



2017 Christmas Bird Count Results

Well it was another successful season and we've completed three Christmas Bird Counts as part of an international network to monitor the health of wintering birds.

We ran the CBC4Kids in November, and the Beaverton and Uxbridge counts in December .. So here's what we found:

North Durham Nature and the Friends of Nonquon Christmas Bird Count for Kids (CBC4K)

by Cara Gregory



On November 25th, 2017, North Durham Nature and the Friends of Nonquon hosted their 4th Annual CBC4K at the Nonquon Provincial Wildlife Area near Greenbank. The morning started out with a light rain, but thankfully stopped before participants ventured outside with their binoculars. The event had a good turnout of families, with many returning participants. The number of bird species observed was 12 compared to last year's 20, and the total number of birds was 110 compared to last year's 435. The large total number last year was mostly attributed to the sizeable flock of Sandhill Cranes that flew overhead. What an amazing sight that was!

Families had the opportunity to feed Black-capped Chickadees out of their hand, and

the morning ended over a warm cup of hot chocolate and cookies with the sharing of results.

It was another successful and fun count.

Beaverton Christmas Bird Count – December 30th

by John McLean

The 43rd Beaverton Christmas Bird Count was reminiscent of those held thirty years ago when winters were harsher and birds less abundant. Frigid temperatures closed open water on Lake Simcoe and on streams leading to it, thus eliminating the possibility of waterfowl. Rich cone crops in northern Ontario and Quebec encouraged winter finches (redpolls, grosbeaks and finches) to stay in the north rather than venturing to north Durham Region where we could count them. The reality was that we counted 39 species on bird count day, just below our average of 41.

Cold temperatures did not deter twenty – one field observers and nineteen feeder watchers from counting over 6000 individual birds. That represents five hundred more birds than we see in an average year. Record numbers of Dark-eyed Juncos, Northern Cardinals, Winter Wrens and Red-bellied Woodpeckers were seen. The Winter Wrens were a complete surprise even though they have been seen on the count before. Another significant surprise was the number of Red-bellied Woodpeckers. We saw 28 this year compared to our previous record of 16 last year. It is always nice to see Snowy Owls and we saw five this year, all in the Simcoe Street area between Cannington and Woodville. Large flocks of Snow Buntings were seen swooping across the open fields in our circle. Feeder watchers play an important role in Christmas Bird Counts and ours is no exception. They were responsible for the addition of Winter Wrens, our lone Screech Owl, 12 Brown-headed Cowbirds as well as Cedar

Waxwings and Red-winged Blackbirds - both of which were count - week birds.

Thanks to North Durham Nature members who once again helped with this enjoyable seasonal event. Check the NDN website for the complete list of birds seen.

Uxbridge Christmas Bird Count

by Derek Connelly

Close to 50 species despite the frigid Polar Vortex

Forty-eight species were recorded this year up from forty-four last year on the Uxbridge CBC held December 27th, 2017. Overall numbers of most species were much lower than last year (down 2400 birds). Exceptions included increases in pigeons, turkeys, woodpeckers and cardinals. A definite sign of the colder air front which parked itself over the region for the season was the arrival of 2185 Snow Buntings and 39 Horned Larks, a nice reward for birding parties driving around the fields of Scugog Township.



Birds caught in the cold this year included Great Blue Herons, Red-winged Blackbirds, Brown-headed Cowbirds, a

Song Sparrow, and Carolina and Winter Wrens. Some of these birds may be pushing the northern edge of their year-round range.

The number of participants was down this year both in the field and at the feeders which reduced the effort overall. This plus the cold affected the numbers of birds seen. On the positive side, the bright sunshine made it easy to see those birds that were out.



This was Uxbridge's thirteenth official count which started in 2005. Over this time, eighty-seven species of birds have been recorded during the Christmas season for this Audubon count. This effort helps understand the trends in bird populations across North America affected by weather and human activities.

Full results will be available on the National Audubon website and on the North Durham Nature website. Why not

join the bird count next year or come to any of North Durham Natures activities throughout the year. Enjoy the birds!

Kid's Corner

by Cara Gregory

The winter season brings with it an important citizen science event - The *Audubon Christmas Bird Count*. It has been running, across North America since 1900, making the count its largest citizen science project. Thanks to thousands of enthusiastic volunteers, who make these counts possible, winter bird populations are monitored over 2000 areas across the Western Hemisphere. The data collected provides important information for bird scientists, government and conservation.

