



OFO NEWS

Newsletter of the Ontario Field Ornithologists

Volume 15 Number 1

February 1997

Revised Ontario Checklist 1997

The Ontario Field Ornithologists and the Federation of Ontario Naturalists are pleased to announce the publication of the latest edition of the *Field Checklist of Ontario Birds*. It includes the recent changes of the Fortieth Supplement to the AOU Checklist and the Ontario Bird Records Committee (OBRC) additions to the list.

Many thanks to Rob Dobos, David Cattrall, Ross James and Ron Pittaway for reviewing the list, and the FON staff for doing the set-up. Special thanks to Michael King for the Black-and-white Warbler on the cover.

Available end of March 1997

Federation of Ontario Naturalists
and Ontario Field Ornithologists

Field Checklist of Ontario Birds

1997



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Winter Dipper

by
Ron Pittaway

The Winter Wren is the smallest of the world's wrens. Wrens originated in the New World. Probably because it is the most northerly breeding wren, the Winter Wren is the only one of its family to have spread across the northern parts of the Old World. In England, it is the familiar Jenny Wren.

A few Winter Wrens are seen on Christmas Bird Counts every year in southern Ontario. So not surprisingly, when food on land is hard to find, Winter Wrens have been observed plunging into creeks, dipper-like, to catch tasty invertebrates about three centimetres long and even tiny fish. Occurrences of this dipper-like behaviour by Winter Wrens were reported by B.A. Heck (1994) in the *Bulletin of the Oklahoma Ornithological Society*, Volume 27, Number 2.

The closest relatives of dippers were thought to be wrens, because dippers and wrens are morphologically very similar. For example, the AOU Check-list (1983) places dippers following wrens. Before DNA studies (which show hidden relationships), one might have imagined that dippers evolved from wrens that had adapted to finding food in the water. However, upon checking the molecular evolution studies of Sibley and Ahlquist (1990), we find that wrens and dippers actually are not so closely related. The similarities between dippers and wrens are due to convergent evolution, not a recent common ancestry. So there goes that idea (hypothesis)!

Next time you see a Winter Wren, watch to see if it takes to the water. Underwater foraging could be more the rule rather than the exception in this mighty midget of wrens.

New Ontario Champ

Congratulations to Glenn Coady of Toronto for setting the new all time Ontario record for the highest number of species seen in one year. Glenn saw 338 species in 1996. In any other year, second place Ray Geras with 324 would have been the champ! Congratulations also to Terrie Smith with 317 in third place. Records are meant to be broken!

Special Edition

What's Inside

- Page 1 Revised Ontario Checklist 1997 • Winter Dipper • New Ontario Champ
- Page 2 Peter's Woods in Northumberland County: Favourite Birding Hotspots
- Page 3 California Gull Subspecies • Niagara Peninsula Hawkwatch • Friends of Kawartha
- Page 4 Baltimore Oriole in *The Birds of North America*
- Page 5 Bird Quiz
- Page 6 Bicknell's Thrush Observation Sites in Quebec
- Page 7 *The Breeding Birds of Quebec*
- Page 8 Notes from the OBRC • Owls and Snow • Ross's Goose Bird Quiz Correction
- Page 9 OFO Certificates of Appreciation • An Evening with Jon Dunn • Thank You • Bird Quiz Answers
- Page 10 Hawk Herbalists • Bitter Berries
- Page 11 OFO trips: Future Field Trips • Van Wagners Beach • Holiday Beach
- Page 12 How to Get Close to a Bird Without Bothering It • OFO on the Net • Birdathon • Niagara's Birds Gain International Recognition

Peter's Woods in Northumberland County

Favourite Birding Hotspots

by Clive Goodwin

Presqu'île Park is the birding destination of choice in Northumberland County for much of the year, but there are other places that can be productive, particularly during the breeding season. One of the best is Peter's Woods, a superb old woodlot some 25 km north of Cobourg. Its significance has been recognized for many years, and it was acquired by Willow Beach Field Naturalists in the 1970s. It is named for A.B. (Peter) Schultz, a leading club member who was instrumental in the acquisition. It was subsequently turned over to the Ministry of Natural Resources as a Provincial Nature Reserve.

The route to Peter's Woods can be rewarding as well, and yield some species I have not encountered in the woods themselves, so this account will describe both the woods and a possible circle route to them.

Take Highway 401 Exit 474, the eastern exit for Cobourg, set your odometer at zero, and drive north on Highway 45. All the distances are from this point. You first pass through the hamlet of Baltimore, and then (between 7 and 11 km) the road follows the heavily wooded course of Baltimore Creek.

The sideroads on either side of the highway here can be productive, especially Bull Road at 9.3 km. It's not necessary to drive far, and indeed most of the roads are deadends. Walking them for a short distance is often more interesting. You can expect a good mix of warblers, including Black-throated Green, Nashville, Black-and-white, Canada, Ovenbird, Northern Waterthrush and Common Yellowthroat, together with Winter Wren, White-throated Sparrow and Purple Finch, Alder Flycatcher in the alder thickets and Swamp Sparrow in the marshy sections. All three accipiters occur and probably breed, as does Broad-winged Hawk, while Red-tailed can be found in more open areas.

On leaving the low-lying wooded areas along the highway, some of the sideroads open up, with sandy old fields that attract Brown Thrashers, Field and Vesper Sparrows, and Bank Swallows in some of the old sand banks. Pioneer Road, on the west side at 8.8 km, passes one such area.

Continuing northeast, note the Centreton Road on the east at 11.5 km as you will return to this point, and soon afterwards (at about 12 km) the highway enters Northumberland County Forest, a huge area of conifer plantations. At 14 km on

the west side is Beagle Club Road, which gives access to the network of ski trails through the forest. The tall pines along the highway should readily yield Pine Warbler, and a more careful search can produce Red-breasted Nuthatch, Hermit Thrush and Solitary Vireo. However, the exceptionally lush growth of poison ivy which dominates as the ground cover (often to the exclusion of anything else), can inhibit exploration if you are susceptible to it. Poison ivy could well be adopted as the official plant of the county, as it grows in remarkable abundance.

Both the Baltimore Creek area and Northumberland County Forest can be good areas for winter finches in season, when the ivy is no longer a problem.

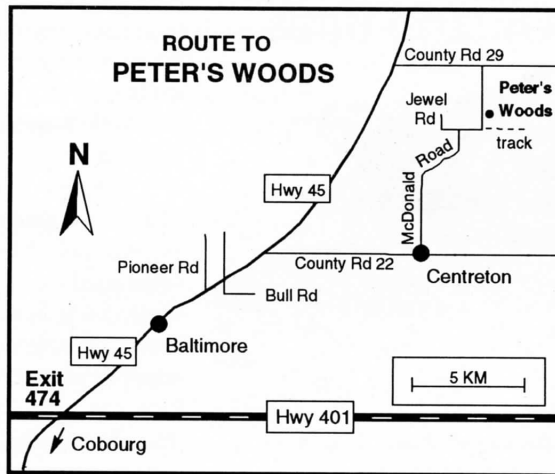
At 18.9 km, turn right on Northumberland County Road 29, signed to Warkworth, and then right again on the second sideroad (22 km, McDonald Road). A small marshy area on both sides of the road immediately after the turn can be worth checking for Green Heron and other wetland species. Then continue south; from the 23

km point on, watch for Eastern Bluebirds along the fence lines on the left, until finally the road goes down into a wooded area, and at 24.1 km, there is a driveway on the left. You have arrived at Peter's Woods.

