

# THE HALIFAX FIELD NATURALIST



No. 117

December, 2004 to February, 2005



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Return address: HFN, c/o NS Museum of Natural History, 1747 Summer Street, Halifax, NS, B3H 3A6

# HFN

is incorporated under the Nova Scotia Societies Act and holds Registered Charity status with Revenue Canada. Tax-creditable receipts will be issued for individual and corporate gifts. It is an affiliate of the Canadian Nature Federation and an organisational member of the Federation of Nova Scotia Naturalists, the provincial umbrella association for naturalist groups in Nova Scotia.

**OBJECTIVES** are to encourage a greater appreciation and understanding of Nova Scotia's natural history, both within the membership of HFN and in the public at large. To represent the interests of naturalists by encouraging the conservation of Nova Scotia's natural resources.

**MEETINGS** are held, except for July and August, on the first Thursday of every month at 7:30 p.m. in the auditorium of the Nova Scotia Museum of Natural History, 1747 Summer Street, Halifax. Meetings are open to the public.

**FIELD TRIPS** are held at least once a month, and it is appreciated if those travelling in someone else's car share the cost of the gas. All participants in HFN activities are responsible for their own safety. Everyone, member or not, is welcome to take part in field trips.

**HFN ADDRESS** Halifax Field Naturalists  
c/o Nova Scotia Museum of Natural History, 1747 Summer St., Halifax, Nova Scotia, B3H 3A6

**EMAIL** <hfnexec@chebucto.ns.ca>

**WEBSITE** <<http://chebucto.ns.ca/Recreation/FieldNaturalists/fieldnat.html>>

**FNSN ADDRESS** Federation of Nova Scotia Naturalists  
c/o Nova Scotia Museum of Natural History, 1747 Summer St., Halifax, Nova Scotia, B3H 3A6

**EMAIL** <[doug@fundymud.com](mailto:doug@fundymud.com)> (Doug Linzey, FNSN secretary and Newsletter Editor)

**WEBSITE** <<http://chebucto.ns.ca/Environment/FNSN/hp-fnsn.html>>

**MEMBERSHIP** is open to anyone interested in the natural history of Nova Scotia. Memberships are available at any meeting of the society, or by writing to: Membership Secretary, Halifax Field Naturalists, c/o NS Museum of Natural History. New memberships starting from 1 September will be valid until the end of the following membership year. The regular membership year is from 1 January to 31 December. Members receive the HFN Newsletter and notices of all meetings, field trips, and special programmes. The fees are as follows:

<b>Individual</b>	\$15.00 per year
<b>Family</b>	\$20.00 per year
<b>Supporting</b>	\$25.00 per year
<b>FNSN (opt.)</b>	\$ 5.00 per year

<b>EXECUTIVE</b>	<b>Interim President</b> .....	Bernice Moores.....	422-5292
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	<b>Past President</b> .....	Bob McDonald.....	443-5051

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Talks & Trips.....	Jennifer McKeigan.....	883-9766
	Ingrid & Burkhard Plache.....	475-1129
	Anne-Noreen Norton.....	423-5663
Design/Production.....	Stephanie Robertson.....	454-8420
<b>Newsletter</b>		
Editor.....	Stephanie Robertson.....	454-8420
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**Conservation**..... Suzanne Borkowski..... 445-2922

**FNSN Representative**..... Bob McDonald..... 443-5051

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**LAST ISSUE**  
**Time to renew**

# HFN NEWS AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

## EDITORIAL

Sadly, our wonderful President, Elliott Hayes, had to resign very suddenly due to unavoidable extra stresses, travelling, and estate affairs within his family. Our Vice President, Bernice Moores, has agreed to take on an interim role until March, 2005, when there will be a new roster of nominees for the executive.

We loved working with Elliott; we'll miss his friendliness, experience, and helpful, quiet manner. We hope he'll be back in the future, when things are more settled in his life. All our best goes out to him and Judi.

Days are drawing in, and it is slowly getting colder and colder. But, by the time this issue is on your doorstep, it will be close to the beginning of lengthening days, and more light once again!

I have put fresh suet out on my feeder tree, but there have been no woodpeckers spotted there as yet. I hope the conditions in Point Pleasant Park are not to blame; many, many trees full of insect grubs have been removed since the alleged BSLB debacle and Hurricane Juan.

— **Stephanie Robertson**

## PPP HELICOPTER PAD

The Friends of Point Pleasant Park learned December 9 that there is to be an emergency helicopter pad installed at the lower PPP parking lot, near the container pier, by the Halifax Port Authority. Their goal is to finish the installation by Christmas.

Two FPPP members are on the PPP International Design Competition Steering Committee (<[halifax.ca/realproperty/PPPIDC](http://halifax.ca/realproperty/PPPIDC)>). Reports will be forthcoming in our next issue.

— **Stephanie Robertson**

## BRINGING NATURE TO OUR CITIES

Unilever Canada and Evergreen have announced that their Aquatic Stewardship grant is being offered again to community groups across Canada.

The 2005 application guide and form are now available on Evergreen's web site, <<http://www.evergreen.ca/en/cg/cg-funding.html>>.

Information about additional Evergreen community grant programmes will be available shortly. You can check their web site for updates, and to learn more about the Common Grounds programme and the resources they provide.

If you have any questions, contact:

**Kristen McPherson, Common Grounds Coordinator  
Evergreen, 355 Adelaide Street West, 5th Floor  
Toronto, Ontario, M5V 1S2**

or, phone 416-596-1495, extension 49; fax 416-596-1443;  
toll-free: 1-888-426-3138; email<[kristen@evergreen.ca](mailto:kristen@evergreen.ca)>.

## OFF-HIGHWAY VEHICLE USE

The final report of the Voluntary Planning Off-Highway Vehicle Task Force Board has been released.

It includes recommendations for fee increases, licensing, and a driver age limit. The report also focuses on enforcement of restrictions and regulations. It proposes the designation of some trails for off-road vehicle use, and the restriction of vehicle use on other trails.

For more info, phone 424-5682, 1-866-858-5850, or go to <[www.gov.ns.ca/vp](http://www.gov.ns.ca/vp)>.

