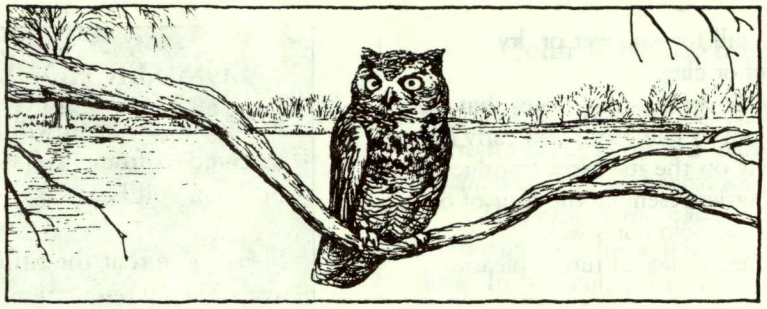
STILLMAN NEWSLETTER



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SAY YES TO SHRUBS!

-- Mark Spreyer

When it comes to plants, many of us are drawn to both the majestic and the delicate. Who doesn't appreciate a huge, centuries-old oak or a colorful display of Solomon's seals? Sometimes we overlook the shrubs, the layer of plants that fall between trees and wildflowers.

I've been thinking of shrubs for a few reasons, one being Commonwealth Edison. Planting a tall tree under a utility line is like arranging for the world's slowest beheading. Sooner or later, that tree will be decapitated.

Small trees and shrubs are the obvious solution to this situation. This begs the question, what's the difference between a small tree and a shrub?

Shrubs vs. Trees

Short answer: not much. A Minnesota botany manual defines a shrub as, "A woody plant usually less than 20 feet high and generally with several stems from a common base." Note the weasel words "generally" and "usually." They are there for a reason.

For example, some trees that have one trunk will often sprout many stems after they have been cut. Basswood is well-known for doing this. So, if you walk through a woods that was logged a decade or so ago, you could see trees looking very much like shrubs.

Also, there are many instances where common shrubs, such as a staghorn sumac, grow far beyond anything usually thought of as a shrub. Here at Stillman we have one isolated sumac stem that looks all the world like a tree-of-heaven.

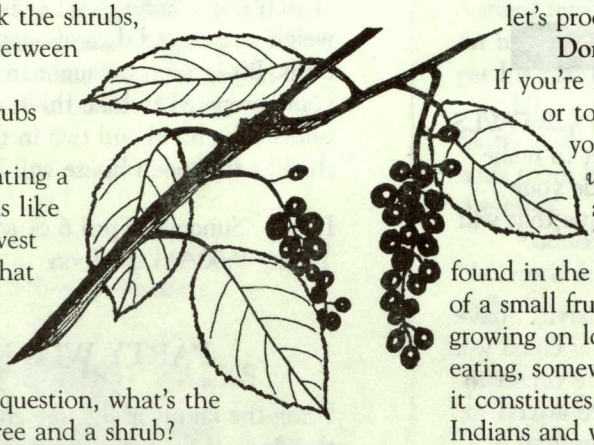
Realizing that nature has not read our botany books, let's proceed with the definition offered above.

Don't Choke on Cherry

If you're looking for a shrub to go under a power line or to hide some of those unsightly utility boxes, you can't go wrong with Chokecherry (*Prunus virginiana*). Eighteenth century ornithologist and Rocky Mountain explorer, John Kirk Townsend, wrote the following in 1834, "We found in the mountain passes today a considerable quantity of a small fruit called the choke-cherry, a species of Prunus, growing on low bushes. When ripe, they are tolerable eating, somewhat astringent... ordinarily so abundant that it constitutes a large portion of the vegetable food of both Indians and white trappers who visit these regions."

Townsend, most likely, also knew that chokecherry is a major food source for over 100 species of birds and mammals. This probably explains why it can be found growing from the Atlantic to the Pacific and from Mexico to the Arctic Ocean.

Chokecherry can be enjoyed by humans, as Townsend reports, particularly when some sugar is added. Jams, jellies, syrup and wine can be made from the tart chokecherry. Native Americans mixed the fruit with fat and buffalo meat to make pemmican. If you want to try some chokecherries, be careful not to eat the pits. As with other members of the Prunus genus, such as plums and peaches, the hard seeds are poisonous.



