

Field Notes – Fourth Week of April
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THE SPRING CARPET

Do you remember the children's books full of images that you could "paint" by brushing with water and dissolving the inks embedded in the paper? Well, April is like a page out of one of those books in which the bottom of the page has been brushed: the trees are still line drawings, but we have color on the ground (and the sky, of course!)



Pennsylvania sedge (*Carex pensylvanica*) carpeting the Hop River floodplain, April 29.

The flush of native green on the floor of the woods this past week is not grass, but rather a sedge. If you pluck a single blade and roll it between your fingers, you'll feel that it's not round, like a blade of grass, but triangular – you can feel edges. ("Sedges have edges.")

The predominant sedge carpeting the floodplain of the Hop River and many open woodlands is Pennsylvania Sedge. It emerges and flowers at about the same time: here is its flower:



Pennsylvania sedge (*Carex pensylvanica*) in flower, Gay City, April 16.

I understand that Pennsylvania sedge has become a popular replacement for lawn turf species, because it requires no mowing (it never gets more than about 6" tall) and little watering (it's adapted to mesic conditions). It grows from long rhizomes and does best in light shade. I have not yet seen a residential sedge lawn. I would like to.



Tussock Sedge (*Carex stricta*) Gay City, lower pond, April 20.

Another sedge that's blooming now is Tussock Sedge (*Carex stricta*), which sinks its rhizomes into the mud at the edges of ponds and lakes. The last year's dead leaves do not decay; the new growth just comes out on top of them, where it is held above the water. The west side of the island in Andover Lake is consists of spreading population of tussock sedge, where a good number of Red-winged blackbirds defend their nests. This photo shows the flowers just before they opened this week. (When they open, you can see the light-colored pollen.)



Red Trillium (*Trillium erectum*) on Townsend Road, April 25.

Most of the spring ephemerals were still on display this past week; only the Bloodroot had gone to seed. The Trout Lilies and Spring Beauties are having a banner year down by the Hop River. And the Trilliums are finally out – here's the first I found on Townsend Road. Like the other April ephemerals, it is rhizomatous, and forms clusters. In Andover, these clusters tend to be small. But each individual inflorescence is huge compared to that of a hepatica, anemone, or trout lily flower. The color is so rich, it always makes me think of velvet. (You sometimes see ivory-colored trilliums of the same species.)



Cut-leaved Toothwort (*Cardamine concatenata*) on recently flooded soil near the Hop River.

Another new ephemeral for this week is Toothwort (*Cardamine concatenata*). I don't see this in many places, but there have always been a few along the Hop River. It likes a wet spot. It's a native member of the Brassicaceae, the family that includes broccoli, cauliflower, radishes, and cabbages. When I was learning plant nomenclature back in the '70s, this family was known as the Cruciferae – cross-bearing – for its 4-petaled flowers.

It is a native plant.



Pennsylvania Bittercress (*Cardamine pensylvanica*).

Another native brassica in the same genus is Pennsylvania Bittercress, which salts our lawns with tiny white flowers in spring, many of which are transitioning from bloom to seed right now. Pennsylvania Bittercress has been out since mid-March and is now going to seed. Its seed pods are long and linear.



Common Whitlow Grass (*Draba verna*). Its seedpods are roundish.

Common Whitlow Grass, a brassica native to Europe, has also been blooming since mid-March. At first the flower stalks are less than an inch long; the blooms are barely a half-inch off the soil. By now, the stems have elongated to 4-5", and the effect is airy. These tiny flowers bloom around exposed rock, and I often see them in cemeteries.



Garlic Mustard (*Allaria petiolaris*).

The brassiest of the brassicas must be the biennial Garlic Mustard, which has just begun to open its flowers in the past couple of days. It will carpet the roadsides and park paths throughout the month of May. It produces hundreds of seeds per plant, which grow easily in almost any kind of soil, and flower the second year, producing hundreds more seeds. The plant is considered not only invasive but noxious, because it releases chemicals into the soil that can reduce the germination and growth of other species. It is edible; the greens can be eaten fresh or cooked, and the roots are rather horseradishy. I nibble on it now and then, and eradicate it whenever I can.

I just want to mention a few more additions to the carpet coloration this week.

Here's a beautiful mix of Chickweed and Gill-o'er-the Ground:



Chickweed (*Stellaria media*) and Gill-o'er-the-Ground (*Glechoma hederacea*), April 28.

Chickweed and Gill-o'er-the-Ground are European weeds that have been naturalized in New England for a long time. They're not considered invasive, though they will take over any untended lawn space they encounter. The Dandelion in the middle of this photo will probably do just fine in the mix.



Field Pussytoes (*Antennaria neglecta*), April 16.

Field Pussytoes are part of our native groundcover. There's a good stand in Townsend Cemetery right now, and a good stand in our front yard, too.

Thoreau described this plant in his journal on April 29, 1854: "The mouse-ear is now fairly in blossom in many places. It never looks so pretty as now in an April rain, covered with pearly drops. Its corymbs of five heads with one in the center (all tinged red) look like a breastpin set with pearls."



Dwarf Cinquefoil (*Potentilla canadensis*), waste ground near Andover Soccer Fields, April 20.

The presence of Dwarf Cinquefoil is a good indicator of impoverished soil. So good that somebody can thrive there!

POLLINATORS



Clouded Sulphur (*Colias philodice*), April 25, Andover soccer fields. (Photo from Wikipedia).

Even in the cloudy, wet conditions we've had most of this week, I've seen LOTS of bumblebees and many small bees and flies out and about. And on sunny April 25, I saw several Clouded Sulphurs on the soccer fields. These butterflies have several generations per season; the first come out from overwintering chrysalises. The ones I saw were males, with black-bordered wings. The females lack the black border.

One last picture:

Look who's enjoying a perfect morning at the Andover soccer fields – besides me!



Chipping Sparrow in a Crabapple, Andover Soccer Fields, April 29