Great Canadian Birdathon 2015

Bird Studies Canada sponsors the Great Canadian Birdathon (formerly) James L. Baillie Birdathon annually to fund volunteer research projects in Ontario and other parts of Canada for the benefit of wildlife. Thanks to the efforts of hundreds of volunteers, over $250,000 was raised last year from this ambitious project. The monies are distributed to individuals and groups who are working on projects to protect, enhance and study bird populations. Some of the current projects funded by the Birdathon benefit owls, Piping Plovers, Purple Martins, bird banding stations, Loggerhead Shrikes, seabirds, breeding bird atlases and Barn Owls, to name a few. Most of these worthwhile projects could not survive without your generous donations.

I will be doing my Birdathon in late **May 2015** in support of **North Durham Nature**. I'll be out for about twenty-four consecutive hours looking for birds between Ajax, Oshawa, Port Perry, Kirkfield and environs. Annually I find in excess of 155 species of birds and last year I found over 170 species – my best ever! But I can't do this without your financial support. I strongly support these worthwhile projects. A portion of your pledge will support North Durham Nature's initiatives and programs.

You can donate and support North Durham Nature by making a donation by cheque or cash or online at my personal birdathon website

http://birdscanada.kintera.org/birdathon/geoffcarpentier

Thanks to all of you who have already donated!

Close to Home: Spring is in the Air

The Frog Listeners of the Beaver River Wetlands

by Derek Connelly

In 2012, Kim Adams and I agreed to take over the Bird Studies Canada Marsh Monitoring Program to survey amphibians in the Beaver River Wetlands. Little did we know what a challenge counting frogs could be!

As birders and nature enthusiasts, we had a general awareness of the frogs that might be found here and some knowledge of the sounds they make. How hard could it be? We'd go out for three nights during the spring, identify different species and estimate numbers of individuals. I was excited – here was a chance to learn frog calls, gain more experience with

amphibians and maybe even see something new.

Bird Studies Canada provides tutorial CDs of amphibian sounds to help with identification and offers a protocol to determine when and how to count. As the temperatures warm up and the season progresses, different frogs begin calling. In mid-April we should hear Wood Frogs, Spring Peepers and Chorus Frogs. By mid-May American Toads, Leopard Frogs and possibly Pickerel Frogs join in and finally, as June approaches, Gray Tree Frogs, Mink Frogs, Green Frogs and Bullfrogs are calling.

Kim and I picked evenings convenient to us and tried to adjust to the changing weather. The temperature was critical and the protocol stated we could survey only if the temperature was over 5 Celsius for the first survey, over 10C for the second and over 17C for the last count night. It also had to be still (e.g. low wind and rain-free). In that first year, the weather conditions were erratic. April was a write off, but we had two good survey days in June and July. However, we found just three species - Spring Peepers, Green Frogs and Gray Tree Frogs.

In 2013, we got out in May and June but only counted Green Frogs and Spring Peepers. It was discouraging as we saw and heard other frogs during the day but by survey time weather conditions had changed. In 2014, we achieved our best results, with surveys done in April, May and June. We tallied Wood Frogs, Spring Peepers, American Toads, Leopard Frogs and Green Frogs. Growing from that first year with just three species to the third year with six was an encouraging improvement.

It was fun listening to the peeping, chirping and grunting and all the other funny sounds these and other creatures make but differentiating between them and estimating numbers was quite a different matter. It was especially distracting when our focus shifted from counting frogs to swatting irritating insects. Bug jackets were worn for the start of the season so we must have looked quite the sight walking down the old rail trail at night with our head lamps and netting.

As time went by, we certainly improved our techniques and were able to accommodate our schedules, those of the frogs and the unpredictable weather. We have also learned a lot about the sounds of the night and thoroughly enjoyed nature's symphony – like being in an outdoor theater where the sounds of nature are always real! April is here finally – so off we go again – I can't wait!

