

BIRD WING MEETING

February 24, 2015

Despite the fact that Dick Tafel was in Arizona spotting the Magnificent Hummingbird, Cassin's Finch, and Say's Phoebe, among many other species, February's Bird Wing continued on its own wings, with Gary Sturge as acting chairman.

Birds Seen in February: February is not the best month to see many birds, but there were a number of interesting sightings. The most exciting, in this consistently cold winter we have endured, was an American Robin seen by Gary on Purdon Line and Maple Hill Road. Surely there can be no better portent of spring than that of an American Robin!



Some robins do winter in Ontario. Obviously they cannot eat their normal diet of earthworms during winter. Instead, they eat berries and other fruits left on shrubs, trees and vines. Like many other winter birds, robins travel in flocks in search of food. When few berries are left by late winter and early spring, the less desirable sumac berries become a staple. If robins have enough food, they can survive the extreme cold. They don't eat birdseed because they can't digest seed and their beaks can't crack seed. Until the snow melts and the ground is no longer frozen, consider buying mealworms and placing apple slices, raisins, blueberries, strawberries or cherries on the ground to feed hungry winter robins. Food is even more important than shelter in cold weather and robins have even been known to catch fish in open water, as attested by a photo appearing on the Journey North website, from which the above information on what robins eat in the wintertime was taken. (*More on this website further on in the summary.*)

Curtis Irish spotted the Brown Creeper in Laurier Woods. It is a bird which can be hard to differentiate from the bark of a large tree as it begins its climb up the trunk, starting near the ground. It then creeps swiftly upward, going round and round the trunk in a sort of spiral until it almost reaches the top, then onto the base of another tree in search of insects and spiders in the bark.

Other interesting February sightings from Gary were a possible Rough-legged Hawk on Pinewood Park Road paralleling Hwy. 11, where the same species was seen frequently in the fall, and a Black-backed Woodpecker on Stillaway Road. Gary reports the Black-backed is often seen in this area, although during a November field trip to Stillaway Road in search for one, none was seen, perhaps because we were too busy hamming it up for the camera and not paying attention to what was behind us, as you will see in **Marc Buchanan's** photo below!



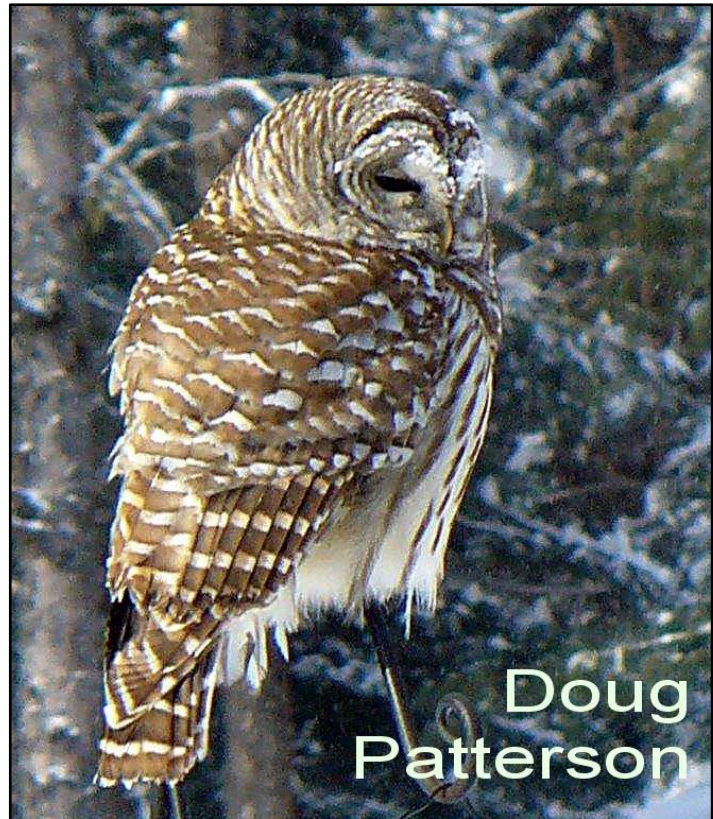
One of Kaye Edmonds' two White-throated Sparrows (seen below) may not have survived the winter, but the other continues to feed at her feeder. Matt Walker's two Dark-eyed Juncos continue to feed at his.



