

Little Silver - Summer of 2018 - Outdoor Observations

Hi Folks,

Several of you know me from work with the Little Silver (LS) Environmental Commission and/or the LS Shade Tree Commission. Others know I help keep the town woods/walking trails accessible - or maybe just as that guy walking around town with hedge trimmers and a bag, picking up trash from our walkways.

I've written about LS outdoor trends before. This is a current update. Yes, there is some attempt at organization in these topics and observations. And Yes, it could be better.

Weather Patterns

So how's your weather been? In my opinion, we have had (with few exceptions) a normally warm and relatively wet summer so far. Very few days above 95 F, and enough cloudiness and rain to reduce the need for routine watering. My mostly unsprinkled lawn is still mostly green, which is also true for other LS residents. By August of many LS summers, things can be looking very yellow and parched.

As a walker and amateur gardener, I tend to watch rain patterns. You might try a cheap (under \$10) rain gauge or two like I do, and watch the trends in your yard. Many weather websites also give daily rainfall amounts for most local areas. One pattern I've noticed is that your rainfall may differ slightly between nearby locations. You may sometimes see a 1/4 inch difference between different yard areas, and maybe a 1/2 inch difference between different parts of town. I got about 2.1 inch during our wet Monday. A LS location 0.5 miles south got 1.57 inches. Some parts of Brick got 0.5 inch on Monday, while others got 5.5 inches and floods!

Our Local Birds

I was talking about all the Bald Eagles I was seeing over LS this Spring - in the air and on the water and in the trees. We had seen 1 or 2 in past seasons, but not like this year. From March through May, we were seeing an eagle about twice per week - and less frequently 2 to 5 Bald Eagles over our waters and adjacent woods and houses and playgrounds at the same time!

But all that activity slowed way down, probably as they picked more obscure nest sites in the general area. We are still seeing Ospreys in fair volume (e.g., several nests on Fort properties adjacent to Parker Creek), but not the eagles - at least not in LS skies. [Note: Ospreys have a wingspan and diet similar to bald eagles; also a mostly white head. But:

- a) their wings are narrower;
- b) their eyes have a horizontal brown stripe through them; and
- c) they have a creamy-white chest. Eagles have a very brown chest, with a rather bigger body and broader wings. That helps explain why ospreys and eagles are often confused - and provides some ways to distinguish them.]

There are, of course, many other birds to be seen and heard around town. Examples: Notice the chimney swifts catching bugs in the skies (especially in the evening) over our LS downtown? And notice how they are more common this year over the south side of town? And notice the similarly-sized barn swallows roosting under water bridges with the same diets at lower altitudes? And the slightly bigger Purple Martins competing with their smaller swallow cousins wherever people have placed martin houses near water?

Lots of basic yard birds, of course (titmice, chickadees, catbirds, robins, goldfinches, etc.) And also note the bigger birds around water (different egrets, ducks, cormorants, etc).

Has anybody else noticed the large roosts of small white egrets in the trees as you cross the bridge over to fort properties? And the darker cormorants who like that area?

We are also hearing occasional Great-Horned Owls in town at night. My favorites, however, are the little screech owls that you almost never see, but you can hear their weird warbling hoots at night. (There are one or two in my area who like to warble-toot to announce the darkening day and the arrival of early morning.)

Okay, so the bird-brain should talk about a few other things.

Butterflies

I've been seeing (my opinion) somewhat fewer butterflies around town through July - occasional swallowtail varieties, a few painted ladies, a few more cabbage whites, and only one or two Monarchs. But things have really perked up for me since my recent return from a week around the Blue Ridge Parkway in Virginia. More butterflies in our yard and more on the LS walking trails. On Tuesday I spotted about eight different Monarchs over a single hour on the trails up to Harding Road that included the Parker Pet Trail and Cooper's Loop. (Seen in several places, but the walking bridge behind the LS Community Garden was best.)

Then there was my "Monarch rescue" Tuesday morning: I saw a strange "leaf" on the nearby sidewalk about 8 AM. A closer look showed it to be a comatose Monarch. A little jostling revealed it was still alive. So I took it behind the house and placed it gently on a leaf of garden milkweed, where it seemed to partly recover. Then left it to Nature to care of further. It was probably a victim of an auto sideswipe near the sidewalk.

