
Nature Niagara News



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Niagara Falls
Nature Club

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A VISIT TO YUKON

We found gold in the Yukon. As our plane lowered toward the Whitehorse airport the vast green forest below was interspersed with gold glittering in the sunlight. The vast green forest was mostly Lodgepole Pine and Subalpine Fir. The gold was the fall colours of Speckled Alder and Trembling Aspen. Our visit third week in September was mostly sunny. We were comfortable in fall clothing except I had to borrow a wool toque.

Whitehorse, to become a city, amalgamated a number of small settlements hidden in the valleys and hills around it.

The Yukon River was a surprise. It is wide and fast moving through town. Arising in the Coast Mountains to the south west of Whitehorse it flows a long way north and slightly west in the Yukon. It crosses the border into Alaska travels north and west finally emptying into the Bering Sea. Whitehorse is a long way from the ocean on this river and yet the Chinook salmon come to spawn. Unfortunately we were too late in the season to visit the fish ladder around the hydro dam. The Dept of Fisheries and Oceans staff runs a hatchery program to offset the squishing of the Chinook babies in the hydro turbines.

A trail runs along the river with interpretive signs. In season a trolley car also follows the river. An interesting stop along the trail was the "SS Klondike" a sternwheeler boat and a National Historical Site.

The business area of Whitehorse stretches north and south with the Yukon River to the east and a white cliff to the west. The north part of downtown has KFC, Wal-Mart, Tim's, Superstore, Starbucks, and Canadian Tire etc — boring. The federal, territorial and municipal government buildings are here. The hospital and a few buildings grace the opposite side of the river. The south

end of town has many small shops housing clothing, jewelry, crafts, travel agents, arts, a good book store, and souvenirs. Whitehorse residents tend to be young and active so a large well-stocked store selling hiking, skiing and other outdoor equipment was busy. There a number of small good restaurants with interesting names like "Baked" and "Burnt Toast".

Yukon College is uphill north of the business area. The airport is on the ridge above the city. Although there are commercial flights most of the traffic is small planes, many of which had pontoons and would, in winter, have skis.

Our Granddaughter's rental home is a townhouse, two storied with a garage underneath. The foundations are wood because of the cold. It is eclectically heated with an automatic climate control. The walls are well insulated and the windows very well sealed. Wood is used almost exclusively in the area for construction. Although it was out-of season and many attractions were closed there was still lots to choose from.

The Yukon Beringia Interpretive Centre just along the highway beckoned. Beringia was the land connecting Alaska and Siberia during the last ice age. The center was intriguing with exhibits of the flora, fauna and human life based on research and archeological evidence. During the last ice age the sea dropped as the water froze and a land bridge formed between North America and Siberia. Alaska and the Yukon did not have glaciers. The land was a grassy tundra. Animals such as the Woolly Mammoth and Scimitar Cat appeared. Humans came from Siberia hunting, and probably followed the animals into North America.

The MacBride Museum contains artifacts and information on the gold rush, the first nations and natural history of the area.

A trip to Skagway, Alaska is almost a must. The Yukon Gold rush brought thousands from Skagway north over the mountain along the waterways into gold country. We traveled south from Whitehorse towards the Coast Mountains. The forest is coniferous. A young moose watched us calmly. The road rose and the vegetation became mostly shrubs with large areas of rock. We came to the Carcross Desert, the world's smallest desert. It consisting of a series of northern sand dunes left by the drying of a large glacial lake. Rain shadow from surrounding mountains keeps the area dry. Now the desert is replenished by sand blowing in from nearby Lake Bennet. It was interesting to look so far and only see sand. Carcross interestingly an abbreviation of 'caribou crossing' is a settlement at one time the terminus of the White Pass and Yukon railway. A charming small community it is a strong hold of the Tlingit culture. Unfortunately as so often because we were out of season most of the exhibits were closed as was the railroad ride you could take to Skagway. We walk through the quiet community and along the lake.

As we drove further south the land became more rugged and sparsely vegetated. We crossed a corner of British Columbia. The road twisted above the tree line---just rocks and gullies and occasional lovely little waterfalls. Then we were in the clouds. The horizon disappeared, as did almost everything. Where were those rocks and gullies? Where was the road?

