



Grand River
Conservation
Authority



The Grand:
A Canadian
Heritage River

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Martin Neumann watches a prescribed burn, an essential step to restore a rare black oak savanna forest.

Photo by Kevin Tupman



Fire restores a rare forest: black oak savanna

By Kevin Tupman
Natural Heritage Specialist

Most people know that some plants and animals are at risk, such as the bald eagle and American ginseng, but not many people realize that communities such as forests, can also be at risk.

It is true that sugar maple woodlots and pine plantations are commonplace. However, the GRCA is restoring one of the rarest of forests — a black oak savanna close to Apps' Mill in Brant County.

Savannas are grasslands with trees spread widely and have 11 to 35 per cent tree cover.

In 1979, GRCA staff noticed young black oak trees kept growing in an area that was used as a Christmas tree farm. As a result, the 1979 Apps' Mill Master Plan recommended that the Christmas tree farm be converted back to black

oak savanna. Older oaks now existing within the area are a testament to the vision, progressive for its time, expressed in the master plan.

Fire is necessary because this rare ecosystem is sustained by fire. Historically, fire resulted from either lightning or aboriginal inhabitants. Fire ensures that savanna areas do not turn into dense forests. Only trees with a high tolerance for fire, such as the black oak, are able to survive.

European settlers cleared much of the savanna for agriculture. They also suppressed the fires. This meant that surviving pockets of savanna became more like forests or thickets and many oak savanna plant species became rare. Conservationists have now started to restore and preserve these surviving pockets of savanna.

Two types of black oak savanna

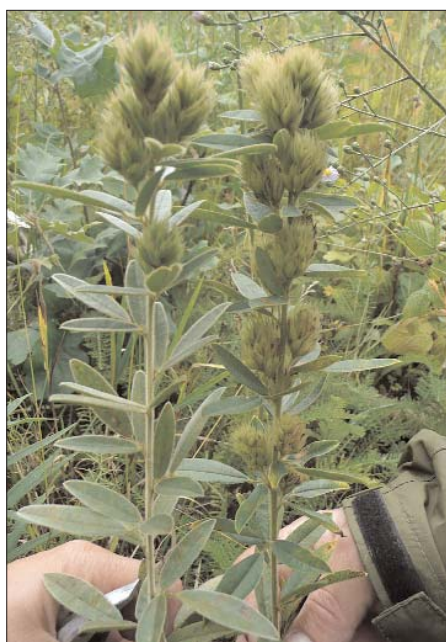
The black oak savanna is one of the rarest savannas in southern Ontario. There are two

types in the province and both are considered critically imperiled or S1, meaning there are five or fewer of these communities in the province. The two types are Dry Black Oak Tallgrass Savanna, and Dry Black Oak-Pine Tallgrass Savanna, which is what the remnant on GRCA land has the potential to become.

Savannas are usually close to tall-grass prairie communities (another vegetation community at risk), because they need similar soil and a history of fire. Prairies can grow on a range of soils from sand to clay, but savannas need sandy soils. Vegetation tends to be less dense on these drier, sandy soils and so there is some open ground for acorns and tree seeds to germinate. Hickory, hawthorn pine and ash also grow in this habitat.

Many trees and plants

Tallgrass Ontario is a network of organizations and individuals that work to conserve prairie and savanna. According to this organization, the black oak, a Carolinian species, is the quintessential savanna tree in Ontario. Chinquapin, white and bur oak are also typical. Black oak savanna wildflowers include aster, butterfly milkweed, round-



Round headed bush-clover is commonly found in black oak savannas.



Black oak leaves are quite dark, but lighter on the underside.

headed bush-clover, wild bergamot, thimbleweed and blazing-star.

According to the Ministry of Natural Resources, until the European settlement era, this general area was primarily an oak forest of various densities, with savannas on drier land.

First prescribed burn

In the spring of 2009, the GRCA, through Lands and Forest Consulting, conducted its first prescribed burn at the Apps' Mill property, which involved two forest blocks, one with cut Scots pine, and one with standing Scots pine. The total area was two hectares. Post-burn monitoring of this trial area revealed that only larger Scots pine trees need to be cut in the future.

A second prescribed burn took place in April. This was much larger, a 12-hectare area including both cut and standing Scots pine.

