

September Field Dispatch

From the LUNA Toronto blog. Originally posted September 2019 at lunatoronto.org, now inactive.

My early September visit to Wilket Creek coincided with joining Alan and a group of participants for a LUNA sketching tour, my first.

I arrived early to do a bit of sketching of my own, getting off the bus early, on Leslie Street close to Eglinton Avenue, and dropping down into the ravine through a small trail between the trees. I found myself in a different spot than I'd expected, and realized I needed to make a steep descent and cross the creek. Fortunately, I found a place where the water was low and the stones dry, and made an easy crossing.

The bank on the other side was abundantly lined with jewelweed and goldenrod, and I sat down to sketch these plants in their early autumn form—the yellow flowers opening on the goldenrod and the seed pods on the jewelweed ready to burst. I was mindful of being further away from the meeting spot than I'd planned and sketched fast, trying to get down the basic characteristics of each plant quickly, but also distracted by watching a bee carrying bright yellow pollen on its back legs.

I made towards the Toronto Botanical Garden, noticing many early fall plants along the way, stopping to admire some towering Joe-Pye weed by the path, and eating a few late purple-flowered raspberries. Since my last visit, I could see that the elderberries had come and gone, the staghorn sumac leaves were beginning to redden, and many more asters were in bloom.

Six people joined us on the sketching tour, including one small girl, and we spent a fun hour talking about Toronto's ravines, admiring native trees, smelling the citrusy scent of black walnuts, looking at details of cedar scales through a jeweler's loop, and practicing some simple sketching techniques.

While Alan demonstrated the sketching techniques, I had the fun of introducing the group to exploding jewelweed seeds, and showing them how to wear a cicada nymph exoskeleton as a brooch. I remembered again how looking at things in nature closely and with awareness awakens enthusiasm and curiosity in almost every human I've met.

When the tour group had dispersed, I stopped again briefly to sketch a couple more flowers to finish my sketchbook page—a cluster of purple asters and the imposing flower stalk of a second-year mullein plant.

A tiny pollinator on the aster caught Alan's eye, and he later identified it as bicoloured agapostemon (*Agapostemon virescens*), which turns out to be—according to *Bees in*

Canada— "Toronto's (un)official melittological mascot," an unusual bee that welcomes newcomers of the same species to its communal nests.

Stopping further down the path by the fallen cottonwood that we'd been observing for months, I was startled to realize that it still seemed to be producing new leaves while many of the original ones slowly dried out. I had known that a decomposing tree can act as a "nurse log" for the seeds of other trees to germinate, but I was amazed to see that a fallen tree could still produce its own new leaves. I walked away with a lot of questions.

At home, I added colour to my sketches, looked up the Latin names of each plant, and found a few new bits of information about each of them. Peering at my hasty drawings and trying to decide whether I'd accurately captured the growth pattern of the leaves, or the branching of the flower stalks, I could understand why the word "sketchy" had become a synonym for incomplete or untrustworthy. I realized that trying to clarify and improve on the details of something I had jotted down quickly made me learn things about these plants that I wouldn't have if I'd only taken a photograph.

Every time I walk around and look closely at things, I find more questions. Some questions have easy answers, but some don't, and these become part of bigger questions that stay with me for months.