Now U.S. customs and then finally we are through the pass and starting down along the Skagway River. The road reappeared and driving becomes easier. I wondered how the gold rush pioneers ever walked or rode through this country carrying huge packs.

Skagway is an ocean port because it is on Lynn Canal, a very deep fjord. Two cruise ships were in harbour so the principal street was busy with tourists. We had an excellent bar lunch then walk out of town along the Lynn. On the water was a raft of King Eider and I spotted one gull. Homeward was not quite as daunting. The clouds and basically lifted. I was intrigued with the strange rock formations, the brief glimpse of snow on mountaintops and waterfalls. This was a fascinating trip into wild country and history.

Just north of Whitehorse is the Yukon Wildlife Reserve. A very large reserve it features habitat for several species of northern animal and anything else that wants to live there. We took the bus tour with a guide as the place looked just too large to walk in a reasonable time. A Bald Eagle was unable to live in the wild but seemed to enjoy the attention. A Golden Eagle had recovered and been released the week before. The broken wing of a Snowy Owl had healed but the bird was showing no inclination to fly. I want to scoop him up and bring him back to the Owl Foundation. The guide explained there is no place for these injured birds locally. They try to help. Mountain Bluebird had migrated so the nest boxes were empty. The Moose was more interested in seeing if we brought food than wallowing in the large swamp in his territory. Often there are several species of migrating ducks living in the ponds but to-day there were only Mallards.

The mass and sturdiness of Muskox was amazing. The Lynxes let a couple of us spot them before lying down in the long grass of their compound. Snowshoe hares were amusing as their large feet and ears had turned white in anticipation of snow while the rest of their bodies remained dark.

Mountain Goats had a small rocky mountain to frolic and look down on us from above. The reserve had too many Mull Deer so last fall they had separated the mature males. Surprisingly this spring there were fawns born. Apparently with absents of dominate competition immature males had been aggressive. Male Dalls Sheep with their long curled hollow horns would clash heads and horns with a loud bang.

Our granddaughter would take us hiking frequently or we would explore the many trails alone. A beaver swam down the river and dived into his riverside lodge. Red Squirrels ran along the side of the trails. A Morning Cloak butterfly rested on White Sweet Clover and then on Narrowleafed Hawksbeard. A female Spruce Grouse accompanied by an immature scurried in the underbrush. The young Bald Eagle soared along the river. Bank Swallow homes were empty on the bluffs. Juncos, Crows and House Sparrows flew. Magpies were frequently in the trees around town. Ravens called noisily from the sky, rooftops, trees and almost anywhere, making us smile. The cotton grass still had some white fluff. The shrubby willows along the trails had loads of catkins. Prickly Wild Rose fruit were large and very red. Northern Goldenrod and Common

Yarrow still had some blooms. My favourite plant was Fireweed. A few tufts of silky hairs used for seed dispersal held on giving the tall spikes a shade of red reflecting in the sunlight..

We did not see Northern Lights but one afternoon following a brief shower a double rainbow filled the sky.

As our plane rose to the south on departure I realized we had seen only a small corner of the Yukon and a tiny area of Alaska yet experienced so much. All week the leaves had been falling. The forests were greener. We would have to come back to find more gold.

Janet Damude

GULL OUTING

On Sunday, December 4th, Kayo Roy led our members on our annual gull and waterfowl outing along the Niagara River. Twelve participants gathered at the control dam above the falls.

Both here and at the adjacent holding ponds we had Ring-billed Gulls, Hooded Mergansers, a Ring-necked Duck and Buffleheads.

Further along the top of the Falls there were Ring-billed Gulls, Herring, Bonaparte's plus Gadwall and Common Goldeneye ducks.

Our next stop was at the Whirlpool where we had the good fortune to find a Black-headed Gull among the many Bonaparte's.

After a lunch break we proceeded to the Adam Beck power station overlook. Here we were treated to views of Iceland, Thayer's and Lesser Black-backed Gulls.

Our next stop at the Queenston Dock afforded us a good view of a Little Gull and a Black-backed Gull.

We ended the tour at Niagara-on-the-Lake where we found a Red-throated Loon, Mergansers and Oldsquaw.

An interesting and pleasant day. Many thanks to our leader.

