

# Nature Guelph News

January/February 2018

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# Looking Back with Gratitude

By Brett Forsyth, President, Nature Guelph

With the holidays behind me I find myself spending time reflecting on the year and on our club.

I am filled with a great sense of gratitude for everyone who makes Nature Guelph what it is. I am thankful for all our members because without you the club could not exist. I am also especially grateful for our executive team. This group of dedicated volunteers is the driving force behind the club and is responsible for all of the amazing events

and activities we all enjoy. Judy, Jenn, Christine, Laura, Val, Peter, Abbie, Ann, Allie, Marnie, Sandra, Randy, Calvin, Kelley, Denise and John – I thank you for all of your hard work.

This hardworking group has been developing a lot of great ideas around advancing our mission as an active community helping to conserve and connect with nature through education and advocacy. We will be sharing them with you in the new year. Many of these ideas

will need your support as a volunteer to come to life. If you're interested in general volunteering, please reach out to Christine Bowen, Volunteer Coordinator at [volunteer@natureguelph.ca](mailto:volunteer@natureguelph.ca) to be put on our list. In the new year, we will also be sharing specific volunteer opportunities with you.

Thank you again for being an amazing group dedicated to all things Nature Guelph! ●

Emily Damstra, Natural Science Illustrator

## Illuminating Goldenrod

Science Illustration and a Common Wildflower's Fascinating Fauna

Nature Guelph Speaker Series

**January 11, 7:30 pm – Everyone welcome**  
**OAC Centennial Arboretum Centre,**  
**University of Guelph**

Emily will inspire us with an image-filled presentation of her recent project – life-sized illustrations of Late Goldenrod through the seasons – along with illustrations of fascinating insects and other organisms that utilize this biodiversity superhero.



[www.natureguelph.ca](http://www.natureguelph.ca)



Illustration: Emily Damstra

# 2017 Guelph Christmas Bird Count

by Mike Cadman



Preliminary results are in for Guelph's 51st Christmas Bird Count which took place on Sunday, December 17. A total of about 60 participants working in 13 groups, found a total of **12,646 birds of 63 species**. The total of 63 species is just below the recent average of 64, with the highest being 70 species in 2008.

Temperatures varied from -10 to -6 Celsius, with moderate winds. There was about 10 cm of snow on the ground, and standing water was frozen. Numbers

were generally low but we did have one new species for count day: a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker (though previously reported in count week) and Townsend's Solitaire was reported during count week for the first time, but not on count day.

## Record numbers:

<b>Bald Eagle</b>	<b>9</b>
Previous high 7, in 2016	
<b>Raven</b>	<b>39</b>
Previous high 17 – some double-counting likely involved	

## Record number ties:

<b>Merlin</b>	<b>3</b>
Tied with 2014	
<b>Eastern Towhee</b>	<b>1</b>
Tied with 2008, 2016	
<b>Turkey Vulture</b>	<b>1</b>
Tied with 2006	
<b>Red-shouldered Hawk</b>	<b>1</b>
Tied with 6 previous years	
<b>Chipping Sparrow</b>	<b>1</b>
Tied with 3 previous years	
<b>Peregrine Falcon</b>	<b>1</b>
Tied with 2015 – possible second	

## Low numbers:

<b>American Tree Sparrow</b>	<b>197</b>
10-year average 274, continuing long-term decline	
<b>American Kestrel</b>	<b>3</b>
Fairly typical of last decade, but well down on long-term average	
<b>Ruffed Grouse</b>	<b>3</b>
Fairly typical of last decade, but well down on long-term average	

## Other unusual records included:

<b>Snowy Owl</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Red-winged Blackbird</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Brown-headed Cowbird</b>	<b>4</b>

## Winter finches were almost non-existent, except for:

<b>Pine Siskins</b>	<b>212</b>
<b>Purple Finch</b>	<b>2</b>

Thanks to all participants, especially the 13 group leaders, to Dave and Margaret Hull for hosting the tally rally and Wild Birds Unlimited and Nature Guelph for their continuing support. ●

# Winter Bird Myth Busters

by Sarah Smith

Learning fun facts about our feathered friends is always interesting! There are lots of 'myths' about our favourite winter birds, so let's set the record straight.

