

Stratford Field Naturalists

CONCERNED ABOUT NATURE SINCE 1966

Winter 2018 Newsletter

Encouraging wildlife preservation and protection of natural habitats. Promoting and cooperating with individuals and organizations that have similar interests and objectives in matters of environmental concern.

Christmas Bird Count

by KEN CLARKE



Candace Terpstra, Ann Griffin, Jean Baloo and Vicki Ryder were part of the Christmas Bird Count team in Stratford West. Photo by Joan Daynard.



Sara Hamilton and Bernie Lawrance scout for birds in the countryside west of Stratford on Count Day. Photo by Chris Polkiewicz.

“The annual Christmas Bird Count demonstrates the enduring trends we see in bird populations over the years.” This is what I wrote about last year’s Christmas Bird Count for Stratford and it applies this year too. Last December 30, 2017, 23 SFNers observed slightly fewer bird species than we normally do in the Stratford circle, 39, and fewer individual birds, only 6,639. However, the species were virtually the same as the year before. We found all of the species seen last year, save 4 and no new species were found. The species seen the year before, but not this year included: Hooded Merganser, Bald Eagle, Northern Harrier, and Ring-billed Gull. These are birds not uncommonly seen here in winter, but not on this day. Once again winter finches were scarce.

Our list is short and stable compared to other counts around us. This is due, I think, to the fact that we count late in the CBC season. By the time we count near to the New Year, most migrants have left, especially if the water is frozen, and what is left are the resident winter birds. The weather is always a factor too. While it was bright and sunny, but cold, when the count day began, during the day at various intervals snow streamers blew across Perth County. It was sunny one minute and the next drivers could not see the road for the snow blowing across the windshield. Several parties packed it in early in the afternoon.

Nevertheless, a continuing story for us is the continuing presence of Turkey Vultures in the winter. This year 9 were found hanging out at the Stratford landfill site. This is the third year in a row that we have found them on count day. Thankfully Stratfordites are still discarding enough appealing garbage to keep our birdwatching interesting here.

Recent Field Events

Avian Research Tour–November 21

by SHARON MCKAY

A group of 22 Stratford Field Naturalists and friends visited the Advanced Facility for Avian Research (AFAR) at Western University in London on November 21. Two bird behaviour specialists, Dr. Scott MacDougall-Shackleton and Dr. David Sherry, provided a guided tour and told us about bird studies currently underway there. We got to stick our heads into the famous wind tunnel where many of the close-up shots of birds in flight for the documentary, “The Messenger”, were filmed. We stood behind the two-way mirror the researchers use so they can observe birds caching seeds without disrupting their natural behaviours. We saw the high-tech machine that can analyze a bird’s fat stores and reveal how much of this is used up under different migration scenarios.

Fortunately, advances in equipment now allow most avian research subjects to be caught, studied and released back into their natural habitats. We learned about the protocols for ethical treatment of the birds and saw the way they are housed and handled. For some projects, the birds must be held in separate cages. For other work, they are held together in rooms with perches, ample food and even wading pools for the shorebirds. Some are housed outdoors in a large roof-top aviary. Sometimes birds are banded when they are released, which is how the AFAR team discovered that a few of those birds have come back and found a way to break into the outdoor aviary in search of food.



SFN members listen attentively as their visit to AFAR begins in the building’s main lobby. Photo by Chris Polkiewicz.

Western’s bird research set up is world class and attracts visiting research teams from across Canada, the United States, Europe and even Asia. The work done at AFAR includes bird reproduction, feeding behaviours, migration and adaptation to environmental changes. One of the more interesting projects we heard about involved when and how some bird species learn their songs.

After the AFAR tour, most of the group visited the Elsie Perrin-Williams estate on Windemere Road to check out the nature trails there. We may return in the spring to walk this area along the Medway Creek.

We ended this field outing with a hearty lunch at the King Edward pub in Ilderton.

Feederwalk–January 21

by SHARON MCKAY



This photo, taken by Chris Polkiewicz, shows the main group before they headed out from the John Street parking lot at 9 a.m.

