

THE WOODLAND OBSERVER

MARCH 2018



NIPISSING NATURALISTS CLUB



From the editor:

March: Spring in the light and winter in the shade

(borrowed from Charles Dickens)

According to my Nature Canada and Canadian Wildlife Federation calendars, there are many special days in March – World Wildlife Day on March 3; Solar Appreciation Day on March 9; International Day of Action for Rivers on March 14; World Sparrow Day on March 20; World Planting Day and International Day of Forests on March 21; World Water Day on March 22; World Meteorological Day on March 23; Earth Hour on March 24 – also the date of Eric Mattson’s workshop on GPS; Take a Walk in a Park Day on March 30; and, of course, St. Patrick’s Day on March 17. It is also the month we switch back to Daylight Savings Time, on March 11, and the month Spring officially begins here in North America, March 20. (Other special March days are the dogsled outing on March 4, International Women’s Day on March 8 and Good Friday on March 30.)

And we can’t forget March 13, when we meet to hear Daniel Pike, Wildlife Consultant, talk about counting the whales in the North Atlantic and elsewhere.

Within this issue, many of the above days are represented in some way by articles and photos on forests, the moon, wildlife, sparrows, parks, water and a river. (The photo above, that I took last March, is of the Sturgeon River as it empties into Lake Nipissing.)

Pick one of the nature days and celebrate it in a big or small way. On March 30, for example, a walk through Laurier Woods Conservation Area or nearby Marten River or Samuel de Champlain Provincial Parks might be in order for Take a Walk in a Park Day. And because March 30 is a statutory holiday, it is a good day for a walk.

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Last year on World Sparrow Day, we in Bird Wing tried to find as many sparrows as possible and this year because of the number of sparrows that spent the winter here, we may up our numbers and species.

On Earth Hour Day, set for 8:30 to 9:30 p.m., you can turn off all your lights and enjoy the night sky.

There are many ways we can show our appreciation for nature on any of these days, even St. Patrick's Day with the wearing of the green in support of a green environment, a nature-friendly environment. (The photo below I took a few years ago along the Antrim Coast Road in Northern Ireland.)

And now that the Winter Olympics are behind us and after our great showing at them, we can look forward to Spring, possibly a green one by March 20.

The cover this month is Grant McKercher's photo of two elegant Common Mergansers, a second place winner in the photo contest. I choose covers based on the month and although Grant's photo was taken in the fall, when the mergansers were getting ready to migrate, Dick Tafel informs me there has not been a March, except one, since 2010 when Common Mergansers have not returned to our area. Reports Dick, "Every year, except 2014, Common Mergansers were seen in March. Many were seen some years. For example, in 2016, 12 were seen; in 2013, 35; in 2012, 120; and in 2010, 54. In some years, a few were even seen in February." And this year is no exception. Kaye Edmonds saw one on February 24 with a few Common Goldeneye in the open waters at Bonfield. So March this year will probably not be an exception for seeing Common Mergansers.

March is one of those months when spring tries to take over winter, but doesn't always succeed. The saying, in like a lamb and out like a lion, is very March-appropriate. It may not happen in that order, but there is no denying March is one of those unpredictable months, warm sun one day, cold winds and snow the next.

- Renee Levesque, editor, rlevesque1948@gmail.com





Bell-shaped blooms of bright red

By Caleb Beck

Caleb Beck

Cardinal Flowers (*Lobelia cardinalis*) grow on the edges of slowly moving rivers, lakes and streams. They are a perennial species that bloom for only a few weeks during the month of August, making them a unique sighting. When fully grown, they are about 3 feet tall, although I have seen them grow up to 5 feet. Native to the Americas, they can be found throughout northern Columbia, Mexico, southern United States and southeastern Canada. They were one of the first plants introduced from the Americas to Europe in the 1600s, admired because of their unique bell-shaped blooms of bright red. Their shape and colour also make them a favourite food source for many species of hummingbirds.

Last year, I moved 2,000 km from my home in Ontario to Nova Scotia to study marine biology at Dalhousie University. Studying at Dalhousie has given me the opportunity to work with these beautiful plants.

Northern Ontario is one of the most uniquely beautiful places in the world. The Nipissing area we call home (known as cottage country by tourists) is considered by National Geographic to be one of the top ten most beautiful summer destinations in the world. Moving away made me realize how easy it is to be desensitized to the beauty around us.

My family's lifestyle was always connected to nature. My father is the third generation to run our family tourist camp on Lake Memesagamesing just outside Port Loring. I spent my summers on the lake, autumns at the hunt camp, winters in an ice shack, and springs at the sugar bush. By the time I was ten, I had obtained my boater's license and was putting around the lake with a two horsepower motor, fishing rod, and as many snacks as I could sneak out of the house without my sisters finding out. I was never a very good fisherman, but from all my time on the water, I knew the geography of the lake like the back of my hand. It wasn't long before I was able to avoid sunken logs and shoals at night without a flashlight by looking at the tips of the trees in the twilight. Plenty of time on the water, plenty of time outdoors exploring and one too many Jules Verne novels instilled in me a love of science and nature that has persisted to this day.

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Because of my background, I was naturally most attracted to the botany section in my first-year biology class. My professor spent the majority of his career researching Cardinal Flowers in Arizona, Michigan and Algonquin Park. Excited by research being done so close to home, I met with him to learn more about Cardinal Flowers and to see if I could get some lab experience. He is one of the few experts who researches *Lobelia cardinalis* as part of a group that studies the whole *Lobelia* genus worldwide. The population he found in Algonquin Park of approximately 1000 individuals was the furthest north he knew they grew. Right then I decided I was going to make myself an essential part of his research by finding Cardinal Flowers further north in my neck of the woods.

