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LIVING

Next word on nature's changes

Drew Monkman's updated and expanded diary of the Kawarthas . . . and beyond

Over the past 10 years, the Kawarthas – and Ontario as a whole – has seen a number of changes when it comes to the natural world. Among the most noticeable have been the ups and downs in species populations. These include everything from the decline of grassland birds and bats to an increase in fishers and wild turkeys. We have also witnessed the decline of trees such as butternut, increased threats to ash from invasive insects like emerald ash borers and more weather extremes and intense storms, probably as a result of climate change.



Drew Monkman

OUR
CHANGING
SEASONS

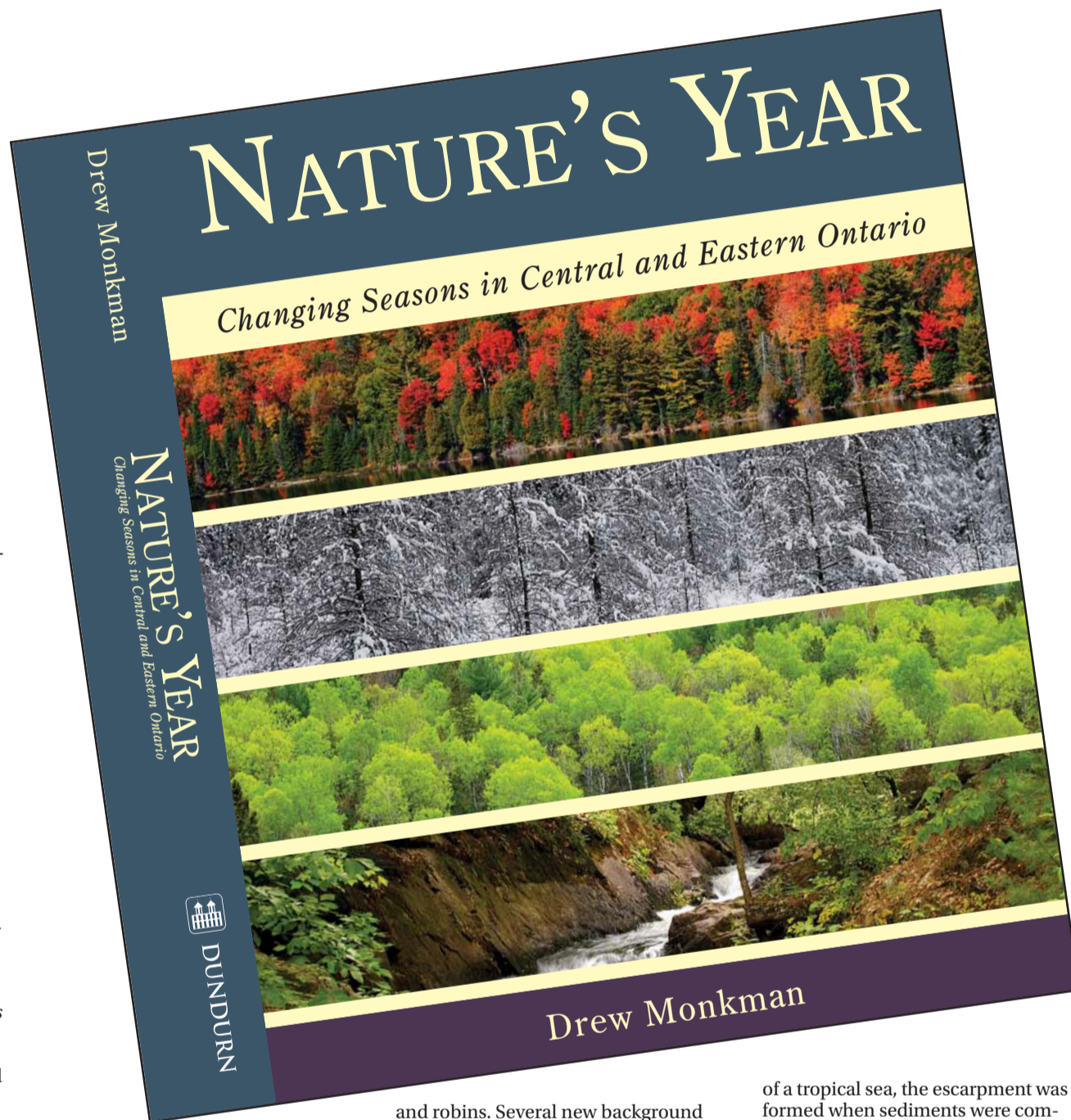
There has also been some movements in the dates at which certain events occur such as fall freeze-up, ice-out in the spring and the first lilac blossoms of May. On a personal level, I have become aware of many different, easy-to-observe events in our flora, fauna weather and night sky that I had somehow managed to miss for much of my life. For all of these reasons, I felt it was time to write a new version of my 2002 book, *Nature's Year in the Kawarthas*.

