



The Peninsula Naturalist

Volume 231

Newsletter of the Peninsula Field Naturalists Club

November 2012

PRESIDENT'S MUSINGS

First Monday night of the month, which means I am hurrying to the PFN Board meeting at the Niagara Region building...

My route is from Effingham Road to Roland Road, along Roland/Holland Road to the Merritville Highway, and thence to the Region building. If you've driven this route, you'll know that Roland Road skirts one side of the Short Hills Provincial Park, through the St. John's valley, and past Howell's Pumpkin Farm.

Just past the Roland Road parking area, I see a tan-colored 'something' moving at the roadside. Jam down on the brake-pedal! When the deer crosses the road in front of me, I can almost count the hairs on its back. Talk about 'deer in the headlights'! Too close, but nobody's hurt – thanks to a quick reflex....

Down through the S-curves at Sulphur Springs Road, past the big brick house at the top of the St. John's valley, down the curving hill – Whoops!! Not again?? Two deer this time, one going each way across the road at the bottom of the valley. Slow down, let them pass...

Up the hill and around the curve, nearly at George Dewar's house – Whoa!! A low-slung round ball of fur scuttles off into the ditch, striped tail twitching – Rocky Raccoon lives to hunt another night...

The rest of the drive is mundane, as is the return trip home. Reflecting on the evening, I can't help thinking about four critters that are still alive out there. Any one of them could have

been dead by now. How many other animals, like those deer and that raccoon, but less lucky, will not see the next day because of impatient drivers? Was it really necessary for me to be in such a hurry? Something to think about – true story....

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PFN JUNE PICNIC

In what seems to be becoming the pattern for our summer wind-down of PFN events, the Picnic this year was scheduled for a Saturday at Minchin's farm, weather permitting. And of course the weather did NOT permit on the selected day – bloody rain again! However, on the following morning, the sun shone, the day was warm (okay, hot!) and a goodly crowd made their way to Robbins Ave.

Ever the gracious hosts, Don and Sue were ready to serve up a casual tour of their 'farm' which is becoming more and more a haven for hatching a wide variety of field and woods-loving feathered friends. For those who tired along the walk, Sue was prepared to ferry the weary with the tractor and wagon – a nice gesture that a few took advantage of.



One birding highlight this year was a Bluebird nestbox with 4 cute fuzzball chicks. Don also pointed out a Redwing Blackbird nest neatly hidden in a clump of cattail shoots beside their pond. Along the edge of the woods, we found a large tree with a knot-hole, in which a colony of bees had decided to make their home – approach cautiously! Out in the open field, we found Horned Larks and a Killdeer family. A Great Blue Heron showed up at another frog-pond, and warblers were about in the bushes beside the field.



Burgers, cool drinks, salad and ‘shade’ made an enjoyable ending to another summer event – see you next year!!.

SPRING LOUTH WALK

Combine Photography, Geology, and Wild Flowers, choose a sunny morning, and what do you have? In the case of the PFN’s late April walk in Louth Conservation Area, what you have is a blend of all the best beginnings to a

summer. The various ingredients for this outing were supplied by three PFN members – Brian C for Geology (and as overall Leader); Donna M for Photography; Roman O for mosses/ lichens/ you-name-it. The following photos provide a mere sampling of what the rest of us missed.



Roman O with a giant Dog-Lichen



16-Mile Creek Falls at ‘Lloyd Oliver Point’
Louth Conservation Area
Photos by Donna Murphy

WHAT BIRDERS DO?

Being the back-up speaker for the PFN is becoming a habit for John Black. His latest tour-de-force happened on September 24, 2012, when the best-laid plans of the President went ugly – i.e. the expected speaker failed to show up. John had already volunteered his laptop as a backup – suddenly he was also volunteering his talents to fill in as presenter of the night. What followed was a delightful evening of wit and whimsy as John tackled the topic of how birders spend their time whilst birding.

Many (if not most) people are collectors – collectors of objects, collectors of thoughts or ideas, or in the case of birders, collectors of sightings of bird species. In John's view, birders come in a variety of collecting types.

