Thickson's Woods Land Trust

Spring 2025
Newsletter 67

World Migratory Bird Day and Invasive Species Hunt

Saturday May 10 8:00 a.m

Migrant Black-thoated Blue Warbler at Thickson's Woods (*Phill Holder*).

After last fall's largely unsuccessful search for Garlic Mustard plants left volunteers with big smiles on their faces, we decided to change our plans for this spring. Saturday is World Migratory Bird Day, so we'll start at 8:00 a.m. instead of 9:00 and spend the first hour or so checking out returning migrants. (Sorry our recent email didn't mention the earlier start. You can still arrive at 9:00 if that suits your schedule better.) The later date means many more birds will have returned to greet us. As well, newly sprouted Garlic Mustard seedlings will be visible, and stalks of Dog-strangling Vine may be emerging. European Buckthorn saplings should be leafing out so they can be spotted and removed.

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Charitable Registration # 11926 3176 RR0001

SPRING IN THE NATURE RESERVE

by Dennis Barry

This year it may seem that winter has lingered longer than you'd hoped, but look and listen carefully and you'll discover signs that spring is right on schedule. March is the best month to begin appreciating the beauty of drake ducks in all their iridescent splendor. Sit quietly on the bluff south of the woods and you'll soon spot groups of three or four male goldeneyes crowding around a single female, tossing their heads back and emitting a very unmusical noise, trying to impress her. At first she seems uninterested, but within a week or two you'll notice couples paired off, swimming and diving side-by-side.

Crowds of long-tailed ducks conduct their own courtship gatherings, but usually farther out from shore. Their musical yodeling is one of my favourite spring sounds. If you can visit on a day when March winds and April showers have given way to sunny calm mornings, you can enjoy their symphony wafting from far out on the water.

The first red-necked grebes showed up in the bay this year in mid-March. The early clue to their arrival is a sound that could be dismissed as squabbling gulls. But memories of having made that mistake in past springs caused a rush of excitement as, smiling, I hurried out to welcome them. Only weeks later, do couples pair off and begin stretching their necks tall, while swimming side-by-side, showing off their modest version of grebe courtship.

Golden-crowned kinglets are the first migrants in the woods. Sit still near a quiet tangle of brightening red-osier dogwood, and these tiny fearless sprites will come near as they search for spider and insect eggs among the twigs. If you're lucky, you could spot a brown creeper, another early migrant, fly to the bottom of a nearby white pine trunk to begin to spiral upward in search of hidden morsels.

American Robin (*Jim Richards*).

The first tree swallows appeared in early April, hawking for emerging midges over the waves in the bay. It was two weeks later before this reliable food supply appeared in the woods. Robins that had been quietly searching in vain for worms on frosty mornings suddenly began gobbling midges off gravel in the laneway, and soon burst into song for the first time since they arrived.

As midge numbers swell, birds follow them as they're blown to the lee of the woods, or into sheltered spots in the interior. On a day when a chilling gale blew from the east, a swirling flock of bank swallows chased midges over the road and parking lot to the west.

For the next month experienced birders will check the winds as they arrive, and head for sheltered areas where birds are most likely to be concentrated.. And if folks awakened to loud cracks of thunder sometime after midnight, they'll be very excited to see if a fallout of migrants happened in Thickson's Woods.

Thank you yet again, Whitby Sunrise Rotarians!

So helpful, so generous, so willing, so creative! So many helping hands and energetic muscles, not to mention brain power. Members of Whitby Sunrise Rotary have contributed so much to the Thickson's Woods Nature Reserve over the years, taking on many an improvement project with such good humour and team spirit that it seems more like fun than work, watching them go at it.

When someone donated a pile of old cement slabs, Rotarians got down on their knees and laid them along stretches of trail that used to be mud holes when frost came out of the ground each spring and birders tramped in, searching for migrants. Rotary Club members bought and planted two groves of white pine saplings in the meadow, trees that half a century from now may be blocking ever-stronger winds from blowing down the last old giants in Thickson's Woods.

