

# the Esquesing

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Newsletter of the Halton / North Peel Naturalist Club

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Volume 45, Number 3

January-February 2011

## Club Activities

**Indoor:** Meetings begin at 7:30 pm on the second Tuesday of the month, October to June at St. Alban the Martyr Anglican Church, 537 Main Street, Glen Williams, unless stated otherwise.

**Feb. 8: Insects of the Credit River Valley – Darryl Gwynne.** Professor Gwynne regaled us last season with a presentation on the giant weta (grasshopper like beasties) of antipodean realms. His talk was a big hit. Now Darryl's focus shifts from distant New Zealand to our own backyard. Darryl will unveil the mysteries of the fascinating lives of local insects.

**Mar. 8: Canadian Chestnut Council – Kelly Schafer.** Most Ontario naturalists are aware that towering American chestnut trees once graced the Carolinian zone in the southern part of the province. A virulent pathogen introduced from Asia destroyed almost all of the mature chestnut trees in eastern North America by the 1940's. An estimated 4 billion trees were wiped out or reduced to suckers growing out of old stumps. The Canadian Chestnut Council has been working to develop blight resistant trees that could eventually restore the American chestnut to its rightful place in our deciduous forests.

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**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.

**Feb 5: Winter Trees and Animal Tracks.** Join Fiona at her Speyside property for a walk in the woods to look for tracks (if conditions allow) and study winter trees and plants. This will be an afternoon outing but please call Fiona for details (905) 693- 9719

**Mar. 12: Tundra Swans at Long Point.** Flocks of Tundra Swans stop at Long Point during their spring migration to their breeding grounds further north. Many other species of waterfowl, early-returning songbirds, Bald Eagle, and Short-eared Owl may also be seen on this **long** day trip. Be advised that lunch at the restaurant is usually around 1:00 p.m., and the outing usually ends after sunset, in the vicinity of Jarvis. Therefore, bring snacks, water, a lunch or money for the restaurant(s), binoculars, scope, layers of warm clothing, etc. Call Ray Blower (519-853-0171) by Wednesday, March 09 with questions or to arrange carpooling and meeting locations.

Deadline for *the Esquesing* March/April issue – Sunday February 27<sup>th</sup>

## President's Message

Dear Friends,

Happy New Year to everyone!

Our club has attracted several new members lately and I would like to give them a special welcome. I hope we will have a good turnout of members new and old at our next meeting. I am happy to report that I should be able to attend all of the indoor meetings this year.

Outside my window this morning is one of those beautiful Canadian winter landscapes, with fresh snow clinging to the hemlocks and bare branches of the beech, maple and oak trees. Although it makes for a lot of shoveling later, it is always good to relax and enjoy the wonderful Halton vistas. And don't forget to fill your bird feeders! The chickadees, woodpeckers and other visitors really need that energy boost at this time of year, and they brighten the scene for us as well.

Best wishes, Fiona

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

| <b>Executive</b>              |                | <b>Appointments</b>            |                |
|-------------------------------|----------------|--------------------------------|----------------|
| President: Fiona Reid         | (905) 693-9719 | Membership: Christine Williams | (905) 877-1539 |
| Past President Andrew Kellman | (905) 681-3701 | Newsletter: Gerda Potzel       | (905) 702-1681 |
| Vice President: Don Scallen   | (905) 877-2876 | Ontario Nature Representative: | Vacant         |
| Secretary: Janice Sukhiani    | (647) 408-9515 | Public Relations:              | Vacant         |
| Treasurer: Marg Wilkes        | (905) 878-6255 | Webmaster;                     | Andrew Kellman |
|                               |                | Crozier Property Steward       | Marg Wilkes    |
|                               |                | Hardy Property Steward         | Ray Blower     |

Membership for one year: \$30 Single; \$40 Family

The Halton/North Peel Naturalist Club is an affiliated member of Ontario Nature.

