

# Bird Wing Report

February 2024





## Bird meetings and events

**Bird Bash:** March's Bird Bash will take place the weekend before the Easter weekend, **March 23-24**. A reminder will be sent with basic instructions for newcomers.

**Bird Wing:** March's Bird Wing meeting will take place by **Zoom on Tuesday, March 26, starting at 7:00 p.m.** Our speaker will be Sue Gratton talking about the birds she saw in Honduras during her trip there in November.



Renee Levesque

**Nocturnal Owl Survey:** The Nocturnal Owl Survey, Birds Canada, takes place during April to help determine owl distribution and abundance to enable the development of sound conservation strategies. For more information, see: <https://www.birdscanada.org/bird-science/nocturnal-owl-survey>.

Members of Bird Wing have taken part in this survey for many years. In fact, when Dick Tafel retired from doing the survey a couple of years back, he was honoured by Birds Canada as a silver owler, having done the survey for 25 years.

Dick's old route, The McConnell Lake Route, has not yet been taken over by someone else, perhaps because it is a remote route. However, Kathy Jones, Birds Canada has informed me it is a high priority route because of the number of years it has been surveyed, so if anyone would like to survey it, please contact Kathy Jones at [volunteer@birdscanada.org](mailto:volunteer@birdscanada.org).

Another route that is a high priority is Mattawa's Hwy 533 route that the Doug Pattersons used to survey some years back. It can be a difficult route because it is along a highway, often well-travelled by trucks, so care needs to be taken in terms of safety. Again, if you are interested in this route, please contact Kathy Jones

I believe all other routes in our immediate area have been accounted for – Oriana Pokorny for the Sand Dam route as well as Gary Sturge's Powassan route; Katharine McLeod for the Feronia route; Lori Anderson and Ken Gowing for the Graham Lake (Chisholm) route; April McCrum for the Restoule route; and Greg Jaski for the Kiosk route. Other members will join in to help the leaders, but any members, even new members, who want to take part, please let me know.

As you may recall, the Nocturnal Owl Survey "contest" was discontinued. However, if any of you want to write an article based on your results, as Katharine and Lori did last year, please do so and I will publish it in one of the Bird Wing Reports. Regardless of whether you write an article or not, I would like to be able to publish a list of the number and species of owls seen or heard. (For new members, if you wish to read about past Nocturnal Owl Surveys, you can read the owl reports on the Nipissing Naturalists Club website: <https://www.nipnats.com/club-activities/bird-wing/reports-and-bird-counts/>. (Scroll down to see the owl reports.)

## Birds seen in February

*By Renee Levesque; photos as indicated*

Because Dick Tafel's February Bird Bash Report was recently sent to members, I will highlight and comment upon only a few of the sightings members mentioned at our February Zoom meeting.

**Northern Cardinal:** As we all know by now, Rick Tripp has had Northern Cardinals coming to his feeders for a few years now – see Rick's article on the Northern Cardinal that follows – and as we also all know by now, Dick Tafel often drives over to Rick's place to peer into his backyard to see them, but, except on maybe one occasion, to no avail! Below is Rick's latest cardinal story:

*Badminton anyone?* “We over-winter plants in the garage so the garage door is not often open in the winter. But on January 23, I briefly opened it and then closed it after I finished doing whatever chores I had to do. The next day, I discovered that our brightly-coloured handsome neighbour had moved in – and was quite vocal about it! (See photo at right.) Though we had seen each other almost daily for three years, he was not very interested in my assistance in moving out. (Male pride, no doubt!) He was correct though. As soon as the door was opened, he flew directly into a cedar tree that is located beside the garage where the female cardinal was waiting. Both were seen flying away without difficulty and both have been at our feeders since. I would have been mortified if this had been anything but a happy ending!”



*Rick Tripp*

**Horned Larks, Lapland Longspurs and Snow Buntings:** This was a winter of large flocks of Horned Larks and Lapland Longspurs. In West Nipissing along Levac and Beaudry Roads both were seen by a few of us – Dick, me, Linda Stoner, Pat Stack and some in Verner by Denise

Desmarais. I don't know what numbers Linda and Pat saw in the two heavily-flocked areas, but Dick and I saw a flock of about 100 Horned Larks in late January, a large flock that continued to be seen frequently for at least another couple of weeks in the same general area. I have never seen such a large flock of Horned Larks. I am used to seeing a few every year, and some years from 25 to 40, but never this many.

We don't often see Lapland Longspurs (**a photo of one taken by Stephen O'Donnell is on this month's cover**) in the winter. More often in my experience we see them on their southern migration. But we do see some in the winter every now and then, usually a couple in with a flock of Snow Buntings. This year, the high count of Lapland Longspurs was 36! (Seen and counted by Lucas Beaver.) However, in recent memory there have been a couple of large flocks, although not in the winter, one of 40 on October 15, 2014 at the airplane club beside Callander Lagoon, and one of 20 on April 28, 2018 on Quesnel Road, Sturgeon Falls,. (These numbers are just from my lists. I am sure others have seen as many, if not more, elsewhere.)

Perhaps because of the mild winter weather, Horned Larks (photo of one at right) were seen earlier than usual, although I have seen them a couple of times as early as January 21, 2017, and January 31, 2022. But mostly I don't see them in the winter until February and March.

