

# Bird Wing Report

January, 2020



*Renee Levesque*

*Text by Renee Levesque; photos as indicated*

The first meeting for a new year and a new decade took place on January 23 at coworking 176 on Lakeshore Drive. By January, we were to have been back in our regular meeting place, the auditorium of the North Bay Public Library, but unfortunately the library's current roofing problems now prevent us from meeting there until May. However by then, Bird Wing outings will have begun and we will not need the auditorium until September. It has been a long two-year delay and we again thank Lori Laporte for allowing us to use her garden centre for some of that time. (Lori was not able to accommodate us this month because she closed her garden centre for the month.)

We had two new members join us, Bill and Carol Fleming. They seem quite keen on bird watching and learning about the different species, and have already taken part in their first Bird Bash! Also in attendance was Jim Hasler who seems to be recuperating quite well from his bypass surgery in December. Nice to have you back, Jim!

## **Species Seen in January:**

We begin each meeting by naming two species we saw during the month.

Bill had the honours of beginning the meeting with two birds he saw in January – Ruffed Grouse and Pileated Woodpecker. And Carol followed with Red-breasted Nuthatch and American Goldfinch. Goldfinches have been here in large numbers this winter and have been seen by most of us. Nice to have them this winter after not seeing any last winter, although having goldfinches this winter usually means no Common Redpolls, and vice-versa. I don't think anyone has seen

Common Redpolls, although I see from eBird that Buddy Myles saw two in Mashkinonje Provincial Park. I am getting only a few goldfinch compared to Grant McKercher's 40 or so and Dick Tafel's 50 to 60, and though they are eating Dick out of house and home, the few I get in my yard prefer the seeds from my lilac trees.

I think the American Goldfinch and the American Tree Sparrow in my neck of the woods got together and decided the goldfinch would go to Leger Road, where up to 40 can be found, and the American Tree would come to my place where I have been getting anywhere from 14 to 25 each day. Gary Chowns also had some in his yard, as did Gary Sturge. I know Steve Pitt also had American Tree Sparrows judging by the photo he sent me of Carrot Top the Snowman, at right.



Steve Pitt

Dark-eyed Juncos have also been seen at some feeders – mine, Lori's and Ken's in particular. I have had up to 10 juncos. Since I have been birding, I don't believe I have seen as many American Tree Sparrows and Dark-eyed Juncos during the winter as this year.

What would be a Bird Wing meeting without one of the Sturges mentioning seeing a raptor and this meeting was no exception. Connie saw a Merlin at her place outside Powassan, as did I at my place and Dick on Hwy 63. But she also saw Northern Goshawk on Hazelglen Road. In Connie's words here is how the goshawk sighting came about:

*"We were driving down Hazelglen and as we passed the home of Bruce Hummel and his wife, we saw some birds at his place. So we turned around and were slowly going by their house when the car wheels on the passenger side went into a snowbank because Gary was paying more attention to the birds than the road. (Editor's note: It happens!) Accelerating to get free of the snowbank only made things worse. So off Gary went to try to get some help while I sat in the car and while sitting there, what should fly across the road right in front of the windshield, but a goshawk! (Just in case you are wondering, we did get the car out of the snowbank with help from a man who drove by with his four-wheel drive.)"*

*As an aside, Bruce Hummel makes bird feeders and houses out of cedar and sells them and other items he makes at various events in the area."*

Gary and Luanne Chowns recently had a Northern Goshawk in their city yard when it swooped down to get one of the pigeons! Not often one is seen right in the City and right in one's city back yard! Gary's photo of his goshawk is at right.

Maybe because Connie got to go before Gary, Gary was confined to non-raptor sightings, the House Sparrow and Pine Siskins. Prior to January there certainly seemed to be more Pine Siskins around. Now most of us are seeing only a few. As for House Sparrows, they were at Gary's place, then left and then returned in large numbers of up to 30. Lori Anderson always has House Sparrows in her barn and you can count on seeing a few at the Co-op Feed Store in Verner. Lori and I are not fans of the invasive House Sparrow, although I quite like seeing these sparrows in places where they are meant to be, Europe and the United Kingdom, for example.

For the second time since joining Bird Wing, Bill Sikora who lives in Guelph was able to attend – always nice to see him! And he had two good bird sightings – the White-winged Crossbill and the Canada Jay. He saw two White-winged Crossbills (below) on Tower Drive and others had seen a few, up to five, on Wasing Road, Fossmills Road, and Hwy 533 connecting Mattawa to Hwy 63. The White-wings, although seen in small numbers, were more frequently seen than Red Crossbills. The Red Crossbills (at heading) were seen this January only by Dick and me when we saw five of them on Hwy 656 between Antoine Mountain and Otto Holden Dam.



