Halton/North Peel Naturalist Club

The Esquesing

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President's Message

At this time of year, even though it has been a warm and slow Fall, the turn in the weather has become more decisive lately and we can all feel the coming of the imminent colder months. Tempting though it is, to hunker inside with a hot drink, there is still so much activity to see when we head outside. Upcoming outdoor events like the Late-flowering Plants walk, birding at LaSalle and the Xmas Bird Count are activities to look forward to! Details for these can be found on page 4 of this newsletter.

Of course, birds have been migrating for some time, and continue to do so. Late migrants like Golden Eagles, for example, can offer spectacular encounters in most parts of this region now. Also, with big Fall weather systems blowing vagrant birds off-course in all directions, some great rarities can be seen from time to time. In recent days, a flurry of Razorbill sightings have been recorded along many parts of the Lake Ontario shoreline, causing a stir of excitement in the birding community. Regular Boreal and Arctic birds, too, are now showing up, to overwinter in the milder parts of Ontario.

The birds that remain resident here can now be seen busily caching food against the lean months ahead. Mammals are preparing for winter in the same way, with Chipmunks and Squirrels hiding whatever they can find while they can. The bumper crop of Black Walnuts has hopefully furnished them with more than they will need to keep warm and fed.

Other mammals, like Opossums and Skunks, can be seen making their way to their snuggest dens to hole up for extended sleeps and wait for the days to get warmer and longer again.

Our club is continuing to host our exciting monthly speaker presentations. This month, we are excited to welcome renowned naturalist, teacher and author, Michael Runtz, who will be sharing his activities and experiences of Algonquin Park, one of Canada's best-known natural areas. His wealth of knowledge along with his open and infectious enthusiasm will ensure that it will be a talk not to be missed!

Next month's club meeting, in keeping with tradition, will be an opportunity for club members to showcase their own sightings and photography, and share some of their favourite nature pics with the rest of us! With the phenomenal talent possessed by our members, this event always amazes and I, along with the rest of us, look forward to it with loads of anticipation each year!

Also in the newsletter are the usual excellent series of articles, including coverage of the ongoing monitoring of bird boxes at the Forks of the Credit and Scotsdale, the benefits of supporting Monarchs (and other wildlife!) with Milkweed in suburban settings, and the long history of the Christmas Bird Count in our region. Don't miss the Photo Quiz at the back, either, featuring some gorgeous photography by Asher Clayton! Be sure to check it out!

Keep safe and warm and see you at the meeting!

Yves Scholten

Talks and Walks

Indoor Events

As you know your executive will continue to hold Zoom meetings online for the time being. Meetings will still begin at 7:30 pm on the second Tuesday of the month. You'll be treated to a captivating presentation as listed below. Zoom login details and information will be sent out closer to each event date. A half hour business meeting, hosted by our president, Yves Scholten, will follow the presentation. We hope you'll join us!

Note: If you wish some support from Alexis to ensure your Zoom connection is functioning smoothly, please log in to zoom at 7:20 pm, prior to the meeting, for helpful zoom tips.

Zoom meeting Tuesday, November 9, 2021 at 7:30 pm
Michael Runtz: Algonquin Park
Michael Runtz will be talking about Algonquin Park. Michael is one of Canada's most highly respected naturalists, nature photographers and authors. A birdwatcher since age 5, he has worked as a naturalist in Canada's parks and has conducted numerous biological surveys. Michael has authored 14 natural history books, many of which are set in Algonquin, where he has studied moose, wolves, beaver, wildflowers and much more. Michael also excels as an educator, his video-streaming course on natural history for Carleton University is the most popular course of its type in Canada. This is a talk not to miss!

Zoom meeting Tuesday, December 14, 2021 at 7:30 pm
Annual Slide Show
Settle into a chair at your computer, top up a glass of your preferred holiday refreshment, and enjoy the images of the natural world taken by club members.

If you'd like to participate (please do!) share up to ten slides or five minutes of your best nature pics. Please let Don Scallen know if you'd like to participate and he'll add you to the roster. dscallen@cogeco.ca

From the Web

Courtesy of our Treasurer, David Williams, is this referral to wonderful slow-mo video of various insects taking flight. Some struggle to get airborne like overloaded helicopters.
https://youtu.be/xbOzYMKROs8

Get a firm grip on your armchair for this one! Video of Ibex climbing the sheer face of a dam to access salts. Not for the faint-hearted.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RG9TMn1FJzc

Outdoor Events

As indicated below, please confirm your participation for each outing so that we can be sure to adhere to the ever changing Covid safety protocols.

Saturday, November 13, 2021 at 1 pm
Late Flowering Plants Survey Field Trip

We will conduct the next (21st) field search for any plants that are still blooming late in the season at sites around Halton Hills. Please plan to reach the sites on your own as we will likely have to carpool to meet COVID restriction. 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 then Willow Park. Afterwards, we will check the new pollinator garden at McNab Park in Norval and wrap up with the usual visit to the Dominion Seedhouse Gardens.

Please confirm your participation with Bill McIlveen at wmcilveen@sympatico.ca

Sunday, November 14, 2021 at 10 am
La Salle Park, Burlington with Fiona Reid and Ian Jarvie.

The waterfront at La Salle is one of the best places to see ducks, grebes, trumpeter swans and other waterbirds. We will start here and may go to other nearby birding areas, depending on recent birding reports of interest. We will **meet at La Salle at 10:00 a.m.**
Please dress warm!

Please confirm your participation with Fiona Reid at fiona.reid7243@gmail.com

Monday, December 27, 2021
Christmas Bird Count

This year's Christmas Bird Count will take place on Monday, December 27, and as usual, our count area will be divided into parcels. In pre-pandemic times the protocol has been that a group is assigned a particular parcel, and is typically led by an experienced birder. Of course inexperienced birders are welcome as we need people to do jobs like keeping the tally and also it's a great learning experience regarding bird identification. Car-pooling has been encouraged in the past however, with the pandemic still present, arrangements may necessarily be different, and detailed arrangements will be sent out closer to the time as the situation hopefully becomes clearer.

If you would like to participate, please email me, Ian Jarvie, at auldscot1@cogeco.ca

A BIG thank you to Bill McIlveen!

After many years of organizing the Christmas Bird Count, Bill McIlveen is taking a well-earned rest, and the responsibility for organizing this year's count now falls to me, Ian Jarvie. I hope I can do as well as Bill, but his are big shoes to fill and he deserves a big thank you for all his efforts over the years.

Thank you Bill!

In addition to all his past efforts, Bill has provided a detailed History of the Halton Hills Christmas Bird Count on page 22.

This year's Christmas Bird Count will take place on Monday, December 27th and you can find more information about it in the outdoor events section above on page 4.

Bird Friendly Window initiative

Chris Glover, a Toronto MPP, will present a petition to the Ontario Legislature asking that Bird Friendly Building Design, established by the Canadian Standards Association, be incorporated into the Ontario Building Code.

To learn more about this initiative and to add your name to the petition, visit the link below.

http://www.chrisglovermpp.ca/protect_migratory_birds?recruiter_id=15890

The Newly Planted Trees for Halton Hills Arboretum

Article by by Don Scallen and photo by Peter Bailey

October 6, 2021, marked the official opening of the Trees for Halton Hills Arboretum at Joseph Gibbon Park on Delrex Avenue in Georgetown. Members of Trees for Halton Hills were joined by Mayor Rick Bonnette, town councilors and Credit Valley Conservation staff to celebrate the planting of 21 species of native trees and a variety of native shrubs.

The objective of the arboretum is to showcase native trees that can be selected by Halton Hill's residents for planting in their yards, instead of exotics like Norway Maple and Little Leaf Linden. The value of trees in sequestering carbon and the value of native trees in supporting biodiversity are emphasized on signage at the park.

Trees for Halton Hills used the opening to launch their 65,000-tree challenge – the planting of one tree for every resident of Halton Hills over the next five years. From my perspective – not necessarily shared by other committee members – most, if not all, of this prospective planting should occur within the urban limits of Acton and Georgetown, not in adjacent natural areas.

