

# Village Voices

## In Our Own Words

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### WHY NATURE NOTES?

by Yoma Ullman

The simplest answer is that I wanted to bring the outside inside. I felt that at Pennswood we lived in a singularly beautiful landscape, but mobility problems prevented many of us from seeing it. I decided to take pictures of our surroundings and bring them inside.

When I began, Nov. 17, 2019, I had no idea how many people would be interested, nor did I care. My aim was to share what beauty I could with whoever was interested. Well over a hundred people are now signed up to receive Nature Notes, and that doesn't count the relatives and friends to whom it is sent.

I have been hugely lucky that Jackie McClellan, an experienced photographer and good friend, was willing to join me and create Nature Notes one day a week. I do it on two days. Our styles are very different, which is fortunate since we cover the same territory, repeatedly.

I started without much knowledge of birds or plants. Many people have helped me, such as Dorothy Jackson. When I first saw her, she was standing in the gazebo courtyard gazing steadily into the distance. I recognized a birder, and indeed she was following a hawk. In addition to her off-the-cuff knowledge, she's an expert at finding information online.

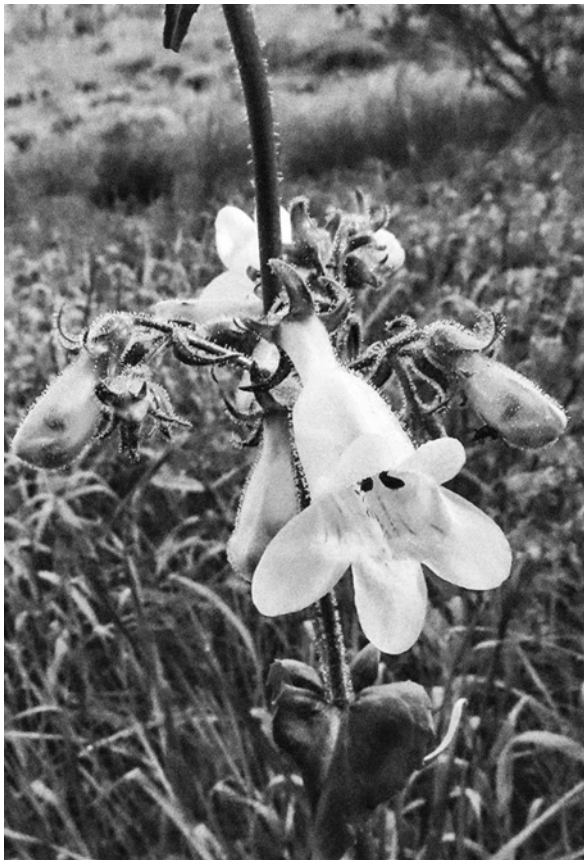
I'm also lucky to know a number of master gardeners who live here at Pennswood. Many of them have answered my questions about the identity of our flowers.

The unusual things I have seen myself include killdeer (a shore bird), the egg sacs of praying mantises, exoskeletons of cicadas, cicada killers, and, of course, green frogs.



In addition, I ask people who see anything of interest to call me if they cannot catch a picture themselves. Steve Schnur once called me to see an enormous bunch of bees hanging from an evergreen near the D/E entrance.

As my archive grows, it shows from year to year what wildflowers bloomed when and what that might mean for climate change. Last year the wild senna, a wildflower that has long upright stems with delicate leaves and clusters of yellow flowers, made a brilliant showing in the Meadow. This year few showed up. In contrast, a penstemon is spreading its clusters of white flowers on long purple stems.



( 2 )

Occasionally, I come across something unpleasant, like the cursed crowfoot. If you rub against its fleshy leaves, you get blisters. Centuries ago, beggars would use the plant to cover themselves with blisters so that horrified passersby would give them money. I've only seen this plant here once, luckily far off in the Meadow.

