

# What's Growing On? The Fletcher Wildlife Garden Newsletter

[www.ofnc.ca/fletcher.php](http://www.ofnc.ca/fletcher.php)

February 2012

## Winter wonderland!

*Snow and ice and everything is sparkly nice. FWG is a different world in winter.*



*Our beautiful new shed, as captured by D Lepage*

The thaw is on in true Ottawa February fashion, but we know there is more winter ahead. Snow makes for a beautiful change when visiting FWG, as everything looks slightly different at this of year. We're back to our monthly newsletters after a short hibernation, and with the new year we're trying a few changes. Events such as work bees will be advertised, well in advance whenever possible so you can mark your calendar and spread the word. This is going to be a busy year with the Monarch Waystation project being added to our usual roster of activities, so all hands on deck will be appreciated. We're considering a garlic mustard weeding bee, so stay tuned as that is likely the first weeding bee of the year - but we'll have planting, potting and other maintenance activities for which we would happily involve casual volunteers. Add to your new year's resolutions some 'greencercise' - or green exercise, which is even defined in Wikipedia! The newsletter will also introduce FAQs to share questions and answers, and hopefully we'll have even more guest authors sharing their knowledge and experiences. Christine Hanrahan prepared a 2011 review of activities, so refresh your memory and get ready for 2012! Overview: [www.ofnc.ca/fletcher/history/2011/2011-update.pdf](http://www.ofnc.ca/fletcher/history/2011/2011-update.pdf)

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## WANTED: Items FWG Could Use!

Our lawnmower needs to be put out to pasture. We'll be needing a new one to mow the lawn in our BYG and along trails! If you have any suggestions or a super discount, please let us know!

## FWG FAQ - Asked by You!



**FWG gets various emails submitted with questions, and if we can't readily give an answer we turn to our go-to experts.**

**~ Selected by Sandra Garland**



**I thought bats hibernated? So, why is there one hanging out on my covered porch in winter!?**



At Christmas time, we had an appeal for a bat expert from a member of our Friends of the FWG on Facebook. She had discovered a bat on her back porch (see photo). It had somehow got separated from its colony (in the roof of the porch) and our friend was concerned that it would freeze on its own.

We decided to go to the top, and sent off a message to internationally-known bat expert, Brock Fenton, at the University of Western Ontario. Brock very kindly replied with the advice to bring the bat inside, let it warm up, give it plenty of water, then release it while the weather was still relatively mild (a storm was due the next day). Most important, DON'T get bitten, he added.

Apparently, big brown bats (*Eptesicus fuscus*) such as this are very hardy and are often roused by warmer temperatures. However, they need to get back to their colony to survive the winter.

*More about our local bats:*

Bats and how to attract them to your yard (FWG):

[www.ofnc.ca/fletcher/howto/htbats\\_e.php](http://www.ofnc.ca/fletcher/howto/htbats_e.php)

Hinterland Who's Who: [www.hww.ca/en/species/mammals/bats.html](http://www.hww.ca/en/species/mammals/bats.html)



Photos: K. Faulkes-Knapp





**I saw a robin! Is it spring??**



Overwintering robins are becoming more common in recent years to the point where they are no longer harbingers of spring but occasional year-round residents. Biologists, such as Fred Schueler and Stew Hamill, have been noticing the trend for years.

According to FWG Friend Gillian Mastromatteo, "Robins often spend the winter here in Ottawa, so I'm afraid they have nothing to do with spring! They will stay if they can find a place with lots of food (berries), shelter and open water. The FWG, Arboretum, and Hurdman Park are good places to look for them in the winter."



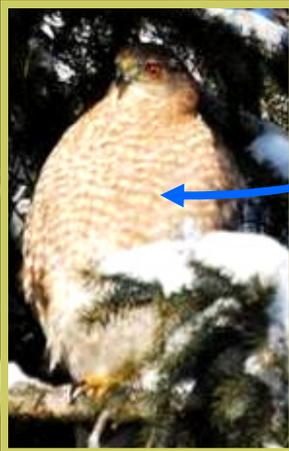
Photo: D Lepage

Our FWG records, although by no means scientific, show a definite increase in robins seen in January and February since 2006. How do we know it's spring? At FWG, we know it's arrived when we hear the shrill calls of male Red-winged Blackbirds staking out territory at our amphibian pond!