*Gary Chowns*



*Stephen O'Donnell*

The Canada Jay was not often seen, but was also seen on Larocque Road by me and on Cook Mills Road by Grant McKercher. Subsequent to the meeting and before January was out, Dick and I saw five Canada Jays, two on Cook Mills, two on Bidwell Road and one in Marten River. It was also

in Marten River while snowshoeing in the provincial park that Bill saw his Canada Jay.

Snow Buntings can be found on Lori's farm and farms near hers. She gets up to 50 to 60 of them, and nearby on Maple Road she saw, as did Stephen O'Donnell, eight Horned Larks (at right).



*Stephen O'Donnell*

Ken Gowing had a Barred Owl at his feeder. I wonder if it is Bart, the Barred Owl that kept returning to Ken's a couple of years back and was named Bart by Ken. Grant has also had a Barred Owl at his place on Callander Bay, as did the Flemings at their place on the South Shore of Lake Nipissing. Dick and I saw a Snowy Owl on Hwy 64 at the corner of the highway and Michel Road. As far as I am aware, we are the only ones to have seen a Snowy so far this year, but more should arrive.

Ken also saw a rafter or flock of about 20 Wild Turkeys (below) that he and Lori saw at Chisholm's landfill site. They were also seen there by Grant, Dick and me. The gatekeeper feeds them and welcomes visitors to commune with the rafter if it isn't busy at the site.



*Renee Levesque*

The Hairy Woodpecker and European Starlings were Jim Hasler's two birds, both seen by most of us.

Grant saw the Peregrine Falcon at its usual spot, atop the Pro-Cathedral, seen there also by the Chowns. If you want to catch a glimpse of it, Grant recommends spending the day at the downtown Twigs! (Others had seen the falcon at both locations, the Pro-Cathedral and the Bell Tower, in December, but that doesn't count for January!)

Dick saw a Cooper's Hawk at the East Ferris landfill site. Another raptor seen was the Red-tailed Hawk, seen by Dick and me on Hwy 11 just outside Powassan and by Buddy Myles in West Nipissing. Bald Eagles were also seen by some, mainly at or in the vicinity of Powassan's landfill site.

Grant also saw Purple Finch at his place. There aren't many Purple Finches around this winter, but a few were also seen by me and by Ken in our yards. Mine are not coming to the feeders, but prefer the berries on one of my trees or just like to sit and survey all the other birds in my yard.

Keith Pearson saw the Downy Woodpecker and the Blue Jay. I believe everyone had seen both, although remarkably the Chowns are not getting any Blue Jays in their yard! Blue Jays are very numerous this year. Lori saw 67 in Chisholm alone during January's Bird Bash!

Gary Chowns had up to 25 Mallards in his yard! That must have been where they were during January's Bird Bash because when Dick and I went by the treatment plant during the Bash, we saw none there, although Grant did see five. We saw a few in the open water behind the Green Store on Trout Lake Road, along with a couple of American Black Ducks. Common Goldeneyes had been spotted by me, Dick and Grant, some in the Ottawa River in Mattawa and one lone male in the Ottawa River in Thorne near Temiscaming.



*Renee Levesque*



Renee Levesque

Luanne Chowns had four to six Mourning Doves (at left) in her yard; Gary and Connie, up to 10; and Mary Young had 19 during the January Bird Bash. I had one or two on and off. Luanne also had two American Crows that came to her yard daily. Quite a few crows can be seen in the City and Common Ravens outside the City.

Species seen after we all named our two sightings were Black-capped Chickadees and Red-breasted and White-breasted Nuthatches (below). Ken, the Flemings, Dick and Grant frequently get White-breasted Nuthatches at their feeders. (Some reported not seeing as many chickadees at their feeders as other years, although the number in my yard is the same as previous years.)

Other species seen were the Northern Shrike seen by the Sturges on Maple Hill Road, by Grant at his place, by Kaye Edmonds in Laurier Woods, and by Lori and Ken in each of their yards. I hadn't seen any until the day or so after the meeting when Dick and I saw five, two on Maple Hill, one on Hazelglen and one on Hwy 17 near the hospital.

Evening Grosbeaks have been very scarce this winter so far, but I happened to see five of them on Hwy 533 between Mattawa and Hwy 63. (More on Evening Grosbeaks later in this report.)