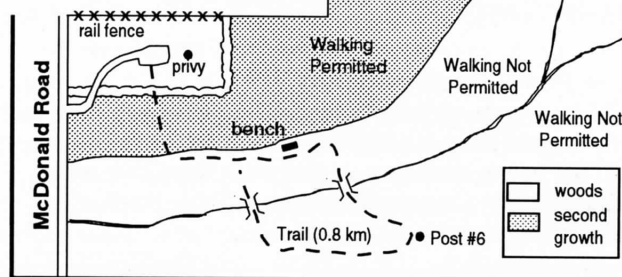
Although the area is currently signed as a Provincial Nature Preserve, the Ministry has stated that it will no longer manage the

area and the parking lot and trails are not actively maintained. New access details are still being worked out, but it is likely that arrangements with the Willow Beach Club will allow the parking lot to remain open, although it would always be possible to walk in from the road (0.2 km) if the drive was closed. Users should be aware that the trail is not a typical manicured Provincial park one; there is some scrambling over deadfalls, parts of the path are boggy (we often wear rubber boots) and the access points to the small bridges that cross the stream are rather steep and can be very slippery.

In addition to the parking lot, there is a small privy and the walking trail through the woods. Walking is also permitted in the areas of old fields and early succession to the northeast, but in the main woodlot please keep to the marked trail. This first runs through an area of young pines and second growth



Map by Michael King



In May 1995, the woods played host for a time to both a Kentucky Warbler and a Louisiana Waterthrush, both frequented the area of the stream west of the first bridge...

(watch and listen for Golden-winged, Blue-winged and Mourning Warblers), and then enters the main woods, looping round to follow both sides of an intermittent stream that runs through the area. At the eastern end is a boggy area with coniferous growth (be alert for possible American Woodcock feeding around post 6). The rest of the woods are mainly deciduous, with a very rich ground flora and some fine old trees including a few magnificent white pines (listen for Pine Warbler).

You should encounter a good mix of typical woodland birds including Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Hairy and Pileated Woodpeckers, Great Crested Flycatcher, Eastern Wood-Pewee, Brown Creeper, Veery, Wood Thrush, Red-eyed Vireo (a positive chorus of its song), Black-throated Green and Black-and-white Warblers, Ovenbird, Scarlet Tanager, Rose-breasted Grosbeak and Purple Finch. You can hope to hear Ruffed Grouse.

In May 1995, the woods played host for a time to both a Kentucky Warbler and a Louisiana Waterthrush, both frequented the area of the stream west of the first bridge, and a Black-throated Blue Warbler was on territory towards the far end of the trail. More southern species that are more regular in occurrence are Blue-gray Gnatcatcher and Yellow-throated Vireo, the latter on the return leg of the loop near the large bench, although I expect the vireo moves around from year to year. The bench, incidentally, looks strange, but is an excellent vantage point for viewing the very high canopy.

The old fields to the north and east have their own birds of interest. A pair of Eastern Phoebes nests on the privy,

bluebirds may nest in boxes along the fenceline and Brown Thrashers and Eastern Towhees can be found in the thickets, with Grasshopper Sparrows in the field itself. As noted above, both Golden-winged and Blue-winged Warblers nest. At least they did in 1994-1995 (I did not check in 1996), but the Blue-winged were not recorded in the area on the *Atlas* (1987), so this is part of the species' continuing expansion in Ontario. It remains to be seen whether Golden-winged continue to hold their own here, or whether they will eventually disappear because of hybridization with Blue-winged Warblers.

South of the drive into the woods, the main road jogs west, and an old cart track continues east from it, following the southern boundary of the reserve. A walk along here will yield a rather different mix of species, as well as many of those already seen in the woods. Golden-winged and Blue-winged Warblers occur here too, and you can expect Least Flycatcher, Chestnut-sided and Mourning Warblers and Indigo Buntings.

Leaving the area, follow McDonald Road as it jogs once more through the eastern part of Northumberland County forest. If you failed to find Grasshopper Sparrow earlier you can turn right on Jewell Road just past the point where McDonald jogs south, and drive a short distance west to the corner where the road turns north. The fields here have both Grasshopper and Vesper Sparrows. Otherwise, continue south on McDonald. After some 3 km, the forest ends and the rest of the route runs through a typical mix of woods and farmland (watch for bluebirds), finally arriving at Centreton (5 km from the woods), where a right turn on County Road 22 leads back to Highway 45 again. Obviously a more direct route is to use Highway 48 and Centreton Road both ways, but the above provides a little more variety, and is only marginally longer.

Literature Cited

Cadman, M. D., P. F.J. Eagles and F. M. Helleiner. 1987. *Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Ontario*. University of Waterloo Press.

California Gull Subspecies by Ron Pittaway

At least two California Gulls were reported at Niagara in November 1996. Surprisingly, two of the birds were distinctly different in appearance and may represent two subspecies (races).

The California Gull is currently regarded as monotypic (no subspecies). However, in the *AUK* 104: 421-428, 1987, J.R. Jehl describes two well-marked races, with no indication of clinal variation between the two races. The southern nominate race *Larus californicus californicus* breeds in the Great Basin of the United States. The northern race *L.c. albertaensis*, named after the province, breeds mainly in the Prairie Provinces. The breeding ranges of the two races were separated (allopatric) until recently, but are now joined in Montana. The nominate race is smaller, smaller billed and darker mantled, a full shade or two darker than a Herring Gull. Compared with it, *albertaensis* is

distinguished by its greater size (and mass in the hand), larger bill and paler mantle approaching or matching the paleness of a Herring Gull. A typical *californicus* is illustrated on page 151 of the *National Geographic Society* (1987) field guide. A typical *albertaensis* is illustrated on Plate 36 in W. Earl Godfrey's *The Birds of Canada* (1986).

Bruce Di Labio (pers. comm.) tells me that a California Gull seen at the Nepean Dump near Ottawa on 13-15 October 1988 by B. Di Labio, S. Gawn, R.P. Holland and L. Neily was a smaller and much darker mantled bird than the breeding birds he had seen in Saskatchewan while working for the Canadian Museum of Nature in 1985. Bruce now thinks the Nepean bird was probably of the *californicus* race.

Interestingly, none of the field guides describes the considerable geographical variation in the California Gull.

1997 Niagara Peninsula Hawkwatch Open House

Good Friday 28 March
10:00 a.m.-3:00 p.m.

Rain date: Saturday 29 March
Beamer Memorial Conservation Area
Ridge Road, Grimsby
Migrating hawks, a rehabilitated raptor release, hawk ID workshops, nature displays and the OFO display.

Free Hawk ID Workshops
Saturdays and Sundays from March 22 to April 27 10:00 a.m.-3:00 p.m.