The most leisurely (and maybe laziest?) pursue their hobby by viewing the birds that come to their backyard or back-deck feeders. The range of species may not be great, but the watchers appear to be satisfied with what they see. (And programs like "Feeder-Watch" encourage this form of avian spying).

Increasing the degree of time and effort (and money) expended are those avid birders who take binoculars in hand and go out into "the wild". The equipment required may also include spotting scopes, taped bird calls, and possibly even Tilley hats. At some point, the increasingly enthusiastic birder may become a lister, gleefully adding names to his/her personal 'list' of birds seen, and increasing the fun by comparing lists with other equally-smitten comrades.

Listing can take many forms, from the personal life-list to specializing in sub-sets of special lists such as lists of birds seen in one particular location, or birds of a specific family, or birds of a special habitat. There are probably as many kinds of lists as there are birders.

A more recent development of listing is the process of listing all birds seen within a single 24-hour period. Given our increased ability to travel long distances, some birders will spare no expense to see an unusual bird in a far-away

place. And unusual birds that pop up in places where they are not generally seen are certain to attract large crowds of birders, all wanting that odd bird for their life-list.

About this point in his talk, John introduced the concept of 'Twitching'. To "twitch" is to deliberately pursue rare birds to add to your life list. 'Twitch' is a verb but it may also be used as a noun. One who twitches is, of course, a twitcher. Twitching is very far to one end of the birding continuum. Twitchers will travel across the world just to see one special bird. They will brave the most adverse conditions and penetrate the most forbidding terrain. Twitching may be fun but it is also very serious. And yes, the term 'twitch' does have something to do with the spastic exultations a successful bird sighting has been known to induce.

In closing, John provided us with a life list, this one being record numbers of birds seen in various locations, out of a possible number for the location:

Niagara: 338 out of 369
Ontario: 437 out of 487
Canada: 540 out of 630
North America: 864 out of 920
World: 8,935 out of 10,000

And to indicate how far birders will go:

The Biggest Twitch: Alan Davies and Ruth Miller sold their house, gave up their jobs, and in 2008 they saw 4341 species of birds – about 12 species per day, every day.

A WHITE "WHAT??"

In Nature, the colouring of most wild animals is distinctive and consistent. Thus we are amazed when an wild individual shows up with a colour pattern unlike all others of its species. And when we see any animal that is pure white, instead of its expected colour, that animal is considered a real oddity.

By now, almost all of us have heard of albino animals – which appear to be white due to the lack of pigment in their fur and have 'pink' eyes because of lacking pigment in their irises. How

many of us have actually seen an albino animal is another story – most of us have not. Now, if you live in Toronto, you can see such a creature – and not in a zoo!

A recent Sun news item by Kevin Connor noted that an albino squirrel is living in Trinity Bellwoods Park in Toronto. The squirrel, a 14-week-old injured orphan, was brought to the Toronto Wildlife Center, along with a normally-coloured sibling, about a month ago. Both squirrels were rehabilitated by personnel at the Center, and then released back at their original habitat at Trinity Bellwoods. The Center's staff assume the baby squirrels were injured either by falling from a tree or being hit by a car. The Sun news report also stated that there is a colony of the 'unusual rodents' at the park.



Okay, now we know squirrels can be white. It's also nothing new that polar bears, beluga whales, and male snowy owls are white – but those are not albinos. (Not saying there can't be an albino of those species, but if there were one, it wouldn't seem unusual). But how about an albino hummingbird?



The photo shows an albino hummingbird (which you can verify by looking at its pink eyes), and was taken by Marlin Shank, a photographer in Staunton, Virginia. This shot is one of nine that were passed to me by Rick Young, for which I thank him. Has anyone else ever seen or heard of albino birds? I seem to recall a photo of an albino Robin that was being circulated around the 'Net a few years ago.

NIAGARA'S SPECIES AT RISK

Karine Beriault's presentation about 'Species at Risk' at the October PFN meeting was fact-filled, informative, and somewhat disturbing with regard to the survival of our plants and animals – not that Niagara is any worse or better than other regions of the Province. Provincially, over 190 species are in decline; in Niagara about 80 species are at some level of risk.

