

Bird Wing Outing Report

July 2022



Nipissing Naturalists Club

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By Renee Levesque; photos as indicated

We (Dick Tafel, Lori Anderson, Fred Pinto, Cindy Lafleur, Linda Stoner, Mary Marrs, Irene Kash and I) began the evening en route to the property of Bird Wing members Ed Rowley and Katherine Byers by seeing a Broad-winged Hawk, a good omen for the rest of our July outing.

Ed and Katherine were our hosts, leading 8 of us through 2.5 km of mixed farm and woodland property on what was once a working farm in the Byers family. Attached to this report is an article by Ed on some of the history of the farm.

The mosquitoes were a bit of a nuisance at times, and some found the uneven ground and length of the walk a bit too long, but we did spot a total 25 species, so well worth the walk! (With the Broad-winged, 26 species.)

The outing began with Katherine showing us her milkweed patch to attract monarch butterflies. I don't believe we saw a monarch throughout our walk, but we did see its caterpillar on one of the milkweed plants. (photo at right)



Mark Olivier

The first part of the walk was through fields to the vegetable garden and it was on this stretch that we heard the Savannah Sparrow and saw and heard many Song Sparrows, including two juvenile Song Sparrows, difficult to identify at first because we hadn't yet put on our juvenile caps!

A lone Ring-billed Gull flew overhead, as is wont to happen over an open field near a large body of water during an early summer's evening.

Around the area of the vegetable garden were also a Ruby-throated Hummingbird and a family of Eastern Phoebes. They were flying to and fro when not sitting on the fencing around the raspberry patch wagging their tails as phoebes do.

In the shrubs and trees near the vegetable garden, we saw a White-throated Sparrow and Rose-breasted Grosbeaks (right), the latter a treat for those who hadn't seen the brilliantly coloured male Rose-breasted since early spring.

As we made our way among the alders and wet areas, we heard Swamp Sparrows (photo below)



David Rooke



Renee Levesque

and a lone Alder Flycatcher, the latter another special treat because some of us have not seen or heard many Alders this year. It was in this area we began to encounter many mosquitoes. We thought of turning around, but as intrepid birders, we kept on going.

We were glad we did, because we next encountered a Double-crested Cormorant flying overhead and heard at least two Sandhill Cranes somewhere not too far off. A murder of crows, 14 of them, was seen making its way towards the lake to roost for the night.

It was a perfect area for a Common Yellowthroat, which we heard but did not see, and a family of Chestnut-sided Warblers (photo right) flying from branch to branch in the low shrubs. A deer in the distance, a jumping wood frog, and a red squirrel all added to the idyllic landscape – if only it weren't for those darn mosquitoes!

A Cedar Waxwing was heard and Linda's Merlin app picked up a Great Crested Flycatcher in what was perfect Great Crested Flycatcher territory, but we did not see or hear it, so couldn't count it.

We then came into a heavily wooded area and saw and heard Blue Jays and a Hairy Woodpecker, and then heard a burst of babbling, melodic, and vigorous trills from a tiny songbird, the Winter Wren, competing with the



Gary Chown

drumming of a nearby Ruffed Grouse. A photo of this mighty little songbird by Stephen O'Donnell graces this month's cover.

Just before we left the wooded area, Lori pointed out a lovely clump of ferns growing out of a boulder above us (photo at right). Dick's booklet, *Native Ferns of Eastern North America*, jointly published by the Canadian Audubon Society and the Federation of Ontario Naturalists, third edition, 1963, identifies this fern as a Common Polypody, a fern that "softens the harsh edges of shady rocks and boulders with its cheerful parade of erect fronds", a fern that is thick and leathery and defies "frost to peep brightly at us through the first snows of winter."



Ed Rowley

At least two Red-eyed Vireos (seen below) were still incessantly singing a few of their daily 2,000 plus songs, although I think the number of daily songs decreased in number by late July.

