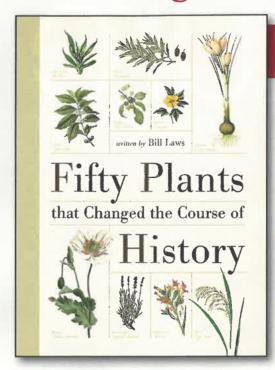


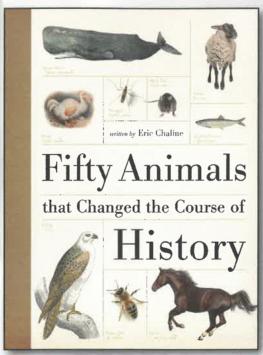
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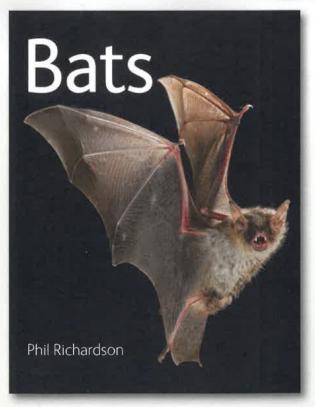
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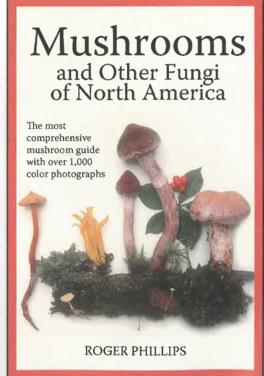
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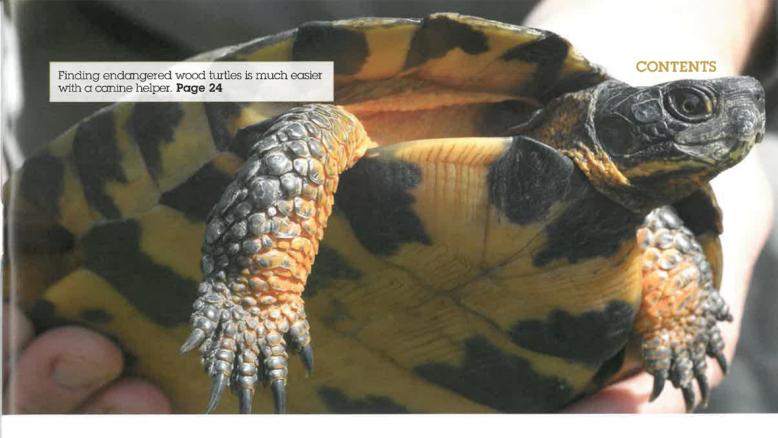
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#### **DEPARTMENTS**

- 6 **THIS ISSUE** LOOKING TO THE FUTURE Passing on the conservation torch. *By Caroline Schultz*
- 7 MESSAGE BOARD A NATIVE NON-NATIVE

#### 8 EARTH WATCH

Ontario Nature's fall birding hot spots: staff reveal their favourite places to witness the fall migration; farmers learn to live with at-risk species; who speaks for the environment in the upcoming election?; Peter Gilchrist, past president of the Board of Directors and champion birder.

#### 44 ONTARIO NATURE CHAMPIONS

Honouring our eco-heroes: Ontario Nature's conservation award winners.

**46 LAST WORD** TREASURE ISLANDS
Wild spaces, like Ontario Nature's reserves, are rich in species and history. *By Peter Middleton* 

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#### 18 THE OTTAWA VALLEY IN AUTUMN

A guided tour of nine great nature getaways in eastern Ontario. By Caroline Schultz and Mark Stabb

#### 24 THE SCENT OF A TURTLE

Scientists turn to man's best friend to help recovery efforts for one of our most endangered reptiles. By Conor Mihell

#### **COVER STORY**

#### 28 WILD CHILD

Our Nature Guardians program sows the seeds for a new crop of environmentalists. *By Denis Seguin* 

#### 32 THE BIG PIT

When The Highland Companies announced plans to dig one of the largest quarries in North America, a small but determined army of farmers, citizens and local politicians declared war. And, in the court of public opinion, they're winning. *By Cecily Ross* 



ON THE COVER Nature Guardian
Lupine Habib. Through the Ontario
Nature program, kids of all ages
get the opportunity to explore their
natural world.
Photograph by Denis Seguin

#### THIS ISSUE



#### Looking to the future

By Caroline Schultz

ver the course of Ontario Nature's 80-year history, we have fought numerous battles for conservation. With you, we have witnessed many wins for the environment and also, regrettably, some losses. As the voice for nature in Ontario, we find ourselves preoccupied with the most immediate conservation battles of the day: fending off development to save significant habitat; crafting a rescue plan for an endangered species; pushing government to implement genuine protection for fragile ecosystems and at-risk wildlife; and, most challenging of all, forging solutions among disparate stakeholders that will, ultimately, reduce our ecological footprint on this province.

But our efforts are not undertaken at the expense of the big picture, a vision for the future of Ontario in which the natural wonders of this province are safeguarded and the needs of people and wildlife are met so that both can be sustained. Who will carry out this vision? Who will take on tomorrow's environmental battles?

Our response is that one of the most important decisions we can make today is to cultivate an ethic of conservation in the next generation of environmentalists. This is why Ontario Nature created Nature Guardians, a program designed to raise environmental awareness and an appreciation for nature among young people. We know that when kids are given the opportunity to explore and connect with the natural world, their physical and mental health improves and school grades get better. We also know that the lack of such outdoor experience - a reality for many children - has been linked to childhood obesity, decreased attention spans and fewer coping mechanisms for stress.

Through our program, kids tell us how they are affected by the natural world and how they plan to confront the ecological challenges before us. For example, on the last day of Earth Month this year, five teens participating in the Nature Guardians program took action by organizing five simultaneous events planting trees, cleaning up shorelines and restoring trails. Afterwards, they posted comments and pictures on the Nature Guardians Facebook page, using social media to inspire and encourage their peers to follow suit. This is what youth leadership looks like.

At Ontario Nature we are handing the conservation torch to a culturally diverse and very passionate group of young people. Whatever career path they end up choosing in life, our best possible investment is giving kids experiences that will pay off in a powerful dedication to nature in the decades to come. As Anne Bell, our director of conservation and education, says, intimate contact with nature gives kids "moments that are filled with colours, sounds, smells, emotion, surprise, awe and wonder."

In Denis Seguin's cover article for this issue of ON Nature (page 28), he quotes one teen as saying that the Nature Guardians program has made her question the way she lives. It's amazing, she adds, to see kids rising up and taking a stand. We, too, are amazed. If you share our awe for our young guardians, please support this program. Doing so will not only help with the day-to-day business of protecting wild species and spaces, it will also, amazingly, help realize the enormous potential in tomorrow's environmental stewards.



Ontario Nature protects wild species and wild spaces through conservation, education and public engagement. Ontario Nature is a charitable organization representing more than 30,000 members and supporters and 140 member groups across Ontario.

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John Hassell



#### A native non-native

I have some reflections on Lorraine Johnson's "Natural invaders" article on invasive non-native plants [Spring 2011, page 22].

It would be wonderful if nurseries in Ontario began to label native plants that are good for sustaining birds and other animals as "eco-friendly." Education would be a necessary component, as gardeners would need to be convinced that holes in the leaves of their plants indicate not impending doom for the garden, but a thriving, healthy ecosystem.

Another reflection is that we need a nuanced approach to plants that may pose a threat to our ecosystems. We need to know which plants are the most detrimental so we can properly direct finite resources towards lessoning their impact.

A nuanced approach would probably find that black locust is not nearly as credible a threat as the other invasive plants featured in the article. The black locust is native to the eastern United States, as far north as Pennsylvania. But it has not arrived from offshore like the other invasive plants. So chances are black locust is fed upon by a full suite of native insects that in turn feed birds and other vertebrates. Consequently, it is probably far less damaging to the environment than plants that have arrived from Asia and Europe.

The tree proposed as an alternative to black locust – honey locust – also merits comment. Honey locust barely enters southern Ontario in the extreme southwest. Many parts of southern Ontario are geographically closer to the range of black locust than they are to [that of] honey locust. Is planting honey locust instead of black locust appropriate simply because its range squeaks into the political jurisdiction we call Ontario? In reality, is honey locust not as foreign to Toronto, Kingston and Ottawa as black locust?

Don Scallen, Georgetown, Ontario

#### Brake for bobolinks

While living in Glen Williams, Halton Hills, I was renting a house on a 60-hectare property that had two mating pairs of bobolinks. After reading your article on the bobolink online [Summer 2010, page 24], I joined Ontario Nature and have since purchased a membership for my granddaughter.

Armed with your article and others, I approached the farmer who leased the hayfields on our property and explained that if he cut our fields a bit later, the fledglings would have a chance to survive. He had about four large hayfields at the time, and he agreed to cut ours last.

My point is that we can all do our part, and cooperating made us both feel very gratified. I think your alliance with various farm groups will help, but we also need one-on-one contact with farmers to make them aware. Keep up the good work.

Bill Shepherd, Glen Williams, Ontario

Executive Director, OREA Centre for Leadership Development

Correction: The photo of Chris Rathgeber in the Summer 2011 issue of *ON Nature* (page 17) should have been credited to Jeff Kirk, not David Briggs. We apologize for the error.



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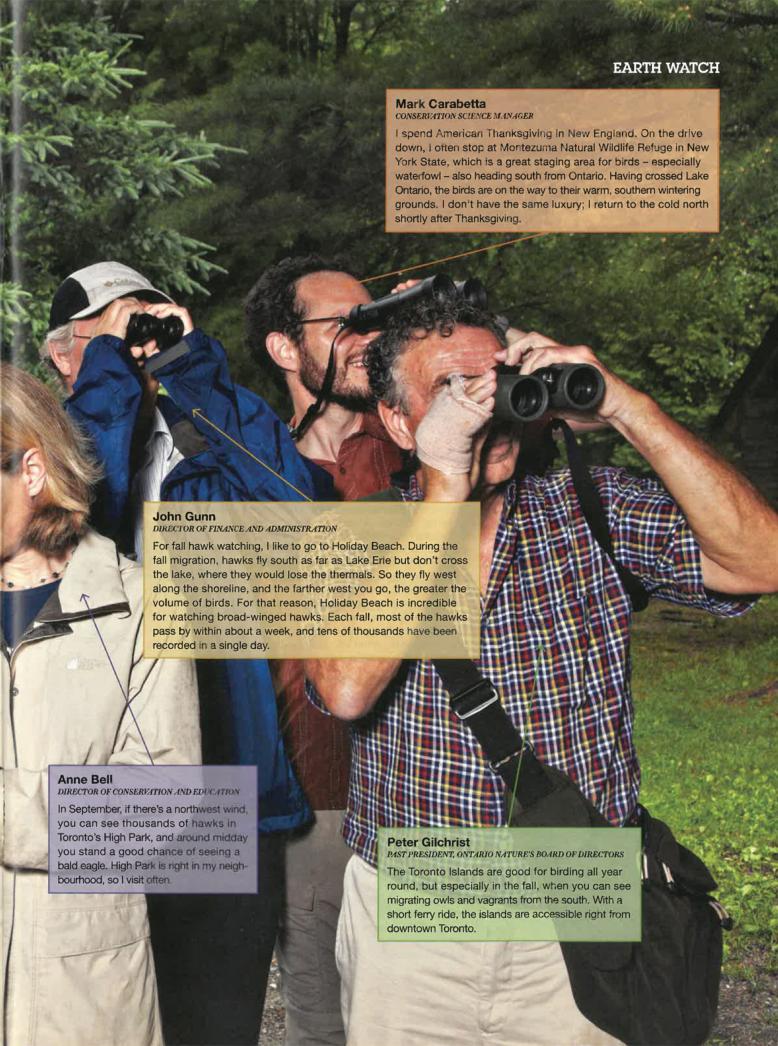
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You can learn a lot about the culture of an office by its internal memos. This past June, Ontario Nature's executive director, Caroline Schultz, circulated an all-staff memo alerting us that several chimney swifts – listed by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada as a threatened species - were flying above our building. At most workplaces, this announcement would not be a typical one. But at Ontario Nature, where birding is a common pastime about which many are passionate, no one was terribly surprised by it. Here, our most avid birders reveal their favourite fall birding spots, a surprising number of which are found either within or very near urban centres. Caroline's pick? Along the south shore of Prince Edward County, near Belleville, which on average attracts a remarkable 220 bird species a year.

John Hassell





# PHOTOS JOHN REAUME

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#### EARTH WATCH



Butler's gartersnake, a globally rare species, is now considered endangered provincially as well as federally.

#### Ontario Nature's Watch List

Last June, the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources released an updated version of its Species at Risk in Ontario List, and the numbers are disquieting. Forty-seven species are listed as being of special concern, 53 are threatened, 94 are endangered and 13 are locally extinct. Three species are of particular concern to Ontario Nature. The status of both the Jefferson salamander and Butler's gartersnake changed from threatened to endangered. The cerulean warbler is now designated as threatened, whereas previously it was listed as being of special concern.

This is the fourth set of revisions since the Endangered Species Act was passed in 2007. Says John Urquhart, Ontario Nature's staff ecologist, "It is disappointing to see species that have been on the list for a number of years still in decline. We have known for a while they are in trouble, yet we have failed to sufficiently protect them."

