

Bird Wing Meeting

February 28, 2017

Text by Renee Levesque, with excerpts from Lori Anderson, Katherine Byers, Ernie Frayle and Gary Sturge; photos as indicated.

On the last day of February, the second Bird Wing meeting of the year was held in the auditorium of the North Bay Public Library. It was one of those lively meetings where passionate birders expressed their opinions on everything from the trivial, such as whether Grant McKercher was allowed to mention more than one bird in his first go-round, to more weighty subjects like the Motus Station.

It was also a meeting in which we had a special guest, Keitha Richmond of the Barrie Naturalist Club. Keitha informed me after the meeting that so many of the members of the Barrie Naturalist Club are birders and, therefore, it might be a good idea to have, as we do, a wing of their club devoted to bird watchers.

Birds Seen in February: As always, we started by naming ourselves and then two birds we saw since the last meeting. Perhaps the most poignant birds seen were Ken Gowing's and Doug Patterson's returned Barred Owls, Bart and Barry/Barri respectively, owls that were with Ken and Doug most of last winter and owls both Ken and Doug think are perhaps the same owls. When you look at the photos from last year and this, they certainly look the same! Below is Ken's Bart.



And the most surprising birds seen were two migrants: three Herring Gulls seen on February 26 by Grant and Shirley McKercher in Callander Bay skimming the ice and no doubt hoping to get a fish or two from those ice fishing near-by; and a Canada Goose seen on Memorial Drive on February 28 by Kaye Edmonds, and one seen nearby by Brent Turcotte. Perhaps the same goose.

Two winter species not seen in many numbers in our area this winter were Red Crossbills seen by Lori Anderson in the Fossmill Road area of Chisholm Township during February's Bird Bash, and a lone Pine Grosbeak seen on Jocko Point Road by Dick and me, also during the February Bird Bash, although prior to the Bird Bash, Grant saw one in downtown Callander.

Other winter species seen include the American Goldfinch seen by almost everyone in good numbers, although as Grant pointed out, they are now being overtaken at feeders by Pine Siskins as you will see from the photo on the right. There are still some Evening Grosbeaks around and many were seen during February's Bird Bash on Jocko Point Road by Dick and me. Not many Purple Finch have been seen this winter, but Dick saw two at his feeder during the February Bird Bash.

And then there were the two woodpeckers not commonly seen. Renee saw a Black-backed Woodpecker (below) in the wooded area behind her house, and Rob Rodger saw a Red-bellied Woodpecker at his place in town. Mary Young in Corbeil has had one most days throughout the winter, though I am not sure if it is still there. Other woodpeckers seen include Connie Sturge's Pileated and Rob's Downy.



Photo by Renee Levesque



The little Brown-headed Cowbird, now definitely a male, is still riding Santana on a hobby farm west of Powassan.

Santana's owner and perhaps even Santana will miss the cowbird when he leaves, but maybe if there is enough food around and he finds a mate, he won't go far. One warm February afternoon, I watched the cowbird jump on and off Santana's luxurious mane with Santana carefully treading whenever the cowbird was underfoot. They seem to have developed a bond.

Besides Mallards seen by Mary Lord, Common Mergansers were seen during February's Bird Bash by Marc Buchanan, Fred Pinto and Sarah Wheelan in Mattawa, and 28 Common

Photo by Renee Levesque

Goldeneye were seen on the Ottawa River between Thorne and Temiskaming by Dick and me (photo below). Dick also saw two Common Mergansers in Restoule earlier in February.



Photo by Renee Levesque

Other not-so-common birds in our area were the Wild Turkeys and three Ring-necked Pheasants Lori saw in about mid-February in Chisholm Township.

Another species seen most winters but not in great numbers is the Dark-eyed Junco, although there were very few reports of any this winter. But Mary Marrs recently saw one at her place on Lake Talon.

