

# Bird Wing Outing Report

June 2023



A little birdie told me ...



## Notices and Reminders:

**Bird Wing Outing:** July's Bird Wing Outing will take place **the evening of Tuesday, July 25**, a day also known as Christmas in July, so perhaps there might be some nice surprise findings! We will once again meet at 6:30 sharp in the parking lot by Urban Planet, Northgate Mall. Details of the outing location will be announced closer to the event.

**Bird Bash:** July's Bird Bash will take place the last **weekend of July, July 29-30**. Expect to see some returning shorebirds.

**Louise de Kiriline Nature Festival:** Be sure to attend the Louise de Kiriline Nature Festival to be held the **third Saturday of August at Laurier Woods**. I don't yet know what some of the highlights might be, but there is sure to be something to please everyone. The photo below goes back to the Nature Festival of 2014 when Bruce Murphy from Hilliardton Marsh Research and Education Centre demonstrated bird banding. The number of species from Laurier Woods banded that day was 20 and the number of individuals was 77. It was a good banding day!



*Renee Levesque*

## Bird Wing Outing, June 28

Our Bird Wing Outing was to have taken place on June 27, but because it rained throughout the day and into the evening, we postponed it to the next day and I think we were all happy we did. Not only was it a typical lovely June evening – sun and cloud, low 20s – but we saw or heard a total of 45 species (counting the swifts)! Most of the species seen or heard were on Hills Siding Road, after which two drove home and three went into North Bay to see the Chimney Swifts at St. Vincent de Paul Church – 57 in total – and five of us went on to our planned route along River Road.

Those who missed the River Road part of the outing missed, I think, the best part of the outing. We were greeted by the echoing winnowings of three Wilson’s Snipes, two of which were seen in a wet field with two Killdeer. It was actually pretty spectacular – the sun was setting and the snipe were calling – a sharp chip-like call – and winnowing and flying and landing. We thought we had hit the jackpot, but that was yet to come! (Photo of a Wilson’s Snipe at right.)



Renee Levesque

As we walked further up the road, while hearing many Savannah Sparrows singing, we stopped and Lori Anderson turned to me and said, “Did you hear that different song?” I said I did, but didn’t know what it was. I turned on Merlin and it identified the song as a LeConte’s Sparrow’s – three times identifying it as such.



Renee Levesque

(Photo at left.) We heard it a few times and tried to flush it out, but were not successful even though it seemed to be practically right in front of us. The reason for going to River Road in the first place was to try and find LeConte’s, so even hearing it was mission successful! This was not the first time we saw or heard this sparrow on River Road. A few years back, we saw it when it briefly perched atop one of the grasses and before that, before my time, it was also seen on this road – as was the Yellow Rail! That a LeConte’s turned up again on River Road was like a dream come true for Dick Tafel, although he would have liked to have seen it, as all five of us would have.

I am dedicating our walk along River Road to Gary Sturge who is slowly recuperating and

undergoing rehab in hospital. I recall during our 2017 River Road outing that Gary and Connie arrived with their two dogs, Gus and Abi, and the dogs, usually so well-behaved, jumped out the open window of Gary's car against Gary's stern instruction not to do so! I believe we saw quite a few Eastern Kingbirds that evening, but saw only two this time. The photo of Gary and Connie with Grant McKercher at right is from our 2018 River Road outing.

Other species seen on River Road were many Red-winged Blackbirds, a flock of Common Grackles heading home for the night, a singing American Robin, three Tree Swallows and a singing Common Yellowthroat. And Brittany Tartaglia ran into her aunt who happens to live across the road from where we were listening for birds. Little did Brittany know that her aunt's house is almost at our usual River Road stopping place.



*Renee Levesque*



*Renee Levesque*

Now back to Hills Siding Road where the 10 of us made many stops listening and looking for birds. Thirty-seven species were seen or heard along this road, but for me, and I suspect for Lori, the highlight on Hills Siding was hearing at least three times the descending whinny call of the Sora (at left) far across the second wetland. It called just before some of us got into our cars to turn them around because the puddle across the wetland was too deep to continue from Hills Siding Road to River Road, forcing us to take the very long way around! Hearing

the Sora was another goal met and I am sorry those who turned their cars around a bit sooner than Lori and Dick did not hear it.

