

Bird Wing Outing

May 22, 2018

Text by Renee Levesque; photos as indicated

Outing

Black-crowned Nigh-Heron: It has been three weeks since our first Bird Wing outing that took place on a lovely, sunny Tuesday morning in Laurier Woods. But with all the other May bird walks in Laurier Woods, as well as the Great Canadian Birdathon, I am hoping at this late date, I can remember all the species we saw. But what I certainly do remember very vividly is Dick Tafel, Lori Anderson, Daniel Currie, Kaye Edmonds and I seeing the Black-crowned Night-Heron. Not something easily forgotten.



When we first caught a glimpse of a bird flying by, we all thought it was an American Bittern. But then when we saw the same bird perched in a tree in the distance, we said, “Hey, that isn’t an American Bittern!” It had a stocky body, and with its neck tucked into its body, it looked quite hunchbacked. Kaye managed to get a photo (above) for identification purposes. However, complicating our identification was the fact that there was also an American Bittern in the same area. So it was a bit confusing when both were making an appearance in the same location but not initially at the same time. But when both finally flew by at the same time, one behind the other, we confirmed we were dealing with two species. .

Although this heron is fairly common and widely distributed, it is not usually found in our area. In fact, as far as I am aware, the last time one was seen in our area was in 1994, also in Laurier Woods, by Dick Tafel. According to eBird, the Night-Heron has been sighted in the Sudbury area over the years, from 2003 – when a juvenile was seen in October – to this past April. It has also been spotted over the years in the Ville Marie area, including one on May 3 of this year. The rest of us had not before seen a Black-crowned Night-Heron in Nipissing, although I had seen the adult and the juvenile in Florida.

From All About Birds: The adult Black-crowned Night-Heron, as its name implies, has a black cap on its large, flat head. It also has a black back, with gray wings and a whitish to pale gray belly. It has short legs, a thick neck and a heavy pointed black bill. Immatures are brown with

large white spots and yellow and black bills. In the photo below you can see the beginning of this immature's black crown.

It is not a big heron like our Great Blue Heron. Rather it is between the size of a crow and a goose, from 22 to 26 inches or 58 to 66 cm. It is found in wetlands across North America – by marshes, streams, lakes and reservoirs. During the day, it tends to spend its time on tree limbs or concealed among foliage and branches. But from evening to early morning, it spends its time foraging. It is an opportunistic hunter, eating leeches, earthworms, insects, lizards, crayfish, clams, mussels, fish, snakes, turtles, rodents, birds and eggs, but also carrion, plant materials and surprisingly, garbage at landfill sites.

It tends to forage on its own despite that fact that it is a social bird, roosting and nesting in groups. The groups include other heron species, egrets and ibises.



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Its nest site is in a tree near cattails.

Both the male and female incubate the nest and brood the chicks which leave the nest when they are a month old. They begin flying at six weeks, after which they widely disperse.

Although the Black-crowned Night-Heron is the most widespread heron in the world and although it is a common wetland bird, you have to look a little harder to find it than you would other herons. And because it is fairly common, it is a species of moderate concern. Threats include the draining and development of wetland habitat and contaminated runoff.

The Black-crowned Night-Heron is a good indicator of environmental quality because it forages at the top of the food chain; it tolerates disturbances; it has a wide distribution; and it is easy to study because it nests in colonies.

Marsh Wren: The Marsh Wren was another species that was a nice discovery – not that some of us hadn't seen one before, but that we saw one in Laurier Woods, not a place they had been seen before until this year, at least not to my recollection. Unfortunately, not everyone in the group heard or saw it, but Lori Anderson and I did. We first heard one, then saw it pop briefly atop one of the cattails, after which we heard another one. We sat and waited to see it again, but the eye had to be quick and the ears had to be keenly tuned. It wasn't that we went out of our way to find these wrens, but rather we had crossed the boardwalk and sat waiting for the Night-

Heron to make another appearance. So the Marsh Wren was actually a by-product of our patience – although happily there was a picnic table at that side of the marsh so we could relax a bit and not get too impatient. See photo below – without Kaye because she took the picture.



Osprey: We saw an Osprey fly overhead with a fish in its talons. Ospreys are not nearly as maneuverable as other hawks and, therefore, require open areas to transport their heavy load of caught fish. Their diet consists almost exclusively of live fish and they are the only North American raptor to live on such a diet. As a result, they are the only North American raptor with the ability to dive vertically into water to catch fish. They must then lift themselves out of the water with the heavy fish, which they position in their talons so that the fish is facing upright with its head forward (for optimum aerodynamics), and with it positioned such, they fly back to their nest.

