

BIRDS OF A FEATHER
by Marg Hendrick

This is the time of year when we welcome back birds which have been wintering further south and notice the gradual disappearance of those species that are only here during the winter.

On March 10, Jansje Keates phoned to say she had an Eastern Bluebird investigating one of her birdhouses! Many people realize that there has been a decline in the bluebird population in recent years. We do not know the reasons for this but I can discuss some of the contributing factors.

Bluebirds, who winter further south, are dependent to a large extent on a plentiful supply of berries. Over the years, for various reasons, this supply has greatly diminished. Should the winter be exceptionally harsh, available food is even less plentiful and many birds die as a result. Orchards are a favoured habitat of bluebirds, where unfortunately, spraying of insecticides can poison the adults or poisoned food may be fed to the young. Bluebirds are cavity-nesting birds. Favoured nesting spots have been holes in wooden fence posts or woodpecker nest holes. The replacement of wooden fence posts by metal ones and the cutting down of dead and diseased trees has eliminated many of these natural nest sites. Even if the nest holes are available, bluebirds have to contend with competition from other birds. They are especially vulnerable to the House Sparrow and European Starling, both of whom are very aggressive and prefer a similar nesting situation.

To off-set these conditions, interested individuals and groups have set up bluebird trails. These consist of suitable nesting boxes placed a hundred yards apart or more. This has resulted in the return of the bluebirds to areas where they have been absent for some time.

If you plan to make a bluebird house use 3/4" lumber throughout. The inside

measurements of the floor should be either 4 or 5" square. The depth of the box should be at least 6" from the floor to the bottom of the 1 1/2" diameter entrance hole. The inside surface below the hole should be roughened to facilitate the exit of the occupants. Make sure that there are drainage holes in the bottom of the box and some means of ventilating at the roof. The roof itself should overhang the entrance and ventilation holes. Make sure you make your box so that it can be opened easily. I prefer a side-opening box. Your box should be cleaned as soon as the first brood has fledged so that a new nest can be built. There are other protective features that you can provide which I would be glad to discuss with any interested person.

If possible, locate the box in an open area with scattered trees, where grass is kept short by cutting or grazing. Mount it 3 to 5" from the ground to the bottom of the box, then sit back and wait. Perhaps you will be lucky enough to have a bluebird take up residence!

Spring birds are gradually moving in. Flocks of Red-winged Blackbirds arrived before the end of Feb. American Robins are present almost everywhere in the area. Bob Waterfield had a Kildeer near his home on Bush Road and Song Sparrows are singing their cheerful song along the hedgerows.

Rob Capell saw a mixture of waterfowl, including a Hooded Merganser at Narrows Lock. red-tailed Hawks are on the move and are frequently seen circling above or sitting in trees well out in the open. One was observed carrying a stick, presumably to its nesting site.

There was a Northern Shrike at Crosby & Annette Mess had a Shrike at Delta, which she believed to be a Loggerhead. This could easily be, for it is about this time of year that the Northern Shrike moves further north to nest and the Loggerhead returns from its southern wintering grounds to nest here.

Ron Tinkess was fortunate to see a Snowy Owl on Hwy#15 not far from Bush Road and the bird was subsequently seen by others. Both Linda Murray & Dick Ussher reported seeing large groups of Cedar Waxwings. During the winter, waxwings rove in large flocks subsisting on whatever fruit can be found.

March 9 was a big day for Winter Finches. Large groups of both Red & White-winged Crossbills, Common Redpolls, Pine Siskins and some American Goldfinches were roaming the heavily coned coniferous woods. The Crossbills probably numbered a thousand or more. Crossbills will nest any time of year, provided food is abundant. One nest has already been discovered northwest of Kingston.

This is an exciting time of year to "bird" as old "friends" return from the south. You just know that in spite of the weather, spring is here and summer is on its way!

My telephone # is 359-5178
GOOD BIRDING!

**RIDEAU VALLEY
FIELD NATURALISTS**

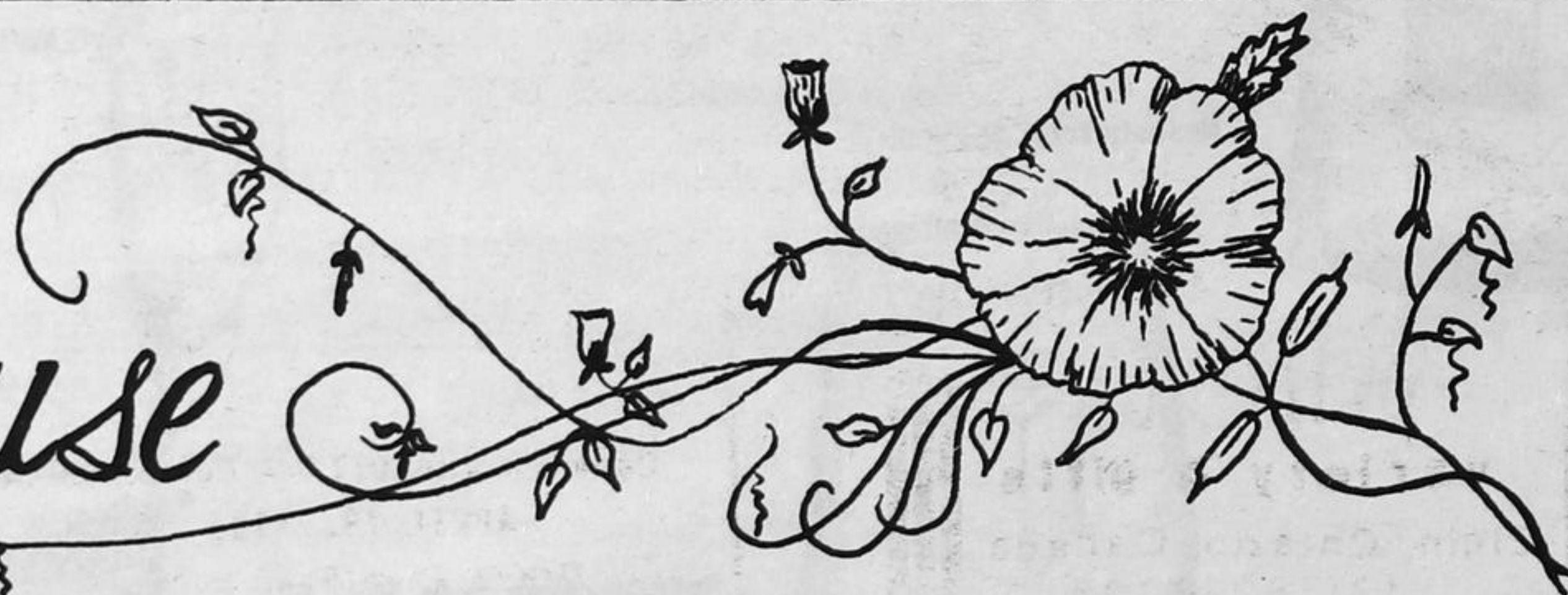
Two field trips have been scheduled. The first will be held at Murphy Point Provincial Park on March 31/85 and the emphasis will be on spring plants and birds.

The second has been arranged for April 28/85 at the Perth Conservation Area, where the group will concentrate on plants, trees and shrubs.

The regular meeting will take place on Paril 14/85 at the Mill Pond Conservation Area.

For further information, please call Ron Beacock at 267-4204

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