

**Field Notes – Fourth Week of May**  
**Carrie Crompton**

**THE GREEN OVERSTORY**

The sycamores and black locusts have at last begun to leaf out, and every living deciduous tree and shrub in our area is green. In the four weeks of May, the buds on branches and twigs have gotten their wake-up calls to break dormancy and BURST into active growth.



**Hop River, April 24, 2020**

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The wild rumpus of photosynthesis is in full swing—each leaf in the carpet, the understory, and the overstory is absorbing photons of sunlight and molecules of carbon dioxide and water at a mad rate and turning these into carbohydrates for their own growth and maintenance, while exhaling oxygen as a byproduct. Let us breathe deeply now! There are four more months of this gala to come—scented air, birds and bees, cricket song, the murmuring of the trees—before the leaves begin to senesce, and the party begins to wind down.

So far, I've seen no evidence of gypsy moth caterpillars—here's hoping for a dense, deep-green canopy all summer.

**TIME-TRAVEL, CONTINUED:**  
**COMPARING NOTES WITH THOREAU**

I had been learning the identities of wildflowers wherever I lived—in Massachusetts, North Carolina, California, Pennsylvania, and here in Andover—and keeping records on their first bloom dates for forty years before I learned that Henry David Thoreau had done exactly the same thing in Concord. I started reading his journals online to find the passages about wildflowers and trees, and then discovered that the best bits had already been extracted and published in a beautiful book, *Thoreau's Wildflowers*, by Geoff Wisner (Yale University Press) in 2016. This week, I decided to compare my notes for this year with some of Thoreau's from the 1850s.

There are 100 miles between Thoreau's stomping grounds and mine, and over 150 years of changes in land use and air quality. Where he lived in an agricultural area that was nearly clear-cut of trees, I live in a forest fractured by roads and house lots. In his time, whitetail deer were scarce, for lack of habitat; now, they are overabundant, and causing great changes in the forest understory. And YET—I see many of the same things Thoreau saw at roughly the same time. Some years he saw things earlier, some years later. The same is true for me. (Climate change may have already shifted things a little, but I can't say as the shift is big enough for me to notice in terms of wildflower phenology in Massachusetts and Connecticut.)

So, for this week's field notes, I thought it would be fun to look for some of the flowers Thoreau reported in the last week of May in the 1850s. I have reproduced some of his journal entries (culled from Geoff Wisner's book) with my corresponding observations—and some photos, of course! His notes are in [blue ink](#), mine in black.

### May 20, 1852

All flowers are beautiful. . . Some apple trees in blossom. Most are just ready to burst forth, the leaves being half-formed.



**Apple tree (*Malus domestica*), May 20, Hebron Center Trail**

Thoreau was very enthusiastic about apples. In his essay “The History of the Apple Tree” he says: “[The apple tree \(\*Pyrus malus\*\) belongs chiefly to the northern temperate zone. Loudon says that it ‘grows spontaneously in every part of Europe except the torrid zone’ . . . . We also have two or three varieties of the apple indigenous in North America. The cultivated apple tree was first introduced into this country by the earliest settlers, and it is thought to do as well or better here than anywhere else. Probably some of the varieties which are now cultivated were first introduced into Britain by the Romans.](#)”

Ever since I first read that line about “two or three varieties . . . indigenous in North America,” I’ve wondered if I’ve ever seen an indigenous apple. How can one tell? I see a lot of “undomesticated” apple trees in bloom here in Andover and Hebron right now, and I expect they are all naturalized progeny of European stock, maybe the great-great-great descendants of Roman trees. The scent of the flowers takes me back to childhood, and the first time I smelled an apple blossom in the back yard.



**May 20, 1852**

A lady's slipper well budded and now white.



**Pink Lady's-Slippers, May 28, Rail Trail**

Lady's-slippers are white for a couple of days, and then the color starts deepening from a pale blush to a deep rose. I saw my first "white" one this year on May 19; HDT recorded his on May 20. I photographed the cluster on the right on May 28. It's a good year for them; I'm seeing many on the Rail Trail and in Gay City.

