

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

www.ofnc.ca/fletcher.php

MARCH 2012

## Welcome back, Spring!



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*Melt up on the Amphibian Pond*

March is a funny month this year, with blizzards segueing into early summery warmth. By the time you read this, we may only have memories of snow and tulips might well be on their way!

The Friday morning volunteer group has started. Tony needs help preparing the ravine slope for planting shrubs and trees. Also, there's a lot of potting to do for the plant sale. Diane will be starting work in the Butterfly Meadow on 25 April and Barry plans to start the Tuesday morning invasive species group on 1 May.

Other projects underway are a reboot of our website, which we hope will make all our wonderful

information more intuitively accessible. If you currently volunteer with us in any capacity, or have done so in the past, please take 20 minutes and fill out our volunteer survey to help us develop the best possible volunteer programme - see inside for details.

This edition of the newsletter focuses on spring as well as children and nature. More specifically, we'll introduce how some youth make use of FWG, perhaps as inspiration for you and your family. We also discuss some early spring nature and garden topics, alongside our usual entries. For more inspiration about children and the outdoors, check out the Child and Nature Alliance of Canada ([www.childnature.ca](http://www.childnature.ca)).

Web-side, our nature leanings are being satisfied though we can only do so much outside at the moment. We're tracking our monarch friends' journey northwards on this website: [www.learner.org/jnorth/maps/monarch\\_spring2012.html](http://www.learner.org/jnorth/maps/monarch_spring2012.html). It is proving to be a fairly addictive seasonal pleasure! The monarchs are already laying eggs in Texas!

Also, learn more about how plants interact, complete with great slow motion filming by the Nature of Things on CBC online: [www.cbc.ca/natureofthings/episode/smarty-plants-uncovering-the-secret-world-of-plant-behaviour.html](http://www.cbc.ca/natureofthings/episode/smarty-plants-uncovering-the-secret-world-of-plant-behaviour.html)

### Contact Us!

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## School gardens for learning: Mutchmor Public School

*by S Garland*

Many years ago, Lynn Armstrong asked the FWG for advice about native plants for a garden in front of Mutchmor school on Fifth Avenue. She was researching the tradition of school gardens and hoping to create a "heritage garden." That garden is now a flourishing reality: the grade 3 class grows plants for it every year and the kindergarten children visit regularly to observe cycles and changes.



Lynn planted a number of native species, especially drought-tolerant ones. Asters, monarda, coneflower, heliopsis, all attract butterflies and bees, and the garden has a bird bath as well. Over the years, it has developed to the point where they can divide plants and sell them to subsidize the garden costs, which used to be paid for by a grant from the city.

### Butterflies for the garden

Now that the school has a garden, Betty Taylor, KP teacher, has somewhere to release the painted lady butterflies her class raises from eggs every spring. Last year, milkweeds appeared in the garden, and she is thinking of raising monarchs as well, although the timing is awkward.

Betty says that seeing the butterflies' life cycle is a "magical experience" for her pupils. Even their grade 4 "reading buddies" are enthralled to see the changes as caterpillars grow, pupate, and turn into butterflies.



The kids spend time in the garden observing nature as well. Cycles and patterns are part of the kindergarten curriculum, so they visit the garden frequently to see, for example, how things seem to die in the fall, but come back and grow the next spring. Some students also bring their parents to see and enjoy the garden.

### Learning by growing

In Dorilyn Kooy-Roome's grade 3 class, children start plants from seed after March break. Some are destined for the heritage garden, but they grow vegetables and herbs as well. The school is surrounded by gardens - heritage out front, native woodland perennials on the west side under trees, and vegetable beds across the street north of the school.

*(Continued on page 3)*



Betty Taylor

Growing plants is part of the grade 3 curriculum and many people contribute to the effort. Lynn Armstrong conducts a 4-station workshop on growing plants, and, a few years ago, Linda Hall of Growing Up Organic held workshops, and showed the kids how to make a mini-composter out of plastic containers (shown in photo).

