The Quinte Naturalist

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

The excitement started on May 2. A lone piping plover appeared on the beach at Presqu'ile Provincial Park. A sighting like this has become an annual event but this tiny relative of the killdeer is an endangered species so an appearance is always a cause for celebration. The bands on this bird's legs identified her as a female, hatched on the shores of Lake Michigan in 2011. Her mate of the past two years waited for her there and she soon left.

Photo: David Bree

Dad. Note Bands on Legs

The incident was fairly typical of the species in previous years but this time the story had just begun. By late May three more piping plovers roamed the beach and they were showing signs of breeding. The bands on their legs told a tale of sibling rivalry. All three had been hatched at Wasaga Beach in 2015.

September's Speaker – John Poland

Author of the *Pictorial Pocket Guide to the Butterflies of the Kingston Region*, John Poland, will explain how to identify local butterflies, ways to attract them to your yard and how to contribute to science by reporting your sightings.

October – Lanna Desantis – The Puzzling Biology of Flying Squirrels

Two brothers were rivals for the affections of the girl next door. (OK, I know this is anthropomorphism and I'm not supposed to do it but who doesn't like a good soap opera?)

Photo: Karina Spence

July 6. An eight day old chick. The chicks were banded on the next day

The park quickly cordoned off the area most frequented by the birds. For piping plovers a nest consists of a scrape in the sand usually lined with pebbles or bits of shell. By June 2 it was obvious the birds were nesting and by June 9 the parents were incubating 4 eggs.

The losing suitor continued to hang around until late June. Then yet another piping plover arrived. Was this a prospective mate or another forlorn bachelor? We'll never know but the two of them apparently left together.

On June 28 the eggs hatched. Young piping plovers are precocial so immediately three chicks were running around their section of the beach. Staff found parts of the fourth egg but no one knows what happened to the chick. By this time a monitoring program established by the park had been running for some time. In 3-hour shifts volunteers monitored the chicks, explained to visitors why parts of the beach were closed and pointed out the balls of fluff which were the centre of attention.

Photo: Karina Spence

How many birds in the picture? Count the legs. Two chicks cuddle up with a parent for warmth. The third waits its turn.

As is the piping plover way Mom left thirteen days after the chicks hatched. When the chicks began flying about 4 weeks after hatching Dad left. Monday, August 15 was the last day anyone saw the chicks. They were on their way.

The historic event is now in the record books. For the first time since 1916 piping plovers had

nested at Presqu'ile. David Bree, Senior Natural Heritage Leader, Elizabeth Steadman who coordinated the 49 volunteers which included some members of QFN, other park staff and the volunteers all heaved a sigh of relief. The Ontario Federation of Ornithologists is awarding a Certificate of Appreciation to those volunteers as a group "for their commitment to public education and citizen science towards the Piping Plovers, nesting at Presqu'ile Provincial Park." Let's hope there is a chance to do it all over again next year.

News from the Frink

Photo: Tom Wheatley

Long-billed Dowitcher. New to the Frink

The H.R. Frink Centre is a conservation area and outdoor education centre just north of Belleville. School classes visit throughout the school year for curriculum based science programs. The 14 km of trails are open to public dawn to dusk at this 138 hectare (341 acres) Conservation Area owned by Quinte Conservation.

There will be a good chance to explore the Frink on Sunday, Oct. 2. The Friends of the Frink invite you to join them from 10:30 a.m. to 3 p.m. for the Stone Soup Festival. It will be a family oriented day of LIVE music, storytelling, activities, trails, crafts and its own Stone Soup.

Visitors are invited to bring a vegetable from their garden to add to a soup available to all while hearing the stone soup folk story of community, harvest, and celebration. Admission by donation towards the wetland ecology boardwalk build. Tax receipts available for donations of $10 or more.

While this year's drought has been disastrous for many denizens of the Frink Centre's marsh, migrating shorebirds have been making use of the newly exposed mudflats to find fuel for the rest of their long trips south. QFN members Tom Wheatley, Keith Gregoire and Kyle Blaney have added 7 shorebird species to the ebird records for the Frink this year as well as 5 other species to bring the ebird list for the Frink to 163 species.

To get to the Frink follow Highway 37 north from Belleville for 9 km and turn right onto Thrasher Road. Follow for two km to 381 Thrasher Road.

NIGHT MUSIC

Photo and story by Elizabeth Churcher and George Thomson
First published in Tweed News, Sept. 21, 2016. Reprinted with Permission

One of the many reasons we love the natural world is that there are constantly new things to experience and appreciate. The arrival of spring birds fills us with hope and the colours of autumn foliage transport us to a world of magnificence. Especially important is the reliability of the events in nature's calendar --- we look forward to them --- the anticipation gives us a sense of security and comfort, somehow often more reassuring than many events in the human world.

