



OFO News

NEWSLETTER OF THE ONTARIO FIELD ORNITHOLOGISTS

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Adult Red Knots with Ruddy Turnstone at Longridge Point on James Bay, 9 August 2010.

Volunteering for Bird Conservation on James Bay

Article and photos by Jean Iron

Many people ask me how I got to be on Mark Peck's Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) team studying the endangered *rufa* subspecies of the Red Knot at Longridge Point on James Bay. This is how it happened. My fascination with the Hudson Bay Lowlands began in 2001 when I was the Ontario Field Ornithologists (OFO) representative on the Ontario Shorebird Conservation Plan Committee. Here, I met Ken Abraham, a research scientist with the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources (OMNR). The committee frequently

discussed Polar Bear Provincial Park and the coasts of Hudson and James Bays as critical to breeding and migrating shorebirds. I had never heard of Polar Bear Provincial Park before but was enthralled by mental images of what it must be like. Daringly I asked Ken about volunteer positions with OMNR to help with bird research. In summer 2002 he invited me to join a Canada Goose and Snow Goose banding crew in Polar Bear Provincial Park. Closeness to geese and seeing spectacular wildlife such as breeding Whimbrels, Pacific Loons and Willow Ptarmigan, Polar Bears and Woodland Caribou on Ontario's tundra landscape drew me back year after year. This led to several seasons on Akimiski Island and the western James Bay coast.

Red Knot with lime green flag KUL on upper left leg was banded in Delaware Bay, USA. In 2010, we sighted over 250 individuals with flags from USA, Argentina, Chile, Brazil and Canada.





Left. Red Knots at high tide. 18 July 2011., Centre. Adult Red Knot in good body condition. Some Red Knots spent two and a half weeks fattening up on James Bay's rich food resources. 13 August 2010.

My past two summers were spent at Longridge Point on James Bay, most recently, five weeks from 14 July to 17 August 2010. Led by Mark Peck, our crew surveyed the endangered *rufa* subspecies of the Red Knot and other shorebirds. We walked the coast in twos or alone up to 14 km a day searching for knots being pushed towards the shore by the rising tide. Patience and concentration were virtues as we crept up on a flock, close enough to read and record the letter and number codes on leg flags without flushing the birds. We also made daily counts of Red Knot flocks to determine how many were using the coast as a migratory stopover. Mark took mud samples in favourite feeding areas to find out what the knots were eating.

We counted and aged shorebirds as either adult or juvenile, noting their plumage. Some shorebirds molt in Ontario on southbound migration such as Hudsonian Godwits, Red Knots and White-rumped Sandpipers, while others do not molt here in Ontario like Short-billed Dowitchers and Pectoral Sandpipers. Noting first dates of juvenile arrival and ratios of adults to juveniles

over several years of data collection will give an estimate of breeding success and recruitment. Aging shorebirds is fascinating and it hones identification skills in preparation for finding that vagrant Little Stint.

Great fun at the end of each day was the checklist roundup. My job was keeper of the daily list. We made sure our counts were accurate, knowing that they will be used for shorebird conservation, for example protection of essential staging areas along the coast.

Several million shorebirds depend on the rich food resources of the extensive unspoiled mudflats of Ontario's James Bay and Hudson Bay coastlines to fatten up before continuing their long migrations (*Ontario Shorebird Conservation Plan*, 2003, page 5). James Bay is situated strategically between shorebird breeding areas farther north in boreal and Arctic Canada and wintering areas to the south. Many species such as the Red Knot, Hudsonian Godwit, White-rumped Sandpiper and Ruddy Turnstone fly thousands of kilometres from James Bay to southern South America, often nonstop. Sixteen Important Bird

Areas are already established on James Bay and Hudson Bay, but it is amazing that Longridge Point and significant shorebird locations along Ontario's western James Bay coast have not yet been designated under the Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network (WHSRN). See Rob Maciver's timely article, *Where Are Ontario's Shorebird Reserves?* in the June 2010 *OFO News*.

What it takes to be a volunteer in the North

1. A good basic knowledge of bird identification, habitats, nesting and migratory behaviour
2. Good physical condition
3. Openness to learning about birds and benefiting from the experience
4. Getting along with a small group of people in close quarters
5. Working hard and sharing the load
6. Initiative and enthusiasm
7. Enjoying wilderness, quiet and isolation
8. Tolerance of mosquitoes and moose flies



Right. This fresh juvenile Marbled Godwit likely came from the small population that breeds on the west coast of James Bay, 9 August 2010.

9. Not being afraid of Polar Bears or Black Bears
10. Roughing it with no cell phones, TV, radio or internet, no electricity or running water, no showers or flush toilets, no refrigeration when temperatures reach 30°C and no heat when it drops to 0°C.

If you have the opportunity to volunteer in the north be sure to interview someone with northern experience to find out what to take along. This includes appropriate clothing for wide temperature fluctuations and footwear for long hikes through marshes and creeks and over mudflats and rocky shores. Personal comfort depends on having essential medications, sunscreen and bug repellent. Duct tape repairs many mechanical problems and protects feet from blisters — don't be without it. To be guaranteed a restful night's sleep, Doug McRae, Lisa Pollock and I recommend fat air mattresses available from

Canadian Tire that fold up for light transport and inflate easily with a built-in air pump.

