

THE NEST BOX, NUMBER 12, FALL 2004

THE OTTAWA DUCK CLUB

726 Weston Drive, Ottawa, ON, K1G 1W2

www.ncf.ca/odc/



CLUB NEWS

Access to the sanctuary this summer was, as usual, rather limited as the range was busy with the war on terror, or something. But things are still getting done. Here's a status report from our President, **Bill Bower**:

"The floats have now been put up on the racks so they can dry. Thanks to the muskrats, some of them were quite heavy. We didn't have time to check the results. Many of our blue bird boxes were also cleaned in preparation for next spring. Winter is about here and we are about as caught up as we can be, all things considered. Even our new (old) metal shed is up and about ready to store our shavings and straw.

"The best sightings have been the five great egrets out on the bay and the six to 12 snow geese that have been around for a month or so, both in the bay and in our ponds.

"**George Martin** is no longer able to drive but he will be out now and then, thanks to family members. He would also like to hear from club members at any time. **George's** phone number at home is 726-3572. A visit (56 Crystal Beach Drive) would also be nice.

"Regarding our winter bird feeders, we would like to have some help keeping them stocked with seed. **George** has brought out three bags already and they are secured in our sheds. **Dale Crook** has already put some feed — 40 kilograms — in the feeders at the far end of the property. These feeders can all be observed from March Valley Drive. Any donations of feed would be greatly appreciated.

"We need a number of items, besides feed, but nothing urgent before spring. Items such as metal sheets for the roofs of our sheds and any lumber, plywood, nails, etc. Looks like we have enough wood duck boxes for this winter.

"We managed to get the lawn tractors winterized and ready for storage, straw moved to the new shed, and we bagged all the shavings and ended up

with 18 feed bags full. That should do us. Then we did a bit of a cleanup but more is needed.

"There seemed to be more light in the main shed than usual, and some water, then we discovered a bullet hole in the roof. Another job for spring. **Jim Maxwell**, the farmer, had been in and taken our Kabota tractor out to the farm to fix a problem with one of the rear tires.

"Once we start our winter nest box maintenance program, around the end of December, we can always use the help of members. Most outings will be on Saturday or Sunday. Contact **Bill** (824-9104) or **Austin Taverner** (824-4654) if you want to help.

Bill also reported that the club and our website got some publicity in the Orleans Star recently in an article about Petrie Island. He plans to invite one of their writers out on a box check this winter.

And **Churchy** is very pleased that **Bill** has been seeing painted turtles in mid-November. Who says we're cold-blooded?

UPCOMING EVENTS

Wednesday December 8th, 7 p.m. Regular (?) meeting at the Connaught Rifle Range HQ Mess.

MEMBERSHIP

Dale would like it known that the Ottawa Duck Club is pleased to recognize the following who have been members for 25 years or more:

Ray Montpetit	38 years
Lorne Whitty	38 years
Audrey Bullis (widow of Jim)	38 years
Elaine Narraway (widow of Bob)	38 years
Carson & Lynn Thompson	36 years
Barc Dowden	32 years
Ron Tomosk & family	31 years
Dave & Mary Gimmer	29 years
Dick & Norah Hamilton	25 years
George Martin	25 years

He would also like to announce that we have a new member, **Diane Buck**, who joined through the website. Diane is interested in helping to band ducks and maintain nest boxes. Welcome aboard Diane.

ODC membership this year stands at 67. The 2005 membership forms are enclosed with this newsletter. Just use the peel-off address label to return your membership. Dues remain the same. As we are not undertaking any fund raising, your support is required to continue the work of the club. Please consider making a donation to the Ottawa Duck Club. A tax receipt will be issued for both membership dues and donations. Please make Dale's Christmas happy and get those cheques to him before Santa comes by.

JIM'S NOT SO EXCELLENT ADVENTURE, OR ESCAPE FROM POLAR BEAR PROVINCIAL PARK

This past June, Ottawa Duck Club member **Jim Sauer** took part in an expedition to Polar Bear Provincial Park as part of the Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas Program.

