



Henslow's on the Cutting Edge

10 Power Birding

We're in a new era of feather fringe birding. Many birders now use eight and ten power binoculars to see aging and identifying features better. Birders should also invest in a high quality 10X magnifying glass to view their *National Geographic Guide*. You won't believe the details you're missing just with the naked eye. In the *NGG*, the artists' originals were reduced and much detail was lost, but you can bring it back and improve your birding.

1-800-327-BAND

We've all had the frustration of finding a dead bird with a band and not knowing who to contact. Few people take the time to mail in the band or its number, only to get a response months later. Now there's a new toll-free number for reporting bird bands, 1-800-327-BAND, from Canada, the United States and most of the Caribbean. Trial studies show that a 1-800 number on the band will significantly increase reporting rates from the public (expected to more than double).

In July, OFO paid a Prince Edward County farmer \$300.00 towards the cost of hay to save the habitat of a singing Henslow's Sparrow.

The Henslow's Sparrow is one of nine birds protected by Ontario's *Endangered Species Act*. In July, the Ministry of Natural Resources cautioned the farmer in Prince Edward County not to cut the hayfield inhabited by the singing Henslow's Sparrow. The Act protects the bird and its habitat, but does not compensate for loss of property values. OFO stepped in and paid the farmer \$300.00 for the lost hay.

The story began in June when Terry Sprague heard two Henslow's Sparrows singing in the hayfield beside his house. He posted the information on the Internet and the story was picked up by Hugh Currie and announced on the Toronto Ornithological Club's Star Hotline. With the farmer's permission and under Terry's guidance, many birders enjoyed great views of this elusive, critically endangered sparrow. OFO became involved when it learned that the farmer planned to cut the field during the first week of July. Don



Photo by Glenn Coady, Point Pelee, May 1996

Sutherland (pers. comm.) reports that this was one of only two known sites of Henslow's Sparrows on territory in the province in 1996.

We are asking birders to help pay for the hay. If you would like to help, please send your donation marked *Henslow's Fund* to: Jim Griffith, Treasurer, Ontario Field Ornithologists, 580 Blythwood Road, Toronto ON M4N 1B5

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Bird Quiz by Hugh Currie

1. What rare Ontario bird has eyes with slits like a cat?
2. There are only 3 AOU-recognized bird species that currently nest only in Canada. Two of these nest in Ontario. Name them. Spell them correctly according to the OFO Checklist. Name the other one.
3. According to Clements (1991), there are 19 bird families in the world represented by only one species. Ontario has one of these species. Name it.
4. Ontario calidrids include *pusilla*, *minutilla* and *minuta*. The scientists are trying to tell us they are really small. Give their English names. Name the Asian species *subminuta*.
5. Which of our flycatchers builds its nest on the ground?

Answers page 7

Birding Haldimand's Lake Erie Shoreline

Favourite Birding Hotspots

by John Miles

General Description. The former county of Haldimand bordered the north shore of Lake Erie from just east of Dunnville, extending west almost to Port Dover. In recent years, birders have come to know Haldimand as a good place for winter birding for hawks and owls, as well as for some southern species such as Red-bellied Woodpecker and Tufted Titmouse.

Time of Year. Birding can be productive throughout the year in Haldimand and it can be particularly good in fall and winter when other areas are quiet. The following is part of a route I started following back in the 60s. Some of the spots mentioned are seasonal.

The Birds

1. Our trip starts at the junction of Highway 3 and Regional Road 18 (Sandusk Road), about 6 km east of Jarvis. Proceed south 4.4 km on Regional Road 18 to where Sandusk Creek crosses the road. This is a good spot for shorebirds in both spring and fall. The creek bottom is limestone and the water is very shallow with lots of algae. Rough-winged Swallows and the occasional Cliff Swallow nest under the bridge.

2. Continue south 2.4 km to the 2nd Concession and turn left. Proceed east for 1.6 km to Sandusk Creek. Here on the north side of the road is another good spot for shorebirds as the shallow creek bottom is about 60 metres wide and extends north for about 350 metres.

3. Travel east along the 2nd Concession 1.9 km to the hamlet of Cheapside and turn right onto Cheapside Road. Continue south 1.3 km to Regional Road 3. Turn right and travel west 1.2 km to Regional Road 62 (Brooklin Road). Turn left and go south .5 km to Sandusk Creek. This location plus the previous two often have shorebirds when none can be found along Lake Erie.

4. 2.1 km south of Sandusk Creek turn right onto Lakeshore Road and continue .3 km to Wilcox. Turn left and follow the road which goes around Peacock Point. Wilcox becomes Lakeshore Drive. On the right .8 km along is a good feeder. Wintering blackbirds have included Red-winged Blackbird, Common Grackle, Brown-headed Cowbird, Rusty Blackbird and Yellow-headed Blackbird. Accipiters and Merlins are often present in winter. Dunlin and Purple Sandpiper have been found along the rocky shoreline of the Point into mid-January. Large flocks of Greater Scaup and other waterfowl, as well as Bonaparte's Gulls and the occasional Little Gull, sometimes winter off Peacock Point in the warm water from the Nanticoke hydro electric plant. Lakeshore Drive swings back to Lakeshore Road with

you facing east. Continue east past Regional Road 62.

