

**St. Charles Park District  
Nature News – June 26**

Most days, it just doesn't seem like there's enough time to get everything done. Get up, make the coffee, eat breakfast, get dressed, and then it's off to the races—phone calls, meetings, errands, appointments... It's a wonder how you get everything done, huh?

Well, if you think you've got it rough, consider the life of the mayfly.

These famously short-lived insects typically live their entire adult life phase over the course of a day, maybe two or three days if their energy stores are large. (Having done all their eating as aquatic nymphs, the airborne adults lack functional mouthparts and do not feed.) In that brief 24 to 72-hour stretch, they need to emerge from the aquatic habitat where they spent their youth (a comparatively long life stage of a year or more), shed their exoskeleton, fly a short distance, avoid predators, shed again, join a mating swarm, then find a mate and create the next generation. Even under the best conditions, death inevitably is the final item on the day's to-do list; it's also the reason the name of this insect's order, *Ephemeroptera*, can be traced to the same Greek root as our word ephemeral.



So why, do you suppose, do we have all this info on mayflies? Because if you head down by the Fox River in St. Charles right now, you're likely to encounter one. Or a some. Or maybe a ton.

Mayflies, for the most part, experience what's called synchronized hatching. All the immature mayflies living in the water develop at about the same rate and emerge at about the same time. The

system ensures that matings occur in roughly the same time period, thus ensuring that the cycle perpetuates in years to come.

Here at Pottawatomie, we had our own up-close encounter with mayflies on Thursday. I'd come back to the community center after doing a program, and happened to notice an insect struggling in a defunct spider web. Since I'd just finished teaching a bug program, I figured it was my civic, and maybe moral, duty to pull the little critter from the web, clean it up and sent it on its way.

What I didn't realize, however, was that "on its way" to this particular mayfly meant flying around my left side and landing squarely between my shoulder blades. Back in the office, it took Lauren, my office mate, about 3 seconds to point this out.

Back outside we went (stopping briefly by the Pottawatomie front desk where the staff, oddly enough, didn't share our enthusiasm for this most transient of creatures) only to find dozens, maybe even a hundred or more mayflies of the same species, literally hanging out on the side of the building. What luck!

A bug jar, a loupe and a camera were quickly procured. A few photos later and I was back at my desk with a copy of my favorite bug book, *Aquatic Entomology* by Patrick McCafferty, opened to the Ephemeroptera chapter. I'm no expert, but we did manage to rule out several mayfly families and settle on *Ephemeridae*, and perhaps the genus *Hexagenia*.

As mayflies go, these guys are large, over an inch in length, not including their two long, trailing tails. Unlike the mosquitoes, midges, caddisflies and other flying creatures that emerge from the Fox River and make a small splat on your windshield, these insects can make the sort of splatter that requires washer fluid and several swipes with the wipers.

Although most humans (fly fisherpersons excepted) may not be too excited about the mayfly hatch, our local fauna probably are tickled pink—especially insect-eating birds like swallows, swifts and purple martins. Look for them to be out in force too this weekend, snapping up the bounty that all too quickly will be gone.

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Speaking of birds...Remember a few months ago, when we predicted an increase in male red-winged blackbird activity would occur around the end of June? Well, guess what? They've begun acting up, right on schedule. Andrew, a member of our park safety team, told me on Wednesday he got bonked on the back of the head by a determinedly territorial RWB on the Fox River Trail at Les Arends Forest Preserve in Batavia.

Watch out for these guys—the RWBs, not park safety—for the next couple of weeks. They're quite busy right now defending their multiple nests, mates and fledglings. The commotion should die down by early to mid July, once the young are raised and off on their own. Until then, though, don't be surprised if your peaceful walk near a stream or wetland is punctuated with thwacks from a resident redwing. Heads up!

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