

LIVING

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

Visitors from the north

The numbers and variety of birds visiting our feeders every fall and winter fluctuate widely from year to year. In fact, many of the species we most look forward to actually breed in northern Canada and winter only intermittently south of the boreal forest. The years they do come south are known as flight years.



OUR CHANGING SEASONS

Drew Monkman

The main cause of this southward migration is a shortage of natural food, mostly seeds and berries, in the breeding range. The birds must therefore migrate to avoid starving. Whether they end up in the Kawarthas mainly depends on how much suitable food is available here. If seed crops are good in the north, the birds stay put. If food is lacking, they will sometimes fly thousands of kilometers to find it.

Each fall, the Ontario Field Ornithologists compiles information on the relative abundance of seed crops in Ontario. Much of the data comes from Ministry of Natural Resources staff as well as birders across the province. This year's forecast was prepared by Jean Iron and looks relatively promising.

So, what is the seed crop situation in the province? The white pine, our provincial tree and a common species in Peterborough County, has a heavy cone crop in most parts of Ontario. Red pine, too, has good numbers of cones. As for spruce and balsam fir, their cone crops are good locally and throughout most of central Ontario, but cone abundance diminishes rapidly northwards into the boreal forest. The hemlock seed crop is reported as being quite poor, at least here in central Ontario.

As for deciduous trees and shrubs, the white birch seed crop is fair to good in central and southern Ontario but poor in the north. The American mountain-ash (rowan berry) crop is excellent throughout the province. Locally, the European mountain-ash, a common ornamental tree, is also laden with a heavy crop of fruit as are most cherries, honeysuckles and dogwoods. The red oak acorn crop is also good, while the beechnut crop is fair.

What does all this mean? Let's begin with the good news. One species that is already turning up in good numbers is the red-breasted nuthatch. Movements of this bird are linked to the cone crop on spruce, balsam fir and white pine. The bumper white pine crop and good numbers of cones on spruce and fir crops in many areas should keep lots of these hyperactive birds around this winter. Expect them at your feeder, too. The abundance of acorns and beechnuts should also convince large numbers of blue jays to hang around rather than migrating south into the U.S.

As for the common redpoll, the forecast is not quite so clear. The redpoll gets by largely on white and yellow birch seeds in winter. Because birch seed crops are poor in the northern two-thirds of the boreal forest, redpolls will be on the move. The question is whether the seed crops in central Ontario are large enough to persuade them to remain here over the winter.



Some bird species turn to our area in search of food



Clockwise, from top: Red crossbills gleaning sand and salt from the pavement in Algonquin Park; bohemian waxwing; and a male evening grosbeak.

Karl Egressy, Special to The Examiner

Hopefully, this is one winter finch that you can expect at your niger seed feeder, at least for part of the winter.

The pine siskin is another species that loves niger seed. However, when it comes to wild food, they prefer to dine on conifer seeds, especially those of spruce. Given the poor spruce crop in the boreal forest where this species breeds, siskins should also be headed our way.

Whether or not pine grosbeaks move south depends mostly on how much fruit is on the wild American mountain-ash. Last winter's crop was poor throughout the north, so the birds headed southward early. Many local residents with a crabapple or European mountain-ash tree in their yard were paid a visit by flocks of this beautiful finch last winter. However, because of the abundance of mountain-ash berries in northern Ontario this year, observers are predicting that pine grosbeaks will stay put. Birds will not expend more energy than they have to in order to reach food sources. A few may show up south to Algonquin Park, but they are unlikely farther south.

Another of last winter's signature species was the bohemian waxwing. The city of Peterborough and the surrounding areas have long been one of the best places in central Ontario to see this bird in winter. Whether we'll see them this winter, however, is not certain. Like the pine grosbeak, this waxwing is a mountain-ash berry

specialist in winter and should find all it needs to eat without having to move further south.

However, because these birds seem to have such strong ties to the Peterborough area, it will be interesting to see if some flocks show up anyway. It may be that they are coming here because of the local abundance of European buckthorn trees, a species that seems to produce prolific amounts of fruit every year. In some ways it is unfortunate that waxwings enjoy buckthorn fruit so much. They inadvertently help to spread the seeds of this aggressive, non-native shrub that crowds out so much of our native vegetation.

The evening grosbeak, a seed generalist in winter, may also make a small southward movement this winter. Some readers may remember that from the 1960s through the early 1980s evening grosbeaks were a common feeder bird in the Kawarthas. It is now thought that grosbeak numbers were greatly inflated during this period by huge outbreaks of spruce budworm which were occurring at the same time. Budworms provided an unlimited source of protein for the birds, allowing them to raise a lot more young than usual. However, a major decline in grosbeak numbers began in the mid-1980s when the size of annual budworm outbreaks decreased. Ontario's breeding population is now believed to be stable.

Red and white-winged crossbills are two other species that are

heavily affected by the cone crop. Although they usually do not visit feeders, they can sometimes be seen eating salt and sand on roads. The abundant white pine seeds should mean that red crossbills will be around this winter, albeit in small numbers. White-winged crossbills should be fairly common, too. They prefer the small, soft cones of white and black spruce as well as those of hemlock. This winter the birds should be widespread in traditional areas such as Algonquin Park and northern Peterborough County. Watch for them, too, on European larch and on ornamental spruce species such as the blue and the Norway. Both crossbill species sometimes turn up right in the city. To receive daily e-mails on what's happening with Ontario's birds, go to www.ofo.ca and follow the links to ONTBIRDS.

A late fall or winter trip to Algonquin Park can be a great way to see many of the winter finches mentioned above, including crossbills. If you arrive early in the morning, you should be able to see crossbills eating road salt and sand right along Highway 60. You should also make a point of walking the Spruce Bog Trail at kilometre 42.5 and visiting the gate area on the Opeongo Road about four kilometres north from kilometre 46 on Highway 60. Watch and listen for crossbills, grey jays, boreal chickadees, spruce grouse and black-backed woodpeckers.

The Visitor Centre and restaurant at kilometre 43 have an obser-

vation deck which overlooks a spectacular bog and black spruce forest. The feeders attract grey jays, evening grosbeaks, pine grosbeaks, common redpolls and other finches, depending on the year. Sometimes, a pine marten or fisher will even put in an appearance at the suet feeder. Eastern Canadian wolves (*Canis lycaon*) are also seen occasionally from the observation deck. They come to feed on road-killed moose put out by park staff. Although the Visitor Centre is open only on weekends in winter, arrangements can be made to view feeders on weekdays. For information call the centre at 613-637-2828.

Whatever the particular mix of species happens to be this winter, it's safe to say that there will be something of interest. Trying to forecast what they will be is part of the game. The latest word is that some small mammal populations are low in the north and that owls could have trouble finding enough to eat. Right now, they may already be turning their big eyes southward, ready to add interest to a Kawartha's winter.

■ **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 at www.drewmonkman.com. Karl Egressy is a Guelph nature photographer. To see more of his work and to contact him, go to www.kegressy.com.**