Greetings Wildlife Enthusiasts!

Those of us who work outdoors, and probably some of you readers, have a running joke that, on occasion, one can experience all four seasons in four days in this great state. There is beauty in having four distinct seasons. However, not in four days! To me, the beauty of four distinct seasons lies in the overlapping change from one season to the next. Trees will change colors the last few weeks of Oct. into the first few weeks of Nov. Summer breeding birds, such as the state icon scissor-tailed flycatcher, will head back south to winter. Other birds will head south from Canada to winter here, bringing a different variety of species to watch. As this happens, we must cherish the moments and begin transforming our backyard landscapes to provide for wintering species. One particular tree, the soapberry, can be planted to add an ornamental touch to your yard while also providing resources for wintering birds.

Soapberry trees are easily identified by their yellow berries, that when crushed, produce a soapy froth. Soapberries have ornamental bark, but they also serve as a host tree for monarch butterflies, and attract mockingbirds, eastern bluebirds and robins looking for food in the winter.

Soapberries can be tough to find in Oklahoma, so it is best to check with local nurseries such as Sunshine Farm and Nursery in Clinton. They can be planted in the spring or fall. Always be mindful of where you plant soapberry trees. Due to their sticky fruit, similar to that of mulberry trees, they should be planted away from the house, driveway, cars, sidewalks, patios and outdoor furniture.

I encourage you to take time the next few weeks and experience the spectacular season transformation in the great outdoors of Oklahoma. Whether taking a drive out east to go birding, introducing a new hunter to the field, or planting soapberry trees, take time to enjoy the view as wildlife prepares for winter.

Share your photos of the season transformation or soapberry planting with us on social media!

Enjoy the view,

Rachel

Rachel Bradley
Wildlife Diversity Information Specialist

Plant soapberry trees to attract butterflies and winter birds. Photo by Rachel Bradley.

Oklahoma Monarch Watch

By Melynda Hickman, wildlife diversity biologist

Each fall, Kelvin Schoonover has observed thousands of migrating monarchs at Hackberry Flat WMA for over 10 years. With so few trees on the area, monarchs are more concentrated and will literally "drip" from branches of western soapberry, elm, hackberry and Osage orange trees.

"I have never seen so many monarchs in one place at one time," said Rhonda Hurst, ODWC employee and Monarch Watch participant. "It looked like they were spray painted on the soapberry trees."

In the last four years, a particular dense stand of western soapberry seemed to be the preferred as overnight roosts for these monarchs. ODWC biologists took advantage of this opportunity and ordered tags from Monarch Watch, an organization sponsored by the University of Kansas, to track the butterflies.

"We arrived on site and waited about an hour for darkness which allowed us

to approach the tree without spooking the butterflies. It was amazing to watch. As monarchs would fly in from feeding, some were already resting on the tree and would spread their wings and then shut them as if to say, 'Hey, I'm right here so don't land on me.'"

Lawton Central Middle School students, science club members and Boy Scout troop, in addition to, ODWC employees; Rhonda Hurst and husband Trent, Kelvin Schoonover and wife Karen, and Melynda Hickman were among those who tagged 45 monarchs.

"We used a light that wouldn't disturb them, plucked a monarch off, and tagged it according to its sex," said Hurst. It was interesting to learn how to identify a male verses a female butterfly according to whether or not a black spot was present against one of the veins on the hind wing. If a black spot occurred, it was a male. We would then make record of the tag and safely place the monarch back where we found it."

ODWC's Rhonda Hurst (left) learns how to tag monarchs from ODWC biologist Melynda Hickman. Photo by Trent Hurst.

The monarchs will now continue their migration to the Transvolcanic Mountains in central Mexico. ODWC will be notified if any of the tagged monarchs are recaptured or observed in Mexico. We'll keep you posted!

On of the monarch butterflies tagged at Hackberry Flat WMA as part of Monarch Watch. Photo by Rhonda Hurst.

Endangered Birds Pass Through Oklahoma

For the first time since records have been kept, whooping cranes were confirmed in Oklahoma City last year. A single bird stopped at Lake Overholser in mid-Oct. Then, just before Thanksgiving, a pair stopped overnight at Lake Hefner. The Wildlife Department asks citizens in to report sightings again this year.

"These sightings were unusual," said Mark Howery, wildlife diversity biologist for the Wildlife Department. "This may have occurred because of the ongoing drought in western Oklahoma. With fewer sources of open water in western Oklahoma, the birds may have been forced to migrate farther east than normal."

