OFO NEWS
Newsletter of the Ontario Field Ornithologists
Volume 17 Number 2 June 1999

Southbound Shorebirds

Ron Pittaway

Quiz: Most shorebirds can be identified to species or genus by their distinctive shapes. Try these two quizzes of shorebird silhouettes at the bottom of this page and on page 5. Answers page 7.

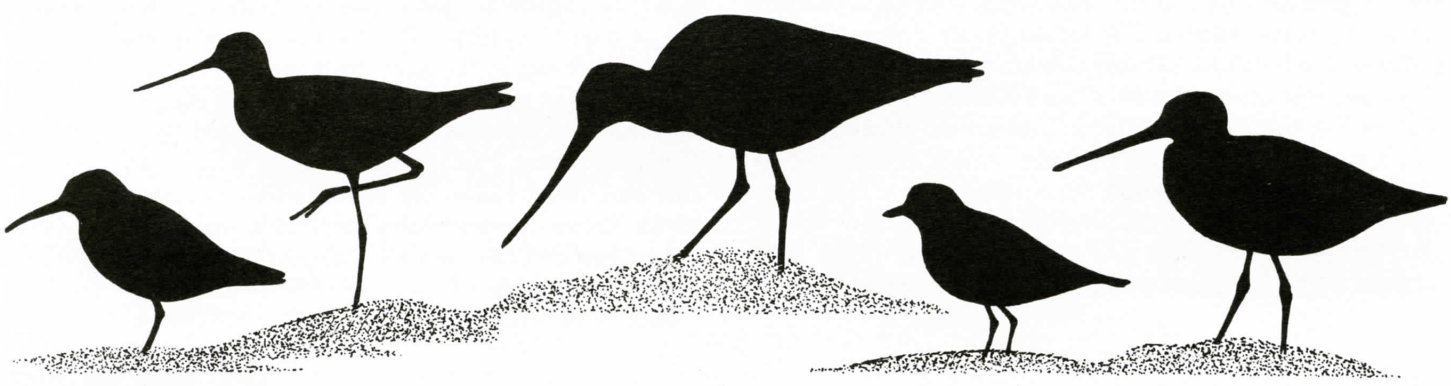
Watching Shorebirds: One of birding's more pleasurable experiences; I have been addicted for years. The opportunities for close observations, the identification challenges and the excitement of finding rarities perhaps explain their attraction. Fifty shorebird species are on the Ontario checklist. *This guide treats the fall migration of 37 species of regular occurrence in southern Ontario.*

When To See Shorebirds: Most shorebirds are long distance migrants. The fall migration of shorebirds begins in late June and goes to mid-November or longer if freeze-up is late. In most species, adults migrate a month or more before the juveniles (Table 1). The first adult Lesser Yellowlegs and Least Sandpipers move south in late June. More adult shorebirds arrive in early July, with species diversity and numbers increasing through July. Adult numbers peak in late July, followed by a sharp decrease by the second week of August. The first juvenile Least Sandpipers and Lesser Yellowlegs arrive in late July, soon followed by juvenile Semipalmated Sandpipers and Short-billed Dowitchers in early August. By mid-August, the juveniles of most species greatly outnumber adults. Total number of individuals peaks about the third or fourth week of August. Highest species counts occur from mid-August to early September, when it is possible to see over 20 species in a day. Numbers, especially peeps, dwindle quickly by early to mid-September, but different species such as Dunlin arrive, so species diversity can remain high into early October. Shorebird numbers decrease following cold fronts in October, but your chances of seeing a rare Red Phalarope or a Purple Sandpiper increase. Shorebirding ends abruptly when mudflats freeze between mid-November and early December.

Failed Breeders: Most adult shorebirds do not stay long on the breeding grounds after nest failure or loss of chicks. Some very early or earlier than normal first migrants in full alternate (breeding) plumage *may* be failed breeders.

First Year Shorebirds: Many shorebirds, especially the larger species, do not breed in their first full summer. They spend their summer on or near the wintering grounds. However, some of these birds may appear in southern Ontario, usually after the main northward migration, still in basic (winter) or partial alternate (breeding) plumage.

Where To See Shorebirds: *Sewage Lagoons:* When water levels are low, sewage lagoons are ideal places to watch shorebirds. Since water levels on the Great Lakes usually stay high through July, sewage lagoons provide better habitat for most shorebirds in



July. Sewage lagoons usually are excellent through August, but often become less productive in September as water levels rise again. *Lake Ontario:* The water level usually drops during August, creating mudflats at Dundas Marsh and Tollgate Ponds in Hamilton, Frenchman's Bay in Pickering, Corner Marsh in Ajax and Oshawa Second Marsh. Shorebirding is usually excellent at Presqu'ile Provincial Park from Beach 4 to Owen Point. *Lake Erie:* In low water years, the entire shoreline from Turkey Point east to Fort Erie can provide a fine day's shorebirding. Other Lake Erie hotspots are the tip of Point Pelee and the onion fields north of Pelee east of Mersea Road 19. Hillman Marsh Conservation Area near Pelee is fabulous when water levels are low. *Ottawa River:* Best spots are west of Ottawa near Andrew Haydon Park and the dike at Shirley's Bay. *St. Lawrence River:* Best spots are between Morrisburg and Cornwall along Highway 2 at Nairn Island and Hoople Bay; the widening of Hoople Creek one km upstream from highway is often excellent. The above locations are *not* intended to be a complete list. *Clive Goodwin's (1995) Bird-Finding Guide to Ontario (University of Toronto Press) is essential for directions to sewage lagoons and other shorebirding hotspots*. Keep it in your car.

Weather: Check your favourite shorebird spot immediately after a major storm. Thunderstorms sometimes cause fallouts of migrating shorebirds, which often depart when the weather improves.

Habitats: Shorebird numbers vary from year to year mainly because of low or high water levels. The levels on the Great Lakes show a seasonal pattern, with levels falling during August and early autumn. Strong winds on the lower Great Lakes continually wash up new clusters of *Cladophora* algae. This mat of decaying algae is full of fly larvae which shorebirds find irresistible. During long periods of hot days in summer, mudflats, beach pools, and algae mats dry out, becoming less productive for shorebirds. However, strong winds are beneficial because waves and wind tides (seiches or oscillations) create new pools on beaches, reflood mudflats and soak dried algae mats, allowing invertebrates to flourish again. Sewage lagoons also produce an abundance of invertebrates. Shorebirds will turn up anywhere there is suitable habitat. Watch lakes and reservoirs for water level drawdowns. Check farm ponds, flooded fields, sod farms, freshly plowed and newly harvested fields.

Plumage, Molt and Age: To identify shorebirds, especially rarer species, it is often necessary to first determine the bird's plumage and stage of molt. Shorebirds have three distinct plumages: *alternate* (breeding), *basic* (winter) and *juvenal* (juvenile). See Figure 1. Learning to recognize alternate, basic and juvenal feathers is the secret to understanding molt and aging in shorebirds. Alternate feathers generally are coloured and patterned; basic feathers generally are pale gray with a distinct dark shaft streak; and juvenal feathers generally have a distinct pale fringe, creating a scalloped appearance above. Adults in July and August are in worn alternate plumage or in body molt to basic plumage. Molting adults show a contrasting and messy mixture of worn alternate and fresh basic feathers. The first juveniles arrive in fresh juvenal plumage, while later juveniles are more faded and worn, usually in body molt to first basic (first winter) plumage. Since juveniles grow their feathers all at the same time, fresh juveniles look brand new lacking any molt contrast of old and new feathers. *Caution:* Bright fresh juveniles often cause identification pitfalls for the unwary. In molting juveniles, the new basic gray feathers contrast with the pale fringed juvenal feathers. *Note:* Very few shorebirds are seen in full basic plumage in Ontario. Most adult shorebirds do not molt their wings and tail until they reach the wintering grounds.

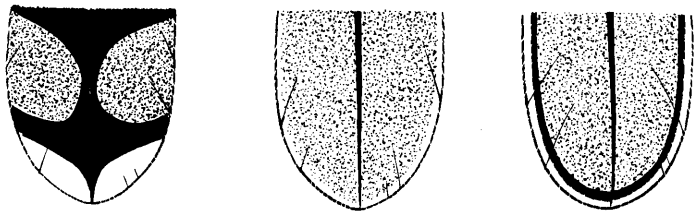


Figure 1. Left to right: alternate, basic and juvenal scapulars of a Red Knot by *Michael King*.

Feather Groups: Learn to recognize these three feather groups on a standing shorebird: scapulars, wing coverts, and tertials. They are important for identification, aging and understanding molt.

