MVFN Winter Walk on Webber Property in Wolf Grove

by Steve Miller

On Sunday, February 7, 2010 an enthusiastic group of hikers gathered at the end of Ramsay Concession 4B, about 3 km east of Union Hall for the Mississippi Valley Field Naturalists' (MVFN) winter walk on the Nature Conservancy of Canada's Webber Property in Wolf Grove. We were immediately greeted by a small flock of chickadees hoping for hand-held peanuts. Guides for this adventure were Ali Giroux of the Nature Conservancy of Canada (NCC), and Tineke Kuiper and Joel Byrne of MVFN.

Following the unopened road allowance to the entrance to the Webber Property, we had an opportunity to discuss some of the unique geological features of the Wolf Grove area—essentially a granitic dome that was sufficiently elevated to resist complete flooding by the Champlain Sea. Now an 'island' surrounded by limestone and marble formations, the interface of these two geologic entities offers an intricate substrate that supports a rich biological overlay. With carefully prepared maps, Tineke provided an overview of the property, its trail system and procedures for obtaining permission to walk on the property. She reviewed the history of the property, the transfer of its ownership to the NCC and plans for its longterm protection.

A few hundred metres along the trail, Joel Byrne helped us solve the mystery of the day. Why were we asked to remember MAD Cap Horse? What is MAD Cap Horse? Joel explained that "MAD Cap Horse" can be used to remember the most common hardwood trees with opposite leaves and branches—they are **M**aple, **A**sh, **D**ogwood, **Cap**rifoliaceae (a group of plants that includes honeysuckle and elderberries) and **Horse** chestnut (not native here).

Invigorated by the short walk that led us to the property, and now sheltered against the wind, spirits rapidly rose, and we continued along the trail, crossing a variety of mammal tracks. The property has a rich variety of mast trees including beech, oaks, and hickory, the occasional specimens of the latter bearing distinctive *Phomopsis*-induced galls (making them look as though they had been randomly decorated with ping-pong balls). Several smooth-barked beech trees bore testament to visits in years past by bears climbing in search of the sweet nuts. One resident, a porcupine, watched us from its rocky haven at ground level, having come down from a nearby hemlock for a change in view. Further along, Ali, suitably equipped with botanical keys, pictures and twig samples, stopped to lead a discussion of the three oak species known to reside on the property—bur, red and white. The group continued on with frequent reports from Joel of fresh animal tracks in the snow—white-tailed deer, turkey, ruffed grouse, snowshoe hare, mink, and fisher. Then it was up onto a ridge, where we discovered the fallen remains of one of the largest butternut specimens we'd ever seen, and then down the other side to Bowley Lake.

Driven by the persistent wind, we settled into a shallow valley for lunch. Protected by a thick band of hemlock, sunshine poured down on us through the leafless hardwoods. While enjoying lunch the guiding botanists were able to continue discussion of the merits of local trees and we considered the influence of site characteristics on tree location— wet areas being dominated by species such as red maple and black ash, drier sites giving an opportunity for sugar maple, bur oak and yellow and white birch, and the highest and driest sites being most suited to species such as red oak.

All too soon it seemed, it was time to pack up for the day. As often happens on such adventures we headed back in smaller groups, each reflecting on different topics of the day and moving at different rates. Regrouping briefly, we said goodbye to the porcupine which was still firmly wedged in its rock fortress, presenting to us its most dangerous end, and doubtless happy to see the last of us.

If you missed this winter walk in Wolf Grove, join us on May 29 for MVFN's Annual Spring Walk which will also be held on the Webber Property. See what the Webber property has hidden beneath its spring blanket!

Photos by Cathy Keddy