



THE BULLETIN

NEWS AND VIEWS FROM THE RICHMOND HILL NATURALISTS

November-December 2011 — No. 500

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Tis the Season! Annual RHN Christmas Bird Count is Dec 17th



The Richmond Hill Naturalists Christmas Bird Count takes place on December 17th this year. The Richmond Hill Naturalists are just one group among thousands participating in the Christmas Bird Count throughout the western hemisphere. The count began in 1900 as an alternative to the then-traditional practice of the Christmas Side Hunt, in which sportsmen and women signed on to teams which then went out and vied to see which team could kill the most birds and other animals in the allotted time. An officer of the fledgling Audubon Society, ornithologist Frank Chapman started the new and less lethal tradition of the Bird Census. 27 birdwatchers in 25 cities (including Toronto) participated in that first count; last year more than 50,000 counters in 19 countries from Antarctica to Alaska took part.

In Richmond Hill, each year groups of birdwatchers of all levels of expertise cruise their assigned sections; each group taking note of every bird and

every species that they see in their area. The groups meet at the end of the day for the annual Chili Dinner, where their findings are totalled up. The club's results in turn are submitted to Bird Studies Canada, which works with the Audubon Society in the US and elsewhere to analyze the data. If you wish to be a counter or to volunteer your back yard please leave a message with Gene Denzel at 905-889-7888 or email lezned@yorku.ca

The Richmond Hill Naturalists are also looking for people with bird feeders to open up their back yards for the Bird Counters. Bird Counters would visit volunteering households ONCE between 8am and 4:30pm on December 17. They will check the yard to count all the birds and bird species that may be seen there for just a few minutes – maybe longer if your yard is particularly exciting at that particular moment! You may also choose to count the birds and bird species in your yard yourself on December 17th and report your results.



The Bulletin is published 9 times per year, from September to May inclusive, by the Richmond Hill Naturalists, and is mailed free to members. The Bulletin is the official publication of the Richmond Hill Naturalists, a non-profit organization the objectives of which are to stimulate public interest in natural history and to encourage the preservation of our natural areas.

Address Correspondence to:
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 Richmond Hill, ON, L4C 9S3

Deadlines: The editor encourages submissions from any member on any topic related to nature or conservation, and in particular, any issue that might be of interest or concern to members of this club. e-mail: editor@rhnaturalists.ca Deadlines are the 2nd Thursday of each month.

Bulletin Advertisers have been selected because of their relevance to member interests. Members are encouraged to patronize our advertisers and please mention that you saw their ad in our Bulletin.

Change of Address: Any change of email or street address should be sent to Mike Turk who prints the envelopes for the Bulletin mailing.

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Visit our Website at
 www.rhnaturalists.ca

See the Executive List for
 additional contact information.

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- Past President..... Natalie Helferty
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Membership



Your membership fee helps pay for the club's monthly hall rental, website registration, speakers, printing and postage for the Bulletin (all Website and Bulletin contributions and editing are on a strictly volunteer basis), and special events. You can join or renew online by clicking on the "Membership" link on the website at rhnaturalists.ca; pick up an application from any member of the executive, or in person at the monthly General Meeting. A single membership is \$30; get a membership for the whole family for only \$35.

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Coming Events



Richmond Hill Naturalists General Meetings

Unless otherwise noted General Meetings are held at Presbyterian Church, Wallace Hall, 10066 Yonge St., North of Major Mackenzie Dr., West side. For info contact Marianne Yake at 905-883-3047, or visit www.RHNaturalists.ca.



Thursday, November 24, 7:30PM - Joint meeting with West Humber Naturalists - Birds and Other Adventures in Machu Picchu with Gene Denzel.



Saturday, December 17 - Christmas Bird Count. Contact Gene Denzel for more information at lezned@yorku.ca



Thursday, January 19, 7:30pm - General Meeting. Topic: Serpents I have found with Glenn Reed.



