

Bird Wing Report

March 2017

Text by Renee Levesque; photos as indicated

Note: Most of the photos in Dick Tafel's slide presentation were from various online sources. I prefer not to use online photos, but instead photos from Bird Wing members or area birders. However, I had to use one from Wikipedia because I know of no one who has a photo of a Great Shearwater. For obvious reasons, I also used an online photo of the Night Parrot.

The Bird Wing meeting was held in the auditorium of the North Bay Public Library on March 28, and although, as always, we began by giving our name and two birds we saw, because the meeting so closely followed March's Bird Bash and this report so closely follows the Bird Bash Report by Dick Tafel, I am going to highlight only the unusual and migrant birds seen in March.

Greater White-fronted Goose: On March 23, some of us received quite the surprising email from Gary Sturge. While out running Gussie and Abi – his dogs, not his grandkids – he noticed two unusual geese in amongst a handful of Canada Geese in a field on Maple Hill Road, and what to his wondering eyes should appear, but two Greater White-fronted Geese – quite a rare goose in our neck of the woods! **Gary's photo is below.**



Greater White-fronted are called just that because of the white patch on the front of the face – on the forehead and at the base of the bill. The bill is pinkish or orange; the legs and feet are orange; and the belly has black markings. White-fronted Geese can be confused with domestic geese, but domestics lack the black belly markings and have



Marc Buchanan

thicker necks and bigger bellies.

The Greater White-fronted breeds across the tundra in wet coastal areas or on the drier inland tundra, from Nunavut to Siberia, across Russia and in Greenland. It has one of the largest ranges of any species of goose in the world. Unfortunately for photo purposes, I saw the geese during a snow storm, but given their breeding range, no wonder they didn't seem to mind! See photo below.



It winters west of the Mississippi River where there are agricultural fields for foraging and shallow waters for roosting. In migration, it tends to follow established routes and tends to be faithful to traditional stopovers. It rarely strays to northeastern North America. This spring, based on Ontbird sightings, it would seem many strayed into Ontario.

Owls: Including the more common Barred Owl, it certainly has been a spring for seeing owls – Great Gray, Northern Hawk and Great Horned. A brief description of each follows.

Great Gray: Another species we don't often see is the Great Gray Owl. Thanks to Ernie Frayle for alerting us to two - and later three - in the area of Boundary and Homestead Roads in Calvin Township. This year seems to be an irruptive year for them because not only were three seen in Calvin Township, but one on Jocko Point Road and one on Birchgrove Drive.



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The Great Gray is North America's tallest owl with a long tail and a body length of up to 32 inches. Yet, an adult weighs only 2 to 3 lbs. It seems as if it should weigh more because of its thick down and insulating feathers that protect it from the northern cold. Overall, it appears silvery-gray in colour with its brown, gray and white streaking. It is a graceful flyer, flying low over fields hunting for mice, squirrels and other small mammals, usually just before dawn and just before sunset, although in the winter, it will hunt by day.

It has a large, round head with huge, strongly-lined facial discs and yellow eyes. It has a black chin with two broad, crescent-like white patches underneath its chin, like a white mustache. It has a yellow bill and no ear tufts.

It seldom ventures south and if it does, it is driven there by a scarcity of food. It likes dense coniferous forests adjacent to meadows and in the subarctic, swampy evergreen forests with bogs. In this isolated environment, it has little contact with humans and that is why it seems tame when approached. In 2011, one showed up in Kingsville, Essex County, in southwestern Ontario, causing quite a stir in the birding world. See:

<http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/windsor/great-grey-owl-draws-birders-to-southern-ontario-1.1079732>.

The Great Gray's call is *whoo-hoo-hoo*, as well as single *whoos*.

The Great Gray was also seen by Dick, Grant McKercher, Ed Rowley, Katherine Byers and me, among others.

Northern Hawk Owl: A Northern Hawk Owl (right) was unexpectedly seen during the March Bird Bash on a wire that crosses Hwy. 64 near Lavigne. If the Great Gray is our largest owl, the Northern Hawk Owl, although not our smallest owl, is a small owl, nevertheless, 14.5 to 17.5 inches long. It is grayish brown above and its under parts are barred brown and white. Its facial discs are bordered with black and its eyes are yellow. It too has a long tail and no ear tufts.

It likes open coniferous forests, birch scrub, tamarack bogs and muskeg, so it too is rarely seen south. It is a day flier and hunter, hunting rodents, birds and large insects.

Because it has little contact with humans, like the Great Gray, it also seems tame and is easily approached.

I believe the last time a Northern Hawk Owl was seen in our area was in 2014 when one spent most of the winter on Ouellette Road.



The Northern Hawk Owl sounds a bit like a falcon – *kikikiki* – and a bit like a kestrel – *illy-illy-illy-illy*.

Dick and I saw this owl during the March Bird Bash.

