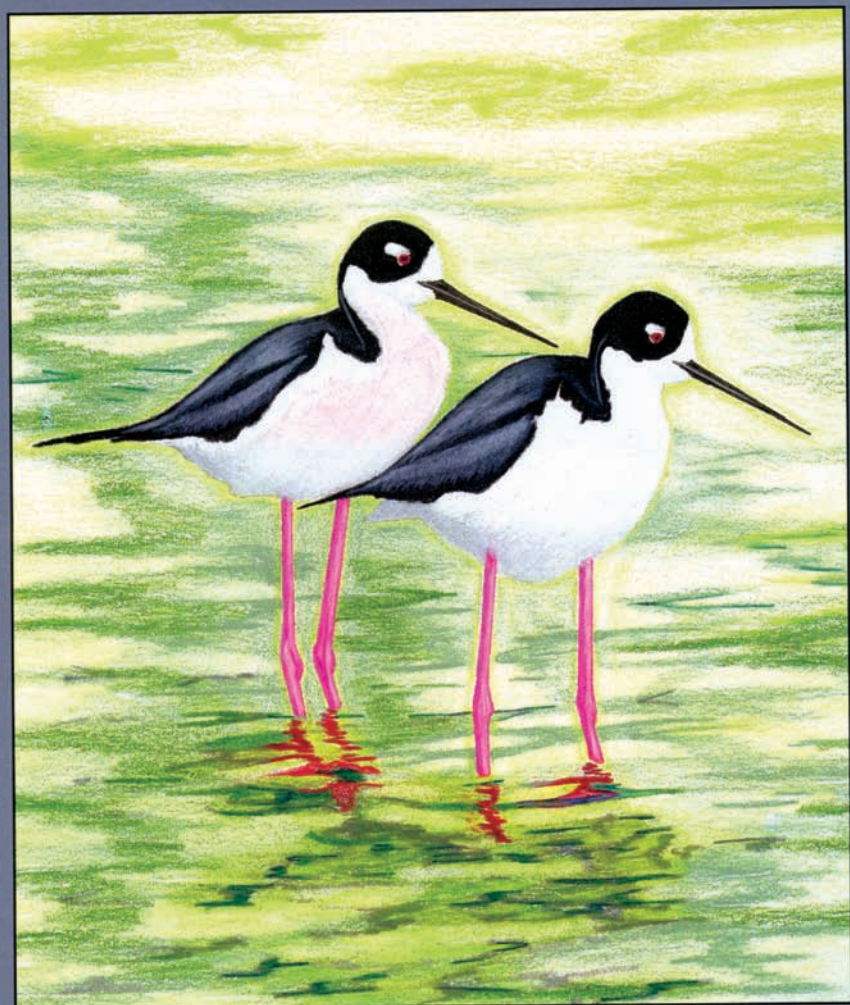


# ONTARIO BIRDS



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## *Articles*

### **First Breeding and Nest Record of Black-necked Stilt in Ontario**

Mark K. Peck, Glenn Coady, A. Geoffrey Carpentier, and  
Barry S. Cherriere

#### **Introduction**

The Black-necked Stilt (*Himantopus mexicanus*) is a striking black and white, medium-sized shorebird with extraordinarily long, pink legs. Stilts are common in shallow wetlands, salt ponds and sewage lagoons, feeding on invertebrates and small fish. In North America, they regularly breed in scattered populations: throughout southern Florida and locally along the Atlantic coast as far north as Delaware Bay and southeastern Pennsylvania; in coastal and inland freshwater sites along the Gulf of Mexico from Alabama to extreme southern Texas (and inland to the Edwards Plateau), through the northwest and panhandle of Texas (and very locally in central Texas) and much of eastern New Mexico; locally in central and eastern Colorado as well as very locally in central Kansas; along the southern Pacific coast of California and inland in central California west of the Sierra Nevada; and widely in the Great Basin, from southern Oregon east of the Cascades, through north-eastern California east of the Sierra

Nevada, northern Nevada, through to southwestern Idaho, northern Utah and extreme southwestern Wyoming. They also breed locally in east-central Washington, west-central Montana, along the lower Colorado River and the Salton Sea, and southeastern Arizona. During a recent range expansion, they have begun to nest extraliminally in North Dakota, Nebraska, Missouri, Illinois, Tennessee, Kentucky, Wisconsin and Michigan. Black-necked Stilts have a tendency to range widely and extralimital sightings are common after storms or during prolonged droughts in their regular breeding areas (Robinson et al. 1999).

In Canada, they are described as a rare and erratic breeder in southern Alberta and Saskatchewan and are considered accidental or irregular vagrants throughout the rest of the country, with records in all ten provinces (Godfrey 1986, Campbell et al. 1990, Gauthier and Aubry 1996, Leighton et al. 2002, Manitoba Avian Research Committee 2003). Breeding records in Alberta (Dekker et al. 1979) and Saskatchewan (Salisbury and

Salisbury 1989, Smith 1996) have occurred since 1977 and are usually associated with droughts in the western United States. One of the earliest breeding records in Canada is an unconfirmed record of a set of eggs in the National Museum of Canada collected by Edward Arnold from Fort Qu'appelle, Saskatchewan on 13 June 1894, a year of widespread drought in the western United States. (Godfrey 1966, Smith 1996).

There have been 13 occurrences of Black-necked Stilt in Ontario (Table 1), but until recently there has never been any indication of local breeding. However, recent droughts in western North America coupled with increasingly regular sightings of this species in and around the Great Lakes Basin, including recently documented nests in Wisconsin and Michigan (Table 2), have made any provincial sightings in 2004 of particular interest.

**Table 1: Chronology of occurrences of Black-necked Stilt in Ontario.**

- 1) 1 September 1955: one, Frederick House Lake, *Cochrane* (Frances Bourne, Rita Seccombe). Reference: Baillie (1955) postulated that this first record for Ontario likely occurred as a result of the passage of Hurricane Connie in mid August.
- 2) 14 October 1979: one, Smithville sewage lagoons, *Niagara* (Gerald Chapple, Gary A. Novosel, Aline Novosel). References: Goodwin 1981, Wormington 1986.
- 3) 7 June 1981: two, Sable Island, *Rainy River* (Evan J. Thomas, M.B. Thomas). Reference: James 1983.
- 4) 28 May – 16 June 1989: one male, Stoney Point, *Essex* (Richard A. Girardin, Alan Wormington, James N. Flynn); photos on file. Reference: Wormington and Curry 1990.
- 5) 12-23 June 1989: one definitive alternate female, North Bay sewage lagoons, *Nipissing* (Ronald G. Tozer, Michael W.P. Runtz; found by Richard Tafel); photo on file. Reference: Wormington and Curry 1990.
- 6) 19 May 1991: three, Mitchell sewage lagoons, *Perth* (Erwin Meissner, Annie Meissner); photos on file. Reference: Bain 1992.
- 7) 1-2 June 1991: one female, Grand Bend sewage lagoons, *Huron/Lambton* [1 June] (Jeffrey H. Skevington, Cathy Koot) and Parkhill sewage lagoons, *Middlesex* [2 June] (re-found by Bob Hayward, Helen Inch and Spencer Inch). Reference: Pittaway 1995.
- 8) 28 May 1996: one, Long Point (Squires Ridge), *Haldimand-Norfolk* (Warren Claydon). Reference: Dobos 1997.
- 9) 26 May 1998: one, Bath, *Lennox & Addington* (Alfred H. Rider); photo on file. Reference: Dobos 1999.

- 10) 31 May – 1 June 1998: one female, Toronto (Leslie St. Spit), *Toronto* (Larry A. Morse, Roy B.H. Smith, John Schmelefske); photos on file. Reference: Dobos 1999.
- 11) 27 December 2001 – 2 January 2002: one definitive basic female, Port Lambton (Snye River), *Lambton* (Larry Cornelis, Blake A. Mann, Harold E. Stiver, Allen T. Chartier); photos on file. Reference: Roy 2002.
- 12) 18 May 2004: one, Pelee Island, *Essex*. Irena Knezevic reported via ONTBIRDS that a Black-necked Stilt, a probable male, was seen by the Pelee Island Bird Observatory staff this morning [May 18]. It was flying northwest over Fox Pond at Fish Point just before 0800h.
- 13) 19 May – 5 June 2004: one definitive alternate male, one definitive alternate female, nest and three eggs, one additional “dropped” egg collected. The birds were first discovered at the Townsend sewage lagoons, *Haldimand* [19 May] (John G. Keenleyside, Daniel Salisbury, R. Douglas McRae, Bruce Di Labio, Tom Thomas, Chris Kimber, Mike Kimber), and later found to be nesting at the Jarvis sewage lagoons, *Haldimand* [19 May – 5 June] (Dennis Lewington, Gwen Lewington, Carl Hamann, Cheryl Edgecombe, Barry Cheriére, Ian Burton, David Milsom, Frank Pinilla, A. Geoffrey Carpentier, Helen Penfold, Mike Penfold, Don Sutherland, Ken Newcombe, Karl Egressey, Barry Jones, Garth Riley); nest and three eggs discovered by Mark K. Peck on 28 May; additional “dropped” egg, discovered 10 metres north of the nest by Glenn Coody on 31 May, was collected by Mark K. Peck (ROM 500585); photos and video on file. This nest apparently failed due to depredation by natural predator some time between 5-8 June 2004.

Note: All of the above records except the latter two have been reviewed and accepted by the Ontario Bird Records Committee (OBRC). These two 2004 records still await eventual review by the committee. A thorough literature search, including Wormington (2004), has failed to reveal any other generally accepted records of Black-necked Stilt in Ontario that have not yet been reviewed by the OBRC.

## **Table 2: Recent extralimital nest records of Black-necked Stilt in adjacent Great Lakes Basin jurisdictions.**

### **Wisconsin**

- 1999      A pair of Black-necked Stilts, found on 27 May 1999 at Horicon National Wildlife Refuge, Dodge County, by Jack R. Bartholmai, successfully raised five young to provide the first state breeding record for Wisconsin (Granlund 1999, Will 1999, Tessen 1999).
- 2004      A family group of two adults and three fledged young was discovered on 22 August 2004 at the Dodge County ponds (north of Beaver Dam), Dodge County, on a Wisconsin Society for Ornithology field trip.
- A lone Black-necked Stilt returned to Horicon Marsh, Dodge County, but no evidence of additional nesting was documented at that site.

## Michigan

- 2003 A pair of Black-necked Stilts was discovered on 10 May 2003 at water impoundments at the Point Mouillee State Game Area, Monroe County. By the fourth week in May, there were two pairs present at this location. Each of these pairs of Black-necked Stilts successfully fledged four young, providing Michigan with its first state breeding records for this species (Svingen 2004).
- 2004 Another pair of Black-necked Stilts was discovered on 2 May 2004 at the Point Mouillee State Game Area by Adam Byrne and Skye Haas. Although this pair continued to be seen into the last week in May, and demonstrated behaviour consistent with another likely breeding attempt (adult seemingly incubating), the birds apparently failed, likely due to habitat flooding from heavy rains in the period 20-21 May 2004 (*vide* Will Weber on Michigan's statewide birding listserv, 22 May 2004).

## Ohio

- 2004 A pair of Black-necked Stilts was discovered at Big Island Wildlife Area, Marion County, in southwestern Ohio (just outside the Great Lakes Basin) on 20 May 2004 by John Kuenzli. They were confirmed to be a male and female pair when re-found on 5 June 2004 by Randy L. Shonkwiler. Multiple observers described behaviour consistent with a probable local breeding attempt in clearly suitable habitat over the period 5-9 June 2004. Although Ohio birders attempted to find evidence to confirm what would have been a first state breeding record for Ohio, the birds disappeared after 9 June 2004. It is quite possible that these birds attempted nesting and failed early in the attempt before confirmatory documentation could be obtained. For a thorough discussion of this occurrence, see: [http://www.ohiobirds.org/news.php?News\\_ID=75](http://www.ohiobirds.org/news.php?News_ID=75)

Note: Ontario's first nesting of Black-necked Stilt coincides with a season for which extralimital breeding records were confirmed in two other Great Lakes Basin jurisdictions (Wisconsin and Michigan) and probable in a third (Ohio).

This first Ontario breeding record also coincides with a year in which unprecedented numbers of Black-necked Stilts were occurring in the Great Lakes area and other areas of recent range expansion in the east. For example, Ohio had six reports involving eight Black-necked Stilts in five different counties in 2004 (compared with seven records of eight birds in the prior 24 years). Wisconsin recorded three birds at two sites as described above. Three birds were discovered in mid May at Rice Lake State Park, Steele/Dodge Counties, in Minnesota. Four birds were present in Bath, Franklin County, in Indiana on 24 April 2004. In Illinois, where the first breeding record occurred in 1995 (McKee and Fink 1995), breeding is now annual in favoured locations, with a growing population. Forty-two Black-necked Stilts were found in Fulton County, Kentucky, where breeding was confirmed in early July 2004, and another seven were found on 2 May 2004 in Boone County, Kentucky. In Tennessee, where the first state records and nesting were documented in 1982 (Coffey 1985), concentrations of Black-necked Stilt sightings are rapidly increasing in the western portion of the state, with unprecedented numbers breeding in Dyer and Lake Counties in 2003, and a peak count of 182 birds by Jeff R. Wilson on 1 June 2003 (Sloan and Palmer-Bell 2003). Across the Mississippi River in southeastern Arkansas, Jeff R. Wilson also recorded 315 Black-necked

Stilts at the Oakwood Unit of Felsenthal National Wildlife Refuge, Desha County, on 4 September 1995.

From the pattern of occurrence outlined above, it would appear possible that the Mississippi and Ohio river valleys may be providing a habitat corridor for the spread of the Black-necked Stilt from the Mississippi River drainage basin to the Great Lakes drainage basin.