## Common Question

### Is that a peregrine falcon in my back yard??

Almost always no. It's usually a Cooper's hawk or a merlin, both of which stalk backyard feeders. Peregrines are seldom found in residential areas.



...Cooper's hawk

Note the difference in chest pattern.



Merlin



Peregrine falcon . . .

## Annual Native Plant Sale Countdown!

***Guess who has awoken from a chilly cold nap in our mini-fridge? Our seeds! Lots of our little green troopers have germinated following their cold stratification period, and we're thrilled to report no freezing issues like last year! We do hope that our plants will now take and set strong roots, growing well and quickly in time for the plant sale - weather providing, of course! Last year, pot growth was delayed due to the chill, so many of our plants looked tiny by sale time. Fingers crossed!***



*Left: Once leaving their baggies, the seeds are placed in these high-tech containers and sit under grow lights to encourage germination.*

*Below: The next step is to plant each tiny seedling in potting cells filled with a special soil mix that won't crush fine roots. Then, back under the grow lights!*





New year, new plant: This is the first time we've tried growing Poke Milkweed (*Asclepias exaltata*). Considered rare in Ontario, this species is more generally found in southern parts of the province. Why is this an exciting milkweed? It likes moist, deciduous, semi-shaded habitats! Essentially, a forest milkweed! More milkweed for our butterfly friends here at FWG on even more habitat - our Waystation Project will benefit greatly. It is unlikely we'll be selling this species in 2012, as we need to study how well it does first before we are comfortable selling to you.



Right: Nodding onions unfurling. An easily recognised seedling in comparison to grasses (below) or dicots (above). These are slow to grow, but once in the garden tend to flourish after a couple of years and create many seeds and dividable clumps. Nodding onion are inevitably the weeniest plants we have at the sale if sold in their first year! Volunteers also dread potting them up as they are so delicate and small! We've overwintered some in hopes of having larger, sturdier plants for sale in addition to the babies.



Below: Bottlebrush grass. It is growing so well, which is wonderful as grasses also tend to look less than impressive their first couple of years. This is a lovely ornamental as the flower heads are very delicate and architectural. We have several plants in the BYG.



## Winter tree spotting - Using tree form



When it's cold outside, we frequently reminisce about the glories of green in spring, summer and then the colourful autumn. Above our heads tree branches stretch out like so many scaly claws in the grey winter sky. Identifying trees in winter is much more difficult for beginner Treespotters than when the leaves are out. However, the activity is that much more rewarding for its difficulty and the unique opportunity to appreciate tree form!

Tree form relates to the shape and size of a tree, as well as the structure its many branches make. If you are a landscape artist, you can well appreciate that each tree is different and capturing the essence of a scene depends upon seeing those differences. The majestic sweep of an elm is not the same as the dense scraggy oak!

Bark is the easiest way to quickly tell the difference between trees – a lovely paper birch is all curly and slakey white while an aspen remains smooth and can even be a tad greenish. A mature silver maple has glorious long slakes of bark. Young trees present a challenge as their bark hasn't taken on the key characteristics for identification, so a Treespotter must rely upon twig characteristics, buds and leaf scars – if he or she can get close enough! For those trees that are out of reach, we have the opportunity to closely study form.

Form requires looking both at the tree and the landscape in which it grows, since the latter will affect its pattern. A tree growing alone in a field will display more 'traditional' form characteristics than a tree growing in a dense forest stand, competing for light and space. Looking at the tree, note the direction in which the branches seem to grow – is it upwards? Out to the side? Are the branches delicate with many small twigs or solid with stumpy twigs? Do the branches go in one direction or do they seem to dip at their extremities? Do the smaller twigs grow off the main branch in opposite or alternate spacing? What colours are present in the bark and twigs? What shapes?

