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LIVING

Stony plain is a nature haven

Carden Alvar near Kirkfield is a wondrous birding site just a short drive away

Birding along Wylie Road last Saturday morning was like being transported back in time. Traffic was almost non-existent, and the only sounds were those of the birds and insects. Meadowlarks whistled, bobolinks warbled, sedge wrens chattered, and eastern towhees sang their well-known "drink-your-teeeee." Bluebirds, too, were a constant presence.



Drew Monkman
OUR CHANGING SEASONS

I had finally made a point of visiting the Carden Alvar, located northwest of Lindsay near the town of Kirkfield. I had known about the area for years and was kicking myself for not having made the trip earlier! For anyone with an interest in nature, this is one place you don't want to miss.

"Alvar" is a Swedish word that describes naturally open areas of flat, limestone bedrock. The limestone can be either at the surface (limestone pavement) or be covered with thin soils and a sparse but distinctive vegetation of uncommon grasses, wildflowers and shrubs such as hawthorn. Large trees are either absent or widely scattered. The only agricultural activity that is possible on alvars is cattle grazing. However, the presence of limestone does make these areas popular for quarry activity.

Alvars are a globally rare landform which support many species. The Great Lakes region of Ontario has some of the finest examples of alvars anywhere in the world. Ontarians therefore have a responsibility to conserve alvar habitats and their specialized flora and fauna. Other significant alvars in the province include the northern Bruce Peninsula, Manitoulin Island, Pelee Island, and the Napanee Plain. Several small alvars can also be found locally. One is located approximately 500 metres north of Flynn's Corners at the junction of County Roads 507 and 36. It consists largely of alvar grassland and is dominated by poverty grass. In some sections, there are scattered common juniper, white oak, white elm and white cedar. Another alvar can be found directly opposite Camp Kawartha on Birchview Road on the east shore of Clear Lake. Be sure to check first with the camp before walking on the property.

As for the Carden Alvar, it is simply the best place in Ontario to see large numbers of grassland and scrubland birds. It represents a remnant of old rural Ontario where iconic species such as bluebirds, bobolinks and whip-poor-wills are nearly as abundant as they were in the 1930s and '40s, before the arrival of modern farming techniques. The scenic gravel roads are rich in wildflowers, butterflies, dragonflies, amphibians, reptiles and the night sounds of nighthawks and whip-poor-wills. However, the Carden Alvar's biggest claim-to-fame is its reputation as Ontario's last remaining stronghold of the endangered loggerhead shrike.

Shrikes are robin-sized, predatory songbirds with hooked bills. Gray, black, and white in colour, they perch conspicuously on fences, wires, and treetops. There are two species of shrike in Canada, the loggerhead and the northern. Loggerhead shrikes used to be fairly common in the Peterborough area but have now completely disappeared. However, we do continue to see northern shrikes which are winter visitors. Although shrikes lack the strong feet and talons of a raptor, they use their hooked bill to kill insects, mice, and birds. They also have a "tooth" near the bill tip which serves to sever the spinal cord of their prey. Shrikes impale their



JEAN IRON photos

The mauve seed heads of prairie smoke (above) are one of the most common sights on the low, flat Carden Alvar. Wood lillies (centre) add bright tones and the alvar is the last remaining stronghold of the loggerhead shrike (bottom left corner) and, clockwise, the eastern bluebird, bobolink and upland sandpiper.

victims on thorns or barbed wire in order to hold them securely while they rip them apart. No wonder they are also known as "butcher birds."

Strangely enough, loggerhead shrikes are dependent on cattle and can only survive in areas that have been recently grazed. This is because they evolved on the prairies in the company of bison and therefore require short, grazed grass in order to find their insect prey. When the cattle are taken off, the land quickly becomes unsuitable as shrike habitat because tall grasses, shrubs, and trees take over.

Over the last 50 years, loggerhead shrikes have declined drastically throughout northeastern North America. They are still relatively common, however, in the south-central United States where they are a resident species. It is unclear why the number of loggerhead shrikes in Canada has been in such a continued decline, since many young hatch and appear to be successfully raised each year. Loss of habitat on their wintering range may be partly to

blame for the decline. Shrikes are frequently victims of collisions with vehicles, as well. This year, the 16 pairs of shrikes on the Carden Alvar are having a very successful breeding season with some nests producing up to seven young.

Last Saturday, Jerry, Mitch, Jim and I saw our one and only shrike of the day at the corner of Wylie and McNamee roads. It flew down into the grass, caught something, and then flew back up to the tip of a cedar tree where its white, grey and black plumage stood out clearly. We later learned that at least four young were present, too.

