Halton/North Peel Naturalist Club

The Esquesing

November - December 2019 Newsletter
Volume 54, Number 2

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Acting President's Message

I'll be at the helm as acting president of our club for another year as Sandy Gillians has decided not to take on the presidency. I welcome the opportunity to serve in this capacity until our October 2020 AGM.

These are heady days for our club. On the heels of our successful *Bees and Beyond* workshop in May the Trash Talk Committee pulled off another highly successful community event, *Strategies on Recycling and Waste Reduction in Halton Hills* in October.

Kudos to Laura Weihs, the lead organizer and to Fiona Reid and Bill McIlveen who spoke at the event. Other important contributors on the committee included John Beaudette, Margaret Beaudette, Chantel Garneau, Katherine Shaw, Janice Gittings, Ann French, Karen Hobbs, Alexis Buset and Sue Sibley. To those club members, and to any I may have missed, my sincere thanks.

My thanks as well to The Town of Halton Hills for helping us with their generous $500 donation through their Community Sustainability Investment Fund and to Foodstuffs, the Superstore, Wastewise and the Beaudette's for their donations and for everyone in attendance. Comments from participants have been very positive. Read more about the success of this event in Laura's account in this newsletter.

We will have an impressive roster of speakers for upcoming meetings. As is our practice these will include club members with special interests in the natural world and notable experts from outside of the club.

Unlike turtles and chipmunks your club will continue to be active outdoors as the world gets colder. The Christmas Bird Count on December 27th is a highlight. It is a wonderful way to discover overwintering avifauna. I'm always surprised at what a concentrated birding effort can reveal in winter. If you'd like to participate please contact Bill McIlveen, the longstanding organizer of this excellent event.

Other winter activities will include tracking and winter tree ID. Owls will again be on our radar, especially if the snowys come southward in force again.

My thanks to all of you for your membership and making our club what it is today: A welcoming organization and an agent for positive change. See you soon!

Don Scallen

Talks and Walks

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

Tuesday November 12, 2019
Bruce Mackenzie: The Special Wetlands of the Hamilton Watershed

From a rare fen to immense swamps, the flora and wildlife abound in the diverse wetlands surrounding Hamilton. Explore the reasons for the existence of the five different wetland types and their biota. Where lies the difference between a swamp and a marsh?

Sora - Photo Credit Bruce Mackenzie

Bruce is retired from the Hamilton Conservation Authority after managing conservation areas for 39 years. He presently is a Commissioner on the Niagara Escarpment Commission and a Member of the Board of the Niagara Peninsula Conservation Authority. He is a past President of the Hamilton Naturalists' Club and is presently the Director of the Club's Bird Study Group and Coordinator for its Grimsby Wetlands Project.

Tuesday December 10, 2018
Annual Potluck and Slide Show

Come for Ray Blower's legendary bean salad and for the opportunity to share some of your nature experiences with the club. If you participate in the slide show, please limit your presentation to ten minutes or less. ***Please remember to bring your own plates, cutlery and mugs!***

Tuesday January 14, 2020
Ryan Wolfe: Ontario Herptiles

Ryan is studying Blue Racers for his Master's Degree at the University of Toronto. He will tell us about his research on Pelee Island, the last refuge of these endangered snakes in Canada. Ryan will also give us an overview of his herptile "Big Year" when he found and photographed every reptile and amphibian species in Ontario. A noted herptile photographer he will be available after his presentation to speak to anyone interested in that arena of nature photography.

Outdoor Events

Reminder: As per new club policy we will pick up litter that we encounter on our walks. Gloves could come in handy. The leader will supply a litter bag.

Sunday, November 17, 2019 at 1pm
Late Flowering Plants Survey Hike at Willow Park in Norval
Bill McIlveen will lead this 18th annual survey to find and identify any flowering plants that are still blooming late in the season at sites around Halton Hills. Meet at the parking lot of the old public school, Mary Street, Norval at 1:00 pm where we will start our usual monitoring at the Lucy Maude Montgomery Garden and Willow Park. Afterwards, we will check the Dominion Seedhouse Gardens.

Friday, December 27, 2019
Christmas Bird Count
The 29th annual Christmas Count for Halton Hills will take place in the standard survey area around Halton Hills on Friday, December 27. The area will be divided into smaller areas with participants assisting experienced leaders. This is a great way for beginners to learn their birds. If you would like to join in any aspect of the count, please contact Bill McIlveen via e-mail at wmcilveen@sympatico.ca or send us a message at info@hnpnc.com. More information will be sent out closer to the Count Day.

TBA: Watch your inbox for other outdoor club events which will likely include tree identification, animal tracking & searches for owls.
Questions? Contact Don Scallen at dscallen@cogeco.ca

Other Notes of Interest for Club Members

Friday, Nov 29, 2019
The next Global Climate Action Day (Greta Thunberg, Fridays4Future)
Halton Hills Climate Action plans to be part of it: "stay tuned" for a future e-blast with more details.

Saturday November 16 & Saturday December 14 from 10 – 11 am
Forest Meditation
Saunter through the Bruce Trail and learn nature inspired meditation practices to facilitate a connection to yourself and the natural world. Forest Meditation is a unique experience that blends forest bathing, mindfulness, and a philosophy of interconnectedness. No experience necessary. Meet at Silvercreek Conservation Area at Fallbrook Trail and Side Rd 27. This is a free event. To register please visit www.chantalgarneau.com/schedule

Halton Region Waste Management Site Tour
If there is interest we could book a tour of the Halton Region Waste Management Site on Hwy. 25. Tours run approximately 1 hour long Mon – Fri between the hours of 8:30 am to 4 pm. Their van can take up to 7 people on each tour. More details are on page 7. If you're interested in a group tour, please let Laura Weihs know at biker_chic@sympatico.ca

Report on Strategies on Recycling & Waste Reduction in Halton Hills

Article by Laura Weihs and photos by Alexis Buset

We were **Talkin' Trash** to the community on October 24 at the Mold-Masters SportsPlex and they loved it! There were 51 people in total including 4 speakers and 12 club members.

