

# STILLMAN NEWSLETTER



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## COTTONWOOD COUNTRY

-- Mark Spreyer

*Let me be by myself in the evenin' breeze  
Listen to the murmur of the cottonwood trees  
Send me off forever but I ask you please  
Don't fence me in*

-Cole Porter

*Don't Fence Me In* was quite a popular song, particularly with the singing cowboys, in the mid-twentieth century. When you stop to think about it, it is not the only time that cottonwood trees appear in song lyrics. If you haven't stopped to think about it, now's the time.

### Murmuring in the Breeze

Eastern cottonwood (*Populus deltoides*) has a very descriptive scientific name. As you might guess, *populus* is Latin for people. So, we are talking about the people's tree.

In addition to indigenous species, many cultivated varieties of *Populus* have been planted across the U. S. You might say, poplars are popular,

The species name *Deltoides* stems, if you will, from the triangular Greek letter delta. The cottonwood's leaf is triangular as well. It is the stem of the leaf, called a petiole, which explains why the cottonwood turns up in many songs.

With inspiration from Cole Porter, picture yourself hiking alone on a beautiful spring evening. You pause on a bridge over a small stream. Along its banks grow elms, maples, and cottonwoods.

A slight breeze moves through the trees. If you're a songwriter, you likely enjoy the cottonwoods' restful whispers.

If you're a student of nature, you might wonder why, in comparison, are the elm and maple leaves so quiet? All you have to do is collect a leaf from each tree and the answer will be in your hand.

Most petioles are rounded and somewhat stiff. Some, like the elm's, are very short. A light breeze quietly passes around leaves attached in such a way.

The leaf stem on a cottonwood is quite a different matter. It is long, flexible and flattened at a right angle to the surface of the leaf.

The least puff of wind catches these petioles like little sails and sets the leaf to quivering. Other poplars also have vertically flattened leaf stems. Now you know why quaking aspen (*Populus tremuloides*) quakes.

### Male Call

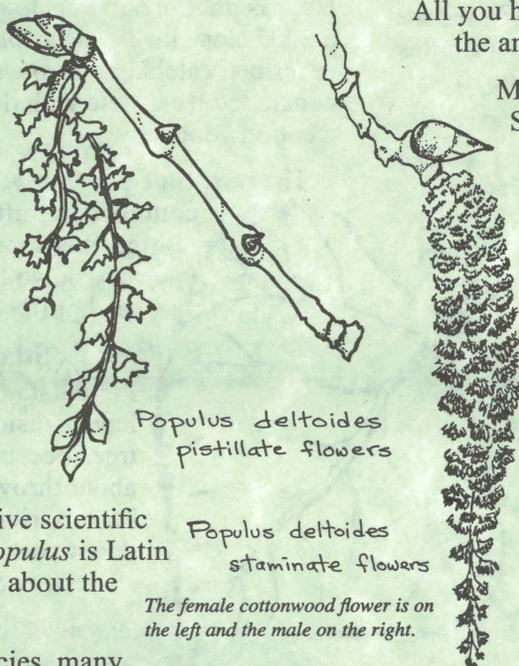
*I love to see the cottonwood blossom  
In the early spring  
I love to see the message of love  
That the bluebird brings*

These cheery opening lines written by De Lange, Loesser, and Meyer are setting you up for disappointment. After all, the song is titled *I Wish I Were Blind*.

I suppose one could say the same about cottonwood blossoms. They are a spring delight that later leads to mounds of wind-blown fluff, that some find annoying.

Of course, not all cottonwood trees produce the seeds that earned this tree its common name. You see, there are male and female cottonwood trees and male trees do not produce seed.

The pendulous male catkins, a type of flower, are three to four inches long and decorated with red anthers (where the pollen is made).



*Populus deltoides*  
pistillate flowers

*Populus deltoides*  
staminate flowers

The female cottonwood flower is on the left and the male on the right.

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Female flowers are shorter and greenish-yellow in color. Compared to the male catkins, the female flowers are semi-rigid and hang more stiffly from the twig (see illustration).

By late May, the female flowers have become greenish-brown capsules grouped in elongated clusters, containing numerous seeds with cottony hairs attached. The hairs are there to catch a gust of wind and spread the seeds far and wide, perhaps to an exposed riverside mud flat.