Human activities are altering landscapes in ways that place tremendous strain on many of the province's plants and animals. "The underlying story here," says Ontario Nature's conservation manager, Mark Carabetta, "is about habitat loss and degradation. Urban sprawl causes tremendous hardship for these three species. The growth of cities and expansion of road networks are shrinking and fragmenting grasslands, marshes and forests."

The dominant threats to Jefferson salarmanders, which are found in forests and swamps, are urbanization, aggregate extraction and resource development in southern Ontario. Small, isolated populations of this salarmander can still be found in this part of the province, but they probably consist of only a few hundred individuals and are at risk of becoming locally extinct.

Smaller than other gartersnakes, the Butler's gartersnake inhabits prairies, grasslands and fields that have seasonal marshes and wet areas. The loss of prairie habitat and the draining of wetlands – often for agricultural purposes – have drastically reduced population numbers of this snake in southern Ontario, which are declining in 33 percent of known



Cerulean warbler

sites. The Committee on the Status of Species at Risk in Ontario (COSSARO) reports that, since the Butler's gartersnake was discovered in 1938, its range has shrunk by 60 percent. Because this snake is endangered in Canada and globally rare, the Ontario population is critical to the species' continued survival.

Cerulean warblers need large, relatively undisturbed tracts of mature deciduous or swamp forest, though the species has been observed in small woodlands. The population numbers of this warbler have declined by 30 percent from those in the 1981 to 1985 and 2001 to 2005 counts, and in southwestern Ontario by 47 percent. COSSARO reports that this species' ability to reproduce is not sustainable, threatening

the estimated 500 to 900 pairs remaining in Canada, most of which are found in Ontario. In southern Ontario, habitat loss due to forest fragmentation and degradation is believed to be the main cause of the decline.

Ontario Nature continues to work with all stakeholders to secure better protection for species at risk. To learn more about our endangered species research, policy and education initiatives, visit our endangered species webpage at www.ontarionature.org/endangeredspecies.

John Hassell

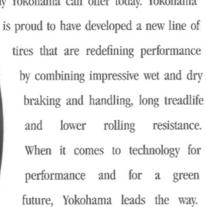


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#### **EARTH WATCH**

#### Wetlands in trouble

Ontario Nature, working in partnership with the David Suzuki Foundation, Ecojustice, Ducks Unlimited Canada and Earthroots, are publishing two reports, one focused on the level of protection afforded fragile wetlands in the Greenbelt, the other on the rich diversity of species and ecosystems within the Greenbelt.

The 728,434-hectare Greenbelt surrounding the most populous region in the country supports more than one-third of Ontario's species at risk and serves as a refuge to many more plants and animals. Our organizations viewed the timing of these reports as critical to raising awareness among decision makers of the importance of the Greenbelt and how its conservation policies can be strengthened, given the upcoming provincial election and reviews of the Greenbelt Plan, the Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan and the Niagara Escarpment Plan, all slated for 2015.

The ecological importance of wetlands cannot be overstated. These delicate ecosystems are critical to water filtration, flood retention, erosion control, carbon storage, nutrient cycling and groundwater recharge, and provide habitat for specialized wildlife communities. Wetlands also support a landscape that is resilient to some of the anticipated impacts of climate change, including drought, extreme weather and the loss of biodiversity.

The Greenbelt wetlands report, which examines the effectiveness of existing legislation and polices under the Greenbelt Act, is the culmination of a two-year investigation incorporating policy analysis, surveys and case studies. The biodiversity report, focused on the rich web of life along the edge of Canada's largest metropolis, highlights the status of the plants, animals and habitats that define the region, the benefits they provide, the ongoing threats to their persistence and the conservation gains won through progressive land-use policy.

Both reports indicate that Greenbelt policies help protect natural heritage. Nevertheless, wetlands and other habitats in the Greenbelt are still in danger of being degraded by certain land uses, such as aggregate extraction and infrastructure development. Both reports emphasize the urgent need for education, outreach and support for stewardship initiatives, in addition to policy reform. Landowners, developers and residents all need to understand the natural values of the Greenbelt and how they can best be conserved.

People and wildlife alike are drawn to the rich habitats that make the Greenbelt such a special place. When the landscape of the Greenbelt is altered, everyone living downstream feels the impact. Conserving this working countryside means that the vital natural functions will continue to benefit Ontarians now and long into the future.

Joshua Wise



Wetlands provide many nature services including water filtration, carbon storage and groundwater recharge.

#### **EARTH WATCH**

#### Animal farm

"Farming," says Henry Bakker of Field Sparrow Farms, "is about good land management," thus explaining his participation in Trent University's innovative two-year research project on alternative approaches to hay harvesting that can help protect important bobolink habitat.

Unlike other at-risk species rendered vulnerable by fragmentation and reduction of natural habitat, the bobolink, a pretty grassland bird, needs its human neighbours to maintain artificial habitat – hayfields and pasture – during June. Bakker points out that land left alone in Ontario reverts quickly to forest; cattle farming, on the other hand, maintains the grasslands that bobolinks need to breed.

While Field Sparrow Farms already conducts its harvests during periods when grassland species are not breeding (even the farm's name was chosen to reflect the owners' concern for grassland birds and habitat preservation), the practice is not common on other farms. Farmers typically harvest hay when the crop and the weather cooperate, says Harry Stoddart, of Stoddart Family Farm, who is a project participant. Most years that means mid-June right when the havfields contain nests filled with baby bobolinks. Rescuing Ontario's bobolink populations requires changing hay harvesting practices, delaying the harvest until late July and so potentially making them less profitable.

Enter Kristen Diemer, a Trent University master's degree student, and her project comparing the standard harvest schedule with a modification: a first cut in late May, followed 65 days later by a second cut after bobolinks have fledged. Radio telemetry tags track the bobolinks displaced by harvesting, and nest searches and point counts determine the breeding success of the birds in the control sites compared with the experimental sites.

Will Bakker's and Stoddart's fellow farmers agree and adopt the new harvesting practices, should the altered schedule prove beneficial for the bobolink? Stoddart believes there will be resistance to any major changes, as high-quality hay is already a hard crop to produce, and Bakker argues that compensation is key. "It's great to ask farmers to voluntarily get involved," he says, "but if society is going to impose schedules, there needs to be a recognition that there is a value to the stewardship work that farmers do – a real service that is provided."

Andrea McDowell







The three-day gathering brings together scientists and expert naturalists to lead workshops, talks and field trips as well as outings to Frontenac Park, St. Lawrence Islands National Park, Queen's University Biological Station and Ontario Nature's Lost Bay Nature Reserve on the eastern arm of Lake Gananoque.

The Frontenac Arch is a nature lover's paradise where you find an abundance of wildlife, including rare and endangered species such as cerulean warblers, prairie warblers, gray ratsnakes, common musk turtles, five-lined skinks, deerberry, bluntlobed woodsia and pitch pine.

Transportation will be provided from the Kingston VIA Rail station to Chaffey's Locks where the Opinicon Resort hotel is located.

Watch for more information and how to register in the winter issue of *ON Nature* magazine and on our website, www.ontarionature.org.



#### **EARTH WATCH**



At-risk woodland caribou depend on the protection afforded through the Endangered Species Act and the Far North Act.

#### Vote for the environment

It often seems that specific issues count for little during elections. Instead, voters are subjected to general images of each party, encapsulated in brief, usually negative sound bites. Campaigning for the October 6 Ontario election, the Official Opposition Conservatives simply distill Premier Dalton McGuinty and his eight-year Liberal administration into one word: "Taxman." The Liberals, in turn, portray Conservative leader Tim Hudak as scary and irresponsible.

How do environmental concerns fit into this electoral landscape?

The Liberals will not unveil their platform until September but claim a strong environmental record that includes support for renewable energy and conservation through the Green Energy Act and feed-in tariffs, a promise to close the province's coal-fired electricity stations, creation of the Greater Toronto Greenbelt, the Far North Act to preserve half the northern boreal region, and additional laws to safeguard endangered species and curb mining exploration.

Hudak promises to gut or scrap most of those measures, calling them punitive taxation, invasions of individual rights or a hindrance to job creation. The NDP and Green Party generally support the government's direction, but say the policies must be made more effective.

The Conservatives argue that the Endangered Species Act would hobble economic development in northern Ontario and, in the south, put farmers in danger of extinction. The NDP – divided between northern members who favour development in their region and members from the south who place more emphasis on wilderness conservation – says listing species is fine but wants, as Timmons-James Bay MPP Gilles Bisson puts it, changes in "how you deal with it on the ground."

Similarly, the Conservatives claim that the Liberals' revision of the Mining Act, which reined in exploration in southern Ontario and requires consultation with First Nations in the north, would kill the industry. The NDP demands more consultation on mining and northern land-use planning, not to slow development but to try to ensure that Aboriginal communities benefit from it.

The Conservatives' task is to incorporate their negative environmental message into the basic campaign attack.

The NDP and Green Party face a tougher job, since urging improvements in complex policies they approve of in principle requires more detail and nuance than most media and voters can likely digest.

In a world of sound bites, how will such messages fare at the ballot box? Peter Gorrie

#### Out of the woods

The woodlands of London, Ontario, have been saved from the axe. Legal battles over stronger protection for the city's wooded areas finally ended in May, when local developers lost a bid to appeal the case to the Supreme Court of Canada.

While that may not be the final word on the matter, Nature London's conservation committee chair and former city councillor Sandy Levin is pleased with the ruling. "About 800 hectares were at issue," he says. "That's two percent of the entire area of London."

The fight began in 2006 after the City of London created a policy lowering the threshold for protecting woodlands over four hectares in size. Previously, a woodland was protected only if a city ecologist gave it a high rating in three of various categories – such as composition of trees, size, location and age. Roughly two-thirds of the city's woodled areas would have failed that test.

But under the new policy, a woodland needs a high rating in only one category, vastly increasing the number of protected areas. The London Development Institute – an association of local developers – unsuccessfully appealed the new policy to the Ontario Municipal Board and to a series of lower courts. In January, the institute asked the Supreme Court of Canada to hear an appeal of the lower court rulings. In May, the Supreme Court said it would not hear the case.

That is a relief for Levin, who helped pay for a lawyer out of his own pocket to support the city's position. The case cost him \$100,000, about half of which he recovered through fundraising and a lower court decision to award legal costs.

The institute's president, Jim Kennedy, argues the case was not about woodlands, but about the way the policy was implemented and its implications for democratic involvement in municipal decision-making. Kennedy's group claimed that the more stringent threshold for protecting woodlands should not have been a city policy, but rather part of the official plan. As a policy, the threshold is not subject to public hearings, whereas as part of the official plan, it would be.

"It's a fine point and hard to get across," says Kennedy. "But if it was part of the official plan, at least we'd be able to speak to the issue through public hearings."

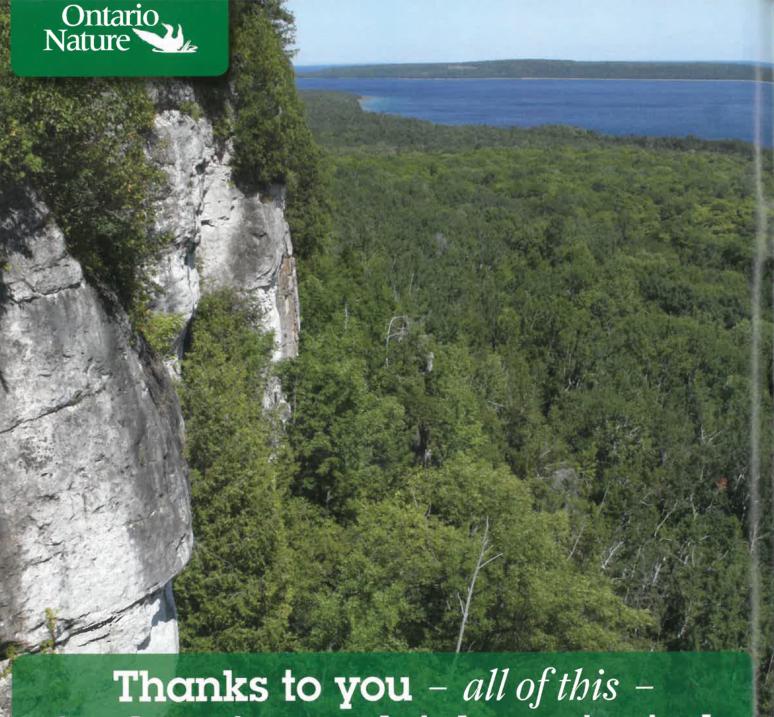
With London's official plan in the midst of its five-year review – as the province mandates for all municipalities – Levin worries that the process could give developers another avenue. "All the developers have to do – with a different city council – is to amend the official plan," he says.

Sharon Oosthoek



Some 800 hectares of wooded areas have been saved in London, Ontario.





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Thank you for helping to do so much for wild species and wild spaces in Ontario.



John Hassell What initially got you interested in nature?
Peter Gilchrist I grew up as an outdoor boy in Ottawa when the city was just developing, so there were farms and streams to explore in the immediate area. It was fun to be outdoors, but it wasn't until my mid to late twenties when I spent time with someone tuned into environmental issues that, by osmosis, I developed a true naturalist attitude.

#### JH What gives Ontario Nature the authority to speak for Ontario's wild spaces and wild species?

PG Ontario Nature develops positions that are widely supported across the organization's network of diverse member groups and thus by many Ontarians. In addition, for 80 years the organization has always taken a science-based approach, which has established its credibility.

## JH Renewable energy sources, wind in particular, have unexpectedly become a lightning rod for heated debate within communities. How do you navigate this discussion?

