THE CARDINAL

No. 232 **August 2013**

Nature London

The McIlwraith Field Naturalists of London Inc.

"To Preserve and Enjoy Nature"

INSIDE THIS ISSUE: REGULAR ITEMS

FEATURE ARTICLES AND MORE

AN AMAZING ANNIVERSARY FOR NATURE LONDON

The beginnings of our club are firmly rooted in 1864 when the London branch of the Entomological Society was founded. Over the decades the seedling grew, thrived in many different forms, and eventually blossomed into Nature London. All members can be extremely proud that in 2014 we will celebrate the **150th anniversary** of the club. That is a pretty impressive feat, one that would be rivalled by few clubs in Ontario.

We certainly feel that this anniversary is worthy of celebration. To this end, we have formed an Anniversary Committee that has already come up with some exciting ideas to commemorate the occasion (see page 31). We want to honour the anniversary in a variety of ways, but in order to do that, we need lots of volunteer help with the various events we are planning. There will be jobs for everyone. Here are a few ways you can be involved: help organize our kickoff anniversary celebration at the January regular meeting, help with publicity, help set up library displays, lead field trips, and so much more. Many tasks are not very time-consuming and the workload is lighter if we have lots of participants.

We look forward to hearing from members who want to help celebrate Nature London's 150th. With your help we can party all through 2014!

Please contact Sue Read (psread@xplornet.com) or Roslyn Moorhead (roslynmoorhead@hotmail.com) if you want to join in the fun!

Sue Read

Eli Davis (left) and John Dearness of the McIlwraith Ornithological Club at the St Thomas waterworks in 1944. (Photo by Keith Reynolds, Nature London archives.)

COVER: Will Lyons took this photo – actually a frame cap-ture from his camcorder – of female (left) and male Spiny Softshell turtles basking beside the Thames River. As well as "turtling" for plea-sure, Will has been involved for some years with Upper Thames River Conservation Authority efforts to protect and increase nesting success of this threatened (provincially and nationally) species, efforts that are bearing fruit – or turtles.

NEWS AND NOTES

ONTARIO REPTILE AND AMPHIBIAN ATLAS STILL NEEDS YOUR OBSERVATIONS

Ontario Nature's Reptile and Amphibian Atlas program is interested in all of your sightings: past or current, common species or species at risk. Observations can be submitted on-line, or on printable forms that can be mailed in. For each observation, you will be asked for contact information, the species and how you identified it (with a photo whenever possible), site description, and date. You can register with the atlas, receiving an atlas ID number and regular communications.

To learn more, visit www.ontarionature.org/protect/species/herpetofaunal_atlas.php or write to James Paterson, the atlas coordinator, at jamesp@ontarionature.org.

You can also submit turtle and frog observations via Ontario Turtle Tally and FrogWatch Ontario (see www.torontozoo.com/AdoptAPond). These data are shared among programs, so you can choose your favourite.

ONTARIO BUTTERFLY ATLAS ONLINE

Last year, eButterfly gave butterfly watchers a new way to keep track of their own records and see other Canadian and American records. For more information, visit www.ebutterfly.ca.

Also in the past year, the Toronto Entomologists' Association (TEA) launched the Ontario Butterfly Atlas Online at www.ontarioinsects.org/atlas_online.htm. Users can submit data, generate maps for each of Ontario's 168 butterfly species, and display records by location and season. The atlas has nearly 200,000 records in it. Records submitted to eButterfly are incorporated into the atlas.

Mourning Cloak photographed by Rob Rodger.

SPECIAL 150TH ANNIVERSARY LECTURE

To mark its 150th birthday, on March 4, 2014, Nature London is hosting a free public lecture by **John Riley** of the Nature Conservancy of Canada. Experience the story of Southwestern Ontario's ever-changing landscape from post-glacial barrens to stunningly magnificent forests teeming with wildlife. Witness the massive post-settlement devastation that even today continues to transform the countryside via land clearance, wetland drainage, and urbanization. Encounter the ecological processes that explain how ecosystems respond to and are part of ongoing changes in our region's landscape. In conclusion, hear a message of cautious optimism for the future. A popular speaker and passionate advocate for the natural world, John Riley is a botanist, geologist, ecologist, and naturalist.

Co-hosted by the London Public Library, the talk will be held at the Wolf Hall of the London Public Library, 251 Dundas Street, on **Tuesday, March 4 at 7:30 pm**. Mark your calendar now! Copies of John's newly released book, *The Once and Future Great Lakes Country: An Ecological History*, will be available for sale ($40 cloth).

