



Finches Finally!

Text and photos by Geoff Carpentier

For the first time in many years the winter finches have been coming south to feed on our local berries, seeds and cones rather than staying in the far north. All expected species have been recorded in North Durham, starting in late October when waves of Purple Finches, Pine Siskins and Evening Grosbeaks came sweeping through, followed shortly thereafter by Common Redpolls. Hot on their heels were a few Hoary Redpolls, Red and White-winged Crossbills and Pine Grosbeaks. Coincident with this movement of birds were a smattering of Bohemian Waxwings. We also had an above average migration of Blue Jays, but many remained to grace our feeders (24 of which stayed at my feeders to ensure that my retirement savings were depleted as they ate all my seed!). Many nuthatches started leaving Ontario in mid-August but several also stayed to overwinter here near feeders. (Editor's note: these last three species are not finches but are subject to the same triggers that encourage mass irruptive migrations).



So why are these birds coming?

To answer this question, one of the best sources of information has been the Winter Finch Forecast published annually for the last 20+ years. Ron Pittaway of Toronto wrote this extremely accurate forecast for all but the most recent year. Upon his retirement, Tyler Hoar of Oshawa took on the daunting task of predicting if and when finches and these other migratory species would share the winter with us. See the Ontario Field Ornithologists website for this year's report.

www.ofo.ca/site/page/view/articles.winterfinches





Why they move is linked almost exclusively to food sources. Obviously it's safer to stay in your home territory but if little or no food is available, you have to go find it. And so they do. When Ron and Tyler did their forecasting they relied on many sources (e.g. agencies and individuals) to define what they believed the birds would do in a given winter. Among the factors considered are the cone, nut and berry crops of many species including Mountain Ash, buckthorn, spruce, oak, Balsam Fir, tamarack, pine, beech, birch, alder and hazelnut.

Most of the Evening Grosbeaks seemed to have already gone through, but several have set up wintering territories north and east of Lake Scugog and the Upper Ganaraska Valley, as have the nuthatches and most of the Purple Finches. The

Bohemian Waxwings are just getting here and a few Pine Grosbeaks are seen infrequently as they slowly move through our area in search of Mountain Ash and Crab Apples. Crossbills are always sporadic and put on a reasonable showing locally but are elusive and not linked to any one spot for the most part. But they are here and can be found with patience – search areas with cone bearing White Pines and spruces. Redpolls (primarily Common Redpolls) and a few Pine Siskins are visible most days in the right habitat. The latter are reliable at feeders but the redpolls so far seem to be mostly seen as flyover birds or feeding in weedy fields or seed bearing alders and birches. Assuredly they will come to feeders eventually. This should also be a good winter for Hoary Redpolls, mixed in with the Common Redpolls.



Christmas Bird Count Results

Uxbridge Bird Count Hits New Record! We made a difference!

*by Derek Connelly, Compiler
Bald Eagle photo by Carol and Doug Apperson*

The Covid factor seems to have positively affected the annual Uxbridge Christmas Bird Count by encouraging more human participation (79 people), up 52% from last year. Many Snow Birds (pun intended) didn't fly south this winter. Instead many of them filled and watched their bird feeders for a total of 144 hours, up 140% from 2019. More socially-distanced birding teams were out on

the roads and fields with new interest. Add to this the milder weather with no rain or snow plus the predicted influx of northern finches and it created the ideal conditions.



The Uxbridge species count soared to 59 species (compared to last year's 44), beating our previous high count of 53 species in 2012 and well above the 16 year average of 46. Individual birds counted surpassed 11,000 also a new record topping 2011's 10,140 birds.

Common Redpoll, one of the northern finches, had the highest count of 2254 with one flock of 550 in Scugog. A new bird for the count was the Red Crossbill, another northern finch, which was identified in two areas by two experienced birders. Other northern finches not seen last year included Pine

Siskins, Pine and Evening Grosbeak and Hoary Redpoll. The northern finches move south into our area some winters when food crops are low in the boreal forest.