Lori Anderson's Snow Buntings and Snowy Owl continue to co-habitat well enough, although the Snow Buntings are at risk of becoming the Snowy Owl's next meal. So far, though, Lori has seen no evidence of this and hopes there is enough other food around to tempt her Snowy Owl. The other owl seen was the Barred Owl on the property of the Doug Pattersons in Mattawa (seen

at right). This owl arrived early one morning, sat on top of one of the feeders and proceeded to nap there for the rest of the morning, thereby preventing other birds from feeding.

Ducks seen by some were three male Common Goldeneyes on the open water of the Ottawa River in Mattawa; a female Common Merganser, seen by Doug, also on the open water of the Ottawa River near Lions Park in Mattawa; many Mallards at the water treatment plant on Memorial Drive in North Bay and some in the small section of open water on Trout Lake behind the Green Store; and the odd Black Duck with the Mallards at both locations.



Other birds seen were the Bald Eagle; Red-breasted and White-breasted Nuthatches; European Starlings; Mourning Doves; Blue Jays; Pine and Evening Grosbeaks; and the very handsome Bohemian Waxwings, found this month not only in the subdivision of Pinewood, but also in Powassan and on Massey Drive in Ferris.



Other woodpeckers seen in addition to the Black-backed were the Pileated (seen at left), the Hairy and the Downy.

The American Crow is being seen in the city and the Common Raven most everywhere. Nicole Richardson and Renee Levesque saw the latter near Canadore College and Nipissing University doing somersaults and flying upside down. Quite a sight!

And finally, one of the most frequently seen birds this winter, in addition to the Black-capped Chickadee, is the Common Redpoll – seen with a couple of Hoary Redpolls by Ken Gowing, Lori and Renee. The Hoary is not always easy to distinguish and complicating this is the fact that there are two subspecies of Hoary, the *hornemanni* and the *exilipes*. (There are also two subspecies of the Common, the smaller southern *flammea* and the larger northern *rostrata*.)



There is a good website, complete with photos, to help distinguish the two subspecies of Common and Hoary, <http://www.jeaniron.ca/2015/redpollsRP.htm>. However, for most of us, to distinguish between the Common and Hoary can be challenging enough. Basically, the Hoary has a stubby, rather pushed-backed bill; minimal to no streaking on flanks; lighter and smaller chin patch; frostier on chest with less pink; pale or white rump; wider and more extensive white wing bars; and a smaller red crown.

The Orchard Oriole Complex: Rachel Sturge, daughter of Bird Wingers Gary and Connie Sturge, gave a talk on The Orchard Oriole Complex. Indeed, complex it was at times, but then Rachel obtained an Hon. BSc. and Masters in Biology from the University of Toronto, after which she went on to acquire her Doctorate, specializing in biology through her study of birds, at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. She has been working at various universities in the Baltimore area as an Adjunct Professor and was recently offered a post-doctoral position at Cornell University.

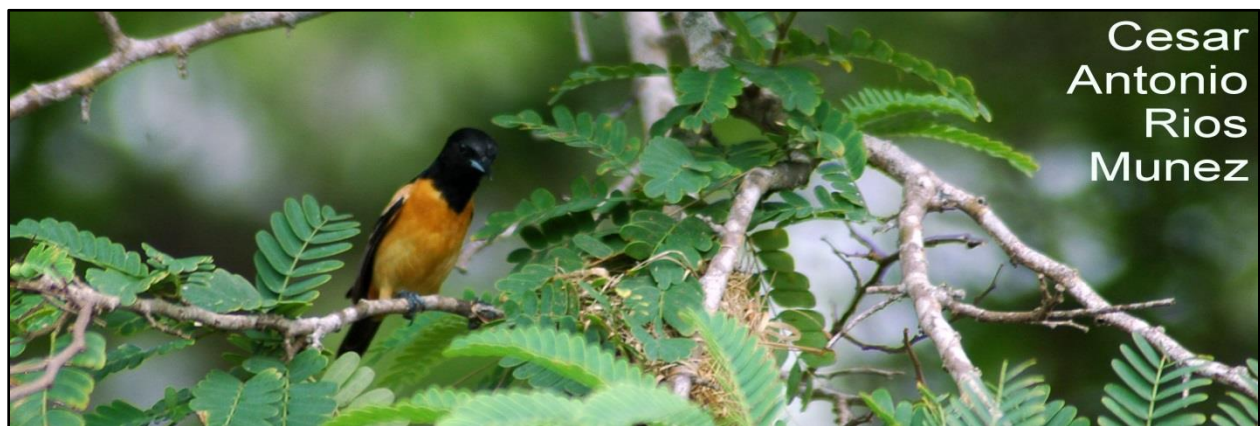
So best the summary of Rachel's talk be in Dr. Sturge's own words:

