The Esquesing

Halton/North Peel Naturalist Club

www.hnpnc.com

Volume 60, Number 3 January - February 2026

Fly Agaric Button Stage

Photo Credit: Don Scallen

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President's Message

Welcome to 2026!

I hope you had a relaxing holiday. Our December Pot Luck meeting had a smaller group than usual, probably due to less than great weather conditions for driving. We did, however, have a great variety of food dishes to sample and a dozen wonderful slide shows to whet our appetite for bird watching and travelling. I have not had any feedback about the Christmas Bird Count but I know the weather was decent that day for getting out into nature.

Here is the schedule for our meetings and presentation topics until June 2026:

January 13: Birds by Jennifer Pierson
February 10: Odonates by our very own Dr. Pedro Pereyra
March 10: Sea Mammals & Sea Birds, Personal Experiences by Patrick O'Reilly
April 14: Niagara Escarpment: Land Between Waters by Mark Zelinski
May 12: Costa Rica Trip Photos and Observations by Des MacNeal
June 9: Bird House Checks at Scotsdale Farm

As always, we try to have a variety of topics to appeal to diverse interests. Who our speakers are also depends on hearing about different people and what they might bring to our club. Over Christmas, I learned that my brother, a member of the Sudbury Naturalists Club, has done some talks for them! This was news to me, not only that he is a member of a naturalist club, but that he will do a presentation to his club! He, like me, has no formal training in the natural world. He simply wants to share his learnings and observations with others. I'll have to consider having him speak to us at an upcoming meeting!

To ensure you know who is working on your behalf for our club, here is the list of Executive members again: President – Margaret Beaudette, 1st Vice President – Ian Jarvie, Past President – Yves Scholten, Treasurer – Helen Pettingill, Secretary – Pedro Pereyra, Membership – Leslie Bissegger, Communications – John Beaudette, and a list of the Directors: Don Scallen, Bill McIlveen, Fiona Reid.

Yours in nature,
Margaret

Talks and Walks

Indoor Events - Talks

Time/Date: 7:30 pm on the second Tuesday of the month
Location: **St Alban's Hall,** 537 Main Street, Glen Williams, ON L7G 3T1
Map on last page of the newsletter.

Talks

January 13, Birds by Jennifer Pierson

Upcoming Adventure Walks and Events

Winter Tracking
Saturday January 17 at 9am.
Terra Cotta Conservation Area, entry fee required
Difficulty: moderate. We'll be walking off trail over uneven terrain.
This walk is weather dependent. Lack of snow or icy conditions may make it a no-go.
Please let Don know at dscallen@cogeco.ca if you plan to attend. He'll connect prior to the walk whether it's a go or not.

Report On Christmas Bird Count 2025

by Ian Jarvie

This year's Christmas Bird Count took place on the usual day, 27th December, with volunteers from our club as well as non-club members who have participated in the past, and some new additions, making for a good mix of birders with varying degrees of experience.

The weather on count day was cold, averaging around -8C, and all of the still water was frozen, only small amounts of open water seen on places like the Credit River. You will have noticed no doubt that we had a white Christmas, with snow cover ranging from 5 cm to 10 cm on the 27th.

Of note is that for many years we have been granted special access to the ponds at Maple Lodge Farms on Winston Churchill Blvd, providing a good number of waterfowl sightings. This year however, we were politely denied access, citing heightened security measures due to avian flu concerns. Despite this, with the number of Canada Geese down from last year, Mallard total was over 1000, the highest seen in many years. A Canvasback was also seen, a new species for the count.

Talking of new species, a Barred Owl was seen in Willow Park, this species only having been seen once in Count Week in 2021. A brand new species not recorded before was a Northern Saw-whet Owl, a little beauty seen and photographed in Hungry Hollow.

The Dark-eyed Junco (*Junco hyemalis*) comes in many subspecies, the one we typically see here in winter being the Slate-coloured dark-eyed junco (*J.h. hyemalis*), but this year one of the subspecies rarely seen here, the Oregon dark-eyed junco (*J.h.oreganus*) was recorded. This subspecies is more at home on the west coast.

The Yellow-bellied Sapsucker is not common by any means, but seems to be less uncommon this year, with 2 being recorded on count day, and a sprinkling being reported around our area.,

As usual, feral pigeons, European Starlings and House Sparrows always show up in large numbers, all non-native invasive species.