Call Notes: Learn call notes because most shorebirds can be identified and are often first detected by their distinctive calls.

Peeps and Stints: These are the tiny sparrow-sized sandpipers in the genus *Calidris*. In Ontario, they include the Semipalmated Sandpiper, Western Sandpiper, Little Stint, Least Sandpiper. North American birders usually include White-rumped and Baird's Sandpipers as peeps, but Europeans do not include them as stints.

Waders: Name used by Europeans for shorebirds.

Shorebirds and Hawks: Merlins, Northern Harriers and Accipters often flush shorebirds, but they usually return to the same spot. However, when Peregrine Falcons are hunting, shorebirds become extremely nervous and will depart or change their feeding and roosting areas.

Vagrants: The following 12 species have been recorded fewer than 10 times in Ontario: Mongolian Plover, Snowy Plover, Wilson's Plover, American Oystercatcher, Black-necked Stilt, Spotted Redshank, Wandering Tattler, Slender-billed Curlew, Long-billed Curlew, Black-tailed Godwit, Little Stint and Sharp-tailed Sandpiper.

Hybrids: Shorebird hybrids are exceedingly rare. I have never seen one. Best known hybrid is Cox's Sandpiper (no Ontario records) which is a Curlew x Pectoral Sandpiper, verified by molecular analysis. A possible White-rumped Sandpiper x Dunlin hybrid was at Hillman Marsh near Point Pelee in May 1994. Another sandpiper that appeared to part Dunlin was at Presqu'ile in August 1997.

Extinct: The *Eskimo Curlew* was probably a regular fall migrant in Ontario. Specimens were taken in Toronto in 1864 and near Kingston on 10 October 1873. Because of market hunting, it almost disappeared by the early 1890s, over a 100 years ago! Last specimen taken in Canada on 29 August 1932 at Battle Harbour, Labrador. Last photographed (one) in March and April 1962 near Galveston, Texas. Last specimen shot on 4 September 1963 in Barbados, West Indies. No 100% reliable sightings since the 1960s. Recent reports probably are juvenile Whimbrels with short bills or vagrant Little Curlews. *The Eskimo Curlew has been extinct for many years.*

Telescopes: A telescope is essential for watching shorebirds. Get a quality scope with a minimum 60 mm objective lens. Choose a wide angle 20 to 32 power eyepiece, but avoid 40, 60 or higher as your only eyepiece. A zoom 20-60 power lens is excellent and versatile.

Annotated List of Fall Shorebirds

Black-bellied Plover: Uncommon to fairly common migrant. A few adults still mostly in alternate plumage are seen after late July. Later adults are in various stages of molt. The first juveniles arrive in early September. Some fresh juveniles are heavily speckled with yellow (fades quickly), suggesting a golden-plover. A few birds, usually juveniles and occasionally basic plumaged adults, linger into November. Lone standing juveniles are difficult to identify, but often a small rudimentary hind toe, absent in golden-plovers, can be seen at close range. Prefers large mudflats, sandbars, wide beaches, and less often sewage lagoons. It sometimes mixes with American Golden-Plovers and Killdeers on freshly plowed fields and sod farms. The plaintive three-parted *pee-u-weee* whistle call is easy to imitate and will attract flying birds in closer.

American Golden-Plover: Uncommon migrant, rarely seen before early August, with a few staying to November. Adults in August are in worn alternate plumage or in blotchy molt to basic plumage. Some are still in almost full alternate plumage in early September. The first juveniles arrive in early September. Fresh juveniles are much darker and richer in colour than shown in most guides. A few golden-plovers usually mix with other shorebirds on the shorelines of the Great Lakes and less often at sewage lagoons. Occasionally, large scattered flocks are seen on sod farms and freshly plowed fields, mixed in with Killdeers and Black-bellied Plovers. Calls include a single whistled *keet* or a double *kee-leet* and a quavering whistled *queedle*.

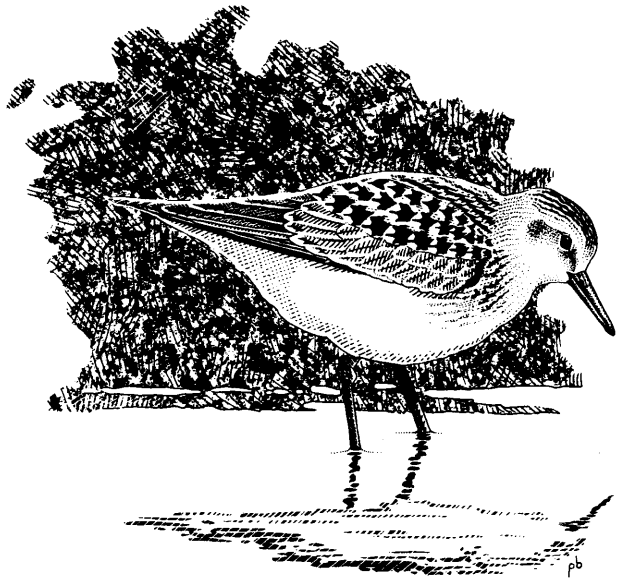


Figure 2. Juvenile Sanderling by *Peter Burke*

Semipalmated Plover: Common migrant from mid-July to mid-September with a few lingering into October. Juveniles arrive in mid-August; unlike the adults they have all-dark bills, fine scalloping on the back and duller neckband. Often first found by its plaintive rising *chu-wee* call, prefers mudflats and sewage ponds, often accompanying Least and Semipalmated Sandpipers. *Caution:* half-grown Killdeer have one neckband, but they are downy with a central tail streamer.

Piping Plover: Once nested on sand beaches such as Presqu'ile, Long Point and Wasaga Beach. Now very rare migrant, usually lone juveniles in August and September. Call is a soft whistled *peep-lo*. Always check Piping for vagrant Snowy Plover which has dark legs.

Killdeer: Common breeder. Adults and juveniles begin gathering in early July at sewage ponds, wet pastures, sod farms, freshly plowed fields and shorelines. Adults show worn reddish brown upperparts while juveniles are grayish above, often retaining central tail streamers (attached downy feathers). Common call is a loud repeated *kill-dee*. Fall birds are less vocal with a few lingering to freeze-up.

American Avocet: A very rare August migrant, occasional to early December. Most are juveniles whose cinnamon head and neck colour mimics alternate plumage. Females have more upturned bills than males, but only extremes can be reliably sexed.

Greater Yellowlegs: Fairly common migrant from early July to early November. Prefers sewage lagoons, open marshes and mudflats; much less often on shorelines. Time of arrival and numbers fluctuate widely from year to year, usually much less common than the Lesser. Adults normally arrive somewhat later than Lessers. August adults are in patchy molt to basic plumage, usually with enough heavy spotting and barring below to identify them as Greaters. The first neatly spotted juveniles usually arrive in early August, contrasting with the molting adults. Late staying juveniles undergo molt to first basic plumage. Both adults in basic plumage and molting juveniles linger into November. Juvenile and most basic plumaged Greaters show a gray base to the bill, helping to separate them from Lessers. Greaters are sometimes more active than Lessers, running and stabbing the water for minnows. The Greater's loud ringing three or four note *deer deer deer* call differs from the Lesser's usual call.

Lesser Yellowlegs: The Lesser is generally much more common than the Greater. Adults often arrive in southern Ontario by the fourth week of June! Numbers build quickly at sewage lagoons, becoming common by early July. Less common along shorelines. The first neatly spotted juveniles arrive in late July, contrasting in appearance with the dwindling numbers of patchy molting adults through August. Lessers are scarce by late September, whereas Greaters occur in small numbers for at least another month. This species, like other shorebirds, sometimes stands or hops on one leg with the other leg hidden in the feathers, leading one to believe that the bird has only one leg! Sewage lagoons ring with their *teu teu* calls, usually given in pairs, but repeated in a long series by alarmed birds. In fact, these calls are usually the first clue to a birder approaching a lagoon that suitable habitat exists. Adults in July are much more vocal than juveniles in August.

Solitary Sandpiper: Fairly common migrant from early July to late September. It is rarely seen on open shorelines, preferring the grassy edges of sewage ponds, marshes and wooded ponds. The first fresh juveniles arrive in late July; they are neatly speckled above with buffy white spots, contrasting with the worn adults that have lost much of their spotting above. This species usually molts on the winter grounds. The Solitary is often first detected when it flushes giving a distinctive *peet weet* call like a Spotted Sandpiper's but shriller.

Willet: A rare migrant. Juveniles are usually seen in August and occasionally September along shorelines of the Great Lakes, much less often at sewage lagoons. Standing Willets are sometimes misidentified as godwits, but watch for Willets to nod their heads like a yellowlegs, whereas godwits do not nod. Godwits also have pink-based bills.

