

Seasonal movements



By Nate Smelle

Each year, as autumn settles in across Ontario, a remarkable transformation takes place in the skies above. While most Ontarians are preparing for the long cold months ahead, millions of birds are embarking on their epic migrations, leaving behind their summer habitats in search of a more hospitable climate. Just as the lowering temperature and dwindling daylight reminds us to clean out our chimneys and ready our snow shovels, autumn's arrival signals these feathered travelers to begin their long and arduous seasonal migration. From the eye-widening flashes of Red-winged Blackbirds to the graceful formations of Canadian Geese flying overhead, this annual spectacle captivates birdwatchers and nature lovers alike. During this pivotal moment in the province's ecological calendar birdwatchers flock to local parks and conservation areas, armed with binoculars, cameras, and field guides, in hopes of catching a glimpse of these winged tourists. As our awareness of these migratory patterns and how they are being altered by the changing climate grows, Ontario's rich avian tapestry serves as a reminder of the delicate balance of ecosystems, and the importance of protecting the habitats that support these incredible journeys. When I first began paying attention to this phenomenon some 25 years ago, I started to recognize the importance of conservation efforts and environmental regulations in protecting Ontario's biodiversity. Since then, my annual observances of this sacred seasonal event have helped to foster a much deeper appreciation for the interconnectedness of the natural world to which we belong. Cleaning out my garage over the weekend, I came across a collection of large desk calendars for the years 2007-2011. Turning through the pages of days, months, and years past, I stumbled upon a record of changes in my natural environment that I had observed over the course of the first four years in Bancroft. An attempt of sorts to get my bearings, interestingly, this archive began with a somewhat common seasonal observance. On Oct. 23, 2007 I reported that: "A flock of approximately 20 Canadian Geese flew overhead at 5:02 p.m." This simple observation, although something I had witnessed countless times before and after I noted it in the fall of 2007, stands out in my mind as a turning point in how I looked at the natural world. Although aware at the time of the fact that all life on Earth is interdependent, until I noticed this flock of geese heading south for the winter I hadn't really given much thought to where they were going, how they would get there, or why they were making the trip in the first place. Without a cell phone to conveniently research these previously un-asked questions invading my mind in the field, I watched the sunset before hiking home to look for answers in my edition of The Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Birds. In conducting this research I discovered that each fall Canadian Geese would fly thousands of kilometres south in search of sanctuary and comfort in the warm climate of the southern United States and northern Mexico. Having driven roughly this same distance south to Mexico and west to Vancouver a few years earlier, when I thought about the migratory path of Canadian Geese it hit me how awe-inspiring this journey truly is. Now, almost two decades later, I still marvel at the thought of a living being traveling such a great distance with nothing more than their muscles and design. However, despite the astonishing nature of this wing-powered migration, the reason this observation is worth noting is because it was my first entry in a catalog of the resident biotic community sharing my home turf. Since then, I have assembled an archive of more than 200 species of flora and fauna, that I have come to consider my non-human neighbours. By documenting when these species come and go each

year, I now eagerly seek out these species when they are expected to return, and notice when they are absent for one reason or another. Because the majority of Canada's population resides in larger urban centres, this kinship with nature I have been establishing over the past couple decades is not something most Canadians are easily able to appreciate. Fortunately, for those of us living in North Hastings, we still have the opportunity to directly experience nature with little effort. Throughout his career, the prominent environmentalist and scientist Dr. David Suzuki has repeatedly shone a light on the critical importance of these type of relationships with our natural world, by highlighting the interconnectedness of human health and the health of our planet. One of the most disturbing trends consistently highlighted by Suzuki is the disconnection between humans and the natural environment. Over the past century, our societal structure has shifted dramatically from rural, agriculture-based lifestyles to urban living. In 1900, a vast majority of the global population lived in rural areas, closely tied to the land and its resources. By 2000, this had reversed, with over half of the population residing in cities that prioritize vehicles and industrial efficiency over human health and connection to nature. This transformation has serious implications for our physical and mental health that are all too often overlooked. According to Dr. Suzuki, children today spend an average of less than eight minutes outside daily, and over six hours in front of screens. This stark contrast to my childhood as a 'Generation Xer', where outdoor play was integral to daily life, underscores a broader societal issue: we are losing touch with the environment that nurtures us. The consequences of this disconnection are profound. As Dr. Suzuki points out, the human body evolved outdoors, thriving in natural environments. Spending time outside is not just a luxury; it is essential for our well-being. Research supports this assertion, demonstrating that outdoor activities reduce risks of chronic diseases like diabetes, heart disease, and obesity. Moreover, nature has therapeutic benefits that extend beyond the physical. Practices such as 'forest bathing' in Japan illustrate the mental and spiritual rejuvenation that comes from immersing oneself in nature. By neglecting our natural surroundings, we are inadvertently compromising our health. As we face unprecedented challenges such as climate change, pollution, and biodiversity loss, the urgency to protect the environment becomes even clearer. The current state of our planet, characterized by record levels of carbon dioxide and the degradation of ecosystems, reflects generations of our collective neglect. He argues that we have a responsibility to advocate for policies that prioritize the health of our planet over corporate profits. The consequences of inaction are severe, not only for our generation but for future ones. If we continue on our current trajectory, we risk leaving behind a world that is inhospitable and bereft of the natural wonders that sustain life. Protecting the environment is not merely an act of altruism; it is an investment in the health and well-being of generations to come. In taking preventive measures to the climate crisis and environmental issues rather than reactive ones, we are encouraging people to embrace outdoor activities while cultivating a healthier lifestyle. As we face rising health care costs and increasing mental health issues, recognizing the connection between a healthy environment and healthy people becomes vital. During a speaking event featuring Dr. Suzuki held in Pelham back in 2017, he discussed the benefits of this privilege we enjoy through our proximity to nature in cottage country in terms of the concept of biophilia: humanity's intrinsic affinity for nature. Citing multiple examples of how this innate love of life manifests in our actions, whether it's growing gardens in urban settings or keeping pets for companionship, Dr. Suzuki pointed out that even hospitals have recognized the benefits of integrating nature into patient care, by demonstrating that exposure to natural elements can significantly improve recovery outcomes. Still, despite the scientific understanding of this essential connection, our society continues to prioritize economic growth over environmental sustainability. Recognizing that our well-being is deeply rooted in the health of the planet, it is up to us as individuals to launch a collective effort to reshape our values, policies, and practices in a way that shifts away from honouring the almighty dollar over our environment. By embracing nature and understanding our place within it, as the Canadian Geese have proven they do through their ability to adapt to a changing climate, we too can nurture our survival while cultivating a healthier, more sustainable future for all.