I contacted Jim Merrick, Commanda Country Gardens, who used to sell me succulents at the farmers' market when I was a kid. He told me he had been growing Cardinal Flowers for years with seeds collected from the Pickerel River. I decided to reach out to a few naturalist groups, including Nipissing Naturalists Club, to see if I could find another population closer to home. I received overwhelming responses with information of 18 separate populations on Lake Nipissing, the Mattawa River, Temagami area, Lake Talon, Restoule Provincial Park, Wolf River and right on my home lake of Memesagamesing.

In late July, I set out in my boat with some naturalist friends, Gary, Jennifer and Sabine, towards a dam on the far side of my lake which I had visited countless times in the past. I must admit I was skeptical because how could I have possibly missed the plants before. However, I did my best to stay optimistic while passing many familiar landmarks.

I tied up my boat in a bay beside the dam and on foot I followed the stream that ran out of the dam. My doubt quickly turned to excitement when I spotted the bright red petals through the trees. Almost instantly my shoes were cast aside and I was knee deep in the stream. Excited to find just one blooming plant, I was ecstatic to realize there were over 300 plants that still had not bloomed in just 70 m of streambed. My professor,



who was almost as excited as I was, sent me special envelopes to collect seeds and leaves.

Later in August, I took my kayak down Wolf River and found a few hundred plants spread out along the river bank. And then towards the end of August, I met up with the editor of this newsletter, Renee Levesque, and with Lucy Emmot to search for the flowers at Jocko Point. Unfortunately, no Cardinal Flowers were found at Jocko, likely due to the high water level. However, there were so many other unique plants and fungi growing there, it made the trip worthwhile.

Since the school year has started up again, I have worked in my professor's greenhouse, measuring leaf size and preparing the plants for over-wintering.

The results from the leaf samples I took show that the plants on Memesagamesing and Wolf River have the smallest genome size of any population ever studied, about 2/3 the size of the population from Arizona. This could have something to do with their short blooming period. The northern populations start and finish blooming long before the southern populations. A smaller genome could allow them to produce seeds and pollen more quickly.

The most exciting data will come when the seeds I collected have grown, and when plants from my populations are crossed with southern populations. I am looking forward to working more in the greenhouse and am hoping to visit the other 15 places that Cardinal Flowers were reported to grow.



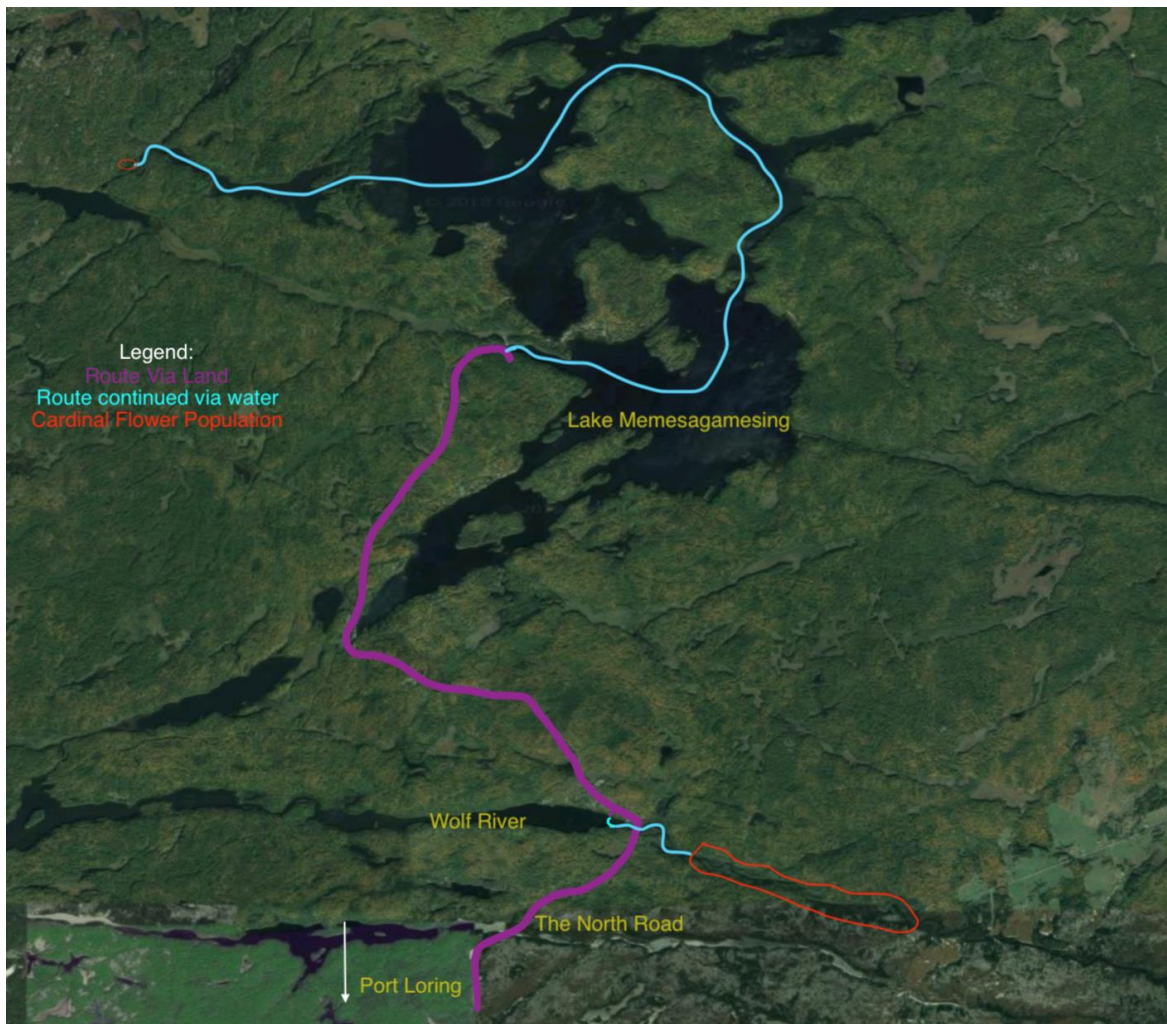
Melissa Beck

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Working with these plants has taught me so much and led me to people I would have never met otherwise. It also taught me that you don't need to move 2000 km from home to experience something new. All you have to do is pay attention and keep your eyes open and you can find something beautiful right outside your back door.

