



# The Peninsula Naturalist

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May 2013

Recently, John Stevens directed me to an article in the New York Sunday "Times", entitled "What Do The Birders Know?" In this article, the author, Brian Kimberling, suggests that bird-watching can be considered as a metaphoric form of trophy-hunting, although fortunately harmless to the 'prey'. The 'trophy' may be a single rare bird, a first-of-year sighting, or a record number of species for a day. The popularity of this sport is almost mind-boggling - Kimberling states that the USA alone has 5.8 million birders; as he puts it "a huge army". (How big is the birder-army in Canada?)

As we now know, the Christmas Bird Count has become a volunteer citizen-science project of major benefit to the Audubon Society, since its introduction in 1900 as an alternative to the former Christmas pastime of shooting birds. More recently, 'feeder-watch' programs are also adding to the knowledge of bird species-distribution and numbers. Data such as first spring-sightings of migratory birds at feeders are useful to determine trends among the bird world. So what are the birds telling us?

The Audubon Society estimates that, for North America, nearly 60 percent of 305 bird species found in winter are shifting northward and to higher elevations in response to climate change. The shift is an average of 35 miles further north, over a period of about 40 years. This shift is not a case of birds moving north in anticipation of climate change; rather, they are moving in response to it. Considering the birds as bio-indicators of the condition of their ecosystem, the shift should give us reason to take note of this major ecological change that is happening.

To read the original article, enter this entire text in your browser:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/21/opinion/sunday/what-do-the-bird-watchers-know.html?ref=science>

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## TRUMPETER SWANS

On February 25, 2013, the PFN was treated to a story told by Beverly Kingdon, about her involvement with Trumpeter Swans which has led to her being known as 'the Swan Lady'.

At one time trumpeter swans were thought to be extinct. They were hunted for feathers and down. However, in 1982 a flock of 69 swans was discovered in N.W. British Columbia. Action was then taken to protect the swans in the U.S. and Canada.

Harry Lumsden, on retiring from the MNR, stimulated a reintroduction program in Ontario. He got licenses and permission from both countries to collect eggs and to keep captive birds for cygnet production and release to the wild. Lumsden decided to teach swans to migrate with ultra-light aircraft. He started with geese, who proficiently followed the aircraft - an adventure that inspired the movie "Fly Away Home." However, Kingdon said,

"the swans migrated before we started training them."

By arrangement, Lumsden delivered a beautiful pair to the northern Ontario farm of Beverly and Ray Kingdon at Powassan. They were now officially "co-operators." (Note: a female swan is called a 'pen'; the significance of this will appear soon).

In the spring of 1992, the female swan tagged #100 was released in Wye Marsh. She was spotted in Burlington and then back in Midland. She was shot in front of witnesses, and went missing for 4 days, but returned and recovered.

This swan was seen in December 1993, at the Appleby Line two blocks from the Kingdon's Burlington home - with a mate and 6 cygnets, the first known breeding of Trumpeters in Ontario in 200 years. Beverly looked for the swans but did not find them.

She then consulted the Wye Marsh swan keeper who said to call out the pen's name, "PIG PEN". Beverly couldn't bring herself to call that out in the populated area where the swans were. There was a huge ice buildup on the shore. Finally, in desperation she went up to the ice mountain and yelled, "PIG PEN!" She thought she heard an answer, but was unsure until husband Ray in the car agreed he had heard it too. She returned to crawl up the ice mountain, stared over the precipice and there "looking back at me were eight little pairs of eyes."

The couple had to deliver corn to the birds. Ray located corn and Beverly had to trek up her "glacier" again, only this time with a heavy bucket. The moment the bucket touched the water, 8 black beaks were vying for position at the feed bucket. The couple stayed with the swans from sunup to sundown while local neighbourhood people brought them hot food and drinks.

Winter deepened its grip. One horrible day she couldn't get over the ice mountain and decided to try to get out on the breakwall to the lake where the swans waited. She tried and retreated several times. On one retreat she was met by a fireman carrying a rope. On hearing her tale, he gave her the rope and admonished her not to go farther than 50 feet as that was the length of the rope, and then he left. She

found later he'd been brought on a 911 call to a possible suicide "because no woman in her right mind would be out in such weather, walking back and forth on ice covered boulders." Eventually the weather improved and the ice mountain floated out.