Reflecting on '20 years' of Beaver River Marsh Monitoring

Text by Ann Balmer & John Peters

Photos by Ann Balmer & Geoff Carpentier

We got interested in breeding bird surveys during the original breeding bird atlas in 1980-1985. During that project, we learned to systematically identify and count breeding birds, find nests and document other evidence of breeding. We gradually increased our skills by learning more about breeding bird habits, field marks and the

many different calls made by birds. We started with the Marsh Monitoring Program (MMP) in southern Georgian Bay around 1996. Bird Studies Canada (BSC) provided tapes of the songs and calls of the birds we were seeking and these calls were broadcast to elicit a response to assist in identifying species and numbers.

It is a magical experience to be standing on the edge of the quiet marsh, to broadcast the calls and have birds suddenly respond, challenging the apparent presence of a rival in their breeding territory and providing a picture of what is really out there. Marsh monitoring is very reliant on this methodology because the birds living in a marsh are hard to see and tend to be fairly quiet and secretive. Counting call backs to the recordings has become a key method of conducting bird inventories in a range of habitats. Of course, in order to not disturb the birds any more than necessary, this method should be used judiciously and only in association with sanctioned surveys and data collection.

The Marsh Monitoring Program

MMP started in 1995 as a cooperative venture between Canada and the United States. The goal of the MMP is to maintain a long-term data to monitor the health of the wetlands and coastal marshes in the Great Lakes basin by identifying changes in the presence of indicator species of breeding birds and frogs. BSC has a wealth of information on this program at www.birdscanada.org.

The protocol for the survey is standardized so all participants collect the data using the same methodology. The forms, bird and amphibian call recordings used, survey route locations and reporting methods are all provided. One must be prepared to dedicate a few hours per month during the breeding season to contribute to this important work.

There are many marshes in Durham Region being monitored as part of this program, most of which are located south of the Oak Ridges Moraine, closer to the Lake Ontario shoreline. Our route is associated with the Beaver River and is considered to be valuable because it is a very large more or less continuous marsh draining north into Lake Simcoe. Although we have several other good candidate large stable marshes in North Durham, none of the others are currently being monitored for breeding birds and amphibians.

Results

The Beaver River Marsh Monitoring route is focused on a 4 km segment of the Beaver River as it meanders between Lines 12 and 13 of Scugog Township. There are designated monitoring stations that have been set up to reflect the size and diversity of habitats within the wetland: open water, narrower shrubby channels and the road edges. Local MMP focal species include Sora, American and Least Bittern, King Rail, American Coot, Common Gallinule, Pied-billed Grebe and Virginia Rail.

The 1995 Survey: The indicator species reported in the marsh along our route were American Bittern, Common Moorhen, Sora and Virginia Rail. After the initial survey in 1995, the Beaver River Marsh route was not surveyed until we took it over in 2007.

Focal species 2007-2014: Of the species monitored as part of this project, only certain ones regularly occur in this region and of these, the most common are Virginia Rail and American Bittern. Common Gallinule was only recorded twice, once in 1995 and once in 2011, both times in a wetter portion of the marsh. Least Bittern has been recorded in small numbers most years in two shrubby and wetter portions of the marsh. Similarly, Sora has been present in small numbers in half of the survey years. We have not recorded Pied-billed Grebe as yet on our surveys since large open patches of water are not prevalent on the marsh.

Secondary species 2007-2014 The most numerous secondary species found include Barn Swallow, Marsh Wren, Swamp Sparrow, Tree Swallow and Red-winged Blackbird - all of which are associated with the marsh itself. Other species we regularly see in small numbers crossing the marsh or foraging along the margins include Great Blue Heron, Killdeer, Mallard, Belted Kingfisher, Pileated Woodpecker, Sandhill Crane, Wilson's Snipe and Yellow Warbler. Both the Great Blue Herons and Sandhill Cranes are nesting in the vicinity of the marsh. We only observed a Black Tern only once (2011) but they are known to regularly occur in the marsh.

A few raptors hunt the marsh. They can be seen either criss-crossing it a few meters above the cattails or making quick raids out into the marsh from the cover of the forest edge. We routinely see Northern Harrier and less frequently have observed Merlin and Sharp-shinned Hawk.

