



the Esquesing

Newsletter of the Halton / North Peel Naturalist Club

Volume 40, Number 5

May-June 2006

Club Activities

Indoor: Meetings begin at 7:30 pm on the second Tuesday of the month unless stated otherwise.

***** June meeting is on Wednesday, June 14 Not Tuesday June, 13*****

June 14: Moths of Ontario. Presenters will be Don Scallen and Kerry Jarvis. Location is the Upper Canada College Outdoor Education Centre. Directions: follow Winston Churchill Boulevard north into the town of Norval to Highway 7 (fourth set of lights north of 401). Continue 1.3 kilometres from this intersection along Winston Churchill Boulevard. The entrance to the property is on the left at the crest of a small hill. Continue past the white house at the entrance and follow the driveway to the end.

Sept 12: Credit River Water Management Strategy. Presenter will be Christine Zimmer, P. Eng., Senior Water Resources Engineer, Credit Valley Conservation. Topics covered; the direct linkages existing between public health and ecosystem health, present watershed conditions showing some degradation in the environment, and current planning and development practices which are not sustainable.

Outdoor: Trips begin at the Niagara Escarpment Commission (NEC) parking lot at Guelph and Mountainview Road, Georgetown, unless stated otherwise. If you would like to meet the group at the trip site, please speak to the trip leader for the location and directions to the starting point.

May 14: Mothers Day Hike in Limehouse. This walk is open to the public. Leave the NEC parking lot at 1:00 pm or meet at the baseball diamond parking lot in Limehouse at 1:20 pm. Call Andrew Kellman or Kelly Bowen at (905) 873-7338 with questions.

May 15: Summer Evening Walks Begin – (see schedule for the summer on page 7). Thanks to our Bill McIlveen and Audrey Oswald, South Peel Naturalists' Club for organizing the events and those who have agreed to lead walks.

May 21: Thickson's Woods Spring Birding, Whitby. Meeting times and locations to be arranged with trip leader, Ray Blower, (519) 853-0171 in Acton or (905) 444-9454 in Whitby. This trip is scheduled on the Sunday of the Victoria Day weekend to minimize the effect of traffic on participants coming from points west. Meeting times at Thickson's Woods could be arranged for any time between 06:00 to 11:00 if the weather is reasonable. Lynde Shores Conservation Area and Cranberry Marsh are the other places visited. All locations are near Lake Ontario which remains cool at this time of the season, so bring warm clothing, binoculars, scope, water, lunch, hat and sunscreen. These three places provide a variety of habitats including mature forest, meadows, marshes, swamps, scrub land and Lake Ontario. Almost any song bird may be seen as well as a variety of the "late" ducks.

Young Naturalists

May 27: Building Bird Houses. Meet at 1:00 pm. at 46 Regan Crescent. Contact Andy and Nancy Kovacs (905) 702-1132

Evening Walks – Summer 2006 – Complete Schedule See Page 7

President's Message

Spring is now well underway as I write this, marking one of the busiest times of year for our members. Yellow spotted and Jefferson's salamanders have crawled back to nearby ponds to spawn, much to the delight of the spying naturalists. I wonder what other group of people actually waits in anticipation for the first warm rainy night of the spring, and then goes forth to romp in the wet, dark woods in their rain gear? The swallows have returned, and the first warblers have arrived back in Ontario. The turkey vultures began arriving over a month ago, and the hawk migration at Beamer's is well underway. Of course, many of us are torn this time of year between birding and watching the emergence of the woodland spring ephemerals, and battling the emergence of garlic mustard, dandelions and other exotics in our own natural spaces, our gardens.



There never seems to be enough time during these lengthening days of spring...

Club members have been involved in several projects this spring. In April, Bill, Kelly, Andrew and Larry finished the tree tagging and inventory portion of the Crozier reserve natural inventory. Stay posted for future monitoring efforts including shrubs and herbaceous vegetation. Kelly and Andrew also participated in the "Trees for Watershed Health" program at the Milton Quarry on Earth Day. Despite the fog and drizzle, a good number of volunteers turned out, and almost all of the seedlings were planted by noon.

