localnews

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LIVING

More fish than you thought

Local species are diverse, and the majority of fish aren't the kind you catch

This week, I'd like to once again turn my attention to the impressive biodiversity that we enjoy in Peterborough County. Few places in Ontario offer such a wide variety of plant and animal life. This richness is a testament to the generally good health of local ecosystems and is something from which we all benefit. The services that biodiversity provides include everything from recycling, purifying, and storing the water we drink to nurturing and feeding our spirits.

Drew Monkman
OUR CHANGING SEASONS

NICK PUJIC photo

PETER ARMSTRONG photo

The exceptionally diverse fish population of Peterborough County includes an estimated 70 species, among them the brook trout (above) a favourite of anglers. The Canadian tiger swallow-tail (left) is one of the best known of the 96 species that have been recorded in the county.

FISH

With a total of 154 species, Ontario has by far the highest diversity of freshwater fish species in Canada. The Peterborough district of the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources, an area that extends south to Lake Ontario and east to Kingston, has approximately 80. Although I was not able to find the exact number of species for Peterborough County itself, it would appear it to be around 70 species. Familiar names include northern pike, muskellunge, lake whitefish, brook trout, lake trout, pumpkinseed, bluegill, smallmouth bass, largemouth bass, black crappie, yellow perch, and walleye.

However, most of this area's fish are non-game species. Unfortunately, the vast majority of them are largely unknown to the public. A perfect example is the Iowa darter, one of six types of darters in this area. Members of the perch family, darters are never seen swimming or resting in normal fish fashion but spend most of their time on the lake or river bottom. And, just as the name implies, they actually dart about from one spot to another. The Iowa darter averages about six centimetres in length and frequents the shallow waters of lakes, rivers and fast-flowing, gravelly streams. Spring males are so vividly coloured that you might think you are looking at an escapee from a tropical fish aquarium. In May, they show blue or green bars between the brown stripes on the sides, are yellow underneath and have reddish lower fins. To top it off, the first dorsal fin is banded in blue and red.

Other non-native species include a wide variety of shiners, dace, suckers, redhorses, bullheads, and minnows. Some readers may be familiar with the creek chub, a popular bait minnow. This attractive fish has a dark lateral stripe and an overall coppery appearance. Spawning males actually develop large, sharp tubercles on the head.

A little over half (86 species) of Ontario's fish species are ranked provincially as secure. Ten species are provincially at risk (e.g., American eel, lake sturgeon), another three species may be at risk.

One local at-risk species is the river redhorse, a thick-bodied sucker with a large, flat-topped head and a prominent snout. It has been found in the Trent River.

A surprising 20 species of Ontario's freshwater fish are exotic. These are species that have been moved beyond their natural range as a result of human activity. The presence of exotic species is one factor that threatens native freshwater fish species. One species of particular concern is the round goby, a fish that has now made its way into Rice Lake. This small, mottled-brown fish, which measures up to 25 cm in length, has a distinctive suction cup fin on the belly. Round gobies prey on the eggs of other fish such as largemouth and smallmouth bass, lake trout and potentially, walleye. They are also prolific breeders.

DREW MONKMAN photo
The northern leopard frog.

AMPHIBIANS

Ontario's amphibians include frogs, toads, and salamanders. Of the approximately 5,743 amphibian species in the world, only 46 are found in Canada. Twenty-six of these can be found in Ontario. Because Peterborough County contains habitats of both southern and northern affinities, the province's amphibian fauna is well represented here. In all, we are aware of 17 species of amphibians in the county: nine frogs, one toad, and seven salamanders.

Northern species such as mink frog and two-lined salamander are near their southern range limits here, while more southerly species like Midland chorus frog are close to their northern distributional limits. At this point in time, none of the county's amphibian species is considered at risk. There is certainly some evidence, however, that chorus frog numbers are declining in other parts of Ontario. No local evidence of this trend has been found.

The amphibian species found in Peterborough County are the mudpuppy (a locally-rare type of salamander), red-spotted newt, blue-spotted salamander, yellow-spotted salamander, two-lined salamander, four-toed salamander, northern redback salamander, eastern American toad, northern spring peeper, Midland chorus frog, gray treefrog, wood frog, northern leopard frog, pickerel frog, green frog, mink frog, and bullfrog.

