

The Savanna Sentinel

No.2



On the Rice Lake Plains, located in the rolling hills north of Cobourg, you will find one of Ontario's last remaining tallgrass prairie and black oak savanna. Today, of the one million square kilometers of prairie and savanna habitat that once covered central Canada and the United States, less than one percent remains. It is one of the rarest ecosystems in eastern North America.

Members of the Rice Lake Plains Joint Initiative -the Nature Conservancy of Canada, Ontario Parks, County of Northumberland, Lower Trent Conservation, Ganaraska Region Conservation Authority and the Wetland Habitat Fund- conservation partners and local landowners are working together to protect and steward this globally imperiled habitat and the species which live here. Here are a few of the ways how:

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Jack Daigneault, a Landowner in Action

by Mike Barker, Wetland Habitat Fund

Jack Daigneault is committed to preserving his personal piece of Ontario's natural heritage. As a sheep farmer in Hamilton Township, Jack has spent a lot of time getting to know his land and over the years he has discovered that his property contains globally imperiled Black Oak savanna and prairie grasslands. Jack has identified provincially rare species such as Prairie Buttercup and Grooved Yellow Flax, along with Big Bluestem and New Jersey Tea here, but invasive species, such as Scots Pine and Buckthorn, are threatening his efforts to protect his savanna and prairie.



Landowner Jack Daigneault. Photo: M. Barker

The Wetland Habitat Fund (WHF) received information about Jack's interest in preserving his land from the Nature Conservancy of Canada (NCC) field staff. Through WHF and NCC's Land Bird Habitat Program, landowners like Jack are supported in their efforts to restore their grasslands for open-nesting birds, such as Upland Sandpiper, Grasshopper Sparrow and Meadowlark. All of these birds, some in serious population decline, have been observed on his property. Jack decided to move forward with the project, which was funded 50% by the WHF, and he has already started to remove the invasive species encroaching on his grasslands and savanna.

Jack's sightings include:

- Hog-nosed Snake
- Smooth Green Snake
- Whip Poor Whill
- Scarlet Tanagers
- Bobolinks
- Meadowlark
- Red-shouldered Hawk
- Bluebirds

The partners in the Rice Lake Plains Joint Initiative envision restoration and protection of sustainable tallgrass prairie and oak savanna habitat through co-operative efforts in conservation science, land stewardship, public outreach, and legal protection of land.

Landowners wishing to improve upland or wetland habitat on their property can learn more about the Land Bird Habitat program and apply for financial assistance by contacting the Wetland Habitat Fund, Mike Barker, Peterborough Regional Representative at (705) 743-5327.

For more information, visit: www.wetlandfund.com

Exploring the World of Butterflies

by Erica Thompson

Butterfly enthusiasts, ranging from novice to expert naturalists, gathered from across the province, at Rick Beaver and Ruth Clarke's Sweetgrass Studios. For two days in June, the sixteen volunteers explored the world of butterflies on the Rice Lake Plains and experienced hospitality Roseneath style!

The volunteers worked alongside Todd Farrell, NCC's Central Ontario Stewardship Coordinator, Andrew Ryckman, NCC's Shell Conservation Intern, Amanda Newell, Alderville First Nation Natural Heritage Coordinator and Rick Beaver, local artist. An interpretive tour of Alderville Tallgrass Prairie and Savanna gave the group a close look the globally rare tallgrass prairie and black oak savanna habitat found on the Rice Lake Plains. After three hours of touring and a quick study on butterfly identification, the group was treated to Ruth's smoked steelhead dinner and a series of presentations on butterflies and the natural history of the area.



Butterfly enthusiasts. Photo: NCC

Records collected during the following day's count, from Burnley Carmel South, Burnley Carmel North, Northumberland County Forest East, and Northumberland County Forest West, are being shared by NCC, Rice Lake Plains Joint Initiative partners and Alderville First Nation's to help track local butterfly populations. Thanks to Mountain Equipment Co-op, Amanda Newell, Ruth Clarke and Rick Beaver for supporting the event.

Findings: 700 individual butterflies, belonging to 28 species including: Dreamy Duskywing, European Skipper, Summer Azure, Red Admiral, American Copper.

