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The Peninsula Naturalist

Volume 216

Newsletter of the Peninsula Field Naturalists Club

February 2008

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE – FEB. 2008

There is a saying: There are two kinds of people - those who separate people into two kinds of people - and those who do not.

In natural science taxonomy, there are two kinds of systematists - the splitters and the lumpers. The splitters take every opportunity to create new taxonomic species by splitting a pre-existing species, if minor variations occur; the lumpers take every opportunity to lump two species together into a single new species at the slightest pretext of similarity. I'm not sure what the "intelligent-design" crowd think of these systematists...

In history, nations have been divided or merged whenever anyone in a position of power or authority thought it best to split or lump groups of people. Political parties tend to take opposite sides in an argument; debating and legal procedures are almost always about choosing sides. Who ever heard of a three-sided war?

I am reminded of the attitude of one of Walt Kelly's characters in the comic strip 'Pogo' - a character who explained his ambivalence in the midst of an argument by saying: "Ever see two dogs fighting over a bone? Ever see the bone fight?"

Considering all the controversy over global warming - (Is it real? Is it a fabrication? Is it caused by human activity? Is it a process caused by natural forces outside of human activity?) -

somehow, all of the debates and arguments strike me the same way - that is, the points for and against any human's attitude about global warming matter about as much to Planet Earth as does the dog-fight over the bone. Planet Earth doesn't really care to take sides on the global warming controversy - it is just reacting to changing conditions, much as the bone reacts.

Focus your thoughts on the probable outcome of the reaction...

Nature photographers are reminded of the display of pictures at the Annual Potluck Dinner Meeting, 28 April 2008. Subjects: anything related to nature. Size: 5x7 in. or smaller. Maximum number of photos: 3 per photographer.

Please bring your photos to one of the next indoor meetings (February or March), and give them to Barbara Austin, Barb West or Don Stevenson, who will mount and label the photos for display. You can retrieve your photos at the end of the dinner. Many people bring their cameras on outings. It will be fun to see some of the results...

IN MEMORIAM

MARGARET LITKE

NOTABLE OUTINGS FOR PFN

The following are events which will be happening through April and May, 2008. Some will occur before the next Newsletter, so this reminder augments the Meetings & Outings Programme (which may have been misplaced by now):

WAINFLEET BOG & HAROLD MITCHELL RESERVE: Saturday, Apr. 26, 2008, 10:00 a.m.

Look for spring wildflowers and shrubs, together with the Niagara Falls Nature Club. Meet at McDonalds Restaurant, Highway 3, Port Colborne. Bring rubber boots and lunch. Leader: Rick Young, 905-734-6226.

SHORT HILLS SANCTUARY CLEANUP: Sunday, May 4, 2008, 10:00 a.m.

We will help the Hamilton Naturalists Club with their annual maintenance of Short Hills Sanctuary, at the corner of Metler Road and Centre Street, east of North Pelham. Bring lunch and tools (brush cutters, shovels, gloves). Many hands make light work, so there should be lots of time to enjoy the wild flowers. Contact: Brian Calvert, 905-892-6267.

ROCK POINT BIRDING: Saturday, May 10, 2008, 9:00 a.m.

This annual Birding outing meets at the Port Colborne McDonalds Restaurant on Highway 3 to arrange car-pooling. A good outing for shorebirds, but also good for inland species, odonates and butterflies in season. Leader: Barb West, 905-935-5339.

MALCOLMSON ECO-PARK WILD FLOWERS: Sunday, May 11, 2008, 10:00 a.m.

Meet in the parking lot, at the north end of Niagara Street, St. Catharines. We will walk the trails to see what is blooming. Leader: Nancy Luft, 905-937-4664.

NECROLOGY

Once again, a long-time member of the Peninsula Field Naturalists is gone from our midst. At this time, we regret the passing of Margaret Litke, a Life-Member of the Club, at age 83.

Margaret died peacefully at home on Sunday, January 20, 2008. She leaves behind her husband Jacob, with whom she enjoyed 60 years of marriage. She is survived also by six children, eleven grandchildren, and one great-granddaughter, as well as a brother and two sisters-in-law, and numerous nieces and nephews.

Margaret was a member of Grace Mennonite Church, and actively involved in the Grace Mennonite Women's Group. Besides her interest in the Peninsula Field Naturalists, she was also a member of the Niagara Heritage Quilters Guild, and a longstanding volunteer driver for the Canadian Cancer Society. Along with her devotion to her extended family, Margaret enjoyed bird watching, nature, quilting, and caring for others.

