



THE BULLETIN

NEWS AND VIEWS FROM THE RICHMOND HILL NATURALISTS

February 2010 — No. 487

INSIDE THIS ISSUE...

Events!

Are you being
Greenwashed?

Snake Highway

Greenbelt Quilt

Book Review - The Tree

Congratulations to
ORFE!

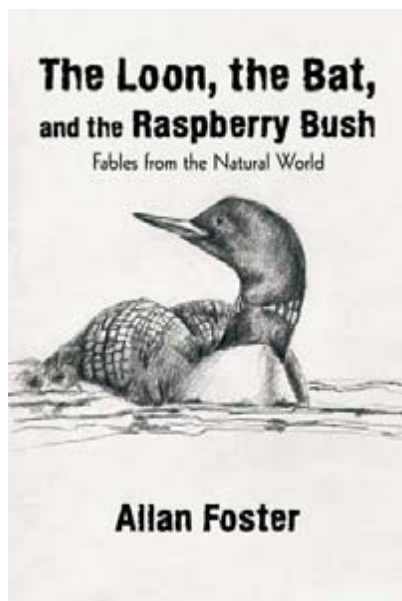
Who was Wilson?



Milk Snake rescued from Road in Bruce Peninsula. Photo by Matthias Weissensteiner

How many snakes die on Ontario roads? RH Naturalist Glenn Reed looks for answers. See Snake Highway, inside.

An Evening with Allan Foster...



Storyteller, Naturalist and
Teacher

Thursday, February 18th at
7:30pm

Please join the Richmond Hill Naturalists for an evening of great nature tales by renowned story teller and author Allan Foster. Foster recently retired as director of the Kortright Centre for Conservation after 33 years of service. During his long career as a naturalist he also collected nature fables and communicated his passion for nature through storytelling. For thirty years he served as resident naturalist on

three CBC Radio programs - Fresh Air, Radio Noon and Day Shift. "The Loon, the Bat and the Raspberry Bush," is a collection of his favourite nature fables. Signed copies will be available.

Richmond Hill Presbyterian Church, Wallace Hall, 10066 Yonge St., Richmond Hill (west side, just north of Major Mackenzie Dr.) Free admission, all are welcome, donations accepted, parking is free and refreshments will be served.

For more information, contact Marianne Yake, 905-883-3047 or president@rhnaturalists.ca.



THE BULLETIN

NEWS AND VIEWS FROM THE RICHMOND HILL NATURALISTS

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.

Denise Potter, Bulletin Editor:
 editor@rhnaturalists.ca

647-504-4586
 Mailing Address: 128 Pugsley
 Av, Richmond Hill, ON

Mailing Database: Mike Turk

Distribution: Athena Antiochos

Visit our Website at
 www.rhnaturalists.ca

See the Executive List for
 additional contact information.

2008 / 2009 RHN Executive

- President..... Marianne Yake (president@rhnaturalists.ca
 905-883-3047)
- Past President..... Natalie Helferty
- 2nd Vice President..... Position Available
- Secretary..... Position Available
- Treasurer/Secretary..... Gene Denzel (treasurer@rhnaturalists.ca)
- Field Trips..... Joe Agg (trips@rhnaturalists.ca)
- Environment..... Position Available
- Publicity..... Position Available (publicity@rhnaturalists.ca)
- Bulletin Editor..... Denise Potter (editor@rhnaturalists.ca)
- Membership..... Mike Turk (membership@rhnaturalists.ca)
- Events..... Position Available
- Ontario Nature Rep..... Marianne Yake
- Website Admin..... Rod Potter (webmaster@rhnaturalists.ca)
- Chair of AstroNats..... Heidi DeBond (astronomy@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 by clicking on the Membership link at: www.rhnaturalists.ca

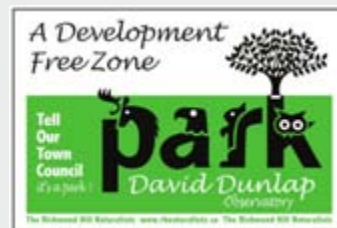


SAVE A TREE OR THREE Get the Bulletin by Email!

If you have internet access, and are currently getting the Bulletin by "snail mail", please get yourself on the email list. Enjoy the full-colour pictures, clickable links and more. Please email editor@rhnaturalists.ca if you would like to receive the Bulletin in your In-Box instead of your Mailbox.



