



OFO NEWS

Newsletter of the Ontario Field Ornithologists

Volume 18 Number 2

June 2000

J. Murray Speirs Distinguished Ornithologist

Jean Iron and Rayfield Pye

The OFO Board is pleased to announce that J. Murray Speirs is the third recipient of the Distinguished Ornithologist Award.

For over 65 years, Murray has been a leading ornithologist in Ontario. He is known for his meticulous recording of ornithological information. His primary interests are bird censusing and studies of American Robins, Black-capped Chickadees, Evening Grosbeaks and Lincoln's Sparrows. Murray is author of many articles and books. He compiled *Birds of Ontario County*, 1973-1979, a five volume series and one of the first annual publications on local bird populations in Canada. An authority on the Lincoln's Sparrow, Murray wrote the account in Bent's *Life Histories of North American Birds* in 1968. His two volume *Birds of Ontario* was published in 1985.

Murray's contributions to conservation and local clubs are considerable. He is a founding member of the Toronto Ornithological Club, the Federation of Ontario Naturalists and he co-founded the Pickering Naturalists in 1977. In 1995, he donated part of his property in Pickering to the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority to preserve part of Altona Forest as an ecological reserve.

Murray always took time to encourage and assist young ornithologists to develop their interests and expertise. These include Ron Tozer, Jim Richards, Barry Kent MacKay, Rob Nisbet, Ron Orenstein and Matt Holder.

Murray distinguished himself among peers with his truly amazing powers of sight and hearing. Now in his early 90s, Murray still enjoys watching birds.

Murray Speirs, a quiet giant of Ontario ornithology, received the Distinguished Ornithologist Award and Honorary Life Membership on 3 February 2000 at his home in Pickering. The formal award presentation is on 16 September 2000 at the OFO Annual General Meeting at Kortright Centre in Kleinburg.

Cormorant Law and Control in Ontario

Ron Pittaway

There is a general misconception in Canada that the Double-crested Cormorant is protected by the federal *Migratory Birds Convention Act*, probably because it is a migratory species. Just to make matters more confusing, in the United States the primary responsibility for cormorants rests with the federal government. In Canada, many highly migratory birds are *not* under federal jurisdiction. The Double-crested Cormorant is an example of a migratory species that is *not* protected in Ontario by the federal law. The name *migratory* in the *Migratory Birds Convention Act* is misleading. Cormorants are under provincial jurisdiction. In Ontario, cormorants are regulated by the new *Fish and Wildlife Conservation Act* (Statutes of Ontario, 1997, Chapter 41). Cormorants are protected by Clause 5(1)(e) that states "A person shall not hunt or trap ... a bird that is wild by nature and is not a game bird." However, Clause 5(2)(d) authorizes the Minister of Natural Resources to allow hunting or control programs for species such as cormorants.

The meteoric rise in numbers of Double-crested Cormorants has caused concern in Ontario, Quebec and states bordering the Great Lakes. Following the ban on DDT, cormorant numbers are probably far higher now on the Great Lakes than anytime in recorded history.

On 9 May 2000, Ontario "announced a five-year cormorant program to examine effects of Double-crested Cormorants on fish and wildlife populations and sensitive vegetation." Beginning this year, the Ministry of Natural Resources (MNR) cormorant program will (1) include intensive baseline monitoring, (2) test selected harassment techniques as a means of reducing the impact of cormorant populations and (3) undertake experimental control beginning in spring 2001 using alternatives identified this year.

MNR's monitoring and research program will take place in the Presqu'île area of Lake Ontario, islands in western Lake Erie, in Georgian Bay and north channel of Lake Huron and some inland lakes. MNR plans are similar to actions in other jurisdictions. The Ministry will post information about its cormorant research on the Environmental Bill of Rights registry at: <http://www.ene.gov.on.ca/envision/ebr/welcome.htm>

Favourite Birding Hotspot

Britannia Conservation Area and Ottawa River

Bob Bracken and Christina Lewis

For birdwatchers not familiar with the Ottawa area, this 5 km stretch of shoreline and conservation area bordering the Ottawa River represents the best year-round birding hotspot in Ottawa.

