

OBSERVATIONS FROM NATURE

MARCH, 2012

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
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This year we are privileged to have a pair of Red-Shouldered Hawks (*Buteo lineatus*) nesting in a big Sweet Gum tree (*Liquidambar styraciflua*) that is only about eight feet from the back of our house. The yellow arrow on the photograph at left shows the nest high in the tree, and the photograph below shows one of the hawks on the nest. They will have 3 or 4 eggs and these will be brooded for about 30 days. After hatching, the young stay in the nest for about 40 days.

I think our pair are incubating eggs now, because they don't seem to be making very many trips to the nest.





The latest ducks to visit the lake behind our house were these Lesser Scaup (*Aythya affinis*). These were a long way out in the lake, so it was difficult to get a satisfactory photograph. Two types of Scaup are found in North America. The other is the Greater Scaup (*Aythya marila*), which is very similar but slightly larger. The Greater Scaup prefers salt water, and the Lesser Scaup prefers fresh water.



I found a piece of Bushy Beard Lichen (*Usnea strigosa*) which had fallen from a tree. This species is also called Old Man's Beard Lichen, and it is quite common on the trees around here. The light-colored, cup-shaped structures are the apothecia. Spores are produced in these and dispersed by wind or by rain drop splatter. Like all lichens, this one is a combination of a fungus and an alga.



The first butterfly of the season is this Falcate Orangetip (*Anthocharis medea*). This species forms only one brood early in the season, and they can be seen flitting about low to the ground in wooded areas. This fine male (females don't have the orange tips on the wing) was near the Broad River. These are small butterflies (only about 1.5 inches across) in the "White" group.

Pictured below is an early-season dragonfly. This is a male Common Green Darner (*Anax junius*). The female lacks the blue markings. This group of dragonflies is called "Darners" because of the resemblance of their bodies to a darning needle. The Common Green Darner is one of our largest dragonflies; it has a wingspan of over three inches. Remarkably, some individuals migrate from the northern U.S. to Mexico. This species is the official state insect of Washington.





Some fields are very pretty this month. The one pictured above has a mixture of pale blue Toadflax (*Nuttallanthus canadensis*), which is pictured at left and a Wild Mustard (*Brassica sp.*) pictured below.

Toadflax is variously said to be named because the flowers resemble a small toad or because if one squeezes the flowers laterally they open like the mouth of a small toad.





We do not often see Woodchucks (*Marmota monax*) in our area of Georgia. I barely got a shot of this one before it ducked into its burrow. The orange color comes from the red clay in which it has been digging. Washed-up, it's color would be a grizzled gray-brown. They are also called Groundhogs or Whistle-Pigs.

Here is a scorpion on the rug in our hallway. We often find these interesting little creatures in the house. They collect in our ceiling lights and sconce lights. This is *Vaejovis carolinianus* the Southern Unstriped Scorpion, also called the Southern Devil Scorpion. The largest of these is only about two inches long. They can sting, but it is no more serious than a bee sting. The enlargement below shows a large eye on top of its trunk.





Wild Plums (*Prunus sp.*) bloom in early March here. They often grow in thick clumps as in the photograph above. The clusters of aromatic, white flowers appear before the leaves.





Princess Trees (*Paulownia tomentosa*) started blooming in South Georgia this month and will continue into April in more northern parts of the state. Flowers come out before the leaves on these trees, and they make quite a spectacular sight.

The genus name, *Paulownia*, was named in honor of Queen Anna Pavlovna (1795-1865) of the Netherlands. She was a daughter of Czar Paul I, of Russia, and she married the Prince of Orange. He later became King William II of the Netherlands, and Anna became Queen.

Princess Trees are native to China and nearby parts of Southeast Asia. The wood is soft, fine-grained, and resistant to warping. It is commonly used to make wooden surfboards.



The photograph at the top shows the interesting pattern of Princess Tree bark. The middle photograph is a new stem emerging from a twig. The slightly raised, white blotches on the bark and twig are lenticels, which are made up of a loose aggregation of cells that allow gases to be exchanged between the interior of the tree and the atmosphere.

The photograph on the left shows seed pods from last year's flowers. The seeds are very small and winged. Each pod may produce about 5000 seed, and Princess trees have become somewhat of a weed species in Southeastern forests.



At a stop in the Smoky Mountain National Park, we were able to get close to this Eastern Comma Butterfly (*Polygonia comma*). This interesting creature has a very different color pattern on the top and bottom of its wings. The group of butterflies called “Commas” get their name from the small white comma-shaped mark on the lower surface of their wings. I have put an arrow showing the “comma” on the photograph below, and an enlarged view is shown in the lower left photograph.





At the same stop, we saw a group of white butterflies. Despite their snowy white, pure appearance, they were feeding on dog feces! These very plain butterflies are part

of a group called, appropriately, “Whites “. This particular one is the West Virginia White (*Pieris virginiensis*). This species is characterized by having the veins on the lower surface of the wing outlined in pale grey, as shown in the photograph on the lower right.



