



Green Gems: A conservation priority list for Lanark County

By Dr. Paul Keddy

One of the most beautiful aspects of life in Lanark County is our natural environment. Much of southern Ontario has already been reduced to subdivisions and cities, surrounded mostly by fields of corn. Many people now live crowded into large cities.

There are few places in the world where one can live surrounded by wild landscapes. Here in Lanark County, we still have that good fortune. It will take some common sense to keep it that way.

One common-sense action is to ensure that the most important wild places in our county are recognized and protected. These places are Lanark County's green gems.

There is an international initiative to protect important wild places around the world, the United Nations' Strategic Plan for Biodiversity. Big wild places like Algonquin Provincial Park and the Great Barrier Reef are well-known examples, but they are far away. They can also be expensive to visit.

What about smaller places that are closer to home?

One familiar green gem closer to home is Murphys Point Provincial Park. It has some fine wetlands and forests and an important population of the threatened gray ratsnake.

Other local green gems are not so well-known. Here is one ex-

ample. Every time you cross the Hwy. 7 bridge at Innisville, you are passing through an enormous wetland, including a vast silver maple swamp.

The view from Hwy. 7 is mostly obstructed by buildings. Yet, downstream from the bridge is the Mississippi Lake National Wildlife Area, 264 hectares of mostly wetland, and the McEwan Bay Provincially Significant Wetland.

The open marsh and shallow water provide habitat for migrating waterfowl.

Upstream from the bridge is a larger area of Mississippi River floodplain, the Steward Lake-Haley Lake Provincially Significant Wetland. Together these areas form the Innisville Wetlands Area of Natural and Scientific Interest (ANSI), an official designation for a wild place that has been carefully studied by professional biologists and found to be of provincial value.

Although the Innisville Wetlands ANSI is surely a green gem, it seems to have a low profile in the county. Most people I meet are unaware of its existence or importance.

Lanark County has many other important natural areas that remain virtually unknown in our community. What might some of them be?

When I wrote my guide to the natural environment of Lanark County back in 1999, it included a short list of some of our important natural areas – our "Special Places." The list included Murphys Point Provincial Park, Purdon Conservation Area and Burnt Lands Alvar.

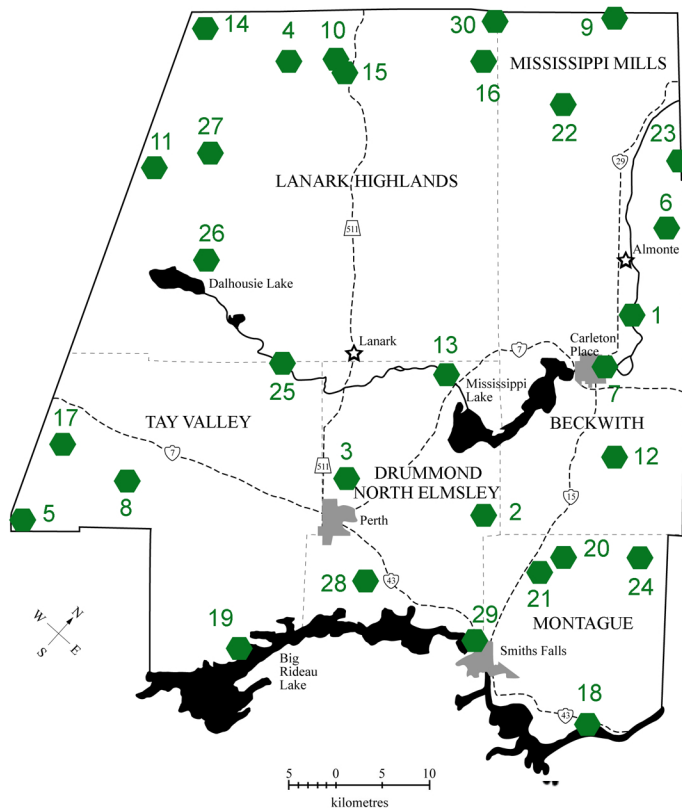


Table 1. Green Gems of Lanark County

A provisional list of the green gems of Lanark County – areas with our most important natural landscapes and highest concentrations of wild species. Each needs to be protected at the county and township level, with a core area of natural habitat surrounded by a buffer zone with limited human development.