SNAKES ALIVE!

Wild creatures seem to like taking advantage of Read hospitality. Mice are not unexpected when you live in a woodlot, but the huge Norway Rat was a definite surprise. We had a bat in the bathtub in the middle of winter. One time a junco flew in when I opened the door to scare away the Cooper's Hawk at the feeder. And then there was the Raccoon that fell through the roof window in the sunroom when we were away. There can be no doubt that animals feel at home in our home, but an experience in May has me wondering if a few of them are getting a little too cosy.

Pete was away doing environmental work for several days. I was watching TV downstairs and decided to come up from the basement around 10 pm. I was promptly stopped by a snake about 3 feet (a metre) long lying at the base of the stairs. I was extremely unnerved, to say the least! (This is where I should mention that my mother passed on her fear of snakes to me. Pete has helped me appreciate the beauty of these reptiles and now I can honestly say I enjoy seeing them *in the wild*.) While I was trying to call Dave Martin or my son, Rob, from a cell-phone with the wrong number for Dave and no reception for Rob, the snake disappeared. I went upstairs very quickly and called Rob. Julie and Rob settled me down until suddenly the snake appeared 10 feet (three metres) away, having managed to follow me up the stairs. While I was waiting for Rob to come over and catch the snake, I talked to Dave on the phone to try to stay calm. Once Rob arrived, we had to look to see where the snake had gone after staring me down for 10 minutes. Rob displayed some very good snake-catching skills, caught the wiggly reptile quite readily, and took it outside to the far corner of the yard. My heart rate was just starting to slow down when I looked down the stairs and saw a SECOND snake! Rob got that one fairly quickly and let it join its friend outside.

I didn't get much sleep that night as I was busy imagining more snakes waiting to make an appearance. The scariest part (as I lay in bed with a light and the radio on) was knowing that snakes are so *quiet* and realizing I wouldn't hear one coming, unlike that tiger that stalked us in India!

The next day I entertained the women at the hair salon with my hair-raising adventure. After some research, Rob, Dave, and I concluded that the visitors were Milk Snakes, something new for both our house and yard lists. That evening I stayed on the main floor and checked the basement stairs every time I walked by. As I was about to go up to bed, I did a final check, and there in all its slithery glory was yet another snake – number THREE! I decided I would take Rob and Julie up on their invitation to sleep over at their place until Pete came home. Ironically, Pete was up north doing bird and herpetology surveys. It turns out that I found more snakes than he and his partner did!

We haven't seen any more snakes since those two days near the end of May, but I must admit that I would like to know what happened to Number Three! Did it make it outside on its own, or is it planning to make a surprise appearance when I least expect it?

Sue Read

ASK THE CARDINAL

HOW TO TELL MALE FROM FEMALE

Dear Cardinal,

This question is something that has long puzzled me. When males and females of one bird species look the same, like those of the raucous Blue Jay, how do these birds tell if another one is male or female?

Puzzled by sameness

Dear Puzzled,

The question that has long puzzled me is why humans assume that what they see is the same as what I and my fellow birds see. But then, I have trouble telling humans apart, other than those who bring seeds, that is. In any case, not all male birds share the sort of lovely, bright colouring that I have, or they enjoy it for only part of the year, so I will try to answer your question.

Singing Song Sparrow.
(Drawing by Gladys Carey.)

At the risk of sounding immodest, which of course I never like to do, birds have much better vision than humans (and all other vertebrates, for that matter). We can see about two to three times more sharply than humans, and have better perception of colour. Most of us can also see near-ultraviolet and ultraviolet light, which humans can't see at all. Birds that look identical to you might not look identical to us.

There are some bird species, though, in which males and females apparently look the same to each other, for example Song Sparrows, some of the thrushes, and the jays you mentioned. Males and females tell each other apart by their behaviour, especially songs and calls. For example, a male Song Sparrow busy guarding his breeding territory is likely to fly at any stranger who intrudes. If the stranger displays and is aggressive in turn, he knows it is a male and a fight will ensue. If the stranger gives the calls of a female in breeding condition, he will court her instead.

It's so much easier to be flashy.