## NATURE CALENDARS

Both the Nova Scotia Trails Federation (NSTF) and Blomidon Naturalists calendars are now available!

For NSTF's, contact Bob McDonald, 443-5051, or go to <[www.trailtc.ns.ca/support/calendar.htm](http://www.trailtc.ns.ca/support/calendar.htm)>.

For the Blomidon Naturalists', contact Harold Forsyth, 1-902-542-5983 (Greenwich, Wolfville), or email <[harold.forsyth@ns.sympatico.ca](mailto:harold.forsyth@ns.sympatico.ca)>.

## CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNTS

You can still take part in some of these bird counts, which are happening between December 14 and January 3. There are over 35 counts in Nova Scotia!

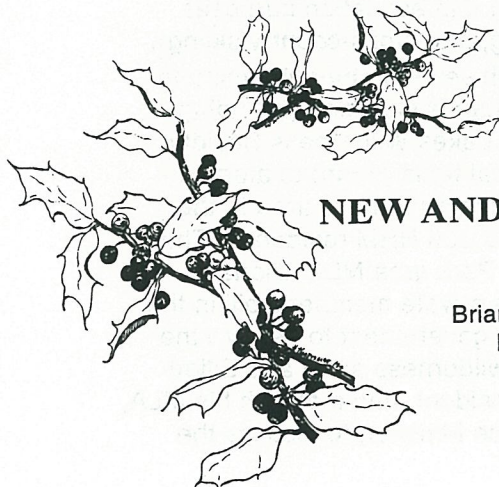
Additional information can be found on Blake Maybank's webpage, <[www3.ns.sympatico.ca/maybank/other/nswinter.htm](http://www3.ns.sympatico.ca/maybank/other/nswinter.htm)>.

## !!! HUNTING SEASON !!!

Be aware; hunters will still be out and about in Nova Scotia for the following two species:

**Ruffed Grouse** ..... **Oct. 1 to Dec. 31**  
**Rabbit (Snowshoe Hare)** ..... **Nov. 1 to Feb. 28**

**!! NO HUNTING OF ANY KIND IS PERMITTED ON SUNDAYS !!**



## NEW AND RETURNING

Loraine Beattie  
Jill C. Comolli  
Brian Bartlett & Karen Dahl  
Donald & Joan Embree  
Mollie MacGregor  
Christine Anne Smith  
Sean Steller  
Eva Ann Williams

# SPECIAL REPORTS

## CONSERVATION

### BLUE MOUNTAIN/BIRCH COVE LAKES WILDERNESS AREA



The Halifax Field Naturalists have taken a renewed interest in the preservation of provincially owned Crown Land on the Chebucto Peninsula.

In the summer of 2002, the Ecology Action Centre (EAC) published a booklet describing several tracts of undisturbed Crown Land within HRM. Called Public Land by EAC, they propose that these lands be established as Wilderness Protected Areas.

One of these areas is the 1750-ha Blue Mountain/Birch Cove Lakes (BMBCL) that lies just south of Kingswood Estates off Hammonds Plains Road, west of highway 102, and north of highways 3 and 103. The area contains the headwaters of several natural watercourses; many wetlands; barrens containing a variety of flora and fauna (including the mainland moose, an endangered species); a remnant old growth forest; and the highest point in HRM (Blue Mountain has an elevation of 152 metres). The Nova Scotia Bird Society has compiled a list of over 140 species that either breed here, or are found here during migration.

Urban sprawl, the trade-off of crown land by the province, and a highway proposal are some of the threats faced by this area. Many locals use it for low-impact recreation and education purposes (e.g. hiking, canoeing, and cross-country skiing).

HFN has joined with several other like-minded groups in the Public Lands Coalition (including EAC, the Birch Cove Lakes Wilderness Society [BCLWS], and the local trails group) to alert citizens to the value of this wilderness area in the backyards of over 300,000 HRM residents. The Halifax Area Clayton Park area MLA, Diana Whalen, introduced a private member's bill in the legislature urging the government to declare the BMBCL a protected wilderness area, and Elliott Hayes, Past HFN President, had met with his MLA, Peter Christie, Finance Minister, to discuss the issue.

Here is Ms. Whalen's bill:

#### RESOLUTION

"Mr. Speaker, I hereby give notice that on a future day I shall move the adoption of the following resolution:

**Whereas** the Blue mountain Birch cove Lakes area is a unique parcel of publicly owned land that lies on the doorstep of the fastest growing communities in Nova Scotia; and

**Whereas** the tremendous urban growth in the area has generated much concern about the need to balance growth with long term planning and a vision for the future; and

**Whereas** these lands are within the immediate proximity of more than 100,000 HRM residents and as such have a tremendous recreational potential as well as positive health and environmental benefits;

**Therefore be it resolved** that the members of this House call for the Government of Nova Scotia to take immediate steps to protect and preserve the Blue Mountain Birch Cove Lakes wilderness area for the benefit of future generations.

Mr. Speaker I ask for a waiver of notice and passage without debate."

The most immediate threat to the area is the Highway 113 proposal from the Dept. of Transportation and Public Works.

First brought forward many years ago, since 1998 it has gone through three amendments, each one prompted by serious environmental questions raised by the public or the Dept. of the Environment and Labour. On behalf of HFN and with the approval of the Board, I made a submission opposing construction of the highway principally on environmental grounds.

Chris Miller of the BCLWS has summarized the current status of the highway proposal as follows:

"The project has neither been approved nor rejected... it has been referred to a focus report. What this means is that the Dept. of Environment and Labour recognises that there *may* be damaging effects on the environment from the Highway 113 project, but that these effects are limited in scope. So, the Department of Transportation and Public Works will now have to prepare an additional report examining these potential negative effects, and address terms of reference put forth by the Department of Environment and Labour. They will have one year to prepare this report, after which the public will have 30 days to comment on its findings. At the end of this process, the Minister can accept, reject, or require a full environmental assessment.

The Minister of Environment and Labour could have referred this project to a full environmental assessment (e.g., a Class II environmental assessment), but chose not to. The highway was 9.9km in length, just under the 10km mark that would have triggered the full environmental review. Some feel that this is just too close to call."

