



The Peninsula Naturalist

Volume 234

Newsletter of the Peninsula Field Naturalists Club

October 2013

PRESIDENT'S OBSERVATIONS

A Swift Recovery

I hear them throughout the summer. Their chattering calls coming from above. I look up and I see 1, 2, 3, at times as many as 10 cigar-shaped bodies with wings, flying in aerial formation not unlike the Canadian Snowbirds. I've observed them disappear into the chimneys of the Lake Street Armoury at dusk but I never had a closer view than the one I experienced during an afternoon in late August.

My wife Jean has taken in many injured animals at the local shelter and her coworkers always look to her when it involves a bird. After completing her shift, Jean arrived to pick me up from work with an additional passenger hidden away in a small cardboard box. It was a Chimney Swift! The bird was found earlier in the day and allowed to rest and recover at the shelter until it was ready for release.



Photo by Jean Hampson

After arriving home, Jean and I stood in our backyard with the Chimney Swift in my hand. Its first attempt at flight was short-lived and on the second it looked more promising until it came to rest in the branch of a nearby tree. It was decided we should leave it be to allow for further recovery on its own. Checking on the bird's progress later on proved the release was successful. The bird was no longer resting in the tree and had rejoined its fellow swifts that fly over the downtown area.

The majority of Chimney Swifts have left for their winter home now but come next May, I'll look for the return of the swifts knowing that the chattering aerial display flying above our home includes the bird we released in late August of 2013. *By Bob Highcock, President*

CONTENTS

Page 2 – Late Spring / Early Summer Outings

Page 3 – PenFieldNats 2013 June Picnic

Page 4-5 – Dr. M. Richards on 'Bees'

Page 5 – Upcoming Speakers & Fall Outings

Page 6 – Ramblings

Page 7 – Adminis-trivia

LATE SPRING & EARLY SUMMER OUTINGS

In May, Barb West led a group through the east end of Shorthills Provincial Park. A good number of enthusiasts attended.

Since the leaves by this time were full on the trees it made identifying birds a little difficult but we persisted. The first birds to be seen were Cedar Waxwings and a White-crowned Sparrow.

As we moved along, notes were taken of some of the flora. Those in flower included White Baneberry, May-apple and Jack-in-the-Pulpit. Among the shrubbery were many examples of Chokecherry with their candle-like flower spikes.

Moving on we found a number of birds such as Eastern Towhee, Rose-breasted Grosbeak and an Eastern Kingbird.

At one point we thought we had found a specimen of American Chestnut but this is still to be confirmed.

By Barb West.



On the first day of June, members and friends, led by Rick Young, took a trip along the north shore of Lake Erie starting at Rock Point Provincial Park.

Our first destination was the bird banding station. Unfortunately there were very few birds. Apparently it has been the poorest spring since 2001 number-wise. The group did however see how the birds were processed such as aging, sexing and of course banding.

From here we proceeded to the point on the lakeshore and were treated to the sight of a small flock of Ruddy Turnstones plus Caspian Terns and a Herring Gull. We also were treated to a good show of Wild Geraniums.

After lunch we drove out of the park and along a side road, stopping to see a reported Red-headed Woodpecker. It was a treat to see it. Further along on the shore we saw an abundance of Beach Peas, a rather colourful flower.

Leaving this location we drove east on Lakeshore Road, stopping in Lowbanks to see Purple Martins. Our next stop was Morgan's Point, where we found Spotted Sandpiper, a Greater Black-backed Gull and a White-breasted Nuthatch while in the floral department we found Wild Columbine, Carrion Flower and Virginia Waterleaf.

A short distance to the east we found some Semi-palmated Sandpipers and then at Reeb's Bay there was a Northern Rough Winged Swallow.

After a long day, we finished at Port Colborne by having Ice Cream at McDonald's. *By Rick Young.*



Ruddy Turnstones



Beach Pea

Photos by Rick Young

PFN 2013 PICNIC (by Bob Highcock, reporter)

Try as it might, the weather did not change the PFN picnic to the rain day as it had in previous years. Monitoring the weather channel as well as standing on the front porch the early morning of June 8 played an important role in the decision to go ahead with the planned date. The skies were overcast but the precipitation held off, allowing for a comfortable day for all.

The event was once again held at the Minchin's farm but there was something missing - Don and Sue! Whilst the gracious hosts were exploring the glaciers of Iceland and Highlands of Scotland, 14 members of the PFN were peering into nesting boxes and checking out the insects and plants found along the forest edge on the property nestled near the Niagara Escarpment. The in-depth training from Don before his departure helped and we found nesting Black-capped Chickadees and Tree Swallows. Though an adult Eastern Bluebird made a brief appearance for a lucky few, the young had fledged. Red-bellied Woodpecker could be heard calling from the woods and across the field of winter wheat, a Field Sparrow was singing. Red-winged Blackbirds were raising young in the cattails beside the pond and a Great Blue Heron was spotted flying overhead. Two more spiralled down to the smaller pond, while Club members enjoyed salad, burgers, hotdogs and desserts.