PG We need to separate local issues from provincial and global ones. We can come together on a principle of wanting to green the power grid, and there are only a few ways to do it. Ontario Nature has been at the forefront of promoting efforts to make sure renewable energy projects are subject to rigorous environmental assessments and not undertaken at the expense of the wildlife we are trying to protect.

### JH What role do you see Ontario Nature's Nature Guardians program playing in shaping the environmental movement?

PG There is a serious risk of the next generation becoming less connected to environmental issues. Qualified organizations like Ontario Nature are reawakening a connection with nature in young people. Fostering that environmental sensitivity is the first step in developing the next generation of environmental leaders.

#### JH I have to ask: how long is your bird list?

PG The birding community is varied. Some people just like to look out their window while others like to go out specifically to look for birds to see and record. I fall firmly in the latter group and have seen 4,839 species, almost half of the known species on earth. I'm hoping to reach 5,000 in 2011.

#### JH What are some of your favourite birds?

PG For beauty, rarity and difficulty, I would say the endangered birds are my favourite. It is amazing to see a species of which only a couple of hundred are left. But, for me, the next bird is the one that I'm most excited about.

#### JH Do you have any advice for aspiring birders?

PG Don't overlook birding in the winter. Lots of ducks and other waterbirds can be found on the Great Lakes. You can see year-round residents, northern visitors that have come to feed and some surprises, such as birds that normally migrate from southern Ontario yet have remained here for some reason. Owls are hard to find at the best of times, but Ontario is blessed with a wide variety that regularly come to its southern regions in the winter in search of food.

JH I understand you travel extensively to bird watch. Where are some of the spots you've particularly enjoyed and why? PG I have gone to Point Pelee nearly every spring for 40 years and still find it thrilling. Despite many trips farther afield, Ontario, with its narrow, migratory flyways, remains my favourite place for birding. In the developing world, you can find some spectacular endemic birds that contrast well with those in Ontario. The joy of visiting is often tempered by seeing environmental damage caused by economic development. Countries are varied in how they manage their rich resources, which can be significant tourist attractions if they are preserved.

# The Ottawa Valley in autumn

A guided tour of nine great nature getaways in eastern Ontario.

By Caroline Schultz & Mark Stabb

Eastern Ontario naturalists sometimes jokingly refer to the phenomenon of the "Kingston curtain" – a perceived boundary in the knowledge and experiences of southern Ontario nature lovers about the landscape east of Kingston. During almost a decade of living and working in the Ottawa Valley, we both observed this anomaly. We know "the Valley" as a distinct cultural community that retains a link to the great river that shaped its history. Defined by its drainage through tributaries such as the Petawawa, Bonnechere, Madawaska, Mississippi and Rideau, the Ottawa Valley is rich in unheralded natural areas. Now that we have moved from the region, we miss our natural history explorations in this beautiful part of the province – the big, clean waters, the wild areas and the hidden gems that spice up the landscape.

Most of these spots have strong river connections. Like the Nile, the Ottawa River flows through a gargantuan trench caused by bedrock displacement. The area has a high concentration of fault lines and the earthquakes that come with them. The geological activity created a huge linear depression known as the Ottawa-Bonnechere graben. Hills and cliffs climb steeply along the sides. Downstream, clay deposits mark the site of the postglacial Champlain Sea.

The mighty Ottawa, which drains an area twice the size of New Brunswick (around 146,000 square kilometres), still has wild shorelines and roaring whitewater. But the 1,300-kilometrelong river is much diminished from what it once was, not least because of the 50 or so dams that interrupt its flow. Some 8,000 to 10,000 years ago, the river carried most of the waters of the Great Lakes and carved evidence of its force in the bedrock. The channels of this ancient waterway swerve away from the existing riverbed and have developed into large wetlands.

Spectacular and special sites line the Ottawa River and its tributaries. We encourage you to explore some of our favourite spots, places we love to return to.

18 ON NATURE AUTUMN 2011



#### Mer Bleue and Alfred bogs

Two of eastern Ontario's best-known wetlands – Mer Bleue Bog and Alfred Bog – were formed in ancient, low-lying former channels of the Ottawa River. While most bogs in southern Ontario have been drained or mined for peat, groups of committed conservationists have seen to it that large portions of these two bogs are protected and, with the aid of boardwalks and interpretive signs, accessible to visitors. In the fall, you can find these wetlands aglow with the rich reds and auburns of heath vegetation.

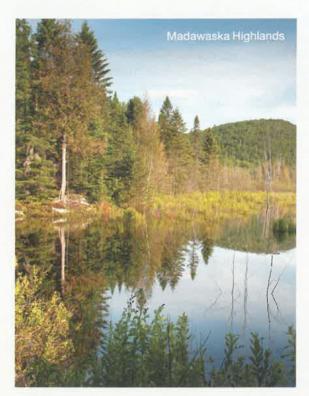
Mer Bleue Conservation Area protects a 2,500-hectare raised peat bog, located within the Ottawa Greenbelt. The site was expropriated in the 1940s by the Department of National Defence (DND) to serve as a bombing range. DND ownership allowed Mer Bleue to escape development amid the rapidly urbanizing landscape, and it is now one of the most studied bogs in the country, recognized as a wetland ecosystem of international significance under the Ramsar Convention.

A walk along the 1.5-kilometre boardwalk will give you a true taste of northern flora, with sightings of black spruce, tamarack, bog rosemary, Labrador tea, blueberry and cottongrass. Orchids, as well as insect-eating pitcher plants and sundew, are also common. Birding is a popular activity here during spring and fall migrations, and in the summer you can get glimpses of such breeding birds as Lincoln's sparrow, clay-colored sparrow and palm warbler.

Protecting Alfred Bog required a greater effort. For 30 years, the bog was actively mined for peat, after a struggle by the Ottawa Field-Naturalists' Club (OFNC) and the Vankleek Hill and District Nature Society (VHDNS) failed to prevent a zoning change that allowed peat extraction to proceed. Today, thanks to dedicated collaboration between the OFNC, the VHDNS, the Nature Conservancy of Canada, the South Nation River Conservation Authority and the United Counties of Prescott-Russell, 90 percent of the remaining bog is permanently protected. The raised peat bog has been building for 10,000 years and harbours many rare or endangered plants and animals, including the bog elfin butterfly, Fletcher's dragonfly, eastern white-fringed orchid and rhodora. Northern birds such as the gray jay and black-backed and three-toed woodpeckers have been spotted there.

At 4,200 hectares, the Alfred Bog is the largest peatland in southern Ontario and the pride of Alfred and Plantagenet Township. "Rarely do you go there when there isn't someone visiting the boardwalk," says Frank Pope, OFNC member and chair of the Alfred Bog Committee, which oversees the bog's protection. "It gives a super view of the heath portion of the bog." With a nature reserve at its core, the bog adds wildness to an otherwise tame agricultural landscape. Moose still inhabit the area, which is outside the species' typical range. Alfred Bog is well worth a visit, though it's a bit more out of the way than Mer Bleue and the boardwalk is more rustic.





#### Madawaska Highlands trails

In the rugged and wild forested hills of the Madawaska Highlands, undeveloped Crown land eclipses private holdings, and logging, hunting, trapping and fishing continue on the public lands. But over the past decade, some new opportunities have opened up for nature lovers to explore the public properties in this land of marble and granite.

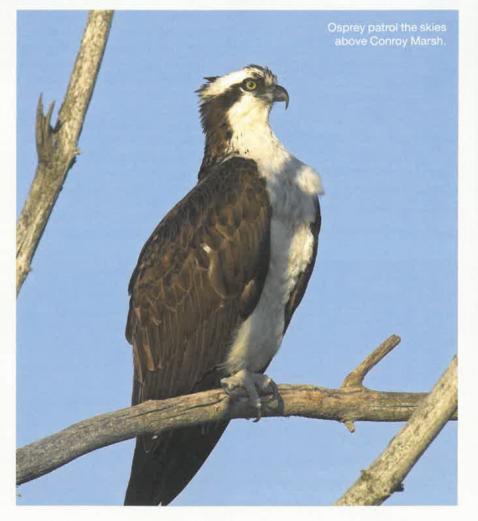
For people who crave the self-propelled challenge of backcountry wilderness exploration, the Madawaska Highlands offer a number of ways to become immersed in the region's natural history. At Calabogie Lake, local resort owners and municipal authorities have opened a series of loop trails that lead to wonderful vistas of the hills. Eagle's Nest Trail and Manitou Mountain Trail are two well marked and well used paths through highland habitats.

But perhaps the best introduction to this area is the Griffith Uplands trail. Opened in 2010 (with assistance from the Greater Madawaska Township), it offers a two- to three-hour walk that takes you first through a young forest and then across a clear creek, where trail creator Tim Yearington has left a water cup to tempt thirsty hikers. Here, you can actually hear the water running underground through the fractured rock. Then the ascent starts. You climb past some mature stands of pine and oak before the forest begins to open up to barren rock, with shrubs and stunted trees along the hilltops. In summer, you may see blueberries in profusion and woodland sunflower. The trail even skirts some wetlands nestled up in the hills.

#### Conroy Marsh

The middle reaches of the Madawaska River are best known for thrilling whitewater, but they also contain a hidden oasis. Conroy Marsh spans the confluence of the Madawaska, York and Little Mississippi rivers, and has been an important travel corridor for people and wildlife for thousands of years. In the late 1800s, it was also a busy junction for the shipment of red and white pines. Today, the area is a 2,400-hectare provincially significant wetland, protected as a conservation reserve.

The large wetland, south of Combermere and bounded on the north by Negeek Lake, is made up of marsh, fen and swamp habitats, and has stands of wild rice - a boon for waterfowl. It is also a known hot spot for wild cranberries. River otters, ospreys and bald eagles live here, and the marsh supports healthy populations of black and ring-necked ducks. Hemmed in by the hills of the Madawaska Highlands and broken up by granite mounds, the eight-kilometre-long Conroy Marsh is an ideal area to explore quietly by canoe or small boat. With its many side channels and inviting indentations, the marsh is a place in which you can get pleasantly lost.



#### **Larose Forest**

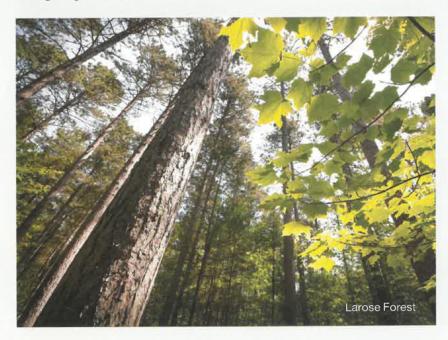
A mere 30-minute drive east from Ottawa along Highway 417, the Larose Forest is an oasis of biodiversity in the heart of an almost entirely agricultural area. The 10,540-hectare stretch of land includes a complex of wetlands, riparian thickets, small open areas, and mixed deciduous and coniferous forest.

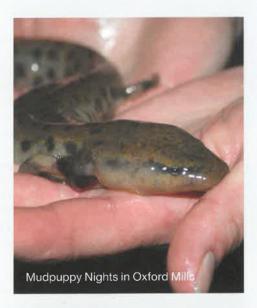
The woods are home to an impressive number of breeding birds, offering a refuge for whip-poor-wills (listed as a threatened species) and evening grosbeaks. It is also one of the few breeding locations in eastern Ontario for the Cape May warbler. More than 200 species of moths have been observed in the forest, and the list of butterflies spotted there now stands at 67, at least two of them – the mulberry wing skipper and the pepper-and-salt skipper – considered very rare. Among the 12 known species of reptiles and amphibians found here are the four-toed salamander and the threatened Blanding's turtle. And for mushroom enthusiasts, Larose Forest is a fantastic hunting ground, with more than 500 species. "Larose Forest has enough biodiversity to satisfy any naturalist, whatever their interests, whether flora or fauna," says Christine Hanrahan of the Ottawa Field-Naturalists' Club (OFNC). "The variety is astonishing."

Diane Brunet, of the Club de Miroise de l'Est Ontarien, also sings the forest's praises: "The Larose Forest is one of the crown jewels of the United Counties of Prescott and Russell. This beautiful historical area is cherished by all nature lovers, bird watchers, mycologists, or simply for a nature walk." ("La Forêt Larose est un des joyaux des Comtés unis de Prescott et Russell. Ce merveilleux site historique est privilégié de tous, que ce soit pour l'observation d'oiseaux, la mycologie ou simplement une randonnée en nature.")

The extraordinary thing about this haven of biodiversity is that it is less than 100 years old. In 1919, agrologist Ferdinand Larose planted the first conifers on abandoned farmlands (known as the Bourget Desert) around the present-day villages of Limoges and Bourget. Since then, more than 18 million trees have been planted by an array of forward-thinking groups and agencies. Today, the forest produces Forest Stewardship Council-certified timber and is logged, with care being taken for its ecological integrity, during the winter months.

The OFNC has done extraordinary work in documenting the species in the forest and keeps adding new records. Any naturalist planning a visit should download the species lists from the Larose Forest website (www.ofnc.ca/conservation/larose/index.php), along with other information about this ecological gem.





#### Oxford Mills

For a unique natural history experience, consider a winter trip to Oxford Mills, on Kemptville Creek, a tributary of the Rideau River. Roughly 60 kilometres south of Ottawa, this area is the haunt of naturalists Fred Schueler and Aleta Karstad, who offer one of the few winter herpetological programs: Mudpuppy Nights. Mudpuppies are secretive aquatic salamanders with frond-like external gills. These animals are active year-round in many of our bodies of water (much to the surprise of numerous ice-fishers). The salamanders tend to concentrate in flowing water from time to time, and in the 1990s, a large number were discovered just below the dam in Oxford Mills. They move fairly slowly and can be seen from the shore with the aid of a flashlight.