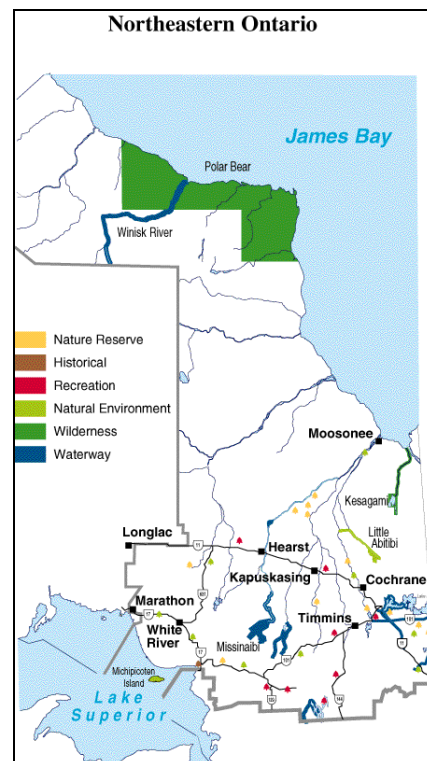
Bill says Jim was an obvious choice for the trip because he has: "the ability to read topographical maps, the skills to survive in the tundra covered area, a knowledge of satellite phone systems, GPS, and navigation by the stars and vast knowledge of the Canadian north. But that wasn't all. This planned expedition would be going into polar bear country along Hudson Bay. So they also needed an individual with the experience, training, reputation, not to mention the right permits to travel on an aircraft in Canada with firearms and ammunition. And there was one final requirement that iced the issue. They needed someone who could provide fresh fish to help feed the crew while in camp."

Here's Jim's sometimes harrowing account of the trip:

Back in April, the Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas Survey managers were looking for groups of wildlife specialists to go up to the Brant River area on the shores of Hudson Bay, in Polar Bear Provincial Park, and spend two weeks hiking the surrounding landscape and collecting evidence of breeding bird activity.

Many factors were involved in selecting team members to go up to this remote location in north-eastern Ontario. They would need experienced outdoorsmen and naturalists who were experts in the field of bird identification and who could be expected to conduct a thorough search of the land for breeding bird evidence. I volunteered for a remote trip for 2005 but was a last minute fill-in for the 2004 Brant River trip due to someone having to cancel.

Polar Bear Provincial Park is the largest Ontario park covering some 10,000 square miles of northern tundra. It is remote with the small settlement of Peawanauk (formerly Winisk) being about 100 miles due west of our eventual base camp. It is about as far north as you can go in Ontario and straddles both Hudson and James Bay. It is a non-operating Provincial Park which means there are no facilities and no staff permanently assigned. Much of it is covered with low lying sedge fens and marshes. A beautiful land with little evidence that man had ever been there.



The other members of the Brant River team were **Mike Runtz**, a well known author, photographer, naturalist and Carleton University lecturer, and

Marcel Gahbauer, also a well known naturalist, educator and expert in bird identification.

Plans were made and equipment and food purchased. Each team member was limited to 100 pounds in total for the flight. Not much when you consider everything that would be needed to survive. I also had to add in two 12-gauge shotguns, ammo, a trip wire scaring device, and a fishing rod.

Travelling by car, our team headed out on June 14th to Timmins where we were to be flown north on a Ministry of Natural Resources (MNR) Twin Otter. The flight was approximately three-and-a-half hours from Timmins, with refuelling stops in such exotic locations as Moosonee and Attawapiskat. After a bumpy drop-off on a gravel ridge runway — I thought we had crashed when we had in fact landed successfully — it was a matter of getting the camp set up and liveable.

We had a food tent, my own small Canadian Tire special, and a larger tent for Mike and Marcel. Snow drifts were still evident in many areas and there was still ice on the surrounding tundra lakes and ponds. The temperature was in the eight to 15°C range when the sun shone which was rarely, and just around zero during the nights, which were short. Even at two in the morning it was not completely dark, but rather a dark grey.

The first couple of days were spent exploring the surrounding area. The Brant River was about a 20 minute tundra walk from base camp. The river is unique in that it is accessible only by air or water, is a large, but short river, and originates in the north, therefore does not contain many of the contaminants found in rivers that flow from populated areas to the south, such as Kapuskasing.

We found and recorded many species of birds. I added about 40 species to my yearly list — including all three loons in one day — many of which I would have had difficulty locating in the Ottawa area if at all.

Some of the more common species breeding in the area were common raven, savannah sparrow, fox sparrow, horned lark, common redpoll, hoary redpoll, Lapland longspur, Smith's longspur, American pipit, yellow warbler, least sandpiper, semi-palmated sandpiper, semi-palmated plover,

northern harrier, willow ptarmigan, common snipe, green-winged teal, northern pintail, Canada goose, and snow goose.

Species that were fairly common at times and probably nesting were common loon, Pacific loon, tundra swan, lesser and greater scaup, bank swallow, mallard, and black duck.

Other species spotted passing through were bald eagle, rusty blackbird, snow bunting, horned lark, dark-eyed junco, white-crowned sparrow, Harris' sparrow, Lincoln's sparrow, tree sparrow, Wilson's warbler, blackpoll warbler, northern waterthrush, robin, herring gull, northern phalarope, dunlin, Hudsonian godwit, sandhill crane, red-throated loon, black scoter, white-winged scoter, surf scoter, long-tailed duck, northern shoveler, and American bittern. (But no brants!)