Spotted Sandpiper: Common breeder at sewage ponds, lake and river shorelines. Numbers decrease sharply after mid-August. A few juveniles and occasional unmolted adult linger to late September. Juveniles are unspotted below with narrow pale fringes to the wing coverts. Juveniles also have a prominent white eyering leading to confusion with Solitary Sandpiper, but Spotted has pale legs, pale base to the bill and habit of constantly teetering its body. Common calls are a sharp *pee-weet* and a series of *weet* notes, usually given as the bird flies low over the water with rapid shallow wing beats and frequent short glides.

Upland Sandpiper: Uncommon and declining breeding bird of the pasturelands where grass is kept short by grazing. Not frequently seen on migration, usually singles, but look for them from early July to mid-September at sod farms and recently cut hay fields. I have seen flocks up to 75 birds in July staging on the Carden Plain. Migrants occasionally stop at dried out sewage ponds, usually not returning like other shorebirds after flushing. They are regular on the onion fields east of Mersea Township Road 19 north of Point Pelee. High flying migrants are sometimes detected by distinctive call, a liquid *quit-it*. Interestingly, migrating birds usually have a full wing stroke unlike the shallow stroke seen on the breeding grounds.

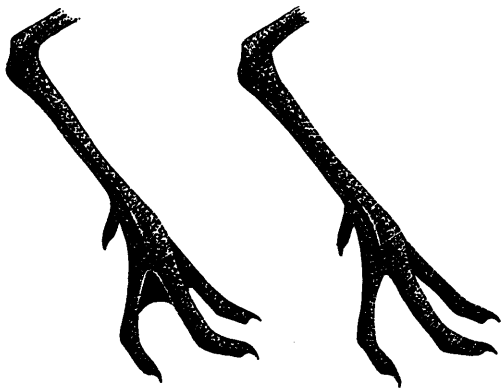


Figure 3. Partial webbed foot of Semipalmated and Western Sandpipers (left), unwebbed foot of other peeps and stints (right) by *Michael King*.

Whimbrel: Rare fall migrant (usually singles) in southern Ontario from mid-July to late September. July birds are adults; most birds after mid-August are juveniles. Most southbound Whimbrel migrate from James Bay directly to the Atlantic Coast, their flight path is mainly east of Ontario. Usually seen along the shores of the Great Lakes. Very rare inland at sewage lagoons and farmland. The practiced ear often detects flying birds by their call, a rapid series of *tu-tu-tu-tu-tu-tu-tu* notes on the same pitch.

Hudsonian Godwit: This species was once thought to be on verge of extinction. In July 1942, Ontario ornithologists Cliff Hope and Terry Short found large numbers in James Bay. We now know that thousands gather in James Bay from mid-July to late September. Most fly nonstop over Quebec and the Maritime Provinces to South America. However, a few molting adults and occasional flocks are seen from mid-August to early September in southern Ontario, usually after being grounded by thunderstorms. A few juveniles (rarely flocks) are regular from mid-September into November, with late staying birds molting towards first basic plumage. Prefers large mudflats along the lower Great Lakes, much rarer at sewage lagoons in fall. Migrants are rarely vocal. *Caution:* this species is sometimes misidentified as a Willet because it shows more white in the wings and tail than expected. A flock of Willets seen in fall is probably Hudsonian Godwits!

Marbled Godwit: A very rare migrant from August to October. It prefers sewage lagoons and large mudflats along the Great Lakes. Migrants are rarely vocal.

Ruddy Turnstone: Fairly common migrant on sandy, rocky or algae covered shores of the Great Lakes. Rare at sewage lagoons. Adults showing slight signs of molt occur from late July to mid-August, sometimes later. The first juveniles arrive in mid-August, becoming rare after mid-September, very rarely lingering into October. Juveniles are much duller (no reddish) above than adults, and like them, appear to be wearing "a drooping brassiere." Distinctive call is a harsh cackling *chut-chut-chut-chut*.

Red Knot: Adults are common in James Bay, but very rare in southern Ontario from mid-July to mid-August. Adults stage on the tidal flats of James Bay; they then fly to the East Coast with the main migration going east of Ontario. Juveniles are regular in southern Ontario, usually one to three birds at a time from mid-August through September, rarely to early November when still in juvenal plumage. One of the best places to see juvenile knots is Presqu'ile in late August and September. Juveniles are rarely vocal, but flying birds sometimes give a low whistled *eer-oit*.

Sanderling: Common migrant on the sandy and algae covered shorelines of the Great Lakes. Very uncommon at sewage lagoons and inland locations. The first adults arrive by mid-July; they exhibit a variety of worn, faded and molting plumages through August. *Caution*: bright individuals in alternate plumage are sometimes misidentified as Red-necked Stints! If you are not sure, Sanderlings lack a hind toe that is present on other sandpipers and they have a striking white wing stripe in flight. The first fresh juveniles arrive in mid-August; they are distinctly checkered above (Figure 2), contrasting with the decreasing numbers of molting adults. Juveniles in molt are common through October with a few usually staying until mid-November. Late birds acquire first basic plumage. They utter sharp *jip jip* calls.

Semipalmated Sandpiper: Common migrant from mid-July through August with numbers declining sharply by early September. As the season progresses, adults molt some scapulars showing a mixture of old alternate and new basic feathers. Juveniles begin arriving in early August and soon become commoner than the departing adults. Juveniles have backs neatly scaled with buff, sometimes rufous. Both Semipalmated and Western Sandpipers have small basal webs between the front toes, webbing is larger between middle and outer toes. You can see these webs with a good telescope (Figure 3). The Least Sandpiper and vagrant stints lack these webs. *Caution:* Some Semipalmateds have extremely long bills leading to confusion with the Western Sandpiper. Call is a short harsh *chert*.

Western Sandpiper: Look for the locally rare Western Sandpiper among the flocks of Semipalmated and Least Sandpipers. A few adult Westerns are occasionally seen from late July to mid-August. Westerns are more regular in areas around Point Pelee than elsewhere in the province. The molt of adult Westerns is

much earlier than adult Semipalmated Sandpipers. Look for a mixture of contrasting old red/black alternate and new gray basic feathers in the scapulars and scattered black arrowhead marks on the flanks, both indicators of a molting adult Western in mid-summer. By late August, adult Westerns are in almost full basic plumage, unlike adult Semipalmateds. A few juvenile Westerns occur after mid-August. Compared to juvenile Semipalmateds, they have the combination of much brighter red inner scapulars and longer drooped bill. As in adults, juvenile Westerns molt earlier than juvenile Semipalmateds. By late August, juvenile Westerns show many new gray basic feathers on the back and scapulars. A few young Westerns can be seen to early October. These first basic Westerns look like tiny Dunlins, whereas juvenile Semipalmateds are still mostly in worn juvenal plumage. *Caution*: Novices sometimes misidentify bright reddish juvenile Least Sandpipers as Westerns because the Least's bill also droops at the tip. Molting juvenile Dunlin with their reddish scapulars and drooping bills, and both adult and juvenile White-rumped Sandpipers, are also mistaken for Westerns. Call note is a high pitched *chee-rp* like a cross between a Least and a White-rumped Sandpiper.

Least Sandpiper: Common migrant. Smallest sandpiper in the world. The first adult Least Sandpipers arrive south in late June and are common through July, but adult numbers dwindle by mid-August. Worn adults in late summer show some new basic scapulars. The first juveniles arrive in late July and by mid-August they greatly outnumber adults. Least numbers drop off sharply early to mid-September. A few juveniles may linger to mid-October or later, sometimes showing first basic scapulars. In all plumages, Leasts can be told from the Semipalmated Sandpipers by their yellowish (adults) to greenish (juveniles) legs. *Caution:* the greenish legs of juveniles may appear black in poor lighting or if coated with muck. Leasts are easily identified by their distinctive flight call, a high thin *kree-eet*, often drawn out.

