

Natural History Day 2006

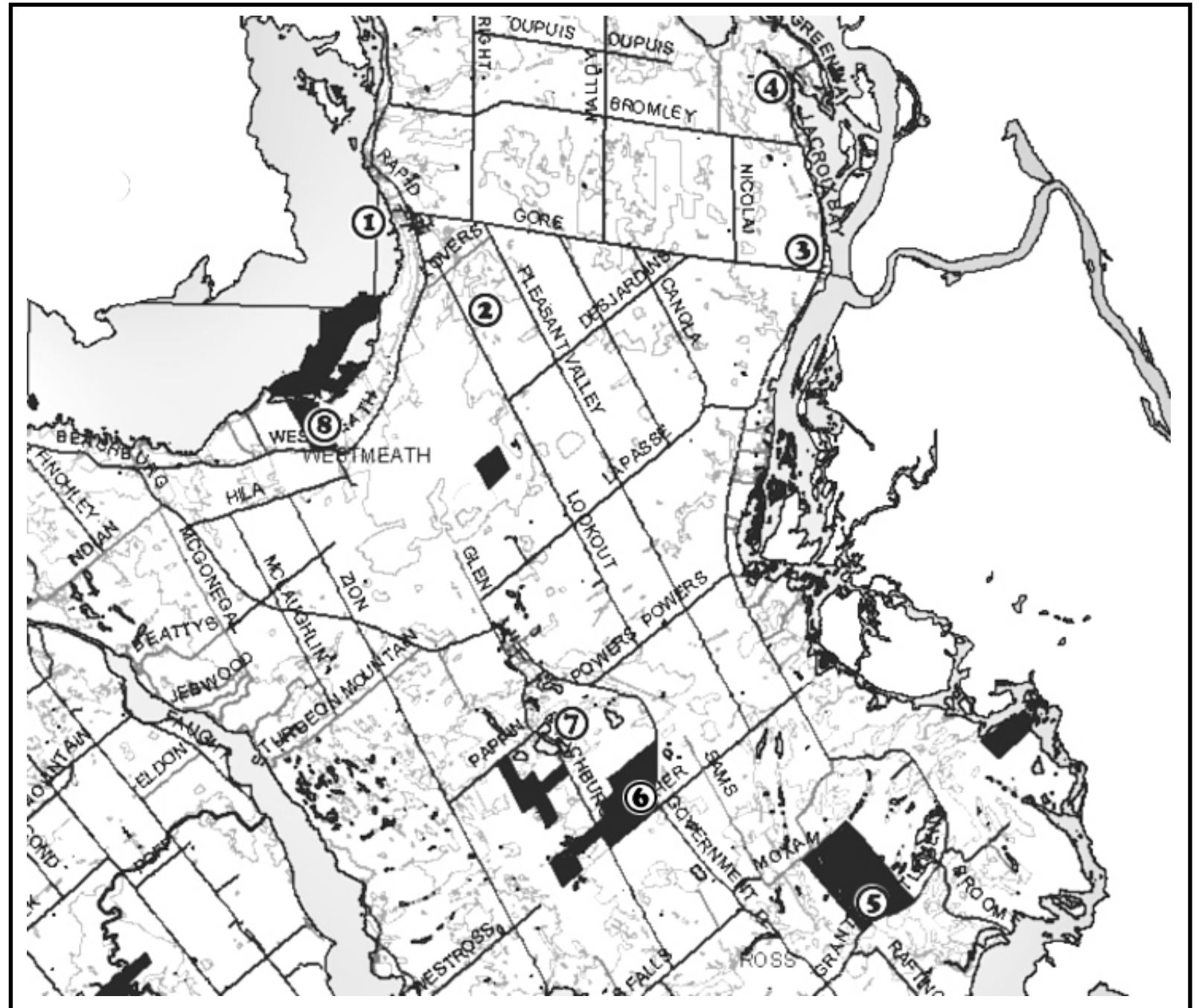
Westmeath Drive Tour

This Drive Tour will introduce you to some accessible natural areas in this part of Renfrew County. There is no particular order to follow as it will depend on which stops interest you the most, but the tour is somewhat circular, although the marsh at Cobden is a little farther afield. A few of the stops will introduce you to hiking opportunities, which you may want to take advantage of at a later date, such as Westmeath Provincial Park, the Cobden Marsh, the Beachburg Forest and Hubert Property Crown Land Forest.

On the way, keep your eyes open for hunting hawks, Turkey Vultures, Sandhill Cranes, Wild Turkey or other birds of the open country. You may encounter a Ruffed Grouse near forested lands and you will undoubtedly want to check ponds and small lakes for geese, ducks, grebes or Great Blue Herons.

Watch out for turtles laying eggs in the soft sand on road edges. As well, other animals such as Red Squirrels, 'ground hogs' and snakes may be seen crossing the roads. Frogs will be calling, the expected ones being Peeper, Wood, Leopard, Mink and Green Frog. Also, the trill of the American Toad may be heard.

Check out the fencelines for Vesper or Savannah Sparrows and alder thickets for Catbirds and Common Yellowthroats. We hope your drive will be enjoyable and full of pleasant surprises.



Westmeath Area Drive Tour Points of Interest

1. **Westmeath Boat Launch** - From this vista, one can scan the Ottawa River for migrant waterfowl, Osprey, hawks, falcons and even eagles, which can sometimes be seen as they cross this expansive open area. Watch for wading shorebirds in the vegetation along the shoreline. To your extreme left (west) you will see a dip in the tree line where the entrance to Bellow's Bay is situated. This bay is a major nesting, resting and staging area for waterfowl in Spring and Fall. Terns and a few gulls nest on a rocky, low island in the river across from 'Sand Point', which is visible to the north of the entrance to Bellow's Bay. Across the Ottawa River is Allumette Island, Quebec and on the skyline is the western extremity of the Laurentian Mountains.

