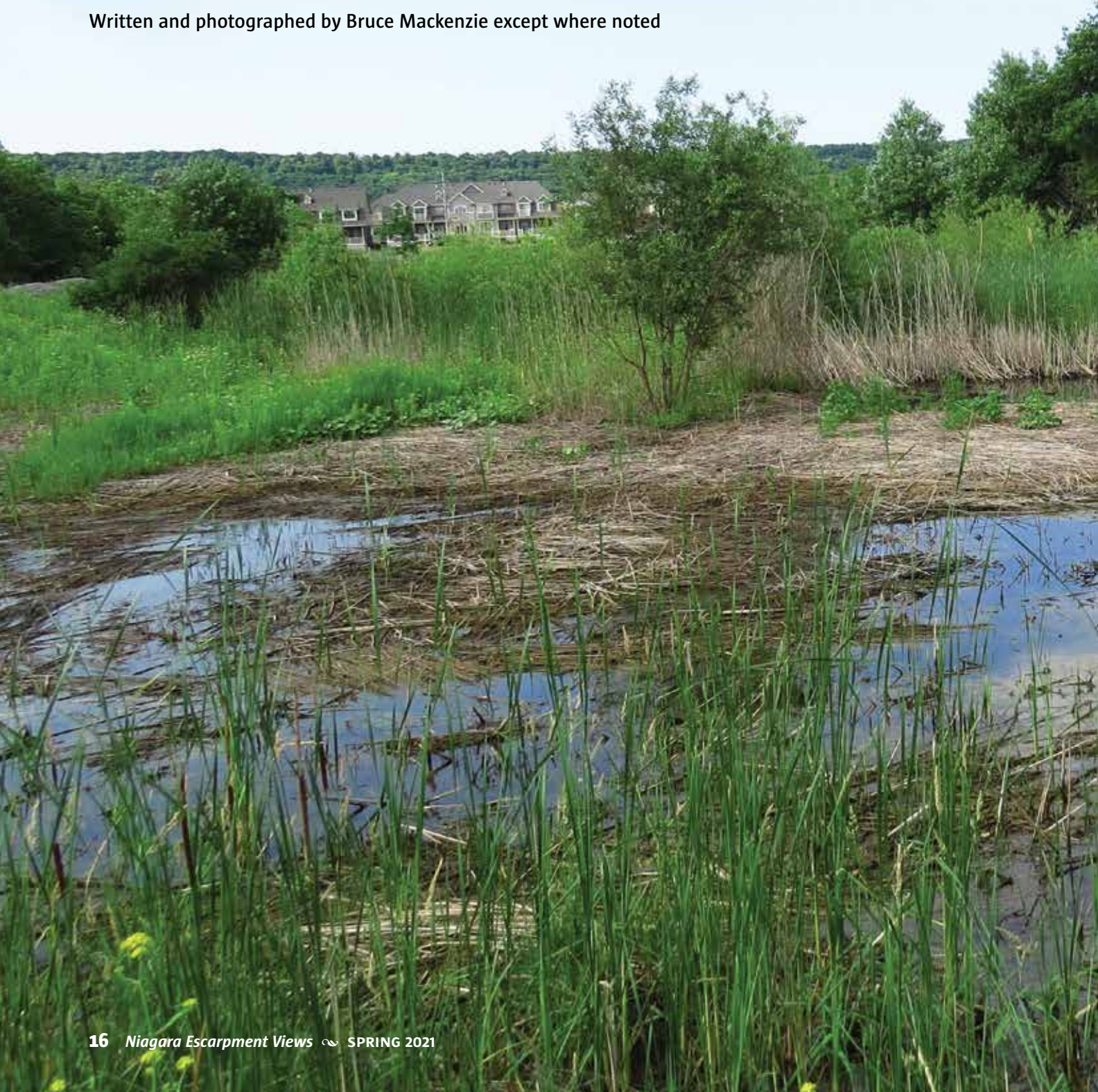



# SIGNIFICANT, IMPORTANT: **The Grimsby Wetlands**

Written and photographed by Bruce Mackenzie except where noted





**T**he largest green space on the south shore of Lake Ontario is the Fifty Point Complex, a 420-acre significant site for breeding and migrating birds. These special lands include Fifty Point Conservation Area, the Winona Rifle Range, the former Biggar Sewage Lagoon and the radio tower lands. They straddle the border of Hamilton and Grimsby.

