



Bird  
Wing  
Report

June 2024

## A very Veery walk through Laurier Woods

By Renee Levesque

It began with an adult Veery greeting us in the middle of the trail at the start of the entrance to Laurier Woods, with its two Veery nestlings snug in their nest (photo below) just slightly off the trail – an absolutely delightful way to start our Bird Wing outing on June 27.



Fred Pinto

This wonderful start was followed by many Veery calls and songs along the way

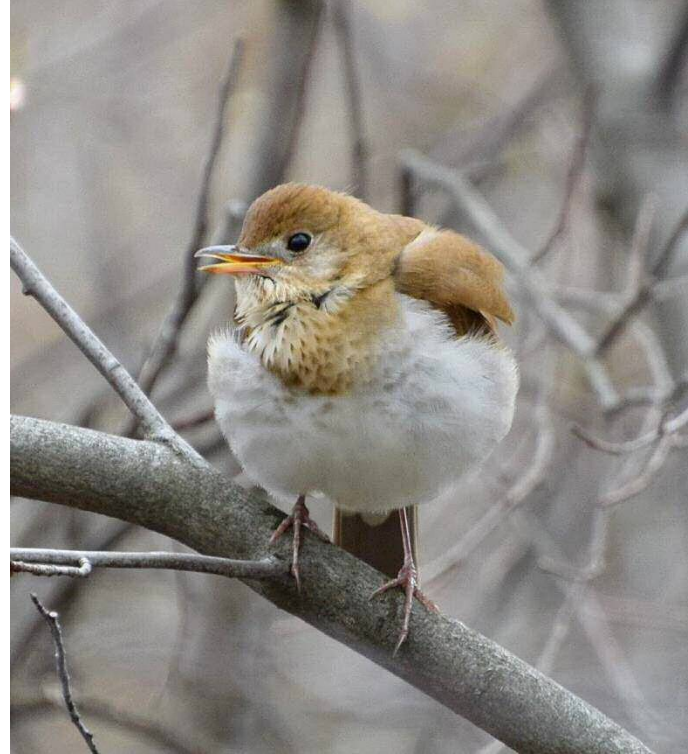
(photo above). We heard at least eight Veerys throughout our almost 3 km walk, perhaps as many as ten. Usually it is the Red-eyed Vireo we hear constantly, but on a late June evening, we heard only about three. We also usually hear many Ovenbirds constantly singing their *teacher-teacher-teacher* song, but this time we heard only one.

Not to be outdone by the Veery, we were also greeted at the entrance by a Warbling Vireo singing its melodious warble, best described by Ornithologist Elliot Coues (1842-1899) as “a ripple of melody threading its way through the mazes of verdure.” The Red-eyed Vireo,

whose insistent song is far from being melodic, was the only other vireo we heard.

You may recall that in last month’s report, there was a photo Fred Pinto took of a Ruby-throated Hummingbird in her nest, also near the beginning of the trail. That nest now looks to be abandoned. There are many Common Grackles constantly flying along that corridor of the Woods and perhaps one got to the eggs or nestlings. Although there were plenty of grackles flying around, we saw one grackle low in that area carrying food.

And what is a walk in Laurier Woods without plenty of Red-winged Blackbirds (photo on next page), most calling, but some still singing. As spring wears on and summer arrives, the Red-wing isn’t what one would necessarily call our go-to bird, but it is a welcome harbinger of spring – for some more than the American Robin – and you cannot discount the brilliant red patches in its wings. When we do the Saturday morning May walks in Laurier Woods, it is a bird many in the community take delight in because of their flash of red.



Renee Levesque

But plenty does not begin to describe the 300 or so European Starlings flying in multiple small flocks from the west over the pond reeds. Grant McKercher reports, “They then landed in various trees and on the sand piles in the city yards at the east end of the pond. They seemed mostly attracted to the sand piles, but roosted first in the small trees.” Sue Gratton sent me some photos of them and many were young starlings that seemed to be eating insects in the sand piles. Funny thing about starlings. They are a very successful invasive species and not our favourite bird by a long shot, but come fall, they certainly do put on a spectacular aerial ballet.



