

## **A Submission from the Willow Beach Field Naturalists for the Cobourg Parks and Recreation Master Plan**

This submission is on behalf of the Willow Beach Field Naturalists in response to the Cobourg Municipal Council's initiation of a new Parks and Recreation Master Plan, which we understand will include the waterfront.

Willow Beach Field Naturalists is the only nature club in Northumberland County. It is based in Cobourg and Port Hope, but draws its membership from all across the County. The Club is dedicated to the preservation of our natural heritage, and the protection of our flora and fauna and its associated habitat. A major objective is to educate both adults and young to appreciate and enjoy the natural world, and it provides an outlet for those who value recreation in a natural environment. More information on the Club, its history and activities, can be found on our web-site:

<http://www.willowbeachfieldnaturalists.org>

Cobourg has been a significant destination for naturalists, and particularly birders, for many years. Most interest has centred on the harbour, where an ever-changing panorama of birdlife attracts birders, sometimes from far afield. Apart from the harbour area itself and the west beach, Lookout Point Park, Lucas Point Park and Peace Park are all important, as are the foot of Darcy Street and the vista from Monk's Cove Road; and to a lesser extent we utilize pockets of natural vegetation throughout the town, particularly parts of Rotary Park and Union Cemetery. Other life forms – plants, butterflies and dragonflies, for example - tend to be studied and appreciated in parallel with the birds.

Given that we utilize these pre-existing areas in our recreation, and the natural parts of these locations require little or no actual maintenance except some form of access to provide for our activities, there might seem to be no need to even consider naturalists in Parks and Recreation

Planning. In fact, we understand this has been the case in some former Plans – naturalists were not even mentioned.

Unfortunately in practice things are not quite so straightforward. In urban areas inevitably all open space is potentially subject to being turned to some use, either for alternative recreational purposes or to meet other perceived needs. Even when no actual 'need' has been identified, pressures can develop to 'clean places up.'

Areas in their natural state can be – and too frequently are – seen simply as 'undeveloped land' and hence 'waste land', or 'eyesores'. 'Reasonable' changes are proposed to make them more acceptable to the individual's standards, but typically to the detriment of the area's natural quality and its associated wildlife. This dismissive attitude also extends to the uses of these areas: dogs are allowed to run loose, cyclists rut muddy places, trash and cuttings are dumped, and vegetation is cut and trampled. These attitudes and practices are changing, but still exist, both in the community at large, and possibly even among some of those who must make decisions on its behalf.

Accordingly, it is important that the value of these places and their role in providing for these specific needs be recognized formally. This gives legitimacy, and could avoid constant rearguard actions where some individual or group innocently proceeds to make damaging changes under the mistaken impression that no one else cares, or has a legitimate interest that should be accommodated. In fact, birding itself is reported to be one of the fastest growing recreational pursuits in North America, and nature appreciation generally should be given consideration as an important recreational activity.

In the light of these considerations we will outline briefly the importance of natural areas generally, and then consider the locations and timing of naturalist activities across the year in

Cobourg. We have consolidated an overview of the dynamics of bird movements in our area into an Appendix.

### **The importance of natural areas.**

Given the increasing pressures on natural environments, it is important that those remaining be preserved wherever possible. Such places:

- ◆ Maintain important natural functions such as protection of ground water, amelioration of climate, provision of shelter, enhancement of biodiversity, and protection for unusual plants and animals;
- ◆ Provide rich and ever changing panoramas year-round, from the first coltsfoots flowering, the first Mourning Cloak butterfly drinking fresh sap, the early songs of redwing and Song Sparrow, through to Monarch butterflies at the late aster blooms, with the first Snow Buntings of the coming winter foraging on the beaches.
- ◆ Provide educational opportunities, and opportunities for both quiet walks in tranquil settings, and more invigorating experiences in more bracing weather.
- ◆ Provide all of this free! The usual costs of parkland; of manicuring and mowing, tilling and fertilizing, the need to allocate manpower and resources, are largely unnecessary, and the attendant pollution of noise and emissions is largely avoided.

### **Recreation in Cobourg natural areas.**

As outlined in the Appendix, Cobourg is exceptionally well situated for birding, which is the activity we will address. Birders scan the open waters of Lake Ontario and watch the more sheltered waters of the harbour for waterfowl, study the skies overhead for migrants following the shorelines, and visit patches of woodland and scrubby tangles in search of grounded migrants.

*The Harbour:* The harbour areas, including the piers and west headland, the beaches immediately adjacent, and the sky back from the shore, are the most important birding

areas year-round. An amazing 330 bird species have been recorded here, and the County database includes over 124,000 records. Many noteworthy rarities have been recorded, and it is a recognized destination for out-of-town birders, which has included groups from the southern U.S., because it provides excellent viewing of northern waterfowl that are very rare further south.