The following six sites form a corridor of varied habitats, heavily used by migratory bird species. All areas described are public lands and access is available all year long.

1. The Britannia Conservation Area (BCA)

This isolated island of "greenspace" located within city limits, offers incredible birdwatching during migration. Located at a constriction of the Ottawa River at the Deschenes Rapids, it is an obvious landmark with a great diversity of habitats. The pond (Mud Lake), the mature white pine stand and deciduous woods, and the surrounding urban landscape, all combine to make this a magnet for tired migrants. To date, 248 species of birds have been found in or seen from the BCA, representing 74% of all species recorded in the Ottawa District (the 50 km radius from the Peace Tower). Additionally, 52 species are known to have nested here over the years. For a site around 20 hectares in area, the BCA has hosted a truly remarkable number and diversity of birds!

To reach the BCA, take Pinecrest Road (exit 129) north off Hwy 417, then turn right (east) onto Richmond Road. After Richmond crosses Carling Avenue, turn left (north) onto Poulin Avenue. Poulin eventually ends at Britannia Road. Turning right onto Britannia will take you to Cassels Street. Britannia Road and Cassels Street form the BCA's western and northern boundaries respectively, and a National Capital Commission

(NCC) recreational pathway borders it to the south. Parking is easy along Cassels; however, there are no facilities in the CA.

The Pond (Mud Lake)

Along Cassels, there is a good overview of Mud Lake. Large numbers of ducks stage here in the fall. All of Ottawa's puddle duck species can be seen, and a Eurasian Wigeon returned here for several consecutive years. The pond also attracts herons. Great Blues are frequently seen along the pond's edge and check the dead trees for Black-crowned Night-Herons from mid-summer to early fall. A Little Blue Heron was present in August 1998.

The Ridge

On the north side of Cassels, there is an elevated strip of land known as "the ridge". A trail runs along the crest, then follows the shore of the Ottawa River around the grounds of the Water Purification Plant. This ridge is one of the best places to start your birding day in spring and fall. Many migrants arrive first thing in the morning, and repeatedly circulate through the BCA in a north-south direction, winding up at the river. Thrushes, vireos, warblers and sparrows can be well-represented here.

The Woods and Fields

A pedestrian gate marks the entrance to a trail at the northwest corner of the pond, which leads to a network of well-used footpaths offering easy access to the many habitats found here. A counterclockwise tour of the BCA follows:

Upon entering the trail, a path to your right leads to a



scrubby old field with grassy areas and shrubs, mainly honeysuckle (*Lonicera*), buckthorn (*Rhamnus*) and staghorn sumac (*Rhus typhina*). This is a good area for flycatchers, thrushes and sparrows.

The main north-south trail continues south along the pond's west side through a hardwood stand of maple, oak and ash. Depending on the date of your visit, look carefully in the honeysuckle thickets bordering the pond for skulkers, including Mourning, Wilson's and Canada Warblers. Connecticut Warbler, a rarity in Ottawa, has been seen twice in this habitat.

The Pines

Further south, you will enter an impressive stand of mature white pine overtopping maple forest. Wood Duck, Brown Creeper and Pine Warbler nest here. Recently (since 1997), both Merlin and Cooper's Hawk have bred in this area in consecutive years.

A path running parallel to the fence marking the western boundary of the CA should also be covered. The east-west trail along the south side of the pond can also be good, but is typically less productive.

