

THE WOODLAND OBSERVER

OCTOBER 2015



Making a Newsletter... One Page at a Time

Because I also do the newsletter for Bird Wing, when I was asked by Fred Pinto if I would assume the task of editor of *The Woodland Observer*, it was with some trepidation. But, I thought, at least I don't have to take notes at meetings or write the articles as I do for Bird Wing, except for small information articles. However, I found that editing copy and developing the newsletter's new design as taxing, if not more so, than writing the Bird Wing newsletter. There are photos to be found and added to the text in a meaningful and aesthetic manner, whether editing or writing. But if this October edition is any indication, everyone has been very helpful and has provided me with articles in a timely fashion.



In deciding that I wanted the newsletter to have a cover similar to a magazine cover, I wasn't prepared for how difficult this can be. The photo has to lend itself to be cropped to fit the cover and it has to have minimal or no imagery at the top in order to be able to read the name of the newsletter.

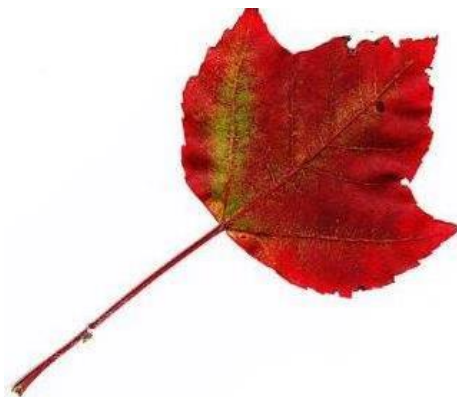
I will be using seasonal photographs, although that may change with time. But for now, what better way to welcome in October and the new-look October edition of *The Woodland Observer* than with a fall photograph on the cover.

The photo chosen shows some woods, thereby taking into account the upcoming fall walk in Laurier Woods and the article on trees and forestry by Lynn Ingham. But if it just also had a Bank Swallow, a honeybee, a fern and a moose in it, to take into account Sonje Bol's article on Bank Swallows, Fred Pinto's article on the Nipissing Naturalist's Club's visit to Board's honeybee farm, Dick Tafel's article on non-seed producing plants and Karen Major's article on animal visitations to her pond, it would have been perfect!

I welcome written and photograph submissions by members. I may not be able to use them all, or use them all right away, but will always see what I can do. It is your newsletter.

Renee Levesque, Editor

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Bank Swallows and Canada's Boreal North: Biological and Historical Perspectives

By Sonje Bols



Yukon River, photo by Sonje Bols

As a Nipissing University student working on her Masters of Environmental Science, I have had many opportunities to talk about my project to a variety of groups, from fellow students to tourists. At the September Nipissing Naturalists Club meeting, I was fortunate enough to be invited to speak to club members. The following is a summary of that presentation which detailed my project and fieldwork in Whitehorse, Yukon, during the summer of 2015.

Background and Project Introduction

Bank Swallows are the smallest of the North American Swallows and are found all across the continent, from central United States north to Canada's Boreal Forest. They have dark gray backs and wings and white bellies that possess a distinctive gray chest-band. They nest colonially in sandy, near-vertical banks like those found along lakes, rivers and in gravel pits. In these banks they dig (using their beaks, wings and feet) deep burrows in which they raise their young. They certainly are fascinating birds, but why is it so important to study them?



Photo by Kris Vande Sompel, courtesy of Bird Studies Canada

Recently, birds like Bank Swallows have been getting a lot of attention in the scientific community. Bank Swallows belong to a group of birds known as aerial insectivores, characterized by their ability to catch flying insects which form a major part (or all) of their diet. Recent studies have shown that swallows are declining more steeply than any other group of birds in North America – and it's not known exactly why. Bank Swallows have declined by over 90% in Canada from 1970 to 2011.

A few hypotheses have been put forward, from intensive agriculture to climate change, but it has so far proven difficult to study or pinpoint an overall cause of decline. My hopes for this study are to shed a bit of light on this decline by focussing on one type of aerial insectivore – the Bank Swallow.