In 2007, a *Christmas Bird Count for Kids* was inspired by the *Audubon Christmas Bird Count*. It was first established by *Sonoma* birding in California, and in 2010, *Bird Studies Canada* joined as the Canadian partner. This event is co-ordinated by individual naturalist groups in their local areas, throughout November, December and January. It provides families with an opportunity to spend a few hours together learning how to identify winter birds in their area, how to use binoculars and to enjoy time out in nature. This event promotes environmental stewardship in our youth, and fosters an appreciation of wild birds and their habitats. Many families make this count their annual family tradition, as bird watching can be enjoyed by many different ages and skill levels. For this reason, it is an activity that you can begin at a young age and continue to appreciate throughout your life.

Participants in the count are divided into teams, and given different survey routes, where they observe and record the species of birds that they see, and the number of each seen. They then return to meet and discuss their results, over a cup of hot chocolate and cookies. The data collected is submitted to *Bird Studies Canada*. The knowledge that their data is being submitted, introduces the concept to young naturalists as to how their citizen science efforts can assist bird population monitoring and conservation.

If the young people in your life participate in the count and are interested in doing more bird watching, their own pair of binoculars and a good bird identification book are essential. *Peterson's First Guide to Birds of North America* by Roger Tory Peterson is a good book to start with. *Birds: Explore the World of our feathered friends* by DK is a book filled with fascinating bird facts for young children interested in learning about bird behaviour. I would recommend *Bushnell 8 X 40* binoculars for young children learning to bird watch. They are more affordable and children can focus on a bird more easily.

Photography Corner

Winter Photography is for the Birds

Text and photos by Jay Thibert

There are many places to photograph birds in the winter, but one of the closest locations is in your own backyard. For aspiring wildlife photographers, setting up

a bird feeder in your yard can provide great photo opportunities to capture the smaller members of the avian community. With a bit of planning and the right camera settings you can capture some great bird images all while remaining within quick reach of a warm cup of tea.

Figure 1 - House Sparrow in spruce tree - ISO 200, 1/200 sec at f4



The Feeding Station

If you are a North Durham Nature member, the chances are high that you set up your bird feeding stations in the fall. Most likely your feeders are in front of a large window so you can enjoy the various birds that frequent during the winter. Why not take this perfect set up and photograph the visitors?

You will want to make your final image look as though it really was photographed in a more natural setting. As such, the location chosen for your feeder will have a big impact on the quality of your bird photos.



Set the feeder up near a tree or shrub. Birds will use these branches to perch on in between feeding. If that is not possible, consider sticking some branches into the nearby soil before it freezes.

Think about where the dominant light will fall when you set up your feeder. The low angle of the winter sun could cause some harsh silhouetting if your feeder is backlit through most of the day.

Consider adding 'props' to help improve the natural look. A coniferous branch or a gnarled piece of wood would be a good landing spot.

Birds are creatures of habit and will return to your feeder as long as there is an ample supply of seed or suet. Keep your feeders well stocked.

Figure 2 Chickadee shot with side lighting - ISO 640, 1/320 sec. at f5.6

Camera Settings

The exposure triangle is never far from my mind when photographing wildlife of any kind.

I am looking to balance a fast shutter speed with a narrow depth of field. Given the speed at which these feathered friends can move, I generally aim for a shutter speed of around 1/500 or faster in order to freeze the action.

As lighting conditions change or in recomposing a shot, I may have to adjust the ISO in order to maintain that speed.

Although I am not a huge fan of shooting in bright sunlight, it can be the perfect conditions for capturing the action around the bird feeder. Here are my typical settings;

Camera: Nikon 610
Lens: 300mm f4, sometimes with the 1.4x tele-converter
Mode: aperture preferred
Shutter Speed: 1/500 or faster
Aperture: f/4 or f/5.6 – A larger aperture will help to keep your background soft.

ISO: I will adjust this to keep the shutter speed and aperture within the range mentioned above.

Continuous Shooting Mode

Focusing: S-AF

EV: +0.3 - +1.0 in order to brighten colours and the snow

Composing the shot

Your goal should always be creating the best composition you can. I try my best to eliminate the bird feeders in my shots. Determine the best angles for shooting and frame your shots before the birds arrive. Look for and avoid distracting elements like fence posts or hydro lines that will take away from the photograph.



Many species of birds can be quite skittish so if you shoot outside they may require time to become accustomed to your presence. You can also construct a simple blind through which you can shoot.

It is possible to get good results by shooting through your picture window. Just make sure it is clean and that you shoot at a 90° angle to eliminate glare. A polarizing filter can also aid in this regard but will slow your shutter speed.

