Keith Stait-Gardner receives prestigious award

By James Kamstra
with notes by Geoff Carpentier

Congratulations to North Durham Nature member Keith Stait-Gardner who received the Dr. J. Murray Speirs Restoration Award from the Durham Environmental Advisory Committee for habitat restoration on his 152 acre property south of Utica. Keith has planted much of his property on the Oak Ridges Moraine with a variety of tree species creating coniferous and mixed forest. In addition he has left part of the property in meadow for grassland bird species. The property has a conservation easement through the Oak Ridges Moraine Land Trust to ensure that it maintains its protected status long into the future. Keith also greatly assisted NDN in the past by donating workshop space and helping construct the mouse-proof metal bird boxes for our bluebird nest box program.

The Durham Environmental Advisory Committee sponsors an annual awards program to recognize and acknowledge environmental achievements of individuals and organizations in the public, private and non-profit sectors within Durham Region. The awards program has eight categories, which were named in memory of past local environmental leaders. For more info visit www.durham.ca/DEAC

Christmas Bird Counts

Text by Derek Connelly and John Mclean
Photos by Geoff Carpentier

Uxbridge Christmas Bird Count – December 27, 2021
Derek Connelly - compiler

A freezing rain morning greeted our 37 field birders and 32 feeder watchers for the seventeenth official Uxbridge Christmas bird count. Our bird species count dropped from last year's high of 61 to 53 but our diversity was slightly over our average (47). Warm weather and open water kept some waterfowl and other species around which hadn't migrated. New birds for the cumulative list were Wood Duck and Bufflehead. Rare birds for this time of year included Eastern Screech Owl, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Winter Wren and a Merlin in count week. The species with the highest number was Dark-eyed Junco (1289), more than double its average of 505, followed by European Starling (1107) and Canada Goose (833), which was slightly below its average. Mourning Doves were also in high numbers (712) - above their average but slightly lower than last year's all time high count (823). Northern Cardinal at 112 was also over its average though only about half of last year's (211). House Sparrows have shown a decline over the last five years and this year was one of their lowest showings(29). House Finches were also down in numbers similar to last year. With lots of food available in Ontario's north, a large finch invasion was not predicted and this lowered both species counts and numbers. Birder participation had also dropped 23% from last year which may also have affected results.

Thanks to John McLean for setting up our post count Zoom call, James Kamstra for reviewing the data summary, our field observers for braving the elements, our feeder watchers for sending in their reports and all those who opened their gates and helped us document the birds of winter.

If you want to participate next year be sure to contact Derek Connelly compiler by email at NDNature7@gmail.com.

Beaverton Christmas Bird Count December 30, 2021

John McLean - compiler

Calm air, cloudy skies and moderate (for winter) temperatures were part of the back drop to Beaverton's 47th CBC. By the end of the day 25 field observers and another 14 feeder watchers produced the second best count for our north Durham circle. Fifty-eight species and in excess of 9700 individuals were recorded on the day. An additional six species were identified during Count Week period resulting in the best overall count for this event ever.

Favourable weather conditions resulted in very high numbers of some of the most common species (Blue Jays, Starlings, Crows and Rock Pigeons). Most species of land birds had sizeable numbers although winter finch numbers were down, as expected. A good variety of raptors were available although their individual numbers were lower than you might expect under the conditions. Individual Screech, Great Horned and Barred Owls were observed but Snowy Owls eluded us on the day even though they were seen during Count Week.

The most successful Beaverton counts depend to a large extent on open water on Lake Simcoe. We were pleased to find the waters adjacent to Brock and Georgina Townships open in varying degrees during the count period even though the ducks and ice moved unpredictably during that time. Common, Red-breasted and Hooded Mergansers and Common Goldeneye were noted on the day of the count. Greater Scaup and Long-tailed Ducks were count week additions as were Greater Black-backed, Glaucous and Iceland Gulls.