Her life was celebrated at Grace Mennonite Church, Niagara Street, St. Catharines on January 23, 2008, with interment at Victoria Lawn Cemetery.

Although I did not know her well, I have one personal memory of Margaret. I was asked to come to her home on one occasion to pick up a donation for the PFN's ticket draw at their Annual Dinner evening, since Margaret was not able to attend that night. When I arrived, she gave me two beautifully-finished wooden folding chairs, which had been made by Jacob. I still recall how proud she was of her husband's handiwork.

Margaret will be missed...

Some of us - perhaps most of us - recall when we used to see tall American Elm trees with their canopies of branches shading streets or sheltering pasture-fields. The elms of Winnipeg and Fredericton were legendary. Yet within our lifetime, such elms almost ceased to exist except in legend or memory.

One man, Henry Koch, was determined that the American Elm would not become just a memory in Ontario. At the University of Guelph Arboretum, Henry began a program to bring back the elm from the near-extinction resulting from the so-called Dutch Elm Disease in the mid 1900's. Henry's plan was to find surviving elms where the disease had passed, obtain cuttings from those elms, and propagate new trees to be tested for resistance to the Dutch Elm disease fungus.

As Sean Fox, Assistant Curator at the Guelph Arboretum, told the story of how he worked with Henry Koch and continued the research after Henry's untimely death, our November meeting became a tribute to Henry's memory as well as a learning experience. With historic and current photos, Sean's presentation showed why many cities have an "Elm Street", and how massive the old giants really were. The skills involved in obtaining twig cuttings from trees whose lowest branch might be 50 feet up were illustrated, as were the methods of rearing seedlings and separating susceptible shoots from those possibly resistant.

Some large elms still survive in Ontario, in areas where the disease has gone through. Sean mentioned that several hundred have been sampled as part of the recovery process. He also cautioned that a clonal elm strain developed in the USA has been widely sold but, being clones, if one tree gets the disease all the others will be susceptible. The Guelph approach is to include as much diversity as possible among the strains under selection-evaluation. Hearing Sean's story of the research, one had to feel optimistic that Henry Koch's goal will be achieved.

While the Chinese zodiac designates 2008 as the Year of the Rat, global conservation organizations are calling this the 'Year of the Frog', particularly apropos since this is a leap-year. The serious reason for the designation is that frogs and frog species (along with other amphibians) are disappearing at unusually rapid rates; so much so that extinction looms for 1/3 to 1/2 of amphibian species.

Frogs and other amphibians are both terrestrial and aquatic during parts of their life-cycle. In the aquatic phase, they are particularly sensitive to water quality, since they take in moisture through the skin. As a result, they are indicators of poor water quality or chemical pollution. Frogs are also important as consumers of insects, as food for other predator species, and have been used extensively in medical research.

Unfortunately, the medical use of frogs has had a nasty repercussion. Chytridiomycosis, a disease caused by a fungus called a 'chytrid', has been killing frogs all over the world, and has been spread partly because of importing frogs for research from countries where the chytrid fungus is widespread. The fungal disease has been blamed for the extinction of one-third of the 120 species of frogs lost since 1980. However, New Zealand scientists have found what appears to be a cure for the disease. Chloramphenicol, currently used as an eye ointment for humans, may be a lifesaver for the amphibians, they say. The researchers found frogs bathed in the solution became resistant to the disease.

One odd aspect of the use of chloramphenicol is that the chemical is used with humans to control bacterial infections. The New Zealand scientists are unsure why this bactericide works on a fungal disease. They also must determine if the chemical will work in the wild as well as it does in the labs. There is also some indication that a frog cured of chytrid infection remains immune to the fungus. It may yet be a good leap-year for the frogs!

CATHARINES CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT

Dec. 29, 2007

Faced with the prospect of sending thirty of my friends out into blinding snow, ice pellets and high winds, I reluctantly postponed the Christmas Bird Count originally scheduled for December 17, 2007. The good news was that many people were still able to attend the new day (Dec.29, 2007), although some people had other commitments and couldn't participate.

The weather that day was much more favourable, just above freezing with a slight wind. We had 32 participants in 10 parties. They spent 80.5 hours in the field and walked or drove 991 km. The final bird count was 80 species and 17,947 individuals.

