

# *Bird Wing Report*



*Nipissing Naturalists Club*  
*July 2019*



## *Bird Wing Report*

# July Bird Wing outing



*Gary Sturge*

Despite the photo above showing Bird Wingers (from left) posing, talking, pondering, and fiddling with equipment, with only one member actually looking for birds, we all nevertheless saw at least 24 species during our outing to Callander Lagoon on July 23. (The other member present is invisible in the photo – he was busy taking it.)

Lest you think some of us seem serious in the photo, do not be fooled. We were a joyful group of birders, showing our sense of humour when from across Cranberry Road on the Osprey Links, a golfer, curious as to why we all had binoculars, called over to us to ask us what we were doing. Looking for golf balls was our reply. (I exaggerate slightly. One member thought of the deadpan response after the fact.)

There were not many different species of shorebirds, but there were three –many Killdeer, many Spotted Sandpipers and a lone Lesser Yellowlegs (right).



*Renee Levesque*



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Five Great Blue Herons were in one lagoon cell and later, a sixth one flew overhead. Many Canada Geese also occupied the same cell, as did 3 American Crows and one Ring-billed Gull.

Ducks included Green and Blue-winged Teal, many Wood Ducks, mainly female with their young, an American Black Duck (below) and three Common Goldeneye.



*Stephen O'Donnell*

Sparrows heard were Song and White-throat. The only warbler heard was a Common Yellowthroat.

As expected, there were Red-winged Blackbirds, although not many were seen, about 6. Three were adult males and the other three were young or females. There were probably more about, but I saw only 6.

Only one swallow to my knowledge was seen, a Tree Swallow (right) sitting on the wire as I arrived at the lagoon. And one Double-crested Cormorant was seen by some flying over the lagoon.



*Renee Levesque*



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Two Blue Jays were seen and a third heard in the distance. After a bit of an absence, the Blue Jays have once again made their presence loudly known. A couple of Cedar Waxwings were also heard without making their presence known to most.

European Starlings were also seen and will be discussed later in this report.

The piece de resistance, for me anyway, occurred when we were ready to leave and were back on Cranberry Road. There sitting right on the tip of a dead tree was the Olive-sided Flycatcher (right), a flycatcher I had not yet seen this year, although I had heard one earlier in the month. This time it stayed silent, not quickly asking for its three beers! (For those not familiar with the Olive-sided's song, it sounds as if it is saying *quick, three beers.*)



*Dominic Sherony, Wikimedia Commons*



*Renee Levesque*

And as we got into our cars and were about to drive off, another first sighting for me this year, a Green Heron (left) flying home for the evening.

Birds were not the only species observed. We saw a few dragonflies, one of the bluets, perhaps the Marsh Bluet, and some Chalk-fronted Corporals; four deer, one a handsome buck; and a groundhog. And the flower of the evening was the Field Bindweed (*Convolvulus arvensis*), a twining plant that looks like the Morning Glory. The flowers of this plant are white or pink, the white ones prominent at the lagoon.

- *Renee Levesque*



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## Stories from the field

*Buddy Myles: It is Buddy's delightful photo of a gosling that graces the cover of July's Bird Wing Report.* But it is not the only photo Buddy took of young birds. Below is the equally delightful photo of Northern Shoveler chicks.

Reports Buddy, *"As I approached the second cell at Verner Lagoon, there they were, just hanging out on the shoreline below me while Mom had her head down taking a snooze. No wonder she needed a rest – imagine looking after such a large brood! The chicks were wide awake watching me but didn't make a peep. I snapped a couple of photos and noticed Mom still had her head down but with her eyes now fixated on me. I backed up and moved on my way hoping she would get some more shut-eye."*



*Buddy Myles*

These Northern Shoveler chicks look a lot like Mallard chicks, but their beaks are larger and if you look closely, you will see they are convex-shaped as opposed to the concave shape of the Mallard chicks.

There is a possibility that some cute little chicks at the lagoons could be hybrids. Mallards commonly crossbreed with American Black Ducks, American Wigeon, Northern Shovelers, Green-winged Teal and Gadwalls.

*Steve Pitt: Steve did not get any photos of Wood Duck chicks, but he did get a photo of Daddy Duck protecting its tree cavity nest on Steve's Talon Lake property (see photo at the top of the next page).*

Wood Ducks, like some other ducks, are cavity-nesting ducks, preferring tree holes made by woodpeckers, decay or fire. As an alternative, they make use of nest boxes placed in wooded

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areas near ponds or marshes. When the chicks are only a day to four days old, they jump one by one from their nest, a nest which can be as high as 20 m or 65 feet above the ground. They make a leap of faith to the ground or water before they can even fly. They are so light that they bounce when they hit the ground without hurting themselves. They then make their way to the water, sometimes as far away as 1.6 km or 1 mile, where their mother awaits them – or if the nest box is directly over the water, they jump into the water.

