



the prairie falcon

VOL. 32, No.1
SEPTEMBER 2003

NORTHERN FLINT HILLS AUDUBON SOCIETY,

P.O. Box 1932, MANHATTAN, KS 66505-1932

September 13, 2003
ANNUAL ICE CREAM SOCIAL
NATURE WALKS

Please join the NFHAS for our

ANNUAL BIRD & BUTTERFLY TOUR AND ICE CREAM SOCIAL

Pat Yeager will give a tour of

THE CECIL BEST BIRDING TRAIL

(featuring newly planted trees)

THE MICHEL-ROSS NATURE PRESERVE

(which was formally dedicated this spring)

SOJOURNER TRUTH BUTTERFLY GARDEN

We will meet at 11:30 AM on Saturday, September 13th at Howie's Recycling parking lot for the Nature Walk, and the Ice Cream Social begins at 2:00 PM. in the Sojourner Truth Park at 10th & Pottowatomie. Bring your family and friends for a pleasant afternoon of refreshments and entertainment!

Field Trips

BEGINNING BIRDWATCHING WALK

Join us Saturday, Sept. 13th and every second Saturday at 8 AM in the Ackert/Durland parking lot on the KSU campus. We will carpool to a local birding hotspot and should return by about 11 AM. Birders of every age and interest level are welcomed. Children are especially encouraged to attend. Call Dave Rintoul or e-mail him at drintoul@ksu.edu for more information.

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CONTRIBUTORS:

DRU CLARKE

PETE COHEN

THOMAS MORGAN

PATRICIA YAEGER

UPCOMING DATES:

SEPT 13 Annual Ice Cream Social
Bird & Butterfly Tour

Oct 4 River Festival See pg. 6

Oct. 3-5 KOS Fall Meeting See pg. 6

Oct 11 Beginning Birding, Sam
Ackert/Durland Parking Lot

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Berry Picking

dru clarke

*"Skin me," say Brer Rabbit, "Pull out my ears, snatch off my legs an chop off my tail,
but please, please, PLEASE, Brer Fox and Brer Bear, don't fling me in dat brier-patch!"*

"De Tar-Baby" from Uncle Remus Stories

(Song of the South), by Joel Chandler Harris

Come June, near summer solstice, an atavistic strand of DNA, tethered to hunter-gatherer roots, activates: It's berry picking time. Prickly canes arched and swaying, betrayed by the dull green leaves whose bone-white undersides belly up in a breeze, the brier patch beckons. Snow white flowers in a fruity genus of roses have bloomed, largely unnoticed, in early May. In their places are clusters of nipple-shaped berries, pertly waiting to be peeled off and into an open mouth.

It was agony waiting through the long summer days for the berries to finally ripen. As a kid at our summer place in the New Jersey highlands, the task of gathering wineberries, black caps, and blackberries fell to me. My brother always had more important things to do, and that was just fine with me because I could spend the better part of the morning by myself, exploring the woods in search of new patches of berry bushes that usually sprang up where there was a windfall, a tree blown down by wind, letting a circle of sunlight warm the humus and dormant seeds. A windfall indeed.

Dressed in long pants, I'd head out, armed with an archaic woven basket that seemed more fitting for my job than the galvanized pail with a bent bail hanging on its nail in the kitchen. (Its bottom was too deep for my ambition.) The basket's slats were stained by years of juice pressed out by the accumulating burden of berries. I vowed not to return to the house until the basket was brimming with the glistening fruit.

The wineberry, *Rubus phoenoclasius*, is an exotic invader from Eastern Asia, but a welcome alien on the East Coast. Its carnelian berries shone, polished by rain and attendant bugs' feet, not dusty and dull like its domestic raspberry cousins. The entire plant is sticky, plentifully equipped with tacky-glye glands and fine red hairs. Each fistful of berries stuck together in a pulpy mass, and jammed into my mouth, I'd get a distinctive taste of acrid bug blended with tart sweetness. I'd occasionally smell the scent of fresh-cut cucumbers and know a copperhead lay nearby. Often the hour glass-patterned serpent would be coiled on a warm rock, fat with a steady diet of chipmunk, and while I never stepped on one, my dog was bitten. The venom sent her reeling and staggering in ragged circles, but she survived, thanks to a vet's quick injection of antivenom. She was reluctant to accompany me after that.

I'd come back after a few hours, tick-ridden, chigger-bit, abraded by slashing canes, but completely victorious when a steaming cobbler, bubbly brown and

satin-topped, emerged from the oven. We'd fill bowls with it, dribbled with a hot, viscous berry sauce: plates wouldn't do to contain the red rivulets drooling like magma down the mountainous chunks.

Here in the Flint Hills, on our land, the berries are a hybrid type of *Rubus* of the raspberry persuasion, and, according to "Symonds" (*The Shrub Identification Book*), are undergoing rapid evolutionary change due to disturbance of the land by "white man," settlers bent on subduing the land. (Related blackberries and dewberries have a hard core left inside when separated from their receptacle. Our berries peel off easily into a waiting palm.) The brier patches are easy to spot: Just look for those bone-white undersides about three feet high riding on looping stems. Invariably the most luscious berries are hidden beneath the leaves, so a lot of sweeping with arms and legs is necessary to reveal them. Impatience can lead to disaster: many times my basket has overturned, spilling berries to the ground. A sack strung over a shoulder avoids this sort of mishap, but I haven't made one yet.