## Myth: Birds freeze during frigid days and nights, especially their feet!

False! Our birds are very well adapted to survive freezing cold temperatures. They are able to store fat during the day to keep themselves warm at night. They can also fluff out their feathers to create a layer of insulation which traps heat, as well as slow their metabolism to conserve energy. Birds also have a protective scale-like covering on their feet, with veins and arteries that keep their feet warm, even when 'exposed'.

## Myth: Birds only use houses during nesting season.

False! Birdhouses make excellent roosting cavities! They are a nice safe space for birds to conserve heat on those cool winter nights. Multiple birds will share roosting cavities in the winter. This helps the birds share their heat.



Some houses have the entrance hole in a front panel that you can remove. You are able to invert the panel so the hole is closer to the bottom of the house than to the top. This will keep the house toasty warm, since heat rises and is trapped inside. You can also add some sticks or twigs for the birds to use as perches.

## Myth: All Robins fly south.

False! Not all Robins migrate! If there is enough food, they will remain in the same area where they spent the summer. They are able to eat overwintering bugs in bark as well as frozen berries. Bluebirds can overwinter here, too! Take a look at this Bluebird that was hanging out in The Arboretum a couple of years ago. ●



# A Lasting Impression: the Killdeer

By Kyle Horner, onewordbirds.com

*reassembled the family with some difficulty. Many years later, I visited an island in the Bahamas not knowing that it was the migratory destination for many Killdeer and there were thousands all in one place.”*

I find myself beginning this week’s post under the weather and cloudy of mind, which makes forming cohesive thoughts and comprehensible words a significant challenge. While I am under the influence of microbial onslaught, it seems a fine time to cheat a little and begin with the words of my father. Well not the words of my father but, like, some of his words...you know what, never mind. Here is a thing my father said:

*“Some of the earliest birding experiences I can recall involved the nostalgic Killdeer. Its plaintive cry – repeating its name over and over again – is such a familiar, unmistakable and welcome sound for me.*

*“I recall, as a young birder, being taken by the broken-wing act to protect the nest and, although I knew this behaviour was instinctive,*

*it somehow seemed to be a well-thought-out plan. I remember thinking that I had outsmarted them when I finally learned that the nest was in the opposite direction to the one I was being led in.*

*“Nest is a little too expansive a word for several eggs simply laid in an open gravel lot, but differentiating eggs from gravel was a far more difficult task than I thought it would be as I stepped very slowly and carefully to avoid crushing them. And all the while the adult was running in that peculiar gait, dragging one wing and exposing the rusty rump to try and draw my attention.*

*“A later visit startled the fledglings and they fled with surprising speed, each in a different direction. Then, as I watched from a distance, the parent*

Not surprisingly, given my father’s obvious affection for it, the familiar Killdeer is one of the earliest birds I can recall forming a connection to. I’d say without hesitation that I recognized a Killdeer before I recognized some of my own relatives. It has been in my life for so long, in fact, that I never once stopped to consider how strange its name was. Then a few weeks ago I pointed one out to a person who’d never seen one before, and she gave me the darndest look when I told her what it was called.

I had to step back and consider that it is indeed odd to give this innocuous little bird a name that suggests it’s hunting far above its weight class. The dainty Killdeer does nothing of the sort. I explained that the name Killdeer is an onomatopoeic reference to the bird’s distinctive call<sup>1</sup>, but upon further consideration I realized that not only is “kill deer” a strange thing for a bird to say, but you also really need to use your imagination to hear it.

I don’t know who originally decided on the unusual name<sup>2</sup> but it has stuck over the years, even in the face of alternative and suitable suggestions like Noisy Plover and Chattering Plover. In case you’re not picking up on the theme here, these little birds are loud! Their nervous screams and cries can be heard at great distances, and the word “incessant” could have been invented specifically for them. If you’re seeing but not hearing a Killdeer, it’s probably dead.

