

THE WOODLAND OBSERVER

MARCH 2019



NISSING NATURALISTS CLUB

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From the editor:

Nature fixes

I don't set out deliberately to create a theme each month for *The Woodland Observer* and there have been many months where you would be hard-pressed to come up with a theme, other than that of nature. When there is a theme, I like to think it is the result of some creative process, but usually it just happens.

This month, the theme emphasizes the concepts in the book *The Nature Fix*, a book reviewed by Katie Tripp about getting out and enjoying all nature has to offer, a theme reiterated by Paul Smylie in his article on the lives of active winter animals, those animals that manage to stay alive despite the cold and the snow, "maximizing calories ingested while minimizing calories spent." There is nothing Paul loves more than cross-country skiing in the silent winter woods, stopping every now and then to discover what these furry little creatures are up to.

Nipissing Naturalists Club has had a number of snowshoe hikes so far this winter and despite one particularly cold day when some members hiked the trail off Tower Drive, you will see from the two collages inside this issue that it didn't matter what the day was like, they enjoyed the hike. As a blast from the past, reprinted is part of a winter hike article from *The Woodland Observer*, February 2005. (Some of us were busy not enjoying some aspects this winter had to offer, like snow shovelling and snow shovelling and snow shovelling and then more snow shovelling! It has been one of those winters in which a mountain of snow fell, a winter that even resulted in the cancellation of February's meeting of the Nipissing Naturalists Club.)

Then there is an article on feeding birds that don't normally stay here during the winter. In his book, *The Birds at My Table*, author Darryl Jones says that people feed wild birds for complex



Courtney Kee

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and profound reasons – wanting to give back to nature; wanting to learn about birds; and because this interaction with nature increases our psychological, physical and spiritual well-being, all ideas presented in *The Nature Fix*.

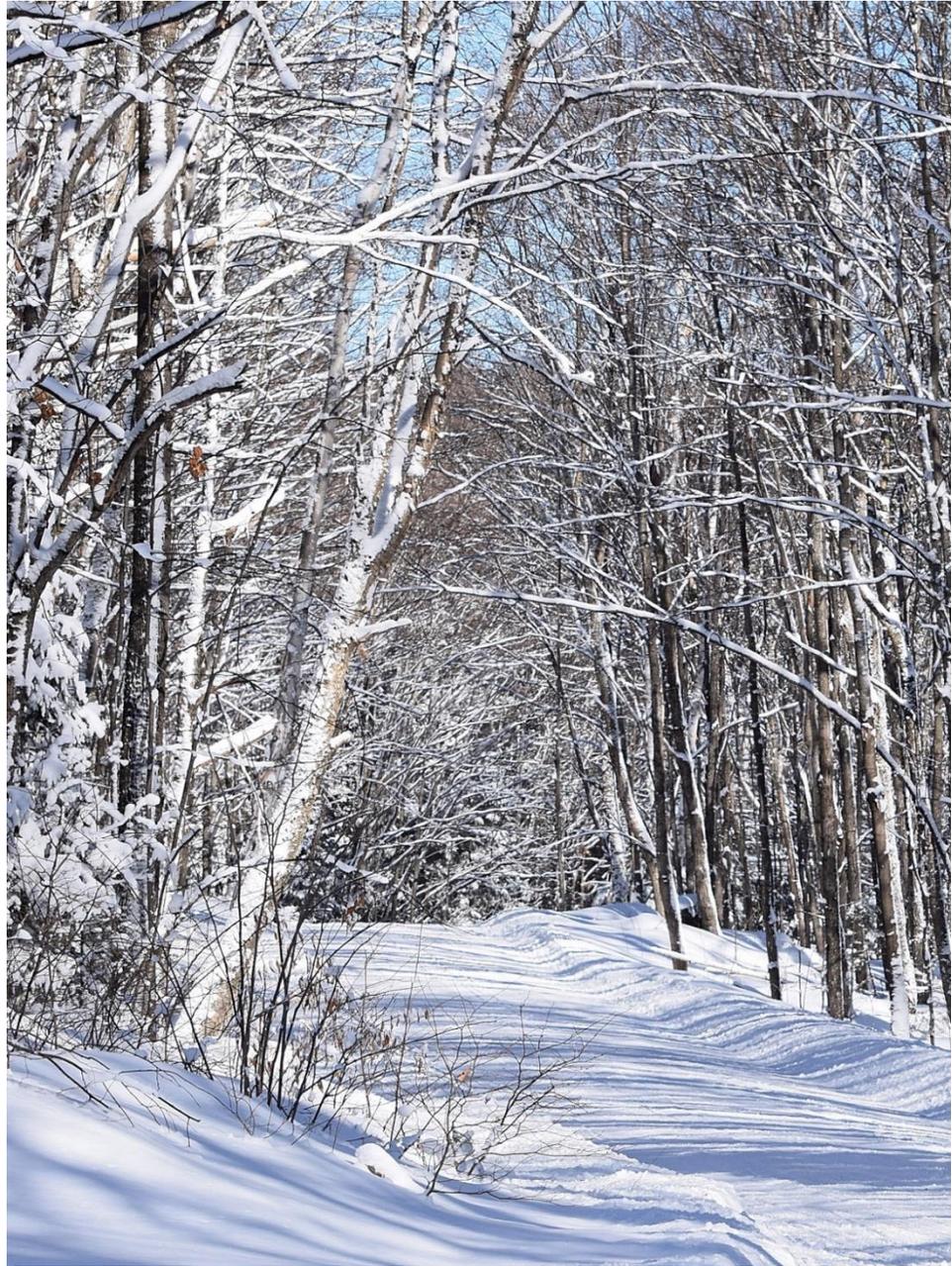
I received an email from Miles Hearn, grandson of Murray and Doris Speirs, who were life-long friends of Louise de Kiriline Lawrence. Miles leads many nature walks, primarily in the Toronto area, but he also does Breeding Bird Surveys in Northern Ontario. His grandfather, ornithologist Murray Speirs, took a walk in nature almost every day until the age of 90. You can read about Miles and the Speirs in this issue under Emails to the Editor.

Our speaker this month is Peter Ferris, another avid outdoors person, especially when it comes to long-distance canoe tripping. Peter will tell us about his solo canoe trip last summer on the Yukon's Hart River.

