

A Visit to Thorah Island

Text and photos by James Kamstra

Sitting 4 km west of Beaverton, pork-chop shaped Thorah Island is the second largest island in Lake Simcoe (after Georgina Island). Part of Brock Township in north Durham, it is roughly 3 km long by 3 km wide. Much of Thorah Island was once farmed or pastured, but cultivation ceased in the 1960s (according to one cottage



owner). The former farmland is regenerating to Old Field and thicket in various stages of succession. Layered limestone bedrock is exposed along the shoreline indicating that the soil is often shallow, probably the main reason for farm abandonment. The flat island has no streams but deciduous swamps occur in several locations, with a large marsh and thicket swamp along the southeast shore.

I was interested in visiting this little known piece of Durham to see what natural features it had in store, but also because there were virtually no records for Thorah Island in either the Ontario Reptile and Amphibian Atlas

<https://ontarionature.org/programs/citizen-science/reptile-amphibian-atlas/>

or the Ontario Butterfly Atlas

<http://www.ontarioinsects.org/atlas.htm>

If nothing else we could fill in some gaps by documenting species from two atlas squares that cover parts of the island.

On June 26, 2018 James Kamstra and Derek Connelly headed out with Dale Leadbeater, Ginny Moore, Judy Wilson and Tom Wilson of Kawartha Field Naturalists to explore Thorah Island. We crowded into Tom's 18 foot inboard/outboard at the Talbot Marina, and then cruised onto the calm waters of Lake Simcoe to our destination. We noticed the wafer-like limestone layers exposed along the north shoreline, showing that the bedrock is very close to the surface. Thorah Island is all privately owned so generally not open for public visitation. We stopped at a cottage where a writer was spending the summer in seclusion. He gave us permission to land and explore.

The interior of the island contained variable meadows amongst dense thickets of European Buckthorn, Staghorn Sumac, some Black-berried Elder and Poison Ivy blanketing the ground in many places. We had been forewarned of the abundance of the nasty three-leaved plant so we wore rubber boots and took care to avoid it when we searched for Lepidoptera with our butterfly nets. The meadow was co-dominated by a variety of typical non-native field plants such as Smooth Brome Grass and Kentucky Bluegrass, while Cow Vetch, with its purple flower clusters, was the most conspicuous blooming plant. I thought that some characteristic alvar flora might be present due to the shallow soils and open meadow habitats but we found none. We diligently searched for butterflies since any species would be new for this 10 x 10 km atlas square. Fourteen species were evident, mostly common species, with large numbers of European Skippers, Common Ringlets and Silvery Blues. The most noteworthy was a Bronze Copper in a shoreline marsh.



We turned over whatever cover we could and found an Eastern Garter Snake under one log and a Blue-spotted Salamander under another. Then Dale and Ginny uncovered an Eastern Milk Snake under some debris, characterized by distinct reddish blotches and satiny smooth scales.

On close inspection we could see the chubby body indicating that it was a gravid female, meaning she was carrying eggs. In the same vicinity we soon found a second Milk Snake also in gravid condition, and then a third. We eventually found 10 Eastern Milk Snakes there, all gravid females. It seems that the snakes may be coming from across the island to lay their eggs in this favoured patch of tangled vegetation and debris. Egg-laying snakes will hang out in warm sites for several weeks so that the eggs within them will incubate prior to laying. Snakes of various species are known to have communal egg laying sites. We just happened to stumble on this Milk Snake haven at this critical time of year.



Closer to the shore we found another blotched snake under cover, but this one was duller with opaque keeled scales - a Northern Water Snake. Another one was seen swimming in the water along the shore. As we boated around the island, we found at least one water snake at almost every landing spot. Several water snakes were sunning on the gravel bar along the southeast shore and two were within a tree cavity about 30 cm above ground. Although Northern Water Snakes are a common reptile in much of southern Ontario, they are quite rare in Durham and the GTA. For example a Northern Water

Snake has not been reported on Lake Scugog since the 1970s. Consequently it was a surprise to see how common they are around Thorah Island, where much of the shoreline remains undeveloped. This species is disliked by many and as a result has been persecuted and eliminated from many cottage areas.