The Committee on the Status of Species at Risk in Ontario (COSSARO) decides whether a declining species is at risk. Those classified as being at risk are added to the Species at Risk in Ontario (SARO) list, which is governed by the Ontario Endangered Species Act (ESA).

Karine explained the different categories of concern under the Act, which are: *Extinct*, *Extirpated*, *Endangered*, *Threatened*, *Special Concern*, and *Not at Risk*. *Extinct* simply means a species no longer lives anywhere in the world; *Extirpated* means the species is gone from an area but lives elsewhere; *Endangered* denotes a native species facing extinction or extirpation; *Threatened* is a native species which might become endangered; and *Special Concern* describes a native species sensitive to human activity or natural events which might cause it to become threatened or endangered.

As examples, the Karner Blue butterfly is *Extirpated*; American Ginseng is *Endangered*; the Eastern Hog-nosed Snake is *Threatened*; and the Snapping Turtle is of *Special Concern*.

Not at Risk seems obvious; one very familiar example is the common Raccoon. Species that are not at risk are usually those which can co-

exist with humans, may be sustained by human garbage and litter, or are species which live in areas away from human habitation.

The reasons for species being at risk are numerous, but largely due to human activities. Admittedly, some species are at risk because of competition by other invasive species – think of native road-side grasses competing with the invasive Phragmites grass. Generally, invasive diseases such as Butternut canker or Beech bark disease can place a species at risk without human involvement. However, human activities, many related to roads (salt, dust, roadkill, fragmented habitat) or to pollution, can cause loss of habitat because of human activity, and can place a species at risk. Illegal harvesting (in plain English “Poaching”) can reduce native species populations. Off-road vehicles also can ruin habitat. And as the urban ‘sprawl’ moves further north into the Boreal forest, more species will probably be found to be at risk there.

Karine next reviewed the status of a few species of particular concern in Niagara. In her list of *Endangered* species were: Eastern Flowering Dogwood, American Chestnut, American Columbo, Butternut, Barn Owl, Gray Ratsnake, Fowler’s Toad, and Red Mulberry.

Among the *Endangered* plants, Eastern Flowering Dogwood, American Chestnut and Butternut all are susceptible to fungus diseases, while Red Mulberry hybridizes with the non-native White Mulberry, a much more aggressive species. The American Columbo, a very rare plant which blooms only every 20 years, is so uncommon that many field-guide books don’t even mention it. It is rare to see the inflorescence of this plant, even if one can recognize it.

The *Endangered* animals (Barn Owl, Gray Ratsnake, Fowler’s Toad) are all stressed by loss of habitat, and road mortality endangers the latter two as well. Besides the lack of warm barns for nesting, Barn Owls lack the suitable pasture and hay fields for hunting prey. The Gray Ratsnake suffers from human persecution, loss of habitat and road mortality. Fowler’s Toads are adapted to exist only on the sandy beach of the Lake Erie north shore, where human activity (trampling, vehicle driving,

beach grooming) is a problem, and where now the crushed shells of Zebra mussels disturb the toad’s egg-hatching grounds. These toads burrow in the sand to lay eggs. And how to identify a Fowler’s Toad? Look for a single dark spot on the white underside of the body, in the pectoral area, or also look for 3-4 warts in the brown spots on the back ...

Karine’s *Threatened* species were: Common Hoptree, White Wood Aster, Chimney Swift, and Blanding’s Turtle.

The *Threatened* Common Hoptree in Niagara occurs mainly on the north shoreline of Lake Erie, where human activity is its main threat. The White Wood Aster, only found in Niagara, is threatened by loss of habitat and by the fact that deer decimate it.

The Chimney Swift and the Blanding’s Turtle are also under pressure from loss of habitat. In the case of the Chimney Swift, the capping of chimneys prevents the birds from nesting, while declines in the abundance of food-insects depletes their food supplies. The Blanding’s Turtle, which Karine described as having a shell that looks like a domed army-helmet, travels extensively and thus is subject to road mortality. Like some other turtles, this species suffers loss of eggs by predation by other animals.

