



OAKLAND
COUNTY PARKS

The Wilder Side of Oakland County

by Jonathan Schechter



Embracing Nature's Way in July

July has arrived; and I am once again wandering the woodlands, fields and trails of our county. As is often the case during my nature-embracing treks timeless words of Henry David Thoreau come to mind. "I wonder what the world is doing today." Go for a walk and you will see what the world is doing! You may even encounter a cluster of beautiful Golden Oyster mushrooms as I did last week.

Golden Oyster mushrooms (*Pleurotus citrinopileatus*) are a wood-decaying fungus that thrives on decaying downed hardwoods. I saw a real eye-catching cluster last week while exploring at the Tenhave Woods Nature Preserve in Royal Oak.

Summer wildflowers always catch my attention. Their colors and scents also serve as advertising billboards for honeybees, butterflies, birds, moths, bats and even ants that come for the energy rich nectar and pollen and in the process spread pollen from flower to flower. After the pollen is transferred from the anther (male part of the flower) to the stigma (female part) the fertilized flower will produce a seed.

Last week I also wandered at Stony Creek Metropark and Independence Oaks County Park and as always, my eyes are scanning the sides of trails and creeks. Some flowers and fungi are almost hidden from sight, but others; like common mullein are now as tall as me.

Butterfly Weed is a brilliant orange beauty that thrives in sunny fields and is often found along roadsides as well. Its sweet nectar attracts butterflies and is essential to the survival of the Monarch Butterfly. Monarchs seek out Butterfly Weed to lay their eggs and their emerging caterpillars feed exclusively on milkweed.

Common Mullein has brilliant yellow blossoms that are just now opening on the top of stalks that may be six feet tall. The blossoms also attract a great variety of insects with bumble bees one of the most common pollinators. Their large thick leaves are soft and are sometimes referred to as Mother Nature's toilet paper; something well known by hikers on the Appalachian Trail.

Deptford Pink is now blooming in sunny fields. This delicate beauty is actually a European wildflower that is now widespread across much of the United States and is very common in many of our parks. Just walk slowly and scan the trail's edge and it won't take long to spot them.

Common Daylily is perhaps one of the most recognizable wildflowers of rural Oakland County. I've heard it referred to as a "ditch lily", perhaps because it often thrives in sunny roadside ditches. I'm happy to have large cluster of them appear very near my

house in Brandon Township. The stalks can be cooked like asparagus and the tubers boiled like potatoes. When camping I've even nibbled on crisp unopened buds.

A woodland walk is not always productive if you are searching for a particular sighting or plant, but is always pleasurable if you walk slowly, stop often and look about. Living only a few miles from Independence Oaks County Park, I circumvent Crooked Lake at least once a week and every trek brings new sights and sounds. I always pause where Crooked Lake flows into the headwaters of Clinton River. There is something soothing; almost magical about the sound of the flowing water.

Although my last trek at Independence Oaks did not bring any sightings of Trumper Swans that occasional visit Crooked Lake, I took pleasure in watching mallard ducks perched on a shoreline log to bask in the sun. A few dragonflies were also zipping around hunting insects. I'm always happy to see these avid mosquito hunters.

A bit further down the trail I encountered an Eastern Painted Turtle that had crawled up from the lakeshore. That encounter gave me the chance to chat with a couple who paused to watch the turtle and I assured their young daughter the turtle would return to the lake after completing her egg-laying mission.

Summer can be fleeting; perhaps make this weekend a time to join your friends and go for a nature-embracing hike in the woodlands of the wilder side of Oakland County.

Oakland County Parks staffer Jonathan Schechter is an avid "nature-embracing" hiker who follows phenology - the study of natural cycles of nature's way - to inspire his blogs.

