



THE BULLETIN

December 2007 No. 468

2007-2008 EXECUTIVE

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Events calendar

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| Botany Group Meeting | Monday January 7, 2008. 12:30pm |
| Executive Meeting | Tuesday January 8, 2008. 7:30pm Where: Robert Holland Centre |
| Bird Group Meeting | Wednesday January 9, 2008. 7:30pm Topic: Semi-Palmated and Wilson's Plover Host: Mike Turk 905-731-8380 |
| General Meeting | Thursday January 17, 2008. 7:30pm Speaker: Dr Ian Shelton Topic: David Dunlap Observatory Location: Richmond Hill Presbyterian Church, Wallace Hall. 10066 Yonge St. |

Check for more Events and Outings on Page 2

DDO - the wild heart of Richmond Hill

By Denise Potter

While Rod and I have tried to explore every public park and ravine in our neighbourhood, the David Dunlap Observatory property was always off limits to us, the dense forest was surrounded by a fence laced with "Private Property! No Trespassing!" signs.

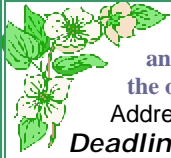
We'd often see deer in the meadow fronting on Bayview, once a coyote, and once a fox, streaking into the woods like a ghost, but rarely had we ever passed the gates and climbed the winding road up to the Observatory itself.



It is not an old forest. Our people chopped down the original forest to farm the land before Confederation. Decades ago, U of T students planted many of the trees we see now, and many are transplants from Europe and elsewhere, but still they have grown to make a place that is something like wild.

Continued on Page 3...

Please see article on Page 5, for information about our campaign to create the "David Dunlap Park and Observatory"



The Bulletin is published 9 times per year, from September to May inclusive, by the **Richmond Hill Naturalists**, and is mailed free to members. The Bulletin is the official publication of the Richmond Hill Naturalists, a non-profit organization the objectives of which are to stimulate public interest in natural history and to encourage the preservation of our natural areas.

Address Correspondence to: **Richmond Hill Naturalists, P.O. Box 32217, RPO Harding, Richmond Hill, ON, L4C 9S3**

Deadlines: The editor encourages submissions from any member on any topic related to nature or conservation, and in particular, any issue that might be of interest or concern to members of this club. e-mail: editor@rhnaturalists.ca **Deadlines are the 2nd Thursday of each month.**

Bulletin Advertisers have been selected because of their relevance to member interests.

Members are encouraged to patronize our advertisers and please mention that you saw their ad in our Bulletin.

Change of Address: Any change of email or street address should be sent to Mike Turk who prints the envelopes for the Bulletin mailing. See the Executive List for contact information.

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Visit our Website at www.rhnaturalists.ca

MEMBERSHIP IN RHN


The *Membership Application Form*, is available at each General Meeting from Mike Turk, or in our club brochure, available from any executive member. You may also sign up or renew at <http://www.rhnaturalists.ca/membership/>


NEW MEMBERS:

*Carla vonn Worden, Jim Bodi,
Penny Parmenter, Elinor Mansbridge*
Meet new members at club events and say Hello!

EVENTS FUTURE

 - **Tuesday January 8, 2008. 7:30pm. Executive Meeting** will be held at [Phyllis Rawlinson Park](#).


 - **Wednesday January 9, 2008. 7:30pm. Bird Group meeting.** The meeting is hosted by Mike Turk and will be held at 217 Romfield Circuit in Thornhill. Contact Mike at 905-731-8380 for more info.
Topic: Semi-Palmated and Wilson's Plover.


 - **Thursday January 17, 2008. 7:30pm. Dr. Ian Shelton** will speak to us about The **David Dunlap Observatory** [DDO] in downtown Richmond Hill at our next **General Meeting** at the Richmond Hill Presbyterian Church, Wallace Hall. 10066 Yonge St., first block North of Major Mackenzie Dr., West side. For further info contact Marianne Yake at 905-883-3047, or visit our web site at www.RHNaturalists.ca.




Ian Shelton made a discovery that wowed the world and changed the course of astronomy -- he found the first supernova visible to the naked eye in four centuries. Using a small, 50-year-old telescope that he had refurbished himself, and looking at the Large Magellanic Cloud on the morning of Feb. 24, 1987, Dr. Shelton spotted the brightest supernova since the one observed by Johannes Kepler in 1604. It was later to be dubbed 'Supernova 1987A'. The discovery provided modern astronomers and other scientists with unprecedented research opportunities and a whole new science was born that day. To this day, he supernova is still one of the most studied objects in the night sky. In 2002 he was one of fifty Canadians chosen to represent the "past 50 years of Canadian achievement". Ian now runs the University of Toronto's outreach program at the David Dunlap Observatory.