In my study, I focus on Bank Swallow nesting habitat in Canada's Boreal Forest with goals to a) identify good-quality habitat characteristics that can be prioritized for conservation, and b) determine if nest habitat characteristics can explain Bank

Swallow decline (and perhaps that of aerial insectivores). To do this, I am examining both historic and current Boreal nesting habitat.

Why historic nesting habitat? Because a greater understanding of an animal's decline can be obtained by looking at its population and behaviour over the long term. Also, no known Bank Swallow study has examined historic nesting locations in Canada. Combined with fieldwork in current nest colonies, I can generate a well-rounded understanding of Bank Swallow nesting biology. By focussing on the Boreal Forest, my findings are contained in a useful ecological boundary. Furthermore, bird communities in this ecoregion are little-understood and require further study.

Fieldwork

I travelled to Whitehorse, Yukon, where an abundance of nesting habitat supports a large sample size of my study subjects, and canoed various 25km stretches of the Yukon River to locate and study Bank Swallow colonies. At these colonies, I recorded a variety of nest-site characteristics including bank height, number of burrows, and aspect. I also grabbed soil samples (photo below) from both occupied and unoccupied Bank Swallow colonies.



Photo by Alex DeBruyn

I took 30-minute videos of the colonies to measure how often nestlings were being fed and how many occupied nests eventually produced juveniles. Juveniles can be seen when they are about two weeks old, perched at the edges of their burrows awaiting food from their parents. By measuring these variables, I can get a good idea of nesting success and compare it to the nest-site characteristics mentioned earlier.

Historical Work

It can be difficult to study historic information on birds. It often comes in the form of diary entries, quickly-jotted notes or expedition journals, but with a critical eye and by keeping context in mind, many studies have managed to draw meaningful conclusions about bird populations through these records.

What I am doing is aggregating all the historical information (dating before such standardized bird monitoring programs as the Breeding Bird Survey which began in the 1960s) on Bank Swallow nest sites in the Boreal Forest Region I can find and mapping it. By doing this, I hope to reveal patterns of nest site selection and use. Perhaps Bank Swallows nest in man-made habitat like gravel pits and road cuts more often in some regions than others? Maybe there is a relationship between northern Ontario development and Bank Swallow nest colony locations? These are a few of many questions that have cropped up in my research so far.

While I approach the issue of Bank Swallow decline from a variety of angles, I have one goal: to better understand this decline so we can work to bring Bank Swallows back to a healthy population. I'm excited to see what I find!

Editor's note: Please visit Bird Studies Canada's swift and swallow website, <http://www.bsc-eoc.org/birdmon/ai/main.jsp> and report your sightings of swifts and swallows, including Bank Swallows. Most of these species will have long left our area, but please keep this in mind for the spring.

At Chris's Pond

By Karen Major

A couple of years ago, my husband, Chris, dug a pond out in our field just because he wanted one. He had visions of deer, moose, and other wild creatures coming to this pond and building a whole new ecosystem in the water. Well, his vision came true.

Frogs have taken up residence and last year we had tadpoles overwinter and turn into frogs this year. There are also dragonfly larva, water sticks and water boatmen.

We saw deer and moose tracks by the pond too. Then, one evening Chris yelled out saying there was a cow moose and calf in the back field. Once we were able to get a better look, it turned out to be two bull moose. They were obviously the ones that had been visiting the pond because they came out of the bush, went directly to the pond, waded through it, then went back into the bush. Seems they just wanted to cool off. One of the bulls had both antlers, the other was missing one.



Photo by Karen Major



Photo by Karen Major

One day, my friend Jackie, Chris and I were sitting by the pond just enjoying the peace as we watched the frogs sunning themselves and the dragonflies laying their eggs in the water. Suddenly, one of the frogs jumped up trying to grab a dragonfly. It missed. This went on a few times. Unfortunately, I didn't have my camera with me so I ran home to get it. As luck would have it, once I had my camera, the frogs stopped their jumping after dragonflies. What a wonderful sight to experience, though.

