



# The Quinte Naturalist

The Quinte Field Naturalists Association is affiliated with Ontario Nature, a non-profit organization sponsoring nature education, conservation and research.

April 2016 Issue

## Barred Owls Give More Than a Hoot

It seemed like a good idea at the time. Isn't that how a lot of embarrassing situations begin? There was a section of the campground where there were very few campers.



Photo by Kyle Blaney

There were no loud radios playing. It would be a fun family activity to play a recording of a barred owl's "*Who-cooks-for-you. Who cooks for you-all*" to see if we could get a response. In the peace and quiet of the twilight campground it would be easy to hear even the most distant owl. We proceeded to a neighbouring empty campsite and played the recording.

To say that we got a response would be a gross understatement. In a couple of minutes two adult birds flew in to deal with the supposed intruder. Since it was late summer their two juvenile offspring joined them. Perched just over our heads the four birds cackled; they hooted; they whooped; they called us every obscenity in the barred owl vocabulary, all in voices so loud that there couldn't have been any camper who didn't hear them. They were consumed by the mentality which in humans leads to riots. We immediately returned to our campsite before anyone could realize that we were the focus of this ruckus.

Undoubtedly barred owls are our loudest owls. You can hear their calls in many contexts beyond defense of territory. A.C. Bent, writing in the first half of the last century quoted one observer.

### ANNUAL DINNER – APRIL 25

For all those lucky people who have tickets for the dinner: (you can't get in without one and it's too late to buy one)

Punch available at 5:45

Dinner to be served at 6:30

*The Quinte Naturalist – April, 2016 – Page 1*

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*At one of my lonely wilderness camps in the month of March a pair of Barred Owls came to the trees over my campfire and made night hideous with their grotesque love-making, banishing sleep during the evening hours. Their courting antics, as imperfectly seen by moonlight and firelight, were ludicrous in the extreme. Perched in rather low branches over the fire they nodded and bowed with half-spread wings, and wobbled and twisted their heads from side to side, meantime uttering the most weird and uncouth sounds imaginable. Many of them were given with the full power of their lungs, without any regard to the sleepers, while others were soft and cooing and more expressive of the tender emotions; sounds resembling maniacal laughter and others like mere chuckles were interspersed here and there between loud wha whas and hoo-hoó-aws.*



*Photo by Kathy deGroot*

*Great Gray Owl*

Researchers have identified 13 different vocalizations given by barred owls. Various naturalists have described these sounds as hooting, gurgling, twittering, screaming, caterwauling like a cat in heat, grunting like a monkey and bill snapping. Sounds made by females are generally at a higher pitch than a male's and contain more vibrato. All of these sounds are innate. Unlike song birds owls do not have to learn their calls from other birds; they know them from the day they hatch.

Researchers have noted that barred owls respond very strongly to a recording of the typical "who-cooks-for-you." That was certainly the case with the pair we found on the recent QFN outing. We watched as they flitted back and forth gradually homing in on the source of the offending call. What they thought of a calling owl that took the shape of an old-fashioned boom box there's no way of knowing. Probably they didn't care and were just pleased that they had been successful in driving it away as we got in our vehicles and left.

You may see a barred owl even during the day when you are walking on a forest trail. Barred owls are primarily nocturnal but are sometimes active in the daylight, particularly in the late summer when the young birds are more likely to be exploring their woodlands. How do you identify a barred owl if you see one and it's silent? The only other large owl with a rounded head and no ear tufts in our area is the great gray owl. Except during winters when an irruption occurs they are very uncommon and they do not nest in the Quinte area. Great grays are larger but that's not easy to determine without making a direct comparison. The trick is to look at the eyes. A barred's eyes are black; a great gray's are yellow. Also look for the barring on the throat which gives the barred owl its name. The great gray owl sports a white bow tie.

*The Quinte Naturalist – April, 2016 – Page 2*

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## EARLY BLOOMERS

**Photos and story by Elizabeth Church and George Thomson**

First published in Tweed News, April 6, 2016. Reprinted with Permission

Our annual early spring venture to the Stoco Fen area is now in the past for another year. The first flower to emerge is Skunk Cabbage. It is this unique plant that lures us to East Hungerford Road where we walk up and down, exploring the ditches until we discover our prize, a flower which looks and smells like decaying flesh. Heat generated by its own enzymes enables it to push up through the snow to claim its #1 status, at least in the timing of its appearance.