Not everyone who loves birds and nature can venture into the North. This is why Ron Pittaway and I bring the North south through reports on Ontbirds and photo essays on my website. We will only save this vast wilderness if many know it and care about its future.

For more photos and information, please see:
<http://www.jeaniron.ca/2010/JamesBay2010/index.htm>



Acknowledgements: I thank Mark Peck of the Royal Ontario Museum for inviting me to join his team and Ken Abraham of the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources for encouragement and support of the Red Knot project. Team members in 2010 were Christian Friis, Jean Iron, Mark Peck, Lisa Pollock, Mike McMurtry, Don Sutherland, Doug McRae and Ray Ford. In 2009, the team comprised Gerry Binsfeld, Jean Iron, Mark Peck, Doug McRae, Don Shanahan and Amy Whitear. Communicating via satellite phone, Ron Pittaway crafted posts of our northern adventures about birds and other wildlife on Ontbirds and Shorebirds listservs.

Left to right: Christian Friis (Canadian Wildlife Service), Mark Peck (Royal Ontario Museum), and Lisa Pollock (ROM volunteer).

The American Crow (*Corvus brachyrhynchos*) is one of the most widespread of all members of the *Corvus* genus. Since the late 1800s, the crow has expanded its range in Ontario, believed to be due to settlement and agricultural intensification. Breeding Bird Survey and breeding bird atlas data indicate that the increase in population has continued in recent decades.

The crow is highly migratory, with many individuals leaving the province, often in very large numbers. For instance, at just two Hawk Migration Monitoring Stations along the Lake Erie shore (Holiday Beach and Lake Erie Metro Park), the total number of crows observed migrating out of Ontario in 2010 was more than 343,000. This number is conservative to avoid potential overlap, and also likely represents only a portion of the departing crow population, as others will have crossed elsewhere, or at times when monitoring wasn't being conducted.

Despite this exodus, many thousands of crows remain in the province, gathering in southwestern Ontario where they form large communal roosts during the winter months.

Over the past two to three decades, the largest Ontario winter crow roosts have been near the town of Essex, in central Essex County, as well as in Chatham, in the municipality of Chatham-Kent. Both of these urban areas are centrally located within thousands of hectares of agricultural fields, where the predominant crops are usually corn and soy beans. There is very little pasture left in this part of Ontario. The weather is slightly warmer here than most other parts of Ontario, and there is usually less snow cover, giving crows relatively easy access to the fields and the waste grain in them. Also, each urban area is within a short flight to a nearby landfill for a more varied diet.

A Gathering of Crows

By Allen Woodliffe



Photos by Allen Woodliffe





The Cedar Creek Christmas Bird Count (CBC), which includes the southern part of the town of Essex where the crow roost was located, began in 1986. Numbers of crows reported during the first decade of that CBC were typically between approximately 50,000 and 90,000, with a peak of 96,669. The St. Clair National Wildlife Area (SCNWA) CBC began in 1981. During the first few years, it did not include the west corner of Chatham where the primary crow roost was located. In 1990, however, the count circle was shifted slightly to include this crow roost, as well as to avoid the Wallaceburg CBC circle to the north. The average number of crows reported for the SCNWA CBC in the first five years following this adjustment was not quite 38,000 birds. Counts increased through the second half of the decade and an all time high of 159,860 birds

was reported on the CBC held on 3 January, 2000.

Since this peak, numbers reported on the SCNWA CBC have been very wide-ranging, though not due to population fluctuation. Some parts of the Chatham roost traditionally have been in residential areas, and homeowners did not take kindly to the mess that such a huge number of large birds can leave behind. Sidewalks, vehicles and other property were literally dumped on, and the local human constituents convinced the municipal council to do something about it. A bird control company was hired to bring in trained raptors as well as use special bangers and pyrotechnic effects discharged by a shotgun to disperse the crows to less problematic areas. The company has estimated that between late October and mid November, when numbers peak as southbound

migrants temporarily join the overwintering birds, there may be 250,000-500,000 crows in the greater Chatham area. For several years the company continued almost daily attacks on the crows from late October until almost the end of December. After which local municipal staff would take over, responding to complaints from the local crow complaint hot line. As a result, depending on the timing of the municipality's control efforts, the crows had shifted their roost to a location outside the CBC circle, and most individuals would not get counted.

Counting crows, the avian version

In the late 1990s, I was determined to refine our method of counting, (or should I say, estimating), the number of crows spending the night in Chatham. When I did a web search for 'counting crows', I was ecstatic to discover many

sites. Very quickly, however, I discovered that there was a rock band from southern California with the name Counting Crows. I did not find a single site that would answer my question about how to go about estimating the size of crow roosts.

Crows returning from their daily forays for food are a treat to observe. By mid to late afternoon, they begin returning to the roost, but they do it in stages. Huge numbers will gather on farm fields close to the urban area, seemingly waiting for most of the birds to arrive. Some will rest high in trees. Some fields are virtually black with birds. As they get closer to the city, they will temporarily roost on the rooftops of light industrial, commercial or even office buildings as well as those fields still in existence. They may move in a circuitous route, roosting temporarily, as the masses gather. During this, there is a fair bit of crow chatter. Eventually the birds head towards their roost, and it often then becomes eerily quiet. The birds are silent; there is nothing but the sound of thousands of wings beating the air. It is an awesome spectacle to see: so many huge, black birds streaming low through the gradually darkening sky with hardly a sound. I'm sure even Alfred Hitchcock would be impressed.

