

# The Woodland Observer

*Newsletter of the Nipissing Naturalists Club*

[www.nipnats.com](http://www.nipnats.com)



March 2020

This month's cover photo is a reprise of Fred Pinto's winning entry to last year's Photo Contest, showing a beautiful winter scene in Widdifield Forest Provincial Park.

Fred Pinto

## **From the Editor**

This month's *Woodland Observer* highlights some of the Club's recent winter snowshoe outings and Peter Ferris' inspiring presentation on canoeing in Nahanni National Park. There is a submitted book review by Chris Connors about a geologist's reflections on the natural world, prompted by a journey to Greenland; and Renee Levesque has provided an in-depth review of a feature article about Ron Pittaway published in the prestigious magazine, *Living Bird*, from the Cornell Lab of Ornithology.

Thank-you to all the contributors to this month's edition. As always, I welcome any nature-related observations, photos, or articles of interest for inclusion in the newsletter. I can be reached by e-mail ([gmckercher@mac.com](mailto:gmckercher@mac.com)) or phone/text (705-499-5577).

## Recent Meetings and Club Activities

### **Snowshoe Outings – February 1<sup>st</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup> & 23<sup>rd</sup>**



Kaye Edmonds

A large number of enthusiastic members and other interested people showed up for an evening walk/snowshoe through Laurier Woods on February 1<sup>st</sup>. It was a mild, calm evening, and ideal for a walk. We were led by Fred Pinto and Katie Tripp who guided the group(s) along the trails and provided information about the area and the stewardship role of the Friends of Laurier Woods and the Conservation Authority in maintaining this unique park in the heart of North Bay.



Kaye Edmonds

Katie gave an informative talk about [Phragmites](#) (Common European Reed), an invasive species of plant that has spread widely across the United States and southern Canada. We are now seeing it more, even in Northern Ontario. It causes damage to biodiversity, wetlands and beaches by out-competing native species for water and nutrients. She pointed out some areas where it is growing in Laurier Woods.



Kaye Edmonds

On February 8<sup>th</sup> a group enjoyed a beautiful sunny Saturday while snowshoeing along the Cranberry Trail – Lavase River Loop.

On February 23<sup>rd</sup> another snowshoe trek went to the Redbridge Lookout to enjoy the view from the top.

Many thanks to Daniel Kaminski for organizing these popular winter outings!



View from the Redbridge Lookout

Fred Pinto



## Club Meeting presentation February 11<sup>th</sup>

### “Experiencing the Broken Skull and South Nahanni Rivers – Three Weeks in Paradise” by Peter Ferris

In the summer of 2019, Peter and five companions canoed two remote rivers in the Nahanni National Park Reserve in the Northwest Territories.

At the club meeting he presented an enthralling slide show of his adventures, including navigating through a series of spectacular canyons, rapids and whitewater with names such as Tricky Current and Lafferty’s Riffle. A highlight of the trip was being able to see Virginia Falls, which is twice the height of Niagara.

In addition to seeing the breathtaking geological formations through which the rivers ran, animals were also encountered on the way, including moose, bear, wolf and various bird species.



Peter Ferris



Peter Ferris



Peter Ferris



Peter Ferris

We certainly look forward to hearing more about Peter’s future canoeing adventures, brought to life by his wonderful photographs, and storytelling.

Listed below are two website links providing further video highlights of the Nahanni National Park Preserve and a documentary about one of the legendary early prospectors, Albert Faille.

*Highlights of Nahanni National Park Reserve* - a Parks Canada film (2012) about this spectacular Canadian natural treasure, which is also a UNESCO World Heritage Site [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xJl\\_SdU2osg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xJl_SdU2osg)

*Nahanni* - a NFB film (1962) about an aging prospector, Albert Faille, and his quest for lost gold <https://www.nfb.ca/film/nahanni/>

## Book Review

*By Chris Connors*

**A Wilder Time: Notes From a Geologist at the Edge of the Greenland Ice** by William E. Glassley

Published January 2018, Bellevue Literary Press. 224 pp.