[www.hnpnc.com](http://www.hnpnc.com)

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### Halton North Peel Naturalist Club Statement of Income and Expense \* For the period, May 1, 2009 through November 30, 2010

| <u>INCOME</u>                 |            | <u>EXPENSES</u>             |           |
|-------------------------------|------------|-----------------------------|-----------|
| Memberships                   | \$1,370    | Rent May 2009-November 2010 | \$200     |
| Miscellaneous income          | 222        | Maintenance fee             | 100       |
| Investment interest           | 90         | P.O. Box rental             | 131       |
| Donations - General           | 84         | Ontario Nature. membership  | 75        |
| Begging box                   | 17         | Office supplies             | 51        |
| Christmas card sales          | <u>10</u>  | Newsletter costs            | 75        |
| Total\$                       | \$1,793    | Speakers' fees              | 50        |
|                               |            | Bank charges                | <u>35</u> |
|                               |            | Total                       | \$717     |
| Excess of Income over Expense | \$1,076    |                             |           |
| Cash in bank, November 30/10  | \$2,008.05 |                             |           |

\*compiled on "cash basis"

*by Marg Wilkes, Treasurer*

## Elms

I grew up in the shade of elm trees that arched magnificently across the Georgetown street where I lived as a young boy. Then, one by one they began to die. By the early 1970's only their bare bones remained. In the 1920's, the fungus that killed those elms arrived in North America. Carried by elm bark beetles this fungal scourge swept across the eastern half of the continent, laying waste to millions of elms.

Elm trees are still with us though. Young trees sprout vigorously along streams and rivers. Others grow along fencerows alongside ash, maple and basswood. Few however, live long enough to attain the gracious majesty of yesteryear. Most are struck down long before they spread their branches in the iconic umbrella form. The few that do attain this lovely shape are solitary trees, gripping roadside verges or standing sentinel in agricultural fields. The survival of these loners is not likely due to some inherent resistance to the fungus. Isolation is probably their salvation. They simply haven't been discovered by the bark beetles.

When a tree species disappears or declines dramatically as with the elm, the result is not only tragic for the species, but for the ecosystem with which it is intertwined. Every native tree

supports a suite of insects that in turn feed birds and small mammals.

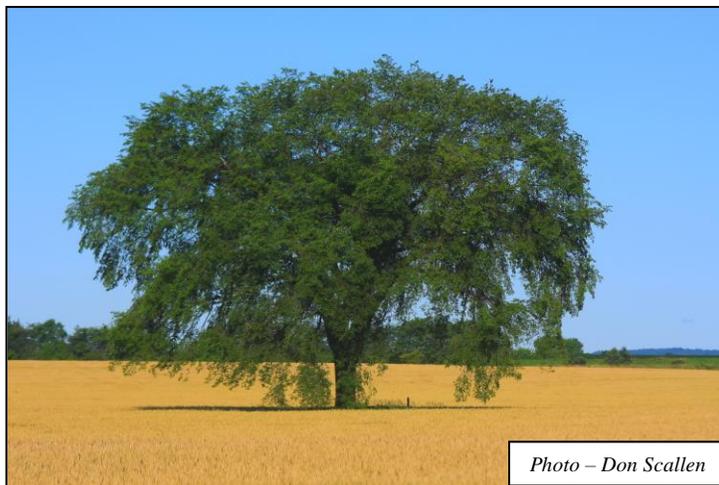
Some of these insects are host specific. This means that they depend solely on a particular tree for survival. So the passing of a species of tree, while tragic in its own right, ripples outwards to diminish the health of entire ecosystems.

Will our elms ever reclaim their former glory? The University of Guelph and other institutions have been investigating and breeding elms that may be resistant to the fungi. Elm trees that may have some resistance are now available.

Two years ago I gasped when I discovered that a magnificent elm growing in Glen Williams had been cut down. I had admired this tree for decades. It was huge, with leafy branches reaching clear across Confederation Street in this village. Perhaps it was diseased. If not, its removal was a terrible, thoughtless mistake.

Pause a moment to marvel at the glory of the few large elms that remain. They are natural treasures and touchstones for a rural landscape that may someday be reclaimed.

*by Don Scallen*



See some of Don's other elm photos at *Notes from the Wild* at [inthehills.ca/blogs](http://inthehills.ca/blogs)

## Results of the 2010 Halton Hills Christmas Count

The annual Christmas Bird Count for Halton Hills that took place on December 27, 2010 represents a notable milestone. That is because it was the 20<sup>th</sup> such version of the modern counts in Halton Hills. The weather was chilly starting the day at around minus 10°C in the morning but warming to about minus 4°C later on. It was a mostly cloudy day with a stiff breeze.

