

# The Peninsula Naturalist

Volume 221

Newsletter of the Peninsula Field Naturalists Club

April 2009

## PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE – April 2009

An old truism in agronomy states: "Humankind owes its existence on this planet to two factors - six inches of topsoil, and the fact that it rains." In the past two or three years, it has become obvious that a third factor also influences human existence. That factor is, that bees pollinate flowers.

Granted, some plants such as grasses and certain trees are wind-pollinated. Birds, bats, and a number of other insect species also account for some pollination. However, for the vast majority of our food crops and the crops that we feed to livestock, bees are the agent of pollination. About one-third of all our food crops are bee-pollinated.

The significance of this simple fact has been forced upon us by recent problems in the world of apiculture. Bees have been under stress for reasons not completely understood. Pesticides, viruses, predatory parasitic mites, poor winter survival because of bad management, and a number of other notions (including cellphone radiation!) have been suggested as the causes of so-called 'Colony Collapse Disorder'. The bottom line is, bees are failing to overwinter. It is too early yet to know how the overwintering went this year, but certainly much of the country had difficult and cold weather conditions. Only time will tell how the bees survived.

Can we do anything about this? Well, consider that bee-pollination contributes \$1.7 billion to the Canadian economy, including the pollination of hybrid canola worth \$13 billion, yet beekeepers receive minimal assistance from governments. Possibly a stinging letter or two to the Agriculture Department, suggesting they not be stingy with aid to the beekeepers, might be in order?

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A Walk in the Short Hills (HNC) Property  
(story inside)

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## THE WORLD BENEATH MY FEET

Versatile, in a curious way - that might be one way to describe Brian Pihack. Some people may know Brian as a trained chiropractor; some know him as an amateur astronomer with more than the average grasp of the heavens; and some know him as down-to-earth - literally. It was the latter aspect that I anticipated when I asked Brian to speak to the Club this year.

If you attended last year's event, when Brian took off on the topic "What in Heaven..." and proceeded to give us a tour of the Universe and beyond, then you might have had an inkling of what was in store for this year's topic "The World Beneath my Feet". Just an inkling, mind you, because with Brian the destination is the journey. I might have known, given that Brian is also a knowledgeable geologist, that we would cover a lot of ground (pun intended).

Up front, the geologist in Brian demanded that we should realize from whence we came. So we were introduced to Planet Earth by way of a reminder of the formation of the Universe, some several billion years ago. With our galaxy's position as a rather minor little corner of the vastness of space fixed in our minds, we were then brought to the location of our solar system out on one edge of the galaxy. All this was done with gorgeous color-photos (with the lighting from many light-years in past history).

Next, we were given a 'quickie' tour of Earth's previous existence, from coalescing space-debris to an inhospitable hot ball of molten rock with rather noxious gasses for an atmosphere, to at last a cooler ball of rock with an orange colour thanks to the presence of substantial amounts of iron.

Now, the main event - the proper chemical elements in place to form molecules of organic compounds, the eventual merging of these into something that reproduced itself, and now we started to get life-forms - marine life initially, since the planet was largely covered in water.

About this stage was where one of Brian's favorite groups of antique creatures started to live, and die, and become fossils. And fossils, particularly those found in the Ridgepoint area of southern Niagara, are one of Brian's passions. He brought with him a display of a number of his 'finds' from the quarry, including some near-perfect examples of prehistoric animals preserved in the layers of sedimentary limestone deposited many million years ago.

He also mentioned, and had a fossilized example, of the horseshoe crab, essentially unchanged in 50 million years of living on this planet. It is humbling to realize how little time we humans have existed in the geological time-scale of this Earth, and how little we know of its history - unless, like Brian, we have studied the World beneath our feet.

It was also interesting to see how serious the Club members were about absorbing Brian's message - to the extent that a joke 'photograph' of a group of modern human hunters around a dead dinosaur was accepted with complete belief - at least until Brian remarked on the fact that this was really a trick photo! Gotcha!

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### PFN / BMNC / NFNC OUTING IN HAMILTON SHORT HILLS NATURE AREA

An enthusiastic group of about 22 members of the three Niagara Nature Clubs met at the Hamilton Short Hills nature area on the corner of Metler Rd and Center Street in Pelham for the 8<sup>th</sup> annual Pancake Hike, on March 14 / 09. The weather was excellent, with the temperature hovering around 0°C, sun shining, and dry weather with a high of about 6°C predicted. PFN President John Potter led the walk, after group photo shots by Dawn Pierrynowski and Rick Young, with the group standing beside a blooming Pussy-willow bush. (see p. 07).

