



*Wilson's Snipe, David Rooke*

## **Bird Wing Report July 2020**

*Text by Renee Levesque, with articles by Grant McKercher, Gary Sturge and Dick Tafel  
Photos as indicated*

Other years, there would have been a Bird Wing outing on the fourth Tuesday of July and one of the places where we would have birded, if not the only place depending on the number of shorebirds present, would have been Callander Lagoon. This summer being our first Covid summer, and hopefully our only Covid summer, we did not have a July outing. However, on July 20, Dick Tafel and I did go to Callander Lagoon despite the fact there was work going on and we were fortunate to find some shorebirds in addition to the many Mallards and Canada Geese, some Wood Ducks, a couple of Great Blue Herons, a Turkey Vulture, a couple of Song Sparrows, a Common Yellowthroat and a few Tree Swallows.

Shorebirds seen were 20 or more Killdeer, 6 to 8 Spotted Sandpipers, 2 Wilson's Snipes (one pictured at top of the page), a Short-billed Dowitcher (seen in photo at right), a Pectoral



*Buddy Myles*



Sandpiper, a few Least Sandpipers and 3 Lesser Yellowlegs. A week or so earlier, we saw a couple of Solitary Sandpipers. Some of these shorebirds were seen again by Dick, me and Grant McKercher during July's Bird Bash.

Shorebirds, long-distance migrants, begin their migration south in late June. For more information on their migration and who arrives first and where and when we can expect each species, see Ron Pittaway's article:

<http://www.ofo.ca/site/page/view/articles.southboundshorebirds>

The other lagoon in which some shorebirds can be seen to date is Verner Lagoon. There is not much in the way of shorebirds so far at Powassan and Warren Lagoons, although recently Dick and I saw an interesting duck at Warren Lagoon, a male Canvasback (pictured at right), with its ruddy head and neck, white back and red eye. It is a large diving duck that breeds in small lakes, ponds and deep-water marshes. Although it is a powerful diver, capable



*Frank Schulenburg, Wikipedia*

of depths of 9 metres or more, it is also a duck that dabbles, rooting with its large bill in shallower water for plant material and invertebrates. It is also a powerful flier, but awkward on land because of its large size, short legs and webbed feet.

During July's Bird Bash, we also saw at Warren Lagoon an early female Bufflehead, and during June's Bird Bash, Chris Sukha saw a Redhead Duck and an American Coot. So Warren, although devoid of shorebirds as of the writing of this report, is getting some nice water birds. Other birds seen during July will be covered in Dick's July Bird Bash Report.

The rest of this report is comprised of three articles, each with an introduction by me: Gary Sturge on the survey results of the Canadian Nightjar Survey; Dick Tafel on a Common Loon family in Trout Lake; and Grant McKercher on a canoe trip he and Dick took in search of the threatened Least Bittern.

## Canadian Nightjar Survey

### *Introduction*

By Renee Levesque

On June 30, Gary and Connie Sturge conducted their third Canadian Nightjar Survey, a survey they began in 2018, after I was contacted by Kevin Hannah, Population Assessment Biologist, Canadian Wildlife Service, Environment and Climate Change Canada, asking if I knew who might be interested in volunteering for a vacant route close to where Gary and Connie live. They are a couple who seem to like these nighttime sojourns, so I knew they would gladly volunteer and they did. Management of this survey has been transferred to Birds Canada for long-term management, but still supported by Environment and Climate Change Canada.



Queen's Printer of Ontario

The nightjars in Ontario are the Common Nighthawk and the Eastern Whip-poor-will (above), aerial insectivores that have seen a significant decline. Both are federally listed as threatened, although the Committee on the Status of Endangered Species in Canada recently reassessed the Common Nighthawk as being of Special Concern. When he was young, my husband who grew up on McIntyre Street West in North Bay heard and saw many nighthawks during the spring and summer, so much so he can quickly identify them by their sharp, buzzy *peent* before any are in sight.

