



## *Happy Canada Day*



### *Editor's Note*

We're well into our 7<sup>th</sup> year of publishing your newsletter. I hope you like what we've been doing. The newsletter, as any publication would, is evolving – new ideas, new writers, new challenges and new solutions. I thought I'd try changing the format for this edition from a 2-column page to a single column page. Which do you prefer? Please drop me an email over the next few days with your thoughts and suggestions. Got an idea for a newsletter article? – let me know I'm listening! Thanks.

Geoff Carpentier, Editor

[geoff.carpentier@gmail.com](mailto:geoff.carpentier@gmail.com)

# Covid-19 Backyard Bird Challenge

By James Kamstra

Photos credits noted within the article

With the government enforced Covid-19 restrictions it was more difficult for birders to get out to their usual haunts. As an antidote, North Durham Nature encouraged members to get involved in a friendly competition, to keep track of all the bird species that could be seen or heard from their North Durham yards during the month of May.

*Editor's Note: We also ran the event in April as a warm-up to the big May Challenge. We had lots of participants and great finds in April as well.*

Sixteen eagle-eyed participants kept watchful eyes on their feeders, bushes and the air above to see what they could find.

May is peak migration and the best month of the year for birding. Some bird species may show up that rarely appear at other times. Geoff Carpentier was untouchable, finding an astounding 96 species in and over his yard. How did he find so many? Nearly every morning Geoff was out on his deck, binoculars in hand, with eyes peeled and ears focused, picking up on every twitter or feathery streak that flew by. Carol & Doug Apperson found the second most with 66, while Brenda Near was third with 62 species.



All of the participants combined reported 131 species. Interestingly, 28 of those species only showed up in one yard, including some that are infrequently encountered in north Durham. Kim Adams had a Carolina Wren and Canada Warbler; Margaret Almack spotted a Fox Sparrow; Carol Apperson found Blue-gray Gnatcatcher and Orchard Oriole; Geoff Carpentier saw six Willets fly over and had a Gray-cheeked Thrush; Heather Jacobson noted a Bald Eagle overhead; James Kamstra had singing

Yellow-throated Vireo and Clay-colored Sparrow; Brenda Near picked up a Grasshopper Sparrow; and Ann Balmer and John Peters recorded a calling Eastern Screech Owl. Perhaps most unusual of all was a Chukar, which must have escaped from someone's aviary, that showed up in the backyard of Ranald McKay.

White-throated Sparrow

It is interesting to note how common the Red-bellied Woodpecker has become. Ten of 16 participants reported them this May. Just 10 years ago this bird was still very uncommon in north Durham.



Among the mammal watchers Carol & Doug Apperson reported 11 species and Garry Patterson recorded 10. A total of 20 mammals were found by all participants. Among these, a Black Bear showed up in Margaret Almack's yard, while Steve Cluff spotted a River Otter in his!

The following is a summary table of all who participated and what they saw.

Name	Birds	Mammals	Name	Birds	Mammals
Kim Adams	43		Rick & Nancy Hannah	21	
Margaret Almack	50	9	Heather Jakobsen	43	6
Carol & Doug Apperson	66	11	James Kamstra	56	6
Patricia Asling	43	7	Ranald McKay	54	
Ann Balmer & John Peters	55	5	John McLean	17	
Geoff Carpentier	96	6	Brenda Near	62	2
Steve Cluff	55	8	Garry Patterson	44	10
Cara Gregory	42	4	Alan & Anne Wells	25	
<b>TOTAL SPECIES</b>	<b>131</b>	<b>20</b>			

The Covid-19 Backyard Bird Challenge also included a photo contest, which encouraged members to submit up to two images of birds photographed in their yards during the month. Sixteen photos were entered by eight participants. Judging was accomplished by members who were encouraged to email their votes for 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> choices. Eighteen members sent in their votes which scored Heather Jakobsen's Northern Parula in first place, Pat Asling's White-crowned Sparrow in second and a tie for third between Carol Apperson's Orchard Oriole and Doug Apperson's White-throated Sparrow. The Challenge was a good opportunity for members to focus inwardly on the birds in their immediate yards at a time when our movements were restricted.