The event was hosted by the Halton/North Peel Naturalist Club and this initiative was supported by the Town of Halton Hills Community Sustainability Investment Fund with a grant of $500. It was Waste Reduction Week in Canada and October 24, the day of the event, was themed Plastics and Packaging day which fit in perfectly with our event!

Bill McIlveen opened the event addressing global waste problems and gave an interesting look into how humans and their environmental impacts evolved over time, particularly

accelerating to the present. That acceleration can be explained largely on increasing rates of population growth in combination with ever-advancing technology. He discussed loss of habitat, species extinction and relayed a sense of urgency to take collective action regarding waste reduction. Every person can play a part in reducing waste which is one of the easiest of the problems that needs speedy resolution.

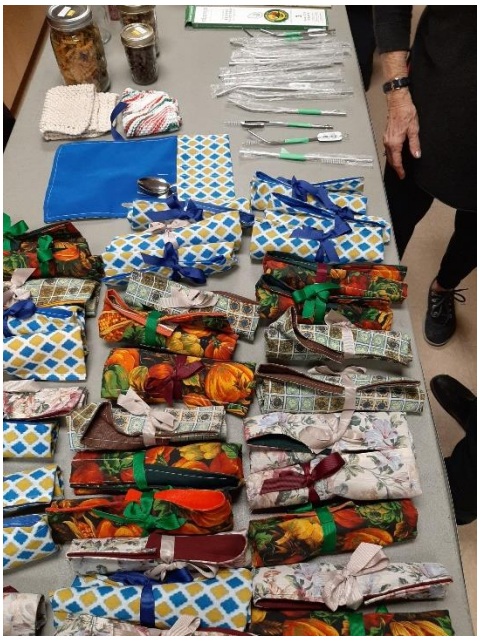
Nicole Watt, Waste Diversion Education Co-ordinator from Halton Region discussed the processes at the Halton Region Waste Management Centre and how they have lengthened the life of the landfill, as well as what happens from blue box to the end of the process. She addressed some confusing items and explained which waste stream they belonged in: blue box, green cart or garbage. Attendees were quite engaged and asked several questions during her talk as well as at her display table before and after the event.

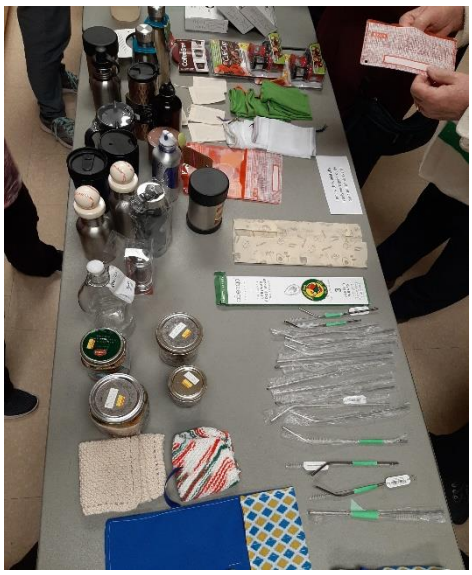
Jennifer Spence, Climate Change Outreach Coordinator with the Town of Halton Hills informed us of the ways in which the town has reduced waste in its facilities and at community events. We heard how the Town piloted a new way of handling waste diversion at an event in Halton Hills by centralizing the waste receptacles at Roger's Hometown Hockey on Oct. 4th and 5th.

They worked with vendors to ensure minimal waste and it was green cart or recycling material only. Environmental volunteers were at each station and took the opportunity of educating the participants as they threw out their waste. Volunteers also roamed the site to ensure it was clean at all times. Over 11,000 people attended the event. Containers were weighed and they calculated that 157.8 pounds of recycling material and 56 pounds of green cart material was diverted from the regular waste stream!

Fiona Reid explained ways to reduce personal waste and cut our use of plastics, particularly single use items. She discussed a variety of strategies stemming from the R's in the graphic to the right. Local businesses who offer alternative products were suggested. Products were presented and explained, then afterwards given to attendees interested in trying them. Fiona also discussed interesting things you can make with waste, like eco-bricks. Facts were presented on the fantastic work that Wastewise does and how the community and environment have benefited.

The event was free to the public and we gave away many reusable or eco-friendly items. Club members Katherine Shaw, Margaret Beaudette and Janice Gittings sewed beautiful reusable travel cutlery kits to give to attendees. There were also things like reusable dryer balls and sheets to replace single use sheets, eco-friendly dishwashing soap, beeswax food wrap, reusable bags, metal straws with brushes and reusable water bottles. Most were bought with the grant, and some were generously donated from club members John and Margaret Beaudette, Foodstuffs and Wastewise.





Nicole Watt and Jennifer Spence e-mailed very favourable comments afterwards. Our club and team should be very proud of hosting another successful event!

Everyone remained networking long afterwards and we received very positive and enthusiastic feedback. We've been asked for guidance in putting on a similar event which is the ultimate result we could have hoped for. Momentum for the environmental movement and waste reduction is increasing with collective grassroots pressure!

We thank all the volunteers and speakers, as well as the Town for providing support and funds and hope to continue working with The Town on future projects!

Halton Region Waste Management Site Tour

If there is interest we could book a tour of the Halton Region Waste Management Site on Hwy. 25. The tour runs approximately 1 hour and can be booked Mon – Fri between the hours of 8:30 am - 4 pm. Their van can take up to 7 people on each tour.

Learn how they:

- weigh vehicles so they know how much waste they are managing daily,
- process items in the Household Hazardous Waste Depot, Paint & Stain Reuse Depot, and the Reuse Depot,
- Yard waste is composted into a nutrient rich, natural fertilizer,
- Blue Box and Green Cart materials are brought to a transfer station before being shipped out for recycling and composting locally,
- they collect landfill gas like methane, and generate green energy,
- they monitor the local environment, and what innovations are in place to help protect our air, soil and water.