If Halton Hills' residents plant a diverse array of thousands of native trees of reasonable size and, crucially, care for them afterwards, the program in my eyes will be a significant success. Along with residential yards, boulevards, church and school yards and commercial properties offer great opportunities for planting.

Bird Box Use at Forks-of-the-Credit Provincial Park, 2021

Article by W.D. McIlveen and photos by Laura Weihs

A network of ten bird nesting boxes was first established at the Forks-of-the-Credit Provincial Park in Caledon in 2017 by the Halton/North Peel Naturalist Club. An additional 12 boxes were erected in 2018. One of these (Box FC-01) was dedicated to the memory of former club member Valerie Dobson along 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 2021 by members of HNP. The first visit was made on June 2 early in the breeding season. The last visit to document the nest box contents and to clean the boxes was made on October 12. The results from the first four years of operation have been reported in various issues of the Naturalist Club's newsletter [McIlveen 2018a, 2018b, 2019 and 2020].

Bill McIlveen and Kim Dobson checking a bird box at Forks of Credit P.P., Oct. 2021.

Like previous years, all 22 boxes were used during the 2021 breeding season. Three species – Eastern Bluebird, Tree Swallows, and House Wrens - accounted for all the use observed (Table 1). No use by Chickadees was observed in 2021. Nearly all breeding evidence at the first visit was as eggs though 5 Bluebird nestlings were dead. The first visit (June 2) was about 10 days earlier than in 2020. This earlier monitoring date as well as the cool wet Spring could account for the lower number of nestlings. Data for 2019 and 2020 had combined 89 and 87 offspring (eggs plus young) respectively in comparison to the corresponding 75 noted in 2021. In 2021, six nest boxes had neither eggs nor young though there was clear evidence of intended use of the boxes (2 Bluebirds and 4 Tree Swallows). It was presumed that most of these boxes were fully used after the monitoring visit and that the breeding was simply delayed or the visit was too early.

Table 1. Summary of bird box use at Forks-of-the-Credit Provincial Park, 2021

Species	Box Use		Box Contents June 2	
	June 2	Oct. 12	Eggs	Young
Eastern Bluebird	5	5	5	10
Tree Swallow	15	15	50	0
House Wren	2	11	10	0
Black-capped Chickadee	0	0	0	0
Total	**22**	**31***	**65**	**10**

***** Total nests exceed total boxes due to reuse of boxes, primarily by Wrens

Overall, the results from the October evaluation matched the breeding season observations. The greatest difference was that during the intervening time, House Wrens had built nests in nine of the boxes making the total Wren tally exactly half of the boxes. One of the late Wren eggs did not hatch. Two nests were from late-nestings of Tree Swallows. One interesting discovery was three adult Bluebirds in one box. They were roosting there in the middle of the afternoon.

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.

McIlveen, W.D. 2019. Bird Box Use at Forks-of-the-Credit Provincial Park, 2019. The Esquesing. Vol. 53 (2): 13-14.

McIlveen, W.D. 2020. Bird Box Use at Forks-of-the-Credit Provincial Park, 2020. The Esquesing. Vol. 55 (2): 10

This mouse was peeking out of a cozy Chickadee nest after it was removed from a bird box at Scotsdale Farm. Initially, you could only see its ear through the hole. It was trembling so hard that the entire nest was quivering until the mouse decided to make a mad dash for safety!

Results of the 2021 Monitoring of Bird Boxes Established at Scotsdale Farm, Halton Hills

Article and photo by W.D. McIlveen

In 2014, the Halton/North Peel Naturalist Club began the installation of bird nest boxes at the Scotsdale Farm located at Silver Creek north of Georgetown. An additional 27 boxes were added to the trail in the following year. Some old existing boxes were incorporated into the network but these have mostly deteriorated over time and are no longer useful. All 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 2021.

Starting in 2018, many of the boxes were moved to new steel posts away from the hedgerows and trees because they had become overgrown by trees and vines. Many of the remaining boxes were similarly day-lighted in subsequent years with still a few that need to be moved. At the end of 2021, there were 43 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 2021 was continued in the peak of the breeding season with an assessment visit made on June 10. The boxes were cleaned on October 14, 2020 and the contents of each box was noted.

Four of the usual species occupied the boxes in 2020. These were Eastern Bluebird, House Wren, Tree Swallow and Black-capped Chickadee. The results of the monitoring are summarized in Table 1. At the time of the June visit, 28 of the boxes had nests present. Not all nests showed evidence of use but most had eggs, young or a combination of these. Tree Swallows again occupied most of the boxes in use with 19 out of the 28 occupied boxes being used by the Swallows. One box was occupied by a mouse species. Unfortunately, no counts of young or eggs were made on a portion of the trail in June so it is not possible to accurately assess the overall productivity of the nest boxes in 2021.

Table 1. Nest box contents use in 2021

Species	June 10	Oct 14
Eastern Bluebird	5	11
Tree Swallow	19	11
House Wren	3	6
Black-capped Chickadee	1	1
Mouse	1	4
Empty	14	14
Total	**43**	**47**

At the time of the October visit, there was a shift in the species distribution with respect to box use. The nests identified indicated that Tree Swallow nest-use declined by 8 boxes while Bluebirds increased by six. While it is certainly possible that the observers might have

confused Bluebird and Swallow nests due to their generally similar structure, it is very unlikely that they would have mistaken such a high number. The most likely explanation for the observed results is that the Tree Swallows were not particularly successful in breeding and did not attempt a second brood. Boxes left unused by the Swallows were taken over by Bluebirds. House Wrens only took over three more boxes in the latter part of the season. Mice built nests in three additional boxes before the October visit. The boxes that had not been occupied in June were the same ones that were still empty in October. These same boxes have a general history of being unused and are mostly candidates for relocation before any future breeding season commences and indeed several have already been moved.

While it would be unreasonable to expect that every egg laid would lead to a fledged young, the results suggest that the failure rate for 2021 may have been a bit higher than we have seen in previous years. For boxes where we have numbers of eggs or young in June 2021, those numbers appeared to be quite typical in comparison to species norms for the species. The failures among the Bluebirds included one nest with a blue egg, a nest with one white egg and a nest with 5 unhatched blue eggs (Fig,1). Two separate nests had single unhatched Wren eggs. Two of the Tree Swallow nests had single unhatched eggs while a third box contained two such eggs. While the success rate of the nest boxes at Scotsdale in 2021 was apparently lower than usual, the pattern appears to also have occurred at the trail operated at the Forks-of-the-Credit and elsewhere. A cool wet Spring seems to be the likely cause. We shall see if a return to more typical weather in 2022 brings a greater success rate.

Fig. 1. Unhatched Eastern Bluebird eggs, Scotsdale Farm, Oct 14, 2021

References Cited

McIlveen, W.D. 2019a. Results of the 2018 Monitoring of Bird Boxes Established at Scotsdale Farm, Halton Hills. The Esquesing. Vol. 53 (3) pp. 5-6.

McIlveen, W.D. 2019b. Results of the 2019 Monitoring of Bird Boxes Established at Scotsdale Farm, Halton Hills. The Esquesing. Vol. 54 (2): 11-12.

McIlveen, W.D. 2020. Results of the 2020 Monitoring of Bird Boxes Established at Scotsdale Farm, Halton Hills. The Esquesing. Vol. 55 (2): 11-12.

Planting Milkweed in a Suburban Garden Benefits Wildlife

Article and photos by Fiona A. Reid

Last newsletter our esteemed past-president, Don Scallen, wrote a piece "Reflecting on good intentions". One of his examples was planting milkweed for Monarchs. Don has found that generally no Monarch eggs survive to adulthood in his Georgetown garden, despite multiple eggs being laid on his Butterfly Milkweed. He even went so far as to suggest that planting milkweed might adversely affect Monarch numbers when planted in a suburban setting. I believe his assumption was that those Monarchs might disperse to more suitable habitat if they did not encounter milkweed plants in suburbia. I have no information regarding how far Monarchs will fly to search out suitable egg-laying areas, so I'm limiting my response to the assumption that Monarchs do not reproduce successfully in suburbia, and I'm also providing information on the value of milkweed plants, in any setting (much of which I think Don would agree with). For the record, I would also like to add that I strongly agree with Don that Barn Swallow replacement "kiosks" are completely worthless!

