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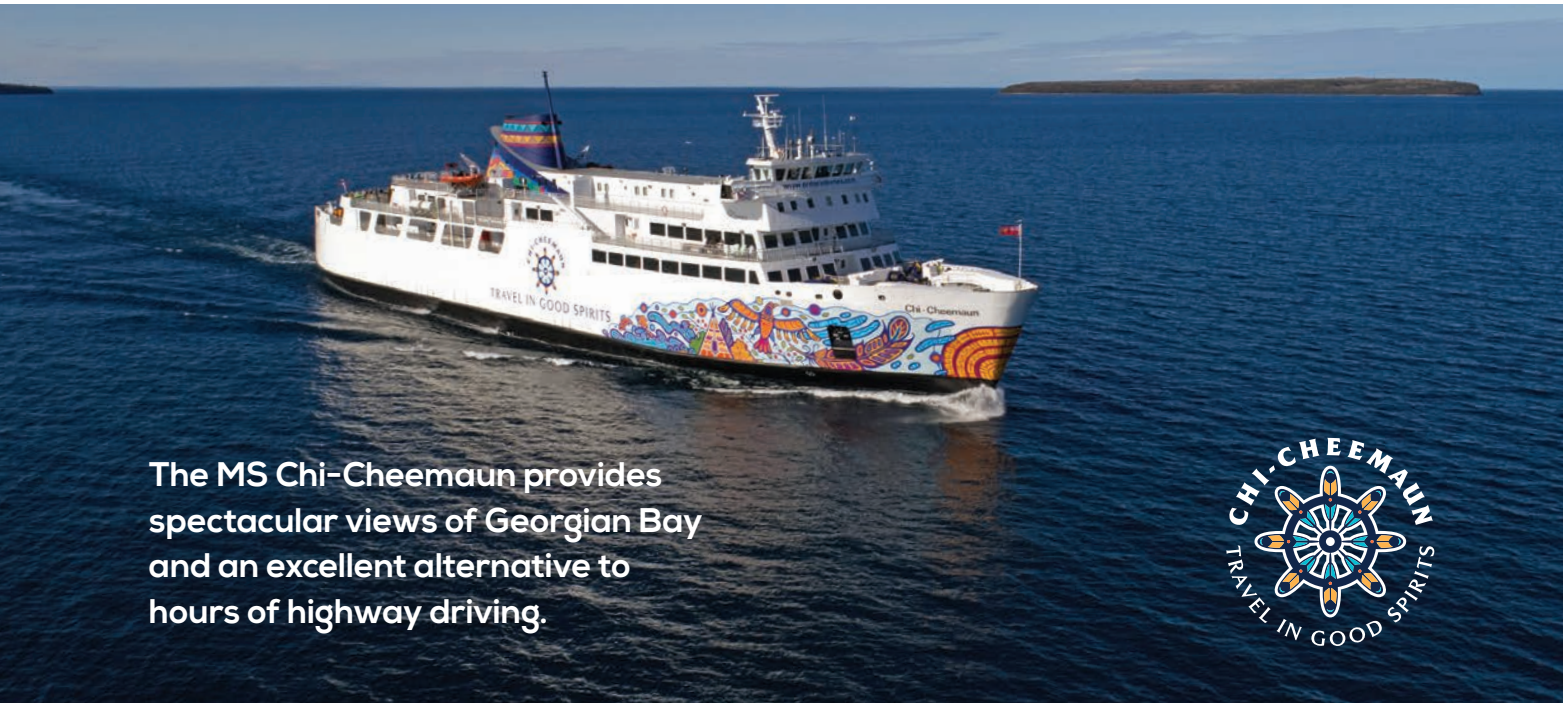

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(CLOCKWISE) EBTI NABAG; ANTHONY GLESNEK; NOAH COLE; LARRY KIRTLEY
(COVER) DAVID COULSON

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LUIS TINOCO; (OPPOSITE PAGE) ROBERT MCCAW

Nature for All

By **Caroline Schultz**

I frequently speak about how my experiences in nature have shaped the person I am and the career I have chosen. I spend much of my personal time exploring the wild places of Ontario: hiking bird hot spots during the spring migration or canoeing the serene lakes of eastern Ontario. These forays provide peace during hectic times and reaffirm my commitment to safeguarding our province's wildlife and wilderness.

It is easy to forget that the nature excursions so integral to my life are out of reach for many Ontarians. In this issue's cover feature, "A Breath of Fresh Air" (page 18), writer Julia Zarankin details some of the barriers—physically inaccessible trails, lack of transportation, feeling unwelcome—that prevent members of under-resourced communities from reaping the health and wellness benefits of time spent in nature.

When some members of society are denied those benefits, all of us suffer. We are living in a time of apprehension and isolation, and we need the healing power of nature now more than ever. This is especially true for essential workers, many of whom come from Black communities and communities of colour, who are striving to save lives and provide goods and services while the pandemic rages on. Eliminating barriers to the soothing sights and sounds of local greenspaces will help bolster the well-being of the workers we depend on, which in turn will improve the well-being of everyone else.

It will also help conservationists gain important allies for their fight to save Ontario's species at risk, such as the critically endangered eastern loggerhead shrike ("Butcher of the Alvar," page 30). Preventing the loss of this unique and once plentiful songbird will require coordinated efforts from diverse stakeholders, including community members who may previously have been unaware of the bird and its plight.

We have long known that connecting people with nature inspires in them a commitment to protect it. Only by welcoming individuals of all backgrounds and abilities to the natural areas a select few of us currently enjoy can we hope to secure the continued existence of Ontario's wild species and wild spaces.

Letters to the Editor: *Read some recent letters on our revamped webpage at* ***onnaturemagazine.com/letters****.*

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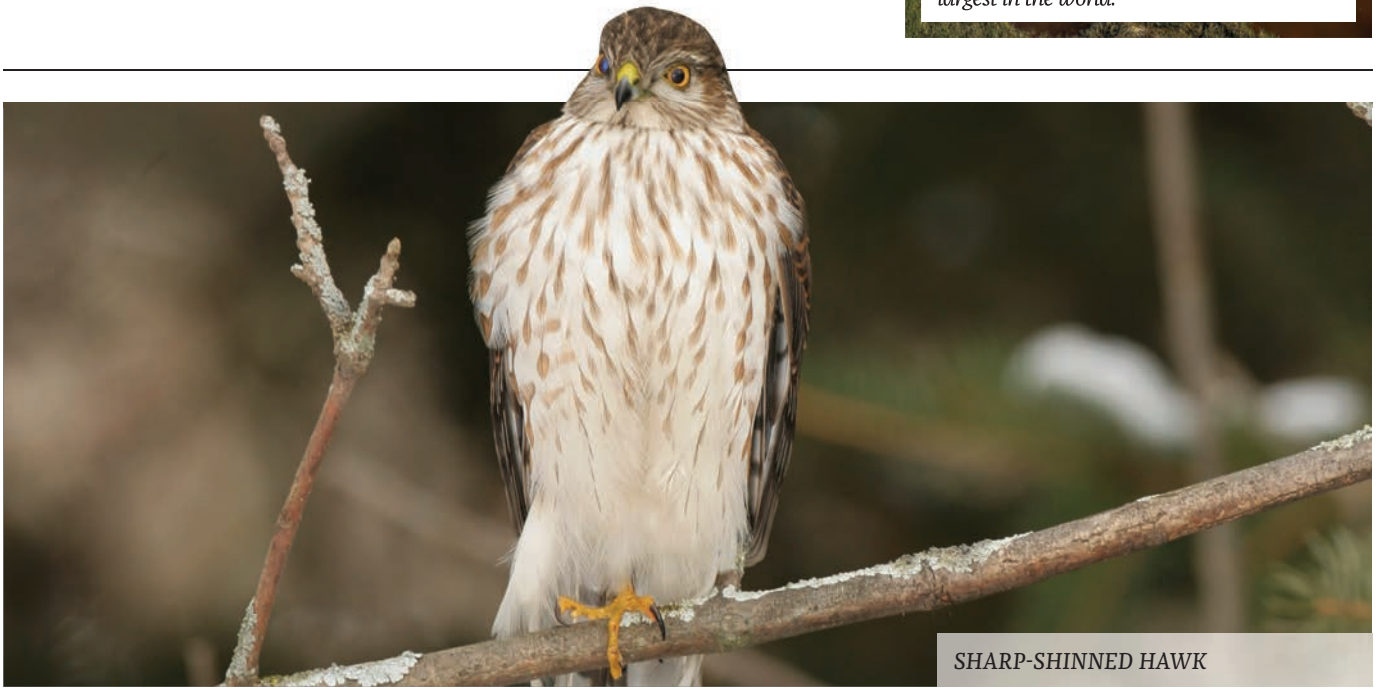
Earth Watch

Did you know? *The Hudson Bay Lowlands, most of which lies within northern Ontario, is the largest wetland in Canada and one of the largest in the world.*



SHARP-SHINNED HAWK

Rising threat: *The Government of Ontario is considering whether to allow falconers to take more birds from the wild.*

More Wild Raptors at Risk of Capture

By **Anne Bell**

The Government of Ontario is proposing to raise the number of raptors that people can take from the wild for use in falconry. Without any formal risk assessment of the potential impact or a clear rationale for the increase, the new policy would allow an eightfold increase in the raptors captured.

