

# localnews

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## LIVING

# Cycling trip to autumn's origin

## First signs of fall creep slowly across sunny sections of local rail trail

With itchy eyes and a walloping sneeze every minute or so, I was beginning to wonder why I had let my daughter talk me in to going for a bike ride on such a hot and humid day. The dusty, tattered leaves of the elms, the drone of the insects, and the tired flow of the creek weren't helping my energy level much either. Obviously, the feeling of get-up-and-go that I enjoy each year with the cooler days of September hadn't arrived yet.



Drew Monkman

OUR CHANGING SEASONS

Sophie and I had decided to ride the Trans-Canada Trail from Jackson Park to the trestle bridge at Orange Corners. We weren't alone, as many other cyclists had the same idea. But, despite the annoyance of ragweed-induced hay fever and my general dislike of hot weather, my mood quickly began to improve. All around us were the signs that summer's transition into fall was unfolding as it should - more or less on time and involving all of the usual players. All of the expected blossoms, fruits, colours, sounds, and smells were there. For me, at least, anticipating and then observing the same changes in nature each year as a new season arrives provides a reassuring counterbalance to the never-ending change and uncertainty of modern life.

Despite the objections from my daughter for stopping so often, we got off our bikes at one of the bridges to scan the creek for any animal activity. The bird chorus we'd heard there just a couple of months earlier had been replaced by the muffled calls of countless insects. This is a sound so commonplace that it barely pierces our consciousness. Yet it is the sound of summer passing as crickets and grasshoppers race to procreate before frost puts an end to their ephemeral existence. I didn't dare say all of this to Sophie, however, since I would have been accused of casting a pall on her last few days of summer vacation!

As we rode along, the only other sounds we heard were the occasional buzz of a cicada, the screeching of a blue jay, and the clucking of an agitated chipmunk. But it was chickadees that I was really listening for. In late summer, when chickadees are calling, you can expect migrants like warblers and vireos to be with them as well. Letting my daughter go on ahead, I stopped by some large cedars where a flock of chickadees was flitting about. A few seconds of pishing immediately attracted a very upset song sparrow, its tail cocked as it scolded me. A little more of my noise-making soon coaxed a Wilson's warbler into view, resplendent in its black cap. Next, an immature chestnut-sided warbler - looking nothing like the adult - hopped out onto an open branch as well, allowing me a good look at its white eye ring. Eventually, no less than six different species showed themselves.

I caught up to Sophie in a shady area where we shared a drink of water. The vegetation here was pretty much the same as in early summer. There was little insect damage and no hint yet of colour change. This was especially true of the buckthorns that were completely unscathed by the insect swarms and heat of summer. Their leaves were still a



DREW MONKMAN photo



DREW MONKMAN photo



KARL EGRESSY photo

shiny, immaculate green. Clearly, our native, leaf-eating insects want nothing to do with this ubiquitous exotic species.

When we were pedalling through sunny, open areas, however, a lot of the foliage already betrayed summer's end. Here and there, some of the Virginia creeper and sumac leaves had changed to a full-blown crimson. A dabbling of orange could be seen in a few of the sugar maples, and a wash of burgundy had already appeared on the higher branches of the white ashes. American elms and balsam poplars were showing a great deal of yellow, while most of the chokecherries that grow in open fields

adjacent to the trail were now entirely orange. I like to think of these early splashes of red, orange and yellow as sparks that will set woodlands across the Kawarthas ablaze in colour in a few short weeks. Vines, like grape and Virginia creeper, are among the most common plants along the rail trails. In some areas they drape themselves over almost every available fence, shrub, or clump of vegetation. Virginia creeper is also particularly fond of showing off its climbing ability as it scales high onto dead trees and telephone poles. Two other common vines, the wild cucumber and the virgin's bower, are also easy to find. The former has somewhat maple-like leaves, clusters of white flowers, and green, cucumber-like fruits that are covered in soft spines. The latter has coarsely-toothed leaves and silky, green plumes on the flower heads. The plumes will soon turn gray or brown and persist on the vine through the fall and winter.

The wildflower diversity along all of

Cyclists cruising along the rail trail from Jackson Park to Omemee on a September afternoon could expect to see, or hear (clockwise from above) a dog-day cicada, Wilson's warbler and New England aster in flower.



KARL EGRESSY photo

our local rail trails is quite impressive and certainly adds another element of interest for the attentive observer. On this particular day, a large array of both summer and fall species were in bloom. Most should still be in flower for another couple of weeks. Some of the most attractive native species grow in damp areas such as the section of the trail just west of Jackson Park. Plants such as white turtlehead, boneset, and Joe-Pye weed are easy to find here. Later, as we approached the underpass at Hwy. 7, blue fringed gentians and white ladies'-tresses orchids were also putting on quite a show. Seeing them immediately brought to mind all of the similar flowers that have been destroyed with the construction of the new hospital-access road between Parkhill Rd. and Weller St.

In drier, sunny areas along the trail, the golden yellows of goldenrod and the rich purples of aster overwhelmed most everything else that was flowering. Without stopping to consult the book - this was, Sophie reminded me, supposed to be a bike ride - I easily recognized Canada, grass-leaved, and zig-zag goldenrods, as well as heath, panicked, and

New England asters. As for non-native plants that were in flower, the rail trail in late summer offers up just about every variety in the book from bird's-foot trefoil and hawksbeard in the yellows to yarrow and Queen Anne's lace in the whites.

Another layer of colour was quite evident in the abundant seed everywhere, be it berries, cones, acorns, or keys. Unlike a year ago, when the trees and shrubs seemed to conspire to make next to no seed, this year seems to have produced prodigious amounts. Elderberries, dogwoods, hawthorns, high-bush cranberries, Virginia creepers, cedars, oaks, Manitoba maples, basswoods and black cherries are just some of the species that are festooned with a healthy seed crop this season. On one Canada elderberry the

heavy clusters of purplish-black fruit had caused the branches to literally hang vertically. All of this bodes well for good numbers of robins to hang around this winter.

A sort of mental checklist I always keep at this time of year is how many monarch butterflies I see. I also try to check out the milkweed plants themselves on the off chance there might be a monarch caterpillar on one of the leaves. Although we only saw two adults on this particular outing and no caterpillars, the monarch story has been positive this summer. Thanks to the warm, generally dry weather, monarch numbers across the province have been good.

Patterns in nature are everywhere and the insects that frequent milkweeds are no exception. Like the orange adult butterflies that monarch caterpillars become, nearly all of the other insects that live on these plants are at least partly orange, too. The most common of these are the large milkweed bug, the milkweed long-horned beetle and the caterpillars of the milkweed tiger moth. These insects have few predators because they concentrate in their bodies bad tasting compounds found in the sap of milkweed plants. Like the adult monarch butterfly, they use their bright, orange coloration to advertise their bad taste. Inexperienced birds that try to eat a monarch butterfly or milkweed bug are unlikely to try it again. The cover of *Scientific American* once showed a blue jay actually throwing up after being force-fed a monarch!

When we finally got to the trestle bridge, we took a long break to simply enjoy the commanding view. We also watched attentively as a muskrat swam idly by in the stream far below. The overall look of the scenery around us was one of summer. The signs of fall we'd seen earlier on the ride were now largely hidden. But that was fine with me. There's no need to rush the season. It's much more satisfying to simply enjoy fall's arrival as it comes, little by little, but with the assurance that those heady days of late September and early October will soon be upon us.

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