



The Peninsula Naturalist

Volume 229

Newsletter of the Peninsula Field Naturalists Club

February 2012

PRESIDENT'S MUSINGS

"If we had no Winter, the Spring would not be so pleasant; If we did not sometimes taste of adversity, prosperity would not be so welcome..." So wrote Anne Bradstreet in 1664.

I'll leave it to you to determine who Anne Bradstreet was - but somehow her observation about the seasons seems to apply to this year. With a winter that can't make up its mind, farmers are having nightmares about whether the vines and trees will bud out too early. Will there be a late hard frost? If so, Spring might not be so pleasant for them.

In the past two days, I've heard that Snowdrops are blooming at the RBG, about two months too early, and a Chipmunk was scavenging birdseed on our deck. What in creation provoked a Chipmunk to come out of hibernation in early February? Maybe for a taste of adversity?? Or an urge to live like the Woodchucks?

On the other hand, anyone who can recall the Blizzard of '77 can identify with the sentiment in Bradstreet's meteorological comment. Boy, was Spring ever pleasant after that event!!

Perhaps Bradstreet was thinking about Canadians when she wrote her piece. Perhaps it's in our genes to revel in the adverse weather of our country, knowing that we are a hardy lot and can look forward to better times after 'the Winter of our discontent' is history. Does that mean that global warming might soften us up - or just provide a different form of adversity? Who knows?

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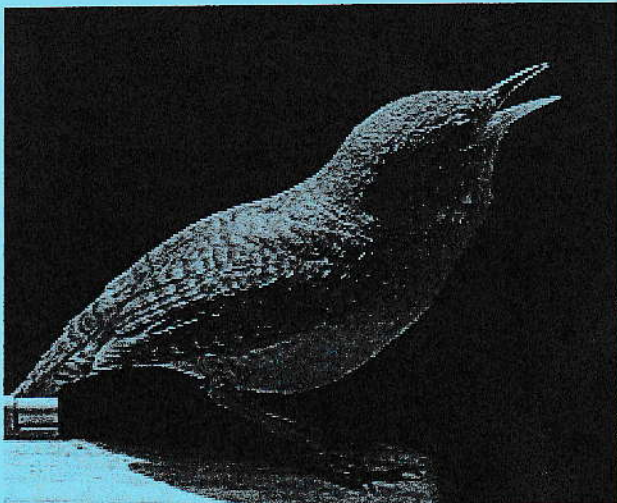
ST. CATHARINES CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT December 18, 2011

The Peninsula Field Naturalists held their Christmas Bird Count on December 18, 2011. It was a partly cloudy day out in the field with temperatures hovering between -4°C and 2°C. If you recall, the fall of 2011 was unusually warm.

It turned out to be a great birding day for the 30th anniversary for this count. We tallied 79 species. This was above average for the count (75.9 average over the last 30 years). We tallied 19,962 individuals, which is below the average of 24,133. A very mild fall delivered some lingering birds but many of the feeders were empty due to the availability of wild food and lack of snow.

Many thanks are due to all the participants. Also a big thank you to Mary and John Potter for organizing this year's count and round-up party. A great big THANK YOU to everyone who helped set up, clean up and brought very yummy food to the round up. It was very much appreciated.

The big surprise of the count was a House Wren (1). This is a first record for this count and the latest date recorded for this species. Normally they are gone by the end of October.



(House Wren – from AllaboutBirds – Google)

A Snowy Owl, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker (only 4 records all in the last 7 years) and Gray Catbird were nice finds. The biggest misses were Snow Bunting (last year we counted 1543) and Rough-legged Hawk.



(Sassy Q -courtesy of TOF – A.G.R.)

This year we had record high counts of Redhead (76), Ring-necked Duck (28), Lesser Scaup (34), Surf Scoter (9), Hooded Merganser (123), Carolina Wren (27), and Red-winged Blackbird (270).

High counts for the decade were Red-throated Loon (11), Great Blue Heron (10), Belted Kingfisher (9), Eastern Bluebird (88), Brown-headed Cowbird (192) and House Sparrow (2018).

Great Black-backed Gull (15) was the lowest count in 25 years. American Crow was the lowest count in 30 years. Field Titmouse (1) was tied for the lowest count in 25 years.