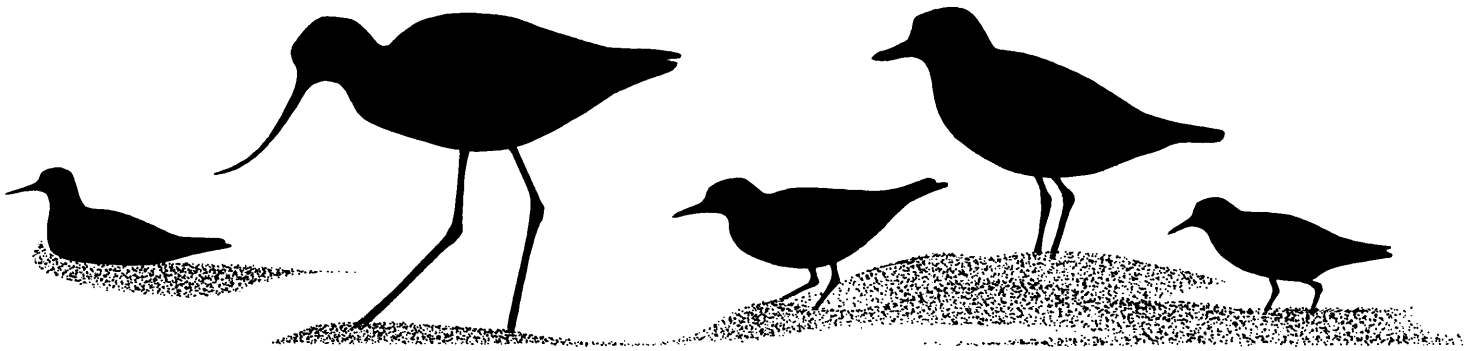
White-rumped Sandpiper: Common in James Bay, but fall migration route of adults is mostly east of Ontario. Look for a slightly larger and more elongated peep with flocks of Least and Semipalmated Sandpipers. Such a bird is likely either a White-rumped or a Baird's Sandpiper. *Note:* Standing White-rumps do not show a white rump patch because it is hidden by the folded wings. A few molting adults are seen regularly from mid-July to mid-September. Molting adults exhibit many transitional stages between alternate and basic plumages. Juveniles usually occur in larger numbers than adults, but rarely arrive before mid-September. They acquire considerable first basic plumage through October with the occasional bird staying to freezeup. Call is a squeaky mouse-like *jeet*, often the first clue to its presence in a flock of peeps.

Baird's Sandpiper: A few adults (usually singles) in slight molt are seen from mid-July to mid-August. Juveniles are much more frequent than adults, usually singles and rarely more than five together. Juveniles arrive early to mid-August and are regular through October and rarely into November. Late juveniles do not appear to be molting. Juveniles are distinctly scalloped above; most are very buffy, but a few juveniles (and adults) are much grayer. Baird's has a distinctive horizontal posture. It gives a reedy *kreep* call that helps draw attention to it in mixed flocks.

Pectoral Sandpiper: Fairly common migrant. Adult males first appear in mid-July. Males are larger than females, sometimes quite evident in the field. Unlike most shorebirds, the males (not the females) migrate when the young hatch. Some July males seen in southern Ontario show a sagging lower neck bib, evidence that they were recently courting males. On the nesting grounds, hooting males inflate their throats immensely. The first bright juveniles arrive in mid-August looking like giant juvenile Least Sandpipers. Juveniles are best told from adults by the bold white lines on the back and bright tertial edges. Juveniles are sometimes common through September and October with some into November. Both adults and juveniles show little signs of molt in Ontario. In flight, Pectorals give a grating reedy *kriek*, sharper than the Baird's.

Purple Sandpiper: This very late migrant usually does not appear in southern Ontario before mid-October. Unlike most shorebirds except the Dunlin, both adult and juvenile Purple Sandpipers undergo prebasic molt in the Arctic before migrating south. Normally seen as singles or small flocks in southern Ontario with a record 57 at Presqu'ile in December 1998 during a warm fall and low water period. A few occasionally winter above Niagara Falls. All birds I have aged were in first basic plumage, based on retained juvenal buff-fringed coverts. Its preferred habitat is wave-washed rock ledges and rock jetties, sometimes joins Sanderlings and Dunlins on algae mats and gravel beaches.

Dunlin: A late migrant, very few arrive before mid-September. Usually common through October and sometimes into November. Like the Purple Sandpiper, both adult and juvenile Dunlin stage near the breeding grounds, molting to basic plumage before migrating. The odd molting juvenile turns up after mid-August. Since many birders are not familiar with molting juveniles, they are mistaken for molting adults because they have dark spots on the sides of the belly suggesting an adult molting its belly patch. Look for the juvenile's sharply defined rufous fringed scapulars and tertials. First basic birds often retain enough traces of juvenile plumage, especially the bright edged tertials to tell them from adults. *Caution:* Molting juvenile Dunlins are mistaken for West-



ern Sandpipers because they have drooped bills and reddish scapulars. Distinctive flight call is a loud slurred *tree-ur* that carries a long distance. *Note:* An extremely small and short-billed Dunlin in heavily worn alternate plumage was seen at Hamilton on 31 July and 1 August 1994. It was either the subspecies *arctica* or *schinzii*; both races breed in Greenland.

Curlew Sandpiper: The occasional adult in alternate plumage or molting adult is seen in Ontario from mid-July through August. I have never seen a juvenile in Ontario, but look for them in September and October with Dunlin, White-rumped or Pectoral Sandpipers.

Stilt Sandpiper: Uncommon migrant, usually mixed in with other shorebirds. The first worn adults appear at sewage lagoons in early July. Less frequent along shorelines. Late July and early August adults are in body molt to basic plumage, with some adults completing body molt before departing in mid-August, rarely later. The first juveniles appear in early to mid-August, with later birds undergoing body molt to first basic plumage. A few birds of the year linger to mid-October. Stilt Sandpipers often associate with Lesser Yellowlegs and Short-billed Dowitchers. In fact, the Stilt Sandpiper suggests a hybrid between a yellowlegs and a dowitcher. Stilts often feed by plunging their whole head and neck underwater. Migrant Stilts are rarely vocal.

Buff-breasted Sandpiper: Rare migrant, usually only singles or a few birds together, but occasionally small flocks are seen at favoured locations such as Point Pelee. Most are seen from mid-August to mid-September with a few October records. Almost all birds seen in Ontario are juveniles, but very rarely adults are seen in late July and early August. Look for them on sod farms and freshly plowed fields. A few also mix with other shorebirds at sewage lagoons and along the Great Lakes, such as at Presqu'ile. One of the best places to see them is the onion fields adjacent to the north dike of Point Pelee National Park. Early in the day is best when the heat haze is at a minimum. A scope is essential. You can often pick them out by their unusual high stepping gait and head bobbing. Single migrants are usually silent.

Ruff: Very rare migrant in July and August. Most seen at sewage lagoons with Lesser Yellowlegs. Males molt ruffs early. One female in early August was in worn alternate plumage, another mostly in basic plumage. Leg colour varies. Females often can be picked out among yellowlegs by their orangy legs, but some have greenish legs. Watch for juveniles after early August. Many people refer to the female Ruff as a reeve, but this is not an official name of the species.

Short-billed Dowitcher: Fairly common migrant from early July to mid-September, rarely later. Adults in alternate plumage occur July to early August, rarely later. Two subspecies (races) occur in Ontario: nominate *griseus* and *hendersoni*. These two races in alternate plumage are separable in the field. *Hendersoni* is the much commoner of the two races. A few intergrades (intermediates) occur. Juveniles arrive early August and a few stay to mid-September, rarely later. Very bright juveniles are sometimes mistaken for adults. Learn distinctive call of Short-billed, a rapid *tu-tu-tu*, suggesting a soft version of the Ruddy Turnstone's call.

Long-billed Dowitcher: Much rarer than the Short-billed. Most adult and juvenile Long-bills migrate about a month later than same age Short-bills. Adults may be present in southern Ontario from mid-July to mid-September. *Caution:* Summer Long-bills in worn alternate plumage look like *hendersoni* Short-bills. There is a difference in molt. Adult Short-bills do not molt in Ontario, whereas adult Long-bills sometimes do. An adult dowitcher in heavy body molt in summer is a Long-billed. Some also show active wing molt with a gap in the flight feathers. Juvenile Long-bills are much more frequent than adults; normally arriving by mid-September (rarely late August) and occur through October.