## Observations

In May 2004, reported sightings of a pair of Black-necked Stilts began appearing on the Ontario Field Ornithologists' listserv, ONTBIRDS (see website: <http://www.ofo.ca/ont-birdsguide.htm>). The reports eventually led to the discovery and documentation of Ontario's first nest of Black-necked Stilt adjacent to the Jarvis sewage lagoons, Haldimand County. Much of the behaviour and

breeding information associated with this nesting is in large part due to the collaborative efforts of individuals sharing observations and information posted on ONTBIRDS.

The following is a summary of ONTBIRDS reports and additional information from other sources concerning the pair of Black-necked Stilts in and around the Jarvis sewage lagoons in May and June 2004.

Tuesday, 18 May 2004: A Black-necked Stilt, a probable male, was seen flying northwest over Fox Pond at Fish Point just before 0800h by staff of the Pelee Island Bird Observatory, Essex County (*vide* I. Knezevic).

Wednesday, 19 May 2004: J. Keenleyside and D. Salisbury discovered a pair of Black-necked Stilts this morning at the Townsend sewage lagoons, Haldimand County. D. McRae, B. Di Labio and T. Thomas observed the birds there later and they were noted flying off to the east. D. Lewington and C. Hamann subsequently rediscovered the pair of Black-necked Stilts at the Jarvis sewage lagoons. Later that afternoon, M. and C. Kimber saw the pair copulate back at the Townsend sewage lagoons.

Thursday, 20 May 2004: At about 0830h, C. Edgecombe observed two Black-necked Stilts at the Jarvis sewage lagoons.

Saturday, 22 May 2004: Two Stilts were observed at the Jarvis lagoons in the afternoon in the southernmost cell. Vocalizations were heard. I. Burton speculated on the possibility of nesting.

Monday, 24 May 2004: D. Milsom observed one of the Black-necked Stilts at the Jarvis sewage lagoons. F. Pinilla observed the pair, in the cornfield, preening, and witnessed vocalizations and interactions with a Killdeer.

Friday, 28 May 2004: G. Carpentier reported the following observations from Wednesday, 26 May 2004. Only one of the pair was vocal, calling softly at first, but both were alert to the observer's presence. One bird (female) was seen to settle on a "fake" nest on the shore of the south lagoon. On Thursday evening, 27 May 2004, Carpentier found only one bird in the lagoon. It vocalized softly throughout the period of observation. The bird (male) was observed settling on the "later to be confirmed" nest in the cornfield northeast of the south lagoon. On Friday

afternoon, 28 May 2004, G. Coady reported that M. Peck had located the stilt's nest, which contained three eggs that morning.

Sunday, 30 May 2004: One of the Black-necked Stilts was observed at about 1100h by K. Egressey.

Tuesday, 1 June 2004: G. Carpentier reported both the male and female were more vocal than usual and reacted quickly to intruders. One of the pair (male) mobbed a passing Red-tailed Hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis*).

Wednesday, 2 June 2004: H. and M. Penfold observed the pair at the lagoons at about 1350-1410h.

Friday, 4 June 2004: D. Sutherland and several other individuals saw the stilts highly agitated in the cornfield, reacting to a human intruder in the nearby hedgerow/gully.

Saturday, 5 June 2004: G. Riley, N. McPherson, D. Riley and A. Riley saw one of the birds at 0900h.

Tuesday, 8 June 2004: Stilts were not observed despite deliberate searches by B. Jones and K. Newcombe. B. Jones found an eggshell in the cornfield near the nest site.

Wednesday, 9 June 2004: B. Farnan did not find the birds, despite searching.

Wednesday, 16 June 2004: T. Cosburn reported seeing the pair on 4 June.

### **Nest Information (not posted on ONTBIRDS)**

Thursday, 20 May 2004: During five and a half hours of observation from the Jarvis sewage lagoon berms, B. and L. Cheriére observed both stilts preening and feeding in the south lagoon. One of the birds (male) was defending part of the lagoon from other shorebirds using typical crouch-run aggression displays as described by Hamilton (1975). The birds would regularly fly to the corn stubble field to the northeast of the south lagoon and then return to the lagoon after several minutes. Using a spotting scope, they were able to observe the birds in the cornfield. The birds landed near each other and, while one bird stood quietly nearby, the other bird was observed picking up bits of vegetation from the surrounding area and tossing it onto what they presumed was a nest. After a few moments, the stilt would sidestep a little and continue tossing material onto the same spot. The bird then began making adjustments to the area with its bill while slowly lowering itself onto the nest. The birds returned several times to the same area during the Cheriéres' visit and continued with nest building behaviour. A Killdeer (*Charadrius vociferus*) that had wandered into the nest area was quickly persuaded to leave.

At one point during observations, a heavy rain started to fall. At the time, both birds were feeding in the lagoons but when the rain started one of the birds (female) quickly left the north lagoon and headed back into the field where it remained until the rain had ended. The other bird continued to feed in the south lagoon. Upon returning to the lagoon, the birds continued to feed until one of them (female) stretched her body out horizontally and angled her head slightly downward in a typical sexual solicitation posture as described by Hamilton (1975). It was at that point that the male mounted her and copulation took place. The presumed sex of each bird had been correctly identified prior to copulation. The male was distinguished by black mantle and scapular feathers, and a faint wash of pink/cream colour on his throat, chest and upper belly. The colour of the mantle and scapular feathers was difficult to see on dull, overcast days. The female was browner on the back with a platinum white breast. Approximately an



hour later, the female assumed the same “bowing” position and the subsequent copulation was photographed (Figure 1).

Thursday, 27 May 2004: G. Carpentier contacted M. Peck to inform him of the probable nest site in the unploughed cornfield northeast of the lagoons. Carpentier had been observing the birds with a spotting scope, but was not able to locate the nest because of impending darkness.

Friday, 28 May 2004: M. Peck traveled to the sewage lagoons, arriving at 0830h, and observed both birds feeding in the southern lagoon. After 10 minutes, the male, distinguished by the blacker feathers on the back, flew to the cornfield (Figure 2) and disappeared from view. Using a spotting scope from the fence line between the cornfield and the lagoon, the male was observed walking to the north end of the field and sitting on what appeared to be a nest. A Killdeer was also observed sitting in the field approximately 40 m south of the stilt, but nesting was not confirmed. After 10 minutes of observation, Peck walked to the site and located the nest (ONRS 173915). It was located at 17T 573018 4747719 (North American Datum 1983). During the approach, the male left the nest and walked to the northeast edge of the field, where the female joined him. Both appeared agitated and called noisily during Peck’s visit to the nest site.

The nest was an untidy platform of dead corn stalks, weed stalks and corn leaves with no indication of a lining (Figure 3). It was placed 50 mm above the bare ground and had an outside diameter of 230 mm and an inside diameter of 118 mm. Three pyriform eggs were found in the nest (Figure 4). The eggs were golden brown, heavily marked with dark brownish black blotches concentrated near the larger end. They were measured with digital calipers accurate to 0.01 mm and found to be 42.95 x 30.59 mm, 42.57 x 30.95 mm and 43.23 x 30.79 mm. The eggs were weighed using an electronic balance accurate to 0.1 g and weighed 19.6 g, 20.3 g and 20.1 g, respectively.

While leaving the cornfield and returning to the lagoons, both stilts stayed in front of the observer and performed wing-flapping and false incubation crouching (Figure 5) distraction displays as described by Robinson et al. (1999).

Monday, 31 May 2004: G. Coady and M. Peck returned to the nest site to determine final clutch size and potential incubation period. Coady found a dropped egg (single egg laid on the bare ground without evidence of any scraping or association with any nest), 10 m from the nest. The incidence of such dropped eggs is not uncommon in this species (Sordahl 1996, Robinson et al. 1999). This fourth egg measured 43.85 x 30.85 mm. The egg was cold and obviously faded on one side from sun exposure and had probably lain there for several days. It was salvaged under Canadian Wildlife Service permit CA0080 and is now in the permanent collections of the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM 500585). The active nest still contained three warm eggs.

Tuesday, 1 June 2004: The authors contacted B. Jones of Simcoe, who agreed to assist with the protection of the nest. Jones located the landowner, G. Miller, who graciously agreed to minimize disturbance to the nest by delaying ploughing of the field or, if ploughing was unavoidable, to not work in the immediate vicinity of the nest.

Saturday, 5 June 2004: From the lagoon berm, B. Cheriére observed one of the stilts sitting on the nest while the other bird moved between the south lagoon and the cornfield. When Cheriére left the lagoon at 1500h, both birds were still present.



**Figure 1:** Black-necked Stilts copulating in southernmost sewage lagoon, Jarvis, Haldimand County, 20 May 2004. Photo by *Barry S. Cherie*.



**Figure 2:** Unploughed cornfield directly east of Jarvis sewage lagoons, Haldimand County. Nest of Black-necked Stilt in foreground, 28 May 2004. Photo (ROM 2113) by *Mark K. Peck*.



**Figure 3: Nest and eggs of Black-necked Stilt, Jarvis, Haldimand County, 28 May 2004. Photo (ROM 2114) by Mark K. Peck.**



**Figure 4: Eggs of Black-necked Stilt, Jarvis, Haldimand County, 28 May 2004. Photo (ROM 2112) by Mark K. Peck.**



**Figure 5: Black-necked Stilt performing false incubation crouch distraction display, approximately 70 m from nest, Jarvis, Haldimand County, 28 May 2004. Photo by Mark K. Peck.**

### Discussion

The first report of Black-necked Stilt in Ontario in 2004 was a lone bird flying northwest on the southern tip of Pelee Island on 18 May, approximately 150 km west of Jarvis. Although coincidental, there is no evidence to suggest that this was one of the Jarvis stilts. Based solely on distance to known pairs, it is more likely this was one of the birds that bred in 2003 and possibly 2004 in the Point Mouillee State Game Area, Monroe County, Michigan, located just 55 km northwest of Pelee Island.

Pair formation of Black-necked Stilts may occur on the wintering grounds, on migration, or on the breeding grounds (Sordahl 1984). A

search of the meteorological data for mid May revealed no major storms in the U.S. midwest or along the Atlantic coast. Checking the U.S. drought monitor website (<http://drought.unl.edu/dm>), we did find evidence of abnormally dry to extreme drought conditions throughout much of the Black-necked Stilt's western range and abnormally dry conditions throughout much of the eastern range in 2004. Similar drought conditions were also found in the west from 2000 through 2003, suggesting the extralimital sightings around the Great Lakes Basin may be the result of a prolonged drought. Whether the Black-necked Stilts from Jarvis came from the west, the

Atlantic coast, or were a pair of birds from a previous Great Lakes Basin sighting is not known.

It is our belief that the stilts had arrived together very recently and were probably already paired. Pair bonds are known to be maintained throughout the breeding season (Robinson et al. 1999), so the arrival and disappearance of the birds at the same time is not surprising. During spring migration, both the Jarvis and Townsend sewage lagoons receive considerable attention from birders and it is doubtful the birds would have been in the area for more than a couple of days without being noticed or reported.

The first observations of these birds occurred at the Townsend sewage lagoons, 3.5 km to the northwest of Jarvis, on 19 May 2004. During that day, the birds were reported moving between the sewage lagoons at Jarvis and Townsend and were observed copulating at the Townsend lagoons. At the time of the first observed copulation, we would suggest that the birds were still searching for suitable nesting habitat and had not yet established a territory. The report of nest building and copulation the following day at the Jarvis sewage lagoons demonstrates how quickly this species is able to establish a breeding territory and initiate nesting.

The ONTBIRDS listserv is primarily for bird sightings and it clearly warns contributors not to report rare or endangered species on breeding territories so as not to

cause a species to abandon a nest or breeding attempt because of disturbance. Reports of rare birds are acceptable if the birds can be seen from a public location or at a safe distance. Prior to the reports by the authors on 28 May 2004, all reported observations were following the established guidelines and were providing valuable information on breeding behaviour. However, it was evident from many of the reports that the Black-necked Stilts had established a nesting territory and in all probability were nesting in the vicinity.

Our decision to search for the nest and report it on ONTBIRDS was based on three factors. Our primary goal was to properly document the first known nesting of Black-necked Stilt in Ontario. We had also hoped that by announcing the finding of the nest that we had served a warning to individuals to limit their observations to the lagoon berm. In fact, anyone leaving the berm would have done so knowing they were causing possible disturbance to a very rare Ontario species and, given the interest the birds had generated, were in danger of being observed by other birders. Finally, by locating the nest, we were hoping to protect it by contacting the property owner and requesting his assistance, prior to the field being ploughed.

During each of our visits, we always attempted to minimize disturbance to the nest. This included determining the exact location of

the nest site from a safe distance, using spotting scopes. We were careful to approach and depart the nest from different angles and tried to minimize disturbance to vegetation around the nest site. During our first visit to the nest site, all of the equipment necessary for proper documentation was carried with us, including calipers, scales, global positioning system (GPS), and the necessary photographic equipment. Time spent at the nest was minimized and no attempt was made by the authors to photograph the birds at the nest. The photograph of copulation (Figure 1) was taken in the lagoon and the false incubation crouch distraction display (Figure 5) was digiscoped, approximately 70 m from the nest site, at the edge of the cornfield. Our follow-up visit to the nest was undertaken to determine an accurate clutch size and hopefully to allow us to obtain an accurate incubation period at a later date. This visit inadvertently resulted in the finding of the dropped egg, providing additional information on the breeding attempt. The authors did not revisit the nest after 31 May 2004, but did continue observations from the berm until 5 June 2004.

