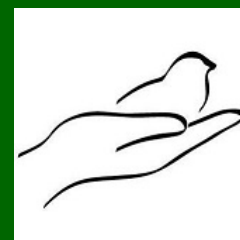




# Friends of Gatineau Park


**2015-I**

## BIODIVERSITY

### Habitat Selection and Coverboard Efficiency in Sampling Snakes

*By Francisco Retamal Diaz*

The necessity to maintain an adequate body temperature is absolutely vital for the upkeep of physiological and developmental processes in reptiles (Peterson and al., 1993). Thus, temperature is considered to be one of the most important factors regulating the selection of habitats by colubrids (Reinert, 1993). Some of the behavioral strategies used by these animals are active thermoregulation by exposure to sunlight (Blouin-Demers and Nadeau, 2005).



Forests being dense and disallowing proper sunlight for colubrids, the animals should use open habitats

because they offer a larger variety of temperature, allowing the animals to alternate between basking in the sun and using natural covers (Row and Blouin-Demers, 2006).

In collaboration with the National Capital Commission, the Friends of the Gatineau Park and various organizations, the University of Ottawa's herpetology lab conducted a research on habitat selection and coverboards efficiency in sampling snakes in the Gatineau Park.

3 main research questions were elaborated;

1. Do snakes prefer open, high thermal quality environment or closed, forest habitat?
2. Does this preference vary seasonally?
3. Do coverboards transects increase sampling efficiency and which material is the most effective to attract snakes?

#### Materials and methods

The snakes were sampled in 4 different sites across the park; Meech Creek Valley (Site 1), Pilon rd., Denison Lake dam and Luskville Falls.

*(cont'd on page 2)*

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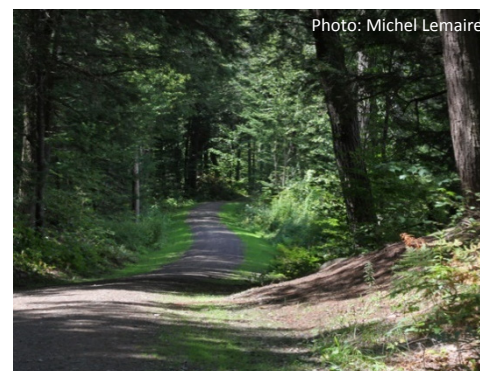


Photo: Michel Lemaire

#### Ridge Road Settlers

The trail crosses old farms



#### The Alexander Family and Meech Lake Tourism


Irish settlers with a famous reputation

Coverboards transects were set up across the Gatineau Park. Each sampling plot contained both forest and open habitat types. Transects were 200 meters long, with coverboards pairs every 10 meters. The pair consisted of one plywood coverboard and one tin coverboard juxtaposed together. Each forest transect matched the shape of its adjacent open transect. Matching forest and open field transects were set up 50 m apart from the edge of the forest. A total of 40 coverboards pairs were set up at each site (20 in open habitat, 20 in forest habitat), for a total of 160 tin and plywood coverboards pairs across the Gatineau Park.

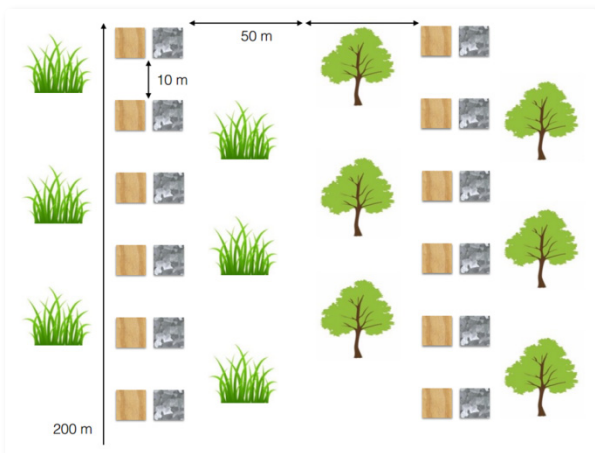
The sampling period lasted from May 14<sup>th</sup> 2015 to November 16<sup>th</sup> 2015, for a total of 26 sampling days. We looked under every coverboard once a week. We chose the day looking for the best possible weather for sampling snakes using coverboards. Snakes were all hand captured and data was acquired directly on the field. Individuals were then released at their point of capture.