Some Other Animal Trends

Are the deer eating most of your (unfenced) lilies this year? They are either more common or less fearful - or both. I am seeing more in my yard and more (and closer ones) on our LS woodland trails.

Have you seen a fox or two in your yards or on a walk? They are there for people who get outside, and I seem to be hearing more fox stories this year.

By the way, I have seen many more chipmunks in other nearby towns than in LS. But they are more common along trails in northern or western parts of LS. Later this summer, however, I am beginning to see chipmunks in southern parts of LS. Cute little guys.

I'm no turtle expert, but it's clear LS has some variety of turtles. Anyone outside with open eyes will spot a big snapping turtle occasionally - hard not to when they start ambling across roads to lay their eggs in early summer. Some places you may see

snappers are bigger ponds and the brackish ocean inlets. The ponds beside Parker House and behind Sickles Market are examples. The narrower sections of Little Silver Creek and Parker Creek are others. They can put on quite a show when they start fighting over territory. And have you ever seen a an erratically moving chunk of seaweed? The ponds usually have other smaller turtles as well, sometimes hanging out on a log just above the waterline.

And did you know there are at least two kinds of frogs in the stream behind Memorial Park? Bigger bullfrogs and also the smaller leopard frogs. (Thanks, Ciaran.) A leopard frog recently met its demise in front of the firehouse. (Thanks, Jeff.)

Woods Walking Trails

We have about 2.5 miles of woodsy walking trails in LS (plus several park and neighborhood walking routes). I have now walked them all since our last heavy rains a few days ago. I was concerned about status and trends and making sure there were no major fallen tree problems or serious vegetation blockages. These trails are all clear and walkable right now, despite the heavy rains in the early week. A few spots (at high tide beyond the Prospect Ave boardwalk and near Alderbrook on the north part beyond the the Parker Pet Trail) were mildly wet - though I had little problem keeping my walking shoes dry. (Those spots will improve, given a few more days without heavy rains.) There are no tree falls or heavy weeds blocking walkers. (I walk with hedge trimmers and a folding ripsaw to help insure that.) And there is very little "street trash" on these trails, perhaps because most people are careful not to discard it - and a few people carry bags to help pick it up.

Let me specifically mention the newer trail that connects the Eastview parking with Challenger Field. It is providing a useful walkway for local residents. Deer are frequently seen here. And it is well maintained. You will often see animal wildlife on these trails (woodchuck, wood duck, deer, etc.) as well as interesting trees (cottonwoods, small elms, beech, vine maple(!), catalpa, boxelder, green ash, devil's walkingstick(!)) and vines (Virginia creeper, trumpet vine, concord and Asian grape, poison ivy (!), etc.) and shrubs (elderberry, high-bush

blueberry, raspberry, groundsel bush) and flowers (swamp hibiscus, dayflower, wild morning glory, asters, daisies, clovers, honeysuckle, etc.)

Fortunately, by the way, I am not very susceptible to poisonivy, though I can sometimes get it. It helps if you can recognize the plant. [Three smooth leaves (raspberry doesn't count) often growing as a tree vine, turning reddish in early Fall]. I wash hands (and sometimes legs) often right after returning from a woods walk - it much reduces your PI risk. I haven't had any PI problems for over 4 years. {Until my vacation and Appalachian Trail walking two weeks ago!}

I am not the only one, by the way, who helps to keep our trails clear for walkers. We get assistance from the LS Public Works staff. And some adjacent landowners also spend time keeping the trails near them free of tree branches and weed problems.

In my opinion, it is becoming just a bit safer to walk or bike in LS lately. The focus on pedestrian safety is making motorists just a bit more concerned and careful where walkers are present. More is needed, but the trends seem good.

So take a walk. It's free, healthy, interesting, and educational!

Our Community Garden

The town community garden activity has been very impressive this summer (despite its slow start). All plots in this large community garden are in use. And all seem relatively well tended and green. The Pollinator Garden (nice sign!) started slowly, but it now has a large variety of interesting plants and flowers. And the large variety of butterflies and other "buzzers" around the gardens show that it is working. My understanding is also that a moderate fraction of the produce is being donated to people who really need it. It is an enjoyable, beautiful, and "wild" place to visit even if you are not a participant this year.

John Heidema