



A Season at the Celery Farm Natural Area

Winter

Spring

Summer

Autumn

Summer

R. H. Kane

Continuing an account of a year at the Celery Farm, Allendale, NJ

Cover photograph: View towards Warden's Watch

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SUMMER

A SEASON AT THE CELERY FARM
NATURAL AREA

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY R. H. KANE



INTRODUCTION

Northwest from New York City in suburban New Jersey, about 25 miles as the crow flies, one can find a small nature preserve. It is easy to find if only you were a crow; for people, it may be harder. The hundred-acre Celery Farm is unmarked, with only an unpaved seven-car parking area with a pond shielded by trees. It's not even widely known by residents of the area.

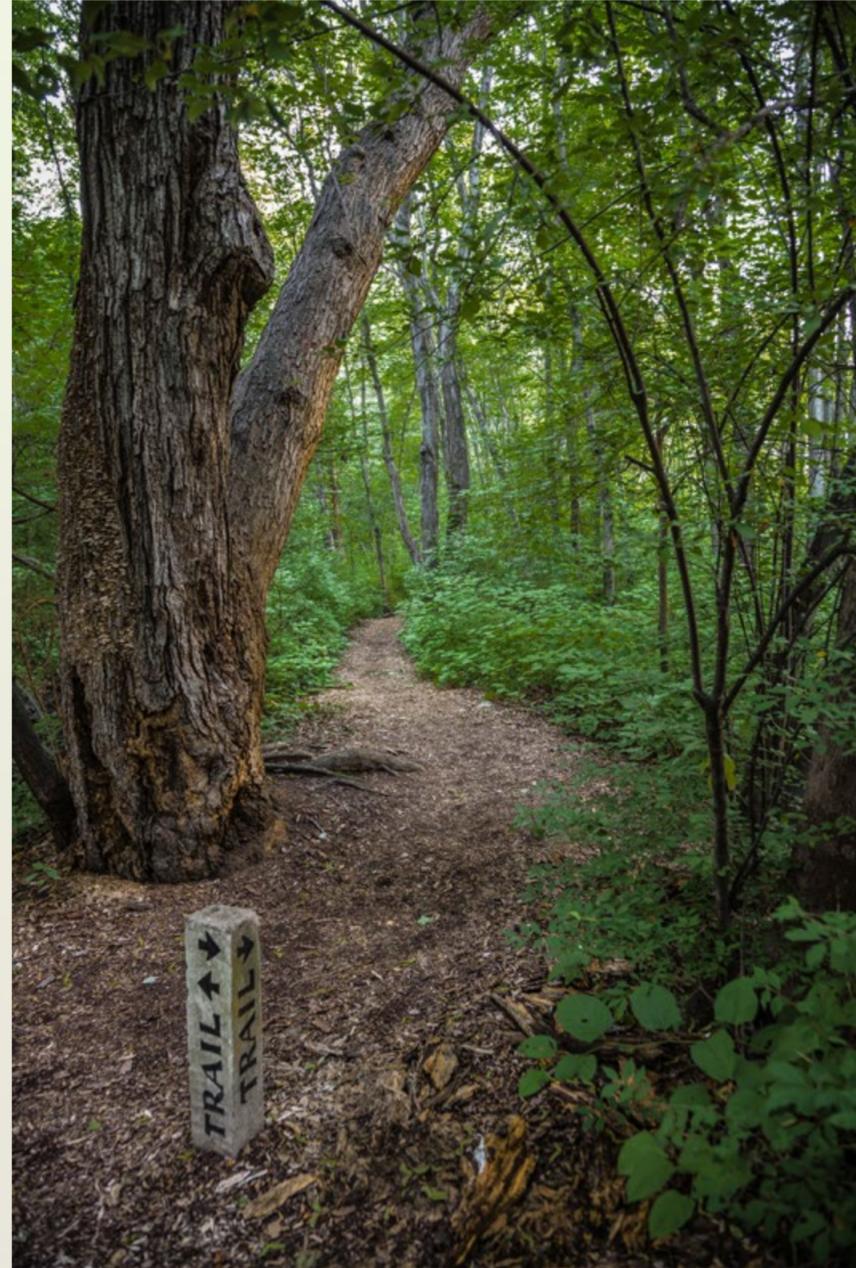
Although the Celery Farm may have most attraction for locals, this book is intended to have more than local appeal. The preserve could be anywhere in the northern half of the country, and it's no more special, and perhaps less, than other wildlife sanctuaries. It's small, the murky shallow pond has more carp and snappers than anything else, and it's been invaded by phragmites and other exotics. It faces the same environmental problems as other preserves, and has the same kinds of wild visitors and residents you might find in Maryland, Missouri or Minnesota. It may only be unique in that it is an unexpected oasis in the middle of the most populous county in the state with highest population density. Those who have read the previous two installments know that this will be a diary of a composite season, based on years of visits and photography. One will not find what is described here on a single walk (or in a single year!). You will likely find some things to be different than described; the Preserve has evolved in the past twenty years and will continue to do so.

Sad to say, newcomer photographers will have slimmer pickings than I have had over the past fifteen years.

Now we will explore it in summer, following its landscape and residents as we have in the record of winter and spring, tracing the course of the season from the exuberance of spring through the settled, warm monotony of the middle age of the year. Those new to this series or to the Celery Farm can find a tour and notes on photographing here at the end of the Winter narrative. Some may wish to begin there. Newcomers might consult this map for orientation; it was prepared by the Fyke Nature Association: <http://www.fykenature.org/cfmap.html>. The place is not refined, remember, and only enough is done to keep it accessible; it will not always be a comfortable place to visit. Paths will be mostly dry in summer, but heavily rooted. Bring closed shoes just in case and always after a rain--and bug repellent; you should take some precautions against ticks, to be prudent. There will be poison ivy, too, but one need not become obsessive here.

One can't step in the same river twice. The Celery Farms changes more slowly than that, but every year will be different; again, you won't find exactly what you will read about here when you visit.

Now our survey begins when the Preserve is fully leafed-out, freshly renewed. The first summer heat is already here.



SUMMER

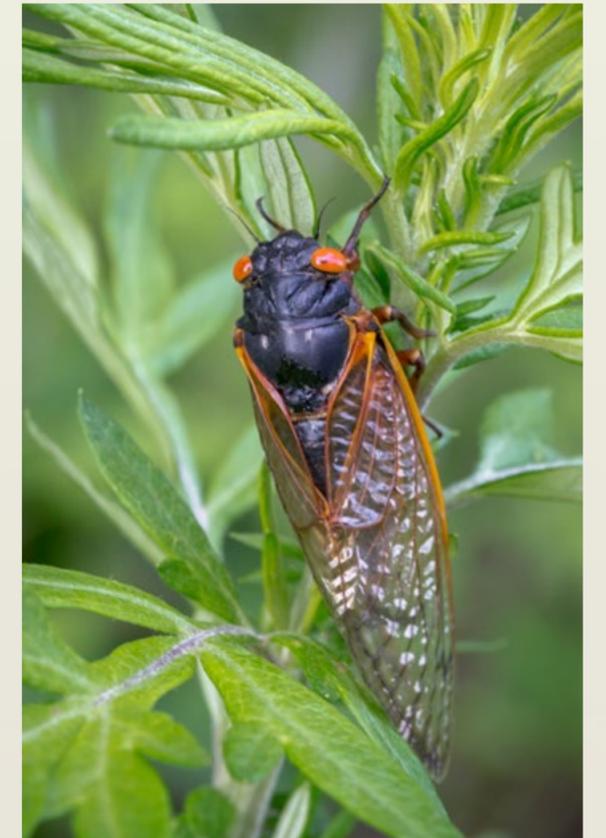
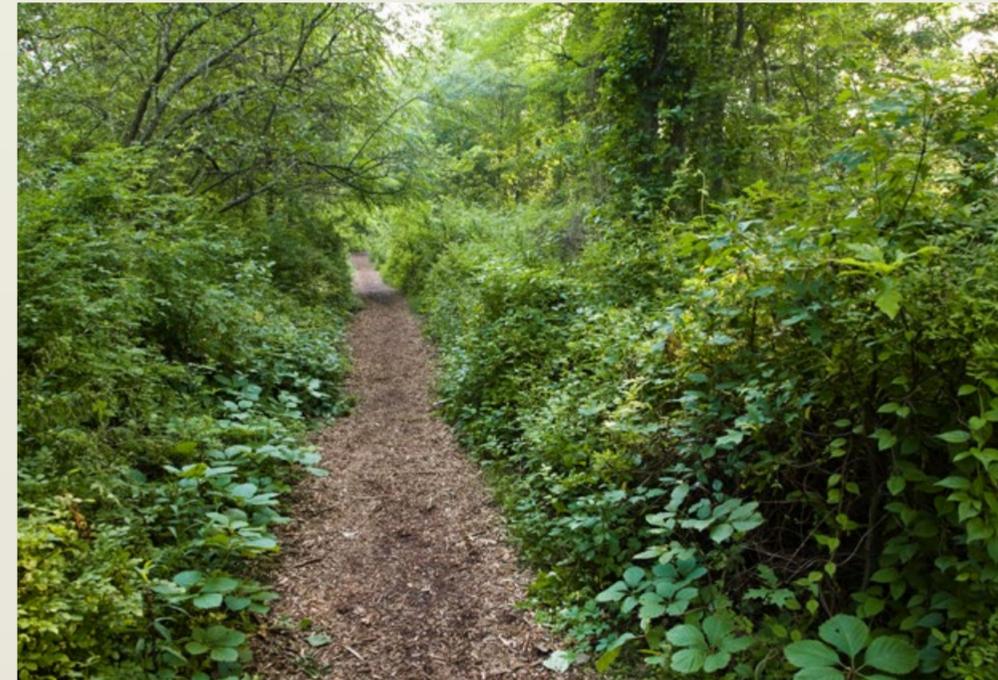