The Cardinal

MYSTERY SKELETON ON THE BEACH

Dear Cardinal,

While walking along the beach at Grand Bend in late April, I found a strange-looking skull and part of a skeleton (see photos at right). The mystery skull is 3.5 centimetres long, 1.5 centimetres wide at the widest point, and the whole thing is very light. The vertebrae are 1.0 centimetre in diameter. The peg-like teeth seem pretty distinctive but I don't recognize the skeleton as any of the familiar critters that regularly show up dead on beaches or around the countryside. Do you have any idea what this creature might be?

Greatly puzzled,
The Bone Lady

Dear Bone Lady,

Yikes! Identifying teeth and bones is definitely not my forte. And, being toothless myself, I don't even have a dentist to ask for help. Hence I circulated your photos to naturalist friends and searched the Internet as well as I could with my feathery fingertips. All sorts of "toothy" possibilities came up – goose, fish, mammal, snake, turtle, skink . . . Alas, none was a match.

Fortunately, Nature London member Gail McNeil put me in touch with her son, Paul, who is an expert on fossil bones out in Alberta – in other words, a SERIOUSLY knowledgeable bone guy. Paul confirmed the skeleton was definitely not that of a bird or fish, and also ruled out frog and reptile. Based on bone configuration, Paul narrowed the search down to salamander, and, given the dimensions supplied, he suggested the skeleton belonged to one of the larger salamander species.

Now it was up to me to figure out which big, Lake Huron salamander species could end up on the beach at Grand Bend. Tiger Salamander looked like a good fit, but its skull seemed a shade narrow and its range doesn't go quite as far north as Lake Huron. That left Mudpuppy as the only plausible candidate, and an Internet check of its skull dimensions and teeth nailed the ID.

At this point, Erin Carroll, another Nature London member, came forward with some pertinent information. Last fall, during and just after Hurricane Sandy, thousands

of dead and dying Mudpuppies washed ashore along both sides of southern Lake Huron.

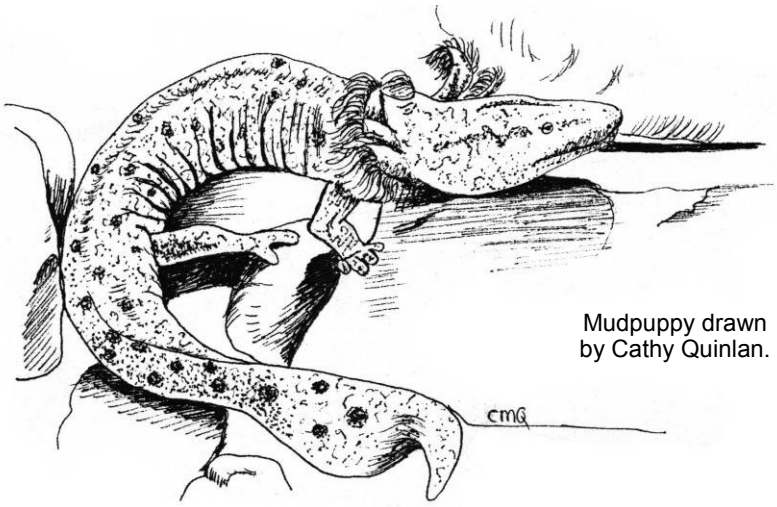
Although there had been no previous reports of mudpuppy die-offs from severe weather, Sandy's unprecedentedly high waves (greater than eight metres) may have been the cause. It is speculated that such rough conditions, especially in shallower areas frequented by Mudpuppies, tumbled the slow-moving animals about to such an extent that many died of their injuries. Interestingly, Mudpuppies were the only aquatic species to come ashore in big numbers following Sandy.

And there you have it; the poor Mudpuppy whose skeleton reposed in the strand line of a Grand Bend beach this spring was likely the hapless victim of Hurricane Sandy's fury last fall. If you would like to know more about Mudpuppies, see page 27.

Pleased to get by with a little help from my friends, but saddened by the deaths of all those "pups",

Detective Cardinal

All-washed-up skeleton gives up its identity thanks to a palaeontologist and the Internet.



Mudpuppy drawn by Cathy Quinlan.

THE DIRT ON MUDPUPPIES

The Mudpuppy is the largest species of salamander found in Ontario (the biggest adults approach 50 centimetres in length!). Although the species remains in the larval (gill-bearing) stage during its entire lifespan, maturity is reached in about five years. The Mudpuppy has a greyish-brown, somewhat splotchy, body; four-toed feet supporting short legs; a broad, flattened head with small eyes; bushy, reddish-coloured external gills; and a notably slimy skin. Gills are larger in animals living in murky or weed-choked waters and smaller in clear, cool, well-oxygenated conditions.