An American Robin obliged the birders while the group assembled, and thereafter the group saw or heard Chickadees, Cardinals, Red-bellied Woodpeckers, Nuthatches, and a Great Horned Owl being pursued by a murder of Crows. Other unidentified woodpeckers were also heard.

The trail wound around a spring which is one headwater of Twelve-Mile Creek, and in which Skunk-cabbage is the main groundcover later in the spring; Red Osier Dogwood was vivid on this day. John pointed out large White Birch, Yellow Birch, Bitternut and Shagbark Hickory, Black Cherry, small Sassafras and later some larger specimens, Red Oak, White Oak, White Pine, Hemlock, American Beech in various stages of decline due to beech-bark disease, Red Maple, tarspot on fallen Norway Maple leaves, and several large Tulip trees with flower buds glistening in the sun.

Later, Christmas fern, ostrich fern, wood fern and garlic mustard were seen, and eventually a few Witch-hazel bushes and some very large and old ironwood (Hop-hornbeam) trees. The trip continued with a run to Agape Valley where a pancake and sausage lunch was enjoyed. The day had something for almost everyone, including some owl scat and a few pellets which might have been either bunny or deer dung - we did not definitively decide which.

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## GREENBELT - ROADS - BIODIVERSITY

At first sight, these three words might not seem to be directly related. However, in his presentation in February, Dr. John Middleton clearly explained their connection. As an ecologist, a member of the Greenbelt Council (which advises the Minister) and a founder of the Ontario Road Ecology Group, John knows whereof he speaks.

He reminded us that because the way Ontario was originally surveyed, no place anywhere in southern Ontario is more than 1-2 km away from a road. This road network contributes to

most of the area being inhabited, and as a result very little of the area is ever really dark at night - or quiet. As well, this road network also disconnects the corridors that wildlife travel in.

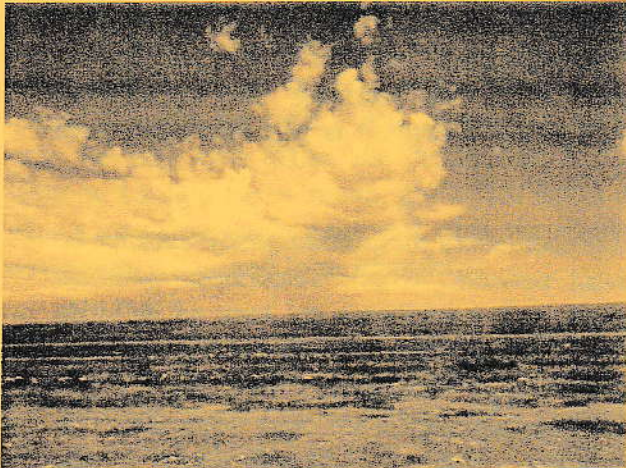
Seen on a satellite photo or aerial map, little of Ontario's original forest cover remains; Essex County has about 2%. Niagara has about 15%, similar to the Oak Ridges moraine or areas along the Escarpment in the Bruce. It is these areas which make up the Greenbelt. Essentially, the Greenbelt constrains the Golden Horseshoe or Greater Toronto Area (GTA), an area larger than the Netherlands. However, the concern is that growth/sprawl may be restricted by the Greenbelt, but will 'leapfrog' into the outside areas. And the Greenbelt is still interlaced with roads.

Biodiversity enters the picture partly because of the road network, which disconnects wildlife corridors and contributes to loss of wildlife through roadkill. John pointed out that a study of Massasauga rattlesnakes had shown that adults of the population are most important. The loss of a few juveniles, while unfortunate, is less serious than the loss of a single adult, in relation to population decline. Roadkill, particularly of adults of many species, is a major problem. Some Provinces address this by designing the roadways with wildlife passages, such as bridges, tunnels, etc., depending on the type of wildlife that might be known to cross the roads. Hopefully Ontario will take note.