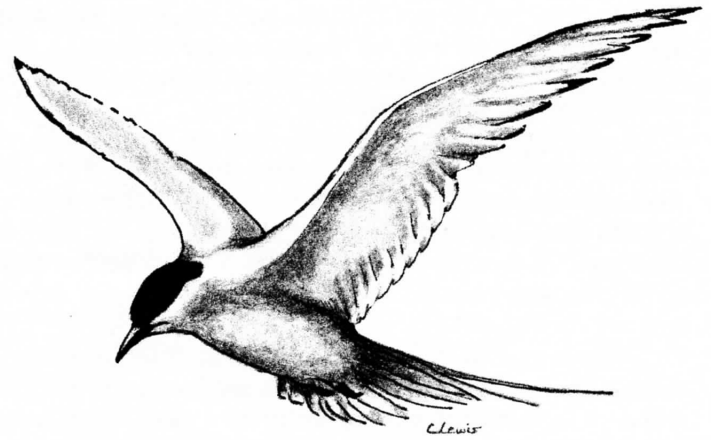
Remember, early in the morning, most of the birds move repeatedly back and forth in a north-south direction. Take your time! On good days after a fallout, a broad variety of songbirds of every family (except shrike) can be found *anywhere* along these trails. A total of 34 species of warblers has been found in the BCA, including (rare in Ottawa): Yellow-throated, Prairie, Cerulean, Prothonotary, Worm-eating, Connecticut and Yellow-breasted Chat.

At this point, return to Cassels via one of the alternate north-south trails (as most birders do) or continue on this counterclockwise route by taking the paved NCC recreational pathway along the southern edge. Access through a pedestrian gate to the fields in the southeastern portion of the BCA to search for scrubland birds; this approach will also lead to other views of the pond. Further east, again along the pathway before the settling ponds, another pedestrian gate near Pinecrest Creek indicates a right-of-way which takes you north through a narrow patch of scrubland bordered by a silver maple swamp. This area can be good for thrushes, vireos and warblers.

Britannia Point

At the northeast tip of the Water Purification Plant grounds, known as "Britannia Point", there is an excellent vantage of the Ottawa River and base of the Deschenes Rapids. From late May through June and again in the fall, this part of the river offers the best gull-viewing in Ottawa, with the possible exception of the Trail Road landfill site. The appearance of several emergent insect species, e.g. mayflies, attracts large numbers of larids. Ring-billed Gull is abundant, but many Bonaparte's and the odd rarity can be seen. Nineteen of Ottawa's 21 gull and tern species have been sighted here. Both Franklin's and Laughing Gulls were seen from "the Point" in May 1996. Other records include Black-headed, Little and Sabine's Gulls, Caspian and Forster's Terns, as well as all three species of jaegers. Look also for Red-throated Loon, which can be present on the river during October and November.

Britannia Point happens to be the only location in southern Ontario where *Arctic Tern* occurs almost annually. The best time to see this rare inland migrant is during the last week of May and the first two weeks of June. Typically, more than two



Arctic Tern by Christina Lewis

are seen at a time, with a high count of 14 on 29 May 1999. Weather is the key factor to success; strong winds and/or mid-day rain seem to be the best conditions, but when Arctic Terns are discovered, they often linger for more than a day.

The grounds surrounding the Water Purification Plant offer yet another good view of the pond. Rarities seen here in the past include Cassin's and Gray Kingbirds.

The Rapids

The rapids themselves are best viewed from the Britannia Yacht Club (permission is required from the management). From spring through fall when the river is low, the rocks can be good for interesting shorebirds. Below the rapids, especially in May, June and September, good numbers of larids can be seen (see Britannia Point, above). Barrow's Goldeneye is semi-regular here in winter and there are 3 records of Harlequin Duck.

On 6 December 1995, a Thick-billed Murre appeared briefly in the rapids. It likely would have stayed longer if it hadn't been taken by a Gyrfalcon.

2. Lakeside Gardens

This parkland environment can prove interesting during the autumn months, especially October to November. There is a sand beach (public swimming in summer) and a breakwall extending out some distance into Britannia Bay.

To reach this site, from the BCA, take Britannia Road south and turn right (west) onto Carling. The first street you encounter is Greenview Avenue. Turning right (north) on Greenview will lead to a large parking lot with public facilities.

Although not generally productive for rarities, Lakeside Gardens offers an excellent vantage of Britannia Bay and Lac Deschênes. Large numbers of waterfowl, particularly Canada Geese and the common puddle ducks, congregate here in the fall. Look for Snow Goose, Brant and the rare Greater White-fronted Goose. Scanning the water in late fall can turn up loons and grebes; some of the sea ducks (scoters and Oldsquaw) are easily viewed from here as well.

