

Peninsula Naturalist

Peninsula Field Naturalists

Box 544

St. Catharines, Ont.

L2R 6W8

1954

1979

25th Anniversary Issue

APRIL MEETING - THURSDAY APRIL 26

POT LUCK SUPPER - GRANTHAM UNITED CHURCH

- 6. 30 pm -

Grantham United Church is on Linwell Rd., west of Niagara Street.

FOOD Members with initials A - M are asked to bring either salad or casserole for 8 people. Members with initials N - Z please bring a dessert. Cutlery and dishes are available at the church. For further information please call Barbara Simpson, 892-3032.

SLIDES April is our regular members night and for this anniversary evening we would like to emphasise the Niagara Peninsula. Bill Honsberger is co-ordinating and he asks that slides to be shown are spotted in the lower left hand corner as they are viewed right side up.

RAFFLE The Habitat Guide to Birding by Thomas P. McElroy Jr. will be raffled. Not a field guide, this book makes good reading and contains a wealth of information that is helpful when in the field. Tickets are 25¢ each or 5 for one dollar.

CREST After a slow start, response to the Crest competition is encouraging. There is still time to submit a design. Please mail to Judy Bernet, 10 Riverview Blvd., St. Catharines, L2t 3L6, before April 20.

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Next Indoor Meeting - Monday, Sept. 24, 8.00 pm. Lakeport Secondary School.

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WE EXTEND A WARM WELCOME to the following new members -

Miss Helen V. Cornwell	1	Ridley Hts. Drive,	St. Catharines
Mr. & Mrs W.H. Smith	2179	Niagara Blvd.	Ft. Erie
Mrs. Lydia Szukis		Box 37	Virgil
Ms. Dorothy Johnston	6	Louis Ave.	St. Catharines
Ms. Jessie C. Dundas	68	Pine Street North	Thorold

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excerpts from
Minutes of Inaugural Meeting
PENINSULA FIELD NATURALISTS.

The inaugural meeting of the Peninsula Field Naturalists was held April 26, 1954, at 8.00 pm in the Board Room of the Agricultural Representative Office, St. Catharines.

Mr. R.J. Ferguson, President of the Niagara Branch of the A.I.C. acted as chairman. Mr. Ferguson introduced and welcomed all present and explained that the aim of this meeting was to form a nucleus for a potential naturalist club in the eastern end of the Niagara Peninsula.

The meeting was turned over to Mr. George Dickson who explained in brief the objectives of the Ontario Federation of Naturalists. Mr. Dickson introduced the guest speaker of the evening, Dr. W.W. Gunn, President of the Ontario Federation of Naturalists.

Dr. Gunn had each person introduce himself and briefly state his particular interest in a naturalist club. Dr. Gunn outlined the four main aims for a successful naturalist club.

1. To bring together persons with like interests and to bring them in touch with others of like interests.
2. By good club publicity the latent or hidden talent of many persons is revealed and they are provided with an opportunity to expound such talents.
3. A club can be a source of encouragement and information for younger persons. It provides an opportunity for elder persons to give confidence to junior members.
4. A club can do things which individuals cannot, such as give expression of opinion in conservation.

In addition to the four main aims of a club, Dr. Gunn added further suggestions to the formation of a successful club. Particular stress was made that a club has to be fun for its members, not work.

Additional suggestions were:

1. A club should embrace social pleasure.
2. Small group outings were preferable to mass attacks on nature.
3. Follow-up discussion groups should be held to report on outings.
4. Specialized groups should be formed to acquaint others with their environment.

Stress was made on the point that too often the public tend to get out of touch with nature and the basic relationship of mankind to nature. Such persons are missing much and were compared to individuals going through life with one blind eye.

Mr. George Dickson, acting as chairman, opened the meeting for general discussion.

