

Conservation Corner

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Last week, county naturalists from around the state met at the Hartman Reserve Nature Center in Cedar Falls for the IAN Fall Workshop hosted by Black Hawk County Conservation. As always, it was fun to connect with friends and peers while gaining new knowledge and insight of our natural world. Today I'd like to share my encounter with three diverse topics – plant dyes, lichens, and insect collections.

The first workshop of the day, "Connecting Self and Place Through Local, Natural Color," was led by UNI Art Professor Angela Waseskuk. As Hartman Reserve's 2018 Artist in Residence, Angela has processed plant materials collected along the Cedar River to create natural dyes. The resulting silk fabric sculpture representing the Korean color wheel of red, blue, yellow, white and black helped Angela re-connect to her birth country right here in her adopted home of Iowa.

The last workshop of the day was led by Dr. Kirk Larsen, Professor of Biology and Entomology at Luther College. He presented guidelines for donated insect collections as well as tips on how to prepare and identify butterflies and other insects to create our own collections. Many scientists started their careers by collecting insects, including Charles Darwin who collected and identified beetles as a young boy.

In between plant colorings and butterfly pinnings, I learned more about lichens from John Pearson, Iowa DNR Ecologist. In the morning workshop, Pearson shared his wonderful pictures and introduced us to the unique biology of the 500 lichens found in Iowa. Like me, I'm sure many of you were taught that lichens consist of fungi (structure) and algae (photosynthesis) that have literally taken a likin' to each other, enabling them to grow in places they couldn't separately. But now, thanks to recent DNA studies, we have learned that many lichens also contain a third symbiotic component, yeast, that helps ward off predators and repel microbes.

After lunch, John led us on a walk through the wooded grounds of the reserve. While cold, it was still the best part of the day as we looked through magnifying glasses to glimpse a world I hadn't really considered before. After all, every tree in Iowa is home to lichens, and it's not uncommon to find 5 to 6 different lichens on a single square inch of bark and as many as 25-30 species on a single tree. Even the names are nifty – Green Whiskered Shadow, Birds Nest and Lacy Lemon Sunburst, Sidewalk Firedot, Brown Cobblestone, and the punctuation lichens to name just a few.

Just a reminder that everyone is invited to the Pocahontas Art Walk this coming Saturday, November 24. Join Conservation from 10:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. at the ISU Extension Office on Main Street where this year's Make & Take Workshop will feature wheat weaving and straw tying.

In closing, we encourage everyone to pause this Thanksgiving season and give thanks for the many miracles and mysteries of nature, including the lichens, we experience and enjoy each day.