While it was unfortunate that some individuals did not heed the advice given on ONTBIRDS to stay on the berm, we have come to the conclusion that a natural predator probably depredated the nest. Nesting success rate for this species is dramatically lower when site



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selection occurs away from islands or situations that protect the nest from easy access by ground-based predators (Robinson et al. 1999). Solitary nests amplify this problem in comparison to colonial nesting situations with other Black-necked Stilts or American Avocets (*Recurvirostra americana*). Egg predation has been documented to be the predominant cause of nest failure in Black-necked Stilts (Robinson et al. 1999). During our visits to the Jarvis sewage lagoons, we observed or found evidence of Raccoon (*Procyon lotor*), Domestic Dog (*Canis familiaris*), Domestic Cat (*Felis catus*), Red-tailed Hawk, Northern Harrier (*Circus cyaneus*), and Ring-billed Gull (*Larus delawarensis*), all known nest preda-

tors (Robinson et al. 1999), in the general vicinity of the cornfield. The eggshell remains found on 8 June 2004 by Jones and Newcombe further support this conclusion. What effect human disturbance had on the breeding attempt remains unknown.

### Summary

The information presented in this paper documents the first nesting of Black-necked Stilt in Ontario, with material evidence that includes photographs of the nest and eggs, egg measurements and weights, nest dimensions, and a salvaged dropped egg. At present, this represents the easternmost Canadian nesting record for this species, and further demonstrates the ongoing range expansion in eastern North America.

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## Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas Expeditions Yield Additional Information on Solitary Sandpiper Nests

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The Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas projects (1981 to 1985, and 2001 to 2005) have provided a unique opportunity for ornithologists to survey northern Ontario. The primary goal of any Atlas is to provide information on avian distribution and, with the introduction of point counts during the second Ontario Atlas, an estimate of relative abundance for many bird species. The Atlas projects have also provided interested parties with an opportunity to access hard-to-reach areas, and produced greater breeding and nesting information on poorly known northern species (Cadman et al. 1987, Peck et al. 2004a, 2004b). An example was the third reported nesting in Ontario of Solitary Sandpiper (*Tringa solitaria*), noted last year by Jake Walker (2004). During northern Atlas trips in 2004, two crews each found a nest of Solitary Sandpiper and were able to obtain photos and supplemental information. Since the breeding biology of the Solitary Sandpiper is so poorly known (Moskoff 1995), we felt the additional information would be a relevant addendum to the details and historical summary previously provided by Walker.

### **Shamattawa River**

At 1100h on 12 June 2004, after finishing point counts and while return-

ing to base camp along the Shamattawa River, an atlas team (Peck, Coady, Konze and Binsfeld) observed an agitated Solitary Sandpiper flush from a nest (ONRS 184530) in a tree, calling as it left. The nest was located at 16U 602237 6078061 (North American Datum 1983).

The nest tree was in an area of open muskeg near the edge of a large sedge wetland. Small copses and individual Black Spruce (*Picea mariana*) of varying heights were scattered throughout the area (Figure 1). The maximum height of spruce in the area was approximately 6 m. Ground cover consisted predominately of reindeer lichens (*Cladonia* sp.), mosses (*Sphagnum* sp.) and Labrador Tea (*Ledum groenlandicum*). The nest site was approximately 300 m from the edge of boreal forest running alongside the Shamattawa River. There were several small ponds within 200 m of the nest site.

The nest was situated 1.65 m up in a 3.3 m Black Spruce. It was placed against the trunk in between two horizontal branches in an area of the tree that had been previously disfigured. The nest blended in well and, although visible from most angles,



**Figure 1:** Solitary Sandpiper nest tree in foreground, and surrounding habitat located in muskeg near large sedge meadow (Shamattawa River), 12 June 2004. Photo (ROM 2117) by *Mark K. Peck*.



**Figure 2:** Nest and eggs of Solitary Sandpiper (Shamattawa River), 12 June 2004. Photo (ROM 2115) by *Mark K. Peck*.



**Figure 3:** Muskeg habitat near nest of Solitary Sandpiper (Ekwan River), 23 June 2004. Photo by *Patrick C. Hodgson*.



**Figure 4:** Nest and eggs of Solitary Sandpiper (Ekwan River), 23 June 2004. Photo by *Patrick C. Hodgson*.

was difficult to see. The diameter of the tree at breast height was 7 cm. The nest had an outside depth of 100 mm, inside depth of 46 mm, outside diameter of 125 mm and an inside diameter of 95 mm (Figure 2). It contained three pyriform eggs, pale buff with dark reddish brown blotching concentrated near the larger end. The eggs were warm to the touch. They were measured with digital calipers accurate to 0.01 mm and found to be 35.51 x 25.01 mm, 37.26 x 26.26 mm and 37.3 x 25.81 mm. The eggs were weighed using an electronic balance accurate to 0.1 g, and weighed 10.7 g, 12.0 g and 11.8 g, respectively. The adult bird stayed in the area during our 30-minute visit to the site.

### **Ekwan River**

On 23 June 2004, Hodgson and Furino found this nest (ONRS 1004636), 1.7 km west of the junction of the Ekwan River and the North Washagami Rivers at 16U 631700 5962867 (North American Datum 1983). It was located in an area of open, wet muskeg with small scattered Tamarack (*Larix laricina*), spruce (*Picea* sp) and areas of open, shallow water (Figure 3). Ground cover was similar to the Shamattawa River nest. The bird flushed from the nest as we passed nearby but was not actually seen sitting. The nest was located 1.5 m off the ground in a 3-metre Tamarack, one of several growing fairly close together. The nest tree was scraggly, with a few short branches without a lot of needles, and the nest was visible from all angles at close range. At greater distances, the cryptic construction and

the placement of the nest between two lichen encrusted branches next to the trunk made it difficult to locate visually. As seen from the photograph (Figure 4), the nest was in good shape and the grass lining was still intact. The nest contained four eggs of similar appearance and colour to the Shamattawa River nest. The eggs appeared too large for the cup and left the impression the bird would be sitting more on top of the nest than in it. The bird stayed close by, remaining agitated, but did not return to the nest while we were there.

### **Nest Construction**

Although American Robin (*Turdus migratorius*) cannot be completely ruled out, we believe that both nests were originally constructed the previous year by Rusty Blackbirds (*Euphagus carolinus*). In our experience, Rusty Blackbirds and American Robins construct similar-looking nests in muskeg areas, with some notable exceptions. The robin nests we have observed tended to be placed in more protected habitats and were more likely to be better hidden by live branches. The cryptic construction and the position of the nests against the trunk in a tangle of small branches further suggests Rusty Blackbird. In addition, both of these nests were constructed using decaying vegetation (Figures 2 and 4), which is usual with Rusty Blackbirds (Avery 1995). A female blackbird with a nest under construction near the Shamattawa River nest was observed gathering decaying material from the edge of a nearby small

pond. Decaying vegetation often looks like mud after it has dried.

It is interesting to note that Solitary Sandpipers were not seen or heard on any of the point counts in the general vicinity of the nests nor were they observed at any other time in the area of the nests. Although Greater (*Tringa melanoleuca*) and Lesser (*T. flavipes*) Yellowlegs would often approach both teams from considerable distances, this was not the case for Solitary Sandpipers, suggesting this species may be more difficult to accurately census in the north than other tringids.

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# Birding in the Rainy River Area

David H. Elder

## Introduction

This is an updated version of my bird-finding guide published in *Ontario Birds* in April 1991. It will give visitors to the area nearly all the information they may need to see the local specialties, whether their stay is only for a few hours or several days. Keep in mind, however, that circumstances, time of day and just plain luck affect the outcome of a visit to Rainy River.

The area around the small community of Rainy River in extreme northwestern Ontario presents some exciting birding opportunities. A combination of geographic location, topography, climate and land uses has resulted in a definite "western" condition that is reflected in the natural history of the area. In addition, the Rainy River empties into Lake of the Woods here, and together they provide unique and interesting habitats that are very attractive to birds as breeding and migration staging areas. And where there are birds, there are birders. A good day in the Rainy River area can be incredibly rewarding; a week, unbelievable!

## Scope of the Guide

Through a series of maps and written descriptions, information on what to see and where to see it is provided. Assuming that most area

visitors will arrive from the south and the east, information from Thunder Bay (very general) to Rainy River (very specific) will be given. Although the entire region is of considerable interest, the area around the town of Rainy River will be given the most attention.

## GENERAL INFORMATION

### Weather

Assume the weather will be variable, and prepare for it, particularly in the spring and fall. The ground is usually snow-covered by mid November and remains so until mid April. Ice will be present on Lake of the Woods until early May, but the Channel between the Sable Islands and the mainland usually opens two weeks earlier. Each year is different, of course, but the Rainy River itself is usually ice-free by the second week in April. From mid May to early September, the days can be very warm with temperatures exceeding 30° C. Afternoon birding can be an effort in these conditions. Wind can be a problem and *extreme care* should be taken when boating or canoeing on the Rainy River, Lake of the Woods and the Channel. The lake, in particular, can blow up very suddenly, so keep an eye on the wind. Winter temperatures can drop to -40° C on occasion, but usually are more pleasant.

Most of the roads in the area are gravel and can get a little muddy in rainy weather.

### **Insects and Ticks**

Mosquitoes, black flies, deer flies, moose flies, dog flies and the infamous wood tick combine to make life interesting for the birder. With some precautions, insects and ticks need not constrain birding activities. Early mornings and late evenings will generally be bad for mosquitoes since most of the area is low-lying and there is an abundance of breeding habitat. Use a good repellent and wear light-coloured clothing, including long-sleeved shirts. Head nets can be worn but tend to restrict vision and trap heat. In the open areas during the day, mosquitoes should not be a problem. Expect them in wooded areas and marshes all the time.

Wood ticks are present in the area from early May to August, and are found everywhere except in the middle of ploughed fields. Use of a repellent, tucking pant legs in socks, and a complete tick check (body search) at the end of each day are the best precautions to take. If you find a tick attached to you, it can be removed by gently pulling it until it comes free. Ticks take some time to become firmly attached and can usually be removed with no difficulty. If one is strongly attached, you may want to consult a physician. Publicity concerning Lyme disease has made people more aware of ticks. While the possibility of infec-

tion exists, common sense and a little care will generally reduce the risk. Wearing light-coloured clothing makes any tick that finds you easier to see. After a walk in grassy or brushy areas, look over your clothing carefully and remove any ticks you find. The wood tick of the Rainy River area is small, rounded (half a centimetre or less in diameter), flat and reddish brown.

### **Where to Stay**

Accommodation in the Rainy River area consists of motels, hotels, rental cabins and rental campsites. In the town itself, there is one motel, the Roadrunner (807-852-3296) and a couple of older hotels. Cabins or campsites can be rented at Budreau's Oak Grove Camp (807-852-3702) and Camp of the Woods (807-852-1043), both located on the Rainy River, and also at Harris Hill Lodge (807-488-1116) on Lake of the Woods. Boats and motors can be rented at both Oak Grove and Harris Hill. In addition, rides out to and back from the Sable Islands or Windy Point can be arranged. Check with the owners in advance.

Also, there is a free campground on the river in the town of Rainy River, and a Provincial Park, Lake of the Woods, on Highway 621 north of Sleeman. There are numerous motels in Baudette, Minnesota, in the United States on the south side of the Rainy River. Be prepared for the usual border crossing procedures if you decide to stay there.

## **Bird Specialties of the Rainy River Area**

- Eared Grebe:** sewage ponds at Rainy River and Emo
- American White Pelican:** Lake of the Woods; overhead anywhere
- Ruddy Duck:** Rainy River sewage ponds
- Bald Eagle:** Lake of the Woods; Rainy River
- Sharp-tailed Grouse:** fields and roadsides throughout the area
- Yellow Rail:** the Big Marsh off Fred's Road; wet fields
- Sandhill Crane:** fields and roadsides throughout the area
- Piping Plover:** Sable Islands; Windy Point
- Marbled Godwit:** fields throughout the area
- Wilson's Phalarope:** Rainy River sewage ponds
- Franklin's Gull:** Lake of the Woods; Sable Islands
- Red-headed Woodpecker:** throughout the area
- Western Kingbird:** throughout the area (irregular)
- Yellow-throated Vireo:** aspen and oak woods
- Black-billed Magpie:** throughout the area
- Sedge Wren:** wet fields throughout the area
- Connecticut Warbler:** aspen groves throughout the area
- Clay-colored Sparrow:** brushy fields
- Le Conte's Sparrow:** wet meadows; hay fields
- Western Meadowlark:** fields throughout the area
- Yellow-headed Blackbird:** Rainy River; Sable Islands
- Brewer's Blackbird:** fields and roadsides throughout the area





**Figure 1: American White Pelican. Photo by *Mark K. Peck.***



**Figure 2: Sharp-tailed Grouse. Photo by *Mark K. Peck.***



**Figure 3: Sandhill Crane.** Photo by *Mark K. Peck.*



**Figure 4. Marbled Godwit.** Photo by *Jean Iron.*



**Figure 5: Brewer's Blackbird.** Photo by *Jean Iron*.



**Figure 6: Yellow-headed Blackbird.** Photo by *Jean Iron*.

The town of Rainy River has all the stores associated with a small community, and food, gas, supplies and incidentals can be purchased there. Restaurant meals are available in Rainy River, but getting an early breakfast can be a problem. There are several restaurants in Baudette, across the border.

### **Getting to Rainy River**

Rainy River is located in the extreme southwestern corner of northwestern Ontario at the western end of Highway 11, about 1900 kilometres from Toronto. Getting there is time-consuming. If you are not keen on driving for two and a half days (at least), you can fly commercially to Thunder Bay or Fort Frances and rent a car on arrival. The drive from Thunder Bay will take about five hours. Flying to Winnipeg and renting a car to drive through southeastern Manitoba and northern Minnesota (two border crossings) is another alternative that takes about four hours.

### **Private Property**

Most of the land in the Rainy River area is privately owned. If you encounter a "No Trespassing" sign,

respect it. Farmers in the area are getting to know birders and will usually give permission to enter their property if asked. Most birding can be done from public roads or on unposted land.

