

Bird Wing Meeting

April 26, 2016

By Renee Levesque

The last indoor meeting of the season was held in the Board Room of the North Bay Public Library on April 26. And perhaps because it was the last meeting of the season, or perhaps because the chairman was a good 10 minutes late and we were waiting for him to arrive, we made the decision to do things just a bit differently. Normally we start each meeting by giving our name and two birds we saw during the last month. But this time, we stepped out of the box and gave our first name, followed by two birds, and then our last name. And amazingly everyone, even the chairman who is not usually big on change, complied and got it right – everyone, that is, but Curtis Irish who absolutely refused, saying the chairman was the boss and he would do it the way the boss liked it to be done!

Birds Seen in April: I will mention only the new birds seen during a month that seemed more winter than spring. Interestingly, despite the weather, many new birds were seen. (More have arrived since the writing of this report, so remember those listed below are April birds only.)

The greatest harbinger of spring, the American Robin, was seen by many. Following the massive snowfall of April 6 and 7, many could be seen by the side of the road trying desperately to find food and seemingly so in need of it that they hardly moved when approached.

During April, the huge numbers of Common Redpolls we had all winter departed and were replaced by huge numbers of Dark-eyed Juncos and American Tree Sparrows. None of us can recall as many juncos as this April.

The distinguished Fox Sparrow (right) made a brief appearance on its way north and slowly but surely the White-throated, the Song, the Savannah and the Swamp Sparrows began



Photo by Renee Levesque

arriving. Ken Gowing saw a Chipping Sparrow and more of these pretty little sparrows have arrived since, as have the regal-looking White-Crowned Sparrows on their way north. Ken had already seen one by the meeting date and Brent Turcotte had an over-wintering one in his yard.

The other bird that arrived in seemingly large numbers this month was the Ruby-crowned Kinglet, seen by many. It's always a delight to catch a glimpse of its red crown, just as it is to catch a glimpse of the golden head of the Golden-crowned Kinglet, also seen by some. A small bird seen by some this winter, but seen in greater numbers this month, was the Brown Creeper. Marc Buchanan reported the one he saw was his first in five years and Gary Sturge reported his was the first in three or four years.

Besides the Savannah Sparrow, the other new grassland bird was Lori Anderson's Eastern Meadowlark, as well as her Eastern Bluebird that showed up once, perhaps scouting out a possible summer home.

The Belted Kingfisher has arrived, as have the Tree (below) and Barn Swallows. We now await the Northern Rough-winged, Bank and Cliff Swallows.

The Hermit Thrush also arrived and was seen by a few in Laurier Woods and some of us had one in our backyards, like me and Gary and Connie Sturge.

The parasitic Brown-headed Cowbird has also arrived, although so far not seen often.



Photo by Kaye Edmonds



Photo by Renee Levesque

Kevin Cowcill had a great sighting at Sunset Park, Lapland Longspurs in their breeding plumage. Not often do we get to see them on their northern migration. Kevan hoped to be able to get the ultimate photo of one, but they flitted so much, it was difficult. Still, he captured one fairly well, sitting momentarily in a budding Maple Tree.



Photos above by Kevan Cowcill

In warbler land, the Yellow-rumped and the Nashville were reported, both seen in Laurier Woods and the latter by Lisa Hackett.

Also seen was the Pine Warbler (above), reported by Gary in the Weiler Line and Hemlock Road area, where we heard one last summer during one of our summer outings led by Gary. Other warblers have since appeared, so be sure to take a walk through Laurier Woods or Cranberry Trail to look for these small, pretty wood warblers.



Photo by Renee Levesque

In woodpecker land, the noisy Northern Flicker (above) has arrived in seemingly large numbers. Some have also seen the Yellow-bellied Sapsucker.

Many ducks were seen in the few areas of open water and in wet fields – the handsome Common and Hooded Mergansers, the former in plentiful number; the small and pretty Green-winged Teal; the dramatic Buffleheads; the large-billed Northern Shoveler; the misnamed Ring-necked Duck; and the Lesser Scaup – could not think of a descriptive adjective for it, so “lesser” will have to suffice. But the duck that we don't often see as it makes its way north, and the one that is particularly lovely, the Northern Pintail (below), was seen by Lori and Ken in Chisholm Township and by Dick and me in the one wet field on Hwy. 17 between Cache Bay and Verner. Dick and I saw five, four males and a female, and Lori and Ken saw about 80.