Renee Levesque



Renee Levesque

Another plentiful bird was the American Redstart (photo at left) heard throughout the Woods singing its multiple versions of its *tsee tsee tsee tsee tsee-o* song. I counted eight redstarts, but there could have been more. Other warblers besides those already mentioned were a couple of Common Yellow-throats, at least four Yellows, a Yellow-rumped, a Black and White and a Magnolia. A much quieter warbler time than earlier in the month, and soon to become even quieter.

We did not get to the area where back in May Jérémie Corbeil spied a female American Redstart building her nest, but Fred led us to a perfectly round golf-sized hole in a birch tree where we heard at least two young Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers chirping away, and then while we were listening to the young, an adult female entered the nest and after a bit flew out

again to get more food for her hungry young. The only other woodpeckers we saw were a couple of Northern Flickers.

Sparrows seen or heard were a Song Sparrow, about three Swamp Sparrows and a White-throated Sparrow bursting forth with its Canada song, knowing perhaps we are about to celebrate Canada Day!



**Garry Waldram**

The only flycatchers seen or heard were two Eastern Kingbirds (photo at left) at Arum Pond. Also making its presence known at Arum Pond was the Brown Thrasher.

Other birds seen or heard were a fly-over Double-crested Cormorant, two cheery American Robins, a croaking Common Raven, a cawing American Crow, two twittering American Goldfinches and our ever-faithful Black-capped Chickadee.

As our walk ended and just before the trail leading to the Laurier Street entrance, we heard a Gray Catbird (photo below) calling fairly constantly until it made an appearance, defending its territory as it has since May and now feeding and protecting its young.

To enter and to leave our Laurier Woods walk with two species watching out for their young, and knowing most of the other birds I mentioned are nesting somewhere in the Woods, makes having a conservation area of this sort in the middle of our city something to cherish!

*Note: Although all the above birds mentioned were probably seen or heard by most members, numbers seen or heard may be different.*



**Renee Levesque**

## Seeds and Cones

**New beginnings:** I received a number of emails and photos of nests, eggs and nestlings, celebrating a new life in the wonderful world of birds. You may recall that in May's report, there was a photo of an Eastern Phoebe in her nest on top of Lloyd Sparks' shovel. By June, three phoebe nestlings were big enough that they could peek over the edge of the nest for their first close-up (at right), and on June 15, they left the nest just when Janet Sparks happened to be near. She reports it was absolutely amazing. And a few days after this, the Wilson's Snipe couple nesting somewhere on the Sparks' property brought forth their three chicks to enjoy the expansive lawn in front of Janet and Lloyd's home. How fortunate to have both birds nesting on your property and to be able to view the fruits of their labours. (Some of you may recall that a couple of years ago, the Sparks hosted a family of Northern Saw-whet Owls.)



Lloyd Sparks

And as you will see from this month's wonderful **cover photograph by Stephen**

**O'Donnell**, he happened to be in the right place at the right time to capture a young Black-backed Woodpecker in its nest cavity chirping away to his father, asking, I think, when can I leave this hole and explore my wooded world. Well, it wouldn't be long because the day after Stephen took this photo, it spread its wings and left. I just happened to see the family too – mom, dad and the little one – on the same day as Stephen and it seemed I arrived at the spot just before or just after Stephen had left. (It had been seen by a couple of other birders a day or so earlier and posted on Nature Counts and eBird and that is how I was able to locate it.)



Then we have Barbara Lee who sent me a photo of an American Robin's nest with four robin blue eggs, followed by a photo taken on May 22 of the four nestlings that looked even then to be too big for the nest. (Photo at left.) By June 1, they had fledged. (The nest was on the porch of a friend's house in Sundridge.)

Courtesy of Barbara Lee

Sue Gratton also has a robin's nest at her South River cabin on her front deck at the top of a wood stove pipe. Her husband, Darcy, set up a live birdcam so they could watch the progress from inside their cabin so as not to disturb the birds on their deck. As I write this, Sue informs me the parents are busy feeding their young. She sent me a delightful video from the birdcam showing the parents feeding their chirping chicks. By the time this report is completed, they may have fledged.