The results for the 2010 Count are summarized in the attached table on page 5. For comparison, the average and high numbers recorded for the previous 19 years are also included in the table. The total number of species recorded for the day plus Count Week was 50 and that is right on the long-term count average. The total number of birds (9040) is substantially below the long-term average count of 9744. No new species were seen in 2010 so the cumulative number of species remains at 96. Eastern Bluebird is included on the list by virtue of its having been seen in Count Week, rather than on the Count Day proper.

New high numbers of Bohemian Waxwing (131), Pine Siskin (58) and Red-bellied Woodpecker (10) were reported. The former two species are irruptive and new high totals might be attributable to the year-to-year variability. By contrast, the increase in the Red-bellied Woodpecker is likely part of a real trend to higher numbers throughout our general area.

The numbers of birds of four species (Canada Goose, Wild Turkey, American Crow, and Snow Bunting) were present in numbers higher than the respective long-term average.

Sixteen species (roughly one out of every three) were present in numbers lower than their corresponding long-term averages. It is possible that the weather might have been partly responsible for the lower numbers but it is likely that the observed decreases in populations of the birds present were real. In particular, the numbers of gulls observed was extremely low with only a single Ring-billed Gull being present for the count (compared to a high count of 2010 birds in 2003) and no Herring Gulls were seen at all. There is no reason to suspect that these latter species are in decline as their numbers, particularly those of the Ring-billed Gull, are high along the Lake Ontario shoreline. On the day of the Count, these birds simply had not moved inland away from the lake.

In total, 21 people participated in the count, either as observers or as feeder watchers. Thanks to the following participants: Judy Biggar, Brad Bloemendal, Ray Blower, Betty Ann Goldstein, Lou Marsh, Meryl Marsh, Larry Martyn, Irene McIlveen, W.D. McIlveen, Michael Pearson, Fiona Reid, Dawn Renfrew, Teresa Rigg, Don Scallen, Dan Shuurman, Rick Stroud, Janice Sukhiani, Christine Upton, Mark Upton, Jake Veerman, and Dave Williams.

Appreciation is extended to Larry May for arranging access to the Maple Lodge Farms property and to Halton Regional Police for use of the community boardroom for the wrap-up session.

*by W.D. McIlveen*

### Conservation Halton – Owl Prowls

Mountsberg Conservation Area (2259 Millborough Line, Campbellville) is once again gearing up for our popular winter Owl Prowl programs! Intrepid prowlers will be provided with lots of information on our native Ontario owls, a winter night hike to search for wild local owls, and—of course—a visit with our resident birds will help give our guests a ‘nose to beak’ experience that will not be easily forgotten.

Tickets are: Adults \$15 and seniors \$10, both prices are + HST.

Owl Prowl (Adult Night), January 28<sup>th</sup>, 7 pm – 9 pm  
Owl Prowl (Adult Night), January 28<sup>th</sup>, 7 pm – 9 pm  
Owl Prowl (Family Night), January 29<sup>th</sup>, 6:30 pm – 8:30 pm

To pre-register: email [mtsberg@hrca.on.ca](mailto:mtsberg@hrca.on.ca) or phone (905) 854-2276

