of this area is protected. Yet the region is still home to impressive remnants of nature: three Great Lakes shorelines, Lake Simcoe, and the Kawartha Highlands, across a landscape spanning Carolinian woods to rugged Canadian Shield. With connectivity corridors connecting the Greenbelt to adjacent lands, this area remains vital to a huge range of flora and fauna, including many at-risk species. Yet it will only persist if viable ecological connections are recognized and preserved. Indeed, we need more Greenbelt not less.

For example, where the Greater Golden Horseshoe overlaps with the Shield and Cottage Country, Wildlands League, local land trusts and others are working to build and protect ecological corridors from the Greenbelt to Algonquin Provincial Park and Georgian Bay to Kawartha Highlands. The stepping stones are in place: with some existing protection in various Crown and unceded lands. Additional public land protection, private land acquisitions and conservation easements are necessary to enhance and secure connectivity to withstand the stresses of accelerating development. We have the tools, all that's needed is quick and strategic action.

Connecting the Rouge

Rouge National Urban Park is one of Wildlands League's greatest successes. It's a project we started working on in 2010, to make sure that ecological integrity was paramount in the establishment and management of Canada's first National Urban Park. At the same time, we supported more secure tenure and viability for the farmers leasing land in the park.

Now, we're working with local groups and a road ecology specialist to enhance ecological connections around the Rouge. We are also joining with a growing number of advocacy groups to remind the federal government it's time to expand the Rouge by incorporating the obsolete Pickering Airport Lands, which have been held in a state of limbo since 1972, into the protected area.

A Hotspot of Hotspots: Safeguarding Carolinian Canada

Southwestern Ontario, London and the Thames

The heart of Carolinian Canada is rich in southern species including magnificent riparian forests of hackberry, sycamore and cottonwood and some of the densest populations of aquatic species at risk: exotic-looking fish like the spotted gar, reptiles like the spiney softshell turtle and enchantedly named mussels like the lilliput. But it has a miniscule .06% permanently protected. Ribbons of green follow the "back forty" of farm woodlots and some of the major waterways like the Thames River, affording a skeleton of green to add to. Municipal Parks in London have been uniquely recognized as regulated protected areas and guard significant pockets of Carolinian forest, wetlands and riparian habitat. Indigenous communities, including Deshkan Ziibiing (Chippewas of the Thames First Nation) and many other groups are active in protecting and restoring healthy landscapes. What's needed now is action and support from governments to recognize more areas for protection and better connect these oases of rare communities.

A National Urban Park for Windsor

Windsor embodies all the threats and opportunities that are being faced across southern Canada. Its remnant Tallgrass Prairie is the most endangered ecosystem in the country, and the region is home to more rare species than anywhere else in Ontario. Tallgrass Prairie is extremely resilient to a warming climate and one of the best natural sponges when the skies open up and waters rise. Protecting this landcover is a natural solution in a city where annual flooding makes insurance almost impossible to obtain. We are supporting local partners in their efforts to establish a new Ojibway National Urban Park that includes the Federal Ojibway Shores parcel as a great example of what can be done to protect nature in and around cities.

Preserving the Freshwater Seas: National Marine Conservation Areas (NMCAs)

The Nature Network should extend out to Southern Ontario's Great Lakes as well. So far, the vast and diverse freshwater and island habitat of the Southern Great Lakes have not been recognized for their contributions to supporting biodiversity. Canada has a great opportunity to expand its inventory of National Marine Conservation Areas by establishing new protected areas in Lake Huron, Lake Erie and Lake Ontario. The establishment of new NMCAs will improve ecosystem health upstream and downstream in aquatic systems, at the same time preserving flyways of millions of migratory birds and complimenting adjacent terrestrial protection.

We All Need Natural Sanctuaries

The Covid-19 pandemic has reminded us all of the peace and sanctuary to be discovered in nature. Of course, natural lands and waters are also essential to supporting the biological diversity that makes nature so inspiring. In this regard, Southern Ontario is a nexus: not only is this place home to the majority of Ontarians, it's also home to some of the most endangered habitat, flora and fauna.

