



# *The Quinte Naturalist*

*The Quinte Field Naturalists Association is affiliated with Ontario Nature, a non-profit organization sponsoring nature education, conservation and research.*

## **March**



What's going on here? Is this more ecological devastation in Prince Edward County? The picture shows Big Island marsh just outside Terry Sprague's front door. Read his story on page 4 to see why he is actually happy about this project and why he is looking forward to seeing the results.

Our speaker this month is Mark Conboy from the Queen's University Biological Station. His topic is the Frontenac Arch and the Land Between, a long neglected area stretching from the Thousand Islands to Georgian Bay. It includes a significant part of Hastings County with which we should become more familiar. The Frontenac Arch is one of 16 Biosphere Reserves in Canada which are part of UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere Program. The program promotes sustainable community development in areas of globally significant biodiversity.

## THIS MONTH'S SPEAKER

MARK CONBOY

### THE LAND BETWEEN; A NATURAL HISTORY OF THE FRONTENAC ARCH



MAP COURTESY OF THE ALGONQUIN TO ADIRONACKS CONSERVATION ASSOCIATION

The Frontenac Arch is a place where northern and southern species of plants and animals intermingle among a wide variety of aquatic and terrestrial habitats to produce one of the richest collections of biological diversity in Canada. The largely undeveloped Arch acts as a natural corridor for the movement of wildlife between the wilderness areas of Algonquin Provincial Park in the north and Adirondack State Park in the south, making it of paramount conservation importance. Furthermore this UNESCO World Biosphere is home to the Queen's university Biological Station which has contributed immeasurably to our understanding of the Arch's natural history. Together we will explore the diversity and wildness of the Frontenac Arch.

*The Quinte Field Naturalists Association, an incorporated affiliate of Ontario Nature, is a non-profit organization sponsoring nature education, conservation and research. It was founded in 1949 and incorporated in 1990, and encompasses the counties of Hastings and Prince Edward. The Quinte Field Naturalists Association is legally entitled to hold real estate and accept benefits.*

*Quinte Field Naturalists meet on the fourth Monday of every month from September to March (except December), 7:30, Sills Auditorium, Bridge Street United Church, 60 Bridge Street East, Belleville. In April we hold our annual dinner at an alternate time and location. New members and guests are always welcome. Bring a friend.*

**President**

George Thomson  
613-478-3205

**Treasurer**

Doug Newfield  
613-477-3066

**Outings/Newsletter**

John Blaney - 613-962-9337

Next Newsletter Deadline – April 10, 2013

Please send submissions to [john.blaney@sympatico.ca](mailto:john.blaney@sympatico.ca)

**Past President**

Wendy Turner  
613-966-1518

**Environmental Officer**

Denice Wilkins  
613-478-5070

**Recording Sect'y**

Bernadette Hymus  
613-962-7926

**Membership/Mailing**

Marge Fisher  
613-968-3277

**Corresponding Sect'y**

Elizabeth Churcher  
613-478-3205

**Refreshments**

Sharron Blaney  
613-962-9337

**PRESQU'ILE OUTING**



*Photo by Elena Petrich*

It's beginning to look as though the weather gods are relenting. The March 6 QFN trip to Presqu'ile was the second outing in a row with good weather. My guess that the weekend before Presqu'ile's Waterfowl Weekend would be best for seeing migrating waterfowl should be given at least a passing grade. As it turned out neither weekend was absolutely optimal. The ice hadn't melted far enough back in Presqu'ile Bay to encourage the return of many dabblers but diving ducks were there and numbered into the thousands.

It's always encouraging to see that the flocks of overwintering scaups, long-tailed ducks, common goldeneyes and buffleheads have been augmented by returning hordes which have spent the winter further south. The best two sightings of the day were probably not waterfowl at all. A brown creeper entertained us for a few minutes before we had even left Zwicks Park. In Presqu'ile we met Fred Helleiner who pointed out pine grosbeaks in a tree near the government dock. Nothing spectacular but how can you criticize a day spent outdoors with friends?