During the school year, when the weather is nice, Dorilyn brings her class outside for

gym. Groups of 6 kids take a turn weeding and tending the garden for a short enough period to keep the hard work fun. When vegetables ripen, kids are encouraged to pick and eat. At end of the school year, a big treat is the salad they make using all the vegetables.

Is there a downside?

A school garden requires considerable work. When the school closes for summer, parents do the necessary watering and weeding. Betty would like to have a garden inside the schoolyard fence so that the kids could enjoy it more often, but the yard is too small and plants would need to be protected.

Plants that attract butterflies also draw in bees. Lynn says this hasn't been a problem at Mutchmor, but poison plants are an issue. She follows the CSA standard for playgrounds, which contains a list of poisonous plants, including black-eyed susans!

Why aren't all teachers involved in the garden? Mainly because growing plants and raising butterflies do not fit their curriculum, so they can't afford the time.

There is also a considerable time commitment and Mutchmor is lucky to have a garden champion in Lynn Armstrong. She started the garden when her own children were at the school, but remains deeply involved even though they have gone on to highschool.



Dorilyn Kooy-Roome and Lynn Armstrong

## The Macoun Field Club

*text and photos by R Lee*



The Macoun Field Club, for young naturalists aged 8 and up, holds hour-long meetings in the Fletcher Wildlife Garden Interpretative Centre on Saturday mornings (every other week) through the school year. Topics can cover any aspect of natural history, from astronomy to zoology. Some presentations take us into the garden itself, where we can practise finding birds through binoculars or search for insects in the long grass.

Our all-day field trips on alternate Saturdays take us into wilder places. We have an extensive Nature Study Area in the western Greenbelt and where each Macoun member chooses a tree of his or her own (what we call a "Study Tree") which we visit and examine at every opportunity. At this time of year the buds are swelling and one of our activities involves bringing freshly cut twigs of the right species into our homes. How does a rounded bud turn into a flat leaf? Or are the leaves already there, inside the bud, and just spread out when it opens?

To find out for yourself, cut a twig off a living branch that has fallen onto the snow during the winter, or if the tree can spare one, cut it off yourself. To test whether the twig is alive, bend it to see that it is flexible, and if in doubt, scrape away a bit of thin outer bark with your thumbnail. If it's alive, green chlorophyll will appear underneath. Prop the twig up in a jar of water and keep it on a tabletop or window ledge - in 10 to 14 days you'll see that something is happening! Maybe the bud will seem bigger, and you'll wish you had measured it when you started. Maybe it will pop open and a tree flower will emerge, instead of a leaf.

Keeping a late-winter twig indoors hurries the process up by a month or so. Most trees normally leaf out in early May, but some species lead the way, while others, like ash trees, wait so long you'll think they must be dead.

Do check out our schedule online, through the OFNC site, to see what's coming up! Kids can try it out and join at any time; parents are welcome to sit in on meetings and tag along on field trips. There are no fees. Visit [www.ofnc.ca/macoun/index.php](http://www.ofnc.ca/macoun/index.php) for more information.



*Clockwise from top: half-opened buds of American Beech, Bitternut Hickory, Striped or Moose Maple, and Sugar Maple.*



## **WANTED: Items FWG Could Use!**

Our lawnmower has been 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!

Do you have old wooden roll-up blinds, like IKEA sells? We are developing a better shade system for the nursery, ideally one that can be tweaked with solar exposure and stores small. Ditto if you happen to have old camo netting like the military uses.

## Knowledge Note: Grass and Melt Up



*Seriously, DO NOT WALK on the grass yet, buddy!*

The upper depth of soil always contains water, which freezes over winter. As the ground is freed from the insulating layer of snow, this ice melts and combined with snowmelt creates a waterlogged soil. This is the moment of the year when your grass roots, and soil health in general, are most vulnerable.

If you start walking on your lawn, you will compact the soil as water is pushed out - and wet soil can't rebound as it can when drier. Compaction will kill grass roots and also the fine roots of any other plant growing.