We know that to abate the extinction and climate crises, we must preserve intact and connected natural spaces, working with many collaborators, including Indigenous Peoples. Fortunately, the Canadian government has recognized these needs, too. It's time to encourage governments at all levels to take bold action on its pledge to halt and reverse biodiversity loss, combat climate change, and expanding protected areas nation-wide. A big part of achieving these targets is restoring, protecting and connecting the natural landscapes of Southern Ontario—and inspiring similar work across Canada.

Barn Owl

Wildlands League is a not-for-profit charity working to protect public land and water since 1968. We are policy experts, negotiators and communicators standing up for wildlife and standing with communities. We tackle irresponsible development that threatens precious rivers, lakes and wildlife habitat. We create solutions and hope. We give voice to Canada's irreplaceable nature to make sure at least half of the country is protected for all children, the climate and for the planet.

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Ontario's Greenbelt Under Threat by Ford Government

FIND OUT MORE

Rouge River, Rouge National Urban Park

FALL 2022

A Vision for Connected Greenspace

Take a closer look at Southern Ontario and you'll discover incredible relics of nature scattered like gems across the landscape. Communities have battled hard at the grassroots level to preserve wild spaces against a tide of development and industrialization. Meanwhile, environmental groups like Wildlands League have worked for decades to protect natural havens from urban sprawl, extractive industries, and other unsustainable uses that have left heavy footprints across Canada's most populous region. The list of advocates for protecting nature includes Indigenous communities, farmers, land managers, naturalists, hikers, anglers, hunters, and others who recognize how greenspaces enhance their lives. Consequently, there are remarkable remnants of natural areas still waiting to be protected, enhanced through restoration and recognized as ecological corridors to hold the landscape together.

Now more than ever, it is essential to create an inter-connected Nature Network that will help recover at-risk species, enhance natural solutions to climate change, assist with reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples and ultimately leave a rich legacy for all our children. What's more, this vision also provides an inspiring model of conservation in and near our cities to employ all across Canada. Extinction, climate and the pandemic crises threaten to overwhelm our remaining natural heritage with habitat loss, extreme weather, and over-use. Southern Ontario contains Canada's fastest growing urban regions and one-third of the Canadian population. Yet, barely 3 percent of the landscape is safeguarded by permanent legislated protection. It's no surprise that Ontario's list of species at risk has grown by 22 percent since 2009—and that the majority of Canada's at-risk species depend on critically-imperiled habitat in Southern Ontario.

Seizing the Opportunities

We must recognize and commit to protecting these resilient yet overtaxed pockets of nature. The federal government demonstrated its desire to take leadership, setting lofty goals of protecting 25 percent of Canada by 2025 and 30 percent by 2030, as part of commitments to halt and reverse biodiversity loss and respond to climate change. Ottawa has also committed 2 billion trees to permanently grow Canada's tree canopy, provide habitat for a range of species, and improve opportunities for outdoor recreation, while supporting ecosystem services like natural climate regulation and flood control. Governments have also committed to working with Indigenous Peoples in conservation and reconciliation. It's obvious that Canada cannot achieve these goals without recognizing Southern Ontario as one of the most biologically diverse and threatened parts of the country.

We currently have the greatest opportunity in a generation to leave a positive lasting natural legacy for our children and their children. Once development has consumed the rare opportunities to protect nature and build ecological connectivity it will be impossible to get it back. Wildlands League's big vision is for a robust interconnected Nature Network across Southern Ontario. We are working with collaborators on three focus areas:

- A Near-Urban Nature Network in the Greater Golden Horseshoe and Central Ontario, including:
  - Recognition and reinforcement of the Greenbelt as valuable ecological corridor.
  - Expanding protection and connection around Rouge National Urban Park
- Enhancing connectivity in the heart of the Carolinian Zone, through the Thames Valley and London's unique urban protected areas
- The expansion of Windsor's Ojibway Prairie Complex to include the Federal Ojibway Shores' land and the establishment of a New National Urban Park