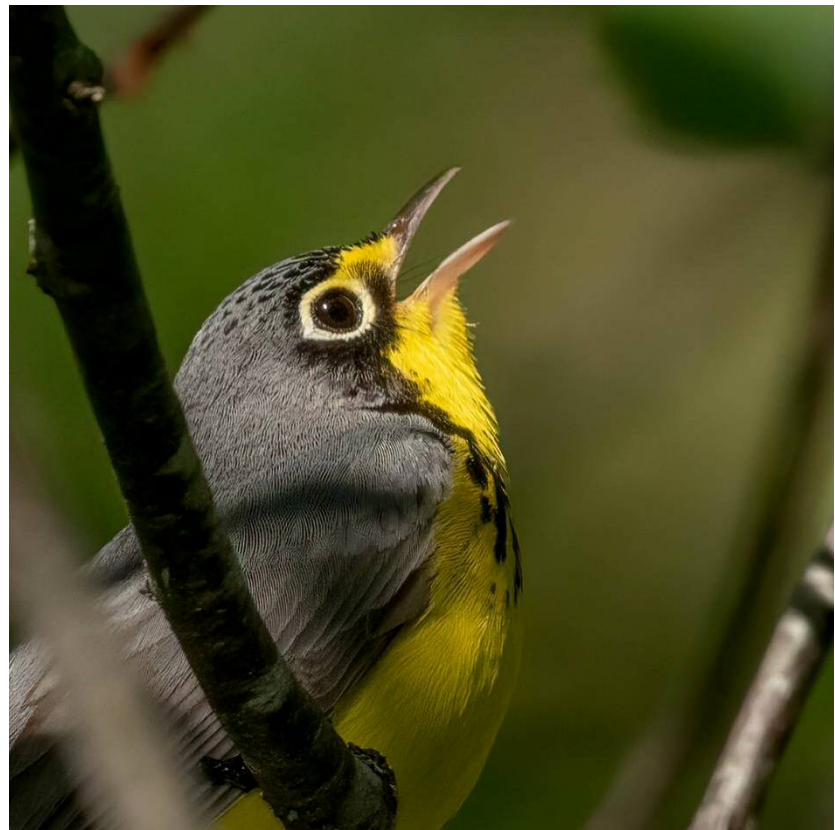
Other species seen or heard were:

Warblers: Canada Warbler (right), Northern Parula, and Black-throated Blue thanks to Brittany; Blackburnian; American Redstart; Chestnut-sided; Black and White; Common Yellowthroat; many Ovenbirds (below); a Yellow-rumped seen at the beginning of our route by Fred Pinto and Diane and Alvin Deagle; and a **male Yellow, gracing the cover this month with a photo by Renee Levesque**. I doubt there are many birding places where one doesn't hear or see many Yellows.

Flycatchers: Eastern Phoebe, a few Alders, and a Least heard by Fred.

Sparrows: Chipping, White-throated, and many Swamps.

Finches: male and female American Goldfinch, a Purple Finch, and three Evening Grosbeaks.



*Stephen O'Donnell*



*Stephen O'Donnell*

Jays: Blue Jay.

Kingfishers: Belted Kingfisher.

Birds that are Black: many Redwings, including a couple of females that popped up briefly; a Common Grackle; an American Crow; three Common Ravens; and a European Starling.

Woodpeckers: A Yellow-bellied Sapsucker and a Downy again seen by Fred, Diane and Alvin at the start of our route.

Thrushes: Six singing American Robins and 2 singing Veerys.

Waxwings: At least two Cedar Waxwings and perhaps more.

Kinglets: A singing-up-a-storm Ruby-crowned.

Ducks: One Mallard. (Probably more, but we saw only one.)

