

The Quinte Naturalist

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

Winter's End



Maybe I'm a little overly optimistic about declaring the end of winter but the spring solstice is just around the corner. The returning red-winged blackbirds are a better indicator of the end of winter than any robin. This photo by Karen Swoboda, Virginia won the grand prize in the Audubon Society's 2019 photo contest. Swoboda caught the three syllable *conk-a-ree* call in the bird's breath on a frosty spring morning. Red-winged blackbirds in Quinte marshes mean winter is over however much snow you think you see. (Continued on page 2)



Photo by Andrea Kingsley.

Male red-winged blackbirds arrive first, claiming a territory which has been known to accommodate as many as 15 late-arriving females. For their part females may very well dally with neighbouring males. There's lots of hanky panky in the red-winged blackbird world.

Female red-winged blackbirds are sometimes mistaken for large sparrows. Habitat, prominent eyebrow stripe, heavy streaking and yellowish wash around bill are distinguishing fieldmarks..

CLUB NEWS

Meeting

Forty-four people attended our February 27 meeting. Jess Pelow from Sandy Pines Wildlife Centre was our speaker illustrating her discussion of their work with videos showing the rehabilitation of animals from turtles to opossums. In appreciation QFN made a donation of \$300.

We learned the assignments given to the conveners elected at our January 16 Annual Meeting:

Outings and Facebook – Catherine and Bernd Baier

Advocacy, Environment and Liaison with Ontario Nature – Lori Borthwick and John Lowry

Website – John Lowry with Kyle Blaney

Membership – Nancy Stevenson

Newsletter – John Blaney

Social – Vacant. This job is an excellent way to make a contribution to QFN and get to know some of our members better. You remind others who have volunteered to provide treats for regular meetings and oversee fund-raising dinner preparations. Menu choices, ticket sales, etc. have already been settled for the dinner.

Marketing – Vacant. In this role you publicize our club. Denice has established an effective system and will show you how it works.



You will soon be hearing a common harbinger of spring, a song sparrow. The central breast spot is not 100% reliable to identify the species but it is a good indicator. Watch also for the long tail and a “pumping” action as the bird flies from perch to perch. Follow the link below for information on how to tell the song sparrow from similar species and to hear a recording of the song. Photo from Tony and Kathy deGroot’s website.

https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Song_Sparrow

ADVOCACY

February was a busy month with QFN involved, directly or peripherally, in four campaigns.

Nellie Lunn Park

Nellie Lunn Park is 100 acres of Woolaston Township woodlands and wetlands south of Coe Hill. It contains walking trails and a lookout over a small lake. In 1981 a World War II veteran bequeathed the land to the township on condition that it become a public park and be named after “the love of his life.”

The current township council reversed the decision of the previous council to sell the property. During the extended campaign to save a public park John Lowry supported the work of Sheila Currie, now a councillor, Congratulations to all involved in preserving Nellie Lunn Park.

Bakelite Property

The news was not as good in Belleville. In this case, the council elected in the 2022 municipal election reversed the earlier decision to purchase 8 acres of the former Bakelite property containing a pond and to accept gifts of two wetland properties. Chris Malette, Chair of the Green Task Force, had earlier advocated for the purchase, but he joined the mayor and six other councillors in the decision. Councillor Tyler Allsopp cast the lone vote to proceed with acquiring the property.

To his credit, Councillor Malette did not duck the issue. He provided a detailed explanation to John Lowry. Due diligence led council to understand that the site could not be developed as they had hoped because of continuing pollution problems. In a period of a serious budget crunch council felt that the expenditure seemed like a poor use of public funds. Even with the passage of Bill 23 Malette felt that no one could develop the property for any purpose.

QFN has sent a letter officially expressing our disappointment in the decision. Councillor Malette expressed the opinion that simply letting nature take its course would heal the property. Nature does have great healing powers if left to do its job. Unfortunately neither the current nor subsequent owners of this site are under any obligation to let nature do its job.

Bill 23 Information Meeting

On February 8 The Bay of Quinte Green Party of Ontario held a town hall meeting in St. Andrew's church in Picton. The main speakers were Brad McNevin, CAO of Quinte Conservation and Mike Schreiner, leader of the Green Party of Ontario.

