

The Quinte Naturalist

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

Winter 2024-25



Photo by Rick Beaudon

In downtown Belleville the current in the Moira River is fast enough to keep the water open after the bay and local lakes have frozen. A few common mergansers like this pair often take advantage of the open water where they can forage and rest. Common mergansers are large ducks with narrow serrated bills which allow them to hang onto the small fish which are important prey.

For the past few summers you could often see a female merganser (top in the picture above) raising her brood in the river by Lion's Park on Station St.

Club Notes

In the last newsletter's discussion of flowerflies I neglected to mention Jonathan Balcombe's book, *Superfly*, which was one of my sources. Reading the book gives you an absorbing and sometimes amusing insight into all aspects of the lives of flies and their role in varied ecosystems. Each chapter is devoted to a specific element of the life of a fly. There is an entire chapter devoted to flies as botanists and their importance as pollinators. Don't stop reading there. The author presents a compelling case that we need to examine the possibility that animals other than ourselves may have a degree of sentience, might be able to reason, feel pain or experience emotions. It's an argument we need to hear.



On Dec. 10 at 9 a.m. I presented a request to Tweed council that they allow birders access to the site of the Tweed sewage lagoons. Because of the nutrients in these lagoons they are important sources of food for many birds such as waterfowl and shorebirds. Particularly during migration birds congregate there. When allowed access birders were able to gather data for citizen science projects, encourage others to learn about birds and to enjoy and photograph birds. Council was amenable to the idea but their insurance provider refused to cover the activity. I was requested to return later in the year with more information about municipalities which do allow access to see if we could reach an agreement. Before the lagoons were gated during the upgrade of the wastewater system birders recorded 177 species at this site.



Many QFN members belong to other organizations or assist with their projects. John Lowry is also on the board of the Friends of Sandbanks Park where he organized a project to rehabilitate the West Point section of the park by planting native vegetation.

Before the planting, two blitzes in 2022 and 2023 removed as much common buckthorn as possible. Common buckthorn is a very invasive shrub or small tree with sharp thorns. Its dense foliage and changes to the soil's nitrogen levels make it difficult for other plants to grow. Removing it is not fun.

Finally this year volunteers were able to plant native vegetation which could now flourish. John was happy to announce that the majority of volunteers this year were members of QFN.



**John and a member of park staff examine a shrub to identify it.
Photo from the Friends of Sandbanks website.**



John Lowry certainly keeps busy. On Giving Tuesday, Dec. 3, he sent us the following email: “Some literally last minute donations included, pushed our alcohol / pop can container drive total to \$3,948.10 -- I threw in an extra \$50 to round it off at \$4,000!!”

That means since 2022 we have raised \$9,069.60 for the NCC, which combined with the donation being made on Giving Tuesday means we have raised over \$18,000 to help protect local natural areas!!!”

MAJOR QFN PROJECT

QFN also had a planting project, this one organized by Greg Parsons. The site was the home of Hillcrest school, now demolished, and Hillcrest Park which has been renamed Clifford Sonny Belch Park. Belch grew up in this area known to long-time Bellevillians as Stony Lonesome and his daughters attended Hillcrest school. He was a two-term councillor where he served as Director of Recreation. After leaving council he became Belleville’s CAO until he retired.

The park is an impressive addition to the city’s recreation facilities. It has a playground and areas devoted to lawn bowling, skate-boarding, pickleball and basketball. A ball diamond, soccer field, toboggan hill and walking trails are either already completed or soon to be completed. City planners have shown great foresight in including considerable green space in the park. This caught Greg Parsons’ eye and he set to work organizing a project to populate the area with native plants.

Greg and his committee raised money and labour worth about \$40,000. On each of two planting days (Oct. 25-26) about 60 volunteers dug holes, hauled topsoil and mulch and put plants, shrubs and small trees in their new homes. Earlier in the week Picture Perfect Landscaping planted the larger trees, volunteering equipment and labour worth nine or ten thousand dollars.



For several weeks this project dominated Greg’s life. Just the time to make sure potted plants were situated so volunteers would know where to dig them in consumed hours. For many of us the effort required to complete the project would convince us to let someone else take over the next project. Greg is more committed than that. He is already talking about this year’s project.



Everyone pitched in. This fellow (right) helped his dad by hauling mulch to control weeds and retain moisture around the new plants.

At the QFN canopy (below) volunteers registered and got refreshments.



On Saturday (below) Belleville councillors Chris Malette (gray hoodie) and Barbara Enright-Miller (white jacket) joined with members of the Belch family for the unveiling of commemorative signage.

