



# the Esquesing

Newsletter of the Halton / North Peel Naturalist Club

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Volume 45, Number 4

March-April 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.

**Tuesday April 12: Edible and Medicinal Plants Alexis Burnett.** Mr. Burnett is a naturalist, tracker, wilderness skills practitioner and canoe guide. Join us as Mr. Burnett unravels some of the mysteries of our local flora. He'll tell us about native plants that are good to eat and others that can heal what ails us.

**Tuesday May 10: Vernal Pools Brenda Van Rhyswk.** Ms. Van Rhyswk is a Natural Heritage Ecologist with Halton Conservation. She will introduce us to little known but highly important wetlands called vernal pools. These temporary woodland pools are critically important nurseries for a wealth of invertebrate and amphibian life. Join us to learn about the remarkable creatures that depend on these wetlands for their survival.

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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.

**Saturday March 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 9<sup>th</sup> with questions or to arrange carpooling and meeting locations.

**Saturday April 9: Salamanders at Silver Creek.** Join Fiona Reid and Don Scallen to look for salamanders and frogs at one of the best sites in the region. This is an after-dark outing. Please call Fiona (905) 693-9719 for meeting time and carpooling details

**Saturday April 16: Beamer Conservation Area Hawk Watch, Grimsby.** On the way to Grimsby we stop at Scotch Block reservoir and La Salle Park to see waterfowl and early songbirds. Beamer Conservation Area, at the top of the escarpment, provides a large clearing and two fabulous lookouts to search the sky for migrating hawks. The woods show early wildflowers and songbirds. On the way home a few stops are usually made along the south shore of Lake Ontario to look for more ducks. Bring a lunch and water, hat, sunscreen, binoculars, scope, etc. Call Ray Blower (519) 853-0171 for car pooling and other details.

**Sunday April 24: Early spring wildflowers and other arrivals.** 2:00-4:00 pm. Join Fiona Reid on her Speyside property to look for emerging flowers and other plants, check ponds for frogs, salamander eggs and other small creatures, and look for early spring migrants. Call Fiona for details (905) 693-9719

**Outings continue on page 2  
Note to all members on page 2**

## President's Message

Now that March is on its way, spring really should be just around the corner, and for me the best months of the Canadian year will be coming up soon, along with all the new growth and visitors from the south. Our club continues to grow as well, and I send greetings to all new members and look forward to seeing you at our indoor meetings and outdoor walks.

Even in the wintery months, there is always something to see outdoors. Don Scallen and I took a walk in Forks of the Credit in the Caledon area last weekend and although we did not see very many birds in the park, we did find a sleeping porcupine, watched a coyote hunt in a field, and saw a cold, puffed up mockingbird huddles under a spruce. There is always something to discover, even in these cold winter months, and even more to see in another month or two.

Best wishes to all,

Fiona Reid

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

### Executive

President: Fiona Reid (905) 693-9719  
Past President Andrew Kellman (905) 681-3701  
Vice President: Don Scallen (905) 877-2876  
Secretary: Janice Sukhiani (647) 408-9515  
Treasurer: Marg Wilkes (905) 878-6255

### Appointments

Membership: Valerie Dobson (905) 828-1729  
Newsletter: Gerda Potzel (905) 702-1681  
Ontario Nature Representative: Vacant  
Public Relations: Vacant  
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)