Photo by Renee Levesque

Although the Green-winged Teal tend to arrive first and could be seen in Callander Lagoon, Gary saw a Blue-winged Teal at Purdon Line and Maple Hill Road. Since then, others have been seen, particularly at the lagoons.

A Wild Turkey was also seen by Gary in the Weiler Line and Hemlock Road area, and Dick and I saw a female pheasant in Lavigne (seen at right). Lori and Ken see pheasants fairly often near their homes in Chisholm Township. There was some discussion on whether these were once domestic pheasants and if there has to be a certain number of generations of escaped domestic pheasants before they are considered wild. I asked Mike Burrell about this and he said pheasants are tricky because there are so many escaped ones. He reports, “Pheasants are a tough issue in Ontario because the remaining (small) population of real, wild pheasants is continuously augmented by escapees/releases.” Mike provided the link for the American Birding Association’s (ABA) rules for accountability: <http://listing.aba.org/criteria-determining-establishment-exotics/>



Photo by Renee Levesque

The only shorebirds reported were Greater Yellowlegs (below), seen by Lisa Hackett in a field on Leclair Road in West Nipissing; by Therez Violette in Cache Bay; and by Connie at Maple Hill Road and Purdon Line; and the Killdeer seen by Ken on Chiswick Line as he headed into the Bird Wing meeting, although he and



Photo by Lisa Hackett

Lori heard one during the April Bird Bash and the Owl Survey. Therez also believes the Greater Yellowlegs she saw was with a Lesser Yellowlegs because one was smaller than the other.

That iconic Canadian bird of summer, the Common Loon, has now been seen by many, mainly on Lake Nipissing. In fact, Dick saw 10 on Lake Nipissing on our waterfront, just waiting for the ice to melt. More about the loon later in this report.

Sandhill Cranes have been seen by some, as has the Great Blue Heron. The Double-crested Cormorants have returned and were seen by most everyone. Recently, I saw a cormorant on Lake Nipissing sitting on a nearby rock and it was the first time I got a close look at its double-crest which was blowing in the wind. (A tribute to Bob Dylan here.)

Tundra Swans at the mouth of the Sturgeon River (right) were seen in large numbers, 18 to 20, in early April by Ken and Lori and Dick and me. They were waiting for the ice to melt so they could continue on their journey northward. They seem to know that if there is still ice here, there is certainly ice further north. And Stewart Greig had Two Trumpeter Swans by his place on Greening Bay, Lake Nipissing.

The Osprey have returned to all their nests - the one on the Lakeshore exit off Hwy. 11; the one at the Cache Bay ball park; the one by the Sturgeon River, seen across the river as one heads down Quesnel Road in Sturgeon Falls; and the one that can be seen from Rainville Road near Hwy. 64.

The Broad-winged Hawk has made an appearance, two seen by Ken and Lori near Summit Drive and by Gary on Hwy 11.

Merlins, American Kestrels and Bald Eagles are being seen by many. A Cooper's



Photo by Renee Levesque

Hawk and Sharp-shinned Hawk were seen by me in my yard as they swooped down to snatch an American Tree Sparrow or two. A Red-tailed Hawk was seen by Gary who seems to see every raptor there is, but his piece de resistance is the Golden Eagle seen by him near his place during the April Bird Bash.

Naturally other birds that had been seen all winter were seen, like Kaye Edmonds' Evening Grosbeaks.



Photo by Renee Levesque

Common Loon: Every year I make mention of the Canadian Lakes Loon Survey through Bird Studies Canada, but I have yet to hear from anyone who participates in it. This survey that monitors chick hatch and survival has been ongoing since 1981. Participants need only dedicate three dates at the very least, the first in June to see if loon pairs are on territory; the second in July to see if the chicks have hatched; and finally in August to see if the chicks survived long enough to fledge. For those who live on a lake, or have a cottage on a lake, in which there are nesting loons and they are easily accessible, this is not a major commitment of your time.

The Common Loon will probably become our national bird next year if the number of votes to date in the National Bird Project is any indication. The loon continues to be in first place with 9,145 votes. If you haven't yet voted for your favourite bird to become our national bird in time for Canada's sesquicentennial in 2017, now is the time to do so. You can vote by clicking on <http://www.canadiangeographic.ca/nationalbird>, but you can vote only once.

