

## Distemper Continuing?

Newport Forest Wednesday/Thursday April 14/15 2010 2:10/3:40 pm

weather: prec. omm; RH 49%; BP 101.7 kPa, S 0-10 kmh; haze/sun; T 20° C

purpose: two-day stay

participants: Kee, Darren

I was reminded of the subject now called "human ecology" as I descended one of the gullies along the Beattie Line en route to the property. There was Edgar Hurdle's tractor parked off road and Edgar himself prowling along the ditch with a garbage bag in hand. "Edgar, what in blazes are you doing?" He held up a beer can. "I get ten cents for each one of these!" (The Scottish legacy runs strong in these parts.)

I was startled, upon swinging open the farm gate, to see the road already developing mud cracks -- another sign of impending drought. The rain gauge was empty and the air temperature was 20° C

I had barely set up camp when Darren arrived in his Jeep Rubicon. We brought the box-net up from the creek, then set out to look under logs for salamanders in the Blind Creek Forest. Log after log revealed nothing but sow bugs, beetles or centipedes. Darren crossed a fallen tree to the south side of Vernal Pond D, while I continued to pick my way along the rose-choked north side. I was in the midst of photographing a stand of ash saplings, when I heard Darren call out: "Hey, There's a coon over here. Looks sick." I walked along the same trunk, but lost my footing near the end, plunging chest-deep into rather cold water. "I never seen you move so fast," said Darren of my scramble back to land. The raccoon was very feeble, a female, lying on her back and snapping at any flies that came too close. Her right eye was sunken and filled with white pus. But my first priority was to get into dry clothes, so I went back to the trailer, finding a pair of Pat's jogging pants in the bedroom. Any port in a storm.

I went back to the sick raccoon, even as Darren moved on to the Hogsback to look up there. I found the best way to re-hydrate her was to fetch water from the vernal pond in a baggie. She would put her head inside, gulping eagerly, wheezing between gulps. Things did not look good. I had a strong feeling this was the same individual that had showed up at the Nook two weeks ago.

I moved on, eventually hooking up with Darren at the Sand Bar by the river. There I had another accident: Intending to take a little refreshment, I sat on a large log that looked quite solid. It exploded into a cloud of dust and chips and I ended on my back with coke all over my shirt. "Sh-t:!" Then for some unknown reason, I laughed my head off as I pictured myself lying in a cloud of woody debris, wearing Pat's white jogging pants. I was having such a great day!

At the Sand Bar, we found that one of the American Hazels had died, while the other had new, healthy-looking buds. The pawpaws were fine. They seem to like the sandy, well-drained soil. Near Bluebell Woods a little further on, I found a new fungal form growing on a log in one of the mysterious hollows found throughout this landscape. The fungus is a hard, white crust, which I may just turn over to Greg Thorn directly, without an attempt at identification. In Bluebell Woods the Virginia Bluebells were still not fully out. We found several of the American Beeches I had planted a few years ago still doing well, with their spindle-shaped, copper-coloured buds ready to burst.

Back at the trailer I changed back into my now-dry clothes and cooked up some chicken soup & hamburgers. We hung out in the Nook until sunset, then Darren headed back to Moraviantown, dropping me at the gate where I could close up for the night and pay a brief social visit to the Hurdles across the road. I walked back to the trailer under vey bright stars, looking for the Summer Triangle as I went. I sat up that night reprogramming my digital camera to coax it out of its dampened spirits, finally succeeding. Then I memorized the four species of smallish snake species that we should expect to find in this area: Brown Snake (logged on site); Smooth Green Snake (unlogged); Northern Red-bellied Snake (unlogged); Ribbon Snake (unlogged). The night was dead quiet, without even owls calling. I heard some toads trilling once or twice, but only briefly. Overnight low was + 4° C.

Next morning, Darren rolled in with some Tim Horton's coffee and muffins. We watched birds for a while, noting that more should be about than were actually present. We discussed the possibility of a snake drive some day, then did a quick walkabout in the meadow, noting that numerous tent caterpillars had already begun their trade. By noon the air temperature above the Lower Meadow had reached 30° C (!) Then Darren had to leave for baseball practice. Shortly after his jeep went out of sight, I was startled by the arrival of the sole surviving daughter of Two-stripe. (last year's brood). Her coat was in fine shape, but she looked a little gaunt, wandering around the camp looking for food. I gave her some water and kibble and she ate with good appetite. (What is the difference between confused wandering and systematic foraging?) It also worried me that she showed no fear of me -- a symptom of canine distemper. Although she may have remembered me from last summer, she would not normally approach me. Still, there may have been an association between me and food in her mind -- and she seemed desperate. Her eyes were still bright and unclouded.

