

Lorne Peterson
lornep@copper.net
Spring 2010

Equinox Field Notes from Spring Branch

In the mid-Potomac River region, Spring began on March 20 as a clear and sunny day, with temperatures ranging from 40 F to a high of 72 F.

On the morning of the vernal equinox, I walk from our backyard to the Spring (Gulf) Branch Natural Area with the plan of hiking downstream to the cliffs of the Potomac Heritage Trail.

Before entering the forest habitat, I ask for the permission of flora and fauna. One of my first stops is the Native Plant Restoration Place to see who might be appearing. I see small leaves of Dutchman's Breeches, grassy leaves of Spring Beauty and several fellow spring ephemerals rising among autumn's fallen tree leaves and winter's pruned branches. I look in particular for signs of Bloodroot shoots and flower buds, another early spring ephemeral. None is visible to me.

Walking on, to the Gulf Branch Nature Center pond, where the Wood Frogs had last week completed their March mating, along with Spotted Salamanders, I stop to look with binoculars for floating egg masses of the Wood Frogs.

Further downstream, after crossing Military Road and passing our odoriferous Sanitary Sewer pumping station, I visit one of the last patches of mature Yellow Trout Lilies on an eroded stream bank. Green mottled leaves are beginning to point upwards among autumn leaves. These long-lived spring ephemerals, perhaps several hundred years old, are called by some naturalists "potentially immortal". I love the paradox of being ephemeral and immortal.

Their *ephemerality* involves the aim each spring to rise, flower and pollinate, before trees leaf out and shade them. Their *immortality* involves seeding for the next generations; plus sprouting from underground corms and sending out runners to create cloned communities. It makes sense to have several back-ups to live well and contribute to the future of life.

I admire the persistence and endurance of the Yellow Trout Lilies and wish them well, on this very vulnerable stream bank.

Further on, I cross the stream on random rocks, and stop in the middle to look upstream into the deep U of cut banks and dangling tree roots. This is a place where water pools and reflects gray-blue layers of rock, a mélange of metamorphic sandstone and mudstone, forming the streambed. Here and there sits a big chunk of milky quartz, often tinted with reddish minerals.

On the other side of the stream, I am startled from behind by a boisterous and loud song: Carolina Wren, singing out his presence on a top branch of Rosebay Rhododendron. Hey! My friend, thanks for keeping me awake and alert.

Lorne Peterson
lornep@copper.net
Spring 2010

Just before the stream path goes beneath the George Washington Parkway overpass, set high above on gigantic concrete pillars, I stop at an unmarked historic camping place of the Algonquian peoples. Maybe this was a dwelling place for food gathering and tool making. Perhaps their fishers also set out from here to climb down the cliffs above the Potomac River. I give my respects to these Algonquian peoples, whose descendants continue to live here and there in the Potomac River region.

At a look-out place on the cliffs along the Potomac Heritage Trail, I see two wildflowers blossoming near each other, Early Saxifrage and Spring Beauty. Saxifrage (rock breaker) is opening a cluster of white flowers and Spring Beauty is flowering bright pink (more often their petals are white with pink stripes).

This is a prelude to seeing many signs of native plants beginning to leaf, bud and blossom along the Potomac Heritage Trail. Most of the ones flowering are Spring Beauty. (As reported in previous postings, these indigenous plants are persisting, yet are threatened by many invasive exotic herbs, grasses, vines, shrubs and trees.)

Now and then, I look with binoculars downwards some one hundred and fifty feet to the Potomac River. I see a pair of Common Mergansers, female and male, flying low upriver. This perspective gives a perfect and uncommon view of their striking upper body and wing patterns. Great Blue Herons also fly across the river.

Walking back later, and crossing Gulf Branch stream, I meet a mother with several boys and a girl about to cross the same place. I say hello to this mother as she follows her seven-to-eight year old boys, who surge ahead screaming with delight. The girl is more tentative in her crossing, and is encouraged by her mother. These children and mother, each in her or his way, living the adventure of *being in nature*.

When I have returned to the upper Gulf Branch Natural Area, and stop again to check the Native Plant Restoration Place, I am happy to find in full blossom two White Flowers of Bloodroot. It is close to the celestial moment of Spring Equinox (Eastern Daylight Saving, 1:37 pm). Some three hours earlier, there had been no sign of these two flowers. (See photograph attached pdf.)

Best wishes for the Spring Season in Northern Places and for the Autumn Season in Southern Places around our Earth home.

Lorne Peterson
Spring (Gulf) Branch stream valley
Eastern Piedmont hills
mid-Potomac River region