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LIVING

Selected sightings

One of the nice things about writing a nature column is hearing about the many interesting nature sightings and experiences that people have all over the Kawarthas. This winter has been no exception. I would therefore like to share with readers today a sample of the more intriguing reports.



OUR CHANGING SEASONS
Drew Monkman

Backyard visitors

First of all, local feeders have been attracting quite an array of exciting birds in recent weeks. That this may have something to do with winter's exceptionally late start is an interesting possibility. The birds range from the simply uncommon to the totally unexpected.

In the uncommon category, there have been at least three Carolina wrens in and around the city. One has been visiting feeders on Manning Avenue in the city's north end. A second bird has been frequenting the scrubby area bordered by Silverdale Road, Afton Road and Clonsilla Avenue. The Carolina wren is fairly common in extreme southern Ontario but has not yet become established as a breeding species this far north. It is known for its large size, beautiful colouration and rich, caroling song.

An even more uncommon sighting has been that of a female yellow-rumped warbler. The bird turned up recently at a feeder on Fairview Lane, just off the Fifth Line of Smith. Primarily an insect eater, the warbler has managed to survive the many frigid nights thanks to the availability of suet. Wintering birds will also eat berries. The hardiest of the warblers, yellow-rumps sometimes overwinter as far north as the Lake Erie region but only rarely in our area. Three yellow-rumps were recorded on the Christmas Bird Census of 1981.

A feeder on Sandy Point Road north of Young's Point has been graced by the presence of a male eastern towhee (formerly rufous-sided towhee). This beautifully marked bird has a black head and back, rufous flanks and white belly. A member of the sparrow family, it forages on the ground by scratching the snow for seeds. Towhees do nest in the Kawarthas in the summer but usually overwinter in the southeastern United States. A number of winter records do exist for our area, however.

The two most unusual sightings, however, are of species that should be in Central America right now, namely the Baltimore oriole and indigo bunting. The oriole, a brilliantly coloured black and orange male, has been coming to suet feeders in Fowler's Corners since November. The indigo bunting, on the other hand, is a female bird that could easily be mistaken for a sparrow. It has been showing up regularly at a feeder on County Road 8, east of Indian River. At least one bird was also present in the Peterborough area in December of 1981. Indigo buntings are a fairly common nesting species in the Kawarthas. The male, which is entirely blue, is an inveterate singer.

Finally, a family living on Bland Line, west of Mount Pleasant, has had a visitor of an entirely different sort. A northern shrike has set up home on their property and has shown them why the species used to be known as the "butcher bird." While out walking one day, the people started to find the bodies of deer mice hung in the crotches of trees along a nearby trail. Through the help of a neighbour, they soon discovered that a shrike was responsible for the killings. If given the opportunity, a shrike will kill more prey than it can immediately eat or feed to nestlings. By storing excess prey to eat later, the species has adapted to surviving periods of food scarcity. Early observers thought that such behaviour was simply an example of wanton killing, hence the name butcher bird.

Only about the size of a robin, the shrike has the hooked beak of a raptor which it uses to kill and dismember small birds and mammals. Winter visitors from the far north, shrikes are usually seen perched on the

Readers report on winter experiences of note in the natural world

uppermost twig of small trees, often in brushy fields.

Busy eagles

According to Susan Brooks, a Lake Katchewanooka resident who has been closely monitoring the nesting activities of bald eagles for several years now, it was confirmed on Jan. 3 that the Katchewanooka eagles are indeed building a new nest on the same small island where the old nest stood. Located in the top of a dead pine tree, the original nest blew down during the ferocious wind storm of July 8, 2006. Fortunately, when the nest was destroyed, the two babies were already able to fly. Even without the comfort of their nest, they remained in the area and continued to roost on the island and be fed by the adults.

Presumably, the same pair of adult eagles have now chosen a live white pine, just to the south of the former nest, to relocate home-making operations. They have been busy bringing nesting materials to the crotch of a healthy white pine and are indeed building a new nest. The tree they have chosen looks to be the tallest and strongest of the pine grove, and they are building near the top. This should afford the eagles an excellent view for several kilometers in all directions. In addition, because it is a live tree this time, the pine boughs will provide good cover and shade as well as protection from the wind.

As of Feb. 12, the eagles were still working on the nest and did not appear to have laid any eggs yet. According to Susan, one bird will always be on the nest once an egg has been laid. The eagles do, however, exchange places. Last year, one bird would fly in and land on the side of the nest while the other would shuffle over to the side. They would then exchange places as the arriving parent would immediately move down into the pit of the nest. Last year, the pair laid their first egg on approximately Feb. 27.

On a similar note, an eagle was observed soaring over Armour Road for several minutes on Feb. 10. Thinking at first it was a vulture, the observers managed to get closer to the huge bird and were thrilled to see the white head and tail of a mature bald eagle.

Wayward moose

On Jan. 29, a justifiably surprised observer saw an adult moose just north of the city near Hilliard Street and Woodland Drive. Many parts of northern Peterborough County are seeing a marked increase in the number of moose, but few animals are ever seen this far south. A mother and calf were also seen near Lovesick Lake this summer. Another animal turned up on Northey's Bay Road.

Monarch butterfly update

The count is finally in on the size of this year's butterfly population. Scientists have calculated that the trees harbouring monarchs this winter cover 6.67 hectares, an area equal to the size of 16 football fields. This is larger than the past two years but down somewhat compared to three years ago. Looking at the last 12 years, the area used by monarchs has averaged about eight hectares. Scientists think there are between 10 million and 50 million butterflies per hectare.

This year, more than half of the continent's monarchs are at just two of the wintering sites, El Rosario and Sierra Chincua. This gives you an idea of how important those sites are for monarch conservation. The town of Anganguero sits between Sierra Chincua and El Rosario and is considered the monarch capital of the world.

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From top: A northern shrike, a female yellow-rumped warbler an eastern towhee.

Karl Egressy, special to The Examiner