Summer at the Celery Farm will be a season of few surprises. Obviously, there will be no open water one day and ice the next; it will be rare to stumble upon new hatchlings in the path and new arrivals will be infrequent. We certainly won't be impressed with changing colors. The Celery Farm will coast through summer as we slowly lose hours of daylight after the solstice. Spring was full of change. It brought June heat after March cold, full foliage from barren winter; summer will be monotonous by comparison. We will watch the leaves tire and the sun-track shift slowly toward the south, but life and weather will be pretty much the same for the season. Spring was a race to leaf out, to mate and reproduce, and the middle of June now seems like a finish line.

If winter is the most wretched season here, some summers may provide competition. Warm temperatures may already have arrived before the solstice. There will be glorious days, certainly—Bermuda days—but heat and miserable humidity can be the norm, often for a week at a time. We visit early in the morning when it is still relatively cool, and sometimes come late in the day to enjoy the light. But wildlife then is scarce and birds are done for the day. It's not Georgia, but sometimes seems to be.



As the pale green of mid-spring matures, the Celery Farm puts on most of its summer coat and by the middle of June sameness has settled in. By now, vegetation has reached full summer exuberance. The path along Warbler Alley has been a tunnel for weeks, and elsewhere new growth will eventually threaten to suffocate the paths. Foliage is still fresh, without hints of wear the coming weeks will bring, but the fresh leaves are already wilting in the summer heat. The trails will require clearing throughout the season as shrubs, vines, grasses and phrags quickly narrow the passages.



Should the pattern of recent years continue, it's likely that a pair of swans will have been here since early spring. If they have nested there may be young now. We are ambivalent, admiring their adult grace and happy to photograph, but with concern about the damage they are doing to an ecosystem probably already out of balance.

Mudflats appear when rain is scarce, anticipated by birders since the low water attracts sandpipers and killedeer. When the lake fills again, algae will grow quickly at the bottom and reach into the water column. The pond hosts duckweed--often lots of duckweed in some years--and the algae bottom growth slows; deeper murky water and duckweed shading can keep light from the bottom. Light penetration can be just 18 inches in summer.



The pond is shallower than one might guess. Even fifty feet from shore it may be just a foot deep, perhaps even less at the northern end.

Taken just one week apart from the Scout Platform these views show how quickly mud flats can form in the shallows during even moderate dry spells. Snapping turtle tracks criss-cross the bottom.

Rainfall feeds the lake, and runoff brings lawn fertilizer, encouraging vigorous algae and duckweed growth. The pond is murky, and snappers and carp churn the sediment to make it worse. At the end of winter there may be a fish kill and a few carcasses may float to the surface, but, rarely, a kill can be spectacular and the fish population plummets. With fewer carp to disturb the bottom water clarity can be better until suspended algae growth takes its course. We will seldom get a glimpse of what the murky water conceals.

For a short time, snapping turtles might be visible below the surface, reminding us of their impressive size and number. Count the snouts poking above the surface on summer mornings when the pond is calm. The carp are almost impressive as the snappers. As summer progresses they often surface to pipe, apparently to coat their gills with oxygen. Oxygen can be scarce after a winter with long-lasting ice cover. Looking like Chinese kites—and nearly the size—they will become invisible when they make the water more turbid as they churn the bottom.

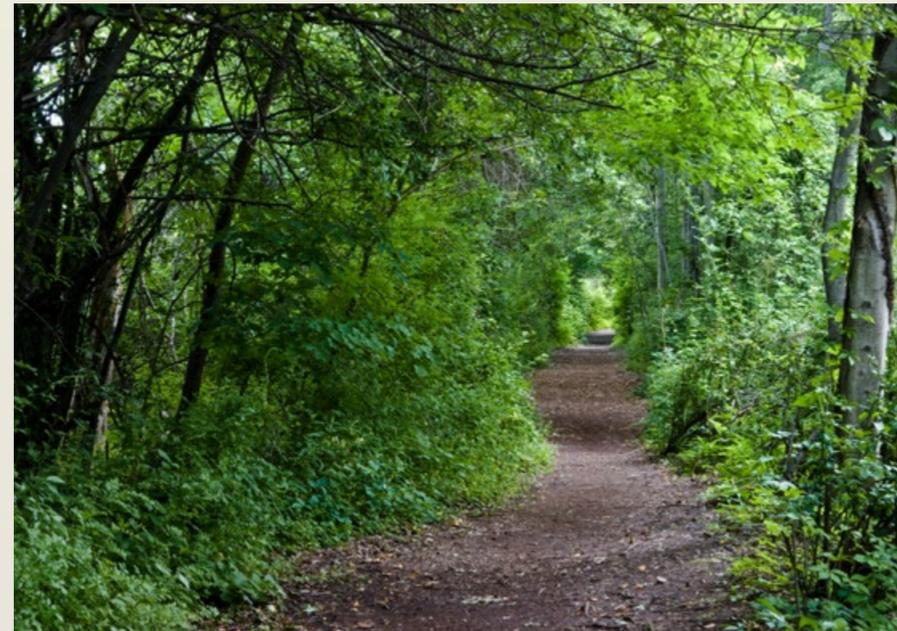


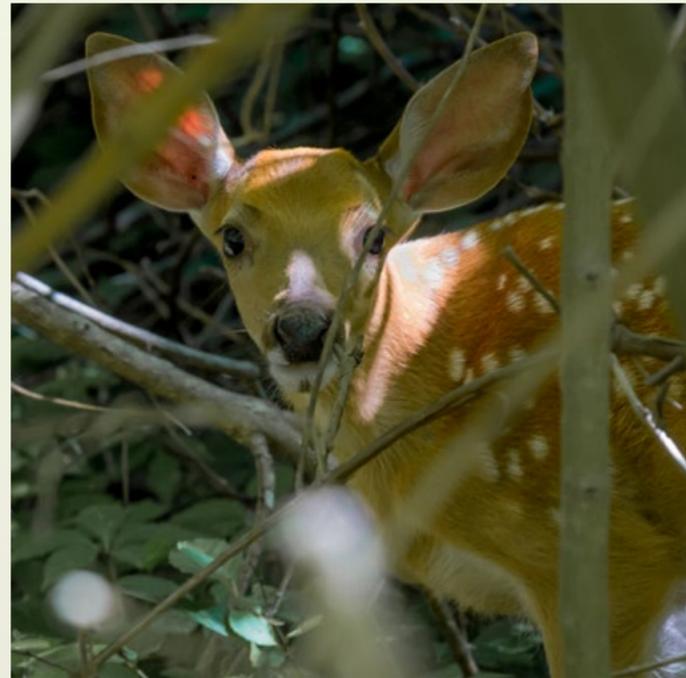
Painted turtles will be everywhere, sunning on logs, rocks or the shore, but quick to dive as we approach. Five, eight, or even fifteen might be sunbathing on the brush pile. Once in a while we might even stumble on a box turtle, perhaps near Phair's Pond.