Once your lawn has dried out, after a few weeks of no snow and warm sunshine, feel free to grab a lawn aerator or hire one for the task. This tool pokes small holes in the upper centimetres of the soil profile or pulls out plugs of earth. This reduces compaction and lets the topsoil breathe. Grass tends to form thatch over time as dead leaves stay in place, so aeration also helps maintain a healthy lawn. Dethatchers can be hired, or you can just energetically rake parts of your lawn exhibiting pronounced thatch to loosen the cover.

Aerators can be pricey, as can hiring a lawn company to do this service for you. You can achieve similar results with a bit of patience, a pitchfork or a fat nail and hammer. Target those areas of your lawn that receive the most abuse, like paths to the BBQ. Start poking holes and trying to gently loosen the soil. Don't fling about clods - think of it as poking holes in a baking potato with a fork! Then, spread fresh grass seed of your preferred mix. Your reward will be a greener lawn faster, and a healthier one during the course of the season.



*This is not some strange animal dropping - these are soil plugs from a freshly aerated lawn!*

## Win-win youth enrichment at FWG

by **Renate Sander-Regier**

Each year, during the first full week of May, participating university and college campuses in Ottawa-Gatineau are filled with enrichment program mini-course students. The mini-courses provide young people in grades 8-12 at schools throughout the region with a post-secondary education experience, exposure to life on campus, insight into a particular area of study and an enriching week away from their usual classroom!

Since 2007, I have taught four enrichment mini-courses at the University of Ottawa, and the Fletcher Wildlife Garden has always been an integral part of the program.

On Monday, we typically stay on campus. It's a day of introductions – to each other, to course content and to the university campus. The main activity for the day is group work focusing on invasive species. The students are divided into research teams, and each team researches a particular invasive plant species (all found at the FWG!) In the afternoon, the teams introduce their plants to the rest of the class.

On Tuesday morning, we go to on a "field trip" to the FWG. We walk the Bill Holland Trail, explore the habitats, and discover the invasive species we learned about on Monday. Last year, FWG volunteer Barry Cottam joined us and shared his knowledge, experience and humour.

At the end of the week, we return to the FWG to work with the Friday morning volunteers. Students have worked on a variety of tasks over the years: planting trees with Sandy Garland in the Ash Woods, digging up garlic mustard with Sandy and Gretchen Denton, pulling out buckthorn with Tony Denton, removing DSV with Barry Cottam, and distributing compost with Al Beaulieu. Students find it especially satisfying to work at removing the invasive species they researched earlier in the week.

The enrichment mini-course students usually find the Friday morning hands-on "field trip" the highlight of the week. They love being active, working with and learning from the FWG volunteers while making a contribution to the natural environment. And the FWG appreciates the extra help and youthful energy – a win-win situation for everyone involved!



## 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*



**When should I put out my hummingbird feeder?**



Like other migrating species, hummingbirds follow their food sources as they fly north in the spring. If no flowers are blooming in our area, it's very unlikely that you will see a hummingbird. They'll stay where they can feed on nectar. So, the timing of migration varies - a cold spring will delay things, and warm weather might accelerate it. At the FWG, hummingbirds usually arrive in May - our earliest sighting was 12 May in 2000.

Journey North tracks hummingbird migration based on reports from people all over North America and displays the information on maps ([www.learner.org/jnorth/humm/index.html](http://www.learner.org/jnorth/humm/index.html)). You can even sign up for a newsletter that will let you know weekly progress - and you'll learn all sorts of interesting things about hummingbirds. For example, this week, someone asked how hummingbirds bathe.

With our recent unusually warm weather, hummingbirds and other species are being seen far north of their usual range at this time of year. But a sudden cold snap could have serious consequences for those in the vanguard. So keep an eye on the map on Journey North and be prepared to put out your feeder in April.