Currently, members of Ontario's falconry community altogether can take up to 25 birds of prey per year, on the basis of a lottery system. The proposal would allow licensed falconers, who number approximately 200 in the province, as well as apprentices to capture one wild raptor per year.

The species falconers are permitted to take today—red-tailed hawk, sharp-shinned hawk, merlin and Cooper's hawk—live between eight and 20 years in the wild. "The current limit should be more than enough to ensure that falconers have wild birds at hand," says Lynne Freeman, president of the Ontario Field Ornithologists, adding that an eightfold increase "speaks more to greed than need."

The government's proposal fails to address long-term monitoring of raptor populations or consider cumulative impacts. As Freeman explains, "Our birds are facing so many threats—habitat loss, climate change, pesticide use, and collisions with buildings and other structures. Increasing the take of raptors from the wild should be assessed in light of these other challenges."

The government is also recommending that the northern goshawk be added to the list of raptors falconers can capture, with up to five taken annually throughout Ontario through a lottery. Uncommon and sparsely distributed across the province, northern goshawk is less abundant than the other bird-of-prey species falconers use. The probability of observing a northern goshawk in Ontario dropped between 1985 and 2005 (the years of the two *Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Ontario* editions), with a significant 54 percent decline in the northern Canadian Shield region. "At the very least," says Freeman, "the government should wait until 2025, when the results of the third breeding bird atlas survey will be known, before permitting falconers to take northern goshawks from the wild."

(INSET) SCOTT FAIRBAIRN; (TOP) TOM ROOK

EASTERN MUSK TURTLE

What to Expect Next From the Ontario Reptile and Amphibian Atlas

By **Brittney Vezina**

Since submissions to the Ontario Reptile and Amphibian Atlas (ORAA) ended in 2019, Ontario Nature staff and project partners have been busy analyzing the data in preparation for an upcoming publication. During more than 10 years of data collection, the database of reptile and amphibian observations in the province more than tripled, to just over 480,000 records.

Between 2009 and 2019, more than 12,000 researchers, naturalists and community scientists, along with some 200 organizations, submitted observations. "Community science projects allow researchers to cover a geographic area that would otherwise not be possible," says former ORAA coordinator Tanya Pulfer. Previous herpetofaunal atlas efforts, such as the Ontario Herpetofaunal Summary and Eastern Ontario Herpetofaunal Atlas, provided an important foundation for the ORAA.

The upcoming publication will highlight where Ontario reptile and amphibian species, including species at risk, are known to occur and will be an important guide for conservation initiatives, says David Seburn, the Canadian Wildlife Federation's freshwater

SCOTT GILLINGWATER

turtle specialist and member of the ORAA Publication Steering Committee. "We can't protect species unless we know where they occur," he says. "Just as importantly, [the maps will show] where species have not been found recently and where surveys are urgently required."

While atlas efforts have improved our knowledge of distributions for many species, including the threatened Blanding's turtle, many knowledge gaps still exist. Analyses of ORAA data by Trent University reptile and amphibian expert Dr. James Paterson will highlight where species are likely to be found but have not yet been reported, in an effort to prioritize areas for future survey efforts.

The publication is slated for release in late 2021. Announcements and updates will be available on Ontario Nature's ORAA webpage, **ontarionature.org/fieldguide**.

Turtle trends: *The ORAA will highlight the distribution of Ontario's reptiles and amphibians.*

Special thanks to TD Friends of the Environment Foundation for providing funding to help promote this publication.

Earth Watch

Spring Species Watch

Sensitive Fern
Sensitive ferns live in a variety of wet and wooded habitats throughout Ontario, including thickets, bogs and river-banks. Also called bead ferns, they are often among the first plants to colonize disturbed areas.

Spotted Salamander
Identifiable by their large yellow or orange spots, spotted salamanders inhabit deciduous or mixed forests in close proximity to ponds. The species is sensitive to increased acidity in its breeding ponds, which can negatively affect its eggs and young.

(TOP) RON ERWIN; (BOTTOM) CHRISTIAN AUTOTTE

EVENING GROSBEAK

Welcome sight: *Ontarians counted more than 1.2 million individual birds in 2019-20.*

Counting Birds During a Pandemic

By **Miranda Baksh**

Even as lockdowns throughout Ontario created challenges to usual holiday festivities, the Christmas Bird Count (CBC) tradition prevailed, maintaining the event's status as North America's longest-running community science project. The annual count, which attracts thousands of volunteer participants worldwide, informs research on bird prevalence and location, aiding in conservation efforts.

RED-BREASTED NUTHATCH

This year, participants collected observations over a single day between December 14, 2020, and January 5, 2021. Some organizers worried that constraints on social activity might result in a low turnout, but in fact, eight more counts took place than last year.

"Participating in the Christmas Bird Count is a way that I can give something back to the birds, as they gave me peace all year long," says William Fairhead, a 14-year-old member of Ontario Nature's Youth Council, who counted birds in the Ottawa region.

The 121st CBC adapted to COVID-19 guidelines, enabling most regions to operate the events safely. Some routes were changed to lower the number of people within individual zones, and organizers advised participants to socially distance, wear masks and survey with no more than one partner. Carpools and post-count gatherings were cancelled. One convenient element of the event that remained unchanged was the ability of participants who live within one of the 25-square-kilometre count zones to survey birds from their properties.

CBCs provide one of the world's largest sets of wildlife survey data that naturalists and biologists use in their research. The findings are often surprising. For instance, during the previous year's count, a participant spotted a northern fulmar—a bird typically found over large bodies of water—in the Ottawa-Gatineau region.

Results from the most recent CBC will be available later this year at **netapp.audubon.org/cbcobservation**.

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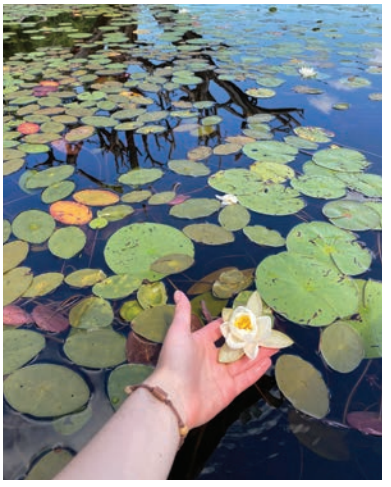
Youth Summit to Grow in 2021

By **Anna Entzin** *and* **Emilie Fry**

Despite COVID-19 restrictions, the 2020 Virtual Youth Summit for Mother Earth offered young people from across Ontario the opportunity to connect and share their passion for the environment. Run by young leaders from the Ontario Nature Youth Council and the Youth Circle for Mother Earth, the summit engaged participants in workshops, challenges and activities such as a photographic scavenger hunt.



Since it was virtual, the event spanned four weekends instead of the traditional single weekend in person. Activists and speakers from across the province led workshops on sustainability and treaties and Indigenous politics. They also gave inspirational talks about environmental and Indigenous issues. Many participants describe the event as a big success. "The summer summit is one of the best experiences I have ever had," says Sissy He, a participant from Markham. "I met great people here, and since we all have the same interests and dreams, they make me feel that I am not fighting alone."

Youth leaders are already preparing for an expanded 2021 summit, scheduled to take place in late September. COVID-19 case levels and restrictions, along with the guidance of health authorities, will be closely monitored by organizers to inform their planning. Youth Council members will be working alongside those from the Youth Circle for Mother Earth to deliver what they intend to be the largest summit yet, engaging 200 youth aged 14 to 20.

Information about the 2021 Youth Summit for Mother Earth is available at **ontarionature.org/youthsummit**.

The 2020 Youth Summit was funded by the Government of Canada, the TD Ready Commitment, the Chawkers Foundation, TD Friends of the Environment Foundation and Cade Associates.

Stoking passions: *The Youth Summit is a formative experience for many participants.*

MIKAYLA WILSON

Featured Photographer

GRAY TREEFROG

Michael Wynia

krystawynnatureblog.com

An environmental consultant, Michael Wynia spends as much time as possible hiking, canoeing, camping and photographing nature. He enjoys exploring the natural world with his wife, his sons and his daughters-in-law. With two grandchildren on the way, he is excited about teaching a new generation about the wonders of our forests, fields and wetlands.

Channel Naturalized

By **Lisa Richardson**

Fish in the east channel of the Eramosa River that flows through the village of Eden Mills near Guelph can now safely navigate the waterway. Last September, the Eden Mills Eramosa River Conservation Association (EMERCA) removed a weir (a metal barrier designed to control water levels) from the dam that had been installed at the head of the channel in the early 1990s. The weir was impeding the movement of fish and damaging downstream habitats by restricting water flow during the summer.

"Some summers, the channel bed was nearly dry," says EMERCA president Marilyn Baxter. "It was devastating for the plants and animals that live downstream." Workers from R&M Construction replaced the weir with a cross vane—a series of large rocks strategically placed to direct water flow to the channel's centre—that will allow fish to move freely. The more natural opening created by the cross vane will also facilitate the recovery of frog, turtle and bird habitats along the channel by reducing bank erosion, which in turn allows native vegetation to become established.

The channel naturalization project was eight years in the making. "Community members developed project objectives and then we consulted experts, received community support and secured funding," says Baxter. "We are incredibly proud of the result."