When the HRM Regional Planning team brings forward the next stage of the Plan, HFN members should remind them of the importance of *open spaces* rather than a 4-lane highway at a cost of \$30 million and the loss of this pristine wilderness area.

For more information on the above, go to: <[www.publicland.ca](http://www.publicland.ca)>. There, you will also be able to link to many other sites proposed for protection.

For a personal tour of the area, join HFN for a walk in the spring.

— Bob McDonald



## THE COLIN STEWART CONSERVATION AWARD – A CALL FOR NOMINATIONS

Here is your opportunity to nominate a friend, colleague, or special group for the Colin Stewart Conservation Award. This award was established by HFN in 2004 to honour Colin's (1954-2004) many contributions to the preservation of natural areas in Nova Scotia.

Nominations for the the award will be evaluated by the Colin Stewart Award Committee. Members of this committee are HFN members appointed by the Board of Directors, and may or may not be Board members.

The Award will be given annually by HFN to an individual or a group for significant conservation efforts in the province, but not in a year when there is no nominee deemed suitable for the Award by the Board of Directors of HFN. The award consists of: a story in the Halifax Field Naturalist describing the accomplishments for which the recipient won the award; the presentation of a plaque bearing the HFN logo and an appropriate inscription; and the presentation of a certificate suitable for framing.

The purpose of the award is to recognise individuals or groups who have made an outstanding contribution to conservation in Nova Scotia. Such contribution is characterised by undertaking and completing challenging conservation tasks of

provincial significance in Nova Scotia, or by outstanding efforts over an extended period of time that yield significant progress towards the completion of a conservation task of provincial significance.

HFN board members shall not be eligible for this award during their term of office, unless the Award Committee unanimously considers the contribution in time and effort by the board member to be truly outstanding and significantly above that expected of an HFN board member.

Nominations for the award can be made by any individual or group in Nova Scotia; neither the nominee nor the nominator need be members of HFN. Nominations are to be made in writing and submitted to the Halifax Field Naturalists by the published deadline.

For further information on the criteria and evaluation procedure, and for a copy of the Nomination Form, email us at <[hfnexec@chebucto.ns.ca](mailto:hfnexec@chebucto.ns.ca)>, or write to:

**Halifax Field Naturalists  
Colin Stewart Conservation Award  
c/o Nova Scotia Museum of Natural History  
1747 Summer St., Halifax, N.S., B3H 3A6**

The deadline for nominations will be November 30 of each year. **However, for the 2005 Award, the nomination deadline is January 31, 2005.**

— Bob McDonald



## HUGA

The Halifax Urban Greenway Association (HUGA) has been working for some time now to develop plans for a safe and accessible trail from the Armdale Rotary to the South End, particularly the universities (i.e. King's, Dalhousie, SMU, and AST).

There is an informal path presently along some parts of the railway cut, which has been threatened by accelerated development. The intent is to preserve this route as a public resource, and to enhance it and link up the pieces to make a network of parks and urban green spaces. This would be a multi-use trail wide enough to accommodate both cyclists and pedestrians. The recent controversy regarding the footpath from Marlborough Woods to Francklyn Street shows the level of interest among the general public to preserve

these established paths.

The route proposed by HUGA would extend from Chebucto Road and Flynn Park to Young Avenue paralleling the railway cut — approximately 4.5 kilometres. There are plans for side tracks to public waterfront areas along the Northwest Arm, such as those at the foot of Oakland Road on Rockcliffe Avenue, and in Marlborough Woods. There will also be a branch to Point Pleasant Park via a projected pedestrian bridge over the railway. There will also be a second, narrower footpath or 'nature trail' along a portion of this route, which would be closer to the cliff edge above the rail line. Areas unsuitable for footpaths would be designated as 'conservation areas'.

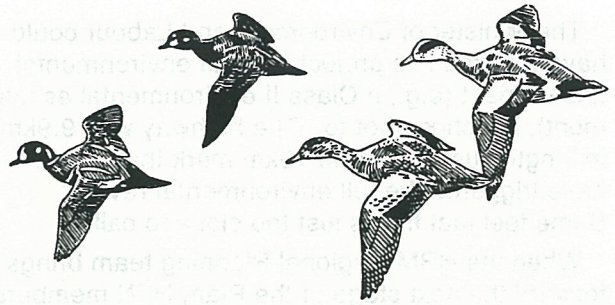
The Halifax Regional Municipality is very interested in establishing alternative transportation routes through the city, and has encouraged HUGA in its work. In the spring of 2004, HUGA received funding from HRM to proceed with the detailed planning and design of Phase One of its system of multi-purpose trail and footpaths. A Request for Proposals for design consulting services for Phase One is about to be issued.

Phase One would include: the 1.5 km stretch from South Street to Point Pleasant Park along the east side of the CN railway cut — both sides of the cut along Marlborough Woods to the Pinehill Drive-Francklyn Street intersection; and the west side of that intersection to Young Avenue.

This urban walking trail could become a real amenity for neighbourhoods in peninsular Halifax, and an important route for many non-auto commuters. The footpaths that exist now are well known to berry pickers and bird watchers as a valuable natural corridor, providing important habitat especially for migrant birds. In fact, some years ago the Halifax Field Naturalists carried out a Natural History survey of much of this route. HFN sends a representative to HUGA's meetings, and we hope to be of assistance during the route planning process.

For more information about the proposal, visit <http://www.halifaxurbangreenway.org/>.

— Patricia L. Chalmers



## HRM 2004 NORTH AMERICAN MIGRATION COUNT

The 13th North American Migration Count (NAMC) took place on May 8, 2004. Cool temperatures and high winds hampered counters, but the rain held off so we all had a full day in the field. Numbers of permanent resident species and early migrants seemed in line with our short-term averages, so perhaps Hurricane Juan did not have a dramatic effect on our avian populations after all.

As mentioned in last year's report, the early date chosen for the 2004 NAMC (the second Saturday in May) means that only our earliest migrants are censused. Therefore flycatchers and warblers are poorly represented. However, our coverage remains good, as measured by participant numbers and hours spent in the field, such that total species and total individuals showed encouraging increases. Ten species were added to the four-year cumulative list, and it now stands at 173 species. Most noteworthy perhaps was Pat McKay's observation of a Red-bellied Woodpecker at Birch Cove Park in Dartmouth; this bird had spent essentially the whole winter visiting a feeder near the Park.

