

# The Nature of Merrickville

A monthly column by Andrea Howard

## Local Species at Risk - October 2021

When you first search the internet for a list of Canada's endangered animals, you find Polar Bear, Sea Otter, Beluga Whale, Wolverine...not exactly the creatures we would find around here. Though there are indirect ways to help ensure a future for these wonderful animals, there are some very direct ways that we can help protect the threatened species trying to survive and thrive, right here in our own backyards.

More than 800 species at risk are named by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC). The Ontario list contains 221 species that are endangered, threatened, or of special concern. Of these at least 50 might be found living in or passing through Merrickville-Wolford. A youth initiative is underway to encourage interest in and protection of local species at risk: the ECO-Champions Contest, described elsewhere in this issue of the Phoenix. Wildlife Biologist Stew Hamill has narrowed the list to 16 species that the average person might come across. We would like to use this forum to tell you a bit about them.

There are birds! Almost all of them will certainly be migrating to warmer climes this fall and hopefully returning in the spring to a dwindling habitat near you. In grassy open fields, you might spot the distinctive black and white **Bobolink** or the yellow-streaked **Eastern Meadowlark**, both of whom are ground nesters. The **Barn Swallow** might be seen flying around an old cow barn. In mature dense woods, listen for **Eastern Wood-pewee** & **Wood Thrush**. To hear what these birds sound like, I turn first to the Audubon Society's [audubon.org/field-guide/bird](http://audubon.org/field-guide/bird). The Cornell Labs site [allaboutbirds.org](http://allaboutbirds.org) features educational materials to help you learn what to look and to listen for. Birdwatchers are notoriously early risers, as dawn is the best time to hear and see most birds. Being a night owl, I am more familiar with the **Eastern Whip-poor-will**, whose name is its calling card, remarkable in its relentlessness, but a comfort to those who know how threatened is its survival. It nests in the open mixed woods south and east of Merrickville, sleeps on or near the ground during the day and flies around the village at night hunting large moths and night-flying beetles, prey that is becoming ever more scarce.

There is a colony of **Chimney Swifts** living in Merrickville; they can be seen flying about in late afternoon, catching insects. They are recognizable by their almost non-existent tails. We have yet to identify the chimney they call home and can only hope that it will remain standing.

If you fancy a dawn or dusk paddle in the Rideau Migratory Bird Sanctuary at the western edge of the village, you might spot a **Black Tern** flying low over the water in search of small fish or hear the peculiar clucking call of a **Least Bittern** from its well-hidden perch among the cattails.

Finally, it is the **Bald Eagle** who might not migrate given a late or a mild winter. It will hang around and feed on small mammals, carrion or waterfowl who have stayed here as long as possible on open waters. As to Osprey and eagles sharing a habitat, there is some evidence in the research that eagles take chicks from untended nests and occasionally 'pirate' prey by harassing the 'fish hawk' until it drops its catch. Ideally there is plenty for all.

Among the reptiles at risk, three turtles and a snake can be found in M-W. The nocturnal **Milksnake** may be found sleeping under logs, boards, or stones during the day. More likely, it will be found lifeless on the road, victim to careless or, worse and entirely too often, deliberate death by vehicle. In a N of M article years ago, I wrote of the benign nature of the slow-moving **Snapping Turtle**, an opportunistic scavenger who helps keep our waters clean and absolutely does NOT compete with hunters for waterfowl. Still, it is assassinated. The small **Eastern Musk Turtle**, aka Stinkpot, lives in the shallows and is more likely prey to riparian hunting mammals and birds. The distinctly yellow-throated **Blanding's Turtle** is the poster-child for endangered reptiles. If you see a WW1 German army helmet laying eggs on your lawn, that is probably a Blanding's. Please protect its nest. And when you wonder, "Why is the turtle crossing the road?", trust that it knows where it is going and try to ensure that it is safe while crossing. Its grandmother likely laid eggs in the soft earth we now see only as the shoulder of *our* roads.

The list of 16 would not be complete without a plant, the lovely **Butternut** tree and an insect, everyone's favourite **Monarch Butterfly**. The miraculous migration of the Monarch is known to all schoolchildren and its singular diet of milkweed is a limiting factor in its survival all over North America. You know what to do! As for the Butternut, if you have one that can resist the deadly canker disease attacking the species, the government would like you to share its seed, please.

We can all be citizen scientists now. Innumerable wildlife databases need our input to effectively monitor all species, whether at risk or not. Notice, observe, enjoy and be grateful for the nature of Merrickville. We are so blessed. Let's all be ECO-champions.

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