

Field Notes  
Carrie Crompton  
October 15, 2023

## **IDES OF OCTOBER – FIRSTS AND LASTS**

### **BIRDS**

The birds in the yard are changing the guard. Our hummers left September 16; a migrant passed through on September 28. The catbirds left around October 1.<sup>1</sup> Flocks of migrating chipping sparrows have been visiting for the past month, but I haven't seen any in the past week. The last of the summer-resident phoebes are still here, calling, flying from perch to perch, catching insects on the wing. The first of the winter-resident juncos have not yet arrived from the north. They tend to arrive October 17–25, depending on the October winds and weather conditions. The juncos' arrival will probably coincide with the phoebes' disappearance, any day now. Starlings are flocking, and the grackle conventions in leafless trees will soon begin.

### **INSECTS**

The surround-sound of crickets and katydids continues. There were fewer katydids in our yard this year than usual, but many, many field crickets. I think that their music is a great mood regulator for me; it engages some frequency of my brain waves, and I feel good. This summer, it cheered me on through days of relentless heat and humidity. I'm paying special attention to the concerts now, knowing that the last chirps, trills, and "Katy's" are around the corner.

I'm still seeing many bumblebees on the asters and the remaining garden flowers. Until about October 1, many were still collecting pollen, still growing their colonies. Since October 1, I have noticed that they're just collecting nectar in the warmest parts of the gardens – which happen to be where the chrysanthemums are in bloom.

