

Bird Wing Report February 2019



Renee Levesque

By Renee Levesque; photos as indicated

We were back at Laporte's for February's Bird Wing meeting, but before I begin to itemize the topics discussed and some not discussed, all of us in Bird Wing extend our sympathy to Lori and her daughter at the devastating loss of their greenhouses as a result of this winter's snow. See <https://www.nugget.ca/news/local-news/laportes-vows-to-rebuild> and <https://www.baytoday.ca/local-news/local-gardening-centre-suffers-devastating-loss-1303629>.

Lori asks that all of us who shop at Laporte's to continue to do so. Being Lori, and with the help of her family, she has made alternate arrangements for the busy spring and summer season.

It is remarkable that birders and bird watchers saw as many species as they did during the month of February what with snow, snow and more snow. In fact, more snow fell in North Bay during the month of February since the North Bay-Mattawa Conservation Authority started measuring snow depth in 1987. By mid-February the average depth of snow at all three sites the NBMCA measure was 85 cm, compared with the last record set since measurement began, 73 cm in 2001. To have seen 31 species during the Bird Bash held over the Family Day weekend, just a week before our meeting, was actually quite good!

Bird Seen During February:

Because we just received Dick Tafel's Bird Bash report scant days before our meeting, most, but not all, of the birds mentioned at our meeting were listed in that report – just the way it goes in January and February.

It is not often one owl is mentioned as being seen, but this time, two owls made the February seen list! Connie and Gary Sturge saw a Barred Owl on Maple Hill Road, an owl which stayed put and asleep to allow Gary time to get a picture of it. Gary also found a dead Barred Owl west of Powassan. There were no obvious trauma marks on the owl. Speculation is that it may have died from a lack of food. The owl was given by Gary to Nipissing University for its collection.

And the other owl was a Snowy Owl Dick Tafel and I saw during February's Bird Bash, no doubt the same adult male seen by some of us previously and during January's Bird Bash. We saw it behind a house on Hwy. 64 near Piquette Road on the way to Verner.

Other raptors seen were a Merlin, a Cooper's Hawk and a Bald Eagle. Connie and Gary saw the Merlin three times at their home going after their feeder birds. Dick and I saw an adult male Cooper's on Eloy Road off Gormanville Road, and Grant McKercher saw a Bald Eagle fly over his place in Callander, no doubt on its way to check out the ice fishing huts on Callander Bay. Eagles were seen by others at the North Bay and Powassan landfill sites and on the famed Stillaway Line.

That passerine which thinks it is a raptor, the Northern Shrike, continues to visit Gary Chowns' back yard going after the Black-capped Chickadees, and one made another appearance in my yard shortly after a flock of Common Redpolls made a landing. Others have seen one frequently hanging out on top of a tree near the corner of Maple Hill Road and Purdon Line.



Gary Sturge



Stephen O'Donnell

This winter, Stillaway has become most famous for its Red Crossbills (left), crossbills only Gary, Connie and Rachel Sturge see, Gary and Connie frequently. Red and White-winged Crossbills are in very short supply this winter because of the poor cone crop, so many of us, desperate to see even one of these crossbills, have made our way to Stillaway, some of us more than once, but keep coming up empty handed. Gary and Connie have an advantage, however.

They live out that way and so can follow the sander, a sander the crossbills also wait for so they can swoop down from the pine trees to get at the grit the moment the sander passes. And guess who is right behind on their tail? (Since our meeting, and according to eBird, Red Crossbills have also been seen by Scott Dewey on Lighthouse Road. Also made a trip out that way to no avail!)

Another species not seen much of this winter is the Snow Bunting. It makes an appearance at Lori's farm every now and then. So after looking everywhere for it, Dick and I paid a visit to Lori's. No Snow Buntings. However, a couple of hours later, we saw a flock of 50 to 60 at Beverly Hills Farms on Pioneer Road, just down from Lori's. (More on Snow Buntings later in this report.)

Bohemian Waxwings have also been scarce this winter despite the number of berry trees in the various subdivisions. (Dick saw a flock on McKeown Avenue in January; Martha Gould saw a flock at Sweetman's Gardens during the February Bird Bash; and some of us saw some on Claudia Court and elsewhere in December, but none since.) However, we should see some in March as they make their way north. Maybe they just didn't care for all the snow we got this year and who can blame them!

