

Bird Wing Report

October 2023



Notices and Reminders

Bird Bash: It is almost here, **the weekend of November 4-5**, so bundle up and see what you can find.

Bird Wing: Our next Bird Wing meeting, **Tuesday, November 28**, takes place on **Zoom** to allow those members from afar – and there are many – to hear all about the Birds of Patagonia, Argentina, from Fred Pinto who visited and birded in Patagonia during his 2022 Antarctica year. Since then, Fred has been to the Arctic, but that is for another time. Zoom time is later than in-person meeting time - **at 7:00 pm, not 6:30.**

Christmas Bird Count: Our Christmas Bird Count (CBC) will take place on **Saturday, December 16.** We have seven set routes for field observers, observers who have been doing these routes for years. If you wish to join any of these routes, it is important you email Lori Anderson, our compiler, as soon as possible, at lori.anderson58@hotmail.com.



Renee Levesque

However, you don't have to be a field observer. You can be a feeder watcher, watching for birds in your yard from the comfort of your home as long as you live within a 24-km (15m) radius of Dugas Bay, Trout Lake, on Hwy 17, a radius that remains the same every count year. See the CBC circle on our Bird Wing CBC page at <https://www.nipnats.com/cbc>. If you aren't sure you are within it, Lori will let you know.

Thousands of volunteers take part in over 2000 locations throughout the Western Hemisphere, forming one of the world's largest sets of wildlife survey data. The results are used by conservation biologists, environmental planners and naturalists to assess population trends and distribution of birds. It has been citizen science project since 1900, making it the longest running citizen science project. This year marks North Bay's 45th year!

Ask the Expert, Fly like a bird: WGBH Events is putting on another Ask the Expert Zoom webinar with David Allen Sibley on **November 17 from noon until 1:00 pm**. Tickets are free for this webinar on birding migration, although you can make a donation if you like. Google WGBH Events, Ask the Expert, Bird Migration. Then click Buy Tickets even though they are free, then indicate how many you want, and then register.

David Allen Sibley is the author and illustrator of *The Sibley Guide to Birds*. He will share his knowledge of birding migration with GBH News reporter Craig LeMoult.

Project FeederWatch, Birds Canada: It begins on **November 1 and goes through to April 30**, but you don't need to watch birds in your yard every day over these 6 months, just 2 days a week and for as little as 15 minutes. Don't worry if you are away or not available for your two days for whatever reason. You can start up again when you are able. And you don't even need to have feeders – shrubs, plants, trees, etc. in your yard will do. Some of us in Bird Wing have been participating for years. For more information and for instructions on how to participate see: <https://www.birdscanada.org/you-can-help/project-feederwatch>.



Steve Pitt

Bird Wing Meeting: Two birds seen in October

October's Bird Wing meeting took place at Club 183 in the basement of the Masonic Temple on First Avenue in North Bay. The Temple itself is a beautifully maintained building built in 1928, and although Club 183 is in the basement of the Temple, it was quite cozy with its round oak tables and artifacts on the wall. We were able to use it for our meeting at a greatly reduced rate thanks to the generosity of Bruce, with whom I was fortunate enough to connect through the Rorab Shrine Club.

Two Birds seen in October:

Garry Waldram: Garry saw a Gray-cheeked Thrush (at right) in Boulter Township and the very next day, one was seen by Dick Tafel and me at Cache Bay. And interestingly enough, just four days before the meeting, Garry saw a Scarlet Tanager. It is not a bird that is often seen so late in the season.

Grant McKercher: Grant saw two Hermit Thrushes together. Seems there were many thrushes around during October's hot spell while they were waiting for a favourable wind to take them south. I also saw, as did Garry, a Swainson's Thrush. Grant's second bird was the Yellow-rumped Warbler, seen by many of us because it was around in some numbers this fall.

Angela Mills: Angela's two birds were Blue Jays and American Robins. Some robins are still with us and with feeders going up, more and more Blue Jays have appeared, at least in my yard and Erica Buck's yard!



Garry Waldram



Renee Levesque

Kevin Telford: Kevin saw a Merlin (at left) harassing pigeons in downtown Callander. Lori Anderson saw one at her farm in Chisholm Township and Dick and I saw one at Powassan Lagoon. Kevin also saw a Brown Creeper, not always easy to see even when you know they are around, but when you do see them, they are fun to watch.

