

LIVING

EDITOR: ROB McCORMICK 745-4641 ext. 244 / fax 743-4581 / life@peterboroughexaminer.com

They're odd birds . . .

Unusual winter visitors venture outside their regular boundaries to check out the Kawarthas

Every year, a variety of rather unusual birds turn up in the Kawarthas. For some, the Peterborough area is just beyond the extreme northern limit of their range. Many of these species are quite common further south. Other birds that appear here may be

thousands of kilometres from their normal range and show up for largely unknown reasons.

A particularly interesting and attractive species was found on Nov. 24 at a residence on Lovesick Lake near Burleigh Falls. Unfortunately, the bird had flown into a window and was found dead on the ground. The

woman who found it quickly realized it was a species she had never seen before and, getting out her bird book, correctly identified it as a varied thrush, a species native to western North America and the Pacific coast.



OUR CHANGING SEASONS
Drew Monkman

Quite similar to the American robin in size and shape – in fact, one of its common names is the Alaska robin – the male varied thrush has a burnt-orange breast and throat, gray to blue-gray rump, back, nape, and crown, and a distinct black V-shaped breast-band. It also has an orange stripe above the eye and orange wing-bars. Its striking plumage, along with its unique song of long, eerie, quivering whistles, makes the varied thrush a very distinctive species.

According to Michael Butler, a Trent University graduate student who prepared a "skin" of the Lovesick bird for future use as a research specimen, the bird was a male and in good shape physically. Its gizzard contained fruit from American highbush cranberry.

On Nov. 25, another varied thrush was found at a home on Baptiste Lake near Bancroft. It, too, was a window kill. A third individual turned up at a feeder at Kawartha Park on Clear Lake on Dec. 9. Also a male, it sat in a cedar tree most of the time, periodically flying down onto the ground to eat sunflower seeds in the company of mourning doves, blue jays, and juncos. Quite often, if a varied thrush finds a good food supply, it will stay put for weeks. Unfortunately, this particular bird had other plans and was not seen again after Dec. 15.

Varied thrushes breed most commonly in mature and old growth forests along the coast of Alaska, south to California. A second inland population resides in the Yukon, south through the mountains of the interior of British Columbia. Varied thrushes have a long history of regularly wandering east in the wintertime. Most turn up in the Great Lakes region and along the Atlantic coast. It is believed that the birds that wander eastward are part of the inland population.

Previous reports of varied thrushes in Peterborough County include a bird coming to a feeder near Buckhorn, in early December



Tony Bigg

Several varied thrushes, like this male at a residence on Clear Lake, have turned up in our area this winter. They are typically found in Western North America and along the Pacific Coast.

1980, and another frequenting a feeder near Petroglyph Provincial Park in January 2001.

In early November, another notable bird put in a brief appearance in our area. A cattle egret was observed in a field, feeding alongside a herd of cows. As its name implies, this small, short-legged, white egret often follows livestock or even tractors in order to catch insects stirred up by their movement.

A native of Africa, this species somehow crossed the South Atlantic and became established in South America. It gradually spread northward, reaching the United States in 1941. One of the few recorded Ontario nestings was at Presqu'île in 1962. However, the cattle egret was not reported as a nesting species in the latest Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas (2005). There are a half-dozen or so records of this species in Peterborough County. The birds seen here typically show up in the late summer or fall, having presumably wandered northward from their breeding territories in the eastern U.S.

There were also a number of sightings this past summer and fall of a larger cousin of the cattle egret, namely the great egret. Just a little smaller than a great blue heron, great egrets have an all-white plumage, blackish legs, yellow bill, and an unusually long neck. On Aug. 16, three birds were seen in ponds at the southwest corner of Mervin Line and Airport Road. Five days later, four egrets were seen roosting in a treetop along the Otonabee River, just north of the Wallace Point bridge. When an osprey approached, sending the egrets into a fuss, the four birds actually started dive-bomb-

ing the intruder and successfully drove it away. In September, there was also a great egret sighting at Jack Lake.

According to the Atlas, great egrets were confirmed as breeding species in 12 different "squares" in the province between 2001 and 2005. A square is a 10 km by 10 km area of land. One of the largest colonies is on Nottawasga Island near Collingwood, where more than 100 nests are located. Breeding locations closer to Peterborough include High Bluff Island at Presqu'île Provincial Park and the Leslie Street spit in downtown Toronto. The birds seen around Peterborough may be post-breeding wanderers coming down from a location such as Nottawasga, or they may be birds that are actually breeding in our area in some unknown location.

