

NATURE FROM A BICYCLE *OCTOBER 4, 2014 - Drew Monkman*

"Riding a bicycle through the country is like "running your hand over the countryside" – you see, smell and actually feel nature on your skin, as you ride along."

Will try to provide some ideas for enhancing the seeing, smelling and feeling

1. Two kinds of outings

- **a quiet peddle** with the express purpose of enjoying nature... plenty of stopping to look and listen - moving at the right speed to visit multiple habitats and destinations while listening and watching, almost like a nature walk on wheels
- **a faster peddle** in which you take in the bigger picture without necessarily stopping (e.g., a daily commute, a more exercise-based outing, road biking)

MOST OF WHAT I'LL SAY APPLIES TO A SLOWER, NATURE-ORIENTED OUTING

2. Advantages as compared to a car ... or even on foot!

- On a bike, birders can see much more than you would in a car
- for neophyte birders, it's probably more fun (not so much walking/standing/waiting...)
- access areas where cars are not permitted
- it's a more responsible form of transportation & reduces your carbon footprint
- you can cover greater distances than walking or hiking
- no beeping from the ignition key, no car door to remember not to slam
- you can hear well if you pedal slowly enough to keep wind noise to a minimum
- When a bird darts across the road, you can just put your feet down and lift your binoculars
- Excellent way to appreciate bird song (and, of course, frogs & insects) Very rewarding to learn at least the most common voices

3. Equipment

- dress warmly - cold is the enemy, especially in spring
- a kickstand, since you'll want to occasionally stop and dismount
- consider adding a basket for toting equipment or maybe a handlebar bag
- maybe a binocular harness so your binos don't swing about
- a flexible bike lock, should you want to leave the bike and wander down a pathway
- camera, or at least a cell phone
- maybe a few apps such as Sibley's eBird Guide

4. While on the bike

- Pedal slowly to give yourself more time to observe the habitat you're passing through and to be able to listen
- Use scatter vision: look skyward, to the side, check the road surface, look far ahead

- Check out common animal hotspots: wires, telephone poles, fence poles, high branches of dead trees, meadows (e.g., deer in early morning); road surface (caterpillars, dead butterflies, frogs, snakes, etc.)
- listen to how the calls change over the course of the first couple of hours of early morning and how each habitat type is different
- get out early in the morning and, in spring and early summer, do an evening twilight ride
- look for quieter locations
- try to visit different habitat types
- use your phone to take pictures, make voice recordings of your sightings, etc.

5. Things to pay attention (general)

- roadside wildflower parade and how they change from June through late October
- progression of leaf-out, colour change, leaf-fall in a given tree or landscape over the course of a week or season
- roadside animals: turtles in June, Woolly Bears in fall, etc.
- How the smells change along a trail - also, each month has its signature smell (balsam poplar, hay, milkweed, rank vegetation, fallen leaves...)
- How the temperatures change between sun and shade, high and low elevation, etc.
- the soundscape (e.g., frogs and birds of spring & early summer; insect chorus of August and early fall; cardinals and chickadees starting in mid-February)
- soaring birds (Turkey Vultures, hawks, gulls, etc.)
- difference between the city and the country (non-native trees vs. native trees; extent of buckthorn along hedgerows)
- roadside geology (e.g., erratics, limestone south of shield, granite of Canadian Shield - Buckhorn village good for all three)
- different types of clouds; recognize threatening cloud formations

6. Fun activities

- Have a "Big Day" - How many species can you find, by bike, in a given day or outing?
- Do a scavenger hunt - maybe make your own list of common plants & animals to look for
- Do a colours ride - how many different colours can you see? What colours dominate?
- Do a sounds ride - how many different bird, insect or frog sounds can you hear?
- Count an individual species - how many can you see (e.g., squirrels, gulls, Monarchs)
- Find a "special spot" where you can get off the bike, sit quietly for five minutes, maybe write in a journal, take note of how its changed since the last time you were there