Early in June the phrags began their growth spurt along the trails, from shoots that pierced the soil like daggers. At the start of summer they are now more than head high, even in the old stands beaten down by snow. Views from the air reveal the new green reeds intruding into the last year's shafts in the old farm beds. Their invasion of the Preserve continues relentlessly, pausing only for winter.

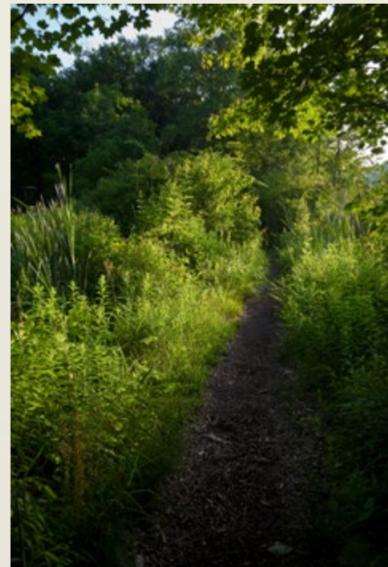
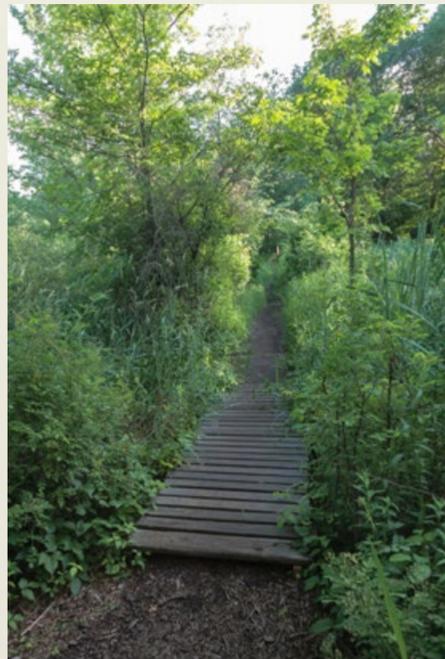
Exuberant vegetation along the trails makes birding a challenge, even this early in summer. Overhanging foliage will increasingly shield the paths.





On the solstice the milkweed blossoms open, signalling the end of quick spring growth at Phair's Pond. Elsewhere, some wildflowers are peaking while others lag. Spikes of common mullein carry yellow flowers head-high near the Butterfly Garden. Not native, but not invasive either, they make a striking display. It is still far from its final eight-to-ten foot height. And we can find flowers near Greenway, in fragmented gardens that will last all summer. There are few water plants; clumps of pennywort appear in the shallows around the pond, but little else. There are some growing below the water visible in the spring, probably algae, but little or nothing else appears above the water.

Deer, once uncommon, can be seen now during many visits. They once fled from us but now tolerate visitors. They just continue to browse, destroying the woods' understory all the while. Despite our feelings about the adults, fawns continue to charm us.





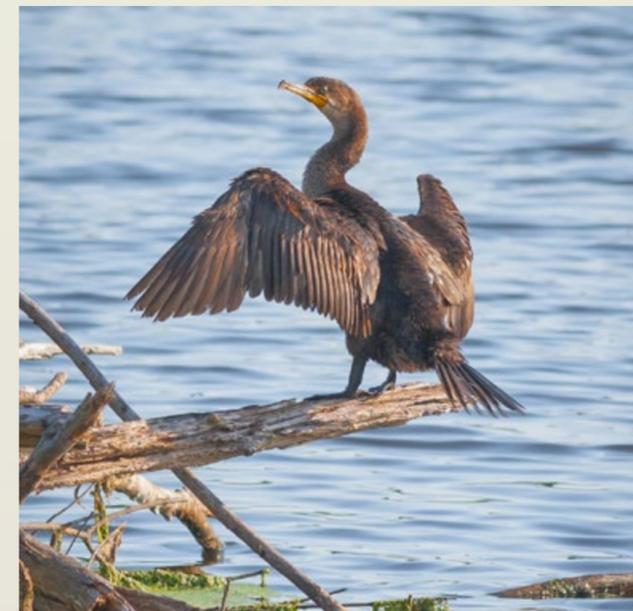


As the day warms, dragonflies begin the mosquito hunt and we will find common whitetails everywhere in the Preserve. On the hottest mornings they will already be active when we arrive, leaping ahead of us as we walk. Blue dashers will be slower to rise.

Already, late in this June, it is even warmer and drier than usual. Summer rain often will be infrequent; dry spells may last for weeks and even the poison ivy will wilt. Only the tree swallows seem to attend to business. There may be young already, crying to be fed.



We find ourselves in an early July day, warm and humid and boringly green, seasoned with a dash of mosquito, an episode of blazing heat that will be repeated often into September. Humidity makes things worse, but discomfort will eventually pass with cold fronts from the north and west, until the heat builds again. In eight weeks or so it will not be a worry. By July, summer has settled into its rhythm. Wood duck chicks are growing and seem to be everywhere on the pond. They are good at avoiding the snappers, but too frequently not good enough.



The Preserve shelters the small, as well. At Greenway, bumblebees and some honeybees raid the swaths of monarda that remain in full flower for most of July. We might find eastern swallowtails, or even a hummingbird moth.

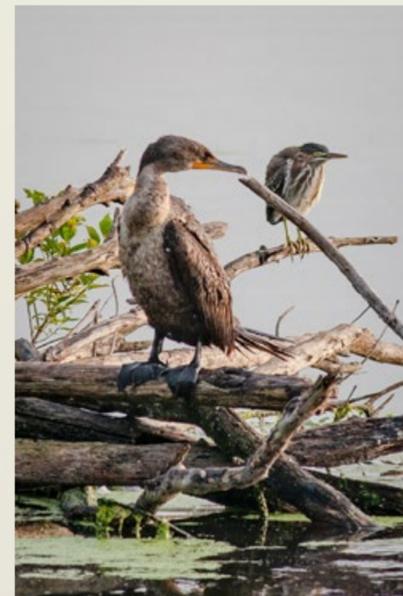


It is a season of herons—great blues, black-crowned night herons, little greens, great egrets, and, too rarely, perhaps a snowy egret or a little blue. We watch them while they fish and squabble, and arrive and leave at their pleasure.





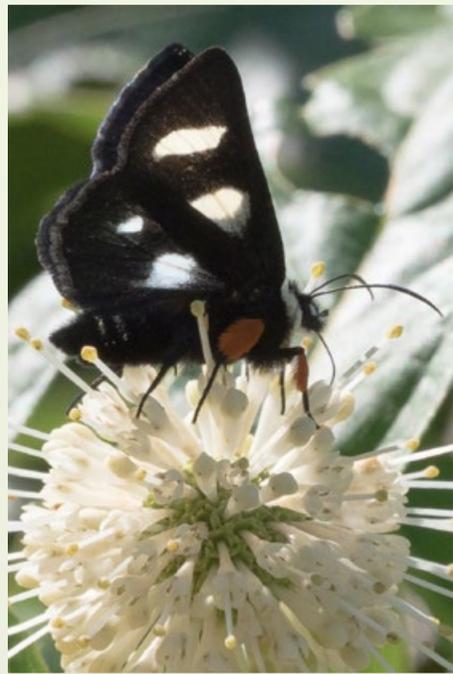
Occasionally a little green couple will have nested here and the air will be filled with their screeching. In other years, they may be scarce. We will watch them tear by our viewing spots, and sometimes hunt, all summer.





The buttonbush at the Warden's Watch has bloomed early in July. The composite flowers will last for a month before fading to pale brown; guests will visit often until then. Late in the season the browned blooms are interesting only for dragonfly perches. For now, they attract moths and eastern tiger swallowtails and, of course, the bees.