I have included a map of the location of both populations I found. It is a beautiful sight to which my photos do not do justice. I ask that if you visit either location, you do not uproot any plants to take home. The populations are small, understudied and likely quite fragile. Seeds are easy to collect. The fruits are ripest in late August near the bottom of the stem and can be easily plucked to yield lots of small brown seeds. There are also local experts, like Jim Merrick at Commanda Country Gardens, who have been growing plants from local seeds for years and from whom you could purchase plants or get advice.

If you have any questions, please feel free to email me at ohcalebbeck@gmail.com. I may be back in August with my professor to check out the very strong leads I received from Nipissing Naturalists Club members of populations along the Mattawa River.



Courtesy of Caleb Beck

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Photo contest: second place winners

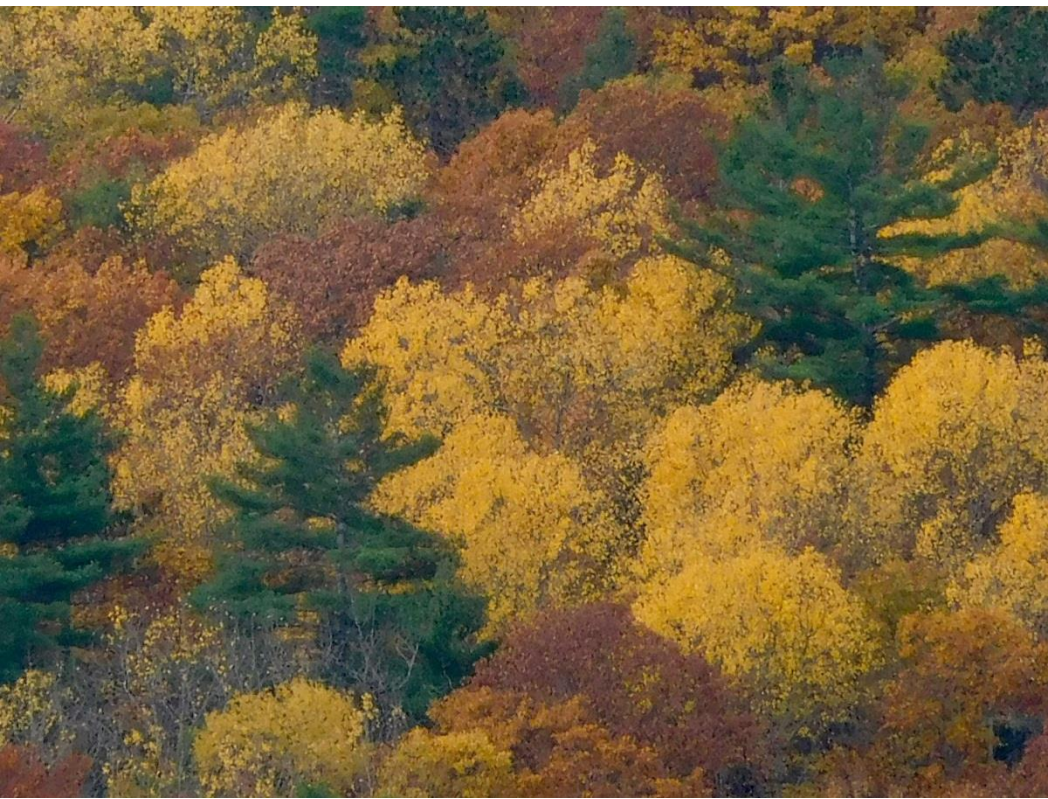
Below and on the cover are the second place photo winners as voted upon by members present at December's meeting.



Landscape: Tie between Fred Pinto and Grant McKercher

Fred's serene photograph of a lonely White Pine in a subdued November sunset (above) captures beautifully the approaching winter. Photo was taken at Sunset Park and should make an excellent cover for November's newsletter.

Fred used a Pentax K-70 with an 18-135 mm lens.



Grant's autumnal photo (left) was taken from the Three Crosses, Mattawa, looking across the Ottawa River. "It was a warm, still autumn day and the colours had a slightly hazy, soft palette."

Grant took his photo with a Nikon Coolpix P610, Nikkor 60x Wide Optical Zoom 4.3-258mm, 1:3.3-6.5.

Flora: Eric Mattson

“The flora image was taken last July when Ingrid (my wife) and I went blueberry picking to our secret spot. The berries were exceptional, hanging like grapes on a vine. The brilliant blue of the berries, a colour we don't often see in nature, makes the image stand out.”

Eric took his photo with what he calls his “bush” camera, an Olympus Tough TG-5 Waterproof & Shockproof Wi-Fi / GPS 12MP 4x Optical Zoom Digital Camera with a built in 4.5-18 mm lens.



Fauna: Tie between Eric Mattson and Grant McKercher

Grant's photo of two elegant female Common Mergansers graces the cover of this month's newsletter. Grant captured these mergansers from his dock on Callander Bay. “They were initially basking on the rocks and preening. As I moved along the dock, they became aware of me, but I was able to catch this brief moment of alertness just before they slipped into the water and swam away.”



