

WINTER

POTOWMACK NEWS

Potowmack Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

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Fire comes to Meadowood

By Jenny Meyer



ONE OF MEADOWOOD'S DIVERSE HABITATS PHOTO BY MARGARET CHATHAM

One of the nicest botanizing destinations in Northern Virginia that you may have never heard of is Meadowood Special Recreation Management Area. Tucked away on Mason Neck, Meadowood is one of the few properties in the eastern United States that is managed by the Bureau of Land Management.

In late September, BLM announced a call for public comment on a new plan to manage vegetation and reduce potential fuel for wildfires at Meadowood. The comment period closed in late October, but native plant lovers will want to track this project as BLM refines its plan.

Fire-Evolved Woodland Species

The plan for prescribed burns seems appropriate and likely beneficial for the health of some natural communities at Meadowood. Much of Meadowood is what the Virginia DCR would categorize as fire-adapted Coastal Plain Mixed Oak/Heath Forest (CEGL006269).

Meadowood has a wonderful population of understory Heath family (Ericaceae) shrubs, which generally have high fire tolerance. These include *Kalmia latifolia* (Mountain Laurel), *Gaylussacia baccata* (Black Huckleberry), *Vaccinium staminum* (Deerberry), *Vaccinium corymbosum* (Highbush Blueberry), *Rhododendron periclymenoides*

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Upcoming

Charles Smith: Assisted Migration: A solution to climate change - or gardening?

Thursday, Jan 9, 7 pm

Zoom: register at: <https://us06web.zoom.us/meeting/register/tZwtceCurDsoHdA3JJWn5ASt2ZL6f0uNieQL#/registration>

Moving species to new areas to offset climate change is being much discussed and promoted. Join this discussion of how species are chosen to be moved, whether moving them promotes healthy ecosystems, and if the outcomes best serve natural or human needs.

Walk: Winter Greens at Long Branch Nature Center with Margaret Chatham

Friday, Jan 10, 1 pm

Evergreen native, early spring ephemeral, or exotic plant stealing a march on the natives, plants that are green in the winter all have a story to tell. Space limited, watch for registration announcement.

7th Annual Prince William Native Plant Symposium

Saturday, Feb 8, 9 am - 4 pm

On-line and in person, Verizon auditorium, GMU 10900 University Blvd, Manassas

Doug Tallamy keynote

<https://www.eventbrite.com/e/7th-annual-prince-william-native-plant-symposium-2025-tickets-1057538148069?aff=oddtcreator>

Mike Hayslett: Vernal Pools

Thursday, Feb 13, 7 pm

Zoom: watch for registration announcement

Melissa McCormick: Our Native Orchids

Thursday, Mar 13, 7 pm

Zoom: watch for registration announcement

Melissa McCormick is Director of the Smithsonian's North American Orchid Conservation Center

All events are free and open to the public. Walks require preregistration. To receive email notices about upcoming events, subscribe to our mailing list at <https://vnps.groups.io/g/potowmack> You can also send a blank email to potowmack+subscribe@vnps.groups.io.

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Check out the Potowmack Chapter Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/vnpspot>.

What More Can You Do with iNaturalist? By Margaret Chatham

Everybody knows iNaturalist is a free app to identify living things you see around you, right? It wants posts of what occurs naturally, native or invading, but is only "casually" interested in what somebody planted. An observation is considered "research grade" if two people agree on an ID without a competing identification, or if three people agree in spite of a competing identification. You can also use it on your desktop computer, either to enter your own observations or to identify other's observations. Invader Detectives watch what gets posted to track invasive exotic species. But there's so much more!

On the second Tuesday of the month from 7-8:30 pm, anyone who wishes to may join a Zoom call to learn about some aspect of our local ecosystem and about how to use iNaturalist in general. These sessions are organized by Deborah Barber of MD/DC Nature Conservancy, Serenella Linares of PG County's Mount Ranier Nature Center, and Ana Ka'ahanui of Capital Nature and Fairfax Master Naturalists. They were originally set up to assist people in our region with the City Nature Challenge, so the April session (and some extras thrown in around the CNC weekend) focus on that. This year's City Nature Challenge will run from April 25-28 for making iNaturalist observations and until May 4 for identifying the observations made.

At other times, each second Tuesday session features an area expert cluing us in, followed by break-out rooms to try our hands at doing some IDs, or just exploring the features of the platform. Upcoming topics: 1/14 The Wonderful World of Lichens; 2/11: Using iNat Far from Home; and 3/11 Spring Ephemerals. The same sign-in is used every time: <https://tnc.zoom.us/j/92735142185> Register for sessions at <https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLScv6-uv3TMSURiH4ozSN2aUzC00KF7Mv0XDpXr6Yeo0NbGUyA/viewform> or you can simply sign in.

