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OFO News

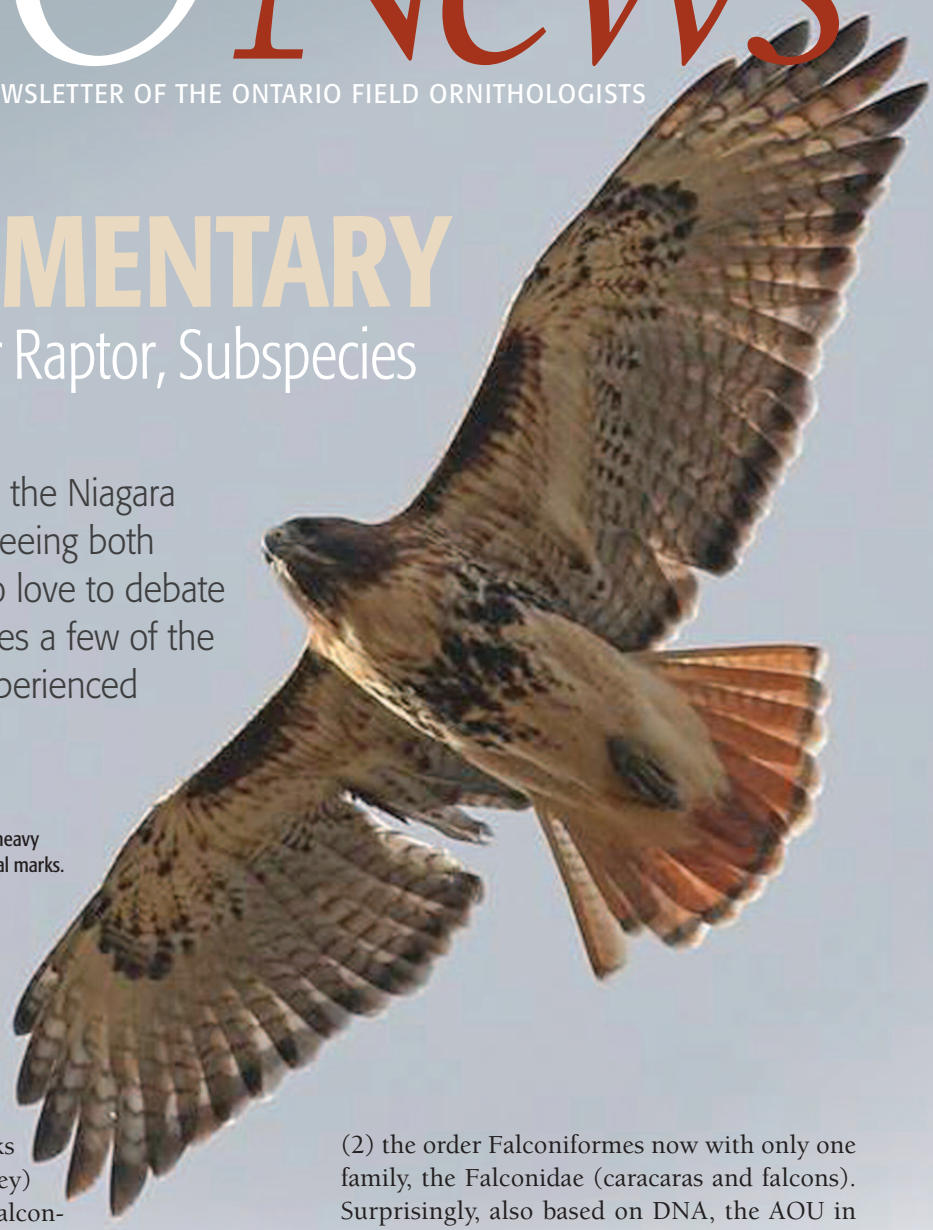
NEWSLETTER OF THE ONTARIO FIELD ORNITHOLOGISTS

HAWK COMMENTARY

DNA, Taxonomy, Hawk or Raptor, Subspecies

By Ron Pittaway

Very likely the main reason we go to the Niagara Peninsula Hawkwatch is the fun of seeing both hawks and longtime friends. We also love to debate hawk lore. This commentary discusses a few of the changes that hawkwatchers have experienced over the years.



Northern Red-tailed Hawk (*abieticola*) showing a heavy dark belly band, dark throat, and bold dark patagial marks.
Photo by Charmaine Anderson

In This Issue

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Taxonomic Changes and Checklist Order

Until 1998 all hawks (diurnal birds of prey) were in the order Falconiformes based historically on morphological similarities That year the American Ornithologists' Union (AOU 1998), citing DNA studies, transferred the New World vultures and condors in the family Cathartidae out of the order Falconiformes into the order Ciconiiformes, which included storks and ibises. However, not long afterwards this decision was reversed and vultures/condors were returned to Falconiformes. Then in 2010, the AOU split Falconiformes into two orders: (1) Accipitriformes, which included the families Cathartidae (vultures and condors), Pandionidae (Osprey) and Accipitridae (accipiters, buteos, harriers, ospreys, kites, eagles), and (2) the order Falconiformes now with only one family, the Falconidae (caracaras and falcons). Surprisingly, also based on DNA, the AOU in 2012 moved the order Falconiformes with its only family Falconidae (caracaras and falcons) to immediately before the New World Parrots in the family Psittacidae of the order Psittaciformes. Now falcons and caracaras are separated from other hawks by more than 150 pages in the new Sibley Guide (2014). Regardless of current phylogeny, I'd prefer that all hawks be kept together in field guides for practical convenience. Finally, the latest 56th supplement to the AOU (2015) list changed the sequence so that Rough-legged Hawk now precedes Ferruginous Hawk on the checklist.

