

March 22, 2011 – Bird Wing Meeting

Dick Tafel began the March meeting of Bird Wing by encouraging those present not already members to join the Nipissing Naturalist Club. They were informed about the club, its meetings and functions, and membership contact information. They were reminded that at the next meeting Doug Tozer, an avid birder from Huntsville was to be the guest speaker.

Dick Tafel then presented the motion that the Bird Wing group donate \$800 towards 100 acres that was recently purchased to expand Laurier woods. Fred Pinto moved the motion, and Gary Sturge seconded it. The motion was passed unanimously.

Spring weather is hopefully just around the corner. This was evident by observations of a Grackle, Herring and Ring-billed Gulls, an American Robin, and Red-winged Blackbirds. Observations this month included a Red-tailed Hawk, White-winged Crossbills, a Merlin, a Bald Eagle, Red-breasted Nuthatches, Mourning Doves, Pine Siskins, Gold Finches, Grey Jays, Ruffed Grouse, redpolls, a Black-Backed Woodpecker, a Northern Shrike, Blue Jays, a Pileated Woodpecker, a Common Goldeneye, a Hairy Woodpecker, a Goshawk, and Mallards.

Laura Turcotte conducted a quiz about the bills of birds. The winners were Connie and Gary Sturge with nine correct answers. Fred and Claire Pinto were the runners up with eight correct answers. Next month's bird quiz will be about Warblers.

Brent Turcotte did a presentation on accidentals from the past ten years. Accidental birds are those that are observed out of their range. Our region (the blue sky region) is considered to be roughly an 80 km radius circle around North Bay. Brent gave us some interesting facts on the following accidental birds: Parasitic Jaeger, Blue-grey Gnatcatcher, Great Egret, King Rail, Yellow Rail, Northern Wheatear, Hudsonian Godwit, Yellow-headed Blackbird, Greater White-Fronted Goose, Blue Grosbeak, Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Summer Tanager, and Prairie Warbler. He also showed four birds, Ring-neck Pheasant, European Goldfinch, Mute Swan, Ringed-Turtle Dove, which are considered to be escapees. Brent will be presenting the second half of his presentation, the remaining accidentals, next month.

The feature presentation of the evening was a wonderful talk entitled "The Effects Burgeoning Snow Goose Numbers are Having on the Savannah Sparrow Populations in the Hudson Bay Lowlands". Rachel Sturge studied this relationship on the breeding/feeding grounds of the lesser Snow Goose in Wapusk National Park in La Perouse Bay. La Perouse Bay is on the Northern Manitoba coastline with salt and fresh water marsh systems, and is the breeding and feeding ground of the Lesser Snow Goose colony.

Rachel has completed a Masters' of Science and Honours Bachelor of Science from the University of Toronto, and is currently a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. She gave us an in depth look at the relationship between Snow Geese and Savannah Sparrows. She also educated us on the local furry and feathered inhabitants, and told us stories of how the local wildlife affected her experiments.

There has been a significant increase in the Snow Goose colony over the past fifty years. Their intensive grazing in the salt marsh ecosystem shifts the salt marsh to hypersaline mudflats. The geese then move on to other ecosystems where they continue grazing intensively and other species are affected.

Data was collected on nesting success and territory quality by mapping out male territories. The presence of singing males determined the territories. Then nests were located and observed for success or failure. The vegetation composition also needed to be determined. This was done by walking two transects and identifying all the vegetation along each transect. Then statistical analyses were used to determine which variables correlated with breeding success or failure.

Territory quality consisted of the amount of medium-sized shrubs, the presence of grasses at the base of the shrubs, the amount of grasses in the territories, the amount and size of the bare patches, and the shape of the territory. A bird with a long, skinny territory would do much more traveling to find food than a bird with a round territory.

Rachel concluded that there has been a decline in the reproductive successes of the Savannah Sparrow. There are less males finding mates, less eggs hatching, and less nests fledging. The presence of medium sized shrubs and grasses made for better reproductive success, while the amount of bare patches and shape of territory made for lower success. Due to these conclusions, Snow Goose hunting has been increased.

The meeting concluded at 8:50 after miscellaneous birding materials collected during the month were presented by chairman Dick.

Submitted by Laura Turcotte