

Nature Notes, July 2022

Counting Birds in My Neighbourhood

By Bill Robertson

My neighbours know me as a walker. Days and evenings, all seasons, my wife and I are out there, up and down the streets. People even comment on it. But on Saturday, May 28th, I gave them something else to talk about. On that Saturday I was out with a pair of binoculars around my neck. The Saskatoon Nature Society's Spring Bird Count was on.

I managed four good walks around my Queen Elizabeth district, three drives, and two sessions where I simply sat in my backyard with the sprinkler on low and let birds come to me. And they did. We watched a lovely, little house wren dart into the undergrowth and work its way carefully to the water. It's got a big voice for a tiny bird, but it doesn't let itself be seen very often, so it's a pleasure to get a look at it. That was the easy part.

Starting out early, binoculars around my neck and listening carefully, I began separating out the ubiquitous house sparrows from the American crows, the black-billed magpies, the now abundant American robins, and the, sadly for today, only occasional black-capped chickadees. Where were those cheery little fellows? As I stopped at one tree to look, a woman working in her yard asked me what I was seeing. Well, I told her, I was pretty sure it was a yellow warbler, and, yes, it was. We were both thrilled with that bit of colour high up in the foliage.

Was I seeing lots, she went on to ask, so I told her about the bird count. With just a little prompting I mentioned that this was a way for citizen naturalists to help scientists keep track of bird populations, not just here, but right across North America and, indeed, the world. They're literally the canaries in the coal mine, I told her, a tangible sign of how our environment is doing. Taking nothing away from frogs, bees, and butterflies, which also have a big part to play in giving us warning signs about our ecology, birds have gained in popularity as something we can turn to for pleasure, as a way to live in the moment, and as learning tools about their place, and ours, in the world we share.

I moved on, leaning into the sharp trilling of the chipping sparrow, a beautiful



Photo: May Haga

The house wren is a common backyard resident with a loud boisterous song.

little, indigenous sparrow with a rusty-red cap. I'd hear and see at least 15 that day. Later came a couple of rock pigeons, a blue jay, and the song of my first two house finches. On an afternoon walk I fell into conversation with a neighbour, starting with my binoculars and leading to her cats, one on a leash, one roaming the yard. I used the opportunity to talk about the severity of cat depredation on our bird populations and told her about the millions lost to house cats in Canada alone. I could see she wouldn't be giving up her cats any time soon, but I could tell that I'd given both her and her daughter something to think about.

Afternoon turned to evening, two Franklin's gulls soared overhead and I saw a northern flicker. By day's end, I'd recorded what I thought was a meagre 14 species. Where were all the other birds I see so often? Well, it's a one-day snapshot of what birds one person can see, faithfully recorded and sent to be collated. Tomorrow I'd see the merlin and the least flycatcher.

Bill Robertson is a member of the Saskatoon Nature Society. The best nature destinations in the area are described in the SNS publication *A Guide to Nature Viewing Sites in and Around Saskatoon* (3rd Edition).

The opinions expressed above are those of the writer, a long-term member of the Saskatoon Nature Society.

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