NATURAL NEIGHBOURS

How well do you know your neighbours?

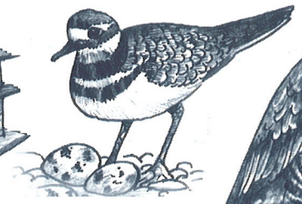
1. Match the real names of these birds with their "street names".

a. edge flycatcher
b. porch thrush
c. mini-condo swallow
d. skyscraper raptor
e. parking lot shorebird

2. List 6 Ontario birds whose names originated from their nesting habits around our homes or farms.

3. Name two ways that starlings, house sparrows and rock doves (pigeons) are similar to many Ontario residents.

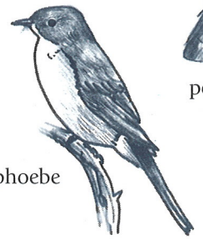
purple martin



killdeer

peregrine falcon

American robin



eastern phoebe

Answers:
1. a. eastern phoebe, **b.** American robin, **c.** purple martin, **d.** peregrine falcon, **e.** killdeer
2. barn owl, barn swallow, house sparrow, house finch, house wren, chimney swift
3. a. Most live in towns, cities and urban areas.
b. Their ancestors mostly came from places like Europe, Asia or Africa. Ontario's native people are called First Nations because they were here first, before European or other settlers.

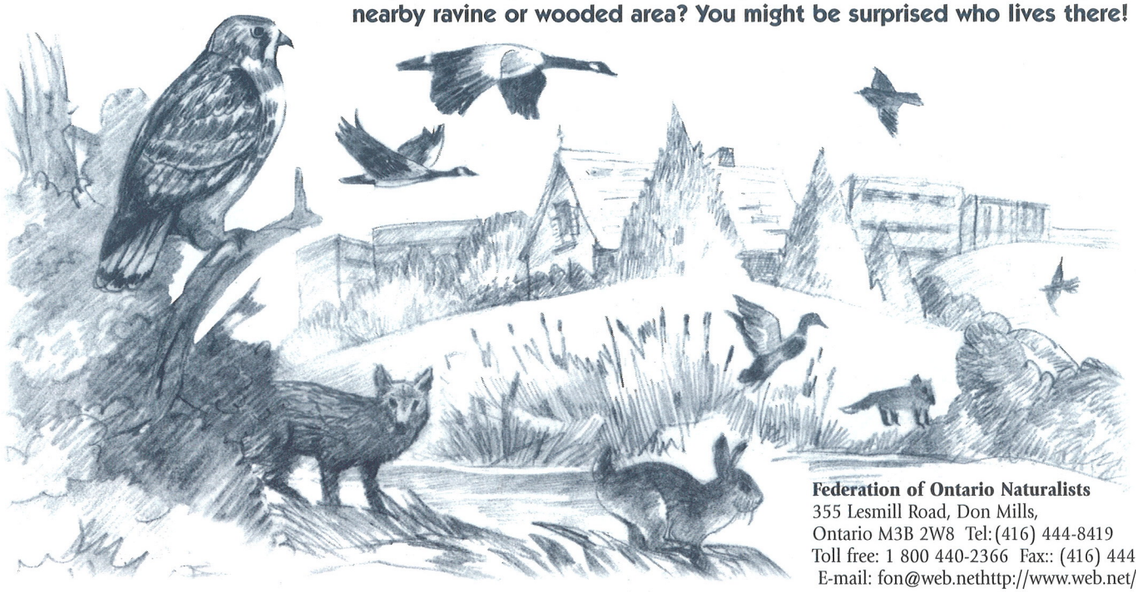
Flying goatsuckers!

Watch the skies around urban areas for the swooping flights of the common nighthawk. Nighthawks are members of the goatsucker family. They nest on the ground and were given the strange name "goatsucker" when people thought they took milk from goats in the fields. Nighthawks have made a successful switch to city living by nesting on flat gravelled roofs.

Natural Neighbours

Thanks to good planning and good luck many Ontario towns and cities still have great natural areas to explore. Toronto's High Park, for example, is a haven for plants of rare oak savannah habitats. Windsor has the Ojibway Prairie Nature Reserve right within its borders. Owen Sound and Hamilton have Niagara Escarpment forests, and Thunder Bay has the wild Mission Island marsh nearby. The list could go on and on. These natural areas are important refuges for all kinds of wildlife. Birds such as pileated woodpeckers and red-eyed vireos are not likely to live in the suburbs. They need wilder spaces — the kind you find in larger parks.

Why not take your binoculars with you the next time you head to your nearby ravine or wooded area? You might be surprised who lives there!



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An interesting collection of animals inhabit urban areas. Some rely on parks and green spaces, while others live right in or on our buildings. We now create homes (or habitats) for wildlife in ways we never intended.