This spring, our club has been asked to become involved in another ecological monitoring program in Georgetown's Hungry Hollow ravine. In 2003, the Town of Halton Hills drafted the "Hungry Hollow Management Plan". When available, these monitoring efforts will follow established protocols. The goal of this monitoring is to determine if trail development and other human activities (e.g., unauthorized trail proliferation) are adversely affecting biodiversity in Hungry Hollow. The plan also calls for the placement of a monitoring coordinator and the creation of a database. The monitoring program will include the following:

- an amphibian monitoring in the spring, primarily based on calling frogs and toads
- species richness of breeding birds (based on Canadian Wildlife Service's forest bird monitoring program). Indicator species include hairy woodpecker, ovenbird and winter wren.
- Fish monitoring in Silver Creek (coordinated by Credit Valley Conservation)
- Non-native plant monitoring
- water quality monitoring
- Trail monitoring (e.g., proliferation of mountain bike trails).

Many of these monitoring efforts will rely heavily on volunteers. Specifically, our club has been asked to participate in the breeding bird survey. Any involvement from naturalist club members would be greatly appreciated. If anyone is interested in helping out, or would like to receive a copy of the "Guidelines for Implementing Monitoring in Hungry Hollow" report, please contact Bill McIlveen (519) 853-3948 or any member of the executive.

Sincerely,
Kelly Bowen

Halton/North Peel Naturalist Club, Box 115, Georgetown, Ontario L7G 4T1

Executive

President: Kelly Bowen (905) 873-7338
Past-President Andy Kovacs (905) 702-1132
Vice-President: Andrew Kellman (905) 873-7338
Secretary: Janice Sukhiani (905) 693-8227
Treasurer: David Williams (905) 877-1539

Appointments

Membership: Teresa Rigg (905) 873-0614
Newsletter: Gerda Potzel (905) 702-1681
Ontario Nature Representative: Teresa Rigg
Public Relations: Gerry Doekes (905) 873-0179
Young Naturalists: Nancy Kovacs (905) 702-1132

- Membership for one year: \$20 Single; \$30 Family
- The Halton/North Peel Naturalist Club is an affiliated member of Ontario Nature

Email submissions/questions/concerns to: gpotzel@sympatico.ca
<http://haltonnorthpeelnaturalists.org>

Bird Report from Upper Canada College (UCC)

April 19, 15 rusty blackbirds flew over the property, calling as they went.

April 27, an early Spring Azure was in a flower garden area. Also on the same day at 8:00 am, a male purple finch was singing for a while in a nearby ash tree.

For the last three weeks or so, there have been several brown creepers migrating through, singing their beautiful high spring song as they were foraging for food.

Wood ducks seemed to be actively seeking good trees for nesting in the deciduous woods on the slope between the Stephen House and the Credit River.

An unidentified mammal was seen by two teachers and their group of students. While walking close to the Credit River, they spotted a dark brown mammal (not of a feline species) about 30 feet up in a large black walnut tree. It was trying it's best to keep out of sight in the fork of a large branch. Nobody had binoculars, but identified it as being larger than a mink; my next guess would be a river otter. I don't know whether they can climb trees. Have fishers ever been sighted in Halton Hills? I would not expect groundhogs being interested in foraging for food in a tree, let alone climb one. The animal was too dark brown in colour, for the last species I mentioned.

Would anyone want to guess what it could have been, I would like to hear from anyone who wants to share their thoughts on this. Thanks.



Gerry Doekes

Other Events of Interest

Saturday, June 3, and Sunday, June 4, RiverFest.

Willow Park Ecology Centre (WPEC), Norval. The theme is w-a-t-e-r, featuring Children's Water Festival events. There will also be exhibits, musicians, workshops, pancake breakfast, beer/wine tent, hikes, and an outdoor market hosting vendors and community groups offering new ideas, products and services related to water, environmentally friendly practices and sustainable living. More help is welcome and needed. Contact Tunde at the WPEC office (905) 702-9055, wpec@willowparkecolgy.com or www.willowparkecolgy.com.

