

This Week in the Woods

October: Week Two

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Autumn leaf litter



Ravenel's stinkhorn



Fire-colored beetle larva



Cinnabar polypore



Groundcherry



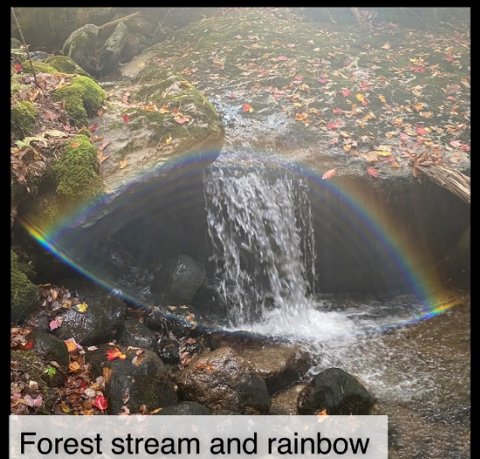
Sulphur butterfly



American basswood



Eastern red-backed salamander



Forest stream and rainbow

This Week in the Woods, the winds are blowing, migrating sparrows are hopping around fields and lawns, and more than once this week we've discovered a pair of spiky balls perched high in the trees – it's porcupine mating season.

As you're out and about this week, take a moment to appreciate the colorful **leaf litter** blanketing the forest floor. Autumn leaves are an essential forest fuel; they feed and shelter many of the tiny creatures that make up the bottom levels of the forest food web, and – eventually – they break down into humus, holding moisture and offering critical supplies of calcium, magnesium and other elements. Read all about it in this [Outside Story essay by Joe Rankin](#).

Ravenel's stinkhorn is a common, fast-growing-and-fading mushroom that is almost always covered in flies. Its unpleasant smell attracts carrion eaters to disperse its spores, and its looks invite sophomoric descriptions by otherwise staid mycologists. Odd as it is, this member of the stinkhorn clan is unremarkable looking, as compared to, say, Australia's starfish stinkhorn, or (closer to home) the netted stinkhorn. Here's an [overview of stinkhorns by author Michael Ko](#) and a [fun blog post from the University of North Carolina Press](#), discussing (among other things) the origin of Ravenel's stinkhorn's name.

This is a great time to go searching under logs – a fun family activity, and perhaps the basis for a competition to see who can find the most creepy crawlies? One common find: **fire-colored beetle larvae** (multiple species). Here's a [fascinating post by Mary Holland in her Naturally Curious blog](#), noting that the beetles may use burning compounds exuded by blister beetles as protective covering for their eggs. You can read more about the logistics of this process from the [University of Wisconsin Milwaukee Field Station's "Bug Lady,"](#) and see our [August Week Four post](#) for a photo of an oil beetle (a type of blister beetle).

Cinnabar polypore is dressed for hunting season. Look for clusters of blaze orange, semicircular bracket fungus on dead hardwood. Here's a [brief profile from the Missouri Department of Conservation](#).

Despite the dropping temperatures, **sulphur butterflies** (orange and clouded) are still flitting around our meadows and woods edges, and will linger for a little while yet. They move south as late autumn sets in, although their path isn't as dramatic as the monarchs' trip to Mexico. It's fun to consider migration from a southern perspective.

You can still see the rounded leaves of **American basswood** in the canopy, although many have drifted down to bright yellow patches on the forest floor. Also called American linden, this is a prized shade tree for yards and parks, and in the woods, it has significant wildlife value, providing both winter food (bark and stems) as well as nesting cavities. Bees and other pollinators are strongly attracted to its blossoms. Here's a [profile from the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center](#).

Eastern red-backed salamanders are small, and typically red-striped (there's also a black morph). Like fire-colored beetle larvae, they commonly lurk under rotten logs. They're fun for children to (gently!) hold in their hands. As [Brett Amy Thelen notes in this *Outside Story* essay](#), what these salamanders lack in size, "they make up for in abundance." According to Thelen, a 1975 study at Hubbard Brook Experimental Forest "found that the biomass of red-backed salamanders – just that one species – was more than *twice* that of all the bird species in their study area *combined*." Here's a [profile from Smithsonian's National Zoo and Conservation Biology Institute](#).

Groundcherries (eight species in New England) are common weeds of disturbed sites, fields, and dry woods. They're often overlooked, but their intricately veined, lantern-like husks are beautiful, and can make appealing accents in a fall bouquet. The husks, which contain single orange or yellow fruits, become more translucent as they age. Groundcherries are members of the nightshade family, and are poisonous except for their fruit, which is gobbled up by wild turkeys and other wildlife. Here's a [Native Plant Trust profile of clammy groundcherry](#), a common species.

Finally, we're not out of drought conditions yet, but the recent rain is cause for celebration, and our excuse for sharing this beautiful shot of a mini-**rainbow arching over a forest stream**, courtesy of Meghan McCarthy McPhaul. So how dry is it? According to the [National Integrated Drought Information System \(NIDIS\)](#), a federal program, most of New England and New York are somewhere in the abnormally dry to severe drought range, with the notable exception of the Catskills. Keep your fingers crossed for more clouds!

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