



THE BULLETIN

NEWS AND VIEWS FROM THE RICHMOND HILL NATURALISTS

January 2011 — No. 501

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Christmas Bird Count

Northern
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Unique Grassland
Birds

Great BackYard Bird!



Naturalist Kristen
Martyn comes to the
rescue of a surprising
visitor to an Oak
Ridges back yard.



This owl needs her rest. The owl in this photo was seen in the Onion Fields along Ravenshoe Road and Yonge Street at the southern edge of Lake Simcoe. See page 7 for important Owl Etiquette. Photo by Gene Denzel, January 8, 2012

Snowy Owls on the move

Winter always means Snowy Owl time in northern York Region, where a few usually drop in for a visit. But this winter has seen Snowy Owls irrupting from their Arctic home in unusually large numbers and moving farther south than usual.

See page 7 for the full story.





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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.

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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.

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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.

DONORS OF \$100 OR MORE will receive a 2012 heritage calendar of The David Dunlap Observatory Parklands

2012 Calendar Heritage Facts & Photos

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, January 19, 7:30pm - General Meeting. Topic: Serpents with Glenn Reed. NOTE: LOCATION CHANGE: The January 19th meeting will be held at the McConaghy Centre - #205 Program Room. 10100 Yonge Street, Richmond Hill. (That's just one driveway north of the usual meeting location).



Thursday, February 16, 7:30pm - General Meeting. Topic: Botswana! with club members Kevin Shackleton and Mike Turk who recently returned from a trip to Africa.

Bird Group Meetings



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. 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

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.



Astronomy

Friday night observations continue weather permitting. Contact astronomy@rhnaturalists.ca for more information.

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.

Bobolink and Dickcissel are unique grassland birds

December Bird Group meeting by Theo Hofmann

The Topic of the get-together was the discussion of Bobolink and Dickcissel.

General comments. These two species are both grassland birds. They are in some difficulty because of the loss of suitable grassland habitat. The Bobolink in fact is classified as Threatened by COSEWIC, the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada. The Dickcissel, although significantly less numerous than the Bobolink in Canada is at present not at risk.

Bobolink

The Bobolink has the scientific name *Dolichonyx orizovor*, roughly translated as the Long-clawed Rice-eater. It is the only species in the Genus. It belongs to the family Icteridae, the New World Blackbirds. But it has sometimes been placed by itself in the subfamily Dolichonychinae.

Globally the Bobolink is not threatened. It is common, but at the edge of its breeding range, it is in decline because of loss of habitat and the adverse effect of herbicides in Canada and the USA.

The Bobolink breeds in a relatively narrow range covering the southern parts of most of the Canadian Provinces from Nova Scotia to Alberta and the many of northern states south to about Illinois. It winters -- often in large flocks -- in Bolivia, Brazil, Paraguay and Argentina.

It breeds May to July, single-brooded and is monogamous to polygamous. The nest is cup-shaped on the ground hidden by clumps of grass. A clutch of 4-7 eggs is incubated for 11-13 days. The young are altricial and downy. They are tended by both parents and leave the nest at 10-



14 days, but cannot fly for several days. They are threatened by the movement of animals and usually killed by early harvesting of the field.

Bobolink have a beautiful song, a bubbling bo-bo-link.

The food of the Bobolink consists mainly of seeds and insects, and during migration and winter mainly of rice, hence its latin name.

Dickcissel

The scientific name of the Dickcissel is *Spiza americana*, an earlier name was *Emberiza americana* and it was listed in the family Emberizidae, the New World Sparrows. *Spiza* translates as Finch. Recent genetic studies show, however, that it is monotypic, i.e. not closely related to the finches and is more appropriately placed in the family of the Cardinalidae. There are no other species in its Genus.

The Dickcissel is not globally threatened, and is common locally in the Central USA. Its rarity in Canada is due to the fact that it breeds only in the extreme south mostly near the southwest edge of Lake Erie. The overall population of the

Dickcissel has varied very greatly in its history, but it is now relatively stable. Like the Bobolink they are strongly dependent on the timely and local maintenance of suitable fields.

The Dickcissel breed from May in the south to mid-June in the North. The males are generally polygamous. The males arrive a few days before the females. Mating begins immediately, A clutch laid in the nest in the grass consists of 3-6 eggs. They are incubated by the female for 12-13 days and after hatching feeds the nestlings alone for 8-10 days and another two weeks after they leave the nest. Brown-headed Cowbirds are very active in parasitizing, on occasion in some areas up to 100%.

The call of the Dickcissel, often given in flight is a distinctive electric buzz bzrrrrrt, the song a variable "dick dick dickcissel".

The main common features of the two species are their use of grassland for breeding and their similarity in behaviour in nesting. As pointed out they belong to two different families and are unusual in both making up a genus of a single species.