Saturday, June 17, 10:00 am to Noon, 2nd Annual Nature Walk-a-Thon.

Gather pledges and raise money for your environmental group and the Halton Environmental Network (HEN). Your environmental group keeps 80% of all donations collected by you and HEN receives 20%. Location of route in North Halton – Willow Park Ecology Centre. To receive a pledge sheet call HEN at (905) 849-5501 or email info@the-hen.net or visit www.the-hen.net.

Tuesday, May 16, 7:30 pm, Plant Invaders and Their Enemies: Tales from Old Fields.

MacEwan Field Station at Riverwood, 1475 Burnhamthorpe Road West. For more information and to register contact the Mississauga Garden Council at (905) 279-5878 or www.mississaugagardencouncil.org

Nature by the Numbers

150: bird species to become extinct since 1500.

authority on the status of birds and their habitats.

12: percentage of the world's birds threatened with global extinction (that's one in eight!)

597: number of Important Bird Areas in Canada (IBA)

1996: year Nature Canada became Canadian co-partners in Birdlife International, the world's leading

136: number of IBA conservation plans Nature Canada has helped develop since 1996.

From Nature Canada

Unusual Plumage of Juncos at Acton, 2005-2006

Back in 1997, I prepared a short note for the newsletter in which I described some encounters with birds with unusual plumage variations [1]. One of those involved a junco that was clearly a hybrid between a dark-eyed junco and a white-throated sparrow. It stayed around our house located south of Acton for much of the winter of 1992-1993.

This winter we had not one but two juncos with unusual plumage. One was noted intermittently in a small flock of normal juncos for much of the winter season. It has large white patches on the cheek below the eye and smaller white patches just below that on the side of the neck in the vicinity of its throat. It is actually a rather pretty bird. Unlike the previous bird, this one was dark on the throat where the white patch of a white-throated sparrow would be. The bird also had two pale to white lateral crown stripes above the eye. I would not want to pronounce this as a hybrid between a junco and a Harris' sparrow though this would be the first combination of species that I might imagine if hybridism was involved. A single white tip of a primary feather is sometimes visible when the bird is viewed from the back.

The second unusual junco appeared in April 2006 in the same flock as the previous bird. The unusual

plumage pattern was not like that just described above. In this case, the bird has standard junco features except in the head area. It has a band of whitish feathers around the mantle area just above the wings as seen when folded. It generally resembles a light-colored stole around the bird's neck. In addition, there are four to six narrower bands of light-colored feather running crosswise on the nape of the neck.

In each case, the birds were noted as behaving like typical juncos. The fact that two unusual birds were present in the same flock but having different colour forms suggests that they might possibly come from the same nest. Such a nest might involve parents carrying genetic coding that is prone to producing partially albinistic offspring. Only by testing the DNA of these birds would one be sure if they were even related. Regardless of the cause of the plumage variants, they are interesting to watch.

W.D. McIlveen

1 McIlveen, W.D. 1997. Unusual birds in the Georgetown area. *The Esquesing: Newsletter of Halton/North Peel Field Naturalist*. V.32, No.1. pp 4.



Avian Flu as a Risk to Naturalists

In recent years, much media coverage has been given to disease outbreaks in humans. Prime examples are West Nile Virus, SARS, and now Avian Flu. Sometimes the amount of coverage does not accurately represent the risk. It is hoped that the following information will help to clarify the risk of Avian Flu as it relates to bird banders.

Flu Basics

Flu, or influenza, as it relates to the present discussion is one of a number of virus diseases of animals. In particular, the discussion involves the kind labeled Influenza A (types B and C exist but are of lesser importance). Various forms of Influenza A exist and are responsible for all of the many major flu outbreaks. All of the documented flu outbreaks (including the great Spanish Flu of 1918, and more recent Asian flu, Hong Kong Flu, and Russian Flu) originate from strains infecting birds. Periodically, the genetic information within the virus is altered and the result is a change in the host specificity and disease severity.

