



Nature Notes

Todmorden Mills Wildflower Preserve

Your nature guide for the week July 26–August 1



Wildflowers

This summer the meadows have been dominated by the white flowers of **Queen Anne's Lace** and **White Sweet-clover**. Queen Anne's Lace is a biennial, usually flowering in the second year, therefore the flowers that we see today are on two-year-old plants. The high density of plants in the meadow reflects good germination success last year, while the tall, lush growth is due to the cool and wetter than normal conditions this year. The flower — actually a flat-topped cluster of florets— is snow white, except for a characteristic central floret which is red or dark purple. From a distance it looks like a small fly is sitting on the flower—and perhaps it is a decoy to lure pollinators. Folklore has it that the centre flower is stained with a drop of blood from Queen Anne's finger which she pricked while sewing her lace. Queen Anne's Lace flowers do attract many visitors (one estimate is as many as 60 insect species). It is an ideal landing pad for butterflies and moths, and predators, such as spiders, take up residence to ambush visitors.

In the upland parts of the Preserve, the forest floor is beginning to dry out as summer progresses and as the trees gradually take up ground moisture. This drying triggers the spring wildflowers such as Mayapples and Trilliums to shut down the leaves and become dormant. Other cool-season plants such as **Garlic Mustard** are also shutting down. The tall flower stalks stand like dry, bleached skeletons. The plants may look dead, but the pods are full of ripe seeds which split open at the lightest touch. Examine a flower stalk with its ten to twenty pods, each pod holding about sixteen seeds, and you can understand why studies in Ontario have found up to 100,000 Garlic Mustard seeds per square metre in dense stands.

In the swamp portions of the woodland trail, **Spotted Jewelweed** has started to flower. The speckled orange flowers produce nectar which bumblebees and hummingbirds feed on. Other wetland species that started flowering this week include pink-flowered **Spotted Joe-Pye Weed** and **Swamp Milkweed**.



Wild Fruit

One of the most common understory shrubs at Todmorden, and indeed in most Toronto ravines, is **Chokecherry**. The clusters of berries have finally ripened, and the dark red clusters of fruit can be seen throughout the Preserve; this year is a bumper crop. The fruit is used to make wines, syrups, jellies, and jams, and it is a valued food source for wildlife.



Insects

There is good reason to keep to the formal walkways at present: the **European Fire Ant** doesn't seem to like the crushed brick substrate and is at lower density on the trail. In the forest, if you stand around for too long, or disturb the soil, the female workers will swarm out of a nearby nest and may sting. Nests can contain as many as 1,000 ants, and they can be spaced as closely as one metre apart. While the European species does not pack the punch of the South American fire ant that has invaded the southern United States, it can nonetheless inflict a painful sting. If you plan to strike out off-trail, we recommend pulling socks over your pants, and spraying your boots with bug repellent.

The European Fire Ant has probably been at Todmorden for about 20 years. This invasive Eurasian species may have arrived in Canada in shipments of nursery stock from New England where it has been present for at least fifty years. In coastal areas of Maine, European Fire Ants are now a significant garden pest, and it seems inevitable that the ant will spread to the tableland above Todmorden and into gardens.

More Info

For more information about the Todmorden Mills Wildflower Preserve, please visit the Preserve Web site (www.hopscotch.ca/tmwp), or contact the Todmorden Mills Heritage Museum (Tel: 416 396-2819).

Nature Notes is researched and written by Mike Dennison and Alejandro Lynch, and is published in print and online formats by Hopscotch Interactive Inc. For more information on **Nature Notes** and other services provided by Hopscotch please visit their Web site (<http://www.hopscotch.ca>).