Schueler and Karstad, both committed natural historians, held the first Mudpuppy Night in 1998. Today, Mudpuppy Nights are recognized as the longest-running winter herpetological program in Canada. These events are held on Friday evenings through much of the winter, and kids get priority to observe the slippery creatures. "It's your only chance to see an active amphibian when the air temperature is -26 C!" Schueler claims proudly.

Outside the winter field season, Schueler and Karstad, along with family, friends and visiting researchers, operate the Bishop's Mills Natural History Centre, offering research and educational programs and facilities. It is a place where you can learn about the natural history of eastern Ontario from a committed and concerned family and community.

#### Gillies Grove

Towering white pines, huge maples and stately beech abound at the Gillies Grove. The 23-hectare nature reserve is within the boundaries of Arnprior, about an hour's drive up the Ottawa Valley northwest of Ottawa, making it an excellent destination or stopover spot on longer journeys.

The Grove, as it is known locally, is a precious remnant of the magnificent forest that once covered this region. It contains some of the Ottawa Valley's most impressive white pines, one of which may hold the record for the tallest pine in Ontario. As you wander along the well laid out trails, expect the forest to echo with the squawking calls and pounding of its resident pileated woodpeckers, along with the gentler tapping of sapsuckers and hairy and downy woodpeckers. The woodland is also home to barred owls, red-shouldered hawks and scarlet tanagers.

Michael Runtz, president of the Macnamara Field Naturalists' Club, recalls how as a child he got a glimpse into the life of the forest inside the Grove. "I have fond memories of skipping church to search for owls, pileated woodpeckers and lady's-slippers," he says.

Visitors will find a rich array of plant life here. In spring, the forest floor is a living carpet of hepaticas, spring beauties, violets, and both red and white trilliums. In summer, white baneberry (also known as doll's eyes) and Indian pipe punctuate the lush green understorey. In fall, look for interesting fungi, including soccer ball-sized giant puffballs.

The Grove is the legacy of the Gillies family, one of the Ottawa Valley's "lumber king" families. They bequeathed the Grove with the intent that it be preserved and enjoyed by the people of the town of Arnprior. However, the path to protection proved challenging, involving decades of wrangling with the subsequent landowner, before conservationists and donors, both local and from as far away as Toronto and Montreal, secured the property. Today, the Nature Conservancy of Canada owns and manages Gillies Grove, with stewardship support from local volunteers.





#### The Bonnechere parks

The Bonnechere River weaves through the heart of Renfrew County and links many of its communities, including the old mill towns of Renfrew, Eganville, Douglas and Killaloe. The Algonquin First Nation's history with the river – in particular the area where it meets Golden Lake – goes back at least 5,000 years.

Visitors can get fine views of the river at bridges and along roadsides across the southern part of the county. But to get a stronger feel for this waterway, venture upstream to Round Lake and explore the Bonnechere parks. Bonnechere Provincial Park sits on an ancient sand delta that protects the mouth of the Little Bonnechere, as the section of the river stretching northwest from Round Lake is called. Park trails invite you to explore the wetlands and oxbows formed by the river's meandering path through deep sand. This process also created a beach on the northern shore of Round Lake, washed with clean, clear water fed by the protected watershed. Nearby Bonnechere River Provincial Park is one of Ontario's southernmost waterway parks, snaking along Little Bonnechere's shores to Algonquin Provincial Park, where the river originates.

Forests of red and white pine, red and silver maple, black ash, eastern hemlock and even stands of white oak flourish along the largely undeveloped river valley, and give you an idea of what this area was like before European settlement. There is a variety of trails for easy hiking, from the oxbow meanders at the river's mouth to the Egg Rock trail that brings you up the fault line to a lovely vista of the valley.

You can also explore the river by canoe, floating along its mainly calm, flat water. Camping on the shores will bring you into close contact with loons, bitterns, herons, turtles and frogs in the many adjacent wetlands, and you can admire the stands of red and white pine that loom like sentinels above the river that once carried entire pine forests to market in log drives.

The staff of Bonnechere River Provincial Park is dedicated to natural and cultural history, and has developed extensive education programs, research projects and publications to give visitors a deep understanding of the local residents' relationship with the river. You can learn about its history on archeological digs, along interpretive trails and through theatrical recreations during "spirits" walks. Ask park staff to guide you to such memorable sites as the famous Bonnechere Caves to the south, to the officially non-operating but accessible Foy Provincial Park across the lake, or on quiet hikes along the river. And for people seeking an entry-level camping experience, Bonnechere Provincial Park is one of the few Ontario parks where visitors can reserve rustic cabins.

#### Westmeath Provincial Park

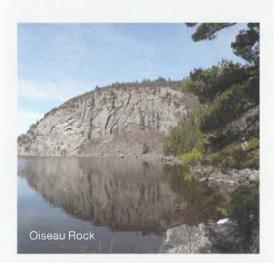
One of the few undeveloped areas left along the Ottawa River is the 610-hectare Westmeath Provincial Park, about 30 minutes' drive southeast of Pembroke. The park is primarily made up of an active sand spit, which continues to grow northeast into the Ottawa River. Relict beach ridges and terraces can be found here, as well as an active dune system that runs along the spit's western edge, where the sand land-scape is constantly changing.

The flora here is exceptional. The dry beach and several wetland and upland communities are habitat for rare species such as blue beech and silky dogwood. The forest contains abundant pine and is an excellent place for mushroom forays from late August through the fall. Late summer and fall are also great for waterbird sightings. Shorebirds use the beaches as migratory feeding stops from late August until October. In late April and again from early to mid September, the sand spitenclosed Bellows Bay is an important staging area for migrating waterfowl. However, be aware that waterfowl hunting is permitted in the bay, so visit before September 17 when the duck and goose season opens.

The wetlands are home to map turtles, a species listed nationally and in Ontario as being of special concern. The park is also one of the few known Ottawa River locations where the eastern spiny softshell turtle was once found, giving herpetologists hope that the species will return there one day.

Westmeath has no facilities or staff on site, but the park is worth the extra effort needed to reach it. You can get there from Highway 17 by exiting northeast on County Road 7, then turning left onto County Road 21. From the junction of County Roads 21 and 12, drive east 4.5 kilometres along the gravel access road. A park boundary sign is posted near a gated access road that enters the park.





While writing this article, we lost a dear friend and a champion of natural history in the Ottawa Valley. Chris Michener was an avid naturalist and professional field biologist, a founding member of the Pembroke Area Field Naturalists Club and, most recently, the coordinator of the ambitious Renfrew County biodatabase project. Michener was well known as a friendly trip leader and field companion and as a hard worker, characteristically behind the scenes, for nature in the Valley. He succumbed to cancer in June. We miss him very much, but for now we remember him through this article about places he explored and loved.

#### Oiseau Rock

For many people who live along provincial or national borders, locations are defined less by political boundaries than by landforms and family connections. The people of the Ottawa Valley are no different. They see the Ontario and Quebec sides as part of one vast entity. And for residents of the upper Ottawa Valley around the Ontario towns of Chalk River and Deep River, Quebec's Oiseau Rock is an icon. "Geologists, biologists, naturalists, historians and archeologists all agree that Oiseau Rock is one of Canada's least-known but best-loved spots," says Elizabeth Bond, a local historian.

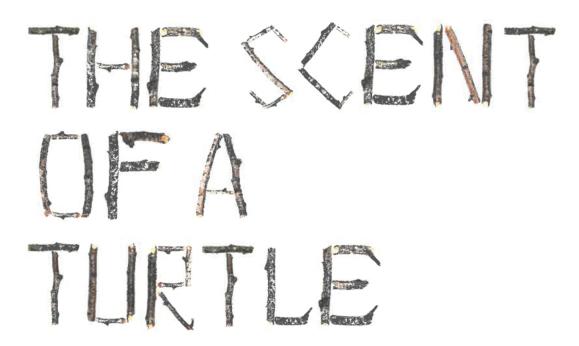
Overlooking a narrow reach of the Ottawa across from Chalk River, the 150-metre sheer face of Oiseau Rock rises out of the river in Pontiac County, Quebec. The water below is just as deep. The majestic landform made an impression on the earliest residents, who left more than 70 pictographs on its granite walls documenting hunting parties, myths and even the coming of Jesuit priests. Oiseau Rock is a sacred site for the Algonquins of Pikwàkanagàn First Nation near Golden Lake, as well as for the Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg First Nation in the area around Maniwaki, Quebec.

In Ontario, the site is accessible only by boat or canoe, which can be rented locally. It can be reached by road on the Quebec side. A gentle 40-minute climb will bring you to the peak, with its panoramic views of the valley, from Algonquin Park to the Ottawa River's roaring whitewater. Hikers are also rewarded at the top by a gloriously clear spring-fed lake, perfect for a refreshing swim. Along the way, watch for soaring bald eagles and peregrine falcons, which nest on the crest of Oiseau Rock.

Caroline Schultz is the executive director of Ontario Nature and Mark Stabb is the central Ontario program manager for the Nature Conservancy of Canada.

Interested in visiting one (or more) of these hidden gems? Please visit ON Nature's website for all the contact information: onnaturemagazine.com





Scientists turn to man's best friend to help in recovery efforts for one of our most endangered reptiles.

Text and Photography by Conor Mihell

harging along a frenetic course through a cedar swamp, Rebel looks like any youthful Labrador retriever exploring the outdoors. Nose to soggy ground, he zigzags haphazardly through tangled alders at a pace no human could match. Rebel's handler, Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources (MNR) conservation officer Mike Buckner, seems exasperated by his dog's hyperactivity. "He always wants to be at the front of the pack," sighs Buckner, who has been training MNR "canine units" for 12 years and is currently serving as the acting supervisor of provincial canine services.

Branches slap my face, mud grabs at my feet and mosquitoes chase in my wake as I follow Rebel and Buckner, as well as MNR species-at-risk biologists Nathan Hanes and Jessica Sicoly, through the wetland. With great relief, we emerge onto a sandy beach on a river north of Sault Ste. Marie, where Hanes and Sicoly are conducting a field survey in search of wood turtles, a species listed as endangered under the provincial Endangered Species Act (ESA). (Due to the risk of wood turtle collection for the illegal pet trade, MNR does not disclose the precise locations of this turtle.) With his sharp nose and go-any where enthusiasm, two-year-old Rebel – who is trained to Ontario Provincial Police dog standards and capable of detecting a dozen different scents – is the team's turtle-sniffing secret weapon.

Ontario is home to an estimated 1,100 wood turtles, or about 8 percent of the North American population, which ranges from Ontario to Nova Scotia, throughout the Great Lakes states and as far south as Virginia. Joe Crowley, a Peterborough-based MNR herpetology species-at-risk specialist, says the distribution and abundance of wood turtles on the Canadian Shield of central Ontario, at the northern and western edges of the species' range in Ontario, "has probably remained relatively consistent with presettlement conditions." However, habitat loss due to agriculture and development, road mortality and pressure from poachers have all but wiped out wood turtles from their historical southern Ontario range, and forestry and off-road vehicles are probably curtailing northern populations as well.

As I pause to catch my breath after completing the bush-whack, Rebel's efficiency leaves me dumbfounded. In the time it takes five humans to merely spot the wispy marks left by a wood turtle in the sand, Rebel has found the source of the tracks – a dessert-plate-sized turtle with orange appendages, a tiger-tail-patterned underside and a gnarled, wood-like shell that camouflages it perfectly in a bramble of dogwood and ferns. Rebel perks up his ears, wags his tail rapidly and sits, proud of his find and quivering with excitement. As a reward, Buckner flips him a rubber ball, and Rebel lies down for a satisfying chew.

It's late May, and in the next few weeks this female wood turtle (its gender identifiable by its flat lower shell, or plastron) will likely lay a clutch of up to 18 eggs on a beach like this one. She has probably just wandered away from the water to warm herself in the morning sun, Hanes tells us, as he records air and water temperature readings. Wood turtles spend more time on land than any other of Ontario's eight species of turtle. Since turtles rely on their external environment to regulate their body temperature, in all likelihood this one spent the cool overnight hours in the relatively warm

How you can help turtles

The fact that the Ontario Reptile and Amphibian Atlas has added more than 160,000 records, many provided by the public, to provincial natural heritage databases in just two years demonstrates volunteers' ability to play a key role in conservation. Ontario Nature staff ecologist John Urquhart says the biggest contribution the public can make is to document and report sightings of species such as turtles, salamanders and frogs. Under Ontario's Endangered Species Act, simple observations identifying species and their location (preferably including photos and a site description) "automatically create the potential to protect their habitat," says Urquhart.

Rural property owners can go further by being good stewards of their land. Maintaining buffers around watercourses protects water quality and preserves important transitional habitat, making it a valuable ecological practice for conserving populations of reptiles, amphibians and other species of wildlife.

For more information, visit these websites:

Ontario's Reptile and Amphibian Atlas: www.ontarionature.org/atlas

Adopt-A-Pond: www.torontozoo.com/adoptapond

Ontario Turtle Tally: www.torontozoo.com/adoptapond/turtletally.asp

Conservation Ontario: www.conservation-ontario.on.ca

Ontario's Species at Risk Program: www.mnr.gov.on.ca/en/business/species/index.html

Conor Mihell

river water. The species also spends the winter months in rivers or streams under the ice. (Turtles, like frogs, snakes, lizards and salamanders are "ectotherms," meaning that their surroundings control their body temperature.)