Bird Group Meetings

December 14, 2011 Host: Mike Turk Birds: Dicksissel and Bobolink

January 11, 2012. Host: Athena Antiochus. Birds: Three-Toed Woodpecker and Black-Backed Woodpecker

February 12, 2012. Host: Joe Agg. Birds: Long Tailed Duck and Northern Pintail Duck

March 14, 2012: Host: Muriel Farran.t Birds: Whippoorwill and Common Nighthawk

April 11, 2012: Host: Joandice Marshall. Birds: Connecticutt Warbler and Mourning Warbler

For more information about the Bird Group contact Mike Turk at turkm@accessv.com



Astronomy

Observing every Friday night in Richmond Hill, weather permitting. Contact astronomy@rhnaturalists.ca for more information.

Please note: Richmond Hill Naturalists welcomes anyone to volunteer as an outing leader. Contact trips@rhnaturalists.ca if you would like to organize or promote an outing.



Gull Viewing Above the Niagara Gorge

November 27th - Join the Pickering Field Naturalists on November 27 for a day of viewing Gulls above the Niagara Gorge. For more information, contact Carolyn King at cking@yorku.ca.

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A Night Fit for Ducks

Bird Group gets daffy discussing Lesser Scaups and Ring-Necked Ducks

by Barbara Jackson

On November 9, the Bird Study Group met in the warm and comfortable confines of Gene and Charlene Denzel's home to discuss and compare two birds, the Ring-necked Duck and the Lesser Scaup. Present were Muriel Farrant, Mike Turk, Martin Chen, Theo Hoffman, Joe Agg, Gene and Charlene, and Barbara Jackson. The weather outside was wet and rainy – a most appropriate atmosphere to be discussing ducks!

The identification of these birds proved quite challenging for the group because of the many similarities, and resulted in some stimulating conversation. Both the Ring-necked Duck and the Lesser Scaup are considered to be “diving” ducks – that is they dive underwater for their food that consists mainly of aquatic vegetation and/or invertebrates. However, the Ring-necked is also considered a “dabbling” – dabbling being a foraging technique in which the head and neck are submerged while the body and tail remain on the surface.

The Ring-necked Duck (*Aythya collaris*) might better be named the Ring- BILLED Duck because the black and white rings on the bills of the male and female are a prominent field mark. The red-brown neck collar after which it was named is apparent only on very close observation, such as on a lab specimen or in a museum!

The Lesser Scaup (*Aythya affinis*) may also be known as a “Bluebill” because of the blue-gray colour of the bill of the male. The scientific name “affinis” is Latin for “adjacent” or “allied”, referring to this bird's close association to other diving ducks. Scaup may also be derived from the bird's preferred winter food



Ring-Necked Duck Photo by Rick Leche http://www.flickr.com/photos/rick_leche/

(shellfish), as shellfish beds in Scotland are called “scalps”; or it might refer to the bird's alarm call, which is a deep ‘scaup, scaup’.

Both the Ring-necked Duck and the Lesser Scaup are approximately the same size - 26 to 46 cm.

The males of both species have dark purple heads, although the head of the Ring-necked appears more angular. The male Ring-necked has a black breast, back and hind quarters, gray sides, a white shoulder slash, and a thin white border around the base of the bill. The male Lesser Scaup has a black breast and hind quarters, but a grayish back and dusty-white sides.

The females of both species are dark brown overall, but the female Ring-necked has a white eye-ring, while the female Lesser Scaup has a well defined white patch at the base of its bill.

Both the Ring-necked Duck and the Lesser Scaup can be seen along the shores of Lake Ontario in winter. Fresh water ponds or sloughs are the preferred breeding habitat of both species, with the nests being built near the water, although the nest of the Lesser Scaup can be 100-150 feet from the water's edge.

