

Field Notes – Second Week of May

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THE PASTEL OVERSTORY

Last week, the understory was greening, but the tops of the trees were still mostly bare. This week, we're seeing tender, young leaves unfolding at the tops of the trees in full sunlight. Before the full development of the chlorophylls (photosynthetic pigments), "accessory pigments" are visible in the developing leaves: carotenoids (which look yellow and orange) and xanthophylls (red). Carotenoids assist chlorophylls in the job of photosynthesis, harvesting wavelengths of light not directly accessible to the chlorophylls, and xanthophylls are thought to protect tender leaf tissues from damage due to excessive light. The result is a lot of light, bright tones overhead.

Because they're so high and far away, I can't see individual leaves very well, so I do a lot of tree ID by gestalt, picking up general impressions of the color, texture, and size of leaves. I think of this week as "maple week," because so much of the color at the tops of trees is due to the maples breaking bud.

Here are some of my "gestalt" ID key questions for the second week of May:

- **Is the haze yellowish-green and fuzzy?** This week, it's likely sugar maple in blossom, with a few leaves developing, perhaps. The fuzziness is due to the clusters of flowers held on long pedicels (filaments) so that they "ride the wind."



Sugar Maple flowers (*Acer saccharum*) against the sky



Sugar Maple flowers up close



Sugar Maple leaves just opening – always folded and droopy at first,

• **Is the top of the tree reddish?** That's Red Maple, almost certainly. From this distance, this tree appears to be just leafing out.



Red maple (*Acer rubrum*), Airline Trail, Hebron, May 13



Red Maple (*Acer rubrum*) leaves just opening as the samaras (fruit) are ripening. The samaras will detach from their twigs as the leaves mature.

Here's a lovely painting by William S. Robinson of the Florence Griswold artists' colony from the early 1900s. A lot of red maples bordering the stone walls! The tree in the center of the painting looks like a birch that has not yet started leafing out. (Gestalt ID for leafless birches: they're very "twiggy" trees.)



"Pasture in Old Lyme," by William S. Robinson (1861-1945) (image from MutualArt website)

<https://www.mutualart.com/Artwork/Pasture-in-Old-Lyme/71D39406525187F2>

Of course, it's ideal if one can find a branch low enough to the ground to confirm a gestalt ID! If you're not sure how to identify sugar maple leaves and red maple leaves by shape, here's a mnemonic:

The red maple leaf has 3 points (R-E-D). The sugar maple has -- well, more. Many people count the points as 5, but as you can see from the picture, it's a little more complicated than that. But it's more than 3!



R-E-D

Sugar

There are also Silver Maples and Norway Maples.



Silver Maple (*Acer saccharinum*) on Andover Lake, May 7

I don't tend to see Silver Maples in the woods or along roadsides, so I don't have "gestalt" to ID them while walking or driving. I find them drooping their branches over Andover Lake, where I can reach up to them from my kayak. Their samaras are large, heavy, and asymmetric in shape, unlike Red Maple samaras. They float; they tend to be transported as much by water as by wind. The leaves are deeply lobed. They'll be green soon, with whitish undersides, but now are showing off their accessory pigments.



Silver Maple samaras



Norway Maple (*Acer platanoides*) in leaf and flower, Airline Trail, May 13

Norway Maples are European trees, not native to New England, but they have been planted in North American cities as shade trees since the mid-1700s. Because they have been planted so much in cities, and because they leaf out so early, spring seems to come much earlier in urban areas than in the country. (I'm always amazed at the difference between Andover and Willimantic in April!) At the flowering stage, you can tell them from the sugar maples by the habit of the flowers; Norway Maple flowers stand upright in a bouquet, Sugar Maple flowers droop. The trees are considered invasive in CT.

- Is it putting on small, truly green leaves at the same time that it has long droopy golden catkins? It's probably a birch.



Black Birch (*Betula lenta*) leafing and flowering, May 13, Lake Road

- Does it have flat, broad leaves shining bright golden-green in the sun? Likely to be Tulip Tree.



Tulip Tree (*Liriodendron tulipifera*), Bishop Swamp, May 13



Tulip Tree leaf

The tulip tree leaves are still small this week, relative to the size they'll grow to, but they're not "folded up" or "droopy," the way maple leaves are this week, or "thin and pointy," like birch leaves.

There are others, of course, but this week, the maples, and birches have been the trees with the most color in their tops. The tulip trees are less common, but worth noticing if you have one nearby.

Some treetops are identifiable right now by their buds alone. Although there are a lot of dead White Ash trees along the roads of Andover, thanks to the Emerald Ash Borer, I'm delighted to see how many are still with us. Their male flower buds are absolutely distinctive this week – like big round black knobs on the ends of twigs:



White Ash (*Fraxinus americana*) male flower buds—far away and closer up

I'm looking forward to Oaks, Hickories and White Ash leaves next week.

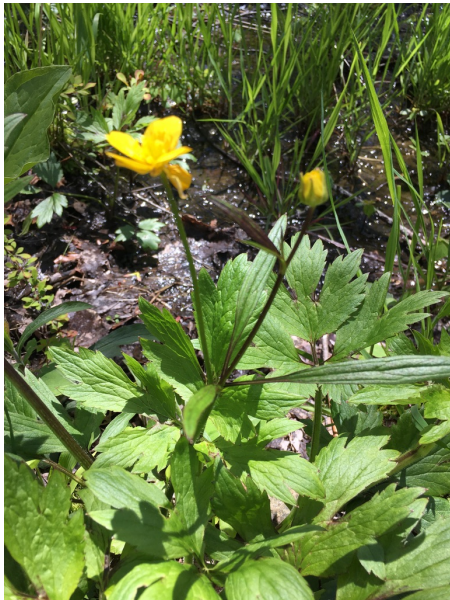
Meanwhile, on the ground, the rhizomatous ephemerals are on their way out. There are still many Wood Anemones and Trilliums in bloom, but this is their last hurrah.

Coming in are the fibrous-rooted perennials. Here are a few fresh, new faces full of carotenoids:



Bulbous Buttercup (*Ranunculus bulbosus*), Airline Trail, Hebron, May 13

This is a nonnative buttercup that is thoroughly naturalized in our area. It blooms a little before the Common Buttercup.



Swamp Buttercup (*Ranunculus septentrionalis*), Airline Trail, Hebron, May 13.

The Airline Trail goes through a Maple Swamp – the perfect place to find the native Swamp Buttercup and other species that like it wet.



Golden Alexanders (*Zizia aurea*), May 13, Hop River Trail

A cheerful-looking native member of the Carrot Family, related to the nonnative Queen Anne's Lace. This plant also likes to have its roots in moist soil. It's abundant along the Hop River.

Even as I write this on Friday morning, the world outdoors is changing. Gotta get out and watch it!

“My soul can find no stair to Heaven unless it be Earth's loveliness.”
— Michelangelo

Till next week, friends. Be safe and well—and if you can be, outdoors.