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This article was published in the February 16, 2012, edition of *The Bar Harbor Times*. The Manset, Maine, Dovekie persists. Snowy Owls galore! An early Turkey Vulture. Northern Shrike. All these and more are highlighted in Rich's column this week.

Nature Notes

By Rich MacDonald

We seem to be in a cycle of clear skies and cold weather. For those looking to the heavens, this means skies free of moisture, making for observation conditions free of distortion.

The "lovely ring of haze around the moon" Carol Muth reported February 2 during her nightly walk with her dog is not the only heavenly phenomenon to be seen: planets can be seen, too. Venus and Jupiter are the first "stars" to be visible after dusk. Mars is growing brighter than it has been in several years. Mercury is visible on the horizon shortly after sunset. Saturn is the least bright, but those with a telescope might be treated to its rings.

While stargazing does not require special optics, they help. Much can be seen with the naked eye. Of course, binoculars can enhance the experience. A guide to locating these heavenly bodies can be found on earthsky.org Web site (search for "February 2012 guide to the five visible planets").

Our resident squirrels have been active of late. Anyone with bird feeders is familiar with the diurnal activities of both the Red and Gray Squirrel. Northern Flying Squirrels sleep by day and forage by night. I have had several reports of flying squirrels emptying feeders overnight. As they do not hibernate, they roost communally during the day for warmth. A friend reported once removing 27 flying squirrels from his attic.

The Dovekie, that diminutive cousin of the Atlantic Puffin, persists in our area. First found January 23 by Bob Duchesne, it was present for a week. Dovekies are an abundant pelagic seabird but quite uncommon near shore.

This bird has been drawing birders from across the state, coming from places such as Portland, Augusta, Cumberland, and Waterville. It would be interesting to track the economics of this unusual bird. Certainly visiting birders are buying gas; hopefully they are patronizing our restaurants and shops, too.

By February 1, the Manset Dovekie seemed to have moved on. However, on that same day, Roberta Sharp found one at Seawall. On February 10, photographer Norm Talbot reported it once again in Manset. Look for the Dovekie in the vicinity of where Alder Lane joins Shore Road. Parking at the boat launch and please be considerate of private property.

As exciting as it always is to see a Dovekie, the award for best bird may have to go to the Snowy Owl...well, to all six of them.

Shane Cox photographed one on the South Ridge Trail of Cadillac Mountain February 4, one of their regular haunts. On February 8, Zach Holderby found four Snowies on Sargent Mountain. Two days later, I learned a College of the Atlantic student found six atop Sargent about two weeks previously; a new Mount Desert Island record! Over the years, as many as four have frequented Sargent Mountain's alpine zone. Five were reported from Cadillac Mountain in 1981 and from Sargent Mountain during the winter of 1996-97. While not quite as exciting a number as six, during a February 10 hike up Sargent Mountain I was treated to wonderful views of three Snowy Owls.

This year has seen a major irruption of Snowy Owls across the continent. They have even been reported in Louisiana and Hawaii! Alas, many are being reported in poor health. Fortunately, our Snowy Owls seem to be in fine fettle. The fact that they come here each winter suggests an adequate food supply.

One hundred years ago, Turkey Vultures were virtually unheard of in Maine, with only four confirmed records by 1905. In 1958, James Bond indicated a single, questionable record here on MDI. By 1987, Ralph Long noted "Turkey Vultures nest regularly within 50 miles of Mt. Desert Island." Today, they regularly arrive by mid-March. Still, one observed by Scott Robinson February 9 over Bar Harbor was unusual. The next day, a Turkey Vulture soaring over The Tarn was so unexpected I had to pull over and whip out my binoculars to confirm this unusual sighting.

We think of birds as migrating, courting, mating, and nesting during spring and summer. In fact, purely for statistical reasons, the Bird Banding Laboratory assumes a birth date of June 1 for all birds. While this works for many species, a large number are now beginning that process. Barred and Great Horned Owls court in February. Red and White-winged Crossbills nest during the winter. Pine Siskins can nest most any time. While Brown Creepers tend to nest in spring and summer, they begin bonding in February. For those of us with good, high-range hearing, the musical warbling song of the Brown Creeper can be heard beginning now, through May, and into June.

The Northern Shrike, a.k.a. Butcher Bird for its habit of impaling prey on sharp objects such as buckthorn or barbed wire, have been unusually absent this winter. Home for the Northern Shrike is the open landscape of the Arctic taiga lightly forested with alder, willow, and poplar. The first local report this winter was one observed by Bill Townsend at College of the Atlantic's Beech Hill Farm February 5.

Winter finches are finally being reported. Pine Siskins, the brown streaked cousin of the American Goldfinch, are showing up at feeders, with reports coming from Bar Harbor, Southwest Harbor, and Town Hill since February 1. Purple Finches are also being found across the island, a welcome splash of color to this winter's drab landscape. My February 10 hike up Sargent Mountain found 2 White-winged Crossbills and 13 Red Crossbills.

In a spirit of full transparency, I made an error in last week's column. In discussing non-native and invasive species, I wrote that "European Starlings and House Finches, both species from Europe, were intentionally introduced in the 1800s". Oops! "House Finch" should have been "House Sparrow." It seems my birding dyslexia got the best of me. That said, the House Finch is a bird of western North America that was introduced to the east in 1940, when some were released on Long Island, New York. Thanks to Jim Cook, of Germantown, Maryland, for correcting my error.

Rich MacDonald runs The Natural History Center in Bar Harbor. If you would like to share your observations of the natural world that is Mount Desert Island, contact him at rich@thenaturalhistorycenter.com.