



The Quinte Naturalist

The Quinte Field Naturalists Association is affiliated with Ontario Nature, a non-profit organization sponsoring nature education, conservation and research.

April



The Warblers Are Coming! The Warblers are Coming!

This month our featured photographer is Ian Dickinson. Ian calls himself a “Photobirder.” He’s actually much more than that. If you go to his website you will also find great pictures of insects, mammals, plants, fungi, in fact just about anything you can see outdoors. However it will soon be May and May is the month to look for warblers. Grab your field guide and get reacquainted with these tiny birds. Start with the four species shown above in Ian’s pictures. Go to Ian’s website for more of Quinte’s nature. Be sure to check his blog (I said he was more than a “photobirder.”). Scroll down and click on the entry for May 22 last year “*Warblers – the birder’s obsession.*”

Ian’s website - <http://photobirding.smugmug.com/>

Old Friends Return

By George Thomson & Elizabeth Churcher

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The alarm clock jarred us out of a deep sleep on March 8th. With a bit of resentment about the hour we had lost because of the shift to Daylight Saving Time, we pulled ourselves out of bed. As we yawned and stretched, a distant call refocused us on the gifts that this day had to offer. The faint “caw-caw-caw” grew louder and, in minutes, two magnificent American Crows had come to rest on the peak of our garage. “They’re back,” we both chimed.

For the past several years, this fascinating pair has entertained us with their antics at our bird feeders. While one takes on the role of guard, situated on the roof top, the other delights itself in a gourmet meal at the feeders: then they exchange places. “Why gourmet?” you might ask.

These clever birds employ strategies that we would never have dreamed possible. Each morning, George fills the feeders and then engages in a series of daily outdoor tasks. One of our feeders is a top loader into which he pours seeds until the central shoot is full to the brim. After closing the lid, he moves on to other jobs. For some time, a mystified George could be witnessed scratching his head as he returned to find an open lid! It took some undercover detective work to discover that, as soon as George was out of sight, one of the Crows would fly to the feeder, perch on its roof and flick the lid open with its strong bill. Rather than picking from the more restricted menu of seeds that flow gradually out the bottom by gravity, the Crow could have a feast of peanut pieces, sunflower seeds and other choice items, all found in large quantities at the top of the feeder. Efficiency is the name of this game!

While it may not be a surprise that the Crow family is noted for its intelligence, it might shock you to learn that this family, known as the Corvidae (pronounced Kor-vid-ee) family, is in the Songbird Order of birds. Worldwide there are one hundred twenty-two members of Corvidae --- the Crows, Ravens, Jays, Nutcrackers and Magpies. The Crow’s nearest relative, our Northern Raven, is the world’s largest Songbird! Neither species would be likely to gain a prominent role in any choir.



The American Crows which entertain us daily from spring to fall have a scientific name which gives us a little insight into one of their physical features. Corvus is the Latin for Crow, Brachy is Greek for short and rhynchus is Latin for bill. Apparently, some other species of Crows have longer bills than our friends.

Both here in Tweed or on the other side of the world, people are intrigued by the clever feats of Crows. Their intelligence is legendary. The New Caledonian Crow routinely uses its bill to shape the ends of stems into hooks: it then uses the tool that it has designed to 'fish' for food items that would otherwise be out of its reach. Crows have often been observed putting hard food items, such as nuts, mussels and clams, on roadways so that passing vehicles crush the tough outer surfaces, exposing the delectable avian gourmet food inside. If you watch carefully, you may even see Crows putting food items on the road just before a car-carrying ferryboat docks! --- And why tolerate a dry crust of bread when it can easily be dipped in a birdbath to soften it!

Another sign of high intelligence is play: Crows seem to have a lot of fun! Be careful --- they sometimes mimic human speech! All animals are intelligent and will adapt in their own ways to aid in survival. The Crow's increased IQ is a result of its highly social behaviour. By observing other members of its species and engaging with them in many activities throughout its life span of up to ten years, it benefits from a wide range of learning opportunities.

While still playful, another aspect of the Crow's behaviour can be witnessed at this time of year. In early morning, we watch the pair fly from our woods which is situated across the field and directly in front of our kitchen window. Although we have not seen their nest, we know that they have chosen this peaceful habitat as their summer home. --- But they are not just here to bask in the sunshine: they have to ensure the survival of their species by bringing young into the woods, too.