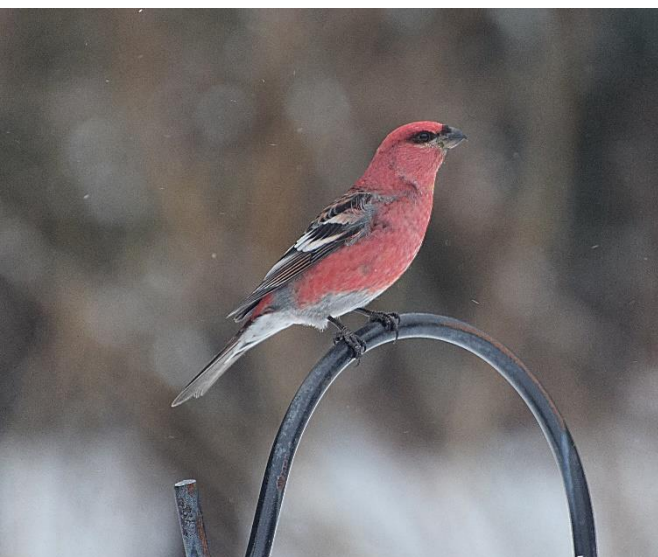
Not many species of sparrows have been seen this winter. Dick and I saw an American Tree Sparrow on Johnson Road during February's Bird Bash and Ernie Frayle had one at his place. House Sparrows continue to be seen at Gary and Connie's and Lori's.

With the exception of Mallards, ducks have been scarce. Dick saw an American Black Duck behind the Green Store and Gary Chowns had one in his backyard. The only other species of duck seen – by Dick and me – were a male and female Common Goldeneye on South River by the bridge on Maple Hill Road.



Renee Levesque

The finch seen most of this winter seems to have been the Pine Grosbeak. I had an orange variant in my yard on one occasion. It stood out from the red adult male grosbeak, as you will see in the photos of both below and at left.



Renee Levesque



There were some Evening Grosbeaks around (see heading), seen by a few of us; Common Redpolls made the occasional appearance in many of our yards, but didn't stay for long; Red-breasted Nuthatches were not nearly in the numbers of other years, but were seen by Lori Laporte and Dick Tafel. White-breasted Nuthatches could be seen here and there. Black-capped Chickadees were everywhere and in great numbers.

Gary and Connie continued to get a lot of Mourning Doves in their yard, and many of us saw the odd one sitting inside large roof overhang feeders or roosting on railings – as one did at Lori Anderson's mother's house.

Ruffed Grouse were seen by a few of us.

As to woodpeckers, Grant had two Pileated Woodpeckers (photo at right) on the same tree in his yard. Gary Sturge also saw two in the Maple Hill Road and Purdon Line area. I had one that flew over my house on a regular basis, sometimes stopping at the hydro pole at the end of my driveway. Naturally, many of us saw Downy and Hairy Woodpeckers.

Perhaps because I had to go first in naming my two birds, not something that has ever happened since I joined Bird Wing in 2012, I failed to mention Canada Jays, especially as the Canada Jay may become our national bird, perhaps one day when other very weighty matters are not front and centre in the government, as they are at present. Two were seen by Dick and me on Cook Mills Road during the February Bird Bash, and two were seen by me on Larocque Road, silently making their way through the snowy forest.

World Sparrow Day:

It is an annual event we have all been waiting for: World Sparrow Day on the first day of spring, **Wednesday, March 20!** Because we in the North don't see many sparrows at this time of the year, we took it upon ourselves to extend World Sparrow Day to World Sparrow Days - 5 days, from Monday, March 18, to Friday, March 22. But the big day, the one that will get you many points, will be those sparrows you see on the actual count day, March 20.

This will mark our third year of counting sparrows on World Sparrow Day, although I doubt we will see as many as the previous two years. What you need to look for primarily are



Grant McKercher



House Sparrow, Buddy Myles

House Sparrows that are apparently in decline world-wide. It was for this reason World Sparrow Day got started. But because we don't get many House Sparrows here, we decided to include all sparrows seen during this timeframe, not that we get many of those either at this time of the year.

One day, you never know, our numbers may be very important and we will get the due we so deserve!

I will remind everyone of this eventful week when the time comes.



Renee Levesque

Snow Buntings:

Lori Anderson receives updates on how the Snow Buntings (left) are faring from Rick Ludkin, Chief Bander at Ruthven Park National Historic Site in Haldimand County, near Cayuga. Rick's blog, Ruthven Park Nature Blog, updated to March 5 as I proofread this report, has posts from many stating there have not been a lot of Snow Buntings seen across Canada this winter. You can read these comments, including one from Lori and Bruce Murphy at <http://ruthvenparknatureblog.com/category/cmmn/csbn/>.

No wonder it took some of us all winter to find any despite looking in all the regular spots, spots – especially in West Nipissing – where they are usually seen during the winter months.

