

Date and time: Wednesday March 29 2017 2:30 - 5:00 pm

Weather: Pr 21mm; RH 52%; BP 102.5 kPa; sun/cloud; calm; T 14°C

Contents: Searching the vernal ponds while birding.

Approaching the property gate along Fleming Line, I happened to glance over at the Upper Meadow, noting that several hummocks had already detached themselves from the upland, already beginning their intermittent migration down the bluffs to the creek. This is a typical form of erosion from uplands next to watercourses. Soon we must begin to move the track leftward to avoid accidents!



Driving in today was just as bad as our last visit to the site, with rather soggy ground from the continuing rains (another 21 mm). As a precaution (I was unaccompanied on this visit) I decided to park on a rise in the Upper Meadow rather than risk getting stuck in the bottomlands.

Walking in I felt heartened to hear more birds calling than has recently been the case. A Song Sparrow greeted me from a field nearby, then a Northern Cardinal from the forest beyond. By the time I got to the trailer, I had heard American Crows calling and Canada Geese from the river. Having put up some birdseed to get a feeder count, I sat in the Nook for a while to enjoy the antics of a lone Eastern Chipmunk foraging for spilled seeds. But all play and no work makes Jack a bit of a jerk. So off I went to explore the vernal ponds, armed with aquatic nets, sample jar and water pail, serenaded by an American Robin deep in the woods on my way.

I stopped at Vernal Pond A, surprised that it was now half full. Previously it had been nearly empty. But before I could visit the pond my attention was arrested by the ghastly sight of yet another large White Ash, about 100' in height, broken at a height of about 15', and with the top leaning on another treetop near the Hole. I did a quick inspection of this latest tree death, noting the heavy growth of *Tramxetes* fungus down the trunk and two D-shaped holes of the Emerald Ash Borer. I have learned to ignore the screams of dismay when people hear of the notorious EAB in their neighbourhood. As one ecologist once pointed out to me, this borer tends to favour trees weakened by drought or some pathogen. They're not such a bother for healthy trees. I therefore blame the exceptionally dry year, the second of two in a row, for the drying stress which invited this attack.

Back to Vernal Pond A, I swept the bottom with a wide-mouthed aquarium net, stirring the bottom, then sweeping up the debris cloud. On my third sweep, I netted a pretty little snail, which I thought was a species of *Physa* (already logged). Not so. Back home I realized we had a new species of aquatic snail. (See New Species below.) Vernal Pond B turned up very little of anything, a dead and floating wireworm (beetle larva) being the main find. I then walked the better part of the Blind Creek Trail to get to the ponds I had seen deep in the forest during our previous visit. On my way, I heard some peculiar sounds from the swamp area just to the south of the trail. Was it the Western Chorus Frog? No. It was ducks all talking to each other with a kind of fluting squeal. Wood Ducks? (A later check with the Cornell bird site confirmed this.) In any event the vernal ponds deeper in the woods turned out to be devoid of visible life. Secretly I had hoped to snag some Fairy Shrimp, an endemic species in the Blind Creek Forest but not appearing every spring. Nada.

Returning to the main trail, I retrieved a specimen of fungi that I sent an image of last week to our fungus consultant, Prof Greg Thorn. Then I thought I heard a Northern Flicker, but couldn't be sure. Back in camp I heard it again, much closer. The birds were piling up in unprecedented fashion. During another sit in the Nook I spotted a Black-capped Chickadee poking along a branch in the Gallery Forest. But no birds came to the feeder. From deeper in that wood a Red-bellied Woodpecker burred. Meanwhile, the sky had clouded over, the temperature had begun to fall from a comfortable 14°C to about 10°C and a harsh wind began to blow. I felt it was time to leave, but had promised Pat to clean up the Weasel scat that decorated the back rest of the breakfast nook in the trailer. Quite a mess!

Having closed up camp, I now had to walk back to the Upper Meadow where the van was parked. Along the way, I was startled by an explosion of wings and a large

dark bird flashing past my face, too sudden for me to catch a profile. But it flew like a Woodcock. Near the top of the rise, I was entertained by a “paddle” of ducks, Wood Ducks taking off from the Blind Creek Swamp area. About eight. I started the van, got up some speed going down the rise, then slewed along, all the way to the gate and that ever-so-welcome road. Was that the end of my visit? Not quite. Our first Turkey Vulture of the year wheeled majestically above the Upper Meadow, then over my head. “I’m not dead yet”, as Pat would say.

We have noted with gratitude that Donald Craig visited the site last weekend to cut up the deadfall blocking the trail.

Birds: (12)

American Crow (EW); American Robin (BCF); American Woodcock? (UM); Black-capped Chickadee (GF); Canada Goose (TR); Common Flicker (GF); Northern Cardinal (BCF); Red-bellied Woodpecker (BCF); Song Sparrow (LM); Turkey Vulture (UM); Wild Turkey (BCF); Wood Duck (BCF).

Phenology: First Turkey Vulture today, first Wood Frog on March 24 (with thanks to Donald Craig).

New Species:

Polished Tadpole Snail *Aplexa hypnorum* VP-A KD Mr27/17

Note: The first set of images below show the snail recorded here. Every now and then, when I have a photogenic specimen, I may include a discussion of the basis of the identification, along with the image.

TTLT Annual Wildflower Walk:

The Annual Spring Wildflower Walk, led by Muriel Andreae, will be held at Newport Forest on Sunday, May 14 from 1:30 to 3:30 pm. The Virginia Bluebells are expected to be at their peak. We know it’s Mother’s Day, so bring your mom! Light refreshments will be provided. Please park inside the gate, conditions permitting. To RSVP please email Pat Dewdney. <dewdney@sympatico.ca>



IMAGES:



Aplexa hypnorum, the Polished Tadpole Snail, is identified here on the basis of a) sinistral architecture b) length $13 \text{ mm} \leq 17 \text{ mm}$, c) flattened whorls, d) a slender spire, e) amber-coloured nuclear (smallest) whorl, and f) whitish suture bands, as well as other features. *Aplexa* is easily mistaken for a species of *Physa* owing to its sinistral* shell. Most freshwater snails have dextral architecture. The ornamentation on the back of the shell (left image) appears to be a remnant of the dark coloration of the living specimen, the shell having bleached a bit.

* If you come upon a snail you can tell the shell type by holding it up in one hand with the spire (point) under a forefinger and the base upon your thumb. Now rotate the shell, if necessary, until the operculum (opening) faces you. If it's on the right side of the shell the architecture is dextral (from the Latin "dexter" for right). If it's on the left side, as above, the architecture is sinistral (from the Latin "sinister" for left).



A Wild Turkey passes Cam #2 at The Elbow on the morning of today's visit, so we get to put it on today's bird list.



On March 25 a dead adult cougar was found lying in a snowbank beside Boreal Drive, a road northwest of Thunder Bay, Ontario. Two passersby spotted the cat. The corpse was taken to the Thunder Bat MNR for an examination; the cat had starved to death, possibly due to the heavy snowpack. Joe Belanger of the London Free Press and I have long maintained that cougars are present in the Province.