Also, this year I used a T-test statistical analysis at the 95% confident level (see Black, J.E., & Roy, K.J. (2010). Niagara birds : a compendium of articles and species accounts of the birds of the Niagara Region in Ontario. St. Catharines, Ont.: J. E. Black and K. J. Roy for previous analysis) to compare the decade from 1982/1991 to 2002/2011, for species increases or decreases.

The following species are some of the birds which have shown a significant increase: Canada Goose; Mute Swan; Hooded Merganser; Double-crested Cormorant; Sharp-shinned Hawk; Coopers Hawk; Herring Gull; Red-bellied Woodpecker; Carolina Wren; American Robin.

The following species have shown a significant decrease: American Kestrel; American Crow; Song Sparrow .

This year we had 40 participants (listed below).

PARTICIPANTS: Brian Ahara, Rhonda Armstrong, Manley Baarda, John Black, Peter BonEnfant, Peter Booker, Paul Chapman, Sue Chapman, Barb Charleton, Paula Clark, Trevor Confield, Carl Damude, Janet Damude, Don Dimond, Elaine Dimond, Rob Dobos, Ben Escott, Chris Escott, Denys Gardiner, Cathy Giancario, Jean Hampton, Bob Highcock, Carol Horvat, Marcie Jacklin, Nabil Khairallah, Ramsey Khairallah, Irene Kiers, Mike Kiers, Natalie Kiers, Kara Kristjanson, Win Laar, Cody Law, Don Mills, Gisele Mills, Kayo Roy, Dan Salisbury, Joyce Sankey, Karin Schneider, Roy Sorgenfrei, Chris Street, John Stevens, Katherine Stoltz, Tom Thomas.

BIRD LIST: Next Page.

NOTE: Hawk-Watch; Beamer CA; April 6

SPECIES OBSERVED:

Goose	1595	Northern Shrike	2
Swan	13	Blue Jay	260
Wall	9	American Crow	78
American Black Duck	37	Horned Lark	13
Mallard	860	Black-capped Chickadee	314
Redhead	76	Tufted Titmouse	1
Ring-necked Duck	28	Red-breasted Nuthatch	9
Greater Scaup	84	White-breasted Nuthatch	28
Lesser Scaup	34	Brown Creeper	5
Surf Scoter	9	Carolina Wren	27
White-winged Scoter	39	House Wren	1
Long-tailed Duck	95	Winter Wren	2
Bufflehead	32	Golden-crowned Kinglet	16
Common Goldeneye	91	Eastern Bluebird	88
Hooded Merganser	123	American Robin	409
Common Merganser	146	Gray Catbird	1
Red-breasted Merganser	495	Northern Mockingbird	40
Ring-necked Pheasant	2	European Starling	7348
Wild Turkey	20	Cedar Waxwing	169
Red-throated Loon	11	American Tree Sparrow	200
Common Loon	2	Song Sparrow	10
Horned Grebe	2	White-throated Sparrow	29
Double-crested Cormorant	53	White-crowned Sparrow	17
Great Blue Heron	10	Dark-eyed Junco	663
Bald Eagle	1	Unspecified sparrows	21
Northern Harrier	4	Northern Cardinal	270
Sharp-shinned Hawk	8	Red-winged Blackbird	270
Cooper's Hawk	13	Brown-headed Cowbird	192
Red-tailed Hawk	94	Purple Finch	2
American Kestrel	23	House Finch	340
Merlin	1	Pine Siskin	14
American Coot	3	American Goldfinch	476
Bonaparte's Gull	161	House Sparrow	2018
Ring-billed Gull	648		
Herring Gull	111	Total individuals	19,963
Great Black-backed Gull	15	Total species	79
Unspecified gull	11		
Rock Pigeon	869		
Mourning Dove	623		
Eastern Screech-Owl	9		
Great Horned Owl	4		
Snowy Owl	1		
Belted Kingfisher	9		
Red-bellied Woodpecker	36		
Yellow-bellied Sapsucker	1		
Downy Woodpecker	77		
Hairy Woodpecker	15		
Northern Flicker	27		

NECROLOGY

Roy W. Atamanuk (May 9, 1937 – Jan. 25, 2012).

