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NEWSLETTER OF THE NORTHERN FLINT HILLS AUDUBON SOCIETY

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MANHATTAN, KS

SEPTEMBER 15, 1999
7:00PM
SOJOURNER TRUTH
PARK

Butterflies

&

Ice Cream

Join us for an informal tour of the NFHAS-established **Butterfly Garden** in Sojourner Truth Park - followed by an Ice Cream Social. The park is located south of Fort Riley Blvd., north of Pottawatomie Ave., between Manhattan Ave. and South 10th Street.

We will meet at 7:00 PM at the Butterfly Garden located at the east end of the park. After the tour, about 7:30 PM. We will gather at the Pavilion (located at the west end) for the Ice Cream Social.

There is no scheduled program. We have invited other local environmental and civic groups and hope for a chance to visit with old friends and make new ones. Bring your own bowl, spoon and favorite accompaniment (sauce, fruit, cookies, etc.) for the ice cream.

Field Trips

Sat.,— Beginning Birdwatching Walk — Join us Saturday, September 11th, 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, 532-6663 or e-mail him at drintoul@ksu.edu for more information.

Restoration Journal for September

FOUR LITTLE SUMMER STORIES

— Wayne Corn

Jason said it reminded him of a scene from “Cool Hand Luke” — swinging the brush cutter through the weeds, even hacking at the tougher ones with a machete, sweat flying off of us, the sun burning down on our backs.

Clearing brush away from the old, broken-down stone wall in front of my house, we found a Copperhead among the rocks — a young one, lovely and calm. It was coiled and watching from a flat stone surface. I didn’t reach out to touch it like I wanted to, the two little poison sacs behind hidden fangs made me cautious even though I felt sure the snake wouldn’t strike. Its perfect angular head, if an artist had been drawing it, could almost have been done with all straight lines and the slit pupil would have been a single, black, vertical stroke, the creature’s essence in this staring greenish eye. The rest of the snake’s coiling, concentric body, like leaves caught in a vortex, could have been the sinuous, circular stroke of a Japanese calligraphy brush.

We caught it easily and let it go — away from my wall. There may have been some subtle shift of power in my yard with the snake’s absence, but we had more stone work to do and it wasn’t a safe place for little snakes to hunt or to lie full-bellied in the sun.

When we let it go, out of the bucket, into last winter’s leaf litter, it seemed to disappear. Even though it was there in front of us, its patterns were indistinguishable from the dried edges and curls of old leaves at our feet. The snake, carried gently to this spot, did not seem the least bit concerned, but was intent and curious about its new surroundings. It slipped silently into the twilight woods — seeking, and wonderfully aware and alive.

The giant Polyphemus moth had become disoriented, I suspect, and come to rest on a broad concrete lot. I thought it was dead and walked over to it to get a closer look at the shapes and colors on its wings. As soon as I picked it up it began to flutter and I closed my palms over it. My hands felt like the size of a human heart and the brushing radiant wings sent a pulse through the veins of my arms. I opened my hands to look, of course, and yes, of course, the moth flew up from the open bowl of my palms and away into the hot blue

sky. With grasping gestures, without thought, I ran after it a few steps and stopped. It was already well out of reach, and my intention wasn’t to capture it anyway. I stood and watched it go. Its wings seemed tired.

I wouldn’t have imagined such an exotic creature as a Long-eared Sunfish in the common waters of a Kansas stream — but I saw it! We pulled it in on a hook through the jaw. It’s hard to remember now exactly what it looked like, it was such a surprise, and so fleeting — it didn’t exactly want to stay out in the air to visit. I remember an iridescence of blue-green in a woven coral-like pattern on a lighter, but equally startling, background green. Its belly was the soft yellow of a sunrise glow. A burning, orange eye shone through the forest of entwined greens and blues. When we laid it back into the stream, unhooked, the pause of the Sunfish was a reflection of our held breath, and then there was a sudden stirring and its rush to the flowing pastures of deep water.

