

# Bird Wing Report

July 2024



## Bird Wing Outing

*By Renee Levesque*

On a cloudy evening on Tuesday, July 23, we made our way to Cache Bay for the July Bird Wing outing, seeing only Ring-billed Gulls and American Crows along the way. Usually we save this trip for our August outing, but the mosquitoes were bad at our originally planned destination, so we had to make a switch.

Always our first stop is the ballpark to see the Ospreys. Over the years, it is usually two young ones we see in the nest, but this year there is only one. It was being fed in the nest by its mother when we arrived while its father kept watch on another lamppost. (Photo below.)



*Renee Levesque*

Then down to the dock on the trailer park side. No sooner did we get there when it began to rain! We weren't expecting that, but it didn't deter some of us from standing on the dock watching about six Caspian Terns and eight Common Terns fishing and foraging nearby, with the Osprey also making an appearance, flying low over the bay not to be outdone in the fishing department by the terns.



The Caspian Tern (photo at left), so named because early ornithologists associated it with the Caspian Sea where it is fairly common, is the largest tern in the world. In addition to being large, it has a massive coral-red bill. It has a black cap, black legs and feet, a shallow-forked tail and black on the underside of its outer wing. Its upperparts are light grey while its underparts, rump and tail are white.

*Renee Levesque*

The Common Tern, so named because it is common in the northeast of North America and in the Old World, is a medium-sized tern with a slender and straight bill that is coral-red with a black tip. It has a black cap, light grey body, orange-red legs, and a deeply-forked tail. When you see it beside the Caspian, you can more easily discern just how much smaller it is – about half the size of the Caspian – and how much more slender its bill is. Its wings are also narrower than the Caspian's. Stephen O'Donnell's photo of the Common Tern, a photo used for the cover of the May 2023 Bird Wing Report, is at right.



*Stephen O'Donnell*

Both terns forage over open water, scanning the water with their bills pointed down, primarily catching small fish and sometimes even large insects. The Caspian is a bigger and much more dramatic plunger than the Common which plunges just under the surface. It will also catch fish that are close to the water's surface while it is flying and without submerging. The Caspian will only sometimes do this. Both will consume their prey while in flight unless they are taking it to their mates or their chicks. Both will also pirate from others.



*Renee Levesque*

Caspian and Common are the usual terns we see at Cache Bay and in our area. Oftentimes, it is the Caspian we notice more. The Commons tend to stay further out in the bay, so this time it was nice to see them so close that comparisons could be more readily made. Black Terns (at left), small terns with fairly broad dark grey wings, black heads and black bodies used to be more common at Cache Bay than they are now. Earlier in the spring, some were seen skimming over the bay catching small insects. Garry Waldram reports that Merlin (the app) picked up one while he was kayaking in the marsh a week or so earlier, but he didn't see it.

Arctic Terns can be seen for a brief period during a very short window when they tend to rest on Lake Bernard before heading north. Most years some are seen by Stephen O'Donnell. Last year at Jocko Point, I saw what appeared to be a different tern, but didn't give it as much attention as I should have and in retrospect when it was too late thought it might have been an Arctic Tern. I have seen Arctic Terns elsewhere, but to see one in our area would have been special.

Because it was raining, we did not take our usual song bird trail routes, but went straight to the Government Dock and then to the far end of the boathouses. When we arrived at the dock, we

heard the tremolo of the Common Loon, and our way to the boathouses, some saw a Mourning Dove, heard an American Robin or two, heard an American Goldfinch or two, and heard a Common Yellow-throat. We also saw and heard a couple of American Crows, some Red-winged Blackbirds and a couple of Song Sparrows.



*Renee Levesque*

When we arrived at the last boathouse, two Barn Swallows (one at left) made an appearance, another bird with a nicely forked tail. When I was in the exact same location with my husband John a few days before, the two Barn Swallows buzzed our heads, coming dangerously close. We backed off to prevent injury to ourselves and to not disturb the swallows. They did not buzz any of us at the outing. (Shortly after the outing when I was again at Cache Bay, there were four Barn Swallows with their two young ones. They came very close to the side of my head even though I stood quite a bit away from the boathouse. I finally had to get back in the car.)