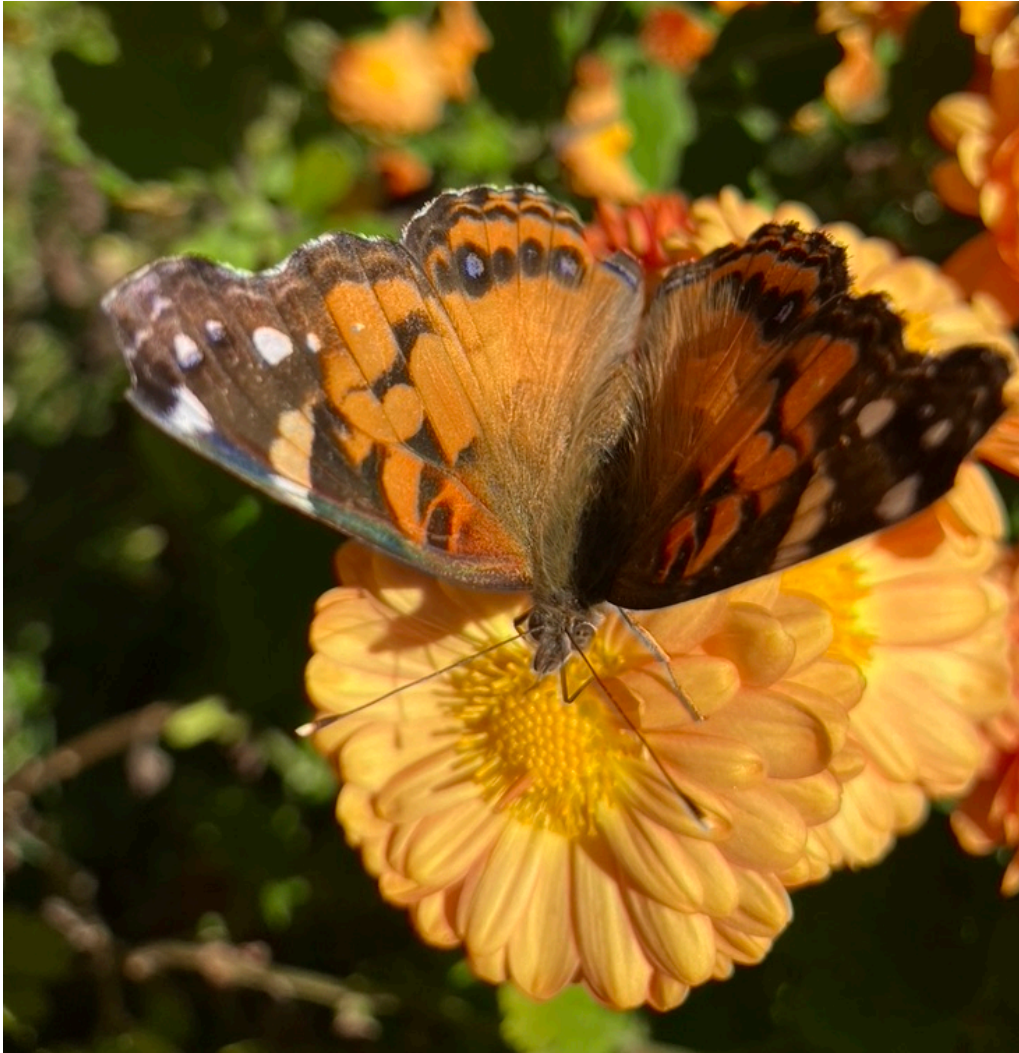


**Bumble bees nectaring on chrysanthemums, October 13, our yard**

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<sup>1</sup> The hummers' season was May 4–September 16. The catbird season was May 1–October 1. These are pretty normal dates for our yard.

The garden mums attract a lot of nectar-seeking insects:



**American Lady butterfly on chrysanthemum, October 13, our yard**

The American Lady caterpillars develop on the foliage of the field pussytoes (*Antennaria spp*). I saw my first American Lady adult of this year on August 5. Then, once a week or so through September and early October, I saw another. This one, October 13, wasn't a fresh adult; it had some broken edges on its forewings. Was it the last I'll see this year?





**Transverse-banded flower fly, October 13, our yard**

Almost every mum flower has a flower fly on it. The plant provides pollen and nectar for the flies – and likely the flies provide late-season food for the phoebes.



**Ailanthus webworm moth, October 13, our yard**

This is a diurnal moth. The caterpillar (“webworm”) stage eats ailanthus (Tree of Heaven) leaves. It’s considered to be harmless to other trees. There are no ailanthus trees within sight of our yard, but I always see this moth in October, so I think there must be one or some nearby.



I saw relatively few Monarchs this year, and the first ones seemed to be late. They've shown up in our yard intermittently since June 23, with at least one every day during the second week of September. I captured one caterpillar on September 8 and brought it indoors with milkweed stalks in a 5-gallon bucket and a cooking screen over the top. The butterfly eclosed on October 9. It stayed attached to its chrysalis on the underside of the screen for hours. I took it with me, screen and all, on a visit to the David Hayes Sculpture Fields in Coventry, and took this photo there. You can see the shadow of the butterfly and its chrysalis on the rusted iron of the sculpture (and shadows of other sculptures and myself on the grass).



**Monarch butterfly on David Hayes sculpture, Coventry, October 9**

Was this to be my last Monarch of the year? No! On October 12, I saw another one. It seemed to be exploring the immediate gardens to get its bearings. It may have been the last one to eclose in our yard for this year. I might see a few more flying south on the north winds before the end of October.



It seems to have been a good year for the Black Swallowtail butterflies. I saw a butterfly on the dill plant on our deck on September 7:



**Black Swallowtail butterfly on dill, September 7, our yard**



Ten days later, I found seven small Black Swallowtail cats on the dill. I brought them, potted plant and all, into the greenhouse.



**Black Swallowtail caterpillar, first instar, on dill plant, September 17**

The cats ate the dill plant down to a skeleton, getting fatter each day as they developed their mature coloration.



**Maturing Black Swallowtail cats on dill, September 26**

At this stage, they had a dill-green color with yellow spots that looked almost like the nodes of the leaves they'd chewed down to round, yellowish stumps.

As they continued eating, the proportion of black to green coloration increased. I wondered if the black coloration would have helped it to “disappear” as it looked for a place to pupate, but I found an article suggesting that the fall-developing Black Swallowtails tend to become blacker in response to daylength:



the black skin helps them to absorb sunlight (and thus stay warm and able to move) better than mostly green skin.<sup>2</sup> (I gather that the regulation of melanin pigments in larvae is hot topic in genetics and biochemistry, and it's complicated.)



**Really mature fall-maturing Black Swallowtail cats, September 28**

On September 30, there were no leaves left on the dill, and no cats to be seen . . .

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<sup>2</sup> Backyard Biology: "A Different Look – For a Good Reason," October 18, 2013  
<https://bybio.wordpress.com/tag/caterpillar-color-variation/>

Oh yes! Here was one that had crawled about ten feet away from the potted plant and attached itself to a structure in the greenhouse with a sticky, silky cremaster at its tail end and two thin, silky threads toward the head end.