*Continued on following page*

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Whether or not you're familiar with the Killdeer, chances are good that if you live in North America, you've seen (or heard) one before. These birds belong in the shorebird group and do like the shore, but are also quite at home in a farm field, parking lot, roadside, golf course, urban park, or the vacant lot next door. Any open habitat whatsoever could be the site of a Killdeer nest, so if you have even a fleeting awareness of them, you're bound to run across one sooner or later.

It is probably the Killdeer's status as a familiar neighbour that has allowed it to keep its one-word name, as it is not physically very distinct from many of the other plovers. It is about the size of a dove, with a similarly chunky body but longer legs. Its back is brown, its belly is white, and it sports two concentric, black collars that wrap around its breast. Its stout black bill – characteristic of most plovers – allows it to grab all manner of invertebrate prey on dry land or in shallow water.

The Killdeer's most colourful feature is exposed only when it flies or when it defends its nest, the latter of which it does with great spectacle. If a predator<sup>3</sup> approaches its eggs or chicks (both of which are stealthily camouflaged), the Killdeer initiates an elaborate act. Hanging one wing to the ground as though it were broken, the Killdeer exposes its Creamsicle-orange rump and screams bloody-murder, drawing the animal's attention and slowly leading it

away from the concealed young toward the promise of an easy meal. When the bird figures the predator is far enough afield, it simply picks up its lame wing, launches into the air, goes momentarily (and uncharacteristically) silent, and returns to rejoin its family.

I have argued before that charismatic, one-word names can help capture people's imaginations, and I think that goes doubly for children. With indoor recreation and "nature deficit disorder" becoming the norm, it is now more important than ever to give kids the opportunity to connect with the natural world. Birds – with their bright colours, loud noises, ubiquitous presence and unusual behaviours – are a perfect tool with which to do that.

But with a thousand things vying for children's attention these days, it's tough to grab a 10-year-old's focus with something as drab-sounding as a Clay-colored Sparrow or Black-and-White Warbler – they'll hardly look up from their Gamebox or Playcube. Whenever possible, we need to be able to captivate kids with a single word. Maybe if every child had a relationship with their neighbourhood Killdeer like I did, and my father before me, we could open the doors to the out-of-doors for an entire generation. ●

- 1 I didn't actually use the word "onomatopoeic" because, you know, that would be weird.
- 2 Nor, apparently, does Google, although it seems to have arisen in the 18th century.
- 3 Or a bumbling human.

## Going Squirrely!

By Marilyn Swaby

The Young NATs met on November 11 to search for squirrels. As cold as it was, we all enjoyed the hunt for those scrappy creatures. After a quick lesson on using binoculars, we looked for signs of their presence, including things like tracks in the snow, left-over meals and nests in the trees.

In-between our search for squirrels, we played games to keep our toes warm. The players were grey or red squirrels and they had to hide and find "nuts" while four of us were "cats" who tried to catch them.

Because it was Remembrance Day, while feeding the chickadees, we also observed our minute of silence in remembrance.



Photo: Marilyn Swaby

## Join Nature Guelph! Sept. 2017 – Aug. 2018 Annual Membership

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# Scenic Niagara Gulls

By David Brewer



Five hardy souls assembled on a very foggy December 3rd morning for our annual pilgrimage to Niagara. We stopped off at a couple of places en route. Firstly, Eastport Drive in Hamilton, where there were good numbers of (mostly Greater) Scaup and Ruddy Ducks in Windermere Basin. A Snowy Owl sat on top of the far berm, against the scenic and picturesque backdrop of the smoke-belching Stelco works.

Further on we stopped briefly at Gray's Road, a worthwhile few minutes that gave us good views of all three Scoters, lots of Oldsquaw and Common Goldeneye and one Horned Grebe. The Barrow's/Common Goldeneye hybrid, which had been present the previous week, was not seen. Then off to the Niagara-on-the-Lake lookover, which was not particularly productive, although we did get reasonable looks at an adult Little Gull associating with the Bonapartes on the American side.