If you're interested in going for a group tour, please let Laura Weihs know at biker_chic@sympatico.ca

The Flight of the Mayflies

Article and photos by Don Scallen

Mayflies rise like tiny white angels from the surface of the Credit River in August. At first only a few, fluttering. Then a flurry of gossamer-winged insects trailing filamentous tails that quickly builds into a blizzard. A blizzard driven not by wind, but by the imperative to reproduce.

They live only briefly as adults. Their genus name, Ephemeroptera (essentially meaning winged ephemeral insects) is apt. One year in the stream as larvae, perhaps an hour as winged adults before they die.

Thousands get distracted from mating by streetlights during this precious hour, Great swarms orbit these lights then drop dead to the asphalt below where they collect in drifts.

And some females seem to mistake the smooth asphalt for water, landing and laying their strings of orange eggs on the tarmac instead of on the surface of the river.

The lure of lights is puzzling but is probably related to the challenge that hatchling sea turtles face on ocean beaches adjacent to urban areas. In natural settings, light reflecting off the ocean surface guides turtles to the surf. But hotel and condominium lights can draw the turtles inland to their doom.

A river flowing through natural darkness would reflect moonlight and even starlight, guiding the mayflies upstream. Even in overcast conditions the rivers likely offer more reflected light than the surrounding landscape.

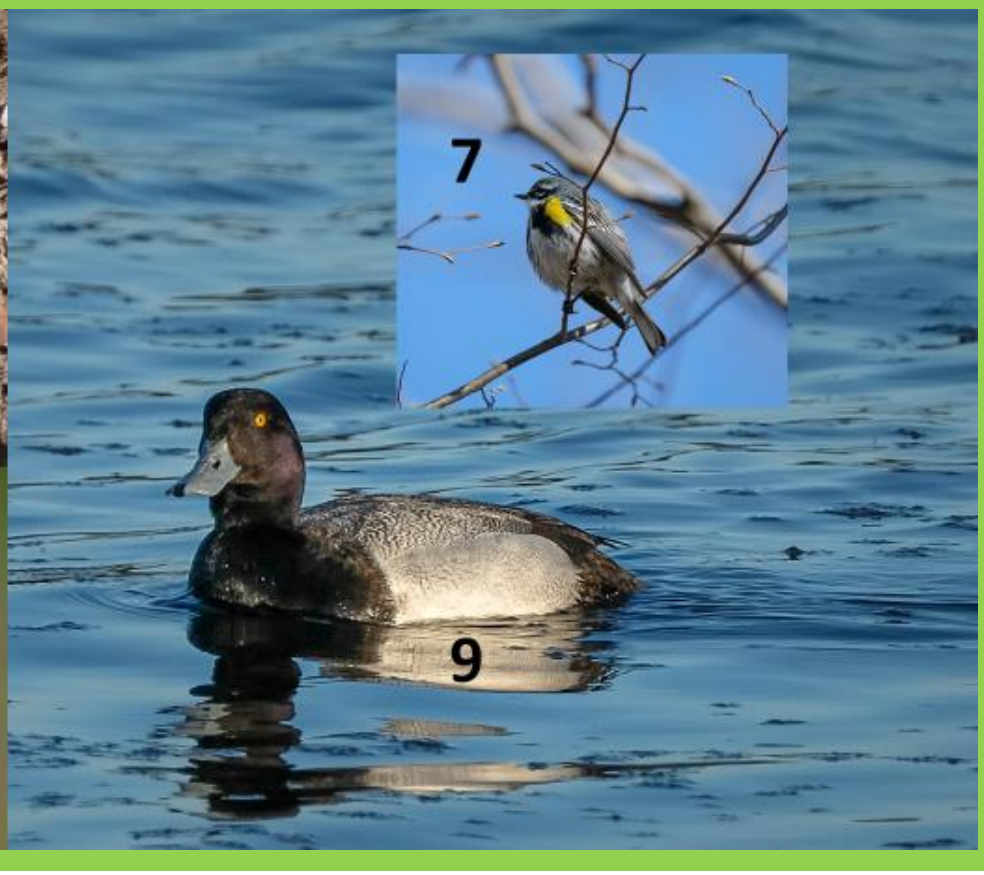
The annual emergence of mayflies, wherever it occurs, brings predictable responses. As I stood on a bridge in Glen Williams this year, smitten by the spectacle, a woman hurried by muttering “ugh!” and “gross!”. Sad, and indicative of the ignorance that taints our relationship with bugs.

Mayflies in spider web.

Mayflies have great ecological value, but they are also beautiful, and their brief flicker of existence is a poignant reminder that life, theirs and ours, is transitory.
Don is indebted to Skytree Smith, the Glen William’s shadfly* soothsayer, for inspiring his investigation of this amazing annual phenomenon. See more Glen Williams mayfly photos and video at https://www.inthehills.ca/2019/09/the-flight-of-the-mayflies/
*AKA “mayfly”

November/December Quiz

Photos: Dave Welfare



Results of the 2019 Monitoring of Bird Boxes Established at Scotsdale Farm, Halton Hills

By W.D. McIlveen

In 2014, the Halton/North Peel Naturalist Club set up a preliminary network of bird nest boxes at the Scotsdale Farm located at Silver Creek north of Georgetown. In that first year, sixteen boxes were placed on the property. Another 27 boxes were added to the trail in 2015. At that time, it was decided that 13 old boxes already at Scotsdale would also be monitored and incorporated into the network. The boxes have been monitored annually since they were established. The present report is a summary of the results for the most-recent year which is 2019.

In 2018, about half of the boxes were moved to new steel posts away from the hedgerows and trees because they had become overgrown by trees and vines. Most of the remaining boxes were similarly day-lighted in 2019. Some of the latter were not changed until October and therefore spent the 2019 breeding season in their original positions. Some old boxes were effectively discontinued because they had deteriorated. At the end of 2019, there were 42 operational boxes.

As previously reported, the majority of boxes were of a standard design suitable for Tree Swallows or Bluebirds; however, two boxes were designed for owls and one was for kestrels. The old boxes had mostly been designed for Tree Swallows but at least one was intended for nesting ducks. Each box has a unique identification number to assist with the monitoring. Monitoring in 2019 was continued in the peak of the breeding season with visits made on June 11. The boxes were cleaned in late September and early October 2019 and the contents of each box was noted.