One of our two new Directors this year is Rick Tripp, another avid outdoors person. Rick's nature photo – a second place winner in our photo contest – depicting blue ice on Callander Bay raised interest in why we sometimes see ice the colour blue. You can read why in Eric Mattson's article.

And last but certainly not least is the delightful cover photo of a Northern Saw-whet Owl taken by Gary Chowns one very cold January morning when the owl decided to spend the day in a tree outside Gary and Luanne's window. Sometimes you just don't have to go far to enjoy nature!

Renee Levesque, editor
rlevesque1948@gmail.com



Renee Levesque

Book Review

The Nature Fix: Why Nature Makes Us Happier, Healthier, and More Creative

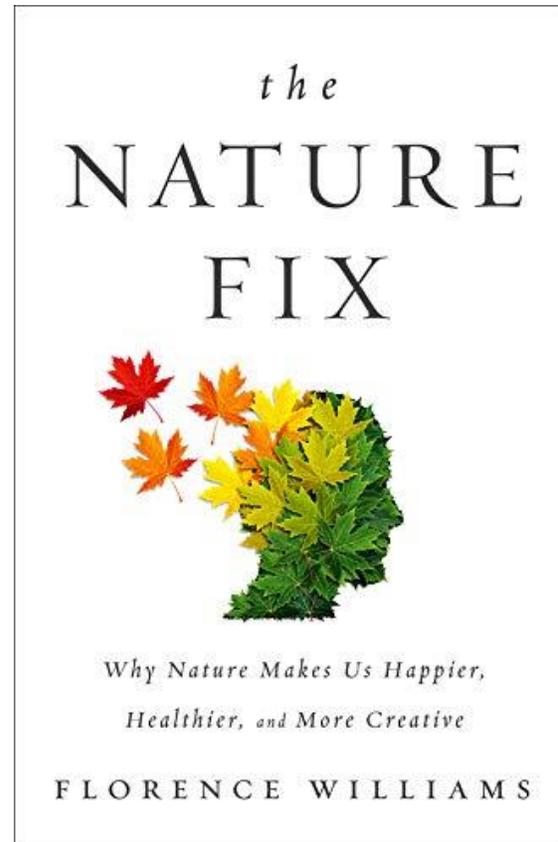
Florence Williams

WW Norton (Feb. 7 2017)

288 pages (Hardcover)

By Katie Tripp

“Go outside often, sometimes in wild places. Bring friends or not. Breathe.”



The Nature Fix is a book that explores the effects nature has on our brain and how spending time outdoors can make us healthier and happier. Written by journalist Florence Williams and published in 2017, it provides a review of some of the current studies that relate health and happiness to nature. The science of studying the impact of nature on our brains is a very small field and much more research needs to be done to understand the correlation between them.

Williams travels all over the world – Korea, Japan, Finland, Sweden, Scotland, Singapore, the U.S., to name just some countries – to participate in studies and talk to leading scientists about their work, looking at the psychological, physical and spiritual benefits of being outdoors, as well as the effects of city living, the proximity to green spaces and the socioeconomic factors that result from being around nature. In fact, the author explores how our connection to nature affects everything we do.

Until relatively recently, psychologists and neuroscientists did not accept or consider the possibility that nature has an effect on our brains, although this concept has long been discussed in the arts by poets, writers, painters, composers and musicians.

What is called “forest bathing” is being developed in Japan. This is where city dwellers get away from the hustle and bustle of city life and learn to get in touch with all five senses. It has been shown that this helps relieve stress, anxiety and depression, promotes reflection, improves self-esteem and helps lower blood pressure. (*Editor’s Note: For more on forest bathing see Fred Pinto’s article on page 7 of the October 2017 issue of The Woodland Observer: <https://www.nipnats.com/newsletters/>.)*

Forest therapy is associated with the theory of biophilia, an affiliation or bond human beings have with nature and with other organisms. This goes back to an evolutionary adaptation not just for survival but also for human fulfillment. We have always been deeply and psychologically attached

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to nature. Seeing things in nature that would have benefited our survival causes a release of happy hormones, and yet we continue to remove ourselves from nature.

A large part of this book revolves around how more people are moving to cities and spending less time near nature. Williams writes about how simply having windows in hospital rooms or simply having photos of nature can help improve one's health; how parks that are busy and loud virtually cancel out the effects of having a park; and how there are very few places left in the world that are completely silent of human activity.

Williams explores the effects of spending significant time in the backcountry, disconnected from the rest of the world. She spends time in the backcountry with young children diagnosed with ADHD, veterans suffering from PTSD and busy university students. All groups experienced improvements and a reduction in their symptoms. Although not a foolproof fix, there are clear benefits to spending time outdoors in this way.

This is a highly intriguing book that makes you want to put it down and get out into nature. Whether you're spending ten minutes looking at a photo of nature or spending ten days in the backcountry, this book shows how nature can positively benefit you. I always knew that being in nature made me happy, but after reading this book, I have become more aware of the ways it can help my well-being.

Editor's Note: Listen to author Florence Williams on You Tube:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iwOkTuhId-o>



Renee Levesque



WINTER HIKES

Winter hikes to date were to the trail off Tower Drive; to Widdifield Forest Provincial Park; to Lorie and Janis Reed's woodlot; and to LaVase River and Lake Nipissing via Cranberry Trail. Photos by Fred Pinto and Daniel Kaminiski.





Photos by Fred Pinto and Daniel Kaminski

The more things change ...

Because hiking in the woods during our 2019 snowy winter has been quite a prominent Club event, here is a shortened and edited snow hiking article from the past by Debbie Lee who referred to herself as a would-be Northerner. This article and photo appeared in the February 2005 issue of *The Woodland Observer* when Pat Boxwell was editor and Angela Martin, Club president.

JOHNSON ROAD TREK: SUNDAY, JANUARY 30, 2005.

On a beautiful, sunny day, eighteen Naturalists (two on snowshoes, the rest on cross-country skis) enthusiastically followed Dick Tafel, the intrepid frontiersman, 10-12km (round trip) along a snowmobile trail from the end of Johnson Road to Long Lake, and on to the Mattawa River.

