



The Peninsula Naturalist

Volume 211

Newsletter of the Peninsula Field Naturalists Club

October 2006

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

- October 2006 -

The novel *A Tale of Two Cities*, by Charles Dickens, begins "It was the best of times; it was the worst of times." Set in the period of the French Revolution in the late 1700's, it vividly contrasts the luxury of the rich ruling class and the squalor of the poor. Dickens drew from the reality of his time in making such comparisons, but he was not alone in adopting this approach. Conflict, or the collision of opposing forces, is a common theme in literature.

So what?

Well, reflecting on the general state of the environment in most parts of the world this year, and considering the effects of weather in our own enriched hemisphere, we North Americans would do well to consider the state of the planet we live on and our relationship to it. The last two years we have come through should give us cause for sober thought about colliding forces.

I needn't remind you of the events of these two years. The images of floods, tsunamis, earthquakes, fires, hurricanes - these are all too real now. So real that they have almost erased or at least obscured the images of enlarging holes in the ozone layer, melting arctic ice and permafrost, smog, etc.

I can't help but remember a comment made by David Suzuki, speaking in St. Catharines last year. Suzuki recalled watching parents

arriving at a hospital emergency clinic during a smog period, dropping off asthmatic children for treatment - and bringing the children in SUV's! Suzuki's reaction - "If you drive a SUV, you don't give a s**t about the environment!"

Suzuki may be right - or perhaps the connection between vehicular-generated smog and respiratory problems simply hasn't sunk in amongst drivers. Maybe the connection between our lavish lifestyle and that of the rest of the world, or the connection between our luxurious use of non-renewable energy sources and the developing world's reaction to our greed, hasn't hit home with us yet. Maybe we learned nothing in August 2004, when our electrical-grid crash left thousands of people in the dark for a few days . . .

Political history, in Dickens' time, showed what can happen when lifestyle conflict erupts. We are only a few Celsius degrees from learning how environmental conflicts can affect our lifestyle. We are already nearly past the time when we can pretend we don't know what results climate change may bring, if we are unwilling or unable to mitigate its causes.

IN MEMORIAM

MILDRED E. HEATHERTON

BOOK REVIEW

Birds of Hamilton And Surrounding Areas

By Robert Curry

(Hamilton Naturalists' Club, \$60)

Reviewed by Gord McNulty

The breathtaking extent to which birds enrich our lives in heavily urbanized Hamilton and vicinity is celebrated in a classic new book that promises to become a collector's item.

Dazzling photography, superlative art and passionate writing combine to make *Birds of Hamilton And Surrounding Areas* an authoritative and inspiring publication that will long be treasured.

Senior author Bob Curry, a retired high school teacher who has tirelessly pursued birds for more than 50 years, is justifiably proud of the collaborative effort that turned this 650-page masterpiece from dream to reality.

The Burlington Art Centre was packed for a highly successful book launch on Oct. 12. Many of the authors who contributed to the book --- exemplified by Mike Street who wrote an account entitled *Raptors Over Grimsby* --- attended the launch, as did Fred Bodsworth, well-known author and birder who wrote an eloquent foreword to the book.

All proceeds from the sale of this Hamilton Naturalists' Club publication, involving five years of intensive work and close to 100 contributors, will support the conservation projects of the club.

More than 385 bird species that have occurred in the Hamilton Study Area (HSA), a 40-kilometre circle radiating from Dundurn Castle and extending east of Grimsby and Smithville, are described and documented, together with many bird conservation projects undertaken by dedicated birders past and present.

The meticulous, history-laden individual species accounts reflect Curry's expertise and love of birding. He was mentored by George North, a legendary Hamilton birder who bridged the time from the days of collecting birds with a gun to collecting by checklist.

Some of the most fascinating stories chronicle the early days of birding in the city dating back 150 years. In 1866, Thomas McIlwraith published a Hamilton bird list that inspired bird listing on a provincial basis and helped ornithologists to understand changes in the environment and birdlife.

Birders described flocks of Passenger Pigeons as so thick that they would darken the sky and even break the

limbs of trees with their weight. Sometimes they flew so low that hunters could knock them down with sticks.

In 1854, in an effort to lessen the slaughter, a rumour circulated that eating too many Passenger Pigeons caused a cholera epidemic in the city. The reprieve was short-lived, as the passenger pigeon was last reported in the HSA in 1890.