On Friday Councillor Garnet Thompson also spoke and started the project off. QFN appreciates the city's recognition of

our efforts and also the help from all individuals and groups working to make the project a success: Bayview Home Hardware, Belleville Home Building Centre, Tree Canada, Picture Perfect Landscaping, Connan Nurseries Trenton, Natural Themes Native Plant Nursery, Campbell's Orchards, Food Basics, St. Theresa School, Rotary Loves Trees, Girl Guides (Embers), Roland Cave-Browne-Cave and City of Belleville.



Meetings



Laura and Dan Guenther are the proprietors of Wild Birds Unlimited. At our meeting on Oct. 21 Dan gave a presentation on bird feeding. After explaining the elements of bird feeding Dan gave a number of hints about how to help birds. He finished by encouraging club members to take part in citizen science projects which provide data for conservation efforts.



On Nov. 18 Eli Drummond, Assistant Conservation Biologist with NCC, described NCC's many projects in this area. Despite what was an almost overwhelming number of projects Eli gave a clear and excellent summary of the work. Photo by Doug Knutson

For more information about Dan's talk click "Hobby Guide" on the store website <https://belleville.wbu.com/>. There you will find the "The 12 elements of a Thoughtful Bird Feeding Station." Dan ended his presentation with a plea for QFN members to participate in citizen science such as Project Feederwatch, like the woman below.

For more information about NCC's projects in Quinte visit these two websites:

North of Belleville <https://www.natureconservancy.ca/en/where-we-work/ontario/featured-projects/hastings-wildlife-junction.html>

On Lake Ontario's shore <https://www.natureconservancy.ca/en/where-we-work/ontario/our-work/natural-areas/eastern-lake-ontario-coast.html>



THE NOT “THE ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING” MEETING

January 24th was scheduled to be our annual general meeting. Unfortunately we forgot to inform the weather gods. A developing winter storm limited our numbers to 26 and led our speaker, Cheryl Anderson, who lives in Picton, to make the wise decision to give her presentation using Zoom. With attendance too slight to justify calling the meeting our AGM, the executive decided to make the February meeting our AGM. Then we settled in to hear Cheryl’s excellent summary of the accomplishments and plans of the South Shore Joint Initiative.

The SSJI is a very busy organization with several exciting projects. The Moses Hudgin house is a log building occupied by the family for over 100 years to 1967. SSJI is restoring it as the field house for another successful project, the Monarch Point Nature Reserve. Work has also begun on a 26 kilometre walking trail across the south shore. For a complete list of SSJI accomplishments and plans. <https://www.ssj.ca/>

Recently QFN lost two long-time, loyal members.

Harold West. For many years Harold was one of our most hard-working members. He took on jobs that helped to maintain our club and prepare for the future. When it became obvious that our constitution no longer reflected changing conditions Harold volunteered to be on a committee to update the document. When we needed a treasurer Harold accepted the job. His engineering background resulted in precise, accurate figures for many years

Within QFN Harold was kind and helpful with a quiet sense of humour. He loved talking about cars and his origins on Prince Edward Island in addition to the future for QFN. His family reported that Harold particularly loved being among the trees at his cottage on South Bay in The County. He was a great friend, both to us and to nature.

Douglas Stevenson. With his wife, Margaret Anne, Douglas lived on a farm in Tyendinaga township where they produced honey and maple syrup and maintained a vegetable garden. They regularly attended QFN meetings, donating their products for QFN sales and talking to members about wildlife on their farm. When after-dark driving became too challenging they could still be counted on to attend the annual dinner where Douglas often said grace.

I also knew Douglas as the chair of the Hastings-Prince Edward Land Trust. His desire to work with nature was obvious. He consulted experts for their advice. He devoted one hayfield to bobolinks and other grassland species. The sugar bush produced maple syrup but also served as habitat for a variety of wildlife. With Margaret Anne, Douglas worked hard and personified the goals of QFN.

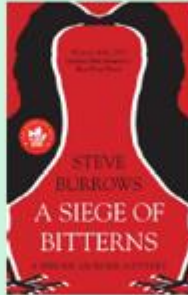


Quinte Field Naturalists

Annual Fundraising Dinner and Presentation



Featuring Steve Burrows – Author and Birder



Steve is an engaging, witty and humorous speaker who will present

Travels and Travails: Researching & Writing the Birder Murder Mystery Series

A light-hearted look at Steve's path from birder and environmental journalist to award-winning author of the best-selling Birder Murder Mystery series. Tracing connections between the worlds of birding and mystery fiction, Steve will recount some of his adventures on the research trips he has undertaken, look at the reception the series has received from the birding and non-birding communities, and explore some of the surprising opportunities that have come his way as a result of writing the series.

www.steveburrows.org

Wednesday May 14, 2025

Emmanuel United Church, 458 Ashley Street, Foxboro
Doors Open at 5:15 p.m. Welcome Remarks and Dinner at 6:00 p.m.