The forest is naturally succeeding back into a black oak savanna. There are portions of the site that are attractive natural mixed oak savanna, but other areas are dominated by non-native invasive species. Future prescribed burns will allow this rare black oak savanna ecosystem to become healthier with a diversity of oak trees and native prairie and savanna wildflowers.

For further information on black oak savannas and the project at the Apps' Mill property, please contact the GRCA's terrestrial resources department at 519-621-2763 ext. 2241.



MILESTONES

Byng Island celebrates 50 years

By Janet Baine
GRCA Communications Specialist

Since its birth 50 years ago, Byng Island Conservation Area has grown into one of the busiest of the GRCA's network of 11 parks.

It records more than 250,000 paid visits a year from people who enjoy water access to the Grand River and Lake Erie, the huge swimming pool, the Carolinian forest and many other features. In fact, most of the people who come to the park are from outside the Grand River watershed, with Niagara Region and the Oakville-Burlington area topping the list.

The ball got rolling to create Byng Island Conservation Area way back in 1955. This was just a year after Ontario's first official conservation area opened — Elora Gorge, also operated by the GRCA.

In 1958, 26 hectares of private land was purchased and about the same amount was leased for the future park. The Mayor of Dunnville between 1949-1953 was Garfield Disher, who went on to become chair of the GRCA 1954-63.



The pool at Byng Island attracts lots of visitors and is one of the biggest in Ontario.



Conservation authority chair Garfield Disher (left) cuts the ribbon with assistance from Ontario Premier Leslie M. Frost at the official opening of Byng Island on July 28, 1960. This was also the 100th anniversary of Dunnville and many people, including Disher were participating in a beard growing contest.

He negotiated with the St. Lawrence Seaway Commission to have Byng Island and the Welland feeder canal basin that emptied into the Grand River transferred to the municipality. This led to rebuilding the bridge across the Grand River at Dunnville, a project that was completed in 1964. Ownership of the land was transferred to the GRCA for the meager price of a buck.

The official opening on July 28, 1960 attracted Ontario Premier Leslie M. Frost and three cabinet ministers. At the opening, Frost said: "As you look at this beautiful island, the unspoiled beauties you see were once part of the highways and communications of the beginnings of Canada and I rejoice with Dunnville in 300 years of growth."

The opening of Byng Island took place at the same time as the 100th anniversary of the founding of Dunnville, so history was very much on the minds of people during the opening ceremonies. Some, including Disher, were dressed in old fashioned clothes and were participating in a local beard growing contest.

Frost also noted that the Grand

River was explored by Louis Jolliet (1645 –1700) and Robert de LaSalle (1643 –1687). The Grand and the Thames River were "the interior waterways of old Ontario."

The origin of the name of Byng Island is not precisely clear, but some things are known. It was on the Canadian postal record by March, 1865. There had been confusion about the name of the postal outlet and it needed a separate name from the Village of Haldimand. One theory is that it was named after John Byng (1704-1757), a British naval officer who was executed for negligence after a naval disaster in the Mediterranean. His sentence was controversial, so there might have been a good deal of sympathy for him, hence the use of his name.

In the early years, Byng Island Conservation Area visitors could picnic, fish and hike at the park. In 1961 they could also camp next to the Grand River. At that time, the park income was under \$2,000 and by 1965 it had grown to just under \$5,000. In 1966, a two-acre "swimming lake" was constructed that held over two million gallons of water and was a key feature in bringing crowds to Byng on hot summer days.

The pool was updated in 2000 and remains among the largest outdoor swimming pools in Ontario.

Many unique features

Byng Island has many unique features — lots of water sports including canoeing, kayaking and motor boating. The Dunnville Marsh lines the Grand River, Lake Erie is a short boat ride away and water skiing is very popular. Many family reunions, ethnic gatherings and larger picnics take place there. But if you want a seasonal campsite at Byng Island, be prepared to wait, because there is an eight year waiting list.

"When people finally get a seasonal site, they tend to stay for a while," said John Johnston, the superintendent. "Some visitors have memories of long-ago visits to the park and now are bringing their children or even their grandchildren back for summertime activities."



LOOK WHO'S TAKING ACTION

Caring for bluebirds

A retired resident of Wellesley Township with a passion for bluebirds received a 2009 Grand River Watershed Award.