The local people are friendly, helpful and quite willing to talk to visitors about birds. Farmers in particular are quite aware of the more obvious species and can be helpful in pointing out a field visited by Sandhill Cranes or Sharp-tailed Grouse. Don't abuse the rights of the landowners. If property is posted, assume there is a good reason for the posting. Don't make things difficult for everyone by selfish or inconsiderate actions.

### **Maps**

More detailed maps are available in the 1:50,000 National Topographical Series. These can be obtained from: The Canada Map Office, Department of Energy, Mines and Resources, 615 Booth Street, Ottawa, Ontario, K1A 0E9, or from most retail map outlets. The following sheets cover the Rainy River area: 52 D/15 and 52 D/10 (Rainy River), 52 D/16 (Arbor Vitae), and 52 D/9 (Pinewood).

## **Birding Areas**

### **Area # 1: Thunder Bay to Fort Frances**

This is a 350-km drive on Highway 17/11 west from Thunder Bay to Shabaqua, and then west on Highway 11 to Fort Frances. The highway passes through typical Canadian Shield country with numerous rock outcrops, lakes and boreal forest. Stop occasionally at places that catch your interest

such as Black Spruce stands, Jack Pine stands, cutovers, Black Spruce bogs and mixed aspen-conifer stands for warblers, sparrows and other boreal species.

Connecticut Warblers can be found in most of the more open Black Spruce bogs. They are easy to hear but hard to see. You *may* see a Great Gray Owl or a Spruce Grouse along the highway right-of-way. Black-backed and American Three-toed Woodpeckers are possible anywhere, but not to be expected. Spend as much time as you wish birding as you travel. Just before Fort Frances, you will cross Rainy Lake on a causeway. There are several pull-offs along the causeway that give a good view of the lake and a good chance to see a Bald Eagle.

### **Area # 2: Fort Frances to Rainy River**

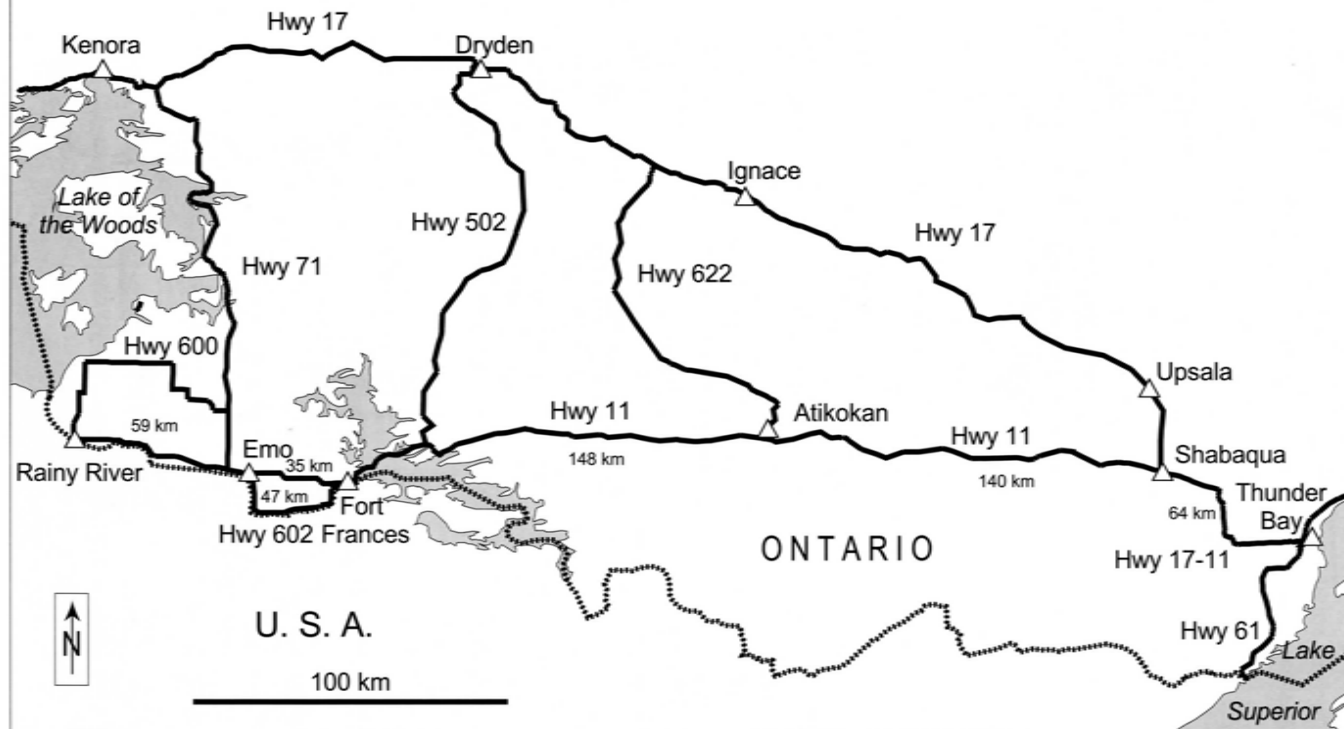
This is about a 100-km drive west on Highway 11. West of Fort Frances, the rock of the Canadian Shield is left behind. Flat country, farm fields and patches of aspen woods characterize the landscape. The change is sudden and is reflected in the birds likely to be seen. Near the west end of Fort Frances, just west of the cemetery, is a small, open, wooded park. The park overlooks the Rainy River and the pulp mills located on both shores. The river is good for waterfowl, and when low, for shorebirds. The park trees harbour Eastern Wood-Pewee, Warbling Vireo, and Baltimore Oriole, while Chimney Swifts wheel overhead. None of these are found east of Fort Frances, except rarely.

There are two alternatives for driving west from Fort Frances. One is to follow Highway 11 west to Rainy River, checking fields and other interesting spots as you go. The other alternative takes a bit longer but is much more enjoyable. Just before the “McDonald’s” restaurant, turn left on Highway 602 (also called River Road) and follow it to Emo. The road follows the Rainy River and a leisurely drive will produce Western Meadowlark, Clay-colored Sparrow, Eastern Bluebird (check each one in case it is a Mountain Bluebird), Brewer’s Blackbird, Northern Harrier, and usually Black-billed Magpie. This 47-kilometre drive is a good introduction to the country and the birds you can expect as you move west.

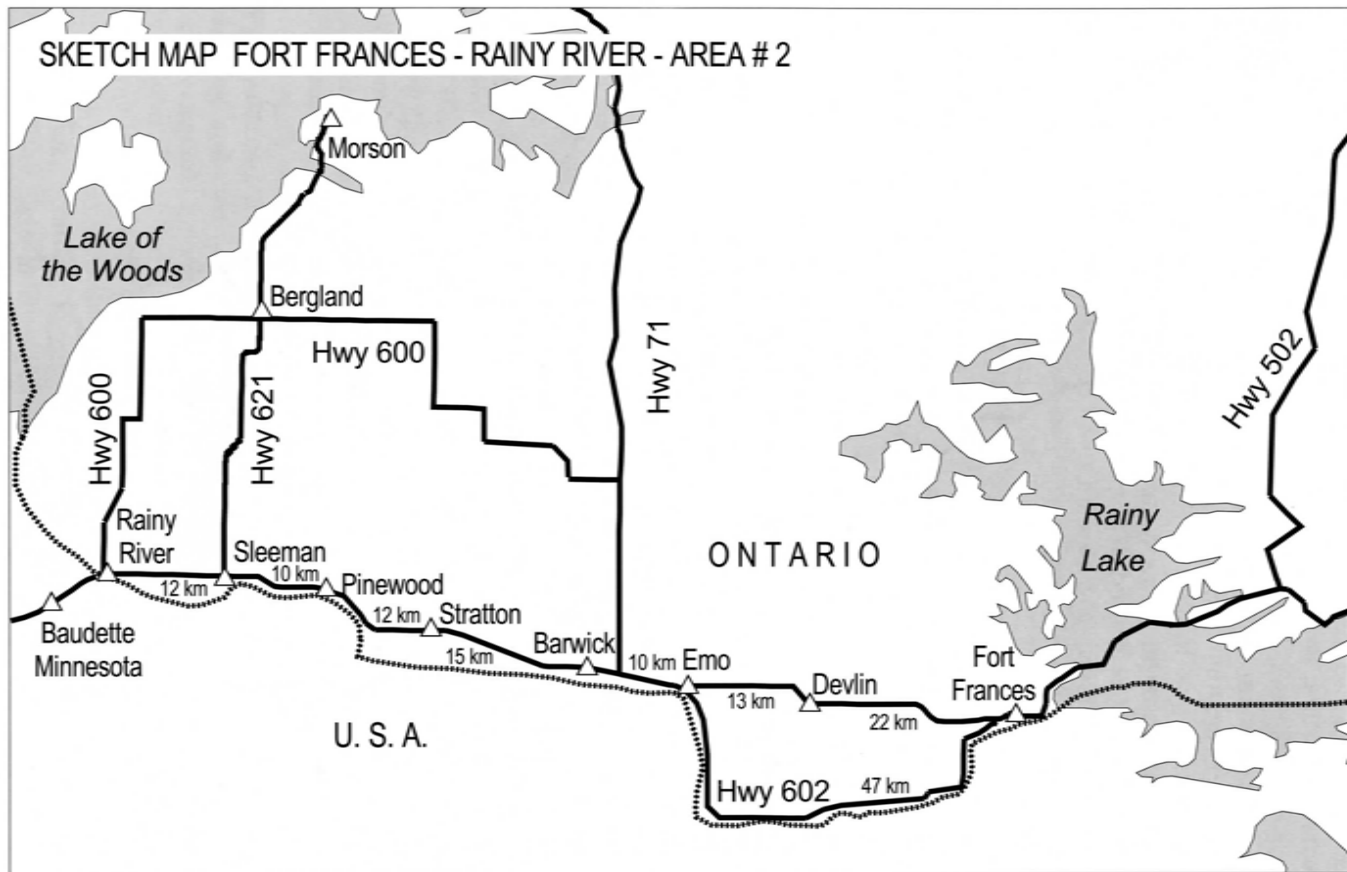
Directly across Highway 11 is a large stadium that is part of the Emo Fair Grounds. Cross the highway and follow the sides of the fair grounds to the west and then north. Straight ahead are the Emo sewage ponds. This area is excellent for waterfowl and shorebirds, and Eared Grebes are usually present. There are two ponds, one to the west of the first. Return to Highway 11, turn right (west) and continue to Rainy River.

West of Emo, you will pass through several small communities, including Barwick, Stratton, Pinewood, and Sleeman. At the west side of Pinewood, the highway crosses the Pinewood River. This is a good spot to

# REGIONAL SKETCH MAP THUNDER BAY - RAINY RIVER - AREA # 1



SKETCH MAP FORT FRANCES - RAINY RIVER - AREA # 2



stop and look for waterfowl and herons, and to observe the large colony of Cliff Swallows that nest under the highway bridge. The open fields on both sides of the highway can be checked for open country species as you drive or during occasional stops.

### **Area #3: Worthington Road #3 and Highway 11**

This is the first of the site specific areas described for Rainy River and it can be an exciting introduction to the bird specialties of the area as a whole. The best time to be here is during the first couple of hours after sunrise any day in the last week of May and the first two weeks of June. This well-signed junction is about 4 km west of Sleeman or 8 km east of Rainy River. Turn right on Worthington Road 3, cross the railway tracks, park, get out and watch and listen. In the surrounding fields, you will see or hear Sharp-tailed Grouse, Marbled Godwit, Upland Sandpiper, Horned Lark, Northern Harrier, Brewer's Blackbird, Le Conte's Sparrow, Clay-colored Sparrow, Western Meadowlark and Black-billed Magpie.

The magpies nest in the small aspen woods just ahead on the right. Watch for them flying over the fields or perched in the tops of trees in the woods. There is a magpie nest in a willow tree right by the fence at the nearest corner of the woods beside the road. Move ahead (north) to the second group of farm buildings on the right. For three years, 1987, 1988 and 1989, Western Kingbirds nested in one of the willow trees in the farm yard. Opposite the farm buildings, turn left. The short grass field on the right has several stone piles in it, and in 1990, the field was occupied by a Sprague's Pipit. The species could occur here again, but good ears are necessary to find this bird as it seems to spend most of its time high in the air, singing. Moving ahead, Connecticut Warblers have nested in the first aspen woods on the left. Continue moving ahead to Highway 600, checking fields, woodlots and farm yards as you go.

