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LIVING

Nature's almanac for July 2013

Plants in bloom, birds in song during the hottest month of the year

July, the seventh month of the year in the Gregorian calendar, represents summer at its height. It is our warmest month with hot, humid and often thunder weather. This is because almost half of our summer air masses originate over the Gulf of Mexico. The heat and humidity often lead to severe thunderstorms and lightning. By remembering that thunder travels one kilometre in three seconds, the time between when you see the lightning and when you hear the bang will tell you how far away the storm is. According to Environment Canada, any time you can hear thunder, you are within striking distance of lightning and should take shelter immediately, preferably in a house or automobile. Thunderstorms can also be accompanied by hailstones, high winds and increasingly heavy rain. More and more evidence suggests that man-made climate change has increased the frequency of heavy downpours and will continue to increase flooding risks – something Germany, the midwestern U.S., southern Alberta and Peterborough know all too much about.



DREW MONKMAN

OUR CHANGING SEASONS

EARLY JULY

■ Common milkweed is in flower and its rich, honey-sweet perfume fills the early summer air. The scent serves to attract insects whose feet will inadvertently pick up the flowers' sticky pollinia – small packets containing pollen – and transfer them to another plant. If the insect is not strong enough, however, it can actually become stuck to the flower and die. This is why you often see dead bees and other insects on milkweed blossoms.

■ A huge number of other plants are blooming right now, as well. In wetland habitats, watch for Common Elderberry, Swamp Milkweed, Joe-Pye Weed, Yellow Pond Lily and Fragrant White Water Lily. Along roadsides and in meadows, you can see Ox-eye Daisy, Yarrow, Viper's Bugloss, Black-eyed Susan, Queen Anne's Lace, Wild Bergamot, Hairy Beardtongue, Purple-flowering Raspberry and Orange Hawkweed – to name a few!

■ Don't miss the beautiful waning crescent moon in the early morning twilight of July 6. Both Mars and Jupiter are visible just above the moon, about three degrees and seven degrees respectively.

■ July is a great time to turn your attention to our many species of butterflies. Although these colourful insects can be found just about everywhere, Sandy Lake Road south of Lasswade is one of the best locations for less common species. An early July trip to this area usually produces a large variety of skippers as well as up to six species of hairstreaks. Gray, Edwards's, Striped, Banded, Coral, and Acadian hairstreaks are all possible. The Peterborough Field Naturalists have organized an outing to Sandy Lake Road for July 6. The leader is Jerry Ball, an authority on the butterflies of the Kawartha. Aimed at beginners, this trip will be an excellent opportunity to develop your butterfly identification skills. Meet at the Tim Horton's outlet at the west entrance to Havelock at 10 a.m. Call 705-745-3272 for more details.

■ By now, juvenile Bald Eagles are usually able to make their first solo flights from the nest. They will, however, remain in the vicinity of the nest for most of the



JEFF JONES photo



DREW MONKMAN photo

Clockwise from top: Adult Bald Eagle and two eaglets on Stony Lake nest. Adult Bald Eagle and two eaglets on Stony Lake nest. Boreal Bluetail damselfly. Common Reed (Phragmites). Common Milkweed blossom.



DREW MONKMAN photo



RICK STANKIEWICZ photo



WIKIMEDIA photo

summer. Both this year and last, Bald Eagles have nested on Stony Lake.

■ Take note of the marked decrease in morning bird song. Birds only sing during the nesting season so, with nesting wrapping up, why waste all that energy when there is no reproductive imperative to do so? In many ways, this is the turning point of the avian year since southward migration for some species will soon begin.

■ It is hard to go anywhere near water in July and not notice dragonflies and damselflies. Some even turn up in suburban gardens. To tell them apart, remember that dragonflies have thick bodies, are strong fliers, and their wings are open at rest. Damselflies are usually much smaller, have thin bodies, are weak fliers, and their wings are closed or only partially spread at rest. Some of the most frequently-seen damselflies are powder blue in colour, hence the common name of "bluets." As for dragonflies, some common species include the Dot-tailed Whiteface, Common Whitetail, Four-spotted Skimmer, and Chalk-fronted Skimmer. Go to for pictures of all Ontario dragonflies and damselflies. Click on "checklists" and then type "Ontario" in the search box.

MID-JULY

■ Exotic invasive plants are very

noticeable. One particularly harmful species is the Common Reed, also known as Phragmites. It is a tall, perennial grass that can grow to over three metres in height and form dense stands. The flowers form bushy, purple or golden panicles in July and August. Later in the season, these panicles become grey in colour and fluffy in appearance because of the hairs on the seeds. Phragmites can completely take over a marsh or damp meadow community and destroy the area as wildlife habitat. It is now very common around Peterborough.

■ Deer flies (genus Chrysops) are a bothersome presence throughout July. They are actually quite beautiful, however, and can be quickly identified by their black-patterned wings, colourful bodies and iridescent eyes. Deer flies tend to buzz most persistently around the head and shoulders. Their mouthparts include two pairs of cutting "blades" that lacerate skin and cause blood to flow out of the wound. A sponge-like mouthpart is used to lap up the blood. We can at least be grateful that only the females bite. The seldom-seen male feeds primarily on nectar.

■ On the evening of July 16, the waxing crescent moon can be seen setting in the west. Remember to look for the "earthshine" effect which partially illuminates the unlit portion (left side) of the

lunar surface. If you look up four degrees, you'll be able to see the planet Saturn.

■ The buzzy, electric song of the cicada is beginning now to fill the void created by the decrease in bird song.

■ Throughout the summer, Elk can sometimes be seen grazing in cattle pastures and hay fields in the Bancroft area. One location to try is Hartsmere Road, located at the north end of Weslemkoon Lake. In 2010, the population was estimated to be between 330 and 766 animals.

■ The days are growing shorter – but only very slowly. Sunset in mid-July (about 8:55 p.m.) is only about 10 minutes earlier than it was in mid-June. Sunrise (about 5:45 a.m.) is just 15 minutes later.

LATE JULY

■ Watch for mushrooms such as White Pine Boletes and Fly Agarics. Summer – not fall, as some people think – usually produces the greatest variety of mushrooms. Rainfall, along with several days of high humidity, is necessary to initiate their appearance. Generally speaking, coniferous and mixed woodlands are richer in fungi than deciduous forests.

■ Flocks of post-breeding European Starlings, Red-winged Blackbirds, Common Grackles and American Crows

are noisy and conspicuous. Forming flocks provides advantages to birds such as safety in numbers. The chance of any one individual being killed by a predator is lower in a flock than if the bird was by itself.

■ Local lakes reach their warmest temperatures in July, with the average being about 23 C. If you are swimming or canoeing, you may see a Northern Water Snake. It is curious species and sometimes unwary of humans. Although water snakes are harmless and will only bite in self-defense, they have been known to approach swimmers. They may be doing this to see if a prey item such as frog is actually the source of the ripples. Sadly, some people feel threatened by any snake they see and are quick to kill the animal. This is one of many reasons why, like turtles, Ontario's snake populations are in a serious decline.

■ Being opposite the high-riding summer sun, the summer moon is always low in the sky. This means that summer moon shadows are much longer than those of winter.

Drew Monkman is a retired Peterborough teacher and author of Nature's Year: Changing Seasons in Central and Eastern Ontario. He can be reached at . Visit his website and see past columns at www.drewmonkman.com.