

Bird Wing Report January 2019

By Renee Levesque; photos as indicated

January's meeting was held in the Board Room of the North Bay Police Service station while more snow fell outside. By the time we left, blowing snow was everywhere. It was that type of January – very cold and lots of snow.

Birds Seen in January:

Poor Brent, because he was the second last one to mention the two birds he saw in January, was stuck with Rock Pigeon and a non-January bird, a Dark-eye Junco he had seen in his yard in December. One has to choose one's seat carefully at Bird Wing in the winter! If only he had sat on the other side of Laura Turcotte, he could have mentioned the White-throated Sparrow he and Laura had in their yard. They had two, but in the week before Bird Wing, only one was making an appearance.

Dick Tafel was the last to go, as usual, and he had a good one, about 40 Bohemian Waxwings he saw on McKeown Avenue off Ski Club Road, not seen by anyone else in January, although some of us saw some in December. And the only one to see Snow Buntings in January was Lori Anderson, very unusual for January. For whatever reason, they were not hanging around this January. Lori sees them sporadically at her farm in Chisholm Township.

The most dramatic sighting was that of Gary and Luanne Chowns. They woke up one cold morning to see a Northern Saw-whet Owl (at right) sitting on a branch of their Hemlock tree right outside their window. How fortunate! It stayed there for the day, seemingly sitting on a frozen dead mouse waiting for it to thaw so it could eat it for supper. Laura naturally arrived at her parents' to see the owl. She said it was the only thing that would get her outside on such a cold day. (I received some great photos of the Northern Saw-whet from Gary and Laura. One of Gary's photos will grace the cover of *The Woodland Observer*, March's issue, and at least one of Laura's photos will be featured in "Interesting Finds" within the newsletter.)



Gary Chowns



Grant McKercher

Dick and I saw a total of four male Snowy Owls in West Nipissing – on Hwy 17 just east of Verner, on Hwy 64 near Piquette Road, with another one at the corner of Hwy 64 and Piquette Road, and one on Levac Road. Grant McKercher subsequently saw one near Piquette Road and managed to get a photo of it in flight as seen above.

I was so looking forward to beating Connie and Gary Sturge in mentioning that I saw a Northern Goshawk on Millrand Road, just off Hwy. 64, but Connie beat me to it and mentioned she saw one on the famed Stillaway Line. And what would a meeting be without Gary mentioning a raptor he saw. This time a Red-tailed Hawk, but at least it was not on Stillaway or even Maple Hill Road, but at the Powassan landfill site. What he did see on Maple Hill and Stillaway were Red Crossbills, another species not seen by other members in January, except Connie.

Bald Eagles were seen by some of us, and although not a raptor but thinks it is one was the Northern Shrike seen by Lori, the Chowns, Grant and me. Except for Grant, the one the rest of us saw was the juvenile, a handsome-looking bird with its brown coat, looking at first glance like a rare bird because we are more used to seeing the adult shrike. I saw mine one morning wildly chasing a chickadee across the yard, but not catching it. However, that was not the case at the Chowns'. Their shrike stayed around, catching up to 3 chickadees a day, those very same cute little Black-capped birds that eat out of our hands! Perhaps they were going after chickadees because it was one of the few smaller birds around. Had there been redpolls, I think the shrike might have been more interested in them.

Two common spring and summer birds not often seen during the winter months were seen – as previously mentioned, a White-throated Sparrow seen by Laura in her yard and a Common Grackle I saw on Leclair Road in West Nipissing. It had a very obvious bill deformity, but was otherwise healthy looking. More on that later in this report.

Grant had a White-breasted Nuthatch (at right) at his feeder, as had the Chowns, and others had seen these nuthatches elsewhere. They have not been as common this winter as the Red-breasted Nuthatches.



Renee Levesque

Woodpeckers seen were the Pileated, the Hairy and the Downy. Luanne and Gary had 5 Hairy Woodpeckers coming to their suet and shelled sunflower feeders!

Mourning Doves were seen regularly by Gary and Connie, Gary and Luanne, Grant and Ken Gowing. (Ken was not able to come to the meeting, but Lori reported he was getting them regularly.)

Fred Pinto reported seeing 5 Ruffed Grouse popping out of the snow during the Nipissing Naturalists Club's hike off Tower Drive. Grant saw 2 on Maple Hill Road; I saw one on Hazelglen Road; and Dick saw one on Hwy. 533.