Suzanne Borkowski and I continue to serve as joint coordinators/compiler for the HRM NAMC. Anyone wishing to participate in the 2005 Count (which takes place on May 14, the latest possible date, so we anticipate an excellent count) should contact Suzanne, **445-2922**, [suzanneborkowski@yahoo.ca](mailto:suzanneborkowski@yahoo.ca); or me, **443-5051**, [bobathome@hfx.eastlink.ca](mailto:bobathome@hfx.eastlink.ca).

Here are the results of the last three years' observations in HRM for the annual North American Migration count. The following 15 species have not been reported since the 2001 NAMC count, so they have been taken from the list this year; however, we hope that perhaps some or all will be counted/seen/heard again in 2005:

**Pied-billed Grebe**, **Sora**, **Spotted Sandpiper**, **Red Knot**, **Sanderling**, **Least Tern**, **Yellow-billed Cuckoo**, **Long-eared Owl**, **Whip-poor-will**, **Common Nighthawk**, **Scissor-tailed Flycatcher**, **Veery**, **Swainson's Thrush**, **Blackburnian Warbler**, and the **Long-tailed Duck**.

The birds' names that are in bold type are ten new additions this year to the HRM count.

SPECIES	08/05/04	10/05/03	11/05/02				
Red-throated Loon	4	0	0	Greater Black-backed Gull	337	433	388
Common Loon	31	39	18	Caspian Tern	1	1	0
Red-necked Grebe	3	1	0	Common Tern	7	33	21
Northern Gannet	64	61	37	Arctic Tern	2	4	0
Double-Crested Cormorant	317	406	302	Black Guillemot	1	3	0
Great Cormorant	4	6	17	Rock Dove	312	414	198
American Bittern	2	2	2	Mourning Dove	172	100	121
Great Blue Heron	45	45	32	Great Horned Owl	2	0	1
Great Egret	1	0	1	Barred Owl	1	0	0
<b>Snowy Egret</b>	1	0	0	Northern Saw-whet Owl	2	1	2
Turkey Vulture	1	0	1	Chimney Swift	2	0	3
<b>Snow Goose</b>	1	0	0	Ruby-throated Hummingbird	5	1	4
Canada Goose	17	17	26	Belted Kingfisher	23	18	19
Wood Duck	2	0	4	<b>Red-bellied Woodpecker</b>	1	0	0
<b>Gadwall</b>	1	0	0	Yellow-bellied Sapsucker	1	1	6
Eurasian Wigeon	0	0	1	Downy Woodpecker	57	26	45
American Wigeon	12	5	10	Hairy Woodpecker	18	15	12
American Black Duck	425	400	335	Black-backed Woodpecker	2	0	1
Mallard	121	73	56	Northern Flicker	96	64	81
<b>Blue-winged Teal</b>	4	0	0	Pileated Woodpecker	2	1	2
Northern Shoveler	2	0	3	Least Flycatcher	5	0	2
Northern Pintail	4	1	0	Eastern Kingbird	3	1	0
Green-winged Teal	11	24	3	Blue-headed Vireo	39	12	95
Ring-necked Duck	37	30	28	Red-eyed Vireo	0	0	7
<b>Greater Scaup</b>	4	0	0	Gray Jay	6	5	3
Common Eider	490	247	462	Blue Jay	248	213	222
Surf Scoter	2	7	7	American Crow	938	721	597
White-winged Scoter	50	55	6	Common Raven	59	26	58
Black Scoter	57	1	70	<b>Horned Lark</b>	1	0	0
Bufflehead	0	0	2	Tree Swallow	357	96	102
Hooded Merganser	0	3	0	Bank Swallow	2	2	1
Common Merganser	66	38	24	Cliff Swallow	4	0	40
Red-breasted Merganser	21	18	5	Barn Swallow	54	51	54
Osprey	67	38	46	Black-capped Chickadee	639	408	292
Bald Eagle	15	12	17	Boreal Chickadee	10	18	31
Northern Harrier	0	3	6	Red-breasted Nuthatch	54	11	29
Sharp-shinned Hawk	11	6	8	White-breasted Nuthatch	0	1	4
Northern Goshawk	0	2	2	Brown Creeper	5	4	14
Broad-winged Hawk	1	2	2	Winter Wren	11	10	48
Red-tailed Hawk	6	2	6	Golden-crowned Kinglet	9	11	69
American Kestrel	5	2	3	Ruby-crowned Kinglet	63	47	178
Merlin	5	3	3	Hermit Thrush	24	35	107
Peregrine Falcon	2	0	0	American Robin	588	391	538
Ring-necked Pheasant	20	11	19	Gray Catbird	0	0	2
Ruffed Grouse	14	19	13	Northern Mockingbird	0	1	0
Spruce Grouse	1	2	2	European Starling	700	809	552
Black-bellied Plover	0	6	2	Cedar Waxwing	0	1	0
<b>American Golden-Plover</b>	1	0	0	Tennessee Warbler	0	1	1
Piping Plover	6	3	1	Nashville Warbler	4	2	2
Killdeer	0	0	5	Northern Parula	5	2	16
Greater Yellowlegs	28	151	34	Yellow Warbler	1	0	4
Lesser Yellowlegs	0	7	14	Chestnut-sided Warbler	1	0	2
Willet	57	151	109	Magnolia Warbler	7	0	21
Whimbrel	0	0	1	Black-throated Blue Warbler	0	0	2
Least Sandpiper	5	4	0	Yellow-rumped Warbler	362	238	361
Common Snipe	3	0	1	Black-throated Green Warbler	14	6	132
American Woodcock	2	11	0	Palm Warbler	20	55	77
Wilson's Phalarope	0	2	0	Bay-breasted Warbler	0	0	1
Black-headed Gull	0	0	3	Blackpoll Warbler	0	1	0
Bonaparte's Gull	0	1	0	Black-and-White Warbler	25	12	45
Ring-billed Gull	22	15	19	American Redstart	1	0	1
Herring Gull	1924	2066	1701	Ovenbird	0	0	8
Iceland Gull	4	6	1	Northern Waterthrush	3	3	3
Glaucous Gull	1	1	0	Common Yellowthroat	0	0	5
				Wilson's Warbler	2	1	0