Faye Oei sent me a photo of a Red-eyed Vireo's nest that hangs in a tree in front of her friend's living room window on Eagle Lake. The family, says Faye, obviously wanted a lake view! Faye also reports, "What was amazing looking at it from below was I could see single threads holding each side in place on the slim branch. A real architectural marvel."

**Rare birds:** Some birds are not necessarily rare, but are unusual to find in our area. Stephen O'Donnell was very fortunate this June to see a Yellow-billed Cuckoo in his yard, a bird more often heard than seen. I note from eBird and Nature Counts that a couple of other birders also saw or heard one in the Parry Sound District. Caterpillars are the Yellow-billed's food of choice, so look for them in areas of tent caterpillar infestations.

Like the Black-billed Cuckoo, it is a slender bird with a long tail, but unlike the Black-billed, it has very bold white spots on its undertail and has an unbroken yellow eyering, although interestingly, Stephen's bird did not. It is white underneath and brown on top and, of course, it sports a yellow curved bill – yellow on the lower mandible, black on the top. It also has rufous or cinnamon coloured patches on its wings, more often obvious in flight. Stephen's photo is at right.

If you don't see one, you will certainly know one is around if you hear its hoarse croaking song, as if it could use a dose of cough syrup, or if you hear its distinctive knocking call, hollow and wooden-sounding. In some areas, it is called a rain crow or a storm crow because it sings its croaking song on a hot humid day when it is about to rain or storm.

Like the Brown-headed Cowbird, the Yellow-billed is a parasitic bird, laying its eggs in another bird's nest. But unlike the Brown-headed Cowbird, it will lay eggs in another bird's nest only if it wants to. It may parasite other cuckoos' nests or nests of the American Robin, Wood Thrush, Chipping



*Stephen O'Donnell*

Sparrow and Gray Catbird. Or it may make its own nests and raise its young. (This is known as facultative brood parasitism – a term that also applies to our Black-billed Cuckoo.)

It takes as little as 17 days from the start of a Yellow-billed's incubation period to fledging. Within a week of hatching, chicks are fully feathered, ready to fly from the nest.

The Golden-winged Warbler is making the odd appearance here and there this spring. Sheldon McGregor saw one on June 20, not within our two districts of Nipissing and Parry Sound or even within our 80.5 km limit, but not too too far away, in the District of Algoma. He travelled there on purpose to see it, and see it he did! I believe it was first seen on or around June 15, so nice it hung around for quite a few days – and may still be there – unlike the one Garry Waldram saw last month. Some of us looked for it after Garry's sighting on McNutt Road, but to no avail. Nor did anyone else to my knowledge see the Brewster's Warbler after it was seen last month by Sue Gratton and Stephen O'Donnell on Hills Siding Road.

**Common Loon:** Garry Waldram took a photo of a Common Loon on its nest, albeit not in our counting area, but in Nipissing District, at Lake of Two Rivers, Algonquin Park. Photo below.



**Garry Waldram**

There are concerns about the declining numbers of loons and until recently Dick Tafel had not seen a loon in his immediate area of Trout Lake. I asked Yvonne Montgomery if a loon couple is nesting on her Trout Lake platform and she said it is. She also reports she has seen only two other loons on Trout Lake so far this year. (Some of you may recall the wonderful presentation Yvonne gave to Bird Wing last fall about her nesting platform and loons. If you weren't at the meeting, you can read about it in the October 2023 Bird Wing Report, starting on page 13. All Bird Wing reports are posted under Bird Wing on Nipissing Naturalists Club's website.)

The Canadian Lakes Loon Survey undertaken by Birds Canada shows loon chicks have decreased by 30% across Canada since the early 1990s. Doug Tozer, Director of Waterbirds and Wetlands, Birds Canada, who grew up among the loons of Algonquin Provincial Park where his father, Ron Tozer, was the park's naturalist for 24 years, reports that no one really knows why there is such a decline. However, it may be linked in part to past damage from acid rain, mercury pollution, decreasing water clarity due to runoff and algal blooms and climate change. I also suspect increased boating and other water activities on some lakes and a lack of wildlife-friendly waterfronts. Birds Canada is committed to attempt to get to the bottom of the decrease in chick population and to figure out what to do to protect the loon.

