

**BIRDS OF A FEATHER**

By Marg Hendrick

It is mid-February as I write; snow covers the ground and it is -18°C. But the promise of spring is in the air, for those early migrants, the Horned Larks, have arrived on schedule. They fly up from the roadsides, hardy little birds, scrounging for what they can find on the way to their nesting grounds. By the time you read this, larks wishing to nest farther north will be well on their way; others will remain to breed here.

Now that migration is underway, you should soon be seeing other harbingers of spring, such as American Robins and Red-winged Blackbirds. Then, before we know it, nesting will have begun as returning birds hasten to set up territories and choose their mates.

Great Horned Owls are non-migrants and they have been courting for some time now. One evening, when John and Elsie Goodman heard the soft, deep hoots of this species, they opened the window and John hooted back. The owl replied once and then fell silent. During the courting period Great Horned Owls are more apt to be seen out in the open. Abi Hudson reported that one nearly flew into her car as it crossed Hwy. #15. Pat McManus was impressed by the size of a Great Horned Owl as it flew in front of him then on into his yard.

Great Horned Owls breed early; many are already on the nest. Incubation takes approximately a month, and hatching coincides with the reappearance of birds and mammals that have been absent or difficult to find during the winter months. This is a great advantage to the adult owls for it makes it much easier for them to find food for their ravenous owlets.

On January 30 Winona Barker heard the tremulous call of an Eastern Screech Owl near her home. This little owl is polychromatic: it comes in red, grey and intermediate colour phases. It chooses a tree hole for its nest, and some birds nest as early as March.

Another small owl, the Northern Saw-whet Owl, was heard by Bill Cutfield near Red Horse Lake. This bird whistled continuously, but because of the ventriloquistic



**Blue Jay**

quality of its call, Bill was unable to locate its roosting spot.

Last month I mentioned the scarcity of winter finches, and although more have appeared recently certain species seem to be noticeably absent: there have been no reports of White-winged Crossbills, Red Crossbills or American Redpolls. Bill Cutfield sighted a single Pine Grosbeak, a species that usually winters in flocks. Most feeders are visited by a good number of American Goldfinches and, as many of you have pointed out, the males are starting to regain their bright plumage. The numbers of Pine Siskins seen in the area have increased. Harrison Peters now has 20 or more at his feeder, and on their February 18 field trip, the North Leeds Birdwatchers (NLB) saw approximately 120 near Delta. These intrepid birders, who were birding during a snowfall, considered this sighting their just reward for braving such nasty weather!

Evening Grosbeaks, which were few and far between last month, have been more plentiful and have appeared in varying numbers at the following feeders: John Goodman's, Mary Anne Leggett's, Harrison Peters', Miriam Ondra's and Margaret Bulloch's. Purple Finches have also been noted at the above-mentioned feeding stations.

Gladys Burt and Moreen Ready still entertain Northern Cardinals, and a pair also frequent Fred Olivo's feeder in Delta. A lone male cardinal was seen flying across the

Davis Lock road into thick cedars on the other side.

House Finches are nearly always present in the Goodman's yard and are seen in large numbers in Elgin. There, their chirping and singing make it sound like spring.

A Rufous-sided Towhee visits at Miriam Parish's place. This species should not be here during the winter months. However, it has managed to find a spot where it is surviving the cold weather. A couple of years ago a towhee was able to cope all winter near a feeder in Smiths Falls, so hopefully this bird will also make it.

The Song Sparrow, Common Grackle and Brown-headed Cowbird seen at Harrison Peters', Miriam Parish's and Moreen Ready's, respectively, are not "winter birds" in our area. However they are more frequently seen here during the winter months than birds such as the towhee.

Several people have mentioned the wintering American Crows. Harrison Peters had a pair at his feeder, and Margaret Bulloch saw 75-100 near Portland in early February. Crows are early nesters and are already pairing off as they bob and caw noisily from their perches.

Mourning Doves seem to be prevalent this winter. Kay Williams, Marjorie Earl and Harrison Peters have all had them at their feeders. Doves have a soft rosy hue to their breast and an interesting tail pattern, attributes which often surprise people who have not noticed them before.

Snow Buntings, which usually travel in large flocks, have not been very abundant in this area lately. However, a flock appeared at the Peters' feeder and another group was seen just south of Elgin. Tree Sparrows have also been scarce this winter. The NLB have listed them on some of their field trips, but in fewer numbers than usual. Miriam Ondra has them at her feeder as do the Goodman's. We have only 2 at ours, whereas during most winters we entertain a dozen or more. On January 30 Pep Burt saw 2 Eastern Bluebirds, and early in February John Goodman spotted another member of the thrush family, an American Robin. Both these species, like the Northern Mockingbird, reported last month, survive the winter on left-over berries such as staghorn sumac, buckthorn and juniper. (Incidentally, in discussing the mockingbird last month, I inadvertently referred to the abundance of mountain ash berries near the site rather than staghorn sumac.) Another bird that makes use of available wild fruit in winter is the Northern Flicker. One was seen by Bill Cutfield on January 21 - a woodpecker not too commonly found here at that time of year. Bill also saw a Pileated Woodpecker on January 24. Pileateds are year-round residents, and anyone who has this species inhabiting their woodlot will have noticed its loud, flicker-like call becoming more and more frequent with the approach of spring. Once it starts to nest it will become almost silent.