Rotarians designed and built a new entranceway to the nature reserve when the original cedar posts and rails finally rotted away--wooden fencing that 90 year old Edge Pegg and Dennis Barry constructed to block ATVs from entering where 66 hundred-foot-long pine trunks had been skidded out, during the tragic logging of Thickson's Woods in 1983.

Building boardwalks is another of the Rotary Sunrise Club's specialties. Last spring they constructed one across a wet valley in the southeast corner of the woods, after removing one they'd put in decades ago that had finally served its time. In September they replaced an even longer, larger boardwalk in the middle of the woods. Both were designed and crafted by Frank Howie, a brilliant engineer/problem-solver retired from a long career at Darlington Nuclear, whose son is a Rotarian. Frank himself might as well be, for all the thought, time and craftmanship he contributed.

According to Rotarian Mike Miller, project coordinator, it took three days of focused work to dismantle and haul away the old bridge, then set firm new footings, assemble and construct the new. Frank came back later to install graceful, practical handrails that keep visitors secure while they're crossing.

Next time you step onto either of those solid, sturdy, made-to-last boardwalks, be sure to smile and mentally thank Whitby Sunrise Rotary, a service club with a great big generous heart.

North Bridge, Thickson's Woods.

Lest We Forget

By Margaret Carney

Eighty years since Canadian troops liberated Holland during World War II? I was surprised and touched, catching CBC coverage of memorial events in the Netherlands this week. Time flies, but memories run deep.

Mine did—straight back to the fifty-year celebration and TV coverage explaining heroic historical happenings I knew little about, but which speared my heart. So much so that I mentioned it to Dave Calvert when he dropped by after birding in Thickson's Woods that May morning, as he often did. I was likely just making conversation with a lonely old guy who wanted company, a bit of time out of my busy day, but never had much to say. Imagine my shock when he looked at me and stated, "I know. I was there."

Dave Calvert spent 4 ½ years of his youth tramping across war-torn Europe in the infantry? Why didn't I know that? I stood open-mouthed as this man of few words told me a tiny bit about what he'd been through. Including how he'd had a kidney burst when, while training how to cross rolls of barbed wire by becoming a "human bridge," a big burly fellow Canadian kneed him in the back crawling over him. Dave was granted a few weeks R & R but no specialist, no surgery, before heading on into the war. He had a lifetime of kidney problems after that, and in fact died of kidney failure in the end. Years after I'd met him, thank heavens.

Because Dave Calvert is my hero. I owed him time out of any busy day he happened to come by, always. Dave was the first person to come forward in the horrible, upsetting days after Thickson's Woods was desecrated by logging and we were madly trying to figure out how to save the rest. Buying it, a daunting prospect, seemed the only option, but how…? Then Dave dropped by and sat in our living room, waiting patiently for a long-winded "expert" to leave, and quietly offered to help. His pledge of $5,000 toward a down payment was the clincher, making it suddenly, magically possible to take on the challenge. If this aging retiree cared so much about nature that he was willing to dip into his life savings to help buy Thickson's Woods, surely other people would contribute as well.

He was. They did. The rest is history.

We did it! Paid off the mortgage on Thickson's Woods in 1989, ahead of the five- year deadline.
Core team, left to right: Dennis Barry, Margaret Carney, Edge Pegg, Margaret Bain, Mary Calvert, **Dave Calvert.**
Betty Pegg took the picture.

We are in Serious Trouble

By Jim Richards

Here at home in Clarington, I continually get questioned about the lack of birds, in the forest, at the lake, along roadsides and at private feeders. The answer to “where are all the birds?” is sometimes about timing. Late fall / early winter, before any ‘winter finches’ arrive (and many years they don’t due to available food in northern climes) and when many summer residents have departed for points south, is often a slow period. The same applies to mid / late summer when most species are busy attending to young in/out of the nest and utilizing natural occurring food sources.

However, there is a more real, yet sinister reason for the lack of birds. First, let’s take a brief look at the history of North American birds that have been lost to extinction. The following met their demise due mainly to overhunting, and a few due to habitat loss.