5. 1 km east of Regional Road 62, turn left onto Cheapside Road and proceed .2 km to the bridge over Sandusk Creek. This can be a good spot for waterfowl in spring and fall.

6. Proceed .9 km north to Regional Road 3 and turn right. Travel east 1.1 km, turn right onto Wheeler Road, then go south 1.1 km to the entrance to Selkirk Provincial Park. Selkirk Provincial Park can be good year round. Long-eared and Saw-whet Owls can be found in the winter in the pine plantations on the west side of the park. Red-bellied Woodpeckers and Tufted Titmice are year round and nesting residents. Blue-gray Gnatcatchers nest here. Six species of vireos and 31 species of warblers have been found in the park during migration. Wintering species have included Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Gray Catbird and Palm Warbler. In the fall, the park entrance can be very good for hawks and eagles moving west at tree top level so that many can be identified without binoculars. This hawk flight continues well into December most years. Flocks of land birds such as pipits, Eastern Bluebirds, blackbirds, Blue Jays, etc. can also be seen moving west at this location during the day in the fall.

7. 1.1 km south of Selkirk Provincial Park the road turns east and becomes Lakeshore Road again. It goes east and then turns inland at the mouth of Stoney Creek and dead ends at the Townline (Selkirk Road). This 3.8 km stretch of road offers the birder good looks at the lakeshore. Depending upon the lake level there can be many good spots for shorebirds from the foot of Wheeler Road east to the Grand River. Along the lake, most of the points that have algae growths are limestone, while many of the bays are sandy. This stretch of lakeshore has produced many good birds including large flocks of Whimbrel around May 24, plus the occasional Laughing Gull, Little Gull, Least Tern, Marbled Godwit and Piping Plover. Off-shore, rocky outcroppings offer good shorebird locations and waterfowl resting spots. In October, the fields behind the cottages often have large flocks of Eastern Bluebirds acting like flocks of American Robins on the ground. Also in May, watch these fields carefully for flocks of up to 500 Lapland Longspurs!

8. Turn right at the Townline and proceed 1.2 km to the lake. Here the road turns east and again is called Lakeshore Road. 1.7 km along Lakeshore Road, the Salvation Army's Camp Selkirk is on the left side of the road. If you ask the camp custodian you may be able to walk back to their private sewage lagoon system. There is also a very good large pine plantation at the back of the property which is used as a winter roost by Long-eared Owls. A further 1 km along



Map by Michael King

Lakeshore Road brings you to Hoover Point. The main road proceeds past a small woodlot on the south side of the road with large spruce trees on the north side. This spot is very good for small landbirds in mid-May. I have found Worm-eating Warbler and Rusty Blackbird here.

9. Turn right at Fisherville Road and go .1 km south to where Lakeshore Road continues east for 19 km following the lakeshore. There are many very good spots for shorebirds and waterfowl. 5.5 km along Lakeshore Road is a large pond and cattail marsh on the north side.

10. Turn left at Aikens Road (Regional Road 49), go north .6 km and turn right (east) 1.2 km on Kings Row Road. Turn right onto the gravel road. This road goes to the lake and the James N. Allen Provincial Park. As you enter the park there is a good woodlot on both sides of the road. Follow the road which turns west and ends at a gate. You will be at Low Point and there is a good lookout towards the west at this location. Return to Kings Row on the road you came in.

11. Proceed 3.6 km east on Kings Row to Johnson Road. This is a Short-eared Owl location in the winter late in the afternoon. Kings Row continues east for another 2.3 km where it meets Regional Road 11. Continue east into Port Maitland. The feeders on both sides of the road often have blackbirds in winter. Tufted Titmice have been found coming to these feeders. The mouth of the Grand River and the breakwall may have birds of interest. Return to Regional Road 11 and go north 5.7 km to the hamlet of Byng. Turn right on Regional Road 3 and go .8 km into Dunnville over the dam on the Grand River. The water below the dam is open all year so waterfowl are usually present in winter as well as white-winged gulls.

12. Over the dam, turn right at the stop lights and follow Regional Road 3 (Main Street) east out of Dunnville. This road follows an old Welland Canal feeder canal. The fields on the east side sometimes have shorebirds such as Hudsonian Godwits in early November. Continue through the hamlet of Stromness and 8.2 km out of Dunnville turn right onto Regional Road 64.

13. .5 km along Regional Road 64 turn left onto Downey Road and continue south 1 km to Niece Road. Turning right onto Niece Road, continue .2 km to the entrance to Rock Point Provincial Park. The south east corner of the park is a rocky point which is extremely good for shorebirds in both spring and fall. Offshore is Mohawk Island which has an active gull nesting colony. The pine plantations in the park provide winter roosts for Long-eared Owls and a Boreal Owl has been found in November. Good birding.

Flight ID Tip

Except for hawks, ducks and a few other birds, most birders wait until a bird perches before using their binoculars to identify it. This causes many missed identifications because birds often keep on going or disappear out of sight in vegetation. Top birders instinctively look at birds in flight, even warblers. Many passerines can be identified in flight. Try it out, you'll be amazed at how much detail (shape, pattern and colour) you can see. There's an added benefit of first looking at a bird in flight; you'll be on it faster if it perches in full view!

