



## CONFLUENCE AND CONSERVATION

Newsletter of the Alton Grange Association/AGA

Winter – Spring 2009

### Presidents Message

#### Greetings

Spring is in the air after a very snowy winter! It was a great year for snowshoeing and cross-country skiing in the Grange.

If you have been along the trail to the Credit River Bridge, you will see our spring work project. The boardwalk has relocated itself and with our usual spring cleanup workday, we will be looking for volunteers to help to realign it. A great opportunity for high school students looking for volunteer hours!

The Grange board was busy over the winter, naming the trails so that trail maps can be posted in a few key locations. You may find there are more trails than you realized. We thank our partners, the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources, for providing students this summer that used GPS to map the trails accurately for us.

We are also planning to partner with Credit Valley Conservation to pilot their new invasive species monitoring program. We will share the details as they become available.

We look forward to seeing everyone at our **APRIL 16** Annual General Meeting – details are on the back of the newsletter! This year, we learn why “slow and steady” wins the race. Again, this year, this is a family-focused event so please come and join us. Bring your friends and neighbours too. This is also the time to renew your membership so don't forget your wallets.

Hope to see you walking through the Grange!

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#### Which Weasel Was That?

Have you been down in the Grange near the river and noticed muddy footprints in the snow that were not a deer, or coyote. Alternatively, maybe you

have seen a brown streak disappear into the underbrush, or even definitely have seen a long sinuous creature that sure wasn't a beaver. It was likely either a Fisher or Otter.

Both the Fisher and the Otter are members of the family Mustelidae that mainly includes weasels, polecats, skunks, and badgers.

The Fisher (*Martes pennanti*) is a medium sized weasel that ranges from the Rocky Mountains, north to the Yukon border, east throughout most of Canada and south to the Appalachians. Adults weigh between 2 and 7 kg and are between 65 and 125 cm in length. Males are usually about twice as big as females.



Their coats are darkish brown with black legs and tails, and some have a cream coloured patch on their chest. All have short legs, and the four feet have five toes with semi-retractable claws. Because they can rotate their hind paws 180 degrees, they can grasp limbs and climb down trees headfirst.

They are speedy, agile tree climbers, but usually move on the ground. Like all weasels, they have powerful scent glands used for communication or when frightened. Fishers are solitary hunters, active both day and night. They are shy and difficult to observe. Fast and aggressive, their primary prey includes rabbits, squirrels, mice, porcupines, and sometimes-domestic animals. They will also eat small



**Otter prints**

birds, berries and other fruit, carrion deer and ground nesting birds such as grouse and turkeys. The eggs and young of these are easy targets. It is also one of the few animals that will kill a porcupine. Unlike longer legged animals that can only strike from above, fishers are the same height as porcupines and can fight face to face. Quickness, agility, and effective biting help the Fisher to avoid a porcupine's back and tail and concentrate on rapidly striking the unprotected face and belly. They can become a problem for farmers by breaking into pens and killing large numbers of chickens. In the past, it has been reported that Fishers have been responsible for a large number of domestic cat deaths, however a study in 1979 showed that of 1000 Fishers trapped in New Hampshire; only one had cat hairs in its stomach contents. However, because of it's nature, it will kill whatever it can overwhelm Fishers breed at one year of age, but do not give birth until at least 10 months later due to delayed embryo implantation; a unique reproduction feature of weasels. A female will produce one litter of 2 to 3 offspring per year. Fishers are most often found in coniferous or mixed forest with high continuous canopy cover. They avoid open spaces. Fishers are solitary, and only associate with other Fishers for mating. Ground or snow dens are used mainly in winter, and tree

nests are used year round. Fishers can live up to 10 years in the wild.

The main threat to the Fisher in the past has been hunting (for its pelt), and habitat loss. Young Fishers can fall prey to hawks, bobcats, or foxes. In recent years, populations in Ontario have rebounded.

