



Sid Hadlington Retires

This fall, Sid Hadlington retires as Membership Secretary. OFO extends much thanks to Sid for his dedication and hard work. Sid also handled OFO Sales: back issues of *Ontario Birds* and *OFO News*, sweatshirts, t-shirts, *Ornithology in Ontario*, decals and bumper stickers. A familiar figure on field trips, Sid served on the Board of Directors for six years and helped make OFO a great success. We extend gratitude to Dorothy Hadlington who worked with Sid to manage this large portfolio. Sid and Dorothy will now have more time to travel and watch birds.

Bird Quiz by Bill Crins

1. Which Ontario breeding bird still listed as endangered by the province has expanded its breeding range eastward in this decade?
2. How many subspecies (races) of the Dark-eyed Junco are known to have occurred in Ontario, and what are they?
3. Which warbler's breeding range is limited, at least in part, by the distribution and abundance of lichen?
4. Which passerine, now common on the southern part of the Precambrian Shield in summer, and often common in southern Ontario in winter, was restricted to extreme western Ontario and westward 150 years ago? How and why did it spread eastward?
5. Which Ontario breeding birds form leks? Name another species that occurs in Ontario and forms leks, but is not known to nest here.
6. What is the difference between gannivory and granivory?

Answers page 5

What's Inside

- Page 1 Sid Hadlington Retires • Bird Quiz • Magpie Mystery
Page 2 The Leslie Street Spit: Favourite Birding Hotspots
Page 4 Small Canada Geese in Ontario
Page 5 Juvenile Hawks • Bird Quiz Answers • Notes from the OBRC
Page 6 Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow
Page 7 OFO trips: Future Field Trips • Bird Lines • Early Birding Experiences
Page 8 Marsh Bird Lockup • OFO on the Net

Magpie Mystery

by
Ron Pittaway

Why the New World subspecies *hudsonia* of the Black-billed Magpie is found breeding only in western North America has always been a mystery to me. Magpies are a food generalist, found in a variety of habitats such as open areas with scattered trees, river valleys, farmland and suburban areas. All these habitats are abundant in southern Ontario and much of the East, but we have no magpies. We get a few vagrants, but they haven't formed a breeding population. Over the years, I asked many birders why magpies have not spread into eastern North America like many other species did when the eastern forests were cleared. No one seemed to know the answer.

By coincidence, I discovered the answer to my magpie mystery on a recent birding trip to Colorado. In *Colorado Birds*, Andrews and Righter (1992) say, "This species is heat-intolerant, and high temperatures and humidities restrict its distribution to west of the 100th meridian".

Digging further into the mystery of magpie distribution, I obtained several important references cited in *Colorado Birds* with the help of Ron Tozer. For instance, Hayworth and Weathers (1984) in the *Condor* 86(1): 19-26 found that Black-billed Magpies died of heat stress at temperatures of 40°C because magpies were unable to dissipate all of their metabolic heat production by means of evaporative cooling. Overheating developed progressively between 30° and 40°C. They concluded that "climate acts directly to restrict Black-billed Magpies in North America to the Cold Type Steppe Dry Climate, rather than ecologically through a secondary effect on food availability".

In summary, the Black-billed Magpie is adapted to a cool and dry climate. We normally think that climate affects a bird's distribution by controlling vegetation and food supply. But, there is no clear break in suitable habitat that should limit magpie distribution (Bock and Lepthien 1975, *Great Basin Naturalist* 35(3): 269-272). Recent studies of the Black-billed Magpie now indicate that in some species a climate's physiological affects can be the dominant factor limiting distribution. I conclude that there is no breeding population of Black-billed Magpies in southern Ontario because magpies are not adapted to the hot and humid summers of eastern North America. Just why heat tolerance is so low in magpies is yet another mystery.

The Leslie Street Spit—Toronto's Pelee

Favourite Birding Hotspots

by Norm Murr

The Leslie Street Spit (Toronto's Pelee), one of the best birding spots in southern Ontario, is a well known but under birded peninsula on Toronto's eastern waterfront. Along with the Toronto Islands, it is one of the first and last landfalls seen by migrating birds as they cross Lake Ontario in spring and fall. It is also an important wintering area for large numbers of waterfowl, gulls, and in some winters, many owls. *The Spit* has breeding colonies of Ring-billed Gulls, Common and Caspian Terns, Black-crowned Night-Herons and Double-crested Cormorants. A fair number of passerines and Common Snipe also nest. Rarities may show up at any time. *The Spit* checklist stands at 299 as of July 1, 1997.

Stretching five km into Lake Ontario, *The Spit* is a landfill area created from construction/demolition rubble and sand dredging in the greater Toronto area. It is closed on weekdays, but is open Saturday and Sunday in winter from 9:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. and to 6:00 p.m. in spring, summer and fall.

The Base. This can be good from August to June. The east side of the base has a small marsh that contains breeding Sora and Virginia Rail. The fence line is very good for sparrows; Le Conte's and Golden-crowned have been seen. At the east end of the fence is a small pond that does not freeze over in the winter where you may find Green-winged Teal, Wood Duck and sparrows.