Murray Schlueter has been a guardian of bluebirds in since about 1973, when he first started building blue bird boxes.

"When I was walking to school as a young fellow in the mid-1940s, I knew where there were at least two bluebird nests and I guess I've been fascinated by bluebirds ever since," Schlueter said.

Through the late '60s and early '70s he didn't see any bluebirds, because they were in decline. A decrease in habitat and competition with non-native birds such as house sparrows and starlings for nesting sites took a toll on their numbers. Like many other concerned people, Schlueter began to build bluebird boxes to provide the shy bluebirds with places



Murray Schlueter checks out one of his many bluebird boxes on private properties around Wellesley Township.

to raise their young. It wasn't until the 1980s that he began to see them again and he's been a midwife to the young bluebirds ever since.

Sign of spring

"To me, bluebirds are the sign of spring. Today, the people that are interested in bluebirds are seeing a good number of them again. They've been taken off the endangered list," he said.

In 2009 alone, Schlueter ensured that 42 baby birds took to the skies from bluebird boxes he built and checks regularly.

"I have a total of 60 boxes. They are all out in pairs, so I have 30 locations. Most of them are on private land," he said. The boxes are in locations where the bluebirds won't be disturbed and where they can forage, so usually close to fields or people's lawns.

The GRCA presents watershed awards each fall to individuals and organizations for outstanding examples of conservation and environmental work. To see a short slide show about Murray Schlueter, visit the GRCA's Youtube channel: www.youtube.ca/grandriverca.

Making up for lost swallow habitat when replacing a bridge

By Chris Winder and Ruedi Waelchli

Swallow populations in the watershed are in decline, but one species is getting a little help from birding enthusiasts, a municipality and engineers thanks to careful observation and some ingenuity.

The northern rough-winged swallow (*stelgidopteryx serripennis*) is a small long-winged stocky songbird. Their upper parts are uniformly a dull brown and they are one of six swallow species in the watershed. These birds do not excavate nest burrows but instead use pipes under bridges or cavities created by bank swallows or belted kingfishers.

The bird derives its name from small hooks on the outer wing feathers; these hooks can be felt when running a finger along the wing edge. The genus name, *Stelgidopteryx*, comes from a Greek word meaning "scraper wing." The species name *serripennis* is from Latin and means 'saw feather'.

We have watched this species of bird use three- to four-inch drain pipes for nests under the old bridge on the 10th Line of East Garafraxa for many years. We were concerned when the bridge was slated to be replaced. However, with the help of a team of people including John Burger, a bird enthusiast and bander from Erin, the township council and Dave Menary (road superintendent) of East Garafraxa, Dufferin County, K. Smart Associates Limited (engineers for the bridge construction) and Looby Builders, 13 nest cavities composed of PCV pipe with attached nesting cavities were placed in the cement pillars of the new bridge over the Grand River.

The nesting cavities were made from 18-inch lengths of three-inch PVP pipe and six-inch lengths of four-inch pipe. A piece of plywood was taped to the open end of the 4-inch pipe to keep the cavity open during pouring of the concrete.

All 13 cavities were occupied by the swallows in the spring of 2009 and they are again occupied this year. John Burger was able to band one male northern rough-winged swallow.

This is a simple way of helping a bird species survive habitat loss. It also provides a unique opportunity for municipalities in the Grand River watershed to help northern rough-winged swallows by placing nesting-cavity pipes in the pillars of new bridges over waterways.



Tiny swallow gets a helping hand: Dave Lamble is holding a male northern rough-winged swallow after it had been banded by John Burger.



Year three planting of Rotary Forest

The tree planting event at Guelph Lake Conservation Area drew a crowd of about 1,000 people, including individuals, families, youth groups and organizations.

This is the third year for the Guelph Rotary Forest Earth Day celebration. A 40-hectare piece of land is being transformed into a forest. The event also included displays, food, and a performance by the Funky Mamas, a Guelph band that caters to children.

A special component this year was the dedication of an outdoor classroom across from Guelph Lake Nature Centre that was sponsored by Ken Murray through the Grand River Conservation Foundation.

This was one of many tree planting events that the GRCA participated in or organized.

To see a video about this event posted online, check www.youtube.com and search for Guelph Rotary Forest.