Daybreak was hard to observe in Stratford on January 21 due to heavy fog. Nonetheless, 25 SFN members braved poor visibility and slippery trails to see what birds could be found in and around the feeder stations in the T.J. Dolan Natural Area in the city’s west end.

A smaller contingent departed from the Jenn-Ann subdivision at 9:45 a.m. for a shorter walk to the feeders in the buckthorn grove near the cemetery path on the north side of the river.

Both groups adopted a leaderless, democratic approach, resulting in a series of divisions and mergers which make it difficult for this reporter to say how many folks completed the full circuit or to total up what was seen. However, confirmed sightings by one or more of the meandering SFN birders included: Mallards, American Crows, Dark-eyed Juncos, Black-capped Chickadees, Northern Cardinals, House Sparrows, and at least one American Tree Sparrow and one House Finch. One sub-group of walkers spotted a raccoon sleeping in a tree along the upper path than runs below the Jenn-Ann subdivision. Harald Scholz noted that the scarcity of wildlife sightings might have had some correlation with the chattering among the participants.

Most of the walkers eventually made their way to the Johnson/McKay home on Cody Drive, where coffee, tea and juice were available along with mini quiches, croissants, muffins, cinnamon buns, cookies, fruit and cheese. Lots of finger-licking, lip smacking and conversation followed.

Local Nature Sightings

by SHARON MCKAY

This report covers just some of the nature sightings that have been reported in our local area between late November and the end of January.



Mountain Bluebird feeding on buckthorn berries. Photo by Terry Crabe.

Our first item concerns a rare bird—a female Mountain Bluebird which first appeared in the Waterloo area in mid-November. This pretty bird drew human visitors from all across the province to the spot on Snyders Flats in Waterloo where it took up residence for a couple of weeks. Terry Crabe joined the stream of admirers on November 27 and came away with some splendid photos. While he was observing, Terry says the bird would feed for awhile on buckthorn berries, then fly up to perch atop small trees nearby.

Other birding highlights from late November included 2 probable Fish Crows seen by Jarmo Jalava near his home on Cobourg St. on November 20, an Iceland Gull spotted by Jarmo at Wildwood Lake the following day, a Great Black-backed Gull seen by Carol Berney at the Stratford Landfill/Stormwater Ponds on November 21, and a Common Raven observed by Jonathan Wilhelm on November 30 near Amulree. Large numbers of Herring and Ring-billed Gulls were reported in several spots and waterfowl sightings included Ruddy Duck, both Common and Red-breasted Merganser, Northern Shoveler, Bufflehead and Hooded Merganser. Last-of-season sightings near month end included Gray Catbird, Chipping Sparrow and Double-crested Cormorant. Steve Thorpe saw his last flock of 35 Red-winged Blackbirds at McCarthy Lake on November 28.

Meanwhile, walkers in the T.J. Dolan Natural Area on the edge of Stratford were becoming increasingly alarmed by the number of trees being felled there by a beaver or beavers.



Other SFN Sunday morning walkers stand by while Steve Thorpe 'sizes up' the beaver chomping effort required to take down this good-sized tree. Photo by Joan Daynard.

Variable weather in December affected what was being seen. Open water early in the month resulted in good waterfowl and gull sightings. Steve spotted 2 American Wigeon among Mallards on one of the storm water ponds in Stratford on December 5 and Carol reported a Lesser Black-backed Gull at Lake Downie on December 9. Doug Brown saw 2 Snow Geese flying with a flock of Canada Geese over Perth East on December 8 and Jarmo found 2 Cackling Geese at Lake Victoria on December 11.

Steve was excited to observe a Peregrine Falcon flying above a flock of Canada Geese at Lake Victoria on December 11. Other notable raptor sightings included a Northern Harrier along Line 37 in Perth East seen by Terry on December 7, 2 Rough-legged Hawks and 5 Red-tailed Hawks spotted by Herman Veenendaal on December 7 along Roads 130 & 134 near Road 20, and David Johnson and I were surprised to see a mature Bald Eagle flying above Stratford's west end on Christmas morning and again on December 27.