Sixty percent of the bird species were more numerous than the sixteen year average including Northern Cardinals, which hit a new record of 206. Some species' counts were low however. American Robins and American Crows were well below their averages and there were far fewer European Starlings this year. Many factors can influence bird populations.

Thanks to John McLean, who organized our Zoom bird tally at day's end, James Kamstra for editing the summary and to all the volunteer bird counters and feeder watchers who are out there collecting all this useful data. Full results will be available on the North Durham Nature website next week and the National Audubon website later this winter. (Editor's Note: And very importantly, thank-you so much to Derek Connelly for tirelessly organizing and compiling our Uxbridge CBC!)

Beaverton Christmas Bird Count – 46th Edition

by John McLean, Compiler

Long-tailed Duck photo by Geoff Carpentier

We have certainly had better weather and probably more field observers but rarely have we had better results than on December 30th. Bitterly high winds from the south and east and heavily overcast skies with a mixture of snow, rain and sleet made birding challenging and drove birds further into the woods. However, between field observers and feeder watchers, we were able to produce our third highest count-day results with 55 species.

Included on that list of 55 species were several notables including our first ever Eastern Bluebird seen by Doug and Carol Apperson. Tyler Hoar was able to spot both Long-tailed Duck and Trumpeter Swan for just the second time in 46 years, as well as a Common Loon for just the third

time. Lake Simcoe was partially open but the ebbing and flowing of the ice cover for the previous two weeks reduced the total number of ducks significantly. Only one, apparently injured, Canada Goose remained in the vicinity of Lake Simcoe. Gulls were, likewise, almost totally absent.

While the complete results can be found on NDN's website, some other notables include a smattering of winter "finches": Pine Siskin, Common Redpoll, Pine Grosbeak and Bohemian Waxwing. All the usual hawks and owls were found but in very low numbers. High counts for Common Raven and Northern Cardinal were the exceptions. I think an



appropriate synopsis for the day would be to say the number of species was extensive while the number of individuals was low. We are blaming that in large part on the day's weather.

The effort on the part of the field observers was excellent, working for the most part on their own, as required by Covid-19 and under less than ideal weather conditions. Special mention should be made of the 15 Feeder Watchers who contributed nearly 20% of our total birds and who were the only ones to identify American Kestrel, Merlin (Dixie Pallett-Firth), Brown-headed Cowbird (Dave Martland), Purple Finch (Barb Glass) and Northern Flicker. Everyone's contribution to the success of the day is appreciated.

Protected Should Mean Forever!

Text by Cara Gregory

Photo of Blue Flag Iris by Geoff Carpentier

Wetlands are highly biodiverse habitats with great value to many. They contain a large variety of plant life, which helps to clean our air and water and act as a "carbon sink" to reduce climate change impacts. A wetland provides breeding habitat for a variety of wildlife and a resting and refueling spot for migrating birds. It also provides food and shelter to a large amount of wildlife year round. Wetlands act like sponges, reducing flooding, especially needed in the spring, and releasing water held in times of drought. They also provide a variety of recreational opportunities.

The Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry has a Wetland Evaluation System created to inform Ontario's land use planning process and can only be performed by a trained evaluator. The wetland evaluation process defines, identifies and measures wetland functions and values. Wetlands are

assessed based on their perceived values in maintaining natural processes (ecosystem values). They are also assessed on the benefits provided to society (human utility values).

Under the Planning Act, the Provincial Policy Statement protects wetlands that have been evaluated and deemed to be significant, from a development and site alteration perspective. Provincially significant wetlands (PSWs) in southern Ontario enjoy the highest level of protection of any natural feature.

Over 72% of wetlands in southern Ontario have been drained since European settlement, for a number of human uses, before their value was completely understood. In this age of rapid extinction, the preservation of the remaining wetlands is vital to the health of our ecosystems and all those living within it.