Fred Pinto: Fred managed to get out to West Nipissing to see some Sandhill Cranes, as did Linda Stoner, Grant and some others. But the most spectacular sighting was the 1,000 cranes Dick and I saw on Beaudry Road. Fred's

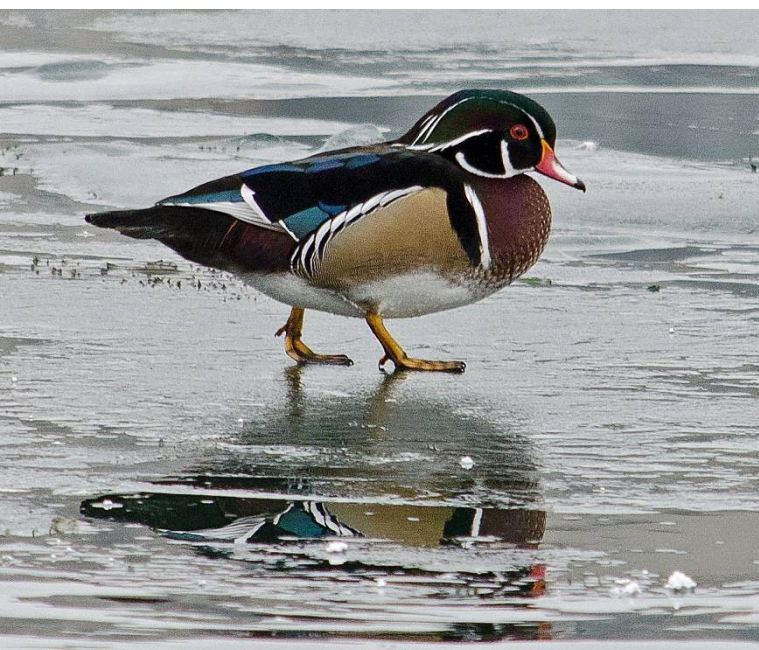
second bird was the Ring-necked Duck that he saw at Verner Lagoon. Because most have not been seen it since the spring, it was nice to see them again this fall.

Audrey Tenwesteneind: Audrey, who just joined Bird Wing the night of the meeting and is a newcomer to birding, saw a bird on Lake Temagami that looked similar to a loon. We decided it must have been a Red-necked Grebe, which was seen by Dick and me at Jocko Point and at Sunset Point. The photo below is of two Red-necked Grebes Stephen O'Donnell recently took in Lake Ontario, one with some red still visible on its neck and the other in its winter plumage.



Stephen O'Donnell

Other grebes besides the Red-necked that should get a mention are the two Horned Grebes seen by Dick at Jocko Point. Their smaller size and shorter all-dark bill separate them from the Red-necked Grebes with their heavy yellowish bill and longer neck. And although in our area we see Pie-billed Grebes during the spring and summer, there were recently over 20 of them at Cache Bay, all gathered in preparation for their migration south.



Donna McQuay

Audrey also saw American Crows. They are birds that will remain in some numbers in town over the winter. In my area north of Nipissing University, they have now left and been replaced by the Common Raven, although not in crow numbers.

Erica Buck: Erica's two birds were the Northern Harrier and the Wood Duck. Those members who live on farmland or travel through farmland have seen the harrier, one of the last hawks of the spring and summer to leave as they fly low over fields looking for things that scurry among the stalks. Erica's second bird, the Wood Duck (at left), was

seen by most who visit the lagoons and ponds. For Dick, and I know also for Lori Anderson, the male Wood Duck is the most beautiful of all the ducks. And really who can disagree?

Karen Boehm: Karen is another new member who joined at the meeting. I think maybe she joined because she was hoping that someone would want to adopt her two roosters! (Kidding – I think!) There were no takers at the meeting, but if anyone would like a rooster or two, let me know and I will pass it along to Karen. Dick did not make it clear to the newcomers that he was asking us to name two **wild** birds, so Karen’s first bird was accepted. Her second bird was the Rock Pigeon. Karen reported after the meeting that she is so looking forward to learning more about birds and that’s the kind of enthusiasm we like to hear.