Besides the birds, we spotted some animal life, especially caribou with calves in tow and Arctic fox. The caribou migrate north each spring from the boreal forest to the tundra for the summer and then return to the forest for the winter. Even the male caribou were relatively tame and curious. With the ice still on Hudson Bay, we didn't see any polar bears. They come ashore and wander inland once the ice melts. And it seems they much prefer seals for dinner, rather than humans. Incidentally, the MNR said that the Northern Ontario population of polar bears is considered the healthiest of the entire wide-spread population.

Insects were basically non-existent due to the weather. We spotted some very large bumble bees, however, and one can just imagine how big and bad the bugs could have been. As for fish, the speckled trout fishing in the Brant River can only be called world class.

The rest of the story takes a downhill turn. Each day brought worsening weather conditions with less and less sun and colder temperatures. It was becoming difficult to stay warm and unpleasant to try hiking to other remote areas. Walking was a challenge as each step was either in soggy tundra or water filled ponds. An excursion to the Hudson Bay coast, some 12 kilometres away was called off. The fight was on to stay warm and dry. The satellite phone worked great for the first four days — then nothing as the batteries went

dead and we had no extras. Our team was supposed to call in each morning at 09:20 to let the home base know if things were going okay. With no phone, there was no way to communicate with the MNR in Moosonee who were monitoring our trip.

Then, on June 24th, the weather turned really nasty. A violent storm was settling in with very high winds mixed with rain, freezing rain, and ice pellets. The land is basically flat and treeless, so there was no place to seek shelter. No trees and nothing to build a fire with. The winds coming from the north over the ice on Hudson Bay were extremely cold.

A second atlas team, some 20 miles east, at Cape Henrietta Maria, a point of land separating Hudson and James Bays, still had their satellite phone and were able to advise home base of the storm. They knew it would be just as bad in the Brant River area. MNR decided to try to retrieve the two teams as they feared for our safety. However, severe weather conditions at the Bay were keeping both fixed wing and rotary wing aircraft on the ground. It was too windy for the Twin Otter to land and too foggy for the helicopter to fly. They would have to wait for improving conditions.

Meanwhile on the Brant River, our team was trying our best to survive. The wind was tearing the tents apart and some crucial items were lost or destroyed. Even with all three of us huddled in the one remaining tent it was difficult to stay warm. Each of us was wearing all the clothes we had brought and were thanking our lucky stars for investing in some top grade rain gear. We did have food and were able to brew a coffee now and then and eat bagels and peanut butter. Keeping the water out of the tent became impossible and it was necessary to soak it up with clothes and whatever else was available, then wring them outside. This went on continually for 38 hours. Sleep was not in the cards.

Flight crews, communications people and weather experts further south, at Cochrane, Moosonee, Timmins and Peawanuck, were all on standby and ready to take action once the storm abated. It didn't. Finally on the following Saturday, June 26th the MNR decided we had to be taken out as there was no end to the storm in sight. Two MNR pilots each flying their own helicopter departed Timmins

heading north. It was still felt that the Twin Otter would be unable to land, even if it did reach the Brant River or Cape Henrietta teams, due to high winds. The so-called runway is nothing more than a small, slightly raised gravel ridge located in the middle of tundra.

Let's just say that there was great delight when the sounds of a helicopter were heard by the Brant River team. Our rescue helicopter had barely settled down when a bold male willow ptarmigan perched on the tail. It must have wondered what such a large flying intruder was doing in its territory.

Much of the gear that had been brought up was either blown away or could not be brought back on the helicopter due to weight restrictions. But no one cared. The essentials were on board and we were headed back to Timmins. A safe landing in Timmins at eight p.m. brought to an end a very tiring, risky, and ultimately, very dangerous, trip to Hudson Bay. Another day and there would have been very serious consequences. The next step would have been to contact Search and Rescue to attempt to bring out the two crews.

No one can predict the weather in that remote part of the world. Had it cooperated, this could have been an exciting and beautiful trip. The northern landscape, perfectly beautiful as it was in spite of our temporary predicament, probably just needed another two to three days of warm and sunny weather to burst into colourful bloom to be really spectacular.

So ended an adventure of a lifetime.

The members of both teams were extremely grateful for the concern, effort, time and money spent by the Ministry in arranging our safe return to Timmins. A great job by all involved.

It is especially noteworthy to add that both MNR helicopter pilots **Kevin Mulcair** and **Gord Bain** are being considered for bravery awards for their part in the rescue.

Jim Sauer, A/Wildlife Director