Our next stop was the "Sand-dock" just below Queenston Heights, with good numbers of Bonaparte's Gulls and another one, or possibly two, more adult Littles. The parking lot just below the Brock Monument gives a good overview of the river; there were about a dozen

vultures sitting on their usual perch of a church roof on the American side; at extreme range we persuaded ourselves that two of them were Black Vultures, the others were Turkeys.

The two species are instantly identifiable even at long range when in flight, but when sitting, the diagnostic colours of the head are a little difficult at three quarters of a mile range, even with a good telescope. Fortunately, a little later they roused themselves and we could identify a couple of Blacks from our next stop at the Sir Adam Beck overlook. This was as usual quite productive, with large numbers of gulls, including several Iceland (Kumlein's race) Gulls, both adult and in various stages of immaturity; one Glaucous Gull; one or possibly two Thayer's Gulls; and at least one Lesser Black-backed Gull.

We then stopped off at the Whirlpool, which did not produce much, then on to the Falls themselves. We started by parking, as do all good birdwatchers, in the no-parking zone at the River Control Structure half a mile upstream from the Falls themselves. This gives a very good view of the upstream rapids, with several additional species of duck and large numbers of gulls, including several

of both Greater and Lesser Black-backs, sitting on rocky outcrops in the middle of the river. Unfortunately, the river was unusually high, washing over the concrete mole which is usually a good place to observe sitting gulls at close range.

There was a very dense assemblage of ducks on the upstream side of the River Control Structure itself; both species of Scaup, Redheads and Canvasbacks, while in the centre of the river further up there was a small flock (I am told that the correct collective term is a "herd") of Tundra Swans. A second Snowy Owl was perched on the light at the far end of the mole. We then parked legally at Dufferin Island and walked down in the direction of the Falls, which was a worthwhile activity.

The water impoundment lagoons just up from the defunct power station had their usual small flock of Hooded Mergansers, while the overlook next to the power station gave a good view of the rapids, with large numbers of Common Goldeneye, along with smaller numbers of a few other species, such as Gadwall and American Wigeon. After we were there a few minutes, we spotted first one, then several, Harlequin Ducks playing hide-and-seek in the rushing waters besides the boulders just below the old barge wreck. They were very active, frequently diving into the surf and hiding behind rocks, but in the end everybody got good views through a telescope. There were, in total, four males in full plumage and one female.

Finally, we walked down to the Falls, where a very obliging Kittiwake, in the immature "W" plumage, flew directly below us in the mist. Altogether, we recorded twenty-one species of duck and ten gulls. ●

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# Upcoming Events

## NATURE GUELPH MEETINGS & SPEAKER SERIES

**January 11, 7:30–9:00 pm**  
**Illuminating Goldenrod:  
Science Illustration and a Common  
Wildflower's Fascinating Fauna**  
*Emily Damstra,*  
*Freelance Natural Science Illustrator*

**February 8, 7:30–9:00 pm**  
**Birds & Mammals of the Falklands  
and Sub-Antarctic Islands**  
*David Brewer,*  
*Organic Chemist (retired),*  
*Royal Ontario Museum Research*  
*Associate (Ornithology), Author*

Meetings occur on the second Thursday of each month. We begin with a brief business meeting, followed by a short break, then the speaker's presentation.

Non-members are welcome at this free event. Goodwill donations gratefully accepted. Snacks and coffee available for a nominal fee. Please bring your own coffee mug.

*OAC Centennial Arboretum Centre,*  
*University of Guelph*  
*270 Arboretum Road, Guelph*

Visit [www.natureguelph.ca](http://www.natureguelph.ca) for updates.

*We ask that you do not wear perfumes out of respect for people who are allergic to them.*

## NATURE GUELPH OUTDOOR EVENTS

**January 6, 7:45 am–12:00 pm**  
**The Arboretum Winter Bird Count**  
*Chris Earley, Interpretive Naturalist,*  
*University of Guelph*

*Meet at the J.C. Taylor Centre in  
The Arboretum.*

**February 4, 2:00–3:30 pm**  
**Rare Trees in Winter**  
*Sean Fox*

*Meet at The Arboretum Centre  
parking lot.*

## NATURE GUELPH WILDFLOWER SOCIETY

**January 17, 7:30 pm**  
**Becoming a RAINGER:  
Gardening with a Purpose**  
*Christine Bowen, Program Coordinator,*  
*Hamilton Bay Area Restoration Council*