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American Sycamore

By Margaret Chatham



PLATANUS OCCIDENTALIS PHOTOS BY MARGARET CHATHAM

American Sycamore (*Platanus occidentalis*) is a stand-out tree in the wintertime, with white branches rising high along any waterway. It is one of our largest native trees, rivaling Tuliptree (*Liriodendron tulipifera*) in height and outstripping it in girth. These are the trees of legend, within whose hollowed trunks various early European settlers, surveyors, and fur trappers were said to have spent a winter or even years. Those giants are mostly gone, but the smaller hollows in today's trunks and branches do shelter birds and mammals, even up to the size of bears.

American Sycamore is an unusual tree in many ways. Its bark peels away in camouflage patches, though you may not immediately notice this on large trees until you look up. The lower portions of a large trunk will be an ordinary bark-brown. If the patchy pattern extends down to eye level on a



mature tree, suspect it to be a London Planetree (*Platanus x acerifolius*), a frequently planted cross between our American Sycamore and the Oriental Planetree, *P. orientalis*. London Planes are valued as street trees for their resistance to pollution and urban growing conditions, but they can not match American Sycamore's modest list of 45 species of Lepidoptera hosted. Both are subject to anthracnose, which may cause "witch's broom" growth after branch-tip die-back.

Sycamore leaves are some of the largest around, wider than long, and very slow to break down after they fall. When they first open, they are covered with branching "candelabra" hairs. The hairs are soon shed, and some people suffer an allergic reaction while they are thick in the air. The leaf petiole completely covers the next season's bud. Can you make out the inflated petiole end in the leaf picture?

Sycamores are monoecious, bearing male and female flowers in separate balls, probably both wind and insect pollinated. We rarely see the male flowers up in the canopy, but the female flowers mature to form balls of seeds that hang on the tree all winter, to be dispersed in the early spring. The hard core left after the seeds are gone is the button that gives Sycamore its other common name of "Buttonwood." (Another way to tell Sycamore from London Plane: Sycamore seed balls are almost always one to a stem, while London Planes often have two seed balls on a single stem.)

Sycamores grow quickly at least while young, and Michael Dirr complains that they're always dropping something: not suitable for small yards. Their wood is dense, and especially used for butcher blocks.

There can be some confusion about the Sycamore name. In Europe, "sycamore" refers to the Sycamore Maple (*Acer pseudoplatanus*) which has somewhat similar leaves, but is a smaller tree with very different bark, flowers and seeds.



MEADOWOOD CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

(Pinxterflower), and *Eubotrys racemosus* (Fetterbush).

Another possible beneficiary of fire would be the Small Whorled Pogonia, *Isotria medeoloides*, a federally threatened species. It's not known to be present at Meadowood, but some habitat is appropriate and the BLM plan calls for a survey in June 2025 to look for it. There are some indications that this charming little native orchid benefits from fire, and Virginia Tech and DCR are currently doing research on this question.

Mesic Mixed Hardwood Species

Not all of Meadowood's forest communities have evolved with fire, however. Mesic Mixed Hardwood Forest, where disturbance by fire is not the norm, is another frequent forest community at Meadowood. (My best guess is that the Virginia DCR would classify these communities at Meadowood as Northern Coastal Plain/ Piedmont Mesic Mixed Hardwood Forest, CEGL006075).

One example of these communities is found on Thompson Creek Trail, which is an excellent destination for seeing spring ephemerals and other flowering understory plants. These include *Thalictrum thalictroides* (Rue Anemone), *Stellaria pubera* (Star Chickweed), *Ranunculus hispidus* (Bristly Buttercup), *Houstonia purpurea* (Summer Bluets), *Hypoxis hirsuta* (Yellow Star Grass), *Chelone glabra* (White Turtlehead), *Hepatica americana* (Round-leaved Hepatica), and one of my favorite places at Meadowood, a hillside blanketed with a huge colony of *Oxalis violacea* (Violet Woodsorrel).

USDA fire tolerance data is not available for many of these species, but *Ranunculus hispidus* is categorized as having only medium fire tolerance. Most of these species are uncommon or absent from Mixed Oak/Heath Forest communities, but commonly found in the North Coastal Plain/ Piedmont Mesic Mixed Hardwood Forest.

So how would one know how a prescribed fire affects spring ephemerals? It's unclear, but their brief above-ground period, when they accumulate their yearly dose of energy, is right in the middle of the planned burn season. The potential impact on their reproductive success and capacity for regrowth seems like an important consideration, since these plants are slow growers that can take multiple years to accumulate enough stored energy to bloom. Early-emerging bee species would also miss them, since they are some of the first flowers to bloom after winter.