Monarchs on *Liatris ligulistylis*

I was a bit shocked by the suggestion that planting a native plant could be a bad idea, especially one that is host to numerous native species, but I thought I would see if I could come up with a larger sample size than Don's n=1. So I put out a question on Facebook's Ontario Native Plant Gardening site, and also asked some enthusiastic local pollinator gardeners about their luck with Monarchs (only gardens with milkweeds and in suburban settings were considered). I received 24 responses, out of which only 3 had no eggs laid on their milkweed plants. Of the 21 gardens that recorded eggs or caterpillars, 4 reported a failure similar to that of Don's garden, 3 were successful in rearing adult Monarchs with no intervention, and 14 were

successful rearing Monarchs using protective cages to prevent predation. Of those 14, some raised as many as 45 adult Monarchs this year. Therefore 3/24 gardens, or 12.5% of the gardens were successful without any kind of interference. This does not seem too far off conditions in the wild, where an estimated 90% of eggs and caterpillars do not reach adulthood. Of course, I am not calculating the percentage success in each garden reported to me, only if there was some success at all. We also do not know if any caterpillars would have survived if they had been left unprotected in the 14 gardens where owners chose to protect them. My conclusion, then, is that Don's sample was too small to be used to opine on the fate of all suburban Monarchs that lay eggs on milkweeds. My sample is also very small (n=24), not enough for a scientific rebuttal, but indicative that more work is needed on the topic.

Great Golden Digger Wasp on Swamp Milkweed

Much more important, in my opinion, is that milkweed is far more than a mere host for Monarchs. As many of you know, for me the noble moth far outshines the gaudy day-flier, both in number, diversity and importance (butterflies are lousy pollinators, moths are pretty good). I have recorded over 30 different species of moths visiting milkweed in my garden at night. Various other insects scour these plants for nectar by day. It also hosts numerous creatures that suck plant juices or eat leaves, bud or flowers – Milkweed Tussock Moth caterpillars, two species of milkweed bugs, several milkweed longhorn beetles, Swamp Milkweed Leaf Beetles (with their blobby pink larvae), and Oleander Aphids, to name a few. And even if all the Monarch eggs and caterpillars are devoured, is that necessarily a bad thing for the environment? Most suburban gardens are devoid of native plants and largely devoid of insect life as a result. But throngs of insects will come, even to one small patch of natural habitat amongst a desert of neatly mown lawns. Do we begrudge birds eating caterpillars in these tiny oases?

Below top to bottom: Milkweed Tussock Caterpillars, Small Milkweed Bugs and a Swamp Milkweed Leaf Beetle larva.

Even if one lives an entirely Monarch-centric life (shockingly, some people do try to remove anything other than Monarchs on their milkweed), is it a good idea to protect Monarch caterpillars from predation? The National Wildlife Federation (NWF) reports that there is a lack of scientific evidence that rearing Monarchs actually results in overall population increases, and there is the risk that higher densities of animals can make them vulnerable to pathogens and parasites, which may then harm truly wild populations (in this case they are referring to folk who purchase hundreds or thousands of eggs to rear). If we raise the eggs of animals that would have died if

outside, we are bypassing natural selection. The report goes on to say that small-scale rearing efforts are probably harmless. Nonetheless, it is good to keep in mind that in Ontario a permit is required to raise more than one individual of a Monarch or swallowtail butterfly.

I for one second the words of Mary Phillips, senior director of NWF's Garden for Wildlife program, who states: "*The best way to help Monarchs is restoring their native habitat by planting native milkweeds and nectar plants, eliminating pesticides, and encouraging others to adopt these practices*."

Below: Banded Tussock Moth on Common Milkweed

Masthead Photo…

Bohemian Waxwing*, (Bombycilla garrulus)*

Description and photo by Fiona A. Reid

For me, winter in Ontario makes me shudder – short days, cold, damp weather, a world gone dormant – not my favorite season! But it does have some compensations. Winter brings the arrival of avian visitors from the north – Pine Siskins, Common Redpolls, and if lucky an Evening or Pine Grosbeak are all exciting additions to the bird feeder crowd. But for me the top contender is the Bohemian Waxwing. Like its more common relative, the Cedar Waxwing, it is always very well-groomed, its soft burnished-gray body never seems ruffled, only the crest may be jauntily raised. Bohemian Waxwings are larger than Cedars and have chestnut undertail coverts. Their face has a pinkish "blush" unlike the Cedar. Bohemian Waxwings are very social birds, traveling in groups that may number into the thousands. They breed in evergreen forests, often near lakes or ponds. They are not territorial and do not return to the same area each spring. The male courts the female by fluffing up, raising his crest and pushing his tail down. Then he passes food to her, and she passes it back. This can happen 14 times prior to mating! Waxwings feed mainly on insects in summer and fruit in winter. When berries and fruits are bountiful in the north, the birds stay, but when fruit is in short supply (or bird numbers are especially high) they migrate large distances. We never know if these wonderful birds will make their way south to our area this winter or next, but they are certainly something I look forward to seeing.

Extinction is Forever

The Great Auk?
Pinguinus impennis?
The museum's curator led me
To an ornithology lab
Halting in front
of a grey metal safe
he turned the dial
to the left
stopping at 18
To the right
stopping at 44
then left again
stopping at 1

He opened the door
to expose
a stuffed bird
a Great Auk
hermetically sealed
in glass and brass
to protect it from
insects
decay
light
so the colours
will last

Paul Leet Aird, from ***Butterfly Beautifly Beautiful,*** reproduced with author's permission.

End Note: The Great Auk species *Pinguinus impennis* became extinct in about 1844. All that remain are about 78 stuffed birds, 75 empty eggs, a few skeletons and some bones.

The Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto owns the only stuffed Great Auk in Canada, which is stored in a locked safe.

A Level Balance

on the left pan I placed	on the right pan I placed
a swamp complete with	an equal weight of
water plants and cedar trees	diamonds and emeralds
painted turtles and muskrats	pearls and amethysts
wood ducks and red-winged blackbirds	sapphires and rubies

Paul Leet Aird, from ***Butterfly Beautifly Beautiful,*** reproduced with author's permission.

biodiversity

warblers

wasps

whales

willows

wolves

worms

billions of species

co-habiting

co-mingling

co-existing

co-equals in

co-evolution

Paul Leet Aird, from ***Butterfly Beautifly Beautiful,*** reproduced with author's permission.

Paul Leet Aird and his partner, **Linda Pim** are lifelong advocates for nature and the environment. They live in Inglewood where they enjoy the blossoms of a Flowering Dogwood in Spring and the fruit of Pawpaw Trees in the Fall. Read their bios, listen to Paul recite his poetry, and purchase *Butterfly Beautifly Beautiful* at Inglewood Nature Press .

Wood Turtle Elegy? Not yet

Article and photos by Don Scallen

The email arrived on a Wednesday in the spring of 2007. “Friday looks good. It’s a go.” Sun with a high of 18C was the forecast. Perfect weather for an April wood turtle search. Ron Brooks a professor at the University of Guelph, and a prominent turtle researcher, had invited me to join his first-year biology class on a mission to count wood turtles at one of their last outposts in southern Ontario – a site in Huron County.