Immature Bald Eagle

Sixteen Bald Eagles in total were counted, the highest reported previously being 12, and the average more like 3 or 4. Unbelievably, these spectacular birds are becoming almost commonplace along the Credit River and surrounds. I myself have seen one fly low over my house in Glen Williams, one circling over the Copper Kettle Pub, and 3, yes 3 seen in quick sucession flying low over Creditview Road. All adult birds, within a week or so of each other. I also photographed a juvenile bird on 14 December on Old School Road.

Rough-legged Hawks have apparently been re-named Rough-legged Buzzards, and possibly due to their displeasure at the name change, they refused to make an appearance this year.

Speaking of species misses, despite being reported as a “good” year for winter finches due to a poor seed crop in the north (good for birders, not so good for the birds themselves) very few have been recorded in general in this area. On count day, only 20 Snow Buntings, no Purple Finches, only one Redpoll, no Pine Siskins or Grosbeaks showed up.

In summary then, 51 species showed up in 2025, compared with 56 in 2024 and 54 in 2023.

And a special thank you to the dedicated volunteers who give their time, their energy, their expertise (and their gas money!) on one cold winters day each year to provide data from this ongoing important citizen science project.

Thank you,

Ian Jarvie, CBC Compiler

Christmas Bird Counts in Ontario – An Overview

W.D. McIlveen

There are lots of people that appreciate nature and all of its parts. Those of us that fall under that group are pleased to share our knowledge and to expand the number of nature lovers. But, if one does get involved with a nature group, they will still surely hear about Christmas Bird Counts. The following report is a synopsis of the whole activity and especially the part that applies to Ontario. Having just undergone a review of all the available data for the province, the author can share that information with others in the area.

The Christmas Bird Count was initiated on Christmas Day, 1900, as an alternative to the usual hunting of birds that was often done. The counting procedure has continued for 125 years across North America and other places in the Western Hemisphere. The rules for the Counts are well-established. Counts are done over a 24-hour period between December 14 to January 5. Each count takes place in an established 15-mile diameter circle. Volunteers count every bird they see or hear all day within that Count circle. In addition to the birds encountered, the volunteers record the conditions experienced and the effort expended to obtain the data. Birds Canada now oversees Canada's Christmas Bird Counts but cooperates very closely with the National Audubon Society who originally operated the entire program.

The species encountered includes resident species (there year round), species that migrate south for the winter, vagrants that wander in from elsewhere, eruptive species, escapes, purposeful releases, and stragglers that either don't know the normal procedure or may lack the ability to do the required flying. But regardless of the reason for their particular presence, the avian part of natural world is likely to be slightly different for each successive count.

One does not have to have a great deal of statistical talent to see some patterns in the numbers of birds reported. There are some specific local influences that might also change over time but the following are particularly evident.

- The number of species (new additions) increases with time. The number of species is influenced by the number of years that a Count has been operating [Fig. 2]
- The number of species is influenced by the number of participants and the available talent pool of observers.
- The number of species is highest at southerly sites suggesting that bird populations are greatly affected by winter temperatures and southerly migration for the winter [Fig. 3}.
- The number of species is greater when the count includes a part of the Great Lakes, especially Lakes Ontario and Erie.

The data available from the Audubon Society website indicates a total of 225 separate counts. This may overestimate the number of counts since a number of these may have shifted location slightly as the organizers decided that the count area would be better-served by relocating the count circle. A total of 16 counts appears twice in the greater list after relocating or re-organizing. Of these, four have made the change for a third time. It would likely not make a huge difference if the data for such pairings were to be combined making the realistic Ontario count locations total 205. If the data were combined, it would effectively extend the number of years that a particular count was carried out. The majority of Counts have been carried out in Southern Ontario which reflects on the number of observers available to do the field work. Proximity to a Count circle is one factor but opportunities to see more birds is another.

The earliest count in Ontario was undertaken in the year 1900 at Toronto. This is remarkable as it was the year that the very first count was done anywhere. It is also quite remarkable that so many new counts were started so early in time (any time up to about 1960). The greatest numbers of new counts were started in decades after 1960 [Fig. 2]. The lower number of new counts after 2020 must be interpreted as only a partial decade has elapsed.

