

WILD BIRDS IN THE PUBLIC GARDENS:

Report of a Two-Year Project, October 2018 – September 2020

Joan Harbison and Gisèle d'Entremont

Most people who visit the Halifax Public Gardens notice a small number of wild birds that are present throughout the year. Rock Pigeons, European Starlings, American Crows, Blue Jays, and Mallard ducks are frequently seen throughout the Gardens. Female Mallards and their young are a common source of delight. Herring and Great Black-backed Gulls occur in lesser numbers but may be found on Griffin's Pond, even when it is frozen over. Those who are regular visitors also look forward to seasonal bird visitors including the Great Blue Heron and Osprey that are seen in the vicinity of Griffin's Pond from Spring into Fall. Many other birds are seen less frequently or with more difficulty because they are smaller, more secretive, or irregular visitors.

Aims of the Wild Bird Project

Our two-year Project coincided with my time on the board of The Friends of the Public Gardens (TFPG). It was intended as a contribution to the Board's continual efforts to add interest for visitors. The Project's chief aim follows from those of the Nova Scotia Horticultural Society which began to establish the Gardens in 1836. However, while the Society wished to “promote interest in and the study of horticulture and botany” (*The Halifax Public Gardens*, 2008, p.10) we had in mind enhancing the enjoyment of visitors by providing knowledge about the birds that frequent the Gardens. We also knew that with careful attention many more birds could be seen than most people imagined. First, the Gardens provide an excellent and diverse habitat for birds. They include a wide variety of trees, shrubs, and perennial flowers, as well as ponds and water features, all of which provide shelter, food, and water for diverse species of birds.

Second, Barbara Hinds who was a dedicated birder, Friend, and board member of TFPG wrote that as Nova Scotia was part of the “Atlantic Flyway” for birds migrating to and from their breeding grounds one might expect to see some of these birds making a stopover to rest and feed in the Gardens (*The Halifax Public Gardens* (2008, p.51). For this reason birders frequent the Gardens and we have seen lists online, generated over many years, of the numerous birds that we might expect to see.

How to See Birds in the Gardens

To see more than the common birds, even without using binoculars, there are a few things that one can do. Visit frequently. Gisèle and I made it our aim that one of us would bird in the Gardens daily if possible, and if not at least several times a week. The success of the

Project owes much to Gisèle who has spent a great deal more time in the Gardens than I have and hence has seen many more of the species we name.

It is important to walk in the whole of the Gardens and linger in several places looking up and down and sideways for movement. By doing so it should be easy to add at least a few more delightful “regulars” to one's sightings. For instance, the ever-friendly little Black-capped Chickadee calls loudly as it moves, often as part of a group, among the lower branches of trees. Song Sparrows are shyer but in Spring can be seen singing loudly on the tops of low bushes in order to attract a mate. At other times of year they are busy foraging under shrubs along the paths. American Goldfinches can be seen both high and low. One can hear their tuneful high-pitched chatter in the sky above the Gardens year-round or see them at the top of tall trees. In Fall, in their more drab winter feathers, they sometimes descend to feast on the seed heads available in the perennial beds of in the Gardens. Downy Woodpeckers and White-breasted Nuthatches are very attractive birds that are also readily seen on tree trunks.

Yet even when using our best strategies Gisèle and I have noted that on some of our visits only the “regular” birds are seen. Notwithstanding, the more frequent and longer one's visits, the greater likelihood that one will see a greater variety of birds.

Soliciting People's Interest

We received the support of TFPG Board, and of Heidi Boutilier, HRM supervisor of operations for the Gardens, to place an easel with a display of photographs of birds in Horticultural Hall when it opened for the season in April 2019. The photographs were taken by Gisèle and were of birds seen by us in the Gardens through the seasons. The easel was adapted by Bruce Doucette to hold the photographs in a movable exhibit. Further information about birds that might be seen was offered in two birding guide books placed alongside a log book at the Visitor's Desk in Horticultural Hall. We invited anyone who wished to log a note of the birds they saw in the Gardens, and when they saw them, and to add questions or comments. From these comments and our own discussions with visitors as well as those of the ever helpful TFPG Volunteers and TFPG summer staff we learned that people were indeed interested in the Gardens' birds and many had their own favourites that they looked for each year. HRM's gardeners and Commissionaires, as well as regular visitors to the Gardens, have over the years closely observed the birds that occur. We thank them for sharing with us their intimate knowledge, especially about where birds had nested, and with regard to ducks exactly when the young had hatched. We also encountered a number of birders and bird photographers who had looked for birds in the Gardens for many years and who were happy to share their findings with us.

Seeing Birds Through the Seasons

Taken together Gisèle and I saw 65 different species of birds. To our count we added 10 others each seen by more than one birder. In the birding world it is usual to include birds seen flying over a location. In the Gardens these included the Common Loon, and birds of prey such as the Red-Tailed Hawk, Northern Harrier, and Peregrine Falcon. They were added to our count. We categorized birds according to the times of year they were seen. These categorizations demonstrate that there are opportunities to see a variety of birds throughout the year. Seventeen species were seen year-round. A further 17 species were seen in Spring migration only, 4 from Spring through Fall, 14 during Spring and Fall migration, 7 in Fall Migration only, 6 flying overhead, 2 in Summer and Fall, 1 in Spring and Summer and 1 in Winter only, 7 other birds were characterized as “occasional sightings”. (A complete list of the birds seen and at what time of year can be accessed through TFPG website).

The possibility of seeing different birds at different times of year adds to the enjoyment of the changing seasons in the Gardens. So in the Spring, and to a lesser extent in the Fall of the last two years we have been treated to sightings of many species of warblers. Indeed 17 of the 23 species of warblers that breed in Nova Scotia have been seen. They have been observed throughout the Gardens but most often enjoying the insect food provided by the low growing trees overhanging the water on the East side of Griffin's Pond and by the large trees to the East of the Gazebo. The spectacular Wood Duck has visited in both Summer and Fall. All year the Northern Flicker flies speedily throughout the Gardens displaying its large white rump. Common Grackles arrive in Spring, raise their young in the Gardens, and this Fall were seen feeding on acorns from the English Oak trees. Mallards and Black Ducks gathered underneath to catch any acorns that fell their way. This reminds us how resourceful birds are at finding food in their natural habitats throughout the year. It is not necessary, and indeed detrimental to their good health, to feed them human food as was done in the past.

In winter birds are highlighted against a background of snow. The Red-bellied Woodpecker with its scarlet head and black and white chevron patterned back is especially spectacular at this time of year.

We have enjoyed carrying out our Project very much. Our special thanks go to the Board of TFPG for their support and enthusiasm throughout. It is good to know that our Project has increased the knowledge about birds in the Gardens as well as the number of people who enjoy these birds. We hope that this interest will be sustained.

Photographs of some of the birds mentioned in the above report are included in the companion Photo Gallery of the birds seen during the two-year project. Our photo gallery

may also be viewed on The Friends of the Public Gardens Website as may the complete list of birds seen.

Submitted by,

Joan Harbison and Gisèle d'Entremont, November 20th, 2020

Those wishing to enhance their birding skills may wish to join the Nova Scotia Bird Society (NSBS). Information about the many activities of the Society is available on the NSBS website: www.nsbirdsociety.ca

Recommended birding guides for Nova Scotia include:

Sibley, D. A. (2017). Sibley birds East (2nd ed.). New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Peterson, R.T. (2020). Peterson field guide to the birds of North America (2nd ed.). New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

Alderfer, J. & Dunn, J. L. (2017). National Geographic field guide to the birds of North America (7th ed.). (National Geographic publications).