TORONTO FIELD NATURALIST

Number 523 April 2004

"CHORLEY PARK" - ink drawing by Mary Anne Miller 2002

Inside

TFN OFFICE HOURS: Fridays 9 am to 12 noon

TFN MEETINGS

Sunday, April 4, 2004 - TURTLES IN TROUBLE: THE CONSERVATION OF ONTARIO'S TURTLES

at 2:30 pm

at Emmanuel College - an illustrated talk by Bob Johnson, curator of amphibians and reptiles at the Toronto Zoo and author of two books on these animals.

75 Queen's Park Cres. East

VISITORS WELCOME! - Bob will discuss not only the natural history of Ontario's 8 turtle species, but will discuss why turtles are in trouble here and around the world -- despite their appearance of abundance.

DAYLIGHT SAVING TIME BEGINS!

+ "social hour" beginning at 2 pm with free coffee and juice

+ selected publications and TFN memberships for sale

NEXT MEETING: Sunday, May 2, 2004

NEXT NEWSLETTER: MAY (summer issue) - to be mailed in mid April

IT'S YOUR NEWSLETTER

Requested: Essays (no longer than 500 words), reviews (no longer than 300 words), poems, cartoons, sketches and newspaper clippings.

Subjects: plants, animals and natural areas in the Toronto region, especially reports of personal experiences with wildlife, including locations, dates, and any sources consulted.

Please include your name, address and telephone number so submissions can be acknowledged. With newspaper clippings, include source and date of each clipping.

Time dated material such as notices of meetings should be submitted at least six weeks before the month in which the event is to take place.

Send material to: Toronto Field Naturalists
2 Carlton St., #1519
Toronto, Ont. M5B 1J3

Editor: Helen Juhola
Poetry, Art and Nature Observations: Diana Banville
Assistants: Patricia Brind, Eva Davis, Karin Fawthrop, Nancy Fredenburg, Toshi Oikawa, Marilynn Murphy, Robin Powell
Printer: DM Printing
Mailer: Perkins Mailing Services

TFN OUTINGS

REMEMBER: Children and visitors are welcome on all outings but please, NO PETS! To get to outings on time, check TTC routes and schedules by calling 416-393-4636. Check the weather by calling 416-661-0123 so you will know what to wear on outings which go rain or shine.

	Saturday April 3 10:30 am	TORONTO REFERENCE LIBRARY - nature arts Leader: Melanie Milanich Meet at the library entrance 789 Yonge St. (1 block north of Bloor St.) Bring what you need for photography, sketching or painting and anything you wish to show the group when we compare our morning's work after lunch.
	April 4	TFN MEETING -Daylight Saving Time Begins!!!
	Wednesday Apr. 7 1:15 pm	UPTOWN TORONTO - discovery walk Leader: Ron Allan Meet at the Wellesley subway station.
$ ferry tickets	Saturday Apr. 10 9:30 am	WARDS ISLAND - nature walk Leader: John Eastwood Meet at the ferry docks at the foot of Bay St. in time to take the first ferry available. Bring lunch.
	Thursday Apr. 15 1:30 pm	BEACH BOARDWALK & ASHBRIDGES BAY - nature walk Leader: Boris Mather Meet on the south side of Queen St. East at Neville Park Blvd. Bring binoculars.
	Sunday April 18 1 pm	ROWNTREE/LAVENDER CREEKS - urban ecology Leaders: Dick Watts, Rob Colle, Richard Anderson et al Meet at Bert Robinson Park on Caledonia Rd. south of Eglinton Ave. West. This is a joint outing with the North Toronto Green Community.
	Thursday Apr. 22 10 am	HUMBER VALLEY - nature walk Leader: George Bryant Meet at the Old Mill subway station. Bring binoculars and lunch. Walk will finish at Eglinton Ave. West.
	Saturday April 24 8:30 am	LESLIE STREET SPIT - birds Leader: John Carley Meet at the foot of Leslie St. Bring binoculars. Morning only. Bring a snack & a drink.

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APRIL OUTINGS (cont'd)

Sunday April 25 10 am	UPPER LAVENDER CREEK - nature walk Leader: Ken Cook Meet at the southeast corner of Dufferin St. and Eglinton Ave. West. Morning only.
Thursday April 29 10 am	WILKET CREEK - birds and flowers Leader: Phoebe Cleverley Meet at the park entrance on the west side of Leslie St. just north of Eglinton Ave. East. Bring lunch and binoculars.

"Dame's rocket"
European species
established
in Toronto

Four petals
in mauve, white
or pink.

Lovely perfume,
showiest of the
mustards.

drawing by
Eva Davis

Under the crack willow
dame's rocket in pink and white.
Spring in the valley.

Haiku by Helen Juhola

PRESIDENT'S REPORT

Recently there's been a lot of activity on Toronto's central waterfront. Except for construction in the Cherry Street area, most of the activity is just talk and published proposals. However, the area of the lower Don River south of Queen Street East is noteworthy. There are two Environmental Assessments (EA) for projects which, once completed, will initiate major urban development in this area, e.g. West Don Lands, East Bayfront and the Port Lands. The recently started Lower Don West Remedial Flood Protection Project is primarily to remove a large area to the west of the Lower Don River from the regulatory floodplain. The regulatory floodplain is the area of the Lower Don River Watershed that's estimated to be affected by a storm equal in severity to Hurricane Hazel. Once completed, this will allow residential development (10,000+ people) in the West Don Lands and the East Bayfront (11,000+ people in mixed use). A levy or dike is among the alternatives being considered. The second EA, not started yet, consists of two projects, Don Mouth Naturalization and the Port Lands Flood Protection Project. Implementing these projects presents special challenges due to the intensive development in the area, existing infrastructure and pollution issues. Coordination of these interrelated projects also complicates matters. The Don Mouth Naturalization is especially interesting to us and will be monitored closely. Although I'm not aware of any proposals being considered, we would like to see renaturalization carried as far up the west side of the Lower Don River as possible.

Another interesting project (recently announced) is the Lakeshore East Corridor Rail Expansion for GO Transit. This project involves an additional mainline track on the Lakeshore East GO line from Cherry Street to the Scarborough GO station. At first this wouldn't seem of much interest to us until you realize that this stretch of GO track passes through or beside 6 parks and natural areas. From West to East these natural areas are Jimmie Simpson Park, Monarch Park, Gerrard Ravine, Oakridge Park, undeveloped land northeast of Gerrard and Victoria Park, and Natal Park. The Gerrard Ravine is of special interest as it is a relatively natural area that is bisected by the rail tracks. The other natural areas have been developed for active recreation. We will be monitoring this project closely as well.

Robin Powell

One of the ugliest experiences known to man (or to this man) is being caught in the realms of some birding enthusiast ready at the faintest encouragement to tear the helpless victim to shreds with his rarities, his experiences, his lists, his superb binoculars, his even more superb camera -- his need, normally childish in its eager transparency, so flagrantly to cap, to humiliate, to better us. It betrays neither love of birds nor love of humans, but an overwhelming passion for one's own expertise.

from "Call of the Wild" by John Fowles in NEWSCIENTIST, Dec. 20,2003-Jan. 9, 2004

KEEPING IN TOUCH

Feb. 5, 2004

Re: Karin Fawthrop's Article "Birds and Windows"

We were somewhat dismayed to read the "Birds and Windows" article in the February 2004 edition (#521) of Toronto Field Naturalist. The article bemoaned the sad fate of all of the birds that hit windows. While it is indeed sad, the situation is relatively common, and needn't arise, nor result in fatalities. There are a few simple things that all homeowners can do to prevent these deaths.

