

THE PARKLAND NATURALIST

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Bohemian Waxwing (top) and Cedar Waxwing (bottom), Hermitage Park



Common Redpoll, Centennial Park



Townsend's Solitaire, Hermitage Park

Enjoying Nature during a Pandemic

As I am writing this in late March, things are really looking up. Many of the Covid restrictions have been lifted and hospitalizations are coming down. Hopefully, the club will be able to start an Outdoor Program. Through the fall and winter, I continued to monitor eBird, ENC Nature Talk, WhatsApp, personal communications, and even Facebook – Alberta birds to stay up-to-date with bird activity in the Edmonton area. Here is my brief take on the late fall and winter.

Redpolls were everywhere and at just about every feeder. It was a very good winter for finding Townsend’s Solitaires.

A Varied Thrush was recorded on the Edmonton Christmas Bird Count at Hawrelak Park and provided sightings and photos for many local birders. Another one was also reported in the Mill Creek ravine. An American Goldfinch appeared at the Hawrelak feeders in early January. Their winter plumage is different but still very impressive. There were quite a few Sharp-shinned Hawk sightings. For over a week two Goshawks hunted ducks at the Hermitage bird feeders. Bohemian Waxwings were very common. There were a few sightings of Cedar Waxwings.

The highlight owl this winter was a Boreal Owl in the Whitemud Ravine. It provided a “lifer” for many birders and several reasonable photo ops. Saw-whets were reported often in the winter and frequently in early March. A pair of Barred Owls also provided many photo ops in early March. Both Black-backed and American Three-toed Woodpeckers were present in the Whitemud Ravine. Several Brown Creepers found a suet mix they liked and attracted a lot of birders and photographers to Whitemud South. Two White-throated Sparrows and a Song Sparrow managed to survive the winter in Roper Park. Prairie Falcons were reported at the grain terminal, but on only on a few days.



American Goldfinch, Hawrelak Park (above), Sharp-shinned Hawk, St. Michael’s Cemetery (below)



On the Cover:

Varied Thrush, photo by Chris Rees



Northern Goshawk, Mount Pleasant Cemetery



Boreal Owl, Whitemud South



Saw-whet Owl, Hermitage Park



Black-backed Woodpecker (left) and American Three-toed Woodpecker, Whitemud South



Brown Creeper, Whitemud South



Prairie Falcon, Alberta Grain Terminal

All photos by Chris Rees

A big thank-you to Gerry Fox, who helped us survive the winter with the Winter Bird List. We were down a bit this year, with only 87 species. Once again, there are many other interesting locations, sightings, and contributors to the local eBird community and ENC Nature Talk that I have failed to recognize. Again, I apologize for that.

Right now I'm hoping this is the last column on "pandemic birding," and we can look forward to ENC field trips in the spring.

Chris Rees, ENC Director

President's Message



Our President, Brian Stephens



*Franklin's and Bonaparte's Gulls
Photo by Brian Stephens*

We had a good range of Zoom Talks, especially those organized by Bird Studies (Karen Lindsay) and the Edmonton Native Plant Society, along with several presentations from other organizations across the province that were made available through Nature Alberta. Attendance has been good, varying from 70 to 140 participants.

The ENC, along with seven other organizations (Nature Alberta, Edmonton and Area Land Trust, Beaver Hill Bird Observatory, North Saskatchewan River Valley Conservation Society, Wild Bird General Store, Wild Birds Unlimited, and Wild North), formed a team to apply for certification of Edmonton as a Bird-Friendly City. As of April 2022, we have attained Entry Level Status.

We got started in June 2021 with an excellent presentation by a city staffer showing important City initiatives. From that we continued exploring and adding additional information across three broad areas, each with specific criteria. The application examines policies, practices, and evidence of Threat Reduction; Habitat Protection, Restoration, and Climate Resiliency; and Community Outreach. Completing our initial submission to Nature Canada gives a good view of where we are now and helps identify additional actions that can be undertaken in the next 2 or 3 years.

For example, we plan to host an Edmonton May Species Count, develop and implement a process to select an Official City Bird, and measure and track the effectiveness of several existing programs.

In April we began holding city nature walks again. We got started with a series of walks linked to Nature Calgary's Birding 101 presentations. Thanks to them for including ENC in this. It may be a bit longer before we can restart car-based field trips, but I am hopeful that this will happen in July.

