

Award-Winning Rural Hamilton Property

Written by Gloria Hidebrandt | Photos by Mike Davis

▲ Bridge over the pond, made by Brian Hutchison from a tree that fell across. Brian and Alba DiCenso won an award for improving the health of Mountsberg Creek on their property.

A large, textured tree trunk stands prominently in the foreground, partially obscuring the view. To its left, a wooden deck with a set of stairs leads down to a river. The background is filled with dense green foliage and trees, with sunlight filtering through the leaves. The overall scene is a lush, natural setting.

BRIAN HUTCHISON
AND ALBA DICENSO
bought a 16-acre
property in a rural part
of Hamilton about 12
years ago and have been
protecting, preserving and
enhancing it ever since.
In 2015 they received a
Watershed Steward Award
from Conservation Halton. ▶



◀ The log deflector with plant material behind it, directs creek water away from the pond, taking it off line and improving the creek's habitat for fish.



◀ The pond has been taken offline from Mountsberg Creek and has aerators operating to improve the quality of the water.

Mountsberg Creek which flows through their property. Specifically, they keep water flowing in the creek by having closed the man-made channel which used to send water to the pond.

“The objective was to improve the water quality in Mountsberg Creek for native species,” explains Alba. “Staff from Trout Unlimited Canada and Hamilton-Halton Watershed Stewardship placed a log deflector approximately two metres upstream of the pond’s inflow channel. It is secured in place with wooden stakes and twine. This deflector directs flow into the centre of the channel and away from the inflow of the pond. Plant material was placed behind the deflector to act as a sediment trap and to stabilize the creek’s bank. As the sediment continues to build up, the inflow channel will be completely blocked and the creek will be disconnected from the pond. Disconnecting the on-line pond reduces the temperature of the creek water improving the habitat for fish because ponds absorb more heat from the sun and then heat up the creek water.”

They added five aerators to the pond, which provide the benefits of reducing the oxygen stress of fish, mixing the water, insuring that oxygen reaches the bottom of the pond, and improving bacterial activity and decomposition of organic material, reducing the growth of algae.

Conservation Halton describes the Hutchison-DiCenso property as uniquely beautiful, with “a variety of natural features including portions of the provincially significant Lower Mountsberg Creek Swamp Complex,

Mountsberg Creek, a tributary of Bronte Creek, locally significant woodlands and ... part of the Mountsberg East Wetlands Environmentally Significant Area.”

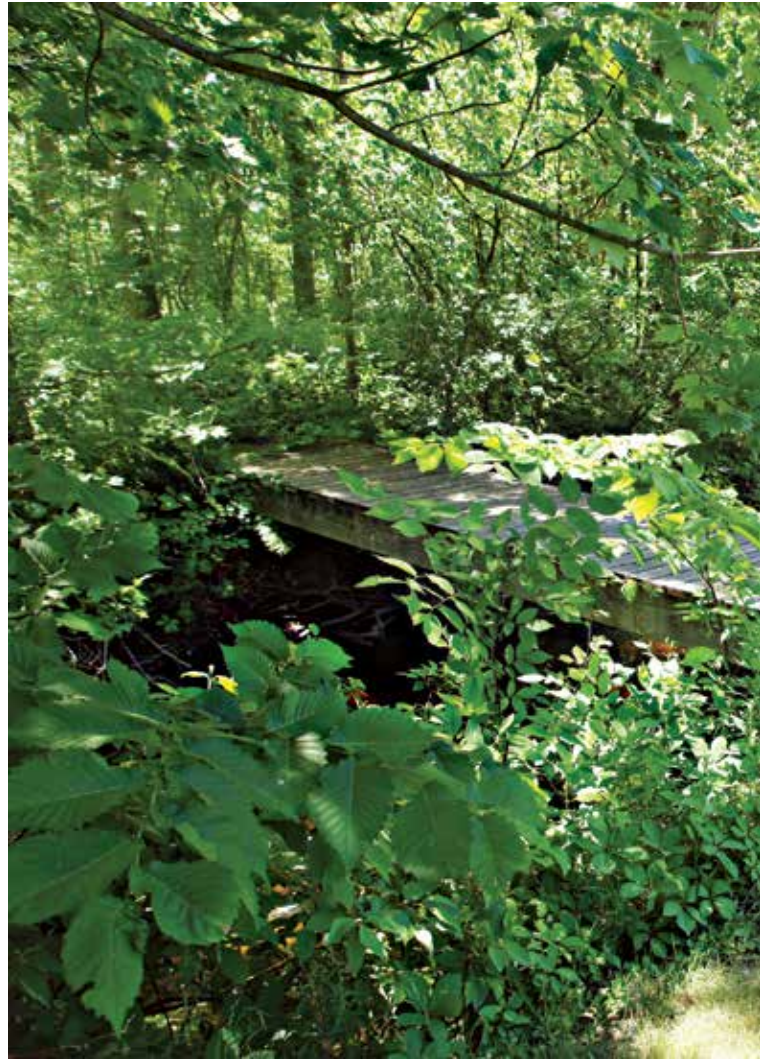
“We had a dream for what we wanted each part of the property to be,” says Alba,

