TRAILBLAZER

Oregon Ridge Nature Center Council – Supporting Oregon Ridge Nature Center since 1982

FALL 2020

SIGNS OF SEASON
American Persimmon

by Jessica Jeannetta, Director/Naturalist

While apples, pumpkins and changing leaves get our attention at this time of year, fruits and nuts native to our area often get overlooked as signs of the season. One such native fruit is the American Persimmon (*Diospyros virginiana).*

Although its genus name, *Diospyros,* translates to "fruit of the gods," persimmons have gotten a bad rap because biting into one that's unripe is quite distasteful and is sure to make your mouth pucker! The round fruit begins ripening in late fall, usually becoming bright orange (but the color can range from yellow to red). A ripe persimmon is waxy and slightly soft, and it should pull off the tree with a gentle tug. If it doesn't, or if it has fallen to the ground or been exposed to freezing temperatures, it's probably inedible.

People aren't the only ones who enjoy the sweet taste of a ripe persimmon. Wildlife does too! Persimmons are a high-value tree for many species. Sometimes called possum apples because they are a favorite of the native Virginia Opossum, the fruits also appeal to deer, coyote, fox, raccoon, squirrel, wild turkey, quail, and other species. In addtion, over 45 butterfly and moth species, including the Luna moth, lay their eggs on persimmon trees.

The persimmon is dioecious, meaning that some trees have male flowers while others have female flowers. Fruit will be produced only if both male and female trees are present. Preferring partial to full shade, a tree typically grows around 30 feet high (though it can reach up to 80 feet). It has 4-6 inch simple oval-shaped leaves in an alternate branching pattern. In the spring, leaves are dark green above and pale underneath. The bark is distinctive - very scaly and ranging in color from dark brown to gray.

According to the Farmer's Almanac, you can use the seed of the persimmon fruit to predict winter weather based on the shape you see when you crack it open. If the kernel inside looks like a fork, plan for a mild winter. If it's spoon-shaped, expect plenty of snow to shovel. And if you see a knife shape, winter temperatures will be so cold they'll cut you like a knife!

So, as you're exploring nature this fall, keep an eye out for this bright orange fruit. If it's the right time of year, take a bite and enjoy the sweetness or break one apart to see it's seed shape. Persimmons are full of nutrients such as iron, potassium, and vitamins. You may want to collect some (make sure you have permission to do so, and remember that foraging on most public lands is not allowed). Use them as ingredients in recipes you can find online for persimmon pudding, pies, bread or cookies... or leave the fruits of the high-value persimmon tree for the wildlife species that are getting ready for the upcoming winter season!

Have You Heard the Buzz about Our Bees?

Steve McDaniel

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The Observation Hive at the Oregon Ridge Nature Center is doing quite well. In fact, it swarmed three times this spring. I cleaned and added some honey in mid-July, removing some of the bees in the process, but it is getting crowded again and might swarm a fourth time.

Swarming is the honey bee colony's way of reproducing itself and happens when the colony is especially successful. An individual honey bee can only survive on its own for a few days and cannot reproduce at all, but the colony, a superorganism, can raise new bees and new queens and can potentially survive indefinitely, for years or even decades. All the bees in one beehive make up a colony, and since they are all the offspring of a single queen, they are all brothers and sisters, essentially a family. If there is lots of food coming in from flowers blooming nearby, the colony will use the pollen and nectar they provide, the bees' only source of nourishment, to raise more bees.

When the behive becomes crowded, the colony will raise new queens by feeding only royal jelly to a few select larvae, or baby bees, and the old queen will leave the hive along with a few thousand bees. The swarming bees will fly in circles near the hive, filling the air in a space the size of a house, then fly off to set up housekeeping in a new location, creating an entirely new colony. You can hear the roar of a swarm a hundred yards away, and it is a thrilling sight, one of the many wonders of nature. The bees are excited but not at all aggressive. I have stood in the middle of such a swarm, unprotected and unthreatened, bees swirling in the air all around me. I could smell the pheromones they use to keep the family together, a combination of lemon and geranium scents, and feel the wind from their wings on my bare arms and face. What an experience!

Usually, the swarm will gather together on a surface such as the branch of a tree while scout bees search for a new home. They are looking for a hollow, protected space of about a cubic foot, such as a hollow tree or wall, with a small,easily defended opening. While they are clustered, a beekeeper can collect them in a box and put them into a beehive. If you see a clump of bees about the size of a football or baskestball, call a beekeeper. They typically remain on the branch only a few hours or up to a couple of days, so act quickly. If they are tended by a beekeeper, they have a much better chance of survival than in the wild. We did not collect any of the Observation Hive swarms, as no one was around at the time.

Meanwhile, back at the hive, several new queens emerge from their cells. The strongest one kills the others, and in a few days, she flies from the hive to mate with the male drone bees, then returns and starts laying eggs. She becomes the new mother of the colony, and life goes on.