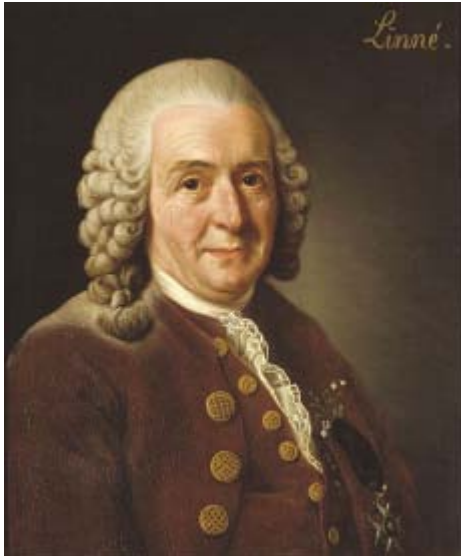
What's the use of Botany?

Botany Group learns about the origins -- and use -- of modern botany

by Ted Hampton

The Botany Group met on January 9, at the home of Marion Martindale. Members spoke about favourite plants and flowers, including Mountain Ash (Rowan), Toadflax, Fireweed, Gold Thread, Hepatica and Pearly Everlasting.

In addition, we learned about Carl Linnaeus, the father of taxonomy. Born in 1707 in Sweden he became a medical doctor. He was always very interested in plants and their names, and published books on the subject.



Linnaeus

He developed the binomial nomenclature system of naming plants (and animals) to simplify and standardize the process. At the time botanists chose long Latin plant names with many words, and Linnaeus used two words only. If you find "L." attached to the name of an organism you know that is the name given it by him more than two hundred years ago.

Marion Martindale read this poem to the members:

There should be no monotony
In studying your Botany.
It helps to train
And spur your brain,
Unless you haven't got any.

It teaches you – does Botany
To know the plants and spot any
And learn just why
They live or die
In case you plant or pot any

You learn – from reading Botany
Of woolly plants (and cottony)
That grow on earth
And what they're worth
And why some spots have not
any

You sketch the plants in Botany
You learn to chart and plot any
Like corn or oats
You jot down notes
If you know how to jot any.

Your time – if you'll allot any
Will teach you how and what any
Old plant or tree
Can do or be
And that's the use of Botany

by Berton Braley from Nature Smiles in Verse

Next meeting is February 6, 2012 at the home of Siglint Fitting – 1101-65 Spring Garden Avenue, Toronto.



Fireweed



Hepatica



Pearly Everlasting

Townsend's Solitaire star of 2011 Christmas Bird Count

by Gene Denzel

The 57th Christmas Bird Count for the Richmond Hill Circle (ONRH in the Audobon database) was carried out on Saturday 17 December. The weather was fair, ranging from -8 to -4 with occasional flurries during the day, and not much wind. A total of 31 observers fanned out over our 8 sectors, with some going out before dawn to look for owls, and most working through the day until we met at 5 at Athena Antiochos's home for the traditional Chili Supper (many thanks to Athena and all who helped in the kitchen and brought deserts/salads/bread). The results were augmented by reports from 7 feeder-watchers.

Given the mild weather for most of December, the results were mixed. A total of 52 species (plus a group of suspected Black-duck/Mallard hybrids) were observed, close to the long-run average of 51. The highlight for the day had to be the Townsend's Solitaire observed by Bruce Brydon in sector 7. This was indeed a 'rare bird' at any time of year for the region, and certainly the first one in the history of our count. A 'rare-bird report' has been submitted to the regional authorities. There



was also a report of a Broad-winged Hawk, but this is so unusual in Canada in the Winter that without photos it will not be accepted by the authorities.



Other notable sightings were another set of Green-Winged Teals, and a total of 3 Common Ravens (only the 2nd time in our history for both), a Merlin grabbing a Robin and eating it while posing for the audience (see photo), and a total of 3 Red-bellied Woodpeckers. The mild Winter (so far) also allowed for Hooded and Common Mergansers (respectively reported in 4 and 9 previous counts), and the Mute Swans as well. Big misses were Song Sparrow (reported in 54 previous counts), and Pileated Woodpecker (seen in 42 counts). Also missing were Belted Kingfisher (37 counts), and Northern Harrier (29 counts). Given the mild December, it was not surprising to miss Snow Buntings and Horned Larks. Great thanks to Andy and Debbie of Wild Birds Unlimited for their support.

Great BackYard Bird Count - February 17-20

Count and Be Counted! Make sure your local birds are represented in the upcoming Great Backyard Bird Count—they won't count unless YOU do! Save the dates: the 15th annual GBBC takes place February 17-20. Everything you need to know to participate is on the website at www.birdcount.org, including downloadable instructions, FAQs, and a how-to video. Get a regional list of the birds you might see in your area in February so you can brush up on your identification skills ahead of time.