The cricket cries, the world changes

Cameroonian Proverb

September is marching on! As we sit writing, a short diversion to glance at our calendar reminds us that we have already said "Good-bye" to one third of this month. --- But our memory bank has been refreshed. Our warm, late-summer evening strolls can never be forgotten! We do not need to purchase a ticket or join a long line-up for entry to the orchestral performance: we are just there, in the midst of it. Admittedly, we are missing a lot of birdsong through the day, but the musicians of the night have moved onto the stage. When we drive along country roads in the moonlight, we hear a continuous soft, raspy song: tst---tst---tst---tst---tst---. As we walk around the garden, our ears welcome hearty, loud, clear chirping. From the low shrubs and taller herbaceous plants at garden's edge comes a mellow, beautiful chirping.

Who is making these melodious sounds? The musicians are members of the insect order Orthoptera, broadly speaking, the crickets, katydids and grasshoppers. --- But not all of them have their instruments poised to play as the sun lowers in the west. Some of our short-horned grasshoppers don't sing at all and none of them sing at night. Certain members of the crickets and katydids also sing in the daytime --- and there's always the loud daytime, sizzling shrill of the unrelated Cicadas who are in the same order as the true bugs.

Our late August and early September moonlit strolls are often slowed while we pause to cup our hands behind our ears in an attempt to sort out the many different players in the orchestra. We know that katydids and crickets have different subgroups and we are attempting to identify the various species. How? After isolating a specific sound, we go back to the house and listen to our CD cricket songs and read descriptions of them in our resource books. It's a slow process but we are pleased to report ongoing progress.

After learning who is making the sound, the next logical question is: "How are the sounds produced?" In crickets and katydids, the front pair of wings is elevated and a roughened area at the base of one forewing (the scraper) is rubbed against a raised ridge at the base of the other forewing (the file). This action produces the chirps or trills of crickets and the rasping, buzzy notes of katydids, a type of sound production labelled stridulation. Some grasshoppers sing by rubbing files on the femurs of their hind or jumping legs against the edges of the forewings. Other grasshoppers "crepitate", making sounds by snapping their hindwings together in the male's courtship flight. Only the male crickets, katydids and grasshoppers sing. Females of some species do give a special call to acknowledge that they've received the male's message.

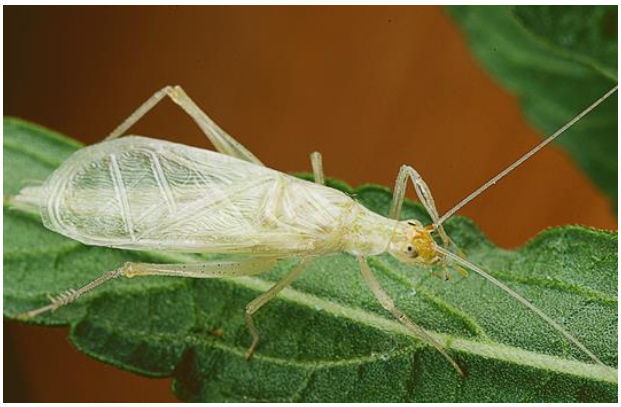
From one evening to another, the rate or frequency of singing can change: it is temperature dependent. "Hot singers" sing faster while "cold singers" sing more slowly. --- And if you stay up until midnight, you will notice that, despite the pace, most of the musicians pack up their instruments around this time. They, too, need a rest.

Now, let's narrow our focus to crickets. We have already hinted at why crickets do announce their presence with such intensity at this time of year. The males sing to attract a mate. They also sing to stake out a territory and to ensure that they will be evenly spaced to reduce competition for mating. Sometimes, males even sing in a chorus, to increase the chances of attracting females.

When we are describing sounds, it helps to know that crickets produce two basic sounds: trills and chirps. A trill is a continuous series of pulses that are too fast to count and the trill usually lasts for several seconds. A chirp is a very short burst of pulses too fast to count individually: chirps are uttered in a series, with a brief period of silence between each one.

Now that we have some understanding of the nature of cricket music, it's time to introduce you to the players that we have met in our area. That very distinctive loud, clear chirping is the song of the Fall Field Cricket. They are large black individuals and their song is the typical 'cricket on the hearth chirping' heard in all Hollywood movies featuring summer night scenes. The small (less than ½ inch long) brownish ground crickets inhabit our woods and fields. Their songs can be rapid, buzzy trills with a wavering, hesitant quality (Carolina Ground Cricket) or a pleasing continuous trill (Allard's Ground Cricket). --- And that regular series of short high-pitched metallic buzzes with silent intervals between is the call of the Striped Ground Cricket. If you are just starting to identify various species, we recommend trying to recognize this one first: We found it to be the easiest.