The easiest thing to do is to pick up a tree book which included a key and clues about winter identification. Practice is key and also studying trees in different types of landscape to see their ideal and cramped forms. Another hint is to look at what else is growing around your target tree – you may recognise a more 'typical' version of your tree species, or other species which are known to grow in similar environmental conditions. If you're in an artificial landscape, however, all bets on that count are off!

The Arboretum is an excellent tool to hone your skills, as many of the trees are tagged with their names. Some examples to get spotting with around FWG on the next page:



*Avoid interacting with aggressive trees that prefer to remain anonymous.*

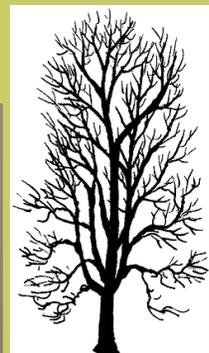
**Red Oak (*Quercus rubra*)**

- ✂ Alternate bud arrangement, with buds looking knobby like a massive multi-bud-lump
- ✂ Buds generally shiny, reddish-brown
- ✂ Twigs reddish-brown and shiny
- ✂ Mature bark in deep ridges with the higher portion frequently being dusty grey in colour – giving a sort of zebra effect



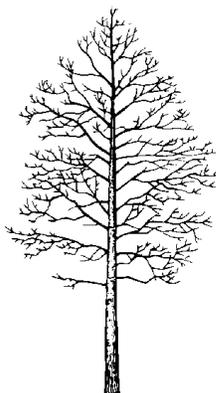
**Silver Maple (*Acer saccharinum*)**

- ✂ Opposite bud arrangement
- ✂ Buds are pointed and reddish-brown
- ✂ Light to medium brown twigs
- ✂ Slakey mature bark in long, vertical strips



**Trembling Aspen (*Populus tremuloides*)**

- ✂ Straight trunk
- ✂ Buds in opposite arrangement, sharp-pointed
- ✂ Twigs alternate, slender and shiny
- ✂ Bark smooth whitish to greyish green with horizontal lenticels, becomes furrowed with increasing age from base of tree



## Eye Spy

***Avid naturalists like Christine Hanrahan can find the bits of nature the rest of us overlook. This time of year is a great time to see what is frequently hidden, or observe winter animal behaviour. These photos and descriptions are curated from our always enjoyable photoblog. Give it a visit if you're feeling deprived of your red squirrel cuteness quotient! [www.pbase.com/fwq](http://www.pbase.com/fwq)***

### Red squirrel nest in an old bird house

Long, long ago red squirrels took over this old nest box, which was just fine, because it was not in a great spot for birds we realized! But for squirrels, it is ideal being close to two great food sources. It has been used for years, obviously not by the same red squirrel, not unless he (or she) is the Methuselah of the squirrel world. Notice all the grasses and fibres stuffed into this. This creates a lovely warm nest, protected by the wooden walls of the nest box.



### Hanging out the mushroom to dry



Squirrels, both grey and red, but mostly the latter, will hang up mushrooms to dry for later consumption. This one had been stuck into a tiny hole in a tree.

I'm thinking of starting a gourmet grocery business....Sciurus Chanterelles Co., perhaps?



## Nibbles on sumac

Squirrels will frequently nibble on bark as yet another way to find nutrients. In this case, a sumac has been freshly chewed. Sumacs, while often thought of as a nuisance plant, are not only a native species, but do provide food for many birds and animals.



## Woodpecker work



This is an old birch snag that, during the late spring was first excavated by chickadees. If you look closely, you can see at the top of the opening, where a nice circular hole goes right back into the snag. However, the chickadees ended up not using this cavity. Much later, woodpeckers took turns enlarging the hole, looking for insects, and even possibly contemplating this as a nest site. But it was much too low down and was not used by them either!

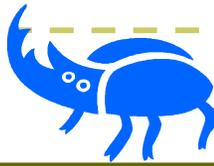


## American redstart nest

Or at least I think this is. It was very snow-covered and rather dilapidated, but the size, shape and height were all right and this is where a pair of redstarts hung out in the summer of 2011. Amazing little construction these nests. Really, when you think about it, using only their beaks, birds weave these intricate little cup-shaped nests that can hold 4 or 5 youngsters plus an adult. Amazing. In the truest sense of that word.



