

The



Leaflet

“Strange and Unusual” Walk at Sweet Run State Park by Julie Olechnicki SUMMER 2026

February always seems a strange time to me, something like the twilight zone. I’m not sure if it is the lengthening days while the cold weather still has a firm grip, or if it’s the bird song while the landscape colors are still bleak. Something about the way nature seems to be trying to escape winter’s grasp while simultaneously reluctant to rouse from slumber. February was not a time when I thought I would be enthralled with a nature walk- I was so terribly wrong. My suspicions were confirmed by our Saturday, February 21 walk at Sweet Run State Park. My impression of oddities happening during this time is right—not in a bad way. The life that is stirring this time of year is impressive. Nothing seems to fit the box of what we might think of as “routine” horticulture or ecology.

Not thirty paces into the walk, we saw a pond sprinkled with Duckweed (*Lemna* spp.). It is a bane for every aquarium or pond keeper. Duckweed produces the smallest flowers in the plant kingdom. They have one stamen and one pistil, but you wouldn’t know it unless you had a microscope with you. (Unfortunately, none of us did. Our pocket folding magnifiers weren’t enough to do the trick.) We did not happen to see any frog eggs at the edge of the pond, which was disappointing because I would have loved to talk about how strange THAT process is.

We saw quite a few fruits persisting on Spicebush (*Lindera benzoin*) plants. We all agreed this seemed odd because usually the birds have cleaned that feast up by now. Emily had mentioned that her Dogwood at home has fruits persisting. Why could this be? No one was sure. Regardless, time marches on and the flower buds of the male plants are beginning to swell, with the females not far behind.

Moss was also very abundant on the walk, and we witnessed their yearly reproductive phenomenon. We saw last year’s sporophytes—tall (well, for them I guess, maybe ¼”) stalks called seta arise with a little capsule on the end that produces spores. Here’s where it gets crazy. The sporophyte is technically its own plant; it’s a diploid which means it contains both sets of genes needed for reproduction. That’s where the spores come from. Fertilized spores grow into “haploid gametophytes” which become the green cushy soft moss we all know and love.

Haploid- meaning it only has one set of chromosomes. These produce either a sperm or an egg that will combine via water (which is why we find moss growing primarily in damp places). That combination will create a, and the cycle continues!

Very strange indeed. Throughout the trail we encountered many Christmas Ferns (*Polystichum acrostichoides*) that reproduce the same way, but the big green fronds we see are the sporophytes.

Puttyroot orchid leaves (*Aplectrum hymale*) also made an appearance—very cutesy, very demure.



Common Haircap Moss (*Polytrichum commune*)

(continued on page 2)



“Strange and Unusual” Walk at Sweet Run State Park (continued)

Among the many oaks and maples we encountered on our walk in the woods were quite a few young and beautiful specimens of American Hornbeam (*Carpinus caroliniana*), American Beech (*Fagus grandiflora*), and Hackberry (*Celtis occidentalis*). Many were still young, which tells us the area we were moving through was farmland in years past, not dense forest. However, we passed one particularly large, very old oak with many low limbs. Low limbs suggest that this tree did not have close companions around as it was developing and thus would have spread farther horizontally to maximize photosynthesis. Phil Daley suggested that it would have been permitted to grow in

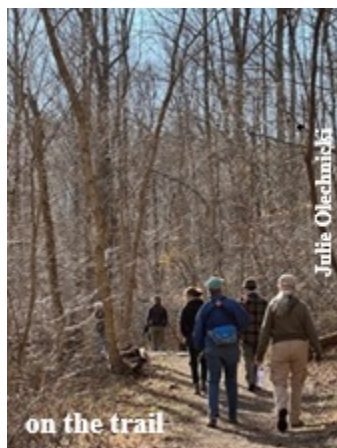


the field, perhaps as a shade tree for cattle. An old “Marker Tree” later marked our path, though unfortunately it had been cut down in years past. We saw Tulip Tree (*Liriodendron tulipifera*) winged fruits called samaras littering the ground. Each brown structure surrounding the core in the picture is a fruit. We discussed why tulip trees produce so many fruits and yet their seed germination is reliably low. What purpose does this serve the tree? Questions remained unanswered.