Moved by J.W. McInally, seconded by M.J. McCombs that,

A NATURALIST CLUB BE FORMED IN THIS AREA.

carried unanimously

The Genesis of the Peninsula Field Naturalists

From early boyhood I have had an interest in bird life, but it was not until 1923 that I was in a position to actively develop this interest.

In the late fall of 1921 I moved into a house on the grounds of the Ontario Horticultural Experiment Station - now the Horticultural Research Institute of Ontario - located some 200 - 300 yards south of Lake Ontario. During 1922 I realized that situated as I was, I was in the general path of most of the birds on their spring migration. Few birds attempted the long flight across Lake Ontario. As a result when approaching the lake they changed direction west, and while some covered a wide area in their westerly flight, great numbers followed along the shore line.

The warblers especially seemed to favour a route close to the Lake Shore, because of the 65 kinds identified in 1923, thirteen were warblers and in 1924 nineteen were identified out of a total 77 kinds.

For some years the main interest in bird migration centered around the Experiment Station grounds, which among other items of interest had a fair sized wood lot. This proved popular with many of the migrating birds as a resting spot. Thus it was not necessary to go far afield to see the migrants. On occasion one might wander far afield seeking birds, only to return home, and see these and several others close at hand.

In 1925 Dr. W.E. Hurlburt, a medical doctor, settled in Vineland. Apart from his medical practice, his main interest was in birds. At all times, he maintained a fairly large collection of tropical birds. With these, his main interest seemed to be a study of their breeding and nesting habits. After learning as much as possible from each species he would obtain others for study. In addition, however, he was greatly interested in the native birds, and together we spent considerable time on bird outings. One point of general interest was a large area of bush and open land at Warner where, at that time a large colony of Great Blue Herons nested.

As time went on, it was apparent that there were also many others interested in bird outings, over and above the teachers of nature studies in High School. It was, therefore, planned that a regular naturalists outing be arranged for the Warner Woods. This required much publicity and for this the St. Catharines Standard deserves credit. Among other things mentioned in this publicity was that skinks (one of the lizard family) were common in the Warner area. This publicity resulted in a large turnout, under ideal conditions. Some came because of an interest in nature, others for an outing, and one because he was anxious to see a skink and learn what it was.

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CHANGES IN THE BIRD LIFE OF THE NIAGARA PENINSULA

The years since 1920 have seen several striking changes in bird-life of the Niagara Peninsula. Some kinds that were once only stragglers are now familiar birds, while a few that were common at that time have become scarce. No doubt there have been less noticeable changes in the abundance of many other birds, it is often difficult to tell how real these lesser changes are, especially when we must depend on memory. When I was a boy on a farm in North Grimsby Township, I heard many Whip-poor-wills every year, and I thought they spent the summer here. Now I am not sure, perhaps I only heard the spring migrants. Anyway I have not seen or heard a Whip-poor-will in June, July or August since I began to take a more active interest in birds.

The most deplorable change is the decrease of the Bluebird. Only those who remember it during the 20s can realize how common it once was. By 1930 it had decreased considerably, coincident with the increase of the Starling, and by 1935 it was probably less than one-tenth as abundant in the Peninsula as it was fifteen years earlier. For a long time it persisted without much change, then after the very severe winter of 1957-58 in its winter quarters in the southern states its numbers fell to a new low. This was by no means the first such disaster. Edward H. Forbush said it became very scarce in New England after heavy winter mortality in 1895 but it recovered in a few years. At that time it did not have to compete with the Starling.

Those who have known the Bluebird only for the past twenty five years or so may think that its' favourite nesting site is an open cavity in the top of a post. Some have always nested in such places, but in pre-Starling days a much larger proportion nested in old Flicker holes or other deep protected cavities in trees. Now these better places are occupied by Starlings, leaving the Bluebird only the poorer, exposed sites.