Approximately 6-12 eggs are laid, again by both species, and incubated for 26 days by the female only. The females also tend the young on their own. Of particular interest is the fact that the young Lesser Scaup are led to the water by their mothers soon after hatching, and dive from a very young age.

The evening concluded with the dreaded QUIZ, this time focusing entirely on ducks (thanks Mike), with one question challenging our “inner child” by asking us to name two duck characters made famous by Walt Disney. We may have to grow old, but may we never grow up!

The Night Sky Makes an Awesome Gift

Gift ideas for astronomy wanna-bes

by Heide DeBond

This wonderful season of longer nights is just perfect for enjoying the splendours of the universe. No need to stay up late to view celestial treasures, just dress warmly, step outside and look up. Our old friend, the constellation Orion rises early evenings in the east, Jupiter, the brightest "star", blazes its path across the sky from east to west almost the whole evening and radiant Venus rises in the west soon after sunset.

As the holiday season approaches you may be thinking of astronomically- related gifts for your loved ones, or even for yourself. Astronomy is a wonderful hobby for families and does not require expensive or high-tech products to appreciate the night sky. The binoculars you may already have can be used to view many objects in the night sky so you may wish to give books on astronomy with binoculars such as Philip Harrington's 'Touring the Universe with Binoculars' or Stephen James O'Meara's books on 'Observing the Night Sky with Binoculars: a Simple Guide to the Heavens', or his 'Observing the Solar System with Binoculars: a Beginners Guide to the Sun, Moon and Planets'. A must-have book for all stargazers is Terence Dickinson's 'Nightwatch: A Practical Guide to Viewing the Universe', filled with practical information and sky maps you can take outside with you to help you observe whether naked eye, with binoculars or telescope.

An excellent book for families is Philip Harrington's 'Astronomy for All Ages' filled with activities for children and adults to discover the universe. If you are



The Constellation of Orion lights up the winter sky

considering purchasing a telescope, you should do your research as there are several different types of telescopes available. You should include opportunities such as our free Friday night observing sessions to look through the different types of telescopes first to find the one just right for you. As a first telescope we recommend a low- tech, easy-to-use, 8" Dobsonian telescope as they are your biggest bang for your telescope dollar, offer great views and they are family-friendly. You can buy a new large 8 inch-mirror Dobsonian telescope for under \$400 with

no worries about proper polar aligning for set-up.

If you must have the latest technological telescopes and accessories do your research so you can find the right product for your needs. As always purchase from a reputable dealer. We are always willing to answer your questions at:

astronomy@rhnaturalists.ca.

Naturalists storm Normandale...

Joe Agg's account of the RHN Club field trip to Normandale and Long Point October 21-23

We traveled to historic Normandale on Friday and arrived around 2pm. There are 2 bed and breakfasts in the center of the village: The Century Inn and The Union Hotel. Both are over 100 years old but are quite comfortable. The Union Hotel is said to be haunted by a young woman and there were some strange things going on which did make a skeptic like me more of a believer. It is beautifully restored and well worth visiting just for that reason. There is a good selection of rooms and most beds are doubles. It is quiet and sleep comes easily. The breakfasts prepared by our host Debbie were spectacular looking and delicious and are usually three courses by candlelight. The food is more than you can eat and provides you with a good start for the day. She garnishes dishes with things from her garden such as chives and something called Stevia which is very sweet.

Following the talk by Dr. Sheldon the night before I went to the pier at 5 am to see the meteor shower. After looking straight up for the longest time I gave up after seeing no meteors. The sunrise over Lake Erie is very lovely though. As you look across the lake the glow from the U.S. cities is quite evident. Cleveland in particular was very bright against the partly overcast sky. Erie Pennsylvania is directly across the lake from Normandale and Buffalo is off to the east.

We saw thousands of birds. Many were stopping in Normandale on their migration farther south. In the morning Normandale was alive with excited birds soon after the sun came up. The noise from them was like nothing I have ever heard. There were mostly Robins with a mixture of other birds. Before noon they were mostly gone and next morning the whole thing was repeated.