Friends of Kawartha Region Conservation Authority will be publishing an Annual Bird Report for Victoria County. Please send your 1996 Victoria County bird sightings for inclusion in the report to: David Gascoigne, Friends of Kawartha Conservation Authority, RR 1, Lindsay ON K9V 4R1

Baltimore Oriole

in

The Birds of North America

by Jim Rising

When I graduated from university in the mid-1960s, I wanted go on to graduate school and study birds. I was accepted at the University of Kansas, and discussed with my supervisor, Dr. Richard F. Johnston, a number of potential research projects, among them a study of hybridization between Baltimore (*Icterus galbula*) and Bullock's (*I. bullockii*) Orioles in the Great Plains. At that time, Dr. Charles Sibley had recently published results of research which showed that these two orioles hybridized commonly in western Nebraska. It was logical, Dr. Johnston and I thought, to assume that they also were hybridizing in far western Kansas, where the cottonwood trees that grew along the major rivers would support populations of these birds. Thus, in the summer following my graduation, I briefly went to western Kansas on a reconnaissance trip to see if orioles lived in sufficient numbers there to serve as suitable objects of study. I found the orioles to be abundant, commoner than anywhere else I have seen them, and spent the better part of the next three summers studying them.

I learned that there, as in western Nebraska, hybridization between the two was common and that hybrids were viable, that is, they themselves could produce young. Nonetheless, even at sites where the majority of birds were hybrids, many apparently "pure" individuals of both could be found.

In the 1960s, ornithologists, and indeed most biologists, had embraced Ernst Mayr's species definition: "Species are groups of actually or potentially interbreeding natural populations which are reproductively isolated from other such groups." Consequently, in the 1960s and 1970s, many taxa that had formerly been recognized as distinct species because of phenotypic distinctiveness were "lumped" by ornithologists when it was recognized that they hybridized, or at least hybridized more than just rarely. Because of the rather frequent hybridization in the Plains, the Baltimore and Bullock's Orioles were among those lumped into the Northern Oriole. Friends have often accused me of being to blame for the loss of a good tick on their life lists, but in truth (for reasons too complex to go into here) I had argued against lumping them; however, the AOU Check-list Committee of the day disagreed.

Upon moving to Toronto in the late 1960s, I decided to continue my work with oriole hybridization. I had previously learned that this hybridization had first been described by Arthur Cleveland Bent in 1908 on the basis of specimens he collected in the vicinity of

Maple Creek, Saskatchewan. Thus in late May 1970, I went to southern Saskatchewan and Alberta to study orioles. One thing I quickly learned was that spring came later to the Canadian prairies than to the prairies of Kansas. I just missed a late blizzard, and spent the first week of June in a cold camp in the Cypress Hills waiting for the snow to melt and the summer birds to return.

In my many years at the University of Toronto, I have had two graduate students working on Baltimore Orioles—Val Schaefer studying nest construction and Nancy Flood the delayed acquisition of the full breeding plumage of males. As well, I have twice returned to Kansas to follow up on my earlier work, to assess the stability of the "hybrid zone" in that area.

It is thus not surprising that when the compilers of *The Birds of North America* were looking for authors for accounts of North American species, I was approached to do the "Northern Oriole". Because the Northern Oriole was, in my mind, really three very different things (Baltimore, Bullock's, and the little-known Mexican Black-backed Oriole), I requested that I have a couple of collaborators, Nancy Flood, who is an expert on the breeding biology of Baltimore Orioles, and Pam Williams who is similarly knowledgeable about those aspects of the biology of Bullock's Orioles. We could ignore Black-backed Oriole, which is entirely Mexican in its distribution. Subsequently, when the Northern Oriole was split into the three species, in large part as a consequence of our research, Nancy and I have been concentrating on the Baltimore account, and Pam and I on the Bullock's.

Because of the rather frequent hybridization in the Plains, the Baltimore and Bullock's Orioles were among those lumped into the Northern Oriole. Friends have often accused me of being to blame for the loss of a good tick on their life lists, but in truth I had argued against lumping them; however, the AOU Check-list Committee of the day disagreed.

The Baltimore Oriole is one of the better-known and most colourful songbirds of the eastern US and Canada. As a species of forest clearing and edges, orioles doubtless benefited from the activities of European settlers, and readily became conspicuous residents of urban parklands. In the northeast, they apparently have a particular fondness of elms, but with the loss of many of these to Dutch elm disease, orioles have taken freely to maples and other deciduous species. In the prairies, as noted earlier, they most often nest in cottonwoods.

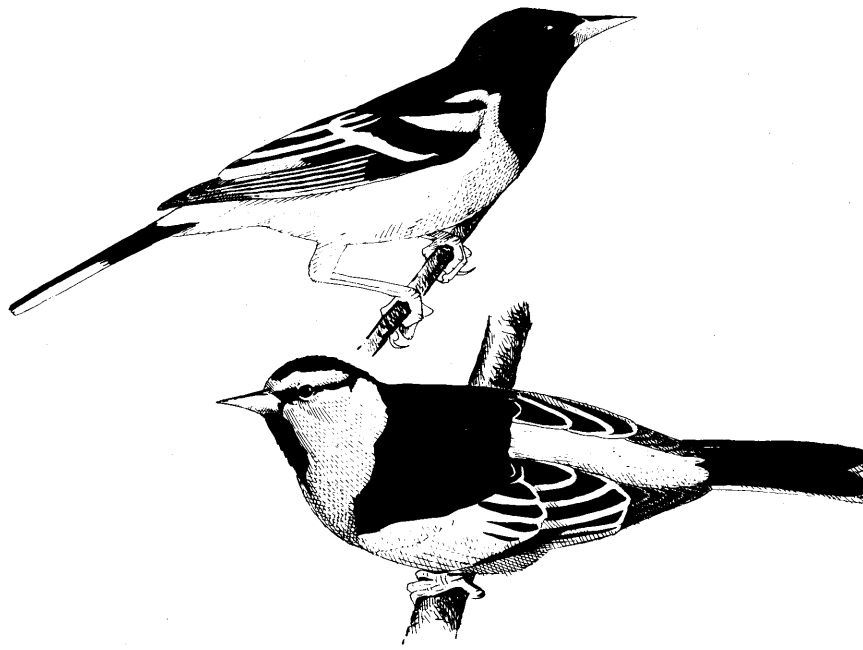
Male orioles typically arrive in the spring before females. Males do not acquire their full, bright breeding plumage until at least two years of age, and it is the older (after second year or ASY) adult males and a few second year (SY) ones that are characteristically the first to arrive in southern Ontario generally in the first week of May. Upon settling on a territory, the males are conspicuous, and sing vigorously. The song is rich and distinctive, and highly variable. After mating, males sing much less frequently.

Females generally arrive a few days later. Courtship seems to be brief, and the pair quickly starts to weave their characteristic woven, pendent nest. The female does most if not all of the weaving, although the male may bring her some nesting material.

As mentioned above, males do not develop their full orange and black plumage until their second breeding season. There is a great deal of variation in the SY plumage of males, but they generally resemble rather bright females.

Be warned that the figures of female orioles in field guides generally bear more resemblance to first autumn birds (of either sex) than to adult females. Even in their first breeding season, female Baltimore Orioles have black on their head and commonly on their throat and back, and they seem to get more brightly coloured with age. Nancy Flood had a breeding female on her study site whose plumage was indistinguishable from that of a ASY male, and everything in between has been observed. It is not possible to separate females from SY males in the field, except sometimes behaviourally. In the breeding season, of course, they can be sexed in the hand by looking for incubation patches and cloacal protuberances. One of the things that Nancy learned in her study was that essentially all of the ASY males obtained mates. However, there are more females than ASY males, so many SY males also obtain mates, but not all because the total number of males is larger than the number of females.