BUFFET DINNER MENU

Choice of Vegan "Homemade Un-Meatballs" or "Chicken with Mushroom Sauce"
By choosing a plant-based meal you will be helping to reduce the environmental impact on our planet. Both include mashed potatoes, carrots, coleslaw, rolls (with gluten-free option), punch or juice, tea/coffee, water and assorted seasonal desserts.

Silent Auction

Come early to view an array of nature-related items and place your bid to take home a treasure for yourself or a gift for someone else!

Dinner Tickets available at QFN meetings or contact Nancy Stevenson

nlsriver@gmail.com or 613-922-9566

\$40 per person (non-refundable)

CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT

Citizen science, also known as community science, has become an indispensable part of research into the size and health of wildlife species populations and our ecosystems. The Christmas Bird Count is the world's longest running community science project. This season's count was the 125th consecutive year participants collected data. Since it's first year at the beginning of the twentieth century the CBC has grown from 27 birders participating in 25 counts to the 2022-23 season (the most recent statistics available) when 67, 203 field observers joined 2625 counts. The area covered included eastern North America north to Arctic Bay on Baffin Island, south to Colombia in South America and west to Guam and other islands in the western Pacific.

2024 Belleville CBC Saturday, December 28th

Submitted by Tom Wheatley

The weather for 22nd Belleville CBC started with overcast conditions and light rain, +2 Celsius and icy roads, eventually staying mostly overcast with fog and warming to +7 Celsius. Below freezing temperatures prior to Count Week caused the Bay of Quinte to almost entirely freeze over (the opposite of the previous year, when the Bay remained open), forcing many Waterfowl into open areas of the Moira River, or opting to fly outside the Belleville Count Circle into Lake Ontario.

Twenty-five participants covered 10 areas within the Belleville CBC Circle, in addition to about 5 feeder watchers. They saw 59 species on count day (Average 53) with one additional Count Week species being Northern Harrier. A total of 9301 individuals (average 7103) were tallied.

One new species, Sandhill Crane, was added to the cumulative Belleville CBC list, now at 109 species. A countable unspecified Meadowlark species was also added.



Sandhill Cranes are no longer rare in Quinte. They nest and occasionally overwinter. Photo by Andrea Kingsley

Uncommon Species seen on Count Day: Great Blue Heron, Belted Kingfisher, Hermit Thrush, Red-winged Blackbird, Rusty Blackbird, Brown-headed Cowbird and 2 Grackles. Owls on Count Day included 4 Great horned owls, 1 Screech owl and 3 Barred owls.



Snow Bunting. Males will soon be leaving to claim nesting sites in the high arctic. Photo by Kyle Blaney

Notable missed species on count day: Harrier, Rough-legged hawk, Snowy Owl, Peregrine falcon, Red-breasted nuthatch, Carolina Wren, Brown Creeper, Yellow-rumped Warbler, Purple Finch and all "winter" finches.



Eastern Bluebird. The red breast betrays its close relationship to robins. The hermit thrush found on the count makes three members of the thrush family. Photo by Andrea Kingsley

Notable highs: Cooper's hawk 8 (previous 8 - tied), Sandhill Cranes 4 (first for Belleville CBC), Red-bellied Woodpecker 19 (previous 9), Merlin 9 (previous 4), Horned Lark 43 (previous 21), Winter Wren 2 (previous 2 - tied), Song Sparrow 8 (previous 8 - tied) and a Northern Mockingbird was seen for only the second time.

Notable Species numbers: 1392 Mourning Doves (ave. 634, record 1481), 25 Eastern Bluebirds (ave. 12), 815 Robins (ave. 270), 358 Snow Buntings (ave. 139), 481 Dark-eyed Juncos (ave. 262), 104 Cardinals (ave. 45) (record 120, in 2022) and 21 Wild Turkey (ave. 39). Most of our commonly occurring Waterfowl species had low counts due to the lack of open water on the Bay, except Canada Geese, with an above average count of 1826 (ave. 1165)

Thanks again to everyone who took part. – Tom Wheatley, Belleville CBC Compiler

Ed.Notes: Pictures found in iNaturalist, not taken on count day. Thanks to Tom for acting as compiler, submitting data to the international database and composing this article. It's a big job.

COUNTING CHRISTMAS BIRDS

Submitted by George Thomson and Elizabeth Churcher
Reprinted with permission from the Tweed News, Jan. 8, 2025



Armed with a clipboard and binoculars George and Elizabeth head out to count birds. Photo by Bernadette Hymus.