Part of the hike was along a trapper's trail where we came across a pile of skinned beaver carcasses, which the trapper said are visited regularly by Boreal Chickadees. We also encountered some open water at the Narrows where we startled two Common Mergansers.

I took plenty of pictures as I toddled along on my snowshoes, following the shoreline and thoroughly enjoying myself while savouring the stillness and the beauty of nature on a "drop dead gorgeous" winter day.

Editor's Note: The photo below does not copy well, but, nevertheless, perhaps some of you recognize some of the participants. I recognize one member by his coat! Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.





Migrate, hibernate or tolerate

Ermine, Renee Levesque

By Paul Smylie

Those of us who have spent our lives in a northern climate are familiar with the rigours and extra effort it takes to survive the winter cold. As the mercury starts to plummet, much of nature retreats into a quiet slumber to emerge anew at the far end of winter. To combat the winter cold, different survival strategies are put to use, not one strategy common to all organisms.

Winter is one of my favourite times of year. I love the variety of activities that come with snow and cold temperatures. While cross-country skiing along many of the beautiful trails we are fortunate to have in our area, I often stop to enjoy the quiet solitude and beauty that can only be enjoyed by venturing out into nature in winter.

I love to cross-country ski and I like to push myself a bit for the exercise benefits. However, I do make constant brief concessions in my speed to stop and try to figure out those messages in the snow. Another benefit of winter is that we can see just how active animals are by the signs they leave in the snow as they go about their daily activities. Although rarely seen, we can imagine the various fur-clad beasts as they bound across the snow to seek the safety of a tree, or dive headlong into the snow to emerge from their subnivean swim metres away.



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There are three main strategies that can be used by animals to get through the cold months of a northern winter – make like a snowbird and leave; find a cozy place to snuggle up and go to sleep, a strategy some of us human-folk have been known to entertain; and bear down and find ways to tough it out. In more technical terms - migrate, hibernate or tolerate. The strategy each of the species uses will depend on what adaptations it has been granted to maximize survivability and reproduction.

We are all well aware of the mass migrations that birds make each fall, as well as some butterflies, dragonflies and most of the bat species that live in our area. But for many of our northern mammals, unless they are blessed with wing suits or large thumbs for hitchhiking, they're not likely going to make it too far south. Best to save travel plans and energy and instead hunker down and make the best of it.

If an animal is really not up for the challenge of trying to keep itself fed during a time when food is sparse, most of it locked away in impenetrable chunks of frozen water, then best to save energy and go to sleep. We all know about hibernation, the poster child for most of us being a bear snuggled cozily in its den as the winter winds howl above.

In reality, there are very few “true” hibernators in the way many of us think of hibernation. Hibernation is defined as a reduction in body temperature and a decrease in metabolic and respiration rates. Hibernation is more likely on a continuum with a short-term state of reduced metabolic function called “torpor”. Essentially this means there is a gradation in the level to which different species hibernate. It's not some animals hibernate and some don't kind of a thing. Hibernation is now thought of as a prolonged state of torpor. The most hard-core or true hibernating mammals are typically rodents, such as ground squirrels and groundhogs. Some bats are also true hibernators.



Groundhog, Renee Levesque

A groundhog's heartbeat will drop from its normal 80 beats per minute to a mere 4 to 5 beats per minute, and a body temperature of 3 degrees C. The Arctic Ground Squirrel (*Urocitellus parryii*) can attain sub-zero abdominal temperatures, with the brain maintained at zero degrees C or just slightly above. It's no wonder that Warton Willy and Punxsutawney Phil don't often grant us an early spring. Most of us would be grumpy too if we were awakened from such deep slumber.

Whether bears are what we would call true hibernators or not is still up for debate. They don't achieve the low body temperatures of the hibernating rodents, showing

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only a decrease in body temperature of 3 to 5 degrees C below normal. Bears are relatively easy to awaken during their winter slumber, so best not to go poking a sleeping bear despite what you have heard about their hibernation habits.

Raccoons are another local species that are not true hibernators despite the fact that in winter they have extended periods of reduced activity. Although not common, it is possible to find the tiny human-like footy prints (below) of these masked bandits in the snow.



Mother Nature Network

Most interesting is that hibernation does not equate to sleep, and many hibernating mammals have brief periods of arousal. It is thought that one of the functions of these active bouts is so they can “get some sleep”, and possibly to initiate an immune system response.

There are many advantages to using hibernation as a strategy to get through the coldest months of the year. During hibernation an animal's energy requirements are much reduced and so foraging for food is not a must. Many predators key in on movement to find prey. If animals are not moving, there is less chance of becoming someone else's dinner; and when their metabolism is reduced, they produce less body odour, another cue that will lead predators to them. Research indicates small animals that remain active in winter are five times more likely to become prey. As much as 90% of many small mammals will perish during the winter months; however, with short gestation periods, their populations recover quickly.

This brings us to the third strategy used by some mammals to endure the cold and snow - tolerance or resistance. A winter trek through the woods on a mild winter day attests to just how many furry little critters have elected to remain active throughout the winter and eke out a living. Little footprints are everywhere in the snow telling tales of busy lives of these robust creatures, whilst their woody brethren