Table 1. Main Adult Migration Period & Average Juvenile Arrival of 18 Shorebirds in Southern Ontario

Species	Main Adult Migration Period	Average Juvenile Arrival Time
Black-bellied Plover	Late July to early September	Early September
American Golden Plover	Early August to early September	Early September
Semipalmated Plover	Mid-July to third week August	Second week of August
Greater Yellowlegs	Early July to mid-August	Early August
Lesser Yellowlegs	Late June to mid-August	Late July
Solitary Sandpiper	Early July to mid-August	Late July
Ruddy Turnstone	Late July to mid-August	Mid-August
Red Knot	Mid-July to mid-August (very rare)	Mid-August (uncommon)
Sanderling	Mid-July to mid-August	Mid-August
Semipalmated Sandpiper	Mid-July to mid-August	Early August
Least Sandpiper	Late June to mid-August	Late July
White-rumped Sandpiper	Mid-July to mid-September	Mid-September
Baird's Sandpiper	Mid-July to mid-August (rare)	Mid-August
Pectoral Sandpiper	Mid-July to early September	Third week of August
Dunlin	Mid-September to early November	Early September
Stilt Sandpiper	Early July to early August	Second week of August
Short-billed Dowitcher	Early July to early August	Early August
Long-billed Dowitcher	Mid-July to late August (very rare)	Mid-September (rare)

Any dowitcher seen after mid-September is probably a Long-billed. In all plumages, Long-bills usually have a conspicuous pale lower eyering. The Long-bill's eyering is wider and more even in width compared to the thinner and often uneven eyering of the Short-billed. The eyering difference is not diagnostic, but an indicator of the species. Learn the diagnostic call of the Long-billed, given standing and flying, a single thin whistled *peep*, sometimes repeated.

Common Snipe: Common breeder. Usually hides by squatting or skulking near reeds in sewage ponds and marshes where small groups gather after nesting. Rarely seen on open mudflats, where they can be told from dowitchers by their boldly striped heads and backs. Adults and juveniles are very difficult to separate in the field. Flushes in a zigzag flight calling a raspy *scape*.

American Woodcock: Secretive woodland sandpiper, never seen at sewage ponds or mudflats. Unless flushed, seen only at dawn and dusk flying between feeding and roosting sites. Wings make a twittering whistle.

Wilson's Phalarope: Uncommon migrant and rare breeder. Most seen at sewage lagoons. Bright adult females are extremely early fall migrants, rarely seen after late June. Males attend young until about mid-July, then migrate south by early August. Most birds seen after mid-July are juveniles molting to first basic plumage. The occasional birds seen in September and October are in gray first basic plumage. A few young are in full juvenal plumage in mid-August. The legs are yellow in juveniles and first basic birds. The three species of phalaropes are the only shorebirds that habitually swim, but all shorebirds can swim. Occasionally a swimming Lesser Yellowlegs is misidentified as a Wilson's Phalarope. Wilson's swim less than the other two phalarope species, often wading in shallow water with other small shorebirds. Don't be confused by a fresh scaly-backed juvenile walking on the shore just because it doesn't seem to be a phalarope! On hot summer days, Wilson's Phalaropes often run on the shore with their bills pointed down and tails pointed up, actively jabbing and snapping at flying insects. This behaviour allows them to be identified at a long distance. Breeders give piglike grunts but migrants are usually silent.

Red-necked Phalarope: Adults are very rare from mid-July to mid-August; early females are mostly in alternate plumage or molting and late males are well into basic plumage. A few juveniles, usually showing some scapular molt, are regular from early August to late September, rarely later. Usually seen at sewage lagoons and sometimes along shorelines with other shorebirds. A phalarope seen after mid-October is probably the next species.

Red Phalarope: Adults mostly in alternate plumage or molting are extremely rare in mid-summer. Usually seen near the Great Lakes and rarely at sewage lagoons. A few juveniles are regular every year. Juvenile Reds migrate much later than juvenile Red-necked Phalaropes. However, early juveniles may arrive in late August when Reds are not expected by most birders. September birds are in body molt, showing a mixture of bright juvenile and gray first basic feathers. Juvenile and molting juvenile Reds are sometimes mistaken for Red-necked Phalaropes because they appear streaked on the back. One bird on the 24 October 1992 at Frenchman's Bay in Pickering was in almost full juvenile plumage, with some gray basic scapulars. However, most are in first basic plumage by late October, except for telltale retained bright edged juvenile tertials. Reds sometimes linger into early December. In flight, juvenile and basic Red and Red-necked Phalaropes look like Sanderlings with their conspicuous white wing stripes. Call is a *whit* like a Sanderling, but higher and thinner.

Best Books: The new *Field Guide to the Birds of North America*. 1999. Third Edition. National Geographic, Washington, D.C. Best field guide to ID and plumages. I also recommend the following:

Chandler, R.J. 1989. *North Atlantic Shorebirds*. Facts on File Inc., New York. An ID gem with photos of adults and juveniles.

Hayman, P., J. Marchant and T. Prater. 1986. *Shorebirds: An Identification Guide to the Waders of the World*. Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston. Best handbook; keep it in your car.

Paulson, D. 1993. *Shorebirds of the Pacific Northwest*. UBC Press, Vancouver. Another gem, highly recommended.

Acknowledgements: For valuable information, I thank Ken Abraham, Bob Curry, Bruce Di Labio, Earl Godfrey, Michel Gosselin, Brian Henshaw, Tom Hince, Jean Iron, Kevin McLaughlin, Guy Morrison, Ken Ross, Don Sutherland, Ron Tozer and Mike Turner. Michael King and Peter Burke kindly provided the illustrations.

Shorebird Quiz Answers: Silhouettes on page 1 from left to right are Dunlin, Greater Yellowlegs, godwit, *Charadrius* plover, dowitcher. Page 5 are Red-necked Phalarope, American Avocet, Spotted Sandpiper, Black-bellied Plover, peep or stint.

Shorebird silhouettes illustrated by Michael King

Notes from the OBRC

Bob Curry

The Annual Spring Meeting of the Ontario Bird Records Committee was held at the Federation of Ontario Naturalists headquarters in Don Mills on 27 March 1999. Members spent a full day discussing and taking final votes on bird records where a final decision had not been reached during the earlier round of voting by mail. The Committee will meet again on 11 September 1999 to discuss policy matters.

OBRC thanks David Brewer and Nick Escott, two long-serving members whose most recent three-year terms ended with this meeting and to Peter Burke who completed his first term. We hope to see these skilled people back on the Committee in the future. Ron Tozer has stepped down as chair after yet another fine job of guiding the Committee with aplomb and good humour. Also, Rob Dobos is relinquishing the job of Secretary after four years of meticulous and exacting attention to Ontario's rare bird records and the Annual Report in Ontario Birds. He has the 1998 report to do before he can enjoy the challenge as a voting member.

David Beadle and Alan Wormington were elected for the 2000 to 2002 term. We welcome Dave as a first time member of OBRC, and look forward to Alan's return to the Committee.

The 1999 Committee is: Margaret Bain, Bob Curry (Chair), Rob Dobos, Ross James (ROM Liaison), Kevin McLaughlin, Doug McRae, Ron Pittaway, Kayo Roy (Secretary) and Ron Tozer.

I encourage everyone to document sightings of species and forms on the OBRC Review List during 1999 and submit reports to the Committee. You will be contributing to the permanent record of Ontario field ornithology. Visit the OFO Web Page for a report form and see the Review List: **www.interlog.com/~ofo**

Send reports to:

Kayo Roy, OBRC Secretary
13 Kinsman Court
Fonthill ON L0S 1E3
E-mail: kayoroy@niagara.com

Blue-headed Vireo

in

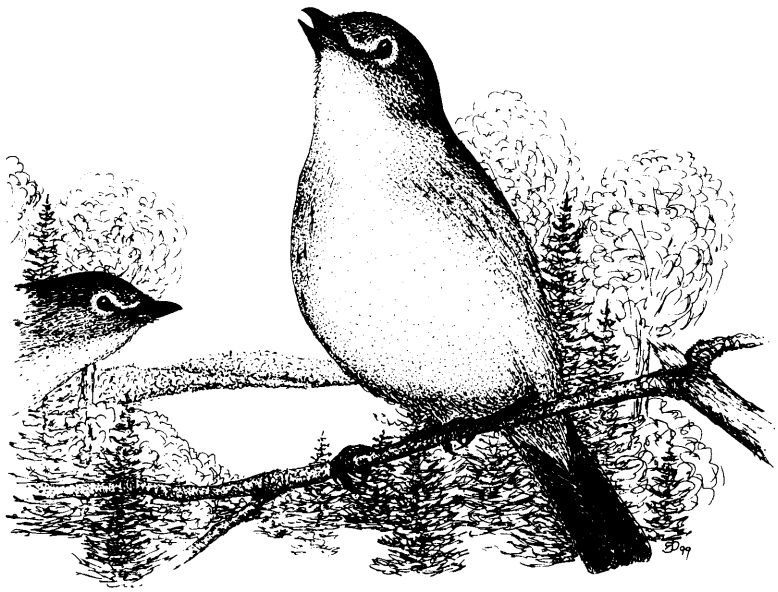
The Birds of North America

Ross James

Vireos to most people are probably about as well known and as interesting as the sex life of earthworms. Tiny movements among a waving sea of green far overhead or off in forests too replete with blackflies and mosquitoes to be visited by choice. Certainly as a young lad roaming about the southern Ontario fields and woodlots learning about poison ivy or Great Horned Owls and the like, they were not among the most numerous fascinating aspects of the natural world that made a lasting impression on my conscientiousness.