Baltimore Orioles raise but a single brood of young per year, although they will sometimes lay replacement clutches. Only the female broods, but both of the parents feed the young.



Baltimore Oriole (top) and Bullock's Oriole by Peter Burke

Unmated birds often depart the breeding grounds in mid-summer, with a few beginning to appear in their wintering grounds in Mexico and Central America as early as July. Both parents leave the young to undergo molt after the young are independent, and groups of independent fledglings can be found after mid-July. The young probably start migration in late August, although, because they are difficult to separate from females, little is known of their behaviour.

Although the data are somewhat inconsistent, Breeding Bird Survey data indicate that Baltimore Oriole numbers seem to be stable. Highest numbers are reported in the central Plains (central Kansas, southern Iowa, north-central Oklahoma, south-central Alberta), with isolated pockets of high density also in central Wisconsin, southeastern Michigan, and in Ontario along the northern shore of Lake Erie. They are also locally common in New York, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and southern New England.

The bulk of Baltimore Orioles winters from southern Mexico through Central America south to Panama. In Central America, they are often common in shade trees planted in coffee plantations. This is cause for concern among conservationists, as increasingly these shade trees are being removed as plantation methods change, resulting in a potentially significant loss of suitable wintering habitat for the species. We can only hope that our worst fears are not realized, and that Canadians can continue to enjoy this colourful songbird for generations to come.

Bird Quiz by David Brewer

We fully admit that the questions below have more to do with bird trivia than any deeply significant ornithological knowledge, but what do you expect when the quizmaster is a member of the Ontario Bird Records Committee?

1. What Ontario passerine (aside from House Sparrow), which also breeds in the other nine provinces and both territories, breeds on five continents?
2. What three Canadian breeding nonpasserines (aside from Rock Dove) nest on six continents?
3. What Canadian breeding bird occurs regularly on seven continents?
4. What Canadian bird was "scarce heard among the guns below," and in which province does it breed?
5. For what bird (not Canadian) did Juliet mistake the bird in question 4, and for whom was her ornithological incompetence nearly fatal?
6. What is a Skunk Blackbird?
7. Identify the following birds, all breeding in Ontario (a knowledge of the Classical Languages will help).
 - a. I am green, and love my brother
 - b. I stay out of bed, and cut up meat
 - c. I eat worms, and wander widely
 - d. The noisy, bull-headed bird
 - e. The quail-faced bird from New York
 - f. The Newfie buzzard with feet like a hare

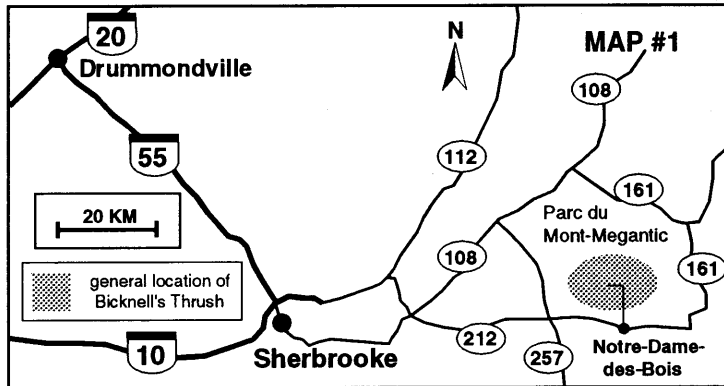
Answers on page 9

Bicknell's Thrush

Observation Sites in Quebec

by Henri Ouellet

There are several easily accessible locations where Bicknell's Thrush can be readily observed in Quebec, but some locations may be difficult to reach or are a long distance from major cities in Ontario and Quebec. With a good road map of Quebec and the following information, birders should not have trouble locating suitable places and birds at the right time during the nesting season.



Map by Michael King

Map 1. The easiest spot, particularly for those who do not have much time at their disposal, is undoubtedly Mont Mégantic, east of Sherbrooke in the Eastern Townships. This area, where an astronomical observatory is located, is part of a provincial park, Parc du Mont-Mégantic, and the summit can be reached on a paved road. Bicknell's Thrush can be heard and seen from the main road but one increases the chance of good sightings by using the numerous paths that lead away from the road, starting near the observatory. The best times of the day are very early mornings around sunrise, and evenings before sunset. There is much singing in early June on calm and foggy days, at all hours. This bird also sings occasionally at night, particularly when there is no wind. Mont Mégantic offers the added opportunity to hear and observe several species of the boreal forest such as Boreal Chickadee, Common Raven, Blackpoll Warbler, Black-throated Green Warbler, Philadelphia Vireo and Gray Jay to name only a few.

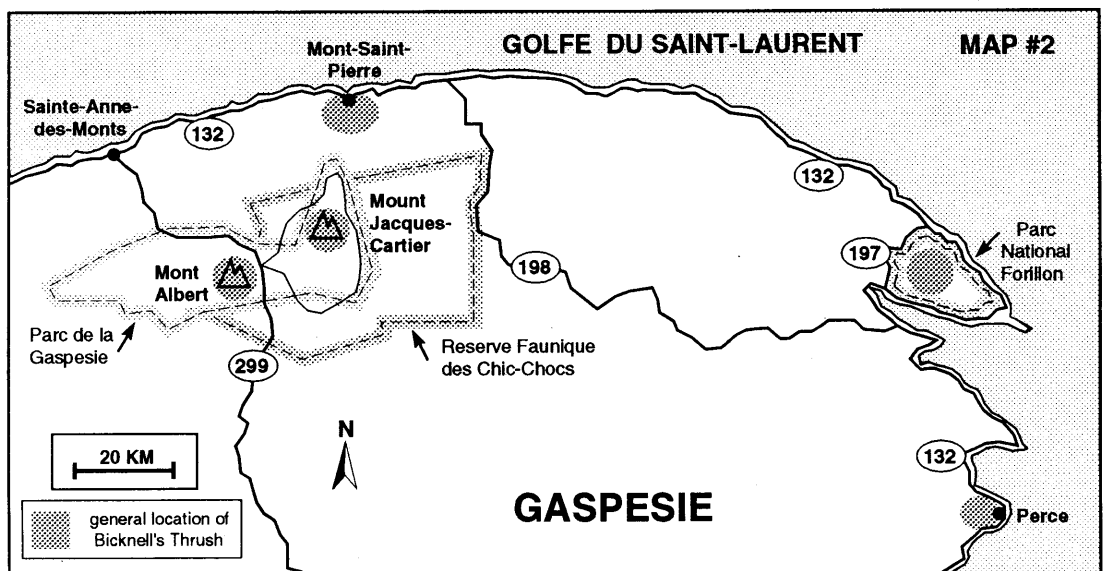
Early mornings and evenings, or calm foggy days in the first three weeks of June are best for hearing and seeing the bird.