## Event Space



**Get ready, get set and mark your calendars!**

*It is going to be a busy year at FWG, with work bees, events and reminders of the Native Plant Sale. This new space will highlight FWG events for the entire season - so check back each month for additions and date confirmations (our website will always be the most current source.) Visit the OFNC and Friends of the Farm webpages for information on their great activities.*

### APRIL

Potting bees for potters! We have lots of lovely plants to make comfy in larger homes so they can grow and be lovely for the Plant Sale - our main source of operating funds. Depending on weather and plant growth, this might be moved to May. Stay tuned for an exact date.

### MAY

Saturday, **May 19 or May 26** - PLANTING BEE - It will depend on the weather and but we will have 2245 plants to put in the ground at the Butterfly Meadow.

### UPCOMING

We're still sorting dates for some work bees, but there will be more DSV attacking, work in the Butterfly Meadow with the inaugural season of the Monarch Waystation Project and well as other types of activity where many hands make for light work!

Saturday, **June 2**- the **Annual Native Plant Sale** at FWG's Interpretation Centre!!!

Sunday, **July 8** - WEEDING BEE

Sunday, **July 15** - WEEDING BEE

Sunday, **August 12** - WEEDING BEE

Sunday, **September 9** - WEEDING BEE

#### Links:

(**FWG**) - Check our website for more details if the newsletter isn't enough!

(**OFNC**) - For OFNC events, visit their [www.ofnc.ca/events.php](http://www.ofnc.ca/events.php) for information.

(**FoF**) - For FoF events, visit [www.friendsofthefarm.ca/events.htm](http://www.friendsofthefarm.ca/events.htm) for information.

# Help FWG from the comfort of home!

Are you a current volunteer? Have you volunteered with FWG in the past, in any capacity? If so, then we need your input!

We are reviewing our volunteer strategy, and need your help to learn more about what the experience is or was like for you. The survey we developed is online, and a combination of click the box and fill in more detailed answers. We'll be collecting feedback until the end of May.

Please do find the time to participate by going to this webpage: <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/viewform?pli=1&formkey=dDBSRFRYeDZsV2dKTllpNFFDQzQwVnc6MQ#qid=0>

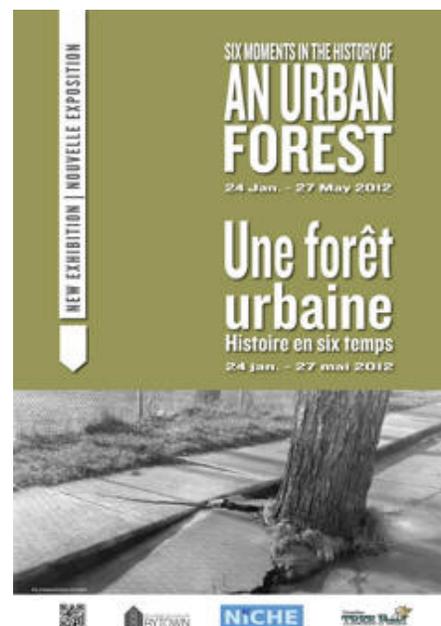


## Urban forests in Ottawa exhibit

Too cold outside to enjoy the woods? The Bytown Museum (below Parliament Hill at the canal locks) is hosting an exhibit about the change in Ottawa's urban forest. Included with aerial imagery tracing the development and erosion of our local canopy, there is a photo storyline tracing the history of a bur oak from what its environment was like until its death due to development activities, over 150 years later.

Curated by Carleton University professor Joanna Dean and graduate student Will Knight, the exhibit explores the contested place of trees in Ottawa's urban history. The exhibit explores early street tree planting, the 1920s campaign to "control" urban trees, the commemorative Centennial crab apple tree, the role of arborists in negotiating the conflicts between trees and the built environment, and the closing of Lovers Walk behind Parliament Hill.