In recent years the roosts have seemed less quiet than they used to be, perhaps because they are nervous about the possibility of disruption. Crows are intelligent, and it may be that they have learned to recognize the municipal vehicles and the humans of the crow crew if they get too close. On the occasions when the birds are flushed from their initial roost by the municipal employees, there is lots of crow chatter. The birds wheel en masse, perhaps moving to other roosts several hundred metres away. Nonetheless, once the workers depart and the birds are settled in for the night, wherever that may be, they

become very quiet. One can drive along the River Road or even along a sidewalk and might not even know the birds are there if you didn't look and see the masses of black; there is hardly any sound to give away their presence. With the regular activity of the municipal crow crew oftentimes flushing or disturbing them, it is difficult to count the birds as they are approaching their roost. To accommodate for this, on the night before the SCNWA CBC, I determine where the main crow roost has settled in. All available counters then assemble early the next morning to decide where each of us will situate ourselves. We need to be far enough from the roost to adequately detect the various streams of crows leaving the roost, yet not be in a position to duplicate the efforts of the other counters. By about 7 a.m., the crows are getting restless and ready to leave the roost,



Many CBCs have experienced their highest numbers of crows in just the last decade or so.

and take a few flights out and about. However very few birds actually leave until about 7:15, and then the exodus begins. It is only as the crows begin to depart that one gets a true sense of their numbers: sometimes birds can leave a tree in large groups for ten or fifteen minutes, and yet the tree looks as full as before. A critical element of the count is that the counter needs to be able to use a fixed object as a reference point to count the stream of birds as they pass by, estimating in groups of tens or hundreds. Without this point of reference, staring through binoculars in the semi-

darkness at a continually moving mass of black objects for 30-45 minutes can be somewhat hypnotizing. The main exodus flight is usually over after about 45 minutes or so, leaving just a few stragglers.

Between 1986 and 1990, there was an average of 7.8 crows counted per party-hour across all counts reporting the species. Between 1999 and 2004, there was an average of 31 crows counted per party-hour. Many CBCs have experienced their highest numbers of crows in just the last decade or so. London had a high of 13,488 in 2000; Woodstock regularly tallies over 10,000, with a high of 38,844 in 2001; the all time top count for Cedar Creek is 117,149 recorded in 2000; Fisherville recorded its high of 1,745 in 2009, while St. Thomas had 2,044 in 2000 and Stratford counted 2,903 in 2004. Even Ottawa, well away from the traditional winter stronghold in the extreme southwest has recorded several thousand annually, with more than 11,000 in each of 2005 and 2006 and a peak count of 21,000 in 2008.

Interestingly, over the past five years the average number counted per party-hour has dropped to 16. Given that many CBC circles have recorded their top counts during this period, it is unknown whether this drop is due to an actual reduction in the number of crows, an increase in the number of CBCs (and thus party-hours) in areas of Ontario where crows are rare in winter, an increase in disruptive crow management efforts as roost sizes have grown, or perhaps simply that the crows have tended to spread out and not congregate in their traditional roosting areas.

Crows are certainly an increasingly common observation during the winter and on Christmas Bird Counts across Ontario. Whether a trend of warmer winter weather sees a trend of greater numbers of this species remains to be seen.

Researching Ontario's Red-headed Woodpeckers

These flashy woodpeckers are no longer found in Quebec (where I hail from), except for the rare sighting, and are swiftly declining in Ontario, with >60% population loss over the last 20 years. The birds were once considered quite common in central and southern Ontario. In 1837, naturalist Charles Fothergill reported that Red-headed Woodpeckers were one of the most common birds in the Rice Lake area and similar reports described the species being more plentiful than the Northern Flicker. Anecdotal evidence suggests the species began declining throughout most of their range by late 1800s and decline that has worsened over time.

Historically, the Red-headed Woodpecker occupied savannas and open deciduous forests. Long ago, the settlement of Europeans in North America led to massive losses of these habitats, causing difficulties for many species that called these habitats home. Yet a certain crimson-headed bird found that settlement towns and the resulting countryside to its liking, especially the new sources of food settlers brought, in the guise of planted fruit and nut trees. This trend of flexibility seems to continue today as Red-heads may be found nesting in a variety of areas with large dead and dying deciduous trees such as town centres, golf courses, animal pastures, cemeteries and woodlots.

So here comes the tricky question: Why is a species, such as the Red-headed Woodpecker, that seemingly can make its home in many places, from a leafy downtown suburb, to deciduous woodlots, to cow pastures, undergoing such declines?

I have a confession to make. Prior to embarking on my doctoral research last year, I had never actually seen a Red-headed Woodpecker. Likely, I'm not the only one.



Photo by Tom Thomas

Factors suggested for Red-headed Woodpecker declines include: loss of overall habitat and, within habitats, standing dead wood required for nest sites, limitations of food supply, and possible nest-site competition with other cavity nesters such as European Starlings or Red-bellied Woodpeckers. As few, if any, of these factors have been substantiated, and no research has occurred on the species' ecology in Ontario, we have undertaken the challenge.