1) If you have a bird feeder or plants that are popular with birds, move them away from your windows. You may not enjoy as many close-up views of your favourite species, but you will spare them needless trauma and even death.
2) If it is impossible to move a bird's favourite feeding area, or, if they continue to hit your windows, there is a product made by the 3-M company that may prove to be effective. It is a non-reflective film that you put over your window. It won't disturb your view and allows birds to recognize windows as solid objects, thus deterring them from flying into them.
3) If a bird has hit your window, contain it in a box that has some airholes in it, and place it in a very dark and quiet place. Sometimes they are just stunned and need time to recover. If, however, after an hour the bird is unable to fly away, or if you notice any blood or other signs of injury, then it likely needs medical attention as quickly as possible, to prevent the damage from becoming either permanent or fatal. Luckily for us Torontonians there are non-profit wildlife hospitals that can provide this, and that are open every day of the year. You can call Toronto Wildlife Centre or Toronto Humane Society. Both organizations have the staff, skill and expertise to medically treat these birds, and offer them, and you, much happier endings.

Happy and safe backyard birding!

Leanne Pancer Kim Valenta

Listen to the crows,
their chatter an enigma,
all uttered in codes.

Haiku by Therese Paradis

PROJECTS

BECOME A FROGWATCHER!

Frogwatch-Ontario is a fun, easy, and exciting opportunity for individuals and families to explore local wetlands, collect valuable information about amphibians and contribute to our understanding of ecosystem health. Simply by listening for the calls of frogs and toads in your backyard, local wetland or pond, or at the cottage, you can help collect valuable information on the status and distribution of amphibians and their habitats in Ontario. The presence of calling amphibians indicates a healthy habitat. By recording the abundance or absence of calling frogs and toads, you are actually telling us the quality of the freshwater or wetland habitat in your area!

To register as a frogwatcher or learn more about this program, visit the Frogwatch-Ontario website at: www.naturewatch.ca or contact Adopt-A-Pond at: 361A Old Finch Ave. Scarborough, ON M1B 5K7 or fax at: 416-392-4979.

from the AMPHIBIAN VOICE, Vol.13 No.4, Winter 2003

JOIN THE CANADIAN LAKES LOON SURVEY

If you plan to spend at least one day in each of June, July and August on your favourite lake, then you can collect important information on the breeding success of loons by participating in the Canadian Lakes Loon Survey. All participants receive clear, concise survey instructions and data forms. You can return the data by mail or enter the information online. To participate you must register as a Bird Studies Canada member for $35. For more information call 1-888-448-BIRD or e-mail aqsurvey@bsc-eoc.org. or write to the Canadian Lakes Loon Survey, Bird Studies Canada, P.O. Box 160, Port Rowan, Ont. N0E 1M0.

from BIRDWATCH CANADA (insert), No. 26, Winter 2004

ATTENTION PARENTS AND KEEN TEEN BIRDERS!

The 2004 Doug Tarry Young Ornithologists' Workshop will be held at Long Point Bird Observatory near Port Rowan, Ont. from Friday July 30 through Sunday August 8, 2004. Workshop activities focus on hands-on training in field ornithology, including bird banding, censusing, field identification, birding trips, bird skinning, avian energetics, guest lectures and much more! Come make new friends who share similar interests in the world of birds and the natural sciences. Six applicants (ages 13-17) from across the country will be selected to attend. Applications are due April 30, 2004. For additional information and an application form, email lpbo@bsc-eoc.org or visit the web site (www.bsc-eoc.org/lpbo/yow.html).

from BIRDWATCH CANADA, No. 26, Winter 2004

PROJECTS (cont'd)

TORONTO WILDFLOWERS

Every month of the year, wildflowers have been reported in bloom in Toronto -- though sparsely in winter, of course. We are starting to keep a record-book of blooming-times here of species in this category: aroids to composites -- those most noticeable in the field -- among them both native and introduced herbaceous and woody plants.

So far, we have reports of only five March-blooming species, the native skunk cabbage and silver maple and introduced coltsfoot, dandelion and snowdrop -- no doubt there are more.

Please mail in reports of all Toronto plants for which you would like to see records kept, to the TFN office, 2 Carlton St., #1519, Toronto, M5B 1J3 When submitting outing reports, please "star" plants in bloom.

We are gleaning much material from back records in TFN files and back newsletter issues where artists have dated their field-drawings and authors have been conscious of the time element -- good practices -- thank you for remembering not only the WHAT and WHERE -- but also the WHEN.

Diana Banville

KIDNEY-LEAVED BUTTERCUP among Norway Maple roots - Earl Bales Park May 16, 1989

from a field drawing by Diana Banville,

BIRDING AROUND THE BLOCK

Since having young kids I don't get out birding much any more, but occasionally birds come to me. Here are a couple of interesting observations from the past year.

A spring flock of Bluejays:

At 10:10 am on May 14, 2003, I observed a loose flock of about 30 Bluejays flying purposefully (relatively high and fast) over the Annex in a northeasterly direction. I could not tell from whence they started out nor where they ended up, but their bearing was headed toward the vicinity of Mount Pleasant Cemetery. Projecting their course backward, we pass over Dufferin Grove Park and ultimately the southeast corner of High Park. I was surprised to see such a big flock of Bluejays because of the toll that the West Nile virus has recently taken on corvid populations, and also because such flocking behaviour in Bluejays seems more typical of the autumn. I am aware that small groups of Bluejays chase about in the spring as part of courtship, but this was a larger group, and all appeared to be heading for a common destination rather than flying follow-the-leader. Any thoughts about what was going on?

A Goshawk comes for Sunday brunch:

February 8, 2004—eleven o'clock on a bright cold Sunday morning. I'm holding my two year old daughter and we are looking out the back window, watching the squirrels chase and leap between the backyard trees and the balcony railing, and the pigeons wheel over the garages lining the back lanes running south and east of Palmerston and Dupont. Suddenly a hawk appears out of nowhere and strikes a pigeon out of the air. Hawk and prey flutter down together, landing in the lane on a snowbank behind the party rental place. I run to get my binoculars and my five year old daughter. As we crane our necks for better views and take turns looking through the binoculars, the hawk—an immature Goshawk more than twice the size of the lifeless pigeon—begins a leisurely brunch. After 10 minutes or so a man comes walking briskly down the lane. He doesn't take note of the birds, but as he passes, the hawk flies up with its meal clutched in its yellow talons and lands on a branch of a birch in the backyard next door. After settling in for a minute or so, the hawk resumes its meal in full view just ten metres from our window.

Allan Greenbaum

□

I know of no pleasure deeper than that which comes from comtemplating the natural world and trying to understand it.

from LIFE ON AIR: MEMOIRS OF A BROADCASTER by David Attenborough, Princeton University Press, 2002

To Feed or Not to Feed

For many of us who feel a kinship with or interest in the natural world and its creatures, feeding wildlife has become a regular part of our routines. From regularly attending to backyard bird feeders to scattering crumbs, seeds and scraps, many wild individuals and even populations have come to satisfy their hunger at the hand of the nature-enthusiast. During the winter months, a wild population that has become dependent on human food sources may require supportive feeding in order to survive. However, when the weather is warmer, and more natural food sources are available to dependent populations, it may be time to think about weaning the flock, as there are potential long-term effects that should be considered before feeding any wild animal.