A sleepless morning brought me outside to stand under the sky for a chance at a cool breeze. A rising moon captured me as if it was lying in wait. The deep indigo of the night was fading slightly in the east, the waning crescent of the moon seemed buoyant, floating in the sparkling sea of the fresh, new-day blue. The ashen-gray dark surface of the moon was as visible as the crescent’s brightness and the two seemed unseparate and full. Orion was rising further to the south, joining in this drama on the eastern horizon — anticipation and loss — the coming sun and fading night, the grace and beauty of the moon and its cycles of increase and decrease, and the intensity of Orion’s strength and skill — his perseverance, the re-born, chastened hero.

When I described this scene to Pete and Sue Cohen, Pete quoted Thomas Percy, who spoke of a similar, lovely crescent moon as “The old moon holding the new moon in its arms.” So Pete added the missing characters, the lovers, to the night sky passion play.

*Today, like every other day, we wake up empty
and frightened. Don’t open the door to the study
and begin reading. Take down a musical instrument.*

Let the beauty we love be what we do.

There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground.

— Rumi, 13th century Persian Poet

Plant of the Month

**In South Carolina there are many tall pines
I remember the oak tree that we used to climb
But now when I'm lonesome, I always pretend
That I'm getting the feel of hickory wind
Callin' me home, hickory wind**

*A song, "Hickory Wind,"
by Gram Parsons and Bob Buchanan*

The **bitternut hickory** tree has smooth bark that seems surprisingly feminine. I believe that this tree may be a powerful link between the past, present, and future. During Sunday afternoon, I walk into the sanctuary of slender, hickory trees that reach up to the sky. Light has found a small hole in the canopy, and dust dances in this spotlight that slants down from the southwest. Green moss grows on the northeast side of hickory, extending up the hickory for four feet. An enchanting shadow extends out from the tree. The golden light has a subtle power that has etched the shadow into earth, as if this moment has been etched into time. As I step forward, I am aware of whispering of leaves underfoot. I am shocked by the sudden roar above, as wind catches the leaves at the tops of the trees. Looking up, I am achingly aware of the strength of trunks swaying as they are pushed and pulled by the masculine wind. The tree feels the wind. I only pretend to feel the wind. I only pretend to understand this beauty that is woven into fibers of being. Soaring above the trees on incredibly slender wings is a bird with pure white feathers. Perhaps it understands.

The bitternut hickory, *Carya cordiformis*, is the common hickory of northeast Kansas. It sometimes grows in pure groves on hillsides that face away from the afternoon sun. Its leaves have 7 to 9 leaflets. These leaflets may be wider on a seedling that is shaded, and the bitternut can thrive in the shade, but the seedling will never feel the wind, until the day it finds its place in the sun. The bitternut readily hybridizes with the pecan, *Carya illinoensis*, which is native to southeast Kansas. Although it should have a dignified name, somebody named the hybrid a "hican." Perhaps some of the hybrids have useful combinations of characteristics, but I don't care about that. I care about the original works of art.

The bitternut has stronger wood and smoother bark than a pecan, and it has distinctive, yellow buds. Although it does have bitter-tasting nuts, the nuts are eaten by squirrels. Everything does not have to be useful, but indeed the bitternut

has been useful to man. Uncle Odus helped me weave bark from a hickory into a seat for a chair. I'll never sell it. My relative is gone, but I feel a connection.

After the old man was long gone, I carved a tool handle from a section of hickory that had been cut for firewood. Hickory makes an excellent fire, but it seems a shame that it only goes up in smoke. I didn't carve the fibers with anything like the skill of my ancestors, but the handle fit the tool. I contact the past when I touch the handle of a hoe that has been used for generations. It was my people who used such tools. It was their life's sweat that soaked into hickory handles.

I helped my dad repair a fence in the flood plain of a small creek, near our old home. I was just a boy, and from time to time, I would stop working. I would see sweat soaking Dad's shirt. A man's willingness to be like him, to sweat and get covered with dirt and scratches, ... it seemed that was the measure of a man. As years marched by, Dad eventually turned sixty, and began to change. I was shocked that he spent less time repairing fences and more time socializing with his neighbors.