*"[Wilderness] is good for us when we are young, because of the incomparable sanity it can bring briefly, as vacation and rest, into our insane lives. It is important to us when we are old simply because it is there—important, that is, simply as an idea. – Wallace Stegner, "Wilderness Letter", 1960."*

The author, William Glassley, is a geologist who worked in Greenland with two other geologists to gather evidence that demonstrated the theory of plate tectonics is a more ancient process than some believed.

However, in this book the geology is more a side story with the main part of the book an ode to wilderness, an evocative and poetic narrative on how wilderness shapes our minds and thinking.

*"I am not who I was when I got off that plane at Kangerlussuaq. Certainties I held to be immutable—what the world was, what constituted reality and knowledge—are evolving as we live here."*

*"Separation from the clutter of culture removes the incessant challenges of having to judge, act, and react to bombarding opinions and information."*

Even when geology is discussed the writing is still poetic.

*"That rock can flow always astonishes, but revealed in those outcrops are patterns that imagination could never conjure...Layer upon layer, some a fraction of an inch thick, some thicker than houses, colored in a palette of earth tones and off-whites, greens and blue-blacks and reds, fold back on one another, pinch and swell, stretch to paper thinness, then thicken again, telling stories we ache to know but can barely read."*

Biology and natural history are also described in such detail you can almost see it yourself. On a fishing trip to crystal clear water in a bay nestled between ocean cliffs he noticed the cliff was a solid purple colour once it entered the water. Why would it be purple, he wondered? He rowed over. It was covered in purple sea urchins

*"... so densely crowded that their spines tangled together in an organic, spiked weaving. Barely an inch of space existed between any of them for hundreds of feet. Looking closer, it became clear that what seemed a static purple surface writhed in subtle motion, each urchin slowly making its way through that forest of individuals, spines lazily waving in the current, grazing on whatever algal remnant had been missed by its neighbors."*

A short while later he puzzled over an iridescent wire just below the surface.

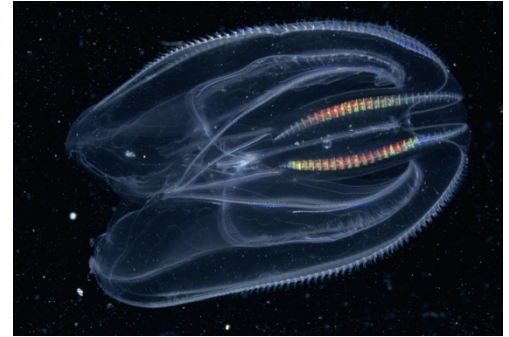
*"Then, as though a veil had suddenly been lifted, that one wire resolved into a collection of hundreds, moving in a slow ballet with the gentle current."*

They were comb jellies.

*“The cilia beat in rhythmic waves that flowed along the nearly transparent bodies, giving the impression of thin threads of rainbow colors tumbling in the clear water. They surrounded the boat as far as I could see, immersing me in a world of shimmering kinematic magic.”*

At that point, he writes, he gave up on fishing.

*“There was nothing to do but relinquish intent and float with the jellies. I lay down in the boat, head braced on the stern board, and gazed at the silent spectacle of light and colors, mesmerized, as the skiff slowly turned.”*



Comb jelly, from National Geographic  
<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/news/2014/5/140521-comb-jelly-ctenophores-oldest-animal-family-tree-science/>

Throughout the book he wonders what we have lost in ourselves when we cannot find the wilderness; and how you miss its impact when you have never experienced its impact?

He argues “wilderness as an idea” is a resource in its own right, which is a similar argument made by Wallace Stegner (quoted at the start of this review) in his 1960s Wilderness Letter to the Outdoor Recreation Resources Review Commission’s report: *“What I want to speak for is not so much the wilderness uses, valuable as those are, but the wilderness idea, which is a resource in itself.”*

Both Stegner and Glassley argue that the wilderness idea is something that has helped form our character. Even if we are no longer able to experience wilderness, knowing it is there is comforting.