Few of the early counts lasted for very many years. Obviously, the year in which a count was started will dictate its possible age. The longest running count is the one at London which had been in operation for 113 years. The ones at Hamilton and Ottawa have been going for 100 and 99 years respectively.

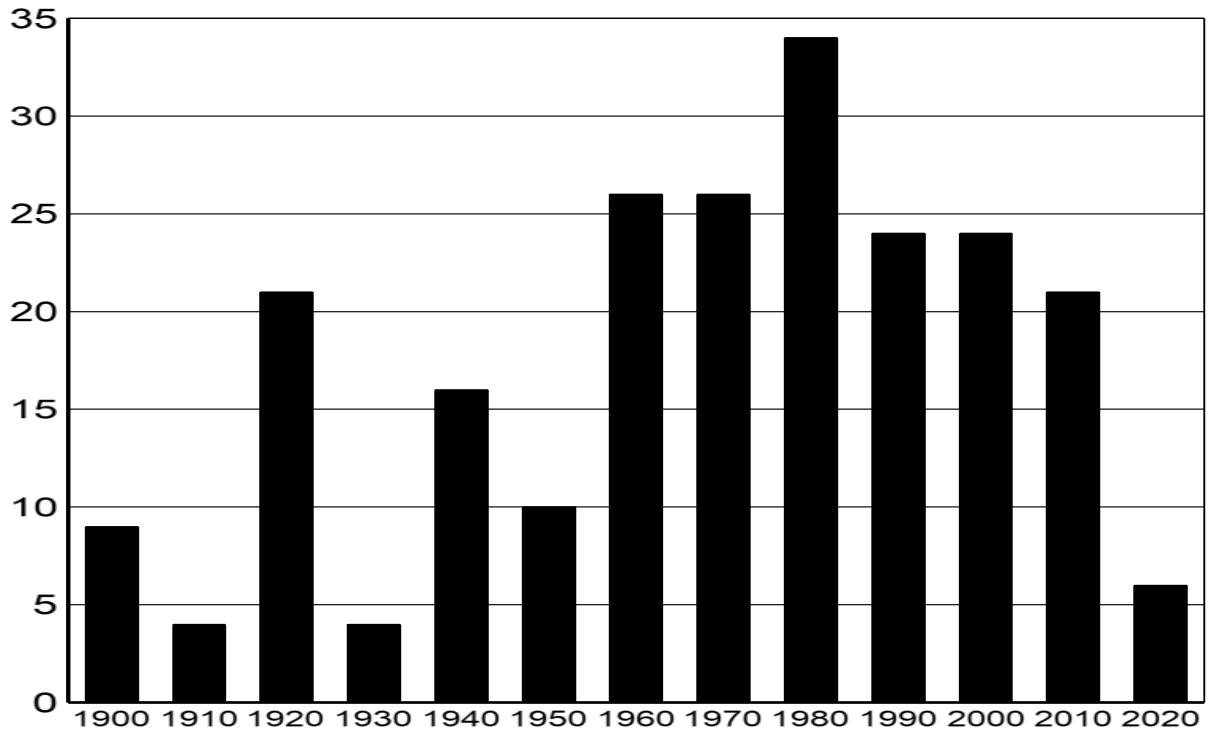

Fig. 1. New Christmas counts in Ontario by decade

The number of observers that participated over the years is not known. People frequently participate in more than one Count in a given year. Still, it is not unreasonable to believe that thousands of people have contributed data to the data base. Considering that the Counts have been in existence for nearly 125 years obviously means that those early participants have departed from the living crowd for a very long period of time. We need to recognize and thank every single person for their contributions to a very wonderful database.

We need to recognize the great changes that have occurred over the life of the counts. Things as simple as field guides are important. The availability of field glasses and spotting scopes have improved our viewing of distant birds. Originally, participants would not have had the luxury of current technology. They certainly lacked computer-based technology for recording and identifying species and for communications involved in setting up an observer team. The earliest Counts might easily have lacked any telephones and needed written letters to do that. Over time, cars became more common so that more sites could be covered. At times, car travel could have been restricted when gasoline was not readily available during War years and by limitations imposed on individuals by the Great Depression. So, not every Count year can be considered as equal.

