

Maryland's Wild Acres



HABITAT - the arrangement of food, water, cover, and space - IS THE KEY.

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Time to stock up!

Photo by Giles Gonthier, Wikimedia Commons

Forward

Welcome to the Fall issue of Habi-Chat! This time of year, many birds, bats and butterflies are on the move to southern latitudes as part of their annual migration events. In addition, many asters are out in full bloom from the ironweeds to the pye-weeds! While enjoying the cooler temperatures, be sure to keep a lookout for "unusual" visitors in your yard. Some birds, like the Blackpoll Warbler, can consume up to 0.6% of their body fat per hour while migrating! So, these weary travelers often take pit stops along the way. To find out ways to attract these migrants, then check out the article at the end. For those of you with bird feeders, then consider joining Project FeederWatch to record your sightings!

Maryland Native Plant Profile
New York Ironweed
(*Vernonia noveboracensis*)

New York Ironweed is a tall, perennial wildflower in the Sunflower family (Asteraceae) that is found from Massachusetts to Ohio and south to Florida. This magnificent plant produces clusters of deep purple blooms in late summer that last through early fall. Occasionally, New York Ironweed can be found sporting white flowers. New York Ironweed can grow up to 7 feet tall, though it usually only gets to about 5-6 feet in height. The toothed leaves of New York Ironweed alternate around the stem and often have an elliptical or lance-shaped appearance. Each inflorescence contains a collection of tiny flowers. In an average year, a single plant can produce between 6,000 – 19,000 seeds! The seeds often remain on the plant throughout winter, providing a food source for songbirds, game birds and small mammals.

New York Ironweed attracts a multitude of butterflies such as Whites, Sulfurs, Monarchs, Painted Ladies and Swallowtails. This showy plant is also an important plant for many species of native bees, particularly those which have longer tongues. Interestingly enough, this plant is unpalatable to many mammal species which is why it can often be viewed in cattle pastures.

New York Ironweed grows best in full sun in moist soils. This species of Ironweed can also grow in dry soils, though plants in dry soils rarely get over 3 feet in height. Often, you can see New York Ironweed growing in roadside ditches or in wet meadows. After flowering, this native plant produces rusty-colored seeds, and the stems often remain through much of the winter. These two characteristics give rise to its name as Ironweed. Interestingly enough, the Ironweed genus, *Vernonia*, is named after an English botanist, William Vernon, who collected the plant in Maryland in the 1600s.



Photos by: Kerry Wixted

Maryland Native Wildlife: Orb weavers



**Orb weavers can often be identified by the distinctive pattern of their webs.
Photo by: Fir002, Wikimedia Commons**

The word “spider” can often generate some of the most visceral reactions of disgust and fear. However, many of those emotions are triggered by misconceptions concerning our eight-legged friends. In fact, spiders around the world and in your backyard work to keep populations of insects, including those which carry diseases, in check. One estimate found that spiders on 1 acre of woodland can consume more than 80 pounds of insects a year! In addition, research on spider venom shows that some species’ venom may be useful for developing medicines for heart-attack victims, for tumor treatment and for preventing tooth decay.

This time of year, some of the most visible spiders are late season orb weavers. There are over 150 species of orb weavers north of Mexico. Orb weavers create webs that are organized around a circular grid and use structures such as weeds, fences, trees and walls to build their webs. Orb weavers tend to have a bulbous abdomen and striped legs with visible hairs. Orb weavers are considered beneficial to humans as they eat many pest insects including the invasive brown-marmorated stinkbug! While most spiders have venom, orb weavers generally do not pose a health threat to humans and often attempt to flee when encountered. However, with all bites, it is important to monitor the wound for potential signs of infection or allergic reactions.

Some of the most distinct orb weavers include the *Micrathena* genus. These spiders have spiky abdomens with bright yellow or white markings. Three species of *Micrathenas* can be found in Maryland.

Other common orb-weavers include Barn Spiders (*Araneus cavaticus*). The lovable Charlotte from Charlotte’s Web was based off of this spider species. While barn spiders don’t write messages about pigs in their webs, they do weave a new web every day.