"Its fate epitomizes the all too frequent human disregard for life and beauty," Curry writes. "This was a bird larger than the mourning dove, with a much more beautiful blend of blue and pink."

It is sobering to revisit other disturbing examples of destruction during the Victorian era. Birds were exploited to decorate women's hats and regulations were weak and poorly enforced. No fewer than 17 specimens of Snowy Owls were observed on sale at Hamilton Market in the winter of 1858-1859.

While encouraging progress has been made in protecting birds, Curry underlines how many problems --- from loss of habitat caused by inexorable urban sprawl to intensive agricultural practices --- continue to exact an ominous toll.

The shoreline of western Lake Ontario and Hamilton Harbour is increasingly popular with birders in search of rewarding encounters with impressive waterbirds. Some species, exemplified by the Black-crowned Night-Heron, show a remarkable ability to nest and live cheek-by-jowl with heavy industry and vehicle traffic all around the harbour.

In January 2001, dozens of birders enjoyed watching an extremely rare Ivory Gull, a denizen of the high Arctic, for several days on the bay. Jubilation turned to despair, however, when the gull, flying to the lake, collided with power lines on the Hamilton Beach Strip and plummeted to the ground.

As some species have declined, others have spread northward into the HSA with milder temperatures and reduced snowfall. Migrating birds such as the Northern Flicker, Eastern Bluebird and American Robin now overwinter here with increasing frequency.

Beyond doubt, the book will forge a closer connection between the feathered gems of Hamilton and the ever-growing numbers of people who take delight in observing them year-round.

Anyone with an appreciation of nature will savour this literary gateway into an exciting avian world that is waiting to be discovered and cherished for generations to come.

Courtesy of The Hamilton Spectator

SEEN AND HEARD

The PFN have enjoyed two very different but quite informative presentations thus far in the current speaker series; we hope you were there.

In September, Marcie Jacklin gave us a sight-and-sound tour of 'Fifty Years of the Christmas Bird Count' – an ongoing event for a half-century. As Marcie mentioned, it is definitely more conservation-minded to count birds in the Christmas season rather than to shoot them, as used to be a Christmas tradition long ago. A surprising feature of Marcie's presentation was the number of species of birds that have become naturalized in the Niagara area only recently, and how many species show severe declines in numbers that overwinter here. We are all aware of the increase in overwintering Canada geese, as well as American Robins and even Bluebirds, but who would have thought of the Cardinal as not being a winter bird 50 years ago? More disturbing is the decrease in some shorebird species such as Black-backed Gulls. It is a valuable reference to have such an extended record of bird species variation - we need to keep up this good work!

Our October speaker, Paul O'Hara, took a rather unusual approach toward his topic 'The Faithful Witness: The Journey of the White Pine in Southern Ontario'. While the essence of his talk was the life-cycle of the white pine, Paul spun a mythic story of the pine tree as an observer of the changes as its environment progresses from open meadow to thicket to climax forest - and to developed cityscape. Illustrating his talk with beautiful photographs of the landscapes and the related plant species, Paul narrated the events as a pine changes from a seedling to being the tallest tree in a forest. His style of presentation was reminiscent of the way that a First Nation storyteller would describe such a history. His sense of the artistry in nature photography helped make this presentation one which many of the Club members would agree as being 'memorable'. I was amazed to know that a White Pine measuring over 20 feet in circumference once existed in Mississauga!

Whether a tree planted in a city site should be capable of living in such an alien environment, or whether the city should be re-engineered to provide an environment more like that which trees inhabit in non-urban locations, is a question which Paul left for the viewers to decide. His personal opinion was made obvious in his presentation.

OUT AND ABOUT

Ma Nature served up two relatively fine outing days for members of the PFN and other Club in October - November.

On Sunday, Oct.29, a dozen or so hardy souls bundled up against the chilly wind and followed Leader Roman Olzewski into the dampness of Wainfleet Bog in search of likely lichens. In moments, we were immersed in the lingo of lichenology; adjectives like 'fruticose' and 'crustose' and tasty nouns like 'rhizine' and 'tomentum' were thrown to the wind by our Leader. Boldly we tracked down the ubiquitous *Polytrichum* and the elusive *Fissidens* - who knew such colour and diversity of shape waited there to be discovered under our feet? Deeper into the Bog, one might have become immersed in more than just language - as Roman explained, a week earlier the Bog had been flooded by several feet of water, making trails impassable.

