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**Bar Harbor, Acadia National Park, Downeast Maine**

This article was published in the March 01, 2012, edition of *The Bar Harbor Times*. Snowy Owls persist. Red-bellied Woodpeckers in Hulls Cove, Maine. A fly-by Razorbill off Acadia National Park's Great Head. Bohemian Waxwings. Merlins making White-throated Sparrows nervous. All these and more are highlighted in Rich's column this week.

## **Nature Notes ....**

By Rich MacDonald

The days are getting longer in the annual march toward summer solstice. Coupled with the recent bouts of unseasonably warm weather, it has many of us thinking to spring. Reports of unidentified, white midges flying around a few backyards on the warmest days further that impression; an intriguing contrast to what I had come to think of as the typical winter. This is the first February of my Bar Harbor residency without skiable snow on the Carriage Trails.

Meanwhile, the dearth of snow makes it virtually impossible to find Snow Fleas, which are not fleas at all but a species of springtail. It is understandable if you never noticed them before as they blend in with the natural litter—the bits of lichen, bark, and other natural litter—that stipples the snowpack of a more typical winter. If we had snow, and were you to look closer, you might see these bits of presumed litter moving, hopping about. Snow Fleas are tiny, 1/8-inch long insects that emerge on warm, sunny days to feed on vegetative detritus. They have a unique method of locomotion: two “tails” are tucked beneath, held in place by miniscule “hooks” or furcula. When released, they can catapult as far as a few inches. Snow Fleas are year-round denizens of the forest floor, part of the nutrient cycling regime, constantly eating rotting vegetation.

On the bird front, no new species are among the avian highlights of the past two weeks. Which is not to suggest there are no interesting species. Snowy Owls, Northern Shrikes, and Bohemian Waxwings are among the more sought after species this time of year, and they are all being consistently found.

The relatively snow-free trail conditions has proved a siren-song enticing the more adventurous up the mountains of Acadia National Park. The reward continues to be regular sightings of Snowy Owls above tree-line. Recent sightings include three Snowies observed by Roberta Sharp February 15 atop Sargent Mountain and another atop Penobscot. On the latter peak, she also saw a Peregrine Falcon and said the two made a “ruckuss of noise.” Paul Garrity reported at least four Sargent Mountain Snowies February 20.

Northern Shrike, the “Butcher Bird,” can be found most anywhere on Mount Desert Island during the winter months. Bill Townsend reported one on Otter Point February 24. The next day, while hiking Great head with my family and friends, I heard a distinct, dry, almost warbler-like call, a *shraaa, kididdle*. I had only heard this once before, years ago, at my old home near Lake Placid, New York, when a shrike was espying prey from the peak of my house.

Ed Hawkes reported about 15 Bohemian Waxwings flying across Route 3 near Salisbury Cove on February 13. And on his February 20 hike up Sargent Mountain, Paul Garrity had 40-50 Bohemians. Shane Cox hike Sargent the same day and made the same report.

Bohemian Waxwings breed in the boreal forest extending from Hudson Bay west through Alaska. During winter, they migrate south to a wide band along the U.S./Canadian border spanning the continent. It was once thought you would not find Bohemian and Cedar Waxwings together. We now know that is not true, although it is an infrequent occurrence. Bohemians are discerned from their slightly smaller cousin by being drabber overall, having both yellow and white in the wing feathers, and rufous undertail coverts, the area beneath the tail. They also sound different. In subjective terms, the Bohemian Waxwing utters a sweeter-sounding series of continuous twitters to the Cedar’s thinner, high-pitched *zeees*.

A Red-bellied Woodpecker was among the more intriguing reports this period. Rob and Tammy Packie have been seeing one regularly in Hulls Cove, with the most recent sighting being February 18.

Another intriguing sighting was a brief flyby of a Razorbill during the February 25 Great Head hike discussed above. Razorbills are cousin to the Atlantic Puffin. Locally, they breed on Petit Manan Island.

As far as owls go, Snowies are not the only species reported. On February 16, Carol Muth heard two Barred Owls calling in the woods of Town Hill. Keep your ears peeled for the *who-cooks-for-you, who-cooks-for-you-all* of the Barred Owl most anywhere on Mount Desert Island. This time of year we could also hear the bold, deep hoot of the Great Horned Owl and the back-up-beeper of the diminutive Northern Saw-whet Owl. As with the Barred, both of these can be found most anywhere on MDI.

Continuing on the raptor front, Priscilla Keene had two in Seal Cove on February 13. First, a Merlin was making a couple White-throated Sparrows, skulking in the Forsythia, nervous. After it “flew away in haste like a kestrel,” she reported the pleasure of then watching a Red-tailed Hawk soaring above marshy area of Seal Cove Pond.

Priscilla also reported her first Fox Sparrow of the season on February 15. Another was observed by Craig Kesselheim, also in the Seal Cove area, February 25. People like Priscilla and Craig are an ornithologists dream. In Priscilla’s case, she knows the birds of her neighborhood and keeps records year-to-year. In this instance, she noted her first fox Sparrow last year was March 24.

This early date is a pattern I suspect we will see with other bird species in the coming months. I was recently asked about the effect such extralimital dates have on data analysis. From a statistical standpoint, population trends are typically averaged over long periods of time, typically five or ten years, so a few outliers in a single season do not have a significant impact on overall trends. Of course, should such a particular early or late record develop into a pattern, that would have an impact over repeat seasons.

If you are interested in participating in a citizen science project designed to help our understanding of the changes in local bird populations over time, The Natural History Center has an annual citizen science opportunity: the Spring Arrivals and Departures Project. This project simply requires observers to note the first date they see a returning species or the last date a winter visitant is observed. Datasheets can be requested by email ([Rich@TheNaturalHistoryCenter.com](mailto:Rich@TheNaturalHistoryCenter.com)) or snail mail (P.O. Box 6, Bar Harbor, ME, 04609).

Happy birding!

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