



# THE BULLETIN

NEWS AND VIEWS FROM THE RICHMOND HILL NATURALISTS

April 2010 — No. 489

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*American Woodcocks at Phyllis Rawlinson Park - see inside for details!*

## Dunlap takes centre-stage at Naturalists AGM

RHN President Marianne Yake and Astronats Chair Heide DeBond led the naturalist club through the rich history of the David Dunlap Observatory following the delicious potluck dinner on Thursday, April 15. From early colonial times to the space age, the Dunlap lands and especially the people who lived and worked on those lands have been integral to the history of Richmond Hill and of Canada. The presentation was



informative and eye-opening. Who knew that so much work was still being done at the

Observatory, right up til the University of Toronto closed the doors?

The proposed development for the property involves a wide boulevard leading from Bayview to the Observatory, with typical suburban houses covering nearly the entire site. If this is allowed to proceed, many fear that this unique and historical place will become just another bland subdivision.



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.

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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.

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## 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](http://www.rhnaturalists.ca)



## Baillie Birdathon



Denise and Rod Potter will try to beat last year's Birdathon results, but they need your help!

More than 7,000 people from across Canada participate in and/or sponsor the Birdathon in May of every year. During a 24-hour period in May, they attempt to find as many bird species as they can, sponsored at a flat rate, or on a per-species basis. Last year Rod and Denise identified 97 species in a 24-hour period in the Long Point area; this year they intend to break the 100 species barrier! Run by Bird Studies Canada, the Baillie Birdathon both commemorates the great birder James L. Baillie and funds the James L. Baillie Memorial Fund for Bird Research and Preservation. 25% of the money Rod and Denise collect will go to the Richmond Hill Naturalists; the rest goes to Bird Studies Canada.

Please go to the following website to make a pledge or donation or just to learn more about the Baillie.

<http://www.bsc-eoc.org/support/birdathon/index.jsp?targetpg=donate&lang=EN&number=59091>

Or, pledge forms will be available at the General Meeting and potluck Dinner on Thursday, April 15 from 6pm.

## Coming Events



**Thursday, April 22, 6:30PM** - Join naturalists and residents for a park cleanup. Meet at the Mill Pond Park gazebo on Thursday April 22 at 6:30pm sharp for a one hour blitz of some of the trouble spots in the park. Bags and gloves will be provided. For info contact Tom Waechter 905-737-4305



**Friday, April 23, 8pm - Astronomy Observing Night** at Observatory Park. Notices will be sent to members by early Friday afternoon if the event is a GO or NO GO. A notice will also be posted on our website: <http://astro.rhnaturalists.ca>. Led by Heide DeBond. Learn to navigate your way around the universe at the David Dunlap Observatory Park, 350 Sixteenth Avenue, east of Yonge Street on the north side behind the Elvis Stojko arena. When: April 23, 2010. Other observing nights: Weather permitting, Friday nights from April 23 to the end of August!

\* Participants should dress warmly: layers, outdoor shoes, hats, and consider insect repellent.

\* Telescopes will be provided. If you wish you can bring your own binoculars and telescopes.

\* Red filters will be available for your flashlight.



**Saturday, May 1 - 7:30am - until early afternoon - Bird Migration - Thickson's Wood**, Whitby, and stops along the way. Led by Gene Denzel. Meet at 7:30am at the Richmond Hill Go Station Parking Lot, northwest corner of Yonge and Major Mackenzie, to carpool. Bring binoculars, snacks and appropriate footwear. Please RSVP to Gene at 905-889-7888 or email [lezned@yorku.ca](mailto:lezned@yorku.ca)

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



**Thursday, April 29 7:30 pm. Bridget Stutchbury** discusses the social lives and sexual antics of birds and celebrates the release of her new book, THE BIRD DETECTIVE. The Toronto Botanical Garden, 777 Lawrence Avenue East. Bridget will give a presentation, sign copies of her books and refreshments will be provided by Birds & Beans and Vert Catering.



