

March 22, 2005

The Spring Waterfowl Spectacle

One of the highlights of spring migration in the Kawarthas is the impressive number of waterfowl that congregate on our lakes and rivers as they push northward towards their breeding grounds. For local naturalists and bird enthusiasts, viewing the thousands of ducks, grebes and loons that pass through our area from mid-March to late April has long been a much-anticipated rite of spring. Not only are the birds decked out in their finest breeding plumage, but they are often engaged in interesting courtship behaviours and can be seen quite close to shore. The mix of different species changes, too, as spring's advance unfolds.

While some birds such as mergansers will stay to breed in the Kawarthas, the majority are simply waiting for the ice to go out, so they can continue their journey northward. Having spent the winter in the southern United States or along the Atlantic seaboard in areas such as Chesapeake Bay, ducks such as goldeneye are heading towards the boreal forest of Northern Ontario while others such as scaup will continue all the way up to the Hudson Bay Lowlands. The species that are present in the largest numbers include ring-necked ducks, common goldeneyes, buffleheads, common mergansers, hooded mergansers and lesser scaup. Most of these are diving ducks which feed by diving underwater for various plants and animals. In addition to ducks, common loons, pied-billed grebes, red-necked grebes and horned grebes will also be moving through in coming weeks. In recent years, small numbers of snow geese and tundra swans have also been regular visitors during spring migration. Although our local population of "giant" Canada geese has now returned, the smaller "northern" Canada geese, bound for James Bay, won't pass through until late April or early May.

Of all migrating birds, waterfowl are probably the easiest to observe. Although they will congregate almost anywhere there is open water, some locations attract more birds than others. Like any kind of nature observation, however, it is usually necessary to try more than one spot and to make multiple visits. Obviously, if the water is still frozen, there won't be any ducks. On the other hand, if the ice has been out for a long time, most of the birds may have already moved on. Binoculars are usually sufficient to provide good looks. However, for those individuals that are farther out from shore, a spotting scope is sometimes necessary to make a sure identification.

One of the best places to start is Little Lake. Located right in the heart of Peterborough, it is not uncommon to find over 500 individual birds at a time and up to 20 different species. In addition to the birds mentioned above, Little Lake can also be good for mallards, wood ducks, green-winged and blue-winged teal, American wigeon and sometimes northern shovelers and redheads. The best viewing locations are the Mark Street wharf, located just south of Maria Street; Lock 20, also south of Maria Street; Little Lake Cemetery; and the shoreline in front of Beavermead Park. If you arrive early in the morning, the ducks can often be seen quite close to shore.

Other places that usually offer good waterfowl viewing include Rice Lake at Harrick Point near the village of Hiawatha, the Otonabee River between Peterborough and Lakefield, the Lakefield sewage lagoons on County Road 33 just south of Lakefield, the Lakefield Marsh on Deyncourt Street near Kingdon Lumber, Lake Katchewanooka at the bottom of Stenner Road and near the bridge at Young's Point, Clear Lake from South Beach Road and Gannon's Narrows on County Road 16 at the junction of Pigeon and Buckhorn Lakes. Numerous other locations on

Pigeon, Buckhorn and Lovesick lakes can be very productive, too.

Depending on the amount of snowmelt and spring rain, flooded fields are also attractive to migrating ducks. For a number of years now, a spring run-off pond at the southeast corner of County Road 2 and Drummond Line near Keene has been especially popular with “puddle ducks”. These are species that prefer shallow water and feed by simply dabbling their bills below the surface. The combination of water and corn stubble often attracts teal, mallards, black ducks, wood ducks and even northern pintail.

In order to get a more accurate picture of the different species and numbers that pass through the Kawarthas in a given spring, local birders carried out a mid-April waterbird census for several years. Depending on the amount of ice cover, a great deal of variability in the numbers of birds was noticed from one year to the next. However, in a day’s counting, we would typically see over 3000 ring-necked ducks, 1500 common mergansers, 1000 buffleheads as well as hundreds each of scaups, wigeons, goldeneyes, mallards and hooded mergansers. In addition, dozens of loons and pied-billed grebes were tallied. In 2001, the count was carried out on April 13 with ideal conditions for concentrating large numbers of birds. Lakes were open in the south but still mostly frozen in the north. A total of 18,601 waterfowl were counted that day.

If you are new to birding, begin by learning the male ducks. When seen from a distance, many of the males appear as various combinations of white and black. However, specific markings such as the white spot on the face of the goldeneye and the white spur on the side of the ring-necked duck serve to separate them. The only males that are difficult to tell apart are the lesser and greater scaup. For most of us, they need to be seen at close range under optimal viewing conditions to be identified with confidence. As for female ducks, many are fairly similar in appearance and take a little more time to learn. Some, however, such as female mergansers with their shaggy, punk-rock crest, are instantly recognizable.

While you’re out looking at the waterfowl, keep your eyes and ears open for other spring arrivals as well. By the end of March, the first tree swallows will have arrived and are often seen flying over lakes and rivers. Great blue herons, ring-billed and herring gulls, killdeers, robins, grackles, red-winged blackbirds, eastern phoebes and song sparrows are often seen or heard as well.

So, with no playoff hockey to distract us this year, we have a wonderful opportunity to get out and witness a true rite of the change of season. It is part and parcel of the extraordinary surge of life occurring at this time of year and a great way to free ourselves of our late winter blahs. And, it serves to whet our appetite for the many pleasures of nature that are just ahead as spring arrives in the Kawarthas.

What to Watch for this Week:

When the temperature climbs above 10 C, the first mourning cloak, Compton tortoiseshell and Eastern comma butterflies usually make their debut spring flights. All of these species, which overwinter as adults, can often be seen around cottages and at maple sugar bushes where they will sometimes dine on sap.

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