Many had also seen Pine Grosbeaks, but only some had seen Evening Grosbeaks. They were around this January, but seemingly not as common as the Pine Grosbeaks.



Buddy Myles

No one mentioned Canada Jays, but I saw a couple in January on Mantha Road, off Larocque Road, and some can also be seen on Cook Mills Road, off the North Highway.

Many have seen Common Redpolls (at left) sometimes as many as 50, sometimes as few as 1 or 2, but they don't seem to be staying in any one place for long.

Black-capped Chickadees were everywhere in large numbers this January. European Starlings were seen, but not many. Also seen were many Common Ravens, some American Crows, some European Starlings and some Blue Jays, although seemingly not as many as in other years. In my yard, however, I get anywhere from 5 to 11 daily. They like my paint. (More on that later.)

For the last 8 years at some point between Christmas and the beginning of February, about 24 to 36 House Sparrows arrive at Connie's and Gary's. From whence they come, Gary and Connie do not know. Gary

does not feel they come from the barn across the street from his place. They stay for about a week before flying off, and whither they go, Gary and Connie do not know. Lori always has some at her place – they like her barn – and even had one at her feeder the day of the meeting. And, of course, the Co-op feed store in Verner is always a good spot to see some and were seen there by Dick and me during January's Bird Bash.

Also during January's Bird Bash, to add some numbers to their paltry list of 12 or 13 species, Dick and I visited the water treatment plant on Memorial Drive, confident we could at the very least add Mallards to our list. But not a Mallard was to be seen – not there and not in the open water of Trout Lake by the Green Store, two spots where Mallards are usually seen in the winter. We wondered what happened to them. Well, they were at Gary and Luanne's – 35 of them and one American Black Duck! Other ducks seen were about 40 Common Goldeneye at the Mattawa Lagoon.

Unusual/Rare/ Birds Seen in 2018:

Harris's Sparrow (at right) – Gary and Luanne's yard, seen by many of us last winter.

House Finch - in Renee's yard in late January for an hour or so.

Black-capped Night-Heron – seen by some of us during the May bird outing in Laurier Woods.

Eastern Towhee – in Renee's yard for about half an hour in the spring.

Upland Sandpiper – seen by Dick and me in the spring on Stewart Road in West Nipissing.

Cackling Goose – seen by Dick in the spring on one of the little lakes off Hwy. 17 East.

Lark Sparrow – seen in the fall by Dick and me in Warren.

Cattle Egret – seen by many of us in the fall at Optimist Park, Wallace Road, by Palangio Arena, and also on Memorial Drive.

Carolina Wren – seen in November by Dick and me on Besserer Road and by Lori and Ken at Vic Rizzo's during the Christmas Bird Count.

Slaty-backed Gull – first seen by Dick, Lori and me at North Bay's landfill site and later by others on Trout Lake. I wrote an article on the sighting of the Slaty-backed that you will find in February's *The Woodland Observer*. What is of particular interest might be what Jeremy Bensette, famous for his Ontario 2017 Big Year, told me: that all 4 Slaty-backed Gulls seen in Ontario from November to January – one in North Bay, 2 in Brantford and 1 in Windsor-Essex - were 4 different birds. However, it is believed that one seen in Wayne County, Michigan, about



Gary Chowns

an hour or so from Windsor, from late December to early January is the same one that was in North Bay!

Chukar (right) – not considered a wild bird, but we can't forget about the excitement the Chukar briefly caused last spring. Gary Chowns was the first to bring it to our attention, after which many of us made a trip to Young's Store on Wasi Road to see this chicken-like game bird, a bird that was introduced from Eurasia and now makes its home in the wild in the steep rocky grasslands and shrublands of the U.S West. (It is also found in Hawaii and New Zealand and is the national bird of Pakistan and Iraq.)



Grant Mckercher

Certainly quite the list of rare and unusual species for our area and nice that they came for us to see during the Year of the Bird.

