

Bearly There

Newport Forest Thursday/Friday June 24//25 2010 2:10/5:15 pm

weather: prec. 4 mm; RH 64%; BP 101.6 kPa; NW 20-30 kmh; sn/cld; T 16 °C

purpose: two-day visit

participants: Pat, Kee

Just beyond the farm gate, we were amazed and delighted to find a flock of some 35-40 (visible) Bobolinks congregating in the Upper Meadow, about half males. Last autumn, the TTLT Stewards Committee organized a thorn tree removal operation to encourage such open-country birds.

Setting up camp for an overnigher is somewhat more complicated than a day visit, but by the time we were done, a baby Red Squirrel was on one of the tray feeders and the Chipmunks were up and running. Pat walked down to the creek as I gave the trail there a badly-needed grooming. Several years ago she found a rare Green Dragon growing near the base of the bluffs, but the plant was promptly crushed by a large dead Bitternut that fell right on top of it. When Pat called out "Green Dragon!" I raced down to see a new plant growing much closer to the bank. (See IMAGES below.) A Great Blue Heron took wing upstream.

Watching their behaviour around the tray feeders reveals a lot about inter-bird relations such as a bedraggled Grosbeak Mom with a baby Cowbird in tow. We also noted today, as before, how larger birds always displace smaller ones at the trays. We were visited briefly by the Murrays (no Uno) with news that a bear had been sighted a mere 8 km away at the Hwy 76 bridge over the Thames. This was a terrific morale-booster for Pat who promptly canceled all excursions away from the trailer.

While Pat took her ms nap in the trailer, I walked the Thames River Trail, quite forgetting about the bear. The afternoon sun sent glorious shafts of yellow slanting into the Riverside Forest. There is a textbook example of an ecotone or transition zone between the Box-elder/Elm/Hackberry forest on the point bar and the Beech/Maple forest closer to the Hogsback, with no change of elevation. Stand on the trail at this boundary, look south and the difference is quite striking, with a tangled, tropical-looking jumble of leaning Box Elders to the right and an open forest with stately Maples to the left. The Beeches grow further upslope. There is still quite a lot of Garlic Mustard growing in both the Riverside and the Blind Creek Forests, with relatively little at higher elevations on the Hogsback itself. I have the impression, however, that the GM population has reached an uneasy truce in its biowarfare on native plants, with an overall population that seems no larger than in previous years. Or is that merely wishful thinking?

Returning to camp, I adjourned with Pat to the Nook, where a Tufted Titmouse visited the tray briefly. We remained in the Nook until about 7 pm or so, when Wanda showed up with one kit. Then two and three. Then her sister Wilma and another kit. The possibility remains that Wilma is also a mother and not just a "maiden aunt." She is distinguished from her sister by a large rufous patch over her shoulders. The kits were, as usual, amusing to watch. They are about 10 years old now in human terms, a little less than half-grown. Meanwhile, Strawtail showed up out on the track, munching on a scattering of kibble. His/her colour is improving. We wondered if Strawtail might actually be Waldo, a brother who fell on hard times in the late winter, nearly dying of starvation. We are well aware that our supply of kibble and birdseed to the site amounts to approximately 500 kg of imported biomass annually and that this gives a boost to various local populations. The raccoons, however, in spite of being about twice as plentiful as they would otherwise be, do not grow yet more numerous, since raccoon rules allow only one family to benefit at a time. We think of the added biomass as a "bailout," in any case.

After supper we walked to the Copse to look for Uno. We found a faint foraging trail from the Copse to the thorn scrub under the Power Lines. Was it made by Uno? We think she's gone. The bushes at the edge of the Gallery Forest beside the track were alive with birds calling, including Gray Catbirds and Northern Orioles.

After sunset, we settled down as the temperature slowly dropped to its overnight low of 15° C. Thin cloud screened out the stars, allowing only Jupiter to shine through. The moon was one day shy of full and a faint mist slowly enveloped the Lower Meadow, giving the firefly lamps halos as they winked on and off.

Some Coyotes started their insane chorus off to the east, possibly in the Fleming Creek Forest or in Purcell's Wood beyond that. "Yip-yap-yeeeeow-yeeeeow, waw-waw-waw-yeeow." Was it the full moon? A Screech Owl called and, a little later, a few brief calls from our "mystery bird," possibly a Short-eared Owl. This species has a variety of calls, the call in question being a descending rasping note that reminds one of a Gray Squirrel's complaint, but louder and with more of a burr.

About this time I began an experiment with the electronic "wolf ears" given to me by a friend I recently visited in Santa Fe. (Dr Gregory Zeigler has joined our "Newport Friends" list.) Two microphones directed forward are mounted on a headset. When you turn the ears on you hear ALL sounds amplified, including those nearby. (Intestinal gas sounds like

someone blowing a trumpet in your ear.) Against a background of white noise from myriad sources, I could hear a Green Frog calling from the vernal ponds (?) deep in the Blind Creek Forest, the supposed Short Eared Owl, distant farm dogs, cattle lowing far away and, somewhat irritatingly, traffic on Highway Two, just 1.2 km to the north. A motorcycle sounded like it was coming through the Lower Meadow. Suddenly I heard it, an abrupt and distinct growl, a pause, then another. I had forgotten all about the bear! Terrified, I got up on the deck. With the next growl I tore off the ears and locked myself in the trailer, only then noting that Pat had begun to snore. So much for Mr. Nerves-of-steel.