The west side of the base can be more productive. It has a small pond, cottonwoods, willows, brush, muddy areas and open grassland. This is one of the most reliable places in Toronto for Ring-necked Pheasant, along with the east side. In migration you should find all the common flycatchers, vireos, thrushes, and warblers. Golden-winged, Blue-winged, Orange-crowned, Prairie, Cerulean, and Connecticut Warblers have also been seen. Check the wet areas for Common Snipe, American Woodcock and American Bittern. Watch for Common Nighthawks at dusk. All the eastern swallows occur in migration. Look overhead in early morning to see migrating Common Loons.

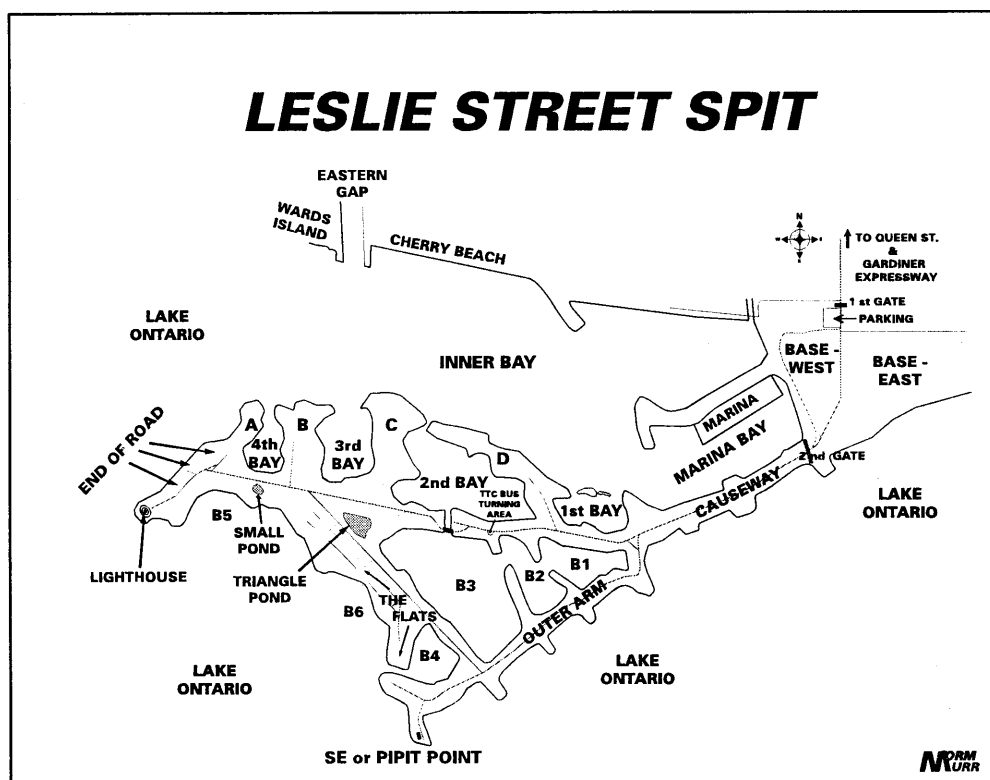
Check the sparrows as there can be a large number, including Fox, Lincoln's, Swamp, Field, Chipping, Song, White-throated, White-crowned and Eastern Towhee.

Northern Shrike, Snowy, Long-eared, Short-eared and Great Horned Owls can be found from October to April. Look for Glaucous and Iceland Gulls passing by.

The Causeway. Check the bushes for spring migrants as some days good numbers move towards the base. In 1996, a Hooded Warbler was found. Fall through spring, the marina bay sometimes has all the common ducks, White-winged Scoter and Horned Grebe. When the bay is frozen, look for Lesser Black-backed Gull on the ice. A Little Gull sometimes accompanies the Bonaparte's Gulls in fall.

Check the lake side for Common and Red-throated Loons and overhead for all the "white-winged gulls".

On the causeway, look for Snowy Owl, Short-eared Owl, Snow Bunting, American Pipit and Lapland Longspur. You may be rewarded with a sighting of a Coyote on the road; they are resident on *The Spit*.



The 1st Bay and area: As you come to the end of the causeway it widens out to a point on your right and beyond is the 1st Bay. Check the point at all seasons as it may hold a surprise among the usual migrants. This is particularly good for all the regular warblers, plus Prairie and Connecticut, and for sparrows; Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow has been found. It can have both cuckoos, Eastern Meadowlark and Bobolink. In fall through spring, look for Northern Shrike, Great Horned, Short-eared and Long-eared Owls,

The 1st Bay is a loafing area for gulls and terns. Ten species of gulls have been spotted including Franklin's, Mew and Lesser Black-backed. If it is not frozen, you can find all the common waterfowl, and all three scoters on the lake beyond. In some years if the water level is low, many shorebird species feed here on migration.

It is always wise to stop here on your way out and back as birds move in and out of the bay all day.

The Outer Arm. At times, the walk is very cold and windy, but well worth the discomfort. On the lake side in spring and fall you may see 50+ Common Loons and Red-necked Grebes. White-winged Scoters flying past are a common sight from October to April, and Red-throated Loons are seen in fall.