"Songbirds learn the songs of their species from their parents while they are nestlings. Studies have shown that most birds can only learn from other members of the same species. Once these songs crystallize, a bird will sing that song the same way every time, with very little variation. As songs are transmitted culturally from parent to offspring, they have the potential to change very

rapidly as taxa speciate. Songs of very closely related species can be very different and can contribute to reproductive isolation if members of each species fail to identify members of the opposite species as potential mates.



The Orchard Oriole Complex is made up of two taxa, Orchard Oriole (seen above), which breeds from southern Canada across the eastern USA and into north central Mexico, and Fuertes' Oriole, which breeds in the coastal lowlands of Veracruz, Mexico. Fuertes' Oriole (seen below) was originally named as a separate species based on the differences in adult male plumage, putative size differences, and the fact that its song was softer and less rich to the ears of the scientists describing it. Research since then has supported the difference in plumage, but



failed to find support for any size difference. My research goals were to look for differences in the vocalizations of the two taxa. To this end, I compared songs and calls from adult males of each species, measuring 18 acoustic, temporal and frequency characteristics. I found no evidence of differences in the songs, but did find that a call differed in five acoustic characteristics between the two species. As calls are believed to be largely innate, this indicates that the DNA may have potential differences in the region coding for these calls. I also conducted playback experiments on male Orchard Orioles in Maryland to determine if

they would respond differently to Orchard versus Fuertes' songs. These orioles responded to the calls of Fuertes' orioles, indicating that song is not a strong barrier to hybridization between these taxa. However, my study also hinted that they were reacting less strongly to the songs of Fuertes', indicating that some subtle differences in the songs might exist. A larger sample size would be needed to support or refute this possibility.

This study gives us a better understanding of the Orchard Oriole complex, and the relationship between these two orioles. While they have many similarities, such as their songs, the female and juvenile plumage and the DNA, they have many differences, such as the adult male plumage, the breeding habitat, the migratory behavior and the calls. These two taxa are at the earliest stages of speciation, making them an interesting case study for future studies such as this one."

Gary, who introduced his daughter, neglected to make sure there was a gift to present to her after her talk. This will surely need to be rectified!

National Bird: Currently, the Common Loon (seen below) is in the lead, followed by the Snowy Owl, the Gray Jay, the Canada Goose, and the Black-capped Chickadee. If you have a favourite bird you want to see as our national bird, please vote at <http://www.canadiangeographic.ca/nationalbird/>



An overwhelming majority of citizens, 70 percent, are of the opinion that we should have a national bird. See the Bird Wing summary of January's 2015 meeting for further important details to help you with your choice. (Summaries are posted on the Nipissing Naturalist Club website <http://www.nipnats.com/>. Click on Newsletters and Bird Bash and scroll down until you come to Bird Wing Meetings. There you will find the summaries in date order, starting with the most recent.)

OFO Code of Ethics: For those of you who subscribe to ontbirds, you are aware that some birders and photographers who stake-out unusual and rare birds have not behaved well, to the point where one owner threatened to stop feeding the bird so the bird would move elsewhere. Most birders are polite and respectful, but the few who do not behave well can affect

the well-being of the bird, the patience of the homeowner or landowner, and the enjoyment of other birders. Many clubs have been reviewing the Ontario Federation of Ornithologists' (OFO) Code of Ethics as a reminder that all birders "**must show consideration to other birders, landowners, habitat, birds and other wildlife at all times.**"

Renee gave a print-out of the Code of Ethics to those attending.

The main points in the Code of Ethics are:

- 1. The welfare of birds must come first.**
- 2. Habitat must be protected.**
- 3. Disturbance of birds must be kept to a minimum.**
- 4. The rights of landowners must be respected.**
- 5. Consideration must be shown to other birders.**

The above points, including the handling of reporting rare birds, are discussed in greater detail on the OFO website at <http://www.ofo.ca/site/page/view/aboutus.ethics>. A yearly review of the Code of Ethics at one of our meetings should be considered.