Striped Ground Cricket



Snowy Tree Cricket

We cannot leave our review of the common local crickets without mentioning the pleasant melodious series of soft, evenly spaced chirps coming from low down in trees and shrubs. It is the song of the delicate-looking Snowy Tree Cricket which, if located with a flashlight, appears pale green in colour. It is so pale, though, that it appears to be "snowy". Incidentally, the rate of chirping of this species can help you to calculate the air temperature: in degrees Celsius, just count the number of chirps in 8 seconds and add 5, or in degrees Fahrenheit, count the number of chirps in 15 seconds and then add that number to 40.

Joining crickets in our evening serenade are the katydids, also known as long-horned grasshoppers and quite often sporting a green coat. Some katydids, however, do look more like crickets and others resemble short-horned grasshoppers. One of the katydid groups in our midst is called the cone-head katydids because they can be distinguished by their slanting, cone-shaped heads. That tst---tst---tst---tst---tst---tst--- that we hear on our night-time late summer and autumn drives along county roads is probably made by the Sword-bearing Conehead Katydid. This grasshopper-like species is large and green --- but 'sword-bearing'? The female's ovipositor, her egg-laying organ, is long and sword-like and slung beneath her body.

Sword-bearing Conehead Katydid

As late summer changes into autumn and this beautiful season loses its glow, the nights get cooler and the members of our nocturnal orchestra gradually drop out. The players decrease in number & move farther apart and their songs become slower. Eventually, the music fades and is gone. The musicians have mated and died but the females have deposited their fertilized eggs in the soil. They have been faithful, giving us a guarantee that, come next summer and autumn, there will be night music. We'll look forward to it for comfort and reassurance that all is well in the natural world.

2016 – 2017 Program

Sept. 26 – Butterflies Nearby Author of the *Pictorial Pocket Guide to the Butterflies of the Kingston Region*, John Poland, will explain how to identify local butterflies, ways to attract them to your yard and how to contribute to science by reporting your sightings.

Oct. 24 - The Puzzling Biology of Flying Squirrels Flying squirrels have higher levels of stress hormones than most any animal, so how do they survive? PhD candidate, Lanna Desantis, presents her research into this fascinating aspect of flying squirrel biology.

Nov. 28 - Saving Grassland Birds Kurt Hennige, President of the L&A Stewardship Council, will review his research on local nesting Bobolinks and Meadowlarks and outline the land management strategies that will help save these threatened species.

Jan. 23 Spiders of Ontario Tom Mason, retired Curator of Invertebrates for the Toronto Zoo, will introduce some of our common spiders, as well as explain their significant role in the ecosystem and the importance of learning more about this understudied group of animals.

Feb. 27 Algonquin's Natural Beauty Amateur naturalists and outdoor photographers Tony and Kathy deGroot, will present an audio and visual tour of Ontario Park's crown jewel.

March 27 Motus Wildlife Tracking System This most ambitious bird tracking initiative in the world is leading to spectacular discoveries! Motus Program Manager Stuart Mackenzie, will explain the project, share some of the discoveries and discuss how this technology will aid in conservation efforts.

QFN Annual Fundraising Event

April 24th, 6:00 p.m.

Being a Bird in North America
by Robert Alvo

Join us for a delicious meal followed by an entertaining and informative talk by Robert Alvo, conservation biologist and author of *Being a Bird in North America*. Alvo will share highlights from his unique bird book which brings its subjects to life on the page with a blend of humour and science. With over 200 original cartoons, the book makes every species memorable, and sets itself apart from field guides. Whether new to the world of birds or a veteran birder you will laugh and learn. Alvo's talk, like his book, will offer new insights into the lives of birds, reveal some tricks they use to survive, explore the problems they face, and address their conservation issues. A book signing will follow.

CLUB NEWS

Outing – Friday, October 14 – Northern Saw-whet Owls -Since 1995 staff at the Prince Edward Point Bird Observatory have banded over 10,000 northern saw-whet owls as well as a few owls of other species. With luck we will be able to see more of these owls on Friday, Oct. 14. Meet at the Petro-Canada variety store parking lot in Rossmore, near the south end of the Bay Bridge to car pool at **7:00 p.m.** We should be back in Belleville sometime between 10:30 and 11:00 p.m. Check your email after 5 p.m. on Fri. 14 to confirm that the trip will proceed. There is no banding on windy or rainy nights.

Club Project – For the past few years budget restrictions at the Frink Centre have prevented full maintenance of the bird feeders. Every year hundreds of students visit the Frink as part of their science curriculum. During the off hours dozens of individuals and families with children of every age also hike the trails. All enjoy the birds which visit the feeders. QFN will be providing seeds for the feeders this year. It's a chance to partially meet our mandate to educate the public and also publicize our work more widely.

If you wish you can make a donation specifically for this project. Give your donation to the treasurer or to John Blaney. Be sure you specify the money is for the feeder project. Unfortunately we cannot give tax receipts.

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 – October 10, 2016
Please send submissions to sharronjohnblaney@gmail.com