localnews

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LIVING

Big cats, meet big birds

Already high, local biodiversity boosted by vultures and cranes, bobcats and lynx

CONRAD FIJETLAND photo

KARL EGRESSY photo

A bobcat, like the one seen above, was reportedly trapped north of Havelock in 2008 and the large cats seem to be on the increase across Southern Ontario in general.
The magnolia warbler (left) is moving down into the northern part of Peterborough County from its more traditional home in the Algonquin Park area.

Drew Monkman
OUR CHANGING SEASONS

Peterborough County and the Kawarthas enjoy one of the highest levels of biodiversity in Ontario. The mix of Canadian Shield country, Great Lakes–St. Lawrence Lowlands, and numerous lakes and rivers makes for a rich assortment of habitat types and ecosystems – hence the diversity in everything from fungi and orchids to damselflies and weasels. This week I'd like to take a closer look at the two most visible animals groups, namely birds and mammals.

BIRDS

There are approximately 10,000 species of birds worldwide, of which 653 have been found in Canada. More than 450 species have been observed in Ontario, nearly three-quarters of the Canadian total. Of these, more than 300 have been recorded in Peterborough County, including approximately 160 breeding species. Thirty-two species are present in significant numbers all year round. The rest are migratory.

Five species are exotics, meaning they have been introduced to North America from another part of the world: the house sparrow, European starling, rock pigeon, mute swan, and ring-necked pheasant. The only local species to have gone extinct is the passenger pigeon. Over the course of a year, an experienced birder might see as many as 20 species of ducks, three grebes, 14 raptors (hawks, eagles and falcons), 15 sandpipers and plovers, five gulls, three terns, 10 owls, two cuckoos, eight woodpeckers, six swallows, eight flycatchers, five wrens, six thrushes, five vireos, 27 warblers, and 30 sparrows and finches – to name just some of the better known bird families represented here. Over the course of just one day at the height of spring migration in May, it's quite possible to see more than 120 species, if you cover both the northern and southern sections of the county.

In the southern part of Peterborough County, hooded warblers, screech owls and, with luck, a red-headed woodpecker, are species to be expected during a day's birding. Drive north up onto the Canadian Shield, however, and white-throated sparrows, olive-sided flycatchers, and magnolia warblers will have you convinced you're actually in Algonquin Park. The 10 species you would most likely record in northern Peterborough County are (in order of probability): red-eyed vireo, black-capped chickadee, white-throated sparrow, chestnut-sided warbler, American robin, ovenbird, common yellowthroat, blue jay, veery, and song sparrow. In the south your most abundant species would be: American robin, song sparrow, American crow, common grackle, red-winged blackbird, American goldfinch, chipping sparrow, blue jay, tree swallow, and northern flicker.

There have been considerable changes in local bird populations over the past 20 years. Some of the species showing the greatest increases locally are Canada goose, house finch, turkey vulture, wild turkey, merlin, eastern bluebird, sandhill crane, bald eagle, Cooper's hawk, trumpeter swan, double-crested cormorant, and common raven. The most precipitous decreases belong to common nighthawk, chimney swift, bank swallow, blue-winged teal, red-headed woodpecker, barn swallow, cliff swallow, whip-poor-will, purple martin, tree swallow, and olive-sided flycatcher.

The majority of the species in decline are "aerial foragers" that catch their food on the wing. Their decline in Peterborough County and Ontario in general is mirrored very closely by similar declines across most of North America. Many entomologists fear that aerial insects, including pollinators such as bees, wasps, butterflies, and moths, are decreasing in number, most likely as a result of man-made changes in the environment.

One of the good news stories of the last 20 years is the increase in raptors. This is partly due to the reduction in DDT and its derivatives in the environment. Bald eagles have probably benefitted the most from the DDT ban. Some species, such as Cooper's hawk and merlin, have now become quite common right in the City of Peterborough.

Most of our resident species, such as the house finch and mourning dove, have increased in number over the past 20 years. It is also interesting to note that big, heavy birds are doing well. This group includes species such as wild turkey, sandhill crane, turkey vulture, and double-crested cormorant. Of our short-distance migrants (species such as the American robin that winter primarily in the U.S.), substantially more have increased than decreased. As for long-distance migrants (species that winter in the Caribbean, Mexico, and Central and South America), the news is not so good since many more have decreased than increased. Aerial foragers fall into this group of migrants.

