

VNPS Piedmont Chapter WILDFLOWER of the WEEK

WILDFLOWER #47 answer: SMOOTH ALDER (*Alnus serrulata*)

Wherever ground is boggy, smooth alder is right at home. Look for this member of the Birch family by a soggy ditch, in a spring-fed meadow or a wet field, or along the edge of a lake, pond, or river. Growing fast, sending up suckers and multiple gray-brown trunks, alder can form a dense thicket. For this reason smooth alder often serves to stabilize a bank, naturalize a pond margin, or restore a wetland.

Smooth alder (or tag alder, or gray alder) is just as great a boon to birds. In March, male flowers dangle together on catkins—four-inch long golden chains, creating the tasseled look of a Victorian den. Above them on the same shrub, female catkins are easy to miss—tiny, upright and red, splayed on the tips of twigs like painted fairy fingernails. Pollen blows onto the females, which ripen into *strobiles*—fruiting structures that look like cones. By fall, these woody little structures are full of thin, winged nutlets that resemble rudimentary angels. The alder cones last all winter, so you can shake nutlets into your hand or see them strewn on snow—that is, if eager resident and migrant birds haven't already cleaned them out.

This is not the end of smooth alder's gifts. It can be a critical component of woodcock habitat, concealing nests on the ground from predators. In spring and summer the leaves, wedge-shaped at the base and pointy at the tip, feed a grand total of 255 species of caterpillars. As if that is not enough, nodules on the roots fix nitrogen, which enriches the soil.

WILDFLOWER #48

Clues: This low-lying plant in the Heath family is a promise of Spring.

© Steve Mattan