The trickiest aspect of studying a species-at-risk is finding individuals to study in the first place. This past summer I began my research in the beautiful rolling hills of Northumberland County. Thanks to dedicated field assistants, invaluable tips from local naturalists, and friendly landowners, our team located 15 territories of Red-headed Woodpeckers. We will return to Northumberland this summer; in addition we plan to form a second field team to work further south in Elgin County. This will increase the number of pairs of woodpeckers in the study and

allow a comparison of habitat and threats in two geographically different areas of the province.

How does one find a Red-headed Woodpecker? It takes a certain measure of patience and time to pour over maps, visit potential habitats, and talk to as many locals as possible. Armed with a playback of their call, we scoured the county for breeding pairs. Luckily, this pugnacious bird will quickly respond to the challenge of our playback. Each time we heard a raucous call in response, followed by rapid-fire drumming,

we jumped for joy. Next came the game of 'where is your nest hole', with the Red-heads darting in and out of the leafy canopy and hopeful researchers attempting to keep up, backpacks and binoculars jostling. Once found, we monitored the nest throughout excavation, egg laying, incubation and nestling rearing.

Monitoring a nest excavated in a dead tree or limb an average of 13 m off the ground (and up to 32 m) is another challenge altogether. Using an elevated video inspection system (EVIS), consisting of a wireless spy camera (and yes, there is a spy store in Montréal) mounted on a telescoping pole we managed to 'peep' all the nests within reach (16 m off the ground). This allowed us to know precisely the number and age of eggs and nestlings in at each visit.

To understand what constitutes 'good' Red-headed Woodpecker habitat, we measure habitat characteristics at multiple scales surrounding the nest site. In addition, we also compare habitat characteristics between successful and unsuccessful characteristics. Thus we hope to answer two important questions: (a) what kind of habitats are Red-headed Woodpecker choosing to nest in, and (b) how do their nests fare in different habitats?

Many bird species nest in cavities, either those of their own making (such as woodpeckers) or those that are naturally-occurring or made by others (secondary cavity nesters). As habitat loss occurs, and/or dead wood (necessary for cavity making) becomes harder to find within the habitat, competition for available cavities increases. Both Red-bellied Woodpeckers, a southern species moving northward, and European Starlings, an infamous invasive species, are considered possible nest site competitors for Red-headed Woodpeckers. From our 2010 findings, it seems the role of European Starlings as competitors may be limited to an urban setting, where they are found in higher densities. A Red-headed Woodpecker nest we monitored in Cobourg, a small city on the shores of Lake Ontario, was indeed usurped by a pair of starlings. The pair abandoned the nest after several days of fierce battle, where multiple starlings repeatedly harassed



Top: Photo by Barbara Frei
Below: Barbara Frei watches a nest cavity for activity.
Photo by Veronica Aponte



them. Yet, in a rural location nearby, a pair of Red-headed Woodpeckers and a pair of starlings nested in the same snag as near neighbours. I look forward to gathering more information on this perplexing question.

Red-headed Woodpeckers are the most omnivorous woodpecker in North America. There is, however, little actual information on what Red-headed Woodpeckers do eat, as the only study was performed in the southern U.S. a century ago. During the breeding period, the species is thought to feed heavily on aerial insects. There is strong evidence that a majority of aerial insect-eating birds are declining steadily in Canada, including Ontario. Now, if finding Red-headed Woodpecker nests are difficult, imagine trying to see what they are catching while they hawk for insects 15 m in the air! We hope to find the answer in a sneakier way. By taking a small blood, feather, or feces sample (if, in the latter, they so gift it to us) from captured Red-headed Woodpeckers, we could employ the science of stable isotopes to give us

an insight as to what the bird has eaten in the last weeks or months. Therefore another challenge for 2011 is to use canopy mist-nets to capture a number of these high-flying individuals.

How You Can Help Our Red-headed Friends

We are deeply indebted to the people of Ontario that have reported Red-headed Woodpecker sightings. If you too want to help in the conservation and research of the species, please

visit our website at www.redheadedwoodpecker.ca.

If you know of a past or present breeding location of Red-headed Woodpeckers in our study areas, I would love to hear from you. If you are a landowner (or have a friend that is) with a mature deciduous woodlot or a pasture with old trees and would like to have your area surveyed for Red-headed Woodpeckers in the summer of 2011, contact us at info@redheadedwoodpecker.ca. Lastly if neither of those options applies to you but you want to help our Red-headed friends, please become a champion of conserving dead wood in your neighborhood. Dead branches and trees are often removed for aesthetic reasons, but think of how pretty it would be to have a Red-headed Woodpecker nesting where you live.

Christmas Bird Count For Kids

By Jody Allair and Liza Barney

The first Christmas Bird Count for Kids (“CBC 4 Kids”) was established in 2007 in Sonoma Valley, California by Tom Rusert and Darren Peterie, whose successful annual event is now being conducted across North America.



Photos: Jeff Tribe courtesy of Sun Media

This program targets nature enthusiasts aged 8 to 15. The day begins with a “Birding Basics and Binoculars 101” session to prepare participants for their bird count. Each participant (and accompanying parent) is part of a small birding team, led by an experienced birder. The teams record the numbers of bird species and individuals they find along their survey routes over the course of a morning. After the survey, all teams regroup for lunch and a tally of the results.

