

Field Notes – First Week of May
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THE GREENING UNDERSTORY

All April, I keep my eyes on the ground, looking for spots of color in the woodland duff, below the wind. This is where the greenness begins. The first week of May, my eyes are moving up, down, and all around; suddenly there is greenness at eye level and higher throughout the woods, even though the top of the canopy is still open to the sky. For just a few days, I really notice the woodland understory – a community of shrubs, young trees, and small trees all shining in the sun. By next week, “the trees that have it in their pent-up buds to darken nature and be summer woods” (Robert Frost, “Spring Pools”) will begin to block out the view of the sky, and the understory will be in shadow. For just a few days, it is *the* story.

Green rising: Young trees, small trees, and shrubs

YOUNG TREES: Sapling beeches, birches, tulip trees, hickories, and maples leaf out ahead of their elders, and thus have a week or so of full sun before the canopy begins to close in over their heads. These are shade-tolerant or semi-shade-tolerant species. They’ve made it past the seedling stage, a time of heavy mortality in the tree world, and have a chance at growing to maturity.

Beech



Sapling beech leaves (*Fagus grandifolia*), Gay City, May 7.

What can I say? These are exquisite. There’s no way my phone camera can capture the dance of the light on the leaves as they move in the breeze. They’re thin and flexible and beautifully pleated. When they first emerge, there are little hairs all along the margins of the leaves that catch light, too, and give each leaf a narrow “aura.”

Elm



Young Slippery Elm (*Ulmus rubra*), our yard, May 8

Slippery elm leaves are similar in shape to beech leaves, with finely serrated edges, but they are thicker, opaque even when young, and have a raspy texture to the hand. American Elm leaves are identical in shape and thickness, but smoother to the touch.

Birch



Sapling Birch leaves, Hebron Center Trail, May 6

You'll see Yellow Birch and Black Birch saplings reaching out at into the sun the edges of the woods. They are considered "pioneer" species, because they colonize the land at the edge of the forest, germinating on bare soil or on fallen logs. Within a couple of decades, they're creating shade themselves, as adult members of the mid-succession

forest. Ooh, such vibrant pleated young leaves! It's hard to tell Black and Yellow Birch apart when they are this young. Both have shiny, golden twigs.



Sapling Gray Birch (*Betula populifolia*), Hebron Center Trail, May 6. Close-up of leaf, Wikipedia

Like the Black and Yellow Birches, Gray Birch starts out with golden bark, but it will change to white by the time it's mature. Its leaves are distinguishing, though – long and pointed. It tends to be multi-trunked.

SMALL TREES: These tend to be slow-growing species, adapted to low light. Most never get more than 25 feet high.

Musclewood



Musclewood or Ironwood or Eastern Hophornbeam (*Carpinus caroliniana*), Hebron Center Trail, May 5

This is one of my favorite understory plants, and that may be partly because I remember my grandmother pointing it out to me on a walk when I was a child and asking if I could see the “muscles” under the bark. It was not common in

the dry upland woods of Western Massachusetts where she pointed it out, so I learned to look for it and be pleased when I found it. It turns out to be one of the most common understory trees in Andover, especially along the Hop River. I am now accustomed to recognizing it by the small size and distinctive sheen of its early leaves, but I still look for confirmation in the bark!



Musclewood trunks, Gay City

Shadbush



Shadbush (*Amelanchier* sp.), Andover Lake Island, May 3



Close-up of Shadbush flowers (AKA Shadblow), our yard

For just about a week, the Shadbush bends and blows like a beautiful dream along the roadsides and forest edges. It is hard to photograph the blossoms, because the twigs and petals are in constant motion, responding to the spring breeze.

Its flowering has traditionally been associated with the running of the shad, a bony fish used by Native Americans as fertilizer for their crops. According to historian Howard S. Russell, they “built bush or stone weirs out into the stream from each bank, then arranged wicker cages between. When the shad rushed up the stream, the weirs herded them into these narrow waters, where they were trapped. On a big job like this ‘all the neighbors, men and women, forty, fifty, a hundred join and come in to help freely’”(quote from *Indian New England Before the Mayflower* by Howard S. Russell, p. 166, with internal quote by Roger Williams, 1794). The shad were then brought to the fields in baskets, and two or three fish were placed in each corn hill.

I’ve kept records on the earliest bloom since 1990. This year’s date was April 30. Does anyone have dates for the shad run out of Andover Lake for these years?

Striped Maple or Moosewood



Striped Maple (*Acer pensylvanicum*), May 7, Gay City



Close-up of Striped Maple leaves, May 7, Gay City

This is an understory tree I associate with trips through northern New England, especially Maine. I don't see it on my walks in Andover, so I was surprised to see its large leaves in a single grove on the Red Trail in Gay City

yesterday, very close to the spot where I noticed Round-leaved Violet a few weeks ago. It likes cool, moist slopes, as does the violet. Its bark is tasty to deer. The leaves will continue to enlarge to about the size of a hand.



Striped Maple bark. You can see other saplings with dark bark behind it in this grove.

SHRUBS:

Maple-leaf Viburnum



Maple-leaf Viburnum (*Viburnum acerifolium*)

Most years, I hardly notice Maple-leaf Viburnum until it blooms in June, and then I forget it again until its leaves turn a very lovely pinkish-orange in the fall, and it produces purple fruits. This year, I'm noticing it early and enjoying its contribution to the many textures and shades of green in the understory.

Speckled Alder



Speckled Alder (*Alnus incana*)

These leaves of this shrub are highly pleated, like birch leaves, but they're without teeth and rounded at the tips, and there's always a tinge of yellow in them. The bark is dull and speckled with whitish lenticels.

Highbush Blueberry



Highbush Blueberry (*Vaccinium corymbosum*)

Promise of summer sweetness.

There were lots of new birds in the woods this week, too: Ovenbirds, Scarlet Tanagers, Veerys, Baltimore Orioles, Catbirds, Redstarts, Yellow Warblers, Common Yellowthroats. . . There is always more than I can notice, never mind photograph and write down, and even as I write, the understory story is changing. Just a few more short items:

POLLINATORS

This week's butterfly:



Cabbage White (*Pieris rapae*), May 5, our yard (Photo from Wikipedia).

New on the ground:

Poison Ivy



Poison Ivy (*Toxicodendron radicans*), May 5, Townsend Road
“Leaves of three, let it be. . .”



Wild Strawberry (*Fragaria virginiana*), May 6, our yard
Well, not these leaves of three . . .

Till next week. Here's a verse that always comes to mind at this time of the year.

Spring Pools

**These pools that, though in forests, still reflect
The total sky almost without defect,
And like the flowers beside them, chill and shiver,
Will like the flowers beside them soon be gone,
And yet not out by any brook or river,
But up by roots to bring dark foliage on.**

--Robert Frost, ("Spring Pools," first stanza)



Vernal pool, Gay City, May 7