This list is compiled from information collected by professional biologists. Areas in bold include significant amounts of upland, that is, areas not protected by wetland regulations. The primary sources are given in brackets^{1,2}

1. Appleton Silver Maple Swamp (candidate ANSI, EWF, PSW)
2. Black Creek Wetland (PSW)
3. Blueberry Marsh (ANSI, EWF, PSW)
4. Blueberry Mountain (protected by Mississippi Madawaska Land Trust) (PLC)
5. Bolingbroke/Bob's Lake deciduous woodlands (PLC)
6. Burnt Lands Alvar (ANSI, EWF, PLC)
7. Carleton Place Hackberry Forest (EWF)
8. Christie Lake Fire Barrens (candidate ANSI, EWF, PLC)
9. Clay Bank Alvar (PLC)
10. Darling Township Forest (includes Napier Lake) (ANSI, EWF, PLC)
11. Dixon and Bottle Lake Shoreline Wetlands (PLC)
12. Goodwood Marsh (candidate ANSI, PSW)
13. Innisville Wetlands (ANSI, PSW)
14. Lavant Long Lake (EWF, PLC)
15. Lavant/Darling Spillway (EWF)
16. Lowney Lake (part of candidate ANSI, PLC, part of PSW)
17. Maberly Bog (candidate ANSI)
18. Merrickville Marsh (candidate ANSI, PSW)
19. Murphys Point Provincial Park (EWF, PLC, PSW)
20. North Montague Swamp (candidate ANSI, PSW)
21. Numogate Mud Lake Fen (ANSI, PSW)
22. Pakenham Mountain (EWF, PSW)
23. Panmure Alvar (candidate ANSI, EWF, PLC)
24. Pinery Road East Alvar (PLC)
25. Playfairville Rapids (EWF, PLC)
26. Purdon Conservation Area (EWF, PLC)
27. Robertson Lake (PLC)
28. Tay Marsh (candidate ANSI, PSW)
29. The Swale Marsh (candidate ANSI, PSW)
30. White Lake Wetlands (candidate ANSI, EWF, PSW)

¹ ANSI (Area of Natural and Scientific Interest documented by the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry; see Map 16 on page 48 in EWF), EWF (Special Place described by Paul Keddy in *Earth, Water, Fire: An Ecological Profile of Lanark County*, PLC (Significant Area documented by David White in *Plants of Lanark County, Ontario*. <http://www.lanarkflora.com/areas.html>), PSW (Provincially Significant Wetland designated by the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry based on systematic inventory by teams of biologists)

² Note that this list does not contain all 47 provincially significant wetlands in Lanark County, only the largest. These wetlands are each individually important. Each has been evaluated by teams of expert biologists and is protected by provincial regulation. You can view a map of more significant wetlands in *Earth, Water, Fire: An Ecological Profile of Lanark County*, Map 14, page 40).

Twenty years have passed. I have done more talking to local naturalists and biologists and new information has become available.

One example of new informa-

tion is our county flora that has been compiled by David White. His website *Plants of Lanark County, Ontario* (www.lanarkflora.com)

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Green Gems: a conservation priority list

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flora.com) names all our plant species and describes where they are found.

This site also describes 17 important areas that have exceptional plant diversity. The Burnt Lands Alvar, for example, has plants found nowhere else in Lanark County.

We also have seen new efforts to identify and protect wild places. The Mississippi Madawaska Land Trust now exists to accept donations of ecologically significant land for protection in perpetuity. MMLT protects wild places, including Blueberry Mountain and Poole Family Nature Sanctuary.