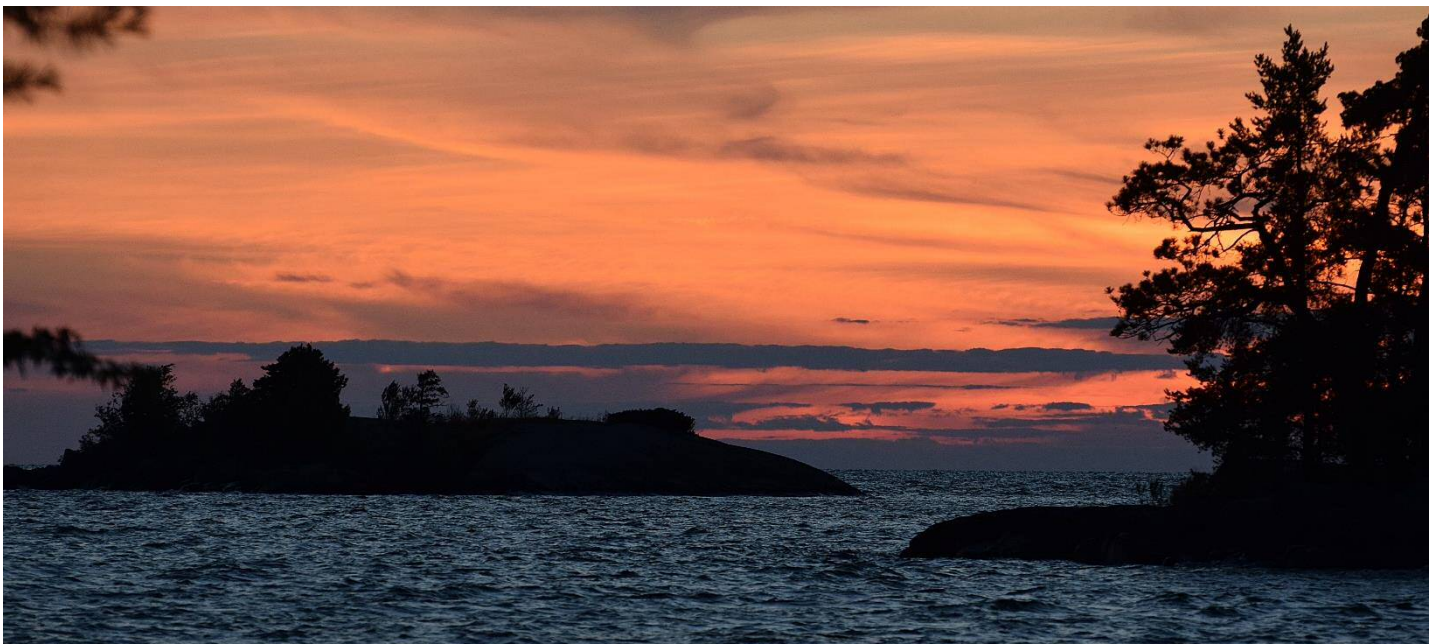
As we came out of the woods and into the wetland where we were hoping to find the American Bittern seen frequently by Ed and Katherine in this area and last seen by them a week before, all seemed quiet. But then, the Red-winged Blackbirds appeared – female or immature – and surprisingly, another wren, the March Wren. (See Grant McKercher's report that follows.)



The Song Sparrows began singing even more vigorously than when we started out, a distant Common Raven croaked, a Mourning Dove made an appearance, and an American Goldfinch sang its last song of the evening as we made our way to our vehicles, tired after a long, but satisfying, walk.

Some of us headed west to the end of Birchgrove Road, towards Sunset Cove Road, and were rewarded with a beautiful sunset, photographed below.

Photos above and below by Renee Levesque



History of Our Farm



Text and photos by Ed Rowley

The history of the property located at 829 Birchgrove Drive West in Nipissing Township has been difficult to locate. It was originally a 100-acre working farm established and operated by the Ibbitson family, grandparents of Kathy's mom.

