



# Conservancy NEWS

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

Seasonal Highlights from The Couchiching Conservancy

FEBRUARY 2009

## On the wing:

**T**he Chimney Swift has been described as “a tiny, twittering, circling, bundle of energy.” As its name suggests, this species has adapted to roosting and nesting in chimneys largely as a modern substitute for setting up house in the hollow trunks of large old-growth trees.

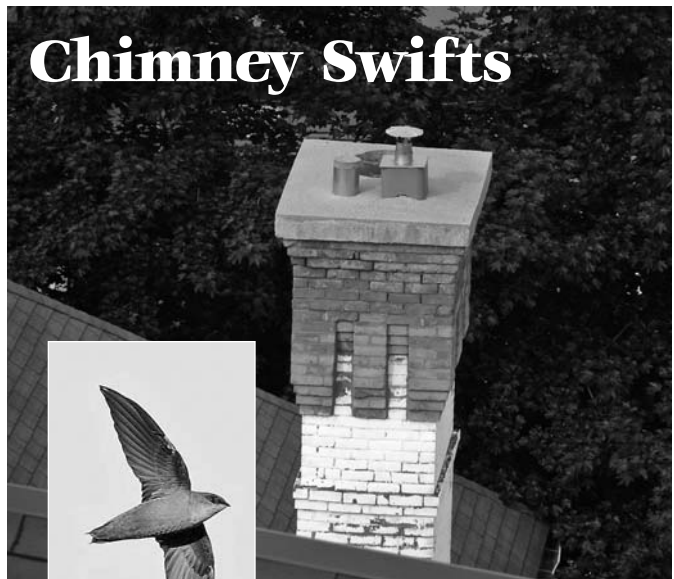
Unfortunately, the Chimney Swift population has dropped dramatically over the past several decades, and there is considerable risk that it may disappear. As a result, it has been officially listed as a Threatened Species.

Habitat loss appears to be the major factor in this decline. In Orillia, as elsewhere, there are many older brick chimneys that have been capped or modified with steel flues that make them unsuitable for Chimney Swifts.

Swifts are insect-eaters, so communities that have extensive waterfront areas like Orillia does are attractive to them. They are also gregarious, gathering in large colonial roosts in spring and fall and then dispersing into other chimneys to nest.

Under the direction of Janet Grand, members of the Orillia Naturalists Club volunteered to assist in locating and monitoring Swift roosting and nesting sites in Orillia in 2007 and 2008. This project was linked to the Waterway Wildlife project, sponsored by the Trent-Severn Waterway, and coordinated by The Couchiching Conservancy.

The two-year survey documented one major roost site (formerly in the Opera House chimney, now in the Post Office), as well as nine confirmed nesting sites clustered in close proximity to the downtown core. It also raised concerns about whether the deterrent calls and kites used to keep gulls from nesting in the downtown are having a negative effect on Swifts as well.



## Chimney Swifts

The Orillia library chimney is an example of a capped chimney – no longer accessible to chimney swifts.

Project volunteers also erected an artificial Chimney Swift nesting tower on the flat roof of a downtown store. Although there has been no evidence of its being used yet, further monitoring this year may yield a more positive result.

This project has provided opportunities to increase local awareness about Chimney Swifts and their habitats. The City of Orillia, the *Packet & Times* and Mariposa Market all deserve credit for their cooperation and support in helping this popular urban bird. ♡



**Building  
new  
bridges!  
See inside.**

# UPDATES **On the Conservancy Front**

## **Building Bridges – Alexander Hope Smith Nature Reserve**

On a cold January day, a dozen Conservancy volunteers got together to build bridges on the new Alexander Hope Smith Nature Reserve east of Washago. Local volunteers Cathy Massig and Ian Button had already laid out a beautiful trail, and now Ken Thomson and John Jenkins were organizing the construction of three footbridges spanning a total of 24 metres across wet spots on the new trail.

The frames were assembled in Dave and Page Kennedy's driveway and carried into place over the deep snow. Floor boards were cut to length, strapped onto toboggans and dragged in by snowshoe-clad volunteers. Bare fingers braved the cold while the boards were nailed into place.



Testing the new bridges! Photo by Barry Peyton.

As the sun was starting to set, toddlers and seniors alike got to test the new bridges. We were fortunate to have several new volunteers come out, most notably two from Quebec and Honduras courtesy of the Canada World Youth program. A special thanks to Shell Environmental Fund for funding for this project.



Ken Thomson readies lumber for bridge construction.

## **Golden-winged Warblers up for study**

The Land Between, where the limestone plains and farmlands of southern Ontario meet the Canadian Shield, is a hotspot for species-at-risk. One of these species, an attractive little summer resident of shrublands, is the Golden-winged Warbler.