Baillie Birdathon 1996 by Chris Escott

OFO's celebrity birder in the 1996 Baillie Birdathon was Bruce Di Labio. Birding more than 1,000 km from the Ottawa Valley to Algonquin Park and Presqu'île, then home again, Bruce and his good friend Chris Traynor recorded a credible 160 species. Had the late May weather been warmer they might have done even better! Bruce's efforts raised \$2,130 for the Birdathon, a portion of which will be paid to OFO as the sponsoring club. Well done Bruce and Chris, and thanks to all the sponsors!

A number of other OFO members did their own birdathons, naming OFO as their club, and a portion of their funds raised will also be paid to OFO. Thanks to Maris Apse, Geoff Carpentier, Ted Chesky, Brian Gibson, Jean Iron, Don Kerr, Mike Runtz and John Schmelefske, who raised a combined \$2461.54. Your efforts help sustain OFO and are used to support projects through the Baillie Fund, the work of Bird Studies Canada, and the Long Point and Thunder Cape Bird Observatories.

Notes from the OBRC by Rob Dobos

By now, OFO members will have seen the *Ontario Bird Records Committee Report for 1995* published in the August 1996 issue of *Ontario Birds*. For those rare bird reports that were not accepted by the Committee, a letter of explanation has been sent to the submitters by last year's Chairman, along with copies of the members' comments. If you submitted a bird report to the Committee late in 1995 and it does not appear somewhere in this annual report, likely it was received too late to be considered by the 1995 Committee, but will be reviewed in 1996. If you have any questions, drop me a line.

The work of the 1996 Committee is well under way. At this point, relatively fewer reports have been received by the OBRC than in the past few years. I encourage members to submit any documentations for species on the Ontario Review List to me soon. Please do not wait until the end of the year, as we are usually unable to complete a review of reports received after mid-December by that year's Committee, and the records will end up appearing in the following year's annual report about 20 months later! A number of published reports of significant rarities for Ontario over the past several years, including some birds likely seen by many observers, have yet to have any documentation submitted to the OBRC for review. A few selected examples include:

Mississippi Kite, 19 May 1995, Burpee Twp., *Manitoulin*

Snowy Plover, 27 April 1993, Strathroy, *Middlesex*

Rufous Hummingbird, 17 October-28 November 1995, Owen Sound, *Bruce*

Bewick's Wren, 13-20 May 1994, near Hillman Marsh, *Essex*

Brambling, 24 December 1993-15 May 1994, Hungry Hollow, *Lambton*

Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch, 16-17 March 1988, Evansville, *Manitoulin*.

If any readers have written descriptions or photographs of any of these sightings, we would greatly appreciate receiving them for review.

Please send your rare bird reports directly to me:

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1156 5th Concession Road West, RR 2,
Waterdown, ON L0R 2H2
E-mail: rob.dobos@cciw.ca

Recognizable Forms

by
Ron Pittaway

This is the first revision of my checklist that appeared in the August 1991 issue of *Ontario Birds* 9 (2):49-55. The list follows recent taxonomic decisions by the American Ornithologists' Union including the 40th Supplement in the *Auk* 112(3): 819-830 (1995), except Thayer's Gull which is treated here as a subspecies of the Iceland Gull following *The Birds of Canada* by Earl Godfrey (1986) and the *Annotated Checklist of the Birds of Ontario* by Ross James (1991). Hybrids have been dropped, except Brewster's and Lawrence's Warblers because they have long been considered recognizable forms. Many English names have been updated. There is no authority on the English names of recognizable forms. Most scientific names of subspecies follow Godfrey (1986) and James (1991); both are excellent sources of information on subspecies. My series (recently co-authored with artist Peter Burke) in *Ontario Birds* has detailed information on many of the forms listed here. Forms treated to date are followed by a reference for your convenience. The following explains the terms in the checklist:

Recognizable Form: A neutral term that includes any subspecies, subspecies group, morph, etc. that is identifiable in the field. A few forms (like some species) are distinguishable in the field only under ideal circumstances; for example, the subspecies of the Common Eider and Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow. Recent studies indicate the forms of the Red Crossbill comprise a number of hidden species, best identified in the field by their diagnostic vocalizations. They differ in colour, size, bill size and cone preferences.

Scientific Name: The scientific name of a species is two words italicized in Latin; for example, *Limnodromus griseus*. The first word is the genus (plural genera); the second word is the species. Closely related species are in the same genus. Some species are divided into subspecies. The third word is the subspecies; for example, *Limnodromus griseus hendersoni* is the Inland race (*hendersoni*) of the Short-billed Dowitcher.

Subspecies or Race: The terms are interchangeable. A subspecies is a subdivision (usually subtle differences in colour or size) of a species occupying a separate geographical breeding range (or with limited overlap) exclusive of other subspecies. Subspecies *intergrade* (interbreed) where their ranges meet, whereas species rarely hybridize (interbreed). The subspecies name is most useful where it describes well-defined geographical variation in a species. Well-marked subspecies are identifiable in the field. In the checklist, scientific names of subspecies are enclosed in brackets.

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

Intergrade: Intermediates (and intermediate populations) produced by interbreeding between subspecies. Some intergrades are recognizable in the field. Intergrades have an "x" symbol between the subspecies names; for example, *griseus x hendersoni*.

Subspecies Group: Very similar subspecies (races) that are combined as one recognizable form. For example, Slate-colored Junco is the English group name for the three subspecies in the nominate *hyemalis* group. In the checklist, the nominate race or an appropriate Ontario race is chosen for a group's scientific name.