In 2023, I did not see any Lapland Longspurs, and the year before that, in 2022, many of us saw the one that stayed in April McCrum's yard for most of the winter. We tend to see Lapland Longspurs only in their winter or non-breeding plumage, but in May, 2021, Dick and I briefly saw one at Verner Lagoon in its beautiful breeding plumage. That was a treat for me because it is the only time I have seen one in breeding plumage – and what a



*Renee Levesque*



*Omar Runolfsson, Wikipedia*

difference! In the winter, longspurs are quite nondescript, but in breeding colours, the male looks very dapper with his yellow bill, black hood and chin and bright rufous nape (see photo at left). The longspur refers to its long hind claw. You can see it well on Stephen's cover photo.

However, we are used to seeing Snow Buntings in large flocks and this year was no exception. Many of us who saw the Horned Larks and Lapland Longspurs saw the Snow Buntings in the same area. Some, like Garry Waldram, saw them in Calvin Township and some, like Lori Anderson, in Chisholm Township.



*Renee Levesque*

All three of these species, found in the winter here in agricultural fields, are on their way north. The Lapland Longspur breeds in the High Arctic, as does the Snow Bunting. Although the Horned Lark breeds across much of North America, from the High Arctic south, the ones we see here are on their way further north or to James and Hudson Bays. One June when I was in Iceland on the Island of Grimsey just at the Arctic Circle, I was so excited to see the male Snow Bunting in his breeding plumage and to also see some young ones. (See photo of a young one at left.)

**Bohemian Waxwings:** Another species that arrived here in January and continued through February in very large flocks was the Bohemian Waxwing, seen by many of us – Dick, me, Garry, Pat, Linda, Diane Deagle and many others. They are true bohemians, nomads that have wandered through many North Bay streets this winter in flocks that numbered in the 300s. I highlighted the Bohemian Waxwing last month with

two great photos by Stephen O'Donnell, but because it is such a beautiful bird – a bird Dick has often declared must have been to a Parisian hairdresser – I will show another photo of a flock by new member Pat Stack (photo below). Although I saw a small flock in Thibeault Terrace the day after the meeting, these wanderers are probably now on their way east, having eaten most of our suburban berries.



*Pat Stack*

**Pine Siskins and Common Redpolls:** Other large flocks of birds this winter were ones we often see during our winter months when they irrupt here – Pine Siskins seen by Fred Pinto and many others and Common Redpolls, no doubt also seen by many. Wherever I went in February, there were often large flocks of Common Redpolls. I have twice seen at least 60 on Cook Mills Road off the north highway. And sometimes in amongst these flocks was one, sometimes two, outstanding frosty ones, the Hoary Redpoll. The redpolls are on their way to the Arctic tundra and the Pine Siskins to northern conifer forests. I sometimes have had a few Pine Siskins in my area during the summer.

**Evening Grosbeaks:** I think the most excited member at our Zoom meeting was Angela Mills, who waited 10 to 15 years before once again seeing an Evening Grosbeak! She saw a flock in Chisholm Township and was so delighted she emailed me with the “breaking news”! (An article on the Evening Grosbeak follows in this report.) Many of us, including Faye Oei and Garry, have also seen Evening Grosbeaks. The largest flocks I saw this winter were in the Bonfield area – flocks of about 25 – and Garry has had about 30 in his yard most of the winter.

**Owls:** Although Denise and I heard a Horned Owl in January, Denise heard one again during February’s Bird Bash while she was out strolling with her husband in the moonlight at Cache Lake north of Verner. It was a very, very cold night, so maybe strolling is not the right word! While out on this cold moonlit walk, Denise did not just hear the Great Horned Owl, but also a Barred Owl! There may be a couple of Barred Owls in my neighbourhood, one that comes to a neighbour’s property a mile or so up the road from me and one that landed on my feeder pole early one evening. My daughter took a photo of it through the window with her cell phone – at right. And the Northern Hawk Owl continues to be seen, although Garry and Pat report it has moved its locale from Nosbonsing Park Road to a nearby locale still in the Lake Nosbonsing area.



**Spring Migrants:** Herring Gulls have arrived. Faye saw four at the South River landfill site, and a couple or so days after our meeting I saw 24 that had taken up residence at Minnehaha Bay in Sturgeon Falls. (And a few days after that, Dick and I saw about 75 at North Bay’s landfill site.)

A day after the meeting, Angela spied an American Robin in flight, I believe in the Airport Road area.

Canada Geese have arrived. A day or two after the meeting, Garry, Dick and I saw a few in Bonfield, and a few days after that, Dick and I saw a few in South River in the little open water there was at that time.

Although American Crows are with us in urban areas all winter, as seen by Mary Marris, many were also seen in non-urban areas – in Chisholm Township and especially West Nipissing. On one occasion, Dick and I saw 17 on Beaudry Road. Since the meeting, the crows have come into my northern neighbourhood and for a day or two there was much cawing and croaking between the ravens and the crows – the crows arriving while at least a couple of pairs of ravens in my area are nesting.

Common Goldeneye and sometimes some Common Mergansers stay with us in open water areas all winter, but recently many Common Goldeneye (photo below) have made an appearance and were seen by Dick, me and Garry in Bonfield, Dick and me in Restoule and Dick and me in Mattawa where we saw at least 20 along the Ottawa River.



