



The Quinte Naturalist

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

Docfest



I hope that you were able to see some of films shown during the Belleville Downtown Doc Fest at the beginning of the month. One of the films Sharron and I saw was *Revolution*, sponsored by QFN.

Rob Stewart, the producer and director of the film begins with concern for sharks but soon realizes that there is more at stake than the survival of sharks. Oceans and ultimately humanity are in grave danger.

Travelling through 15 countries Stewart documents the factors which have put us in this perilous situation. Environmental degradation, species loss, pollution, ocean acidification leading to scarcity of both food and water are reducing the earth's ability to support us.

Stewart's film keeps our attention with beautiful shots of fantastic creatures such as the flamboyant cuttlefish shown above. His message is clear though. We must take more care of our ecosystem or the consequences will be dire.

As if to drive the point home the very week of Doc Fest newspapers and TV news casters were reporting the death of ten million or more scallops off Parksville on Vancouver Island. The cause? Ocean acidification. Carbon dioxide from the atmosphere forms carbonic acid in the oceans. When acidic enough the seawater dissolves the shells of coral and shellfish.

QFN also sponsored *People of a Feather*. This film examines the lives of the Inuit on the Belcher Islands in Hudson Bay. Their survival in the winter depends on the Common Eider. The theme of this film is also the impact of human activity on the ecosystem. Massive hydroelectric dams on the mainland have caused changes in sea ice and ocean currents leading to large die-offs of the Eider.

The message is clear. We must look after the ecosystem or it will not be able to look after us.

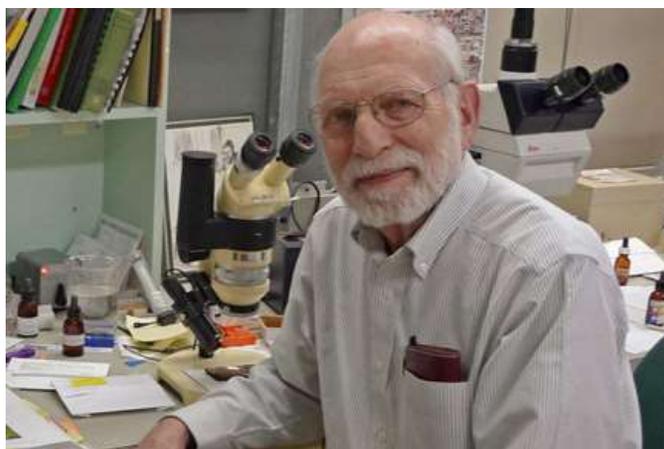
Special thanks to Denice Wilkins who worked with the organizers of Doc Fest and spoke extremely well on our behalf at the screenings. Denice also did an excellent job explaining the QFN's mandate and selling turtle ICUs at the Hastings Stewardship Council's speaker series.

THIS MONTH'S SPEAKER

Dr. Irwin Brodo

Lichens of Ontario

Monday, March 24, 2014 – 7:00 p.m.



Dr. Irwin Brodo, past chief of botany at the Canadian Museum of Nature, international leader in lichenology and author of *Lichens of North America* - one of the “great natural history books of this or any age”, will introduce us to the more common, conspicuous and interesting species found in Ontario.

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.

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Next Newsletter Deadline – April 10, 2014

Please send submissions to john.blaney@sympatico.ca

CLUB NEWS

NEXT OUTING

How often do you get to spend time exploring with a world-recognized expert in his field? Dr. Brodo will lead an outing at the Frink Centre to illustrate his talk at the meeting on the previous evening.

Last November Terry Sprague, in a column in the Picton Gazette, discussed the finding of a rare lichen on Main Duck Island. National Parks biologist Josh van Wieren had discovered the pale-bellied frost lichen on this isolated island. It was only the seventh known site for this lichen in Canada. In this article Terry reminds us of the importance of paying attention to all aspects of nature.

Join Dr. Brodo at the Frink Centre to see what lichens can be found there. Are there rare lichens there? We just don't know. Dr. Brodo can help us find out.

Meet **behind the Shell station at the mall at 10:00 a.m.** or at the **Frink Centre at 10:30 a.m.** on **Tuesday, March 25.**

TREASURE TABLE

The Treasure Table at the February meeting was a great success. Donations and purchases by members raised about \$250. Thanks to June Humphrey who looked after the project as table manager, sales staff, cashier and every other job you can think of. Thanks, June!