In the bays B1, B2, and B3 you should find most of the common waterfowl with 100+ Redhead and Ring-necked Duck on some days. If the bays are frozen, check the gulls sitting on the ice. Snowy Owl is often found on the ice and anywhere along the arm.

Snow Bunting, American Pipit and Lapland Longspur can be overhead or along the road. Glaucous and Iceland Gulls commonly fly alongside the arm. Look for Thayer's Gull with them.

Pipit Point. As you walk onto this point watch for Snowy and Short-eared Owls, American Pipit, Snow Bunting, Horned Lark and Lapland Longspur. In the bay on the right (B4) you may find all three scoters, Horned or Eared Grebe, Harlequin Duck, King Eider, Red-throated Loon or any of the commoner waterfowl. On the way to the tip, in season, watch for Brant, Whimbrel, Red-necked Grebes and white-winged gulls flying alongside or sitting on the lake.

If you are patient or can stand the cold winds at times, then spend some time on the left-hand tip watching the lake as waterfowl pass by. Last winter (1996-97), thousands of scaup, Oldsquaw and White-winged Scoters, as well as Surf and Black Scoters, King Eiders, Common and Red-throated Loons, Black-Legged Kittiwake and Lesser Black-backed Gull were seen.

Pomarine and Parasitic Jaegers also occur and I believe that this point during favourable weather conditions (easterly winds) from September to December should produce most of the pelagics seen at Van Wagners Beach. Sabine's and Black-headed Gulls, phalaropes and gannet are good possibilities. I'm going to be there in 1997 to see if this is so.

The Flats. After you pass bay B4 you are on The Flats, which are good in winter for Snowy and Short-eared Owls and the birds mentioned as you walk onto Pipit Point.

If water is present, look in spring and fall for migrating shorebirds; 18+ species have been seen over the years including Buff-breasted, Baird's, Western and Stilt Sandpiper, Hudsonian Godwit, both dowitchers and American Golden-Plover.

This is another great area to observe all six swallows as they migrate and in fall is a good vantage point for spotting raptors including hundreds of Sharp-shinned Hawks.

The Small Pond, End of Road and base of Peninsula A. All of these areas are good from spring to fall for flycatchers, thrushes, vireos, warblers, both cuckoos, Whip-poor-will and American Woodcock. This is the best place to check for Purple Sandpiper. In late fall and winter, watch for Great Horned, Saw-whet and Long-eared Owls. **Please do not disturb the owls.**

Peninsula B. This is the best birding spot on *The Spit*. Expect most the birds mentioned at the previous site plus a good number of sparrows in the clearing on the east side; 15 species have been seen including Nelson's Sharp-tailed and Clay-colored. Watch for Le Conte's. This is probably the best place

for Connecticut and Mourning Warblers and Yellow-breasted Chat.

Boreal Owls wintered on the base of this peninsula and on Peninsulas C and D, hopefully returning this winter (1997/98).

Peninsula C. All the birds found on Peninsula B can be found here with the exception of the large number of sparrows, but look for Fox Sparrow.

The woods on this point are more extensive than B but not as good for owls, though Great Horned and Long-eared can be found. Both Labrador (dark) and Snyder's (pale) races of the Great Horned Owl have wintered here.

This point has a breeding colony of 1000+ Black-crowned Night-Herons, and twice recently a Yellow-crowned Night-Heron has been found.

Peninsula D. The birds are similar to Peninsula C but with the chance of a large number of land birds along the road to the sailing club including Gray-cheeked Thrush, Yellow-throated Vireo and Pine Warbler.

Black-billed Cuckoos and Brown Thrashers breed on this point. Sometimes it can be tough to find birds here but don't forget the water on both sides.

A Barrow's Goldeneye was found on the 2nd Bay in the 1996-1997 winter. All the scoters, thousands of Common Goldeneye, Greater Scaup, and many Bufflehead winter off this point. Many gulls rest on the ice so check for Lesser Black-backed Gull and the occasional Bald Eagle.

Before I close, I would like to mention the owl problem on *The Spit* or more precisely the people problem. A few photographers, a few amateur birders and some birders who should know better were seen to harass the owls. Why, if they have long lenses or binoculars, they feel they have to get within 5 or 6 feet is beyond me. These owls have enough problems surviving the winter without being flushed or having a flash bulb popped in their faces. If you spot an owl, stand back and enjoy, if you see others bothering them, ask them please to back off.

As you can see there are birds all over *The Spit* so get out and enjoy them. You can't spot a bird from your couch.

Good birding,

Norm Murr

Directions

The Leslie Street Spit, officially called Tommy Thompson Park, is operated by the Metro Toronto Region Conservation Authority. Entry is free. From downtown Toronto, go east on the Gardiner Expressway to the Leslie Street exit and make a left turn onto Leslie Street. (From eastbound Lakeshore Boulevard, make a right turn onto Leslie.) Follow Leslie south to where it ends at the park gates. Unwin Avenue is on your right. Park on the street or in the parking lot inside the park. Be sure to remove your car from the parking lot before closing time as they lock the gates! Cars are not permitted on The Spit, so prepare for a long walk (5.5 km from park gates to the lighthouse). You may ride a bike. In winter, dress very warmly as it can be bleak. A scope is an asset, but remember the long walk.