Three of the usual species occupied the boxes in 2019. These were Eastern Bluebird, House Wren and Tree Swallow (Fig 1). The results of the monitoring for the June 2019 monitoring are summarized in Table 1. Based on the nest box contents, it appeared that the first species to breed was Bluebird followed closely by the Tree Swallows. House Wrens were the last to breed. By comparison to 2018, the Bluebirds used one more box in 2019 than in the year before. At the same time in 2018, the Bluebirds had produced 5 eggs and 2 young, therefore reproduction in 2019 was higher. Much of the increase can be explained by the additional nest box used by the Bluebirds. At least one egg never hatched.

Table 1. Nest box contents in June,2019

Species	Boxes Used	Eggs	Nestlings
Eastern Bluebird	5	2	12
House Wren	6	23	5
Tree Swallow	14	9	40
Total	25	34	57

Nest of Tree Swallow from one of the nest boxes at Scotsdale.

House Wren and Tree Swallow numbers increased as well with total eggs and nestlings reaching 28 and 49 respectively. Comparable numbers in 2018 were 11 and 39. As in the case of the Bluebirds, the higher numbers are likely due to an increased use of the available boxes. It is reasonable to presume that the increase in nesting is aided by the upgrading of the nest boxes by bringing them to more open positions on the edges of the old pastures. Since additional boxes have been brought into the open subsequent to the 2019 breeding season, we can expect that even more boxes will be used in future years.

Table 2. Comparison of box use in June and September

Species	June	Sep
Eastern Bluebird	5	7
House Wren	6	7
Tree Swallow	14	13
Unused	17	15
Total	42	42

In general, the use of boxes as determined during the September/October cleaning operation matched the pattern seen during the June evaluation (Figs. 3 and 4). There were some changes however (Table 2). House Wrens took over three additional boxes but it is not clear if these were late nesting attempts or dummy nests which Wrens are prone to do. There were four additional nests identified as those of Bluebirds at the end of the breeding season but not so identified in June. This appears to be related to second broods of Bluebirds but this second nesting was not monitored.

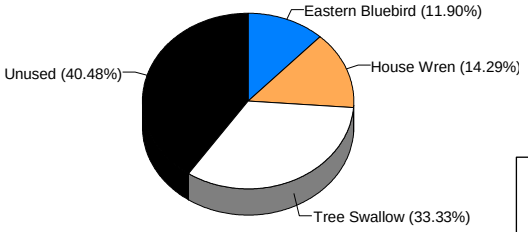


Fig. 1. Use of nest boxes at Scotsdale Farm, June, 2019

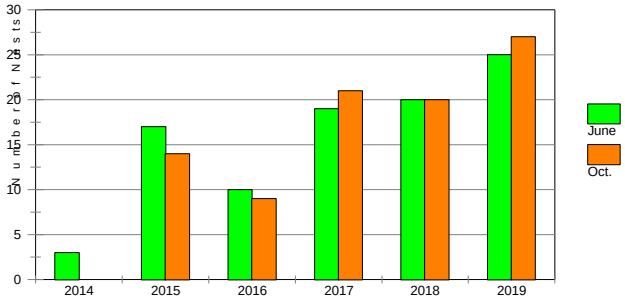


Fig. 2. Nest box use at Scotsdale Farm, 2014 to 2019

Figure 3. Laura Weihs enhances a box number that had faded.

Bird Box Use at Forks-of-the-Credit Provincial Park, 2019

By W.D. McIlveen

The Halton/North Peel Naturalist Club first established a network of ten bird nesting boxes in the Forks-of-the-Credit Provincial Park in Caledon in 2017. This number was expanded to 22 boxes in 2018 [McIlveen, 2018a, 2018b]. One of these (Box FC-01) was dedicated to the memory of Valerie Dobson with a small plaque.

The boxes were of a design suitable for Eastern Bluebirds or Tree Swallows. The boxes were placed in open sites to reduce predation by snakes or certain mammals. The boxes were fixed on metal T-bar fence post supports supplied with baffles. The boxes were examined for evidence of breeding birds during 2018 by members of HNP. The first visit was made on June 15 during the peak of the breeding season. The last visit was made on October 1 to document the nest box contents and to clean the boxes.

Figure 1. HNP members cleaning bird boxes at Forks-of-the-Credit Provincial Park, October 2, 2019

As happened in 2018, all 22 boxes were used during the 2019 breeding season. The same species were encountered in all years of operation. All boxes are currently in good condition and ready for occupancy in 2020. At the time of the June visit, one box contained five large young Eastern Bluebird (Table 1). On the same date, four boxes contained typical nests of House Wren but only two of these contained eggs (six eggs each). The remaining 17 boxes contained Tree Swallow nests. Most contained four to six young but a few contained eggs. At the time of the June visit, the tally of Tree Swallows was 65 young and 7 eggs. The count in 2018 was estimated to be at least 60 young so the reproduction for 2019 might have been slightly higher. The nesting sequence appears to be Bluebird first followed by Tree Swallows with House Wrens being last to nest.

Table 1. Summary of bird box use at Forks-of-the-Credit Provincial Park, 2019				
Species	Box Use		Box Contents June	
	June 15	Oct. 1	Eggs	Young
Eastern Bluebird	1	2	0	5
House Wren	4	12	12	0
Tree Swallow	17	13	7	65
Total	22	27	19	70

The contents of the nest boxes were quite different at the October clean-out date. Characteristic nests were seen on top of earlier nests and there were examples where three different nests were present in some boxes. When the combinations are included in the tally, it would appear that the total nests exceed the number of nest boxes (at least 27 nests in 22 boxes). It is reasonable to conclude that some cases of multiple nests represented second nesting attempts by some pairs of birds. The large increase in numbers of House Wrens from June to October could be due in part to the practice of building dummy nests by that species. An accurate count of nest box use would require additional visits during the summer season.

References

McIlveen, W.D. 2018a. Bird Box Use at Forks-of-the-Credit Provincial Park, 2017. The Esquesing. Vol. 52 (4) pp. 18-19.

