

This Week in the Woods September: Week Five

SEPTEMBER: WEEK FIVE



Blackpoll warbler (non-breeding plumage)



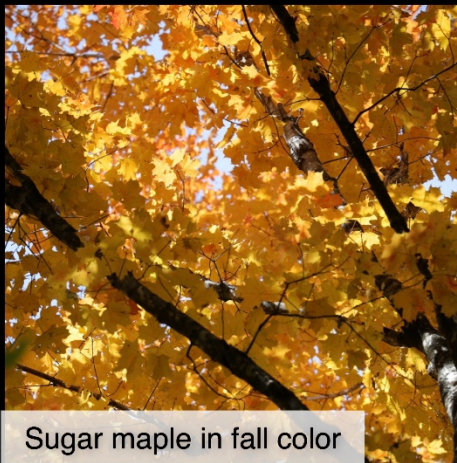
Milkweed pod



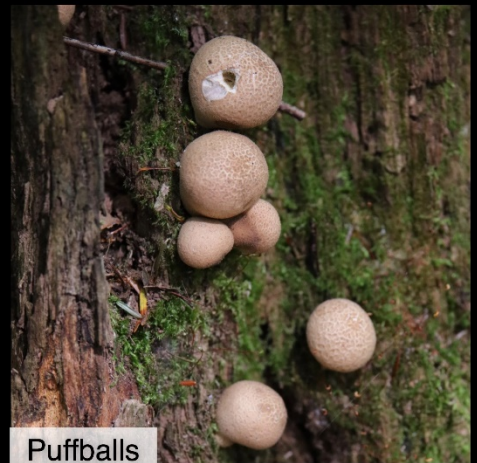
Woolly bear caterpillar



Gray dogwood



Sugar maple in fall color



Puffballs



Broadleaf goldenrod



Sensitive fern fertile frond



Red-breasted nuthatch

This Week in the Woods, the ongoing severe drought conditions are taking a toll, from dried up streams to withered plants. The dry weather also negatively impacts insect populations. All the more reason for migrating birds to head south.

We found several **blackpoll warblers** flitting around in a stand of oaks and birches, apparently gleaning tiny insects. Here's an [article by Todd McLeish](#) from the Autumn 2015 issue of *Northern Woodlands* magazine, describing recent research (including by the Norwich-based Vermont Center for Ecostudies) to track the birds' migration path. As noted in the article, these tiny boreal forest birds make an epic journey, flying "offshore for about 1,500 miles to Puerto Rico, Cuba and the Greater Antilles before continuing on to South America." To prepare, they fatten up (some double their weight) and temporarily reduce the size of some organs, including their digestive systems.

Milkweed pods are delighting children across the region with their fluffy seed pods. They are also, one hopes, spreading this critical pollinator plant to new growing sites. If you'd like to harvest seeds for your own pollinator garden, here are some [tips from the Xerxes Society for Invertebrate Conservation](#), with customized advice for both not-yet busted out pods and full-on fluffy pods (including the "shop vac" method). And here's our [write-up about milkweed](#) from a July post.

Editor Cheryl Daigle discovered a host of **woolly bear caterpillars** scaling different meadow plants...why, we do not know. But the caterpillars – the larvae of the Isabella tiger moth – will be active until late fall, when they'll develop freeze tolerance and go into hibernation. Often people find them in unheated sheds and garages. Despite common wisdom, their coloration is not predictive of winter weather. As Meghan McCarthy McPhaul explains in [this Outside Story essay](#), the size of the rusty colored band is actually an indication of genetics and age: a wider band likely means the caterpillar has been through more instars, or molts.

Gray dogwood leaves are starting to turn pinkish red – a foliage color that contrasts beautifully with its white berries. A shrubby dogwood that often develops into thickets, it has high wildlife value as habitat, and birds devour its berries. Here's a [profile from The Morton Arboretum](#).

Here and there, a **sugar maple** has raced ahead of its neighboring trees, blazing into full autumn color. It's one of the great sights of the season, and it's due to carotenoids – yellow and orange pigments that have been in the leaves the whole time, but are now revealed as chlorophyll recedes. [This Outside Story article by Joe Rankin](#) explains some of the factors that go into a good foliage year – and why a fall drought diminishes the saturation of red leaves.

If you're trying to coax young kids into the woods, there's no greater lure than stomping **puffballs**. And this is one of those rare cases where nature benefits from a little stomping. Puffballs (multiple species) are essentially small spore bombs. When something presses down on them – rain, for example, or a child's shoe – they puff out millions of microscopic spores, which

appear as greenish-yellow or brown clouds. We've spent hours seeking and stomping these fungi. Just be aware that they can stain shoes, and that it's not a good idea to breath in the spores. Here's an [Outside Story by Madeline Bodin](#) about these fungi, including giant puffballs, and a [blog post with photos](#) of puffing in action.

Although goldenrod is usually associated with sunny meadows, some species are blooming in the woods as well, including **broadleaf (or zigzag) goldenrod**. Because of its shade tolerance, this is also a great late-season pollinator plant to consider for shady areas in a garden. Here's a [profile from the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center](#). And by the way, that freaky-looking insect in the photo? It's a **tachinid fly**. We shared a photo of one of its many cousins, and a description of the flies' gruesome early eating habits, in [last week's post](#).

The sterile fronds (what look like leaves) of **sensitive ferns** are turning yellow-to-brown now. As these fade, the plants' fertile fronds are becoming more noticeable. These take the form of dark, beaded wands. They'll stand all winter, weathering cold and snow, and release spores in the spring. Here's a [profile of the species from Penn State New Kensington's "Virtual Nature Trail."](#)

Finally, we've been finding flocks of **red-breasted nuthatches** – and some white-breasted nuthatches and chickadees tagging along – on old, buggy snags and other good insect hunting sites. They're pretty little birds that sound like kazoos. Here's a [profile from Audubon](#), including sound files. We disagree, however, with Audubon's characterization of this bird's honks as "quiet calls;" a group of them sounds like a clown car traffic jam.

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