Deadline for *the Esquesing* May/June issue – Sunday May 1<sup>st</sup>

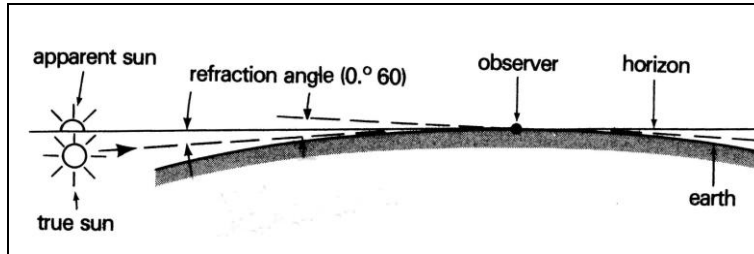
**Outings continued from page 1**

### **Sunday May 22: Spring Birding at Thickson Wood, Lynde Shores Conservation Area, and**

**Cranberry Marsh.** This trip leader has long recommended this as the best day-trip location for spring birding. This cluster of very good birding locations provides a wide variety of habitats including mature forest, meadows, marshes, swamps, old fields, and Lake Ontario and its shoreline. The result is a diverse collection of bird species, especially during spring migration. Scheduling on the Sunday of the Victoria Day weekend has resulted, so far, in trouble-free driving to and from these Whitby birding hot spots. Bring a lunch and water, warm layers of clothing, hat sunscreen, binoculars, scope, etc. Call Ray Blower (519) 853-0171 for car pooling and other details.

**NOTE TO ALL MEMBERS: This will be your LAST mailed newsletter unless you contact the membership coordinator and let us know you do not want the emailed copy but prefer a mailed copy! Thank you**

## Climate Change – Seeing Around the Corner



The news in October 2010 included a report about the release of a film related to knowledge of Inuit elders with respect to climate change. The film was the result of the combined efforts of Zacharias Kunuk (director of the film *Atanarjuat - the Fast Runner*) and researcher and filmmaker Dr. Ian Mauro. Along with information regarding social and ecological impacts of a warming Arctic, there was mention of how the Inuit elders had observed, among other things, that the position of the sunrise had shifted over the past approximately 50 years. The shift in position was calculated to be about 19 kilometres (km).

So, could the sun possibly have shifted position? Both the sun and the earth have in fact not shifted at all from their usual trajectories in that time and there is no reason to doubt the observations of people closely tied to the land. The explanation it turns out is due to the refraction of light as it passes through the atmosphere. This is particularly important at the times of sunrise and sunset when the angle of sunlight passing through the atmosphere is low.

This phenomenon is further complicated by the fact that air density is greatest near the earth surface and diminishes with height above the earth surface. The net result is that an observer on the ground is observing the maximum degree of light bending near the horizon. The angle of refraction of light in air is small (1.0003) but because of the scales involved, the effect is quite

significant for an observer on the ground. The overall effect is that the beam of light arriving from the sun is caused to bend as it travels through the atmosphere. Because of the bending, observers can actually see an image of the sun before it appears above the horizon in the morning. The converse applies in the evening. The effect of the refraction is negligible when the sun is directly overhead.

The shift in position of sunrise observed by the Inuit can be explained by the fact that global warming is changing the density of the air. Warmer air is less dense and therefore the amount of bending of the sunbeam passing through it would be slightly less. This change in the overall bending of the light is enough, however, to cause the observed difference in position of the sunrise. Considering the speed of rotation of the earth, the time required for an observer to move 19 km takes less than nine seconds. Such a small change in the overall period of day length, especially over a period of 50 years, would hardly be detected by the human eye. On the other hand, a change in position of the rising sun with respect to a known landscape feature could certainly be noted by a competent observer. We still do not know all the changes that are lurking over the figurative horizon with respect to global warming but the phenomenon noted by the residents of the Arctic is one that involves the literal horizon.

*by W.D. McIlveen*





## Songbirds Only Avian Rehabilitation (S.O.A.R) 8<sup>th</sup> Annual – Mother's Day Bird-a-Thon

**When:** Sunday May 8<sup>th</sup>

**Where:** Meet at the S.O.A.R. clinic, 145 Inkerman Street, Rockwood

**Time:** Registration: 8:30 am: Walk begins: 9:00 am

Duration of the walk through Rockwood Conservation Area is approximately 2 hours. A light lunch will be provided.

**OR**

If you are not able to attend drop off your pledge forms and you will be included for the prizes. Be sure to tell us where you are birding!

