

Nature Notes, December 2023

Winter Birding in the Saskatoon Area

By Bill Robertson

So, we're well into winter here in Saskatchewan and, as a recent convert to this wonderful pastime of birdwatching, you are, to quote an old Beach Boys song, "thinking that your fun is all through, now." Well, don't let those kings of the summer sun hold you back just because snow has covered the grasses and cold winds have stripped the trees of their leaves. There are still many birds to see and take delight in.

First, if you live in a reasonably treed area of the city and you have a few trees yourself, get a couple of feeders and hang them out where they're conspicuous from your windows. Add a suet cage to that mix, even a peanut ring, and you'll find you get all kinds of bird action from such species as black-capped chickadees, red-breasted nuthatches—maybe even a white-breasted nuthatch—house finches, and possibly common redpolls, though you'll find your chances with those birds increase if you have some mature birches nearby. Downy and hairy woodpeckers, as well as northern flickers, will go for your suet and blue jays will attack your peanut rings. So will black-billed magpies, of course, and ever opportunistic ravens. You'll also get lots of our ubiquitous house sparrows. A local feed or nature store will gladly help you with choices around seeds to put in your feeders.

Don't feel like putting out feeders? No problem. Just take a walk through a treed area or a local park and you'll see many of the birds I just mentioned. If you're near a tall spruce and see bits of seed falling from above, look way up and you may witness white-winged crossbill activity as these busy birds use their specialty bills to crack open pine cones and remove the seed. A pair of binoculars and a craned neck are helpful here. And on your walk you may even spot a brown creeper inching its way up a tree, then flying down to the base of another to head up again. They're small, but watch for that flight pattern.

And now's the time to keep an eye on your neighbour's crabapple tree to see



The white-winged crossbill is perfectly adapted to feed on pine cones. The crossed tips of its bill give it the leverage needed to quickly open a cone and extract the seeds.

Photo by May Haga.

the waves of Bohemian waxwings descend to strip the tree of its dried fruit. Take a good look at these birds with your field glasses. Their colouring is exquisite.

Had enough of town, well, why not a drive out Pike Lake way to see if you can spot a pileated woodpecker, with its ever-arresting red comb, or an evening grosbeak, resplendent in yellow, white, and black. Last winter on a drive to Blaine Lake I came across a huge flock of Lapland longspurs along the side of the highway. In their dull winter coats they looked like a group of house sparrows, but not behaving like one. A look closer revealed the facial colouring that distinguished this longspur. And while out on the highway, keep your eyes peeled for flocks of snow buntings, stout little black and white birds that travel in large groups, and, in smaller flocks, especially right along the side of the highway, watch out for horned larks: beautiful if you can catch them with your binoculars before they fly.

As you roll along the highway, keep an eye on the tops of telephone poles, fence posts, or even road signs for the often inscrutable snowy owl. They are gorgeous birds, but don't stop to try and get a picture or to stare. Just look and drive. Too many gawkers are pushing these birds away from our roads and out into the fields where they're hard to spot.

Despite the cold and snow, there are many birds out and about. These are some of them. Happy birding.

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