McIlveen, W.D. 2018b. Bird Box Use at Forks-of-the-Credit Provincial Park, 2018. The Esquesing. Vol. 53 (2) :9-11.

Quiz Answers:

1. Yellow Warbler (male)
2. Merlins (mating)
3. Catbird
4. Canada Jay
5. Horned Grebe
6. Red-bellied Woodpecker (female)
7. Yellow-rumped Warbler (male)
8. Downy Woodpecker (female)
9. Scaup (male) Lesser? Greater?

A big thank-you to club member Dave Welfare for contributing his wonderful photos to our quiz!

Five years ago my mother spent six weeks in Georgetown Hospital after breaking her pelvis. Sitting by her bedside, it occurred to me that bird feeders could make hospital stays somewhat more bearable. I got buy in from our club's executive and some money. Wild Birds Unlimited in Guelph gave us a deal on the bird feeders and contributed bags of free seed. The feeders have been up for the last four winters. Last winter, as I filled the feeders, a knock on a window beckoned me over. A patient excitedly told me about the wild turkeys that were visiting the feeders in the mornings. I've heard a few other stories from patients and staff about our feeders, but none as poignant as the one that landed in my inbox in October:

Hello,

My name is Ryan and I am a resident of Georgetown. In January, I was put into isolation at Georgetown hospital for several days due to H1N1 & Pneumonia.

While there, I found alot of comfort watching the Northern Cardinals at the feeder outside the window. It got me into birding! I watched day in and day out.

This Fall, I had tried to set up a feeder of my own just outside my condo. It was a huge success but, the condo Corp made me take it down.

As you can imagine, this is a regrettable policy as our birds need our support. I feel quite badly about this.

The point of my email is that I have a small bag of Black Sunflower seed that I can no longer use. I want to donate it. It's not large at all...but I'd rather it go to help our feathered friends ahead of this winter. I bought it a month ago and stored indoors where it is dry/sealed.

Could the hospital feeders use it? Any recommendations to make it accessible to our wild birds are appreciated. Are there public feeders anywhere, perhaps?

Thank you kindly for your time.

Ryan Massi

By the time you read this our hospital bird feeders will be up and running for another winter.

Don

Thinking about Invasive Species

Opinion Piece and Photos by Don Scallen

In past articles I've written about the necessity of thinking critically about the act of planting trees and about the stories that appear about nature in the media from newspapers to films like Diana Beresford-Kroeger's *Call of the Forest*.

This essay looks at the issue of invasive species and argues that this is yet another area that demands critical thought. Few naturalists would deny the negative impact of virulent introduced invasive pathogens like Dutch Elm Disease or Emerald Ash Borer. And it would be difficult to deny that plants like Garlic Mustard, Norway Maple, Dog-strangling Vine and Phragmites aren't having significant negative impacts on our ecology.

This essay isn't about these obvious bad actors. It's about a selection of other organisms that get caught in the invasive species net that don't deserve to be there or at least deserve a better hearing.

A starting point is to acknowledge that differences of opinion on what constitutes "invasiveness" exist. No great surprise. Books have been written – *Where do Camels Belong?* and *The New Wild* are two – that tell us to relax and enjoy the new "biodiversity" that is being introduced to our landscapes. That's one extreme. The other extreme is occupied by people who believe vast numbers of organisms can be problematically invasive – even some that are native. A book called *Eradicate Invasive Plants* has chapters on the perceived invasiveness of Fireweed and Marsh Marigold, and how to control them. I kid you not.

Some of us believe that any introduced plant or animal is bad. If this is you, perhaps a war on praying mantids from Europe and Asia and on House Finches from Western North America is called for. Other people, including some eminent environmental thinkers, welcome certain introduced organisms. Rachel Carson, for example, author of the seminal "Silent Spring" liked starlings. She wrote this in 1939: "*On one point ornithologists are pretty well agreed –the starling is here to stay. Shall we then continue to regard him as alien or shall we conclude that his successful pioneering and his service in insect destruction entitle him to American citizenship?*"

And then, of course, there are honeybees. Introduced from Europe and generally beloved. But not by all. Sheila Colla an entomologist who spoke to our naturalist club a few years ago is frustrated by our acceptance of honeybees. She was taken aback by the decision to place an apiary at the Royal York hotel in Toronto and concerned that the introduction of thousands of "invasive" honeybees was being celebrated as an environmental good. Last year Dr. Laurence Packer of York Universities Bee Lab spoke to the club. He advocated honeybee free zones in Ontario. This to relieve the competitive pressure on native bees from the non-native honeybees.

Most people view honeybees very positively though and believe that they compensate for a dearth of native pollinators or at least aren't big competitive threats to those pollinators.

(And of course, they produce honey.) What I'm trying to establish is that different opinions surround "invasive" species and the existence of this spectrum of views necessitates critical thinking.

Here are four organisms that have been regarded as invasive and destructive. It is worth looking at each in turn.

Earthworms

Commanding the tide not to rise

The knock: Earthworms aren't native to Ontario. Most of our 19 species came from Europe and perhaps two from the U.S. Though celebrated in places like England (Darwin was a big fan) for their role in turning over the soil, research indicates that they may be having a negative influence on our forest ecosystems by eliminating leaf litter… pulling those leaves underground and consuming them. This may have adverse effects on wildflowers, tree regeneration, and on salamanders by removing the protective buffer that leaf litter represents. Diminished leaf litter could also reduce the quantity of invertebrates that provide food for salamanders and other small vertebrates. (See photo)

So we know some potential negative effects that earthworms may visit upon forest ecosystems. But is that the whole story? Of course not. First, we could ask a fundamental question that should be central to any discussion about any invasive species: Do we have a reasonable chance of controlling it? This is not a question that is usually voiced, perhaps

because we fear it might lead to the conclusion that sometimes we simply can't win. With earthworms I think any prospect of control is highly unlikely. They are near ubiquitous, fabulously abundant and comprised of multiple species. Can we really expect to successfully fight such diverse and astonishingly numerous invaders? Perhaps, sometimes, with some invasive species, we must humbly acknowledge, that like King Canute, we can't hold back the tide.