SIGN UP! For Richmond Hill The Richmond Hill Naturalists and community groups such as the DDO Defenders and Observatory Hill Homeowners Association continue to advocate for the complete protection of the David Dunlap Observatory and Park. Please call your local councilor (905-771-8800), write a letter and/or buy a sign. Tell Town Council you want LEADERSHIP & ALL Dunlap Parklands protected! If you support the community drive to preserve the entire Dunlap Observatory property, please purchase one of our beautiful lawn signs. Our volunteers will be happy to deliver a sign to your door. Buttons and T-Shirts also available.



Coming Events



Thursday, February 18, 7:30pm. General Meeting

– Speaker: Allan Foster - Storyteller, Naturalist and Teacher. The meeting will take place at the Richmond Hill Presbyterian Church, Wallace Hall. 10066 Yonge St., North of Major Mackenzie Dr., West side. For info contact Marianne Yake at 905-883-3047, or visit www.RHNaturalists.ca.



Saturday, February 20, 9:30am. Winter Walk through Jefferson Forest with Joe Agg.

Meet and park at the Lake Wilcox Parking lot just west of Bayview near the lake. The plan is to go into Jefferson Forest just east of Bayview south of the Bethesda Rd. If people are interested there may also be an excursion into the Lake St. George area.



Saturday, February 27, 2010. The Stewardship Forum is an annual event that provides a venue for learning, information sharing and networking for community based environmental stewardship groups active in the GTA. Details will be posted on the TRCA Events Calendar at <http://www.trca.on.ca/events/>, or contact Kasey Livingston at 416-661-6600 ext. 5639 for more information.



Monday, March 8, 2010. 12:30pm. Botany Group Meeting Hosted by Marion Martindale. Please call 905-889-1690 for information.



Tuesday, March 9, 2010. 7:30pm. RHN Executive Meeting. Location: McConaghy Centre. The Executive is still looking to fill a number of positions. If you would like to join us, please contact Marianne Yake (president@rhnaturalists.ca).



Wednesday, March 10, 2010, 7:30pm - Bird Group Meeting - Snow Goose and Trumpeter Swan - hosted by Martin Chen, 398 Highcliffe Dr, Thornhill. For information phone 905-709-0246.

Please note: Richmond Hill Naturalists welcomes anyone to volunteer as an outing leader. Contact trips@rhnaturalists.ca if you would like to organize or promote an outing.



Tuesday, February 16 at 7:00 pm: Markham Council debates Foodbelt Issue:

If you care about preserving the Markham Foodbelt from development, please bring your body to the Hilton Hotel Ballroom (SW corner of Hwy 7 and Warden Ave) on Feb 16 at 7pm. Visit www.protectmarkham.wordpress.com for more information.



Saturday March 27, 8:30 pm: Earth Hour 2010

Earth Hour is symbolic event where people around the world are encouraged to turn off their lights for one hour to show support for action on climate change. Millions of people globally turning off their lights together demonstrate that individual efforts, when taken together, add up to make a big difference and can be as easy as a flick of a switch.

Climate change is the most urgent environmental issue facing our planet and every one of us has a role to play to help stop it. Earth Hour is an easy and powerful way to show that you care about your planet. This sends a very powerful message to government and world leaders that people want the right policies and regulations put in place to achieve the meaningful emission reductions necessary to help fight climate change.

Mark the date on your calendar now and visit the Earth Hour web site over the coming months for more information about a variety of ways that you can participate and encourage others to do so. EarthHourCanada.org

Have you been Greenwashed?

by Paul Lee

TerraChoice Environmental Marketing Inc. is a science-based private environmental consulting company that provides services to businesses to enhance their "environmental leadership into winning strategy, communications, and positioning" In addition, since 1996, TerraChoice Environmental Marketing Inc. has been responsible for managing the EcoLogo Program (originally founded by the Government of Ontario in 1988). This program certifies products for their environmental leadership; over 3,000 products have been certified through this program.

Concern for the environment is growing in today's society. It should be no surprise that this concern is reflected in the preferences of Canadian consumers: we want the things we buy to be safe for us and safe for our environment, and quite often we're willing to pay a premium when we believe that they are.

