



The Peninsula Naturalist

Volume 222

Newsletter of the Peninsula Field Naturalists Club

October 2009

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE – OCT. 2009

Every so often, a 'good-news' story arises, begging to be announced to all who read this newsletter. This is one of those occasions.

The good news is that John Black and Kayo Roy (with a supporting cast of 30 contributing writers) are nearing the culmination of their project of producing a book about Niagara birds. The title: "Niagara Birds". The product: an exhaustive 600+-page volume dealing with just about anything you might wish to know about the 373 species of birds in Regional Niagara during the last 40+ years.

The Board of Directors of the PFN have agreed to assist our two member-authors in promoting and publicizing "Niagara Birds" to fellow naturalists and the public at large. An initiative which John and Kayo espouse is the placing of copies of the book in all schools and public libraries in Niagara, for the educational value of the contents to be widely available. The Board concurs that this book should be readily accessible to anyone who shares the authors' fascination with Niagara's avifauna.

Now, folks, here's where you come in. If you are passionate about birds and birding, and in the spirit of supporting local initiative, you can buy the book. Then you might consider making a gift of a copy of the book to friends, relatives, acquaintances - anyone you know who loves birds and birding. Please note that the book is not a field guide - but if you want to know more about raptor migration, Peregrine Falcon hacking, the Owl Foundation, or even how birds

affect Niagara vineyards, then this book is your source. For further information, John, Kayo, or your Editor can provide you a brochure about this significant new source of local avian lore.



ANNUAL MEETING

With our November meeting being the last in the current calendar year, most members will know that the November meeting is our Annual Meeting as well as being 'Dessert Night' and 'Bring a Friend Night'.

At the time of writing this notice, one Director (Bryan Joule) has completed his second 2-year term on the Board and has agreed to stand for election for another term. One Director (Shannon Fletcher) resigned from the Board for personal reasons, and the office of Vice-President is vacant. Thus, we are open for nominations of two new Board members, and the re-election of one Director. Is a few hours a year too much to ask, for the good of the Club?

Also, after due consideration of the Club's financial status, the Board has voted to raise membership fees to \$35/family, \$25/individual, and \$10/person under 25 (unchanged), effective immediately. These rates are comparable with those of our sister Nature Clubs in Niagara, and are the first increases in several years. Increased costs of insurance, our Canada Post box and mailing rates, and a decline in membership have all contributed to reducing our revenue.

students in Alan Unwin's class at Niagara College are required to produce examples of technical writing about real subjects in local ecology. The following is one student's submission. – Ed.)

WINTER IS FOR THE BIRDS

Niagara College students document the habitat needs of winter bird populations along Twelve Mile

By Simon Gräfe

It may seem like our forests and streams are empty during the cold winter months, but if you get up early enough you will find a variety of brave little birds and several college students sticking it out.

Students from Niagara College's Ecosystem Restoration program have been monitoring winter birds along Twelve Mile Creek between January and March to help Ontario Power Generation gain a better understanding of who calls the creek home and how they can benefit from habitat restoration initiatives.

Results from the winter indicate that the creek supports a variety of birds, from common urban generalists to birds that favour woodlands and thickets to waterfowl.

The OPG's DeCew power generating station is particularly well suited to supporting waterfowl as the warm, open waters are ideal habitat for northern ducks as they move south for the winter. However, the birds are limited by a lack of food, as the swift, variable waters of the dam prevent water plants from establishing.

On the other hand, the trails that run along the creek contain many exotic species, like Manitoba maple and buckthorn and are poor habitat for many bird species due to the absence of both a dense shrub cover and a nutritious food source.

In both cases a greater abundance of native vegetation would benefit the birds greatly.

Waterfowl depend directly on aquatic vegetation like cattail, arrowhead and duckweed for food and also indirectly to support the water insects (benthic macroinvertebrates) and fish that they prey on.

More native shrubs like dogwoods, viburnums and ninebark would increase the food available for birds as well as the density of woody plants. This would provide small, perching birds with a greater energy reserve for the winter, shelter from the elements and protection from predators.

A higher diversity of heavy seeded trees like beech, hickory and oak would add an even greater supply of energy rich foods that aren't available from plants like Manitoba maple and buckthorn.

