

The Kestrel Fields – a personal memoir

by Dr. Robert Barnhurst, scientist and nature aficionado. (Mabel McIntosh, hawkwatcher and birder extraordinaire, botanist)

I support the common vision for the area and give some of my reasons herein.

As a new immigrant to Montreal I first visited the Kestrel fields in the mid-70s. I was immediately taken by the wealth of wildlife to be found there. In my native Britain, old farm fields and hedgerows make for some of the better habitat for wildlife. Within the Kestrel Fields I found just the type of countryside that was so familiar to me. A short drive or bus journey brought me quickly from my home in Pointe-Claire to this hidden and precious corner of nature, already a green area so rare on the island as to be considered endangered.

My main interest was bird-watching, a passion I developed during my childhood. All the birds were new to me then. Early on, I joined Bird Protection Quebec members on an early spring evening field trip to the Kestrel Fields to observe American Woodcock doing their courtship display, something they only do at night. Within a few months, I had already seen over 100 species of birds in this one place alone, plus 50 or so more in off-island locations. A birding friend helped me work up a list of species I might not otherwise see on my own. Amongst many other avian families, the lives of owls fascinated me. One of the first I saw there was a Screech Owl, a species found only in woodland and overgrown fields. A recording of its call quickly brought the bird to a tree not 10 metres from me. The bird proceeded to serenade us for several minutes before we slipped away and left it in peace. Later that week I saw another owl species, one which is many times larger than a Screech Owl; namely, the Great-Horned Owl, which feeds on larger prey like rabbits and skunks. A magnificent bird, a predator so necessary to the health of the environment that it provides a much-needed balance that is crucial in nature. Over the years, I eventually got to see all the species of owl known in Quebec, which included such rarities as Boreal Owl and Hawk Owl. Many times I have snowshoed through the area to observe Great Grey and Snowy Owls, as well as other species such as Red-tailed and Rough-legged Hawks and Northern Shrikes. The American Kestrel, the bird that the area was named after, was once common here. It is now in serious decline globally due to habitat loss.

Shortly after my initial introduction to the birds of the Kestrel Fields, I joined with another birder to begin a study of the fall migration of hawks through the Montreal area. Focussing on the extreme south-western area of the island I often found myself at the Kestrel Fields, counting hawks as they migrated south overhead. Late one afternoon, a large group of Broad-winged Hawks came down in the area and sat on trees, and even pylons. The birds hunted for a while and then settled down to roost overnight before continuing on their migration. Such species need safe places to feed and spend the night, or several nights, and the Kestrel fields provide such a haven, set apart from the sterile urban milieu surrounding it. Without such a place, their long-term survival is put at risk.

Later, in the 90s, my interest in the Kestrel Fields expanded to include botany. The area happens to be particularly rich in rare plants, including grape ferns and native orchids. The area shelters the only known colony of the “mormo” species of moonwort known in Quebec, plus the Yellow Lady’s Slipper Orchid, the only extant colony known on Montreal Island.

Able to

Little known species from many wildlife families and genera are present in the Kestrel Fields. It would be impossibly sad to lose the area to housing development. As more people seek nature for solace from an increasingly stressful world, the loss of such an urban jewel as the Kestrel Fields would be tantamount to a crime against nature and humanity.

N.B. My views are shared by many people, not the least of whom is Mabel McIntosh, a veteran of 95 years spent in Montreal and the West Island. She taught me about birds and has shared the duties of hawkwatcher with me since 1980. She is extremely well-known and respected by her peers, has received various awards and is much sought out by students of nature and the media alike, including the CTV and CBC, plus various private radio stations, newspapers and journals. Regretfully, she was not able to provide a written submission in time and cannot attend the upcoming meeting. However, she related to me one instance when, in the 1960s, 70s and 80s, she observed breeding Short-eared Owls in the Kestrel Fields. Uncommon at the time, the species is now threatened, its decline primarily due to human causes and activities, such as habitat loss (primarily due to commercial and residential development of prime habitat), plus a litany of attacks by poisoning, illegal trapping, collisions with vehicles and other means.