A long-time member of the PFN Club, Roy Atamanuk passed away on Wednesday, January 25, 2012, at the St. Catharines General Hospital, at age 74. Roy received his BA in 1963 from Queens University and his LLB in 1965, and had practiced law for 46 years. He was an avid birder, and also a Niagara Woodlot Association member.

BIRD BRAINS

Last year, when John Black suggested that I give a presentation on Bird Brains to the PFN, I had no idea what I was in for. By the time that I delivered the talk on November 28th, I had devoured several books, and obtained a dozen or so articles (thanks to the NHS librarian!) in preparation. What I learned from my research astounded me, and I feel that I have only scratched the surface on the topic of avian intelligence. Some species, especially corvids (*crow family*) and parrots have a relative brain size equivalent to that of the great apes. Most birds have superior visual skills compared to humans (*some birds can see UV light or objects that reflect UV*). The diurnal species have better visual acuity, range of colour vision, and in some cases, field of view. Nocturnal hunters have vastly better night vision than we do. The “night owls” have enhanced hearing as well, and species that dwell in caves use echolocation, similar to bats.

But what drives intelligence in “feathered apes”? There are several possible factors, including an omnivorous diet, sociability, relative brain mass, prolonged “childhood”, longevity, variable environment and even urbanization. It seems that we humans are making birds smarter! Some species, such as the Clark’s Nutcracker possess an incredible spatial memory, allowing them to re-find most of the 30,000 seeds that they cached months earlier. Birds such as the Common Raven can solve problems, like how to get meat dangling from a string. Birds use and, even more astonishingly, make tools. The New Caledonian Crow fashions the avian equivalents of a rake and a poker. Each tool is employed in a different circumstance. Thus, form fits function. Birds have personalities, and some dance and others play, much as we do. They even engage in deceptive behaviour.

We all know that songbirds sing, but what exactly are they saying? Chickadees communicate information regarding predator size and proximity to their mixed feeding flock

brethren. Corvids have an extensive vocabulary, not only I could learn to speak Corvid. Some species, especially parrots can be taught to speak English. Alex, an African Grey Parrot with a brain the size of a shelled walnut, had a vocabulary of 150 words, including concepts such as colour, shape, size, and numbers up to 8. So, the next time someone calls you a dodo, or a birdbrain, you might just turn to them and say “Thank-you!”

....by Katherine Stoltz

LAKE ONTARIO MID-WINTER WATERFOWL COUNT, JANUARY 8, 2012.

The Mid-winter Waterfowl Count was first run in Niagara by Gordon Bellerby in 1984. Our portion of Lake Ontario runs east from Fifty Point Road to Niagara-on-the-Lake. Results are in the table below.

Fifteen volunteers participated in this year’s event. The weather was unusually mild with little or no ice on the lake. Most of the Waterfowl encountered were located in the vicinity of Fifty Point where roughly 14,000 Long-tailed Ducks, 1,800 White-winged Scoters and 1,400 Common Goldeneye were observed.

Unusual sightings included a Snowy Owl on the Port Weller Piers and one on the lakeshore in Grimsby. A male King Eider was observed in the canal at Port Weller close to the entrance to the trail on the east pier. No Canvasbacks were seen.

Since the inception of the count we have also totaled the waterfowl on the Niagara River from Niagara-on-the-Lake to the base of Niagara Falls. Unusual sightings on the river included 22 Great Blue Herons along with our only Canvasbacks, 4 in all, on the count.

....John Black- Coordinator

(Bird Data follow on next page)

WATER WATERFOWL
DATA, Jan. 8, 2012

<u>Species</u>	<u>Number</u>
Common Loon	2
Pied-billed Grebe	1
Horned Grebe	7
Double-crested	
Cormorant	49
Mute Swan	8
Cackling Goose	1
Canada Goose	1589
American Black Duck	24
Mallard	825
Greater Scaup	1139
Lesser Scaup	1
Long-tailed Duck	14185
Black Scoter	3
White-winged Scoter	1884
Surf Scoter	20
Common Goldeneye	1973
Bufflehead	536
Common Merganser	687
Red-Breasted	
Merganser	1201
American Coot	1
King Eider	1
Snowy Owl	2

PANAMA BAIL-OUT BY MY GO-TO GUY

Monday, January 23, 2012, was the PFN's meeting night. At mid-morning, an email arrived! Our speaker had a severe case of flu and could not attend. Fortunately, my sensible better-half suggested calling John Black.