Please note: Richmond Hill Naturalists welcomes anyone to volunteer as an outing leader.

 - **Friday January 4 to Saturday January 5, 2008.** The 2008 **Green Reel Environmental Film Festival** takes place at The City Playhouse. Tickets are \$4 per film - Day Passes are \$10 each - Full Festival Passes are \$18. Reserve your tickets by calling the Box Office at 905-882-7469. Admission into the City Playhouse "Green Market" of green vendors, environmental groups, information kiosks, activities and refreshments is free and several community screenings are being held free of charge. The City Playhouse is located at 1000 New Westminister Drive in Vaughan. www.cityplayhouse.ca

 - **Sunday January 27, 2008. 1:30pm to Sunset.** Toronto Ornithological Club **Jim Baillie Memorial Bird Walk**, "Gulls and Waterfowl". Meet in the Sunnyside Parking Lot at the foot of Windermere Ave. Dress warmly.

 - **February 15-18, 2008.** Count for Fun, Count for the Future! The 11th annual **Great Backyard Bird Count** is looking to top the record-breaking 2007 count, when participants submitted more than 80,000 checklists!

Participation in this citizen-science program is a vital part of bird conservation in North America. For information and to get involved visit **Bird Studies Canada** at www.bsc-eoc.org/national/pfw.html or call (888) 448-2473.



- **Tuesday April 22-26, 2008.** 7th International Ecocity Conference and World Summit. San Francisco, California. For more information contact Kirstin@ecocityworldsummit.org or visit www.ecocityworldsummit.org.



- **Fri to Sun June 6-8, 2008.** Second Annual **Carden Festival** and **Ontario Nature AGM.** Field trips, workshops, Bird identification sessions, kayaking, displays, exhibits and the Ontario Nature Annual General Meeting sound out the activities of the Festival. See the program at www.cardenguide.com/Festival. Discount passes are available by contacting Diana Piche at diana.piche@sympatico.ca or call 905-773-4199.



MEMBER SUBMISSIONS

... Continued from Page 1

Because the [University of Toronto](http://www.utoronto.ca) may soon declare these 189 acres of meadow and forest to be "surplus land", we need to explore the interior, document it and get to know it, just in case it disappears forever beneath the asphalt desert that has buried much of the rest of Richmond Hill.

So for the past few weekends we've walked the DDO, and have been startled by the diversity and abundance of wildlife we've found. In a brief hour on Thanksgiving weekend we surprised a Cooper's hawk, three passing Sharp-shinned hawks, and a red-tailed hawk...a triple-handful of flickers, hairy and downy woodpeckers, a pair of Eastern Towhees, an astonishing number of robins, hermit and wood thrushes. There were gold finches, house finches, purple finches, chickadees...tiny ruby-crowned and golden-crowned kinglets, red- and white-breasted nuthatches.

Some thickets were full of white-crowned sparrows, others offered cover to hordes of white-throated sparrows and juncos. Yellow-rumped warblers and cedar waxwings trilled while a family of catbirds mewed at us. We didn't see deer but they clearly saw us...we heard their alarm calls in the forest all around us but never laid eyes on them through the thick undergrowth. On later walks we've seen a phoebe and even a merlin, glowering at us from the radio tower.



The following Saturday was the Ontario Nature meeting of representatives from Nature groups around central Ontario. Keynote speaker was Ian Shelton, a well-known U of T astronomer longing for Dark Skies, but pointing out that much real valid work still goes on at the DDO.

Despite the blustery weather, some of the visiting representatives and several Richmond Hill naturalists spent another pleasant hour walking the DDO lands. RH Naturalist Joe Ag, a long-time neighbour of the DDO lands, led us along a well-used deer trail through meadow, orchard and thicket to a kind of secret place. Coyote, raccoon and other creatures have left their mark in many places on the path. Not far from Bayview, but completely hidden from the traffic, among the stands of maple, birch and hawthorn, we found the fascinating yellow birch trees, standing on their toes above the dirt, their tangled roots sprawling naked to the world over the ground.



Fortunately an MNR forester was there to explain that the yellow birch often begin growing on the stumps of dead trees, so their roots begin above the ground and grow down over the stump, spreading across the top of the soil. The damp earth beneath the roots was scored with the prints of deer hooves.