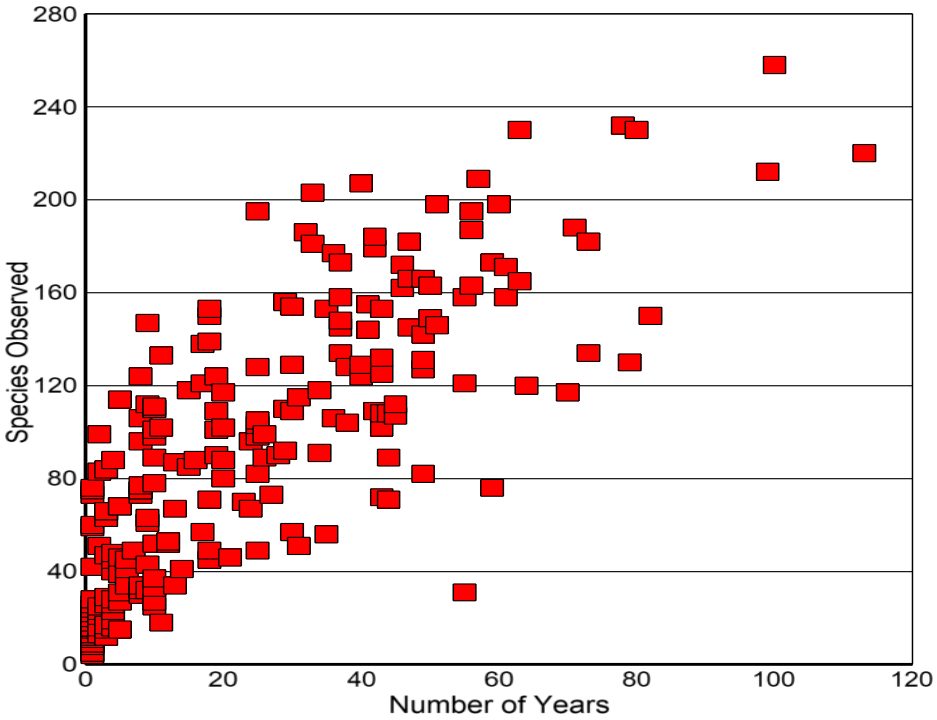

Fig. 2. Number of species accrued vs. years of operation

It is to be hoped that the Christmas Counts will be continued for many years into the future. That count in addition to other standardized surveys are required if we are to properly understand what is happening to various bird populations. Assessments of bird populations in conjunction with assessments of other types of biota are needed if we hope to know what is indeed happening to the world we live in.

Figure 3 shows the locations of count circles across Ontario. The colours indicate the distribution of the circles according to the number of bird species that have been accrued over the various counts. The pink colour indicates the highest number of species (total species between 174 and 258). It is obvious that those high numbers are associated with sites located close to Lakes Erie and Ontario where winter temperatures would be less severe. Possibly, the southern sites also indicate some late migrants that were still present later in the season. As one moves northward in the Province, the number of species declines. Overall, these maps illustrate that the Christmas Counts have meaning via the data that they generate.