Jonathan spotted a Ruffed Grouse along the Avon Trail near Amulree on December 3. And noted a White-throated Sparrow picking at seeds under the feeders on the Wilhelm's farm near Amulree on December 9. American Tree Sparrows seemed to be late arriving in our area this year and few, if any, Song Sparrows have elected to overwinter here this year—Steve found one in a tangle of logs and vines at the edge of the rive in the Dolan on December 28 and refound it nearby on the 30th, but the bird has not been reported since.

Several SFN members assisted Vicki Ryder when she led a Christmas Bird Count for Kids in the T.J. Dolan on December 20.



Bonnie Sitter took this photo of ice in the Ausable River at Huron Woods in mid-December.

The pursuit of Snowy Owls occupied many local birders in January. A friend of Herman's had spotted one just south of Stratford in mid-December, but no one was able to relocate this bird. However, reported sightings north and east of the city grew throughout the following month. Herman found a couple north of Mitchell and has posted a good photo of one on the [SFN website](#). David and I were fortunate enough to see 4 'snowies' in the Dorking/Linwood area on Jan. 25. Terry also had multiple sightings photos near Conestoga Lake the next day. Doug & Ev Brown saw one along Perth Road 121 and Carol spotted one east of Stratford on Line 33 that same day.



One of the Snowy Owls seen in Perth County in late January. Photo by David Johnson.

Several birders have reported multiple Rough-legged Hawks in the same rural areas where Snowy Owls were being observed; Steve found one south of Sebringville on January 10. Jarmo spotted a Bald Eagle in the Dolan on that same date and he, Steve and Carol all reported Bald Eagle sightings in St. Marys mid-month. Carol observed an American Kestrel successfully hunting rodents at the storm water ponds at the eastern edge of Stratford in late January. Turkey vultures continue to be seen in that same area, as well as near the Art Gallery and the parkland off Devon Street.

The 200+ Mallards regularly seen on Lake Victoria and along the Avon River in the Dolan have occasionally been joined by a few Common and Hooded Mergansers this past month; a half dozen American Black Ducks are also frequenting this territory. Jarmo has reported seeing a hybrid American Black Duck-Mallard. Other waterfowl spotted in January included Common Goldeneye (5 seen by Steve in St. Marys on January 10 and 16 seen there by Carol on the 17th) and a Ring-necked Duck (also seen by Carol on the Thames River in St. Marys on January 17).

Snow Bunting and Horned Lark numbers are way down this winter. Steve reported one large flock of 100 Horned Larks and 2 Snow Buntings feeding on freshly spread manure along Road 108 near Line 51 on January 10 and found 4 more Horned Larks south of Sebringville on the same date; Jarmo reported 3 Horned Lark at Ellice Swamp a few days later and one near Lake Victoria on January 28; Doug & Ev Brown found a flock of 60 Snow Buntings near St. Marys on January 30.



Chris Polkiewicz photographed a Common Merganser chasing a Mallard in the Dolan on January 9.

American Crows, on the other hand, appear to be prospering. Linda Schori noted at the January meeting that she and husband Nick have seen and heard thousands of them massing in the Dolan around 7 a.m. and 5 p.m. each day. That account matches my own sightings of 700+ crows there just before dusk. Also during the nature sightings report at the January meeting, Thelma Kudelka and another member related stories of opossums being seen cleaning up bird seed around backyard

feeders. Harald told how he had been putting out raisins for a sick robin and later finding Dark-eyed Juncos eating these special treats. Which brings me to one last January report: Jonathan observed an atypical junco among flocks of flocks of 30 and 75 Dark-eyed Juncos at

the Wilhelms' feeders on January 8 & 9. He noted that the bird appeared to be an intergrade between a Slate-coloured and Oregon Junco, which makes it an unusual find for anywhere in southern Ontario.

Membership Renewals

If you haven't already done so, now is a good time to renew your SFN membership. The fee for a single membership is \$25; family memberships are \$35, and students can join for \$10. Please see Val Craig at the February meeting or mail a cheque payable to Stratford Field Naturalists to: SFN Memberships, Box 21113, Stratford, ON, N5A 7V4.