We had a few significant sightings on the day. Included amongst these were Winter Wrens, Peregrine Falcon, Swamp Sparrow and a couple of unexpected winter species: Evening Grosbeaks and Pine Siskins, both counted by feeder watchers.

We enjoyed the benefit of a very strong birding team so that each area was covered thoroughly and expertly. Included among our crack team were several members of North Durham Nature: Carol and Doug Apperson, Derek Connelly, Willa Worsley, Karen Vanderlee, Garry Paterson and Mark Dorriesfield.

Fact or Fiction?

Text by Dave Mudd and Cara Gregory

Photos by Cara Gregory and Geoff Carpentier

GRAY SQUIRRELS AND BLACK SQUIRRELS ARE THE SAME SPECIES.

RACCOONS ARE EXTREMELY CLEAN AND WASH THEIR FOOD BEFORE EATING.

What do you think? Please see page 9 to find out if these statements are fact or fiction.

Focus on Nature

Is 2022 the Year That You Go Wild?

by Pat Baldwin and photo by Geoff Carpentier

The news is full of dire warnings of environmental collapse and tragedy. If you're feeling helpless and hopeless take heart. There are ways for you to become part of the solution instead of the problem. Most North Durham Nature club members live in a single-family dwelling where wild animals and plants once lived. Lawns now replace the deeply-rooted native plants that once helped prevent erosion, mitigate flooding, provide habitat, cool the earth and absorb CO_2 emissions and pollution. If you want to play a role in healing the earth, why not put in a native plant garden next year that includes wildflowers, grasses, a tree or shrub and possibly some mosses?

Next year, North Durham Nature club will be selling seeds again as a fund-raiser starting in late January or early February. These seeds are locally collected wildflowers and are appropriate to the Great-Lakes - St. Lawrence Region where the club is located unless the seed package indicates otherwise.

Last year was the first year for our sale. Our seed collection included plants from former board member Brenda Near's garden which won an award with the North American Native Plant Society (NANPS) this fall. You can see Brenda's garden at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pUHEOeS6mfo

NANPS has also been working with the David Suzuki Foundation to develop a workshop series for both collecting and growing native plants from seed. You can sign up for a workshop at: https://www.eventbrite.ca/e/the-diy-seed-series-canadas-wild-seeds-growing-our-biological-gold-tickets-195097861957

Buying from our club will allow you to skip the collection phase of the project and move right into the growing stage. Native plants almost always need to experience winter before they will germinate. They can also be "stratified" which means you fool them into thinking winter has passed. The workshop listed above will explain how this works or you can read how to prepare your seeds on our seed packages. We hope you'll consider growing some of Ontario's lovely flowers next year!

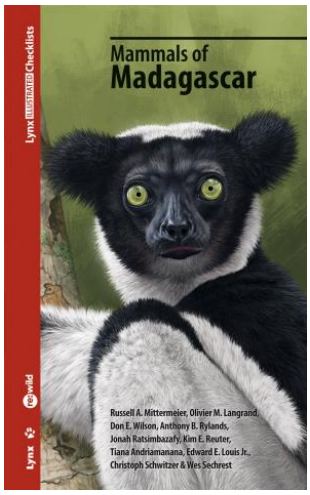
Nature Quiz

Text and photos by Geoff Carpentier

I love bird seed and enjoy people's accommodations (sometimes). I am a prolific breeder and can feed many mouths, but also am food for many other species. Here is what I look like when only a few days old. I know this looks like an odd place to nest but we did it anyways! Later I will look very different when I grow up!

Book Reviews

By Geoff Carpentier



Mammals of Madagascar with the Comoros, Seychelles, Reunion and Mauritius. Russell A. Mittermeier, Olivier M. Langrand, Don. E. Wilson, Anthony B. Rylands, Jonah Ratsimbazafy, Kim E, Reuter, Tiana Andriamanana, Edward E. Louis Jr., Christoph Schwitzer & Wes Sechrest. Lynx Edicions, Barcelona, Spain. 2021. 22.00€. 173 pages, Softcover. ISBN: 978-84-16728-48-0.

