



ELOISE BUTLER WILDFLOWER GARDEN AND BIRD SANCTUARY GARDEN HIGHLIGHTS

Phenology* notes for October 7-13, 2019

Temperatures dropped rapidly this week from normal highs in the 60s to colder than usual 30s and 40s. By Friday and Saturday, snowflakes were flying. Snow settled on dried flower heads like little hats, dusted sloping tree trunks, and powdered the boardwalk, revealing footprints of visitors determined to catch fall colors at their peak. Phenology records reveal it's been exactly 6 months since our last snowfall in April and one year to the day since our first snow in October 2018.

A few flowers linger throughout the Garden. In the wetland, red turtlehead remain, and petals cling to white wood and Ontario asters along the woodland trails. In the upland, brown-eyed Susan, bottle gentian, and New England aster contrast brightly against blackening leaves. As plants are exposed to freezing temperatures, water inside crystallizes into sharp shards of ice, cutting open and killing plant tissue, turning it brown or black. Maples blaze at peak color, decorating Geranium Path with vibrant reds and yellows. Tamaracks continue to shift from green to gold, dropping needles, and oaks give the upland hills a rusty hue. Virginia creeper climbs one oak, wrapping its limbs in red fire.

Most birds seen around the Garden now are here to stay, but a few late migrants are still gleaning the last berries and bugs from our branches. Ruby-crowned kinglets and white throated sparrows were seen in large groups this week, along with an occasional yellow-rumped warbler and brown creeper. Early Birders braving the Saturday snowfall saw robins roosting in trees with their feathers fluffed up for warmth. Only one male mallard paddled the pond north of the back gate. If you prefer to birdwatch beside a cozy fire, white-breasted nuthatch and downy woodpeckers have been frequent visitors at the feeder outside the Visitor Shelter window, along with the turkey and its poult strolling by to peck up fallen seeds. Other birds seen this week who will remain in winter's cast of characters include the rest of the woodpecker lineup—hairy, red-bellied, pileated and Northern flicker—, American crow and its Corvid cousin blue jay, black-capped chickadee, house finch, and cedar waxwings, who migrate sporadically depending on where the berries are. During the Full Moon Hike, a great-horned owl juvenile was heard screeching for food from the upland conifers and then took flight across the dark sky. This winter, young owls will be expected to find mates and set up their own territories. Owl courting begins in fall, so listen for males and females hooting duets.

What happens to the Garden in winter? While this patch of land is undisturbed by humans, wildlife like owls and foxes find sanctuary to nest and have young. Other Garden animals find places to hibernate. The little brown bats often seen on Night Hikes have migrated to Minnesota caves and mines, where consistent temperature allows them to sleep the winter away til May, as long as humid conditions don't lead to the suffocating fungus responsible for white nose syndrome. Garter snakes were seen in the woodland this week on sunny days, but when the ground freezes, they will retreat below the frost line into rock crevices, ant hills, and animal burrows to hunker down. Woolly bear caterpillars have been inching along the trails in the upland, recently hatched from eggs laid by the Isabella tiger moth. Although long-running legend claims we can predict how severe winter will be based on the width of their black and brown bands, these colors vary in individuals and change as caterpillars molt and grow. Even if the Polar Vortex returns, the woolies will survive negative temps by filling their bodies with antifreeze, curled under the snow just like their mammal namesakes.

There's still time to witness the signs of fall firsthand: the Garden is open weekends through the end of the month, with continued programming. Join us for an end-of-the-season tour!

**Phenology: The study of periodic biological phenomena such as flowering, breeding and migration especially as related to climate.*

Prepared by Naturalist Kyla Sisson 10/13/2019