EMERCA leases the site of the project from owners Charles and Anna Simon, who plan to donate the property to Rare Charitable Research Reserve to become part of that group's Eramosa River Conservation Corridor. The organization will work with EMERCA and the Simons to develop a stewardship plan for the property that supports appropriate recreational activities while protecting its species and habitats. Photos of the new cross vane are available on EMERCA's Facebook page at **facebook.com/EdenMillsERCA**.

(OPPOSITE PAGE) MICHAEL WYNIA

Is Nature Stewardship for You?

By **Gabriella Zagorski**

Nature lovers looking to take part in preserving a piece of local wilderness can find a great deal of joy and satisfaction in serving as volunteer stewards of nature reserves. The roles vary widely depending on the stewards' areas of interest and the property's needs, from monitoring the condition of a trail a few times a year to planning restoration projects and hosting events.

For example, Larry Cornelis, the dedicated steward of the Sydenham River Nature Reserve, is assisting Ontario Nature staff in a multi-year, multi-partner restoration project, including organizing events to engage the local community. Cornelis and other members of Lambton Wildlife and the Sydenham Field Naturalists have been crucial to enabling Ontario Nature to acquire and preserve the property.

Dan Bone, a member of the Kawartha Field Naturalists who recently retired as steward of Altberg Wildlife Sanctuary Nature Reserve (AWSNR), made friendships with steward colleagues that he knows will last a lifetime. "But not as long as the AWSNR, that will outlast us all," he adds. "The AWSNR is forever and that is our greatest accomplishment."

Ontario Nature owns 26 reserves throughout southern Ontario that feature diverse habitats, from alvars to bogs to old-growth forests. Volunteer stewards are essential to helping care for these special properties. The organization is currently looking for stewards for the Bruce Alvar, Gananoque Lake, Quarry Bay, Reilly Bird, Stone Road Alvar, Wilfred G. Crozier and Willoughby nature reserves. Individuals interested in becoming nature reserve stewards and willing to commit to the role for at least a year should email **reserves@ontarionature.org** with information about their interests and any prior experience with nature conservation.

From Ontario Nature's Blog

New Booklet Guides Outdoor Learning

By **Mirabai Alexander**

The chestnut-sided warbler's song sounds like he is "pleased-pleased-pleased-to-meetcha!" I explained to a group of children at one of Ontario Nature's outdoor events last summer.

While running Ontario Nature's outreach program in Thunder Bay, I saw a gap in children's knowledge of local species, especially birds. When I showed them pictures of mallards and American white pelicans, which are commonly seen in the area, many kids could identify them only as "birds."

Considering the pandemic forced children to spend most of their time indoors last year, it is not surprising that they are more familiar with the Apple logo than the song sparrows singing in their schoolyards. When I was a student, I recall begging teachers to let the class go outside.

Times are changing, albeit slowly. There has recently been a shift toward outdoor learning and place-based education that helps support the evolution of today's youth into tomorrow's stewards of the land and water humans depend on. Learning more about local flora and fauna helps to nurture relationships of respect and reciprocity with the living world.

Learning in nature is also good for kids' mental and physical health. Although provincial health regulations require students to stay two metres apart, teachers have an opportunity to make outdoor classrooms in nature a regular part of the school day.

Some such classes are engaging students in conservation, teaching ecological values as the kids remove invasive shrubs from school property, for example. Taking students outdoors to show them which plants are healthy for the local ecosystem is just what is needed to balance the current trend of school systems overemphasizing technology. As Richard Louv states in his book *Last Child in the Woods*, "putting all our eggs on one computer chip" must be avoided.

Ontario Nature's Boreal Program has created an online booklet, Nature Connections, focused on birds, which features video links and activities designed to connect teachers and students with nature in their schoolyards and neighborhoods. Ontario Nature is grateful to the Thunder Bay Community Foundation and TD Friends of the Environment Foundation for supporting the project. The booklet is available at **view.publitas.com/on-nature/nature-connections**.

The more rocks children can look under, trees they can climb and species they can observe, the more focused and happier they will be.

Outdoor education: *New online booklet helps children learn about local species.*

CHRISTINE AMBRE

Waning wilderness: *Southern Ontario is losing its forests and savannas.*

Restoring a Forest in Northumberland County

By **Jackie Ho**

This article is part of a series on natural areas in Ontario that call out for protection, in the process helping Canada meet its international commitment to protect at least 25 percent of land and inland waters by 2025.

At the easternmost edge of the Oak Ridges Moraine lies an almost century-old forest that harbours the headwaters of eight creeks flowing into Rice Lake and Lake Ontario. The Northumberland County Forest, established in 1924 through a provincial program that reclaimed and restored degraded agricultural lands, is today a vibrant, 2,235-hectare multi-use site where conservation and forestry co-exist.

County forest managers stabilized eroded soils by planting coniferous trees and sustainably harvesting timber while restoring a natural forest ecosystem. They also focused on protecting important habitats, such as wetlands and globally rare black oak savannas, that are habitat for many species at risk, including the wood thrush, Canada warbler and eastern whip-poor-will. Management of the forest, which buffers and connects local protected areas and nature reserves, was certified by the Forest Stewardship Council in 2011.

Mike Muldoon, acting natural heritage manager for the county, says that sustainable forestry can be attentive to the needs of biodiversity and rare ecosystems, employing forestry practices to "promote the transition of conifer plantations into natural forest." As pine plantations are thinned out to encourage growth of other species, they regenerate healthy, natural forest while preserving unique habitats such as sand barrens, black oak savannas and tallgrass prairies, all of which are characteristic of the Rice Lake Plains region. Forestry staff actively monitors species and habitats of concern and participates in scientific research. Timber revenue supports conservation, recreation and invasive species management.

As Canada moves toward its new target of protecting biodiversity on 25 percent of its lands and waters, the Northumberland County Forest serves as an example of an innovative conservation project. The forest's management should be assessed to determine if and how it might serve as a model for long-term habitat protection.

NORTHUMBERLAND COUNTY FOREST SERVICES

Demiesha Dennis: *Spending time outdoors can significantly improve well-being.*

A Breath of Fresh Air

Pandemic-spurred lockdowns have exposed the unequal access Ontario residents have to the outdoors. How can experiencing nature be made more inclusive?

By **Julia Zarankin**

When Andrés Jiménez walks his daughter to school, he does not feel like he is traversing an inner-city maze of concrete monoliths. Instead, he is on alert for the *conkaree* of the red-winged blackbird or drumming that could signal a hairy woodpecker's presence nearby. "I'm trying to embrace the ordinary in a more mindful way," says the downtown Toronto resident, "and break with the idea of nature as something iconic, mysterious and rare."

HAIRY WOODPECKER

The ability to uncover natural marvels anywhere, not just in pristine reserves or lakeside cottages, is arguably part of Jiménez's job as urban program director for Birds Canada. But it is also borne out of necessity. Jiménez lives with his wife and two daughters in a cramped high-rise in a densely populated part of the city where access to greenspace is limited. His conscious decision to redefine what constitutes an encounter with wild species and spaces is his way of addressing a disturbing reality: nature is not available to all equally.

If there is one thing that life during the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted, it is nature's importance to human well-being. According to a recent University of Michigan study, a 20-minute "nature pill"—such as sitting or walking outdoors—noticeably reduces the production of cortisol, the human body's stress hormone. In a time of radical uncertainty, spending time in nature, at a remove from the news and Zoom screens, provides people solace and reminds them that a world exists beyond the pandemic. With restrictions on indoor gatherings, it is not surprising that more people are turning to the outdoors. The amount of visitor traffic to Ontario parks last year was unprecedented—sometimes to the point of straining park infrastructure.

And yet natural spaces have built-in barriers preventing some people from enjoying them. "There is a sense that the outdoors is open for everyone and that it's a neutral space, but it isn't," says Jacqueline Scott, writer of the Black Outdoors blog, who leads hiking excursions. Urban apartment dwellers, people who have a disability and racialized communities are just a few groups whose inadequate access to nature is a product not only of infrastructure barriers, such as lack of affordable transportation, but also of the stories people tell themselves about who belongs in the outdoors. It is time for nature advocates and urban planners to "broaden our understanding of what counts as nature," observes Tenley Conway, a professor of geography and planning at the University of Toronto, and "break down stereotypes about who can spend time in nature."

In 2019, the Global Wellness Summit included "nature prescriptions" in its list of the year's eight wellness trends. But the connection between exposure to nature and improved well-being is no mere fad. A growing body of scientific evidence shows that spending time in natural greenspace not only sharpens humans' cognition and memory but decreases anxiety and has

Urban adventures: *Nature lovers like Andrés Jiménez can pursue urban outdoor activities.*

ONTARIO PLACE

other beneficial effects on mental health. A 2020 study by the German Centre for Integrative Biodiversity Research, for example, reveals that people who regularly frequent biodiverse areas report higher life satisfaction. A 10 percent increase in exposure to birds, for example, has about as much of an impact on well-being as a comparable boost in income, the researchers found, leading them to conclude that nature conservation is an investment in health.

The medical community has started paying attention. Melissa Lem, a Vancouver doctor, has been prescribing two hours of nature per week—at least 20 minutes at a time—to patients experiencing mental health issues, and she sees improvements in their symptoms when they incorporate time outdoors into their treatments. Inspired by park prescription programs established in the United States a decade ago, Lem partnered with the BC Parks Foundation late last year to launch PaRx, Canada's first nature prescription initiative. Research suggests that formal prescriptions increase the chances of patients following doctors' orders, Lem says. And there is a fringe benefit: "People who are more connected to nature are more likely to protect it," she says.