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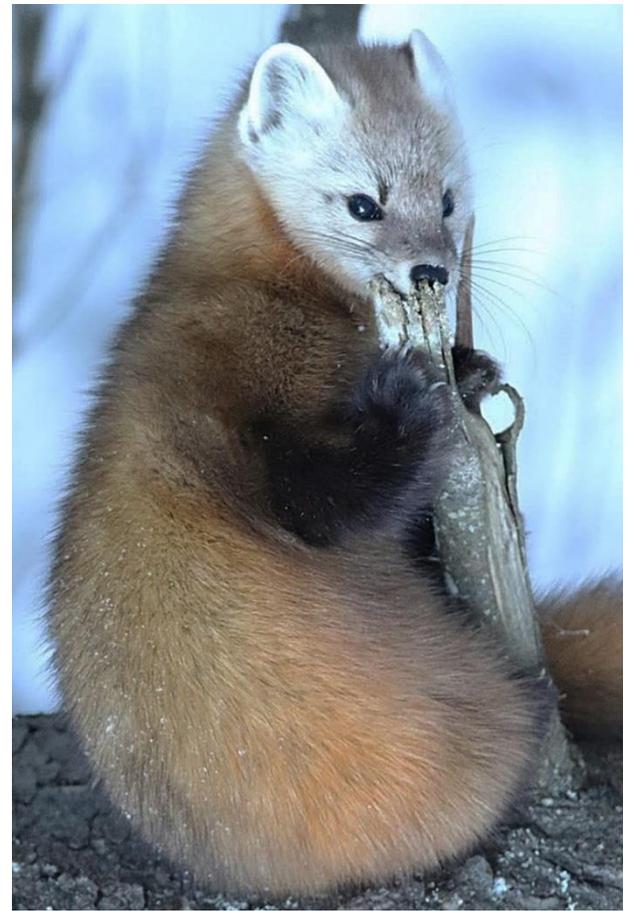
lazily snooze the days away. This raises the question of what allows these animals to remain active all winter, like the Pine Marten, while others must bow out for the season. What is it about their behaviour and physiology that allows them to endure life despite threatening cold temperatures?

During cold temperatures, energy demands are increased to maintain internal temperatures. Shrews, for example, require 43% more food during winter months. Unfortunately, the bountiful buffet that's available during the months of summer abundance gets picked over and is mostly empty by the time the snow flies, making food scarce for many small mammals during the winter months. Much of an animal's activity in winter is focused on foraging to maintain metabolic processes. Colder temperatures mean even more heat needs to be produced to stay warm, or heat loss must be kept to a minimum.

One way to combat the reduced hours of the buffet is to stash a little extra food away for those lean winter months. This is the strategy of many small rodents, as well as many birds that would rather battle the rigours of winter than fly to more hospitable locations. Mice will cache seeds in small holes for winter munching, including bird nests which they will often build a dome over to hide their winter stores. Foraging by some small mammals takes place under the snow where there is protection from the elements and from predators.

Another strategy to stay warm in winter is to snuggle up with friends. Species such as deer mice and squirrels, including flying squirrels, will use this strategy. By huddling together on cold days, it is easier to keep their heat.

Many species of small mammals that remain active all winter will go into a physiological state called "torpor", as previously mentioned. Torpor is defined as a short period of inactivity where metabolic rate, heart rate and respiration rate are decreased. During torpor, metabolism changes from carbohydrate to fat, the same



Pine Marten, Vijai Rao and Su Mathur

physiology used during prolonged, low-intensity exercise. Species such as mice and squirrels may do this on a daily basis to decrease their energy demands.

Only small animals or "smammals", a term of endearment used by some biologists, are able to use



Flying Squirrel, Gary Chowns

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torpor to save energy because they are too small with a proportionately large surface area to store fat for extended periods of hibernation. For larger mammals, it takes too long for the body to cool down and warm back up again which is the reason they will use longer periods of inactivity closer to a state of hibernation.

Torpor isn't reserved for saving energy only during cold winter months. It is a strategy used by some animals, including hummingbirds, to save energy during cool spring or summer nights. Chickadees are known to go into torpor during winter to save energy at night, reducing their body temperature by about 20 degrees C from a feverish 108.

The Northern Short-tailed Shrew (*Blarina brevicauda*) is only one of five shrew species reported to live in this area; however, it is by far the most commonly observed species. Unlike rodents with their enlarged incisors adapted for gnawing, shrews belong to a different family altogether, the Soricidae. With pointy conical teeth, shrews are adapted for an omnivorous diet and have a reputation for being voracious in their dietary behaviour. The Northern Short-tailed Shrew is one of only a very few venomous mammals. With silky, lead-coloured fur, pointy little snouts and beady eyes, this shrew is active day and night, although it is mostly nocturnal. Shrews will create a lined nest in winter and will cache food to meet their energy demands.



Northern Short-tailed Shrew, Gilles Gonthier, Wikimedia

Some other mechanisms shrews use during winter is to undergo morphological changes, losing 30% to 50% of their body weight, shrinking their bones, skull and internal organs. They also possess a relatively high proportion of brown adipose tissue, as do many small mammals, as well as humans. This tissue is loaded with iron-containing mitochondria, the small organelles responsible for metabolism at a cellular level, basically the engines for the cells. This is what gives the brown adipose tissue its darker colour. The importance of brown fat is the production of heat through “non-shivering thermogenesis”.

Now that we know a little bit about how many small animals are able to remain active in winter, it would be nice to find out just who these critters are that leave messages in the snow for us nature lovers to ponder. In a subsequent article, I'll look at the different species that are found in this area, how to identify them, and the tracks and signs they leave as they go about their lives in this harsh but most beautiful time of year.

The phenomena of blue ice

Callander Bay, Rick Tripp

By Eric Mattson

People are often intrigued by the blue colour of lake ice such as that illustrated in Rick Tripp's photo of Callander Bay shown above. I've been asked to explain this phenomena in as simple terms as possible while at the same time maintaining scientific integrity. The explanation lies in the field of optics which simply can be defined as a segment of physics which evaluates and analyzes the properties and behaviours of light.

Light particles or photons come in different wavelengths which the human eye sees as different colours. Short photon wavelengths look blue while longer ones look red. When light waves come into contact with the ice, they can bounce back (reflection); they can bounce in several directions (scattering); they can pass right through (transmission); or they can give up their energy by crashing into the water molecules which make up the ice (absorption). The amount of reflection, scattering, transmission and



Iceland, Renee Levesque

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absorption is a function of both the wavelength of light and the physical properties of the ice itself.