Feeding animals by hand or scattering food can pose potential problems for the animals involved. Unfortunately, not everyone loves wildlife, and animals that are regularly fed directly by people can become habituated, losing their natural fear of us, a fear that is beneficial to their survival. Also, the type of food that they are offered often has little, if any, nutritional value. Each species has such varied and specific dietary needs that to repeatedly fill up on just one small part of what they require is extremely detrimental to their long-term health. For example, approximately 10 percent of the natural diet of squirrels is composed of nuts and seeds, so the odd peanut won't harm them. But a squirrel who is offered peanuts enough that they become the mainstay of his diet will likely develop long-term and irreversible nutritional deficiencies that seriously limit his life span and overall health. Recent research suggests that this may be becoming a problem in Toronto with migratory ducks and geese that are increasingly spending their winters in Canada. Unfortunately, geese cannot live on bread alone, and often fall victim to the harsh winters that they were not necessarily meant to endure.

In addition to our unforgiving Canadian winters, birds who are regular visitors to feeders are prone to more specific health risks as well as increased predation. The huge numbers of birds that can develop around well-stocked feeders can attract predators like birds of prey, who find an easy and constant food source in these unnaturally high populations. Bird feeders also tend to support species that are invisible to the naked eye, yet just as deadly as any raptor: these are parasites, bacteria, fungi and viruses that can flourish in an unclean feeder. These diseases also spread much more quickly through a feeder-dependent population because of the unnaturally close quarters they are living and eating in. The spread of disease is further facilitated by the many other species that feeders attract, such as mice and rats.

So what is the wildlife aficionado to do? One alternative is the planting of native trees, flowers and shrubs that are staples of the desired species' diet. Several books on what animals eat in the wild are currently available. This will not only allow you to provide for the immediate food needs of an animal, but will also help foster the development of populations that are free to enjoy their natural health and longevity, while retaining freedom from human dependency, high predation rates, habituation, and unnaturally rapid disease transmission. Hearty native Canadian plants will also regulate the dispensing of food themselves, should you ever decide to take a vacation.

Kim Valenta ▢

MULTITUDES OF VULTURES

There's no question but that there are a lot of Turkey Vultures around, and that every year the numbers increase. They're easy to spot, since they fly only in the daytime, are very large and have a distinctive dihedral (V-shaped) slant to their wings. At nesting time a pair will go off by themselves, lay their two eggs in a rudimentary nest (or no nest at all) on the ground (e.g. rocky ledges, hollow stumps and deserted buildings) and raise their young. The rest of the year they hang around in large, sociable groups, just waiting to be counted.

At Hawk Cliff*, slightly fewer than 2,500 were recorded passing by in September and October 1995. By 2003 the number had risen to 13,549. Over the years 1995-2003, about half of the nearly 107,000 hawks or hawk-related species seen at the site were Turkey Vultures. The figures from southern Michigan, where a hawk-watching station is located on the Detroit River just as it enters Lake Erie south of Detroit, are even more astonishing. From 349 TVs recorded in 1983, the numbers increase to 1957 in 1985, 10,637 in 1990, 27,708 in 1996, and 49,404 in 2002. Why is this happening?

First, it's a matter of diet. Close to 50% is carrion and the rest vegetation. They don't attack orchards or fish hatcheries, and they do clean up roadkill. For them the best location has numerous narrow roads, with a fair bit of traffic, edged with wide shoulders and preferably with fields beyond, all encouraging small animals to become roadkill and then vulture gourmet dinners. As the only known species that can eat spoiled meat and not succumb to food-poisoning, they have a large food source all to themselves.

Secondly, they have few enemies. The sheer size of individual birds, along with their habit of living in groups, deters most of the usual enemies. The easy comparison is with Canada Geese, but Turkey Vultures don't befoul paths and, indeed, spend much less time on the ground, more in the air and in trees.

The ones our watcher sees in the fall are likely not on their territories. They're getting ready for migration and testing their wings. Intelligent birds, the young ones at least benefit from practice in the complicated art of group flying. Those that summer around southern Ontario may go as far away as Central or South America. In the spring, they'll return just about the time of the spring equinox. One of the humans I talked to remembers watching the first vulture of the year, very early in the spring, hovering over the Arva hill, evidently watching Highway 4 very closely. On distribution maps of Ontario, Turkey Vultures appear well into the north and particularly the northwest, probably following the network of roads. Why venture over square miles of bush when humankind has laid out a route for you, one with a veritable cafeteria of food and trees to roost in alongside?

Flying south is pretty serious business. The time for games is in the late summer, when it would seem to be entirely possible that vultures might decide to befuddle a counter. That's when on a fine evening they play follow-the-leader, tag, soaring at times high in the air and out of sight, only to come down and do it all over again. Although generally paying little attention to humans, they can, it would seem, recognize familiar, friendly, figures, and give every indication of enjoying their company and even appreciating their games.

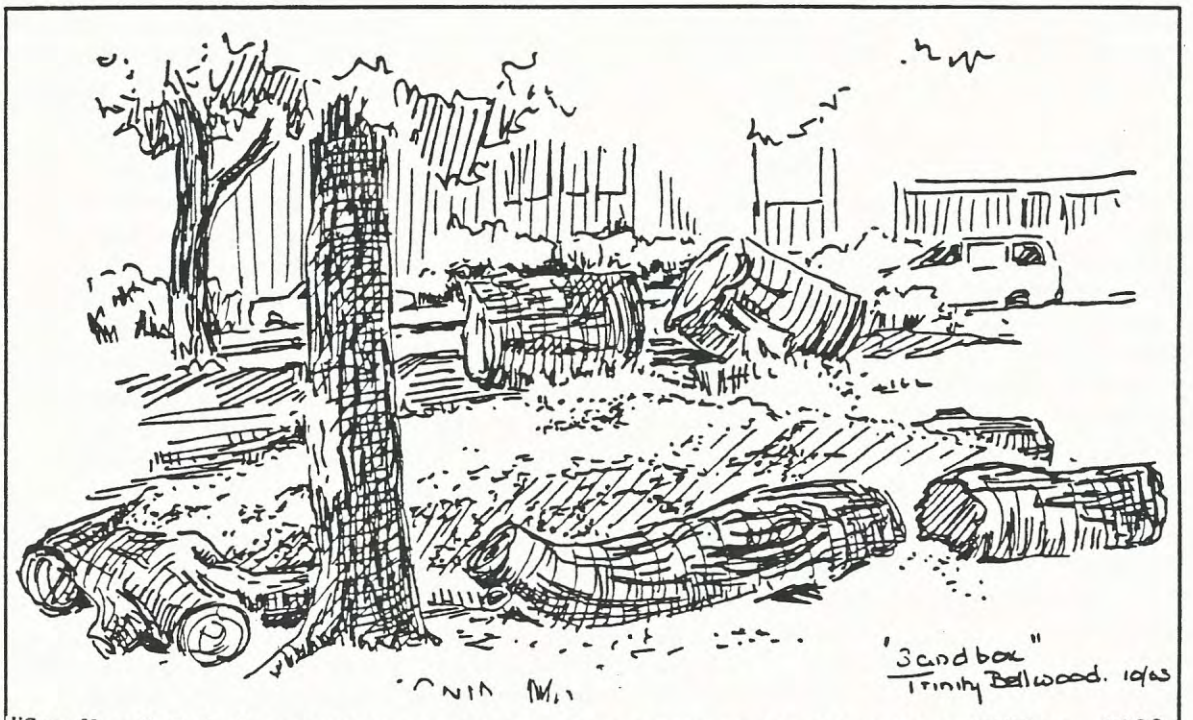
*Hawk Cliff is located east of Port Stanley on the north shore of Lake Erie.