At the same time, development continues to sprawl westward from Ottawa. Bulldozers continue to destroy our forests and wetlands.

Meanwhile, our county and townships are slowly moving toward plans to guide future land use in Lanark County. One planning responsibility is to ensure that our vital areas of wildlife habitat remain.

So, this is a good time to ask: where are these vital areas? How many are there? What kinds of unusual plants and animals occur in them? We need to know.

Such a list of our vital green spaces would provide us with a precious kind of information: the areas of our county that we must protect for future generations.

Since the county does not have a plan to describe or protect such areas, I am going to share my personal list and a map. I started with the list of our special places in my own original guide, *Earth, Water Fire: An Ecological Profile of Lanark County*.

I then added information from

David White's county flora. Further, I incorporated some sites, such as Provincially Significant Wetlands and Areas of Natural and Scientific Interest, for which I had other information collected by professional biologists.

This is not a full list, but it shows some top priorities – our green gems.

A few are obvious. Murphys Point Provincial Park, the Purdon Conservation Area and Blueberry Mountain, for example. These are all familiar gems, already known and appreciated. All three have trails for visitors.

More, you ask? The Innisville Wetlands, mentioned above, are on the list. And, of course, so is the Burnt Lands Alvar.

Before I say more about the other locations, let me offer a few cautions.

There are risks in naming the county's special places. One risk is that it will attract the wrong kind of people, such as those who dig up wild orchids. It would be wrong to let such people know where certain rare orchids occur.

Other people might want to see certain rare birds, but by visiting the area in May or June, they might interfere with nesting. Other people want to collect wild plants to eat, even if those plants should not be harvested. So, caution is necessary.

Another reason for caution is that some green gems are privately owned. Green gems need not be government land and they need not be open to the public for recreation.

Sometimes wild nature needs to be left alone. Our own property, Keddy Nature Sanctuary, for example, is protected by the Mississippi Madawaska Land Trust through a conservation

agreement. This agreement will protect the forests and wetlands in perpetuity.

Visitors can tour the property by appointment only, or during guided walks. One reason for this limitation is to protect wild birds while they breed.

So, there is potential harm in naming our important wild places. But there is also a problem with silence. If we don't name wild places, they can be forgotten or ignored.

If our planners don't put them on maps, then the next thing you know they are logged or subdivided and gone forever. In 2017 our own county chose to sidestep environmental-protection measures for numerous candidate ANSIs and handed this responsibility off to individual townships.

How are our townships supposed to plan for the future and protect important natural habitats, if they don't even have documentation of where these important areas are? Townships don't have the budget to hire teams of professional biologists.

So, for this reason, someone needs to speak on behalf of our green gems.

Why me? Mostly because if I don't write it, I doubt anyone else will. I am a professional biologist, I went to high school in Carleton Place, my family has owned land here for more than 50 years, and the county has awarded me a heritage prize for my work on protecting wild places.

No one is paying me to write this article. I am writing simply because this is my home and because the wild creatures who live here cannot speak for themselves.

So, with this background, and cautions, here is my provisional list for some of our priority natural areas in Lanark County.

One final caution. The list is not complete. There are other green gems that could be added.

For example, the list does not include all land-trust properties. Nor does the list include all of our provincially significant wetlands, only the larger ones. A refined and complete list is needed.

I look forward to our county requesting its planner to hire a biologist to prepare a comprehensive document for our county, with a complete list of green gems, proper documentation for each one, and a map of each area. This short article is just a beginning. It is not a full plan.

Green gems. Each green gem could use some friends who care about its future. We need to protect these areas for the benefit of all the wild creatures that live there. We need to protect these natural areas so we don't end up with a depressing landscape of urban sprawl like so much of southern Ontario.

We also need to protect these areas for the benefit of our grandchildren and for future generations. We also need them for ourselves, just so we can have the pleasure of seeing ospreys diving to catch a fish or hearing wild loons call at dusk.

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