

Nature simply full of questions

Why are cedars brown and trilliums green? Ask Drew and be enlightened

This week, I'd like to pass along some questions and interesting anecdotes that I've received from readers over the past month or so.



Why is it that most places I go the cedars are brown and many have almost no foliage? Is there some kind of blight, a lack of rain or are the trees dying naturally? A lot of places along the river from Lakefield to Peterborough are going to look like deserts – and a large part of the zoo and park lands. (Callie Stacey, May 31)

According to Taylor Scarr, provincial forest entomologist at the Ministry of Natural Resources, the "browning" is the result of coincident attack by several of the cedar leafminers – tiny, native caterpillars (larvae) which eventually become moths – of the genus *Argyresthia*. The main culprit appears to be *Argyresthia thuiella*. Four species of leafminers attack white cedars in eastern Canada. The damage occurs when the larvae feed by tunnelling through the tips of the leafy branchlets. In the process, the foliage begins to turn brown and is later shed. By holding the dead foliage up to the light, it sometimes possible to the larvae within their feeding tunnels. The larvae pupate within the tunnels in the cedar leaves and small, silver-grey moths appear from late May until July.

Significant areas of defoliation from leafminers were also recorded last year, especially in parts of Douro-Dummer Township. According to the Pest Diagnostic Clinic at the University of Guelph, removing and destroying infested branch tips before the moths appear will give adequate control in the case of light infestations on small ornamental cedars. White cedars can withstand considerable injury from leafminers before significant damage occurs.

I was out for a walk on a local rail trail recently when I came across a trillium with green striping and a double flower part. Is this a different species or just an aberrant white trillium? (Paula Baruch, May 5)

Surprisingly, what you are describing is actually a diseased white trillium. The cells of the plant have been infected by virus-like, parasitic mycoplasmas that cause the greening. As time passes, the mycoplasmas may also cause deformities in the shape and number of petals and leaves. For example, trilliums with as many as 30 extra petals and/or bracts have been recorded. It is still a beautiful flower, however, even with the green stripes!

I am an amateur birder and learning something new every day. I feed the backyard birds year round. This spring with the arrival of the grackles, I found an odd one in the bunch. Its head and neck are flecked with patches of white and its throat is entirely white. The poor bird almost looks like a mix between a grackle and a blue jay! Can you help me learn more? (Trish Cowley, May 4)

Common grackles usually appear all black, but in the proper light, the males in particular show a glossy, mostly purple-blue iridescence. Your bird, however, is partially "leucistic." Leucism



TRISH COWLEY photo



PAULA BARUCH photo

Among the requests for information that arrived on Drew Monkman's desk last month were queries about unusually coloured grackles (top photo) and trilliums (above). Another reader wrote to say she has been keeping track of a pair of bitterns recently and one of them was spotted inside a commercial greenhouse, cruising the aisle like a customer.

is a "condition of plumage resulting from reduced pigment in feathers; leucistic birds vary from having a few stray whitish feathers (pied) to being nearly all white with just a trace of normal pigmentation (the latter resembling albino birds but with normally pigmented eyes)." From 2000 to 2006, Project FeederWatch participants reported fewer than 1,000 leucistic birds. Given that participants report about 5.5 million birds each season, the percentage of leucistic birds being reported is very small. Leucism is most often reported in American robins and chickadees. Although you often read that these birds do not live as long as normal birds, one local leucistic chickadee that comes regularly to a feeder is at least five years old!

Over the past few weeks, we have had a robin that has been spending long periods of time each day thrashing and pecking at various windows at our home on Clear Lake. The windows that this robin attacks are on at least three of the four sides of the house. We have read on-line that a robin may do this to chase away the "rival" – its own reflection – that it sees in the glass. We have closed the blinds/drapes on the inside of windows

but that has not helped. Do you have any ideas about what we can be doing so that this robin doesn't harm or exhaust itself? (Barbara McGregor, May 1)

We had this same problem at our own house this spring. A female robin – to my surprise, the females are also quite territorial and often engage in this behaviour – was pecking at a window with multiple panes. I tried covering the outside of several of the panes with cardboard but the bird simply went to a different part of the window. At that point, I gave up. One fairly simple suggestion I recently found on-line, however, is to try soaping the outside of the window for a couple of weeks. This will decrease the reflectivity of the glass and hopefully convince the bird that the interloper has flown the coop. It will also continue to allow light into the house. Remember, too, that window-pecking behaviour is at its peak during the nesting season and usually stops as soon as the young leave the nest – or before.

