

BIRDS OF A FEATHER

The day was bitterly cold, but bright; the blue sky was cloudless, and the fresh fallen snow sparkled in the sunlight as I walked down the driveway, I heard a sweet whistled "fee-bee" that took me back in time. It was on a day such as this, more than twenty years ago, when I first heard the song.

In those days I lived in the Montreal area, and it was my custom to snowshoe in a cedar wood near my home. I was a new birder then, and was just beginning to learn how many birds there were to be found. So, when I heard the "fee-bee" I was very excited for I knew it would be most unusual to discover an Eastern Phoebe in mid-winter - and I had found it! I also realized if I wanted to report my find, I had better have a good description of the bird, for I would be closely questioned by the experts. (This helps to keep birders honest!)

My hunt began. It was very frustrating, for I would bushwhack towards the sound, only to have it change direction when I reached its apparent source. Eventually, it began to dawn on me that the only birds around were Black-capped Chickadees. Surely, it couldn't be? Then, right before my eyes a little chickadee opened its mouth and whistled, "fee-bee". Even though no one had witnessed my search, I felt like an idiot, for it had taken me so long to realize the obvious.

I soon learned the Black-capped Chickadees have, what is termed, a "spring song". This "fee-bee" song usually begins sometime during the winter, though it can be heard occasionally throughout the year. As the breeding season approaches it is heard more and more frequently. Some days, towards spring, the woods are alive with the sound of chickadees whistling to one another.

Needless to say, the above experience taught me to pay attention to the difference in the "fee-bee" song of the chickadee and phoebe.

To my ear the chickadee whistles it and the phoebe says it. The chickadee's song has a sweetly plaintive quality, whereas, the phoebe's sound harsh. There are also times when the phoebe seems to say "fee-bnee".

Learning to recognize bird songs gives one a definite advantage in birding; it helps a person to know what bird to follow up. When an expert hears an unrecognized song, it usually means there is a bird present which

is rare to the area.

However, one has to be careful, for as with the chickadee and the phoebe, there are songs that have similar qualities and are difficult to differentiate.

There are also variations in the "same" song of a given species. Even after all my experience, I sometimes have difficulty if an especially melodious robin sings. Is it a robin, a Rose-breasted Grosbeak, a Northern Oriole, or a less husky sounding Scarlet Tanager? It helps when one discovers some subtle difference to rely on, and it sometimes takes someone else to point out the nuance. That is why I can hardly wait to get my hands on a new bird tape that has become available. It is called "Birding by Ear" and purports to be of help in the area of recognizing bird calls which are alike. If you are interested, it can be purchased at Printed Passage Books in Kingston. Anna Greenhorn spotted a Gray Jay at her feeder in Philippsville on December 28, 1991. Due to an oversight on my part, it was omitted from last month's column. Gray Jays, formerly known as Canada Jays, are a more northern species, and are seldom seen this far south. So this is an interesting record. This bird was seen again on January 18 at John and Elsie Goodman's feeder, which is also in Philippsville. It would be a good idea for those with feeding stations in Philippsville to keep their eyes open for this unusual species. Superficially speaking, the Gray Jay resembles an overgrown chickadee. With "gray" in mind, we seldom get reports of Gray Partridge (formerly known as Hungarian Partridge) in this area. However, Pauline Hockey did see this species north of North Gower. Winter is a good time to see these birds as they are more noticeable when they walk across the snow, and they frequently turn up in barnyards.

Northern Cardinals are still making appearances. Mary Carbino mentioned that they were seen at her place and Dorothy Read had a pair of cardinals appear at her feeder. Moreen Ready was fortunate to see a Snowy Owl near Forfar. The North Leeds Birdwatchers (NLB) tried

to "cash in" on this sighting, but when they attempted to find the bird on their field trip it had "flown the coop"! Moreen also had either an overwintering or early Brown-headed Cowbird turn up at her feeder. It seemed to be travelling with the House Sparrows.

A Sharp-skinned Hawk appeared and stationed itself near Annette Mess' feeder. It had probably fed, for it made no attempt to go after the few chickadees that ate nervously while it was present.

While driving along the Indian Lake Road, Edgar Connell saw a Great Blue Heron standing in a spot near a little open water. I recall one winter when the NLB saw a heron under similar circumstances. When members investigated, the heron was feeding on bullfrog tadpoles that were quite active in the water.

Bill Cutfield and a friend from Kingston discovered a Great Cormorant in the Thousand Islands area. The species of cormorant that is common here is the Double-crested Cormorant. So, the sighting of a Great Cormorant is an unusual one, and all the moreso in winter.

The NLB met before dawn one Wednesday to owl. The morning turned out to be very windy, which was probably the reason the owl prowl was not very successful. Only one owl was heard and none were seen. However, after having a delicious breakfast at a local restaurant, the group left to bird in the Thousand Islands area. Among other species, a total of 8 Bald Eagles and 1 Wild Turkey were seen - a great finale for the field trip.

By the time this column is published the first American Robin and Red-winged Blackbird will probably have been seen, so spring cannot be far away!

The number to call with your sightings is 359-5178 and until next month.

GOOD BIRDING!



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 17

Presbytery Resource Centre at 30 Colborne Street, Kingston, encouraged groups to come in and view what is available through the Centre. She brought along a good display of books. At noon the ladies proceeded to the lower church area for a tasty luncheon complete with birthday cake provided by the hostesses, and the afternoon found everyone refreshed and ready for more music, followed by business session.

The Arden Unit provided a hilarious skit introduced by Sara Hale with Margaret Humphries and Serena Hawes as guardian angels belabouring the problems they have with UCW members in their charge and their idiosyncrasies, but ultimately deciding to stay with them for the 100th birthday of UCW.

A memorial service to remember those members who passed away in 1991 was conducted by Arleen Benn of Charlmers United and a moment's silence was observed.

Women from the Brockville Section led the closing worship - "Journeying in Faith" which traced the journeys of many Bible women as each of them told their story of faith. Communion Service was conducted by Reverend Miriam Stroud to end the day.

Betty Withers of Morven thanked all members taking part in the annual meeting and wished them a safe journey home; President Norma sent the group on their way with her blessing.

Margaret Shaw

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