

Bird Wing Report

March 2020

*Text by Renee Levesque;
photos as indicated*

The Covid 19 pandemic prevented us from meeting on March 24, but nevertheless some eager birders reported spring and sparrow sightings to me by email. They were: Lori Anderson, Marc Buchanan, Kevan Cowcill, Kaye

Edmonds, Ernie Frayle, Ken Gowing, Pam Handley, Mary Ann Kenrick, Katherine MacLeod, Angela Martin, Grant McKercher, Buddy Myles, Fred Pinto, Steve Pitt, Oriana Pokorny, Stephen O'Donnell, Paul Smylie, Gary Sturge, Chris Sukha, Keith Thornborrow, Dick Tafel, Brent Turcotte, Janet Sparks, Sarah Wheelan and Mary Young.

Spring Bird Sightings up to March 24:

Almost all the above birders saw Red-winged Blackbirds and Common Grackles. One of the birds that signals spring is the Red-winged Blackbird with its *conk-larree* song and magnificent display of red in its wings. We get so used to these numerous blackbirds as spring wears on and we may not even notice their song after a bit, but for the first little while they let us know that spring is finally here and during these troublesome times, we can use every beautiful bird song that comes our way.

Of course, the other sign of spring is the American Robin (above), also seen by most of the above birders. The one in my yard, and the one in Pam Handley's yard, are overwinter robins and I think they are probably the same robin because I don't live far from Pam. There is something quite special about an overwinter bird not normally here in the winter months seemingly managing and thriving, singing



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for a mate as it is doing now. Kevan Cowcill had more than one in his yard and I saw six near Nipissing Village.

There was only one report of a Brown-headed Cowbird and that was by Gary Sturge who had one at his feeder.

Another spring migrant some birders spotted was the Herring Gull, seen in Mattawa, where Dick Tafel saw about 70; seen in Callander by Kaye Edmonds and me; seen in Sturgeon Falls by Buddy Myles and me; and seen near Circle Lake by Katherine MacLeod, although Stephen O'Donnell reported seeing them in Sundridge long before they arrived here. Fewer saw the Ring-billed Gull (below), usually a later arrival than the Herring. Two were seen by me, and I believe Brent Turcotte, on Lakeshore Drive near McDonald's, maybe wondering what happened to all the people and their French fries; seen in Mattawa by Dick; and one seen in Sturgeon Falls by Buddy Myles.



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Kaye Edmonds

And then there is the Canada Goose (above), seen by Marc Buchanan and Ken Gowing, and by me, Dick and Kaye in Mattawa, Bonfield and Callander, and by Gary Sturge on South River.

Angela Martin had Trumpeter Swans by her place, West Lake Nipissing, in early March.

Paul Smylie was fortunate to have a Northern Cardinal in his area. I believe this was an overwinter bird, perhaps the one seen in Paul's area during the Christmas Bird Count.

Many are reporting Mourning Doves at their feeders, seen in singles or pairs.

Cedar Waxwings (at right), up to 24, arrived in my yard on March 16 and stayed for a few days. After denuding my berry trees, they moved on, hopefully not too tipsy! I also saw quite a few near Nipissing Village, as well as a Golden-crowned Kinglet. I know others had earlier seen or heard the Golden-crowned, but it was exciting for me to get a very close look at the male in his kingly breeding crown. In the same general area, I saw my first Brown Creeper of the year.

Although later in this report you will find the results of Sparrow Week, mentioned here as a spring sighting is the Song Sparrow heard by Kevan Cowcill in North Bay and seen by Keith Thornborrow at his feeder in South River. Angela Martin had a Chipping

Sparrow at her place before count week and Gary Sturge had a White-throated Sparrow at his feeder the day after Sparrow Week.

A bird seen by almost all of us was the European Starling (at left) now in its dramatic speckled breeding plumage and its yellow bill. Usually the first person to inform me of this sighting each spring is Steve Pitt and this year was no exception.



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Steve Pitt

Although they have been seen on and off during the winter, mostly near Lori Anderson's farm, last week I saw about 80 Snow Buntings on Laplage Road in West Nipissing, probably making their way north. And Buddy Myles earlier in the month saw a Horned Lark on Leclair Road also in West Nipissing. Before this sighting, the only area where I had been informed Horned Larks were seen was on Maple Road near Lori's.

Only one person reported seeing Canada Jays and that was Angela who had a pair near her place in mid-March.

Most reported seeing the three main woodpeckers, Hairy, Downy and Pileated, but the Black-backed was harder to find. About six were first seen by Stephen O'Donnell in the Peacock and Joly Boundary Roads of South River and I, after three attempts, subsequently saw two on Peacock Road, a male and female (at right). I had a wonderful view of the female in her sleek black feathers.

