

# Lake Erie Islands Chapter of the Black Swamp Conservancy



December 2003

## What's In Your Backyard?

Part 2  
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In the last newsletter we began an exploration of some of the smaller lesser-known islands in our backyard. We learned about Starve and Green Islands. This month we'll take a look at three privately owned islands: Rattlesnake, Sugar and Ballast and Lost Ballast.

### Rattlesnake Island

Perhaps one of the most interesting animals of Rattlesnake Island is the melanistic garter snake. They are garter snakes that are all black due to a recessive trait in their genes and are only found along the western Lake Erie mainland shoreline and four other islands. They are reportedly popular in the pet trade because they're so unusual. This may actually be contributing to a decline in the numbers of these unusual snakes. The Lake Erie water snake is also known from Rattlesnake.

The harebell and northern bog violet grace the dolomite cliffs along the shoreline of this privately owned island. Appearing with them, and known from two other islands, is the narrow-leaved summer bluets. They have tiny purplish-blue (sometimes white) flowers with four petals that appear like a plus mark. They stand on an erect stem, have narrow, linear leaves and bloom in mid-summer.

### Sugar Island

The only unusual species currently on record for this privately owned island is the Lake Erie water snake. A good-sized population of these non-poisonous animals persists on Sugar. The snakes may be plain gray or have a pattern of dark half-moon shaped blotches running down their length. They primarily eat fish and amphibians, and a recent study revealed that some have been feeding on the non-native round goby that recently invaded Lake Erie. They

can live up to about ten years. The snakes use near shore waters for feeding, beaches with cobbles or limestone ledges for basking, creeping vegetation for cover, and burrows or rock piles for hibernating. Some snakes may hibernate up to 200 feet or more from the shoreline. Like any other animal, it will leave you alone if you leave it alone, but if threatened, it will bite to defend itself.

Although they may seem to be everywhere, they truly are not. What makes this species so special, and listed as federal threatened and state endangered, is that the only place they live is the Lake Erie islands. Unfortunately, some people see this as a bane and not a boon. The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service is working on a recovery plan that will eventually allow the snakes to be removed from the federal list. Habitat loss and human persecution are the two main threats to this species.

### Ballast and Lost Ballast Islands

Ballast is another small, privately owned island. When the lake level is high, Lost Ballast is truly lost beneath the water! It is currently visible on the south-southwest side of Ballast as a small rock outcropping with a little vegetation growing on it. The main feature on Ballast is the harebells growing on its shoreline in limestone cracks. Just west of Lost Ballast, the aquatic Richardson's pondweed grows where there is a sand-gravel substrate and

five or six feet of water. The entire plant is submerged in the water, and can be found growing with eel-grass and other species of pondweed.

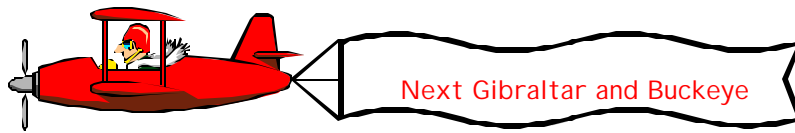
In deeper water near Ballast and Lost Ballast, several mollusks (clams) have been collected. The purple wartyback, eastern pondmussel and fawnsfoot were once found as live specimens, but with the arrival of the zebra mussel, now only dead, empty shells are being found. The purple wartyback has a thick and heavy shell that is very round and somewhat flat with little knobs or "warts" on the outside. By the time you find a shell though these warts may have been worn down. The inside of the shell or nacre is usually a beautiful purple, so it is aptly named. The eastern pondmussel, on the other hand, has a long and narrow shell and the nacre is usually white. The shape of the fawnsfoot is more similar to that of the eastern pondmussel but is a little wider in the middle. The inside is white and may have some iridescence. The outside may look like it has rays marked on it.



*The purple wartyback (2 shells in center) shows its color.*

*The other shells show the variety in mollusk shapes and colors.*

One of the interesting things about the life cycle of mollusks is that when the young, called glochidia, are released from the female they must find a host to continue their development. It is thought that certain species of mollusks use certain species of fish and may attach themselves to the gills, fins or skin of their host. After a length of time the young mollusk drops off its host and buries itself in the bottom of the lake.