Brooks, now a Professor Emeritus, studied snapping and painted turtles in Algonquin Park for decades and contributed mightily to our understanding of their reproduction, behaviour and survivorship. A turtle that featured prominently in that research was Humongous Harry, a snapping turtle first captured in 1978 and then encountered periodically over the following decades, until his death in 2017. During that span of time Harry grew hardly at all. His carapace length remained at 40.7 cm throughout. Brooks and others, during their summer field sessions, treated Harry like a King at Court, feeding him large quantities of choice edibles purportedly to monitor his growth response to abundant sustenance. (I suspect a less scientific motive as well: their great fondness for Harry.) The results? Though Harry ate like a glutton, the length of his carapace didn’t grow at all. His plastron length added a few mm, but essentially Harry remained unchanged.

At the wood turtle research site in Huron County, we descended a slight ravine to reach a small stream at the bottom. In my mind’s eye I had anticipated the haunts of this wood turtle population as largely untracked and pristine – after all, wood turtles, rare and exquisite, lived here! – but the landscape was decidedly ordinary. Narrow bands of second growth woodland consisting of boxelder, white ash, cedar and buckthorn hugged a small stream that wended through agricultural fields, sere after the recent departure of winter’s snow. Plastic trash, whiskey bottles and discarded tires littered the valley slopes.

We gathered on the floodplain and Brooks reiterated the simple objective: Walk the banks of the stream and look carefully for the cryptic turtles, disguised among the prevailing browns of early spring. They might be seen sheltering among the roots of a winter-toppled tree or be basking in a grapevine tangle. We would count and photograph them as part of an ongoing study to monitor their population size.

Wood turtle missing a leg.

Our group split up and began the search. It wasn’t long before shouts signaled discovery. In all we found 22 wood turtles that day, almost all of them adults. Many were walking wounded, evoking images of recuperating combatants at an army field hospital. The most common injuries were lost or damaged legs. One animal was missing both hind legs. With only forelimbs, it dragged itself stoically,

excruciatingly, forward – testimony to its resolute will to live. Another turtle coped with a leg injury that had healed but had left a portion of the tibia exposed.

Raccoons were the likely cause of these injuries. But ultimately, the guilt almost certainly falls on us. Raccoons, in their 21st century manifestation are known as subsidized predators – subsidized by our crops and our garbage. Moreover, we've eliminated the wolves and cougars that once ate them and likely inhibited reproduction by creating what is known in predator-prey relationships as a "landscape of fear". That fear is largely absent from a raccoon's awareness now. They wander freely, largely untroubled that they may become someone's dinner.

Another turtle had a carapace rent by a deep, jagged crack. Wood turtles are born to wander. Though needful of immersion in oxygen-rich streams in the Winter, when the warmth returns, they can range up to 500 metres from those streams to forage on fungi, berries and earthworms. In the past, this itinerant lifestyle, though not without peril, was safer than today. Now wood turtles, doing what they've done for millennia, encounter cars - the most formidable "predators" ever, of adult turtles.

Wood turtle with cracked shell.

Wood turtles inhabit disparate parts of the province: Minesing Swamp, the east side of Algonquin Park, streams near Sault Ste Marie. Since wood turtles can't fly, the widely separated pockets of habitation strongly suggest that at one time they were linked – that once, wood turtles occupied much more of southern Ontario than they do now. One area they lived in until quite recently, was along streams flowing into the west end of Lake Ontario. The Royal Ontario Museum has records from the Humber River and Bronte Creek. Other sources indicate former occurrence in Etobicoke Creek. They may have been in the Credit River as well. Some years ago, I read a brief historical account of a wood turtle sighting in Glen Williams.

Early last decade hope was rekindled that a natural population of wood turtles still lived along Bronte Creek when one turned up at Lowville Park. Alas, it was discovered that the turtle had been released.

Of our eight native turtle species, wood turtles may be the least equipped to deal with humanity. Most other species are more aquatic than wood turtles which almost certainly assists their survival. There is probably a strong correlation in turtledom between the

percentage of time spent on land and mortality. Simply put, the more time spent in or near water (basking on a log just above the safety of the water for example) the better. Spiny softshell turtles, a species that rivals wood turtles in scarcity in Ontario, probably have better prospects because they rarely, if ever, wander on land except to lay eggs. This allows them to exist in the Thames River through the heart of London Ontario.

Since wood turtles do roam widely however, they are far more vulnerable to dying from the cars and to the subsidized predators mentioned earlier. But woefully, depressingly, if wood turtles avoid being run over by cars and survive raccoons gnawing on their limbs, they remain vulnerable to poachers, who can sell them for hundreds of dollars each. They are coveted in the illegal pet trade for their beauty and reputed intelligence. Ron Brooks speculates that the wood turtles in Huron County that I helped count on that spellbinding Spring day, had been targeted by a poaching event, indicated by a recent and abrupt decline in their numbers.

Wood turtle plastron.

Even passive recreation can impact wood turtle populations. Two formerly stable wood turtle colonies were quickly extinguished following the opening a hiking trail along a stream in New England. Poachers may have done their vile work, but ordinary hikers, besotted by the beauty of the turtles, likely returned home with turtles in their pockets.

In 1984 a fascinating discovery was made by a wood turtle researcher in Pennsylvania named JH Kaufmann. He recorded wood turtles stomping on the ground with their forelimbs, a technique that had the salutary effect of summoning worms to the surface, which the turtles then consumed. Since that discovery, this behaviour has been observed with other wood turtles in other locations and in captivity. In October of this year an employee at Reptilia in Vaughn Ontario, posted video of the foot stomping of one of their captive wood turtles.

This turtle of beguiling habits and captivating beauty may not have a future in Ontario. Ron Brooks holds a fatalistic view. In fact, he looks at the dizzying array of challenges that turtles of all species face in a landscape utterly dominated by our species and responds to the question of their survival with richly informed pessimism. For him, we are living in the twilight of the era of turtles in Ontario.

I do think, with foresight, education, and proper management, that wood turtle populations in the near north can be protected and perhaps even enhanced. Management will need to include strict measures to minimize our impact on their remaining habitats. Measures that could include preventing access by ATV's, not allowing hiking trails and preventing logging and within 500 metres of the turtles' home streams. Where roadkill is a problem, barriers could be installed.

I left the Huron County site that April day, with a mix of emotions. One was elation. After seeing an artist's rendering of a wood turtle in my Golden Nature Guide as a little boy, I had yearned to see one. A carapace seemingly hewn out of fine oak and bright orange neck, legs and plastron appealed to my early aesthetic sense. And, I admit, I was excited by this sentence in the nature guide: "They make fine pets and will take fruit, berries and bits of meat from your hands." At age ten in the late sixties, I had no concept at all of endangered species. I wanted to "own" a wood turtle. In my adulthood, I cast aside this misguided aspiration, though I still longed to find one. Stories of their foot-stomping worm hunting added to their allure, as did, sadly, their rarity. We tend to pursue rarities, whether they be birds, wildflowers or turtles.

Wood turtle

So at last I had encountered the creature of my desire and that was satisfying. But I also left with a measure of despair. I think the wood turtles of Huron County – those that are whole and those that are maimed, will disappear, perhaps in a decade or two. Unfortunately, they occupy a sliver of land in the agricultural south, near towns and within easy driving distance of big cities. After they're gone their little stream flowing through a little inconsequential valley, sullied by human refuse, will become just like a thousand other streams in southern Ontario. It will continue to support minnows and muskrats, mink and kingfishers. But it will be devoid of the magic that the presence of wood turtles imbues.

I don't know why the potential loss of wood turtles bothers me as much as it does. Their disappearance won't affect the material wellbeing of Ontario's citizens at all. Wood turtles have little utilitarian value. They don't pollinate plants and they don't control insect pests. The best I can do is to compare their possible extirpation to the loss of priceless pieces of art. Art doesn't contribute to the economic well-being of most of the people who view it, but it feeds the soul. It makes life worth living. And just as an art museum will have more appeal with a diversity of beautiful art on its walls, an ecology full of beautiful creatures, has greater appeal than one that has lost diversity because of our machinations.