Changes over Time While the focal marsh species in the Georgian Bay location changed due to dropping water levels, the

Beaver River Marsh has been stable with regard to water levels, vegetative make-up and focal marsh species. The overall MMP results indicate that Common Gallinule and Black Tern populations appear to be declining, even in prime habitats like this marsh. Since the 1995 survey, the primary change we have observed involve Sandhill Cranes, which appear to have relatively recently moved into the marsh. Evidence of breeding was first recorded in 2011 and at least one breeding pair has been present every year since. Similarly, Wilson's Snipe was not recorded in 1995, but has been regularly observed in small numbers since 2007.

There has been a significant regeneration of cedar, spruce, alder and birch on the west side of the marsh. This has led to an increase in forest edge species being recorded foraging in the marsh. These include Black-capped Chickadee, Blue Jay, Cedar Waxwing, European Starling, Great Crested Flycatcher, Gray Catbird, Mourning Dove, Northern Flicker, Song Sparrow and Veery.

Conclusion

We thoroughly enjoyed our experiences over the last seven years monitoring the birds in "our" marsh. Fond memories will persist for years in our minds. The spring peepers go quiet as we walk by and then erupt in a chorus as we move on. We have made our way carefully around nesting snapping turtles laying eggs beside the trail and then weeks later had to be careful not to turn an ankle in the holes left by predators having dug up the eggs. Once we watched a Virginia Rail family foraging on the trail at the edge of the marsh and on another day two Virginia Rails mated not more than 10 metres away from us, completely unconcerned with our presence. One of the most exciting things we have seen is a Sandhill Crane young, fuzzy topknot and all, with two watchful parents in attendance.

The Beaver River Marsh is a large and very rich upland marsh. It supports many interesting habitats and species. The walking is easy and very accessible and represents a birding spot of special significance in Durham Region.

Spring Signs and Sounds

Text and photo by Nancy Melcher

As I write this piece on spring, snow is falling and the temperature, with wind-chill, hovers well below -30. It's a challenge to contemplate anything but staying warm, avoiding exposed flesh while outside and the necessity to go shovel the walk yet again. Nevertheless, we've noticed that daylight lasts longer, so thoughts of the changing seasons may be uncovered from beneath piles of woolies and fleece!

The first harbinger of spring must be the sun. Not only is it rising earlier and setting later, but we can also feel the warmth it brings. Gradually the piles of winter snow disappear, melting away to leave just the dusty remains of roadside plowings and sidewalk scrapings.

Forest trails, meadowlands, wetlands and roadside ditches bristle with the promise of new growth, new life and fresh arrivals. Some of the first sounds to assure us of the continuance of the cycle are the birds' songs. Chickadees broadcast their three-note proclamation as they claim their nesting spot. Red-winged Blackbirds stake out territories squeaking, "kong-ka-ree" from pond-side branches, crows caw from treetops, while robins encourage us with a liquid "cheerily cheer-up cheerio", serenading the dawn!

Once the soil thaws, there are slender green shoots piercing last autumn's leaves in their quest for sunlight. Coltsfoot is one of the

earliest blossoms, gracing roadsides with their cheerful yellow discs. Bright yellow bouquets of marsh marigolds reflect the golden glow of the sun off their masses of shiny green leaves. Soon the floor of the forest will be covered in green and white as trilliums, hepatica and bloodroot bloom, the latter's milky flowers held delicately above clusters of emerald leaves.

Wetlands also echo the sounds from a wide variety of animals. Spring Peepers are tiny frogs - three can cuddle in a teaspoon. However, their sonorous calls may be heard almost a kilometer away. Their proclamations are perhaps the most widely-heard of all! We also enjoy the soft pitter-patter of the rain, anticipating summer's rumbles of distant thunder.

The night sky tells us winter has passed. Orion slips below the western horizon while Leo's backward question mark shines overhead and the Big Dipper is prominent high in the sky. Follow the stars of its 'handle' in an arching curve to Arcturus, one of the brightest stars in the sky.

