

Bird Wing Report

October 2024



Events and Reminders

Whatsapp: If you want to be informed about an unusual or rare bird or a first-of-the-season bird, consider signing up for Bird Wing's Whatsapp. Many of us have been using the Whatsapp for a year or so now, but if others want to join, please let June Telford know by calling her at 519-791-2030.

Project FeederWatch: Project FeederWatch runs from **November 1, 2024, to April 30, 2025**. It is a joint effort by Birds Canada and the Cornell Lab of Ornithology to help scientists “monitor the health of bird populations and their habitats, to understand how the distribution and abundance of birds change over time and to identify species at risk so as to develop recommendations for their recovery.” To take part in Project FeederWatch, you must first make a donation, usually from \$25.00 and up. You then pick two consecutive days a week to watch birds at your feeder or anywhere in your yard and report your sightings on a special Project FeederWatch data entry site. For further details and instructions, see <https://www.birdscanada.org/you-can-help/project-feederwatch>.



Steve Pitt

Bird Wing Meeting: Our next Bird Wing meeting is a Zoom meeting on **Tuesday, November 26, starting at 7:00 pm** with member and guest speaker, Fred Pinto, talking about the birds – and some animals – he saw during his Arctic adventure last year. A reminder and the Zoom link will follow closer to the date.

Bird Bash: December's Bird Bash will take place over the **weekend of December 7-8**.

Christmas Bird Count: The **North Bay Christmas Bird Count (CBC)** takes place on **Saturday, December 14, with the tally lunch taking place the next day, on December 15, at noon at 176 Lakeshore Drive**, where Nipissing Naturalists Club holds its meetings. We are hoping the daytime tally lunch will enable those from the South River/Sundridge area who take

part in our CBC to attend – no night driving after a long count day. Details will follow closer to the tally lunch.

If you haven't already contacted Lori Anderson, compiler, to let her know if you want to be one of the field observers – or a backyard counter – please do so. We will be missing June and Kevin Telford as field observers this year, so field observer spots are open for those who want to take part in this long-running survey that is now in its 125th year. In North Bay, we are in our 46th year.



Fred Pinto

Also missing again will be Gary and Connie Sturge, but I am hoping they will be able to come for lunch, even if they can't stay for long.

Participation means travelling for a day by vehicle and by foot in designated areas, counting the species and number of species seen within a 15 km or 24 miles radius of Dugas Bay on Trout Lake. Feeder watchers must also live within this 15 km or 24-mile radius.

The circle can be seen on Nipissing Naturalists Club's website at: <https://www.nipnats.com/cbc/> under Christmas Bird Count, and if you are still in doubt as to whether you live within the circle, check with Lori at lori.anderson58@hotmail.com.

Burk's Falls Christmas Bird Count takes place this year on **Wednesday, December 18**. For those who live south of us – Powassan, South River or Sundridge – you might want to join in. If so, contact Craig Evans at cpe4@hotmail.com.



Renee Levesque

Bird Wing Outing and Meeting

By Renee Levesque

Instead of our regular Tuesday evening meeting on October 22, thanks to Oriana Pokorny, we had quite the interesting outing/meeting at Nipissing University on Saturday, October 26. When I first approached Oriana about the possibility of showing us the mounted taxidermy birds and specimens done over the years by members of Nipissing University and ornithology students, Oriana immediately said she would, but that such an outing would not take very long, no more than about 15 minutes or so. I knew otherwise. I knew many members would show great interest in these birds and I knew Oriana was an excellent teacher and would not be stuck for anything to say. I was right! We started our meeting around 10:30 and finished around 1:00!

Before heading to the ornithology lab, 14 of us toured the various other labs in the biology wing – the chemistry lab, the human anatomy lab, the plant lab, the herbarium and the dendrochronology lab (study of tree rings). And there wasn't a lab that members didn't show interest in! (Although there were 14 in attendance including Oriana, Dick Tafel had to leave for a funeral so was not able to join us on the tour, but arrived back in time for part of the meeting.)

Photo of us minus Dick below.



Greg Jaski

We saved the best lab for last, though – the ornithology lab. We first admired the taxidermic birds mounted 100 years ago. Some of these birds have seen better days, but the mounting in

some were to be admired – the Northern Goshawk (photo at right), the Great Horned Owl, an American Crow and an immature Bald Eagle. Other taxidermic mounts included the Great Blue Heron, the Pileated Woodpecker, the Three-toed Woodpecker, the American Kestrel, the Wilson's Snipe, the Red-necked Grebe, the Least Bittern, the Pectoral Sandpiper and the Wood Duck. Looking at these birds from 100 years ago, I wondered how many more of them were seen then in Nipissing than today.