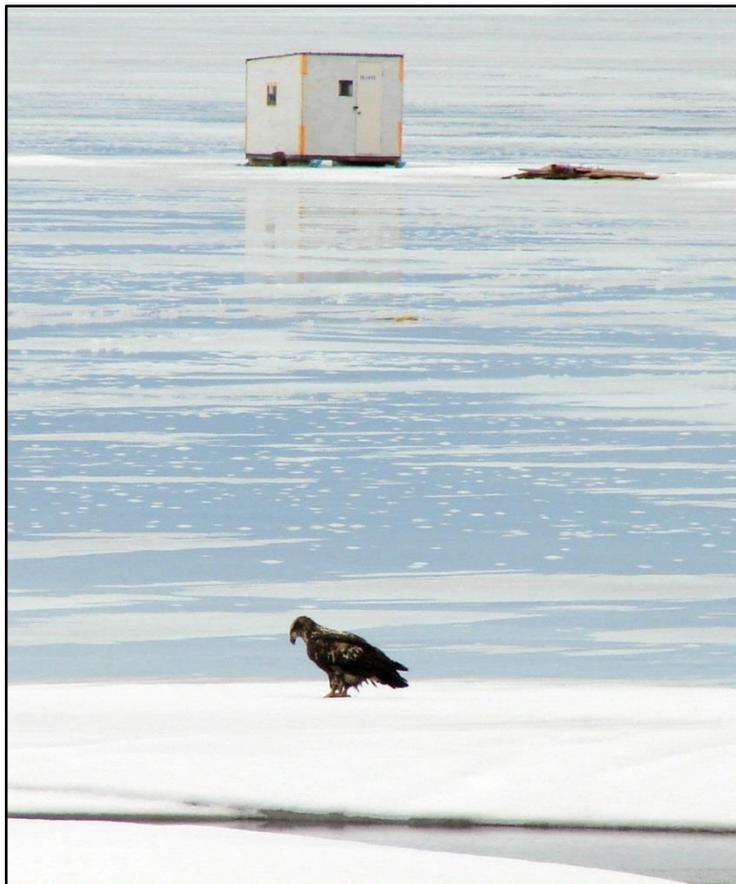


Photo by Kaye Edmonds

We can always rely on Gary Sturge to see a raptor and he did not disappoint. He saw a Cooper's Hawk in his yard – his story in his own words later on in this report, as well as a story of another Cooper's Hawk by Ernie Frayle. And if Gary isn't seeing a raptor, well, Connie is – a Bald Eagle at the Powassan Landfill Site. Kaye and Grant also saw a Bald Eagle, an immature sitting on icy Lake Nipissing waiting for its chance to get a fish (see photo at left). Dick saw a Rough-legged Hawk in Chisholm Township, a hawk that was not seen too often this past fall, a time when we normally see quite a

few in migration. And Lori saw a Red-tailed Hawk at the East Ferris Landfill Site during February's Bird Bash. More on the Red-tailed Hawk later in this report.

One species we have not seen a lot of this winter is the Mourning Dove, although Ken has some at his place; Grant five to 10 at his place; and Marc a single one at his feeder all winter.

Seen surprisingly often during December and January was the Northern Shrike, but not many reports of one in February. However, Irene Kasch saw one near her place. And on Family Day, I saw two Lapland Longspurs and one Horned Lark at the Verner Co-op Feed Store where House Sparrows are bound to be found, although on Family Day, I saw only one there. Gary had one at his feeder for the first time. He usually sees these sparrows only at the farm across the road from his place. More on the House Sparrow later in this report.

As Curtis Irish pointed out, many American Crows and Common Ravens are to be seen and Curtis, who usually hears ravens croak only, was intrigued by a different call he heard the raven make, a gurgling call. Common Ravens do have many calls. To listen to some of these, visit:

https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Common_Raven/sounds.



Photo by Renee Levesque

Ravens have been seen carrying twigs and sticks, a sure sign of nesting. The ravens in my area seem to come to my feeder only when they are nesting. (photo above) The rest of the winter, they ignore the feeder.

Many Snow Buntings can be seen in Chisholm Township, at Lori's and on Memorial Park Drive. And although there do not seem to be many Bohemian Waxwings around as earlier in the year, they are still coming to Kaye's feeder.

Both the White-breasted (below) and the Red-breasted Nuthatches visit Marc's feeder, with the Red-breasted eating out of his hand!