Northern Parula

*Editor's Note: I hear there might be a small prize offered at our next in-person member's meeting for the winner.*

## Secret Garden

### My Secret Garden – The Beaver River

*Photos and text by Jay Thibert*

Driving north from Port Perry on Highway 12 brings you through the hamlet of Blackwater. I always slow as I pass over the bridge that crosses the Beaver River – a quick look left and a quick look to the right. As I see the river flash past it reminds me of times that I rode my bike along the Beaver River Wetland Trail that originates in Uxbridge. This four season trail is built upon the flat, wide bed of the historic Toronto and Nipissing Railway dating back to the late 1800s when it supplied the Toronto Distillery District with wood and wheat. Now this 40 km trail connects Uxbridge, Cannington and Manilla in a Y-like configuration. Blackwater tends to be the hub at the



centre of the trail and is a great place to start a hike or cycle in the summer. The trail is a great way to explore “My Secret Garden, the Beaver River Wetland Conservation Area (BRWCA)”. The BRWCA is managed by the Simcoe Region Conservation Authority and covers more than 500 hectares. The historic abandoned CN rail line gives access to an extensive Provincially Significant Wetland.

For a new perspective on this area my wife Bev and I have been exploring the river in our canoe and kayaks. We have been rewarded with many wildlife sightings as we glide silently along this winding waterway. This year there was a North Durham Nature canoe trip planned to paddle the Beaver River between Sunderland and Cannington on April 25. Had the trip gone ahead we would have needed very warm clothing and sharp paddles to break the ice!





We finally got on the river on May 3. Here is a partial list of sightings: Beaver, Muskrat, River Otter, Sandhill Crane, Wood Duck, Trumpeter Swan and Swamp Sparrow. The American Bittern revealed itself with its water pumping call. This section of the river is slow moving and has numerous turns and bends. In places, cattails line the banks and as you paddle north there are trees along the waters' edge and farm fields are replaced by tracts of forest. The section of the river north of Hwy 7 to Cannington gives the feeling of wilderness - you can't hear traffic and no farms are visible. We were back on this same section of river again on May 13 and 14. The treat this time was flocks of Greater Yellowlegs. They blend so perfectly with last year's vegetation that they went unnoticed until they exploded in flight making their loud high pitched call. The Canada Geese had gone mostly silent and secretive, but the Marsh Wren

punctuated the wetland with its loud staccato call. There was a Bald Eagle, a Red-tailed Hawk and a pair of Northern Harriers.

This secret garden is close to home and is superb wildlife habitat. It is an area that will draw us back on foot, riding a bike or paddling a canoe. It is a perfect setting for a day's outing in nature. For more information about the Beaver River Wetland Conservation Area go the Lake Simcoe Region Conservation Area web site – [lsrca.on.ca](http://lsrca.on.ca).

## *One Hefty Hickory*

*Photos and text by James Kamstra*

The Bitternut Hickory is not a common tree in North Durham. In fact, it is near the north edge of its range here, which is why I was quite surprised to encounter a very impressive specimen north of Port Perry. Its massive branches reached high and the trunk looked to be about a metre in diameter, certainly larger than any hickory that I'd ever seen. I returned a few days later with my wife Lynda and a tape measure to confirm its girth. At the standard 1.3 m above ground, the trunk measured 106.5 cm diameter at breast height (DBH). Could this be a record-sized tree I wondered? I checked the internet for the Ontario Honour Roll of Trees, which documents the size of the largest known individuals of each species. The most massive Bitternut Hickory in the province was reported to have 123 cm DBH near Burlington. Well it obviously was not the grand dame of Ontario's bitternuts, but perhaps it is the biggest in Durham Region. If you know of a larger one please let me know!