At this time of year many avid birdwatchers will be traveling Ontario to their favourite birding spots. Lead the flock...sponsor yourself with a high pledge and be sure to ask your family, friends, and co-workers to sponsor your walk.

Prizes for: the top 3 participating fundraisers, top junior fundraiser (12 and under), and the top absentee fundraiser.

Pledges are based upon participation. If you would like to participate in our walk, but do not want to collect pledges, you can pay an entry fee of \$20.00.

For a copy of the form email Judi Drake – drake@sentex.ca.



### Shagbark Hickory

At one of the quiet country roads in the Toronto Bruce Trail section stands a strange tree. Flaky bark surrounds its trunk as if to separate from it and to come loose in long shreds. The buds are plump and luxurious, the way one would expect to find them on a tree in the tropics, rivaling the exotic magnolia. This is the shagbark hickory, a rarity so close to the northern limit of its range.

Once there had been a stone quarry where the tree stands. The backbreaking labour to cut flat stones from the limestone rocks is no more, but the cable that fenced-in the property is still there. It was fastened on anything available, yes, even on the hickory which at the time must have been of a much smaller size than it is now. All these growing years the tree ingested the twisted half inch thick steel cable into its stem, endlessly, without let-up.

I tried to give the tree some relief from its never ending struggle but found it impossible to cut the cable with what I had at my disposal. Hoping to get some help from the town I called the Town of Halton Hills, Public Works which sent a crew (which in turn sent a crew) who, with the help of then Councillor Mike Davis, were able to cut the offending cable at both ends of the trunk. The tree was saved.

Another prominent shagbark used to spread its compound leaves at the top of the Escarpment, gracing the forgotten Silvercreek community. It was removed when Highway 7 was realigned to form the smooth curve between Georgetown and Acton.

*by Charles Hildebrandt*

**2011 Grassland Bird Survey – Volunteers Needed!**

Volunteer surveyors are needed for our Grassland Bird Survey (GBS) beginning in Spring, 2011. The GBS is a collaborative effort of Bird Studies Canada, Wildlife Preservation Canada, and the Canadian Wildlife Service to locate Loggerhead Shrike (*migrans* subspecies) while at the same time collecting information on other grassland bird species associated with shrike habitat. The survey results will help to



improve our understanding of bird species composition in Ontario's remaining grasslands.

Grassland birds have demonstrated more significant and widespread population declines than any other group of North American birds. Given its need for large areas of suitable habitat, the Loggerhead Shrike serves as a flagship species for grassland birds in general. The GBS will focus on grassland habitats in the key breeding areas of the Loggerhead Shrike including the Carden, Napanee and Smiths Falls limestone plains, the area around Grey and Bruce Counties in the Bruce Peninsula, Manitoulin Island, and

Pembroke/Renfrew. Participants will be asked to complete a survey of a suite of grassland bird species compiled based on North American migratory bird population trends as well as results of the second Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas. Surveyors will conduct 15-minute roadside surveys along assigned 'sites' from which high quality, grassland habitat is visible. Each volunteer will be provided with a survey kit containing detailed survey methodology, data forms and survey maps.



If you are interested in participating in this project and would like more information, please contact the GBS Coordinator, Erica Lagios, at Wildlife Preservation Canada, (519) 836-9314 or 1-800-956-6608 (toll free), or by email: [gbs@wildlifepreservation.ca](mailto:gbs@wildlifepreservation.ca). Please confirm your participation prior to **March 18**. We hope we can count on your support!

*\*\*Photos © Peter Lin*

**Great Horned Owls**

When night shrouds the countryside an army of small mammals that hide by day become emboldened. The twitching noses of mice and voles search beneath snow for seeds of wildflowers. Numberless shrews emerge. These tiny carnivores seek dormant insects and pupae to fuel their hyperactive bodies.