Figure 3 Downy framed with tree branches. ISO 640, 1/1600 at f4

Generally, I don't use a tripod for my bird shots. I want the freedom to move the camera quickly and capture as much of the action as possible. You must hold the camera steady and take a burst of shots. With several images to choose from there is a better chance of a good composition. Good luck with your winter shooting. Stay warm and respect the birds that you photograph. (All the shots in this article were taken around Christmas and New Year.)



Figure 4 Snowy Owl near Lindsay, ON. ISO 640, 1/1600 at 5.6. Not exactly my feeder, but I could not resist including it.

I would like to connect with readers who are interested in photography. You can message me on Facebook if you have questions or comments. Let's share our images on North Durham Nature's Facebook page.

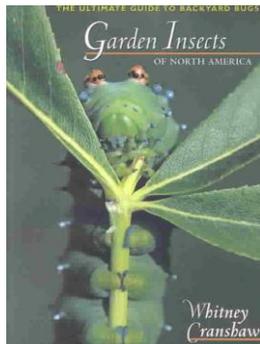
Book Reviews

Well Santa was good this year and introduced me to some more new titles ...

Garden Insects of North America by Whitney Cranshaw and David Shetlar.

Princeton University Press. 2017. ISBN: 978-0-691-16744-2. \$35.00 USD.

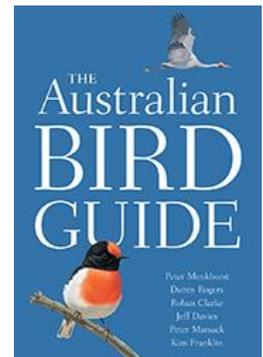
This second edition of the classic published a few years ago, updates the knowledge and experience into a concise volume that deals with most



garden insects in Canada and the USA. In its over 700 pages and 3300 full colour photos it describes and explains thousands of facts about virtually any insect or ally you might encounter in your gardens.

Not just a gardener's reference book, it deals with invertebrates of interest to all naturalists, from pollinators, soil pests, earthworms, predators to decomposers. So whether you're a gardener or a naturalist (or both) you will find this book beyond useful – it is essential!

The Australian Bird Guide by Peter Menkhorst, Danny Rogers, Rohan Clarke, Jeff Davies, Peter Marsack and Kim Franklin. Princeton University Press. 2017. ISBN: 978-0-691-17301-6. \$39.95 USD. 566 pages.



My first reaction was “do we really need another field guide to the birds of Australia?”, because in recent years several have been published. Then I recalled the short-comings I found in earlier books and how I longed for a better guide. Surprisingly (to me at least) I looked first at the way this new book covers seabirds, having just returned from another Antarctic voyage and being somewhat frustrated about how poorly most of the books cover seabirds. To my surprise this book appears excellent in this regard. It takes the time and makes the effort to explain the similarities and differences between complex seabird identification issues. What a welcome sight. Forty-four pages alone are dedicated to albatrosses, shearwaters petrels and their kin, with hundreds of images to support the detailed text. Once I finished this part of the book, I was sold ... It could have ended there and I would have

been happy. But it didn't! It went on page after page describing all the 900 species that can be found in Australia. Even its coverage of vagrants wasn't cursory. The authors took the time to explain where they had been reported and how to identify them and distinguish them from more expected species. Almost 25 colour plates adorn the book, displaying about 4000 images. Incredible! If you're thinking of going to Oz or have been there and want to relive your adventure, this guide will be a welcome addition to your library.

Online Resources

The internet has made life so much easier when it comes to finding information about nature. There are thousands of great websites out there. Cornell Lab of Ornithology is an incredible resource. They have just announced that they have updated their online resources called "All About Birds".

The new site is completely redesigned to put the information—photos, ID hints, cool facts, life history details, maps, conservation status, and more—right where you need it. Here are some of the main changes and highlights:

- New "Overview" tab:** The Overview tab puts the top hits at your fingertips:
- a large-format image
 - a recording of a typical song or call
 - a quick link to all other ID photos
 - range map
 - basic description
 - icons to tell you what the bird does and where it lives
 - expert tips on how to find the bird
 - backyard tips
 - cool facts

All-new images: They made the images larger for more detail, and are using an entirely new set of photos (more than 7,500) curated by experts at our Macaulay Library.

Similar species compare tool: Narrowing down an ID? Dive into the compare tool for side-by-side comparisons of similar species. Each species has a hand-picked set of similar species photos, and each photo has a caption that tells you exactly what to look for to distinguish species.