3 were captured through active search, with equal time investment. Snakes showed a preference towards tin coverboard (218 out of 350 captures) versus plywood (132 captures). However, plywood coverboards were efficient and have the benefit of being decomposable. Finally, snakes captures were most frequent during spring and early summer (From May to July), although remaining important during August.

In conclusion, we demonstrated that coverboards are a really cheap and efficient way to sample snakes in the Gatineau Park. To maximize snakes captures, efforts should be put in sampling open habitats during spring and early summer. Using tin coverboards appears to increase captures frequency, although plywood coverboards are an interesting alternative.

Our partners: National Capital Commission (NCC), Ministère des Forêts, Faune et Parcs (MFFP), Nature Conservancy Canada (NCC), Canadian Wildlife Service (CWS) and National Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada (NSERC). 

### Experimental design illustration



### Results

A total of 207 red-bellied snakes, 84 common garter snake, 14 milksnakes, 2 ring-neck snakes and 2 smooth green snake were individually captured throughout the summer. Snakes seemed to prefer open habitat as we predicted; a total of 344 captures (97.5%) were made in the open environment, versus only 9 in forest habitat. This preference did not vary seasonally. Coverboards transects showed to be extremely efficient, as 350 out of the 353 (99.15%) snakes were captured under coverboards, while only

### Heritage

## Ridge Road Settlers

By Bill McGee

Gatineau Park contained many farms, but those along the Ridge Road are most interesting because of the large number of settlers, and the fact that the land is crisscrossed with familiar ski trails. I have done research on the early settlers using the Census data from 1842-1911, the Quebec Index of Land Grants to



1892, birth and marriage information from St Stephens Church, Old Chelsea, and especially, a privately published book by Mrs. Sheila C Thomson entitled, *Recollections of Early Days in the Gatineau Hills*, 1965, as well as discussions with many people. I did little research on the Dunlop family, one of the first settler families, because it is well documented, as too is Michael Grimes and Patrick McCloskey.

The research has led to an elementary genealogy of all the families which is too intensive to show here. The main focus of this article is on the map (p.3). The map shows the current winter ski trails, the farm lots, the various farmers on them, a crude indication of altitude, the lakes and streams, current roads and the current park boundary. The green dots indicate potential farm house sites.

The original settlers obtained their land in many ways. One was to squat on the land with no ownership at all.; this was rare. The others involved applying for land and obtaining a location ticket. In one case, after a few years in which a cabin was erected and some land cleared, title was given. Another way involved payment for the land over 20 years.

(cont'd on page 3)



In either case, the date of first settlement is hard to discover from the date of awarding of title. What seems to be a better rule of thumb is that settlement was a young man's endeavor, and typically done by 30-year olds. Most of the land was given up after the original settler was too old to farm (if not sooner), but several passed the land on to children.

*The family genealogies and a longer version of this article are available from the author wfmccgee@gmail.com. ☞*

### Heritage

## Responsible Trail Management in Gatineau Park

*By Catherine Verreault*

Gatineau Park offers an extensive, 200-kilometer-long network of official trails with numerous trailheads and access points. Nevertheless, each year, the trail management team receives many requests to modify existing trails and to add more trails to the network. New trails are developed without approval, to the extent that there are now more unofficial trails than official trails throughout the Park. A number of these unsanctioned trails are negatively affecting species at risk that inhabit Gatineau Park. Also, the proliferation of unofficial trails has led to ecosystem fragmentation, which has a negative impact on the Park's overall environmental health, in addition to raising public safety concerns. In June 2014, the NCC initiated a series of consultation sessions with a number of user groups in an effort to develop a sustainable solution for this issue.

In the first two steps of the consultation process, the NCC focused on increasing user awareness of the issues and concerns relating to these unofficial trails, identifying user needs, sharing the results of field studies and outlining the draft trail network management principles. The results of these consultations and the policy direction provided in the Gatineau Park Master Plan provide the framework for ongoing discussions with stakeholders. Additional meetings were held this past fall with small groups involved in various trail-based activities (mountain biking, backcountry hiking, winter uses) and with neighbouring residents.