Several explorations later Rod and I realize we have barely begun to know this piece of land. I suppose to many people it's just an obstacle they have to drive around. To me it is the largest remaining fragment of wilderness within walking distance of my home, a refuge where hawks spiral across the empty sky and the sounds of traffic are slightly muted, a place where you might see anything, if you look carefully.

The following is a Web comment made on the article entitled, "*DDO - the wild heart of Richmond Hill*", featured on the Richmond Hill Naturalists website blog and written by Denise Potter on Sunday, October 21st, 2007. The original article is reproduced above and can be found online at <http://www.rhnaturalists.ca/blog/2007/10/>.

"Heavens, what a moving article. I'm glad to learn that even the serious naturalists find the terrain intricate."



It looks deceptively simple in an aerial photo: some tidy patches of woodland, some open pasture, in a sort of quilt. When one starts walking the terrain, the initial impression is of baffling complexity. Here there are conifers, in an artificial monoculture. Then, suddenly, conifers give way to broad-leaved trees. And then there is a sort of open alley or firebreak. And then there is savannah, or some reasonable approximation thereto! And then more trees, and then again savannah... I have found that a compass, such as girl guides or boy scouts might use in orienteering, is a help.



Thanks above all for the list of bird species. Such a haunting writeup - rather like the terrain itself, which has a haunting quality, as one might encounter in a half-sad, half-happy dream.

- Toomas (Tom) Karmo

Caring for Heritage Woods - Part 3

It is a dull Thursday afternoon. A small gang of students led by a young employee of the Town of Richmond Hill is working among a jumble of fallen branches, brown dried weed stalks and mean red ants. They are trying to make things better. They are in the Town of Richmond Hill **Heritage Woods**, a 3 acre woodlot. That is all that remains of so much of Langstaff Corners history.



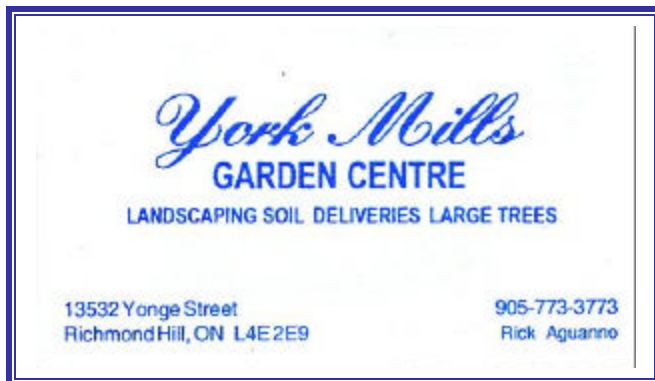
The young workers are pulling seedlings of a particularly aggressive weed that is filling the woods. These weeds crowd out anything else that might try to grow through its dominating greenery. There are no May Apples, Trillium, Solomon's Seals, wild ginger, wild garlic, violets, trout lilies or Herb Robert in this part of the woods. Now the woodlot is a browning forest of weedseed heads, each with twenty or thirty neatly arranged black seeds, next year's crop of stifling Garlic Mustard.

There are other things happening on at this site this afternoon.

First there is the roar of traffic going north up Yonge Street and east - west along the huge Highway 7 and 407 corridors. Hundreds of cars an hour serve the suburban homes and industries of the cities north of Toronto.

It is at the old Highway 7 and Yonge Street intersection. This is now "the gateway to Richmond Hill" and to most of York Region north of the city of Toronto, yet the noise of so many vehicles filters into the deepest part of the woods.

Next to the contrast of the green of the trees in this tiny oasis are the grey colours of a "Super Center", an intense and superficial urban and commercial development that has replaced the [Langstaff Jail Farm](#). And yet the Woods, which include Sugar maples, big Walnut trees, Ash trees, Spruce, White and Scot's pines, survive and flourish in this small green corner of frantic human activity. The Woods once protected the Jail Farm from northwest winds.



Most of the woodlot's trees, even after this dry summer, are surviving. But not all. The development around the Woods has seriously changed the moisture levels in the soil they live in. The tallest and widest tree, which is nearly 12 feet - or about two arms distance - in circumference, is a huge Carolina Poplar. It may be one of the biggest trees in Richmond Hill today. It now has many bare branches.