Choke Cherry
Prunus virginiana

The Basics

A chokecherry shrub can grow to a height of about fifteen feet and a width of ten feet. It likes full to partial sun, just like you have under a power line. Chokecherry is

not too picky about soils. It will tolerate wet or dry conditions and grows in sand or clay.

Its white flowers, which are arranged in spikes that are three to six inches long, bloom in late April and early May. The birds will be seen feeding on the its shiny, translucent, red berries in August. The berries resemble the fruit of one of our delicate wildflowers, false Solomon's seal.

In early autumn, chokecherry's leaves turn a pleasing red-orange.

There are scads of cultivated varieties of cherry for sale. I prefer the good old-fashioned "eaten, digested, pooped, and planted by a bird" variety, *Prunus virginiana*. One source for native chokecherries is the Possibility Place Nursery in Monee.

With any luck, a bird may have already planted a chokecherry under your electric line. If so, don't be like the apocryphal George Washington and chop it down. Just say yes to this wonderful shrub.

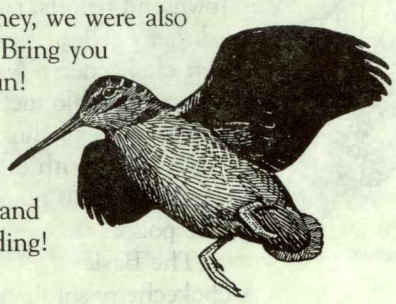
PROGRAMS

Program Basics: Please call or fax us at (847) 428-OWLS (6957), or e-mail Stillman at: stillnc@flash.net to make reservations for programs. Remember to include your name, phone number, and the number of people that will be attending.

If less than 5 - 10 people (varying with the activity) have called two days prior to a program, the program could well be cancelled. So, don't forget to call the nature center in advance. If you discover that you are unable to attend, please call to cancel your reservations. This courtesy will be greatly appreciated. Programs are free unless otherwise noted.

WOODCOCK WATCH

Last year, we not only heard and saw the male woodcock strut his stuff for his unseen honey, we were also serenaded by the local coyotes. Bring you binoculars and come join the fun! A woodcock, by the way, is a portly inland sandpiper with a long beak and sort legs. Its other names include bogsucker and timberdoodle... no, I'm not kidding!



Date: Saturday, March 22
Time: 5:00PM until 7:00PM
Age: 10 years and up

SUMMER HOURS BEGIN IN APRIL

In March, Stillman will be open to drop-in visitors on Sundays from 11 AM to 4 PM. Starting in April, Stillman will be open Sundays from 9 AM to 4 PM.

Please note that the Stillman Nature Center is available, by reservation, during the week to school classes, Audubon chapters, garden clubs, and other organized groups. For a brochure that describes the programs and fees, just call (847) 428-OWLS or email us at stillnc@flash.net and we'll be happy to send you one.

BIRD BANDING

Watch Mark Spreyer, a licensed bird bander, measure, weigh and record data about our resident and migratory birds. Birds are not caught in a predictable manner, so come prepared to hike the trails. With luck, you'll see a bird in the hand and two in the bush. If it is raining, the banding open house will be cancelled.

Dates: Sundays, April 6 & May 4
Time: 9:00AM to Noon

PARTY WITH THE STARS!

Bring the family and come check out lunar landscapes, the rings of Saturn, the moons of Jupiter and other wonders of the celestial heavens. The **Northwest Suburban Astronomers** will have a variety of telescopes set up for your viewing pleasure and will be available to answer your questions about telescopes, viewing with binoculars, or taking photos of your favorite stars.

Bring the family early (gate will open at 6 p.m.) and check out the great hiking trails. The woodcocks may still be doing their spring aerial mating display at dusk.

After leaving the parking lot, follow the trail toward the pond. Bring a flashlight for walking the trail. If overcast or raining, event will be cancelled. If unsure, call (847) 428-OWLS and there will be a message if the event is cancelled.