That is why it is devastating to hear that the current Provincial government, very focused on development, are finding ways to bypass the protection of these valuable lands. They are using Minister Zoning Orders (MZO) to circumvent the protection afforded to these lands. MZOs allow the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing to ignore provincial policy, bypass municipal planning processes and directly zone land for a variety of development projects. The Minister does not have to give notice or consult with the public prior to issuing an MZO and there is no opportunity for appeal.

MZO's have already been issued to bypass protections of three PSWs on agriculturally zoned land in Vaughan for the construction of a Walmart distribution facility, a large coastal PSW in Pickering

to build a warehousing facility and there is talk of one being issued for five wetlands within the East Humber River complex in Vaughan.

I have worked as an Outdoor Educator in a local wetland, within the Nonquon Provincial Wildlife area in Greenbank, for over 16 years. My focus has been on educating youth about the value of wetlands, helping them to make a connection with the land and gain an appreciation for it, so that they will be good future stewards of our natural areas and ensure their protection. Hearing that the government is disregarding past legislation put forward to “protect” these significant wetlands just breaks my heart.

North Durham has a number of wetland areas; the above mentioned Nonquon Wetland Complex, the Beaver River Wetland, wetlands within the Uxbridge Brook Watershed, and within Scugog’s Crow’s Pass Conservation Area to name a few. These areas don’t have the protections that PSWs have. I would hate to see anything happen to make them disappear.

North Durham Nature has sent letters to the government regarding our opposition of the use of MZOs in this way, pertaining particularly to the Duffin’s Creek Wetland Complex in Pickering, within Durham Region. Ontario Nature has done the same, and NDN has signed on to their letters to show our support. Environmental Defence, Ecojustice and Ontario Nature have now taken joint legal action in regards to this matter.

My questions are: What use is the designation “Protected” if there are ways to override it? How can it be justified to bypass these “protections” without the input of citizens whose ecosystem and overall health would be greatly impacted by the development of PSWs? What can we do to be heard?

“Protected” should mean FOREVER.

Winter Maintenance of your Natural Garden

Text and photos by Brenda Near



For many folks fall yard maintenance means cutting down all the dead plants, raking up the leaves and generally tidying the garden. For me, it is the easiest time of the year. I cut down nothing and if I rake the leaves at all, it is to heap them higher onto the gardens. I don’t shun tidying the garden in the fall because I am lazy. Rather I leave everything alone to benefit the insects that call my garden home. Many native bees nest in the fall, laying their eggs in the hollow stems of standing plants. Other bees and insects and even some butterflies such as Mourning Cloaks, Commas

and Question Marks overwinter as adults in piles of leaves and brush. Other butterflies, like Swallowtails, overwinter in pupal form and they rely on standing vegetation to hold and shelter

their chrysalis. So while my garden is a cultivated space, it is also a natural space full of insect life and such. If I were to start cutting and ripping out plants and raking up leaves at the end of the season, shoving them into bags to be carted off in trucks to a huge compost facility, I would be ridding my garden of all the pollinators I've been planting for in the first place!

Aside from creating habitat, many native plants are sculptural in form and thus offer great winter interest in the garden if leave them standing. The contrast of their stems against the winter landscape is a lovely sight and puffs of snow sitting on the seed heads are as pretty as any summer flower. Some of the best native plants for winter interest are Stiff Goldenrod (*Solidago rigida*), Round Headed Bush Clover (*Lespedeza capitata*), Giant Hyssop (*Agastache nepetoides*), Coneflowers (*Echinacea*) and many native grasses. Another bonus of leaving your plants through the winter is that your garden will come alive as finches, sparrows and juncos weave in and out of the standing vegetation, eating seeds and sheltering, offering more delight and visual satisfaction. The seeds of Anise Hyssop (*Agastache foeniculum*), Grey Headed Coneflower (*Ratibida pinnata*), Echinacea and Cup plant (*Siliphium perforliatum*) are all on the finch's winter menu.