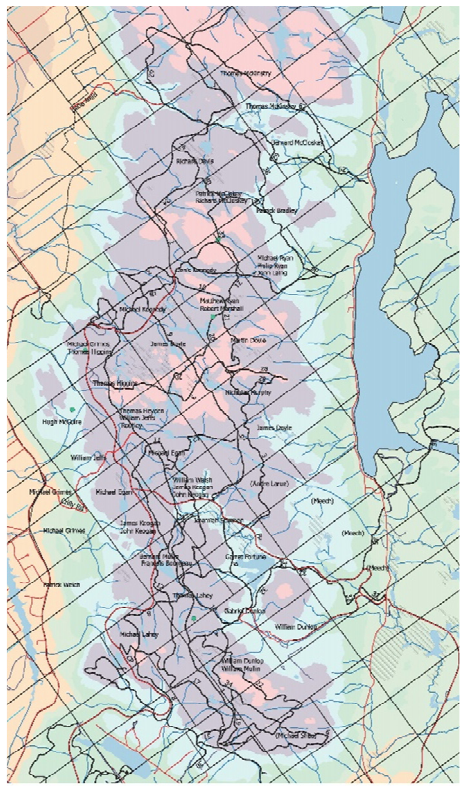
The goal of the Gatineau Park Responsible Trail Management Project is to develop a trail system that offers a broad range of experiences, that responds to user needs and that reflects new trail use and management practices. And this must be done in compliance with the NCC's legal obligations relating to the protection of species at risk, the Park's mandate and the need to reduce ecosystem fragmentation related to trail use.



This consultation approach invites participants to express their views, to hear the opinions and desires of others (realizing not everyone shares the same priorities) and to engage NCC representatives directly in frank and earnest discussions on actual opportunities for change.

The final step in the consultation process will bring together all interested stakeholders for a presentation of potential changes to the trail system that would comply with all project objectives. Afterward, user groups will be invited to play an active role in the implementation of these changes. ☞

*Catherine Verreault is Manager, Land and Natural Resources for the Gatineau Park at NCC*



The settlers chose this land because they could survive on it. They left when better possibilities arose. Cutting the forest to obtain sunlight for crops was easier than on the flat lands below, which were more heavily forested. The soil was poor and rocky, but supported a few acres of potatoes and pasture land enough for food for animals. Each farm had a few horses, cows, sheep, pigs and goats or oxen, an elementary plough; of course, a saw and axe were essentials, as well as a gun to scare off bears and capture supper on occasion. Neighbors were relatively close, and were available for special events. The church in Old Chelsea would be a center of life, and there were roads to Hull and Ottawa for an occasion when goods were taken to market for cash. Baptisms were often a few days after birth, but I do not know whether the parish priest visited the family, or vice versa.

## Heritage

### The Alexander Family and Meech Lake Tourism

By Michel Lemaire

Upon leaving his native Ireland, James Alexander first immigrated to Ontario, before moving his newly established family to Quebec. He is first mentioned in official records in 1891, as a resident of Eardley, just west of what is now the City of Gatineau<sup>i</sup>. In 1896<sup>ii</sup>, he purchased the Anthony Cafferty property on Meech Lake, in what is now the Municipality of Chelsea<sup>iii</sup>. James Alexander made his living in the forest trade, as would many of his children after him. He operated a sawmill at the mouth of a stream flowing down from the hills into Meech Lake.

James Alexander died in 1903, followed by his wife, Mary Graham, in 1906. See the Alexander family tree below. Of their ten children, Andrew Alexander would take over the Meech Lake property. In 1908, he wed Emily Findlay<sup>iv</sup> ("Emma"). He kept his father's business going, while Emma operated a boarding house for sawmill employees and teachers from the nearby Meech Lake schoolhouse.

In 1914, Andrew Alexander leased Meech Lake House<sup>v</sup>, a country inn located at the lake entrance and owned by Thomas Cowden. He purchased three vehicles to shuttle clients between the Old Chelsea train station and the inn. The daily passage of these newfangled contraptions on the dirt roads of Old Chelsea was in itself a special event.

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, there was a railway line that ran along the Gatineau River connecting Ottawa and Maniwaki, and for Ottawa residents, this was the pathway to discover the river's edge and surrounding hills. During the summer, people

would stay at one of many small inns along the way, enjoying various activities such as sailing and tennis. In the winter months, people would board the train with their skis in tow, get off at one of the local train stations between Chelsea and Wakefield, and then ski up and down the hills of what is now Gatineau Park.