But perhaps the reason we should care about the plight of wood turtles is even simpler. They are stunning creatures that have intrinsic value. They are fellow travelers in the glorious pageant of life and, like so many other species, their fate is in our hands. Surely one of the noblest of causes in the 21st century is doing what we can to slow and even reverse the disappearance of wildlife. Wood turtles need us. May we muster the concern and the necessary action to help them persist long into the future.

History of Halton Hills Christmas Bird Count

Article by W.D. McIlveen

Many of the local naturalists or members of the Halton/North Peel Club are aware of the annual Christmas Bird Count for Halton Hills. They may also be aware that the Count has been happening for quite a few years but it is very unlikely that they are aware of the full history of that activity. The present account is an attempt to clarify that based on the records that we have available.

Before the Halton/North Peel Naturalist Club came into being, there was an earlier version of such an organization. It was called the Georgetown and District Naturalist's Club. At the present, we have very little hard information about their activities but birds seemed to be a particularly strong interest. From about 1967 to 1971, they compiled records of sightings made by members within the geographic area of interest. I have converted those records to electronic form where they could be more useful. More to the purpose of the present account, the GDNC conducted at least two Christmas Counts. They do not appear to have been formally conducted using standard Christmas Bird protocols with data submitted to the National Audubon Society. We have one early map of the count area used but it was a square rather than the required circle. Later, they used the standard circle for monitoring. Both the square and the circle were centred on Georgetown with the central coordinates being Main Street and Highway 7. The only count for which we still have full data is December 27, 1971. On that date, the teams tallied 33 species. A portion of the summary is included on the data card shown in Fig 1. It is presumed that the 1971 count had adopted the circular area to monitor.

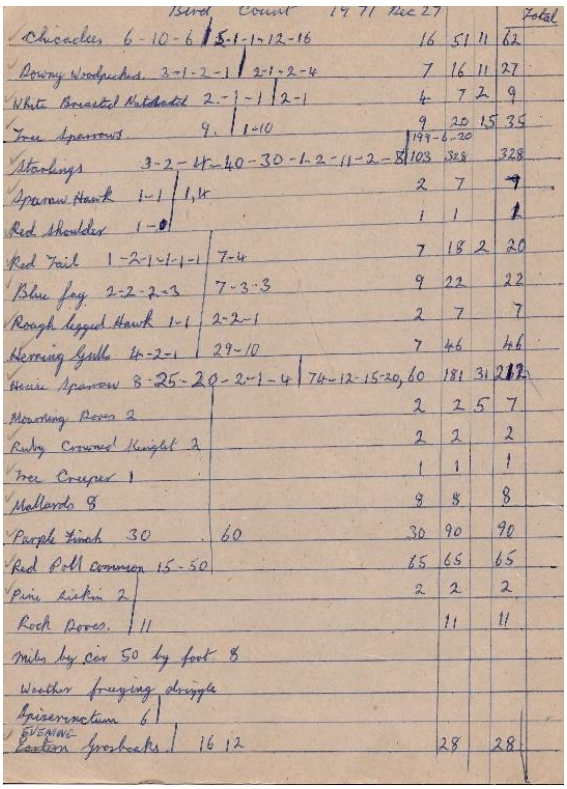

Fig 1. Data card showing part of the data for 1971 Christmas Count at Georgetown

In very general terms, there is a very general sharing of common species reported 50 years ago with the more recent counts. There are some changes and changes in practices where some comments are warranted.

We have no clear information regarding the number of participants on the early counts. It is very probable that there were fewer counters in the early counts. This would likely affect the ability to find larger numbers of common species or to discover the less-common species. It is hoped that we may yet find additional count data but we can only comment on the data available. The more notable changes include numbers of Canada Geese.

None were reported in 1971 and only 2 in 1973. By contrast, the recent counts averaged well over 2,200 for a thousand fold increase in that species. One other notable exception is the Evening Grosbeak. That species no longer spends any significant amount of time in Southern Ontario.

We have further evidence that the GDNC continued the Counts until at least 1973 and it seems likely that this may have been the last year a count was done. The information available for the 1973 count included 30 species but that list was still missing the records for one observer group.

Table 1. Summary of Christmas bird counts at Georgetown, 1971 and 1973*

Species	1971	1973	Species	1971	1973
Canada Goose		2	Ruby-crowned Kinglet	2	
Mallard	8	2	Red-breasted Nuthatch	1	3
American Black Duck	11		White-breasted Nuthatch	9	19
Common Goldeneye		25	Brown Creeper	1	
Rock Pigeon	11	163	European Starling	328	316
Mourning Dove	7	10	American Robin	1	
Herring Gull	46		Cedar Waxwing	16	
Red-shouldered Hawk	1		House Sparrow	212	363
Red-tailed Hawk	20	20	Evening Grosbeak	28	36
Rough-legged Hawk	7	3	Purple Finch	90	4
Belted Kingfisher		2	Common Redpoll	65	2
Downy Woodpecker	27	16	Pine Siskin	2	
Hairy Woodpecker	3	4	American Goldfinch	34	27
Northern Flicker		1	American Tree Sparrow	35	44
American Kestrel	7	7	Dark-eyed Junco	27	15
Northern Shrike	2	1	Song Sparrow	4	5
Blue Jay	22	62	Red-winged Blackbird	2	
American Crow	2	4	Common Grackle		1
Black-capped Chickadee	62	54	Northern Cardinal	26	12
Boreal Chickadee		6			

Complete data set not available

In 1990, a preliminary Christmas Count was undertaken at the urging of Sandy Symmes who was President of the current Halton/North Peel Naturalist Club at that time. A few members of HNP went out for several hours in the afternoon of December 30, 1990 in the general area between Georgetown and Brampton. No formal count circle had been established at that time. A total of 22 bird species were seen during that first attempt at a new Christmas Count. The results were encouraging enough that the current survey format was adopted.

The new (now current) survey was initiated in time for the 1991 Christmas Count. It included a circle centred just south of Stewarttown. The new circle (Fig. 2) was unknowingly set up very close to the location of the original Georgetown circle and was only offset from it by about 2 or 3 km. Its location was largely dictated by the available space in the area not occupied by the nearby counts at Guelph, Hamilton, South Peel, and Headwaters (Orangeville). Preferably, count circles should not overlap and this was accomplished.

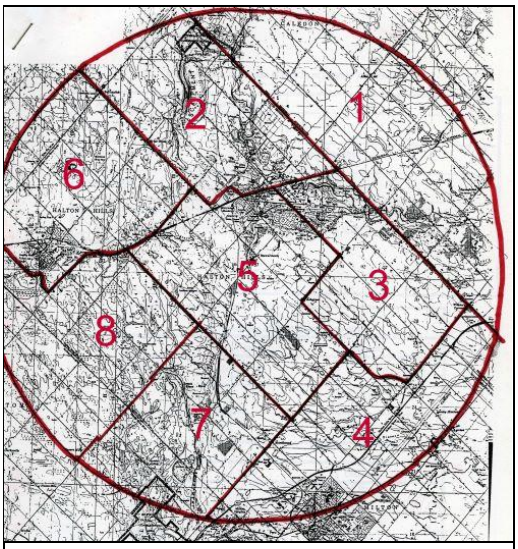

Fig. 2. The Halton Hills Count circle

The current survey was initiated in 1991 as indicated. From the beginning, the protocol that was followed was that set out for any acceptable Audubon-sponsored count. It was not until 1996, that the Halton Hills Count became a formal count and the data was submitted to the Audubon database. Later, the data for counts completed in Canada were handled by Bird Studies Canada. In late 2019, the COVID 19 pandemic arrived. It did not interfere with the Christmas Count in that year. In 2020, various restrictions to deal with the disease came into effect in March. An extra-heavy level of restrictions came into effect the day before the 2020 Count was to be done. In order to comply with those restrictions, that count was cancelled for that year. It is anticipated that the Count can be reinstated in 2021 while following all health guidelines. From 1991 to 2019, the Count Compiler was Bill McIlveen. The 2021 Count will be managed by Ian Jarvie. It was considered that this would be a good time to prepare a summary of the historical records for the Halton Hills Count and that is what is included here.