Great egrets were not the only large, white birds to generate interest this fall. On Oct. 5, three trumpeter swans turned up on Best Pond, just east of Mount Pleasant. Originally native to Ontario, the trumpeter swan had completely disappeared from eastern Canada as a result of hunting pressure and habitat loss. However, in the early 1980s, biologist Harry Lumsden began a provincial reintroduction program to re-establish this magnificent bird in its former habitat and range. The Wye Marsh Wildlife Centre, located near Midland, became a key player in the swan's restoration. According to Mr. Lumsden, the program has been an unqualified success. There are at least 1,000 wild birds in central Ontario and an estimated 131 breeding pairs. The population is considered as being self-sustaining. The Atlas lists the trumpeter swan as a con-

firmed breeder in 58 squares. A pair of these birds has even nested on Rice Lake.

One of the swans seen at Best Pond wore a wing tag bearing the number 050. I contacted Mr. Lumsden and he was able to tell me a little about the bird's history. It was a male that was born in captivity in 2004. It was released to the wild in Prince Edward County in 2006 and flew south to spend its first winter in Connecticut. The swan then showed up on Lily Lake near Peterborough in May 2007. During its second winter, the bird was recorded in New York state.

On Dec. 17, three different trumpeters were found on Little Lake near the cemetery. This group consisted of a juvenile and two adults. Initially, there was some confusion as to whether they were really trumpeters or possibly tundra swans. The two species are extremely similar. Identification usually comes down to the length of the bill and the presence or absence of yellow at the base.

On Dec. 13, a Carolina wren put in a brief appearance at Curve Lake. The bird was seemingly gleaning dormant insects off the screen door and walls of a house. Known for its raucous "tea kettle! tea kettle!" song, this large, striking wren turns up most years somewhere around Peterborough, almost always at feeders. However, the Kawarthas is on the northern edge of its range, and those individuals that do show up here probably either die or retreat southward. The species is very sensitive to severe winter conditions when ice and snow cover food resources on the ground, which leads to starvation. It also appears unable to withstand temperatures consistently below -12 C.

According to the Atlas, the Carolina wren is confirmed as breeding in 65 squares, mostly in the Carolinian zone of southern Ontario, which extends along the north shore of Lake Erie. Nesting has also been confirmed near Lake Scugog and is probable in the Rice Lake area.

Finally, a red-bellied woodpecker has been coming to a feeder on Stoney Lake, near Mt. Julian. This species has shown up regularly at feeders south of Millbrook in recent years, as well. About the same size as the hairy woodpecker, the red-bellied has a barred black and white back, faintly pinkish belly, bright red nape, and, in the male, a red cap. Like the Carolina wren, it is quite common in the Niagara Peninsula, along the north shore of Lake Erie and, more and more, along the north shore of Lake Ontario. Breeding has been confirmed in the Balsam Lake area and at Presqu'île. There are indications it may be breeding in Peterborough County, too, but this has not yet been proven.

Climate change is likely to redraw the bird distribution map of Ontario. Just in case the snowy, cold winter we are having leads some to believe that global warming has somehow ceased, the U.N. World Meteorological Organization has calculated that 2008 is likely to rank as the 10th warmest year on record since the beginning of instrumental climate records in 1850. This long-term warming trend will almost certainly allow species such as the red-bellied woodpecker, Carolina wren, and even the northern mockingbird to eventually expand their breeding ranges into the Kawarthas. They may someday become as common as cardinals and mourning doves, both of which used to be considered strictly southern birds.

■ Drew Monkman is a Peterborough teacher and author of *Nature's Year in the Kawarthas*. He can be reached at dmonkman1@cogeco.ca. Visit his website and see past columns at www.dreumonkman.com.

Ontario Nature contest for young writers

Ontario Nature magazine is looking for essays from grade 7 and 8 pupils on how they are helping the environment.

The magazine's 2009 writing contest is open to grade 7 and 8 pupils only. Three winning entries chosen by a panel of judges will be published in Ontario Nature magazine. The winners will also get prizes courtesy of Mountain Equipment Co-op and be honoured at Ontario Nature's annual general meeting May 30 at the Bruce County Museum, Southampton.

For additional information go to http://www.ontarionature.org/events/youth_writing_contest.html