

Date and time: Saturday August 2 2014 12:25 - 6:00 pm

Weather: Pr 0 mm; RH 72%; BP 102.0 kPa; calm; overcast; T 24° C

Activity: Hosting visiting Entomologist Dan Bickel

Dan drove up to Newport Forest following a visit to his home town Detroit (of which more later). A larger itinerary had brought him from his post at the Australian National Museum for one of his annual visits to the US. The weather was cloudy when he arrived, but warm. We made two forays during his visit, one to the river and one to the creek. The rest of the time we sat in the Nook and discussed species identification problems, ATBI, and general issues of site monitoring.



Bickel

stands

on the bank of Fleming Creek: “I wouldn’t mind coming here for a couple of days. This creek looks clean and probably very rich in species.” He reels off the orders: “Trichoptera, Plecoptera, Diptera, Ephemeroptera . . .”

Our walk to the river brought us to the bluffs and a bench high above the sullen currents. As an American, he was delighted when a Bald Eagle winged grandly by, heading upstream. He reminded me that Benjamin Franklin had railed against the

bird as a national bird. After all, it eats carrion. Franklin preferred the Wild Turkey for the role.

We scrambled around on the bluffs, noting the Spreading Dogbane, Horsetails and other plants growing sparsely on bare, rock-studded soil, all of it on a slow march to the river below. And here, wedged into an erosional overhang was a large mussel valve (clam shell). Dan wondered how it could ever have come to that position. Raccoons? It turned out to be a species with a descriptive common name: “White Heelsplitter.” We headed back to camp to stay on schedule. On the way we spotted a Wolf Spider carrying a bundle of eggs beneath its abdomen. Then later an Agele-nid (Funnel Spider) lurking in its silken tunnel. And of course, insect after insect along the way: Crane Flies, Robber Flies, Longhorn Beetles, and strange caterpillars, among other things.

Next venue: Fleming Creek was low enough to wade across for a quick visit to the Fleming Creek Forest. Once open pasture, this wooded area is currently succeeding from Hawthorn forest into Boxelder/Maple/Ash and the canopy is now reaching about 6 m in height. We paused in a small clearing surrounded by Giant Ragweed, Jewelweed and other pioneers. “I’ve never seen this place looking so lush”, remarked Dan, echoing the same remark made earlier about southern Ontario generally, as seen during his drive. A damselfly clinging to a stem nearby caught our attention. It was entirely a pale pink. Later I would ID it as the Dancer *Argia fumipennis*. But was it the (new) subspecies, *A. fumipennis violacea*?

On the way back we stopped on the shore while Dan surveyed the visible 200 m stretch of creek, waxing eloquent about its relatively pristine nature. Back in the Nook we settled into a discussion of ATBI, addressing questions like the conflict between ATBI and monitoring. Where does one stop and the other begin? What change in methodology is required? More generally, I described recent attempts to build an ATBI umbrella organization in the US. Should we have one in Canada? We discussed everything from ID standards to the inclusion of citizen science.

Dan also described his ongoing documentation of vegetational and wildlife changes in Detroit. Whole neighbourhoods of abandoned houses are gradually reverting into a kind of dissected urban forest, with increasing Raccoon and Possum populations. Abandoned factories can now be purchased for the price of a small home, attracting artist cooperatives and other enterprises. Dan has taken photographs and notes, promising to send a report to the Newport Forest Bulletin in due course.

We had barely warmed to the latter topic when thunder began to rumble and the first drops of rain began to fall. We had no time to close camp before being caught in a soaking deluge. “It’s all part of the ecology,” remarked Dan brightly as we got in our respective vehicles to head out for our respective homes.

Birds: (14)

American Robin (LM); Bald Eagle (TR); Black-capped Chickadee (LM); Blue Jay (GF); Common Flicker (GF); Common Grackle (LM); Common Yellowthroat (LM); Eastern Towhee (UM); Field Sparrow (UM); Great Blue Heron (TR); Red-bellied Woodpecker (GF); Rose-breasted Grosbeak (GF); Song Sparrow (LM/Nk); Spotted Sandpiper (FC)

New Species:

Litter Polyzoniid	<i>Petaserpes cryptocephalus</i>	FCB oaKD JI31/14
‘Whitehead Fungus Weevil’	<i>Euparius marmoreus</i>	LM/GF KD JI11/14
‘Rosy-backed Crane Fly’	<i>Nephrotoma eucera</i>	BCF db/KD Au02/14

Phenology: Mosquitoes no longer plentiful, even in humid forested areas.

Extending the ID Process: One way to enhance the participation of ordinary (non-biologist) people in what is known broadly as “citizen science” is to build a procedural bridge between the work of professionals and attempts by amateurs to identify things. Such a bridge would be based on the fact that some species are quite distinctive and relatively easy to identify, even for amateurs. At the same time, one needs a working definition of “amateur” as someone who is willing and able to learn the terminology that applies to the characters of a given group. For example, to describe a mushroom, one should know the terms *gills*, *stalk*, *cap*, *mycelia*, *attached*, *close*, *distant*, *decurrant*, *spores*, *deposit*, and so on.

Lookalikes bedevil the ID process for amateurs. But if each species came with a distinctiveness rating, one would be encouraged by a number like $dr = 0$ (meaning no lookalikes), very cautious when $dr = 1$ (one lookalike), and giving only a genus or family (or nothing) when $dr = 2$ (two or more lookalikes). As well as many species looking like one, it can also happen that one looks like many. The variability rating vr could be 0 when there is little or no variation, 1 when a species is moderately variable, and two when highly variable. Definitions of such terms would have to be made to the satisfaction of those assigning the numbers, of course. This is simply a work in progress.

IMAGES:



Io Moth larva

Image: Kee Dewdney

The “strange caterpillars” mentioned in the text above turned out to belong to the Io Moth, clinging here to stems of a young Redbud tree. The larva is decorated by two rows of bushy green spines that are toxic to the touch. We counted some ten of the caterpillars on the Redbud. We rarely see these moths at Newport Forest and this was our first sight of their larvae.



image credit: Sweet Juniper @

<http://www.sweet-juniper.com/2009/07/feral-houses.html>

Overgrown houses and reforesting back yards mark the transition of some neighbourhoods into a new kind of “urban forest”. It is estimated that approximately 15,000 former homes have now entered this state, some having been burned down by squatters or vagrant partygoers. Watch for Bickel’s report in a week or two.

Is this image prophetic in some sense for other North American cities?

One of many websites describing abandoned homes and businesses in Detroit:
<http://www.theseekerbooks.com/detroit/neighborhoods.html>