Renee Levesque



Renee Levesque

The specimens, in drawers and laid out by Oriana, seemed to be of even greater interest. There are so many of them, I will list only a few –

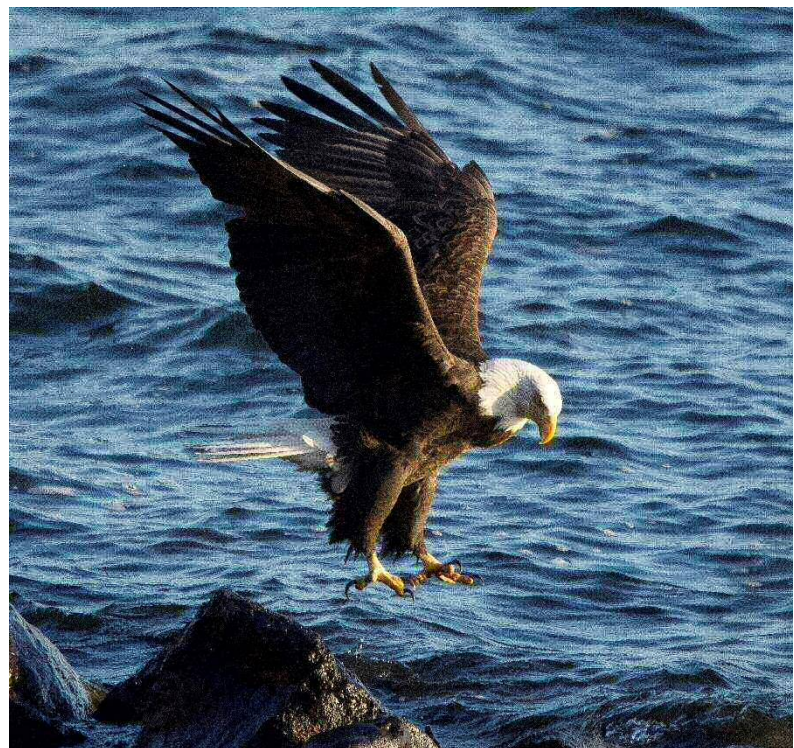
Long-tailed Duck, Snowy Owl, Long-eared Owl, Great Gray Owl, Common Loon, Rough-legged Hawk, Red and Yellow-shafted Northern Flickers, American Bittern, American Robin, Pine Grosbeak, Evening Grosbeak, Chestnut-sided Warbler and Black-throated Blue Warbler. (Photo at left of Bill, Kim and Alex checking out the specimen drawer.)

Although a couple of members said they could have stayed all day looking at the specimens, it was time to head to an empty classroom to conduct our meeting. (We were not able to eat and meet in the cafeteria because quite an interesting science

fair was taking place there. Helping at the Astronomy Club display was Bird Wing member Curtis Irish, and those who know Curtis made sure to say hello to him because since the pandemic and Zoom, we don't often see Curtis.)

Birds Seen:

Grant McKercher: Grant saw a Bald Eagle in Callander Bay in front of his home (photo at right). Others saw Bald Eagles too, and Dick Tafel and I recently saw an immature Golden Eagle at Jocko Point. An adult Bald Eagle flew in after it saw the Golden Eagle, chased it off and fought briefly with it in the air before the Golden flew away. It was quite an exciting experience.



Grant McKercher

As late as last week, Grant saw a Yellow-rumped Warbler. No other warblers got a mention.

Grant also saw a Red-necked Grebe, a grebe also seen by Dick and me, as well as Garry Waldram who wasn't present at the outing/meeting because he was off birding in the Niagara Peninsula. As usual every fall, Pied-billed Grebes gather in Cache Bay. Some of us saw at least 20, if not more. The Horned Grebe was another grebe seen by Garry, Dick and me in Lakes Nipissing and Nosbonsing. Horned Grebes look rather drab in the fall in their non-breeding plumage, but in their breeding plumage, as seen on three Horned Grebes on Lake Bernard, they are quite the colourful and decorative grebes. Compare both plumages below.



