



THE BULLETIN

NEWS AND VIEWS FROM THE RICHMOND HILL NATURALISTS

March 2012 — No. 503

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Signs of Spring

Stirred by the



thunder of passing
Tundra Swans

Menacing Plants!

If it's March it must
be Earth Hour



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Oak Ridges Moraine -
update by Michael
White



Lev Frid

We're Baaaack!

Red-winged Blackbirds are among the earliest, most visible... and definitely the loudest of the returning birds. They were reported in Oak Ridges as early as March 2 this year, by Naturalist club members Theresa McKenzie and Glenn Reed. Thanks to Lev Frid for this perfect picture of a blackbird announcing his return.

Signs of Spring bustin' out
all over

Fishermen are trapped on
melting ice, salamanders are
migrating, and scary-looking
things are poking up out of the
ground. See inside for more
signs of spring!





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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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Shhhh! RHN Potluck Dinner and Silent Auction April 19th



Membership



Your membership fee helps pay for the club's monthly hall rental, website registration, speakers, printing and postage for the Bulletin (all Website and Bulletin contributions and editing are on a strictly volunteer basis), and special events. You can join or renew online by clicking on the "Membership" link on the website at rhnaturalists.ca; pick up an application from any member of the executive, or in person at the monthly General Meeting. A single membership is \$30; get a membership for the whole family for only \$35.

Coming Events

Richmond Hill Naturalists General Meetings

Unless otherwise noted General Meetings are held at 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 RHNaturalists.ca.



March 15, 7:30pm. General Meeting. Speaker: Michael White. Why Plant Trees with Kids on the Moraine? Creating the 1200-acre Corridor Park in Oak Ridges.



April 19, 6:30pm: Potluck Dinner and Annual General Meeting with speaker Paul Laporte, North American Native Plant Society



Bird Group Meetings

March 14, 2012: Host: Muriel Farrant. Birds: Whippoorwill and Common Nighthawk

April 11, 2012: Host: Joandice Marshall. Birds: Connecticut Warbler and Mourning Warbler

For more information about the Bird Group contact Mike Turk at turkm@accessv.com



Botany Group Meeting

April 16th, 2012: 12:30pm. Host: Muriel Farrant (tentative)

Astronomy

Friday night observations continue weather permitting. Contact astronomy@rhnaturalists.ca for more information.

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.



March 19, 2012 RH Historical Society talk: Heritage Trees - Preserving Our Natural Roots presented by Edith George, Adviser, Ontario Urban Forest Council. 7:30pm at Richmond Hill Presbyterian Church, Wallace Hall, Yonge Street, Richmond Hill



March 24, 1–3pm - Hike York Region Forest, Bender and Graves Track, 17689 Kennedy Road. Hike with a York Region forester to learn about Land Securement, how the Region protects land and grows new forests. This track is in East Gwillimbury (north of Davis Dr, park at end of road). Register for all events on-line at: <http://bit.ly/Ab91Xu> or call 1-877-464-9675, Ext 5364



April 28, 2012 - Oak Ridges Community Clean Up Day. Join friends and neighbours and help clean up the winter litter from our parks and green spaces. Students – this is a great way to earn volunteer hour credits! If you have not joined us before, see the 2011 report to get the flavour of the event. Visit: <http://www.oakridgesfriendsoftheenvironment.ca/CommCleanUp.htm>

If you would like to help plan and organize the day or would like more information, please contact ORFE at: orfe@oakridgesfriendsoftheenvironment.ca

Spring is not without its hint of menace

Botany Group report by Ted Hampton

Charles Bishop hosted the March meeting of the Botany Group on March 5 where members discussed favourite flowers and plants.

Marion Martindale started proceedings with a quiz for the assembled "experts":

What plant is the earliest to bloom in the spring in Ontario? (Answer below)

There was a hint of menace in two of the favourites. The Round-leafed Sundew (*Drosera rotundifolia*) is a carnivorous predator that snares and devours unwary insects. Luckily it is a very small plant. It is sometimes found growing on top of floating logs.

A more serious concern is the Hobblebush (*Viburnum alnifolium*), so named because its branches bend down and take root, tripping or "hobbling" passers-by!

Other plants presented were Blue-Eyed Mary, Elderberry and



This month's quiz plant is one of the earliest to appear in spring.

Hazelnut.