Here in North America, we have witnessed the extinction of the following species: Labrador Duck, last seen in 1878 at Elmira, NY; Eskimo Curlew, last confirmed sighting in 1963, and a doubtful sighting from 1989; Great Auk , the last one killed on Eldey Island off Iceland on 3 June 1844, with an unsubstantiated sighting in 1852; Passenger Pigeon, once flocks of over 2.2 billion darkened the skies, the most numerous bird in the world. The last bird died in the Cincinnati Zoo on 1 Sept. 1914; Painted Vulture, last seen in the 1770s; Ivory-billed Woodpecker, last verified in 1944 in a swamp in Louisiana; Carolina Parakeet, the last one died in the Cincinnati Zoo in 1918; and Bachman’s Warbler; the last female was seen on 28 Feb. 1940 in Mississippi, and the last male on 21 March 1941 in Louisiana. Finally, the Pinnated Grouse or Heath Hen has been extinct since 1932.

This would be fairly good news if that was the end of extinction, but sadly, it is only the beginning. Aside from fossil birds, 159 species have gone extinct world-wide, since 1500. This includes 30 per cent of Hawaiian species and 60 per cent of species in Guam. Five others are extinct in the wild. Right now, according to the United Nations, we are facing the greatest mass extinction of species since the Ice Age!

In 2022 it was estimated that 1480 species of birds were at risk and 223 were critically endangered. In 2023 it was estimated that of the 10,000+ extant species, 233 were critically endangered, 413 endangered, 754 vulnerable and 991 threatened. What a sad commentary on those animals we share the earth with, and this does not include mammals, fish, reptiles, amphibians, wildflowers, insects and the like, of which many are either extinct or presently endangered. We must consider just where we humans fit into this equation, and it does not look good!

Hooded Warbler (*Jim Richards*)

In North America in 2025, 77 bird species are currently threatened with extinction, including several here in Canada like Long-tailed Duck, Steller’s Eider, Whooping Crane, Eskimo Curlew, Bristle-thighed Curlew, Kittlitz’s Murrelet, Marbled Murrelet, Bicknell’s Thrush, Sprague’s Pipit, Cerulean Warbler, and Rusty Blackbird. Currently, 65 per cent, more than 450 species in Canada are considered secure. The rest, such as Ivory Gull, Hooded Warbler, Cerulean Warbler, Prothonotary Warbler, Canada Warbler, Golden-winged Warbler, Acadian Flycatcher, Eastern Wood Pewee, Wood Thrush, Louisiana Waterthrush, Chestnut-

Bobolink (*Jim Richards*)

Barn Swallow (*Jim Richards*)

collared Longspur, Sprague's Pipit, Bobolink, Eastern Meadowlark, Piping Plover, all of our swallows, most seabirds, and others such as Common Nighthawk and Whip-poor-will are threatened and in critical danger. About 50 per cent of our bird species have seen a steady decline in numbers in the past fifty years.

Only 15 per cent of our land, oceans and freshwaters are protected, and all are subject to political decision-making. These very habitats are being destroyed at a rate never before seen. Couple all of the factors such as habitat loss, pesticides, herbicides, fungicides and other forms of pollution with climate change and we have a recipe for disaster. Keep in mind that as we see birds, mammals, herptiles, plants and insects going extinct, it's only a matter of time until it's our turn! It's up to you, not the politicians. Politicians respond to their financial donors, so do your homework and vote accordingly at all levels.

Our own government authorities in Canada have determined that we've lost 30 per cent of our birds since 1970, and the numbers are growing. Consider that we have lost 17 per cent of eastern forest birds, 29 per cent of western forest birds, 23 per cent of our arctic birds, 33 per cent of boreal birds, 37 per cent of our shorebirds, and an alarming 53 per cent of grassland birds, and all of this equates to over 3 billion birds.

Sticking with loss due to habitat destruction alone we see the following disturbing numbers: 9 species of waterbirds, 17 species of grassland birds, 23 species of shorebirds, 5 species of seabirds, 44 species of forest birds and 13 species of aerial insectivores. Those numbers represent a loss of 862 million sparrows, 618 million warblers, 439 million blackbirds, 182 million larks, and 145 million finches. This in addition to waterfowl, birds of prey, seabirds, and numerous other groups. Hope this answers your questions about "where have all the birds gone?"