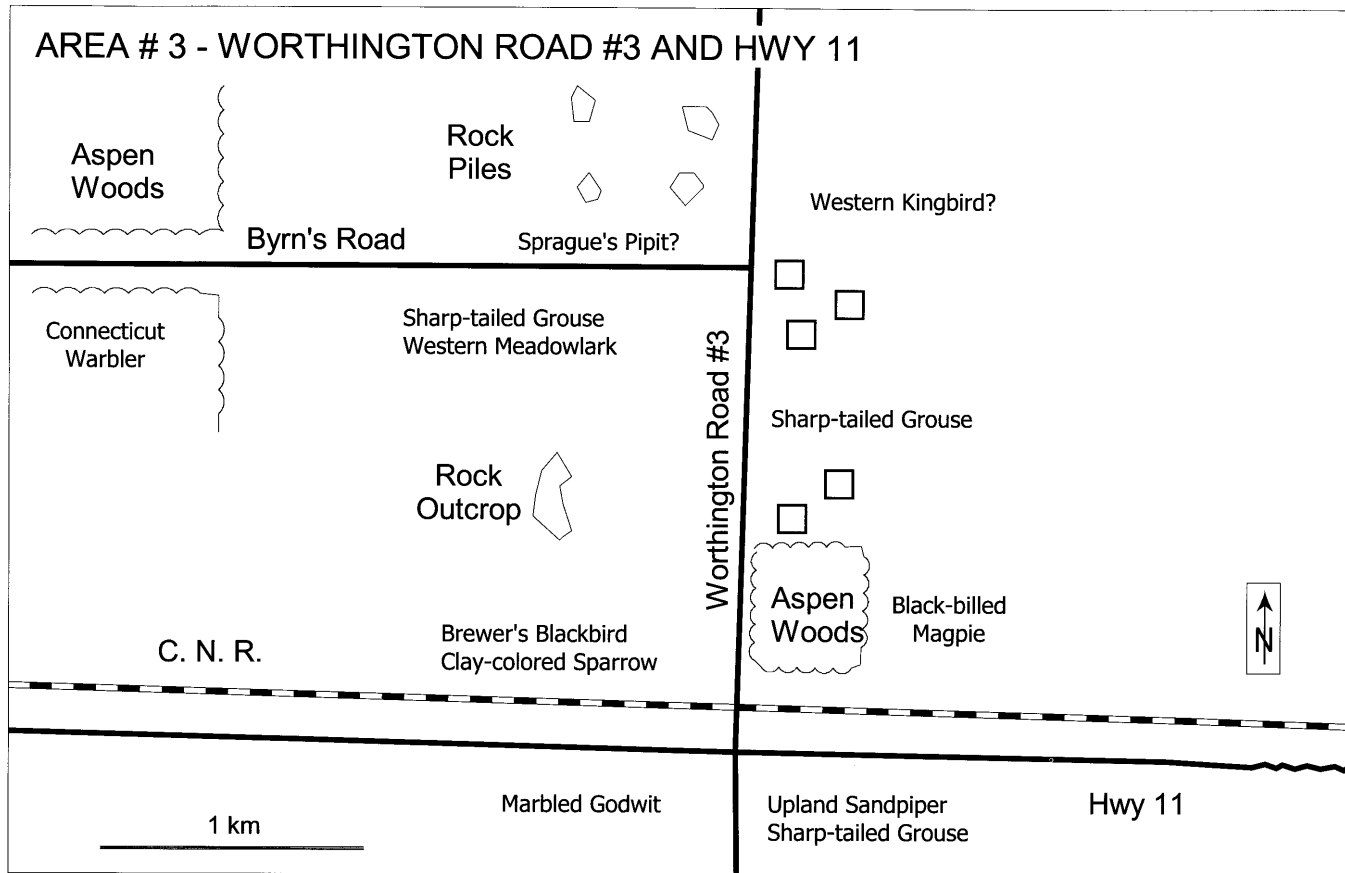
### **Area #4: Rainy River Sewage Lagoons**

This area can be very productive for waterfowl and shorebirds depending on the water levels present in the lagoons. They are easily reached by turning right on Government Road off Highway 11 opposite the Roadrunner Motel in Rainy River. Cross the tracks and take the first drivable dirt road to the left to the lagoons. There is the usual fence and "Keep Out" signs, but entry to date has not been challenged. Use your own judgement. There are two lagoons and they should both be checked.

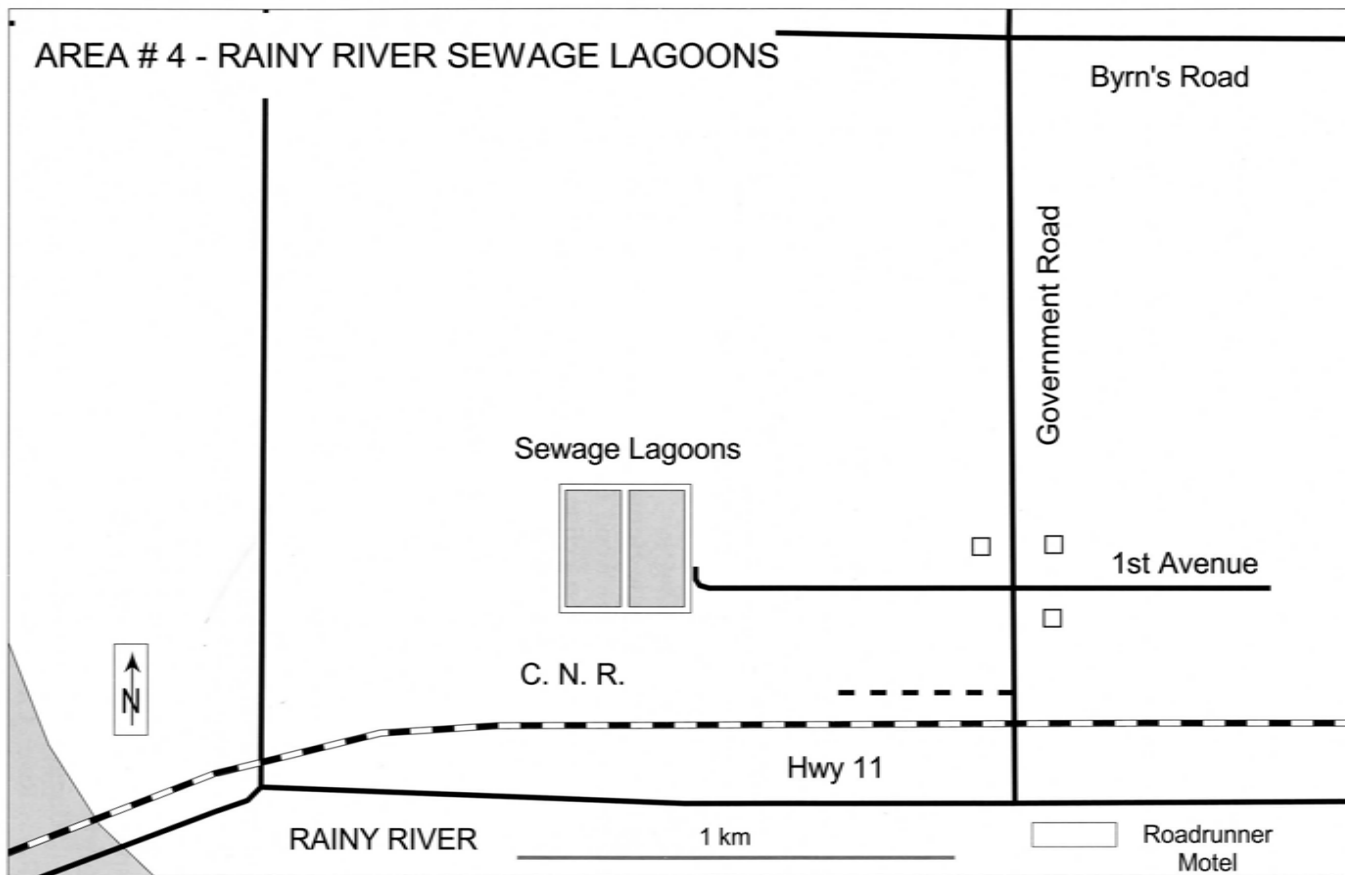
Eared Grebes have been observed at the lagoons each breeding season since 2001. Most of the common duck species are usually present, with several species breeding, including Ruddy Duck. In late May and early June, it is not unusual to see up to 300 Wilson's Phalaropes spinning around on the



# AREA # 3 - WORTHINGTON ROAD #3 AND HWY 11



# AREA # 4 - RAINY RIVER SEWAGE LAGOONS



ponds. Soras frequent the cattail edge, and good numbers of shorebirds congregate when water levels are low in the lagoons. During spring and fall migration periods, all of the regular swallow species can be seen. If you are in the Rainy River area for several days, more than one visit to the lagoons is recommended.

### **Area #5: Highway 600, Wilson Creek Road, and River Road Loop**

From Highway 11 at the west end of the town of Rainy River, turn right (north) onto Highway 600. Follow Highway 600 north past the garbage dump to Wilson Creek Road, on the left. As you travel along Highway 600, stop at any aspen woods and listen for the loud ringing song of the Connecticut Warbler. If you hear one, you can walk into the woods with care and see the bird. They are hard to find in the aspens; their colour blends in perfectly with their surroundings.

Turn left (west) on Wilson Creek Road and drive slowly along watching the big fields on both sides for Sandhill Crane, Sharp-tailed Grouse, Sedge Wren, Le Conte's Sparrow, Black-billed Magpie and, in the evenings, Short-eared Owl. This is one of the best areas to find Sandhill Cranes, especially in the spring and early summer. Even though cranes are large birds, they blend in extremely well with the ploughed fields and the vegetation of early summer. Look carefully. As you near the western end of the road, check the deciduous woods on either side; Wood Thrushes live in them. Brush up on your thrush songs because Hermit Thrush is quite common in the area and can be confused with the Wood Thrush at a distance.

Continue to the intersection with River Road (to the left and straight ahead). Go ahead, past the metal building and the grey house on the right, to the Wilson Creek culvert crossing. Check both sides of the creek for waterfowl, grebes, herons and landbirds in the surrounding oaks. Continue ahead on River Road and take the next road on the left which leads past some houses and ends where Wilson Creek flows into the Rainy River. Waterfowl and American White Pelicans like this area, and the woods are great for landbirds.

Return to the Wilson Creek culvert and follow River Road south. (If you go straight ahead, you will be on Wilson Creek Road again.) Ahead on the left, you will see a tall microwave tower. Just south of the tower are some farm buildings and some tall spruce trees. Black-billed Magpies nest here and can usually be seen after a short wait. The fields around the microwave tower are good for Sandhill Crane and Sharp-tailed Grouse. It is also a good spot to look for Western Kingbird. In 2001, a pair built their nest on the tower.

Continue to the south until the road swings to the left and follows the Rainy River. Check the reed beds in the river for Yellow-headed Blackbird,

# AREA # 5 - HWY 600 - WILSON CREEK ROAD - RIVER ROAD LOOP

Short-eared Owl

Wilson Creek

Wilson Creek Road

Sedge Wren

Sandhill Crane

Le Conte's Sparrow

Sharp-tailed Grouse

Black-billed Magpie

△ Microwave Tower

□ Farm Buildings

Garbage Dump □

Hwy 600

River Road

Government Road

Hwy 600

Rainy River

U.S.A

C. N. R.



5 km

Hwy 11

waterfowl, American White Pelican, gulls, grebes and swallows. The oak woods and the small ponds near the residences along the road are excellent for Yellow-throated Vireo and other landbirds. Follow River Road east to Highway 600, checking the fields as you go; then turn right and you will soon be back in Rainy River.

### **Area #6: North River Road**

Starting at the Wilson Creek culvert, go north along River Road to the sign and road leading to Budreau's Oak Grove Camp on the left. Take this road and check the woods on both sides for warblers, flycatchers, sparrows and Scarlet Tanagers. Oak Grove Camp is a beautiful spot set in a stand of Bur and Red Oaks on the Rainy River. The place usually abounds with birds. It's a great place to stay in a cabin, but stop in the office first and ask if you can do some birding if you are just visiting; there should be no problem. Blue-gray Gnatcatchers have been seen here several times, as have Western Tanagers. Spend some time on the river bank as waterfowl, gulls, terns and American White Pelicans are constantly flying by. Both Western and Eared Grebes have been on the river several times. Return to River Road, turn left and proceed northward. Continue on until you cross McInnis Creek. The big trees near the houses are good for Red-headed Woodpecker. The culvert under the road is usually occupied by a large colony of Cliff Swallows.

After a left turn and a right turn, watch for Fred's Road on the left. Take this road to its end and turn left for a few car lengths and park; don't block access to the field on your right. In that field, you will notice a single tree. Beyond the tree is the south end of the Big Marsh. The marsh is the best place in the area to look for Yellow Rails. Check the stand of phragmites for Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow and watch and listen for Sandhill Cranes. The best time to check for rails is in the evening. The marsh is wet; you will need rubber boots or runners, and the mosquitoes will be bad. Walk out into the marsh and listen for the "tick-tick, tick-tick" calls of the rails. Good luck in seeing one! Le Conte's Sparrows and Sedge Wrens are here in good numbers also. Walking in the marsh is very strenuous. Take a flashlight with you if you stay after dark so you can find your way back to your car.

Return to River Road, turn left (east) and follow it to Highway 600. If it is after dark, stop from time to time to listen for Whip-poor-wills and owls. At Highway 600, turn right (south) and return to Rainy River. The big fields on the right are good for cranes, grouse and Short-eared Owls (in the evening). Check any farm yard that has cattle; Yellow-headed Blackbirds like manure piles. The vast Tamarack and spruce bog on the left, north of Wilson Creek Road, is almost inaccessible, but for birders made of stern stuff, it could be home to some interesting species.