This astounding series continues with this latest offering, detailing all of the mammals of Madagascar covering 219 terrestrial and 34 marine species. Add to this descriptions of 13 other species found only on neighbouring islands and you have a very concise reference to the mammals of the region. This follows on the heels of three other books in the series (China, the Southern Cone of South America and South Asia).

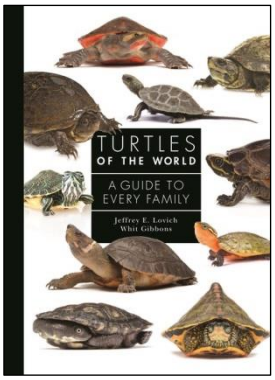
Madagascar is a unique and diverse region where many of the species are threatened with extinction. Most of the books on the market that try to cover the mammals of Madagascar fall well short of their goal and in some cases fail miserably. I was there a couple of years ago and tried to

identify the species of lemurs I saw based on the photos I took and resources available at the time. It was a very challenging exercise as the books were unclear and species identification was extremely difficult in some cases. I certainly wish this book had been published when I was there; it would have made my life so much easier!

The format is similar to the previously published volumes and is equally concise. Illustrated lavishly with beautiful descriptive plates, each one shows 2-3 species with a range map for each, details of habitat and tips on distinguishing features to help in identification. The paintings are spectacular and accurate. The maps are small but totally readable. I found the checklist built into the book very helpful as it would allow travellers to finally be able to build a world mammal list of species they've seen – something I have wanted to do for years but didn't have a reference list to get started. Once the series is complete I will have such a resource at my disposal. I also liked the section that explained where to go to see specific species. This is again invaluable as the Madagascaran landscape is fractured and many mammalian populations isolated. Each site description indicates key species to be found there and gives accessibility advice.

Due to its small size and light weight this is an irreplacable asset for any traveller to this island.

Turtles of the World. Jeffrey E. Lovich and Whit Gibbons. Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 08540. Hardcover 240 pages. $29.95 US. ISBN 13:978-0-691-22322-1.



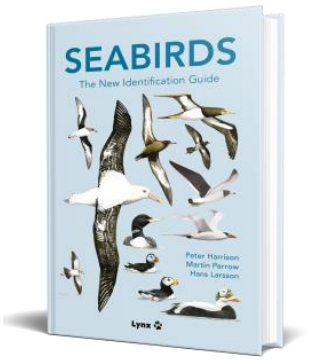
Once again I was drawn to a book of this caliber and the scope of species it covers. I have always been frustrated as I seem not to be able to find any (or at least any "in print") books to identify herptiles around the world. As traveller we see many fascinating things and the scientist in us wants to identify everything. This won't solve that issue but it sure moves us in the right direction.

Every family, subfamily and genus of turtle in the world is covered, but sadly not every species. Perhaps that will be forthcoming in the future. Many of the 350 species of turtle known worldwide are well represented so a broad knowledge can be gained by studying this book. The layout of the book is useful and readable. The first chapters deal with a definition of turtles and how they relate to terrapins and tortoises. It goes on to explain turtle biodiversity, evolution, taxonomy, systematics, fossil records, and classification and more. The next sections explain in fine detail the anatomy and physiology of turtles, and their behaviour, migration, senses, vocalization, feeding and reproduction. The last chapters in the book speak to their cultural and ecological importance and conservation initiatives.

The balance of the book focuses on the families and genera of turtles. Here we are given details of distribution, species, habitats, reproduction, activity and lifespan. The book is broken into two broad categories of turtles – hidden-necked and side-necked. You will be fascinated by many of the example species they use to describe the behaviour and features of these two groups. The text is augmented with over 250 excellent photos and many maps for several species.

In a nutshell, I loved the book and know so much more than I did before. Still waiting for a book to detail all the species of reptiles and amphibians though!