Thirty-five participants (including 15 young birders and their parents) came out for Bird Studies Canada’s first Christmas Bird Count for Kids on December 11, 2010. After a brief introduction at BSC’s Port Rowan headquarters, the young birders were divided into teams, taught some birding basics, and provided with binoculars and field guides if needed. Three teams (The Epic Eagles, The Short-eared Owls, and The Harriers) headed out in the Long Point area with their checklists, led by BSC staff and volunteers.

After an exciting morning, the groups shared stories about their birding adventures over a hot lunch at BSC. In total, participants found a whopping 62 species and 3867 individuals. A highlight of the count was a sighting of Thor — a second-year Bald Eagle carrying one of BSC’s satellite transmitters — feeding on some fish on the ice. Other exciting finds included 16 waterfowl species including three Cackling Geese, five raptor species, a Dunlin on Turkey Point beach, and an

albino Horned Lark. The event concluded with a live birds of prey demonstration by the Canadian Raptor Conservancy.

BSC's first CBC 4 Kids introduced young people and their families to the fun and rewarding pursuit of birdwatching. It was the first birding experience for many of the participants, but all agreed that it would not be their last!

CBC 4 Kids events are relatively easy to set up, they are flexible with regard to location (they can be done just about anywhere), and they can be hosted by

anyone who enjoys connecting kids with the natural world. Unlike traditional Christmas Bird Counts (which focus on population monitoring through data collection), the CBC 4 Kids is about creating a fun outdoor experience to help kids learn about birds.

Many thanks to all of our volunteer leaders, the participants, and their parents for making this inaugural event a huge success. *We look forward to our next CBC 4 Kids in December 2011.*

For more information about how you can start up a CBC 4 Kids event in your area:

Please contact Jody Allair (jallair@birdscanada.org) or Liza Barney (lbarney@birdscanada.org).

To learn more about Bird Studies Canada's Bird Science and Environmental Education Program, visit www.birdscanada.org/longpoint/education



Cassiar Junco

By Ron Pittaway

Recently, I was sent a photo (above) of a junco to identify. It was a Cassiar Junco (*Junco hyemalis cismontanus*), which is a controversial subspecies of the Dark-eyed Junco breeding in the northern Rocky Mountains. It is named after the Cassiar Mountains in northern British Columbia and southern Yukon. Cassiar is an intermediate (intergrade or hybrid) population that originated from interbreeding between Slate-colored (*J. h. hyemalis*) and Oregon Juncos (*J. h. montanus*) (Miller 1941). Cassiar-like juncos also result if a stray Oregon Junco in the East mates with a Slate-colored Junco. The Cassiar Junco is the Kumlien's Gull of juncos, which is also a large intermediate

(hybrid) and variable population. Cassiar and Kumlien's are convenient names for birders.

Like Oregon Juncos, a few Cassiars wander east occasionally to Ontario (James 1991). Many Cassiar Juncos, particularly males, are identifiable with a high degree of certainty. Adult males have (1) a convex hood (turns up at sides) suggesting Oregon Junco, but with grey sides similar to Slate-colored Junco, and (2) a more blackish hood than Slate-colored's contrasting (usually shows neck line) with the back, which is often brownish. Female Cassiars show a paler hood frequently cut off from the sides, which are more mixed with pinkish brown than in

First year male Cassiar Junco (*J. h. cismontanus*) on 8 January 2011 at the Hendrie Valley in Burlington, Ontario. Aged as a first year bird in formative plumage by juvenal tertials broadly edged with cinnamon and brownish juvenal primary coverts contrasting with fresher and greyer formative greater coverts.

Photo by Malcolm Benn

most Slate-colored. Oregon Juncos almost never show grey on the sides. On Slate-colored Juncos the lower edge of the hood is concave turning onto the sides. Many puzzling juncos are best left unidentified. Most of the above is from Miller (1941).

Adult male and adult female Cassiar Juncos are illustrated in a box on page 501 in the big *Sibley Guide to the Birds* (2000). See also the photo of adult male Cassiar on page 439 in the *Smithsonian Field Guide to the Birds of North America* (2008).

For more information

Discussions about Cassiar Junco.

www.oceanwanderers.com/JuncoID.html

Junco subspecies in Ontario.

www.jeaniron.ca/2010/darkeyedjuncoREpdf

Acknowledgements

I thank Malcolm Benn for use of his photo. Wayne Weber provided information about the origin of the name Cassiar Junco. Seabrooke Leckie contacted Peter Pyle who confirmed the junco's age and plumage. Jean Iron made suggestions and proofed this note.

Literature Cited

James, R.D. 1991. Annotated Checklist of the Birds of Ontario. Royal Ontario Museum.
Miller, A.H. 1941. Speciation in the avian genus *Junco*. University of California Publications in Zoology 44:173-434.

Kowa Genesis 8 x 33 Binoculars

By Ron Pittaway



Kowa's birding telescopes are rated among the best in the world in a select group

that includes Swarovski, Zeiss, Leica and Nikon. Yet Kowa's new top end Genesis binoculars are largely unknown by birders, but they have the same Prominar high definition fluorite glass and coatings used in their scopes.

Last May I bought a pair of 8 x 33 Genesis binoculars so I've had plenty of time to test them for this review. They are comfortable, well balanced and exceptionally light weight at only 590 g or 20.8 oz, making them ideal for many hours of continuous easy viewing. The image is bright and sharp with a wide field of view and the close focusing is perfect for butterflies and birds in thickets. The focus wheel rolls smoothly lacking the annoying play, stickiness or hesitation found in many binoculars.