Toni Beninger: Toni, a recent member, saw a Common Loon on Lake Nosbonsing. There is much more about loons, our main topic this evening, later in this report. Loons are starting to gather in rafts ahead of their journey south. Grant recently saw 22 of them in Callander Bay. Toni also saw the lovely little Black-capped Chickadee, the bird that Erica reports provides therapy because of the joy of holding one in your hand when it comes to take seed from it. If you haven’t experienced that, take a walk along La Vase River trail off Champlain Park or the Cranberry Trail in Callander. At right is a photo of Dick taking in some chickadee therapy near Field one beautiful February day.



Renee Levesque: With Dick, I saw seven Snow Geese at Warren Lagoon, once in the eastern cell and once in the field across from the lagoon. Thanks to Michael Arthurs for informing me of their presence. Five were white morph adults, one was a blue morph adult, and two were immatures.

One of my Snow Goose photos, the adult white morph, graces this month’s cover. My other bird

was the Fox Sparrow. I saw only one in my yard one day and I know Dick saw two in his yard on the same day. They are on their way south from James Bay and I am hoping more will come through so others will see this very handsome, large sparrow, not seen since its northern migration back in the spring, and one that is aptly named for its fox-like red hue.

Linda Stoner: Linda saw the Red-tailed hawk, a hawk making its way south. She also saw a Great Black-backed Gull at Sunset Park where it is often seen at this time of the year, other than

Renee Levesque

perhaps at the landfill sites. Gulls not mentioned were Bonaparte's, seen by Dick and me at Jocko Point, and a Lesser Black-backed seen by Dick in the Government Dock area, a gull seen by Linda and me at Verner Lagoon in the spring.

The Lesser is smaller than the Black-backed, as its name implies. The adult Lesser's back is lighter in colour, not as dark as the black of the Great, and its legs are bright yellow as opposed to the Great's pink. Both adults have yellow bills with a red spot and both are four year gulls. Seeing Great Black-backs in our area is much greater than seeing Lesser Black-backs. That is because the Lesser is a common Eurasian bird with no nesting confirmation of pure pairs in North America, although there has been nesting confirmation of its breeding with Herring Gulls. If the Lesser is to be seen in our area, it is usually in the spring or more often in the fall and usually not



Renee Levesque

more than one or two are seen. Its non-breeding plumage is similar to its breeding plumage, but with brown spotting on the head and neck as seen in the photo above. However, it can be seen during its non-breeding season in larger numbers on the coasts of the mid-Atlantic states and in Florida. (The one seen in these areas is the sub-species that breeds in Iceland, Britain and Western Europe.)

The handsome and regal-looking Great Black-backed is the largest gull in the world. It is primarily an Atlantic Canada breeding bird, found in the Great Lakes area and along the Atlantic coast in non-breeding season, although some stay all year around their breeding grounds.

Lori Anderson: Lori hasn't been able to get out birding these days, so her birding has been confined primarily to her farm area where she has seen Wild Turkeys and American Pipits. Certainly there have been many pipits seen this fall, sometimes in large flocks of 30 to 40.

Dick Tafel: Dick recently saw the handsome Ruddy Duck at Powassan Lagoon, one seen at Callander Lagoon by some of us in the spring. He also recently saw two American Tree Sparrows. We should be seeing more of them as they make their way south from their northern breeding grounds. It is one of those misnamed birds, once again misnamed by European settlers

who were reminded of the Eurasian Tree Sparrow. Why misnamed? Because American Tree Sparrows forage and nest on the ground and breed mostly in scrubby areas at or above the treeline. Most other sparrows have now already migrated, although in late October, as I write this report, we can still see the odd White Crown and White-throat.

Kaye Edmonds: Kaye was a guest at this month's Bird Wing meeting. You will read why later in this report. She saw Red Crossbills on Shields Point Road and a Gray Catbird (at right) recently in Laurier Woods, a nice surprise sighting, although unlike Garry's Scarlet Tanager, it has been known to stay around late into the fall.

Many other birds were mentioned after we all named our two birds. They are too numerous to list in this report, except for those birds we see usually only in the fall. The main fall migration birds not mentioned until after the fact were the three scoters – Surf, Black, and White-winged. They are diving sea ducks that breed in the far north and are on their way to their coastal wintering grounds. They are usually seen at Sunset Park or on Lake Bernard. At a glance, they all look basically the same with their stocky bodies and short necks, so a scope is very helpful in identifying them, especially as there are adult males, adult females, first winter males and first winter females to identify if you want to get that specific. Because scoters molt into their breeding plumage on or near their breeding grounds, most have molted at least by the time they reach Lake Ontario; however, in our area, there certainly could always be some that have not yet molted. My favourite is the male Surf



Matt Walters



Scoter, seen at left, with its colourful bill, brightly patterned with orange, black and white, as seen at left.

