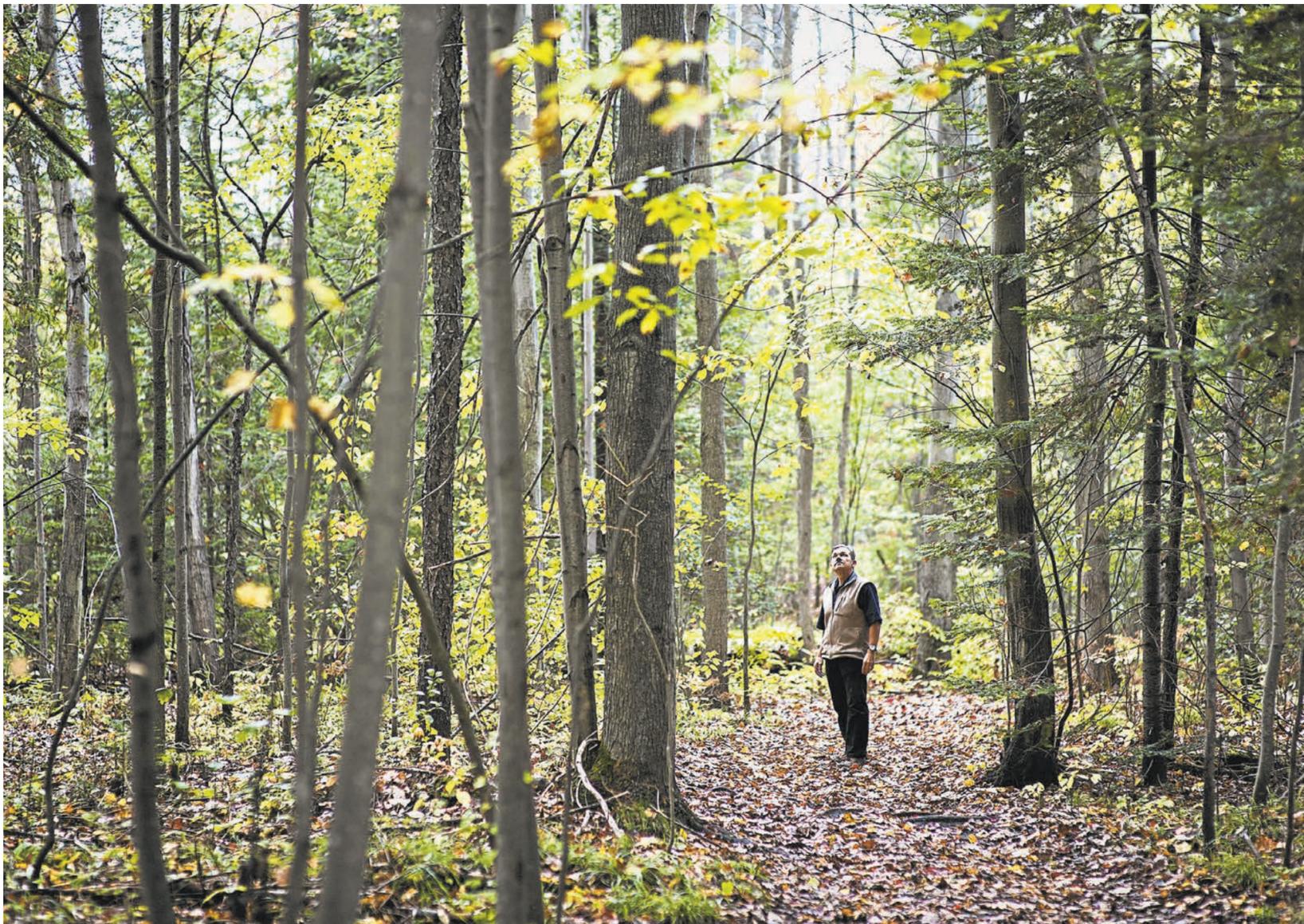


Where will the wild things go?

Preserving room for wildlife in the shadow of Greater Toronto a constant struggle



AARON VINCENT ELKAIM

ACT NATURAL: Paul Harpley, a Georgina resident and naturalist, stands among the trees in the Greenbelt near Lake Simcoe.

> THE GREENBELT PART 5

In the fifth of a six-part series, journalist John Barber puts the topic of ecology under his microscope.



John Barber

Looking at most maps of Ontario's Greenbelt, the innocent observer will see a great bulge of protected countryside in its middle — a 4,000-square-kilometre tract stretching from Scarborough all the way to the southern shores of Lake Simcoe.

But looking at the detailed map artist and naturalist Paul Harpley unfolds in his office in Georgina, near Simcoe's south shore, a whole new picture emerges. Here green gives way to grey — large blocs of forest and wetland set aside for major urban development. And this is the map that matters.

In Georgina's Official Plan, the village of Pefferlaw, population 3,000, is slated to grow to the size of Orillia, population 30,000 — and virtually all of that growth will occur in the untouched forests and wetlands of the Greenbelt.

Nearby Sutton is slated for similar expansion. Just to the west, residents are fighting a losing battle against the construction of a 500-acre, 1,000-home subdivision in a provincially significant wetland that is likewise part of the Greenbelt but exempt from protection. The barricade of green is riddled with loopholes.

"This secondary plan bears no relationship to any future we can see for this area," says Harpley, a founding member of the South Lake Simcoe Naturalists' Club, pointing to the im-

probable emergence of Greater Pefferlaw. "Some of the most important core areas of the Greenbelt are right here in this development area."