The Genesis series comes in three other models: 10 x 33, 8.5 x 44 and 10.5 x 44. Twenty-five years ago most birders thought that they were under-powered unless they had 10 power binoculars. Today many birders prefer the more versatile 8 power binoculars because they are easier to hold steady and have a wider field of view. The 10 x 33 Genesis are the same size and light weight as the 8 x 33 but have a narrower field of view. I found the 8.5 x 44 and 10 x 44 models too heavy for my liking at 940 g (33.2 oz) and 960 g (33.9 oz) respectively, each being more than 2 pounds. Kowa's neoprene neck strap is the widest I've seen so the greater weight of these models may not be an issue for some birders. However, comfort also depends on the number of times you raise binoculars and the time spent viewing. The reasons I prefer the 8 x 33 over the other three models are the combination of light weight, ideal magnification, close focus (all models) and the widest field of view of all four models. The optical quality of the Genesis 8 x 33 rates



with the finest binoculars in the world, but they are priced much lower than major contenders. Their cost is about two-thirds of comparable models from Swarovski, Zeiss, Leica and Nikon.

Kowa Genesis 8 x 33 Features

Weight: 590 gr or 20.8 oz is exceptionally light.

Field of View: A wide 140 m at 1000 m or 420 ft at 1000 yd.

Close Focus: 1.5 m or 4.9 ft is excellent for very close birds and insects.

Eye Cups: Four locking settings allow for individual preference.

Length/Height: 14.2 cm or 5.6 inches with eye cups up.

Diopter Lens: Locking ring keeps individual eye setting from moving.

Eye Relief: 15 mm suits my eyeglasses, but check yours before purchasing.

Weatherproofing: Waterproof and filled with nitrogen gas to prevent internal fogging.

Magnesium Body: Covered with comfortable green protective rubber amour.

Accessories: Wide neoprene strap, rain guard and storage case (no strap).

Kowa Lifetime Warranty

Dealer Location Map. Click on Ontario.

www.kowa-usa.com/kowanewweb/sporting/dealer.html

Test Your Birder's Vocabulary

By Cindy Cartwright

Myrtle Warbler by Seabrooke Leckie



Word: nominate subspecies

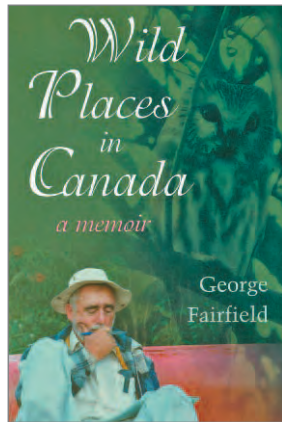
Clue: Myrtle Warbler but not Audubon's Warbler, Western Palm Warbler but not Yellow Palm Warbler

Answer below.

A subspecies whose scientific name is a repeat of the species name; for example, *Limnodromus griseus griseus* is the nominate subspecies of the Short-billed Dowitcher. The nominate subspecies (race) is the first named race; it is not necessarily more important or more typical than any other race of the species.

Nominate Subspecies

Book Reviews



Wild Places in Canada - a memoir

By George Fairfield. 2011.

General Store Publishing House, Renfrew Ontario.

\$24.95 Canadian. Softcover. 221 pages.

ISBN 9-78-1-926962-02-3.

Birds are the underlying theme of George Fairfield's book about Canada's wild places. He is an all round natural and human historian but primarily he is a field ornithologist. George authored the Chestnut-collared Longspur account in 1968 in Bent's *Life Histories of North American Birds* after studying them in Saskatchewan. For many years he was editor of the Toronto Ornithological Club's newsletter. George was involved in the early days of the Long Point Bird Observatory and helped establish the Toronto Bird Observatory. These are just two of the many fascinating short stories told in his book.

Throughout his travels and adventures, George kept detailed field notes (a lost art now) which are frequently excerpted in the book adding a "freshness and immediacy of days gone past and people and places that are no more."

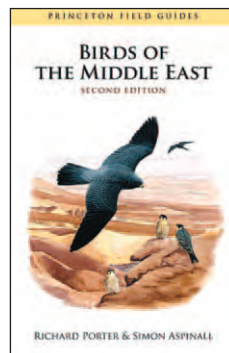
George worked for Ontario Hydro and early in his career he spent many summers surveying wild rivers by canoe for hydro power potential in northern Ontario. His descriptions of the birds

and other wildlife, loggers and First Nations people are enlightening. Later, George and his wife Jean led canoe trips for naturalist clubs in the north.

George describes wildlife and places from across Canada but the book's emphasis is on Ontario. He mentions many birders and ornithologists and his encounters with them such as Jim Baillie, David Hussell, Jim Richards, Charlie Long, Bob Nero, Eva Beckett, Fred Lahraman, Jim and Pat Woodford and many others.

George ends with his philosophy that "There is always something to look forward to when you love the outdoors".

Ron Pittaway



Birds of the Middle East

(Second Edition). 2010. Richard Porter and Simon Aspinall, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 08540. Softcover 384 pages. \$39.50USD.

ISBN13: 978-0-691-14844-1.

