

## Bird Wing Report February 27, 2018

*By Renee Levesque; photos as indicated*

Three weeks after the last meeting, we met again in the auditorium of the North Bay Public Library, as passionate and lively as ever, especially when the topic of lists came up!

### **Chukar:**

When Gary Chowns said he had seen a Chukar on Wasi Road at Young's Store, you could have heard a pin drop! A Chukar? Here? The Chukar is a western bird that was introduced to the United States and Canada from Eurasia. However, here in Ontario it is an abandoned or escaped domestic bird.

There have been many reports of abandoned Chukars or escapees in Southern Ontario, but this is the first I have heard of one in the North Bay area. And subsequent to Gary's report, some of us have been out to see the Chukar, called Chucky by the locals, only to

discover it is quite the famous little game bird. Even a wildlife photographer has been out to take its photo and according to those at Young's store, Chucky loves to have his picture taken.

Chucky showed up one summer's day last year and has been at Young's Store since. The owners of the store have been feeding it and have provided it with a straw "roost" under the verandah. At least two people in the area claim Chucky was once theirs, that they purchased it to train their retriever hunting dogs. It is seen most days and if not there when you drive out to see it, it should come if called. And if you think it is lonely all by itself, well, it has a Mourning Dove to keep it company as seen in Grant McKercher's photo below. Brings to mind Rick Lee Jones's hit from 1979, Chuck E's In Love: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wLu387iIBmM>.



*Grant McKercher*



*Grant McKercher*

You will see from the photos that the Chukar is chicken-like in appearance.

It is sandy brown in colour with bold striping on its sides, a creamy throat bordered in black, a red bill and a red eye ring. Like a chicken, it has a small head, plump body and short legs.

In the wild, the Chukar is not often seen, although its loud call is often heard, so this may be the only time many of us will ever get to see one even if it is not a wild bird. From Mike Burrell, Ontario Birds Records Committee (OBRC): *“A few years ago the OBRC made the decision to not review reports of Chukars because all reports are assumed to be released/escaped individuals. I suspect that will not change until someone writes a compelling argument to show that they have a self-sustaining population. That seems a ways off at present, but there are now breeding reports.”*

Dick Tafel saw one in the wild near Salt Lake City in June 1996. (Dick not only keeps lists, but consults them!) It likes dry, rocky hillsides in remote and rugged areas, and also pastures and sagebrush flats. It would rather walk and run than fly, and can run quickly and with agility up rocky slopes and hop from one craggy rock to another.

It eats mainly seeds, foliage and grasshoppers.

### **Birds Seen in February:**

*Gary Chowns:* Gary saw three Trumpeter Swans (below) in Restoule River by the bridge in the village of Restoule, where they are seen almost every year at this time. None of the three had wing tags.



**Gary Chowns**



The Harris's and White-throated Sparrows continued to come to Gary and Luanne's feeders. Gary is to keep us informed when the Harris's departs, hopefully to its breeding grounds.

My Chipping Sparrow continued to come daily, but lately I noticed it has a damaged upper mandible, as you can see in the photo at right. I went back through my photos and from them I saw that the damage was definitely noticeable as of mid-January. Perhaps the mandible was always damaged and that could explain why the little Chipper didn't migrate. Anyway, it is holding its own and the damage does not seem to affect its ability to eat. I notice it resting a lot on my fence or outside my office window, sheltered from the cold and the wind.



*Renee Levesque*

Other sparrows that have stayed around this winter were American Tree Sparrows, seen by many. I had up to 11 visit my feeders on a daily basis.

Dark-eyed Juncos have also been seen by many, including Ken Gowing and Gary Sturge who had up to 12 in their yards.



*Kaye Edmonds*

Gary also saw Common Goldeneye (left) by the Government Dock in Restoule; Dick and I saw some in the Ottawa River by Holden Dam; and I see from eBird that Kaye Edmonds saw some in the open water at Bonfield.

*Grant McKercher:* Grant was one of the only members to have seen Bohemian Waxwings in February. He saw a flock of 40 in Powassan on February 10. They certainly seem to be scarcer this year than in recent years despite much fruit on suburban trees. Dick Tafel and I saw a flock of about 40 in Pinewood, and Therez

Violette had some in her yard in Sturgeon Falls, but both those sightings were in January, and Grant's sighting is the first sighting we have heard of since.

Grant also saw Pine Siskins, as did many others. It was a fairly numerous winter bird this year.