Coming Soon

February 16-19—Great Backyard Bird Count



What started out a few years ago as a fun local bird count in a few spots in Canada and the United States has grown into a global census of bird populations and movements. This year's event will run from February 16-19. Anyone can participate. All you have to do is count birds for at least 15 minutes on one or more of those days. Simply register online at birdcount.org, then submit your observations with the help of an electronic checklist each time you watch for birds in your backyard, from another stationary location, or while out

walking during that 4-day period. If you already have an eBird account, you don't have to register for GBBC—your checklists on those days will automatically be included in the GBBC data base.

Last year, 14 individuals in the Stratford-Perth County area submitted 57 checklists from our area. Collectively they reported 46 different species, 10 more than during the 2016 count. Among the less common birds seen were Tundra Swan, Green-winged Teal, Common Goldeneye, Tufted Titmouse and Brown Creeper. A few early arriving migrants were found, including Common Grackle and Red-winged Blackbird, while winter birds such as Snow Bunting and Horned Lark were still being seen.

May 25 & 31—Huron Fringe Birding Festival

It's one of the best nature festivals in North America and SFN members don't have far to go if they want to attend.

This year's program includes more than 80 outings over two 4-day weekends from May 25 to 28 and May 31 to June 3. Besides guided birdwatching walks and road trips, Huron Fringe also offers excursions for those interested in learning more about plants and nature photography. The festival operates out of MacGregor Point Provincial Park near the town of Port Elgin and the field outings explore various spots in Grey and Bruce Counties.

Check out this year's program at friendsofmacgregor.org. Registration starts on February 1. Outings are limited in size (20 people for birding hikes, 12 for botany and photography events), so those wanting to attend are encouraged to register as soon as possible.

Upcoming SFN Events

Tuesday, February 13—Out of this World

Dr. Margaret Campbell-Brown, a member of Western University's Meteor Physics Group, will speak about how meteors and asteroids can affect us and the planet. This will be the last regular SFN monthly meeting to be held at the Kiwanis Centre on Lakeside Drive in Stratford. It will start promptly at 7:30 p.m. and conclude with refreshments and social time following Dr. Campbell-Brown's presentation.

Tuesday, March 13—The Invaders

Invasive plant species can cause problems in our natural environment. Learn why these plants are a concern and what can be done about them from this talk by Brenda Gallagher of the Upper Thames River Conservation Authority. The meeting will start at 7:30 p.m. Please check the SFN website to confirm meeting location. Our Board has been exploring new venues for the monthly meetings now that the Kiwanis Centre is going to be torn down to make room for a new theatre. Avondale United Church appears to be an option, but as of when this newsletter was written, no rental arrangements had been finalized.

Saturday, March 17—Return to Long Point

The SFN birding contingent will travel to the Long

Point area to observe returning Tundra Swans, Sandhill Cranes and other early migrants. Everyone is welcome to attend this day-long outing. Check the SFN website for car-pooling location/arrangements; departure time will be 8:30 a.m. Alternatively, members may proceed directly to the Port Rowan Marina where the group plans to meet at 10 a.m.

Tuesday, April 10—Night Creatures

Our April speaker, Brock Fenton, Professor Emeritus from Western University, will be talking about why bats are misunderstood and underappreciated. Please note: he may be bringing live bats with him to illustrate his presentation. Meeting is scheduled to start at 7:30 p.m. As with the March meeting, location is still under discussion, so check the SFN website.

Wednesday, April 25—Roadside Clean-up

Stratford Field Naturalists has an ongoing civic commitment to gather up garbage from the ditches along Highway 8 from Stratford to Sebringville. Participants should meet at 6 p.m. in the parking lot at Shoppers Drug Mart on Huron Street in Stratford. Wear sturdy footwear and bring a pair of work or gardening gloves. Safety vests and garbage bags supplied. Afterwards, the crew swaps stories over pizza at Pino's. Please consider coming out—many hands make light work!