Much of Twelve Mile Creek is developed, and the creek itself varies too much due to the DeCew dam to support aquatic vegetation, however there are areas that can be enhanced.

Several potential ponds were observed alongside the creek during the end of winter and may serve as a quiet site for water plants, while Rotary Park near the dam still has a great deal of open space that can be planted without removing existing woody vegetation.

Local residents can help out too by choosing to plant shrubs or trees that provide food and habitat for birds. Not only do the trees support the local bird population, but they also provide homeowners with a chance to view birds without leaving their home.

With increasing development removing bird habitat, every extra tree and shrub means a lot for these birds. Without suitable habitat and food, the seemingly empty winter forest and streams may become just that – empty.

(Thanks, Simon and Alan, for this report. – Ed.)

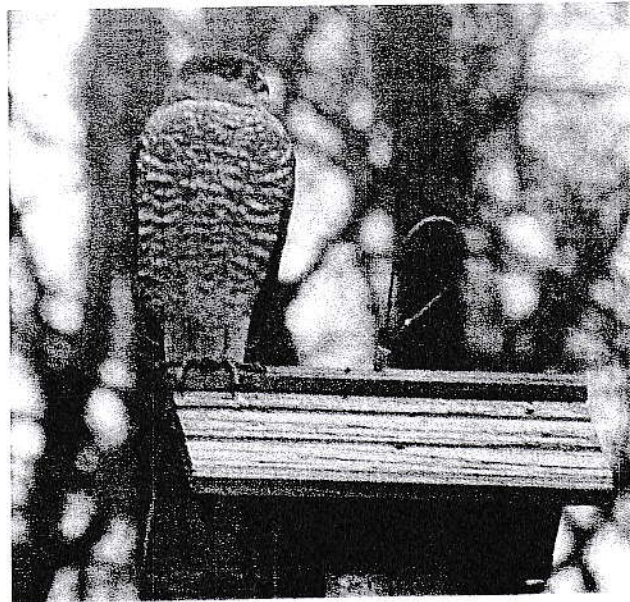
NIAGARA PENINSULA HAWKWATCH

Any non-naturalist who has ever visited the ANPCA's Beamer Conservation Area on 40-Mile Creek at Grimsby may have wondered what was the purpose of the tower that sits in the middle of the circular grass area. By now, most naturalists probably know that the tower is used for the Niagara Peninsula Hawkwatch (NPH). But what exactly goes on at the top of that tower, and what does the NPH do?

The reason for the tower, and what goes on there, was well explained by John Stevens, Past President of NPH, at the September PFN meeting.

The history of hawk-watching, as John noted, goes back in Ontario history to at least 1796, when Lady Simcoe (wife of Governor John Graves Simcoe) described the coloration of a Red-tailed Hawk in her diary. The modern-day organized Hawkwatch at Beamer CA began 35 years ago and, since its beginning, has created a remarkable track record. In those 35 years, watchers have contributed 16,800 hours of watching time, made 468,000 individual bird sightings, and recorded data on 22 species of birds. The volunteers are present from March 1 to May 15, averaging about 11 hours per day, which is an enviable level of dedication to volunteering.

What do the volunteers watch? As most of you know, the 'hawk' family includes a number of species, mainly (in our area) in three subfamilies - the Buteos, Accipiters, and Falcons - with a few species in the related families of the Harriers, Ospreys and Vultures. Over the years, the five most-common species have been Broad-winged Hawk, Sharp-shinned Hawk, Red-Tailed Hawk, Turkey Vulture, and Red-shouldered Hawk. There have been significant increases in the numbers of Turkey Vultures, and since the banning of DDT, the Osprey, Bald Eagle and Merlin have been making a comeback. However, some species such as the Sharp-shinned Hawk are showing a steady decline, for reasons not yet known.



Why Beamer CA? John explained that raptors prefer not to fly over large areas of open water, because many hawks use thermals of rising air to gain altitude, and open water does not supply such air currents. Consequently, the birds tend to skirt around large lakes; thus many hawkwatching sites are on the south shores of the Great Lakes. In Niagara, the birds will travel along the Escarpment rather than fly directly across Lake Ontario. The point of land at Beamer, above 40-Mile Creek, provides a good place to watch for birds moving along the Escarpment. However, in the 35 years of the Hawkwatch, the trees around Beamer CA have grown, and made viewing more difficult. Hence, the tower.