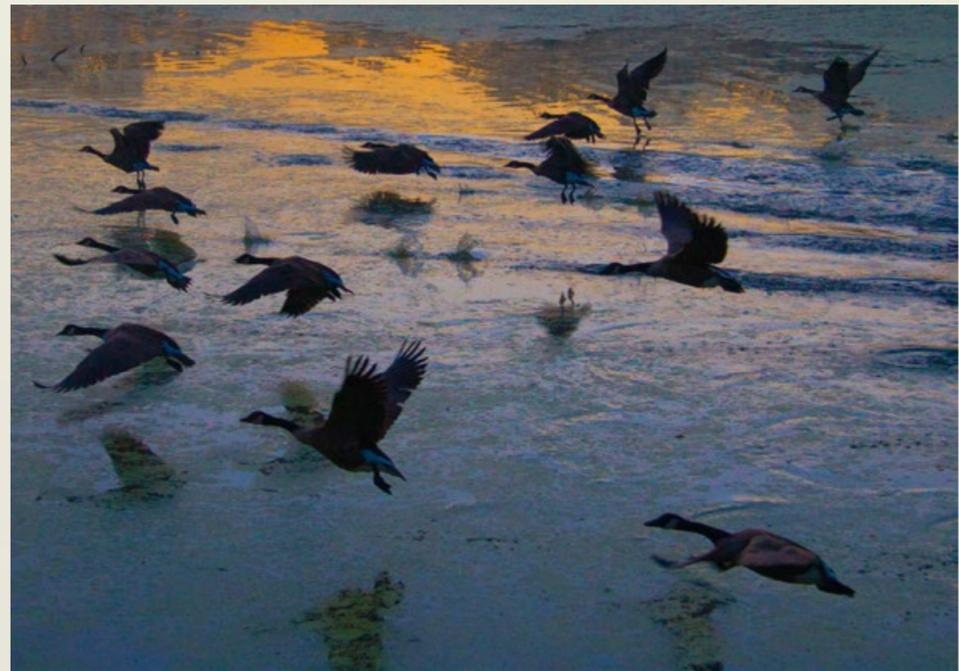
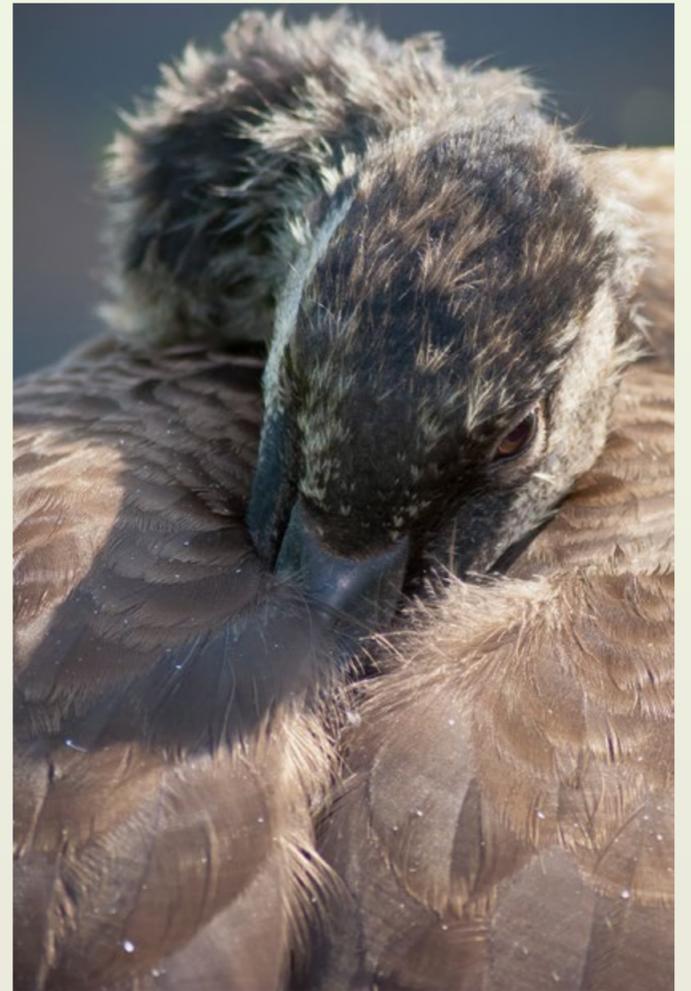


In the spring, volunteers once again had cut back the phragms to widen the path From the Scout Platform to the Butterfly Garden. By mid-July new shoots have already reclaimed a couple of feet. Without intervention the path would shrink to the width of a person. I think that phragms have spread five to ten feet a year, not much on the scale of the pond but obvious over a decade, and likely calamitous in a few more.

If we arrive before the joggers we can surprise some egrets and black-crowns. We can spook them easily, especially the great egrets. It seems impossible to avoid disturbing them if they are close to shore. Safe in a tree or woodpile they are happy to preen.



No journal about the Celery Farm can ignore the Canada Geese. From loveable hatchlings to cute chicks to awkward adolescents to scruffy droppings engines then on to full adulthood, their life cycle is front and center at the Preserve. Anyone can witness nest building and egg-laying, then chicks toddling behind parents. Early summer brings an irritation we can't ignore. The charming goslings of May have become the ungainly teenagers of early summer, and a nuisance. For too long already they and their idle parents have lolled at the Warden's Watch, fouling the path, either molting or waiting for first flight feathers. Mother Nature is not a good housekeeper and the Warden's Watch needs an air freshener. Until feathers mature, they and the adults crowd the way to the steps. But with breeding season past, the males are now more docile as we tiptoe delicately as best we can. A half-hearted hiss replaces previous aggression. For weeks, we wish success to the snappers.

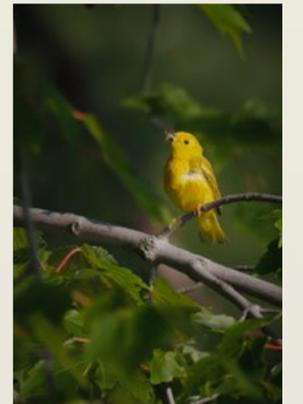


Before mid-August, though, they will join the adults in the early morning ritual of lining up with the wind, honking, and flying off to spend their days making a mess of golf courses or business parks. If we arrive just a bit later, what was a teeming mass on the water has vanished, leaving no evidence that they were there. They will return before dark.

If the swans have not nested successfully, they won't remain long. They take their practice flights, and one day simply will not return. Photographers will miss them; environmentalists probably won't. A nesting pair will stay with the young and make test flights all summer.



A cormorant may be drying wings on a convenient perch as we reach the Warden's Watch, less common a sight in recent years. They need clearer water, and more safe places to preen and dry. An early visitor might find one on shore.



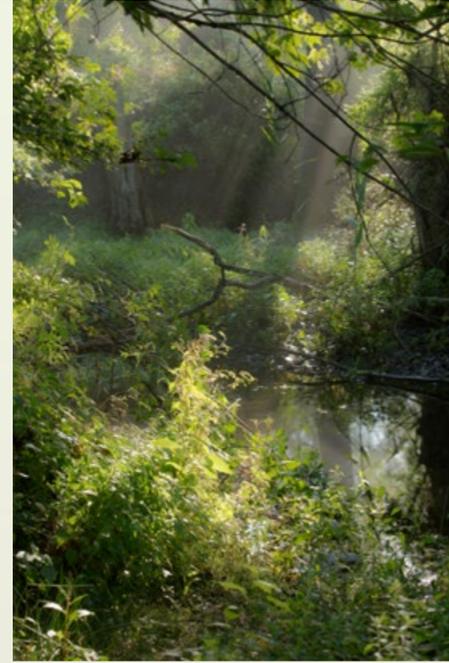
Small birds become harder to find in the dense canopy. Cedar waxwings, though, and often yellow warblers are still easy to photograph in the open marsh around No Name Culvert. We find skittish goldfinches there, too, in full breeding plumage, synchronized with the coming thistle seeds. Bug-hunting season is open for warblers and fly-catchers.



Chickadees, titmice (I still prefer titmouses no matter what the experts call them), and nuthatches will flit around the Warden's Watch on a lucky day. A phoebe or perhaps a kingbird may sit patiently in a tree across the inlet. Reliably, song sparrows will call all summer long. Kingfishers will torment photographers, zipping by before a camera can be raised. An occasional swift adds to the insult. And so goes July. August will be much the same.



