

Seeing the Sourlands



Summer into Winter: Part I September

By Jim Amon

One of nature's great shows is the change from a summer landscape--with what seems like a hundred shades of green at all levels of the forest--to a winter landscape with almost no green and little color of any kind except for browns and blacks. The show is made all the more dramatic because between these two stages of a forest's life there is an explosion of color. Leaves turn yellow and red and orange and mauve. Flowers that have been unseen all summer come into bloom.

I recently realized, however, that I perceive this extraordinary change on such a day to day basis that I do not pay close attention to the sequence of changes. So I decided to document it. I went into the forest, notebook and pen in hand, in early September, early October and early November. Then I wrote three essays to summarize the changes I saw, condensing them into one for each month.

I didn't really know what to expect when I walked into the woods in early September. It occurred to me that I should be conscious of the air. The air in autumn is supposed to be clearer, free from humidity and in some unspecified way it is supposed to smell different. I checked, but reluctantly I had to admit that the air was pretty much like the air on any nice summer morning. Next, I looked at the foliage. Did I see any hint of autumnal glory in the canopy or the understory? No. So is early September in the Sourland forest just like July? Pretty much, but I began to see subtle differences when I looked down at the plants on the forest floor instead of at the canopy.

I had long known that Spring comes to the forest from the ground up. In late April and early May, before tree leaves create a strong shade, the sun streams onto the forest floor, warming it and allowing the lovely spring ephemeral flowers to bloom. The shrub, understory and canopy layers, in that order, subsequently come into flower and leaf. What I had not realized is that autumn also comes to the Sourland forest from the ground up. The ferns are

among the first plants to show that summer is over. Sensitive fern was particularly conspicuous with its browned fronds. Many of the Christmas fern fronds were browning at the tips even though they will usually stay green until--well, until Christmas. Wood ferns and New York ferns looked like they had lost their stamina; they were sagging instead of stabbing at the sky, and they too were starting to turn brown.

Several species of flowers that were just stem and leaf all summer were now in bloom. Hog Peanut is a vine that is modest in appearance but I have always enjoyed it because of its triad of pale, smooth leaves. Now the leaves were joined with trailing shoots of modest white flowers. Spires of Virginia Jump Seed shone white against the dark forest background. Beneath gaps in the canopy were the spotted orange flowers of Jewelweed, pink spears of Smartweed and clusters of white Snakeroot.

In meadow openings goldenrod and thistle were flashing yellow and purple beneath dogwood trees whose leaves were also a shade of purple. (Dogwood trees were the exception to my earlier observation of no change in the canopy or understory.) Tiger swallowtail butterflies were flitting from one thistle flower to the next, often with parts of their wings missing from close encounters with hungry birds. Grasses, particularly my two favorite--Bottle Brush and Indian--became dominant parts of the meadow as their seeds ripened into burnished browns.

The oak trees had not yet given up their acorns, nor had the beechnuts fallen from the beech trees, but the ground beneath the Shagbark hickories was littered with hickory nuts, many of them with arils half eaten--squirrel lunches interrupted.

There was not yet a chorus of cicadas but there were one or two producing the sound that is indisputably from autumn. Early September in the forest is still a long way from winter and from the full splendor of autumn, but neither is it summer.