

Newport Forest

Tuesday January 31 2012

2:15 - 5:15 pm

Weather: prec.22 mm; RH 65%; BP 101.5 kPa; sun/haze; SW 0-15 kmh; T 10° c

Purpose: tracking

Participants: Kee

Missed again! After hearing from an area resident yesterday that snow had blanketed everything, I felt tempted to go down to Newport Forest. I arrived to find the open areas about 20% snow-covered, the wooded areas about 50%. Apparently there hadn't been much snow on the ground to begin with and it was disappearing quickly thanks to the high air temperature. That would make about 4 days over the winter so far when there has been complete snow cover. Blame it on the "polar oscillation". Europe and Russia are getting a *lot* of snow this winter.

Although I could see some badly deteriorated squirrel and raccoon (?) tracks, I had almost given up on tracking when I came upon some boot prints on the path leading to the Hole. We had a trespasser. Human tracking is my favorite sport. I photographed and measured the boot prints, then compared them to my own prints for size. They corresponded to about a size-ten shoe. I lost the trail when I got to the Elbow, but picked it up again deep in the woods toward the river. This time there were two sets of identical prints and, as before, I was backtracking. Where were the tracks going TO the river? I doubled back in both directions, hoping to pick up the outgoing trail. Nothing. The interloper must have gone out across ground that had no cover, with plenty of that to choose from. There was an outside chance that two individuals were involved, but I still believe there was one who walked the same route twice. I spotted no deer tracks in my wanderings.

In the course of all this tracking, I came upon a rabbit kill, with fur and skin scattered about. No coyote tracks and no corpse meant a probable hawk or owl kill. I also found a patch of fur (no skin) along the Blind Creek trail far from the first scene. Raccoon? All the predator got was a mouthful of fur by the look of things. No signs of a struggle.

As usual over the last four months, there were few birds about. If I hadn't made a foray into the Blind Creek Forest to check the pond levels and look for Fairy Shrimp, I never would have spotted the lone Downy Woodpecker foraging among trees on the shoulder of the Hogsback. Usually I see them at the feeders long before I see them in the forest. Was there a message there? Have the lack of snow cover and this year's heavy seed production conspired to keep the birds from relying on the feeders?

Back at the trailer I decided to take Trail Cam 2 off-line for the time being, as the battery expenses were getting to me. A black-phase Eastern Gray Squirrel enjoyed the seeds in a feeder and I spotted another foraging in the woods across the creek. Earlier a single White-breasted Nuthatch had shown up at the tray briefly. That was *it*, not even a chickadee.

The Thames was up no more than a metre today, while Fleming creek was up no more than 30 cm.

My departure from the property resembled a NASA shuttle launch. Positioning the van at the extreme end of the “runway”, I launched with a steadily increasing speed, nearly spinning and slewing to a halt at the first hill, then gunning the engine on the downslope to get me up the big hill to the Upper Meadow. Here again, I had to pick up enough speed to make it through the mudhole and out to the gate. Tomorrow the neighbourhood boys will gather around my mud-splattered van in the drive. “Gosh, mister. You must have been going real fast!”

Birds: (6)

American Crow (FCF); Blue Jay (BCF); Downy Woodpecker (BCF/HB); Red-tailed Hawk* (Rd); White-breasted Nuthatch (Tr);

*I cheated a bit on this one, as the RTH crossed the road ahead of me just before I got to the property line. (I’m desperate for birds.)

New Species: (from last summer’s butterfly count on site, with thanks to George Preiksaitis and the West Elgin Nature Club)

Delaware Skipper	<i>Anatrytone logan</i>	LM WENC J103/11
Appalachian Brown	<i>Satyroides appalachia</i>	LM WENC J103/11

Phenology: At most five (isolated) days with complete snow cover to this point.

Readers Blog: (postings are lightly edited, mainly for length)

Richard Janik, owner of the (conservation) tract to the west of Newport Forest along the Fleming Line: “I’m making regular visits out to my acreage. I was there last Saturday for about 4 hours. Beautiful day. I covered pretty much the western side of the land (west of the gully and back to the Thames)...The deer population appears to be extremely dense. I have never seen more tracks...may have

something to do with the soybeans that were left on the front 15 acres which the deer appear to be feasting on....I didn't see any rabbit tracks, but did see many coyote tracks in groups of 3. Huge population of wild turkey ..They congregate around the white pines that we planted back in the 70s. Possible few pheasant tracks, unless they were just turkeys (they looked a bit different than the turkey prints). I'm assuming that the rabbit population has been decimated by the hawks and the coyotes... I don't hunt, but if the coyotes are a problem I might consider something. Better me than those I don't know taking liberties on the property.”

Mary Lofthouse is a landowner up on the Oak Ridges Moraine east of Toronto: “Yes, I agree it is disappointing to have so little snow. But I do have more than you, it seems....Still noticing coyote tracks, as well as rabbits and the odd grouse. But not much in the way of deer tracks this year, although my neighbours report they are frequent visitors to their bird feeder. Lots of young beech trees naturally regenerating through the property where maples used to be the only hardwoods that were filling in the gaps between the aging wild apples and hawthorns.”

Darren Jacobs, a Newport Forest Steward, alerts us to an unusual bird in the area: “I was talking with Yarmo, a guy with Carolinian Canada. He said a Mountain Bluebird is currently in the neighbourhood of the Shetland/Florence area. I guess it was reported recently to them, hanging around that area...I’m wishing for more snow so you can do some more tracking. There is snow here [Moraviantown] now, not a lot and not too good for tracking.”

Terry Keep, another Newport Forest Steward, comments on the “jetsam” at his property in Wardsville, near Newport Forest: “The jetsam I see is beer bottles/cans (drinking and driving is unfortunately alive and well), paper coffee cups and fast food packaging from drivers passing by on Long woods Road. Not sure why the Province canceled the most excellent "Give a hoot, don't pollute" campaign or the native american shedding a tear...powerful stuff!”

Mathis Natvik, a local ecologist and pioneer in reforestation methods, responds to the crow-and-cats video: “Thanks for this viral video. I don’t normally appreciate “viral forwards”, but this one is an exception. They say high intelligence and humour go hand in hand. I think the Corvid is showing this. I wonder if he is taunting the cats just for kicks!”

IMAGES:



FinePix

Fleming Creek Forest across Fleming Creek seems to have most of its snow next to the creek. Note greenish colour of water -- "in spate"
Hillside in foreground is snow-free owing to morning sun exposure.



FinePix

Fresh rabbit kill. Flesh can be seen adhering to the patch in the upper part of the frame. No coyote tracks were in evidence.



FinePix

Mouth of Fleming Creek -- in case you were wondering what it looks like. The upstream view of the river shows a higher-than-average level, with the river backing into the creek (lower right) before passing along behind nearby trees at the upper left. I hope to fish here soon for Gizzard Shad (and other fish) with Darren.