

Interesting wild Mississippi places and faces, and their champions at MVFN event

by Pauline Donaldson

The Mississippi Valley Field Naturalists (MVFN) held their Spring Gathering 2011 and AGM May 19th at the Almonte Civitan Community Hall. The evening was a celebration of wild nature and a tribute to those who help champion it including keynote speaker Paul Keddy, and Mike McPhail, named MVFN Champion for Nature for 2011. The over one hundred members of MVFN and the public in attendance were treated to a delicious banquet served by Civitan volunteers.

MVFN President Joyce Clinton presided over a short business meeting during which MVFN's officers for the 2011-2012 year were elected. Returning to MVFN's board of directors are Joyce Clinton, President; Janet McGinnis, Vice President; Mike McPhail, Past President; Janet Fytche, Secretary; Cathy Keddy, Program Chair; Brenda Boyd, Chair of Environmental Education; Bill Slade, Chair Environmental Issues; and Janet Snyder, Social Committee. Newly elected to the board of directors are Elisabeth DeSnaijer, MVFN Treasurer; Ken Allison, MVFN Chair Publicity; and Bob McCook, MVFN Director at Large.

Clinton reported on the year's highlights, including a recent significant change to MVFN's status. "I am pleased to announce that through the efforts of the board of directors and in particular Cathy Keddy and Howard Robinson, the Mississippi Valley Field Naturalists is now officially a charitable organization. To help the board gain a clearer focus for the future, we held a visioning meeting in August last year. Our financial pulse is strong and healthy. Our treasurer Howard Robinson will be stepping down this year. I want to thank Howard for all his hard work over the last 3 years. Referring to other highlights with implications for children and youth Clinton stated, "The Environmental Education committee (Chaired by Brenda Boyd) has also begun the process of developing a plan for an MVFN Young Naturalists Program. The project is still in the pilot project stage, but it is a very exciting step for our group."

A special part of the evening was presentation of the *2011 MVFN Champion for Nature Award*, given to individuals or groups who make outstanding contributions to the natural world in the Mississippi Valley. "This year we are awarding the MVFN Champion for Nature Award to Mike McPhail" said Clinton. "Mike was born and raised in Almonte . . . a geologist by training and has many passions in the field of nature. As MVFN's vice president for three years, then president for three, Mike continues to serve on MVFN's board." Without a doubt, many MVFN projects would not have taken place without the driving force of Mike McPhail, a quintessential organizer, natural public speaker and leader, and a man with a passion and curiosity for our natural world. To mention a few such projects: Mike researched and organized MVFN's first bioblitz which was held on the Bell property in Mississippi Mills in September 2009. This bioblitz quickly became a model for other clubs. Another project close to Mike's heart is MVFN's Habitat Creation which has resulted in hundreds and hundreds of blue-bird houses for our feathered friends as well as duck nesting platforms and other habitat projects still in the works. Mike was unable to attend the evening due to illness, however the award was accepted on Mike's behalf by his wife Peggy McPhail and daughter Christine.

Photo 1: At the May 19 MVFN Spring Gathering at the Almonte Civitan, Christine (left) and Peggy McPhail accept the 2011 MVFN Champion for Nature award on behalf of their father/husband Mike McPhail. *Photo courtesy Pauline Donaldson.*



Photo 2: Mike McPhail (shown in May 2009 holding up a copy of *The Breeding Bird Atlas* presented to him upon completion of his 3-yr tenure as MVFN President) was named 2011 MVFN Champion for Nature. *Photo Howard Robinson.*



Following the banquet and business meeting, the audience settled in for local ecologist Dr. Paul Keddy's presentation "*Natural Faces of Wild Mississippi Places.*" "These [wild] species don't come to meetings and don't vote, so it is easy for them to be overlooked. One of my tasks at this spring celebration is to talk on their behalf." Keddy's virtual tour gave the audience an opportunity to reconsider a few of Lanark County's special natural places, or to learn about them for the first time. In Lanark County we live in the great northern deciduous forest region which also includes some relatively rare (globally) areas of deciduous forest over marble. In the county, as farm land returns to forest, we are seeing good signs, such as the return of fishers, natural predators of porcupines. We share the northern deciduous forest with Ontario's only lizard species (the five-lined skink), but few of us realize just how many salamanders we share it with. 'Salamander Central', the forest is teeming with these seldom seen amphibians. In addition to the return of favorite birds, spring in the deciduous forest means that spring ephemerals are about. These include often fragile and beautiful perennial woodland plants, such as wild columbine. These plants must quickly sprout from the

forest floor, grow and flower while the sun can still reach them through the leafless trees. Attached to the seeds of ephemeral species such as Trillium, Hepatica, and Dutchman's breeches is a little oil-rich snack for ants. Attracted to this food, the ants spread the seeds, but colonization of new areas occurs only very slowly. When plants are lost from an area, re-colonization is very slow and not guaranteed, since, as Keddy pointed out, ants do not travel far and are not good at crossing highways. As soon as the leaves bud out on the trees the tree frogs arrive and summer begins again in the forest.

A second special place featured was the Innisville Wetland Complex, an area officially designated as an ANSI (Area of Natural or Scientific Interest) by the provincial government. It is a huge, significant wetland area and yet it is relatively unknown and unseen by visitors and locals alike. Why aren't there interpretive signs and perhaps an access point to the Innisville Wetland Complex, and a boardwalk to allow people to safely enter and experience this important natural area?

A third local area discussed was the 'Lanark Highlands Glacial Spillway Forest', an area so named by Paul Keddy. This glacial spillway, near White Lake, is a remarkable area which was carved in the past by tremendous volumes of glacial meltwater which flowed past carrying and depositing loads of sand and gravel. Surprisingly, one corner of the spillway 'valley' actually overlaps part of Blueberry Mountain, but this is possible. As is often the case for unique areas such as this, a variety of interesting things are aggregated there. For example a rare southern tree species, the shagbark hickory has been found there, and in shady areas, walking fern (found in forests over marble) which spreads by producing new plants where the leaf tips touch the ground.

Photo 3: Two Champions for Nature! In 2008, Mike McPhail (right) presents an MVFN Champion for Nature award to Dr. Paul Keddy. Local ecologist Dr. Paul Keddy presented the keynote address "Natural Faces of Wild Mississippi Places" at the Spring Gathering event. *Photo courtesy Howard Robinson*



Keddy's lecture was an excellent conclusion to MVFN's 2010-2011 lecture series *Biodiversity and Vital Connections for Fauna, Flora and People*. People connected with the presentation, the local natural areas featured and were educated and inspired. MVFN's lecture program is on break now until September but the canoe and summer outing season is just getting started. The next MVFN summer walk takes place June 19th at the Purdon Fen and the next canoe outing is scheduled for July 10th. Please watch the MVFN member email network or consult mvfn.ca for further details on these outings.