At perhaps 200 years of age, this tree has flourished in its chosen spot along the crest of a slope above Cawker's Creek. It grows in amongst



a grove of smaller bitternuts that likely are its progeny, midway between Cawker Public School and the Scugog Soccer Fields on vacant land owned by Scugog Township. A maze of footpaths meandered through this track of land, some not far away but none immediately beside the robust trunk. The tree did not grow in a remote place, but due to the slope and surrounding tangle of vegetation, it could be easily missed by the non-observant eye! How many people or animals have passed within the shade of this tree over its long life? Surely someone else must have looked up in awe at this giant of a tree. It appears to still be healthy and therefore Scugog Twp. should be notified of this magnificent tree so that it is publicly recognized and protected for others to appreciate. Since the giant Bitternut Hickory grows on the edge of a floodplain, the land is zoned as Environmental Protection and therefore should not be threatened by future development.



alternate.

Hickories are nut trees related to walnuts. As the name implies, bitternuts have bitter tasting inedible nuts, unlike some other hickories which are edible (pecan, for example, is a type of hickory). Bitternuts are eaten by squirrels and those bushy-tailed rodents are largely responsible for dispersing them, since the nuts do not fall far from the tree and cannot move on their own. These trees are rarely sold in tree nurseries because they do not transplant well. Hickories develop deep taproots that cannot be cut, or the tree will die. Knowing this, I once dug up a bitternut seedling that was about 50 cm tall to plant in my yard. I made sure to carefully dig down to the bottom of the taproot which extended about 1 m! It survived the transplant but barely grew for the first three years after being moved.

Bitternut Hickory (*Carya cordiformis*) is one of four species of hickory that are native to Ontario. Shagbark Hickory (*Carya ovata*),

As a species, Bitternut Hickory is not well known locally. Within Durham they are most frequently found on the Oak Ridges Moraine, but can be found anywhere on well drained soils. The tree's twigs bear characteristic yellow buds that have earned it the name of 'sulphur-bud'. The bark is smooth with shallow ridges and pale lines in the grooves. The compound leaves have 7 to 11 leaflets, that somewhat resemble an ash, but the first pair of leaflets are longest, while subsequent leaflets are progressively shorter. Ash leaflets, meanwhile, are uniform in length and oppositely arranged on the twigs whereas hickories are



Lynda with the hickory to show how big it is!

easily recognized by its distinctive shaggy bark, is very rare in Durham. As far as I know, it only occurs in the Rouge Valley at the extreme southwest corner of the region and in a remnant grove on the southeast side of Oshawa. Big Shellbark (*Carya laciniata*) and Pignut Hickories (*Carya glabra*), are provincially rare species that only occur in southwestern Ontario. Bitternut is the widest ranging and most cold tolerant of the 12 hickory species that occur in eastern North America.

## *Fact or Fiction?*

*by Dave Mudd in collaboration with Cara Gregory*

### **True or False?**

- 1. CATTAIL AND BULRUSH ARE NOT THE SAME PLANT**
- 2. BEAVER EAT FISH**

What do you think?

Please see page 10 to find out if these statements are fact or fiction.

## *Native Plant Spotlight*

*Photos and text by Brenda Near*



**J**ack-in-the-pulpit (*Arisaema triphyllum*) is an interesting and beautifully exotic looking plant! I remember my grade 4 teacher taking our class on a plant discovery walk and showing us the wonder of finding Jack the preacher (flower spike/spadix) hiding in his little covered pulpit (spathe).

What I did not know was that *A. triphyllum* is hermaphroditic, meaning that Jack could become a Jill or vice versa; they can be male, female or nonsexual depending on the year. If a plant has had significant fruit production one year, it may take on male traits the next. Male plants that have a good growing year, may take on female traits the next year.

The tiny staminate or pistillate flowers are at the base of the spadix at the bottom of the spathe. Males and females look more or less the same, however male plants are smaller than females, and have a small hole near the bottom of the spathe

which allows pollinators, gnats and small flies, attracted by the flower's mild scent, to escape the trap-like spathe with their pollen and hence spread it to the female plants.