Involving more people in conservation projects can help address a growing need for increasing wild spaces in urban areas. "Cities can create wildlife gardens in local parks to attract native birds, bees and butterflies," suggests Lisa Richardson, who oversees Ontario Nature's network of more than 150 community and conservation groups. But she stresses that nature organizations need to be more aware of the challenges some people face. For example, assessments of trail accessibility often fail to take into account how a person who has a disability would travel on them. Richardson, whose daughter is dependent on a wheelchair, points out that many trails are "narrow, bumpy, muddy and rutted, with steep inclines and declines that are difficult to navigate" and cannot accommodate mobility devices. "Designing programming that is accessible to as many people as possible, regardless of ability, needs to become the norm," she says.

Diversifying access to nature also requires breaking down information barriers. In his outreach work, both through Birds Canada and as environmentalist-in-residence at the Toronto Public Library, Jiménez seeks to make information about nature more easily accessible and specifically tailored to the needs of different people who might not know where to look for it. His focus was born of experience: as a new immigrant from Costa Rica, Jiménez found that his inquiries about natural spaces were met with vague suggestions, most requiring a car or a cottage, neither of which he possessed. He now strives to target nature information to the needs of specific communities, especially people of colour, immigrants and people who have a disability.

Jacqueline Scott: *Nature groups should better reflect society.*

> **If people of colour are excluded from conversations about nature, then there is only a small percentage of people doing the work of caring for our planet.**

Making natural spaces feel safe is also essential. For years, Toronto's Thorncliffe Park, which includes one of the most biodiverse ravines in the city, was underused by the South Asian immigrant community that lived nearby, whose leaders referred to it as the "green monster"—largely out of fear and unfamiliarity. "If you're an immigrant new to forest environments and you only have information from TV, you wouldn't feel safe there," Jiménez says. The Toronto and Region Conservation Authority is now improving signage and disseminating information about the ravine to the community.

A key part of making people feel more comfortable in nature revolves around empathy with the people you are trying to reach. For example, as the Toronto captain of Birdability, a US-based organization focused on making birding accessible to all, Jiménez created an online course for birding by ear for people with vision loss, the first of its kind. "To break that one barrier means opening a whole world for people with disabilities," he says, but that requires putting yourself in their shoes. "Every audience has different information barriers that need to be addressed."

Demiesha Dennis, an outdoors enthusiast and founder of Brown Girl Outdoor World, has a simple motto for her organization: "Change the narrative about the outdoors." Frustrated by the lack of diversity among people working in conservation and those she encountered while hiking and fishing in Ontario parks, she set out to give the Black, Indigenous and people of colour (BIPOC) communities a new way to experience nature first-hand. By providing excursions that offer BIPOC the chance to explore nature safely, Dennis wants to alter the misconception that people in "BIPOC communities don't have the same level of interest in our environment as our white counterparts."

Her program educates BIPOC communities about ways they can participate in nature activities and provides a growing "gear library" of essential outdoor equipment to rent at a low cost. It also aims to transmit an important nature conservation message: "Know it, love it, protect it." Fostering more diversity in the outdoors may be the easiest way to expand environmental awareness, she argues. "If people of colour are excluded from

(BOTTOM LEFT) ANDRÉS JIMÉNEZ; (INSET) ANDREW MCLACHLAN; (TOP RIGHT) EBTI NABAG; (PREVIOUS SPREAD) DAVID COULSON

Out of reach: *Many people do not have access to cottages.*

conversations about nature, then there is only a small percentage of people doing the work of caring for our planet."

By inviting people of colour on small-group outdoor adventures, she not only introduces them to nature in a safe way but helps to prove that "we do belong in these spaces and we deserve to have a voice in the conversation." Her proudest moment to date? Taking a Black woman to Algonquin Provincial Park for the first time and teaching her how to fish, neither of which the woman had ever imagined doing. "She caught fish, got to see the park in its fall glory and now wants to take her daughter fishing," Dennis reports.

Some nature advocacy organizations are making progress on broadening access to nature. For example, Parkbus enables people without vehicles to travel to national and provincial parks for a reasonable fee. For its part, Ontario Nature has created wheelchair-accessible trails at its Petrel Point and Cawthra Mulock nature reserves.

Celebrating the history of natural spaces, in particular the Indigenous presence, also helps under-resourced communities feel more welcome outdoors. The Moccasin Identifier Project, for example, erects markers within Ontario's Greenbelt to educate people about Indigenous connections to specific landscapes. Featuring images of BIPOC and people who have a disability in park brochures and recruiting BIPOC for conservation efforts are other critical ways to build relationships with those communities. "When you have Black people on your staff, it sends a message [to participants] that you don't have to be wary that someone is going to call the police because Black people are in the park," says Scott.

Another important step to reshaping the narrative is redefining what nature means. "So many people look at conservation as an elite space," Dennis laments, in part because nature tends to be presented as remote, untouched wilderness or cottage country—areas to which many communities lack access. "People think that nature is outside of the city, yet nature is right here," says Jiménez of his Toronto home. "A mink at Tommy Thompson Park or a beaver at Colonel Sam Smith Park or long-tailed ducks at Humber Bay are just as amazing!"

If people redefine what nature means, they will find themselves, much like Jiménez, paying attention to the world around them with greater care and awe. "I saw a kestrel hunting for dragonflies on top of Yorkdale Mall and I screamed, 'Wow!'" he says. Nature is all around us. People just need help to see it.

Making a connection: *Experiencing nature often inspires a desire to protect it.*

Julia Zarankin *is a Toronto-based writer, lecturer and birder, and the author of* Field Notes from an Unintentional Birder.

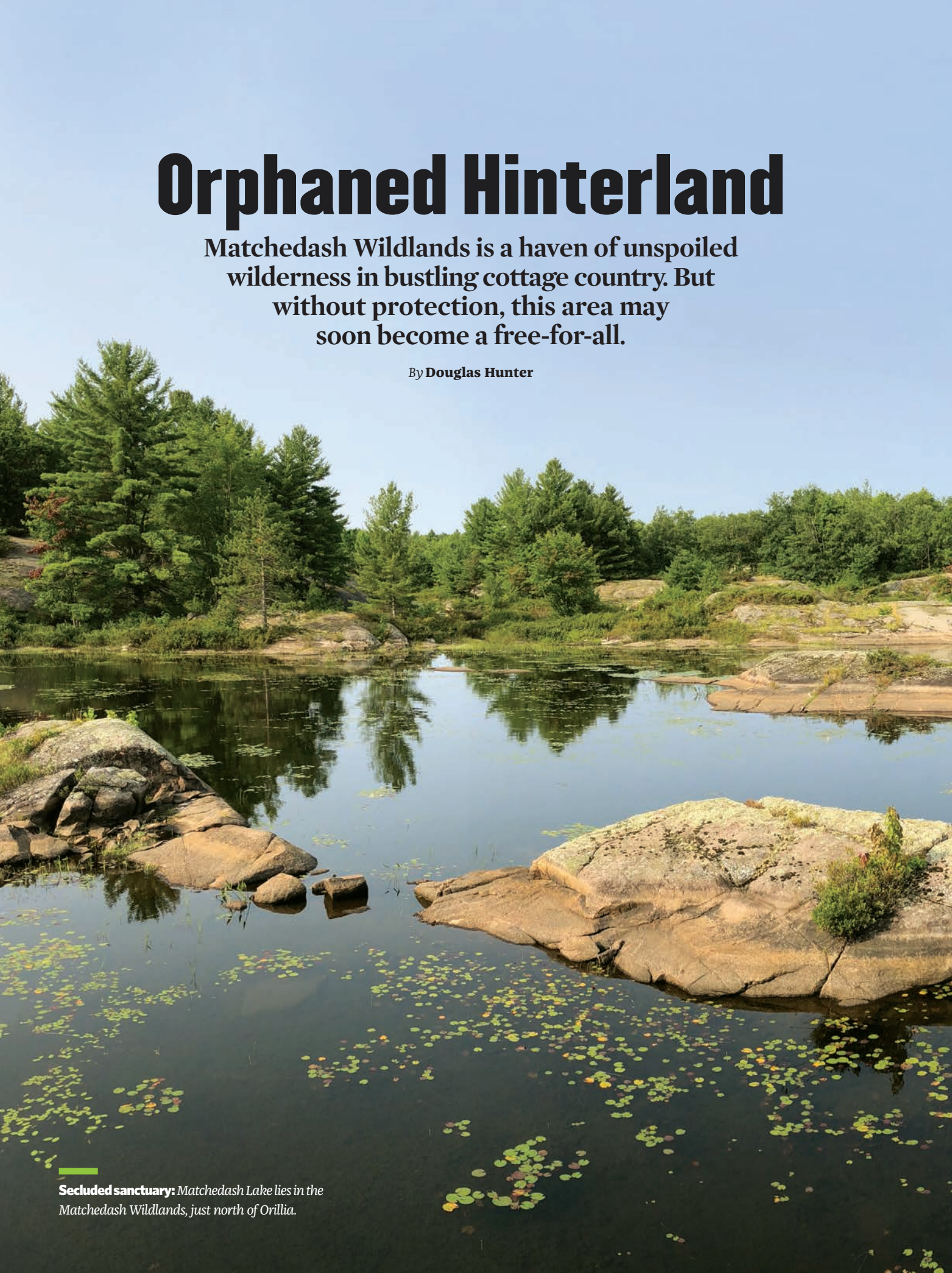
GEORGIAN BAY

(TOP) DARREN BAKER/SHUTTERSTOCK; (BOTTOM) LYDIA DOTTO

Orphaned Hinterland

Matchedash Wildlands is a haven of unspoiled wilderness in bustling cottage country. But without protection, this area may soon become a free-for-all.

