

# This Week in the Woods

## October: Week Three

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Red oak



Tar spot



Turkey vulture



Fragrant bedstraw



Downy woodpecker on gall



Maidenhair fern



Small milkweed bug



Blackberry psyllid sign



Yarrow

**This Week in the Woods**, recent rains have mitigated drought conditions, and tree leaves are falling fast. **Red oaks** are now in full fall color. Common trees of northeastern forests (more cold-hardy than white oaks), they provide a host of benefits for wildlife, including acorns, winter

browse and shelter. Where there are high deer populations, however, they may become less common over time, because few young trees can get established. Here's a [link to a study from Cornell University](#) documenting deer browse of 60% or more of red oak seedlings annually. And here's a [profile of red oaks from the Native Plant Trust](#).

Have you noticed weird black blotches on maple leaves? This is **tar spot**, discoloration caused by fungi in the genus *Rhytisma*. The fungi ride the leaves down to the ground in fall, then in spring release spores that – carried by wind – infect new leaves. [The Morton Arboretum has a helpful profile](#) of tar spot, which notes that harm to trees is minimal.

On sunny days, **turkey vultures** often appear high in the sky, circling up and soaring between the rising columns of warm air called thermals. They also practice contorted soaring – you may notice that their wings aren't symmetrically positioned, but that the birds instead wobble back and forth as they fly, with one wing raised and the other parallel to the ground. This helps them maintain lift in uneven (and weak) air flows. Despite the ick factor (feeding on carrion; regurgitating said carrion as a defensive technique) they're fascinating birds with all kinds of cool features, including a keen sense of smell. Here's a [video about them from the Cleveland Museum of Natural History](#), and an [Outside Story essay about the birds](#) by Meghan McCarthy McPhaul.

Say the word “bedstraw” to a farmer, and they may say something back that's less than civil. Smooth bedstraw is a bane of hayfields, reducing the quality and quantity of yields. However, its woody cousin **fragrant bedstraw** is a native plant. This time of year, it offers cheerful bright green color in the increasingly brown woods. Here's a [profile from the nonprofit Minnesota Wildflowers](#).

There's a lot of activity in the meadows now, as birds take advantage of the early fall bounty of weed seeds and insect galls. One common meadow visitor is the **downy woodpecker**, which we've seen several times chiseling into the centers of goldenrod ball galls. Here's a [profile from the Cornell Ornithology Lab's “All About Birds” website](#), including a fun detail on the way male and female birds divvy up foraging space in the winter. And here's a [helpful primer by Doug Morin](#) from our *Outside Story* series, explaining how to distinguish downy woodpeckers from their larger look-alikes, hairy woodpeckers. Despite appearances, the birds aren't close cousins.

**Maidenhair fern** is starting to fade, and in its interim phase turns a pretty pale green. We wrote about the species back in early May, when it was just emerging from the ground as a ruby red fiddlehead. Here (again) is a [link to an article by Michael Snyder](#), explaining that maidenhair is an indicator species for moist, well-drained loam – in other words, the perfect soil for sugar maples.

**Small milkweed bugs** are (no surprise) strongly associated with milkweed plants, and if you look in field guides you may see milkweed seeds listed as their only food source. However, in the adult phase, these bugs are broad-minded in their dining choices. As entomologist [Eric Eaton notes in this blog post](#), they're opportunists that will sometimes prey on other insects, and Eaton once found a pair "sharing a dead honeybee on a curb in Tucson, Arizona." There aren't many curbside dining opportunities nearby, but we've found small milkweed bugs this week, crawling on (and presumably feeding on) goldenrod seed heads.

Wild blackberry leaves are turning dark red, but here and there – especially if there are conifers growing nearby – you may notice a misshapen clump of leaves, often featuring multiple colors. This is feeding sign of **blackberry psyllids**, tiny, winged insects that are also known as bramble flea lice. As the adult insects feed on growing blackberry plants, they deform stems and leaves. They lay their eggs on the plants, and the newly hatched nymphs cause further damage. In autumn, the psyllids decamp to conifers, where they spend the winter. Here's a [post by Mary Holland from her Naturally Curious blog](#), noting that these insects have yet a third name: "jumping plant lice."

There aren't many flowers still in bloom, but sprigs of **common yarrow** are present here and there, sheltered underneath the gone-by stalks and seedheads of previously-bloomed yarrow and other meadow plants. This tough wildflower, able to thrive in dry conditions, has delicate, fern-like leaves, and holds up well in fall bouquets. Here's a [profile from The Native Plant Trust](#), which notes yarrow's traditional use to promote blood clotting.

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**Northern  
Woodlands**

PO Box 270, Lyme, New Hampshire 03768  
[mail@northernwoodlands.org](mailto:mail@northernwoodlands.org) / 603-795-0660  
[www.northernwoodlands.org](http://www.northernwoodlands.org)