



The Quinte Naturalist

The Quinte Field Naturalists Association is affiliated with Ontario Nature, a non-profit organization sponsoring nature education, conservation and research.

October



Photo by Kyle Blaney

Winter and frosty days are on the way.

fashion. In a network of banding stations such as the Prince Edward Point Bird Observatory volunteers assist trained banders. These stations keep records of the boreal nesters and other birds as they move between their winter and summer homes.

Programs like the Marsh Monitoring Program, Nocturnal Owl Surveys and the Mid-Winter waterfowl survey provide records regarding specific groups of birds. In addition there are programs for specific species such as loons, chimney swifts, whip-poor-wills, bank swallows and more.

The digital revolution has multiplied the value of such programs many times. Our speaker this month will be telling us about the many things which have already been learned from a relatively new crowd-sourced program, eBird.

Crowd-sourcing is a term I first heard only a few months ago. It refers to a method increasingly used by researchers to gather more data than they could with their own limited resources. The process depends on hundreds or even thousands of volunteers who understand that the health of bird and other wildlife populations is an excellent indicator of the health of the ecosystem we all rely on. This “crowd” gathers the data.

Possibly the first use of this practice among naturalists was Christmas Bird Counts. These counts now provide a record of the numbers and distribution of winter birds for every year since 1900. CBCs have been so successful that ornithologists have developed other programs to fill in the gaps in the data. Project Feederwatch covers the rest of the winter season. For Ontario the breeding bird atlas provides the data for the breeding season. Its limitation is that it's impossible to cover the extensive northern wilderness in anything like a complete

THIS MONTH'S SPEAKER

Mike Burrell

eBird: Making Your Sightings Count



Mike sent us this information:

Since its humble beginnings in 2002, eBird has captured the imagination of thousands of birders around the world. Birders are now flocking to the website to upload their bird sightings into the online database which is maintained by scientists and volunteers. Between 2006 (when the Canadian eBird portal was launched) and 2010, nearly 3000 users reported bird sightings to ebird. Last year in Ontario 1039 users submitted 56,861 checklists for more than 6,000 different locations containing more than half a million bird observations of over 340 species! The growth of eBird is incredible, and as membership increases so too does our understanding of bird distribution and abundance patterns. eBird is already an important tool for making bird conservation decisions and will continue to be in the future. On top of its conservation implications, it opens up this vast amount of data to anyone interested and will surely make us all better birders and record keepers. There are lots of incentives too, with a variety of user stats available. Come hear more about what eBird is, how you can get involved, and what it is already teaching us about Ontario's birds.

OUTINGS

We're at the peak of saw-whet owl migration. We'll be making an evening trip to the Prince Edward Point Bird Observatory sometime before the end of the month. Please let John know if you have a preferred date or some evening that should be avoided.

If I can find the owls we'll have an owling expedition in central Hastings in late November.

The Christmas Bird Count will be Thursday, December 27. Let John know if you want to take part. You don't need to be an expert. We need drivers and recorders as well as identifiers.

AVOIDING LEARNED HELPLESSNESS

By Terry Sprague

I plan to retire in two years, when I reach 70. And that has some people worried. While likely I will be retiring my Outdoor Rambles column in the Picton Gazette then too, after 50 years and 2,600 columns, some have visions of me collapsing into a rocking chair on the sundeck, and watching the world go by, confused, and monitored closely by care givers.

It won't be that way. The outdoor program that I have operated for almost 20 years will be phased out gradually. As a one-man show, operating an extensive program as I do involves considerable expense and administration. The high cost of liability insurance has not made it easier either in a world where responsibility has become an off colour word. It has been an exciting part of my career, and very rewarding to show those who register for my guided hikes, a few of my favourite natural areas and teach them how important these areas are in preserving biodiversity and how crucial they are to our very existence. The best part has been leading people as a group into remote areas that most would not have visited on their own due to safety concerns.



Photo by Louisa Ielo

Terry and friends hike the Hell Holes Nature Trails near Centreville.

Truth is, I am jealous. I want to experience the senior years like some of those who register for my hikes. The other day, I watched an 80-year-old on a guided hike at Tamworth as she clawed her way up a steep granite escarpment, and upon reaching the top, broke into an infectious smile as she gazed around her at the parade of fall colours in the forested valley below. When I reach 80 I want to be just like her and many of the others on our hikes who regard age as just a number and continue hiking long distances, challenging trails and conquering obstacles.

While many on our hikes have no health issues, others do. Arthritis comes up frequently during conversations behind me, and one has Parkinson's. Another is 87. Due to angina, he builds up his speed gradually, eventually catching up and levelling off as he joins me in the lead. Others may have health issues, but say nothing, for today, there are no health concerns, as they ingest whatever medication they need, and forge bravely ahead, refusing to give in. These people will live forever because they exercise and are always in a positive frame of mind.