# AREA # 6 - NORTH RIVER ROAD

Sable Islands

Lake of the Woods

The Big Marsh

Le Conte's Sparrow  
Yellow Rail  
Sedge Wren

American  
White Pelican

McInnis  
Creek

Fred's Road

Sharp-tailed Grouse

Hwy 600

River Road  
Whip-poor-will

Atkinson Road

Sandhill  
Crane

Hwy 600

Oak Grove  
Camp

Rainy  
River

Wilson Creek

Wilson Creek Road

River Road

5 km



**Area #7: Harris Hill and Windy Point**

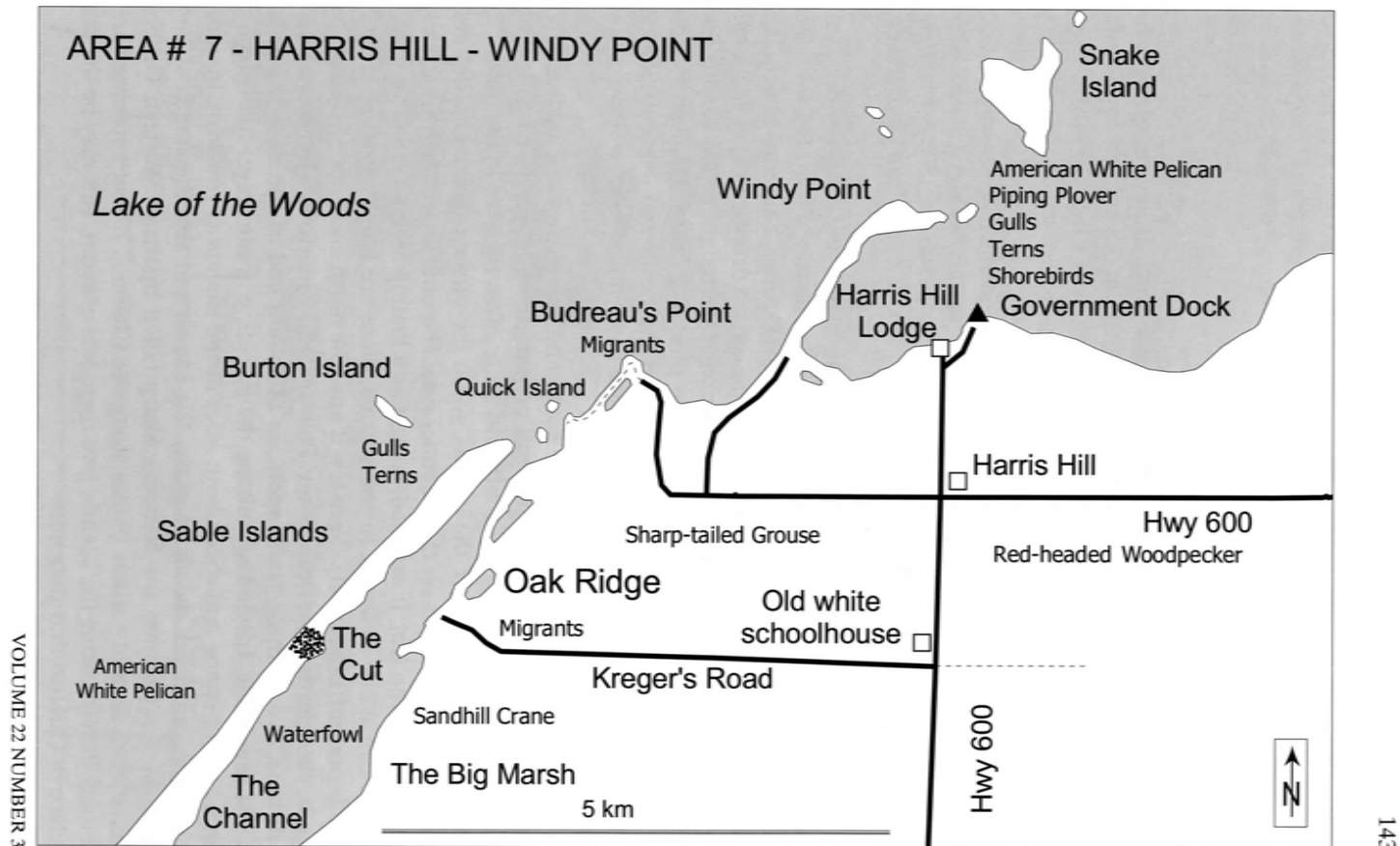
This is a good area in which to spend a lot of time. Again, proceed north from Rainy River on Highway 600 past River Road and Wilson Creek Road until you reach Kreger's Road on the left. An old white schoolhouse on the corner is a convenient landmark. Turn left (west) and follow the road through the woods (good for landbirds), past some fields (check for cranes), until you reach the end on the shore of "The Channel". To the south is the Big Marsh. Straight ahead across the Channel are the Sable Islands. This is a good spot to launch a boat or canoe if you want to go out to the Sables. To the right is the "Oak Ridge" that gives an excellent view of the area. From the Oak Ridge overlooking the Channel and the main lake, watch for American White Pelican, Franklin's Gull, terns, waterfowl, shorebirds and raptors. The oaks around you are excellent for migrating landbirds. Northern Mockingbird and Red-bellied Woodpecker are two rarities that have been found here.

Return to Highway 600 and turn left (north) to Harris Hill. Here the highway makes a sharp turn to the right. Instead, go straight ahead on the gravel road and follow it to Harris Hill Lodge and the Government Dock on Lake of the Woods. If you ask, the lodge owners will let you go down to the water's edge to bird. You can see the same area from the Government Dock. Check the surrounding woods for landbirds and look over the lake toward Windy Point for waterfowl, American White Pelican, Double-crested Cormorant, Bald Eagle and Great Blue Heron. Windy Point is worth a visit, and boat rides can usually be arranged at the lodge for a reasonable fee. Ask to be dropped off and picked up a couple of hours later. The point is excellent for gulls, terns, shorebirds and American White Pelican, and is often frequented by a pair of Piping Plovers. If you see the plovers, give them lots of room. They occasionally try to breed here and should not be disturbed. The cattails and phragmites on the Windy Bay side of the point contain a large colony of nesting Red-winged and Yellow-headed Blackbirds.

Return to the Harris Hill corner and turn right (west) towards Budreau's Point. This road leads through an interesting woods and to the base of Windy Point and Budreau's Point. The first road to the right (north) leads to some private cottages at the base of Windy Point. The extensive cattail stands are home to both Yellow-headed Blackbird and Marsh Wren. Do not go near the cottages unless you see someone there and can ask permission.

Continuing ahead, the road ends on a rocky ridge at a gate near some cottages. Park outside the gate, not blocking the road. Walk past the gate and the cottages. If you see anyone at the cottages, say hello and explain that you are birding. From the ridge, you can walk ahead to Budreau's Point on a trail from the small beach at the bottom of the ridge. The big trees on the point

# AREA # 7 - HARRIS HILL - WINDY POINT





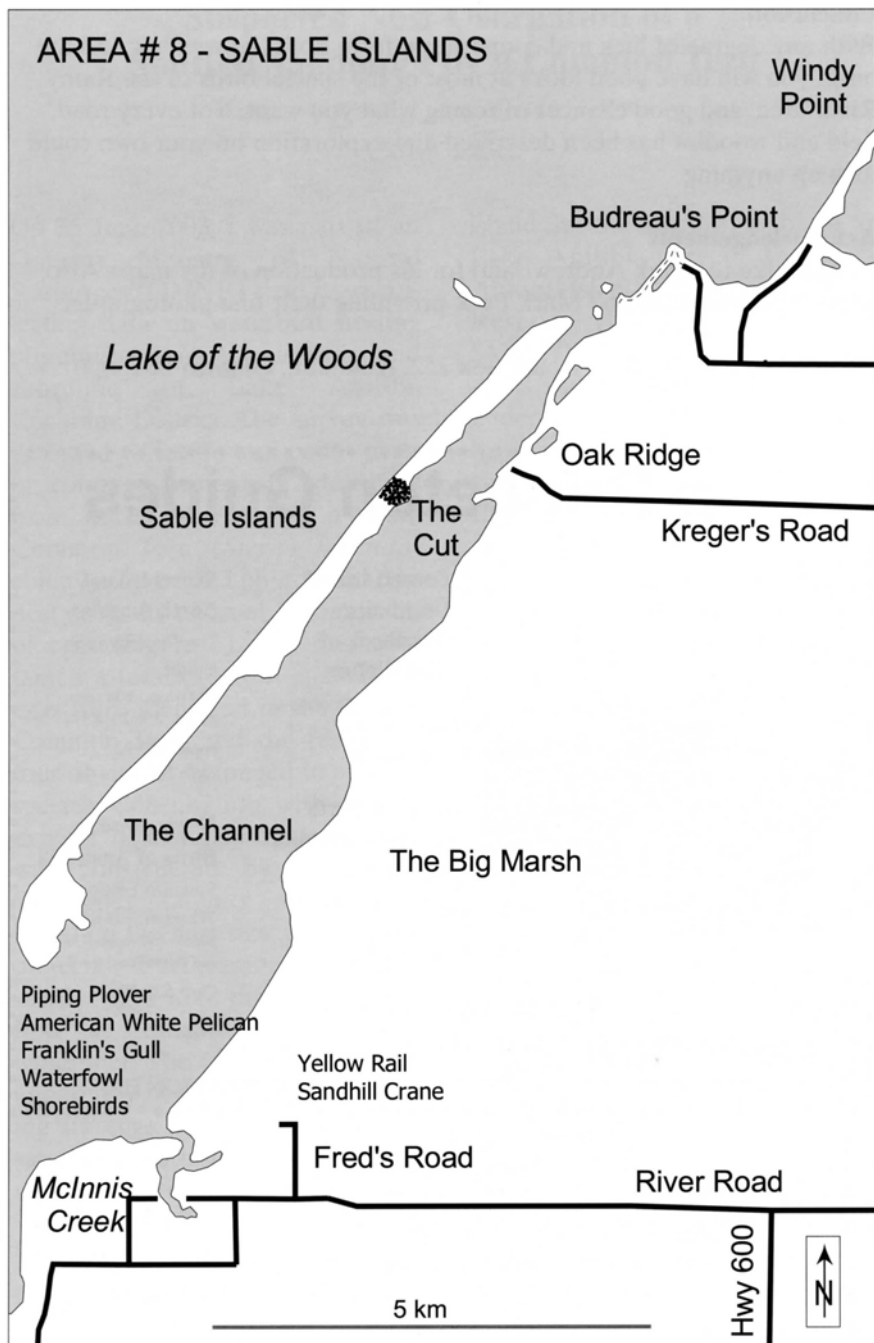
are great for landbirds, and the rocks on the far side of the point are attractive to waterfowl and gulls. Be careful on the trail because there is an abundance of Poison Ivy in the woods. Return to Highway 600 and go back to Rainy River.

### **Area #8: The Sable Islands**

These sand barrier islands at the mouth of the Rainy River are like a magnet to birds. The islands have a total length of about 9.5 km and consist of a south island and a north island, joined by a sand bar (The Cut) that is high and dry in low-water years and covered with up to two feet of water in high-water years. A day spent on the islands can be very interesting. Getting there is the hard part. If you have your own boat or canoe, you can launch at Oak Grove Camp for a fee, or at the Oak Ridge at the end of Kreger's Road or at the Government Dock near Harris Hill Lodge, for free. *Always watch the weather* on both the lake and the Channel as conditions can change very quickly.

Arrangements for a boat ride out to the Sables and a later pickup can be made at Budreau's Oak Grove Camp and at Harris Hill Lodge, for a fee. Boats and motors can also be rented at Oak Grove Camp and Harris Hill Lodge if you wish to go on your own. You can be dropped off at the south end of the islands and spend the day walking the length of the islands and back, or simply stay in one place and be picked up later. The best birding areas are the south end, the Cut area, and the north end. No matter how long you are on the islands, make sure you have ample food, water and sun protection.

Depending on water levels, the south end has extensive sand and mud flats. Expect any shorebird, tern, gull or waterfowl. Piping Plovers nest on the islands in the U.S. to the south and quite often fly over to the Sables to feed. If you plan to walk the islands, go on the outside (the lake side) and make periodic checks on the Channel side. The outside beaches are easiest to walk on. The Cut, if exposed, is used as a loafing area by gulls, terns and American White Pelicans. In some years, there are hundreds of Franklin's Gulls present; other years there few if any. The north end is also favoured by gulls, shorebirds, American White Pelicans and waterfowl. If you are short on time, two or three hours spent on the south end of the islands will be most rewarding. Instead of walking the islands, you can travel the Channel in a boat or canoe and check both sides of the islands as you wish. In addition, you can check the shore of the Big Marsh and also the stands of bulrush in the Channel for Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow. Western Grebes have been seen at various places along the Channel. If you encounter any Piping Plovers along the islands, give them lots of room. This may be the last place in Ontario that they nest.



## Conclusion

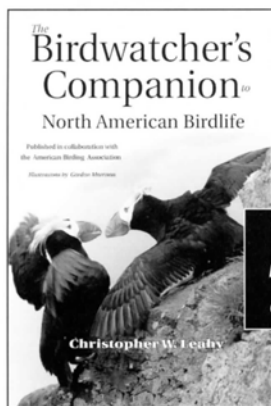
With any degree of luck and cooperation from both the weather and the birds, you will have good looks at most of the special birds of the Rainy River area, and good chances of seeing what you want. Not every road, field and woodlot has been described and exploration on your own could turn up anything.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Andrew Jano for his production of the maps. Also, I appreciate Jean Iron and Mark Peck providing their fine photographs.

David H. Elder, 23 Birch Road, Box 252, Atikokan, Ontario P0T 1C0

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## Suspected Nest Usurpation of a Spotted Sandpiper by a Common Tern

Colin Lake

On 25 June 2003, I was part of an Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources (OMNR) field crew collecting data on waterbird nesting populations on the islands and shoreline of Lake Abitibi, Cochrane District. The survey was designed to locate and count nests in colonies previously identified from aerial surveys. In a small Common Tern (*Sterna hirundo*) colony of 22 nests, I photographed a nest with an unusual complement of eggs (Figure 1). The nest contained a total of seven eggs. Three eggs were identified in the field as Common Tern, and the remaining four obviously belonged to another species. Consultation with various experts determined that the nest was constructed by a Spotted Sandpiper (*Actitis macularius*), based on the nest size and building material. Furthermore, the four smaller eggs were positively identified as those of a Spotted Sandpiper. The Common Tern had apparently been the latecomer, laying its eggs in the nest after the sandpiper. Although adults of both species were observed in the vicinity of the colony, none were obviously attending the nest.

The colony was located on a small, sparsely vegetated bedrock

island in the northwest basin of Lake Abitibi, part of the Lake Abitibi Islands Provincial Nature Reserve (UTM E 577943, N 5420247), in Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas square 17NQ71. In order to understand the factors which may have contributed to the mixed clutch, a brief survey of the literature follows.