REPTILES

Ontario's reptiles include snakes, turtles and one species of lizard. Of the more than 8,000 reptile species in the world, only 47 species are found in Canada. Of these, Ontario is home to 27 species. As for Peterborough County, 17 different kinds of reptiles can be found here. This lack of diversity is due to in part to the relatively short summers. This means that there is less time for reptile eggs to develop.

More than half of the county's reptiles are considered to be "species at risk." A species at risk is any naturally occurring plant or animal in danger of extinction or of disappearing from the province. Species that are most at risk are designated as "endangered." The following local species are considered to be at risk: common snapping turtle, musk turtle, common map turtle, Blanding's turtle, spotted turtle (endangered), five-lined skink, northern ribbon snake, eastern hognose snake, northern ringneck snake, and eastern milk snake. Our only local reptiles that still enjoy healthy population levels are the Midland painted turtle, eastern garter snake, northern water snake, northern redbelly snake, brown snake, and smooth green snake.

The only recent addition to the county reptile list is a new turtle, the red-eared slider. There have been several local reports of this non-native species, including one seen at Beavermead Park several years ago. Another significant record is that of a spotted turtle seen last year crossing a road in the vicinity of Methuen Lake. This is one of Ontario's rarest turtles. Most local reptile species make poor pets and should not be removed from the wild. No poisonous species occur in Peterborough County.

R. A. NONENMACHER photo
A widowskimmer dragonfly.

BUTTERFLIES

Butterflies belong to the order Lepidoptera, a group of insects that includes moths. At present, we have a lot more information on the distribution and status of butterflies than moths, a group that generally receives less attention. Ontario is home to 146 butterfly species (excluding those ranked as accidental) and 96 species have been recorded in Peterborough County. On a good day in July, an experienced butterfly watcher could expect to find 50 species or more. In fact, Sandy Lake Road, just south of Lasswade on County Road 46, is considered one of the very best locations in all of Ontario for butterfly watching. This is due to its rich variety of habitat types, including 1,000 acres of sedge marsh.

In addition to well-known species such as the monarch and Canadian tiger swallow-tail, Peterborough County is home to many other dazzling groups of butterflies such as whites, sulphurs, checkerspots, coppers, blues, hairstreaks, fritillaries, crescents, anglewings, elfins, admirals, satyrs, and skippers – to name a few.

The diversity of skipper butterflies is particularly impressive – 25 or more different skipper species can be found locally. Skippers are small butterflies that are usually coloured in dull tones of orange, brown and black, making them look like a cross between a butterfly and a moth. They are a particularly good example of how evolution can produce so many closely-related species that, despite outwardly similar appearances, all show key differences as to habitat, food preferences, host plants for egg-laying, and season of abundance.

Approximately 29% of Ontario's butterfly species are of provincial conservation concern. At-risk species in Peterborough County include the monarch and the West Virginia white. There are two exotic butterfly species in the county — the cabbage white and the European skipper — both of which are common and widespread.

ODONATES

Dragonflies and damselflies (order: Odonata) are another group of insects that has become quite popular with naturalists and for which we have a fair amount of information. Emerging over 300 million years ago, odonates are one of the oldest orders of insects alive today. There are approximately 6,500 species of odonates globally, of which 210 species are found in Canada and 169 in Ontario. Prior to 1993, very little was known about local populations. However, we have now tallied over 100 odonates in Peterborough County, approximately one-third of which are damselflies.

Their names alone make this order of easy-to-observe insects a joy to watch, identify and photograph: ebony jewelwing, emerald spreadwing, variable dancer, aurora damsel, rainbow bluet, sphagnum sprite, harlequin darner, lilypad clubtail, dragonhunter, stream cruiser, racket-tailed emerald, Stygian shadowdragon, eastern pondhawk, yellow-legged meadowhawk . . . to name but a few. Two of Ontario's dragonfly species are considered to be at risk. However, this list is expected to grow as more species are evaluated.

Next week, I'll look at crayfish, mussels and plants.

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