On Sunday, Nov.5, a goodly party assembled at Beamer CA as Brian Calvert led a 'stroll' around the top of the escarpment. Birding was not overly productive, but at least one American Tree Sparrow provided some entertainment. Brian pointed out the different forms of sedimentary rock making up the layers of the now-abandoned quarry near the Hawk-Watch area. With most of the leaves fallen, tree identification became a matter of recognition by bark patterns, branching habit, and sometimes plain simple guesswork; some giant red oaks and elderly hop-hornbeams can be found at Beamer! The newly-fledged lichenologists and bryologists from the previous week had many more opportunities to wrack their memories. With weather cooperating, a good outing was enjoyed by all.

LOST AND FOUND ?

About two months ago, the elusive Ivory-billed Woodpecker made the news again. Reported in 2005 from a sighting and video made in Arkansas in 2004, after having been considered near extinction since the 1930's, the bird has now been seen by a team of Canadian and American bird experts in the Florida Panhandle - not just once, but 14 times! As reported by Peter Calamai in *The Toronto Star* in September, researchers from University of Windsor and Auburn University have seen Ivory-bills, recorded distinctive vocal calls, found recent tree-nesting cavities of the right size, and identified the bird's chisel-marks on bark.

The one bit of evidence still lacking is a photograph. After 6 months in the habitat area, no picture has been taken, which the researchers explain by noting that, upon seeing the bird, viewers instinctively grabbed binoculars rather than a video-camera. The scientists are being a bit coy about the actual habitat area, hoping to avoid masses of birders trying for a glimpse and perhaps frightening the birds out of the area. Check the website: www.uwindsor.ca/ivorybill

The *Star* article also included a list of rediscovered species that had been though extinct; 6 species re-found in the 1900's and 9 more since 2000. They included: Coelacanth (S.Africa, 1938); Takahe bird (New Zealand, 1948); Asian gray whale (Russia, 1973) White-winged guan (Peru, 1977); Black-footed ferret (Wyoming, 1981); North Pacific right whale (Alaska, mid-90's); Chinese crested tern (China?, 2000); Northern bald ibis (Syria, 2002); New Zealand storm petrel (2003); Long-legged warbler (Fiji, 2003); Rusty-throated wren-babbler (Himalayas, 2004); Slater's skink (Australia, 2004); High Range dwarf cattle (India, 2004); Laotian rock rat (2005); and the Giant Palouse earthworm (Wash.-Idaho border, 2006). The Coelacanth had been thought extinct for 80 million years, the Laotian rock rat for 11 million years, and the White-winged guan for 100 years.

Just in the past two weeks, I read/saw reports that the California Condor is on a resurgence (thanks to an assisted breeding program), and that the Giant Panda (with a little genetic help from humans) will have produced about 50 more offspring in 2005-2006. Revives the hope that many other inhabitants of the planet may make a comeback, doesn't it?

(Thanks to Joyce Auty for the Toronto Star report - ed.)

BAR-CODING SPECIES

A novel idea from a University of Guelph scientist is beginning to shake up the whole science of classifying organisms to species. As reported by Stephen Strauss in the *Toronto Globe and Mail*, Professor Paul Hebert has discovered a new way to distinguish one species from another, a method that is faster and more accurate than anything before.

Previously, taxonomists followed the notion that if something looked like a duck, quacked like a duck, and flew like a duck - it was a duck.

What Prof. Hebert has discovered is that a special gene from the DNA in a cell's mitochondria differs from one species to another and every living organism can be distinguished by this very specific gene - a process that Prof. Hebert calls 'species bar coding'. Not only is his gene differentiation method absolutely accurate, but it is also very fast. As a result, a new laboratory will be built in Guelph which could identify a million species a year. In comparison, the old 'quacks like a duck' method identified less than 2 million species in the past 200 years.

Prof. Hebert's discovery will also work on parts of animals or plants, for example, being able to tell which species of fish a particular fillet came from. The application of the method to pest species moving across country borders is obvious.

(Thanks to Bob Layton for the Globe and Mail item - ed.)