Wood turtles don't mature until well into their teens and have a very low reproductive success rate due to flooding of nest sites, parasites, infertility, and predation by raccoons, foxes and skunks, which eat turtle eggs. "A female may only produce a couple of offspring over the course of her life that survive to adulthood," explains Crowley, who previously coordinated the Ontario Reptile and Amphibian Atlas project for Ontario Nature. But since adult wood turtles have few natural predators, they can live upwards of 50 years – enough time to maintain stable populations. This is why the species has persisted since the dinosaur age. But now its continued survival is threatened – by us.

he impact of humans has put seven of Ontario's eight turtle species on the province's species at risk list. Part of the reason for the decline in wood turtles is the loss of floodplains and mixed-shrub and wood forests – preferred terrestrial habitats for turtle nesting and foraging – and the contamination and alteration of swift-moving rivers and streams that are essential for the turtles' year-round survival. Logging roads often bisect wood turtle habitat along waterways, increasing the risk of roadkill (see "Road block," opposite page) and allowing all-terrain vehicle users unfettered access to sensitive turtle nesting areas on sand and gravel beaches. As well, roads often support exploding populations of voracious, development-tolerant raccoons and other predators that thrive in human-altered habitat.

Due to the low breeding rate of wood turtles, "even a slight increase in annual adult mortality can cause slow but steady declines in populations," says Crowley, and a spike in poaching can wreak instant havoc on populations. An internal MNR report demonstrated that one Ontario wood turtle population decreased by 70 percent between 1993 and 1995, probably due to systematic poaching. While illegal collection

is less of a concern in the far-flung reaches of central Ontario, Sault Ste. Marie District MNR biologist Sicoly found a wood turtle on a remote river last May with leash holes drilled in its shell – no doubt a pet trade refugee.

The first step in staging the species' recovery is identifying key habitat and remaining wood turtle populations. With the help of Rebel and two other MNR tracking dogs trained in detecting wood turtles, biologists like Hanes and Sicoly are scouring areas throughout northeastern Ontario in search of viable and vestigial wood turtle populations. Information gleaned from these surveys is catalogued in their local database, which is then used in land-use planning for forestry, water-power development and other activities.

Meanwhile, Ontario Nature, with support from MNR and Environment Canada, is conducting its own field surveys and relying heavily on "citizen science" to help gather information for Ontario Nature's ongoing Reptile and Amphibian Atlas project. Over the past two years, the atlas project has collected more than 160,000 occurrence reports - in part from members of the public (see "How you can help turtles," this page) - of reptiles and amphibians across the province, almost doubling the number of entries in government databases. According to Ontario Nature staff ecologist John Urquhart, this information is filling a "shameful" knowledge gap about the range and distribution of many species that are rapidly disappearing. What's more, Urquhart's work is creating more safe havens for endangered species like the wood turtle. "Species don't get habitat protection unless there's a confirmed occurrence in a particular location," he says. "That's why it's so important that we go out and find evidence of turtles in a particular place."

The wood turtle became the centre of a heated debate in 2009 when the Liberal government acted on the advice provided in a wood turtle recovery strategy, and created swaths of regulated habitat. Because individual wood turtles have been shown to move as far as 600 metres away from bodies of water to forage and can range up to six kilometres along a waterway, the team advised the government to designate

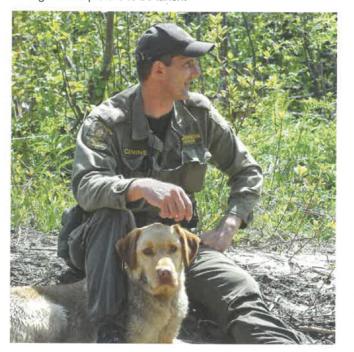
known habitat along rivers and streams as being subject to permits for development. Documented wood turtle habitat in southern Ontario was afforded 200-metre-wide buffers on either side of watercourses, extending 2,000 metres upand downstream; in central Ontario, these buffers were increased to 500 and 6,000 metres, respectively.

Forestry lobbyists and resource-based communities cried foul, arguing that this "overbearing protection of wood turtle habitat" would effectively shut down the already faltering forest industry. In response, Ontario Nature challenged loggers to address the sector's fundamental problems – "the strong Canadian dollar, the falling demand for products like pulp, newsprint and lumber, and highly efficient, low-cost global competitors" – rather than making wood turtles a scapegoat. "It is time for the [Ontario Forest Industries Association] to stop blaming endangered species for an economic crisis," concluded an op-ed signed by Ontario Nature's executive director, Caroline Schultz, which appeared in the Pembroke *Daily Observer*. "The real casualties deserve better. They deserve what most citizens want: an industry that conserves endangered species and jobs."

For its part, MNR points to the flexibility of ESA habitat regulations, which allow for striking a compromise between different land practices. "Essentially, there aren't any specific dos and don'ts," says Crowley. "Restrictions are going to be assessed on a case-by-case basis." The ESA prohibits killing, harming, harassing and capturing a living member of a species that is listed as threatened or endangered in Ontario, or against damaging or destroying its habitat. Under the legislation, companies can obtain permits by demonstrating ecological net benefits through mitigation strategies. "We're looking at whether or not the activity would impair the function of the ecosystem," adds Crowley.

Urquhart generally accepts this compromise. "In principle,

Rebel, with handler Mike Buckner, sits long enough for his picture to be taken.



#### Road block

Ontario Nature staff ecologist John Urquhart likes to describe turtles as "miniature tanks" that have evolved durable protection from predators. But turtles are defenceless against a speeding automobile. What's more, turtles stranded on roadways are easy targets for poachers. State University of New York researchers used models to predict that, in areas with lots of roads, roadkill rates for semiterrestrial turtles (such as wood turtles) would probably lead to their eventual disappearance.

Members of the public need not get dirty to reduce turtle road mortality. "Keep your eyes open while driving, and if you see a turtle, and it's safe to do so, pull over and move it off the road," says Joe Crowley, MNR herpetology speciesat-risk specialist.

C.M.

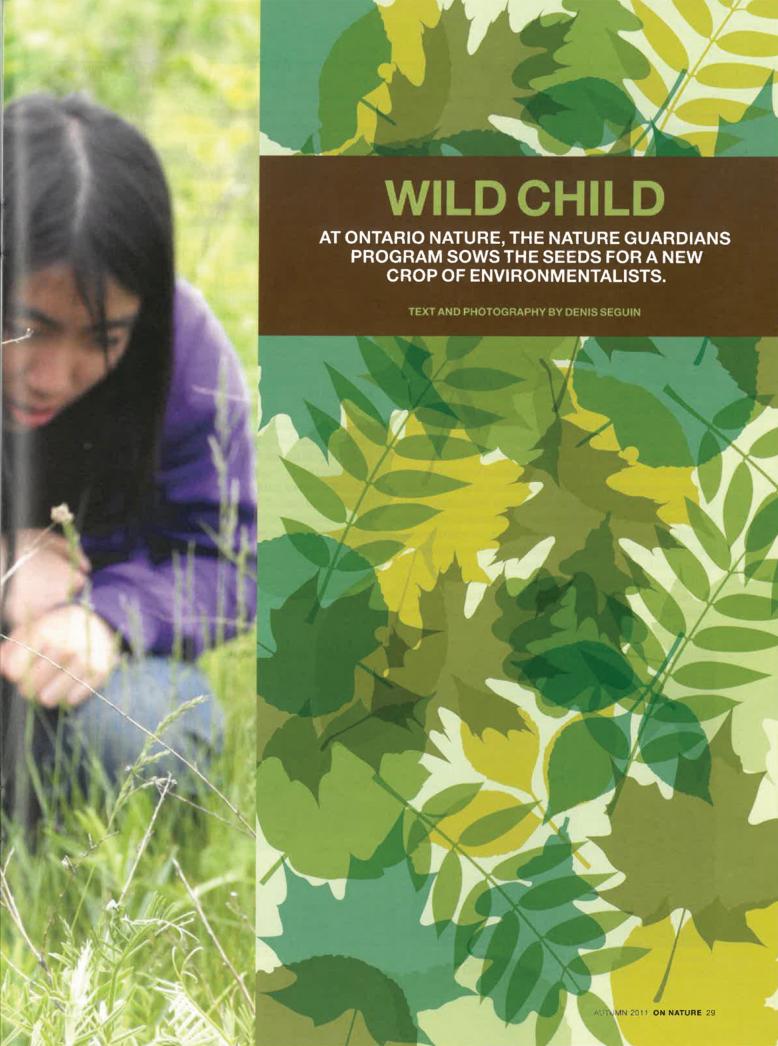
the system can't fail. If there's always net gain with every permit issued, then the species cannot disappear," he notes. However, he has concerns about how the framework functions in reality. "The problem with overall benefit is that nobody knows how to measure it. If you create a new wetland as mitigation, how can you say that turtles are going to be able to successfully overwinter there?" Just as the ESA is flexible in issuing permits to well-planned developments, decision making on what constitutes mitigation must also evolve on the basis of experience. "Biological systems are complicated," says Urquhart. "We understand that MNR has to make an educated guess. But when you do that, post hoc monitoring is critical and so is the need to adapt to what's learned overtime. That's going to be the test of whether or not the overall-benefit clause actually works."

ack on the river north of Sault Ste. Marie, Sicoly and an assistant quickly measure and weigh the wood turtle, take notes on the habitat in which it was found, check for any injuries and use a metal file to create unique, harmless indentations on the perimeter scutes (enlarged scales on the shell) of its carapace to identify it in future surveys. Aside from the wood turtle being another spoke in the wheel of biological diversity, researchers admit that little is known about the role this species plays in the greater ecological community. "They're not a keystone species" that acts as a lynchpin for the entire ecological community, says Crowley, "but if wood turtles disappeared, you could have a number of chain effects in the ecosystem." As opportunistic omnivores, wood turtles are part predator, scavenger, and plant- and fungi-eater.

Sicoly finishes taking notes and passes me the surprisingly docile animal for a closer look. "The real reason you can tell it's a girl is because she's so well behaved," she jokes. And for a moment, as we get ready to head back downstream, I hold a one-kilogram, gently squirming example of one of Ontario's most imperilled species.

Regular ON Nature contributor **Conor Mihell** lives in Sault Ste. Marie. His first book, a work of non-fiction about Lake Superior, will be published by Dundurn Press in the spring of 2012.





ON A CHILLY SPRING MORNING, it takes a lot of imagination to picture a forest along this eastern fringe of the Greater Toronto Area. Acres of damp farmland stretch west and south, stubbled with stalks and desiccated cobs of cattle corn left from the passage of last autumn's combine harvesters. Clods of earth poke out of puddles, and low areas are nothing but muddy swamp after a very wet April. But this field is a special space. Named for the late environmentalist, the Bob Hunter Memorial Park is a 200-hectare swath of what will become – with the help of a new generation of conservation activists – Canada's next national park.

Jim Robb, general manager of the Friends of the Rouge Watershed, stands on a rise as he explains the 35-year journey to this point, from the near-miss that would have put this field on a flight path to a major airport in Pickering, to a massive habitat restoration and amelioration project that balances wilderness and sustainable local farming. "Every year we bring out about 4,000 people to plant 60,000 native trees, shrubs and wildflowers," he says. "Ten years ago, there were only three sycamore trees left in the Rouge. Now, there are probably 3,000." Then he turns to watch this year's crop of Nature Guardians – none of them born before 1990 – tromp toward him across the field.

Launched in 2009 with a three-year grant from the Ontario Trillium Foundation, the Nature Guardians program connects kids with their wild side and with nature preservation activities. Part of that program is the vibrant Youth Council, which consists of 22 energetic and outgoing teens from across the province who organize volunteering opportunities in their communities; people like Stephanie Glanzmann – a well-spoken 16-year-old who is not sure yet what career she will choose but knows she wants to make a difference in the world.

Glanzmann has chosen to focus on the Rouge watershed, which has been a special space for her and her family – enthusiastic hikers all – for as long as she can remember.

"It's one of the few big parks accessible to Toronto. I've always been going out here, and so has my family. So this is giving back."

Not a moment too soon. There is a great need for the enthusiasm of people like Glanzmann. "Ontario's naturalist community is greying and membership in nature clubs is in decline," says Sarah Hedges, the Nature Guardians coordinator. "The clubs are worried for their future." For some time, Ontario Nature has had a general outreach program – essentially an adult version of the Nature Guardians. But Hedges, who at 22 could be a Nature Guardian herself, says, "We decided to refocus our efforts on youth." How young? Very. The program is aimed at kids five to 18, although university-aged students are also welcome.

The seed for the Youth Council was planted at a youth summit for biodiversity held in June 2010. Sixty-five high school-aged Nature Guardians from across the province attended a weekend filled with workshops on a range of topics ("Slime and Scales"), seminars ("Boreal in Jeopardy") and inspirational speeches (astronaut Roberta Bondar delivered the keynote address) guaranteed to stoke environmental fervour. The challenge was not so much to find the next generation of Jim Robbs, but to help young people find the Jim Robb within them. At the end, the conveners put a question to the group: Who among you would be interested in pursuing this process year-round? Thirty keeners raised their hands.

In November 2010, a core group of 22 gathered at the Toronto Zoo, one of Ontario Nature's partner organizations, for a leadership weekend. This colloquium was made of sterner stuff than the youth summit: the attendees heard about how to fundraise for their activities and organize a conservation event with volunteers. Worthy causes abound, but somebody has to order a bus, procure the tools, pack the snacks and get the people out.

