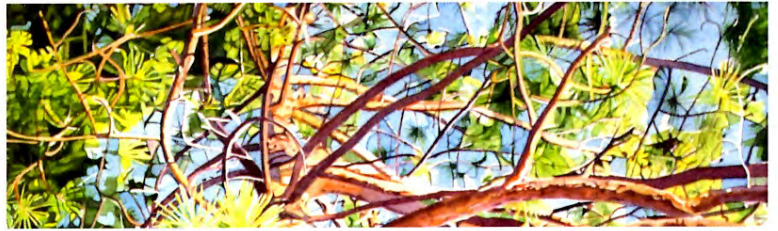


Branching Out

Autumn 2018



As residents of Huron Woods, we are fortunate to be surrounded by natural areas with abundant recreational opportunities and a remarkable amount of biodiversity. A crucial component of that natural environment is the Old Ausable Channel (OAC), which runs south for 14 km from Grand Bend to Port Franks. With most of southern Ontario's wetlands destroyed, the OAC provides critical habitat for wildlife, and is home to a number of species at risk.

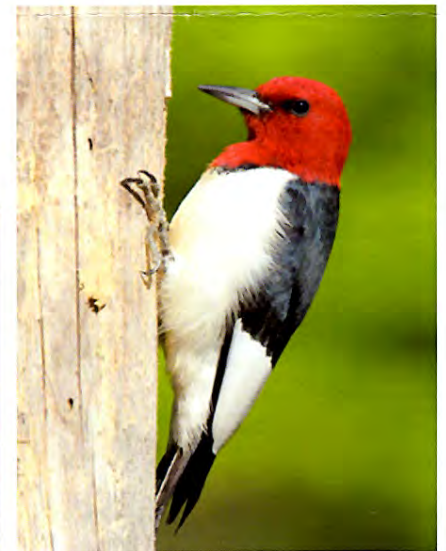
History of the OAC

Today's river channel bears little resemblance to the Ausable River prior to 1875, when the Canada Company completed "The Cut" which redirected the river's flow directly into Port Franks. Then in 1892, Parkhill Creek (formerly a tributary of the Ausable) had its flow diverted from the present OAC when a second cut was dug to create Grand Bend's harbour. Today, the Channel is fed only by precipitation, groundwater and small amounts of runoff. As a result, it has been spared from the industrial and agricultural pollutants that have negatively affected other sections of the Ausable River.



Wildlife Habitat

The OAC and its corridor provide critical habitat for a wide variety of flora and fauna, including 17 species that are listed as being at risk... 1 mammal; 3 birds; 6 reptiles; 3 fishes; 2 insects; and 6 plants (2018 ABCA Watershed Report)



Three of the OAC's Species at Risk - Common Snapping Turtle, Bald Eagle, and Red-headed Woodpecker

Beaver Dams and the OAC

Although they might be a minor inconvenience for canoes and kayaks, beaver dams in the Pinery help maintain a suitable water level in the north section of the channel for canoeing and kayaking. Removing these dams lowers the water level which can negatively affect aquatic life. Shallow water also becomes more oxygen-depleted in winter months.



Beaver yawning after a hard night's work



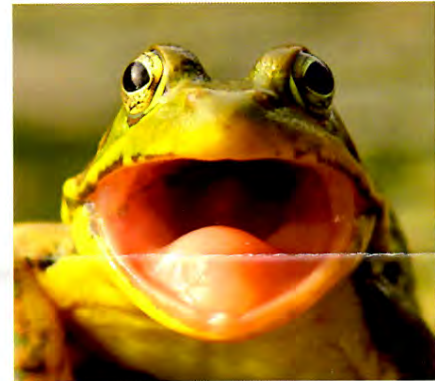
Dead fish downstream of the Beach O' Pines culvert - April, 2014

Future of the OAC

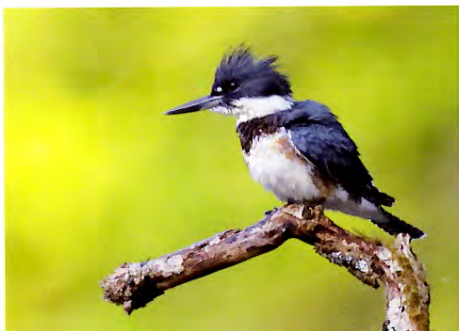
Through the process of natural succession, the OAC is gradually transitioning from a pond-like ecosystem to a more terrestrial one as it fills in over time. Because of the channel's minimal flow, nutrients like nitrates and phosphates from decaying vegetation build up over time. Human activity can increase the rate at which this happens, leading to excessive plant growth and unsightly algal blooms. As this vegetation decomposes over the winter, the channel's oxygen level can become severely depleted, leading to massive fish die-offs.

How We Can Help

- Maintain (or replant) a natural shoreline. A natural shoreline traps nutrients and waste in runoff more efficiently than a lawn. (MNR: www.lronline.com/Extension_Notes_English/pdf/shrlns.pdf)
- Avoid the use of fertilizer as it contributes to algal blooms.
- Don't blow leaves into the river channel... Yes, there are already lots of leaves there, but adding more just adds to the nutrient levels and contributes to the channel filling in over time.
- Use environmentally friendly cleaning products.
- Maintain septic systems according to recommendations
- Leave beaver dams intact... portage around them if necessary
- Volunteer for ABCA's turtle monitoring program



Green Frog



Belted Kingfisher



Blue Dasher dragonfly



Painted Turtles basking on a log