The beach is a good area for roosting gulls and while not productive for shorebirds, it has been a site for Purple Sandpiper. The breakwall has also attracted Purples. A Northern Wheatear was here in October 1995.

3. Scrivens Street

Continuing further west along Carling will bring you to

Scrivens Street at the second traffic light below the hill. Turn right onto Scrivens (there is a Harveys on the corner), drive to the end and park near the recreational pathway. Please be mindful: *don't park near laneways*.

At this location, scan the sand flats that extend west to Andrew Haydon Park and east to the break wall at Lakeside Gardens. In late summer through mid-fall, there is an extensive and rich feeding area for shorebirds and puddle ducks. Most of the shorebirds that can be viewed from Andrew Haydon Park can also be seen from this site; a Marbled Godwit spent several days here in June 1998.

Under certain weather conditions and at different times of the day, the birds frequently shift from one location to another. Any visit for shorebird viewing along the Ottawa River in the fall should include a stop here, as you may miss something by checking only the Ottawa Beach end of the flats.

4. Andrew Haydon Park East (Ottawa Beach)

Ottawa Beach is best defined as the narrow riparian zone with extensive emergent marsh vegetation from east of Graham Creek to a small viewing area surrounded by a split-log blind.

Access is from Carling Avenue, west from site #3 or by taking Richmond Road east or west to Bayshore Drive, then Bayshore north to Carling. Shortly after the Carling/Bayshore intersection, continue west along Carling to a small parkland with play structures and a view of the Ottawa River. The facilities are open until early fall and parking is available until the first snowfall.

This is one of the best single locations for shore/water birding in Ottawa and has been the scene of many rarities. Generally not a productive area in the spring as high water levels preclude the emergence of the sand flats, it is nonetheless a good spot to scan for loons, grebes, bay and sea ducks. Under the right conditions, a good assortment of migrant songbirds can be found here in the cottonwoods and the surrounding lowland vegetation.

The water level of the Ottawa River fluctuates widely throughout the seasons, and is controlled from the Lac Des Chats power dam, located about 40 km upstream just outside Fitzroy Harbour. Depending on the number of rainfall events, the river may or may not be low by mid-summer.

Whereas Britannia is a dynamite place to visit in both spring and fall, Ottawa Beach can be fantastic during late summer and the autumn months for many reasons.

Waterfowl

From September through early December, search for loons and grebes out on the lake; 30 of Ottawa's 35 waterfowl species have been found here. During October-November, many thousands of Canada Geese stage here, and you never know what other surprises you may find with them. Richardson's Canada Goose (the mallard-sized subspecies) and Greater White-fronted Goose are semi-annual. Snow Geese are typically present, as well as Brant during their brief flight time.

Shorebirds

By late summer, the exposed shoreline of Britannia Bay offers a rich feeding and resting area. Of Ottawa's 38 species of shorebirds, 35 have been recorded here. Under ideal conditions (e.g. northwest winds, late summer downpours), these flats can be carpeted with plovers and sandpipers.

This is a good place to see American Golden-Plover, and during heavy rains in August, numbers of Whimbrel have landed here. Look for Red Knot August to September. During peak flight times from late August to early September, Western Sandpiper is occasionally discovered among the large numbers of Semipalmateds. Piping Plover, Willet, Hudsonian Godwit, Buff-breasted Sandpiper and Red Phalarope have all occurred at Ottawa Beach. A recent rarity for Ottawa was our second record of Spotted Redshank on 21 August 1998.

Post-breeding Merlins and Peregrine Falcons also frequently use this Ottawa Beach-Scrivens corridor for hunting. Peregrines have nested in downtown Ottawa since 1997.

Other Specialties

Similarly, if the sandbar is extensive, good numbers of loafing larids gather here, including Iceland, Lesser Black-backed and Glaucous Gulls. Rarities have included Ottawa's second Mew Gull.