VULTURES (cont'd)

The story is told of one group of vultures that discovered a soccer-sized ball lying on a lawn and proceeded to hit it back and forth to one another, repeating the game for several days in a row. Again, at a nature park in Florida, a caregiver reported that, working with a Turkey Vulture that had lost a wing and a toe, she was able to teach it more in two months than she had been able to teach a Red-tailed Hawk in eight months. She described the bird as "gentle, inquisitive, and very intelligent". So we have to say vultures would be quite capable of playing little games of deception with a counter, just for the fun of it. We also have to say that they probably wouldn't, having better things to do with their time. At this time of year (late summer), their energies are going to polishing their flying skills, practising working in groups and preparing for the journey south.

There is still the question as to why there are so many Turkey Vultures these days. After all, many humans can remember when there were no Turkey Vultures around at all. Slightly warmer winter temperatures certainly contribute to the spread northwards, but it's probably the ever-increasing network of roads, visible from high above the ground, accessible from above, and abundantly dotted with roadkill that has made the big difference. Shrew, mole, squirrel, gopher, mouse, rat, rabbit, bird, reptile, insect, muskrat, raccoon, skunk... the bones and hair of all of them appear in their pellets, all found dead, all sterilized on the way through the digestive system.

from "Ask the Cardinal" (information obtained from Dave Martin at Harrietsville and the Turkey Vulture Society) in THE CARDINAL No.194, February 2004 □



"Sandbox" Trinity-Bellwoods Park, site drawing by Mary Anne Miller, 2003

2002 AND 2003 CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT RESULTS

The 2002 Toronto Christmas Bird Count attracted an unprecedented amount of attention due to the arrival of West Nile Virus in the city earlier in the year. On the heels of our count, articles appeared in both the Toronto Star and Globe and Mail, citing the low numbers of crows and jays as 'proof' that the disease had a major impact on the city's birds (a questionable conclusion given uncertainties about the extent of migration in these species and the unusually high numbers recorded at other Ontario counts, but one which they seemed convinced of, regardless of what we told them). Following that, there were additional interviews with CFTO television, university biology professors, and other media outlets. Having discussed and analyzed the results so many times, I apparently never realized that I hadn't summarized them for the TOC newsletter! So, with my apologies for the delay, here are the results for both the 2002 and 2003 counts.

2002 results:

Following the 2001 count, we decided to standardize the date of the Toronto Christmas Bird Count to be on the last Sunday before Christmas. So, on December 22 we all set out for our annual search, under generally cloudy and windy conditions, but without snow and with temperatures just below freezing for most of the day.

Whether due to West Nile Virus or not, there's no question that the scarcity of American crows was the story of the day -- our count of 49 marked a decline of 97% from the previous year's 1,201, and the fewest since 1965. For the first time in memory, several route leaders reported not being able to find a single individual all day long.

In general, most of the birds with unusually low counts this year were backyard birds: mourning dove (279, lowest since 1982), blue jay (21, lowest since 1949), black-capped chickadee (296, lowest since 1978), red-breasted nuthatch (4, lowest since 1983), white-breasted nuthatch (27, lowest since 1978), and house finch (302, lowest since 1987). Some, such as the nuthatches, tend to naturally fluctuate considerably; others have been relatively stable, and the declines may reflect the impact of West Nile Virus. The only other species with notably low numbers this year were American black duck (92, lowest since 1975), herring gull (807, lowest since 1986), and glaucous gull (1, lowest since 1990).

But, it wasn't all bad news -- we set 13 new record highs and tied another. As has been the case in recent years, many of the record-breakers were waterfowl and gulls: American wigeon (44; 36 in 2001), greater scaup (5,866; 5,482 in 2000), long-tailed duck (13,938; 11,724 in 1997), bufflehead (1,096; 736 in 1998), hooded merganser (111; 105 in 2001), ring-billed gull (7,494; 6,540 in 2001), Iceland gull (23; 11 in 2000), and lesser black-backed gull (2; 1 in 1997). Rock dove improved upon last year's record of 2,983 with 3,521 this time around. For the sixth time, we had 2 merlins on the count. Cooper's hawks continue their increase, with 11 topping the 9 from 1998. Likewise, the steady growth of the mockingbird population continues, with this year's count of 20 topping the record of 14 established in 1999. Most impressive among the new records are two which shattered marks set more than a half-century ago: winter wren (21; 14 in 1950) and golden-crowned kinglet (88; 64 in 1952). ▷

CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT (cont'd)

Other species of particular note included two lesser black-backed gulls which were at Ashbridge's Bay, seen on the count for only the second time, and two eastern bluebirds at the north end of Rosedale Golf Club, the first record since 1984. Missed on the count itself, but an impressive count week record was an ovenbird in Sunnybrook Park.

2003 results:

For the third consecutive year, we experienced an improvement in the weather for count day -- this is the first time in recent memory that I would describe as having been truly pleasant, with no snow, generally sunny conditions, and above-freezing temperatures. Those who faced some stiff winds along the lakeshore might beg to disagree with my glowing assessment of the weather, but even they would have to agree conditions have been worse the last few years.

Walking my route along Wilket Creek and the East Don, I got the impression that I was seeing proof of the old adage of 'the better the weather, the worse the birding'. With no snow cover at all, the species that traditionally congregate in the few bare spots and at feeders were nowhere to be found. Fortunately, as I sat down to compile the results in the evening, it quickly became apparent that my experience had been atypical for the day -- most parties reported above-average results. In the end, our tally came to 89 species and 63,417 individuals. This is only one behind our record high for species, and is the fourth highest count of individuals in our history.

For the first time since 1999, we added a new species to our all-time list -- our 172nd entry. It was a male Eurasian wigeon, discovered on the Leslie Spit. Two other significant winter rarities were found this year. A Wilson's snipe in the East Don Valley near Finch was our first since 1973. Meanwhile, just a few kilometres downstream, an American woodcock was flushed near the FON headquarters, only the third record in the history of our count.

Several other good sightings in 2003 included 2 red-necked grebes (Leslie Spit and Ontario Place), 2 double-crested cormorants (Old Mill and Humber Bay), 2 northern goshawks (Serena Gundy and James Gardens), 4 short-eared owls (Downsview Park), 1 ruby-crowned kinglet (Humber River north of James Gardens), and 1 common yellowthroat (Humber Marshes).

There were seven new record highs, and four ties with previous records. Three species have now set new records in three consecutive years: American wigeon (58; 44 in 2002 and 36 in 2001), hooded merganser (172; 111 in 2002 and 105 in 2001), and ring-billed gull (8,241; 7,494 in 2002 and 6,540 in 2001). Another two improved upon last year's records: greater scaup (6,896; 5,866 in 2002), and northern mockingbird (24; 20 in 2002). The most impressive increase in numbers was shown in the lesser scaup with 147, with the 94 from route 2 alone more than tripling the 2001 record of 31. Also of particular note were red-breasted nuthatches at 63, breaking the 1997 record by seven, and showing a nice comeback from last year's nearly twenty-year low. Species tying previous highs were ruddy duck (2; 1972 and 1976), merlin (2; six previous years), Thayer's gull (2; 1998) and swamp sparrow (11; 1976). Also of note, though not in record numbers, were hairy woodpecker (66: highest since 1965) and red-winged blackbird (18; highest since 1987).

CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT (cont'd)

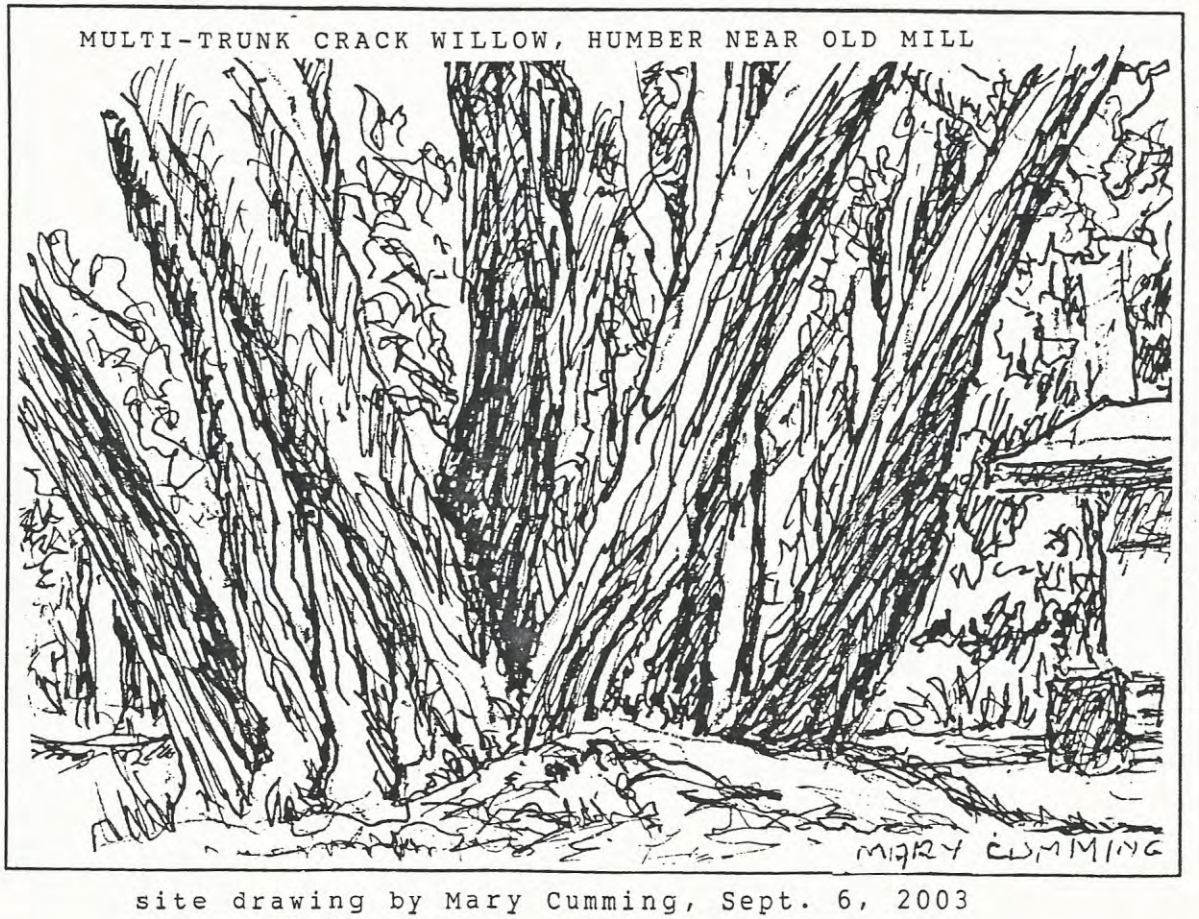
This year's lows mirror 2002 to a large extent. American black ducks continued their decline, with 82, now the fewest since 1946. Surprisingly, mallards were also down this year to 2,610, their lowest number since 1990. All the large gulls were scarce: herring gull (777, fewest since 1986), great black-backed gull (54; fewest since 1990), and glaucous gull (none; missed for the first time since 1987). Blue jays at 22 and American crows at 76 showed just a slight increase over last year's long-time lows of 21 and 49, respectively.

We only had one count week species this year, ring-necked duck. Among the species missed were several which had been recorded five or more times in the past decade, including common loon, horned grebe, ring-necked pheasant, bald eagle, northern harrier, northern saw-whet owl, and common grackle.

Acknowledgments:

As always, we are indebted to the large number of volunteers who spent the day searching out all of the birds -- 90 observers and 6 feeder watchers in 2002; 93 and 4 in 2003.

Adapted from an article by Marcel Gahbauer, in THE TORONTO ORNITHOLOGICAL NEWSLETTER, #142, February 2004. □



site drawing by Mary Cumming, Sept. 6, 2003

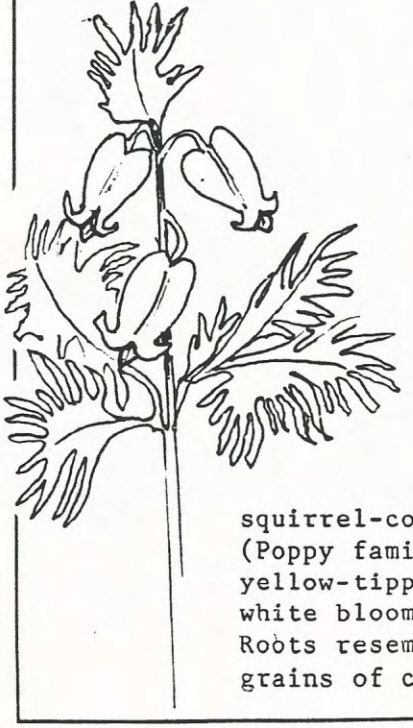
SPRING FLOWERS
in forest bordering Etobicoke Creek, Brampton
(all native Toronto species)

spring beauty
(Purslane family)
flowers white or
mauve-pink, dark
veined

trout lily
(Lily family)
yellow,
6-petalled

blue cohosh
(Barberry family)
greenish-brown
flowers

Eva Davis
May 3, 2003



squirrel-corn
(Poppy family)
yellow-tipped,
white blooms.
Roots resemble
grains of corn.

bloodroot
(Poppy family)
white flowers
Named after
its orange-red
juice.

IN THE NEWS

BIRDS OF PREY

Recently, I noticed a few people standing in the snow at a parkette at Dundas and Bay, staring intently at something. They were gazing at a juvenile red hawk* calmly tearing up and devouring a pigeon. It was indifferent to the attention it was attracting, and its leisurely dining was a compelling spectacle. A couple of years ago, my wife came across a similar scene in Allan Gardens. There are hawks all over the place in big cities. In Toronto, peregrine falcons regularly nest on hotel ledges and stoop for prey, at well over 160 kilometres an hour. Though we do our best to keep our concrete canyons free of any significant life except our own, nature usually finds a way to wriggle back in and surprise us.

*[presumed red-tailed hawk]

from OUR TOWN · A CITY DIARY, by Geoff Rytell, in THE GLOBE AND MAIL, February 7, 2004

DESTRUCTION OF BIRD NESTS IN CANADA'S FORESTS UNDER PROBE

Under one of the world's oldest agreements for environmental protection, Canada and the United States agreed in 1916 to prohibit any destruction of migratory birds' nests unless specifically authorized by permit. A complaint launched two years ago by eight environmental groups -- both American and Canadian -- claims the rule is rarely enforced and routinely ignored by forestry companies logging the boreal forest, where 93 per cent of birds are migratory.