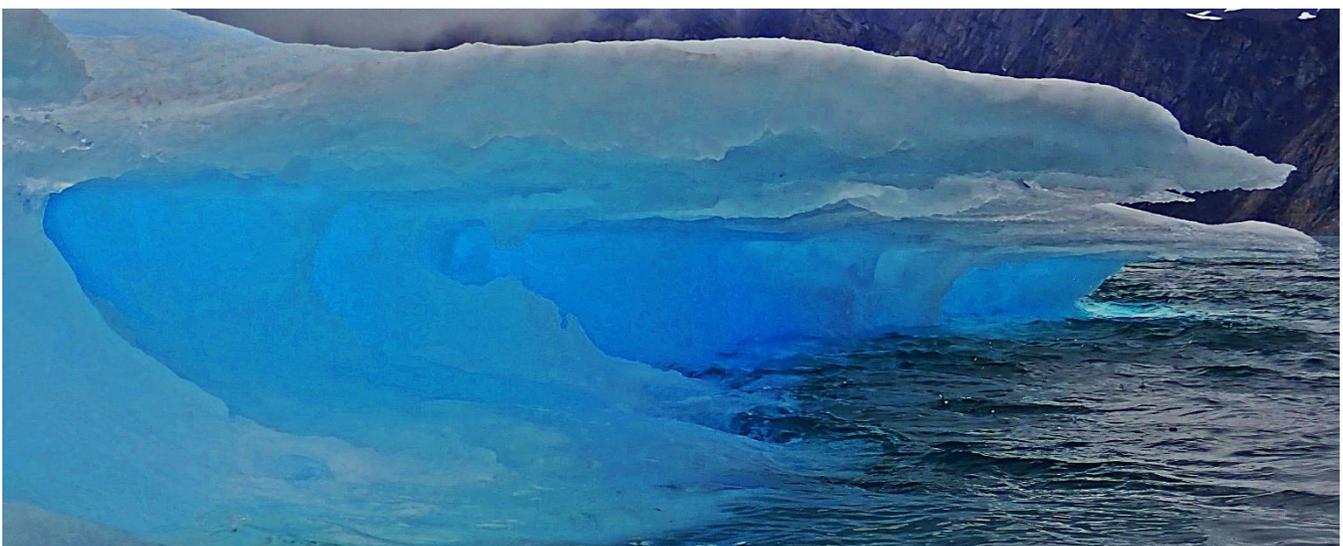
Ice that contains numerous air bubbles (known as white ice) appears white because the ice grains and facets scatter light of all visible wavelengths (white light) back toward the viewer rather than allow it to penetrate into the ice. However, if the ice is completely solid (i.e. containing few air bubbles), the light can penetrate the ice. Water molecules making up the ice absorb red and yellow wavelengths, so the remaining reflected light from within the ice is blue. (In ice, the absorption of light at the red end of the spectrum is six times greater than at the blue end). Without the scattering effect of air bubbles, light can penetrate ice undisturbed. Thus, the deeper the light travels into the ice, the more blue it becomes. However, there is a point, at about two metres, where all of the reds are absorbed and the ice cannot get any bluer.

In addition to the above, when the light source is at a low angle of incidence (such as at sunrise or sunset), there is much greater reflection off the smooth, pure ice surface. Hence, at these times, the colours in the sky are viewed as coming off the ice. This is likely the case with Rick's photo since not only do we see the reflection of the blue sky, but we also see the reflection of the pink clouds in the distance.

Lastly, all digital cameras have the tendency to exaggerate colors in the images they produce. These are a result of initial factory settings and may be adjusted by the user through the camera's High Dynamic Range (HDR) settings. In other words, different cameras produce different degrees of colour in the images of the same scene. Next time you are out with a friend compare images of the same scene taken with two different cameras each with similar settings. I'm sure you will notice a difference.

To sum things up, there are several factors which all contribute, to some degree, to why the lake ice appears so blue in Rick's photo of Callander Bay.

On a side note, the bluest of ice comes from glaciers where the enormous pressures have squeezed out or super compressed most of the air bubbles, giving this ice the lowest porosity (ratio of air space to bulk volume) of all forms of ice on Earth. As a matter of fact, some glacial ice appears more turquoise or violet than blue as seen in the photo (below) taken in Greenland.



Greenland, Eric Mattson

Winter strays – and their human friends

By Renee Levesque

I had a Chipping Sparrow show up at my feeders in December 2017 and stay through the entire winter of 2018. The Chipping Sparrow is a tiny sparrow and just happens to be one of my favourite sparrows, maybe because there has not been a year in recent memory that I have not had a pair nest in my yard or nearby.

Although last winter was not as consistently cold and snowy as this winter – has there ever been one like this one in recent memory? – it was still cold and snowy. And so I was concerned about the Chipper's welfare – would it make it through the winter, a winter that lasted a long time?

I don't know where it stayed during the night, but I suspect under the gazebo of the next door neighbour. Until I saw it every morning, I worried it hadn't survived. I would stare out the window, sometimes for a good hour, waiting for it to arrive. Then one day I noticed there was something wrong with its upper mandible and that caused me to be concerned about it even more.

Many a day it would sit sleeping outside my window in the sun warming itself as I typed away on the newsletter or Bird Wing report. It became a companion of sorts.

Making sure it had enough food despite all the other birds that came to the feeders was paramount for me.

As the weeks passed, the upper mandible began to heal though not completely, and when spring came, I wondered if it would find a mate. But it did and nested successfully. For a good part of the summer, I was able to identify it by its bill. It was a success story and perhaps it would have survived without my intervention.

This winter I did not have the responsibility of looking out for another non-winter bird, a bird that should have flown south with its flock come autumn.



Renee Levesque

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But Martha Gould, writer and poet, did have that responsibility and some winter to have had it! Here is Martha's story about her winter care of a Brown Thrasher. I can't recall a time in recent years in which this bird spent its winter here.

By Martha Gould

This winter (2018-19) we have had an unusual bird visiting our feeder – or rather, under the feeder – a Brown Thrasher, a bird that should be vacationing far south of here. The thrasher first appeared in December and has come many days since, surviving the bitter minus 35 C nights of January and the freezing rain and snowstorms of February, even the big one of mid-February.

(Editor's Note: That was the one that resulted in the cancellation of the Nipissing Naturalists Club's meeting and dumped even more snow in North Bay than most of us have ever seen.)

I know the thrasher from my childhood in Georgia where it is the state bird, but I have only recently, in my nearly 30 years in North Bay, been aware of the thrasher here in the summer time. We had thrashers in our yard last summer off and on.

The thrasher is a beautiful, elegant bird with an apparently cheery and assertive disposition, but it is hard to assert yourself in snow when your habit is to feed on insects and seeds on the ground under the leaves.

