

Bird Wing Report March 2019



Renee Levesque

By Renee Levesque

March's Bird Wing meeting was held once again at Laporte's Nursery, the day after *Cardinal* filmed there to a closed set, meaning we don't know where the "dead" body was found – in the room in which we held our meeting, in the greenhouse or at the back of the property? Reminds me of the board game, *Clue*. In the parlour with a candlestick by Miss Scarlet or Professor Plum? Very appropriate that a series named *Cardinal* was filmed where we Bird Wingers meet.

Since our meeting on March 23, more spring species have been seen, but this report focuses only on those seen up to the date of the meeting. At that time, there were still hills and hills of snow and frozen lakes and ponds – not that this didn't continue beyond that date, but as you read in Dick Tafel's March Bird Bash Report, many spring species were seen after our meeting, although in small numbers.

Birds Seen in March:

I have to start with Red Crossbills seen once again only by Gary and Connie Sturge and where but on Stillaway Line. It is a species that has eluded the rest of us once again despite our attempts to make that not so. And just in case you might wonder about the sole Sturge sighting, Gary sent me photos of the crossbills he saw. It may be we will need to camp at the corner of Stillaway and Maple Hill if we have any hope at all of seeing these crossbills.

Now for some spring species: Gary and Connie had four Red-winged Blackbirds at their feeder, and although Kaye Edmonds was not in attendance, she had one. Rose McClelland had a

Common Grackle at her feeder and Grant McKercher saw one at Memorial Drive and Lakeshore in North Bay. Curtis Irish saw European Starlings and although many stay here over the winter, they are now arriving with their breeding yellow bills. (More on sightings of starlings at feeders later in this report.)

Grant was the first member of the group to report seeing a Turkey Vulture, seen by him and Shirley in Sundridge.



Matt Proconier reported a Merlin on Maple Hill Road and Connie and Gary, one in their yard.

Dick Tafel saw about 20 adult Herring Gulls in Mattawa, about 50 in Sturgeon Falls on the tiny bit of open water near Twigg's, and a few in North Bay, and I saw an adult Ring-billed Gull (left) in Sturgeon Falls. I know it is a very common gull by the time the real spring and summer arrive, making a nuisance of itself at lakeside picnics, at McDonald's and even at lakeside restaurants, but it's always special seeing the first bird heralding spring, even if it is a common gull.

Lori Anderson had a Song Sparrow in her yard, seen on the last day of Nipissing's

version of World Sparrow Day. Steve Pitt also had one during Sparrow Count Week, and Gary and Connie had one in their yard on March 25, too late to be counted for Sparrow Week. American Tree Sparrows were seen by Gary and Connie, also after count week, although Ernie Fraye had a couple on count day. (More on World Sparrow Day/Week later in this report.)

Canada Geese were seen by Jim Hasler and by Dick and me. They were seen on the open water in Bonfield; in Mattawa, along the Mattawa River; and in flight in North Bay. Lloyd and Janet Sparks saw some on icy Wolfe Lake.

Newcomer Bill Sikora, who actually lives in Guelph but whose daughter lives in North Bay, joined our meeting and mentioned seeing the American Crow. Like the starling, many stay in the City year-round; however, the sheer number of crows arriving in North Bay and surrounding areas heralded spring even before spring



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officially began – after the time changed, but before the calendar’s official first day of spring. In my area, the crows arrived on March 12, displacing all but a couple of the Common Ravens who were seen by some carrying twigs with which to build their nests.

But the most iconic of the spring birds, the one that truly is a harbinger of spring is the American Robin, not yet seen by anyone at our meeting. However, Martha Gould in her Pinewood subdivision saw two in her yard the week before our meeting. (Since the date of our meeting, others have been seen as you read in Dick’s March Bird Bash Report.)

Common Goldeneye have been here all winter, a few seen recently on the Ottawa River and in Bonfield, and about 20 or more a few weeks back at the Mattawa Lagoon. Mallards were seen by some, but it doesn’t seem as if they were seen in the numbers of other years. Gary Chowns wasn’t present so we don’t know if they were still all congregated in his yard.

Other birds seen included all three woodpeckers, the Hairy and Downy by Ken Gowing among others, and the Pileated by Sarah Wheelan among others.

The Canada Jay was seen by Jim, Dick and me, Jim at his place near the airport and by Dick and me on Papineau Road near Mattawa.