There is second question that is almost heretical to ask once an organism has been designated as invasive: Does that organism confer any positive effects on our ecology? With earthworms, one answer is that they feed an awful lot of animals. American robins for example. Anyone with a lawn and rudimentary observation skills knows that earthworms are the go-to food of robins in suburbia. Families of these beloved birds are raised on little more than these wriggling invertebrates. It's worth pondering this fact for a moment. If somehow, miraculously, we were able to expel earthworms from our midst, robins, one of the very few songbird species able to thrive in urban environments, would likely soon follow. They'd take their songs and their beauty with them.

Robins aren't the only animals that tap into the abundant food source that earthworms represent. Earthworms feed everything from woodcocks to toads to snakes, raccoons, skunks, foxes, and even the salamanders that they may hurt by disturbing leaf litter.

House finches

Correlation doesn't necessarily imply causation

The knock: House finches expanded into Ontario in the 1970's, the descendants of birds released in New York City in the 1940's. Originally from western North America, they are now well established in settled areas in this province. Their rise has corresponded with a decline in purple finches, a closely related native species. This has led some to conclude that the house finches are outcompeting the purple finches. And, in fact, research has shown that house finches displace purple finches at bird feeders, when both species are present.

House finches and purple finches though, have markedly different habitat preferences. Purple finches are forest and woodland birds and house finches, as suggested by their name, like to nest in towns and cities, though the two species, as indicated above, can overlap at bird feeders in the winter. The dramatic difference in breeding habitats makes it improbable that house finches are responsible for the decline of purple finches.

I asked Julie Craves at BirdWatching magazine for her take on this issue. Craves recognized the correlation (house finch numbers rising, purple finch numbers declining) but indicated that purple finch numbers were high in the 1970's because of a major spruce budworm outbreak in the boreal forest regions of eastern Canada and northeastern United States. As budworm numbers declined purple finch numbers declined and Craves writes that this

decline began “before House Finch numbers increased, and in places where House Finches do not occur in large numbers.” She concludes “While competition between the two species may occur, it seems possible that other factors are at play in Purple Finch declines.”

Pointing a finger at house finches to explain purple finch declines is easy because we have been conditioned to believe that any and all introduced species are negatively affecting our ecology**.**

It’s possible to look at the arrival of house finches in Eastern North America in a positive light and I realize that, again, such a suggestion may be seen as heresy. How on Earth could an “invasive” species be anything but bad! Perhaps when it’s able to thrive in the heavily modified urban environments that we’ve created. Most of our native birds can’t do that. Our cities aren’t going away. The melodic songs of House Finches provide tonal relief to the sounds of traffic and lawn mowers and the colour of male House Finches pleases the eye.

Manitoba Maple

Weedy is not synonymous with invasive

The knock: Manitoba Maple is seen as an aggressive colonizer, able to outcompete native species. It is featured in the booklet “A Q*uick Reference to Invasive Plant Species*” a guide to some of Ontario’s worst offenders.

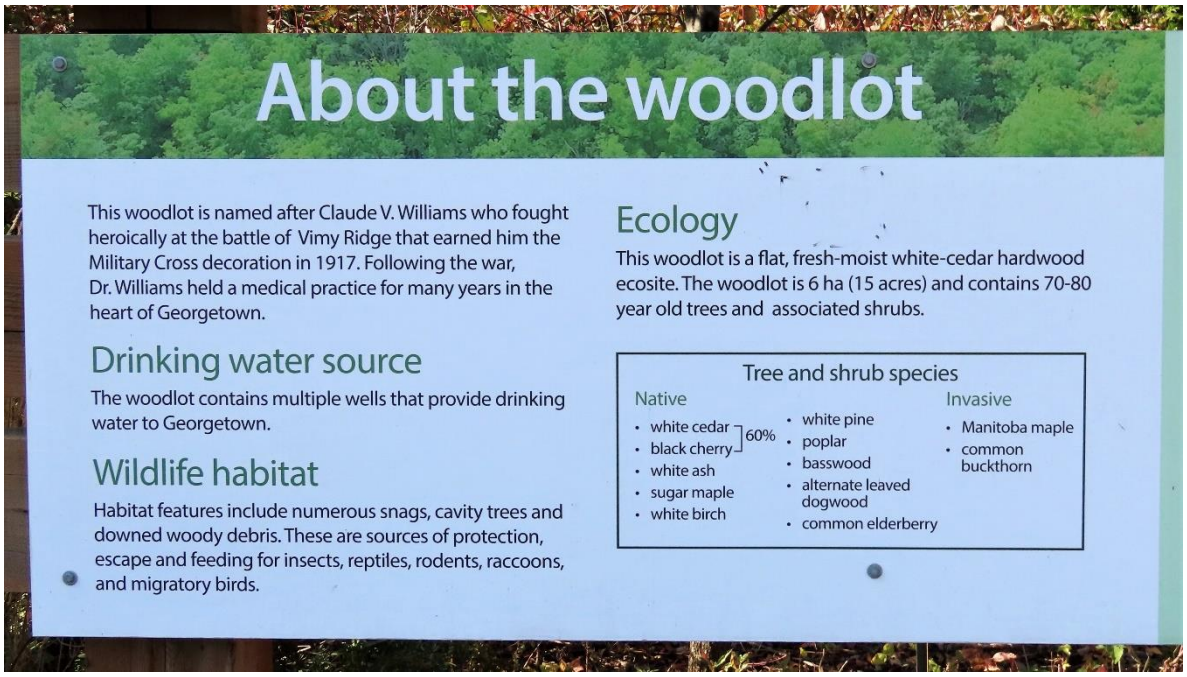
Manitoba Maple is rather weedy. It self-seeds readily throughout our urban areas, popping up along foundations and fence lines, anywhere it can gain a roothold and it grows like stink. That’s its biggest mistake. It grows where we don’t want it and it demands regular attention from pruning shears. Another knock against Manitoba Maple is its appearance. Poets are unlikely to rhapsodize about its form and stature. (However, a gnarly old Manitoba Maple does have a certain charm.)