Date: Saturday, April 12
Time: 7:30PM (sunset) until 10PM

SUNDAY MORNING BIRD WALKS

Mark Spreyer will lead a morning bird walk. Migration will be under way and you never know what we might find. Binoculars and field guides are a must. If you don't have any, don't worry, Stillman does. Please call 428-OWLS to make reservations.

Date: Sundays, April 27 & May 11
Time: 8:00AM
Age: 10 years and up

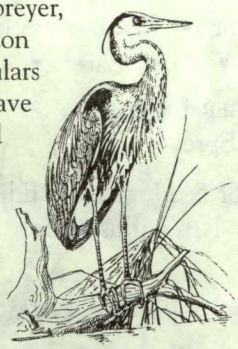
FITNESS ON THE TRAILS

It's fitness camp meets nature excursion! Join us for a fun and invigorating way to get some fresh air and exercise while enjoying Stillman's burgeoning spring ambience. Led by certified fitness expert **Evamarie Pilipuf**, we'll greet the morning sun with an energizing outdoor hike, interspersed with exercises and stretches to target the legs, upper body, abdominals and back. Beginners are welcome. Participants should bring an old towel (for the times we sit) and a bottle of water.

Date: Friday, May 2
Rain Date: Saturday, May 3
Time: 9:00-10:30AM
Age of Participant: Adult
Workshop fee: $7 members, $10 non-members

FRIDAY MORNING BIRD WALKS

Just like above but on a weekday. Mark Spreyer, former Director of Chicago's peregrine falcon release project, will lead the walks. Binoculars and field guides are a must. If you don't have any, don't worry, Stillman does. Please call 428-OWLS to make reservations.



Date: Fridays: May 2, 9, & 16
Time: 8:00AM
Age: 10 years and up

WILDFLOWER WALKS

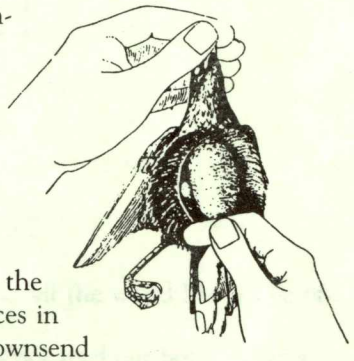
Join us as we explore Stillman's woodlands in search of ephemeral beauties such as white trillium, may-apple, Virginia bluebell, and jack-in-the-pulpit. Bring your camera!

Dates: Sundays, April 27 & May 4
Time: 2:00PM
Age: 10 years and up

John Kirk Townsend (1809 - 1851)

The Townsend chokecherry quote on the first page is from his *Narrative of a Journey across the Rocky Mountains to the Columbia River.*

This pioneering naturalist should be better known. Unfortunately, he suffered some bad luck. In particular, the competitive John James Audubon received credit for much of Townsend's labors.



Audubon was able to do this because the birds Townsend collected in the West were shipped back to the Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia long before Townsend himself returned. The eager Audubon, who was working on his famous *Birds of North America*, could not wait to get his hands on these new skins.

He pulled out all the stops to purchase some of the birds. Understandably, the Academy was slow to part with them but, eventually, they took money for some of the birds.

Audubon was not pleased with how he was treated. He wrote that seldom, "...have I ever felt more disgusted with the conduct of any opponents of mine..."

In another letter, he wrote of Townsend's birds, "Such beauties! Such rarities! Such novelties!" How odd, then, that he described Townsend as "Lazy and careless."

Since Audubon's book preceded Townsend's, he was the first to introduce these new species of birds to the world-- species that Townsend had carefully collected, preserved, identified, and shipped back East.

Townsend died at age forty-one, just eleven days after Audubon had passed. In 1916, historian Witmer Stone wrote the following, "John K. Townsend was evidently a genius who force of circumstances prevented from reaching his proper place in ornithological annals."

Had he had the financial backing enjoyed by Audubon, Stone continues, "...or had there been salaried scientific positions in those early days... the name of Townsend would have been among the leaders of American ornithology."

Perhaps because of a guilty conscience or out of genuine gratitude, Audubon did name one bird after John Kirk Townsend, the Townsend's Solitaire *(Myadestes townsendi)*. The other bird named after him, Townsend's Warbler *(Dendroica townsendi)*, was named by J. K. himself.

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