At the back of our property is a large beaver pond. I like to go sit there in the evenings and see what creatures come out. This year, I watched two adult beaver feeding on lily flowers. I could hear the crunching as they fed. These beaver are very curious little guys and will swim about 20 feet away from me, back and forth, watching me watching them. After the adults fed, I'm sure they sent Junior out to feed because never before have I seen such a small beaver. I also saw the mother deer bring her fawn to the beaver pond.

I had great nature experiences this summer. I hope you did too.

Bird Sightings of the Season

By Renee Levesque

In the wonderful world of birds, there have been some very interesting “finds” so far this season. To date, Fred Pinto’s and Marc Buchanan’s spotting of the Great Egret, a very rare find indeed in our area, tops the list. (See photo at right.) Fred and Marc saw this bird at the Powassan Lagoon while out on their August Bird Bash. The bird didn’t stay around for long, but long enough for Fred to capture it on camera before it flew off in a south-westerly direction.

Other recent interesting sightings of shorebirds not frequently seen in our area were the Baird’s Sandpiper and the Whimbrel, the former at the Callander Lagoon and at Sunset Park, the latter along the waterfront.

Therez Violette recently saw a Snow Goose (see below) on Lake Nipissing in Sturgeon Falls, along with about 70 Canada Geese. Snow Geese may be seen in the hundreds in British Columbia, and along the St. Lawrence, but we are lucky to see two or three here and not every year.



Photo by Fred Pinto



Photo by Therez Violette

Another rare sighting was that of the Black-bellied Plover spotted by Dick Tafel and Renee Levesque at Sunset Park. It was on one of the rocky outcrops near the point, but flew the short distance to the beach at Sunset when a mink decided to swim and climb onto to the rock the plover was on. (See photos below.)



Photos by Renee Levesque

If you are interested in birds, attend the **Bird Wing meetings held the fourth Tuesday of every month from 6:30 to 9:00 p.m. in the auditorium of North Bay Public Library.** The membership fee is low, just \$5.00 for the year.

Bird Bash events take place monthly, the date varying depending on when the optimum number of birds can be expected. It is a fun event. Gets you out to areas within 50 miles of North Bay and gets you noticing all the birds in the districts of Nipissing, Parry Sound and Sudbury.

For more information about Bird Wing and the Bird Bashes, contact Dick Tafel at 705-472-7907 or email him at rtafel@sympatico.ca.

Ferns and Other Non-seed Producing Plants

By Dick Tafel

Some twenty curious naturalists found out a lot about non-seed producing plants - ferns and mosses - during a lovely September 5 hike in Laurier Woods. Although these plants are commonly found in Ontario, ferns and mosses are such beautiful features of our lovely woods!

Joseph Boivin, an instructor in Nipissing University's biology department, identified for the group some six local ferns and three mosses and explained how they materially differ from the far more obvious seed-producing group of plants. He also explained how they have survived through the centuries, though beset by considerable competition.

Joe explained that it is only during the "fiddle-head" period of growth that ferns are edible. Interestingly, animals and insects have not discovered how to ingest the ingredients of the fronds.

Ferns reproduce via spores and create wide groupings by joining up via underground rhizomes.

Participants were provided with a descriptive aid illustrating the make-up of ferns and the names of some of the common ferns found in Laurier Woods:



Cinnamon, Interrupted, Sensitive and Bracken. (See table below.)

