

ENGAGE

WITH CWF

The Eastern Meadowlark and Sassafras are Van Hemessen's favourite bird and tree



FIVE QUESTIONS FOR WILLIAM VAN HEMESSEN

Passionate for the Wild



William Van Hemessen identified almost 18,000 BioBlitz Canada 150 images on iNaturalist this year, making him the nation's top identifier

What inspires someone to get outside and explore nature, make it a career and a favourite hobby? William Van Hemessen is the top species identifier on iNaturalist and shares his talents with and for the world.

HOW DID YOU GET INTERESTED IN BOTANY?

I think my interest in botany ultimately started with my dad. Like me, he's a biologist and he used to take my siblings and I for hikes around southwestern Ontario. I remember pointing to plants on the side of the trail and asking him what they were. I don't think I retained very much but it was enough that by the time I got to university I knew an oak from a maple from a basswood, and so on. When I got to university I didn't have much of an interest in botany—I thought I wanted to be an architect. Unfortunately (or fortunately?) the architecture program at the University of Waterloo was super competitive and I didn't get in.

Instead I decided to major in urban planning. One of my mandatory courses in first year was Dr. Roger Suffling's introductory field ecology course and it was there that I rekindled my love for nature.

HOW DID YOU CHOOSE YOUR FAVOURITE PLANT?

I'm not sure if I can realistically choose a favourite plant. Soft-hairy False Gromwell (*Lithospermum parviflorum*) is a rare species of sandy flood plains that blooms on my birthday every year, without fail. So I guess I kind of like it for that

reason. I'm also a huge fan of the genus *Lobelia* and I've always considered *Sassafras* my favourite tree.

HOW DID YOU CHOOSE YOUR FAVOURITE MUSSEL?

Southwestern Ontario, and particularly the Thames and Sydenham Rivers, have an incredible diversity of Unionids. The sheer variety of shell shapes, sizes and colours is astounding. When I was introduced to Unionids a few years ago I immediately fell in love—a phenomenon aptly described by Abbie Gascho Landis in her book *Immersion*. I started looking for mussels in every watercourse I came across, and lucky for me I live along the Thames River, which has the second highest diversity of Unionids of any watershed in Canada. Why Deertoe? It's incredibly pretty. It's small, hoof-shaped, gold with green flecks on the outside and pure white inside. But like plants, I can't realistically choose just one.

HOW DID YOU CHOOSE YOUR FAVOURITE BIRD?

I think Eastern Meadowlarks have the most beautiful song of any bird. Unfortunately, this once common bird of grasslands and meadows is becoming less and less familiar to Canadians because its habitat is in serious decline. Conversion of grasslands, meadows and hay fields to intensive agriculture has dramatically reduced available habitat for Eastern Meadowlarks and other grassland birds like Bobolinks, Savannah Sparrows and Grasshopper Sparrows. Meadowlarks are still very common in some areas and there's something refreshing about hearing them singing back and forth across open fields.

WHAT IS YOUR VISION FOR CITIZEN SCIENCE IN THE FUTURE?

My vision is that tools like iNaturalist will get more and more people involved in citizen science. There's a massive amount of knowledge out there that needs to be shared. Especially since the threats to our natural environment are greater than ever. With the pace of ecosystem change in the 21st century, we can no longer rely on an exclusive handful of experts to gather ecological data. London has a population of about 400,000 people; Ontario has about 13 million; Canada has about 35 million... every single one of these people has probably observed some ecological change in their lifetime. Some may be more in tune to it than others, but there's a massive army of brains out there and for the first time in history we have the tools to collect the myriad natural history data our citizens can provide.

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CANADA'S NATURE SELFIE CONSERVES THE WONDER

TAKE ALMOST 40,000 IMAGES OF WILDLIFE AND HABITAT AND WHAT DO YOU GET? CANADA'S NATURE SELFIE!



With more than 2,000 species of vascular plants, 323 species of birds, 124 species of fish, 81 species of mammals, 25 species of reptiles and a wide variety of insects, arachnids, crustaceans, lichens, fungi and protozoans, the BioBlitz Canada 150 project is now complete.

Led by the Canadian Wildlife Federation and other partners in conservation, BioBlitz Canada 150 was one of 38 Canada 150 signature projects.

The initiative created a venue for Canadians to come together to celebrate our natural heritage, furthered conservation through science and data sharing, and educated the next generation of naturalists.

About 10,000 Canadians attended the official events across the country and 1,020 species experts shared their knowledge and passion.

In all, 16,600 volunteer hours were donated and 7,510 species were catalogued. There were 1,096 different observers and they took 556 pictures of species at risk.



Working with partners from sea to sea to sea, CWF presented 35 BioBlitzes across the country — at least one in every province and territory and at least one in every ecozone. There were five flagship events in major cities, 20 community events in smaller locales and 10 science-intense surveys. BioBlitz locations ranged from urban parks to remote wildlands to the ocean seabed.

WEIRD BUT TRUE

- **Communities in Georgian Bay, Ont.,** and South Okanagan, B.C. challenged each other to search for rattlesnakes at their BioBlitzes. This friendly competition led to the discovery of five eastern Massasauga rattlers and two Western Rattlesnakes.
- **At the Vancouver bioblitz,** the discovery of the "Big Blob" bryozoan went viral on social media and the story was picked up by international news media. It was the second find ever of a bryozoan in BC (a bryozoan is a colony of "moss animals," one of earlier forms of invertebrate life on the planet) and masses of them are living happily in Lost Lagoon in downtown Vancouver.
- **A non-native earthworm** species possibly never before found in North America was discovered at the New Brunswick BioBlitz.

Visit BioBlitzCanada.ca for more highlights from this incredible project.