National Nocturnal Owl Survey: Soon it will be time to once again participate in the annual nighttime owl prowl, an opportunity for birders to get startled by an unexpected *who cooks for you, who cooks for you all* on a dark and lonely road in the middle of nowhere. The Ontario Nocturnal Owl Survey was initiated in 1995 by Bird Studies Canada in partnership with the Wildlife Assessment Program of the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources to gather information on the distribution, abundance and population of owls.

Participants in the survey conduct standardized roadside surveys of owls in forested areas in central and northern Ontario. A team of at least two volunteers drives a pre-determined route, stopping at fixed intervals along the route to play a tape consisting of pre-recorded owl calls, followed by a listening period. Owls seen or heard during each listening period are identified and recorded. Surveys begin a half hour after sunset during a single evening in April and take about 3 hours to complete, not including travelling time to and from the survey route.

Owls are very secretive, primarily nocturnal and very territorial, especially during breeding season. When songs are played within an owl's territory, the resident owl will respond vocally in an attempt to defend its territory against an intruder.

Anyone can participate in the survey, with a training tape provided to participants to become familiar with the different owl calls. However, there are designated routes and you need to check to see if these routes are available. If there are no routes available, you will be put on a waiting list for an available route.

You can also set up your own route, but there are definite instructions for doing so. You will need your own vehicle and a portable CD player or tape player. Roads used in surveys should be permanent so they can be surveyed in future years and should be at least 30.4 km. long for the northern surveys and 18 km. long for the central surveys.

For more information on the Nocturnal Owl Survey see <http://www.bsc-eoc.org/volunteer/natowls/index.jsp?lang=EN&targetpg=index>. This link will also provide you with the name of the Ontario Volunteer Coordinator, Kathy Jones, and her contact information, as well as a link to the available routes and the most recent *Ontario Nocturnal Owl Survey Newsletter*. (There are currently 4 routes available in our area – Route 262, Sand Dam Road; Route 101, Brain Lake; Route 377, Monetville; and Route 85, St. Charles. Click on the link to find out exactly where these routes are.)

The 2014 results in Ontario show that 143 owl routes were surveyed across central and northern Ontario. Deep snow, impassable roads and very cold conditions resulted in a slight decline from 154 routes surveyed in 2013. But despite this, the number of owls increased from 523 of 10 species in 2013 (seen below is the Great Gray Owl, which is nocturnal but hunts primarily at dusk and dawn) to 697 of 9 species.



The highest number of owls was on a route near Bracebridge, 15 Barred Owls and 6 Northern Saw-whet Owls.

The Barred Owl was detected the most in Ontario, with 392 recorded, up from 382 in 2013. Boreal Owls were down slightly, from 35 in 2013 to 33, perhaps because of the fewer northern routes surveyed. The biggest increase was seen in the Northern Saw-whet Owl, from a record low of 24 in 2013, to 201.

Three additional non-owl target species on the routes were recorded: 37 Wilson's Snipe, up from 28 in 2013; 19 Ruffed Grouse, up from 10 in 2013; and 125 American Woodcock, yet another yearly decline, this time from 331 in 2013.

Journey North: Journey North is an online global study of wildlife migration and seasonal change. You can enter your sightings in various categories or simply read interesting facts about wildlife and seasonal change or play with the various maps showing, for example, where the Ruby-throated Hummingbird (seen below) is being spotted on its migration north or south. (It has been spotted recently in Florida, so spring is on its way!) It is a fun site, as well as educational. Regular updates are emailed to all who register.



Some of the categories are on the spring and fall migration sightings of other birds – the American Robin, the Common Loon, the Oriole, the Bald Eagle, the Barn Swallow and the Red-winged Blackbird. Other categories are concerned with plants, daylight hours, and sightings of the Monarch butterfly during its north and south migration. Each category comes with reading material and interactive maps, as well some terrific photographs and citizen science comments. Play around with it as you do with eBird.

To register, google Journey North and then register as a new user. Your email address and a password will be required, after which you can enter sightings in whatever category is of interest to you. On the maps, click on each dot to find out where each bird or monarch butterfly has been spotted, who entered the sighting, and comments made. Although Journey North is geared towards teachers and students, you do not have to be a teacher or student to register.

Rusty Blackbird Migration Blitz: This spring marks year two of the Rusty Blackbird spring migration blitz. Scientists know surprisingly little about the migratory habits and requirements of the Rusty Blackbird and are looking to find out whether there are hot spots where many individuals congregate during migration; if these hot spots are used by the Rusty Blackbirds each year; and if these hot spots are protected.