## *Bye Bye Bonnie*

Bonnie Petro announced her resignation from the board after two years of enthusiastic service. Bonnie helped with many projects but especially with our Nature Camp at the Bay and with our new brochure. We appreciate all her hard work and will miss her. The board presented a token of our appreciation to Bonnie at our annual meeting in September at the South Bass State Park.



Left to Right  
(sitting) Lianne Genzman, Bonnie Petro  
(standing) Lisa Brohl, Carol Richardson, Bob Russell, John Ladd

## *Welcome Kristin*

Kristin Stanford, an island resident and Lake Erie water snake researcher (aka the Island Snake Lady) will be taking Bonnie's place on our board. We look forward to working with Kristin and welcome her to our group.



# Clean OhioFund Grant for Petersen Woods

Good news! The LEIC-BSC has received a Clean Ohio Conservation Fund Grant to purchase and preserve 1.5 acres of wet woodland owned by the Petersen family on Middle Bass Island. The property is adjacent to the Kuehnle State Wildlife Area and across Deist Road from the airport property where the bald eagles built a nest last year. They were often seen perching on the tall trees on this property. The cobble shoreline is used by Lake Erie water snakes. Other rare species that are recorded from Kuehnle and likely use the woods as well include Blanding's turtle, eastern fox snake, the unusual melanistic form of the eastern garter snake, and Abystomid salamanders. The woods composed of green ash, silver maple, box elder, swamp bur oak are also important habitat for migratory songbirds. We are excited about being able to preserve valuable wildlife habitat and provide more opportunities for enjoyment of outdoor activities. Thanks to all who helped with the grant application or wrote letters of support!



Photo Courtesy of Debbie Woischke

white and



## Christmas is for the Birds

The **Annual Audubon Christmas Bird Count** will be held here on South Bass Island on **December 14, 2003**. We need volunteers to listen for owls in the early morning, travel the island bird watching during the day, and to watch their feeders. If you are interested in being a feeder watcher, call Joey Wulkowicz at (419)285-2141. If you are interested in bird watching on the island for the day or a portion of it, call Lisa Brohl at (419)285-5811. If you would like to be listed as a participant in the Annual Report of the Christmas Bird Count, there is a \$5 fee. As Joey Wulkowicz has graciously agreed to feed participants lunch, we would like you to RSVP. It is great fun and there are usually some nice avian surprises with the changing weather we have at that time of year! Last year, it was the large number of tundra swans that were present. In 2001, it was purple sandpipers! Join us to see what shows up this year!

## Snakes and Taxes.

Do you own shoreline property that is a great place for Lake Erie water snakes? Would you like a break on your income taxes? Then consider a conservation easement for your property. Remember the Lake Erie Islands Chapter of the Black Swamp Conservancy (LEIC-BSC) still has money granted from the Ohio Department of Natural Resources, Division of Wildlife (ODNR-DOW) to use for expenses associated with securing donated easements (ex. survey or appraisal costs) on the Lake Erie Islands. The grant is from the state's Wildlife Diversity program. Protecting habitat through easements will help meet the targeted number of protected acres the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Lake Erie Watersnake Recovery Plan need set aside to have the snake removed from the list of federally threatened species.

A conservation easement is a restriction that a landowner can voluntarily place on their property. It is a legal agreement between a landowner and a land conservancy that permanently protects its conservation values. A building envelope can be reserved for future construction within an easement. An easement can be placed on either a portion of a property or the entire property. A landowner keeps the title to the property and there is no public access. An easement can be written for each individual landowner. Any donation of a conservation easement is tax deductible. If you have any questions about this program or are interested in participating, please contact us.

## Slide Show?

Looking for a **speaker for your island group**? We can come with a slide show to inform your group about our organization and the island's natural history. For further information on how land preservation can make good economic sense, [Preserving Family Lands III](#) by Stephen Small will be available at the Erie Islands Branch of the Ida Rupp Library for anyone to read. You can also contact us at (419)285-5811 or [leic\\_bsc@cross.net](mailto:leic_bsc@cross.net).