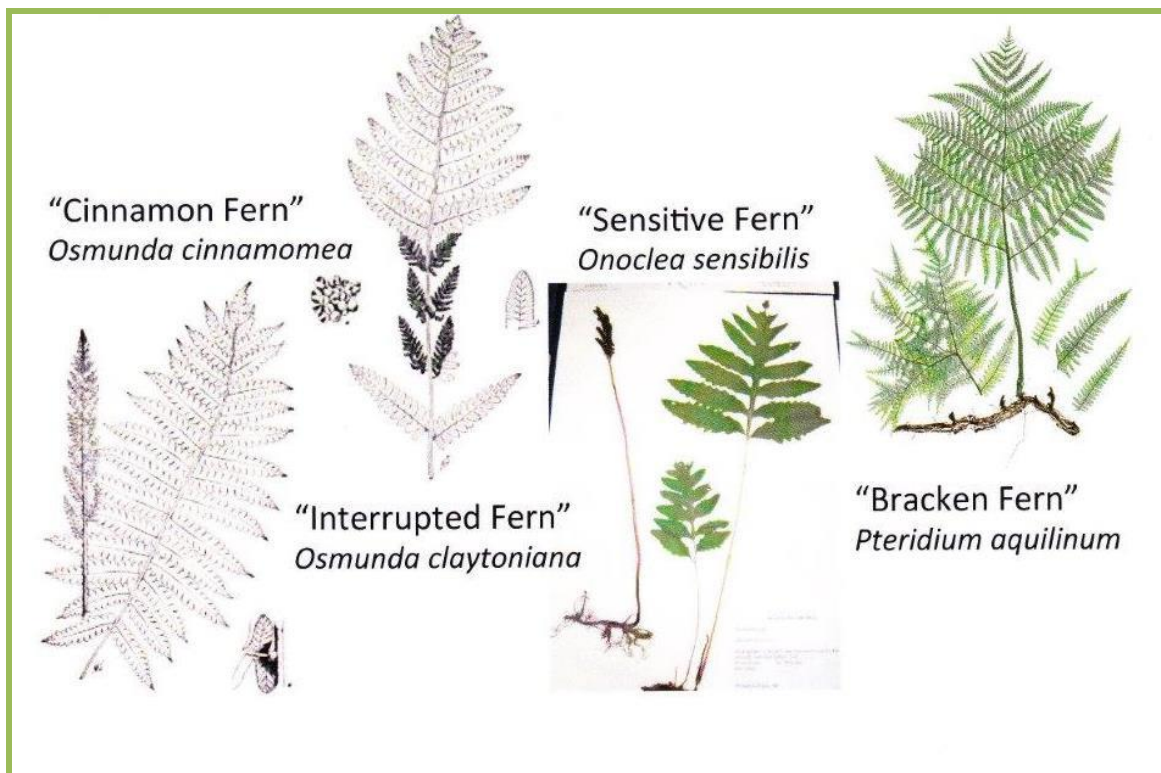
The annual growth periods of Club Mosses and the manner of growth of Reindeer Mosses and lichens were also touched upon.

It was a period of great discovery by all participants, none of whom flittered away, or showed signs of decay, during Joe's most informative presentation.



For more information on ferns and mosses, check out this website: <http://www.kidsgardening.org/node/12087>. It is an easy read, unlike some sites on non-seed producing plants.

If you were not present for this walk, you missed an eventful morning! But not to fear, **other walks will be conducted the first Saturday of each month for the rest of the year to commemorate Laurier Woods' 25th anniversary.**



Guided Walks in Laurier Woods

Since May of this year, guided walks have been held in Laurier Woods to commemorate its 25th anniversary. Word is getting out just how informative and interesting these walks are – over the past couple of months, the number of people participating in them has greatly increased. In August, about 40 people participated and in September, about 20.

Be sure to participate in the three guided walks that will take place on the **first Saturday of the month, from 10:00 a.m. to noon, in October, November and December** when you will see the Woods in all its splendid autumn glory and in its crisp early stage of winter.

Upcoming guided walks for the rest of the year are:

Saturday, October 3, *Investigating Tracks and Signs*, led by Jeremy St. Onge and Lucy Emmott, local biologists who grow and harvest their own food and who trap and fish.

Saturday, November 7, *Geology of Laurier Woods*, led by Larry Dyke, retired from the Geological Survey of Canada and prior to that taught engineering geology and hydrogeology at Queen's University.

Saturday, December 5, *History of Laurier Woods*, led by Dick Tafel, well-known local naturalist, birder and one of the founders in 1990 of Laurier Woods, saving a natural sanctuary from urban encroachment. For his efforts, Dick was awarded, in 2012, the Queen's Jubilee Medal. This walk marks a fitting way to end Laurier Woods' 25th year.