Rick Young



Members above the Falls

MEMBER'S SHOW NIGHT

14TH DECEMBER 2016

December is the month where we all bring a treat to share and enjoy an evening entertained by our very own members. This December we had the pleasure of alternating between young and experienced speakers on a wide variety of topics.

Our evening began with a fascinating presentation on Nature in Arizona by Skye Newman Glancy. Skye has spent a great many vacations in her 11 years visiting family in Arizona. She has made many observations and comparisons to life in the desert vs life in Niagara. The rocky soil is home to many varieties of cacti and a very mountainous terrain. This difference in habitat is one of the reasons that we have common squirrels but Arizona has ground squirrels - not many trees in Arizona to climb! Skye shared some photos of many beautiful flowering cacti as well as a lemon tree at her Nannie's house. We also traveled with her to the Grand Canyon, the Wupatki Pueblo Ruins, underground caves, a thousand year old volcano still with nothing growing on it and ended sliding down freezing cold natural water slides in California. A wonderful, energetic trip through the eyes of one of our young members!

Next, Rick Young shared some beautiful heartwarming memories with us. Being that this is the 50th anniversary of our club, many of our members brought in pictures from our outings of long ago and not so long ago to share and archive our history. The photos began with pictures of one of our founding members, Mary Moses with Mary Deere in Woodstock, Vermont in 1974. We enjoyed reminiscing or putting faces to the names of members that may no longer be with us or have helped our club to thrive over the years. From the first weekend outing in Presqu'ile Prov. Park in 1997, the yearly gathering at Hawkwatch, many interesting trips to the Bruce Peninsula, the Jr. Naturalists Club at the Laar residence and the yearly reports and maintenance of Harold Mitchell Nature Reserve. Thank you to all of our members for making the last 50 years so memorable.

Michael Deely is one of our newer board members and treated us to a collection of photographs that he has taken since moving into the Niagara area. He is often inspired by the beauty that can be found in the common birds, colors that catch his attention and the power of nature to take over buildings and man made structures. His photos included many wonderful shots of animals, like the albino squirrel, snapping

turtle and birds such as the ruddy turnstone, and even a shot he took the day before of a cardinal in the snow at his feeder. We are truly blessed to be living in an area with nature to be found all around us, and thankful to Michael to sharing his view of Niagara.

Back to a young presenter, we had Emmy Darling present on the animals and plants of Newfoundland. Emmy and her family visited the west coast of Newfoundland this past summer. Her photos took us along the breath taking coast through Gros Morne and all the way up to the St. Anthony at the very tip of the island. Some highlights included seeing the Tablelands, where the you can actually walk on the mantle, the pitcher plant which is the carnivorous provincial flower, fjords, an iceberg, a fishing trip for cod, and a visit to her favorite spot at Cape Onion, where the cold winds cause the vegetation to look like the tundra. The photos reminded us what a beautiful, rugged and diverse landscape Newfoundland has to offer. And what a great way to experience it, with our 10 year old tour guide!

Following this, Kerry Kennedy, our incoming president presented on Time, Nature and the Great Wall of China. Kerry visited a section of the Great Wall near Jinkou while visiting friends last May. She told quite a tale about the adventure she had climbing this steep and wild part of the wall. After a small misadventure (missing the trailhead) that resulted in a time delay and a restart of the hike, Kerry shared the amazing flowers, emergent leaves, almond orchards, brush bundles and rock walls to contain erosion that they encountered on their very steep climb up the wall. We finally reached the top to stand with Kerry on a watch tower where soldiers stood 1000's of years ago looking for invading Mongolians. The dolomite bricks used to make the wall by 1000's of workers are now slowly being taken over by shrubs and trees working their way through the cracks. This adventure ends with an uneasy descent back down through the dark without a flashlight, an injured hiker, little water and insufficient clothing! Luckily they all came out ok and even managed to catch their dinner at a local restaurant that cooks your catch for you! Kerry ended her presentation with the reminder to be prepared so your story doesn't have quite as much adventure as she did!