Renee Levesque



Stephen O'Donnell

Dale Duncan: Dale, who a few years back had a Red-headed Woodpecker in her Wasi Road yard, has had a Northern Cardinal coming to her feeder, and two days after the meeting, there was a female in my yard and interestingly enough, a male in Grant's yard!

In late September since our last meeting, Dale saw a Warbling Vireo. The vireos have long gone, as have the flycatchers, the last one to leave being the Eastern Phoebe seen by some of us in October.

Greg Jaski: Because Dick had not yet joined us, we allowed Greg to mention an unusual bird seen this October in Beaverton Harbour - the Great Egret! Many Ontario birders made the trip to Beaverton to see it.

We also allowed Greg to mention the large number of Trumpeter Swans he saw in the Beaverton area. I haven't heard yet of large flocks being seen this fall in our area, but Dick and I saw one on Lake Nipissing off Marleau Road in Sturgeon Falls and Garry recently saw one at Warren Lagoon.

Dick, Garry and I saw many Tundra Swans on Lake Nipissing off Beaucage Park Road.

Greg also recently saw an adult Pileated Woodpecker (at right) feeding its young.

Carol Fleming: Carol saw a Mourning Dove at her place, exciting because she rarely sees one in her yard. I too don't often get a Mourning Dove in my yard and others concurred. I usually see a couple of them and their young in my yard after the young are fledged, but not much after that.

Carol has a White-breasted Nuthatch coming to her feeders, as have some others.

Bill Fleming: Bill was the only one to see a Snow Bunting, a single one, in the Wasi Road area. But then a few days after the meeting, Dick and I saw a flock or a snowflake or a drift of at least 40 in Sunset Park.

Bill also saw a Great Blue Heron. Most of us had seen one, but most also commented that they hadn't seen as many this year as other years.

Alex Dumouchelle: Alex very fortunately saw a couple of Canada Jays at Mashkinonje Provincial Park in West Nipissing off Hwy 64. It is a park we don't seem to get to very often, but one worth exploring. Check it out at: <https://ontarioparks.ca/park/mashkinonje>

Alex also saw Dark-eyed Juncos, seen by many members this fall. As I write this report, there are 16 at my feeder.

Linda Conway: Linda saw an American Robin in recent days, as had Grant and April McCrum. Dick and I saw one after the meeting at Cache Bay and I am hoping to see one or two in my yard in November. I have a couple of bushes that produce late berries and when the leaves fall off the bushes, one or two robins often make an appearance. After a season of, "Oh, just another robin," it is always sad to see them go.



Greg Jaski

Linda also made mention of the Blue Jays she saw, seen by many of us. You will see photos of a couple in the “Seeds and Cones” article.

Kim Stahl: In addition to seeing a Downy Woodpecker, Kim also heard the *peent* of an American Woodcock in the Carmichael Drive area off Airport Hill. Usually it is Ken Gowing who hears a late – as well as an early woodcock – but we haven’t heard from Ken since maybe March or April.



Renee Levesque

Other than the Downy and the Pileated Woodpeckers already mentioned, some have seen the Hairy Woodpecker. But the rarer woodpecker, the Red-bellied, recently made an appearance in Nipissing, as it tends to do every now and then in the fall/winter. Garry recently saw one by the tower in Cache Bay, and when Chris Sukha used our Bird Wing app just before the meeting to inform those on the app of a Red-bellied Woodpecker in Garden Village, Dick and I made our way there after the meeting and fortunately saw it making use of feeders on Gabriel Road off Ted Commanda Drive. It may be the same Red-bellied as Garry saw and was making its way along Lake Nipissing. The one we saw was a female. Not sure if Garry’s was. The female has a red nape, the male a red head and nape. And if these two sightings weren’t enough, Greg saw one on Premier Road at his mother’s house on morning of October 29, and Faye Oei informed me her friend in the South River area also had one in her yard, I believe also on October 29! Photo of a male at left.

Angela Mills: Angela just moved into a house she recently bought – her first house! Congratulations, Angela. Obviously she hasn’t had a lot of time to look for birds, but she did see our faithful Black-capped Chickadees and our handsome Common Ravens.

April McCrum: By the time I got to April, others had already named the two birds on her list, so what could she do but name the two gulls most of us see these days, the Ring-billed and the Herring. For good measure, she also mentioned the Rock Pigeon, a bird most denigrate, but extolled by Oriana because of its beautiful iridescent colours.

