



# Conservancy NEWS

Protecting the special natural features of the Couchiching region for future generations.

Seasonal Highlights from The Couchiching Conservancy

OCTOBER 2008

## The great reptile search along the Severn

by Steve Marks

**I**n the summer of 2008, the Conservancy was contracted by Parks Canada to inventory species-at-risk reptiles along the Severn River corridor from Port Severn to Washago. This area is particularly rich in its diversity of snakes and turtles. A primary focus species was the massasauga, Ontario's only rattlesnake, and we hoped to outline accurately its current range. The Conservancy hired Steve Marks and Brennan Ackert to conduct the fieldwork.

And into the field they went! On the very first day, accompanied by the Conservancy's Kristen Field, the team located four species at risk: a spotted turtle, a massasauga, and several ribbon snakes and five-lined skinks, along with other interesting reptiles like smooth green snakes and ringneck snakes. By summer's end, Steve and Brennan had documented over 160 sightings of rare reptiles within five kilometres of the Severn River.

The project was about reaching out to people, as well. A highlight was talking to a young family who really appreciated the dozens of baby map turtles they see at their cottage near Port Severn. It was awesome to nurture that interest in those kids! They will grow up with a true appreciation of nature, which is so rare to find these days.

In fact, the team interviewed all sorts of different people. Parks Canada employees proved a valuable source of local knowledge. Couchiching Conservancy members including Amy and Dave Darker, Nancy Ironside, Isabelle and Gary Thiess, Joan Grandine and Val Watt were particularly helpful in providing information and tips.

In the third week of August, brand new baby skinks were being found; their brilliant blue tails were a sure marker. Several nests of eggs had already been located, so finding the hatchlings regularly on their granite barrens habitat was not difficult.

Steve and Brennan were able to locate over 60 individual massasaugas and form a decent idea of the current distribution of this little snake. Its range has been shrinking for decades due to habitat fragmentation, road kills and persecution. It is quite refreshing to interview folks who have a healthy attitude toward these animals. Education programs are definitely having a positive effect.



Northern Map turtle. Photo by Brennan Ackert

While finding Blanding's turtles throughout the entire study area was somewhat expected, finding both map turtles and musk turtles (stinkpots) so widely distributed was a surprise. Stinkpots in particular are very secretive animals and hard to locate. Brennan and Steve actually spotted one basking in a tree that overhung the water! If a predator should happen along, the turtle can quickly drop into the water and disappear. That is exactly what happened when the researchers tried to get closer for a better photograph. Two more metres and the turtle would have landed in their boat! ☺

# Corporate members renew their support

Our region has an attractive natural environment that sustains the tourism industry and attracts retirees looking for a slower pace – an important asset for its economy. For example, the Carden Nature Festival recently drew more than 350 enthusiastic participants who enjoyed a weekend of nature-related events. Well over \$50,000 was spent in the community on accommodation, food, services and products.

Last year, 80 local businesses showed their support for the Conservancy by becoming Corporate Members. This assistance reflects a belief that conservation of our natural world is good for the community and good for business. Mid-way through this year's campaign, we are delighted to report that the following businesses and organizations have already joined or renewed their membership:

|  |   |                                       |
|--|---|---------------------------------------|
| Dr. Ravi Aggarwal                              | Donald D. Scott Custom Builder & Renovator Inc. | Orillia Mazda                         |
| Army Navy & Air Force Veterans                 | Donald H. Worling Q.C.                          | Orillia Power Corporation             |
| Ms. Julia A. Bailey                            | Garfield Dunlop                                 | Our House Design                      |
| Bayview Wildwood Resort                        | Ellis Hearing Aid Service                       | McDonald's Restaurant                 |
| Birchmere Retirement Residence                 | First Student Canada                            | Pelee Island Winery                   |
| Bird House Nature Company                      | Gartner Lee Limited                             | RBC Foundation                        |
| B.D.O. Dunwoody LLP                            | Hacker Gignac & Rice                            | Rotary Club of Orillia – Lake Country |
| Casino Rama                                    | J.R. Booth Chartered Accountant                 | Scott's Garden Centre                 |
| Century 21 Sparkling Waters                    | Mariposa Market                                 | Sir William MacKenzie Inn             |
| Champlain Manor                                | Mawdsley's Mobile Crane Rental Ltd.             | T.J. Hehn & Associates                |
| C.T. Strongman Surveying Ltd.                  | Meridian Credit Union                           | The Davey Tree Expert Co.             |
| Coldwater Road Animal Clinic                   | Metroland North Media–Orillia Today             | The Packet & Times                    |
| Crawford McKenzie McLean Anderson & Duncan LLP | Mid-Ontario Disposal                            | The Water Market                      |
| Dr. Steven Cruise                              | Office Links                                    | Unison Engine Component               |
| D. Saulnier Auto Parts & Wreckers & Used Cars  | Ontario Waterway Cruises Inc.                   | Washago Tim-BR Mart                   |
| Dalt's Honda                                   | Orillia District Chamber of Commerce            | Wildflower Farm                       |
|  | Orillia Lions Club Inc.                         | Zwicker Evans Lewis LLP               |