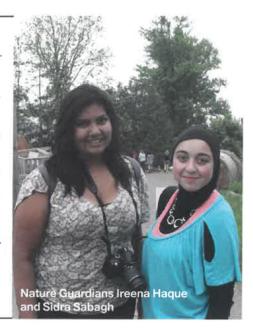
Since then, hundreds of children, youth and their families



Previous page and above: budding conservationists attend a Nature Guardians photography workshop at an organic farm.

#### Nature with benefits

- → As little as five minutes spent in nature has been shown to improve mental health.
- Workplaces and schools that incorporate nature even just by adding natural light — will experience fewer sick days and more efficiency.
- Studies suggest that interacting with nature can help children pay attention, motivate them to learn and improve both classroom behaviour and scores on standardized tests.
- Canadian children with a park playground within 1 kilometre of their homes were five times more likely to be of a healthy weight than children without a nearby park playground.
- → The average Canadian child spends more than 40 hours/week (2,080 hours per year) in front of the TV and/or computer.
- Only 9 percent of boys and 4 percent of girls meet Health Canada's recommended minimum of one hour a day of moderate-to-vigorous exercise. Of both sexes only 7 percent are getting the recommended amount of daily exercise.
- Outdoor play declines as children and youth age. Eighty percent of five- to 12-yearolds vs. 43 percent of 13- to 17-year-olds, play outdoors after school.
- Canadian children and youth spend 62 percent of their waking hours in sedentary pursuits, with six to eight hours per day of screen time as the average for school-aged kids.



have participated in Nature Guardians events. Whether those events involve "engaging with your environment" or "walking in the woods," they benefit the kids as much as they do nature. The hard truth is that most Canadians, especially children, do not get outside enough. (A British research team found that youngsters are more likely to identify with Pokemon characters than with local wildlife.) What's more, group activity develops people skills, and interacting with nature challenges the individual to think beyond the self. "Connecting with nature is key to a child's healthy development and to their physical, mental, social and spiritual well-being," explains Anne Bell, Ontario Nature's director of conservation and education. Intimate contact with nature, she says, gives kids "moments that are filled with colours, sounds, smells, shapes, emotion, surprise, awe, wonder."

At Bob Hunter Memorial Park on this last day of Earth Month 2011, around 40 people, mostly teenagers, are awaiting their moment of nature intimacy as they gather around Jim Robb's mud-splattered pickup truck. Surprisingly, most of them are recent immigrants to Canada, many of whom speak only basic English. "Newcomers to Canada," says Robb later, "are the future of this country, the future protectors and managers of the park. We want them to fall in love with the place, invest a little sweat and energy, get their hands dirty and understand a little more about nature." After Robb explains the morning's plan and demonstrates the proper method for planting a tree, groups of shovel-wielding kids start to dig enthusiastically. "When you plant a tree, it's a spiritual thing," observes Robb. "Every major faith uses tree-planting as a symbol or a rite."

Conservation groups like Robb's always need young volunteers, and one place that has them is the YMCA. Its Newcomer Youth Leadership Development Program encourages young immigrants to engage in their adopted community, while getting the 40-hour community service credit required for graduation from high school. Newcomer youth advisors Ashley Korn and Hanna Caplan are at the

Rouge planting right along with their program participants. "We're always looking for volunteer opportunities, and Ontario Nature has been setting stuff up," says Korn.

Asked how long it will be before these slender stalks are worthy of the term "tree," Robb points to a stand to the north. "We planted those pines in 2008. They're already eight to nine feet. The trees I planted 20 years ago are now 30 to 40 feet tall. It's a forest." Then he points south and east, beyond the waiting ranks of saplings, hundreds of them, grouped by species according to his ecologist's calculus. "Bob Hunter will be looking down on us smiling, knowing this park is getting greener and healthier."

efforts in Ontario that day, he had a variety of choices. The Rouge planting was one of five Nature Guardians events taking place across the province. On the other side of the Greater Toronto Area, a team of young conservationists was setting off into Mississauga's Rathwood Park to plant trees. At Lemoine Point near Kingston, a crew was engaged in shoreline cleanup along Lake Ontario. At the Minesing Wetland near Barrie, another team was restoring a stretch of the North Simcoe Rail Trail. Near Thunder Bay, yet another gang of young volunteers was preparing a site for tree planting in the Pine Bay Nature Reserve.

"Pine Bay had been clearcut," explains Lupine Habib, one of four members of the Youth Council who are Nature Guardians in the Thunder Bay region. Through her affiliation with the Thunder Bay Field Naturalists, Habib had sought volunteers to help restore the area to its natural state. "It was a good fit, because restoration is part of conservation," she says. On this day, the Grade 12 student has mustered 17 volunteers ranging in age from six to 60, armed them with saws and clippers, and put them to work clearing brush in areas where trees were to be planted.

Habib was only mildly interested in environmental issues until Grade 11, when she noticed a poster for EcoSuperior, a CONTINUED ON PAGE 40



When The Highland Companies announced plans to build one of North America's largest quarries on some of the richest soil in southern Ontario, farmers, citizens and local politicians dug in for a fight. In the court of public opinion, the quarry-busters seem to be winning.

**By Cecily Ross** 





Carl Cosack, who runs the Peace Valley Ranch and is a founding board member of the North Dufferin Agriculture and Community Taskforce, notes that water is becoming the number one issue in the fight to stop the mega-quarry.

orman Wolfson, a Toronto businessman, and his artist wife, Sandi Wong, spend most weekends at a windswept retreat they built seven years ago high on a ridge in Dufferin County. The home overlooks the rolling lushness of the Niagara Escarpment to the east and Melancthon Township's vast counterpane of potato lands to the west. Wolfson well remembers the day a few years ago when a neighbouring farmer dropped by and told him that someone was buying up all the farms in the area. Somewhat apologetically, the farmer admitted that he, too, had sold. He got an offer he couldn't refuse. "But," he told Wolfson, "I realize now that they're not just after potatoes."

"He had tears in his eyes," Wolfson recalls.

That farmer was turning his back on no ordinary farm. His land and the surrounding farms have some of the best growing soil in eastern Canada. Honeywood loam is named for a tiny hamlet in north Dufferin County just up the road from Wolfson's place. According to the North Dufferin Agri-

culture and Community Taskforce half of all fresh potatoes consumed in the Greater Toronto Area are grown here in Melancthon Township, which lies at the highest elevation in southern Ontario. The rich soil also produces an abundance of cereal grains, hay and pasture. No wonder The Highland Companies, a Nova Scotia corporation operating in Melancthon, wanted to acquire some of this land in its stated quest to become the largest potato producer in Ontario.

In 2006, Highland began purchasing land in the area, offering farmers \$8,000 an acre, at least a 30 percent premium on the market value. The company eventually amassed about 7,500 acres (2,630 hectares) in Melancthon and Mulmur

One of the company's stated plans is to rehabilitate the quarry to farmland. "It's total insanity," says one critic.





#### The politics of pits

Aggregates are a vital resource in construction-hungry Ontario, a province that has grown to accommodate more than 13 million people. The provincial Aggregate Resources Act reflects this reality by allowing quarry developers to bypass comprehensive environmental assessment requirements.

And yet every time a company applies for a quarry licence, opposition from environmentalists and nearby communities is swift and vociferous. Right now, battles like the one escalating in Melancthon Township are playing out across the province, costing the industry, municipalities and private citizens untold millions of dollars.

Kevin Thomason, on Ontario Nature board member, is a high-tech executive in Waterloo who describes himself as "a passionate advocate" for the environment. He believes that the regulations aren't keeping up with construction activity. "At one time," he says, "roads were paved once every 10 years and trucks could only carry a few tonnes. It was inconceivable to move gravel more than a few miles. Now," he continues, "entire communities are decrying the loss of farmland, the dust and truck traffic. We need rules and regulations that cover the current realities."

The David Suzuki Foundation's John Werring agrees. "The system is ass-backwards," he says. "The government should require the [quarry] applicant to go to the community before spending millions of dollars doing 'comprehensive' studies." When bureaucrats tell a company to go ahead with environmental studies for a project on which it then spends millions of dollars, "the government has given the company the idea that the project is going to be approved," says Werring. "All of this happens before the community has a chance to be involved." Arguably, a quarry of this magnitude would never have come this close to realization had Highland been required to begin at the municipal level.

Thomason would like to see 150 small, sustainable quarries across the province instead of large operators coming in under false pretenses. "In too many cases, these projects are sited in small communities with people who don't have the knowledge to fight back, while the company has unlimited resources," he says.

But even as the fight in Melancthon grinds on, there is hope that future quarries may follow a different process. On June 1, Ontario Nature and five other environmental nongovernmental organizations, along with the Ontario Stone, Sand and Gravel Association, collectively known as the Aggregate Forum, announced the development of a certification program that will enhance standards of environmental stewardship and community engagement across Ontario's aggregate industry.

Caroline Schultz. executive director of Ontario Nature, says, "We feel that it is critical for us to put in place a program that has the involvement and support of a broad group that reflects the consensus of a wide constituency of environmental, community, industry, and provincial and municipal interests. It is essential to have a process that communities can trust."

#### The quarry effect

In Highland Companies' application for a licence to operate a limestone quarry in Melancthon Township, Edmonton-based Stantec Consulting Ltd. reported its assessment of the potential impact of the pit on species in the region. Of particular concern to environmentalists are the bobolink and the Henslow's sparrow – two species at risk known to nest in the area – as well as fish habitat, namely that of brook and rainbow trout in the Pine River.

John Werring, with the David Suzuki Foundation, reviewed Highland's 3,100-page application in a 10-page letter to the Ministry of Natural Resources last spring. He concluded that the consultants' report did not contain enough data to support their findings.

For instance, the consultants stated that bobolinks were observed in the area of the proposed pit, but contended that the numbers were "relatively low." Werring counters that "all the consultants reported was that bobolinks were found 'where appropriate habitat occurred.' They do not quantify how much bobolink habitat is in the licensed area." And, according to Jon McCracken, a biologist with Bird Studies Canada, "if the pit destroys grassland habitat, then that's against the Endangered Species Act."

Anne Bell, director of conservation and education for Ontario Nature, adds that the Endangered Species Act requires the developer to "agree to a set of conditions whereby, in the end, the species in question will be better off than before the development took place."

The Highland consultants found no evidence of Henslow's sparrows, Werring reports, but he's dubious about the methodology used to search for the bird. "All the consultant did was to go into the field on two separate days in June of 2008 and broadcast a recorded song for, at most, six minutes at a few locations. Needless to say, they did not find any of these birds during these brief surveys."

The consultants also asserted that the quarry would have no negative impact on fish habitat, says Werring. In fact, they concluded that the proposed mega-quarry would improve "the diversity, connectivity and function of the natural heritage systems in the area."

"We question how these conclusions can be reached," Werring wrote in his letter to the ministry. "The salient points I raised in my letter," Werring explains, "are that they haven't done a good enough job of identifying the fish habitat. The project should be subjected to a detailed environmental review."

Emil Frind, a professor of earth sciences at the University of Waterloo, whose specialty is groundwater, is likewise skeptical. "Highland says there will be no effect on groundwater, and I think that is not true. They have no basis for claiming that. The water quality is not going to be the same; it's going to be much worse." Cecily Ross

#### The numbers game

Amount, in tonnes, of rock reserve in the proposed quarry: 1,000,000,000

Length of two-lane highway, in kilometres, that could be built with this aggregate: 55,555

Circumference of the earth, in kilometres: 40,075

Number of major watersheds affected: 2

Amount, in litres, of water that will need to be pumped each day to keep the guarry from flooding: 600 million

Number of times 600 million litres of water exceeds the combined amount pumped by all quarries in Ontario today: 60

Fee, per tonne, that the government levies on virgin aggregates extracted in Ontario: \$0.115

Corresponding fee in the United Kingdom: \$3.22

Percentage of Ontario aggregate production that comes from recycled material: 7

Percentage of U.K. aggregate production that comes from recycled material: 21

Approximate amount, per acre, that Highland Companies paid for its quarry land: \$8,000

Approximate value, per acre, of the aggregate reserve on this land: at least \$9.5 million

Amount, per acre, the quarry will pay in annual county and township property taxes: \$86

Number of permanent jobs Highland says the quarry will provide: 465

Percentage of these jobs that are local, on-site jobs, other than trucking: 35

Percentage of surveyed quarries that MNR found to have compliance problems when it conducted an internal review in 2006/07: 83

Percentage of government aggregate fee that goes to a fund for abandoned pits and quarries: 4

Number of farmsteads demolished by Highland on its properties prior to its application; 30

Percentage of Melancthon's prime potato-growing area – a unique 14,000-acre (5,666-hectare) plateau of Honeywood loam soil – located on the quarry site: **15** 

Percentage of farmland lost in central Ontario since 1951: 49

Percentage of proposed quarry area that the Highland application says will be rehabilitated to "prime agricultural land" and agriculturally related uses on the quarry floor, where a "hardy crop... will produce acceptable yields": 58

Courtesy of Tim Shuff, In The Hills magazine (Summer 2011 issue).

townships. But Wolfson's neighbour was right. It seems something is even more valuable than Honeywood loam up here, and that's Amabel dolostone limestone. Underneath all that rich vegetable-growing soil lies one of the largest deposits of the highest-quality limestone in the province.

