

Carolinian West

Yours to Explore!

Nestled in the heart of Canada's deep south, the Carolinian West region is one of the most diverse natural areas in all of Canada. It is the warmest corner of the Carolinian zone. This zone follows the shore of Lake Erie and curves around the southwestern tip of Lake Ontario, before finally fading out on the eastern edge of Toronto.

This southern ecosystem is able to exist due to the tempering effects of the Great Lakes. Habitats within the Carolinian Zone are incredibly varied and include fresh water marshes, Carolinian forest (featuring species more commonly found in the Carolinas and Mississippi Valley), tallgrass prairies, alvars, bogs, sand-dune complexes and the rarest of them all, oak savanna. This diversity of habitat accounts for the wide diversity of species found in the region: More than 900 species of plants, 380 species of birds and countless insect species have been recorded here. Many are considered rare, threatened or endangered in Canada.

The great majority of natural areas in this heavily developed region have been cleared to make way for agriculture, industry and urban centres. Nevertheless, there are some significant gems left in the Carolinian West region, including a number of important protected areas.

Protection for the unique ecosystems of this natural region remains a high priority for all Ontario Nature member clubs and organizations in the region. An excellent example of local determination to protect the natural wealth of this area is the recent acquisition of the Clear Creek property in Kent County. Ontario Nature member clubs and individuals banded together with the Nature Conservancy to purchase this significant area for conservation.

Members are also highly involved in monitoring programs, realizing that you need to know as much as possible about natural areas in order to ensure that they are managed properly. The Hawk Cliff Foundation actively monitors the migration of raptors along the Lake Erie shoreline, for example, while at the opposite end of the region, Lambton Wildlife Incorporated undertook an insect survey in the Port Franks area.

Members are involved with bluebird monitoring, marsh monitoring, breeding-bird survey work and Christmas Bird Counts, all of which provide invaluable information about the natural areas they are concerned about. Their work has helped to establish eight Important Bird Areas in the Carolinian West region and has helped identify an additional nine potential sites. Members have found countless new plant species and have added much to our knowledge of animal populations in the region.

Restoration work is also a high priority for member groups and they are involved in many different types of work, from wetland rehabilitation and tree planting to prairie

restoration projects. The statistics about remaining natural areas in this region can be negative, but this has not dampened the spirits of the member clubs. In fact, it has done just the opposite: Nature lovers in the region see this state of affairs as a challenge for them to meet – one which they are approaching head on and gaining some significant ground!