

Spruce Country Signs of Summer



Summer is a time when “signs” hardly seem visible amid the rather uniform blanket of green. Even so, many plants, birds and other wildlife are best looked for at certain times during the season.

Characteristic northern plants that will be found in bloom in early summer beneath the spruce are the yellow clintonia and dwarf cornel. The clintonia produces blue berries that have given it another name, blue beadlily, while the cornel is also called bunchberry for its cluster of red berries. Mountain folk know the azaleas as “honeysuckle” and these flowering shrubs add splashes of rose and pink amid the spruce at Dolly Sods when blooming in early summer.

Early summer is the best time to search for birds busy with nesting. The beautiful Blackburnian warbler with flaming orange throat builds its compact nest in an evergreen where it sings its high-pitched notes. After mid-July, nesting activity and

song is greatly diminished among most species.

The name of the chimney swift that looks somewhat like a cigar with wings when seen rocketing over rooftops seems appropriate. Swifts seen over the mountains and far from any dwelling are doubtless nesting in hollow trees in the ancestral way.

Mushrooms give the forest floor the look of a fairyland in July and they seem to have a magic quality by springing up overnight. The ghostly “death angel” may grow to a height of a foot and even though having a strange beauty contains a deadly poison.

The delicate grasspink orchid will be found in bloom on mats of sphagnum or “peat” moss in bogs high in the mountains about mid-summer. The striking wood lily appears later in the season with flowers shaded from orange to red.

The ghostly green luna moth with long tails on its lower wings can be expected throughout the season. Luna is Latin for “moon” and when the moth is seen dancing in flight it almost has the look of moonlight flickering through the treetops.

Late in the summer the cardinal flower will be a blaze of color along a stream or swampy place where hum-mingbirds will be attracted to its bright-ness. Before blooming, its weedy stem and that of the closely related blue lobelia would be easily overlooked.

Summer is nearing an end when fireweed is found abundantly in bloom at the road-side and the birds are mostly silent. The spruce woods seem napping before the arrival of fall with its patchwork of colors.