Activity in winter is governed by the weather and ice conditions, and interest is largely on the wintering waterfowl (not the flocks of tame geese and Mallards) and gulls. It then peaks in the 'shoulder' seasons of spring and fall, with emphasis on waterfowl continuing in March and April, and then changing mainly to landbirds on the headland and the open land along the west beach in May and early June. During June and July birds are nesting, and disturbance limits activity, but by August shorebird migration has commenced, and these birds will feed and rest along the inner (east) beach of the headland and along the Town's west beach. Depending on the availability of habitat and the amount of disturbance, flocks may be present and attract much attention. September and October are again 'shoulder' months, with emphasis on waterfowl increasing through October, and becoming focused there through November.

Formerly the Ecology Garden was a major location, but recent management there has involved extensive clearance to open up sight-lines, with commensurate losses of quality to attract birds, but it still has some appeal.

Access to the harbour is mainly from the boat launch parking lot, and by automobile viewing on the main (east) pier. Most winter birding relies on automobile access. The Town's current approach of snow clearing the boat launch area is most welcome, and together with salting of footpaths makes winter birding much more pleasant.

One peripheral but important matter here is with regard to the west beach. It is a sensitive area, as the plant association there consists mainly of pioneering species associated dune stabilization; they cannot withstand much trampling, and a few are quite rare. Too much recreational pressure of any kind would degrade the area. The boardwalk there was an excellent initiative. It concentrates most of the foot traffic, and at present the rest seems mainly confined to the actual shoreline, which is more resilient.

*Lookout Point Park, the foot of Darcy Street and Monk's Cove:* Activity and timing at these three locations is essentially similar to that in the harbour in that the Lake vista is a main element of interest. Visits tend to be brief. The foot of Darcy is also important because the shoreline there consists of a rocky shelf, which attracts shorebirds, mainly in fall.

*Lucas Point Park and Peace Park:* Lucas Point Park is the more extensive of these two areas, and after the harbour is the most diverse (we have over 4000 records of 195 species). It has a small woodlot, a brushy area at its east end, and excellent lake viewing from the top of the high bluffs. There is also a small woodlot on either side of Normar Road at the east end, and an agricultural field there that can be wet in the spring, and may attract shorebirds then. Viewing of these latter areas is entirely from the road, and as they form part of Diamond Head Industrial Mall they must be regarded as impermanent. In all, activity at Lucas Point Park itself is mainly on foot, and follows a similar pattern through the year to the harbour itself. Peace Park contains Factory Creek and some very limited marshy areas. Its main attractions are waterfowl along the creek and migrating landbirds among the trees bordering it.

### **Appendix: Bird life through the year in Cobourg**

Cobourg borders a wilderness. Lake Ontario, while a magnet for boaters and a major route for cargo ships, has no

permanent human occupation. While humans have changed the ecology of the Lake's waters beyond recognition, its natural systems function with little direct interference from mankind. Consequently, birdlife is abundant, and huge flocks of waterfowl feed, migrate and stage there through the year. Hence much birder activity consists of viewing the open waters to our south.

These waterbirds must nest on the land, some in huge extended colonies like those at Presqu'île, some individually in marshes and other waterfront locations. Hence in migration they tend to follow shorelines, and will often rest in more sheltered places, such as harbours and estuaries. Cobourg harbour is one of these places.

For migrant landbirds the Lake presents a barrier, and as most of our birds migrate, they must somehow deal with this enormous obstacle twice each year. Some fly around it, and these birds move along the shoreline, flying over Cobourg on the way. So we have annual movements east and west, paralleling the shoreline. Others fly over the Lake, usually at night. The weather is not always suitable for flights, so in fall birds will concentrate in suitable areas along the shore, awaiting better conditions. In spring, migrants overflying may encounter hostile conditions, such as rain or fog, and head for the nearest suitable land.

The havens the birds seek at these times do not need to have the specialized qualities these same birds may require for breeding. But they must provide cover, shelter and food. And they are vital to the birds themselves. Most of these migrants originate from the boreal forests, so they seek wooded areas. The woodlots and shrubby areas along our shoreline - sometimes even the gardens - become havens for exhausted birds resting and feeding. So places like Lucas Point Park, Peace Park, and the wooded and shrubby areas all along our shorelines, provide these needs. Therefore it is important to maintain these areas in a natural state, despite

the fact that some people regard them, as pointed out above, simply as 'unused'.