But there is something else special happening above the heads of the workers which they have hardly noticed: The annual fall migration gathering of the Monarch butterflies. In the gentle quiet of the Heritage Woodlot, hundreds of the black and orange butterflies fly around, circle about and rest on the leaves and branches of live and fallen trees. Wings folded, dozens of the bright insects hang from branches of a fallen spruce tree. They appear like a memory of the National Geographic photos of mountaintop pines of central Mexico where these amazing insects will fly to for the winter. In Heritage woods, they rise up in a small cloud from resting places as a young worker moves around near them. A vole scurries away into the mixed underbrush. It appears to be the only other non human living thing in these woods today.



- Michael White, Past President

... To be continued



The “Project Feederwatch” was started by the Richmond Hill Naturalists

Recently I have come across something fascinating in the distinguished history of the Club. You probably all know about the successful tool for monitoring the distribution and abundance of winter bird populations in North America, the "Project FeederWatch". This project involves volunteers who are watching their bird feeders according to a defined protocol and send their observations bi-weekly from mid-November until March the following year to the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology. Over 15,000 volunteers from all over North America, including Hawaii, take part in this.

What you probably don't know, and very few people know, is that the project was started in the 1960s in our Club by Carroll Langstaff Davis as the "Richmond Hill Naturalists Club Feeder Survey".

Carroll was the sister of Jim Langstaff who as an honorary member is no doubt recalled by many of you. He had played a prominent role in the Club and died just a few years ago. Carroll was an active member in the first two decades of the Club.

While the project was going on Dr. Erica Dunn, an eminent professional Ornithologist, joined the Club. She was working for the Canadian Wildlife Service. One of her main research interests is the monitoring of landbird populations. She thought that Carroll's survey could provide a valuable tool for monitoring if it were applied to a larger area. In 1976 she set up the "Ontario Bird Feeder Survey" through the Long Point Bird Observatory in a fashion parallel to Carroll's survey. For 10 years she ran it successfully with more than 500 participants. As the project proceeded, Erica Dunn and her collaborators realized that much more valuable and accurate information could be obtained if the survey was run over the whole of North America. Since this would become a much larger undertaking they approached the [Cornell Laboratory](#) with the idea of managing the Feeder Survey jointly. This joint effort became the "[Project FeederWatch](#)" in 1987 and has turned out to be an eminently successful program.

[Bird Studies Canada](#) has now succeeded the [Long Point Bird Observatory](#) as the partner of the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology. More recently FeederWatch has been joined by the [National Audubon Society](#) and the [Canadian Nature Federation](#) and become an active research project. It has proven itself as a valuable tool for monitoring winter bird populations. I think the initiation of the Feeder Survey is quite a feather in the cap of the Richmond Hill Naturalists and well deserves to be more widely known.

I am indebted to Dr. Dunn for much of the information. Dr. Dunn is now with the National Wildlife Research Centre of the Canadian Wildlife Service in Ottawa where she continues with her research. Other information was obtained from the Cornell Laboratory's Website (<http://www.birds.cornell.edu/pfw/Over-view/history.htm>).

- Theo Hofmann

NATURE NEWS

Richmond Hill Naturalists seek to permanently protect the “David Dunlap Park and Observatory”

The executive of the Richmond Hill Naturalists are urgently seeking the support of our members in order to go before the Ontario Government's "[Conservation Review Board](#)", a board created under the Ontario Heritage Act whose mandate is to conduct hearings and make recommendations dealing with the proposed designations of a heritage property.

A special confluence of astronomy, Ontario history, geology, and wildlife makes the DDO site unique. The David Dunlap Observatory [DDO] and Park sits on part of the Oak Ridges Moraine, although it is outside of the politically determined boundary. The property houses a heritage building that once belonged to the Marsh family, who took part in the 1837 Upper Canada rebellion. The DDO continues to make significant contributions to astronomy and astrophysics. Local and visiting international scientists conduct research at the DDO that cannot be carried out at other observatories. The site also provides a much needed green oasis in southern York Region. The 189 acre site, once farmed, and through re-naturalization, is now a vibrant ecosystem of forest and meadow providing a home for over 30 bird species, deer, butterflies and other animals in the middle of Richmond Hill.

Our local councilors and citizens of Richmond Hill are scrambling to save this national treasure from becoming just another development. We would like to ensure the preservation of the David Dunlap Observatory as a historic landmark, an operating observatory for scientific research, and a natural landscape for the people of the GTA to enjoy. It would be an incredible loss to this province, and this country, to see these amazing buildings demolished, as they were the site of numerous scientific discoveries, and are filled with history.