The last presentation of the night was shared by Margaret Pickles on Burrowing Owls in Cape Coral, Florida. This area, close to Fort Meyers was the running joke in the 1970's - can I sell you

some swampland? But now boasts some 2500 burrows belonging to the protected Burrowing Owl. This species of special concern can be seen throughout this cape, nesting in front yards and vacant lots. By contributing a donation to the Friends of Cape Coral Wildlife you can get a list of where to find these magnificent birds. What a wonderful story of protection and a great birding experience! The Burrowing Owl is one of the smaller of the species, weighing a mere 150grams and standing only 24 cm tall. It has many interesting adaptations to help it survive life in a burrow, including beautiful long eyelashes to protect it from the sand and a tolerance of carbon dioxide that allows it live underground. Mom can often be found sitting on a perch while dad protects from a distance. The females hunt during the day, sometimes even leaving dung near the burrow to attract bugs to make the hunt easier, while the males hunt mice and rodents at night. Thank you Margaret for making it a good birding night for all!

Tara Darling

JANUARY PRESENTER

January 11, at our regular Nature Club meeting, Ann Yagi, 35-year veteran of the MNR, and now, MSc candidate at Brock University, filled us in on some special issues of snake hibernation in the north temperate zone.

First of all, snakes can't regulate their temperatures except by moving around their environment. And if that environment has severe, frost-bitten winters like ours, this creates a problem for their survival. There's a definite northern limit to snake territory, although a few species like the European Adder and the Garter Snake do have strategies for coping with cold weather and even snow.

The techniques that researchers, including Ann, use to investigate snake behaviour are intriguing. She introduced the topic by showing us pictures of snake burrows, cavities under rocks, peaty soil or brushwood, sometimes burrows borrowed from other species, or even burrows shared with other species of snakes. Researches like her might involve finding ways to measure the depth of burrows, using fiber-optics tools to inspect burrows (not very successful), and devising experimental, clear plastic tubes to simulate snake hibernacula under controlled laboratory conditions.

Apparently some species have taken a page from the Goldilocks story of The Three Bears. Remember? Three bowls of porridge, three beds, etc. A snake can survive the winter by locating that underground zone that's just below the frozen top layer, and just above the water table that may be out-gassing toxic CO₂, CO, or hydrogen sulphide: by locating that middle third where it's comfortable for curling up and waiting for spring. In fact, in The Goldilocks Zone, in a "bed" that's "just right".

Then along comes a researcher who, in a gruff voice, poses a question equivalent to: "And who's been sleeping in my bed?" But, hopefully, not waking up the snake.

We too, like northern snakes, inhabit a Goldilocks zone. Our own planet, as well as other recently discovered star-circling planets, have been described using that same metaphor. Not so hot that we roast, not so frigid that we freeze, not so wet that we drown in liquid methane, not so gravitational that we're crushed. Just right, and with a comfortable pillow to let us snooze for the duration.

Derek Richards

WATERFOWL ALONG THE NIAGARA RIVER

On January 22, nine people braved the fog & met at Dufferin Islands for the Niagara River outing.

Starting in Fort Erie, we saw many Buffleheads, Cormorants & a few Long-tailed Ducks.

Driving up the river we saw Black-backed Gulls, Goldeneye, Canvasback & Red-headed Ducks.

Then we encountered fog; the river was impossible to see. Not one of the 327 Tundra Swans I saw the week before were seen.

After lunch in Chippawa the fog seemed to have lifted so we headed to the Holding Pond, where we made up for what we couldn't see in the fog. We had Red-breasted & Hooded Mergansers, Greater Scaup, Coot, Red-headed Duck, Gadwall and Green-winged Teal.

At Queenston Overlook, some members got lifers of Black Vultures in Lewiston, NY.

Back at Dufferin Islands some members handfed Chickadee's & Tufted Titmice. We also saw Red & White-breasted Nuthatch, Pine Warbler, Gadwall and Mandarin Duck.

Carol Horvat

THE GENIUS OF BIRDS BY JENNIFER ACKERMAN

We already admire birds for the beauty of their plumage and song, and for their impressive migrations; now Jennifer Ackerman, in her new book, *The Genius of Birds*, gives us even more reasons to be impressed by our feathered friends.

Genius, as it relates to birds, has been defined as a flair for meeting environmental and social challenges with acumen and flexibility. Some of the smartest birds are ravens, crows and parrots, and the dumbest are emus. (Sorry, Australia.)

The chickadee is curious, intelligent, and opportunistic, with a remarkable memory. Its high whistles and complex calls are described as "the most sophisticated and exacting system of communication of any land animal." Its brain is double the size of birds in the same body weight range, such as flycatchers or swallows.