As the snow continues to vanish and the days grow longer, our dreams are filled with Pussy Willows, exploding buds, roadsides garnished with pastel blues, pinks and brighter yellows and woodland floors carpeted with colourful floral arrangements. As we drive slowly along Hunt Road or enjoy the beauty engulfing Rapids Road, we scrutinize their gravelly borders in search of spring's next arrival. "Yes!" shouts Elizabeth as she catches her first glimpse of yellow. A small patch of flowers which resemble Dandelions are poking their heads above the mounds of sand and gravel. These brilliant yellow flower



heads are supported by stems -- but where are the leaves? A closer look helps us to realize that our discovery is not Dandelions but a near relative, the Coltsfoot. Both plants are in the Aster family.

Coltsfoot is a perennial which grows from underground rhizomes in early spring --- so early that there may still be snow on the ground. After its flower heads have transformed into Dandelion-like seed heads,

its large basal leaves appear. Each one of them resembles --- you guessed it --- a Colt's foot! But this plant is lucky enough to have two possible names. You may have heard someone refer to it as Coughwort. Why? Its Latin name is "Tussilago farfara". The genus "Tussilago" comes from the Latin word "Tussis" meaning "cough". This label begins to make sense only when we realize that European settlers introduced the plant to our country as a cough remedy.

*The Quinte Naturalist – April, 2016 – Page 3*

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As in all members of the Aster or Composite Family, what appears to be the flower is really a flower head composed of yellow ray florets. Each one of these florets or “petals” is really a separate little flower! The flower head is supported by a hairy stem, up to 45 cm in height, which helps to insulate this early bloomer when icy air lingers in its bed. Under close scrutiny, you can also observe many leaf-like bracts which hug the flowering stem tightly.

While driving along our country roads offers a chest of spring treasures, nothing can surpass the thrill of woodland adventures. The freedom offered by the disappearance of ice and snow and the donning of lighter clothing and boots motivate us to climb frequently to the peak of our tree covered hill in anticipation of a spring floral display. The warmer days of early April always offer



rewards. There at our feet, in shades of pink, blue, mauve and white is our Hepatica, a native species which thrives in dry to moist rich forests. The beauty of this delicate flower prospering on the hilltop as well as its early appearance in our woodlands each spring inspired us to name our farm, Hepatica Hill.

While we have not yet seen the Hepatica this year, we are feasting on the pleasures that this beautiful species has shared with us in years gone by. For a few moments, we allow our minds to float into the past and we envision it all. --- Sitting on an old log, we gently touch the fragile petals and then proceed to count them on a number of plants. We learn that they can range from 5 to 12 in number. Our fingers run up and down their stems and we feel the hairs that probably protect them from the cold, just as those on a Coltsfoot stem do. We push away the dry Maple leaves surrounding their stems and discover remnants of last year’s Hepatica leaves, hardy ones that have survived under the snow throughout the winter. Days later, we arrive at the same location to find the flowers withered, their stems bent low to the ground and rich, sharp-lobed leaves taking their place. In passing, we comment that the later emergence of the leaves, too, is similar to Coltsfoot.

After climbing down the hill, across the marsh and up through the field, we go into our house for a cool drink. As we sit discussing our observations, the questions begin to flow and we soon find ourselves pulling books off of our library shelves. We discover that there are two species of Hepaticas, *Hepatica acutiloba*, implying that it has sharp pointed

leaves and *Hepatica americana*, a variety that sports round-lobed leaves and, as its name suggests, is “of America”. Both are in the Buttercup family.

The genus name “Hepatica”, too, has a story to tell. It refers to the liver! To help you remember, just think about hepatitis, an infection of the liver. Back in the Middle Ages in Europe, it was thought that the shape of plant organs revealed their usefulness in healing. This notion was labelled the doctrine of signatures and was one of the bases for early classification of plants. The 3-lobed leaves of Hepaticas resembled the liver and the plants were used to treat liver ailments.