*Garry Waldram*

Common Mergansers have also started showing up. By the meeting date, Garry had seen a couple in Bonfield and subsequently Dick and I saw 6 there.

**Canada Jay:** I last saw a Canada Jay in January 2023, so was in awe when Lori and Ken Gowing saw one in SE Chisholm during February's Bird Bash. And not to be outdone, Greg Jaski saw one on Bomarc Road off the north highway, although Keith Thornborrow usually always sees one in the South River area during many of our Bird Bashes. (Since the meeting, Dick and I ventured twice up Bomarc Road and saw one on our second trip at the very end of this short road. It was great to finally see one after 13 months!)

**Finches:** Therez Violette had American Goldfinches coming to her feeders and Rick continues to have quite a few coming to his. And the beautiful finch dipped in raspberry juice, the male Purple Finch, was seen at the feeders of Sue Gratton, Faye, Garry, Rick, Dick, and me. Most of us saw only one, but Rick had quite a few coming to his feeders. Sue joined Zoom from Florida where that day she saw another lifer, the Black Skimmer! (Photo below.)



*Renee Levesque*

**Crossbills:** Red Crossbills continued to be seen eating grit along various roads, often in flocks and sometimes in pairs. The ones I saw in male/female pairs, I entered in Nature Counts for Ontario Breeding Bird, Atlas-3. There weren't as many White-winged Crossbills in February as in January, but a few were seen here and there.

**Sparrows:** Although Lisa Hackett has had a White-throated Sparrow over-wintering in her yard, the main sparrow seen this winter was the American Tree, seen by new member Hillary Drenth, and perhaps some others. I had eight coming to my feeders all winter and when we had that thaw in late February, a puddle formed on my patio where the cement met the snow bank. Although I delight in birds bathing in my bird bath in the summer and fall, I took a special delight in seeing an American Tree bathing in February, splashing about in the patio puddle as vigorously as many birds do in the bird bath later in the year. (See photos below.)



*Renee Levesque*

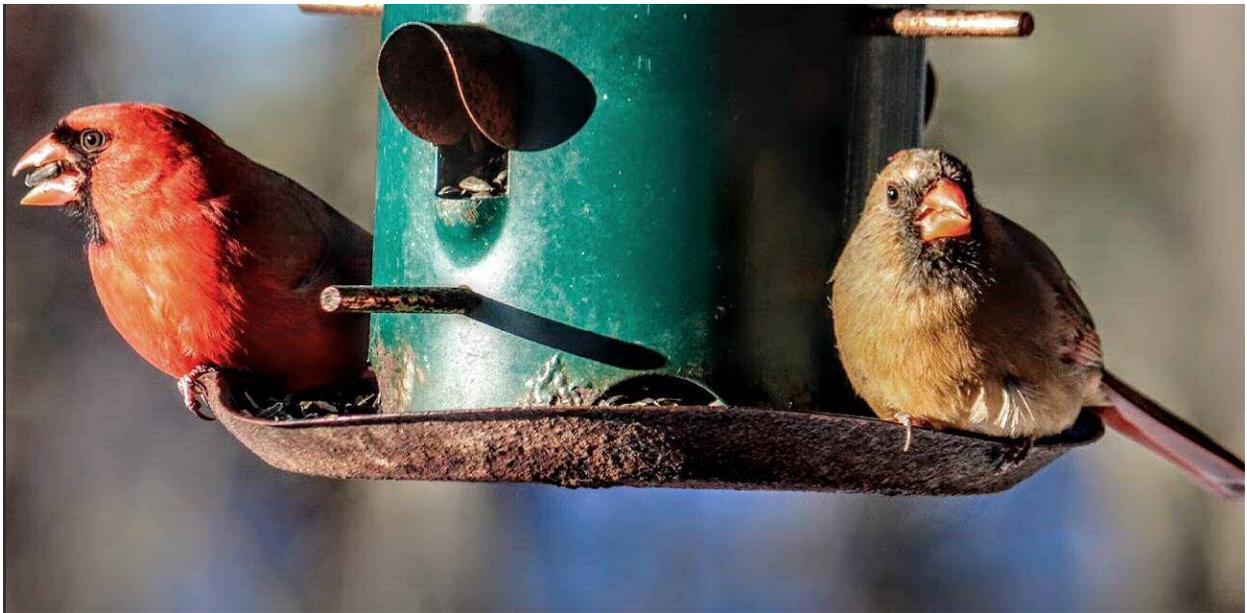
## Finally, proof positive!

*Photos and text by Rick Tripp*

During the summer of 2003, we had a brief encounter with a Northern Cardinal pair in our Callander yard. We were pre-digital then, and though I believe I have photos, I am sure the photos don't amount to much more than a red dot on a dark background! Fast forwarding to 2023, I now have a collection of cardinal-based mugs!!

In November of 2020, a cardinal pair appeared at our feeders and have been daily guests since then. I certainly think that by September of 2021, we had our first cardinal born to this pair, though it seems my case for this was not strong enough!

Since September 2021, we have observed cardinals at our feeders consistently. Observations are easily had as our cardinals are very vocal once they are on the feeder. I have heard both the male and female sing. In fact, the female is as vocal as the male.