Part of the activity on the tower involves a full set of weather-recording instruments; temperature, wind speed and direction, humidity, cloudiness and precipitation are all monitored, to provide data which may correlate with hawk activity. One observer, the counter, is responsible for recording all raptor sightings and recording these hourly on a tally-board. Other watchers may help spot and identify birds and give this information to the counter. Ultimately, all of the data collected is shared with the Hawk Migration Association of North America (HMANA), of which the Niagara Hawkwatch is a member.

While most of us recreational birdwatchers might feel lucky at being able to identify a hawk species, the experts can distinguish the age and sex of birds where appropriate visual clues are visible.

Obviously, an interesting part of hawkwatching is the watching - observing the birds in flight - and John provided a number of gorgeous photos taken at the Beamer site and elsewhere. The identification process involves clues such as how the bird flaps its wings, and specific markings on the wings and body. Personally, although I've looked at many Red-tailed Hawks in flight, I'd never noticed that it is the only Buteo with dark bands along the leading edge of each wing. Such features as the way the head of a Bald Eagle projects from the body differently than that of a Golden Eagle are part of the technique of a trained watcher. Photos by Barry Cheriére and Tom Thomas were used to show us what the watchers look for. It was amazing to see a kettling group of hawks in one photo, numbering nearly 100 birds - and astonishing in the next photo to have several hundred visible. I'm sure everyone came away with a new appreciation of the skill and dedication of the men in the tower.

MOSSES AND LICHENS

Sunday, April 19, was designated as an excursion of exploration into the world of tiny green things - and some brown things. Roman Olszewski, our resident Niagara expert on lichens and mosses, led a hike through parts of Short Hills Provincial Park, with a gathering of twenty or so followers.

The day was sunny and spring-like, dramatically unlike the cold weather that had pertained at the Beamer Hawk Watch event. We armed ourselves with hand lenses and hiking boots and note pads for some of the participants, and set off into the easterly side of the Park on the path to the Wiley-Terrace Creek Trail.

The entry trail, obviously a farm lane in its previous incarnation, was up-and-down, muddy in places, but productive from a micro-botanist's point of view.

If you've ever prowled with Roman, you will know that tongue-twisting Latin names are his forte - although, to be fair, all aspects of biology make use of equally perplexing names. Fortunately, Roman provided a handy checklist of Mosses, Lichens and Liverworts that we might expect to find - with common English names (where known).

In any case, our first sighting was *Fissidens taxifolius* (Common Pocket-moss to us novices), a name which almost always pops up in a bryological walk. Where the *Fissidens* grow, can *Brachythecium* be far behind? No, *Brachythecium* was our third moss of the morning, with an *Atrichum undulatum* (Common smoothcap moss) tucked in between.

In the course of 2-3 hours, we found (or were shown) at least 24 species, including two lichens which Roman pronounced to be rare (*Peltigera praetextata* - Scaly Dog Lichen) and very rare (*Trypethelium virens* - no common name). We also saw a *Xanthoparmelia* lichen on a granite erratic rock, and *Lecidella stigmathea* (Disk Lichen), a black crusty lichen on the rock faces in the creek bed.

Unfortunately, we missed seeing any Liverworts, but saw at least two-thirds of the species on Roman's checklist - which made for a very satisfying spring day. Somehow, it always seems that lichen and moss hunting goes best when one has a knowledgeable guide - like many other aspects of life - and we are very fortunate to have one of the best!

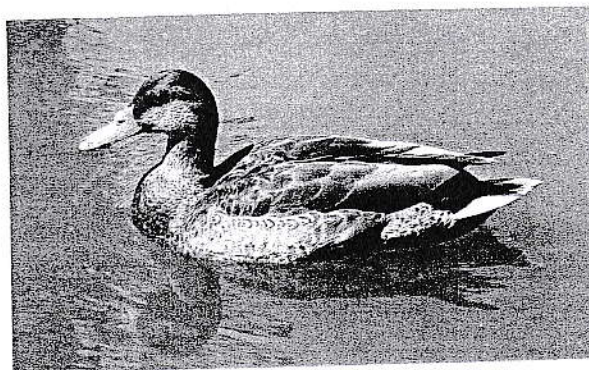
Make a point of being at the Wainfleet Bog on October 25, with a magnifier lens, and you too will have a chance to learn about tiny green things with large names, under Roman's direction. Good hunting!