Brian Stephens

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Conservation Corner

River Valley Planning Modernization? Has the River Valley a Future as a Natural Environment?

The river valley and ravines have begun to look decidedly tatty and well-worn over the last few years, as public access and usage has skyrocketed. Trails short and long, both multi-use and single-track, City-sanctioned and those hacked through the bush, usually by mountain bikers acting as if public property belonged to them personally, form an anastomosing labyrinth in all but the most isolated places. Riverside real estate is pitted with lookout trails to viewpoints; hillsides are scored with toboggan runs and short-cut trails; infrastructure, tree decorations, artifacts, and graffiti all declare that this is human space. It is not the corridor for nature that the City of Edmonton once boldly declared it to be its intention in the early years of this century. Edmonton then had an Office of Natural Areas and was a member of an international group of cities committed to taking local action for biodiversity.



User-generated trail on wooded escarpment, Patricia Ravine area, June 2, 2020. Note tree damaged by blaze, loss of vegetation, and bared tree roots. Dandelions (non-native) are in the foreground. Photo by P. Cotterill.

The river valley has become a very busy place, and it can only get busier if the City's anticipated population increase to two million people within the next 20 years comes true. To its credit, the City recognizes, at least in its policy literature, the pressures the river valley is facing, from "growth, expansion and densification of Edmonton's neighbourhoods"; increased interest in diverse outdoor recreation activities, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic; and "development, utility, and infrastructure projects" (River Valley Planning Modernization Update Phase I Report, <https://pub-edmonton.escribemeetings.com/filestream.ashx?DocumentId=106264>). Its response is to call for updated policy, guidance for future planning, and a strong regulatory framework.

Since the "existing framework...is over 30 years old," the City lacks "adequate direction to balance ecological protection and appropriate use within the river valley." This lack of direction presumably must be the City's excuse for letting the sprawling, widespread network of illegal user-generated trails excess to the point it has, while allowing an ecologically innocent populace to acquire an entrenched sense of entitlement to the river valley as their urban playground. (By "innocent" I mean not that people are not doing harm, but that they don't know they are doing harm, or are in denial of it.) As for ecological protection, that does not extend to doing anything that requires scientific measurement of ecosystem health, such as setting up plots to determine vegetative cover and regeneration, analyzing soils and creek water contaminants, and removing invasive weeds; a possible exception is the use of remote cameras to establish wildlife movements.

Revamping the River Valley

I suppose then I should welcome the City's latest planning spotlight on the river valley and ravines and an intention to reform and reorganize. The City has two projects under way. One is a regulatory update of the North Saskatchewan River Valley Area Redevelopment Plan (River Valley ARP), designed to "address immediate challenges" and "reflect the City's new boundary as a result of the 2019 annexation." I assume that this technical process has now been completed by City staff. The second project is River Valley Planning Modernization (RVPM), which will provide general "planning guidance and regulation" for the river valley. This involves the Ribbon of Green (RoG) Concept and further updating of the River Valley ARP, and is in progress. The RoG will confirm or amend the planning that went into the southwest and northeast areas of the river valley and ravines in 2018, and extend to the central portion. A long-standing

concept in RoG planning is to zone the river valley into land management classes. These are the areas of greater and lesser restrictions on human activity, the Preservation, Conservation, and Working Landscape zones, which presumably will also dictate limitations on infrastructure and project development.

Anticipated developments include more connecting trails as communities expand, including joining up the regional trail system from Fort Saskatchewan to Devon, and moving to complete an “active transport network” so people can walk or cycle commuting distances, which will include building more footbridges.

Apart from the RoG land management classifications that guide the locations of development, environmental impact assessments with more parameters for assessment and site location studies will indicate the most appropriate places for development or how they can be mitigated.

The River Valley Bylaw, 7188

The River Valley ARP modernization process (surely a strange term to use for a law rather than real estate!) remains inscrutable to most of us. The RVARP bylaw is designed to protect the river valley from unnecessary development or at least mitigate its impact, and in the opinion of conservationists it has done a piss-poor job of it. For one thing, what development is deemed essential – a building, a footbridge, a solar farm, a gondola – is the subjective decision of Council, and for another, the boundaries of the river valley that the bylaw applies to are constantly being changed. Now, one would imagine that a statutory bylaw (meaning one mandated by the provincial government) that needed updating would be gone through clause by clause by an appropriately qualified committee, followed by Council approval with the opportunity for public input at a hearing. However, all we public know is that bylaw modernization will involve facilitating decision-making on developments so that Council does not have to waste time debating new “minor facilities.” Fast-tracking such decision-making and according more authority to City staff has raised a red flag for conservationists.