Adult male American Kestrel.
Photo by Barry Cherriere

Juvenile light morph Rough-legged Hawk.
Photo by Barry Cherriere

Hawk or Raptor

These two terms are often confused. They are not taxonomic categories and have different meanings. Hawk is the general term for the diurnal birds of prey which includes vultures, kites, accipiters, buteos, eagles, harriers, ospreys, caracaras and falcons. Raptor, however, includes both hawks and owls so these two terms are not synonymous. Over the years the meaning of raptor has become more and more associated with hawks and less so with owls. Also, older hawkwatches often have hawk in their official names such as Hawk Cliff, Hawk Mountain and the Niagara Peninsula Hawkwatch. Whereas many more of the recently established hawkwatches call themselves raptor watches, such as the Rosetta McClain Gardens Raptor Watch on Toronto's Scarborough Bluffs, but with rare exceptions these raptor watches do not count owls. Raptor sounds sexier than hawk and it seemingly increased in popularity after the release of the motion picture Jurassic Park in 1993 and possibly because modern birds are now known to be descended from a lineage of feathered dinosaurs.

Juvenile or Immature

Older field guides and old-timers used immature for hawks in their first year of life. Now the more precise term juvenile is used in modern hawk handbooks. In most hawks, the juvenile plumage, which is acquired in the nest, is held for almost a year before the hawk undergoes a prolonged complete molt over the summer into its first adult plumage. Northbound juvenile hawks in spring at Beamer are wearing the same feathers that they migrated south with in the previous fall. Some spring hawks, particularly juvenile Broad-wingeds, show missing primaries in late April and May indicating they've begun their first annual molt.

Morph or Phase

Morphs are different colour forms that coexist in the same interbreeding population. Just as juvenile has replaced immature, morph has replaced phase as the modern term used in ornithology. No authoritative publication since 1990 uses the outdated term phase. Morph is preferred because phase suggests changes over time such as the phases of the moon, whereas a hawk hatched as a light or dark morph remains the same morph its entire life. Juvenile and adult plumages have different appearances, but they are different ages/ plumages, not morphs. Albinism, leucism and other aberrant colour variations are not true morphs. Unlike subspecies, morphs do not have scientific names. Morphs presumably arose as adaptations to local conditions. For example, the different colour morphs, particularly in buteos, may confuse mammalian prey making them more likely to be caught.

Subspecies

Subspecies is the official term in ornithology for taxonomically distinct subpopulations of a species. Subspecies differ from morphs in having separate breeding ranges. They interbreed freely where their ranges meet and intermediates are called intergrades, not hybrids. Different subspecies mix together during migration and in winter. Subspecies, unlike morphs, have scientific names. Race is a less formal synonym whose present-day use now has a negative connotation.

Spring hawkwatching at Beamer starts Tuesday 1 March 2016.
For more information see http://www.niagarapeninsulahawkwatch.org/

Turkey Vulture or better named Turkey Condor to reflect its true relationship. *Photo by Barry Cherriere*

Northern Red-tailed Hawk

There is an overlooked subspecies that is a common migrant at Beamer. It is the Northern Red-tailed Hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis abieticola*) that breeds mainly in the boreal forest. *Abieticola* means dweller of the fir. It was first described by W.E. Clyde Todd in 1950 in the *Annals of the Carnegie Museum, Pittsburgh*. However, Northern *abieticola* has not received much recognition until recently because it was poorly known, nesting in remote areas. Now more and more authors are recognizing it. Northerns are highly migratory whereas many of the Red-tails that breed locally are resident or short distance migrants. Adult Northerns migrate in March and April when local birds are at their nests. In my experience at Beamer, many of the adult Red-tailed Hawks passing Beamer are Northerns. Typical Northerns look like "heavily printed" versions of the Red-tails breeding in southern Ontario. Compared to more southern local birds, adult Northerns usually have a darker throat (more streaked), heavier belly band with large dark blotches, and they often have a buffy wash on the breast. Some Northerns are more richly marked and therefore more easily recognized. In the past, Northerns in the East were overlooked or confused with light morph Western Red-tailed Hawks (*calurus*).

Watch for Northern Red-tails at Beamer. Type the link below into your URL line. It is the best reference on Northern Red-tailed Hawks, authored by Jerry Liguori and Brian L. Sullivan (2014) and published in *North American Birds* 67(3):374-383. http://bit.ly/1JSHqmE

Turkey Condor and Black Condor

Palmer (1998) in the *Handbook of North American Birds* wrote that "At least all of the dark species of Vultures might better be called Condors." New World vultures in the family Cathartidae are unrelated to the true Old World vultures in the family Accipitridae, so calling our birds vultures is a misnomer. Their similarities are due to convergent evolution. Is it time for the AOU to change the names to Turkey Condor and Black Condor? This would correct the misleading name vulture used for our two Ontario condors. It also would be good public relations because vultures are considered ugly and looked down upon by many people. Imagine the increase in visitors coming to Beamer to see migrating condors.

Hawk Specialty Books

Up until 1987, we used mainly general field guides to identify hawks. The illustrations and texts were often inadequate or misleading. The first authoritative hawk ID guide was *Hawks* in 1987 (revised 2001) in the Peterson guide series by Bill Clark and Brian Wheeler. *Hawks in Flight* came out soon afterwards in 1988 (revised 2012) by Pete Dunne, David Sibley and Clay Sutton. These two specialty guides revolutionized hawkwatching. They were followed by photographic guides by Wheeler and Clark in 1995, *Raptors* (Eastern and Western editions) by Wheeler in 2003, *Hawks From Every Angle* by Liguori in 2005, *Hawks At A Distance* by Liguori in 2011 and *The Crossley ID Guide: Raptors* in 2013 by Crossley, Liguori and Sullivan. More guides and apps are forthcoming.

Good News Story

This article would have been a bad news story if written in 1934 when Maurice Broun first climbed Hawk Mountain in Pennsylvania to count migrating hawks and protect them from shooters. Back then most hawks were unprotected and considered vermin. They were shot at every opportunity. Golden Eagles were often poisoned when they accidently ate strychnine placed in bait to kill wolves and coyotes. The pesticide DDT caused major declines in Bald Eagles, Ospreys, Peregrine Falcons and Merlins. The good news story today is that most hawk populations are doing well following the banning of DDT and strychnine, and because of protective laws, education, and a shift to greater public appreciation for birds of prey. The Niagara Peninsula Hawkwatch continues to play an important role in monitoring population trends in conjunction with other well-established hawk lookouts in North America.