With the rain still on and the sky getting darker, we thought our viewing privileges had come to an end and we would not see any ducks except the two we couldn't make out, probably Mallards, when a couple of Wood Ducks along the edge of the marsh came into view. And then the best of all, for me anyway, was when I and some others watched with our binoculars a bird flying low along the marsh, not quite realizing what it was until it dropped down in the grasses. It was then that I saw its buffy colouring and realized it was a Least Bittern. We weren't able to get a good view of it again, although we did see movement among the grasses where it landed. (You can see a photo of one in "Seeds and Cones", later in this report.)

It was shortly after this that Laura Turcotte heard two Marsh Wrens (at right), one near the boathouse area and one further away. I don't know if others heard them, but I was deeply impressed by Laura's ability to hear them!

Bringing the evening to an end was the always spectacular sight of a murmuration of European Starlings. It wasn't a huge murmuration, more of a practice round of 300 or more starlings preparing for more wondrous murmurations before the end of the summer.

It was now time to head home. Although it rained on our parade, like the opening ceremonies of the Olympics, the rain didn't dampen our spirits and we saw some interesting birds, if not a lot of them.

(Garry Waldram wasn't able to join us because he was in Nova Scotia and Newfoundland, but he made two earlier July kayak journeys through Cache Bay's marshland. His sightings during these two trips follows.)



*Garry Waldram*

## Alive with early morning birds: Cache Bay's amazing marsh

*By Garry Waldram and Renee Levesque; photos by Garry Waldram*



For many years in late July, Dick Tafel, John and I used to canoe Cache Bay's wetland locating species we didn't always see that well elsewhere. It was always an exciting and adventurous trip, culminating in a picnic lunch on one of the islands. A couple of times we were suddenly attacked relentlessly by many Black Terns out with their young – talk about paddling quickly to get away! And we usually we saw Common Gallinules, Soras (one seen above), Least and American Bitterns, many Marsh Wrens and, of course, Black Terns until they seemingly disappeared from the area, I think the year the water levels were particularly high.

So when Garry Waldram kayaked the same area early on July 7 and reported his findings to me, it brought back some nice memories.

Garry reports, "I launched at the Government wharf at 7:00 am and saw many amazing birds, adding a lifer, the Common Gallinule, to my list. Right off the bat, Merlin picked up several birds although I couldn't see them too well in the fog. One was a Black Tern but I didn't get eyes on it. When I headed out into the bay the first bird I found besides Red-winged Blackbirds and Ring-billed Gulls were Marsh Wrens. So many of them! I caught a glimpse of one Pied-billed Grebe and heard quite a few more. They kept well-hidden but called all the time I was out there. I saw one American Bittern, two Caspian Terns, four Least Bitterns, two Common Gallinules (photo on next page) and many other more common birds."



Garry returned to Cache Bay on July 12 for another early morning kayak trip through the marsh. He reports that the marsh was alive with birds. “I saw three Common Gallinules, one juvenile briefly strolling along the edge of the reeds (photo at right) before it disappeared and two adults, one swimming and one sitting on a nest with seven eggs in it! I also saw two Soras, one adult (photo on the previous page) and one juvenile; four Least Bitterns, an American Bittern and many Marsh Wrens. The young Marsh Wrens were now fledged, flying everywhere. I heard several Pied-billed Grebes, saw two Caspian Terns, a Common Tern, but again no Black Terns.”

Both trips for Gary were “truly amazing”. He plans to do another trip sometime in August.

On one of his morning trips, Garry was “greeted at 6:00 am by a nice-sized bull moose” at the end of the dock road by the boathouses. As soon as Garry stooped his truck and got out his camera, the moose disappeared into the woods.



## The variable Savannah Sparrow

By Renee Levesque

I am often struck in the spring and especially in the fall during migration how variable in appearance some Savannah Sparrows can be. I noticed that some are darker than the Savannahs we usually see here, that some don't have much of a spot where their breast streaks converge, and some don't have a very distinct yellow loreal area. And because I can rarely hear their insect-like song, I have to rely on other field marks – a good thing to do for all birds, but not always easy to check for if the birds don't stay put for long.

So when I read an article by Lev Frid in *OFO News*, June 2021 edition, I was happy to discover that the Savannah Sparrow (above) is indeed “one of the most variable sparrows in terms of plumage, habitat, song and size.” In fact, Lev reports there are 28 subspecies! When I researched the Savannah a bit further, I discovered that some are subspecies of the subspecies!