**May 21, 1953**

Landed [on the Island] beyond the grapevine bower and cleared out the spring of leaves and sticks and mud and deepened it, making an outlet and it soon ran clear and cold. The cress, which proves to be the rock cress, or **herb of St. Barbara**, is now luxuriant and in bloom in many places along the river, looking like mustard.



**Winter Cress (*Barbarea vulgaris*), our yard, May 20**

This cress is naturalized from Europe, likely brought here as a medicinal. William Turner, a sixteenth-century English herbalist, described it thus: “*Barbarea herba groweth about brokes and water sydes. It hath leaves lyke Rocket, wherefore it may be called in English woundrocket, for it is good for wounds*” (qtd. in *The History and Folklore of North American Flowers*, Timothy Coffey, Houghton Mifflin, 1993). It has many names, including Land Cress, Poor-Man’s-Cabbage, Rocket, Rocket-Cress, Wound-Rocket, Yellow Cress, and Yellow Rocket. But when HDT mentions St. Barbara, it’s clear which plant he means.

**May 21, 1856**

**Chelidonium.**



**Celandine (*Chelidonium majus*), May 21, Rail Trail**



I saw my first Celandine of the year on May 11; by May 21, the day HDT mentions it, it was well out on the banks of the old rail line. This is a naturalized European plant, common throughout. It was likely brought here for medicinal purposes (for skin problems).

**May 21, 1856**

*Rubus triflorus* [dwarf raspberry] abundantly out at the Sawmill Brook—how long? . . .



**“Dwarf Raspberry” (*Rubus* sp.), May 24, Parker Bridge Road**

I am not at all sure about which of the dwarf raspberry species I saw on Parker Bridge Road on May 24. It’s possible that it’s the same one HDT saw . . . it’s the first of the year for me, and it seems to have been the first of the year for him, too. *Rubus* species are notoriously difficult to identify. But it’s easy to tell the tall ones from the ground-hugging ones!

May 22, 1854

**Tall buttercup** a day or two. Dandelions for some time gone to seed.



**Tall Buttercup (*Ranunculus acris*), May 27, Hop River Trail. Naturalized.**

Notice the rich, bright quality of yellow in the buttercup flower. Thoreau contrasted this with the other yellows he saw . . . .

May 23, 1853

Today I am surprised by the dark orange yellow of the **Senecio**. At first we had the lighter paler spring yellows of willows . . . dandelion, cinquefoil, then the darker . . . and deeper yellow of the buttercup and then this broad distinction between the buttercup and the *Krigia* and *Senecio* as the seasons revolve toward July.



**Left: Dwarf Dandelion (*Krigia virginica*), May 24, Riverside Drive, Andover  
Right: Golden Ragwort (*Senecio aureus*), May 28, Gay City**

I had never thought to compare the intensity of the yellow pigments in early-season vs. later-season flowers, but now that HDT mentions it, I have to agree that the *Krigia* and *Senecio* flowers are a more orangey yellow than the



earlier Dandelions and Buttercups. It seems to me that it must be a matter of carotenoid composition—there are many different carotenoid compounds. The proportions of these compounds in the petals of a given species is surely a matter of genetics. But perhaps different proportions of carotenoids are attractive to different species of pollinators as the growing season progresses? That might be.

**May 26, 1852**

Walking home from surveying. – The fields are just beginning to be reddened with **sorrel**. . . . Channing says he has seen a **red clover** blossom – and heard a stake-driver.