Reports Steve: *“Although I did not see the chicks make the jump, mom later brought the brood up to our lawn when they were just tennis ball sized fuzzy-wuzzies. I never got a decent photo of the fuzzy stage because Momma Duck was very sharp-eyed and skittish. She would sound the retreat alarm as soon as I noticed them and they were gone.”*



Steve Pitt

You might want to check out the short video of six Wood Duck chicks jumping out of their nest box: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Dbllfwi3Gw>. I wondered as I watched it how it is determined which chick jumps first.

You may recall from one of the winter Bird Wing reports that Steve frequently fed Red-breasted Nuthatches from his hand. Well, one pair of those same nuthatches has now fledged its young. Steve reports, *“One of my Red-breasted Nuthatches has returned after taking a hiatus and has brought back an offspring for an introduction. It wouldn't land on my hand like its parent, but it landed within a foot of me. The parent looked as if it had a pretty gruelling summer – its*

*feathers were dull and sparse looking, but kids will do that to you. The young nuthatch (at left), by comparison, was plump and perky.”*



The next couple of pages consist of a collage of young birds. The American Robin in the collage is just out of its nest and working up the courage to fly. It took a number of hours to do so, unlike its two siblings.

-Renee Levesque





***From top left clockwise: Common Yellowthroat, Renee Levesque; Great Blue Herons, Peter Ferris; Osprey, Renee Levesque; Common Mergansers, Peter Ferris; and Common Goldeneye, David Rooke.***





*From top left clockwise: Killdeer, Buddy Myles; Mallards, Grant McKercher; Red-eyed Vireo, Renee Levesque; Common Loon, Buddy Myles; and American Robin, Renee Levesque.*



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# Interesting find: Yellow-billed Cuckoo

On June 29, Jessie Barry and Chris Wood from Cornell Lab of Ornithology just happened to be in Cache Bay, an Important Birding Area in Nipissing, and saw a very rare bird for Nipissing, a Yellow-billed Cuckoo.

Jessie and Chris saw the cuckoo, not an easy bird to see even if it weren't rare, for about 10 seconds perched in the open and then a couple of times in flight. They did not hear it calling, although it's usually as a result of its distinctive croaking call that it makes its presence known. It can be heard at a great distance on hot, humid days before there is rain or a thunderstorm, and hence its nickname, "rain crow".

After Jessie and Chris posted their sighting on eBird, some of us high-tailed it to Cache Bay, but to my knowledge no one else saw or heard it.



*Wikimedia Commons*



*Peter Ferris*

It is a bird mainly of eastern United States and southern Ontario and Quebec. But although rare for our area, according to eBird, it has been seen a few times in Algonquin Park with a sighting reported as far back as 1977, and more recently in 2016 and 2018, with 4 sightings in 2016 and one in 2018. There was also one sighting reported in Algonquin Park in 2007.

In our immediate area, Bird Wing member, David Rooke, saw one at Seguin Beach on the south shore of Lake Nipissing in July 2017, and Peter Ferris took a photograph of one in the summer of 2018 ( at left) near where the Great Blue Herons roost beyond Birch's Road. Dick Tafel also had one at his Trout Lake home many years ago.



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It is a bird that is not easy to see because it sits very still on hidden perches with its shoulders hunched to disguise its white underparts, patiently waiting for its prey, primarily large hairy caterpillars. It is a fan of tent caterpillars, eating as many as 100 in one sitting, so it can be found in deciduous forests whenever there is an infestation of tent caterpillars. Best to find one by listening for its guttural, croaking call: [https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Yellow-billed\\_Cuckoo/overview](https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Yellow-billed_Cuckoo/overview). However, during migration, it is silent, and in late summer, it coos almost like a dove.

It is a large, slim bird with a curved, yellow bill almost as long as its flat head. Its very long tail is quite distinctive with large white spots on the back of it. When perched, it is these bold white tail spots that are the most visible feature of the bird. It is warm brown above with rusty patches in its wings, the patches mainly seen in flight. Unlike our Black-billed Cuckoo (at right) which has a very distinctive red eyering, the Yellow-billed has a yellow orbital ring. Other differences between the two cuckoos include the rufous patches on the Yellow-billed's wings, its yellow bill and its more prominent white-tipped tail.

It breeds in dense deciduous stands, forest edges, tall thickets and overgrown orchards. Sometimes, especially when there is an abundance of food, it will lay its eggs in other birds' nests, the way the Brown-headed Cowbird does. It seems to prefer the nests of the American Robin, the Gray Catbird and the Wood Thrush.

It is a long-distance migrant, migrating mostly to South America for the winter.

There has been a general decline in its population in recent decades and it has disappeared entirely from some western areas.