*Photos by Kyle Blaney*  
*Buffleheads (left) and hooded mergansers(right) go to the same stylist and both nest in cavities. However buffleheads will soon be travelling to the boreal forest and hooded mergansers will set up housekeeping just a little north of Belleville, quite possibly in the Land Between.*

**NEXT OUTING – NIGHT SOUNDS IN THE LAND BETWEEN**  
As mentioned on the first page we're going to start exploring the Land Between. What's active after dark? You can hear far more than owls on a spring evening although we will try for owls, perhaps a laughing owl. Timber doodles are also a good possibility as are pinkletinks. Look for more details in the April newsletter



## BIG ISLAND MARSH LOOKS DIFFERENT NOW

by Terry Sprague



*Photo by Terry Sprague*

As the huge arm and bucket dug into the cattails, I could feel the entire floating mass upon which the high-hoe was perched start to sink about 10 inches beneath our feet. Raising the bucket to dump the dredged material into the growing pile, the cattail surface started to rise again. The huge machine was safe though as it rested on a secure construction mat of square timbers, thereby distributing the weight of the machine over a greater area. A second platform nearby could be snagged with the bucket and moved to another location either in front of or behind the machine when it was necessary to move to a new location.

This is the Big Island Marsh, and compared to its younger days, the 2,000-acre wetland has since become a tangled, cohesive mass of cattails. The entire marsh is like a thick carpet of vegetation and root masses that floats languidly on a shallow layer of water and years of accumulated silt. The network of channels that once interconnected with small ponds has long since disappeared. Fish are no longer present in its core, and both frog and bird species have declined. My father once spoke of how, as a child, he could skate from Northport, all the way to Muscote Bay, a distance of eight kilometres, on a channel that flowed from one end of the marsh to the other. Memories. All memories. Today, only infinitesimal remnants remain of that channel. The introduction of water level regulations and the presence of the causeway that connects the mainland of Prince Edward County to Big Island resulted in the over-growth of cattails in the area, but that is about to change.

The ambitious, privately funded project, when fully implemented, will provide approximately 12 hectares (30 acres) of open water pond habitat and 4.6 km (almost three miles) of channel habitat. The giant pond, jokingly dubbed by friends as the “Sprague Pond” is being excavated with more than a half dozen high-hoes right in front of our home and will extend in a westerly direction for a distance of almost a half kilometre. The new pond will marry with the central channel by interconnecting waterways.

The project is fashioned after the success of the Sawguin Marsh restoration project of 20 years ago, located between Huff’s Island and Mountain View. A maze of sinuous channels excavated there have remained deep and intact, and now support numerous fish and other wildlife species, including species at risk. It is hoped that the Big Island Marsh project will be as successful. The Bay of Quinte Remedial Action Plan (BQRAP), Quinte Conservation and Prince Edward County Stewardship Council actually began a partnership last February to improve wetland habitat at the Big Island Marsh, with part of the leading end of the channel at the marsh’s east end being dredged. This year’s project will build on the success of that initial effort. The project helps the

BQRAP address several of the environmental challenges it has been working to restore: loss of fish and wildlife habitat and degradation of fish and wildlife populations.

Contractor Drew Harrison and his crew are an ambitious lot, getting under way most mornings before light and continuing through the day until darkness. Even during the heavy snow and winds in January when a lake effect storm dumped over 30 cm on parts of the county, the machines carried on for most of the day, although they were rarely visible in the blowing snow. As a farmer from way back, I bask in the sound of diesel engines at work, and I am ashamed to confess that I enjoy the smell of diesel smoke wafting my way.