But, as I searched for an interesting subject to embrace for graduate studies, they seemed a better option than fruit flies or slugs. So led down the forest path, I began to delve into the residential and dining preferences of Red-eyed, Warbling and Yellow-throated Vireos. In the process of reading available literature, I became intrigued by the question of the relationship of the "Solitary" Vireos and the Yellow-throated Vireo.

The "Solitary" Vireos have recently been split into three species: the Blue-headed, ranging across Canada and south into the highlands of the eastern U.S.; the Plumbeous of the interior western mountains of the U.S. and Mexico; and the Cassin's of the western mountain forests. The "Solitary" Vireos and the Yellow-throated Vireo would at first glance appear to be very different birds. But, if you took the former and added a lot of yellow colour–voila!



Singing male Blue-headed Vireo by *Ross James*

So when Hamilton proposed the evolutionary origins of the Yellow-throated Vireo from ancestral "Solitary" types, I thought a study of the comparative behaviour was a worthwhile endeavour. I had several places where I had been observing Yellow-throated Vireos. Looking for a place to study Blue-headed Vireos, I approached a dear friend and childhood neighbour, Pat Kerr, who kindly agreed to let me use her tiny cabin tucked away in the Muskoka woods as a field camp.

For several springs I faced the flies behind a mask of DEET, plus several layers of tight clothing and drove madly north and south to record comparative behaviour for a doctoral thesis. In the intervening years after those efforts, I became involved in many other things, and when *The Birds of North America* project began, I didn't even seriously consider trying to find time to work in writing an account.

When I was asked finally to co-author the Yellow-throated account, I rather reluctantly agreed. But, I soon found it so attractive again, I volunteered to write the Blue-headed account.

For an animal that does not talk as we understand the process, it is intriguing to consider how they can communicate sufficiently well to undertake pairing and cooperating to raise a family. But, since they are not concerned with such trivial things as writing a novel, getting a university degree, or building a four-wheeled, earthbound, gas-guzzling, polluting and expensive encumbrance with which to get around, they have remarkably elaborate "language" that serves them rather well.

A male singing loudly and persistently is unmated. A female has an opportunity there, other males should go elsewhere. When first a female approaches, she can see how well he performs in his displays, one that is similar to that used later prior to copulation, and a ritualized nest building display. She can also see where he has selected potential nest sites, and if agreeable, can join the building. If not, they can look elsewhere, if in fact she is impressed enough to remain. He then encourages her by confining singing and displaying largely to the immediate nest area, as well as taking a lead in building.

While away from the immediate nest, they have scarcely audible contact notes with which to "talk" to each other. They may be more like "sweet nothings"—important, yet not communicating vital statistics. But then, just maybe I'm missing something here!

Jays and crows and the like are greeted with loud scolding calls, as the birds actively mob them. The more urgent the situation, the louder and longer the calls, and the greater is the ruffling of feathers to make them look larger and more fierce (if that is possible).

When a mild or potential threat is detected, an alarm call is quietly given, but a bird-eating hawk elicits an immediate loud alarm of a different kind, while the bird remains as immobile as possible. The scolding calls are of unstructured sound, readily located, but the alarm calls are purer tones, ventriloqual, and much harder to locate by any potential predator.

In a variety of situations, relating to outside interference by other birds or when mates are interacting in various ways, wherever there is some degree of excitement, they have lovely sounding trills that seem to express a release of tension.

When members of a pair lose contact during the nest building period, he will suddenly begin to sing rapidly and give trills. If the female calls from someplace or returns to sight, he immediately calms down. He or she may also use a distinct *cheee* type call in such situations. It may partly express desire (where are you?) or location (here I am), and perhaps mild annoyance at the situation (having to call, or having to answer). A similar call is used in winter, rather than song, and may denote a mild territorial function.

But then, this *cheee* is also used later, sometimes as a bird approaches the nest while still a way off—or be used by a female on the nest in answer to song. All in all, there are a number of possible meanings that are not entirely clear. But it works all right for them. Perhaps it is like us using "you know", where somehow the other person should be a mind reader or something. "You know" is used often enough by some people to confuse me also at times.

Then there is the serious business of sperm transfer. When this exciting day arrives, the male again continually serenades with song and fluffs all his feathers slightly. I suppose this fluffing is designed to enhance his appearance. But, not being a female vireo myself.... He also uses this fluffing on the first day a new pair has formed—another suitable time to look impressive, yet not too aggressive.

And when the happy moment arrives (I assume they are happy—quite a bit of excitement anyway), the male has a swaying display with various feathers accentuated (Oh those eyes!) and quivering wings to vibrate the fully extended sides. Plus, he is singing his head off with a special bubbling call appropriate to the moment. I was impressed! How could she not be, especially after days of careful preparations for laying eggs, and only a few centimetres away?

Exchanges on the nest are easy; almost any song or call seems to serve as a signal, both from the incoming bird and the outgoing. If the one on the nest won't answer, the incoming bird had better beware. There may be an unwanted character watching too closely.

They use quivering display to overcome individual distance. Young use it when begging, allowing the close approach of an adult. Two adults never come together at the nest to feed unless the first there is wing quivering on the other's approach. And it had been incorporated into the precopulatory display, as mentioned, where closeness is a bit of a must.

All in all Blue-headed Vireos have about 10 fairly distinctive types of songs or calls that are used regularly. But the meanings of any one can obviously be varied depending upon the particular situation in which each is used, or through variations in loudness and intonation, and through changes in accompanying feather postures.

They also have a few other calls that are seldom ever heard and presumably they know what they mean even if I haven't been able to comprehend yet. Even with simpler needs for communication, there is a complex of behaviours that would require many years of study to try to understand all the details.

Ross James, recently retired from the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, is a leading authority on vireos.

A Swimming Eagle

Wolfgang Luft

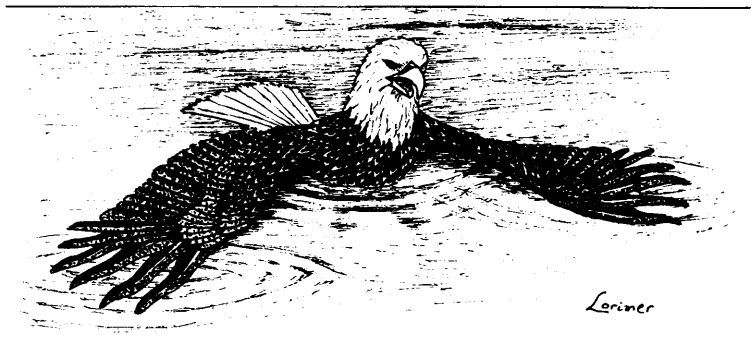
On 9 January 1999 off the shore of Lake Ontario at Burlington's Venture Inn, I noticed a probable first year Bald Eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) swimming about 200 metres off shore. The bird was deliberately swimming toward shore, using its extended and splayed wings as levers on the water surface to lift itself a bit and to propel itself forward. A small wake was seen in the not too choppy water to indicate a general forward movement.

At one point, the eagle actually lifted its body and wings above the water but its legs were still in the water and was unable to climb any further; clearly it had something heavy in its talons and was unable to lift the prey. Eagles like many birds of prey "lock" the tendons of the talons for more effortless grasping while flying or perching, but are not always able to let go at will. Although able to catch, kill and transport quite large prey such as fish or fowl, there is a finite limit.

After this unsuccessful attempt at flight, the bird dropped back down and resumed swimming for a further 75 metres. The eagle then attempted and successfully cleared the water but without prey. The bird quickly flew to the nearest tree to dry and preen. While in the tree, I approached within 25 metres to verify that it was a Bald Eagle.

A.C. Bent (1937) in his book *Life Histories of North American Birds of Prey* mentions on page 346 that "occasionally one may fasten its claws on a fish that is too big for it to lift, which results in a struggle that is unpleasant or even dangerous for the eagle". However, he also states that eagles have been observed "to alight on the water, float about for several minutes as lightly as a gull, probably in pursuit of fish, and then arise from the surface with no great difficulty".

I thought this was a most interesting observation of eagle behaviour.



Swimming adult Bald Eagle by *Peter Lorimer*

New Ontario Record

Congratulations to Tom Hince, Paul Pratt and Glenn Gervais (driver) who set a new Ontario Big Day record with 200 species on Saturday 29 May 1999, breaking the previous Ontario record of 194 set by Tom and Paul in 1994. Tom, Paul and Glenn went from Algonquin to Pelee with their 200th bird a calling Yellow-breasted Chat in the dark at Pelee. They feel that the 205 species record for Canada set in Manitoba will be broken in Ontario next year.

