



MAITLAND MUSINGS

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LOWER MAITLAND STEWARDSHIP GROUP ANNUAL NEWSLETTER

Cliff Notes: a significant ecological community of the Lower Maitland River Valley

- Laura Robson, Conservation Technician, NCC

If you have ever had the pleasure of floating down, hiking alongside or looking out over the Maitland River, you have probably admired the dramatic jagged limestone cliffs rising up along its banks. Over many centuries, the river has worn away glacial till and carved into the limestone bedrock, creating steep slopes, crevices and talus (the loose rock fragments from the cliff face that accumulate at the base of the slope). In addition to reshaping the riverbanks, this wear and tear has revealed the fascinating history of the land; fossil corals and other invertebrates let us peer into the ancient Silurian sea that once covered the area.

In modern times, the steep slopes and complex structure of these cliffs create distinct micro-climates and unique habitats that are globally rare. As you admire the Lower Maitland River Valley's craggy cliffs, you might be surprised to learn that the small, twisted, and seemingly - precariously perched northern white cedars above may actually be up to 300 years old! Living on the edge is tough; the inhospitable nature of cliffs means that only the hardiest plants can survive the thin soils and exposure to the elements.

The Lower Maitland River Valley is home to a fascinating intersection of Northern and Southern habitats. The limestone cliffs host a number of arctic species such as hyssop-leaved fleabane, while riverbanks only a few hundred meters up-stream could contain plants more typically found in the Carolinian zone, such as sycamore or the rare green dragon.

If that wasn't enough, the Maitland is also one of only four rivers in the province where the endangered queen snake can still be found. As one might expect of royalty, this slender snake is quite picky – it prefers clean, running water, typically with cobble or gravel riverbeds and shores, and it feeds only on soft, freshly-molted crayfish. It is thought that the queen snake may hibernate in cliff fissures, crevices and talus. Together, these are pretty specific requirements, but the Lower Maitland River fits the bill! For the past 3 years, the Nature Conservancy of Canada has worked with others – including the Huron Stewardship Council, Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources, and members of the Lower Maitland Stewardship Group – to monitor local queen snakes and determine how the Maitland River population and its habitat are changing over time.

The limestone cliffs contribute to the beauty, habitat complexity and biodiversity of the valley. People in this area are fortunate that riverfront landowners have retained so much of the community's natural heritage. On a single canoe trip along the river, one might see ancient marine fossils, an old-growth cedar, arctic plants and an endangered species. The species



NCC Conservation Biologist Cara Copeland mapped the cliffs of the Lower Maitland River in June 2011, with the help of local river experts Mike Verhoef and John Hazlitt.

and habitats supported by these cliffs are among the features that the Nature Conservancy of Canada (NCC) considers as priorities while setting goals to conserve and manage lands in the Lower Maitland River Valley.

To learn more about NCC's work and how you can help, visit www.natureconservancy.ca/ontario or contact ontario@natureconservancy.ca.

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Inside this issue:

Non-natives: Himalayan Balsam	2
LMSG at El Camino de Rio Maitland	2
Jane Bowles, 1993 Field Report	3
Funding for Stewardship Projects	4

Himalayan Balsam: Recognizing a beautiful, non-native species

- Rhea Hamilton-Seeger

A walk along the banks of the Lower Maitland in the early fall is a painter's dream. The riot of colour matches any pallet and is not restricted to the trees. Colour weaves along the river in wonderful swaths of flowers; golden rod, wild purple and white asters, pink bea balm or monarda, and the elusive cardinal flower.

Then there is Purple Loosestrife, Giant Hogweed, and Garlic Mustard. Some of these are due to naturalized introductions. They become established through natural migration of seed via wind, water, or animals. Sounds harmless enough on its own but when these plants become aggressive they threaten the native or indigenous plants which have been here long before European civilization. It is the native plants that feed the insects, birds and creatures that live in the area. The introduced plants can replace natives, close off habitat to migratory birds, and reduce food sources, in effect changing the biodiversity.

A fairly recent addition to the waters' edge is the *Impatiens glandulifera* or more commonly known as Himalayan Balsam (see picture below).



Himalayan Balsam

The three to four-foot fleshy-stemmed plant is easily recognized by its striking, large pink tubular blossoms that have spurs on the end. It is not a native plant but a cousin to the common jewel weed, *Impatiens capensis*. Common jewel weed is a bit smaller but no less colourful with electric orange blossoms flecked with reddish brown spots in the throat. Hummingbirds and insects that feed on nectar are drawn to the deep reservoir of nectar in the spur of the wide throated flowers.