Lower Trent Conservation Gets to Work at Alderville Woods Natural Habitat Area

by Marilyn Bucholtz, Lower Trent Conservation

The first phase of restoration activities began this fall at Alderville Woods. Visitors will notice erosion control work underway along the western edge of the property to prevent severe erosion, runoff and siltation into adjacent forest. Invasive species, such as Buckthorn, are being removed as part of ongoing efforts to restore these forests and wetlands.

Alderville Woods, a 115.7-hectare drumlinized till plain located three kilometres south of Roseneath, protects a source area for a cold water stream flowing into Burnley Creek. While the inventory work completed in 2004 did not reveal significant prairie communities, the property provides a key link between significant natural areas near Alderville and Burnley-Carmel. The main conservation targets for the property are the wetland and forested region harbouring species of conservation concern (COSEWIC-listed) including Butternut trees and Red-shouldered Hawk.

From the Land Protection Tool Box

by Erica Thompson, Nature Conservancy of Canada

All of these "tools" have important legal and tax implications. Landowner should get independent legal and tax advice at an early stage of any discussion that might result in a transaction affecting their land. Conservation organizations are happy to discuss what questions landowners should be asking of their professional advisors.

There are many options designed to help landowners conserve the natural features such as wildlife habitat or unique plant communities that make their land ecologically significant. Increasingly, landowners are employing conservation tools to determine what the future holds for their property. Here are a few of the options available today:

Fee simple donations: private owners may transfer their property to a charitable organization, such as a land trust, for conservation purposes. Tax benefits may be available for the donor.

Conservation easement agreements: a legally binding agreement between a landowner and a conservation organization to preserve ecologically significant lands; once registered it binds future owners. The agreement sets out restrictions on activities that would threaten

the natural value of the land. An easement allows the owner to remain on the land while ensuring its protection from future development. The owner can keep the land in the family, sell it, or donate it whenever he or she chooses. Each agreement is customized to suit that particular piece of property, and, provided the property meets certain ecological criteria, the federal government offers a tax incentive for protecting the land.

Sales at less than fair market value: if made to a qualified charitable organization or government entity, such a sale can also result in a tax benefit to the property owner based on the difference between the appraised value and the actual sale price provided certain criteria are met.

The Ganaraska Plains Initiative

by Ken Towle, Ecologist, Ganaraska Region Conservation Authority and Kawartha Conservation

Today, the tallgrass prairie and savanna of the Rice Lake Plains are considered high priorities for biodiversity conservation and organizations throughout the region are creating new plans to help preserve and restore these rare habitats.

For the western portion of the plains, the Ganaraska Region Conservation Authority (GRCA) launched the Ganaraska Plains Initiative (GPI) in 2004 to restore tallgrass and other habitats from the boundary between Hamilton and Alnwick-Haldimand townships in Northumberland County, westward through the Pontypool area. The GPI complements the work already underway through the Rice Lake Plains Joint Initiative. Support has been provided by the Oak Ridges Moraine Foundation.

Given that some of the best remnants in the Ganaraska Plains area are found on Conservation Authority lands, GRCA's restoration efforts began with a baseline inventory of birds, butterflies and plants and a prescribed burn for a five acre prairie remnant located in the Ganaraska Forest. GRCA staff also used GIS modeling to create a map that can help determine priority sites for prairie and forest restoration. To learn more about the GPI please contact Ken Towle at ktowle@grca.on.ca.

Updates from the Alderville Black Oak Savanna and Tallgrass Prairie

by Amanda Newell, Alderville First Nations

We have had a very busy field season on the Rice Lake Plains. For those of you who don't know about the Alderville project, this 109 acre site supports some of the most impressive tracts of Black Oak savanna and tallgrass prairie in central Ontario. Alderville has been actively managing the rare grassland habitat for more than five years and the results of the hard work performed by all those involved is now on "natural display".

Some of the most exciting things that happened this year:

- 83 nestlings fledged from our 18 bird boxes, including 35 Bluebird chicks
- 6 acres of old-field have been seeded with grassland species locally collected from the Alderville site
- land that was thick with cultivated oats in 2002 is now swaying with Indian Grass, Big Bluestem, Kalm's Brome and a variety of prairie wildflowers

If you'd like more information, please contact Amanda Newell at amandaDnewell@hotmail.com.

Community Stream Stewards

by Tara Borwick, Program Coordinator

How healthy is your stream?

