

Sounds of spring



May 7, 2019 By Nate Smelle

Living in North Hastings one can't help but notice the arrival and departure of species that come and go with the seasons. Each spring, as the snow retreats and the moss paints the forest floor in tones of green, I start keeping an eye out for the return of my non-human neighbours.

Often, the honking of Canadian geese flying overhead is the first familiar sound to enter my ears at this time of year. Next, is the drumming of the ruffed grouse echoing through the trees, and the calling of the robins and northern flickers as they pick through the grass. Around the same time as when the ice melts and the songbirds fill the air with their chorus of voices, the wood ducks, mergansers, mallards and loons arrive and begin building their nests. Scanning the Earth's surface from above for their next meal there are turkey vultures and birds of prey such as broad-winged hawks, Cooper's hawks and bald eagles. As traversing the forest gets easier for larger mammals, black bears crawl from their dens and moose emerge from the deep woods to graze in the roadside wetlands.

Every spring, like clockwork the wild returns to grace us with its presence in North Hastings. In awe of these annual arrivals when I first moved here in 2006, I started keeping a journal, noting my observations. Looking back on my notes, with only a few exceptions most of the species I have crossed paths with tend to show up within a week of their arrival the year before.

Walking up the steps to my home on Monday night, I smiled as I felt the fluttering of wings brush my beard and noticed that the flycatchers which nest on my front porch every year had also returned. Switching on the television just in time to catch the evening news, I was surprised to see that the lead story was a feature on the global biodiversity crisis. It wasn't that more than one million species were at risk of extinction because three-quarters of Earth's land, two-thirds of its oceans and 85 per cent of wetlands have been severely altered or lost that shocked me. As vital as these facts are to our survival, they are essentially old news. What grabbed my attention was that the mainstream media devoted an entire three minutes to these issues at the head of their newscast.

I could hardly believe it, they had almost spent the same amount of time on biodiversity as they had on the sports report. Nevertheless, whether the media had finally caught on to the importance of these issues, or it was just a slow news day, it was great to see biodiversity featured in the news.

I managed to finish this column later that night when I was awakened by a strange sound seeming to come from my front porch. Turning on the lights I could see that one of my seasonal neighbours was gnawing away on my front step. Knocking on the door from the inside, I could see a porcupine, likely the same one that returns to my porch every year at this time, scurry awkwardly into the bushes.

Last year, this sound was accompanied by the screams of my friends from the city who believed they were about to become a midnight snack for some mysterious and ferocious beast about to break down the door. Laughing as I remembered their brush with death, I was reminded of the news broadcast I had seen the night before. I then thought of how foreign and frightening such a noise would be for someone accustomed to the humming of street lights and traffic. Having lived in the Niagara Region where brushes

with wildlife are rare, I have come to appreciate these moments and the excitement they bring.

Here in North Hastings the biodiversity crisis may appear to be a distant threat that only others in less natural surroundings need to worry about. However, as wetlands and woodlands continue to be swallowed up by cities this threat moves closer every day. If we take these type of encounters with the natural world for granted, we will lose them. Despite the massive loss of biodiversity underway in Ontario and around the world, the government of Ontario is making an attempt to weaken the Endangered Species Act. Such changes will make it easier for industry and developers to industrialize and urbanize areas like ours that serve as hubs of biodiversity. Unless we want to force Hastings County to throw away all the hard work and tax dollars they have invested in putting together their 'Wildly Authentic' branding campaign, it is time for us to speak up on behalf of our non-human neighbours and the value they add to our quality of life.