Grant McKercher

Although some of us saw Cedar Waxings (at right) in December when we were expecting Bohemian Waxwings, only Grant saw some in January and on January 1 at that! Nice welcome to the New Year, Grant. And I had a nice Christmas Day present when an American Robin showed up in my yard.

And finally, Linda Stoner had a Gray Catbird appear in her yard on January 29 and 30. About four years ago, I remember when Matt Walter, a former Bird Wing member, had one in his yard in Thibeault Terrace. Matt's photo is below.



*Grant McKercher*



### **Favourite Sighting in 2019:**

For me and others who witnessed it, the most dramatic sighting in 2019 had to be the shorebirds that had gathered by the hundreds in the wet fields at the end of Veuve River Road last May – Red Knot, Hudsonian Godwit, Ruddy Turnstone, Black-bellied Plover, American Golden Plover, Semipalmated Plover, Dunlin, Least Sandpiper, Spotted Sandpiper and Killdeer. It was the first time I had seen a Hudsonian Godwit and a Red Knot, rare birds for our area. However, I think the most spectacular sight, one I will never forget as I stood there in awe with Dick and Lisa Hackett, was when a good couple of hundred Black-bellied Plovers took to the sky, covering it like a large black cloud.

In addition to these shorebirds, there were hundreds of gulls – Ring-billed and Herring and even some Caspian Terns, to say nothing of the hundreds of Canada Geese. (Michael Arthurs also reported seeing a Laughing Gull at this location and although I got there shortly after he told me one was there, I did not see it.)

For Gary and Luanne it was the presence of a Northern Saw-whet Owl twice in their yard, once in January 2019 and once in October. How fortunate is that!

For Lori it was the large number of warblers seen at Powassan Lagoon during May's Great Canadian Birdathon, in particular seeing the Cerulean Warbler (at right), another rare bird for our area. She saw it at the same time Jackie Manella and I saw it, and although Dick was on our team, he did not stick with the women as he should have and so didn't see it! We were unable to find it again for him. Unfortunately, I did not get its photo. The sighting was a brief one, but a good one. Another great view that day at Powassan Lagoon was of the Blackpoll Warbler. There it was sitting on a fence post as we drove up the laneway. And if that wasn't enough, there was also a Scarlet Tanager in plain view. Lori also mentioned the abundance of Cape May Warblers. Some years, we can barely see one, but last year, we saw quite a few.



*Wikimedia Commons*

For Gary Sturge it was getting nine Common Nighthawks during his and Connie's Canadian Nightjar Survey last spring. Dick and I inadvertently flushed one during the day by the boardwalk on the Sturgeon Museum Trail, not a trail one can easily walk on because it is in such need of repair. But the pièce de resistance was the one Gary Chowns saw in Laurier Woods during the day as it slept in a tree. I remember that day well because we were at Veuve River looking at the shorebirds for about the fifth time, when Gary called Dick to tell him and off we went, hoping against hope it would still be there – and it was! It was my very first sighting of a Common Nighthawk during the day – the one seen on the museum trail was the second daytime sighting.





*Buddy Myles*

But Gary and Connie's greatest highlight I would think was seeing an Orchard Oriole (above) in their yard in the spring, followed by five Baltimore Orioles. At around the same time, Buddy saw an Orchard Oriole near his place in Verner.

And for Jim Hasler it was, as it was for those of us walking the Laurier Woods trails, the pair of Pileated Woodpeckers nesting there. Each time we walked near their nesting area, they would let us know!

### **Rock Pigeon:**

I was sorry the Rock Pigeon did not get a mention because I wanted to talk about one exceptionally intelligent one that comes to my yard. I had recently read an interesting article on one Puffin on Grimsey Island in Iceland and one in Wales, both having been seen using a stick to scratch an itch! You can read the article at <https://www.icelandreview.com/nature-travel/puffins-iceland-wales-use-tools/> and can watch the video at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rDWkJOP7ycg>. So how does this relate to my pigeon? Well, just take a look at the photo on the right of the pigeon in my yard!



*Renee Levesque*

## Summaries of the Christmas Bird Count:

Using the historical data from the American Audubon Society website, Dick spent quite a bit of time summarizing the results from 1982 to 2018 of the Christmas Bird Counts (CBC) in our CBC circle. Except for a couple of examples, I will not repeat the numbers here, but instead will format Dick's report and send it to Bird Wing members at a later date.