Vireos: many Red-eyed (photo at right). One hears so many of them that frequently their song almost fades into the background, except for Louise de Kiriline Lawrence who heard 22,197 songs in a single day from just before dawn until evening. (Speaking of which, I saw some Bird Wing members at the Callander Bay Heritage Museum for the June reading by Marilyn Simonds of her book, *Woman, Watching*, on Louise de Kiriline Lawrence – Grant McKercher, Faye Oei, Janet Philips, Dick Tafel and Rick Tripp. There may have been others I didn't see because Marilyn's reading attracted quite a crowd – 85 people.)



Renee Levesque

Hérons: Hills Siding Road never disappoints in terms of seeing a Great Blue Heron, one of the last birds we saw.

A day or so before the outing, Brent Turcotte had emailed me to let me know that he heard an Eastern Towhee along the pipeline. We couldn't wander along the line – too wet – but we did listen and listen and look and look and tried calling it, but we weren't successful, although we did see a bird with two white spots on its back, but then couldn't locate it again. Maybe it was the towhee, but maybe not. We will never know.

And even though Dick told us we were there to look for birds and not animals, we did exclaim at all the animals we saw – a moose, 4 snowshoe hares, a mole, a deer and a beaver. (I am very sorry not all of us saw the moose, just the early arrivers – Mary Marrs, Brenda and Lori. Maybe Linda Stoner was even sorrier – she wanted to get a photo of one.)

On the way home along Alderdale Road after our exciting walk along River Road, we stopped by a wooded area and heard a Veery on one side and a Hermit Thrush on the other. Nothing like hearing thrushes singing at dusk! So wonderful.

All in all, a very successful outing in terms of species seen and laughs we had!

-Renee Levesque

## Seeds and Cones

**Indigo Bunting:** There is something about the word indigo that is very appealing to me. I like the sound of the word and I love the colour. It is such a distinctive blue, a natural dye from the *Indigofera* plants. Nations – India, China, Japan, Southeast Asia, Egypt, Peru, Iran, West Africa and Britain – have used indigo as a dye for centuries. Indigo as a colour name was first recorded in English in 1289.

In the world of music, indigo connotes deep melancholy, bluer than blue. Think Joni Mitchell's *Turbulent* – “Oh what do you think about living in Turbulent Indigo?” or Duke Ellington's *Mood Indigo* – “Yes you have been blue/But not until you have that mood indigo.” And then there is Grant McKercher's song that he borrowed from Marty Robbins about the leucistic robin featured in last month's “Seeds and Cones” – “I'm in a blue, blue mood.” See the full song on the page after Seeds and Cones.

And then there are countless novels with the word indigo in their titles. I haven't read any of them, but was struck by one title, *The Indigo Bunting*, by Marissa Virtuoso. The novel is about Harper Lexington who knows a lot about birds, but does not know how to cope with the death of her fiancé who died just before their wedding. A year later, Harper still struggles to the point where “if she could fly away, she would.”

But the beautiful little Indigo Bunting, though well-named in terms of colour, is anything but melancholy. It sings a robust cheerful song and though its feathers seem deep blue to us, like all blue birds, it lacks the blue pigment. Instead, its colour comes from the structures in its feathers that refract and reflect blue light.

Compare below the colour of the Indigo Bunting with an extract of natural indigo on paper.



*Renee Levesque*

**Armchair Travellers:** For various reasons, some of us are just not able to get away on a major trip this season, a trip that would also take in some birding time, and so we take comfort from the birding delights of others. Sue Gratton, who gave a talk to the Bird Wing group in April on the birds of Cozumel, is recently back from Scotland, as is Katharine McLeod. Sue and Katharine hope to combine their efforts and talk about the birds they saw in Scotland at one of our upcoming meetings. I won't give away all the birds they saw, but will highlight a couple.

Katharine was in Glasgow, Inverness, and the Isle of Sky and she swam in the cold waters of Loch Moy, a freshwater loch by the village of Moy, near Inverness in the Scottish Highlands and close to the Culloden Moor Battlefield where Scotland lost its sovereignty to England in 1746. One of the birds Katherine saw – and she saw many – was the Greylag Goose, photo below.