Acknowledgements

I thank editor Sandy Darling for asking me to write this commentary in the Niagara Peninsula Hawkwatch Newsletter. Michel Gosselin of the Canadian Museum of Nature provided valuable information and taxonomic advice.

I am grateful to Charmaine Anderson and Barry Cherriere for the use of their photographs.

This article was published in the August 2015 issue #51 of the Niagara Peninsula Hawkwatch (Beamer) Newsletter. Several birders suggested that it should be republished in OFO News making it available to a larger readership.

Finch Forecaster

An Interview with Ron Pittaway

We hope OFO members will enjoy this interview with Ron Pittaway about his popular winter finch forecast. Ron is a founding life member of OFO, a past co-editor of Ontario Birds and OFO News, a past OBRC chair and secretary, and a recipient of OFO's Distinguished Ornithologist Award.

Ron Pittaway. *Photo by Jean Iron*

OFO News: What inspired your interest in winter finches?

Ron: My interest in winter finches grew over a lifetime of birding. Their nomadic migrations intrigued me as a young birder in the 1960s growing up in Aylmer, Quebec, near Ottawa. Some winters buzzed with the calls of redpolls, siskins, crossbills, Purple Finches, Evening and Pine Grosbeaks. In other winters finches were few or absent. It was known that cone crops regulated crossbill and siskin abundance and distribution, but I knew little about finch irruptions until meeting British ornithologist Ian Newton in 1970 at Churchill, Manitoba. Newton was writing a book on finches and he mentored me by explaining fascinating ecological facts about them. Newton's book *Finches* is a classic (Collins 1972).

OFO News: What other circumstances led you into finch forecasting?

Ron: It was serendipity. I studied forestry so I'm both a birder and a tree watcher — prerequisites for finch forecasting. In the 1970s as a naturalist in Algonquin Provincial Park, there were many opportunities to study finches and tree seed crops. My supervisors, Ron Tozer and Dan Strickland, both shared my strong interest in winter finches. The Algonquin Christmas Bird Count regularly records Canadian and North American high counts of boreal finches such as the White-winged Crossbill. The setting was perfect.

OFO News: When did you make the first winter finch forecast?

Ron: Informal forecasts were made among Algonquin birding friends in the 1970s and 1980s. In the 1990s, bird columnist Peter Whelan occasionally reported my forecasts in *The Globe and Mail* newspaper. Finch forecasting surged in popularity in 1999 when the first forecast was posted to the Ontbirds and Birdchat listservs. It was an instant success.

OFO News: How do you gather information for the forecast?

Ron: Finch forecasting is an example of citizen science. I get tree seed crop information from staff of the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry, and contacts from across Canada, New York State, New Hampshire and Alaska. I send out an email survey in mid-August asking contacts to rate tree crops as poor, fair, good, excellent or bumper. The list of trees includes spruces, pines, balsam fir, hemlock, birches and mountain-ashes. I also ask contacts if they are seeing finches. Then I map out tree seed crops and do a first draft in late August, updating it as reports come in. Normally I've heard from most sources by mid-September and post the forecast about the third week of September.

Fidgety redpolls such as this Hoary are best observed at feeders where they prefer nyger seeds. *Photo by Jean Iron*

The Purple Finch has a notched tail that is squared off in the similar House Finch. *Photo by Jean Iron*

The best place to see Evening Grosbeaks in winter is the feeders at the Visitor Centre in Algonquin Park. *Photo by Jean Iron*

Pine Grosbeak. *Photo by Jean Iron*

The Pine Grosbeak is my favourite finch. It is a symbol of wilderness like the loon and wolf.

OFO NEWS: How did you assemble such a wide network of contacts?
Ron: I'm fortunate in having many birding and naturalist friends. After Algonquin, I worked at the Leslie M. Frost Natural Resources Centre near Minden. There I met ministry foresters and biologists from across the province. Expert colleagues were just a phone call or email away.

OFO News: Why do you include three non-finch passerines in the forecast?
Ron: Red-breasted Nuthatch, Bohemian Waxwing and Blue Jay are included in the forecast because their movements are often linked to those of finches. For example, the Red-breasted Nuthatch is an "indicator species" of conifer seed crops. A little or no southward movement of nuthatches indicates a good cone crop in the north for finches. When nuthatches flock south in August and September, a later irruption of winter finches often follows.

OFO News: How popular is the forecast?
Ron: Birders tell me that they eagerly await each forecast hoping for an irruption year with lots of finches on Christmas Bird Counts and at their feeders. The forecast is reposted on countless internet sites such as provincial, state and local listservs, eBird, ABA Blog, QuébecOiseaux, plus numerous shares on Facebook and Twitter.

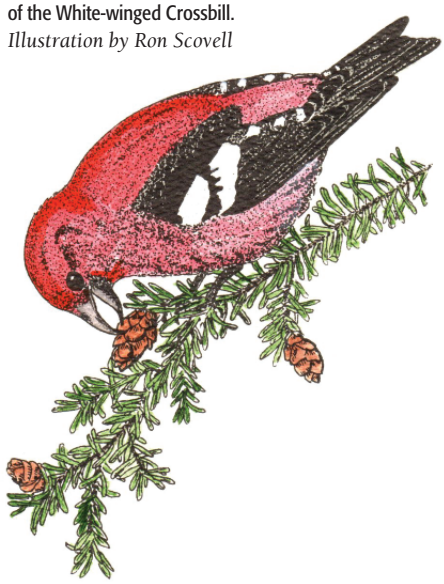
OFO News: What sort of feedback do you get from finch fans?
Ron: I normally get positive feedback. For example, Kenn and Kimberly Kaufman in 2008 wrote on their blog that "it's amazing how often Ron Pittaway is right on the mark." In non-finch winters, birders and bird seed retailers are disappointed but they don't blame me.

OFO News: Does the forecast have scientific value?
Ron: A number of university and college students have used concepts and data from the forecasts in their theses.