Early this morning the temperature is nearly 80. Dew has condensed on everything, enough to dazzle against the sun. The woods make shafts of light in the humid air. It is stifling, and we shorten our visit.



Full summer a season unkind to photographers. Sunrise comes too early for us to catch the golden, glancing light. The sun rises quickly, making lighting too contrasty for decent work. Evening light stays after dinner time, though, and we may find some landscape opportunities. But glaring light then at Pirie-Mayhood is awful and birds are scarce in the evening. With heavy foliage, mornings are little better. Deer are no longer a novelty. We do still visit, hoping. Usually the herons are reliable, so that's something.



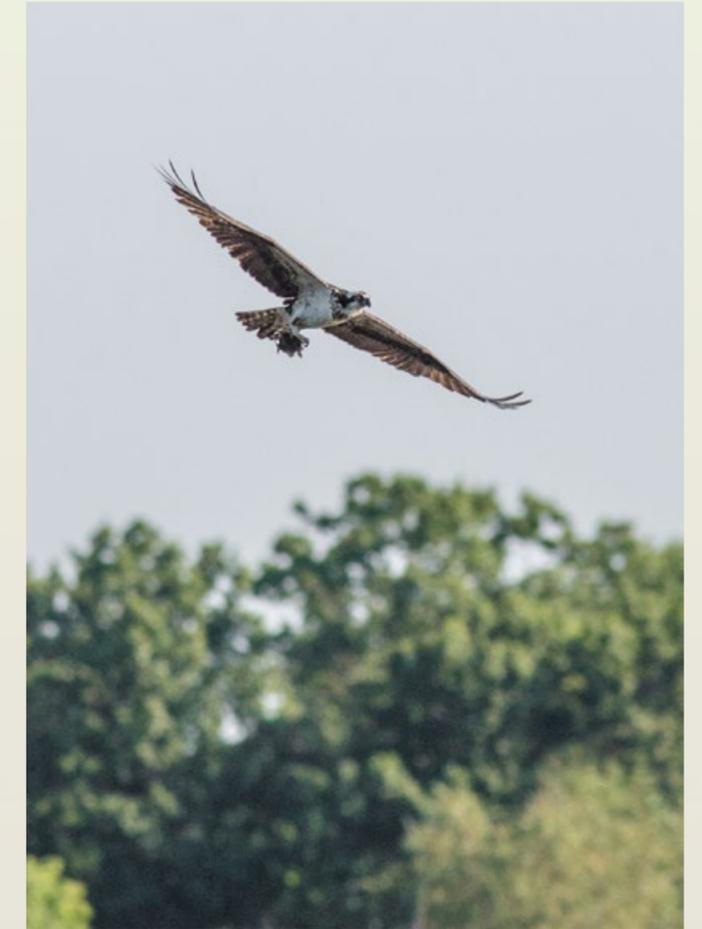


There have been changes since this view from 2009 at Pirie-Mayhood, but boring mid-day light, a quiet pond, and uniform green are still what characterize the Celery Farm all through July and August. There is life here around noon, but it has taken a nap.

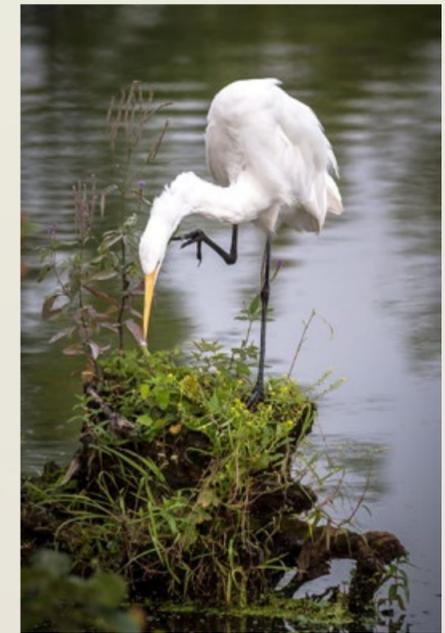
An osprey trying its luck relieves the monotony; a bird might often appear for days at the same time to hunt. A few passes to survey, some aborted dives, then a long hover before the plunge is the routine. The big carp rule the pond but it supports smaller fish, mostly sunfish and maybe some bass. Otherwise invisible, they show up mostly in spring fish kills and raptor claws. Sunfish,

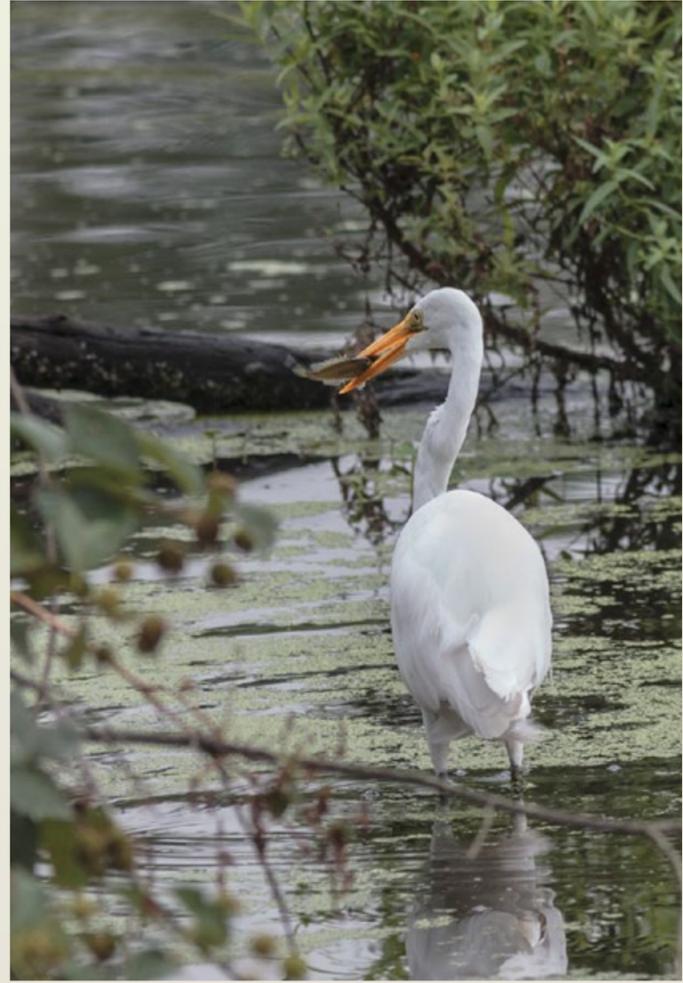
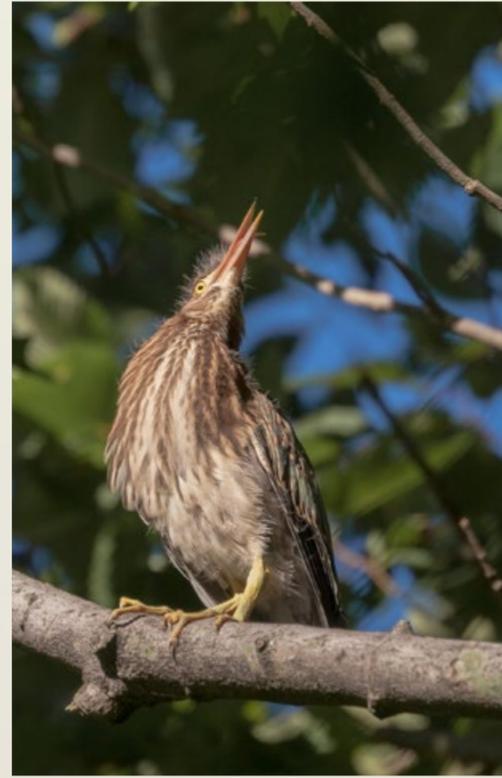


and goldfish which were probably tossed in years ago by former owners and now less common, have provided targets of opportunity for the osprey and cormorants.



You will see herons or egrets in nearly every visit; this book could have been about a summer of herons. Feeding, preening, squabbling, they provide much of the photo chances, and interest, of the season. Unless water levels are too high the great egrets and great blues wade and fish. Smaller birds—black crowned night herons and little greens—fish from shore or twigs and rocks. The birds are usually efficient. Efficient they may be, but the shadow of failure follows every hunter. Those failures might be comical, but always photogenic.