### NESTING BIOLOGY

It is not uncommon to find these two species nesting adjacent to one another in Common Tern colonies. Sandpipers (Scolopacidae), Plovers (Charadriidae) and other shorebirds are known to actively seek out nest locations within Common Tern colonies so that they may take advantage of the Common Terns' aggressive nest defense behaviour (Oring et al. 1997, Lauro and Tanacredi 2002).

Spotted Sandpipers nest near water, preferring some cover from herbaceous vegetation (Oring et al. 1997). Nesting generally occurs from mid May to early July. Nests are constructed of dead grass and small woody material, and are approximately 12 cm in diameter when finished (Oring et al. 1997). Clutches generally contain four eggs, but successfully incubated clutches of five

have been observed (Smith 1932).

Common Terns nest on low elevated sites, generally near water (0-5 m above high-water mark), with slightly higher sites being preferred and occupied by early arriving birds (Nisbet et al. 1984). Nest sites near patchy vegetation are preferred (Nisbet 2002), as they provide important sources of cover for chicks (Burger and Gochfeld 1990). Nesting occurs from late April to early June (Nisbet 2002). The male initiates nest building at several sites until the female chooses an acceptable site for egg deposition. Once incubation begins, both parents gradually add to the nest, the material varying with availability near the nest, including sticks, pebbles and shells. The diameter of the completed nest is variable depending on construction material, averaging 18 cm (Nisbet 2002). Clutch size is usually three eggs (90%), although rarely four or more (Nisbet 2002).

### **Nest Parasitism**

Nest parasitism is the intentional laying of eggs in the nest of another bird without contributing to incubation or care of the young. The host and parasite can be the same species (intraspecific parasitism) or different species (interspecific parasitism). Intraspecific nest parasitism has been documented in 234 bird species (Yom-Tov 2001). Intraspecific nest parasitism in Common Terns has been observed rarely, e.g., 0.15% of 4000 nests (Burger) and

0.35% of 2000 nests (Nisbet) checked during laying (*in* Rohwer and Freeman 1989). A survey of the literature failed to turn up any reported instances of interspecific nest parasitism concerning Common Terns, either as host or parasite. Similarly, Spotted Sandpipers are reported to experience intraspecific brood parasitism rarely (<1%), and only two instances of interspecific parasitism (both by Brown-headed Cowbirds, *Molothrus ater*) were observed during 19 years of fieldwork (Oring et al. 1997). Common Terns and Spotted Sandpipers rarely experience supernumerary clutches due to intraspecific or interspecific nest parasitism, and the observed mixed species clutch was not likely due to this behaviour.

### **Egg Dumping**

Egg dumping differs from parasitism, in that it refers to atypical laying behaviour, rather than a calculated reproductive strategy. Wiens (1971) predicted that egg dumping can occur in three situations: when nest destruction occurs immediately prior to, or during, egg laying; by accidental placement of eggs; or with inappropriate synchronization of nest building and laying. Egg dumping, then, can occur in any species that finds itself in unusual or unfavourable nesting situations. Sealy (1989) described a case of "incidental egg-dumping" by a House Wren (*Troglodytes aedon*) into a Yellow Warbler

(*Dendroica petechia*) nest, and referred to other cases of egg dumping by species which appeared to be anomalies, rather than intentional nest parasitism. Mixed clutches have resulted in situations where unrelated species had similar nesting requirements that were in short supply. This was hypothesized to be the case when an American Kestrel (*Falco sparverius*) pair successfully hatched a Bufflehead (*Bucephala albeola*) egg (Dawson and Bortolotti 1997). Both species are cavity nesters, possibly resulting in competition for nest sites and the unintentional egg dumping incident. As mentioned earlier, Common Tern and Spotted Sandpiper have similar nesting preferences and timing, and perhaps a high local density of Common Tern nests and limited desirable nest sites influenced the nesting sequence in the Lake Abitibi nest. Fournier (2000) suggested that a combination of factors, including island nesting, colonial nesting behaviour and high densities of birds resulted in a mixed nest of scaup (*Aythya* sp.) and Ring-billed Gull (*Larus delawarensis*). These conditions exist on Lake Abitibi, and may have contributed to the observed nest.

### **Interspecific Nest Usurpation by Common Terns**

Paz and Eshbol (2002) described an inferred case of Common Terns usurping a Black-winged Stilt (*Himantopus himantopus*) nest

containing eggs. They observed a pair of Common Terns providing care to three Black-winged Stilt chicks and speculated that the Black-winged Stilt nest was either found abandoned or the Common Terns forcefully evicted the original occupants, then incubated the eggs and "adopted" the chicks. They further speculated that the terns, once incubating the stilt nest, could not identify the original eggs as foreign, as the two species have eggs that are similar in size and colour. Saino and Fasola (1993) reported that Common Terns do not discern their own eggs from foreign ones. The nest I found on Lake Abitibi appears to agree with this statement. Were the Common Terns able to discern their own eggs from those of the original nest occupant, the sandpiper eggs likely would have been ejected from the nest, rather than remaining with the newly added tern eggs. The mixed species clutch suggests that the Common Terns accepted all the eggs in the nest as their own. Paz and Eshbol (2002) also observed Common Terns evicting other species (terns, stilts, and Avocets, *Recurvirostra avosetta*) from nests, but did not report on whether these usurped nests also contained eggs. Midura et al. (1991) reported a Least Tern (*Sterna antillarum*) usurping a nest containing three Piping Plover (*Charadrius melodus*) eggs. The Least Tern added two of its own eggs, then successfully incubated all five. The

young plovers were removed and placed with other Piping Plover adults by the researchers, so subsequent observations regarding brooding were not made.

The cases reported in Paz and Eshbol (2002), along with the Lake Abitibi observation, suggest that Common Terns will occasionally appropriate and lay eggs in the nests of shorebird species.

### **Discussion**

Unfortunately, the Lake Abitibi Common Tern colony was not visited on subsequent days, so no further information about the nest was gathered. For example, were the eggs being actively incubated, how many hatched, and if any hatched, was there any evidence of "adoption" of the Spotted Sandpiper young by the Common Tern adults? Based on the evidence suggesting that the Common Tern pair were latecomers, and the Spotted Sandpiper was the original occupant and builder of the nest, some speculations can be made.

Possibly, the tern pair arrived at the colony late, finding the preferable nest sites occupied. Common Terns are reported to have relatively high colony-site fidelity over seasons, and fledge more young per nest in larger, denser colonies than in smaller less dense colonies (Karwowski et al. 1995). Perhaps for these reasons, the usurping terns were reluctant to settle for another less-populated nesting site. Spotted Sandpipers exhibit a polyandrous

mating system in which one female mates sequentially with up to four males, each of which cares for a clutch and a brood, usually alone (Oring et al. 1997). The single male sandpiper would likely not have been able to fend off the intruding terns, which are known for their aggressive behaviour. Pickett et al. (1988) found that Spotted Sandpiper males were significantly more protective during the brooding period than they were during incubation, when the Common Tern deposited its eggs into the nest. Either the tern forced the sandpiper off the nest, or found the nest recently abandoned, then laid its eggs in the nest. This raises the question of why the Common Tern female accepted a previously constructed nest with a full clutch of another species' eggs, despite the fact that nest parasitism is so rarely observed in the species.

Assuming that the terns were incubating the eggs normally, it is possible that the eggs of both species hatched. The equivalent clutch volume of the observed nest (four Spotted Sandpiper eggs plus three Common Tern eggs) was approximately 96 ml, equivalent to a clutch of 4.8 Common Tern eggs (tern egg volume from Nisbet 2002; Spotted Sandpiper egg volume calculated after Hoyt 1979). Common Terns have been reported incubating four or more eggs, albeit rarely (Nisbet 2002), and therefore, it is possible that both species in the clutch could have been incubated successfully.



**Figure 1: Spotted Sandpiper nest with a full clutch of Spotted Sandpiper eggs and Common Tern eggs, located in a small Common Tern colony, Lake Abitibi, Ontario, 25 June 2003. Photo by Colin Lake.**

Once hatched, Spotted Sandpiper chicks are somewhat more precocial than Common Tern young, and may be expected to benefit from their foster parents' aggressive defense of young and perhaps survive to fledge. However, behavioural differences caused problems for the adoptive Common Tern parents and Black-winged Stilt chicks reported in Paz and Eshbol (2002), including the chicks not accepting food and not responding to danger calls made by the adoptive terns. Ultimately, all of the adopted Black-winged Stilt chicks died by 10 days of age, apparently due to inappropriate parent-offspring interactions between the two species.

Presumably, an extra large brood would result in poorer care

per individual chick (less food, poorer vigilance against predators) by the Common Terns, and subsequently lower fledging rates. The Lake Abitibi nest and aforementioned literature suggest that terns can occasionally obtain supernumerary clutches via nest usurpation behaviour. Common Tern adults that adopted foreign chicks in addition to their own brood were thought to be displaying maladaptive behaviour (Saino et al. 1994) by incurring higher than normal parental effort costs. This presumed cost associated with increased brood size might explain why Common Terns do not usurp nests as a rule, even though they certainly have opportunity to do so in most high-density colonial nesting sites.



In the observed nest, it appears that the terns obtained a nest site at the potential cost of increased parenting duties. It would be interesting to know whether any young (of either species) successfully fledged in this instance, or if this unusual situation proved too taxing on the apparently unwitting adoptive parents.

### Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Ken Abraham (OMNR) for first suggesting I write

the note, providing contacts and review of early drafts. Mark Peck (Royal Ontario Museum), Don Sutherland (OMNR) and George Peck (Ontario Nest Records Scheme) all gave freely of their experience, identifying the nest and eggs in the photo. Pete Cott (Department of Fisheries and Oceans) provided helpful suggestions on an early draft. Ed Morris and Mick Gauthier (OMNR) were co-workers during the Lake Abitibi fieldwork.

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## Notes

### Barred Owl Mating Behaviour

Chris Robinson

On the evening of 19 March 2004, I was conducting owl surveys using calls broadcast from a compact disk at locations along the road within Charleston Lake Provincial Park, which is located in southeastern Ontario between Kingston and Brockville in Leeds County. Having had no success with my target species, Northern Saw-whet Owl (*Aegolius acadicus*), Eastern Screech-Owl (*Megascops asio*), and Long-eared Owl (*Asio otus*), I broadcasted Barred Owl (*Strix varia*) calls to try to obtain a general idea of the abundance of the species in that area of the park.

Sometime between 2230 and 2330h, I heard a loud crashing sound behind me, less than 20 seconds after playing the Barred Owl calls. I immediately turned to see a large, dark silhouette hastily land on a branch of a nearby large Eastern Cottonwood (*Populus deltoides*) tree, seemingly without much regard for stealth. This individual was immediately followed by another dark shadow of the same size which landed in a tree very close to the first. The two flying silhouettes were clearly Barred Owls, with the first individual that arrived being extremely vocal, a great deal

more so than the other both in terms of the frequency and volume of its calls. I presumed that this was the male of the pair. The commonly heard two-phrase hooting sequence (“who cooks for you? who cooks for you all?”) and the ascending hoots (“madam, who cooks for you all?”) were given occasionally, but the most commonly heard vocalizations during this encounter consisted of a large range of calls, including dog-like barks, squawks, and cackles, that did not seem to be in any pattern that I could discern.

I shone a flashlight on the owls. The presumed male exhibited a fair amount of body posturing, stretching out its neck, lowering its head and body in a horizontal alignment roughly parallel to the ground, raising its wings forward at the shoulders, opening up its “armpit” areas and partially opening its wings, and fanning open its tail feathers. The “male” then moved to another tree, and was moving about a fair bit, while the apparent “female” remained on the same branch upon which it had initially landed.

While I shone my light on the female, examining the patterns and colouring of the breast barring, belly streaking, and spotting of the

wings, the other more vocal individual flew over, and to my amazement, mounted her, verifying my speculation that it was indeed the male. While copulating, the female's neck was outstretched and her head and body were held forward and horizontal, almost parallel to the ground. I cannot confidently say how long the mating lasted, as I was somewhat taken aback by this rarely seen nocturnal encounter, but I would estimate between 10 and 20 seconds.

I interpreted, rather anthropomorphically, that the male's copulatory behaviour was a blatant signal to me (or rather to the presumed owl it heard calling) that this female is "taken". I stopped the owl broadcast, as I felt the birds were agitated. One of them flew over the road several times during the next two minutes or so, and I lost track of which one was the male and which the female. At least one of the owls (perhaps both, I am not sure) was moving among the trees on both sides of the road, repeatedly vocalizing from various perches. Finally, I left the area, as I did not want to disturb them any longer.

### Discussion

It appears that little has been written on Barred Owl pair bonding, but it is likely similar to that of its near relative, the Tawny Owl (*Strix aluco*), in which pair bonds are permanent and the permanent territories are defended year-round (Johnsgard 1988). Barred Owls are

presumed to be monogamous, but there have been no genetic studies of young (Mazur and James 2000).

All of the Barred Owl behaviour that I witnessed occurred with me standing on the road in plain view, periodically shining a flashlight on the owls, so I am sure my presence was obvious to them. The owl broadcast presumably sparked the male's elaborate response behaviour, possibly because it perceived the calling to be that of an intruder in its territory.

A number of other Barred Owls are in the general area, some of which were heard in the distance around the same time as the previously described observation. There may be a high density of Barred Owls there, with possibly four pairs having territories within approximately a 2.5-km stretch of the park road. Average Barred Owl home ranges have been reported as being 273 ha in Minnesota (Nicholls and Fuller 1987) and 282 ha in Michigan (Elody and Sloan 1985), suggesting that the owl density in the area in which I observed the copulating owls may be high. Also, Nicholls and Fuller (1987) and Elderkin (1987) reported the presence of non-breeding "floaters". The male that I observed may have been responding to an apparent intrusion by a nearby territorial male or a floater male into its territory.