The Common Nighthawk and Eastern Whip-poor-will are active at dawn and dusk, although the whip-poor-will will stay active all night if there is moonlight. To see these well-camouflaged birds, especially the whip-poor-will, during the day can be very difficult. Last summer Gary Chowns, whose photo is at right, happened to see a Common Nighthawk



Gary Chowns



roosting in a tree in Laurier Woods, one that stayed there for the day enabling some of us to get a peek - and even then it wasn't easy seeing it despite the fact we knew in which tree it was. Although Common Nighthawks are usually solitary, during migration they flock in large groups, so if you haven't seen one yet, you may get to see them during migration. Some of us will recall one evening in late August during a Bird Wing outing two years ago seeing quite a large flock on Leclair Road in West Nipissing.

I have never seen an Eastern Whip-poor-will, just heard it endlessly chanting its name, *whip-poor-will*. When I was young, I heard it a lot more frequently than today. In our immediate area, I have heard it only at Dreany Lake off Hwy 17 East near Centennial Crescent.

In *The Woodland Observer*, September 2018 issue, I featured Gary and Connie's first survey, in which they heard only one Common Nighthawk and no Eastern Whip-poor-wills, but it was windy and noisy with traffic that night. However, they made up for that in 2019 with 9 Common Nighthawks, although no Eastern Whip-poor-wills – and also a vixen with her 4 kits, a drumming Ruffed Grouse and a flying American Woodcock.

## ***Survey Protocol***

*By Gary Sturge*

Because nightjars are rarely seen, in preparation for the survey, surveyors are encouraged to listen to various birding websites to familiarize themselves with the call and “wing booms” of the Common Nighthawk, as well as the signature call of the Eastern Whip-poor-will. As part of its courting ritual, the Common Nighthawk makes a *whooshing* sound as it dives with its wings. Several wing booms in a minute are significant, indicating one serious dude! As for the Eastern Whip-poor-will, well, if *whip-poor-will* is heard over and over again, there is no doubt it is the Eastern Whip-poor-will.



*Common Nighthawk, Gavin Keefe Shaefer, Wikipedia*

Those familiar with the Nocturnal Owl Survey will recognize the similarities between the surveys. However, the Canadian Nightjar Survey is more detailed at each stop and the manner of recording a bird is different.

The survey is to be done between mid-June and mid-July, preferably within a week on either side of the full Moon, and begins 30 minutes before the exact sunset time for your locale. There are 12 stops and at each, the surveyor listens for 6 minutes in one-minute intervals, so it helps to have someone with a stop watch or smart phone who can time this. Weather conditions, noise and traffic are also recorded at each stop, as well as the temperature at the start and finish times. With 9 or 10 minutes per stop, you should be finished in two hours and on your way home.

## ***Bug eaters and creatures that go bump in the night, Survey Results 2020***

*By Gary Struge*

We picked June 30 since it was about a week before the full moon. Not only was it the best time to hear Whip-poor-wills, but also it was a clear warm evening with perfect conditions, no wind or cloud.

Driving to our first stop on Hwy 524, we had a race with a wild turkey along the highway until I forced it back into the woods. We also met up with one of the many porcupines around this year. It was walking down the highway, same direction as we were going. I honked to try and get it off the road, but it just wouldn't listen.

We set up and within 2 minutes we had a Common Nighthawk calling nearby. It proceeded to call for the rest of the 6-minute interval. It was still before the actual sunset and we had never had one here or even thought we ever would, so we were excited, anticipating a good night!

The next 2 stops were disappointing, but driving between stops 3 and 4 with our windows open, we heard another nighthawk. Unfortunately it was an "unofficial" call, but again our expectations were raised.

At stop 5, we saw a Barred Owl fly across the highway. At stop 6, we had a nighthawk within the first 2 minutes. However, at this stop and the next, there was a lot of traffic, 7 vehicles (very noisy on the road), although we did manage to hear another Barred Owl. We suspect the traffic noise may have discouraged some nighthawks from calling.