Before closing camp, I went to the Hole, changed camera cards and dumped the water tub in case it had distemper

viruses in it. Then I went over to see how the sick female was doing. I found her dead under a rose bush not far from her position yesterday.

birds: (15)

American Robin (BCF); Black-capped Chickadee (RL); Blue Jay (GF); Brown-headed Cowbird (GF); Common Flicker (BCF); Dark-eyed Junco (GF); Downy Woodpecker (Tr); Field Sparrow (UM); Northern Cardinal (ER); Red-bellied Woodpecker (GF); Song Sparrow (LM); Turkey Vulture (LM); White-breasted Nuthatch (Tr); Wood Duck (VP-B); Wild Turkey (BCF)

phenology: bee-flies out in numbers; tent caterpillars starting up, green tiger beetles out in numbers

Canine Distemper (CD): symptoms include wheezing or difficulty breathing during the respiratory phase, diarrhea, vomiting and loss of appetite during the digestive tract phase, and wandering/mental confusion during the central nervous system phase. CD has no medical implications for humans, although the virus is very similar to the RNA-based Rubella virus that cause measles in humans. Treatment is not successful in advanced stages, but can supplement an animal's natural immune system during early phases: a drug called ribavirin and lots of vitamin A.

Counter-indications: every spring we see one or two "auslanders" show up in a starved condition, having used up virtually all of their fuel during hibernation. They are usually weak and tremble a lot; their fur is straw-coloured and rather unkept. They raid the bird feeders by daylight, as the resident raccoons keep them away from kibble-drops at night. Although the sole surviving daughter of Two-stripe was not in this condition, it would not be unusual for the Two-stripe brothers to gang up on their sister to keep her away from the food source at night, forcing her to adopt the same daytime foraging strategy. The jury is out on this one.

## IMAGES:

(click on image to enlarge)



Sapling recruitment in the Blind Creek Forest following the loss of canopy due to Bitternut dieback (Within 5 min of taking this picture I fell into Vernal Pond D)

(click on image to enlarge)



Yellow Trout Lilies are peaking, with White ones close behind in the Fleming Creek bluffs forest.

(click on image to enlarge)



Dead female raccoon: probable cause canine distemper. Note yellowish, unkept fur, generally a sign of starvation.

(click on image to enlarge)



Next Victim? One of the Two-stripe brood from last summer, foraging around camp during daylight. Here she tries to climb my leg.\* Note eyes still bright and unclouded.

\*This is unusual behaviour for a kit of Two-stripe, as we refrained from any physical contact with them.

## Addendum

Two small notes round out the report on Work Day filed April 10 last.

First, the list of volunteers was incomplete. It's important to get this right, since each and every volunteer makes an important contribution to the work as a whole and such efforts are greatly valued and much appreciated by the TTLT. So here is the revised list, as it should have appeared:

volunteers: (22)

Muriel Andreae, Peter Andreae, Jane Bowles, Heather Campbell, Erin Carroll, Stan Caveney, Pete Chapman, Kee Dewdney; Dave Daugherty, Darren Jacobs, Terry Keep, Andre LaChance, Quentin Land; Steve Logan, Mhairi MacFarlane, Ken Murray, Nancy Murray; Gordon Saylor, Brent Sinclair, Bernie VandenBelt, B. Wheeler, R. Wheeler

Second, I neglected to mention that someone found a large, baggy cocoon at the base of one of the thorn trees they cut in the Upper Meadow. Here is Erin Carroll holding the cutting, with the cocoon attached to the base of its stem. It appears to belong to a pupa of the Cecropia Moth, one of the large silkworm moths that are relatively common at Newport Forest. (several sightings).

Erin Carroll is a UWO biology graduate, having benefitted from Stan Caveney's course in entomology . . .

. . . and here is the splendid adult Cecropia laying eggs to restart the cycle.