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Editor JIM HENDRY life@peterboroughexaminer.com 745-4641 ext. 242

LIVING

Bad news for bats, butterflies

White nose syndrome found on Ontario bats; monarchs hit hard in Mexico

At times, it can get downright depressing when you look at what is happening to some of Ontario's mammal, insect and bird populations. However, we can't stick our heads in the sand, either, and pretend that everything is fine, just because backyard birdlife may seem more or less normal.



Drew Monkman
OUR CHANGING SEASONS

In recent weeks and months, more unsettling news has come to light regarding many of our most common species. These include bats, monarch butterflies, bobolinks, aerial insect-eating birds, and, as the icing on the cake, nearly all birds that pass through the Gulf states during migration. Hopefully, it's not too late yet to turn at least some of these trends around.

WHITE NOSE SYNDROME NOW IN ONTARIO

The first cases of bats with white nose syndrome (WNS) in Ontario have been confirmed. As of March 31, WNS has been identified at seven sites: in the Bancroft-Minden area, Kirkland Lake, Flesherton, Faraday, near Belleville, and two in Renfrew County. WNS has been linked to the deaths of at least some bats at these sights. WNS was first recorded in 2006 in a cave near Albany, New York. It is now routinely seen in caves and abandoned mines where bats hibernate throughout the northeastern United States.

The syndrome gets its name from a ring of white fungus on the faces of some affected bats. Bats with WNS appear to wake up far too often during hibernation and to stay awake too long. Being overly active during winter depletes their stored fat reserves prematurely and the animals end up starving to death. Some of our most common bat species could completely disappear from North America within 10 years, according to Dr. Brock Fenton of the University of Western Ontario.

This sort of precipitous decline in wildlife species is expected to become more common as climate change continues to make itself felt. A fungus-related disease is also wiping out entire populations of frogs in Central America. It, too, may be related to climate change. To report unusual bat deaths that you may have observed this past winter, call the Canadian Cooperative Wildlife Health Centre at 1-866-673-4781 or the Natural Resources Information Centre at 1-800-667-1940

BAD WINTER FOR MONARCHS

On Monday of this week I saw my first monarch butterfly. This was encouraging, since monarchs were devastated by torrential rains in their winter home in Mexico. In fact, the overwintering population dwindled to the lowest levels in decades. More than 50% of the insects are believed to have died, according to Chip Taylor, a professor of



KARL EGRESSY photo



entomology and director of Monarch Watch at the University of Kansas. "I'm hoping it wasn't as high as 70% or 80%. We've never seen it this bad before," he went on to say. Researchers estimated that the butterfly population in Mexico – measured in hectares, which represent the areas with trees that contain monarchs – covered 1.92 hectares, down from the average of 7.44. As many as 50 million monarchs may be found in a single hectare. The monarch population was already unusually low because of unfavorable conditions in parts of the U.S. and Canada last summer.

Monarch Watch, a Kansas-based monarch butterfly conservation group (www.monarchwatch.org), is starting a campaign to encourage gardeners, farmers and even transportation officials to plant milkweed, a monarch favorite. The plant is a lifeline for the traveling butterflies. "It's not just the backyard garden," Taylor said. "We're hoping to encourage changes in roadside management practices, and how public lands are managed."

On the positive side, conditions for growth in the monarch population in Texas have been very good this spring with abundant milkweed and nectar sources for the butterflies. So, with a lit-

tle luck, we may still see good numbers of these beautiful insects in the Kawarthas this summer. The long-range forecast of warm, relatively dry weather should help the monarchs.

BOBOLINKS AT RISK

A relatively common grassland bird of the Kawarthas also appears to have fallen on rough times, at least in other parts of its extensive Canadian range. The Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) has recommended that the bobolink be added to Canada's list of species at risk. Over 25% of the bobolink's breeding range is in Canada. It met COSEWIC's criteria for "threatened" status owing to significant population declines (88% since 1968) that are due to habitat loss and degradation, high levels of nest failure resulting from increasingly intensive agricultural operations, and threats faced on its wintering grounds in South America.