The Red-headed Woodpecker is another of our most beautiful birds, whose decline paralleled that of the Bluebird. In the early twenties it was a common bird throughout the Peninsula, often nesting in road-side trees, and cherrygrowers at times complained of its depredation. Now it is scarce, though scattered pairs may summer anywhere in the district, if you know its calls you can find it in many of the larger woods south of the Escarpment. The numbers I see vary from year to year but its abundance does not seem to have changed appreciably over the past thirty years.

It has been suggested that the cutting of oak woods was responsible for its decline, for acorns are one of its chief foods, especially in winter. But I doubt if this was of much importance in the Peninsula where the Woodpecker is mainly a summer resident. It was once common here in districts with few or no oaks, and it has become scarce in those larger parts of southwestern Lincoln where oaks are still abundant. Another suggested cause of its decline is killing by automobiles. This too does not seem very plausible. The Red-headed Woodpecker began to decline while auto traffic in the ditrict was still light, and the numbers hit by model T's moving slowly over rutty roads could not have been very great.

MUD LAKE

by Norman Haultain.

Each year the Club has an outing to Mud Lake just north of Pt. Colborne. It was one of the best birding places that I know of in Ontario. That is before the Department of Natural Resources improved on it by putting in a parking lot and building a board walk over the marsh, building duck blinds and wood chip trails so the general public won't get their shoes dirty, so they can disturb the nesting birds.

Each species of bird has its own area in the lake for its nest.

The first nest I photographed when I got my first camera was a Marsh Hawk's nest with six eggs in the long grass on the south end of the lake, where the board walk now crosses the wet spot.

The Killdeer always had a nest on the high ground in this area. Another Killdeer nested in the field at the north end of the lake.

The Blue-winged Teal nested in both these places. They are late nesters for ducks, generally in early June. The Yellow warblers had their nests, generally two or three of them in the raspberry canes, along the creek at the south end of the lake.

The Catbird had her nest where the path goes up from the parking lot to the embankment. The Robins were in a cedar tree beside the road.

You don't see the intimate bird life from the banks. I used my little Birchbark canoe and paddled and pulled through the reeds.

The Purple Grackle was the first nester generally about the end of April. Normally the Grackle builds a bulky nest in bushes, but here they build a nest in the bullrushes just like the Red-winged Blackbird. The Grackle is a nest robber, both eggs and young. The food is not so abundant in the many nests when their young are hatched. It is my belief that is why they have changed their nesting habits.

About this time the Mallards nest in a corner of the duck blinds. There were always two or three nests.

Towards the end of May and the first week of June was the real nesting time.

The Red-winged Blackbirds are all over the marsh. Dozens of nests.

The Black Terns nest on the edges of the open spots. Three eggs on a clump of bullrush root in the open. I can remember a canoe with a boy and a girl. The girl sitting up on the thwart in the bow of the canoe trying to hit the Black Terns with her paddle as they dived on them as they approached their nests.

Needless to say I gave them a nice welcome to the marsh - "get going and don't come back".

There were always two or three Pied-billed Grebe nests. They gather a few decayed bullrushes together to form a floating nest on the edge of the openings. When they leave the nest, they cover their eggs so they can't be seen. I was photographing a Coot's nest when two little Pied-billed Grebes swam over to the canoe.

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BEAUTY IN THE TREETOPS

by Margery Coffman.

Somebody brought a bunch of pussy-willows to the Club. "Spring's first flowers", smiled a member. And of course, they are, though we don't always think of the soft, silver pussies as flowers. Properly, I suppose we should call them catkins.

I got to thinking. There's poplars on the hill. They flaunt a long, pendant type catkin, soft and furry, like the pussy willow, and walnuts have a green tassel for theirs. Lovely little green flowers make up the walnut catkin. I know. I pulled one apart (don't tell David). Nut trees all have catkins, I think the hazelnuts have brown ones, not very showy.