2. **Pretty's Hill** - Pretty's Hill (aka Westmeath Hill) provides excellent representative examples of earth science features remaining from the ancient marine waterbody, the Champlain Sea. As such, the site was officially designated in 1987 as a provincially significant earth science Area of Natural and Scientific Interest (ANSI). This rather large landform of about 670 ha. in size, towers to about 175 m. above sea level and is approximately 1.5 km. wide by 4.5 km. long and is oriented on its long axis almost due North-South. The municipally-owned lookout with a hilltop gazebo at 'Lookout Hill' has excellent views in all compass directions and includes vistas of the Ottawa River, Westmeath Geographic Township lands including the Westmeath Bog (westerly near base of hill), the Opeongo Mountain range (on horizon to SW), and part of the Laurentian Mountain range across the Ottawa River in Quebec.

A marine sand spit is preserved at the base of the hill and remains of marine pelecypods (mollusca) shells from at least two species, *Macoma balthica* and *Portlandia arctica*, are known from the site.

3. **LaPasse** - The road between Westmeath and LaPasse crosses the peninsula of land surrounded by the Ottawa River. The open farm country along this road and others in the vicinity often produce Upland Sandpiper, Eastern Bluebird, Northern Harriers, Gray Partridge and Sandhill Crane. The boat launch site in LaPasse provides a good

viewing opportunity at the Ottawa River where one can frequently observe Map Turtle, Bald Eagle, and Osprey. Many of the islands in this area of the river are large sand deposits with Silver Maple and Butternut. Butternut Island which is part of the Ottawa River Provincial Park occurs just downriver and is home to a number of the endangered Butternut trees. Many anglers frequent these waters fishing for walleye, sturgeon, and smallmouth bass.

4. **LaCroix Bay** - The causeway crossing the wetland at the edge of the Ottawa River provides for viewing opportunities of a variety of waterbirds due to the diversity of wetland and water habitats. Snapping Turtles and Map Turtles are locally common. Watch for the very wary Map Turtles basking on rocks, logs or shorelines – see if you can get a good look at them before they drop into the water.

5. **Hubert Property Crown Land Forest** - This 288 ha. Crown Land forest is a mixed forest of hardwoods and conifers with some hybrid poplar plantations. Bitternut Hickory, Butternut and Bur Oak also grow there, at the northern end of their range. This site is home to forest research plots, acid rain studies and studies of poplar growth, forest soil-vegetation interactions, and forest growth and yield. An old farm site exists within the property and an unmaintained trail system provides access into the interior of the property.

6. **Beachburg Forest** The Beachburg walking trail is a trail developed originally by MNR staff a while back. Forestry interpretation signs were updated in 2000. The formal entrance is off Government Road where there is a reasonable parking lot. It is an easy walk through Red Pine plantations and mixed forest where tree species include White Pine, aspen, Red Maple, White Spruce and Balsam Fir. As well, there are roads all through the property, but no real wetlands. The Red Pine plantations are the oldest in the County Forests at over 50 years of age. They have had a second thinning and the forest is now in good shape. Native vegetation is recolonizing the plantations now, such as White Pine and Red Maple and ground plants such as woodferns and moccasin flower are finding a place for themselves. There is an underplanting of White Pine in places. Some birds in the plantations are Hermit Thrush and Golden-crowned Kinglet

7. **Beachburg Ponds (aka Little Lakes)** - This complex of about 17

small lakes and ponds located about 2 km south of the Village of Beachburg provides for an interesting geological and life science feature in a landscape that is otherwise very limited in the number of lakes. These waterbodies provide valuable wetland habitat for a great variety of waterbirds and dragonflies. In the summer of 2005, this was one of the sites visited by those attending a conference of the Dragonfly Society of the Americas. The provincially rare, Mottled Darner has been seen here.

8. **Westmeath Provincial Park** is accessed by walking the old bush road from the Westmeath Rd. A leisurely walk of 40 minutes will take you to a pristine, extensive beach along the Ottawa River. A meandering creek, a Silver Maple floodplain, a cattail marsh, a Red Pine plantation and mixed woods will be encountered along the way. The upper elevation of the beach is a vegetated dune with oaks (Red and Bur Oaks), pines, Silver Maple and shrubs such as Mountain-holly. Map Turtles bask on any available rocks in the river. Watch for Spotted Sandpipers along the beach.

9. **The Cobden Marsh** is really a sewage treatment facility, which uses the marsh vegetation as a further water purifier. A short path along a berm is easily walked and is accessed at the south end of the treatment facility. In mid to late May, shorebirds such as Least Sandpiper, Semi-palmated Sandpiper, Pectoral Sandpiper and Lesser Yellowlegs can sometimes be seen. Northern Cardinals occasionally frequent the tangles and Green Heron, Common Moorhen, Virginia Rail and Sora are usually summer residents. North, just up the street at the municipal dock, is a good vantage point to view the north shoreline of the marsh and any Osprey, ducks, terns or gulls flying around the bottom end of Muskrat Lake. (not on map)

Renfrew County Natural History Day is organized in partnership with the Macnamara Field Naturalists' Club, the Pembroke Area Field Naturalists, Renfrew County Stewardship Council, Ontario Nature and Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources-Pembroke District