An advertisement for Wild Birds Unlimited Nature Shop. At the top is a photograph of a blue bird with an orange breast perched on a branch. Below the photo is the shop's logo, which includes a stylized house and the text "Wild Birds Unlimited Nature Shop". The owners' names, "Debbie & Andy Neale", are listed, along with their address: "8150 Yonge St. Thornhill, ON, L4J 1W5". Contact information includes "Phone: (905) 709-3775" and "Fax: (866) 902-5167". At the bottom, it says "YOUR BACKYARD BIRDFEEDING SPECIALIST" and provides the email "feathered_friendship@bellnet.ca" and website "www.wbu.com/thornhill".

Snowy Owls on the Move

by Denise Potter

This winter has seen Snowy Owls irrupting from their Arctic home in unusually large numbers, and for what is thought to be an unusual reason. While most reports cluster around the Great Lakes, Eastern Seaboard and the Plains, they have been reported as far afield as Kansas, Oklahoma, and even Honolulu, Hawaii (although whether that individual flew there on its own or somehow hitched a ride with an Alaska Airlines flight is unknown).

According to eBird, Cornell's citizen-science bird-tracking database, the Arctic raptors are invading because of an exceptionally good 2011 breeding season.

Snowy Owls typically spend their entire lives on the frozen Arctic tundra, surviving primarily on lemmings and voles, supplemented by snowshoe hare, fish, ducks, grebes and grouse -- and anything else they can get. They scratch out their nests on



the tops of small hillocks or rises where they can command the best view of the surrounding landscape. In bad lemming years they may not nest at all. In normal times clutches average 5 to 8 eggs. In really good years they have been known to lay up to 14 eggs in a clutch. At two lemmings per day per nestling, it



takes a lot of lemmings and a lot of energy to raise a brood that big. It's said that in a normal breeding season a typical Snowy Owl family requires 1,500 lemmings.

Usually irruptions occur every 3-5 years when the lemming population crashes, but this year's irruption has apparently been

caused by a bumper crop of lemmings. The adult birds protect their own territories, forcing the young birds to move south to seek their own. This explains why the majority -- but not all -- the Snowy Owls we see in the winter are immature. It is not unusual to see a couple of these young birds every winter in tundra-like locations -- such as onion fields and airport fields -- but the numbers this year have been phenomenal in some areas. One photographer got a shot with eleven Snowy Owls in a single frame (near the Vancouver coastline):

<http://www.spokesman.com/stories/2012/jan/15/post-falls-photographer-seizes-snowy-owl/>

Owl Etiquette

Despite the good hunting over the summer, these birds come south in the winter because they are starving. They have travelled far to get here and are already suffering from hunger and exhaustion. Owls will often allow humans to approach very closely, but that doesn't mean they are not frightened and stressed. Photographers -- sometimes hordes of them -- in search of the perfect wildlife picture may spend hours within a few meters of the same owl, preventing that owl from hunting or resting. Causing them to flush can also alert other predators and crows of their presence, and the crows will then mob them so that they are unable to rest or hunt. We must ask ourselves: as birdwatchers and photographers, as much as we all share the desire to experience that magnificent wild creature, do we have the right to cause the DEATH of that creature in our pursuit of that better view? How close is close enough? We suggest no closer than 12 meters, based on a study showing an alert or stress response in owls when humans approach within 12 to 18 meters. (Fernandez Juricic, E., M. 2000. Local and regional effects of pedestrians on forest birds in a fragmented landscape. *The Condor* 102: 247-255.) The more people present, the farther back you should be. Get the better lens, get the better binoculars, get the better scope, get your picture from that safe distance and then get out of the way. See also:

Kingston Field Naturalists' "Owl Woods Management" report at
<http://www.kingstonfieldnaturalists.org/reports/owlwoodsmanagement.pdf>
"Got Snowies?" eBird Newsletter:
<http://bit.ly/x6c9No>

A Grebe Adventure

by Kristen Martyn

Richmond Hill Naturalist and Birder Kristen Martyn shares an adventure she had with a Back Yard Bird in Oak Ridges this month. You can read Kristen's blog and see some of her beautiful pictures at <http://naturatours.blogspot.com/>

I had an interesting bird experience today that I wanted to share. As a birder and naturalist sometimes I get calls from friends and family about their wildlife encounters. Today (January 12) I got one of those calls.