Acadian Flycatchers in Ontario Ravines

Dave Martin, Jon McCracken and Mike Cadman

Over the years most Ontario birders have considered themselves fortunate to find an Acadian Flycatcher. If missed on the annual trek to Point Pelee there was always the chance to "tick" one off at Rondeau, or in the last few years, on territory at one or another sites in the Long Point area. During the Breeding Bird Atlas years, only a few lucky atlasers found a singing male or perhaps even a pair of this elusive species in their square. It is probably safe to say that very few birders feel that they have the skills or search image to find an Acadian Flycatcher outside the few well-known Ontario migration and breeding sites.

The purpose of this note is to change the prevailing wisdom that the Acadian Flycatcher cannot be seen or found apart from a lucky encounter during migration.

In the 1998 breeding season, field surveyors with the Hooded Warbler/Acadian Flycatcher Recovery Team (formed in 1996 to develop and implement a Recovery Plan for these two species that had been designated as Threatened and Endangered respectively) successfully tested the hypothesis that Acadians can be found by searching in the "right" habitat even at previously unexplored sites. The results: on just a few field days in late June, a survey team of two people found 11 pairs of Acadians, 5 unmated singing males, 14 active nests and 5 inactive nests at 5 sites, four of which were new for Canada.

Historically, most Acadian Flycatchers in Ontario have been found in large swampy woods. W.E. Saunders found the first Canadian birds in "an immense black ash swamp" a few miles from the Lake Erie shoreline in Essex County. For many decades Rondeau Provincial Park was *the* place to find Acadians. Here, the birds nested on American Beech branches overhanging the shallow sloughs. In the last few years, however, no nesting has been documented. More recently, good numbers of Acadians have been found in the Long Point area, usually in Silver Maple swamps and wet woods. The prevailing thought on where to find Acadians in Ontario, then, has been in large, mature, wet woodlands.

A careful reading of Bent (1942) shows that this traditional image does not quite tell the whole story. The descriptions of Acadian habitat by Bent's correspondents provide one common feature no matter whether the species is breeding in Texas, North Carolina, Wisconsin or Pennsylvania. In Florida the species is found "along small watercourses"; in Louisiana "wherever there are river swamps and creek bottoms"; in western North Carolina "most numerously in rhododendron thickets bordering streams"; in Wisconsin "typical habitat is a deep, well-wooded ravine having a rocky stream bed, which is usually dry"; in Texas "open glades in timber along water courses and along creeks and wooded ravines or Spanish Oaks overhanging creek valleys in hills, or deep, shady woodlands watered by small streams"; and in Pennsylvania "in streams in wooded ravines". Bent finishes his long list of habitat "types" with a statement that neatly sums up the best search image for Acadians: "it is where the pendent lower branches of great beeches overhang the small streams that these birds are most likely to be found". The common feature, then, is watercourses in well wooded sites (especially in ravines). This is not to say that Acadians cannot be found in a host of other "wet" situations such as Saunder's Black Ash swamp in Ontario, the cypress ponds of the Okefenokee Swamp, or "swampy woods of every character" in Louisiana. Even in these situations, the Acadian is most likely found and building its nest overhanging water.

After the results of the 1998 surveys were analyzed and discussed, the Acadian Flycatcher/Hooded Warbler Recovery Plan was updated to include this new important habitat for Acadians. Since the Recovery Team estimates an annual Ontario population of 50 to 75 pairs and the recovery plan estimates that 250 pairs are needed to ensure a stable sustaining population, the first future action to consider is that potential Acadian habitat has to be surveyed before implementing more expensive actions. Excited by the prospects that there may be many more pairs of Acadians in the province than was previously thought, the Recovery Team began planning how the many hundreds of kilometres of ravines in Ontario could be explored.

A quick look at a topographic map for any portion of the Acadian's known range in Ontario (primarily the Carolinian Zone) shows that there must be hundreds if not thousands of kilometres of wooded ravine habitat. Possibilities include any small stream flowing into Lakes Erie, Ontario or southern Huron, tributaries and side ravines of the larger rivers and creeks (Ausable, Thames, Grand, Kettle, Catfish, Otter), and ravines on the Niagara Escarpment. Even if a small percentage of these ravines has Acadians, the Ontario population will be doubled or tripled. The ravines do not have to be long nor does the surrounding upland have to be wooded. In Elgin County landowners have cleared the forest right to the last tree at the top of slope and yet plenty of "heavily wooded ravines" remain.

And so, Ontario birders can help the Acadian Flycatcher/ Hooded Warbler Recovery Team by exploring ravines in their home birding area, looking for Acadians and reporting sightings to the Recovery Team. Having additional breeding sites to study in southern Ontario will help the Recovery Team to better understand the species' habitat requirements.

The following guidelines will help you to determine what kinds of ravine habitat are worth looking into, how to look for Acadians and what to do if you find them.

Finding Acadians

1. Finding Acadian Ravines

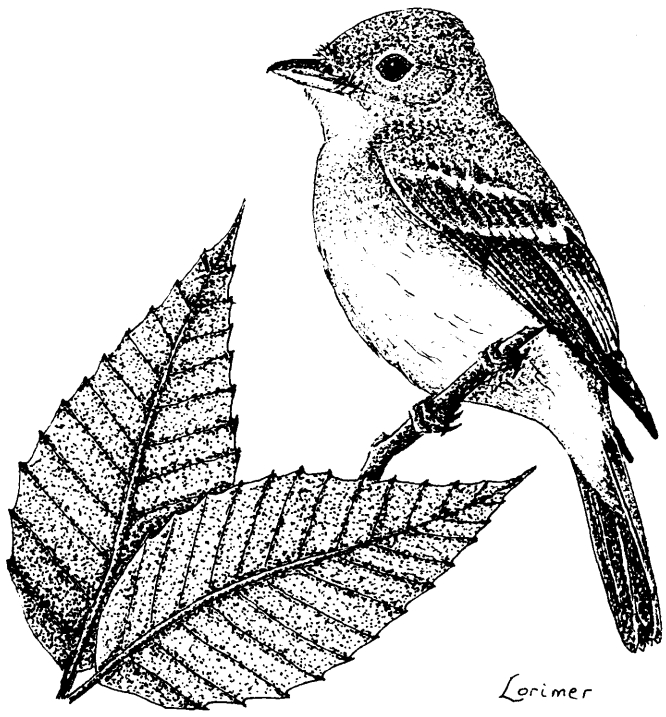
Study topographic maps of your area. Look for tertiary or secondary streams flowing into a larger creek or river or smaller streams flowing into Lakes Erie, Ontario or southern Huron. Green shading on the topographic map is the clue that the site is wooded. Even better, if the map shows a stream and there are several contour lines close together indicating a steeply sloped ravine, you will have a prime candidate for further investigation. Look to see if there is a road crossing the ravine at some point. Visit the

site and look up and downstream from the road to see if the ravine has a closed canopy forest. If the valley is too wide and open, don't proceed any further (unless the map shows that there are small ravines flowing into this valley). If the ravine does have a closed canopy, study possible access points and get permission from the landowner, private or public. You can do this search anytime, even in winter, and return to the site in the breeding season.

2. Finding Acadians

Once you have located sites with "apparently suitable" habitat and secured permission, start visiting the site after June 10. Acadians are late migrants and may continue moving around for a week or so before they settle onto a territory so there is not much point in visiting the site any earlier. Soon after you start exploring the ravine you will know if you are in suitable habitat. The forest canopy should be closed or almost closed; the understorey should be very open with few saplings; there should be little or no shrub layer; and the ground should be almost bare of vegetation.

The Acadian Flycatcher is well known for its *peet-sa* song which can be heard up to 100 m away. The song has also been rendered as a *pizza* or *pit-see* among other variations. In many of the ravines we visited, the breeding birds most likely to be encountered were Black-capped Chickadee, White-breasted Nuthatch, Red-eyed Vireo, Rose-breasted Grosbeak and Wood Thrush. Some ravines had Eastern Wood-Pewee, Ovenbird, or Great Crested Flycatcher. Three of 19 ravines visited along the Elgin County shoreline had Tufted Titmouse. Although we did not find Louisiana Waterthrush in Elgin ravines that were on clay soils, ravines on sandy soils (e.g. Otter Creek in east Elgin and west Norfolk) with clear running streams are a likely location for this *Vulnerable* species.



