

Sharing Our Space with Wildlife in Halifax

by David Patriquin for *Naturally Nova Scotia*, November 2014¹

Halifax, referring to the whole of HRM or Halifax County, is close to a paradise for nature-loving folks – hikers, bikers, hunters, fishers & birdwatchers alike. Unlike most Canadian cities, the urban core is surrounded not by farms or endless burbs but by forested and coastal landscapes. Even within 30 km of downtown Halifax where approximately three quarters of the population resides, developed areas are interspersed with substantive wild spaces. Numerous and diverse trails provide access to wild spaces by foot, bike or ATV, while the many lakes and rivers and 2000 km of coast-line are a paddler's dream. In Halifax, a few hours off is all it takes to enjoy a wilderness setting.



Hikers on The Bluff Wilderness Hiking Trail
Photo by David Patriquin



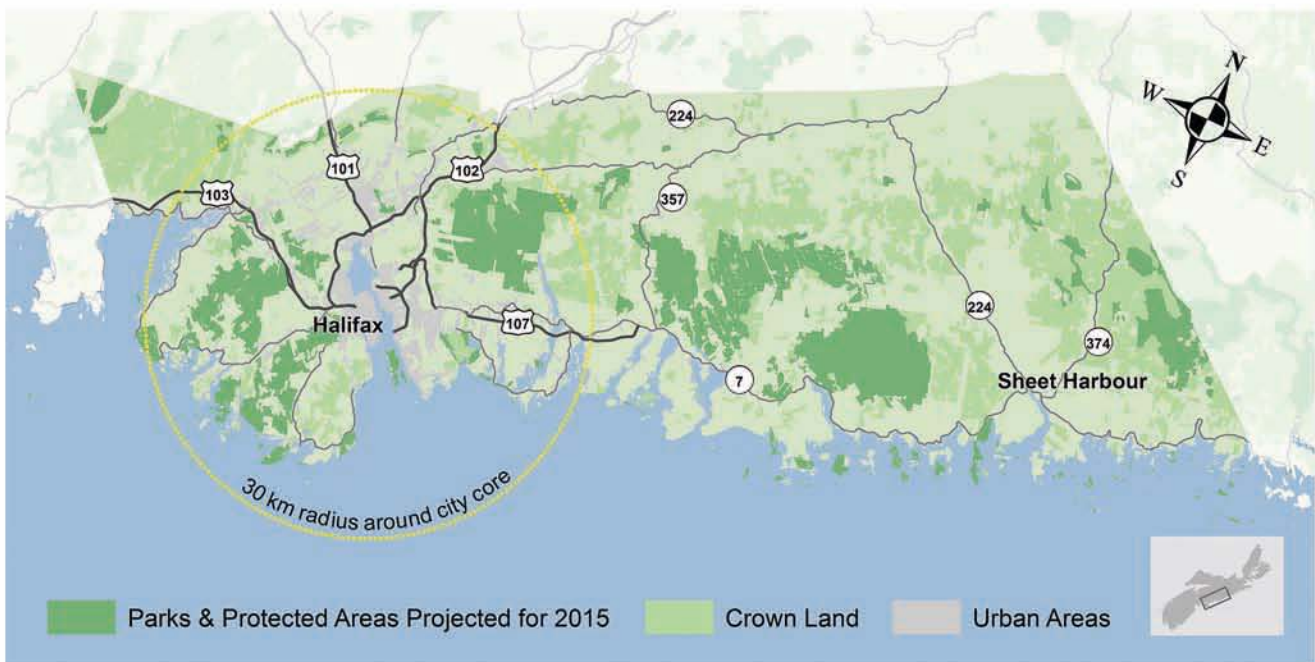
Grass Pink orchids in a small bog
Photo by David Patriquin

Some of the highlights of the natural world in HRM that I have enjoyed include spectacular shorebird migrations on eastern shores, an osprey sweeping down to pick up a trout on the lower Woodens River, a kingfisher plucking an eel as it passes through a saltmarsh-lined inlet on the eastern shore, summer blooms of pitcher plants and pink orchids in our many boglands, magical barrens in their fall colours, kelps swaying in clear waters along rocky shores – all readily accessed; or being “visited” by a bull moose while overnighting after a day’s hike into the Five Bridge Lakes Wilderness Area. I am far from alone in such experiences. Nature-oriented outdoor clubs are thriving, e.g., several MeetUp groups now number in the 1000s. Twenty trail groups are hard at work creating and maintaining ecologically appropriate trails. The Safety Minded ATV Association and others build multiuse trails and encourage responsible ATVing. Paddling groups work to widen the circle of folks who access wild spaces via the water.



So we humans are doing fine in our provincial capital area, but what about the plants and animals and ecosystems that were here before European settlement?

At left: Common Eider nesting site on an island of the eastern shore archipelago. These unspoiled and wild islands are one of the last ecologically rich, island groups of this size, anywhere in North America. Photo courtesy Peter Green (Nova Scotia Nature Trust)



Halifax is well endowed with parks, protected areas and other publicly owned, mostly undeveloped land even within 30 km of downtown Halifax (circle). Map by Alain Belliveau.