The window to protect this site is very short. The University of Toronto is already accepting bids for the lands since declaring the observatory facilities "surplus" at the end of October. U of T requires submissions by Feb. 15, 2008, and hopes to select a purchaser by March, and will close the sale by July 1, 2008.

In order to go before the Heritage board, the Richmond Hill Naturalists must secure the services of a Lawyer, and is therefore seeking donations from our members and the public to cover the costs for this legal battle.

We are asking all members of the Richmond Hill naturalists, along with their friends, colleagues and associates to please make a small donation of \$20 (or more) to our "Save the DDO" legal fund so that we can defend the superb natural and historic heritage of this property and secure it for future generations.

You may make a donation online from our website using Paypal (at www.rhnaturalists.ca), or you may send a cheque, payable to the "Richmond Hill Naturalists" (please indicate "David Dunlap Park Legal Fund" in the memo section of the cheque), by mail to The Richmond Hill Naturalists, P.O. Box 32217, RPO Harding, Richmond Hill, ON, L4C9S3. Our deadline is February 15, 2008, so the earlier the donation can be made, the better.

Emerald Ash Borer Confirmed In Toronto

On December 4th the [Canadian Food Inspection Agency](http://www.inspection.gc.ca) confirmed the presence of the emerald ash borer (EAB) in Toronto. They found this invasive alien species in the vicinity of Sheppard Avenue East and Highway 404. The infested trees were first detected by Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources staff. This is the first find of the pest in the Toronto area. While EAB poses no risk to human health, this beetle poses a significant threat to our forests.

The pest is currently in its dormant period and will not spread naturally during the winter months, however, some trees may be removed for research purposes. Restrictions on the movement of all firewood and ash tree materials will be implemented on properties within a five-kilometre radius from where EAB was detected. EAB had previously been confirmed in the municipalities and counties of Chatham-Kent, Essex, Elgin, Lambton, Middlesex and Norfolk.



Elm Recovery Program



Elms, which were once found across the North America, were devastated by a fungus that has killed millions of trees in Canada and the United States. Dutch elm disease was one of North America's greatest forest diseases. It reached Eastern Canada during the last world war, hitting Ontario especially hard.

Alan Watson, director of the University of Guelph's [arboretum](http://www.uoguelph.ca/arboretum), is attempting to revive the Elm tree in Ontario after noticing a few scattered Elms, some of them hundreds of years old, had survived across the province. But because they are scattered and isolated from each other, they have not been able reproduce and pass on the genes that make them resilient to the disease, so Professor Watson and Guelph horticulturalist Sean Fox are taking cuttings from the most eligible singles and creating clones able to resist the fungus by taking hundreds of cuttings and grafting them on to hardy root stock. The clones are then incubated and encouraged to grow for about three years - at which point they are turned over to University of Toronto [forestry](http://www.utoronto.ca/forestry) scientist Martin Hubbes, who repeatedly injects them with Dutch elm disease to make sure they are resistant.



While he and Prof. Watson have lost some of the clones to such injections, most have survived and roughly 30 are now planted in the University of Guelph's seed orchard. Once all the clones are old enough to produce flowers - in about 10 years - they will be crossbred to create seedlings and immunized again. The aim is to make truly resistant seeds and seedlings available to the public within 20 years. The Guelph system also may provide greater insurance against the effects of climate change by ensuring genetic diversity, therefore increasing the likelihood that one or more individuals will have the right combination of genes to adapt.

Of course, even if Guelph's project succeeds, it will be decades before its orchard produces the impressive elms of yesteryear, which means the scientists may not even live long enough to see the fruits of their labour. But, as the ancient Greek proverb says, "A society grows great when old men plant trees whose shade they know they shall never sit in."

If you know of large elms in your area or if you wish to support this unique project, go to:
http://www.uoguelph.ca/arboretum/SpProjects/Elm_Recover1.htm.

(Part of the) Northern Boreal Protected

The Canadian government plans to set aside 10 million hectares of northern boreal forest and tundra in the Northwest Territories as protected land, off-limits from resource development. The protected area is about twice the size of Nova Scotia and more than five times the size of Prince Edward Island, and represents about 3.2% of the Canadian Boreal Forest. A new national wildlife area will be created along the **Remparts River** and its wetlands, a 15,000-square-kilometre area along the Arctic Circle.

The Remparts River proposal dates back at least four years, when the previous Liberal government began talks with local native groups. The government has also set aside 62,000 square kilometres of land adjacent to the proposed national park while negotiations continue with Akaitcho Dene First Nations. The interim land withdrawal protects the area from mineral staking, sale or lease during the course of negotiations.