Acadian Flycatcher in American Beech by *Peter Lorimer*

You may think that you have to search for Acadians early in the morning, but we found that they often sing throughout the day as do Red-eyed Vireos and Eastern Wood-Pewees. Besides you will be moving through their territories on your search and you will also be listening for alarm calls.

Although you may occasionally detect singing Acadian males by walking the top of the ravine slope, we found that the best way to determine their presence is to follow the stream (you may need boots) through the ravine. By walking the ravine bottom you will inevitably enter a territory at some point (remember: Acadians build their nests near or overhanging the stream) and cause an alarm reaction to your presence. You should move slowly and stop to listen and look every few metres so that you are prepared to see movement or hear the "chipping" alarm note which may be given by either the male or female and can be heard up to about 20 metres away. If you encounter "chipping" you have come too close to the nest and you should move out of the territory.

If you only find a singing male, visit the site again about a week later. Finding the singing male in more or less the same location as on the first visit will confirm that it is a territorial bird. Spend some time determining the extent of the territory which should be, in general, up and downstream from where you located the singing male. Watch for a second bird in the male's territory which will undoubtedly be the mate of the singing male.

3. Mapping and marking sites and territories

Acadians have linear territories along the watercourse in ravines. You will be mapping singing males, the chipping alarm calls of pairs, and nests on your map. To mark the territory, number and tie flagging tape to a branch overhanging the stream where you first hear the male singing. Note and map any landmarks such as large downed trees, a side channel, large rocks in the stream. As you move through the territory, the male will probably stop singing and there may be alarm calls from either the male or female. Mark this spot on your map, again noting any landmarks and tie flagging tape where the chipping notes came from. As you leave the territory the chipping calls may cease (flag and map) and as you get further away the male may resume singing (flag and map). Alternatively, if you come back the same way later in your visit you will be able to mark the "other" end of the territory. An example of a note on your map would be: "Flagging Tape #1: singing male first heard—the flagging tape is on the west side of the streambed. Large downed tree crossing the stream about 15 paces upstream. Flagging tape #2: alarm calls from 1 adult. Large Hemlock on the east bank of the ravine".

Finally, you should also note how far in time and/or distance the territory is from your entry point to the ravine so that a Recovery Team member can later relocate the site fairly easily and quickly. Determining the UTM coordinates from your topo map will also help.

You can also help by letting the landowner know what you have found and securing permission for a Recovery Team member to visit the site on one or more future dates to find the nest and study the nest site characteristics. When you report your sighting, provide the landowner's name and phone number.

4. Minimizing disturbance

The Acadian Flycatcher is an Endangered Species. If you follow the steps above, you can locate breeding birds with very little disturbance. Providing that information to the Recovery Team will allow trained biologists visit the site to assess the situation. You will be making a significant contribution to the conservation of the species in Canada. Do not deliberately look for nests, but if you stumble on one, do not approach it or attempt to examine the nest

contents. Because Acadian Flycatcher nests are located towards the end of flimsy branches and the nests are so shallow, the eggs or young could be too easily knocked out of the nest. Also, the parents will become alarmed by your presence and start making alarm calls. Their alarmed behavior will alert nearby Blue Jays, Eastern Chipmunks or Grey Squirrels to the presence of the nest. If you find a nest, move out of the territory as soon as possible. It goes without saying that nest locations should not be revealed.

5. How to get involved and how to report

OFO members and readers can help search for Ontario Acadians (and other rare species) in the 1999 field season, especially in ravines in the southwestern part of the province. Anyone interested in exploring "new" ground in their own birding area and anyone finding singing Acadian males, a territorial pair or a nest should contact *Ontario Birds At Risk* program at Bird Studies Canada as soon as possible.

Phone: 519-586-3531

E-mail: jmccracken@bsc-eoc.org

A Reminder About Ethics

The Acadian Flycatcher is a Canadian Endangered Species. Most pairs in Ontario will be found on private property. OFO's *Code of Ethics* is just as appropriate in the case of breeding birds as it is for hotline rarities.

No private property should be entered without permission. Even in the case of public lands, the owner/manager should be contacted because the work may involve going off established trails or parking cars away from designated parking lots. If nests are found there is no need to disturb the nest. Nest locations should be kept confidential. The Recovery Team will determine if additional information needs to be collected from the nest site and may ask for a site visit with you.

References

Bent, A.C. 1942. *Life Histories of North American flycatchers, larks, swallows, and their allies.* United States National Museum Bulletin 179, Washington, D.C.

Woodliffe, P.A. 1987. Acadian Flycatcher. Pages 256-257 in M.D. Cadman, P.F.J. Eagles, and F.M. Helleiner (eds.). *Atlas of the breeding birds of Ontario.* University of Waterloo Press, Waterloo, Ontario.

Dave Martin is a naturalist and guide in southwestern Ontario. He is a member of the Acadian Flycatcher/Hooded Warbler Recovery Team.

Jon McCracken works for Bird Studies Canada and is a member of the Acadian Flycatcher/Hooded Warbler Recovery Team.

Mike Cadman works for the Canadian Wildlife Service and is chair of the Acadian Flycatcher/Hooded Warbler Recovery Team.

Change of Address

If you move, please send your change of address to:

Eleanor Beagan, OFO Memberships
Box 455, Station R
Toronto ON M4G 4E1
E-mail: etbeagan@wiznet.ca

OFO NEWS Editor

Jean Iron, 9 Lichen Place, Toronto ON M3A 1X3
416-445-9297 E-mail: jeaniron@globedirect.com
Editorial assistance: Michael King & Ron Pittaway

OFO Web Page: www.interlog.com/~ofo
OFO e-mail: ofo@interlog.com

Ontario Field Ornithologists
Box 455 Station R
Toronto ON M4G 4E1

Ontbirds

Ontbirds, with over **600** subscribers, is OFO's very successful listserv for reporting and receiving bird sightings.

To subscribe, send an e-mail to:
majordomo@hwcn.org
Skip the subject line and in the body of the e-mail, type:
subscribe ontbirds
Skip another line and type:
end
Send the e-mail. That's all it takes!

Questions : contact Mike Street
mikestreet@hwcn.org

OFO trips

Future Field Trips

September 11 (Saturday) and October 9 (Saturday) Hawk Hill, High Park, Toronto. Hosts: Greater Toronto Raptor Watch.
Meet in the Grenadier Restaurant parking lot at **10:00 a.m.** Use Bloor St. entrance at High Park Ave.

September 12 (Sunday) Presqu'ile Provincial Park. Leader: Don Shanahan.
Meet at Beach 4 parking lot at **8:00 a.m.** Fall migrants, shorebirds, raptors.

September 18 (Saturday) Port Burwell Provincial Park. Leader: Dave Martin.
Meet at day-use area at 9:00 a.m. Park entrance fee applies. Camping is available. For reservations, call 519-874-4691. Exit 401 at Ingersoll. Take Highway 19 through Tilsonberg to Port Burwell. Hawk migration and other migrants along Lake Erie shoreline. (Note Dave Martin's article in *OFO News*, June 1998) ****NEW TRIP****

October 2 (Saturday) Westmeath Dunes, Ottawa River. Leader: Chris Michener.
Join Pembroke Area Field Naturalists at Westmeath Municipal Dock, turn left at blue house at **8:00 a.m.** Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow, raptors, migrants, extensive unspoiled beach and riparian habitat.
Call Chris: 613-625-2263
e-mail: cmichener@renc.igs.net

October 2 and 3 (Saturday and Sunday) Point Pelee National Park. AGM field trips. Leaders: Alan Wormington, Paul Pratt, Dave Milsom, Ron and Doug Tozer.
See enclosed flyer for registration.

October 9 (Saturday) Leslie Street Spit. Leader: Norm Murr. Meet at the base of The Spit parking lot at Leslie and Unwin Avenue at **8:00 a.m.** Fall migrants and waterfowl.

October 23 (Saturday) Holiday Beach Leader: Paul Pratt.
Meet at the hawk viewing tower at Holiday Beach Conservation Area on County Road 50 (3 km south of Malden Centre, 30 km west of Kingsville) at **9:00 a.m.** Migrating raptors.

October 24 (Sunday) Grand Bend Area Leaders: Tom and Jill Hayman.
Meet at Colonial Hotel on Hwy 21 in Grand Bend at **9:00 a.m.** Fall migrants, also possible: Red-throated Loon, Brant, jaegers and rare gulls.

November 21 (Sunday) Niagara River Gull Watch. Leader: Ron Scovell.
Meet in Niagara-on-the-Lake at the mouth of the river at **9:00 a.m.** for a trip to this premier gull watching area.