

Strictly for the birds

by Bethsheila Kent

Well, Birders, it's all about the Spring Migration Count and what a fabulous day we enjoyed with mild temperatures, mostly sunny skies once the cloud of early morning blew off and the sun shone down uninterrupted for the remainder of the day. Even the light wind didn't affect the birds' activities. And, although it is still early and not all of the results have come in, here, in Victoria County 13 birders counted in the field and/or at feeders for a total of 66 species observed and an impressive 1672 individuals counted. My thanks to everyone who participated - Bev Brett, Barb and Don Tower, Hamilton Carter and Amy MacDonald, Jim and Sharon Morrow, Fritz McEvoy, Donna Montgomery-Frizzel and Harold Frizzel, Roberta Fraser and Floyd Kent. (Needless to say I won't thank myself). Below is a report of the results tabulated to Tuesday, May 11. Further results will be commented on in future columns.

Spotlight on the American Woodcock:

The American woodcock (approximately 11" in length) is a nocturnal shorebird that prefers thickly wooded swamps and wet forested areas. Its body is very chunky and thick; it has virtually no neck. Its legs are very short. Its colouration reflects its preferred habitat - a strongly black-striped head gives way to a mottled



AMERICAN WOODCOCK

black, brown and grey leaf-pattern back. It's huge, bulging eyes are set high on its head; its dark brown bill is thick and heavy and is extremely long given the size of the bird. Its dark crown contrasts sharply with its pale underparts. The American woodcock is a secretive bird, very shy, and as a result is not often seen regardless of its local abundance. Males are seen more often in early spring when they are engaged in courtship ritual. Like the Wilson's snipe, the male American woodcock flies high overhead in tight circles, its rapid wing-beats producing a distinct whistling sound. The American woodcock often plunges to the ground in a dizzying display of zig-zags, twittering and chirping before coming to earth. American woodcock are ground nesters; therefore I would caution anyone walking through broad openings in wet woods to tread carefully.

On the Water:

Before I launch into the business of reporting the "water" sightings, I must share with you my excitement at finding four hooded merganser (3 male, 1 female) on the Baddeck River at its outflow into the Bras d'Or Lake. A species associated with freshwater habitat, it appears to be expanding into Cape Breton's inland waters as this is not the year's first sighting of this beautiful, mid-sized duck and hopefully, not the last! Now to count business. Almost all of Victoria County's shorelines were scoured by avid birders with the exception of a short stretch of Atlantic Coast south of Smokey to North Shore. The results are impressive: common loon, double-crested cormorant, great blue heron, Canada goose, green-winged teal, American black duck, American widgeon, ring-necked duck, hooded merganser, common merganser (in record numbers!),

greater yellowlegs, spotted sandpiper (weeks ahead of schedule), Wilson's snipe, American woodcock, herring, great black-backed and ring-billed gull and belted kingfisher. For some unknown reason, no mallard were found on Count Day, although they were observed at Baddeck Bay and Baddeck Inlet during the reporting period. Ditto with regards to red-breasted merganser seen at Big Harbour after Count Day. Jim Morrow, in addition to his count results, reported 2 red-throated loon at Ingonish Harbour on May 5, a very late date for this high-north nester.

Landlubber Report:

County birders reported excellent numbers of passerines, ground birds and raptors including the following: American bald eagle, red-tailed hawk, sharp-shinned hawk, ruffed grouse, rock and mourning dove, woodpeckers including downy, hairy, pileated, black-backed and northern flicker. Jim Morrow also reported a pair of yellow-bellied sapsucker seen May 1, a very early sighting of this secretive woodpecker species. Back to the count. Swallows counted include tree and cliff

although Angie Aucoin (thank you!) reported barn swallow at Big Harbour and Jim Morrow reported a large mixed flock of tree, barn and cliff at Middle River on May 10th. Once more, back to the count. What would a count be