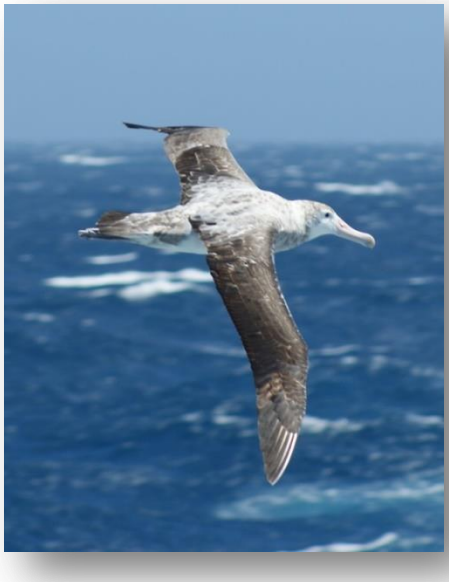
Seabirds – The New Identification Guide. Peter Harrison, Martin Perrow and hand Larsson. Lynx Edicions, Barcelona, Spain. 2021. 65.00€. 600 pages, Hardcover. ISBN: 978-84-16728-41-1.



Many years ago when I first started birding I always envied those who got to go to sea and see pelagic species of birds, such as albatrosses, petrels and shearwaters. Now I am amongst those lucky few who have studied many species worldwide as opportunities arose. The first book I ever owned on this complex group of birds was the original book by Harrison (Seabirds – An Identification Guide) published in 1983. This update of that book is way overdue and most welcome. The difference in the quality of the artwork is amazing as the new book is lavishly, accurately and superbly illustrated. Every species receives wonderful coverage showing multiple plumages and age classes. Compared to the earlier book this one has less cluttered plates with many fine details highlighted with textual inserts right on the plates.

As an example, I have seen thousands of Kelp Gulls in my travels but the book plate for this species shows 18 paintings that teach more than I can recall seeing in all my personal observations combined. Almost 40 bits of information are offered on the plate to help distinguish age, subspecies and variations. Supplement that with a full page of text and you have a very good recounting of the life of this species.

The book covers every species of seabird, including sea ducks, grebes, sheathbills, phalaropes, skimmers, gulls, terns, noddies, skuas, jaegers, auks, tropicbirds, loons, penguins, albatrosses, petrels, shearwaters, diving-petrels, storm-petrels, frigatebirds, gannets, boobies, cormorants, shags and pelicans. Wow that's 433 species in a single book. I read through several of the species accounts for species I was familiar with and could not find any obvious errors. I would have liked a bit more info in some cases about biology and breeding, but perhaps that can't really be managed in a book of this size covering so many species. Regardless the detail provided is extensive and informative.



One interesting concept I noted is that the authors in many cases have decided to adopt a different nomenclature for the species list and for some families. For example, the American Ornithological Union (AOU) (the North American authority) lists the Northern Fulmar as a single species with subspecies in the Pacific and Arctic/Atlantic Oceans. However, the authors have split these two as Northern and Pacific Fulmars, giving them full species coverage. They have done likewise with the Wandering Albatross complex. Many authors simply treat the "Great Albatrosses" as a single species with several subspecies. This makes sense in many cases as the subspecies are often so similar they are almost impossible to tell apart. These authors have divided the Wandering Albatross complex into five separate species as have some other authors but not the AOU.

All said and done if you want a concise single source reference book that will teach you about all these families of birds, this is the one. It's big, full of facts and a bit technical but well worth it!

Fact or Fiction – Answers Revealed

GRAY SQUIRRELS AND BLACK SQUIRRELS ARE THE SAME SPECIES.

This is **FACT**. The Eastern Gray Squirrel (*Sciurus carolinensis*) commonly occurs in two colour morphs, gray and black, which misleads people to believe that there are two different species. A litter may contain both black and gray individuals.

Black is the dominant colour morph found toward the northern limits of this species' range (Ontario and Quebec). This morph is less common farther south and is not found at all in the southern U.S.A. This may signify that the gene responsible for black colouration has a cold-weather adaptation associated with it.