Small Canada Geese in Ontario

by Ken Abraham

Canada Geese are so common in Ontario that they rarely get a serious glance, but some of them merit one because their story is so different from that of the familiar urban Giant Canada Goose (*Branta canadensis maxima*). These are the "small" subspecies: Richardson's, formerly Hutchin's Canada Goose (*B.c. hutchinsii*) (see Ron Pittaway's Checklist of Recognizable Forms, *OFO NEWS* 14: 3, October 1996). For population monitoring and hunting regulations, the small geese are called the Tall Grass Prairie Population, which contained about 272,000 birds in December 1996. They nest from just north of the Manitoba border on the western Hudson Bay coast to Southampton Island and western Baffin Island, and they winter from Oklahoma and Arkansas to the Gulf of Mexico coast of Texas, Louisiana and northern Mexico. Another population of small geese, the Short Grass Prairie Population, mixes with the Tall Grass population in winter, although they do not occur in Ontario.

Small Canada Geese are regular and abundant migrants in northern Ontario in spring and fall, with counts of nearly 50,000 obtained in 1979 (V. Thomas and P. Prevett, 1982. The role of the James and Hudson Bay Lowland in the annual cycle of geese, *Naturaliste Canadien* 109: 913-925), but less regular or at least less common in southern Ontario. Banding recoveries and aerial surveys reveal that those from Southampton Island and west Hudson Bay are regular and abundant migrants in fall as far south and east as the Winisk River, Ontario. They then head southwest towards the Missouri River watershed. In the spring they move through the eastern prairies and can probably only be seen in extreme northwestern Ontario.

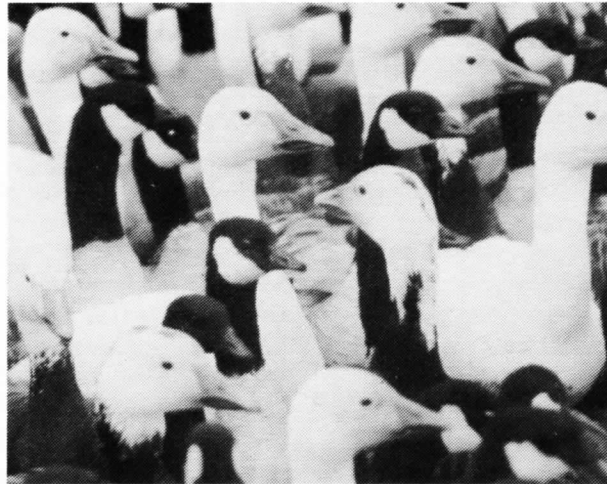
The birds from western Baffin Island migrate south along the east Hudson Bay coast then cross James Bay, stopping in large numbers between Cape Henrietta Maria and Albany River, Ontario, before heading southwest over the boreal forest towards Lake Superior and the upper midwest states and the Mississippi River watershed. In the 1990s, observations of neck-banded birds linked the nesting areas on the Koukdjouak plains of western Baffin Island with migration areas in the Slate River area near Thunder Bay and with migration and wintering areas at Swan Lake Refuge of western Missouri. In spring, their route appears to be largely a reversal of the fall route. They are abundant in the Winisk River area and along the northwest James Bay coast north of Ekwan River. They often migrate and feed in mixed flocks with Lesser Snow Geese. Larger than normal numbers of small Canada Geese occasionally sweep

through eastern and southern Ontario, as in fall 1989.

In spring, roosting and migrating flocks of Canada Geese should be scrutinized for small forms, especially after May 1. In fall, the best period is from mid-September to mid-October. Near Thunder Bay, fall numbers have been increasing over the past 10 years and they have lingered there through most of October. Their size makes the small form birds stand out among other geese or waterfowl. Compared to large Canada Geese, their necks are proportionately smaller and similar to the neck length of Snow Geese. Their bills are smaller and more delicate, having a more triangular appearance in comparison to the long, sloping and flatter bill of larger Canadas. They are eaters of short green grass throughout the year and their bills show it (Charles MacInnes, pers. comm.). They stand only about one-half the height of large Canada Geese, and the Richardson's are even slightly smaller in stature than Lesser Snow Geese, while Lesser Canada Geese (*B.c. parvipes*) are slightly larger than Lesser Snow Geese.

A final but significant note of interest comes from a yet-to-be-published review of the taxonomy of Canada Geese. In the 1997 revision of his classic book *The Giant Canada Goose*, Dr. Harold Hanson indicates that his reworking of the taxonomy and evolution of "The White-cheeked Geese" accords species level status to the small arctic form, (*B. hutchinsii*), one of six species into which he will subdivide the former Canada Goose!

OFO member, Ken Abraham, is a waterfowl biologist and leading North American expert on geese. He works for the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources.