Renee Levesque

In 1982, 383 Evening Grosbeaks (at right) were seen, with a high number of 2,219 in 1994. The numbers stayed in the hundreds and thousands until 2002 when only seven were seen. With the exception of 2003 when 123 were seen and 2015 when 122 were seen, numbers from 2002 on did not get into the hundreds, and certainly not into the thousands.

On the other hand, American Goldfinch numbers have increased. In 1982, five were seen compared to 2016 when 419 were seen. Numbers remained low until 1992 and then generally stayed high from that time on with the exception of 2007 when none was seen and 2018 when one was seen.

Of course finches and finch-like species are irruptive species, going to where the winter food source is the greatest. Scientists and researchers take that and other variables into consideration – weather, temperature, snow depth, change in landscape, the number of participants, etc. From Mike Burrell:

*“For the CBC data use, it is really up to the researchers using the data to best*

*decide how to use it. I'd say often the questions being asked use very large datasets (e.g. 50 years of North America-wide results for the Rusty Blackbird), so that sort of self-corrects for some of the year-to-year variations caused by weather and effort changes. But beyond that, those researchers using the data know ... how to do their statistics. They'd certainly have the*

*ability to correct for things like weather and effort, which would be two of the biggest variables accounting for the changes in bird numbers.”*

### **Book Review:**

I had asked Kevan Cowcill for his book review of *A Feathered River Across The Sky: The Passenger Pigeon's Flight to Extinction* by Joel Greenberg before I decided to scale back on the Bird Wing reports. So here is Kevan's review below:

September 1, 1914. It isn't often we can record an exact date for an extinction, but it was on this date, Martha, the last Passenger Pigeon, died in a Cincinnati Zoo. A mere 60 years earlier flock numbers were still counted in the billions!

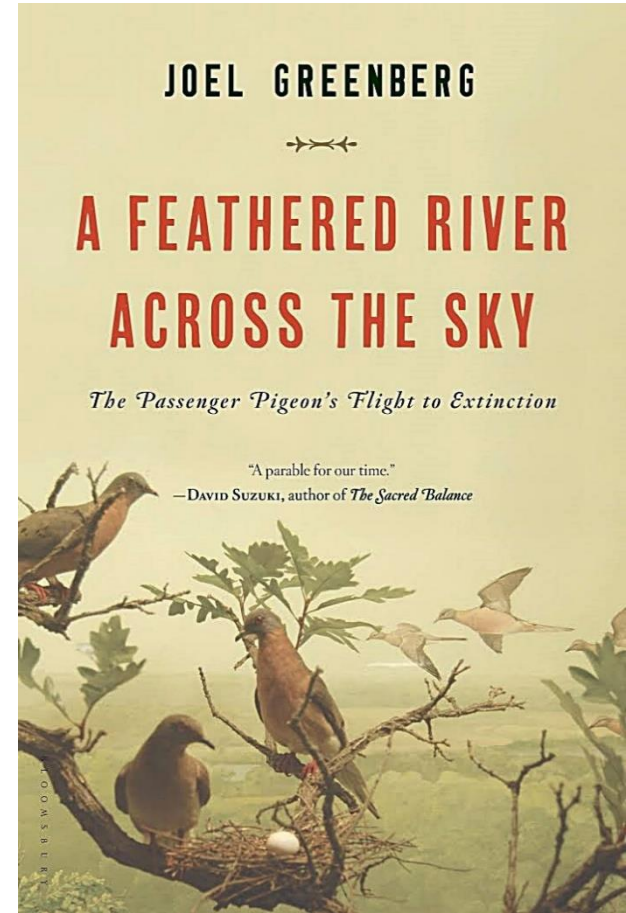
This book, written around eyewitness and newspaper accounts from the time, shows human actions and attitudes are still unchanged. As Mark Twain is reputed to have said, *“History doesn't repeat itself, but it often rhymes.”*

As an example, in the 1860s pigeons were shipped to open air markets in such large numbers that small mountains of unsold birds were shovelled into the streets to rot! A century later, fish from Lake Ontario were caught in such large numbers that bulldozers were used to push small mountains of unsold fish back into the lake to rot.

The book covers a great deal of the known biology of the bird, such as the 42 genera of plants they ate, their favoured foods, and how they (probably) discovered new sources of food. Some of the best parts of the book are the eyewitness accounts that tell of the awe an incoming flock evoked. Chief Pokagon's account alone makes you want to experience what he did.