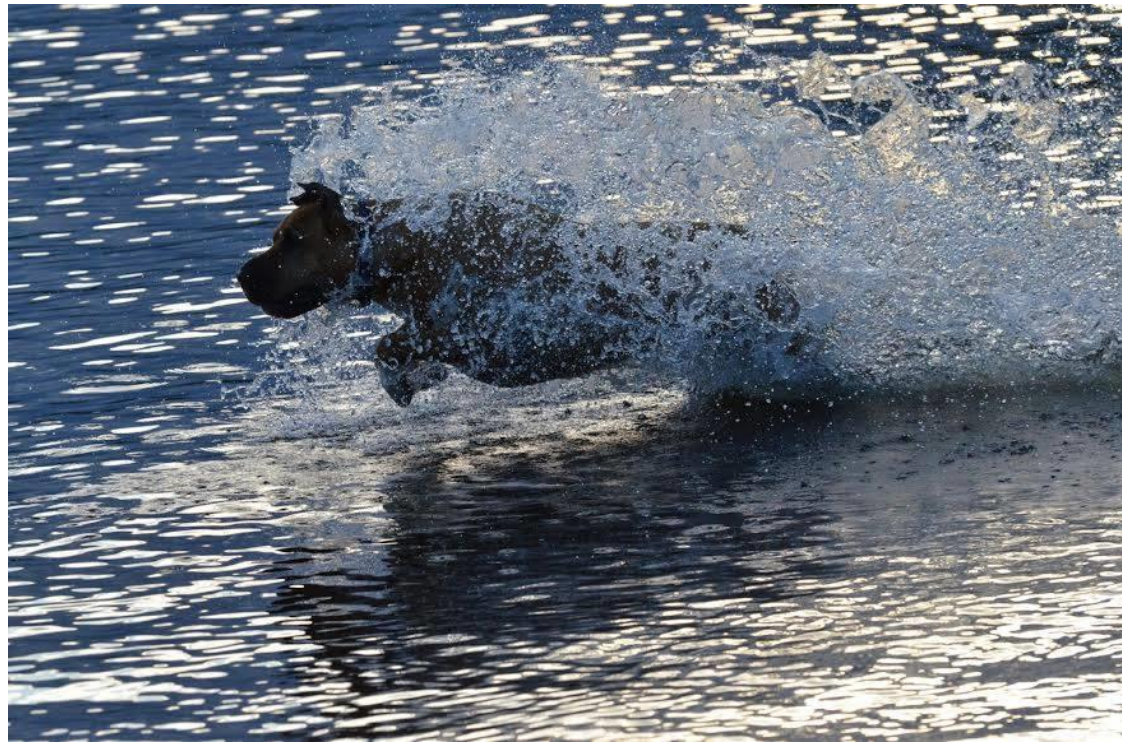
Grant also tied in second place with his photo of the Black-bellied Plover which he saw in the fall on the North Bay waterfront. Although the plover was not in its breeding plumage, “the intricate colour patterns were striking, nonetheless.”

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Grant took both fauna photos with his Nikon Coolpix P610, Nikkor 60x Wide Optical Zoom 4.3-258mm, 1:3.3-6.5.

And if two second place winning photos are not enough, there is also a third winning photo, Eric's action photo of his dog, bounding through the water after a stick. Eric took this photo last summer on Lighthouse Beach. It may not be a photo of fauna in its true sense, but it is a great action shot of an animal.

Eric again used his "bush" camera to take this photo.



People enjoying nature: Eric Mattson

Eric's photo, once again using his "bush" camera, was taken last September at sunset while he was kayaking at the mouth of Callander Bay. "The colours and reflections are indeed breathtaking, but it is the peace and tranquility of kayaking at sunset which I enjoy the most."



Damage from Forest Tent Caterpillar, photo by Ariel Llic

Forest Health Monitoring Program

By Chris McVeety

*Forest Health Technical Specialist, Northeast Biodiversity and Monitoring Unit
Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry*

The key tenet of the Forest Health Monitoring Program, Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry, is to record the occurrence of native, non-native and invasive biotic (insects and disease) and abiotic (blowdown, snow and drought damage) disturbances and events. This objective is achieved through a variety of means, including ground and aerial surveying, collections, temporary and permanent plot work, research projects and trapping.

Aerial surveying allows us to quantify the extent and severity of a disturbance through digital mapping. Ground surveying enables us to capture smaller scale disturbances that cannot be captured through aerial mapping. Ground surveying is also used to prepare for aerial surveys to determine what defoliation will be mapped and where. In addition, it allows us to plan flights when defoliation is at its peak. For example, in North Bay, we fly after the Forest Tent Caterpillar (see photo at right of one creating its cocoon) has finished feeding, but before the trees reflush or replace their leaves, and



Chris McVeety

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when the needles that were partially eaten by the Spruce Budworm have turned red. This planning allows us to get the most accurate record of what is happening on the landscape.

The two major defoliators mapped in North Bay this past summer were Forest Tent Caterpillar and Spruce Budworm. Forest Tent Caterpillar saw expansion across the northeast. (See photo above headline on previous page.) In North Bay, populations increased along Hwy 11 north of North Bay; along Hwy 805 north of Sturgeon Falls; and along Hwy 17 from North Bay to Sault Ste. Marie. Fortunately, hardwoods, such as poplars, have the ability to reflush their leaves if they are defoliated early in the season, and typically, a heavy defoliation will result in stunted growth, but not mortality. However, several consecutive years of severe defoliation can weaken trees and cause secondary agents to cause mortality to some trees.

