

# Bird Wing Outing

August 29, 2017

*By Renee Levesque; photos as indicated*

## Outing

We had our last regular outing of the season before we move indoors at Cache Bay where we always seem to go come August. Only this August, it was a week later than normal and I don't think we accounted ahead of time for the fact that it gets darker earlier – a full 13 minutes earlier!! Well, one can see a lot of birds in 13 minutes. Pictured below are some of us looking for birds as daylight fades.



*Renee Levesque*

On the other hand, had we gone on August 22, on the normally scheduled 4<sup>th</sup> Tuesday of the month, we would have been soaked. On that date we had 30.9 mm of rain, and the chances of seeing birds in the stormy weather may have been close to nil.

Despite the 13-minute difference, we saw a number of species, just not as many as we have other years. Last year, we saw two Trumpeter Swans. This year, one, sleeping on the dock by the holiday trailer park.

(As an aside, I returned to Cache Bay the following Tuesday, on September 5, to see if the Trumpeter was still there and it was – asleep once again on the dock. It does not have a wing tag, but has a silver metal tag on its left foot indicating it is a female. I informed Bev Kingdon who happened to be at her cottage on Lake Nosbonsing and with Bev and family,

I returned to Cache Bay the next evening. Turns out this female, who is molting, was tagged in Burlington by Bev herself in November 2012, tagged when she was just a cygnet! Therefore, our Cache Bay lone swan, pictured at right, is now a 6-



Renee Levesque

year-old adult. (It is an interesting story which I plan to write for October's *The Woodland Observer*).

Back to our outing: We also saw among the gulls two Caspian Terns (one below), and enjoyed watching them *kersplash* as they dove bill-first straight into the lake to catch their night-time snacks.



*Renee Levesque*

Out on the lake visible only by a spotting scope were Wood Ducks, Lesser Scaup and a couple of Gadwalls.

We did not see any of the resident Ospreys that night, but some saw a Great Blue Heron. Nor did we see the Pied-billed Grebes, although 8 to 10 were very visible close to shore on August 26 during the Bird Bash.

(As another aside, when I returned to Cache Bay on September 5, I ran into the young man who owns the new boathouse, the one he has been working on for over two years now. He hopes to get it finished before duck hunting season which starts soon. He has stairs built to an upper deck and invited me to have a look from that upper deck. I was a bit nervous climbing the steep, narrow stairs, but there weren't many steps and I made it okay, although coming down with camera and binoculars was a bit tricky. But the view was great and the owner told me any of us

are free to scan for birds from it. In fact, he is going to ask his aunt to make a sign that reads *Birders Welcome* with a painting of a Trumpeter Swan on it. However, although we are welcome to use his deck, I would not recommend climbing the stairs, but use instead his boathouse property to scan the bay for birds.)



*Renee Levesque*

Back to the outing: Perhaps the piece de resistance of the evening was the 600 American Crows flying silently across the sky in the setting sun on their way to roost for the evening. (Some pictured above.) What is it that even the commonest of birds can cause a thrill when we see them fly in such large groups? In the book, *Birdology*, author Sy Montgomery writes about crows and quotes her friend, the poet Howard Nelson, who wrote a poem on the crows massing in the winter in Auburn, N.Y. Entitled “Kingdom of the Crows”, it is a wry poem in which the poet uses a Thesaurus of words, not just a murder, the common term, to describe a flock of crows – hoard, plethora, multitude, throng, legion, host, swarm, mob, rabble, a very big bunch, batch, swad, gang, crush, and “oh definitely a large crowd of crows...”

After the outing, we adjourned to Tim Horton's in Sturgeon Falls where we saw a rare and vintage bird - the 1962 Thunderbird pictured below.



*Renee Levesque*

## **Late Summer Bird Finds**

**Northern Mockingbird:** Dick Tafel and I were on our regular monthly Bird Bash outing on August 26, when we spied a bird on top of an abandoned house on Leclair Road in West Nipissing, a bird we didn't quite recognize immediately. It was a nice surprise to see this Northern Mockingbird (at right) because it is not common in our area. (**Apparently** one was heard in Laurier Woods during the May Birdathon.)