BRAIN FOOD

Here's a synopsis of a global situation: The glaciers are melting, the tundra is thawing, the deep oceans are warming, infectious diseases are migrating, and the timing of the seasons has changed. All this has resulted from *one degree* of warming of the planet. And scientists predict that the earth will become 3 degrees F to 10 degrees F warmer later in this century. What should we do?

I've just finished reading *Boiling Point* by Ross Gelbspan, a paperback book with a rather gaudy cover that made me wonder about the content inside. Two hundred and five pages later (not counting the notes and index), I was almost shaking my head in disbelief at how messed up the planet has become - even though I've read numerous items about climate change and saw '*An Inconvenient Truth*' in the last few months.

Gelbspan has an axe to grind, with his target villains being 'big oil,' 'big coal' and the cozy relationship between these industries and the current United States White House administration; he grinds it thoroughly in this book. However, he also makes it clear that no single country's managers are at fault with respect to climate change. We are all culpable to some degree. Although the United States comes in for its fair share of commentary, Gelbspan also notes that the most air-polluted cities in the world are now in China, Mexico, Thailand, Chile, and other developing countries.

What I found more interesting, and even hopeful, was his final chapter, entitled '*Rx for a Planetary Fever*'. Proceeding from the premise that climate change is a moral issue, and that energy supply lies at the heart of all the factors contributing to climate change, Gelbspan's proposed solution centers on an international agreement to promote renewable clean energy in all countries - what Gelbspan calls 'rewiring the globe with clean energy'. It occurred to me that this proposed solution would agree quite nicely with the policies of the Green Party in Canada - and probably a number of environmental-oriented NGO's as well.

Interestingly, banks and insurance companies have a large stake in the climate change issue as well, having already experienced the economic costs of some extreme weather events. Gelbspan argues that these organizations would come onside quickly with an international clean energy policy, as soon as they had evidence that clean energy might moderate extreme weather events - fewer tornadoes helps the insurance bottom-line.

'*Boiling Point*' is well worth the few hours that it may require to absorb. Digesting its message may take longer, but the time spent ruminating about the 'World Energy Modernization Plan' would be well spent, in my humble opinion.

Gelbspan's background as a journalist is fairly evident in this book. His source material is well-researched and backed up by 30 pages of notes which detail his sources and can be checked if you wish. \$18.95 Cdn.

NECROLOGY

Sadly, we must report the passing of another friend of the Peninsula Field Naturalists.

Mildred E. Heatherton, born October 9, 1926, was a graduate of Trinity College, Toronto, and had worked at Coy Brothers Hardware for 25 years. She was active with the YMCA of Richmond Hill, and with the Childrens Aid Society of Sudbury for 25 years. She was a member of Beta Sigma Phi Society and the Elizabeth Fry Society, and was a long-time member of St. George's Anglican Church, as well as being a member of the Peninsula Field Naturalists (aka St. Catharines Nature Club). She is survived by her brother Donald of St. Catharines, and several nieces and nephews. Miss Heatherton passed away at Linhaven Nursing Home, September 5, 2006.

Ramblings... Sleepwalking With Cassandra

In Greek mythology, Cassandra was the daughter of Priam, the last King of Troy. Through a misadventure with Apollo (the son of Zeus), Cassandra was given the ability to make true prophecies which, however, nobody believed. Her prophecy of the fall of Troy went unheeded - presumably until it actually happened. One wonders what the Trojans were thinking... "Hey, there goes that crazy chick Cassandra..." I can almost imagine Cassandra crossing paths with Chicken Little... "Hey, don't take it too hard, Cassie, they didn't believe me either..."

What does this have to do with nature study and our interest in the environment, you ask? Well, if we were to accept the opinions of certain politicians, leaders of significant countries, and sellers of fossil fuels, we would have to conclude that many eminent scientists in a variety of disciplines can not be trusted to understand what they are observing in Nature. We would also be persuaded to believe that what many scientists are proclaiming about climate change amounts to 'chicken-little-ism'. The political solution to such observations as the rapid melting of glaciers and polar icecaps is seemingly to believe that these are normal events in geological history - don't worry, it's all normal! Don't believe those Cassandra scientists, say the pols...