A well enjoyed day for all that attended the PFN June picnic. I'm still flipping burgers in my sleep.



The Chef



Above – the 14

Chickadee eggs

Dr. Miriam Richards certainly knows her bees. Her presentation to the PFN on Sept. 23 proved that without a doubt. The Brock University professor also has a way with words when it comes to talking about her favorite little insects – “Two bees or not two bees” was just one of her witticisms.

The ‘two bees’ comment referred to the notion that most people have about bees – that there are the Honey bee and the Bumble bee. In fact, she stated that globally there are 6 species of Honeybees, and about 20,000 species of other bees. In Canada, we have about 8,000 species of bees, most of which have not been studied. Miriam stated that there could be 60-70 species of bees in the average Niagara garden, but 1484 species are known to be around Brock University and in the nearby Glenridge Quarry former-landfill. She mentioned that many bee species are ‘cryptic’ meaning they look similar to other species – which adds to the taxonomy confusion. Also, some Wasps and Syrphid flies resemble bees, particularly if coloured with yellow and black markings. Because of their anatomy, most bee species can sting multiple times, unlike the Honey bees which can sting only once and then lose their stinger.

Bee families have varying habitats – the Halictid family (Sweat Bees) live in colonies in the soil, as do some Colletid and Andrenid species. Megachilids (Leaf-cutter bees) also may live in soil burrows but are solitary rather than colonial. In fact, 75% of bee species are solitary. The Apidae family includes the better-known bees such as the Honey bee, the Bumble bee, and the Great Carpenter bee which makes burrows in timbers of buildings. Miriam even mentioned a bee which nests in snail shells.

In a study of the nesting habits of Pigmy Carpenter bees, Miriam and her students found that raspberry canes, teasel stalks and sumac twigs were good hosts for bee nests. The nests were made by the female bee hollowing out the pith and laying eggs in cells in the hollows. The female tends the developing larvae and will remove any that die before adulthood. The bee species preferred raspberry and didn’t like sumac, but also preferred a host plant that grew in bright sunlight – not a good habitat for raspberry. By testing various combinations of plant and sun-or-shade, they found that one species selected a good host growing in shade, while two other species preferred a poorer host growing in sun.

In Miriam’s experience, Great Carpenter bees favour milled lumber as a material to build nests in, by chewing tunnels in the wood. They seem to burrow into parts of the timber which are not vital to the strength of the wooden structure (thus not being a nuisance), but they are also food for woodpeckers which may damage the lumber while foraging for bee larvae. Great Carpenter bees also can supercool down to minus-28 degrees C, as long as they don’t crystallize and freeze. Great Carpenter Bees being studied at Brock are sometimes coloured with paint to distinguish them – which becomes a novelty for visitors to the campus. The Carpenter bees are studied because of their social colonies; in a colony, one female (Queen) will be the dominant egg-layer, but secondary and tertiary females may also be in the nest (unlike Honey bees, with only one queen per hive). This may be a survival mechanism, although in last year’s drought many bees died.

Social structures among bees can be complex. In some cases, bees that are nest-mates will not be aggressive to each other, but will bite other bees that were not nest-mates. Sometimes a single dominant bee will feed pollen to subordinate bees in the same colony and a subordinate will only become dominant if the original dominant dies. A dominant that works hard can be distinguished by the degree of wear on her wings – subordinates have less wing-damage. The number of bees in a colony with a single dominant female may be no greater or lesser than that of a nest with several active females – sometimes females will share the work of nest-making, etc. *(Continued)*

Unlike the colonial Honey bee, the Bumble bee is solitary, with one female starting a colony on her own, without workers. Workers develop from the female's eggs and, after a colony develops, only the original queen will survive the winter.

Miriam used the Glenridge Quarry Landfill Site as an example of how bee communities can be restored. After this landfill was capped with earth and closed (about 2000), some vegetation from seeding and some natural 'blow-in' species started growing. Among the plant species were Wild Carrot, Echinacea, Flax, and Phragmites. About 2003, Miriam and students started trapping to estimate how many bees were present in what was now considered a Park. Their data showed that bees moved into the site within the first 3 years (2003-2006). Because the Brock campus and adjacent fields were the most likely sources of bees, Miriam considers those as the origin for the incoming bees at Glenridge. Numbers of bees were depleted by droughts in 2007 and 2012, but the bee population in the Park now is about equal to that on the Brock campus. It is possible, because of these areas being more meadow-like and less forested, that there are more bee species present now than were there 400 years ago. A similar pattern is being seen at Elm Street, Port Colborne, and Station Road, Wainfleet, where a similar treatment of former landfills is showing good bee re-populations.