Over the years the property has changed ownership a few times, and an 8-acre parcel on the northeast corner was severed off and sold by one of the previous owners. The remaining 92-acre parcel was acquired by Kathy's parents, returning the property to the Byers's family, who then sold the property to us in February 2012.

When we acquired the property, the fields had returned to their natural state covered in tag alder, willow, poplar, spruce, pine, maple, and oak with some small clearings. Kathy's dad had created a network of roads and drainage ditches throughout the property.

We started our adventure by clearing the front of the property from the main road back to a rock ridge that runs across the full width of the property approximately 350 metres back from the main road. This front field, approximately 13 acres in size, is now mostly cleared of trees and brush with some trees and brush remaining at the back of the field.



Abutting the west side of the front field is a beaver pond. The land at the back of the front field in front of the rock ridge is also lower and wetter. These land features combined with the cleared front section, and the vegetable and flower gardens that we have made, have created a diverse and healthy habitat for many species of birds, too numerous to mention.

We also have many turtles, frogs and toads, bees and butterflies, and an abundance of other wildlife that enjoy the open spaces and variety of vegetation that has flourished on the open field, forest and wetlands.

The rock ridge itself is a natural habitat for wildlife. Behind this rock ridge is another large area that was previously farmed, but has now mostly returned to its natural state.

We have opened up areas restoring some of the open field, and we have created and maintain additional trails ideal for birding, walking, and skiing. At the very back of the property, there is another large rock ridge that runs across the full width of the property. We have left this rock ridge in its natural state.

Return to the Marsh



Text and Photos by Grant McKercher

On 25 July 2022, Dick Tafel and I made a return visit to the Cranberry Marsh in search of the elusive Least Bittern which we last saw there in July 2020. We were also in search of other marsh birds, such as the Marsh Wren and rails. On this sojourn, we were accompanied by our guide and expert helmsman, Mark Bassam, who provided the boat for the expedition. Mark and Dick are pictured above.

Our first stop was Cranberry Creek which empties from the marsh into Callander Bay. We were greeted by the excited comings and goings of numerous Red-winged Blackbirds. Some of the females (at right) were carrying food and taking it deep into the reeds where we



could hear the cheeping of fledglings, presumably being fed. The males stood guard on nearby cattails and vocalized as we passed by.

After a bit, we heard the scolding, chittering call of a Marsh Wren from in the reeds, and then the owner made a brief appearance at the water's edge to see who was intruding into his territory, giving us a good view of this furtive marsh resident

We then heard the distinct call of a Virginia Rail, and then a second one called, seeming to respond to the first. They remained hidden from sight in the reeds, however, and did not show themselves to us.

Moving on to the North Channel of Callander Bay, we continued our search. Here we encountered more Marsh Wrens (below) and another Virginia Rail, as well as a flock of Barn Swallows foraging for insects over the marsh. A Bald Eagle was near its nest on the west side of the channel. Alas, no sign of the elusive Least Bittern.



Next, we ventured out through the Middle Channel to the main lake to look for gulls and cormorants. In Ontario, the latter species has been increasing in population in recent years, making remarkable recovery from the devastating effects of DDT in the 1950s and 60s. Its population rebound, however, has



prompted a controversial “fall hunt” during which hunters are allowed to shoot the bird in large numbers - up to 15 per day.

Lake Nipissing is home to migratory cormorants, most being found on the West Arm of the lake, where they nest colonially. We have seen some in Callander Bay in recent years, but they seem to be in lower numbers than previously reported. When we went out into the main lake, we found a small group of birds (about 20) sharing a rocky island with a group of Herring Gulls. (photo above)



Back in the bay, we also sighted four adult birds and two juveniles, (photos below) indicating that they continue to breed in the area.

The day was getting hotter, and we were already out longer than anticipated, but we had to make one more attempt at locating our ‘target’ bird – so back to Cranberry Creek we motored, thinking it was the most likely habitat to find it.