Other fall migrants that deserve a mention are Tundra Swans, a large flock

seen by Dick and me in Lake Nipissing off Marleau Road in Sturgeon Falls. They are on their way south from their remote Arctic breeding grounds. They are somewhat smaller than Trumpeter Swans and unlike the Trumpeters, most, but not all, have a yellow spot in front of their eyes.

Worth mentioning but not mentioned at the meeting were two birds very rare to our area and seen on Lake Bernard during October's Bird Bash. Sue Gratton, along with Stephen and Dan Burton, saw the Red-necked Loon fly by with some Common Loons, and Dick, Stephen, Dan and I spotted the Western Grebe, a large but slender grebe with a very long neck and a long pointed yellow bill and a red eye. The only other time I have seen a Western Grebe was in Vancouver and in its winter plumage. It breeds on western inland lakes with marshy edges, with most migrating to Pacific coasts for the winter. I don't know if any have been seen in our area before this October's sighting, but I don't see any indicated on eBird for our area.

And the only time I have seen the elegant Red-throated Loon, the smallest of all the loons and the one that breeds the furthest north, was in Iceland in its beautiful breeding plumage. I know the Red-throated Loon has been seen here by some during its southern migration. In its breeding plumage, it is easily identified by its brick-red throat patch (see photo below of one with its chick), but in its winter plumage when we might have a chance of seeing it in our area, look for a slender shape, a dark cap and a dark hind neck that contrasts with a white face and front neck, and a thin bill, one that is often held slightly raised.



David Karna, Wikimedia Commons

Without loons, something very special would be missing



Text by Renee Levesque; photos by Peter Ferris

I recently read two of Doug Tozer’s articles on the Common Loon, one from *OFO News*, October 2021 edition, entitled “Loon research takes flight”, and one from *Birdwatch Canada*, Summer 2023 edition, entitled “The Secret Lives of Loons”.

Doug is the Director of Waterbirds and Wetlands, Birds Canada. He grew up among the loons of Algonquin Provincial Park where his father, Ron Tozer, was the park’s naturalist for 24 years before he retired in the late 1990s. As Doug writes in “The Secret Lives of Loons”, he “paddled with the loons, listened to their calls, and observed their nests and chicks.” He saw the first ones arrive after ice-out and saw the last of them leave in the autumn.

Over the years, Doug expanded his interest in loons to include loon science. And no wonder. More and more heavyweight scientific papers on loons have appeared over the months and years and, as Doug indicates, the ones most relevant to Ontario used data collected by the Canadian Lakes Loon Survey, Birds Canada.

So what did the scientific papers conclude?

1. Loons do not mate for life. On average, loons have about four different partners every 10 years. So although they are not faithful for life, they are faithful during a particular breeding season.

2. After loon fledglings migrate south to coastal marine areas to overwinter, they remain there for several years, not returning to their breeding grounds until they are 3 to 5 years of age.
3. Loons are not above hostile takeovers of other loons' nesting territories. In fact, territorial battles between competing loons can be quite violent. Loons risk their lives to acquire breeding territories and risk their lives to keep them. They will also occasionally attack and sometimes kill ducks and grebes and have been known to attack a Canada Goose and a Bald Eagle!
4. Loons have four major calls: the wail, the tremolo, the yodel and the hoot. Nature Canada's website on loon calls explains that the most haunting call and the one we are most familiar with, the wail, is used when the loon becomes separated from its chick or mate and indicates a willingness to interact; the tremolo signals distress and also announces its presence on the lake; the yodel expresses aggression and is used in territorial disputes. It is only given by the male and each male has its unique yodel; hoots are soft, short calls given to keep in contact with each other – parents to chick, one mate to another. To hear these calls see:

<https://naturecanada.ca/news/blog/the-common-loon-what-are-they-saying/#:~:text=>



5. In late summer, up to dozens of individual loons sometimes gather together, a sort of social gathering, where they “peacefully float around very close together, gazing into each other’s eyes.” It is not known why they have this pre-migration social gathering, but if you have ever witnessed it, it is lovely to see.
6. The Canadian Lakes Loon Survey undertaken by Birds Canada shows chicks have decreased by 30% across Canada since the early 1990s. Doug reports that no one really knows why, but it is suspected that it is linked in part to past damage from acid rain, mercury pollution, decreasing water clarity due to runoff and algal blooms and climate