We have had some members of our Bird Wing group by our home to observe – or hope to observe – one of our most striking species. We have enlisted neighbours in trying to find a cardinal nest. At least one book points out that it should be easy to

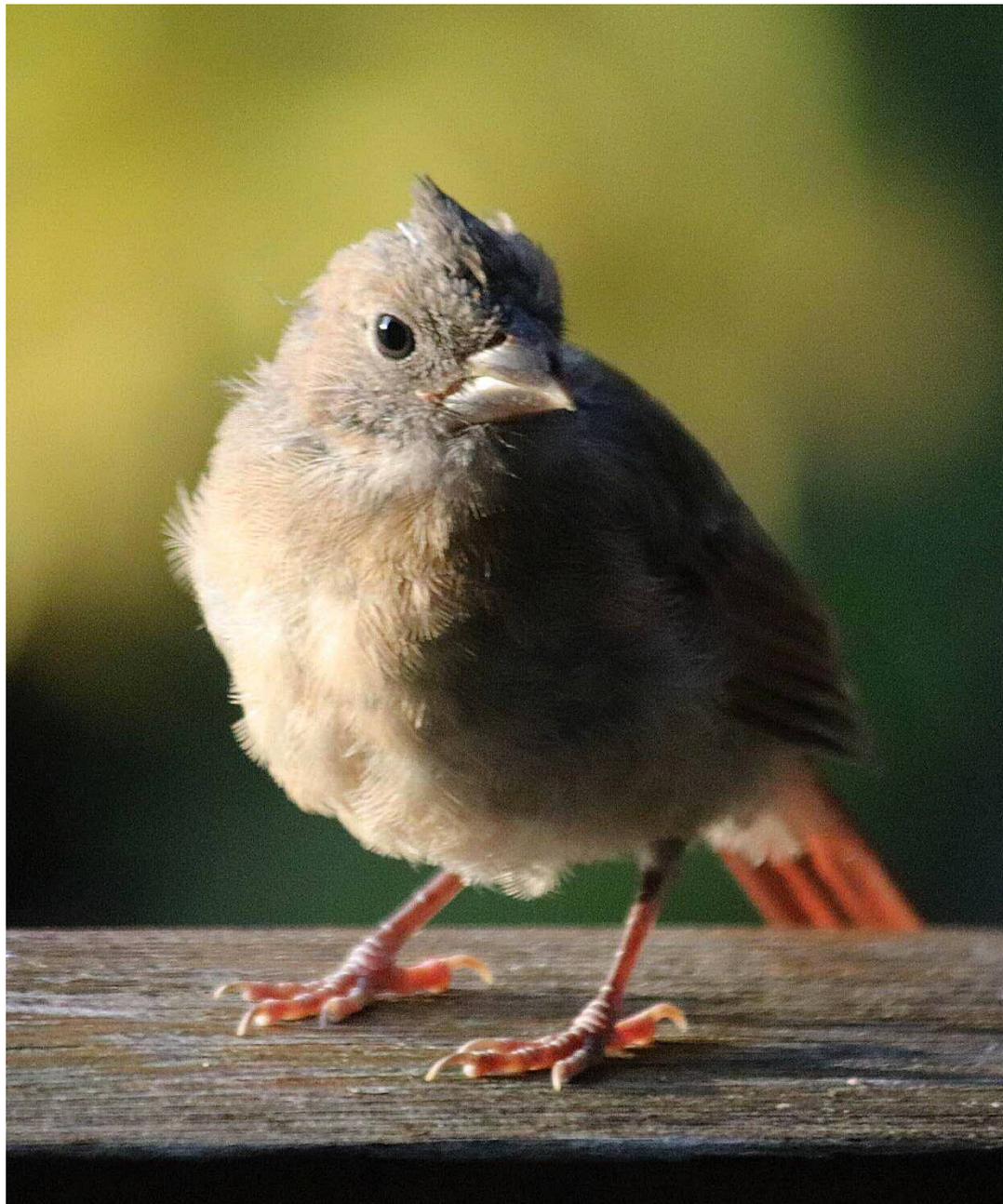
find one. I would take that with a grain of salt, for no nest has been observed to date.

We are near the northern edge of the cardinals' range, a range that is rapidly increasing. After all these years, the cardinals are now so at home in my yard that they will challenge Blue Jays and Common Grackles for feeder time.

The male cardinal has a series of courtship rituals, including food sharing which I have observed!

Hundreds of photos later, this young fledgling appeared on October 29<sup>th</sup>, 2023! The dark beak indicates it is a juvenile. I believe we have the first breeding evidence of the Northern Cardinal in our immediate area.

Authorities have been notified! Seems as if the red coats are here to stay!



# Patagonia, the ends of the earth

*By Renee Levesque; photos as indicated*

Patagonia: a remote, wild, and pristine paradise with stunning and dramatic landscapes, paths not yet trodden, a unique blended culture and an abundance of wildlife.

Patagonia is the southern geographical region of Argentina and Chile, with the western part governed by Chile and the eastern part by Argentina. The very southernmost part, the archipelago of Tierra del Fuego, is often included as part of Patagonia. (See map at right.)