Great Horned Owl: Another large owl, 21 to 22 inches long, seen or heard by some this spring is the Great Horned Owl. It is a nighttime hunter found all over North America – in forests, woodlots, deserts, open country and even residential areas. With its ear tufts widely spread and its conspicuous white throat, large head and seemingly no neck, it gives the impression of a fearless hunter. And it is, with its keen eye, acute ear, powerful talons and sharp hooked beak. And if that isn't enough to catch its prey – squirrels, rabbits, skunks, songbirds, geese, hawks and even porcupine - it is silent on the wing. Its hoot is a familiar one, *hu-hu-hu, hoo! hoo.*

Lori Anderson heard one on her property and Dick and I came upon one near Riding Stable Road.

Other Birds: Kaye Edmonds had a pair of Northern Cardinals at her feeder (photo below); Mary Young's Red-bellied Woodpecker continues to come to her feeder; and although not rare, Brent and Laura Turcotte, as well as Gary and Luana Chowns, saw a



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Kaye Edmonds

Peregrine Falcon at the Pro-Cathedral during the March Bird Bash; and Gary Sturge and I each had a Black-backed Woodpecker in our areas. Gary sent me a photo of his birch tree as proof!!

Kevan Cowcill had a most interesting Common Redpoll at his feeder, one with a rusty cap, much like that of the American Tree Sparrow. (See Kevan's photo at the top of the next page.)

Migrant Arrivals: Although a Canada Goose was first spotted on February 28 by Brent and Kaye, it has now arrived in large numbers and was seen by most of us, including Rob Rodger; both Herring and Ring-billed Gulls have made an appearance, also seen by many of us, including Mary Lord; the American Crow has now replaced in numbers the Common Raven as attested by Curtis Irish, so in honour of the raven, a bird which kept us company all winter, a bird mythologized for its divine and magic powers, **below is a photo of a**



Kevan Cowcill

Common Raven by Stephen O'Donnell, a photo that wonderfully shows the raven's shaggy throat; the Great Blue Heron was spotted by Gary on Maple Hill Road;



American Tree Sparrows are beginning to grow in number; the Dark-eyed Junco is starting to arrive; the Common Grackle has arrived and will soon be increasing in number; the Red-winged Blackbird has also arrived, the male with its brilliant red epaulets; the Merlin is certainly making its presence known in some neighbourhoods; and it seems Steve Pitt may have been the first to spot an American Kestrel and a Turkey Vulture, both in the east part of our area, although Ken Gowing saw four on Nosbonsing Road

and by now, some of us have seen the odd one.

We may have seen some of the last of some of our winter birds, particularly the Snow Buntings and Lapland Longspurs. Connie saw 20 to 25 buntings and one Lapland Longspur among them on Maple Hill Road during the March Bird Bash. Maple Hill Road seems to be the new Stillaway Line for the birds, except for the Northern Goshawk which still haunts Stillaway, but seemingly for Gary's benefit only!

And although there were many Northern Shrikes to be seen this past winter, with one seen recently on Riding Stable Road, they too will now be moving on to the northern taiga, muskeg and tundra.

If anyone wants to see Gray Jays, Jim Hasler suggests motoring up to Chadbourne Drive, off Four Mile Lake Road.

Birds of the Azores: Dick recently spent a week on Sao Miguel, the largest of the Azores Islands and to no one's surprise, Dick did some birding while he was there with Elsa, visiting his niece and her husband.

The Azores are an autonomous region of Portugal situated in the North Atlantic Ocean, 1,360 km west of continental Portugal and 1,925 km southeast of Newfoundland. Sao Miguel, the largest of the nine volcanic islands that make up the Azores, has a population of about 140,000 and has the largest city, Ponta Delgada, with a population of about 45,000. The island, known as the green island because of all its green fields, is approximately 63 km long and 16 km wide.

Although most of the thirty-three species Dick saw he had seen before at some point during his long birding life, he did see four lifers. These four lifers do not take into account the Azores European Starling, the Azores Grey Wagtail, the Azores Wood Pigeon and the Azores Chaffinch, subspecies of the starling, the Grey Wagtail, the Wood Pigeon and the Chaffinch that are found only in the Azores. The subspecies of the European Starling has slightly smaller feet than the European Starling and has a strong purple gloss on its under parts. The very slightly smaller feet were particularly noticeable to our keen birders' eyes in the photo Dick showed us!

I can't possibly touch on all the species Dick saw or you would be reading this report forever, but I want to especially mention the shearwaters.

Dick saw two species of shearwaters, the Cory (a lifer for Dick) and the Great, seen at right. Shearwaters are tubenose medium-sized seabirds with long wings and outside the breeding season, they are

exclusively pelagic, meaning they feed in the open ocean, flying great distances in search for food. They are called shearwaters because they fly very close to the water, seemingly cutting or shearing the tips of their wings. They feed on fish, squid and other similar oceanic food. They have tubular nasal passages, as do storm petrels,



J.J. Harrison, Wikipedia

diving petrels and albatrosses. Their tubenoses help them smell and smell is key to the survival of these seabirds in their search for food in the open ocean.