The other gull seen was the Great Black-backed, three seen recently by Dick and me on Lake Nipissing at Sunset Park. And then there is the rare Slaty-backed Gull, discovered originally by Garry on October 13 on Lake Nosbonsing off Lakeshore Drive, Bonfield, and subsequently seen by Dick, Renee, Grant, Stephen O'Donnell and maybe some others in our group. It remained in that area until at least October 25. (An article with photos about this rare gull follows this article and **its photo is on the cover of this month's report, thanks to Stephen O'Donnell.**)

Fred Pinto: By the time Fred's name was called, usually someone has already mentioned a sparrow, but this time, Fred was on his own with his two sparrows, the White-crowned and the Swamp Sparrow. These sparrows have now moved on with the exception of some White-crowns. We see White-crowns on their migration north and south, in greater numbers in my area when they head north to James Bay. It was the general consensus among those present that more Swamp Sparrows were seen this year than other years.

Dick Tafel: Dick named yet another sparrow, still very much around and perhaps growing in numbers at least in my yard, the American Tree Sparrow. Other sparrows recently seen were the White-throated and Song Sparrows whose numbers decreased as October wore on. But we should see the odd Fox Sparrow. I think only Garry has seen one – in Laurier Woods – so keep your eye open for them.



The one other sparrow that should get a mention is the Nelson's Sparrow (at left) I saw at Warren Lagoon in late September. We don't often get this sparrow here, but every now and then if we are lucky, we might see one in the fall. Check the lagoons in late September for the possibility of seeing one. With its orangey and grey face, it is not hard to identify, although you could get it confused with the very elusive Le Conte's Sparrow that looks similar and that we also get here, but rarely.

Dick's second bird was the Common Loon he saw in Trout Lake and at the Government Dock. Grant recently saw a raft of 23 on Callander Bay. There was a smaller raft of them in Lake Nipissing off Jocko Point in mid-October.

Oriana Pokorny: Oriana recently saw a Rusty Blackbird at the Campus pond, I believe the first time she has seen one there. I think many have now moved on, but some of us recently saw one or two on the shores of Lake Nosbonsing when we were there looking for the Slaty-backed.

Oriana also saw the Red-breasted Nuthatch on the Campus trails, a nuthatch seen by others.

Other birds seen:

Sandhill Cranes: Up to at least 700 Sandhill Cranes were seen in West Nipissing in agricultural fields, gathering there from late September until about mid-October. They were seen in this area by Dick, me, Grant, Steve Pitt, Linda Stoner and Pat Stack. There may have been others after I sent a general email to members informing them of the cranes. At right is a photo Grant took this fall showing a dancing move not related to courtship, but to diffuse aggression. In the photo you can see one leaping and one crouching in submission. An article on Sandhill Cranes follows this article.



Grant McKercher

Finches: Dick, Oriana and Fred have seen a number of American Goldfinch, and others have seen few to none. I have had Purple Finches coming to my feeders.

Kinglets and Wrens: Kinglets did not get a mention, but I had the Ruby-crowned and the Golden-crowned in my yard most of October. The Ruby-crowned has now gone on, but the Golden-crowned was still making an appearance this week as I write this report. I also had a couple of Winter Wrens that spent a good part of October at the back of my yard.

Shorebirds: Shorebirds did not get a mention other than my mentioning at the meeting how fortunate we were to have two rare shorebirds in our area in late September, the Red Phalarope and the Hudsonian Godwit, both seen by Mary Young. However, plenty other shorebirds were seen by some of us at the various lagoons – Lesser and Greater Yellowlegs, Dunlin, Black-

bellied Plover, American Golden Plover, Pectoral Sandpipers, Baird's Sandpipers (one at right) and the Red-necked Phalarope. Articles on the Red Phalarope and Hudsonian Godwit follow this article.

Shrike: I haven't seen many Northern Shrikes reported, but Garry did see a couple recently in Calvin Township, and two days after the meeting, I had one in my yard, chased off by one of the Blue Jays.

Pipits: American Pipits had been seen now and then in October, sometimes just a few and sometimes as many as a flock of 40 in agricultural fields.

Coots: American Coots (only one or two) were seen by Grant, Dick, Renee, Garry and Denise Desmarais at Warren, Callander and Powassan Lagoons.