*Renee Levesque:* After weeks of searching, I finally saw a female White-winged Crossbill on Sand Hill Road in the Sundridge area. It was on the road eating grit and then flew to a cone-filled spruce tree. I took its photo once it flew into the tree and when I got home and uploaded my photos, I saw there was also a male White-winged in the tree. I believe the White-wings have started nesting.



*Renee Levesque*

I also saw three Wild Turkeys on Old Nipissing Road, Comanda. They are being fed by a homeowner who told me they feed alongside the deer. You can see in the photo above that one of the turkeys I saw was using its wings to propel itself through the deep snow. Lori Anderson also had seen Wild Turkeys in east Chisholm Township.

*Lori Anderson:* Lori saw a Rough-legged Hawk on River Road and a male Ring-necked Pheasant on Bellcairn, no doubt the same area where Gary and Connie Sturge saw the female pheasant in January.

Lori is the first to have seen a Rough-legged Hawk this year. Others have seen Bald Eagles – many hang around the Powassan landfill site.



***Stephen O'Donnell***

*Ken Gowing:* Ken saw a Red Crossbill (above) on Gravelle Road in Chisholm Township, as did Lori. Not many have been seen so far this winter, although at the moment they are quite numerous in Algonquin Park. Gary Chowns was the only other member to see any and he saw two in Restoule near the landfill site.

Ken had a flock of up to about 40 American Goldfinch coming to his feeders.

*Curtis Irish:* We can always rely on Curtis to see Rock Pigeons and American Crows in his neck of North Bay. Crows have now migrated into areas outside of downtown North Bay, one of the first signs that spring won't pass us by.

And on the topic of pigeons, I will be calling North Bay's Racing Pigeon Club to see if it can entertain Bird Wingers in some way, either by a talk, by watching the pigeons take off on a race or by watching them finish one. This came about because of the chapter on Homing Pigeons in *Birdology*.

*Connie Sturge:* Although Gary forgot to bring Connie to the meeting, he did not forget her list. She saw a Great Horned Owl, naturally on the famed Stillaway Line – where else? It is probably nesting now and if others are lucky, they should perhaps see it on Stillaway because it will not go far from its nesting area. More on two other owls later in this report. (I would love to have used Gary's photo, but he took it from a distance with his iPhone and so...)





*Kaye Edmonds*

Connie also saw a Pileated Woodpecker. The two species people tend to mention when they know you are a bird watcher are the Pileated and the Bald Eagle.

*Gary Sturge:* Gary had Purple Finch coming to his yard, as well as Common Redpolls (see photo of both below).

There haven't been a lot of Common

Redpoll sightings. I had a few on occasion coming to my yard, up to 10 one time, and others have had one or two. However, during the February Bird Bash, Dick, Greg Jaski and I saw about 200 or more on Riding Stable Road. There is always something very special about seeing a large flock of birds.



*Stephen O'Donnell*

*Jim Hasler:* Jim had up to 5 Gray Jays coming to his feeders, as well as at least 4 Pine Grosbeaks. I had up to 16 Pine Grosbeaks come to mine on a fairly regular basis for a period of

time, but that number diminished as the winter went on and now I rarely get any. Gray Jays were also seen during February's Bird Bash by Dick, Brent Turcotte and me. All were seen in areas off the North Highway, the old Ferguson Road.

*Dick Tafel:* Dick had a Barred Owl come to his yard one night just prior to our meeting. It sat on top of his feeder pole and he tried to get a photo of it, but at that time was unsuccessful. After the meeting, the Barred Owl returned and this time Dick successfully got a photo worthy of Rembrandt as you can see from his photo on the right!

Dick also saw 6 Horned Larks at Verner Lagoon, a lagoon not often visited during the winter, although he was there last winter, in January, and saw Horned Larks and Lapland Longspurs. (This is not from Dick's written list, but from my memory list.)

The only member to have seen Lapland Longspurs this winter so far is Lori. She saw one to five on a few occasions with the large flock of Snow Buntings, up to 200, she has had on and off in her yard. Dick also saw Snow Buntings in Verner, across from the Verner Co-op Feed Store, not a large flock like Lori's, but one of about 50.

### **February Migrants:**

On February 28, two days later than last year, Shirley McKercher saw 2 Herring Gulls on Callander Bay. Jim Hasler saw a Canada Goose in late February in the Memorial Drive area, a bit earlier than last year when one was seen on February 28 in the same area by Kaye and Brent. Kaye saw a Common Merganser in the open waters at Bonfield on February 27. Last year Common Mergansers were seen on the Mattawa River by Marc Buchanan, Fred Pinto and Sarah Wheelan during the February Bird Bash, February 18-19.