Spruce Budworm populations (see photo of Spruce Budworm larvae at right) saw expansion along Hwy 63, but unlike the last couple of years, no populations were mapped along Hwy 11. Softwood trees, such as spruce and Balsam Fir, do not have the ability to reflush their needles, and several years of severe defoliation are more likely to cause mortality.

Collections are of insect and disease samples that record the occurrence, changes in range or host species and changes in abundance. Each sample made requires an information slip that includes land use, stand, tree and sample information. Samples made by each forest health technician are sent to the insect and disease diagnosticians in Sault Ste. Marie who provide expertise and assist with sample identification.



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Traps are deployed to monitor for invasive species and to track the population growth or decline of native insects that historically have had outbreak events. This past summer, green prism pheromone traps were hung (see photo at right) to monitor for any potential populations of Emerald Ash Borer in North Bay that had not yet been detected. Fortunately, all traps in the North Bay area were negative for this species.

Pheromone traps for Spruce Budworm and Jack Pine Budworm were also deployed. These traps were located in areas where historic populations of these insects have been recorded.

Temporary and permanent forest health plots allow us to record and track forest health over time. Currently, Jack Pine health plots and beech bark disease plots are active in North Bay. The Jack Pine health plots record overall tree vigour and changes in Jack Pine health by assessing male flower counts that have been linked to Jack Pine Budworm populations. The beech bark disease plots in the North Bay area have been established to track the current spread of beech scale and the future establishment of beech bark disease.

A Forest Health Conditions Report is provided annually and summarizes the results of the forested areas monitored. Summary reports for the years 2013 to 2016 can be accessed at: <https://www.ontario.ca/page/forest-health-conditions>.

If you have any future questions on forest health in North Bay, I can be reached at 705-475-5566 or at chris.mcveety@ontario.ca.



Ariel Llic

Editor's Note: Chris's article is based on his presentation at December's meeting. Because of the snowstorm that evening, not many members were able to attend and, therefore, we might want to consider having Chris return at the end of this year to let us know how our forest health fared in 2018.

For more information on Beech bark disease see: <https://www.ontario.ca/page/beeceh-bark-disease>; for more information on Jack Pine Budworm see: <https://www.ontario.ca/page/jack-pine-budworm>; and for more information on the Emerald Ash Borer see: <https://www.ontario.ca/page/emerald-ash-borer>.

Book Review

By Chris Connors

**The Hidden Life of Trees:
What They Feel, How They Communicate -
Discoveries from a Secret World
By Peter Wohlleben; translated by Jane
Billinghurst
Graystone Books/David Suzuki Institute (2016)**

You probably know trees have roots that connect with other trees. You probably know, or suspect, trees can communicate through their root system. You probably also know trees depend upon fine fungal growths (mycorrhiza) that envelop their roots and provide better access to nutrients.

But did you know trees are social creatures, able to communicate using electrical impulses similar to our nerves? They know which trees are sick and will nurture and support sick individuals until they can recover. They will send food to ancient parent stumps to keep them alive for centuries.

Trees can also communicate with insects and mammals by sending out messages that attract, for example, predatory insects like wasps, so they will attack leaf-chewing insects. Trees can “taste” the saliva of different chewing insects enabling them to produce a repelling compound for that particular species. Trees may even have individual personalities.

The key behind all these abilities is what the author, German forester, Peter Wohlleben, calls the “worldwide web”, the relationship trees have with mycorrhiza. Through this web, trees send electrical signals, monitor their children, feed other trees, and even ostracize the bully to protect the health of the forest. The fungal web is like an enormously large nervous and circulatory system stretching over many hectares.

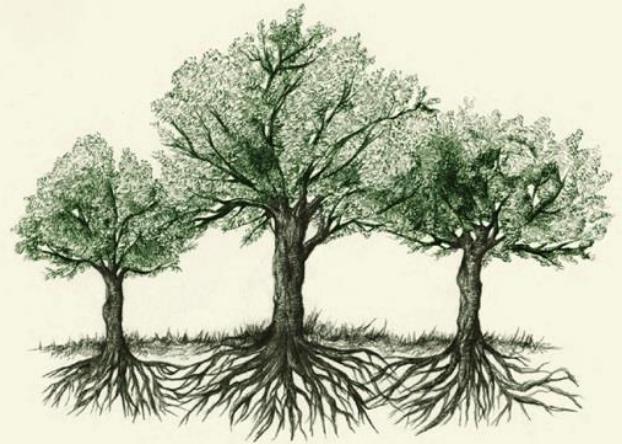
This is a delightfully written book, an international best-seller published in German in 2015 and translated into English in 2016. It is a book that will make you see forests in a different light. Every chapter contains some eye-opening statements. “Mother” beech trees seem to have a maternal instinct. Trees seem capable of learning. Air in young pine groves is almost germ-free, thanks to compounds called phytoncides released by the needles.

However, the book is not a list of tree facts, but an almost poetic consideration of the trees and what we know, what we don’t know and what we are guessing. Each chapter covers a different topic: Friendships, The Language of Trees, Trees Aging Gracefully, Mighty Oak or Mighty

foreword by TIM FLANNERY

PETER WOHLLEBEN

The Hidden Life of TREES



What They Feel,
How They Communicate

Discoveries from a Secret World

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Wimp, Woody Climate Control, The Forest as Water Pump. The author explores different forest ecosystems, the successional stages, how the trees migrate into a new area and why the forest is green.

Wohlleben's writing pulls you in, makes you marvel at what lies beneath your feet and above your head. At times he does get a bit anthropomorphic in his statements—something that usually annoys me—but in his case, the anthropomorphism is a way to make the message memorable rather than an actual belief in the human-like qualities of trees. He provides some research, makes some fanciful and remarkable conjectures, but also points out that there is still not enough evidence for these conjectures.