It seems that the majority of birders hang up their binoculars once the bulk of spring migration has passed in late May, only to resurrect them for a short period in mid-autumn for fall migration, then again to participate in winter bird counts. They tend to frequent the 'hot spots' and thus I suspect do not get the full picture. As a bird and wildlife photographer in all seasons I may get to experience a broader perspective. I recall conducting a breeding bird census with my usual field companion Bruno Kern in the mid-1980s. It was in mid-May in an historically productive forest south of Lindsay along Fleetwood Creek, an area I was very familiar with. This was a mixed forest and usually hosted a great variety and number of bird species such as Barred Owl, Broad-winged and Red-shouldered Hawk, Northern Goshawk, Cooper's Hawk, Ruffed Grouse, Pileated Woodpecker, Red-eyed Vireo, Wood Thrush, Ovenbird, Northern Waterthrush, Scarlet Tanager and Purple Finch. On that and on subsequent visits I noticed a major decline in both species' variety and numbers. I recall saying to Bruno one morning around seven a.m., when the woods should have been ringing with song, "This makes me think of Rachel Carson" (author of Silent Spring), as the forest was in fact silent for the most part.

About the same time, I noticed a major change in song and variety in one of my favourite haunts in the Ganaraska Forest. In that special area, it was not uncommon to encounter Barred Owl, Ruffed Grouse, Cooper's Hawk, Eastern Wood Pewee, Least Flycatcher, Great Crested Flycatcher, Red-eyed Vireo, Veery, Wood Thrush, Mourning Warbler, Hooded Warbler, American Redstart, Chestnut-sided Warbler, Black-throated Blue and Black-throated Green Warblers, Pine Warbler, Scarlet Tanager, Rose-breasted Grosbeak and Indigo Bunting. All had sharply declined!

I experienced the same in a forest near Pontypool where Cooper's Hawk, Sharp-shinned Hawk, Northern Goshawk, Long-eared Owl, Wood Thrush and typical forest inhabitants that had been abundant had declined rapidly. It was obvious to me that the balance had been upset around that time.

Here in Ontario, our current government seems to be interpreting its recent re-election as permission to gut all the environmental laws we've fought so hard for over the last century. Now more than ever, we need to make our voices heard in protest, and support all who are standing up to this dire threat.

We can't let special interest groups, protected and enhanced by party politics, destroy what we've spent lifetimes fighting to protect.

The Ford government has a current plan (Bill 5) to shorten the time for development anywhere in Ontario by doing away with environmental assessments and by gutting and ignoring the Endangered Species Act. The government won't have to announce any development proposals and the public won't have an opportunity to comment as mandated in the Environmental Bill of Rights. You need to let your MPP know how you feel.

All this in addition to them getting rid of the Provincial Environment Commissioner, scaling back duties and regulations of our Conservation Authorities, among other tragic anti-nature/anti-environment moves.

Bottom line, it's up to us what we leave for our children and grandchildren. In the words of a Randy Travis country song, "It's not what you take when you leave this world behind you, it's what you leave behind you when you go." Listen to the song and then think about choices you make.