Richardson's Canada Geese with white and blue morph
Lesser Snow Geese Photo Canadian Wildlife Service

For your further interest, Ken received a flyer announcing Dr. Harold C. Hanson's opus, *The White-cheeked Geese: Taxonomy, Ecophysiological Relationships, Biogeography, and Evolutionary Considerations*, to be published by Illinois Natural History Survey and expected in spring 1998 (ISBN 1-882932-02-J). The flyer describes it as about 800 pages in 2 volumes, including 775 photos, 188 morphometric diagrams, 78 maps, 63 tables, 25 graphs and drawings. It mentions 6 species, and 188 subspecies. The species are *Branta minima*, *B. leucopareia*, *B. hutchinsii*, *B. canadensis*, *B. maxima*, and *B. lawrensis*. Provisional cost is \$50-60 US hardbound. Place orders with Illinois Natural History Survey, Center for Wildlife Ecology, 607 E. Peabody Drive, Champaign, Illinois 61820. Tel: 217-333-6855.

OFO Membership Renewal

OFO membership continues to grow. We are now at an all time high of over 925 members.

Please renew your OFO membership by completing the enclosed membership renewal form. The date your membership expires is on your address label.

New Membership Secretary: Eleanor Beagan, 35 Thorncliffe Park Drive, #503, Toronto ON M4H 1J3 Tel: 416-423-3535.

E-mail: etbeagan@wiznet.ca

OFO is a registered charity. You will receive a tax receipt for donations.

Juvenile Hawks

At Ontario hawk watches this fall, birders are aging hawks, juvenile or adult. Juvenile is now the preferred term over "immature" because it is more precise, and it is used by Wheeler and Clarke in *A Photographic Guide to Hawks*. Aging hawks is not difficult because most hawks have only two plumages: juvenile and adult. For example, hawks born last spring are in their juvenile plumage which they will wear all winter; next spring we'll see them return in worn juvenile plumage. Also, in fall, juvenile hawks tend to migrate before adults, but in spring they migrate later than adults.

Bird Quiz Answers from page 1

1. The American White Pelican now breeds east to Lake Nipigon.

2. This is a bit of a trick question. James (1991) reports four races (*hyemalis*, *cismontanus*, *montanus*, *shufeldti*). Pittaway (1993) discussed the recognizable forms of juncos in Ontario and summarized them this way:

hyemalis and *cismontanus* = Slate-colored Junco

montanus and *shufeldti* = Oregon Junco

mearnsi = Pink-sided Junco (no accepted records for Ontario)

aikeni = White-winged Junco (no accepted records for Ontario)

caniceps = Gray-headed Junco (two reports, one very recently in Huntsville, 25 May 1997)

So, the correct answer is five, three of which can be considered recognizable forms recorded in Ontario.

3. Northern Parula. Earl Godfrey in *The Birds of Canada* (1986) says: "...its numbers being influenced by the availability of the lichen *Usnea*, which it prefers as a nesting site."

4. Evening Grosbeak. This is due to bird feeders and the planting of Manitoba Maple in settled areas and along roads, the keys on which Evening Grosbeaks feed.

5. Sharp-tailed Grouse is the only extant species. Greater Prairie Chicken (extirpated in Ontario, but which formerly bred) forms leks too. The Ruff also forms leks.

6. Granivory - feeding on grasses

Granivory - feeding on seeds

James, R.D. 1991. Annotated Checklist of the Birds of Ontario, Second Edition. Royal Ontario Museum, Life Sciences Publications. Toronto.

Pittaway, R. 1993. Subspecies of the Dark-eyed Junco. *Ontario Birds* 11: 101-105.

Notes from the OBRC

by

Ron Tozer

The Ontario Bird Records Committee will hold a policy meeting on 25 October 1997 at Locke House in Toronto to discuss a number of important issues that are not normally covered at the annual spring meeting, which focuses on discussion of records. Topics at the meeting will include: selection of a Chair and Secretary for 1998, election of three committee members to start their terms in 1999, evaluation of the status of several species on the Review List, and reconsideration of old records where new information has now been received.

The "Forty-first Supplement to the American Ornithologists' Union Check-list of North American Birds" was published in July, 1997 (*Auk* 114(3): 542-552). This is the last supplement before publication of the 7th edition of the A.O.U. Check-list. It contains important information affecting the birds of Ontario, and these will be dealt with by the OBRC in the near future.

The Forty-first Supplement introduced a number of significant changes in taxonomic order, based primarily on DNA-DNA hybridization studies, which will alter the sequence of species on the lists we all use. In addition, some common and scientific bird names were also changed. Here are a few examples. There were numerous changes in the checklist order of the waterfowl species. The vultures will now appear after Wood Stork, having been removed from Falconiformes (diurnal birds of prey) and placed in Ciconiformes (bitterns, herons, storks, and ibises). The European Starling will now follow the Brown Thrasher on the Ontario list. The Solitary Vireo was split into three species: Blue-headed Vireo (found in Ontario), Cassin's Vireo (Pacific coast), and Plumbeous Vireo (central and southern Rocky Mountains and the Great Basin).

OFO members will have seen the Ontario Bird Records Committee Report for 1996, published in the August 1997 issue of *Ontario Birds*. As OBRC Chair, I have sent letters of explanation and copies of the members' comments to submitters of reports that were not accepted by the Committee. If you sent a report to the OBRC in 1996 and it does not appear in the annual report, it was likely received too late to be considered by the 1996 Committee—but will be reviewed in 1997. Generally, reports received after the beginning of December will be held for the following year's Committee to consider. If you have any questions, please contact Rob Dobos (OBRC Secretary).