OFO News: What is your favourite winter finch?
Ron: The Pine Grosbeak is my favourite finch. It is a symbol of wilderness like the loon and wolf. While living in Algonquin, I cared for an injured adult male that couldn't fly. His name was Mope after its folk name in Newfoundland. Mope relished sunflower seeds and his diet was supplemented with tree buds and mountain-ash berries. He loved being outside in all seasons, but was kept inside at night. During bug season he snapped up black flies. One winter other Pine Grosbeaks were attracted by his calls and they perched on top of his enclosure. I felt sad that he couldn't fly away with them. In May and June, Mope's loud rolling song woke me up at dawn.

OFO News: Do you have clues about what finches might do next winter?
Ron: Yes, some trees such as pines and birches indicate the probable size of upcoming seed crops more than a year before they mature. However, I won't know more until trees are growing seed crops this summer. The 2016-2017 winter finch forecast will be posted in late September 2016.

Eastern Hemlock seeds are a favourite of the White-winged Crossbill. *Illustration by Ron Scovell*



Purple Sandpiper at Colonel Samuel Smith Park. *Photo by Garth Riley*

Rare Birds from Toronto's Western Waterfront

Despite the poor diversity of habitat, 16 species of rare birds have been seen along this stretch of waterfront since 1986 until the end of 2015

By Garth Riley

RECENTLY, WHILE SPENDING A QUIET winter day reviewing my list of Ontario birds from the past thirty years, from 1986 to 2015, I was surprised at the large number of rarities that have occurred along the western Toronto waterfront. The area that I am referring to stretches from Sunnyside Park (SP), west to the Toronto side of Marie Curtis Park (MCP) at Etobicoke Creek, the western boundary of the City of Toronto. Birds considered rarities are ones that require review by the Ontario Bird Records Committee (OBRC). In addition to the OBRC reviewable birds, there were significant numbers of locally rare bird species also reported from in this area.

There are numerous access points along Toronto's western waterfront. Most of the parks along the waterfront have formal plantings, play areas, and are groomed with a poor diversity of habitat. The parks are heavily used by the public and their pets. Some of the larger parks have small artificial wetlands and small areas of forest cover but there is a significant lack of mature forest, large wetlands, meadows and mud flats. It is therefore interesting that despite this lack of diversity, 16 species of rare birds have been seen along this stretch of waterfront since 1986 until the end of 2015. A Gyrfalcon seen from SP in the winter of 1996 and a Cave Swallow at Colonel Samuel Smith Park (CSSP) in 2012 barely missed making the list. The OBRC only reviews sightings of Gyrfalcon prior to 1994 and Cave Swallow prior to 2010.

The 16 rare bird species seen in this area include: Ross's Goose, Pacific Loon, Western Grebe, Northern Gannet, Neotropic Cormorant, Snowy Egret, Yellow-crowned Night-Heron, Ivory Gull, Heermann's Gull, Mew Gull, California Gull, Slaty-back Gull, Rock Wren, Townsend's Solitaire, Spotted Towhee, and Harris's Sparrow. The most recent species to make the list, Neotropic Cormorant and Townsend's Solitaire, were added in 2015 and seen by many birders. The reports of these two species are subject to review and acceptance by the OBRC.

In addition to these rarities, 21 other species considered locally rare were also found in this stretch of waterfront. Note that I have chosen not to list the people who were credited for finding the rarity as it would entail an in-depth review of OBRC records, which are available on the OFO website: www.ofo.ca.

A Rock Wren was the first mega-rarity that I became aware of and actually got to see. It was discovered in February 1999 at CSSP. At the time, the park was still under construction, with very little vegetation. The wren was taking shelter and feeding in crevices created by the large barrier stones at the east end of the park. It was an extremely cold and windy day and I am still amazed that the bird was able to survive in those horrific conditions.

CSSP attracts large numbers of birders and has the most diverse habitat of all the parks along the western waterfront. Subsequently, it has the largest number of recorded rarities for all of accessible areas along the waterfront. In addition to the two species already mentioned, CSSP has been host to Pacific Loon, Western Grebe, an adult Northern Gannet, Snowy Egret, a juvenile Yellow-crowned Night-Heron, Spotted Towhee, and Harris's Sparrow. While many of these sightings were brief, the Western Grebe and Yellow-crowned Night-Heron both remained for an extended period of time. Although not currently recognized as a separate species, a Eurasian "White-rumped" Whimbrel was seen and photographed in 2012 during the annual Whimbrel Watch.

Fortunately the Lake Ontario waterfront in the west end of Toronto still has some decent sized pockets of habitat that affords migrating and overwintering birds a place to feed and rest.

In winter months SP has long been a favourite spot for local birders to study the gulls resting along the break wall and adjacent ice. The location allows for birders to see a variety of different species of gulls. It also provides an opportunity to study gulls in various cycles of molt and the differences in their plumage. Typically large numbers of gulls come to roost in the mid to late afternoon during January and February. Birders who are warmly dressed and patient enough have been rewarded with three great discoveries, a Mew Gull in January 1991, a California Gull in January 2003 and an even greater find, a Slaty-backed Gull in January 1999. A Western Grebe and more recently a Neotropic Cormorant have also been reported from this location.

Before CSSP became a primary destination for birders in western Toronto, Humber Bay Park (HBP) was the premier destination. In December 2000 a much sought after Ivory Gull put in an appearance, much to the delight of the many birders who were able to add this species to their life list. The legendary, Toronto Heermann's Gull also put in an appearance here. Since HBP is an excellent location for viewing waterfowl in winter and fall and spring migration, it is not surprising that it has also played host to Pacific Loon and Ross's Goose.

Other locally rare birds recorded from these waterfront locations include: Barrow's Goldeneye, Eared Grebe, American Bittern, Least Bittern, American Avocet, Purple Sandpiper, Western Sandpiper, Red Phalarope, Gyrfalcon, Acadian Flycatcher, Western Kingbird, Cave Swallow, Sedge Wren, Worm-eating Warbler, Louisiana Waterthrush, Prothonotary Warbler, Kentucky Warbler, Yellow-throated Warbler, Yellow-breasted Chat, Le Conte's Sparrow and Nelson's Sparrow. A couple of other unusual sightings have included an American Wigeon x Mallard hybrid and a Tufted Duck x Greater Scaup hybrid.

