

LOCAL

The (by)law is an ass

GRAHAME LIVED IN MORGANSTON FOR MANY YEARS

..... to paraphrase Mr. Bumble in Oliver Twist. It came back to me recently as I parked at Cobourg's west harbour where I occasionally pause to watch the various bird life seeking refuge from this particularly severe winter. I arrived just as a formation of three swans descended on their final, graceful, almost balletic approach to the frozen water, a slight tilt of a wing here, shifting attitude there, negotiating the mass of huddled ducks, geese and gulls, floating onto the ice, feet sliding to a full stop. The western extreme of the harbour has become a natural wildlife refuge and birders' delight - a place where, recently, man's humanity to wild creatures was on full display.

This has been a terrible winter for wildlife, especially birds, the combination of heavy snow, then the ice storm, compounded by more deep snow, reducing their ability to find food and sustenance. One person in Cobourg - a good Samaritan? - decided to provide an assist for the birds of the western harbour during this recent deep freeze, providing them with life-sustaining corn. You might recall Pete Fisher's front page story of last week in this newspaper revealing that a very concerned citizen, Bill Thompson, had been feeding the ducks, geese and swans with corn since Jan. 21 when he tried to help a goose in distress.

He was quoted as saying, "This is not for the fun of it. It's for survival. Their natural food



is gone. They can't fly to the fields because they are buried over. They're relying on us." For his generosity and concern he was issued a \$105 fine by a bylaw officer. Thompson added, "I will continue to do so as long as I have to. If they come today and give me a ticket, I'll take the ticket and say, 'I'll meet you in court because I'm not paying it - at all.'", adding "I'm going to help them survive. The options are, you let them die or give them food. It's a no-brainer" I was going to say what is he has done is a very humanistic gesture. Perhaps avianistic is the right word.

This week, Pete Fisher reported, Thompson was issued a second ticket. But wait; Cobourgians, in their ongoing spirit of generosity, have not only donated money to help pay the tickets, but one gave Thompson a blank cheque. As well, 30 people showed up with bags of corn to help him feed the birds, one from Peterborough bringing three 25-kilogram bags of feed. It does one's heart good.

What makes the whole thing so tacky is that the ticket was issued as a result of two complaints, seemingly anonymous.

Shades of the appalling garden-vendetta of last year against Councillor Miriam Mutton. If it's illegal to feed birds at the harbour, doesn't it follow that backyard bird feeders are also illegal? I've heard it put forward that the Town doesn't like to attract the birds, especially for the mess they leave behind. Hmmm. Has anyone seen the mess left behind by summer weekend visitors to our town?

What we must remember is that the birds were here first. Cobourg harbour is a natural gathering place offering protection - and food - much like Quebec's natural wildlife area at cap Tourmente or Brighton's Presqu'île Provincial Park where visitors flock, especially at migration time. Perhaps Cobourg Council should consider declaring the west end of the harbour a wildlife preserve, banning the walking of dogs that disturb the bird life.

In the meantime, thank goodness for people like Bill Thompson. Cobourg - A Feel Good Town? How about Cobourg - Is For the Birds? Hopefully, when Thompson has his day in court, he will be well supported and able to face his anonymous accusers.

I hear a reasonable voice in my head. "Case dismissed."

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*Cobourg
Birds*

(2)