Business is all about supply and demand, and has clearly recognized the demand for "green" products. Many businesses have been very good at responding to that concern with claims like "all-natural!", "eco-preferred!" and "environmentally friendly!" - but are their products really all that green?

According to a survey conducted by TerraChoice Environmental Marketing Inc. in 2008 and 2009, the vast majority of these claims mislead consumers about the product's real environmental impact. As TerraChoice puts it, the manufacturers are "greenwashing" their products. Out of the more than two thousand products making nearly five thousand environmental claims, TerraChoice found only twenty-five that were as environmentally-friendly as advertised. Most of the claims reflected at least one of the "Seven Sins of Greenwashing"

identified by TerraChoice, including irrelevance, vagueness, and actual fibbing. (see sidebar)

This doesn't mean that when it comes to buying things that we need, we shouldn't demand and choose products that are better for our planet, but it is a case of "buyer beware".

So, how can we avoid being misled by greenwashing? It comes down to educating ourselves, digging for information, and reading labels carefully. TerraChoice recommends that consumers look for credible third-party eco-labels such as Energy Star or their own EcoLogo. If you see a certification that you are unfamiliar with, it's a good idea to check out the organization and the criteria they use before you trust their claims; credible organizations will provide that information. Companies that provide transparent information about their products, whether on the packaging itself or on their websites, are also better choices. As well, a growing number of resources are available through the internet and in print (such as Adria Vasil's book Eco-holic) that can help us learn more about which products really are friendly to our environment.

"Protecting Tomorrow Today" Award goes to ORFE



The Oak Ridges Friends of the Environment (ORFE) has been recognized by the Ontario Parks Association with their "Protecting Tomorrow Today"® Award. The award recognizes a group or community and their contribution towards "Protecting

Tomorrow Today"®. The plaque was received on ORFE's behalf by Jim and Sharon Bradley. As the Bradleys point out, while the award names the organization, ORFE is only as good as the participation of volunteers and local residents in furthering the mandate of protecting and

enhancing the Oak Ridges natural environment. Among the activities listed in the citation read at the presentation luncheon were the great participation in the annual Clean Up Day, stewardship activities like tree plantings and the Richmond Hill

Healthy Yards program, attendance at community feedback sessions and interest in learning about the environment as shown by the popularity of the ORFE guide *Oak Ridges on the Moraine: a guide to the natural environment and the community*. Congratulations ORFE!



The Seven Sins of Greenwashing

from <http://sinsofgreenwashing.org/findings/greenwashing-report-2009/>

1.The Sin of Hidden Trade-Offs: a suggestion that a product is “green” based on a single environmental attribute that ignores other important environmental impacts. For instance, a cleaning product may claim to be chlorine-free, yet contain other toxic chemicals.

2.“Just Trust Us”: The Sin of No Proof: An environmental claim that cannot be verified by easily accessible information at the point of purchase or product website or by a credible third party certification. For example, personal care products may bear a “Not tested on animals” label without any information to support the claim.

3.The Sin of Vagueness: Claims that are either poorly defined or too general. For instance, many products are claimed to be “all natural”, but what exactly does this mean? Arsenic and mercury are naturally occurring poisons, after all. Another example is products that are claimed to be “environmentally friendly” but that do not specify how.

4.The Sin of Irrelevance: Products that make environmental claims that are true but are neither helpful nor important for consumers. For instance, some types of detergents are labeled “phosphate-free” even though they have never contained phosphates. Like the Sin of Trade-offs, this distracts from the product's real environmental impacts.

5.The Sin of Fibbing: Making false environmental claims. An example would be a dishwasher detergent that claims to be packaged in 100% recycled paper, and yet the container is plastic. Another example would be a product that falsely claims to be Green Seal certified and registered.

6.The Sin of The Lesser of Two Evils: Green claims that could be true within the product category, but which ignore the environmental impact of the category as a whole. A good example would be “green” insecticides. Even though they may be less dangerous than other similar products, they may still be environmentally harmful.

7.The Sin of Worshipping False Labels: Products that give an impression of third-party verification through images or logos where no such endorsement actually exists are guilty of this sin. Labeling that looks like a third-party certification logo can trick consumers into believing that the products have been verified by a reliable third party organization. For example, many companies will create a logo for their own in-house environmental initiatives.