Members of the birding group are the primary observers of birds around Pennswood. I can only look for birds, photograph them, and ask an expert for identification. Teams of residents also regularly check the nesting boxes and tally their findings.

As I face the challenge of winter, I often turn to indoor bouquets and the flowers in the winter greenhouse for my photos. But year round, I prowl the Meadow and courtyards, looking for interesting things to show to those who can't see them: bluebirds uncharacteristically house hunting in late fall; ice patterns in frozen puddles; the destructive spotted lantern fly; pileated woodpeckers. I look for the season's first red-winged blackbird, fawn, butterfly, and swallow. I try to capture a Canada goose repeatedly riding fast water in the Neshaminy Creek or just the beauty of our long summer grasses in the Meadow, bending in wave after wave in the wind.

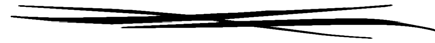


**A MOSAIC THAT IS  
PENNSWOOD**  
by Sally Burkman

A stag, alert in the early morning fog.  
A tiny, tardy bluebird, inspecting a  
bird box—in October?  
Echoes of a noisy volleyball game in  
the pool on Saturday morning . . .  
The peace of a Sunday service in  
Penn Hall . . .  
Pleasant murmurs of conversation in  
Seasons, as residents and staff  
gather for lunch . . .  
New buildings rising to the north,  
obstructing the view of the  
horses . . .  
Trees turning color from the very tip-  
py top, while the twin European  
lindens in the gazebo courtyard  
slowly cover the ground with a  
carpet of their yellowing leaves . . .  
A dog walker, slowly rambling along  
the perimeter road, stopping for  
the dog's needs or to examine  
exploding milkweed pods . . .  
The sparkle of the sun on the foun-  
tains in the Founders Garden . . .  
Pops from noisy guns in the woods, a  
legacy of a gun club founded years  
ago . . .  
Happy voices singing favorite  
Broadway tunes in Penn Hall . . .  
The Neshaminy roaring down below  
after a heavy rain . . .  
A driver carefully helping a resident  
into the front seat—a doctor's visit  
or a trip to the airport?

Beautiful patterns and colors of quilts  
—another exhibit in Passmore  
Lounge, showcasing the interests  
and collections of residents . . .

What might you add?



**THE STORY OF  
THE WALKING STICK  
AND THE BEETLE**  
by David Swain

That Friday was a busy day, judging  
from the view out of apartment  
M-109's windows, which look out  
over the northern drainage ditch and  
sometime pond between Mott and  
Newman and George School's forest.

A few weeks back, huge yellow  
insects, one looking like a gigantic  
beetle, began roaming the drainage  
area, down which ground and rainwa-  
ter periodically flow, narrowed by a  
culvert, into Neshaminy Creek.  
Meanwhile, a large motor with blue  
pipes was sucking up the muddy  
water in the pond backed up by the  
culvert. This sequence of roaming and  
sucking occurred a couple of times,  
maybe three.

The goal appears to be for the huge  
insects to rework and deepen the steep  
slopes and flat bottom of the drainage  
area. Whether to improve the pond or

eliminate it is not clear. Nor do we have a notion of what it might look like when they're done.

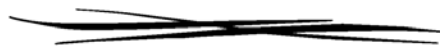


After muddy water from recent rains had been sucked up, the beetle labored back and forth all over the bottomland. Meanwhile, the other huge yellow insect that seems to be a “walking stick” with only one arm lunged its way up the steep side. Upon approaching the road’s wooden guardrails, the insect abruptly turned in place and began long-arm digging on the downhill side. Before long, after busily excavating and piling up dirt all around itself, it had constructed a nice horizontal platform of dirt, up and over which it then clambered, using its two heavy iron tracks, and rested on the top, “king of the castle.”

Later the beetle came and communed with the walking stick on its high

mound. By then, evidently, it was quitting time for the little hard-hatted creatures that had something to do with making the huge insects mobile. Then it rained some more, and by morning, the sucked-up pond was full of muddy water again. But the huge yellow insects didn’t move. They seemed to be holding hands and perhaps had a day off. It was Saturday, after all.