Because so few of us get to see pelagic birds, they seem mysterious and fascinating, especially the albatross made famous in the poem, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* by Samuel Taylor Coleridge

Other species Dick saw included the Mallard; Little Egret (below left); Grey Heron (below right); Common Buzzard; Moorhen; Whimbrel; Ruddy Turnstone; Yellow-legged Gull; Common Blackbird; Blackcap; Atlantic Canary (another lifer); and Goldcrest. These are all common species in the Azores. It can be difficult to tell an adult Great Blue from an adult Grey Heron. Both are large birds, with the Great Blue somewhat larger. The adult Grey is smaller in bulk, has a slimmer bill, shorter neck and legs, and is generally paler, especially on the neck, than the Great Blue.



The uncommon for the Azores species Dick saw included the Ring-necked Duck; Grey Plover (another lifer); and Black-headed Gull. And the rare for the Azores species Dick saw included the Barnacle Goose; Common Shelduck; Ruddy Shelduck (another lifer); Greater Scaup; Red-crested Pochard; and Iceland Gull.

Photos by Grant McKercher

World Sparrow Day: Although World

Sparrow Day was on March 20, we extended it for a week, from March 19 to 24, because of our northern climate and the amount of snow cover at that time. Eleven sparrows were reported during this week – The House Sparrow by Dick, Lori, Gary and me; the American Tree Sparrow

by Dick, Brent, Kaye and Mary Young; and a Song Sparrow on the actual World Sparrow Day by Helen McCombie. I emailed Nature Forever Society in India – https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nature_Forever_Society - to inform them of our results and explained why the numbers were so low.

Nocturnal Owl Survey: This is the month for the Nocturnal Owl Survey and the contest is seriously on now that Ken Gowing has done such a splendid job of building a base for our owl trophy (below). Please make sure all who are taking part in the survey send me their narratives. Remember it is not based on the number of owls alone, although that goes a long way, but also on everything else that goes on during this late night and often cold outing. Hard to make it any

more dramatic than last year's winners, Lori and Ken, but I know some of you – and you know who I mean! – will give it a good try.

This year Marc and Paul Smylie will take over Craig and Elaine Hurst's route in honour of Craig.

More than Birds: Adventurous Lives of North American Naturalists: Grant McKercher who received Val Shushkewich's book, *More Than Birds*, last month for his very early sighting of a Herring Gull, has now passed it on to Gary and Connie Sturge for letting us know about the two Greater White-fronted Geese. Grant particularly enjoyed reading about the early

ornithologists and was impressed, as I was, that so many ornithologists were and are terrific artists.

Night Parrot: Dick received the exciting news from his daughter, Elsa, in Australia, that a Night Parrot (right), not confirmed as still alive as a species until 2013, has been sighted again in Western Queensland, Australia. A confirmed sighting of a Night Parrot is remarkable because for the last 75 years it was thought to be extinct until the 2013 sighting was confirmed – the first sighting of a live Night Parrot in a century. The previous sighting was in 1912, although apparently a dead Night Parrot was found in 2006.



John Young, *Weekend Australian*, 2013



Ken Gowing

It is a small green and yellow parrot that lives in the desert and is active at night. To ensure the safety of the parrots, there is restricted access to the areas where the parrots have been discovered, with very heavy fines or jail sentences in place should these zone restrictions be violated. Read more about this remarkable discovery at: <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-03-23/night-parrot-sighting-in-wa-shocks-birdwatching-world/8377624>.

Great Lakes Marsh Monitoring Program: Through Bird Studies Canada, Craig and Ellen Hurst took part in the marsh monitoring program in Laurier Woods for a number of years. Paul Smylie will now monitor the Laurier Wood's marsh and Paul will continue with the **Breeding Bird Survey** as he has done for a few years now.



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Birdathon: The annual Great Canadian Birdathon will take place on **May 27**. Because no one seems to know where the cuckoo clock is that used to be the Birdathon prize, I have a carving of a shorebird I will donate as a prize to whatever team sees or hears the most birds. It will be passed on each year to the winning team. As you will see from the above photo, the search was on in earnest for the 2016 winning team comprised of Dick Tafel, Lori Anderson, Brent Turcotte and me.

There is a point for seeing a bird and half a point for hearing it only and at least two people on the team need to see or hear it. Each person taking part should make a donation to Bird Studies Canada or Ontario Federation of Ornithologists or someone you know collecting donations. Teams and plans will be worked out as we get closer to the date.

Wooden Owls and Animals: Recently when I went to Burrow's to get seed, I noticed the garden centre has for sale beavers, deer, rabbits and owls made out of wood, twigs and bark as in the photo on the next page. They are handmade by someone in southwestern Ontario and depending on size, they range in price from about \$22.00 to about \$40.00. So if you go there to

get some bird seed with your membership card for the 10% discount, be sure to check these creatures out – and also the wide array of bird feeders.

Bird Bash: April's Bird Bash will take place over a 24-hour consecutive period during **the weekend of April 29 and 30.**

Bird Wing Meeting: April's Bird Wing meeting will take place on **Tuesday, April 25, in the Board Room of the North Bay Public Library, starting at 6:30 p.m.** It is our last meeting until September. Serious birding begins in May when outings start.



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The migrating ducks are returning as you will see from the photo below!



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