Greenbelt Quilt Project



The Burr House Spinners and Weavers don't turn down a challenge, especially when it gives them a chance to demonstrate the beauty of the natural environment. The call came from the Ontario Craft Council and the Friends of the Greenbelt Foundation, inviting artisans to contribute blocks to a quilt extolling what the Greenbelt means to them. With a scant couple of weeks to compose and complete their square, the Burr House group spun into action, visiting Phylis Rawlinson Park, gathering fibres and other materials, and weaving a square in time for the January 29 deadline, focusing on Cooperation, Diversity, Balance, and Transformation. The quilt in its entirety will be unveiled at the Greenbelt's marquis 5th anniversary event in early March.

Visit www.greenbelt.ca for more information about the Greenbelt; visit www.craft.on.ca/Programs/Greenbelt for more information about the project.

Snake Highway

by Denise Potter

Modern humans never seem to be far from a vehicle. We have places to go, things to do, and never enough hours in the day. Most of us are heedless of the price being paid for our desire to get from point A to point B as quickly as possible. We are not speaking today of air pollution or the carbon footprint or salt-poisoning the land. Today we are just going to talk about snakes. Mostly.

Warning: some readers may find the following story disturbing. Not because snakes are creepy and slithery creatures...not because they are scary or sometimes poisonous, but because they are dying in untold numbers on our roads. Richmond Hill Naturalist Glenn Reed set out last fall to see if he could get a handle on those numbers. Snakes are amazing, beautiful, and fascinating...to observers like Reed. An amateur naturalist who recently completed a naturalist program at the University of Toronto, Reed has long been interested in snakes because, as he says, it is amazing how they get around so quickly without limbs, and how hard they are to find. The colourful and intricate patterns of their scales, their lithe musculature, the way they den up together for warmth in the winter...there is much to learn about snakes. Snakes are also important members of the



Dekays Brown snake laid out with fourteen fetal snakes that were found inside the body. Bruce Peninsula, 2009. Photo by Glenn Reed

ecosystem, keeping rodent numbers in check and being themselves a source of food for many predators.

On a trip to the Bruce Peninsula Bird Observatory last spring, Reed had been struck by the numbers of dead snakes he saw on the roads. When he went back as a volunteer at the Bird Observatory for the 2009 fall migration, his mornings of course were occupied at the banding station but his afternoons were free for other interests. He resolved to spend the afternoons doing a disciplined count and study of road-killed snakes during this time period, from August 17th until October 31st.

For five weeks he was assisted by Matthias Weissensteiner, a young Austrian who also volunteered at the Bird Observatory. The rest of the time Reed continued on his own. Every afternoon, he measured, identified and marked the location of each snake found on the road, then moved the little corpses well into the brush to ensure they wouldn't be counted again.

The study area was Dyer's Bay Road from Highway 6 to Cabot Head Road and along Cabot Head to the Bird



Juvenile Ring-Necked Snake, rescued from road. Photo and Rescue by Glenn Reed

Observatory: exactly 20 kilometers. Over the course of 65 survey days, they counted 247 dead snakes, and 30 fetal snakes that were found inside their dead mothers' bodies. The fetal snakes had all perished as well...a shocking reminder that one death affects not just one individual but cuts off all the future generations.

The victims represented nine of Ontario's 17 species, including Massasauga Rattler, Eastern Garter, Ring-necked, Smooth Green, Eastern Ribbon, Dekay's Brown, Northern Red-bellied, Northern Water Snake and Milk Snake. The Massasauga is a threatened species under both Ontario and Canada's Species at Risk Acts. The Eastern Ribbon and Milk are listed as special concern. At first part of the study was just to get a sense of what snakes were in the area and in what numbers. That's still valuable information that will be passed on to various organizations in the province. But as the count kept growing he realized that the real story was about the mortality.

"The longer I did this, the more I realized that wow, this is serious stuff," Reed said. "This is something that has to be done." His wife Theresa McKenzie, a biologist who works with the TRCA, has searched the literature and found very few studies of roadkill, and virtually no other studies that took place in the fall. Yet fully 50% of all the kills were



Quick Red Fox grabbing a meal, Bruce Peninsula. Photo by Glenn Reed

found during October – mostly juveniles. Reed found five or six juveniles of the same species within a short distance of each other on the road.

“They were all born in September, and it looks like half of the brood died on the road in October.”