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*Ruby-throated hummingbird, by C Hanrahan*



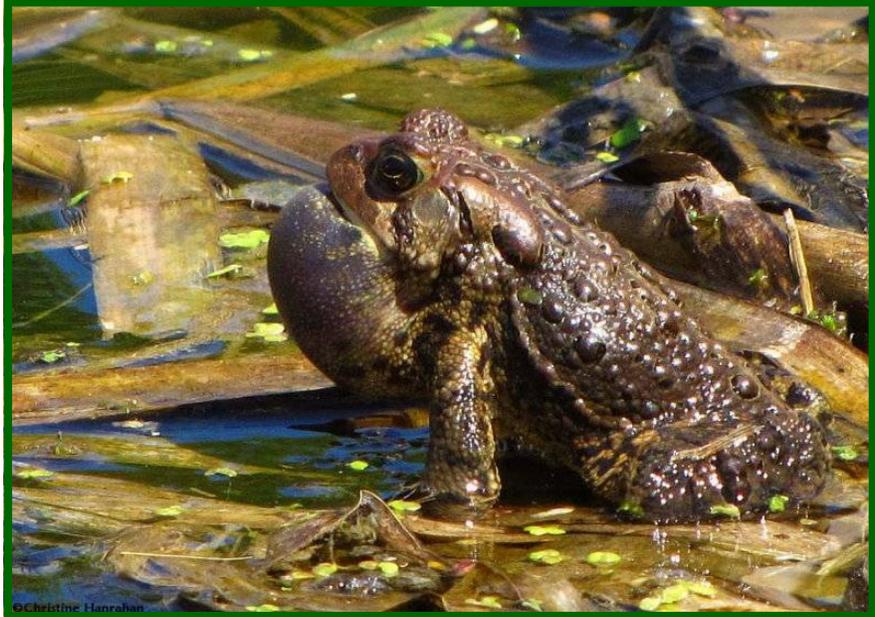
Christine Hanrahan



**How do I identify this frog or toad? Isn't it too early to be hearing or seeing them?**



Frogs and toads are already calling in March. At the FWG, our first amphibians are usually wood frogs, calling in early April followed by American toads later in the month. However, elsewhere around Ottawa, people are hearing the earlier chorus frogs and spring peepers.



*Calling toad (Bufo americanus) by C Hanrahan. Only the males call, so for every male heard and seen calling like this one, there is likely a female silently waiting somewhere in the vicinity.*

A great web site for frog identification is CARCNET, the Canadian Amphibian and Reptile Conservation Network ([www.carcnet.ca/english/index.php](http://www.carcnet.ca/english/index.php)). Choose your province on the map and see a full list of all amphibians and reptiles found there. For each species, the site provides photos, a range map, and recordings of their call, as well as lots of information and "conservation concerns" about these species.



Thank you, thank you! I'm here every night this week!



## Ahhh, that first robin, a sure sign of spring! Or is it?

**text and photos by C Hanrahan**

Once considered the herald of spring, their position has been usurped by other species, for American robins now regularly overwinter, sometimes in very good numbers. While occasional winter robins are nothing new, the last decade has seen a significant increase in birds persisting through the season.

As long as there is some open water and adequate food, robins can withstand the colder temperatures, even surviving frigid periods. Food is the primary key to their survival, as it provides the energy needed to keep warm, particularly at night. Because robins are not seed eaters, they rely on fruit in winter months. Crabapples, plums, mountain ash, viburnum, juniper, and the invasive buckthorns, even amur corktree, are amongst the common fruits consumed. If water sources are frozen, they resort to eating snow. When

the food runs out in one area, they will move elsewhere, which is why they can be common one day, and absent the next. In this current mild winter, unusually large numbers of robins

remained, dispersing more widely as food became scarcer. Large aggregations will again appear in early spring, but these robins will be joining their pals who stuck it out through the cold months.

In the meantime, naturalists look to other creatures for signs of spring. Red-winged blackbirds often arrive in mid-March, eastern phoebes and eastern bluebirds follow soon after. And the real sound of spring for some of us, is the call of the spring peeper and the chorus frog!





