

Outdoors by Art Briggs-Jude

Rare birds a bonus in backyard

Among the many bonuses derived from feeding wild birds in your backyard is the arrival of a rare or unexpected feathered guest.

For the novice to the popular winter pastime, this unusual bird may be just a newcomer with which he or she is not familiar.

On the other hand, it could be fairly common summer resident, such as a brown thrasher, that, because of an injury or some other unknown reason, has decided to spend the winter here.

But while these sightings generate plenty of excitement, it's the appearance of a rare bird that really stirs up a birdwatcher's interest.

And birdwatchers, by the way, can range from anyone who looks more than once at a sparrow to folks who spend all their leisure time looking, listing and field tripping birds.

Some keen types like those I met in Moosonee this past summer appear to take their binoculars to bed with them so that they can get a closer look at the birds in their dreams.

However, trying to define what constitutes a casual birdwatcher is almost as difficult as trying to describe what bird can be classified as a rarity.

While some species, like the endangered Whooping Crane, are continentally listed as rare, other birds like the White Pelican are rare only in Ontario.

In many instances, the category into which they are thrust depends on the frequency that they occur outside their normal range or habitat.

Such a bird rarity for many parts of southern Ontario is the Red-bellied Woodpecker. Similar in size to the common Hairy Woodpecker, this slightly trimmer trunk climber has horizontal zebra stripes covering its entire wings and back.

The male bird an orange-red cap that continues down the back of its neck. The female bird has the orange-red only on the back of its head and neck, while the cheeks, throat and abdomen of both sexes are a soft greyish-brown.

Having seen both sexes of this attractive bird in the past few years with hardly a trace of red on either of their midribs, I'm still at a loss for an explanation as to why it was ever named the Red-bellied Woodpecker in the first place.

The occurrence of the Red-bellied Woodpecker in Ontario is yet another example of a more southern bird extending its range northward.

Although a series of mild winter encourages such movement, there is no doubt that they have also benefited from the increasing numbers of bird feeders.

A rare and local permanent resident in the Carolinian forest area of southern Ontario, it, like the Red-headed Woodpecker, was likely limited to that status by the loss of the oak and beech groves.

This shrinking food source, however, was not the only reason for keeping its number confined to the eastern United States.



Red-bellied woodpecker

The introduction of the European Starling drove this beautiful bird along with many of our other native cavity nesters from their traditional nest sites.

It now appears that the availability of so many nesting cavities in the dead elm trees a few years ago may have started to reverse this trend.

Red-bellied Woodpeckers are by and large non-migratory, staying in the same general area summer and winter. The presence of single birds on various Christmas Bird Counts are believed to be individuals pioneering new territories.

This is certainly not the case in Niagara or southwestern Ontario where multiple sightings are increasing annually. Like the Cardinal and Mockingbird, two other southern species that have pushed northward, the Red-bellied Woodpecker is a welcome addition to our local wildlife scene.

When they do appear for the first time in your yard, the chance of seeing a live bird that for years was just an illustration in a field guide generates some inner excitement.

It causes some people to travel long distances, face all kinds of weather, and all too frequently experience the disappointment of missing it.

Such frustration can only be matched with discovering a backyard bird that's not listed in your bird book. When this happens, don't pull out some of your remaining hair like I did, go to the library and check on the birds from another country.

That's the only way we found out that the visiting rarity to our feeder was a Java Temple bird that had escaped from a private aviary.

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