If your urge to tidy is overwhelming, consider leaving at least one corner of your yard untouched. Even with a small area, you will provide much needed habitat for overwintering bees, butterflies and other important insects and a winter buffet for our feathered friends.



Plant photo ID: *Andropogon gerardii*, *Echinaceae* sp., *Lespedeza captiata*, and *Solidago rigida*

Fact or Fiction?

*Text by Dave Mudd
Photos by Geoff Carpentier*



BEARS HIBERNATE and OWLS ARE WISE

What do you think? Please see page 11 to find out if these statements are fact or fiction.

Nature Quiz

Wow –this is a tough one for sure ... okay here are some clues:

- It is not a plant
- It is not an animal
- It grows in the forest
- It can taste yummy
- It can be very white in colour or not!

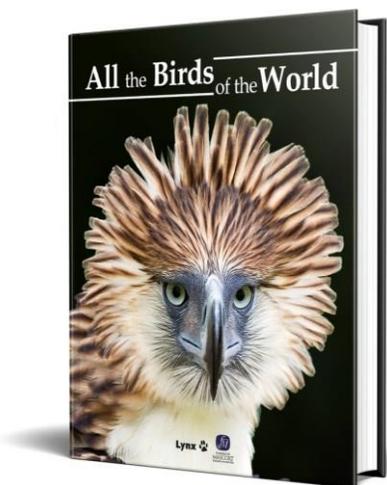
What is it?



Book Reviews

I have the good fortune to receive many great natural history books and I am always pleased to be able to share some offerings with you to assist in finding the perfect book to read and enjoy. In this offering I will talk about two new books from Lynx Edicions. You may recall that I have talked about many of their books in the past. Why? Well they are always timely, thorough and informative.

All the Birds in the World. Josep del Hoyo, Editor. Lynx Edicions, Barcelona, Spain. 2020. 65€. 967 pages, hardcover. ISBN: 978-84-16728-27-4.



Years ago I acquired the entire 17 volume set of the *Handbook of the Birds of the World*, followed by the *Checklist of the Birds of the World*, a compilation based on the larger set. Well one might think that would be enough – but you’d be wrong. The original series was expensive and of most use to researchers and academia. This new book not only focuses on that group of readers but adds the average birder to the mix.

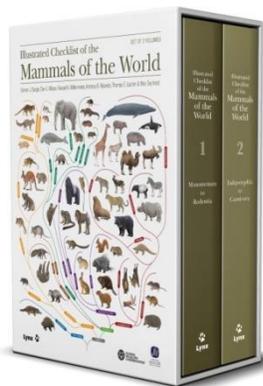
Why should you own one? Well we all know that there are about 10,000 species of birds in the world. Or are there? The science is changing rapidly and books even 5 years old are partially out of date. This book brings all the science into one volume, current to 2020. Now over 11,500 species are known and this book depicts all of them in colour.



The excerpt above, taken from the book, will give you an idea of what to expect. Every one of the species of birds in the world is given equal treatment – almost 21,000 paintings and range maps for every species are included. With a project of this magnitude one would expect that details such as breeding habitat, behavior, detailed field marks, song and the like would be omitted out of necessity. Well that is sort of true, but technology comes in to save the day. QR codes are included for every species. These add access to millions of facts that cover the “missing” subjects. It’s like getting an entire library of EVERYTHING known about the birds of the world in a single book! Oh and if that’s not enough, add a section that covers all the birds in the world that are extinct since 1500, a section on disputed nomenclature (for those that are interested in name origins) and a 37-page atlas of the world because even our map books are outdated!

And if that’s not appealing enough, how about this new title also from Lynx?

Illustrated Checklist of the Mammals of the World. Connor J. Burgin, Don E. Wilson, Russell A. Mittermeier, Anthony B. Rylands, Thomas E. Lacher and Wes Sechrest. Lynx Edicions, Barcelona, Spain. 2020. 179.95€. 2-volume boxed set - 1166 pages, hardcover. ISBN: 978-84-16728-35-0.