These are just a few of the signs and sounds that tell us winter is over and summer is on the way. Enjoy warmer temperatures, shed your thick coat, put away the heavy boots, and go for an evening stroll. Use all your senses to experience the renewal spring brings to North Durham's natural world.

Secret Gardens

Exploring North Durham's Nature

North Walker Woods

Photo and text by Mark Stabb

The hills of south Uxbridge have many large wild spaces to explore. In fact, there is a 2100+ hectare swath of public conservation lands at our doorstep, managed primarily by Toronto and Region Conservation Authority (TRCA) and Lake Simcoe Region Conservation Authority (LSRCA). There is a 100 km long trail network on these properties that attracts

masses of hikers, dog-walkers, mountain-bikers, horse-back riders, snowshoers and cross country skiers. This is the great green gateway that inspired Uxbridge to proclaim itself the "Trail Capital of Canada".

Now if you think all this human activity may be affecting the wild nature of these lands, you would be half right. There is a large body of evidence indicating that trail use has direct impacts on wildlife such as breeding songbirds, nesting raptors and large mammals. Fortunately TRCA recently completed a management planning exercise for all of its lands – more than 1500 hectares in total – and designated almost half of their landbase as nature reserve zones, where trails are minimal and where nature takes priority.

North Walker Woods is one of these quieter spots, where natural habitats abound and where our footprint is not quite so heavy. Located near Coppins Corners on the 6th Concession south of Regional Road 21, North Walker is the northwestern anchor of the "Glen Major-Walker Woods" system of conservation lands that protect headwater habitats on the Oak Ridges

Moraine. Half of the property is designated nature reserve. Like most of the heavily forested lands in the area, the property was once a sandy wasteland, "deserted" by people when they removed the soil-clenching trees from the dry hills. Mr. James Walker rescued these lands through painstaking planting and patience, resulting in some of the finest forest habitats in the GTA.

Natural Red Oak, Sugar Maple, American Beech, White Ash and other trees dominate the property, with fine patches of Eastern Hemlock and old White Pine scattered throughout. Conifer plantations are the exception, unlike the large reforestation tracts of many other TRCA or LSRCA properties in the area.

This is an old-growth-forest-in-the-making, with old forest features such as abundant dead and fallen trees. There are a couple of watery features, including one particularly frog-laden pond, but the area is mostly high and dry like much of the Oak Ridges Moraine.

North Walker is used mainly by hikers (and cross-country skiers and snowshoers in winter), with the occasional equestrian visitor. Dogs must be leashed unlike some other TRCA lands or the Durham Forest to the east. The result is a beautiful, natural property that gives you a chance to connect with nature.

North Durham Nature will be leading annual hikes to North Walker Woods, but why not explore it for yourself? In a world where trails seem to be king, it will help to have more naturalists among the North's walkers.

40 Years and Counting – Beaverton CBC

Forty Year History of the Beaverton Christmas Bird Count: Good News and Bad News

by John McLean

Citizen science can take many forms but the Christmas Bird Count (CBC) is the most successful and longest running example of how amateur naturalists contribute to scientific knowledge. Every year thousands of birders submit their results to Audubon and Bird Studies Canada, which tabulate and analyze the

numbers across North and Central America.

Findings are published each year but the most significant conclusions are drawn when long term analyses are conducted. Herein, we are going to look at some of the trends in the forty year history of the Beaverton Christmas Bird Count.

Positive Trends: There is a surprising list of species that were not seen at least until the 15th year of the count. Each species numbers have grown as the years pass.

- Canada Goose – (first seen in 1988)
- Wild Turkey – (1995)
- House Finch – (1988)
- Common Raven – (2005)
- Bald Eagle – (2004)
- Red-bellied Woodpecker and Carolina Wren have also been growing in numbers. We recently saw our first Northern Mockingbird and we anticipate it will be a more frequent winter visitor as the years pass, if CBC counts to the south are any indication.

These positive trends result from species expanding their territories to the north (House Finch & Canada Goose) or southward (Common Raven) and in some cases because of improved conservation practices (Bald Eagle).