As the City of Toronto continues to expand and good birding locations become harder to find, it is shouldn't be surprising that the few remaining green spaces in Toronto attract rare species of birds. Fortunately the Lake Ontario waterfront in the west end of Toronto still has some decent sized pockets of habitat that affords migrating and overwintering birds a place to feed and rest. So keep looking, you never know what you may find.

Juvenile Yellow-crowned Night-Heron at Colonel Samuel Smith Park. *Photo by Garth Riley*

Townsend's Solitaire at Colonel Samuel Smith Park.
Photo by Garth Riley

Point Pelee Area SHOREBIRDS 2016

American Avocet at Hillman Marsh.
Photo by Jean Iron

OFO Shorebird Viewing at Hillman Marsh

Join OFO experts at the Shorebird Cell to watch shorebirds migrating to Arctic breeding grounds.

Dates: April 30, May 2, 4, 6, 7, 8, 10, 12, 14 and 17

Time: 4:00 p.m.

Admission: Day pass at gate or Annual pass: http://erca.org/conservation-areas-events/annual-passes/

OFO partners: Essex Region Conservation Authority, Point Pelee National Park and Pelee Wings Nature Store

Northbound Shorebirds Workshops

Lunch and Learn Sessions with Jean Iron at Point Pelee National Park Visitor Centre. Included with park admission.

Dates: May 8 and 14

Time: 12:30 p.m.

The workshop focus will be Point Pelee area spring migrant and breeding shorebirds. In the late afternoon, we will visit Hillman Marsh Shorebird Cell (Admission: day or annual pass).

Hillman Marsh Shorebird and Songbird Celebration

Dates: May 7 and 8

Time: 9:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m.

See the Essex Region Conservation Authority website: http://erca.org/birding/

Ontario Bird Records Committee Update

Call for nominations

By Ken Burrell, OBRC Chair

SEVERAL NOTEWORTHY UPDATES to the Ontario Bird Records Committee (OBRC) have occurred over the past few months. For the remainder of the 2015 – 2016 year of review I have taken over from Brandon Holden as chair and would duly like to thank him for his continued outstanding work. The OBRC would also like to thank everyone who has submitted or helped the committee in its efforts to document Ontario's rich birdlife.

The OBRC would like to remind its members that resources, such as the Ontario review lists, checklists, etc., are located on the OFO website: www.ofo.ca

Two vacancies will be opening on the OBRC for the 2016 – 2017 year of review: both Bruce Di Labio and Ron Ridout's three year terms are wrapping up this spring. As such, the OBRC would like to call for nominations for members to serve on the committee. Specifically the OBRC is looking for keen OFO members in good standing, who have a strong record for submitting excellent documentation to the OBRC, have demonstrated expert knowledge with Ontario's avifauna, have a clear understanding of scientific processes, and are prepared to complete committee tasks, such as voting and other appointed tasks in a timely manner. Nominations will be voted upon at the OBRC's 2015 – 2016 Annual General Meeting, held at the Royal Ontario Museum on Sunday 6 March 2016. Nominations are required by 29 February 2016.

Nominations to the OBRC or suggestions for any changes to the OBRC's review lists are also encouraged to be submitted to the OBRC by 29 February 2016. Correspondence can be emailed to OBRC@ofo.ca

Welcome Garth Riley
Lead Editor of *OFO News*

THIS ISSUE OF *OFO NEWS* MARKS GARTH RILEY'S first issue as *OFO News*' Lead Editor. Cindy Cartwright, former Lead Editor is now a Contributing Editor. OFO owes a huge thank you to Cindy for the great work she did during her tenure. We are glad that she will continue to write for *OFO News* as a Contributing Editor.

Garth will be familiar to many of you. Garth and his family are avid birders in the Greater Toronto Area, Long Point and Point Pelee areas. As well as being an expert birder, Garth is eminently qualified to edit *OFO News*. Garth edited the Toronto Ornithological Club (TOC) newsletter for many years and currently serves on the TOC Record Committee and is co-chair of Friends of the Spit, an organization that advocates the urban wilderness at Tommy Thompson Park in Toronto.

The purpose of *OFO News* is to provide educational and informative articles related to birds and birding in Ontario and to inform OFO members about OFO activities, events, Board news and policies. We encourage all OFO members and others to submit articles. Please email Garth at ofonews@ofo.ca if you have ideas for articles, questions or comments about *OFO News*.

By Lynne Freeman

President's Message
Sometimes birding is as much about people as birds

SINCE 1994 OFO HAS HAD A CODE OF ETHICS outlining proper behavior for anyone observing birds in the wild whether they are carrying binoculars, a camera or a sketch pad.

Every year we hear reports of people crowding too close to rarities that are trying to survive in a strange environment, trespassing on private property or disturbing habitat to get a better view. In some cases we have had to stop the publication of sightings on Ontbirds because the behaviour has been so divisive.

While most people behave responsibly and are considerate to birds and their fellow birders, the behavior of a few can ruin the enjoyment of many and quite frankly, give birders a bad name.

Simply put:

- The welfare of birds must come first: keep disturbance to a minimum
- Do not disturb habitat
- Respect the rights of landowners: do not enter private property without permission
- Be considerate to other birders and non-birders alike
- Do not disclose the location of rare breeding birds except to proper authorities

While these guidelines apply to all birds, they are especially important for sought after birds such as rarities or owls, which attract crowds of people eager to see the bird.

We are currently updating the code and will be asking for feedback from Ontario birders and naturalist and photography clubs. We welcome your input during this process. Please drop us a line at president@ofo.ca

By Lynne Freeman
OFO President

Carden Alvar **Bluebirds** 2015

By Herb Furniss

I maintain 75 bluebird boxes of the Coker design on the Carden Alvar. Invented by the late George Coker of Winona, Ontario, this design produces more fledged young than other boxes. It is now used as far west as the Rockies, and in the New England States and Bermuda. I never stop boosting it.

