

**Date and time:** Thursday December 5 2013 2:05 - 4:35 pm

**Weather:** Pr 5 mm; RH 68%; BP 101.0 kPa; ovcst; NW 5 - 20 kmh; T 8° C

**Activity:** maintenance and human ecology

On our way home from the property today, we dropped by Eva Newport's place for some tea and to catch up on area news. Eva, as shown in an early image below in front of her prize sunflowers, is the matriarch of the Newport Clan. Eva was the original landowner of Newport Forest. Our relationship with Eva and other area residents are part of a network that sustains work at the site, an indispensable layer that we call "human ecology". More about our visit with Eva later.



Driving to the property today, we were about 200 m from the gate, when Pat spotted a Northern Shrike in a Hawthorn close to the road. We see this bird only rarely and took it as a good omen -- for something.

Pat contented herself with passive birding today, while I went to install a refurbished trail cam that had been posted by The Hole (entrance to the Blind Creek Forest). The land being bare of green vegetation, certain other features now stood out in the landscape, including thick vines of Riverbank Grape hanging from trees all about me. (See IMAGES below.)

When I returned from this bit of maintenance, I found that Steve Logan, friend and frequent assistant on the property, had arrived to deliver some work receipts. He stayed to enjoy a sit-down in the trailer. We asked him about recent demonstrations in Toronto against changes to the Education Practices Act and what it meant to natives. Apparently native children would now have to receive education in basic literacy off-reserve, instead of learning about their native culture and language at home. Steve also described changes in ownership of native land. In some reserves at least, it would now be possible to sell your house to an outsider for cash and, simultaneously to give up certain privileges. "Sell your land and trash your rights," as Steve put it.

After Steve left, sunset was not far off. I walked to the river, noting that it was still high, while Pat added more names to the bird list. Back in camp, I heard a familiar sound from the Gallery Forest. "Did I just hear a Robin?" Pat said probably not, the robins had all left. Then it was her turn: "Oh no. I just heard one calling!" Then more -- perhaps five of the birds. "Does that mean we'll have a mild winter?" She shrugged. It was time to leave. We stopped at the Hurdle house just across the road to deliver a TTLT advisory about repairs planned for the Newport Forest fence to Nina, a member of the Stewards Committee. Edgar sat watching a curling match on TV. (Curling is Edgar's favorite sport.) It was Nina, by the way, who suggested to Eva Newport that she sell the property to a conservation-minded buyer. We bought the property in 2000, then donated it to the Thames Talbot Land Trust in 2007.

Speaking of Eva, we were long overdue for a neighbourly visit, especially as she had recently turned 90. We brought her a too-tall lemon cake and she retaliated with a fruit cake. Over cookies and tea, Eva told of her contribution of two pies to the church bake sale. We knew that she was under some pressure to leave her lonely farm house for a seniors home, but she has so far refused. "The secret is simple," she said. "You stay healthy just as long as you keep on going." She loves to mow the extensive lawn around the farmhouse in her ride em mower. It was here that she and her husband raised a family of five children. Husband "Duke" Newport owned an oil-drilling business and two of the boys farmed Newport properties -- one of them destined to become Newport Forest. Someone asked her what she would do if she ever moved to the suggested residence. "Why, I'd run my Lawn-boy up and down the corridor!"

### **Birds: (9)**

American Crow (HBF); American Robin (GF); Black-capped Chickadee (Tr);

Common Grackle (BCF); Dark-eyed Junco (Tr); Downy Woodpecker (GF); European Starling (UM); Loggerhead Shrike (Rd); White-breasted Nuthatch (Tr)

**Notes:**

1. Our best bird was not exactly on the property today, but just down the road. We count it because of the relative rarity of the Northern Shrike.
2. We have noted, over the last 2-3 months, a distinct decline in the number of Redbellied Woodpecker sightings. For more than a decade up to three birds have been appearing at the trailer feeder on almost every visit, year-round. For several months we have been seeing perhaps one bird every three visits, on average.

**Phenology:**

Property soft from recent thaw; river over Mussel Beach; American Robins still around

**Readers Write:**

Paul Handford, a retired UWO biologist who now makes his home in Kamloops British Columbia, sends this account of a near-encounter with a Cougar. (See last image below.) “Beckett” is the name of his dog.

“[I had] an exciting walk this morning. Half way round our usual circuit at the open country location, Mr. B. was totally psyched by a sudden and persistent chorusing of coyotes. We couldn't see them, but they weren't far away, and there were at least 3, maybe 4 of them yipping, screaming and howling. Beckett was charging up and down, leaping up to see better, and stotting in his excitement. I thought it best to lead him away rather than risk his seeing them and taking off after ... a favourite trick of coyotes, apparently, is to lure dogs away "to play".

“Shortly thereafter, Beckett found a dismembered mule deer shank, still leaking its bodily fluids; while he was focused on that, I cast about and quickly crossed tracks with a cougar: unmistakable big cat-pads. [assesses size] I've seen cougar tracks up in the bush closer to home last spring, but this is really pretty open country. No sign of the kill-site, so I'm guessing the shank had been dragged away to its present location. There were lots of dog tracks about, but I'd been seeing loads of neat little dog tracks all along on our walk that were probably coyotes ...”

**IMAGES:**



“Monkey vines”, as some native friends humorously call them, are large specimens of Riverbank Grape (*Vitus riparius*) that have matured along with the trees that supported them when both were much younger. Here they festoon the shores and “bed” of Blind Creek. Some of the vines in the Riverside Forest are larger, up to 8 cm diameter, and easily support any man (or monkey) who wishes a swing in the woods.

Besides the several species of herbaceous vine at Newport Forest, the woody ones include Virginia Creeper, Bittersweet, Clematis, Moonseed, Honeysuckle spp and of course, Climbing Poison Ivy (*Rhus radicans negundo*) Unlike the grape vine, it clings tightly to the bark of its tree with a myriad of “roots”, and reaches diameters up to 3 cm.



Cougar track photographed by reader Paul Handford near Kamloops BC. This print shows a hind paw, with its toe and heel pads. The front paws are rather larger than the hind paws, presumably to catch and hold prey. Cougars have recently been admitted by the MNR to exist in Ontario, although one school of thought still holds out for released/escaped pets. The only problem with that opinion is that pet cougars are normally declawed, making a life of hunting somewhat questionable.

Tracks of a cat are readily distinguished from those of a dog by the absence of an 'X' in the print. In other words, in the print of a dog paw, one can draw an X that contains the heel pad in the lower wedge, the two central toe pads in the upper wedge, and a toe pad in each of the flanking wedges -- without touching any of the pads. Also the claws of a dog normally print while the claws of a cat normally don't.

For those with Google Earth, the incident took place at 50.625791°N; 120.112097°W in a natural area called Blackell Trails.