Garlic Mustard (*Alliaria petiolata*) is shown in the top photograph. This was widespread in Southern Indiana, where it formed dense clumps in moist, riverside wooded areas. The four petals arranged in a cross shape are characteristic of the Mustard family (Brassicaceae). It is native to Europe, Central and Western Asia, and parts of North Africa. The crushed leaves smell like garlic, hence the generic name *Alliaria* meaning “like *Allium*”. Garlic is *Allium sativum*.

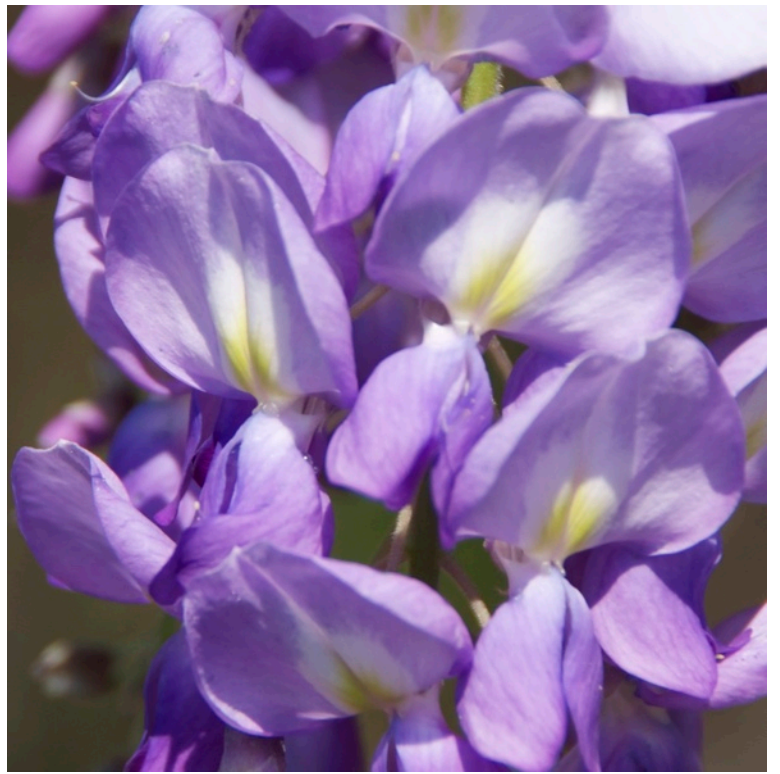
The photograph on the left shows a mating pair of Mustard White Butterflies (*Pieris napi*) on a Garlic Mustard plant. This species is quite variable in coloration, and these two illustrate that difference. Only the bottom one shows the strong outlining of the wing veins with dark green which is characteristic on this species. The larvae feed on a variety of species in the mustard family.



The Buckeyes are now blooming. We have two species in our woods. The one pictured here is the Red Buckeye (*Aesculus pavia*), also called the Firecracker Plant. It is only a shrub or small tree, but it has been crossed with the Common Horse-chestnut (*Aesculus hippocastanum*). The hybrid is a medium-sized tree with attractive large flower clusters similar to a Horse-chestnut, but with the red color of Red Buckeye.

The other common species in our woods is the Painted Buckeye (*A. sylvatica*) seen here at the right. It is also a shrub to small tree.





Chinese Wisteria (*Wisteria sinensis*) is in full bloom this month. As the name suggests, this plant is native to China. The flowers are quite fragrant; some say they smell like grapes. A white-flowered form exists in addition to the lavender one pictured here. Wisteria is a member of the Pea (Legume) family, and it is named after Caspar Wistar, a Philadelphia physician (1781-1816).

As one of the earliest to flower, Wisteria is attractive to insects. The one pictured here is a female Carpenter Bee (*Xylocopa micans*).



I found this Carolina Anole (*Anolis carolinensis*) sunning itself on our deck. These common lizards are sometimes called chameleons, because they can change their color from green to brown. However they are closely related to the true chameleons, which are not found in the New World.



The “Yellow Peril” will soon be upon us. By this I mean the onslaught of Pine pollen which will blanket our cars and everything else left outside. The pollen comes from the male cones of Pines. Here is a cluster of male cones on a Loblolly Pine (*Pinus taeda*). After they shed their pollen the male cones fall off. Any female cones that are fertilized will stay on the trees and produce seeds.



Fringe Tree, Old-Man's Beard or Grancy Greybeard trees (*Chionanthus virginicus*) are also blooming this month. The flowers are produced in drooping panicles. Each flower has very long petals as shown in the photograph below. Fringe trees are usually dioecious, that is, male and female flowers are borne on separate trees. They are native to the U.S.





Here is a nice specimen of the Eastern Box Turtle (*Terrapene carolina*) from Southern Indiana. This one can be identified as a male, because of its bright red iris. It also had a concave plastron (lower shell) which is not shown here.

Box Turtles can be quite long-lived. A minimum age for this turtle can be derived by examination of the scales on its upper shell. As the shell grows, new plates are formed under the old ones. There are about 17 rings visible on the scale shown at left. Since some of the smaller scales may have fallen off, this is a minimum estimate. Box Turtles are known to live up to 100 years.