“and we’re now learning about conservation.”

In 2017, Alba and Brian began improvements to their pond, which is about 2/3 of an acre in size. Created by previous owners, it needed to be taken off line, meaning it is kept separate from



▲ Mountsberg Creek, a tributary of Bronte Creek, meanders lazily through the 16-acre property.



▲ A boardwalk bridge over the creek gives access to more of the forest.

◀ The fallen tree-trunk bridge from across the pond.





Protecting Endangered Species

Wildlife is plentiful thanks to the water on their property.

“We are interested in protecting endangered species,” adds Alba. “We have Honey Bees. We’re involved in protecting Snapping Turtle eggs and we are encouraging Wood Ducks. But this past year, the Hooded Mergansers, which come earlier in the spring and are more aggressive, laid eggs in four of our five Wood Duck boxes. All we have done to encourage the ducks, both of which are cavity nesters, is to install five Wood Duck boxes, each facing a stream, and filled with about six to eight inches of fresh wood chips. In total last year, we had 42 Merganser eggs laid in the boxes, 26 of which successfully hatched.

We have been told that in order to attract Wood Ducks to the boxes, we must remove the Merganser eggs which are laid daily. We plan to try this approach this spring.”

Alba and Brian also raise Monarch Butterflies by harvesting eggs from milkweed plants and keeping them in protected cages.

“Last year I raised 72 Monarch Butterflies,” boasts Alba.

They’ve worked with Dan Welsh, an advocate for Eastern Bluebirds, to install five bluebird boxes on their land.

“Last year was our first year,” says Alba, “and we had a nest in one box with four babies successfully fledged.”

Bluebird conservation and protection involves more than just putting nest boxes on fence posts. The Ontario

▼ Pond aerators work to stir up the water, increasing oxygen to the bottom of the pond and reducing algae.



◀ View inside a Wood Duck box from the side, showing the fine wood chips available as nesting material.

▲ A touch of luxury: in the woods near the house and garden, a charming “she-shed.”



Eastern Bluebird Society has many specific requirements for helping the bluebird population, and declares that failing to meet all the requirements can actually do more harm than good. This includes humanely destroying or relocating 50 km away, alien House Sparrows

which destroy bluebird eggs, young and adult bluebirds and Tree Swallows, which are fully protected by law. “If you cannot bring yourself to remove these alien predators please remove your boxes as you are not helping the bluebird population,” states a brochure of the society. Fortunately, Dan told Alba and Brian that House Sparrows should not be a problem for them. Alba and Brian are happy to share their knowledge



► On last year's Carnegie Gallery Secret Garden Tour, expert Dan Walsh and Alba DiCenso were happy to share knowledge of Eastern Bluebirds.

and successes. Last year they were part of the Carnegie Gallery Secret Garden Tour and had experts in gardening, beekeeping, bluebirds, turtles, ducks and water stewardship stationed throughout their award-winning property to talk with visitors. **NEV**

Gloria Hildebrandt and Mike Davis are the founders and publishers of Niagara Escarpment Views.