We have had a bad year for swallows. There is only one barn swallow in the barn this year and the one that has been coming to the garage for as long as I can remember did not return this year. It makes me sad to see that. Do you have

any explanation? (Scott Sargent, June 4)

Despite some farmers reporting normal numbers of swallows nesting in their barns this spring, you are not alone in noting that, once again this year, barn swallows are in low numbers. In fact, the Ministry of Natural Resources has added the barn swallow to Ontario's list of Species At Risk as a threatened species. As such, barn swallows now receive protection under the Endangered Species Act.

Barn swallows forage almost exclusively on flying insects and are therefore part of a group of birds known as aerial foragers. As a group, aerial foragers have been declining in abundance for many years. For barn swallows, the largest declines have been noted in the north-eastern states and eastern Canada. In Ontario, the barn swallow population is believed to have crashed by about almost two-thirds since 1966. Why the decline is happening is not well understood, but it may be related to major declines in populations of flying insects that, in turn, may be resulting from factors such as large-scale pesticide use. Surprisingly, barn swallow numbers in the Carolinian (southern) region of Ontario have not shown a drop.

I also received the following anecdotes that I would like to pass on.

On May 5, **Sue Paradisis** wrote to tell me that two American bitterns have been hanging around the ponds in the display gardens in the back of Griffins Greenhouses. The first week she saw the two-foot tall, heavily striped birds one of them was very close to the main greenhouse near the sales areas. It was working its way down the far side of the pond in the cattails and stopping every so often to pound out its deep, gulping "bloonk-adoonk" song, which is reminiscent of the sound of an old pump. The owner told her that one morning he went into the greenhouse and one of the bitterns was walking down the aisle, almost looking like a customer. It froze in its typical neck-up position, a pose it takes to blend in with the surrounding vegetation, usually in near-perfect camouflage. However, when he spoke to the bird, it scurried out in a panic.

In early May, **Ralf Griem** of Apsley emailed me about the pine siskins that were coming to his feeder. He was astounded by how fearless the birds were. In fact, he could actually reach out and touch them as they gobbled up broken bits of sunflower seed on the feeder.

Ralf also said that he had to be very careful not to step on one of them when they fed on the ground. I was not aware that siskins could be so tame. However, by doing a bit of research, I soon discovered that they do indeed have this reputation. In his book, "Life Histories of North American Birds," Arthur Cleveland Bent included the following anecdote about siskin behaviour from Massachusetts in 1926: "In a short time the birds came to regard me as their friend, and in the days that followed grew to be exceedingly sociable and to lose every vestige of fear. Whenever I would appear at the window, or step outside the door, down they would come and, settling upon my head, shoulders, and arms, would peer anxiously about for the food that they had learned to know I held concealed from them in a box, dish, or other receptacle. The moment I removed the cover or exposed the food, they would make a dash for it and the usual scrapping program would be on. Nor was it at all necessary for me to go outside the door. . . . In a short time the siskins discovered this opening [in a window pane], and it was only necessary for me to draw the slide when one after another would come right into my kitchen, and soon one or more of them would be perched on my head or shoulder, or hopping around on the desk where I was writing, looking for the handful of seeds that they all knew was forthcoming. . . . Now and then some members of the flock would elect to spend the night in the warm room, sleeping on the clothes-line, stretched across the room a little below the ceiling. On such occasions they seemed to be without fear and totally oblivious to people moving about the room, often within a few inches of them, turning on or snapping off electric lights."

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