Halifax can and should boast about its 11 provincial Protected Wilderness Areas and portions of 3 others as well as a number of smaller Nature Reserves and lands protected by covenants or purchased by the Nature Conservancy of Canada or Nova Scotia Nature Trust. Add our municipal and provincial parks and 16% of the area is protected from development.

“We live in unprecedented times, with the natural systems of our planet under more stress than ever before... within my lifetime, humanity will either begin to find real solutions for sustainably sharing this planet with other creatures -- or we will head towards a fundamental reorganization of social and ecological order. “ Joern Fischer

However, while such core areas protect important habitat and are essential to conserving biodiversity, they are far too small and fragmented to do the job on their own.

In a large, much more contiguous wildland like that which existed in pre-European times, a local population of a plant or animal species might die out through a chance event (e.g. fire, hurricane), but if the habitat remained suitable, individuals from other population centres would eventually recolonize the area. However, when a local population becomes isolated (e.g. by roads, housing, farmland or clear-cutting) and cannot receive (or export) individuals to replace losses or that increase genetic diversity, the likelihood of it dying out increases greatly. Fragmentation over the whole range of a species can cause it to go extinct. An estimated 80% of recent species losses have occurred through this process. Remnant populations may persist for long periods, so the full effects of massive habitat loss and fragmentation since the 1950s are only just beginning to unfold.



Migrating Sandpipers and Plovers at Martinique Beach in August. Photo by David Patriquin.

Halifax Region Stats

Population: 390,096 (2011)

Area: 594,414 ha (including 8.2 % as lakes & streams)

HRM Parkland: 0.84%

Open Space owned by HRM: 2.0%

Protected Areas (including provincial parks) (2015): 15.1%

Other Crown Land: 25.4%

Total of Undeveloped, Publicly Owned land: 43.3%

Overall Open Space (public & private)~ 85%

Coastline: 2,017 km

To slow or reverse our march towards a major extinction event, conservation scientists tell us we need to manage large areas for biodiversity conservation, with natural corridors connecting high quality habitats across roads and through larger patches of highly altered landscapes. How large an area needs to be so managed? Estimates of 50-60% of the landscape are cited for the earth at large and for N.S. in particular, the latter in studies by Dalhousie University's Karen Beazley.

Remarkably, Halifax still retains a mostly natural landscape (approx. 85% of HRM is classified as Open Space & Natural Resource) and 43% of undeveloped land is publicly owned, including the 16% in Parks and Protected Areas. Thus a goal of managing 50+% of our capital area for biodiversity conservation is well within our grasp.



A small group of the endangered Mainland Moose reside in protected lands on the Chebucto Peninsula. Photo courtesy of Aaron Wilson, Dept. of Natural Resources



HRM has taken some significant biodiversity-supportive initiatives, such as the Urban Forest Management Plan. Most importantly, following extensive public consultation during the Regional Plan 5-year review process, HRM is developing a Greenbelting and Public Spaces Priorities Plan. This plan “will define a network of natural spaces (land and water); parks, trails and natural corridors; and cultural landscapes, views and image routes... these spaces will function as a network; shaping communities and affording them access to nature, recreation and cultural opportunities, while protecting and sustaining other important areas of untouched wilderness.”

At left: Members of the Young Naturalists Club on the Crowbar Trail. Photo by David Patriquin.

Considerations of habitat quality and connectivity need to be incorporated in all decisions regarding landscape use. For example, land might be managed within the right of way of a highway to allow wildlife connectivity through a settled area; clear-cutting might be prohibited in certain forest patches to improve habitat; a watercourse buffer zone might be increased to 100 m (from 20) to facilitate connectivity between two forest stands; a large parking area might be retrofitted to include alleys with native trees and to reduce runoff; a new



Paddlers explore eastern islands with the Nova Scotia Nature Trust
Photo courtesy of Nova Scotia Nature Trust

development might employ a conservation design with high density accommodations and a large natural space, rather than dispersed, low density housing. Such decisions involve minimal compromise to meeting our immediate needs and benefit both us and wildlife in the bigger picture.

I am optimistic about the prospects: an enlightened city in a forward-looking province forging a future for all species for which Nova Scotia is home.



The globally rare Jack Pine-Broom Crowberry barrens on a rocky outcrop above Purcell's Cove.



Treading Lightly: Trail volunteers learn how to build stone tread over wet spots.

1. An abridged version of this article was published in The Nova Scotian section of The Chronicle Herald on Dec 6, 2014:
NOVA SCOTIA NATURALLY: Sharing Halifax space with wildlife
<http://thechronicleherald.ca/thenovascotian/1255369-nova-scotia-naturally-sharing-halifax-space-with-wildlife>

This expanded (original) version was posted on the Wildland Writers' website at wildlandns.ca on Dec. 7, 2014. Some Useful Links and more documentation of the Parks and Protected Areas can be viewed at wildlandns.ca/sharing