The horizontal Coker box is designed so the nest is placed at the back of the box beyond the reach of raccoons. *Photo by Jean Iron*

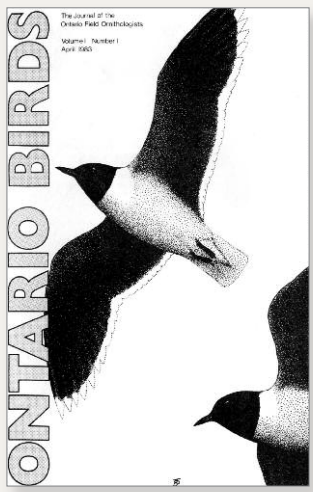
2015 WAS A LATE AND COOL SPRING resulting in a slow start to the nesting season. The latter half of May and early June were very dry resulting in the loss of 18 nestlings. The adults simply had fewer insects to feed hungry young. The losses were replaced in late June and July when the rains returned. The alvar must have rain every week to ten days or it "burns up".

Despite my fears, I ended up with a good year and fledged 144 bluebirds. For the first time in my 30 plus years operating a Bluebird Trail I had a nest of five white bluebird eggs which are normally pale blue. It's not unknown but was a first for me.

To date I have fledged 3450 bluebirds on the Carden Alvar.

Female Eastern Bluebird at well-known box #10 on Wylie Road. The overhanging roof provides shade and reduces rain at the entrance hole. *Photo by Jean Iron*

Ontario Birds and OFO News Back Issues Online



First issue of *Ontario Birds* in April 1983.

IN THE NEXT few weeks, all back issues of *Ontario Birds*, dating from the first volume in 1983 to the present, will be available as PDFs on OFO's website (98 issues). To date, 60 issues have been posted. Notably, OFO will publish the 100th issue of *Ontario Birds* this August.

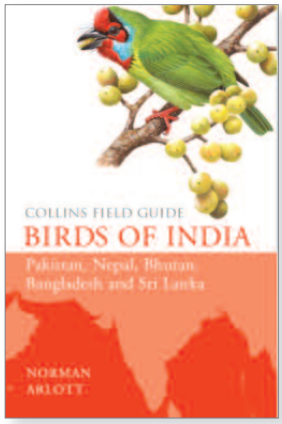
Dating back to the first issue in February 1994, *OFO News* will also soon be available to the public as PDFs. Excellent articles can be viewed and referenced.

The latest year of publication is available only to OFO members.

All of the PDFs are fully searchable, allowing the user to easily search for and locate any keyword within the publications.

www.ofo.ca/site/library

Book Reviews



Birds of India
Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. 2015. Norman Arlott. William Collins Books, London. Hardcover. 400 pages. CAN $66.99. ISBN: 978-0-00-742955-4

IT WAS WITH GREAT ANTICIPATION that I awaited the release of this latest work in the Collins Field Guide series, and for a few reasons. Collins has long distinguished itself for producing some fine field guides; for example, the pithy *Collins Bird Guide: The Most Complete Field Guide to the Birds of Britain and Europe* could be the finest bird guide ever. Additionally, Collins enjoyed great success with its popular *Collins Handguide to the Birds of the Indian Sub-Continent* (by Martin W. Woodcock), which was my first Indian avian field guide. Finally, Norman Arlott has written and superbly illustrated numerous previous guides including the recent *Birds of the West Indies*. Thus this latest guide could be Collins' natural "next step" to provide a complete treatment of India's rich bird life. This new guide is excellent! Let me discuss a number of salient features and their strengths.

First let's delve into the substance of the book: the species accounts and plates. As expected for compact guides, it is laid out with the left-hand pages containing species accounts and plates presented on the right-hand pages. All birds described on one page of text are illustrated on the opposite plate, so there is no need to leaf forward or backward to find any illustrations elsewhere, and the images are presented in similar order to their respective species accounts, really helping the user to find the text that corresponds with an image and vice-versa. Such consistency is not necessarily to be found in many other international field guides.

The composition and layout of the images are also very smart. The colour renditions and the proportions depicted in the images are outstanding. The resolution of the illustrations is also remarkably high and lends a very crisp look. The images alone could serve to whet one's appetite for the birds. In terms of the plate layouts, all birds on a plate are depicted in standardized yet naturalistic poses, usually standing or perched, but sometimes in flight. Certain taxa such as raptors and the swallows are depicted in flight in addition to at-rest. Images are well spaced and the plates are refreshingly airy. This airiness and juxtaposition of similar-looking species may assist the user to quickly discern differences and to find the correct identification, even without Peterson-style arrows or captions. The plates are further enhanced by the consistently white backgrounds, which make the images eye-popping and very appealing. In comparison, another high-profile guide to Indian birds frequently uses coloured backgrounds, which is perhaps a bit visually rich.

Each species account succinctly describes the species' field characters, voice, habitat and geographic distribution etc., and each descriptor is separately and clearly noted so the user can hone in on "Voice" or whichever trait is of interest. Accounts include important field marks that are not depicted on the plate itself but likely to be seen in another pose (e.g. in flight). Many birds of India have two or even three common names in currency and these are included where applicable.

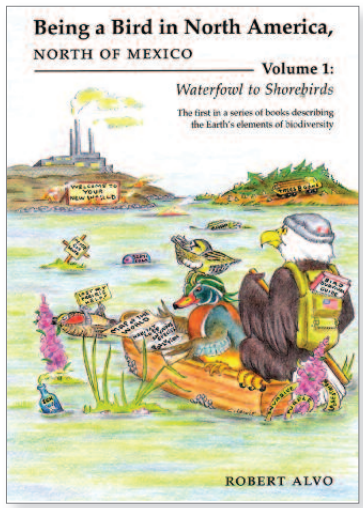
As one comes to expect from field guides covering bird-rich countries, range maps do not necessarily appear with the species accounts. Here, they are all conveniently grouped together in the rear, and labeled with plate and illustration numbers as well as species name. This arrangement is in my estimation far superior and easier to navigate than what one finds in some other guides, in which map pages can be scattered rather haphazardly throughout the guide and where the maps themselves include an illustration number as reference but don't include the species name. Though this placement of maps might take some getting used to for first-time birding visitors to India or indeed those venturing outside of North America for the first time, the characteristic distributions of birds in India — usually either pan-Indian, or distinctly regional — make the simple descriptions of distributions in the species accounts more than adequate as a first reference. Thus, the maps themselves are of secondary importance and their placement is not an inconvenience. I found one mistake. The range map for Painted Sandgrouse is incorrect and word is in to the publisher about this!