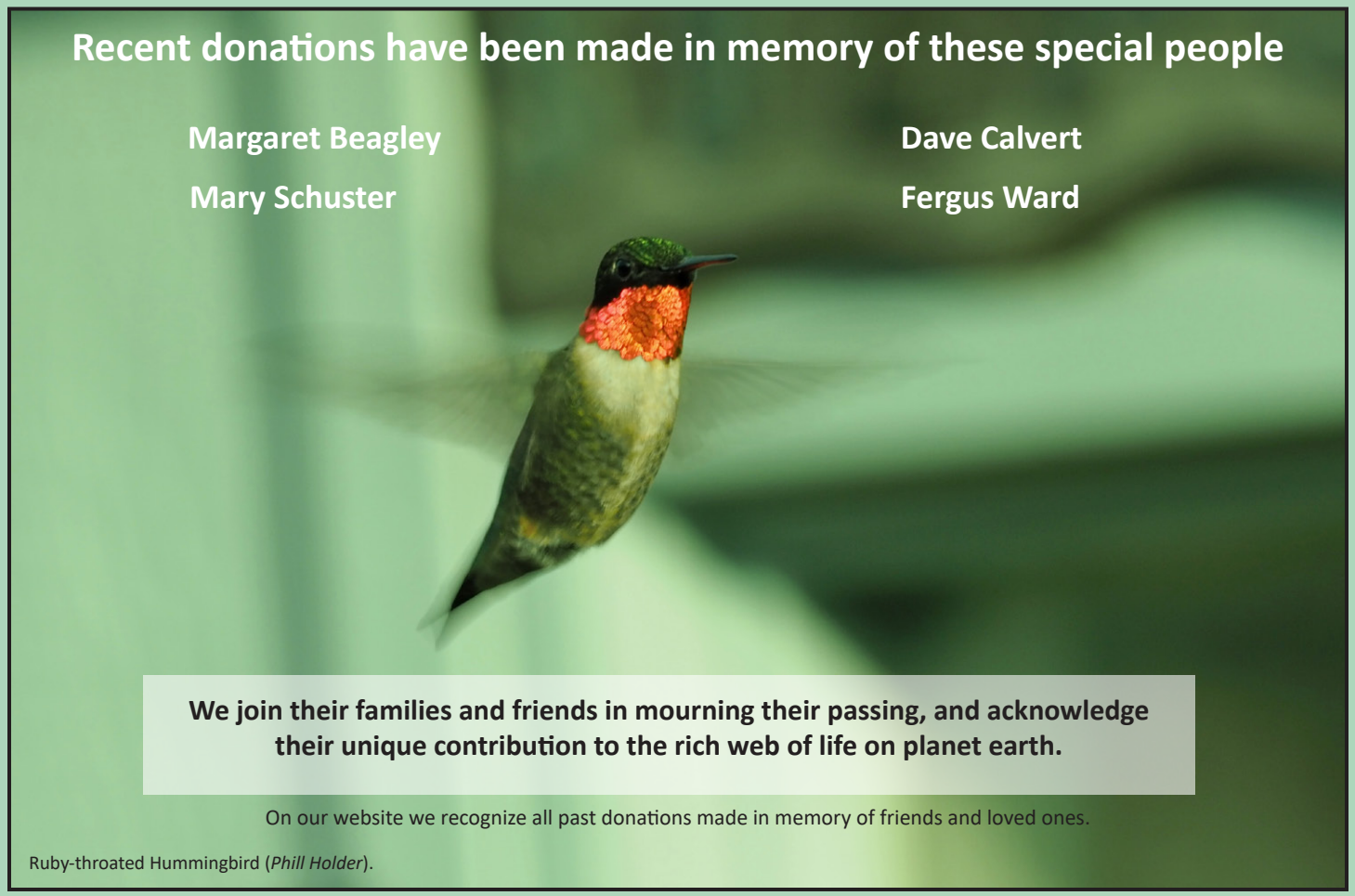
Recent donations have been made in memory of these special people

Margaret Beagley

Dave Calvert

Mary Schuster

Fergus Ward



We join their families and friends in mourning their passing, and acknowledge their unique contribution to the rich web of life on planet earth.

On our website we recognize all past donations made in memory of friends and loved ones.

Ruby-throated Hummingbird (*Phill Holder*).

About the American Chestnut

by John F. Foster

The American Chestnut (*Castanea dentata*) was once a great part of the deciduous forests of the eastern United States centred on the slopes of the Appalachian Mountains. The species also grew in abundance in Southwestern Ontario where it is known as the Northwestern Chestnut.