In the same area, Stephen heard a Boreal Chickadee, the first time in some years one was seen or heard in that area. He also saw a Spruce Grouse. I did not see either during my three ventures to the area, but saw a Ruffed Grouse strutting his stuff in Laurier Woods.



Stephen O'Donnell



In the world of raptors, the Rough-legged Hawk (at left) making its way north was seen in Chisholm Township and in the Powassan area by Lori, Dick and me; and the Northern Harrier was seen by Gary Sturge and by Lori in roughly in the same areas. Also seen was the Merlin, by Paul Smylie and Stephen O'Donnell. (Other raptors seen were the Bald Eagle,

the Red-tailed Hawk, the Northern Goshawk and the Sharp-shinned Hawk.)

Some owls also made their presence known. Mary Young had a Barred Owl at her place on and off and Dick saw a Boreal Owl (at right) on Peddler's Drive in Calvin Township. Nice find!

I thought maybe someone might have reported a merganser, but no one had as of March 24, although by the time of March's Bird Bash, I am sure it, as well as Wood Ducks and other ducks, will have been seen. You can read about those sightings in Dick's Bird Bash report out later this week. Ducks that were seen up to March 24 continued to be

Mallards, American Blacks and Common Goldeneye, with the goldeneye seen in greater numbers later in March than earlier in the month. Dick saw about 50 in Mattawa.

Most everyone reported seeing finch and finch-like birds – American Goldfinch, Purple Finch, Pine Siskins, White-winged Crossbills and to a lesser extent, Red Crossbills. The finch that was not seen by many of us for most of the winter was the Evening Grosbeak, finally seen in Calvin Township, some in flocks of about 20. Purple Finch were more plentiful than they were and currently one can hear both the male and female singing.



Lloyd Sparks

American Crows have now established themselves outside city limits and some have been seen carrying sticks for nest building. Common Ravens continued to be seen or heard. Gary Sturge alerted me to the tower by TD Canada Trust at Northgate and the number of raven nests on that tower, pictured at right.

More sightings, although mostly of the same species already reported, were sent to me after March 24 and before the Bird Bash, but I basically had the report written by then. Two of these sightings were interesting. Grant had three Wild Turkeys strut past his house on Callander Bay and Gary and Connie witnessed a Common Raven trying to dislodge a Rough-legged Hawk.

Sparrow Week:

Sparrow Week, March 15 to 21, was set up to coincide with World Sparrow Day on March 20. We make it a week because chances of our seeing many sparrows in our area on the one day are fairly slim.

This year 144 sparrows were seen during Sparrow Week, a high number thanks to the American Tree Sparrow, and comprised of four sparrow species – American Tree (89); House Sparrow (44); Song Sparrow (4); and Dark-eyed Junco (5).

Unfortunately, Gary Sturge saw the White-throated Sparrow a day after the count week was over, and I saw nine House Sparrows a day prior to count week. Gary had 30 House Sparrows at his place and Lori, 14.



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The American Tree (right) was the sparrow of the winter this year and had the highest number: I had 23; Keith, 25; Stephen 12; Steve Pitt, 8; Mary Young and Ken Gowing , 6 each ; Ernie Frayle, 5; Gary Sturge, 2; and Lori, 2. All but three of these were at feeders. I saw one of mine on Chapman's Landing Road in Nipissing Village and Lori saw her two in S.E. Chisholm.



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Four Song Sparrows were heard or seen by Kevan Cowcill (1); Brent (1); Stephen (1); and Keith (1). Five Dark-eyed Juncos were seen by Gary Sturge (2), and one each by me, Pam Handley and Angela.

So how does this compare to previous years? In 2019, we saw only 36 sparrows comprised of House, American Tree and Song, but it was a nasty winter last year; in 2018, we saw 93 sparrows, comprised of 6 species, American Tree, House, Song, Chipping, Harris's and Dark-eyed Junco; and in 2017, we saw only 11 sparrows, comprised of the normal three – House, American Tree and Song. So this year, we topped the previous high number by 51, but had two less species than the previous high number of 6. If only Gary and Connie had had the White-throat in their yard a day earlier!



Grant McKercher

While in California, Grant McKercher saw a Golden-crowned Sparrow (at left) during Sparrow Week – don't think we can count it, however – and prior to Sparrow Week while also in California, Dick saw three species of sparrows – Black-throated, Rufous-crowned and White-crowned. (We will be seeing White-crowns here soon enough on their way north.)

Book Review:

The Ravenmaster by Christopher Skaife
HarperCollins, 2018

Legend has it that if the ravens leave the Tower of London, England will fall. But as long as the Tower has a Ravenmaster, England will stand, and if future ravenmasters are as caring and loving and cheerful and enthusiastic as the current Ravenmaster, Christopher Skaife, England will not only stand, but flourish. Although we are used to seeing ravens here, they are only now re-establishing themselves in the U.K.