Apparently, 4,500 people took part in the online RoG consultations in February, with separate meet-ups for Indigenous groups. In the stakeholder sessions, at least, these were dominated by mountain bikers protesting that Preservation-classified land would mean closure of their bike trails. (Some of these include “rogue” trails, sanctioned neither by the City nor the Edmonton Mountain Bike Alliance.) For their part, conservationists were concerned that the City would allow existing uses to justify downgrading from Preservation to Conservation zones

where mountain biking and other harmful uses would be permitted.

For those inclined to take a closer look at the River Valley ARP, it is available in its latest (1985) iteration, at https://webdocs.edmonton.ca/infraplan/plans_in_effect/North_Saskatchewan_River_ARP_Consolidation.pdf.

Getting Involved

I recommend that naturalists get up to speed with City plans for the river valley. There is a plethora of documents online that only the most dedicated will wade through, but the document titled *Ribbon of Green SW + NE*, June 2020, is probably the best read for a comprehensive and up-to-date view of the City’s position regarding the river valley. It is available at https://www.edmonton.ca/public-files/assets/document?path=RibbonofGreenSW_NEPlanJune2020.pdf. In particular, take a look at section 4 in this document, which shows plans and maps for various areas (“reaches”) in the river valley. If you are familiar with these areas and disagree with the plans, consider expressing your opinion to your councillor. Alternatively, or simultaneously, since I believe ecological planners are still receptive to input, please email ribbonofgreen@edmonton.ca with any comments you have. If you witness obvious damage, please call 311.

National Urban Park

Has the river valley and ravine system a future in view of continued, increasing human use that negatively impacts wild vegetation and wildlife? Another question mark hovers over the newly proposed National Urban Park. In a ceremony on March 14 at City Hall, federal funding for a national urban park in Edmonton was pledged to the City and local Indigenous communities. No details, of location, size, etc., were released. CPAWS and the North Saskatchewan River Valley Conservation Society are party to some of the ongoing negotiations, but for the general public the project remains shrouded in mystery. We need to stay tuned!

Patsy Cotterill

Note: The URL Internet addresses are not directly linked in this article. Please copy them and use your browser to find the correct link.

continued next page



Mountain bike trail on escarpment, Oleskiw River Valley Park, now Jan Reimer Park. Centrifugal force widens and compacts the trail and removes vegetation, October 10, 2017.

Photo by P. Cotterill



This rogue trail was cut in two weeks in June across this escarpment at Forest Heights Park, June 20, 2021.

Photo by Nathan Binnema



Denuding of ground cover and erosion caused by an informal toboggan run in wooded Patricia Ravine, January 7, 2021.

Photo by P. Cotterill



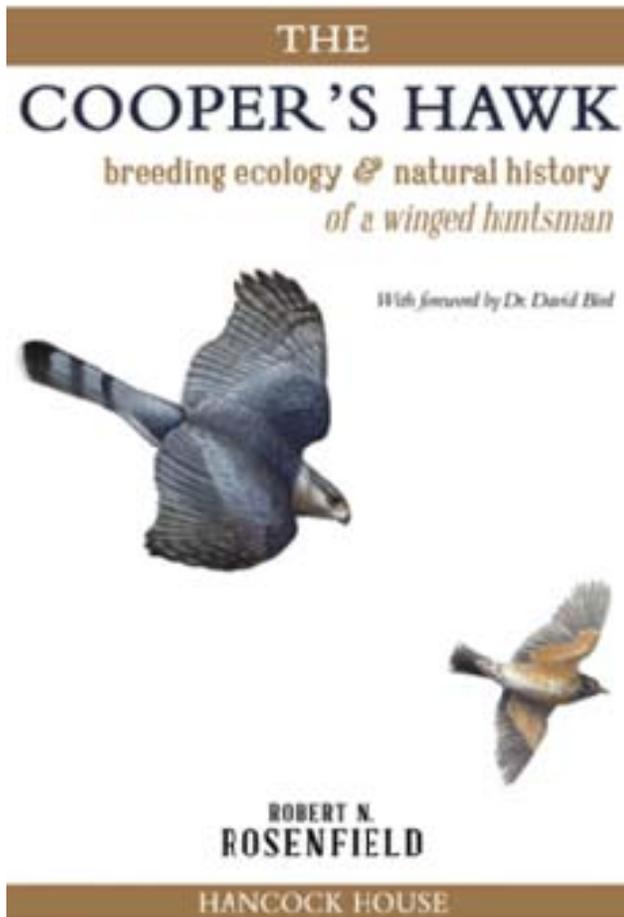
Bike trail down steep wooded escarpment in MacKinnon Ravine, August 5, 2018.