Quiz answer: Skunk Cabbage (*Symplocarpus foetidus*) sprouts so early that its rapid growth produces heat to melt ice or snow, emerging in early March.

The strong odour, for which it is named, resembles decaying flesh and lures pollinators.

The April meeting is tentatively scheduled for April 16 at the home of Muriel Farrant.

Spring Cleaning?

If spring is inspiring you to clean out the basement, garage or attic, you'll want to visit Richmond Hill's new Community Environmental Centre on Elgin Mills near Richmond Green. This Centre provides a convenient, one-stop location to drop off a variety of reusable and recyclable materials.

It takes old electronics, scrap metal, tires, and household batteries, as well as donations to Goodwill such as clothes and books and to Habitat for Humanity such as renovation and building materials. It is located at 1124 Elgin Mills Rd. between Leslie St. and Bayview Ave., just west of Richmond Green.

For more details and hours of operation visit: <http://bit.ly/z6Ebei>

"In the spring, at the end of the day, you should smell like dirt."

— Margaret Atwood

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Passing through: Tundra swans visit en route to Arctic

by Denise Potter

Magnificent flocks of Tundra Swans have been streaming through on their way to their Arctic breeding grounds. On March 10 and 11th Richmond Hill Naturalists were fortunate to see hundreds, perhaps thousands of Tundra Swans in the marshy fields along Bathurst Street just north of Queensville Sideroad, at the Leslie Street Spit -- and even flying over the plaza at Major Mackenzie and Bayview Avenue.



A flock of Tundra Swans stream across the sky at Tommy Thompson Park. March 11, 2012. Photo by Gene Denzel

The smallest of the three species of swans in North America, the Tundras still boast wingspans of 168-211 cm (nearly 7 feet), weighing up to 9.6kg. Tundras are divided into two sub-species: a European/Russian group called Bewick's Swan, and the North American subspecies known as the "Whistling Swan". The Whistlers in turn are divided into a western and an eastern population. This Eastern population is the one that we see in Ontario. They winter in the marshy wetlands and grasslands of Chesapeake Bay and as far south as Florida. A few loiter around the Great Lakes all winter. We see them in vast numbers as they pass through on their way to their breeding grounds in the Arctic lowlands.

Til Death do us part

As with other swans, Tundras appear to mate for life. It is reported that if one partner dies, the other may never mate again though it may live for years. (The oldest recorded Tundra Swan was more than 24 years old; the average lifespan in the wild is about 10 years). Pairs begin courting during the trip to the north, so we may be lucky enough to see their displays. Mating usually occurs after they have returned to the nesting grounds.

Family life

The nesting season starts at the end of May. The pair build the large mound-shaped nest from plant material at an elevated site near open water, and defend a large territory around it. The female, called the "pen", lays and incubates a clutch of typically 3-5 eggs. The male, called the "cob", stands guard against potential predators

heading towards his mate and offspring. Sometimes the cob will use his wings to run faster and appear larger in order to scare away a predator. Wolf, fox, mink, jaegers, gulls and other hungry predators have all taken their toll, but humans are by far the worst enemy of the Tundra Swan. In addition to direct killing and crippling by hunters, the ingestion of lead shot also kills many swans. Nonetheless the Eastern population is thought to be stable and possibly even increasing.

The breeding season is short in the Arctic. Tundra Swan cygnets spend 30-32 days in the egg and another 60-75 days to fledge -- about half the time required by Mute Swan cygnets who breed in warmer climates. The fledglings stay with their parents for the first winter migration; the family may even be joined by progeny from earlier years on their wintering grounds.



If you're close enough to see it, the small patch of yellow at the base of the bill helps differentiate the Tundra Swan from the Trumpeter Swan. Both these black-billed swans are native to North America. The orange-billed Mute Swans -- the swan species we now most commonly see in places such as Stratford or Richmond Hill's Mill Pond were introduced to North America late in the 1800's. Photo by Lev Frid

Pollinator Symposium

Several RH Naturalists attended the annual Pollinator Symposium in Guelph on February 25. Deb Chute reports.

A great reminder that spring is coming and with it the emergence of honey bees and wild bees was Pollination Guelph's annual Pollinator Symposium on Feb 25.

Among topics explored were the Monarch Journey, Creating Pollinator Gardens, a Farmer's Perspective of developing hedgerows for pollinator habitat and the Restoration of Grassland Prairie Habitat in Ontario.