Brad McNevin noted that Ontario's conservation authorities helped protect the environment and sources of drinking water as well as helping keep people safe from natural disasters. Even before Bill 23 funding from the province had been drastically cut. There are intimations that there will be further cuts. Despite diminishing funds



Brad McNevin speaking at the event. Photo by Doug Knutson. Windswept Productions

conservation authorities continue to offer services such as tree planting, habitat enhancement and watershed management to mitigate drought and flood conditions.

Unfortunately while CAs can advise municipalities Bill 23 has removed their authority to refuse permission for land development that could cause flooding, erosion or destruction of wetlands. Alarmingly conservation authorities are now prevented from advising municipalities on matters relating to 10

acts including the Endangered Species Act, the Environmental Protection Act and the Planning Act.

You have probably already heard that of 101 provincially significant wetlands in Quinte Conservation's jurisdiction only 1 is guaranteed to retain that designation. It is likely that municipalities will now have to make decisions regarding wetlands without having access to a conservation authorities' expertise.



Mike Schreiner, leader of Ontario's Green Party, also spoke at the event. He stressed that because Bill 23 had already been passed it would require pushback from people to change the situation. Schreiner also dismissed the claim that Bill 23 would help solve the housing crisis and pointed out the rich rewards available to developers as a result of the bill.

Phil Norton also provided a photographic tour of local wetlands, showing what could be lost unless those who value nature took action.

Mike Schreiner
Photo by Doug Knutson
Windswept Productions

The hall was packed for this session. See below. Photo by Doug Knutson, Windswept Productions



Tweed

Elizabeth Churcher has been extremely busy in the past few weeks corresponding and speaking to more than a dozen provincial and municipal officials and many others knowledgeable about a developing situation. A local landowner is making modifications to a site believed to be important for Blanding's turtles, a threatened species. Kudos to Elizabeth for labouring through the bureaucratic morass. Progress has been slow.



Photo from Argo, a U.S. Sherp Dealership.

Even more disturbing was a demonstration put on by a company called Sherp Adventures at the Tweed winter carnival. A Sherp is a monster ATV. Sherp Adventures is a company offering tours on crown land in a Sherp. Tours are planned in the Tweed area and along Prince Edward County's south shore. Youtube videos show the vehicle churning up

mud in marshes, swamps and lakes. Any creature hibernating in the mud is doomed.

Habitat where fish and other animals lay eggs is destroyed. Here's a link to a promotional video for Sherp. In the first minute after the ads you get a clear view of the devastation it leaves behind. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KTJUMOzx_zE. There are many legitimate uses for a Sherp but destructive recreation on crown land is not one of them.

The box below contains a quotation from the Sherp Adventures website.

The SHERP doesn't follow any conventional trails. Since the SHERP is a true off-road vehicle and is fully amphibious, it can go anywhere. We like to take the SHERP and our adventurers to new areas of the 35000+ hectares of land available to us to roam.

<http://sherpadventures.ca/#faq>

GREAT BACKYARD BIRD COUNT

February 17 – 20 were the dates of this year's Great Backyard Bird Count. The title is a bit of a misnomer because you could submit your sightings lists from anywhere. The final results were impressive as can be seen in the snapshot from the website.

In a snapshot

- **7,538** species of birds identified
- **202** participating countries
- **390,652** eBird checklists
- **372,905** Merlin Bird IDs
- **151,479** photos, videos, and sounds added to Macaulay Library
- **555,291** estimated global participants

The top three countries were the United States with 236,904 checklists submitted, India with 57,774 and Canada with 33,050.

In 3 countries more than 1,000 species were recorded, Colombia

(1317) and India (1073). Canada's climate limited us to 253 species.



Common Myna. The most frequently reported bird in India. Photo by Vivek Rathod.