Summer Tanager	0	1	0
<b>Scarlet Tanager</b>	1	0	0
Rose-breasted Grosbeak	1	0	0
Chipping Sparrow	12	1	6
Vesper Sparrow	0	0	2
Savannah Sparrow	19	50	47
Ipswich Sparrow	4	1	2
Fox Sparrow	1	1	3
Song Sparrow	346	347	267
Lincoln's Sparrow	1	0	1
Swamp Sparrow	4	12	15
White-throated Sparrow	172	138	171
White-crowned Sparrow	6	0	0
Dark-eyed Junco	559	442	344
Northern Cardinal	5	3	1
Bobolink	0	0	1
Red-winged Blackbird	101	76	48
Rusty Blackbird	5	0	6
Common Grackle	468	538	375
Brown-headed Cowbird	3	0	0

Baltimore Oriole	1	0	1
Pine Grosbeak	2	8	7
Purple Finch	173	78	143
House Finch	16	3	3
Red Crossbill	6	0	1
White-winged Crossbill	3	0	0
<b>Common Redpoll</b>	1	0	0
Pine Siskin	86	22	30
American Goldfinch	431	365	393
Evening Grosbeak	3	12	10
House Sparrow	178	223	91

<b>No. of Species</b>	<b>119</b>	<b>112</b>	<b>126</b>
<b>No. of Individuals</b>	<b>12034</b>	<b>11420</b>	<b>10680</b>

Party hours (on foot/by car)	134/62	99/73	93/53
Party km (on foot/by car)	206/1207	177/1359	144/1283

No. of Field counters	48	55	46
No. of Feeder counters	16	27	22

– Bob McDonald



## HFN TALKS

### COUGARS

4 MARCH



Fred Scott shared with us his expertise regarding cougars which he acquired in his years of work with the N.S. Museum of Natural History and in his 1995 assessment of the status of the eastern cougar prepared for COSEWIC.

In the traditional classification of big cats, the cougar was considered to be a unique species, unrelated to the other big cats. However, more recent work, based on DNA evidence, points to a relationship to the cheetah, both felines being less specialized than other big cats.

The cougar is widely distributed in this hemisphere, ranging through 115 degrees of latitude and inhabiting areas from sea level to altitudes of 4,750 metres. Cougars tend to live widely spaced, and although they have a preference for hoofed

animals, they will eat almost anything — including porcupines!

In the 1800's and early 1900's, the concept of 'species' was not well defined or designed. Naturalists tended to separate groups of animals by physical characteristics — such as colouring — and to split the group into more and more species, with a separate name for each. As the science of classification advanced, it became evident that these groups were actually only variations of a single species. The most long-lasting belief was in the distinctness of the 'eastern' and 'western' cougars. However, genetic evidence now available confirms that they are one species, regardless of nametags of eastern, western, puma, or mountain lion.

Fred also talked about the problems with 'sightings'. Reports of sightings have so many variables that it is impossible to compare them scientifically. For example, there are variations in circumstances, variations in reporters, and possibilities of bias and wishful thinking. Regarding the many reports of black cougars, Fred pointed out that DNA research has not turned up any evidence of black colouring and that there has never been any record of a black cougar skin being received by any museum or research centre in North America. His advice was "if it was black, it wasn't a cougar". It was more likely to be a result of poor



lighting or an obscured, fleeting view. Even a definite sighting would have to be considered in the light of the possibility of the animal being a feral escape from a circus or animal park, a released captive/pet, or a descendent of one of these. Even with this caution, Fred's personal view was that there are cougars in Nova Scotia and that a new detection device may provide scientifically valid evidence. This is a Velcro-covered post with a container of female cougar urine on its top. When a male cougar investigates, some of his hairs are captured by the Velcro and become DNA evidence. Parks Canada used these posts this year and recorded cougars in Gaspé and Fundy parks. Analysis of material from Cape Breton Highlands and Kouchibouguac was not complete at the time of the meeting.

Fred's advice to people who sight a cougar was to do their best to take a picture (including taking a subsequent picture from the same position with an object placed in it to provide scale). Also, to try and backtrack the cougar to see if any scat or hair can be found. Any tracks found should be photographed. If you don't have your camera with you, cover the tracks and come back later to photograph them.

Biologists and naturalists alike are just waiting for solid, scientifically satisfactory evidence.

— Lillian Risley



## CHRISTMAS TREES 2 DEC.

Alex Wilson treated us to an informative and enthusiastic overview of Christmas tree production in Nova Scotia at our December meeting. As it turned out, the day he talked to us was the same day as the annual tree-lighting ceremony on the Boston Common. As you probably know, for more than 30 years Nova Scotia has donated a giant evergreen each year to the people of Boston as a thank you for their assistance following the 1917 Halifax Explosion. This year the tree was a 46-foot white spruce that came from Lunenburg County.

Apart from his professional knowledge of Christmas tree operations in Nova Scotia, Alex has a personal interest in cutting and selling Christmas trees. As a boy, he lived in the country (Fall River, though it's hardly 'country' now), and his father operated a lumber mill on Miller Lake. Prior to

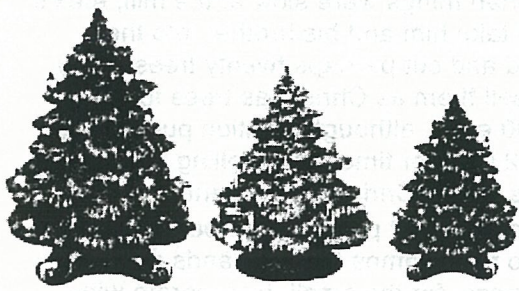
Christmas when things were slow at the mill, Alex's father would take him and his brother into the woods to find and cut perhaps twenty trees. They would then sell them as Christmas trees for roughly \$1.00 each, although inflation pushed it to as high as \$2.00 over time. After selling, they used the proceeds to buy Christmas presents.