So why are we beginning to experience extreme weather events, excessive winds, persistent droughts, untimely snow? Why are a number of species of living creatures extending their habitation ranges into places where they never ventured before? How do we explain dramatic reductions in the survival of corals, the spread of tropical diseases into the temperate zones, the melting of permafrost, increasing temperatures of deep-sea water, and on and on? Natural variation - yeah, right!! Tell that to the polar bears...

The curse of Cassandra seems to have befallen many current inhabitants of this lovely planet. Anyone who speaks out against the political status quo is to be viewed as a Cassandra. More

worrisome, in some halls of power, the decision-makers appear to be either asleep or unwilling to accept the inconvenient truths that Nature is showing us with greater frequency. It seems the Golden Rule now holds sway - i.e. "He who has the gold, makes the rules". How long will it be until the decision-makers learn the lesson that Croesus learned - that gold doesn't substitute for edible plants? I am reminded of an old apocalyptic movie called "On The Beach", in which the world was devastated by nuclear war. In the final scene of that movie, on a deserted beach in California, as a small party of survivors set sail for Australia to see if there was any habitable land left, a fluttering banner read "There is still time..."

OPERATION MIGRATION

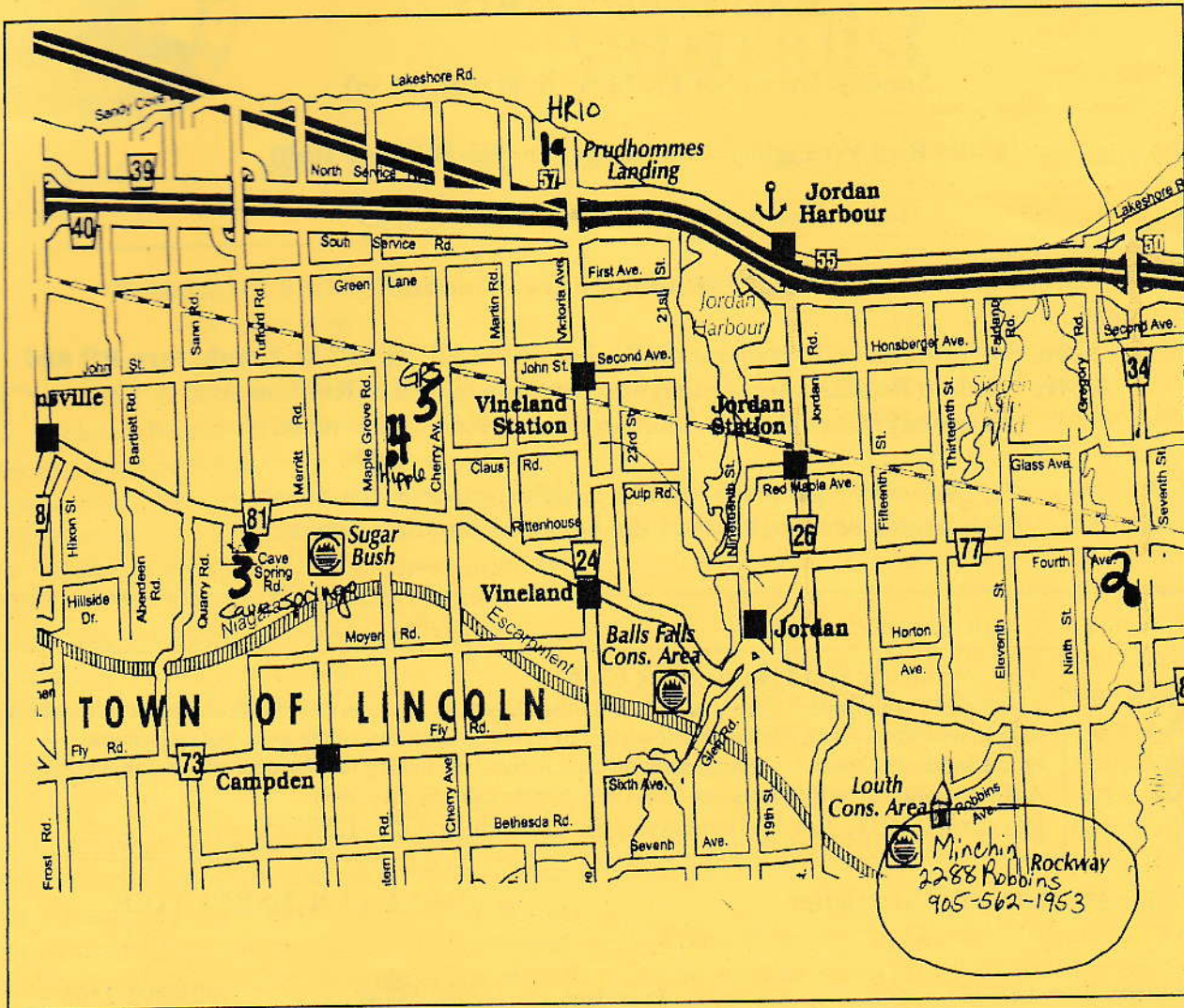
Bill Lishman's still at it! Since the success of the use of ultralight aircraft to lead Canada Geese in their migratory flights in the late 1980's, Lishman has now turned his attention to Whooping Cranes. The success of the Canada Goose project was the source of the fictionalized movie 'Fly Away Home'.