*Dick Tafel*





*Lloyd Sparks*

### **Boreal Owl:**

Two Boreal Owls were spotted in our area in February, one on February 2 by Sonje Bols on Cedar Bay Road on Lake Nosbonsing, and one by Lloyd and Janet Sparks on Wolfe Lake Road near Wolfe Lake. To see a photo of Sonje's Boreal, see page 18 of February's newsletter, *The Woodland Observer*, at <https://www.nipnats.com/newsletters/>. Lloyd's photo of a sleepy Boreal Owl is above.

### **Burrowing Owl:**

Grant McKercher, who is recently back from the Fort Myers area in Florida, told us about some of the birds he saw while there, but the one that raised the most interest was the Burrowing Owl (right).

Marc Buchanan, who was in Florida at the same time as Grant, hooked up with him for a day of birding. They saw, in addition to the many regular Florida species, two





Burrowing Owls in Cape Coral. Amazing how these owls nest right in an established



**Grant Mckercher**

neighbourhood (see photo above).

Cape Coral is 100 square miles in size, has 400 miles of canals and over 3000 Burrowing Owl burrows. For more information on Cape Coral's Burrowing Owls see:

<http://www.capecoralburrowingowls.com/where/>.

Once again because of the copious lists he keeps and consults, Dick saw one near Salt Lake City in June 1996.

Burrowing Owls in Canada, Wildlife Preservation Canada: *“Burrowing Owls were historically found in the grasslands of central and southwestern Canada, central and southern United States and Mexico, and South America. In Canada, they have virtually disappeared from Manitoba. In British Columbia, they were once listed as extirpated, but a small population has been re-established. Throughout their remaining range in Canada, they exist in greatly diminished numbers in scattered nesting sites. With fewer than 1,000 pairs thought to exist in Canada, the Burrowing Owl is one of the most endangered birds in Canada’s prairie grasslands.”*

#### **Nocturnal Owl Survey, month of April:**

And speaking of owls, April will soon be upon us and with it one of the birding events of the year, the Nocturnal Owl Survey. In fact, it is such a major event that a trophy, the base of which was designed and made by Ken Gowing, is awarded to those who see the most owls, Barred Owls in particular, and write about their survey in an entertaining manner – so many points for the number and type seen or



**Ken Gowing**

heard and so many points for the narrative. The winner is judged solely by me, although I will change my mind if there are strenuous objections for good reasons.

There have been quite a few people lately hearing Barred Owls call, so maybe an early date in April would be best.

This is the third year the trophy is up for grabs. The first year, the trophy was won by Lori and Ken and last year by Gary and Connie. To read their winning entry and all other very interesting and entertaining entries, the 2017 Owl Survey report is posted on the Nipissing Naturalist Club's website at: <https://www.nipnats.com/club-activities/bird-wing/reports-and-bird-counts/>. Scroll down past Dick Tafel's Year-end Reports to Owl Surveys.

To date, the teams this year consist of Gary and Connie who may take on their second route even though they had planned to give it up because two routes is a lot of work in the dead of a cold April's night; Doug Jr. and Doug Sr. Patterson who will take their Mattawa Route, Hwy. 533; Dick and Renee who will take their normal route, McConnell Lake Road; and April McCrum and Corey who will take their Restoule Route which proved to be fairly lucrative last year, certainly a lot more than their previous route between Marten River and Field. Last year, Marc Buchanan, Fred Pinto, Paul Smylie and Sarah Wheelan took over Craig and Elaine Hurst's Feronia route, but at this point I don't know if they plan to do so again.

If anyone wants to take part in this nighttime event to provide worthwhile information to Bird Studies Canada and would like their own route or go with others on established routes, please let me know. However, because it is a night survey in very early spring, be prepared to be cold no matter how bundled up you are, and to get home after midnight. You can access the available routes at: <http://www.birdscanada.org/volunteer/onowls/onowhelp.html> (click on Survey Route Map upon opening this page) or contact Kathy Jones, Bird Studies Canada, at [volunteer@birdscanada.org](mailto:volunteer@birdscanada.org). You can also establish your own route, but it has to meet certain specifications, so be sure to contact Kathy first.

For detailed information on the Nocturnal Owl Survey, see: <http://www.birdscanada.org/volunteer/onowls/index.jsp>.

