This Week in the Woods November: Week One

This Week in the Woods, we encountered a mass of white fluff on an alder that wiggled a bit when we passed our hands over it. This was a clump of **woolly alder aphids** – tiny insects dressed in waxy white tutus – and what you're seeing in this photo is a mass of them with their rumps in the air. As noted in this post from the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee's "Bug Lady," the "wool" may deter predators or help the aphids float through the air. It isn't consistent in form – some of it looks like cotton ball tufts, but there are also long, white streamers extending from the fuzz. Woolly alder aphids have a complex life cycle that includes two host trees – silver maples and alders – and a reproductive cycle that includes both live birth of female clones and egg laying. In theory, the cloning stage occurs on silver maples, but we saw it in action in macro views of this clump. Note:

these insects are close cousins of “boogie woogie” beech blight aphids, known for their vigorous synchronized movement (a.k.a. boogie-ing).

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

We found a large cluster of **Pleurotos mushrooms** growing from the side of a tree in the backyard of the Northern Woodlands office. Pleurotos is the oyster mushroom genus. The fungi in the picture are likely either true oyster mushrooms, *P. ostreatus*, or (our best guess) another late-appearing species, *P. pulmonarius*. As noted by Lawrence Millman in *Fascinating Fungi of New England*, oyster mushrooms have value beyond their good looks and culinary potential; their mycelia can break down hydrocarbons, making them valuable in cleaning up contaminated sites.

If you’re out in a wetland, look for the dinosaur head-shaped seed pods of **arrow arum**. They’re busting open now, revealing clusters of their child-pleasing slimy seeds (fun to put in each other’s hair). As noted in this profile from The Chesapeake Bay Program, the seeds are also popular with aquatic wildlife, including ducks and muskrats.

Common yarrow is still in bloom in the meadow, a benefit to small wasps and some other late-season pollinators. As noted in this profile from the U.S. Forest Service, this tough and wide-ranging plant has been used for various medicinal purposes, including the treatment of burns and other wounds.

While walking through a stand of conifers, we encountered two immature **purple finches** that flitted down to take a closer look at us. You can read all about this species in this recent *Outside Story* article by Lee Emmons. As Emmons notes, the birds often visit winter bird feeders, and thanks to a Dartmouth College forester and Hanover legislator’s advocacy efforts, it’s the official New Hampshire state bird, fighting off a challenge from a chicken.

Finally, in recognition of deer hunting season, here’s a timely reminder to wear blaze orange in the woods. This **red eft** isn’t taking any chances. Efts are the immature, terrestrial form of eastern newts, and unlike their aquatic elders, they’ll soon be heading under logs and other shelter for the winter. Incidentally, that bright coloring has a benefit to efts other than helping hunters distinguish them from deer. It’s a warning to would-be predators about their toxicity. Here’s an *Outside Story* article by Vermont Center for Ecostudies’ co-founder and conservation biologist Steve Faccio describing the dire effects of these amphibians’ tarichatoxin, “which is biochemically very similar to tetrodotoxin, or TTX, found in pufferfish…[and] the most poisonous non-protein substance known to science.”

Our thanks to The Bailey Charitable Foundation and the Frank and Brinna Sands Foundation for helping to support this series.

Northern Woodlands
PO Box 270, Lyme, New Hampshire 03768
mail@northernwoodlands.org / 603-795-0660
www. northernwoodlands.org