Wildflowers bloom in the sunshine, so insects are busy in the summer heat. Skippers, swallowtails, bees and wasps take advantage and are active all day. Some plants will seem to be alive with bumblebees.



In some years, like 2005 and 2016, especially heavy algae mats can cover much of the pond and occasionally some cyanobacteria comes with it, looking like swirls of bright green paint. The algae discourage the ospreys, herons and cormorants. Much of the time, duckweed grows as well. It will collect at the north-facing shores, driven by the wind. Turtle snouts, ducks and frogs might disturb the green rafts.

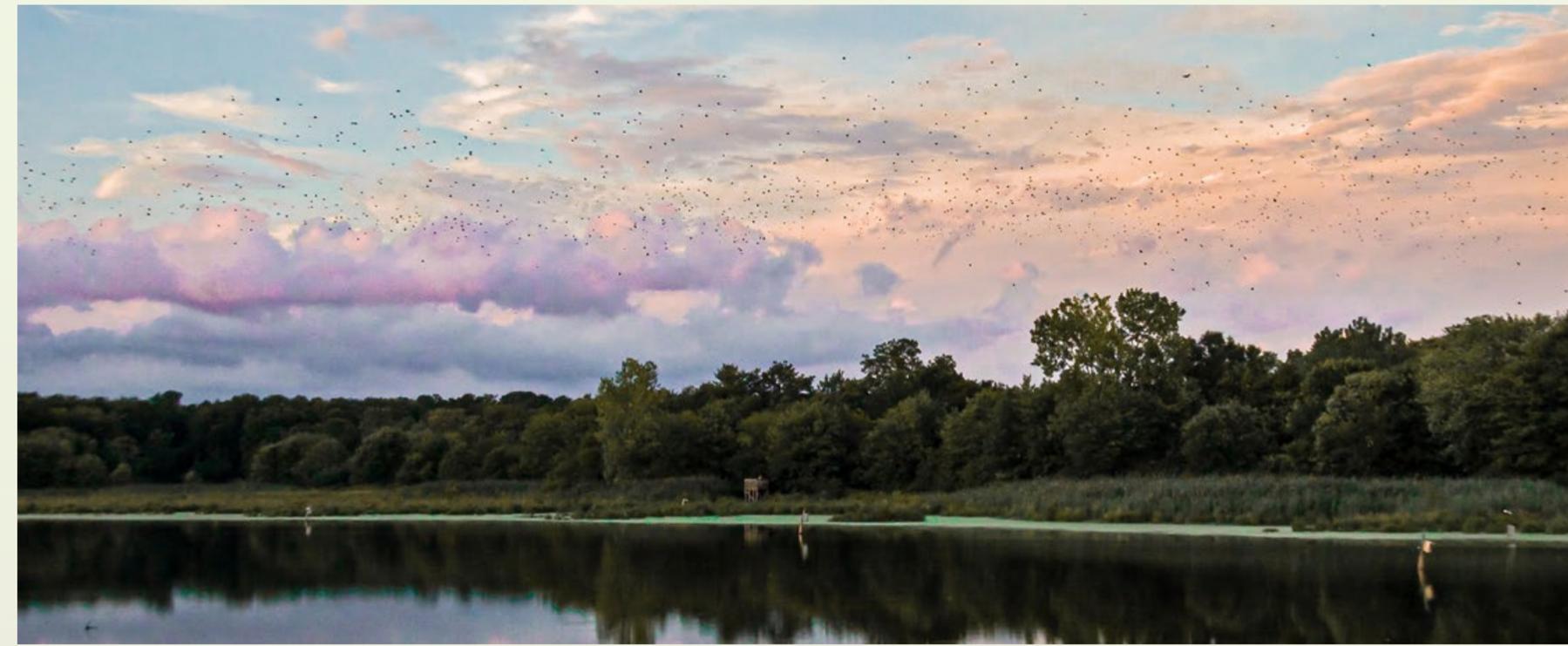




Revealed by low water, pennywort dots the shallow lake bottom near Pink Potty bridge. Marsh marigold will bloom if drought continues. Rain, heat and fertilizer runoff probably decide the balance between algae and duckweed. The pond is a sea of green from the Warden's Watch.



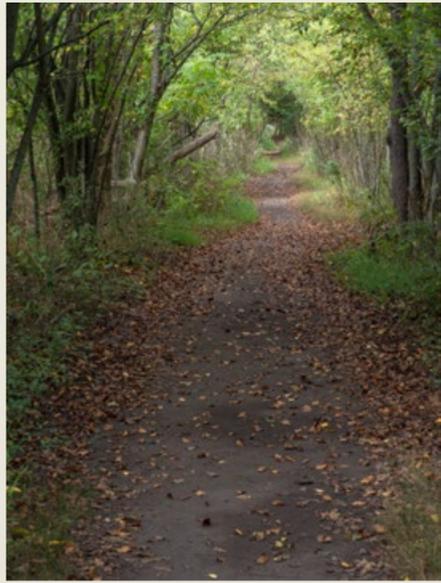
We won't see the big snappers often, but the criss-crossed tracks in the mud and algae when water recedes from the shore are enough evidence of their size and number. A rare turtle fight might roil the water but we won't learn of the outcome.



Now, in late August, there are hints of the fall to come. Days are noticeably shorter and leaves begin to show the scars of summer. Flocks of blackbirds or starlings will make evening flights. Later they will rise in clouds from the phrags at morning.





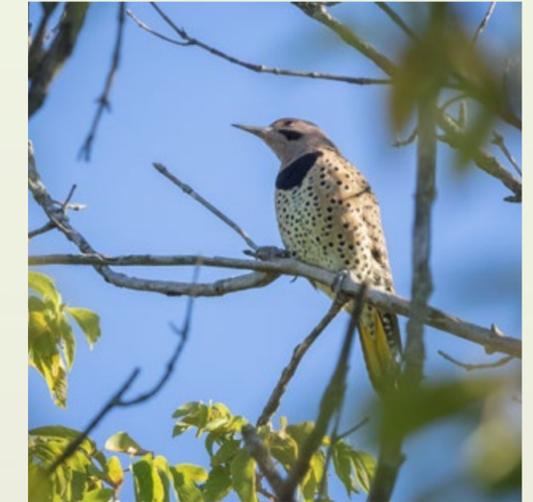
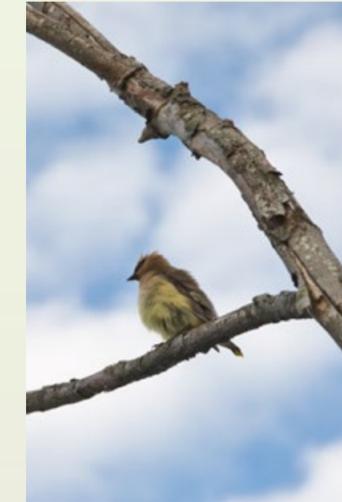




Grazing early evening light at the beginning of September (2017, here) shows the pond at very low water. We are looking south. The extent of the phragms invasion can be surprising since we rarely see much beyond the trail.

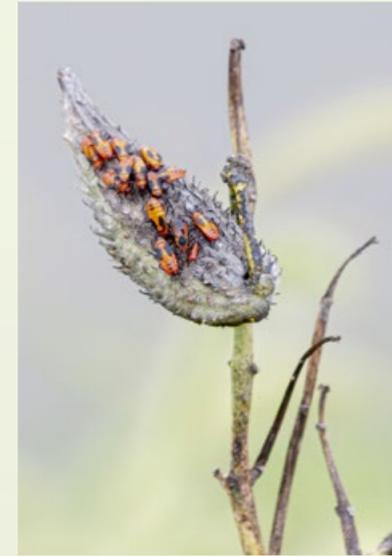


Well into August, the tree swallows will have left; the barn swallows will linger for a time into September. We will miss them. There are still plenty of small birds to see. At the Warden's Watch, flycatchers and kingbirds become active at first light. Some warblers, early fall migrants, might be passing through and stay a day or two. Catbirds are everywhere.





