

localnews

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LIVING

It's official, birds follow the food

Annual Christmas tally finds high number in city, lower at Petroglyphs



Drew Monkman

OUR CHANGING SEASONS

Although turtle doves and French hens were absent from this year's local Christmas Bird Counts, a handful of partridges -ruffed grouse, to be more accurate -were recorded, albeit in aspens instead of pear trees. Local birders also tallied record numbers of six other species in this long-standing census of local birdlife.

Christmas Bird Counts are held throughout North America between mid-December and early January every year. Dating all the way back to 1900, they represent the biggest organized birding event in the world and a holiday tradition for over 50,000 birders. They are also an excellent example of "citizen science" in which volunteers help to examine the state of our natural environment. The only way that bird population trends can be monitored on a scale as large as that of North America is to engage volunteers to count the birds in a systematic manner, and then to have their sightings submitted to a central, online database. Birds are increasingly being seen as general indicators of biodiversity and environmental health.

Two counts are held in the Peterborough area, both organized by Tony Bigg of Lakefield. One is centred in Peterborough and the other in Petroglyphs Provincial Park. They each cover a circle 24 kilometres in diameter and take one day each to complete. Working in small groups and covering the circle by car, foot and sometimes even by snowshoe or ski, birders work from dawn to dusk to do their best to count all of the birds within the circle on the selected day. The 2010 count in Peterborough count took place Dec. 19 while the Petroglyph count was on Dec. 27.

Once again this year the Peterborough count had the good fortune of excellent weather conditions. This made seeing and hearing the birds relatively easy. Both the number of individual birds (11,341) and the number of species (54) was higher than usual. This may have been partly due to the above-average number of birders who took. Although no new birds for the count were recorded, no less than six species turned up in record numbers. They were the pied-billed grebe (4), merlin (3), wild turkey (225), mourning dove (1,329), blue jay (469), and dark-eyed junco (309). The previous record high was equalled in the case of sharp-shinned hawk (5), Cooper's hawk (5), Wilson's snipe (1), barred owl (2), red-bellied woodpecker (2), and red-winged blackbird (5).

One of the interesting stories this year is the 225 wild turkeys that were tallied. This is three times the previous high. The wild turkey completely disappeared from Ontario in 1909 as a result of logging and unregulated hunting. However, in the early 1980's the Ontario Federation of Anglers and Hunters, along with the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources, began a wild turkey restoration project involving the trapping and transfer of wild turkeys from the U.S. to Ontario. In exchange, Ontario transferred wildlife for restoration projects south of the border. This included sending moose from Algonquin Park to Michigan. In 1984, 4,400 wild turkeys were released at 275



KARL EGRESSY photos

Record numbers of the pied-billed grebe (top), merlin (left) and wild turkey (above) were spotted during the annual Christmas Bird Count in Peterborough on Dec. 19

sites across the province. Twenty-six years later the province-wide turkey population is thought to be about 100,000 birds.

Merlins, too, are experiencing quite a comeback in Ontario, as indicated by our record three birds. Originally known as the pigeon hawk because of its fast and direct manner of flying, this small falcon declined drastically in the 1950s and 1960s due to the use of DDT. By the mid-1980s it had still not recovered to pre-DDT levels. Since then, however, it has experienced tremendous population growth throughout the province. Merlins have even colonized urban areas, including Peterborough where at least four pairs nested last spring. In fact, the merlin is probably the most common raptor in many Ontario cities. This is due not only to abundant prey in the form of small songbirds like house sparrows and starlings but also to a variety of good nesting sites such as tall conifers. Although some birds stay here for the winter, most merlins appear to migrate to the southern U.S. and northern Mexico.

As for the Petroglyph count, only 28 species were found this year. This is five species below the 10-year average. The 1,762 individual birds recorded was

also lower than the average of 2455. No new species or record numbers were recorded. However, the one sharp-shinned hawk that was seen equals the previous record high. Most sharp-shinned migrate south in the winter or move into urban areas where the hunting is better. So, why would the Peterborough count be so productive and its poor cousin to the north fare so poorly? It all comes down to food and habitat. The Petroglyph count circle is mostly forest, which means that there is very little habitat diversity. In addition, unlike the Peterborough count, there are very few houses and therefore fewer bird feeders. If wild food is scarce - as was generally the case this year - bird numbers can be quite low. The only forest trees that have produced good crops of bird-friendly food this year are the oaks and white birch, hence the good numbers of blue jays and at least some common redpolls.

PETERBOROUGH: CBC RESULTS

The first number is the number counted this year, while the number in parenthesis is the average number over the past 10 years. NR stands for "new record" and ER stands for "equals record."

finch 175 (145), white-winged crossbill 2 (40), common redpoll 20 (97), pine siskin 4 (26), American goldfinch 736 (456), house sparrow 268 (285)

Total birds 11,341 (9610) Total species 54 (52.7)

PETROGLYPHS: CBC RESULTS

Bald eagle 4 (5), sharp-shinned hawk 1 ER (0.2), northern goshawk 1 (0.3), red-tailed hawk 2 (2), ruffed grouse 14 (30), wild turkey 8 (10), rock pigeon 68 (59), mourning dove 16 (23), barred owl 1 (3), downy woodpecker 13 (23), hairy woodpecker 19 (45), pileated woodpecker 3 (14), blue jay 276 (305), American crow 5 (5), common raven 100 (99), black-capped chickadee 874 (978), red-breasted nuthatch 76 (140), white-breasted nuthatch 48 (77), brown creeper 4 (18), goldencrowned kinglet 33 (25), European starling 14 (39), dark-eyed junco 1 (7), snow bunting 1 (16), white-winged crossbill 2 (20), common redpoll 61 (165), hoary redpoll 1 (1), pine siskin 1 (22), American goldfinch 63 (142), evening grosbeak 51 (46)

Total birds 1762 (2455) Total species 28 (33)

CLARIFICATION

In my column of Dec. 16, "Niagara in winter is birdland" I wrote that "Hundreds of long-tailed ducks were in the canal, too. Although the long, needle-like tail is unique, the bird's former name of oldsquaw had a certain charm, despite being understandably offensive to some Native Americans."

At least one reader found my use of the word "charm" objectionable and, in this particular case, I agree that the word was indeed inappropriate. What I should have gone on to say is that many of the old names by which our birds were once known are indeed charming because of the history and folklore associated with them. They evoke a colourful, less scientific past when a standardized approach to the common name (as opposed to the scientific name) of a species was only in its infancy.

Many present-day birders, naturalists and hunters grew up with these names. For example, the American woodcock used to be known in many parts as the "timber doodle," while the American bittern was sometimes called the "thunder pumper." Hunters still often refer to scaup ducks as "bluebills" and to goldeneye as "whistlers." I can't help but feel that something of our cultural heritage is lost when names are changed. This is also true for the names of geographic features, streets, cities, etc.

As for the name oldsquaw, the origin of which is unclear, it was used in all North American bird guides until only a decade ago. I fully agree, however, that the word "squaw" is offensive to First Nations people and the name therefore needed to be changed. In 2000, the American Ornithologists Union (AOU) did indeed change the name, not only because of its offensive nature but also to conform to English usage in other parts of the world such as the United Kingdom where long-tailed duck has long been the official common name of this bird.

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