Map by Michael King

Map 2. Another choice area for seeing Bicknell's Thrush is the Gaspé Peninsula. The small locality of Mont Saint-Pierre offers two possibilities. The first is the series of hills that surrounds the village, particularly those on the east side which are accessible by a gravel road that leads to a launching pad for paragliders. The upper part of the road goes through suitable habitats and supports a few pairs in the second growth stands that border it. Mont Saint-Pierre also leads to Mont Jacques-Cartier in the Chic-Chocs Faunal Reserve. It is located some 35 km south of the village and at the end of the gravel road one can use the parking lot from where several trails lead to Mont Jacques-Cartier. The areas of transition between coniferous stands and alpine tundra support stunted conifers, birches and willows. This is the traditional habitat of Bicknell's Thrush in that part of its range. Early mornings and evenings, or calm foggy days in the first three weeks of June are best for hearing and seeing the bird. The area of Mont Albert in Gaspésie Provincial Park, with its numerous trails leading to traditional habitats also offers excellent opportunities to see this thrush.

Map 2. Forillon National Park, particularly the higher portions, appear to support a small population of Bicknell's Thrush but I have not checked this part personally. During fall migration, from mid-August to mid-September, it has been reported in good numbers.

Map 2. The higher hills around Percé support a small population of Bicknell's Thrush and all the areas are easily accessible by car or on foot from the village or from the back



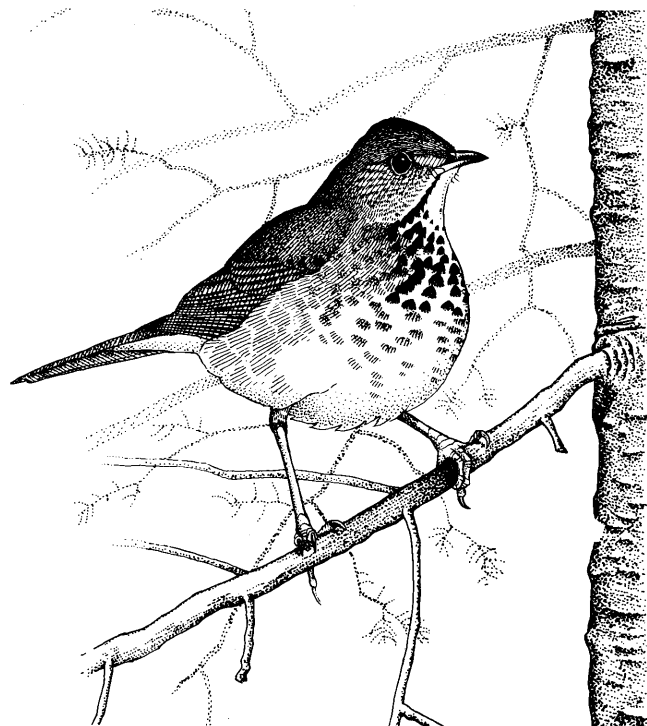
roads. Any of the roads leading to the mountains and hills behind and around Percé lead to Bicknell's Thrush habitat. As well, the path and stairs behind the church lead to a lookout (belvedere) where singing individuals have been observed in June. June would be the preferred time as singing diminishes rapidly and becomes infrequent afterwards. An additional bonus: the gannet and other seabird colonies of Bonaventure Island are close by.

Map 3. There are scattered populations of Bicknell's Thrush in the higher areas of Charlevoix County. I have observed it at locations north of Saint-Urbain, on Highway 381, in Parc des Grands-Jardins and in ZEC (Zone d'exploitation contrôlée) des Martres. The forest roads leading to second growth vegetation, particularly those located east of the highway, are worth exploring, especially at dawn.

Map 3. As well, it has been reported on the higher elevations of Parc Jacques-Cartier and in Réserve faunique des Laurentides using Highways 175 and 169 (Mont Apica). Sideroads are scarce along the highways, but those sideroads going to higher elevations where you can use a car should be productive in June. The road leading to Mont Apica has given good results.

Mont Sir-Wilfrid (46°41'-75°36'), in Labelle County, in the general area of Mont-Laurier, supports a very small population and is difficult to access on an arduous and unpredictable gravel road. It does not offer good chances of observing it in spite of its location close to Ottawa.

The best times of the day to hear and see Bicknell's Thrush are early morning about sunrise and late evenings just before sunset. It sings occasionally during the night and on calm and

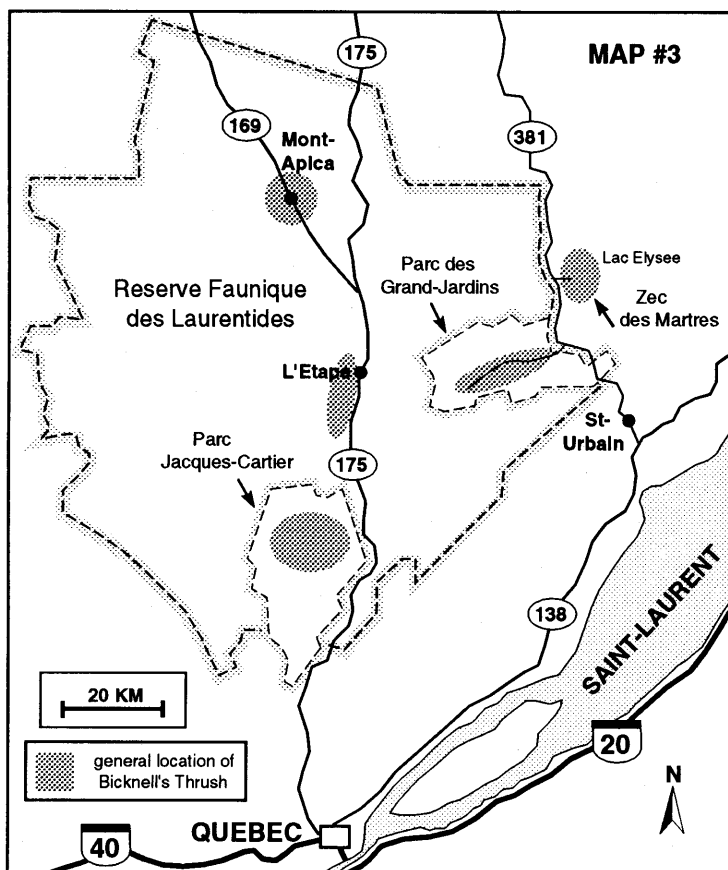


Bicknell's Thrush by Peter Burke

foggy days. The first three weeks in June undoubtedly fall during the safest period to observe it. Patience is important because singing is often very erratic even if several pairs are holding territories. Good birding!

For more information on the Mont Mégantic site and Mont Sir-Wilfrid, see *Ontario Birds* 14(2): 85-88, August 1996.

Ornithologist Henri Ouellet spoke about Bicknell's Thrush at the very successful OFO AGM in October 1996. At the meeting, Henri agreed to provide OFO members with help finding Bicknell's Thrush in Quebec. OFO NEWS thanks Michael King for creating the accompanying maps.



Map by Michael King

The Breeding Birds of Québec In English

This comprehensive work contains over 1300 pages with more than 1400 photographs, maps and illustrations describing 292 bird species.

It covers breeding ecology, behaviour, distribution and habitat, supported by an extensive review of the literature.

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Notes from the OBRC

by
Rob Dobos

At the time of writing this column, the 1996 OBRC members are still busy reviewing reports of provincial rarities submitted during 1996. The work of the Committee will continue in earnest leading to the annual meeting at the end of March, at which time final decisions will be made on any records still under review. About 140 records will have been considered by the 1996 Committee, which is down from the number reviewed in 1995.