So what do we do? When you see swaths of non-natives along the water's edge it can be a daunting task. The most effective means of curbing the spread of invasive species is first recognizing them, and then coordinating management activities.

Efforts are ongoing through the Ontario's Invading Species Awareness program to coordinate workshops, events and presentations that educate early detection and management efforts. <http://www.invadingspecies.com>

If you notice your garden seemingly moving to the edge of your property and beyond, you may want to consider cutting seed heads of aggressive plants before they ripen and spread. When weeding out plants such as goutweed or periwinkle in your garden, make sure they are disposed of carefully so they don't escape into the area around you and beyond. Composting does not always work, so consider bagging and putting in the garbage, or drying and burning. We must understand the impact these plants can have when they escape beyond our gardens. It is a matter of good stewardship.

LMSG at the El Camino de Rio Maitland

Rachel White, Chair—Lower Maitland Stewardship Group

Hosted by the Maitland Trail Association, the 'El Camino' was a hiking journey from Auburn to Goderich along the entire length of the Maitland Trail. The event was held the weekend of June 22nd—23rd, 2013. The Lower Maitland Stewardship Group participated by hosting a checkpoint along the trail for tired hikers who needed a rest and a snack. Hikers were greeted by Barrie Elliott, Tom Lobb, Beth Ross, and Carolyn Williams with homemade treats and 'souvenir' LMSG postcards showing the unique and sensitive plants and animals that can be found along the Lower Maitland River.

The LMSG checkpoint at Cherrydale was 27 km in to the 30 km hike, and was voted the best rest stop on Day 1 by the MTA. Eighty-nine hikers participated in the event, both from the area and out of town. The checkpoint gave us a chance to spread the word about our group, showcase the rare species that rely on the Maitland, and promote good stewardship!



Barrie, Beth and Tom at the LMSG checkpoint

A friend of the Maitland: Dr. Jane M. Bowles

The Lower Maitland River lost a friend and an advocate when Dr. Jane M. Bowles passed away from cancer on July 27, 2013. Jane was a well-respected botanist and conservationist in Ontario. She spent over 25 years working in the Maitland River Valley as an expert botanist and ecologist.

In 2002, Jane conducted life science inventories and Ecological Land Classification vegetation mapping of the Lower Maitland Valley from Sharpes Creek Line to Goderich. This work led to the formation of the Lower Maitland Stewardship Group, and ultimately to the Nature Conservancy of Canada developing a land acquisition program in the river valley.

Jane volunteered many hours to lead hikes through the Maitland River Valley. Her knowledge, passion, and incredible sense of humour will be missed by all.



Michael Oldham is a botanist/herpetologist with the Natural Heritage Information Centre, and long time friend of Jane's. Mike went on a field trip two decades ago with Jane and other naturalists to do some botanical sleuthing along the Lower Maitland River Valley. In a recent e-mail, he reflected on the trip:

"Our two days of exploring the Maitland River Valley in 1993 were among the most exciting botanizing I've ever had in southern Ontario. The fact that we found so many previously unknown unusual species in such a short time period in a relatively well-botanized region (i.e. southern Ontario) was quite remarkable, and probably unequalled in my 30+ years of southern Ontario botanizing. In these two days we found 7 provincially rare plant species and Tom Lobb added another 4 from his explorations. This really demonstrated to us the botanical significance of the area, which was already known for other significant natural heritage values."

Jane's passing is a great loss. She would be pleased to know that her passion for the Lower Maitland River will live on in the work of our dedicated volunteers.

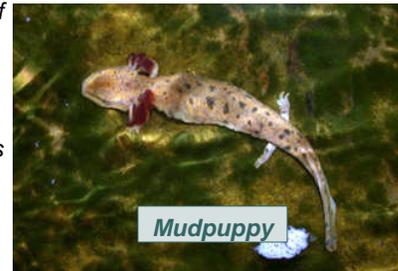
Field Trip Report, Maitland River, Huron County, 1993. Michael J. Oldham, Anton A. Reznicek, Thomas J. Lobb, Jane M. Bowles, Dave Kilgour. (Abridged)

On 11 June and 20 August 1993 we explored a portion of the Maitland River Valley upstream of Goderich, concentrating on river bottom sites. Some extremely interesting limestone cliffs and ledges along the river support a significant assemblage of northern species. Nearby bottomland floodplain woods contain a variety of southern species, some near their northern limits in Ontario. In some areas river bottom flats are dominated by prairie grasses, with additional species with prairie affinities scattered throughout.