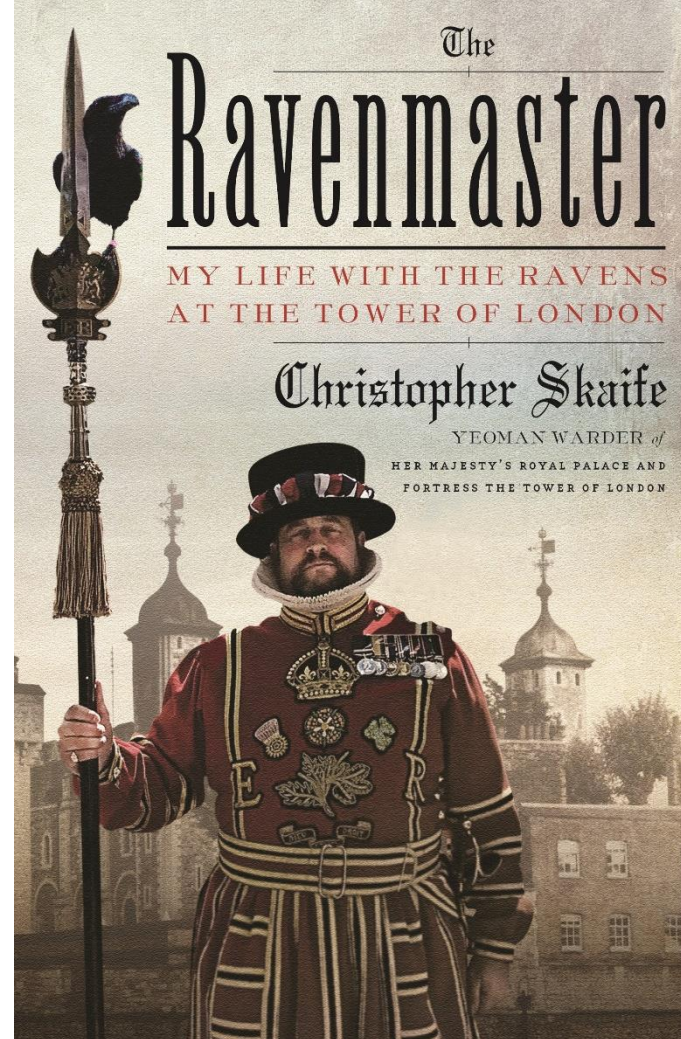
Christopher's book, *The Ravenmaster*, is a delightful and charming read: humorous, serious and poignant all at the same time, filled with raven and Tower of London facts and lore, never boring, but always entertaining.

Christopher as Ravenmaster is a Yeoman Warder, also known as a Beefeater, of Her Majesty's Royal Palace and Fortress the Tower of London. Being a Ravenmaster is one of the strangest jobs one could possibly have, but a job cherished by the author. We get to know Christopher and his love for ravens in particular and his love for wildlife in general.

But more importantly, we learn about ravens, in particular the ravens which make the Tower their home – Munin, Merlina, Erin, Rocky, Jubilee 11, Gripp 11, and Harris.

Christopher in his acknowledgements thanks the ravens. "They won't know, nor do I suspect they care, that they have unintentionally changed my life forever and filled it with joy. I can ask for nothing more from them."

It is a book I highly recommend, a book that is hard to put down because the author is such a wonderful story teller.



Stories from the Field:

Dick was in California in early March and is now out of self-isolation. He sent me a list of birds he saw in addition to the sparrows mentioned above. It included, among many others, Costa Hummingbirds, one in a nest by the edge of the pool, Black-throated Gray Warbler, Greater Roadrunner, Bewick's Wren, Canyon Wren, Prairie Falcon, Black-tailed Gnatcatcher, Lesser Goldfinch, Bell's Vireo, and one lifer, the brilliant Vermilion Flycatcher (right), obviously a highlight for Dick.



Dan Pancamo, Wikipedia

Grant McKercher was also in California in March and as of the writing of this report, he and Shirley are still in self-isolation. Grant also sent me a list of some of the birds he saw besides the Golden-crowned Sparrow already mentioned. His list included 11 lifers, some of which are Clark's Grebe, Common Murre, Black Turnstone, Red-throated Loon, White-tailed Kite, Pygmy Nuthatch and California Towhee.



Grant McKercher

Grant also saw an Acorn Woodpecker (at left), a woodpecker he last saw in 1993 in Costa Rica.

For the last three years or so, I wear the same fall jacket, red and orange in colour, each morning when I go out to feed the birds. It doesn't matter how cold some winter days are, I still wear the same fall jacket. And every morning, I hold out my hand filled with seed for the chickadees. One or two always come. I think they must know by now that until one comes to my hand, the feeder does not get filled. Well, I'm not sure they really know that because sometimes when it is way

too cold, I can't wait to fill the feeder before holding out my hand with seed. But what I do know is that they recognize my jacket. The other afternoon in the warm spring-like weather, I sat outside reading wearing the same jacket – and there was a chickadee, flying very closely around me, looking for its food!