By **Douglas Hunter**



Secluded sanctuary: *Matchedash Lake lies in the Matchedash Wildlands, just north of Orillia.*

MATCHEDASH LAKE

In the summer of 2018, amateur naturalist Anthony Glenesk, who had recently moved to Coldwater, a village near southeastern Georgian Bay, made his first visit to nearby Matchedash Lake. Getting there was not easy; he had to portage a canoe almost a kilometre from a utility road to the lake's west end. But the effort was amply rewarded. The roughly five-kilometre-long ribbon of water was dotted with lovely bays and an abundance of aquatic plant life.

While photographing a lone sandpiper, he spied what he thought was a duck on the far side of the lake. His binoculars revealed the duck had antlers. It was a bull moose. "I realized it was swimming right towards me," Glenesk recalls. As the animal approached, he backed his canoe away to give it space.

Ron Reid: *Founder of the Couchiching Conservancy and a life-long environmentalist.*

"It emerged slowly out of the water, turned around, looked at me for a little while, then casually kept walking on."

One usually has to venture much farther north for such an intimate encounter with big wildlife. But Matchedash Lake (also known as Long Lake) lies at the heart of a wilderness hidden in plain sight. Dubbed the Matchedash Wildlands by the Couchiching Conservancy, a local non-profit land trust, its southern limits are just a half-hour drive from Orillia, a city of 31,000. The wildlands form the western end of what is called "the land between," an ecological transition zone from the Canadian Shield to sedimentary bedrock in southern Ontario. Roughly 25 by 15 kilometres in size, the area borders Lake Couchiching in the east, Severn River to the north, Port Severn on southeastern Georgian Bay in the west, and the agricultural frontier of southern Ontario in the south. Smooth outcrops of granite, gneiss and other igneous rock, surrounded by mixed forests, form the high ground between extensive lakes, marshes and beaver ponds. The landscape, which is ecologically complex, is among the richest places for reptiles and amphibians in Canada. The area surrounding Matchedash Lake in particular is known for the presence of rare Atlantic Coastal Plain plants.

But the rich biodiversity of the Matchedash Wildlands is increasingly threatened. Around the perimeter, homes and recreational boat traffic abound. A skein of private cottage roads has infiltrated the northeastern edge. All-terrain vehicles and off-road trucks have punched into the Crown land, damaging snowmobile trails and rutting the soil. In the past, unauthorized cabins have popped up. Meanwhile, development, agriculture and quarries are moving ever closer to the borders of the wildlands.

When the Couchiching Conservancy marked its 25th anniversary in 2018, it chose four new locations as focal points for future conservation activities. Ron Reid, the founder of the organization, says it looked for sites that were "ecologically significant, understudied or under-protected, and provided opportunities where we thought we could make a difference." The Matchedash Wildlands, he notes, is probably the most important of the four, and the conservancy is searching for some way—any way—to preserve the area from further deterioration.

The only practical way to traverse the heart of the Matchedash Wildlands is by Swift Rapids Road, a narrow 13-kilometre gravel track used by Orillia Power and Parks Canada to access a hydroelectric dam and a lock on the Trent–Severn Waterway. Other than float planes that bring in anglers, only snowmobiles, off-road vehicles and determined canoeists like Glenesk who are willing to portage their way in can penetrate the area beyond the road.

But even this limited access has not prevented human mischief and damage. Target shooting is a problem. At the north end of the road, a sign beseeching visitors "*Please*... do not leave your trash here" is pitted by a close-range shotgun blast. An ad hoc parking area on a rock clearing about five kilometers north of the road entrance has become notorious as a party site. "Tons of trucks and beer, fireworks, firearms, you name it," says Reid. "It wasn't safe to go into that section on weekends." To curtail this behaviour, the road gate is periodically locked, as it was for much of the past summer.

People who brave the dangers, however, are treated to largely unspoiled marshes, rivers, lakes and forests. The area "is just chock full of provincial species at risk," says David Hawke, the Couchiching Conservancy ecologist and a steward who once visited the lake to follow up on a report of a Kirtland's warbler, a bird rare even in its main range among the jack pine forests of northern Michigan. Reptiles and amphibians are especially plentiful. Hawke, a former naturalist with the Ministry of Natural Resources (now Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry, MNRF), has come across massasauga rattlesnakes, Blanding's turtles and other rarely seen species. For six years Bob Bowles, an instructor at Lakehead University, has taken his Ontario Master Naturalist class on field trips here. When the COVID-19 pandemic ended group outings, he travelled to Matchedash Lake with a videographer to shoot instructional videos of five-lined skinks, and later in the summer he went with two students to look for skinks and flora.

Wildlife haven: *The Matchedash Wildlands supports species at risk such as five-lined skinks.*

NICK IWANYSHYN; (PREVIOUS SPREAD) ANTHONY GLESNEK; (OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE) JUSTIN HOFFMAN, SCOTT FAIRBAIRN, ROBERT MCCAW

MOOSE

KIRTLAND'S WARBLER

FIVE-LINED SKINK

VIRGINIA MEADOW-BEAUTY

Atlantic rarity: *Matchedash Lake is one of very few places in Ontario that support Virginia meadow-beauty.*

The area surrounding Matchedash Lake—the largest of five provincial Areas of Natural and Scientific Interest within the wildlands—is also a refuge for about 13 Atlantic Coastal Plain species. These plants are native to the Atlantic coast but have survived in pockets around the Great Lakes since the last ice age. A 1994 study identified 49 Ontario lakes east of Georgian Bay that harbour such species and ranked Matchedash Lake second only to Axe Lake, northwest of Huntsville, in importance. Matchedash is particularly significant for the abundance of Virginia meadow-beauty (*Rhexia virginica*), also called Handsome-Harry, which grows about 0.6 to 0.9 metres high, has pink-purple flowers and is found in only one other location in Ontario.

Atlantic Coastal Plain plants live on undisturbed shorelines where water levels fluctuate. In one study, biologist Anton Reznicek noted that the problems affecting both the Great Lakes populations of these plants and other shoreline wetland floras are similar, including recreational development, off-road vehicle traffic, drainage and dredging—most of which are present around Matchedash Lake. A network of muddied and puddled trails, created by anglers, hunters and snowmobilers, runs from the parking area to the western shore of Matchedash Lake. Its sole outlet to the Black River is clogged by a dilapidated dam made of stone encased in chicken wire.

The MNRF-owned dam was installed in the 1970s to control lake water levels, according to Jeff Haelzle, the ministry's resource management coordinator at the Midhurst office. At that time, a few lots were being sold for cottages (there are five on the lake), and the area's significance as a haven for rare plants was not known. But because the dam has remained, the lake's water levels remain consistently high, says Hawke. "That's been a problem for these plants because they don't have a dry period to get themselves going." During a visit this past summer, Bowles could not find any Atlantic Coastal Plain plants at the lake. He notes, however, that "seeds will remain in the sandy soils for several years and then produce large stands of the plants when the conditions are favourable." But for conditions to be favourable, water levels have to be able to drop.

About half the Matchedash Wildlands is provincial Crown land and represents the largest undesignated block left in southern Ontario, says Reid. Conservation officers respond to enquiries related to hunting and fishing regulations and recreational activities, says MNRF's Haelzle, and "decisions regarding these properties are guided by the Huronia District Crown Land Management Plan." Reid, however, calls such parcels "orphaned Crown lands" because to his mind they receive little management or conservation attention.

> **Here's an area that is still undeveloped enough that, should it be afforded proper protection, we have a chance of keeping it intact.**

In the late 1990s, the Ontario government's Lands for Life initiative almost doubled the area covered by parks and other forms of protected public space in northern Ontario. However, Crown lands south of the Severn River in Simcoe County—including those in the Matchedash Wildlands—were omitted from the process despite being geologically and ecologically contiguous with areas to the north.

The Couchiching Conservancy, along with the Nature Conservancy of Canada, has already established several reserves on the edges of the Matchedash Wildlands and hopes to acquire additional private lands and to secure conservation easements, which leave land in private hands but preserve them from development. Protecting the area is important in part because it completes a natural corridor linking Copeland Forest in the Horseshoe Valley to the lands around eastern Georgian Bay. With the wildlands, Reid says, the Couchiching Conservancy hopes to create "a broader system of conservation corridors to anticipate the effects of climate change and provide opportunities for species movement."

Reid would like the provincial government to protect all or part of the orphaned Crown lands as reserves or under a different conservation designation, and to provide resources and a framework by which they can be managed more effectively. Severn Township, through its zoning powers, could limit or forbid development in sensitive spots. Another option would be for willing First Nations to establish an Indigenous Protected and Conserved Area, a management strategy for lands in traditional territories that allows ecologically sustainable uses consistent with Indigenous knowledge and practices.