### Water & Fire

*Out on the trail night birds are callin'  
Singing their wild melody  
Down in the canyon cottonwood whispers  
A Song of Wyoming for me*

When Kent Lewis wrote this for *Song of Wyoming*, he could have been listening to our cottonwood. Eastern cottonwood does range as far west as Montana. That's why it's also known as plains cottonwood. It is in fact the state tree of Wyoming, Kansas, and Nebraska. Regardless of the state, cottonwoods are often found growing by a river or a lake.

If you are growing in a plains state, being near water is a good place for a thirsty tree to be. Cottonwoods are designed to collect rain water and hold fast against prairie winds.

They have a shallow, widespread root system sprouting numerous fine rootlets. This system combines to absorb surface water, hold soil, and make the tree wind-firm.

As you probably know, prairie winds power grassland fires. Larger cottonwoods are ready for that as well. Obviously, if you are growing in a river floodplain, the odds are low that a fire will reach you.

This is good for the young, small cottonwoods that are vulnerable to fire. However, they aren't small for long. A newly planted cottonwood can grow four to five feet each year.

*Any fool can destroy trees. They cannot run away; and if they could, they would still be destroyed, chased and hunted down as long as fun or a dollar could be got out of their bark hides, branching horns, or magnificent bole backbones. Few that fell trees plant them; nor would planting avail much towards getting back anything like the noble primeval forests.*

-John Muir, naturalist, explorer, and writer (1838-1914)

By the time the tree is twenty years old, its thickly furrowed bark offers some protection from a ground fire. By the way, cottonwoods can live for 100 years and reach a height of 100 feet.

### A White Tie Dinner

*There's a cottonwood tree with a limb hangin' over  
We'll do the cannonball off a rope swing*

Trent Willmon sets this lakeside scene in his song *The Good Life*. What he may not realize is that there are some other lake inhabitants that see cottonwoods as part of their good life. These would be carp.

I kid you not. I first ran across this fact decades ago in *Fishing for Buffalo*, a book dedicated to the joys of angling for roughfish. Rob Buffler, one of the authors, recalled, "I was fishing a lake west of Minneapolis in the late '70s when I saw a carp taking cottonwood seeds off the surface."

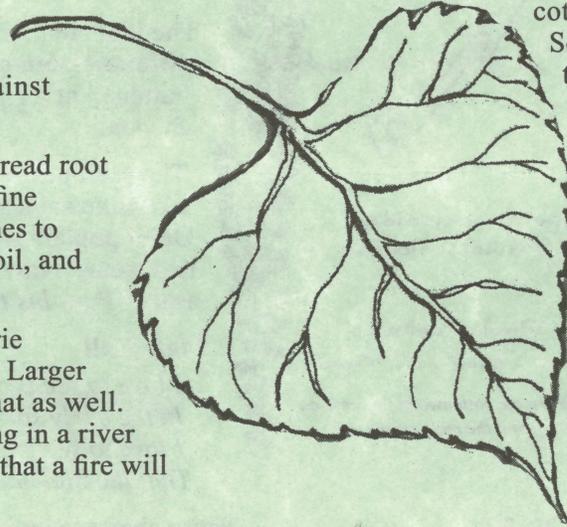
He was not the only one to connect carp and cottonwoods. In a 2005 story for *Pennsylvania Angler & Boater*, Carl Haensel described catching a carp with a cottonwood fly. He concluded the article with detailed instructions on how to tie a cottonwood fly.

The next time you're sweeping the cottonwood fluff off your steps, think about this. Somewhere some guy is using cell foam and turkey down to make an imitation cottonwood seed puff!

### Screen Stars

I understand there are some people who have considered cutting down cottonwood trees because they don't like the mess. Talk about throwing the baby out with the bath, I mean, river water! Here's an idea. Take down your screens, plug in the vacuum cleaner, and... suck it up!

Remember the Arapaho believed great cottonwoods cast the stars into the heavens. So no, those aren't annoying seeds, they're potential stars.



## PROGRAMS

**Program Basics:** PLEASE CALL OR FAX US AT (847) 428-OWLS(6957), OR EMAIL STILLMAN: stillnc@wildblue.net TO MAKE RESERVATIONS for programs. Remember to include your name, phone number, and the number of people that will be attending.

If less than five people plan to attend two days prior to a program, the activity could be cancelled. So, don't forget to call the nature center in advance. If you discover that you are unable to attend, please call to cancel your reservations. This courtesy will be greatly appreciated.

