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Earth Almanac: April/June 2003

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Crinkled Beauty



Photo by Byron Jorjorian/Bruce Coleman

As of old, the comparison of human epidermis with lotus blossoms elicits blushes in America and Asia, where the other lotus species evolved. But he who compares a woman's skin to lotus leaves—that brown, crinkled, mud-stained foliage pushing up from pond muck in May and June—is likely to get slapped. American lotus, found in roughly the eastern two-thirds of the nation, starts blooming in late spring. Pale yellow flowers, sometimes 8,500 per acre, open in full sunlight, but when the hot earth belches clouds into the firmament, they close to protect delicate pollen from possible rain. Showerhead-like seedpods, which keep growing after the petals fall off, contain about 20 acorn-size seeds that are relished by all manner of wildlife and sufficiently hard-shelled to stay viable for years. Hence the plant's other names: duck acorn, alligator button, and rattlenuts.

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The Turtle Stomp

If you are abroad in the woods anywhere from the upper midwestern states to the Maritime Provinces, and south to Iowa and Virginia, you may encounter the wood turtle, named less for its habitat than for its spectacular carapace, which looks as if it has been carved from black walnut. Depending on date and latitude, your wood turtle may be newly emerged from hibernation and easing over the bed of an ice-girded stream, or high and dry—positioned under an evergreen canopy to catch a shaft of sunlight no wider than itself. You may even find a courting couple facing each other and swinging their heads back and forth. If a turtle is walking on land, follow. Unlike other pond turtles, this species spends much of its life foraging in uplands. It will pause, stretch its orange neck, then daintily pluck a mushroom, berry, or dandelion. Occasionally it will stop, stomp its feet, bang its yellow plastron on the wet earth, then snatch the earthworms brought to the surface by the vibrations. If it's a female, it may be en route to an open, sunny spot to lay eggs. Wood turtles can live for a century. And, as with many long-lived creatures, reproduction is limited; they don't even reach sexual maturity until they are at least 15. Illegal collecting threatens the species' existence. In one study 33 marked specimens began disappearing immediately after the public was invited into a 2,471-acre reservoir watershed. Eight years later only 14 of the turtles remained. Two years after that they were gone.

The Vulture Test

Poets commonly celebrate the first robin and bluebird of the year. Not the first black vulture—cousin to the stork but also an "anti-stork," symbolizing death instead of birth. We are talking about a bald-headed scavenger, drawn flylike to filth, that gorges on rotting offal, that cools and possibly disinfects its legs by hosing them down with acidic excreta, that hisses and grunts if you startle it on the ground, then projectile-vomits into your face. So if your heart soars at the sight of the first black vulture of spring, you have arrived as a naturalist. You may spy a black vulture almost anywhere in the Southeast. Black vultures will roust larger turkey vultures from carrion. They flap more than turkey vultures, lack their red heads, and are aloft later in the day and on straighter wings. One poet who did celebrate the black vulture was George Sterling: "Aloof upon the day's immeasured dome, / He holds unshared the silence of the sky. / Far down his bleak, relentless eyes descry / The eagle's empire and the falcon's home."

Fairy Shrimp

Vernal pools—those pockets of snowmelt and rain that vanish in summer heat—teem with life unseen by those who hasten through their days oblivious to earth's wonders. Don't be one of them. Among obligate denizens of vernal pools are fairy shrimp, an order more ancient than dinosaurs. Keep looking under the dappled surface, between the floating pine needles. First you'll see the two white stripes on the tail, then a translucent creature roughly an inch long will materialize. Fairy shrimp hang and hover, always swimming on their backs, rowing and extracting oxygen with 11 pairs of legs. They are there because fish are not. Ducks eat fairy shrimp but also transport their eggs to other vernal pools. There are two kinds of eggs—one for times of plenty and one for low, warm water laden with salts concentrated by evaporation. The first type, laid by unfertilized females, quickly produces clones. The second—actually encysted embryos—results from male-female unions and remains viable through

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summer dust and winter ice. Because vernal pools are generally regarded as worthless puddles, many species of fairy shrimp are endangered.

Blueberry Time

In most of North America there is a delicious pause between spring and summer when those who have been waiting repair quietly to secret places to pick blueberries with beak, muzzle, or fingers. Some blueberry species grow high, some grow low, and all favor forest disturbances. As Robert Frost noted: "But get the pine out of the way, you may burn / The pasture all over until not a fern / Or grass-blade is left, not to mention a stick, / And presto, they're up all around you as thick / And hard to explain as a conjuror's trick." On those fleeting mornings when ripe fruit and dew hang together like sapphires and diamonds, don't miss the chance to take children blueberrying. Note the color of their tongues when they tell you that all the berries went into the pail.

A Fearless Predator

There is no better time for mink watching than now. From the Canadian treeline south across the entire United States, save the driest portions of our Southwest, these efficient predators are on the move. They fear nothing, including you. A mink may chase a muskrat into its burrow, devour it along with its young, then take over the quarters. Or, perfectly aware of your presence, it may run across your feet in pursuit of newly emerged turtles, frogs, and crayfish. Confront a mink up close, however, and you may find yourself wearing vile-smelling musk similar to eau de skunk. In fact, the name mink derives from the Swedish menk, meaning "that stinking animal from Finland." Keep watching and you'll see another side to the mink's personality—playfulness. Like its larger cousin, the otter, it will slide down rocks and slippery banks.