Links to more images and sounds from the Macaulay Library archive: In case you don't find quite what you're looking for in our species account, you can click through to more images and sounds. Each link takes you to a ready-made search results page that displays the highest-rated images or



BASIC DESCRIPTION

Dark-eyed Juncos are neat, even flashy little sparrows that fill about forest floors of the western mountains and Canada, then flood the rest of North America for winter. They're easy to recognize by their crisp (though extremely variable) markings and the bright white tail feathers they habitually flash in flight. One of the most abundant forest birds of North America, you'll see juncos on woodland walks as well as in flocks at your feeders or on the ground beneath them.

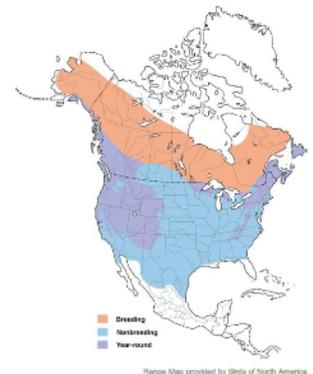
[More ID Info](#)

Backyard Tips

This species often comes to bird feeders. Find out more about what this bird likes to eat and what feeder is best by using the Project FeederWatch Common Feeder Birds bird list.

✓ Cool Facts

- Juncos are the "snowbirds" of the middle latitudes. Over most of the eastern United States, they appear as winter sets in and then retreat northward each spring. Some juncos in the Appalachian Mountains remain there all year round, breeding at the higher elevations. These residents have shorter wings than the migrants that join them each winter. Longer wings are better suited to flying long distances, a pattern commonly noted among other studies of migratory vs. resident species.
- The Dark-eyed Junco is one of the most common birds in North America and can be found across the continent, from Alaska to Mexico, from California to New York. A recent estimate set the junco's total population at approximately 830 million individuals.
- The oldest recorded Dark-eyed Junco was at least 11 years, 4 months old when it was recaptured and rereleased during banding operations in West Virginia in 2001. It had been banded in the same state in 1991.



[Explore Maps](#)

Find This Bird

You can find Dark-eyed Juncos by walking around open, partially wooded areas with understorey for cover. Keep your eyes on the ground and listen for their twittering call or their trilling song. If they are flushed from the ground, look for an overall gray or dark brown bird with obvious, white outer tail feathers.

OTHER NAMES

Junco Pizarroso (Spanish)
Junco ardoisé (French)

sounds for the species you're on.

More maps: The new site offers both static range maps for North America and zoomable eBird maps for the world. **eBird sightings maps:** In addition to range maps for North America (via Birds of North America), you can click over to zoomable eBird maps and explore a species' worldwide range.

Videos appear alongside images: one tab that no longer exists on the site is the Video tab—and that's because they now intersperse Macaulay Library videos alongside photos so you can watch how a bird forages or flies, or hear it call, as easily as studying a still photo.

And coming soon: Merlin Bird ID for the Web. Our popular free smartphone app, Merlin, will soon be available from our website as well. Merlin asks you five simple questions and gives you a short list of likely species—so you can use this feature to ID the bird, find its species account, and learn more about it.

Cuba Update

NDN Cuba Tour Update

We have offered a special natural history tour to Cuba for North Durham Nature members from February 23 to March 5, 2018. The purpose is to experience some of the natural wonders and biodiversity of this largest Caribbean island. All 10 spaces have now been filled. NDN members Derek Connelly, Pat Asling, Jean Jacobs, and Jay & Bev Thibert are signed up along with tour leader James Kamstra. The other spaces have been filled with nature buffs from other clubs. Stay tuned for trip highlights.

Quiz

Well clearly this is a snake, so we can rule out all frogs, turtles, lizards, salamanders and their kin. And yes it occurs in Ontario.



Most snakes are easily identifiable to species but some can be problematic as they are similar in appearance.

NDN Logo Contest

We did not receive as many submissions for the logo contest as was hoped and the NDN board of directors did not feel that any of the submissions incorporated all the elements the Board thought were necessary to reflect our goals and perspective. However the Board felt that two species that would appropriately represent the North Durham area are the Eastern Bluebird and Baltimore Checkerspot butterfly so we are looking at coming up with a design that incorporates both.

Nifty Nature News

New Dinosaur Species Described

What is about the size of a small goose and looks like a cross between a penguin, duck and swan? Well, it's a newly discovered dinosaur called *Halszkaraptor escuilliei*. Related to velociraptors (made famous in Jurassic Park), it was a feathered, long-necked bird-like dinosaur that fed like a heron. To top it off, it had small flipper-like wings that might have been used for swimming. The original fossil, found about 15 years ago in Mongolia, had a troubled past as it was stolen by fossil thieves and traded several times before a French fossil dealer obtained it. François Escuillié recognized it as a species new to science. From there it was eventually described and the story published in Nature magazine recently.

