

# Bird Wing Report



Nipissing Naturalists Club

# Bird Wing Report

February 2022

*Text by Renee Levesque*

*Photos as indicated*

February's meeting marked our last Zoom Bird Wing meeting for the winter of 2022. Next month's meeting will take place in the official spring, although I can't promise you it won't seem winter-like. Nevertheless, spring migration will have begun and with it the "wings of hope" in the form of perhaps American Robins, Red-winged Blackbirds, Canada Geese and certainly many more American Crows – maybe even Turkey Vultures. We see these birds so frequently throughout the spring and summer that sometimes we say, "Oh just a robin or just a goose or just a vulture", but I try to remember those days of winter when they weren't around and how excited I was at first seeing them, that I stop myself from saying just another...

Of course southern members like Greg Jaski had 22 robins in his yard recently and Sheldon McGregor heard one singing, so perhaps not a big deal for them to spot a robin in March. (Late breaking news: Since our meeting, an American Robin was spotted during the last weekend of February by Lori Beckerton on a crabapple tree on Bank Street off Trout Lake Road, and apparently it was seen earlier, on February 19, by someone else. It would seem to be an overwintering bird.)

A bird that stays around for the winter, although not often seen during our winter months, is the Black-backed Woodpecker. Surely one or more will be seen on Peacock Road come mid-March. So we have been promised!

## **Birds Seen in February:**

Almost all the birds that can be seen in February were itemized in Dick Tafel's recent February Bird Bash Report. A couple mentioned in his report were not mentioned at our Bird Wing meeting, the Dark-eyed Junco and the American Tree Sparrow. Both are constant visitors at my feeders and those of Gary and Connie Sturge. And Dick forgot to mention a Northern Shrike that had been visiting his place recently. But more importantly, he also forgot to mention the Northern

Cardinal (at right), a bird he saw in February near Rick Tripp's home in Callander, a bird he had gone on and on about **not** seeing for weeks, maybe months!

Rick did not mention his seeing the cardinal because he was leaving it for Dick to mention, anticipating that Dick wanted so badly to finally tell us all he saw it. Instead, Rick graciously chose the Ruffed Grouse for his bird, while Dick felt he had no choice but to mention the Rock Pigeon!

I was so caught up in hosting the Zoom meeting that I forgot about marking down the birds everyone saw, but halfway through the meeting or maybe towards the end, I managed to recollect what everyone reported. If I have left anyone out, I apologize.

Other sparrows seen were a White-throat that has been at the Sturges' feeders all winter and the long-ago introduced House Sparrows, which are not related to our sparrows, also seen by Gary and Connie. Sheldon has seen White-crowns, but not in our area. Usually we don't see them here until early May when they come through on their way north.

While I am on Sheldon and his sightings, he also saw an Eastern Bluebird and with the snow Hamilton and area had in February, it must have looked especially lovely against the white background.

Connie reported seeing both winter grosbeaks, the Evening and the Pine. Not many are seeing the Evening, but I get them in my yard, large numbers a few weeks ago, but 4 to 6 recently and not daily as in weeks past. Pine Grosbeaks (photo top of next page) seem to be almost everywhere this winter unlike some



*Renee Levesque*

past winters when we were lucky to see one. They are such a beautiful bird and we are fortunate to see them this winter.

Corinne Urrutia has seen American Goldfinches while walking the Laurentian Trails. Gary had a flock of about 30 at his place and Grant McKercher gets about a dozen a day. I get one or two. At my place, they usually arrive with redpolls and sometimes with Pine Grosbeaks.

Grant has had both redpolls in his yard, the Common and the Hoary – well only one Hoary. Like the Pine Grosbeaks, redpolls are almost everywhere this winter. I think seeing the Hoary is such a special treat, so frosty white it stands out from all the other redpolls. Stephen O'Donnell was not able to join us for the meeting because he was without power as a result of Tuesday's storm, but he did send along a photo of the hundreds of redpolls (see below) feeding in his yard.



*Renee Levesque*



*Stephen O'Donnell*

Many of us have not yet seen a Brown Creeper, but Mary Marrs saw one near her place on Lake Talon and Grant had one in his yard in early February.