Now, Lishman and several fellow pilots, dressed in white smocks to allay the fears of the birds, have led a flock of adolescent Whooping Cranes annually since 2001 on a flight from Wisconsin to Florida. A support team of birdhandlers, mechanics and technicians follow the flight in trucks, tracking progress and setting up overnight stopping-points, complete with frozen smelt for the birds.

This fall, a group of about 30 people will have paid \$4800 each to spend 10 days as tourists invited to follow along with the flight, on the leg from Wisconsin to Tennessee. The 'Path of the Whooping Crane' tour will give the tourists an inside look at how 'Operation Migration' carries out its work, and the ground-planning that is needed to make it a success. It is worth noting that, from a population of 15 in the 1940's, the Whooping Crane now numbers around 500, thanks in part to Lishman's team's efforts.

(Thanks to Bob Layton for the Globe & Mail item. - ed.)

Map to Minchin's – for Birders on Christmas Bird Count



'NATURAL CAPITAL' FACTS ON FORESTS

The environmental work of Canada's boreal forests in purifying air and water, and the tourism dollars the forests generate, are worth at least \$93 billion a year, according to economist Mark Anielski. That value should be taken into account when making decisions about logging, mining, and other industrial activities that affect forests. Canada is home to one-quarter of the world's forests. Boreal forests regulate the climate by capturing and storing an estimated 67 billion tones of carbon in Canada alone – a job worth \$1.8 billion, based on the price of carbon emissions from the global insurance industry. The water filtration and erosion control of boreal peatlands is worth \$77 billion. (Guess why ONTARIO NATURE has determined that a major initiative should be mounted to publicize the value of the boreal forests in Ontario!) *(data from Canadian Press).*

**PENINSULA FIELD NATURALISTS CLUB
CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT
& APRES-BIRD PARTY**

Sunday, December 17, 2006; 4:30 p.m. (or so)

Chief Bird Wrangler: Marcie Jacklin 905-341-6665 (cell)

Hosts: Don and Sue Minchin 905-562-1953

Location: 2288 Robbins Ave., Vineland

Directions: From St. Catharines, drive west on Regional Road 81 to 11th St. Louth, turn left and drive south to Robbins Ave. (on right); continue to end of Robbins Ave.

From anywhere else, see map on reverse side of this page.

**The Minchin's property adjoins Louth Conservation Area;
you might see bluebirds at the back of Minchin's house.**



The Peninsula Field Naturalists Club

A non-profit organization started in 1954 with the objectives to preserve wildlife and protect its habitat, to promote public interest in and a knowledge of the natural history of the area, and to promote, encourage and cooperate with organizations and individuals having similar interests and objectives. Affiliated with Ontario Nature (ex-FON) and Nature Canada (ex-CNF).
P.O. Box 23031, 124 Welland Ave., St. Catharines, ON. L2R7P6

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The Editor welcomes written articles or artwork on any natural history topic. Handwritten articles will be accepted, and if possible, please submit typewritten articles, or computer disks containing your file. All pieces of artwork will be accepted, although line drawings are preferable, as they are better suited to photo copying. New ideas and constructive criticism are always welcome.

Editorial Staff: John Potter

Labelling/Mailing: Kay Smith

– please send submissions to the above address –

Deadlines for submissions 2006:

Jan. 28; May 20; Sept. 30

2005/6 PFN EXECUTIVE

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