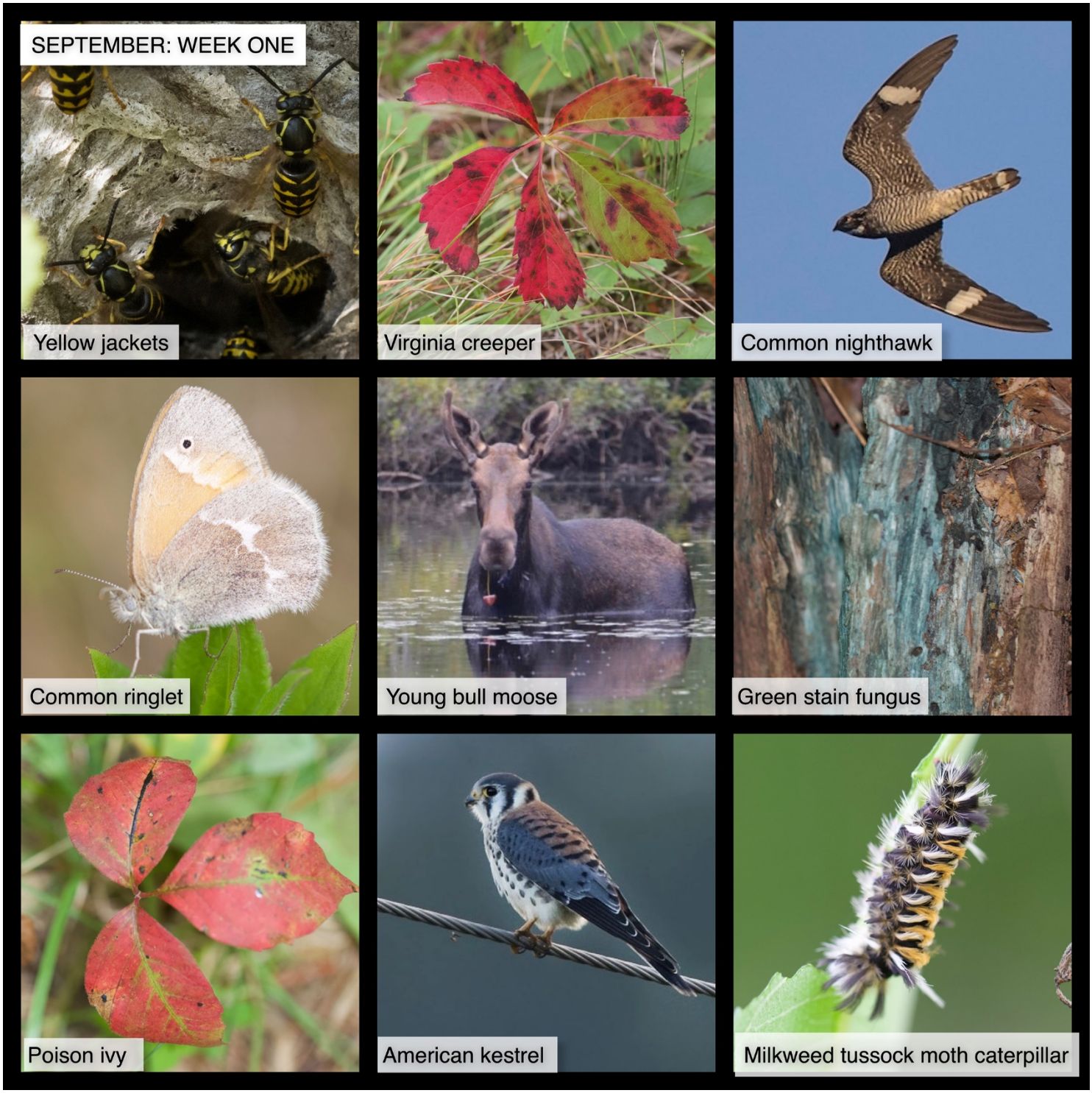
This Week in the Woods September: Week One



This Week in the Woods, it feels like the tipping point between the summer and autumn – cool, foggy mornings, and so many acorns on the trails.

Yellow jackets are becoming more noticeable. There are more of them now than at any other time of the year. And here's some even better news! Soon, they'll start craving your food. As explained in this *Outside Story* essay by Joe Rankin (quoting entomologist Jon Turmel), when a

yellow jacket hive shuts down its summer egg production, the adults stop catching caterpillars and other prey to feed larvae, and instead just loiter around, defending their nests, craving sugars, and waiting for the cold spell that will kill off everyone but the queen. As Turmel put it, "all they want is carbs."

