

Backyard Naturalist

By DON SCALLEN
Herald Special



Naturalists living in this part of Canada should consider themselves fortunate. As inhabitants of Canada's "deep south" they are able to study and enjoy one of the richest biotic zones in the country.

In categories of plants and animals such as reptiles, amphibians, migrating birds, trees and vascular plants, southern Ontario possesses more species than anywhere else in the country.

A rough tally of tree species from R.C. Hosie's Native Trees of Canada indicates that approximately 80 species are found in southern On-

tario. This compares to about 40 north of the Great Lakes, 35 in the harsh prairie climate of Alberta and even eclipses the 50 species found in relatively balmy British Columbia.

Walk into a typical southern Ontario woodlot, field guide in hand and it would not take long to identify 20 or 25 species of trees. Unlike B.C. or northern Ontario, most would be broadleaved deciduous trees (trees bearing broad flat leaves that are shed each fall). Common deciduous trees in Halton include various Ashes, Maples, Oaks and Hickories.

The forests of Halton also contain a few species of coniferous (cone bearing) trees. Conifers and in this area include the majestic White Pine, Eastern White Cedar and Eastern Hemlock. The few bogs that remain in this area contain conifers that are much more abundant in the north-White and Black Spruce and Tamarack. Tamarack is unusual because it is a deciduous

conifer. It loses its needles in the fall and replaces them with fresh growth in the spring.

Halton Hills lies just north of, or more correctly, in a transition area between the Carolinian forest zone of southwestern Ontario and the mixed forest zone of south-central Ontario.

The Carolinian zone harbours a great number of plants and animals that are scarce or absent entirely elsewhere in Canada. Many species of trees such as Sycamore, Tulip Tree, Sassafras and Cucumber Magnolia are not found naturally beyond this region.

Halton Hills does not contain naturally reproducing populations of the four tree species mentioned above, but it is possible to grow them here. Homeowners have planted Sycamores for their ornamental value. The bark of this tree is an attractive mottled brown and white. A mature specimen grows in Green-

wood cemetery in Georgetown.

Tulip trees, in maturity one of the largest deciduous trees in the world, are also used as ornamentals here. They possess large four lobed leaves and tulip-like flowers in the spring. A good example of a Tulip tree is located in a treed lot on the west side of Main Street in Georgetown, just north of Maple Avenue.

Another tree that is usually identified with Ontario's Carolinian zone is the Black Walnut. This tree is found naturally in Halton Hills and despite the fact that north Halton is near the northern limits of its range, they seem to do quite well here. They are particularly abundant in the Credit River valley. Norval boasts several mature specimens as does Cedarvale Park in Georgetown.

The Black Walnut is a medium sized tree, reaching heights of up to 30m and diameters of about 1m. Its leaves are compound, consisting of

15-23 leaflets and are about 30cm long. The wood of the Black Walnut is probably the most valuable of any tree in Canada. More so in the past, when the trees were more abundant, than now, this hard, heavy wood was fashioned into furniture, cabinets and used as veneer for boat hulls and interior finishing.

A toxic substance is exuded from the roots of Black Walnut trees that inhibits the growth of most other plants in the root zone area, including some garden vegetables and flowers. In the natural state this toxin probably benefits the walnut by eliminating competing vegetation.

Black Walnuts also bear tasty nuts, that unfortunately can be very difficult to crack. The most useful device for doing so is a hammer or vice. Collectors of these nuts should be aware also of a dark brown oil exuded by the green husks. This substance, formerly used as a dye can stain hands and clothing.

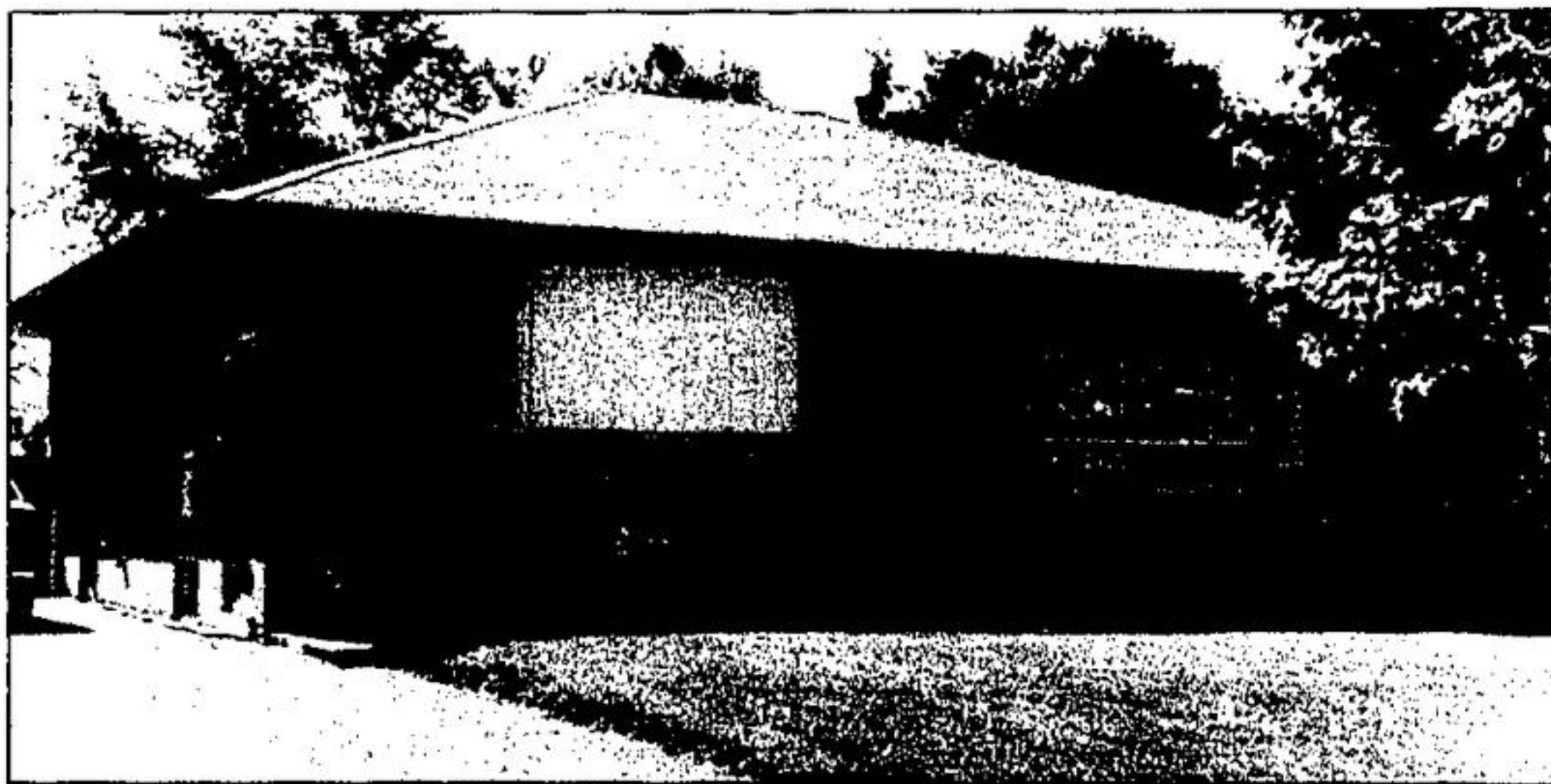
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