Photo by P. Cotterill

Armchair Naturalist

The place where club members review books about natural history they found particularly rewarding. Some of the recommended books may be borrowed from the Edmonton Public Library (EPL). To check on the availability of books in printed and electronic formats, go to epl.ca and click on “Search.”

Curl up with one of the recommended books and escape into the wonderful world of nature!



The publisher, Hancock House, describes the book as follows:

The Cooper's Hawk presents the general reader and professional biologists interested in birds and nature, with an authoritative account of the breeding biology of what is perhaps the most abundant, backyard breeding raptor in North America. This urban status exists despite cross-generational human persecution through shooting of individuals and indirect felling of forests, their apparent preferred nesting habitat. Using conversational prose, the natural history of the bird's diet, including bird feeder use and disease concerns, courtship behavior, and the ecological themes of breeding density, reproductive success, and adult survivorship are described. There too is a focus on how and why fieldwork is conducted on this ubiquitous city dweller that preys mostly on birds, or “urban fast food.” How urban birds may differ from their rural counterparts is addressed, and especially highlighted is the novel aspect of reproductive deceit in this red-eyed, blue-backed predator, as, unlike all other birds of prey studied to date, it is highly promiscuous. The text is complemented with original art and especially crisp photographs that demonstrate this bird's natural history.

The book is a very good read if you enjoy a detailed look at the life history of a single species. The book also illustrates many characteristics of the Cooper's Hawk that can be related to other species of raptors and birds in general. It is a slow read, as there are many details and statistics and the book is written in a semi-academic style with many in-text citations.

Recommended by Chris Rees

I am out of book recommendations and am looking for more reviews of good nature books to share! To suggest a book review, go to the ENC website, click on “Member Entrance,” and log in using the password you received with your membership. Use “Contact us!” to provide your information, e.g., in the “Comment” section, write “Parkland Naturalist book review,” describe the book you'd like to recommend, and I'll get in touch with you.

Karen Lindsay

A Bad Day for a Solitaire



Townsend's Solitaire

The Townsend's Solitaire is a sought-after winter sighting for many birders in the Edmonton area. During the post-breeding season of 2021 (Aug. 31 to Nov. 16, according to *All About Birds*), many sightings were reported in eBird.

On November 3, a solitaire was reported at the Hermitage Park bird feeders. This tweaked my interest and I decided to check it out the next day. When I arrived at the site, several solitaires were singing loudly and the birds were chasing after each other with lots of fluttering among the evergreens. It took me a few minutes to comprehend what I was witnessing. I saw three birds, but another birder/photographer who was present told me he had seen a total of five. Their behaviour was in line with the description of Townsend's Solitaires in *All About Birds*:

During the winter, the male and female are both strongly territorial, defending patches of juniper trees against other solitaires and other birds. They feed largely or even exclusively on the juniper's ripe fleshy berries for the entire non-breeding season.

The Townsend's solitaire sings throughout the fall and winter to set up and hold its winter territory. Violent fights may break out in defense of the winter territory, because owners of large berry-rich territories survive the winter at higher rates than solitaires on small territories with few berries.

This day all the birds observed were either at the top of spruce trees, singing, giving the high-pitched "tew" call, or feeding fairly high on the junipers. The "tew" call is repeated many times per minute and is used to defend their territories. An interesting observation this day was that solitaires singing at the top of the spruce trees were frequently harassed by both House Finches and Black-capped Chickadees.



The prized winter berry (photo above), feeding on fallen berries (below)

On November 13, things had quieted down. Only two solitaires were present and they seemed to be mostly tolerant of each other, although a few chases did occur. These birds perched at the top of a spruce tree and vocalized a bit, but they seemed to spend more time lower down in the evergreens and even on weed stems near the ground.