Locally I was surprised and a little disappointed that my 28 species topped the Hastings County List. At least collectively Hastings birders found 52 species. Obviously some expert birders spent the time elsewhere. In Prince Edward County Paul Jones, local birder extraordinaire was the

leader, with 51 species with all county birders finding 60. Surprisingly in Northumberland which includes Presqu'île three members of the Nemisz family tied for the lead with only 27 species out of the 70 found. Mid-February birding in Ontario. can be slow but it's rewarding to make a contribution through citizen science.



As might be expected the most frequently reported bird in Canada was black-capped chickadee. Photo by Joel Wetherley.

What's hot at Quinte Conservation
Saturday, March 25th, 9:30 – 11:30 am



Featuring -
Brad McNevin, CAO of Quinte Conservation
speaking on a range of topics, including:

- The fallout from the Ontario Government's recent Bill 23 and how it may impact on our region
- The Fifth Depot Lake dam project and why it is so critical to the Napanee Watershed
- The Flood Plain mapping project for the Napanee and Salmon Rivers

Refreshments will be provided.
Event hosted by the Friends of the
Napanee River
For more information, contact us at:
info@FriendsNapaneeRiver.ca



PATCHES

By Elizabeth Churcher and George Thomson
Reprinted with permission from the Tweed News, January 16, 2019

This article was written four years ago but its message is both timeless and universal. We need patches of natural habitat everywhere to preserve our ecosystems. Nature performs many services for us.

When George was a young boy, he and his neighbourhood friends in the Dufferin and Bathurst area of Toronto enjoyed playing outdoors. One of their favourite pastimes transformed them into cowboys, like Roy Rogers and Gene Autry. Outfitted with broad-brimmed cowboy hats, flashy red handkerchiefs tied about their necks and holsters securing cap guns fastened to their belts, they were all set to rule the world! Their inspiration for their western escapades was the one hour cowboy movies on TV. In the late 1940's, on George's street, there was only one TV set, situated in the living-room of his long-suffering next-door neighbours. This home became the popular meeting place of all the kids on the block every week night from 4:30 to 6:00 p.m. Howdy Doody and a cowboy movie, in glorious black and white, were mandatory to the good health of the children, at least from their perspective.

As the boys rode their imaginary horses around the neighbourhood, they would sometimes 'hide out' in the woods. Their secretive escapes could be imaginary or real places such as the Lilac clump in the backyard of George's parents' rented house. To a small boy, a patch of Lilacs can seem like a forest! As George grew older, he explored patches of woodland farther afield in Toronto and started to watch the denizens of these little places, creatures like squirrels, insects and birds.

A lot of places where our friends of the wild find refuge are not very large but they provide a safe haven with food and appropriate habitat to raise a family. In many ways, George still is fascinated by small, wild places harbouring life, and he has helped Elizabeth to appreciate them more. Gone is her notion that she must be roaming through the vast expanses of forest in North Hastings to benefit from Nature's offerings. Mind you, she still loves those ramblings on the trails of her childhood but she now sees the natural world in every corner.

Just a little while ago, on December 27th, we took part, as we do every year, in the annual Belleville Christmas Bird Count. The area that we survey has many large, open farm

fields and is well populated with beautiful homes. Where are the birds in this area that has been so altered by Humans? Of course, they are present: we just had to search in small habitat patches to find them feeding and sheltering. They were in treed and shrubby borders of roadways, in little segments of farm fields where the natural habitat has been left undisturbed, along fence rows between fields and tucked away in the thick patches of flora at the edges of streams. These patches of wild Nature may seem small in any given place, but, added up over a larger area, they can be surprisingly significant in helping to maintain biodiversity in our region.

--- But you don't even need a roadway, field or stream to make a difference! A single tree can offer an important contribution to the life of many in the wild who are working hard to survive. As we were driving along Blessington Road counting the birds, we saw a flock of small finches undulating over the fields. They were too far away for positive identification. George was inclined to give up but Elizabeth's determination to succeed overruled his decision. She jumped out of the car and raced down the road with binoculars clutched in her hands. The dark dots in the sky circled north over the road a



Pine Siskins look very like their cousins, American Goldfinches (bottom right) and it's not unusual for a mixed flock to appear at feeders. The siskins are heavily streaked all year with yellow edges on their wing and tail feathers. You can see goldfinches gradually acquiring the bright breeding garb in March and April. Andrea Kingsley had this group at her feeder in Brighton a few years ago.

couple times and then came to rest behind a house in an ornamental birch tree. Needing a second opinion for reliable identification, Elizabeth waved to George who lumbered down the road to her side. By the time he arrived, she was squealing with glee, "Pine Siskins! Look, they're feeding on the birch seeds." We made a conservative estimate of 75 birds and were proud to present our findings at the compilation when we met others at the end of the day. We must admit that we were rather surprised and felt quite privileged to have been the only participants of the bird count to have seen Pine Siskins that day.