Although not as productive as Britannia in the fall, a nice assortment of migrant passerines may be encountered at Ottawa Beach. From late September through early October, it is not unusual to find half-a-dozen species of sparrows. In 1976, the first modern record of Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow was banded at this site, and since that time, it has been semi-annual. Look for this secretive species by walking through the Tall Cord Grass (*Spartina pectinata*) and Purple Loosestrife (*Lythrum salicaria*) near the sand spit.

Note: Rubber boots are a good idea at any time of year for exploring Ottawa Beach. Also, if you visit during good i.e. *bad* weather and see no birds, visit the Scrivens site (#3) and return here later.

5. Andrew Haydon Park West

The remainder of Andrew Haydon Park, located north of the traffic light intersection of Carling and Acres Road, is a manicured parkscape of lawn with scattered trees and artificial ponds. It has not proved very productive for land birds, but has an expansive view of Lac Deschênes. From anywhere along the river's edge, scan for loons, grebes and waterfowl in the late fall. Large numbers of immature Ring-billed Gulls also concentrate around the ponds in fall. Although no rarities have yet been found among them, this is a good opportunity to check for any potentials.

6. Dick Bell Park

Proceeding still further west on Carling, you will very shortly encounter the Nepean Sailing Club on your right. The sign says Dick Bell Park and there is public parking.

Again, this is a site to visit in the fall. A good diversity of loafing gulls can be seen on the docks during November and early December before freeze-up and often Snowy Owl in November-December.

Walking along the break wall to the lighthouse, check the numbers of scaup for interesting *Aythya* species (Redhead and Canvasback are both scarce in Ottawa), as well as scoters. Picking through the sometimes large rafts of Common Goldeneye requires patience, but you may be rewarded with a Barrow's. Harlequin Duck has been seen here once. Be sure to scan out onto the river for jaegers and unusual larids, e.g. Black-legged Kittiwake in October-November.

The reason birders visit Dick Bell Park late in the fall is to search for Purple Sandpiper as this the most consistent location in Ottawa to find that species. In late October through November during strong northwest winds, check the break wall carefully. The rocks are large and these birds have a habit of hiding between them.

Accessibility

In addition to being easily accessible by car, all of the above sites are connected by a paved NCC pathway. This path can be used as a conduit for visiting any or all of these sites on two rather than four wheels or on foot for a full day's outing. All areas except the BCA trails are accessible by wheelchair. Any mode of transportation will do to cover the best birdwatching

strip in Ottawa!

Overnight accommodations are available along Carling Avenue and there are numerous restaurants nearby, ranging from fast-food to fine dining. Refer to current tourist guides, e.g. the CAA's Ontario Tour Book, and be sure to call the Ottawa Field-Naturalists' Club Bird Status Line 613-860-9000 for the most recent bird sightings. The Environment Canada Weather Line 613-998-3439 provides recorded weather forecasts and frequent updates throughout the day.

Acknowledgements

We thank Bernie Ladouceur for his assistance with statistical information.

Reporting Banded or Marked Birds

Marcie Jacklin

Improved optics and an increasing number of field observers result in more banded or marked birds being seen. Within the last few months *Ontbirds* has reported banded Trumpeter Swans, Peregrine Falcons, Bald Eagles, Canada Geese and Osprey. Also, birders are asked to look for banded Tundra Swans and colour-banded juvenile Great Black-backed Gulls. Birders contribute to research and monitoring programs by accurately recording band information. Recoveries of bands or sightings of colour bands/markers are low especially for nongame birds and each report adds another piece to the puzzle of bird behaviour and migration.

Any species of birds can be banded from vultures to hummingbirds. Birds are banded (or ringed) with aluminum bands or coloured bands on the leg, or they are marked with neck bands or collars, nasal markers, dyes, web tags, radio transmitters or tail streamers.

When birds are banded the bander records information about where and when the birds is banded, how old it is, what sex it is and other information. Banders are trained to handle birds in ways that minimize stress and injury.