MY BIRDATHON ON MAY 20, 2009

Getting up several hours earlier than normal but with American Robins already singing, I began the day by heading to Port Weller. There I met with Katherine Stoltz who guided me through Malcolmson Woods, her regular morning haunt during the spring migration. She helped me find more than a dozen warbler species including a Canada Warbler (the species on the Bird Studies Canada logo that is declining significantly in number) and pointed out a branch that a Ruby-throated Hummingbird liked to perch on. Obliging, he and a female showed up right on cue. After an hour or so, Katherine had to leave for work and I headed to the eastern pier of the Welland Canal.

Almost immediately I noticed a decrease in the variety of the bird song compared to what it had been last Sunday when we had done a Count for the Buffalo Ornithological Society. There were abundant Yellow Warblers, Baltimore Orioles, American Goldfinches, Gray Catbirds and Warbling Vireos, all common species but few less common migrants. At the first pond, now the only one since the second has been infilled, two American Coots, a noisy Common Moorhen, a pair of Mute Swans (they were pretty quiet) and a Blue-winged Teal were added to my list. I decided to turn back at this point as I could only find cormorants on the lake and was not getting new land birds. A surprise find near my car at Jones Beach was a female Eastern Bluebird.

I now headed for Fireman's Park in Niagara Falls, which had a good variety of species on the BOS Count. Along the way, I picked up Horned Lark, American Kestrel, Swamp Sparrow and Orchard Oriole but on a quick side trip to Queenston for Bonaparte's Gull where an estimated 1,800 had been present on Sunday, I came up empty as nary a one could I find. Fireman's Park was also much quieter and I was starting to get a message. I headed west, stopping at the former lagoons near Glendale and the QEW that are now part of Niagara College and have been restored as two large



ponds. Here, the highlight was a female Pintail with 12 young ones trailing behind her.

I tried to visit the former Grimsby lagoons that have also been restored as waterfowl habitat but not having been there before, came at them from the lake side through poison ivy and scaling a farm fence. One of the little islands that had been created hosted a pair of Common Terns, which were vigorously defending it against a larger Caspian Tern. My way to the southern pond was blocked by a barbed-wire topped fence so I retraced my steps. Heading south, I stopped at Beamer Memorial Conservation Area where the hawk watch is conducted to try and get Brown Thrasher and/or Cooper's Hawk, which were both nesting there ten days earlier when I was last doing the monitoring but found neither and had to push on. I wasn't starting to panic but was concerned at the number of species that I hadn't found; it was already 2:30.

Striking south toward Smithville on country roads, I came across a flooded field that had some shorebirds and caught a glimpse of the only Great Blue Heron that I saw all day. Fortunately, I later stopped when something reddish-brown ducked into a bush. I had my Brown Thrasher, confirmed when it then flew across the road. I continued south to the Wainfleet area where I had my 'atlas square' between 2001 and 2005, visiting almost all the spots where I had Scarlet Tanagers and Cuckoos several years ago but came away with nothing as you generally don't find things when you want to, but only when you happen to. The meadows where Bobolinks had been present in years past were also strangely free of them.

While it had been beautifully sunny and warm all day, as I got closer to Lake Erie and the day wore on, it was getting markedly cooler (14° versus 26°). I found only the occasional Spotted Sandpiper along the lakeshore but in Port Colborne harbour found a pair of Common Mergansers and a Greater Scaup. There was no sign of Peregrine Falcons around the grain elevators and further east, where we find lots of Tufted Titmice during the winter, there were none of those to be heard or seen either.

About 7:00 pm, I arrived at Mud Lake hoping to get some marsh birds and migrant songbirds. I circumnavigated the entire thing, making several forays into the rushes but in more than 90 minutes added nothing new to my list except for Purple Martin and Cedar Waxwing. These two along with Tree Swallows and Eastern Kingbirds were feasting on the millions of insects that were swarming throughout. A few woodland birds like Wood Thrush, House Wren, Great Crested Flycatcher and Blackpoll Warbler were singing but mainly it was Red-winged Blackbirds making the noise.