In this initial study Reed focused on snakes but he did take note of the other creatures found killed on this tiny section of road. The death toll included Chipmunks, Red Squirrels, Spotted and Blue-spotted Salamanders, Wood, Leopard & Green Frogs, Raccoons, White-crowned Sparrow, Dark-eyed Junco, Black-billed Cuckoo, American Starling, Ring-billed Gull.

Not all the creatures found were dead. He also removed 23 live snakes from the road (moving them off the road to the closest edge).

Reed was not without competition in his study. Bears, crows and other carrion eaters were also very interested in the kills. “A red fox was often encountered on the road...once we saw him with a large water snake. Later the whole family – three kits and one adult – was seen on the road. I suspect they got some of my roadkill before I did.”

We all know that lots of animals are killed on Ontario roads, but Reed said the biggest surprise from this study was the real tally.

There are thousands of kilometers of roads in Ontario, and more roads are being built all the time. If 270 snakes are killed on a mere 20 kilometers of road on the Bruce Peninsula, over 65 days, how many are killed each day on the hundreds of kilometers of roads on the Bruce Peninsula alone? How many are killed across Ontario? If the numbers can be extrapolated the amount of carnage is disturbing. Reed plans to continue his volunteer study this year and hopes that other organizations will as well.

With each new road built, more wildlife is exposed to danger. In Richmond Hill, Reed points out, you will rarely see snakes as road kill. That’s probably not because snakes in Richmond Hill have learned to look both ways before crossing the road. It’s because through habitat fragmentation and the vast amount of pavement to contend with, there just aren’t that many left any more. Is this what we have to look forward to everywhere in the province as development continues?

Asked what we can do to stop the carnage, Reed was thoughtful. We aren’t likely to stop driving any time soon, and we really don’t want to slow down. The speed limit in Reed’s study area was 60 km/hr, but he estimates that most people drove at 80 to 100 km/hr. To stop the killing...to slow it down...roads have to be built differently. Indeed some places have started building tunnels in key areas for wildlife to cross roads, but these are few and far between. At the very least Reed hopes to educate people about the high death rates on our roads, and raise awareness.

Reed and McKenzie are now in the process of writing up the results of his study for a paper that will be submitted to a number of organizations including: Ontario Nature for the Herpetofaunal Atlas, Ontario Road Ecology Group, Toronto Region Conservation Authority, Eastern Massassagua Recovery Team, Bruce National Park, Bruce Peninsula Bird Observatory, and any other entity that may be interested.



One afternoon’s roadkill collection laid out on the tailgate. Photo by Glenn Reed. Top to bottom, Massasauga Rattler, Eastern Garter, Ring-Necked, Smooth Green, Eastern Ribbon, Eastern Garter, Smooth Green, Eastern Garter.

Book Review

The Tree

Reviewed by Rick Berry

Author: Colin Tudge

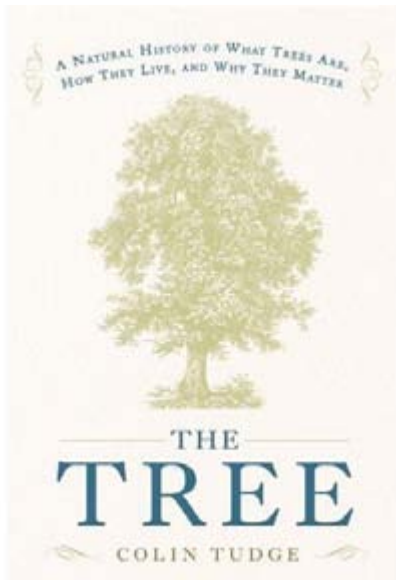
The Tree: A natural history of what trees are, how they live, and why they matter.

Publisher: Three Rivers Press, New York, 2005.

Colin Tudge is a biologist living in Oxford, England. He has written many books on evolutionary biology and many more articles. This is the first book I have read by Tudge and as one reviewer stated, "In this comprehensive book, Tudge combines vast knowledge of evolutionary biology with a gift for storytelling".

This is not a tree identification book. Rather it is about the what and why of trees that informs us about these wonderful plants. He sets the tone for the book right away by asking the simple question "What is a tree?". The answer – a tree is a big plant with a stick up the middle. He then proceeds to show us how we need to interpret/question such a simple answer and along the way starts to inform us on how the questioning mind should respond i.e. is the tiny dwarf birch (*Betula nana*) not a tree because it's not big?