John mentioned France as a country committed to 'greening', based partly on their President's personal commitment, particularly with respect to 'green' transportation. As an example, trucks are shipped across France by rail, instead of utilizing the highways. He noted that Ontario is starting to consider 'green' approaches to transportation, although designs such as the MetroLinks system still project plans for the GTA well into the future. John also speculated that Ontario may in future levy road user charges, not only on current toll-roads but on all highways.

## NOTES FROM DOWN UNDER

We spent this past winter in Australia and New Zealand. While waiting for the arrival of our son and daughter-in-law's first child we decided to take a train trip across Australia. After flying to Sydney we boarded the Indian Pacific for the three and a half day journey across southern Australia. The rails took us from the Pacific to the Indian Ocean, passing through the Blue mountains of eastern Australia, stopping in Adelaide for a tour, across the prairies, then the Nullarbor Plain and finally to Perth.



### **The Nullarbor**

The Nullarbor meaning 'no trees' is a flat, treeless area some 1200 kilometres at its widest point. It was here that we saw many feral camels roaming off in the distance. The camels were originally brought to Australia in the 19th century as pack animals and as a means of transportation for mineral explorers in the outback. As with so many things introduced, there are now over one million feral camels and it is thought that the population will double in the next eight years. The camel drivers came mostly from Afghanistan, but also from Pakistan and the Turkish Empire. The other excursion train which we didn't take, the Ghan, is named after the Afghan camel drivers who came in the 1800's. These feral animals are edging out native species such as kangaroos, overrunning aboriginal villages, destroying their sacred sites, ruining waterholes and other property such as cattle pastures. Camels are

seriously upsetting the balance of the fragile Australian desert ecosystem.

One of the interesting train stops was Cooke, population 4, who were all there that day. This is where the train drivers change. I'm sure they look forward to their three or four days in Cooke waiting to board the returning train.



### **Cooke**

The 3 ½ days passed quickly. While in Perth, we took a trip to Margaret River known locally as "Maggie's Creek" which is a more accurate description, to see vineyards, caves, and the Cape Leewin lighthouse where the Great Southern Ocean meets the Indian Ocean.

However, the main purpose for sharing this trip with the PFN newsletter readers was our visit to the "Eagles Heritage Raptor Wildlife Centre" (on the Boodjidup Road), a non-profit group specializing in the rehabilitation of injured raptors including owls, breeding and also for education of adults and children. As you walk through the grounds, there are owls and hawks who never recovered sufficiently to be returned to the wild, although each year many birds are rehabilitated and returned to the wild.

After telling our guide, Nancy, that we came from the Niagara area of Canada and lived near an Owl Centre she immediately recognized the work of Kay McKeever and said; "Everyone knows Kay!"



### **Echo**

Nancy took us to an amphitheatre where we were shown an owl, Echo, who is a female barn owl (*Tyto alba*) which had been captive bred and raised.



### **Echo with Nancy and Sue**

A big hit with visitors is the twice-daily flight displays. We were fascinated by the released, rehabilitated black kites (Madame Pele and Little Mate) that came for a feeding twice a day as the guide threw bits of chicken into the air. A feral one joined them having learned of the easy lunch.

We learned about the role of insecticides in raptor health. Although insects are an important part of ecology and are the source of food for many animals they can be terrible nuisances, as we are well aware. We learned of different ways to get rid of those biting, food-spoiling, and disease-carrying insects: bay leaves deter cockroaches, cedar wood balls or oil keep away silverfish. Australia has different insects and they use sticky traps for their pantry moths and midge screens instead of 'fly wire'. Nevertheless, the overuse of toxic pesticides has an undesirable effect such as poisoning of animals that eat insects and well as further down the food chain. Some of the raptors are at the sanctuary because of insecticide poisoning which damages their brains and nervous system; many have had to be put down.

Other raptor food such as mice and rats certainly need controlling as they spread serious diseases and fleas. The common anticoagulant poisons cause internal haemorrhaging from the animal's liver taking three to ten days to kill the animal, a very slow death for them. We were taught other way to get rid of these annoying pests such as cleaning up gardens and junk, as leaving these things untended-to is inviting rodents. We learned that pumpkin seeds and the good old-fashioned peanut butter are good to use in traps. Apparently a poison containing Coumatetralyl does not accumulate up the food chain in the same way as Warfarin does. This means that it poses less of a risk to our native predators.