Although our mockingbird did not sing, Northern



*Renee Levesque*

Mockingbirds are famous for their singing repertoire. Both males and females sing, often mimicking other birds, frogs and other sounds they hear, even telephones! They are open-ended learners, learning new sounds throughout their lives, though recent studies indicate this may not necessarily be the case. Each song is a long series of phrases with each phrase repeated 2 to 6 times. Brown Thrashers have a similar song, but their phrases are not as varied and are repeated only 2 to 3 times. Gray Catbirds, others mimics, can sound similar, but their phrases are not as melodic – more nasal, hurried and slurred.

**Black-capped Chickadee:** Fred Pinto had a leucistic Black-capped Chickadee (at right) in his yard on September 3, and I understand a leucistic American Robin was seen in Laurier Woods on August 31.

A leucistic bird's plumage lacks melanin pigment, resulting in white feathers. It is a condition that is inherited, although the extent and the positioning of the white feathers can vary between parent and young and can even skip generations.

The problem with leucism is that it causes feathers to weaken and to be more prone to wear and this can hinder flight. It also causes the bird to become more conspicuous and, therefore, heighten its chances



*Fred Pinto*

of predation.

**Red-winged Blackbird:** There are so many Red-winged Blackbirds to be found that they do not seem terribly special, yet people, even seasoned birders,

are in awe of that blaze of red on the male's wing. Many of the Red-wings we see now are juveniles and females, both of which can look fairly drab, although I don't like to use that term in describing birds.



Steve Pitt

But Steve Pitt

captured a shot of the juvenile male looking anything but drab as you will see in the photo above.

**Yellow-headed Blackbird:** A birder not known to most of us, Brad McBlain, was very fortunate to have seen a Yellow-headed Blackbird on Kells Road in Chisholm Township. You can see a photo of this blackbird in *Bay Today*: <https://www.baytoday.ca/more-local/rare-bird-sighting-in-chisholm-704776>. Some of us went looking for it, but to no avail.

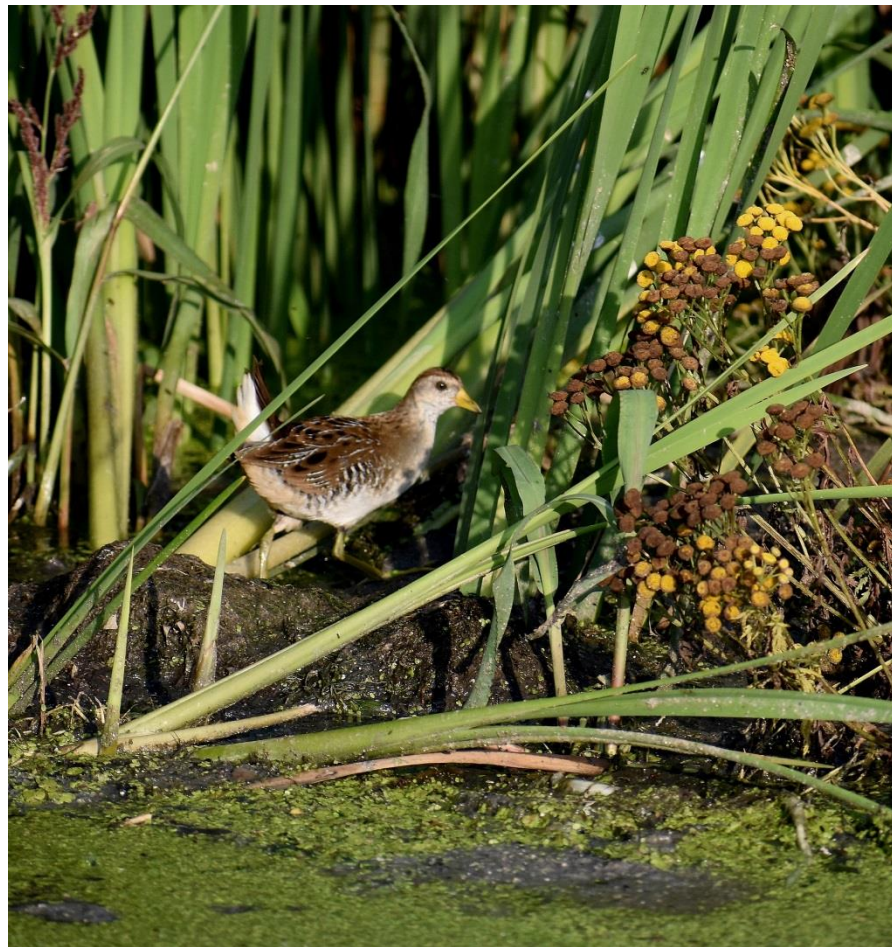
The Yellow-headed Blackbird is the size of a robin, but certainly does not sing like one! It has a raspy and harsh song that sounds like rusty