Mallards, usually too common to command respect from photographers, might be used for practice portraits on slow mornings. It is one step up from having to shoot a goose but sometimes we can be tempted. This hen has stationed herself at the water's edge to preen in very early morning, deliberately cooperative.



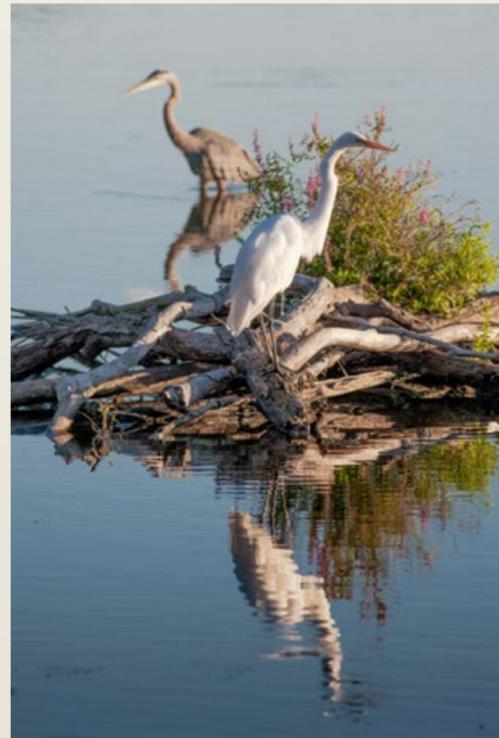
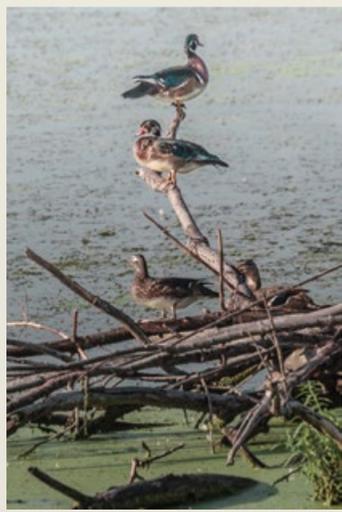
Unmistakable signs of fall appear even this early in September. Milkweed is turning, and its pods now host the familiar orange beetles. Goldenrod blooms where there is sun and the crabapples ripen. Many of the wildflowers have gone to seed; the others will follow soon. Spotty patches of color dot the trees, hinting at the changes soon to come.

The brushpile continues to interest visitors all summer. Egrets, wood ducks, great blues, little greens, black crowns, cormorants, swallows, painted turtles, and a perhaps a rare sandpiper all use it to rest, preen, and perhaps hunt.



Cormorants have hunted all summer, managing even in water murky with algae and sediment turned up by the big carp and snappers. Sometimes reach may exceed grasp. One may regret being greedy for attempting an oversized lunch.

The maniacal call of a kingfisher alerts us. We try for a shot and will likely fail. Again. We have to be lucky as they blast by. Sometimes they perch just within view, almost always at our lens' limits. We may laugh at their crazed appearance; in turn, they mock our sophisticated camera and long lenses. Catching a successful hunt is beyond our expectations.



Our osprey has been back, joining the other hunters. For a time in this year the lake has been clear enough of duckweed and algae to give it the confidence to dive.



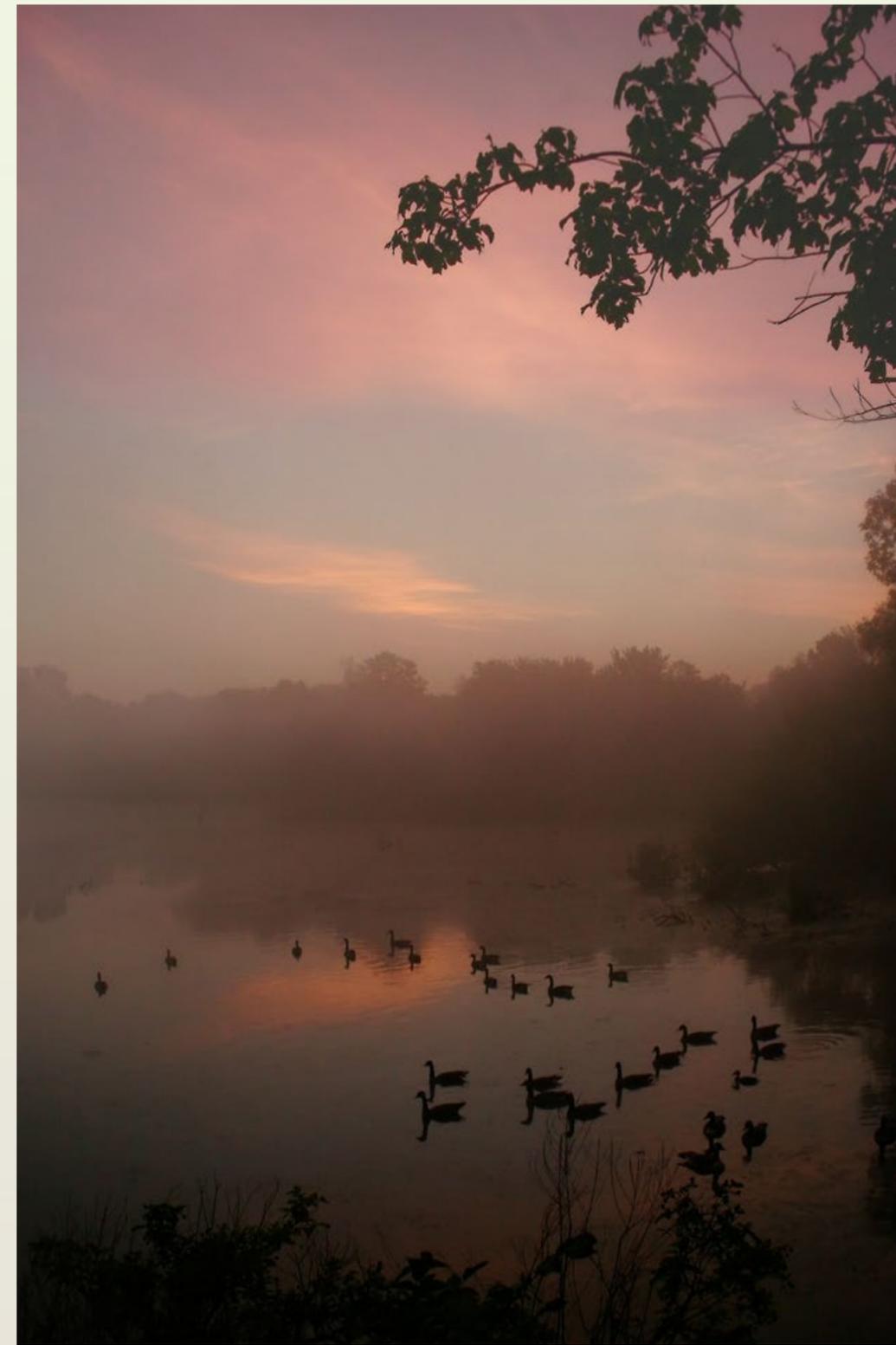
Tiny creatures have prospered in the summer heat. Late in the season when morning light is low, the orb weavers' work pops out at us. We might find a jumping spider in a hole in the Warden's Watch beams. On warm mornings the dragonflies are already active when we arrive—common white-tails, blue dashers and sometimes a ten-spot. There can also be surprises, like a mantis hiding in plain sight.