The government has also set in motion new studies and negotiations for the creation of a national park in the East Arm of Great Slave Lake.

Editor's note: Now we just need protections for the other 300 million hectares of Canadian Boreal Forest.

More than a quarter of U.S. bird species are endangered

It's not a good time to be a bird in the U.S. The [Endangered Species Watch List](#) for 2007, published by the National Audubon Society and [American Bird Conservancy](#), has found that 178 bird species in the continental US, and 39 in Hawaii, are vulnerable to extinction. That's almost all of Hawaii's non-migratory native birds and more than a quarter of total U.S. bird species.

While 27 bird species are coming off the list this year, the total number of species on the list is up 11% from five years ago. The Endangered Species Act has done little or nothing to limit habitat loss and can do nothing about climate change.

EVENTS PAST

DDO In the News

On Wednesday, December 12, 2007 the National Post newspaper published an article with the headline, "**Donor's heir at odds with U. of T.**" The article states that Donald Robarts, granddaughter of Jessie Donald Dunlap, gave the University of Toronto a significant parcel of land in Richmond Hill for the David Dunlap Observatory [DDO] in 1927 and 1932. The university voted last month to scrap the observatory and Canada's largest telescope, and sell the land, in the heart of Richmond Hill, to the highest bidder. For 20 years Mrs. Robarts had resisted pressure from the university presidents who wanted her to let them sell the land and pocket the proceeds. She says she only agreed to the deal after the university asked the Ontario Superior Court to set aside her grandmother's wishes.

Jessie Donald Dunlap had donated their farm "to enable the establishment of a world-class observatory at the University of Toronto, and to provide a memorial to her husband, the late David Alexander Dunlap." The deed said the lands "shall not be used in whole or in part for any other purposes". The school had asked the court to "discharge any and all conditions and covenants" on the land. The application did not proceed because the three siblings settled with the school out of court.

A groundswell is growing against the deal, led by the university's celebrated astronomer, Tom Bolton. Support is also coming from the Mayor of Richmond Hill, David Barrow and from our newly elected MPP, Reza Moridi. Mr. Barrow has said that the school silenced its opponents at a Governing Council meeting where it approved the deal.

Please help the Richmond Hill Naturalists, MPP Reza Moridi, and our Mayor and Town Council protect this vital natural and cultural heritage by contacting the following ministers and asking them to not only protect the heritage buildings on the site, but also to protect the contents of the Observatory and all of the property surrounding it, including that it should be deemed a 'park' as part of its heritage designation.



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The Minister of Culture is **M. Aileen Carroll** (acarroll.mpp@liberal.ola.org, 416-325-1660). The PC and NDP Culture Critics are Julia Munro (julia.munro@pc.ola.org, 416-325-3392) and Peter Tabuns (tabunsp-gp@ndp.on.ca, 416-325-3250), respectively. We would also encourage you to contact Natural Resources Minister Donna Cansfield (dcansfield.mpp@liberal.ola.org, 416-314-2301) and Environment Minister John Gerretsen (jgerretsen.mpp@liberal.ola.org, 613-547-2385) to voice your concern.

Lake Simcoe Protections

On December 6, 2007 the Ontario government committed to developing legislation and programs for Lake Simcoe that will protect the health of the lake. Immediate action to address phosphorus is being undertaken by placing interim limits on phosphorus discharge from existing municipal and industrial sewage treatment facilities which will reduce their phosphorous by up to 40% and prevent any new ones from discharging additional phosphorus.

All new stormwater facilities must also meet the highest design standards to increase phosphorus removal. The interim limit will be in effect until March 31, 2009. The government is also investing \$850,000 for information and research to support reducing phosphorus loadings from other urban and agricultural sources and to promote awareness of what people can do around their homes and workplaces to reduce their phosphorus footprint, and will establish a **Lake Simcoe Science Advisory Committee** to provide advice and recommendations to ensure the long-term protection strategy for Lake Simcoe is based on science.

Brickworks Project

On December 20, 2006 the federal government provided [Evergreen at the Brickworks](#), located on a 16-hectare former industrial site west of Bayview and south of Pottery Rd, with a \$20 million grant so the site can be transformed into a mixed-use complex that will be a model of heritage preservation and sustainable development.

The \$55 million Evergreen project will likely include a farmers' market, restaurants, school programs, a performance space, demonstration gardens, a plant nursery, nature trails, wetlands and meadows along with 15 heritage buildings on the property that will be cleaned up and re-used. The site will become a showcase of environmentalism and of nature in the city: Canada's first full-fledged large-scale environmental discovery centre. The current round of work is expected to be completed by late 2010.