Moving on to the moment we had been waiting for, the elusive Skunk Cabbage (*Symplocarpus foetidus*). We found it after searching around a low lying, wet area. We did not see it until we were literally stepping on it. This plant solidifies my conclusion that “the strange and unusual” happens in February. It is called Skunk Cabbage because its blooms produce a rancid odor. It is pollinated primarily by flies and beetles. But it gets weirder. Skunk Cabbage flowers produce heat. This process is known as “thermogenesis” and happens mostly in the spathe (sheathing bract enclosing the flower cluster). This allows the plant to bloom through the cold of February- even melting the snow and ice around it if necessary. But why? The heat could certainly make the smell travel farther, but there is another interesting hypothesis that has recently



come to light: certain beetles have the ability to detect infrared rays, like a thermal camera. Ancient cycad plants are known to generate infrared radiation to attract their beetle pollinators through the same thermogenetic process. Is this an evolutionary trick the Skunk Cabbage has picked up as well? More questions than answers at this point!



The walk at Sweet Run State Park was as thought-provoking as it was enlightening. Thankfully, the leader of the walk, Dr. Emily Southgate, has a wealth of knowledge. Without her keen eye and that of the other seasoned VNPS members I wouldn't have picked up half of the things we saw! Much less learned about the depth and complexity and strangeness that is February in Loudon County, Virginia.



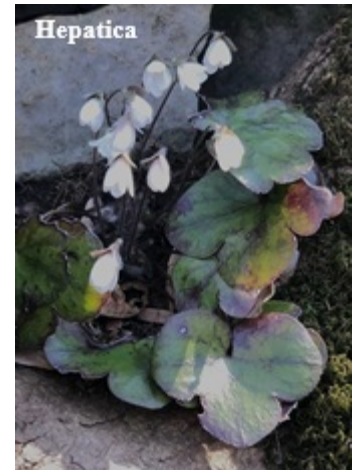
Ferry Hill Walk article and photos by Sally Anderson

Our March walk was at Ferry Hill across the Potomac River from Shepherdstown. Our leader was Rod Simmons, an extraordinary ecologist from Alexandria, who has led trips here many times. He explained that the level portions of the trail that goes down to the river are on old terraces from a time when the Potomac was young, and likely a braided river. Old cobble beds illustrate this and are often of quartzite brought down the river from the mountains, while the rocks below are limestones and dolomite.



Although the season was not far along, we saw some spring blooms,

especially as we went from the chilly and windy parking area to the lower slopes near the C & O Canal and the river. Spring Beauty (*Claytonia virginica*) was out, along with Round-lobed Hepatica (*Hepatica americana*) and Bloodroot (*Sanguinaria canadensis*). We also found Walking Fern (*Asplenium rhizophyllum*), always a favorite of mine. One always hopes to see the Shooting Star (*Primula media*) in bloom. We were too early,



although the plants were emerging in abundance on the old terraces above the river.

The magnificent old trees were the highlight of the trip. Rod explained identification characteristics of Black Maple (*Acer nigrum*), a tree of limestone habitats and rich floodplain forests. We visited an enormous Cucumber Magnolia (*Magnolia acuminata*) with two trunks and took note of the American



Arborvitae (*Thuja occidentalis*) growing with Redcedar (*Juniperus virginiana*) on the cliffs. Deer browse Arborvitae when they can, so it is mostly found

clinging to the steep cliffs.

We finished the walk along the canal and returned by a steep trail where we were treated to patches of Toadshade (*Trillium sessile*). Many thanks to Rod for this wonderful trip.