As a whole, Patagonia has a population of about 2 million people, most living in Argentina. The 28,000 or so indigenous people of Patagonia are called the Tehuelche or the Mapuche-Tehuelche. Very few live in Chile.

Fred Pinto who spoke to us at November's Zoom meeting about his time in Argentine Patagonia could have spoken on many aspects of a region most of us will never see, but was confined, for the most part, to talking to us about the abundant bird life he saw there.

When I introduced Fred at our meeting, I made mention of Bruce Chatwin's best-selling book published in 1977, *In Patagonia*. It is probably the book that made so many of us of a certain age yearn to go to Patagonia. Like Chatwin, we too wanted to experience what it felt like to visit the ends of the earth.

On November 2, 2022, Fred began his incredible journey from Puerto Madryn in the northern part of Argentina to the Antarctic, but before he left on his once-in-a-lifetime voyage, he explored, with a local guide arranged by Naturalists Journeys, the coast of Patagonia from Puerto Madryn to Punta Tombo. Fred was not the first to explore the Atlantic coast, however! In 1520, one of the most famous explorers came to the area – Ferdinand Magellan, after whom many birds are named, probably the most well-known, the Magellanic Penguin.

Although I wrote a bit more extensively about Magellanic Penguins on Fred's Antarctic journey, it is important to make mention of them here. About 180 km south of Fred's starting point of Puerto Madryn is the National Reserve of Punta Tombo, a small peninsula jutting out into the



Atlantic Ocean. Here you will find the largest colony of Magellanic Penguins (photo at right) outside of the Antarctic. At least a million of these penguins find their way here in breeding season to build their nests and raise their young.

Punta Tombo is also an important breeding site of the Guanaco, a smaller wild cousin of the domesticated llama that was once hunted but is now protected.

Another bird named after Magellan, and one Fred just happened to see, is the Magellanic Horned Owl or the Lesser Horned Owl. At one point it was considered a subspecies of the Great Horned Owl, but is now considered a separate species. It looks very similar to the Great Horned Owl, but the Great is larger with longer ear tufts and broader bars on its underparts.



Fred Pinto



Wikimedia, Benjamin Lablee

When Fred saw the Magellanic Horned Owl (at left), it happened to be in a cavity on the side of a small cliff, poking its head out while Fred and the other birders were looking for birds along a dusty roadside stop near the city of Trelew, about 65 km south of Port Madryn.

I found it interesting when Fred told us that Trelew was a Welsh settlement founded by Lewis Jones in 1886. The name of the city is partly from *tref* meaning town in Welsh and partly from Lewis. What was also of interest to me when I researched this was that in 1902, 208 Welsh settlers comprised of 44 families left Trelew because of unfavourable conditions, conscription for one, and came to Saltcoats, Saskatchewan, originally named Stirling by earlier Scottish settlers who had arrived there from Scotland in the early 1880s. Some of the

settlers who went to Saltcoats eventually returned to Patagonia, although in total over the years, there were probably only about a couple of thousand Welsh settlers in the area. Nevertheless, every year in Trelew there is a musical and literary festival celebrating the city's Welsh heritage. It is called Eisteddfod made up of two Welsh words that basically mean sitting-together.



*Steve Parrish*

At Peninsula Valdes, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, near Puerto Madryn can be found Southern Right Whales. Kelp Gulls land on these whales when they swim to the surface to breath and bite into their skin and blubber, a painful experience for the whales! (See photo above.) Over the years, this behavior has become more prevalent and, as a result, young whales often endure painful injuries and some even die prematurely. It used to be that gulls were content to just eat the shedding skin of the whales, but at some point they discovered better food can be had by biting into the whales. The adults have adapted to this behavior by arching their backs when they surface for air, preventing the gulls from biting them, but calves are not able to do this. Right Whales were also seen by Fred in the bay at Port Madryn and Kelp Gulls were seen by him throughout his trip.

Also found in the Peninsula Valdes is a large colony of magnificent Southern Elephant Seals. At least 20,000 of these enormous seals – the males weighing 3.5 tons and measuring 16 feet (5 m) in length – reach this peninsula each year between August and March to give birth and to molt. But it was north of Punta Tombo at a beach just outside the National Reserve that Fred saw Southern Elephant Seals for the first time and was struck by how huge they were. The females who depart after about 30 days when the pups are weaned had already departed when Fred saw