I was with some friends a week ago on an eight km trail at Presqu'île Provincial Park and we talked about this – retirement, keeping active. We talked about acquaintances we know who retired and became old well before their time, due to inactivity and lack of exercise. Doing nothing is wrong at any age, but as we get older, inactivity results in becoming more withdrawn and apathetic about life in general. Learned helplessness. It starts when we lose faith in our own ability to do anything effectively.

On our hike at Presqu'île, we talked about many things, but what was clear was our passion for hiking. Not only for the exercise – one estimate is 100 calories burned for every kilometer – but also for the experience of being out in nature. There is a spiritual connection within nature that can help us make sense of this crazy world we live in. We passed through mixed forests and fields that make up the heart and soul of Presqu'île Park, areas that are not experienced by any motorist driving through the park, but enjoyed by anyone who takes this trail that loops through almost the entire peninsula. We entered one section that was cautioned by one of us as “less interesting”. As we disappeared into this abandoned field we stared in awe at the tall goldenrods, festooned with sprigs of New England asters here and there, and knowing that this habitat was its very own little ecosystem. What creatures would we find deep within, had we stopped and probed a bit? As it was, juncos and song sparrows flitted out of our way as we passed. And from everywhere came the invisible sounds of kinglets and the call notes of yellow-rumped warblers as they searched for remaining insects and spiders.

We heard the clucking of chipmunks, a sound synonymous with the fall season. But, contrasting sharply were the peep calls of spring peepers going through their autumnal recrudescence as they respond to shorter days and cooler temperatures, much as they would experience during the cooler spring mating season. It takes a while, but eventually we learn how vitally important and connected everything is in nature. Everything we stumble upon, whether bracket fungi on downed trees, a caterpillar on a leaf, a salamander under a decomposing log, or a fall warbler snatching insects, are important links in biodiversity that are strategically interconnected. How important everything is that we see. It is only during our stumbling efforts to improve or alter, that we upset this natural scheme of things.

We spent three hours on this trail, returning to our cars exhausted from the effort, but refreshed mentally. Hikes like this do not age us – they actually make us younger.

LOOKING BACK

We look back to October, 1975, when Dr. Steven Morphy was president; Marion Fisher, secretary; Gertrude Lazier, treasurer; and Irwin Knight, bulletin editor. Dr. Morphy presented the program for the evening on “Nature In Stamps”. It was mentioned that a field trip to the Cardiff area produced the poisonous amanita muscaria mushroom, numbering in the hundreds. The first flocks of evening grosbeaks were seen in the Belleville area and hundreds were already busy munching down Manitoba maple seeds. Several members had commented that they had never seen an autumn with so many birds, and it was hoped that the recent ban on DDT was starting to show results.

WINTER FINCH FORECAST

What birds can we expect to see this winter? Every fall naturalist and writer Ron Pittaway bravely forecasts what finches we can expect to see in the coming winter season. He bases his predictions on reports from over twenty OMNR staff and other experts across Ontario and a few other areas in northeastern North America. By assessing the size of the seed and berry crops in these areas and matching this information with the known food preferences of the finch species he arrives at his conclusions.



Photo by Lynn Havsall, Bangor, Maine

The report is too long for this newsletter so I'll summarize key points of local interest. The full report can be found on the Ontario Field Ornithologists website. Click on the "Articles" tab <http://www.ofo.ca/webapp/index.php>.

According to my field guide pine grosbeaks are slightly less than twice the size of redpolls. One or possibly both of these birds appear not to have paid attention.

Watch for pine grosbeaks early in the season. Drought in the province has made many of the berries in the boreal forest hard with low moisture content so this species will be on the move. In this area we also suffered from drought so the same comment applies to our ornamental crabapples and European mountain ash. These grosbeaks also like buckthorn berries and you might attract them to your feeder using black oil sunflower seeds. Their stay is likely to be short as they exhaust the local food supply.



It's a problem as an invasive but at least common buckthorn does provide winter food for several bird species.

It's not likely to be a good winter for crossbills but we should be on the lookout for common redpolls. A poor to fair white birch crop in the north will give them the incentive to visit us. Watch for them in birch trees and weedy fields. In feeders nyger seed is a redpoll favourite. If you are

willing to make the effort it is possible to distinguish the related hoary redpoll and possibly even subspecies. See page 7 for more information about this species.

Finally, from Ontario's finch species we may see a few evening grosbeaks. This species is a far less common visitor than it used to be so it would be a treat to find them. You can't miss their noisy flocks and their antics which are so amusing that even non-birders enjoy seeing them. Of course they will also quickly devour as many sunflower seeds as you can supply.

