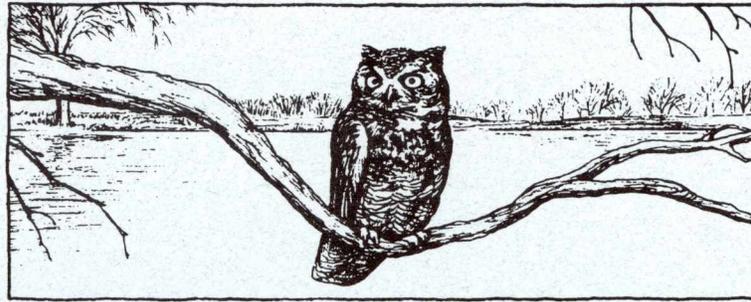


# STILLMAN NEWSLETTER



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## *The Undercover Life of a Vole*

--Mark Spreyer

A cold winter day deepens into a moon-chilled night. The morning's flurries are being packed and sculpted by the wind, filling animal and tire tracks alike. Beneath the surface powder lies a thicker, coarser layer composed of previous snowfalls. The snowflakes from earlier storms have been reformed by the warmth of the earth, temporary thaws and evaporation. They have melded together to form a lower layer composed of icy granules, frozen leaves, miniature grottos and well-traveled tunnels.

It is through one of these tunnels that a meadow vole scurries. The area of the abandoned orchard that the dark, stubby-tailed creature explores is unfamiliar to him. Over the past seasons, voles have been reproducing prodigiously, resulting in fields and woods overflowing with hungry little rodents. The orchard's dwindling food supply supports not only the voles but other inhabitants such as shrews and rabbits. Hunger drives the vole to explore new territory.

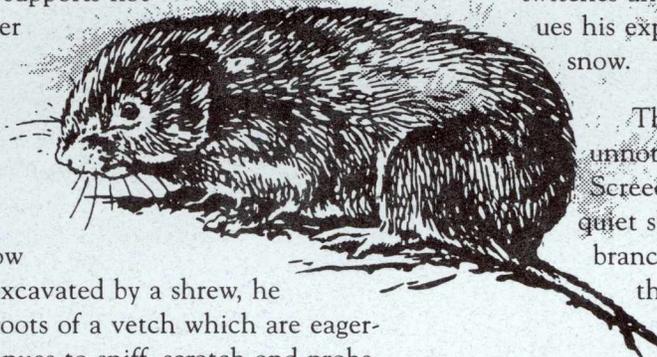
Following a shallow subterranean passage excavated by a shrew, he unearths the nodular roots of a vetch which are eagerly consumed. He continues to sniff, scratch and probe down the passage until he crosses a well-gnawed root. The bare tree root offers little to the vole but hunger urges him to dig along the root searching for the tender inner bark. Previous foragers have been less thor-

ough and he soon locates a section of root with pieces of bark still attached. He promptly chisels these pieces off and, in the process of moving from one bark fragment to another, works his way above the ground, beneath the snow, and toward the base of an old apple tree. On the opposite side of the tree, framed in the fork of a large root, is an abandoned cottontail den presently occupied by a sleeping deer mouse.

The deer mouse survives the winter in a different fashion than the vole. With her wide ears and long, fine tail, the mouse can lose a lot of heat if she remains constantly active. During extremely cold weather, the deer mouse simply curls up in a nest and sleeps deeply. Her sleep is disturbed as the vole inquisitively nibbles on her tail. Had she been dead, he would have satiated himself, but as it is, her twitches and kicks discourage the vole and he continues his explorations along grass hummocks under the snow.

This commotion between rodents did not go unnoticed by the apple tree's other resident, a Screech Owl. The owl focuses her ears on the quiet skirmish and then hops further out on a branch to listen again. In one silent motion, the bird sweeps down to the snow, explodes the surface as she swings her legs forward, and seizes the mouse firmly in her right talon.

The vole, startled by the mouse's abrupt squeak, hurries through the snow, this time making his own



# STILLMAN NATURE CENTER

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tunnel. After only a few seconds, he hits an impenetrable wall of snow.

It is packed solid and there is no space between the ground and the snow above. He turns left and then burrows up onto the surface. The unseen wind chills his body. The unseen teeth, claws and talons of nocturnal predators add to the wind's chilling effect. The vole zig-zags through the powder, plowing an erratic pattern of shallow troughs in the snow.

What is a wall of compacted snow to the vole is a hard-packed trail to the house cat. The black-and-gray striped animal has made this deer trail part of her nightly rounds. The young cat had been watching the episode at the apple tree with apparent disinterest but this vole poking through the snow at her feet is more than she can resist. The well-fed feline views the vole more as a toy than a meal and merely snags the rodent with her claws rather than pouncing with the weight of her body.

The vole does not feel playful. He seeks refuge under the snow only to be flipped again and again into the cold air by the cat. The cat's new toy is quickly losing energy.

The moon's light is blocked as a large bird glides over the vole, cat and Screech Owl. Any of these animals could be potential prey for the Great Horned Owl. This evening, though, he is more interested in mating than feeding. As the cat and small owl watch the horned owl land in a distant spruce, the vole escapes under the thick blanket of snow.

## PROGRAMS

### OWL MOON WALK

Native Americans called January's full moon the "owl moon." In honor of this, Mark Spreyer will present an indoor presentation on owls. Afterwards, with the help of the full moon, we will walk the trails in search of Stillman's Great Horned Owls. Space is limited so call **428-OWLS** to make reservations.

Date: Thursday, Jan. 9  
Time: 7:00PM  
Age: 10 years and up  
Fee: None

### MAKING TRACKS

Join Susan Allman as she shows you how to recognize the different types of tracks made by winter's active animals. After an indoor introduction, explore Stillman's trails for signs of rabbits, squirrels, deer and fox. If there is no snow on the ground, the program will be cancelled.