Fine weather and an enthusiastic crowd including many young people gathered to plant trees for Earth Day at the Guelph Rotary Forest at Guelph Lake Conservation Area.



WHAT'S HAPPENING?

Nature Centres offer three new programs to students

Grand River nature centres are offering three brand new programs starting this spring.

The first is formal day-long programs in **GPS** (Geographic Positioning System) technology, primarily for Grade 6 students, but applicable to high school students as well. Map reading and orienteering have long been staples of GRCA outdoor education. This is now combined with teaching how GPS units work and how these are used in resource management. Most school boards have limited access to GPS units, but thanks to generous donations to the Grand River Conservation Foundation, each GRCA nature centre has a class set, and the first pilot programs are being run this spring at Apps' Mill and Pinehurst Lake.

The second new programs are **Specialist High Skills Major** (SHSM), a new initiative of the Ministry of Education geared to high school students. These programs provide with practical skills and certification upon graduation. A major category is the environment. The GRCA can provide certifications in GPS and continues to develop specialized programs in watershed management, species identification and other areas. Schools can access GRCA expertise and undertake hands-on projects to provide a practical grounding for students enrolled in these programs.

The third program, in co-operation with Ducks Unlimited, is the **Project Webfoot** wetland education program for Grade 4 students. This is free of charge to a total of 50 classes in the Grand Erie



Each GRCA nature centre has a class set of GPS units. The pilot programs are being run this spring at Apps' Mill and Pinehurst Lake.

and Waterloo public, Brant/Haldimand Norfolk and Waterloo Catholic school boards, through a generous donation by SC Johnson and Son, Limited. Through Project Webfoot, students will receive classroom teaching material from DUC and a hands-on outdoor component will be provided by the GRCA staff at Apps' Mill, Laurel Creek and Pinehurst Lake.

New rounds of all these programs will be offered in the new school year, and teachers can to contact Ralph Beaumont at 519-621-2763 ext. 2271 or their local nature centre for more information.

Sign up for summer day camps

Summer is a time of fun and an excellent opportunity for kids to learn about the outdoors.

Guelph Lake, Rockwood and Laurel Creek in Waterloo have week-long programs in July and August for kids ages 6-10 and 10-13 years as well as Naturalist in Training programs for campers 13-16 years.

The emphasis is on hands-on, outdoor fun, with many exciting programs - including a specialty French camp at Rockwood, and a fishing camp at Belwood Lake, as well as canoe trips and other adventures for more senior campers. Apps' Mill near Brantford has similar camps but only during the month of July.

For specific camp dates, registration fees, more detailed information, and camp applications, check out the Nature Centre/Day Camp section of the GRCA website at www.grandriver.ca or contact your local nature centre.

Guelph Lake and Rockwood:

519- 836-7860

Laurel Creek in Waterloo:

519- 885-1368

Apps' Mill in Brantford:

519-752-0655

SWP update next step

By Dave Schultz
Communications manager

The next step in the development of a Drinking Water Source Protection Plan for the Grand River watershed will be taken this summer.

An Assessment Report will be released which will provide an overview of municipal water systems, where their water comes from, where the systems might be vulnerable to contamination, and the potential threats to the water supplies.

Some of this information has been the subject of public meetings held throughout the watershed in recent months.

The report will be based on the results of technical studies done by the GRCA and municipalities over several years.

The Assessment Report will provide the scientific and factual basis for the Drinking Water Source Protection plan which will be drafted over the next two years.

The plan will outline the policies and

programs that will be needed to manage the risks posed to municipal water systems by human activities.

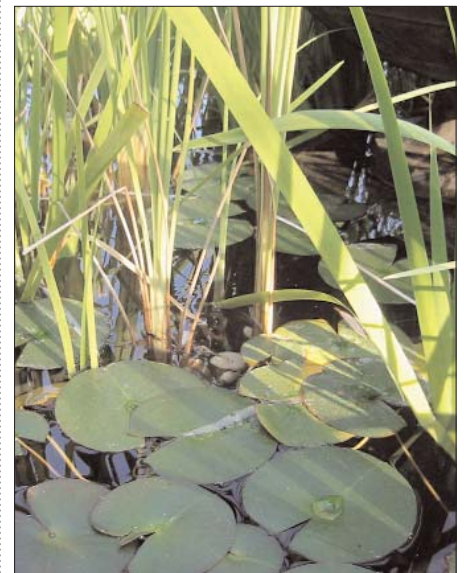
For example, municipalities may pass zoning bylaws that would restrict the use or storage of certain types of chemicals near a municipal well or surface water intake. Another option might be to put conditions on pesticide use permits or nutrient management plans in sensitive wellhead protection areas or intake protection zones.