Thinking about tree flowers, other than fruit trees, our glorious red maple has by far the showiest. They are red, sometimes yellow clusters of lovely little jewels, usually blooming well before the leaves appear. I'm not sure what kind of maple it was, but a friend told me her husband cut off an offending branch of their tree, and sap immediately began to ooze out. Along came the local mockingbird to slurp it up, regularly enjoying the sweet stuff until the flow ceased. Trust him to smell out a bargain!

One of the loveliest of these not-so-spectacular blossoms is that of the basswood. When Gibbons, of "Stalking the Wild Asparagus" was hunting for a basswood to use the blossoms for a brew, said to cure no end of ills, his young guide suddenly declared, "We're close, I can hear a basswood tree!" Gibbons was a bit nonplussed, but on getting closer, he realized what the boy meant. The huge tree, in full bloom, was literally humming with bees, diving into the basswood nectar!

Speaking of tonic brews, the fruit cones of the sumac are also recommended (not by me - I prefer Ceylon!) to be used as a tea. The flowers of the sumac are greenish colour and are called 'panicles'. There is a variety of poison sumac, though I've never seen one. This variety has whitish flowers, and the juice, or oily sap acts like poison ivy. Sumac wood is a beautiful medium for carving. Petersen, late of Chippawa, now of Winnipeg, always used sumac for his owls. The wood, cut on the bias, forms symmetric rings, perfect for owls' eyes.

I can never resist picking a cluster of sassafras flowers. As a rule they hang in yellowish green bunches, and smell like honey. The bark, leaves and root of sassafras were used by pioneers as a spring tonic, and I've read that the oils are used in some drugs. There's a splendid clutch of sassafras trees at the entrance to Dr. Hurlburt's woods -- Short Hills.

Chokecherry and mountain ash blossoms are showy enough to be noticed by the most casual observer. The berries of both these trees make good jelly, rather inclined to be bitter, but a good substitute for cranberry.

Elderberry and hawthorn deck our roadsides still, though the ambitious highway department workmen manage to chop down the elder

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OUR BEGINNINGS

Our origins came from several sources, but I think it may be said that the Vineland group could be called the nucleus of the club.

For a number of years, beginning in 1926, a few of us held Christmas Bird Counts. As a rule only two or three people took part in these affairs, and only a few miles were traversed so our lists were never long. The average list of species came to fifteen, and individuals one hundred and ninety three. The most unusual species noted were the Carolina, Winter and Long-billed Marsh Wrens, and the Mockingbird. Those taking part in the censuses were Campbell, Coffman, Dickson, Fretz, Harkness, Hurlburt, Putman, Palmer, Strong and Ross. Quite a high proportion of these people were on the staff of the Horticultural Experiment Station.

As time went on, our outings took place, oftenest, at the height of migration season in May. The places where our rambles were held tended to change. On one occasion we went to Decew Falls. People from other districts were joining in some numbers, among these may be mentioned the Misses Jessie and Jean Scott and Mr. H. Doolittle of the St. Catharines Collegiate staff, also Mr. Ralph Gardiner and his son Dennis of Fort Erie.

The late George J. Clout of St. Catharines was active at about this period. He was a native of Kent, England, and an employee of McKinnon Industries. Mr. Clout's interest in nature was combined with a great enthusiasm for boys' work and he regularly went on hikes with groups of Scouts. He made a specialty of finding the nesting birds of Lincoln County and compiled a comparatively long list in a short period. He also was the first to report the presence of the Purple Gallinule in the Jordan Marsh. Mr. Clout died at the early age of fifty-six years. It was proposed to erect a memorial in Burgoyne Woods to this man of very fine character, but, so far, I can't discover that this was done.

On May 18, 1935, an especially successful field trip was held at Warner Woods. This was promoted by our group, but was, also, a Regional Gathering of the Federation of Ontario Naturalists, and an invitation for the Buffalo Ornithological Club. About one hundred and fifty people met at Smithville and motored a further ten miles to the woods where there was a Great Blue Heronry of forty nests. Numerous other interesting birds were seen that day including Ducks, Woodcock, and the Pileated Woodpecker. This region is a good place to see several species of reptiles and has an interesting flora. Afterwards we returned to Smithville where a good supper was provided at the Church Hall. About a hundred people sat down to this and were addressed by Professor Coventry of Toronto University at the conclusion of the meal.