For those who live on a lake in which there are loons, you should seriously consider helping out by taking part in the Canadian Lakes Loon Survey. See: <https://www.birdscanada.org/bird-science/canadian-lakes-loon-survey>. There are many interesting loon links on this home page, including information gleaned from 40 years of conducting the Canadian Lakes Loon Survey.

**Lifers:** I enjoy hearing about members' lifers. Brings back memories of when and where I saw the same bird for the first time, something we all tend to remember. Garry Waldram got some while he was birding this June in the Niagara Peninsula – Tufted Titmouse, Marsh Wren (photo at right), Field Sparrow and the Eastern Towhee. And in Algonquin Park, Garry saw another lifer – a Black-backed Woodpecker – followed by a Sedge Wren he recently saw on Memorial Park Drive, Powassan.



Garry Waldram

Barbara Lee and Faye Oei saw Brown Thrashers for the first time. Two came to Barbara's yard while Faye was visiting.

**Humour in birds:** In late June, my husband John and I attended the Stephen Leacock gala awards dinner in Orillia, an evening of laughter and humour. The Master of Ceremonies was comedian Steve Patterson of CBC's *The Debaters*. Steve was hilarious. I and other Orillia birders at the dinner especially laughed at his bird humour that began with: *"I thought turning 50 would be a huge, depressing change in my life where I would have to take stock of my life, realize what I was missing from my life's inventory up to this point and try to do something massive to correct it, like buy a new sports car or go to space. Do you know what the only difference I noticed was being 50? I looked out my window the day I turned 50 and saw a bird and thought, 'Huh, I wonder what kind of bird that is?' I got 49 years not caring at all.* (I understand Steve is performing at the Capitol Centre in North Bay on Saturday, March 15, 2025.)