This is the type of book you want to read in some quiet, warm spot in the forest this spring. You can take a reading break to stare at the trees and imagine what is going on beneath the bark and the soil, maybe see things you hadn't noticed before and maybe catch yourself carefully listening for the trees to talk to each other.



Laurier Woods in spring, Chris Connors

Editor's Notes: To read more about Peter Wohlleben, visit:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/30/world/europe/german-forest-ranger-finds-that-trees-have-social-networks-too.html>.

*From Wikipedia: The 2016 documentary film, **Intelligent Trees**, features several of Wohlleben's observations. It portrays him and Suzanne Simard, a professor of forest ecology, University of British Columbia, whose research supports most of Wohlleben's observations about communication among trees.*

This review was written by a Nipissing Naturalists Club member under a pen name.

If you have read a nature book you think others might like to read, you can send your book review to: rlevsque1948@gmail.com.

Once in a blue moon



By Renee Levesque

On January 31, for the first time in 150 years, a Super Blue Blood Moon and a total lunar eclipse were visible in many parts of the world, including parts of North America. Unfortunately here in Nipissing, there was cloud cover on January 31 and at the time of the eclipse in the early morning, the Moon was already below the horizon.

This Super Blue Blood Moon encompassed four astronomical events in one – the lunar eclipse; a super moon, meaning the moon is somewhat bigger and brighter than usual because of its proximity to earth; a blue moon because it was the second full moon of that month; and a blood moon because of its reddish hue just before the eclipse began (seen at right).

During a lunar eclipse, the Earth's shadow reveals the shape of our planet, showing the Earth as a sphere and not a flat plane. That is why in ancient Greece, Aristotle and others were aware the Earth was round.

There will be another Super Blue Blood Moon, not 150 years from now, but only in 19 years, in 2037. That Super Blue Blood Moon will be visible in North America, the UK, Europe, Asia, Australia and parts of Africa.

The best I can do in terms of a photo here in Nipissing is a one I took two days before the Super Blue Blood Moon, during the evening of January 29 (below).



Winter finches and a Bald Eagle

At February's meeting, two members reported on wildlife they had seen recently. Gary Sturge spoke about the increasing number of finches we are now seeing in our area, and Andree Morneault talked about the Bald Eagle she saw at the end of Cranberry Trail. Below is a collage of the birds mentioned photographed by Kaye Edmonds (Bald Eagle), Renee Levesque (American Goldfinch, Pine Grosbeak, and Pine Siskin) and Stephen O'Donnell (White-winged Crossbill and Purple Finch with Common Redpolls). Note the winter colour of the American Goldfinch and the cross bill, used to extract seeds from cones, on the White-winged Crossbill.



Interesting winter finds

By Renee Levesque

Boreal Owl: A Boreal Owl (*Aegolius funereus*) was seen on February 2 by former Board member Sonje Bols near Lake Nosbonsing, and one was seen in mid-February by Janet and Lloyd Sparks in the Wolfe Lake area. Fortunate sightings indeed because these small nocturnal owls, not much bigger than a robin, are not easy to spot during the day. (In Europe the Boreal Owl is called Tengmalm's Owl after the Swedish naturalist, Peter Gustaf Tengmalm.)



Sonje Bols

Sonje reports, “It was a very exciting find! I have to give my dog some of the credit for finding it. I was taking him for a walk and he stopped to look at a little Balsam Fir. I followed his gaze up to the very top of the tree, and perched there was the Boreal Owl! It later flew down the road to an Aspen, where it (mercifully) remained long enough for me to RUN back to my house and grab my camera. It was still on the Balsam Fir when I left about 30 minutes later.” Sonje’s photo is above.

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Although a small owl, it has a relatively large head, with eyes that are pale to bright yellow, no ear tufts and a grayish white facial disc with a black border. An adult's overall colour varies from reddish-brown to a more greyish tone, and the juvenile's colour is chocolate brown as pictured at right.

Across northern North America and Eurasia, the Boreal Owl nests in coniferous forests with spruce and fir, and some deciduous trees, like Aspen and birch, as well as in the high sub-alpine forests of the Rockies and the Alps. It nests in tree cavities, old woodpecker holes and natural hollows 6 to 24 m (20 to 80 feet) above the ground. However, in some parts of northern Europe, it nests mostly in nest boxes. See:

<http://www.audubon.org/magazine/summer-2017/the-smart-nest-box-provides-peek-secret-lives> for some fantastic footage of a Boreal Owl family in a nesting box.

Beginning in late winter or early spring, the male sings at night and sings only until it gets a mate. To hear its song, visit: <https://www.bird-sounds.net/boreal-owl/>. You can also hear the song of many other owls on this site – good preparation for the Nocturnal Owl Survey in April.

The Boreal Owl is not a regular migrant. It is only partly migratory, especially the northern population, and confined mostly to females and the young. When food is scarce on the breeding grounds, there are some irregular invasions a bit south of the nesting range.

Although a nocturnal owl, in the northernmost parts of its range, the Boreal Owl also hunts in daylight because of the short summer nights. It feeds mainly on voles, mice, small squirrels, shrews, lemmings, moles, pocket gophers, but also on small birds, bats, frogs and insects. It is preyed upon by other owls and large raptors. It doesn't live terribly long, only 7 to 8 years.

It is one of the least known owls of North America and Europe because its habitat is often inaccessible, it is a shy and unsociable owl, as well as being nocturnal. It is considered to be uncommon to rare, and in some areas, endangered.