After the Assessment Report is released, there will be a period for public consultation before the report is submitted to the Ministry of Environment for approval.

More consultation will take place as work is done on the Source Protection Plan, which must be completed by August 2012.

The task of directing the development of the plan is in the hands of the Lake Erie Region Source Protection Committee which is made up of representatives of municipalities, farmers, businesses, residents and other stakeholders. The committee is overseeing the drafting of four plans — one for the Grand and others for the Long Point Region, Catfish Creek and Kettle Creek watersheds.

More information on source protection in the Grand River watershed can be found at www.sourcewater.ca.



Grand River a grand place for canoeing

Last fall canoeing guru James Raffan travelled in his solo canoe from just south of Guelph Lake and paddled down the Speed and Grand rivers to Lake Erie.

He then wrote about his experience in the current issue of Canadian Geographic Travel magazine.

Raffan is the author of bestselling canoeing books such as *Emperor of the North* and *Fire in the Bones*. He is executive director of the Canadian Canoe Museum in Peterborough and his biography states that he was born in a canoe on the Speed River. The magazine article reflects upon his experiences growing up in the area and paddling on the Speed and Grand rivers. Local waterways and the experiences they offer come off very well in the article.

"That [fishing guide Neil] Demaria and a host of others make their livings from outfitting and guiding on the Grand is testament to its rehabilitation and the care it has received from every community along its banks. But today, that doesn't seem to matter," Raffan wrote.



NOW AVAILABLE

Hot off the press: Grand fishing book

Do you want to discover some great fishing on the Grand River this year? The GRCA has just released a vastly updated version of its popular *Fishing Grand River Country* book.

Essentially an entirely new book, it was researched and written by noted angler Stephen May on behalf of the GRCA, and published by James Lorimer publishing.

The book contains 160 pages, in full colour, with detailed information on



About 1,500 students attended the Brantford Brant Children's Water Festival May 11 to 13 at Mohawk Park in Brantford with their classes. This was the fifth year of the festival and during that time more than 7,000 students have attended to visit interactive stations and learn about water use. The Waterloo Wellington Children's Groundwater Festival is held the first week in June.

Photo By Louise Heyming

fishing in all parts of the main Grand River and its major tributaries.

The Grand has more than 80 species of fish - more than 50 per cent of all fish species found in Canada. Being a river so close to major cities, the Grand has become a major recreational fishery of exceptionally high quality.

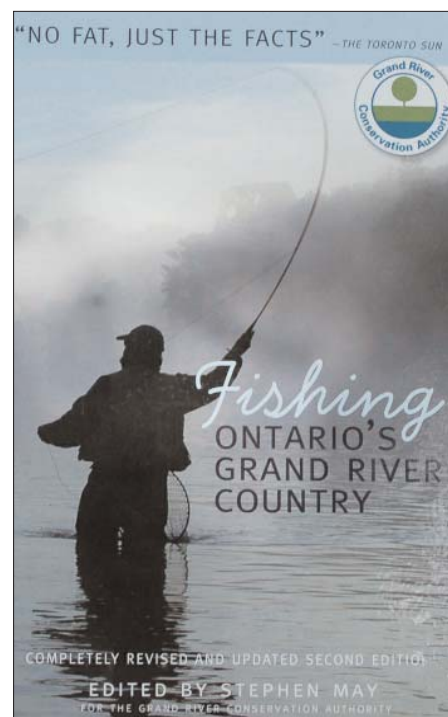
The book highlights all of the major sport fish species, including the best times for fishing, river character and access points. There are even special sections on urban angling opportunities, and fishing within Grand River Conservation Areas.

Fishing Grand River Country is a must have for both novice and experienced anglers. Proceeds go to help with fisheries habitat improvement work on streams within the Grand River watershed.