Other activities that the OBRC has recently been involved with include assistance in the revision to the Ontario bird checklist to be printed this spring by OFO and FON, as well as updating and reprinting the Provincial Review List of species, a copy of which has been included with this mailing.

Two members are finishing their terms on the OBRC as of the annual meeting. They are Kevin McLaughlin and Alan Wormington. I am thankful to both of them for their hard work, and their helpful support during my first stint as Secretary. The new members joining the Committee in 1997 are Ron Tozer and Richard Knapton. Ron Tozer, who lives in Dwight and is supposedly now retired, was the park naturalist at Algonquin Provincial Park for many years. He has served twice previously on the OBRC from 1988-90 and 1992-94. Richard Knapton lives in Fonthill, and is currently the Research Director of the Long Point Waterfowl and Wetlands Research Fund. This will be his second term on the OBRC, having served previously from 1991-94. The other members on the 1997 Committee are Margaret Bain, David Brewer, Peter Burke, Nick Escott and Don Sutherland. The Chair of this year's Committee will be selected at the upcoming annual meeting. I will be continuing as Secretary in 1997.

Once again, I encourage you to send your reports of provincial rarities to the OBRC, even if you were not the finder of a particular bird. Do not assume that someone else will document a rarity, as every year, rare birds that were seen by numerous observers go undocumented.

Send your rare bird reports directly to me:
Rob Dobos, Secretary OBRC, 1156 5th Concession Rd. W., RR 2, Waterdown ON L0R 2H2 E-mail: rob.dobos@ec.gc.ca

Owls and Snow

Why northern forest owls invade the south
by Ron Pittaway

This fall and winter have been fabulous for seeing Northern Hawk Owls and Boreal Owls in southern Ontario. Last year, we had perhaps the largest southward movement of Great Gray Owls on record, followed by a good echo flight this winter.

Why do northern forest owls invade the south from time to time? We often read and hear that "they were forced south by deep snow in the north that prevented them from catching voles and mice." This deep snow and owl myth has persisted a long time with birders, especially among those of us living south of the snow belt. Just like Snowy Owls come south when lemming populations crash, northern forest owls move south too when vole numbers crash.

Snow is a protective layer for northern plant and animal species. Their life cycles are dependent on cold weather and deep snow. Most years see the boreal forest deep in snow and if prey populations are high, the owls stay on territory. Sometimes we hear about crusts forming on top of deep snow following a mid-winter thaw or rain. Do crusts prevent northern owls from catching prey? Crusts may actually help owls find prey! A metre below the snow surface at ground level, the temperature is above freezing; bacterial decomposition of dead leaves and plants goes on all winter. This decay releases carbon dioxide gas which is trapped under the crust. The buildup of CO₂ gas agitates the voles and causes other behavioural changes, forcing voles to the surface and out through openings into the talons of waiting owls!

Northern forest owls, cold temperatures, deep snow, crusts and voles are part of the boreal forest ecosystem in winter. Great Gray, Boreal and Northern Hawk Owls are adapted to cold and snow. Extreme cold, deep snow and crusts do not force northern owls south, but the lack of food does.

Ross's Goose Bird Quiz Correction

The number of bird species currently known to nest only in Canada is now down to two: Whooping Crane (formerly bred in the United States) and Harris's Sparrow! In the Bird Quiz in the October 1996, 14(3), issue of *OFO NEWS*, Hugh Currie asked what *three* species nest only in Canada.

Ron Ridout e-mailed *OFO NEWS* with information that "Ross's Geese have bred in Alaska in the Sagavanirktok River delta (east of Prudhoe Bay). The first nest was found in 1984 and written up in the *Condor* 89:665-667 by Steve Johnson and Declan Troy...I spoke with Steve Johnson about it and he said that there really has been only the one confirmed nest though the species has been observed on several occasions since in breeding season in Snow Goose colonies both in Alaska and on Wrangel Island in Russia. He and others strongly suspect breeding is taking place, but with the remoteness of some of the Snow Goose colonies in Alaska and the lack of resources to check them (Steve's banding program ended a few years ago) there's no way of knowing the present status of Ross's Geese in northeastern Alaska...with the big increase in their numbers in Canada, there is a very good chance that they are breeding in Alaska..."



Northern Hawk Owl by Sam Barone

OFO Certificates of Appreciation

OFO Certificates of Appreciation were awarded to the following people for their courtesy, hospitality and helpfulness to the Ontario Birding Community.

Howard Doellel

Lac Doré
Ivory Gull, 12 November 1995

Norma and Victor Mowat

Selkirk
Least Tern, 5 December 1995

Lorraine and Bill Hatch

Hanover
Harris's Sparrow
November 1995-6 January 1996

Howard Nussey

Big "O" Incorporated Comber Division
Providing Access to Comber Woods
and Lagoons

Rose Petersen and Ian Smith

Ancaster
Hoary Redpoll, January 1996

Joan and Frank Xuereb

Stoney Creek
Varied Thrush, January 1996

Alex Scott

Stella, Amherst Island
Access to Owl Woods
January-February 1996

Chris Davies and Tom Harvey

Unimin Canada Limited
Assistance in Search of Eagles
Petroglyphs Area

Kathy Vowinckle

Demorestville
Providing Breeding Habitat for
Henslow's Sparrow, June-July 1996

Terry Sprague

Demorestville
Assistance to Birders Looking for
Henslow's Sparrow, June-July 1996

Ursula and Manfred Kolster

Hamilton
Spotted Towhee
December 1995-April 1996

An Evening With Jon Dunn



Fred Bodsworth (left) and Jon Dunn chat about shorebirds and pose for Jerry Guild's camera at this very informative evening on 25 November 1996.

Thank You

OFO is a registered charity and donors receive a tax receipt. Please support OFO by giving generously. Many thanks to those who contributed to the successful Henslow's Sparrow project to help protect this endangered species. We appreciated all your letters endorsing this worthwhile project. OFO recognizes the following donors for their generous contributions during 1996:

| | |
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| Theo Hofmann | George Thomson |
| David Hussell | Peter Webb |
| Jean Iron | James Wilson |
| Donald Johnston | |

Bird Quiz Answers *from page 5*

1. Horned Lark
2. Barn Owl, Peregrine Falcon and Cattle Egret
3. Arctic Tern
4. Skylark. British Columbia (*In Flanders Fields* by John McCrae)
5. Nightingale. Romeo and Juliet had a difference of opinion as to the identity of a singing bird: Juliet, who wished to continue canoodling on the balcony, maintained that it was a nightingale, whereas Romeo, whose life was not worth two cents if he was caught in town in daylight, more realistically recognized it as a lark.
6. A Bobolink.
- 7a. Philadelphia Vireo. *Vireo*, Latin, I am green; *philadelphicus*, Greek, the city of brotherly love.
- b. Northern Shrike. *Lanius*, Latin, a butcher or meat-cutter; *excubitor*, a sentry (from its habit of perching right on top of bushes, but literally, one who is out of bed; the same root, incidentally, as concubine).
- c. Tennessee Warbler. *Vermivora*, Latin, eater of worms; *peregrina*, Latin, a wanderer or pilgrim.
- d. Common Goldeneye. *Bucephala*, Greek, having the head of an ox or bull; *clangula*, diminutive of clangor, Latin, noisy.
- e. Yellow Rail. *Coturnicops*, from *Coturnix*, a quail; *noveboracensis*, from Eboracum, the Roman name for York in England, hence *noveboracensis*, pertaining to New York, NY.
- f. Rough-legged Hawk. *Buteo*, Latin, a hawk; *lagopus*, having the feet of a hare; *sanctijohannis*, from St. John's.