While much of the Matchedash Wildlands may be "orphaned" today, it is not too late to adopt them in a meaningful way. "In so many other places, we get there a decade too late and we end up protecting postage-stamp parcels," says Hawke. "Here's an area that is still undeveloped enough that, should it be afforded proper protection, we have a chance of keeping it intact."

Douglas Hunter *wrote about the Sydenham River in the spring 2016 issue of* ON Nature.

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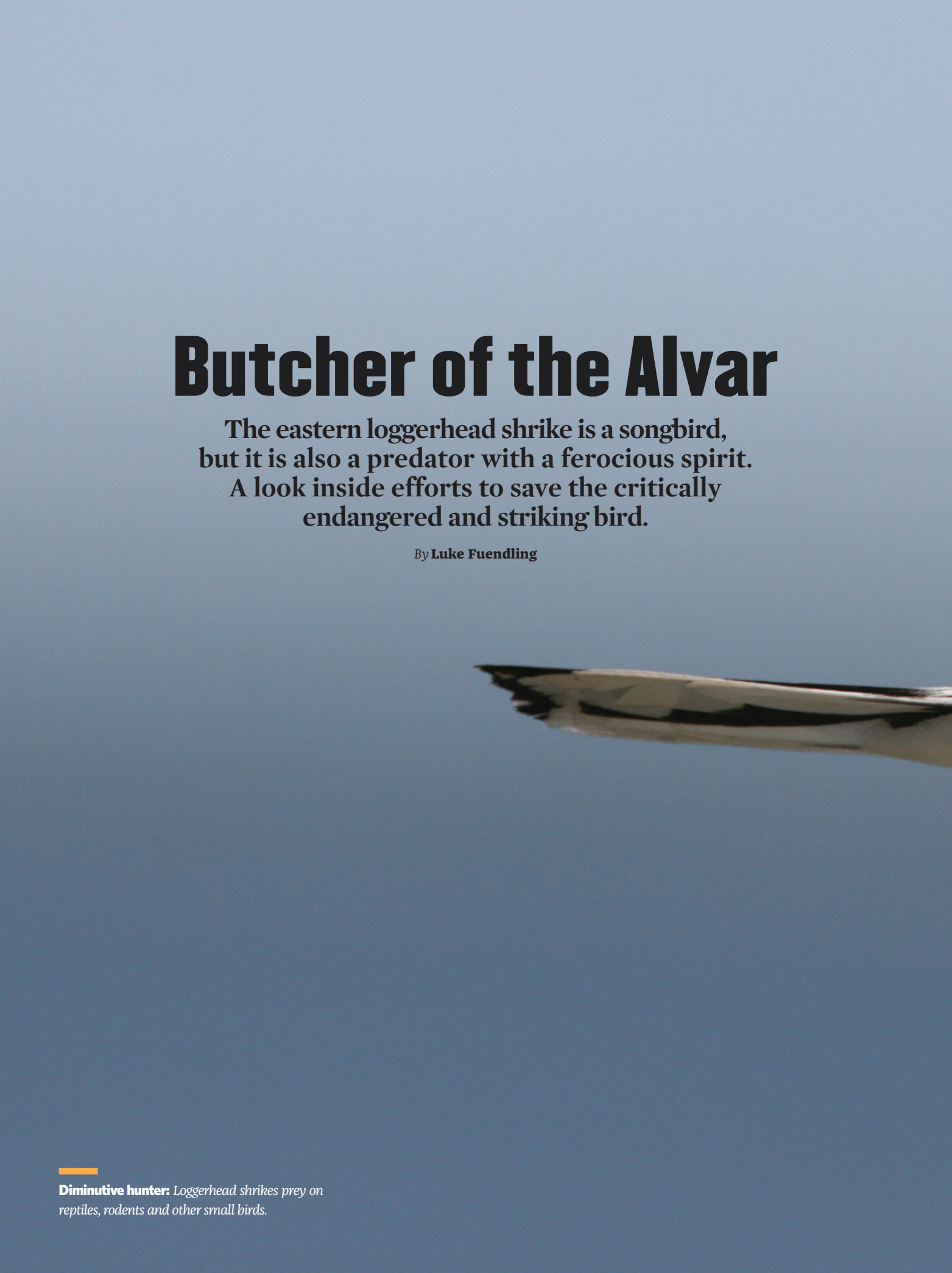
Butcher of the Alvar

The eastern loggerhead shrike is a songbird, but it is also a predator with a ferocious spirit. A look inside efforts to save the critically endangered and striking bird.

By **Luke Fuendling**



Diminutive hunter: *Loggerhead shrikes prey on reptiles, rodents and other small birds.*

EASTERN LOGGERHEAD SHRIKE

In the early sun of an August morning, I make my way north past Lake Simcoe. After three hours of driving through the typical rural southern Ontario landscape—manicured cropland periodically broken up by dense bush and tidy small towns—the sudden appearance of a flat expanse of scraggly shrub and patchy grass is a stark anomaly, a scene reminiscent of a frontier flick.

I have entered the Carden Alvar, among the largest and most accessible alvar ecosystems in the world. Characterized by grassland and sporadic dense shrub growing on thin soil over limestone basins, alvars are both extremely rare and, despite their barren appearance, exceedingly biodiverse. A team of biologists from Wildlife Preservation Canada (WPC) is here preparing to release eastern loggerhead shrike fledglings into the wild, part of a breeding program trying to sustain the wild population. The species, which exists only in North America, is one of two carnivorous songbirds in Canada (the other being the northern shrike) and relies on alvars for breeding habitat.

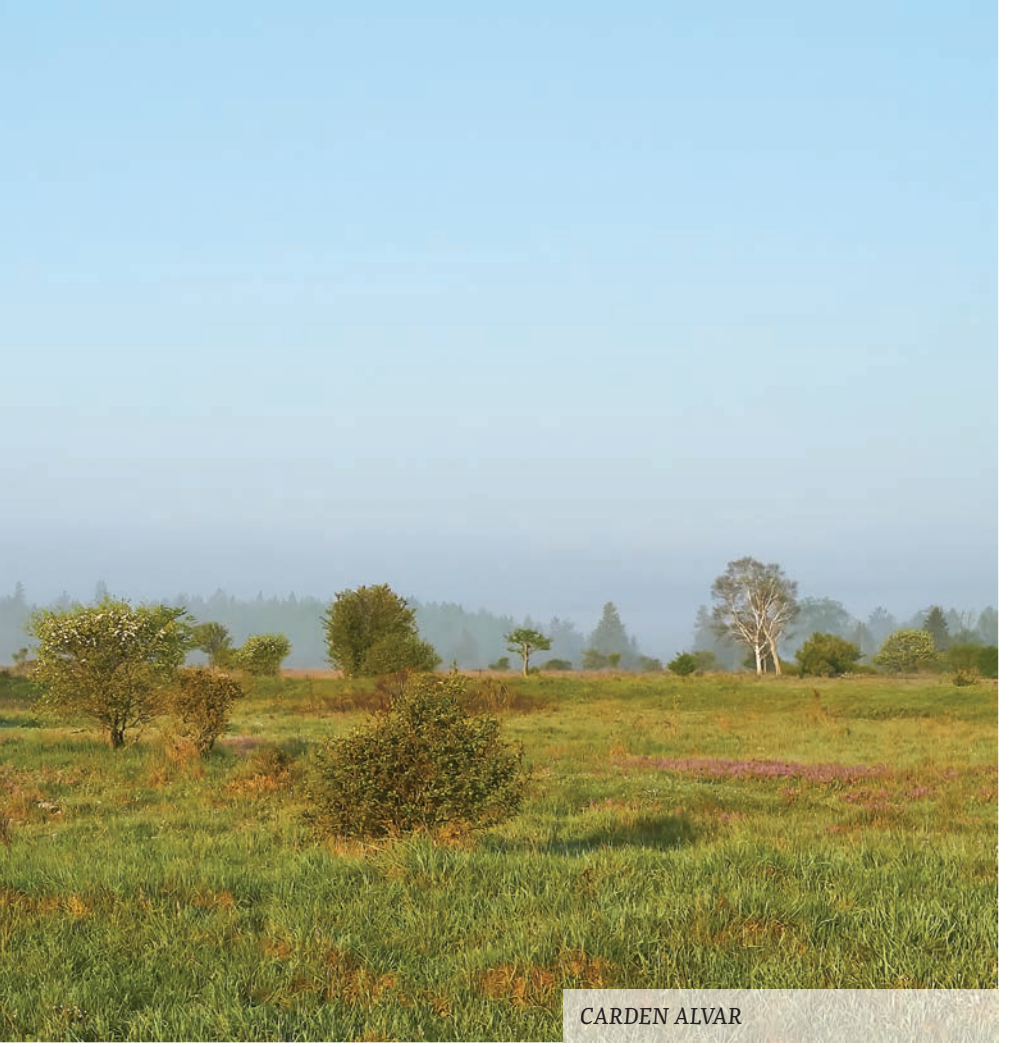
The eastern loggerhead shrike has a smaller body, like other songbirds, but has a large head (a trait that lends the species its name). It has big predatory eyes and a hooked upper beak, a feature common among raptor species, but one that evolved independently. Though most of their diet consists of insects, shrikes will hunt prey up to 1.3 times their size, including rodents, small reptiles and amphibians, and other birds. They kill larger prey by using dog-like whiplash motions to break their victims' necks. Shrikes have small claws, unlike talon-wielding larger predators, but they overcome this shortcoming by impaling their prey on thorns or barbed-wire fences. It is a gruesome practice that has given them the nickname "butcher bird"—and they do this while singing their pretty song.