During migration in Ontario, Lev reports that the Savannahs we most often see here are joined by those Savannahs that breed much further north, along the coasts of Hudson and James Bays and even further north. These Savannahs are larger and darker with less yellow showing in the lores. They can fool us because they look different from our smaller, lighter-coloured

Savannahs, but both still have short, notched tails, small heads, fairly small and fine pink bills and yellow in the loreal area, even if it is very limited and sometimes difficult to see with the naked eye.

Other Savannah subspecies mentioned in most field guides are the Ipswich (at left) and the Belding's. The Ipswich breeds in coastal Nova Scotia. It is a pale Savannah with narrow and pale brown breast streaks and is 50% heavier than other subspecies.



Renee Levesque



Chance Hines, Center for Conservation Biology

The Belding's is a darker, longer-billed and more heavily streaked Savannah Sparrow that breeds in the salt marshes of California and Baja California where it is a year-round resident. It was once considered a separate species. (See at right.)

There is also the Large-billed and the San Benito Savannah Sparrows. The Large-billed, as its name implies, has a large, heavy bill and is quite dark often without a yellow lore stripe, but sometimes a very faint one judging by photos I have seen online. It is found in Mexico and Baja California. The San Benito, as its name implies, is a resident of Isla San Benito off Baja California. It is a large-bodied and large-billed subspecies, an offshoot of the Belding's.

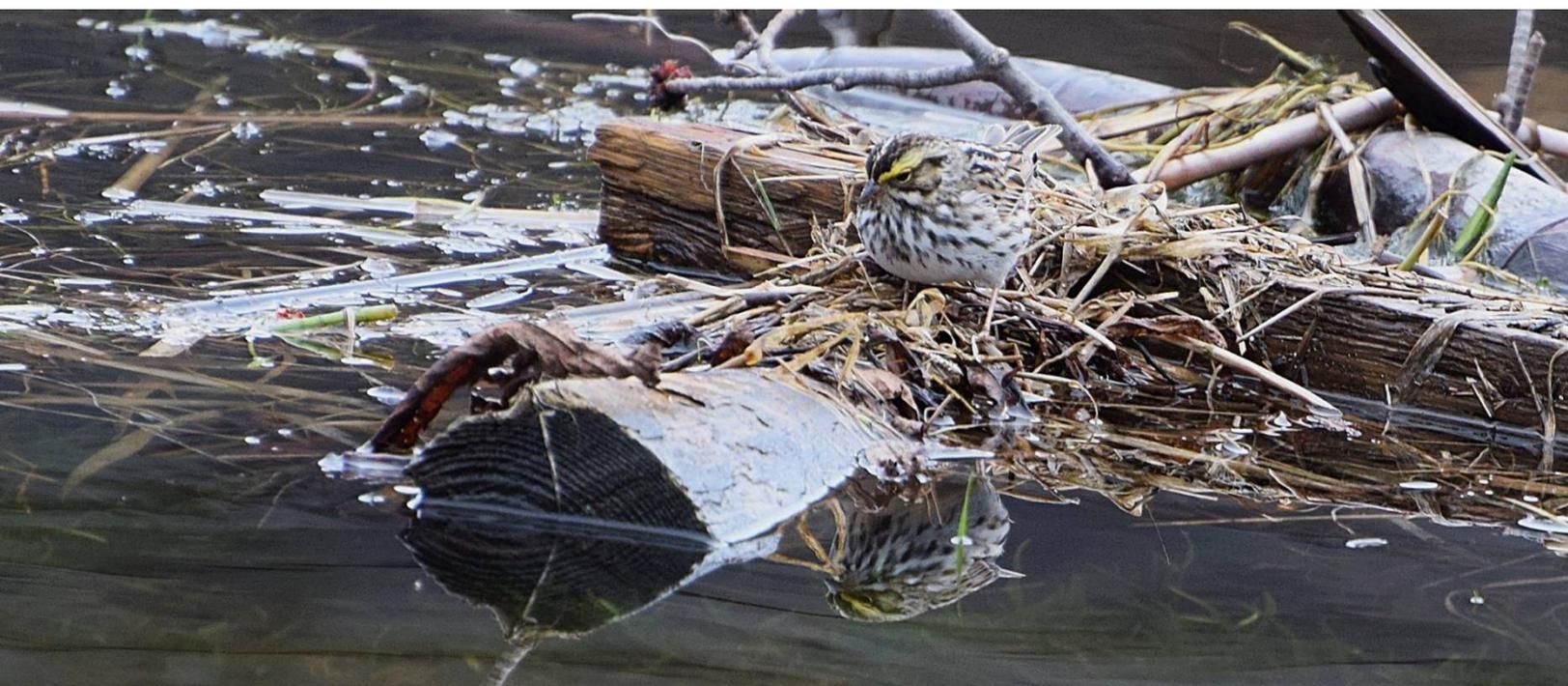
The reason for so many subspecies is that many Savannahs return, especially the coastal area and island ones, to the area in which they were hatched. This is known as natal philopatry that can “shape population genetics and link essential habitats across generations.”