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*Robins snacking on Mountain Ash and Crabapples.*



## Insights from the 2012 record-breaking Great Backyard Bird Count

by the Great Backyard Bird Count (Cornell Lab of Ornithology, Audubon Society and Bird Studies Canada)



*Cedar waxwing - C Hanrahan*

When bird watchers joined this year's Great Backyard Bird Count, they recorded the most unusual winter for birds in the count's 15-year history. With 17.4 million bird observations on 104,000 checklists, this was the most detailed four-day snapshot ever recorded for bird life in the US and Canada. Participants reported 623 species, during February 17–20, including an influx of snowy owls from the arctic, early-migrating sandhill cranes and belted kingfishers in northern areas that might normally be frozen over.

"The maps on the GBBC website this year are absolutely stunning," said John Fitzpatrick, executive director of the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. "Every bird species has a captivating story to tell, and we're certainly seeing

many of them in larger numbers farther north than usual, no doubt because of this winter's record-breaking mild conditions."

Ironically, a few arctic species also moved farther south than usual as well. Participants recorded snowy owl sightings in record-breaking numbers throughout the Great Plains and Pacific Northwest of the United States. Canadian bird watchers saw four times the number of snowy owls they reported to the count last year. Experts believe that snowy owls move south from their usual arctic habitats in years when prey, such as lemmings, are scarce.

Warmer weather and lack of snow and ice in some regions set the stage for other spectacles, including more than two million snow geese reported on two counts at Squaw Creek National Wildlife Refuge, Missouri. In Ruskin, Florida, participants reported more than one million tree swallows, vaulting this species to the GBBC top-ten list of the most numerous birds for the first time ever.

Some northern locations recorded high numbers of waterbirds such as mallards, ring-necked ducks, hooded mergansers and American coots, that either never left or came back early to lakes, rivers, and ponds that remained unfrozen.



*Male hairy woodpecker - C Hanrahan*

©2012 C Hanrahan



Pileated woodpecker - C Hanrahan

"Citizen scientists are helping us document changes to birds, starting in our own backyards, which is also where the solution begins," said Audubon chief scientist Gary Langham. "My preschool-age daughter came out with me to count birds in the yard and around the neighbourhood - we're still talking about the experience weeks later."

To find out more about these and other trends from the 2012 count, visit [www.birdcount.org](http://www.birdcount.org). To report bird sightings all year, visit [www.ebird.org](http://www.ebird.org).

The GBBC is a joint project of the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and National Audubon

Society with Canadian partner Bird Studies

Canada. The event is sponsored in part by Wild Birds Unlimited.



## ~~ What FWG Found ~~

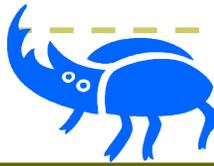
### FRIDAY, 17 FEB 2012

- 1 DOWNY WOODPECKER
- 1 HAIRY WOODPECKER
- 1 PILEATED WOODPECKER
- 8 AMERICAN CROWS
- 16 BLACK-CAPPED CHICKADEES
- 2 WHITE-BREASTED NUTHATCHES
- 1 BROWN CREEPER (ARBORETUM)
- 26 EUROPEAN STARLINGS
- 2 NORTHERN CARDINALS
- 12 HOUSE FINCHES
- 3 ROCK PIGEONS

### SATURDAY, 18 FEB 2012

- 3 MOURNING DOVES
- 6 BLACK-CAPPED CHICKADEES
- ABOUT 70 AMERICAN CROWS
- 2 RAVENS
- 1 DARK-EYED JUNCO
- 2 NORTHERN CARDINALS (A MALE AND A FEMALE)

## FWG 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 annual 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.*

## MAY

Tuesday, **May 1**, 9 AM - **Tuesday Invasive Species Group** starts up again!

Tuesday, **May 8**, 7:30 PM - **Adventures with the Monarch Butterfly** by Don Davis and Diane Lepage @ the Canadian Museum of Nature, basement Auditorium.

Thursday, **May 17**, 6:30-8:30 PM - **An Evening Walk at the Fletcher Wildlife Garden**. Meet @ the Interpretative Centre.

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.