Alex pointed out that people have been bringing greenery into their homes for thousands of years – for the freshness, for the smell, to decorate windows, and to form a ring around the wassail bowl. The use of evergreens as Christmas trees began in Germany during the 8th Century, and expanded gradually from there. The first recorded use of a Christmas tree in Canada was in 1781 at Sorrell, Quebec, predating their use in England, where they became popular only after Prince Albert used one at Windsor Castle sometime in the 1840s. After this Princely indication that Christmas trees were 'in', the practice became common throughout the United Kingdom as folks sought to emulate the Royals.

Nova Scotia has a claim to fame in the Christmas tree world – Lunenburg County is the Balsam Fir Capital of the World. Thriving best in a damp climate, balsam fir is common throughout the Maritimes, especially on the Cape Breton uplands. It ranges from Newfoundland to Alberta, and from northern Quebec to Maine. It grows to around 60 feet tall and one to two feet in diameter, and matures in 60 to 70 years (maximum around 150). The clear, oily resin ("Canada balsam") is used to make glass cement for microscope slides because it bends light to the same degree as glass. Pioneers used balsam to heal sore throats, and woodsmen still apply it as a stopgap dressing for cuts. While balsam fir has value as pulpwood and lumber, many Nova Scotia landowners now cultivate it as Christmas trees.

Balsam fir cones are beautiful – standing upright, dark green to purple in colour, often with whitish resin droplets. When they ripen around October, they fall apart, leaving erect, naked centre spikes, or candles, which are sometimes evident when a tree comes into the house as a Christmas tree.

There are roughly 40 species of fir trees worldwide, and four are native to Canada. The most popular species for use as Christmas trees in North America are the Douglas fir, the balsam fir, the scot's (or scotch) pine, and the white spruce. The balsam fir is considered the best, as it has a popular 'Christmas tree' shape, a very nice scent, and it keeps green indoors for a long time. Spruce trees are also attractive, but be careful about using the white spruce indoors, as its common name 'cat spruce' relates to its characteristic smell like a male cat's urine – not pleasant.



Trees that are grown as Christmas trees are usually sheared four to five times while they are growing. This produces a more-or-less perfect conical 'Christmas tree' shape, with more growth in the centre of the tree than normal. While this practice produces a commercially popular shape for the export market however, it makes the tree more difficult to decorate, as ornaments have only limited spaces in which to hang. Well, perhaps it's better than the occasional old-fashioned 'Charlie Brown' Christmas tree.

The trees regenerate themselves on the same land in seven to eight years. Alex said some growers use a stump culture strategy which substantially increases the biological productivity. When a tree is harvested, the cut is made above the bottom few branches. Each of the remaining branches then send out leaders which themselves become individual Christmas trees – each of which can be harvested about two years after the first cut. Isn't nature wonderful?

Christmas trees are subject to little natural predation, although porcupines can do a lot of damage on occasion, as they find the tender, inner bark particularly tasty. Very little chemicals are used on Nova Scotia-grown trees. Roundup is occasionally used for worm infestations, but only rarely. For those who want a totally pesticide-free tree, the Ecology Action Centre markets such trees each year through the Farmers' Market.

The Christmas tree industry in Nova Scotia employs about 2,500 people, who grow, harvest, grade, and ship roughly 2-million trees a year. About 90% of them are exported, mostly to the US. The industry began in the 1930s centred in the New Ross area. Today, most trees are produced in Lunenburg and Antigonish Counties. Cutting and shipping begins in late October. The trees are tightly wrapped and tied to minimize their size for shipping. Wrapping is done both by hand and by machine, and in most cases up to four or five wrapped trees are then wrapped into a bundle. From the slides that Alex showed us, a fully-loaded 18-wheeler appears to hold in the neighbourhood of 1,000 trees. In addition to the demand for Christmas trees, there is a large demand for bows and wreathes, but finding enough folks to make them is an increasing problem.

Have you ever wondered why we tend to use round ornaments as much as we do when decorating Christmas trees? It derives from the early practice in Germany of decorating the trees with fruit – apples, pears, and probably rose hips as well as holly and hawthorn berries. The problem with fruit, however, is that it's heavy, and the branches holding heavy fruit like apples and pears droop too much. The only fruits typically in use now are berries – cranberries mainly.

For those of us who feel it's somehow an inappropriate use of our forest resources to cut young trees for use as Christmas trees rather than letting them grow to become marketable timber, Alex assured us it does make sense. If they were to be left alone, most would be crowded out by the few dominant trees that would ultimately become large enough to be used as timber. Use of the land to keep regenerating trees every seven or eight years makes economic sense for woodlot owners, provides a significant number of jobs for those in the industry, and it allows us the delight of decorating our homes during the holiday season with a beautifully scented natural tree.

— Allan Robertson



## “MICROCOSMOS”

2 DEC.

Suzanne Borkowski announced with great regret, that due to ill health, the meeting's scheduled speaker, Anita Hamilton, was unable to present her talk, "Vanishing Watercourses". The program committee will look into rescheduling this at a later date.

In the absence of Anita Hamilton's talk, our ever-resourceful and efficient Programme Committee Chair, Jennifer MacKeigan, offered to our audience the fabulous award-winning nature film, "Microcosmos". This 1997 feature won international awards and world-wide acclaim for its ground breaking photography and remarkable, close-up filming of the world of insects. Over 25 people stayed to view this fascinating film.

French biologists and film-makers Claude Nuridsany and Marie Perennou developed a number of innovative film techniques to capture the world of insects and other small creatures in a European meadow over the course of 24 hours. Essentially, and miraculously, it is filmed from the insects' perspective — with all the different and