Jim also saw a Ruffed Grouse, as did others. Wild Turkeys were seen at the Chisholm landfill site. Lori reports the person in charge there feeds them, so if you want to add them to your list, you can rely on Chisholm’s dump for that.

Jim had about 15 Mourning Doves at his place, and Gary and Connie about 10 at their place.



Some of us saw many Blue Jays and some of us very few. I had 14 in my yard and Gary had 12. My 14 were very noisy the day they all descended, taking up many branches in one of my trees. I think they were at a Blue Jay conference determining what positions and roles each are to take as we move into spring and the breeding season. I also had one that suddenly arrived, in that it was not with the others in my yard most of the day. It stood out from the others because of the black stripes on its chest. Yes, it was snowing and it looked wet, but none of the other Blue Jays had these black stripes and they were part of the same weather system. Maybe this particular Blue Jay got wetter than the others or maybe its grey/white chest feathers were sparse, showing black underneath. I got a poor photo of it (left), but it shows the black stripes.

Up until a week or so before the meeting, I was still getting quite a few Pine Grosbeaks (pictured on heading), but now only Evening Grosbeaks. Gary and Connie also had Evenings at their feeders. Common Redpolls continued to come to feeders, but not as many as there were during the winter, although for some, still in fair numbers. Grant recently had 12 at his feeder. On a couple of occasions, I had the larger, darker and more heavily striped redpoll at my feeder, the subspecies *rostrata*. The redpoll we tend to see most frequently is the subspecies *flammea*. I had hoped to see the Hoary Redpoll this winter, one that is very frosty looking, but it did not make an appearance in my yard. See <http://jeaniron.ca/2015/redpollsRP.htm> for more information on identifying the redpoll subspecies.

The one bird that was absolutely everywhere this winter was the Black-capped Chickadee, one of Marc Buchanan's favourite birds and who can blame him. I am beginning to think it really should be Canada's national bird. So faithful, doesn't mind winter, very friendly and yet fearsome. We should not be put off by its littleness.



Scott Dewey

A few days prior to the meeting, I saw on eBird that Scott Dewey saw my nemesis bird, the Boreal Chickadee, not once, but twice on the same day and in different locations! Now how is that for luck! And not just that, but the Boreal ate out of his hand!! Scott and his family were feeding Black-capped Chickadees from their hands, when along came the Boreal wanting some of the feeding action!

I simply had to call Scott even though I don't know him, but did meet him briefly once on Riding Stable Road while he was surveying. He said he was expecting my call. That is how well we eBirders know one another when we don't really know one another! Anyway, that day he saw one at his place in West Ferris and one

on Nosbonsing Park Road. We resisted sitting outside his house in West Ferris, but Dick and I went to Nosbonsing Park Road off Quae Quae Road, armed with seed. We found the exact spot

after calling Scott again and stood there for half an hour or more with our seed-filled hands held out, but only the Black-capped came and came and came. (More on both chickadees later in this report.)

Not sure if the Northern Shrike (right) is still catching chickadees at the Chowns', but I had one in my back yard and the Sparks had one at their place.



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In addition to Lori Laporte's *Cardinal*, I noted on eBird that someone in Sturgeon Falls saw a Northern Cardinal in her yard in March. I spent some time looking for it there, but to no avail.

On the raptor front, I saw a Peregrine Falcon on top of the cross at the Pro-Cathedral, later seen by Kaye and by Dick. I featured the Peregrine in an article I did in April's newsletter, so be sure to check that out at <https://www.nipnats.com/newsletters/>. Later in the year, we will be screening the DVD we purchased, *World's Fastest Animal*, a DVD we will add to our collection of two, the other on hummingbirds. Both will be kept at Gary and Connie's.

Sarah saw an adult Bald Eagle (below) in flight and others saw some at the Powassan landfill site and elsewhere.



Gary Sturge

For about three days, Jim had a Barred Owl at his place, and Matt also had one at his place, and although that was in February, I will let that go and report on it this month. Lori Laporte had a couple of Great Horned Owls by her place!

World Sparrow Day/Week:

World Sparrow Day was the first day of spring, March 20, but because most years we have snow and continuing wintry conditions at that time, we extended the day to a week, but still place emphasis on the actual Count Day. The

main sparrow target is the House Sparrow because apparently its numbers are declining worldwide, but other sparrows are also counted. So how did we fare this year? Not too bad considering the weather and the sheer amount of snow. We saw a total of 36 sparrows made up of 3 species – House, 32; Song, 2; and American Tree, 2.