hinges. Take a listen: <http://www.audubon.org/field-guide/bird/yellow-headed-blackbird>. Scroll down to the bottom of the page and on the right side you will see links for its songs and calls.

The Yellow-headed Blackbird is named aptly, just as it looks. The male is black with a yellow or orange-yellow head and breast, although the female is brown with only a yellow throat and chest.

It is primarily a western and mid-western bird, and, therefore, a rare sighting in our area.

**Sora:** Kaye Edmonds was fortunate to see and photograph the normally shy and secretive Sora at Callander Lagoon on August 31, as seen at right. It is a small rail found in freshwater marshes. Dick Tafel also saw it in the same location on September 2, and Kaye saw it again on September 6. I like getting photos of these secretive rails, the Sora and the Virginia Rail. This spring and summer I heard both a few times, but never did see either long enough to get a photo as Kaye did.



*Kaye Edmonds*



**American Golden Plover:** Dick and I saw a juvenile American Golden Plover on the shores of Lake Nipissing near King's Wharf (photo at right). This is a shorebird that breeds on the high Arctic tundra and migrates to the grasslands of central and southern South America for the winter. It makes one of the longest journeys of any shorebird.



*Renee Levesque*

**Other plovers** seen recently are the Semipalmated Plover and the Killdeer.

Watch for **more shorebirds** as they migrate south. Some of us have seen the Solitary, Pectoral, Baird's, Semipalmated and Least Sandpipers, as well as the Lesser and Greater Yellowlegs, and most recently the Sanderling.

**Wilson's and Red-necked Phalaropes:** The Wilson's and Red-necked Phalaropes were seen by a few of us at Warren, Verner and Callander Lagoons. Grant and Shirley McKercher and Dick and I were fortunate enough to see a juvenile Wilson's swimming with two juvenile Red-necks at Verner Lagoon in late August – the first time I have seen both

phalaropes swim side-by-side, and a nice opportunity to compare them. Both phalaropes have slim bodies and slender bills and regularly swim in deep water, often spinning in circles to bring food within reach of their slender bills, although you can also see the Wilson's walk on mudflats and dash about on shorelines. Visually, it is distinguished from the Red-necked mainly by its lack of strong facial markings.

**Sandhill Cranes:** Sandhill Cranes are starting to mass. In late August, about 75 were seen in a field off Levac Road in West Nipissing and others were seen in Chisholm Township. **Peter Ferris's wonderful photo** of two Sandhill Cranes in flight is pictured below.

**Bird Wing:** Our first indoor meeting of the fall takes place on **Tuesday, September 26, starting at 6:30 p.m.** in the auditorium of the North Bay Public Library. This is the meeting where trophies are to be presented: the Nocturnal Owl Survey trophy to Gary and Connie Sturge and the Birdathon Trophy to Dick, Lori Anderson, Brent Turcotte and me.



*Migrations speak to us, not just as observers of nature but as integral parts of it. The world moves and, deep inside, we long to move with it.*

– Mike Bergin, *10,000 Birds*: <http://www.10000birds.com/>