



MAITLAND MUSINGS

Volume 6, Issue 2

November 2012

The Queensnakers

- Susie vanderVaart - Huron Stewardship Council

At the core of Huron County, the South Maitland River winds its way through farm fields and along limestone cliffs towards its final destination, Lake Huron. This meandering lifeline is home to a number of unique and rare creatures, many in unequalled abundance elsewhere in the province. Amongst them is the Queensnaker. These young professionals can be found along the South Maitland's banks, turning over stones nearly every day of the work week. Easily spotted in their tell-tale aviator sunglasses, ball caps and water shoes in addition to two messenger bags loaded with gear, the Queensnakers move forward together with one solitary purpose: to find the endangered Queensnake.



A rare shot of a Queensnaker in mid-search

From July through to October the Huron Stewardship Council Queensnaker team delved into a snake catching frenzy and despite low water levels and high water temperatures were highly successful.



A Queensnaker and a volunteer measure an adult Queensnake

Often accompanied by an assortment of volunteers, Tom the area naturalist, and members of the Nature Conservancy of Canada, the team have caught, measured, and weighed 114 snakes at 12 different sites along the river, shattering the previous years record of 88 snakes. The team also uncovered new birthing locations.

These sites host all age ranges from the gargantuan female at 70 cm from snout to tail, to the miniscule newly birthed neonate weighing a mere 3 grams and only 19 cm in length. The teeny Neonates are excellent clues for the gumshoe Queensnakers to follow when searching for optimum Queensnake living space. These tiny snakes though small in stature are big in numbers allotting for 54 of 114 captured, with big Mamma at 20, smaller Papa at 15 and all the kids and teenagers at 12 and 13 snakes respectively.

After a time of enthusiastic search where exclamations of "got one" and "there's one" abound, the Queensnakers take time to do what the snakes do and try to catch crayfish themselves. Armed with green fishnets, a collapsible bucket



Tom— QS. Accomplice

and the air of competition, the Queensnakers spend 10 minutes traveling a mere 10 m searching for the elusive invertebrates. Although an action-packed way to spend 10 minutes, the crayfishing serves an even more important function: Queensnake food data. These bug-like water beasts are the only food source of the endangered Queensnake and only when they are nice and soft having moulted (like shedding the outer layer during

the growing process). Tracking crayfish populations also provides essential clues in the quest for understanding Queensnakes and the search for optimal Queensnake habitat.

Concern arose in the early days of the season as the Queensnakers spotted dead crayfish that were otherwise healthy in appearance. It was concluded that the high water temperatures and high silt levels had resulted in the mass die-off of all the larger crayfish, which in turn boded ill for the crayfish loving Queensnake. Despite this however, the Queensnakes appear to be thriving (if their numbers are of any indication).

On your next foray to explore all the beauty the South Maitland has to offer, keep an eye out for one of its most unique creatures: the Queensnaker. Unless it's past October 1st or before July because when their quarry the Queensnake disappears for the winter, the mysterious Queensnaker does as well. As the snakes head for the warmth of their hibernacula, the Queensnakers hole up in the warmth of the office, trying to make sense of all the numbers collected in hopes of better understanding and protecting their reptilian friends.



The Queensnakers

Inside this issue:

In a Spin: Post-tornado Rehabilitation	2
Tornado Alley	2
Walking the Tornado Trail	3
Local Heroes	3
A Year in the Life of a Snapper	4

IN A SPIN: Recovery and Rehabilitation in the Wake of the Tornado

- Rachel White - Huron Stewardship Council

Someone's sitting in the shade today because someone planted a tree a long time ago"

- Warren Buffett

In the past three decades, there has been an increase in scientific research showing the health benefits of trees in communities. Simply put: having more trees makes for a better life, and healthier communities. Given the importance of green space in our lives, it's no wonder that in addition to repairing homes, businesses and infrastructure in Goderich after the tornado in August, 2011, significant efforts have been devoted to planting trees to help rebuild this community.