Larger mammals become more active after dark as well. Cottontail rabbits and snowshoe hares gnaw the tender bark of shrubs and sapling trees by moonlight.

The stirrings of these small beasts don't go unnoticed. Owls can hear the scurrying of the smallest feet. Their extraordinary vision turns night into day, revealing furtive movements concealed from our straining eyes. We perceive the winter woods and meadows to be almost bereft of life. Owls perceive a small mammal buffet.

Largest of these gifted hunters are great horned owls. Their size and their sensory abilities allow them to feed well even in the depths of winter. So well in fact that, as winds wail and snow sweeps down from leaden skies, great horned owls can, remarkably, begin to raise their families.

In February some great horned owl parents are already brooding eggs. Then by late March the raucous cries of hungry great horned owl young begin to pierce the quiet of the nocturnal woods.

Most often great horned owls appropriate a red-tailed hawk nest to raise their family. As the owls begin to nest before the red-tails, the nests are simply there for the taking. They need not fear that a hawk couple will attempt to reclaim their nest. Discretion being the better part of valour, the hawks yield to the owls and build another.

*Continued on page 7*

## Book Review: Dry Storeroom No. 1: The Secret Life of the Natural History Museum By Richard Fortey

The Natural History Museum in the book's title is the one in London, England. In South Kensington actually. If you have visited it you will remember that the building is imposing – the modern equivalent of the Gothic cathedrals but designed for a scientific age. Mr. Fortey describes it as “extravagant”. He covers the history of the building itself and its contents from a point of view not available to the casual visitor. The museum is, for example, home to the collections of both Darwin and Banks.

The first book I read by this author, *Trilobite: Eyewitness to Evolution*, was a very readable description of the animal which is Fortey's area of expertise. After a lifetime working in the Palaeontology department, he sets out to explore the parts of the museum that he was less intimately acquainted with during his working years. He moves through the departments of Mineralogy, Zoology, Botany and Entomology.

Fortey describes the various departments in each chapter (including some rather scurrilous anecdotes about former officers) and in every section he lays emphasis on the importance of the library and the holotype collection. The holotype, the unique specimen selected to be used when attempting to identify a new species, must be given a museum number and becomes part of the type collection to be used as a worldwide reference.

The Dry Storeroom No. 1 of the title is described as a “huge square room entombed with a motley collection of desiccated specimens”. Amongst the items housed there are stuffed fish, shells of giant tortoise, skins and pelts and, oddly, models of human heads of various racial types. In another chapter he describes the “Spirit

Building” which, by contrast, is a wet collection containing items that are “pickled, preserved and potted”. These include such items as a pythons, lizards, fishes, frogs and lobsters.

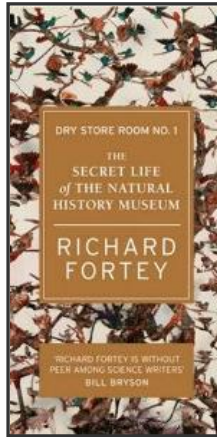
The museum has changed over the years as it incorporated new technology. High powered microscopes and DNA sampling have led to many elements of the collection being viewed in a different light. In 1957 a new species of *Abra* genus (clam) was named by Eames and Wilkins as *Abra cadabra*. But a later authority decided it was actually a different genus: *Theora*. So the correct nomenclature is no longer humorous but merely the pedestrian *Theora cadabra*.

Here is another of the stories he tells: “In 2005 Quentin Wheeler and Kelly Miller named a series of slime-consuming beetles after President George Bush and some prominent members of his cabinet: *Agathidium bushi*, *A. rumsfeldi* and *A. cheneyi*. The press was tempted to draw a rather obvious conclusion from this. However,

Quentin Wheeler assured me that he had been a Republican all his life, and that he was very fond of slime beetles (p 218).”