As a final 'caveat', Miriam mentioned that pesticide sprays, particularly those using neonicotinamide, are the worst enemy of bee-keepers and farmers, and should be avoided.

(Thanking the Speaker, JP couldn't resist saying "Bee it ever so bumble, there's no place like Comb")

Peninsula Field Naturalists FALL EVENTS

Upcoming Speakers

Monday, October 28:

Brian Montgomery
Hamilton Public Health Service
Topic: Climate Change

Monday, November 28:

Patrick Moldowan
Topic: Turtle Identification and Conservation
(Also our Dessert Night – bring goodies!)

Outings

November 3 (Sunday):

Mud Lake Conservation Area Outing

9:00 a.m. Standard Time (Time changes this weekend)

Meet at Elm St. Entrance to Conservation Area

Leaders: Bob Highcock, Jean Hampson (905-688-1260)

November 10 (Sunday):

In Search of the Purple Sandpiper

8:30 a.m. - ?

Leader: John Black (905-684-0143)

Location: East Spit of Canal, Port Weller

December 15 (Sunday):

St. Catharines Christmas Bird Count & Round-up)

Birders Contact: Marcie Jacklin (905-871-2577)

Roundup: North Pelham Youth Center, 1718 Maple St., Fenwick

Volunteers to help set up at Youth Center, contact Mary/John Potter (905-892-2566)

Ramblings...

It all began with the Creeping Charlie. You know, Creeping Charlie, or Ground Ivy, or Gill-Over-The-Ground - or *Glechoma hederacea* - that creeping ivy-like plant with the kidney-shaped leaves and the purple flowers that invades lawns surreptitiously. Especially lawns that have missed being overseeded with grasses every fall, and are somewhat shaded and rarely fertilized and on clay. Like mine. Between the Creeping Charlie, and the encroaching Sweet Woodruff, and the assorted small holes where chipmunks had tunnelled into the turf over a decaying stump or two - basically, our front yard was a disaster zone.

Since we live in a rural area, probably the quality of our front lawn is a less serious issue than, say, the fact that the deer had decided to forage the foundation plantings last winter and nearly defoliated a few yew bushes. Still, when the next-door neighbour is a gardening freak, with immaculate grass that would put a putting-green to shame, one does feel that at least a degree of lawn quality is necessary. Especially if one used to work for the Department of Agriculture - (Don't ask what I used to DO there!).

So - we pondered and considered whether a nice solution would be to plough up the whole front lawn and plant it with evergreens - heather and small cedars and junipers - especially junipers. They come in so many colours and shapes, and are spikey so that deer don't browse them.... yeah, let's just plant evergreens and retire the lawnmower. By the way, evergreens would require about 30 years to cover the lawn area with foliage completely! Back to the drawing board....

Not to prolong this story, we soon had several tons of new topsoil spread over the old lawn, levelled, raked, seeded and (we hoped) ready to burst forth with new greenery before the snow flies. We even used eco-friendly grass seed....

What's my point? While I don't consider myself an eco-terrorist, there were times when I wondered if buying topsoil from elsewhere was the right move. I couldn't help comparing our situation to that of an acquaintance from the Woodlot Association. About a decade ago, he recognized the value of his farm, particularly his farm woodlot, as a place of ecological variability. It was a large section of Red Maple - Pin Oak wetland, with numerous significant wetland plants. After checking around and finding that no Land Trust then existed in Niagara, he eventually placed the entire property under a permanent conservation easement, to be managed by the Niagara Peninsula Conservation Authority. It's called "Smith Ness".

So now there's a nice large chunk of wetland forest preserved in perpetuity. And as I look around and notice that Ash, Beech, Maple, Oak, Serviceberry, Elm and many other trees are threatened by diseases and pests, I can't help wondering about what the future effect would be if more of us retirees that own woodlots just did what my acquaintance did and preserved an important piece of treed land for the future. Good on you, Norm Smith! Kinda puts a different perspective on stressing over a few square yards of lawn-grass!

Oh, by the way - this item was first written in 2009. We've now (2013) gone ahead with the plan of planting evergreens all over the front lawn - and bought a battery-powered weed-whacker - and just realized that we need to remove the deciduous tree-leaves amongst all those evergreens - sheesh!

Oh, by the way #2 - does anyone know how to prevent a fawn and a doe from munching on the tops of Closed Gentians, Michigan Lilies, Tall Meadow-Rue, Blue-eyed Grass and other tasty garden plants??



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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Editor: John Potter

Assistant: Mary Potter

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

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

NOTE: For this issue of the Peninsula Naturalist Newsletter, we are testing a new format using one column instead of two. Some members have suggested that they would prefer the single-column format. Please specify which format you prefer, by email if possible, to **jmpotter068@gmail.com**.