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LIVING

Doing the math

When American ornithologist Frank Chapman asked birders to go out at Christmas and count the birds in their home towns, little did he know that his suggestion would lead to the largest organized birding event in the world. Today, Christmas Bird Counts (CBCs) are held in more than 1,800 localities across Canada, the U.S. and Latin America. There are two counts in the Kawarthas, one centred in Peterborough and a second near Petroglyphs Provincial Park.

Over the course of a single calendar day, groups of birders do their best to count all of the birds within a circle measuring 24 kilometres in diameter. By car, foot and ski, they are out from before dawn until nightfall, making sure all of the roads and different habitat types in the circle are covered.

These counts provide valuable information on the relative abundance and distribution of bird species, and constitute the world's largest and oldest database on bird populations. For example, CBC results show a very significant increase in the number of merlins, a small falcon, both in magnitude and geographical extent. Although this species is not present in our area in winter, it has become a regular breeder in the Kawarthas, with several pairs nesting right in Peterborough. On the other hand, CBC data show birds such as evening grosbeaks and purple finches to be in decline. Our two local CBCs reflect this tendency as well, although grosbeak numbers on the Petroglyph count were up this year. The decline may be related to a decrease in spruce budworm infestations. Both of these species are known to feed heavily upon budworms.

This year, the 54th annual Peterborough CBC was held on Sunday, Dec. 18. A total of 52 species and 10,555 individual birds were recorded, which is fairly average for this count. The five most common birds of the day were black-capped chickadee (1,457), snow bunting (1,152), rock pigeon (1,129), mallard (1,124) and European starling (871).

Three species showed up in record numbers this year, namely mallard ducks and both red breasted and white-breasted nuthatches. However, the most noteworthy bird of the day was a northern mockingbird, observed in Terraview Heights, just north of the zoo. This species is quite rare in Peterborough County, although its range does seem to be slowly expanding northward. Other birds of note included five red-winged blackbirds, 103 pine grosbeaks and 336 bohemian waxwings. This is turning out to be an excellent year for the latter two species. Wild turkeys, too, figured prominently in the count, with 58 birds tallied. Turkeys appear to be more common than ever in our area. The mourning dove population also seems to be expanding, with almost twice the average number recorded this year.

As you may have noticed, the number of American robins around Peterborough is down this winter, although we still managed to find nearly 100. The walkway between Weller Street and St. Peter's High School and the trail running from Hilliard to Cumberland are usually good places to find them.

Peterborough CBC results

(The first number is the number counted this year, while the number in brackets is the average number over the past 10 years. CW indicates a bird seen during the count week, but not on the count day.)

Great blue heron CW (1), Canada goose 147 (738), black duck 1 (7), mallard 1,124



Bird counts constitute the world's largest and oldest database on bird populations

On both the Peterborough and Petroglyphs Christmas bird counts, the number of pileated woodpeckers seen or heard this year was slightly above average. The pileated is about the size of a crow.

(572), common goldeneye 28 (57), hooded merganser 3 (2), common merganser 3 (22), red-breasted merganser 1 (0), bald eagle CW (0), sharp-shinned hawk 3 (3), Cooper's hawk 4 (2), Northern Goshawk 1 (1), red-tailed hawk 34 (28), rough-legged hawk CW (1), American kestrel 2 (3), ruffed grouse 14 (10), wild turkey 58 (16), ring-billed gull 34 (124), herring gull 316 (506), greater black-backed gull 5 (12), rock pigeon 1,129 (880), mourning dove 748 (444), eastern screech owl 1 (0), great horned owl 4 (5), downy woodpecker 45 (37), hairy woodpecker 32 (29), pileated woodpecker 7 (5), northern flicker 1 (1), horned lark 13 (4), blue jay 403 (231), American crow 341 (292), common raven 1 (1), black-capped chickadee 1,457 (1,043), red-breasted nuthatch 21 (7), white-breasted nuthatch 92 (46), brown creeper 7 (5), golden-crowned kinglet 7 (6), American robin 93 (151), northern mockingbird 1 (0), bohemian waxwing 336 (312), cedar waxwing 60 (129), northern shrike 8 (6), European starling 871 (1,260), northern cardinal 104 (59), American tree sparrow 514 (260), dark-eyed junco 267 (127), snow bunting 1,152 (401), red-winged blackbird 5 (1), pine grosbeak 103 (31), purple finch 1 (6), house finch 116 (167), common redpoll 20 (218), pine siskin 5 (5), American goldfinch 334 (274), house sparrow 476 (262). Total birds 10,555 (8,855), Total species 52 (51).

The 20th annual Petroglyph CBC was held on Jan. 3, 2006. Twenty-four birders in

six parties scoured the area between Apsley and Lasswade south to Stoney Lake. A total of 35 species and 2,624 individual birds were recorded. The five most common birds of the day were black-capped chickadee (928), blue jay (653), evening grosbeak (196), common redpoll (122) and white breasted nuthatch (114).

The number of evening grosbeaks recorded was quite encouraging, since this species is in serious decline in eastern North America. During the 1980s and early '90s however, we would routinely observe more than 400 grosbeaks. As for blue jays, this year's total was a record high, and three times greater than the 10-year average. Most of the blue jays were found in woodlands as opposed to feeders. Despite predictions to the contrary made earlier this fall, there is obviously sufficient wild food such as acorns to tide the birds over for the winter. It is also possible that the acorn crop further north was poor, therefore forcing large numbers of jays southward into our area. The star of the Petroglyph count, the bald eagle, was once again present in average numbers.

Petroglyphs CBC results

Bald eagle 6 (5), sharp-shinned hawk 1 (0), rough-legged hawk 1 (0), ruffed grouse 14 (30), wild turkey 1 (1), rock pigeon 71 (40), mourning dove 17 (12), barred owl 3 (3), downy woodpecker 23 (28), hairy woodpecker 46 (55), black-backed woodpecker 1 (2), pileated woodpecker 16 (16), grey jay 9

(6), blue jay 653 (288), American crow 8 (4), common raven 121 (119), black-capped chickadee 928 (1079), red-breasted nuthatch 68 (186), white-breasted nuthatch 114 (74), brown creeper 8 (25), golden-crowned kinglet 10 (44), bohemian waxwing 2 (8), northern shrike 2 (2), European starling 10 (58), American tree sparrow 13 (54), dark-eyed junco 1 (24), snow bunting 7 (29), pine grosbeak 5 (16), red crossbill 2 (7), common redpoll 122 (170), pine siskin 12 (80), American goldfinch 107 (213), evening grosbeak 196 (104), house sparrow 25 (16). Total birds 2,624 (2911). Total species 35 (35).

What to watch for this week

This weekend's full moon is worth some special attention. In early winter, the moon rises higher in the sky than at any other season of the year. At midnight, it passes almost directly overhead. Coupled with the reflective quality of the snow, moonlit winter nights shine with an unforgettable brilliance and are a great time for a late evening walk or ski.

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