After getting some fuel, I had one more site to visit and that was the road along the west side of the Wainfleet Bog where I arrived just after sunset. I stopped the car and there were Veerys calling from both sides of the road, a species that I had not had all day. Almost immediately a Whip-poor-will began calling from the east, then moved to the edge of the road to the west, almost right in the car with me. It makes an astonishingly loud call. I heard several of them as I moved along but could not get a Common Nighthawk or Woodcock. Nor did I get those two as I headed home so the Whip-poor-will became my 98th and final species of the day. Several surprising misses included House Finch, which was the first species that I heard when I awoke the next morning, Belted Kingfisher and the aforementioned Bonaparte's Gull.

So I missed my target (100 birds) but had a good day overall with excellent weather, travelling 320 km over the 16 hours. Upon arriving home, I discovered that I had

accumulated 11 wood ticks that I suspect came from the Mud Lake area as I had removed one from my neck shortly after leaving there. Every article of clothing that I had on was infested.

So that's it, folks. Thank you for your interest in birds. The list of species seen and heard is attached. - *John Stevens*

Pied-billed Grebe, Dob-crested Cormorant, Great Blue Heron, Green Heron, Turkey Vulture, Mute Swan, Canada Goose, Wood Duck, American Wigeon, Mallard, Blue-winged Teal, Northern Pintail, Greater Scaup, Long-tailed Duck, Bufflehead, Common Merganser, Red-tailed Hawk, American Kestrel, Ring-necked Pheasant, Wild Turkey, Common Moorhen, American Coot, Semipalmated Plover, Killdeer, Spotted Sandpiper, Least Sandpiper, Pectoral Sandpiper, Ring-billed Gull, Herring Gull, Gr. Black-backed Gull, Caspian Tern, Common Tern, Rock Pigeon, Mourning Dove, Whip-poor-will, Chimney Swift, Ruby-throated Hummingbird, Red-bellied Woodpecker, Downy Woodpecker, Hairy Woodpecker, Northern Flicker, Eastern Wood-pewee, Willow Flycatcher, Least Flycatcher, Great-crested Flycatcher, Eastern Kingbird, Warbling Vireo, Red-eyed Vireo, Bluejay, American Crow, Horned Lark, Purple Martin, Tree Swallow, N. Rough-wing Swallow, Barn Swallow, Black-capped Chickadee, Carolina Wren, House Wren, Eastern Bluebird, Veery, Swainson's Thrush, Wood Thrush, American Robin, Grey Catbird, N. Mockingbird, Brown Thrasher, Cedar Waxwing, European Starling, Tennessee Warbler, Nashville Warbler, Yellow Warbler, Magnolia Warbler, Yellow-rumped Warbler, Blue-throated Green Warbler, Blackburnian Warbler, Bay-breasted Warbler, Blackpoll Warbler, Black-and-white Warbler, American Redstart, Common Yellowthroat, Wilson's Warbler, Canada Warbler, Chipping Sparrow, Field Sparrow, Song Sparrow, Swamp Sparrow, Northern Cardinal, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Indigo Bunting, Red-winged Blackbird, Eastern Meadowlark, Common Grackle, Brown-headed Cowbird, Orchard Oriole, Baltimore Oriole, American Goldfinch, House Sparrow

(Editor's Note: Although missing his target of 100 birds for the day, John's pledges raised nearly \$1000 for the Baillie Birdathon, of which 25% is returned to the PFN. Well Done, John!)

BIRDING MALCOLMSON

With a temperature only slightly higher than the inside of a refrigerator, and a snappy breeze stirring the branches of shrubbery, May 10, 2009 seemed more like a prelude to Thanksgiving instead of being Mother's Day. However, birders (and wanna-be birders) are a hardy (or crazy) lot, and so five of us set out, with Barb West in the lead, to sample the bird-life of Malcolmson Eco-Park. A Baltimore Oriole had been seen at the Park on the preceding day, so at least there was hope for a sighting of something colourful.