Highland is backed by a Boston-based hedge fund called the Baupost Group. On March 4, 2011, Highland filed a 3,100-page application with the Ministry of Natural Resources to develop 2,135 acres (937 hectares) of agricultural land for aggregate extraction. But this is to be no ordinary gravel pit. The magnitude of the proposed Melancthon quarry is staggering. The hole in the ground will be anywhere from 27 to 77 metres deep – which is one and a half times as deep as Niagara Falls – and well below the water table. The pit will span an area more than three times the size of the Toronto Islands. The quarry may have an impact on the headwaters and watersheds of five rivers: the Nottawasaga, the Saugeen, the Humber, the Credit and the Grand.

What's more, the pit will lie on the western edge of the Niagara Escarpment, a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve inhabited by hundreds of species of flora and fauna. Indeed, thanks to ongoing development in southern Ontario, 40 percent of Ontario's rare flora along with numerous at-risk species are preserved on the escarpment.

To mine the limestone, the company will have to pump 600 million litres of water out of the pit every day. That water

will then be pumped back into the ground to resume its journey into the surrounding streams, rivers and wells. When the quarry is operating at its full potential, more than 150 trucks could be leaving and entering the area every hour of the day, with the attendant dust and noise.

The story is as old as that of David and Goliath: a small community of farmers and local politicians with no money pitted against a big, foreign-owned company with vast resources. What has ensued so far is a war of words and statistics, with one side raising the spectre of unrelieved environmental and social disaster, while the other paints a picture of prosperity, harmony with nature, and the joys of sustainable progress – a picture that most people up here just don't buy.

On the day I visit Wolfson and Wong, we stand beside their beautiful home and look out over the ploughed fields spreading away to the west. In the far distance, I can make out a stand of wind turbines. Despite the controversy the towers have been generating over the past few years, they are beginning to look insignificant – small potatoes, in retrospect. Because, if things go according to Highland's plans, in a few years the couple's view will be obliterated by a mega-quarry, one of the largest in North America, belching clouds of dust into the sky, six days a week.

"We won't be able to live here," says Wong. "This was going to be our retirement. Now it's mega-death."

# The hole in the ground will be anywhere from 27 to 77 metres deep — which is one and a half times as deep as Niagara Falls — and well below the water table.

arl Cosack, Wong's and Wolfson's neighbour one concession over, is more sanguine. A giant of a man wearing a cowboy hat, boots and a tattered red bandana around his neck, Cosak has agreed to take me on a tour of the Highland properties and surrounding area, but the fog on this Wednesday morning in late May is thicker than a cloud of, well, limestone particulate, so he ushers me into his house to wait out the weather.

Cosack has been training horses and raising black Angus cattle on his 485-hectare Peace Valley Ranch since 1975. He also runs Rawhide Adventures, charging city folk to help him herd cattle on horseback. He believes the mega-quarry will not – cannot – go ahead. "I still believe that people want to do the right thing," he says. "I understand that it's not always easy to know what the right thing is. But in this case, the proposed quarry doesn't make any sense on any level at all."

Cosack is a founding board member of the North Dufferin Agriculture and Community Taskforce (NDACT), which was formed in 2009 after some local farmers noticed that Highland was digging test holes on its newly acquired lands. These holes, says Cosack, were "consistent with those one would dig to determine water patterns. We figured it was about more than potatoes." (Wolfson is also on the NDACT board, along with farmers who have held out against Highland's lucrative offers.)

According to Cosack, when NDACT questioned the company, Highland admitted it was planning a series of small quarries. Highland then tried to allay fears about the impact of the project by claiming it would use a water-management system that would not affect the surrounding ecosystem. So in March, when Highland unveiled the true extent of its plans, it was like a bombdropped on the farming community, one that could forever change its way of life.

"They say the quarry will have zero impact outside its boundaries," Cosack snorts. "Any reasonable person knows that can't be true."

One of the company's stated plans is to rehabilitate the open pit after the limestone has been extracted by returning it to farmland. The usual practice would be to allow the quarry to fill up with water, leaving a lake in its place. Instead, Highland proposes to pump 600 million litres of water a day (the same amount of water that 2.2 million Ontarians use, also on a daily basis), in perpetuity, out of a hole half the size of Orangeville so that it can grow crops on the bottom. According to Emil Frind, a professor of earth sciences at University of Waterloo, the plan is preposterous. "It's total insanity. To get a few potatoes out of this, they're going to pump all that water out and keep on pumping. That takes energy, and lots of it."

A visit to Highland's website is like taking a virtual tour of

# What the politicians say

Most major developments in Ontario require a full environmental assessment under the Environmental Assessment Act (EAA) before they can go ahead. Gravel pits and quarries are an exception; they're governed by the Aggregate Resources Act (ARA), which is not as comprehensive as the EAA. The ARA does not, for instance, require a company like Highland to provide a needs assessment, showing, in this case, that a billion tonnes of limestone are needed in the province. Because of the unprecedented scale of the proposed Melancthon quarry, opponents are calling on Queen's Park to order a full assessment under the EAA.

Since Ontario voters go to the polls October 6, we asked Sylvia Jones (Conservative MPP for Dufferin-Caledon) and Peter Tabuns (provincial NDP environment critic) whether they believed that a full environmental assessment under the EAA was needed before a quarry licence is granted. (Linda Jeffrey, Liberal Minister of the Environment, did not return our calls.) Here is where the three main parties stood on the issue as *ON Nature* went to press.

**NDP:** Tabuns, who joined the marchers at Queen's Park on the April 22 Stop the Quarry walk, says he was "quite taken aback by the magnitude of this project. I think there should be a full environmental assessment. If you are reshaping the headwaters of major rivers and rich agricultural land is being eliminated, you need a full assessment of the impacts ... Protecting water in Ontario is a major concern for us."

Conservatives: Jones raised the subject of the proposed quarry in the House last spring, which resulted in a 75-day extension of the objection period by the Ministry of Natural Resources (MNR). Jones does not, however, think an environmental assessment is necessary. "The MNR will review the [Highland's] application," she says. "If it does not meet standards, then the application will be turned down." But Jones does express concern that the ministry may not have adequate staff and other resources to properly assess an application of this scale. "If they don't, they'd better get them in place."

Liberals: Jeffrey is on record as saying, in a June 8 message to critics of the project, that "the ARA provides for a full review of the potential impact of such a development on the local environment. The proposed quarry will also require approval under other legislation, including the Planning Act, the Environmental Protection Act and the Ontario Water Resources Act."

C.R.



Quarry near Parry Sound

# They think this is a small, uneducated community... But we are all working together to stop this project.

a promised land, where technological prowess and human ingenuity come together in a Disneylandish video of tree-lined berms, impeccable construction yards and bucolic-looking quarry pits. Plans call for restoring a rail corridor from Lake Ontario to Georgian Bay and, of course, the creation of jobs - more than 400 of them. The site also promises that the operation will have "no adverse effect on water quality and quantity." Indeed, according to the company website, "This could make Melancthon a model of rural sustainability."

John Lowndes, who founded Highland in 2006 and carried out the Melancthon land acquisitions is sole director of the company. However, he has retreated backstage. Until spring of this year, the voice of the company was Michael Daniher, who runs Toronto-based public-relations-firm Simple Situations Inc. He returns my call promptly, but his answers to questions about Highland's plans are bland to the point of evasion. Told that some experts consider the rehabilitation plan ludicrous, Daniher replies, "The rehabilitation plan has been tabled and the decision-making process will address peoples' concerns." I ask him what happens if the pumps fail. His response: "The company has indicated that its water-management plan can operate as detailed."

Water is emerging as the issue in the fight to stop the mega-quarry. "We have taken the attitude from the beginning that the water issue is vital," says Cosack as we drive away from his farm through thinning fog, turn onto 20th Sideroad and then head into the woods along Centre Road. Through the ditches on either side run swift, clear brooklets tumbling down to the Pine River where it flows through a deep, sinuous valley below. At River Road, we turn right and wind slowly back up the escarpment through forests and meadows, past trout ponds and creeks, until we reach the village of Horning's Mills. The twisting road crosses the Pine River several times on the way.

NDACT warns that the mega-quarry would affect the water quality for everyone, and everything, downstream. "Where is downstream?" I ask Cosack, as we drive out of the village and head north through open farmland. "Everywhere is downstream from here," he replies. Because Melancthon, known as the Roof of Ontario, is the highest point in the southern part of the province, "the water runs down in all directions," says Cosack.

What perhaps most enrages Cosack is that Ontario's Aggregate Resources Act does not require a full environmental assessment before a quarry licence is issued. "If my neighbour wants to build a house on a one-hectare lot, he needs an environmental assessment. And these guys don't?" The decision rests entirely with the Minister of Natural Resources, Linda Jeffrey, who can decide for or against the proposed quarry, or

A freshly planted potato field

in southern Ontario.

# What you can do

On blustery, sunny Earth Day last April 22, more than 300 people (and a few horses) gathered at Queen's Park in Toronto before heading out on a 120-kilometre Stop the Quarry walk. Five days later, the group emerged from the fog and drizzle to end the protest walk at a Shelburne-area farm. In all, more than 1,000 protesters of all ages had joined the march in order to draw attention to the proposed mega-quarry in Melancthon Township.

The event drew considerable media attention to the issue and resulted in the Ontario government granting a 75-day extension (until July 11) to the official objection period.

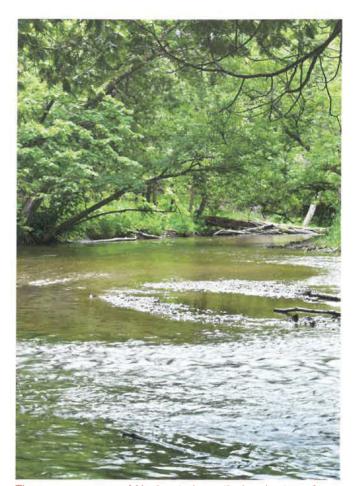
That period has now passed, but the North Dufferin Agriculture and Community Taskforce (NDACT), which is spearheading the effort to stop the Melancthon megaquarry, still needs your help. The organization is desperately short of funds. In the words of NDACT member Sandi Wong, "NDACT needs money to fight this. It has retained lawyers who have to be paid. Highland has a water expert; we have to have a water expert. They have a blasting expert; we have to have a blasting expert. We, the citizens, have to come up with the money to fight this."

Here's what you can do:

- → Purchase (for \$10) and display a Stop the Quarry sign from NDACT.
- → Write to or e-mail any, or all, of the following people:

Premier Dalton McGuinty dmcguinty.mpp.co@liberal.ola.org Sylvia Jones, MPP for Dufferin-Caledon sylvia.jones@pc.ola.org John Wilkinson, Minister of the Environment jwilkinson.mpp.co@liberal.ola.org Linda Jeffrey, Minister of Natural Resources Ijeffrey.mpp.co@liberal.ola.org

In your e-mail or letter, express your concerns and end with a statement such as the following: "Since this is the largest quarry application ever filed in Ontario, I request that you elevate this file to a full environmental assessment. Please give this request your full attention." C.R.



The mega-guarry would be located near the headwaters of the Humber River - a Canadian Heritage River alongside which run several well-used trails.

refer the matter to the Ontario Municipal Board. "The Planning Act is not designed to handle applications of this magnitude," says Cosack. "It was designed for 50-acre [20-hectare] applications. Projects of this size are not sustainable."

The quarry's effect on fish and wildlife is also of vital concern. John Werring is a Vancouver-based aquatic habitat specialist with the David Suzuki Foundation. It was his job to respond to Highland's 3,100-page application last spring and send it to MNR by the April 26 deadline. (The public was given a month and a half to comment on the application. The ministry eventually extended the deadline to July 11.) "It is important to note," Werring wrote in his letter of objection, "that this section [downstream from the quarry lands] of the Pine River will be destroyed if the project is to proceed as planned."

Werring's main worry is about the fish, mostly brook and rainbow trout, that live in the river. "The Pine River is primarily fed by groundwater," he explains. "They [Highland] are going to increase the stream temperature, which will change the entire dynamic of the water downstream."

Werring is also critical of the wildlife surveys, undertaken as far back as 2008 by Highland's environmental consultants, Edmonton-based Stantec Consulting Ltd. "They need to go back at different times of the year," says Werring. "They say there's no fish habitat [on the quarry land] but they have

no data." He expressed the same concerns about surveys Stantec conducted in 2008 of amphibians and of two at-risk bird species, the Henslow's sparrow and the bobolink, insisting that "the project should be subjected to a detailed environmental review" before a licence is granted (see sidebar, page 35).

When I contact Stantec to ask about the surveys, the company's media relations officer, Rachel Sa, says that the "gentleman who did the consulting work for Highland no longer works for us." She adds that she's not at liberty to tell me who he is and that Stantec does not discuss its work for clients with the media.

Now that the official comment period has ended, Highland has two years to address the concerns expressed by the thousands of letter writers who have objected, including Werring and Anne Bell, director of conservation and education at Ontario Nature. "Given the scale of the proposed development, we believe that it demands unprecedented review and consultation, with clear proof and broad agree ment about how to mitigate unacceptable impacts," wrote Bell.

Clearly, it's going to be a long fight. (A recent OMB decision denying an application for a much smaller quarry in Caledon came on the heels of a decade-long battle.) But Cosack is resolute that the community will stop Highland. "Big business cannot do what it wants when it comes to food and water. They think this is a small, uneducated community and if they give a new clock to the arena, we'll be happy. But we are all working together to stop this insane project."

andi Wong pours me a glass of wine as we sit on her lofty deck and brush away the occasional blackfly. In the fields that fall away from the house, I can hear the unmistakable trill of bobolinks staking out their nesting territories in the long grass.

"You know what they call the soil they push away to get at the limestone?" she asks. "It's called 'overburden.' Isn't that sick? As though there's something wrong with it." The spectre of this quarry has clearly taken over the couple's lives. "You know what?" she says. "I don't paint anymore."