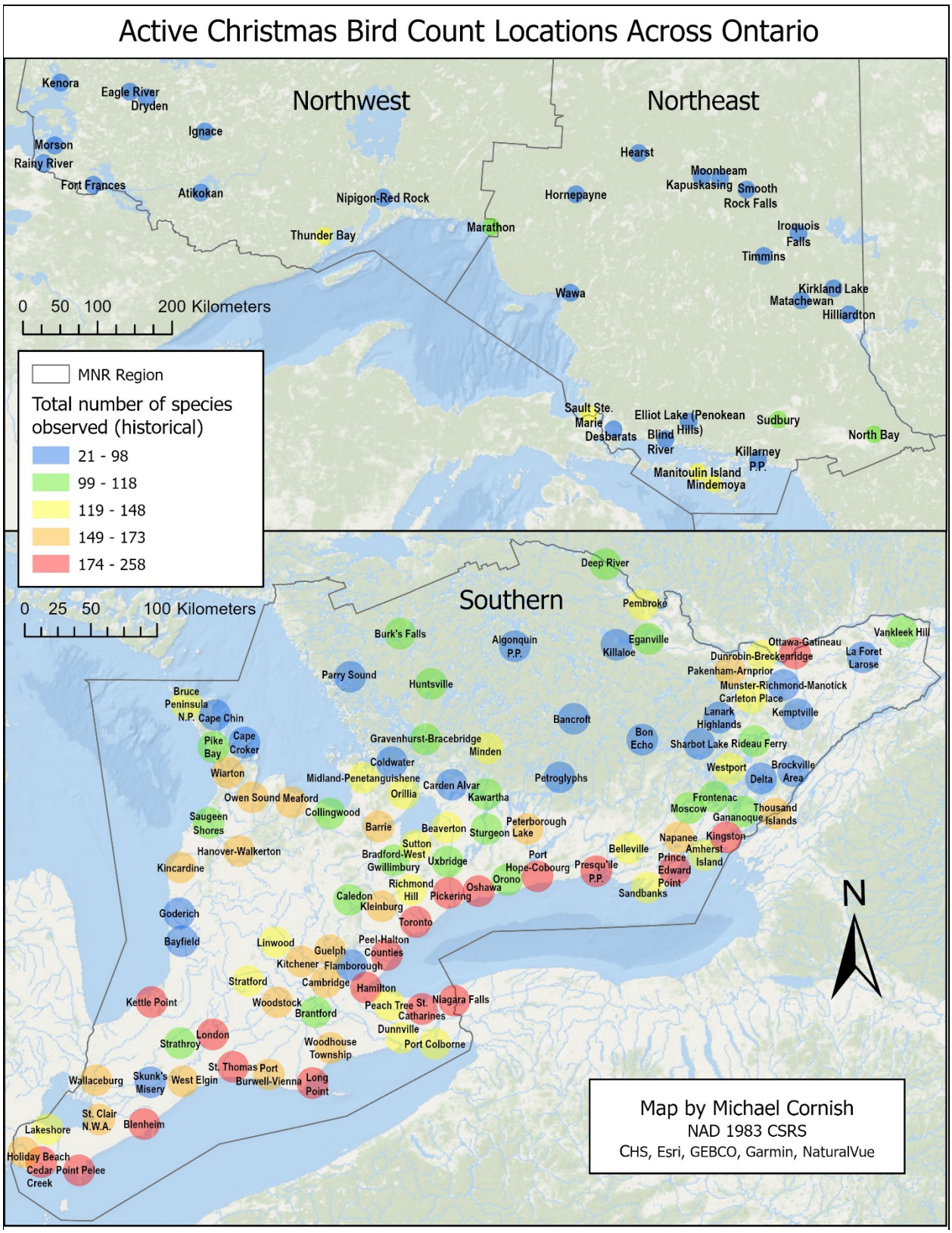

Figure 3. Christmas bird count areas are circles of 15 mi/24 km diameter, represented on the map in colours reflecting species richness. Active count areas include those with records since 2020.

Fly agaric, Alice in Wonderland, and pee

By Don Scallen

Fly Agaric Button Stage

Fly Agaric showing Stem

Alice gazed quizzically at the mushroom pondering what the hookah-smoking caterpillar had just told her: “One side will make you grow taller, and the other side will make you grow shorter.”
After eating a tiny cake, Alice had shrunk to three inches tall. She ardently hoped she’d nibble the side of the mushroom that would make her taller.
The mushroom in *Alice and Wonderland,* written by Lewis Carroll, is believed to be based on an iconic species called fly agaric. Grace Slick of Jefferson Airplane in the psychedelic ‘60s tapped into Alice’s mushroom encounter with a rock tune called “White Rabbit”, a song that alludes to fly agaric’s psychotropic qualities.

Fly agaric grows over a vast circumpolar range. It is fungal royalty. Known in scientific circles as *Aminita muscara,* it has insinuated itself into the cultural fabric of our world as thoroughly as its mycelium networks insinuate our woodland soils.
Think mushroom and the image conjured is often the red subspecies of fly agaric, flecked by white patches. These are the mushrooms that proliferate in fairy tales and fantasy books. Red fly agarics generally grow in Asia.

Our fly agarics – same species, different subspecies – are usually orange or yellow but like their more popular Asian cousins they are beautiful fungal standouts.
Some Siberian peoples such as the Koryaks have reputedly used fly agarics for millennia as medicine and to help them access the spirit world. The path to the “other side” via these mushrooms is fascinating, albeit one that might offend your modern sensibilities.