In the year since the tornado, local tree planting groups like Goderich Trees and Trees Beyond Goderich have worked hard to restore and enhance the natural areas that made this area iconic. The community spirit that has been evoked by this natural disaster has been inspiring. Both groups have been fortunate to work with many enthusiastic local residents to plant hundreds of trees in Goderich, and in the rural area beyond.

Post-Tornado Walk and Talk

In June, Dave Pullen, one of the organizers of '**Trees Beyond Goderich**', had the opportunity to tour members of the Lower Maitland Stewardship Group around a woodlot at the Treblehill Farm, where upwards of 90% of the trees had been destroyed in the tornado.

On the mornings of May 11th and 12th, 2012, students from three different local schools and community volunteers converged on the site of the Treblehill woodlot. Their mission: to help restore the woodlot by planting seedlings and large trees amongst the damage. The event was a huge success, with approximately **100 volunteers** working together to plant over **1200 trees!**



Local School Plants a Windrow

Trees Beyond Goderich (formerly Trees for Benmiller) is a project lead by the **Huron Stewardship Council** and the **County of Huron** to restore tree cover in the twenty-kilometre rural corridor beyond Goderich where

the tornado damaged tens of thousands of trees in woodlots, fencerows and farmsteads. Over two hundred acres of woodlands have been severely affected and at least sixty landowners have sustained significant loss of tree cover and damage to woodlands.

Tornado Alley

A first hand account of rural tornado damage in Huron County

- Barrie Elliot

Late that afternoon as the tornado charged up the Maitland River Valley, further fuelled by the heat of the limestone bedrock, it couldn't make the increasingly sharp turns of the river and bolted inland at Benmiller in a south-easterly direction. It hadn't lost any steam as it intersected the river again at the farms of Ed and Larry Fisher. Then, it flew down the bank and pounded 10 acres of Jack Tebbutt's bush laying thousands of Maple, Ash, Cherry and Cedar trees flat. Next, it levelled acre after acre of cornfield and neatly snapped off the whole row of 100 year old Maples on Bill Crawford's laneway. It took down Herb Oakes' barn and cleared more bush until it reached the Base Line Road. At just before 4pm I drove past Brad Westerhout's brand new large storage barn standing on the west edge of the road. Twenty minutes later I drove by on the same road and this time the barn was no more than a few piles of twisted wood and steel on the east side of the road! The Goderich tornado was far-reaching.

Goderich reTREEt: Nov 16-18, 2012

With still more work to be done in the path of the tornado, **Goderich Trees** and **Trees Beyond Goderich** are teaming up with **reTREEt America** for an exciting tree planting event from **November 16th - 18th**. Dubbed "**Goderich reTREEt**", this event is an opportunity to work with volunteers from all over North America to increase tree cover in the town of Goderich, and beyond!

Many local residents will be familiar with the striking view of tornado damage while crossing the Maitland River at the Benmiller Bridge. On the flood plain south of the river, approximately 15 acres of woodlot were severely damaged in the tornado. On **November 18th**, the **Goderich reTREEt** volunteers and local community members are welcome to help plant trees to restore this woodlot.



Volunteers will be instructed by local forestry experts in proper tree-planting techniques. All trees planted will be indigenous to the area, able to survive the current soil and weather conditions.

Please join us !

For more information, contact Rachel White at Rachel.c.white@ontario.ca or 519 482-3661.

Walking the Tornado Trail

- Wendy Hoernig

A year had passed since a large chunk of Goderich had been blown away by a tornado. A day of commemorative ceremonies was being planned, and as the **Maitland Trail Association** has many keen walkers, it seemed a good time to head out on foot, to see how these areas were faring. We knew that while the year most certainly hadn't been easy for those affected, the power of families, friends, neighbours, and community groups all working together had wrought wonders. We wanted to witness and celebrate this tenacity of spirit, this determination to not only recover, but to become even better than before.