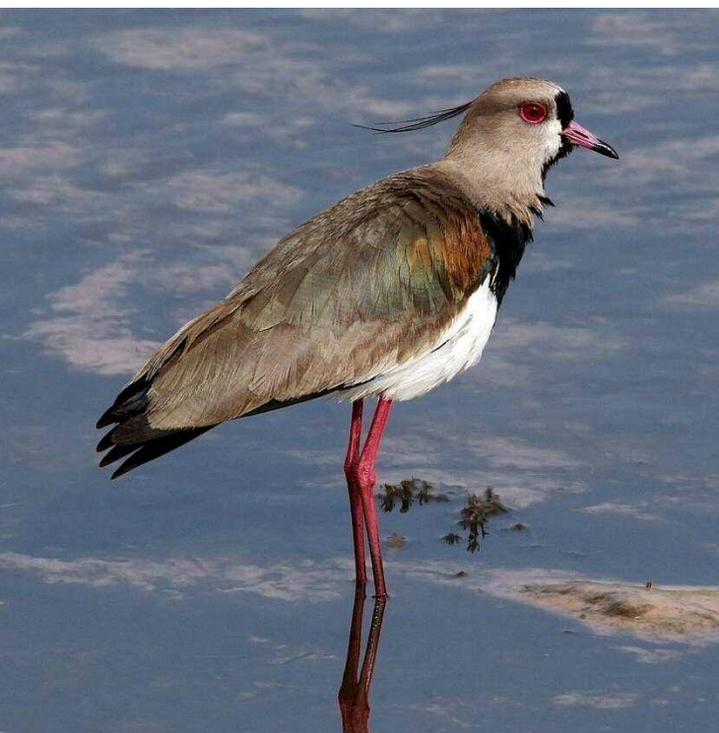
them, leaving the males in charge of the pups. (Later as Fred sailed south, he saw Elephant Seals whose pups had not yet been weaned and some whose pups had not yet been born.)

An interesting coastal bird is the Coscoroba Swan (at right), a large white swan with a very bright duck-shaped bill, endemic to southern South America. It is not a true swan, but rather a common ancestor that lead to true geese and true swans. Recent genetic studies show it is closely related to the Cape Barren Goose. There are many references to birds in Chatwin's *In Patagonia* and one refers to the Coscoroba: "*A flotilla of white coscoroba swans were swimming close inshore.*"



Wikimedia, Olaf Oliviero Riemer

Two ducks Fred mentioned seeing in the northern part of his Patagonia bird journey are the Southern or Chiloe Wigeon and the Crested Duck. The Chiloe Wigeon is similar to our male American Wigeon but unlike our wigeon, the male and female Chiloe Wigeons look alike, although the male is brighter coloured than the female. The Crested Duck, another dabbling duck, is endemic to South America. Its body may be a muted gray and brown and its crest not terribly distinctive, but its eyes during breeding season from October to December are outstanding – a brilliant red or orange, more so in the male than the female.



There is yet another crested bird Fred saw in Patagonia, the Southern Lapwing (photo at left), the only crested wader in South America, although its crest, like all lapwings, is very distinctive, as is its black breast, white belly and beautiful bronze-coloured shoulder. Found on lakes, river banks and grasslands, lapwings are ground nesting birds much like our plovers. If the conspicuous feathers of the Southern Lapwing don't give it away, its raucous call will.

And then there are the three finches, all actually tanagers – the Diuca Finch, the White-bridled Finch and the Patagonia Sierra Finch. The Diuca Finch, which prefers dry shrubland, is grey with a white

Wikimedia, Charles J. Sharp

throat and rufous under its tail. The White-bridled Finch, a grassland bird, is quite handsome, the male with a black throat, yellow wings and yellow tail edgings. And the Patagonia Sierra Finch (at right) with its grey hood and golden back and undersides is, I think, the handsomest of the three finches (tanagers) mentioned. Although it too is a bird of the open habitat, it can also be found at various elevations, including at high altitudes.



*Wikipedia*

A large common parakeet of Argentina is the Burrowing Parakeet. It is a parakeet that prefers drier regions with cliffs nearby. It nests colonially, excavating burrows as much as 9 or 10 feet (up to 3 m) deep. It has a large and distinctive white eyering and a bright yellow belly with a red patch. At one point, populations seriously declined because of the wildlife trade and from persecution because it was considered a crop pest. However, populations have bounced back and overall its conservation status is of least concern. It is native to Chile and Argentina, though it has been introduced in Hawaii.

Before Fred even left his hotel in Porta Madryn, he saw the Austral Thrush, looking very much like a duller version of our American Robin. And another bird that would be familiar to us as being unmistakably a sparrow is the Rufous-collared Sparrow. It is a handsome sparrow with its peaked crown, a black and grey patterned head, a black chest patch and a lovely rufous collar. An adventurous one, much like Fred himself, even came aboard his ship as it made its way south! Both birds are pictured below.



*Wikimedia, Sharp Photography*



*Fred Pinto*

One of Fred's bird highlights was the Chilean Flamingo (photo below). It is a large flamingo, 43 to 51 inches (up to about one metre) in height, found from Ecuador and Peru to Chile and Argentina and east to Brazil. It can be seen on mud flats, estuaries, lagoons and salt lakes where it feeds on algae and plankton. Like other species of flamingos, it is pink, but unlike the others, its legs are grey with dark pink joints and its bill shows more black areas. Again from *In Patagonia*: "A flock of flamingos took off, flashing orange and black and stripping the blue water white as their legs lifted clear."



*Wikimedia, Claudio Dias Tomm*

In addition to the Chilean Flamingo, there are five other flamingo species - Greater, Lesser, Caribbean, Andean and Puna or James's, with the latter the rarest and thought to be extinct until a colony was discovered in a remote area in the late 1950s. Along with the Chilean and Andean it makes up the three species of flamingos found in South America, with all three considered Near Threatened.