We are also recording an increasing number of "vagrant" species that are outside their expected range. Many of these vagrants are dispersing northward from warm, dry life zones of the southern U.S. Among them is the white-winged dove, one of which made an appearance in Peterborough last summer. Others that we may see here in the future include black-bellied whistling duck, Mississippi kite and cave swallow.

MAMMALS

Of the more than 5,000 species of mammals known worldwide, 218 are found in Canada. Ontario is home to 81 of these. Fifty-five species have been recorded in Peterborough County. As in the case of birds, some species are restricted to the northern Shield country, while others are found only in the more agricultural lands of the south. There are still large gaps in our knowledge of the county's mammals, especially with regard to shrews, moles, mice, and bats. According to Don Sutherland of the Natural Heritage Information Centre here in Peterborough, all three forest bats (eastern red, hoary, and silver-haired) undoubtedly occur in the county during at least part of the year but have yet to be reported.

Some of our more common species include short-tailed shrew, star-nosed mole, big brown bat, little brown myotis (formerly little brown bat), eastern cottontail, snowshoe hare, European hare, eastern chipmunk, groundhog, gray squirrel, red squirrel, northern flying squirrel, southern flying squirrel, American beaver, deer mouse, white-footed mouse, muskrat, meadow vole, Norway rat, house mouse, American porcupine, coyote, Eastern wolf (see below), red fox, American black bear, raccoon, fisher, ermine, American mink, striped skunk, river otter, white-tailed deer, and moose. Our three exotic species are the house mouse, Norway rat, and European hare.

Opossum sightings have increased over the past couple of decades, if only very gradually. There have also been an increased number of reports of American black bear. More bears are also being seen in the southern half of the county including Peterborough. River otters also seem to have increased in and around the city, particularly along the Otonabee River and Jackson Creek. This seems consistent with a general increase and expanded range of otters in southwestern Ontario.

Anecdotal evidence would also seem to show an increase in moose numbers. I regularly hear of moose being seen in areas such as Sandy Lake (south of Lasswade), Haultain, Northey's Bay Road, and Pencil Lake, to name a few. There even seems to be a trend towards increased bobcat numbers in southern Ontario. Locally, there was a report of an animal being trapped in December 2008 near Oak Lake, north of Havelock. It is also likely that a small number of lynx can still be found in the extreme northern parts of the county.

The fisher, a member of the weasel family, has certainly increased, too.

Fishers were completely wiped out from much of southern Ontario prior to the 1950s because of trapping and habitat destruction. However, it now appears that small refuges of this species did remain. Our local animals may very well have originated from a remnant population that managed to persist in the Bancroft area. The increase in fishers is probably responsible for what appears to be a decrease in porcupines, their preferred prey of fishers. This can be seen in the lower incidence of road-killed porcupines. Porcupine numbers have decreased elsewhere in southern Ontario, as well.

Wolves in Peterborough County are represented by the widespread coyote or brush wolf (Canis latrans) and the eastern wolf (Canis lycaon) whose taxonomy remains somewhat unclear. Peterborough County lies at the interface between the ranges of these two species. Eastern North American wolves have long been recognized as distinct from both coyotes and gray wolves (Canis lupus). This has led to questions regarding the origins and taxonomic status of these wolves. For a long time, many considered them to be a gray wolf subspecies. Although debate persists, recent molecular studies suggest that the eastern wolf is not a gray wolf subspecies, nor the result of gray wolf/coyote hybridization. Prior to the eastward spread of coyotes in the late 1800s, eastern wolves were most likely a totally distinct species onto themselves. This wolf has now been given the name Canis lycaon. Now, however, interbreeding with coyotes is complicating the picture and reducing the distinctiveness of the eastern wolf. Wolf-like animals seen in northern Peterborough County are probably closer to true eastern wolves than to coyotes, although they undoubtedly contain some coyote genes. Sightings south of the Shield are most likely coyotes.

Finally, a word about cougars. At this point, it's still unclear whether reports sightings are of released or escaped pet cougars or of wild animals that are recolonizing their former eastern North America territory.

(Note: The Natural Heritage Information Centre was incorrectly referred to as the Natural History Information Centre in my Feb. 11 column.)

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