So, early on the morning of August 21st, a large group set out from **Harbour Park** and walked a large circuit that started up **St. Patrick's St.** where home-owner, Beth Ross described the horror of seeing their beloved home demolished, and the challenge of recreating it, from the basement, up. Behind her, stood the proud result: their almost completed new home. However, just down the street, stood an empty plot, highlighted by a colourful border of tenacious perennials that eloquently marked the 'footprint' (or rather the 'houseprint') where a home had once stood.

We crossed **Court House Square** which now felt, naked, empty, compared to its previous leaf-canopied beauty, and passed the yawning space which had once been home to not only several thriving businesses, but also the not-quite forgotten second-storey **Opera House**.

Our journey took us along one of the most devastated roads – **Park Street**, where so many beloved homes, all full of memories, have disappeared and are now replaced with lovely new homes. Here, we learned from Deb Bell's testimony, that the journey from a home left in ruins towards a lovely new home was indeed a difficult one. The colourful, attractive exteriors of these new houses could also be hiding, in some cases, lingering wounds to be dealt with, such as psychological and financial worries.



All along the route, as we eventually circled back along **Huron Road** and finally traipsed down **West Street** (which a year ago had been an unimaginable ruin) we viewed on all sides, locations where work had yet to be started, places that were in the middle of being repaired or replaced, and freshly finished new buildings.

Our town hasn't completely recovered yet, but what a testimony this walk turned out to be, of a community's commitment and co-operation, of people refusing to be beaten down by nature's fury. If you didn't take part that day, I encourage you to take your own:

Tornado Trail Recovery Appreciation Walk.

Local Heroes Masquerade as Garbage Pickers

Beth Ross, Chair—Lower Maitland Stewardship Group



The Great Canadian Shoreline Cleanup took place across Canada between September 15 and 23, 2012, involving hundreds of sites and thousands of volunteers (over 56,000 in 2011). On Saturday, September 15, a small but keen group of volunteers did their bit along about half a kilometre of the shore of the Maitland River, near the Menesetung Bridge and golf course. In two hours we collected about sixty pounds - three bags of garbage and one of recycling. Interesting findings included:

- 30 golf balls (which we left in a pile for the golfers)
- 89 food wrappers/containers
- 26 bottles (plastic and glass)
- 31 plastic bags
- 53 pieces of Styrofoam
- 315 cigarette butts

Of particular interest were the six full doggie poop bags. It boggled our minds that somebody would stoop and scoop, tie up a bag, and then toss it in the river.



Wendy, Rachel, Courtney, Beth and Tom

Want to be a Hero?
Volunteer With Projects in Your Community!

A Year in the Life of: the Snapping Turtle

By Cam McCauley, Area Biologist

It's springtime, ice has left the waterways and they have warmed to 7.5 °C. This warming trend has triggered snapping turtles to emerge from winter hibernation. Adults over wintering in stream environments will have been buried under logs and undercut banks; those hibernating on lakeshore sites will have been wedged beneath or beside submerged logs and stumps within 5 m of shore; and some will have spent the winter buried deep in the anoxic mud of marshy areas or beneath floating mats of vegetation.

Mating will soon occur, usually during the month of May. This species can live as long as or longer than humans with some estimated at 100+ years and regularly reaching age-50. Male snapping turtles do not reach sexual maturity until they are between 15 and 20 years of age. The female will not begin reproducing until ages 17 to 19 years which can equate to a length of ~25 cm.

Snapping turtles can be found in almost every kind of freshwater habitat including more polluted waterways but prefer slow-moving water with soft mud bottom and dense vegetation. The more polluted habitats can lead to feminized male turtles and increased embryonic deformities.

These turtles will eat plants and smaller animals (molluscs, crustaceans, insects, small fish, frogs, juvenile turtles, and birds) but plants tend to make up the majority of their diet. Instead of crossing a lakes basin, snapping turtles prefer to stay close to the shore (within 5 m) and are often found partially covered by sediment, vegetation or logs on the lake bottom. Snapping turtles tend to only be active during the day and most of this activity occurs during the early morning and evening hours.