Pancakes began the new day and our planning session in the Nook resulted in a decision to go kick-fishing in the Thames rapids out by the beach. We approached the River Landing cautiously, hoping to catch some Spiny Soft-shelled Turtles by surprise. Pat heard a "plop" upstream and I saw what I thought might be one offshore that dived at our approach, but nothing definite. New birds were there, however. A mother Killdeer watched over four fledglings that marched along the shoreline. Pat thought she saw a Scarlet Tanager in the trees across the river and a Cedar Waxwing flew overhead.

Pat bravely took to the rapids, supported by her walking pole and aquatic net. I stood by with pail, camera and baggies. The first spot we picked was poor, so we moved to what she thought would be a better riffle. Here, almost every try brought up fish. To kick-fish, you face downstream and jam the base of the square-mouthed net into the rocks ahead of you. Then you kick the rocks beneath you, letting the current carry anything dislodged into the net. Pulling the net up quickly, remove any stones from the bottom and pluck the squirming harvest into pail or baggie, temporary prisoners. Among the readily identifiable fish she found were some Emerald Shiners and a Greenside Darter, neither new, but always interesting to examine. (See IMAGES below.) Smaller fish like these form a staple of heron and cormorant diets.

Back in camp, we found an Eastern Gray Squirrel (Black phase) raiding the feeders, along with an exceptionally dark Red Squirrel. Speaking of populations, the latter species now has a new population in the Fleming Creek area, adding to a bunch in the Pine Plantation next door. Had we not been putting out bird seed, we doubt the new population would have happened. Is this good or bad?

We drove to the Upper Meadow to see what the Bobolinks were up to. Surprisingly, they had all moved down to the scrub meadow between the Power Lines and the Upper Meadow, not where we expected to find them. They seemed irritated by our presence and scolded Pat when she got out of the van. Before leaving we inspected a mother Phoebe and young in a nest on the Hurdle's porch.

Birds: (32)

American Crow (TR); American Goldfinch (LM); American Robin (FC); Black-capped Chickadee (GF); Bobolink (UM); Blue Jay (Tr); Brown-headed Cowbird (Tr); Cedar Waxwing (TR); Common Flicker (ER/W); Common Grackle (GF); Common Yellowthroat (BCF/LM); Downy Woodpecker (Tr); Eastern Phoebe (HP); Eastern Screech Owl (EW); Eastern Towhee (GF); Field Sparrow (LM); Gray Catbird (GF/W); Great Blue Heron (FC); Killdeer (TR); Mallard (TR); Mourning Dove (GF); Northern Cardinal (BCF); Northern Oriole (GF/W); Red-bellied Woodpecker (GF); Red-tailed Hawk (HBF); Rose-breasted Grosbeak (Tr); Song Sparrow (LM); Tufted Titmouse (Tr); Turkey Vulture (UM); White-breasted Nuthatch (Tr); Wood Thrush (BCF/LM); Yellow-billed Cuckoo (EW)

Possibles: Scarlet Tanager (TR); Short-eared Owl (BCF)

Best birds: Tufted Titmouse, Bobolink, Eastern Pheobe

Leps: (13, a mere teaser for the upcoming annual Ontario butterfly count)

Cabbage White; Clouded Sulphur; Common Wood Nymph; Eastern Comma; Giant Swallowtail; Great Spangled Fritillary; Little Wood Satyr; Meadow Fritillary; Monarch; Red-spotted Purple; Summer Azure; Tiger Swallowtail; Virginia Ctenuchid

Extirpation Note: We may have lost not only the Ruffed Grouse, but the Southern Flying Squirrel (main food source was Bitternuts -- now gone)

Drought Watch: precipitation shortfall 166 mm (annual baseline of 900 mm)

New Species:

'Acuminate Hypotrach' [Strongylidium] sp. TR KD Je24/10

Phenology: vernal ponds now completely dried up, Bobolinks arrive

IMAGES:

Pat finds Green Dragon. Leaves have clay dusting from recent high water event.

The Emerald Shiner is beautiful when examined closely. Distinctive field mark consists of “emeralds” that stud the lateral line, as here: (Drag to desktop for an expanded view.)

Kit peers at camera in wonderment, while Wanda feeds behind it. Divided masks are characteristic of the “Two-stripe family.”

When children ask why the eyes glow, we explain that at night, raccoons turn on their headlights in order to find their way around the woods.

IMAGES

(click on image to enlarge)



For anyone not yet sick of our raccoon pictures, here are two of Wanda's kits in the Nook:

(click on image to enlarge)



*I often see this species of beetle parked on leaf or log just waiting for a whiff of death to go flying off to the source: The American Carrion Beetle (*Necrophila americana*)*

(click on image to enlarge)



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