7. Preparation

- try to memorize some of the most common bird, amphibian and insect sounds (**birds:** www.allaboutbirds.org; **amphibians:** <https://www.naturewatch.ca/english/frogwatch/on/> **insects:** <http://musicofnature.org/songsofinsects/iframes/twentytypes.html>)

- slowly work on being able to identify the most common plant and animal species, including invasive plants
- learn to "pish" in birds <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LI4EwnWavUw>
- maybe invest in some apps - Sibley's eBird guide, Sky Guide, Audubon series of nature apps, etc.
- Learn what's happening in nature in the different seasons and even months (see www.drewmonkman.com or my book: "Nature's Year: Changing Seasons in Central and Eastern Ontario" published by Dundurn)

8. Think "seasonally" - What to watch and listen for

Spring (mid-March thru May)

- **birds:** loud bird song, especially in AM; migrating ducks on Little Lake & Otonabee River
- **mammals:** beavers and muskrats active at dawn and dusk
- **amphibians:** frog chorus (even during the day such as toads & cricket frogs; easily identifiable by call)
- **reptiles:** basking turtles, turtles laying eggs in June; predated nests with egg shells scattered about
- **invertebrates:** first butterflies (often perch on dirt roads, even on dung), first dragonflies
- **plants:** leaf-out (trees leaf out at different times, have different shades of green, identifiable at great distances), flowering shrubs and small trees (e.g., cherries, Juneberries, dogwoods, hawthorns, lilacs, etc.), wildflowers along the road and trail side (e.g., coltsfoot, common horsetail equisetum) and in woodlots (e.g., trilliums in May, Wild Columbine in June), smell of Balsam Poplar
- **sky:** Orion in the SW sky, Big Dipper high in NE, phases of the Moon; pay attention to where the sun rises and sets
- **Sounds to know:** Sandhill Crane, American Robin, Mourning Dove, Swamp Sparrow, Song Sparrow, Eastern Meadowlark, Red-winged Blackbird, Yellow Warbler, Common Yellowthroat, Northern Flicker, Spring Peeper, Chorus Frog, Leopard Frog, American Toad, Spring Field Cricket

Summer (June through August)

- **birds:** chorus winds down; over by early August
- **amphibians:** chorus (treefrogs in evening in early summer); bullfrogs and green frogs in July and early August
- **reptiles:** snakes basking on roads and trails snapping turtle hatchlings on trails by late August
- **invertebrates:** dragonflies - sometimes thousands of the same species along a given road trees; butterflies (sulphurs, swallowtails) puddling on dirt roads, visiting roadside blossoms; fireflies at dusk in low, damp areas; buzz saw call of the cicada, cricket chorus; increase in Monarch butterflies by mid-August; Carolina locusts flying up from trails

- **plants:** trees identifiable by shade of green, size and shape; roadside wildflower parade at its best (e.g., daisies, buglos, buttercups, hawkweed, Queen Anne's Lace, Tall White Clover, Milkweed, etc.); wide variety of plants in flower in wetlands; fruit on trees becomes evident in late summer; colour change begins in August; smell of milkweed, freshly mown hay, rank vegetation (August)
- **sky:** Milky Way, Summer Triangle, Big Dipper high in NW, sunrise, sunset, Moon phases; pay attention to where the sun rises and sets; heavy morning mists in late summer
- **Sounds to know:** Ovenbird, Red-eyed Vireo, Cedar Waxwing, American Goldfinch, Eastern Kingbird, Savannah Sparrow, Bobolink, Indigo Bunting, Gray Treefrog, Green Frog, Dog-day Cicada, Fall Field Cricket, Allard's Ground Cricket, Snowy Tree Cricket

Fall (September thru November)