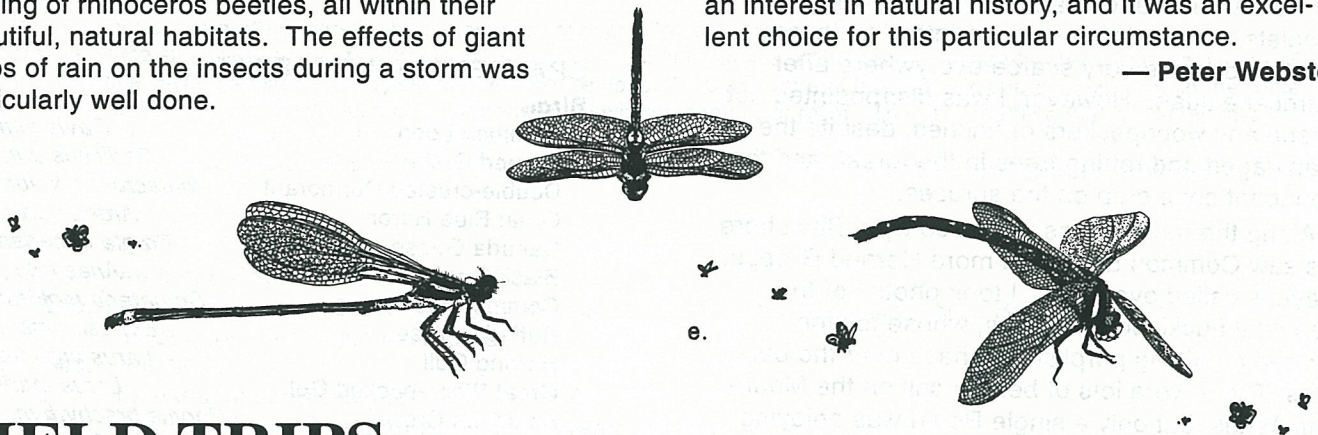
magnified sounds, sights, and views that their techniques engender.

The featured players include an indomitable dung beetle, the amazing underwater activities of water spiders, the Herculean labours of ants, the courting habits of snails, and the competitive battling of rhinoceros beetles, all within their beautiful, natural habitats. The effects of giant drops of rain on the insects during a storm was particularly well done.

It was a particular pleasure to watch this film with a group that included a number of knowledgeable naturalists. The commentary from the audience about the habits of the creatures being filmed gave an added depth to the experience.

This film is an absolute must see for anyone with an interest in natural history, and it was an excellent choice for this particular circumstance.

— Peter Webster



## FIELD TRIPS

### CRANBERRY PICK AND HIKE

**Date:** Saturday, 23 October, 2004

**Place:** Taylor Head Provincial Park

**Weather:** +8°, overcast with sunny breaks, windy

**Leader:** Scott Yetman

**Participants:** approximately 15

The weather didn't look too promising when I stopped at the Museum to pick up three people who wanted to come on the outing to Taylor Head. Overcast and windy, the skies threatened rain, and I predicted it would be much colder out on the peninsula than in the shelter of town. So we stopped by one person's home to pick up warmer clothing, just in case.

Once on the road, there were sunny breaks between grey clouds, and in fact the day brightened considerably. We found ourselves talking a lot about the damage Hurricane Juan did to this stretch of the coast. It was heartening to see that many Osprey returned this year and rebuilt their nests along the Eastern Shore, where they had been destroyed last fall. But we were sobered by the extensive clearcuts where the victims of Hurricane Juan have been cleared away.

It was almost sunny when we reached the entrance to Taylor Head Provincial Park, just past the village of Tangier. The peninsula juts six or seven kilometres out into the Atlantic, with wonderful coastal hiking trails. The Park closes after the Thanksgiving weekend, but Scott had arranged to get a key from the Department of Natural Resources, and so we were able to drive in, locking the gate behind us. We saw a lingering Great Blue Heron along the shore, and a few Horned Grebes out on the water.

We headed for the last parking lot, at Psyche Cove; the low-lying areas behind the dunes there are the best places to pick cranberries.

Some people settled in right away to pick the abundant large cranberries, *Vaccinium macrocarpon*, but most of us immediately scattered, heading out for a hike along one of the several trails.

Verna Higgins and I started for the beach with our binoculars, but were disappointed to find no shorebirds at all. Late fall stragglers are sometimes found here. The skies were grey and there was some fog off shore, and it was hard to see anything on the wind-chopped water. So we walked out over the old fields until we picked up the Spry Bay Loop. Along one of the boardwalks we found a Banded Woolly-bear Caterpillar, the larva of the Isabella Tiger Moth, *Pyrrharctia isabella*. This black/brown/black striped caterpillar is often seen crossing the road in late fall, as it feeds upon several common roadside weeds such as Dandelion and Common Plantain before going dormant for the winter.



**Burke-Gaffney Observatory:** Public shows at the Burke-Gaffney Observatory at Saint Mary's University are held on the 1st and 3rd Saturday of each month, except from June through September when they are held every Saturday. Tours begin at 7:00 p.m. between November 1 and March 30, and at either 9:00 p.m. or 10:00 p.m. (depending on when it gets dark) between April 1 and October 31. For more information, phone 496-8257, or go to <<http://apwww.stmarys.ca/bgmo/>>.

**Friends of McNabs Island:** For more information, go to <<http://chebucto.ns.ca/Environment/FOMIS/>>, or contact Dusan Soudek, 422-1045.

**26 Feb.** "Annual Dinner and Silent Auction" at Royal Artillery Park. Phone Faye Power, 443-1749 for tickets.

**Nova Scotia Bird Society:** Indoor meetings take place on the fourth Thursday of the month, September to May, at the Nova Scotia Museum of Natural History, 7:30 p.m. For more information, phone Suzanne Borkowski, 445-2922, or go to <<http://www.chebucto.ns.ca/Recreation/NS-BirdSoc/>>.

**8 Jan. Storm date - 9 Jan.** "Sewer Stroll 1, Halifax/Dartmouth Area", with leader Bob McDonald, 443-5051, email <[bobathome@hfx.eastlink.ca](mailto:bobathome@hfx.eastlink.ca)>.

**27 Jan.** "NSBS 50th Birthday Party and Members' Slide Night", with cake and 'historic' photos.

**19 Feb. Storm date - 20 Feb.** "Sewer Stroll 2, Halifax/Dart. Area", with leader Fulton Lavender, 455-4966

**24 Feb.** "Historic Rare Bird Sightings in Nova Scotia", with guest speaker Ian McLaren.

**20 Mar.** "Along the Fundy Shore", with leader Jim Wolford, 902-542-9204, email <[jww.triv@ns.sympatico.ca](mailto:jww.triv@ns.sympatico.ca)>.

**24 Mar.** "Surveying for Owls", with guest Speaker Becky Whittam, Bird Studies Canada.

**30 Mar.** "50 Years of Watching, Recording, Studying & Saving Birds", first in the "50th Anniversary Bird Lecture Series", with organiser Joan Waldron.