Unfortunately for the gnats, the females have no such opening thus ensuring pollination as the insects spend hours milling around looking for a way out and dispensing pollen in the process. Isn't nature neat...unless you are the gnat!



The leaves are a set of three (hence the triphyllum in the Latin name) and look much like a trillium. They add lovely foliage to the spring shade garden. Females have two sets of leaves as compared to the males which have only one set of leaves. Females that have reached a large size will develop a cone of stunning bright red berries in the fall.

They generally like moist, shady woodlands but mine are growing very well in the rather dry shade of my sugar maple where I let the leaves lie. I do water them occasionally in times of drought. The clumps are slowly growing in size and this year I see that one has many babies at the base! Overall it is pretty easy to grow, so consider adding this native to your shade garden this year.

References:

<https://www.natureconservancy.ca/en/what-we-do/resource-centre/featured-species/plants/jack-in-the-pulpit.html>

<https://www.minnesotawildflowers.info/flower/jack-in-the-pulpit>

[https://northernwoodlands.org/outside\\_story/article/jack-in-the-pulpit-or-jill](https://northernwoodlands.org/outside_story/article/jack-in-the-pulpit-or-jill)

<https://extension.illinois.edu/blogs/nature-journal/2016-03-22-jack-pulpit-most-mystical-plant>

## *Nestbox Update*

*By Derek Connelly*

Nest boxes are monitored on Uxbridge trails and at the Lafarge gravel pit by local residents and members. It provides an opportunity for human families to learn about the challenges cavity nesting birds face and to give them a hand. This year Eastern bluebirds started nesting earlier and in more boxes than other years. Tree swallows are less abundant but are still producing well. Wrens the most aggressive competitors for boxes are also lower in numbers. What factors are affecting these

populations? Swallows are dependent on flying insects while bluebirds eat a variety of foods including fruit so a drop in insect populations would affect swallows more than bluebirds.

So let's take a moment to see how 2020 is faring against 2019 at two local nest box sites.

Note: Numbers represent total eggs, and young hatched as of June in both years

Species	Lafarge (48 boxes)		Countryside Preserve (29 boxes)	
	2019	2020	2019	2020
Tree Swallow	123	121	44	26
House Wren	4	9	31	16
Eastern Bluebird	29	50	8	17

There are almost twice as many young bluebirds this year (50 and 17) compared with last year 29 and 8). The nesting season continues what will be the final fledgling tally be?

*Thanks again to my Bird Box Buddies who provide weekly updates on the feathered family fledgling future!*

To get involved in bird houses contact: Derek Connelly [ndnature7@gmail.com](mailto:ndnature7@gmail.com)



To the left is a cell phone photo in a bird house showing mother swallow and her new babies.

Cell phones have enabled easier viewing of the nest activity and reduce the time that the bird house door is open by our assigned monitors. While swallows and bluebirds are tolerant of our monitoring, too much disturbance can influence their success which must be weighed against our support.

Thanks to Marcy Geddes for this photo from the Uxbridge Countryside Preserve.

## Answers to Fact or Fiction Quiz

Photo of beaver drawn from free online sources; plant photos by Geoff Carpentier

### CATTAIL AND BULRUSH ARE NOT THE SAME PLANT

This is **FACT**. The Cattail and the Bulrush are not the same plant.

The Common Cattail (*Typha latifolia*) is found in marshes, ponds, and ditches, and is a member of the Family Typhaceae (Cattail Family). The Hardstem Bulrush (*Scirpus acutus*), grows in similar habitat, but is a member of the family Cyperaceae (Sedge Family). Both are emergent, perennial plants, whose stems rise from spreading rhizomes. The cattail can have stems over 1 m in height, while the bulrush can grow up to 3 m in height. Leaves on the cattail are tall and flat, while the leaves of the bulrush are reduced to bladeless sheaths at the base of the stem.