In simple terms, a virus is a very tiny package of

genetic material, either DNA or RNA, encapsulated in a coating of protein. Because it has no metabolic structures of its own, the virus must 1) enter the host cell, 2) cause the host cell to convert its metabolic system into the making of many complete new virus particles, and 3) escape of the completed viruses from within the host cell to start the cycle over again.

The composition of the protein coating is important in the infection cycle. Of the six recognized protein types on the virus surface, two are key. These are hem agglutinin and neuraminidase. The former is critical in matching the lock-and-key mechanism that allows the virus to enter the host while the latter controls the escape of the new virus particles from the host cell. These are the 'H' and 'N' that are mentioned so frequently in the media as the infamous H5N1 strain of Bird Flu. In fact, there are 16 forms of 'H' and 9 forms of 'N'. This means that there are some 144 possible flu strains that can affect birds. Some of these are relatively rare. It is important to remember that just because a strain can be defined on this basis, there is no uniformity of effects of that strain. Within H5N1, there is an extremely wide range in the virulence towards the host or hosts. That

Continued on page 5.....

.....continued from page 4

is controlled by the genetic component of the virus.

Avian Viral Diseases

Minimally, there are at least 38 different viral diseases that affect birds. Many of these are likely very restricted in distribution, species range, and probably represent limited potential to infect humans.

Several viral diseases, however, can be transmitted to humans (Table 1).

West Nile Virus is a very serious disease of certain birds (e.g. jays, crows and northern owls) and is readily transmitted to humans via a mosquito. Although the numbers of deaths is rather significant (804), the actual number of infections is very much larger than the 21,539 cases where medical help was needed. This means that only a small proportion of the infections cause human mortality. By comparison, the Avian Flu has a mortality rate in excess of 50%. For sheer numbers, the Spanish Flu caused the deaths of between 20 and 100 million (likely 30-40 million) people around the globe.

Table 1 Important viral disease of birds transmittable to humans		
Disease	Vector	Human Rate of Infection
Eastern Equine Encephalitis	Mosquito	200 confirmed cases in the US 1964-present
St Louis Encephalitis	Mosquito	10,000 cases in 50 years USA
West Nile (WN) virus	Mosquito	1999-2005 21,539 cases with 804 deaths in Canada & USA
Newcastle disease	Direct	Conjunctivitis in eyes of bird handlers
Spanish or Swine Flu	Air-borne	20 million to 100 million worldwide in 1918
Avian Flu	Direct	World wide – 176 cases, 97 deaths (Mar. 10, 2006)

Avian Flu Symptoms

Avian Flu can occur in various forms depending upon the host. The most prevalent hosts of the H5N1 strain are larger birds, particularly waterfowl and domestic poultry, but other types can be infected. Among chickens, the disease symptoms include depression, poor appetite, ruffled feathers, fever, weakness, staggering gait, semi-comatose state, heads touching ground, internal hemorrhaging, combs and wattles cyanotic & edematous, small hemorrhages (petechia) of combs, few and soft-shelled eggs, profuse diarrhea, excessive thirst, labored respiration, and a mortality rate from 50 to 100%

Distribution and Spread

The present outbreak of the H5N1 strain of Avian Flu was detected in Hong Kong in 1997. Heavy culling of the chicken flocks there brought the outbreak under control and no new cases were reported until 2003 when several outbreaks were found in Vietnam and Thailand. Since then the disease has spread to approximately 40 countries leaving at least 97 deaths. The spread of the disease appears to have followed the major migratory bird flyways, generally moving northward and westward over the past two years. The disease has now been found in many countries in Europe as well as in parts of Africa. Because the flyways overlap, the disease can spread beyond the flyway boundaries. It seems probable that the disease will naturally make its way into North and South America where flyways overlap in Alaska and the eastern Arctic.

Threat

The concern about the disease is that it has a high rate of mortality among infected humans. Almost all those people infected had direct contact with infected poultry. No good evidence exists that indicates the disease can spread from person to person – yet! The great fear is some poor soul will be unlucky enough to contract both the H5N1 strain and another flu type that can be easily transmitted from person to person.