Photo by Renee Levesque

Notes from the Field: Sometimes birders email me with their interesting bird sightings and stories. Below are three of their stories in their own words:

Gary Sturge: *The other morning after the snow day, we came home from dog running. Connie and friends went into the house while I got the tractor going to clear the snow. I just pulled out of the garage with the tractor and there it was sitting on a low branch of a maple tree - the Cooper's Hawk. I slunk into the house to get Connie and the binoculars and when we came out, it was still there, so we had a good view. Then as I was heading to the tractor, it made a beeline for a large spruce tree close to the garage, resulting in an explosion of Blue Jays who were definitely not impressed! I looked to see if the Cooper's got one of the Blue Jays, but was not able to locate it again.*

Just few minutes later, I looked east and there were a couple of Bald Eagles (photo at right). I had seen one earlier from the living room window as I was drinking my second cup of java. While enjoying it, more eagles and some ravens arrived. It was one of those periods in the day when the clouds part and the sun shines and it's just a great day for a fly – or maybe the dump was empty. Every bird was chasing another. It was hard to keep count. Two eagles swooped low over the drive, the lower one turning sideways to fend off a mock attack. They were all seemingly enjoying themselves. Then a few seconds later, they were



Photo by Renee Levesque

gone in every direction. Final tally was six Bald Eagles including the earlier one.

Katherine Byers: We had just returned from snowshoeing and feeding the birds at our farm property. We timed it perfectly because as we were heading out of the field, we saw a beautiful owl. Unfortunately it was not bright enough outside for us to identify what kind of owl. I am hoping that this weekend I will spot it again. What a beautiful bird and a wonderful moment!

Ernie Frayle: There were four American Tree Sparrows feeding under the trees when the Cooper's Hawk (photo at right) got three of them. But when going for the fourth, it sadly snagged its head in the crotch of dried branches and broke its neck. It died with its wings still open and talons extended for a grab. I left it for the ravens or foxes. Nothing goes to waste out there in nature.

Red-tailed Hawk: Those who receive Ontbird notifications may have seen the email from Jon Ruddy, Ottawa-based field birder and a freelance birding guide, about research that is being done on migrant and wintering Northern (*abieticola*) dark morph Red-tailed Hawks in the east. Jon requested birders send photos of **dark** Red-tailed Hawks they may have



Photo by Ernie Frayle

seen in Ontario either as migrants or as wintering birds, along with pertinent details – date seen and location of the sighting.

The email from Jon was of particular interest to me because during the December Bird Bash, Dick and I saw a darker Red-tailed Hawk near the Merrick Landfill Site. I had taken a photo of it, although at the time conditions were not the best for photographing birds (photo at left). After leafing through my field guides with the photo on my computer screen in front of me, I thought it might be a Western Red-tailed, but Jon emailed me after he saw the photo I sent to him to

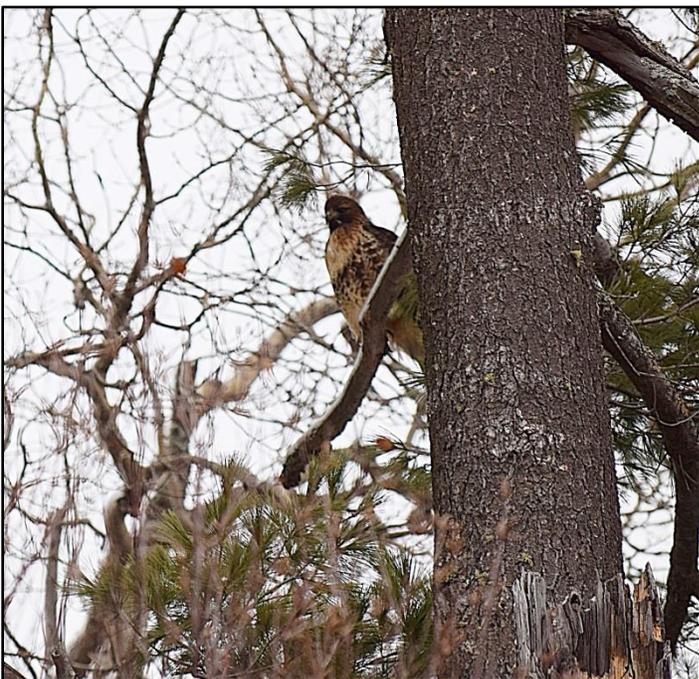


Photo by Renee Levesque

say, “Looks good for a richly-marked light Northern (*abieticola*).” Northern, however, can be even more richly coloured than the one Dick and I saw.