Like Dad, hopefully I'll become wiser. I've learned that the older a person becomes, the more yearning he has to connect with eternity. Hickory wind is the breath of eternity that I can only pretend to feel, but like the rustling in the tops of the trees, this moment endures forever.

Insect of the Month

One of the beautiful underwing moths, *Catocala opalaeogama*, is dependent on hickory or walnut trees to provide leaves for its caterpillars. The beauty of this night-flying moth is considered the motivation for an activity known as "sugaring." Various recipes are used, but most involve mixing beer and sugar into a syrup which is painted onto trees. W. J. Holland described this in his classic book that was first published in 1903, and simply entitled "The Moth Book."

Just above the moistened patch upon the bark is a great *Catocala*. The gray upper wings are spread, revealing the lower wings gloriously banded with black & crimson. In the yellow light of the lantern the wings appear even more brilliant than they do in sunlight. How the eyes glow like spots of fire!

— Thomas D. Morgan

September Birding

“In a desultory sort of way the little peeps, the least sandpipers, as they are quaintly called, are arriving now from their breeding grounds within the arctic circle. Now they are descending on any convenient pond or stream bank, and even around some mud hole where the arm pigs wallow. I see them gathering, bringing life to the ugly slough, and setting it to ringing with their cries. They are never still a moment, continually wandering about on their bright toothpick legs that always seem to be jointed in the wrong direction, and constantly pecking like those wooden mechanical birds I used to buy for my children in Europe.”

Donald Culross Peattie, *An Almanac for Moderns*,
G.P. Putnam’s Sons, New York, 1935.

Somehow you have to wonder about a bird that would abandon the arctic climate in August. As I write this the temperature hovers just above 100 F, and a kiln-hot wind blows hard and steady from the south. It sure doesn’t seem possible that autumn, and then winter, can be very near. But the birds are telling me that, and I fervently hope that they are right. Flocks of purple martins are massing on the utility wires and football field lamp posts even now; soon these swirling dark clouds will be winging south, fattening on the frantic insects who also sense the oncoming winter. They will be followed in September by nighthawk congregations, competing with swirling assemblages of Franklin’s gulls to see who can garner the largest share of dragonflies, cicadas, katydids and grasshoppers above the Flint Hills pastures. Sometimes it is possible, if the grasses are tall and the wind gentle, to transform the waves of bluestem and gulls into ocean swells, and to imagine that time has been turned back 70 million years or so to an era when pelagic birds really did inhabit this part of the planet. But then one reads the papers, and finds out that 70 million years is too long a time for some small minds to contemplate. They are content to just turn the clock back a mere couple of centuries, before the voyage of the Beagle...

But those concerns are transient, and the clock moves inexorably forward. When the seasonal clock

strikes September, there are lots of opportunities for the Kansas birdwatcher, some thrilling and some exasperating. Regal white pelicans return to the state this month, on their way to the Gulf Coast, and it is awe-inspiring to watch them glide down to earth after a long migratory flight. Ospreys find their way to the best fishing lakes, and flaunt their considerable skills in front of the human anglers who are fortunate enough to co-exist with them. Olive-sided flycatchers set up shop on exposed tree snags, and sally out to show you the white tufts above their dark tails. Early flights of waterfowl, mostly blue-winged teal, take up residence in the marshes, and teasingly wander south just before the start of the early duck season.



But exasperation also comes on tiny wings, in the form of migrant warblers, vireos, and flycatchers, adorned in shades of dun, pale yellow, and gray, who flit from branch to branch and defy even the experts to name them all. Their ranks are swollen by a host of young birds, born this summer, who have yet to grow the gaudy plumage that first attracted most of us to birdwatching. All of these birds seem to look alike; in September it is possible to find whole flocks of birdwatchers with their eyes glued to the “Confusing Fall Warblers” pages of their field guides. That is not a good idea. It is advisable to drop the book and pick up the binoculars, since in the fall a bird’s behaviors and

habitat associations can be far better identification clues than plumage. Watch for that tail-wagging action to help you distinguish between a palm warbler and a Cape May warbler, or between a young eastern phoebe (which can have wing-bars) and an eastern wood-pewee.