We were down significantly from last year when we saw 93 sparrows and 6 species. However, we did much better than in 2017 when we saw only 11 sparrows and the same 3 species as this year. I would think 2018 was a bumper year because we had the Chipping Sparrow that stayed at my place all winter and the Harris's Sparrow that stayed at the Chowns'.

Gary saw 16 House Sparrows at his place and Lori, 14 House Sparrows at her place on Count Day, and Dick and I and Buddy Myles saw 2 at the Co-op Feed Store in Verner during Count Week – probably the same 2, so counted only as 2.

Steve Pitt had a Song Sparrow (right) at his place on March 21, and Lori, one at her place on March 23. And Ernie Frayle had 2 American Tree Sparrows at his place on Count Day.

Not that there is a trophy for this event, but if there were, it would have to go to Gary for seeing the most sparrows, and House Sparrows at that, and on the legitimate Count Day.

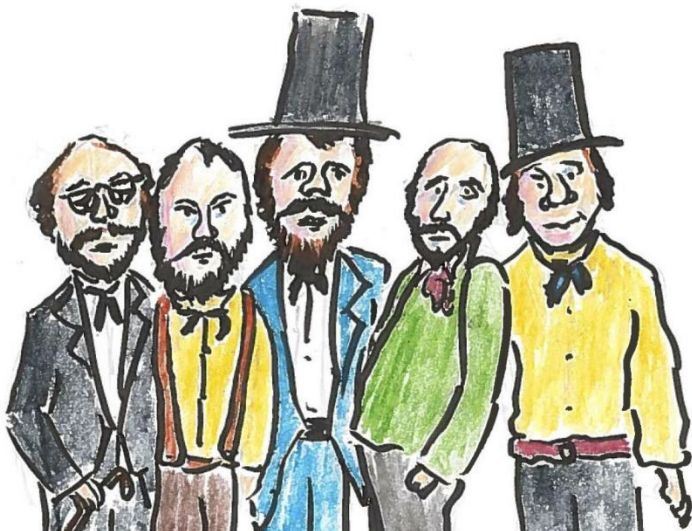


Steve Pitt

Stories from the Field:

Gary Sturge: Gary was one of the first, along with Kaye Edmonds, to report the arrival of a Red-winged Blackbird at his feeder. He mistook it for a sign of spring, but as I type this on April 5, it is snowing and the snow in many parts of our northeastern world continues to be deep. Maybe Gary and his Powassanites got carried away thinking spring was just around the corner. But you have to give

them credit for their optimism, especially when, as Gary reports, “The mayor, a small delegation (left) and band were on hand to celebrate the event and to present some feed to the weary traveller.”



Steve Pitt: Steve also had early Red-winged Blackbirds, and being a funny man too, he reported, “They looked like tourists who booked a B&B and just arrived to find out the place was a dump.”

Steve was also the first, along with Kaye again, to have European Starlings with their yellow breeding bills, and he, like Gary, had a delegation greeting his first starling, only in Steve’s case, it was a delegation of one, as you will see from Steve’s photo.



Steve Pitt



Renee Levesque

Renee Levesque: I previously wrote about Blue Jays getting their calcium by peeling paint off the white posts and railings of my verandah. Their numbers have expanded from 2 to 8 and their territory has expanded from the white posts and railings to the green verandah floor and the green wooden border around my front flower bed. So much for the Blue Jays preferring light paint as I had read!

Rock Pigeons:

It is not usual that I write specifically about Rock Pigeons, birds most of us consider nuisance birds. But one day when three landed on my patio, I watched them intently, their necks glistening purple and green in the

brilliant sun we occasional got when it wasn't snowing, and I noticed that they blink a lot. Of course, I had to check that out and discovered they are indeed big blinkers. And once I discovered that, I had to get a photo (right) of one blinking. The range of blink rates of most individuals and species are from 1.5 blinks per minute for the Screech Owl to more than 50 blinks per minute for the Rock Pigeon and Ruby-throated Hummingbird. Only the Ruby-throated blinks slightly more than the pigeon! Fascinating stuff!!