In Guelph, this organization continues to reach out to the community with the creation of demonstration gardens in various parks, schoolyards and commercial sites in the city.

The message is loud and clear. Pollinators are losing ground (quite literally) but we can all help. Having native trees, shrubs and flowers in our own home gardens can be our



*Pictures: Above: Monarch on Milkweed, Asclepias syriaca, David Dunlap Observatory Meadow, July 24, 2009. Chungsen Leung
Left: Wild Bee on Gray-headed Coneflower, Ratibida pinnata, home garden. August 26, 2010. Deb Chute*



Now remove the berries, the fruit and almonds, the fruit juices and the jam. That's what would be left if we only had wind pollinated cereals and grains.

For a great read about bees, enjoy a chuckle with York University's Dr. Laurence Packer as he relates his world travels exploring wild bees in *Keeping the Bees: Why All*

contribution. This is the theme of Douglas Tallamy's book, *Bringing Nature Home, How Native Plants Sustain Wildlife in our Gardens*, 2007. Tallamy includes birds in this review.

Imagine a world without pollinators. Consider this simple breakfast menu.

- Cereal with berries or fruit and almonds,
- Apple or Orange Juice,
- Toast and jam.

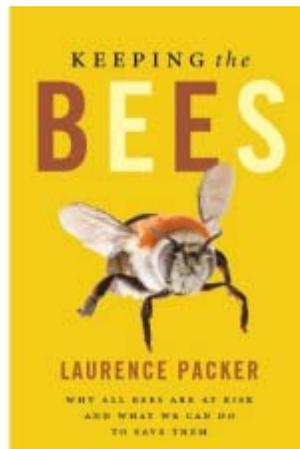
Bees Are At Risk and What We Can Do To Save Them, HarperCollins, 273 pages.

NANPS Annual Spring Plant Sale

Reserve the date for North American Native Plant Society annual native plant sale! Planting native plants is a great way to help our native pollinators.

Saturday May 12, 2012 from 10:00am to 3:00pm, Markham Civic Centre, 101 Town Centre Blvd, Markham, Ont. L3R 9W3 (Hwy 7 and Warden)

Wildflowers, ferns, grasses and sedges as well as trees and shrubs available. This one day event is the biggest native plant sale in Canada and it's a great place to meet like-minded people.



How many of these Signs of Spring have you noticed?

contributed by Joe Agg

Snowmobilers going through the ice on Lake Simcoe...fishermen needing to be rescued from ice floes...

On the first weekend in March I was in a parking lot in west end Toronto just south of Steeles. I suddenly noticed that out of hundreds of vehicles mine was the only one with snow on it. It looks like spring starts in Toronto and moves north.

The activity of the birds has changed as they start preparations for breeding time. They are becoming more vocal and active. Northern birds will be returning home soon.

On a more personal note I have started pruning my apple trees in hopes of a good crop.

On my northern ice fishing trip the rivers were wide open as far as Massey Ontario (north west of Sudbury) and most lakes had open patches as well. There was not enough snow in places to

operate a snow machine.

One of the nicest signs is when you can smell the earth and the rhubarb starts to poke up from it.

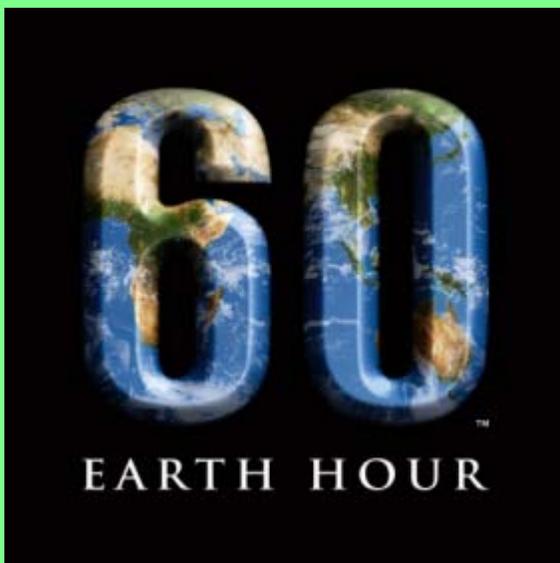
The Winter that Wasn't
This week on the national CBC Radio program The Current, a segment called "The Winter that Wasn't" brought together birders and naturalists for a conversation about an unusually mild season that allowed some migratory birds to stay in the north over the winter, or to return to Canada early from their southern wintering grounds. Bird Studies Canada biologist Dick Cannings discussed population declines among long-distance migrants and other guilds of birds, and shared his observations about some species that are expanding their ranges to the north. Bird Studies Canada is the Canadian partner in two major Citizen Science programs that were prominently featured in the

segment: eBird and the Christmas Bird Count.