This guide notably does not contain the voluminous, multi-sectioned introductory text found in many international field guides. Those birders with a more complete geographic and natural history background of India may find this refreshing as one can delve right into the plates, whereas those wishing for a more complete discussion of Indian geography and bird life in general will have to look elsewhere.

This guide is an improvement on what has generally been available. For someone who expects to bird but casually while in this region or who simply wishes to get a frame-of-reference for India's bird life, this field guide may be overkill and the stalwart *Collins Handguide* by Woodcock should be adequate. However, for any serious student of birds who wishes to gain a full appreciation of India's great richness and geographic diversity and who wishes an informative, well organized and visually appealing reference, this new Collins guide is a must. The guide is compact and light enough to carry in the field despite being a hardcover.

Reviewed by Justin Peter

Being a Bird in North America, North of Mexico
Volume 1: Waterfowl to Shorebirds.
2015. Robert Alvo. Robert Alvo, Canada. Hardcover, 255 pages.
CAN $44.95. ISBN: 978-0-9877733-0-2



IT'S NOT A FIELD GUIDE nor is it a bird finding guide, and Robert Alvo's *Being a Bird in North America, North of Mexico* cannot easily be made to fit into any of the existing bird book families. As the title suggests it is a book that explains what it is to be a bird, their day to day lives, the adaptations they use to overcome obstacles and most importantly the threats they face from humans and a changing environment. Alvo's first book, *Being a Bird in North America, North of Mexico* is self-published and sponsored by NatureServe as well as The Nature Conservancy of Canada. It is the first in a planned series of three volumes, beginning at Black-bellied Whistling-Duck and ending at Red Phalarope. A strong message of conservation and a passion for birds and all forms of life appear to be the driving forces behind Alvo's book.

Although it is not a field guide, the book is laid out in a very similar fashion; the species are each given a page and are presented in taxonomic order. Each page shows a world map with the given species range, a photo or two, a cartoon related to the bird and text about the bird. The text in each species account is widely varied and discusses a number of behavioural traits, specific adaptations, and threats faced by the bird in question. These species accounts are very well cited and many prominent ornithologists are quoted. Arthur C. Bent seems to be a personal favourite of Alvo's and provided one of my favourite quotes from the book on the Golden Eagle. He states, "This magnificent eagle has long been named 'king of birds', and it well deserves the title. It is majestic in flight, regal in appearance, dignified in manner, and crowned with a shower of golden hackles about its royal head." (Bent 1937, 293). Quotations like this placed through the book provide a vivid mental image for many a bird using a few choice words. One thing that caught my attention while reading *Being a Bird in North America, North of Mexico* was the lack of flow between some of the ideas. The transition between species accounts and thoughts is sometimes jumpy and can be a challenge to follow.

The range maps for each species are shown using a world map giving the reader a better understanding of the global role that each bird plays. The use of this strategy in illustrating the range of a species such as the King Eider is very effective. That said, I found its practicality was lost on a species like the Lesser Prairie-Chicken, which here has such a small range that showing the context of the entire world only took away from understanding how they are distributed in North America. It would perhaps be best to create maps at a scale that is most useful for the individual distribution of each species.

The cartoons, which appear on each page, add a touch of humour to lighten up some of the more serious environmental topics discussed throughout the book. In the Piping Plover account, the cartoon shows a solemn plover playing a flute while stuck in a metal cage being harassed by a raccoon and a gull. This cartoon is clearly referencing the issue of Piping Plover nests being destroyed by "beach going" humans or depredated by animals, and the mesh cages used to protect the nests by conservation groups. The illustrations are meant to animate some of the discussion that takes place within the text and act as a memory aid for people less familiar with birds. Although I found some of the cartoons humorous, they are difficult to understand if you have not read the information on the page as well. They may be made more effective by adding some sort of caption that concisely and humorously explains the image.

At the beginning of his book Alvo says that his book "is intended for a wide audience, which includes birders, anyone with a passing interest in birds, nature lovers, anyone interested in conservation or simply people who enjoy humour." In the process of reading and reviewing his book I believe that a more ideal target audience may be students of environmental studies and those who are interested in ecology as a whole as well as the lives of birds. It is tremendously difficult to write a book that appeals to everyone and Alvo has put in a commendable effort in his attempt to create something that can be enjoyed by many.

Volume 1 of *Being a Bird in North America, North of Mexico* is not your typical book on birds. It uses words and cartoons to share a message of conservation. The use of well cited material gives the book a notably academic feel. By mixing in illustrations that provide a sort of comic relief, it is easier to digest some of the more serious subject matter. Alvo's love of birds and all aspects of the natural world is evident throughout the book and I look forward to seeing how his style will evolve in the coming volumes.

Reviewed by Dan Riley

Photo Quiz

By Jon Ruddy

Even before beginning to analyze plumage detail, we can narrow our list of possibilities down to a few suspects...

Photo by Nicole Watson

YOU'RE OUT WITH FRIENDS ENJOYING a hike on a beautiful, sunny winter's day. Upon cresting a small hill, one of your friends stops dead in her tracks in front of you. As she stands there with her mouth ajar and eyes wide like saucers, you trace her gaze to a large brown bird perched in tree along the forest edge...