With so many subspecies, the Savannah is a sparrow that is found in a variety of habitats – coasts, shorelines, deserts and arid habitats, fields, meadows, grasslands, saltwater wetlands, shrublands, savannas, thickets, tundra and boreal habitat. (The Savannah was named by Alexander Wilson in 1811 because he saw one in a coastal area near Savannah, Georgia.)

During breeding season, we see our Savannahs in open areas - in fields and meadows – but during migration, they can be seen in other areas, even in the waters of Cache Bay, as seen below, always a little bit of a surprise!



*Hiram Moreno Higareda, Sonora Joint Venture*



*Renee Levesque*



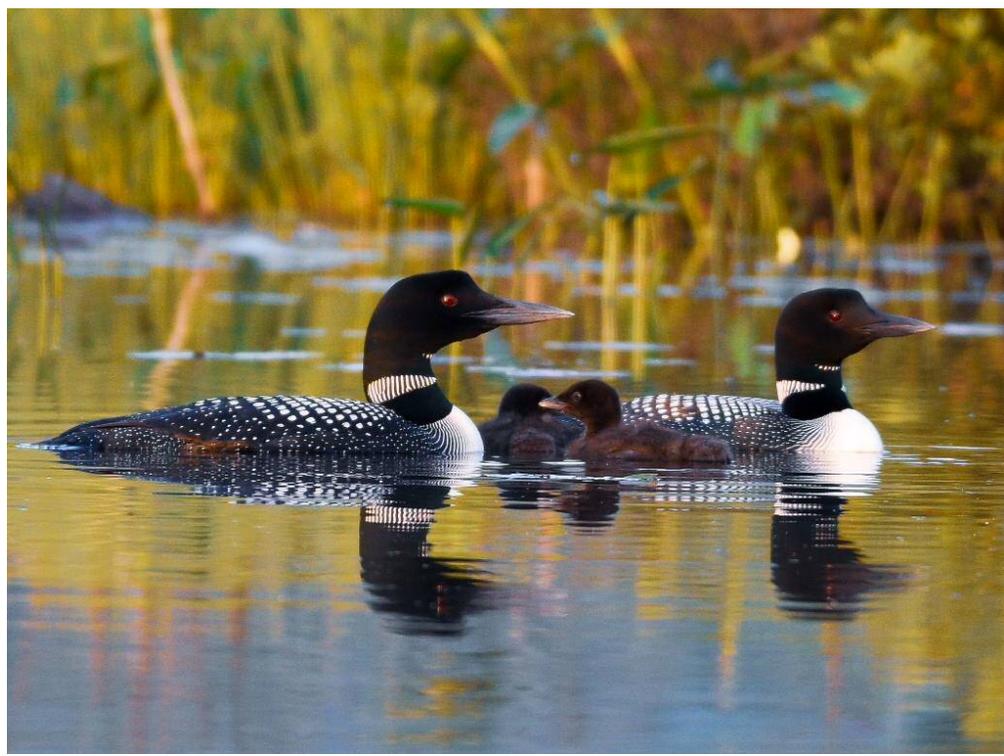
## Peace and aggression on Pine Lake

*By Renee Levesque with Garry Waldram and Kathy Jones; photos by Garry Waldram*

On July 11, Garry Waldram kayaked Pine Lake off Pine Lake Road, Bonfield, in search of Common Loons and their chicks and he was fortunate to see a pair with two chicks. When he got back to the boat launch, he ran into a Pine Lake resident who was posting a Loon Alert sign. She told Garry she had seen two pairs with chicks on the lake and was a participant in the Canadian Lakes Loon Survey, Birds Canada.