There were other birds, which although we see either regularly or from time-to-time, were considered exciting finds. Connie saw the Great Horned Owl on Stillaway Line; Kaye Edmunds, Sarah Wheelan, Louise Simpson and Fred saw a very young Barred Owl (at left) during the Great Canadian Birdathon in May; Laura saw a Green Heron while out fishing with the family, a heron she doesn't usually get to see closely; Brent had a great view of a male Bay-breasted Warbler on Sage Trail; Grant saw an Indigo Bunting on Hazelglen Road, a bird he doesn't usually see; Lori saw for the first time Common Gallinules at Cache Bay – and there were many of them this year, more seen than usual; and Lori, Brent and Fred saw many Black-backed Woodpeckers during the Nipissing Naturalist Club's outing in October to the fire site north of River Valley. I am sure there were many others, warblers in particular – Canada Warbler, Northern Parula and Cape May to name a few of our lovely wood warblers. And we can't forget the sightings of the Red-bellied Woodpecker and the Northern Cardinal.

Christmas Bird Count:

Lori Anderson provided a brief summary of the Christmas Bird Count (CBC): 33 species, a bit low because of the frozen lakes, eliminating gulls and limiting waterfowl. There were some noticeable



Kaye Edmunds

misses like the Northern Shrike, but some unexpected species like the White-throated Sparrow and the Red-necked Grebe. There were not as many birds at feeders as last year, perhaps because the weather was quite mild and lovely on the day of the Count, unlike many of the days this January. For a complete summary of the CBC, see January's *The Woodland Observer*, <https://www.nipnats.com/newsletters/>.

What isn't mentioned in the summary is the number of cumulative species seen over the 40 years the CBC has taken place here. It is quite the astonishing number, 98! Lori thanked Brent for his records from which Lori was able to determine this number. I will be borrowing the records from Lori to go through the list and provide at some later date, maybe just before the next CBC, what some of these species were. Lori did mention a Yellow-headed Woodpecker that Brent said was found in Callander by Martin Parker and Stephen O'Donnell.

Lori also thanked Dick and Sarah Wheelan for the publicity they generated through a *Nugget* article and the website, helping to increase the number of feeder watchers.



Kaye Edmonds

Great Backyard Bird Count:

The Great Backyard Bird Count (GBBC) takes place as usual over the Family Day weekend. It begins on **Friday, February 15 and goes through to and includes Monday, February 18**. During this timeframe, you can watch and report on the species and number of birds seen for as little as 15 minutes a day, and report for free your sightings on eBird. For those already on eBird, just enter your sightings as normal. Birds do not have to be watched just in your backyard, but anywhere. For more details, see: <https://www.birdscanada.org/volunteer/gbbc/>.

Stories From the Field:

Eating out of Hand: On the LaVase Trail off Champlain Park, someone erected a beautiful roofed wooden platform bird feeder, most often filled with bird seed. It seems residents of the area keep it full and I do not go there without some bird seed in my pocket. Black-capped Chickadees abound, along with the occasional nuthatch. And not only do the chickadees abound, but they also swarm, just waiting for you to hold out your hand to feed them. In fact, it would seem they prefer to come to your hand than to

use the feeder. It is a wonderful feeling having a little bird eat out of your hand. So trusting, like falling backwards into someone's arms knowing that person will catch you.

Steve Pitt's chickadees come to his hands, even two at a time, though such is not always tolerated by the dominant chickadee. Steve even has the Red-breasted Nuthatch come to his hand. Steve's photos of the chickadees and the Red-breasted Nuthatch eating out of his hands are below.



Every morning when I fill up the feeders, I hold out my hand waiting for a chickadee to alight. One usually does almost immediately, but there have been some very cold mornings when they do not alight quickly enough and my hand gets too cold to wait any longer.

Blue Jays: Over the years, I always thought the peeling of the south poles and the railing on our verandah was caused by the sun. They were starting to get a bit desperate looking and we were about to paint them this past spring, but because of the construction on our road resulting in dust and dirt accumulating on our verandah in copious amounts, we held off. However, in holding off, the poles and the railings became almost denuded of paint. (See photo at left.) I couldn't understand why until I noticed 5 or 6 Blue Jays gathered on the verandah peeling off the paint. It was a surprise to say the least. And so I looked into it and found out that Blue Jays, usually during the winter months, will peel off light-coloured paint to get calcium. Limestone is a key ingredient in paint and limestone is a source of calcium and calcium is needed for egg-laying. It is thought Blue Jays gather the paint and stash it for later.

Gary and Connie have had the same problem with Blue Jays peeling off the light-coloured paint on their garage.