The walking stick decided to express its feelings in writing by printing on its own arm—kind of like tattooing. It finished only one word—DEERE. Maybe the final word would have been BEADLE. Insects aren’t known for their spelling capabilities.



## **DINNERTIME TALK** **by Glenna Follmer**

Our Village Salon beauticians are optimists, despite their daunting tasks.

Some folks raise butterflies in their apartments.

Dogs are supposed to bark only in the Bark Park. Some cheat.

Canvases in our galleries may be artful, but often I just don’t get it.

Non-church-goers rush to Seasons on Sundays at 11:30.

A pallino is larger than a golf ball and smaller than a pimple ball.

The Village has no garbage disposals, a step down from my former kitchen.

The Community Garden excludes deer and groundhogs. But it is home to voles, snakes, and overweight rabbits.

The washer-dryers have their way with my clothes.

Different food servers have quite different ideas about “a serving.”

My refrigerator should have a freezer on the bottom.

Political talk is discouraged—and is not good for digestion, but it’s so-o-o interesting.

We all go nutty over anyone’s visiting grandchildren.



## **SIGHTINGS**

**by Lynne Waymon**

“I barked at him,” says Judy Yaskin, “It seemed like the thing to do when I saw him trotting by on the landscape road.”

“He was about three feet away from me during one of his 5 a.m. visits to

the G courtyard,” reports Nancy Arnold, who reads and meditates just inside her patio door each morning.

“I think he was following Rufus and me,” Diana Deacon says a little nervously. “My dog and I often walked over in the more remote parts of the George School property.”

Have you seen the fox? Or foxes? I’ve seen our Pennswood/George School fox only three times in eight years.

My best sighting was on a snowy morning. I was driving on the entrance road when I saw the fox about ten feet off the road, right near the road to the garden. He was about ready to pounce. Like a guided missile, a fox uses Earth’s magnetic field to hunt. Other animals, like birds, sharks, and turtles, have this “magnetic sense.” But wildlife experts say the fox is the first animal they are sure uses it to catch prey.

“The fox can see Earth’s magnetic field as a ‘ring of shadow’ on its eyes that darkens as it moves toward magnetic north. When the shadow and the sound of prey line up, he knows it’s time to pounce,” says a website called [www.mentalfloss.com](http://www.mentalfloss.com) in an article called “25 Fascinating Facts About Foxes.” And check out the 3-minute video, “Fox Dives Headfirst into the Snow” on [YouTube.com](http://YouTube.com) to see a fox in action.

My pouncing fox, that cold morning, came up out of the snow with a mouthful of breakfast. I couldn't tell if he'd caught a mouse or a rabbit, but something was dangling from his jaws as he trotted back into the Meadow. With his sharp sense of hearing, a fox can hear a mouse squeak from about 150 feet away—even when it's under the snow.

Foxes live a solitary life except when raising their kits. Once their babies are grown, they live in a small family group called a “leash” of foxes or a “skulk” of foxes. (You think those names are odd? A group of pandas is called a “cupboard” of pandas, or a “bamboo” of pandas, or worse yet, an “embarrassment” of pandas. Some say that name comes from the hilarious, clumsy, clown show they put on as they tumble over and over each other in play.)

Each person I interviewed about seeing a fox at Pennswood remarked about its beauty and its distinctive red color. Describing a fox on the move, Judy Yaskin told me, “It looks like it's trotting on glass.” Foxes walk on their toes, which accounts for their elegant, feline-like tread. And they're fast. Some can run up to 42 miles per hour, giving new meaning to the phrase “quick like a fox.”

There's been lots of speculation about where our Pennswood fox's den might

be. It's probably in an area with heavy vegetation. Sometimes foxes dig a tunnel or hole under a tree or large rocks. An underground den may have several entrances and be 50 to 75 feet long. Foxes are good at modifying burrows abandoned by other animals. Except when raising a family, they rarely use a den and like to hunt and sleep alone.