Mudpuppy range extends across much of the central part of eastern North America from southern Quebec and the Great Lakes southward. Mudpuppies are aquatic throughout their entire lives. They inhabit rivers, streams, lakes, ponds, reservoirs, and other large, permanent bodies of water. They are active year-round, preferring deeper water in winter and summer and shallower, near-shore areas in spring and fall. Although rarely encountered because they are most active at night, Mudpuppies occur in the London area. They spend their time foraging on the bottom (walking or swimming) or sheltering under rocks or other large objects. The diet is varied and includes crayfish, aquatic invertebrates (e.g., other crustaceans, worms, insect larvae, and molluscs), carrion, and occasionally fish eggs and small fish. The Mudpuppy is regularly caught by ice fishermen and in traps baited with dead fish.

Population numbers and trends are poorly known for the secretive Mudpuppy. The species can be locally abundant, but, in the Great Lakes region, Mudpuppies have declined or disappeared from some areas where they were once common. Precise reasons are unknown but various factors may be contributing (see page 28). In some places they have been harvested for the biological supply trade. They are also vulnerable to pollutants in the water. In the past decade, documented Mudpuppy die-offs have been attributed to diseases such as botulism and the growing use of lampricides to kill the larvae of the invasive Sea Lamprey. Storm-related mortality is a new and puzzling phenomenon, and there is some thought there may be additional factors involved in the Lake Huron die-off associated with Hurricane Sandy in the fall of 2012 (see page 11). Nevertheless, the expectation that extreme weather events related to climate change will increase in frequency and severity in the future is a cause for concern for Mudpuppy populations.