## Results of the 2010 Christmas Bird Count at Halton Hills

| Species                | Total | Avg. | Low | High | Species                 | Total       | Avg.        | Low         | High         |
|------------------------|-------|------|-----|------|-------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|--------------|
| Canada Goose           | 3325  | 1879 | 229 | 3534 | American Crow           | 619         | 345         | 55          | 692          |
| American Black Duck    | 30    | 18.7 | 2   | 67   | Common Raven            | 1           | 1.7         | 0           | 3            |
| Mallard                | 492   | 558  | 135 | 1636 | Black-capped Chickadee  | 515         | 683         | 244         | 1211         |
| Common Goldeneye       | 6     | 2.6  | 1   | 7    | Red-breasted Nuthatch   | 3           | 9.2         | 1           | 22           |
| Common Merganser       | 5     | 14.5 | 1   | 66   | White-breasted Nuthatch | 28          | 44.9        | 19          | 82           |
| Ruffed Grouse          | 1     | 4.2  | 0   | 8    | Brown Creeper           | 1           | 3.2         | 1           | 8            |
| Wild Turkey            | 42    | 21.9 | 0   | 55   | Golden-crowned Kinglet  | 5           | 7.6         | 1           | 30           |
| Northern Harrier       | 4     | 3.5  | 0   | 11   | Eastern Bluebird        | CW          | 6.0         | 4           | 8            |
| Sharp-shinned Hawk     | 4     | 4.5  | 1   | 11   | American Robin          | 8           | 30.8        | 1           | 206          |
| Cooper's Hawk          | 1     | 2.5  | 0   | 5    | Northern Mockingbird    | 1           | 1.9         | 0           | 5            |
| Northern Goshawk       | 1     | 1.1  | 0   | 2    | European Starling       | 1128        | 2114        | 485         | 3490         |
| Red-tailed Hawk        | 59    | 64.7 | 39  | 117  | Bohemian Waxwing        | 131         | 127.0       | 127         | 127          |
| Rough-legged Hawk      | 5     | 7.5  | 1   | 45   | Cedar Waxwing           | 79          | 73.4        | 7           | 240          |
| American Kestrel       | 3     | 10.4 | 0   | 16   | American Tree Sparrow   | 295         | 299.7       | 95          | 837          |
| Ring-billed Gull       | 1     | 183  | 3   | 2010 | Song Sparrow            | 9           | 5.0         | 1           | 22           |
| Rock Pigeon            | 552   | 617  | 210 | 1455 | White-throated Sparrow  | 1           | 2.6         | 1           | 10           |
| Mourning Dove          | 240   | 709  | 191 | 1385 | Slate-colored Junco     | 205         | 257.2       | 91          | 565          |
| Eastern Screech Owl    | 2     | 1.7  | 0   | 4    | Snow Bunting            | 302         | 267.5       | 1           | 1118         |
| Belted Kingfisher      | 1     | 2.8  | 1   | 7    | Northern Cardinal       | 54          | 58.9        | 29          | 95           |
| Red-bellied Woodpecker | 10    | 1.9  | 0   | 6    | Purple Finch            | 7           | 12.6        | 1           | 52           |
| Downy Woodpecker       | 41    | 52.1 | 21  | 91   | House Finch             | 92          | 235.1       | 23          | 456          |
| Hairy Woodpecker       | 19    | 16.6 | 2   | 32   | Pine Siskin             | 58          | 13.3        | 1           | 50           |
| Northern Flicker       | 2     | 1.1  | 0   | 2    | American Goldfinch      | 170         | 185.9       | 37          | 470          |
| Pileated Woodpecker    | 4     | 3.5  | 0   | 12   | House Sparrow           | 367         | 668.7       | 196         | 1316         |
| Northern Shrike        | 4     | 4.2  | 1   | 19   |                         |             |             |             |              |
| Blue Jay               | 107   | 158  | 60  | 333  |                         |             |             |             |              |
|                        |       |      |     |      | <b>Total Birds</b>      | <b>9040</b> | <b>9744</b> | <b>3131</b> | <b>15507</b> |
|                        |       |      |     |      | <b>Total Species</b>    | <b>50</b>   | <b>49.5</b> | <b>41</b>   | <b>57</b>    |



## Fascinating Fungal Forms

If you are like most people, the word “fungi” conjures up images of mushrooms with stalks, caps, and gills. But look a little closer, and a wide world is opened up full of fungi of all shapes, sizes, and with bizarre, intriguing names.

Fungi, once considered plants, are now in their own Kingdom (Kingdom Fungi) and are set apart from most plants by their lack of chlorophyll and absence of true roots, leaves, and stems. Instead they get their food through decomposition of organic matter, symbiotic mycorrhizal relationships with plants or even as parasites on living plants, animals or other mushrooms (for a fascinatingly morbid peek into this world, Google David Attenborough’s Planet Earth video on the killer fungi Cordyceps).