As always, we want to encourage birders to submit their reports of Review List species and forms to the OBRC. Please send your rare bird reports directly to:

Rob Dobos, OBRC Secretary,
1156 5th Concession Road West, RR 2,
Waterdown, ON L0R 2H2
E-mail: rob.dobos@ec.gc.ca

Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow

by Ron Pittaway



Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow in Smartweed by Ron Scovell

Ron Scovell '97

Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrows are rarely-seen but regular migrants in southern Ontario. To see Nelson's in southern Ontario, one must know their peak migration time and search their preferred habitat.

When to see them. Sometimes seen in spring, but fall is the best time to find them. *Peak migration is late September to mid-October.* They often arrive and depart with strong cold fronts.

Where and how to see them. Nelson's are seen most years at Hamilton's Dundas Marsh. Check the Hamilton Naturalists' Club birdline at 905-648-9537 for sightings. Bob Curry's directions to finding them at Dundas Marsh are: "Take Cootes Drive east from Dundas. Park on the side of the road just before the bridge over Spencer Creek (tickets are given on the other side). Cross the road and walk about one half kilometre down the trail along the creek to a bridge. Cross the bridge and go left another half kilometre along the willows lining the old canal. Don't look for typical sedge and grass meadows...there is almost no such habitat at Dundas Marsh. Best area is the narrow zone of Manna Grass bordering the cattails between the small pond and the open water of the bay. Best time of day is the first hour after sunrise. In October, the reeds are soaking wet from condensation and the birds will tend to sit up rather than get wet. Wear rain pants over rubber boots to avoid being drenched. Try spishing from the edge of the willows where you can get a look at the marsh. If this fails, walk briskly through the waist high reeds, checking all flushed sparrows. Swamps and Songs have an undulating flight as they pump their long tails. Nelson's are chunkier, grayer and fly on a straight plane with no pumping of their short tails. If they drop into the reeds, approach quietly to about 10 metres and spish loudly. In the morning, there is a good chance they will climb up on a reed or bush." See also "Birding in the Hamilton Area" by John Olmsted and Ron Scovell in the December 1990 *Ontario Birds*.

Alan Wormington saw 16 Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrows at Hillman Marsh near Point Pelee on 8 October 1995. This is highest number seen in one day in Ontario away from James Bay. Alan wore hip waders to check the northwest impoundment. The Nelson's were in the zone of grasses, sedges and Beggar's Ticks between the shore and the cattails. The birds often flushed into cattails where they could be seen.

When Bill Walker lived in Deep River in Renfrew County, he found Nelson's in fall at Welsh Bay on the Ottawa River just downriver (east) of the town. They were not there if the river level flooded the sedge/grass beds. Bill had a Yellow Rail in the same habitat. He also saw Nelson's regularly in similar habitat at Black Duck Lake near Chalk River.

After seeing the Nelson's habitat at Deep River, Chris Michener now finds them in similar sedge/grass habitat along the Ottawa River at Westmeath Provincial Park just east of Pembroke. From Renfrew County Road 12, take Westmeath Road 2 to the river. Best area is one half kilometre beyond the last cottage. Walk the waist high sedges along the river.

In early summer, singing Nelson's are easy to find at Shipsands Island near Moosonee on James Bay. They sing most often in early morning and late afternoon.

Habitat. Migrant Nelson's Sparrows in southern Ontario usually inhabit marshes bordering large lakes and rivers. Do not look for them in deep water marshes or thick stands of tall cattails. Instead, concentrate your search in the zone of grasses and sedges where the vegetation varies from knee to waist high (sometimes taller) and where the ground is moist to slightly wet. Nelson's are sometimes found on drier sites where lake levels have receded. Plant communities to search include *Scirpus* and *Carex* (sedges), *Spartina* (Cord Grass), *Phalaris* (Canary Grass), *Glyceria* (Manna Grass) and other similar grasses and sedges, sometimes with a mixture of *Typha* (Cattail), *Bidens* (Beggar's Ticks) or *Polygonum* (Smartweed). Interestingly, Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrows and Yellow Rails often share the same habitat. Le Conte's Sparrows prefer drier habitats.

Subspecies. Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow comprises three subspecies. Most birds seen in southern Ontario are the James Bay race *alterus*. The Prairie race *nelsoni* is more frequent in extreme southwestern Ontario. Migrants of these two races are extremely difficult to separate in the field. Fall migrants in basic plumage are more heavily streaked below than spring birds in alternate plumage. The Acadian race *subvirgatus* has not been recorded in Ontario, but it should be looked for in eastern Ontario because it occurs in summer near Montreal.

Summary. Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrows also have been seen in Algonquin Park, Ottawa, Kingston, Presqu'ile, Oshawa, Toronto, Long Point, Rondeau and elsewhere. If you know their habitat and search for them at the right season, you should find Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrows. Look for them in your area.