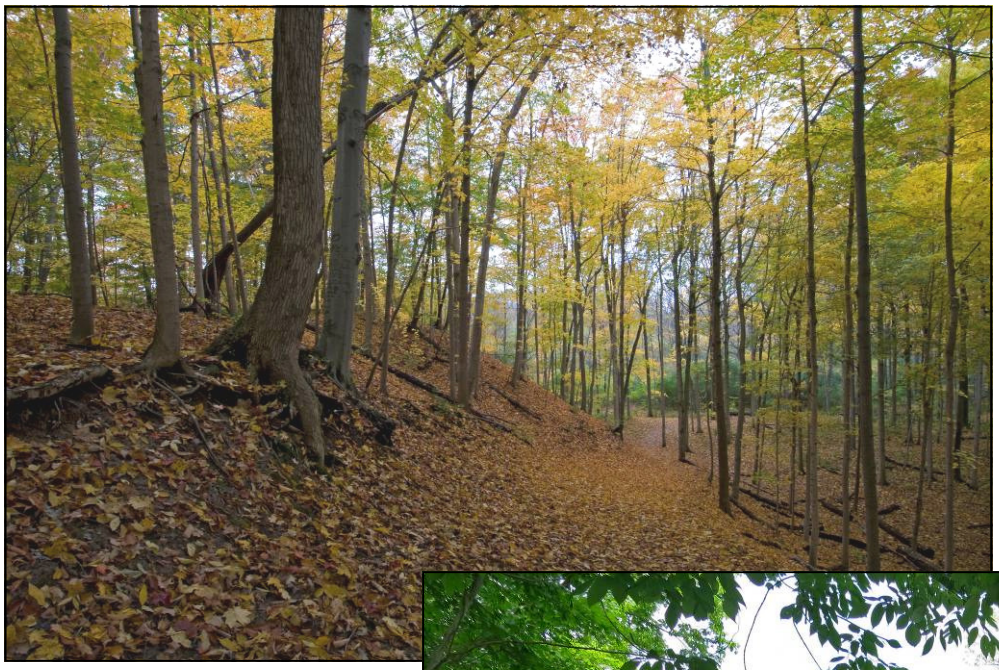
Winifred Wake

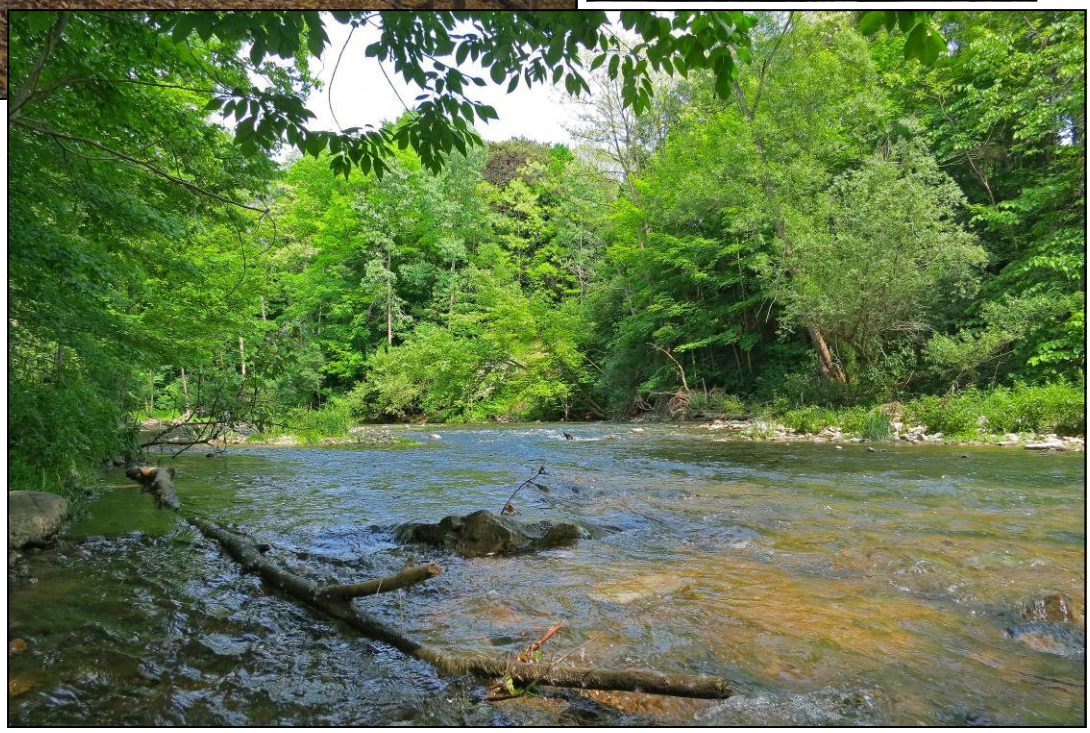
REPORT YOUR SIGHTINGS

If you come across a Mudpuppy (or other salamander) or have records of past sightings, please submit the information to the Ontario Reptile and Amphibian Atlas at www.ontarionature.org/protect/species/herpetofaunal_atlas.php or write to James Paterson, atlas co-ordinator, at jamesp@ontarionature.org (see page 8).

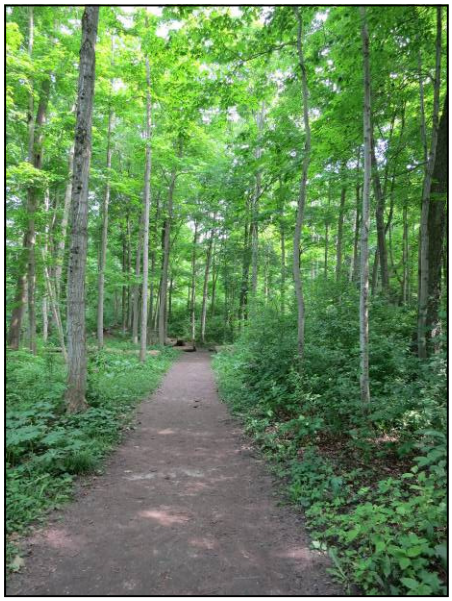
MEDWAY VALLEY HERITAGE FOREST

A PHOTO ESSAY BY GERARD PAS





One of Gerard's childhood haunts is now the Medway Valley Heritage Forest Environmentally Significant Area (ESA) and Gerard returns there when in need of the pastoral solace it offers. The Medway ESA also provides excellent birding. He took these photos in the southern part of the ESA in order to share this special place with Nature London. For him, the creek is the heart of the forest. The creek, forest, and meadows provide habitat for a myriad of species including the Dryad's Saddle (above right), Monarch (below left), Widow Skimmer (below centre), and Painted Lady (below right).



This pathway (left) is in keeping with the environmental significance of the area, unlike the 3.2-metre-wide asphalt path that City Council has approved in the northern portion of the ESA.