We motored back to the marina, entering through the mouth of the Trent Canal. Here two piers stick out from shore creating a concrete walled embayment that shelters boats from the surge of Lake Simcoe. Various floating branches and logs collected on the south side of the embayment, and there were turtles sunning on those objects. Map Turtles -16 on the logs and another seven with their heads



protruding from the water surface. Map Turtles are also rare in Durham and have only been reported from a few locations on Lake Simcoe. Despite this, a local population seems to be thriving in the vicinity of the Talbot River and Trent Canal mouths in extreme northern Durham and adjacent Simcoe County.

The day was done, the crew was contented having explored a little known part of our region, and adding many records to the two provincial wildlife atlases

Photo Inspiration

Text and photos by Jay Thibert

June – The Month of Life!

June is truly the month when the natural world finds its stride. My exposure to the flush of new life began on June 4 when Bev and I headed to our camp northeast of Sudbury. June is not normally the time when one heads into Canada's boreal forest. Our motivation was to continue work on our log sauna – our son Stuart had a break from work and was coming with us to move the project forward. In this *Photo Inspiration* column I will share some scenes that inspired me to set down my chainsaw and pick up my camera during that 10 day stay on Joan Lake.

The first 418 km journey to our camp is done in a car. The next 1.5 km is a walk on a forest trail, then a paddle across a small lake and finally a short steep climb to our cabin. We had done the walk and paddle hundreds of times, but never in June. To our delight, this familiar trail looked very different with hundreds of Pink Lady's Slippers in their prime. The first photo, showing several Lady's Slippers was taken on a cloudy morning with very little wind. The cloud eliminates harsh shadows and provides a more uniform light for your subject. The stillness allows you to use a slower shutter speed and a lower ISO.



On a still day in prime orchid habitat you must prepare for persistent mosquitos. Can you see them on the plant?

I like using a tripod for flower shots – it ensures that the camera is not moving and it forces you to slow down and compose the shot more carefully. This was shot with an ISO of 400 with a 65 mm focal length. The shutter speed was 1/60 of a second at f 13. This provides a wider depth of field and ensures that most of this unique flower is in sharp focus. The second shot of the solitary Moccasin Flower was shot with an ISO of



400 at 1/250 of a second at f 8.0 with a 75mm focal length.

Most mornings the log work got started by 8:00 a.m. Next to the path leading from the existing cabin to the log sauna project there were patches of Clintonia in bloom. On June 12 I had to put the chainsaw down and run for the camera when I saw a pair of Tiger Swallowtail butterflies feeding at the yellow/green Clintonia flowers.



These are large colourful butterflies that attract attention from both photographers and nature observers. In the first shot (see above) what you see is the usual composition taken by most photographers, with wings fully open while the insect feeds at a flower. In this classic pose, the colours are beautiful and the shape is exquisite. The second shot was originally that same shot, but I decided to crop the



image so that you see only a portion of the wing and your attention is drawn to its head, proboscis and the flower. What do you think of the new composition?



In this side view notice the sharp focus on the body, legs and flower

In the third image I tried for a completely different perspective – a side view of the butterfly as it fed on the Clintonia flower. It was shot at f 5.0 so the depth of field is shallow, leaving only the body and the flower in sharp focus. It creates a very soft out of focus background and blurs the colours in the wings. I love the way this shot is composed. I had to get low to the ground and wait for the right moment. All three of these shots were shot at 1/1000 of a

second or faster to ensure a tack sharp image.

So life at Joan Lake in June had its challenges and its rewards. Doing exacting log building tasks while surrounded by thousands of biting mosquitos is not for the faint of heart. We were rewarded with carpets of Bunchberry flowers, occasional glimpses of Fringed Polygala and Blue-



eyed Grass flowers. On the log building side, we completed three full courses of logs.

So find your way to a new location at a new time of year and be inspired.

Book Reviews

Text and photos by Brenda Near

Victory Gardens for Bees. A DIY Guide to Saving the Bees. Lori Weidenhammer. 2016. Douglas and McIntyre, Vancouver, B.C.

The term “Victory Gardens” refers to a successful, WWII allied forces campaign, which encouraged citizens to ‘feed the troops’ by turning any available piece of land into food gardens. In this book, Lori Weidenhammer, likens the urgency to grow bee gardens to the Victory Garden campaign: “If we want to protect our pollinators and the very survival of life on our planet, we need to grow Victory Gardens for bees with a level of dedication similar to the Victory Gardens of our past.” *Victory Gardens for Bees* is a call to arms to all citizens to help save our native bees.