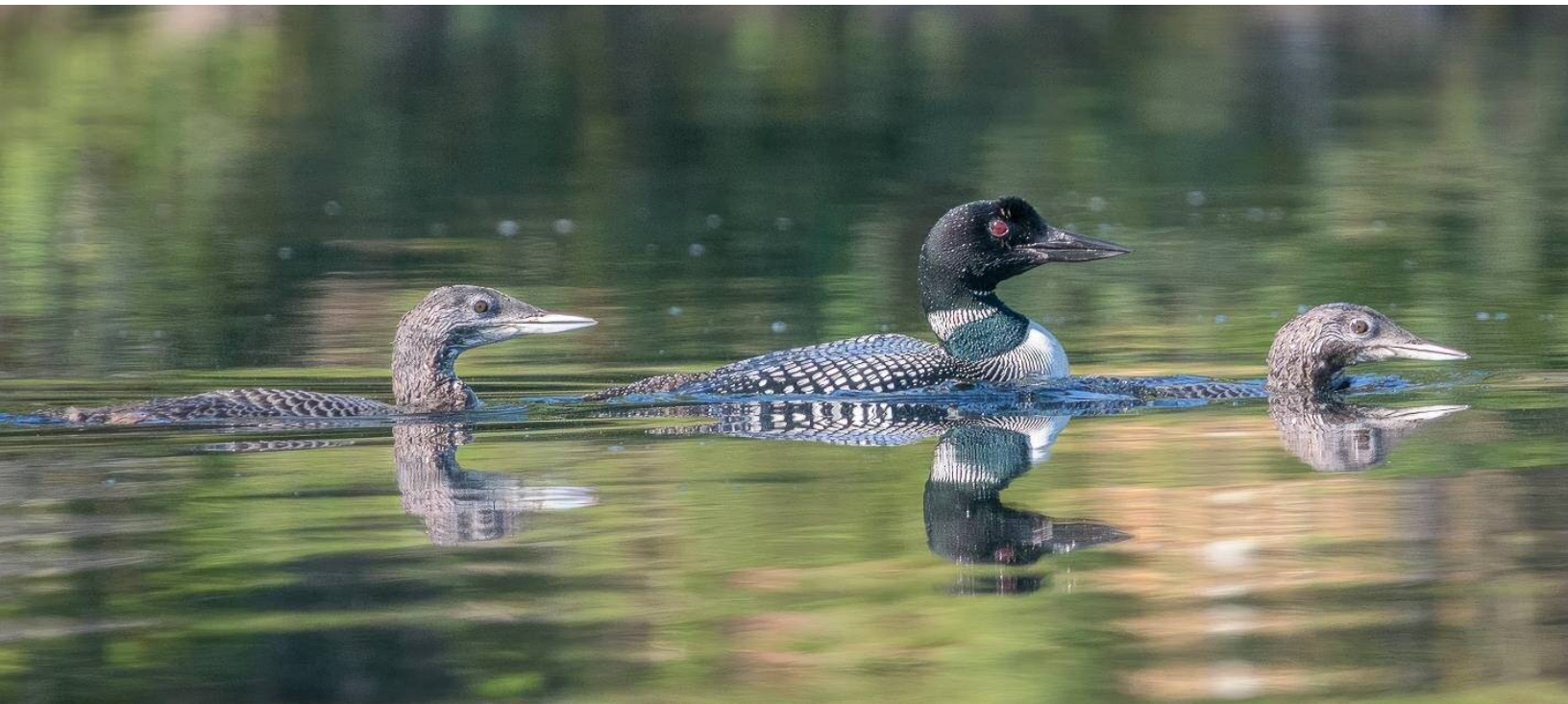
change. I also suspect increased boat and other water vehicular activity on some lakes and a lack of wildlife-friendly waterfronts.

Birds Canada is committed to attempt to get to the bottom of the decrease in chick population and to figure out what to do to protect the loon. Think about supporting Birds Canada by contributing to loon conservation work. See:

<https://conserve.birdscanada.org/page/50719/donate/1?chain&ea.tracking.id=Loon-Kombucha>. By donating anywhere from \$25.00 up, you can also take part in Project FeederWatch, a winter bird monitoring project that we highly recommend.