The weediness of Manitoba Maple though – its audacity to grow rampantly the unnatural environments of our towns and cities – is not enough to qualify it as invasive. Bona fide natives like wild grape, Virginia creeper and even black walnut grow with uncommon vigor in our artificial landscapes. I regularly deal with these three species (along with Manitoba Maple and Norway Maple) to keep them from overwhelming my naturalized backyard.

Along with our urban environments, Manitoba Maples also thrive along our streams and rivers, where they can become a dominant species along with other vigorous floodplain growers like various willows and again, black walnuts. Beavers, like homeowners, will chop them down again and again and again. The ability to sprout vigorously from the roots, vexing for us in suburbia, is a boon for beavers… a self-replenishing food resource.

Leaving weediness aside, the powers aligned against this tree contend that it is not native to southern Ontario. This bears examination. The late Henry Kock, long time interpretive horticulturalist at the Guelph Arboretum, wrote this in his book *Growing Trees from Seed:* "I think it was always present along isolated stream banks and clearings, reaching out into the light. It ultimately gives way to other species but not before it has made a valuable contribution stabilizing and renewing a humus layer on the degraded sites where it thrives."

But even if you're not persuaded that Manitoba maple is native to southern Ontario, here's another consideration. Does it deserve to be grouped with invasive exotics like Norway Maple or Common Buckthorn? Manitoba maple is well integrated with our local ecology. It is unquestionably native to regions just west of Ontario. Not surprisingly then, it supports, along with its native maple cousins, 247 species of caterpillars including Io Moth, Luna Moth and Imperial Moth according to Douglas Tallamy's research presented in his book *Bringing Nature Home.* Other species of large well-known moth caterpillars that feed on Manitoba Maple include Cecropia and Polyphemus. And in the winter its prolific seeds feed birds including the beautiful evening grosbeaks. Yet we continue to lump Manitoba maples in with trees and shrubs from Asia and Europe that offer far less to our bugs and birds.



Red-eared slider

Presence is not equivalent to invasiveness

The knock: Red-eared sliders allegedly compete aggressively with imperiled native species for resources including food and basking sites. It is hypothesized also that the sliders may introduce pathogens into wild turtle populations.

Red-eared sliders, the most frequently sold pet store turtle have been released throughout the province, presumably by owners bored with taking care of them. Sliders, like most

turtles, have a long lifespan, demanding years of care from their owners. They are a poor choice for a pet.

Red-eared sliders are hardy in Ontario even though their native range is primarily well south of the Great Lakes. They occur widely throughout the south of the province where they have been released. As habitat generalists, they can occur in ponds, lakes and rivers. The greatest numbers occur in our urban areas because that's where most of the former pet owners live. They don't drive north to release their unwanted pets; they just take them to the nearest body of water. Hotspots of occurrence occur throughout the GTA: the Humber River marshes near Lake Ontario, the Credit River marshes in Mississauga, Carroll's Bay in Burlington and adjacent Cootes Paradise in Hamilton. The Thames River in London is another location of relative abundance.

Red-eared sliders are reviled by many in the naturalist community. They are cast as uber competitors, formidably equipped to displace native species. Fantastic claims circulate on social media: that they mate with our native midland painted turtles, that they lay three or even four clutches of eggs a season. There is no scientific evidence to support these claims but that appears to be of little consequence. It is taken as a given that these turtles are chelonian terminators intent on destruction.

I'm not endorsing the release of this turtle species into the wild, or the release of any non-native organism for that matter. A justifiable concern, mentioned above, is the possibility of disease transmission from former pets to wild animals. But with red-eared sliders they've already been let out of the turtle bowls so to speak. Most were undoubtedly released in the 1960's and 1970's when they could be purchased for a dollar or two at Woolworth's and Zellers. Any disease that those former pets may have had has now been in our environment for 50+ years. We can't put that genie back into the bottle.

As far as I know there are no studies from eastern North America that provide evidence that red-eared sliders should be a significant cause for concern beyond their native range. There is a study from France that concludes that they are an invasive species of concern, but Ontario isn't France. Regardless the hysteria surrounding these turtles here in Ontario is quite remarkable… and disturbing. A post on Facebook last year, indicated that a turtle conservation group euthanized captured red-eared sliders in the Hamilton area. There was little pushback from the Facebook community even though there is little, if any, scientific data to support such drastic measures. Without such support, the killing of sliders is simply ill-informed vigilantism.

A great deal of my mis-spent middle age involved floating on the water and counting turtles for the Turtle Tally Program at the Toronto Zoo. I paddled wetlands throughout southern Ontario – all of the wetlands adjacent to Lake Ontario from the Niagara River to Sandbanks

in Prince Edward County, all of the Grand River from Waterloo to Lake Erie. Also Long Point, Rondeau and the Thames River through London. I've kayaked some of these sites many times. I came come across no sliders at all on most of my turtle tallies. London and the GTA sites mentioned above are where I found most of them. But always, they have been only a small minority of the total number of turtles observed. I've surveyed the Credit, the Humber, Carroll's Bay and Cootes Paradise every year from 2008 to 2019. Over those 12 years I haven't noticed any discernible trend upwards in populations of sliders in those locations, or any discernable decline in populations of native turtles that are found with them. I'll be the first to admit that my studies may not pass academic rigor, but I'd suggest that they are of some value… certainly more value than anecdotal sightings that don't follow any standard protocol. Anecdotal sightings that then serve as "proof" of the red-eared sliders invasiveness and provide justification for its euthanization.

Of eight native turtle species that once lived in the GTA, three are extirpated: spotted, wood and spiny softshell. Two are approaching the brink: Blanding's turtle and stinkpot. Only three species can still be found in good numbers: map, painted and snapping. This decline in turtle diversity was not caused by red-eared sliders. Rather it was a host of anthropogenic factors including habitat loss, roadkill and collection. It could be argued — and I realize that this too will be taken as heretical – that red-eared sliders having demonstrated the ability to survive in our human altered environments, should be accepted as a welcome addition to the depleted turtle fauna in these urban settings.