Naturally Connected: Corridors and Ecopassages

Nature cannot exist in isolation. Increasing legally protected areas is vital—but the act has far less value if it doesn't occur in conjunction with improving ecological corridors. Most protected areas in or near an urban setting are too small to support species with larger home ranges. Natural passageways are essential in allowing flora and fauna to migrate, find food, mates and shelter, as well as to adapt in response to climate change. These areas don't need to be legally protected by provincial or national parks, though they can be. Most important is conserving a connecting web of greenspace that is not dominated by buildings, pavements, and gravel pits, and includes safe crossings of roads and railways—so plants and animals can safely "commute" to and from larger havens of protected habitat.

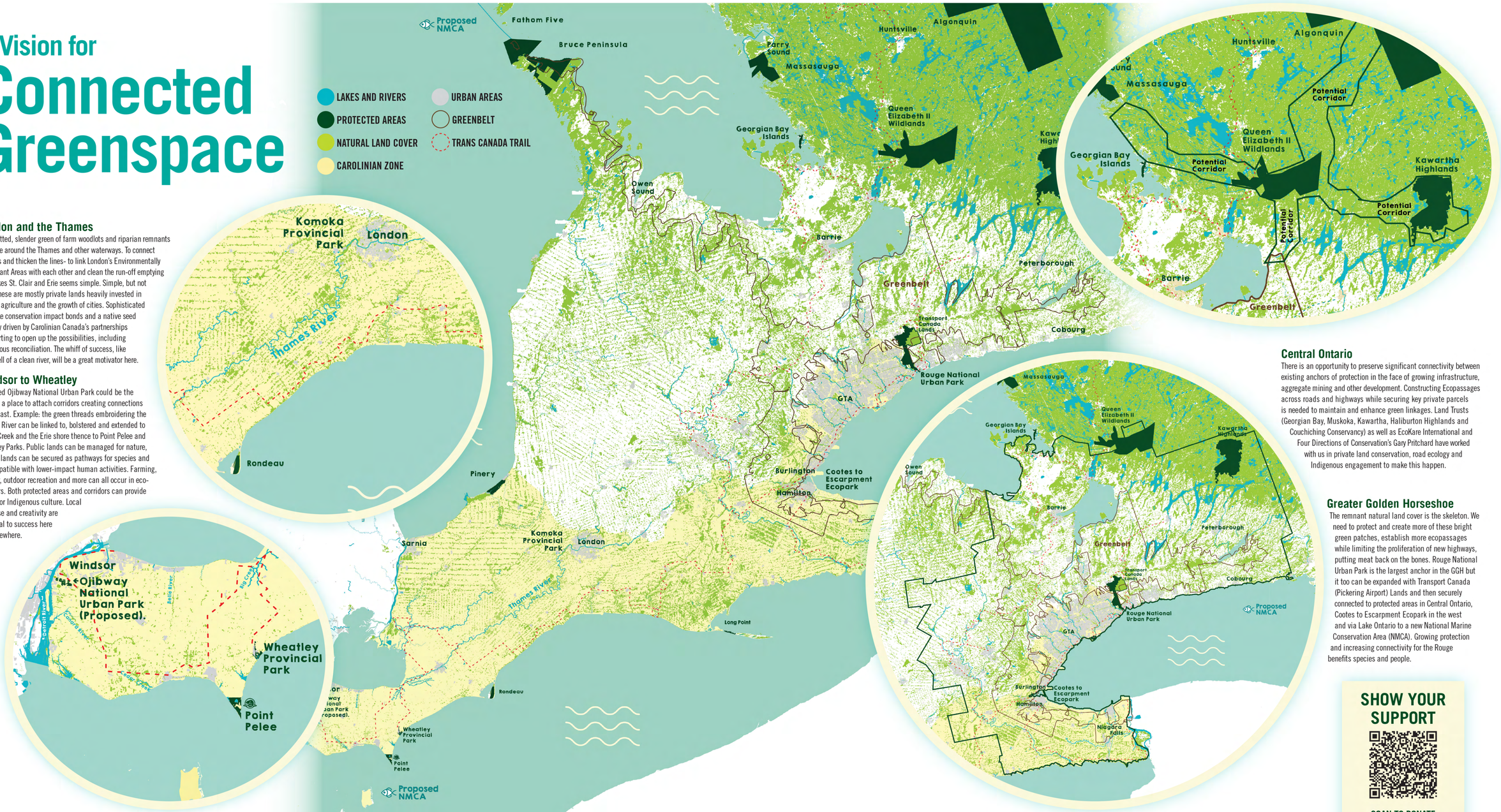
A Near Urban Nature Network

The Ontario Greenbelt has helped to preserve many ecological corridors—and offers an excellent example of cooperative conservation in action that's served as a model for other initiatives across Canada. The Greenbelt consists of 800,000 ha of farmland and natural areas that have been designated as protected from urban sprawl. The Greenbelt provides clean air, fresh water, local food, and public access to nature while supporting some of the most diverse habitats in Canada, home to rare reptiles, amphibians and plants. It provides opportunities for outdoor recreation, buffers the impacts of climate change, and serves as a counterpoint to the biodiversity loss that's occurred due to urban development elsewhere.

But ongoing pressure for unsustainable urban expansion and highways means the Greenbelt desperately needs certainty and greater ecological connectivity. Wildlands League is working with seven other groups under the Southern Ontario Nature Coalition to expand the Greenbelt and enhance its function for flora, fauna and humans with a new Near-Urban Nature Network across the 3.2-million ha Greater Golden Horseshoe area. We're also working with groups to ensure endangered species are protected from proposed highway expansion and development.

With 70 percent of Ontario residents living in the Greater Golden Horseshoe, it's no surprise that only 2.6 percent

A Vision for Connected Greenspace



London and the Thames