Maik Meide-Kauz, Wikimedia

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Harris's Sparrow: Since January 12, Gary and Luanne Chowns of North Bay have had a juvenile Harris's Sparrow (*Zonotrichia querula*) at their feeders. For a sparrow that winters on the southern Great Plains, from Iowa and Nebraska south to Texas and Louisiana, this was quite the unexpected visitor. But if it had to stray from its wintering grounds this far east and north, it is good it found the Chowns' welcoming backyard, a well-stocked and lovely feeding area, for some of the very cold winter days we had earlier this year. The Chowns even have a heated bird bath and in the photo below left, you will see the Harris's using it to get a drink of water.

The Harris's Sparrow is a handsome sparrow and the largest of the North American sparrows at 19 cm (7.5 inches). It is rarely seen outside its wintering grounds because it breeds in the transition zone between the subarctic boreal forest and the Low Arctic tundra of north-central Canada where the northern forest gives way to tundra. It nests on the ground, although well-hidden under stunted trees or shrubby thickets.

In its breeding plumage, it has a pink bill, a black crown, black chin, black upper breast, grey cheeks and a white belly. In its non-breeding plumage, it has brown rather than grey cheeks. The juvenile is similar in appearance to non-breeding adults, but lacks the black face and head.



Gary Chowns



Renee Levesque

The overwintering population monitored by the Christmas Bird Count shows a significant population decrease of this bird since the 1970s, although its status is listed as being of Least Concern. It is felt the decrease in population is a result of climate change affecting its breeding grounds and loss of habitat affecting its wintering grounds.

On occasion, Harris's Sparrows do find their way to Ontario, mainly to southern Ontario. I saw one in breeding plumage with a migrating flock of White-crowned Sparrows and one Field Sparrow at Long Point Provincial Park on May 5, 2013. In our

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area, Gary Chowns saw one about 20 years ago and Dick Tafel saw one in Cache Bay on February 5, 1995.

Gary and Luanne have had out-of-town birders come to their house to see this rare visitor, and it was the Chowns's Harris's that made the Ontario Winter Bird List kept by Josh Vandermeulen.

See:

<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1umLlSr70JMC85hbAq82tryI1Jz55M8oRGxapWBr7dIc/edit?pref=2&pli=1#gid=0>. (North Bay is mentioned on the left side of the spread sheet.)

House Finch: Although the House Finch (*Haemorhous mexicanus*) is a common bird in southern Ontario, we do not usually get to see it here. However, I did have one show up at my place near Nipissing University and Canadore College on January 21. At first glance, I thought it was a Purple Finch, but then the colouring and the markings made me reach for my binoculars and field guide and with both I was able to confirm it was indeed a House Finch.

It did not stay for long, on and off from late morning to early afternoon. When in the early afternoon a Barred Owl came swooping into my yard, all the birds dispersed, including the House Finch. When the owl left, all the usual birds returned except the House Finch. I did not see it again.

It is a small bird, 14 to 15 cm (5 to 6 inches), with a thick, curved bill. The male has red across its forehead, on its throat and upper breast, with a streaky brown back, belly and tail. It also has a red rump, conspicuous in flight. The intensity of red is affected by diet and can be orange and even on occasion yellow. The Purple Finch has more of a raspberry red and its red is more extensive than that of the House Finch. You can compare both in the photos below.

The House Finch, like some other finches, suffers from conjunctivitis, *Mycoplasma gallisepticum*, which resulted in a population crash in the 1990s. However, the current



House Finch, Walter Siegmund, Wikimedia



Purple Finch, Renee Levesque

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population trend shows the species to be increasing. In fact, the House Finch competes with and displaces the native Purple Finch.

The House Finch is an introduced species in eastern North America. It was originally a resident of Mexico and southwestern United States. In the east, it was illegally sold in pet stores as a “Hollywood Finch”. However, in the 1940s to avoid prosecution, vendors and owners released their birds and since then its range has greatly expanded.

Today in the east it is found primarily in city parks, suburban areas and backyards where it is attracted to seed feeders, farms and forest edges. In the west, it is found in its native habitats – deserts, grassland, chaparral and open woods.



Fisher: Ernie Frayle sent me the photo above of a Fisher (*Martes pennanti*) captured on his Webcam on January 26 in Calvin Township. The Fisher is a member of the weasel family and a close relative of the marten. Its name is derived from the European Polecat, also called a Fichet, among many other names. It has a slender body, 50 to 70 cm (20 to 28 inches) in length, with a bushy tail, 30 to 40 cm (12 to 16 inches) long; a pointed face with rounded ears; thick dark brown/black fur; short legs with strong, large feet and sharp claws.

An exceptional predator, it feeds on a variety of animals which it attacks from behind. It favours Snowshoe Hares, but also preys on mice, chipmunks, squirrels, shrews, voles and porcupines. In fact, it is one of the few animals to eat porcupine. It also feeds on carrion, birds, reptiles, amphibians, fish, insects, eggs, fruit, nuts and berries. The Fisher can also swim and climb trees, although it does most of its hunting on the ground, hunting an area in a zigzag pattern. Since few animals can take on such a large weasel, the Fisher has no natural predators except Bobcats, and only because both these animals compete for hunting territory. It is also trapped by humans.

The Fisher is found only in North America and mainly in Canada in our boreal and temperate forests. It finds shelter in holes in the ground, hollow trees, logs and stumps.

Marking 100 years of bird conservation

By Renee Levesque with H el ene Gaulin, Canadian Wildlife Service

To mark 100 years of bird conservation and to wrap up the centennial of Canada’s Migratory Birds Convention Act (MBCA), the Canadian Wildlife Service, a branch of Environment and Climate Change Canada, asked their network of staff, partners, volunteers and birders, as well as the general public (via social media) to submit a 100-word story of a memorable moment spent with birds.