**Tuesday, April 27 7:30pm Markham Council to decide the fate of the Foodbelt (location to be determined)**

Markham Council will meet the evening of Tuesday April 27, 2010 to decide the fate of 10 million square meters of farmland. At least 2,000 people attended a public meeting earlier this year, with so many deputations that they had to be continued the next evening. This is a controversial issue with landowners objecting to government control of what they can do with their own land vs environmentalists -- and people who care about our future food supply -- striving to protect the land it is grown on. Behind them all are the developers and speculators who just want to build houses and stores and roads...



**Saturday, May 8, 2010, 9:30 am - 4:00 pm, Koffler Scientific Reserve THE SECRET LIVES OF SPRING WILDFLOWERS: AN ALL-DAY WORKSHOP** at Jokers Hill, 17000 Dufferin Street (between Hwy 9 and 19th Sideroad): Instructor: Richard Aaron. Learn the answers to questions such as: why do some wildflowers smell great, others awful, while some have no scent at all? What purpose do stripes on the petals serve? Are they edible? medicinal uses? Registration starts April 12 2010 for this all-day spring wildflower workshop. The \$60 fee includes a delectable catered lunch. See <http://ksr.utoronto.ca> for registration information. The Koffler Scientific Reserve is a research and teaching facility of the University of Toronto.

# Condor Rising - RH Naturalist revisits the status of bird on the verge of extinction

Is the recovery of the California Condor successful?

by Theo Hofmann

As most of you probably know, the California Condor, *Gymnogyps californianus*, one of the three North American Vultures, experienced a slow decline in the 20th century for a variety of reasons, but mainly because of lead poisoning and illegal hunting. It used to be found in the dry mountainous areas of southern and central California. I was very lucky in 1981 to observe four individuals in the foothills of Mount Pinos, a 2,500-metre high mountain north of Los Angeles. I saw them just as they were rising in a thermal updraft after they had been feeding on a carcass in the plains. It was a magnificent sight to see them rising from the valley to over 3,000 m without beating their wings once, giant wings which reach a wingspan of over 2.7 m.

At that time there were only 22 individuals left in the wild and the Ventana Wildlife Society reckoned that this small population would become extinct in the foreseeable future. It was decided to capture the remaining birds, an action which aroused a great deal of controversy. The last wild bird was captured in 1987 and brought to San Diego Zoo where young birds were successfully raised by captive breeding. Between 1988 and 1991 there were no free-flying California Condors.

Reintroduction was started in 1992 and continues at present in various traditional and non-



*California Condor in flight - (Wikipedia)*  
Wingspan of 277 cm - just over 9 feet - dominates sky. Adult bird weighs about 7 to 10 kilograms (15 to 20 pounds).

traditional places, like the mountains on the Big Sur Coast, the Los Padres National Forest, the Grand Canyon and in northern Mexico.

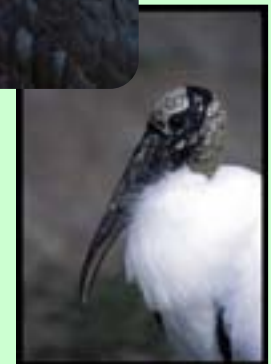
In February 2010 there were 187 California Condors living in the wild and another 161 in captivity, mostly in the San Diego Zoo. Some of these are bred for later release and others are not capable of living in the wild. Several of the released free-flying pair of California Condors in the Grand Canyon area and elsewhere have successfully produced chicks. Several of these have survived. It remains to be seen whether they will breed successfully and help to establish a self-propagating population. This is likely to take several years. The young adults do not molt into final adult plumage until they reach 5 to 6 years of age. They

become sexually mature at around 8 years, but may not start breeding until 12 years. They can live up to 50 years.

It appears that the pessimists who forecast a failure of a reintroduction were probably wrong, at least we hope so.

## Condor's Distant Relations

Like the New World Vultures (the familiar Turkey Vulture and the more southern Black Vulture), the California Condor is more closely related to the Stork (lower right) and Ibis than to Hawk and Eagle. DNA evidence strongly points to the relationship and shows that the New World Condors and Vultures are not in the same family as the Old World Vultures. Convergent evolution rather than divergence from a common ancestor explain the similarities in these birds.