Anthropological records tell us that shamans would consume the mushrooms, pee, and share their urine with the tribe. Though the shamans could get violently ill, the fungal toxins would be denatured by passage through their bodies. Their urine, with the psychoactive properties of the mushrooms still intact, would then open a safer portal to the spirit world for the imbibers.
Other stories, perhaps apocryphal, reveal that tribespeople would also drink the urine of Siberian reindeer. According to these tales, the deer, seeking ungulate highs, were avid consumers of fly agaric mushrooms.

Today there is burgeoning interest in the use of psychoactive mushrooms like fly agaric to ease health issues like insomnia, depression and PTSD. The indigenous Siberians may have been on to something.

Best, of course, to leave these investigations to mycologists (fungi scientists). Though few deaths have been attributed to eating fly agaric mushrooms, tasting one as Alice and the shamans did, can provoke severe gastrointestinal distress.

So, let's leave these lovely enigmatic mushrooms in the ground while pondering their place in nature and in human culture. Like so many fungi, their subsurface mycelium networks connect with the roots of trees, transferring carbon and minerals to the trees while receiving sugars in return.
We owe a debt to these fungi for nurturing our forests. But they are also valuable for inspiring the imaginations of writers and artists like Lewis Carroll and because of their potential medicinal applications.

Fly Agaric fully expanded

The Bass, The Crayfish And The Organic Food Processor

By Don Scallen

Standing in a stream in June watching fish is about as close to heaven on Earth as I'll ever get. Warmth, birdsong and gurgling water embrace me. My concerns recede, as I revel in a magical place of serenity and discovery.
One of the joys of wading streams in June is watching smallmouth bass. Exciting videos of their breeding behaviour can easily be attained with the excellent underwater capable cameras now available.

Male smallmouth bass clear silt and other debris from gravel stream bottoms in June, creating roughly circular redds (nests) that attract females.
Eggs are laid and fertilized and, departing from the usual standard of maternal caregiving in nature, the males guard the eggs and the fry after they hatch. The females get on with their lives.
The video in this blog shows an interaction between a crayfish and one of the nest-guarding males.

My Go-Pro camera recorded the crayfish foraging near the smallmouth bass nest while the male guardian was temporarily absent. When he returned, the crayfish rolled on its back and appeared to play dead. The bass showed some desultory interest in the crustacean but then left it alone.

Soon though – the segment captured in this video clip – the bass eyed the crayfish again and the crayfish made a fatal error. It flinched, betraying that it was indeed alive, and the bass promptly swallowed it.
The crunching in the video is the ill-fated crayfish being ground up by sharp structures lining the throat of the bass called "pharyngeal teeth".

I was gobsmacked as I watched the video, fascinated by the apparent death feigning by the crayfish, by the initial indifference of the bass, and by the discovery that bass use their throats as organic food processors!

Next spring, if you're looking for me on a sun-kissed day in June, best check a local stream.

See the video of the bass/crayfish encounter at *https://www.inthehills.ca/author/don-scallen/*

The Mammals of Scotsdale Farm

W.D. McIlveen

The biological inventory of the Scotsdale Farm completed by Jocelyn Webber included a list of mammals encountered during her study in 1983. That list included twelve species. Since then, notes of the mammals seen have been made during visits made by W.D. McIlveen and other members of the Halton/North Peel Naturalists. Those visits added at least four more species. The combined observations to date are presented in the following table. Species listed in the Webber report are indicated.

List of Mammals reported at Scotsdale Farm

Family	Common Name	Scientific Name	Webber
Castoridae	Beaver	*Castor canadensis*	
Cricetidae	Mouse	*Peromyscus*	
	White-footed Mouse	*Peromyscus leucopus*	
Dipodidae	Woodland Jumping Mouse	*Napaeozapus insignis*	JW
Erethizontidae	Porcupine	*Erethizon dorsatum*	JW
Sciuridae	Eastern Chipmunk	*Tamias striatus*	JW
	Eastern Gray Squirrel	*Sciurus carolinensis*	JW
	Black Squirrel	*Sciurus carolinensis*	
	Groundhog	*Marmota monax*	JW
	Northern Flying Squirrel	*Glaucomys sabrinus*	
	Red Squirrel	*Tamiasciurus hudsonicus*	JW
Leporidae	Eastern Cottontail	*Sylvilagus floridanus*	JW
Canidae	Coyote	*Canis latrans*	JW
Canidae	Red Fox	*Vulpes vulpes*	JW
Mephitidae	Striped Skunk	*Mephitis mephitis*	JW
Procyonidae	Northern Raccoon	*Procyon lotor*	JW
Cervidae	White-tailed Deer	*Odocoileus virginianus*	JW