Morph: Morph replaces *colour phase* as the preferred term. Morphs are distinct forms that coexist in the same interbreeding population, often in the same brood. Morphs usually are not correlated with age, sex or subspecies. In highly variable species, the names chosen for the morphs are arbitrary. Morphs *do not* have scientific names.

Intermediate: Used instead of intergrade for morphs. Where continuous variation exists between light and dark morphs, the plural *intermediate morphs* is used in the checklist.

Variant: Instead of morph, variant better describes extremes of individual variation, mutations, and colour forms caused by diet. Variants *do not* have scientific names.

Asterisk: * Indicates that the form has not been recorded in Ontario to my knowledge, but is listed because it may occur.

Checklist of Ontario Bird Forms 1996

Northern Fulmar

- Light morph
- Intermediate morphs*
- Dark morph*

Least Bittern *OB 14(1):26-40, 1996*

- Typical morph
- Cory's Least Bittern

Double-crested Cormorant *OB 14(3), 1996*

- Black-crested form (eastern races)
- White-crested form (western races)

Tundra Swan

- Whistling Swan (nominate *columbianus*)
- Bewick's Swan (*bewickii*)

Mute Swan *OB 12(1):19-26, 1994*

- Gray morph
- White or Polish morph

Greater White-fronted Goose

- Tundra or Prairie race (*frontalis*)
- Greenland race (*flavirostris*)

Snow Goose *OB 10(2):72-76, 1992*

- White morph, Lesser race (*caerulescens*)
- Blue morph, Lesser race (*caerulescens*)
- Intermediate morph, Lesser race (*caerulescens*)
- White morph, Greater race (*atlanticus*)
- Blue morph, Greater race (*atlanticus*)
- Intermediate morph, Greater race (*atlanticus*)

Ross's Goose

- White morph
- Intermediate morph*
- Blue morph*

Brant

- Atlantic Brant (*hrota*)
- Black Brant (*nigricans*)

Canada Goose

- Giant race (*maxima*) (breeds S) (large)
- Todd's race (*interior*) (breeds N) (large)
- Lesser race (*parvipes*) (small)*
- Richardson's race (*hutchinsii*) (tiny)
- Cackling race (*minima*) (escapee) (tiny)

Green-winged Teal

- American race (*carolinensis*)
- Eurasian race (nominate *crecca*)
- Intergrade (*carolinensis x crecca*)

Common Eider

- Hudson Bay race (*sedentaria*)
- Maritimes race (*dresseri*)
- Northern race (*borealis*)*

Barrow's Goldeneye

- Orange-billed female (NA form)
- Yellow-tip billed female (Icelandic form)*

Broad-winged Hawk

- Light morph
- Dark morph

Swainson's Hawk

- Light morph
- Rufous or intermediate morphs*
- Dark morph

Red-tailed Hawk *OB 11(1):23-29, 1993*

- Light morph, Eastern race (*borealis*)
- Light morph, Krider's race (*kriderii*)
- Light morph, Western race (*calurus*)
- Rufous morph, Western race (*calurus*)
- Dark morph, Western race (*calurus*)
- Dark morph, Harlan's race (*harlani*)
- Light morph, Harlan's race (*harlani*)*

Ferruginous Hawk

- Light morph
- Dark morph*

Rough-legged Hawk

- Light morph
- Intermediate morphs
- Dark morph

Merlin *OB 12(2):74-80, 1994*

- Taiga Merlin (nominate *columbarius*)
- Richardson's or Prairie Merlin (*richardsonii*)
- Black Merlin (*suckleyi*)*

Peregrine Falcon

- Released Peregrine (*anatum*-like mix) (breeds)
- Tundra Peregrine (*tundrius*) (migrant)

Gyr Falcon

- White morph
- Gray or intermediate morphs
- Dark morph

Ruffed Grouse

- Gray morph
- Brown or intermediate morphs
- Red morph

American Coot

- Typical morph
- White-shielded or Caribbean variant

Solitary Sandpiper

- Pale-dotted juvenile (nominate *solitaria*)
- Cinnamon-dotted juvenile (*cinnamomea*)*

Willet

- Inland race (*inornatus*)
- Coastal race (nominate *semipalmatus*)

Whimbrel

- North American race (*hudsonicus*)
- White-rumped races (nominate *phaeopus* group)

Baird's Sandpiper

- Buff or typical morph
- Gray morph

Dunlin

- Hudson Bay race (*hudsonia*)
- Short-billed races (*schinzii* and *arctica*)

Ruff

- White morph
- Red morph
- Black morph

Short-billed Dowitcher

- Eastern race (nominate *griseus*)
- Inland race (*hendersoni*)
- Intergrade (*griseus* x *hendersoni*)

Wilson's Phalarope

- Dull morph male
- Bright or Pied morph male

Pomarine Jaeger

- Light morph
- Intermediate morphs
- Dark morph

Parasitic Jaeger *OB 13(3):123-130, 1995*

- Light morph
- Intermediate morphs
- Dark morph

Long-tailed Jaeger

- Light morph
- Intermediate morphs
- Dark morph*

Mew Gull

- North American race (*brachyrhynchus*)
- European race (nominate *canus*)*

Iceland Gull *OB 10(1):24-26, 1992*

- Greenland race (nominate *glaucoides*)
- Kumlien's race (*kumlieni*) (intergrade)
- Thayer's race (*thayeri*)