Another member of the Mixed Hardwood communities is *Euonymus americana* (Strawberry Bush). Once-common *Euonymus* has the misfortune to be a great favorite of deer. Earth Sangha's Maddie Bright has been pushing it for years in an effort to keep it on the landscape in Northern Virginia. Possibly Meadowood's deer management has paid off, because it is thriving at multiple locations across Meadowood. The USDA classifies its fire tolerance as "medium."

Meadows at Meadowood

True to the name, Meadowood also features some expansive meadow areas, including one of the last locations in coastal Northern Virginia where one can occasionally still hear the song of the Meadowlark. I'm

quite curious what treasures might be waiting underneath the non-native grasses of the old pastures? Until recently, grassland communities in our area have been understudied.

One of my favorite little-known spots at Meadowood, adjacent to the parking area at the Giles Run trailhead, is an old field with nice stands of native wildflowers: the non-uncommon *Trichostema dichotomum* (Blue Curls) and *Stylosanthes biflora* (Sidebeak Pencilflower), but also *Schizachyrium scoparium* (Little Bluestem) and *Polygonum tenue* (Slender Knotweed), which the Flora of Virginia characterizes as typical of Low-Elevation Outcrop Barrens communities. That seems really unusual for Northern Virginia.



Polygonum tenue, Slender Knotweed; Jenny Meyer photos

Managed thoughtfully, prescribed fire might be just what some plants at Meadowood have been waiting for. But, as with so many things, the devil is in the details. For instance, many native orchids are believed to benefit from prescribed fire, but the timing is critical. Native orchids at Meadowood include *Cypripedium acaule* (Pink Lady's Slipper), *Goodyera pubescens* (Downy Rattlesnake-plantain), *Spiranthes lacera* var. *gracilis* (Southern Slender Ladies' Tresses), and *Tipularia discolor* (Cranefly Orchid).

Meadowood is full of botanical treasure, and its floral richness suggests that (at least some of) its underlying soil chemistry and biology is healthy, established, and stable. Even as we work on habitat restoration, we know that we don't have – and probably never will have – the tools to fully replicate high-quality remnants like these.

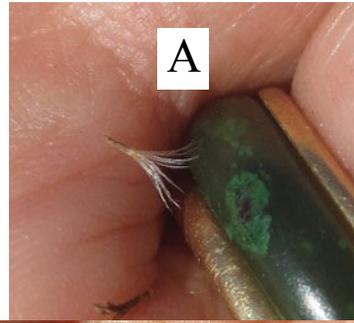
I hope that those of us who love native plants will work with BLM to refine their plan, which needs to take a closer, more detailed look at Meadowood's natural resources. Plant-lovers like us can help them do that, by sharing our knowledge of the local flora, pointing out the locations of valuable plant communities, and advocating for those precious semi-wild natural fragments.

The Vegetation Management and Fuels Reduction for Lower Potomac Field Station Draft Environmental Assessment is available at: <https://eplanning.blm.gov/eplanning-ui/project/2032507/570>

More Fly-Away Seeds

Some later season seeds with wings, including a bunch that do all pretty much look alike, but there are a couple of really distinctive ones. These photos have to be taken on sunny days. When it's wet, the seeds don't try to fly. Look for awns still attached to separate out the grasses. Can you guess any of these? Photos by Margaret Chatham. Answers on page 6.

- 1 *Andropogon gerardii*, Big Bluestem
- 2 *Andropogon virginicus*, Broomsedge
- 3 *Apocynum cannabinum*, Hemp Dogbane
- 4 **Catalpa speciosa*, Northern Catalpa
- 5 **Clematis terniflora*, Sweet Autumn Clematis
- 6 *Eutrochium fistulosum*, Hollow Joe-Pye
- 7 *Lactuca biennis*, Tall Blue Lettuce
- 8 *Mikania scandens*, Climbing Hempweed
- 9 **Phragmites australis*, Common Reed
- 10 *Platanus occidentalis*, American Sycamore
- 11 *Solidago altissima*, Tall Goldenrod
- 12 *Sorghastrum nutans*, Indian Grass
- 13 *Symphotrichum racemosum*, Small White Aster



A



B



C



D



E



F



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M

POTOWMACK NEWS

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Word of the Month: Phyllary



Merriam Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary defines phyllary as "one of the involucral bracts subtending the flower head of a composite plant." Phyllaries often can be used to distinguish among species of *Helianthus* or *Symphyotrichum*. Shown at left, phyllaries of *Helianthus decapetalus*, Thin-leaved Sunflower, persisting well after the ray flowers have faded.

PHOTO BY MARGARET CHATHAM

Answers to the puzzle on page 5: 1-H; 2-D; 3-B; 4-M — who knew what was inside one of those foot-long "cigars"?; 5-I; 6-C; 7-L; 8-E; 9-J; 10-K; 11-A; 12-G; 13-F.