Project FeederWatch:

Because of the current Covid 19 crisis when so many are housebound, Project FeederWatch has been extended through to the **end of April**. Therefore, you can continue to watch birds in your backyard and submit your counts if you so choose. This extension is for this year only –

hopefully!! I think it will be great to finally have the opportunity to submit species we don't normally get a chance to report. It can be disheartening not to be able to report a Pine Warbler that comes to your feeder the day after Project FeederWatch normally closes up shop in early April.



Steve Pitt

Barn Swallow Project:

Paul Smylie has now submitted the completed application on behalf of Nipissing Naturalists Club and EcoTec Environmental Consultants to the Ministry of Environment, Species at Risk Branch, for funding for the building of four Barn Swallow structures and the monitoring of these structures for three years. Although Paul submitted the application by the deadline of March 25, the deadline subsequently was extended, perhaps in response to the Covid 19 crisis. Whether funding will get approved by the time the project is supposed to begin on May 15

given the current situation is not known. Much will probably depend on the continuing crisis situation.

The four areas where the structures are to be erected are: one on the waterfront and one by La Vase River in Champlain Park, both approved by the City of North Bay; one in Laurier Woods, approved by the Friends of Laurier Woods; and one on private property approved by the owner. The species experts who supported the project and who can be called on should advice be needed are Allison Bannister, Management Biologist, MNRF, North Bay District; Megan Hiebert, Ontario SwiftWatch Coordinator, Birds Canada; and Liz Purves, Ontario Region Program Director, Birds Canada.

I will keep you informed of the status of this project, **but in the meantime, if anyone is interested in helping with the monitoring, please let me know.**

Great Backyard Bird Count:

This year's Great Backyard Bird Count (GBBC) which took place over the Family Day weekend in February topped all previous years in terms of participation, checklists and species reported. The number of species reported around the world was 6,942, and the number of checklists, 249,444.

In Canada, 250 species were reported and 17,662 checklists were submitted. Ontario reported the second highest number of species seen, 161, after British Columbia at 192. However, Ontario had the highest number of checklists submitted, 8,092.

Breaking that down further into counties and districts, Nipissing District was 40th in terms of species seen, 36, but we live in the north and do not get as many species in February as our southern neighbours. But despite that, Nipissing was 7th in terms of checklists submitted, thanks mainly to those who spent the Family Day weekend in Algonquin Park which is mostly in Nipissing District. But still, Lori Anderson, Marc Buchanan, Buddy Myles, Corinne Urrutia, Lisa Hackett, Mary Ann Kenrick and I submitted checklists locally.

Parry Sound District saw 26 species, but only Sarah Wheelan and I from our area submitted checklists. The rest came from areas outside our immediate 80.5 km area. Grant normally would have participated, but he was in Ohio at the time.

Sudbury District saw 27 species, and 46 checklists, but only two of us from Bird Wing, Sheldon McGregor and I, submitted lists. Again the rest came from outside our immediate 80.5 km area.

Nocturnal Owl Survey:



The Nocturnal Owl Survey takes place in April. At this time, I do not know if it will be going ahead in all areas we normally survey. April will soon be upon us and it should be a much better April weather-wise for the survey than last April. I know Gary and Connie will certainly do their area, as no doubt will Ken and Lori. Other groups that do not consist of couples may wish to decide among themselves if they will be participating or how they want to go about participating safely.

Please let me know who will be participating and your route. (How we handle who wins the trophy will be determined at a later date.)

I certainly hope that by the time of the Great Canadian Birdathon in late May, the pandemic crisis will be behind us and participants can take part as usual. I will inform you of the date and an alternate plan if one is necessary.

Bird Bash:

April's Bird Bash will take place the weekend of **April 25 and 26**. A reminder email will be sent.

Bird Wing Meeting:

It is unlikely at this time that there will be another Bird Wing meeting before the spring and summer outings begin. However, Sarah Wheelan has proposed that if we can't meet by then, she can set up a virtual meeting. She will prepare the link and instructions. **Please let me know if you are interested in participating.** It could be a fun way of connecting with one another if we can't meet in person. Whether the meeting is held in person or we participate by video, it is scheduled for **Tuesday, April 28, at 6:30 p.m.**

In closing, to provide us with some indoor bird fun while we are doing our bit by staying indoors and keeping our distance from each other when out for a walk or shopping for necessities, at right is a photo Steve Pitt took of two Blue Jays. It needs a caption. Send me your witty, funny, or more serious captions and I will report on them in the next Bird Wing report, if not sooner.