Many thanks are due to all the participants. Also a big thank you to Don and Sue Minchin for hosting once again the best round-up party in Ontario and for everyone who brought in food for this event. Also thanks to John Potter for all the logistical details!

One pleasant though time-consuming surprise this year was the amount of coverage we received by the press. On count day I was interviewed live on CBC NewsWorld. The same day Don Minchin and several other participants were interviewed by the St. Catharines Standard. A few days later I was interviewed live on radio CKTB. In addition a very nice article appeared in Niagara This Week written by Doug Draper. I hope this is an indication that people want to learn more about birds and the environment.

Record high counts included Snow Goose, Canada Goose, Wood Duck, Hooded Merganser, Red-breasted Merganser, Double-crested Cormorant, Bald Eagle, American Coot, Rock Pigeon, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Chipping Sparrow, and Common Redpoll.

We tallied the lowest count in 20 years for the following species: American Black Duck; Bonaparte's Gull, Ring-billed Gull, Herring Gull, Downy Woodpecker, and Northern Mockingbird .

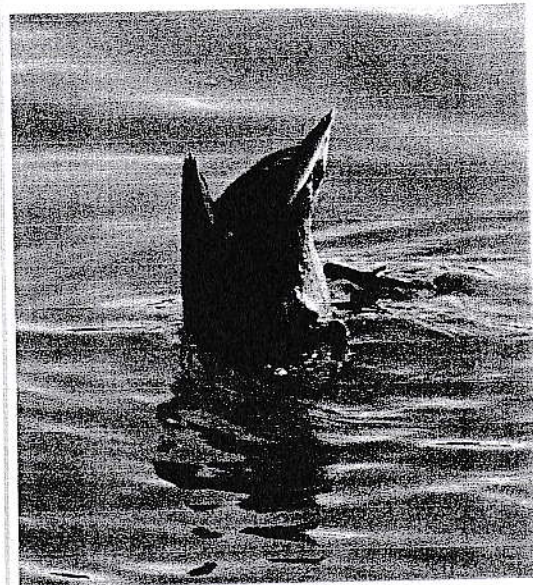
Unusual species found on the count were Wood Duck, Northern Pintail, Ring-necked Duck, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker and Chipping Sparrow.

Sadly we missed sighting any Belted Kingfisher for the first time in 39 years and Song Sparrows were the lowest count in 30 years.

We missed adding Turkey Vultures which were found 2000 metres outside of the boundary of the count.

Participants: Brian Ahara, Barbara Austin, Manley Baarda, John Black, Brad Clements, Trevor Comfield, Carl Damude, Janet Damude, Elizabeth Dentan, Rob Dobos, Jason Elliott, Chris Escott, Denys Gardiner, Simon Gawn, Jim Grassie, Marcie Jacklin (compiler), Myra Kennedy, Nabil Khairallah, Kara Kristjanson, Bill Lamond, Kevin McLaughlin, George Melvin, Roman Olszewski, Kayo Roy, Joyce Sankey, Karin Schneider, Tim Seburn, Roy Sorgenfrei, John Stevens, Katherine Stoltz, Rob Waldhuber.

"the duck stops here"



See page 05 for the species names and counts.

-Report and list by Marcie Jacklin

Species	Number	Species	Number
Snow Goose	7	Bald Eagle	3
Canada Goose	2766	Northern Harrier	1
Mute Swan	5	Sharp-shinned Hawk	6
Wood Duck	3	Cooper's Hawk	11
Gadwall	5	Red-tailed Hawk	82
American Black Duck	8	Rough-legged Hawk	2
Mallard	1129	American Kestrel	27
Northern Pintail	1	American Coot	19
Redhead	45	Bonaparte's Gull	80
Ring-necked Duck	12	Ring-billed Gull	533
Greater Scaup	42	Herring Gull	99
Lesser Scaup	5	Great Black-backed Gull	20
White-winged Scoter	67	Rock Pigeon	776
Long-tailed Duck	230	Mourning Dove	630
Bufflehead	62	Eastern Screech-owl	7
Common Goldeneye	276	Great Horned Owl	2
Hooded Merganser	94	Red-bellied Woodpecker	14
Common Merganser	506	Yellow-bellied Sapsucker	1
Red-breasted Merganser	343	Downy Woodpecker	57
Wild Turkey	26	Hairy Woodpecker	9
Red-throated Loon	3	Northern Flicker	11
Common Loon	1	Northern Shrike	4
Pied-billed Grebe	1	Blue Jay	146
Red-necked Grebe	2	American Crow	140
Double-crested Cormorant	56	Horned Lark	29
Great Blue Heron (Blue form)	3	Black-capped Chickadee	287
Tufted Titmouse	8	Chipping Sparrow	5
Red-breasted Nuthatch	23	Song Sparrow	3
White-breasted Nuthatch	42	White-throated Sparrow	7
Brown Creeper	1	White-crowned Sparrow	20
Carolina Wren	9	Dark-eyed Junco	563
Winter Wren	1	Snow Bunting	36
Golden-crowned Kinglet	9	Northern Cardinal	168
Eastern Bluebird	15	Red-winged Blackbird	1
American Robin	192	Brown-headed Cowbird	2
Gray Catbird	1	Purple Finch	10
Northern Mockingbird	29	House Finch	295
European Starling	5746	Common Redpoll	153
Cedar Waxwing	95	American Goldfinch	385
American Tree Sparrow	163	House Sparrow	1271