*“We simply need that wild country available to us, even if we never do more than drive to its edge and look in. For it can be a means of reassuring ourselves of our sanity as creatures, a part of the geography of hope (Stegner).”*

Glassley’s writing on placing a higher priority on wilderness rather than developing it is reminiscent of many other authors: Rachel Carson, Aldo Leopold, Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, Edward Abbey. Indeed, their books are listed in his acknowledgements. Like them Glassley asks that we have the forethought and wisdom to recognize what we are doing to wilderness, and why destroying the wilderness will also leave us impoverished, if not destroyed ourselves.

*“...on every continent, wilderness is being consumed, and the people who have depended on it, living at its fringe and within its embrace, are forced to relinquish what they cherish. ... Whether through direct experience or through poetry, art, or song, we must share and celebrate the wild so that it may be saved. The lives lived there—of all species—are worthy of our recognition and respect, the land, our awe, art, and dreams.”*

This is a beautiful poetic book putting into words what many of us already know and feel. It is a reminder that the idea and sense of wilderness runs deep in us, and that without it we all lose something essential that is within ourselves.



# Ron Pittaway, celebrity winter finch forecaster

By *Renee Levesque*

My favourite bird magazine by far is *Living Bird*, Cornell Lab of Ornithology. I love the cover design (to the point where I used it as my model when I was editor of the newsletter) and this February's magazine with a Common Redpoll on the cover was no exception. Perhaps because we are not seeing the Common Redpoll here this winter, I was curious why the magazine was using its photo and to discover that it was because Ontario's Ron Pittaway (pictured at right) was the featured birder was indeed a real treat. (To read the *Living Bird* article, see <https://www.allaboutbirds.org/news/how-ron-pittaway-developed-his-acclaimed-winter-finch-forecast/>.)



*Jean Iron*

I have never met Ron but we have emailed back and forth over the last three or four years. I think it may have started with a finch question from his annual Winter Finch Forecast, a forecast for which he has become famous among birders. I have found over these years that despite Ron's great knowledge, reputation and celebrity status as a birder, he has always been patient, understanding and helpful towards me and I suspect to others like me who, comparatively speaking, are birding novices.



*Renee Levesque*

The article in *Living Bird* is titled "The Winter Finch Almanac" by Hannah Hoag who compares Ron's Winter Finch Forecast to the Farmer's Almanac. It is not as if Ron has special magic powers that enable him to predict what finches and finch-like birds will appear in various areas each winter. Instead, his predictions are based on science as well as his knowledge of finches and their irruptions or itinerant wanderings.

An irruption occurs when large numbers of birds move outside their normal range to find food elsewhere, and where they go is closely tied to the summer production of seeds by trees.

For years, I have been summarizing Ron's Winter Finch Forecast in our Bird Wing reports, and even in *The*

*Woodland Observer* while I was editor. It is a forecast birders rely upon, preparing them for the excitement of winter species they are bound to see in their area, but also preparing them for the disappointment of species they will not be seeing. In Southern Ontario, many birders were very excited at Ron's forecast for the winter of 2019 when he predicted an influx of Evening Grosbeaks, (pictured at left) Pine Grosbeaks and redpolls, species birders in Southern Ontario don't often get to see. This winter (2020) we are missing Pine and Evening Grosbeaks and redpolls, but they are being seen further north, as Ron had predicted in this winter's finch forecast.

Matt Young, a Cornell Lab of Ornithology scientist, states that "Ron's Winter Finch Forecast is one of the most eagerly anticipated events of the year", comparable to our waiting to see what Wiarton Willy will predict. (Matt used Punxatawney Phil as his groundhog example because after all, *Living Bird* is an American magazine.)

So how does Ron make these predictions? Certainly not by seeing or not seeing shadows! Instead his predictions are rooted in science. "My forecasts try to make sense of what might happen based on tree seed crops and knowledge of past irruptions."

"It is a matter of knowing which crops are heavy in which places, and knowing which of those crops are prized by which finch species. The hard part is actually gathering and collating all that information from remote places in Canada."