Hawk Herbalists

by
Jean Iron

Forest hawks such as the Northern Goshawk and Red-shouldered Hawk commonly adorn their nests with fresh green plant material. The choice of plants is not random and includes pine, hemlock, aspen and maple. The reason for nest decoration is much debated. Some observers thought that the greenery provided camouflage, insulation, shading and sanitation of the nest, but these hypotheses are largely unsupported. Nest decoration is most likely a territorial marker, but the greenery may also serve another important purpose.

Clark (1990) reported finding that the chemical properties of certain green plants helped decrease the effects of parasites such as mites on the nestlings of European Starlings. This also may play a role with hawks, but they have a different open nest ecology. The Red-shouldered Hawk may provide a clue to the puzzle of reason for the greenery. In Ontario, Red-shouldered Hawks often decorate their nests profusely with green hemlock sprigs, increasingly so once the young hatch (Dent 1994). Recent experiments by McDonald et al. (1995) suggest that volatile compounds (for example, cyanide) of certain green plants protect nestlings by repelling biting insects like mosquitoes and black flies.

Brian Naylor (e-mail) of the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources, an expert on hawks, commented on the above: "To my knowledge, no-one has proven why hawks decorate their nests. However, I would be careful not to discount the alternative too quickly, that is, territorial advertisement. If the decoration only served to repel insects, why would hawks place decoration on their nests long before incubation and why would they decorate alternate as well as primary nests?...On another note, we also find conifer decoration on nests of Broad-wings and Red-tails, but rarely Cooper's (I haven't seen enough active Sharp-shin nests to comment). In my experience,



Northern Goshawk nest adorned with greenery
by Christine Kerrigan

our birds rarely use deciduous foliage as reported in the US, especially for Broad-wings. However, we have seen hemlock, white pine, balsam and cedar used. I can't recall a nest with spruce but it is possible."

In summary, the placement of fresh greenery by hawks on their nests is probably a territorial marker, but it may also repel and be toxic to biting insects and reduce parasites on the nestlings.

Literature Cited

- Clark, L. 1990. Starlings as herbalists: countering parasites and pathogens. *Parasitology Today* 6(11): 358-360.
- Dent, P. 1994. Observations on the nesting habits of Red-shouldered Hawks in York Region. *Ontario Birds* 12(3): 85-94.
- McDonald, B.A., W.S. Brooks and B.E.P. O'Connell. 1995. Possible insect repellent function of green leaves placed on nests by hawks. *The Passenger Pigeon* 57(1): 37-40.

Bitter Berries by Ron Pittaway

It's hard to miss the clusters of scarlet berries against the backdrop of winter this year. The brilliant red berries are the fruit of Highbush Cranberry. Most garden centres and most books on landscaping for wildlife habitat recommend planting Highbush Cranberry to attract birds. The funny thing is that the scarlet berries hang on the shrub all winter. Birds don't seem to like them!

So do birds eat the berries of Highbush Cranberry? I asked veteran birder Dan Brunton of Ottawa who also is a botanist. Dan (pers. comm.) has never seen birds eating the berries, but added that there are two species (or varieties) of

Highbush Cranberry in Ontario: a native species (*Viburnum trilobum*), which grows mainly in wetlands, and a similar European horticultural species (*V. opulus*). The European form is the one not eaten by birds according to *The Shrubs of Ontario* by J.H. Soper and M.L. Heimburger (1982) published by the Royal Ontario Museum. It says: "a species often planted as an ornamental in southern Ontario and occasionally found as an escape along roadsides and in woods...The fruits of *V. opulus* often remain on the bush all winter, and although they look as if they should be attractive to birds, they are apparently

scorned until other food is gone, and even then they are eaten reluctantly."

Being a survival or starvation food fits in with a report from Jim Wilson (pers. comm.) of Dorset who once saw a Ruffed Grouse eating the berries in late winter. As well, Ron Tozer (pers. comm.) of Dwight saw 15 American Robins feeding on Highbush Cranberry on 12 April 1992. There had been five inches of new snow overnight and the robins were hard-pressed for food.

Highbush Cranberry is an emergency food when other foods are exhausted. Plant a few, but not instead of guaranteed favourites like Russian Olive, Mountain Ash, elderberries and Eastern Red Cedar.

OFO trips

Future Field Trips

March 8 (Saturday) Kingston Area Winter Birding. Leader: Bruce Di Labio. *Group size limited.* Call Bruce by February 22 for information and to register (613) 599-8733.

April 19 (Saturday) Gore Bay Airport, Manitoulin Island. The Friends of Misery Bay invite OFO members to join them on a trip to a Sharp-tailed Grouse lek. Call Jerry Guild (905) 823-1973 for information and suggestions for accommodations. Register by April 1. **NEW TRIP JUST ADDED**

April 26 (Saturday) Algonquin Park. Leader: Ron Tozer. Meet at the WEST GATE of the park at **9:00 a.m.** Park permit \$8.00 per car required.

May 3 (Saturday) Rondeau Provincial Park. Leader: Allen Woodliffe. Meet at the Visitors Centre at **8:00 a.m.** Call Allen by April 29 (519) 351-7884.

May 17 (Saturday) Sandbanks Provincial Park. Leader: Terry Sprague. Meet at Canadian Tire parking lot on Highway 33 just west of Picton at **9:00 a.m.** **NEW TRIP**

May 30-31 (Friday-Saturday) Rainy River. Leader: Dave Elder. (807) 597-2008, or Box 252, Atikokan ON P0T 1C0. Call Dave before May 1 to confirm. Meet at the junction of Worthington Rd. #3 and Highway 11 which is about 10 km east of Rainy River (3 sideroads east of town), **7:00 a.m. local time.**

June 1 (Sunday) Carden Alvar. Leader: Ron Pittaway. Meet at the parking lot of the Kirkfield Lift Lock on Highway 503, just north of the village at **9:00 a.m.**

June 7 (Saturday) Owen Sound. Leader: Dave Fidler. From Springmount (west of Owen Sound) go 4 km on Hwy 21 to Jackson. Turn right (north) & go 2 km to a T intersection. Turn left (west) & go 1 km to first road on right. Turn right (north). At 1 km, see sign "Fidlers" on left. Meet at **8:00 a.m.** (519) 371-2919.

June 14 (Saturday) St. Clair Wildlife Reserve and Pelee. Leader: John Miles. (519) 587-5223. Meet at the gates of the St. Clair Wildlife Reserve at **7:00 a.m.**

Correction

Glenn Coady's photograph of a Henslow's Sparrow on page 1 of the October 1996, 14(3), *OFO NEWS* was taken in May 1990, not 1996!

Van Wagners Beach

by

Rob Dobos

The outing to Hamilton's Van Wagners Beach on Sunday 20 October, following the OFO Annual General Meeting, was very successful. About 40 or more OFO members and other birders endured the strong easterly winds and intermittent rain to look for jaegers and waterbirds over the west end of Lake Ontario.