At stop 8, a noisy motorcycle went by and then returned. Although this was very annoying, the driver was checking to make sure we were okay. After we finally got rid of him, we heard another nighthawk in the last minute.

Nothing at stop 9, but because stops 10 and 11 are off the highway on King's Road, we held out hope since we got nighthawks here the past two years. But alas no.

Finally we got to stop 12, the last stop, which is at the cemetery by the second entrance. We set up. It was dark but the moon was showing. There didn't used to be graves in the grassy area where we set up until sometime earlier this year. Now there are 4 or 5 at the back by the woods. Relatives had put up solar powered lights at several of them. All was quiet until minute 4 when something crashed near the woods about 100 feet east of us. I had been using my flashlight to help me record information, and Con's night vision is not good, so we could barely

see. After our burst of adrenalin, something – we couldn't see what – slowly walked out onto the road and proceeded to walk around. Finally, as it made its way down into the ditch on the other side of the road, I could just make out the back of a large deer!

We breathed a sigh of relief and were able to laugh that one off, but no sooner had we more or less recuperated when we heard a dry loud cough coming from behind the tombstones near the woods. More adrenalin! I shone my small flashlight over the graves and surrounding woods but naught, no stalking ghouls, probably just a disapproving porcupine.

Then time was up and we gladly hopped in the car to head home, mildly satisfied that we heard 4 Common Nighthawks; saw or heard 2 Barred Owls; saw a Wild Turkey, a porcupine or two, a deer, a fox as we neared home; and thankfully no ghouls or ghosts!

**If interested in doing what Gary and Connie do in terms of the Canadian Nightjar Survey, and why wouldn't you want to have this much nighttime fun, contact Andrew Coughlan, Director Quebec, at [acoughlan@birdscanada.org](mailto:acoughlan@birdscanada.org).**



*Oriana Pokorny*

## **The Great Northern Diver, a Canadian Icon**

### ***Introduction***

*By Renee Levesque*

My late brother-in-law was not a birder, but he loved the Common Loon and his great ear for sound and music enabled him to mimic the loon's four calls: the tremolo, the yodel, the hoot, and the very familiar mournful wail, often made during the night.



Most of us may not be able to mimic to perfection the calls the way my brother-in-law could, but I know no one who doesn't love our iconic bird of the summer, the bird of our northern freshwater lakes. No matter how often we hear the loon, especially its nighttime wail, we never tire of it. It is our summer's song.

There is nothing common about our loon with its black and white, checkered body, its long neck when stretched, its large bill that acts like a dagger and its red eye. It is built so it can expertly dive, up to 60 metres, without even making a splash. Its muscular legs and feet are located at the rear of its body to help it propel when diving – legs and feet that can also be splayed out to the side, making it a graceful and nimble swimmer.

It has to be an expert diver because its diet consists mostly of small fish. No wonder in Europe the loon is called a diver and the Common Loon, the Great Northern Diver, a rather more appropriate name, I think. It can stay underwater for as long as three minutes, seemingly longer when you are waiting for it to surface so you can get its photo.



*Steve Pitt*

It is not a bird that likes any old lake. It prefers clear lakes so it can see its prey and lakes that have an abundance of fish. It also needs lakes that offer areas for nesting. And because its wings are small, it needs a large enough lake so it can take off. If you have ever watched a loon take off, you know it has to have enough water surface so it can flap and run before becoming airborne, much like a plane needs a runway. But once in the air, although it is not able to glide or soar because of its small wings, it has no trouble flying, travelling for several hours and reaching speeds of more than 100 km an hour.

Although the loon is an expert swimmer and diver, it is not an expert walker. Because of the position of its legs, it can't walk well on land, so it needs to make its nest close to a bank, preferably with a steep drop-off so it can access the nest from underwater. It tends to use the same site from year-to-year for its one brood of 1 to 2 eggs. Within hours of hatching, the young ride on their parents' back, another wonderful iconic sight if we are lucky enough to live on or be on a lake where the young have hatched.