Trends of Common Species:

Trends can be identified by looking at a few common species and comparing their numbers in the first 10 years with the last 10 years. Declining numbers are significant because they represent areas of environmental concern,

especially in the case of American Kestrel and to a lesser degree House Sparrow where loss of habitat and perhaps competitive species have negatively impacted their numbers. The dramatic decline of the Evening Grosbeak is more easily explained by the loss of its major food source the Spruce Budworm. The

chart below illustrates some trends over the last 40 years.

Species	Average Number Seen in First 10 Years - 1975 to 1984	Average Number Seen in Last 10 Years – 2005 to 2014	Trend
Am. Kestrel	7.6	2.1	↓
Mourning Dove	20.1	378.7	↑
Hairy Woodpecker	17.5	31.9	↑
Am. Crow	40.6	378.4	↑
Dark-eyed Junco	27.1	243.8	↑
Northern Cardinal	17.2	70.4	↑
Evening Grosbeak	451.6	0	↓
House Sparrow	686.3	180.9	↓

It's All About the Food: Not all fluctuations in species numbers are steadily increasing or decreasing. Dramatic changes from year to year are usually about food supply in the bird's home territory.
We know, for instance, when there is a die-off of lemmings, mice, voles etc. in arctic and sub-arctic environments that we will be counting Snowy and perhaps Great-grey Owls. We have had 4 Snowy Owls in each of the last two years but they have only been seen in eight of our 40 year history.

Similarly, when fruit crops fail to materialize in western Canada, we can count on an invasion of Bohemian Waxwings here in the south. They have been observed on only eleven counts but their numbers are usually quite large when they do appear. For example, we counted 1313 in January 2000.

Finally, the health of the boreal cone crop can be deduced from the size of the "winter finch" invasion each year. A cone crop failure in the north results in large numbers of Common Redpolls, Pine Siskins, Purple Finches and Pine Grosbeaks and perhaps a few other finch species. These species are seen on forty to sixty percent of our counts.

The 40 year summary of the Beaverton CBC is posted on the club's website. There is sufficient data on those pages to assist with an investigation of the state of health of our avian population.

Photos accompanying this article have been kindly provided by Dave Milsom, Flora and Fauna Field Tours

Citizen science Opportunities

I've often spoken of Citizen Science and how valuable the amateur biologist's input is to the wealth of knowledge generated annually by "average" folk! Here are some of the projects you might consider joining:

Visit Bird Studies Canada website for more information on these exciting projects
www.birdscanada.org/volunteer

Project FeederWatch

Participants count birds at their feeders over a 2-day period every week from November to March. Count for as long or short a period as you like.

Christmas Bird Counts

In late December through early January, groups of organized participants conduct one-day winter bird counts in circular areas, 24 kilometres in diameter.

Christmas Bird Count for Kids

A fun, family-friendly birdwatching event that promotes nature appreciation and environmental stewardship.

Canadian Lakes Loon Survey

Participants spend time observing loons at their favourite lake throughout the summer.

Canadian Migration Monitoring Network

Participants volunteer at one of a series of migration monitoring stations established across Canada to gain hands on training in bird banding and censusing techniques.

eBird Canada

Keep track of your bird sightings online and contribute to an international database all at the same time.

Great Backyard Bird Count

This North America-wide event takes place over four days every February and anyone can take part. Participants create a real-time snapshot of where birds are across the continent.

Nocturnal Owl Surveys

Through regionally-based programs, participants are assigned roadside routes to document owl calls during spring breeding.

Project NestWatch

Anyone with a bird nesting in their yard or neighbourhood can help monitor nesting success. Participants check nesting progress and report observations online.

Marsh Monitoring Progam

Participants are assigned routes in marshes to track the presence and abundance of marsh birds and amphibians.

Breeding Bird Surveys

Participants count birds during the breeding season on roadside routes in their region.

SwiftWatch

Volunteers observe and identify potential nesting and roosting sites.

Ontario Whip-poor-will Survey

Volunteers conduct surveys for singing Whip-poor-wills throughout their Ontario range.