WHAT'S NEW AT ORNC

Thinking outside the box leads to great things inside the box...

The Nature Discovery Box!

Jessica Jeannetta, ORNC Director and Naturalist

This has not been a typical summer at ORNC. The COVID pandemic certainly threw us for a loop and forced us to think outside the box!

Our building remained closed throughout spring and into summer causing the Center to cancel our annual summer camps. We really missed the opportunity to provide children with memorable educational experiences in nature, so we decided to come up with a new way to further our mission even if we couldn't do it in person. As a result, we created the Nature Discovery Box Program as a way to provide hands-on experiences in nature for families with children of varying ages.

As a team, the Nature Center staff worked together to research, budget, and create eight nature boxes with different themes: Hiking, Plants, Bugs, Mammals, Birds, Reptiles and Amphibians, Water Life, and Weather and Astronomy.

Each nature box contains an informative guidebook with directions for various explorations, activities, experiments, and crafts, along with needed tools and materials.

To start, families picked up their nature boxes outside the Nature Center. From there, they could complete the activities together in our park, another park or outdoor space, or even in their own backyards. This gave families the flexibility to complete the activities at their own pace and COVID comfort level.

The Nature Discovery Box Program began in July. At that point, we were unsure about whether it would succeed as a new and different way to explore and learn about nature. But soon our nervousness became excitement as more and more families registered for the program. Then, in late July, the ORNC Council learned that we were awarded a COVID-19 Emergency Response Fund Grant from the Baltimore Community Foundation to support the program as a way to engage youth in nature.

We have distributed almost 375 boxes to about 1,284 participants... and the Nature Discovery Box Program has caught the attention of the National Recreation & Parks Association, which will include it in an upcoming article featuring the Baltimore County Recreation & Parks Department.

We look forward to using the success of this program and the feedback from families to create new educational opportunities this fall, so families can continue to explore and enjoy the natural world with what's inside the box!

ORNC SPEAKER SERIES

The Recent Migration of Coyotes into Maryland
John Canoles
October 19th, 7 - 8:30 p.m. via ZOOM

John Canoles is an ecologist with Eco-Science Professionals, Inc. They provide natural resource and habitat delineation, assessment, and restoration throughout the State of Maryland. He is both a former naturalist of ORNC and a past president of the Nature Center's Council and the Long Green Valley Conservancy. He is currently on the Board of Cromwell Valley Park and the Ladew Topiary Gardens. He also contributes a monthly nature article to the Country Chronicle newspaper.

Maryland was one of the last states to support a wild coyote population and that population is now surging. John's presentation will provide a historic view of the factors that contributed to the migration of coyote into Maryland. He will provide suggestions as to how we can learn to live with this new predator in our midst.

Old Growth Forests: A Journey to
Preserve and Protect
Dr. Joan Maloof
November 16th, 7 - 8:30 p.m. via ZOOM

Dr. Maloof is a public speaker, an ecologist, and a conservationist. She is the Founder and Director of the Old-Growth Forest Network, a nonprofit organization that is creating a network of forests across the US that will remain unlogged and open to the public. The network now has over 100 forests in 23 states.

Trees are one of our most valuable assets in maintaining the health of the environment. and ensuring the survival of the planet. Dr. Joan Maloof will discuss the history of this nation's forests and where they stand today. She will discuss obstacles of forest preservation, including here in Oregon Ridge Park.

Three Cheers for Our 2020 Scholarship Winners!

Polly Roberts, M.D., Chair, Scholarship Committee

For the 26th consecutive year, the Oregon Ridge Nature Center Council has awarded scholarships to graduating seniors who have demonstrated academic excellence and a commitment to the environment. This year, due to the coronavirus pandemic, the application deadline was extended by one month, and the applicants were interviewed on ZOOM instead of in person. Four graduates from Baltimore County have each been awarded $5500.The Council heartily congratulates the 2020 scholarship winners and sincerely thanks all who donate so generously to our scholarship program.

Cheyenne Nickerson, a graduate of the SPECIES environmental magnet program at Sparrows Point High School, will pursue environmental studies at the Community College of Baltimore County. She envisions a career involving water quality-combining field and laboratory work. She has achieved the Girl Scout Silver Award and has spent time in the summers with marine-related activities: Marine Quest camps and Venture Crew.

Kayla Thanner, who graduated from the Carver Center for Arts and Technology, will major in marine science at Eckerd College. Her goal is to become a marine field researcher in order to make significant contributions to the natural world. She has served as a volunteer Marsh Ranger at the Marshy Point Nature Center from 8th grade to the present and has participated in her school's Environmental Club from 9th through 12th grades.

ORNC COUNCIL ANNUAL REPORT

Audrey Azzam, a graduate of Loch Raven High School, has chosen a combined major consisting of biology, ecology, and evolution at the University of Maryland, College Park. She hopes to perform field research on different ecosystems in order to protect widlife. She completed the Naturalist Internship at the Oregon Ridge Nature Center during the past year and was a member of her school's Ecology Club.