Fred has been fortunate enough to have seen all the species of flamingos with the exception of the Puna. And interestingly enough, even though he has seen thousands of Lesser and Greater Flamingos on the shallow alkaline-saline waters of Lake Nakuru in Kenya, Fred nevertheless was very excited when he woke up on his first day in Puerto Madryn to see outside his hotel window many Chilean Flamingos on the nearby shore. Although seeing Lake Nakuru in Kenya covered in pink is truly spectacular, this was tempered for Fred during his most recent visit to Kenya in 2013 when there were no flamingos at all to be found on Lake Nakuru. High water levels as a result of nearby forests being cleared have unfortunately affected the feeding and breeding grounds of the flamingos.

In total, Fred saw 65 species of birds during his northern trek of Patagonia before he boarded the M/V Hondius for the Antarctic. On his return from the Antarctic, Fred spent time in Tierra del Fuego. I will write about that part of Fred's birding trip for the next Bird Wing Report.

## A Road to Recovery for the Evening Grosbeak

Because the Evening Grosbeak has lost 92% of its population since 1970, an international collaboration, called *A Road to Recovery*, has been formed to shed light on why this irruptive species is in such decline. Once a common winter feeder, its population has now declined more than any other land bird in continental United States and Canada. (*Road to Recovery* is an independently funded collaboration, focusing on “the recovery of the most rapidly declining birds in the United States and Canada.” In addition to the Evening Grosbeak, focus is also on the Golden-winged Warbler, the Lesser Yellowlegs and the Yellow-billed Cuckoo.)

To help determine why Evening Grosbeaks are in such decline, colour-banding and tagging with satellite and radio transmitters have begun in earnest “to better understand their irruptive movements and to link populations across seasons and geographies.”

The reason for the decline in the Evening Grosbeak population is not fully known, but it could be a result of “fluctuations in the spruce budworm populations, mature forest alteration and loss, collision mortalities, disease and climate change effects on northern forests.”

For those who were members of Bird Wing in February 2016, you may recall that Kevin Hannah, biologist with Canadian Wildlife Service, Environment and Climate Change Canada, was our guest speaker and was in our area from February 23 to 25 banding finches and taking feather samples to also better understand the irruptive movements of winter finches. Feathers provide isotope signatures, much like our fingerprints, but can give only a region where the bird has been, not a specific area. (I am not sure if this is still a common practice.)

Kevin’s main focus at that time was on Common Redpolls, Pine Grosbeaks and Evening Grosbeaks and as these three birds are found in our area, Kevin received permission from Lori



Renee Levesque

Anderson, Mary Young and the late Ernie Frayle to set up “traps” at their homes to band the finches and obtain feather samples from them. Dick Tafel and I were at Lori’s farm to talk to Kevin and to watch the process. (See photo at right of Kevin setting up a trap to attract finches.)

So what can we do to help? We can enter our sightings on eBird, iNaturalist and take part in the various Birds Canada, The Cornell Lab and Audubon birding events - Christmas Bird Counts, Great Backyard Bird Counts and Global Big Days. Audio recordings are also helpful because, like the crossbill, the Evening Grosbeak has five call type populations across its range and “each could exhibit differential connectivity”, and, therefore, require different conservation strategies.

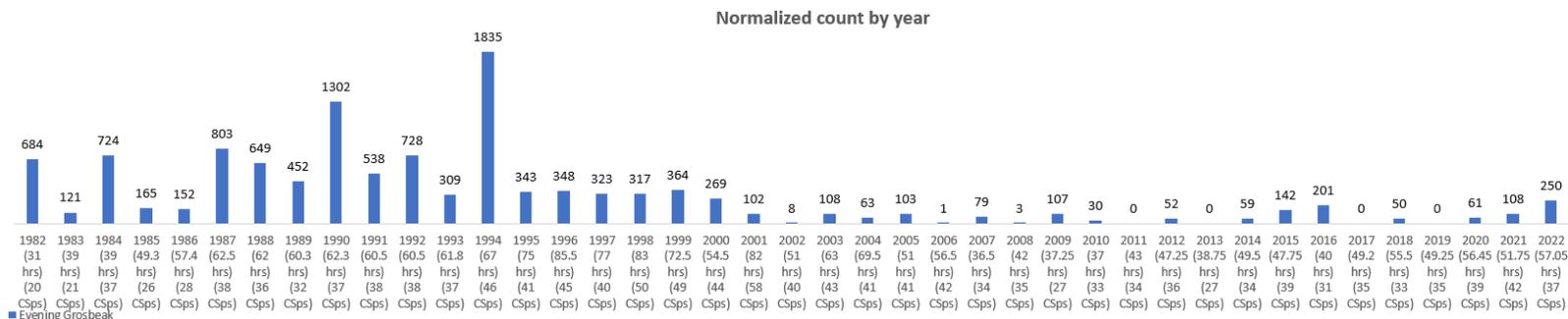


Renee Levesque

Angela Mills provided me with the normalized Christmas Bird Counts for North Bay for the Evening Grosbeak using our new dashboard. As you will see from the screen shot below, numbers varied from 1982 to 1994 from a low of 121 in 1983 to a high of 1835 in 1994. Then from 1995 to 1999, numbers remained fairly stable in and around the mid-300s. But then from 2000 to 2022, numbers declined from 269 to 0. Three years - 2002, 2006 and 2008 - saw single digit numbers, and four years - 2011, 2013, 2017 and 2019 –there weren’t any seen. In 2022, numbers went back up to 250. We don’t yet have the normalized numbers for 2023, but my recollection is that only about 35 Evening Grosbeaks were seen.

