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LIVING

Protecting woodlands

Even in mid-winter, a characteristic sound of our forests is the loud, ringing "kuk-kuk kuk" of the pileated woodpecker. Since the pileated defends its territory in all seasons, the bird also advertises its presence through loud and resonant drumming.



OUR CHANGING SEASONS

Drew Monkman

This is also the woodpecker species that excavates the characteristically rectangular holes in trees to find ants. Although the pileated is still common in our area, it belongs to an increasingly threatened group of birds known as forest interior species. In order to reproduce successfully, these birds require large woodlands with a healthy interior, far from any edge. Because this type of habitat is quickly disappearing, a local body was established several years ago to help protect these forests.

The Large Woodlands Conservation Cooperative is a volunteer-based organization dedicated to the conservation and enhancement of large forests in south central Ontario. It is made up of landowners, naturalists, scientists, and agency representatives, all of whom share an interest in forest conservation and management, especially in light of the ongoing fragmentation of our area's forests. The main goal of the LWCC is to provide landowners who own parcels of large woodlands with effective stewardship information and forest management assistance in order to protect this increasingly rare habitat. In addition to their ecological importance, these woodlands have considerable economic, social and recreational value, all of which need to be considered if they are to be managed sustainably.

Unlike southern Ontario, which has lost nearly all of its large woodlands, we are more fortunate in this area in that several tracts of large, unfragmented forests still remain. The LWCC focuses on six of these forested areas, all located in the counties of Peterborough, Northumberland, Durham and City of Kawartha Lakes. They are all large, unfragmented examples of eastern deciduous forest. Each is greater than 200 hectares (500 acres) in size. Much of this land is privately owned, however. The LWCC hopes to enable the stewardship of these forests by developing and delivering educational materials and resources directly to these private landowners.

For the most part, the woodlands of southern and even central Ontario tend to be small and fragmented. While many used to be large and continuous forests, the vast majority have now been broken up into much smaller pieces by roads, trails, clearing for agriculture, urbanization, or other human development. Compared to large forests with a deep interior far from any edge, these small woodlots tend to be sunnier, windier, warmer, drier and more susceptible to environmental change. They



The wood thrush is a forest-interior species whose survival depends on large, unfragmented woodlands.

Jeff Balsdon, Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources

are continually subjected to winds which bring in air pollution, disease and the seeds of non-native plants. They tend to have far fewer native wildlife species, and those that are there have less reproductive success.

The main reason for their failure to reproduce is predation. Small, isolated woodlots tend to concentrate local predators such as blue jays, common grackles, American crows, raccoons, grey squirrels and domestic and feral cats - all of which feed extensively on other animals. They are particularly fond of the eggs and nestlings of woodland birds. Small woodlots and forest edges are also a favourite habitat of brown-headed cowbirds, a parasitic species that lays its eggs in the nests of other birds such as warblers. The end

result is that the young of the host species usually die. These predatory and parasitic species are spelling disaster for many of our most beautiful and best-loved forest birds.

In order to breed successfully, many bird species are almost entirely dependent on large forest tracts with a healthy interior. Far away from the influence of the forest edges, the "deep woods" is a refuge from most predators and parasitic species. Pileated woodpeckers, veeries, wood thrushes, ovenbirds, rose-breasted grosbeaks and scarlet tanagers are only a few of the species that require large forest tracts in order to successfully reproduce. These birds seek out sheltered core areas that are more than 100 metres from the nearest edge. Since 1961, forest-interior

bird populations as a whole have declined by more than 50 per cent in eastern North America.

Many of our woodlands are also struggling with invasive exotic plants such as dog strangling vine, garlic mustard, Norway maple and European buckthorn. Because these plants choke out our native flora, they are ultimately destructive to the biodiversity needed to sustain our native ecosystems. LWCC provides interesting fact sheets on these species and how to get rid of them.

If you own a large woodlot, there are many things you can do to maintain it as a viable, functioning ecosystem. These include creating a stewardship plan for your property; avoiding fragmentation of large forest blocks by concentrating disturbances along the edge of

the forest; keeping any interior trails narrow; preserving existing old-growth features, such as fallen logs, cavity trees and standing dead trees, all of which provide valuable habitat and food for wildlife; planning any forest harvest to retain a variety of types and ages of trees and habitat features; and by avoiding high grading, which takes the best trees and leaves the rest.

You may also consider expanding your woodland through reforestation, or by allowing natural regeneration. Some of the guiding principles to keep in mind include planting native trees or shrubs that are best suited to your climate and soils; managing for shapes that create the least amount of edge such as square or circular forest patches; and creating corridors of planted trees or vegetated fence-lines to connect small patches of woods — possibly with those of your neighbours.

Funding is available for these sorts of projects through the CFWIP program and the Wetland Habitat Fund. You may also qualify for the Managed Forest Tax Incentive Program.

In a nutshell, the key organizing principle for intelligent woodlot management is maintaining diversity in both the age and species of trees and plants. This is essential so that the forest will survive the many stresses it may suffer in the coming years. These include pests, disease, drought, and wind and ice storms, to name a few. The normal weather extremes in the future will almost certainly be exacerbated by the effects of climate change. For example, it already looks like 2005 will go down as the planet's warmest year ever.

The great ice storm of 1998 was an especially important lesson in the importance of diversity. While many species were devastated by the ice, some, like spruce and burr oak, stood up quite well. A diversity of species within any forest helps to ensure that after any stress, though trees may be lost, the forest itself remains. As the ecologist Aldo Leopold once said: "The first rule of intelligent tinkering is to keep all the pieces."

You can get in touch with the LWCC by calling Danielle Tassie, the project co-ordinator, at 748-1011, ext. 5068, or e-mailing her at lwcc@trentu.ca. On the web, go to www.trentu.ca/org/woodlands. Free workshops will be held in the near future for woodlot owners. The dates will be published on the website.

What to watch for this week

With Valentine's Day quickly approaching, it somehow seems appropriate that February marks the return of bird song and avian love. Nuthatches, mourning doves, starlings, cardinals, house finches and chickadees are some of the birds singing by mid-month. In fact, the chickadee's three-note whistle is often represented as "Hi Sweetie."

Drew Monkman is a Peterborough teacher and author of Nature's Year in the Kawarthas.