Some birds are adept tool users. The New Caledonian crow crafts just the right tool for the job, then travels with it and reuses it. A crow will drop stones into a water-filled tube to raise the level so it can drink, suggesting the crow understands the principle of water displacement. A white stork brought water to its chicks in a clump of damp moss, which it wrung out to fill their beaks.

Some birds also exhibit a love of play. A video from Russia of a crow snowboarding down a roof with a jar lid went viral.

Scrub jays show astonishingly smart and manipulative behaviour and tactical deception as they cache food, pilfer other birds' caches, then pretend to cache and move their booty, depending on who is watching.

The chapter on bird songs described Thomas Jefferson's two pet mockingbirds, whose serenades included not only renditions of all the birds of the local woods, but also popular American, Scottish and French songs. Scientists note the remarkable similarities of song learning in birds with human speech learning.

We are awed by animal builders, such as Baltimore orioles, who knit together their nests with tens of thousands of rapid shuttle stitches, or barn swallows, who make thousands of trips with mouthfuls of mud to fashion their cup-shaped nests. English ornithologist Charles Dixon wrote in 1902, "A bird's nest is the most graphic mirror of a bird's mind. It is the most palpable example

HIDDEN CORNERS EAST ANDES ECUADOR

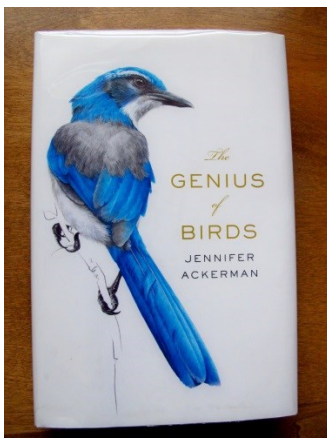
of those reasoning, thinking qualities with which these creatures are unquestionably very highly endowed.” Who can forget the bowerbird, who must be good at house construction, learning, decorating, mimicry, dancing and problem solving, as well as being sensitive to his potential mate’s mood.

Some birds can accomplish feats of navigation that few humans can carry out even with the use of a compass. Pigeons can be trained to return home from distances of over a thousand miles. The Chinese have lately built a force of 10,000 messenger pigeons to deliver military communications in case of electromagnetic interference. The tiny blackpoll warbler, a bird of boreal forest, flies nonstop over the Atlantic to its staging grounds in Puerto Rico and Cuba, a flight of up to 1,700 miles, in just 2 or 3 days.

I found particularly interesting the chapter, *A Mapping Mind*. Experiments showed the size of a pigeon’s hippocampus depends on its use. Those with experience navigating had a 10% larger hippocampus than inexperienced birds. Similarly, London cabbies who had been driving for many years have more gray matter in the hippocampus compared to bus drivers. Some scientists fear that in humans over dependence on GPS technology will shrink our hippocampus, and when researchers at McGill U. scanned the brains of older adults who used GPS and those that didn’t, they found that those accustomed to navigating on their own had more gray matter in the hippocampus and showed less overall cognitive impairment than those who relied on GPS. Use it or lose it.

Ackerman has travelled the world to examine the most recent research into the minds of birds. I travelled only to the Niagara Falls Public Library to find her book. You may enjoy it too.

Win Laar



Our special quest, Owen Bjorgen, Niagara’s own young Attenborough, took us on an awe-inspiring exploration of the East Andes of Ecuador. This area, where the Andes meet the Amazon Rainforest is one of the most biodiverse regions of the world, and Owen treated us to views and stories of a great many of the species he encountered on his travels. Among the diverse ranges of species were bullet ants, giant toads, large and “delicious” grubs, and a myriad of amazing plants. In Owen’s own words “the amazon is a hot house for life, and is the backyard that the entire world needs protected and healthy.”

During his stay Owen was able to travel deep into the rainforest to areas that no other foreigner has even reached before. He also climbed the Sumaco Volcano, to experience the complete gradient of ecosystems from lowland forest to cloud forest to barren lands above the tree land. A variety of endemic species was layered up the side of the mountain, changing with each small change in the microclimate. Owen left us with the thought of “what will climate change do to this environment and all species it supports?”