I look forward to seeing waterfowl gathering in the spring and fall in “our” pond, something I haven’t seen or heard at our end of the Big Island Marsh since moving to our present location 37 years ago. Returning too perhaps, will be the exhausted calls of pied-billed grebes, the croaking of gallinules, and the cuckoo-like calls of least bitterns. Is it too much to hope for the return of black terns, a species that disappeared from our marsh a decade or more ago? I look forward to launching my canoe this spring and just letting the gentle breeze take me along and relish in the marsh wrens and swamp sparrows appearing on centre stage along the edges of the cattails that remain. It is an exciting project and one that I never thought I would see in my lifetime.

Be sure to stop by if you get a chance and see this project underway. Of course, with any good thing, there is always a downside. Early on in the project, the Quinte Conservation canoe that was used to monitor the water depth and other aspects of the project, was stolen. In today’s disturbed and irresponsible society, someone noted that we had neglected to chain and padlock it to one of the high-hoes! The canoe is a natural finish aluminum canoe with a square stern designed to accommodate an outboard motor. If you should see it in your travels, let us know. We’d like it back.

### A WELCOME? SPRING VISITOR

Part of the morning routine at our house involves going out to collect the morning paper from the driveway. Whichever one of us performs this duty has a chance to sample the weather and report on temperature, sky conditions, depth of snow in the winter or whatever else we may notice. Recently both Sharron and I on different days have experienced the same sign of spring on the brief excursion, the strong scent of skunk.

Neither of us saw the animal but the strength of odour indicated that it was fairly close. I think that our reactions to this visitor diverged somewhat. Sharron seems uncertain that the presence of the skunk is a good thing. I like skunks. Possibly I would not feel the same way if I had ever been the target of a skunk’s displeasure but fortunately I have not. Undoubtedly some of you who are pet



owners may have had experiences which cause you to lean more toward Sharron's attitude than mine. Still I can't help feeling that the skunk has just as much right to its livelihood as we do to ours.

In its *Hinterland Who's Who* pamphlet the Canadian Wildlife Service stresses that almost 70 percent of the skunk's omnivorous diet is beneficial to people. They eat plants, small mammals, and bird's eggs but during the summer they consume mainly insects such as grasshoppers, crickets and white grubs. The latter item on the menu may explain the holes in your lawn next June. Remember that the skunk is providing free aeration and pest control services and sparing you the guilt of using chemical poisons.

The pamphlet's author does admit that the skunk's musk has an odour that is strong enough to be detected almost a kilometre away if there is a good breeze. For what it's worth the pamphlet recommends a mixture of vinegar and detergent to get rid of the odour on clothing or a pet. Alternatively the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources suggests a mixture of 1 litre of hydrogen peroxide, 50 ml of baking soda and 5 ml of dishwashing liquid.

Of course it's better to be proactive on this problem and avoid it by heeding the skunk's warning messages. While a fully loaded skunk carries enough musk for 5 or 6 discharges it prefers to conserve the liquid which it produces rather slowly. Our neighbourhood skunk will be a striped skunk as it is the only species occurring in this area. When annoyed this species will growl, hiss and stamp its front feet so the message is pretty clear. If the skunk is in a U-shaped position with both its head and a raised tail facing you stand well clear. It is preparing-to-fire.

Skunks seem to be aware that they don't smell too good as they don't spray in confined spaces or their dens where they may get some of the musk on themselves. They may even take up residence under your shed or porch without your being aware of their presence because of the lack of odour.



Why do I like skunks if even they find themselves offensive? Although beekeepers and anyone with free-range chickens would disagree, on balance their diet makes them a significant benefit to agriculture. They are beautiful animals, admirable in their preference for minding their own business and a little comical. Perhaps I'm overly influenced by the beautiful Miss Mam'selle Hepzibah (left), the love interest of Pogo Possum in my favourite comic strip.

Certainly my attitude toward skunks has been at least partially shaped by some of our experiences when we were camping. Probably my favourite skunk was the one which visited us regularly two summers in a row at Arrowhead Provincial Park near Huntsville. We were camping with two preschoolers so mealtime tended to leave a skunk banquet under the table. Every evening while I did the dishes the skunk would saunter into the campsite and dine while I stood quietly and watched. One evening while conducting the usual full reconnaissance for every last morsel the skunk bumped into my foot. It sniffed my boot and took off into the woods faster than I had ever seen a skunk move previously. Apparently the skunk found my scent offensive.