Red foxes usually choose one mate for life. That's right; they're monogamous. From four to eight kits are born in the spring. The kits are blind at first and don't open their eyes until nine or ten days after birth. They stay with the vixen (female) in the den while the dog (male) brings them food. They live with their parents until they're seven months old.

One spring, a few years ago, Susan Haskins (whose parents lived at Pennswood and whose husband taught at George School) tells me she saw the kits playing at the edge of the lacrosse field—several times! Even when the George School kids were out there playing. Kits and kids! She thinks maybe the den was under the big row of forsythia bushes we can see as we drive by on 413.

I read that a red fox weighs between seven and fifteen pounds. That surprised me! Todd and I have two cats that each weigh more than that. As an omnivore, the fox eats from one to

two pounds of food each day—  
insects, eggs, fruits, berries, grasses,  
and small birds and mammals.

Residents aren't the only ones on the  
lookout for the fox. John Washington,  
who is on night duty at the Welcome  
Center booth, says that sometimes the  
fox appears about 2 or 3 a.m.

I'm thankful we share our neighbor-  
hood with the beautiful foxes. And I  
know farmers and gardeners appreci-  
ate their help controlling the rodent  
and rabbit populations. I think Frank  
Lloyd Wright got it right when he  
said, "Study nature, love nature, stay  
close to nature. It will never fail you."

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**ON THE MATTER  
OF NAPPING**  
by John Wood

As I traversed the common room,  
There in the penumbral light of the far  
corner,  
Sat this lone and silent figure,  
Gray head dower bent, mouth agape.  
Nothing moved, nary a hair.  
I was taken aback:  
Was she napping?  
Was she vital?  
or  
Had she passed?  
You see, I had walked this path a  
week ago

And the panorama was the same.  
Nothing had changed.  
It seemed a still life.  
I was set to call The Desk  
When it hit me,  
It was past nap time—  
And I turned for home.  
There are priorities, you know.

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**FICTION**

**THE ENDING AND  
THE BEGINNING OF ME**

by J. B. Means

I don't recall exactly when I began to  
have trouble getting out of a chair, or  
when I first paid attention to it. After a  
few minutes, it's as if I'm becoming  
slowly glued to wherever I'm sitting,  
and all sense of feeling begins to drain  
from the legs: feet first, then my  
ankles, and on up to my hips. Trying  
to stand up—to get out of the chair—  
becomes a dicey process best done in  
stages, lest I topple over. Getting out  
of bed has to be carefully planned,  
because it could lead to the task of  
pulling myself up from the floor.  
Mornings pose the greatest challenge.  
Slow and easy does it, usually.

Is this the sort of thing for which a  
doctor's appointment is appropriate?  
My doctors—great practitioners of the  
healing arts—tolerate my plea for  
renewed youth with thinly-veiled

boredom, reminding me that “I’m not as young as I used to be.” For such keen insights, Medicare pays \$67.32. “You’re getting older,” the doctor said, almost robotically, as if speaking to no one in particular. “Your metabolism is changing; it’s nothing new. All those years of rich foods, too much sun, the good life . . .” The walls, chalky white and edgeless, seemed to be closing in around me as he spoke. “No matter how much you do, there’s always more you haven’t done,” the doctor continued. “Decades of inattention and inaction incubate in the brain and cloud your senses. By the time you start to understand who you are or what you’ve accomplished, that person is already gone. It’s happening to everybody.” The doctor scribbled a couple of prescriptions for some pills in the morning, others at bedtime. Without the slightest sense of irony, he told me to rest more. His voice trailed off hesitantly, and he became silent for no apparent reason except, perhaps, because our time was up.