Beverly reminisced: "PIG PEN would spend hours with me on the beach and, in special moments, would make soft purring sounds. She would nibble my laces and zipper tags. I would put corn into my pocket and she would dig for it." The bird got to know the sound of Kingdon's car, and on one special occasion PIG PEN came to Bev and 'preened' Bev's hair.

At the end of March the birds left and were seen at Wye Marsh on April 1.

Beverly recalled that PIG PEN's mate was injured in Wye Marsh and didn't return south for two years, during which time she got a new mate. But mate no.1 rediscovered her in Wye Marsh the next summer, fought it out with mate no.2 and won. Mate No.1 was later killed when he and a cygnet flew into hydro lines - it was later learned they both had lead poisoning. Thereupon PIG PEN acquired husband No.3 and lived happily with him for 10 years. She was then hit by a speedboat on Lake Simcoe and though she was rescued and patched up, she succumbed to pneumonia. She also had lead poisoning.

PIG PEN and No .3 produced 80+ descendants. A memorial to her was built at Wye Marsh. The name "PIG PEN" is because she was a messy eater, and a female bird.

#### **Additional information from questions:**

Beverly and Ray have been volunteering with the swans for over 30 years. Inbreeding was a concern, so other birds have been brought in from Yellowstone, Grande Prairie and the Rocky Mountain areas. The swans (once thought to be extinct) now number 195, which can be determined by the numbers on their wing bands - females are banded on the left side, males on the right. The birds are protected by federal law (COSEWIC) although this is not recognized by Ontario's ESA-SARO listing.

Corn is a favorite food, and Kingdon's use up to 8000 lb of corn to feed their birds, and to attract them for banding.

The birds are bottom-feeders in shallow water, where they 'tip' rather than dive to feed. Lead poisoning can occur because of lead shot and lead sinkers on the bottom of water bodies, or in corn fields where swans might feed.

Mating takes place in late February, and 6-7 eggs are laid per adult pair. Eggs hatch about June.

Trumpeter swans weigh 25-30 lbs, and have a 7-8 ft wingspan. The adults have an annual moulting period of 4-6 weeks, during which they don't fly. However the female moults first and the male later, so that one parent bird is always available to care for the cygnets.

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## SQUIRREL HUNTING IN THE UNITED STATES

The most common members of the Sciuridae (squirrel) Family in Eastern North America are: Eastern Grey Squirrel (*Sciurus carolinensis*); American Red Squirrel (*Tamiasciurus hudsonicus*); Red Squirrel (*Sciuris vulgaris*); Fox Squirrel (*Sciurus niger*); along with Chipmunks, Flying Squirrels and Woodchucks.

A Wildlife Management Manual written by a US Army Corps of Engineers Biologist stated: "The Eastern Gray squirrel is a small 'game' mammal that occurs naturally in the eastern hardwood forests of North America. It can be found from the Gulf of Mexico in the South, west to southern Manitoba, and to southern Quebec and southern Ontario in the North. It is an important North American game species and hunted in every state within its natural range, to the extent that the combined annual harvest of grey and fox squirrels totals approximately 40 million animals." (Teaford, J. W. 1986. US Army Corps of Engineers. Chap.1. Squirrel Ecology.) This report also noted that squirrel-hunting tended to be more prevalent in the southern and western States.

Squirrels (primarily the Eastern Grey and the Red) are hunted annually in the United States as a sport, in many cases as fund-raising

competitions where participants pay a fee to enter the hunt.

There is an American Squirrel and Night Hunters Association, and also a Squirrel Dog Association which offers to: "Train your dog to bring squirrels to your side of the tree".

An inducement for the sport: "Collect all eight species of American squirrels and become a "Squirrel Master of the USA".

A random sampling of United States squirrel-hunt events found on the Internet includes:

Surprise Valley Squirrel Roundup (since 1991)  
Rush Creek Hunt Club Squirrel Roundup  
Cedarville Squirrel Roundup  
Louisiana Swamp County Annual Squirrel Hunt Festival  
Sandbagger's Squirrel Fest  
Nevada Squirrel Roundup  
Annual Men and Boys Squirrel Hunt, Feb 8 - To deplete the population  
Tree Dixie Roundup  
Holly, New York, Seventh Annual Hazard County Squirrel Slam

As an example of the interest in this 'sport': Saturday, March 20 was the day of the 19<sup>th</sup> annual Surprise Valley Squirrel Roundup. Hunters came from Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Wyoming, Arizona, Nevada, Oregon and California. Their sole mission - to shoot as many squirrels in one day as possible. There was even a pre-shoot according to one participant and his shooting partner who were consistently taking squirrels at 400 yards.