To get your copy of *Fishing Grand River Country*, ask for it in local stores, or it's available in the Online Store section of the GRCA's website at

www.grandriver.ca. The book sells for \$24.95.

The GRCA also has canoeing, hiking and coffee table books for sale online.





Please ensure we have your full address

Each time we send out Grand Actions, we receive several copies back from Canada Post because the rural addresses are incomplete.

Before you throw out the envelope for this issue, please check the address to ensure that it is complete. Any changes can be directed to Janet Baine at 519-621-2763, ext. 2302 or jbaine@grandriver.ca. Remember that Grand Actions is also available online and you can be notified when the new issue becomes available.

About Grand Actions

This newsletter is produced bi-monthly by the Grand River Conservation Authority. Current and back issues are available at www.grandriver.ca.

For newsletter submissions and e-mail or post subscriptions, contact:

Janet Baine, GRCA

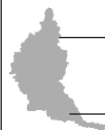
Phone: 519-621-2763, Ext. 2302

E-mail: jbaine@grandriver.ca

Deadlines for submissions are the 15th of February, April, June, August, October and December. Submissions may be edited for length or style.

Tax deductible donations and sponsorships toward the cost of producing this newsletter are always welcome.

This publication is printed on Rolland Enviro100, an FSC certified, environmentally-friendly paper. The paper is manufactured using 100% post-consumer fibre and is processed chlorine-free using biogas energy.



The Grand Strategy Calendar

Ecofest, Saturday, June 5, Waterloo Region Museum (Doon Heritage Museum), Kitchener, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Over 20 environmental groups, displays, activities, entertainment and workshops for the entire family. Interactive activity centres focused on groundwater education. For more information, call 519-748-1914.

31st annual Speed River Clean Up, Saturday, June 12, meet at the Gazebo at Royal City Park, 8:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. This year OPIRG is teaming up with the Wellington Water Watchers and Trout Unlimited for a new and improved event that will include a focus on local food and more in-depth watershed education.

Grand River Spey Clave, June 26, 2010 - Bean Park, Paris, 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. Demonstrations and instruction will be available in Traditional, Skagit, and Scandinavian Spey techniques. The Spey Clave website at www.grandriver-spey.ca has more details, including biographies of the instructors. Donations will go to Friends of the Grand River.

National Canoe Day, Saturday, June 26, Guelph, 5:30 p.m. to 9 p.m. Celebrate the canoe and kayak in Canadian history with a guided paddle by Bill Mungall along the Speed and Eramosa rivers. Boats are available for rent at the Boathouse. Meet at the put-in at Royal City Park near McCrae Boulevard at 6:30 p.m., paddle to Victoria Rd., and return by about 9:00 pm. A pre-paddle picnic is slated for 5:30 p.m. to 6:30 p.m.

Annual Fishing Derby, Sunday, July 11, Conestogo Lake Conservation Area, 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. Derby entry fee is regular park admission plus \$1. Registration is at the boat launch. Length will decide the winning fish and ties will be decided by a coin toss for this catch and release event. There is also a \$5 Big Fish Pool for the adults. In addition to prizes for the biggest fish, many draw prizes are available. Derby entrants will be fishing for catfish, smallmouth bass and pike. For more call the park at 519-638-2873.

At Husking Time Women's Conference, Chiefswood National Historic Site, Ohsweken, Saturday Sept. 11, 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. This event is held annually at the historic home of E. Pauline Johnson and offers a series of concurrent workshops which aim to teach an Iroquoian perspective to healing and wellness. Keynote speakers, entertainment and local cuisine are also part of this award winning event. **Pre-registration required by June 30.** For more information visit www.chiefswood.com or call 519-752-5005.

Inspiring Grand Transformations: Our Preferred Future, 10th Annual Grand River Watershed Water Forum, GRCA, 400 Clyde Rd., Cambridge, Friday, Sept. 17, 8 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. The focus of this year's forum is to explore innovative solutions and preferred directions in addressing changes that will impact future water quality and watershed health in the Grand River watershed. To learn more and to register, please check the conferences section of www.grandriver.ca or contact Sonia Morgan at 519-621-2763, ext. 2315 or smorgan@grandriver.ca.

Note: A complete list of events in the GRCA's conservation areas and nature centres is available on www.grandriver.ca in the Calendar section.