The worst-case scenario is the genetic information from the two viruses will get mixed and the result will be a new strain of Avian Flu that has the potential to spread from person to person. We can only hope such an unfortunate individual will succumb to the disease and cannot transmit the disease to others.

Little has been said about the possibility that such a change could happen in another type of animal – a pig for example. In addition to the obvious bird hosts and the human hosts, the H5N1 strain has been found in several types of cat (zoo-kept tigers are very susceptible) including domestic cats, swine, and most recently a stone marten.

Concern for Naturalists

Although the H5N1 strain of concern has not reached North America yet, it is something that banders should be concerned about. The disease persists as infections among wild bird populations. What group of people is most likely to be in contact with wild birds? Bird banders and hunters is the logical answer.

Continued on page 6...

Most bird watchers generally remain at binocular viewing range unless they are feeding birds. To date, most of the people who have died have been younger parts of the population (i.e. younger than 30); however, older members of the population are not immune to the disease. People handling birds are at risk of exposure not just to the Avian Flu, if and when it arrives in North America, but they could also be exposing themselves to the viral diseases listed above as well as a number of other bacterial, fungal, and protozoan agents. It would serve bird handlers well to be cognizant of the risk that these agents pose and take steps to prevent illness or worse. Medication and vaccination to prevent the Avian Flu are currently not available in sufficient quantity or kind to prevent the disease therefore proper behavior is needed to minimize the risks of exposure to infection.



Reducing Risk

The major route of infection by many of the aforementioned diseases is through direct contact with birds (on plumage) or via fecal material. Certain procedures to restrict transport of potentially infected birds or culling of infected flocks will definitely be useful. Keeping domestic flocks separated from wild birds will also be important. At a personal level, it is up to individual bird handlers to modify their behaviour and institute procedures that generally fall into the category of good sanitation. Washing of hands and equipment on a regular basis will reduce the chances of spreading disease from birds to people as well as from bird to bird. Education of the public on the relative risks posed by Avian Flu could be done via the media but that is not particularly newsworthy. It is up to individuals to seek out the needed information. A number of books (9 by my last count) on the subject are now available but I cannot comment on how useful any of these are because I have not read them.

W.D. McIlveen



Young Naturalists

The March 20 meeting of the Young Naturalists was held at the home of Fiona Reid. First, we kids played in the snow with the dog Rollie while the parents talked about who knows what?? Then we all went for a hike in the woods looking for animal tracks. We found a really big print that looked like a bear print, but no one knew what it was. (Fiona's daughter Holly kept seeing footprints she thought were Bigfoot/Yeti/the Abominable Snowman). Later we found some deer and squirrel tracks on a frozen pond, and everyone made tracks of their own. When we went on past the stream, we found some wild turkey tracks

On the way back we pond-dipped and brought the containers back to Fiona's. We looked at everything under microscopes. Emily had also brought her computerized microscope, so we could see the creatures on the computer screen. We found caddis fly larvae and other neat creatures alive and wriggling in the cold. At the end, we got our own duo tangs with information on animal tracks.

During March break, we were invited to Upper Canada College's (UCC) outdoor campus in Norval to do maple sugaring.



First we played the game "Maple or Not Maple?" with Bill Elgie, the Director of UCC. Then he showed us how to tap trees. After a few minutes we separated into two groups. We drilled holes into the trees, and then put the spile in the hole and attached buckets to collect the sap. We started a fire to boil the sap down. In no time the buckets were full enough to start collecting. While the sap was boiling we played pioneers. Then we had a little snack and helped keep the fire going. It was already starting to smell good by the time we left.

For the April meeting, we walked the Crozier and Hardy Properties. It was a lovely, warm day, and we saw lots of wildflowers, including trillium, toad lily, colt's foot, and one tiny blooming violet. We talked about moss and how long it can take to grow. There weren't many birds around, but there were tree swallows, Canada geese. A turkey vulture soared overhead. Andy and Nancy spotted a yellow-rumped warbler.

The May 27th meeting will be at Andy and Nancy Kovacs's house, 46 Regan Crescent. We'll be building bird houses and hope to take a walk, too.

Andrea Huckins and Emily Kovacs