On December 1, I observed some different solitaire behaviour. This day there was only one chase, just as I arrived. However, when the bird reappeared it spent a few minutes low in an evergreen. After that the bird spent most of the time on the ground picking up juniper berries that had fallen. The bird finally flew onto a spruce branch that had ice on it and appeared to swallow several ice crystals.

As the weather had warmed up and the snow had melted, the solitaire, in addition to picking up berries, may have been catching some insects, although I did not see any such action.



On December 30, a very cold day (-26°C), I decided to check and see how the crop of juniper berries was holding up. As I stopped at the Hermitage bird feeders, a robin flew in and sat at the top of a large poplar. Several other robins flew overhead. I parked on the south side of the circle and immediately found a robin sitting part way up in a juniper in the bright sunshine, every so often picking a few juniper berries to eat. One solitaire came in to land lower in the juniper but was immediately chased away by another solitaire. A solitaire came back but was immediately chased away by the robin. After a few minutes another photographer came from the centre of the circle and told me two Cedar Waxwings were feeding on the junipers there. I went along and we found the waxwings and at least ten robins eating juniper berries. It seemed competition was heating up. However, on this day there was still a substantial number of berries.



Cedar Waxwing



American Robin

On December 31, the first flock of Bohemian Waxwings was spotted high in the poplar trees west of the circle.

January 1, 2022, was a bad day for the solitaires. When I stopped by to check, the junipers in the centre of the circle were covered with Bohemian Waxwings. There was constant movement of waxwings between the tall poplars to the west and the junipers. The robins and one solitaire seemed to have declared a truce and were sitting in the sunshine in the junipers on the south side of the circle. The solitaire was sitting less than a metre above the ground. Toward the end of the time I was present, waxwings began to feed on berries where the robins and the solitaire were. This appeared to agitate the solitaire, as it started flitting its wings and tail. After a few minutes, it moved higher in the juniper and began giving a harsh, raspy distress call. It moved into a spruce tree and for the next five minutes or so continued to flit and call. It finally returned to a lower perch, but still flitted and called off and on.



Bohemian Waxwing invaders



A solitaire in distress

On January 2, the only waxwings present flew over. Six robins were in the south junipers and two or three more were in the bigger junipers in the middle of the circle. One solitaire was high in a bigger juniper; when it moved lower, a second solitaire came. On January 3, I saw one solitaire in the centre junipers, no robins, and only fly-over waxwings.

For the next several weeks, solitaires were only intermittently present. It was not until mid-February that I saw a bird on consecutive days. On February 10, a solitaire was singing in the juniper thicket at the centre of the island, but I did not see it. About 30 minutes later it was in the top of a spruce, then it disappeared. On February 11, one solitaire was sitting in the sun in a spruce beside the middle junipers. On February 12, one solitaire was present. When I entered the island it was singing in the large junipers on the west side. It flew down to the left. As I moved to leave, it flew across low to the bushes at the right. As I reached the top of the centre hill, it appeared low down in a spruce, then dropped to the ground and started picking up juniper berries. The warm weather had again melted the snow under the spruce and junipers, and the bare ground was littered with fallen berries. It now made sense why the solitaire would have been present the last 3 days. The bird picked up 4 berries and flew back into the spruce thicket.



Filling up again



On the ground among the fallen juniper berries

Townsend's Solitaires continued to be reported in eBird in the Edmonton area for the duration of the non-breeding season (Nov. 23 to Mar. 1, according to *All About Birds*). It was interesting to have the opportunity to spend more time observing these birds, and I thank them for tolerating my presence.

Chris Rees

Reference

Townsend's Solitaire, *All About Birds*, https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Townsend's_Solitaire.

All photos by Chris Rees

Merlins in Central Alberta: How They Avoid Kleptoparasitic Peregrines

The Order of Falconiformes includes more than thirty species of the smaller falcons such as kestrels, hobbies, and tropical falconets. The Merlin has the widest circum-polar range. While I lived in Holland, it was rare to spot any of these dashing northern falcons during their fall migration. In Alberta they could be seen the year round, and to my surprise, they were even nesting in the cities. In 1993, Geoffrey Holroyd, who was then chair of the Edmonton Natural History Club, organized a census to find out how many occupied Merlin territories there were in Edmonton. The project involved 14 young club members and 21 older volunteers. Additional information on the location of Merlin nests was received from some 85 cooperating citizens. The final rapport, written by Carla Palaschuk and Geoff Holroyd, was published in the *Edmonton Naturalist* 22(3), 11–15.

