

November 9, 2004

Living the life of Riley: geese, gulls and crows

In recent decades, we have seen a huge increase in the numbers of Canada geese, ring-billed gulls and American crows in eastern North America. For much of the year, these are among the most common species observed around Peterborough. As with so many of the common species these days, the explosion in their numbers is directly related to human activity.

There are two separate populations, or races, of Canada geese seen in the Kawarthas. The most familiar race is the “giant” Canada goose, a common sight on the Otonabee River, especially along Water Street. These birds are only partially migratory, going no further south than the Great Lakes and central United States when our lakes and rivers freeze up in late December. In the fall, giant Canada geese feed heavily in nearby corn, soybean and winter wheat fields. They are often seen flying low in small groups, usually in the early morning or just before dark, as they make their way to and from farm fields where they feed.

The giant Canada goose is native to southern Canada but had disappeared from most of its range by the late 1800s. After coming close to extinction, the species was re-introduced to southern Ontario during the 1960s, using geese from captive breeding flocks. Ever since, life has been wonderful for them: acres and acres of emergent corn and soybean fields to feast upon in the spring, succulent winter wheat in the fall, lush lawns of appetizing grasses in our municipal parks, lots of winter food thanks to conservation tillage practices, milder winters with less snow cover and a major decrease in the number of hunters. So, forty years later, we have ended up with a southern Ontario population of over 400,000 birds and rising.

The large, high-altitude flocks that pass through in late September and early October and then again in the first week of May are the so-called northern Canada Geese. A smaller bird, it nests around the fringes of the Hudson Bay Lowlands and winters mostly in the Tennessee Valley. Peterborough County is on the eastern edge of its migration route. The northern race has been in decline for at least a decade although the population does seem to be recovering.

Ring-billed gulls, the ubiquitous city “seagull”, have also undergone a continent-wide population explosion. From a Great Lakes population estimated at 3,000 pairs in 1930, ring-billed numbers had climbed to 640,000 pairs by the late 1980s and are still increasing. In addition to their natural diet of fish, insects, earthworms, small mammals and baby birds, humans have now provided gulls with unlimited amounts of new food, mostly in the form of garbage. They have also become quite adept at getting everything from fast food handouts to contributions from children’s school lunch bags. Other key factors explaining their abundance include a wide variety of man-made sites for nesting, a decrease in human persecution and, consequently, a decrease in the gulls’ fear of people. Since 1916, ring-billed gulls have been a protected species under the Migratory Birds Treaty.

Like most gulls, ring-bills nest in colonies, often consisting of thousands of pairs. Where they share nesting habitat on the Great Lakes with smaller birds such as common terns, the gulls can sometimes have a negative impact. Ring-bills arrive earlier in the spring than the terns and often take over all of the good nesting sites. Terns that try to nest in less suitable habitat are usually not successful. Terns do not normally nest in the Kawarthas.

Being so adaptable, ring-bills are now establishing new nesting colonies on breakwaters, in industrial yards, around sewage lagoons and even on the roof of General Motors in Oshawa.

Locally, there are reports of these birds attempting to nest atop Zellers on Lansdowne Street.

In and around Peterborough, ring-billed gulls are most common from August to November. By mid-summer, they have left their breeding colonies at sites such as Presqu'ile Provincial Park and many have dispersed inland. With their numbers bolstered by the year's crop of young birds, the gulls congregate at garbage dumps, golf courses, zoos, parks and school yards. This provides us with a good opportunity to study their behaviours and local movements. Ring-bills are superb flyers, and it is particularly interesting to watch how adeptly they can catch flying insects.

Ring-bills spend the night in large flocks on our larger lakes such as Rice Lake where they are safe from predators. Watch for them commuting late in the day and again in the early morning between their night-time roosts and daytime feeding sites. With freeze-up in late fall, ring-bills head south where they winter along the coast of the Gulf states, primarily Florida. However, some remain on the Great Lakes. Ring-bills begin to return to the Kawarthas by early March.

Several other species of gulls turn up in the Kawarthas in late fall and early winter. These include great black-backed, glaucous and Iceland gulls. In order to distinguish these less common species from their pedestrian cousin, take some time first of all to learn how to identify the ring-billed itself. Remember that immature ring-bills are quite different from the adults and have a narrow black tail band and duskier colouration. Little Lake, Bensfort Road Landfill and the fields in the vicinity of the landfill are great spots for gull watching.

Like geese and gulls, American crows, too, have benefited immensely from human activity. Crows have become a common sight at dumpsters, garbage dumps, picnic areas, agricultural fields and backyard feeders. They are often seen dining on road kill or even tearing holes in garbage bags set out on the curb for collection. Obviously, suburbia is very much to their liking. Not only is food readily available, but there are large trees for roosting and nesting, and predators are few. Their biggest enemy, the great horned owl, is very rare in built-up environments. Unfortunately, the increased number of crows does lead to some predation of the eggs and young of other birds. A common sight in the spring is a robin or grackle trying to drive away a menacing crow. For the most part, however, the crow's diet is primarily plant matter and insects.

You have no doubt noticed large numbers of crows all flying together late in the day in a long, strung out flock. This is because crows congregate at day's end to sleep in communal roosts. The roosts provide safety for the birds as well as information about good feeding sources. The birds follow each other in the morning when they leave the roost to fly out to feed. With increasing numbers of roosts in urban areas, the noise and droppings inevitably cause conflict with people

In the Kawarthas, most of our crows are migratory. According to reports from hawk watch stations, October 27th was a particularly busy day for crow migration this fall with tens of thousands of crows observed migrating westward along the shores of Lake Erie. Many will stop to overwinter in Essex County near Windsor, while others will carry on to destinations south of the border. However, with mild winters and high food availability, increasing numbers of crows are simply spending the winter in the Kawarthas. Whether these are local birds or crows from further north, is not known.

So, as much as we may curse geese for the droppings they leave on lawns, berate gulls for their brazenness or condemn crows for their noisy, early-morning cawing, it's important to

remember that humans are the cause of this state of affairs. We must also remember that the latter two species provide a huge amount of free garbage removal. However, it is in the interest of both humans and other plant and animal species to find ways to reduce the amount of food that we make available to these birds, since it is never healthy in nature when the population level of a given species become too high.

What to watch for this week:

Look for the beautiful Pleiades star cluster in the eastern sky in the evening. Also known as the Seven Sisters, at least six stars are visible to the naked eye. Several dozen additional stars are revealed when the Pleiades are viewed through binoculars.

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