Trillium Walk by Deepak Janardhanan

Despite walking miles on end and marveling at grand vistas in Virginia's State and National parks, I had paid scant attention to the flora along the trails. That changed this year when I had the privilege of joining the VNPS Piedmont Chapter on their spring walks in Clarke and Warren counties. In particular, the Trilliums of Thompson Wildlife Management Area at the end of April offered a window to the splendor that is afoot during spring in Virginia.



Upon first stepping on the trail, a newcomer could assume that an explosion had strewn bits of wrapping paper all around. It takes a moment for the eye to discern the three distinct petals that make up each streak of white, before realizing that the forest floor is carpeted by White Trillium (*Trillium grandiflorum*). While mostly white, a few trilliums had purple blushes while the fully purple ones, we learnt, were the earliest to emerge.



Other native botanical highlights of the walk include: patches of Bear Corn (*Conopholis americana*), Wild Geranium (*Geranium maculatum*), Rue-Anemone (*Thalictrum thalictroides*), an abundance of Star Chickweed (*Stellaria pubera*), and Virginia Waterleaf (*Hydrophyllum virginianum*) that had yet to flower, and a lone Yellow Lady's Slipper orchid (*Cypripedium parviflorum*).

The Trillium Walk was not just a visual spectacle, it was a multi-sensory experience. The several species of birds nesting or passing through Thompson WMA chirping, warbling and pecking provided a fitting soundtrack. Touching the foliage of the Northern Spicebush (*Lindera benzoin*) for its allspice like fragrance, feeling the lush, dark soil that the forest has regenerated, and watching worms scamper through it rounds out the walk.

When an evening drizzle signaled the end of the walk, the group headed back to the trailhead in silence. Surely we were going over the many images of what we had already seen, to even notice the rain.

Kudos to the leaders from the Piedmont Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society, Sally Anderson and Emily Southgate. Sharing their knowledge and expertise in plant identification made for a remarkable experience. Thank you.





Shenandoah National Park Snead Farm Walk article and photos by Richard Stromberg

Shenandoah National Park moved its Wildflower Weekend from the second weekend of May to the first weekend this year, moving it away from Mother's Day and the State Arboretum Garden Fair. This was also fortuitous because the warmer than normal April had made everything bloom two to three weeks earlier than usual.

I led the walk on the Snead Farm Loop on Saturday, May 2. A small group met me at the magnificent Fringetree (*Chionanthus virginicus*) in the Dickey Ridge Picnic Area.



Fringetree

We walked through the Picnic Area and crossed Skyline Drive to the Snead Farm Road and turned right



Flowering Spurge

onto the Dickey Ridge Trail, where we saw a patch of Ramps (*allium tricoccum*), aka Wild Leeks. As we climbed up Dickey Hill we saw two blue Violet species flowers: Common Blue Violet (*Viola sororia*) and Wood Violet (*V. palmata*), differentiated by leaf shape, but Downy Yellow Violet (*V. pubescens*) had already gone to seed. Bloodroot (*Sanguinaria canadensis*) leaves were still showing, but flowers were long gone, and Cut-leaf Toothwort (*Cardamine concatenata*) leaves were turning yellow.

Near the top of the climb, we reached the open area used to launch hang gliders. The view south across Browntown Valley to Hogback Mountain and west to the ridges of the Massanutten is spectacular. The slope below us was yellow with Common Winter Cress (*Barbarea vulgaris*). More sun-loving plants like Flowering Spurge (*Euphorbia corollata*) grow here.

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Registration notices for Chapter events will be sent out three weeks before the event. Business meetings will conclude with a discussion of a current topic. Members are encouraged to join us.