As it turned out, they found 62 adult male Merlins in roughly 60% of the municipality. By extrapolation over the remaining amount of similar habitat in the city, the researchers added another 41 possible territories. This resulted in a hypothetical total of 103 breeding pairs. Divided over 684 square kilometres, the figures came down to one nest per 6.6 km² (15/100 km²). Interestingly, in 1992, Merlin surveyors found 25 nests per 100 km² in Saskatoon (Sodhi and others, 1993).

What would the merlin population be today? Are there just as many or even more nesting pairs in the city? No doubt the municipality has expanded in the intervening 28 years. But have the habitat and tree cover remained comparable? And what about the prey base? Nesting Merlins can be quite noisy, especially during the time when their young are on the wing, loudly begging for food. In the south Edmonton community of Greenfield where I live, I have yet to meet anyone who likes their Merlins, especially considering the disappearance of robins from their neighbourhood. However, based on several studies in Alberta and Saskatchewan, the common summer prey of city Merlins is the House Sparrow. Are there today just as many sparrows in the city as formerly?

Last summer there were again Merlins around my house. When the three or four young had fledged from a nest, they spent a lot of time perched on the wooden sidebar of a power pole behind the back yard. If I have one complaint, it's that I have yet to observe them hunting. Patiently waiting for them to take off from their perch, all I ended up seeing was a quick dash out of view behind trees or houses.

Watching Merlins and Peregrines on the hunt has been a

passion of mine for more than sixty years. My usual Alberta stomping grounds are the open shores of Beaverhills and Cooking Lakes. Thirty years ago I wrote up the results of 354 hunting flights by Merlins compared to 647 attacks by Peregrines (Dekker, 1988). With a capture rate of 12.4 percent the Merlins proved to be significantly more successful than the larger falcons at catching small passerines and shorebirds. The Peregrines attained a rate of 8.2 percent.

My recent book (Dekker, 2021) includes anecdotal details of Merlins' hunting methods. An interesting discovery was that they had changed their food habits. It had to do with the increasing threat of piracy by Peregrines. After the pesticide era, Peregrines had become quite common, and just like all other big raptors, they used every opportunity to rob the little Merlin of its freshly-caught prey. Both in Alberta and on the west coast of BC, I have often seen successful Merlins immediately carry their captured sandpiper or sparrow inland. There, they pluck and consume the catch under the cover of bushes instead of on a fence post in the open as they used to. On the other hand, on well over a dozen occasions, I saw Merlins promptly release their catch when pursued by a Peregrine. In contrast, prey-carrying Merlins repeatedly managed to dodge pursuing buteo hawks and Bald Eagles.

Merlins nest across rural Alberta, and without actually searching for them, I knew of several traditional territories around Beaverhills Lake. Today, though, most have been abandoned. One year I was consulted by the late Edgar Jones, a well-known Edmonton bird photographer. Did I still know of any nesting Merlins? As a longtime associate and friend, I did not hesitate to tell him of the only active breeding site I knew. Unfortunately, a few days later, walking by that location, I saw that a tall aluminum tower had been set up right next to the nest tree. There was no sign of the adult falcons. Upon contacting the photographer, he told me that the chicks had died. "Merlins are on the way out," he said. "Because of agricultural pesticides. That's why I wanted to photograph them."

The overriding cause of the Merlin's disappearance from the region may have been the decline of open-country passerines. Walking the pastures year after year, I noticed that grassland sparrows had become scarce. In past years, I had not conducted any transect counts, which now could have been repeated for comparison. One day, I invited bird-status biologist Gordon Court to accompany me on a walk down a west shore pasture. He concurred. Compared to what he had seen elsewhere, the number of



Merlins are very good at intercepting the erratic flight of dragonflies. Photo by Chris Rees

small birds we put up that afternoon was an absolute minimum.

One day a local Merlin showed me a telling new hunting tactic. Using me as a beater, he followed in slow hovering flight while I walked along a fence line where the vegetation was somewhat richer than elsewhere on the overgrazed pasture. As soon as I put up a small bird, the Merlin dashed after it in pursuit.