The Community Stream Steward Program (CSSP) is designed to help you learn first hand about stream restoration, enhancement, and protection projects in your community. Though the CSSP was originally established as a three-year pilot project in Northumberland and Peterborough counties, the City of Kawartha Lakes and the Region of Durham, with funding from the Ontario Trillium Foundation, the program has received a great reception from landowners. An expanded version of the stream oriented stewardship program is being considered by additional funders.



Streamkeepers planting. Photo: T.Borwick

Program staff are working with a wide variety of partners, ranging from individual landowners to government organizations, providing expertise and funding for stream restoration projects of all types and sizes. The CSSP also recruits, trains and supports individuals and community groups who are interested in becoming stewards of their waterways. For more information on becoming a Community Stream Steward or volunteer, or to suggest a potential project site, contact Tara Borwick at 705-748-6324.

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The Rice Lake Plains Joint Initiative is dedicated to the identification, protection and stewardship of the best remaining tallgrass prairie and black oak savanna within the Rice Lake Plains.

The Savanna Sentinel is an annual publication of the Rice Lake Plains Joint Initiative - dedicated to the identification, protection and stewardship of the best remaining tallgrass prairie and black oak savanna within the Rice Lake Plains, funded by the Oak Ridges Moraine Foundation.

Rice Lake Plains Landowner's Guide for Prairie Restoration Coming Soon

The Peterborough County Stewardship Council and the Nature Conservancy of Canada (NCC), through the Rice Lake Plains Joint Initiative, are releasing a revised edition of A Landowner's Guide for Restoring the Rice Lake Plains Tallgrass Prairie in Central Ontario. This guide is specifically designed for residents of Hastings, Northumberland, Peterborough, and Victoria counties and the Region of Durham and is intended to help you create and steward your native prairie and savanna habitat. If you are interested in learning more about the region's native species, grassland birds and how you can care for your land contact Peter Mabee, peter.mabee@mnr.gov.on.ca, or Erica Thompson, erica.thompson@natureconservancy.ca, to reserve your copy.

Get Involved - Management Planning for Burnley Carmel and Peter's Woods

by Susan Grigg, Ontario Parks

Ontario Parks and NCC are continuing to work on a management plan for Peter's Woods Provincial Nature Reserve and the Burnley Carmel property on the Rice Lake Plains. The intent is to combine these two unique sites into one large nature-reserve-class provincial park and you can contribute to this vision.

NCC purchased the 784-acre (317 ha) Burnley Carmel property in 2002 in partnership with Ontario Parks. The site houses prairie remnants but requires active restoration from recent land uses including pine plantation. Nearby, the Peter's Woods Provincial Nature Reserve's 82 acres (33 ha) are located on the sandy, north-facing slope of the moraine and include mixed habitats such as steep-sided valleys, springs, wetlands, deciduous forests of Sugar Maple Beech, Red Oak and deciduous-evergreen forest containing Hemlock and White Pine.

The project is currently in the preliminary park management plan stage, during which policies for stewardship, operations and development for the nature reserve for the next 20 years will be proposed. The terms of reference for the project were approved last spring, and an invitation to participate issued in September of 2004. Background information on the areas has been gathered, life science inventory information updated and a summary of issues and optional approaches was released in June of 2005. Input on the issues and optional approaches will be considered during preparation of the preliminary park management plan, which is anticipated to be released shortly for review and input. Opportunities for public involvement will be announced at each stage, but you are welcome to provide comments at any point during the planning process. Notices of each stage and opportunities for comment will also be posted on the Environmental Registry of the Environmental Bill of Rights at the following website address:
http://www.ene.gov.on.ca/envision/env_reg/ebr/english/

This is an important planning project and your suggestions and comments will help produce a plan that will best protect the significant natural and cultural features of Peter's Woods and Burnley Carmel. To review the index page providing the project terms of reference visit

http://www.ontarioparks.com/english/pete_planning.html

If you would like more information or want to be added to the mailing list for this project please contact:
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Find NCC on the web!

Our website has all the latest news and background information on the Rice Lake Plains Joint Initiative, as well as details of upcoming stakeholder meetings, property tours, and volunteer days.
www.natureconservancy.ca
look for the "Rice Lake Plains" link.



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