**2 Apr. Rain date - 3 April.** "Baccaro/Blanche Peninsula" with leader Donna Ensor, 902-875-4269, email <[smokeytow@yahoo.com](mailto:smokeytow@yahoo.com)>.

**Nova Scotia Museum of Natural History:** For more information, phone 424-6099, or 424-7353, or go to <<http://museum.gov.ns.ca/mnh/>>.

**15 Nov.-Jun.** "Trace Fossil Mystery", an interactive exhibit.

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**1 Jan.-7 Feb.** "Building Our Collections: Preserving Our Heritage", a special exhibit of new acquisitions.

**19 Jan.** "Places Less Travelled — Remote Areas of China", with Yau-Sun Tong of the NS Photo Guild.

**26 Jan.** "Focus on Winter Photography", with Stephen Scott Patterson of the NS Photo Guild.

**16 Feb.** "The Volcanoes of Greece", with Dr. David Piper, Geological Survey of Canada (Atlantic), and Dr. Georgia Pe-Piper, Saint Mary's University.

**2 Mar.** "Perilous Plants — Poison Plant Awareness", with Museum botanist, Marian Munro.

**12 Mar.-15 May** "Dinosaurs; big, bad... they're back!" Many activities, for children especially, during March Break.

**23 Mar.** "The Rocky Planets: A Geological Field Trip through the Inner Solar System", with Dr. Simon Hanmer, Geological Survey of Canada.



**Nova Scotia Wild Flora Society:** Meets fourth Monday of the month, September to May, at the Nova Scotia Museum of Natural History, 7:30 p.m. For more information, phone Barry Sawyer, 449-4938, or go to <<http://www.chebucto.ns.ca/~nswfs/>>.

**24 Jan.** "Members' Slide Night."

**Nova Scotian Institute of Science:** Meets first Monday of the month, September to April, at the Nova Scotia Museum of Natural History, 7:30 p.m. For more info, go to <<http://www.chebucto.ns.ca/Science/NSIS/index.html>>.

**7 Feb.** "Antibiotic use on the farm. Implications for human health?", with speaker Kevin Forward, Faculty of Medicine, Dalhousie University.

**7 Mar.** "Filling the void; discovering life beneath the seas", with speaker Ellen Kenchington, Fisheries and Oceans Canada.

**4 Apr.** "Hurricanes and their impact on the forests of Nova Scotia", with speaker Peter Neily, NS Department of Natural Resources.

**Photographic Guild of Nova Scotia:** Meets second Monday of the month, as well as the first and third Sundays of the month, at the Nova Scotia Museum of Natural History, 7:30 p.m. Shows are held at Saint Mary's University, Theatre A, Burke Education Centre. For more information, go to <<http://www.photoguild.ns.ca/>>.

**3 April** "N.S. Bird Society Trophy Competition"; & "Atlantic Geoscience Society Trophy Competition".

**Royal Astronomical Society of Canada (Halifax Chapter):** Meets third Friday of each month in Room L176 of the Loyola Academic Building at Saint Mary's University, 8:00 p.m. For more information, go to <<http://halifax.rasc.ca>>.



## NATURE NOTES

### October Meeting

Patrica Chalmers saw the following at the Frog Pond – a Green Teal duck, a Great Blue Heron, a Black Pole Warbler, and Witch Hazel.

As late as the 2nd of October, a hummingbird was seen (his/her flight south had been booked on Air Canada and consequently delayed!).

Peter Payzant spotted some small white orchids in a lawn. It was suggested that they might have been Ladies Tresses, *Spiranthes* sp.

John Smith went to the infamous beach at Pennant Point but was unable to find his usual cranberry area; he thought the high tides and salt spray caused by Juan might have killed them. Pat Chalmers, inspired by Fred's scientific talk on cougars, went the next day to check her cranberry spot. She reported that samples were large and dark red, but that the habitat was now deserted. The bulk of the species had been probably earlier removed to freezers!

— Pat Leader

### November Meeting

Prof. Jim Wolford gave us some more info re his sighting of a tree frog as noted in our last issue's Nature Notes; it was a grey tree frog, *Hyla versicolor*, a species not normally found north of southern Maine. This is in fact a rare and unusual visitor. The frog was sighted near Hennigar's Farmers Market; he speculates it may have come in with a shipment of plants from another part of the country.

Jim also mentioned that Red-bellied Woodpeckers, *Melanerpes carolinus*, seem to be expanding their range into Nova Scotia. Bob McDonald confirmed that he has seen one in South End Halifax.

Christine Anne Smith reported a bald Eagle, *Haliaeetus leucocephalus*, over Suzie Lake, west of Halifax. Peter Webster also saw Eagles near the city from hwy 103. Suzanne Borkowski suggested that she feels that Eagles are expanding their breeding range into the Halifax area; she noted nesting Eagles south of Halifax along hwy 103.

Doug Linzey noted viewing a female Merlin, *Falco columbarius*, hunting birds near his home in Hantsport. Finally, Bob McDonald noted that with the onset of cold weather, he has seen an increase in activity at his backyard birdfeeders. Others with feeders agreed.

— Peter Webster

### December Meeting

Flocks of snow buntings were seen the last weekend of November at the airport.

Patricia Chalmers spotted a Song Sparrow nest at eye level in a newly planted street tree (since Hurricane Juan). Also, she saw some fall dandelions still in bloom, and in Point Pleasant Park, at least a dozen species of plants were still flowering, one of which was Bunchberry. She also had a resident's report of the sighting of a deer in Marlborough Woods.

Allan Robertson spotted a blooming sunflower along the south end of Barrington Street.

Lesley Butters saw deer in a wetland in Burnside, and a noisy area at that. Regina saw a deer in a neighbour's garden on the 2nd December. Peter Payzant reported that there is a herd of resident deer in the Magazine Hill lands.

Keith Vaughan reported an unusual number of finches at his freshly filled bird feeder.

— Stephanie Robertson

**! NEXT DEADLINE !**  
**21 February for March Issue**  
**contributions to the Editor, HFN**  
**c/o NS Museum of Natural History**  
**or, 422-6326**