Over 20 jaegers were seen throughout the day, including all three species. Most were Parasitics, some flying very close to the beach and even a few overhead. A juvenile Long-tailed in close gave a number of birders a lifer or Ontario bird. One or two juvenile Pomarines were also seen, one right over the beach. Both of these species came in to chase gulls that had been chummed in with Hutch's famous fries!

About a dozen Black-legged Kittiwakes in total were also seen. Most of these were first winter birds, which are what we typically see on the Great Lakes. However, two adults were also present, a rare sighting indeed. A Peregrine Falcon put in a brief appearance over the parking lot. Numerous waterfowl were sighted over the lake, including numbers of Oldsquaw, Greater Scaup, White-winged, Surf and Black Scoters, Common Mergansers, Bufflehead and Common Loons. A Black-bellied Plover patrolled the beach. All in all, an excellent day during what has proven to be probably the best fall ever for jaeger watching at Van Wagners.

Holiday Beach Conservation Area

by

Allen Chartier

Holiday Beach is located at the extreme southwestern tip of Essex County. As such, it necessitated a considerable drive for most of the 15 OFO members attending this field trip on 26 October 1996. The feature that makes this site so distant for many OFO members, is the same feature that makes it so attractive to migrating hawks, the main target of the trip. Ontario is funnel-shaped in this area, and funnels the migrating hawks to cross the Detroit River, the narrowest such crossing available to them on the Great Lakes (4 km).

This late in the season, the spectacle of hawk migration is very dependent on favourable winds, north to northwest. Unfortunately, the winds this day were light from the southeast, about as bad as it could get. Only a few Sharp-shinned Hawks, a couple of Red-tailed Hawks, a single Red-shouldered Hawk, and a couple of the local Bald Eagles were seen by the group. These circumstances allowed for a more thorough exploration of the park that otherwise might not have been possible, as a good hawk flight would have tied us to the 17 metre tall Hawk Tower all day.

Few ducks were in evidence, as it was a hunting day and they were mostly elsewhere and shy. A resident Carolina Wren serenaded us as we were on the tower, and a few Golden-crowned and Ruby-crowned Kinglets could be heard. Several American Pipits were heard and seen as they flew over the tower. One observer found two Eastern Towhees in a brushy area. This species is not frequently reported from the park. The whole group found a few Hermit Thrushes, Brown Creepers, Yellow-rumped Warblers, and a single Fox Sparrow. A rarely reported (but probably resident) Red-bellied Woodpecker was seen by a few.

On a short jaunt outside the park the nearby resident Northern Mockingbird was fairly easy to find, but the reported Long-eared Owl (the first of the season) eluded us as we went through a pine plantation in search of it.

Hopefully, more OFO members will visit this site in the future on their own, or with the next OFO field trip here. I almost hesitate to report that the real "bird of the day" occurred about 4 p.m., an hour after all the trip participants had left. A flock of eight adult winter Franklin's Gulls flew directly over the tower fairly low and off to the southeast! This was only the third local record in 21 years of this species, and an unusually large number anywhere southwestern Ontario. See you next fall!

How to Get Close to a Bird Without Bothering It

by
Doug McRae

I once watched a birder trying to take a photo of an American Avocet at a sewage lagoon. When I arrived, he was already in hot pursuit—essentially walking as quickly as he could, directly at the bird. The avocet of course kept about 50 metres ahead, but only by running full-tilt. After chasing the bird around the lagoon *twice*, he finally gave up, much to the relief of all creatures present.

That observation, along with a few subsequent similar ones, taught me that people could benefit from a few tips on how to approach birds. There are two good reasons why learning to “stalk” a bird is important. One is that you will see the bird much better than if you scare it away. The other is that ethically we should be aware that our activities do not stress birds. This is particularly true when a vagrant is found, and will be sought by dozens or even hundreds of birders.

The following tips will help you get you closer without stressing the bird.

First Tip. Move slowly and don't look like you're trying too hard (sounds like dating advice!). Birds spook easily if you move quickly or head straight for them. Meander to the bird, don't walk directly at it, stop frequently and pause a minute. Don't position yourself so that the bird is trapped; always leave it an escape route.

Second Tip. Watch the birdie! Your best critic is the bird you are trying to approach. If the bird suddenly becomes alert (sticks its neck up, tenses as if to fly, gives alarm notes, starts to run away, etc.), then you are moving too quickly or you are at its critical threshold. Stop immediately, even back up a bit and let the bird relax. After a few minutes, start again but more slowly.

Third Tip. Geography is your friend. Remember the cartoons with the Coyote sneaking up on the sheep? He would tiptoe from tree trunk to tree trunk to get closer. The same applies here except you don't have to tiptoe (and sheep aren't very challenging either). Use shrubs,

trees, mounds of earth or anything nearby as cover. The idea isn't necessarily to hide, but to make yourself look less imposing. It may be obvious, but *be quiet too—loud noises startle birds.*

Fourth Tip. Never look a bird in the eye. Some people think this sounds nuts, and it's not true for all birds, but some species don't like being stared at. A bird I find this true for is Long-eared Owl. Many times when I looked for this species, they flushed as my eye makes contact. Now if I see a large pile of whitewash indicating a traditional roost, I look away and use my peripheral vision to search for the form. If I see it, I put my binoculars to my eyes and only then turn to look at the bird. Sounds strange but it seems to work.

Fifth Tip. Be patient. If a bird goes out of view behind a bush, wait for it to come out rather than chase after it. Birds do not like being followed intensely, so take your time and the rewards will follow.

In summary, approaching a bird depends on many factors: lighting, how many people are approaching it, local geography, the species involved, and the presence of other species that might startle more easily than the target bird. There is no substitute for experience, so try the above guidelines and you will have better luck than if you charge straight at the bird.

Niagara's Birds Gain International Recognition

by Kayo Roy

At ceremonies on Wednesday 11 December 1996, the Niagara River Corridor was recognized as a globally significant *Important Bird Area*. Dignitaries from Canada and the United States representing the Canadian Nature Federation, Bird Studies Canada, Canadian Wildlife Service, Federation of Ontario Naturalists, Ontario Field Ornithologists, National Audubon Society, Partners in Flight, American Bird Conservancy and the Commission for Environmental Cooperation met at the Orin Lehman Visitor Centre on Goat Island in Niagara Falls, New York, where the designation was officially announced. Present as well at this joint ceremony were prominent Canadian and American politicians, environmentalists and Parks officials, together with representatives from area nature clubs. At the request of President Jean Iron, I was pleased to represent the Ontario Field Ornithologists at this moving ceremony.

The goal of the *Important Bird Areas Program* is to identify and conserve habitats critical for long-term survival of North American bird populations. The Niagara River Corridor qualifies under a category for sites where birds congregate in significant numbers for breeding, migration or in winter. This honour focuses international attention on the Corridor and birding in the area. Niagara now joins Long Point to become Ontario's only other *Important Bird Area*.

Baillie Birdathon

We are thrilled to have Jon Dunn as OFO's Celebrity Birder in the 1997 Baillie Birdathon. Please support Jon and OFO.

You can do your own Birdathon and name OFO as your club. This too will help raise money for OFO! For more information, call Chris Escott, Birdathon Coordinator, (416) 444-8055
E-mail: escott@user.rose.com

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