

Newport Forest

Sunday March 4 2012

2:15 - 5:40 pm

Weather: precip. 23 mm; RH 74%; BP 100.9 kPa; calm; ovcst; T -2° C

Purpose: monitoring an early spring

Participants: Pat, Kee

Driving down to the property today we came upon a great many cars parked off-road by the Battle Hill Memorial cenotaph, where the Middlesex Historical Reenactment Society was holding its annual memorial troop-muster and musket-firing ceremony. I stopped to take a few pictures.

Nearing Newport Forest, Pat spied a “kettle” of Broadwing Hawks and, when we rolled into camp, there seemed to be lots of birds around, with seven species in the first ten minutes. Pat decided to make herself a birding blind near the Hole, while I ventured into the Blind Creek Forest to check on the condition of the long chain of vernal ponds, otherwise known as Blind Creek. They appeared to be fully charged. We anticipate a robust chorus this spring.

Halfway into the forest, I sighted a medium-sized hawk flying through the trees and settling on a branch half way up the slope of the Hogsback. I put the binos on it, but could only make out a streaked breast, dark-looking head and a rather peculiar tail consisting entirely of white feathers, with a lone black feather interspersed! I realize this is hardly a useful description, but someone may have a suggestion or two. I can only remember thinking, as I watched it fly in, “Aha, a Broadwing!” But Broadwings don’t have streaked breasts. Immature?

Instead of proceeding along the main trail, as usual, I thought to go exploring down the far end of the vernal pond area, finding there an end to the ponds altogether, replaced by three little streams running along narrow channels and flowing west, toward the river. I cut across the swampy land, gaining higher ground, then followed the south side of Blind Creek Forest in the opposite direction. I passed a beautiful little valley as I went, thinking it might be the climax of the ravine that drains the Hurdle pond up by the road.

Following a deer trail up a gradual, sparsely wooded slope, I began to feel a bit lost as I wandered through unfamiliar landscape. Once I passed under the power lines however, I realized I would probably come out of the woods into Power Line Meadow -- which I did, but not before flushing an American Robin from the bordering scrub. About this time, Pat was also hearing one.

In the meadow, the heavy overcast began to break up and sunlight peeped through here and there, producing a cheerier scene. Comparing notes in camp, I wrote down Pat's observations, including the Dark-eyed Junco, and Mourning Dove.

We were about to take a coffee break in the trailer, when Steve & Karen Logan walked into camp. They had come to pick up two bird boxes that we had brought down for them. But they stayed for coffee and we had an even cheerier time as the trailer filled with sunlight and the talk turned to the stupidity of the government as it tinkers with things that don't need fixing.

All this time, however, the temperature was dropping rapidly under a breeze from the north. There had been warnings today of an exceptionally cold night ahead. When we finally decided to pack up and leave, Steve and I went out to check the temperature, where Steve noticed that the large ant mound near the weather station had an entrance on one side, with a scattering of empty snail shells all around it. At first I thought Mole or Shrew, but Steve suggested snakes. It turns out that a few local species of snakes hibernate somewhat preferentially in these mounds -- and all eat snails!. But who says *anyone* is there at the moment?

We made it out to the road without incident, thanks to the steadily freezing surface mud. Steve & Karen got into their van and we all waved goodbye. On the way through Wardsville, Pat spied an American Robin on a lawn and later, as we emerged into open country, she saw a Red-winged Blackbird in a roadside slough. "Spring is here," she sighed, somewhat prematurely.

Birds: (11)

American Crow (EW); American Robin (GF/E); Black-capped Chickadee (Tr); Blue Jay (LM); Canada Goose (TR); Dark-eyed Junco (GF); Downy Woodpecker (GF); Mourning Dove (GF); Northern Flicker (BCF); Red-bellied Woodpecker (GF); White-breasted Nuthatch (Tr)

Phenology: property snow free, vernal ponds full; ground frozen below 4-5 cm

Long range forecast: We've had a hunch for the last several weeks that 2012 will be a dry year. But the long range (3 month) weather outlook for the Great Lakes area, as predicted by the US National Weather Service, is for wetter (and warmer) weather than normal.

IMAGES:



FinePix

We stand on gaurd for thee! Troop of British soldiers in the uniform of the Scots Guard stands at attention by the Battle Hill Cenotaph to mark the 199th anniversary of the Battle of the Longwoods. Officer on the left sports a bearskin busby and also gets to wear smart-looking white pants. Guy on the right may be a militiaman. An equal-sized troop stands behind the cenotaph.

Battle Hill marks a relatively minor skirmish between a small American raiding force and a detachment of British regulars from the garrison in London. Several British troops died while trying to storm the American breastworks at the top of a ravine. They didn't make it to the top because those nasty Americans poured water down the slope in the dead of night. By morning it had frozen, turning the charge into a turkey-shoot.



FinePix

Just one of two dozen vernal ponds (of various sizes) awaits the arrival of seven or eight species of amphibian in the coming weeks. Old willow on the right has a large internal cavity for small hermits.



FinePix

Does this large mound in the Lower Meadow have a new occupant or two? The litter of shells in and around the “vestibule” indicates a predator of snails, perhaps. One sometimes finds piles of snails by the burrows of moles and shrews, but the entrance is not characteristic. Other possible tenants include snakes, particularly the Brown Snake, Smooth Green Snake, and Northern Red-bellied Snake, all of which are known to take shelter in ant mounds over the cold months. (The last two would be new.) Or is this domicile now abandoned? And why the large opening? Was there a raccoon raid at some point?

You want mysteries, we got mysteries.