In Summary

Thinking critically about invasive species is important, because we allocate scarce resources in attempts to control them: money, time and person power. There is a philosophical reason for thinking critically as well. Once we label an organism as invasive it is stripped of virtues, becoming an object of contempt and even fear. We need to be careful about the plants and animals we choose to send to the dark side.

We need to think about this issue without the hindrance of mental blinders. It is puzzling that we ignore obvious information about the benefits of organisms like Earthworms. It is equally puzzling that we lump Manitoba Maple with Norway Maple, ignoring the fact that it is demonstrably better at feeding arthropods because it is a North American native (and possibly even an Ontario native.)

We should avoid the knee-jerk reaction that anything introduced is bad by default. House Finches, I believe, have enhanced our urban ecology.

And the maligned Red-eared Slider? The vilification of this turtle has taken on a life of its own. We "know" it's a danger to other turtles in Ontario, because that's the message we've heard time and time again. Truth by repetition. Critical thinking yields to groupthink. In short, if we don't have firm science-based evidence that it is a credible threat to our native turtles, we have no business killing it.

Halton/North Peel Naturalist Club, Box 115, Georgetown, Ontario L7G 4T1
Charity Registration number 869778761RR0001

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

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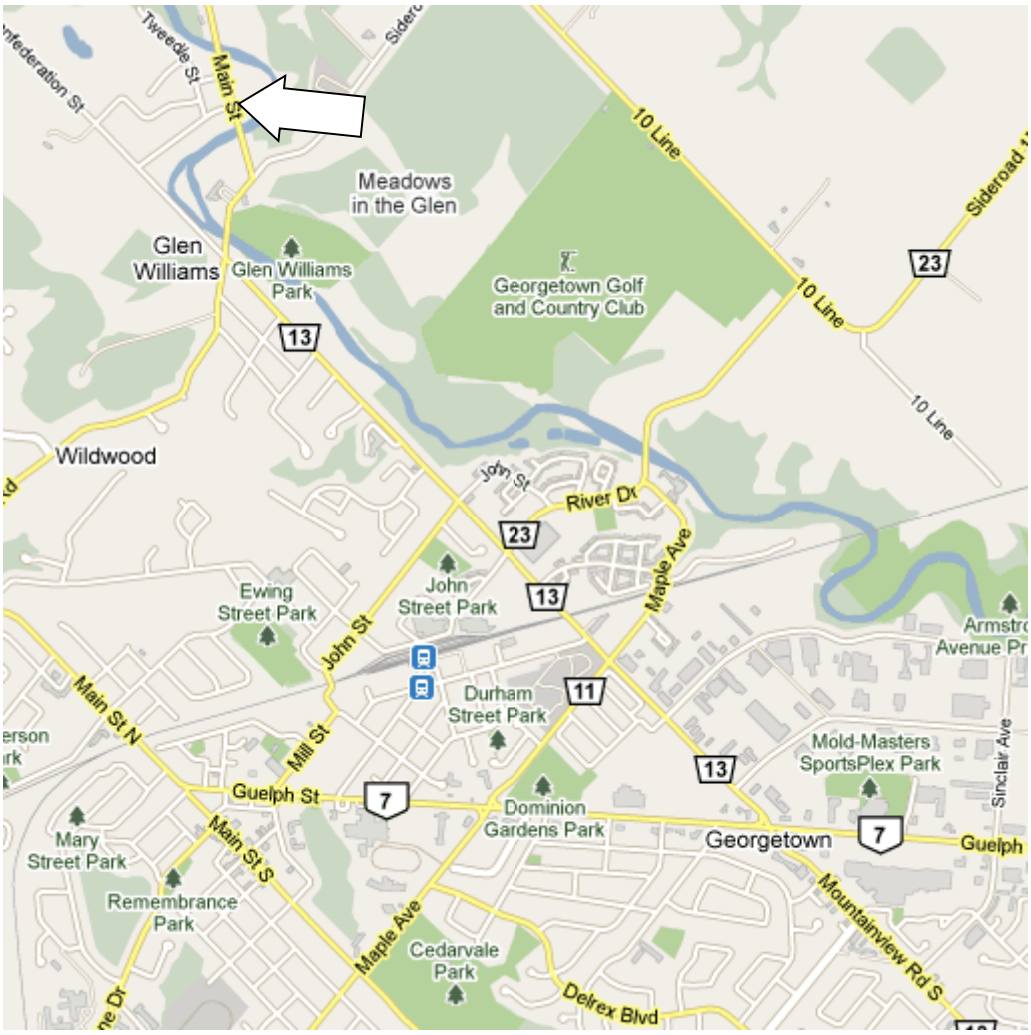
Halton/North Peel Naturalist Club

Meetings are at St Alban's Church in Glen Williams starting at 7:30 p.m.



Halton/North Peel Naturalist Club Membership Form

_____ Renewal or _____ New Member(s) Date_____

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Membership Renewal:	_____ Single ($30.00) _____ Family ($40.00)
New members only for the period:	
from December through to August	_____ Single ($22.50) _____ Family ($30.00)
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Would you like to make a donation to help send a youth to the **Ontario Nature Youth Summit for Biodiversity and Environmental Leadership**? If yes, amount of donation: $_____

Do you have any suggestions for programs or field trips?

_____

_____

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WAIVER OF LIABILITY

(must be signed by anyone planning to attend field trips or other outdoor activities)

In making this application, I affirm that I am in good health, capable of performing the exercise required to participate, and that I accept as my personal risk the hazards of such participation and will not hold the Halton/North Peel Naturalist Club or its representatives responsible.

In consideration of the Halton/North Peel Naturalist Club accepting my application, I hereby and forever release and discharge the Halton/North Peel Naturalist Club and its officers, directors, servants and agents from any liability whatsoever arising as a result of my participation in these trips and declare that this is binding upon me, my heirs, executors, administrators and assigned.

Signature(s): _____ Date: _____

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Please fill out this form and bring it in to next indoor meeting or mail with payment to:

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