**Red Clover (*Trifolium pratense*), May 24, near soccer fields. Naturalized.**



**Sheep Sorrel (*Rumex acetosella*), May 24, Rt. 316. Naturalized.**

I can only imagine how the sorrel would have looked on open fields in the 1850s; here, it's an old field weed, long naturalized, that spreads by fast-growing, shallow rhizomes. It is always to be found at the edges of my garden beds—one of the hardest old-field weeds to get rid of! Roger Tory Peterson, describes it as growing in “thin fields, roadsides, acid soils. Throughout.” According to my *Guide to Wildlife Food Habits* (Martin, Zim, and Nelson, Dover, 1951), the seeds and leaves are eaten by many species of ground-feeding songbirds. So it's not a worthless weed, and it does brighten the roadsides with a lovely copper color at this time of year.

**May 27, 1852**

The *Convallaria bifolia* [has] a strong but not very pleasant scent . . .



**Canada Mayflower, (*Maianthemum canadense*, formerly *Convallaria bifolia*), May 27**

I have looked for the opening of the Canada Mayflowers every year for decades— there are enormous carpets of it on the Red Trail in Gay City— but it never once occurred to me to get down on the forest floor to sniff the flowers. After reading HDT's comment on the scent, I gave it a try. He's right: it's not an attractive scent for humans. The flowers are visited by small bees, flies, and beetles that feed on the pollen, and to these pollinators, the scent is doubtless appealing.

**May 27, 1853**

How beautiful **the geranium flower buds** just opening, little purple cylindrical tubes or hoods—cigaritos—with the petals lapped over and round each other. One opens visibly in a pitcher before me . . .



**Wild Geranium (*Geranium maculatum*) in bud . . . and in full bloom, May 21, Townsend Road**



**May 29, 1854**

The **chokecherry** is leaving off to bloom now that the **black cherry** is beginning.



**Chokecherry (*Prunus virginiana*), Rail Trail, May 25**

The Chokecherry racemes look exactly like those of the Black Cherry – they bloom earlier, though, and the Chokecherries are always low enough to look at closely and photograph, because the mature plants are shrubs. The Black Cherry (*Prunus serotina*) blossoms are in fact beginning to bloom now, at telephone-wire height and higher.

**May 30, 1852**

Yellow lilies are abundant.



**Yellow Bullhead Lilies (*Nuphar variegata*), May 30, Gay City**

**May 30, 1852**

Now is the summer come. A breezy washing day. A day for shadows—even of moving clouds—over the fields in which the grass is beginning to wave. . . . **Cinquefoil and houstonia cover the ground, mixed with the grass and contrasting with each other.**



**Cinquefoil, Bluets (*Houstonia*), and grass, May 19, Gay City**

The same carpet, 100 miles away, 168 years later.

**June 5, 1857**

I am interested in each contemporary plant in my vicinity—and have attained to a certain acquaintance with the larger ones. They are cohabitants with me on this part of the planet, and they bear familiar names. Yet how essentially wild they are—as wild really as those strange fossil plants whose impressions I see on my coal.

I, too, am interested in each contemporary plant in my vicinity, and I have the same feeling that the plants I see in the surrounding woods and fields are part of evolutionary dramas that are unfolding through vast reaches of time. The annual re-leafing and reflorescence in my own back yard and woods and on nearby trails is thrilling for me, every single year. I don't want to miss greeting any of my old friends as they arrive on the scene.

But there comes a day, each spring, when I realize: "The world is green, and I am happy." The Black-throated Green Warbler is singing its song: "Trees, trees, murmuring trees," I take deep, slow breaths of the freshly oxygenated air all around me, and sit down in the shade. After a while, I amble over to the hammock for a deeper rest. There will be four more months of this greenness, lots to see and do and enjoy. But for now, as the I need to just rest and breathe.

So I think I'll take a break from writing next week. I'll be thinking of you as I walk and paddle, and I'll be back with field notes now and then throughout the summer.

Continue to be well, and breathe in this green season!

Carrie

P.S. If you have a chance to walk in Gay City this weekend, be sure to take the path that goes to the right from the edge of the pond. The Wild Azaleas bloom is at its peak, and it is absolutely spectacular.





**Wild Azalea (*Rhododendron periclymendoies*), May 29, Gay City**