Acknowledgements: This article benefited from the helpful advice of Margaret Bain, Dan Brunton, Barb Charlton, Bill Crins, Bob Curry, Bruce Di Labio, Rob Dobos, Jean Iron, Chris Lemieux, Kevin McLaughlin, Chris Michener, Ron Scovell, Roy Smith, Don Sutherland, Ron Tozer, Mike Turner, Bill Walker, Nancy Wilson and Alan Wormington.

by

John Miles

Future Field Trips

October 25 (Saturday) Holiday Beach.

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

November 15 (Saturday) Cornwall, Robert Moses Power Dam and Area.

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

November 23 (Sunday) Niagara Gull Watch. Leader: Ron Scovell. Meet at Niagara-on-the-Lake at the mouth of the river at 9:00 a.m.

January 11 (Sunday) Petroglyphs Provincial Park, Peterborough.

Leader: Geoff Carpentier. Meet in the parking lot at the north end of Riverview Zoo in Peterborough at 8:30 a.m. Bald and Golden Eagles, Common Raven, Gray Jay, winter finches.

January 11 (Sunday) Cornwall, Robert Moses Power Dam and Area.

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

February 8 (Sunday) Fisherville Area, Haldimand-Norfolk County. Leader

John Miles. Meet in the parking lot of the high school at the north end of Cayuga on Hwy 54 at 9:00 a.m. Hawks and owls.

Bird Information Lines

Hamilton 905-648-9537

Kingston 613-549-8023

London 519-473-5853

Oshawa/Durham 905-576-2738

Ottawa 613-825-7444

Point Pelee 519-322-2371

Sault Ste-Marie 705-256-2790

Simcoe County 705-739-8585

Toronto 416-350-3000 ext 2293

Detroit/Windsor 248-477-1360

OFO appreciates the efforts of those who maintain the Ontario bird information alerts/lines as a service to birders.

My first experience of a birding hike was as a 13-year old in late November 1955 when the late Ross Anderson asked me to go on a Hamilton Junior Nature Club walk in Kings Forest. (Many nature clubs changed their name in the early 60s to *naturalists clubs* to distinguish nature clubs from nudist clubs!). We met at the end of the Delaware bus line and walked up Redhill Creek to the Archery Club under the leadership of George and Glen Meyers. Here, roosting in the trees, were about a dozen Long-eared Owls. While I do not remember much else, this was my introduction to birding. Others on the walk included 13-year old Bob Curry and the late Doug Smith.

By the first of January, I was hooked on birding. Ross Anderson and I started the new year with a "big day". We were off before daybreak, encountering the late Eric Bastin at the low level bridge at the east end of Dundas Marsh. Eric was kind enough to drive us around the bay to Burlington and home. We saw a grand total of 32 species.

The following Sunday was the annual duck count. We met at the low level bridge, and the legendary George North was the leader. On these duck counts in the mid- and late-50s, we were usually joined by one or two cars of birders from Kitchener, lead by Bob Pickering. They came down to Hamilton to get waterfowl and their first crows for the year. This was before the growing of early maturing hybrid corn as a cash crop. Now a flock of up to 500 wintering crows is not unusual in Kitchener. If you wanted to see Mourning Dove, another uncommon wintering species in the 50s, you had to go to Port Credit to Dr. Donald Gunn's feeder where he had two to three each winter.

After looking over the Mallards and Black Ducks on the edge of the ice, several of us juniors crawled into George's car, a 1938 Nash Lafayette which he inherited from his father's estate. This "tank" had fenders that were twice as thick as the bumpers on today's cars. George insisted that we drive with the windows down, and he would not put on the heater in case it fogged the windows. In those days, we juniors wore plain rubber boots, and if we were lucky we might have a pair of felt insoles. Needless-to-say, on one of these air conditioned outings, Ross Anderson ended up with frost bitten toes.

We were off to Woodland Cemetery on the north shore of Hamilton Bay near the Royal Botanical Gardens headquarters. Here, George had his favourite tombstone and trees for resting his brass captain's telescope. This was before spotting scopes became common. There were only about two spotting scopes in the Hamilton Club; Eric Bastin and Dave Powell each had one, but the usual scope was a telescope and no tripod. If something came by and George wanted to look at it through his telescope, he would pull it out, but about half the time he pulled it out too far so that the telescope separated in the middle. By the time he had it back together, the bird was gone.

One winter trip after leaving Woodland, we headed down Plains Road and onto the QEW towards Oakville with us juniors shivering in the back. Suddenly, George slammed on the brakes and pulled over to the side. Jumping out, he yelled, "Bald Eagle". High overhead was a spot in my 7x50s. Back in the car, George gave us hell for not spotting the eagle, as he was supposed to be driving and watching the road.

George wore extremely thick glasses and could see very well at a distance. Ross Anderson told me about the time he and George were driving down a country road when George said, "There's a Lapland Longspur. I just saw it go up 20 furrows over." When they backed up, there was the longspur! The reverse was true for birds up close. George had great difficulty seeing a bird five or six feet away, especially if it was not moving.

Getting back to the duck count, there was open water under the high level bridge and the bay was open, but not at the east end, east of where the toll gate ponds are now. Consequently, we did the north shore of Lake Ontario to Oakville and then spent the rest of the day looking for special finds for our visitors from Kitchener. To finish our count before heading home, we went to a woodlot near Milgrove, northwest of Waterdown, where a Black-backed Woodpecker was working on a dead elm.