> **Large sections of once grazed land that 30 years before harboured nesting shrikes are now densely wooded.**

Despite their diminutive stature, eastern loggerhead shrikes exhibit the ferocity of raptors many times their size, says Alisa Samuelson, a biologist on WPC's recovery team. She recalls observing a male perch above his nest during a torrential rainstorm, fully exposed to the elements, scanning the landscape for potential threatening predators, or prey to catch for his family. The birds are beautiful and bizarre, and critically endangered; the wild population in Ontario is estimated at fewer than 50 individuals.

The shrike and the alvar habitat are just two examples of threatened Ontario biodiversity that require the cooperation of multiple groups to sustain them. The North American Loggerhead Shrike Working Group is a transcontinental collaboration to preserve the species. WPC coordinates the group in Ontario, working with the Toronto Zoo, African Lion Safari and several other organizations focusing on

(TOP) JOHN REAUME; (PREVIOUS SPREAD) KEN NEWCOMBE



CARDEN ALVAR

Shrike stronghold: *The Carden Alvar is prime loggerhead shrike habitat.*

The protected alvar in the Carden IBA spans more than 3,640 hectares, including a provincial park established in 2014. However, grassland habitats along shrike migratory routes are rapidly shrinking across North America, due in part to a shift away from cattle grazing to the farming of monocrops such as soybeans and corn. As well, the practice of leaving previously grazed land fallow quickly results in thick brush growing in. "Large sections of once grazed land that 30 years before harboured nesting shrikes are now densely wooded," says Ron Reid, co-founder of the Couchiching Conservancy, which has been acquiring and protecting alvars since its inception in 1996. The effort, which began as a project to identify the extent of these rare habitats in Ontario, has since expanded to include numerous other organizations, among them Nature Conservancy of Canada, Ontario Parks and Ontario Field Ornithologists.

The perilous state of shrike populations has been a concern for decades. James Kamstra, an Ontario Nature board member who has been an avid birder since the 1970s, recalls as a youth finding a loggerhead shrike nest in a hedgerow on his family's eight-hectare rural property northeast of Oshawa. At the time, he thought the species was widespread. When the first *Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Ontario* was published in 1987, it estimated the population at fewer than 100 breeding pairs. After the second atlas was published in 2007, it showed even fewer. "The small number was so surprising

breeding efforts. Over the past few years up to one-third of Ontario's wild shrike population has come from WPC's breeding program. The recovery effort also relies on conservation groups such as the Couchiching Conservancy, who owns the land where the field site is located, and the Nature Conservancy of Canada to acquire, steward and protect alvar habitat essential to the program's success. "Growing the conservation breeding program by bringing on new partners means greater breeding capacity," explains Hazel Wheeler, lead biologist in the WPC's shrike program. "It also means greater release capacity and hopefully a reversal of the declining population trend in the wild."

Working to protect the shrike from extinction has been an eight-year "love affair" for Wheeler. "The idea of working with a critically endangered species like the loggerhead shrike seemed to me the pinnacle of purpose," she says. But the job is not glamorous. The work requires Wheeler's team to spend months taking shifts staying in a rustic old cabin on a sprawling cattle ranch, where they prepare field enclosures and help the birds adapt to their environment through what is known as a "soft release."

Shrike conservation efforts underline an important role served by cattle ranches. Much of the Carden Alvar and surrounding area was once widely used for cattle ranching, and some still is. "Loggerhead shrikes prefer habitat with short grasses and thorny but scattered shrubs or low trees," explains Amanda Bichel, the Ontario Important Bird and Biodiversity Areas (IBAs) coordinator for Birds Canada. "This is exactly the type of habitat you find on the few alvars in Ontario."

Labour of love: *Multiple organizations are collaborating to save eastern loggerhead shrikes.*

EASTERN LOGGERHEAD SHRIKE

(BOTTOM) NATURE CONSERVANCY OF CANADA

AQUATIC WARBLER

MANGROVE FINCH

Model method: *Shrike recovery techniques have been adapted to help aquatic warblers and mangrove finches.*

to me," Kamstra recalls. "The population was clearly plummeting."

While the decline in cattle grazing is a significant factor, Kamstra also points to aggregate companies acquiring limestone basins for quarries, as well as the steady decrease in wild hawthorn, which shrikes rely on to nest. Climate change adds another growing threat. Shrikes are vulnerable to erratic and extreme weather, and WPC staff and volunteers have seen nest failures after recent bad storms. Additionally, the species is susceptible to diseases, particularly the West Nile virus. With continuing climate change, both precarious weather and disease are expected to worsen.

Due to the shrike's migratory nature, WPC works with a far-reaching network of partners, including the Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute, the Nashville Zoo at Grassmere and, starting this year, the National Aviary in Pittsburgh. Back in 2015, Wheeler recalls, members of the binational working group trapped and colour-banded a female shrike in Virginia in May. The bird was part of a breeding pair and, amazingly, turned up at a release site in Napanee in August—a mid-season trip north of more than 900 kilometres. "We don't know why this bird made the move, but it's an example of the kind of surprising information that we've gotten from cross-border collaboration with our U.S. partners," Wheeler notes.

Lance Woolaver, WPC's executive director, says that the eastern loggerhead shrike program is the only one of its kind and scope in the world for recovering migratory songbirds. "Not only is the work keeping this charismatic songbird from disappearing from Canada, but the techniques we have developed have a much wider application for endangered species conservation on a global scale," Woolaver says. Since it started in 2001, techniques developed by the program have been adapted to help in the recovery of the mangrove finch in the Galapagos, the lesser grey shrike in Spain and the aquatic warbler in Lithuania, among others. Within a few years of launching the field-breeding program, one of the released birds successfully migrated and returned to breed with a wild shrike, a first for a migratory songbird conservation breeding program. The importance of these successful releases to the Ontario breeding population has grown significantly since then.

Beneficial by-product: *Grazing cattle help maintain shrike habitat.*

As I walk with the shrike recovery team to the fledgling release site, we pass several empty shrike enclosures. In years past, many of these would have been filled with fledglings awaiting release, but due to COVID-19 restrictions, many of the breeding program partners were unable to transfer their fledglings to the field. In 2019, the program released 65 young shrikes into the wild. The year before that, the number was over 100. At the 2020 release site, there are only 7 birds inside a single enclosure.

The three biologists fall silent, suddenly transforming the pastoral countryside into a place of reverence, as if we had stepped into a 19th-century basilica. Wheeler stresses just how important any fledgling release could be now. "If we stopped our efforts or were unable to fund the program, these birds would be gone in 5 to 10 years."

By the end of the day, this year's juveniles are fending for themselves, their release a success. The fledglings seem very cautious this year, Samuelson observes, which bodes well for their survival. But she and her colleagues know that lasting progress depends on preservation of shrike habitat, which in turn requires public awareness and resources, including funding and land donations. Private land owners can also act as habitat stewards without donating their property. Since 1970, North American bird populations have plummeted by 29 percent, a troubling signal suggesting a trajectory toward widespread extinctions. Restoring a flagship species benefits all others that rely on the same habitat for survival. "Biodiversity is inherently valuable," Wheeler argues. "A more diverse ecosystem is a more resilient ecosystem, which will be all the more important as we face climate change in more tangible ways."

Luke Fuendling *is a writer based in Kitchener-Waterloo. This is his first feature for* ON Nature.

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Celebrating Philanthropy

Voices of Ontario Nature Members

By **Chris Robinson**, **Ann Atkinson** *and* **Spencer Burton**

I'm proud to have just finished the circle on something my parents and I started in 1966. They purchased property and reforested the land with native trees over the years. I just signed the transfer agreement and the Escarpment Biosphere Conservancy will preserve the land forever.

Not everyone has my good fortune and career to be able to make such a big gift. There are small things you can do to protect nature. I live in a small house, I don't use pesticides and I choose to plant native species.

Last year I helped members of the Youth Council plant a pollinator garden. That doesn't feel like work to me. It was entertainment—I left feeling great.

Supporting Ontario Nature and other organizations is just one way that I contribute toward protecting our natural environment.

Nature lovers: *Chris Robinson (left) and Spencer Burton (right) are inspiring.*

***Chris Robinson** is a member of our For Nature Forever Circle legacy giving program.*

My interest in nature began when I was 17 and had chicken pox. I started birdwatching in my backyard. Now I'm a former birdwatcher who is getting lazy!

Forty years ago I started giving to charities. I do it because it makes me feel good (they say it's the dopamine!). And it's the right thing to do. I'm single and I don't have kids, so I have more than I need. But everyone can do it—even a small gift can have a big impact. And I think everyone should have a will.

Mostly I support human rights groups, but I like that Ontario Nature is buying and protecting land, and also advocating for the environment and wildlife. We should be keeping as much of it as we can.