Well this is another offering but perhaps for the more serious naturalist as the price point is quite high, but weighing value against cost you come out way ahead if you choose to own this book. Educators, researchers, consultants and the like will want to own this set. Where else can you even find any list of all the mammals of the world? Have you ever tried to Google how many kinds of bats there are around the world? Try it – you won’t find an accurate or complete list anywhere – until now. The answer is 1423. Every one is given coverage in these books!

Information provided to support the beautiful paintings of every species include a map and details on range and vagrancy, conservation status and a cross reference back to the other monumental tome that Lynx put out recently – the 9-volume set of Handbook of the Mammals of the World. In that set you will find out just about everything known about all these species, beyond what is provided in this book.



So think you have everything? If you can’t decide on a great gift for a friend or colleague, maybe these two offerings from Lynx can help you decide.

Answers to Fact or Fiction Quiz

BEARS HIBERNATE

This is **FICTION**. Bears don't hibernate. They fall into a short-term winter sleep called torpor. Hibernation is a more long-term, extended sleep. Body temperatures and metabolic rates drop much lower than animals in torpor and bears in torpor can wake up fairly quickly if needed.

OWLS ARE WISE

This is **FICTION**. Owls may have been portrayed as wise because of the shape of their face being round with large eyes facing forward, similar to a human. In terms of bird brains though, they don't score as high as birds like crows (*corvids*) and parrots. The space in the owl's head is mostly made up of its eyes, not its brain. Neurological maps of an owl's brain show a large amount of brain power focused on their sense of sight, so their brain spends most of its time processing information from its optic nerves. They may not be as "wise" as their reputation portrays them to be, but the focus on their sense of sight is part of what makes them such an effective predator.



Nasty & Nice Nature News

by Geoff Carpentier

Will the impact of Covid last 450 years? OceansAsia, a Hong Kong based environmental group, estimates that 1.5 billion disposable face masks will end up in the oceans this year, based on an estimate that 3% of the masks manufactured this year will make their way to the seas. The ear straps will pose a threat to wildlife but the plastics in the composition of the masks will leave a legacy that can last 450 or more years! (Source OceansAsia)

Zombie worms feast on alligator carcasses! In Mexico a team of scientists from Louisiana Universities Marine Consortium accidentally discovered a new species of worm that feeds in deep waters offshore. The fuzzy worms have not yet been identified but have been assigned to the genus *Oseida*. They consumed an entire alligator carcass (placed there by the researchers for the study) in 51 days in this study. (Source: PLOS ONE)

A Hummingbird with Fangs? A tiny dinosaur skull was identified after a specimen was donated to the Hupoge Amber Museum. The origin of the specimen is not yet known, nor has the rest of the

skeleton been located. The tiny creature looks like a minuscule hummingbird with fangs and it is not known if it is actually related to birds or if it could fly. Regardless, it has been assigned the scientific name *Oculudentavis khaungraae*. (Source; Nature magazine)

Court Rules Glue Traps Permissible in France. A French court ruled that French bird ‘hunters’ can legally use glue sticks (called limesticks) to trap wild birds because this is a traditional cultural form of hunting. This hunting technique is widely deemed to be brutal and cruel and is banned across the European Union except in five departments of southern France. Because one can’t control which species are caught, many untargeted species are taken, including endangered ones. (Source: Bird Guides)