Since January, there have been a fair number of flocks seen in our area especially in the Bonfield area and, I understand, in Calvin and Chisholm Township areas. So far this winter, I have had two or three flocks come through my yard in the northern part of North Bay.

- Renee Levesque



## One for sorrow: the lone magpie of Echo Lake

Long before I began seriously watching birds, I was fascinated by magpies, particularly those found in Northern Ireland. My father loved to drive and would take us on long trips all over Ireland. Invariably we would see many magpies on the road, in fields or on lawns (below) and each and every time, he would pretend to spit on two of his fingers for good luck, and had the rest of us do so too. I later found out that in folklore and myth, the magpie evokes an element of suspicion, bringing with it good or bad luck and hence the nursery rhyme:

*One for sorrow,  
Two for joy,  
Three for a girl,  
Four for a boy,  
Five for silver,  
Six for gold,  
Seven for a secret,  
Never to be told,  
Eight for a wish,  
Nine for a kiss  
Ten for a bird  
You must not miss.*

This is the modern version of the nursery rhyme. The words have changed over time, with the oldest version going back to the 18th century.



*Renee Levesque*

When I write about the magpie of the UK and Europe, it is a different magpie than our Black-billed Magpie (*Pica hudsonia*). They very closely resemble each other and the only visible difference of which I am aware is that the Eurasian or Common Magpie (*Pica pica*) is larger. But their DNA is different, making them two distinct species.

Although there are 20 species of magpies worldwide, we see only the Black-billed in Canada. (The Yellow-billed Magpie is endemic to California.) The Black-billed is a bird of western North America, its habitat being grasslands, meadows, sagebrush plains, other open areas and some small towns. It is often spotted on road signs, fence posts, tree tops and roadsides.

However, one has frequently been seen at Echo Lake near Echo Bay in Algoma and is often listed on Mike Burrell's weekly Ontario rare bird sightings list, including the one seen just this past January.

I decided to email Carter Dorscht about it because I knew if anyone had seen the Black-billed Magpie, it would be Carter, Executive Director, The Kensington Conservancy, Desbarats. (Check out The Kensington Conservancy at <https://www.kensingtonconservancy.org/>.) And yes, Carter had seen it, probably many times.

It is Carter's understanding that it arrived at Echo Lake in the fall of 2013, perhaps even the same bird that had been seen at Whitefish Point, Michigan, in the spring of 2013. Carter informed me, "Once it arrived, it then took until 2015 for birders to become aware of it. It is present all year round, but is often tougher to find during the non-winter months because then it doesn't have to rely on coming to feeders for food."

It's a large, very striking, flashy bird, bold and social, a member of the Corvidae family and one that is quite jaylike. If any bird can be more vocal, querulous, and racious than a Blue Jay, it is the Black-billed Magpie, although the Yellow-billed even more so. And like others in the Corvidae family - crows, ravens, Blue Jays - it has a wide-ranging diet, including carrion and scraps left behind by other animals. It is also known to eat ticks off animals, like deer and elk, and in so doing establishes a symbiotic relationship, having a meal while providing a service to the animals. Apparently during the western expedition of Lewis and Clark, it entered their tents and stole food!

It is a black, blue and white bird as seen in the photo below, although the blue on its wings and tail is really a blue-green iridescence, not always visible. In addition to its white belly and scapulars (shoulders), it also has bright white wing patches that can be seen when it flies. It



glides when it flies and struts when it walks. It has a very long tail, longer than its body length. Only four indigenous birds in North America – the two magpies and two flycatchers, the Scissor-tailed and the Fork-tailed – have tail lengths greater than their body lengths

The magpie is a mimic, mimicking humans, birds and other animal sounds. Carter reports that he has only ever heard it mimic a Blue Jay, a slightly off Blue Jay, but a Blue Jay nevertheless.

But if its voice and its looks aren't enough, this bird is also intelligent and inquisitive, with a long memory and an excellent recall of faces. So best not to ever cross it!

“One of the most notable Black-billed Magpie behaviors is its “funeral”. When one magpie discovers a dead magpie, it begins calling loudly to attract other magpies. The gathering of raucously calling magpies (up to 40 birds have been observed) may last for 10 to 15 minutes before the birds disperse and fly off silently.” (From *All About Birds*.)

Carter states that “while the magpie is a non-migratory species, there is some precedence for Black-billed Magpies showing up in the east, although I don't have an explanation for it. There are a few records in southern Ontario as well. But in northwestern Ontario, they are a regularly-occurring species, and if you are heading west, you can usually start seeing them once you get to the Dryden area. I'm sure that's the furthest east that they've been confirmed to breed.” (When I checked eBird, for recent sightings in Southern Ontario, there were a number in 2023 and a sighting in the London area by a few birders this past January.)

If you plan to see any, aim for 2 or 10. I am reminded of a photo Dick Tafel sent me some years back from Vail, Colorado. There were 5 magpies in that photo. Not a bad number either.

**Note:** If you are heading west this summer, you might want to make a stop at The Kensington Conservancy – between Sudbury and Sault Ste. Marie. See the link provided above for more information.