

OBSERVATIONS FROM NATURE

WILDFLOWER EXTRA

MARCH, 2012

PHOTOGRAPHS BY

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March is such a great month! Everything is coming back to life; flowers are blooming, birds are singing, and insects are buzzing. We had so many items for the Notes this month that we decided to produce an “extra”, just devoted to wildflowers. The photographs were taken near our home in Georgia, in the Smoky Mountains, or in Southern Indiana.



The photograph above is Common Chickweed (*Stellaria media*). Chickweed has five petals, but these are deeply cleft, so that it appears that ten petals are present. Apparently, chickens like to eat these plants and their seeds, hence the common name. It is native to Europe, and is often a weedy invasive here. The generic name “*Stellaria*” means “star-like”.



The white-flowered (*Baptisia alba*) and yellow-flowered (*B. tintoria*) species of Wild or False Indigo are members of the Pea family (Fabaceae). They make a nice bush up to 3 or 4 feet tall. *Baptisia* comes from the Greek “baptizein” which means “to dye”. These plants were once used as an inferior substitute for true indigo dye.



One of the first wildflowers to bloom is Bloodroot (*Sanguinaria canadensis*). It is in the Poppy family (Papaveraceae). The flowers are very conspicuous, but only last for a day or two. The plant starts to bloom before the leaves fully emerge. The leaves are very distinctively lobed, and are easily recognized. The rhizomes sprout to produce small colonies of plants (left).

The name Bloodroot comes from its orange rhizomes which exude a red sap when broken. The sap was used as warpaint by Native Americans.

Bloodroot seeds have a fleshy appendage called an elaiosome that is attractive to ants. The ants carry the seeds off to their nests, eat the elaiosome, and then cast off the seeds which can germinate in the new location. Consult the Wikipedia article at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bloodroot> for information about medical uses (and abuses) of Bloodroot.



Trout Lilies (also called Dogtooth Violets) grow in large colonies and flower in early Spring. To someone, their mottled leaves resembled a trout, hence one of the common names. Their bulb resembles a white tooth, thus “dogtooth” another common name.

The species pictured on this page is the Yellow Trout Lily (*Erythronium americanum*).





There is also a white species of Trout Lily (*Erythronium albidum*). Here is a nice group of it from Southern Indiana. The anthers are bright yellow instead of the purple of the yellow trout lily. Plants with a single leaf and plants with two leaves are found, but only the plants with two leaves bloom.





The Wild Azaleas (*Rhododendron sp.*) around our house are blooming now. Flowers like these with recurved petals, long protruding stamens and pistils and an orange color are usually thought to be pollinated by birds (hummingbirds). Bees are not attracted to red or orange flowers, and the recurved petals do not give insects an easy landing platform. The long corolla tube also makes it hard for bees to reach the nectar. However, I have also seen butterflies on these flowers many times.





Green and Gold (*Chrysogonium virginianum*) grows very low to the ground. It can stand considerable dryness if it has some shade, and it is sometimes found on dirt banks or road cuts. This plant is somewhat unusual in that the ray flowers (the five large yellow structures) are fertile and the small disk flowers in the center are sterile. Thus each flower can produce a maximum of five seeds.





Virginia Bluebells (*Mertensia virginica*) have pink buds that become light blue as they open to form flowers. Butterflies are a common pollinator, because they have a long proboscis with which to reach the nectar at the base of the long corolla tube. Seeds are produced in the early summer, after which the plant goes dormant until the next Spring. It seems to prefer moist and at least partially shaded locations.



