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# LIVING

# Readers have questions

*..about fall colours, cranes, crayfish and weird weather*

This week, I'd like to pass along some questions, sightings of note, and interesting anecdotes I've received from readers over the past several months.

**Q:** It would seem that many of our trees have changed colour much earlier than usual this year. Why is that?

**A:** Our trees have been stressed this summer by abnormally dry conditions. Without sufficient moisture, a tree cannot produce enough energy through photosynthesis to maintain its leaves. Chlorophyll, the green pigment responsible for photosynthesis, therefore begins to break down, resulting in quick and early colour change. As the chlorophyll disappears, the yellow, red, brown, and orange pigments are revealed. Soon after, the leaves detach from the tree.



**OUR CHANGING SEASONS**  
Drew Monkman

**Q:** We move to our cottage for the summer months at Catchacoma Lake and I commute when not on holidays. In mid-July, I saw a pair of sandhill cranes feeding in one of the fields on 507 near Charlie Allen Road and wondered if they are an unusual sighting for this area. I always thought them to be a western bird.

**A:** It's true that sandhill cranes used to be more a bird of extreme western Ontario and the Prairies. For a long time, the only populations anywhere near Peterborough were in the Bruce Peninsula and around Sault Sainte-Marie. However, over the past 20 years, the sandhill crane population has been expanding eastward fairly aggressively. In the latest Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas, a five-year census in which thousands of individuals scoured the province for evidence of what bird species actually breed in Ontario and in what numbers, the sandhill crane showed a huge increase both in numbers and in breeding range. Locally, they are now seen quite regularly in the Buckley Lake/Lynch's Rock Road area east of Lakefield. Sightings are often reported, too, from south of Peterborough such as along Bensfort Road. However, that being said, they are by no means a common bird and still quite a thrill to see. The loud, bugling call is particularly impressive.

**Q:** I experienced a rather weird weather event recently. I live in Fraserville across the highway from the new Baxter Creek Golf Course. All of a sudden a wind came up and I had to cover my face as it felt like the breath was being sucked out of me. The duration, however, was less than 30 seconds. A metal frame garage that you cover with plastic for the winter was lifted up, twisted and dropped back on the ground. Two other gentlemen doing work outside had almost been blown over. Is this some type of mini-tornado or possibly a tornado when it first begins before eventually working itself into a full blown one? I have never experienced anything like it before nor has anyone I know. I am interested in finding out more about this phenomenon.

**A:** It sounds like what you experienced was a dust devil. Like a tornado, it is a vertical swirling column of air. However, dust devils form under clear skies and are nowhere near as strong as tornadoes. They are created when a strong updraft of air is formed near the ground on a hot day. If there is a sudden change in wind direction and speed, the column of hot, rising air can actually develop a small cyclonic motion that can be seen near the ground. They are not considered tornadoes because they form during fair weather and are not associated with any actual cloud cover. However, they can cause damage, as you witnessed.

**Q:** On a recent trip to the Bruce Peninsula, I came across an unusual phenomenon that you may be able to shed some light on. I was walking across a low meadow of grass, sedge and butter cups. At ground level there were a number of holes about an inch to an inch and a half in diameter. The sides of the



Karl Egressy, special to The Examiner

holes were built up with the clay soil, forming a crude cylinder. They were not mounds and I would discount moles. Can you give me any explanation of what would be making these forms? Would it connect to tunnels or living quarters?

**A:** I believe what you saw were burrows made by crayfish. Two species, found primarily in southern Ontario and the Bruce Peninsula, actually spend most of their time in underground burrows that they dig themselves in soil that is permanently saturated with water. They use their claws and tail to do the excavation. Depending on the species, the mud may be left at the entrance to the burrow, moved elsewhere, or even built up into a chimney over the burrow entrance. It is thought that the chimney may provide some protection against terrestrial predators. Although I've never seen this mound-building phenomenon here in the Kawarthas, there is evidence that most Ontario crayfish can burrow down into the mud to find moisture if their habitat is drying out.

**Q:** In my garden is a drinking fountain for the birds which I keep filled with a good supply of water. In the last four days a large crow has been drinking from this fountain and now brings dead baby robins, strips them of their flesh and leaves me the bones, head and legs. The water is filled with blood and a smelly mess remains at the end of each day. Can you explain why the crow does this? Today I finally emptied the bird bath and removed it.

**A:** Male crows are known to moisten food in water before they deliver it to the presumably thirsty female who, in late May or early June, can still be spending most of her time on the nest. It would certainly appear that crows are exacting a heavy price on robins these days. I saw very few fledglings this

A pair of sandhill cranes (above) and a great egret.



spring and early summer in Peterborough, and I suspect that predation by crows is certainly one of the reasons for this. Crows have become much more common in built-up areas over the last 20 years and appear to have lost the fear of humans that they once had.

**Q:** In late August, I was driving along Beardsmore Road near Airport Road and Highway 115. At one of the ponds, I saw several heron-sized white birds which turned out to be great egrets. How unusual are these birds in the Kawarthas?

**A:** In recent years, great egrets have become much more common in Ontario, especially along Lake Erie and Lake Ontario such as in Presqu'ile Provincial Park. In late summer, after the breeding season is over, small numbers routinely wander north into Peterborough County. Some of these post-breeding wanderers may come from as far as the southern United States. They often turn up in ponds adjacent to Beardsmore Road,

Bensfort Road, and the Old Keene Road. Other species of herons and egrets sometimes show up as well, including the cattle egret.

**Q:** I've recently had both a grackle and chipping sparrow at my backyard feeder with strange growths on their bodies. The grackle had a nickle-sized growth on its face, while the sparrow's growth was on one of its feet. What would be causing this?

**A:** Although warty growths on birds can have different causes, one fairly common cause is avian pox. It causes wart-like growths on featherless surfaces such as the legs, feet, around the eye and the base of the bill. The virus responsible for avian pox is usually spread by direct contact with infected birds or by healthy birds picking up shed viruses on food or feeders. Feeders can be disinfected by immersing them in a solution of one part liquid chlorine household bleach and nine parts of warm water.

**An anecdote of note:**

I received an interesting phone call in response to my article on carp. The caller, originally from Germany, explained to me that carp is considered a Christmas delicacy in many parts of Germany. Like stuffed goose, it is part of a traditional Christmas dinner and is particularly popular on Christmas Eve. Some fishmongers actually sell the fish with red bows around their necks. Before cooking the carp, it is first soaked in a tub of water for an hour to remove the silty taste.

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