

Newport Forest

Tuesday March 29 2011

2:45 - 6:45 pm

Weather: prec. 35 mm; RH 51%; BP 102.7 kPa; clear; N 5 km/h; T +5° C

Purpose: to monitor the onset of spring

Participants: Kee

I was just unlocking the gate when a big black Ford 250 rolled up with two conservation officers inside. They were looking for illegal hunting activities, so I told them about our deer-poaching incident in February. Then we got talking about deer generally and they mentioned that the population was down. I replied that it had been a hard winter. They said it wasn't the winter, the SW Ontario "herd" was already down last year. We also discussed the TTLT and its role in preserving land. We shook hands. They parted.

The property was so wet that I decided to park in the Upper Meadow and walk the rest of the way in. This turned out to be an excellent idea, as the lower meadow turned out to have that deadly combination of loose, melted surface soil and underlying frozen ground that gives the tires no purchase. I would have had trouble getting back out!

After taking the weather and putting out winter rations, I walked down to the creek, noting it was now only half a metre above normal levels, flowing briskly and still showing an algal bloom.

At first there were very few birds about, but after the trays and suet feeders had been replenished, they began to show up in numbers. A male Cardinal chased a female right past the trailer and two or three other males could be heard calling from the Blind Creek Forest. Before long, a black Eastern Gray Squirrel showed up at the Hickory tray, while a Red Squirrel showed up at the Black Maple tray. The Chipmunks have not yet emerged from their burrows, apparently.

It is a bit early for arthropods generally, with a lone micro-moth on a window of the trailer and a small wolf spider hunting in the meadow grass. Undoubtedly there were more about, in any case. Before leaving for the van to retrieve a bag of kibble, I thought I heard the distinctive whine of a very young raccoon from nearby. In the Upper Meadow, I was delighted to see a Great Blue Heron perch in a tree about 100 m away.

Back at the trailer I "girded my gumption", and set out on the 1.7 km walk on the Thames River Trail, passing several; fully charged vernal ponds, en route. But

there were no frogs calling, the air temperature being perhaps a bit low for that. The clear blue sky and glorious sun lit the woods with an early spring magic, making it a delight to walk the trail. The Blind Creek Forest is back to swampland, with some areas still overcharged, not to say mildly flooded. Up on the Hogsback, I spotted a raccoon watching me from a branch of the old Black Maple, a year-round “coon tree”.

I was pleased to see that trails and liner logs are still in good repair, with some ephemeral seep water making furrows in trails that ran downslope to any degree. Seeps and seepage ravines ran with tiny open streams. Near the river, as I walked through the Bluebell Woods section of the Riverside Forest, a flight of Wood Ducks (about 4-5) flew downriver, making their calls. Here and there, throughout the woods, small spears of grasses and sedges poked up through the dark soil.

On the return from my walk. I found a small flock of newly arrived Song Sparrows. Their plumage seemed bedraggled and they looked, well, just tired out. They perched in low bushes or stood quietly among the dried stems and grasses of the lower meadow, calling to each other occasionally in a low-pitched monotone burr, but none of them making their usual song. Return from migration?

I threw some kibble under the trailer in case the possum was still about and set out some more kibble by the old log for nursing raccoon mothers. Walking back to the van for my departure, I spotted two Turkey Vultures back on their aerial death-patrol.

The open areas of Newport Forest are now 95 % snow-free, while the wooded areas are about 50% snow free.

Birds: (15)

American Crow (WM); Black-capped Chickadee (Tr); Blue Jay (LM); Canada Goose (TR); Common Flicker (EW); Dark-eyed Junco (GF); Downy Woodpecker (Tr); Great Blue Heron (UM); Mourning Dove (GF); Northern Cardinal (GF); Red-bellied Woodpecker (GF); Song Sparrow (LM); Turkey Vulture (UM); White-breasted Nuthatch (Tr); Wood Duck (TR)

Phenology: Turkey Vultures back, Song Sparrows back, no frog chorus yet, chipmunks still underground

IMAGES:



Giant Black Willow (cross) stands guard over its swampy domain.



Now that snow has left the meadow, one can see clearly the Meadow Vole runs that formed the bottom half of extensive networks of foraging tunnels under the snow. It appears that the runs are not made simply by “nosing-up” the snow as I reported earlier this year, but the floors of the tunnels are pushed aside in some manner to form half-walls.

Below: A seep at the edge of the Upper Meadow runs with meltwater that feeds into a rather large gully on the Fleming Creek slope. Flowing water is visible at the bottom of the image.



(with apologies to local farmers for tilting the land momentarily)