For those who live on a lake in which there are loons, you should seriously consider taking part in the Canadian Lakes Loon Survey. See: <https://www.birdscanada.org/bird-science/canadian-lakes-loon-survey>. There are many other interesting loon links on this home page, including information gleaned from 40 years of conducting the Canadian Lakes Loon Survey.

In *OFO News*, Doug concludes his article with, “Without the haunting cry of a loon from a distant lake, the northern woods would just feel wrong...something very special would be missing...”



A case of if you build it, they will come

Yvonne Montgomery, who spoke to Bird Wing members during October's meeting, is our local Common Loon Ambassador. She loves loons and the loons love her nesting platform and the Trout Lake bay where she and her husband, Bill, built their home in 2000. It is a calm bay, free of heavy water activity.

In 2005, Yvonne received a loon platform from a friend. She no sooner got it placed in her bay when two loons began nesting on it. A couple of years later, Yvonne and Bill made their own nesting platform and a lovely one it is, liked by the many loon couplings that have nested on it. The vegetation is natural, springing up from the moss-covered rocks on the platform with the exception of a little birch tree Yvonne planted. Every year before the loons arrive, Yvonne carefully maintains it – sort of like spring cleaning.



Renee Levesque

Since 2005, loons have successfully fledged chicks on Yvonne's platform in all but two years, 2022 and 2023. In 2022, a rival pair of loons who had had their eye on the platform attacked the newly-hatched chicks, killing one and driving off the parents. It was a violent loon time, one Yvonne won't easily forget because up to that point she did not know loons could be so aggressive. I am not sure why the pair waited until the chicks were born for their hostile

takeover – perhaps because at that point the parents were weak from their round-the-clock nest sitting and vigilance and the attacking pair knew they therefore would have the upper hand.

This year, hatching was not successful. Yvonne believes the pair that aggressively took over the nest in 2022 was the same pair nesting on the platform this year. In fact, Yvonne did not see one chick on Trout Lake this year and usually she sees up to five. So what Doug Tozer is reporting and what the Canadian Lakes Loon Survey indicates seem to be the case on Trout Lake, a lake on which there is an inordinate amount of boating and other water activity.



Steve Pitt

Yvonne recommends that if you live on a lake, provided all the conditions are optimal, you should consider building a nesting platform. **Before you build, there is much you have to take into consideration because the last thing you want to do is cause more harm than good.** If you are thinking of constructing one, first carefully read Birds Canada's instructions: <https://view.publitas.com/birds-canada-gyxxaz9yrrpp/cillsloonplatform-2022-ed/page/1>. This article comes complete with building specifications and recommended materials.

Yvonne also loves her ducks and has eight nest boxes on her property, all facing Trout Lake. Wood Ducks, Hooded and Common Mergansers nest in them. This year, all eight boxes were occupied! If you are thinking of setting up nest boxes, you should do so by at least mid-April.

What made Yvonne receive her 15 minutes of national fame was her rescue in her Trout Lake bay of a Canada Goose gosling that she named Dazy. Dazy became so attached to Yvonne that it would fly along beside her in her car and in her boat! Even once when Yvonne took her goose to join other geese, hoping Dazy would stay with them, by the time Yvonne arrived home, guess who was waiting for her?



Denis DuBois, North Bay Nugget

Yvonne made the evening fun and in appreciation, Bird Wing presented her with a painting on driftwood of a loon and her chick by Kaye Edmonds. The photo at right is of Yvonne with Kaye. It was taken by Yvonne's grandson, Will Montgomery, who also served as Yvonne's technical advisor at the meeting.

- *Renee Levesque*



Will Montgomery

Seeds and Cones

Red Knot: One of the Arctic-nesting Red Knots, B95, of the subspecies *rufa*, is affectionately named Moonbird because over its lifetime its annual migrations of 32,000 km between the Arctic and its wintering grounds in Tierra del Fuego, Argentina, exceeds the distance to the moon! Photo of Moonbird at right.

Moonbird (also known as B95 – the inscription on the orange flag in its upper left leg) was born in 1992 and banded in Rio Grande, Tierra del Fuego, in 1995. It is the oldest known Red Knot.