- Renee Levesque

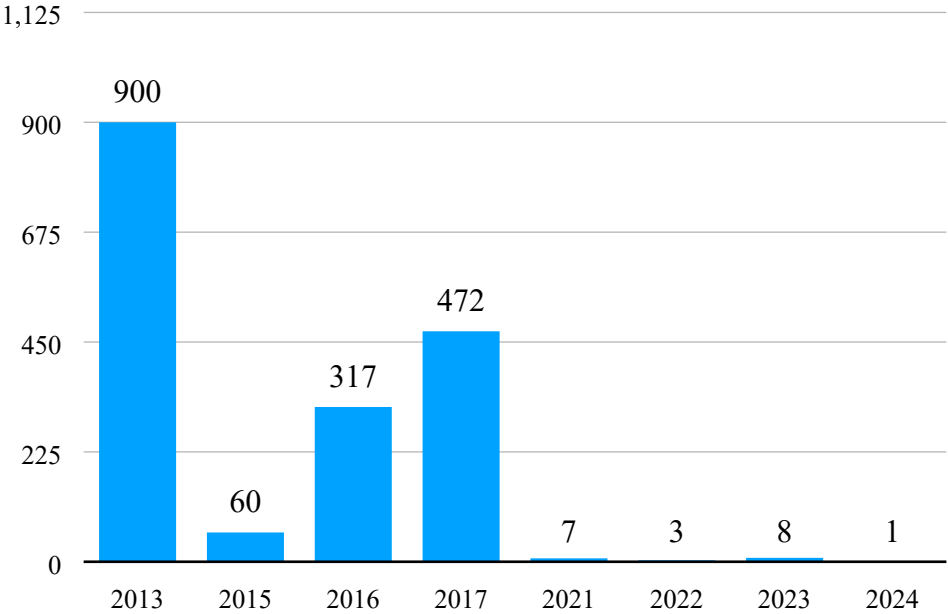




# The spectacle known as a swiftnado: SwiftWatch Report 2024

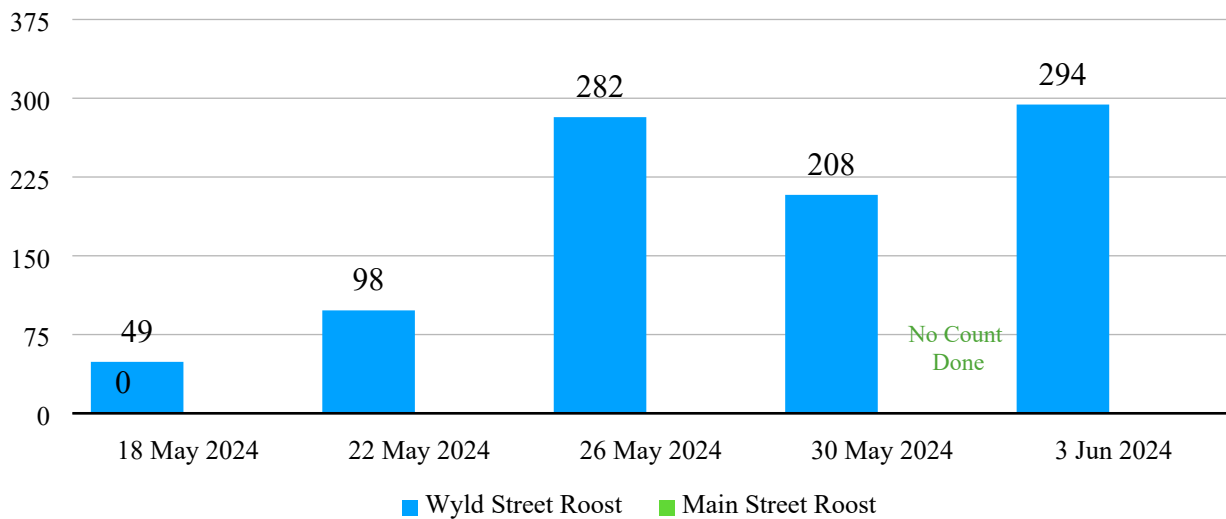
By Grant McKercher

Nipissing Naturalists Club participated in Birds Canada’s National SwiftWatch again this year. Club members have been monitoring a number of roost sites in North Bay since 2013 and submitting observations to a central database (NatureCounts) where it is used to analyze population dynamics of Chimney Swifts and inform conservation policies for this species at risk. The data gathered by SwiftWatch helped inform the Government of Canada’s *Recovery Strategy for the Chimney Swift in Canada*, published in 2023.



We continue to monitor two chimney sites in North Bay - one at 409 Main Street West and a second at Paroisse St. Vincent-de-Paul on Wyld Street. As I reported last year, the sightings at the Main Street roost have progressively declined since monitoring began in 2013, although no

data are available for 2014, 2018 and 2020. (See chart on previous page.) This year we observed only one bird entering the chimney during the official SwiftWatch count days in May and early June. This would suggest that the chimney is now being used primarily as a nesting site rather than a roost for large numbers of birds. Typically, a nesting site will be utilized by only one pair of birds, whereas roosting sites used during migration may accommodate hundreds of birds at a time.



Currently the main identified roost for the returning swifts is the Wyld Street site (see chart above.) On certain evenings not all of the circling birds actually enter the chimney, so there may be other active roosts in the area that have not been identified.

The reason for the abandonment of the Main Street roost is not known for certain, but could be related to predator attacks (Merlin and Peregrine Falcon) in previous years, witnessed by Fred Pinto. There have been some similar attacks at the Wyld Street roost, even this season, but the swifts continue to roost there. The Merlin typically attacks the birds at a low level just as they are fluttering downwards to enter the chimney. Fred has observed that when a predator is in the vicinity the birds change their vocalizations ('predator alert?') and flying behaviour – circling higher and entering the chimney more quickly.

The entry of the swifts into the chimney soon after sunset is quite a spectacle, especially when a large number enter in quick succession. It has been described as a "swiftnado", as the birds whirl around and then are seemingly drawn into the chimney by a giant vacuum cleaner! As the breeding season progresses, the birds disperse to nest in pairs in other structures and are not as abundant in the roosting sites. By the late summer and early autumn, they start their long return migration to South America where they spend the winter.

