

## NATURE NOTES – SPRING 2020

Mercifully the mid-**March** lockdown due to COVID-19 came at a time when the lakes were just emerging from the thrall of winter and the excitement of seeing the first signs of spring made self-isolation at the lake quite tolerable. By the end of the month the year's list of bird species seen around the area was increasing by leaps and bounds, American Woodcock were displaying every evening and the first Eastern Phoebes were already prospecting for nest sites around the cottage.

Then **April** brought the first loons back to the lake, accompanied by other water birds such as Wood Ducks, Hooded Mergansers, Ring-necked Ducks and Buffleheads hiding in the bays and up at the marsh. Wilson's Snipe chuntered away on the mud flats as they dug for worms or displayed whinnying overhead, Belted Kingfishers flashed past with their rattling churr, and the first Swamp Sparrows were seen darting through the reeds. Nests of both Ruffed Grouse and **American Woodcock** were found,



the first Beavers were seen cruising around and Snapping, Painted and Blanding's Turtles were observed sunning themselves on rocks and logs. Of course what every birder waits for in the spring is the arrival of the first of the wood warblers, resplendent in their breeding plumage and loudly proclaiming their territory for all to hear. True to form the first species to arrive was Pine Warbler, heard trilling stridently from the White Pines around the lakes, their yellow breasts glowing in the sun. Three days later, on April 23, the first Yellow-rumped Warblers appeared, flashing their bright yellow side patches and yellow rumps - hence the country name "Butter Butts". Black-and-White Warblers were next and at the same time the first Ruby-crowned Kinglets showed up. By the end of the month migration was in full swing and I had recorded 60 species around the lakes for the year.

**May** is traditionally the best spring month for birders and advisories against unnecessary travel meant our usual spring migration trip to southern Ontario went by the wayside. Focussing on the immediate area, however, proved pretty productive. The Ospreys which had shown up late in April were found to be nesting over on Little Silver and were easily observed fishing on both lakes while both Red-shouldered and Broad-winged Hawks appeared back on territory. Wildflowers such as Hepatica and Spring Beauty started to bloom in the woods, the first Garter Snakes wriggled out of hibernation, the neighbourhood Red Fox was seen regularly strolling the neighbourhood while Eastern Whip-poor-Wills could be heard most evenings at dusk and beyond. May 7 saw the first Ruby-throated Hummingbird appear at the feeder - always a cause for celebration. These tiny birds migrate from south and central America via the Gulf of Mexico, putting on 50% of their body weight in order to make the crossing. More warbler species appeared on the scene early in May: Ovenbird, Chestnut-sided, Palm, Yellow, and Nashville Warblers and Common Yellowthroat, and by the end of the month I had found 17 different species including Golden-winged Warbler, always a nice bird to see. Thrushes also make their first appearance in early May and the area has produced Veery and both Hermit and Wood Thrushes. One day I recorded four species of vireos: Red-eyed, Blue-headed, Yellow-throated and Warbling. Once the Scarlet Tanagers, Indigo Buntings and Yellow-billed Cuckoos showed up later in the month, one could almost imagine one was birding many miles south of here. By the end of May, the lake total had now reached a very respectable 102 species of birds.

As one gets into **June** bird activity is less easy to detect, partly because of the leaves making it hard to see the birds as they flit to and fro, but largely because they are singing much less as territories have been established and they are busy feeding young. There are exceptions to the rule, such as the Red-eyed Vireo which calls persistently all day long, the Ovenbirds, whose explosive “Teacher, teacher” still echoes through the woods, and the flycatchers. Great Crested Flycatchers are relentless in their “wheeps” and chuckles which start early in the morning and continue all day. The “Tchebec-Tchebec” call of the Least Flycatcher can be heard in the more open patches of woodland, especially along the 36, Eastern Phoebes can be found everywhere explosively saying their name, while the Eastern Wood Pewees can be heard whining high up in the canopy: “Pee-a-wheeee”. The last flycatcher species, Eastern Kingbird has a staccato call which sounds almost electrical: they can be seen up at the marsh at the end of Rainbow Lane and sometimes near the put-in on Little Silver. As for mammals, apart from the usual White-tailed Deer, Eastern Chipmunks, Red and Gray Squirrels and Raccoons, the first Black Bear of the year sauntered past the property a few days ago, we have seen Mink down at the waterfront and Otter have been noted regularly on Little Silver.



Unfortunately, we seem to have been invaded by caterpillars once again, not sure from which species of moth, but all I can say is that the cuckoos are not keeping up with the feast available to them! More welcome was a visit from the threatened Gray Ratsnake, a beautiful reptile which we were privileged to find on the property two days in a row. These guys are considered a Specially Protected Reptile under the Ontario Fish and Wildlife Conservation Act, so it is always a treat to see them.

So, as some of you return to the lake, keep an eye out for the wonders of the natural world. Nature seems to have been supremely unaffected by all that is causing us humans concern. The rhythms of the seasons are proceeding apace and there is comfort to be found in surrounding oneself with the unchanging and yet ever-changing spectacle of God’s creation.

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