

Hikers, Hunters, Stinky Socks and Wild Raisins

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Hunters, hikers and others who traipse through the autumn woods have probably all been accosted at one time or other by a pungent odor akin to a rank locker room or an overripe laundry basket. Oftentimes this happens in or near a wetland, and the smell is strongest when the sun first hits.

The culprit is one or more of the many native shrubs and small trees in the genus *Viburnum* such as wild raisin, arrow wood and nannyberry. These humble plants are found throughout in the North Country in fencerows, old pastures, forest edges, and especially in wetlands. They provide essential cover and nesting habitat for songbirds, and in late summer they bear sweet berries that are relished by birds and outdoor enthusiasts alike. Many viburnum species are sold commercially, and make attractive landscape specimens with their copious spring flowers, and berries which attract wildlife.

When viburnum leaves break down they give off butyric acid, a noxious chemical that in its pure, lab-made form is listed by the US EPA as a toxic substance. Its smell has been likened to rancid milk, stinky feet and extreme body odor. Aside from a few industrial uses, butyric acid is added to some carp-fishing bait and has been found in homemade stink bombs deployed by pranksters and activists. Incidentally, it's also an ingredient in rooting compounds used in the nursery trade to propagate woody plants. Not surprisingly, viburnum cuttings root readily and typically don't need rooting compound.

Some viburnums, most notably highbush cranberry, even have butyric acid in their fruit. The fruit of highbush cranberry, which is not a true cranberry, is an acquired taste, to put it mildly. Viburnums have no thorns or burrs, are not invasive and don't cause rashes. Why these otherwise amiable shrubs add this chemical agent to their tissues is a mystery.

While I excel at making wild conjectures (which are nearly always way off the mark) I will refrain in this case. But wait – maybe butyric acid repels herbivores, or inhibits competing vegetation. What we need is for some college Biology majors to spend a year comparing browse damage and seed germination between viburnums whose fallen leaves have been raked clean, and an undisturbed control group. Or maybe we just need someone with a better track record at casual guesses.

Of all viburnums, I think the leaves of wild raisin (*V. cassinoides*) are the most pungent. It's easy to forgive its funk because it has the best fruit. From late August through the fall and sometimes into the winter, you can find sweet, dark purple “raisins” in wetlands and on the edges of ponds. Relative to the size of the fruit, the seed is rather large, but its flavour and sweetness make up for it. Sometimes the stinky-sock odor is what alerted me to the presence of wild raisin, and I've sniffed out some good raisins that way.

I think everyone who enjoys the outdoors should get acquainted with the wild raisin, which can provide a welcome snack on a cold day. Hunters and hikers have an added incentive: Wild raisin's butyric acid-laced leaves could come in handy as a cover story for actual stinky socks back at deer camp or inside a cramped tent.

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