While sitting quietly in the boat, we heard the Marsh Wren again and a couple of Swamp Sparrows. The Virginia Rails had gone silent. Then, behind the boat, I had a fleeting view of a bird flying out from the reeds and crossing the creek to quickly hide again in the dense weedy growth. Dick and Mark had their backs to it, so I was the only observer. It was a medium sized bird, with a long bill and trailing legs, and distinctive buffy wing colouring,....could it have been the Least Bittern?...I think so!..... *but*, it also had some of the field marks of the notorious Bare-fronted Hoodwink*, also known to frequent these parts. I guess we'll have to chalk it up as a 'possible' sighting. But it is also another reason to return to the marsh to locate more of its secretive inhabitants.

All in all, a great day of birding on Callander Bay!

Bird list for the day:

Common Loon	American Crow
Double-crested Cormorant	Barn Swallow
Least Bittern (possible)	Marsh Wren
Great Blue Heron	Song Sparrow
Wood Duck	Swamp Sparrow
Bald Eagle	White-throated Sparrow
Virginia Rail	Red-winged Blackbird
Ring-billed Gull	Bare-fronted Hoodwink (possible)
Herring Gull	
Red-eyed Vireo	
Blue Jay	

*First described by Matthew Meiklejohn (1913-1974), a professor of languages at the University of Glasgow, Scotland, and an amateur ornithologist. In his article published in 1950 in *Bird Notes*¹ (the journal of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds), he described a particularly uncommon species of bird which he proposed be named *Dissimulatrix spuria*. The main characteristic of this species is that it is "generally recognizable by *blurred appearance* and extremely rapid flight away from the observer". Although it has never been fully observed and described, it has been photographed. "It is the brown blur that passes rapidly from right to left in all ornithological films." Meiklejohn claimed that this single species could easily account for every bird not completely sighted.

¹Meiklejohn, M.F.A. (1950). "Notes on the hoodwink (*Dissimulatrix spuria*)". *Bird Notes*. 24 (3): 89-92

American Kestrel Musings from 2020

By Gary Sturge and Stephen O'Donnell

Gary Sturge to Stephen O'Donnell: I understand you put up a bird box on the dead tree over the creek on Maple Hill Road at Purdon Line. Connie and I have taken notice of it since you put it up, but have seen only the odd starling sitting on it. We often wondered what the box would attract, that is until yesterday morning when we noticed a sizable bird sitting at the opening. On closer look, we saw it was a young kestrel, but when I tried to get an even better look, it disappeared inside the box, so on our way we went.

Later on the same morning, on our way to our camp, sure enough, there it was again. I took a photo of it with my cell phone and was walking back to our car when Mother Kestrel raised a racket and junior disappeared again.

In the evening, I went back with my actual camera, but no sign of the kestrels. They had flown. Seems we caught them in the fledging process with mama flying around calling for her young to emerge and fly.



Stephen O'Donnell

Stephen to Gary: Well, that's good news! I knew the kestrels were using the box because a friend of mine had checked on it earlier, although he did not see any young at the time. Kestrels can be very secretive and difficult to see during the nesting process.

The young should hang out in the area until the end of August or later and will roost the box every night. Sometime in late August, the adults will slip away, leaving the young, and I swear they must do this in the middle of the night so the young won't follow!

I also put up three kestrel boxes closer to home. Two boxes have young in them and the third, used by kestrels the year before (2019), had Tree Swallows nest in it this year.

Stephen to Renee: Here is a photo of a young kestrel taken a couple of years ago in the very first box my friend and I put up on Purdon Line, just a bit further down from where the box is located now. That first box got crushed in the Fall when a wind storm blew the tree down. So we put up a new box and last summer (2019), it appeared as if the box was unused, but a success this year as Gary points out!

Update from Gary: In 2021, we saw kestrels around the box from time to time, but no direct evidence that there was a nest in the box. They were around more that year than this summer, so they likely had a nest in the area, but where, I can't say. This year, one was seen from time to time, but I'd say definitely no nest in the box.

If you would like to put up an American Kestrel nest box, see <https://www.birdwatching-bliss.com/american-kestrel-nest-box.html> for instructions and plans.