During the winter season, city Merlins shadow the flocks of Bohemian Waxwings that are feeding on mountain ash berries or crab apples. In the absence of waxwings, hungry Merlins may take on much bigger prey. Jim Lange and other frequent watchers at the Edmonton granary have seen them kill pigeons. John Acorn watched Merlins tackle feral doves near the University. In my view, underpowered predation like that is not a pretty sight. I imagine that those Merlins began plucking their prey while it was still alive.

I wrote the above article after I published a four-page story about Alberta's Merlins in a Dutch raptor journal (Dekker, 2022). All of this was in response to reports of a major downturn of open-country passerines in Holland, based on transects conducted by the long-term editor of that Dutch journal. He also mentioned declines

of wintering Merlins and wondered about possible competition from Peregrines. My experience in Canada turned out to be quite comparable and revealing.

I thank Geoffrey Holroyd for reviewing the text.

Dick Dekker

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See outside back cover for more photos.

2022 Bird of the Year

2022 is the fifth year Edmonton Nature Club members have voted to choose a Bird of the Year (BOTY). Pre-pandemic, we chose from birds seen on ENC field trips. The last few years, the pandemic has shut down club trips, so we chose from birds seen by members within the Capital Region. The BOTY committee considered several suggestions for this year's bird and created the following short list for members to vote on.



Baird's Sparrow – This is a bird most people would expect in the grasslands quite a bit south of Edmonton, but they have been found sporadically east of the city. Last summer Chris Rees saw a few near Chipman, but there was a problem. A lot of birders have been working on their eBird county lists, and although Chris's birds fell in the 80 km circle that we use for winter counts, they were outside eBird's Edmonton county. Andy Ross explored the southeast section of the Edmonton eBird county and found a few grasslands birds, including some Baird's Sparrows.

It was tough to get a look at the skulky, secretive sparrows, but lots of birders went out and at least heard the birds' beautiful trilling song.

Harlequin Duck – You never know how or when you'll find an uncommon bird. Sometimes if you need a pit stop and then decide to go for a short walk, something will



pop up. After a quick call of nature, Colleen Raymond and Gerald Romanchuk went for a short stroll at White-mud Park where the creek empties into the river. One of the ducks on a gravel bar looked different – a dark little diver that wasn't a Goldeneye. It was a female Harlequin Duck.

Harlies have been seen in the city a few times over the years, but a lot of active birders didn't have one for their Edmonton list. Luckily, the duck hung around long enough for many people to see it.

Pine Warbler – This past November Alexandra Molenkamp posted to Facebook about an unusual bird coming to her feeders. She wondered about a few possibilities and was right on with one of them. She had a Pine Warbler! Special arrangements were made for the weekend. People were welcome to visit her yard to look for the bird, but they were asked for a donation to the Food Bank. Birders from across the province saw the warbler, and the Food Bank got a large donation of 170 pounds of food and \$135 cash.

Pine Warblers are very uncommon for the province, with fewer than 10 records, and haven't been reported from the Edmonton region before. This bird was fairly bright yellow and distinctive, but drabber individuals might be easy to miss because of their similarities to fall Blackpoll and Bay-breasted Warblers.

Eastern Towhee – The day before the Pine Warbler appointment, another rare bird showed up about 20 km to the west. It hit a window, unfortunately, but the homeowner, Laura Joy, was a volunteer for WildNorth and knew what to do. She took the bird in and cared for it overnight. Her photos showed it to be an Eastern Towhee. The bird survived the night and was released the next day. What are the odds of birders seeing two provincial rarities on the same day and so close to each other?

Eastern Towhee has been recorded in our region a couple of times, but it's a provincial rarity with fewer than 10 records, and many birders got their lifer or provincial bird by seeing this visitor.

ENC members cast over 200 votes. With two provincial rarities and two birds that were very uncommon for our region, it was tough to choose. There were a hard-to-see sparrow, a somewhat drab female duck, another skulky shadow-dweller, and a flashy bright yellow warbler. Probably not a huge surprise who won. It wasn't a runaway, but the winner had a comfortable lead. ENC's 2022 Bird of the Year is Pine Warbler!

Gerald Romanchuk



Pine warbler, photo by Chris Rees



Eastern Towhee

All photos by Gerald Romanchuk except the Pine Warbler



Juvenile or female Merlin, photo by Brian Genereux



An adult male Merlin, photo by Gordon Court