Birds Canada runs the Canadian Lakes Loon Survey, suspended this year like most surveys because of Covid-19. It is a survey that doesn't take up much time or effort. Volunteers need only to check on the loons three times over the summer months: in June to see if the loons have returned to their nesting site; in early July to check for hatchlings; and in August to determine if the hatchlings have made it to the age of 6 weeks. If they have, the chances of them fledging in the fall are greatly increased.

Although loons are considered to be a species of least concern, they are vulnerable. Loon chick production is declining and to prevent this, loons need our help. How can we help? By keeping the shoreline natural to provide shelter and food; when boating by slowing down near wetlands and shorelines – wakes can wash out nests and separate the young loons from their parents, making the young easy prey; by steering clear of loons when boating and paddling; by taking garbage and fishing lines to shore for proper disposal; and by not adding pollutants to lakes and rivers.

(Sources: All About Birds, Cornell Lab of Ornithology; Birds Canada; and *Canadian Wildlife*, July/August 2020 issue.)

Our Bird Wing chair, Dick Tafel, fortunately gets to see a pair of loons and their young near his Trout Lake residence each year. Dick is delighted by them, but also concerned. His story follows.

### ***They arrived, they nested, but is all okay?***

*By Dick Tafel*

A few years ago, the Common Loon was voted upon by a large number of Canadians to be our national bird – like the Bald Eagle is in the U.S. Unfortunately, the powers-to-be did not pursue that idea in any formal sense. But it illustrates the important manner that the Common Loon has invested itself within the Canadian consciousness, particularly its loud cries in the stillness of a dark night upon our lakes. Anyone hearing that call has to be amazed at the wonderment of it all. Our loon is indeed an icon!

Trout Lake is a typical lake in Northern Ontario. It has deep, cold waters, various islands and wandering shorelines. And it has had its good share of loons.

As a resident on the lake, each spring, as soon as the ice leaves, I seek out the loons' early arrival. This year was no exception. Two were noted by me on May 7 just at the edge of the large and nearby Hemlock Island. Others had been noted elsewhere in the area as early as April 25. But this was a late year for the lakes to be losing their ice due to a major freeze late in the winter season.

On the evening of June 19, I paddled across our then mirror-like lake to the nearest island. At its northeast corner is a tiny sand spit where loons had in past years nested. And sure enough there, stretched flat out, with its neck upon the low-lying shore trying to hide from me, was a loon upon its nest. I was so glad to observe its presence.



Then on July 12, not far from the front windows of our home, I noticed two adult loons with the tiniest black speck of an infant riding on the back of one for a time, and then floating, seemingly unconcernedly, in their midst. Such an image! The young spend very little time upon the nesting area, going into the water almost immediately after birth. Such a thrill to me!



*Buddy Myles*

## **Least Bittern**

### ***Introduction***

*By Renee Levesque*

I think most of us remember our first sighting, like our first love, of a specific bird and I recall vividly my first sighting of this small, elusive heron. I was not looking for it, but there it was perched on a reed at the edge of the marsh boardwalk at Big Creek, Long Point, with its yellow bill pointed upward, its neck distended and its eyes fixed forward. This is what is known as the bittern pose. It kept its pose long enough for me to snap a photo. I have not seen a Least Bittern as well or as close all these years later. And when looking for a bird I want to see but haven't seen, my nemesis bird so to speak, I think back to this heron and make myself not look for it. My thinking being, if I don't look for it, it will come.



*Renee Levesque*



The Least Bittern is a furtive heron that nests in freshwater and brackish marshes, preferring marshes with tall vegetation, like cattails or bulrushes, interspersed with patches of open water. By compressing its body, it can move stealthily through dense stands of these reeds. Its long, flexible toes enable it to climb high in the marsh vegetation from where it patiently looks for prey.