Leading up to nesting season, this pair of life-long mates strengthen their bond with affectionate gestures. Just last week, we captured a glimpse of one of their tender moments in the big White Oak tree at the field's edge. They were sitting very close together engaged in the gentle mutual preening of their heads. It was a moment for us to reflect on the challenges that they face in raising their young. Together, we wished them strength and success in this breeding season and the year to come.

After nurturing their offspring for a few months in our woods, the family will leave us in the autumn to gradually migrate south into the Northern and Central United States. We trust that the healthy diet gleaned from our feeders, fields and woodlands along with the solitude of our environs will carry all of them successfully to a more southern home protected from the ravages of winter. A year from now, we will listen with great anticipation for those "caw-caws", telling us our old friends have returned once more.



All living things on earth are kindred - Edward Abbey , American author and naturalist

WIND TURBINES AGAIN and again and again and again ...

It really is the issue that will not die. Should wind turbines be built in ecologically sensitive areas? Kingston Field Naturalists have calculated that over 1000 turbines are placed or planned in eastern Lake Ontario defined as Prince Edward County and the part of the lake contained by the chain of islands which includes Main Duck Island. Here's a brief look at three of those projects.



Map by Google Earth

Ostrander Point

Prince Edward County Field Naturalists with the determined leadership of Cheryl Anderson and Myrna Wood won their appeal against this project at the Appeal Court of Ontario to cap a seven-year struggle. It's a very important legal precedent because proponents of future proposed wind turbines will have to give more consideration to the ecological effects of their projects.

Unfortunately the court also ruled that Gilead Power Corporation and the Ontario Ministry of the Environment must be given a chance to put a proposed mitigation plan before the Environmental Review Tribunal. The plan involves putting gates on access roads to prevent public vehicles from entering. This plan brings to mind one of my father's favourite expressions. "That's closing the barn door after the horse has bolted." In other words the damage will be done by the actual construction of turbines. Merely getting the 40-metre long turbine blades to the site will destroy considerable habitat.

White Pine

This project involves 29 wind turbines, 12 of which would be within the Important Bird Area. These 12 would be located at the base of Prince Edward Point, just where migrating

birds are being funnelled along the point. Currently the company is awaiting final approval for their plan.

It's unclear how much the Ostrander Point decision will affect this project. While the company will have to be diligent on ecological issues this project is different in many ways and much more complicated. Although Ostrander Point is also within the Important Bird Area the final decision there was based on the presence of a single species, Blanding's Turtle. The threat in the White Pine project is to birds and bats in general, not necessarily to specific species. The project is also scattered over several properties so it might be required to launch several different objections and establish several different threats to stop even part of the project.

Amherst Island

Up to 37 wind turbines are proposed for this project, some of them very close to the owl woods. This is also a project with multiple private properties involved. On March 28 this year an observer tallied 35 rough-legged hawks. Three days later on March 31 a Kingston birder found 44 snowy owls on the island and the ice on the south shore. Does this sound like a good place to erect wind turbines?

A Couple of Comments

After the expense, time and stress resulting from the struggle over the Ostrander project is anyone likely to launch a lawsuit against either the White Pine or Amherst Island proposals?

The concept doesn't apply directly to these wind farms because different companies are involved but the strain on a citizens' group can be behind what is called a SLAPP, a Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation. A corporation with large sums of money available to it may drag out a lawsuit to try to discourage anyone from pursuing legal action in future cases or continuing an existing suit.

There is another key difference in the three projects. It's one thing to launch a lawsuit against a faceless government landowner. Clearly even that has raised considerable rancour in Prince Edward County. It would be a different matter to try to stop a project which has a considerable financial benefit for a next door landowner.



Cheer up. Hepaticas will soon be blooming.

This and That from Here and There

Redpolls



Photo Courtesy Allaboutbirds.org

Were you like me this winter? Did you scan every redpoll flock hoping to find the elusive hoary redpoll? We may have been wasting our time. A new study by two scientists at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology found no significant difference in the DNA of what were thought to be two species. The pictures above show birds on scale from common redpoll on the left to “hoary” redpoll. Even the lesser redpoll found in Europe may simply be part of a single species with slight variations in appearance from region to region.

Bats



The little brown bat in the picture is suffering from white-nose syndrome, a fungus which is wiping out many bats in eastern North America. This month Canada, the United States and Mexico signed a letter of intent to promote the conservation of bats. White-nose syndrome is the greatest threat to bats but habitat destruction and other human-related disturbances such as wind turbines are also cited as problems.