Spined Micrathena (left) and Barn Spiders (right) are common species of orb weavers. Photos by: Bruce Marlin, Wikimedia Commons and Kerry Wixted

Other neat orb weavers include the large black and yellow garden spider or the marbled orb weaver.



Black and Yellow Garden Spiders (left) and Marbled Orb Weavers (right) are colorful species of orb weavers Photos by: Kerry Wixted



**An orb weaver dines on a tasty meal.
Photo by: Kerry Wixted**

Usually, spiders need little enticement to colonize backyards and porches around Maryland. However, like other insects, they are sensitive to chemical insect sprays, particularly those which contain bifenthrin, cyfluthrin, permethrin and tetramethrin. So, limit the use of these sprays around your backyard if you want to have spiders around.

Rock gardens and mulch also provide habitat for spiders. In addition, ornamental statues and fences provide good web attachment points.

If a particular spider is becoming a nuisance, then gently knock the web down with a broom or spray it down with the hose. Most spiders will relocate after their web has been destroyed a few times.

If you are interested in learning more about spider identification, then check out the general page on [Maryland Spiders](#). In addition, Bug Guide is a fantastic resource for all things relating to insects, spiders and their kin. You can even post photos on the [Bug Guide](#) site for identification.

Backyard Wildlife Fun for Kids: Acorn Necklaces

This time of the year, oaks all across the state are dropping their acorns. Take a trip out to your backyard or to a local park and see if you can collect some acorns with their caps still on. Bring the acorns home and let your kid's imaginations soar!

Materials:

- Capped acorns
- Colored fuzzy yarn or wool
- Tacky glue
- Permanent markers
- Scissors
- String



Instructions

1. Gather capped acorns and carefully remove the caps.
2. To make hair, put one large drop of tacky glue on the top of each acorn and press wisps of fuzzy yarn and wool roving into it. After applying a second drop onto the wisps, put the caps back on and hold them on for one minute.
3. Use a permanent marker to draw faces. Trim the hair, then make "chains" by tying string around the cap stem and securing it with a drop of glue.



Other Tips:

- Use other plant parts to make acorn people. Sticks and various seed pods can also be used.
 - If you decide to only draw faces on acorns, then kids can plant these into the ground. Label the areas where the acorns have been planted and check them in the spring to see what sprouts!
 - Collect acorns from different species of oaks. Place 10 of each type of acorn on a labeled paper plate and set them out in the backyard or on your deck. Let the acorns sit for a day, and then see if any wildlife like squirrels carried them off. Are certain types of acorns favored more than others? If possible, then try to use a field guide to identify the oak species to see which are the most palatable.
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Habitat Tips: Attracting Fall Migrants

The recent cold front that hit Maryland this past weekend brought more than just a break in the heat- it also heralded fall migrants to our State. Passerine birds, such as tanagers, warblers and sparrows, tend to follow cold fronts in their southward journeys. Some of these species fly tens of thousands of miles to get to their destination, and they need to take pit stops along the way. So, to entice some of these weary travelers to your backyard, try out the following tips:

- Put out your feeders at least 1 week before migration and keep them out at least 1 week after the last birds leave. This includes hummingbird feeders which can be left outside until November. Occasionally, Rufous Hummingbirds will visit feeders in the Fall, and sometimes they will stay through the winter! Suet, black oil sunflower seed and Nyjer seed are some of the best seeds for fall migrants.
- Clean feeders at least once every other week to prevent the spread of disease.
- Offer a variety of foods from seeds to fruits to nuts and nectar. A diversity of foods tends to attract a diversity of birds.
- Plant late-blooming flowers which can attract nectar feeders like hummingbirds. Sunflowers and coneflowers are also great resources for tiny seed-eating birds like finches.
- Plant fruit-bearing trees and shrubs for a berry resource in the fall. Good native berry sources include chokeberries and hollies.
- Leave your birdhouses up for potential overnight guests.
- Prevent bird collisions with windows by placing decals or mesh over windows. Organizations like the [American Bird Conservancy](#) also sell special window tape designed to reduce window strikes.
- Provide a water source. Fall migrants also need to take water breaks too! Be sure to clean bird baths every two weeks to cut down on the spread of disease.
- Sign up for [Project FeederWatch](#) and report your sightings!