Bird Group



On the evening of November 14th, the Bird Group met at Theo Hofmann's home to discuss the Vesper Sparrow and the Field Sparrow. These two birds are both quite possible to see in the spring and summer without going far from Richmond Hill. Present were Theo, Gene and Charlene Denzel, Muriel and Harold Farrant, Martin Chen, and Barbara Jackson.

The Vesper Sparrow (*Poocetes gramineus*) is the only member of its genus. Its closest genetic relative is deemed to be the Lark Sparrow. It was long called the Bay-winged Bunting, but the current name was given to it by the naturalist John Burroughs who thought that its song was particularly melodious in the evening (although in fact it will sing rather beautifully at any time of day). This is a large, robust, rather blandly coloured sparrow with a shorter tail than a song sparrow, marked with white outer feathers, and having a distinctively pale face. Its bill is fairly hefty. In breeding season it is found across most of the Northern US and Southern Canada, commonly in the prairies and patchily in the NE. It prefers dry grasslands, often of poor quality or in the early stages of succession, and likes to have scrub trees or fence posts to sing from. It winters across much of the southern states, and most of Mexico, found in dry weedy fields bordering brush land, weedy roadsides and fencerows, and similar sites.

It forages primarily on the ground, often in fairly exposed areas, going for a mix of insects and seeds. Its nest is a cup located in a small depression, and usually has 3-5 eggs.

The Field Sparrow (*Spizella pusilla*), often known as the 'Bush Sparrow' or 'Pasture Sparrow', the former name being more accurate since it prefers bushy areas to open fields. The Field Sparrow is common in this habitat across the eastern half of the US, except in the far southern and SE Canada. It winters in and south of the lower S-E portion of this range and even in the most southern parts of Ontario.

It is a chubby rosy sparrow, larger than a Chipping Sparrow, but smaller than a Tree or Song Sparrow, distinguished by its pink bill, largish head, crisp white eye-ring, and disproportionately long narrow tail. Its song is often particularly distinctive, starting with several slow notes and speeding up, reminiscent of the bouncing of a ping-pong ball, although it also has a number of trilling songs.





The species often raises as many as three broods, with early nests containing 3-5 eggs being small cups on or near the ground in grass tufts or weed clumps. Later nests are sometimes built a bit up in small thick shrubs.

After refreshments and a discussion about these birds in more detail, and comparing them with others, the group enjoyed a particularly malevolent quiz prepared by Theo, involving having to know where various species of birds build their nests. It wasn't even a multiple choice test!

GENERAL INTEREST

On December 4th, 2007 Environmental Commissioner Gordon Miller warned that the province's "car culture" and highway expansions are fuelling congestion, pollution, greenhouse gas emissions and sprawl, and said any growth strategy for southern Ontario should seek to "avert any further plans for new highways and/or highway expansion projects."

The government is encouraging a trend toward further car use by spending more than \$6 billion a year on highways while spending only slightly more than \$4 billion on public transit. Sprawl is eating up greenspace and farmland that Miller said "carries a significant environmental penalty".

The continued availability of local sources of produce, meat and dairy products is key to any strategy to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. High quality 'natural' areas in Southern Ontario are quite limited--and disappearing fast.



Algonquin Provincial Park is looking for talented and mature naturalist youths in high school, college or university (they should be at least 16 by June 2008) to join their team as Seasonal Park Naturalists in summer of 2008. For more information, visit their seasonal employment website at <http://www.algonquinpark.on.ca/news/jobs.html>.

- The **Monitoring The Moraine** (MTM) project has created a "Moraine Watch Manual", a how-to guide for community members to monitor land use planning activity and the performance of their municipal government on moraine-related planning. Check the MTM website, www.monitoringthemoraine.ca, or order a hard copy by contacting Kate Turner at kturner@stormcoalition.org or call 416-778-7527.

- 2008 marks the **International Year of the Reef**, yet with no immediate prospect of slowing climate change, the long-term outlook for the survival of coral reefs is bleak. Human societies are dependent on coral reef resources to help maintain our fisheries, yet even small further increases in atmospheric carbon dioxide could tip many reef systems into ecological and structural collapse. To maintain the status quo requires urgent implementation of conservation measures to reduce stress on corals.

See <http://www.sciencemag.org/cgi/content/short/318/5857/1737> for more information about the latest study.

