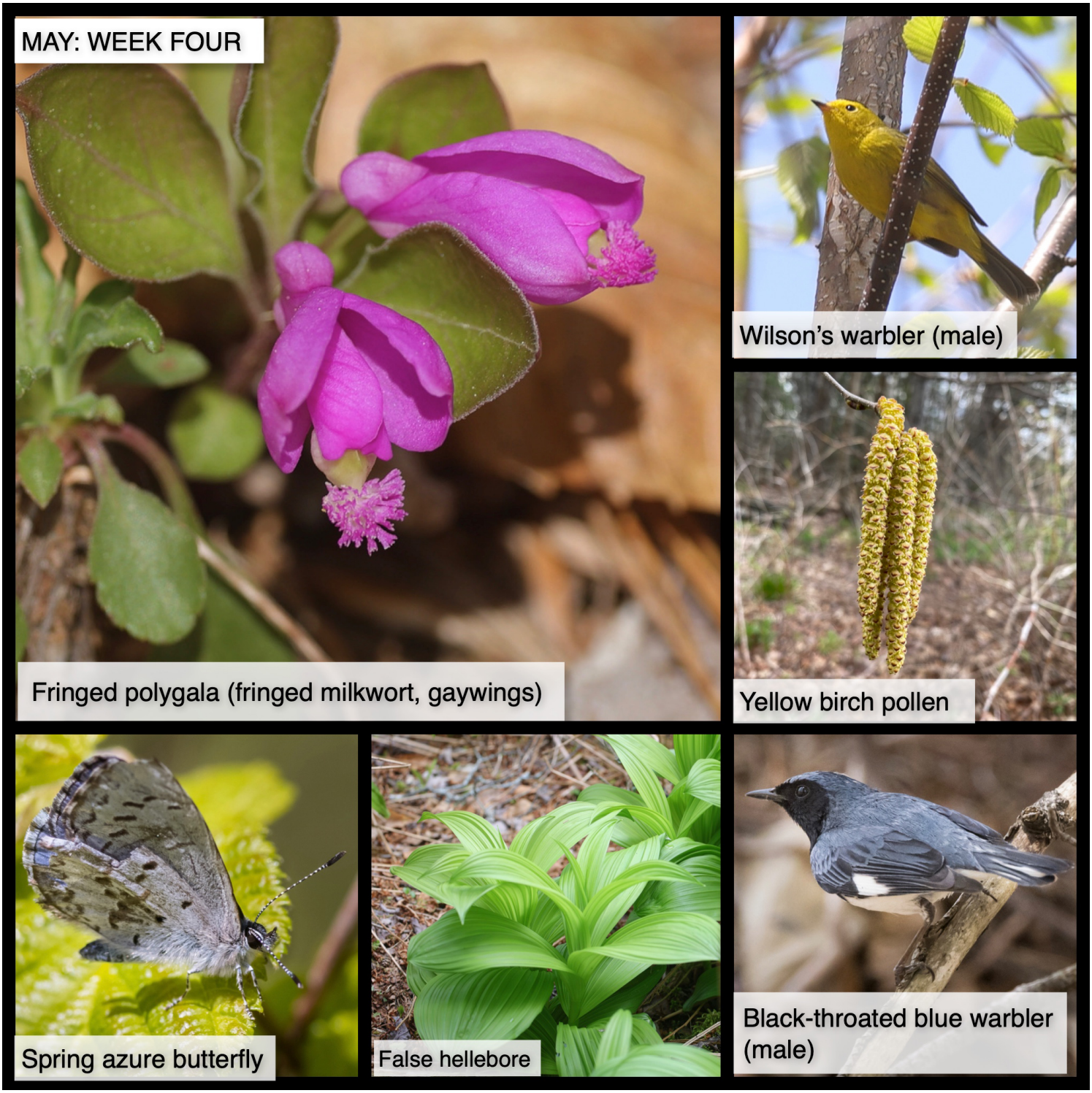
This Week in the Woods May: Week Four



This Week in the Woods, the small but spectacular spring wildflower **fringed polygala** (also called **fringed milkwort** and **gaywings**) is in bloom. This little evergreen reproduces both by pollination of its blooms (bees are common visitors) and through smaller underground flowers that self-fertilize. Here's a profile from the U.S. Forest Service, and here's a post from Mary Holland's Naturally Curious site, explaining how pollinators access the odd-looking petals.

Here are some other nature sights this week (clockwise):

As summer leaves unfurl, it's getting harder to see forest warblers, so we were excited to spy a male **Wilson's warbler**, sporting bright yellow plumage and a jaunty black cap (you can just barely see it in the angle of this photo). The bird may have just been passing through, as the southern edge of its typical breeding range is in Maine. Speaking of Canada – and spying – Wilson's warblers are named for Alexander Wilson, a Scottish-born illustrator who published the first ornithology of American birds, and who in 1812 was arrested in Haverhill, New Hampshire, on suspicion of being a Canadian spy (an early 19th century hazard for bird watchers?). Here's a brief biography for Wilson, "the father of American ornithology," from *Pennsylvania Heritage* magazine, and another example of his artwork from our Summer 2020 magazine. And here's a profile of Wilson's warbler from Audubon.

If you visit a vernal pool or other forest wetlands, you may notice that the surface has developed a yellow film. A main cause is wind-dispersed tree pollen, including pollen from **yellow birch catkins**. As Susan Shea notes in this recent *Outside Story* essay, yellow birch's small female flowers open before the leaves unfurl and are often pollinated by the same tree's catkins. This common forest tree is valuable to wildlife, and it's also used for a number of forest products.

We've been frequently hearing – and occasionally seeing – **black-throated blue warblers**. As noted in this profile from the U.S. Forest Service, black-throated blues are typically found in a areas that include both thick understory and canopy trees – in other words, areas that are created by natural disturbances such as wind knocking down trees to create a gap in a mature forest, and forestry practices that mimic this effect. Check out this *Community Voices* interview with scientist Alicia Brunner, who has researched climate change impacts on the black-throated blue warblers' breeding behavior at Hubbard Brook Experimental Forest and connects her work in the White Mountains with that of Jamaican scientists who study the birds in their wintering habitat.

False hellebore grows in patches in sunny, wet areas – typically along the edges of permanent wetlands – and it's especially eye-catching now, when its tall, bright green leaves stand out against the still mostly brown surroundings. As noted in this profile from the Native Plant Trust, it's poisonous, but it may have been used in the past (in small doses, presumably) for various medicinal purposes.

Finally, this week we've noticed **spring azures** flitting around. These blue-gray butterflies are beautiful but tiny – perhaps best appreciated through a camera's magnified lens. As noted in this profile from the Vermont Center for Ecostudies' Vermont Butterfly Survey spring azures typically appear in edge habitat (this specimen was found at a trailhead parking lot) and their larvae feed on the flowers and buds of blueberries, cherries, and viburnums.

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