**Black Swallowtail caterpillar preparing to pupate, September 30**

The next day, it shed its caterpillar skin, revealing its chrysalis.





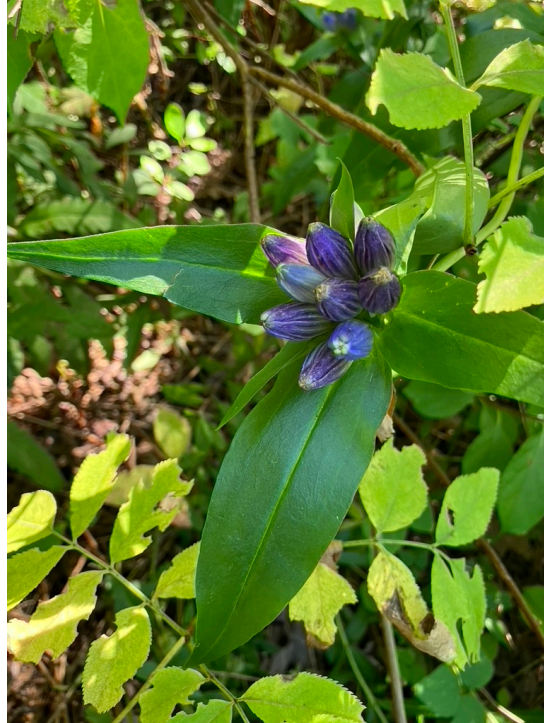
**Black Swallowtail chrysalis, October 14, 2023**

I think I've seen my last Black Swallowtail caterpillar of the year. This one may well spend the whole winter in this form, and emerge next spring. I'll keep an eye on it, and let you know when it ecloses!



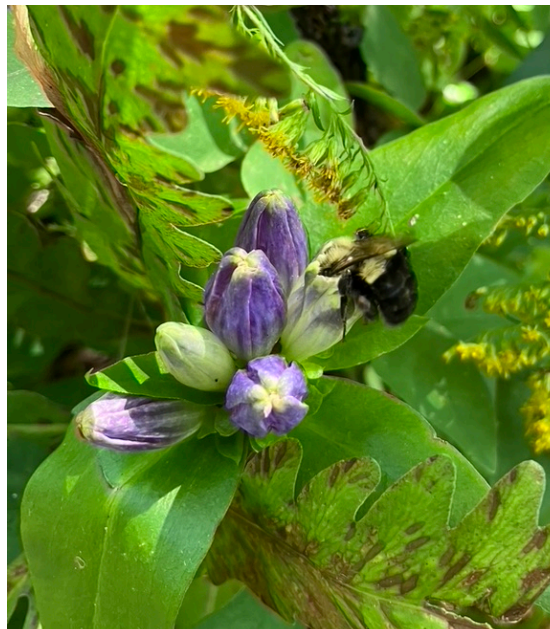
## FLOWERS

I found the first fully blue blossoms of closed gentian (*Gentiana clausa*) at Gay City on September 1. By September 7, there were many, many flowers in bloom. These are low-growing, sprawling plants that like to have wet feet – I usually see them growing next to ponds.



**Blue-purple blossoms of closed gentian, September 7**

On September 17, the nectar must have been at peak flow; the flowers were attracting a lot of bumble bees.



**Bumble bee opening the door of the closed gentian, September 17, Gay City**



It takes the bee a lot of noisy, buzzy effort to get one of these flowers open, but it appears to be worth it to both the bees and the gentians. When I looked at the spent flowers and fruits the other day, I found huge numbers of developing seeds. Go, closed gentians! It's a long time till next September, and I won't see that special gentian blue again until then.



**Closed gentian fruits and seeds, October 13, Gay City**

Finally, here's a first and a last in one – the first opening of the last wildflower of the year, witch hazel (*Hamamelis virginiana*). I always look for it over my head, against a blue sky. No bees in this photo, but the flowers are insect pollinated, by the last pollies that are active in October.



**Witch hazel blossoms, Gay City, October 6**

When I see the first yellow ribbons of the witch hazel, I know I will not be recording the first blooms of any other native flower species until spring.

With all renounced as I had thought,  
There still remains a heart  
Dyed with the flowers.  
— Saigyō<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Translation of haiku by Saigyō Hōshi (1118–1190) by R. H. Blyth, *Haiku* vol. 3, Hokusaido Press, 1952.