Madonna Stallmann has this gene, too. She recently shared with me her joy at finding an abandoned blueberry farm where she waded in glorious pickings, having entered "berry time."

Jane Bonser is another one afflicted: she used to pick the scattered wild strawberries in our weedy fallow ground. Her gift for this pleasure (and hours of labor) was a small but exquisite jar of jelly.

On the Bay of Fundy, during an early morning foray from our campsite, I found a cache of low bush blueberries which were quickly interred into a thick pancake batter. At Glacier National Park, not fifty feet from a bull moose, I picked blueberries growing along the edge of a stream. And, on the San Juan Islands on Haro Strait, from the shore where we watched for killer whales, I found a bounty of blackberries that our clever cook – a graduate student from University of California at Santa Cruz studying whale acoustics – folded into tender muffins. If your mouth isn't watering by now, you probably don't have the gene.

Brer Rabbit rhapsodized, "Dat's de place in all dis world I love de very best." Indeed, rabbits (as well as song and game birds and red foxes) do enjoy the brier patch habitat. I flushed one frantic cottontail this morning, while picking berries. Not enough for a cobbler, but enough to satisfy that hunter-gatherer gene.

© 2003 June 26, Dru Clarke



Deerberry (*Vaccinium stamineum*) grows in the acidic soils of the eastern United States, southeastern Ontario, and central Mexico. It has been found in the extreme southeastern corner of Kansas and in nearly one third of the counties of Missouri. While hiking in Bennet Springs State Park in Missouri on August 4th, I admired a five-foot tall shrub with clusters of plump, greenish to dark-reddish berries. I crunched my teeth into a dark red one. And I experienced a burst of sweetness with a taste like a novel, exotically-flavored apple.

Deerberries or huckleberries, as my dad calls them, ripen from July to September. My dad gathered them in the 1930s, when he had free time while he was in the Civilian Conservation Core. I've heard some of his old friends talk about boys who arrived at their camp, nigh about starved, and after a few weeks filled out considerable. I figure that those berries helped fill up some of those boys sort of round the edges. And I suppose that includes my dad.

As good as deerberries taste to me, they taste as sweet to a gray fox or a black bear and black bears are "coming back" in Missouri. Unfortunately, the ripe berries quickly fall to the dirt, where they are consumed by chipmunks and other creatures. Berries are consumed by birds, but according to some accounts, birds are less important than mammals for the dispersal of deerberry seeds. The sucrose concentration of at least one variety of deerberry is 5% of the wet weight. This concentration inhibits feeding by robins and other birds in the thrush family, because thrushes lack an enzyme which is needed to digest this sugar. I reckon that sucrose gives thrushes tummy aches, just like eating Jerusalem artichokes give some people tummy aches from excessive "wind."

The lack of sucrose in thrushes may be a selection pressure that helps keep sucrose levels low in berries that are dispersed by thrushes, according to one group of scientists. I always enjoy speculations, ... and

perhaps ... if deerberry colonizes a new region, a phenotype with low sucrose will be selected by thrushes that transport the seeds. And perhaps after that region has been initially colonized, a phenotype with higher sucrose concentration will be selected by critters with a sweet tooth, that disperse seeds within the region. Deerberry can spread vegetatively, reproducing from its rhizomes, but a study in South Carolina found a high degree of variation in DNA within many patches of bushes, suggesting that many bushes germinate from seeds.

Like others in the genus, *Vaccinium*, deerberry is considered a blueberry, but it has an unusual type of flower for a blueberry with stamens extending beyond the fused sepals of the corolla (giving deerberry its name, *stamineum*, which means 'stamens which stick out'). These pollen-dispersing tubes have pores along the last quarter of their length. Efficient pollinators cause the pollen to emerge from the anthers like pepper from a pepper shaker by vibrating them rapidly. The bee that does this with the greatest fidelity for deerberry stamens is *Melitta americana*. This leaf-cutter bee gathers pure loads of deerberry pollen which it takes to its nesting site where it wraps the pollen in large packets made from cut leaves for its offspring. The flowering season of deerberry is more than sufficient for this solitary bee to provision its nest. There is much diversity in the behavior of different bees that visit deerberry, but this is too large a subject to write about in this month's column.

Deerberry is an ornamental shrub with ruggedly attractive, crooked branches and dainty flowers. It could be a potential agricultural crop due to its tasty berries, which are sometimes more than 1/2 inch in width, and the bushes may produce a berry crop even in dry conditions. In some ways, the deerberry is a lucky charm for me. Touching it makes me feel closer to the vital, ongoing processes

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This past July a filler appearing in our local paper, the Wabaunsee County Signal-Enterprise, helped to add literary legitimacy to star-gazing. And about the same time I discovered that the law has been doing that as well.