Officials with the North American Commission for Environmental Co-operation -- a watchdog agency under the free trade agreement -- have recommended that Canada be investigated for not enforcing the Migratory Birds Convention Act. The complaint focuses on logging by companies licensed by Ontario's Ministry of Natural Resources.

Information obtained from the ministry and the forestry companies showed that in 2001-02 more than 44,000 migratory birds' nests were destroyed in the area managed by the ministry. The number -- for a portion of one province -- is an indicator of widespread habitat destruction across Canada due to activities like forestry, resource extraction, pesticide use and road construction.

Despite legal jurisdiction to do so, Environment Canada has failed to conduct a single assessment of a forest management plan or proposed logging operation for the threat to migratory birds. A major concern is that so little is known about many of Canada's migratory birds. An estimated 3 billion to 5 billion make the annual trip -- as long as 10,000 kilometres -- from northern nesting grounds to winter habitat in the southern U.S., Mexico, the Caribbean and as far south as Argentina.

A recent study sponsored by the Canadian Boreal Initiative discovered population decreases among 40 of the 186 species of boreal-nesting birds, 93 per cent of which are migratory. In Ontario, the Connecticut warbler leads the list of migrants in decline, followed by the olive-sided fly-catcher, the black-throated green warbler and the chestnut-sided warbler.

from an article by Kate Harries, in THE TORONTO STAR, February 7, 2004

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IN THE NEWS (cont'd)

LIBERALS TAKE STEPS TO SAFEGUARD WATER

Ontario is to introduce legislation this spring that for the first time will protect water from the source to the tap and charge bottlers for the resource. Ontario will be the first province in Canada to charge for water on a volume basis. For example, a cost will be assessed to beverage manufacturing, water bottling, fruit or vegetable canning or pickling, ready-mix concrete manufacturing and aggregate processing where water is incorporated into a product, such as slurry, which is used to make paint, paper, antacid tablets and calcium supplements.

It is too early to say how much the province will charge for the water and it remains unclear whether other users, such as golf courses, will also have to pay, even though much of the water would find its way back into the aquifer. Farms, however, will be exempt. The province is going to strengthen the rules around water-taking permits and get a handle on how much water is being taken from aquifers, rivers and streams.

Currently, there are 5,300 water permits in Ontario, allowing up to 580 billion litres of water to be taken daily from the ground, creeks and rivers. Most of that, 480 billion litres, is for power production.

News of the long-awaited source-water protection, which has been considered by various governments for at least 20 years, was welcomed by environmentalists and critics alike. Much of the responsibility for protecting water sources would fall to the province's 36 conservation authorities.

from an article by Richard Brennan, in the TORONTO STAR, February 13, 2004

COLD TRUTHS ABOUT GLOBAL WARMING

Ice-core records from Greenland and elsewhere going back more than 100,000 years show that the planet's climate has often reorganized itself in periods as short as three or four decades, with regional temperature changes of 8 degrees Celsius or more in as little as a few years. Once the climate has reorganized itself, the new patterns can persist for centuries, even millenniums.

So here's the paradox: While Earth is, on the whole, getting hotter -- very quickly so by historical standards -- some large regions could become much colder, because of radical shifts in the way heat circulates around the planet.

extracted from an article by Thomas Homer-Dixon, in THE GLOBE AND MAIL, February 16, 2004 ▷

The northward invasion of southern species into Canada has been well documented for a host of species including Carolina wren, northern cardinal, northern mockingbird, blue-winged warbler, golden -winged warbler and hooded warbler. Climate warming is likely responsible for these range expansions.

from "Species in Focus" in BIRDWATCH CANADA, No. 26, Winter 2004

IN THE NEWS (cont'd)

NEW ROAD COULD PAVE OVER VAUGHAN'S WILDERNESS

Vaughan conservationists are vowing to place themselves "in front of the bulldozers" to stop construction of a planned road that would pass through environmentally sensitive parkland. The road's opponents had hoped the project would be stopped at an Ontario Municipal Board hearing slated to begin earlier this month. The National Golf Club, on Pine Valley just south of the proposed link, was set to argue the road should be erased from the city's official plan. Reportedly, part of the four-lane connection would be built on a city-owned right of way being leased by the golf club. But at the 11th hour, opposition was withdrawn after the club reached an agreement with city council behind closed doors. According to the mayor of Vaughan all property matters involving city land are dealt with behind closed doors.

Currently, Pine Valley Dr. ends just north of Langstaff Rd. and begins again north of Rutherford Rd. The link to connect the two segments would be built through the Boyd Conservation Area and cross the East Humber River Valley, sections of which have been designated as environmentally sensitive and areas of natural and scientific interest. Vaughan owns a right of way of between 27 and 28½ metres through the park that is currently nothing more than a footpath. Vaughan officials say studies show the link is needed to meet demands of future development planned east of Pine Valley to Highway 400 and north of Rutherford to Teston Rd.

Vaughan has hired a consultant to study the environmental, social and economic impact of building the link and bridge and mitigation. Preliminary estimates peg the cost of the project at about $24 million. The Toronto and Region Conservation Authority has asked the province to insist on a more in-depth environmental assessment of the link because the proposed road isn't a routine infrastructure project. The authority had planned to present environmental arguments against the link at the OMB but doesn't have legal grounds to proceed now that opposition has been withdrawn.

from an article by Leslie Ferenc, in the TORONTO STAR, February 17, 2004

HOTEL SEEKS TO KEEP TREES

Vaughan council has asked the province to allow a local hotel to test an unapproved pesticide on infected trees that have been attacked by the Asian long-horned beetle in its courtyard. The owners of Dodge Suites, a family-owned, extended-stay hotel, which is located at Steeles Ave.W. and Highway 400, said the courtyard would be ruined if the trees were removed. The pesticide is currently registered in Canada only for use against white grubs and in flea collars. It is currently being used in the U.S. to treat trees 400 to 800 metres away from the last known area of infestation.

from an article in the TORONTO STAR, February 26, 2004

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IN THE NEWS (cont'd)

WHOOPING CRANES

There are about 430 whooping cranes in the world, up from 21 in 1941. Researchers believe there were once as many as 10,000 whooping cranes in North America.

from SOCIAL STUDIES by Michael Kesterton, in THE GLOBE AND MAIL, January 30, 2004

LAZY CARRIER PIGEONS?

When Oxford scientists put tracking devices on homing pigeons, they discovered the birds were often navigating by following main highways and straight roads, even though this mentally less-taxing approach added kilometres to their journey. Pigeons appear to ignore their inbuilt directional instinct and follow the road system.

from SOCIAL STUDIES by Michael Kesterton, in THE GLOBE AND MAIL, February 17, 2004

THE REAL JUNGLE

"Do natural history programs on television distort reality?" writes David Attenborough. "Of course they do. Go for a walk in a tropical rainforest after watching a program about one and you will be in no doubt of that. On television, all kinds of animals appeared continuously all over the place. In reality, you may be lucky to see a single bird or monkey."

from SOCIAL STUDIES by Michael Kesterton, in THE GLOBE AND MAIL, February 4, 2004

CATCHING FLAP

Toronto Hydro is patting itself on the back after an environmental assessment found that its wind turbine at the CNE does not kill birds. Just two dead birds were recovered during the recently released assessment. [Report in TFN office).