Common Loon reproduction has declined over the last 30 years. Better boating, fishing and shoreline practices need to be emphasized to prevent further decline of

this iconic Canadian bird with its haunting call. It is a call that goes way back. The Common Loon is one of the few North American birds that has ancient ties. It belongs to the same ancient evolutionary lineage as penguins, and both loons and penguins share the lineage with albatrosses, shearwaters and storm-petrels, all from the tubenose families. (This information is from the “Eight Wonders of Evolution From the Wall of Birds”, Cornell Lab of Ornithology’s magazine, *Living Bird*, Spring 2016 edition.)

There is something about the word albatross that seems so ancient. Maybe it is because it is a bird so rarely seen because of it being a seabird that can stay aloft for long periods of time and nests on remote oceanic islands; maybe because it is one of the largest flying birds, with one of the species having a wing span of 12 feet; maybe because of the 21 or 22 species, many are threatened to some degree, some with extinction; or maybe and most likely it is that many of us recall the poem we studied in school, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, by Samuel Taylor Coleridge:

*'God save thee, ancient Mariner!
From the fiends, that plague thee thus!—
Why look'st thou so?'—With my cross-bow
I shot the ALBATROSS.*

If interested in participating in the Canadian Lakes Survey, especially now that you know of the loon’s ancient lineage, contact Kathy Jones, Bird Studies Canada, at volunteer@birdscanada.org for further information.

Nocturnal Owl Survey: First to get out on a cold but clear April night (April 14)) for the Nocturnal Owl Survey were Gary and Connie Sturge, with a second Connie in stow, Connie Hergott, a new Bird Wing member. Gary reports Connie H. brought them beginner's luck because they heard the nest defense call of a Great Horned Owl as they began their route. This was followed by eight Barred Owls (right), four of which flew out over them. It is a great thrill when one does that, but four!

Gary and Connie went out on their second route, minus Connie H., on April 17, another clear but warmer



Photo by Ken Gowing

night. They expected their luck would continue, but they obviously needed Connie H. for this to be so. Actually, in the thicker bush of this route there seemed to be fewer owls this year and this, as you will see, was the experience of others. But still, they heard two Northern Saw-whet Owls, and, as the forest thinned, they saw a Barred Owl when it flew out of the bush and over them. No American Woodcocks and no Ruffed Grouse were heard during both outings.

There was no wind, no frogs, little running water, no Amish buggies and only two cars when Ken Gowing and Lori Anderson did their survey route, also on the 17th. And it turns out, this year was by far their busiest survey ever. Maybe their luck was that it was the third consecutive year they conducted their survey on the 17th. Bookending their survey were the calls of Barred Owls at the first and last stops. It was the sixth stop at the corner of Bellcairn and Pioneer that produced the most excitement. At this stop, they heard two Boreal Owls close by which

interestingly responded after the first and second Barred Owl recordings; and if that wasn't enough, a Northern Saw-whet (right) then got into the action by calling out; and if that still wasn't enough, a Killdeer began screaming in terror! And while the owls were calling and the Killdeer screaming,



Photo by Dave Palangio

three American Woodcocks were preenting; a Ruffed Grouse, drumming; and a Wilson's Snipe, willowing. Sort of unbelievable, but Lori swears it to be the case!

Other non-target species Ken and Lori heard, as if they hadn't heard enough, were wolves, ducks, Canada Geese, Sandhill Cranes, and some dogs, although fewer dogs than usual.

The Doug Pattersons, Junior and Senior, did their survey on the 19th, a night that was clear with a near full moon and a sky full of stars. In the less thickly forested areas, they heard two Barred Owls in the distance and heard and saw a third when it flew back and forth across the road. Doug reports it scared him when it flew over him very low to the point where he could see its shadow on the ground! And if you have never done this survey, in a remote area with no one around and you get lulled into a false sense that no owl is going to respond, when one finally does and then flies over you, it is scary! After the tape stopped, the owl sat on top of a pine tree calling after each time Doug spoke to it. Please don't get the impression we all speak to the owls during these yearly April surveys, but then Doug, like Ken, has a special relationship with Barred Owls. For those of you with a memory, you may recall their friendships with their backyard Barred Owls from last year.