Photo by Renee Levesque

Board's Northern Nectars Honey Farm

By Fred Pinto



The summer air was heavy with the scent of flowers when we visited Ann and Stefan Board's Northern Nectars Honey Farm in Restoule on July 19. Their eight-acre property is full of buildings and trails that display different aspects and products of the honeybee (seen above).

We started in the Bee Bus, a school bus that Stefan used his skill as a welder to modify into a classroom.

Bees take about 24 days to grow from egg to adult. Adults, who are not queens, are either drones, males whose purpose is to mate with a fertile queen, or worker bees, females who gather the pollen. The royal jelly, the honeybee secretion, is fed to the developing larvae (seen at right) and results in the development of a queen. Queens live for up to 3 years.

Every few days, worker bees transfer to a new job. They begin as cleaner bees and after about three days, move on to become bees that control the



Photo by Fred Pinto

temperature of the hive, kept at an amazing 30° C. even in the winter. Another task the worker bee is responsible for is searching for flowers with a high amount of nectar. Once it finds these flowers, it flies back and communicates the geographic location through a dance. It also communicates which flowers are full of nectar by sharing the nectar it brings back to the hive. In this way, the worker bee that now heads out to collect nectar knows where to fly to and the specific flowers it needs to visit.

After the Bee Bus, we moved to the hives, located in an area surrounded by an electric fence to keep bears away. Because it had been raining, most of the bees were in their hives. But once the rain stopped, the bees began flying around.



Photo by Kaye Edmonds

Modern bee hives have a plastic separator to keep the queen out of the topmost box, called the super, so that only honey is stored in the super. The queen can walk from cell to cell in the brood boxes below, laying one egg in each cell.

A bee that has stung emits an acrid smell that gets other bees agitated. Bee venom is being used by some to treat a variety of diseases, such as arthritis and blood pressure.

In addition to the varieties of honey, such as lavender infused honey, Board's gift store, open daily from 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., also sells beeswax candles, soap, insect repellent and lip balm, all made at Board's.



Wetland Conservation in Ontario

Ministry posts discussion paper for public input



Photo by Renee Levesque

The Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry was given a mandate to review Ontario's wetland conservation framework and identify ways to strengthen policies and stop the loss of wetlands.

The Ministry recently posted a discussion paper that provides an overview of Ontario wetlands for the purpose of stimulating ideas that will help guide the government's actions over the next decade, ideas that could be included in the government's *Strategic Plan for Wetlands in Ontario*, ideas that could help identify challenges and opportunities associated with wetland conservation in Ontario.

You can read the discussion paper and post your ideas online by visiting: <http://www.ebr.gov.on.ca/ERS-WEB-External/displaynoticecontent.do?noticeId=MTI1MzM3&statusId=MTg4ODE3>.

You will note on the right-hand side of the web page an address to where comments are to be submitted in writing or, if you prefer to submit your comments electronically, a comment link whereby comments can be submitted online using the form provided. **Comments must be submitted by October 30, 2015.**

The Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry will also be holding a series of public sessions to seek feedback. In North Bay, the public session will be held at **Discovery North Bay Museum, 100 Ferguson Street, on Thursday, October 8, 2015, from 6:30 to 8:00 p.m.**

We have some significant wetlands in our area, wetlands we need to preserve. Therefore, your contribution is important.

Forestry Is Simply Not Clear Cut

Reconsidering Our Views of the Trees

By Lynn Ingham

Dr. Mark Kuhlberg, Professor of History, Laurentian University, began his presentation at the June 9th club meeting by declaring that he is a self-confessed “tree hugger”, finding joy in being with trees. His initial encounter with forests and forestry was not until he was a tree planter while at university. It was during this time he came to understand how foresters protect all of the forest and he developed his belief that logic, not emotion, be one’s guide in managing human activity in the environment.

