

# Naturalist's Notebook

by Carl Kurtz



**Love birds:** Animal interrelationships are always mysterious. It's rare to have a ringside seat to their bonding; however, you may have seen pair-bonding in cardinals when male birds offer food to the female. Here, a female American goldfinch offers food to the male, who behaves like a fledging being fed by his parents. Mating followed this activity. Goldfinches are late nesters, usually beginning after the end of July. They may still have young in the nest in September. Shrubs or tall vegetation such as thistles hold their very tight cup-shaped nests that are lined with thistle down.

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**Summer storms:** Cumulonimbus clouds of sometimes epic proportions form when cold fronts and warm, moist air collide. The tops of these clouds can reach 60,000 feet, or 12 miles, and be visible from more than 100 miles away. While they may spawn violent weather, they generally bring rain when it is desperately needed to help fill the seeds of prairie, woods and farm.

When you are beneath these clouds, as we were here, you can see the wind currents in the billows. Weather reports indicated that this line of thunderstorms stretched for more than 100 miles in a northwest-southeast direction.



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**Migrating monarchs:** Watch for monarch butterflies in September and October as they pause on their way to Mexico and Central America. You'll see them roosting for the night in the low limbs of trees. In natural areas where there is suitable habitat they feed on goldenrods and late-summer sunflowers. After a small group has settled on a roost site, each new arrival elicits a response from the others as it settles in. Often this wing-fluttering action appears to travel across the group, then quickly settles down until the next newcomer arrives.

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**The bee's knees:** It was a good day for this hard-working bumblebee, judging from the bulging load of pollen on its legs gathered from a patch of purple prairie clover (*Dalea purpurea*). Our friend James Trager points out that the bee packs the pollen into the pollen brushes, or scopae, on its hind legs. It mixes the pollen with a small amount of nectar to stick it together.

A perennial legume, purple prairie clover is a wonderful plant that seems to spread over time in the prairie community. Individual plants also increase in size. They start out with a single stem and in a dozen years may have a dozen or more stems on each plant. They become a dazzling bouquet.

### Follow his call:

Amphibians are aquatic canaries. Their presence or absence appears to reflect the quality of wetland environments. The protective coloration of the gray treefrog (*Hyla versicolor*) and its small size, about 2 inches, make them very difficult to locate unless you know the trill of its bird-like call. Careful searching of trees, shrubs and building exteriors can lead you to this elusive animal. To hear its call, go to: <http://www.zo.utexas.edu/research/txherps/frogs/calls.html>



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