Roads - the Good, the Bad and the Ugly. In 1925, Dayton Stoner undertook the first ever study to look at the impact of roads on birds in Iowa. In the 632 miles he drove, he found 225 kills, almost 2.5/mile. Across the globe, there are an estimated 45 million km of roads! The impacts can be direct or more subtle – roadkills, noise, chemical and light pollution, habitat fragmentation and avoidance. A modern study in Great Britain found that 80% of the land fell within half a mile of a roadway. 75 species were studied and it was found that almost 2/3 of them were impacted in some way by the roads. While many species declined in numbers closer to roads, some actually increased. Urban and garden species fared better than migrants and forest species. Common Gulls (*Larus canus*) were found to be 138% more abundant around roads, pigeons 48% more abundant, Eurasian Blackbirds 23% more abundant, Eurasian Goldfinches 67% more abundant and Greenfinches 55% more abundant. Negatively affected species included Shelducks (83% decrease), Greylag Goose (67% decrease). Northern Wheatear (53% decrease), Reed Warbler (52% decrease) and Willow Warbler (20% decrease). In total about 194 million birds are killed annually on European roads. (Source: Nature Communications)

Answers to Quiz

Hmm it’s growing in a conifer forest by the looks of the substrate and it appears to be quite round and unstemmed. Well, not a plant and not an animal – what does that leave? Fungi! So some type of fungi and it’s edible – that leaves a lot still – shape is roundish and the surface relatively smooth so most of the fungi can be ruled out quickly – of the edible types (morels, chanterelles, puffballs, amanitas, boletes, etc.)



only one seems to fit – the puffball. But there are 4 possible species – Pasture, Gem-studded, Pigskin Poison and Giant. The Pasture Puffball is generally darker in colour, has a rutted surface appearance and has a short stem, so this appears to be something else. The Gem-studded Puffball is clearly stemmed and has a whitish exterior with little knobs on it. Again doesn't sound like our guy. The scary sounding Pigskin Poison Puffball is in fact poisonous but is very dark in colour and again has a long distinct stem. So that leaves us with the Giant Puffball (*Calvatia gigantea*). This is a white, smooth fungi that grows in the forests or meadows and can be quite large (8-20" in diameter). It tastes great as long as the spores are still white in colour.

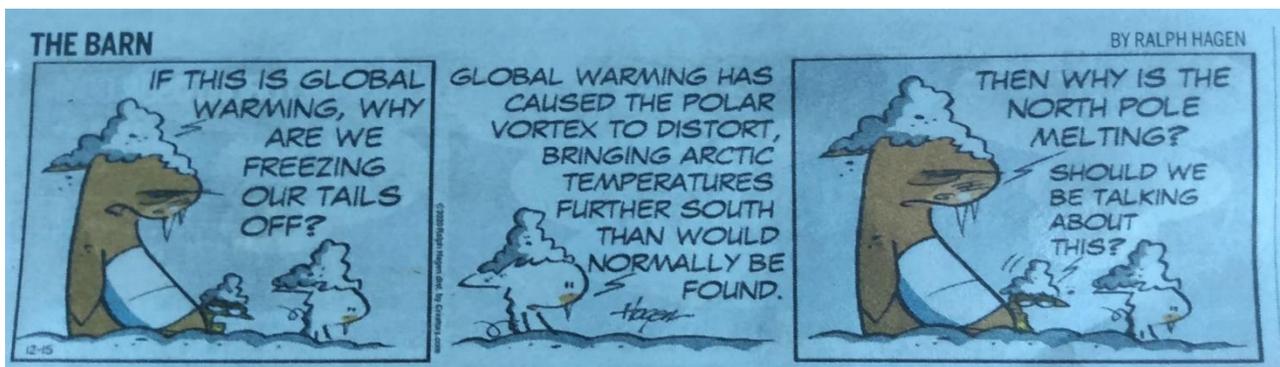
Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas 3

Photo and text by Geoff Carpentier

Get ready ... it has begun .. officially on January 1, 2021 the 3rd Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas started and will run for 5 years. Birders of all levels can play a part, whether its intensive field work or just casually, “near your home” stuff! Sign up now! For more info email Geoff at geoff.carpentier@gmail.com or visit the atlas website at <https://www.birdsontario.org/#>



In closing



Cartoon reprinted with permission of Ralph Hagen

Nature's Pretty Side

White-breasted Nuthatch – a delight at any time of year!
photo by Geoff Carpentier



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