Andrea Rudai, who graduated from the Carver Center for Arts and Technology, will pursue marine sciences at the University of Maine. She is especially interested in laboratory work involving water quality/micro-organisms. Andrea has been a volunteer Ridge Runner at the Oregon Ridge Nature Center for 5 years and has attended the Sea Grant Consortium Summer Day Camp program in NJ for many years, serving last summer as a Sea Grant Intern Field Instructor.

Harry William Holt, who is the recipient of the four-year Getty Dutrow Mullan Scholarship, has successfully completed his sophomore year at the University of Baltimore in the Environmental Sustainability Program. He will receive $1000 for his junior year.

FUN FACTS
Did You Know?

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Bees combine pollen and nectar or honey to make fermented “bee bread” to feed to their young. In the winter they will cluster around the queen in the hive keeping her and themselves warm by shivering and flapping their wings.

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Gardeners love these colorful spotted creatures because, every day, they eat 50 or more aphids. But technically what we call a ladybug beetle isn't a bug at all. It is a 7 ± . år female beetle. GÏÏ ;å . . ±sÚ±eåfamily name of beetles that we refer to as ladybugs, but scientist prefer to call them ladybird beetle or lady beetles since they are not actually bugs!

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Ants hibernate in the soil, under rocks or under tree bark in the winter. In the autumn they eat as much food as they can. What do they eat you might ask? They like a “carbohydrate” called “honeydew.” This honeydew is not like the summer melon you enjoy, but a liquid produced by aphids and scale insects. In fact, the ants will protec the aphids and the scale insects from the predatory ladybug beetles!

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The female dragonfly lays her eggs underwater while the male dragonfly may hover closely to guard her. The eggs hatch to become nymphs and eat everything from mosquito larvae to tiny fish. Some species can live in the water as nymphs for as long as five years. As an adult, the dragonfly catches its food in midair. This is the only way they eat. A dragonfly can fly an average of 10 miles per hour and beat their wings 30 times per second.

Newsletter Committee: Judy Breitenbach, Bob Cooke, Ging Shamberger
Contributors to this issue: Jessica Jeannetta, Kathy Kadow, Steve McDaniel, Mark Gingerich, Polly Roberts, Jeanne Pinto, Mary Jane Shanks, Bob Cooke, Judy Breitenbach

Kid's Corner

Make Your Own Nature Bandanna

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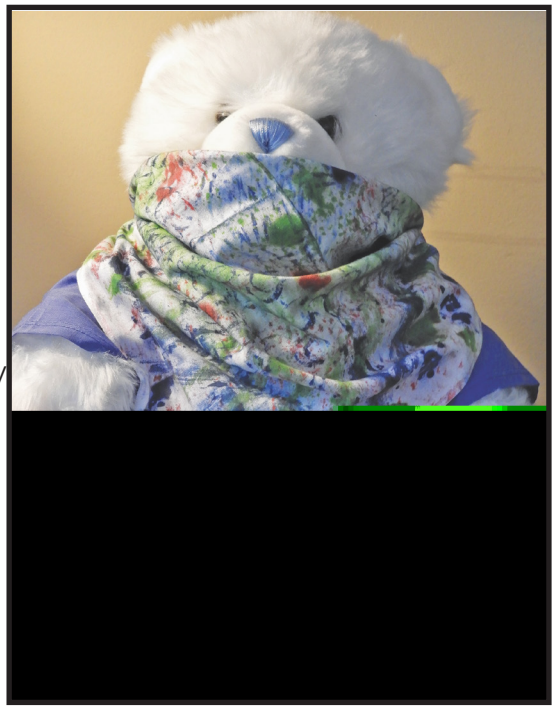
- Leaves, sticks, acorns, spices, bark, seeds, and/or shells
- A white or solid-colored handkerchief about 18 inches square
- An iron
- Newspaper or heavy piece of cardboard
- Old rags or a piece of foam
- Ink pads of various colors
- Help from an adult

1. Gather your materials and arrange by shape and size. Be creative and tear or break items into a smaller size if desired. Examine the texture. Is it smooth or rough? Found some interesting twigs? Look closely at them and note the points on either end.
2. Now its time to get to work. Fold the handkerchief in half several times, until it is about 3 inches square. Have an adult help you iron the folded handkerchief. When you unfold it, you will have crease marks that form squares. The crease marks are your grid lines to help guide you when making your design.
3. Place the handkerchief on top of the newspaper or heavy piece of cardboard. Use the old rags or piece of foam under the newspaper or cardboard to make a softer surface.
4. Now its time to be creative. Open your ink pads. Take a piece of nature and press it into the ink pad. Next, take your piece of nature and press it onto your handkerchief. Don't be afraid to dot, roll, or smear it on your handkerchief to create your design.
5. Once complete, leave your one-of-a-kind handkerchief laying flat to dry.
6. Daisy the bear is very happy with her bandanna and hopes you are happy with yours too!