Blink rates differ little between individuals in bright light and those in the shade. Like humans, the blink rate for birds does not depend upon photo-stimulation of the retina, provided the light is not extremely bright, although diurnally active species blink more frequently than nocturnally active ones. Owl blink rates are the lowest among birds, with the Snowy Owl, a diurnal owl, having the highest blink rate among the owls.

Nocturnal Owl Survey:

Speaking of owls, the teams taking part in April's Nocturnal Owl Survey that have been confirmed to date are: Ken and Lori; Gary, Connie and Matt; Marc, Sarah and Louise Simpson, with Grant possibly joining them; Oriana Pokorny and friend; and April McCrum and Connie Hergott.



There may be many roads that are in rough shape, and with our continuing deep snow-covered areas, especially wooded areas, most of those taking part will want to wait until the latter part of April.

There is a trophy at stake (left), if it can ever be taken back from the Sturge team. We can only but try! Each team is to write an account of their outing and the number of owls seen. I will be the judge again, if that is fine with the rest of the Bird Wing group, and to date, no one has come forward offering anything to the contrary. I will take into account not only the number of owls seen, but also the type of owls,

particularly our Central area target owls, the Barred and the Northern Saw-whet, as well as the writing and the dramatic effect. In past years, each article had its merits and all were well-written, but the sheer number of owls seen by the Sturge team last year was remarkable compared to other teams, even the team with the most drama, the one that on their way home at midnight after the survey, saw a man at the side of a dark road holding a Barred Owl with the police in attendance. For drama, that was pretty hard to beat.

If you want to form a team, contact Kathy Jones at Bird Studies Canada, volunteer@birdscanada.org, for available routes.

Great Canadian Birdathon:

This fun annual event to raise money for Bird Studies Canada, with a percentage going to a nature club of one's choice, will take place over a 24-hour period during the weekend of May 25 and 26, from 1:00 p.m. on Saturday, May 25, to 1:00 p.m. on May 26. **Please let me know who will be participating.** There is also a trophy at stake, won last year by the team of Dick Tafel, Lori Anderson, Jackie Manella and Renee Levesque.

Last year, Dick was the only team member to seek donations and directed a percentage of what he donated to Bird Wing. Gary has now received that percentage from Bird Studies Canada which he has safely deposited into our bank account, increasing that amount by \$330.00. We feel rich. If no local birdathoner will be collecting donations this year, please donate to Bird Studies Canada at <https://www.canadahelps.org/en/charities/bird-studies-canada/p2p/birdathon19/page/support-birdwatching/> or a birdathoner you may know who is collecting donations.

Great Backyard Bird Count:

The statistics for the great Backyard Bird Count (GBBC) are in and as of March 22 they are:

Checklists submitted from around the world: 205,779
Number of countries that participated: 177
Number of species recorded: over 6700
Number of checklists submitted in Canada: 14,620 plus
Number of species recorded in Canada: 241
Top participating countries in order of participation:
United States, India, Canada, Australia and Spain
Top participating Canadian province: Ontario, followed
by British Columbia, with Ontario and Quebec
reporting a good number of Evening Grosbeaks,
Common Redpolls (right), Pine Grosbeaks, Bohemian
Waxwings and Snowy Owls. (We have yet to see a



good number of Bohemian Waxwings in our neck of the woods.)

Countries in which the greatest number of species was observed: Columbia, Ecuador, India, Brazil and Mexico – from 1103 species to 760.

Global Big Day:

Saturday, May 4 marks Global Big Day. This is an event for eBirders, so be sure all who post sightings on eBird enter all the species you see on that day. “[Last year's Global Big Day](#) featured more than 30,000 people across 171 countries, collectively reporting 7,026 species of birds—about two-thirds of the world's bird species in a single day!” May 4 also marks the first Saturday of the Laurier Woods bird walks with Dick, so if any eBirders walk that day with Dick and the birds, be sure to enter your sightings. There may not be a lot of warblers seen then and it could be that snow will be seen in some or many parts of the woods.

Project FeederWatch:

Project FeederWatch ended on Friday, April 5. It is a citizen science project that marks the beginning and end of winter. Some years it goes by remarkably quickly, but I did not find that to be the case this year, perhaps because winter started early in November and is still ongoing to some extent. I did manage to get American Robins, a Song Sparrow and a Dark-eyed Junco on the last day of this project, and although Friday is not generally my count day, I may make it so this count week because how can anyone mark the end of winter without seeing a robin! A fair number of us in Bird Wing participated in Project FeederWatch, and one who promised he would, did not – maybe he was too busy giving money to Bird Studies Canada!



