

Bluffviews

a quarterly newsletter by Clifftop

October, 2023

Vol. 13, No. 4



Leave the Leaves

by Joann Fricke



As conservation minded folks, your Facebook feeds are probably full of posts about native plants, pollinators and animals that benefit the environment. I know mine is. The most prominent posts at this time of year are regarding leaving the leaves, and this has become a controversial topic. Just last week I was listening to a garden show on a local radio station when someone called in to question the "Leave the Leaves" initiative. "Why would anyone do this?" he wondered. "It will kill the grass!" Even the so-called expert was appalled that such a practice was being promoted in local communities. This led me to think that we need a "Native Garden Hotline" on the radio. I have a host in mind, but that's another story.

At the end of summer, bumble bee queens burrow just below the soil to wait out winter. Give them the extra protection they need.

LEAVE THE LEAVES



xerces.org

Photo by Rich Hatfield

It is ingrained in us to rake the leaves in the Fall to "clean up" our yards. Raking has given way to using powerful leaf blowers to dispense with the leaves. Some communities even offer curbside leaf pickup. But where do those leaves go? Likely a landfill. Do you know what you might find in that pile of leaves? In the October 6, 2017 Xerces Society blog, Justin Wheeler wrote, "While monarch migration is a well-known phenomenon, it's not the norm when it comes to butterflies. In fact, the vast majority of butterflies and moths overwinter in the landscape as an egg, caterpillar, chrysalis, or adult. In all but the warmest climates, these butterflies use leaf litter for winter cover. Great spangled fritillary and woolly bear caterpillars tuck themselves into a pile of leaves for protection from cold weather and predators. Luna moths and swallowtail butterflies disguise their cocoons and chrysalises as dried leaves, blending in with the "real" leaves."

Still in question is will the leaves kill your grass? Once again, Wheeler provides an answer. "To mimic the natural ecosystem an animal needs, a layer of leaves needs to be at least a couple of inches thick. While this would be too much of a good thing for turf grass to handle—research has shown that lawns actually benefit from a thin layer of leaves, and the rest can be piled up around ornamental trees, shrubs, and perennials to no ill effect."

Bottom line, according to Wheeler, "You gave them flowers and a place to nest. You tended your garden and avoided pesticides. Don't carry all of that hard work out to the curb. Simply put, when we treat leaves like trash—we're tossing out the beautiful moths and butterflies that we'll surely miss and work so very hard to attract."

Caterpillars of fritillary butterflies overwinter in fall leaves - so please

LEAVE THE LEAVES



xerces.org

Photo by John Flannery / Flickr

Quilting

By Katie Mae Steinmetz

As a relatively recent resident of Illinois' bluff and sinkhole territory, I've come to appreciate the interconnectedness of our hill prairies, woodlands, sinkhole wetlands, and the sprawling floodplains of the big river. It nicely mirrors my thoughts on the natural resource management community, where vital threads weave through the vast tapestry of our ecosystems, connecting those dedicated to preserving, safeguarding, and enhancing our finite wilds. In many ways, it's like a beautifully crafted quilt.

My foundation in natural resources followed a conventional path, beginning with my time at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale. There, I pursued a Bachelor's degree in Geography and Environmental Resources, and later, a Master's degree in Plant Biology. These years were a journey of connecting with fellow natural resource practitioners devoted to managing the diverse ecosystems of southernmost Illinois.



Hike up Cave Creek Glade Nature Preserve in Johnson County. Photo courtesy Katie Mae Steinmetz.

I found invaluable mentorship at Cypress Creek National Wildlife Refuge, where I had the privilege of participating in projects aimed at preserving the remaining Cache River watershed. From tree plantings in bottomland hardwoods to weekly waterfowl surveys, I gained hands-on experience in ecological conservation. One particularly memorable summer spent working for Shawnee National Forest left an indelible mark, highlighting the importance of invasive species removal (I can still smell the pungent odor of hot, bagged garlic mustard!).

A change in location brought a fresh opportunity for me to refine my skills in tallgrass prairie management at the Champaign County Forest Preserve District. Working alongside passionate individuals deeply invested in tallgrass prairie restoration and deft with a drip torch, I participated in 32 prescribed prairie, savanna, and woodland burns in just two years.

A year-long stint at the Illinois Natural History Survey introduced me to some of the state's most accomplished natural resource scientists. Here, I had the privilege of managing 11 natural areas owned by the University of Illinois, totaling around 970 acres.

Yet, my ultimate goal was to transition to federal employment, and in 2016, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) provided me the opportunity to serve as a Botanist in their Regulatory Branch. This leap represented not only a change in career direction but also an entirely new facet of environmental management. Section 404 of the Clean Water Act grants the USACE the authority to regulate the discharge of dredged or fill material into waters of the United States, including wetlands. The permit process is crucial for protecting aquatic ecosystems and



Burr Oak "wolf tree" released through timber stand improvement by Champaign County Forest Preserve District. Photo courtesy Katie Mae Steinmetz.

ensuring projects that impact these waters are conducted in an environmentally responsible manner and may require the purchase of mitigation credits. I have the honor of being able to work alongside foresters, wildlife biologists, soil scientists, and other biologists, creating a dynamic team in the identification of wetlands and streams—including those in our bluff region.

While not even at the midpoint of my career, I can see the thumbprints of all those who have graciously taught and mentored me. Without their guidance, patience, and unwavering passion, my career path would have fallen flat. Those threads of interconnectedness crisscross all over the state, running through the ecosystems we love and the people working for them. And what a beautiful quilt it is.

In the photo at right, Clifftop member, Katie Mae, can be seen in a cypress tree swamp in Caddo Parish, Louisiana.

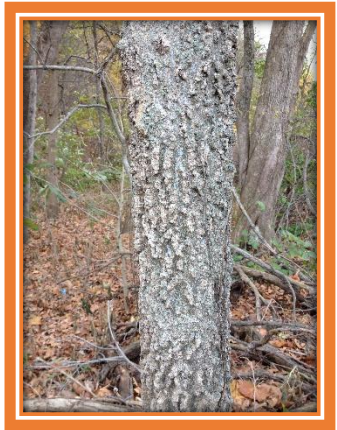


Upcoming events...

Members' Day

Please join us for the annual celebration of our members at Paul Wightman Subterranean Nature Preserve, 3325 G Road, Fults from 11:00 a.m. until 2:00 p.m. on Saturday, November 4. Hike one or all of the trails or just sit and chat with other members. Refreshments will be served. RSVP by October 30 to Joann at 618-935-2542 or email cliffmbr@htc.net.

A **Winter Tree ID** program will be presented by former IDNR forester, Bear Engbring, at noon on December 16 at White Rock Nature Preserve, 6438 Bluff Road, Valmeyer. Learn how to identify our native and maybe invasive trees by their bark and buds. Dress for the weather and be ready to hike a bit.



Moving?



Please be sure to notify us of your new address. Send updates to cliffmbr@htc.net or call 618-935-2542

Photo gallery...



The Deer Hill Band concert at Paul Wightman Subterranean Nature Preserve on Sept. 23



Touring the Illinois Audubon Society's newly acquired property adjacent to PWSNP on September 26 with IAS Executive Director Jo Fessett.



Work day at White Rock October 8.



Seed collecting with Project Wingspan at PWSNP on October 21.