But in 1904, American Chestnut trees were found dying at the Bronx Zoo in New York City, from a bark blight accidentally introduced on wood from China, known today as the Chestnut Bark Blight (*Cryphonectria parasitica*). It went on to infect the American Chestnut throughout its entire range by 1950, killing off four billion American Chestnuts and rendering the species functionally extinct. This kind of extinction means that although the top part of the tree has been killed, the roots have not.

Chestnut Bark Blight (*John Foster*)

Over the last hundred years or so, the still extant roots of many American Chestnuts have been sending up sucker growth. The suckers rarely reach fifteen years old, the age at which they start to produce burrs containing two to three nuts. The blight kills off the suckers most of the time, hence the functional extinction, because the trees cannot reproduce. The suckers provide energy to the live roots, but if they keep getting killed off by the blight, then the roots die too. American Chestnut does not have an immunity to the Chestnut Bark Blight. In its native range in East China, the Chinese Chestnut has enough immunity to be protected. It has existed with the blight for a long time and so developed an immunity to the fungus. A separate chestnut species exists in Japan, and it, too, has immunity. The European Chestnut, lacking immunity, has also been decimated by the Chestnut Bark Blight.

American Chestnut Bark
young tree (*John Foster*)

American Chestnuts once grew up to thirty metres tall with diameters at breast height of three metres. They were often called the “King of the Forest.” The tree is recognized by its very long narrow leaf that has many hooked teeth along the edges. When young, the bark is very smooth and gray, but as the chestnut ages, the bark becomes furrowed. If the tree grows in the open, the crown spreads up to thirty metres wide. In forest conditions, the tree has a narrower canopy. It reaches upward for the light to great height.

The leaves appear in April. In autumn they turn a brilliant yellow. The landscape once looked fiery with their colour. When the leaves have detached from the tree, they blanket the ground, later rot, and provide sustenance and cover to the plants and animals living there.

Flowering season for the American Chestnut is mid-May to the beginning of June. The long narrow white flower spikes are found on the top half of the tree. Chestnuts once made up a third of the forest on the Appalachian slopes. When their flowers bloomed, they gave off prodigious

American Chestnut Burr (*John Foster*)

American Chestnut leaves (*John Foster*)

quantities of pollen. From the flowers, burrs develop, and drop to the ground in great abundance. Young trees grow from the nuts that developed in the burr. The American Chestnut relies heavily on mammals and birds to carry the nuts away for dispersal.

The American Chestnut had many uses pre-blight. It was a profuse producer of mast. The nuts were eaten by many mammals and birds in the forest. Farmers once grazed their cattle in the groves so they could eat the nuts that had dropped. Bushels of nuts were transported to markets and sold.

American Chestnut nuts (*John Foster*)

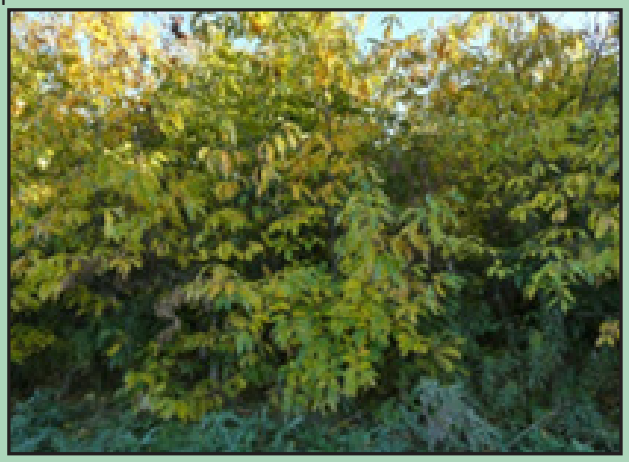
American Chestnut wood contains a lot of tannin, which makes it rot resistant. The tannin was useful in the leather industry. The wood was used for fenceposts, panels, railroad ties, furniture and cabinetry. Today, the only American Chestnut wood available is from old barn panels or logs salvaged from rivers and forests.

Chestnut Bark Blight infects the trees by gaining access to their cambial layer through wounds. It can be transmitted by airborne spores or carried by birds. It infects the point of contact and spreads, creating cankers on the bark, some sunken, some open that bulge the bark outward, exposing the infected area. These areas often appear orange and have streaks of spores running down the trunk. The blight girdles branches and trunks, killing the trees, while the roots remain intact.