Finally, September brings the first of the winter sparrows back to our state. The first tree sparrows, juncos, song sparrows, and white-throated sparrows, as well as other feeder birds like pine siskins and red-breasted nuthatches will usually appear before October. These particular individuals may winter to the south of Kansas, but their arrival is a signal of cooler weather to come, and a reminder to clean out your birdfeeder and head to the seed sale. But don't spend too much time there, September in Kansas is a great month to be outside, looking at the migratory birds (and butterflies), and waiting for the arctic weather to follow the arctic birds which pass through here this month.

— Dave Rintoul

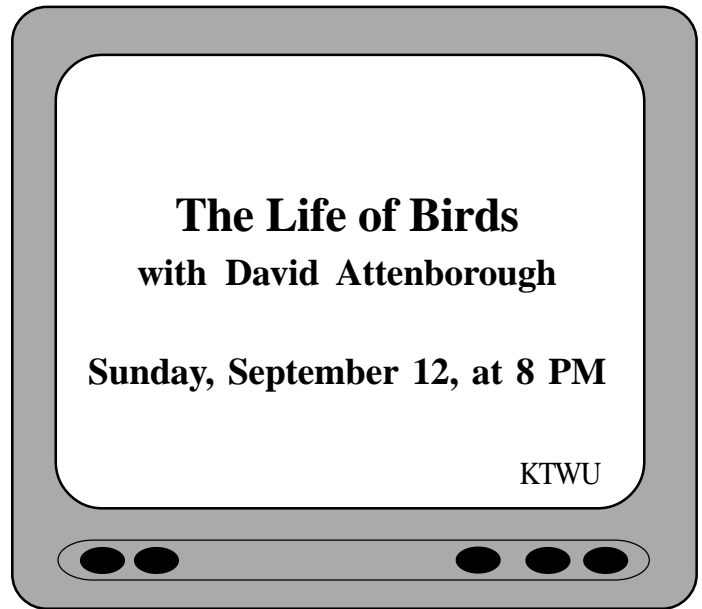
OPEN SPACES PAY

Open space pays: Parks, open space and farmland contribute billions of dollars to local economies each year, according to a report by the Trust for Public Land.

"The Economic Benefit of Parks and Open Space" (800 714-5263, www.tpl.org) details success stories from Chattanooga to Portland where local communities have seen the "profit" from conserving their land. Among the findings: the value of land next to a greenbelt in Salem, Ore., was \$1,200 an acre more than land 1,000 feet away. Owners of small companies ranked the presence of recreational facilities, parks and open space as the most important factor in choosing a new location for their businesses. And river rafting and kayaking add \$50 million a year to Colorado's economy.

Common Ground Vol.10, No. 5, July/August 1999

TELEVISION WORTH WATCHING



NFHAS has gone Hollywood! Well, at least we get our name on the TV screen. KTWU in Topeka will begin airing "The Life of Birds with David Attenborough" Sunday, September 12, at 8 PM

The series will run for the next ten weeks. The episodes will delve into why birds fly (and why some don't), how they use a variety of flight techniques, communication, egg laying and parenting, and the amazing adaptability of birds. Once you've tuned in, you'll be hooked for the duration.

NFHAS is delighted to be one of the underwriting sponsors, so be sure to watch for us before and after each episode.

— Jan Garton

Northern Flint Hills Audubon Society
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Subscription Information

Introductory memberships are available for \$20 per year; after that a basic membership is available for \$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. Renewals of membership are handled by the National Audubon Society and should not be sent to NFHAS. Questions about membership can be answered by calling a toll-free number, 1-800-274-4201, or by electronic mail to Betsy Hax at the National Audubon Society (bhax@audubon.org).

Nonmembers may subscribe to the **PRAIRIE FALCON** newsletter for \$10 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

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Kansas City area (incl. W.MO): 785-342-2473

Nebraska (statewide): 402-292-5325

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