*Renee Levesque*

I am not sure of all the places where Sue travelled in Scotland, but I know her favourite part of the trip was her time on the Isle of May that is in the Firth (estuary) of Forth about 8 km. off the coast of Scotland. I would have thought the Atlantic Puffin would have been her favourite bird, but it was the European Shag, a cormorant, that reminded me of Fred Pinto's Imperial or Antarctic Shag that he saw in the Antarctica and shown in April's Bird Wing Report, only Fred's had blue eyes and Sue's green eyes. Sue's photo of this banded bird is at right. I am not sure, but I think the banding indicates this Shag was banded as a nestling between 2001 and 2009.

Then there is a friend of Faye Oei's who was recently in the Galapagos and took the wonderful photo of Blue Boobies on the next page. Apparently one doesn't often see so many of these birds in such a large group and it certainly emphasizes their blue feet. If we didn't know any better, we would think no such bird would have feet so brilliantly blue and that whoever took the photo photo-shopped the feet.



*Sue Gratton*



Blue Boobies get their blue feet from the carotenoid pigments in their fish diet. The higher the concentration of the pigments, the greater the intensity of the colour of the feet. To impress the female, the male flaunts his blue feet in a sort of foot dance. Because the blueness of the feet is a reliable indicator of how healthy and strong the male is, the brighter the feet, the more successful the male is at attracting the female.



Debra Lamb

**Great Blue Heron:** My travels didn't take me far, just up the north highway to Oak Ridge Lane where I found a couple of Great Blue Herons in a nest. I bird along Oak Ridge Lane a few times over the spring, summer and fall, and I usually see a Great Blue Heron either at the lake or at the marsh. Although I know they are in the area, this was the first time I saw a nest with the herons in it. (I just realized that up to this point in "Seeds and Cones" there has been much mention of the word blue!)

**Monique Beauparlant:** Therez Viloette emailed me to tell me she was pleased about my honouring Monique in last month's "Seeds and Cones" and told me that every time she sees a White-throated Sparrow, she is reminded of Monique. Monique enjoyed telling us that the White-throat's song in French is: *Baisse tes culottes, Frederick, Frederick*.

**Broad-winged Hawk:** In early June, again on Oak Ridge Lane, I took a photo of a Broad-winged Hawk that landed on a nearby tree. (photo at right) I have seen many Broad-wings this spring, but what stood out with this Broad-wing was that it was a juvenile. This surprised me because I thought a juvenile would not be this advanced so early. But this juvenile was hatched sometime in 2022 and will retain its juvenile plumage for a year before beginning a protracted full molt over the summer to its first adult plumage before migrating south in mid-September. (This information is thanks to Ron Pittaway.) Later on Oak Ridge Lane, I may see this same Broad-wing again in its adult plumage, but won't factually know for sure it was the juvenile I saw earlier, but, nevertheless, I will decide it is.



Renee Levesque

- Renee Levesque

## A WHITE SPORT COAT (AND EXPECTATIONS)

by 'Marty Robin'

(With apologies to Marty Robbins)

A white, sport coat, and expectations,  
I'm all dressed up for the dance.  
A white, sport coat, and expectations,  
I'm all alone in romance.

Once you told me long ago,  
To the nest with me you'd go.  
Now you've changed your mind it seems,  
Someone else will hold my dreams.

A white, sport coat, and expectations,  
I'm in a blue, blue mood...



*American Robin (leucistic)*

*Grant McKercher*

## Nestlings



**Bald Eagles:** By now, most of us are familiar with the nesting Bald Eagles by the government wharf in Callander. Grant McKercher got a photo of the three nestlings facing him! (Grant's photo is above.) He was fortunate because when I was there, I saw only two nestlings and neither was facing me. One was turned to the side and one was snuggled in the nest, looking up only once and getting its mother's attention – well, she turned from her roosting perch to look at it until it settled down again. There was no sign of the third one.

**Ospreys:** By now all the nesting Ospreys in our area should have nestlings and this is certainly true of the Cache Bay ballpark Ospreys with their two nestlings. Photo at right.