If you get down to Hamilton or communities within or nearby Haldimand County, be sure to visit Ruthven Park. (<https://ruthvenparknationalhistoricsite.com/>)

Birdmania: A Remarkable Passion for Birds:

Dick spoke passionately about the book, *Birdmania: A Remarkable Passion for Birds* by Bernd Brunner, translated by Jane Billinghamurst, with a forward by Pete Dunne, an American writer on natural history and birding.

So what is *Birdmania* about? It is all about the enthusiasm people have for birds. These people are not necessarily ornithologists, but people whose love for birds make them stand out. It is also about birds, their eggs, their songs and so much more, complete with wonderful illustrations.

If you want to hear more about this book, listen to the author himself talking about it at, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bhs5czg1SLQ>.

Grant borrowed the book from Dick so once he reads it, we will see what he has to say about it.

Nocturnal Owl Survey:

The annual Nocturnal Owl Survey takes place any time during the month of April. It is time to think about getting your teams together. Please let me know team names and routes when you can. I suspect this year, like last, most will want to wait until later in April. There is a trophy up for grabs. Hard to beat the Sturge team who have won it for the last two years, but always worth a try. Of course, the owls have to cooperate, in particular the Barred and Northern Saw-whet owls (at right), the two that are the count target for our Central area.



Gary Chown

With the Pattersons now living out east, their route on Hwy 533 in Mattawan may be available, although it may already have been taken by someone. If anyone who doesn't normally take part in this survey

wants to try their hand at it, you can contact Kathy Jones, Ontario Volunteer Coordinator, Bird Studies Canada, at volunteer@birdscanada.org or 1-888-448-2473, extension. 124. See <https://www.birdscanada.org/volunteer/onowls/> for more details, and while on that page, you can click on the map for available routes.

This year marks the 25th survey season of the Nocturnal Owl Survey and the Silver Owlers as they are called by Kathy are those who have taken part in the Nocturnal Owl Survey since the 90s. There are 10 people who have surveyed since 1995, 4 since 1996 and 12 who began later in the 90s. Says Kathy, "Some surveyed steadily through the years, others had to leave but then came back as their schedules permitted. This has resulted in excellent long-term collection of data."

Those who participated within 2 years of the beginning of the survey were requested by Kathy to submit comments on their impressions over the years. In our area, Dick is a Silver Owler. He has surveyed consecutively for 24 years. Not sure if anyone else in our area fits the bill.

Family Day with the Trumpeter Swans:

Trumpeter Swans are the largest swans in the world, native only to North America. They have made an amazing comeback from extirpation in Ontario thanks to Harry Lumsden and Bev Kingdon, with continuing help from Ontario Trumpeter Swan Coalition and Ontario Trumpeter Swan Restoration.

On February 18 over the Family Day weekend at LaSalle Park in Burlington, Trumpeters were tagged by licensed banders, while the public interacted closely with these beautiful swans, learning all about them.



This annual Family Day event known as *Meet the Trumpeter Swans Family Day* began in 2014. Over the years, it has drawn more and more people to LaSalle Park where so many Trumpeters, up to 200, overwinter, as shown in photo above. (Ava is not there yet.)

From the Burlington Gazette

This event was originally started by Liz Benneian, Executive Director and Manager, Environmental Education, Ontariogreen, (<http://www.ontariogreen.ca/home.html>) to inform the public about the multi-million dollar permanent wave break and marina expansion that was being proposed by the City and the negative effects this development would have on wintering Trumpeters. (The project has been halted, at least for the time being.)

This year, there was a tribute to the late Ray Kingdon who worked tirelessly alongside Bev to help make the return of the Trumpeter Swan a conservation success story.

At right is a photo of Swan Lady herself, Bev Kingdon, with Harry Lumsden, the biologist who began it all in the early 1980s at Wye Marsh, Midland, with the Trumpeter Swan reintroduction program. (As an aside, Bird Winger Buddy



Courtesy of Bev Kingdon

Myles received a certificate for reporting a Trumpeter in January 2017 from Burlington, tagged by Harry himself in Port Severn in June 2009!)

Great Canadian Birdathon:

Subsequent to the meeting, Gary Sturge, Treasurer, informed me he received a percentage of the money Dick collected as a result of his participation in the Great Canadian Birdathon. Most of the money donated as a result of Dick's participation goes to Bird Studies Canada, with a small percentage to the nature club of Dick's choice, Bird Wing. We are not exactly rich, but we have \$330.00 more than we had in January. Thanks to Dick and the donors.