Another unusual occurrence last year was that

of a landowner who photographed six adult Whooping Cranes on one of her ponds. One of the birds had red and white leg bands. The bands allowed biologists to determine that it had been banded in 1988 - indicating that it was at least 25 years old!

Whooping cranes can be identified in flight by the black wing tips and white plumage. Photo by U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Each year, the nearly five-foot tall birds take a journey from Canada to the Gulf Coast of Texas, passing through western Oklahoma.

Whooping cranes have never been common in historic times, but were once more common than they are today. Their decline was largely due to a loss of wetland habitat in both nesting and wintering ranges and unregulated market hunting in the 1800s before modern wildlife conservation regulatory laws.

"Today, there are just over 300 cranes in the wild," said Howery. "The Canadian Wildlife Service monitors whooping crane nesting success each summer and develops an overall population estimate. During the winter months, biologists at Aransas National Wildlife Refuge on the Texas Gulf Coast conduct monthly aerial flights to monitor the birds."

The Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation is part of a team of state wildlife agencies that monitor the cranes during their long migration. These efforts help identify the birds' important stopover habitats as well as potential migration hazards.

In 1941, the whooping crane population had been reduced to a mere 15 to 20 birds. Conservation measures such as the protection of the cranes' breeding and wintering habitat have helped bring about a slow, yet steady, increase in the population.

"The public can aid monitoring efforts by reporting any whooping crane sightings," said Howery. "Whooping cranes typically migrate through Oklahoma during the day from mid-Oct. to mid-Nov. Most cranes travel in small groups of two to eight birds. They usually are seen around ponds and rivers or in crop fields."

Should you see a whooping crane, please take note of the number of birds, the time, date, location and the habitat in the area. Report your sighting to Mark Howery by phone at (405) 990-7259 or by email at mhowery@zoo.odwc.state.ok.us.

Whooping cranes are protected by the Endangered Species Act of 1973. Photo by U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Creepy Fish Indicate Healthy Habitat

There are some unique wildlife species around the world, and even in Oklahoma. Some are cute and cuddly looking and some are just plain creepy looking. Some fly and some walk, but what we often forget is that some live underwater. The American eel and the lamprey, although quite creepy looking, are indicators of healthy aquatic ecosystems in Oklahoma.

"Oklahoma has the most diverse habitat than any other non-coastal state in the United States," said Curtis Tackett, fisheries biologist. "This allows for an array of aquatic and terrestrial species. However, many forget about the abundance of beautiful, and not-so-attractive fish in Oklahoma. Even the creepy, not-so-attractive species serve an important role underwater, often giving biologists insight into changes that may be occurring in the ecosystem."

An American eel is a snake-like fish with a well-defined jaw and teeth. Photo by Brandon

The American eel and the lamprey look somewhat alike. The eel is a long, snake-like fish

that has a well-defined jaw and teeth, which distinguish it from the lamprey. Although an uncommon visitor to Oklahoma, the eel lives most of its life in freshwater streams and occurs in small numbers. A young eel, or elver, travels inland in freshwater streams. In Oklahoma, the eel has been documented as far inland as a small spring near Ada. However, the adult migrates east to the Sargasso Sea near Bermuda. There, it spawns and dies.

Brown.

The lamprey is a primitive, cartilaginous fish, meaning it has a skeleton made of cartilage. It can easily be identified from the American eel by its disc-shaped mouth with whorls of raspy teeth. A lamprey has seven round spiracles, or external respiratory openings in place of gills. There are two species of lamprey in Oklahoma, the southern brook and the chestnut. The two species are difficult to differentiate. The lamprey spends most of its life as a larva. It will burry itself in streambeds and feed on microscopic life. As an adult, the chestnut becomes parasitic and attaches itself to a host fish to feed on its blood. Unlike the chestnut becoming like an aquatic tick, a brook lamprey does not eat as an adult. It will spawn the following spring, dying shortly after, much like an adult American eel.

The whorls of raspy teeth inside an adult lamprey's mouth. Photo by Brandon Brown.

"I often get reports of the chestnut lamprey being attached to a fish host," said Tackett. "Anglers tend to believe the lamprey is an exotic species. But from a biological standpoint, the lamprey serves as an indicator of a healthy aquatic ecosystem."

The lamprey only exists in healthy streams and rivers with sufficient water quality and sound habitat. It is unusual to find American eels or lamprey in degraded habitats with poor water quality.

An adult lamprey can be identified by the seven spiracles on its sides from which it breathes. Photo by Brandon Brown.

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Visit wildlifedepartment.com for more wildlife diversity information and events. For questions or comments, please email info@odwc.state.ok.us.

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