Take the time to watch Birds Canada's video on Chimney Swifts entitled *Revealing the life of our upstairs neighbours: Chimney Swifts* - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HnAgWr1Qtk8>.

If you would like to read the Government of Canada's *Recovery Strategy for the Chimney Swift in Canada* see: <https://www.canada.ca/en/environment-climate-change/services/species-risk-public-registry/recovery-strategies/chimney-swift-2023.html>



Pat Stack

## Owl Survey Results

April's Nocturnal Owl Survey results are in and they are impressive!

### 1. Katharine MacLeod, Grant McKercher, and Gilles Belecque, McConnell Lake Route:

*From Katharine:* Grant, Gilles and I met at the MNR at 6:45 pm on April 15. We took a group photo (below) as a kettle of eight Turkey Vultures circled over the hill behind us. We had a drive of over an hour to reach our survey start point. On the way, we stopped for a black and white bird that flew across our path. It turned out to be a lovely little Snow Bunting. Grant saw a Common Loon on one of the lakes.

We proceeded to our start point. The survey started half an hour after sunset, so we had time to listen to a lonely American Woodcock *peenting* in an open area close by. We also saw a Pileated Woodpecker.



**Katharine MacLeod**

the road while calling maniacally. Nice way of wrapping things up as we headed back to North Bay. A great night!



**Stephen O'Donnell**

Our first three stops were quiet, but we had a chance to enjoy the night sky on this calm, partly cloudy night. We saw the Big Dipper and Pollux and Castor beside the half-full moon. At one stop, we saw a falling star, possibly a reminder that Lyrids would be at peak activity on April 21-22.

At stop 4, we heard the unmistakable *toit* calls of a Northern Saw-whet Owl. It was the first time that I identified one by its call!

Next stop, we heard a drumming Ruffed Grouse, and the stop after that, another Northern Saw-whet. But after that, the party really got started with a frenzy of four Barred Owls flying back and forth across

*From Gilles:* It was great. We had a few good laughs; Katharine was an awesome rally car driver; and Grant was a good navigator. We had a few equipment glitches, but still it worked out.

It got pretty cool around 11:30. Lucky Grant got the heated seat!!

We certainly saw some very chatty Barred Owls and heard some Northern Saw-whet Owls. We also heard some American Woodcocks and a Ruffed Grouse and were serenaded by frogs. Could not get any pictures, but the memories are ingrained! I certainly hope to take part again next year.

**Total: Six owls - four Barred Owls and two Northern Saw-whets**

## **2. Lori Anderson and Ken Gowing, Graham Lake Route:**

*From Lori:* Ken and I conducted our survey on Sunday, April 7. Conditions were ideal – a very quiet and clear evening, and the first time we have surveyed with no snow on the ground!

At the first Stop, we had three American Woodcocks; at Stop 7, we heard a Barred Owl at the Kell's farm; and at Stop 10, we had two Barred Owls that came and perched beside the car!

**Total: Three Barred Owls**

## **3. Oriana Pokorny, Sand Dam Route:**

*From Oriana:* We saw/heard three Barred Owls and one Northern Saw-whet Owl (at right).

However, we also saw or heard a Spruce Grouse, six Ruffed Grouse, four American Woodcocks, two Common Loons, two Hermit Thrushes, one Mourning Dove, eight Dark-eyed Juncos, two American Robins and two Mallards.

And as a special treat, one beaver!

**Total: Four owls - three Barred Owls and one Northern Saw-whet Owl**

## **4. April McCrum, Restoule Route**

*From April:* Our first stop on April 13 was near the gate at Restoule Provincial Park. We saw one Barred Owl land in the tree above our heads, after which another one showed up in the same tree.



They called back and forth, with one flying closer to let the other know he was not welcome.

Another Barred Owl was heard at Stop 8.

And then at Stop 9, we were fortunate to hear a Great-Horned Owl (at right) which continued to call from the beginning to the end of that stop! We estimated it to be about 0.5 to 1 km away.

No other owls were heard. However, the Spring Peepers, Wood Frogs and the occasional American Woodcock made their presence heard.