Indeed, some fungi do look scary- take for instance the charcoal-black Dead Man’s Fingers (*Xylaria polymorpha*), a finger-shaped fungus which pokes out of the ground in clusters. If you see five of these “fingers”- watch out! another hand might be reaching out from the ground behind you! Or consider Witches Butter (*Tremella mesenterica*), a yellow jelly-like blob found on hardwoods, or Devil’s Urn (*Urnula craterium*), a black cup fungi that fruits on the ground.



White Elfin Saddle (*Helvella crispa*) Photo - Leanne Wallis

(*Scutellinia scutellata*) is a common local species that has an orange-red cup with black “eyelashes” around the margin. It is found on rotting wood.

Last year, during Natural Areas Inventory (for more information about the NAI project, visit

[www.creditvalleyca.ca/NAI](http://www.creditvalleyca.ca/NAI)) fieldwork, I found a bird’s nest fungus in Glen Williams, a fungal highlight for me. The White Bird’s Nest Fungus (*Crucibulum laeve*) has a very small (~1cm wide) cup-shaped “nest” full of white lens-shaped “eggs”. I found it growing on a Red Pine (*Pinus resinosa*) cone. Stumbling upon this small gem was quite a thrill. More than just a pretty fungus, it is an engineering marvel. The cup is designed so that rain drops hit it in such a manner as to dislodge the spore-bearing “eggs” and shoot them into the air. At the base of each “egg” is a coiled cord which, when the “egg” is launched, unfurls and can wrap around objects, thus anchoring the “egg” until it disintegrates and releases its spores.



White Bird’s Nest Fungus (*Crucibulum laeve*) Photo CVC

Recently, I found a rather interesting fungus called Netted Stinkhorn (*Dictyophora duplicata*). Its alternate scientific name, *Phallus duplicatus*, should give you a clue to its appearance. In the early stages, its fruiting body resembles an egg, but it quickly elongates revealing a netted “skirt” and a somewhat conic head. The head is covered with stinky olive-green ooze. Mycologists often say that you smell it before you see it. The stink however, is positively appealing to flies and other insects that mob the stinkhorn and transport the spore-bearing ooze to other locales.

Perhaps you’ve seen Morels (*Morchella spp.*), Turkey Tails (*Trametes versicolor*), Giant Puffballs (*Calvatia gigantea*), Earthstars (*Geastrum spp.*), Artist Conks (*Ganoderma applanatum*), Chanterelles (*Cantharellus spp.*), Coral Fungi (*Clavicornia spp. et al.*) or Shaggy Manes (*Coprinus comatus*). All these reflect the diverse and marvelous world of fungal forms.

by Leanne Wallis, Credit Valley Conservation

## Trip Report – La Salle, Burlington, January 2

The weather was as can be expected in January, quite cold, but a few brave souls ventured out to see ducks at La Salle on this new year outing. I was joined by two friends visiting from warmer climes – Sophie Webb from California (two years ago she gave a talk to our club about her work in the Atlantic Ocean) and George Smiley from Texas. We met up with some of our newer club members, Jim and Joan Hughes, and Doug and Judy Biggar for our walk.

La Salle is a great place to get close looks at several species of waterfowl, especially the Trumpeter Swans that have been banded and are fed regularly at the park. Dipping in and out between Mallards, Canada Geese and Black Ducks were a few tiny Buffleheads, one of my favourite winter ducks. George took a photo of this species which shows the amazing iridescence on their black and white head.

We spent a while studying two species that are sometimes confused – Canvasbacks with their sloping foreheads and whitish backs, as compared to Redheads with their rounded heads



and darker grey backs. We also had good looks at mergansers, both red-necked and commons, including some Common Mergansers out of the water. A few Ruddy Ducks were seen, their stiff tails held up. We also looked at Scaup, which were present in huge numbers, but mostly far out. Some were quite close in the parking lot area, and we could make out the rounded heads and greenish color that typifies Greater Scaup. Some of us went on to the swing bridge to look for Peregrines, but we were unsuccessful. We had a very good morning and I recommend a visit to La Salle any time, especially on a cold winter day.

by Fiona Reid



### Credit Valley Conservation – Upcoming Events

#### **Feed the Chickadees – Saturday, January 15<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup>, Time: 10 am – 2 pm**

Make your own bird feeders to take home and encourage winters birds to visit your backyard. Afterwards, go outside and try to feed the chickadees from your hand!

