

Conservation Corner

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Where were you during the Great American Eclipse? Hopefully someplace sunny! Or at least, as was the case throughout much of Pocahontas County, in a spot where the cloud cover broke just enough to give glimpses of sunlight and shadow. I especially enjoyed watching the 5-inch crescent eclipse shadows flicker across the sidewalk as the sunlight filtered down through the branches of a locust tree.

Later in the week, a neighbor asked for help in identifying a tree in her yard. Each year it produces several green, husked nuts that the squirrels soon run off with. Its most easily recognized feature, though, is its namesake shaggy bark. Did you know Indiana bats roost under the long, peeling strips of bark?

And so this week's plant friend will be *Carya ovata*, commonly called shagbark hickory. A member of the walnut family, shagbark hickories grow throughout the eastern United States on upland mesic-dry habitat. Hickory trees are monoecious with male catkins and female flowers on the same tree. Their compound leaves have fine, saw-tooth hairy margins. Its fruit is a drupe 1 to 1.5 inches in diameter with a hard, bony nutshell hidden within a thick, green, 4-sectioned husk.

Shagbark hickories are large, long-lived trees, growing over 100 feet in height and surviving 200 to 300 years. The strength and straightness of the hickory gave our 7th President, Andrew Jackson, his nickname Old Hickory. Shagbark hickories held an important place in pioneer life as they gave bushels of sweet-kerneled nuts, cords of perfect firewood, tough durable hoe handles, and served as the primary fuel for the smokehouse curing of meats. Hickory wood is still used for smoking meat, especially bacon; while the tough hickory lumber is still used for making axles, axe handles, ploughs, skis, and drum sticks.

Algonquian Indians depended on hickory nuts as an important food source. In fact, the name hickory comes from the Algonquian word *pawcohiccora*. Shagbark hickory trees are slow to mature, taking half a century or more before they bear fruit, and then only produce a good crop every 3-5 years. The sweet nuts are also eaten by squirrels, racoons, chipmunks, mice, black bears, foxes, rabbits, wood ducks, bobwhites, and wild turkeys.

Pocahontas County is also home to *Carya cordiformis* or bitternut hickory, the most widely distributed hickory in the Midwest. Their golden, compound leaflets make these trees easy to spot in the fall. You can find them at White Tail Ridge and Sunken Grove. Unlike shagbarks, bitternut hickories grow in moist soils along rivers and are sometimes called swamp hickories. Like shagbarks, the bitternut hickory is also a large tree with a straight trunk and hardy wood. While not as strong as other hickory woods, it is good for smoking hams. Alas, its nuts are so bitter even the squirrels won't eat them.

I'll close with a familiar nursery rhyme.

Hickory, Dickory, Dock.
The mouse ran up the clock.
The clock struck one.
The mouse ran down.
Hickory, Dickory, Dock.