Hardstem Bulrush  
(*Scirpus acutus*)

Cattails are most commonly known for the female spike on their flower, which is green in early summer, but browns with age. They spread their seeds by wind when their smooth brown look becomes “fluffy” in appearance. The flowers of the bulrush look quite different than those of the cattail. They are in tight clusters of 1-5 spikelets that appear to grow from the side of the stem. The fruits appear mid-summer, and are brown to black, with barbed bristles at the base.



### BEAVER EAT FISH

This is **FICTION**. Although American Beaver (*Castor canadensis*) are often depicted in cartoons as eating fish, they are herbivores. They only eat the cambium (inner growing) layer of the bark, and the buds, leaves, and fine twigs of trees and shrubs. They are commonly seen feeding on the bark of aspen, birch and willow trees. Beaver will also eat water plants such as Yellow Pond Lily and Fragrant White Water Lily. Unable to climb, beaver use their large, strong rodent incisors to help them to cut down trees, so they can reach all of the trees' plentiful branches.



Beaver – (*Castor canadensis*)

## *Nifty Nature Photos*



Which came first the duck or the egg? This collage of photos above taken by Carol and Doug Apperson offer a rare view of a Hooded Merganser from egg to adult.



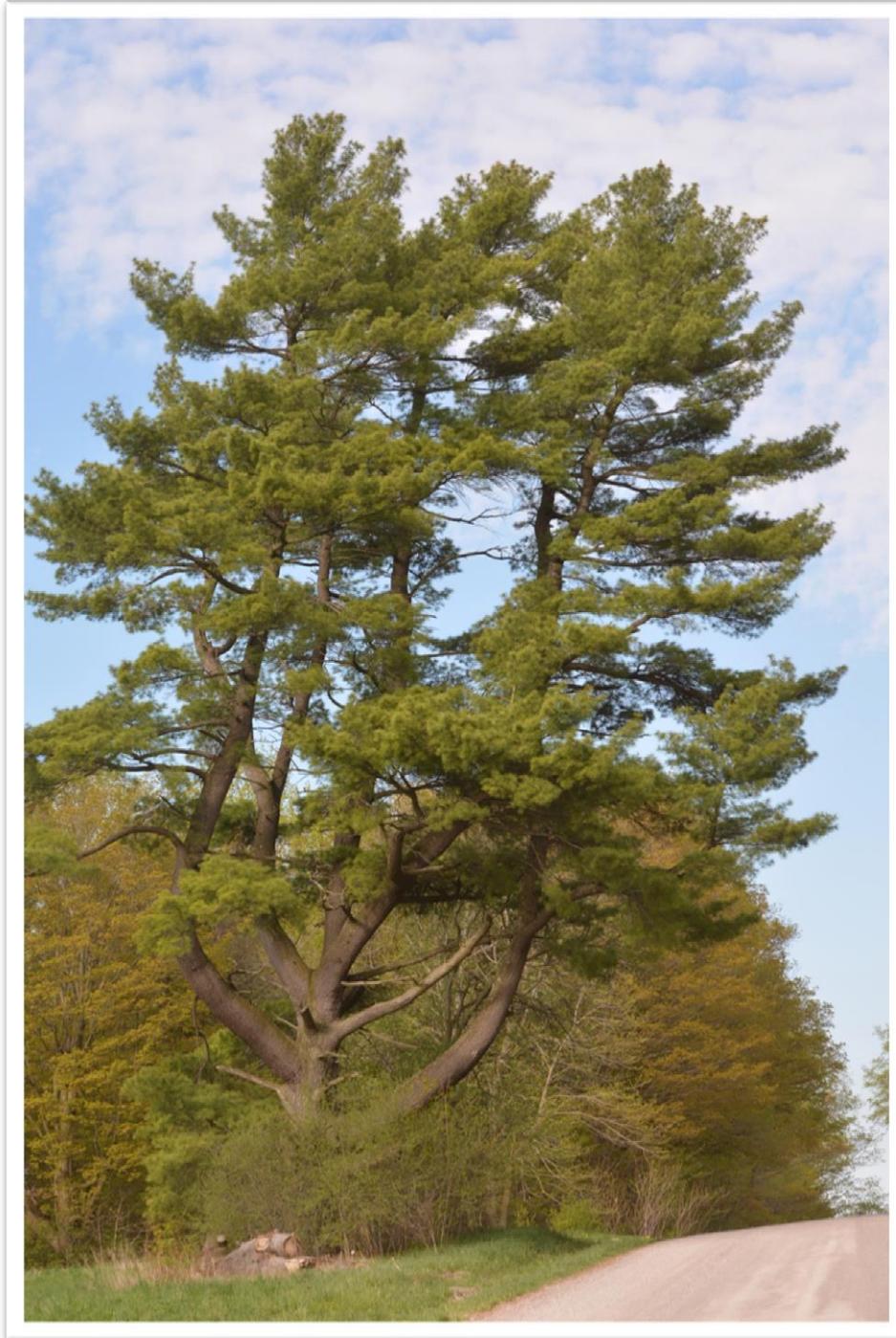
Great Crested Flycatcher nest – photo by Carol and Doug Apperson