White and tan morph and leucistic Eastern Gray Squirrels also occur and are found in the U.S.A and Canada. There are infrequent occurrences of a reddish colour morph. These individuals should not be confused with the Fox Squirrel *(Sciurus niger)* which does not occur in Ontario except on Pelee Island.

RACCOONS ARE EXTREMELY CLEAN AND WASH THEIR FOOD BEFORE EATING.

This is **FICTION**. The front paws of raccoons have thousands more nerve endings than human hands, giving them a very acute sense of touch. They use their dexterous fingers to reach under rock crevices in shallow water, feeling for crayfish and searching for frogs, without seeing them. Being mainly nocturnal, this acute sense of touch helps them examine objects in low light and find and examine food before eating it. Biologists believe that water enhances their sense of touch but that they are not actually washing their food when they wet their paws in a stream.

The 3rd Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas Update

Photo and text by Geoff Carpentier

Well it's been a pretty exciting first year for the Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas. We have had excellent coverage of our Durham squares with some great nesting successes. But there's lots left to do and only four years to do it! So let's get out there and start finding these nesting birds. I know it's a bit wintry out there but here is some stuff you can do right now:

1. Register for the atlas if you haven't already. NatureCounts - Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas (birdscanada.org)
2. Hone your ID skills, both visual and auditory. There are some great tools on the atlas website to help you.
3. Go out now and record calling Eastern Screech and Great Horned Owls – these are the only ones you can count so far.
4. Go out and look at stick nests to see if you can figure out where owls and hawks might nest in 2022.
5. Go out and look for used nests from last year, but make sure you are confident in your ability to identify a used nest.
6. Clean out your nest boxes now (if you haven't already) so they are ready when the birds start nesting again in the spring.
7. Build some new boxes if you have the time and skill.

Pictured to the left is a used Eastern Kingbird nest.

That's it.. Any questions? Let me know as I'm the Regional Coordinator for the atlas for Durham Region 46.

Nasty & Nice Nature News

Compiled by Geoff Carpentier

Coral Reefs in Trouble; Between 2009 and 2018, 40% of the world's coral reefs died according to a new study by the Global Coral Reef Monitoring Network. That's about the equivalent of all the coral in the Great Barrier Reef! Coastal activities and construction, fishing and tourism have contributed but coral bleaching is the biggest culprit. However reefs are resilient and some will return to their glory if we stop negatively impacting them. (Source: Washington Post).

Bats not safe on the Prairies: The White-nose Syndrome that has devastated eastern North American bat populations in recent years has been found for the first time in Saskatchewan. The Wildlife Conservation Society made the discovery of this fungus that has killed up to 85% of the bat population in some areas. It is an odd virus that eats away at the skin on the bat's wings during hibernation, causing them to dehydrate and then eventually die as they now must use energy to heat their bodies, impacting their body's reserves. (Source: The Canadian Press).

Komodo Success: Animal caregivers at the San Diego Zoo have successfully bred Komodo Dragons in captivity. The first ten eggs hatched in November 2021. With less than 1400 wild Komodos in existence in Indonesia this is a massive breakthrough. (Source: Washington Post).

Climate Porn: The media continually reports only negative stories about climate change. If we listened to them exclusively we would have declared the world doomed already! Coined by the UK Institute of Public Policy and Research "climate porn" is an alarmist reporting technique designed to shock and scare us to act, sometimes outside the realm of science. That's not to say that climate change isn't dangerous and impactful, but sometimes it's hard to separate fact from fiction or from opportunistic conjecture. The most recent report from the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reported that (in their opinion) we are likely to avert catastrophic events such as ice sheet collapses and abrupt changes in oceanic circulation. It also stated that we are unlikely to experience the most extreme temperature changes projected in earlier reports. For more information check out the Sixth Assessment IPCC Report. (Source: Opinion piece by Lorrie Goldstein, columnist Toronto Sun).