In 1918, Andrew and Emily Alexander returned to their Meech Lake homestead. Andrew built a new house, where Emily enjoyed an excellent reputation as an innkeeper. Her keen sense of hospitality and talents in the kitchen were known far and wide:

"Here again the Alexander hospitality continued to be enjoyed by summer guests and, in the winter, by ski lovers. Everyone from near and far knew that 'The Alexanders' was the place where one could be sure of excellent meals and homelike atmos-

phere, with Emma doing all her own work."<sup>vi</sup>

Skiing in the Gatineau Hills became increasingly popular the 1920's and 30's. Many new trails were developed, notably by members of the Ottawa Ski Club. These trails wound their way from the railway stations to the top of the hills, and then back down toward Hull. And the

Alexander House was a much sought-after stop along the way, as is evidenced by the following recollection from Louise Brault, daughter of noted historian Lucien Brault:

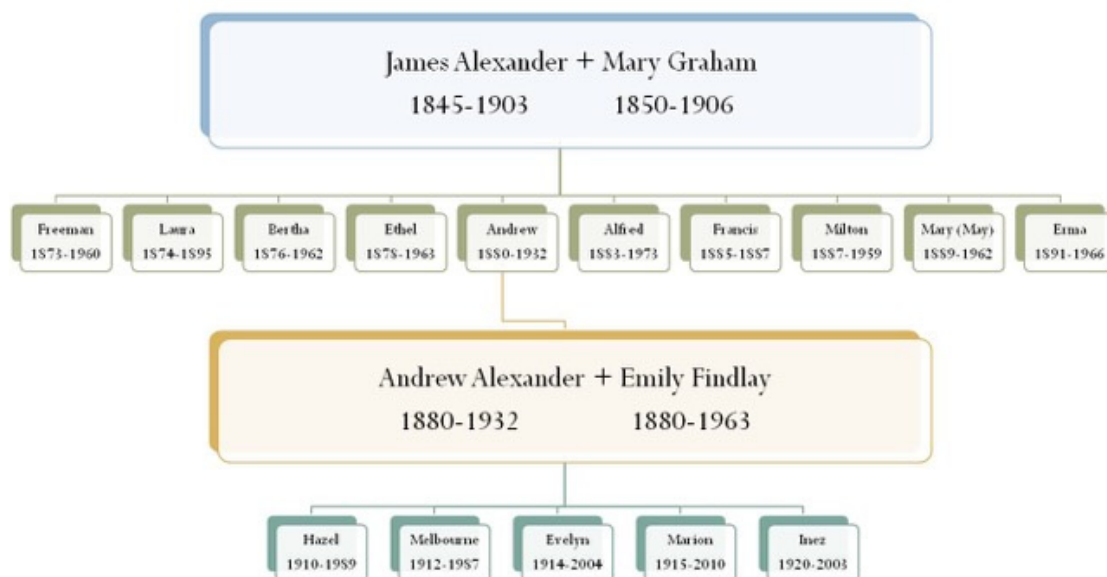
"Yes my father [Lucien Brault] used to ski Alexander Road in the 20's... He would take the ski train from Union Station and get off at the Cascades station and ski to Meech Creek Valley, and go up the ski trail to Hope's Bay on Meech Lake, cross the lake toward Alexander trail that went up beside the Alexander property that we know. He would then reach the Ridge road and connect with some trails that would take him to Wrightville, where he would get on the tramway to get back to Lower Town in Ottawa, where he lived. What a trek!!!"<sup>vi</sup>

In 1930, Alexander House was destroyed by fire, but Andrew immediately undertook to rebuild, and the new house was completed before year's end. Unfortunately, he would die suddenly in 1932. Emily Alexander remained at the homestead with their son Melbourne, as each of their four daughters married and moved on. Emily put an end to her inn-keeping and boarding house activities. In the years that followed, Melbourne took charge of the homestead and built a dozen or so small log cabins around the main house. These cabins were rented (some year-round) to outdoor recreation enthusiasts, and the site became what was described by another Meech Lake resident as the 'Alexander Community'<sup>ii</sup>.