Normally, when I'm asked to review a new guide, or a new edition of a guide as in this case, I have a bit of an advantage as I have already visited the country and/or region and have experience with the species presented. However, I've never been to the Middle East, so at first I approached this task with some trepidation. I soon found my fears to be unfounded as I could relate to many of the species due to my travels to Africa, Asia and Europe. And that sets the stage for a very challenging task for the authors — how do you write a concise guide when you're at the epicentre of the ranges of so many Euro-Afro-Asian species? To complicate the task, approximately 800 species of birds are described in only 384 pages. So how did they do it?

Well let's see... first you need knowledgeable authors and highly skilled artists to depict the key features of the species covered, and then you need a pleasing and informative layout. They were successful on both counts.

To demonstrate, perhaps a short stroll through the book will help. The inside front cover features a handy map of the geographical boundaries of the Middle East, followed by a fairly typical introduction that offers information on taxonomy and nomenclature, bird topography, voice, habitat, range maps, status, and a birding code of conduct. Based on the Ornithological Society of the Middle East, the species accounts are presented in a clear, concise and informative manner. Each page displays several images of the birds' salient field marks. Additionally, where value is added, additional images show flight patterns, courtship, display, and immature/juvenile plumages. On average, 4-6 species are depicted on each page, with 8-22 paintings presented to share the key characteristics. One might think that 20 or so paintings on a page would be confusing, but it wasn't, as each was laid out clearly with white boundaries between species, and insets were used to ensure the information being presented was understandable. Each species is accompanied by a clear and readable map, which shows breeding and seasonal distributions. An interesting feature was injected in the gull section, when the authors broke from tradition and inserted a table differentiating the large white-headed gulls. This very concise summary deals with eight often-confused species, providing information on status, back colour, leg colour, bill, wing tip pattern and "helpful tips". Following this, a simplified table details the onset, continuation and completion of primary moult. Additional examples of the first table would be useful for other complex and confusing groups of birds (e.g. small gulls, terns, selected shorebirds, hawks, seabirds and eagles, etc.). Perhaps other authors will pick up on this and continue to provide this useful type of information to birders in future guides.

While most of the paintings are excellent and properly depict the key identifying features of the species, I would point out that a small number of the paintings seem to have some inaccuracies in them. In some cases the plumage patterns are too bold (e.g. Eurasian Woodcock and Common Linnet), while in others the structure of the bird seems wrong (e.g. Bohemian Waxwing and Long-eared Owl). While this doesn't mean I couldn't identify the species regardless of their exaggerated patterns or postures, the more accurate the paintings are, the easier it is to separate similar and confusing species. Maybe it's just my non-artist's eye, but for me I have to be able to identify the species in the field, and the book should match what my eye sees. I also would also have preferred that the seabird plates all be in colour. I know that many pelagic species are shades of black, grey and white, but subtleties of colour and pattern are better shown when a coloured format is used. In one plate they show a "feral" duck, without comment — what the heck is that? Looks like a typical multi-cross hybrid Mallard/Rouyn.

Out of curiosity and because so many guides do a poor job depicting goatsuckers, I compared the paintings of seven illustrated species of nightjars (i.e. European, Egyptian, Nubian, Sykes's, Montane, Indian and Plain) to actual photos of published in Cleere's *Nightjars, Frogmouths, Oilbird, and Owlet-nightjars of the World* (Princeton University Press 2010). The depiction of the European Nightjar was exaggerated and included distinct spotting on the wing coverts that do not appear in the plumage of the photographed birds, and the Indian showed a small facial patch of white that doesn't appear in any of Cleere's photos. That said the paintings of the other species were excellent and quite accurate.

So bottom line — I must admit I like the book very much and would find it very useful in the field. The layout and information provided was informative and quite complete for the size of the book. It is a welcome addition to my library, and I hope to field test it soon in some remote corner of the world.

Geoff Carpentier

Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas now in French

L'Atlas des oiseaux nicheurs de l'Ontario, 2001-2005 est maintenant disponible en français

Vous pouvez vous le procurer au coût de 63 \$, incluant taxes et frais d'envoi ici:
http://www.ontarionature.org/protect/species/breeding_bird_atlas.php

Le projet de l'Atlas a été mené par Ontario Field Ornithologists, Environnement Canada, Études d'Oiseaux Canada, Ministère des Richesses naturelles de l'Ontario, et Ontario Nature.

The Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Ontario, 2001-2005 is now available in French under the title *Atlas des oiseaux nicheurs de l'Ontario, 2001-2005* and is available for \$63 including tax and shipping from:

http://www.ontarionature.org/protect/species/breeding_bird_atlas.php

The Atlas project was sponsored by Ontario Field Ornithologists, Bird Studies Canada, Environment Canada, Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources, and Ontario Nature.



Cameron Ranch Point Counts

On 29 May and 12 June, 2011, the Ontario Field Ornithologists, Toronto Ornithological Club and Couchiching Conservancy will be conducting the 7th Annual Point Counts of the Cameron and Windmill Ranches on the Carden Alvar.

Birders have a rare opportunity to visit unique, prime alvar grassland habitat usually closed to the public. These point counts offer an opportunity to see many provincially rare species; the alvar is home to a population of Loggerhead Shrikes, and in previous years we have recorded a Henslow's Sparrow.

Birders of all skill levels are encouraged to participate. Point counts are conducted in parties of three or four, mixing experienced point counters with those who want to learn.