The unusual reason for the species' decline is “genetic swamping.” The Golden-winged is susceptible to hybridization with Blue-winged Warblers, which are expanding their range northwards. When these two different species mate, they produce hybrids that cannot successfully reproduce. This process has resulted in severe population declines of Golden-winged Warblers across much of their range, and as the more aggressive Blue-wings continue to expand into this area, there are fears that the same pattern will occur.

However, there may be salvation for the Golden-winged yet. It appears that dense alder thickets may be one habitat where Blue-winged Warblers do not breed but where Golden-winged Warblers can thrive. So these habitats, which are relatively common in The Land Between, may provide a refuge for this threatened species.



Photo by Larry Kirtley.

This summer, The Couchiching Conservancy will be asking local naturalists to assist with a study of these species in our region. We hope to gain a much better understanding of the frequency and habitat use of both species and their hybrids in our area, and to assess the importance of alder swamps and other shrubby habitats for the future of Golden-winged Warblers. If you would like to take part, please call Kristen Field at 326-4643.

## Species on the Edge in 2009

Species on the Edge – a volunteer project aimed at promoting species-at-risk awareness and private land stewardship – is set to continue in 2009. Conservancy staff will attend community events to promote the project and to ask volunteers to continue reporting their sightings. The reports given so far have helped create range maps for the *Species on the Edge* guidebook, due to be completed this spring.

The guidebook will help volunteers identify the 38 species-at-risk in our region. Separate bird, plant, reptile and amphibian sections explain a great deal about species-at-risk: what they look like, where they can be found, why they are at risk and how they behave.

The guidebook will also be a significant “go-to” guide for private landowners in the Couchiching area who are hoping to enhance habitat on their property. The stewardship section is geared toward private land management based on the ethic of conservation for future generations. It explains basic stewardship ideas and processes and provides numerous information links to where more specific information can be accessed.

**Copies of the *Species on the Edge* guidebook will be available for purchase at The Couchiching Conservancy office at Grant's Woods in March 2009.**

For more information or to report a species-at-risk, please visit our website, [www.couchconservancy.ca](http://www.couchconservancy.ca), or contact Kristen Field at 326-4643 or [kristen@couchconservancy.ca](mailto:kristen@couchconservancy.ca). ☺

## And the winner is...

The Couchiching Conservancy was honoured to receive the very first Ontario Land Trust Alliance award for outstanding community engagement. The award recognizes our strong history of partnerships with other community organizations and local media, the involvement of our corporate members, and our network of active volunteers.

## Of note...

**Mother Earth Day:** As part of the recent Strategic Plan, the Conservancy decided not to hold Mother Earth Day this year. Instead, there will be a new outdoor event in the fall for families to help promote our conservation efforts.

**Carden Nature Festival:** Plans are well underway for the third year of this successful event. Mark your calendars for Friday June 5 to Sunday, June 7. New this year is a user-friendly online registration system; registrations are already coming in, so book early. Check it out at [www.cardenguide.com/festival](http://www.cardenguide.com/festival).



**E-newsletter:** By the end of this year, we hope to be sending the *Conservancy News* via e-mail as much as possible. This method is more environmentally friendly and reduces printing and mailing costs. If you haven't already provided us your e-mail address, please send it to [gayle@couchconservancy.ca](mailto:gayle@couchconservancy.ca). We will continue to send our paper newsletter for those who do not have e-mail.

**Pelee Island Wine Order:** Just in time for Easter. Be sure to fill out the enclosed Pelee Island Wine order form and send it to us by March 13. Cheques must be made out to Pelee Island Winery. Cases of wine will be ready for pick-up by April, and remember that the Conservancy receives \$2 for every bottle you order. ☺

# Planning ahead for the next five years

Last fall, we reported on our successful progress in implementing a Strategic Plan covering 2003-08 and asked for your views on priorities for the next five years. Nathalie Rockhill guided us through the process of compiling and analyzing the range of comments we received, and a new Strategic Plan 2009-2014 was approved by the Conservancy Board in January.

For the most part, we heard strong endorsement of staying with our current course but with more emphasis on property management and an added goal of encouraging sound public policy in support of natural heritage protection. One factor to be addressed in 2009 will be the hiring of a new Executive Director. Ron Reid is stepping down from that role in June after seven years but will remain involved in Carden on a part-time contract.

If you would like to see the updated Strategic Plan, call Ron at 326-1620 or e-mail him at [nature@couchconservancy.ca](mailto:nature@couchconservancy.ca).



Couchiching Conservancy President,  
Isabelle Thiess

## The Couchiching Conservancy Board

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- Peggy Foley .....325-2287
- David Kennedy .....835-5131
- Kristi McKechnie .....689-9491
- Jamie Powell .....835-0149
- Lou Probst .....438-1324
- Bob Sullivan .....325-8775
- Ingrid Vandermarel .....835-2289
- Nathalie Rockhill (Ex-officio) .....438-1301
  
- Ron Reid, Executive Director .....326-1620
- Kyra Howes, Stewardship Coordinator
- Gayle Carlyle, Outreach Coordinator
- Kristen Field, Science Intern

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