Three grade-school friends, Fearless Frank, Dead-eye Dana, and Marty Miss-a-lot formed a team bagging 150-200 squirrels total - "a good day but hard work for the desk jockey".

Natalie (age14) has been shooting squirrels since she was seven years old, killing seven squirrels in her first year. This year she took 41, a lifetime high; she and brother Luke (age16) got about 70 squirrels.

In Tonganoxie, Kansas, "Squirrel Scramble" draws hundreds for a squirrel hunting contest. This season, nearly 200 teams will take part in the third annual "Squirrel Scramble". The rules are:

“On Saturday, two-person teams will have until 4 p.m. to shoot squirrels anywhere it is legal to hunt.”

“Participants draw numbers to determine how many red squirrels and grey squirrels they must collect. The winner is the team boasting the highest combined weight of 10 squirrels.”

This year’s winning adult team will collect \$500. The youth division winner will take home a new 22 rifle. Last year, a 10-year-old won the rifle. The winner’s father said it is a good way to spend time with his son. Organizers say the squirrel hunt is also a good way to get children involved in the outdoors.

In 1931, amateur ornithologist Richard Pough visited “Hawk Mountain”. There he saw gunners stationed, shooting hundreds of passing hawks for sport. He returned to gather the carcasses lying on the forest floor and to take photographs. Pough’s photographs were eventually seen by a New York conservation activist, Rosalie Edge.

In 1934, Mrs. Edge came to Hawk Mountain and leased 1,400 acres. She installed a warden on the property and the shooting stopped immediately. The next year Mrs. Edge opened a sanctuary to the public as a place to see beautiful, but persecuted birds of prey. She purchased and deeded the 1,400 acres to the Hawk Mountain Sanctuary Association incorporated in 1938.

It would appear that today we need another Richard Pough and a Rosalie Edge as activists for the protection of North American squirrels.

*Compiled by Paul Summerskill*

*Thanks to John Stevens, Peter Skelton and Paul Summerskill for contributions to this Newsletter.*

## **ANNUAL PFN PICNIC/BBQ**

**SATURDAY, JUNE 8, 10:30  
AM**

**(RAIN DATE : JUNE 9)**

### **LOCATION:**

**Home of  
DON & SUE MINCHIN**

**2288 ROBBINS RD.  
(West off 11<sup>th</sup> Street, Louth)**

**DIRECTIONS: From St. Catharines, take 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue past the new Hospital westward, to 11<sup>th</sup> St Louth. Turn left (south) onto 11<sup>th</sup> Street, cross over King St. (Reg.81), up a small hill and look for Robbins Ave on the right. There may be Bluebirds, Purple Martins & more.**

### **NOTE:**

**King St. (Reg.81) is closed to traffic between 7<sup>th</sup> Street Louth and 9<sup>th</sup> Street Louth.**

**ROCK POINT PROVINCIAL PARK OUTING: Saturday, June 1, 2013, 8:30 to midafternoon. Meet at Shoppers Drug Mart parking lot, Fonthill at 8:30 to carpool. Bring lunch! Rick Young, 905 734 6226**



### **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 .  
**P.O. Box 23031, RPO Carlton, St.  
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### **The Peninsula Naturalist Newsletter**

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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:

**[jmpotter068@gmail.com](mailto:jmpotter068@gmail.com)** Colour photos (jpg) accompanying articles are welcome. All pieces of artwork will be accepted. New ideas and constructive criticism are welcome.

**Editor:** John Potter  
**Assistants:** Mary Potter,

- please send submissions by email to the above address  
or mail to the Club's postal address

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**Deadlines for submissions 2013:**  
**February 4; April 7; October 6**

### **FALL PFN MEETINGS & SPEAKERS**

**Monday, September 23:**

**Miriam Richards, Brock University**

**Topic: Bees**

**Monday, October 28:**

**Brian Montgomery, Hamilton Public  
Health Service**

**Topic: Climate Change**

**Monday, November 25:**

**Patrick Moldowan**

**Topic: Turtle Id. And Conservation  
(also our Dessert Night)**