To begin, the author outlines why our pollinators are declining: habitat destruction, global warming and pesticide use have caused the loss of over 50 percent of native bees in the last century. She paints a dire picture of survival should we ignore the pollinator’s population collapse: “if the bees disappear, they’re taking us with them”. The mood of the book shifts to greater optimism after the first chapter, as Lori outlines how everyone can create some kind of habitat for bees, even if it’s just a small pot of flowering herbs on your balcony which could help a stranded bumblebee. She encourages us to buy our produce wisely from growers who are bee-wise to be okay with



weeds and bugs in our gardens and to beware of neonicotinoids (a pesticide used to treat corn and other crop seeds) which are linked to high mortality rate in bees.

There is a whole chapter dedicated to bee identification which discusses in detail each of the native bees likely to be found in our Canadian gardens.

I truly enjoyed all the information about how bees collect pollen and nectar, how they nest and other tidbits on behaviour. Lori opens the door to a whole world that I knew nothing about. My only complaint would be that the photographs, while beautiful, are not always detailed enough for accurate field identification. If your interest is piqued with this book, you may want to look for a better field guide.

For the people who wish to create a bee Victory Garden, subsequent chapters have lengthy plant lists and designs for all garden types, from herb and vegetable gardens to native plant gardens, to hedgerows for making farmers’ fields more bee-friendly, and a chapter for bee keepers. The lists in each chapter identify plants as a native plant or an old world plant (meaning that it came here via the settlers), and adds garden site preferences and benefits to bees. She is careful not to include any invasive species on these lists, although I would encourage anyone buying plants to research

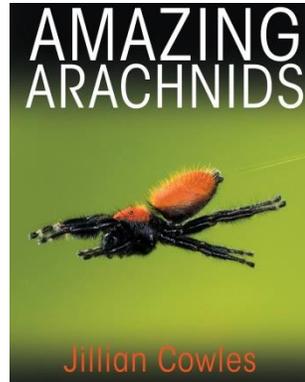
carefully and refer to the Ontario invasive species website before purchasing.

Lori explains how to choose flowers for their benefit to bees and how to include areas for nesting bees. For example, when buying plants for the garden it is important to look at the shape and form of the flower, making sure that your garden includes deep flowers for the long-tongued bees and shorter, open flowers for short-tongued species. I found this was fascinating as I had never really thought about the tongue length of a bee! Lori also explains how important it is to not till your soil or cover it with heavy bark mulch, leaving some open, undisturbed dirt areas in your garden, since 70% of native bees nest in the ground. Some bees travel long distances (honey bees and bumblebees) so they need a community of gardens to get from place to place, while others only travel a short distance all their lives and need nectar and pollen sources close to their nests.

Victory Gardens for Bees is not just a gardening book; it is ultimately an entertainingly written resource book, chock full of information about the amazing world of native bees that are in our own backyards. It is a great read for over the winter as it is full of ideas and enthusiasm to encourage all of us to plan a Victory Garden for next year. It's time to rip out some grass and other plants in the name of conservation!

Note: Flowers shown here: Swamp Milkweed and Anise Hyssop. Swamp milkweed not only attracted lots of bees, it was also a nursery for 10-15 Monarch caterpillars this summer.

Amazing Arachnids. Jillian Cowles. Princeton University Press. 2018. \$45.00 (hardcover). USD. 328pages. ISBN:978-0-691-176581.



Arachnids include the obvious and ubiquitous spiders, but also myriad other critters, such as scorpions, pseudoscorpions, whipscorpions, harvestmen, mites, ticks and

opiliocarids. All of them are “spooky” looking and reviled by most. But let’s stand back for a moment and look at their lives and structures. What you find is an amazing array of characteristics and behaviours. In this book you will be introduced to over 300 species of spiders and allies. You will learn about web-making, spitting and trapdoor spiders, orb weavers, tarantulas and so much more. Hundreds of excellent photos and hundreds more pages of text will guide you through the secret lives of these animals that we unjustly vilify. Prepare to be amazed as you turn the pages of this excellent book, written by arachnid expert Jillian Cowles – but don’t read it in the dark – you never know where they’re hiding!