## Jefferson's Forest - Public Meeting May 4th

Last month in these pages Sue Mallinson wrote about her beautiful winter walk in the Jefferson Forest. Like the Mallinsons, many of us have spent beautiful hours wandering through the green cathedral of the hemlock forest, puffing up the steep moraine ridges to wind through the birch and the meadows lined with scarlet sumac. Those of us who visit it know that it offers the most dramatic scenery to be found in Richmond Hill. Now that the Toronto Region Conservation Authority owns a 200-hectare chunk of this land (officially known as the Oak Ridges Corridor Park East lands), they are planning to rehabilitate and renaturalize it. This means closing down SOME of the trails and keeping others. It may mean closing down certain access points and opening different ones.

If YOU hike, bike, or walk your dog in Jefferson's Forest you will want to learn more about the plans for formalizing (and hopefully improving) the trail system. The TRCA is hosting a public meeting on

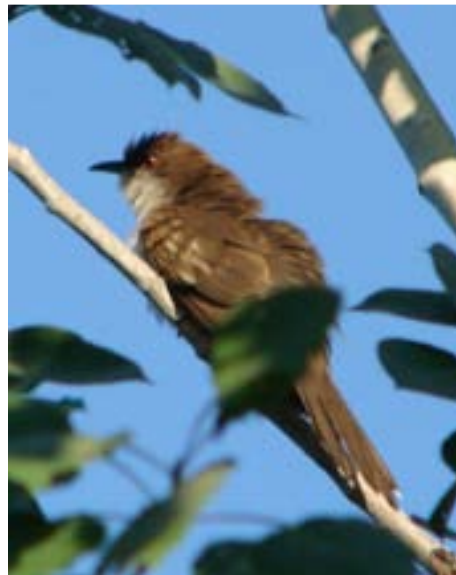


Tuesday, May 4, 7pm to 8:30pm, at the Lake Wilcox Community Centre on 81 Wildwood Avenue, Oak Ridges.

This is your chance to have your say about the future management of Jefferson's Forest. For more information go to [www.trca.on.ca](http://www.trca.on.ca).

## Cuckoos and Potluck finish off great Bird Group Year

On Wed. evening (14 Apr), the Bird Group held its annual potluck dinner, this year at the apartment of Barbara Jackson. Twelve people were in attendance for a wonderful eclectic feast of interesting salads, mains, and a variety of deserts. The topic for discussion was the pair of local cuckoos, the Black-billed and Yellow-billed. Both can be seen in season on day trips from here, although they are easier to hear than to see, as they tend to skulk in the bushes, especially liking forested tracts. We spent some time on the details of their status, behaviour, migration, etc., and then had a long discussion of how best to tell which one you are seeing IF you are lucky



enough to spot one. Up close, the red eye-ring and smaller black

bill of the Black-billed are definitive. On the wing, the reddish primaries of the Yellow-billed are sometimes visible, or the large white spots in its tail, but not always seen. It can be tough.

After discussing the birds, we finalized the sets of birds for next year's discussions, and were then subjected to a neat quiz from Muriel Farrant to see just what we had learned of the birds under discussion this past year.

Most of us are not revealing our scores!

Newcomers are welcome for next year's sessions, starting resuming in September. Contact Mike Turk for details.

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# Herdsmen, Meteor Shower are highlights of April sky

by Heide DeBond

The constellation Bootes has a rich cultural history. Throughout Europe, Bootes was considered to be the 'Herdsmen' watching over nearby circumpolar stars or the "Bear Driver", and to the Arabians he is the 'Spear Bearer'.

Bootes was also thought to have invented the plough and was thus rewarded with his place in the heavens. The constellation may also be named after 'Icarus' the Athenian who taught the world how to make wine and whose daughter Erigone accompanied him to the heavens as Virgo.

The constellation Bootes is easily found by extending the handle of the familiar Big Dipper (the tail of Ursa Major) southward until you come to a very bright star.

The "Guardian of the Bears" Arcturus is the brightest star in

harvesting of grapes by the Greeks.

Hippocrates even believed that the bright star Arcturus had the power to exert various effects upon the human body.

Arcturus is actually a giant 23 times the diameter of our sun and radiates 130 times as much energy. Its spectral type is K2 with a surface temperature of 4200K (3,927C), 1200 degrees cooler than our sun.