The filler, “No sign that the human eyes can look upon is more provocative of awe than the night sky scattered thick with stars,” was attributed to an English novelist of the 1920s and 30s, Llewellyn Powys. As to the law, in 1993 the New Hampshire supreme court wrote a unanimous decision affirming a town’s disallowance of an internally illuminated sign. The Court said that the restriction “related to a municipality’s legitimate, aesthetic goals of preserving vistas, discouraging development that competes with the natural environment, and of promoting the character of a ‘country community’; it (was therefore) reasonable to infer that the municipality sought to preserve the vista of the mountains at twilight and the stars at night.....We now conclude that municipalities may validly exercise the zoning power solely to advance aesthetic values, because the preservation or enhancement of the visual environment may promote the general welfare.”

At the same time, there were two letters to the editor of the Lawrence Journal-World concerning a large brightly illuminated American flag which Douglas county commissioners permitted the Heritage Baptist Church there to put up, against the recommendation of the planning board. One letter-writer said that if you don’t like that bright flag, go to Iraq, look at the stars in the dark desert there, then come back and see if you don’t prefer to see that flag. The other writer said that her faith and patriotism did not require blotting out the stars. As was true with Galileo, as was probably true longer ago among the Sumerians, as is true today, an appreciation of the quiet stars is no guarantee of peaceful conversations. Still, it should be possible to peacefully gaze upward from mid-Sep. to mid-Oct. and quietly admire Mars.

Though losing half its special Aug. 23d glory by the end of September, Mars will still be a bright presence in the western evenings, without blotting out anything. It will set about 5a30 in mid-Sep. and about 3a30 by mid-Oct. Then look east and behold Jupiter returning in the east from about 5a45 to 4a20 during the same period. Mercury will be there, too, best from September 26 to October 12, below Jupiter. On the 23d and 24th the Moon will join them to celebrate the coming of autumn, which will have come at 5a47 CDT on the 23d. The Moon will be above them on the 23d, between on the 24th. Then on October 5-6, it will visit Mars, and if you’re good with binoculars several sources say you might see a greenish Uranus above Mars for about ten days starting the 10th. Saturn begins returning, amid Gemini, a little after 1a00 to a little before midnight through the period. Venus will be a coy maiden these evenings, setting about a half hour after the Sun to start, then lingering a little bit longer as time goes by. Meanwhile, like stagehands at work in a flyloft, the constellations are shifting the scenery we will see upon the ground: summer changing to autumn. At mid-Sep. sundown the elongated kite of Arcturus is towing green things offstage in the west, with the half-circle of the Crown and the keystone middle of Hercules trailing at the same task. The cross of the Swan and the triangle of Aquila the Eagle will be moving the Milky Way into a more east-west line, putting down red and yellow props in the process, with the big square of Pegasus and Lazy-V of Andromeda following and assisting. By mid-Oct. Perseus will be pushing up in the northeast like a large letter Pi, and with the three stars of Aries in a very short bent line further south, and the long reach of Cetus the whale still further south, will begin removing those seasonal reds and yellows. I think watching them at it gives of an extra sense of connectedness to, and of participation in, life. New Moon September 25, full October 10.

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**Can you identify this bird?
(answer at bottom left of page 3)**

RIVER FESTIVAL Oct. 4th

Some events include:

- 8-9am - Konza Prairie Nature Trail
- 9-11am - Van/Bus tours King's Creek Watershed (USGS)
- 9-12n - Research Exhibits in Konza Barn, parking available
at Konza Headquarters
- 11:15-12n Talk by Rex Buchanan on natural history
of local land and river resources or similar topic.

**55th Meeting of the Kansas Ornithological Society
Southwestern College, Windfield, Kansas
October 3-5, 2003**

For more information:
<http://www.ksbirds.org/FallMeeting2003.html>
or contact:

Chuck & Jaye Otte
613 Tamerisk
Junction City Kansas USA 66441
785-238-8800



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Edited by Cindy Jeffrey, 15850 Galilee Rd., Olsburg, KS 66520 (cinraney@ksu.edu)
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Introductory memberships - \$20 per year; then basic membership is \$35 annually. When you join the Northern Flint Hills Audubon Society, you automatically become a member of the National Audubon Society and receive the bimonthly Audubon magazine in addition to the *PRAIRIE FALCON*. New membership applications may be sent to NFHAS at the address below; make checks payable to the National Audubon Society. Membership Renewals are handled by the National Audubon Society and should not be sent to NFHAS. Questions about membership? Call toll-free, 1-800-274-4201, or email the National Audubon Society join@audubon.org.

If you do not want to receive the national magazine, but still want to be involved in our local activities, you may subscribe to the *PRAIRIE FALCON* newsletter for \$15 per year. Make checks payable to the Northern Flint Hills Audubon Society, and mail to: **Treasurer, NFHAS, P.O. Box 1932, Manhattan KS 66505-1932.**

RARE BIRD HOTLINE: For information on Kansas Birds, subscribe to the Kansas Bird Listserve. Send this message **<subscribe KSBIRD-L>** to this address **<listserv@ksu.edu>** and join in the discussions!

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