## **Turn on the Tap and Ditch the Bottle!**

Submitted by Denice Wilkins

### **Bottled water is NOT safer or healthier than tap water.**

In Canada, water bottling plants are inspected on average only once every three years. Municipal tap water is tested continuously. Canada has one of the best public drinking water systems in the world.

### **Bottled water -**

#### **contributes to climate change and global water scarcity.**

The industry requires massive amounts of fossil fuels to extract, manufacture and transport bottled water. Plus the 3-5 litres of water used to produce a one-litre plastic bottle.



**Plastic bottles are toxic to us and to those who produce them. They will remain in the environment forever - harming the land, oceans and wildlife.**

#### **Our landfills cannot support bottled water.**

“As few as 50% of the water bottles Torontonians consume everyday are actually being recycled. That means as many as 65 million empty plastic water bottles per year, end up as garbage in a landfill waste site.”

**Water is a human right! Resist the corporate takeover of a shared public resource.**

**Source:** Council of Canadians website

**Check it out!** *The Story of Bottled Water* – YouTube

“Bottled water companies are taking what’s ours to begin with, packaging it in a lethal way, overcharging us for it, and asking us to pay for the recycling. All they’re really doing is selling us this convenience, which is actually highly inconvenient. What’s convenient about any of the health (and environmental) problems linked with using plastic water bottles?”

--- **Jackson Browne, musician**



## LATEST NEWS ON THE OSTRANDER POINT ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW TRIBUNAL

By Myrna Wood

Sylvia Davis, the Ministry of the Environment's lawyer, cross-examined our witness, Paul Catling, for the entire first half of the day, even though she claimed she would take only one hour.

By pursuing her theme that Ostrander Point is a disturbed area, she opened a path for Paul to further discuss alvar habitats and the effects of roads, pollutants and invasive species. Davis questioned his assertion that construction would harm 50 ha, not six. He explained once more the fragility of alvar species and how water movement and drainage affect the site.

He again discussed alvar plants, especially those that are unique to these areas and thus indicators of the site's importance. Available studies have listed only 30% of the species that would be expected to be found. No hydrological study was done.

Davis raised the subject of the Alvar Management Plan imposed on Gilead's project prior to construction. She asked many questions, trying to show that human management is better than nature's. Paul explained why Gilead's goal of returning the site to pre-construction condition is impossible.

Gilead's lawyers say they intend to take 5 hours to cross examine Paul, so even after spending two days on our appeal, Paul will need to return. This raises serious questions about the Tribunal process. The Green Energy Act says that if a decision is not reached in 6 months – July 3 – the proponent automatically wins approval. Will the Tribunal limit the amount of time spent on cross examinations by the Proponent? Can PECFN and its volunteer witnesses continue a legal court procedure against a multi-million-dollar-corporation and a government funded by tax payers?

Our lawyer, Eric Gillespie, asked about the status of PECFN's Motion to prevent construction activity. The Tribunal adjourned our motion; Gilead has agreed that no work will be done on the site. The proposed Alvar Management Plan must be discussed by the community and public authorities prior to construction. It has not been determined how that discussion will take place..

The remaining time was devoted to two Presenters. Parker Gallant, vice-president of Wind Concerns Ontario, discussed the status of bats on the site and the harm the project will do to the Species at Risk. His presentation is available on the WCO site.

Alban Goddard-Hill cited his experience with the Prince Edward County South Shore Important Bird Area and the Prince Edward Point Bird Observatory as reasons for believing that the Ostrander Point wind project will cause serious and irreversible harm. With each death, genetic diversity is lost, he explained. This hastens the decline of species. He included an appendix of MOE activities in the Bay of Quinte area which showed how difficult it is to make wise decisions.