Stephen O'Donnell

Over the 21 years Ron has been forecasting, he has built up a connection of 30 trusted bird and tree experts, bird experts like club member Stephen O'Donnell, and tree experts like Fred Pinto. They are two of Ron's intelligence agents and are credited along with all the other agents at the bottom of Ron's forecast reports. (Stephen's photo of a Common Redpoll is pictured at right.)

Ron assiduously goes over the data he receives from his intelligence agents and "weighs the seed crop abundance of one tree species against another, pinpoints their location, compares them to previous years and looks for backup food sources – such as berries or outbreaks of spruce budworms – that might allow the birds to stay put." In other words, based on the information he receives and his study of this information, Ron "builds a seed crop map of North America in his mind." His first written report is ready in draft form by late August and updated as he receives more information. By the third week of September, his forecast is completed and posted online.

It was in 1999 that Ron published his first official Winter Finch Forecast, although he made informal predictions to his birding friends prior to that. In 1999, computer technology was still evolving and predictions were received by birders primarily by email through Ontbirds and



Birdchat. But as technology evolved and Ron's predictions became more and more popular, even worldwide especially during irruption years, he began posting his forecasts on the website of his partner, Jean Iron. (See <http://www.jeaniron.ca/2019/wff19.htm>.)

Why is there such anticipation and excitement for Ron's forecasts? Ron's take on it is, "There is something about boreal finches that excites the birders, something about their unpredictable nomadic nature" – something magical and mysterious about them.

Ron developed an interest in birds while growing up in Aylmer, Quebec. As a keen birder, he noticed that some winters there were many finches and others not as many. But it wasn't until he met Ian Newton, a British ornithologist and a finch expert, that he learned more about finch irruptions. In 1972, Ian's book, *Finches*, was published, a book Ron once highly recommended I buy. He said its content continues to be as relevant today as it was then. (For those interested, it can be purchased on Amazon.ca: <https://www.amazon.ca/Finches-Ian-Newton/dp/0002130653>.)

Ron worked as a park naturalist at Algonquin Park for almost 10 years, from the early 1970s until 1981. He was hired by Dan Strickland who says, "I was always on the lookout for the best and the brightest and Ron Pittaway certainly fit the bill." Ron left Algonquin Park to work at the Leslie M. Frost Natural Resources Centre near Minden, where he was employed for 23 years, teaching conservation science to high school, college and university students.

As one of the founding members of the Ontario Field Ornithologists (OFO), Ron was honoured by the OFO in 2005 with its Distinguished Ornithologist Award. What is Ron's favourite finch? The same as mine, the Pine Grosbeak (pictured below). Ron thinks of it as a symbol of wilderness, much the same as the loon and wolf. When Ron was working and living at Algonquin Park, he cared for an injured adult male Pine Grosbeak for several years. He named the grosbeak Mope, its folk name in Newfoundland. Mope stayed with Ron for the rest of its life.



**Grant McKercher**



## Calendar of Events

### Club Meetings (176 Lakeshore Drive, North Bay P1A 1J8)

**Tuesday March 10, 2020**

**“Hiking the Ontario Temiskaming Highland Trail” - *presentation by Keith Pearson***

**Tuesday April 14, 2020**

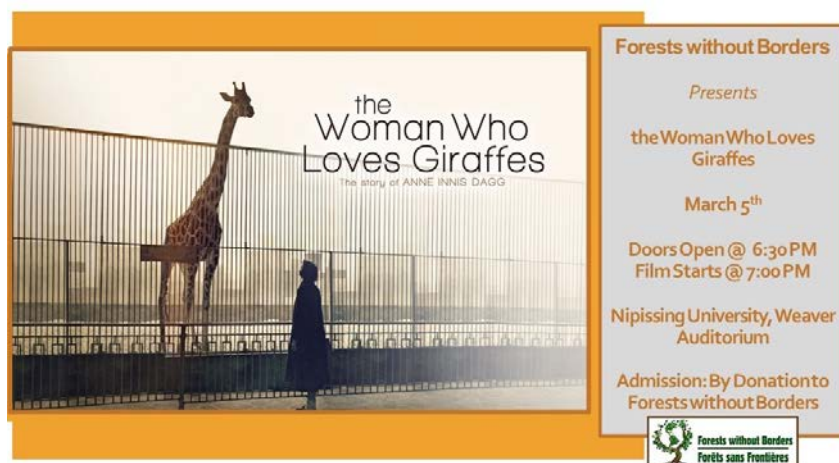
**“Freshwater Mussels” - *presentation by Paul Smylie***