Looking at this bird's large, hooked bill and broad, powerful-looking shoulders, it becomes immediately apparent that our quiz bird is a solidly built diurnal raptor. In this clear, unobstructed view, we can see that our quiz bird is perched perfectly erect, affording an excellent view of its structural features and relative proportions. A bird perched in such a way is unlikely to belie the true length of its wings relative to its tail length, as might occur with a bird perched horizontally with its tail drooping below its body. Structurally speaking, the bird is sound and we are ready to investigate further its plumage, features and proportions.

Even before beginning to analyze plumage detail, we can narrow our list of possibilities down to a few suspects by relying heavily on GISS (General Impression of Size and Shape).

The proportionately short wings and very long tail immediately eliminate large members of the falcon family. In this posture, Gyrfalcon, Peregrine Falcon and Prairie Falcon would show long, dagger-like wing tips tending to fall equal to (Peregrine) or nearly equal to (Gyrfalcon and Prairie Falcon) the tip of the tail. The smaller falcons, Merlin and American Kestrel, are easily eliminated on the basis of the sheer bulk of our quiz bird. Both of the smaller falcons are rather dainty in build with proportionately large heads. American Kestrels of either sex are highly colorful and intricately patterned birds and Merlins are generally solid in tone throughout the upperparts and showcase pale barring atop a dark tail.

Compared to our quiz bird, a brown (female/juvenile) Northern Harrier would showcase a lengthy, lean visage; a long wing-fold extending down toward the tip of the tail; and an owl-like facial disk.

Both immature Bald Eagles and Golden Eagles have a massive bill with a staggering, hooked tip; they are both massive and long-bodied; and both species have long wings that would extend down toward the tail tip in a similar posture as to our quiz bird. Osprey is immediately eliminated on the basis of wing fold length relative to tail tip and our quiz bird showcases an absence of the whitish head with a dark post-ocular stripe seen with Osprey.

Again using the unique 'signature' of short wings and very long tail seen on our quiz bird, we can examine the possibility of our quiz bird being a buteo. Broad-winged Hawks are quite stout in build, with a relatively large head, short body and much shorter tail than what is seen with our quiz bird. Swainson's Hawk and Rough-legged Hawk are much longer-winged, with both species also showing proportionately "lighter" bills. Is it possible that our bird is a Red-shouldered or Red-tailed Hawk? Adults of both species have striking, brightly-coloured plumage characteristics that our brownish quiz bird lacks. So, perhaps our quiz bird is a juvenile of either of the two species. Juvenile Red-tailed Hawks would show a proportionally shorter tail and longer wings; vague V-shaped pale mottling to the upperparts; and finer, more abundant tail banding. Juvenile Red-shouldered Hawks would show pale mottling throughout the upperparts, such as our quiz bird, but would also

keep with the buteo theme of proportionately longer wings and shorter tail. Note: juvenile Red-shouldered Hawks generally have quite a long tail as far as Buteos go, so we're getting warmer but still not quite there.

This leaves us with the accipiters: Sharp-shinned Hawk, Cooper's Hawk and Northern Goshawk. We can see by the brownish color overall, pale mottling throughout the upperparts and dull yellow iris that our bird is a juvenile of one of the three species of Ontario accipiters. The accipiters are characterized by short, relatively rounded wings and proportionally long tails. Starting with Sharp-shinned Hawk, we see that our quiz bird lacks the 'bug-eyed' look of a Sharp-shinned, and the small, domed head; stocky build, and proportionally small bill. which is typical of this species.

Moving along, we will now focus on Cooper's Hawk as a possibility, which our quiz bird may very well be. With Cooper's, typically the head and nape are heavily-streaked and tinged with a varying intensity of tawny tone throughout. The supercilium (eyebrow) is typically reduced to a dash of whitish feathering though in some birds it is quite well-defined. The upperparts are typically mottled with a modest degree of pale spotting.

These described features fit our bird quite well but something is amiss. A close look at the tail bands reveals several strikes against Cooper's Hawk. Firstly, the tail bands on our quiz bird are relatively thin, wavy and nearly disjunct in orientation. Typically, Cooper's Hawks have straight-lined tail bands which average broader than what is seen with our bird. Secondly, the tail bands are bordered by a light buff-toned edge; a feature that is not seen on juvenile Cooper's Hawks' tails. The tail pattern is a diagnostic feature for Northern Goshawk. Many of the other features, including size, are subjective and postural.

From the tail to studying the upperparts on our quiz bird, we can see the rather extensive whitish-buff spangling throughout, a patterning which is especially true of the upperwing coverts, seen here along the visible folded wing. Cooper's Hawks generally have less spangling throughout and typically lack the conspicuous pale mottling along the upperwing of juvenile goshawks. Visually stepping back from plumage detail all together and admiring the bird in its entirety, we conclude, after careful deduction, that our quiz bird is a juvenile **Northern Goshawk**. This juvenile Northern Goshawk was photographed in Kingston in Lemoine's Point Conservation Area by Nicole Watson on 25 November 2015.

Welcome to our new Photo Quiz editor

OUR SINCERE THANKS GO TO WILLIE D'ANNA for his dedication and expertise as author of OFO's Photo Quiz for the past six years. Willie both challenged us and educated us on how to observe and identify difficult species.

We anticipate that this well deserved break will enable Willie to spend more time with some of his favourite pastimes, birding and photography. We wish Willie all the best and anticipate that he will turn up another mega-rarity such as the Ancient Murrelet he discovered at Port Weller on 13 November 1994.

PLEASE WELCOME JON RUDDY who has agreed to take on the responsibility of writing the *OFO News* Photo Quiz. Jon is an Ottawa-based field birder/freelance birding guide and became interested in birds while studying under the tutelage of Carleton University professor and naturalist, Michael Runtz. From 2012-2014, he worked as a field biologist, conducting bird surveys in southern Ontario, southern James Bay, throughout Manitoba and the southern portion of the Okanagan Valley. In 2015, he started up his own birding tours company, Eastern Ontario Birding, and loves nothing more than sharing birding experiences with others.

Jon is very active with the Ontario Birds Facebook group where he provides excellent advice on improving one's identification skills. His favorite bird species is the Yellow-throated Vireo.

Ontario Field Ornithologists

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