Ron also comments on some non-finch birds. The beech nut and hazel nut crop in central Ontario was very poor but a good red oak acorn crop in central Ontario will convince many blue jays that the trip further south is not worth the effort. Red-breasted nuthatches have already arrived but most will probably keep moving to the south. As berry eaters Bohemian waxwings, like pine grosbeaks, may move into our area to consume our tasty buckthorn berries.

NEWS AND NOTES

ENVIRONMENTAL COMMISSIONER'S REPORT



Gord Miller, the Environmental Commissioner of Ontario, has stated that wind turbines should not be placed in any of Ontario's Important Bird Areas. His opinion is very like the policy developed by Ontario Nature and other naturalist groups like the QFN – support for wind turbines as long as they are not placed in areas with concentrations of birds or bats.

WELCOME VISITORS

Some old friends have returned this week. A flock of up to 8 dark-eyed juncos, at least 3 white-throated sparrows, some chickadees and goldfinches and even a single pine siskin have appeared in our yard. It's time to reactivate our feeders completely. Most of them were taken out of service in June because of the rowdy element they were attracting. I know that I'm supposed to love all nature but starlings and grackles need to develop the good sense to visit in moderation.

PROJECT FEEDERWATCH

The appearance of migrating and possible winter resident birds reminded me that Project FeederWatch will start soon. Sure enough the package of materials arrived this week. It's always interesting to have a look at the list of top 25 feeder clients in the previous year. Our area includes all of Canada east of Manitoba and the American northeast. As usual chickadees topped the list being recorded at 98% of the feeders with juncos and mourning doves rounding out the top 3. Average flock sizes for these and some other common birds were at all-time lows. Robins and red-bellied woodpeckers made big jumps up the list. On average they appear at 50% of feeders but last year they appeared at 71% and 66% respectively. Why not join FeederWatch? It's couch potato birding and you are making a contribution to conservation research. Information is available on the Bird Studies Canada website. <http://www.bsc-eoc.org/>

IDENTIFICATION CHALLENGE

If you are anything like me you want to improve your birding skills. Maybe you aspire entry into the Birding Hall of Fame, if there is such a thing. To achieve even the first of these goals I'm going to need a course in redpoll identification. It's a tough course so pay attention. There are two redpoll species recognized and two subspecies for each species. With the possibility of a good redpoll winter we can learn how to distinguish the species. The subspecies are another matter. At the end of this article I'll tell you how to cheat on the final exam.

David Sibley teaches the first lesson in his online blog. Sibley begins the lesson with his comment that there are "no fully reliable differences" between the species so for now we won't worry about subspecies. That's a second year course. To become more competent in redpoll identification you have to practice a lot. You need to study several large flocks so that you can observe the difference among individual birds. Even after this practice you still have to be prepared to say, "I don't know."



Photo by Dave Bell

We can say with some confidence that the bird in the top picture is a female common redpoll. It's dark and the background for the stripes on the back is more brown than white. Hoary redpolls have a generally lighter appearance and tend more toward grey. We can go on to say that it's a female or possibly a juvenile. The picture on page 5 shows an adult male.

The bottom image shows a hoary redpoll. Hoary redpolls are lighter (usually). The streaks tend more toward grey (often). The beak is shorter and has a pushed in look (sometimes). The one feature that birders at our level can rely on is the lightness of the bird. We can call redpolls that are very, very light hoary redpolls. We probably need to leave the identification of indeterminate birds to the experts and say, "I don't know."



Your final exam is the CBC. Are you able to say for sure that any of that flock of redpolls is a hoary? Neither am I. Rather than saying about 130 commons and 2 hoaries make a note of about 130 commons. This avoids embarrassing questions from the Ontario coordinator about how we knew it was hoary. Of course a good picture might solve the problem. With a photo factors such as light, angle and even date enter into the equation.

FOR THE KIDS

There are a number of free nature-related activities available which parents, grandparents and teachers can use to get kids interested. For instance the Canadian Wildlife Federation offers the Great Canadian Turtle Race. Using satellite tags attached to ten endangered leatherback turtles, the project tracks the turtles as they travel thousands of kilometres from feeding grounds off Atlantic Canada to tropical beaches where they breed. Individuals or classes can choose a turtle and follow its progress. The website offers videos, a chance at a prize, videos and even a game. <http://www.cwf-fcf.org/en/>

Project Feederwatch offers information showing how the program can be an educational tool for subjects as varied as science, math, writing, geography, history, art and music. There's a program for homeschoolers which you can mention to anyone you know who is taking on that difficult task. Be sure to mention also that you heard about it through the Quinte Field Naturalists.

Of course the best and simplest activity is going for a walk with a child, commenting on what you see and working together to try to understand what is happening.



Photo by Kyle Blaney

We'll have to admit that it's a while until we see scenes like this again. The picture was taken from highway 62 south of Maynooth.