

THE NEST BOX, NUMBER 10, MARCH 2004

THE OTTAWA DUCK CLUB

726 Weston Drive, Ottawa, ON, K1G 1W2

<http://odc.ncf.ca>



CLUB NEWS

Memberships

****If you haven't already done so, don't forget to RENEW YOUR MEMBERSHIP, using the handy renewal form and return address label enclosed in the last newsletter. If you've lost it, I'm sure Dale will be happy to provide another. You can also make a tax deductible donation to the club.****

Coming Events

ANNUAL MEETING - Tuesday, March 16, 2004, 7:00pm at the Citizen Building, Baxter Road. This is your chance to overthrow the gang that has been running things for as long as the Liberals, maybe longer.

CARLINGWOOD WILDLIFE FESTIVAL - Friday, April 2 to Sunday April 4. As usual, we will be looking for volunteers to staff our booth. Please try to help out. Contact **Bill Bower** (824-9104) to volunteer.

Insurance

In the last newsletter, we reported that the Ottawa Duck Club had been accepted for group membership in the Federation of Ontario Naturalists and we had applied for insurance through them.

It took a while for the insurance to be settled, but settled it has been.

On December 5th Bill reported that we had received a quote from LMS Prolink that he said looked very reasonable, all things considered. Basically the coverage is as follows:

- \$2,000,000 general liability + \$10,000 for dishonesty of volunteer / misappropriation of funds;
- \$1,000 deductible (per occurrence) for all perils;
- Premium + activity fee - 1 Dec 03 to 31 Mar 04 will be \$378;
- Annual premium + activity fee(s) for period 1 Apr 04 to 31 Mar 05 will be \$1,134.

We did not ask for coverage for any of our equipment.

This quote is in line with our previous costs (except we did have some equipment coverage).

With the insurance in place, we were able to resume operations just in time for Christmas. See below for interesting stories and pictures.

Within the FON, we are now part of the Nature Network whose manager is **Deanna Coop**. There are three Regional Coordinators: Southern, Central & Eastern.

Dale Crook says "We come under the Eastern Region, and the Coordinator is **Chris Grooms** based out of Harrowsmith, near Kingston. A regional meeting was held at Charleston Lake Provincial Park on September 27, and I received a package from that meeting including group reports. I've just received another package including the following:

- Nature Network Directory (ODC is included)
- Operations Manual for Ontario's Nature Network
- Leadership Basics: A Guide to Leading Groups of Volunteers
- Risk Management Manual (prepared by Rick Barnard who was our contact for Insurance)

I'll pass the material around for others to have a look at. Also we received a Christmas Card from

Chris Grooms. We probably will want to invite him to visit the sanctuary sometime in the spring."

Sightings

It is shocking what goes on when nobody's watching. Just before Christmas, **Tony Denton** made a very interesting and grisly discovery while cleaning out some nest boxes. In box number 138, he found a cache of 19 dead voles. Suspicion immediately pointed to a screech owl that was apparently using the box as a food warehouse.



Exhibit A - dead voles in nest box

It seems that this is not really unusual. **Austin Taverner** checked with **Marcel Gahbauer**, of the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources who said that **Kay McKeever** of the Owl Foundation, told him a story about a Northern Hawk Owl she watched east of Toronto years ago. The owl flew into an old elm tree, rummaged about in the crotch of the tree and removed a mouse, which it then proceeded to "incubate" for 15-20 minutes until it was thawed enough to eat!

Marcel is not sure how many owls do this, but based on Tony's discovery he concludes that the behaviour occurs in at least two rather different species.

Dale submitted these two pictures as further evidence of the criminal activity:



Exhibit B - close-up of dead voles



Exhibit C - dead voles on coroner's slab (OK, snow)



Exhibit D - prime suspect, screech owl photographed by Dale last year, in the same box.

What seemed like an open and shut case took another twist a week or two later when the owl was found dead in the box. Was it murder or suicide? Bill thinks it might have been the extreme cold. Churchy is sceptical.



Exhibit E - vole impaled on a brier.

And then this: another dead vole was found impaled on a brier down by the Heron Pond, the well-known *modus operandi* of the northern and loggerhead shrikes. Could it have been responsible for all the killings? CSI Shirley's Bay is continuing its investigations — good thing we have some ex-Mounties in the club.

Well, the autopsy on the owl has been done and here is Tony's report: "This bird came to me in perfect condition, not having been killed by an impact as have most of the birds I handle, and having been frozen since the time of death.