Grant McKercher

SwiftWatch:

Allison Bannister, Director, Nipissing Naturalists Club, is looking for volunteers to participate in this year's SwiftWatch. The key dates for volunteering are **May 22, May 26, May 30 and June 3**, but if some are willing to volunteer beyond that time period, Bird Studies Canada will use the count data up until fall migration. It may be roosts in Callander and Powassan will be added this year depending on how quickly or slowly spring comes. If you would like to volunteer for this important citizen science project, contact Allison at uebannis@lakeheadu.ca, and if you can, indicate the evenings

you will be available so Allison can make sure all roosts are covered on key nights without overcrowding the roost sites.

The Great Chickadee Debate:

While countries around the world, even Canada, are involved in weighty political debates and controversies, the State of Maine has its own unique controversy and debate that may split the voters of Maine into two groups, and I don't mean Republicans and Democrats. Way back in 1927, Maine named the chickadee as its state bird, and although this was many years before most of us were born, recently this has caused a State uproar. It is not that the chickadee isn't wanted as the State bird, but what species of chickadee should it be. A chickadee is not a bird, but a family of birds, two of which are found in Maine, the Black-capped and the Boreal. So which is it to be, the one everyone knows and sees, the Black-capped, or the other, the Boreal, most never see or hear, but one that is a chickadee, nevertheless. (Both are in the photo below.) Thanks to Steve Pitt for alerting us to this weighty issue.



Scott Dewey

The Great Declutterer:

Over the last few meetings, Dick has brought bird books and magazines and pieces of paper that he found during his home decluttering program, items he doesn't want but wants to give to us to further clutter our own homes. One of the items I took that may be of interest to me as the Bird Wing Scribe is a list of species Martin Parker made based on Bird Wing newsletters from March 1992 to November 1997, entitled *Noteworthy Bird Observations from Bird Wing Newsletters*.



Bruce Tuck

Because this is March's Bird Wing report, I will list the two birds reported in the March 1992 newsletter: a Northern Cardinal at Greg Boxwell's house in Rutherglen in early December 1991, and a Boreal Owl seen at Pat Stamp's yard on Wasi Road in February 1992. Pat's owl was later found dead. Martin also predicted that in the next few years we can expect to see and hear more House Finches, at left. Hindsight has shown that this turned out not to be the case, although there have been occasional sightings of this finch. I had one at my feeder in January 2018, but it is a bird that continues to be rare in our area. I don't know from Martin's report why he made this prediction.

Dick suggested that someone in the group might want to go through all the more recent Bird Wing reports and make the same list. None of us took Dick up on the suggestion, but if anyone changes his/her mind, Bird Wing reports from April 2014 to present have been posted by Sarah on the Nipissing Naturalists Club's website: <https://www.nipnats.com/bird-wing/bird-wing-meetings-outings/>. I don't know what happened to the Bird Wing newsletters/reports prior to that date.

Bird Bash:

The next Bird Bash takes place the last weekend in April, **April 27 and 28**. We did very well in the number of species seen in wintry March this year. We can only do better in terms of the species seen in April. Participation in the monthly Bird Bashes is excellent considering the weather we have had so far during this year's Bird Bash weekends.

Bird Wing Meeting:

The next Bird Wing Meeting is a special one that will take place at coworking 176, the former Tweedsmuir Public School at **176 Lakeshore**, at the corner of Gertrude and Lakeshore, on **Tuesday, April 23, from 6:30 to 9:00 p.m.** We have been assigned **Meeting Room A**. I don't know what room that is, but wander the halls and look for people who look like birders. It is not special because it is being held here as opposed to Laporte's, but special because **Michael Arthurs will be talking about and presenting a slide show on owls**, using photos he recently took on Amherst Island.

Last month, I ended the Bird Wing report with a heart-warming robin story in honour of St. Patrick's Day; this month with a joke, a slightly edited version, in honour of the arrival of the Turkey Vulture. I can't recall who sent me this groaner, probably Steve Pitt.

*A Turkey Vulture carrying two dead raccoons boards a plane.
The stewardess looks at the vulture and says,
"I'm sorry, sir, only one carrion allowed per passenger."*