Special Concern species were: Bald Eagle, Milk Snake, and Snapping Turtle. All three of these are victims of human persecution, although the Bald Eagle is making a comeback in Ontario. However, this bird has a limited habitat since it feeds mainly on fish. It also has been found to be adversely affected by fire retardants. The Milk Snake, besides being a victim of road mortality, is persecuted because of being mistaken for a rattlesnake, partly because of its similar colouring and partly its tendency to imitate the rattling sound by moving its tail in dry leaves. The Snapping Turtle, like many other species, is afflicted by loss of habitat, in this case because it lives in wetlands which may be drained. It is also a victim of road mortality (often intentional on the part of humans). Its carapace is formed in such a way that the turtle can not retract all of its appendages into its shell (unlike other turtles) and as a result it tends to

be aggressive instead of withdrawing. Curiously, while this species is nearing the *Threatened* designation, it also is considered by the OMNR as a game species with a daily catch limit – a rather odd decision.

Karine provided several suggestions as to how people can help the various species-at-risk. On an outing, staying on the trails and leaving the wild species alone; taking pictures only; and reporting sightings of rare species to the local MNR office are good practices to follow. Except when helping wildlife to safely cross a road, wild animals should not be picked up. Providing habitat by planting a native garden or making a brush pile is a good practice, as is avoiding the use of chemicals on lawns and gardens. She noted that wild species can provide services to humans (e.g. pollination by bees); can be indicators of adverse conditions (think ‘canary in the coal mine’); and some species provide natural resources (timber, etc).

WALKING FERN WALK, OCT. 14

A group of five people plus one dog met at the Louth Conservation Area on a coolish but sunny Sunday afternoon. After an overnight rain, some parts of the trails were muddy and some rocks a bit slippery, but the fungi and lichens seemed not to mind. At one spot, Brian pointed out a large Dog-lichen, which covered the surface of a fairly sizable boulder (2 feet diam. at least). This lichen was also noted on the early summer walk in Louth (*see Pg.2*).

Many of the usual plants were still identifiable, including Sharp-lobed Hepatica, Wild Ginger, Meadow Rue, Hooked Buttercup, Virginia Waterleaf, Blue-stemmed Goldenrod, Running Strawberry, Virginia Creeper, and of course Poison Ivy (which in some places was covered with yellowish berries).

As we strolled along, Brian explained how the crevices in the limestone rocks were oriented, why the fissures sometimes ended blindly, and which layers of the rock were deposited at various geological times. Along an escarpment, it was amazing to see a large block of stone, several feet thick and many feet long, which had

been lifted off the escarpment by the glacier long ago and deposited several hundred feet southeastward. In other places, modern marks have been made in the stone by snowmobiles.

Brian studied the Louth area as a project at Brock, and had mapped the area with a detailed topographical map; hence his geological knowledge of the site.

True to the title of the walk, we found a few places where Walking Fern was established in crevices of the limestone faces. Polypody Fern was also noted on the surfaces of the dolostone.

As previous visitors to this Conservation Area will attest, a great variety of tree species are found here. Black Walnut was particularly noticeable, but Shagbark and Bitternut Hickory, White Ash, Sugar Maple, American Beech (most specimens in poor condition), and Red Oak were all plentiful, with lesser numbers of assorted hardwoods and conifers. As we were leaving the CA, Bladdernut, Bittersweet and Prickly Ash bade us goodbye and good health.

IN SEARCH OF THE PURPLE SANDPIPER

Port Weller East Pier, November 11, 2012.

Thirteen participants walked out to the end of the east pier and back in just under three hours. Alas, there were no Purple Sandpipers to be found on the rocks on the north side of the pier. We did, however, have really good looks at a Merlin perched in a tree in the woods at the end of the pier. This was a highlight for many of the participants for whom it was their best look ever at a Merlin.

