

Newport Forest

Friday April 13 2012

3:20 - 8:40 pm

Weather: Prec. 2 mm; RH 41%; BP 102.6 kPa; sn/hz; SSW 0 - 10 kmh; T 19° C

Purpose: Maintenance & birdwatching

Participants: Pat, Kee, Darren

The weather was perfect, but we arrived late. While Pat set up camp, I drove up to the “mudhole”, where a major seep crosses the track. In past years we used to fill in the huge ruts with gravel, but this year we thought to install a drain beneath the track. I prepared the site with a shovel before the truck arrived with two yards of B-gravel in it. The dump went well, the truck departed and I eagerly returned to camp to begin our already delayed birdwatch and species hunt.

Pat showed me several bullet galls she had found on the twigs & branches of a young Bur Oak that we planted four years ago. There seemed to be plenty of birds around and our daylist grew rapidly at first, with as many species heard as seen. Blue Jays were the most frequently seen bird, their occasional screams punctuated by crescendos of shrieks from a Northern Flicker in the Blind Creek Forest.

We walked to the river. I stopped to change the SD cards on Trail Cams #1 and #2. Pat rested on the bench where the circuit rejoins itself along Edgar’s Trail, so I motored on to the river, noting that Mussel Beach was still not fully emerged. I continued on over the bluffs and down into the riverine part of the Riverside Forest. I stopped to admire a giant Hackberry with a girth that exceeds a metre.

In Bluebell Woods the many plants that border the trail there are coming up nicely, with the Virginia Bluebells now fully emerged and flowering. Passing the trail to the Sand Bar, I took it on a whim. The Sand Bar seems to enlarge every year. It is perhaps the most rapidly changing bit of topography on the property these days, matched only by the slow erosion of Mussel Beach and the Fleming Creek Terrace. I came across the bones of a raccoon, possibly only a year since they walked the forest. I have been dealing routinely with population numbers as part of my (academic) biological research over the last 20 years. The abstract quality of birth/death processes do not hint at the underlying realities, as here.

A black-phase Eastern Gray Squirrel dashed across the forest floor ahead of me as I returned to the main trail and headed for the Hogsback. It was the first of three squirrels I would see on this walk. Up on the Hogsback, I took a rest on the bench there at the 1000 metre stake. I sometimes look around me and try to grasp the dynamism of the place as a whole. Think of it all at once. Impossible!

My contemplative mood was shattered by the walkie-talkie. It was Pat. "Darren is here!" I gathered my bag & drink and double-timed down the Hogsback and through the Blind Creek Forest. On the way I listened for a frog chorus. Nothing once again. Just before joining up with Darren at Edgar's Elbow, I spotted the diminutive tracks of a fawn accompanying its mother along the trail.

Darren had just returned from a trip to Kettle point up on Lake Huron, where he had collected some tree samples, working to sharpen his tree identification skills. He mentioned that he had just been appointed as Natural Resources Technician by the Moraviantown Band Council. As we walked back to camp, we heard the "gronk" of a Great Blue Heron and later the rattle of Belted Kingfisher.

Over a modest trailer supper in the Nook, Darren told of fishing in the Thames last Saturday with a friend from Detroit. They took 17 Pickerel, Darren keeping only five to eat later. His friend took the rest home with him.

As the sun set, we began to pack up, when Darren heard buzzing from across the Lower Meadow. "Must be a woodcock over there." I couldn't hear anything. "Try the wolf ears." Darren, handed me a pair of amplifying headphones given to me by a friend who used to be an intelligence officer. The buzzing had stopped now, but I distinctly heard several Spring Peepers calling from Blind Creek. I turned off the ears and removed them. I could hear no spring peepers, but Pat could. My hearing must be going.

Driving out first, Darren flushed an American Woodcock by the track in the Upper Meadow. Then another whirred across our windshield. These must have been the large ground birds I had been flushing in recent visits. Let's see. That would make a total of at least three woodcocks in the Newport meadows.

New Species:

Oak Rough Bulletgall Wasp *Dischalcaspis quercusmamma* LM/ER pd/KD

This is a small gall-making wasp in the Cynipid family.

Birds: (21)

American Crow (EW); American Robin (RSF); American Woodcock (UM); Belted Kingfisher (TR/S); Black-capped Chickadee (Tr); Blue Jay (LM); Brown-headed Cowbird (Tr); Canada Goose (TR); Common Grackle (LM); Dark-eyed

Junco (GF); Eastern Towhee (BCF); Field Sparrow (LM); Great Blue Heron (TR); Mourning Dove (GF); Northern Cardinal (BCF); Northern Flicker (BCF); Red-bellied Woodpecker (GF); Song Sparrow (LM); Turkey Vulture (UM); White-breasted Nuthatch (Tr); Wild Turkey (RSF/W)

Phenology: Most trees breaking bud, approximately 10-20 % leafing out. In bloom: Gooseberries, Trilliums opening, Virginia Bluebells at peak; first Red Admiral, Spring Peepers calling, fawns out with mothers.

Trail Cam Record: Month|date (number)

- #1: Virginia Deer Ap10 (3) (a pair of deer wandering in the vicinity)
- #2: Eastern Gray Squirrel Ap13 (1) Possum* Ap10 (1)
Raccoon Ap09 (2) Ap11 (2) Ap12 (1)
Wild Turkey Ap12 (1)
- #3: Eastern Gray Squirrel Ap08 (3) Ap09 (2) Ap10 (2) Ap11 (2) Ap12 (2)
Raccoon Ap08 (5) Ap11 (1)

*This is our first trail cam “capture” of a possum.

Readers Write:

(My brother Chris, a well-known poet and author, is a keen naturalist. Here he comments on the phenology of Nighthawks.)

“During the 1970's, while I was still living in London, urban nighthawks arrived on average the night of May 19. In the 1980's, (I moved to Toronto in 1980) this time slid forward to May 20, and during the 1990's the urban nighthawk arrival slid forward again to the 24th. For the most recent decade, the 2000,s it was May 30th. These recent figures probably reflect the increasing scarcity of nighthawks rather than climate change. However, a parallel delay took place in my leafing-out phenology. The average leaf opening date (of mature Norway maples) during the decades of the 1970's and 1980's was April 23, though by the 1990's and 2000's it had shifted to April 29, a delay of 6 days.”

IMAGES:



FinePix

Virginia Bluebells are now nearing their peak bloom. Flowers that came out earlier tend to be darker and somewhat stunted, thanks to the recent cold spell.



FinePix

Alas, poor Yorick. I *may* have known him well, but probably didn't. When a vertebrate animal like this Raccoon dies, its flesh rots away, even as scores of other animals scavenge it: Turkey Vultures, Crows, Carrion-, Sexton-, and Trox Beetles, Flesh Flies and Bluebottles, right down to keratin-digesting fungi, leaving only the bones -- which mice will eventually nibble:for the sake of their salt content.

This Raccoon met its end near the Sand Bar, not far from the river.

Below: Giant Hackberry in the Riverside Forest is a member in good standing of the One Metre Club, an exclusive group of Newport giants, all with diameters exceeding one metre. Members include not only Hackberries, but Willows, Sycamores, Cottonwoods, and a Blue Ash.



FinePix



WILDVIEW

04-10-2012 23:54:43



Trail Cam #2

A Possum can be seen prowling off-trail in the background. At first I thought it was a feral cat, but then noticed that the legs seemed too short and the face too long. Possum fur is often scruffy and marked with dirty-looking discolorations.

We get about one feral (barn-) cat every 2-3 years, following the trail in one direction or the other.