If anyone sees a dark Red-tailed Hawk, you can send your photo and/or documentation to contbird@gmail.com.

Gulls and Ducks: Dick went through some gulls and ducks we should soon be seeing, because spring surely will arrive any day or more likely any week now. The two most common gulls we will see are the Herring, which usually arrives first, and certainly this winter it may have set a record with its early arrival, and the Ring-billed Gull. Besides the Ring-billed having a ring around its bill and being smaller than the Herring, the other sure way to tell a Herring from a Ring-billed is by the colour of its legs and feet (see photos by me below). The Herring has pink legs and feet, the Ring-billed, yellow. If you forget, Dick suggests this word association – red herring. (As Mary pointed out, the other discernible difference is that the Ring-billed likes McDonald’s, although once on St. Joseph’s Island, a Herring did land on the restaurant patio table next to us and proceeded to eat the leftovers.)



Also in the spring, we get a few of the large and handsome Black-backed Gulls which breed on Lake Nipissing, as well as some of the small Bonaparte’s Gulls named after Charles Lucien Bonaparte, French ornithologist and nephew to Napoleon. Glaucous and Iceland Gulls we tend not to see until the fall on their migration south, but if we are lucky, as Grant, Shirley, Marc and Sarah were during the 2016 Birdathon, we might see a Franklin’s Gull. Despite the fact this foursome did not win in terms of numbers, they certainly saw the bird of the Birdathon.

In addition to the Common Goldeneye, diving ducks that we can expect to see as soon as there is open water are Ring-necked Ducks (photo below) with their ring around their bill and NOT their necks – usually the first to arrive; Lesser and Greater Scaup; Common Mergansers which nest on Lake Nipissing and Trout Lake; Hooded Mergansers which nest in small ponds; Red-breasted Mergansers, although not very common here; and Buffleheads, the smallest of the diving ducks, and our most common duck in the spring and fall. Sometimes the male Bufflehead can be confused with the male Hooded Merganser.



Photo by Renee Levesque

And the puddle or dabbling ducks, ducks that don't submerge or dive for their food, but rather feed by dabbling or tipping can be found in lagoons, fresh shallow marshes and rivers, and in the very early spring some in wet fields, are American Wigeon, Blue-winged and Green-winged Teal, Wood Duck (below), Northern Shoveler, Redhead Duck and Northern Pintail. These are in addition to the American Black Duck and the Mallard.



Photo by Renee Levesque

Motus Station: The liveliest discussion of the evening was saved for the Motus Station. Most were in favour of one being installed in our area, on higher ground in Laurier Woods for example, but there was at least one birder against it. More on the Motus Station as the story unfolds. For an explanation on the Motus Station, see the Bird Wing report of November 2016, pages 7 and 8: <https://www.nipnats.com/club-activities/bird-wing/bird-bash-reports/>

Nocturnal Owl Survey: It is almost that time for a team of at least two to once again count and note owls by stopping at fixed intervals along pre-determined routes. Surveys begin half an hour after sunset during **any single evening in April** and take approximately three hours to complete, not counting the time it takes to travel to and from the survey route. The main target species for our area are the Barred Owl and the Northern Saw-whet Owl (at right).

There is a local route open, that of Craig and Elaine Hurst's, that encompasses an area off Tower Drive. If anyone is interested in taking over this route for Elaine and in memory of Craig, please contact Kathy Jones at Bird Studies Canada at volunteer@birdscanada.org.

As usual, I would like each group of surveyors to send me an email outlining their experiences – the date of their survey, how many owls they heard or saw, how many other birds they heard or saw, what the weather was like, what exciting things or what dull things happened along their route. I then pick a winner among the entries. Last year, Lori and Ken won and received a wooden owl they can display in their home for a year before handing it over to the next winner or even keeping it themselves, a distinct possibility, unless a team, like Gary and Connie for example, encounters a charging moose after they play their tape! If that happens or something as dramatic, well, that could seal the deal!

Below is Lori and Ken's winning entry from last April.