SIX MOMENTS IN THE HISTORY OF THE URBAN FOREST  
January 24 - May 27, 2012



[www.bytownmuseum.com/](http://www.bytownmuseum.com/)



## Science Corner!

*If fossils dictate the tune of song, play on!*

A recently published open-access article in the journal *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* details how researchers were able to analyse the finely-preserved fossilised remains of a cricket – and then recreate its mating song 165 million years since its extinction. *Archaboilus musicus* lived on the mid-Jurassic forest floor in what is now northern China, which was then a sparse forest of coniferous trees and giant ferns.



*A thoroughly modern katydid (*Scudderia* sp., female) at FWG.*

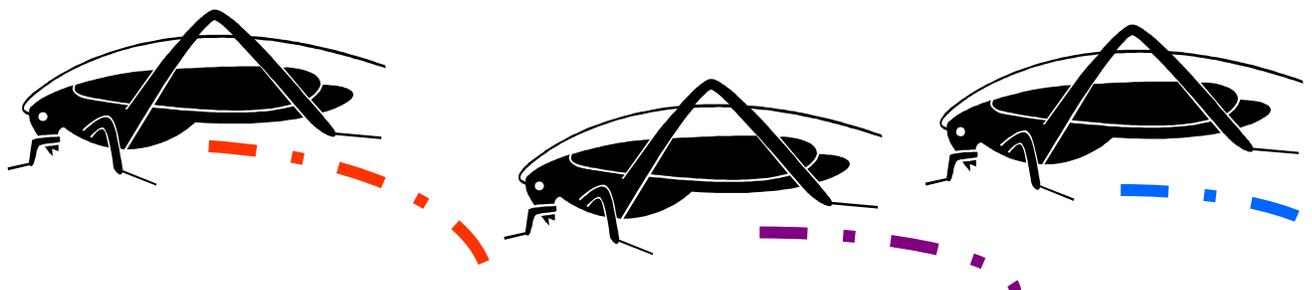
Through phylogenetic comparison of the striding katydid's body and wings with those of modern-day species, the researchers were able to determine that its song was a series of repeated single notes, chirps lasting 16 milliseconds at a frequency of around 6.4 kilohertz. This rather monotonal song could travel a distance along the forest floor – and was audible to a variety of predators along with the target female listeners.

Full-text of the article is available at: [www.pnas.org/content/early/2012/02/02/1118372109](http://www.pnas.org/content/early/2012/02/02/1118372109)

Gu JJ, Montealegre-Z F, Robert D, Engel MS, Qiao GX and D Ren. 2012. Wing stridulation in a Jurassic katydid (Insecta, Orthoptera) produced low-pitched musical calls to attract females. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, Published online before print at [www.pnas.org/cgi/doi/10.1073/pnas.1118372109](http://www.pnas.org/cgi/doi/10.1073/pnas.1118372109)

Visit FWG's Orthoptera images: [www.pbase.com/fwg/grasshoppers\\_katydid\\_and\\_crickets](http://www.pbase.com/fwg/grasshoppers_katydid_and_crickets)

Visit FWG's photoblog beetle galleries: [www.pbase.com/fwg/beetles\\_of\\_the\\_fwg](http://www.pbase.com/fwg/beetles_of_the_fwg)



## Activity: Sap is rising!



Every year at about this time, red squirrels can be seen nibbling at maple branches to get the sap running, which they then lap up. This little guy was busy on a Manitoba maple and you can see his little pink tongue licking away!

## Nature Notes: Bird of the Month

Diane said that while it was very cold at the FWG, it was also sunny and looked like a winter wonderland. She snapped a photo of this adult cooper's hawk (*Accipiter cooperii*) looking very regal under his coniferous bower. Photo: D Lepage



## Nature Notes: Critter of the Month



Christine was both surprised and not surprised to see this little guy having a feeding on wild plums. Chipmunks are not true hibernators and will emerge on mild days, such as this was, to seek food. When it gets cold again it will no doubt be some days before he climbs back out of his underground den.