This impressive list of businesses and organizations will be recognized at our corporate event on Friday, October 17 at Grant's Woods. Next time you patronize one of these businesses, say "Thanks!" for its role in keeping Orillia and area green for future generations. ∞



## Plan ahead for the festive season

It may be hard to believe, but Christmas is only a few months away – time to start thinking about gifts and holiday get-togethers. The Conservancy can help, with several special offers that make your planning easier:

In partnership with the Orillia Photography Club, we have created unique **Christmas cards** featuring images reflective of the season, of nature and of conservation. Linda McRae's image of an American tree sparrow evokes memories of a quiet winter's day. Her photo is joined by two striking images from Larry Kirtley to create a set of special cards perfect for sharing. Each mixed package of six cards and envelopes sells for \$10.

The **Ladies of the Lake 2009 calendar** provides an artful introduction to Lake Simcoe and is available through the Conservancy at \$15. A perfect gift!

Our special-label **Pelee Island Wines** have been a big hit, with many of you asking if they will be available for Christmas giving. Indeed they will, through an early-November order on the enclosed form. You must order by the case of 12 and be able to pick up your wine at our office. For every case you order, we receive \$24 from the Winery.

**To take advantage of these offers, call Gayle at 326-1620. We accept cash, cheques and VISA.** ∞



# Waterway Wildlife Program in its second year

— by Gayle Carlyle

**T**he Waterway Wildlife Program is sponsored by Trent-Severn Waterway to promote actions on habitat health for species at risk. Couchiching Conservancy is the lead organization for this section, teaming up with local organizations to deliver messages about species at risk to the public and to encourage good stewardship among landowners.

A tireless team from Scienstational Ssnakes spent the summer and fall attending various functions across the entire Waterway system, from Georgian Bay to Trenton. Miraculously, they managed to visit almost 100 different events and reached approximately 9,000 people! Using both live animals and lifelike replicas, they provided information on protecting turtles, snakes and Ontario's only lizard, the five-lined skink.

Kids For Turtles have wrapped up their field work and environmental-education program for the Swift Rapids Road area, where abuses of Crown land by ATVs and off-road vehicles are particularly evident. This project was done in partnership with the Severn Sound Environmental Association.

One of the landscapes needing special attention is the mosaic of wetlands and forests along the Black and Head rivers corridor. Landowner contact meetings and some ecological fieldwork are ongoing in this area. To date the response among many landowners has been positive. There appears to be a growing awareness and appreciation of the special land features and the species at risk found in this area.

Two habitat-restoration sites have also been selected. At Parks Canada Lock 45 in Port Severn, improvements for skink and turtle habitat will be implemented this fall.



Plans are also underway to plant native trees and shrubs and provide cover for milk snakes in a three-acre community park on Lake Simcoe north of Beaverton. Partners in this project include the Lake Simcoe Region Conservation Authority and members of the Mara Shore Estates Property Owners.

A new book called *Alvar Plants of Central Ontario* by Margo Holt is in the final proofreading stage and should be available early next year. The book describes 53 specialized alvar plants and includes one or more photographs for each plant. This guidebook will be a lasting contribution to alvar conservation, and we look forward to making it available. ∞

# Species on the edge

by Kristen Field

**T**he Species on the Edge project made for an exciting summer for Conservancy staff and volunteers alike. Under my direction, this project aims to raise awareness of local species at risk and promote good stewardship of their habitats.

Local nature enthusiasts have helped to report almost 200 species-at-risk sightings, and counting, just this summer. This is a great start for the range maps that will be included in the final *Species on the Edge* guidebook to be produced this winter. Training sessions helped tune up skills in identifying birds such as golden-winged warblers and chimney swifts, plants such as ginseng, and reptiles such as ribbon snakes.



Baby skink. Photo by Steve Marks.

Outings with volunteer groups to natural areas in our region were fun and rewarding. A high school group accompanied us to the Kahshe Barrens Conservation Reserve; together we found several five-lined skinks (Ontario's only lizard), two patches of Virginia chain fern, and a Blanding's turtle. Margo Holt, a local naturalist, led us on several excursions through wetlands, mosquitoes and all sorts of weather to find some of the area's rarest species, including white fringed orchid. A sympathetic cottager helped us survey shoreline habitats around Kahshe Lake, where we found stinkpot turtle shells washed ashore on the beach – a first record for the species in Kahshe Lake.

Some of the nearly 30 species at risk that are part of the project had no new reports this summer, among them American ginseng, walking fern, broad beech fern, yellow rail and the short-eared owl. To help out by reporting a species or to get more information on the project, contact me at 326-4643. ♪

## We need your help on setting a course for the next five years

Over the past five years, the growth of the Couchiching Conservancy has been guided by a Strategic Plan with five broad goals and dozens of proposed actions. With the help of Past President Nathalie Rockhill, a new Strategic Plan is now being developed. You can help shape our future by returning the enclosed survey, and by attending a planning workshop if you wish. Please take a few moments to let us know your views and your priorities.

### The Couchiching Conservancy Board

- Jane Ball, President .....835-2674
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