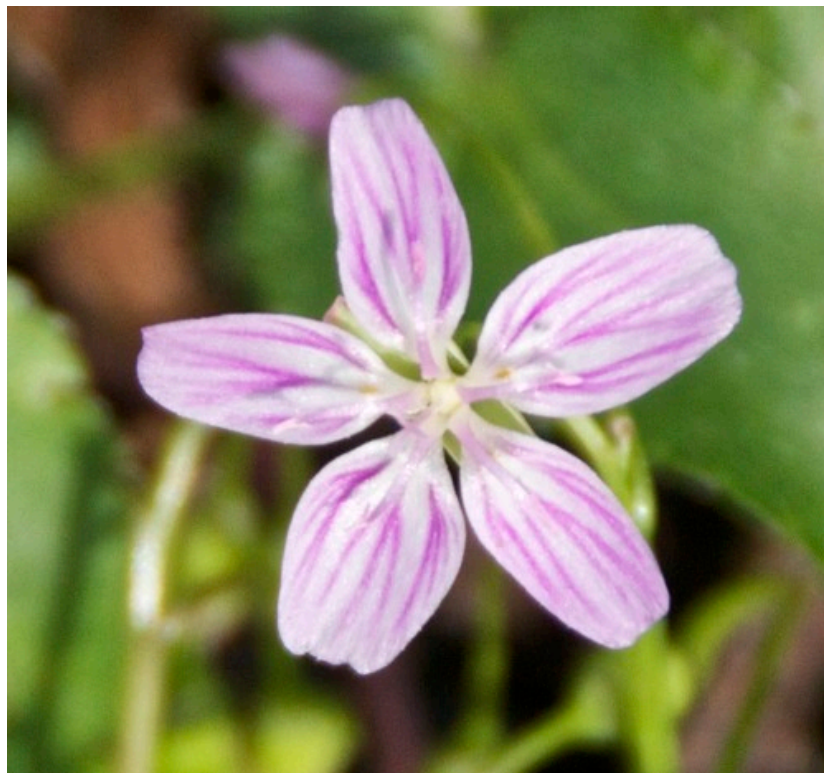
Celandine Poppies (*Stylophorum diphyllum*), also called Wood Poppies, have four brilliant yellow petals and many stamens. The Celandine name was given because of its resemblance to a European plant called Celandine (*Chelidonium majus*). Celandine is



from the Greek word for “swallow”, and it was given because the European plant blooms about the time that migratory swallows return.



Spring Beauty (*Claytonia sp.*) plants can occur in great colonies. When we stopped in the Smokies, they were blooming all around. The tiny bulbs are edible, but it would take a lot to make a meal. One of the common names for this plant is “fairy spuds”.





Yellow Woodland Violet (*Viola pubescens*) is a common Spring flower in rich woods. The genus *Viola* has about 500 species distributed world-wide. Violet seeds also have elaisomes and are dispersed by ants.

Fringed Phacelia (*Phacelia fimbriata*) grows in great abundance in the Smoky Mountains National Park. It forms an almost solid carpet of blooms in some places. However, it is an annual, so the whole group of plants must grow anew each year.

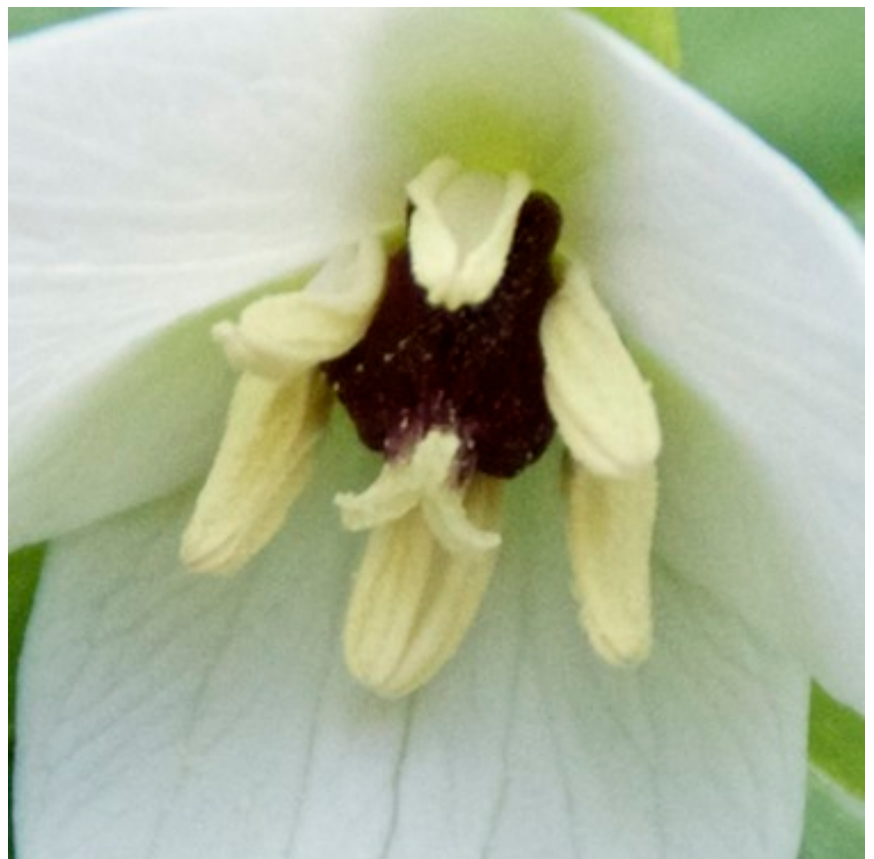
This plant can cause a rash similar to poison ivy in some people.