Red-breasted Nuthatches were seen by Linda Conway at her place in Nipissing Village, and White-breasted Nuthatches were seen by Sue Gratton and Faye Oie in South River, by Greg who saw them near the LaVase River boat launch in Champlain Park while he was visiting his mother in North Bay, and by Connie and Gary. There do not seem to be many nuthatches around this winter. It took me forever to find both.

Grant saw a Common Raven flying across Pinewood Park Drive carrying a stick, and after the meeting I saw one also carrying a stick, heading south along the LaVase River. Nest building? And a sign of spring? I think so. Ravens are one of my favourite birds. I love their various calls and watching them soar and play. For a beautifully photographed pair of ravens see the photo of the month at the end of this report.

Rick saw a flock of Bohemian Waxwings, known as a museum of waxwings, in Callander, as did Grant. It seems the same flock was flying around Callander eating all the berries they could find. (Eating all the berries they could find reminds me of a song. Do you know which one?)

A flock or happiness of Horned Larks, as in the expression happy as a lark, has been hanging around the Verner feed store for a few weeks now and seen by Denise Desmarais, Dick and me. One of these happy little larks graces the cover of this month's report. I took that particular photo back in



Grant McKercher

January when a flock was also seen at Verner Lagoon.

Also seen in the same area are flocks or drifts of Snow Buntings seen there also by Denise, Dick and me, and seen elsewhere by Gary. Greg saw a large foraging flock of about 1,000 near where he lives in Beaverton. They got scared up by a Belted Kingfisher he saw on January 27, a very unusual winter sighting in Greg's more southern area, although April McCrum did spot one on our Christmas Bird Count, an all-time first for our CBC.

Denise also saw a couple of Canada Jays near her "camp" on Labrosse Road off Hwy. 575 north of Verner. I believe she was the only one to see Canada Jays this month.

Connie and Gary have Mourning Doves, as many as a dozen at their place.

Dick and I also saw April's Lapland Longspur, a Longspur that has been in her city yard since early January and that she has named Larry. Because April was away for the Bird Bash weekend, Dick and I went over to her place to leave out some seed for Larry and later in the day, lo and behold, there he was feeding with a Rock Pigeon. (Photo below.) April reports Larry is actually friends with two pigeons.



Woodpeckers: Faye was delighted to see a Hairy and a Downy feeding side-by-side. She had not seen that before and her delight was palpable. It allowed her to compare both woodpeckers. The Hairy is much larger in size, about 3 inches larger, and has a much bigger bill. In addition, a Hairy has white unmarked outer tail feathers, whereas a Downy has small black bars on its outer tail feathers. At a distance, it can be hard to distinguish a three-inch difference in size, so when you see one in the distance you could compare its size in relation to something close by the bird, a leaf, for example, or think of a Hairy the size of a robin and the Downy a size of a sparrow. Another woodpecker seen was the Pileated, seen by Dick. Most have seen the Hairy and Downy, but I believe just a few of us have seen the Pileated.

I don't have a photo of a Hairy and Downy side by side without my spending hours looking through all my files, but I do have Kaye Edmonds' photo at right of a Hairy and a Pileated feeding almost together. That would have really delighted Faye had she seen such! Not hard to compare the difference between these two woodpeckers.



*Kaye Edmonds*

Sue saw Mallards, as did Grant, Dick and me. The only other duck mentioned was the American Black Duck, although Dick and I saw a Common Goldeneye in the water by the falls in Magnetawan, but neglected to mention it at the meeting. (It would have been another bird for Dick to mention instead of the pigeon!) It was interesting watching this particular male goldeneye manage the fast-moving waters.

Two very common birds deserve their due, the Blue Jay seen by Corinne and most of us and the Black-capped Chickadee seen by Mary and no doubt all of us. Neither bird often gets their photos in the Bird Wing Report, but this month, let's honour the Black-capped Chickadee, shown below. Did you know it is the provincial bird of New Brunswick and the state bird of Massachusetts?



*Renee Levesque*

The chickadee is constantly eating throughout the winter as it must gain 10% of its body weight each day. It caches its food and has an excellent memory of where it hides it. Corvids also have an amazing memory of where they stash food. Although Blue Jays won't come to one's hand to eat out of it, chickadees do and it certainly is a nice feeling that they trust us so.

Another common bird, another member of the Corvid family, is the American Crow, mentioned by Rachel Sturge. Crows can be seen all winter in the City, but

come March they will arrive everywhere. Each year when the crows move in to my area, our raven tree becomes our crow tree. Another sign of spring for me.