*“... I was startled by hearing a gurgling, rumbling sound, as though an army of horses laden with sleigh bells was advancing through the deep forests towards me. As I listened more intently, I concluded that ... it was distant thunder, and yet the morning was clear, calm and beautiful. Nearer and nearer came the strange comingling sounds of sleigh bells, mixed with the rumbling of an approaching storm. While I gazed in wonder and astonishment, I beheld moving towards me in an unbroken front millions of pigeons .... They passed like a cloud through the branches of the big trees, through underbrush and over the ground.... They fluttered all about me, lighting on my head and shoulders...uttering to their mates those strange bell-like wooing notes which I had mistaken for the ringing of bells in the distance.”*

Many of the other eloquent descriptions of pigeon flight come from those who indiscriminately slaughtered them, which leads Greenberg to sardonically write, *“What a shame that passenger*





*pigeons became extinct. Future generations would be denied the near euphoria that apparently accompanied raising a gun toward a flock of pigeons and firing.”*

It was also morbidly amusing to read how various writers unrealistically denied human agency in the pigeon decline by saying the pigeons were still doing well. The pigeons had “*retreated in great numbers to the deserts of Arizona*” (an article in the journal *Science*, which was thoroughly rebutted by a reviewer in the journal *Condor*); had escaped persecution by hiding out in the plains 15 miles east of Puget sound: “*Every bird lover would rejoice to hear that this wonderful bird had finally outwitted its great persecutor and lengthened its lease on life by ‘going West’ in the true American spirit of liberty*” (*The Auk*, 1877); and were hiding in the millions in the pine forests of Chile where the bird had assumed a new disguise, “*a renovated plumage far more gorgeous than before, and more befitting of its new tropical home in Columbian jungles.*” Turning parrots into Passenger Pigeons must surely rank as one of the great examples of motivated reasoning!

Today, we can see Passenger Pigeon’s influence in terms like “stool pigeon” and “clay pigeon”, and in place names. There are over 130 places in Canada and the US with the name “pigeon” in them. As well, places like Mimico (a Toronto suburb), Omemee (near Peterborough), and

Omemea (an island in the Parry Sound area) are derived from the Mississauga word *omiimiikaa*, denoting a place where wild pigeons gather.

While this book is fascinating for many reasons – natural history and descriptions of the birds in flight – it is also difficult to read for two reasons.

Firstly, it is based on the writings of the time. What they wrote with pride we view with horror. It elicits a “How could you?” reflexive response in us. Secondly, you see the similarity between their short-sighted actions and our own. Since 1970 fish stocks have halved, commercial stocks are down by 75%, other stocks have collapsed completely; we have reduced bird populations by a third and other animal populations more than 50%. Yet industry lobbyists, their politicians and ideological-based editorials insist this isn’t a problem, there’s no need to impose restrictions upon their industries. It is as if we have not learned from history.

Still, if you want an idea of what it once was like to see and hear millions of birds flocking, then this book that relies on many eyewitness accounts, will bring back the Passenger Pigeon if just in your imagination.

### **Injured Owl:**

Through Bird Wing member, Corinne Urrutia, I learned that North Bay Hydro workers found an injured Great Horned Owl at one of its transformer stations. Through Facebook, North Bay Hydro reached out to the public for help and help it got. It is my understanding that the North Bay Animal Hospital on Seymour Street stepped in, contacted The Owl Foundation in the Niagara Peninsula, and from there a driver was found to transport the owl to its facility. For more information on The Owl Foundation see

<http://www.theowlfoundation.ca/>.

The photo of the owl at right is from the North Bay Hydro Facebook page.



*North Bay Hydro*

### **Dine with the Author:**

Canadian writer, Steve Burrows, will be the guest speaker at the **Rotary Club/Callander Library dinner at the Best Western on Lakeshore Drive on Saturday, May 9**. Why is this

announcement being made in a Bird Wing report? Because the author is a birder who has birded on six continents and took his passion to another level by writing birder murder mysteries! (I wish I had thought of that, but too late now!!) Steve's first birder murder mystery is titled *A Siege of Bitterns* and was so good it won the prestigious Arthur Ellis Award for best first novel. Other books in the series are *A Pitying of Doves*, *A Cast of Flacons*, *A Shimmering of Hummingbirds*, *A Tidying of Magpies*, and *a Dancing of Cranes*. For more on this author and his birder mystery novels, visit his website at <http://www.abirdermurder.com/>.

Tickets are expensive at \$85.00 a person, but for \$40.00 of that you get a tax receipt. And 50% of the net proceeds go to the Callander Library and 50% to the Rotary Club's literacy projects, both great causes. So start saving your toonies now and if interested, please let Dick Tafel know. Dick's email address is [rtafel@sympatico.ca](mailto:rtafel@sympatico.ca).