Politicians, he believes, often tend to make poor forestry decisions based on short-term goals. Forests and forestry need to be assessed on a long-term basis. Because people have less of a connection with nature today than in the past, they can be easily swayed by emotional stories, when it is logic that is needed to determine solutions to the uses of forests.

Dr. Kuhlberg pointed out some myths about the nature of the forest before European contact some 400 years ago:

- that the whole forest is idyllic despite its varied nature caused by a variety of natural and human disturbances.
- that the death of trees is undesirable despite the fact that this is a crucial process of nature.
- that forest fires are not necessarily devastating. Over the long term, fires are very functional in a living forest, serving a regenerative purpose.

He emphasized that sometimes social values get in the way of good environmental decision-making. For example, is a fur coat necessarily inappropriate relative to the petrochemicals and energy involved in manufacturing plastics that do not decompose? And there are those who oppose clear cutting of the forest which results in a temporary opening, but then remove natural vegetation for very long periods (i.e. deforestation) for homes, factories and agriculture.

Dr. Kuhlberg pointed out that the monoculture of some tree plants is very similar to nature's own Black Spruce, Jack Pine and Poplar monocultures, dispelling the demerit of tree planting with just one tree species.

Some other facts:

- 1) The fees paid to the province for trees that were cut were the single most significant source of revenue for Ontario until the introduction of income tax. These provincial revenues were used to build the infrastructure that helped to diversify Ontario's economy and help its citizens.
- 2) Since 90% of the forests in Ontario are owned collectively by its citizens, it is important that the general public develop a forest culture and understand the dynamics of nature.
- 3) Forestry is complicated and Ontario requires foresters to be licenced. They develop and implement forest plans on Crown, private and urban forests. These licenced professionals protect the public's interest and are held accountable like other licenced professionals.

In summary, Dr. Kuhlberg advocates a "Head Over Heart" approach: forest stewardship should be driven by logic, not emotion.



Photo by Renee Levesque

Upcoming Speakers at Monthly Meetings

Three informative speakers will be presenting appealing topics at the last three monthly meetings of 2015. **Meetings take place the second Tuesday of every month starting at 7:00 p.m. in the auditorium of Casselholme.**

On Tuesday, October 13, Maxime Lefebvre, a former student at Nipissing University, will be talking about the Lady Slipper and native orchids. We are all in awe of these woodland plants and get quite excited when we spot one in the woods.

On Tuesday, November 10, Rebecca Geauvreau, Biologist and the species at risk specialist with FRi Ecological Services, North Bay, will talk about bats, including the Little Brown Myotis (seen below), a species at risk because of a rapidly spreading fungal disease known as white-nose syndrome (WNS) that affects hibernating bats. This talk is especially topical for us in Nipissing because the largest maternal colony in Ontario of the Little Brown Myotis is in Lavigne.