One of the Grimsby Wetlands, which form a refuge for marsh birds, amphibians, reptiles and plants, between the south shore of Lake Ontario and the Niagara Escarpment.

Aerial view of Grimsby Wetlands with the wildlife observation tower in the centre. PHOTO BY DRONE'S EYE PHOTOGRAPHY.



**T**he Niagara Escarpment parallels the shore of Lake Ontario and lies closest to the lake at Grimsby, leaving a narrow tract of precious land that is turning more and more from fruit lands to urban developments.

In the midst of this urbanization the Fifty Point Complex reaches out into Lake Ontario by about 1.6 km. Its location makes it a significant “green island” for wildlife to live and people to enjoy in the centre of

the Greenbelt surrounding western Lake Ontario.

Today the former Biggar Lagoon property is referred to as the “Grimsby Wetlands.” They rank among the province’s most important wetlands on the south shore of Lake Ontario and they could have easily been lost while the lagoons were being decommissioned in 2001. But it was saved with a citizen-led conservation effort spearheaded by the Hamilton Naturalists’ Club

(HNC). They have become an integral piece in the centre of the Fifty Point Complex.

### **Saving Lagoons**

The 29-acre site was originally the Biggar family farm until 1959 when Grimsby purchased the farm for the future Biggar Sewage Lagoons. The Regional Municipality of Niagara now owns the southern 20 acres and the Department of National Defence owns the northern nine acres.

The decommissioning

plans called for the removal of the lagoons and the return of the property to open fields. In 2002 HNC presented a proposal to the landowners that would allow for these constructed wetlands to remain.

The original goal of the proposal was to maintain and then enhance the substantial public investment in the original lagoons and parlay it into natural wetlands at minimal cost. The potential was great. Creating these



▲ The “Marsh Master” was critical to eliminating invasive Phragmites and creating life-sustaining wetland habitat.

► The completed two-storey wildlife observation structure has a radio tracking tower that uses the specialized Motus program to collect data on migrating creatures.



wetlands is so important today when so many other wetlands have been lost and or are threatened.

Saving the Biggar Sewage Lagoons took some out-of-the-box thinking and a lot of patience for the sometimes-difficult discussions ahead. The proposal was not well received. It took four years of negotiations and assistance from supportive politicians at the municipal and federal level to make it all work.

By 2006, an agreement

was reached. The two biggest lagoons would be left as wetlands and four new water bodies would be created, each one designed to be different to give wildlife a choice.

Keeping this as a group of wetlands and in public ownership, adds tremendously to the stability of this collection of lands. From 2006 through 2015, nothing much happened around the lagoons. Nature had a



▲ The wetlands are a birdwatcher's dream. Kevin McLaughlin scans for shorebirds in Watcher's Pond.



▲ Lesser Yellowlegs, sandpipers on migration. PHOTO BY TED BUCK.

free hand in naturalization. In 2016, a part of Grimsby's new waterfront trail was built into the wetlands. The trail featured interpretive signage and a two-storey wildlife observation tower. The public was finally welcomed to visit.

### Nature Projects

In 2016 the HNC approached the Region for permission to start working on the Regional lands with its wildlife enhancement projects. The club was allowed to begin work in 2017.

The next step was to do what naturalization could not. Most of the site had no natural structure for wildlife because it was formed in some ways by

the blade of a bulldozer. The HNC started simply, putting in rocks, logs, and brush piles, as well as Eastern Bluebird and Tree Swallow boxes. Projects were designed to be visible from the trail so the public could easily experience the wildlife attracted by them. When families enjoy nature close to home it significantly adds to their quality of life.

Support from HNC members, local community foundations, private businesses and individuals all provided the capital and materials for the projects. Successes are a result of the partnerships made in the community.

► The marsh bird Sora is secretive, wades in shallow wetlands and can be identified by its bright yellow bill. PHOTO BY TED BUCK.