Concrete Jungles

DISCOVERING NATURE ALONG THE WAY

For as long as people have settled this continent, they have provided homes for wildlife. Native people, for example, first attracted purple martins by using hollowed out gourds. The birds received free housing, while the native people enjoyed insect control in return. The size, shape and variety of bird houses have grown tremendously since then. Purple martin houses now look like miniature condominiums, and we now build homes for everything from falcons and chickadees to bats.

An interesting collection of animals inhabit our urban areas. Some rely on parks and green spaces, while others live right in or on our buildings. They may not seem as wild as the those animals that live in more natural habitats, but they still have wildness in them. Take time to watch them and learn some great biology lessons right around your own neighbourhood!

Omnivores such as raccoons love our leftovers. Keep raccoons and other scavenging creatures at bay by sealing garbage cans. Close off areas under porches and access to attics where the animals take shelter.

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From falcons and flycatchers to bats and raccoons—discover wildlife right in your own neighbourhood.

Chimneys

If chimney swifts were given their name before we built homes, they might have been called hollow tree swifts. Nowadays they nest mainly inside chimneys, where they build cup-shaped nests. The protected brick columns are just more hollow trees to the birds!

Watch for these "flying cigars" circling over urban areas at dusk. Hundreds of tiny birds funnelling into an abandoned chimney is a sight to behold!

Attics

If people said your house was "batty", they could mean your house is bat habitat. Two Ontario bat species regularly set up summer roosts and nursery colonies in attics, siding, and other warm, sheltered spots in and around buildings. Little brown bats and big brown bats both have adapted to the dark hollows provided by buildings in the summer. Humans also provide winter habitat for these creatures. Both species hibernate in mines (and caves) in the winter.

Porches

Remember the story Three Little Pigs? Only one had a house that could not be blown down. Can you recall which house it was? The well-made solid brick one, of course. Several bird species know that solid buildings provide sturdy platforms for nests. They aren't escaping a make-believe wolf, though. They are getting a firm support for bulky or heavy nests, and they also usually get some kind of roof over their heads. Eastern phoebes — a type of flycatcher — naturally nest on cliffs, on rock ledges or on heavy branches or in the crotches of trees. They also now take to buildings for the same support, and they often return year after year to nest in prime porch locations. American robins seek the same spots. They find our lawns to be excellent worm hunting-grounds.

Metal signs

Woodpeckers stick to the trees for nesting, so urban areas with mature trees can still give natural homes to downy and hairy woodpeckers, northern flickers and other relatives. But these wood-whacking birds use urban structures for other reasons. They sometimes search for food in the outer walls of old wooden homes. Homeowners are not usually very keen on that! Fortunately, it is uncommon. The birds use structures to communicate with each other rather than as snack bars. When you hear them make a repeated drilling like a jackhammer, you are hearing a territorial call. The loudest noisemaker around, woodpeckers drill on road signs, aluminum siding, television aerials and even metal hydro towers.

Skunks love digging up insect larvae from lawns during the evenings. Flickers scour the grounds during the daytime in search of ants.

Skyscrapers

Picture a rock ledge high on a cliff, with a canyon below and an abundance of birds. This is prime peregrine falcon country. Peregrines are the endangered falcons that are making a comeback in Ontario thanks to laws that ban pesticides and due to the efforts of hundreds of volunteers who have helped release captive-raised peregrines. Release sites have often been in urban areas such as Toronto, Hamilton, Ottawa, Brockville, London and Waterloo where there is healthy supply of food such as pigeons, and easy access for the volunteers who support the young birds with food, water and shelter. Now there are a number of natural nestings in Ontario, with several in cities. Urban cliffs and canyons are helping the birds make a comeback!

Gravel lanes and parking lots

Amazingly, towns and cities even attracted birds of the sea! Killdeers are shorebirds that often nest in the gravel of trails and parking lots. Their mottled eggs blend in excellently with the small gravel of these habitats. Sometimes the birds even nest on tops of buildings. This creates a challenge for young birds that are ready to leave the nest.

Birds of a feather

Crows, swallows, blackbirds and starlings all roost in large numbers, sometimes near urban areas. Hundreds of crows roost in places like Chatham and Essex. Pembroke, Ontario was once called Canada's swallow capital because of the large swallow roost along the Ottawa River. Sadly for the city, the birds have now moved on to other locations.

The peregrine falcon is the world's fastest bird. This magnificent aerial predator can dive at speeds of up to 320 km/hour in pursuit of smaller birds. Peregrines almost disappeared, largely because of poisoning by pesticides such as DDT.

If you ever see a disturbed killdeer giving a "broken-wing" display, leave it alone. It is trying to lead you away from a nearby nest. And if you try to find the nest or touch the eggs, you could be leading a predator like a cat, dog or raccoon to them.