The species seen are generally common ones that might be expected in the area though some may be secretive and less likely to be observed. Some like the squirrels are more active and are readily encountered. Some comments about specific species are needed. The Beaver was included on the list by virtue of the classic feeding signs seen near the farm pond in 2023. Mouse activity was frequently noted at the bird boxes during the clean out period. Sometimes the mice were briefly seen while they were making their escape. At least one of these was of the White-footed form. Both the gray and the black phase of the Eastern Gray Squirrel were seen. The Northern Flying Squirrel was notable as it was observed in the trees in the wetlands just east of Trafalgar Road. These animals are usually active at night as they are nocturnal by nature. A fawn of the White-tailed Deer indicated that the species is breeding on the property. Some species were conspicuous by their absence. This includes the bats which are almost certain to be present. A proper survey should turn up a half dozen species. Small forms like the Meadow Vole and Shrews could easily be added to the list as could Ermine. Groundhog burrows were occasionally seen on the property but

several were noted as traffic casualties on Trafalgar Road in 1983. This is a declining species in Southern Ontario and it has not been seen on the property in recent times.
Domestic cattle in the form of Shorthorn cows were seen in the fields in earlier years of the present report. Prize-winning cows and horses were part of the farm heritage but domestic animals were not included on the list.

References

Webber, J.M. 1983. The vegetation, flora and fauna of Scotsdale Farm/Bennett Estate. A reconnaissance biological inventory. A report prepared for the Ontario Heritage Foundation. 61 pp.

Beaver feeding activity, Scotsdale Farm, 2023

White-footed Mouse nest in birdbox Scotsdale 2016

Quiz – Can you name these mammals from Ontario?

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

Mammal Quiz Answers

1 - Eastern Chipmunk. Rattray Marsh
2 - Groundhog, Silver Creek Outdoor Ed Centre
3 – American Bison, Sideroad 15 Nassagaweya
4 - White-tailed Deer, Magnetawan
5 - Striped Skunk juvenile. Rattray Marsh
6 - Black Bear, Killarney Park
7 – Northern Raccoon, Acton
8 – Virginia Opossum, Acton
9 - Snowshoe Hare, Cabot Head

Monthly Memes

Halton/North Peel Naturalist Club Membership Form

Name: _____

Address: _____

City: _____ Province: _____ Postal Code: _____

Telephone: _____

Email: _____

Application Type: New_____ Renewal_____

Membership Type: Single ($40)____ Family ($50)____

If "Family Membership", please list additional names:

_____

The membership year is September 1 to August 31. Renewals are due in September. For new members who join after April 1, the fees are applied to the following year's membership.

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Participation in our outings involves walking or hiking on various trails. By voluntarily participating, you assume full responsibility for all risks of personal injury. Make sure that any outing you choose to participate in is within your fitness level. Please wear appropriate clothing and footwear.

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Please fill out this form and bring it to our next indoor meeting, or mail it along with a cheque payable to Halton/North Peel Naturalist club to:

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

Halton/North Peel Naturalist Club

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

Board of Directors

President: Margaret Beaudette
Vice President: Ian Jarvie (905) 877-1441
Treasurer: Helen Pettingill
Secretary: Pedro Pereyra
Past President: Yves Scholten

Appointments

Membership: Leslie Bissegger
Newsletter: Imogene MacMoffat (geniemac16@gmail.com)
Webmaster Communications Director: John Beaudette
Roving: William McIlveen
Ontario Nature Rep: Don Scallen (905) 876-6180
Crozier Property Steward: Pedro Pereyra
Hardy Property Steward: TBD

Meeting Time/Date: 7:30 pm on the second Tuesday of the month
at
St Alban's Hall, 537 Main Street, Glen Williams, ON L7G 3T1