Rachel interestingly enough saw a Great Blue Heron outside Gravenhurst on her way back down south after the Family Day weekend.

The raptors: Two were seen - the Bald Eagle seen by Linda flying over her home in Nipissing Village and by Dick and me and perhaps others at landfill sites, the ones in Powassan, North Bay and East Ferris. There they were in all their splendour, at least three adults per landfill site, among many ravens and European Starlings. And an adult Red-tailed Hawk was seen by Dick and me on Hwy. 11 North outside Powassan.

And that leaves us with two owls seen by Greg in his yard, maybe not here in North Bay, but no matter, having two owls in your yard is amazing no matter where you live. The first was a Snowy Owl that flew into a tree in his yard on New Year's Eve and the second was an Eastern Screech Owl that flew into a tree in his yard recently. How lucky can you get! I haven't even seen a Barred Owl this year yet. Greg's photo of the Eastern Screech is at right.



*Greg Jaski*

### **Barn Swallows:**

It may be a case of if we build it, will they come? Maybe not the first year or even the second year, but Paul Smylie who is taking on this project through Nipissing Naturalists Club is hoping they will eventually occupy the artificial nesting structure the Club will be building.

There is some concern regarding the effectiveness of artificial nesting structures, so emphasis will be placed on the monitoring aspect of the project over at least a three-year period. Barn Swallows do not necessarily use a new artificial nesting structure immediately. It could take two or three years, or they may be never use

it. However, they are nest faithful, so if they build their nest in one, they will generally return to it.

With funding from Nipissing Naturalists Club, an artificial Barn Swallow nesting structure like the one seen at right only a bit smaller will be built and erected near Nipissing Naturalists Club's wildflower garden on the opposite side of Memorial Drive and the Government Dock, aka, King's Wharf. Nesting cups are constructed under the roof of the main structure in which the Barn Swallows can build their nests. However, Barn Swallows will avoid nesting in cups in which their flight patterns to their foraging habitats are obstructed by trees, hedges, or buildings, so careful placement of the nest cups must be taken into consideration. Barn Swallows already nest at the waterfront where many of us tend to see them every year.

Paul talked to Bird Wing about this project in February 2020 when he had hoped to get funding through the Ministry of the Environment, Species at Risk branch, to build four nest structures in various types of natural environments and by monitoring all four determine which sites were used and possibly preferred by the Barn Swallows. Unfortunately funding was denied and anyway the early Covid pandemic at that time shut everything down.

Paul and Nipissing Naturalists Club are looking for volunteers to help with this project, a project that will get started this spring. Help is needed to build the nesting structure and to monitor any activity at it at least once a week after it is



*Courtesy of Paul Smylie*

erected. At the meeting, Greg Jaski volunteered to help build it. **If Bird Wing members are interested in helping build the nesting structure or in monitoring the activity at it, you can let me know and I will keep a list to pass onto Paul and Nipissing Naturalists Club, and perhaps through them a rotating roster of monitoring can be developed so all weeks get covered.**

### **Shades of Hope:**

As you know, we made a donation to Shades of Hope, a wildlife refuge centre in Pefferlaw not too far from where Greg Jaski and his wife, Joanne, live in Beaverton, which is not too far from Lake Simcoe.

A couple of weeks prior to our meeting, Greg and Joanne had an American Goldfinch in their yard, blind as a result of disease in both eyes, perhaps House Finch eye disease, also called *Mycoplasmal conjunctivitis*. (Greg's photo of his diseased goldfinch is at right.) Greg was able to capture it – with gloves, of course – and he and Joanne took it to Shades of Hope for treatment. With antibiotics, it was successfully rehabilitated and returned to Greg's area and released!



While the goldfinch was being cared for at Shades of Hope, Greg took down all his feeders and thoroughly washed them, let them dry, and waited a few days to put them up to discourage others from feeding in his yard.

House Finch eye disease is very contagious, although the birds that tend to get it other than goldfinches and House Finches, which we don't have here anymore, are Evening Grosbeaks and Purple Finches.