**Great Blue Herons:** After I told Grant McKercher that I saw Great Blue Herons in their nest on Oak Ridge Lane, Grant took his scope to the location and saw an adult in the nest with three nestlings and another adult roosting nearby. While Grant was there, two other adult herons flew by, seemingly upsetting the roosting heron that left his perch and flew after



them. This could mean there are more nests in the vicinity.

**Baltimore Orioles:** While Grant was taking a photo of the three Bald Eagle nestlings, Shirley McKercher spied a Baltimore Oriole nest nearby and Grant captured the oriole leaving the nest in the photo at right. When I was there, I watched the male oriole fly to and fro and at one point land for a bit on the eagle tree. None of the eagles budged. They must be used to their neighbour by now.

**Common Loons:** Yvonne Montgomery informed me that once again the loons are nesting on the platform she has for them on Trout Lake. Some of you may recall that last year after the loons hatched, they died in the hands of a usurping pair of adult loons that wanted the nest for themselves. Seems it is the usurping pair that got first dibs on the nest this year. Yvonne, who was a professional photographer, hopes to talk to us in the fall about “her” loons and show us some of her fantastic photos. The loon sitting on nest that I took at Yvonne’s place last year, the loon that got usurped, is below.



*Grant McKercher*

*-Renee Levesque*



## The sparrow with four sexes

By Grant McKercher

At a recent Bird Wing meeting, Fred Pinto mentioned having read an article (1) about White-throated Sparrows (*Zonotrichia albicollis*), and the fact that they effectively have four separate sexes! But how could this be?



*White-striped morph of White-throated Sparrow, Grant McKercher*

As it turns out, these rather nondescript little brown birds have a unique combination of genetic and behavioural characteristics that result in their mating with only specific members of their population.

It has long been known that White-throats have two distinct morphs - those with black-and-white head stripes, and those with tan-and-white head stripes. Pioneering work by the Canadian ornithologist James Lowther (2) showed that **about half of all males and half of all females fall into each morph category.** Although other species of birds have colour morphs (e.g. Red-tailed hawks, Eastern Screech-Owls, among others) and mate freely within their populations, Lowther found that **White-throats mated in a very selective way: tan-striped males with white-striped females, or white-striped males with tan-striped females.**

He also showed that the two colour morphs had very **different behaviours, with white-striped morphs being more aggressive, while tan-morphs were more passive and nurturing.** As Ken Kaufman notes, “We see four distinct types: super-aggressive males, more nurturing males, somewhat aggressive females, and super-nurturing females.”(3)

Since the 1960s we have also known that the two colour morphs have different chromosomes: tan-striped birds have two identical copies of chromosome 2, while white-striped birds have one ‘normal’ copy of chromosome 2 and another which contains a large inverted section. Recent work by ecologist Elaina Tuttle (4),

utilizing a combination of long-term field observation with advances in genetic mapping, has shown that this “**super-gene**” is responsible not only for the head stripe colours, but also the wide range of behavioural differences that account for the preferential mating of the birds.

The White-throated Sparrow is the only known bird in the world with this combination of genetic and behavioural traits; but that may be because we haven’t looked for other examples! This fascinating story of the White-throated Sparrow shows the power of combining historical and contemporary field observation with cutting-edge genomics tools to uncover untold complexities of Nature’s continuing evolution.

- (1) Arnold, C. The Sparrow with Four Sexes. *Nature* **539**, 482-484 (2016).
- (2) Lowther, JK. Polymorphism in the White-throated Sparrow, *Zonotrichia albicollis* (GMELIN). *Can J Zool.* June 1961. <https://doi.org/10.1139/z61-031>.
- (3) Kaufman, K. The Fascinating and Complicated Sex Lives of White-throated Sparrows. Ken Kaufman’s Notebook [www.audubon.org](http://www.audubon.org). March 29, 2017.
- (4) Tuttle, EM, et al. 2016. Divergence and Functional Degradation of a Sex Chromosome-like Supergene. *Curr Biol* **26**. DOI: [10.1016/j.cub.2015.11.069](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cub.2015.11.069)



*Tan-striped morph of White-throated Sparrow, Stephen O'Donnell*