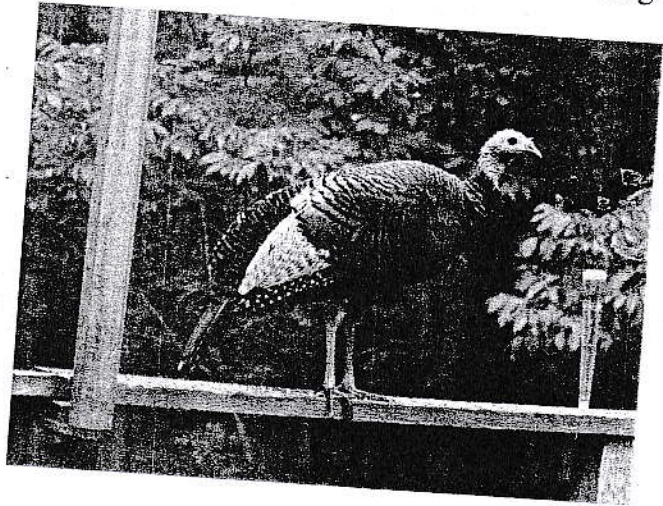
Nothing much was moving in the entrance to the open area, other than Tree Swallows darting overhead, and no water-birds were seen on the pond at the amphibian wetland. However the action picked up as we reached the north end of the open area. A trio of Baltimore Orioles made their appearance, probably two males and a female arguing over territory, Barb suggested.

Once into the wooded north end, warblers began to announce themselves. We quickly found Yellow Warbler and Yellow-rumped Warbler, and from then on the viewing continued to improve. Cardinals sang out, American Robin laughed at us, and a Catbird meowed in the brush.

Emerging at the north end of the woods, we exited toward the canal, where dozens of Cormorants circled over an approaching ship, while more bobbed in the water. Caspian Terns, Ring-billed Gulls, and a solitary Canada Goose occupied the pavement alongside the canal.

Back into the woods, on the east side, more action. Along the sheltered and warmer east side, besides the blackflies we found Chestnut-sided Warbler, a Cerulean Warbler, a Carolina Wren, a House Wren, a female Ruby-throated Hummingbird, and a Brown-headed Cowbird. Near the pond, Barb pointed out a Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, a Yellow-shafted Flicker, and a Hairy Woodpecker. Eventually we also saw a Chickadee, a Turkey Vulture, a White-throated

Sparrow, a Crow, a Common Grackle, and in the amphibian wetland pond a Mallard. Barb also heard a Black-throated Green Warbler which was too elusive to be seen. All told, 26 species seen and another heard made for a very decent three hours of birding, weather notwithstanding.



(What's for lunch? This Pelham resident decided that Potter's deck was a good parking spot.)

UPCOMING EVENTS

Wainfleet Lichens and Mosses; meet at parking lot at end of Erie Peat Road. Sunday, Oct. 25, 10:00 a.m. Bring a magnifier; wear long pants and boots. Leader: Roman Olszewski, 905-732-9955.

Heartland Forest, Kalar Road, Niagara Falls. Saturday, Oct. 31, 10:00 a.m. Fall colours and tree identification. Leader: John Potter 905-892-2566

Louth Conservation Area; meet at parking lot on Staff Road. Sunday, Nov. 1, 12:30 p.m. Dolostone plateau, waterfalls, high biodiversity. Leader: Rick Young 905-734-6226

EVENTS OF INTEREST

ST. CATHARINES CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 20, 2009

COORDINATOR : MARCIE JACKLIN, 905-871-2577; CELL 905-341-6664

PLEASE CONTACT JOHN OR MARY POTTER (905-892-2566)
IF YOU ARE WILLING TO HELP AT THE 'AFTER-BIRDING PARTY'
AT THE NORTH PELHAM YOUTH HALL, 1718 MAPLE STREET, NORTH PELHAM

- Ω -

LAKE ONTARIO MID-WINTER WATERFOWL SURVEY (‘DUCK COUNT’)

SUNDAY, JANUARY 3 OR JANUARY 10, 2010

COORDINATOR : JOHN BLACK, 905-684-0143

PARTICIPATION IS LIMITED - PLEASE CALL JOHN BY DECEMBER 15, 2009 FOR DETAILS



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

Published: February, April, October

Circulation: 120 recipients per issue

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@talkwireless.ca 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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