



Bay watch | EVERY THURSDAY THROUGHOUT THE SUMMER WE UNCOVER THE HIDDEN WONDERS OF HAMILTON HARBOUR

# Alive *and* well

Hamilton Harbour is home to a wide variety of animals and they are flourishing thanks to cleaner water and the return of aquatic plants

BY SUZANNE MA

Hamilton's 47-kilometre shoreline is home to more than a dozen types of mammals. Most of them can be found in Cootes Paradise, a wildlife sanctuary that is part of the Royal Botanical Gardens. The sanctuary is the largest coastal wetland in western Lake Ontario and it supports a wide variety of birds, fish, reptiles and mammals.

For decades, rapid urbanization and industrialization destroyed nearly 85 per cent of original plant cover in Cootes Paradise. Thys Theysmeyer, aquatic ecologist at the RBG, says the key to sustaining wildlife in the harbour is restoring wetlands.

"Animals like the beavers and the muskrats are plant-eating animals," he says. "The restoration is all about first being able to grow plants again and getting clean water flowing into the wetlands. If we can't grow plants, we can't support (the wildlife)."

A number of projects launched by the RBG and the Hamilton Harbour Remedial Action Plan since the 1980s have focused on supporting animals in the harbour.

Local industries have made significant improvements to the quality of their discharges into the harbour and to the municipal treatment system. By 2001, more than three kilometres of habitat had been enhanced at six sites around the harbour. Improvements in water quality and habitat have since resulted in almost two kilometres of aquatic plants returning to the marshes.

**Sunday July 24**  
11 a.m. - 1 p.m.

Come out and help restore habitat and plant wetland species along the shoreline of Cootes Paradise under the guidance of Royal Botanical Gardens staff. Limit of 20 people, please pre-register by calling 905-527-7111 or e-mail [barc@hamilton-harbour.ca](mailto:barc@hamilton-harbour.ca)

## Here are just some of the furry friends you might be able to spot in Cootes Paradise and around Hamilton Harbour:



### Mink (MUSTELA VISION)

**What do they look like?**

Minks usually have dark brown fur with white patches on the chin, chest and throat areas. Their fur is soft and thick, with oily hairs that make their coat waterproof. They are skilled swimmers, climbers and divers. Toes are partially webbed to help with swimming. They can dive as deep as five metres and swim up to 30 metres underwater.

**Where can you find them?**

Minks like forested areas that are close to water. They find shelter in bank burrows — tunnels that are excavated in a bank. Mink are predatory carnivores and can be seen scurrying along the waterfront trail looking for clams, fish, small frogs, mice and even small muskrats, rabbits and ducks. It's estimated there are around 30 minks living around Hamilton Harbour.

**Did you know?**

Minks are commonly found throughout North America. But they can also be found in the British Isles, where they were inadvertently introduced when they escaped from fur farms in the 1960s.



### Beaver (CASTOR CANADENSIS)

**What do they look like?**

Grown beavers weigh about five pounds. They have large, webbed hind feet for swimming and a flat, scaly tail (as big as 30 cm) that is used as a rudder. Their ears and nostrils can be closed to keep out water and their eyelids are transparent so they can see through them as they swim. They use their large front teeth to chew bark and to cut down trees. Floppy lips seal behind their front teeth so that the beavers can carry objects under water while keeping their mouths closed. Beavers can store enough oxygen to swim underwater for almost a kilometre. Their front feet can be used for holding branches, grooming, digging and dam construction.

**Where can you find them?**

Beavers spend most of their time chewing on bark, water vegetation and trees. They build lodges made of tree limbs and logs plastered with mud and sod in the standing water of lakes, ponds or marshes. Entrances are underwater, so beavers need to dive down to get in. Beavers usually live in families, with as many as six members in one lodge. They also build dams to slow down the flow of water. This protects their lodges from being destroyed by fast-moving rapids. The dams also create ponds, still water that various animals use to hibernate in the winter.

There are about 10 beaver lodges in Hamilton Harbour, most of them in Cootes Paradise. Ten years ago, the beaver population dipped low; the RBG estimates only three were living in Cootes Paradise. During the past decade, bay restoration projects have brought back the beaver population. Existing beavers were able to multiply and those who escaped to build dams in surrounding streams began returning to Cootes and the harbour.

**Did you know?**

Beavers use their flat, scaly tails to slap the surface of the water to warn against predators. The slap can be as loud as a gunshot.



### White-tailed Deer (ODOCOILEUS VIRGINIANUS)

**What do they look like?**

White-tailed deer have distinct white fur in a band behind the nose, circles around the eyes, inside the ears and over the chin. They are greyer in the winter and redder in the summer. Males possess antlers that are shed from January to March and grow back again in a month or two. They are the most nervous and shy type of deer and will wave their tails from side to side when startled.

**Where can you find them?**

White-tailed deer can be found in the less-urbanized parts of the shoreline. Cootes Paradise is the best place to spot them in the summer. In the winter, they can be seen on frozen farm fields looking for food. They are extremely agile and may bound at speeds of up to 48 kilometres an hour, even through tangled terrain in a forest. They are good swimmers.

**Did you know?**

When looking for food, females leave their offspring in a hiding place for about four hours at a time. Fawns lie flat on the ground, with their necks outstretched as a means of camouflage against the forest floor. To keep themselves hidden from predators, fawns do not release any waste until the mother comes back. She will then ingest whatever urine or feces her offspring release to make sure predators find no sign of the animals.



### Red Fox (VULPES VULPES)

**What do they look like?**

Red foxes aren't totally red. They range from being pale yellowish red to deep reddish brown. Their molars are shaped for crushing. A fox's tooth row is more than half the length of its skull. Tails usually have a white or black tip. They have excellent vision, sense of smell and touch.

**Where can you find them?**

Red foxes use a wide range of habitats including forest, tundra, prairie and farmland. They are increasingly seen in urban areas, probably because rapid development leaves them with nowhere else to go. A good place to spot them is on RBG property at Valley Inn Road. They like to eat rodents, rabbits, insects and fruit. People might dislike foxes because they are intimidating and seem ferocious. But Chari Wiseman of the Hamilton Conservation Society says they are essential to a healthy ecosystem. "Foxes get a bad rap, but people don't realize they help keep things in equilibrium," she says. "If there are no predators, there will be nothing to control those lower in the food chain, like the number of water fowl and rodents."

**Did you know?**

A red fox likes to play with its supper. It will stand motionless, listening and watching intently for a mouse it has detected. Then, when the time is right, it will leap high in the air and bring down its forelimbs to pin its prey to the ground. Kits (baby foxes) have been seen rolling dead mice down an embankment, scurrying down to retrieve them, and then running up the hill to do this again and again.



### Muskrat (ONDATRA ZIBETHICUS)

**What do they look like?**

Muskrats weigh about 2.2 kilograms and are almost 30 cm in length. Their tails are almost as long as 24 cm. They have dense, dark fur that traps air underneath for insulation and buoyancy, and webbed back feet for swimming.

**Where can you find them?**

Muskrats are found in swamps, marshes and wetlands. Their favourite locations are marshes where the water level remains constant and where the best vegetation is available to eat. They hibernate and are active in the summer, usually sleeping during the day and waking mid-afternoon. Muskrats build dens among the reeds, housing an average of five muskrats.

It is estimated there are 55 dens around Hamilton Harbour.

**Did you know?**

Muskrats are good swimmers and can stay underwater for 12 to 17 minutes, but they are quite slow-moving on land.

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