Tudge has divided the book into four significantly different sections. The first discusses several key aspects of trees and botany. My reading of it tells me that Tudge needed to give us some vocabulary so we could better understand the other parts of the book. Here we learn about haploids, diploids, polyploids, the structure of modern taxonomy and scientific nomenclature and the nature of wood to name but a few subjects – and all of it in a very easy to grasp way.



Part two is the largest part of the book for it covers "All the Trees in the World". Here Tudge introduces us to trees around the world that have filled him with wonder and admiration. He tells us about why the particular species are special to the environment they are in and what they mean to our societies around the globe. The species are grouped into families and we learn about what is unique to the families. The information content here is quite dense and I found that I could only read 10-15 pages at a sitting.

Section three goes back to interpretive science to discuss the life of trees under such topics as what they need to survive, why they live where they do, the decrease in tree diversity as one

moves north. A significant topic discussed is the social life of trees which includes a detailed examination of sexual reproduction and the relationships between trees and their parasites. Once again all done in a very engaging and easy to follow way.

The last part deals with trees and humanity – the future with trees. Here Tudge tries to come to grips with the threats facing our forests and the trees in them. Climate change, deforestation and destructive parasites are some examples. He also shows us some success stories about society and trees. Very much the "we're in danger of losing things but there is hope" type of messages. This part of the book is not as engaging as the first three sections. The issues are complex and his argumentation is space-limited and as a result not as compelling.

I enjoyed this book. It is written for the layman but is rich with scientific insight. I plan to re-read it several times and each time I'm sure I will discover something I didn't catch before. It's 459 pages with a very good glossary, references and fully indexed for ease of use. There are no photographs but many skillfully done illustrations.

AUTHENTIC TREE CARE INC.



1-888-366-CARE

416-990-CARE

- TREE & SHRUB PRUNING
- INSECT & DISEASE CONTROL
- PLANTING & TRANSPLANTING
- TREE & STUMP REMOVAL
- DEEP ROOT FERTILIZING
- CABLING & BRACING

I.S.A. CERTIFIED ARBORISTS

Saturn Rising: Spring is Just Around the Corner

By Heide DeBond

Mars is still resplendent in the night sky, blazing in the east at sunset. Our two worlds are still close together in their orbits around the sun and so Mars is still a bright and interesting object to observe. An interesting link to a webpage with an animation created by Randy Russell shows an excellent view of Mars and the orbits of Earth and Mars and can be found at

http://www.windows.ucar.edu/tour/link=/mars/mars_orbit.html

The ringed planet Saturn rises in the east approximately 10 p.m. and can be found due south at 2 a.m. Saturn is named after the Roman god of agriculture. Its presence at this time reminds us that spring is just around the corner and once again our gardens will flourish. Saturn is comprised roughly of 75% hydrogen and 25% helium and has a rocky core. Saturn rotates rapidly and so bulges at its equator.

Incredible wind speeds of up to 1800 km/hr have been tracked in its cloud systems. We will look more into Saturn, its rings and moons next month.

Mars is close to the constellation Gemini – its brightest stars named after the twins Castor and Pollux. In mythology, Castor and Pollux were the mortal children of Zeus and Leda who gained fame in the expeditions of the Argonauts. Castor was a great warrior and horseman while Pollux was a great boxer. As Castor and Pollux were instrumental in saving the fleet of the Argo from a violent storm, they became the patrons of sailors who carved their images on the bows of ships and called upon them in times of distress. Castor is the northernmost and brighter of the two bright stars of this constellation. The star Castor was the first binary star system recognized, under observations between 1719 and 1759 by James Bradley, Astronomer Royal of England who noted a 30 degree change in angle of the components. In

1802 Sir William Herschel announced the components were gravitationally bound. In 1895 Russian astrophysicist announced the primary component itself was a spectroscopic binary and later Herschel found the second component itself was a binary. All together, the Castor system is comprised of six stars, four of which are larger than our sun. The Castor system is approximately 45 light years from us, about 450 trillion km.