Date: Sunday, Jan. 26  
Time: 2:00PM  
Fee: None

### NAME THAT TREE or THIS BUD'S FOR YOU!

With the help of Stillman's naturalist, learn how to identify some of our midwestern trees. Easy to remember tips and simple hand-outs will keep you from barking up the wrong tree! Come prepared for the weather and bring your questions. Teachers and garden club members are especially welcome.

Date: Sunday, Feb. 9  
Time: 2:00PM  
Age: 10 years and up  
Fee: None

Questions? Please call 428-OWLS.

### A BIT OF STILLMAN HISTORY

--Jennifer Rose

In the early 1950s, when the Nature Center was Alexander Stillman's country estate, three "islands" of flowers adorned the grounds where the main house stood. One garden bloomed in spring, one in summer and one in fall. Seeds were collected from each garden, nurtured during the winter in the greenhouse next to the gardener's cottage, and planted in the following spring.

Vernon Hopp, who was employed as a part-time gardener by Mr. Stillman from 1953-55, meticulously cared for all the plantings which decorated the property. Vernon, then a Dundee High School student, would ride his bike along Penny Road to the estate. At that time, the estate extended west to Bartlett Road. During the week, Vernon lived in the gardener's

cottage with Al Karsten, who was the groundskeeper, and his family.

Vernon recently visited the center and toured the grounds with board members. He shared his memories of the property as it was forty-three years ago. With Vernon's help, we caught a glimpse of Alexander (son of Fifi McCormick) and his way of life. His account was fascinating and invaluable in piecing together a historical sketch of this once-vast estate and farm. We are deeply indebted to Vernon for the information he provided as well as for his willingness to share his recollections.

As suggested above, the Stillman Nature Center is a fragment of the much larger McCormick holdings which were being divided and sold during the 1950s. More details on this area's history can be found in George Van Hagen's excellent article, *Pound Foolish Farm provides historic link to Barrington's past*, which appeared in the October 3rd edition of the **Barrington Courier-Review**.

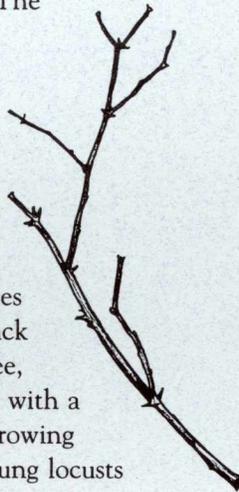
If you have any memories of the Stillman property or of its past residents, we would love to hear from you. You can either call or write the Nature Center or contact our Recording Secretary, Jennifer Rose, at 381-5966.

## PLANT PROFILE

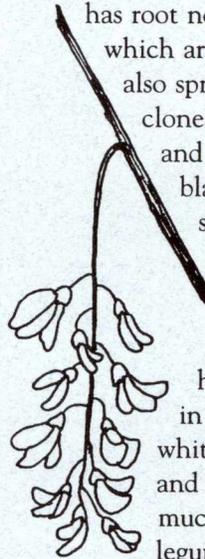
Black Locust (*Robinia pseudoacacia*)

This past incredible autumn, it was hard not to admire our region's many colorful trees. The admiration does not need to stop simply because the leaves are gone. One of the times that trees impress me is during a full moon, on a crisp and clear winter's night. These conditions seem to intensify the artistic pattern of twigs and branches.

One of the most attractive silhouettes to be seen at Stillman belongs to the black locust. Black locust is a medium-sized tree, ranging in height from forty to sixty feet with a diameter of one to two feet. It is a fast-growing species that likes sun. On good soils, young locusts can grow two to four feet in height a year.



If soils are nutritionally deficient or prone to erosion, black locust is often planted to improve the situation. As a member of the legume family, black locust has root nodules containing nitrogen-fixing bacteria which are of great value in soil building. The tree also sprouts readily from its roots forming natural clones or "thickets." Because of its sprouting habit and its vigorous, wide spreading root system, black locust is very useful in controlling erosion. Further, since the tree tolerates air pollution, it can grow not only on degraded soils but in an urban atmosphere.



Looking ahead to spring, black locust has some of the showiest flowers of any tree in our area. The very fragrant flowers are white with a yellow spot, up to an inch long, and arranged in drooping clusters. They look much like a sweet pea, another member of the legume family.

Black locust is also a favorite of a couple of insects which is a classic good news-bad news situation. The bad news comes in the form of the locust borer, a beetle whose larva tunnels into the tree's wood. The good news is that black locust is the most common caterpillar food for our largest skipper butterfly, the silver-spotted skipper. Like the tree, this skipper adapts well to the suburbs where it often puts on spectacular aerial displays.

In this winter season, it is the delicate zigzag pattern of the twigs against the moon that catches my eye. On closer examination, though, the fragile-looking reddish twigs are actually armed and able to catch a mitten or sleeve. Their armament consists of a pair of short spines that frame the buds for next spring's leaves.

This tree's beauty has made it popular with European horticulturists. It was introduced to Germany early in the 17th century. The first part of its scientific name, *Robinia*, comes from Jean and Vespasien Robin, herbalists to King Henry IV of France, who planted black locust in the Louvre gardens and did much to popularize the tree in that country. Today, black locust is one of the most widely distributed North American tree species in Europe.

Of course, you don't have to go to Europe to see black locusts. They can be found growing here at Stillman, just a short walk from the parking lot.



(847) 428-OWLS  
 South Barrington, IL 60010  
 33 West Penny Road

**STILLMAN**  
 nature center



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