It happened that John and Jean had been on a birding trip in Nov. 2011 to Panama, and John had already prepared a power-point presentation! And so, the show went on - not what had been planned, but a fascinating evening nonetheless.

To most of us, the word 'Panama' immediately means 'Canal'. Devout birders like John probably think 'Life-List'. As in - the chance to add more species or families of birds to their

personal list. In John's case, the trip provided new species and new families - plus scenery and relaxation.

John pointed out that Panama is about 50 km across, about as wide as the Niagara Peninsula. The Canal traverses the isthmus, as does also an oil pipeline, and war-time radar towers still stand in some locations. Also, the Continental Divide is accessible for those who wish to see both Atlantic and Pacific Oceans from one site (as Cortez did).

One of the former radar towers has been converted into tourist lodges; Blacks stayed at one of these, as well as at a very comfortable-looking lodge for part of their holiday, both locations run by the Canopy Tower Family.

Birds were, of course, a central feature of the trip. Hummingbirds of various species were everywhere. Some of the other names (no guarantee about spelling) were: Puffbird, Blue Cotinga, Great Potoo, *Sapayoa enigma*, Bat Falcon, Trogon, Toucan, Streak-chested Antpitta, Great Jackamar, and Hawk-eagle. The *Sapayoa enigma* is of particular interest, as it seems not to belong to any other known bird family. John commented that many of the bird species have been called so often by watchers using song-tapes that the birds no longer respond to the tapes.

Although the main point of the trip was birding, John managed to see and photograph a number of other wildlife species: leaf-cutter ants, water buffalo, bluebellied poison frog, army ants, three-toed sloth, peccaries, jaguarundi, white-nosed coati, and bullet ants - the latter in particular having a very toxic bite. Butterflies were numerous, and gigantic trees can be found.

John mentioned that the indigenous Panamanians are worried about the effects of global warming, and have made plans to move off some of the off-shore coastal islands that are barely above sea-level. He also acknowledged that before the trip, he had 3911 species on his life-list, but now has 4006, a gain of 95 species on this excursion.

UPCOMING EVENTS

CLUB MEETINGS:

MONDAY, MARCH 26 – “RESTORING THE AMERICAN CHESTNUT”
MONDAY, APRIL 23 – POTLUCK DINNER AND EX-TREASURES SILENT AUCTION

CLUB OUTINGS:

11TH ANNUAL MAPLE SYRUP FEST – SATURDAY, MARCH 10, 10:30 AM AT ROLAND ROAD ENTRANCE, SHORT HILLS PROV. PARK + PANCAKE LUNCH AT WHITE MEADOWS FARM

LONG POINT TUNDRA SWANS – SUNDAY, MARCH 11, 8:30 AM – MEET NIAGARA FALLS NATURE CLUB AT FONTHILL SHOPPERS DRUG MART – BRING LUNCH, DRESS WARMLY
CONTACT: DON MILLS 905-892-3973

ANNUAL PENINSULA HAWKWATCH – GOOD FRIDAY, APRIL 6, ALL DAY AT BEAMER CONS. AREA, GRIMSBY – HELPERS TO OVERSEE PFN DISPLAY NEEDED: 905-892-2566



The Peninsula Field Naturalists Club

A non-profit organization started in 1954 with the objectives to preserve wildlife and protect its habitat, to promote public interest in and a knowledge of the natural history of the area, and to promote, encourage and cooperate with organizations and individuals having similar interests and objectives. Affiliated with Ontario Nature (ex-FON) and Nature Canada .

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The Editor welcomes written articles or artwork on any natural history topic. Handwritten articles are accepted; if possible, please submit typewritten articles, computer disks, or email to jmpotter@talkwireless.ca. Colour photos (jpg) accompanying articles are welcome. All pieces of artwork will be accepted; line drawings are preferable, as they are better suited to photo copying. New ideas and constructive criticism are always welcome.

Editorial Staff: John Potter

Labelling/Mailing: Kay Smith

– please send submissions to the above address –

Deadlines for submissions 2012:

Feb 4; April 7; Oct. 6

2010/11 PFN EXECUTIVE

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