Females will tend to travel considerable distances from hibernation sites to return back to the same nesting sites used in previous years. They may move overland up to 0.5 km and downstream up to 8.0 km to reach their chosen nesting site. These nesting sites are usually sandy or gravel areas along waterways but other locations include artificial dams, railway embankments, muskrat houses, abandoned beaver

lodges, road shoulders, sawdust heaps, freshly dug soils, gardens, lawns and forest clearings. Nesting is closely tied to water temperatures and can actually be closely predicted for a given



A young Snapping Turtle on the Maitland

geographic area by calculating cumulative water temperatures greater than 5°C. For example: Lake A warms to 5°C on April 7th and stays at that temperature for three days for accumulated Turtle Heat Units of 15. The minimum for females to begin nesting is 344 Turtle Heat Units. The nesting season can last for 12-34 days. A single clutch of 12 to 69 eggs are laid each year with larger females producing more eggs than their smaller counterparts. The female will move to her summer range once the eggs are laid.



A small belly shell (plastron) makes the Snapping Turtle venerable to predators

The entire contents of a nest can be eaten as quickly as one day after being laid and it is not necessary for predators to observe nesting or catch scent of a nest. Soil disturbance may be enough to give away nest location with the most common predators being raccoons and red foxes. Coyotes, skunks and opossums have also been known to fill up on turtle eggs. Egg to hatchling survival can average as little as 23% in a population and the average survival from egg to mature snapping turtle is estimated at only 0.07%.

The eggs that survive the summer are ready to hatch and begin emerging from nests after 60-100 days depending upon geographic location (southern versus northern Ontario). Years with cooler spring-summer temperatures can result in a total failure of eggs to develop and hatch. The hatchlings need to move to water and bury themselves under leaf litter or debris. Only 9% of the hatchlings are likely to survive to the next summer.

Adult snapping turtles have few known predators other than humans once they become active in the spring. They will get quite ornery and face a potential enemy ready to strike if confronted on land but when disturbed underwater will usually flee and conceal themselves in sediment.

The cooling water temperatures of late fall trigger older snapping turtles to return to their favourite hibernation site. They may hibernate alone or in groups. This is a time when adult snapping turtles can be vulnerable to predation by river otters.

And so, once again, begins the year in the life of a snapping turtle.

Photos by Susie vander Vaart

Maitland Trail Association by S. Reid & C. Fisher

The Maitland Trail Association (MTA) was formed on July 2, 1975 with the proposal to build a trail which would follow the path of the Maitland River. The Maitland Trail Association encourages hiking, cross-country skiing, snow shoeing, all-terrain cycling and nature study as a form of recreation along this trail. The trail is built largely on private land through the courtesy of the landowners. Permission of the landowners is granted for the trail as a footpath and is not intended for the use of motorized vehicles of any type.

The Maitland Trail entrances are marked by distinctive identification plates and by white blazes two inches wide and six inches long, placed on trees or posts so they are within the hikers' line of vision. A single blaze indicates the trail continues in the same direction. Two blazes one above the other indicates a change in direction. Side trails, lookout points or paths leading to points of interest are marked with blue markers.

The guide offers full colour detailed maps and informative text describing conditions found on the trails, as well as pointing out places of geographic, historic and cultural interest. This information will enhance use of these trails for local residents and visitors, as they appreciate the natural beauty of the Maitland River Valley while they enjoy walking and hiking in the area. The 48 kilometer Maitland Trail, from Goderich to Auburn, is divided into five sections, with a map available for each section. These detailed maps show contour lines, landmarks and distances. MTA volunteers checked the trail distances using GPS (Global Positioning System) units.



INTERESTED IN BECOMING MORE INVOLVED IN THE LOWER MAITLAND STEWARDSHIP GROUP?

The Lower Maitland Stewardship Group 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!

Quarterly meetings are held at the Tourism office in Goderich on the first Thursday of the month and begin at 7:00pm.

The upcoming meetings are scheduled as follows:

• **March 7, 2013** • **June 6, 2013** • **Sept. 5, 2013** • **December 5, 2013**

Further, if you would like to be receive additional information about LMSG meetings and activities, please send your email to Beth at: bross@hurontel.on.ca

