

Newport Forest

Sunday March 25 2012

2:35 - 6:40 pm

Weather: prec. 2 mm; RH 87%; BP 101.4 kPa; clear; NW 5-10 kmh; T 19° C

Purpose: Birding

Participants: Pat, Kee

The omen for a good birding day at Newport Forest sometimes appears in the form of a Red-tailed Hawk. As today, when one wheeled majestically over our track, flashing its copper tail in the bright afternoon sun. The weather on site was warm, with a cooling breeze from the northwest and an absolutely clear blue sky.

We put some bird seed up in the Black Maple tray by the Nook, then sat to see who came: Blue Jays, White-breasted Nuthatches and Chickadees at first, then a small flock of Juncos flew in to glean the ground beneath the tray. Then a Song Sparrow started calling. We spotted a sparrow in the bushes that I watched through the binoculars, calling the field marks out to Pat. "Does it have a stickpin as well?" No it didn't. "Well is it a Field Sparrow? Get the Peterson."

We walked to the river, stopping occasionally to peer or poke at things. I looked into Vernal Pond C (just before Edgar's Elbow) and found case-making caddisfly larvae lumbering clumsily about the bottom as they dragged their twig-houses about. The first Pond-skaters of the season shared the surface tension above them.

We noticed that all the "wet necks" between successive vernal ponds have already completely dried out, even as the ponds themselves begin to shrink. As mentioned in earlier Bulletins, we anticipate a dry year ahead. (See the precipitation report with this issue.) Continuing our trek to the river, Pat spotted our first Spring Azure butterfly crossing the trail overhead -- a light blue flutter of tiny wings. We heard very few frogs calling, for some reason

We stood at the river landing admiring the panorama of rolling water, when an Eastern Cottontail bounded across the landing in front of us. We went up on the river bluffs to sit for a while. While Pat went looking for Coltsfoot along the trail nearby, I spotted what I first thought was a young Beaver near the shore below. (Pessimism leads to wrong IDs just as readily as optimism does.) But with some relief I saw the snaky black tail and realized it was a full-grown Muskrat. Pat came back in time to see it swim across the river to the opposite bank, where it disappeared.

As the river levels gradually fall, the gravel bars of Mussel Beach slowly emerge

from the murky water. The Muskrat had been prowling the bars, frequently immersing its head, possibly to nibble at the tender shoots of cottonwood that perpetually sprout on the bars, but never reach a year or two in age before being ground away by ice.

Back in camp, we got a little more serious about bird-watching, dividing our forces for better coverage. Pat went up to the Old Snag with some birdseed for the tray there, while I stayed in the Nook. Where were the woodpeckers? Then a Downy showed up. Ho-lee! Wasn't that a Brown Creeper creeping up the side of the Black Maple? Brown Creepers are easy to spot and distinguish from other birds. My personal visual gestalt: 'a dirty-streaky fat little brown thing'.

Pat had found little action at the Old Snag, so she returned in time to spot a Northern Flicker flying overhead and into the Gallery Forest. At last a Red-bellied Woodpecker showed up. We do not seem to be seeing these birds quite as frequently as we have in past years. Pat wondered if there had been something of a decline in woodpeckers since about 2009-10.

We had been hearing occasional gobbles from Eva's Wood, but also what sounded like the barking of a small terrier. It was only when we heard gobbles and barks interspersed that we realized that the barking sound was yet another call in the turkey repertoire. (Checking later, we confirmed this.) Pat went for a brief walk, while I idly watched a distant junco that turned out not to be one, as the grey underparts extended well up the throat. I caught a profile of the head. It looked like a flycatcher. Eastern Phoebe? Eastern Peewee? Suddenly it left its perch to fly to the hickory on the other side of the trailer. I followed, determined to "nail" it. There it was again, perched high in a small tree. It was in fact mostly grey, with a prominent grey crest. A Tufted Titmouse! As if to erase any further doubt from our minds, it sang for Pat, who had hurried back at my frantic arm-waving. After the excitement died down she reported several Common Grackles flying over the Lower Meadow.

It was now late afternoon and we still had to install two bird houses up by the road. Early on, the West Elgin Nature Club had suggested that we put up a "bluebird trail" along the road, a succession of bluebird houses attached to fence posts. In past years they have indeed been inhabited by the occasional Eastern Bluebird, but more often by Tree Swallows and House Wrens, if at all. We got one box up before realizing that we really should be using longer screws, We left the other box for another time and stayed only long enough to watch some Killdeers in the field beside the Hurdle House. Then off we went into the sunset.

Birds: (21)

American Crow (TR); American Robin (RL); Black-capped Chickadee (Tr); Blue Jay (GF); Brown Creeper (GF); Canada Goose (TR); Common Grackle (LM); Dark-eyed Junco (GF); Downy Woodpecker (Tr); Field Sparrow (GF); Killdeer (HP); Mourning Dove (GF/E); Northern Cardinal (BCF); Northern Flicker (BCF); Red-bellied Woodpecker (Tr); Red-tailed Hawk (UM); Song Sparrow (GF); Tufted Titmouse (GF); Turkey Vulture (HBF); White-breasted Nuthatch (GF); Wild Turkey (EW)

Correction: Dave Martin has drawn our attention to the extreme unlikelihood that anyone would record a Rose-breasted Grosbeak this early in the year. Pat, who thought she heard it sing on March 13, has allowed that insofar as a Rose-breasted Grosbeak's song can sound like a variety of other birds (as in the "drunken robin"), the converse must also be true. Nina Hurdle, who claims to have *seen* several on the same day, harrumphs. In any case, we have scratched that species from the corresponding bird list.

Phenology:

First Spring Beauties in bloom; Dark-eyed Juncos still present; pond-skaters, caddisfly larvae, and Spring Azure active, "Thorn Apples" in leaf and flower.

Long-range weather prediction:

We are preparing an analysis of past annual precipitation figures in relation to the three-month records (January to March) as a way of predicting what the remaining nine months will be like. It turns out that even the three-month figure gives a pretty good idea of what to expect during the rest of the year, as explained in a pdf document that will be sent out at the end of this month. Preliminary calculations have revealed a predicted total for 2012 of barely over 600 mm, as dry as we've ever seen the property get. The final prediction will be accompanied by a confidence interval that tells us how variable the prediction is apt to be. At the moment, things do not look good.

IMAGES:



Source: Bill Ko @ PBase

The Tufted Titmouse is a year-round resident of Newport Forest. Not present in large numbers, it nevertheless shows up once to several times every year. We sometimes see the Tufted Titmouse feeding with nut-hatches and chickadees, being about the same size and having much the same diet. Its call is a brief but loud, slightly descending whistle repeated four or five times in quick succession.



FinePix

Spring Beauties are among the next ephemerals to bloom after the Harbinger of Spring. The faintly purple-pink petals are decorated with fine pink rays.



FinePix

Erosion does not always involve the gradual loss of particulate soil, but sometimes mass movements, as here. Hummocks of soil knit together by vegetation may slide downslope on the river bluffs by increments long or short. The bodies of the very large hummocks seen here are reaching the end of their journey to ultimate dissolution -- like us.