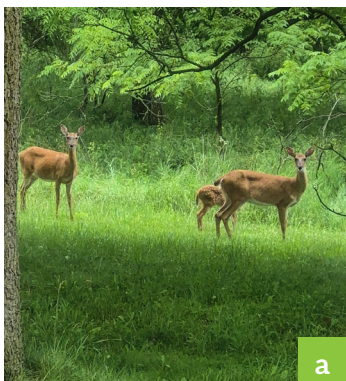




OAKLAND
COUNTY PARKS

The Wilder Side of Oakland County

by Jonathan Schechter



Summer is Sizzling

Summer may be sizzling hot at times, but the world of nature remains full of wonder. One need not wander far for new discoveries and memorable moments of nature's way. Perhaps make today your day to meander a trail, hike in a woodland or just be a patient observer in your own yard.

Nature's beauty and her hidden secrets often appear if you walk slowly, stop often and look around. A few days ago, I wandered my meadow and woodland trail for no particular reason beyond enjoying the sounds, scents and sights of the season. Just a few minutes into my trek, I had company; a doe and her rapidly growing fawn were watching me. (a)

The deer kept their attention focused on me but did not bolt. That calmness let me know this is the doe that lives at the edge of the meadow and knows my ways and wandering well. She gave birth to her fawn near the crumbled foundation of my old barn barely a hundred yards from my house. I gave them a wide berth and headed for my woodland trail for my daily dose of nature's way.

A small sunny clearing supports a healthy growth of milkweed, a 24-hour nectar source for moths and butterflies. During this trek, monarchs and eastern tiger swallowtail butterflies stopped in to refuel. Perhaps one night soon I'll do a night meander to see what moths I locate. (b)

The lavender blossoms of Wild bergamot did not go unnoticed by me, or the butterflies that would not stay motionless long enough for a photo. I discovered last week that it is also visited by our Ruby-throated hummingbirds. (c)

It did not take me long to discover where squirrels that visit my black walnut trees stash away fallen nuts to store away and feast upon. The fallen log a few dozen feet from my woodland trail has served as a feeding platform for the last six years. I may have to set up a trail camera to monitor that site.

Some things I see on my trail trek have been around for more than 10,000 years. I often pause near a glacial erratic, a boulder left behind by a melting glacier. It's a perfect perch to sit on and reflect on nature's way and listen to nature's music. The sultry afternoon brought the song of our eastern gray treefrogs. (d)

While perched on that boulder, I made note of an old grape vine much thicker than my arm; a reminder of the farming history of the land. A red squirrel used that vine as ladder to access its nest high up in the tree.



Ghost pipe, or Indian pipe, is a perennial wildflower that is sometimes misidentified as a mushroom with the scientific name of *Monotropa uniflora*. I love the fact that small clusters appear in my woods. This eye-catching plant lacks chlorophyll and is therefore white, or sometimes a pinkish shade. (e)

There's a giant oak tree along my woodland trail that I suspect is older than our country. It's been struck by lightning at least once and the interior is slowly decomposing. Squirrels inhabit the tree and last summer a Barred Owl often perched on a dead branch over the trail. I suspect that was the perfect location to wait for prey to pass underneath. (f)

Perhaps the least noticed creature along my trail are spittlebug nymphs. These often-overlooked insects are known for their frothy spittle mass that is produced when they feed on plants. Adult spittlebugs are about a quarter inch long and I have yet to see one, a reminder that nature's way holds secrets. I'll be searching for more of these secrets as summer sizzles on. (g)

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.