Now you see me ... now you don't! Blue Jay photos by Geoff Carpentier



**A spectacular White Pine in Scugog Twp. Photo by  
Geoff Carpentier**



## *Nature Quiz*

*Text and photos by Geoff Carpentier*



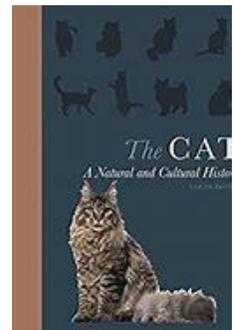
Okay this might be a bit tough! There are obviously five birds in this photo but what are they? Hint – not hummingbirds. Put on your thinking caps. There are three possibly correct answers here, but only one is right.

## *Book Reviews*

*by Geoff Carpentier*

**The Cat – A Natural and Cultural History.** Sarah Brown. 2020. Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J. 2020. \$27.95 USD. 224 pages, hardcover. ISBN: 978-0-691-18373-2.

This book is a little different than those I normally write about, but well worth the space I will dedicate herein. Almost everybody loves cats, despite the cat's ability to make us think they run the show and we are there merely to serve. My wife and I had an indoor cat that passed away last year at the age of 18. She brought joy to both of us for almost two decades. She would curl up with my wife and shower her with love and affection. For me – I was allowed to rub her



tummy (endlessly it seemed) and she called me “He who feeds me”. Oh well – I loved her none-the-less.

Sarah Brown is a renowned author and expert on cat behaviour. Pretty much everything you could wonder about is covered here – origins, breeds, breeding, physiology, behaviour, social organization and interactions with people and wildlife are offered. While I don’t know if Ms. Brown is an advocate of indoor cats, she does offer a balanced analysis of cat behaviour and dedicates a short chapter to indoor cats and another on the impacts of hunting and predation by feral and domestic cats. I do not support cats at large personally and would encourage any of you who do let your cats roam outside to read some of the devastating impacts domestic (feral and family) cats have on all types of wildlife.

Regardless, the other parts of the book are worth reading and in fact fascinating. Did you know that the persecution of black cats during the Black Plague actually contributed to the spread of the disease? As more and more cats were killed, more rats survived as did the fleas that carried the plague!

Maybe you can understand your cat one day – I never did! LOL

Our little cat Jubie – rest her soul!