A little further up Wylie Road, we heard at least four sedge wrens in a damp meadow. Finally, one of the birds perched on a small cedar and we managed to get a good look at it through the scope. An upland sandpiper then flew across the field and landed on a post, folding its wings down slowly onto its back. The bird almost immediately delivered its loud, drawn-out whistle which is often compared to the sound of

some guy making a "wolf whistle" at a girl!

A short time later, Jerry somehow found a sandhill crane at the far side of a huge field. Then, after listening to a birdsong CD and reacquainting ourselves with the songs of vesper, grasshopper and clay-coloured sparrows, we easily heard and saw all three of these uncommon, grassland species. Next, we ran into a fellow who told us he was monitoring the nesting activity of a pair of Henslow's sparrows. This is probably the rarest bird in Ontario. Its presence here further underlines the importance of the Carden Alvar for conservation of rare species.

Butterflies also competed for our attention. Clouds of European skippers, a small orange butterfly, were everywhere. Many gathered around puddles on the road where they were seeking salt and other minerals. Monarch butterflies drifted by, too, stopping from time to time to deposit eggs on milkweed leaves. A bronze copper sitting cooperatively on a buttercup and a Mil-

How to get there

Directions: The Carden Alvar is located less than an hour from Peterborough. Take **Highway 7 east** past Lindsay to Highway 12. Drive **north on Highway 12 to Durham Road 48**, which becomes **Kawartha Road 48**. Go 19 km. to Kirkfield. At the main intersection, turn left (north) on **Kirkfield Road 6** and go 3 km. to the Lift Lock. A short distance past the Lift Lock, turn right onto **McNamee Road** and almost immediately left onto **Wylie Road**. Wylie is usually the best road for birds and plants.

Get a map: You can print off a full guide and map to the Carden Alvar by going to www.ofo.ca/reportsandarticles/cardenalvar.php

bert's tortoiseshell perched on the leaf of a vetch were also nice finds. Tiger swallowtails, fritillaries, white admirals, and ringlets were common, as well.

Alvars present a formidable challenge to any form of plant life. In addition to the thin soil, alvar flora must be able to tolerate spring flooding and summer drought. In fact, some alvar plants are rarely found in other types of habitat. The Carden Alvar's best known plant is the prairie smoke, also known as long-plumed purple avens. Large drifts of its mauve seed heads were easy to see as they stood out smoke-like against the green grasses. The soft downy plumes contain seeds adapted to dispersal by the wind. The prairie smoke's drooping, reddish flowers develop earlier in May in clumps of four or five stems. Although widespread across the Canadian Prairies, it has a very restricted range in Ontario.

Three other very attractive plants that we were able to find were wood lily, Indian paintbrush, and hairy beard-tongue. The latter's tufted stamens explain its whimsical name. Wild bergamot, a very aromatic flower with a dense cluster of lavender flowers at the top of a square stem, was not yet in bloom. Other interesting species found here include fragrant sumac, Virginia saxifrage, balsam ragwort, and long-leaved bluets, to name a few.

One of the highlights of the day was running into Jean Iron, a past president of the Ontario Field Ornithologists. She explained to us that the Carden Alvar will soon become a provincial park, thanks to the efforts of the Nature Conservancy of Canada, the Ontario Field Ornithologists, the Toronto Ornithological Club, and the Couchiching Conservancy. These groups were the main partners in purchasing land and establishing a conservation plan for the alvar. Quarries were a major threat for many years. Over 5,000 acres are now in conservation hands and most of that will be part of the new Carden Alvar Provincial Park. It will be the largest alvar park in the world. It will comprise a variety of pieces of land, including Windmill Ranch, Cameron Ranch, Prairie Smoke Alvar, and Bluestem Grass Alvar. The hope is that the park will be continuous with the new Queen Elizabeth II Wildlands Provincial Park in order to establish a complete wildlife corridor of protected land.

The Carden Alvar is also designated as an Important Bird Area (IBA) by Birdlife International because of its national significance as the last real stronghold of the endangered eastern loggerhead shrike and because of its high populations of grassland birds in general, a declining group in much of Canada.

If you are thinking of making a trip up to the Carden Alvar this summer, the birding should still be good for a couple of more weeks. Butterfly watching and "botanizing" are great all summer.

Drew Monkman is a Peterborough teacher and author of Nature's Year in the Kawarthas. He can be reached at dmonkman1@cogeco.ca. Visit his website and see past columns at www.dreumonkman.com.