We also learned that certain raptors, Wedge Tailed Eagles, that feed on road kill are often killed while eating their delicious dinner and so we were instructed in the fine art of removing kangaroo carcasses from the 'carriageway'. Seeing as this didn't translate well, we didn't pay much attention to it. Nevertheless we were told: "It is very easy to remove a fresh kangaroo carcass – simply protect the hands with gloves and drag the animal off by a leg or a tail. If the animal is female check the pouch for young."

- by Don and Sue Minchin -

## OUTINGS / EVENTS –MAY-JUNE '09

The following trips and field events are planned, subject to weather and level of participation. For the more distant trips, please confirm your participation with the specified leader.

### **SHORT HILLS SANCTUARY CLEANUP**

Sunday, May 3, 2009, 10:00 a.m.

Please 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. With many hands helping, there should be time after to enjoy the wild flowers. Contact: Brian Calvert 905-892-6267

### **TROUT LILIES AND TRILLIUMS**

Saturday, May 9, 2009, 1:00 p.m.

Many spring wild flowers should be in bloom in Short Hills Provincial Park. The first part of the walk will be along the wheelchair-accessible Paleozoic path. Then we will trek downstream along the rocky gorge. Meet at the Roland Road entrance. Contact: Brian Calvert 905-892-6267.

### **ANNUAL PFN BIRDING OUTING**

Sunday, May 10, 9:00 to noon

Watch for migrating birds in Malcolmson Eco-Park. Meet in the parking lot on the north side of Lakeshore Road, at Niagara Street. Contact: Barb West 905-935-5339.

### **ALLEGHENY NATIONAL FOREST**

May 15-18, 2009 weekend

Geology and wild flowers along hiking trails in Pennsylvania. Camping area is primitive, but inexpensive. Passport not required until June 1. Contact: Brian Calvert 905-892-6267.

### **BEAVER VALLEY HIKING**

May 22-24, 2009 weekend.

Serious hiking with the Ganaraska Trail Club, & visits to Feversham Gorge and Eugenia Falls. Free primitive tenting in Brian's woods. Contact: Brian Calvert 905-892-6267.

### **MARCY'S WOODS FLORA & FAUNA**

Saturday, May 23, 2009, 10:00 a.m.

Meet with the Bert Miller Nature Club in Marcy's Woods, at the south end of Holloway Bay Road. Contact: Earl Plato 905-894-2417.

### **ONTARIO NATURE ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING**

Saturday, May 30, 2009, Southampton. See Ontario Nature website for details.

### **MARCY'S WOODS (SECOND CHANCE!)**

Sunday, May 31, 2009, 10:00 a.m.

Meet with the Niagara Falls Nature Club to see many types of plants and birds also. Gather at the south end of Holloway Bay Road. Bring lunch. Contact: Joyce Sankey 905-329-9672.

### **RETURN TO MIDLAND**

June 5-7, 2009 weekend.

Visit Wye Marsh, Awenda Provincial Park and other nature spots in the Huronia area. Last time, we saw plenty of wildflowers and birds. Motel or tenting accommodations. Contact: Brian Calvert 905-892-6267.

### **BROWN'S POINT – ANNUAL PFN BBQ**

Saturday, June 13, 2009, 10:00 a.m. Rain date June 14. **See last page of newsletter for details.**

### **NFNC QUEENSTON HEIGHTS POTLUCK**

Wednesday, June 17, 2009, 6:00 p.m.

The annual Niagara Falls Nature Club potluck picnic supper at the pavilion, followed by a walk in the woods. Bring plate, cup & utensils. Contact: Giselle Mills 905-892-3973.

### **GEM & MINERAL SHOW & SALE**

Saturday, June 20, 2009, 10:00 a.m.-5:00 p.m.

Visit with the Niagara Peninsula Geological Society at the Strawberry Festival, Beamsville. Contact: [www.ccfms.ca/clubs/npgs](http://www.ccfms.ca/clubs/npgs).

### **VALENS CONSERVATION AREA**

Sunday June 21, 2009, 9:00 a.m.

Meet the Niagara Falls Nature Club at Prudhommes Tim Hortons for carpooling to see vegetation, birds and animals. Contact: Janet Damude 905-892-2158.