### GIVE A HOOT AT KNUPPER

Stillman's hard-working volunteers will be at Knupper Nursery to do birdhouse and bird feeder cleaning for customers. Knoppers Nursery is at 1801 N. Rand Rd. in Palatine. Besides the volunteers, a few of our birds of prey will also be on hand. Even if all your feeders are clean, feel free to stop in and say "hi."

Date: Saturday, March 2

Time: 10:00 AM to 2 PM

Fee: Donations gratefully accepted

### THURSDAY TREKKERS

Join us outside for a healthy hour-long walk around a lake, through the woods, and who knows where else? Why not add Stillman to your list of exercise options? Come prepared to hike the trails with hiking boots or sturdy shoes.

Date: Tuesdays: March 7, April 4, May 2, June 6

Time: 9:30 AM

Fee: None

### EVENING WOODCOCK WATCHES

Each spring the American woodcock goes through its amazing mating ritual right here at Stillman. A woodcock is a portly inland sandpiper with a long beak and short legs. During courtship, they make some amazing calls but can be a challenge to see since the birds' displays only occur near sunset and sunrise. Hopefully, the weather will cooperate and we'll have another good nuptial display this year. Don't forget your binoculars!

Date: Saturday, March 16

Friday, March 22

Time: 6:30 PM

Fee: None

Age: 10 years and up

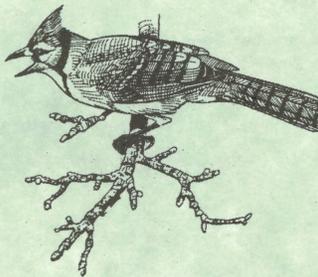
### BIRD BANDING

Watch Mark Spreyer, a licensed bird bander, measure, weigh and record data about our resident and migratory birds. Birds are not caught in a predictable manner, so come prepared to hike the trails. With luck, you'll see a bird in the hand and two in the bush. If it is raining, the banding open house will be cancelled.

Date: Sundays, April 7, May 5

Time: 9:00 AM to Noon

Fee: None



### FRIDAY NIGHT CAMPFIRE

Join us for stories and roasted marshmallows. Enjoy the night sounds of early spring by the crackling warmth of the campfire.

Date: Friday, April 19

Time: 7:30-8:30 PM

Suggested Donation: \$2.00



### SUNDAY MORNING BIRD WALKS

Mark Spreyer will lead a morning bird walk. Migration will be under way and you never know what we might find. Binoculars and field guides are a must. If you don't have any, don't worry, Stillman does. *Please call 428-OWLS to make reservations.*

Date: Sundays, April 21 & May 19

Time: 8:00 AM

Fee: None

Age: 8 years and up

### WILDFLOWER WALKS

Join us as we explore Stillman's woodlands in search of ephemeral beauties such as white trillium, may-apple, Virginia bluebell and jack-in-the-pulpit. Bring your camera!

Date: Sundays, April 28 & May 5

Time: 2:00 PM

Fee: None

Age: 10 years and up



### MOTHER'S DAY with BIRDS OF PREY!

Tired of flowers and candy? Try something different this Mother's Day. Bring Mom to meet our birds of prey. She'll love meeting the great horned, barn, barred, and screech owls plus a peregrine falcon and broad-winged hawk. We will bring the birds out so they can be seen up close. Kids will have a chance to dissect owl pellets. Bring your mom, grandma, a camera, and a friend! Drop by anytime between 1:00 and 3:00PM.

Date: Sunday, May 12

Time: 1:00-3:00 PM

Fee: \$10/car



Stillman Nature Center is available during the week, by reservation, to school classes and adult groups. You can visit the Center or we can bring our raptors to your meeting place. For more information about the group programs and fees, either call (847) 428-OWLS(6957), check our website: [stillmannnc.org](http://stillmannnc.org), or email us at: [stillnc@wildblue.net](mailto:stillnc@wildblue.net)

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*If you aren't already a member, please consider joining us.*

Yes, I'd like to become or continue as a member of the Stillman Nature Center.

You can also join online, just visit [stillmannc.org](http://stillmannc.org) and click on "Become a Member or Volunteer." Volunteer opportunities include teaching classes, clearing trails, and fundraising.

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*Thank you for your donation.*

Please mail with your check to:

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Website: [www.stillmannc.org](http://www.stillmannc.org)

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