WHAT IN HEAVEN...

It may have been sheer coincidence, or perhaps the stars were properly aligned (if you believe in such things). In any case, the Bert Miller Nature Club and the Peninsula Field Naturalists both engaged Brian Pihack as a speaker, in the same month (January, '08). Thus your Editor was able to hear Brian twice - and could easily have listened to him at least one more time that month.

As a member of the Royal Astronomical Society of Canada, Brian is particularly familiar with the discoveries made by Canadian astronomers - and much more aware than most of us about what other devices have been invented by Canadians. How it happens that one man combines an interest in geology and a teaching position in astronomy with an alternate career as a chiropractor, and is knowledgeable in all three pursuits, amazes me. Making a talk on astronomy an evening of fun was a bonus.

Brian had promised that the PFN's presentation would be different from that at the Bert Miller Club, and he delivered on that promise. I had expected a fair amount of discussion about planets, constellations, stars, and comets. Yes, that content was there, but I did not anticipate the parts of Brian's talk in which he demonstrated how the human senses can be fooled, or the brain can be convinced that objects are or are not being perceived, or that, by suggestion, random sounds can be made into supposed words. His demonstration of the various surface features on Mars and other planets, and how they have been thought to resemble people and objects on Earth, paralleled with the infamous E-bay Madonna-of-the-cheese-sandwich, was hilarious.

We were informed that Saturn gradually tips, so that in some years the famous rings are not visible from Earth; that Jupiter's moon Io is volcanic; and that various moons and planets have geysers of liquid nitrogen, seas of liquid methane, or rains of sulphuric acid. And who would have known that the five stars that make up the Southern Cross

constellation are called 'Subaru' in Japanese, hence the emblem on the car of the same name.

Brian also disclosed that a 'secret' US spy satellite orbiting the Earth is basically the same design as the famous Hubble telescope, except that the spy satellite looks earthward instead of out into space. His photos of the Dunlap Observatory at Richmond Hill, showing how much the suburban landscape has encroached on the land around the Observatory, were a disturbing commentary on the results of urban sprawl and bad planning. Wonder what he'll come up with next time?

BRAIN FOOD

Alan Weisman - *The World Without Us* - Harper-Collins; \$32.00

Wintertime seems to produce more reading-time, possibly because of the earlier darkness - or perhaps because the time taken for reading increases as gift-giving puts more reading material at hand. Whatever the reason, several new titles have recently landed on my reading list - this one with a 'whack' that almost shouted "Read Me!". So I did!

What Alan Weisman proposes in this book is, overtly, a description of what would happen to Planet Earth if all humans were to instantaneously disappear from the premises. Covertly, what he also delivers is a panorama of the current state of the Planet, with us present. Frankly, in some places the current picture is not very pretty - and in some places, downright frightening.

How long do you think your house would stand without any maintenance - 10 years? 20? The wooden and wood-composite materials would go quickly - possibly less than 5 years. Any masonry or steel would last a few years longer. Curiously, according to Weisman, the household contents that would probably last longest would be your dishes and the toilet fixtures - ceramics degrade slower than almost anything else, including glass.

AIN FOOD (cont'd)

Did you know that New York City is built on a former swamp and a few hills (which have been levelled), and that the famous subway system runs under all the sewer pipes, flood-water drains, etc.? This means that if humans vanished and the pumps in the subway system failed, the entire system would fill with water within a few hours. How long might it be before that change in water levels would undermine the building foundations, so that the whole skyline would begin to crumble? The lake in Central Park was once a marsh - and would revert to that same condition.