Lesser Black-backed Gull

- British race (*graellsii*)
- Intermediate race (*intermedius*)
- Scandinavian race (nominate *fuscus*)*

Eastern Screech-Owl *OB 13(2):66-71, 1995*

- Gray morph
- Brown or intermediate morphs
- Red morph

Great Horned Owl *OB 11(2):64-69, 1993*

- Nominate race (*virginianus*)
- Snyder's race (*scalariventris*)
- Arctic race (*subarcticus*)
- Labrador race (*heterocnemis*)

Northern Flicker

- Yellow-shafted Flicker (*luteus* group)
- Red-shafted Flicker (*collaris* group)
- Intergrade (*luteus* x *collaris*)

Horned Lark *OB 12(3):109-115, 1994*

- Prairie race (*praticola*)
- Northern race (nominate *alpestris*)
- Hoyt's race (*hoyti*)

American Robin

- Nominate race (*migratorius*)
- Black-backed race (*nigrideus*)*

Cedar Waxwing *OB 9(1):7-8, 1991*

- Typical morph
- Orange-banded variant (diet)

Blue-winged x Golden-winged Warbler

- Brewster's Warbler (dominant hybrid)
- Lawrence's Warbler (recessive hybrid)

Black-throated Blue Warbler

- Northern race (nominate *caerulescens*)
- Appalachian race (*cairnsi*)

Yellow-rumped Warbler

- Myrtle Warbler (nominate *coronata* group)
- Audubon's Warbler (*memorabilis* group)

Yellow-throated Warbler

- White-lored or Sycamore race (*albilora*)
- Yellow-lored race (nominate *dominica*)

Palm Warbler *OB 13(1):23-27, 1995*

- Western Palm (*palmarum*)
- Yellow Palm (*hypochrysea*)
- Intergrade (*palmarum* x *hypochrysea*)

Scarlet Tanager

- Typical male
- Orange variant male (xanthochroism)

Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow

- Prairie race (nominate *nelsoni*)
- James Bay race (*alterus*)
- Acadian race (*subvirgatus*)*

Fox Sparrow

- Red Fox Sparrow (nominate *iliaca* group)
- Slate-colored Fox Sparrow (*schistacea* group)*
- Sooty Fox Sparrow (*unalaschensis* group)*

White-throated Sparrow *OB 9(3):82-83, 1991*

- White-striped morph
- Tan-striped morph

White-crowned Sparrow

- Eastern race (nominate *leucophrys*)
- Gambel's race (*gambelii*)
- Intergrade (*leucophrys* x *gambelii*)

Dark-eyed Junco *OB 11(3):101-105, 1993*

- Slate-colored Junco (*hyemalis* group)
- Oregon Junco (*montanus* group)
- Pink-sided Junco (*mearnsi*)*
- Gray-headed Junco (*caniceps* group)

Common Grackle

- Bronzed Grackle (*versicolor*)
- Purple Grackle (*stonei*)*

Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch

- Nominate race (*tephrocotis*)
- Hepburn's race (*littoralis*)

Red Crossbill

- Small-billed race (*sitkensis*) (hemlock) (breeds)
- Resident race (*minor*) (pine) (breeds)
- Bendire's race (*bendirei*)
- Newfoundland race (*pusilla*)

Common Redpoll *OB 10(3):108-114, 1992*

- Southern race (nominate *flammea*)
- Greater race (*rostrata*)

Hoary Redpoll *OB 10(3):108-114, 1992*

- Southern race (*exilipes*)
- Hornemann's race (nominate *hornemanni*)

Pine Siskin

- Typical morph
- Green variant

Acknowledgements: I am grateful to Peter Burke, Bill Crins, Earl Godfrey, Michel Gosselin, Jean Iron, Ross James, Ron Tozer and Mike Turner for advice, but the final choices of what to include were mine.

I hope you enjoy the checklist. Check off the forms you see in Ontario. Please report new and rare forms to me.