The Dougs also heard four American Woodcocks.

Doug Jr. reports the forest had a lot of snow cover, about 90 percent, with a depth from 6 inches to 1.5 feet. Water levels were high and running water could be heard fairly loudly at Antoine Creek and even in the ditches.

Craig and Elaine Hurst, with Marc Buchanan along for the first time on an owl survey, did their route on April 27. It was a cold night but a fun night, with two Barred Owls responding. The second owl came to the road with a deafening, "Who cooks for you!" They also heard two dogs. When you are alone on a dark road seemingly in the middle of nowhere, a dog's bark becomes something.

Dick Tafel and I waited until the last moment to do our survey because Dick had been sick with a cold and was not up to going any earlier. Our route is quite a



Photo by Renee Levesque

distance away and although it is fine travelling there, returning home after a cold evening is the killer! It is not that the evening started out cold, with the temperature at plus 4, but by the time we were finished, I was freezing despite a winter coat, mittens, hat, scarf, long johns and boots. We brought hot chocolate with us and at the half-way point, it was most welcome. It was a clear, still night with a wondrous sky filled with stars and the Milky Way. Dick even saw a shooting star. I told him to make a wish.

There was still quite a significant amount of snow in the woods and along the sides of the road. The lake, and even some ponds, was still partially frozen. There was not a soul or a vehicle in sight, just one logging truck parked at the side of the road. The only sound in the still of the night was that of four passenger planes flying overhead at various intervals and the water from a small stream at one stop. It seemed so loud after spending hours hearing only distant planes. I had hoped there would be a howling wolf to add some exciting drama to my narrative, but the only animal we saw was a Snowshoe Hare scampering across the road after the last stop, although we saw two deer at the side of Hwy. 63 just after we exited from McConnell Lake Road.

So what about the owls, you might ask. We heard only two, one at the first stop and one in the far distance at the third stop. We did hear a Wilson's

Snipe, at the first stop but before the survey began. And we did see seven Ruffed Grouse, one displaying (above), but that was on our way to our first stop. We also saw and heard about a dozen American Robins enroute.

Our experience bore out what Doug and Gary declared - that the owls this year were not in the heavily forested part of the woods. And this year in the case of the Hursts and Dick and me, we may have done our surveys a bit too late.



Photo by Renee Levesque

I declare, and I am sure you will agree, that Lori and Ken win this year's award for the best survey based on the number of owls seen and the most drama. But did anyone else see a falling star?

In September, Bird Wing will present Lori and Ken with their prize, a prize that will be kept by them until the 2017 survey, which they may well win again, in which case, they can continue to hold onto the prize. If they don't win, it will be passed on to the winner.

Great Canadian Birdathon: To be held this year on **Sunday, May 29**, somewhat later than normal to accommodate Marc. Please make sure that those who are participating donate money to Bird Studies Canada. Not sure if anyone locally is asking for donations, so I donated to Mike Burrell online at <http://birdscanada.kintera.org/faf/donorReg/donorPledge.asp?ievent=1153443&supid=382902872>.

Last year Dick raised a goodly amount, a percentage of which was donated towards the \$5,000.00 cost for the Louise de Kiriline Lawrence Ontario Heritage Trust plaque, so he can be forgiven for not seeking donations this year. (Photo is of Matt, Dick and Lori at last year's Birdathon.)



Photo by Renee Levesque

Bird Bash: The next Bird Bash will take place over a 24-hour period the same weekend as the Birdathon, **May 28 and 29**.

Outing: Indoor meetings have now ended until September, and as an experiment, our first outing will not take place in the evening as has been the case for years. We once again broke out of the box and decided that at least the first outing will take place in the morning, from **9:00 to 11:30**. But not to fear if you consider this too drastic a deviation from our normal approach, as this outing will still be held the fourth Tuesday of the month, **May 24**. Because this is prime warbler time and more warblers can be seen in the morning, we decided we would give this a try. The

downside is that it means those who work cannot attend, but again, not to fear, you can join Dick at Laurier Woods for the next two Saturdays in May, **May 14 and May 21**, when he leads his yearly May bird walks in Laurier Woods from **9 until 11 a.m.**

You will be informed well in advance of June's Bird Wing outing time.

My photo of the Purple Finch below is in memory of Prince, 1958-2016.