***Ann Atkinson** is a member of our Champions for Nature major giving program.*

Dedicated donor: *Ann Atkinson is committed to helping protect Ontario's nature.*

My family and I spend most of our time in the wild. It's incredibly important to get outside and feel that fresh air on the inside. Nature provides in so many ways if you let it.

The inspiration for my music is all life: all living things, humanity, nature as a whole. I don't think it's possible to make music without nature.

We strive daily to keep our lives as sustainable as possible. We are fortunate enough to live on a small hobby farm in southern Ontario. We grow our own produce, raise our own livestock and harvest game and forage as much as possible from the surrounding forests.

I've always supported conservation in my own way, but it wasn't until recently that I realized conservation is something far more than cleaning up your local forests and making the odd donation. Ontario Nature has done and is doing some really cool stuff. I want to be a part of that any way I can.

***Spencer Burton** is a musician supporting Ontario Nature through his album sales. His music is available at dinealonerecords.com.*

Growing pains: *The Lake Simcoe watershed is threatened by urban sprawl.*

Fighting For Lake Simcoe

By **Lisa Richardson**

The provincial government's changes to the Conservation Authorities Act (CAA) could have a devastating impact on many communities, leading members of the South Lake Simcoe Naturalists (SLSN) to speak out against the measures. "The Lake Simcoe watershed is already under pressure from considerable urban expansion," says SLSN president Paul Harpley. "Weakening the CAA will put its vulnerable at-risk wildlife and natural habitats in further peril, and significantly impact future conservation opportunities in Ontario."

The SLSN joined Ontario Nature, the Canadian Environmental Law Association, Environmental Defence and other conservation organizations in opposing the changes to the CAA contained in the omnibus budget bill that the Government of Ontario passed in December. The changes include the elimination of conservation authorities' ability to appeal municipal land-use decisions that could harm local species and habitats, and greater latitude for developers to try to fast-track approvals of development in natural areas.

The southern portion of the Lake Simcoe watershed contains numerous ecologically sensitive areas that SLSN members are keen for the provincial government to protect, including the Oak Ridges Moraine and the Beaver River Wetland. The new measures threaten the already at-risk animals that live in the watershed, such as least bitterns, Canada warblers and snapping turtles.

The SLSN was formed in 1983 with a focus on natural heritage research in the south Lake Simcoe area. Members have contributed data to various province-wide community science projects, including the *Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Ontario*, the Ontario Reptile and Amphibian Atlas and the Atlas of the Mammals of Ontario. In the 2000s, SLSN contributed natural history data that helped inform the Government of Ontario's Lake Simcoe Protection Act, 2008. The group also collaborates with the Zephyr Society of Lake Simcoe, which operates a research station dedicated to surveying species around south Lake Simcoe.

More information about SLSN's research and activities is available at the organization's website, **slsn.ca**.

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PETE RYAN

Ontario's "Zombie Highway" is Back

By **Tim Gray**

On a steamy July afternoon last summer, I stood on the long-abandoned Kirby Road bridge in the lush forest of the Nashville Conservation Reserve. As I looked down at the clear water of the Humber River from this historic "bowstring arch" span, which now forms part of a hiking trail, I found it hard to imagine that this quiet, special place was being hunted by a monster brought back from the dead.

The monster is the proposed GTA West Highway, also known as the 413. It would stretch north from Milton, skirt the west side of Brampton, near Glen Williams and Georgetown, then swing east to cross southern Caledon and into Vaughan to meet the 400—all the while slicing through farms, forests, wetlands and portions of the Greenbelt.

In 2018, the current provincial government restarted the project, which the previous government had cancelled in 2017. That earlier decision was based on the advice of an expert panel that concluded that the highway would shave only 30 seconds off commute times but cause irreversible environmental damage, and that better alternatives existed. Those concerns remain. The 300-metre-wide highway corridor would fragment some of Canada's prime—and rapidly disappearing—farmland, directly paving over almost a thousand hectares of it. At the same time, it would invite more industry and sprawling subdivisions into those areas.

Forests and wetlands are abundant along the proposed highway's route. They provide habitat for wildlife, including interior forest birds and endangered species such as redside dace, as well as help to moderate climate change and protect water. Highway 413 would cut through the largest remaining forests in Vaughan and at least partially destroy 75 wetlands, 28 of which are designated as provincially significant. Its corridor would also snake through a combined 10 kilometres of Greenbelt corridors, which serve as critical wildlife connections, north to the major natural areas of the Oak Ridges Moraine and the Niagara Escarpment.

In addition, the highway would go through the headwaters of the Credit and Humber rivers and Etobicoke and Sixteen Mile creeks, necessitating a shocking 88 bridges and large culverts. The pollution from building the highway and the oil, tire fragments, spills and road salt would degrade these waterways, lowering the water quality downstream and affecting agriculture and drinking water, as well as wildlife and recreational users. Paved surfaces also do not absorb water, which means increasingly violent rainstorms could produce more flooding.

Highway 413 should not be built. There are better ways to move people and goods through southern Ontario. Fortunately, the more people find out about this zombie project, the more they want to ensure it is stopped before it lurches from a bad idea into reality.

Readers are encouraged to join the efforts to stop the highway. Ontario is ours to protect. More information about the impact of, and alternatives to, the proposed highway can be found at the Environmental Defence website, **stopthe413.ca**.

Tim Gray *is the executive director of Environmental Defence, an environmental advocacy organization.*

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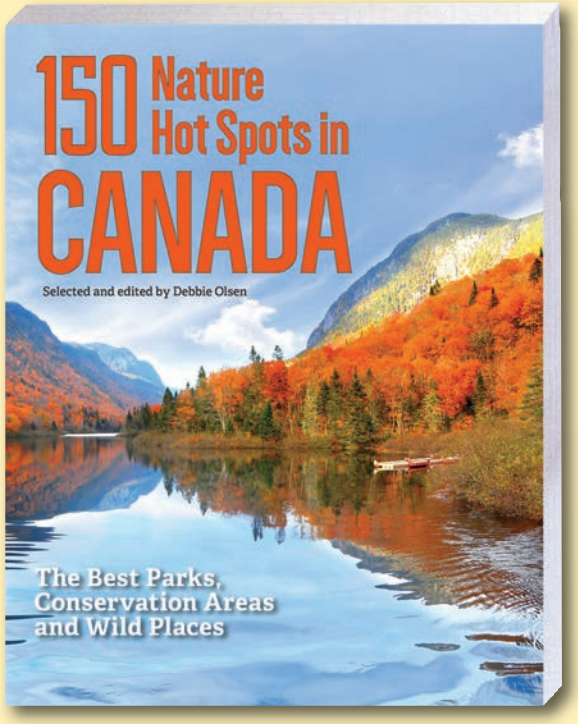

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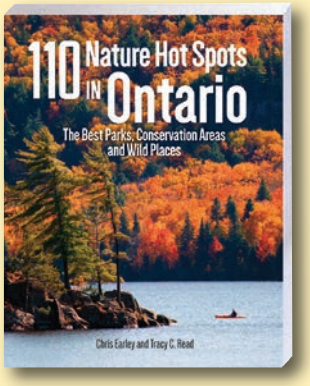

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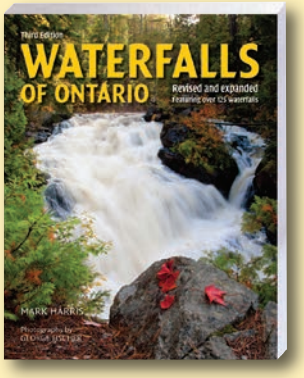

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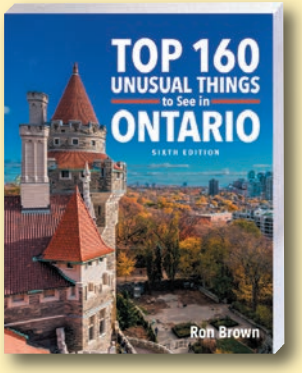

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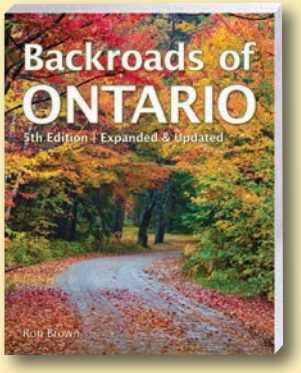

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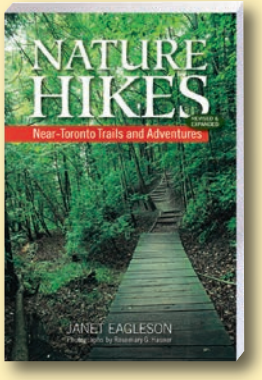

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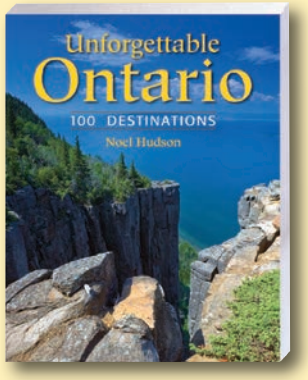

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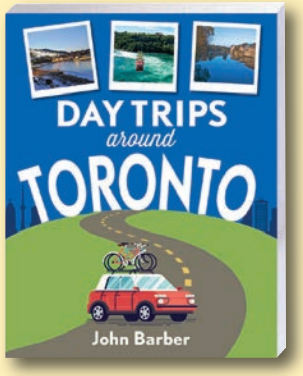

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