Warblers Seen: 5 Yellows; 13 America Redstarts (see female at right, so different in colour from the jet black and orange male); 2 Yellow-rumps; 7 Chestnut-sided; 2 Blackburnians; 4 Ovenbirds; 7 Common Yellowthroats; and 1 Nashville.

Other Birds Seen: (in no particular order, but just as they come to my mind) 1 parasitic Brown-headed Cowbird probably planning to find a Yellow Warbler's nest for its egg-laying; 7 Red-eyed Vireos; 2 Warbling Vireos; 1 Least Flycatcher; 2 Brown Thrashers; 1 Veery; 5 Purple Finch; 1 Yellow-bellied Sapsucker; 1 Ruby-throated



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Hummingbird; 5 White-throated Sparrows; 6 Swamp Sparrows; 6 American Goldfinch; 1 Red-breasted Nuthatch; 1 Gadwall; 2 Mallards; 6 Barn Swallows; 2 Tree Swallows; 2 American Robins; 1 Common Raven; 4 Common Grackles (below because it rarely gets its photo in this report and its iridescent colours in the sunlight are quite striking); 3 Black-capped Chickadees; 1 Blue Jay; 3 Ring-billed Gulls; and many, many Red-winged Blackbirds.

Those of the group who got to Laurier Woods earlier also saw a Merlin and a Double-crested Cormorant.



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It was a very fun outing indeed and we were pleased to welcome Daniel Currie to the group. Daniel plans to join Nipissing Naturalists Club and Bird Wing. He doesn't know a lot of birds yet, but he is a keen learner and loves his new binoculars!

Another Uncommon Find

Eastern Towhee: Another rare bird for our area showed up in my yard in the early morning of May 27, the female Eastern Towhee, a seed-eating bird with a short conical bill, looking somewhat like an oversized sparrow. I had a female in my yard on May 13, 2013, the last time I saw one in our area. According to eBird, there have been some sightings in North Bay, but not many. Martin Parker saw one in May 2006 in Laurier Woods, the same month and year he saw one at Vic Rizzo's. (Martin didn't indicate on his checklist whether he saw a male or a female.) And in May 2009, Brent Turcotte heard its loud distinctive song in Laurier Woods. To my knowledge, none have stayed to breed in our area.



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The female Eastern Towhee (above) has a brown head, throat and back, unlike the male which has a black throat, head and upperparts. Both have a white belly with rufous sides. They have long tails with large white tail corners that they flick and flash in response to other towhees and when disturbed.

The Eastern Towhee is a solitary bird, preferring a dense shrub cover with a lot of leaf litter in which it can scratch with a two-footed backward hop, much like the Fox Sparrow. Because it is a bird of the undergrowth, it can be hard to see and that is why birders rely on hearing its call, *chewink*, or its song, *drink your tea*.

Motus Wildlife Tracking System

On May 25, members of Nipissing Naturalists Club and various dignitaries and donors gathered at the Laurentian Escarpment Conservation Area to watch the unveiling of the plaque signifying that the tracking system is now operational. For more information on the ceremony see June's *The Woodland Observer*, <https://www.nipnats.com/>. Photo of the Motus tower is at right.

Special kudos need to go to Bird Winger, Gary Sturge, for seeing this major project through to completion.

On June 4, Gary informed me that two birds were recorded shortly after the tracking system became operational – a



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Savannah Sparrow that was recorded at Bird Studies Canada's headquarters in Port Rowan was recorded here three days later; and a Dunlin that was recorded near Tillsonburg was recorded here a day later.

Great Canadian Birdathon

Over the weekend of May 26 and 27, two teams took part in the Great Canadian Birdathon. We began at 1:00 p.m. on Saturday, May 26, and birded until we dropped at 1:00 p.m. the next day, Sunday, May 27! Well, I exaggerate slightly. We did get a few hours' sleep, but not until we tried in vain to see/hear the Common Nighthawk flying over Circle Lake and not until we stood around by Dreany Lake campground waiting to hear that nighttime call, *whip-poor-will*.

Dick Tafel's team was comprised of Lori Anderson, Jackie Manella and me. Fred Pinto's team was comprised of Kaye Edmonds, Louise Simpson and Sarah Wheelan. We overlapped twice after our Le Mans start from the former Visitors' Centre – Saturday night at Dreany Lake and Sunday morning at Laurier Woods.

I would think the highlight for Fred's team was seeing two Barred Owls on Alsace Road, an adult and a fluffy, cute immature. Kaye captured a great photo of the immature as seen at right. Their team also got to see or hear more warblers than our team. Not to make excuses, but it poured with rain when we went warbler hunting on Alsace Road and area!