Winter Stray:

Martha Gould, North Bay writer and poet, has had a Brown Thrasher (right) in her yard on and off since December. Martha is originally from Georgia where the Brown Thrasher is the State bird, so it's fitting this winter stray came to Martha's yard. The thrasher was still making an appearance as of March 4. You can read more about it and other winter strays in March's The Woodland Observer, page 17: <https://www.nipnats.com/newsletters/>



Murat Tuncali

Stories from the Field:

Steve Pitt: It has been eating bird seed for so long now that it thinks it is a bird.



Steve Pitt

Martha Gould: Martha was in Georgia recently visiting her mother and brother and while there she emailed me to let me know that in her brother's yard were Brown Thrashers, Northern Cardinals, a Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Eastern Bluebirds, Northern Mockingbirds, various finches, as well as Turkey Vultures flying overhead. I tried not to be envious, not just because of the variety of garden birds she was seeing, but the fact that Martha, for a brief period of time anyway, did not have to put up with a mountain of snow!

Renee Levesque: Further to my mention in last month's Bird Wing report, I finally captured them on camera in the act of denuding yet another verandah post now that they have completely denuded one of the posts.



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Winter Birds of Ontario 2018-19:

Josh Vandermeulen keeps a list of birds seen in Ontario during the winter months, December 1 to February 28. A total of 201 species were reported during this timeframe, more or less representing an average winter, tying for 5th place during the 12 years Josh has been keeping a list. The highest number was during the winter of 2011-12 with 223 species, with the lowest number during the winter of 2009-10 with 183 species. Last year, North Bay contributed the Harris's Sparrow; this year the Slaty-backed Gull, as did other communities.

For a complete list of species seen in Ontario this winter see, <http://tinyurl.com/myyulvs>.

Huron Fringe Festival:

If you would like to spend some time on Lake Huron and McGregor Point Provincial Park, near Port Elgin in Bruce County, consider attending the Huron Fringe Festival over two four-day

weekends, May 24 to May 27, and May 30 to June 2. There are over 90 events, ranging from ornithology, botany, art, photography, history, archaeology and astronomy, to name some. For a list of events see <http://friendsofmacgregor.org/page/huron-fringe-birding-festival>.

Registration has begun, so if you are interested, best to sign up as soon as possible because this is a popular festival. You can register using the link provided above. (At top right of home page.)

Bird Bash:

The next Bird Bash is the last weekend of March, **March 30 and 31**. Surely true spring will be in sight by then and some migrants starting to arrive, although it could take until May for the robin to find any ground in my yard.

Bird Wing:

The next Bird Wing meeting is on **Tuesday, March 26, starting at 6:30 p.m.** Despite Lori's devastating loss (and the fact *Cardinal* will be filming there the day before our meeting), Lori is graciously allowing us to continue to hold our meetings at Laporte's until our monthly walks begin in May.

The library renovations will not be completed by September as expected. Carrie James at the library has informed me that renovations have been pushed back until late fall, so it looks as if we may not get to return to the library until November at the earliest, next January at the latest. To be discussed at the next meeting.

A Happy St. Patrick's Day Story:

From Irish folklore in honour of St. Patrick's Day, a story about how a Robin got its red breast:

One winter, a long time ago, Jack Frost was very cruel. He made the snow fall thickly upon the ground, much like this winter. The birds found it very hard to get food and soon they began to get hungry. What to do, they all asked each other? "I have an idea," said Robin. "I will go into people's gardens and try to get them to give us some seeds."

And that is just what Robin did! In one yard, he saw a man clearing snow off his roof, so Robin flew up to the



Robin, Grant Mckercher

rooftop to get very close to the man. Most birds are somewhat nervous around humans, but Robin was brave. He had to be if he were to help the other birds. When the man saw how friendly Robin was, and how hungry he seemed to be, he climbed off his roof and went into his house and fetched a tray full of black oil sunflower seeds. This made Robin very happy. He flew off to fetch the other birds, and soon there were flocks of them in the man's garden. The best way they could say "Thank you" to the kind man was to eat the seeds out of his hand!

So as not to place undue stress on one man alone and so as to secure even more food for all the hungry birds in the neighbourhood, Robin flew to other gardens, and wherever he went, he made friends. So, although lots and lots of snow stayed on the ground for the longest time, the birds did not go hungry. After many weeks, Jack Frost finally sent the snow away. The well-fed and happy birds thanked Robin by making him a little red waistcoat. He still wears this waistcoat to this very day and that is why he is now called Robin Redbreast. *(Added Note: And because we in Canada get even more snow than in Ireland, our Robin gets a bigger red waistcoat.)*



American Robin, Renee Levesque