

NATURE NOTES – SEPTEMBER 2023



Having spent the first part of the summer in Newfoundland and then been distracted by the arrival of grandchild #3, I fear Nature Notes languished. Others on the lake were more on the ball, reporting regularly on the progress of the **Osprey** nest on Little Silver where two young birds were fledged. Unfortunately, much to the distress of one observer, in August a Bald Eagle swooped in and dismembered one of the young Ospreys

before her very eyes. Although Bald Eagles are usually fish eaters, they are known to eat other birds along with quite a variety of critters: turtles, rabbits and other small mammals, snakes, and carrion. Basically if it has any food value, a Bald Eagle will eat it. RIP little Osprey.

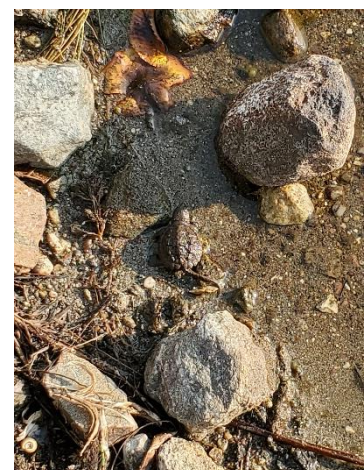
In early summer nesting Snapping Turtles became active around the lakes. Snapping Turtles survive against amazing odds. Only 1 out of 133 of their eggs hatch, mostly getting eaten by raccoons and foxes, and only 1 out of 1445 eggs live to become breeding adults. To survive Snapping Turtles live an amazingly long time and reproduce for as long as 100 years! I don't even want to think about it. Some Rainbow Lane residents decided to give one turtle a helping hand. I'll let Bruce Henry tell the story... "We had a big snapping turtle lay her eggs on the side of our driveway back in June and are now seeing the results. Thankfully we saw her lay her eggs and were able to put a protective wood and mesh cage over the nest, otherwise the raccoons would have had a nice egg snack. The turtles have been hatching over several days, but we have only seen one of the little guys emerging from the nest as they often emerge under the cover of darkness. We saved it from having to make the long trek to the lake by carrying it down to the water and placing it within a few feet of the water's edge. It's important to not place them directly in the water. It was rewarding to know that our efforts have helped at least one turtle (and hopefully more) return to the lake. Every little bit helps because the odds are certainly stacked against them. The website www.ontarioturtle.ca/turtles has lots of tips to help maintain the turtle population. They also have a good page on how to make turtle nest protective cages!"



Protected nest



Hatchling snapper



Safely on the beach

Although these reptiles were given a helping hand, other relations were greeted with less enthusiasm. Gray Rat Snakes were seen regularly along Little Silver Lake during the summer months which is good news as these snakes are a threatened species. After wishing the snake would vacate her deck, one resident relented and wished for its return to keep her mouse population in check!

Also interesting come August was the arrival of Red Crossbills in the area. They have been gradually increasing their summer range in a southerly direction and the abundant cone crop has obviously got them motivated to feed up before returning to more northerly pastures. These northern finches were seen regularly around the lakes and also along the nearby Tay Havelock trail which is definitely worth exploring.

Over the summer I heard from quite a few folk who have installed Cornell University's Merlin app onto their phones. Suddenly being able to identify all the calls that surround us at the lakes was a very exciting prospect, and the app certainly has opened the world of bird sound to a wider audience. Just a word of caution, however. Merlin scans thousands of audio recordings submitted to the Macauley Library and comes up with the best match. It does, however, misidentify sounds on a fairly regular basis, particularly those of similar-sounding species. In Newfoundland we were trying to identify a vireo call which was not typical for either species we knew was in the area. Merlin kept changing the ID and yet it was the same bird singing! Just this morning I had the app identify a warbling song as Warbling Vireo, House Finch and **Purple Finch**. It was, in fact, only the latter species that was vocalizing. I have found the best recourse where it bounces between species is to turn off the recording and start again. Eventually it will settle on the right one!



Once the end of August rolled around fall migration began in earnest. Birding during fall is definitely not for the faint-hearted. Firstly, unlike during spring migration, there are leaves on the trees for the birds to hide behind. Having spent a lot of time birding in rainforests around the world, Stewart and I have come up with the term "sucked into the green vortex" for birds which fly tantalizingly close, only to disappear into the vegetation before ones eyes. Next, many species have abandoned their beautiful bright breeding plumage and reverted to a much duller basic plumage. Here are two pics of exactly the same species: Chestnut-sided Warbler.



Breeding Plumage



Basic Plumage

You see the problem, and that is one of the easier fall warblers to identify. Then there is the issue of juvenile birds. These can look totally different to their parents and often show intermediate stages of plumage just to add to the confusion. In the spring birds are loudly proclaiming their territory and looking for mates. A walk along the lanes is rewarded by constant bird song. In the fall all you hear are various “chips” and maybe an amorphous snatch of song as a juvenile tries out its vocal chords (pun intended). Whether a “chip” is the wet chip of a Black-throated Green Warbler, the harsher chip of a Yellow-rumped Warbler or the two pebbles banging together chip of a Common Yellowthroat requires a fair amount of experience. To help things along most sparrows also give chip calls. This is actually where Merlin can really help to confirm identification. Lastly, in spring the birds tend to be fairly consistent in the habitat where you will find them as they are trying to set up territory. I know, for instance, that after the beaver pond along Rainbow Lane I can be pretty certain of a Chestnut-sided Warbler just before the bend. At the bend Eastern Towhees and Field Sparrows are usually a given. In the fall birds are just trying to feed up and head south as soon as they can. Outside of prime migration areas one has to wander around hoping for a mixed flock of migrating birds. Last week, while walking the Tay-Havelock trail, I was lucky enough to come across one of these. Several species of warblers, vireos, sparrows and kinglets streamed through and I hustled to identify them all before they disappeared. Otherwise fall birding tends to be one “chip” at a time! It is therefore even more rewarding when a normally shy species such as an Ovenbird or **Hermit Thrush** suddenly pops into view.



With the arrival of the equinox and the cooler weather we are starting to see some birds leaving the area completely, whereas others are arriving from their northern breeding grounds in transit south. Today, for instance, there was quite a movement of Blue-headed Vireos over at Silver Lake



PP. Lastly, I have exciting news to report in that a new species for the area showed up in our yard a couple of days ago. I was busy digging potatoes when the unmistakable call of a **Tufted Titmouse** rang across the property. This species is usually found much further south and, once I had reported it, I had folk from Ottawa wanting to come find it! Unfortunately it disappeared over to our neighbour's, never to be seen or heard from again.

But that's birding!

Wishing you a wonderful fall enjoying the beauty of the lakes!

Alison Bentley

Photographs by: Frank Johnson (Osprey nest), Bruce Henry (Turtles) and Stewart Bentley