Our team's highlights were perhaps three-fold - a Red-necked Grebe at Jocko Point, three little Wilson's Phalaropes at Verner Lagoon and nine Black Terns at Warren Lagoon.



Kaye Edmonds

In the end and once again, our team takes the trophy for the third year in a row. However, to be fair, there was a year recently when Fred Pinto and Marc Buchanan were the winners, but this was before our beautiful trophy that was designed and made by Ken Gowing using a carved shorebird I donated. The trophy will be presented at September's meeting of Bird Wing. There may be a second place prize awarded. And why not – all eight participants worked very hard to make this happen and all eight deserve as many kudos as they can get.

Dick's team saw 94 species and heard 6, for a total of 100 species; Fred's team saw 74 species and heard 11 for a total of 85 species.

Jackie Manella will be writing an article on her first experience as a Birdathoner for September's *The Woodland Observer*. Her main observation by the end of the weekend: It is one fast-moving event, no time to look more than once at the bird, have to move on!

Trumpeter Swan



Ernie Frayle sent me a photo of a Trumpeter Swan, R78, (seen at left) that spent a few days on a pond near his place. I contacted Kyna of Ontario Trumpeter Swan Restoration and she informed me that this particular swan, a male hatched in 2015, was tagged in Aurora when he was a cygnet to parents 886 and an un-banded mate who spent the winter in Aurora. (It is not known where R78 was born.) Be sure to continue to send me any sightings of swans with wing tags, or even without. Wing tags on Trumpeters, because they are easy to see and do not have to be captured to see, are sort of like tagged birds picked up by the Motus Wildlife Tracking System.

Other Sightings

Some sightings deserve special mention either because we don't often get to see them or because they are so colourful.

The Indigo Bunting (right) was seen at Ernie Frayle's feeder on Peddler's Drive, mid-May.



A Golden Eagle was seen by Kaye Edmonds near Mattawa during the April Bird Bash. Quite the nice find.



A Baltimore Oriole (left) was seen by me at Cache Bay on May 23, singing its heart out, and on May 27, two were found by the Tafel team on Stillar Side Road, Powassan, during the Great Canadian Birdathon; and on May 26, Fred's team saw a Baltimore Oriole at the Veuve River bridge area, Laplage Road, West Nipissing.

A female Blackburnian Warbler was seen by me on May 5 finding something to eat on icy Lake Nipissing at Sunset Park. Just so unusual to see a warbler on ice.

Cedar Waxwings arrived en masse during the Great Canadian Birdathon. Our team saw at least 70 on Beaucage Road and I later saw a pair engaged in courtship feeding at the end of Johnson Road, Corbeil.

A Red-necked Phalarope was seen by Kaye on June 2 at Callander Lagoon.

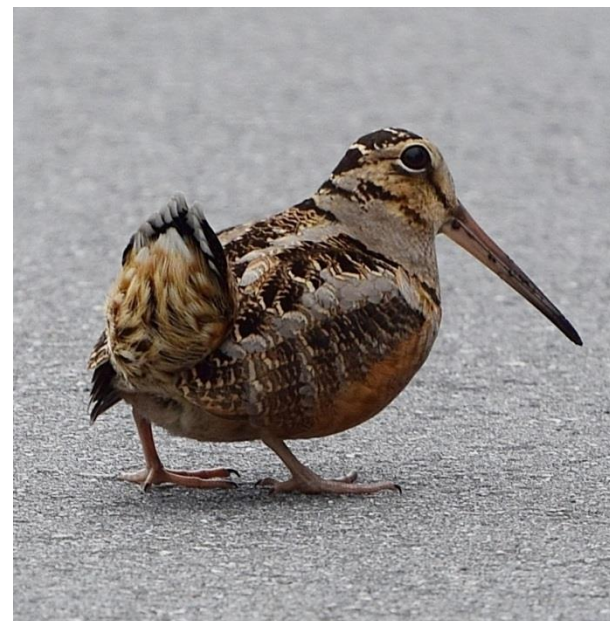
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Nocturnal Owl Survey

I am waiting for Lori Anderson's report, after which I can judge the winning Nocturnal Owl Survey entry. As last year, I will put together a package of all entries for posting on our website, with my explanation as to why I think the winner is the winner. Again, if anyone disagrees and if the reasons are sound, I will take those arguments into serious consideration.

American Woodcock Singing Ground Survey

In mid-May, Gary and Connie Sturge, with Matt Proconier, undertook the American Woodcock Singing Ground Survey, a survey that monitors the breeding populations of the American Woodcock (right) in North America. The results help in the development of management programs for this species.



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Dedicated volunteers, known as runners, spend one spring evening between April 10 and May 20 surveying a roadside route. Runners stop at pre-assigned points and count all American Woodcocks they hear.