The Northern River Otter (*Lutra canadensis*) is slightly larger and occurs throughout North America except the arctic slopes, the arid portions of the southwest and industrialized areas of the Midwest United States. Otter populations are confined to watercourses, lakes and wetlands, and therefore population densities are lower than other land animals. Adults weigh between 8 and 15 kg and are between 112 and 137 cm in length. Males occupy the larger figures. Southern Otters tend to be smaller and lighter than those in the north. The Otter has a long streamlined body, short legs with five webbed toes, and a thick tapered tail. They have a flattened head with snub nose, tiny ears and extremely sensitive whiskers and an acute sense of smell. Their senses of sight and hearing are less well developed. Their short, thick, soft fur is brown to almost black except on the chin, throat, cheeks, chest and belly, where it is usually lighter, varying from brown to almost beige.

Their severe decline in the past was the result of excess trapping for their luxuriant fur, pollution, and pesticides, as well as loss of habitat. Their numbers have been improving, however, and the returns of the beaver in many areas have opened the door for the return of the Otter. Otters are most active from early evening through early morning, although they can be active during the day, especially in undisturbed areas. They are active all year, even in the coldest weather. The Otter is quite adaptable, utilizing a variety of habitats such as lakes, ponds, marshes, wooded rivers and streams. The primary food is fish and crayfish.

Other foods include amphibians, insects, mammals, and birds. They are opportunistic hunters and will take what they can get. Otters generally reach sexual maturity at 2 years, but often do not breed until later, sometimes not until 5 years of age. Females usually do not produce their first litter until 3 years, with 2 to 3 pups most common. Socially, the basic group is a female and her offspring, which remains together through the fall and winter. The young usually leave at about 13 months. They also exhibit the same delayed embryo implantation as the Fisher. The Otter lives in dens in the ground

most of the year. They rarely dig dens themselves; instead, they utilize those built by beavers or other animals, even human structures. As stated previously, the presence of beavers in an area is important to otters, not only because of the dens they build, but also because the ponds created by beaver dams make ideal Otter habitat. Otters have large ranges – up to 155 km<sup>2</sup>. They spend much of their time feeding, or involved in group play, such as wrestling, chasing tossing and diving for rocks or clamshells, the repeated capture and release of live prey, sliding, diving, rolling and body surfing just for the fun of it.

It can swim underwater at speeds up to 10 km per hour, for at least 4 minutes, and dive up to 18 metres. In the wild, the otter can live up to 20 years. The main threat to the Otter (other than humans), and mainly on land is the coyote, wolf, lynx and bobcat. So, the next time you are down in the Grange, especially near the water - keep your eyes open! Perhaps someone will even get a photograph, and then we can finally solve the mystery of Which Weasel Was That?

## **UPCOMING EVENTS**

### **COME OUT OF YOUR SHELL !**

EVERYONE WELCOME

SPRING IS HERE!

IT'S TIME FOR THE ALTON GRANGE  
ASSOCIATION'S FAMILY OPEN  
HOUSE

THURSDAY APRIL 16, 2009, 7 PM

AT THE SGI CENTRE IN ALTON

THIS YEARS GUEST WILL BE:

TORONTO ZOO'S "TURTLE ISLAND  
CONSERVATION INITIATIVE"

Learn about various Ontario Turtle species, Their fascinating lives, the threats that they face & what we can do to help protect them. Learn about the Turtle's importance in aboriginal life & its symbolism & relationship to the world around it. How to rescue a turtle in distress and more!

DISPLAYS BY THE  
ALTON GRANGE ASSOCIATION  
- REFRESHMENTS -

THE SGI CENTRE IS LOCATED AT  
20490 PORTERFIELD ROAD  
(REGIONAL ROAD 136) NORTH OF ALTON

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**Interested parties required to serve on the  
Board of Directors of the AGA**  
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**Clean up the Grange Day  
April 18<sup>th</sup> @ 10 am**

Meet @ Cardwell St. parking lot

We need your help!

### **Our Mission**

- To protect, restore and enhance the natural, scenic, educational and cultural values of the Grange Property.
- To promote public responsibility, understanding, and stewardship through the wise management of the natural resources of the Grange Property.
- To compile and manage natural resource information on the Grange property.
- To promote partnerships to assist in accomplishing these goals.
- To manage and maintain the Grange property in accordance with the goals and objectives of the Alton Integrated Resource Management Plan.

To find out more about upcoming events, share your ideas or become a member:

**E-mail: [altongrangeassociation@hotmail.com](mailto:altongrangeassociation@hotmail.com)**

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