

Conservation Corner

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To begin, I'd like to thank everyone who helped us celebrate Luke & Lindsey's wedding over Memorial Day weekend. It was a special time with family and friends. This week, in lieu of wedding cake, I'd like to serve you an assortment of colorful tidbits that have been in the news recently – planets, wasps, and frogs.

During twilight hours, Planet Mars is shining brightly in the southeastern sky as its orbit passes close to Earth. Perhaps you've noticed its gradual increase in size and brightness over the past few months. On May 30, as the red planet came within 46.8 million miles of Earth, it appeared three times bigger and brighter than at the year's beginning. I encourage everyone to gaze at this celestial treat before it melts.

The dreaded Emerald Ash Borer is also on the horizon. As most of you know, scientists and conservationists have been preparing for the devastation left in the wake of EAB. Here in Iowa, the lives of 55 million ash trees are at stake. Now beneficial insects have joined the fight. During the month of June, several thousand stingless, parasitic wasps will be released at the Whitham Woods near Fairfield in Jefferson County.

Mike Kintner of the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship stresses that "The use of bio-control will not be a 'silver bullet' for the problems we face with EAB, but the natural enemies will serve as a long-term management strategy to lessen the impact of EAB." The two species of female wasps being released in Iowa parasitize the egg and larval stages of EAB before they can hatch into adults. *Tetrastichus planipennisi* are the size of rice grains and lay their eggs inside EAB larvae. *Oobius agrili* are the size of gnats and lay their eggs inside EAB eggs. To date these natural enemies of EAB have been released in 23 of the 25 states now infested with EAB.

The final tidbit is actually a tasty delicacy, although hopefully not these particular specimens. Last week the naturalist from Wapello County posted a photo on the listserve of a bullfrog found in a local pond. Not so unusual, you might be thinking, except for its color – bright blue! If you haven't seen a blue bullfrog, don't feel too bad. They are very rare, only occurring literally once in a million.

How and why blue? Frogs are covered with several strata of skin cells. The bottom layer reflects back blue light which is then filtered through a layer of yellow pigments resulting in a frog's normal greenish color. A rare mutation prevents these frogs from forming the yellow pigment. As a result, when the frog attempts to adjust its skin shade to match its environment, it changes to bright blue instead of green. While the blue color is gorgeous, its high visibility results in very few of these frogs actually surviving past the tadpole stage.

I'll close by paraphrasing an old saying: Once in a red Mars, once in a green EAB, once in a blue frog!