### **World Sparrow Day, March 20:**

If the Nocturnal Owl Survey isn't enough to satisfy birders in the early spring, we have World Sparrow Day on March 20. This is our second year celebrating this day, somewhat early for sparrows in our neck of the woods. However this year, we have had some interesting sparrows stay for the winter and perhaps they will still be here on March 20. And although it's just our second year to recognize this day, it has been a worldwide event since 2010.



World Sparrow Day is an international initiative started by the Nature Forever Society of India in collaboration with France's Eco-Sys Action Foundation and numerous other national and international organizations. Although it is a day set aside to specifically celebrate the House Sparrow (right), it also takes into account all sparrows and all common birds, especially urban birds, birds often taken for granted.



*Renee Levesque*

We may not see many House Sparrows here in our area, an introduced bird not well-liked in southern urban areas; however, over the past 40 years, the House Sparrow has suffered a spectacular decline worldwide. In the UK alone, its numbers have dropped by as much as 50% since the 1970s.

**Last year because of the continuing winter weather, we extended World Sparrow Day for a week, and may do the same this year, although the way things are going, we might just celebrate the sparrow on its special day only, Tuesday, March 20. I will let you know, so be sure to check your emails a few days prior to March 20.**

On that day or during that week, please let me know the species and number of sparrows you see. Naturally, seeing House Sparrows is what really counts, but outside Lori Anderson and the Sturges, it is highly unlikely many of us will see House Sparrows unless we take a trip to the Verner Co-op. Last year, despite some rather wintry conditions, we saw a total of 11 sparrows and three species - the House, the American Tree and a Song Sparrow. I emailed Nature Forever Society in India to let them know just how remarkable this was during a time of winter weather, but never heard back.

March 20 is also the first day of spring.

**Animals:** Birders not only keep lists or don't keep lists of birds they see, but also make note of the animals that come to their yards, most attracted by feeders. Our group have had Red Squirrels, 7 at Ken's place and up to 4 at other homes; Black/Gray Squirrels, 4 to 6 at Gary Chowns', Gary Sturges' and Grant's



**Steve Pitt**



**Renee Levesque**

and written for children. Some of the stories concerning eagles are somewhat violent, eagles attacking humans, and a couple of stories are about the theft of young birds from their nests by humans, a seemingly accepted practice then.

yards; Flying Squirrels at Ken's place and at Gary Chowns' cottage in Restoule; Ermines at Ken's, Jim's and Renee's; Moles at Lori's and moles or shrews Dick's and Renee's; and deer at everyone's feeders, much to Dick's consternation, especially when they knock over the feeders.

### **The Chatterbox Book of Birds:**

At the auction during the Annual General Meeting of Nipissing Naturalists Club, I purchased a 1909 book entitled *The Chatterbox Book of Birds*. It was Oriana Pokorny who donated it and I believe it belonged to her grandmother. It is a soft cover paper book, falling apart almost 100 years later. It is comprised of short stories, each one page in length with illustrations,



### **Discount at Burrow's:**

Again this year, Doug Patterson obtained a 10% discount on bird seed and bird feeders at Burrow's for Bird Wing members. Be sure to show your membership card at the time of purchase. This discount is for members only, one of the many advantages of joining Bird Wing for only \$5.00 a year. Of course, to belong to Bird Wing, you must also take out a membership in Nipissing Naturalists Club. An annual single membership is \$20.00. Thanks to Bob at Burrow's for giving us a discount again this year.

### **Bird Bash:**

Our next Bird Bash is over the weekend of **March 24 and 25**. It should be a good time to see the migrants arriving. From then on, the number of species seen increases, reaching a frenzy come May.

### **Bird Wing:**

Our next Bird Wing meeting is on **March 27**. It will be our second to last indoor meeting before our May to August outings begin.

### **Happy St. Patrick's Day!**

In honour of St. Patrick's Day, I will end with Irish superstitions in which birds play a role. Last year, I mentioned the Magpie and the saying, "one for sorrow, two for joy". If you spot a single Magpie (seen at right), you have to salute it, say hello and make pleasantries with it, even if it's sometimes awkward to do so. If you don't, expect bad luck to come your way.

Two other Irish bird superstitions: When a Robin is near your back door, it is considered a good omen, but if a bird, even a Robin, flies into your house, it is considered a bad omen.

I would think these superstitions apply only to Irish birds, not to American Robins at our back door or to any of our birds here that might fly into our homes, unless, of course, we choose to consider them omens, either good or bad.



*Renee Levesque*