Limestone flats and seepages contain a variety of calciphiles (plants that thrive in lime-rich soils).

The juxtaposition of these northern and southern species and the close proximity of the prairie and limestone habitats makes this area very unusual. Many plant rarities, both locally (29 species discovered were new to Huron County), regionally (19 species are rare in southwestern Ontario), and provincially (7 species are rare in Ontario) were encountered. Four additional provincial rarities are known to the river valley, although we didn't encounter them during our two days of fieldwork.

Our explorations were very limited, and undoubtedly additional significant features will be discovered with a more extensive and thorough inventory. It is our opinion, based on an examination of this and nearby natural areas that the Maitland River Valley warrants designation as a provincially significant Areas of Natural and Scientific Interest. The Maitland River Valley possesses numerous species and vegetation communities not present in the Bayfield River ANSI, and we feel that these two river valleys are different enough to justify provincial ANSI status for both. It is interesting to note that 51 of the 71 plant species listed in this report do not occur in the Bayfield River ANSI. Species of northern and prairie affinities and of calcareous flats and ledges are almost completely lacking at the Bayfield River ANSI, but are well represented in the Maitland River Valley. The Bayfield River ANSI report lists six plant species currently considered provincially rare; during two days of fieldwork in the Maitland River valley, we encountered seven provincially rare plants, and know of four others which occur there.



Mudpuppy

Although we concentrated on the flora, the Maitland River Valley possesses very interesting faunal features also. Perhaps the largest population of Queen Snakes in Ontario occurs in the site. The Mudpuppy and Pickerel Frog, two uncommon amphibian species, are also present. The nest of a Louisiana Waterthrush was discovered on our 11 June trip. Ospreys use the valley from July through October, and a Bald Eagle overwintered on the river during the winters of 1991-1992 and 1992-1993. Additional faunal studies will undoubtedly reveal a variety of interesting and significant species.

We would like to thank Mark Sully for permitting us to explore his interesting property, and for accompanying us in the field.

Note: the Lower Maitland River Valley is now a candidate for designation as a provincially significant ANSI.

WANT TO BECOME MORE INVOLVED IN THE LOWER MAITLAND STEWARDSHIP GROUP?

The Lower Maitland River Valley is a landscape worthy of protection. Surrounded by highly productive agricultural land, the valley is deeply incised and features an intact corridor of forest, numerous natural heritage features for fish and wildlife habitat, woodlands, limestone outcroppings, and many other features of interest. To date, the river valley has been relatively untouched by development.

The Lower Maitland Stewardship Group (LMSG) was formed in 1998 and consists of landowners, stakeholders, organization and agency representatives, and individuals interested in protecting and enhancing the valley and its natural features.

The LMSG holds meetings several times a year and invites interested landowners to come out and join the discussions, help plan outings, and stay informed about happenings in the Valley! Meetings are held at the Tourism office in Goderich on the first Thursday of the month and begin at 3:00pm.

The upcoming meetings are scheduled as follows:

March 6, 2014 • June 5, 2014 • Sept. 4, 2014

Further, if you would like to be receive additional information about LMSG meetings and activities, please send your email to Rachel at: huronstewardship@gmail.com

INTERESTED IN STEWARDSHIP WORK ON YOUR PROPERTY? FUNDING IS AVAILABLE!

Huron Clean Water Project

The Huron County Clean Water Project provides financial and technical assistance to county residents to improve and protect water quality in Huron County. The project is funded by the County of Huron and delivered by the Ausable Bayfield and Maitland Valley Conservation Authorities. Funding assistance covers **up to 50% of the costs** of eligible projects and **can be combined with other cost-share programs**.

Keeping bacteria, chemicals, and nutrients out of creeks and rivers protects the health of land, water, and people. The county initiative has provided financial incentives for projects such as windbreak and tree planting, forest management plans and woodlot enhancement, wetland creation, erosion control, stormwater management, fragile land retirement, and community and special projects. See the enclosed brochure for more details!

Huron County residents have completed more than 1,500 projects through the Huron County Clean Water Project.

Contact the Maitland Valley Conservation Authority for more information:

Douglas Hocking, Water Quality Specialist, 519-335-3557 x236; dhocking@mvca.on.ca



Cattle fenced out of a stream

Together we can keep the Lower Maitland River's water clean!