The constellation Bootes also contains several beautiful binary and triple star systems which can be viewed with telescopes. Notable deep sky objects in Bootes include the globular cluster NGC 5466 discovered by William Herschel in 1784 and spiral galaxy NGC 5248 (left).

## Venus Dazzles in April

During April, Venus continues to dazzle observers with its brightness in the evening sky to the west. And if you observe early in the month, you will have an excellent chance of

seeing the elusive planet Mercury. It appears as a bright star to the lower right of Venus, about half way between the much brighter Venus and the horizon at 8:30 to 9 pm. Watch for the very thin crescent moon to pass just 14 degrees to the



right of Mercury on April 15th. The thickness of a finger seen with your arm fully extended is about one degree. On April 16th, the crescent moon will be brighter and now about 6 degrees above Venus.

Mars and Saturn are still easily viewed in the southern night sky.

Lyrid meteor shower  
April is also the time to enjoy the Lyrid meteor shower, as the Earth passes through debris left from the tail of Comet Thatcher (C/1861 G1). About 10 to 20 meteors per hour are expected, mostly between midnight and dawn on April 22nd. These meteors appear to radiate from the constellation Lyra which rises in the northeast at about 10 pm.

## Observing Night

We will be hosting an observing night on Friday April 23 at Observatory Park at approximately 8 pm, weather dependant. Notices will be sent to members by early Friday afternoon if the event is a GO or NO GO. A notice will also be posted on our website: [astro.rhnhnaturalists.ca](http://astro.rhnhnaturalists.ca)



the constellation Bootes and is the 4th brightest in the night sky. At a distance of 37 light years it is one of the nearest bright stars. Arcturus' risings and settings were closely observed by many ancient cultures and heralded the

## Earth Day Cleanup Events

**10th Annual Oak Ridges & Lake Wilcox Community Clean Up Day Saturday April 24, 9:30 am–2:00 pm** Meet at the RH Parks & Recreation Building 39 King Rd., South West Corner at Yonge St. Bring your family, friends and neighbours to spend a couple of hours to help clean up the winter litter from our parks, wetlands and public areas. Event Assistants, Sponsors and Students Welcome (Students, you can complete your volunteer hour requirement!)



Neighbourhood Captains wanted to organize a group on your block! For information and to register please call 905-773-7415 or visit [www.orfe.ca](http://www.orfe.ca) Note: If you cannot attend this event please do the 20 minute makeover of your own neighbourhood and/or take a garbage bag on your walk.

**Fri. April 23, 7:00 – 8:30 pm** – Phyllis Rawlinson Park, East side of Leslie St. just north of 19th Ave. Enjoy Earth week with some fun outdoor activities in this beautiful natural setting. For more information call 905-787-1441.

## Reptile and Amphibian Rambles with the experts of the Reptile and Amphibian Atlas

*Submitted by Gabe Camozzi, Ontario Nature*

When: May 8-9 and May 15-16

Where: 8-9 Kawartha Lakes, 15-16 Grey County

What: Guided by expert herpetologists, you will learn how to identify and locate salamanders, frogs and more. You will also have the chance to explore the reserve, join a bird walk, and enjoy some of the most beautiful rural areas of Ontario.

Are you looking to spend some quality time with nature this year? The first events of the Volunteer for Nature Schedule for 2010 have been posted at [www.ontarionature.org/connect/volunteer/events.php](http://www.ontarionature.org/connect/volunteer/events.php). As always, registration is online and easy, so learn about our events, then come out and join us!

## Doors Open at Lake St. George

Immediately north of Oak Ridges Corridor Park East (Jefferson's Forest) is Lake St. George Field Centre, an outdoor environmental education centre owned and operated by Toronto and Region Conservation. It is used primarily by school classes on weekdays, by adult or youth groups on weekends, and by youth camps during the summer.