To learn more about "The Winter that Wasn't" and to listen to the program, visit <http://bit.ly/z2gsLe>

Christmas Bird Count Results
Results of the 112th Christmas Bird Count are now pouring into the program's new data entry system, and it's shaping up to be a record-breaking tally. Bird Studies Canada expects more than 400 counts for Canada, up from 257 when they took over the Canadian CBC 11 years ago.

It has been an exciting winter for birds, too. The big irruption of Snowy Owls made headlines across the country, and mild temperatures allowed many birds to linger farther north than usual. To look at the results by count or by species visit the Audubon website at <http://netapp.audubon.org/cbco/bservation/>



Earth Hour

March 31, 8:30
-9:30 pm

Join millions of other people to show the world that you care about climate change and want action. Start by planning to turn out your lights for an hour from 8:30 -9:30pm to celebrate Earth Hour, and get friends and family to join you. There are

lots of ways to get people involved and a vast number of activities that you can do to show that you care about the future of our planet. Visit http://wwf.ca/earthhour/get_involved/

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Oak Ridges Moraine Reforestation - 2012 Update

by Michael White

We have the OK and support of TRCA (Toronto and Region Conservation Authority), managers of the Oak Ridges Moraine Corridor Park, to carry on with the Schools Reforestation Planting for the Fourth year since Bill Harris helped us start up in 2009. The first year's area is beginning to look like a returning forest. Silver Maples particularly are up to 8 to 12 feet, pines to 5 and six feet, Red Oaks to 5 feet. Summers have been moist and the survival rates have been good to very good. Last year more than 1,000 small silver birches went into the 2011 site. We will be looking at how they survived the winter when we go back up this spring.

We have already been granted \$6,300 by Toronto Dominion Bank Friends of the Environment Foundation and have asked for some extra funds to help school boards with the busing costs for their students. The dates this year have not been completely set but will be either Thursday, May 3 or May 10. The site will be a continuation of the previous plantings, about another 1 1/2 acres just south of the 2011 area; 3 to 400 students and from 1,200 to 1,500 seedling trees and shrubs.

We realize the importance of bringing back this significant stretch of the Southern Ontario "jungle" on the Oak Ridges Moraine, for the people of Richmond Hill and York Region, for the health of air and the Oak Ridges Moraine sources of water for Greater Toronto streams. Bringing back the diversity of native tree and shrub species, creating the improved environment and the connections for the return of native flowers, herbs and wildlife, particularly the birds and reptiles of our Moraine woodlands and



grasslands will be the slow and careful results.

But the work with students of the area schools, now going into its fourth group of Grade 5 and 6 students, with the support of local grade 11 and 12 students on their way to university and into the world is probably the other most valuable job of this program. Each year it is a chance, on the grounds of the Park itself to see what the conditions are really like, give a chance to see the work of the past years, and talk to teachers and students about all the things that are happening, introducing - the ideas of plant communities succession to ecological health, and the wildlife that will be coming and may be there. We always come across some field vole nests on the edges of the prepared site each year and the song sparrows have already taken over their territories in the one and two year old planting areas. There are always garter, Decay's and milk snakes encountered. In future years we hope to help with the more open grassland restorations and

provide areas for the return of the bobolink, the meadowlark, even the bluebirds and the accepted indicator species in South Central Ontario, the Henslow sparrow, similar to our song sparrows. See <http://itallgrassontario.org/IndSpeciesCloserGrasslandBirds.htm> for articles about the changes possible. And the actual planting of small trees and shrubs, with a good chance of success, is a memory to fuel those young people who will carry on this work in the years to come.

In the next five years we hope to involve the Ontario Trillium Fund in supporting an education program for Region schools along with the annual May plantings.

Wish us luck and we would very much appreciate your support and maybe a visit on planting day.

In the spring I have counted one hundred and thirty-six different kinds of weather inside of four and twenty hours.

~Mark Twain