

## **Living with Wildlife – Protecting Habitat**

By Donna DuBreuil, President  
Ottawa-Carleton Wildlife Centre – [www.wildlifeinfo.ca](http://www.wildlifeinfo.ca)

For wildlife, home is where the habitat is. While some animals have adapted to live in close proximity to people – let's face it with extensive development they've had no other choice – most wildlife depend on those special natural areas that are needed to sustain a species.

We all know of the importance of Mer Bleue, a remarkable boreal-like ecosystem with a 1.2 km boardwalk that allows visitors to explore this sphagnum bog, just east of Ottawa. It has dozens of nationally and provincially significant flora and fauna, including the Spotted Turtle, a rare species in Canada.

So too are many familiar with Stony Swamp, a conservation area in Nepean that has almost 2000 hectares of woodland, wetland and regenerating old field. It supports a large variety of wildlife such as Canada Geese and other waterfowl, beaver, woodland birds and the northern flying squirrel.

But there are equally critical natural gems that we know less about. For example, the Leitrim Wetland in the south contains stands of 250-year old trees, some of the oldest in the Ottawa area, and some of which are unique in North America.

It is home to over 200 species of regionally significant plants, at least 90 species of birds, a small herd of deer, a variety of fish and amphibians and provides habitat for the Blandings Turtle, a Species at Risk. The Leitrim Wetland is a complex wetland ecosystem that has been listed by the Canadian Coalition for Biodiversity as one of Canada's biodiversity "hot spots".

An even better kept secret is the South March Highlands to the west. Three times the size of Stanley Park, the South March Highlands provide the last bastion for many of this region's wild species, particularly the large mammals that have been driven into increasingly shrinking habitat by development.

Its forests and wetlands offer the most significant biodiversity reservoirs in the area, rivalling those of Gatineau Park and Algonquin Park. It is home to Black Bear, Deer, Coyote, Fisher, Beaver, Ermine, River Otter, Mink, Red Fox, Porcupine and a wide variety of raptors, including the Great Grey Owl, the Red Tail Hawk and the occasional Bald Eagle. And, of course, the myriad of other species that are part of the chain required to support this amazing ecosystem.

While each of these areas is critical, it is the connectivity afforded by Ottawa's Greenbelt and hydro and river corridors that make the preservation of these unique areas a top priority. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts. And, for wildlife that couldn't be more true.