These white Trilliums (*Trillium erectum*) were blooming in the Smokies this month. The common names of this species include “Foetid Wake-Robin”, “Stinking Willie”, and “Stinking Benjamin”. However, the foetid odor is not very obvious. The name “Wake-robin” was given because some Trilliums bloom about the time Robins arrive in the Spring. The generic name *Trillium* was given by Linnaeus because everything about the plant (leaves, sepals, petals etc.) is in threes.

The purple, ribbed ovary and the yellow-white stamens are very striking (left).





When we stopped in the Smoky Mountain National Park in March, the Liverleaf plants (*Hepatica nobilis*) were in full bloom. They have very distinctive three-lobed leaves (above). When the leaves age, they acquire a dark brown color (left). The brown color and three-lobed shape suggested a human liver to early herbalists, and the plant was prescribed for ailments of the liver. The generic name *Hepatica* also refers to the liver association.



Liverleaf flowers come in a variety of colors from pale blue to pink to white. This particular population had flowers that were pale lavender when first opened (left).

The lavender tint fades as the flower ages (right).





The mature flowers of Liverleaf are almost pure white (left).

Liverleaf seeds are scattered by ants (as described for Bloodroot above), because they have a fleshy appendage (elaiosome) that ants carry back to their nest to eat.



Redbud Trees also bloom in March. The photograph on the left shows a Carpenter Bee (*Xylocopa* sp.) foraging among the Redbud blossoms. Smaller bees do not have a tongue long enough to reach the nectar.

Redbud is in the Legume family (Fabaceae).



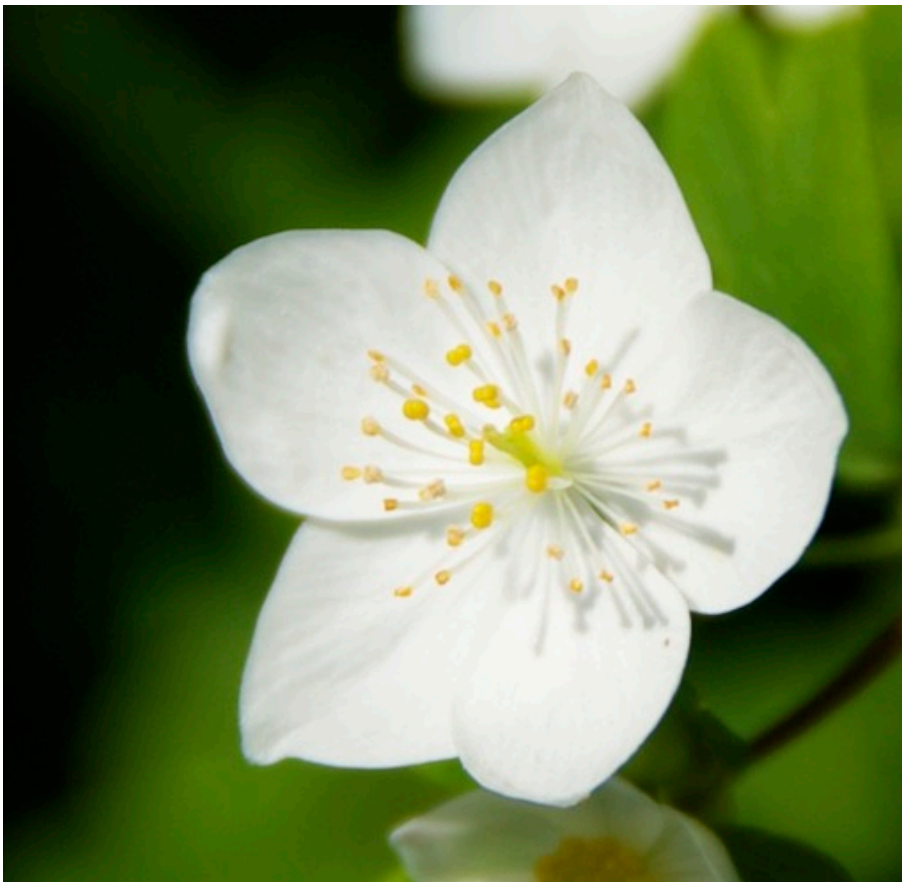
Dutchman's Breeches (*Dicentra cucullaria*) in another plant whose seeds have elaiosomes and are spread by ants. Its white flowers resemble upside down breeches.