## ECOLOGY OF SULPHUR SPRINGS IN NIAGARA

Mention Buckhorn Creek to many folks in Niagara and they would probably answer "What?" Or maybe that just applies to those of us who haven't bothered to roam around the Glanbrook area. Anyway, such a creek does exist, and is near the Binbrook Conservation Area, and is even closer to a landfill site in Glanbrook. All of which relates to the presentation that Dr. Chris Bunt gave us at the March PFN meeting.

Going back almost a decade, Chris was researching Buckhorn Creek for the NPCA and the Niagara Restoration Council, to determine whether any barriers to fish migration needed to be remediated (i.e. removed). He was tipped off to a section of the Creek around which a strong and disagreeable odour was known. The Creek at this point runs only a few meters away from the Glanbrook landfill, and it was suspected that something leaching from the landfill cause the foul odour. However, it also turned out that a spring bubbling up very close to the stream produced the odour, which Chris determined as being 'rotten-egg gas' (hydrogen sulphide).

It became obvious that water from this spring was running into and mixing with the Creek water. Also, for about 500 meters downstream no fish or any other wildlife could be found in the stream. Above the spring entrance, and beyond 500 m downstream, fish lived normally.

Since the City of Hamilton included this area in its boundaries, the City decided at one point to cap the spring and be rid of the foul smell. However, as Chris described it, the City drove a large pipe into the spring, capped it, and promptly the pressure in the spring blew the capped pipe right out of the spring. Capping was summarily abandoned.

Eventually, Chris and his assistants found that numerous species of fish lived in the stream upstream from the spring, and likewise at about

1000 metres downstream. In the distance affected by the spring water, they found by experiment that fish would not live, partly because of low oxygen content, partly because of sulphur compounds that made the water acidic, and partly because the water was also salty from dissolved salts welling up from whatever source feeds the spring. Chris's opinion was that the water derives from an aquifer of unknown depth. On a positive note, he found no evidence that the landfill was related to the water-source for the spring.

As a sidelight to his presentation, Chris also explained how the Welland River, from the Niagara River upstream to Port Davidson, undergoes essentially a fresh-water tidal bore twice daily. This is caused by manipulation of the water level in the Welland River which serves as a water reservoir for the OPG generators at Queenston. Where the Welland River crosses the Welland Canal, the river is forced through deep siphons that run under the Canal, and fish have been shown to migrate up and down-stream through these siphons. Just one more oddity of Niagara, to go along with its own miniature version of 'Old Faithful'.



This cheerful group are the participants in the 2009 Maple Syrup walk at HNC Short Hills – we're sure you will recognize everyone!

Thanks to Dawn and Rick for photos, and to Brian, Don and Sue for articles in this issue.

## EVENTS OF INTEREST

**OUTINGS:** PLEASE NOTE THE SCHEDULE OF PLANNED OUTINGS ON PAGE 06 OF THIS NEWSLETTER. WE MAY BE MAILING/EMAILING A 'FLASH-SHEET' OF OUTINGS FOR JULY-AUGUST – KEEP WATCHING YOUR MEDIA!

ALL OUTINGS ARE WEATHER-DEPENDENT – IF IN DOUBT, CALL THE DESIGNATED CONTACT. FOR THE MORE DISTANT TRIPS, PLEASE CONFIRM YOUR ATTENDANCE WITH THE DESIGNATED LEADER.

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### **BROWN'S POINT – ANNUAL PFN BBQ** **Saturday, June 13, 2009, 10:00 a.m. Rain date June 14.**

The annual PFN barbecue meets at Brown's Point, on the east side of the Niagara Parkway, ca. 2 km north of Queenston (between Line 3 and Line 6). Walk in the forest to see gravel deposits from the Frontenac Stage, when the Lake Ontario water level was a bit higher. Also, a marker from an old border survey after the War of 1812. Contact: John Potter 905-892-2566.



#### **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 .

P.O. Box 23031, 124 Welland Ave., St. Catharines, ON. L2R7P6

#### **The Peninsula Naturalist Newsletter**

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The Editor welcomes written articles or artwork on any natural history topic. Handwritten articles are accepted; if possible, please submit typewritten articles, computer disks, or email to [jmpotter@vaxxine.com](mailto:jmpotter@vaxxine.com) 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 2009:**

**Jan. 28; April 10; Sept. 30**

#### **2008/09 PFN EXECUTIVE**

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