

The Westminster Ponds complex, a sprawling array of glacier-sculpted uplands and ponds, supports a rich diversity of native plants, insects and birds. By the 1860's, it was an important centre for natural discovery in the region. Local druggist William Saunders (1836–1914), a proficient self-taught botanist and avid student of insects, explored Westminster Ponds with his children and other naturalists. His oldest son, William E. (W.E.) Saunders (1861–1943), later turned their shared passion for what grew, flew and crawled into education and preservation initiatives that spanned generations.

A Father's Tradition

Saunders Sr. studied the life cycles of insects, particularly pests, and bred new plant varieties suited to the Canadian climate. The elder Saunders encouraged his son's curiosity and helped W.E. develop the skills and mindset to document nature and share his expertise.

After Saunders Sr. founded the London Branch of the Entomological Society of Canada in 1864, W.E. broadened his father's insect-study group to include birds, launching the Ornithological Section in 1890. It later became the McIlwraith Ornithological Club, now known as Nature London.

W.E. took over his father's wholesale pharmaceutical business when Saunders Sr. moved to Ottawa in 1886 as the founding director of the Dominion Experimental Farm system.

The Saunders Cabin, Nature Education and Instilling a Conservation Ethic

Known for his charismatic warmth, W.E. Saunders welcomed all ages on nature fieldtrips throughout the pond area. In 1913 and 1918, W.E. Saunders bought adjacent plots of land straddling the western half of Saunders Pond. He built a small cabin in 1920, which served as a space for picnics and gatherings.

In the early 1900's, many people did not yet realize that the natural resources of North America had limits. Hawks, owls and eagles were shot on sight, and the Canada Goose had been hunted to near extinction. W.E. Saunders was an early and vocal advocate for wildlife protection.

An internationally respected authority on birds and mammals, W.E. rallied fellow naturalists, teachers and the London public to the conservation cause. He also spread the word as president of the Federation of Ontario Naturalists and through weekly nature columns in London newspapers from 1929 to 1943.

The Saunders Legacy

Much of the Westminster Ponds complex, including Saunders' property, was expropriated for a veterans' care and rehabilitation centre in the 1940's. Acquisition of area land for public park purposes began in the 1960's. In 1990, Westminster Ponds was designated as an Environmentally Significant Area by the City of London. Today the legacy of W.E. Saunders lives on in the passion for nature and commitment to conservation demonstrated by local naturalists.



William Saunders, Sr. (photograph courtesy of Museum London)



Members of the Entomological Society of Canada meet in London, July 8, 1868. W.E. Saunders, 6, stands in front of his father, William Saunders, Sr. (photograph courtesy of Nature London Archives)



The Grass-pink orchid was known to be common at Westminster Ponds when Saunders, Sr. published a list of plant species in 1863. This orchid no longer grows here. (photograph courtesy of David Wake)



The Bog Copper butterfly was observed by the Entomological Society in 1868. Its larvae feed on cranberry plants, shown here. This tiny butterfly is no longer found at Westminster Ponds. (photograph courtesy of David Wake)



This map shows the two parcels of land purchased by W.E. Saunders in 1913 (northern 30 acres) and 1918 (southern 50 acres), aligned with modern-day street references.



W.E. Saunders enjoys lunch outside during a field trip at Westminster Ponds in 1942. (photograph courtesy of Nature London Archives)



W.E. Saunders in front of his cabin with his wife, Emma, daughter, Muriel Fetherston, and two grandchildren, Norah and Marjorie in 1921. (photograph courtesy of Nature London Archives)



The lawn in front of Saunders' cabin was used for picnics and gatherings of family and friends. This view looks north across Saunders Pond with the boat house on the left. (photograph courtesy of Nature London Archives)



Students from University of Western Ontario pose on Wellington Road facing east toward the Saunders property in 1925. They are about to take an early morning bird hike lead by W.E. Saunders (second from right). (photograph courtesy of Nature London Archives)



W.E. Saunders examines leaves in 1937, at a regional gathering of the Federation of Ontario Naturalists, of which he was the president from 1931 to 1943. (photograph courtesy of Nature London Archives)



A passionate advocate for the protection of birds of prey, W.E. Saunders poses with a young Bald Eagle in nearby Delaware, Ontario, in 1941. (photograph courtesy of Nature London Archives)