Red Maple (*Acer rubrum*) in the Smokies gives an early red tint to the forest. The seeds are produced before the leaves appear. Winged seeds like these are called "samaras"; they are typical of maples, ashes, elms, and hops. Maple samaras rotate like little helicopter rotors when they fall. Samara comes from Latin for "elm seed".



Here are two Spring flowers that might be confused at a casual glance. The one on the left is Rue Anemone (*Thalictrum thalictroides*). Rue is a European plant (*Ruta graveolens*), and someone saw a resemblance to it in the American plant. Thus it is an anemone that is similar to Rue. The word “anemone” means “daughter of the winds” in Ancient Greek. There is a myth that Anemone was a beautiful nymph. Zephyr, the God of the West Wind, fell in love with her. Flora, the Goddess of flowers, was jealous and turned her into a flower.



This one is False Rue Anemone (*Enemion biternatum*). It apparently never has more than five “petals”. The flowers do not produce nectar, but various small bees and flies visit to collect pollen.



Gelsemium sempervirens or Carolina Jasmine started blooming early this month. It is a very visible vine, because it blooms before the leaves come out on the trees. Thus great tresses of it can sometimes be seen on trees along the edge of the forest. Carolina Jasmine is the state flower of South Carolina.

This Ragwort is one of the earliest flowering members of the Sunflower Family (Asteraceae) in our area. I think it is a species of *Senecio*, but I did not take the time to collect some to analyze it further.





Star of Bethlehem (*Ornithogalum umbellatum*) is an introduced plant seen along roadsides and other waste places. It was imported as an ornamental, but has widely escaped in the Southeast.

Toothwort (*Dentaria laciniata*) has fleshy protuberances reminiscent of teeth on the rhizomes. The “wort” part of Toothwort just means plant in Old English.





Dwarf Crested Iris (*Iris cristata*) bloom very early. They are one of the easiest wildflowers to grow in a garden. Iris is the Greek name for a rainbow, and refers to the many different colors of Irises.

Moss Verbena (*Glandularia pulchella*) is very low-growing. It survives mowing by the Highway Department, so it can be found right along the road in many areas.

It is a tropical introduction.





This little blue flower is Speedwell (*Veronica persica*) growing in Southern Indiana. It is not a native plant; it was introduced from Southwest Asia. The common name apparently comes from its supposed ability to cure people of various ailments in a speedy fashion. Another version states that the name comes from the fact that the petals fall off the flowers quickly after they are picked. Thus “speedwell” is used in the sense of “so long” or “good-bye”.

Speedwell’s generic name “*Veronica*” apparently comes from the Greek “vera icona” which means “true likeness”. According to one tale, when Jesus was on his way to Calvary, a kindly woman wiped his brow with her handkerchief. The image of Jesus’s face was miraculously preserved on the cloth. The cloth became a famous religious relic, and the lady was christened St. Veronica (a shortened form of “vera icona”)