Yellow Trout Lily (below left) is one of the common spring ephemerals and Skunk Cabbage (below) can be found in the many boggy areas.

One of the highlights of this ESA is the bluffs along Medway Creek that show some of the geologic history of the area and provide nesting cavities for Belted Kingfisher (left) and Bank Swallows. The detrimental effects of the burgeoning population of White-tailed Deer (right) can be seen in almost every habitat in and around the Medway Valley Heritage Forest.

(Nature London member Gerard Pas is a professional artist and photographer. He teaches in the Visual Arts department at Fanshawe College.)

American Snout, the best butterfly on the Skunk's Misery count. (Photo by Robin McLeod.)

BUTTERFLY COUNTS 2013

SKUNK'S MISERY

Our 14th annual Skunk's Misery Butterfly Count was held on Sunday, July 7. This was not a good year for butterflies up to then, so we were pleased to find we ended the day with 45 species seen. During the morning most of the butterflies we found were skippers disturbed as we walked through the grass. Very few large butterflies were flying.

We all had lunch together in Little Kin Park in Wardsville, and then set out to cover the two Thames Talbot Land Trust properties within our official count circle, as well as the outer parts of our area. The sun shone for a while and a few larger butterflies ventured out of hiding. Around 2:15 pm there was a heavy deluge of rain in the northern half of the circle, which unfortunately sent some counters home. Pete Chapman's group fled the rain back to Skunk's Misery, and then found the best butterfly of the day – an American Snout – on the middle of Sassafras Road!

Around 4:30 pm we all started to make our way towards Rodney and the Preiksaitises' home for our barbecue supper. The evening weather was still a bit humid but fine, and everyone enjoyed the great meal and sitting chatting in the garden. After drinking large quantities of lemonade and water and eating nibbles, we moved on to cheeseburgers and salads, which some of the participants provided for us. After that there were several desserts to choose from, before we got down to the serious business of tabulating the results of our count. Although most species were low in numbers, surprisingly two had the highest number of individuals ever recorded on the Skunk's Misery count. They were Eastern Tailed Blue, with 35 seen (previous best 11), and Delaware Skipper, with 40 (39). This year we had only six Red Admirals among us all, and if you remember last year they seemed to be everywhere all summer. Every year is different, which makes butterfly counts so interesting.

I have to thank a lot of people who make our Skunk's counts so successful. There are all the participants who come out, and especially I appreciate those who are experienced cheerfully helping the beginners to see and get to know some butterflies. One new participant this year, who comes from Australia and was visiting in our area, told me she had had a fantastic day. Then those who brought salads and desserts, which turn our barbecue from humdrum to festive, deserve thanks. And, of course, a big thanks to Bill and Marj for welcoming us to their property and making so many preparations with chairs, tables, coffee, and cooking the hamburgers. THANKS, Bill and Marjorie!

I hope to see everyone out again next year – I wonder what surprises it will bring?

Participants: Maris Apse, Rose Braxton, Stan and Anita Caveney, Pete Chapman, Lori Clancy, Donald Craig, Kee Dewdney, Diane Dowling, Sandra Eadie, Jan Gray, Kathi Kirkby, Blake Mann, Linda McDougall, Rob Patton, Gavin and Ian Platt, Henry Przysiezny, Donald Pye, Bill and Marj Preiksaitis, Cathy Quinlan, Chuck and Amanda Summers, Don Taves, Dave and Winnie Wake, Ann White.

Ann White

ST THOMAS FIELD NATURALIST CLUB

On July 13, the St Thomas Field Naturalist Club Inc. held its 16th annual butterfly count. The count area was limited to a 24-kilometre-diameter circle centred at the junction of John Wise Line and Rieger Road. A total of 1192 butterflies of 30 different species was counted. The day was sunny and hot.

Participants: John B Anderson, Barb and Thomas Beharrell, Heather Brady, Alex, Linda, Neva and Ron Carmichael, Mary Carnahan, Pete Corner, Jim Dunn, Olive Ireland, Christine Klassen, Gord and Brenda Longhurst, Jack McBride, Pat Hartwell McLean, Dave Nopper, John Partington, Chantel Reinke, Eren Semercigil, Al Sharpe, Ozden Turan, Ann Vance.

Ann Vance and Neva Carmichael

From left: Eastern Tailed Blue (photo by Mike Nelson), Coral Hairstreak on the Skunk's Misery count (Dave Wake), and Great Spangled Fritillary (Dave Wake).