In case you missed my article in the Standard newspaper on why we should “love” spiders, here’s a link to learn more about spiders:

<http://www.thestandardnewspaper.ca/walk-softly---geoff-carpentier/archives/08-2018>

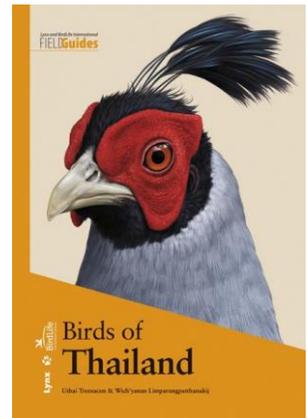


Birds of Thailand. Uthai Treesucon, Wich'yanan Limparungpatthanakij. 2018. Lynx Edicions, Barcelona, Spain. Hardcover. 450 pages. 60 Euros. ISBN: 978-84-16728-09-1.

I love travelling to the Orient for the scenery, the people, the culture, the food but most of all the birds. They seem to have more incredible species than anywhere else

I can fathom. Everything seems to be exotic. I'm not even sure where to start to tantalize you, but let's just say once you see an Asian Fairy-Bluebird, you will forget how gorgeous ours is! Just kidding, but you will be impressed.

In their characteristic style, Lynx has produced not only a gorgeous book with amazing paintings, but also a useful guide for any resident or travelling birder to use. In the past, one had to settle for a guide to the birds of Southeast Asia or Southern Asia, but these were outdated and tried to cram too much into one book, for they covered many countries and regions.



This new book focusses solely on Thailand and showcases all 1029 species known to have occurred in Thailand to date. And if that's not enough, add in several more distinctive subspecies that can be found there and the scope of the book becomes even more fulsome. The biology, distribution, conservation status, habitat, field marks, behavioural attributes and more are documented and supported by over 220 illustrations by 30 topnotch artists! I have had the good fortune to have previously seen many of the species depicted in the book and can assert that the descriptions and illustrations are excellent. For anyone thinking of travelling to Thailand to bird, this new travel friendly book is a must have!

Spring Flowers Quiz

In the last issue of the newsletter, Derek offered a spring time flower quiz. Hope you took the time to do it! Here are the answers

a) Yellow Trillium



b) Bloodroot



c) Red Trillium



d) Fringed Polygala



e) Blue-eyed grass



f) White trillium



Phragmites Update

Invasive *Phragmites* Update Uxbridge

Text and photos by Derek Connelly

Previously, I reported on our efforts with invasive plants: providing outreach and guidance to the Township of Uxbridge, surveying for *Phragmites*, and attempting some control over the spread of the invasive reed *Phragmites* at Barton Pond. (see October 2017 NDN newsletter). This spring Paul LaPorte and I followed up on our previous work and made presentations to Uxbridge Council and the Uxbridge Parks and Roads staff. This resulted in Parks applying for a Grant for a Hit Squad student to continue the Uxbridge survey started last summer. Unfortunately the Township did not get the grant and no students were hired. I organized two volunteer activities at my local retention pond however.

Phragmites had returned to Barton Pond area as expected. This time with help from Lake Simcoe Region Conservation Authority, the Town trails' coordinator and two other local volunteers, we cut stalks (stems) in July before flowers had developed in hopes of reducing the fall seed dispersal. Then in September two of us spent only an hour removing a few flower heads that had developed. It was very obvious we had reduced the ability of the plant to successfully spread seeds this year.

As before, stems and leaves were left at the site to avoid spreading but were moved

from the marsh to open up the area for wildlife and other plants. No below ground rhizomes or stolons were removed. Flowers and seedheads were black bagged, solarized and later burned off site.



Observations and Reflections: Many *Phragmites* stems cut in July and last year were surrounded with new stems by September (photo above). The impact of our cutting may encourage regrowth and may not necessarily weaken the plant. No new populations were observed around the pond however. While I received good media coverage (local paper, Facebook, etc.) there was very little public interest in volunteering. Wagner's Lake residents asked for information but no other town residents indicated any concern over the plants growth. On the negative side, on the 7th concession across from Elgin Park, *Phragmites* was cut indiscriminately along with other vegetation. Stalks and seeds were left on the roadside where they could be run over, blown away and the cutting machine itself could transfer the plant and seeds to other areas of town.

Next year I plan to continue removing the plant at Barton Pond and will assist in other areas if requested. Provincially there seems more interest in management and hopefully a broader support system will develop or our environment could change dramatically.

Scugog's Fight Against *Phragmites*

by Cara Gregory with photo by Derek Connelly

The Scugog Environmental Advisory Committee (SEAC), since its beginning 4 years ago, has invested much of its time and resources into educating the community about local invasive species and has made efforts to remove them. This was accomplished through the hiring of 2 summer students in co-ordination with the Ontario Federation of Anglers and Hunters (OFAH) through the government "Hit Squad" program. Last summer, Lauren Negrazis was hired to map all of the areas of *Phragmites* in Scugog Township using a computer application called EDDMapS. This summer, another student, Christopher Staines, was hired to build upon the work that Lauren had done.

