

village view

by Andrea Leonard

A cricket sings the last of its chorus of songs as hot noons give way to evenings with a nip in the air.

Just outside the doorway, under the edge of the roof where the fascia board of the house trim meets the top of the window casing, there's been a death struggle going on.

'Twas one of the rare sunny days in late July, a hot and humid afternoon, I first noticed the activity. A swarm of bees had apparently found its way into a recess behind the trim, and there had established a new home. On close inspection (but not too close), I concluded the little buzzing creatures were wild honey bees.

After debating the merits of attempting to get rid of them, and weighing the chances of arousing their animosity, I decided to let them alone until cold weather; an inspection of the attic showed no sign of them having penetrated to the interior of the house. They seemed to be doing no great harm; perhaps if I let nature take its course, the problem, if it were a problem, would solve itself.

At various times since, I've observed the comings and goings of the bees. A week ago I became aware of a sudden increase in the number of yellow jackets around the place. A common occurrence in September, I reminded myself, there are always lots of hornets around in late summer.

Then I checked my uninvited guests; no longer did they resemble honey bees. They had become hornets. What happened? I'm uncertain whether the more aggressive hornets pre-empted the home of the original colony, or the bees I identified as honeybees were actually immature hornets. In any event, the insects now busily leaving and entering at the edge of the fascia board were definitely yellow jackets.

Still, they weren't bothersome; although the house door opens less than six feet from their portal, no hornet attempted to invade the part of the building I occupy, nor was I threatened as I went in and out of the house. Once more I chose to let well enough alone.

My decision was born of caution, not courage; an angry horde of hornets is a formidable adversary.

As I stepped outdoors yesterday, however, a buzzing sound above my head attracted my attention. There, caught firmly, was a still-struggling colonist. And entirely covering the area the bees had used all summer to come and go on their endless errands was a silvery scarf of spider web. As I watched, a large and obviously well-fed spider rushed from a corner of its web, approached the enmeshed victim, tested its remaining vigor with a tentative foreleg, then retreated again to its corner.

Again and again, as the hornet's efforts to break through the web slowly sapped its energy, the spider darted out and scurried back. Peering up at the almost silent duel, I could see the yellow jacket was all but finished; there was also dessicated remains of a dozen or more of his brethren enshrouded in the spider's mesh.

The sky overhead was as blue as it had been on the July day I first noticed I no longer lived alone in the house. The sun blazed warmly, sprinkling shafts of light through the still-green leaves canopying low understory plants.

Crows and blue jays traded insults in the woodland behind the house and a chickadee's cheery notes reminded me to refill the bird bath. Beneath the carpet of oak leaves and pine needles, crickets shrilly reported the temperature. Pale coral leaves from the pin cherry growing near the stip drifted noiselessly to the earth, foretelling summer's end.

Overhead a seagull soared, perhaps on a flight to the pond for a sip of fresh water. A dusty brown moth, its antenna broad and feathery, flitted from blossom to blossom where the wild asters opened starlike petals to welcome fall with golden eyes. The gull wailed plaintively, mourning summer.

A fresh southwest breeze set the oak leaves arustle, almost drowning the faint humming buzzing sounds of the hornet. The sighs of the wind continued as those of the insect faded to silence. Again the spider tested its victim's vitality, and now found its mark. With a pounce it trussed the hornet to immobility.

Today the spider sulks in its corner. No winged insects venture forth from under the trim. The battle is over; the war is done. Spider must go elsewhere for its prey for the creatures that gave me pause have been no match for the web that's closed their door.

Now the dogwood leaves show scarlet, and the lacy blossoms of Queen Ann's lace fold like birds' nests, no longer floating like doilies on summer airs. Now the bayberry sports clusters of waxy gray fruit along its stems.

Now, on a sprig of horsebriar, three sluggish caterpillars creep along the bare stem. Their bellies are yellow and their backs white, marked with a screening of black lines as fine and delicate as silken threads. They have shiny jet black noses and on their tail ends, also jet black, gleam a triple row of pure white dots like tail lights.

Perhaps these will be spider-fodder before darkness falls or frost takes their lives in its bitter grip. Or perhaps before either of those fates befalls, the caterpillars will have spun their own cocoons, tough brittle casings where they can metamorphose over winter, safe from storms and marauding spiders.

Even as I turn away, a flutter of motion bids me look again at the spot where the caterpillars clung. They've vanished. A swamp sparrow flits through the foliage and hides itself from view behind spikey goldenrod's nodding plumes.

Here, even here in this peaceful dooryard, life comes and goes, starts and stops, often with rapacious suddenness, nearly always without a sound.

Will that swamp sparrow be taken by a cat? Will its nestlings be pushed aside by a cowbird's greedy offspring? Will winter plumage save it from freezing during the bitter months ahead? Where will it find beetles and caterpillars when winter sets in? Or will it have migrated to warmer climes by then? Will it survive the journey south?

Before a sharp-eyed woodpecker makes a meal of it, will the spider mate and deposit its sack of eggs in some dusty corner?

Have the hornets or the honeybees left a sticky sweet legacy to feed the young that may, even now, be swelling ever so slightly in a nest or comb secreted behind the trim above the window frame?

Each living wild thing outside my door is completing its life-cycle as autumn's crisp evenings warn of coming icy blasts. It's a do-or-die existence as shortening days of Indian Summer slowly close the doors upon another year.

How still it is when I wake in pre-dawn hours! No bird-song fills my ears. Only the cricket chirps, a hesitant intermittent shrilling, for the fellow's chilled.

Soon there'll come a morning when even the cricket is still!