Scoters: The White-winged Scoter (female at right) was seen by Dick and me on Lake Nosbonsing, by Grant at Callander Lagoon and by Garry in Lake Nipissing off Sunset Park. I haven't heard that the Surf and Black Scoters have been seen yet, but maybe one or two will show before I finish this report.



Stephen O'Donnell

Mergansers: A raft of Common Mergansers was seen by some and a few Hoodeds were seen at the lagoons, but the Red-breasted Merganser was seen only by Garry and twice at that – once in Bonfield and once on Lake Nipissing at Sunset Park.



Renee Levesque

Other Ducks: Those who go to the lagoons have seen a number of ducks. The Bufflehead is presently the most prolific of these ducks, but other ducks include the Wood Duck, Ring-necked, Northern Pintail, Lesser Scaup, Greater Scaup, Green-winged Teal, Black Duck, Redhead, and, of course, the Mallard.

Goldeneye have also been seen in Lake Nipissing and Dick and I saw two Long-tailed Ducks in Lake Nospbonsing.

Geese: No doubt everyone saw many Canada Geese – there were at least 36 near the entrance to Nipissing University as we were leaving - but in amongst the Lee Park geese was a Greater White-fronted Goose (photo at right), first noticed by Scott Dewey – always nice for some of us who know him to see his name pop up – and subsequently seen by Linda Stoner, Pat Slack, me, Garry, Grant and perhaps others. It wandered around a little bit after it arrived, mainly remaining in the Lakeshore Drive area and staying for a few days. Grant once saw it in the Metro parking lot, maybe hoping for a more interesting meal than that provided at Lee Park?



Linda Stoner

The Greater White-fronted was seen by Dick and me earlier in the year, in mid-March, on the Ottawa River, Quebec side, after being discovered there by Lucas Beaver. It is a brown goose with bright orange legs and an orange bill, a bill which is surrounded by white feathers, almost like a muff and hence its name, White-fronted. It is a goose that breeds in the high Arctic tundra and one we see here just very occasionally. Where there is a Greater, a Lesser must exist somewhere and it does, in northern Asia and Europe. The sighting this fall makes the fifth time I have seen one in our area, but the only time I have seen one in the fall. The other times were in March, April and May.

The other goose seen was the Snow Goose, a few usually seen in our area in the fall. Garry, Grant, Denise, Dick and I saw a couple at Warren Lagoon and Garry saw one in Mattawa. Garry's photo of the Mattawa one is at right.



Garry Waldram

After our business of naming the two birds plus many more, Oriana took some of us over to the Campus pond and despite a sharp wind, we posed for a photo and to demonstrate there are still birds around on a chilly and very windy day, a Mallard fly by! Photo below without the Mallard.



Greg Jaski

Seeds and Cones

Condolences: Our condolences to Ted Price whose wife Grace died in September. Ted was a past president of Nipissing Naturalists Club and was instrumental in helping get Laurier Woods as a conservation area off the ground. (Ted himself has not been well and is in hospital.)

Lifers: There were many lifers for some members in late September and in October as indicated below:

Slaty-backed Gull: Garry Waldram and Grant McKercher. Article about this bird follows.

American Golden Plover: Grant McKercher and Denise Desmarais at Warren Lagoon and Sue Gratton at Powassan Lagoon. (Photo of one I took at Lake Nipissing at heading.)

Greater White-fronted Goose: Garry Waldram, Pat Stack and Linda Stoner in Lee Park. (Photo and some information about this rare bird in the meeting and outing article.)

Red-necked Grebe and Horned Grebe: Garry Waldram on Lakes Nipissing and Nosbonsing.

Lapland Longspur and Horned Larks: Sue Gratton and Faye Oei in the Eagle Lake area.



Renee Levesque



Linda Stoner

Black-backed Woodpecker: Sue Gratton in the Sundridge area – finally!

Ring-necked Pheasant: Linda Stoner and Pat Stack in Chisholm Township. (Photo at left.)

Tundra Swans: Garry Waldram on Lake Nipissing off Beaucage Park Road

Redhead Duck: Sue Gratton on Lake Bernard.