At 1100 hours we stopped for two minutes of silence. The start and end of the remembrance was heralded by boat horns from the shipyard and/or boats in the canal. The warm weather made this a most enjoyable walk even though we did not find the target bird. A total of 25 species were seen.

Following a brief stop at the Tim Horton’s (Bunting and Carlton), 6 participants returned and walked the west pier (we had permission

from the Coast Guard) in search of Purple Sandpipers on the west side of the pier. Again we struck out on the target species. In this case the highlight was, amazingly, a Great Horned Owl sitting high in a tree with no leaves. Great Looks! By this time the wind had picked up and we completed the walk at about 1300 hours.

John Black

Ramblings....

The philosopher George Santayana wrote: “Those who do not remember their history are condemned to repeat it”.

Doug Draper mentioned that statement while discussing “Caring for Our Natural Areas in Niagara” at a meeting of the St. Catharines Council of Women in October 2010. Doug was a panelist along with Suzanne McGinnis (NPCA) and John Bacher (PALS).

Doug’s comment related to toxic waste disposal in the Love Canal and Hyde Park areas of New York, adjacent to the Niagara River, and the consequent pollution of the Niagara River and downstream, in the early 1970’s. His point was that almost everyone in this (older) audience recognized the name ‘Love Canal’ but that a younger generation (20 and under) have generally never heard of the Love Canal, nor have any idea what the fuss was about. Doug then observed that a lack of critical writing about the environment in the popular press is partly to blame for public ignorance about how we abuse Nature.

But does the fault lies entirely with the level of critical writing? I think one could question how many people, aged 40 and under, ever read a daily newspaper or magazines such as ‘ON Nature’, ‘The Ark’, or ‘Canadian Geographic’. I’m sure that some do, based on my occasional contacts with students from Niagara College’s Environmental Corps. But I suggest that popular-press environmental writing fails to make contact with younger readers, because those readers no longer exist. That is, a certain age-group rarely if ever reads a newspaper, a

magazine, or anything printed on paper. Does the problem lie in the message, or the medium?

What if good critical writing about the environment was presented in an electronic-book format? It is commendable that Doug himself has opened up an electronic newspaper. Probably we oldsters are witnessing a revolution in communication, in which ‘newspapers’ actually printed on paper are a dying technology..... Just thinking....

Whew!



Well, here we are at the end of another year! To all the folks who have helped through the past 12 months, a heartfelt THANK YOU!

And particularly to:

Roman Olszewski, Don Minchin, Brian Calvert, Wendy Bradley, Donna Murphy, John Black, Jean Hampson, Bob Highcock, Carol Horvat, Bryan Joule, John Stevens, Mary Potter, Emma Carlson, Judy Gittings, Dave Gittings, Don Hetherington, Barb West, Moira Davidson, Kay Smith, Marcie Jacklin, Judith Fraser --- THANKS!



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 and Nature Canada .

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UPCOMING EVENTS

ST. CATHARINES CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 16, 2012

COORDINATOR : MARCIE JACKLIN, 905-871-2577

AFTER-BIRDING PARTY AT NORTH PELHAM YOUTH HALL, 1718 MAPLE STREET, NORTH PELHAM
CONTACT JOHN/ MARY POTTER (905-892-2566) IF YOU WILL HELP AT THE AFTER-BIRDING PARTY

- Ω -

LAKE ONTARIO MID-WINTER WATERFOWL SURVEY

(‘DUCK COUNT’)

SUNDAY, JANUARY 6, 2013)

COORDINATOR : JOHN BLACK, 905-684-0143

PARTICIPATION IS LIMITED - PLEASE CALL JOHN B. BY DECEMBER 15, 2011 FOR DETAILS

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The Editor welcomes written articles or artwork on any natural history topic. Please submit typed reports on paper or by email to: jmpotter@talkwireless.ca. Colour photos (jpg) accompanying articles are welcome. All pieces of artwork will be accepted. New ideas and constructive criticism are always welcome.

Editor: John Potter

Assistants: Kay Smith, Mary Potter

- please send submissions to the above address –

Deadlines for submissions 2013:

Feb. 4; April 7; Oct. 6

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