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A Nature Trail Journal Enjoying the Ever-Changing Landscape

Every evening around 5:30, my husband and I take a walk with our dog out behind our house in Ontario County. Living on an abandoned farm, we have watched the successional growth of the landscape over the past 40 years change from pasture to meadow, meadow to shrub growth, shrubs overtaken by small trees and, finally, the climax growth of tall shade trees. Our trail, which starts with flat meadow at the base of a drumlin, is a seasonal wetland, referred to as a wet meadow. Every spring, and especially following this April, there is standing water in many areas along the trail through the meadow. Today there are no wildflowers along this part of the trail, but soon there will be tons of buttercups turning the mowed part of the trail into a carpet of yellow. As we approach the drumlin, the ground is full of shrub dogwoods – red-twig, grey and silky. Each has individual characteristics that make them identifiable, but similar flowers and fruit which makes them cousins.

Arriving at the drumlin, the hill gives us a quick 60 foot climb. 40 years ago this hillside was covered with native hawthorns, called thorn apples. This is the first pioneer tree species to move in and shade out the dogwoods. In the early years, the thorn apples were short and so thick and thorny it took a strong dose of bravery to try and make your way through. About 15 years ago, the thorn apples had finally gained enough height, allowing us to carve out trails beneath them. Following right behind the thorn apples came the native cherries, pin and black. Each spring the cherries, once tall enough to stand above the thorn apples, would give us a beautiful spring display of white flowers. Now, as the shade trees have grown even taller than those pioneer trees, the thorn apples and cherries are dying out as the ash, sugar maples, hickories and black walnut have established themselves.

As we climb the drumlin's west side, there is not a lot of activity in terms of wildflowers, but we see new growth popping up and know that this will soon change. Scaling the hill, the soil becomes drier as the drainage improves. Once at the top, we find the may apples still emerging and the violets starting to flower, both blue and yellow ones. Later we will come here to pick thimbleberries, the tiny, native black raspberries, by the bowlful. Starting down the other side, we pass the Ramps, which give us our first pesto of the year and will soon go dormant. Virginia bluebells have pushed their flower buds, but are holding back their opening thanks to the latest blast of cool weather. Blue cohosh has emerged and, like the bluebells, will hold off flowering until it can no longer wait. Also waiting to flower are the toothworts. Soon we will have lots to enjoy!

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Working our way off the drumlin our trail picks up Beebe Creek, which we follow for a spell. Beebe Creek is a riparian corridor that drains many square miles of land and feeds into Honeoye Creek. The land along the creek supports wetland plants that can tolerate both being flooded and extremely dry conditions. There are basswood, ash and willows. Trout lilies are starting to flower and other wildflowers are beginning to emerge. Colorful displays along the creek will take a little longer to appear.

When we climb out of the creek bed, our trail takes us up to a field that we mow once a year. This used to be cornfield but has been a meadow for at least 20 years. Mostly full of grasses and late summer wildflowers, it offers food and shelter to many birds and other wildlife. From the trail we can view the drumlin where our walk began and complete the cycle of our daily tonic.



Blue and Yellow Violets



Mayflowers Emerging