



BECOMING A NATURALIST

– David Patriquin

Natural history is the observation and description of the life around us and the explanation of how it came to be. Naturalists are people who have some competency in natural history. A naturalist can name many species and say something about them and their habitats. Some are fairly focused on certain groups — birdwatchers on birds and fly fishers on fish and insects — but a naturalist can also say a lot about the habitats of those groups and about other species in those habitats.

Charles Darwin remains the preeminent naturalist, a keen observer and interpreter on local and global scales. His theory of natural selection remains a cornerstone of natural history and of all biological sciences. Geological descriptions and concepts are also very important. Competency in natural history has never been restricted to academics or other scientific professionals. Indeed, most naturalists today are not academics, or if they are, their specialty is often in an area like English or computer science. In general, university is a place to hone one's skills for studying natural history — for example, as a graduate student studying the population genetics of a threatened species — but developing a passion and basic skills for natural history commonly takes place outside academia.

An example is Bernard Forsythe, "The Owl Man of King's County." Forsythe was a mailman before retirement. "He is a good example", Jim Wolford of the Blomidon Naturalists Society told KingsCountyNews.ca in May 2013, "of how someone without formal credentials can take it upon himself to study a group of organisms, become an expert in that group, and contribute to science at the same time as promoting the biodiversity around us." Forsythe is also recognised as an authority on Nova Scotia orchids. Yes, Nova Scotia has orchids — 40 species.

So how does one learn natural history? It has often been an interest and skill set that was passed down between generations or, for example, might have been stimulated by a birdfeeder in the backyard and binoculars in the window, or developed by farmers and woodlot owners as they managed their lands.

Today, in our highly urbanised society, and with the prevalence of industrial-scale forestry and farming, many such connections have been lost. However, the yearning to know more about nature persists, especially through childhood. Paul Keddy, a young graduate

student when he played a key role in the founding of the Halifax Field Naturalists many years ago, said, "If you want to learn more about your world, then you are a naturalist."

In Nova Scotia, we are blessed with nature at our doorstep almost everywhere, and that's the place to start. Pick a favourite site or sites or favourite group of species (birds, wildflowers, insects), begin to observe them through the year and find out everything you can about them.

User-friendly guides, notably the Peterson Field Guide series and Audubon apps for mobile devices, can be used to identify species and geological structures. Digital photo records can be a big help, allowing one to have a second look after returning from the field, as well as providing formal documentation of observations. Once a species has been identified, the web provides access to many resources for finding out more.

One of the best ways to develop skills in natural history and to discover new places is to join a naturalist group such as the Halifax Field Naturalists, the Blomidon Naturalists Society, the Nova Scotia Bird Society, the Nova Scotia Wild Flora Society and, for youngsters, the Young Naturalists Club of Nova Scotia. Visit **wildlandns.ca** for a comprehensive list. Typically, these groups meet indoors once a month through the fall, winter, and spring, with a presentation by an invited speaker, and hold field trips monthly or more frequently. The public is always welcome, so you don't have to join a group to test the waters. Don't fret about 'not knowing much', as most participants are in the same boat. They meet to share what they know and to learn from people they invite to give lectures and lead field trips. Several groups based in the Halifax area hold meetings at the Nova Scotia Museum of Natural History.

Nature Nova Scotia is a federation of naturalist groups that holds a popular annual weekend get-together in the late spring. The Young Naturalists Club participates, holding special sessions for youngsters thereby making it a popular venture for families. Nature Nova Scotia also sponsors an online discussion group that receives multiple postings of nature observations daily. Checking these postings which can be viewed publicly is a great way to keep tabs on seasonal nature sightings in Nova Scotia.

This year, the Halifax Field Naturalists (HFN) are celebrating their 40th anniversary. They will be hosting a public presentation, "The Once and Future Atlantic" by Harry Thurston, on October 1st at 7:30 p.m. at Ashburn Golf Club. Thurston authored The Atlantic Coast, A Natural History. It is beautifully illustrated with photographs by Wayne Barrett and sketches by Emily S. Damstra, and is a wonderful, compelling read. But be prepared; it could well send you running into the wilds, nature guide in hand!



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