Every spring, we delight in finding Skunk Cabbage, Coltsfoot and Hepaticas. Perhaps more than any other flowers, our early bloomers entice us to explore and to experience the newness of spring. Just as plants have new life, so do we feel young again as we ramble through the fields and woodlands. Early bloomers suggest the beginning of a series of miracles and fill us with hope as we anticipate the glorious unfolding of bud after bud throughout the growing season.



## SERVICEBERRY

One of my favourite shrubs is serviceberry (*Amelanchier canadensis*). As its botanical name suggests it is a native shrub. It can also be grown as a small tree. It's as showy as any exotic nursery plant. Covered with white blossoms early in spring it's an important food plant for bees, butterflies and other pollinators. The flowers are followed by purplish berries which birds love. Every year a lone cedar waxwing arrives to check our two serviceberries in early June. Maybe this bird is a scout because a few days later a flock arrives along with several neighbourhood robins. They stay until the berries have all been consumed. In the fall the leaves turn a vibrant orange. It's probably as close to a perfect deciduous shrub as you can get for a small or a large yard.



Peter Fuller's Nursery on Airport Parkway sells these shrubs. You can also contact Bea Heissler at Natural Themes Nursery on Maybee Rd., near Frankford. (613-398-7971). If you choose to buy at a larger nursery try to avoid cultivars. Cultivars are variants of a species which have been selected to emphasize a certain characteristic. Cultivars cross-pollinate freely with wild plants and may produce offspring which are less adapted to our area.

*The Quinte Naturalist – April, 2016 – Page 5*

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## A QUESTION ANSWERED – KIND OF

On our recent night outing one QFN member asked what would appear to be a perfectly simple question. How large is an owl's territory? My answer was accurate but unsatisfactory. "As large as it needs to be to support the bird." I decided to research a follow-up question. "How large is that?" It turns out that the answer to that question is the equally unsatisfactory, "It depends." It depends on how much food, shelter and water is available in any specific area. It depends on where you are in North America. It depends on whether the bird is male or female. It even depends on what you mean by territory.

One author of a summary regarding the great horned owl defines territory as the area defended against intruders but notes that territory differs from home range which is the space a bird uses over time. The authors of other species accounts don't necessarily comment on this distinction and even when they do they may calculate averages based on only three examples.

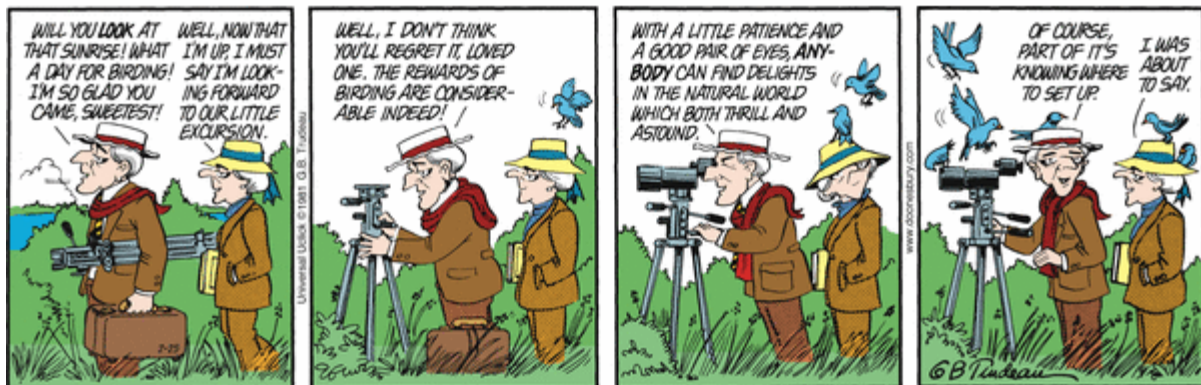
With the excuses for the possibly misleading information to follow here are my semi-educated guesses about territory sizes for the three most common nesting owl species in the Quinte area. I have ignored studies done in places such as Texas or the west coast and tried to find information from areas around the Great Lakes or the New England states

**Great horned owl** – In Minnesota 2 male birds had territories of 1.5 and 5 square kilometers while one female claimed about .75 square kilometres.