Ron Pittaway, Box 619, Minden, Ontario
KOM 2K0 or 705-286-3471

Clay-colored Sparrow

in

The Birds of North America

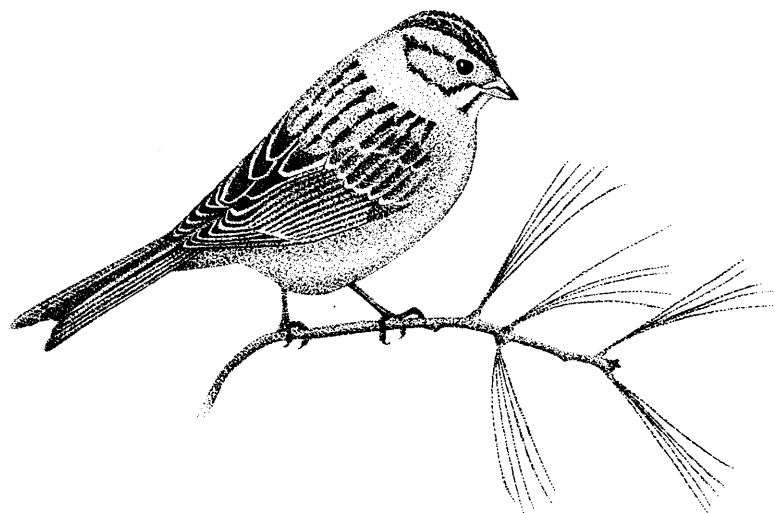
by Richard Knapton

When the compilers of the current *Birds of North America* announced that they were looking for authors for particular species, and asked me if I would write the account for Clay-colored Sparrow (*Spizella pallida*), I jumped at the chance. After all, I have a vested interest in this attractive, sombre-plumaged open-country sparrow; this is the species that I studied for three years out on the prairies of extreme southwest Manitoba for my doctorate degree, looking at various aspects of behavioural ecology, such as territoriality and response to cowbird parasitism and song and so on. There is certainly a truism that studying a species often puts that species in quite a different perspective for the researcher—and so it was with Clay-colored Sparrows. Not just another sparrow, but a fascinating species whose ecological and behavioural traits were well adapted to the broad expanses of low shrub communities across the northern prairies, and whose adaptations have allowed it to expand east and north to occupy suitable habitat in Ontario and elsewhere.

No species is more typical of dry uncultivated brush regions of the Great Plains, and for me the characteristic sound of the prairies from May through early July was the buzzing song of the Clay-colored Sparrow. Breeding Bird Surveys indicate that it is the most numerous passerine of low shrub communities of the northern prairies, especially in the southern parts of the Canadian prairie provinces. I certainly found this to be the case in the populations I studied; one of my study areas had 40 breeding pairs on 3 hectares of snowberry (*Symphoricarpos occidentalis*). However, analysis of BBS data in prairie Canada from 1967-1988 show significant declines, especially in central prairie provinces, and across North America there has been a small but significant annual loss of between 1% and 2% for the last 30 years. The most likely explanation has been recent clearing of shrub communities for agriculture and urbanization. Fortunately, the Clay-colored Sparrow will occupy a broad range of habitats that resemble low shrub communities, and its expansion into southern and eastern Ontario is due to its ability to occupy

habitat types such as young conifer plantations, abandoned fields grown up to shrubs and small trees, regenerating burns and forest openings. Furthermore, Nancy Wilson and Doug McRae found Clay-colored Sparrows breeding extensively in the Hudson Bay lowlands, and it has been known as a breeding species along coastal James Bay for many years. One problem faced by populations in southern Ontario is that occupied habitats are successional, such that birds occur for a few years, then disappear as the habitat becomes unsuitable. This is most evident in conifer plantations, which can hold numerous pairs for several years whilst the trees are small, but the population declines as trees mature.

Male Clay-colored Sparrows arrive on their breeding grounds in early May and immediately start to establish territories. Establishment and subsequent defence of territory involves singing, especially from perches near the territorial boundaries, flights from perch to perch accompanied by bouts of singing, and overt aggression between competing males. Aggressive interactions decline considerably by mid-May, and territorial boundaries remain essentially unchanged for the duration of the breeding season. I was particularly interested in why territory size is the smallest of the *Spizella* sparrows, and one of the smallest reported of any grassland species, hence the very high density of breeding pairs in optimal habitat. My studies showed that territories are not used for feeding or for gathering food for the young; food is gathered off territory and away from the nesting areas. I frequently observed territorial males defending territories, then flying off the breeding habitat to the shoreline of a nearby slough, foraging together for a while, before flying back to their territory to resume their territorial defence. The fact that the territory is not defended for food allows the territory to shrink, probably to



Clay-colored Sparrow by Michael King

an optimal size related to nest cover and minimum distance between nests which reduces chance of nest predation. This trait—defence of a territory that does not contain food—likely explains why Clay-colored Sparrows can occupy habitats that are not particularly resource-rich, such as young conifer plantations, providing there are feeding areas close by, and hence partially explains their spread into southern Ontario.

One consequence of having such small territories is that fledged young can wander into neighbouring territories. Young leave the nest after 8 or 9 days, and scramble up to 20 m away from the nest before climbing into a dense shrub and waiting to be fed by the parents. Occasionally, this meant into the next territory, a potential dilemma, but the territorial male essentially ignored the fledglings and the parents feeding it.

Like many migratory passerines, males return to the same territory from one year to the next, but females show much lower rates of return, and nestlings apparently even less. On my study area, male return rate varied from 46% to an amazing 85% of 39 territorial colour-banded males on one study area, 33 returned the next year, and to the same territory, and the same territorial boundaries! (The birds winter primarily in northern Mexico, and migrate across the southern Great Plains). Female return rates were about 20%, but none returned to the same territory and hence to last year's male in subsequent years. As far as site fidelity in young is concerned, of 146 nestlings banded, not one was resighted in subsequent years.

Nesting success varied from year

Continued on page 7

OFO trips

Future Field Trips

October 26 (Saturday) Holiday Beach

Leader: Paul Pratt. Meet at the hawk viewing tower at Holiday Beach Conservation Area on County Road 50 (3 km south of Malden Centre - 30 km west of Kingsville) at **9:00 a.m.** Migrating raptors. **NEW TRIP

November 16 (Saturday) Cornwall, Robert Moses Power Dam and Area.