He visited the locations Lauren prioritized for removal, and worked on using a method called "spading" to remove selected small patches of *Phragmites*. Where this wasn't possible he would dig up the plant, and its long root system. Two larger populations, one on Old Simcoe in the Nonquon Wetland, and one along the causeway to Scugog Island, were mechanically removed by SEAC Chair Cara Gregory, and Vice-Chair Paul LaPorte. They were then

bagged and removed from the site to be laid out in the sun before disposal or burned.

Educating the local community about invasive species was a large part of Chris's role. His operation of a boat washing station at a boat launch along Lake Scugog helped to inform boaters of aquatic invasive species, and how to prevent their spread. He also developed and ran an invasive species activity for a grade 3 class visiting the Nonquon Environmental Education Centre. An article on his invasive species work was in both the *Port Perry Star* newspaper and in *Focus* magazine. It is the hope of the committee to continue this important work through the hiring of another "Hit Squad" student next year.



In the News

Worldwide, we're still in trouble in many areas, but here are a few bright spots:

Australia's Tourism and Events Queensland spokespeople have announced that the Great Barrier Reef has shown dramatic signs of recovery in the last year. The Reef and Rainforest Research Centre has reported positive signs of recovery and the reduction of "coral bleaching" due to a mild winter in 2017-18 and support from the scientific community to protect and encourage protection of the reef and its features. Coral bleaching occurs when reef animals are exposed to warmer sea temperatures or poor water quality.

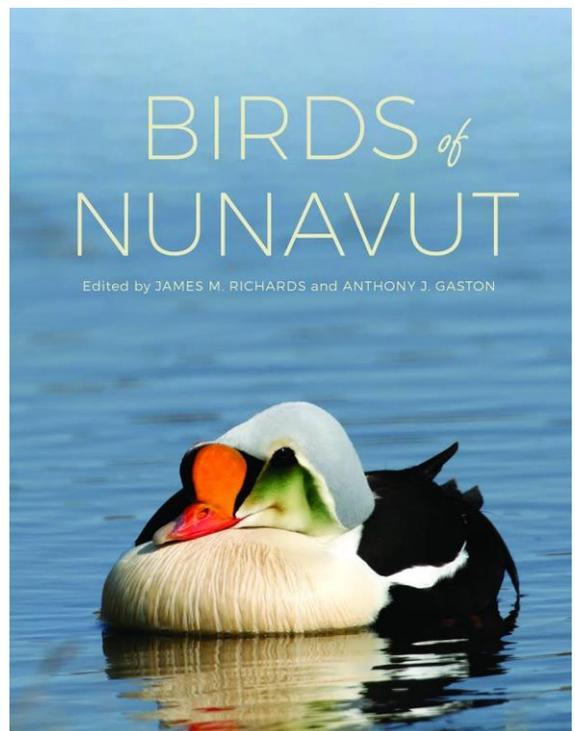
Project – The Ocean Clean-up

Over 5 trillion pieces of plastic currently litter the ocean. Trash accumulates in 5 ocean garbage patches, the largest one being the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, located between Hawaii and California. This ambitious project will run sustainably and will, through innovative technology, gather plastics of various sizes utilizing ocean currents to "corral" them. Within 5 years the project is targeting removal of 50% of the Great Pacific Garbage Patch. It is estimated that by 2040 90% of all ocean plastics can be removed. For more information go to:

<https://www.theoceancleanup.com/technology/>

Birds of Nunavut

NDN is proud to be one of the financial sponsors of the exciting new book **Birds of Nunavut**, co-edited by Tony Gaston and Jim Richards and published by UBC Press in August. This monumental book is the first chronicle of all 245 species of birds known to have occurred in Nunavut. And our own Geoff Carpentier wrote 3 of the species accounts and did the bibliography for this great two-volume work. If anyone is interested in seeing the book, we will have it at our October meeting and a "friends' discount" is available from UBC Press if you'd love to have your own copy for yourself or a friend.



Ivory Gull – an iconic species that nests in Nunavut



Black-legged Kittiwake – another iconic species that nests in Nunavut



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Note: All photos and text in this newsletter by Geoff Carpentier unless otherwise stated

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