## *Answers to Quiz*

Okay – these look like big birds and they fly in flocks ... so lots of passerines are off the table. Hey they don’t look like a hawk or eagle or vulture, nor do they look like swans or herons. So what’s left – waterfowl? Grebes? Shorebirds? Loons? Well, if you look at the feet you will see a clue as they are large and flat, implying they might be used as paddles on the water perhaps? Yes they are used in that manner – so this bird swims. The long pointed wings and long neck and tail, coupled with these dangling feet lead us quickly to the loons. So now we have three choices – Common, Red-throated and Pacific. Let’s take Pacific off the table for as far as I know there has only ever been one record of a single bird in Scugog Twp. That leaves us with the Common and Red-throated. The Red-throated is a very slim bird with thin wings and a daintier body than the

Common. It's hard to determine that in the photo, so is there anything else? Well, the beak on the Red-throated is slender and upturned slightly, which you can see under ideal conditions (these are rare), but what is obvious is the way the Red-throated looks hunchbacked when it flies with the neck well below the horizontal and the head rising slightly above that plane. So the head and neck almost looks like a slight S-shape in flight. Okay these birds don't have that posture so they are Commons.

Frequently in the spring and fall we can see both species migrating over north Durham. You will see way more Commons than Red-throated, but patience will pay off. Look at the neck and the overall build of the birds. If you can get a photo, do so – then you can study the image at your leisure.

*Common Loon in flight*

*Photo by Geoff Carpentier*



## ***Birdathon 2020***

*Photo and text by Geoff Carpentier*

Annually, I do a Birdathon in support of projects designed to help or in some cases save Canadian birds. This is a story that shows how the unusual weather and the impacts of Covid-19 can impact our birds (and my fundraiser) in different ways.

First of all here's the end of the story. I did my 24-hour birdathon this recently in hot and sunny conditions that changed overnight to a cool and breezy start to the day. Sounds ideal - right? Well not really as the muggy weather that has been with us for a few days actually meant that few birds lingered to be counted on my Big Day and few new birds arrived to replace them. My total of 148 species sounds impressive but is one of the lowest totals I have ever recorded in my last 35 years of doing a birdathon!

Covid-19 had an odd effect on my success this year. As I said already I rely on birds to be here, to be visible and in many cases announce their presence through song. But what I have never had to contend with before is access limitations to traditional areas where I look for these migrants. Please don't think me critical for that is not the purpose of the next few statements, for I completely understand and support what officials are doing to protect us.



Piping Plover – weathering the elements at Darlington Provincial Park

Darlington Provincial Park is a major migration staging areas for waterfowl, sandpipers and myriad landbirds. This year we were not allowed access to any of the beach areas and had to view birds from less than ideal vantage points. Much of the lakefront habitat was not even visible to us, so we missed several key species, further reducing our success. Nonquon lagoons in Port Perry generally offer great numbers of unusual land and water birds that help immensely in our quest. This year we could not enter the site at all so likely lost about 10 species of waterfowl and shorebirds that we count on to bolster our total. So bottom line – a great day under trying conditions with diminished success.

I wrote about the adventure in *The Standard Newspaper* as part of my bi-weekly nature column called *Walk Softly* .. Here is the link if you'd like to read the entire story ...

<https://thestandardnewspaper.ca/climate-covid-19-and-the-birds/>

Thank-you so much to all of you that have already donated to my 2020 Birdathon. In case you meant to sponsor me but forgot – it's not too late – here's the link for the online donation. Please help our birds (like the Magnolia pictured below) in these troubling times.

<https://www.canadahelps.org/me/6G9aUug>



## *Kudos and a Huge Thank-you*

John McLean has proofread our newsletter since the very beginning, but has to move on to new pursuits in his busy life. Thank-you so much John for your watchful and keen eye to catch typos and vagaries in the writings we offer.

We are looking for a proof reader to replace John. Interested? Let me know and I will explain what the duties are and the time commitments involved. In the interim, Kim Lendvay has agreed to pick up this role and will support Derek and Cara. Welcome aboard and thank-you Kim.

I know I don't say it enough but please know that I appreciate everyone who has a role to play in the development of each newsletter – Derek and Cara steadfastly keep me in line as they spot errors and grammatical challenges. The writers of individual articles make my job much easier as they develop stories for each issue. The Board of Directors is helpful and supportive of the publication of our newsletter as well!. Thank-you to all of you.

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