

## Small Places.

by Conrad Vispo

*In these flecks of sunlight, lives  
declare themselves.*

*That fly  
hawks from its rock with all the determination of a stockbroker,  
pressing the day with Dipteran machismo  
meant to amass genetic fortune.*

*Or, perhaps,  
it's naught but whimsy;  
a little ditty,  
showing none but the sun  
what life can do.*

It was easy to walk by. A small, low patch of white violets. Smaller and lower than most of the whitish violets that one sees around, but these distinguishing characteristics tended to hide rather than highlight them. A flat, grey stone jutted out of the violets like an iceberg adrift in a floral sea. Only the sun, filtering through a Spring canopy, drew attention to the spot.

Pausing for a moment, one became aware of the life darting about: bees, wasps and flies visiting the violets for their own sustenance, and, in the case of the bees, to provision their young; a forest flea beetle paused on its way somewhere – all modest creatures when compared to larger and more dramatic kin such as bumblebees, horse flies and June Beetles.

Northern White Violet, *Viola macloskeyi* of botanists, is neither unusual nor common in these parts. As was its condition here, it particularly likes somewhat sunny but moist patches, where it forms dense clusters. When flower maturity and weather happily conspire, as they did on this day, those clusters become insect magnates.

Tallying pollinators is a sweet obsession and drew me to look closer. If you try to document pollinators with a macro lens, then this becomes a miniature tiger hunt as one bends, pounces, and stretches in order to get good angles without crushing the intervening flowers.

What at first appears, from size and fuzziness, to be a worker bumblebee is, in fact, a different native bee, *Andrena milwaukeensis*, a generally northern species, who, in Spring and early Summer, is apparently widespread but rarely abundant up and down the Appalachians. Unlike some of its close relatives, this species is evidently broad-minded in its choice of pollen: elsewhere this season, we have seen it on apples and dandelions. It is one of our many ground-nesting bees, gathering pollen and nectar to make buried nursery balls which get 'inoculated' with eggs. Unlike the highly social Honey Bee, each female of this species is her own 'queen' bee, responsible after mating for propagating part of the next generation, unaided by her kin. Why this species is larger and more orange than others of its genus, we

don't know. Surely something in its lifestyle would give us clues, but we know little more about its life than what can be garnered in passing.

There is more going on here. That wasp-like bee with the red abdomen looks wasp-like in part because it is, relatively speaking, hairless. Unlike the *Andrena* bee, a visit to a generous flower does not leave it decked in yellow or white pollen. In fact, although its young do eat pollen, it does not collect pollen at all. Instead, it relies upon others to do that work. This is a Cuckoo Bee, so named, because, like the Cuckoo bird, it lays its eggs in others' nests. These bees of the aptly-named *Nomada* genus wander the forest, homing in on the nesting activities of other bees like our *Andrena* and then darting in and laying their egg on the buried ball of pollen provisions. When the *Nomada* larva hatches, it kills the egg or larva of its host and consumes the stores.

There are other little lives here – a water snipe fly who has made that iceberg of a rock its perch about which, for reasons unknown, its life currently revolves; perhaps, a camouflaged crab spider poised in a blossom, ready to grasp a flower visitor; down in the duff unseen ants, ground beetles, springtails, and a microscopic menagerie. In some ways, there is nothing going on here: none of these creatures are particularly rare or exotic species; none of these relationships bear direct, obvious connection to our own well being; nothing, in short, which one might immediately despair at having walked by. Nothing more or less than life's age-old everyday habits, whose inconspicuousness is both a boon (for they irritate almost no one) and a bane (almost no one notices when they're gone).