There are six global subspecies of Red Knots, three of which occur in Canada – *rufa*, *roselaari*, and *islandica*. The *rufa* subspecies breeds in the Arctic and migrates to three separate wintering areas, Florida, north-central Brazil, and southern South America. All three subspecies have decreased in numbers, most notably the *rufa* population, which is now designated as Endangered.

The decline of shorebirds and Red Knots in particular is related to the harvesting of horseshoe crabs in Delaware Bay, a major stop-over for shorebirds including Red Knots on their migration north. Restrictions on harvesting have now been put in place in an effort to conserve shorebirds.

In fact, Moonbird has become famous as a symbol of shorebird conservation. There is a book about Moonbird written by Phillip Hose, published in 2012 and entitled *Moonbird: A Year on the Wind with the Great Survivor B95*. And that is not all. There is a statue of Moonbird in Mispillion Harbour, Delaware Bay, and Rio Grande has proclaimed Moonbird its “natural ambassador”. (If you are interested, the book can be ordered through Book Outlet.ca for \$10.49.)



Jan Van de Kam



Renee Levesque

A Red Knot, along with many, many other shorebirds, was seen in May 2019 in our area when the fields at the end of Veuve River Road in West Nipissing were flooded. It was the only time I saw one in its breeding colours, although I have seen them in Florida in their dull winter plumage photo at right.

Window strikes, city lights and the mega flight: By now most of you have heard in the news about the almost 1,000 birds that died in Chicago on October 5. They were found dead after striking **just one** building on the Chicago lakefront, McCormick Place's Lakeside Center. This building has been the site of window strike deaths for decades, but October 4-5 was the worst ever. Over these decades little has been done in the way of window treatment and lights out to stop these deaths. Read <https://www.aba.org/chicago-megaflight/>, a link sent to me by Dick Tafel, to find out more about this tragedy and what the weather conditions were like to cause the birds' massive fall-out. The pictures in the article may be upsetting, but they emphasize why window treatments and lights out are so important. It is a case of a picture is worth a thousand words. We have no control over weather conditions, but we do over buildings.

Gardening for birds: I know it's getting late in the year for fall gardening tips to help the birds, but it is never too late to help them get through the winter. Below are tips from *Birdwatch Canada*, Fall 2021 edition

1. Plant native, naturally-occurring species to provide food and shelter.
2. Leave some seed heads and stalks of non-woody species intact for sparrows and finches.
3. Leave the leaves, but if you feel you have to rake, leave some piles in a corner or two of your yard. They provide natural shelter – and the Fox Sparrow loves to kick away those leaves to find grubs!
4. Add plants with different heights and structure – ground cover, shorter shrubs, taller trees.
5. If you use bird feeders, clean them and disinfect them every two weeks.
6. Birds like water, so think about a pond or bird bath. Of course, during our winter, you would need a heated bird bath, but until a non-heated one freezes over, keep it full and clean.

Check out <https://birdgardens.ca/> for helpful gardening tips and designs for a bird-friendly garden.

Azores: In September, June and Kevin Telford holidayed in the Azores, like Denise Desmarais and her husband did back in March. For the Telfords it was not primarily a birding holiday, but when you bird, you can't help but see birds wherever you go.

The Telfords covered three of the Azores islands - Sao Miguel, Graciosa and Terceira. Some of the birds they saw while vacationing in these islands were: Gray Heron (at right), Graylag Geese, Common Quail,



Grant McKercher

Common Wood-pigeons, Eurasian Collared Doves, Eurasian Coot, Black-bellied Plovers, Kentish Plovers, Semi-palmated Plovers, Whimbrel, Black-tailed Godwits, Red Knot, Ruddy Turnstones, Sanderlings, Common Greenshank, Yellow-legged Gulls, Cory's Shearwaters, Common Buzzards, Eurasian Blackbirds, Eurasian Robins, Common Waxbills (introduced from Africa), Common Chaffinches, Island (Atlantic) Canaries, Black-headed Gulls (photo below), as well as other more common birds, and two seen during migration in our area – Ruddy Turnstones and Sanderlings.



Renee Levesque

Like the Red Knot, the Ruddy Turnstone was also seen by a few birders in May 2019 – 10 of them - in the flooded fields at the end of Veuve River Road, and Dick and I saw one on October 23, 2015 at Sunset Park. I'm sure there have been other sightings here. Sanderlings are seen most Septembers running along the beaches of Lake Nipissing. This year I saw only one.

- *Renee Levesque*