The 6:00 a.m. alarm jarred us into full consciousness on December 28th. We could hear droplets beating against the windows. A flick of the light switch revealed a dire situation: the glass panes were covered in ice. These conditions were far from ideal for birds or humans but we were committed to doing the Christmas Bird Count, so we climbed out of bed and dressed for the occasion.

For many years, we have participated in the Christmas Bird Count along with many other people. The Belleville Count is part of a large project which takes place all over North America, in Canada, the United States and Mexico. Thousands of volunteers count every bird they see or hear within a designated 24 kilometre circle on one day between December 19th and January 5th. The 24 km Belleville

circle is centered on Belleville City Hall and is divided into 9 sections, like slices of a pie. Volunteers are assigned to a section and they count all of the birds that they can find in their designated area.

After having a warm breakfast, we packed our bags with binoculars, bird books and snacks, and ventured outside, treading cautiously along the glassy, iced pathway to our vehicle. Due to a malfunction of our garage door, we had left the car outside and were rather dismayed to find it entirely coated in a thin layer of ice. “Not an auspicious start,” George muttered as he struggled to scrape the ice from the windows. But the thought

of making this small sacrifice to show a little kindness to our natural world urged us onward. Before beginning the count, we travelled to Belleville where a friend joined us.

Weather conditions had slowed us down, so it was 8:30 a.m. when we finally entered our area and began counting. While Elizabeth and our friend scanned the surroundings, George drove slowly and very carefully along the road edges, wheels half on the shoulder and hazard lights flashing. Upon sighting birds, the two observers asked George to stop, so that he could redirect his attention from safe travel to bird identification. It was helpful to have three people confirming the species. In some instances, we got out of the vehicle and walked along the roadway to a location where we could see the bird more clearly.

Sitting in the car can become tedious, so we always look forward to the public access trail that winds its way through shrubbery, bordering wide open fields and ultimately meanders into woodlands. Before entering the large stand of White Cedars, one field has become populated with Red Cedars, a great attraction for Cedar Waxwings during years that they have abundant fruit. When we began our walk along the trail, the temperature had passed through zero into the low single digits and the sun was making occasional appearances. What a pleasant gift, after a dull beginning! Our eyes searched longingly, wondering if we might find a Brown Creeper in the White Cedars or a Northern Shrike perched atop the Red Cedars, as we had in the past. These sightings are rare and were not a part of our good fortune this year but Mother Nature did remember us favourably! Read on to learn about our discoveries.

On that December 28th day which started out with ice and freezing rain and transitioned through rain and fog to overcast grey skies with hints of sunlight, we witnessed 629 birds, representing 21 species. Who did we find out searching for food, flying overhead or huddled on a branch attempting to escape the icy raindrops? Three raptors, a Cooper's Hawk flying, and a Merlin and a Kestrel perched on the top of small trees, treated us to their presence. Our most numerous



The American Kestrel is our smallest diurnal raptor and probably our most easily recognized. The blue-gray wings on the bird above identify it as male. Female wing colour matches the back colour. When hunting kestrels can hover in mid-air. Photo by Joe Bartok



In winter European Starlings trade their glossy, dark plumage for this speckled outfit.

Photo by John Lowry.

species was the European Starling (240+), followed by the Mourning Dove (151). To our delight, the third most abundant was the Snow Bunting (60 +) who thrilled us a second time with a flurry of black and white tumbling flight over a barren field. What a wonderful way to light up a dark day! The list of the most plentiful birds was rounded out by Canada Geese (40) and Mallard Ducks (36). The remainder of our sightings highlighted familiar Winter avian friends and featured two American Robins.

Over the years, we have encountered ice, fog, freezing rain, snow and sunshine on the Christmas Bird Count but, despite unpredictable conditions, we continue to participate with enthusiasm. Why? The data about bird numbers and distribution that is collected by the many volunteers provides information about how well birds of many species are doing, what their conservation status is. Society is becoming more and more knowledgeable about birds and other animals, and the growing movement to conserve them and their habitats. We need Nature, we need all other life, all the intact ecosystems, for our survival. In doing our small part in the Christmas Bird Count, we bring closure to 2024 in positive, rewarding action. Now we can look forward to the 2025 Christmas Bird Count and many other citizen science projects. Let's start planning!



Signs of Spring. Ignore what you think you see outside the window. As daylight gets longer birds become restless. Flocks of horned larks (photo by Kyle Blaney) along rural roads are proof that migration has begun. Robins have left their winter quarters in local woodlands and are moving back into town. Soon furry pussy willow catkins and foetid skunk cabbage blooms will provide food for early insects. The spring show has begun.