Newport Forest Saturday September 10 2011 2:20 - 7:40 pm

Weather: prec. 7 mm; RH 69%; BP 101.7 kPa; calm; sun/cloud; T 30º C
Purpose: Property tour
Participants: Pat, Kee, Maria Gitta; Doug Mitchell

Our good friends Doug and Maria take a keen interest in natural environments and have recently purchased a lot that fronts on the Thames River in London. We hadn't expected that our guests would contribute to the species survey, but that's what happened. Score: Doug 1, Maria 1.

The mosquitoes were not bad as we walked the Thames River Trail through the forested areas. One feature of the property that always interests visitors is the time machine on Mussel Beach.

The "machine" as such is found in the variety of rocks on the beach, from the Upper/middle Devonian of approximately 300 million years ago to the (much) more recent glaciation that scoured the area. The shales with their brachiopod fossils tell us something about the Tippecanoe Sea that once filled the interior of our continent, including the bit of sea bottom that would one day be called Newport Forest. At that time, the North American plate was tilted on its side , with the equator running through the middle. As the sea receded, tropical forest spread into the area, leaving characteristic bacterial iron-rich soil nodules that native Americans today call "thunderstones".

A mere 250,000 years ago, the northern half of North America was glaciated while, in the southern half, a remarkable mammal fauna flourished, including three species of sabre-toothed cat, three elephantine species, Dire Wolves, giant sloths and the American Lion, among others. (Africa, move over!) The Thames is the oldest part of post-glacial Canada. It originated as the course of meltwater where the Erie and Huron lobes of the vast Laurentide ice sheets met. On the south (Newport) side of the river are "plucked" granite boulders from Quebec and on the south side are boulders from northern Ontario!

The book of geological history is tattered but has left a few pages on the beach.

We regained the trail by climbing straight up the bluffs to the bench. On the way, we encountered a Wood Frog. (See below.) We stopped at the Honey Tree to check that the wild bee colony there was still in action, then proceeded on down to the Riverside Forest, dominated by Box Elders, Hackberry, White Elm, Slippery

Elm, etc. Our keen-eyed companions spotted many wonders along the way, including a Virginian Tiger Moth on a plant by the trail and, a little further on, a lone Birch Sawfly larva with its showy rows of yellow and blue spots. I showed Doug and Maria the remarkably sharp ecotone between the riverine forest and the interior Beech-maple forest closer to the foot of the Hogsback.

Thanks to recent rains, fungi seemed to be popping up everywhere. As we followed the long, sloping trail up the northern flank of the Hogsback, Maria spotted an amazing fungus that I had known only from books before now. The bizarre Comb Tooth fungus resembles a miniature snow-covered bush. (See below.) We took a break at the top of the Hogsback, going off-trail to inspect the gigantic Chinkapin Oak on the southern crest, then back to the trail, descending into the Blind Creek Forest.

I forget who first spotted the Banded Tussock Moth caterpillar or who first noticed the Shaggy Mane mushrooms sprouting in the middle of the trail, but there they were -- new to our guests, but not to the list. Pat, still recovering from her medical crisis of March, had stayed in camp to rest, do some birdwatching, and put a wee picnic together. She called on the walkie-talkie: “Where are you guys now?” We were in the Blind Creek Forest, 15 minutes away.

It turned out that in our absence Pat had seen both an Eastern Gray Squirrel (black phase) and two Chipmunks. She had also found a wonderful striated bird’s nest fungus full of little spore-packed “eggs” and sprouting on a dead branch. Her eyes are just as sharp as Doug’s and Maria’s.

We sat down to a great picnic, listening to Doug tell of his research into the creek and ravine systems that used to permeate the area we now know as London. (Ontario) One can still trace these systems in back yards and empty lots, but they have mostly been covered by landfill. Doug recounted with a certain unholy glee how a large section of the downtown area is underlain by quicksand. This might explain the giant sinkhole that suddenly appeared two years ago at the intersection of Wellington & Dundas Streets.

After the picnic, we went down to the creek to show them the two rapids and the amazing growth along the bank. The Fleming Creek Forest is basically a no-go zone, owing to the incredibly dense vegetation crowding its non-shaded areas. If the Fleming Creek trail had not proven to be so expensive and time-consuming to maintain, it might still be there, enabling us to visit the stand of enormous beeches and maples at the east end of the property.

It was Pat who pointed to a log parked on the south bank of the creek: “Uh-oh!” It had been felled by a beaver. How long would it take them to discover the stand of delicious poplars planted in the Regeneration Zone? I trembled at the thought.

Maria had found a new species for us, but what of Doug? His chance came just as we were packing up to go. He pointed to a weird-looking black and white grasshopper sitting on a log. “What’s this?” It flew off as he pointed to it, landing at the base of the old Black Maple. Exercising extreme stealth tactics, I approached with the Nikon, taking a series of ever-closer images. It took off while I was still a good two feet away. The image was just clear enough to eliminate the lone lookalike. (See New Species, below.)

Birds:

We did not keep a bird list on this occasion, but were glad to see Nuthatches again. We were serenaded on our departure by the Newport Forest Canada Goose Bicycle-horn Orchestra.

New species:

Crackling Forest Grasshopper *Trimerotropis verruculata* Nk dm/KD Sp10/11

Comb Tooth Fungus *Heracium coralloides* HB/W mg/KD Sp10/11

Note on the grasshopper: This species has a (superficially close) lookalike called the Longhorn Bandwing, which also sports three white stripes on its dark femurs. However, the latter grasshopper prefers sandy habitat and is most frequently found along lakeshores. It also has a different boss-design on its pronotum. Both species belong to the subfamily Oedipodinae, the Band-winged grasshoppers.

Phenology: Sweet Joe-Pye Weed going to seed

IMAGES:

Nikon 995

This Comb Tooth fungus found by Maria resembles a coral fungus superficially (hence H. *coralloides*) but is actually a tooth fungus that fruits on dead deciduous wood. We feel encouraged now to search for its near relative *Heracium americanum*, a “weepimg” version of this species. Both species are edible. (with apologies for focus)

FinePix

This is not the first Wood Frog image we've included in the Bulletin, but it's hard to deny the charm of these little guys. Where could it have first hatched but in the Blind Creek vernal ponds? If so, it must have gone up the Hogsback at some point, then hunted its way along the ridge until it came out at the river, discovering there a smorgasbord of insects in the (high-energy) bluff environment. We have been seeing this species on every visit to the bluffs over the last two months. With this year's long-lived vernal ponds, the Wood Frogs did well. Their main breeding ponds seem to be the ones we call VP 7-10 at the west end of Blind Creek. The breeding calls sound a bit like ducks quacking, if I remember correctly.

Below: This amazing image of a storm just north of Lake Erie appeared recently on the Weather Network website. Taken from Port Stanley or Port Glasgow, both lightning and stars appear in the same picture!