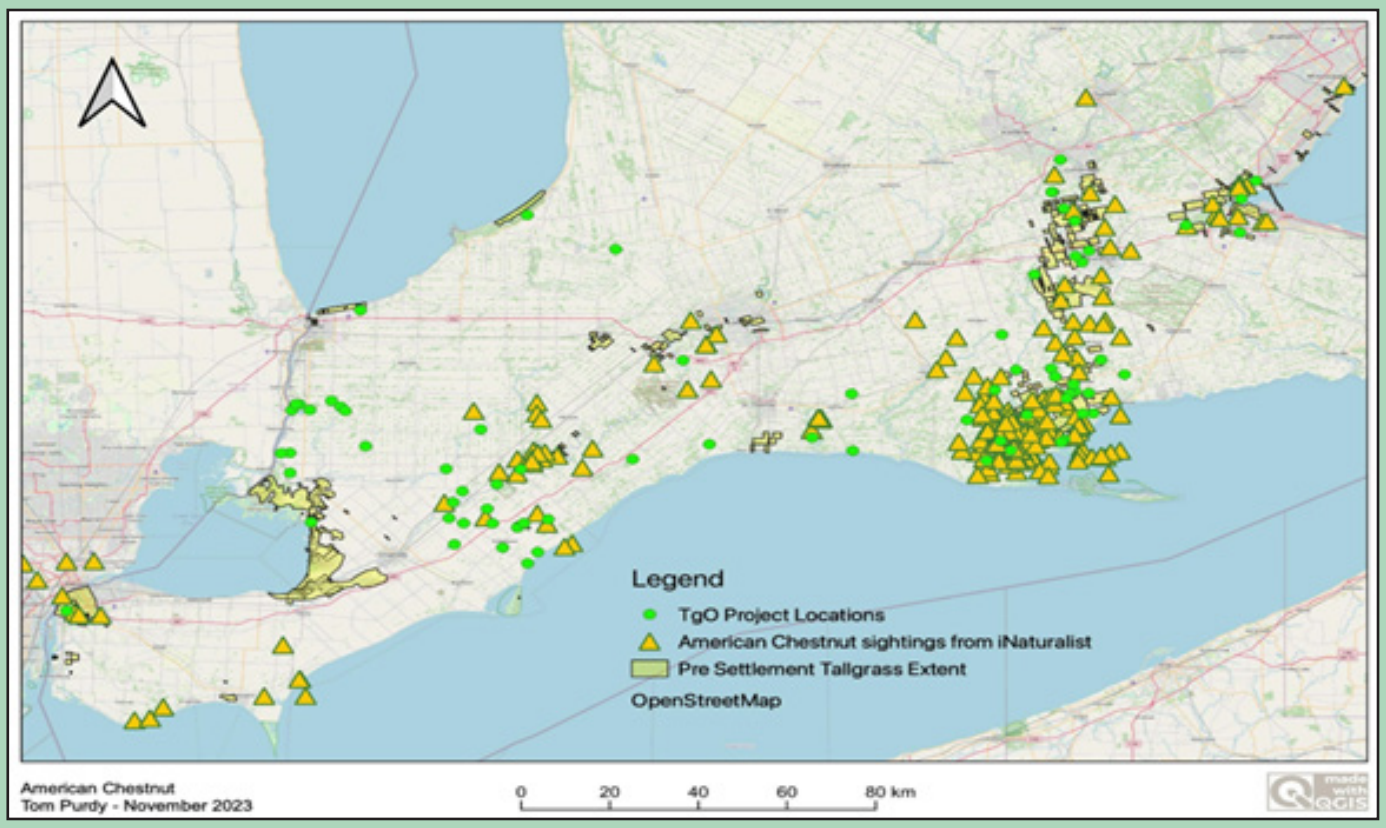
Sophia Stolz, a researcher at the University of Guelph, has found that there are two genetic populations of Northwestern Chestnuts in Ontario.