Over the 29 years of action of the recent Halton Hills Count, at least 130 different people participated for one or more years. The numbers of people varied from a low of 16 (1992) to 36 (2001). Except for the probable low participation being related to the novel nature of the project in the earliest years, the patterns in participation showed no obvious temporal trend (Fig. 3). It is no surprise that many people contributed for only one or two years, some for many years, and others for various intermediate numbers. Two people have participated every year of the 29-year count. These are Don Scallen and Bill McIlveen, Ray Blower was close behind at 28 years. Other long-term (over 20 years) participants included Rick Stroud (26 years), Irene McIlveen (26 years), Janice Sukhiani (23 years), and Teresa Rigg (21 years).

As expected, the greatest single addition of bird species for the Count was for the initial year of operation. Over time, the numbers of species new to the Count declined. This pattern would be expected as it would be normal for more-novel species to be encountered. In the last dozen years, observers did not encounter any species new to the Count in six years (2008, 2010, 2014, 2015, 2016, and 2018. This is shown in Fig. 4. This is further demonstrated in the cumulative species pattern shown in Fig. 5.

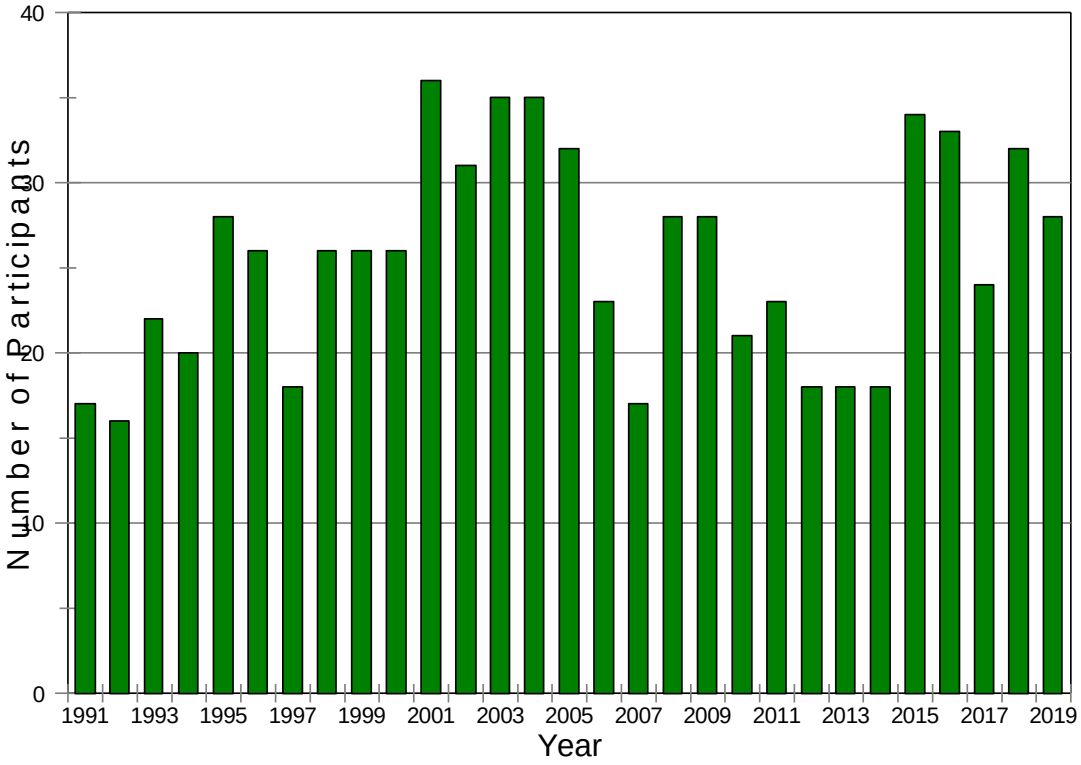

Fig. 3. Number of participants in Halton Hills Christmas Bird Count, 1991 to 2019

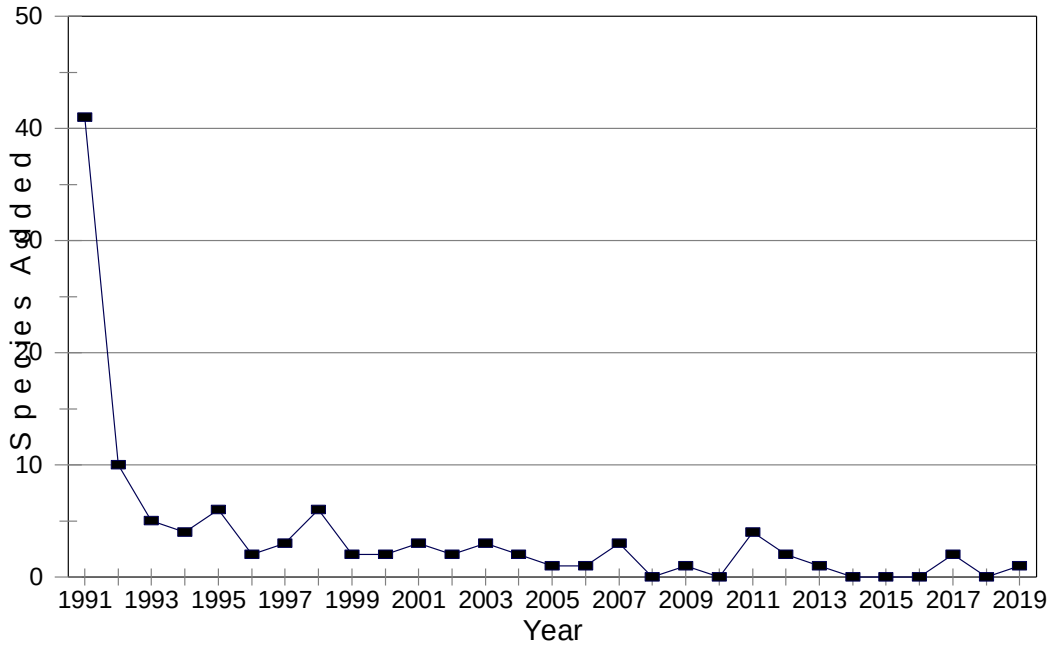

Fig. 4 New species added annually for Halton Hills Bird Count, 1991 to 2019

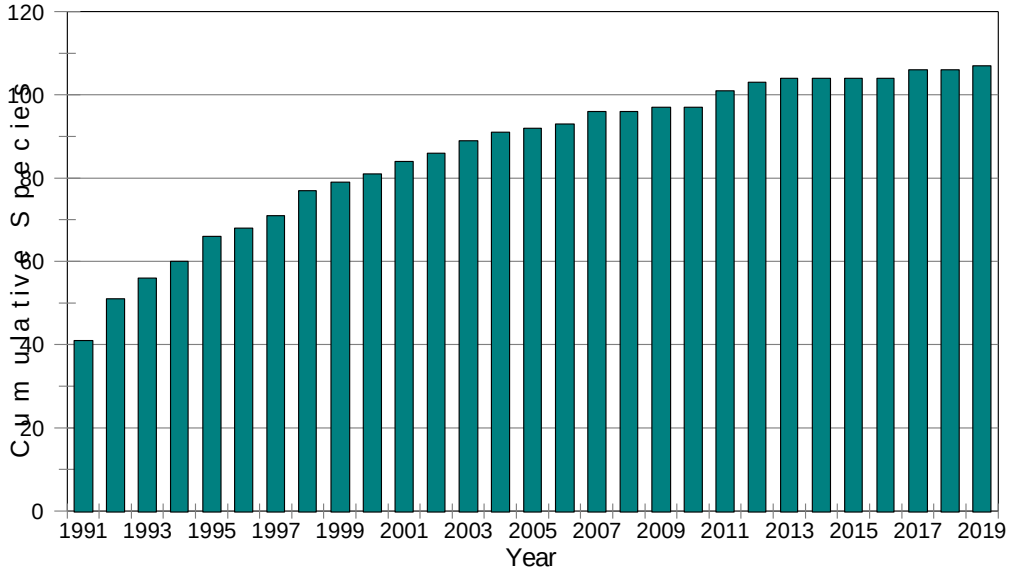

Fig. 5. Cumulative species totals for Halton Hills Bird Count, 1991 to 2019

The number of species encountered each year is indicated in Fig. 6. The lowest number of species was 41 in the first year of operation (1991) when the lowest number of observers were participating. The number of species varied between a low of 41 and a high of 60 species in 2017. Over the duration of the Count, the average number of species was 51 per year. After the latest count, the cumulative total species stood at 107 species (Table 2).