I became aware of this project when last September Sarah Wheelan sent me information from Canadian Wildlife Service, which I forwarded to members of Bird Wing and which Sarah posted on Nipissing Naturalists Club’s Facebook. I had a very limited time, about 2 days, to submit a 100-word story about a bird and find a photo of myself in nature. Because I had just written about Ava the Trumpeter Swan for the September issue of *The Woodland Observer*, I had my story. However, boiling it down to 100 words, just 2 or 3 sentences, was tricky. Still, I got it done, submitted it and it was accepted.

In December, Canadian Wildlife Service issued a beautiful coffee table book, *Taking birds under our wings for 100 years*, which was sent to all contributors. The book, in the form of an album, consists of 100 birders in alphabetical order, their stories, a photo of each birder, a photo of either the bird mentioned in the story or a photo of the birder’s favourite bird.

It is not possible to buy the book because sale of publications by the Government of Canada is permitted only in very specific cases. However, the book is now available online at: <http://www.publications.gc.ca/site/eng/9.846397/publication.html>.



Renee Levesque

Once you open this link, you must then scroll down to just under the pink area where it provides two view links. You have a choice between the lower and higher resolution links. If you want to check out my story, scroll down until you come to Levesque (page 66 in the book), make sure you have a full screen and enlarge to 75%. Be sure to read each birder’s story and look at the great photos. As H el ene Gaulin, Coordinator, Centennial of the MBCA, Canadian Wildlife Service, writes, “Some stories are funny, others touching, poetic or downright epic, but they all show a love of birds.”



Rob Rodger

Gee! Haw! Whoa!

Because it was such a hit in 2016 and 2017, it is back for another year – dogsledding with Roseanne Van Shie at 1655 Peddlers Drive, Calvin Township, on **Sunday, March 4, starting at 10:00 a.m.** (If cancelled because of weather affecting trail conditions, you will be notified by email, so be sure to check your emails before heading out.)

This event is only open to 12 paid-up members at a cost of \$50.00 per member (pay at event). This cost also includes a delicious vegetarian chili lunch.

To become a musher for a day, you must first register with Paul Smylie at psmylie1@hotmail.com. The outing is very popular and fills up quickly, so the sooner you register, the greater chance you have of being one of the twelve mushers.

Meet at the former Visitors' Centre at 9:00 a.m. for carpooling.



Renee Levesque

THE WOODLAND OBSERVER

GPS workshop set for March 24

GPS is the name of a progressive rock group formed in 2006 and named after the initials of its three founders. But in case you think that is the topic of Eric Mattson's workshop at Nipissing University on March 24, rest assured, it isn't. Instead, Eric will focus on the Global Positioning System, also known as GPS, a satellite navigation system that provides location information.



It should prove to be quite the interesting workshop consisting of classroom and field instruction.

The classroom component will answer the following questions:

What is GPS? How does it work? What can we measure? What is the signal? How accurate is GPS? What affects the accuracy of GPS? How do we calibrate our handheld units? How do we navigate through the wilderness using GPS?

The field component will consist not only of calibrating and setting a handheld GPS unit for wilderness navigation, but also locating a geocache (prize) hidden somewhere along the campus trail system.

The workshop is open to both members and non-members at a cost of \$10.00 for members and \$20.00 for non-members. Because the workshop is limited to 20 people, participants must register in advance with Paul Smylie at psmylie1@hotmail.com.

The classroom component will be held at Nipissing University, Room A150, one of the geography rooms behind the cafeteria, on Saturday, March 24, starting at 9:30 a.m. The workshop, including the field component, will finish at 12:30 p.m.



The photo at left is from one of the Students on Ice (SOI) expeditions of which Eric is an education member. It is of a student throwing a drift bottle overboard, part of a project Eric is running with Fisheries and Oceans Canada to track ocean currents. Each bottle requires a GPS waypoint where it enters the ocean – and that is what Eric is doing in the background.

Speaker for March's meeting

Meetings will be held at a new location the second Tuesday of every month from September to December and from February to June. The new location is: **176 Lakeshore Drive at the northeast corner of Lakeshore and Gertrude in the former Tweedsmuir Elementary Public School.**

On **Tuesday, March 13**, Daniel Pike (right), independent Wildlife Consultant based in North Bay, will talk about Counting Whales in the North Atlantic and Other Places.

Whales are difficult to count. They spend much of their time underwater, not visible to observers. Even when they do come to the surface, they can be difficult to detect and identify. They are distributed over huge areas of the world's oceans, often far from land, and many species migrate long distances from tropical to temperate waters every year. Moreover, their distribution can change from year to year, necessitating surveys that cover immense areas.



So how are they counted with any accuracy? Daniel will let us know.



Fin Whales, photos courtesy of Daniel Pike

THE WOODLAND OBSERVER



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Monthly Bird Wing reports are sent to members by email and posted on the Nipissing Naturalists Club's website, <https://www.nipnats.com/club-activities/bird-wing/>. Here you will find in date order monthly Bird Wing reports; monthly Bird Bash reports; Year-end reports; and Christmas Bird Count reports.

The Woodland Observer is published electronically each month from September to June and sent to members by email and posted in date order on Nipissing Naturalists Club website, <https://www.nipnats.com/newsletters/>.

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Membership Fees

Annual Nipissing Naturalists Club membership fees are: single \$20.00; family \$30.00.

There is an **additional annual \$5.00 membership fee for Bird Wing** which meets the fourth Tuesday of every month in the auditorium of the North Bay Public Library from 6:30 to 9:00 p.m. **This membership fee is paid directly to Bird Wing.**



Nipissing Naturalists Club is affiliated with Ontario Nature: <http://www.ontarionature.org/>.