Wandering the Woods with Matt

"Restoration Rollercoaster"

An update on native plants observed May 2022

at Pomeroy Nature Preserve

As I've mentioned before, restoration is not for those seeking immediate gratification. Sometimes it takes years or even longer to achieve a successful outcome, with many rollercoaster-like ups and downs along the way.

About a year ago, in early May 2021, I experienced one of the rollercoaster lows when I visited the Pomeroy Nature Preserve to check on the results of our invasive species removal efforts in an area with high spring ephemeral wildflower abundance and diversity. You can read the whole story here, but the short version is that 1) volunteers and I successfully removed a lot of barberry, multiflora rose, privet and other invasive shrub species; 2) trillium and other native wildflowers responded to the newfound cleared space by growing vigorously; and then 3) with invasive shrubs out of the way, white-tailed deer responded by entering the now-cleared space and consuming the trillium plants voraciously. The upshot was that I questioned whether our efforts had actually made things worse and the plan was to fence the area to protect vulnerable species from deer browse.

So it was with a substantial amount of trepidation that I ventured to the restoration area at Pomeroy about a week ago. Would our modest fencing be sufficient to deter deer? Would the trillium (which is a perennial species and should be able to tolerate heavy browsing some years) return? Was this going to be an up or down moment on the restoration roller-coaster?

I'm happy to report that the answers to those questions are yes, definitively yes, and up. Last year the deer ate all the trillium I could find in the restoration area. [When we moved barberry brush piles to create barriers around the fencing, I did uncover

two flowering trillium plants that had escaped being browsed.] On my count this year, I found 65 stems of trillium, including ten that were flowering. And not just trillium; cut-leaved toothwort, spring beauty, and other wildflowers seemed prolific in the restoration area in general.

I was interested to find that the browse (deer browse, I assume) on herbaceous plants that I found in the restoration area seemed to be mainly on invasive garlic mustard, which is generally considered not to be favored by deer. Here's how I make sense of that. Deer don't know the scientific names of plants. They try something and if they like it, they'll seek out more of it and if they don't like it, they'll go somewhere else where they can find plants that taste good to them. Because garlic mustard is a relatively tall and conspicuous plant--and, despite my and volunteers' best efforts, still a common plant growing at Pomeroy--the deer found some of those garlic mustard plants, sampled them, generally didn't like them and went on their way to greener pastures. Dame's rocket, which is also a prominent invasive plant, and even more abundant than garlic mustard in the restoration area at Pomeroy, was not browsed at all. Maybe it's too hairy for deer?

Because our restoration project isn't designed as a scientific experiment, it's hard to say exactly why the trillium came back so strongly. Maybe it's just been a great year for trillium. I do seem to be noticing more of it at our other PHLT preserves where it occurs (the Learn Preserve, elsewhere at Pomeroy, and several of our conservation easements). Maybe deer just weren't as hungry this year. Maybe the relatively cold spring delayed the emergence of trillium enough so that other plants were up and shielded the trillium from deer.

Whatever the reason, I'm glad to see the trillium rebound. In the ecological restoration business, the results aren't always so obvious and immediate, so I've learned to savor and celebrate our successes!

Ephemeral wildflowers are best viewed from April to June.

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Left: Cut leaved toothwort is most prominent in the photo. But also present are dicentra sp. (either dutchmen's breeches or squirrel corn), spring beauty, wild ginger, and trout lily. A nice mix of five spring ephemeral wildflowers!

Right: Two healthy stems of trillium growing next to the dead remains of invasive Japanese barberry plants (on the left). Also in this photo: false mermaidweed, white wood aster, a few sedges (carex sp.), enchanter's nightshade and virginia creeper.

Below: deer exclosure area with fence visible in the back, right and left edges of photo.