**Tuesday May 12, 2020**

**“Bird and Animal Calls and Their Meaning” - *presentation by Steve Morrin***

## Other Announcements

**Film presentation: “The Woman Who Loves Giraffes” – March 5 at 7:00 pm, Nipissing University, Weaver Auditorium.**



*Forests Without Borders* will be sponsoring a special screening of this [award-winning film](#) about a woman who was a pioneer researcher on the ecology of giraffes in the 1950's.

### **Friends of Laurier Woods – 2020 Annual General Meeting – see poster next page**

This chartered organization, in conjunction with the North Bay-Mattawa Conservation Authority is the current steward of this park in the heart of North Bay. The Nipissing Naturalists, however, had a pivotal role in the early development of the park and the formation of the Friends of Laurier Woods in the 1990's, and continue to have a strong association with the organization.

This year's guest speaker at the AGM will be Dr. Jeffrey Dech, Associate Professor of biology and chemistry at Nipissing University. He will discuss the studies he is conducting with his students on aging of beaver ponds, with reference to work they have done in Laurier Woods.



*"To Preserve Laurier Woods for Future Generations"*

## **2020 ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING**

**Thursday, April 16th  
6:00 to 9:00p.m.**

to be held at

**The Rorab Shrine Club  
1260 Brookes Street, North Bay**

**Reception: 6:00p.m.  
Dinner: 6:30p.m.  
Business Meeting: 7:30p.m.**

***GUEST SPEAKER 8:00p.m.  
Jeffrey Dech, Associate Professor,  
Biology & Chemistry, Nipissing University  
Studies in the Aging of Beaver Ponds***

**\$30.00/person  
Advance ticket purchase required  
Tickets available at North Bay/Mattawa Conservation Authority,  
Mayne Travel or on-line @[www.laurierwoods.com](http://www.laurierwoods.com)  
Contact: Theresa Haist 705-492-9734 or Susan Christian 705-752-2837**



## Board of Directors 2020

Fred Pinto, President [fredpinto1@gmail.com](mailto:fredpinto1@gmail.com)

705-476-9006

Rick Tripp, Vice-president

Connie Sturge, Treasurer

Oriana Pokorny, Secretary

Sarah Wheelan, Website and Facebook

Matt Procnier, Refreshment Coordinator

Louise Simpson

Katie Tripp

Irene Kasch

Keith Pearson

Grant McKercher

## Past Presidents

Dick Tafel

Angela Martin

Ted Price

Greg Boxwell

Steph Romaniuk

Jeremy St. Onge

## Bird Wing

Dick Tafel, Chairman [rtafel@sympatico.ca](mailto:rtafel@sympatico.ca)

Gary Sturge, Treasurer

Renee Levesque, Bird Wing Coordinator

705-472-7907



Monthly Bird Wing and Bird Bash reports are sent to members by e-mail and posted on the Nipissing Naturalists Club's website: <https://www.nipnats.com/bird-wing/bird-wing-meetings-outings/>, and <https://nipnats.com/bird-wing/bird-bash-reports/>.

## The Woodland Observer

The Club's newsletter, *The Woodland Observer*, is published electronically September to June, and sent to members by e-mail and posted in date order on the Nipissing Naturalists Club's website: <https://nipnats.com/newsletters/>.

Grant McKercher, Editor      [gmckercher@mac.com](mailto:gmckercher@mac.com)      705-499-5577

**Contributors to this issue:** Chris Connors, Kaye Edmonds, Peter Ferris, Renee Levesque and Fred Pinto

## Membership Fees

Annual Nipissing Naturalist Club membership fees are:	Single	\$20.00
	Family	\$30.00

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

Nipissing Naturalists Club is a member Ontario Nature:  
<http://www.ontarionature.org/>.