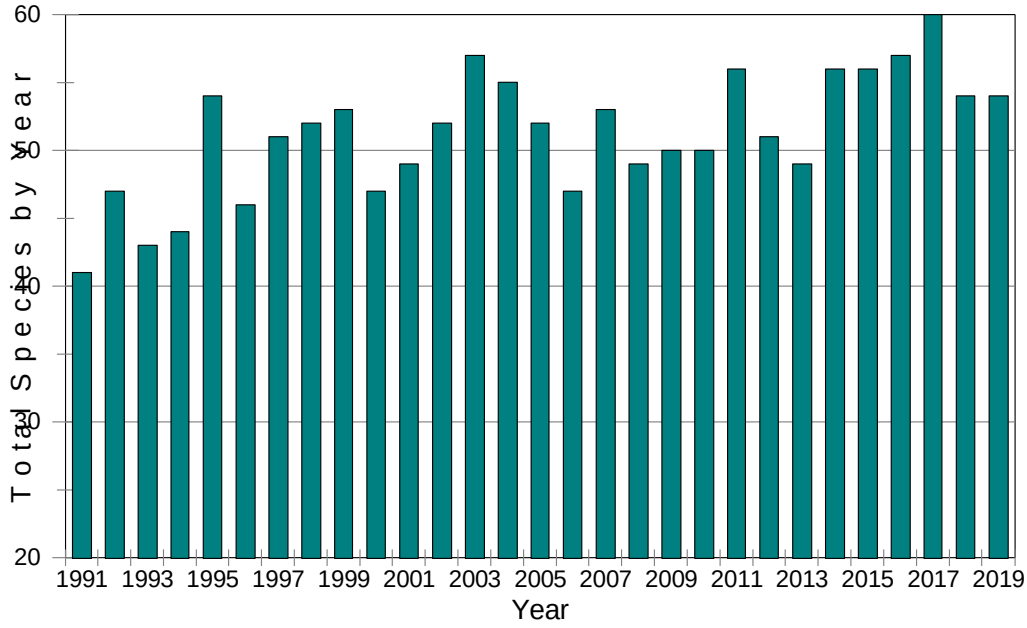

Fig. 6. Numbers of species recorded annually, Halton Hills Bird Count 1991-2019

Table 2. Summary of birds encountered during Halton Hills Christmas Bird Counts, 1991 to 2019*

Species	Avg	Max	Freq	Max Year
Snow Goose	1.0	1	3	2006
Canada Goose	2359.5	4577	29	2011
Cackling Goose	0.7	1	3	2014
Mute Swan	5.2	15	15	1991
Trumpeter Swan	1.0	2	4	2014
Tundra Swan	13.0	13	1	2017
Wood Duck	1.0	1	3	2004
Gadwall	1.0	1	2	1998
American Wigeon	1.0	1	2	1998
American Black Duck	20.1	67	25	2006
Mallard	515.1	1636	29	2005
Northern Shoveller	21.0	67	4	2015
Northern Pintail	1.0	1	1	2002
Green-winged Teal	1.3	2	4	2011
Ring-necked Duck	1.0	1	1	2011
Greater Scaup	1.0	1	1	2011
Scaup sp.	1.0	1	1	2012
Lesser Scaup	1.0	1	1	2019
Bufflehead	2.9	11	8	2015
Common Goldeneye	7.5	26	17	2015
Hooded Merganser	4.8	10	5	2001
Common Merganser	12.8	66	20	2003
Red-breasted Merganser	1.0	1	1	2011
Ring-necked Pheasant	0.8	2	5	2005
Ruffed Grouse	3.2	8	25	2002
Wild Turkey	39.0	195	18	2016
Great Blue Heron	1.3	4	21	2002
Turkey Vulture	1.0	1	1	2013
Bald Eagle	1.8	3	10	2015
Northern Harrier	2.8	11	19	1998
Sharp-shinned Hawk	3.8	11	28	2009
Cooper's Hawk	3.2	10	26	2016
Northern Goshawk	1.2	2	12	1996
Red-shouldered Hawk	1.3	2	15	1995
Red-tailed Hawk	58.1	117	29	2000
Rough-legged Hawk	6.3	45	25	2000
American Kestrel	8.3	16	26	2004
Merlin	1.0	3	8	2016
Peregrine Falcon	1.0	1	3	2019
American Coot	1.0	1	2	2003
Ring-billed Gull	132.5	2010	29	2003
Herring Gull	33.6	222	27	2003
Great Black-backed Gull	2.0	3	2	2009
Rock Pigeon	555.5	1455	29	2003
Mourning Dove	594.6	1385	29	2005

Species	Avg	Max	Freq	Max Year
Eastern Screech Owl	1.7	6	22	2014
Great Horned Owl	2.0	5	23	2000
Snowy Owl	0.6	1	5	1994
Barred Owl	1.0	1	1	1994
Great Gray Owl	1.0	1	1	2004
Long-eared Owl	2.0	3	2	1997
Short-eared Owl	0.0	0	2	1995
Belted Kingfisher	2.7	7	29	2000
Red-bellied Woodpecker	7.6	21	22	2017
Yellow-bellied Sapsucker	0.0	0	2	2017
Downy Woodpecker	51.3	91	29	2005
Hairy Woodpecker	18.7	33	29	2015
Northern Flicker	1.5	3	13	2015
Pileated Woodpecker	3.4	12	28	2000
Northern Shrike	3.6	19	27	1995
Blue Jay	142.2	333	29	2003
American Crow	346.7	692	29	2000
Common Raven	4.9	19	15	2019
Horned Lark	37.5	81	8	2017
Black-capped Chickadee	575.9	1211	29	2004
Red-breasted Nuthatch	8.4	22	29	2003
White-breasted Nuthatch	43.3	82	29	2005
Brown Creeper	2.8	8	23	1994
Carolina Wren	1.5	2	2	1993
Winter Wren	0.7	1	7	1994
Golden-crowned Kinglet	5.7	30	22	2000
Eastern Bluebird	4.1	10	9	2010
American Robin	59.0	266	25	2011
Varied Thrush	1.0	1	1	2009
Gray Catbird	1.0	1	1	1996
Northern Mockingbird	1.8	5	18	2012
European Starling	1791.2	3490	29	2002
Bohemian Waxwing	146.0	180	3	2012
Cedar Waxwing	108.4	592	27	2017
Pine Warbler	1.0	1	1	1998
Eastern Towhee	0.5	1	2	2005
American Tree Sparrow	279.5	837	29	1995
Chipping Sparrow	0.5	1	2	1999
Field Sparrow	1.0	1	1	2007
Fox Sparrow	1.0	1	2	1998
Song Sparrow	4.8	22	23	1992
Swamp Sparrow	1.0	2	4	2015
White-throated Sparrow	2.4	10	18	2005
White-crowned Sparrow	4.8	21	8	2004
Slate-colored Junco	290.9	693	29	2012

Table 2. Summary of birds encountered during Halton Hills Christmas Bird Counts, 1991 to 2019*. Cont'd

Species	Avg	Max	Freq	Max Year	Species	Avg	Max	Freq	Max Year
Oregon Junco	1.0	1	1	1995	House Finch	175.9	456	29	2000
Lapland Longspur	1.0	1	1	1995	White-winged Crossbill	25.0	40	3	2008
Snow Bunting	198.4	1118	20	1999	Common Redpoll	211.4	1670	15	1997
Northern Cardinal	59.7	101	29	2012	Pine Siskin	19.3	63	19	2015
Red-winged Blackbird	2.8	12	6	1998	American Goldfinch	214.2	499	29	2015
Common Grackle	1.0	1	2	1996	European Goldfinch	1.0	1	1	2000
Brown-headed Cowbird	16.7	106	11	2018	Evening Grosbeak	4.0	11	5	1993
Pine Grosbeak	17.0	39	4	1995	House Sparrow	551.4	1316	29	1996
Purple Finch	10.5	52	21	1999					

Average number over 29 years, Max – highest tally in any single year, Freq is number of years when species was seen, Max year is year when highest number was observed

It should be no surprise that some species are far more abundant that others. Canada Geese accounted for one quarter of all the individual birds (25.15%) while European Starling made up 19.10 %. The other species accounting for more than 5% of the records each were Mourning Dove (6.34%), Black-capped Chickadee (6.11%), Rock Pigeon (5.92%), and House Sparrow (5.88%).