That's a relief. Everyone wants to hear good things about the first wind turbine in the city, and the first in a downtown urban setting in North America.

The villains in this story are the city's buildings and cats. A single feral cat can kill 1,000 birds annually, and buildings were responsible for 4,700 bird deaths last year, according to an organization that monitors bird migrations. Michael Mesure, executive director of FLAP [the Fatal Light Awareness Program] says that he has concerns about Hydro's windmill findings. The study, which took place in two phases, in the spring and late summer, ended in September. Mesure notes that fall migration goes to the end of November. Seventy per cent of the collisions that we encounter in the fall happen in October, after the study (done by Hydro) was finished. We believe that they missed a significant portion of the migration season.

But while FLAP has dashed off a letter to Toronto Hydro outlining its concerns, Mesure isn't about to launch a feud between environmentalists. We are not opposed to these turbines per se, he says. Most important is ensuring that they are carefully placed. Positioning them near large bodies of water can be hazardous to birds.

from an article in NOW, February 19, 2004

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IN THE NEWS (cont'd)

DRUG FOR CATTLE SAID TO BE KILLING VULTURES IN INDIAN SUBCONTINENT

A mysterious and precipitous plunge in the number of vultures in South Asia, which has pushed three species to the brink of extinction, is probably a result of inadvertant poisoning by a drug used widely in livestock to relieve fever and lameness. Studies in Pakistan showed that the drug, diclofenac, an anti-inflammatory commonly prescribed for arthritis and pain in people, caused acute kidney failure in vultures when they ate the carcasses of animals that had recently been treated with it. The devastation of vulture populations was the first clear case of major ecological damage caused by a pharmaceutical product.

There has been growing concern among scientists and environmentalists about the "vast amount of drugs that end up in the environment one way or another". A study in 2002 by the United States Geological Survey found traces of many different pharmaceuticals and "personal care products" -- including steroids, insect repellents and many others -- in the American water supply. The effect of these traces is unknown, but the concern is about the unexpected. The vulture finding in South Asia comes as a surprise: while environmental toxins had been suspected in the deaths, a pharmaceutical drug had not.

The investigation, which began in 2000, was prompted by reports of a 95 percent drop in the number of Asian white-backed vultures, Indian vultures, and slender-billed vultures.

In the United States diclofenac, which is in the same class of nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs as ibuprofen, is not used in veterinary medicine, although it is often prescribed for people. In Asia the drug is widely given to cattle because it is cheap and because losing livestock to lameness or fever can be devastating to small farmers with only a few animals.

The rapid decline in vulture populations was first reported in the late 1990s. Vulture populations had been shrinking gradually from loss of habitat and disease throughout Asia, but what happened in India and Pakistan was different. The decline was quick and severe and posed a problem in a part of the world that relied heavily on the ubiquitous vultures for the efficient disposal of dead livestock.

Unlike DDT, which devastated populations of birds of prey, diclofenac does not accumulate in the tissues of livestock or birds. But for the vultures, it is poison. Researchers and other organizations said they intend to push for a ban on the drug in veterinary use in India, Nepal and Pakistan.

from an article by James Gorman, in THE NEW YORK TIMES, January 29, 2004 ▷

NATURE RESERVE WORK PARTY planned for sometime in May before outing to reserves on May 29th. Call 416-593-2656 if you are interested in helping.

IN THE NEWS (cont'd)

TREES, PARKS, GULLS AND LARKS

Toronto is a wonderful city for the birdwatcher. There have been 392 species of birds seen in the GTA, more than any other region of Ontario, including even world-famous Point Pelee. A favourite park is Lambton Woods, along the Humber River north of Dundas St.W., where the best time to visit is May. Another spot is the Toronto Islands, where there are remote beaches for shorebirds, patches of forest for owls and other shy woodland birds, even open areas for snowy owls and meadowlarks at the airport.

Another good place is Tommy Thompson Park on Leslie Spit, which stretches for five kilometres of wilderness out into Lake Ontario. From May to October, a free bus will take the visitor most of the way out on weekends. Birders can easily spend a full day out there, exploring the woods and open areas. In early summer, the enormous colonies of cormorants, gulls, terns and herons are awe-inspiring, although disturbances should be avoided. In spring, it is not unusual to record more than 100 species of birds here. This is also the best place to find vagrant butterflies.

from an article in the TORONTO STAR, August 31, 2003

ASIAN LONGHORNED BEETLE

Vaughan council has officially thanked the man credited with identifying the first Asian Longhorned Beetle found in Canada. Heiko Mantik, of Oshawa, was the first to identify the imported beetle after a co-worker at a Woodbridge plant discovered a strange looking insect on his car. Mantik, along with his wife Janette and daughters Keisha, 10, and Shania, 8, researched the unusual bug on the Internet, then contacted the Canadian Food Inspection Agency a few days later.

from the TORONTO STAR, February 7, 2004

TASK FORCE TO STUDY PLAN FOR GREENBELT

A plan for a massive greenbelt that would ring the Greater Toronto Area from Niagara Falls to Lake Scugog should be in place a year from now, Municipal Affairs John Gerretsen says. A 13-member task force will look into how to create the greenbelt and the price tag. It is to report back by the fall. The task force will examine which areas should be covered, how to protect natural water and water systems, how to best manage uses such as farming and quarries, and how to ensure the land can also be used recreationally.

While the province won't necessarily own all the ecologically sensitive land in the greenbelt, it will be protected by legislation. The Greenbelt Protection Act is currently before the Legislature and, as an interim measure, Gerretsen has imposed a minister's zoning order on portions of the greenbelt study area, overriding local zoning. Urban areas have been excluded from the greenbelt and properties now zoned for rural purposes can expect to stay that way with no hope of future development if they fall within the greenbelt.