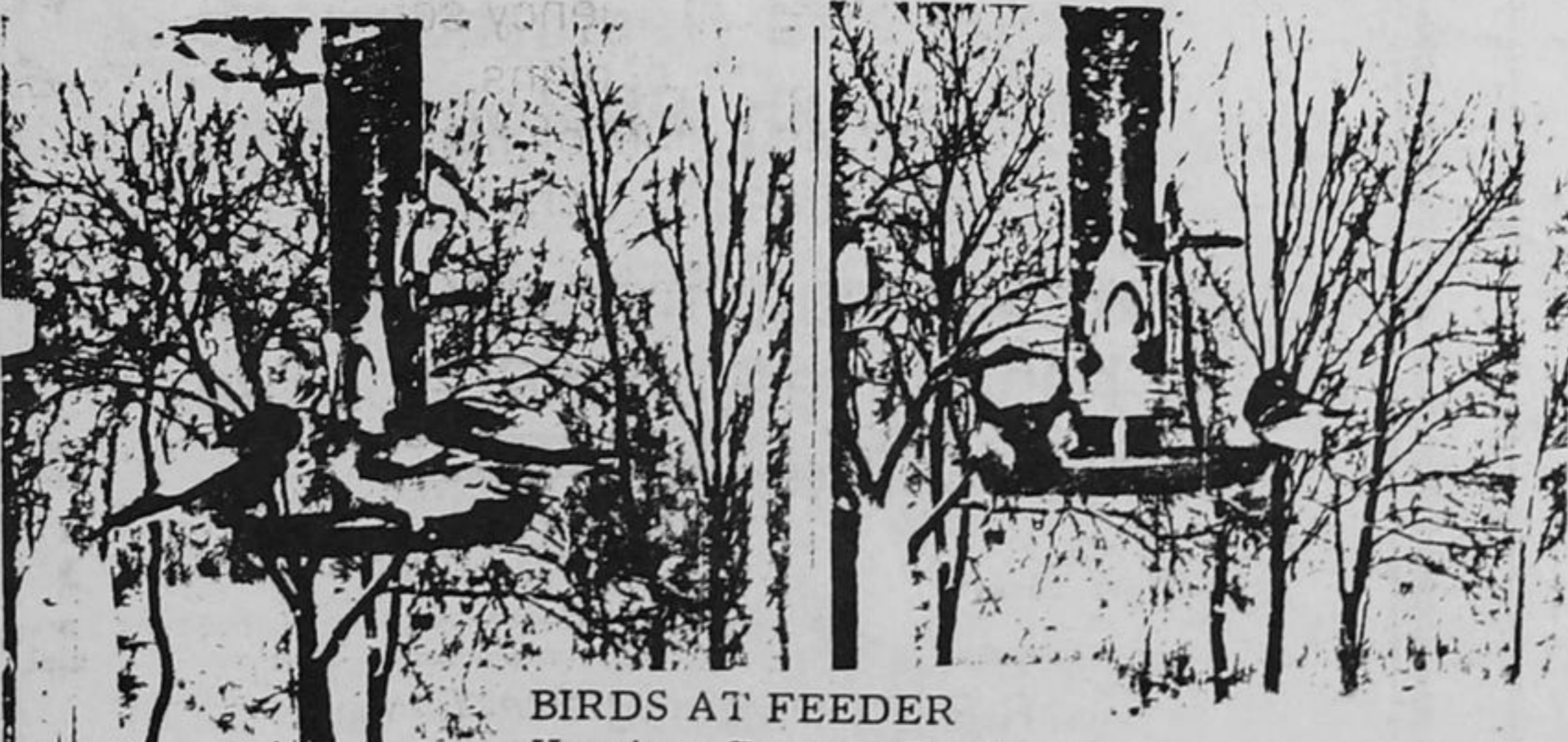
Kay Williams called to say that the eagle she reported last month was definitely a Bald Eagle. I understand that more eagles have been seen in the Wolfe Lake area.

I must mention how much I have appreciated the art work by David Stone which appeared in connection with my last two columns. Here's hoping there will be more of his work to come!

In closing, Leorene Hayes mentioned that her skunk-like squirrel still feeds in her yard and is now learning how to climb up on her feeder. Good luck, Leorene!

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

GOOD BIRDING!



BIRDS AT FEEDER  
Harrison Peters, Portland