without blue and grey jay, American crow, common raven, black-capped and boreal chickadee and, of course, brown creeper! Also noted were loads of both golden- and ruby-crowned kinglet, Hermit thrush and American robin, a few early northern parula, the usual number of in-bound yellow-rumped and palm warbler, a few black-and white warbler and 2 rose-breasted grosbeak at Cape North reported by Fritz McEvoy. A fabulous songster, the rose-breasted grosbeak often comes to feeders in spring and this year was, apparently, no exception. Where was I. Chipping, fox, Savannah, song and white-throated sparrow, dark-eyed junco, black-birds including common grackle, rusty and red-winged blackbird, purple finch, pine siskin, American goldfinch, evening grosbeak and house sparrow. Whew! Obvious by its absence on Count Day, red-breasted nuthatch have been seen in many locations both before and after. Other raptors news includes the remarkably aggressive northern goshawk that flew four feet from me in the yard to take one of our mourning dove and the 2 American kestrel at Middle River reported by Jim Morrow. Bev Brett reported a barred owl at North River. Hummer news: Sharon Morrow passed on a North River sighting by Kathy Kerr of this, our most popular migrant on May 8, right on schedule. When birding at Big Harbour today, (the 11th May), I thought I saw and heard one but, because it moved so quickly and I was unprepared for it, it took me a few minutes to realize what, exactly I saw and heard. Ah, spring.

Again my thanks to all who participated in this year's Spring Migration Count. I can be reached at 295-1749 to report your birding news.

Cabot Trail Relay Race Set for May 29th-30th

by Eileen Woodford

Lace 'em up. Runners will soon be packing their sneakers and heading for Cape Breton to hit the pavement for the annual Cabot Trail Relay set for May 29th and 30th

"We have the maximum 70 teams registered this year, up from 65 in 2009. This means that more than 1000 runners will descend on the island for the 23rd running of the Cabot Trail relay" said Race Chair Dave Parkinson. "Race preparations are in the final stages and we look forward to welcoming teams from across Canada and Maine to our world-class event"

The Cabot Trail Relay Race is a 298 kilometer, 17 stage relay race through some of the most beautiful scenery in the world - from the steep mountains of the Cape Breton highlands to the gently rolling Margaree Valley.

More than half the teams registered for this year's event are from Nova Scotia with another 12 from other parts of Atlantic Canada, 17 from Ontario or Quebec and 4 from Maine. Last year's winners were Dennis Fairalls Grey Hair with a time of 16hrs: 59 min: 48sec almost 5 minutes faster than the second place team.

Much like the course itself, the event has journeyed a long, winding and impressive road to become one of the most popular events in Canada. Six teams competed for the first Cabot Trail Relay Race in 1988 and in just over two decades the event has grown to welcome seventy teams and each year there is a waiting list.

Each of the 70 teams can have as

many as 17 runners with each assigned one of the legs, while others choose to participate with fewer people and runners complete multiple legs. The event draws a mix of ultra-competitive teams as well as teams that are less interested in making record times and simply want to complete the grueling course.

The race begins at 7 a.m. at the Gaelic College in St. Ann's on May 29th and runs around the clock, concluding Sunday morning May 30th around 9:30 a.m. at the Courthouse in Baddeck. A large crowd of participants and local residents is always on hand to greet the final runners as they make their way down the main street to

the finish line.

Legs vary from 12 to 20 km in length and each presents its own unique challenge. Leg #9 is generally regarded as the most difficult with the runner required to climb the daunting North Mountain.

The Relay weekend has proven to be a significant boost to local hotels, restaurants and stores drawing people to Cape Breton at the end of May in the shoulder tourist season. Many community groups also host fundraising events on Relay weekend. Proceeds from the race support bursaries set up at each of the four high schools on the Cabot Trail

For more information visit www.cabottrailrelay.com or Contact Cabot Trail Relay Race Chair Dave Parkinson at ctr@ns.sympatico.ca.



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