The blitz asks birders as of March 1st to look for Rusties throughout their migratory range, from southern United States into Canada and report their sightings on eBird. It also asks birders to revisit the areas where large flocks of Rusties gathered last year to determine whether there is consistency of habitat use and migratory timing. **However, in Ontario the blitz does not begin**

until April and ends in mid-May, and in Nipissing, there are no “specialized areas of interest” that support large flocks of Rusty Blackbirds. Watch for Rusties in wooded wetlands and report your sightings to eBird using the observation type, *Rusty Blackbird Spring Migration Blitz*. In Ontario, you will see this heading on eBird at the beginning of April.



Rusty Blackbirds have experienced one of the most significant declines among North American birds in recent times. Long-term surveys, such as the Christmas Bird Count and North American Breeding Bird Survey, suggest a decline of 85 to 95 percent since the mid-1900s. This

decline may be due to loss of wooded wetlands; increased competition for food with other blackbird species, like the Red-winged Blackbird and Common Grackle; and increased exposure to an unknown disease to which it hasn't developed a strong immunity.

By the time the Rusties migrate, most of the rusty-coloured feather edges have worn off the males, leaving them a glossy black. The females (seen below) retain their rusty appearance longer, but by the time they reach their breeding grounds, they appear charcoal gray in colour. This lack of rusty colour can make distinguishing one blackbird from another challenging.



Below are some tips:

Compared to the smaller Rusty Blackbird with its relatively thin bill, the Common Grackle is a larger bird with a long, wedge-shaped tail and long, thick bill. And unlike the glossy black of the male Rusty, the Common Grackle shows glossy purple-blue on its head. The female Common Grackle's head is browner in hue, with more iridescent plumage than the female Rusty.

The greater challenge is between a male Brewer's Blackbird and a male Rusty Blackbird. The plumage of the male Brewer's is much more iridescent, with a purplish sheen on its head and a greenish sheen on its body. A female Brewer's does not have the yellow eyes of a female Rusty and during the breeding season the female Brewer's is browner than the grayish female Rusty.

Window Decals: With spring migration approaching, we should be purchasing and applying window decals. It was sad to hear through eBird of the death of a local Northern Shrike (seen below) that collided with a window while going after a Common Redpoll.



Ontario Master Naturalist Program: Lakehead University has partnered with Ontario Nature to launch a Master Naturalist program, the first of its kind in Canada. The program will be offered this spring at Lakehead University's Orillia Campus. It involves a 6-module course of in-class instruction, fieldwork and volunteer commitment. Each module focuses on a different area of interest - local plant species, insects, reptiles, birds, wetlands and landscapes.

Program requirements include an interest in the natural environment; prerequisite reading; recommended membership with Ontario Nature; and a demonstrated commitment to conservation work. The fee is \$200.00 and includes 20 hours of classroom and field instruction; a notebook and pencil for field notes; and course material pertaining to each module. Transportation to field locations is not included.

Details about the program, including registration information, can be found online at <http://www.lakeheadu.ca/masternaturalist>, or at <http://www.ontarionature.org/masternaturalist>.

SongbirdSOS: A new documentary, *SongbirdSOS*, narrated by David Suzuki, will air on CBC's *The Nature of Things*, on **Thursday, March 19, at 8 PM**. The documentary features experts



discussing the key threats that have resulted in the decline of migratory songbirds in North America, as well as what can be done to protect birds. (The Canada Warbler, seen at left, is designated as threatened.)

Bird Bash: The next Bird Bash will take place over a 24-hour period weekend of **March 28 and 29**. As always, please email your sightings to Dick at rtafel@sympatico.ca by the evening of Monday, March 30.

Bird Wing: The next Bird Wing meeting will take place in the auditorium of the North Bay Public Library on **Tuesday, March 24, from 6:30 to 9:00 PM.**



HAPPY ST. PATRICK'S DAY

Text: Renee Levesque, Bird Wing Scribe, with thanks to Dr. Rachel Sturge for her text on The Orchard Oriole Complex

Photos: Renee Levesque, unless otherwise indicated, with special thanks to Dr. Sturge for supplying the two oriole photographs and to Kathy Jones, BSC coordinator of the Rusty Blackbird Migration Blitz and the National Nocturnal Owl Survey, for supplying the two Rusty Blackbird photos.