As we drive along our country roads time after time, the beautiful scenery, rich with plant life, confirms why we are so blessed with a diversity of wildlife in the Tweed area. We can trace the course of streams by the clumps of willows, alders, dogwoods and other

shrubs along their borders. --- And fence rows stand out because of the trees, shrubs and herbaceous plants growing in them. Species such as dogwoods, crab apples, elderberries, sumac, American Basswoods, White Ash and Black Cherry are all prime sources of food for birds. At our place, some of our avian friends planted Black Locust seeds in one of our fence rows and now there are several medium-sized trees which benefit both the birds and us.

All types of natural habitat patches contribute positively to wildlife throughout the year. Herbaceous plants, often considered to be 'weedy' species, produce pollen and nectar for bees, butterflies and other insects. Milkweeds, for example, are the larval host plants for the Monarch Butterfly. Some shrubs and trees, too, can acquire the same 'weedy' label. The rather unpopular Prickly Ash is the larval host plant for the Giant Swallowtail Butterfly.

Food, in the form of seeds and fruits, for birds and other wildlife is provided by many plant species, from wildflowers to woody types. A review of our fence lines reveals many sources of nutritious snacks: Wild Grape, Highbush Cranberry & other viburnums like Nannyberry, various dogwoods, elderberries such as Red-berried Elder, hawthorns, Pin



***Eastern Bluebird feeds on staghorn sumac berries.
Photo: Pamela Underhill Karaz/National Audubon
Society***

Cherry, Chokecherry, Sumac, Snowberry and more. Some of these are staple fruit-providers for birds that may or may not stay in our area in the Winter. The 2017 Belleville Christmas Bird Count recorded sizable numbers of Robins and Bluebirds while in 2018, only a small number of Bluebirds were seen and no Robins were observed. A major factor was likely the scarcity of Red Cedar 'berries' and Wild Grape berries this Winter. Winter birds' survival is highly dependent on plant food sources! Cedar Waxwings and Evening Grosbeaks love the seeds of Manitoba Maples, White Ash & many others while Juncos, Tree Sparrows and Chickadees enjoy gleaning the seeds from New England Asters,

Goldenrod and Joe-Pye Weed. Our support of even small numbers of plants filters through the web of life to a host of beneficiaries.

--- But the story continues. It seems that trees and shrubs never stop giving. In addition to food they provide shelter and nesting places for songbirds. If you look carefully after the leaves have fallen, you'll see small bird nests like those of Song Sparrows, Yellow Warblers and many more. --- And shrubs and trees along fence rows and streams reduce the effect of wind and help to lessen soil erosion. Their presence, too, offers wildlife corridors for the safe movement of animals from place to place as well as providing food and shelter for small mammals like Cottontail Rabbits, Red-tailed Foxes and a host of others.

Patches find their way into our lives in many forms. Elizabeth sometimes sews patches onto worn clothing to extend its life or she occasionally attaches them together to make a cozy quilt: George tills up garden patches in the Spring so that we can grow our food: we reach into the medicine cabinet to secure a patch when we are caring for a wound. Patches always are used to benefit, to improve, to strengthen, to heal. In terms of their usefulness, patches of wild Nature are elevated to the top of our list. They serve to benefit life, helping in the maintenance of biological diversity. They heal weakened ecosystems, strengthen many species and improve the possibility of survival for all. Yes, patches support the biological diversity which is essential to the health of the natural world and to the future of humanity!



Belleville's Bayshore trail has patches of more natural habitat. Photo from Google Earth