BIRD OBSERVATIONS

Reminder of our Electronic Bird Observations Tracking System

Our electronic database to keep track of all the *Bird Observations* from club members is up and running. Theo Hoffman is no longer accepting submissions from members.

Members with *Bird Observations* who wish to submit sightings may still do so in two ways:

1. Send submissions by e-mail to: Sightings@rhnaturalists.ca or birds@rhnaturalists.ca
2. Send written submissions by surface mail to: **Gene Denzel, 9 Idleswift Dr., Thornhill, ON L4J 1K8**

[Rod Potter](#), our new website coordinator will be providing members with instructions for submitting their bird sightings using our **online Observation form** on our website at <http://www.rhnaturalists.ca>.

This month's Bird observations are viewable online or, if you would like a *paper copy* contact:
Marianne Yake at 905-883-3047.

A special thanks this month goes out to **Gene and Charlene Denzel** for their work during the Baillie Birdathon. Gene & Charlene's weekend of bird counting raised funds, with 25% of the total amount coming back to our club.

From the Editor

Plastics.

How could we live without them? Modern society is rife with plastic products that have brought us wonders too numerous to mention -- and yet, Mother Nature has never before experienced plastics in the sheer quantity and variety that we have around us today. We have Polyethylene terephthalate ethylene (PETE), High density polyethylene (HDPE), Polyvinyl chloride (PVC), Low density polyethylene (LDPE), Polypropylene, Polystyrene and Polycarbonates that include a wide variety of plastics and plastic mixtures.

Scientists are now starting to advise us, however, that we should avoid repeated exposure to certain plastics, like bottles made from PETE (#1), as there is evidence to suggest that such bottles leach a compound known as DEHA, which is classified by the US EPA as a "possible human carcinogen", as well as acetaldehyde, which has received the same designation from the International Agency for Research on Cancer. And 'Bisphenol A', a toxic chemical found in many hard clear, plastic bottles and the linings of some tin cans, has also been shown to be a suspected hormone disruptor.

But the real horror story with plastic seems to be happening in our oceans. Man-made plastics have been entering the biosphere since about 1945, when a torrent of products the world had never seen roared into general consumption: acrylic textiles, Plexiglass, polyethylene bottles, polypropylene containers, "foam rubber", polyurethane toys, transparent packaging -- including self-clinging wraps of polyvinyl chloride and polyethylene -- and plastic bags. These 'new' plastics are like nothing nature has ever seen. Plastic is a material the Earth has never known through 5 billion years of geologic time and that will likely remain in the environment indefinitely, slowly breaking down into smaller and smaller pieces -- but never quite biodegrading.

Much of this plastic, in one form or another, will eventually reach the oceans, and ultimately it will make it into one of six major tropical oceanic "gyres" -- slow-rotating whorls of water with depressions at the centre -- where an increasingly ugly maelstrom of industrial excretion, already containing an estimated 18 million tons of floating plastic debris in each one, will likely remain for all time. In these areas of the ocean there is estimated to be more plastic by weight than plankton on the ocean's surface.

Furthermore, free-floating toxins from all kinds of sources -- from copy paper, to automobile grease and coolant fluids, to old fluorescent tubes -- readily sticks to the surfaces of this free-floating plastic, and any little plastic fragment eaten by birds -- or any other marine creature, from whales all the way down to zooplankton -- can eventually concentrate these poisons to levels as high as one million times their normal occurrence in seawater.

Almost every bit of plastic manufactured in the world for the last fifty years or so still remains. It's somewhere in the environment. A half century's total production, which now surpasses 1 billion tons -- hundreds of different plastics, with untold permutations involving added plasticizers, opacifiers, colors, fillers, strengtheners, and light stabilizers -- is still out there. None has disappeared (except for a small amount that's been incinerated).

Will it ever fully biodegrade? No one knows.

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Based on an article written by Alan Weisman, published in the May/June 2007 issue of **Orion Magazine** entitled, "**Polymers Are Forever**". See: <http://www.orionmagazine.org/index.php/articles/article/270> for the full article.

Green Tip: Farmed fish are reared under conditions that promote transmission of pathogens, notably crustacean parasites called "salmon lice". Salmon lice are highly damaging to juvenile salmon and can cause in excess of 90% mortality. Fish farms are a fatal source of salmon lice infestation to juvenile fish off the coast of Canada and are rapidly driving populations of wild fish to extinction in some rivers. **Always** choose wild Salmon and avoid farmed Atlantic Salmon when buying Salmon at the supermarket.