Two of the most unexpected species were a Varied Thrush (2009) and a European Goldfinch (2000). Some species were eruptive finches while some others are undergoing distribution changes. In the latter case, there has been a general increase in Wild Turkey numbers with the first seen in 2002 while Common Raven first appeared in 2003. Red-bellied Woodpecker was first reported in Count Week of 1994 but numbers have increased to as high as 21 birds in 2018. Evening Grosbeaks were present on five early counts and was last seen in 1997. Some species were considered to be seasonal stragglers. These would include an Eastern Towhee and a Gray Catbird.

The records obtained in the first 29 years of the Halton Hills Count will serve as an excellent database against which future counts can be compared. We could reasonably expect future years to provide miscellaneous changes due to chance alone. But we can also expect changes associated with local changes in habitat related to the spread of urban area, the loss of agricultural lands, the creation of roads and changes brought about by global warming. We cannot exclude the possibility that introduced foreign species might occur. We could make some guesses as to future patterns among species but until those future numbers are actually determined, those guesses will remain as guesses.

Photo Quiz

Photos by: Asher Clayton

Answers on page 30

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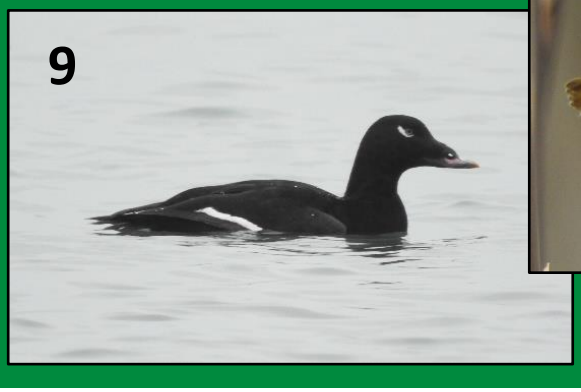

10

Answers to the Photo Quiz on page 29

1. Black Billed Cuckoo
2. Long Eared Owl
3. Blackburnian Warbler
4. Cape May Warbler
5. Leconte's Sparrow
6. Northern Shoveler
7. Piping Plover
8. Red Shouldered Hawk
9. White Winged Scoter
10. Yellow Warbler

Preying Mantis capturing a cricket for lunch at Forks of the Credit Provincial Park. Photo credit: Laura Weihs

Halton/North Peel Naturalist Club

Box 115, Georgetown, Ontario L7G 4T1
Charity Registration number 869778761RR0001
www.hnpnc.com

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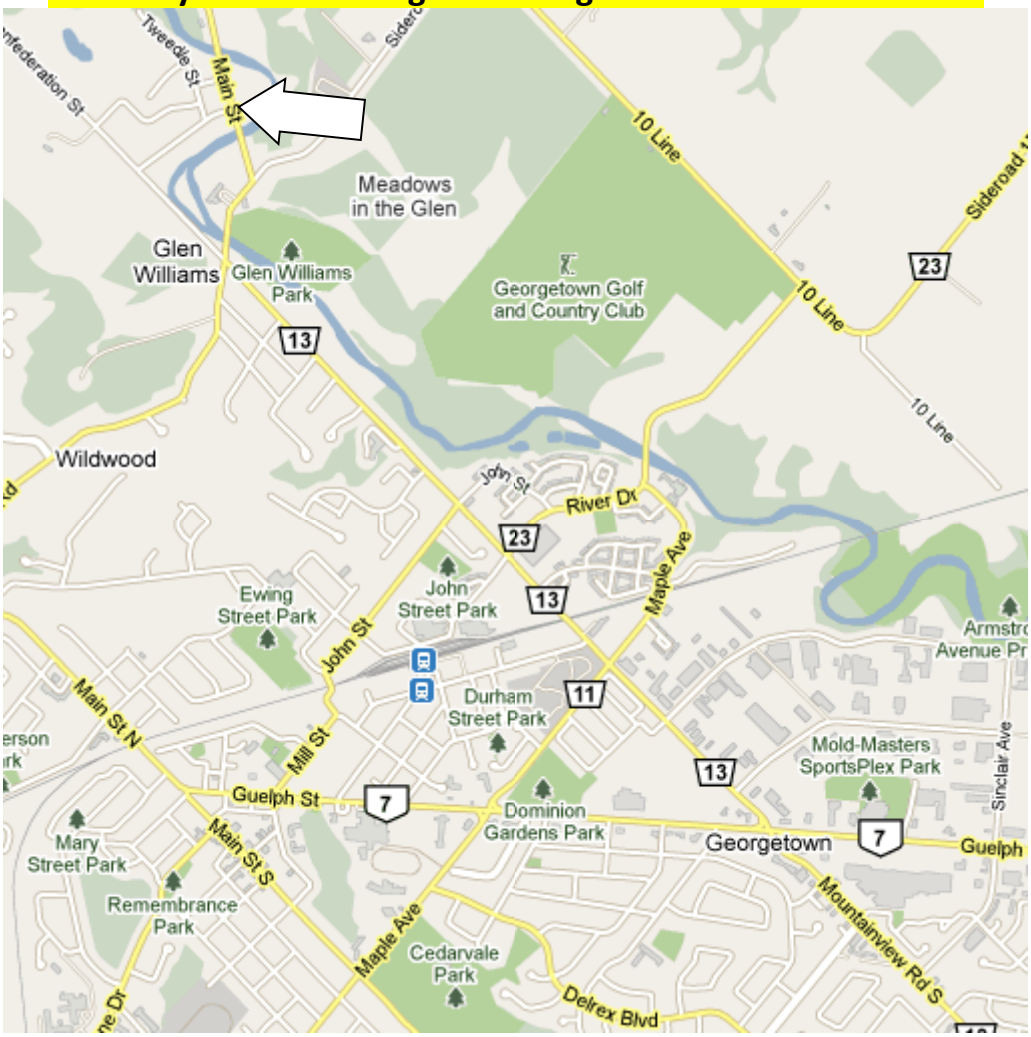
Membership for one year: $30 Single; $40 Family
Halton/North Peel Naturalist Club is an affiliated member of Ontario Nature.
Meetings were at St Alban's Church in Glen Williams starting at 7:30 p.m.

Currently Zoom meetings are being held until further notice.



Halton/North Peel Naturalist Club Membership Form

_____ Renewal or _____ New Member(s) Date_____

Name(s): _____

Address: _____ City: _____

Postal Code: _____ Telephone: _____

E-mail: _____

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)
from March through to August	_____ Single ($15.00) _____ Family ($20.00)
from June through to August	_____ Single ($ 7.50) _____ Family ($10.00)

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?

_____

_____

_____

****

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: _____

_____ Date: _____

****

Please fill out this form and bring it in to next indoor meeting or mail with payment to:
Halton/North Peel Naturalist Club
P.O. Box 115, Georgetown, Ontario L7G 4T1