BEYOND THE KAWARTHAS

When I first wrote *Nature's Year*, I was probably a little restrictive with the title I chose. Most of the book's content actually applies equally well to central and eastern Ontario as whole. I therefore decided to change the name of the new book to *Nature's Year: Changing Seasons in Central and Eastern Ontario*. I use these words to describe the region extending from the Bruce Peninsula and Georgian Bay in the west to Ottawa and Cornwall in the east. Much of this huge swath of the province is also known as "cottage country," a term that refers to areas such as Parry Sound, Muskoka, the Haliburton Highlands, Land o' Lakes, the Rideau Lakes, and, of course, our own Kawarthas. It also includes cities such as Owen Sound, Barrie, Orillia, Lindsay, Peterborough, Kingston, Brockville, Ottawa and Cornwall.

With approximately 50% new and up-dated content, this is in many ways an entirely new book. Like its predecessor, however, the new *Nature's Year* is still fully applicable to Peterborough and the Kawarthas. It also follows the same organizational structure, namely a month-by-month almanac of key events occurring in the natural world. I have always felt that this seasons-based approach to natural history provides the best way to mentally organize and retrieve the profusion of information that the natural world throws our way. Otherwise, much of the content of field guides and other nature books can seem like an impenetrable mass of facts, names and figures.

As with the first book, my purpose in writing this new edition is also to help people pay more attention to the "near-at-hand" of the natural world. Thanks to modern media, we are forever hearing about the big picture of nature such as the amazing biodiversity of the rainforest. But how many of us ever really pay full attention to what's going on in our own backyard, neighbourhood, or cot-



tage community? My hope is that *Nature's Year* will provide readers with an intimate record of the lives of near-by flora and fauna.

Most of the events included in the 2002 book are still there. However, many have been up-dated or rewritten with new details. Where necessary, they have also been changed to reflect an increase or decrease in a species' population. Changes described in bird populations, for example, come from the findings of the latest Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas, carried out from 2001 through 2005. Numerous new events have been added, too. Most of these relate to species not included in the first book such as the Virginia opossum, elk, wild turkeys, Bryozoa (the jelly-like blobs in the water that cottagers often see) and invasive plants like Phragmites. Other new events range from the typical smells of each month to what is happening in rare habitat types such as Atlantic coastal plain plant communities.

COUGARS DEBUT

In addition to changes in the lists of key events, all of the background articles have also been updated. A number of new ones have also been added. These cover everything from cougars and algal blooms to bird navigation and black bears. There are also articles providing in-depth looks at the lives of iconic bird species such as chickadees

and robins. Several new background articles in the weather section reflect the larger region covered by the book and explain phenomena such as lake-effect snow. New articles on species at risk figure prominently as well.

CHARTING THE BIRDS

Another new feature in the book is a detailed seasonal abundance chart for 143 of the most common bird species. The chart allows the reader to see at a glance how common a given species is, whether it breeds in the region and, in the case of migrants, when the bird arrives in the spring and departs in the fall. The expanded introduction to the book provides an overview of the climate and biogeography of central and eastern Ontario, explains why we have seasons and describes some of the potential impacts of climate change. There are also new night sky illustrations, more than 70 photographs to complement the line drawings and two new maps.