Giant Penguin!

In keeping with the dinosaur news above, a penguin skeleton has been discovered in New Zealand. It measured nearly 5 feet, 10 inches (1.77 meters) long when swimming and weighed in at 223 pounds (101 kilograms). Gerald Mayr (and others) of the Senckenberg Research Institute and Natural History Museum in Frankfurt, Germany, describe the giant creature in a paper



Holotype specimen exhibited at Munich Show
in 2011

released recently by the journal Nature Communications. They named it *Kumimanu biceae*, which refers to Maori words for a bird and a large mythological monster. The fossils are 56 million to 60 million years old.

North Atlantic Right Whale

The endangered North Atlantic Right Whale has been in the news all summer as it inches towards extinction. Only about 450 still survive, and of those about 100 are breeding females. The major cause of death is entanglement in fishing nets and collisions with boats. According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, they will go extinct unless drastic measures are taken soon to protect them.

Answer to Quiz

In this case let's look at its overall features. It is brown with dark spots, so Tacers, Green, Red-bellied, and Garter Snakes are off the table.

So is it a Northern or Lake Erie Water, Fox, DeKay's Brown or Milk Snake or Massasauga Rattler, as all of these have a two-toned pattern of dark splotches over a paler base?

Let's get started. The Northern Water Snake is normally a darker snake with squarish blotches on a dark background. The Lake Erie Water Snake is more problematic but a careful look will show the base colour on this species is very pale sandy coloured, not yellowish and the blotches are also pale, unlike the dark ones on our mystery snake. DeKay's Brown Snake has many small diamond shaped blotches arranged in rows, where the background is much more evident. In this

case the blotches are large and irregularly shaped. The Massasauga Rattler is again more sandy basally and the spots are paler with a small black border around each spot. The spots are also more circular and regular in shape.



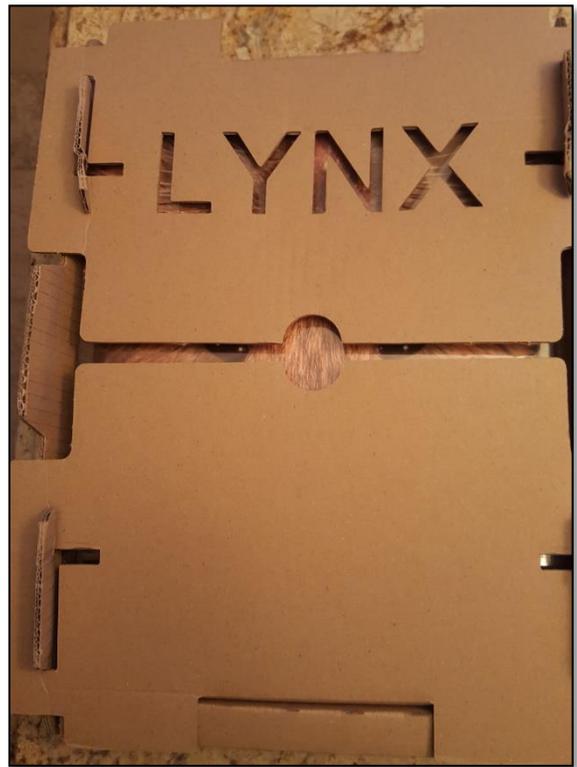
The Milk Snake's spots are distinctly reddish or brownish in colour and again have a black border. So that leaves us with **Fox Snake**. I photographed this individual at Point Pelee a few years ago. Note the spots are not bordered by black, the basal colour of the back is orangish and the head is quite orange-yellow in appearance.

Accolades

I came across this interesting solution to over-packaging and waste when I received my latest volume of the *Mammals of the World* series from Lynx Edicions from Spain. Instead of using packaging peanuts, which aren't always recyclable, they're only using cleverly shaped cardboard inserts with strategic cut-outs to reduce the amount of cardboard used. However the greatest thing that they did that I liked was

they didn't waste energy or resources on printing their own info on the packaging as so many companies do. They simply had their logo stamped into the cardboard – no ink, no chemicals and less cardboard!

Kudos to you Lynx!



Many owls including Great Gray Owls are on the move in eastern Ontario. If you see one please email me privately at:

avocetnatureservices@gmail.com.



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*Note: All photos and text in this newsletter
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