As its name suggests the letter merely expresses intent. The day after the letter was signed the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced that \$1.5 million was available for white-nose syndrome research and called for proposals.

Environment Canada announced that special conservation periods are underway to hunt overabundant species such as snow geese and Ross’s geese. Nothing about bats.

Bees with an Addiction

A recent study found that just as humans become addicted to nicotine bees tend to prefer neonicotinoid-laced food. The implication may be that even when offered an alternative bees will consume the food containing the pesticide meaning that the toxin may be even more prevalent in their diet than previously thought.



Photo courtesy Ian Dickinson

Green Heron



Every year the American Birding Association chooses a bird of the year. This year it's one of my favourites, Green Heron. It's a fascinating bird and more common than many people realize. Most years it's a daily visitor to the ponds Quinte Conservation dug near the dog trail but you may find it on the edge of any local marsh.

It's dark cap, beautiful brown neck and bright yellow legs make it fairly easy to identify. It's usually quiet but if you startle it it will fly away while uttering a very annoyed "skeow." It may also demonstrate one of its alternate names, "chalk-line" as it leaves a white stream on the water behind it.

It's usually a solitary nester in trees. During the research for the second Breeding Bird Atlas birders found only three colonies in the province. The most unusual of these was a colony of 14 nests found among the raspberries on Indian Island at the west end of the Bay of Quinte. If you find a nest, be warned. A. C. Bent, in his account of the species said "When the young are approached too closely, they regurgitate the contents of their crops to the discomfort of the seeker after knowledge, although this action gives the latter an opportunity to learn the character of their food."



The Raven Loonatics will be out again this year. We're the official QFN Birdathon team. Last year by breaking every rule in the birdathon book QFN members found 129 species. Nobody saw all 129 species. Many of us did find over 100 species. Everybody had a good day and we raised over \$500 for bird conservation.

Please support us. We don't really do anything illegal. You can go online to the Bird Canada website <http://www.bsc-eoc.org/>. Click on Great Canadian Birdathon button (beside the "Project FeederWatch" button) and then on "Sponsor a Participant." Enter John Blaney where it asks for the participant's name and follow the instructions. At the moment I am the only registered member of the team. Let me know if you would like to be a registered member and raise funds. 50% of each donation goes to the Prince Edward Point Bird Observatory and 50% is divided between Bird Studies Canada and QFN.

We call it a Birdathon because we are raising money for conservation but it's also a great club outing. It's a chance to try for the more than 20 species of warbler that pass through The County and to see the banding station in action.

Registered Raven Loonatic or unregistered birder please join us. We're planning for **Saturday, May 16, at 6 a.m.** with Saturday 23 as an alternate date if conditions dictate. **Meet at the Point Traverse corner.** It's the sharp right hand turn about 500 metres before the banding station. A map of birding spots is attached. The observatory is number 5.

Is 6 a.m. too early? Come down to the point any time up to about 10 a.m. and look for the red Grand Cherokee licence BSNK287. You can also phone my cell 613-847-3617 to find out where we are.

The Quinte Field Naturalists Association, an incorporated affiliate of Ontario Nature, is a non-profit organization sponsoring nature education, conservation and research. It was founded in 1949 and incorporated in 1990, and encompasses the counties of Hastings and Prince Edward. The Quinte Field Naturalists Association is legally entitled to hold real estate and accept benefits.

Quinte Field Naturalists meet on the fourth Monday of every month from September to March (except December), 7:00, Sills Auditorium, Bridge Street United Church, 60 Bridge Street East, Belleville. In April we hold our annual dinner at an alternate time and location. New members and guests are always welcome. Bring a friend.

President

George Thomson
613-478-3205

Past President

Wendy Turner

Vice-President

Phil Martin
613-395-3246

Recording Sect'y

Bernadette Hymus
613-962-7926

Corresponding Sect'y

Elizabeth Churcher
613-478-3205

Treasurer

Doug Newfield
613-477-3066

Environmental Officer

Denice Wilkins
613-478-5070

Membership/Mailing

Marjorie Fisher
613-968-3277

Outings/Newsletter

John Blaney
613-962-9337

Refreshments

Sharron Blaney
613-962-9337

Next Newsletter Deadline – September 10, 2015

Please send submissions to sharronjohnblaney@gmail.com

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See page 8 for information about our next outing.