

A Summer of Stewardship: My experiences as a Shell Conservation Intern

Debbie Farmer – Shell Conservation Intern, Central Ontario

Through the Shell Conservation Internship Program, I have had the opportunity to participate in a wide variety of activities and events. Over the summer I visited more than a dozen of NCC's properties and easements throughout Central Ontario. Many of the natural areas I've been working on are located within an hour's drive of Toronto in the ecologically significant Oak Ridges Moraine and Niagara Escarpment. Central Ontario is incredibly diverse, from coastal marshes to rolling Sugar Maple forests and rare tallgrass prairies and savannas.



Checking out the view from the Bruce Peninsula National Park Visitors' Centre observation platform during an Ontario Shell Conservation Intern field trip.

My role with Nature Conservancy of Canada (NCC) centered on collecting site data on properties and conservation easements. While on site, I used the Ecological Land Classification system to identify and map the ecological communities. In addition, I completed biological inventories of flora and fauna, and catalogued structures and features such as buildings and trails. This information was collected in order to prepare management plans and baseline documentation reports.

I have learned a great deal over the past few months, in most part due to my time spent working on conservation easements. New field skills that I have acquired include monitoring techniques such as biological inventories, and easement inventories that include structures and trails. Through preparing management plans and baseline documentation reports, I have realized the important role science plays in stewardship. The plans and reports are legally binding documents that must contain accurate and detailed information on the property or easement.



Prescribed burn on the Rice Lake Plains, northeast of Toronto, Ontario.

I have found the process of managing the land very interesting. Some properties are left alone while others are actively managed. Burns, plantings and invasive species removal are in place to optimize the ecological integrity of the property.

I have enjoyed speaking with the landowners regarding their properties. I think that it is important to assist the landowner about conservation in regards to their property. In addition, the

landowner plays a key role in the daily conservation of the property and therefore they can help to update us any changes that may occur. Often, landowners play the role of advocate for the NCC and spread the word of conservation to neighbours or friends.



Ontario Shell Conservation Interns working at Lake Erie Farms near Port Rowan in southwestern Ontario.

Over the summer, the Ontario Shell Conservation Interns got together in each of the three subregions; Central, Midwestern and Southwestern. We took advantage of the extra staff to complete rehabilitation and inventory projects on various properties. We were also able to visit locations unique to each region. It was nice getting together to share experiences and insights.

Volunteer for Nature is a popular volunteer program that NCC Ontario runs in conjunction with Ontario Nature. The program attracts both first-time and long-time volunteers. The volunteer participants work on rehabilitation and conservation projects that benefit NCC and Ontario Nature properties. NCC programs are one day or several days long and include activities such as invasive species removal, bridge building and species inventories. I participated in a butterfly count and photography workshop across the Rice Lake Plains, Northeast of Toronto. It was great speaking with the participants that are conservation-minded and actively working to protect Ontario's natural spaces.



Volunteer for Nature participants keep their eyes peeled for butterflies during the butterfly count across the Rice Lake Plains, northeast of Toronto, Ontario.

By participating in the Shell Conservation Internship Program I have learned many new skills and also improved on some old ones. I have improved my vegetation identification skills through visiting properties in my region as well as being exposed to unique flora and fauna in the other Ontario regions. I improved my GPS skills and knowledge of GIS applications. Working on the baseline documentation reports and management plans has improved my report writing skills. Since I was working on a variety of on-going projects, it was important to stay organized and work efficiently.

In mid-August, the Shell Conservation Interns from across Canada converged on Calgary for a wrap-up event. The trip to Calgary was a great thrill. I have never ventured west

and I was very excited to see the Rocky Mountains. I was not disappointed. The first day was spent traveling west and north of Calgary to several NCC and Shell properties. Seeing the spectacular scenery was breathtaking and it was great visiting with the interns from across Canada. Through presentations, I learned about the various activities and events the other interns participated in during the summer. We also had the opportunity to discuss environmental issues surrounding oil and gas extraction with executives from Shell. It was interesting to learn about Shell's work in the field of conservation and their desire to minimize their impact on the environment.



Shell Conservation Interns hike the Wildcat Hills, near Calgary, Alberta.

I have had the opportunity to work with many people over the last few months. I enjoyed meeting staff from across the province as well as the National office. Over the summer, National staff joined us at two of Central Ontario's properties for very productive work days. Through Volunteer for Nature events I have met many conservation-minded



NCC National and Ontario staff pose for a photo while sorting the contents of a barn on a property near Peterborough, Ontario.

citizens. I have been able to work with other organizations such as conservation authorities, and provincial and federal departments. It is interesting to meet the wide variety of individuals from very different organizations all working for a common goal...to preserve special natural places.

I know that the Shell Conservation Internship has been invaluable to me and has exposed me to a new aspect of conservation that I hope to continue being involved with.