*-Renee Levesque*

*Sources: All About Birds, Cornell Lab of Ornithology; Audubon Field Guide; eBird; National Geographic.*



*Renee Levesque*



## *Bird Wing Report*

# European Starling: pest, mimic and dancer

As we all know, the European Starling is not native to North America. It is native to Europe, northern Africa, India, Nepal and the Middle East, but has successfully been introduced to New Zealand, Australia, South Africa, North America and several Caribbean Islands, and has then successfully migrated from these countries to other countries.

The invasion of North America began in 1890 when 60 starlings were released at Central Park in NYC. (This introduction was featured in the Netflix series *Ozark* – season 1, episode 7.) It is estimated that of the individuals released there are now 200 million starling descendants distributed across most of North America, making it the most successful avian invasion we have experienced so far on our continent.



*Renee Levesque*

On the other hand, this introduction of starlings has resulted in the starling becoming one of the world's 100 worst invasive species, with its annual agricultural damage in the US alone estimated at about US\$800 million. It eats and damages fruit in orchards and digs up newly-sown grain and sprouting crops. However, on the positive side, it consumes a vast number of insect pests.

The Breeding Bird Survey indicates the starling has decreased significantly since about 1970. It is not well-known why this has happened, but in Great Britain and Europe where there have also been declines, it is thought to be linked to changing agricultural habits and the loss of pastureland.

The starling is also one of the main competitors for nest cavities, taking over cavities that would normally be used by native birds like the Eastern Blue Bird.



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However, a study in 2003 found this not to be as problematic as originally thought, that only sapsuckers showed declines while other species held their own.

People used to buy and keep starlings as pets, enamoured with their ability at mimicry, their ability to pick up phrases and expressions. One who kept a starling as a pet was none other than Wolfgang Mozart, whose starling could sing part of his *Piano Concerto No. 17 in G Major*. See:

<http://www.starlingtalk.com/mozart1.htm>.

No matter what you might think of the starling, it offers us a magnificent aerial ballet. Flocks of starlings, called murmurations, can be seen in the sky in the early evening, sometimes in some parts of the world as many as 300,000 silhouetted against the sky.

These flocks perform a ballet, every bird knowing which way to turn to stay in sync with the rest of the flock. Recent studies show that each bird modifies its position in relation to the 6 or 7 birds directly surrounding it.



John Holmes, Wikimedia Commons

During our outing there was a

murmuration consisting of about 250 starlings, and later of about 30 starlings. The largest murmurations I have seen in North Bay occur in the area of Gormanville Road and Main Street West.

A must-watch video is a mumuration video (link below) sent to me by Katherine Byers and Steve Pitt: <https://www.youtube.com/embed/88UVJpQGi88>

*-Renee Levesque*

*Sources: All About Birds, Cornell Lab of Ornithology; Birds of North America; Government of Canada; Mozart's Concerto No. 17; Starling Talk; Wikipedia.*





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If your home, cottage or farmland property boasts a streambank, lakefront, river or watercourse, you may be eligible for free shoreline plants and planting assistance as part of the North Bay-Mattawa Conservation Authority's ***Restore Your Shore Program***. Up to 20 property owners can have their shoreline planted this year with native trees, shrubs and plants to help improve the water quality of our lakes, rivers and streams.

Planting of the shoreline will prevent erosion and run off, enhance fish habitat, and reduce the addition of phosphorus into our waterways which contributes to the growth of blue green-algae. And a healthy shoreline is important for birds.

Julie Falsetti, Stewardship Lead Hand, is currently booking plantings for this fall, and so that the program can hit the ground running next spring, is also setting up plantings for 2020.

If you wish to take part in this program, contact North Bay-Mattawa Conservation Authority at 705 474-5420 or visit [www.restoreyourshore.ca](http://www.restoreyourshore.ca).



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## Upcoming events

**Bird Walks:** Rachel Sturge, daughter of Gary and Connie Sturge and Assistant Professor, Department of Biology Sciences, University of Toronto, Scarborough Campus, will be leading **two bird walks at Restoule Provincial Park on Saturday, August 3, and Saturday, August 10, starting at 9:00 a.m.**

Although these walks were arranged for campers, non-campers can take part, but will have to pay the provincial park day-use fee.

I was reading online that Restoule has over 90 species of birds, including the Peregrine Falcon (at right).

**Bird Bash:** The next Bird Bash takes place over the weekend of **August 24 and 25.**

**Bird Wing Outing:** The August outing to Cache Bay and surrounding area, always a popular one, will take place on **Tuesday, August 27.** As we did last year by popular demand, we will start half an hour earlier than normal for an evening outing because daylight in late August is not at the premium it was in June and even July. You can see from the photo at left



Bruce Tuck

that in 2017 we were practically birding in the dark!

**So meet at the parking lot of the former Sears, now Urban Planet, at 6:00 p.m. sharp.** Last year, among many birds, we saw a couple of Green Herons, a Sora, three Trumpeter Swans, Caspian and Common Terns and a large flock of Common Nighthawks.



Renee Levesque