

Date and time: Monday January 12 2015 1:00 - 2:45 pm

Weather: Pr 37 mm; RH 89%; BP 102.6 kPa; overcast; N 5-15 kmh; T - 3° C

Activity: Tracking and birding.

I pulled the van up to the Newport Forest gate just before the arrival of Pete Chapman, an expert area birder who had agreed to go tracking with me, now that there was a decent snow cover. The first thing I noticed was damage to the rural 911 (address) sign by the gate. A closer inspection revealed that a close-range shotgun blast had blown a hole in the sign, bending it to nearly a right angle in the process.



When Pete arrived, we debated about driving in. I thought we might have to walk, but he encouraged me to go through the gate anyway, so the county snow plow would have room to work the road later on. Once through the gate, I found the “footing” rather good, so I continued driving on to the end of the Upper Meadow, where I parked on a rise. When Pete joined me at the van, we put the bird seed and other supplies on a plastic sled and made our way down to the trailer.

We did not plan to be on site for long, as Pete had an appointment shortly after 3 pm and here it was already past 1 pm. We already knew there wouldn't be much tracking today. The snow was still light powder, not taking prints well and filling in tracks in very slight wind. On the way to the river we followed the tracks of a Virginia Deer that broke into a bound for some four leaps before reverting to its

customary trot. There was little else. Pete spotted squirrel tracks further on and later I saw a long trail of tiny feet, possibly a Meadow Vole.

But if the tracking was bad, the birding was (to amateur me) surprisingly good. At the Elbow in the River Trail, Pete broke off into the brush after hearing some calls to the west. He "pished" out a bird that was too fast and too distant to make out properly. Later this would turn out to be a female Eastern Bluebird.

We discussed Pete's earlier visits to the property last week. Bald Eagles. They're back big-time, according to Pete, thanks to the banning of insecticides like DDT that used to destroy the bird's eggs. He mentioned two previous visits, with a plethora of birds, as listed below. At the river, the middle of the channel was ice-free, bordered by ledges of shore ice. Walking back, Pete picked up a Ruby-crowned Kinglet. At the trailer, I closeted myself to catch up on the day's notes while Pete went out once more. As I wrote, I could hear Wendy the Weasel rustling behind the trailer wall. Two fresh scats on the ledges around the breakfast nook attested to her return. I wondered if she would have young again this year. How long would all this go on?

Pete returned in a jubilant mood. He had walked the Blind Creek Trail nearly to the end, finding many birds sequestered in bushes. That is where they had been hanging out all along: White-breasted Nuthatch, Black-capped Chickadee, Yellow-rumped Warbler and then, to top it all off, several Eastern Bluebirds! And now we observed some more birds that had been attracted by seed and suet placed out in the Nook by the trailer. Blue Jays, a Dark-eyed Junco, then a Red-bellied Woodpecker. Feeling somewhat wrung-out, I suggested that we close up and start for the Upper Meadow.

The van made it easily back to the gate. Pete drove off for his appointment and I called Pat on my cellphone to let her know we were done. She said Steve intended to drop by at 3 pm and could I wait? He showed up right on time and we chatted briefly about some work planned for trails, weather permitting, then I showed him the sign with the hole in it; "Now was that a disgruntled farmer or a drunk deer hunter," I asked. "Probably the latter," said Steve.

Phenology: snow depth in UM 15 cm, in LM 18 cm

Birds: (14)

American Crow (UM); American Tree Sparrow (UM/Rd); Black-capped Chickadee (BCF); Blue Jay (GF); Canada Goose (LM); Dark-eyed Junco (GF); Eastern Bluebird (BCF); Golden-crowned Kinglet (BCF); Hairy Woodpecker (Hole); House Sparrow (BCF) Northern Cardinal BCF; Red-bellied Woodpecker (LM/HBF); White-breasted Nuthatch (BCF); Yellow-rumped Warbler (BCF).

Readers Write:

Dave Martin, a naturalist and bird expert, sent us a link to Environment Canada confirming that, “2014 was the coldest year on record in Windsor with an average temperature of 8.2° C. The previous record was established in 1978 with 8.4° C.” The “average” in question turns out to be the average of the “daily” temperatures, each of which which is itself the average between the daily high and low.

Pete Chapman, today’s on site companion, sent this list resulting from a combination of two visits to Newport Forest. One of these visits was part of the CBC or Christmas Bird Count. Birds are listed in canonical order. (as per bird books)

Canada Goose. 40
Red- tailed Hawk. 2
Bald Eagle. 1
Red-bellied Woodpecker. 1
Downy Woodpecker. 3
Hairy Woodpecker. 1
Blue Jay. 5
American Crow. Flying over, calling. Several
Black-capped Chickadee. 6
Tufted Titmouse. 2
White-breasted Nuthatch. 2
Brown Creeper. 2
Golden-crowned Kinglet. 2
Yellow-rumped Warbler. 2
Northern Cardinal. 3
Am. Tree Sparrow. 6
Dark-eyed Junco. 12
Gold Finch 3

IMAGES:



Pete pauses on our way down to the Lower Meadow. What bird was that? The air temperature was a relatively balmy - 3° C and Pete felt quite comfortable in three layers of clothing, including lined jeans. (Gotta get me some of those.)



photo credit: Sarah Hall

A male Eastern Bluebird has a breakfast of sumac seeds on a winter day at Lake Wallenpaupack in Pennsylvania. Pete told me that the favourite winter food of many seed eaters was poison ivy berries but that (Multi-flora) Rose hips were their backup food source. Pete spotted both males and females on today's outing.



The Thames River was mostly open today, with lots of leads for ducks and geese. The water appeared to be running clear. Being older folks, we wisely decided not to test the ice. The expected overnight low was - 16° C! Yay!