Nelson's Sparrow: It is rare I find a lifer in Nipissing District, so this sighting of a Nelson's Sparrow (photo of one in the "Bird Wing Outing and Meeting" article) at Warren Lagoon on September 27 was particularly wonderful, considering I missed seeing one at Powassan Lagoon back in October 2021. One was also seen this year in late September at Powassan Lagoon, but missed by some of those who came to the lagoon looking for it a couple of days after Craig Evans saw it. (I also finally saw a Pacific Loon, but in Barrie, not here, but it is a lifer for me nevertheless!)

Corvid humour: We are all familiar with some of the many crow jokes and cartoons there are in the world, specifically, *What do you call two crows? An attempted murder.*

But here is one Steve Pitt sent me: Scientifically, a raven has 17 primary wing feathers – the large ones at the end of the wing. They are called pinion feathers. A crow has 16. So the difference between a raven and a crow is only a matter of a pinion.

I hate to spoil the joke, but the premise of it is faulty because it is not a scientific fact. Ravens and crows and, in fact, all corvids and all passerines have far fewer than 16 primaries. Most birds within the passerines have 10 on each wing, and although there are exceptions, the exceptions do not apply to crows and ravens. Both have 10 primary feathers or pinions. So the difference between a crow and a raven is not a matter of a pinion!

Blue Jays and Wild Turkeys: Below are photos of Blue Jays taking part in October celebrations, my photo of a Blue Jay with its Thanksgiving Horn of Plenty and Steve Pitt's photo of one with a scary Halloween visitor.

And speaking of Thanksgiving, Steve Pitt and Ed Rowley had Wild Turkeys on their properties over the Thanksgiving weekend. Perhaps they were giving thanks that they were not in anyone's oven!

- Renee Levesque



The return to Nipissing District of the Slaty-Backed

By Renee Levesque

On a sunny and mild late November morning in 2018, Dick Tafel, Lori Anderson and I made our way to North Bay's landfill site, hoping to get some good views of the Arctic Gulls – Glaucous and Iceland Gulls. We did see them, in fact quite a number of Glaucous Gulls, including an adult which we rarely see. But little did we expect to see an adult Slaty-backed Gull. Not that we knew it was a Slaty-backed at the time.

Dick was the first to notice this unusual gull sitting nicely in the sun beside his car just waiting for more garbage to be dumped. Initially we thought it might be a Lesser Black-backed until we saw its bright pink legs. (A Lesser Black-backed has yellow legs.) I was able to get a photo of it (at right) before it flew off and I did not again get to see it that day in such plain view. In the end, we decided it might be a Greater Black-backed, although its smaller size and its extensively streaked head did not fit the bill.

When I got home, I looked up gulls in my field guides but was not able to confidently determine what type of gull it was and thought it might even be a hybrid. So I posted it with the photo on eBird under Great Black-backed, knowing someone would get in touch with me if it wasn't. And it wasn't long before two birders did, Bruce Di Labio from the Ottawa region and Rick Stronks from Algonquin Park. It was Bruce who finally confirmed its identity as a Slaty-backed Gull after consulting with Newfoundland birder Bruce Mactavish.



Renee Levesque

For about 10 days or so, the Slaty-backed stayed at the landfill site during the day, then made its way to the open water on Trout Lake in the late afternoon. As more severe winter conditions set in, off it went. Many saw it during this time frame. I forget which Bird Wing members saw it other than the three of us who first saw it, but I do recall Stephen O'Donnell saw it, as well as former members Nicole Richardson, Dan Burton and Kevan Cowcill.

And so we skip ahead to October 13, 2024 when one is seen by Garry Waldram on Lake Nosbonsing from Lakeshore Road in Bonfield. At the time, like Dick, Lori and I before him, he

did not know it was a Slaty-backed and thought it was a Great Black-backed. However, once Lucas Beaver consulted with Brandon Holden, well-known Ontario birder, it was confirmed from Lucas's sighting on the morning of October 19 to be a Slaty-backed.