I was pleased to hear about the sign because all boaters and operators of watercraft need to know to “slow down near wetlands and shoreline and to keep their wake to a minimum because wakes can wash out nests or separate young loons from their parents, making chicks easy pickings for predators.”

On July 14, Garry returned with his kayak to Pine Lake to see if he could see the other pair. He found the first pair and their chicks easily enough (photo at right), but the second pair with chicks eluded him. However, as he continued west to the back portion of Pine Lake drama unfolded when he spotted two adult loons, but no chicks. The two were running



across the water and diving between each other, their tremolo calls strong. Garry thought maybe this was a courtship display that ended after a minute or two when they were joined by a third adult loon, with all three swimming off together.

Because I didn't think there would be courtship displays so late in the season and wondered if what Garry witnessed was an act of aggression between two male adults, I emailed Garry's narrative to Kathy Jones, Volunteer Manager of Ontario Programs and Canadian Lakes Loon Survey. She got back to me very quickly.

"What Garry is describing is not courtship. Loon courtship is very subtle and quiet and involves synchronized swimming and bill dipping. It should be completed by now. Anything 'spectacular' with loons involves aggression."

She went on to report that what Garry was describing "was a territorial dispute showing relatively strong aggression, but as no bird died so it was not as aggressive as it could be." What Garry witnessed was "wing rowing, a known aggressive defense mechanism - the loon equivalent to a long distance charge" - with the diving probably being "attack attempts" in which loons "impale each other or grab the throat and drown each other."

Kathy explains that the first two aggressive birds were probably of the same gender, one from the territory and one an invader, with the third late arrival the other member of the pair.

It was then that Kathy asked to see the photos Garry took. After she looked at them, she emailed me again saying, "These are fantastic



photos - every one of them. Many are lovely calm photos but two or more show aggression, and in them you can clearly see the aggression is not towards the cameraman."

Kathy explains that the above photo Garry took is the loon doing what is called the 'penguin dance' that represents "aggression and requires a lot of energy. It is the loon's attempt to show that it is the biggest, baddest bird on the lake and you don't want to mess with it. If you see two

loons doing this together and looking at each other, they are ready to fight. If the bill is pointed out, as in the photo, it is known as the ‘penguin’ position and shows greater aggression than if the bill is pointed down, known as the ‘vulture’ position. The bill down version may relate more to panic and surprise than aggression.”

In the photo below of the three loons together, Kathy reports that “this is likely either a circle dance or the start of a circle dance in which the loons are deciding how social they are going to be. But at this time of year with only three loons, they are not going to be social.”



After they swam off together, either more aggression ensued or perhaps it ended shortly after the arrival of the second pair member. As Kathy reports, “It is likely the adults defended their territory, but there is always a chance the invader was successful.”

I asked Kathy if the pair could have had chicks and she replied that “they would unlikely be that territorial if they did not have chicks or perhaps a nest – or could be a re-nest at this time of year. Loons will stash chicks in vegetation to hide them during these situations. If the chicks/eggs remain after the invasion, that would depend on who won the dispute. Usually it is the territorial holder that wins.”

Kathy requested permission from Garry, which Garry gladly gave, to use the aggression photos for Birds Canada’s library for educational purposes. Because Kathy does not want to promote photographers actively searching out opportunities for loon aggression photos, she reports that “there are times when people get great photos and there are times when I need a photo. Because so many people think the same as Garry – that the display he witnessed may perhaps have been a courtship display – Kathy plans to use two of Garry’s photos as an explanation in her next email to loon volunteers.

Often when Kathy uses aggression photos, she adds a note: “*If you see this, you may be causing stress and panic. Please back off from the loons.*” And because I used one of Garry’s penguin dance photos, I add the same.

## The great northern diver and its chicks

I received reports from some birders of their loon and chick sightings. The sightings listed reflect those up to mid-July. Below is a screenshot sent to me by Kathy Jones showing the various stages of chick development.