Rose-breasted Grosbeaks are fall migrants that visit bird feeders.
Photo by: USFWS



Other Fall Habitat Tips:

- Plant spring-blooming bulbs before the first heavy frost (usually November).
- Dig up and store cannas, gladiolus and other tubers in a cool, dry place until spring
- Separate and divide perennials
- Leave the leaves! Leaf litter provides habitat for all sorts of beneficial invertebrates as well as shelter for eggs, larvae, pupae and even adult butterflies. Leaf litter also helps replenish soil nutrients.
- Enjoy the crisp temperatures! Raptors begin their southern migration, so visit places like Hawk Mountain, PA.- you may see 'kettles' of 1,000 Broad-winged Hawks!
- Let the kids learn about migration by playing the [Bird Migration Game](#) by the Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center

Wild Acres in Action

Recently a friend posted this lovely picture of a black swallowtail caterpillar munching on Queen Anne's Lace. Black swallowtails lay their eggs on plants in the parsley family (Apiaceae) including carrot, parsley, dill, fennel and Queen Anne's lace. So, if you want to attract these guys, then consider planting those species in your yard. If you don't want caterpillars munching on all of your herbs, then consider planting some for the caterpillars and some for you.

There can be a lot of variation in the patterns of black swallowtail caterpillars with some appearing more yellow or spotted than others. Bug Guide has a great compilation of black swallowtail caterpillar photos [here](#).



Black Swallowtail caterpillar munching on Queen Anne's Lace. Photo by: Tami-Elizabeth Bentz

Fall 2012 Dates to Remember

- **9/15- 9:00-3:00 pm Honey Harvest Festival at Patuxent Wildlife Research Refuge.** Join the Maryland State Beekeepers Association as they celebrate the Annual Maryland Honey Harvest Festival! (<http://www.fws.gov/northeast/patuxent/events.html>) Free
 - **9/26-9/27- 7:30pm Preserving and Restoring Biodiversity in Developed Landscapes conference.** Learn about salvaging biodiversity, prehistoric plants of the Baltimore region and sustainable management of Baltimore County's forests in addition to participating in field trips. For more info, visit the Maryland Native Plant Society website (<http://mdflora.org/2012conference.html>)
 - **10/13- 10:00am Creepy Creatures: Toads, Worms, Spiders, Snakes** with Ashley Jarvis & Billy Heinbuch. Learn about these creepy critters found throughout Maryland. (<http://www.hcconservancy.org/upcoming-events.html>) Free
 - **11/10- 10:00am Cooking for the Birds:** Create-n-take winter treats with Diane Ference (<http://www.hcconservancy.org/upcoming-events.html>) Free
 - **11/16- 7:00pm Return of the Spring Pools: Amphibian Awakening and More.** National Geographic Photographer George Grall will present his breathtaking images documenting animal behavior above and below the water in an educational & entertaining presentation. (<http://www.hcconservancy.org/upcoming-events.html>) \$10; \$12 after Nov 15. Kids under 8 free.
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If you enjoyed this issue of Habichat, you might want to check out our [Online Habichat Archive](#) and the [List of Habichat Articles by Topic](#).

Acknowledgements:

- Time to stock up! Photo by Giles Gonthier, Wikimedia Commons
 - Ironweed Photos by Kerry Wixted
 - Orb weaver web Photo by Fir002, Wikimedia Commons
 - Spined Micrathena Photo by Bruce Marlin/Wikimedia Commons
 - Barn Spider Photo by Kerry Wixted
 - Black and Yellow Garden Spiders and Marbled Orb Weaver Photos by Kerry Wixted
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 - Rose-breasted Grosbeak Photo by USFWS
 - Black Swallowtail caterpillar Photo by Tami-Elizabeth Bentz
 - Ironweed Photo by: Kerry Wixted
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We want to hear from you!

Letters, e-mail, photos, drawings. Let us know how successful you are as you create wildlife habitat on your property.

Write to Me!

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