After a territorial intrusion, copulations by resident pairs have been observed in a wide variety of bird species, from raptors to passer-

ines (see Birkhead and Moller 1992). It has been suggested that resident males copulate repeatedly with their females following a perceived territorial intrusion by another male in an attempt to swamp the intruder's sperm with their own, should mating have occurred. Edinger (1988) reported "rapid pair copulation" during song playback experiments with Baltimore (*Icterus galbula*) and Bullock's Orioles (*I. bullockii*), and indicated that these songs may have been perceived by resident males as territorial intrusions. The same response apparently occurs in

Barred Owls. Michael Runtz (pers. comm.) has observed Barred Owl behaviour that was similar to the incident reported here after he imitated their vocalizations.

Perhaps future genetic studies will reveal more about the social and breeding behaviour of nocturnal owls.

### Acknowledgements

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## James D. Rising: Distinguished Ornithologist

J. Bruce Falls

*This note is based on remarks by Bruce Falls at the presentation of the Distinguished Ornithologist Award to Jim Rising at the OFO Annual Convention in Oakville, Ontario, on 2 October 2004.*

Let me tell you about my friend and colleague, Jim Rising, this year's recipient of OFO's Distinguished Ornithologist Award. Jim started young, keeping budgies and interested in nature with his older brother. Family vacations with Pettingill's bird-finding guides and a Peterson field guide started him identifying birds by the time he was 12. He thought male and female House Sparrows were separate species, an early clue that he was to become a *splitter*. He had an early introduction to bird-banding. His parents encouraged his growing interest by providing bird books and he was inspired by reading Fred Bodsworth's *Last of the Curlews*. As a teenager, he subscribed to the *Auk* and the *Wilson Bulletin*. He began coordinating Christmas counts and started a book on *Birds of the Kansas City Area*.

In Junior College and as an undergraduate at the University of Kansas, he began to publish short papers about his bird observations. His first contribution to the *Auk* in 1965 concerned observations of Pine

Grosbeak and Townsend's Solitaire in Missouri. Receiving his Bachelor of Arts in 1964, he continued at U. of K. for his Ph.D. under the supervision of the noted systematic ornithologist, Richard F. Johnston. His thesis topic was *Systematic and Evolutionary Aspects of Interbreeding between Baltimore and Bullock's Orioles*. Subsequently, the AOU combined these two species into Northern Oriole, a decision not to Jim's liking. Perhaps partly as a result of his work, they have been split again—he got his revenge!

After receiving his Ph.D. in 1968, Jim went on to Cornell University for post-doctoral research in ecological physiology. He showed that Bullock's Orioles were better adapted than Baltimore Orioles to hot dry conditions. He also studied adaptations of chickadees to cold. However, in 1969, the "true north" called when an opening appeared at the University of Toronto. He arrived for interviews (one with yours truly) and got the job. At the same time, he became a Research Associate of the Royal Ontario Museum, a position he still holds. It was a lucky day for Jim and for the rest of us, too!

Jim's scientific interests lie in population and evolutionary biology. His particular field is systematics and phylogeny. Perhaps because of his

early experience, he has a special interest in the hybrid zone in the Great Plains. When he arrived in Toronto, he looked for an appropriate and convenient research subject and hit upon geographic variation in the Savannah Sparrow, which he pursued for many years throughout the species' range. A major publication in 2001 dealt with this subject. He has resisted splitting the Savannah Sparrow but recently turned his attention to sharp-tailed sparrows, which have been split.

Jim's teaching at U. of T. has included courses in systematics, phylogeny and evolution, several field courses in subarctic, temperate and tropical venues, and recently, a course in avian biology (ornithology). He has for several years been the Undergraduate Secretary in the Department of Zoology, responsible for counseling students and overseeing the curriculum. Jim has supervised the research of 14 graduate students for Master's and Doctoral degrees on a variety of organisms—juncos, frogs, orioles (of course), bumblebees, squirrels, Lark Buntings, Iceland Gulls and cowbirds, including a wide range of topics.

Jim Rising is a joiner, belonging to more ornithology societies than I can remember. He is a fellow of the AOU and serves on the committee on Classification and Nomenclature. This august body of splitters produces the ever-growing check-list that is music to birders. Jim has been on the council of the Cooper

Ornithological Society and, as elected second Vice-President of the Wilson Society, is in line to become its President. Closer to home, he supports many natural history organizations, including Bird Studies Canada, the Canadian Nature Federation, Ontario Nature, and the Nature Conservancy of Canada which represents one of his major concerns—habitat preservation; and of course, OFO and others.

When I visit Jim's office, I usually find him at his computer. It is hard to know if he is talking to *Bird Chat*, which he often does, writing a new book or playing a computer game. He is a gifted writer with 62 publications in scientific journals to his credit as well as 24 books or chapters in books, and other articles. His papers reflect his early observations in Kansas as well as publications on orioles, Savannah and other sparrows, and more general topics.

He contributed 10 species accounts to the *Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Ontario*, six co-authored accounts to the *Birds of North America* and two chapters to the *Sibley Guide to Bird Life and Behavior*. He has also written for several high school biology texts. His books on birds include *Canadian Songbirds and Their Ways* (1982) and two excellent field guides to sparrows with Dave Beadle (1996, 2002). They have straddled the fence on the question of whether paintings or photographs are best for field guides, publishing one of each. Jim tells me



**Figure 1:** Jim Rising (right) receives the Distinguished Ornithologist Award, presented by Jean Iron and Bruce Falls during the OFO Annual Convention in Oakville, Ontario, on 2 October 2004. Photo by Ron Pittaway.

that a new photographic guide is in the works on tanagers, grosbeaks and finches. No wonder he is regarded as an authority on sparrows and their allies!

Jim is a keen birder. I remember with pleasure how we played hooky from a Wilson Meeting in Corpus Christi to tour south Texas and pick up lots of goodies. Here in Ontario, Jim takes students on bird-

ing trips and keeps track of birds at his cottage that contribute to my Atlas square. Tropical field courses don't hurt his life list!

It is an honour for me to present the 2004 OFO Distinguished Ornithologist Award to my friend, Jim Rising, a man who has not only made important contributions to avian science, but also keeps bird-watchers happy.

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## Thunder Bay Fire 21 Revisited

Nicholas G. Escott

Fire 21 consumed a large area of boreal forest straddling Highway 527, north of the city of Thunder Bay, in the spring and summer of 1998. This burn was the winter home for a major concentration of Black-backed Woodpeckers (*Picoides arcticus*) in 1998-99 (Escott 2001).

I had the opportunity to revisit this area in the summer of 2003, where I did some point counts for the Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas. Five years after the fire, the understory has regenerated in deciduous shrubs, such as poplar (*Populus* sp.), willow (*Salix* sp.), and alder (*Alnus* sp.), to a height of about 4 metres. The dead trees from the original forest rise up above this shrub layer (Figure 1). The point counts tallied in Table 1 are from this fairly homogeneous part of the regenerating burn, north of Kabitotikwia Lake. I did 23 point counts on 19 and 24 June, and the numbers of individuals for each species recorded are listed in Table 1.

The most surprising species was the House Wren (*Troglodytes aedon*), which is uncommon and local in Thunder Bay District, and usually found in towns and suburbs in the southern parts of the district. There is, however, a breeding record from the northeast corner of Lake Nipigon in 1924 (Snyder 1928): a pair was nesting in the

debris from an old railway construction camp.

House Wrens are known to nest in open burned areas (Johnson 1998) and it remains to be seen whether this species is a regular inhabitant of forest fire burns in northwestern Ontario, or whether the sightings reported here were an anomaly. If the former, there are lots of suitable breeding areas across the north, and surveys of such regenerating burns might extend the breeding range of this species in Ontario.

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The part of the burn south of Kabitotikwia Lake was salvage-cut after the fire, i.e., it was logged to salvage the standing dead timber, and then scarified, or scraped, leaving little vegetation on the sandy ground over some areas. No House Wrens were found there, but that area was home to an unusually large number of two other species that are quite uncommon in the Thunder Bay area: Common Nighthawk (*Chordeiles minor*) and Vesper Sparrow (*Pooecetes gramineus*). I estimated at least 11 singing Vesper Sparrows, and at least 10 Common Nighthawks, in a fairly small area of about 20 hectares, on the evening of 23 June.



**Figure 1: Regenerating burn, north of Kabitotikwia Lake, Thunder Bay District, June 2003. Photo by Nicholas G. Escott.**

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**Table 1. Numbers of birds recorded at 23 point counts in naturally regenerated burn, five years after the fire.**

White-throated Sparrow ( <i>Zonotrichia albicollis</i> )	85	Veery ( <i>Catharus fuscescens</i> )	4
Mourning Warbler ( <i>Oporornis philadelphia</i> )	34	<b>House Wren</b> ( <i>Troglodytes aedon</i> )	4
Alder Flycatcher ( <i>Empidonax alnorum</i> )	34	Red-breasted Nuthatch ( <i>Sitta canadensis</i> )	3
Least Flycatcher ( <i>Empidonax minimus</i> )	24	Nashville Warbler ( <i>Vermivora ruficapilla</i> )	2
Hermit Thrush ( <i>Catharus guttatus</i> )	23	Lincoln's Sparrow ( <i>Melospiza lincolni</i> )	2
Red-eyed/Philadelphia Vireo * ( <i>Vireo olivaceus/philadelphicus</i> )	23	American Kestrel ** ( <i>Falco sparverius</i> )	2
Chestnut-sided Warbler ( <i>Dendroica pensylvanica</i> )	19	Hairy Woodpecker ( <i>Picoides villosus</i> )	2
Northern Flicker ( <i>Colaptes auratus</i> )	11	Black-capped Chickadee ( <i>Poecile atricapillus</i> )	1
Chipping Sparrow** ( <i>Spizella passerina</i> )	10	Blue Jay ( <i>Cyanocitta cristata</i> )	1
American Robin ( <i>Turdus migratorius</i> )	7	Gray Jay ( <i>Perisoreus canadensis</i> )	1
Downy Woodpecker ( <i>Picoides pubescens</i> )	5	Song Sparrow ( <i>Melospiza melodia</i> )	1
American Redstart ( <i>Setophaga ruticilla</i> )	4		

\* Both species were present, but songs are similar. Of eight that were seen, two were Philadelphia and six were Red-eyed.

\*\* Restricted to the edges of the highway or main logging road

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## December 2004 Quiz

Glenn Coady

For this photo quiz, we present a bird captured in mid-flight, a view not often easily obtained under normal field conditions. It is probably fair to say that most birders would quickly recognize this relatively long and narrow-billed, long-legged bird, found in open shoreline habitat, as belonging to one of Ontario's 50 species of shorebirds.

A quick look at the general size and shape of this bird reveals it to be a fairly large shorebird with a long and stout bill (longer than the head itself) and quite remarkably long legs (which would seem likely to trail considerably beyond the length of the tail in flight). These characteristics alone eliminate quite a number of shorebird possibilities, including: all of the plovers of the genera *Charadrius* and *Pluvialis*; virtually all of the shorebirds in the genus *Calidris* (with the lone exception of Stilt Sandpiper); all the phalaropes; all the curlews (whose legs fail to trail beyond their long tails in flight); and other relatively short-legged species such as American Oystercatcher, Upland Sandpiper, Spotted Sandpiper, Wandering Tattler, Ruddy Turnstone, Buff-breasted Sandpiper, American Woodcock and Wilson's Snipe. Most of these species can also be eliminated easily using many other criteria.

Two of the most striking features of this bird are its exceptionally and solidly dark tail, and this dark tail's pronounced contrast with its bright white upper tail coverts. These features eliminate a further complement of shorebird possibilities, including: American Avocet, Black-necked Stilt, Willet, Stilt Sandpiper; all four of the possible species of the genus *Tringa*; both dowitcher species; as well as both Bar-tailed Godwit and Marbled Godwit. All of these species have either pale or distinctly barred tail feathers, quite unlike the solid black pattern exhibited by this quiz bird. Additionally, our quiz bird's tail and upper tail coverts lack the fairly unique U-shaped white pattern shown by the Ruff, which we can thus also eliminate from further consideration.

Scrolling through the list of Ontario shorebirds, we can see we have thus eliminated all of the species other than Hudsonian Godwit and Black-tailed Godwit. Certainly, our long-winged, long-legged, long-billed bird, with a narrow white wing stripe visible at the base of the flight feathers, is consistent with a godwit.

Separation of these two species is relatively straightforward, particularly given the look we are pre-

sented with here. Hudsonian Godwits in all plumages show black underwing linings and axillaries, as well as dark flight feathers. Conversely, Black-tailed Godwits in all plumages show a very clean, white underwing lining and axillaries, and very light flight feathers (except for a narrow dark leading and trailing edge to the underwing). Clearly then, our quiz bird is a **Black-tailed Godwit**.

Black-tailed Godwits also have a proportionately longer and straighter bill when compared to Hudsonian Godwits. However, our quiz bird's bill is viewed at an oblique angle, making this feature difficult to assess. The photo does illustrate nicely the broader, more rounded wing profile of a Black-tailed Godwit in comparison to the more pointed-looking wings of both Hudsonian Godwit and Bar-tailed Godwit (which has yet to occur in Ontario). The bright ochre-buff colour of the bird's head and neck, combined with its lack of any belly or flank barring, make it possible to age this as a juvenile Black-tailed Godwit. The rich ochre-buff colour is more characteristic of a juvenile Black-tailed Godwit, with juvenile



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*David Renaud*

Hudsonian Godwits generally showing a less extensive and more muted grayish-buff head and neck.

I photographed this juvenile Black-tailed Godwit at Kingston, Ontario on 19 December 1995. Black-tailed Godwit is accidental in Ontario, with only two occurrences to date. Both involved juvenile birds that occurred in the fall of 1995—possibly the same bird involved in both instances.

Glenn Coady, 604 – 60 Mountview Avenue, Toronto, Ontario M6P 2L4



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