Providing Blue Jays with eggshells, another good source of calcium, may help, but one would need a lot of eggshells and how many eggshells can I possibly gather in a week, especially when I don't like eggs, for the number



of Blue Jays that visit my verandah posts. If you do offer eggshells, make sure they are sterilized by boiling or by heating in an oven at 250 for 20 minutes. I suppose microwaving them is also acceptable. (Eggshells are also a source of grit for the birds to help digest food.) The other solution is to paint out-buildings, garages and verandah/porch railings and posts a dark colour.

Bill Deformity:

As previously stated, in January Dick and I saw a Common Grackle, looking quite healthy, except for its very obvious bill deformity – the top and bottom mandible were crossed (see photo at right). It just so happened that a couple of days after this, Sarah Wheelan sent me a photo of a Red-breasted Nuthatch at her feeder with the same deformity. I sent both photos to Mike Burrell who is of the opinion that the bills are as a result of a genetic abnormality. Deformed bills are caused not only by genetic abnormalities, but also by nutritional deficiencies, diseases, parasites and blunt trauma. It seems there are more and more birds being seen with bill deformities.

Mike sent me a link to report bill deformities. See: https://www.usgs.gov/faqs/what-causes-beak-deformities-birds?qt-news_science_products=0#qt-news_science_products, then click on “Report a bird with a beak deformity”.



Renee Levesque

All last winter, I had a Chipping Sparrow with a bill deformity, but otherwise, healthy looking. It made it through the winter and nested successfully. I think its bill deformity, which slowly healed, was the result of trauma. This past fall, I had an Evening Grosbeak with a mantle of poor-looking feathers and an obvious bill deformity. It spent the last few hours of its life on my patio with its head tucked under its wing. It was very sad. I think its bill deformity was the result of a parasite or a disease.

Wild Turkeys:

Through Ontbirds, I learned that a PhD student at Trent University, Jennifer Baici, is looking for sightings province-wide of Wild Turkeys between December 1, 2018, and March 31, 2019, to help predict Wild Turkey populations. She will access eBird and iNaturalist to obtain the numbers, but if you are not using either of these citizen science programs, you can email Jennifer directly at: jenniferbaici@trentu.ca.

Leucistic Birds:

In *Ontario Birds*, December 2018, following Jean Iron's article on a Double-crested Cormorant with an aberrant pale plumage seen in Barrie this past fall, there is a "Wanted" notice posted by the editors of the magazine. They are looking for photos and notes on birds with aberrant plumage for an article they hope to publish in the December 2019 issue. They are requesting photos of any aberrant birds you may have seen, along with a short narrative, up to 10 sentences, describing details – date, location, behaviours, etc. If you don't have photos, the editors are still interested in your observations. Send your photos and/or narratives to editors@ofc.ca.



Fred Pinto

were not on the list of those who had seen it. I emailed Mike Burrell to find out why and discovered it was because we did not put our sightings where the red Hotspot marker is located on the Google map, but used instead our blue personal marker as we have always done.

I know there are some in our group who have seen leucistic birds – Fred, a Black-capped Chickadee (at left); Lori, an Evening Grosbeak; and I have seen a leucistic Canada Goose, a European Starling, a Pine Siskin, a couple of American Robins and an American Crow.

The light-coloured cormorant Jean Irons and others saw is not technically leucistic. Its colouring is likely the result of a genetic mutation, "whereby the normal black feather colour is replaced by brown due to incomplete melanin synthesis." These brown feathers then got bleached by the sun, resulting in the feathers becoming even lighter.

eBird Markers:

I was writing an article for *The Woodland Observer* on the Slaty-backed Gull and went onto eBird to get the date when Lori, Dick and I first saw this gull, only to discover our names

Because those of us who have been doing eBird for some time use our drop-down box, we tend to use the same personal markers we have always used and some of these personal markers are from the distant past. These markers were not always accurate at the time because Google would not always allow us to place the markers where we wanted to place them. And at the time, Lori and I were eBirding, the North Bay landfill site was not marked as a Hotspot. Lori and I had been using Lori's personal marker to indicate our North Bay landfill sightings. I have no idea when the landfill site became a Hotspot and when I looked at where the Hotspot marker was, it was not at the site, but on Sand Dam Road almost further away from the site as Lori's personal marker. Mike moved the Hotspot marker to its proper location, but he cannot move our personal markers. Only the person whose marker it is can move a personal marker. And how is that done? For instructions, see: <https://help.ebird.org/customer/en/portal/articles/1010517-how-do-i-merge-a-personal-location-with-a-hotspot->.

