

## BELCHERS MARSH WALK

- Bernie McKenna

Date: Saturday, April 27, 2025

Place: Belchers Marsh, Clayton Park

Weather: Overcast, 5C, cool breeze

Leader: Sean Haughian

Participants: 13, leader included

This walk held in conjunction with the 2025 City Nature Challenge (CNCV) could very easily have been titled "Mosses 101". You will note Sean's specimen list includes; 3 lichens, 6 liverworts, 9 vascular plants, and 23 mosses. On top of that we had a number of species that walk-participants pointed out. The weather or projected weather did take a toll on our numbers, cutting us down from 21 registered to the 13 attending.

Based on experience, Sean came very well prepared with extra hand lenses (jewelry loupes and hand magnifiers) which he handed out. Both made a tremendous difference in viewing the specimens he handed us for a closer look. He also had a garden trowel that allowed for minimal plant disturbance when picking up specimens and placing them back down. Other than the odd inadvertent drop, most were returned to their original spot.

### BIRDS

The walk proper got off to a FLYING start, as a Great Blue Heron flew by at low altitude, its curved neck and blue-grey colouring being in contrast to the overcast sky. Almost immediately we saw an Osprey fishing for brunch, hovering a few times before diving, but whether it caught anything was hard to tell. Sean told us that there were suckers in the marsh, and I suspect unfortunately goldfish as well. There were five Canada Geese, and it looked like four had paired off into two couples. Both Mallard and Black Ducks were there, none of which paid much attention to us, being too familiar with people's handouts. Another bird that stood out was a solitary Tree Swallow that we saw on our return walk back to the cars.



## TREES

Apparently there are two beaver lodges/houses in the marsh, although we only saw one. The evidence of their presence was very visible in the number of tree stumps left from their workings. It seemed the birches were their food of choice. I'd have thought poplars, maples or alders would have been at the top of their list. They eat the bark, leaves and twigs, especially the inner bark as well as for lodge building supplies. The most numerous trees were likely the White Spruce, with lots of White Birch, Red Maples and Beech also in the mix. The only spot we saw Black Spruce was on a small island at the shore's edge. In spots the shoreline held clumps of Alders, but surprisingly I never noticed any Pussy Willows. One other tree that stood out was a non-native, Scots Pine of maybe 1.5 metres in height, not likely a volunteer but rather one planted. All of the trees appeared to be in good health, with the normal amount of blow downs and snags, and importantly, they supply nursery logs, bird food, shelter, nesting sites, and movement corridors. Some lesser shrubs and plants along the way were: a Witch Hazel in full bloom, a few Leather-leaf, a well named, acidic loving shrub, in full flower and growing close to the water. Our provincial flower, the Mayflower (*Epigaea arbutus*), was just coming into bud and a few were actually in bloom. Both multiflora and rugosa brambles were arching out in all directions, ready to snag any passers-by. Wetter spots had native Rhodora of a metre or more in height, and later they would put on their pink to purple show, making for good pollinator gathering. Sean pointed out two other pollinator favourites: Common Yarrow and Pearly Everlastings, and both seemed content with minimal growing conditions. The latter are a chosen host plant for the American Lady and Painted Lady butterfly larval stages. The last shrub (evergreen) I'll mention is Lambkill or Sheep Laurel--it's highly toxic but again a welcome provider for bees and butterflies.

## MOSESSES, LICHENS AND LIVERWORTS

These three seemed to be Sean's passion as evidenced by his knowledge level in seemingly every aspect of their lives. His specimen list gives the scientific and local common names of the species. The first mosses he showed us were just before the marsh outlet, a concrete form through which the water flow is channeled. He showed us how, by enhanced magnification, you can see greater detail, some of which help make the names more obvious. Sean explained that while the mosses are indeed plants, they lack the specialized tissues that transfer water and nutrients in vascular plants. Their stems, leaves, and reproductive systems have evolved in a more basic form. They don't have true roots, but do have rhizoids, thin hair or thread-like structures that anchor them instead of actual roots. They mainly obtain nutrients and water through the leaves and less so from these rhizoids. Typically thriving in moist environments, they have also adapted to colder, drier and warmer conditions. Sean showed us some mosses living in shallow soil and drier conditions, yet were looking very healthy. Some of the locally named species he showed were: Black Rock Moss, Waterside Feather Moss, Redshank Moss, Common Fork Moss, White Pincushion Moss and Yellow Fringe Moss. When viewed under magnification each of these names were very descriptive to one degree or another. I found looking up the individual mosses allowed a firmer grasp of the characteristics and features and made visualizing

the plant easier. At the walk start Sean detailed a very specialized moss found in both North America and Europe, the Knothole Moss. It is commonly found in water-filled tree holes, most often an oak or maple. Its spores are dispersed by insects, especially flies.

Our expert leader explained how mosses are quick to colonize bare soil, break down substrata for succeeding plants, and lessen soil erosion. He also talked about their forming dense mats in forests and woodlands, and how the Sphagnum species form extensive peat bogs that we have used for centuries past. These mosses have been identified through fossils going back almost 300 million years.

Sean took advantage of a large rock situated about halfway along the walk to ID some interesting items. One was Smooth Rock Tripe Lichen, apparently Washington's troops used it as food at Valley Forge in 1777/78. Boiled it can be eaten as food, in its raw state (from experience) I wouldn't recommend it! Like all lichens, it's a mutual arrangement of an algae and fungus that works for both. The same rock had a "small rock polypody plant" or Common Polypody, which is also known as Rock Cap Fern or Rock Polypody. It's a small evergreen fern that was clinging for life in a crevice of the rock. The rock was mostly covered in lichens of different colours, textures and shapes; the colour is mainly the result of the mineral content of the rock itself. Past here was a small water stream which made for a moist location that favoured several mosses, one being Sphagnum with its strong water-holding ability included. As well, there was a small liverwort specimen right at the edge of the water and another up a small incline at a drier spot where a species of leafy liverwort, a brown Rustwort, was actively covering the top portion of a rotting log.

This last stop pretty much wrapped up the Belchers Marsh Walk! Here we sincerely thanked Sean for once again conducting a very informative walk. The marsh trail is a busy one and despite the questionable weather, it was being well used by many people.