**Total: Three Barred Owls and one Great Horned Owl.**

**5. Katharine MacLeod and Grant McKercher, Four Mile Lake Route**

*From Katharine:* April 25 was the perfect clear night for owling. It was almost a full moon by our last stop. We had a couple of homeowners near Stop 6 walk out to see what was going on. Apparently we scared the wits out of them!

Stop 1: Two Barred Owls. One Barred Owl – saw and heard; second Barred Owl – just heard. (We had seen a Barred Owl just east of the top of the ski hill during a winter Nipissing Naturalists Club hike, so I was happy for this result.)

Stop 2: Barred Owl – heard – but I think it was a repeat from Stop 1; saw and heard a second Barred Owl.

Stops 3-6: nothing.

Stop 7: Barred Owl – heard.

Stop 8: Barred Owl – heard

Stop 9: nothing.

Stop 10: Barred Owl – seen and heard.

**Total: Six and possibly seven Barred Owls if the repeat from Stop 2 wasn't actually a repeat.**



*Renee Levesque*



Renee Levesque

## 6. Oriana Pokorny, Gary's Powassan route:

Oriana and her students once again undertook Gary Sturge's former route on April 26.

*From Oriana:* At Stop 2, we saw a large silent bird. We assumed it was an owl, but didn't officially record it.

At Stop 4, we heard a Barred Owl (at left) in the distance calling continuously.

At Stop 6, we heard another Barred Owl.

At Stop 7, we heard one Barred Owl and then a pair of Barred Owls cackling together and swooping over the car. I thought they were going to take out the speaker!

**Total: Five Barred Owls**

## 7. Greg Jaski and Gerry Waldram, Kiosk Route:

*From Greg:* Garry and I had a successful count on April 9. While we didn't have the northern lights gracing our skies, it was a beautiful evening with almost 100% clear skies. We managed to encounter three Northern Saw-whet Owls. We were both surprised that no Barred Owls called.

*From Garry:* As a first timer, I didn't know what to expect, although I thought I might hear and see a few more owls. But I really enjoyed the survey – a great night with great company. Greg is an awesome guy. Hot chocolate was awesome as well!

**Total: three Northern Saw-whet Owls**



Greg Jaski

## Summary:

Except for Greg and Garry, it was definitely a Barred Owl April with a total of 21 and possibly 22 Barred Owls. In addition to the Barred Owls, there were six Northern Saw-whet Owls and one Great Horned Owl.

Last year's winner, Katharine MacLeod, did the best job at presenting the McConnell Lake Route. When I did that survey for 3 years with Dick Tafel, it was not my favourite route because it was so far away and that meant a very late night for an early morning riser! So it is great in my books that the three of you – Katharine, Grant and Gilles – surveyed it and that Gilles as a first-timer wants to participate again next year.

Katharine and Grant did two routes this year as did Oriana and her students, but unlike Grant and Katharine, Oriana and her students saw a beaver on their Sand Dam route. (I know it's not an owl, but seeing an animal, especially a wolf or a bear, adds to the excitement!) I don't know if there was still snow on that route, but Lori mentions that when she and Ken did their route in early April, there was no snow for the first time since they started doing their route – and no spring peepers or frogs because they were able to get out early in the month during the great owling weather we had then.

For the first time since I have been compiling the results, I don't think anyone complained of the cold as the evening wore on, although Gilles mentioned it became chilly.

Maybe because Greg and Garry conducted their survey on the evening of the total solar eclipse, the Barred Owls decided to retire early. However, they heard the most Northern Saw-whet Owls! And I like Garry's enthusiasm, like Gilles', as a first-timer. Why he even found the hot chocolate "awesome". Must be that Greg is an excellent hot chocolate maker because no one else mentioned their hot chocolate!!

Although we no longer have "winners", I think the trophy should go to April McCrum for hearing the Great Horned Owl, the only one to hear an owl other than the Barred or Northern Saw-whet Owls and hearing a Great Horned is indeed great. Also, April hasn't yet had the honour of keeping our handsome trophy in her home for a year.

- *Renee Levesque*