When it came up on eBird Rare Birds the morning of October 19, Dick and I headed out to find it. When we got there, we met up with Jeremy Hatt who was doing an Ontario Big Year. Jeremy had driven all the way from Leamington that morning to add it to his growing list of Ontario species seen. We did not see it at that time, but returned an hour or so later and there it was! Dick and I had returned earlier than Jeremy and when Dick spotted it among the Herring Gulls – he is a good gull spotter – we were delighted that six years later we would see one again. However, we were fearful Jeremy would miss it, but as we stood there looking at this vagrant we hadn't seen for 6 years, we soon saw Jeremy walking along Lakeshore Road, all of us elated that his trip was not in vain! (Since that day others have seen it, including Garry again, Stephen O'Donnell and Grant McKercher. For Garry and Grant it is a lifer! **(As previously noted, Stephen's photo graces the front cover.)**)

The Slaty-backed Gull is a large, stocky gull, with pink legs the colour of bubble gum, an orange-red gonydeal spot on a yellow bill and a broad white tertial crescent. In adults, the mantle is slate grey, darker than a Herring Gull's, but not as dark as a Great Black-backed Gull's. In breeding plumage, its head is white, but in winter plumage, the adult has extensive dark smudging on its head and upper breast. Another of its most telling features is the "string of pearls" pattern on the underside of its wings, very noticeable in flight or when its wings are extended. (See photo at right)

The Slaty-backed is a resident of the coastlines of northeastern Asia and a regular summer visitor to western Alaska, though in small numbers. There has been a steady increase in this vagrant in Ontario, seen in some locations besides North Bay in 2018 and now on Lake Nosbonsing in Bonfield in 2024 – also Brantford, Waterloo, Niagara Falls, Thorold and Windsor. However, I don't believe there have been any more than 15 or 16 reported sightings in Ontario in total. (Former Bird Wing member David Rooke saw one in November 2016 in Waterloo. Like Garry, David posted it on eBird in amongst some Herring Gulls, describing it as a Great Black-backed until alerted by Brandon Holden that it was actually a Slaty-backed.)



Bruce Mactavish

***Note:** The above article is partially reprinted from articles I wrote for The Woodland Observer, February 2019, and the Bird Wing Report, October 2019.*

Sandhill Cranes

By Renee Levesque

Come mid-September to early October, hundreds of Sandhill Cranes gather in agricultural fields in West Nipissing on their migration to the southern United States, although some in recent years are wintering further north than in the past. (Because cranes have a liking for agricultural crops, farmers must not be especially happy to see such large flocks in their fields.)

But it's nothing short of a spectacle to witness anywhere from 500 to a thousand cranes (photo below), especially for us in Nipissing District because it really wasn't all that long ago we were lucky to see a few, if any, in our area. (And it was as late as the 19th and early 20th century that they were hunted to near extinction!)



Renee Levesque

West Nipissing could be considered a mini-staging area for cranes coming from further north and the northern tundra before they stage by the multiple thousands in Long Point before heading to their wintering grounds. (There are three subspecies that don't migrate but live year-round in Florida, Mississippi and Cuba.)

These tall birds, despite being heavy-bodied, are as graceful as ballet dancers with their long necks and legs and broad wings. The adults (photo of one at right) have a red crown, a large dark bill, mostly grey bodies



Renee Levesque

with some tan feathers and a bustle of feathers at their back end. (The immatures have a rusty crown and back of neck and have more rusty plumage on their wings and back than their parents.)

When cranes fly (photo below) they look especially graceful with their necks stretched out and their feet trailing behind. And when they want to attract a mate, they literally dance – stretching their wings, pumping their heads, bowing and leaping into the air. It is quite a sight! After such a display, it is no wonder they mate for life.



Peter Ferris

Cranes nest in isolated marshes, bogs and wet meadows, preferably in areas in which vegetation is growing in standing water, although some nest on dry ground. They build their nests from whatever vegetation is dominant – cattails, sedges, reeds, grasses, bulrushes.

Although the chicks can stand and walk shortly after hatching, the adults care for them for up to 10 months, staying with them over the winter until the spring. Watch this delightful video on two chicks just hatched:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QwI_hpcej-k.

Red Phalarope

By Renee Levesque

On the afternoon of September 26, Mary Young and Lucas Beaver were very fortunate to see two Red Phalaropes at Warren Lagoon after they were reported that morning by Chris Wood and Jessie Barry, both of Cornell Lab of Ornithology. (Chris is the Director of eBird.) The phalaropes were also seen in the afternoon by Ellen Horak and Glen Morris who are doing an Ontario Big Year. The phalarope was their 322nd bird.

The Red Phalarope was a lifer for both Mary and Lucas. I didn't get to Warren Lagoon until the next day, September 27, but by that time, the Red Phalaropes were gone! I would have settled for even one because it would have been a lifer for me – and for Grant McKercher, Denise Desmarais and Garry Waldram who were there on September 28 and didn't see them either.