This survey is through the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and delivered in Ontario by Bird Studies Canada, Environment Canada and the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry.

Gary, Connie and Matt heard three American Woodcocks, average for this route, a route Gary and Connie have been doing for a few years now.

Eastern Bluebird Monitoring and Chipping Sparrow

I am undertaking a Year of the Bird Project with Lori Anderson – monitoring Eastern Bluebird houses that Lori installed on her property by Graham Lake (right). However, I have not had the opportunity to do any monitoring yet, although Lori has done her bit in terms of my Eastern Bluebird house – she installed it on April 27, along with some of her own. And because this is a new location for the houses, if they don't find them this year, there is always next. (**Late breaking news:** Unfortunately, a House Sparrow found my house! Just what we didn't want to happen and what we thought would not happen as the house was installed quite a distance from the barn.)

My Year of the Bird project this past winter was to keep my little Chipping Sparrow alive despite a very cold period of time starting after

Christmas and despite damage to its upper mandible. But survive it did and even found a mate. They are nesting nearby, I believe in my

cedar hedge, and I couldn't be happier. I think mine is the female. Its mandible did heal, although not completely and if I take a photo of it (left) and zoom in on its bill, I can still see some irregularity.



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Lori Anderson

Canada Jay

The Gray Jay is no longer the Gray Jay. Yes, it is still grey, but its name has finally been restored to its original name, Canada Jay!

When it was first named back in 1831, it was called Canada Jay, but unfortunately in 1957, the name erroneously got changed to Gray Jay and Gray Jay it has been until May 2018, 61 years later. And when the name was changed to Gray Jay, the American spelling of gray was used instead of our spelling of grey.

In December 2017, Dan Strickland, ornithologist, and six members of the American Ornithological Society (AOS) submitted a proposal for the name change to the North American Classification Committee (NACC). Proposals must receive a two-thirds positive vote by Committee members to pass – and pass it did, 9 votes for and 1 against.

Now what needs to be done is to convince the Trudeau government that we want a national bird, and maybe by renaming the Gray Jay the Canada Jay that will do the trick, especially in this The Year of the Bird. Certainly David Bird, McGill professor emeritus and B.C. ornithologist, will continue to push for having the Canada Jay declared our national bird. Letters have been written to the government, but responses to these letters have not been encouraging.

Why the Canada Jay as our national bird? Well, in addition to its now carrying the name of our country, it is loyal – doesn't migrate in the winter; it is tough – can breed in frigid

temperatures; it is smart – a member of the corvid family like the American Crow and Common Raven and we know how smart they are; it is friendly – will eat out of your hand as it did out of Sonje Bols' as shown in the photo above; it is found in every province and territory; it is not the provincial bird of any other province like the Common Loon (Ontario) and the Snowy Owl (Quebec); and it figures in the folklore of the First Nations people – the Canada Jay is sometimes called whiskey jack, a name derived from Wisakedjak, meaning trickster. Quite a few good reasons for naming it our national bird!



Photo by Mike Kent, courtesy of Sonje Bols

Professor Bird, who believes so much that the Canada Jay must become our national bird, is prepared to walk across Canada to gather a million signatures in support of this. If it comes to a cross-country walk, it will be called **The Great Canadian Jay Walk**.

June and July's Bird Bash

By the time you receive this report June's Bird Bash scheduled for the weekend of June 9 and 10 will be over. But stay tuned for July's, over the **weekend of July 21 and 22**. Mark the dates on your calendar.

June's Bird Wing Outing

This year because of vacation plans, June's **Bird Wing outing will take place on the Summer Solstice, Thursday, June 21, starting at 6:30 p.m. Meet at the former Visitors' Centre** for carpooling to perhaps River Road and environs where we will once again look for Le Conte's Sparrow and the Sedge Wren and maybe not find them, but maybe will. However, we should find other interesting species. Last June, Gary, Connie, Abi and Gus spotted a Wilson's Snipe.

Hoodwinked

And in closing, thanks to Steve Pitt, master of etymology, comes an English word derived from falconry.

A falconer covers a hawk's eyes and head with a small leather hood to keep it from distraction until its hunting spot is reached. Hence the term hoodwinked.

That the English of 16th-century falconry became part of our vocabulary was thanks in part to William Shakespeare, an amateur falconer. "Experts still argue about how much falconry Shakespeare actually practiced in real life, but he was no doubt personally acquainted with the sport – his plays carry more than 50 references to falconry!" (From "How falconry changed language" by Andrew Evans, 19 January, 2017, [bbc.com weekly newsletter](http://bbc.com/weekly).)