From Project FeederWatch: *Birds that have the disease have red, swollen, runny, or crusty eyes. In extreme cases the eyes become swollen shut and the bird becomes blind. You might observe an infected bird sitting quietly in your yard, clumsily scratching an eye against its foot or a perch. While some infected birds recover, many die from starvation, exposure, or predation.*

See <https://feederwatch.org/learn/house-finch-eye-disease/> for more information, and for those who take part in Project FeederWatch be sure to report any finches you notice with this eye disease.

From Shades of Hope: *Bacteria can accumulate on bird feeders when visited by sick finches. Other diseases, including salmonella, can also be spread at feeders, so follow these tips to keep your feeders clean and disease-free:*

- *Clean your feeders at least every month with a diluted bleach solution. Rinse well and allow your feeders to dry completely before rehangng them.*
- *Consider purchasing tube feeders that can be completely disassembled and washed in a diluted bleach solution in the kitchen sink or put in the dishwasher.*
- *Rake the area underneath your feeder to remove droppings and old, mouldy seed.*
- *Space your feeders widely to discourage crowding among birds.*
- *If you see diseased birds, take feeders down and clean them. Wait a few days before putting feeders back up to encourage sick birds to disperse.*

For more information on what to do about sick birds see:

<https://www.allaboutbirds.org/news/what-do-i-do-if-i-find-a-sick-injured-or-dead-bird/>.

And for more information on Shades of Hope, see <https://www.shadesofhope.ca/>. Greg and Joanne have volunteered their services there to help with the release of rehabilitated birds.

### **Marsh Monitoring Program (MMP):**

Paul Smylie has undertaken the Marsh Monitoring Program in Laurier Woods for quite a few years now. But he will be very busy this spring and summer and is hoping to find someone else to take it over.

The Marsh Monitoring Program is a wildlife monitoring program through Birds Canada for coastal and inland marshes. Information collected during the spring and summer months “helps track long-term trends in species diversity, and

guides conservation, restoration and management programs for marshes for their bird and amphibian inhabitants.”

Volunteers monitor marshes close to home and can survey amphibians or marsh birds, such as the Virginia Rail seen below, or can survey both depending on skill level and time availability. I believe monitoring for marsh birds takes places twice, once in June and once in July in the early morning, and three times for amphibians, once each month in April, May and June, in the evening.



*Renee Levesque*

**For those who might be interested, Paul can provide you with more information and perhaps help get you started. If you are interested, please let me or Paul know. Paul can be reached at [psmylie1@hotmail.com](mailto:psmylie1@hotmail.com).**

### **Members Leaving Us:**

Two members will be moving from our area this spring, Buddy Myles and Corinne Urrutia. Although most of you haven't met Buddy, Dick and I have run into him a couple of times in the field. Buddy has been very generous in providing me with his excellent photos for reports and letting me know of any interesting sightings in Verner and area. He was a birder and photographer in Hamilton long before he moved north to the Verner area.

Corrine joined us at our Zoom meeting to say goodbye. She said she learned a lot from being in Bird Wing and Nipissing Naturalists Club and will miss both. She thanked us for offering her words of encouragement as a new birder when she first joined the club. I will always remember her as enjoying bird merchandise. Her enthusiasm for it was infectious. This year for Christmas I got a bird sweatshirt and a raven silver necklace.

At right is a photo of three birders in their birding clothes at an Atlas 3 meeting in Laurier Woods in the fall of 2020. From left to right: Corinne with her bird sweatshirt, Oriana Pokorny with her feathered leggings and I believe she also had on a pair of Blue Jay earrings that you can't see, and Lisa Hackett with her bird mask.

### **Bird Bash:**

March's Bird Bash will take place the weekend of **March 26-27**. Oh the delight then of finding some spring birds!

### **Bird Wing:**

The next Bird Wing meeting will be a Zoom meeting on **Tuesday, March 22, starting at 7:00 p.m.** We will continue with Zoom meetings through to April. For the fall, Dick will look into once again securing the auditorium of the North Bay Public Library, that is if Covid restrictions continue to permit such at that time. Many are anxious to meet in person once again, but there are those who don't live in our area but have taken an active part in our Zoom meetings and they will definitely be missed.



*Courtesy of Corinne Urrutia*

Come May, we will begin our Bird Wing outdoor outings, again if Covid restrictions continue to permit such.

**Photo of the Month:**



*Stephen O'Donnell*

Such intensity. What might be going on?

---