The Red Phalarope is a very rare sighting in Nipissing District and this sighting by Chris and Jessie was the first time one had been reported on eBird for our district. However, long before ebird, in November 1987, Dick Tafel saw a Red Phalarope in Lake Nipissing in an area where shorebirds used to gather before the condo near Timmins Street was built. And long before digital cameras, Dick managed to get a photo of it.



Christoph Moning, Wikipedia

In breeding season, the female Red Phalarope (photo above) is a spectacular phalarope with its rusty red throat, underparts, and parts of its face. It has a white ear patch and a yellow bill tipped with black. (As with other phalaropes, the breeding male is a duller version of the female.) But in non-breeding season, it becomes a grey and white bird (photo below) with a black bill looking very similar to the Red-necked Phalarope in its non-breeding season. The difference is that the Red Phalarope is larger with a chunkier shape, a thicker bill and a smoother, un-streaked grey back. I am really not sure that if I had seen them at Warren Lagoon and I was alone, I would have known them to be Red Phalaropes, especially considering they are very rare here.



The Red Phalarope breeds on flat tundra in the Arctic and winters at sea in the open southern oceans. As with other phalaropes, the females fight over the males and leave after laying their eggs to pursue other males, while the male of the pair incubates the eggs and raises the young!

It is a phalarope that migrates later than the Red-necked and one that is rarely found inland, making the sighting at Warren Lagoon even rarer. It could be many years before one is seen here again, but in the birding world, the unexpected can and does happen!

Christoph Moning, Wikipedia

Hudsonian Godwit

By Renee Levesque

Another rare find, though not quite as rare as the Red Phalarope, was the Hudsonian Godwit Chris Wood and Jessie Barry saw at Powassan Lagoon on September 25, the day before they saw the Red Phalarope. Mary Young and Lucas Beaver also saw it, but when I got there on September 26, the day after, it had gone. It was not a lifer for Mary because she had seen these godwits in Barbados, but it was another lifer for Lucas and an Ontario lifer for Mary.



Francesco Veronesi, Wikipedia

Interestingly, I saw a Hudsonian Godwit in Powassan Lagoon 10 years ago in September 2014. (Must keep that in mind and check for one there in September 2034!) And then in late May 2019, Dick and I on our usual West Nipissing birding route very fortunately came upon a flooded field on Veuve River Road and saw one in its distinctive breeding plumage. There it was with other shorebirds by the dozens, including a Red Knot, three Ruddy Turnstones, a couple of American Golden Plovers, many Dunlins and many Black-bellied Plovers, as well as other common spring shorebirds. They remained in the flooded field for a few days, one of the days being the Birdathon, enabling our Birdathon team – Dick Tafel, Lori Anderson, Jackie Manella and me – to retain the Birdathon trophy for yet another year!

The Hudsonian Godwit is a large, long-legged shorebird in the sandpiper family, although smaller than the Bar-tailed and Marbled Godwits. It has a long, slightly upturned bill that is pinkish at the base and black at the tip, a white eyebrow and long bluish-grey legs and feet. In breeding season, this handsome bird has a distinctive rusty belly with a dark brown mottled back (photo at heading). In non-breeding season, it is greyish-brown with a plain buffy grey belly (photo below). Its tail is black and it has a white rump and black wing linings, all noticeable in flight. Although the female's rusty belly is duller than the male's, the female is larger in size.

It is a long-distance migrant – 32,000 km round trip. In Ontario, it breeds in the Hudson Bay Lowlands along the coast of James Bay in wet sedge meadows and muskeg. Although it nests and forages on the ground, it sometimes perches in trees. It winters in the tidal mudflats along the coasts of Argentina and Chile, although some winter further north in the lagoons, swamps and wet grasslands of Brazil and Uruguay. During migration, it stops in flooded agricultural fields, wet pastures and sewage ponds and lagoons, as it did for us.

In Ontario, the Hudsonian Godwit is considered threatened and, accordingly, the government of Ontario has developed a recovery strategy. From the Ontario government website: “The recommended long-term

recovery goal for Hudsonian Godwit is to maintain a stable population of at least 2,500 breeding pairs within Ontario by 2054. The recommended short-term recovery goal is to slow or halt the population decline by 2039.” This is to be accomplished by addressing knowledge gaps to better understand habitat, breeding range, migration routes and threats and by identifying and protecting habitat and migration routes.



J. Harrison, Wikipedia