Lady Slipper, photo by Renee Levesque

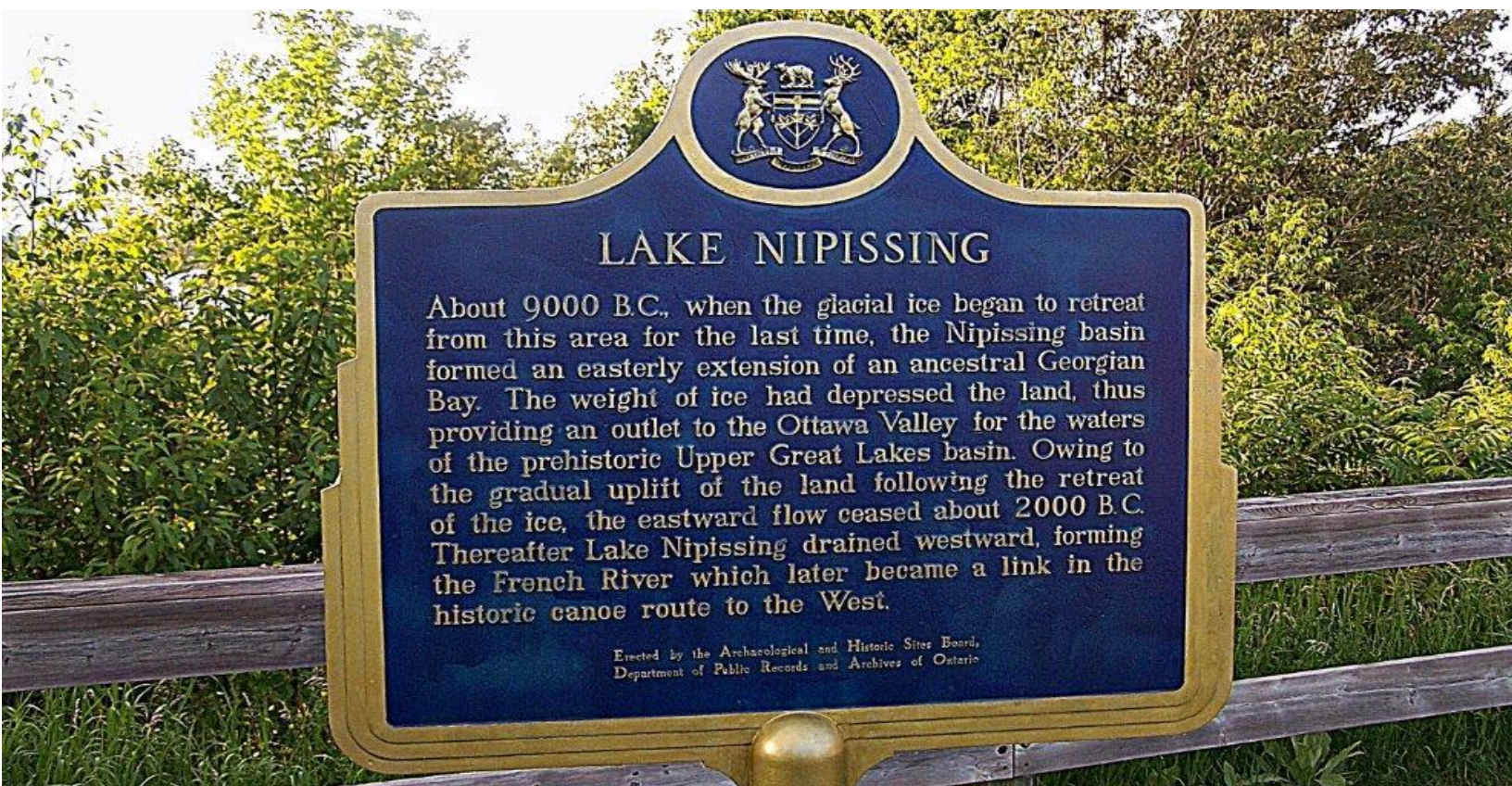


Photo by Renee Levesque



Photo by Renee Levesque

On Tuesday, December 8, 2014, Bill Steer, local author, columnist, historian and environmentalist, will talk about the natural and cultural history of northeastern Ontario. A dynamic speaker, Bill will be sure to provide us with many interesting insights and point the way to some off-the-beaten-tracks, tracks Champlain may have put down





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Special thanks to Kris Vande Sompel and Bird Studies Canada for the Bank Swallow photo and to Alex De Bruyn for the photograph of Sonje scaling the sandy heights.

Membership Fees

Yearly Nipissing Naturalist Club membership fees are: single, \$20.00; family, \$30.00

There is an **additional \$5.00 membership fee for Bird Wing** which meets the **fourth Tuesday of every month in the auditorium of the North Bay Public Library from 6:30 to 9:00 p.m.** That fee is paid directly to Bird Wing.



The Nipissing Naturalist Club is affiliated with Ontario Nature. Check out its website at <http://www.ontarionature.org/>.

The Nipissing Naturalist Club website is found at <http://www.nipnats.com/>. The Woodland Observer and the Bird Wing monthly newsletters are posted there under "Newsletters and Bird Wing". Click on that link found on the left side of the home page.