Its nest is well-hidden, constructed by the male sometimes using the foundation of previous nests and sometimes old nests of another species, like the Marsh Wren. With a furtive bird and a well-hidden nest, it is no wonder the Least Bittern is elusive, “often little more than a voice in the reeds.” But if our wetlands continue to vanish, the Least will not even be that.

And this takes us to the next story from Grant about his and Dick’s canoe trip in search of this elusive bird, considered threatened in Ontario.

***Birding Canoe Trip, Callander Bay Wetland Conservation Reserve***  
*By Grant McKercher*



***Grant McKercher***

Dick Tafel and I explored some of the Callander Bay Wetland Conservation Reserve (Callander Marsh) by canoe on July 13, 2020, in the hope of finding a Least Bittern (*Ixobrychus excilis*). We knew the Least had been seen other years in Cache Bay, but there had not been reports of



any being seen in the Callander Marsh to our knowledge. Dick thought that it should be an ideal habitat for this species and that a search would be in order.

We set out from my home at the end of Marine Drive and paddled along the north shore of Callander Bay to the marsh area. We first entered the marsh via a small creek that drains into Callander Bay. You can paddle up this creek for about 200 to 300 metres before coming to a low beaver dam that stretches across the



*Grant Mckercher*

width of the creek. All along are dense, tall, cattails. There is a small copse of deciduous trees on the east side of the creek – a good place to hear and see warblers. We were met first with the ubiquitous Red-winged Blackbirds, the males loudly vocalizing to defend their territories, and an occasional female flying up from the reeds, likely near her nest site. Three or four Marsh Wrens were also very vocal, defending their territories. We must have been quite close to a nest site because one of the wrens (pictured above) became quite agitated and flew up repeatedly from the reeds as we approached the area.

As we continued up the creek, we did not see or hear a Least. A few days prior to this trip, I had flushed an American Bittern in the area, but today even it did not make an appearance. A Great-Blue Heron flew lazily overhead towards the main lake. Swamp Sparrows were calling from all quarters. In the shorter reeds near the mouth of the creek, we saw a mother Common Goldeneye and her four fledglings.

We continued along the edge of the marsh eastward to a channel (the North Channel) that at one time connected to Lake Nipissing. Over the years it has filled in with encroaching marsh vegetation and is no longer a navigable channel out to the main lake. The habitat still looked promising for bitterns, however, so we continued to skirt along the edge of the marsh. Still no luck.

After a brief stretch onshore, we decided to head back home as rain clouds were gathering, but not before one last attempt at searching for an elusive bittern. We nudged the canoe into a

narrow channel off the main channel, but with no joy. Then I heard a call from deep in the reeds. As we retraced our route towards the continuing call, up jumped a small-sized heron-like bird right in front of canoe! It had the characteristic field marks of a Least Bittern (right) – dark cap, back and tail, buffy flanks with light-coloured breast, and white lines at the base of its wings. Persistence had paid off with a successful sighting! A life bird for me and a first this year for Dick.

On the return trip we were surprised to see a Peregrine Falcon in hot pursuit of a male Red-winged Blackbird over the weeds and cattails. Our presence threw him off his laser-like focus momentarily, changing his course slightly, and allowing the Red-wing to escape into the dense cattails. No lunch for the falcon, and a close shave for the blackbird!

The rain held off and we arrived back after about 4 hours and 10 km of canoeing – certainly pleased with the day's outing.

Our bird list for the trip:  
<https://ebird.org/checklist/S71434343>



*R. Bennetts, United States Geological Survey*

## **Bird Bash**

The next Bird Bash will take place over a 24-hour period during the weekend of **August 29 and 30**. A reminder will be sent, but mark the date on your calendars nevertheless.

## **Bird Wing Outing**

Normally the August Bird Wing outing to Cache Bay that would take place this year on **Tuesday, August 25, starting at 6:00 p.m. instead of 6:30**, to give us more daylight to see what there is to see at Cache Bay, will probably not take place. If there is a change in this, I will let you know.