**Barred owl** – 20 examples in Minnesota and Michigan averaged 2.75 square kilometres but the size of the territory varied with the season and sex of the bird.

**Eastern screech-owl** – A nature centre in Minnesota said territories varied from a little less than 1 square kilometer to about 3.5 square kilometres but provided no evidence or examples. Another study suggested that in suburban Connecticut a territory could be less than one-tenth of square kilometre or 15 acres because this species can comfortably live in suburban backyards or city parks.

So the answer really is, "It depends."



## PEPtBO AND THE BIRDING FESTIVAL

PEPtBO, of course, is the Prince Edward Point Observatory located at the end of Long Point Road in the southeast corner of The County. Between Apr.11 and May 31 in the spring and Aug 15 and Oct. 31 in the fall banders will capture and band more than 15,000 birds of more than 120 species. Daily they will also record birds seen but not banded.

PEPtBO is one of 25 banding stations in Canada. Their work is important to monitor the status of bird species. Because many remote areas are inaccessible banding station records are the only way to monitor populations of species which will nest in the boreal forest and other northern areas. The data the stations gather provide baseline information on populations and make it possible to concentrate scarce conservation resources where they are most needed.

Trails around the station maintained by volunteers give birders access to the areas where migrants gather. Banders are also educators as they explain their work and help individuals and families understand the needs of birds. Visitors can watch banders at work and see the species banded up close. In addition to all this the observatory and its volunteers serve as caretakers for the Prince Edward County South Shore Important Bird Area

PEPtBO receives no government funding. Except for the actual banding all work is done by unpaid volunteers who remove birds from nets, manage the facilities, raise funds and do anything else that needs to be done.

**The Birding Festival** (May 14 – 23) is a fund-raising activity but it also publicizes PEPtBO and the importance of Prince Edward Point and the whole County as a highway for migrants. There are guided hikes where more experienced birders familiar with the point will help you learn the fieldmarks of the species you are seeing. Participation in these hikes costs only \$5.

Organized events at the point are limited to weekends but the banding station itself is open every day and welcomes visitors.

For more complete information see PEPtBO's website. - [peptbo.ca](http://peptbo.ca).



*Photo by Barry Kant  
submitted by Terry Sprague*

*Warblers get all the publicity but other  
colourful birds are just as spectacular. You are  
almost guaranteed to see Scarlet Tanagers*

## OUTINGS



Please support the QFN Birdathon team, The Good Terns. All of the money donated goes to support conservation and public education through PEPtBP (50%), Bird Studies Canada (25%) and the Quinte Field Naturalists (25%).

You can support us by signing a pledge sheet at the annual dinner, emailing me ([sharronjohnblaney@gmail.com](mailto:sharronjohnblaney@gmail.com)), or going online. To donate online go to the Bird Studies Canada website - [birdscanada.org](http://birdscanada.org). Scroll down to the Birdathon box, click on "Learn More," follow the links and when asked enter my name, "John Blaney" since I am the team leader. The rest is easy

Detailed information about this and other outings will be sent by email to QFN members.

*The Quinte Field Naturalists Association, an affiliate of Ontario Nature, is a non-profit organization sponsoring nature education, conservation and research. It was founded in 1949 and incorporated in 1990, and encompasses the counties of Hastings and Prince Edward. The Quinte Field Naturalists Association is legally entitled to hold real estate and accept benefits.*

*Quinte Field Naturalists meet on the fourth Monday of every month from September to March (except December), 7:00, Sills Auditorium, Bridge Street United Church, 60 Bridge Street East, Belleville. In April we hold our annual dinner at an alternate time and location. New members and guests are always welcome. Bring a friend.*

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Next Newsletter Deadline – September 10, 2016

Please send submissions to [sharronjohnblaney@gmail.com](mailto:sharronjohnblaney@gmail.com)

*The Quinte Naturalist – April, 2016 – Page 8*

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