ANNUAL DINNER

Tickets for the dinner will be sold at the March meeting. It will be at St. Mark's United Church, 237 Cannifton Road North. That's north of 401 and just beyond the bridge over the Moira in Cannifton. The dinner will be a buffet with vegetarian options. \$25 per person. If you can't be at the meeting phone Doug Newfield, 613-477-3066. You will not be able to buy tickets at the door.

This year's dinner speaker is Cliff Maclean. His talk is entitled *Transformations – Of Man and Beaver*. If you know Cliff you know that he will be entertaining.

After a career working in an urban world of business, Cliff and his wife, Heather, retired to 113 hectares along the Moira River near Roslin. As they discovered the beauty and diversity of their new home, they evolved from simply owners of property to stewards of the land, from casual interest in their new surroundings to concern for the conservation of the land. Hear the inspiring story of their transformation and take a photographic journey with Cliff as he shares his enthusiasm for their land – from old growth forest to wetlands and alvar habitats. He will also regale us with their adventures discovering the life and habits of their beaver neighbours.



PHOTO BY Tom Wheatley

The QFN outing on Waterfowl Weekend stopped at Barcovan where we got a close look at these trumpeter swans. Distinguishing between our two native species of swans, trumpeter and tundra swans, is challenging. Some of the most obvious clues can be seen by looking at the bills. If there are small yellow markings on the sides of the bill the birds are tundra swans. Unfortunately the occasional tundra swan lacks these spots or the yellow spot is so small that it is virtually invisible. In these cases you have to look at other features of the bill. Note that there is a deep V where the bill meets the top of the head on these two birds. On a tundra swan this feature would be quite rounded. Note also where the side of the bill meets the eye. On these birds there is no division between the eye and the bill. On a tundra swan the bill would come to a point just in front of the eye, Of course all of this is much easier to see in a carefully chosen photograph than it is in a live bird.

YOUNG BIRDERS WORKSHOP – PRESQU’ILE, SATURDAY MARCH 29 – For birders 11-18 with some experience but anxious to learn more. The workshop will focus on the identification of waterfowl using field marks, behaviours and calls. Other skills such as counting large numbers of birds, using ebird, and digiscoping will be topics. The afternoon session will be a demonstration of specimen preparation for collections at the ROM or Canadian Museum of Nature. Meet at the Camp Office. The workshop begins at 9:00 AM with early birding at the feeders starting at 8 AM. There will be a pizza lunch at 1:00 PM courtesy of the Ontario Federation of Ornithologists. Dress warmly and bring warm drinks and snacks. Bring anything you like to use birding such as binoculars, camera, field notebook, cell phone with birding apps, a field guide.



It won't be long until our breeding birds are popping their heads up all over the place. How many of these common Quinte area breeders can you identify?

One species appears twice.

Look closely at the beaks.
Answers on page 7.



ARE THERE COUGARS IN QUINTE?

A few years ago I regarded sightings of cougars in this area in the same category as sightings of Sasquatch. Most informed sources stated that cougars had been extirpated in the province sometime in the second half of the 1800s. Recently I heard of three fairly credible sightings in eastern Ontario, two actually in the Quinte area, one in Prince Edward County and one north of Stirling. It seemed to be time to take a more serious look at the issue.

Most reports of cougars have been put down to misidentification. In the moment of excitement when they see an animal observers have misidentified deer, lynx and bobcat as a cougar. Biologists in eastern Canada and the American northeast believe that coyotes which at a distance may appear to be about the size of small cougar may be the main source of false reports. Surprisingly dogs and domestic cats are also often misidentified. Even in Oregon, a Pacific state where cougars definitely do live, a study found that only 7% of over 800 reports could actually be verified.

People may become embarrassed and defensive if questioned closely. When pressed for specific details people reporting cougars are often quoted making such statements as, "I know what I saw," with a further comment that it was "huge." A biologist in upper New York told of following up a report and finding only the tracks of a house cat. When he took the woman out to show her the tracks a tawny house cat ran between them. When he suggested that that was the cougar the woman became angry and accused him of looking for an excuse to deny her sighting. Locally such reactions may be the origin of the occasional rumour that the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources (OMNR) is re-introducing cougars and hiding the fact.