Ontario Bank Swallow Project

Volunteers monitor Bank Swallow colonies and roosts gathering data on numbers and habitat.

American Woodcock Singing Ground Survey

Volunteers conduct surveys for displaying American Woodcocks throughout their Ontario range.

In other news …

Ontario's Herpetofaunal Atlas Newsletter http://www.ontarionature.org/protect/species/ORAA_news.php is back - go to their website to learn more about what's trending and how you can be involved.

The British Columbia Breeding Bird Atlas is now online and for the first time ever it's free. New information is being added as it becomes available – for more information, go to

http://www.birdatlas.bc.ca/

Vote for Canada's National Bird

Many people are surprised to learn that our country does not have an official national bird. Canadian Geographic wants to change that through their **National Bird Project**.

Forty candidates for the title are presented online and Canadians are invited to vote for their favourite, submit an essay or suggest additional species for inclusion on the list. As National Conservation Partner for this project, Bird Studies Canada is providing expertise and guidance.

Visit the National Bird Project website to read a recent essay by Biologist & Science Educator Jody Allair. In **A Case for the 'Underbird,'** Jody argues that although there are good reasons why birds like the Common Loon, Snowy Owl and Canada Goose are popular with voters, we should also consider some less obvious species to represent Canada as a national symbol. We hope you'll enjoy exploring the options and learning more about Canada's fascinating birds. Don't forget to vote!

http://www.canadiangeographic.ca/nationalbird/

Free stuff to learn more about birds …

585 Bird Species in the "All About Birds Online Bird Guide"

Find information, maps, photos, sounds and more for 585 North American bird species. Learn bird-identification tips, natural history information and cool facts about your favorite species or about new species you aspire to see!

http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/search

100,000 Sounds in the Cornell Lab's Macaulay Library

Learning bird songs is a great way to identify birds. Start by listening to recordings of birds you see often. You can begin with the sounds in the online library or search the entire sound collection in the

https://macaulaylibrary.org/browse/taxa/aves

Sibley Guide to the Birds

Those of you who bought the new (but flawed) second edition (March 2014) of the Sibley bird guide will be happy to know that you can now get the latest revised printing (July 2014) free.

To get your revised second printing free, send the bar code (cut out) from the back of the March 2014 edition and send it to:

Penguin Random House
Attn. Consumer services/DMS
400 Hahn Road
Westminster, MD 21157
USA

Club Outings & Talks

For an up-to-date and complete listing of all events and outings, please visit our website.

Quiz: Who am I?

This eye, surrounded by red and black, belongs to a familiar and beloved bird found throughout the eastern United States. This bird is so popular that seven U.S. states and countless sports teams have chosen the species as their official emblem.

Beyond Our Borders

Ocean Plastic

In some regions up to 5 grocery bags of waste plastic for every 30 cm of shoreline can be found!

China is the worst offender producing 24 million tonnes/yr. - 30% of world output.

Indonesia, Philippines, Viet Nam and Sri Lanka are next in order.

Clever Prairie Dogs

A study in New Mexico has revealed that Prairie Dogs have a complex language. Dr. Slobodchikoff has studed Prairie Dogs for decades and has shown conclusively that they can communicate with each other regarding the identity of predators that threaten the colony. The communication is learned over a period of months as each Prairie Dog matures from pup to adult. Different responses are elicited for each of coyotes, badgers and swift foxes. Additionally the Prairie Dogs adopt different postures when each predator is present.

For the coyote they stand upright and stare at the coyote, while for badger they always crouch when it approaches. The Swift Fox elicits a unique response where they give a “wahoo” call and fall over backwards as soon as the fox starts to leave the area.

Newsletter Editorial Board

Note: All photos and text by Geoff Carpentier unless otherwise stated

Geoff Carpentier – Editor

John McLean – Proof-reader

Nancy Melcher - Proof-reader

For more information about NDN

Visit our website at:

www.northdurhamnatureclub.com

Answer to Quiz:

Northern Cardinal

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