Common Blue Violet (*Viola papilionacea*)

Identification:

The common blue violet is a stemless violet, meaning, no leaves appear on the same stem as the flowers. The flowering stalk is smooth. This plant is very common and very variable. Its leaves can be roundish or come to a pointed apex. You will find that the leaf base is heart-shaped, but this is a common characteristic of many violets. So, look to the flower for clear identification. Although the petals may range from blue to white, the lower three are always strongly veined and the two lateral petals are bearded. Northern Blue Violet (*Viola septenrionalis*) is very similar, but all three of the lower petals are hairy and the flower stalk is downy.

Common blue violet likes its feet wet, so look for it in meadows and moist woods. The broad-leaved wood violet (*Viola latiuscula*) is very similar, but it likes very dry soils and as its name implies the leaves are wider than long.

Natural History:

The Common blue violet has the specific epithet, papilionacea and so is sometimes called the butterfly violet. Butterflies may visit this flower, but the name more likely refers to the butterfly-like shape of the violet's flower. Bees are the preferred pollinators. Bees can see the colors blue and white. And although the flower color is variable, it always uses the combinations of blue and white. The dark lines on violet petals are called nectar guides and they help attract the attention of pollinators, much like the "Golden Arches" might attract your attention when you're hungry. The lower petal or lip of the flower acts as a landing platform for bees when they visit. If you turn the flower slightly, you'll notice the petals form a small spur. At the back of this spur are the nectaries, where nectar is produced. Only insects with long tongues, bees and butterflies for example, can reach the nectar back there. Check out the long-spurred violet (*Viola rostrata*) for an extreme example of this technique. Attracting bees and butterflies ensures a better opportunity for cross-pollination with an unrelated plant.

(*Viola rostrata*) for comparison