"The first thing that I noticed was that the breast bone was prominent, really sticking out. Then the skinning progressed slowly because the skin was difficult to separate from the body, and there was no layer of fat. Next, the weight was below the average weight for this species as given in two guides, by 16 to 29 grams, and the bird was just below the mid-range of size given. Body fluids were almost non-existent, something I have never experienced before in a fresh bird. On starting, I had noticed pieces of dark fur in the beak and between the claws, then later

found that the stomach was filled with the same fur. There was no fluid in the stomach, only fur.

"I discussed this with **Michel Gosselin** of the Museum of Nature and he said that the owl would have been unable to eat frozen vole, hence the starvation while surrounded by food."

Very strange and very sad.

Early in January, Bill, Austin, **Bill Petrie** and others saw two turkeys and a flock of Bohemian waxwings. On the Osprey Pond, Bill and Austin flushed a red-tailed hawk and discovered that it had been in the process of eating a showshoe hare it had killed. Bill says: "It couldn't have attacked the hare from the air as there was too much brush. It must have stalked it, trapped it in one of those strange rock formations and then killed it. You could see all the evidence in the snow." He took a couple pictures of the scene. Churchy isn't sure if he wants to run them. This newsletter will start looking like *Allo Police*.

More recently Dale and Austin found owl pellets and a partially eaten vole (no pictures this time) in one of the owl/kestrel boxes near the bay and possible evidence of owl activity near another one as well as signs of starling activity.

They also saw a turkey that had figured out how to get seed out of a cylinder feeder by jumping up and pecking on it to knock the seed to the ground. Who says turkeys are dumb?

Other sightings included redpolls and goldfinches feeding on the niger seed and an otter near control dam #2. On another occasion, Bill reported that there were lots of deer, coyote and otter tracks around.

Early in February Bill completed a check of all the boxes at Petrie Island with good results. He says "Seven of the 12 had been used by wood ducks — above average results for that location."

He was still planning to do Watts Creek and also to install five new boxes there and a few more at the sanctuary.

**Meadow Vole (*Mictotus pennsylvanicus*)
by Dale Crook**

The meadow vole (sometimes called a field mouse) is the most widespread vole in North America. The literature states that its total length varies between 130 and 195 mm with the tail about 40 per cent of body length. The voles found in the box were closer to 150 mm.

The back surface is dark, blackish brown, and the underside is greyish. They are larger than a mouse and different, having smaller ears and eyes, and a shorter tail. There is no sexual variation in size or colour. Mating is promiscuous and breeding can occur year-round but in our area probably only from April to November. The gestation period is 21 days, young are weaned in 12 to 14 days, and a female reaches sexual maturity at 25 days. Average life expectancy is measured in months. Populations cycle every three to four years, and considering the screech owl's cache, this must be a bumper year.

Meadow voles are voracious eaters feeding on a variety of seeds and grains and consuming close to 60 per cent of their body weight every day. They are active year-round — mainly nocturnal in summer and diurnal in winter. They live in a network of runways through vegetation and in underground burrows.

Evidence of voles remains obscure until early winter when their runways are obvious under first snowfalls. Under the snow, voles can cause substantial damage to shrubs and small trees. They will girdle the trunk by feeding on the bark and roots. All carnivores, from the smallest owl or weasel to the largest hawks, fox and coyote are predators of the meadow vole.

CHURCHY'S COLUMN

I have to wonder what this world is coming to. An obviously sick person keeps sending me pictures of dead voles. Some headless, some impaled on thorns. It makes me sad that people (and birds) can be so cruel. And I'm beginning to have nightmares. As Dale's item on the voles makes clear, life is tough at the bottom of the food chain.

Congratulations and thanks to Dale for the great work he's done on developing a new brochure. It will be good to have a new product to hand out at Carlingwood — if the printer cooperates. This really should have been my job, but I haven't been able to focus on it, so it's great to have members like Dale who are willing to pitch in when something needs to be done, without having to be asked. That was one of Deever's rules.

Special thanks to club member **Chuck Lionais** and his son **Mike**. As members of the Valley Woodturners, they produce lots of wood shavings, (I think they also produce bowls and other turned items, but it's really the shavings that matter), and have offered to collect eight to ten bags that Austin will put to good use. This would also be a good time to thank **Carson Thompson** for the shavings he has contributed over the years. All us swamp denizens are grateful.

Finally, as part of the FON membership, I have been put on the e-mail distribution for the quarterly report *Nature Network News*. I will take copies to the AGM, but if you have Internet access, you can read it at:

www.ontarionature.org/network/news.html

I have submitted an article on the club for the next issue as a way of introducing ourselves.

Tail Feathers

Warning on a fishing lure: *Harmful if swallowed.*