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A FAMILY OF DUCKS SUN THEMSELVES ON GRASS RIVER

We are grateful to Alex Kippe for submitting the photo above to our 2019 Photo Contest.

WILD GINGER SPICES UP SPRING

But maybe not in the way you anticipate

by Emily Burke

Most of the wildflowers in our springtime woodlands – like hepatica, trout lily, and spring beauty – are colorful and conspicuous for their small size, easily attracting the attention of each passerby. The flower of wild ginger, however, lies hidden under its paired leaves just above the forest floor, and this unusual arrangement alludes to the strange reproductive strategies of this plant. The flower, deeply maroon and jug-shaped, is designed for the same purpose all flowers are – pollination, that is – but not by the usual suspects. Wild ginger is pollinated by carrion-eating flies, and the flower has evolved its deep maroon hue and rotten stench to perfectly mimic the color and smell of thawing, winter-killed animal carcasses. Moreover, the flower is positioned under the leaves at the base of the plant to make it easy for these pollinators to reach the flower when they emerge from the soil in spring. Of course, as the flies move from one wild ginger flower to the next on their search for suitable food, they carry pollen granules with them, effectively pollinating the plant!

And just as wild ginger relies on insects for pollination, its seed dispersal method



similarly depends on insects – this time, ants. Each wild ginger seed, like the seeds of other spring wildflowers such as violets and bloodroot, has a small fatty tidbit attached to it called an elaiosome. Ants seem to consider these tidbits a delicacy, so they harvest the seeds of wild ginger and carry them to their underground tunnels. Once they have consumed the elaiosomes, the ants discard the seeds, usually in their waste pile, which happens to be an ideal site for seed germination – sort of like a protected, mature compost pile. So, the wild ginger contributes food for the ant, and the ant disperses and plants the wild ginger’s seeds!

Wild ginger will flower now through May in moist woods, but again, the flower itself is quite inconspicuous. To find it,

search for the large, fuzzy, heart-shaped leaves that cover it, and then look underneath. Because they can reproduce via rhizomes (underground runners) and not just via seeds, wild ginger often occurs in colonies, meaning that many plants are often found at once. Good luck, and happy searching!

Note: While wild ginger has a history of traditional use as an edible and medicinal plant, it is not related to the culinary gingerroot. We do not recommend consuming it, as several studies have found that it contains toxic compounds. We do, however, heartily recommend admiring its evolutionary ingenuity!



ACTIVITIES

Microclasses added

Spend less than 15 minutes learning something new or refreshing your memory about the natural world.

GRNA naturalist, Emily Burke, leads these video classes on YouTube. Click below to take the current classes, and look for new classes each weekend on Facebook and YouTube.

TOUR A CEDAR SWAMP

Our first-ever virtual Grass River Microclass! We'll go on an exploration of a cedar swamp, the most abundant ecosystem in the natural area, and discuss the unique trees, wildflowers, and animals of this habitat. [Click here to start your class.](#)



TOUR A NORTHERN MICHIGAN RIVER

[Click here](#) for your second Grass River Microclass, this one focusing on the springtime goings-on of plants and animals in northern Michigan rivers. Spoiler alert: some pretty neat wildlife sightings are included!

While Michigan's Stay Home, Stay Safe order continues, we will publish *In Otter News* every other week to keep you informed, educated, and entertained. We will include the microclasses, some of the Fun in the Field activities from Facebook, and a lead article from one of our naturalists in each edition. We hope this helps to fill your days.

Time spent in nature reduces anxiety, boosts happiness, combats depression, increases empathy, and increases your sense of belonging.
#getoutside



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If you believe in our mission and want to help us fulfill it for many years to come. Please click on the Donate button below. Your support is greatly appreciated.

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