Owen is a graduate of University of Guelph’s Biodiversity program and he has taken his knowledge and training to heart as he endeavours to educate and inspire the world to explore and take seriously the importance of the world’s biodiversity. Through his organization Biophilic World, Owen has produced a series of documentaries including his latest on the East Andes. You can view his film at

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8UhCmLj_c5E

Another of Owen’s quotes sums up the sentiment worth pondering: “Thriving is what every species deserves a chance at, on this planet.” I couldn’t agree more.

Margaret Pickles

NIAGARA FALLS NATURE CLUB
FINANCIAL STATEMENT FOR THE YEAR ENDED DECEMBER 31 2016

REVENUE	2016	2015
Memberships	\$ 1,625.00	\$ 2,070.00
Donation		
Conservation	\$ 452.00	\$ 896.00
Bank Interest	\$ 103.46	\$ 145.36
Fund Raising (Draws Coffee Shirts Crest Books Plant Sale)	\$ 145.80	\$ 672.75
Other Income: Annual Dinner Meeting	\$ 1,830.00	\$ 2,160.00
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	\$ 4,156.26	\$ 5,944.11
EXPENSES		
Bulletins (printing, envelopes, postage)	\$ 265.80	\$ 255.90
Meetings (incl. "Directions" Meetings, Rent, Speakers)	\$ 656.00	\$ 879.00
Printing (Schedules)	\$ 111.89	\$ 94.93
Liability Insurance (F.O.N)	\$ 460.08	\$ 460.08
Rental P.O. Box	\$ 176.28	\$ 176.28
Annual Dinner	\$ 1,869.25	\$ 1,950.00
MISC.	\$ 131.09	\$ 17.60
Administration	\$ 16.94	\$ 15.82
NFNC Website	\$ 120.36	
Cost of Club Shirts		\$ 375.59
Bruce Trail Conservancy	\$ 100.00	
Donations		
The Owl Foundation	\$ 400.00	\$ 855.00
Bruce Trail	\$ 50.00	\$ 50.00
Adopt-A-Pond (Toronto Zoo)	\$ 50.00	\$ 50.00
Fatal Light Awareness	\$ 100.00	\$ 100.00
Memorial Donation	\$ 100.00	\$ 100.00
Awards	\$ 39.55	
Subscriptions and fees:		
Friends of the Land Trust	\$ 150.00	\$ 150.00
Ontario Nature (F.O.N.)	\$ 83.00	\$ 83.00
Long Point Bird Observatory	\$ 35.00	\$ 35.00
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	\$ 4,915.24	\$ 5,648.20
Excess of Revenue over expense	\$ (758.98)	\$ 295.91
Balance of assets January 1/2016	\$10,476.92	\$ 10,181.01
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Balance of Assets December 31 ,2016	\$ 9,717.94	\$ 10,476.92
Bank Account #124851369	\$ 2,787.94	\$ 3,546.92
Certificate of Deposit	\$ 6,900.00	\$ 6,900.00
Membership Floater	\$ 30.00	\$ 30.00
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	\$ 9,717.94	\$ 10,476.92
Assets consisting of:-		
Current Account	\$ 7,436.46	\$ 8,097.44
Designated Conservation	\$ 1,623.00	\$ 1,721.00
Funds for Fieldwork	<u>\$ 658.48</u>	<u>\$ 658.48</u>
	<hr/>	<hr/>
	\$ 9,717.94	\$ 10,476.92

NOTICE

ANNUAL DINNER

This year our dinner will be held
on Saturday 8th April.

Social hour between 5:00pm -6:00pm.

Dinner at 6:00pm.

Tickets \$33 per person

Reservations Contact Carol Horvat

Phone 905-687-8562

e-mail chorvat1@cogeco.ca

Wondering how to support and strengthen our club?

Here are a few ideas to consider....

- Introduce or thank a speaker
- Bring refreshments to an indoor meeting
 - Lead a walk or outing
- Join the Outings or Program Committee
 - Join the Board of Directors

Email: niagarafallsnatureclub@gmail.com

MARCH REG. MTG.

Book, Magazine & Jig-Saw Puzzle Sale

Bring your used books, magazines and puzzles.

Help to raise funds for the club.

Your editing team wishes to thank
you for your contributions that
help make your newsletter interesting.

Please send your contributions to
Rick Young rick.y@sympatico.ca or
Carol Horvat chorvat1@cogeco.ca