The spotted, slender green of farm woodlots and riparian remnants coalesce around the Thames and other waterways. To connect the dots and thicken the lines- to link London's Environmentally Significant Areas with each other and clean the run-off emptying into Lakes St. Clair and Erie seems simple. Simple, but not easy. These are mostly private lands heavily invested in intense agriculture and the growth of cities. Sophisticated tools like conservation impact bonds and a native seed strategy driven by Carolinian Canada's partnerships are starting to open up the possibilities, including Indigenous reconciliation. The whiff of success, like the smell of a clean river, will be a great motivator here.

Windsor to Wheatley

Proposed Ojibway National Urban Park could be the anchor, a place to attach corridors creating connections to the east. Example: the green threads embroidering the Canard River can be linked to, bolstered and extended to Cedar Creek and the Erie shore thence to Point Pelee and Wheatley Parks. Public lands can be managed for nature, private lands can be secured as pathways for species and be compatible with lower-impact human activities. Farming, forestry, outdoor recreation and more can all occur in eco-corridors. Both protected areas and corridors can provide space for Indigenous culture. Local expertise and creativity are essential to success here and elsewhere.

Central Ontario

There is an opportunity to preserve significant connectivity between existing anchors of protection in the face of growing infrastructure, aggregate mining and other development. Constructing Ecopassages across roads and highways while securing key private parcels is needed to maintain and enhance green linkages. Land Trusts (Georgian Bay, Muskoka, Kawartha, Haliburton Highlands and Couchiching Conservancy) as well as EcoKare International and Four Directions of Conservation's Gary Pritchard have worked with us in private land conservation, road ecology and Indigenous engagement to make this happen.

Greater Golden Horseshoe

The remnant natural land cover is the skeleton. We need to protect and create more of these bright green patches, establish more ecopassages while limiting the proliferation of new highways, putting meat back on the bones. Rouge National Urban Park is the largest anchor in the GGH but it too can be expanded with Transport Canada (Pickering Airport) Lands and then securely connected to protected areas in Central Ontario, Cootes to Escarpment Ecopark in the west and via Lake Ontario to a new National Marine Conservation Area (NMCA). Growing protection and increasing connectivity for the Rouge benefits species and people.

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