- **birds:** calls (jays, crows), subtle contact notes, big flocks of blackbirds and gulls
- **mammals:** beavers very active at dawn and dusk; abundant squirrels on lawns hiding food; watch for deer at dawn and dusk; listen for coyotes; muskrats build cone-shaped homes of mud and vegetation; squirrel dreys
- **amphibians:** leopard frogs in meadows and in grass along trail edges
- **reptiles:** baby snapping turtles hatch out and sometimes seen on trails
- **invertebrates:** butterflies (sulphurs, whites) doing spiral flight; caterpillars crossing roads and trails (e.g., Woolly Bear); strong insect chorus for much of Sept. & early Oct.; flying ants; meadowhawk dragonflies
- **plants:** colour change in trees, shrubs, vines (e.g., Virginia Creeper); amount of fruit and seed on trees; fields full of goldenrods and asters; the tree colour parade from early Sept. (Virginia Creeper, cherry) to early Nov. (tamarack, Norway Maple, oak); extent of non-native trees which remain green well into October; new vistas after leaf-fall; elemental form of trees; branching patterns; evergreen mosses and ferns visible in November; galls on goldenrod; tree identification by shape, bark, buds; fungi (puffballs, shaggy manes); smell of leaf mold
- - **sky:** Milky Way, Great Square of Pegasus, Big Dipper high in NW, sunrise, sunset, Harvest Moon, pay attention to where the sun rises and sets
- **Sounds to know:** Blue Jay, American Crow, same insects as summer

Winter (December thru mid-March)

- **birds:** diving ducks like Common Goldeneye and Common Merganser on Otonabee River; occasional Bald Eagle; flocks of winter robins; flocks of Snow Buntings in agricultural fields
- **plants:** colours of the winter woods; tree identification by shape, bark, buds, etc.; learn to identify conifers at a glance; fruit may still linger on trees
- **fungi:** bracket fungi on trees
- **sky:** pay attention to where the sun rises and sets; Winter Six constellations
- **Sounds to know:** Northern Cardinal, Black-capped Chickadee (song)

9. A few itineraries

- **Trans-Canada Trail** from Jackson Park, through Lily Lake Wetland and on to tressle bridge past Orange Corners Road (turtles, marsh birds, beavers, otters on occasion, orchids, gentians, shrubs, etc.)
- **Trans-Canada Trail** from Lang to Hastings (woodlots, butterfly habitat, birding, deer, coyotes)
- **Rotary Greenway Trail** to Cty Rd 33 and Lakefield Sewage Lagoons, back-track and continue up to Lakefield and west to D'eyncourt Street to Lakefield Marsh (Promise Rock Nature Area at Trent, ducks on Otonabee River, at Sewage Lagoons and at Lakefield Marsh)
- **Herkimer Point Road** east of Cty Rd 31 at Hiawatha First Nation (forest, marsh, excellent birding)
- **Little Lake Loop** Little Lake Cemetery to Millenium Park to Beavermead Park to Ecology Park (ducks in spring on Little Lake, diverse trees at cemetery, migrant songbirds, etc.)
- **Bridgenorth Trail** from Hilliard Street North to Selwyn 7th Line to Cty Rd 24 to Selwyn 5th Line (fields, wetlands, woodlots, Miller Creek Conservation Area)
- **River Road** east of 2cd Line of Asphodel and south of Cty Rd 2 (swamp, mature forest, wildflowers, great birding)
- **Parkway Corridor** from Jackson Park to Cumberland (field, diverse trees, migrants in spring and fall)
- **Sandy Lake Road**, east of Cty Rd 46, north of Havelock (butterflies, reptiles, Jack Pine, sedge meadows)
- **Ganaraska Forest**, Visitors Centre off of Cty Rd 9 between Peterborough & Port Hope. 100+ kms of mountain biking trails through diverse habitats. Woodland birds.
- **Carden Alvar** northeast of Beaverton (one of top 10 birding destinations in Ontario, diverse butterflies, Prairie Smoke wildflowers, etc.)
- **Presqu'ile Provincial Park** at Brighton on Lake Ontario (rare plant communities, great birding, marshes, beaches, bird sightings board, etc.)

10. When you get home

- Share your sightings through Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, etc.
- Submit a bird checklist through eBird.org
- Submit your sightings to a Citizen Science project you are interested in such as **PlantWatch** (https://www.naturewatch.ca/english/plantwatch/why_monitor.html) or the **Ontario Reptile and Amphibian Atlas** (http://www.ontarionature.org/protect/species/herpetofaunal_atlas.php)

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