

THE GREAT OUTDOORS



The violet/ink bracts or leaves of horsemint are often more showy than the flowers. Photo by: J. Morton Galetto.

No Bluffing...

There really is horsemint at the Maurice River Bluffs Preserve, and it's a welcome surprise to hikers.

By J. Morton Galetto, CU Maurice River

In mid-September I was leading a walk at the Nature Conservancy's Maurice River Bluffs Preserve in Millville. The orange loop trail is especially interesting, with small hilly spots that create variety when contrasted with our flat coastal plain terrain. This topography allows you to see into the center of some tree tops, which is helpful for birding. Where the trail meets the tidal wetlands of the Maurice River, the 20' views from the bank are especially nice.



The views from the Maurice River Bluffs 30-foot banks are spectacular in all seasons. Photo: J. Morton Galetto.

The 400-acre Bluffs Preserve also offers taller elevations (30-35 feet) with an eagle's eye view of the river (the east side of the river has an additional 100 acres or so). The topography is the result of sand mining excavations that predate the site's preservation. There are 5.2 miles of trails to

walk and a 6-mile mountain bike path. The orange trail is a little less than a mile but is accessed by a portion of a blue trail, so probably about a mile of trekking. The coastal bluffs are a natural feature caused by glaciation.



Black gum trees are already turning red at the Maurice River Bluffs Preserve's wetland cove. Photo: J. Morton Galetto.

The preserve's habitats include vernal pools, with one large one near Silver Run Rd. along the red trail. There is hardwood swamp and plenty of upland forest for walking. Two tidal marsh coves can be viewed, one from the south leg of the white trail and the other from the orange trail we trekked. The trail heads are accessible from Silver Run Road 2.5 miles south of Millville's center.

The Nature Conservancy provides a great map for orienting you to your options. I always recommend taking a picture of trail signage on your phone before starting off. It can be a great reference tool. If you use trail applications on your phone, in some areas reception can be spotty or even nonexistent. Taking snapshots of the application or of signage may keep you informed as to your location. The preserve's trails are well-blazed; a friends group helps in maintenance and litter collection. In addition, a number of people report wildlife sightings to Damon Noe, Critical Lands Manager of the preserve.

On the return loop the bright purplish-pink bracts of horsemint caught my eye. My companions seemed as awed as I was to see this splash of color in the knee-high grasses. I mentioned that its bracts are like the leaves of a poinsettia, offering more color than the true flower.

These leaves whorl around the stem extending outward, providing a platform for the rosettes of flower clusters perched above. The tubular flowers are creamy yellow and spotted, inspiring other common names for the plant such as spotted horsemint or spotted beebalm. In the mint family, the plant's scientific name is *monarda punctata*. The rosettes can stack; bracts – rosettes; bracts – rosettes, giving a storied appearance. The resulting effect can be quite striking.



Perched on bracts, flower clusters ascend up the stalk of horsemint. Photo: Longmiller Collection.

The perennial herb is aromatic and often compared to oregano. The mint or lamiaceae family also includes thyme, basil, rosemary, and - not surprising - oregano. Many lamiaceae produce a chemical compound called thymol, recognized as having antiseptic and anesthetic properties.

Today thymol is produced synthetically but it was once extracted from thyme. "During World War I, commercial thyme fields were destroyed in Europe and *monarda punctata* was grown in the United States as a substitute source of thymol." (Foster/Duke).

The indigenous people of North America used horsemint leaf tea for treatment of numerous maladies: colds, fevers, flu, stomach cramps, coughs, bowel ailments, and headaches. Tribes utilizing horsemint included the Meskwaki, Delaware, Mohegan, and Nanticoke. "*Historically, doctors used this mint as a carminative, stimulant, digestive, and diuretic, and to regulate menses,*" (Foster/Duke).

The EPA discusses its many purposes including as a pesticide: "*Thymol is an active ingredient in pesticide products registered for use as animal repellents, fungicides/fungistats, medical disinfectants, tuberculocides, and virucides. These*

products are used on a variety of indoor and outdoor sites, to control target pests including animal pathogenic bacteria and fungi, several viruses including HIV-I, and birds, squirrels, beavers, rats, mice, dogs, cats and deer. Products are liquids applied by spray, mop, brush-on, wipe-on dip, aerosol, immersion, and spot treatment. Thymol also has many non-pesticidal uses, including use in perfumes, food flavorings, mouthwashes, pharmaceutical preparations, and cosmetics."



Upon closer inspection the cluster tubular flower rosettes are visible between bracts on horsemint. The spotted lobes inspire the common name, spotted horsemint. Photo: Wildflower Center Digital Library, RW Smith.

The plant stands 11" to 39" tall. The hairy leaves are lanceolate – referring to their narrow oblong *lance-like* shape. Like other mints the stems are square. The upper lip of the flower is narrower than the broad lower lip, similar to a lobelia plant in that it has two distinctive rims. These blooms are summer flowers and the bracts are as eye catching as the blossoms. They are still on view in autumn.

The plant is a great pollinator, a native species which many gardeners have begun to grow, and it attracts both bees and hummingbirds. I'm seeing it utilized more frequently in wildlife management settings. The United States Department of Agriculture and Natural Resource / Natural Resource Conservation Service's Plant Guide fact sheet details propagation of its seed should you be interested in adding it to your landscape.

The plant is broadly distributed in the eastern half of North America (east of the Mississippi) extending into Texas, Oklahoma, New Mexico, and Kansas. It also grows in California.

I didn't know the Bluffs Preserve's grounds had horsemint and it was a lovely little surprise. One of the nicest things about visiting our many local preserves is that you never know what you might see or who you

might bump into. On a prior visit we saw flying squirrels, which is a rarity during the day. Their antics gave us some giggles.

Sources

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Eastern/Central Medicinal Plants, S. Foster and J. Duke 1990, Peterson Field Guides.

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EPA R.E.D. Facts – Thymol, factsheet EPA-738-F-93-100, September 1993 (R.E.D. = Reregistration Eligibility Decision)