Leader: Bruce Di Labio. Meet at Tim Horton Donuts on Highway 138 at Brookdale in Cornwall at **9:00 a.m.**

November 24 (Sunday) Niagara Gull Watch. **Leader: Ron Scovell.** Meet at Niagara-on-the-Lake at the mouth of the river at **9:00 a.m.**

Clay-colored Sparrow continued

to year and study area to study area. Combining all data for years and study areas (232 nests), the average number of fledglings per nest was 1.7, and, when second broods are included, the annual reproductive success is about 2 young reared to nest-leaving per female per season—quite a high success rate. Nest predators included a wide range from weasels and mice to Loggerhead Shrikes, but several nest contents were robbed by Franklin's Ground Squirrel (*Spermophilus franklini*) and Thirteen-lined Ground Squirrel (*Citellus tridecemlineatus*), not predators that southern Ontario populations of Clay-colored Sparrows have to contend with. Brown-headed Cowbirds (*Molothrus ater*) parasitized 36% of all nests, most with one or two eggs, and in only one instance was a young Clay-colored Sparrow raised alongside a young cowbird. The response of the parents varied; sometimes they accepted the cowbird egg and hence raised the young cowbird, but other pairs rejected the egg by deserting the nest—surprisingly, one population of Clay-colored Sparrows was mainly acceptors, whereas another population was rejectors.

Populations of Clay-colored Sparrows in southern and northwestern Ontario will likely continue to fluctuate in tandem with habitat successional changes. It will be interesting to follow the fortunes of the population on the Hudson Bay and James Bay lowlands, to determine if the breeding population there proves ephemeral or persistent and expanding.

St. Clair National Wildlife Refuge

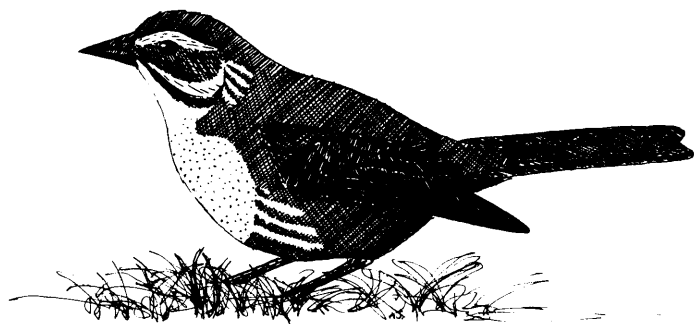
by John Miles

23 OFO members and friends assembled at the entrance to the viewing trail at 7:00 a.m. on June 15, 1996. While waiting, three Ring-necked Pheasants sauntered across the nearby field. Along viewing trail B-12, Least Bitterns flew low over the cattails or over the open pools. One landed where it could be seen clearly in the scopes. Several male Yellow-headed Blackbirds flew over and landed in the cattails. One landed on a metal post so that everyone had good looks through scopes. Six members of the heron family were seen at St. Clair including three Great Egrets.

At Point Pelee's Sleepy Hollow picnic ground, a Yellow-billed Cuckoo called. The group proceeded to the park's nature centre where, on the south side, two Red-shouldered Hawks soared overhead. On the walk, three or four Orchard Orioles were seen, and a Black-billed Cuckoo and Carolina Wren were heard.

Following the side trail that goes south, several more Orchard Orioles were seen, including an adult male which perched on top of a tall red cedar for all to see. Our leader's poor imitation of the calls of a Yellow-breasted Chat were answered. The bird was located and the group saw the chat as it flew and perched.

On the way to Rondeau, a breeding plumaged Cattle Egret was the trip's seventh heron species. At Rondeau, the Prothonotary Warblers did not cooperate but a Red-bellied Woodpecker was heard and a Black-billed Cuckoo sat in a small tree along the trail. The group saw or heard about 85 species during the day.



Female Yellow-headed Blackbird by Alvaro Jaramillo

1996 Pelagic by Glenn Coady

On Sunday 22 September, 98 brave participants arrived for the OFO pelagic trip. Our boat, the Klancy II, departed from the foot of Jarvis St. in Toronto to search Lake Ontario for remnant birds from Hurricane Fran. Although we found none of the hurricane specialties, our highlights included six Parasitic Jaegers, one Pomarine Jaeger, an exceptionally early adult Thayer's Gull, two American Golden Plovers, and flocks of both Black-bellied Plovers and Ruddy Turnstones. In the afternoon, the winds picked up unexpectedly to easterly gusts of 40 knots and the captain decided for the safety of all to dock in Hamilton rather than cross the lake back to Toronto. Despite this setback, many birders on board were happy to have sighted three life birds on the outing.

Thanks to all those who attended this outing and particularly to those who participated in chumming from the back of the boat.

Answers to Bird Quiz

from page 1

1. Black Skimmers have eyes with cat-like vertical slits to protect them from intense sunlight, and they open fully at night to allow for nocturnal fishing.
2. Harris's Sparrow and Ross's Goose. Note the apostrophe "s". The OFO Field Checklist follows Godfrey (1986) in the spelling of possessive names ending in "s". The AOU Check-list spells Harris' Sparrow and Ross' Goose without an "s" after the apostrophe, but is expected to adopt the use of the apostrophe "s" in the next revision of its Check-list (Seventh Edition). The other species that now nests only in Canada is Whooping Crane.
3. Osprey. (Osprey is listed as a sub-family by Godfrey (1986) and the AOU).
4. Semipalmated and Least Sandpipers and Little Stint. Long-toed Stint.
5. Yellow-bellied Flycatcher.