Starmap from: <http://tinyurl.com/gemini-constellation>

The star Pollux is just southeast of Castor and although bright, is intrinsically slightly dimmer than Castor. Pollux is a golden colour and so its spectral class would indicate that it has a surface temperature of 4500 K, a little cooler than our Sun which has a surface temperature of about 5800 K. Pollux is closer at 35 light years away and about four times our sun's diameter.

Gemini is the radiant of a meteor shower which occurs in mid December each year, considered by

many to be the best meteor shower in the night sky. Although Geminid meteors may be seen from December 6 to the 19th, you should mark your calendars for December 13 and 14 to see the main part of the meteor shower, with 50 meteors per hour predicted at its climax at approximately 2 a.m. on the morning of the 14th. At that time, the Earth crosses through the main part of a path of debris in our orbit left not by a comet as with other meteor showers but by 3200 Phaeton, an asteroid which is thought to be an extinct comet. Our next bright meteor shower is the Lyrids in mid-April as we cross through a path of debris left in our orbit by Comet Thatcher. This meteor shower is less intense than the Geminids, with a predicted 5 to 20 meteors per hour, but still enjoyable to watch.

Our website is currently under construction and will be updated soon. However we will be posting February observing nights and a speaker night on our main page.

A Brief History of Wilson's Birds

Rod Potter

If you have ever walked through the meadows at Thickson's Wood or the lanes that cross the Carden Alvar or checked out a sewage lagoon for shorebirds, the name "Wilson" is certain to come up in conversation -- either as a bird seen or one hoped for. Wilson's Warbler. Wilson's Snipe. Wilson's Phalarope. Wilson's Plover. And, once in a blue moon, maybe a Wilson's Storm Petrel. But who was this Wilson character and why are so many birds named after him?



Carolina Parrot -- Alexander Wilson.

Alexander Wilson was a Scottish weaver, peddler and poet who is now regarded as the father of American ornithology. Wilson emigrated to America in 1794 to seek his fortune and lived an amazing life dedicated to his dream of writing and illustrating a large reference work on American birds.

After landing in Delaware and working at various jobs, Wilson found several teaching posts in Pennsylvania and had the good fortune to become friends with William Bartram, a well-known naturalist of his day. Bartram

encouraged Wilson's keen interest in nature and by 1802, Wilson began planning an ambitious 9-volume American Ornithology. For those of us accustomed to all-day birding "expeditions" with the benefit of cars, cameras, binoculars and convenient bio breaks at Tim Hortons, Wilson's accomplishments were impressive: over the course of a decade, he made numerous solo trips on foot, by boat and occasionally on horseback, collecting birds. He shot his own specimens, made meticulous sketches of these birds and set down detailed observations on bird habitat and behaviour.

While conducting his research Wilson's publisher also required him to visit "all towns within one hundred miles of the Atlantic, from Maine to Georgia" to sell \$100 subscriptions to the work. During his travels, he made the acquaintance of many luminaries, including Thomas Jefferson and a young James Audubon.

The first volume of American Ornithology was published in 1808. Although Wilson worked continuously over the next five years to finish it, he died before the 8th volume could be printed. The final two parts were completed by Wilson's friend, George Ord. In the end, Wilson succeeded in illustrating 268 North American birds, including 22 species that had not previously been identified. His work endured and was republished in various forms for decades. In subsequent editions, Wilson's illustrations were replaced with more skilful paintings by artists such as Thomas Brown but these retain much of the character and charm found in Wilson's originals.

Perhaps one of the lasting legacies of Wilson's work lies in



2nd edition. Illustrations by Thomas Brown

his descriptions of birds that are no longer found in North America. In particular, he observed, the Scarlet Ibis, a bird that used to frequent Florida and the Carolina Parrot, the only native North American parrot. Sadly, the Carolina Parrot went extinct by the early 1900's.

For more information on Alexander Wilson, please visit <http://rhnaturalists.ca/blog/wilson>.

 An advertisement for Wild Birds Unlimited Nature Shop. It features a photograph of a blue and orange bird perched on a branch. Below the photo is the shop's logo and contact information.

Wild Birds Unlimited[™]
Nature Shop

Debbie & Andy Neale
Owners

8150 Yonge St.
Thornhill, ON, L4J 1W5
Phone: (905) 709-3775
Fax: (866) 902-5167

YOUR BACKYARD
BIRDFEEDING SPECIALIST

feathered_friendship@bellnet.ca
www.wbu.com/thornhill