

Strictly for the birds ... many wonderful sightings

by Bethsheila Kent

Snow buntings have been spotted in many areas of the County these past few weeks, from just a single bird seen by Jim Morrow at Big Farm to large flocks noted by my husband, Floyd at Big Baddeck and also by Bruce and Bonnie Nunn at Baddeck Inlet. A true denizen of the north, these delightful birds are easy to coax to feeders as they are ground foragers and enjoy the same cornless mix as blue jay and our other boreal species. Spread a liberal amount of feed beneath hanging feeders when buntings are present and they will simply join in with the other species feeding on the ground. Also in the news this reporting period is a lone great blue heron seen very recently adjacent to the Boardwalk on Water Street in Baddeck. Many folks have taken note of this forlorn wader and our hearts go out to this bird in obvious distress. Kate Oland, (our beloved librarian) of West Middle River was able to approach the bird but hesitated to remove it from where it perched beside the water. Apparently,

DNR is aware of this bird's plight but has chosen to allow nature to take its course. It is unlikely the bird will survive as it failed to migrate and the ice is catching



SNOW BUNTING

all along the Bras d'Or. Given its extremely weakened state it is perhaps best that DNR chose not to interfere. And, last but certainly not least, dovekie once again make the birding news. Kate and Brook Oland found one of these diminutive Alcids in their yard after one of our recent "blows". That the birds was blown so far off course that it was found in West Middle River is something of note in itself; that Kate and Brook responded by returning the little black and white bird to the shore of the Bras d'Or where it took its bearings before taking off has endeared them to me forever!

Spotlight on the Snow Bunting:

Snow bunting summer far to the north on Arctic tundra or rocky shores and spend the winters in a wide arc across the North American continent. Here, in Cape Breton, this species is commonly encountered along the coast where small flocks forage among the exposed heads of spartina and maram grasses; occasionally we find them inland on exposed, weedy fields or on wind-blown stubble of cut over fields. Since snow buntings are usually encountered in winter, I will describe that plumage. A small bird (6 inches in length) and rather thick and squat, snow buntings give the overall impression of a bird very light in colour, with the excep-

tion of long, black and white wings and black legs and feet. The male of the species shows more white or buff than the female or juvenile but in winter all birds have a yellow bill, darkening and becoming black as breeding season nears. The winter male sports a buff crown, light, creamy back and black and white tail. The female of the species is somewhat darker overall - the buff of the crown extends down the length of the back and merges with black and white tail feathers. All snow bunting have a buffy face patch in winter but juvenile birds are greyish and somewhat streaked. The snow bunting's distinctive whistled "tew" and persistent buzzy notes while in flight often alert one to their presence before they are seen. As with flock birds, in general, a group will take to flight simultaneously, wheeling and turning rapidly before coming to rest a short distance from where they first took to the air. Its large feet give it buoyancy when moving across fresh, powder snow.

Spotlight on the Dovekie:

The dovekie is the smallest member of the auk or alcid family, measuring a mere 8-9 inches in length. It is a chubby little bird, seemingly neckless, with a very short and stubby bill and a very short tail. Like all other members of this bird family it is a study in contrast - black above and white below. Summer birds show a black chin and upper breast that gives way to pure white underparts. Winter birds show a white chin and breast as well as a broad white stripe that curves up around the eye and that stands out in dramatic contrast to the black head and back (seen in all plumages). Like other members of its family, the dovekie is a strong underwater swimmer and uses its wings to move through the water. Even in flight it is easy to identify - its small, compact size, rapid wing-beats and obvious black-and-white plumage are unmistakable. Although the dovekie is pelagic it can often be seen in protected bays and coves along the coastline of Victoria County during the winter months.

On the Water:
As is often the case at this time of year, sightings have been scarce. On the water, large rafts of common merganser can be found at Big Harbour, along the shores of the Bras d'Or, at St. Ann's Bay and points north. On open water, also look for red-breasted merganser. American black ducks are still present in open water - I encountered 5 of them in a very small patch of water completely sur-

rounded by ice adjacent to the Bay Road seeming unaware that they were hemmed in. A mallard x American black duck was noted at Big Harbour keeping company with a female mallard - Anas ducks are notorious for interbreeding. There were also a number of pairs of American black ducks at the same location. Common goldeneye are on open water from one end of the County to the other. A black guillemot was noted on the Great Bras d'Or channel recently - a first for me as

this species (Alcidae) are associated with the open waters of the Atlantic. Canada geese can be found at River Bennett, Baddeck Inlet and also around Nyanza. A few ring-billed gull have remained in the area and can be found associated with herring and great black-backed gull in a variety of locations. A single belted kingfisher was noted at South gut St. Ann's; however, as the ice continues to form, these wonderful diving birds will become rather scarce.

On the Land:

Feeders are very active these days with all the usual species in attendance: black-capped chickadee, red-breasted nuthatch, American goldfinch, song sparrow, mourning dove, blue jay, European starling and the ubiquitous American crow. Richard McCurdy, Big Baddeck, had 3 white-winged cross-bill at a feeder, a most unusual sight! In the field, watch for boreal chickadee, golden-crowned kinglet, brown creeper, dark-eyed junco (singing their little hearts out!), pine grosbeak, grey jay, hairy and pileated woodpecker. And, of course, what would this report be without a mention of our American bald eagle! Many adults were sighted during this reporting period as they settle into their winter routine near open water.

My thanks to Bruce & Bonnie Nunn, Kate & Brook Oland, Richard McCurdy, Jim Morrow and my husband Floyd, for sharing their recent experiences. I can be reached at 295-1749 with your birding news.



RESCUED DOVEKIE

Volunteer Week 2011

by Tom C. Wilson

The dates have been announced for Volunteer Week in 2011, and they are April 10-16, 2011.

The Provincial Volunteer Awards Ceremony will take place Monday, April 4th at Westin Hotel, Halifax.

Each municipality can send one volunteer to represent their area at the provincial ceremonies.

The Process - Community organizations can nominate one outstanding volunteer from their organization. The deadline for nominations is Friday, February

11th. You can nominate your volunteer online or print off the pdf form and mail or fax (295-1864) in the nomination form.

Council will select the volunteer to represent all Victoria County volunteers at the February 14th Municipal Council meeting. The volunteer selected will be notified by the Municipality of Victoria County the following day and briefed on expenses and what happens at Provincial Volunteer Awards Ceremonies.

For more information visit the County's website at www.victoriacounty.com.

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VILLAGE OF BADDECK

EXPRESSIONS OF INTEREST

Village of Baddeck - Community Wharf

The Village of Baddeck is accepting proposals for the lease of 1,080 square feet of retail space in the "The Old Freight Shed". All proposals should be received at the office of the Village of Baddeck by 4:00 pm on Wednesday, February 9, 2011.

Proposals should be submitted to:

Village of Baddeck

495 Chebucto Street

Box 63, Baddeck, N.S. B0E 1B0

Tel: (902) 295-3666 • Fax: (902) 295-1729

Signed: Eddie Keeling,
Chairman, Village of Baddeck

HIGHLAND ANIMAL HOSPITAL

Vaccination Clinics

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 1ST

NEIL'S HARBOUR ~ 10:00 am to Noon

INGONISH BEACH ~ 12:30 to 4:00 pm

Doctors S. VanZwol (No Appointments Needed)

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