Mike told me it is always best to use the Hotspot markers, which may mean checking the location first to determine if there is a near-by Hotspot marker and, if there is, merging your personal marker with the Hotspot marker.

If you notice any other Hotspot markers out of sync, please let me know and I will let Mike know.

New Bird Book:

Speaking of Mike, Mike and his brother, Ken, have a bird book coming out this spring entitled *Best Places to Bird in Ontario*. See: <http://burrellbirding.ca/best-places-to-bird-in-ontario/>. You can pre-order the book from Amazon.ca before March 31; purchase a copy directly from Mike or Ken and save \$5.00 and get a signed copy; or buy it at bookstores in May. Details are in the link provided.

Peregrine Falcon:

When the story editor of the *Cardinal* TV series emailed me to ask me what birds were of concern in our area in the early 2000s, I mentioned the Bald Eagle and the Peregrine Falcon and then sent his email to Dick to add to the list. When the story editor thanked me and told me I was a help, I did take advantage of that email to basically tell him we Bird Wingers would be very interested in appearing in the episode in which the story revolves around these birds. I did not hear back from him, but I can always hope that one day that email will arrive. So be ready!

Gary Sturge recently watched a Nova special on Peregrine Falcons called *World's Fastest Animal*, a bird which can reach speeds of up to 389.4 km per hour in a dive. We agreed on his ordering the DVD at a cost of \$20.00 so we can all watch it at one of our meetings and add it to our DVD library.





Grant McKercher

Birds of Scotland:

Grant and Shirley McKercher, along with another couple, toured northern Scotland for 17 days last September. While there, they visited the Inner and Outer Hebrides, the Isles of Skye, and the Orkney Islands where he spent 2.5 days. To get to these islands, they had to take multiple ferries on the North Atlantic, and sometimes the voyage was rather rough, resulting in sea sickness if you did not stay on deck and keep your eyes on the horizon – worth it if you want to do some pelagic birding. They also drove along part of the Caledonian Canal, a 97-km canal that connects Scotland’s east coast with its west coast.

Grant wasn’t able to get a lot of birding time – most of it was incidental – but he did see 67 species and 10 lifers! He also got to spend 3 hours on the Orkney Islands with a guide, Tim Dean, who also coincidentally happened to have written a book entitled *Orkney Book of Birds*, a book Grant bought before knowing the author would be his guide and a book, with watercolours by Tracy Hall, that focuses on the almost 200 species that can be found on the Orkneys. In the 3 hours Grant was with Tim, they saw 25 species. (And Grant had Tim sign the book as soon as he realized Tim was the author.).



Grant McKercher

Grant showed some slides not only of some of the birds he had seen, but also of the wild Scottish highlands. Some of the birds he saw were the Blackbird, Robin, Mute Swan, Pied Wagtail, Greylag Goose, Northern Gannet, Kittiwake, Manx Shearwater, Razorbill, Guillemot, Cormorant, Shag, Hooded Crow, Eider Duck (female only), Mallard (where are they not?), Pochard, Jackdaw (at left), Common Curlew, Golden Plover, Northern Lapwing, Oyster Catcher (above), Ruddy Turnstone, Redshank, Rock Pipit and Bar-tailed Godwit.

Bird Bash:

The Bird Bash in February will coincide with the Great Backyard Bird Count (GBBC) and **will be held over 3 days, February 16 to 18**. So choose any consecutive 24-hour period during this timeframe, and don't forget to enter your observations on eBird for the GBBC.

Bird Wing Meeting:

The next Bird Wing meeting will be back at Laporte's, 1054 Lakeshore Drive, on **Tuesday, February 26, starting at 6:30 p.m.**

Because of Grant's presentation and the fact it was Robbie Burns Day on January 25, I end this month's report with:

*Sweet the laverock's note
and lang,
Liltin' wildly up the glen.
But aye tae me he sings ae
sang,
Will ye no' come back again?*

Although the laverock is actually a Skylark, I am using a photo of Grant's Blackbird, a bird known as the Beethoven among birds. I am not sure Grant saw a Skylark, or at least he didn't have a photo of one, but as none of us probably knows what a laverock is, we can pretend it is a Blackbird which Grant did see – photo at right. And the Blackbird's song is also long (lang), with “beautifully shaped phrases, well-defined in time and tone, mellow, flute-like and musical.” Listen to its song: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=997RTKzc39c>