from an article by Richard Brennan, in the TORONTO STAR, February 17, 2004

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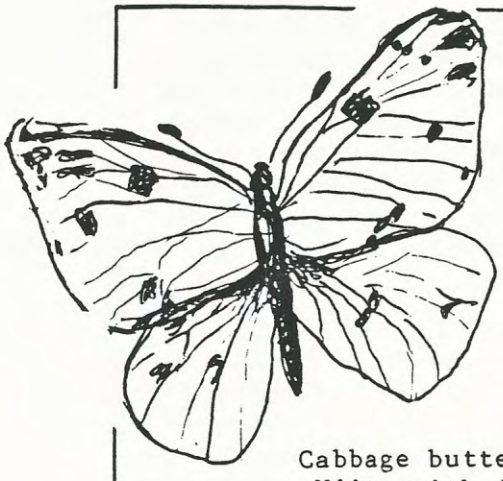
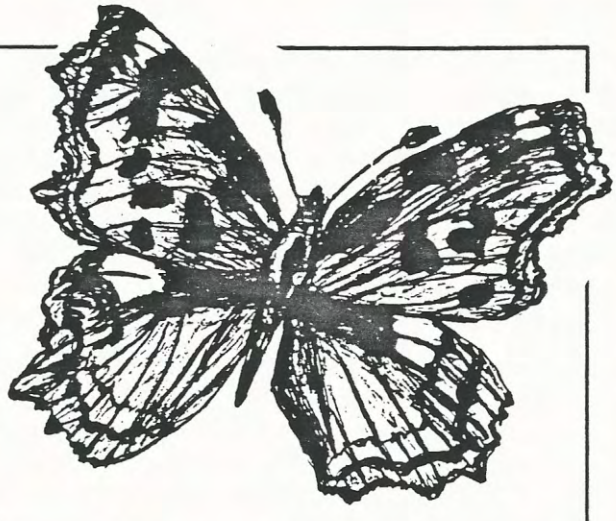
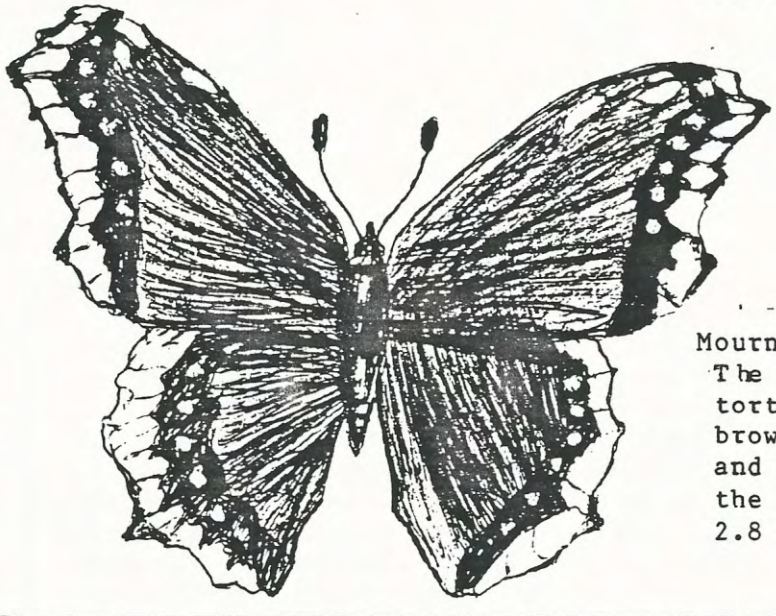
SPRING BUTTERFLIES



Cabbage butterfly
White with dark splashes
The drawing is of a male;
female markings are much
more defined.
1.3 to 1.6 inches



Compton tortoise shell
Vivid orange with striking
white and dark splashes,
wing edges serrated.
2.6 to 2.8 inches



Mourning cloak
The most striking of the
tortoise shells. A rich
brown, with blue dots
and bright yellow bordering
the wings.
2.8 to 3.3 inches

Seen on a meander along Etobicoke Creek, Brampton

Eva Davis

THE WEATHER (THIS TIME LAST YEAR)

April 2003, Toronto

After the promise of spring during the latter part of March, April turned on us with a serious winter storm on April 3rd to 4th and temperatures remaining just below freezing. An arctic high pressure cell hovered just to the north, with a storm system just to our south. The result: several centimetres of dense ice pellety snow and freezing rain. We have been used to mostly warm spring weather the past few years, with the last significant April cold spells in the 1996-1997 time frame. But we were reminded that heavy winter storms are not unusual in this part of the world in April. The ice cover lasted about a week, depending upon the exposure of any given site.

After April 8th, we had more typical bright spring weather -- plenty of sunshine and intervals of warmth and chill, none of which were lasting. Sunshine at Pearson was 195 hours, about ten more than usual. Temperatures averaged 6.2°C downtown and 5.7°C at Pearson, about a degree below normal and the lowest since 1996, because of the wintry spell early in the month. Such phenological indicators as wood frogs and forsythia were slightly late in consequence.

Aside from the winter storm, April was fairly dry. The total rainfall was 22.2 mm downtown, the lowest since 1946 which had 21.1 mm. Snowfall amount was just moderately above normal, but because the frozen precipitation was so dense during the storm, monthly precipitation was actually near normal. April was windy. The average wind speed of 19.7 km/h at Toronto Island was the highest since 1995, and Pearson's 17.3 km/h was the highest since 1996.

The winter of 2002-2003 was a snowy one. 164.1 cm fell downtown, exceeded as recently as 2001; but Pearson's total snowfall of 154.5 cm was the highest since 1975-76, which had 163.3 cm.

Gavin Miller

□

THE ETHICS OF PLANT RESCUE

I wonder... When I consider the number of people who made many repeated trips to rescue plants, I wonder what could have been accomplished had that same time and energy been directed towards saving the site? ... Perhaps if we had not been so focused on "rescuing" individual plants we could have rescued an entire ecosystem. What good are the plants that we saved really? They have become mere gardening material rather than part of a dynamic ecosystem. Is that a worthwhile trade? ... Does the immediate gratification of "owning" rescued plants outweigh the long and sometimes arduous struggle to protect and preserve our nature heritage?

extracted from an article by Moralea Milne in THE VICTORIA NATURALIST, Vol. 60.4, Jan./Feb. 2004

COMING EVENTS

Toronto Ornithological Club - Jim Baillie Memorial Bird Walks - aimed at the intermediate birder, but beginners are welcome. Free.

- Sat. April 24 from 8 am (all day) with Hugh Currie. Meet at the foot of Leslie St. and bring a lunch. Topic is early migrants.

Toronto Entomologists' Association

- Sat. April 24 at 1 pm - Butterfly Conservatory for Education with Roy Gucciardil. Meeting takes place in Room 113 in Northrop Frye Hall, 73 Queen's Park Cres. East. For more details call 905-727-6993.

Mycological Society of Toronto

- April 19 at 7:45 pm in the Civic Garden Centre (Leslie & Lawrence). Guests welcome at one meetingor foray prior to joining. Information: www.myctor.org

High Park Sunday Afternoon Walking Tours

- April 4 - Spring comes to Grenadier Pond at 1:15 pm
- April 18 - The birds of spring (meet at 9 am & bring binoculars)
- April 25 - Earth Day at Colborne Lodge (12 noon to 4 pm) no walk

Meet at the south side of the Grenadier Restaurant. $2 donation expected. Call 416-392-1748 for 416-392-6916 for more details.

Toronto and Region Conservation Authority

- Highland Watershed Event - Wed. April 7 from 7 pm to 9 pm at the L'Amoreaux Community Recreation Centre, northwest corner of McNicoll Rd. and Kennedy Rd. Free.
  Call 416-661-6600, ext. 5660 to register two days before the event.

Citizens Concerned About the Future of the Etobicoke Waterfront

- Sat. April 24 from 9 am to 11 am with Bob Yukich at Sam Smith Park at the foot of Kipling Ave. (in the south parking lot). Everyone welcome. Free. Call 416-252-7047 for more details.

Toronto Wildflower Society

- Wed. April 28 at 7:30 pm at the Beaches Recreation Centre, 6 Williamson Rd. The topic is "Ask the wildflower gardening expert" with Terry Fahey. Free. Call 416-222-5736 for more information.

North Toronto Green Community

- Sat. April 24 from 9 am to 12 noon - Canada Earth Day cleanup of a part of Burke Brook. Meet at the southeast corner of Avenue Rd. and Sylvanvalley Way (north of Lawrence Ave. West). Call 416-781-7663.

Ian Wheal Heritage Walks (Call 416-570-6415 for more details.)

- Sat. April 10 at 1:30 pm - Lost Ponds of Silverthorn. Meet at Blackthorn and Eglinton Ave. West.
- Sun. April 25 at 2 pm - Gravel Bar Prairie. Meet at the southwest corner of Dundas St. West and Scarlett Rd.

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