Jon McCracken, of Bird Studies Canada, co-chairs COSEWIC's Birds Specialist Subcommittee. "The addition of a hitherto common species like the bobolink is particularly worrisome, but perhaps should come as no great surprise. As with nearly every other grassland species in North America, the

This past winter was hard on monarch butterfly populations in Mexico but it has been a good spring for the milkweed plants their caterpillars feed on (above) so we may yet see a good number of the beautiful orange insects in the Kawarthas. The bobolink (left) is more seriously threatened and is another common local species – 20% of the North American population is found in Ontario. Also under threat are the bank swallow (top right) and the little brown bat, which is under attack from a white fungus that has now spread into Ontario.

declines are widespread and severe."

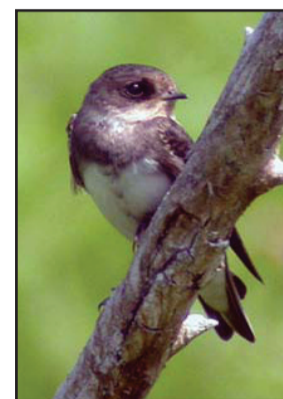
Male bobolinks are black with a yellow head patch and white patterns on the back. Females are a nondescript, sparrow-like, striped brown. The male sings an exuberant, bubbly song as he flies low over fields in May and June.

Bobolinks nest in the long grass of hayfields and lightly grazed pastures. However, when the hay is cut, usually sometime in mid- to late June, nearly all the nests and babies are destroyed. Gulls often take the young birds that the blades somehow miss. Delaying the cutting until about July 8 would make a huge difference to bobolink survival. However, the nutritional quality of the hay apparently declines the longer you wait to harvest it, and there is no compensation paid to farmers who agree to delay hay cutting.

GULF SPILL AND THE KAWARTHAS

The current oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico may become yet another threat to the survival of many migratory bird species, even here in the Kawarthas. This is because millions of migratory birds pass directly through the spill area on their way to their summer territories in the U.S. and Canada. In spring, the coastal islands, wetlands, fields, and

forests of the Gulf states are the very first land that migrating birds encounter after an all night, non-stop flight across the Gulf of Mexico.



Hundreds or even thousands of birds can be literally underfoot as they feed and rest on the barrier islands and coastlines of Louisiana and Texas. This makes the area one of the best birding destinations in North America.

However, there are scientists who fear that some of the birds could be sickened when they stop

to feed in contaminated wetlands and other habitats. The problem is that oil has the capacity to make its way into the food chain. Eating invertebrates that contain trace amounts of oil might not kill a bird outright, but could have serious negative effects on a bird's health. This, in turn, may make it much more difficult for a bird to feed itself and to breed successfully.

AERIAL INSECTIVORES – SIGHTINGS WANTED

As regular readers of this column are probably aware, aerial insectivores – birds that eat flying insects – are rapidly declining throughout much of North America. Members of this group include nighthawks, whip-poor-wills, swallows, swifts, martins and flycatchers. Their menu list includes everything from bees, mosquitoes, and midges to moths, butterflies and dragonflies. Unfortunately, this aerial Cirque du Soleil is becoming a thing of the past, and the exact reasons for the declines remain largely unknown. It would appear, however, that just like the crash in honeybee numbers, other insect populations have also declined, hence the decline in birds. Is it because of climate change, pesticide use, and ultraviolet radiation killing larval insects? No one knows for sure.

As a first step in identifying, Bird Studies Canada is developing research projects targeting three species of concern: bank swallow, chimney swift, and whip-poor-will. To increase our understanding of the current distribution and abundance of these species in Ontario, and to identify their habitat needs, they are compiling reports of breeding locations from anywhere in Ontario.

Bank swallows nest in sand banks, often in old or active sandpits. Any colonies that you are aware of can be reported online through the Ontario Bank Swallow Project or by contacting Myles Falconer at mfalconer@birdscanada.org. Report chimney swifts entering a chimney or other structure through the Ontario Chimney Swift Project <http://www.birdscanada.org/birdmon/chsw/main.jsp> or contact Elisabeth van Stam, evanstam@birdscanada.org. Report observations of singing whip-poor-wills to the Ontario Whip-poor-will Project <http://www.birdscanada.org/birdmon> or contact Audrey Heagy, ahagy@birdscanada.org.

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 and see past columns at www.drew-monkman.com.

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