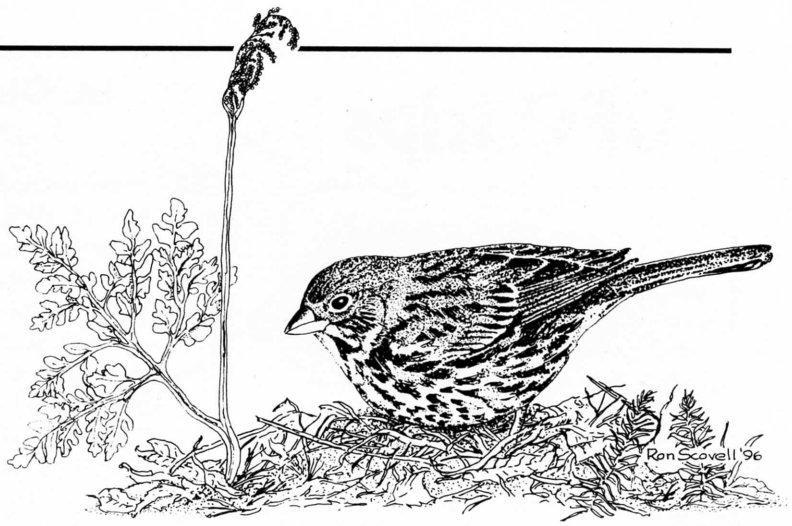
Double-Scratchers

by Jean Iron

Alert birders often find secretive species of the thickets like the Eastern Towhee and Fox Sparrow by listening for their noisy rummaging in the leaf litter. Using both large feet together, they kick back leaves a half metre or more, uncovering seeds and insects. This feeding behaviour is called double-scratching, but only certain birds do it. Harrison (1967) describes it: "The double-scratch is a rapid backward kick performed simultaneously with both feet which are scraped along the surface of the ground, scratching back the superficial layer and exposing what is beneath." It is used to dig down through snow, leaves or debris. Other species such as the domestic chicken scratch, but they scratch one foot at a time.

After watching double-scratching behaviour by the **Spotted Towhee** last winter near Bronte Road in Oakville, I wondered what other North American species did it. At my feeder in Toronto last winter and spring, I noted double-scratching by **Dark-eyed Juncos**, **American Tree**, **White-throated**, **White-crowned**, **Fox** and **Song Sparrows**, and **Eastern Towhee**. I also observed a **Lincoln's Sparrow** double-scratching on 11 May 1996 at Point Pelee. On page 386 of the *National Geographic Guide* (1987), the last line under Rufous-sided Towhee says, "Like all species on this page, forages on the ground, scratching with both feet together." This adds to our list: **Olive Sparrow**, **Green-tailed Towhee**, Brown Towhee now split into **Canyon** and **California Towhees**, and **Abert's Towhee**. Other species of double-scratchers added by Nice (1937), Harrison (1967) and Hailman (1973) are **Savannah**, **Seaside**, **Sage**, **Black-throated**, **Harris's** and **Swamp Sparrows**. There are no doubt other double-scratchers that I have missed. For example, the Yellow-eyed Junco and Golden-crowned Sparrow are probably double-scratchers, but I could find no literature references. In total, I found 20 double-scratchers north of Mexico shown in bold above.

Although species like Northern Cardinals have ample



Fox Sparrow by Ron Scovell

opportunity to observe double-scratching, they don't do it, indicating a possible genetic basis to the behaviour. Also, the American Tree Sparrow uses the double-footed scratch, but it appears to be absent in some other members of the genus *Spizella*, such as the Field and Chipping Sparrows (Clark 1970).

In summary, double-scratching occurs in some New World sparrows in the subfamily Emberizinae (sparrows and buntings). However, it is interesting that no Old World buntings do the double-scratch. Emberizinae is "more diversified in the Western Hemisphere and it probably originated here and spread later to the Old World" (Godfrey 1986). Double-scratching is not restricted to Emberizinae, it also occurs in a few other groups such as babblers (Timaliidae) (Harrison 1967).

Next time you are birding, listen for the distinctive loud rustling noises made by the double-scratchers. It will improve your birding skills. Who can say? You might find Ontario's next Green-tailed Towhee or just imagine a mind-bending Olive Sparrow.

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OFO on the Net

by

David Cattrall and John Barker

Have you visited OFO's Internet site yet? We went "live" in July and initial feedback has been positive. Our Web Page is at www.interlog.com/~ofo and features information of interest to OFO members as well as potential members and birders around the world. You can find the latest Ontario checklist and review lists, updated with all the recent splits and OBRC decisions, plus a convenient form for reporting your rare sightings to OBRC. Also available is news of recent and upcoming OFO trips, OFO publications and much more. In the near future, look for photos and paintings by OFO members, information on volunteer projects, and biographies of Ontario ornithologists. It'll keep changing, so keep visiting. If you have questions, comments or suggestions, e-mail us at:

ofo@interlog.com

OFO Membership Renewal

OFO membership continues to grow. We are now at an all time high of over 830 members. Please renew your OFO membership by completing the enclosed membership renewal form. The date your membership expires is on your address label.

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