As an aside, I attended last year when the speaker was Terry Fallis, humour writer of many novels, and winner of the Stephen Leacock Medal for Humour two or three times. It was quite the entertaining evening.

### **Great Backyard Bird Count:**

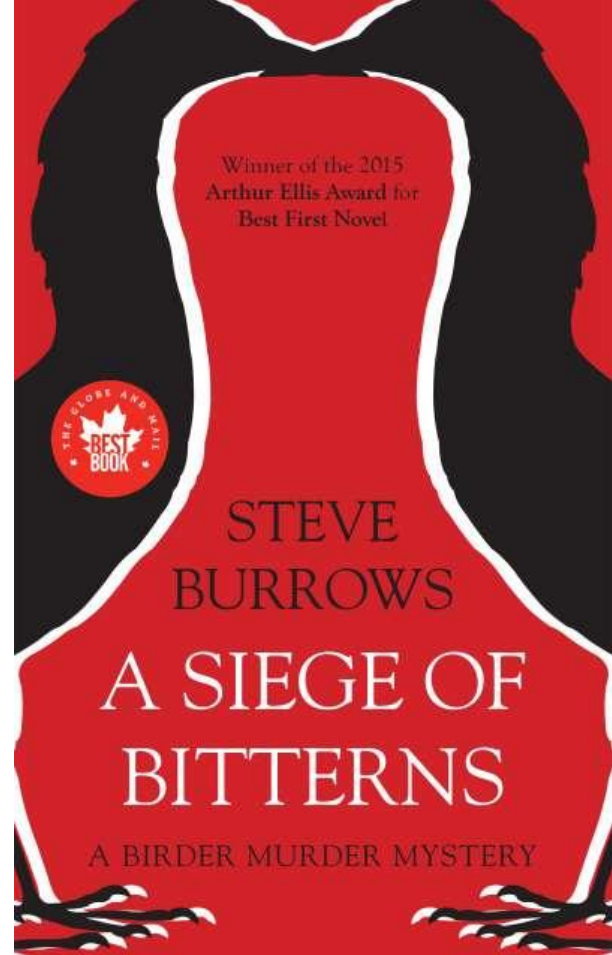
The global Great Backyard Bird Count (GBBC) supported by Cornell Lab of Ornithology, the National Audubon Society and Bird Studies Canada, powered by eBird, takes place over the Family Day weekend, **Friday, February 14, to Monday, February 17 inclusive**. If you love the birds, this is a good activity for Valentine's Day!

To enter you create a free account if you are not already registered with eBird or any other Cornell Lab citizen-science program. If you are registered with eBird, simply use eBird as you normally would.

Basically, you count for as little as 15 minutes on a single day or on as many of the four days as you like. You enter a separate checklist for each new location, each new day and each new time period. The watching doesn't have to take place only in your back yard, but in any location where you have watched birds for at least 15 minutes.

Once you are registered and ready to begin this citizen science event, you will get an online checklist on which you enter the species and number of birds seen.

For more detailed information and to register see <https://gbbc.birdcount.org/>.



### **Bird Bash:**

February's Bird Bash will also take part over the Family Day weekend, but only on **Saturday, February 15, and Sunday, February 16, and only over a 24-hour consecutive period during this timeframe.** So any species you see while participating in the GBBC can also be counted as species seen for our February Bird Bash as long as it is within the Bird Bash timeframe.

### **Bird Wing Meeting:**

February's Bird Wing meeting, to be held on **Tuesday, February 25, starting at 6:30 p.m.,** features Lisa Hackett as our guest speaker. Lisa is a well-known birder in our area who will speak to us on audio bird recording based on the course she took last year at Cornell Lab of Ornithology. If you are on eBird, you may have noticed that Lisa posts many of her bird recordings.

February's meeting, like January's, will be held in the **Café at coworking 176, 176 Lakeshore Drive,** the corner of Lakeshore and Gertrude in the former Tweedsmuir Public School.

In closing, it's not always birds we see while out birding or while checking the birds in our yard. Recently Dick and I saw three Canada Lynx on Riding Stable Road and a wolf on Leclair Road. And it is not only the American Tree Sparrow that decided to pay Steve Pitt's Carrot Top Snowman a visit, as shown on page 1 of this report, but also a Red Squirrel and a White-tailed Deer as pictured below! (I had previously sent you Steve's before and after photos of the snowman he named Carrot Top.)