It is interesting to consider which structures on Earth have stood the test of time the longest. Weisman points out that, while stone buildings generally persist longer than most other kinds of structures, even the pyramids from the Mayan civilization have been covered over by vines and other tropical plants, in some cases to such an extent that these stone ruins are only recognizable as hills protruding up from the rainforests.

Perhaps the most disturbing chapter in the book refers to the 400+ nuclear reactors on Earth - 400+ Chernobyls waiting to happen. Reflect on the fact that the radioactive elements in used fuel rods have half-lives of several thousand to several billion years. In other words, some of those elements might have a longer life than Earth itself!

I would recommend this book to you, not so much as a scare-story (which it is) but as a sober, well-researched, and thought-provoking view of what we humans have created on this Planet and will now have to live with - forever - or as long as we are around. Sleep well...

MALCOLMSON ECO-PARK BECKONS!

Earth Day & Native Plant Sale, Sat., April 26,
8:00 a.m. - 1:00 p.m.

Native Plant Sale Saturday, May 10,
8:00 a.m. - 1:00 p.m.

Ramblings...

What does a 'trail' mean to you?

For some strange reason, the word 'trail' has been on my mind lately. By now, I recognize the symptoms of these mind-seizures. When a word resolutely grabs my subconscious and won't let go eventually I surrender and scoot off to my favorite dictionary to look up its meaning. The preferred dictionary presently is the Canadian Oxford, although Webster, and Funk & Wagnall's also occupy space on my bookshelves. Anyway...

Rejecting combining forms, such as 'trail-head' or 'trail-mix', the Canadian Oxford gave me four main noun definitions for 'trail'. The general sense of these was: a track or scent; a beaten or maintained path; an appendage (a *trail* of smoke); or the rear end of a gun carriage. Verb forms carried the essence of: following; coming behind; drawing along; losing (variant of being behind); or growing along the ground or hanging over a wall. (At this point, I fantasized a native of British Columbia giving directions: "Trail the trail that trails through Trail"...)

Most of us probably identify primarily with 'a beaten or maintained path'. And why not? Think of some favorite holiday or scenic areas - The Cabot Trail; Bruce Trail; Trans-Canada Trail...

Closer to home, consider: the Greater Niagara Circle Route; The Waterfront Trail; The Friendship Trail; The Palaeozoic Path; The Wetland Ridge Trail; The Welland Canals Parkway Trail; The Merritt Trail; The Green Ribbon Trail. Something about the word 'trail' seems to stir one's thoughts toward getting out into nature, walking/running/biking along a path, looking for favorite flowers or trees, exercising just for fun, perhaps discovering new or unexpected vistas...

I think I know why I've got 'trail' on my mind - notwithstanding Warton Willy, it's time for Spring - NOW! See you on the trail...

EVENTS OF IMMEDIATE INTEREST

OUTINGS:

The annual **Maple Syrup Fest and Walk** will take place on Saturday, March 1/08 with the walk starting at 10:00 a.m. at the Roland Road entrance parking lot of Short Hills Provincial Park. We will be joined by members of the Bert Miller Nature Club. At 11:45 a.m. (or thereabouts), we proceed to White Meadows Farms for a maple-syrup pancake lunch (unsubsidized – you pay). Non-walkers may join us at White Meadows at 11:45. - John Potter, 905-892-2566.

The **Annual Niagara Peninsula Hawk Watch Open House** will be on Friday, March 21/08 all day at Beamer Conservation Area south of Grimsby. An opportunity to see many species of raptors and learn from the experts. - Marcie Jacklin, 905-871-2577 or 905-341-6664(cell).

INNINGS:

The **ANNUAL PFN POTLUCK DINNER** will be at Mountainview United Church, 150 Glendale Ave., St. Catharines, on Monday, April 28 /08, starting at 6:00 p.m. As has been the custom, please bring your ex-treasures for the draw – draw tickets will be \$0.25. Those with surnames beginning with A-L please bring salad or desserts, surnames M-Z bring first course. All bring cutlery, cups, plates. Anyone willing to help set up, please arrive about 5:30 p.m.



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 2008:

Jan. 28; April 10; Sept. 30

2007/08 PFN EXECUTIVE

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