To slate those lands for development is "obviously ridiculous," according to Harpley. But so far, a growth-focused town council disagrees.

Despite what the comforting Greenbelt map may indicate — and despite the intentions of dozens of similar, conservation-minded rules and regulations — preserving room for wildlife in the shadow of Greater Toronto remains a constant struggle. In solid green Georgina and elsewhere, habitat seems to disappear in perfect step with the emergence of new measures meant to preserve it.

Just last month, the provincial government completed its long-promised extension of Hwy. 404 from Newmarket to the Georgina border. It's already buzzing with new long-distance commuters. Meanwhile, Harpley and his fellow volunteers are monitoring the ominous appearance of heavy, greasy blobs in nearby Zephyr Creek — "big, ugly things" that sometimes cover the river's entire surface. When you hit it with a stick, Harpley explains, a blob breaks up. Then it recombines. "People are just sickened when they see that."

A trained scientist, Harpley identifies the slicks as "lipid oils — the grease component of the bio-solid application." In plain English, they are the bacteria-laden residue of human waste, which is reduced to sludge in urban sewage plants and trucked north to fertilize local farm fields.

The disappearance of grasslands is another major concern. "Some of our most endangered birds in Ontario are prairie birds," Harpley says. "All of them are in decline."

When he and his family first moved to Georgina 35 years ago, Harpley adds, the fields were filled with upland plovers.

"Now we are lucky to get one in 10 years."

The same qualities that have attracted so many people to southern Ontario make it prime habitat for a tremendous diversity of common and rare species. But in Georgina and elsewhere throughout the Greenbelt, cohabitation ends when sewage clogs creeks and chemical-laced lawns replace natural meadows.

The latest, most spectacular victim of habitat loss is the Monarch butterfly, its population in free-fall throughout its range from Mexico to Canada. "This year the population is up a bit," says John Urquhart, conservation science manager at Ontario Nature.

Extending Greenbelt protection . . . will create a natural system big enough to accommodate genuine biodiversity

"But the long-term trend for the monarch butterfly has been staggeringly bad."

As nature-loving Ontarians rush to plant milkweed in their gardens to succour monarch caterpillars, they should spare a thought for the uncharismatic but critically important salamander.

"In a healthy forest, the combined weight of all the salamanders can exceed the weight of the trees and all the other animals combined," Urquhart says. But recent evidence suggests they have lost half their former range in Ontario.

"It's a giant red flag," Urquhart says. "We're doing investigations now to see what the heck is going on."

After more than 30 years of activism on behalf of wildlife in the rich watershed of South Lake Simcoe, Harpley sees little reason for optimism. "I'm really positive about most things, but you know what?

You're always against the wall, and it's always going to be that way unless we really do get serious about the Greenbelt and these kinds of planning initiatives."

Lines on a map in themselves do little to heal a damaged environment, he notes, or to halt the unchecked spread of such forest-destroying invasive species as dog-strangling vine and Japanese knotweed. "There needs to be a detailed re-envisioning and restoration of these landscapes," he says. "That should be an important goal for the Greenbelt in the future."

Others point to gains already made. "The Greenbelt is not the only thing that needs to be done, obviously, but I think it's incredibly important," says David Miller, president of World Wildlife Canada and former mayor of Toronto. "We need some ways to ensure that species can thrive, otherwise humans won't," Miller says, and the Greenbelt will help if only because of its size. "It's not like a small preserve, it's connected."

Urquhart's view is coloured by his first-ever sighting this summer of a hooded warbler in a renaturalized Greenbelt forest. Once extirpated in Ontario, the striking little bird is now slowly returning thanks to public policy like the Greenbelt. "I think there is absolutely hope, and the Greenbelt is a perfect example of that," he says, adding that extending Greenbelt protection down river valleys and into major cities will create a natural system big enough to accommodate genuine biodiversity.

"Even what we have now is maintaining some biodiversity," Urquhart says. "And if we can have fairly high biodiversity close to the cities, we should be able to keep most of our species in Ontario in their natural habitats."

Follow the discussion on Twitter, Wednesdays at 8 p.m. #ONGreenbelt

> ECOLOGY FACTS

78 SPECIES

Number of at-risk classes of animals, out of the 200 listed in Ontario, that live in the Greenbelt

3.9 MILLION

Approximate number of farm animals in the Greenbelt, including chickens, cattle, sheep, pigs, horses, buffalo, deer and elk

102 MILLION TONS

Total weight of carbon stored in Greenbelt wetlands, forests and agricultural lands

1,700 YEARS OLD

Age of the oldest white cedars in the Escarpment, which provides shelter to some of Ontario's oldest and most unique trees

> SPECIAL REPORT: THE GREENBELT

PART 1

Introduction
Saturday, Sept. 13

PART 2

Food and agriculture
Saturday, Sept. 20

PART 3

Fun and recreation
Saturday, Sept. 27

PART 4

Water resources
Saturday, Oct. 4

PART 5

Ecology and preservation
Saturday, Oct. 11

PART 6

Assessing the future
Saturday, Oct. 18



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I support the Greenbelt because it produces amazing fruits, vegetables and award-winning wines, while contributing billions of dollars in ecological benefits, naturally filtering our air and water and helping to keep the region cool.

— **David Suzuki,**
Renowned environmentalist and broadcaster



Possibility grows here.