

# Strictly for the birds

by Bethsheila Kent

This time it is one of my editors who has bested me in reporting a very nice and rare sighting in the Village of Baddeck - John Johnson reported the presence of a northern mockingbird! My experience with this rather drab-appearing but elegant songster is limited to southern sightings when I have been fortunate to escape the throes of winter and head to warmer climes for a week or two. This is what John wrote: "At first, we spotted it along the gravelled shoulder of the road (Fownes Drive), where, I imagine, it was scurrying back and forth looking for



food. We identified it from its distinct wing movements as it moved around. Every once in a while it would raise and flap its wings a couple of times as it browsed along the gravel. It also had a lovely long slim tail which it used while moving about, flipping it up and down. It ran across the road to our side where it repeated its wing movements, then flew up into a tree in our neighbour's yard. A lovely shade of gray with very obvious white wing patches (very apparent when it did its flapping and, as well, when it flew next door to the tree). He/she stayed a while and then seemed to move down the street. What a thrill! We read that it possibly uses the wing movements to scare up insects. It left before we had a chance to hear it sing." A wonderful sighting indeed!

**Spotlight on (what else?) the Northern Mockingbird:**

The northern mockingbird is a rather large member of the family Mimidae which also includes thrashers. It is approximately 10 inches in length and both sexes show similar plumage; juvenile birds, however, have a considerable amount of streaking down breast and along flanks. Adult birds are rather drab - a grey head and back gives way to an all-black tail with white outer tail feathers. Its wings are rather dramatic and show large white patches, visible in flight, that are flashed during courting and territorial displays. The northern mockingbird is best known for its songs, long, complex and variable as this bird incorporates songs of other species into its repertoire. Northern mockingbird songs are repeated several to many times as this species will remain on a perch for extended periods of time. Both sexes sing. Usually found far to the south of Cape Breton Island, I have had reports of northern mockingbird only sparingly, mostly in the North Sydney area.

**Recent Sightings:**

Hilda Proctor, South Haven, called to alert me to the presence of a small shorebird at one of her feeders. Hilda was unable to provide a definitive identification for the small, quick-moving bird, no surprise as many of these small sandpipers have a very similar appearance in their winter plumage. Out on St. Ann's Bay several groups of common merganser were noted grazing quite close to shore; farther out on the water were a small number of red-breasted merganser on the margin of a large and loose raft of a mix of white-winged and surf scoter, the latter's white head patches glowing in the bright sunlight. Common merganser were also noted on Baddeck Bay as were Canada geese. Black guillemot, all in drab winter plumage were noted at Jersey Cove, offshore at River Bennett, farther north at Wreck Cove and at Seal Island Bridge.

Only a single common loon, noted on Baddeck Bay, was found this reporting period. As recently as November 15, a few common tern were observed at Englishtown as were rather perplexed-looking black-bellied plover, several resigned American black duck (also found in many other locations), Bonaparte's gull (also noted at Nyanza), many, many double-crested cormorant and, of course, the "usual" gulls - herring, great black-backed and ring-billed - were in evidence in a variety of locations. Mallard were found on the pond beneath the Bell Museum, out on the Bras d'Or at

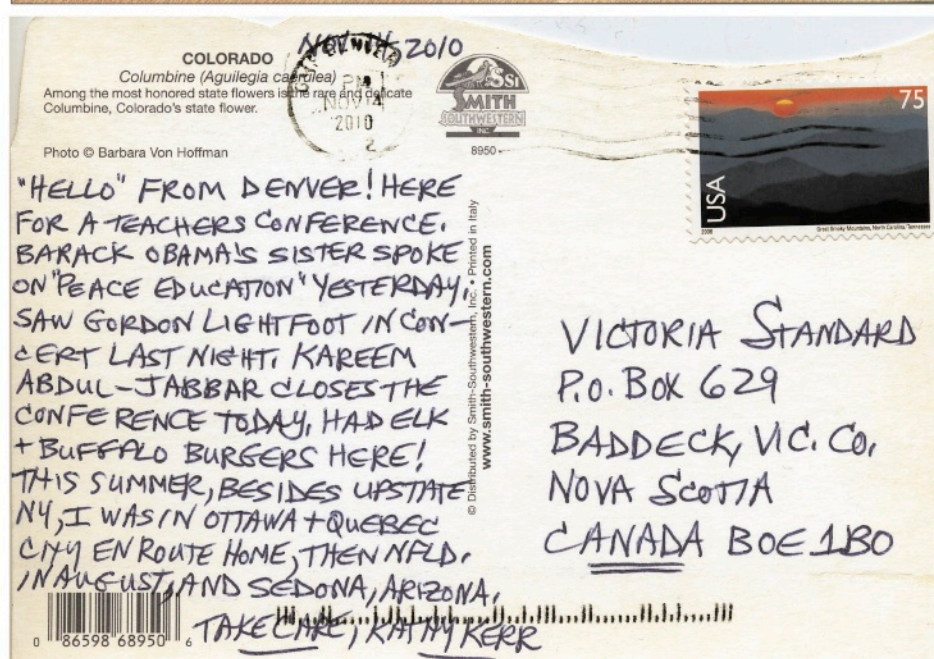
the Inlet, at South Gut St. Ann's and at Big Harbour. Common golden-eye have now made their way onto the Bras d'Or and small numbers were observed at Baddeck Bay and at Big Harbour. A single great blue heron was last noted on November 15th at Big Harbour.

**Landlubber Report:**

Feeders continue to provide excellent observations of all the usual feeder species - dark-eyed junco, black-capped chickadee, American goldfinch, mourning dove, blue jay, red-breasted nuthatch and both song and white-throated sparrow. A few cedar waxwing showed up in my yard one late afternoon and gorged on some of the remaining maple-leaved viburnum berries; several days later it was a small flock of Bohemians who completed the job. A single American robin came in in the company of a very bright rusty blackbird and stayed around for the better part of a very overcast day before departing, together, for parts unknown. Of course, the big news in yards this reporting period is the northern mockingbird seen in Baddeck by John Johnson. Out and about, mostly in South Haven, St. Ann's and Big Harbour, golden-crowned kinglet, brown creeper and boreal chickadee are plentiful; grey jay not so much but very much in evidence. Pileated woodpecker was heard at North Gut St. Ann's; a second individual was both heard and seen at Big Harbour. Many hairy woodpecker were noted recently, many already staking out territory in a very noisy and boisterous manner - lots of displaying including neck extensions, head wagging and wing flapping. Rosy finches are returning to the area with both purple finch and pine grosbeak noted in a variety of locations, many individuals singing. A few ruffed grouse were noted and those at Big Harbour and St. Ann's. Angie Aucoin, Big Harbour, reported a red-tailed hawk taking a variety of small songbirds - very unusual behavior for this large buteo which usually feeds on snowshoe hare and other rodentia, a sure sign of a scarcity of the smaller critters, likely due to the high numbers of coyote on the prowl. Other raptors noted this reporting period include many American bald eagle (both adult and juvenile birds) in a variety of locations, a sharp-shinned hawk at Big Harbour and a magnificent, male northern harrier at River Bennett.

The Christmas Bird Count season fast approaches. Anyone wishing to participate can call me and I'll provide route and data collection information to anyone wishing to come out for this great, annual citizen scientist effort. My thanks to Hilda Proctor, John Johnson and Angie Aucoin for sharing their recent sightings. I can be reached at 295-1749 with your birding news.

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