For the security of all children living and learning on the 340-acre site, the property is normally not open to the public. Lake St. George will be open on Saturday, June 12, as part of

the "Doors Open Richmond Hill" event, when select heritage properties in the Town welcome visitors for one day. You'll enjoy a variety of interesting experiences at picturesque Lake St. George. Explore Davies Hall, the 1908 estate house of the Davies and Snively families. Climb servants' stairs to the second storey, then descend into a basement that was part of the foundation of an 1856 log chateau of Henri Quetton St. George. Henri was son of Laurent, one of the original French royalist colonists of north Richmond Hill in 1800. Step deeper back into history and view artifacts uncovered by archaeologists, who will be on hand to describe a 600-year old longhouse village and 9000-year old caribou hunting camp found

here. Perhaps you'll even hear a ghost story or two! Walk the property to discover historic buildings, remnants of orchards and gardens, and forests and wetlands. Boat tours of the lake's beauty and wildlife will be a special highlight. Board a solar-powered, 23-passenger pontoon boat to cruise the natural shoreline of one of the Oak Ridges Moraine's deep kettle lakes.

Admission and tours are free of charge. Drop in between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m., at 950 Bethesda Side Road, 400 metres east of Bayview Avenue. Bethesda Side Road is two kilometres north of Stouffville Road, or two kilometres south of Bloomington Road.

# The Agg Report

A compendium of observations by Naturalist Club Trip Leader Joe Agg

\* I have noticed mink at the Welland River where it meets the Niagara River. There were also several muskrats. They are extremely fast swimmers. I have also seen mink in the pond behind Wal Mart as well. It seems to be an invasion of sorts. And yet, Ontario researchers are studying the effects of interbreeding between wild and domesticated mink on declining populations of these animals. (See <http://www.people.trentu.ca/jebowman/Mink.htm>)

\* Closer to home I have seen a large predator on the DDO property across from my house. He is much too big to be a coyote and I suspect it is a dog-coyote. He was quietly stalking a full grown deer but I think it was too big for him.

\* A merlin has been killing my feeder birds. It is amazing to see him in action. He is a fantastic flyer when in pursuit of a smaller bird. They hardly stand a chance.

\* I have more than a dozen different kinds of birds at my feeders. The most unusual is a beautiful flicker that has been around all winter. It is now searching for a mate by calling and drumming on things.

\* If RHN members are interested in overnight outings they should let me know. If there is little interest, I can still keep people busy hiking in York Region for the next few years.



Visit [ValerieKent.Com](http://ValerieKent.Com)

## Possum in Richmond Hill

Possoms used to be considered a creature of the southeastern United States but in recent years they have expanded their range into southern Ontario. The Socha family were surprised to have one in their Richmond Hill back yard on New Year's Eve this year. They haven't seen the visitor since but keep an eye out...there

will probably be more! Opossums apparently breed quickly, with females capable of bearing two litters per year, with 5 to 8 babies per litter. When first born, an entire litter can fit into a teaspoon.

Officially known as the Virginia Opossum, these creatures are North America's only marsupial species. They are highly adaptable and will eat almost anything -- including bird seed and suet as the Sochas discovered. The Ministry of Natural Resources has a web page devoted to limiting human conflict with possums. See: (<http://www.mnr.gov.on.ca/en/Business/FW/2ColumnSubPage/251071.html>)



Photo by Adam Socha, New Year's Eve, Richmond Hill (Carrington Drive Area)

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## American Woodcock at Phyllis Rawlinson Park

*Denise Potter*

The timberdoodles are doodling away at Phyllis Rawlinson Park. Several American Woodcocks have been displaying their odd courtship behaviour beginning after sunset at the park. There were at least one or two displaying in each meadow (at least six individual males). The Woodcock is a type of sandpiper preferring brushy meadows to shorelines.

Right now is the time to watch for Woodcock, who are one of the earlier migrants, arriving in Richmond Hill as early as mid-March. Their display ritual begins almost immediately and chicks could hatch by early May.

The males make the funny noises and zoom around, but apparently do absolutely nothing to help raise the young; yet the females apparently like to stick around them, usually building the nest within 150 yards of the male's "singing ground".