"We are fighting as hard as we can," says Wolfson, "but there's no money. It's stupid that ordinary citizens would have to pay to fight against a big company like Highland."

Are you NIMBYs? I ask. "Yes," says Wong, "but that's not why we're fighting it."

"This is in everyone's backyard," says Wolfson. "My heroes are the guys fighting this every day - farmers like Carl and Dave and Ralph. We can walk away, but they can't. Some families have been farming here since the 1850s. They made the decision to stay on the land."

Wong shows me a printout of a chart Highland has released on noise levels. On a scale of 1 to 10, it rates a slamming door as 1. It rates hammering as 4. Jumping up and down as 9. And blasting, the sound of blowing up limestone six days a week? That gets a 1.

"If it wasn't so terrible," says Wong, "I'd be laughing." 🖦



Cecily Ross is a freelance writer living in Creemore, which is downstream from the proposed Melancthon quarry. She is also editor of Food In The Hills magazine.

# Thank you OPG!

Ontario Nature has had a long and fruitful partnership with the Ontario Power Generation (OPG), one of our most generous supporters. OPG holds a deep commitment to promoting a healthy and vibrant landscape that supports wildlife and people. We share this vision for Ontario and have worked closely with OPG over the years to put that vision in action.

This year, OPG generously provided Ontario Nature with a \$50,000 sponsorship of our Nature Guardians program. Through this program, we will continue to foster leadership, raise awareness, and provide environmental education opportunities for young people, as well as engage the broader community through our many conservation events.

"OPG Biodiversity is a program of province-wide, conservation-focused, family-friendly action and education initiatives," says Tom Mitchell, OPG's president and CEO. "Who better to champion the future of our environment than the youth who inherit our actions. OPG is very proud to be the lead corporate sponsor of the Nature Guardians."

Through the Nature Guardians program, OPG is making it possible for young people from diverse backgrounds to take on leadership roles and initiate restoration events in their own communities. We are deeply grateful to OPG for their continued involvement in helping protect and restore biodiversity in Ontario not just today but far into the future.

**Note:** The Nature Guardians program was started with funding from the Ontario Trillium Foundation in 2009. We are now in our third and final year of Trillium funding. In order to maintain this program, more sponsors like OPG or support from foundations and individuals, is urgently needed. Please contact Kimberley MacKenzie, director of development, if you would like to be a Nature Guardians sponsor.

# CONTINUED FROM PAGE 31

local not-for-profit organization that operates green initiatives. She went to a meeting and got involved. The Thunder Bay Field Naturalists had funding to send two young people to the Ontario Nature youth summit in Toronto last June. That weekend proved transformative for Habib. "The people were really passionate about what they did, and they knew what they were doing," she says. "They could stop in front of a tree and just start talking about how First Nations people used a tree while still preserving it." There was even political action: some Nature Guardians wrote a postcard to a local MPP to ask for changes to the Endangered Species Act.

A month after the Earth Day events, 15 members of the

Youth Council were reunited for a weekend conservation photography workshop in Hamilton. The kids, along with Sarah Hedges and four photography instructors, travelled to a local farm, Plan B Organics. As they stepped off the bus, a gender disparity was apparent: 14 are young women. Moe Qureshi, an 18-year-old Youth Council member from Mississauga, doesn't see that as cause for concern. "Guys get involved at a later stage," he says. "There's a lot of distractions in high school. Generally, boys like to know a lot more before they get involved." He connects his own enthusiasm to his eco-friendly parents and an early encounter with water pollution. "My teacher announced that we couldn't eat fish caught in Lake Ontario ... We had just finished the water cycle unit, and I wanted to know why fresh rainwater couldn't clean away the polluted water." Qureshi didn't like the answer.

The work of a Youth Council member is never done. In March, some were in Toronto's Downsview Park helping the Evergreen Foundation remove invasive species and painting bird boxes. A second youth summit is planned for late September, and the Youth Council members are developing the program of events: the theme, the keynote speakers, the workshops, the venue. In a few months, some will probably be back in Earl Bales Park for the Spring City Treeplant alongside the Friends of the Don East and Urban Forestry Associates.

Glanzmann credits the Nature Guardians program's wide range of partner organizations, ranging from Friends of the Rouge to Friends of the Don to the YMCA, for expanding her knowledge and horizons. "Nature Guardians has really built my confidence but also made me question how I live," she says. "If I view something one way, they will give me some other facts and change my way of thinking. It's amazing to see other kids rising up and taking a stand. It has a very big impact, and if we can reach more kids, it will have a still bigger impact."

It takes imagination to see a forest where there isn't one. And it takes tremendous effort and planning to make that forest a reality. The payoff is huge for the younger generation. "When you plant a white pine, which is our provincial tree, you're not just planting it so that you can come back in 20 years and say, 'I did that,'" says Robb. "White pines can live 350 years. You are giving to five or six generations."

**Denis Seguin** is a freelance journalist and filmmaker. He wrote and co-produced the documentary How To Start Your Own Country, which screened at Michael Moore's Traverse City Film Festival this July.

# **Nature Guardians Youth Summit**

This September, Ontario Nature is holding a Youth Summit on biodiversity and sustainable living where high school students from across Ontario will learn about the variety of life in our province, how best to protect it, and how we can live sustainably. Hosted by the Ontario Nature Youth Council, all workshops and activities reflect environmental topics that are the most urgent to today's teens. To find out more about the Summit, visit our website at www.ontarionature.org.





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# Congratulations to our Conservation Award Winners

ntario Nature celebrated 80 years of protecting wild species and wild spaces at our annual general meeting last June. One of the highlights of our gathering at the Ganaraska Forest Centre on the Oak Ridges Moraine was presenting our conservation awards to eight individuals and groups that have made exceptional contributions to natural habitat protection.

This year's conservation heroes tell us about their vision for a greener Ontario:

**Jim Johnston**, recipient of the Ontario Nature Achievement Award, spearheaded the development of the Elliot Lake Bear Smart Project from 2003 to 2004, which subsequently became the Ministry of Natural Resource's Bear Wise Program. "Before that program, people didn't have to put their garbage in sealed containers outside, they had it in bags," says Johnston. "We improved the management practices at the local waste dump and converted all the containers in our parks to bear-proof ones." Thanks to Johnston's program, nuisance calls about bears in the Elliot Lake area decreased from some 530 calls in 2004 to less than half that in 2010.

**Jane and Fred Schneider** were awarded the W.W.H. Gunn Conservation Award for their outstanding service and commitment to nature conservation. For more than three decades, the couple has welcomed visitors to their 300-hectare rural property outside Waterloo, which contains

provincially significant swamps, woodlands and fields. "We're trying to preserve the old forest and keep the trees healthy," says Jane. The couple has been impressed with the absence of litter in the area despite the high volume of visitors, demonstrating that the "the younger generation is taking good care of the property."

Christine Hanrahan received the W.E. Saunders Natural History Award for her efforts to protect Larose Forest and her work on the *Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas*. Hanrahan and others hold an annual community day to introduce people to the forest, and every two years she oversees the organization of a forest bioblitz, using the resulting data to inform best practices for managing the Larose Forest. "As it's a working forest, this data is used by various organizations to see where the birds are and accordingly decide where not to log," says Hanrahan.

The Steve Hounsell Greenway Award recipients - **Iris McGee**, **Renee Sandelowsky** and **Allan Elgar** - founded the Oakvillegreen Conservation Association more than 10 years ago in response to a proposal to urbanize 3,000 hectares of agricultural land in north Oakville. For McGee it has been quite a ride: "Taking that first step to attend a council meeting or write a letter to your local newspaper or councillor can set you on a journey toward making positive change." She believes that forests, fields and streams should be protected

44 ON NATURE AUTUMN 2011 ONNATUREMAGAZINE.COM



through proper zoning so that taxpayers do not have to buy land to protect it.

The Fatal Light Awareness Program (FLAP), established in 1993 by **Michael Mesure** and a team of volunteers, won the J.R. Dymond Public Service Award for the group's efforts to provide safe passage for migratory songbirds in the urban environment. Annually, between one and 10 birds will die in collisions with any single building. With 940,000 registered structures in Toronto, a conservative estimate would be that between approximately one and 10 million birds die annually. "This is a David and Goliath story, but the simplicity of the solution really resonates with people," says Mesure. "It could be easily resolved with the flip of a switch at night and placing some markers on the glass during the day."

The Lee Symmes Municipal Award was awarded to the **County of Northumberland** for its comprehensive forest management plan for a 2,200-hectare forest on the Oak Ridges Moraine. By expanding a network of wooded conservation areas, the county supported a management approach guided by the spirit and intent of the Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Act and corresponding plan. Says Mia Frankl, the county's forestry management officer, "We hope to lead by example among municipal governments in preserving natural spaces and managing them first and

foremost for their ecological significance, while still providing balanced use for social and economic values."

The Huron Perth Healthcare Alliance received the Ontario Nature Corporate Award for its efforts to reduce its ecological footprint. Chief executive officer Andrew Williams realizes that, while the primary goal is to deliver health care, the alliance also feels responsible for making the workplace more environmentally friendly. "We look at this as part of our commitment to the broader community and see a logical connection here, as a healthy environment is closely tied to healthy people," says Williams. The alliance has launched a number of energy conservation efforts at its four sites, including retrofitting lighting throughout the facilities, lowering energy use during times of peak demand and partnering with other organizations in progressive energy conservation programs.

**Fraser Gibson** won the Richards Education Award for fostering environmental values and actions in children throughout his career teaching outdoor and environmental education. Now retired, he continues to promote the importance of the natural world. "My overriding objective is to promote, in children and adults, respect for all life and habitat. Guided exploration of natural areas is a very important first step."

ONNATUREMAGAZINE.COM AUTUMN 2011 ON NATURE 45

# Treasure islands

Wild spaces, like Ontario Nature's reserves, are rich in plants, animals and history.

By Peter Middleton Illustration by Gracia Lam

ast June at Ontario Nature's annual general meeting, I joined a field trip on which our guides led us through a rare remnant of prairie and black-oak savannah

habitat on a lovely stretch of the Oak Ridges Moraine. We walked through an area belonging to Alderville First Nation, where 50 hectares of rolling prairie grassland and oak savannah, once threatened by housing development and aggregate extraction, are now protected. Today, the landscape blooms with prairie buttercup, wild lupine and butterflyweed. In the distance, we could see the silhouette of the fireresistant black oaks. In the past, this land supported herds of deer and elk, and the First Nations peoples who hunted them.

Our guides brought us to the tall grass prairie reserve of Red Cloud Cemetery. This site, designated as a cemetery in 1850, has never been

ploughed. In 1992, Dr. Paul Catling, a plant taxonomist, declared the cemetery to be a remnant prairie because of the presence of a number of prairie grasses and forbs within its boundaries.

At the cemetery, Elwood, a 92-year-old member of the Red Cloud Cemetery board of directors, welcomed our group. This plot of virgin prairie is truly a stunning place to walk through, especially when one is aware that its soils and plants have survived, relatively unchanged, since the glaciers withdrew some 10,000 years ago.

As I looked around in wonder, Elwood drew me aside. He told me of his family and his poor but happy childhood, and of his love for the tiny patch of land we stood on and the profound meaning its preservation had for him. With reverence he talked about the link between humanity and landscapes, and about the people who had occupied this land over time and how the land had nurtured them. He pointed out the importance of conservation, not only as it applies to plants and ecosystems, but also as a way of recognizing that such remnants are links with a planet that has supported countless generations of humanity. He did not refer to land as property, but rather as a source of support. "The land fed me, nourished me and will reclaim me. I ask no more than that. It has done that for people from the beginning. It is where I belong."

Reflecting on his words, I thought about Ontario Nature's nature reserves system and its importance both for Ontario as a whole and for me personally. The reserves contain the

timeless threads of creation in their fabric. Their preservation represents a priceless heritage set aside for the province by Ontario Nature.

Ontario Nature (formerly the Federation of Ontario Naturalists) acquired its first reserve, Dorcas Bay (also called Singing Sands) in 1961. Located on the Bruce Peninsula, this place has special significance for me, and I visit often. The coastal alvars and forests of the region, although greatly reduced by recreation-related development, contain jewels of global importance found infew other places on the planet: bird's-eye primrose, ram's-head lady's-slipper and massasauga rattlesnake. Every time I visit, I am reminded of the beauty, tenacity and continuity of life.

The shorelines of the Bruce Peninsula support unique ecosystems. The steep cliffs on the eastern shore of the escarp-

ment and on the sloping limestone plates on the west supported an amazing array of plants. Until late in the 20th century, our presence was evident mostly in the occasional fishing or hunting camp. This changed, however, as southern Ontario's population grew and more cars filled more roads, and people's leisure time and recreational interests increased. Dorcas Bay is a reminder of what this area used tobe. Having visited the reserves of frequently, I know it intimately – it has shaped my philosophy as a naturalist and outdoor educator.

Each Ontario Nature reserve is a "Rosetta stone" that will allow future generations to connect with a distant past and to witness the tapestry of evolution. The conservation of such places is of the utmost importance, for the heritage, both natural and human, that they hold. These are both islands of refuge and, in a way, islands in time.

**Peter Middleton** is a lifelong member of Ontario Nature and president of the Owen Sound Field Naturalists. He has taught and administered outdoor education programs for the Bruce County Board of Education and the Bluewater District School Board.

For more information about Ontario Nature's reserve system, visit the "Protect" section of our website, ontarionature.org.



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