For more information about Cameron Ranch visit:
<http://www.couchconservancy.ca/cameronranch.htm>.
For details and to sign-up please contact Dan Bone at dan.bone@xplornet.com or (705) 887-4691.

Nikon Photo Quiz

Sponsored by Nikon Canada

By Willie D'Anna

This issue's photo quiz is about a species that gives a lot of birders difficulty, even those with quite a bit of field experience. And yet, many will look at this bird and identify it almost instantly. Why such a broad range of competency with a single species? This analysis will try to shed some light on that particular issue.

One feature of the quiz bird that stands out is its short thin pointed bill, which enables us to quickly narrow down the possibilities to the warblers and kinglets. If you are uncertain about an American Pipit, which has a thin pointed bill that is longer, the behavior of the bird should convince you. That is, the terrestrial pipit is not likely to be seen perching sideways on the stalk of a plant. Likewise, a Blue-gray Gnatcatcher has a longer bill and it lacks yellow on the undertail coverts and olive-yellow on the flanks, areas that are white on a Gnatcatcher. Kinglets are also easy to rule out — in this case by the lack of any noticeable wing bars.

We now know this is a warbler, which includes many possibilities. How can we quickly eliminate species from consideration? There really is not anything that looks that distinctive about the plumage. It is not very contrasting and there is no red, blue, or bright yellow to help speed up the process. There are no patches nor noticeable streaks of black or any other color, no bold eye-ring, no obvious supercilium, and as noted before, no wing bars. Although this seems like it will make our task more difficult, it actually makes it easier. Warblers are often known for their bright colours and dazzling plumages but here we have one that seems to lack bold distinctive features.

Season can play a big role in identification, as in the spring only one species would fit the bird shown here. However, the yellow flowers of the goldenrod in this photo indicate it was taken during the fall season. In the autumn, there are a few non-breeding and immature warblers that can



Photo by Brendan Toews

be pretty nondescript; also, in the absence of any sort of seasonal clues, it would be necessary to examine all possibilities. The yellow undertail coverts are an obvious feature of this bird, and immediately eliminate many warblers from consideration. Remaining possibilities include Orange-crowned, Prairie, Yellow, Mourning and Wilson's Warblers, and Common Yellowthroat.

The addition of the narrow broken eye-ring and thin dark eye-line leave us with just the Orange-crowned and Yellowthroat. The latter always has a yellow throat, which even from the oblique angle in the photo, we can tell is not shown by the quiz bird. In addition, Common Yellowthroat usually has a more complete eye-ring. We are left with only the Orange-crowned Warbler.

Of all of the fall warblers, the Yellow Warbler is the most likely to be misidentified as an Orange-crowned. Immature Yellow Warblers can be surprisingly dull but they can be separated from Orange-crowned by their complete eye-ring and the lack of an eye-line. Experienced birders may rule out Yellow even more quickly by its thicker bill. Orange-crowned Warbler,

as with most warblers in the genus *Vermivora*, has an exceptionally fine, sharp bill.

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OFO News

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Some may well be asking themselves, if this is an Orange-crowned Warbler, where are the streaks on the underparts? The streaks on an Orange-crowned are not sharp and distinct but instead they are blurred and only slightly darker than the base color of the body. Many times, they do not stand out and the observer may well think that he or she is looking at an unstreaked warbler. This may be especially true with the side view that we have of this bird.

As birders, we train ourselves to look for bold field marks that will help us zoom in on the identification. In the case of an Orange-crowned Warbler, however,

the quicker path may be to notice its lack of distinctive field marks. This fine **Orange-crowned Warbler** was nicely photographed by Brendan Toews on October 17, 2007, at Point Pelee National Park.

Now let's talk about the goldenrod at the top of the photo. Goldenrod (genus *Solidago*) blooms in late summer and fall and is a plant of fields and open areas. Although this is not good habitat for most warblers, it is perfect for an Orange-crowned Warbler. In fact, from late September to about mid October, weedy fields with a few shrubs may provide your best opportunity to find this species.



Certificates of Appreciation

Dave Milsom, on behalf of the Ontario Field Ornithologists, presented certificates of appreciation to the generous homeowners who opened their backyards to Ontario's birders to view the *Phainopepla* present in Brampton last winter. *From left to right:* Sue Cameron on behalf of the Cameron Family; Shirley Rawlins; Dave Milsom; Sue Vercesi and Dian Bogie. Absent from the photo was Rachel Paulin.

Recent Retirees from the OFO Board

Chester Gryski

Chester was elected to the Board of OFO at the 2004 Annual Convention. He served for two terms, a total of six years, and was responsible for coordinating the input and accounts of the advertisers in our journal and newsletter. He was also a member of the Annual Convention Committee and could often be seen with his wife Camilla on the Reception desk or later on in the evening coordinating the Prize Draw activities. Chester's background as a lawyer also came in handy when dealing with our insurers. Our appreciation goes out to Chester for all his hard work.

John Stirrat

John was elected to the OFO Board at the 2007 Annual Convention. He served for one three-year term as Secretary and was a member of the Annual Convention Committee. Not only did he serve as Convention Committee Chair, coordinating the many activities necessary to stage our biggest event of the year, he also processed all registrations and served as primary liaison with the banquet hall. The great success of our recent Long Point Convention is evidence of the great work John did for OFO. Thanks John, and good luck in the future!

John Black, OFO President