Current efforts to provide immunity centre around backcrossing with Chinese and Japanese Chestnuts. In the USA, gene splicing and transgenic inclusions are being tried, with varying success.

There is hope that this work to give the American Chestnut immunity will eventually succeed. If nothing is done, the American Chestnut will truly become extinct.



Grove of American Chestnut trees (*John Foster*)



Current Range of the American Chestnut in Southwestern Ontario (Map Courtesy of Tom Purdy – Tallgrass Ontario)

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Introducing a New Group of Outdoor Enthusiasts to the Nature Reserve

by Rhea Noronha

On March 15th, 2025, Thickson's Woods Nature Reserve came alive with excitement as eleven participants took part in an Engaging New Canadians and Diverse Communities event! This program is run by the Ontario Land Trust Alliance (OLTA), a registered charity focused on providing community, knowledge, sharing and support to land trusts and other groups committed to land conservation across Ontario, in collaboration with CultureLink, a settlement and community organization that delivers services to connect cultures and build welcoming communities. Together, OLTA and Culturelink work to build connections between nature groups, new Canadians and individuals from diverse communities, enabling people to connect with the emotional, mental, and physical benefits of nature.

Prior to the event, OLTA staff members Mikayla Johnston Clayton, Species at Risk Specialist and Rhea Noronha, Conservation and Restoration Technician met with Thickson's Woods Land Trust board members to plan the walk and coordinate event details to ensure a smooth and enjoyable experience for all. Posters created by OLTA's communications team were then shared with Rubeen Chauhan, a program worker at CultureLink, who invited New Canadians and other new community members to attend.

Participants spent the afternoon learning from Thickson's Woods Land Trust board members Otto Peter, Dan Shire, and Dennis Barry, along with local naturalist Don Docherty. Armed with binoculars loaned by Central Lake Ontario Conservation Authority and bird ID sheets courtesy of Thickson's Woods Land Trust, the group headed to the Waterfront Trail, spotting local waterfowl swimming in Lake Ontario, and exploring the unique ecosystems within the reserve.

While many birds were identified, the fan-favorite moment was feeding chickadees with bird seed donated by Thickson's Woods Land Trust. This was a new and exciting experience for all involved!

Even though the trip to Thickson's Woods was quite a trek for some, participants couldn't stop talking about returning to see how the reserve transforms with the seasons. One participant even proudly identified a tree at a later event, thanks to knowledge gained during this walk. With the help of our passionate guides and the beauty of the reserve, the event left everyone feeling more connected to nature and excited for their next visit to Thickson's Woods Nature Reserve.

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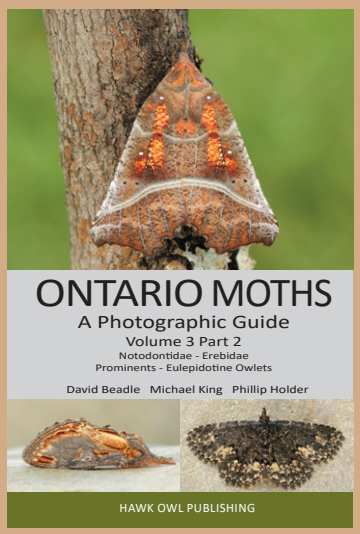

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White-throated Sparrow - bath time! (*Phill Holder*)

Donating to Thickson's Woods Land Trust via Interac e-transfer

by Brian Steele, Treasurer

Please note that we've amended our on-line donation procedure, and no longer require a security question, making the transaction easier and simpler.

For "recipient" use Thickson's Woods Land Trust and our email address nature@thicksonswoods.com.

Under "message" you must put your name and postal address so we can send a charitable receipt.

Of course cheques are still very much welcomed.

Thank you so much for helping to support Thickson's Woods Nature Reserve, this precious corner of nature.

Yes, I want to help protect Thickson's Woods Nature Reserve. It's a very special place!
We need spaces where plants and animals can thrive and people can relax in nature.

Here is my tax-deductible contribution of $ _____ Date _____

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