Our birdfeeder is on a hook under a deep roof overhang, primarily to keep the squirrels and pigeons from climbing on it. It has unshelled black oil sunflower seeds for the chickadees, but I began throwing more of the seeds under the feeder onto the ground once the thrasher was in evidence. Then I tried dry cat food, blueberries, raisins and oats, but the cat food attracted a neighbourhood cat, and the other foodstuff seemed to linger, so I went back to sunflower seeds, including some shelled ones. I also bought a suet cake and hung that up. At my brother's in Georgia, the thrashers use the hanging suet feeder, but this one didn't, so I knocked suet off the cake and that seemed to be acceptable.



Murat Tuncali

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The bird often comes right at first light, so I get up before dawn and put out some seed. That way it has a chance to eat some before the pigeons and squirrels (who seem to sleep in) arrive.

My husband and I are constantly on the lookout for our visitor. It doesn't come every day, nor at the same time of day; thus half the time I am happy, having seen it, and not happy, wondering where it is and if it's still alive.

It seems to be hanging around the neighbourhood where we have quite a few trees, including many evergreens, and I assume others are also feeding it, since it doesn't stay at our house.

Now that it is mid-February, and the bird has more than proved its mettle, I really hope it will live through the rest of the winter, and be ready to brag to its returning brethren that it is a *real* snow bird!

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During the winter of 2012-13, Kaye Edmonds cared for a Carolina Wren. For more information on this little wren see the December 2018 issue of *The Woodland Observer*:
<https://www.nipnats.com/newsletters/>.

By Kaye Edmonds

It was probably my most exciting winter keeping that little wren alive. After I first noticed it in my yard and identified it as a Carolina Wren, I did some research on how to care for it through the winter. First off I had to find it a wooden shelter, but it found one all by itself – a storage

bench in my yard. Its entrance into this bench was through a heart carved in the bench, very fitting I thought when Valentine's Day rolled around.

It loved suet, peanuts and mealworms, and I always made sure I had enough for it. All that eating caused it to become plumper and plumper!

I never got anxious about it because it never left the yard where it had found its wooden shelter. It stayed around the feeders a good bit of the time, never in a hurry to fly off.

It was so friendly that at first I actually thought it must belong to someone and had escaped. I had not ever seen a Carolina Wren before and knew nothing about it. But I learned a lot that winter and I missed it when it left come spring.



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Gary and Luanne Chowns have had a number of unusual or rare birds in their well-stocked yard over the winters, in particular a Harris's Sparrow which made the Chowns' yard its home last winter – and a sparrow that doesn't even come to our area in the summer! See the March 2018 issue of *The Woodland Observer* about this winter stray. As well, the Chowns, like Kaye, cared for a Carolina Wren.

By Luanne Chowns

When an unusual or rare bird suddenly appears in our yard, Gary and I study what it is eating and what part of the yard seems most attractive to it. We make sure it has several appealing feeding areas. We become glued to the window, constantly looking for it, hoping it has survived another sub-zero night.

We had an immature Harris's Sparrow last winter. We were careful not to spook it during the daily task of clearing away snow and topping up feeders and replacing the heated dirty bathwater with fresh water. Eventually it became very relaxed, feeding at the platform window feeder or the nearby tiny feeder mounted on the fence, and was soon keeping company with two White-throated Sparrows, sparrows which also spent the winter with us. It gave us some peace of mind to see it with other sparrows. A bird all by itself seems an easier target for a predator.

Going back about eleven years, we too had a Carolina Wren show up soon after one of the first snowfalls of the winter. It was making do with shelled sunflower seeds, but when Martin Parker suggested offering it mealworms, everything changed! It took half a dozen from a small open feeder and then from our hands as it rested in the feeder. In no time at all, it was coming straight to our hands. We started buying mealworms in bulk, usually five hundred at a time, and also raised some ourselves as a back-up supply. Its curiosity and intelligence never ceased to amaze us. It sought shelter in our neighbour's small run-down garage, gaining access through rotten fascia boards. We naturally worried how it would survive the cold when the garage was eventually torn down, but it managed somehow. Every morning without fail, the first thing we saw was the wren sitting and waiting for us and then bobbing its head up and down when it spied us. We would then go out with a handful of mealworms, something we repeated many times a day. It was always a worry though, wondering how it would cope with the cold.



Gary Chowns

Interesting winter find

By Renee Levesque

Northern Saw-whet Owl (*Aegolius acadicus*)

On very cold January morning, Gary and Luanne Chowns woke up to find a Northern Saw-whet Owl sitting in a tree right outside their large picture window which overlooks their backyard. You can imagine their delight! It is not easy to find and see this reclusive owl, but there it was without even having to venture out into the forest to look for it. Gary got some wonderful photos, as did his daughter, Laura Turcotte, who reported that it was the only thing that enticed her to leave the house that very cold day!



Gary Chowns



Laura Turcotte

You can see from the photos with this article and the one that graces the cover of this month's newsletter that it is a small owl. In fact, it is one of the smallest owls in North America.

Native to North America, it is an owl with bright yellow eyes and a relatively large head and ironically looks like a cat. It is extremely cute, but don't let its looks fool you. It is ferocious in its pursuit of mice and other small mammals. In fact, it found a frozen dead mouse in Gary and Luanne's yard and sat on it during the day, waiting for it to thaw before it had a bite. When these owls eat a mouse, it is usually over the course of two meals. During migration, the saw-whet supplements its diet with small birds, especially chickadees and kinglets, but it will also take Rock Pigeons, a species four times as heavy as it is. It is preyed upon by larger raptors – the

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Peregrine Falcon, Cooper's and Broad-winged Hawks and larger owls.

It is a nocturnal and a seldom-seen owl, but can be heard in forests on quiet nights primarily from late winter to early spring. Listen for a high-pitched constant and monotonous *too-too-too* song or a call that sounds like a saw being sharpened on a whetting stone – one of the theories as to how it came to be called a saw-whet.

Unless you hear it, you might not know it is there, silently roosting by day in dense conifers about 11 feet above the ground on average, usually hidden by foliage. But for nesting, it prefers deciduous trees, nesting in previously excavated holes, mainly those of the Northern Flicker and the Pileated Woodpecker.