#### **Moonlight – Owl Prowl – Saturday, February 12, Time 6 pm - 8 pm**

Come explore the night time as we call and listen for owls. This outdoor hike will teach you how to make an owl call while discovering the mysteries of silent flight and more for these master predators.

These events are recommended for adults and children over seven years. Please dress appropriately for the weather conditions. The programs involve indoor outdoor activities and start at the Watershed Learning Centre where you can enjoy a complimentary beverage.

**Location:** Terra Cotta Conservation Area, 14452 Winston Churchill Blvd., Halton Hills, ON

**Cost:** Free with regular admission to Terra Cotta, although donations are appreciated

Registration: 905-670-1615 x221 or email [education@creditvalleyca.ca](mailto:education@creditvalleyca.ca).

## Fafrotskies and Flying Frogs

Our garage is not particularly unusual but it does have a great proclivity to gather things that the wind blows in. The wind seems to swirl about at the front and while the door is open, annoying quantities of leaves, male pine cones, and all sorts of other organic debris makes its way inside when conditions are dry. This means that if I can't tolerate the invasion of debris on the garage floor, then I need to sweep the floor. That is what I was doing one day last fall when I noted something unusual among the maple leaves on the floor. It was a frog, totally desiccated, and roughly the same size as one of the maple leaves. In its dry state, it was hard to determine its identity but it appeared to be a Wood Frog. In any case, I thought it was an unusual occurrence and an opportunity for me to say "Look what the wind blew in!"

The cause of the poor frog's demise can never be determined. Like most forms of life, a frog can either be caught and eaten by something, die from old age (which is probably a rare occurrence), or suffer from some other affliction. Perhaps this one ventured too far

from a source of water and died of dehydration. There were no obvious signs of trauma and all of the limbs were intact. It was quite flat and light by this point so it was easy for the wind to buffet it about.

The episode made me think about fafrotskies. Chances are that the reader is not aware of what a 'fafrotsky' is. It is a term that was coined by the zoologist Ivan T Sanderson in reference to 'things that **FALL FROM THE SKY**'. Throughout history, there are numerous records of things falling from the sky all over the world. These are things that one would not normally associate with an aerial life style – frogs, fish, toads, eels, lemmings, and worms. There are records of strange vegetable fallout including green beans, green peaches, peas, eggs, wheat, and nuts. As well, there are reported incidences of falling nails, plastic bags of cakes, golf balls, and coins.

There have been at least 117 separate reports of showers with fish falling including 36 in which observers supposedly actually saw the fish falling. In other cases, the distributions made the observers simply think that they had fallen from the sky. During the course of history, there is a high probability that there have been pranks and hoaxes involved with some of the sightings. As well, the observers and the documentation have just been plain wrong through ignorance or wishful thinking. But there are some cases where the phenomena are real. In most cases, the phenomena were associated with severe weather conditions.



A shower of frogs occurring in the year 1345 as figured in the *Prodigiorum ac Ostemtorum Chronicon* by Conradus Lycosthenes. 1557

Not until relatively recent times did anyone put any real effort into figuring out how the various objects (mostly all small and of a similar general size) got into the sky in the first place. It is now relatively easy to explain what had happened. If you ever should witness a waterspout that is really much like a small tornado over water, you can see copious amounts of water being sucked up into the sky. It is easy to imagine how fish and

other water-bound creatures could be taken aloft in the watery vortex, then dropped at some distance from the source.

In the case of land-based beasts, it is dust devils that can do the same kind of thing little whirlwinds have been shown to pick up kangaroo rats in the desert. As for the reported rains of blood that fell in various places and terrorized the locals, wind-borne dust with high iron content from the Sahara Desert is probably responsible for turning the colours of the rain to red. Dust storms could easily account for the first Plague of Blood that befell Egypt in the time of Moses.

But as for me, I know well enough that keeping the garage door shut generally keeps out the leaves as well as the wind-borne frogs.

by *W.D. McIlveen*