Marsh Bird Lockup

by
Ron Pittaway

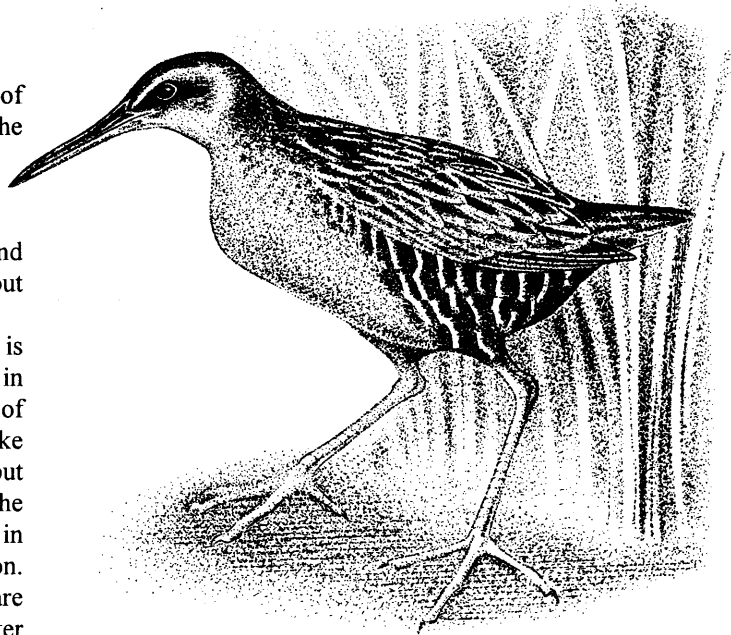
Birders of long experience will tell you that many species of marsh birds are in decline in southern Ontario. Species like the Pied-billed Grebe, King Rail, Sora, Common Moorhen, Black Tern, Green Heron, American Bittern and Least Bittern are all much less numerous than I remember them thirty years ago. Loss of marsh habitat to agriculture and urbanization is part of the reason there are fewer marsh birds, but it is certainly not the whole story!

Why are Ontario's marsh birds in decline? The answer is that many of our best marshes are old and stagnant. They are in a stage called *lockup* where the vegetation is dense and most of the nutrients are stored in organic plant matter. Marshes like forests go through stages of succession to a climax condition, but young marshes are much more productive than old marshes. The problem is that too many marshes around the Great Lakes are in the old or *lockup* stage, having filled in with thick vegetation. The once productive marshes of Point Pelee and Presqu'île are now a sea of crowded cattails with very few areas of open water for birds. Contrast these marshes with the St. Clair National Wildlife Area and Tiny Marsh Provincial Wildlife Area where water levels are managed. At Tiny Marsh, Least Bitterns, Black Terns, Pied-billed Grebes, Virginia Rails and Soras are almost common; they are all indicators of a healthy marsh. Think of some of the best marshes for birds in North America: Delta and Oak Hammock marshes in Manitoba, Montezuma in New York State and Bombay Hook in Delaware. The one thing all these marshes have in common is that their water levels are managed. Management is a nasty word with many birders and naturalists, but we cannot deny that it works and is needed in some areas. For example, most of the remaining King Rails in Ontario are now in managed marshes.

In the past, catastrophic events like floods and fires set back succession by opening up marshes and releasing many of the stored up nutrients to other plants and animals. Water level fluctuations and fire increase biological diversity and enhance habitat conditions for more species. The ideal marsh for birds is a young marsh called the *hemi-marsh* stage where there is an interspersed of 50 percent vegetation and 50 percent open water. After about 10 years, young marshes begin to stagnate and after 30 years they fill in with thick vegetation.

Today, water levels on the Great Lakes are controlled for navigation, hydro power and to prevent flooding and erosion. A dam at Sault Ste. Marie controls the water level of Lake Superior. This dam also indirectly controls the water levels of Lakes Huron, Erie and Ontario by releasing more water during dry years and holding back water in wet years. Another dam on the St. Lawrence River directly controls the level of Lake Ontario. The main effect of these dams is to even out the peaks and valleys and stabilize water levels that would have flooded or dried out marshes in the past. As well, many marshes have been ditched and diked, creating stable water levels. The natural fluctuations in water levels that once set back the stages of succession and rejuvenated marshes are gone forever.

In summary, stable water levels and lack of fires (the role of fire is less clear) have resulted in unproductive marshes. Too



King Rail
Drawing by Michael King

many of our marshes are in the *lockup* stage and marsh birds are locked out! To restore marshes to earlier successional stages and *hemi-marsh* conditions, we must mimic natural cycles by managing water levels and allowing fires to burn, creating a diversity of habitat conditions that benefit a wide range of species.

Many marshes are now being managed by non-government groups. In the future, birders must play a bigger role in advising and supporting wetland managers to manage for marsh birds. If birders want a stronger say in how things are run, we had better get on boards of directors. Our goal should be to increase biodiversity by having a better balance of young and old marshes in Ontario.

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