The female does the incubation and brooding, while the male does the hunting. But when the youngest nestling is about 18 days old, the female leaves the nest sometimes to find a new mate and raise a second brood, although sometimes to help the male hunt for food. The older nestlings often help to feed their younger siblings. Interestingly, though perhaps not surprisingly, the nest gets messy after the female leaves. By the time the nestlings are fledged 10 to 14 days after their mother leaves, the nest is a complete mess. But mess or no mess, the parents have raised especially cute fledglings as you can see from the photo below.

The Northern Saw-whet is considered to be a common and widespread owl of Low Concern.

Sources: All About Birds; Audubon Field Guide; Bird Web; NatureMapping; Wikipedia



Kathy & Sam, Beaverton, OR, Wikimedia

THE WOODLAND OBSERVER

Emails to the editor

I received an email from Miles Hearn informing me that some Nipissing Naturalists Club members may be interested in his website, a website full of photos of birds, plants and scenery, as well as short nature articles. There is also a section called “Friends of Miles” with over 150 posts from others. You can view Miles’ website at: <https://mileshearn.com/>.

Miles went on to inform me that he conducts nature walks in Southern Ontario, over 150 walks in 2018, walks this winter and walks going back to 2014. His posts are not limited to Southern Ontario. They also include nature photos and articles from as far away as Antarctica and as close as Northern Ontario.

Miles also conducts Breeding Bird Surveys in Northern Ontario, near the communities of Gravenhurst, North Bay, Gogama, Cochrane, Smooth Rock Falls, Massey, Espanola, Gore Bay, Geraldton, Nipigon and Terrace Bay.



Courtesy of Miles Hearn

So naturally I checked out Miles’ website and discovered that he is the grandson of famed ornithologists, J. Murray Speirs (1909 -2001) and Doris Heustis Speirs (1894 -1989). (Photo of Miles above is at his grandparents’ home, Cobble Hill, in Pickering.) I recall from the book many of us in Bird Wing took turns reading, *More than Birds: Adventurous Lives of North American Naturalists*, by Val Shushkewich, that Murray was stationed in North Bay as a meteorologist for the Royal Canadian Air Force and that he and Doris became life-long friends with Louise de Kiriline Lawrence.

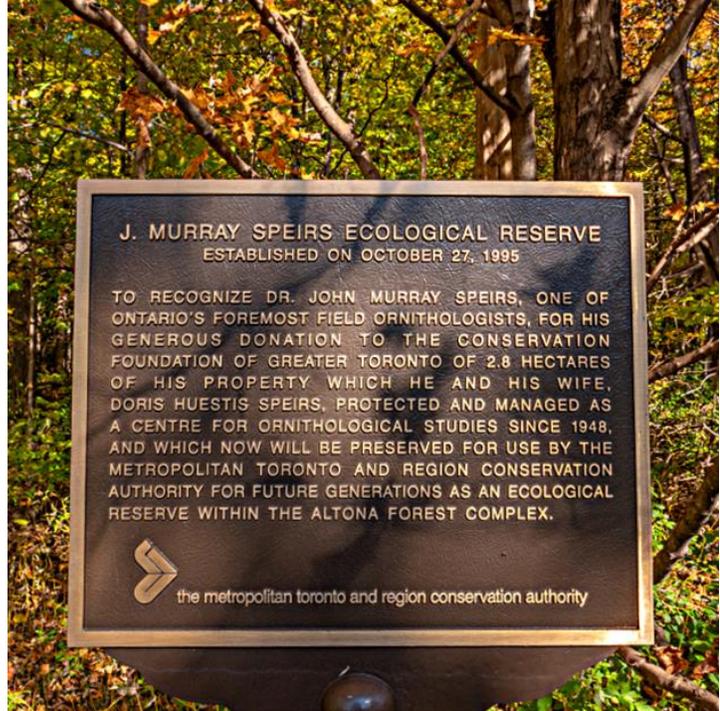
After the war and once he completed his doctorate, Murray became a professor of zoology at the University of Toronto, a position he maintained for 40 years. He was a leading Ontario ornithologist with a great ability to not only identify birds by sight but by hearing their calls and songs. As Val Shushkewich writes in her book, Murray “had a phenomenal ear for bird songs and calls and could imitate bird calls with accurate whistles and clicks.” He was a charter member of the Toronto Ornithological Club and one of the founders of the Federation of Ontario Naturalists. He was passionate about birds and nature, frequently taking others out for walks in nature, as he himself did almost every day up to the age of 90. Among many publications, he wrote *Birds of Ontario*, two volumes on birds identified in Ontario up to 1983.

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In 1996, Murray donated a portion of his Pickering property to Altona Forest (right) on condition it remain a natural preserve. Among his many awards, Murray was presented with the Order of Canada for sharing his passion for birds with other ornithologists and amateur birders and for donating a portion of his land for the preservation of nature.

Altona Forest is a significant urban wilderness in the Greater Toronto Area with its mature forest, fields and wet meadows. It is run by the Metropolitan Toronto and Region Conservation Authority in conjunction with the Altona Forest Stewardship Committee. For more information on this unique forest see:

<http://www.altonaforest.org/>.



Miles Hearn

Doris Heustis Speirs was an artist, a self-taught painter, who exhibited with the Group of Seven and the Canadian Group of Painters. She was also a poet. Her book, *Exercise for Psyche*, published in 1979, is a collection of her poems. She was also a leading ornithologist, particularly known for her study of the Evening Grosbeak. In her honour, the Society of Canadian Ornithologists presents the annual Doris Huestis Speirs Award to "an individual who has made outstanding lifetime contributions in Canadian ornithology".

I read with surprise that the Toronto Ornithological Club was for men only and remained for men only until 1980 when it was finally open to women, thanks to Phyllis MacKay, mother of bird artist Barry Kent MacKay whose art you may recognize from the covers of *Ontario Birds*. Phyllis applied for membership and was accepted, although not without difficulty. But in 1952, so as to have a club of their own, Doris and two of her friends founded an ornithological club for women called the Margaret Morse Nice Ornithological Club, named after the American ornithologist who studied the Song Sparrow and wrote a book about her extensive research, *Studies in the Life History of the Song Sparrow* (1937).



Miles has inherited his grandfather's love of nature – nature walks, plants, wildlife and birds – and according to his website, he too has an excellent ear for bird songs and calls.