Tuesday	Jun 2	3-5pm	Piedmont Chapter Business Meeting
Clarke County. Blandy Experimental Farm Library. All Chapter members are welcome to join the Chapter Board at these Meetings. Discussion will be about Phragmites, Pros and Cons.			
Saturday	Jun 6	1pm	Walk at Cedar Mountain Battlefield
Culpeper County. Enjoy botanizing at this historic site with Historical Ecologist, Dr. Emily Southgate. We will see oak trees that "witnessed" this Civil War Battle, as well as fields and woods that reflect the land cover in the mid-19th century, as well as protection of the landscape as a historic site. We will see the transition in the forests from early spring ephemerals to mid-summer flora.			
Tuesday	Jul 7	3-5pm	Piedmont Chapter Business Meeting
Clarke County. Blandy Experimental Farm Library. All Chapter members are welcome to join the Chapter Board at these Meetings.			
Saturday	Jul 11	9am	Abrams Creek Wetlands Preserve Walk
Frederick County. Shenandoah University Professor emeritus Woody Bousquet will lead a walk in the Abrams Creek Wetlands Preserve in Winchester.			
Tuesday	Aug 4	3-5pm	Piedmont Chapter Business Meeting
Clarke County. Sky Meadows Picnic Area weather permitting or Blandy Experimental Farm Library. All Chapter members are welcome to join the Chapter Board at these Meetings.			
Saturday	Aug 9	10am	Walk being planned
Tuesday	Sep 1	3-5pm	Piedmont Chapter Business Meeting
Clarke County. Blandy Experimental Farm Library. All Chapter members are welcome to join the Chapter Board at these Meetings.			

Shenandoah National Park Snead Farm Walk (continued)

We continued down the other side of Dickey Hill. As we neared the trail junction post we saw clumps of Yellow Lady's-slipper orchids (*Cypripedium parviflorum*). We turned left at the post onto Snead Farm Trail.

Elongated yellow Perfoliate Bellwort (*Uvularia perfoliata*) flowers seemed to hang from the middle of leaves. We saw Pawpaw (*Asimina triloba*) flowers on small trees, fruits to follow in the fall. Under the doubly-divided leaves of Wild Sarsaparilla (*Aralia nudicaulis*), balls of flowers arise from the ground looking like lollypops. We saw a few Four-leaf Milkweeds (*Asclepias quadrifolia*) plants with tightly closed buds that were showing color, but eventually we saw one with open flowers.

Just before the trail emerges from the woods at the white, Snead Farm barn were Red Currant (*Ribes rubrum*) bushes left from the old farmstead. Lots of still-green currants. (continued on page 7)





Shenandoah National Park Snead Farm Walk (continued)



Perfoliate Bellwort



Wild Sarsaparilla

The smallest flowers were Clustered Snakeroot (*Sanicula odorata*), with balls of yellow flowers with protruding, white stamens. Far showier were the pink Geraniums (*Geranium maculatum*).



Four-leaf Milkweed

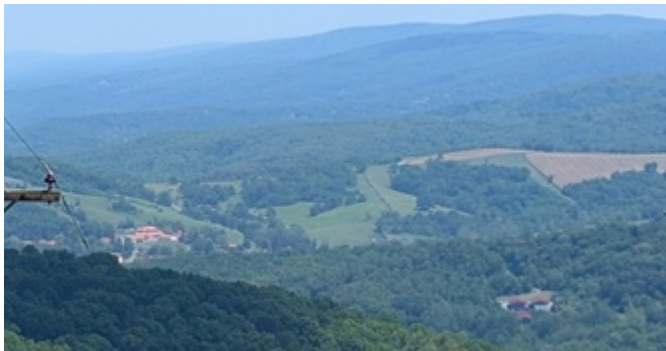


Clustered Snakeroot



Wild Geranium

Following Snead Farm Road back to Skyline Drive, we could see the red-roofed buildings of Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute across the valley.



Red Currant



**PIEDMONT CHAPTER
VIRGINIA NATIVE PLANT SOCIETY
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Curlyheads (Clematis ochroleuca)

The Virginia Native Plant Society (VNPS), founded as the Virginia Wildflower Society in 1982, is a non-profit organization of people who share an interest in Virginia's wild plants and habitats and a concern for their protection.

The Piedmont Chapter is a sub-group of VNPS in the northern point of Virginia east of the Blue Ridge Mountains. It includes Loudoun, Fauquier, Culpeper, Rappahannock, Warren, Clarke, and Frederick counties.

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