The location seems perfect for a rest /overnight stop for migrating birds with a creek, sheltered valley, lots of trees and food. On the way down we observed hundreds of Turkey Vultures soaring above. They were likely migrating as well but I believe they could also be feeding on leftovers from deer hunters. Deer and duck hunting was in full swing. Each morning soon after 7 the gunfire started and went on all day.

Saturday was our touring day with a start at Pt. Dover docks and Silver Lake. There is a wonderful farmers market there where you could even buy fresh Lake Erie perch. Someone has purchased the old Amherst Island ferry for 100k and has it tied up there. Later we made several stops out on Long Point including the bird observatory where banding was in progress. A hot outdoor lunch was eaten in the parking area. We also visited the Bird Studies Canada reserve at Port Rowan where banding was also being done at the Bird Studies Canada lookout. Thousands of waterfowl were observed as well as other birds. They seemed undisturbed by the gunfire. On the way back to Normandale we stopped at Turkey Point which of course is well known for its wild turkeys. None were seen this trip. Later we had a very nice supper at the Century Inn. On one occasion we saw a monarch butterfly struggling in the face of high winds off the lake. It's a miracle they make it all the way to Mexico.

Sunday was departure day but not before a visit to the Turkey Point overlook. The day was sunny and bright and we cleaned up litter in the area.



... and on to Spooky Hollow

Next we visited Spooky Hollow. It is a very unusual but wonderful area now owned by the Hamilton Naturalists. There is fungus, mosses and lichen everywhere., some of which I have never seen. Spooky Hollow is a real jewel with many types of tall mature trees. Legend has it that long ago a peddler went missing near Spooky Hollow and black smoke was seen coming from the chimney of the only house in the area. Hmmm! There have been ghostly sightings in this area as well. We picked up litter near the entrance but the trails are well kept and clean. On the road out there is a fine growth of bamboo grass. (The DDO used to have it as well)

Following Spooky Hollow we visited a locally grown peanut outlet (Kernels) and a bird seed outlet (Royal) followed by lunch in the Simcoe town park. Theo kept track of the birds on the trip and there were lots. It was wonderful to have an experienced birder like him and he more than kept up. Joan just keeps on learning and is ready to purchase her first binoculars. We had fun and and enjoyed ourselves thoroughly.

Norfolk County really is Canada's South Coast with healthy palms growing and a golf course that is open all year. I can't wait to go back and visit some of the remaining 35 birding spots we missed on this trip. At least a week is required to see them all.



The adventurers refuel...Andre and Berthe Agg, Theo Hofmann, and Joan Euell. Photos by Joe Agg.



Many of the trees on the Spooky Hollow trail wore skirts of moss and garlands of different kinds of fungi. Here's a picture of a tree barnacled in a white fungus. Can anyone identify it?

Banding the Little Northern Saw-whet Owls

Deb Chute recounts a late October night of Owl Banding

Long Point, Bird Studies Canada Field Station, Fall, 2011

Chung and I arrived at the small banding hut on the Long Point Road at about 8:00 p.m. on Friday, October 28th to find the process for that night in full swing. There were at least 6 little owls banded that evening. Bands are carefully chosen for the bird's leg size and applied in such a way as to allow the band to twirl freely around the leg. The birds seem to be utterly oblivious to the band as they never seem to pick at the band in an attempt to remove it.

It was encouraging to find a group of local Grade 7 students crowded into the banding hut that night and excitedly taking in all the proceedings.

We were all introduced to the intricate process of measurements. The wing length is measured. Blowing on the chest feathers shows the amount of fat that has already accumulated under the transparent skin. Wetting the feathers on the head helps to ascertain how much the skull has closed over. A fully closed skull means a mature adult



bird. Telling the age is often done by looking at the wing and tail feathers to see how much new growth is occurring. Then, of course, the birds are weighed before being released.