My Uncle called me today, to tell me that he had a strange bird in his backyard. The bird was sitting by their fence and not moving much. He described the bird over the phone as duck-like, with shorter legs, a yellow bill, white belly and gray back. I assumed that the bird was most likely some kind of misplaced domestic duck, as their house is on a fairly typical urban street with a large, but fairly standard backyard. I was a little puzzled by a duck being in his backyard when they don't have any access to water, but it wasn't totally out of the question.

When I got to their house to have



a look at the bird I was shocked at what I saw.....a Red-necked Grebe. My uncle was spot-on with the markings, as the bird was in its winter plumage. The grebe was sitting on top of the snow beside their fence. I took a few photos and approached the bird slowly. It moved slightly when I approached; but didn't go too far.

I called a couple of friends to get their opinions on the matter and concluded that the bird probably couldn't take flight off of the snow. So, I needed to capture

the bird and take it to open water, where these birds spend most of their lives. After checking that our local lake still had open water, I put on some gloves and approached the bird. I threw a towel over the grebe and gently grabbed the bird restraining the wings.

Once captured, I took off the towel to make sure the bird looked healthy. It then managed to quickly nip my nose with its long beak (nice aim!), even while I was holding its neck. Their neck is deceptively long and can stretch out quite far. After capturing the bird, I put it inside of a box with some towels and drove to our local lake.

When I got out of the car I was greeted by about 30 mallards which were hanging out in the open water. I walked a few steps into the water and placed the grebe down gently in the water. It was gone before I blinked and immediately began diving and swimming as grebes do, like nothing had happened in the first place.

What an amazing experience it was. I never thought I would have the opportunity to be that close to such an amazing bird.



Northern Woodpeckers avoid detection

Three-toed and Black-backed Woodpeckers were the subject of January's Bird Group meeting.

by Gene Denzel

The group convened at Athena Antiochos's home on 11 January, with the target species being Black-backed and Three-toed Woodpeckers, both findable in Ontario but, especially for the Three-toed, not often around Richmond Hill. Present were Tony and Joandice Marshall, Joe Agg, Barbara Jackson, Theo Hofmann, Muriel Farrant, Gene and Charlene Denzel, and Athena. Martin Chen made a brief appearance to leave a few quiz questions, but had a conflict as did Mike Turk.



Black-backed Woodpecker

After enjoying some delicious refreshments, we settled down to discuss the birds.

The Three-toed WP was once considered a single species in the

New World and Eurasia (having originally been classified by Linnaeus), but in recent years has been split into the Eurasian species, and one North American species – the American Three-toed WP (*Picoides Dorsalis*) (with currently three sub-species) plus a separate species for the Black-backed WP (*Picoides Arcticus*). The particular subspecies (*P.D. bacatus*) found in Northern Ontario is the darkest backed of the three subspecies. Both species tend to be found in Boreal or mixed forests, especially in areas with recent (1-6 yrs) fire damage or insect infestations. They feed primarily by getting larvae of beetles from under the bark (Three-toed by flaking the bark, Black-backed by flaking but also drilling with very sharp raps). Both birds tend to be permanent residents, although they are subject to irruptions into recently burned/infested areas in some Winters.

The distribution of the two species in general is similar, spreading from Northern Alaska to Labrador and S in higher elevations down the Rockies as far as Montana and Arizona, but the Three-toed breeds further North (in fact it is the furthest North breeding WP), and the Black-backed reaches further



Three-toed Woodpecker

South (as far as the NE portion of Algonquin Park) for breeding purposes. Overall, they both seem to be holding their own, although it is hard to get precise population estimates due to their mostly inconspicuous behaviour patterns (they don't drum that often, they are quiet when feeding, etc.). The populations do broadly overlap, and they can and do coexist, with the somewhat larger Black-backed tending to take the lower portion of a tree compared with the Three-toed (even sometimes on branches) for feeding.

Recalling that they were originally all lumped together, it is interesting to note that the three subspecies of Three-toed tend to range from darker in the East to more light-coloured in the West. In terms of field identification, their calls are different enough that they can help, and both are (for males) easily distinguishable from the broadly similar Hairy WP by their yellow forehead patch and much less of white colouration. Pete Dunne characterizes the Black-backed as 'the sharp-dressed Three-toed WP' vs the Three-toed as 'the shabby Three-toed WP', to summarize the overall impression.

The discussion went on for a while, adjourning after 10:00. The next meeting will be at Joe Agg's on Wed, 8 February.

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Environmental News

See links below for more information about the struggles in other communities:

<http://www.savengforest.org/>

Mega Quarry

<http://nomegaquarry.ca>

<http://www.thestar.com/news/article/1108875--anatomy-of-a-quarry-fight>



Mike Turk's African Adventure

Mike Turk shared these wonderful photos after returning from a trip to Botswana last December. The RHN is looking forward to trip leader Kevin Shackleton's talk on this trip at our February General Meeting.