Thursday, **May 31**, 6:30-8:30 PM - **An Evening Walk at the Fletcher Wildlife Garden**. Meet @ the Interpretative Centre.

## JUNE

Saturday, **June 2** - the **Annual Native Plant Sale 9:30 AM-12:30 PM** at the Interpretation Centre.

Thursday, **June 7**, 6:30-8:30 PM - **An Evening Walk at the Fletcher Wildlife Garden**. Meet @ the Interpretative Centre.

## UPCOMING

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 [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.

# FILL OUT YOUR VOLUNTEER SURVEY

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 - 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#gid=0>

 *Merci*

 *Thank You*

## Ottawa Botanical Art Show

Botanical drawing is an art form that spans centuries, and became especially prominent with explorers setting out from the Old World to discover lands new to them. Accurate drawings were essential for categorising their work, and for developing the first plant record databases. If you have ever used an identification guide, you know the value of an accurate representation! Five local contemporary botanical artists are holding an exhibition of their work, where they combine the observation of a scientist and the sensibility of the artist in their realistic portrayals of the botanical world. Some of these works may even feature flowers from our very own BYG! This art show is by members of the new Ottawa Society of Botanical Artists.



*K Weller*

**When:** March 23 to April 23, 2012 (hours: Mon - Sun: 9 AM to 10 PM)

**Where:** Trinity Art Gallery, Salon B (lower level), Shenkman Arts Centre (245 Centrum Boulevard, Orleans)

**Contact Info:** Kerri Weller (k.weller@magma.ca) 613-304-7785, Shenkman Arts Centre (613-580-2700)



## Science Corner!

### *Those marvellous monarchs!*

At the FWG, we're a bit wing flap-happy for monarchs this year as we move full steam ahead on the Monarch Waystation Project. A recently published study by Guelph researchers Ryan Norris, Nathan Miller and Environment Canada reveals how monarchs recolonise the northern reaches of their breeding grounds.

Miller sampled monarchs from 44 sites across Ontario and the northern states. By analysing stable isotopes as chemical markers and examining wing wear, the researchers found that about 10% of those reaching the northern breeding range in the spring come directly from Mexico - some 3000 km of travel over 8 months. The other 90% of monarchs sampled by the researchers in the spring were first-generation individuals born en route that year. Surprisingly, most of these monarchs were born in the highly productive region of the central United States, not in the southern states as previously thought. Given how milkweed is a problem weed for agriculture, increased planting of monocrops and pesticide use in the cornbelt could have even greater ramifications for monarch population survival than expected.



*After such a long trip, I sure need a drink!*

Full text of the article is available opensource online at: [www.plosone.org/article/info%3Adoi%2F10.1371%2Fjournal.pone.0031891](http://www.plosone.org/article/info%3Adoi%2F10.1371%2Fjournal.pone.0031891)

Miller NG, Wassenaar LI, Hobson KA, Norris DR (2012) Migratory connectivity of the monarch butterfly (*Danaus plexippus*): Patterns of spring re-colonization in eastern North America. *PLoS ONE* 7(3): e31891.



C Hanrahan

## Activity: Vole Holes!



A meadow vole has created a perfect circular entrance by chewing through the grass. Where the snow has melted, numerous vole runs can be found. You can see where they've created entrances in the flattened grass.

## Nature Notes: Bird of the Month

Diane captured this very neat photo of a red-winged blackbird either eating the snow or pushing it off to reach the seeds in the sumac cone. As always, the males of this species are the first to return, calling away from all over the garden and the Arboretum. Such an exhilarating sound because we know that spring really is here, and even if we do get more snow, we know it won't last!



©Diane Lepage

## Nature Notes: Bug of the Month



The lovely bright colours of the eastern comma butterfly (*Polygonia comma*). This species overwinters as an adult, spending the cold months in a protected place such as under the bark of trees, cavities, other sheltered spots. On warm days in early spring they emerge, but will go back into hiding if cold weather returns, which is quite likely here as it is only mid-March, despite the very warm temperatures.