One by one, the pioneers (mostly of Irish descent) who had settled the upper reaches of the Gatineau Hills, cultivating



La famille Alexander, c. 1930






small fields of potatoes and forage crops, left their properties, accepting the purchase offers tendered by the National Capital Commission and its predecessor agencies. At the same time, the lakefront homesteads were slowly replaced with cottages built by city residents to ‘enjoy the cool summer air’. All around the lake, more and more cottages were built.

Melbourne Alexander would soon become the central figure in this growing community, becoming affectionately known as the ‘Mayor of Meech Lake’. Always ready to lend a hand to one and all, he would arrange all sorts of events, barbecues, parties and such, in addition to organizing all manner of sports activities, mostly for the youth, including swim competitions, regattas, etc.<sup>ix</sup> “He is like a legend in this area and there is nothing we like to see more than Mel riding along in his truck with his favourite dog<sup>x</sup>.”

Those were the glory days that followed the Second World War. However, Emily Findlay Alexander passed away in 1963. Her only son, a lifelong bachelor, always more interested in helping others than looking after his own property, followed her in 1987. “They were fine people, the Alexanders<sup>xi</sup>.”

Of the original hundred-acre homestead, all that remained was the land encompassing the main house, Mel’s workshop and the cabins. Over the years, various parcels had been sold by Emily Alexander, and later by her son Melbourne. Early on, the National Capital Commission had purchased the sections located higher up in the hills.

Following the death of Melbourne Alexander, the four surviving sisters (and some of their children) squabbled over the future vocation of the property. The National Capital Commission reconciled their interests by expropriating the property in 1990, razing the remaining buildings shortly thereafter<sup>xii</sup>. 



### References

- i. Government of Canada – 1891 Census.
- ii. Probable date
- iii. Range 10, lot 23A, 100 acres. 1986 Municipality of Chelsea (originally West Hull) Assessment Role.
- iv. Emily Findlay was born in Eardley in 1880.
- v. In earlier times, ‘Meach Lake’.
- vi. Sheila Strang, ‘The Alexander Story’, *Up the Gatineau!*, vol. 10, 1984, p. 5. Based on an account provided by Hazel Alexander Graig, daughter of Emily and Andrew Alexander.
- vii. Louise Brault, email correspondence dated February 24, 2015.
- viii. Margaret Coleman, ‘Memories of Meech Lake Summers’, *Up the Gatineau!*, vol. 37, 2011.
- ix. Accounts provided by Ruth Thompson, Margaret Coleman, Carla Gilders, Louise Brault.
- x. Shirley Shorter, ‘Notes on the History of Meach Lake. As told to Shirley Shorter by Mel Alexander’ (typewritten account).
- xi. « Monsieur Trudeau » d’Old Chelsea, in Sheila Thomson, *Recollections of Early Days in the Gatineau Hills*, (typewritten account), 1965.
- xii. I would like to acknowledge the generous assistance provided by the National Capital Commission (NCC) and Gatineau Valley Historical Society (GVHS) in support of this research project.

## Calendar of Events

### *Spring & Summer*

April 9

Map and Compass (practice), 1:30 – 4 p.m.

April 15

Owl Prowl, 7 p.m. (TBC)

May 6

Amphibians, 7 p.m.

June 5

Introduction to Bird Watching, 8 a.m. (TBC)

June 12

Campfire Cooking, 10 a.m. (TBC)

June 12

Intro to Camping, 1 p.m. (TBC)

June 18

Creatures of the Night, 8 p.m.

Les Amis du Parc de la Gatineau/Friends of Gatineau Park, a registered charity publishes in Amis/Friends articles on a selection of ecology and heritage research undertaken in the Gatineau Park, particularly that funded by us as well as related to our other educational programs. Published twice a year, the Bulletin is archived at [friendsofgatineaupark.ca](http://friendsofgatineaupark.ca) and deposited with the National Library ISSN 1926-6537 (print) + 1913-7648 (online). Comments, suggestions, stories: send via [www.friendsofgatineaupark.ca](http://www.friendsofgatineaupark.ca) or 33 Scott Road, Suite 227, Chelsea QC J9B 1R5 Tel. 819-827-3113. Editor: Julien Raby; layout: Jean-Philippe Rheault; printing: Imprimerie Vincent. Printed on recycled paper. Thanks to all volunteer contributors to this edition.