We were told there is quite an extensive training session before anyone is allowed to carry out the banding process. I can certainly understand why, as it is not easy to judge all these factors.

It was surprising to me to see how docile the little birds were. Some of the other species we saw banded during the day were feistier and would try to pick at the bander's cuticles. They seem to know where it is most tender. The banders joked about crying out in pain all day whenever they had an overabundance of Chickadees and Cardinals.

When released after being in the hut with the lights, the Saw-whets often sat placidly on the bander's hand or shoulder for quite awhile trying to regain their night vision. One little owl flew up into the trees and stayed there a long time looking down at us as if trying to figure out what in the heck had just happened to it.

That was our first night. It was clear and cool with very little breeze.

The next night was a wash-out. It was rainy and no owls were found even after four trips around to check the nets. The nets are checked every 20 minutes to make sure that no owl is left hanging in the net pouches for very long.

So glad we allowed two nights for this wonderful experience!

A bander examines a Northern Saw-Whet Owl after banding it to determine age, weight, sex, fat resources, and overall condition.
Photo by Deb Chute

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As the holiday season & year end comes closer, please consider making a charitable donation to support our continued good works in Richmond Hill - including the protection & preservation of the Dunlap Observatory Parklands. Donations of \$50 or more will receive an Official Income Tax Receipt.

To receive your tax receipt, please make your donation payable to our fundraising partner, The Escarpment Biosphere Foundation & mail to: Richmond Hill Naturalists, P. O. Box 32217, Harding Postal Outlet, Richmond Hill, Ontario L4C 9S3.

You can also purchase single (\$30) or a family membership (\$35) in the Naturalists Club for the 2011-12 season, which make great gifts for community friends & family.

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Robert Bateman inspires in Stouffville

by Marianne Yake

This past October, Robert Bateman spoke at Stouffville's Spring Lakes Golf Course and signed books and artwork for local residents. I enjoyed and was very impressed at the time he spent with each person. One young artist said he had spent a lot of time sketching. Robert advised him to "go out, enjoy nature and make observations in order to fully understand your subjects". The young man then said that he had seen a "grey wolf". Robert asked where he had seen the animal, noting it was unusual to see one around here. "Was the tail up or down?" Down was the answer. "Then you likely saw an eastern coyote", the elder artist concluded. Robert again encouraged the young artist to continue his education out in the natural world.

He signed a painting of a barnyard scene. This painting was the only reminder of a heritage structure that has since been demolished. He mentioned that he was on a local heritage advisory committee in Burlington and had seen the loss of many heritage buildings.

I thanked him for his generous donation to the



Photo: Robert Bateman, Marianne Yake and Joyce Horner

Richmond Hill Naturalists many years ago. He remembered that he had done two presentations for the RHN and was happy to hear we are still very active.

Explore the Universe with Ian Shelton

Lecture series at Richmond Hill Public Library

RHN members who enjoyed Dr. Shelton's talk in October (and those who missed it) now have an opportunity to take a deep space tour with Ian and Dr. Tuba Koktay, 2 of Canada's most respected astronomers.

I. Welcome to the Universe!

Learn about some of the most beautiful and exciting objects in the nighttime sky, and be shown how to find these objects for yourself. Nov 23

II. Seeing Further, Fainter.

A look at the tools used by amateur and professional astronomers, with recommendations for those who already own or are planning to buy a telescope. Nov 30

III. Exploring the Neighbourhood.

Spectacular recent discoveries and new exploration in our Solar System. Dec 7

IV. Is there anyone out there?

Both fun and serious looks at whether life exists elsewhere in the Universe. Dec 14



V. Will the World Really End in 2012???

Our modern understanding about the age of the Universe and a critical look at the claims that the world will end in 2012. Dec 21

For more information and registration details, please visit <http://astro.rhnaturalists.ca> or email astronomy@rhnaturalists.ca