During all this period, and for some time following, there was no formal organization or regular programme of meetings. However, on April 26, 1954, an inaugural meeting was held at the Agricultural Representative's office in St. Catharines. Mr. R.J. Ferguson, President of the Niagara Branch of the Agricultural Institute of Canada acted as chairman pro tem. Mr. George Dickson then addressed the meeting and introduced the speaker, Dr. W. W.

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Genesis of Peninsula Field Naturalists cont'd...

The weather could not have been better for such an outing, and was declared a success. The herons put on a good display, skinks were found and many birds not often seen, including turkey vultures, water thrushes, scarlet tanagers and many warblers and sparrows.

Because of the success of the outing to the Warner woods another was planned for the following spring. This was held at DeCew Falls. It too, was a success, and although many of the birds seen at Warner were not noted, others because of their habitat were observed.

With the success of these two outings, and the widely expressed interest by bird watchers, Dr. Hurlburt and I were approached by interested observers. Why not have our own society? Hamilton is too far away for most of us to attend. The interest shown by two local outings indicated that a local society could be supported.

As a result of this, plans were made to hold a meeting of any who might be interested in the forming of such an organization. Dr. Gunn from Toronto was the guest speaker and outlined proper procedure for the formation of such a naturalist group. From this meeting the Peninsula Field Naturalists Society was formed in 1954. And from the small but enthusiastic group has grown the large, active group of today.

G.H. Dickson
May 1978.

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Beauty in Treetops cont'd...

and leave the poison ivy! We were able to get enough berries last year for a few pies before the birds got around to them. A friend with a yen to try anything once, tried the flat blossom clusters fried in pancake batter. No, I didn't taste 'em, so can't report. I fancy I prefer the pie!

Hawthorn, or May, as it's called in parts of England, is so pretty, but my mum would never let me bring it in to the house, because, she said, it brings bad luck. The berries, too, make a jelly, like rose hips, but it takes a tremendous lot to make a tremendously small amount.

People, especially children, fail to notice these exquisite, unobtrusive flowers of our trees. Perhaps some of our photographers have slides of some of them. If so, we'd like to see them, and it would be easier than craning our necks to peer into the treetops!

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PENINSULA FIELD NATURALIST'S - OFFICERS

President	Dr. P.A. Peach.	Directors -	Miss M. Janzen
Vice-pres	Mrs. B. Simpson		Miss J. Bernet
Past-pres	Mr. H. Lancaster		Mrs. M. Foley
Secretary	Miss N. Rempel		Mr. D. Nasmith
Treasurer	Mrs. N. Dekker		Rev. A. Kaellgren
			Mr. S. Rossetto.

Mud Lake cont'd...

I picked them up and put them in my galosh. They apparently became imprinted", when it was time for them to go I couldn't get rid of them. I had the same thing happen at Luther Marsh. They followed the canoe out to open water.

The Coot and the Florida Gallinule build the same kind of nest well back in the bullrushes out of sight. A flat nest of bullrushes with a runway to enter it. It is very hard to tell which nest it is as the nest and eggs are very similar. You very seldom see the bird, she vanishes into the thick rushes.

One year there were three Least Bittern nests on the far side at the very edge of the open water. An interesting nest, about a foot above the water with an opening looking out over the pond and a canopy to keep the sun off her as she sits.

One day Frank Kingdon and I came on a nest with the Least Bittern on it. She must have been surprised as she never left the nest as we photographed three feet away. Trusted to her camouflage.

The Rails are very shy and elusive. I found one nest with nine eggs in all my years in Mud Lake.