If you go to the park, or other similar habitat, just past sunset, listen for the "peent" sound made by the males. They'll repeat this nasal call for several minutes until it's just too dark to see much. Then they leap into the sky and fly around in crazy loops, all the while making a peculiar burbling sound, winding down into urps and bubbles as they land, exactly where they started from...and begin again. Official bird experts call this process "timber doodling" and the bird itself is known in some regions as the "timberdoodle". Once they've been pumped up, the "peent" part of the exercise



*American Woodcock in Presqui'il Park, Ontario, June 2008 - photo by Rod Potter*

becomes shorter and the doodling part more frequent.

The best time to see them is just before it gets totally dark, when you can locate where they are by the "peent" call. If you can keep the western sky in the background you may be lucky enough to see them leap into the sky. Or if you're really lucky, they will do their performance at the side of the road, like the bird pictured here.



## Heron Rookery

If you're going to check out the Woodcocks at Phyllis Rawlinson park, go before dark and stop to look at the Heron Rookery as well. You can see it from the school parking lot on Leslie just north of 19th Avenue. Bring binoculars! Each one of the clumps in the tree is a nest with at least one heron sitting inside it. There's usually lots of coming and going.

Photo by Tony Marshall

## Native Plants - Q and A

from Alice Kong, Naturalist and North American Native Plant Society Member

Q: Wildflowers – aren't they just weeds? If they grow in the ditch at the corner, why should I pay for some?

A: It can come as something of a shock to people when they discover their favorite "wildflowers" – the ones that flourished around them as children - are not native plants. Delicate Queen Anne's lace, brilliant blue chicory, sunny little dandelions – although they flourish right across the continent, each has been introduced by European settlers hundreds of years ago.

Many native plants are actually quite rare. Even common ones, however, shouldn't be dug from the wild – too much wildlife is already depending on too few resources to survive. By planting indigenous species in a protected environment, you help to ensure their continued survival and the survival of the

wildlife that needs them for food and habitat.



*Clearwing Moth on Monarda - photo by Ruth Zaug*

Q: I don't want my garden to look weedy.

A: Beauty is always in the eye of the beholder. One gardener's colourful wildflower meadow can be another's jumble. In the end, any garden is what the gardener makes of it. A beautiful plant is, however, a beautiful plant – regardless of its origin. The difference with native plants is

their inherent connectedness to the world around them. They feed wildlife, pollinators and the soil.

Q: Why buy plants from the North American Native Plant Society?

A: The plants sold by NANPS have all been carefully grown from ethically collected seed or are from NANPS approved plant rescues. The annual NANPS sale offers one of the largest selections of native plants available in Southern Ontario and is eagerly awaited by hundreds of native plant enthusiasts. The money raised by the sale is used to support NANPS' many programs.

NANPS Plant Sale is Saturday, May 8, 2010 - 10:00am - 3:00pm - Markham Civic Center. Free Presentations: Rachel Gagnon "Identifying and Controlling Invasive Plants" and Gavin Trevelyan "Prairie Plants for Your Garden."

## Horticultural Society Events

Events take place at the McConaghy Senior's Centre, 10100 Yonge St., (north of Major MacKenzie and south of Arnold Crescent. Parking is available at the Centre (enter off Arnold or Yonge St) and in the church parking lot immediately south of the Centre (enter off Yonge St.).

May 4 - 6pm - Interesting Plants on the Path to Eden, Rahe Richards

In 2009, society member Rahe Richards traveled to Ghana, Paris and London, visiting world renowned gardens that included the amazing Eden Project. Rahe's

two recent Garden Post articles described the sights, which will now be shared visually in this pictorial presentation. Rahe Richards has been gardening for only ten years. Her garden, containing many unusual plants, has regularly been awarded Front Garden Recognition status since 2001.

May 8 -Spring Flower Show and Plant Sale, McConaghy Centre

Jun 1 - 6pm - Plants that Attract Beneficial Insects, Lorraine Roberts

Lorraine will provide practical insights into identification of beneficial insects, explain the contributions these small creatures make to the health of our gardens, and let us know which plants best attract them. Owner of Plant Paradise Country Gardens (with husband, Robert), Lorraine is a knowledgeable horticulturalist and landscape designer who regularly authors articles for Caledon Living magazine, hosts workshops and speaks at a variety of venues including Canada Blooms.