Overall the book's tone is chatty with interesting explanations of the behind-the-scenes work at the museum. The book appeals on two levels. It tells of the important work of identifying and housing new species with all the background information required to make the collection useful. It also provides a good account of the Natural History Museum from the time it separated from the British Museum in 1883. I found the book a most enjoyable read.

by Valerie Dobson



### Turtle Haven Art Fundraiser

Wednesday, April 13<sup>th</sup>, 7:00-10:00 pm - Wax Night Club, 125 King Street West, Kitchener

Tickets: \$10.00

Available at Edissi Art Gallery, 1-877-727-8001

TurtleHaven is a non-profit organization dedicated to protecting and providing shelter to all turtles while working towards the conservation and preservation of their environment through education, research, and rehabilitation. TurtleHaven's goal is to establish a Wildlife Nature Centre in the Waterloo Region. For more information or to order tickets online – [www.turtlehaven.ca/index.htm](http://www.turtlehaven.ca/index.htm)



## Great Horned Owls

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If the wonderful vision and hearing of great horned owls is the foundation of their hunting prowess, it is ironic that this success can also be attributed, in part, to a lousy sense of smell. Oblivious to stench, great horned owls augment their already diverse diet with skunk.

This diverse diet according to Arthur Cleveland Bent in *Life Histories of American Birds of Prey* includes "... almost any living creature that walks, crawls, flies, or swims, except the larger mammals."

Porcupines are sometimes attacked - with predictably dire consequences for the owls. Young house cats are occasionally on the menu but stories of small dogs being dispatched by great horned owls may be apocryphal.

Great horned owls along with other members of the owl tribe are gifted with adaptive traits that complement their acute senses. They invented stealth flight long before the U.S. air force. Soft feathers along the trailing edges of their wings enable silent flight, a great advantage when hunting prey with sharp hearing.

So successful are great horned owls that it is likely that the entirety of rural Halton and Peel is claimed and divided up by these impressive birds. If you are fortunate to live in the country, a

great horned owl (or a pair) probably patrols your property regularly.

The dominion of great horned owls extends far beyond southern Ontario. Five years ago as I explored the Pantanal, a vast wetland complex in South America, I was led to a great horned owl nest in a palm tree.

These owls occupy a tremendous range, from Alaska to Tierra del Fuego.

Stepping out at dusk on a wintry eve you may hear the hooting of a great horned owl. (see the link below for a sample of the sound.) Playing a recorded owl call may elicit a response, but do this only occasionally to minimize disturbance.

If you seek owls in the winter woods at night, the chill will eventually spur your return to hearth and home. Marvel then at the great horned owls, roosting comfortably among the snow covered bows of white pine or sailing silently over nearby meadows.

These supremely adaptable hunters shrug off the cold. And, with their suite of wondrous adaptations they have managed, unlike so other predators, to thrive in a human dominated world.



Great Horned Owl – Photo courtesy The Owl Foundation

To hear the hooting of great horned owls go to - [www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Great\\_Horned\\_Owl/sounds](http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Great_Horned_Owl/sounds). To learn more about owls and the rehabilitation of injured owls go to - [www.theowlfoundation.ca](http://www.theowlfoundation.ca).



### Attention Parents and Keen Teen Birders!

The Long Point Bird Observatory is looking for keen teen birders to apply for the 2011 Doug Tarry Natural History Fund - Young Ornithologist Workshop to be held from Friday, July 29 to Sunday, August 7.

Participants will receive hands-on training in field ornithology including bird banding, censusing, field identification, birding trips, preparing museum specimens, guest lectures, and more! Six of Canada's most promising ornithologists between the ages of 13-17 will be selected to attend, and will receive the Doug Tarry Bird Study Award to cover all on-site expenses. For those traveling long distances, special grants may also be available to help offset air travel costs.

Applications are due **April 15, 2011**. For more information and an application form, contact us at [lpbo@birdscanada.org](mailto:lpbo@birdscanada.org), or visit [www.birdscanada.org/longpoint](http://www.birdscanada.org/longpoint).