One year a male Ruddy Duck was on the open lake at nesting time. He had no business being down here as he is a Manitoba nester. I hunted that marsh for the nest, but no luck. Finally the female came out in the open with three young.

I've seen the Long-billed Marsh Wren there but have never found a nest. The male will build 4 or 5 nests then Mrs. Marsh Wren takes her choice. She lays about 8 eggs, cream coloured and heavily dotted.

The Black Water Snake is there, as big around as your arm. Occasionally they will be found curled up on a muskrat's house sunning themselves.

Over the years I have spent many interesting hours in Mud Lake. Nice to look back on them.

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BOOKS FOR SALE

From the April, 1965, Niagara Naturalist comes the following advertisement. We wonder which lucky member won the race to this lady's door.

Taverner's Birds of Canada - 1934

One small spot on cover, otherwise in perfect condition
\$10.00

Gilbert White - Selborne - Natural History and Antiquities.

Edited by Bowlder Sharpe. Illustrated by Railton, etc.

2 thick volumes, Cloth gilt, gilt tops, profusely illustrated. Perfect condition. No 200 of a special edition of 208 copies printed for America - 1900. \$10.00

Walton and Cotton - The Compleat Angler.

Illustrated with engravings on copper and wood.
The John Major edition. London 1823. \$5.00

Mrs. Roger Clarke,
Vineland Station, Ontario.

Our Beginnings cont'd...

Gunn of the Federation of Ontario Naturalists. Dr. Gunn spoke on the aims of a naturalists' club and made suggestions on how to make the club interesting.

At this meeting, Mr. Francis Goldring was appointed temporary chairman and Mr. J.W. McNally secretary-treasurer. Mr. Dickson acted as chairman for most of the meeting and should be regarded as the prime mover in laying the foundation for the Club's establishment. The name, 'PENINSULA FIELD NATURALISTS' CLUB' was suggested by Dr. W. E. Hurlburt, and was adopted.

The first outing took place at Dr. Hurlburt's Woods, one half mile east of North Pelham Village in May. After this start several meetings and a number of field trips were held each year. The indoor meetings were, almost invariably, held in school halls, Power Glen, under the sponsorship of our late member, Principal M. J. McCombe, and then at Maplewood School.

Special mention of some of our senior members would seem to be in order. Mr. Wallace Goldring of Effingham has always been an ardent conservationist, with an especial interest in preserving native woodland. He and his family have planted great numbers of trees, and have encouraged others to do the same.

Mr. A. W. (Bert) Miller of Fort Erie is our evergreen leader of botanical groups. He has an exhaustive knowledge of the flora of the Niagara Peninsula, and has located many rare species. He also grows, from seed, a number of Carolinian zone trees.

Mr. Alexander Cameron has been interested in matters botanical ever since boyhood in his native Banffshire, Scotland. For the last eight years he has made his retirement home on a fruit farm near Beamsville. Before that he was very active in botanical circles in Toronto. Mr. Cameron's interests take in the floral kingdom of the whole world and he owns an extensive library on the subject.

Mr. Roy W. Sheppard of Niagara Falls, has been an amateur and professional naturalist all his life. As a young man he held a position in the British Museum of Natural History, London. He has been a resident of Canada for about fifty years except for a long period of service in World War 1. His knowledge of birds of the world is encyclopaedic and he is the Canadian authority on birds of the Niagara River.

Mr. & Mrs. J.A. Selby of Lookout Point returned to their native Canada eighteen years ago after many years in the United States. They built and maintained a 'Nature House' or small museum at their residence near Fonthill. Many young people of the neighbourhood enjoyed this museum and enlarged their knowledge of the plants and animals of the locality. The Selbys also had a hummingbird banding project at their home for several years, amassing a great deal of new information as pioneers in this field. Finally, mention must be made of Mrs. Selby's campaign to preserve for posterity, the huge Comfort Maple at North Village.

W. E. Hurlburt,
Niagara Naturalist,
April 1965.