Peterborough's central location in the province offers nature-lovers many advantages. In addition to all that the Kawarthas has to offer in terms of access to nature, we are only a few hours away from many other destinations of note. These are all highlighted in a new "where to go" section describing 90 nature-viewing destinations from Lake Huron to the Ottawa River. One of the most fascinating of these is the Bruce Peninsula; an area traversed by the 725 km Niagara Escarpment. Once the bed

of a tropical sea, the escarpment was formed when sediments were compressed into limestone (dolostone) and shale. The rock was then carved by the action of glaciers and the elements into dramatic landforms such as spectacular cliffs, caves, and deep valleys. The "Bruce" also has an incredibly rich flora and fauna including thousand year old cedar trees. Some of the rarest flowers and ferns in Ontario can be found growing here, and orchids such as yellow lady's slipper can almost be as common as dandelions in some areas. The Bruce also offers some of the best birding opportunities in the province such as spectacular spring and fall waterbird migrations along its shores. One destination not to be missed is Bruce Peninsula National Park. The white dolomite cliffs of the Niagara Escarpment and the aquamarine waters of Georgian Bay make for spectacular scenery. In the Dorcas Bay (Singing Sands) section of the park, you will find fen wetlands that are home to many types of orchids and insectivorous plants.

FOCUS ON REGIONS

Moving eastward to Muskoka and Parry Sound, the naturalist will find a great diversity of often rare plants as well as reptiles such as the massasauga rattlesnake. Several locations of note include Hardy Lake Provincial Park with its rich community of Atlantic coastal plain flora (e.g., Virginia meadow beauty); Georgian Bay Islands National Park with its 35 species of reptiles and rare nesting birds like prairie warblers

and Killbear Provincial Park with its spectacular Georgian Bay lakeshore scenery.

The Haliburton area, too, has much to offer. For example, Silent Lake Provincial Park is home to many diverse habitats like sphagnum bogs and beaver meadows. The valleys here support 25 species of ferns and rare amphibians like the four-toed salamander. Algonquin Provincial Park, too, is an iconic destination with its huge network of lakes for canoeing and camping, self-guiding interpretive trails, moose-viewing opportunities and boreal birds like gray jays.

If you are heading eastward, Prince Edward County is not to be missed. Like Point Pelee, Prince Edward Point National Wildlife Area is a famous birding destination that concentrates large numbers of migrants every spring and fall, including songbirds, waterfowl, hawks and owls. The Kingston area has its share of areas to discover, too, including Amherst Islands, an area famous for its raptors and owls in winter. Just north of Kingston is Frontenac Provincial Park with its extensive tracts of mature hardwood forest and the nearby Opinicon Rd. area where birders flock every spring to see rare warblers like the cerulean and golden-winged. St. Lawrence Islands National Park is home to eastern tree species like red spruce and gray birch, southern species such as chinquapin oak as well as the threatened black rat snake. The latter three areas are all located in the Frontenac Arch, a ridge of ancient granite rock that extends southeast from Algonquin Park, across the St. Lawrence River east of Kingston and into New York state. It includes the Thousand Islands. Linking the Canadian Shield in central Ontario to the Adirondack Mountains of New York, it has always served as a vital migration route for plants and animals between these two areas. It also has the greatest diversity of living things in eastern Canada.

OTTAWA BIRDING

Continuing eastward, the Ottawa-Carleton region is well known as a birding destination, especially the many sites along the Ottawa River. These include Shirley's Bay (e.g., abundant ducks and shorebirds) and Britannia Conservation Area (e.g., Arctic tern). The area between Ottawa and Cornwall also attracts huge numbers of snow geese during migration. Many naturalists enjoy visiting the Alfred Bog, a superb peat bog ecosystem with related flora and nesting birds (e.g., palm warbler).

Finally, I just want to say just how fortunate we are in Peterborough to have what is probably the largest number of experts on Ontario's flora and fauna of any city in the province. Most of these people, of course, work at the Ministry of Natural Resources, Parks Canada, Trent University, the Natural Heritage Information Centre, Fleming College and the Ontario Federation of Anglers and Hunters. Many gave generously of their time to review the manuscript of the book and make useful suggestions.

A celebration of the publication of *Nature's Year* will take place on Saturday, April 7, at 2 p.m. at Titles Bookstore, 379 George St. N.

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