“As a child, I spent a considerable amount of time with my grandparents at their home (left) in rural Pickering, Ontario. The house was surrounded by bird feeders and we ate breakfast with chickadees and cardinals eating their breakfast just inches away; we inside, they outside. At the back of the property was a large forest where I played for hours and frequently aw the spring and summer resident Red-shouldered Hawks.”

Miles Hearn

Your Board of Directors

Rick Tripp:

Rick is back as Director on the Board of Nipissing Naturalists Club, a position he previously held from 2004 to 2007.

Rick has spent most of his life in the North Bay area, working in civil engineering for 10 years and as an energy consultant for 20 years. He currently lives in Callander with his wife, Darlene, and two daughters, Katherine and Jennifer. He is a graduate of Nipissing University College.



Courtesy of Rick Tripp

For 15 years, Rick served as a Director on the Board of the Friends of Laurier Woods. During his tenure, the Friends were able to secure the future of the woods after the main beaver pond was drained by an adjoining property owner with the use of a large excavator. Archaeologists may find his picnic table at the bottom of one of the main beaver dams one day! The Laurier Woods Management Plan was developed during this time, as well as the first land acquisition.

During the last few years, Rick dedicated much of his spare time with the North Bay Titans Swim Club in various executive positions, including President, while following his daughters' competitive swim careers.

Quite the outdoorsman, Rick has more than some fluency in a number of outdoor activities – canoe tripping, cross-country and downhill skiing, hiking, kayaking, mountain biking, gardening and snowshoeing. He has cycled through parts of Europe and more recently, completed most of a lap of the legendary Le Mans race course, albeit in a family van! Rick also enjoys photography.

Rick's favourite natural places, outside of Laurier Woods of course, are Algonquin Park and Killarney Provincial Park. He has paddled from the western extreme to the eastern extreme of Algonquin, although not in one trip!

While taking his daughter Katherine (or Katie as we know her and also a Board member) to her summer job in Quetico Provincial Park last summer, Rick developed some additional favourite parks – the various parks along the North Shore of Lake Superior.

One couldn't ask for a more qualified Director for Nipissing Naturalists Club.

Eco Fair and Seed Exchange

The Eco Fair and Seed Exchange, with its theme this year being Butterflies as Pollinators, was held at St. Andrew's United Church on Sunday, February 24, a snow, rain, freezing rain day in a month of extreme weather.



The purpose of the annual Eco Fair and Seed Exchange is to “promote local food resiliency with the exchange of locally grown seeds”, and to promote an awareness of environmental issues. It is also an event that encourages active volunteer involvement with environmental groups.

In addition to the seed exchange, workshops are held to showcase “products, services, technologies and programs that make our lives and our community more environmentally friendly, sustainable and healthy.”

Nipissing Naturalists Club had a booth at this event at which members Riley Cormier and Julie Falsetti represented the club. They are pictured at our booth with a poster made especially for this event by Louise Simpson, Director. Club activities, using photos taken by members, are

highlighted in the centre panel, with photos of butterflies on the right panel and what our Club is about and on becoming a member on the left.

Brent Turcotte, Club member pictured at left, gave an excellent presentation on butterflies and moths as pollinators in our area.





March speaker:

Canoeing Yukon's remote Hart River



Club meetings are held the **second Tuesday of every month**, from September to December and from February to June, **starting at 7:00 p.m.**, at **176 Lakeshore Drive**, the former Tweedsmuir Public School. (January is the AGM.)

Our speaker for **March 12 is Peter Ferris**, an avid wilderness canoeist to the nth degree. You may recall that at our meeting in May 2017, Peter gave a very interesting talk on his 2016 solo canoe trip to Manitoba's historic Hayes River. Peter is back by popular demand, this time to talk about his canoe trip in the summer of 2018 along **Yukon's remote Hart River in the Peel Watershed**.

Peter will provide a description of the Hart River – its topographic features, its wildlife and its importance to indigenous people; an overview of the Peel Watershed and its importance as one of Canada's great wilderness areas; his visit to Whitehorse and the changes he observed since his last visit 20 years ago; and some of the challenges, surprises, mishaps and joys he met along the way.

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Board of Directors, 2019

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Bird Wing

Dick Tafel, Chairman: rtafel@sympatico.ca. 705-472-7907

Gary Sturge, Treasurer; Renee Levesque, Bird Wing Scribe.

Monthly Bird Wing and Bird Bash reports are sent to members by email and posted on Nipissing Naturalists Club's website: <https://www.nipnats.com/bird-wing/bird-wing-meetings-outings/>, and <https://www.nipnats.com/bird-wing/bird-bash-reports/>.

The Woodland Observer is published electronically September to June and sent to members by email and posted in date order on Nipissing Naturalists Club's website:

<https://www.nipnats.com/newsletters/>. **Editor:** Renee Levesque: rlevesque1948@gmail.com.

Contributors this issue: Gary Chowns, Luanne Chowns, Kaye Edmonds, Peter Ferris, Martha Gould, Miles Hearn; Daniel Kaminski, Courtney Kee, Debbie Lee, Renee Levesque, Eric Mattson, Fred Pinto, Vijai Rao/Sumati Mathur, Paul Smylie, Katie Tripp, Rick Tripp, Murat Tuncali and Laura Turcotte.

Special thanks to Angela Martin and Christine Page for providing me with an electronic version of the February 2005 *The Woodland Observer*; and, thanks to Ron Pittaway, to Barry Kent MacKay, bird artist, and Joan Winearls, TOC archivist, for information pertaining to the Toronto Ornithological Club.

Membership Fees

Annual Nipissing Naturalists Club membership fees are: single \$20.00 and family \$30.00. There is an **additional annual \$5.00 membership fee for Bird Wing** which meets the fourth Tuesday of every month in the auditorium of the North Bay Public Library from 6:30 to 9:00 p.m. **This membership fee is paid directly to Bird Wing.**

Please note: While the library is undergoing renovations this year, Bird Wing meetings from February through to April will be held at Laporte's Nursery, 1054 Lakeshore Drive, North Bay.



Nipissing Naturalists Club is affiliated with Ontario Nature: <http://www.ontarionature.org/>.