Photo by Fred Pinto

There was no wind, no frogs, little running water, no Amish buggies and only two cars when we did our survey route on the 17th. And it turns out, this year was by far our busiest survey ever. Maybe our luck was that it was the third consecutive year we conducted our survey on the 17th.

Bookending our 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 Roads that produced the most excitement. Here we 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 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, three American Woodcocks were preening; a Ruffed Grouse, drumming; and a Wilson's Snipe, willowing. Sort of unbelievable, but true!

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

World Sparrow Day: Yes, Birders, there really is a World Sparrow Day! It is celebrated every year on **March 20** and has been since 2010. However, although most of us became aware of it only this year, it is never too late to start celebrating sparrows.

World Sparrow Day is an international initiative started by the Nature Forever Society of India in collaboration with France's Eco-Sys Action Foundation and numerous other national and international organizations. It is a day set aside to specifically celebrate the House Sparrow, (photo at right) but also to take into account all sparrows and all common birds, especially urban birds, birds often taken for granted.

Tony Fitzpatrick, acclaimed Chicago artist, poet and playwright, who has been fascinated by birds since childhood, and whose focus in his paintings is on birds, writes, "*What I've learned from these common, everyday birds is just how uncommon and remarkable their lives are.*" Tony's paintings of birds are different. Take a look at some of them at:

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/media/secret-birds.html>.

He sees birds "as messengers, as the archaeologists of memory." In his painting of a catbird, for example, entitled *The Magic Catbird*, he prints on the painting, "A catbird frightened by the old whispers of a new century." But I digress.



Photo by Renee Levesque

Over the past 40 years, the House Sparrow has suffered a spectacular decline worldwide. In the UK alone, it seems numbers since the 1970s have dropped by as much as 50%. Mark March 20 on your calendars and let me know what sparrows you see that day. Photos of your sightings



would also be nice. There may not be many sparrow species seen at that early date, but who knows – see photo above of a Song Sparrow I took last year on March 23.

More than Birds: *More than Birds: Adventurous Lives of North American Naturalists* is a book by Val Shushkewich about many well-known and some not so well-known naturalists and ornithologists who all share a passion for nature, conservation and birds. Included in the book are chapters on Louise de Kiriline Lawrence, Robert Bateman and Roger Tory Peterson among many others. Dick purchased the book, read it, then passed it on to me at January’s meeting with the understanding that I would read it before February’s meeting and pass it on to the next reader, a birder present who saw the most interesting bird.

Before I handed over the book, I talked a bit about three of the naturalists, Florence Miriam Bailey (1863-1948); Murray Speirs, (1909- 2001) and a friend of Louise’s; and Robert Nero, 1922 -, also a friend of Louise’s.



An interesting comment from Florence, keeping in mind she said this in the late 1800s, and a reason why birds should not be named for their colour: “*Like other ladies, little feathered brides have to bear their husbands’ names, however inappropriate. What injustice! Here an innocent creature with an olive-green back and a yellowish breast has to go about all her days known as the Black-throated Blue Warbler just because that happens to describe the dress of her spouse.*” (See illustration at left from: https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/National_Geographic_Magazine/Volume_31/Number_4/Friends_of_Our_Forests/Black-throated_Blue_Warbler)

I decided that Grant would be the next birder to read the book because he is the one, along with Shirley, to see the first spring migrants, the three Herring Gulls. (As I write this report, it is minus 16 with a strong and bitter wind, and I wonder where these gulls and the Canada Goose are today.)

Bird Bash: The next Bird Bash takes place the **weekend of March 25 and 26.**

Bird Wing: The next Bird Wing meeting takes place **Tuesday, March 28, in the auditorium of the North Bay Public Library, starting at 6:30 p.m.**

Irish Bird Superstition: One for sorrow, two for joy.

If you spot a single Magpie (photo below), you have to salute it, say hello and make pleasantries with it, even if it is sometimes awkward to do so. If you don't tip your hat and say something along the lines of, "Good morning Mr. Magpie, how is your lady today?", bad luck may come your way. Because Magpies usually mate for life, seeing one on its own is a sign of sorrow, but



seeing two is a sign of joy, and that is why when you see a single magpie you ask after its mate because that implies there actually is a mate. **Happy St. Patrick's Day!**