Virginia creeper, also called woodbine, is starting to change into its scarlet autumnal color. This highly adaptable woody vine (often confused with poison ivy, see below) grows in a range of habitats and circumstances – for example, in patches in shady forest floor, and on sunny roadside fencing. A number of birds and other creatures consume its berries (which are poisonous to humans) and its vines are useful both as shelter and nest building material. Here's a profile from the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center. Also, a note for dedicated botanizers: there is a recently recognized, related species, thicket-creeper, best distinguished by how its vines attach to supporting structures. More information on that is available in this profile from The Native Plant Trust.

Common nighthawks are migrating through. These beautiful birds, part of the nightjar family (whip-poor-wills are also in this group), are aerial insectivores, meaning that they catch insects in the air. Often you'll see them flying over fields at twilight. There's an article about nightjars in the summer issue of *Northern Woodlands* magazine, which focuses on a monitoring project in Maine established by ecologist Logan Parker. He credits the Vermont Center for Ecostudies for inspiring and informing the project. Also see this *Outside Story* essay about common nighthawks by Brett Amy Thelen, Science Director at the Harris Center for Conservation Education.

Common ringlets are small butterflies active spring through mid-fall, and we've seen an abundance of them in the past week, flitting between goldenrod blooms. These insects are one of many species that benefit from unmown fields. As noted in this profile from the Butterflies and Moths of North America project, their "first- and fourth-stage caterpillars hibernate in mats of dead grass."

Tom Thomson sent us this image of a **young bull moose** on Mount Cube, noshing on pond lilies. Moose have specialized adapted muzzles, suited for underwater grazing. Pads in their nostrils expand in response to water pressure, sealing off their airways. You can read about this adaptation and other fascinating moose nose facts in this *Outside Story* essay by Lisa Olney.

Those **green stains** on rotten logs aren't old paint; they're discolorations caused by the mycelium of the fungus *Chlorociboria aeruginascens*. Although the stain isn't season specific, the fungus produces distinctive green-blue colored fruiting bodies between now and mid-October. Here's a fun write-up with photographs from Tom Volk's blog, including information about how

Renaissance era Italian craftsmen incorporated green stained wood into their artwork, and 18th century English woodworkers used it to create highly prized "Tunbridge ware." Are there any area woodworkers using green stained wood? We'd love to hear from them.

Poison ivy is also starting to change color – here and there in a patch, you'll find some plants that have already turned red. Notice that poison ivy has three leaves; this is an easy way to distinguish it from its quasi-look-alike Virginia creeper (except when you pull off the bottom two of Virginia creeper' five leaves in order to trick a friend or family member – not that we condone this). Here's an *Outside Story* essay by Ned Swanberg explaining what makes this plant irritate and blister skin (the compound urushiol), its likely reaction to climate change (faster growth! more potency!) and its redeeming qualities, which include fatty berries that sustain birds and other wildlife in the lean winter months.

Incidentally, author Anita Sanchez wrote a children's book about the plant, *Leaflets Three, Let It Be! The Story of Poison Ivy*, that features the beautiful painted paper sculptures (we're not sure how else to describe them) of artist Robin Brickman. You can find a link to the book here.

With so many juicy grasshoppers, cicadas, and large dragonflies flitting around our fields and meadows, it's a good time to be an **American kestrel**. This beautifully marked, dainty falcon often eats large insects. It also preys on other small creatures, including mice and songbirds. Kestrels are in turn hunted by other birds of prey – we've seen a Cooper's hawk snatch one mid-air, for example. Here's a profile from Cornell's All About Birds, and a feel-good moment from the Vermont Institute of Natural Science (VINS), documenting the moment a rehabilitated kestrel was released back into nature.

Finally, we note a new arrival in the milkweed patch. The **milkweed tussock moth caterpillar** wears the customary colors of milkweed feeders – a bright orange and black pattern that warns would-be predators that its body is saturated with cardiac glycosides. In a departure from the typical milkweed script, however, the adult moths lack orange and black coloration. They keep the toxins and use ultrasonic signals to warn off bats. You can read more about the insects in this blog post by entomologist Michael Raupp.

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