### Killing Phragmites

Since 2006 invasive Phragmites grass began to take hold over much of the land. By 2016 it had to be dealt with because it covered three of the new wetlands completely and ringed the other three. It was a severe threat to the ecosystem here. In 2017 a control plan for Phragmites was developed with the assistance of experienced experts and specialists in invasive species removal and control.

Fortunately, with the generosity of the Lois Evans Natural Heritage Fund of the Hamilton Community Foundation, funds were received to carry out the plan. The Phragmites were sprayed





PHOTO BY KEVIN MCLAUGHLIN.




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▲ Painted Turtles frequent the specially designed floating platforms.



◀ A brightly coloured male Wood Duck in the wetland.

▶ The Common Gallinule needs good marsh habitat in order to thrive. It has long toes that let it walk on floating vegetation.  
PHOTO BY CAROLYN BUCK.



in August 2018. With about a 95 per cent success rate it will now be possible to keep ahead of the Phragmites.

Since knocking back the Phragmites there has been a resurgence of marsh life. Marsh birds like Sora, Virginia Rails and Gallinules are nesting now. Bullfrogs

have moved in with many other marsh species. Cattails, one of the preferred marsh plant species, are thriving around the wetlands. It is simply amazing how fast marsh species of plants and animals moved in after the Phragmites were gone.

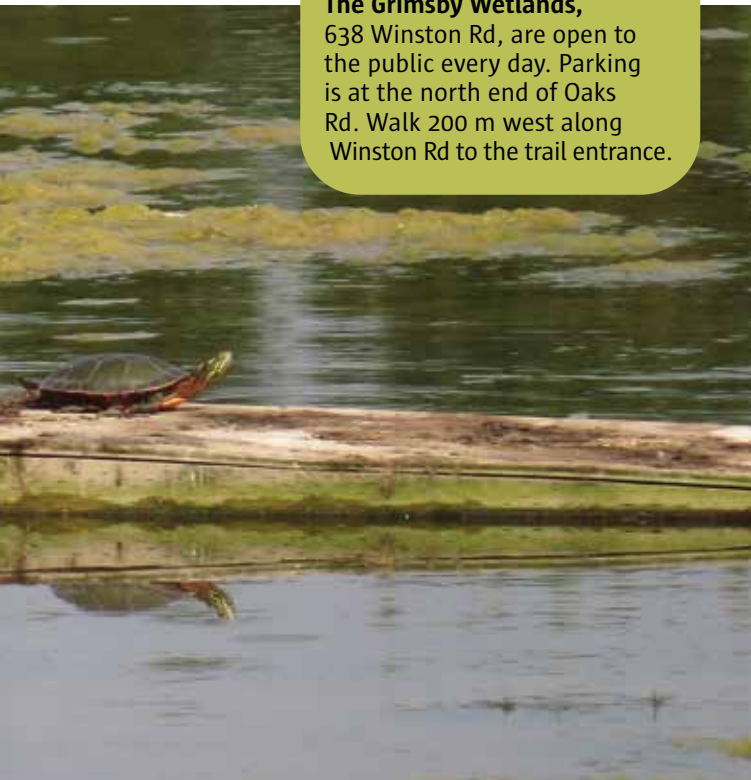
Other projects include

nesting structures for Purple Martins, Wood Ducks, Mallards, Canada Geese and Barn Swallows. Sites have been prepared for turtle nesting and snake hibernation. A beach-like area was made for Killdeer and Spotted Sandpiper nesting sites.

In 2020 a wildlife radio tracking tower that uses the Motus scientific program was installed by Birds Canada. This tower will add data to a western hemisphere biological database on migrating birds, bats and insects.

A Children's Reflections

**The Grimsby Wetlands,** 638 Winston Rd, are open to the public every day. Parking is at the north end of Oaks Rd. Walk 200 m west along Winston Rd to the trail entrance.



wall was created for their artwork to be displayed. With each project and day, new friends are made in the community, whether they be human or with fur, scale, feather or leaf. **NEV**

*Bruce Mackenzie's last article in Niagara Escarpment Views*

*was "Crows vs. Ravens: A Tale of Two Birds" in Summer 2018. Bruce resides in Grimsby and is a commissioner on the Niagara Escarpment Commission, the vice chair of the Niagara Peninsula Conservation Authority and a past president of the Hamilton Naturalists' Club.*

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