Sharknado: 83 Great White Sharks were tagged by *Ocearch* off the northeast USA coast. This phenomenon may not be as uncommon as we think as there is a known NW Atlantic population, but numbers seem a bit larger than normal perhaps due to climate change. Studies to date are inconclusive. (Source: Postmedia Network).

Crayfish on the move: A Belgium cemetery is now home to a self-cloning species of crayfish that were being studied in an adjacent breeding lab. The animals escaped and are impacting local biodiversity. They can breed without fertilization, cloning identical copies of themselves through parthenogenesis. The species is banned by the European Union. The Marbled Crayfish never existed as a natural species but was "created in labs" in the 1990s by pet traders. (Source: Global News).

Answers to Quiz

These are clearly some type of mammal. Their colour doesn't help as most mammals are born pink and hairless. The fact that they appear to be lying in a bed of bird seed indicates they are tolerant of people and will live with or near humans. The size relative to the sunflower seeds isn't that helpful as we don't know how old they are. They have a tail so things like voles and their kin are eliminated but just about all other mice and many shrews are still fair game.

But wait, isn't that a mouse to the left of them? Yes it is a *Peromyscus* type of mouse but that leaves us with either White-footed or Deer Mouse. The way to tell the two species apart is tricky but the key field mark is whether the tail is boldly bilaterally coloured white on the bottom and dark on the top (i.e. White-footed Mouse) or if the transition between the two colours is unclear (i.e. Deer Mouse). We can't tell from these photos so we can only say that these are likely Deer Mice as this is the expected species here.

Mice are opportunistic and will nest in odd places - old shoes, boxes and even seed containers ... perhaps that is why they are so successful. Typically however they shred some material (e.g. paper or cardboard) or more naturally fashion a nest out of grasses and twigs to raise their young.

NDN Bluebird Project

by Derek Connelly

Here are some shots of our meeting with Lafarge's Eastern Canada land managers - two patrons drove all the way from Montreal, others from southern Ontario.

They were here for a Toronto team meeting and the Bird Box project was their field trip. They were keen to learn about the project (and birds) and helped clean out the 48 boxes in the Uxbridge gravel pit on the Seventh Concession . Our project is a one of a kind for Lafarge in Ontario. Our success over eight years with over 80% of our bird houses being used is also significant. Senior Land manager Chris Galway was positive and keen to work with us at keeping the project going as part of further restoration of the gravel pit.

Text by Derek Connelly. Photos by Liz Calvin include NDN Lee Fisher cleaning out box and Chris Galway and his team, also Chris and I sharing a laugh as I demonstrate clean out techniques.

Nature's Pretty Side

This lovely Spotted Sandpiper is a common breeding species here in north Durham

Photo by Geoff Carpentier

Upcoming Events - January to April 2022

January 25 – AGM and Members Night Presentations by various club members
Our Annual General Meeting will be followed by short presentations to highlight experiences by some club members ranging from Scugog to the Arctic and as far away as Uganda.

February 22 – "Amphibians and Their Larvae" with Peter Mills
Frogs and salamanders may be familiar but this presentation will showcase the mysterious egg and larval stages, and transformation of these under-appreciated animals. Peter is the author/illustrator of the recent publication *Metamorphosis: Ontario's Amphibians at All Stages of Development*.

March 22 – "Exploring the Atlantic Rainforest" with Cara Gregory
The Atlantic Rainforest in Brazil is a highly threatened ecosystem, holding many endemic bird and wildlife species. Join NDN President Cara Gregory for an "eco-tour" through the varied habitats and parks in and around Rio de Janeiro.

April 26 – "Weird and Wacky Weather" with David Chapman
Canada has some of the most interesting weather in the world because of its terrain, temperature variations and location. David, who is a weather chaser and acclaimed photographer, will show us the awesome power and beauty through a wide range of weather conditions

Photos by Geoff Carpentier

For more information about NDN

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