Canadian Lakes Loon Survey Chick Ageing Chart

Downy Young (1–2 weeks)	Small Young (3–5 weeks)	Large Young (6–9 weeks)	Juveniles (10+ weeks)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Body &lt; ½ adult length</li> <li>• Bill &lt; length of head</li> <li>• Short, dark, dense down</li> <li>• Ride on adult's back</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Body ½ to ¾ adult length</li> <li>• Bill = length of head</li> <li>• Long, light, loose down</li> <li>• Rarely on adult's back</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Body &gt; ¾ adult length</li> <li>• Bill &gt; length of head</li> <li>• Grey-brown, scraggly</li> <li>• Start to vocalize</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Body adult length</li> <li>• Bill = adult size</li> <li>• Grey/white, scalloped</li> <li>• Make 1<sup>st</sup> flights</li> </ul>
<p>Photos are courtesy of Canadian Lakes Loon Survey participants Kristen Bianchini and Mark Peck. Special thanks to Mark Peck whose annual photo journals have been essential for developing this document.</p> <p>Phenology information is from the Loon / Diver Stewardship Working Group in conjunction with the publication Paruk, J. D., D. C. Evers, J. W. McIntyre, J. F. Barr, J. Mager, and W. H. Piper (2021). <i>Common Loon (Gavia immer)</i>, version 2.0. In <i>Birds of the World</i> (P. G. Rodewald and B. K. Keeney, Editors). Cornell Lab of Ornithology, Ithaca, NY, USA. <a href="https://doi.org/10.2173/bow.comloo.02">https://doi.org/10.2173/bow.comloo.02</a></p>			
		<p>The Canadian Lakes Loon Survey is a program of Birds Canada, delivered in partnership with QuébecOiseaux.</p>	

Because of the response I got about loons and their chicks, I chose a **photo of our great northern diver and her chick by Peter Ferris, Bird Wing member, for this month's cover photo**. It is not easy to find a photo of a loon with its chick that I can crop to fit the size of the cover page of a Bird Wing Report without taking away from the loon's long body. I was fortunate Peter had earlier sent me a photo which I was able to crop.

Janet and Lloyd Sparks: Janet and Lloyd have seen two adult loons on Wolfe Lake, off Wolfe Lake Road, Commanda, but no chicks. In fact Janet reports they haven't seen a loon chick on Wolfe Lake since 2006. She informed me that loons used to nest by the island on the lake, but over the years, too many people began using the island and too many began using personal watercrafts (PWCs) or water scooters. With this use of recreational water vehicles becoming more and more popular, Janet fears the lake is no longer a safe lake for a loon couple to raise chicks.

Yvonne Montgomery: Yvonne reports that the two loons on her nest platform had two chicks, but one did not survive. (Photo of a loon on Yvonne’s nest platform below.) Yvonne also reports that two chicks were seen on Trout Lake on the other side of Camp Island and two chicks were seen on Four Mile Bay.



*Renee Levesque*

Dick Tafel: Dick has seen two adult loons on Trout Lake near his place, but no chicks. Dick and I saw two adult loons in one area of Cache Bay with no chicks and one adult loon with one chick in another area of Cache Bay.

Faye Oei: Faye was recently out with a friend kayaking on Eagle Lake, South River, and saw a pair of loons and their two chicks. Faye reports that it “was such a treat to see them on the water. Of course we didn’t go too close. These chicks are survivors of the wake boarders and other idiots on the lakes.”

Garry Waldram: In addition to his loon sightings on Pine Lake, Garry saw a pair of adults on Lake Nosbonsing with their two chicks.

For more information on loons, Kathy Jones recommends:

“Days of our Loons”, general information from Birds Canada: <https://www.birdscanada.org/days-of-our-loons-common-loons-lead-complex-lives>;

“Loon Natural History”, including loon behaviour: <https://www.adkloon.org/loonnaturalhistory>

Kathy also recommends the book *Loon Lessons* by James D. Paruk, one of the world’s leading experts on loons. You can purchase this book on Amazon at <https://www.amazon.ca/Loon-Lessons-Uncommon-Encounters-Northern/dp/1517909406>. **If anyone purchases and reads it, a book review would be appreciated.**

- *Renee Levesque*

## Seeds and Cones

**Nestlings and Fledglings:** Drama on the high seas wasn't the only bird drama to have occurred. Katharine MacLeod reports Red-eyed Vireo drama in her own backyard. Katharine had earlier informed me of a Red-eyed Vireo's nest with four nestlings in her yard. In the morning of July 4 after the chicks had fledged, Katharine scared off two crows to prevent them from getting at the fledglings, and breathed a sigh of relief when half an hour later she heard the chicks calling for mom to feed them. However, during the afternoon, she found only one and in the middle of her yard. So to protect it from a possible crow attack, she moved it to a more sheltered area by her shed. Katharine believes that at least two of the four young had been eaten by the crows.