**February 21, 7:30 pm**  
**Conifers in Halton**  
*Bill McIlveen*

*John McCrae Public School Library,*  
*187 Water Street, Guelph*

## NEARBY NATURALIST CLUBS SELECT EVENTS

**Halton/North Peel Naturalists Club**  
[hnpnc.com](http://hnpnc.com)

**January 9, 7:30 pm**  
**New Life, New Purpose: Using Non-  
Releasable Birds to Affect Change**  
*Kyle Horner, Wild Ontario*

**February 13, 7:30 pm**  
**Charles Darwin**  
*Darryl Gwynne*

*St. Alban the Martyr Anglican  
Church Hall, 537 Main Street,  
Glen Williams (Georgetown)*

**Hamilton Naturalists Club**  
[hamiltonnature.org](http://hamiltonnature.org)

**January 8, 7:30–9:00 pm**  
**The Owl Foundation:  
A Fly-by-Night Organization?**  
*Jen Baker, HNC Land Trust Manager*

**February 12, 7:30–9:00 pm**  
**Wolves, Coyotes and Hybrids  
in North America**  
*Dr. Brad White*

*Royal Botanical Gardens,*  
*680 Plains Road W., Burlington*

## rare [raresites.org](http://raresites.org)

**January 10, 7:00–8:30 pm**  
**The Great Migration and the  
Mountain Gorillas of East Africa**  
*Rob and Sue Fox*

*rare ECO Centre (Slit Barn)*  
*768 Blair Road, Cambridge*  
*Admission \$8 or \$3 with an Events  
Discount card. Must pre-register online.*

**Waterloo Region Nature**  
[waterlooregionnature.ca](http://waterlooregionnature.ca)

**January 22, 7:30–9:30 pm**  
**From Bats to Boas and Back:  
Flora & Fauna on the Northeast  
Coast, Costa Rica, Cano Palma  
Biological Station**

**February 26, 7:30–9:30 pm**  
**Who Said Trees Couldn't Walk?  
Movement of the Northern Treeline  
in Response to Climate Change**

*Knox Presbyterian Church Hall,*  
*50 Erb Street West, Waterloo*

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# Plant Watch: Citizen Science



The Plant Watch program is part of Nature Watch and enables citizen scientists to get involved in monitoring climate change by recording flowering times for selected plant species and reporting these dates to researchers.

Scientists believe climate change is affecting plant blooming times and

predict that the greatest increases in temperature will be in Western and Northern Canada, while some parts of Eastern Canada may actually be cooling. By observing flowering times of local plants, you can help researchers discover how common plants are responding to climate change and track where changes are taking place in Canada, and at what rate. The plant species selected for study bloom every spring in response to rising temperatures not in response to day length and thus are useful for studying the effects of climate change.

As a Plant Watch participant, you select one or two plants from the Plant Watch species list that you can observe every day for several weeks in Spring and record the dates for bud swell and blooming. Your observations are then submitted to the Plant Watch site. The data collected across Canada is available for viewing on the Plant Watch website.

To register for Plant Watch or for more information, check out [www.naturewatch.ca/plantwatch/](http://www.naturewatch.ca/plantwatch/)

## City of Guelph Parkland Dedication Bylaw Review

The City of Guelph is presently evaluating and updating its parkland strategy. According to the website “The existing Parkland Dedication Bylaw was adopted in 1989, with two amendments in 1990 and 2007. Since then, planning in Ontario broadly, and Guelph specifically, has evolved a great deal and an update is required.”

To help improve Guelph’s park system, the city is asking for citizens to fill out a Park Dedication Survey. It’s a wonderful chance to have some input on Guelph’s parkland strategy. You can take the survey here: [guelph.ca/2017/10/survey-parkland-dedication-bylaw-review/](http://guelph.ca/2017/10/survey-parkland-dedication-bylaw-review/)

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Please submit all contributions for the next issue to Sandra MacGregor by email on or before Feb. 1, 2018.

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