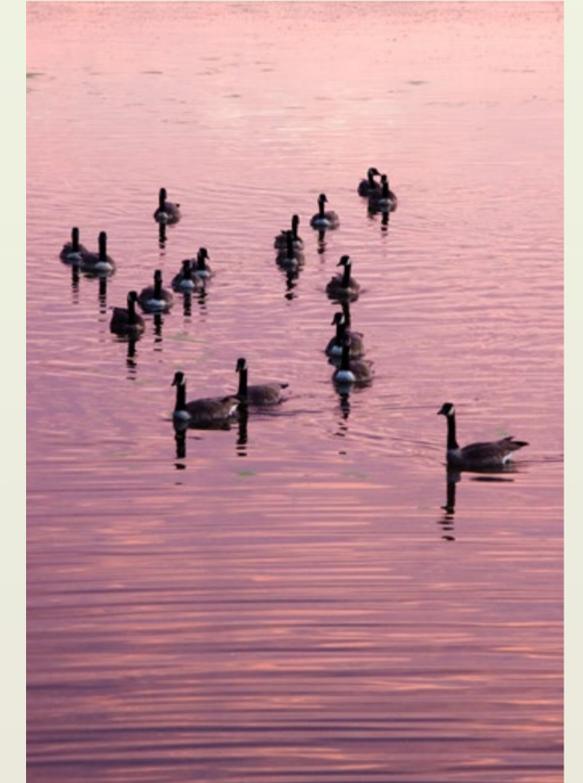
Jewelweed once bloomed in the Dead Zone, but the phrags have now nearly reached the walkway. We will find berries where there is sun and will need a botanist to identify them all. Some, like the pink-to-blue Japanese porcelain-berry, are lovely but this destructive plant has invaded the Preserve. Its inroads will be difficult to reverse. Along with honeysuckle and wild grape, also growing here with exuberance, it intertwines or overgrows more desirable species.



The swans become restless as the days shorten. Despite the effort of lifting their forty-pound bodies into the air they make short flights to get prepared for departure next month. Of the broods hatched over the years, in my memory only one cygnet has survived to be chased away by the parents. At least one adult has fallen to the snapping turtles, as well. They have not nested successfully in recent years, probably due to predation and loss of safe nesting sites as the Celery Farm evolves.

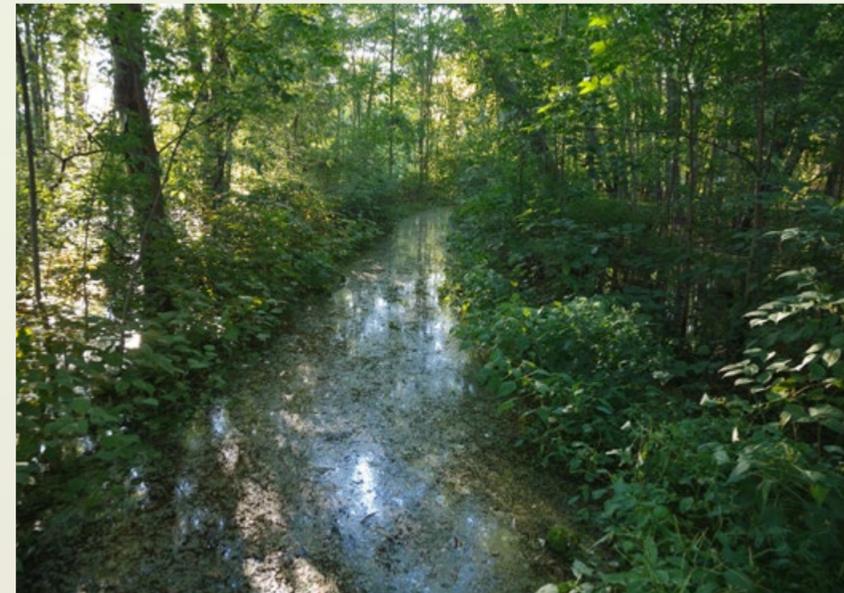


Into September the night time air temperatures drop. Mist and haze greet us in the early mornings and more clouds make for wonderful sunrises. The Celery Farm glows magenta.





It is still summer, though, and heat has returned for a while. The Preserve bakes and misty mornings are postponed. A cold front arrives, but this one brings thunderstorms and torrents of rain. Water builds as the rain and runoff fill the pond faster than the brook can accept it. Paths flood, and we can't visit for a day or more. High water forces the herons and great egrets to find perches if they can't tolerate wet bellies. But those that can't hunt in deep water don't eat, so they must find a way. The waders work from the brushpile or a tuffet, or teeter on a what they find, sometimes awkwardly. The smaller herons' habits needn't change—they perch anywhere and lunge or dive for lunch, as always.



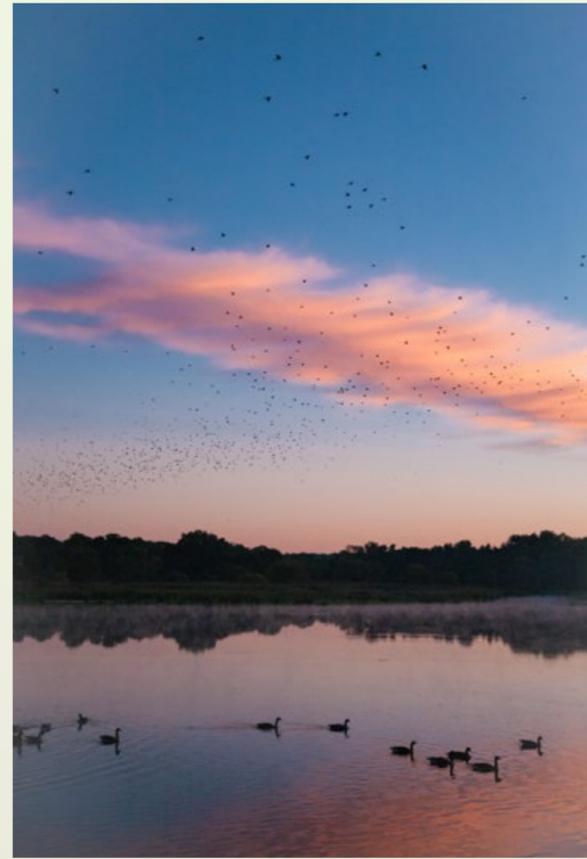
Nearing mid-month the Celery Farm is showing some wear, and squirrels are harvesting what they can to store away for winter. We seldom see raccoons but we catch one foraging just before daybreak; it will hide and sleep for the day.





The great egret leaves the pond with no other effort than a leap into the air. The swans must launch themselves after long and graceless runs across the water, though landings are a bit more confident. The little mallards are nearly as athletic as the egrets.





It is past mid-month now and the starlings gather in the phrags to sleep. In the morning clouds of the birds erupt to fill the sky. They leave the Preserve all alone—except for geese organizing themselves to depart for the day.



Morning comes later each day. Early September brought grazing morning light to bring a yellow cast to the trees, a forecast of color to come. Now, after mid-month, the reality of the coming change is with us. The monotony of summer green is fading as each plant and tree in its turn slowly evolves toward fall. Full color is still weeks away, but the message is clear.



Summer heat and drought have taken their toll. Foliage is tired, their color dulled and edges frayed by wind and sunlight. But the leaves had already begun their decline as soon as they emerged months before. They have fed their hosts, and were meant to be recycled. We have watched the daylight shorten over the entire season, and now we reach the equinox. Summer is over, but fall is not without promise.



AN AFTERWORD

Stiles Thomas has been thanked a thousand times for his determination to save the Celery Farm from development, and for his stewardship of the Preserve for many years. I'm adding this to the pile of appreciation.

The group of photographers who made early mornings so pleasurable and important to me are the reason I was able to build a large enough catalog of reasonable images to compile this series. Reed Andariese, in particular, was a great sounding board and is always willing to share his pro experience. He's a good friend that I would not have met otherwise. George Sliwinski could find more to shoot than anyone. Michael Mouravi, John Lampkin, Jerry Barrack, Chris Gottlieb, Walt Staub, Peter Burger, Kumar Patel, Kevin Watson, John Pastore, Jim Wright and a few other occasional shooters (Nat, Mad Mike, Scott and others) all made for a lot of fun when nothing showed up to shoot. That nothing has expanded lately to mean nothing almost all the time, and the group has evaporated. We were a fluid crew--guys would move but others would join, but now there is little reason for new shooters to come. It was a great fifteen years. I still visit regularly but get more exercise than photographs.

Any opinions (stated or implied) here about the lake and the state of the Celery Farm are my own, developed from observation and reading. If anyone finds factual errors, or has a different mindset, I'd love to talk about it.

Lastly, we should all appreciate the efforts of Marsh Warden Mike Limatola and his deputies, and the Fyke volunteers who work to keep the Celery Farm accessible. The Preserve doesn't like its trails, and would close them in a couple of years if left alone. Trees fall, invasives flourish, and deer ruin the understory while the time and resources to handle the problems are scarcely adequate. It's a hard job, and never finished.