In addition to the young Osprey at the Cache Bay ballpark, Kim Stahl and others reported two at the Osprey nest off the Lakeshore Drive exit on Hwy 11 South, and Dick and I detected at least one in the nest in the tower at Gauthier Road and Hwy 17, West Nipissing. I have not yet heard about the nestlings on Hwy 11 North near Hwy 94 by the former beer sign, nor the one in the tower on Pine Road on the south shore of Lake Nipissing. And I am not even sure if there is still a nest along the Sturgeon River that can be seen from Quesnel Road. Last time I was along that road, I did not see the nest, but perhaps I just missed it.

Garry Waldram, who birds daily, saw a few nestlings: Eastern Bluebird by the pond near his house; Eastern Kingbird on Pratt Rd, Calvin Township; and a Northern Flicker near his place feeding a nestling. Garry's photo of the flickers is at right and is very reminiscent of the same sight some of us saw during June's Bird Wing outing in Laurier Woods. I am sure all the nestlings are now fledged.

The two American Robin nestlings on Sue Gratton's balcony that were highlighted in June's report made a successful fledgling debut on July 4, much to Sue's relief and delight. At first she was unsure if the second one had made the transition from nest to a world outside the nest. It had been perched on the edge of the nest when Sue heard a squeak and next thing she



Garry Waldram

knew, the bird was gone! Sue feared it had fallen and had not survived the fall, but she later heard it in her front yard. Many years ago, I felt the same as Sue when the third of the robin nestlings sat for the longest time on the edge of the nest and seemed incapable of flying, but I too later saw it in my yard. We have to trust that the parents know what they are doing when it's time for their young to "fly the coop."

Garry also came upon a few fledglings and juveniles during his daily birding outings: House Wren fledglings on Rutherglen Line on July 2; Evening Grosbeak fledglings (photo below) at his place on July 3; and a young Killdeer in Bonfield by the railway tracks earlier in July.



*Garry Waldram*

Dick Tafel and I were at Warren Lagoon recently and saw a number of Savannah and Song Sparrows with their young. One young Song Sparrow looked very different from the rest – grayish colour all over and bigger than the other young sparrows. A young Brown-headed Cowbird perhaps?

**Lifers:** Believe it or not, but Faye Oei, although she has often heard a Chestnut-sided Warbler singing, saw one for the first time during June's Bird Bash. So not officially a lifer, although seeing a Wilson's Snipe during the same Bird Bash definitely was.

Garry Waldram had a couple of lifers – a Northern Goshawk that he twice saw near his place in Rutherglen and a Least Bittern (photo at right) he saw in Cache Bay. He also saw Marsh Wrens in Cache Bay, but because he saw one last



*Renee Levesque*

month when he was birding in the Niagara Peninsula, it is also not officially a lifer, but a lifer for Nipissing District.

**An aerial conflict: Oystercatchers and drones:** “Just as New Yorkers flock to the beach to escape the sweltering summer heat, American Oystercatchers have taken to attacking a fleet of drones deployed by city officials to scan for sharks and swimmers in distress.”

So begins a *The New York Times* article dated July 13, 2024, by Michael Levenson about shorebirds and buzzing drones along the beaches of the east coast – the shorebirds nesting and the drones looking for sharks in the water. The American Oystercatcher (photo below) is particularly upset by the drones, “flying alongside it while emitting a loud, shrill cry or trying to strike it with its feet.” The oystercatcher sees the drone as a threat, a predator attempting to attack its young, and each time it leaves its nest to go after a drone, it leaves its young vulnerable to actual predators – cats, dogs and crabs.



*Renee Levesque*

It is not only the oystercatcher that gets disturbed but other shorebirds, some vulnerable, that nest on beaches along the east coast – Piping Plovers, Black Skimmers and Common and Least Terns.

Dr. Shiloh Schulte, an ornithologist and coordinator of the American Oystercatcher Recovery Program, recommends that drones be flown “at higher altitudes or be replaced by lifeguards or people in boats scanning for sharks and struggling swimmers.”

For more about the recovery program, see: <https://www.manomet.org/project/american-oystercatcher-recovery/>.

- *Renee Levesque*