Photographic or video "proof" of cougar sightings posted on the internet must be used with care. I have watched a youtube video titled "Black cougar sighting Listowel Ontario" several times. There are a couple of major problems with the video. It took three viewings before I could see what the observer was trying to show. It was a black speck at the edge of a woodlot. Not convincing. The second problem is even more serious. Cougars aren't black. There are no authenticated records of melanistic cougars either in the wild or in captivity in Ontario. The fellow posting this video was not attempting to deceive. He believed that he had seen a cougar and was offering the only evidence he had. Others may have actually put photo-shopped images on the internet to bolster their case.

Cougars have been shot in Ontario, one as recently as the summer of 2012 in Muskoka. This animal had been declawed, clear evidence that it was a released or escaped captive. DNA has shown other animals shot to belong to the South American subspecies, also likely former "pets." A recent study noted that there are probably several hundred captive cougars in Ontario and it is reasonable to assume that some escaped or were released.

In such an atmosphere how is it possible to make any kind of reasoned judgment? In 2006 the OMNR decided to settle the issue. Rick Rosatte of the OMNR and Trent University set up a network of 89 biologists and wildlife technicians to compile reports of cougar sightings and assess their credibility.

In 2011 Rosatte published the results of the study. For the period 1991 to 2010 Rosatte found 497 pieces of evidence confirming the presence of cougars in Ontario. He divided the evidence into three classes. There were 21 pieces of class one evidence including scat, hair, DNA, tracks and photographs. Thirteen pieces of class two evidence were made up of sightings by qualified observers such as biologists. The remaining 463 class three pieces of evidence were reports with convincing details submitted by people with no special qualifications.

What was the origin of these cougars? Rosatte offers four possibilities. One, of course, is escaped or released captive animals and any of their offspring. Another is dispersal from neighbouring provinces and states with free-ranging cougar populations. A cougar hit by a vehicle in Connecticut in 2011 (not in Rosatte’s report because it was out of province) was found to have been from the prospering breeding population in the Black Hills of South Dakota. There was at least one verified report of this animal along its probable long distance path so it was not transported by humans. It’s no stretch to imagine this or animals from Manitoba or Quebec winding up in Ontario. Rosatte’s third possibility is that some Ontario cougars are remnants of a previously undetected native free-ranging population. Finally and probably likely is that some of the animals are a genetic mix from the other three groups.

Are there cougars in Ontario? Definitely. Do they breed here? Rosatte’s study gives no answer but it does seem possible, even likely. Are there cougars in the Quinte area? There was no class one or two evidence in either Hastings or Prince Edward and Rosatte’s report does not give county-by-county sources of class three evidence. He does however note that cougars are “habitat generalists” so there is no reason why they could not be here or at least pass through here.

I’m now a believer. Sasquatches? Not so much.



*Photo by Greg Hume (Wikipedia Commons)
Captive cougar at the Cincinnati Zoo. The cougar’s closer relationship to house cats rather than such “big cats” as lions and tigers is obvious.*

QUIZ ANSWERS

Starting in the upper left hand corner and proceeding in a clockwise direction.
Eastern Kingbird
Chipping Sparrow
Eastern Bluebird
Great Blue Heron
Bobolink
Common Yellowthroat
Song Sparrow
American Robin
Bobolink (female)
The bird in the centre is a Nashville Warbler. Despite the fact that only birders recognize it it is the most abundant bird in the province with an estimated population of 15 million.

Thur. March 27 at 7 pm
**Be a Natural Gardener,
not a Zookeeper**

Terry Sprague

Naturalist, Hiking Guide, Journalist
On Wildlife Attraction and Control

Bea Heissler

Natural Themes Native Plant Nursery
(Frankford)
On Natural Gardening



The Winter Speaker Series
Presented by the Hastings Stewardship Council
at
Thurlow Community Centre, 516 Harmony Rd, Belleville

All welcome at no charge. Donations accepted at the door.
Information: 613-391-9034 or email: info@hastingsstewardship.ca



Photo: Natural Themes Nursery, butterfly garden