I have always been conscientious about following doctors’ orders, but the pills didn’t help. At night, when I returned home and tried to relax, I began to pay attention to my breathing and heartbeat. For some reason, this never happened at work. During those hours, I would have been just as glad not to move a muscle. It was only when my time belonged to me

that my body decided doing *nothing* was better than doing *something*.

Soon, it wasn’t just the feet or the legs. It seemed that blood was collecting in my chest, my shoulders, my face, pushing into my skull. The more I tried not to let it bother me, to think of happier things, the more deeply into my body it would reach. As long as I kept moving, I could keep my mind clear, though an awareness of my aging self emerged even when standing too long in the same place.

So, I did my best to keep myself busy—doing crosswords or sudoku, drinking coffee, ingesting more pills. Still, bending over to pick up the newspaper or putting on shoes was becoming an ever-greater challenge. Reading a book, a real book-length book, which once was so pleasurable, had now become an almost insurmountable challenge to the eyes if not also to the brain.

Over time, I seemed to have less and less control over what I was doing. I would find myself eating food that I didn’t want to eat and watching TV programs that I didn’t want to see, even going places while fully aware that I would much rather have been almost anywhere else. I was becoming a victim of circumstance, living the life that someone else didn’t want. Well-meaning friends would tell me



to “just be yourself” and other similarly fatuous advice.

Quite apart from my advancing cataracts, waves of color like rainbow clouds would fill my vision, obscuring those parts of the world that I no longer wished to see. With ever-increasing harmonic intensity, beautiful but completely unrecognizable music obscured sounds and speech that I no longer wanted to hear. Perhaps, in an elliptical sort of way, I was becoming able to “be myself” in a condensed form.

Although usually talkative though not necessarily intelligent, my voice slowly began to fail me, not saying what I meant to say in the way I intended. It became increasingly difficult to remember where I had just been not ten minutes ago, in which room and for what purpose. And why do I find myself standing here now?

I recalled the distant past with stunning clarity, or was it merely the memory of a lifetime of dreams? Recollections of my past are not dimmed by the passing of the years, but are the memories real? Yes, without question the memories are all quite real, though not necessarily accurate in any literal sense. All human memories are said to be an evolving combination of illusion and reality, so perhaps we would be well advised to let it go at that.

Is it important to know how many years one has been alive, or how many of those years are remembered? If my nightmarish memories were real, I wonder how I managed to escape. In the here-and-now, I could mount no defense against the invasions and disasters that seem to have shaped my past. So I did what I always do and made another appointment to see my doctor for his next available date, two weeks from Thursday.

As I waited, whole days would pass in a flash. The passing of time didn't seem to be working right. What felt like a minute would be, by the clock, half the morning. Worse, days of the week shifted randomly whenever I gave in to inertia. The length of time I could keep moving grew ever shorter, slowly closing the window on what I could cram into a day.

Gaps began to occur in my understanding of how I got from one activity to the next. I would be standing at the mirror in my bathroom and then find myself tending to the lawn with no requisite segue. Once, I found myself in the cellar for no apparent reason. Bruises appeared on my arms and shins. I would make foolish purchases of things I could barely identify: a rolling pin, for instance. Sometimes, meandering slowly through a store, I would encounter people

speaking among themselves (never to me) in unidentifiable languages.

At this point, I decided it was essential that I write down what was happening, but the words that sprang from this effort did not represent what I meant—as if the words I was writing reflected someone else’s experiences. Or had I become the “someone else”?

Now, when night falls and I lie down, it is with the whispered awareness that *past* and *present* have merged. When the last discernible difference between who I *was* and who I *am* has vanished, would I care enough to notice? Would anybody?



## WRITE YOUR LOVE STORY

Write—only 100 words—a story about someone or something that you love—your first car, beloved cat, favorite friend. Our February issue will celebrate Valentine's Day with “Little Love Stories.” Submit yours by Thursday, February 2 (note the extended deadline) to Anne Baber: ([AnneBaber38@gmail.com](mailto:AnneBaber38@gmail.com)).

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