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Finding Birds in Winter

Although it may appear that birds are few and far between at this time of year, there are actually many interesting species to be found if you know where and how to look. In a nutshell, birds frequent habitats that provide food and shelter. Some species such as finches are generally most active early in the day, but you should be able to find something of interest at any time.

First of all, anywhere there is open water is always worth investigating. Four or five species of ducks as well as pied-billed grebes, bald eagles, kingfishers and even the odd gull or great blue heron are all possible. Areas that often remain ice-free include Gannon's Narrows, Burleigh Falls, Young's Point, Lake Katchewanooka, Lakefield, the Otonabee River and sometimes Little Lake. County Road 32 (River Road) which runs along the east bank of the Otonabee between Peterborough and Lakefield is one of the best spots to view winter waterfowl and, if you are lucky, maybe even an eagle. Two were seen along here during the Christmas Bird Count.

Birds can also be found in habitats which provide good cover such as thick stands of coniferous trees, brushpiles, shrubby areas, hedges and fencerows. Look and listen for chickadees. Their presence often indicates that other species are around as well. Winter flocks of foraging chickadees often include both white-breasted and red-breasted nuthatches, brown creepers, golden-crowned kinglets and downy and hairy woodpeckers. By pishing - softly, but rapidly repeating the word "pish" - the birds will come in close to investigate the source of the unusual sound and should allow you a good look.

Winter robins, in particular, tend to be found in areas that provide a thick cover of white cedar. The rail-trail from Jackson Park to Lily Lake as well as the public path between Hilliard and Cumberland Streets almost always harbour robins in winter. In addition to cover, both of these areas provide food in the form of wild grape and European buckthorn.

When driving through farmland and near airports, watch the open fields for red-tailed hawks or possibly even a snowy owl or lingering rough-legged hawk. All three species will perch in trees, on telephone poles and also on hay bales. Open areas are also good for snow buntings and, by February, horned larks. The buntings feed in large, nervous flocks which fly about close to the ground like swirling snow. In overgrown fields with small trees, watch for northern shrikes. These solitary birds are easy to spot and identify because of their habit of perching on the uppermost point of a tree.

In the northern Kawarthas, keep an eye open for birds feeding right on the road. Winter finches in particular are attracted to the grit used in sanding operations. Sand and grit aid in the grinding action of the gizzard. Watch for crossbills, redpolls, siskins and even pine grosbeaks landing right on the road. This phenomenon is quite common along Highway 60 in Algonquin Park but can also be seen most anywhere when large numbers of finches are present. Try the Jack Lake Road and County Road 507 north of Flynn's Corners. Unfortunately, cars often end up hitting many of the birds.

For those who enjoy cross-country skiing, the Kawartha Nordic Ski Club trails provide opportunities to see species often associated with Algonquin Park. These can include barred owls, black-backed woodpeckers, gray jays, white-winged and red crossbills and even boreal chickadees. Usually, a lot of careful looking and listening is required. Crossbills, however, can be

very conspicuous because they often sing quite loudly in winter, usually from the top of spruce trees. They will nest in any month of the year, given sufficient food. Gray jays tend to be around trail cabins such as the Tanney, where they will come and take food right from your hand.

In the city, keep an eye skyward. Cooper's and sharp-shinned hawks are fairly common in urban areas in the winter and can be identified at considerable distances by their unique "flap-flap-glide" flight pattern. Feeders attract both of these raptor species, which dine almost exclusively on songbirds. I always feel privileged when a hawk makes an appearance in my yard. In addition to being beautiful birds in their own right, they allow me to observe first-hand a healthy food chain at work as the sun's energy passes from sunflower seed to mourning dove to hawk.

Conveniently for us, many birds are associated with human habitations in winter because of feeders and often shelter. However, the number of birds visiting feeders can often fluctuate a great deal from year to year or even week to week. There are several possible explanations. Winter finches such as redpolls, siskins and evening grosbeaks are highly nomadic and will wander great distances over the course of a winter. Human offerings of bird seed are usually not enough to make them stay. Secondly, many species such as house finches, house sparrows, American goldfinches and even northern cardinals flock up in winter and may frequent only one or two feeders. If your feeder is not on their list, you may find things very quiet. Finally, the presence of a hawk in the neighbourhood may explain why, on a given day, there are fewer birds. Hawks, of course, are attracted by the fact that people are feeding birds in the first place.

Dumps also attract large numbers of birds, functioning as de facto feeders. The landfill on Bensfort Road is great place to find gulls. Up to five species are present most winters, especially on mild days. Smaller dumps in the northern Kawarthas attract common ravens and bald eagles. The eagles leave, however, once the dump opens for business. The Apsley dump as well as the dumps on Anstruther Lake Road and West Kosh Road near Petroglyph Provincial Park always have ravens and sometimes eagles.

Finally, there is also good winter birding to be done at night or just before dawn. Screech and great horned owls are calling now and sometimes barred. Great horned can turn up in most any large woodlot south of the Shield. Screech owls tend to be mostly south of the city along the Indian and Otonabee Rivers and in the Rice Lake area. Pleasant Point Road near Squirrel Creek Conservation Area is often a good place for this species. Bared owls are fairly common in the Jack and Chandos lakes area and along McCoy Road south of County Road 504. If you imitate their "who cooks for you" call, they will often answer back, even during the day. If you go out to listen for owls and happen to be driving at dusk or dawn, keep an eye on the upper branches of roadside poplars and aspens. Ruffed grouse can often be seen feeding on buds at this time of day.

What to Watch for this Week:

White-tailed deer are shedding their antlers now. This shows that the antler's role as a tool of defence is minimal, since predators such as wolves and coyotes pose the greatest threat during the winter months, well after the antlers have fallen. By spring, much of the antlers will have been devoured by small mammals seeking the valuable minerals contained within.

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