Since 1923 the Canadian Wildlife Service and the United States Department of the Interior have jointly administered the North American Bird Banding Program (NABBP). This program administers the permits, provides bands and coordinates marking projects. The Bird Banding Laboratory, which is part of the NABBP, has a data file of 54 million bandings and 2.9 million recoveries. They estimate that annually over 1 million birds are banded with about 65,000 recoveries. Most bandings are of nongame species; however, most recoveries are for game species. Anyone can use data bank information free of charge.

Data collection

Data may be collected by either observing birds in the wild and recording enough information to send in a report or by recovering a band from a dead bird. Note the following:

1. Your name and address
2. The band number
3. The date the band was found or observed
4. The exact location where it was found or observed

5. The species of bird, if known
6. How the bird was found
7. The condition of the bird (alive or dead)
8. Any other markers on the bird e.g. colour bands

Reporting a banded bird

Call 1-800-327-2263 toll-free in North America
fax 301-497-5717 or write to:

Bird Banding Office, National Wildlife Research Centre
Canadian Wildlife Service, Hull PQ K1A 0H3

Or

USGS Patuxent Wildlife Research Center, Bird Banding
Laboratory, 12100 Beech Forest Road, Laurel MD 20708-4037

or fill out one of the forms at:

<http://www.pwrc.usgs.gov/bbl/homepage/call800.htm>

or email: bbo_cws@ec.gc.ca or bandreports@patuxent.nbs.gov

You will receive a Certificate of Appreciation telling you where and when the bird was banded and who banded it. A good example was the Piping Plover found at Van Wagners Beach last fall. Birders reported the coloured bands (yellow over red on the right leg) to the 1-800 number. A check of records showed that the bird was banded that summer at Whitefish Point in Michigan by researchers from University of Minnesota. Fascinating!

Acknowledgements

Information for this note was gathered from several helpful participants on the *Ontbirds* e-mail listserv and the following:

<http://sites.netscape.net/tntcomm/obba/OBBA.htm>

Ontario Bird Banding Association

<http://www.cws-scf.ec.gc.ca/nwrc/bbo/birdband.htm>

Environment Canada - Migratory Bird Populations Division - Bird Banding

<http://www.pwrc.usgs.gov/bbl/>

The North American Bird Banding Program - Bird Banding Laboratory

<http://www.bsc-eoc.org/cmmn.html>

The Canadian Migration Monitoring Network

Tracking Birds at Night

Rhonda L. Millikin

The importance of biodiversity and the management of bird populations are evidenced by million-dollar businesses like Birdlife International. Though we want to protect all native species, resources are limited. My doctoral research is to design a remote sensing system that will determine where to focus conservation of habitat for songbirds.

Songbirds concentrate during migration enabling simultaneous measurement of the number of many species. But, the challenge is that most songbirds migrate at night. Traditional migration monitoring methods sample during the day so they measure only those birds that have landed and can be caught in mist nets or observed visually on census. We do not know if the population trends indicated by these diurnal methods are a true reflection of the health of songbird populations.

Critical for migrating birds are resting and feeding locations. Finding these stopover sites is biased by where we look. Radar, by contrast, detects birds in the dark and under low visibility conditions. Nocturnal migrant birds also emit a species-specific call that can be heard and recorded. Using microphones in combination with radar allows us to detect individual songbirds and determine where they land. Both radar and acoustic sensors have been used separately to study bird migration since the 1940s, but never together. By combining these sensors, we can now ask what portions of the flying birds are calling and what are the different species of the birds detected on radar. However, the primary goal of this research is to characterize the landing behaviour of songbirds so as to identify critical stopover habitat.

My research was conducted at Prince Edward Point, a peninsula of Lake Ontario west of Kingston (Figure 1) between 16 August and 19 September 1999. Based on research from a similar site at the tip of Vancouver Island, this is expected to be a critical landing site for songbirds in their migration south. This site is already well known for its concentration of passerines in spring and is protected thanks to the foresight of the Kingston Field Naturalists and the Canadian Wildlife Service.

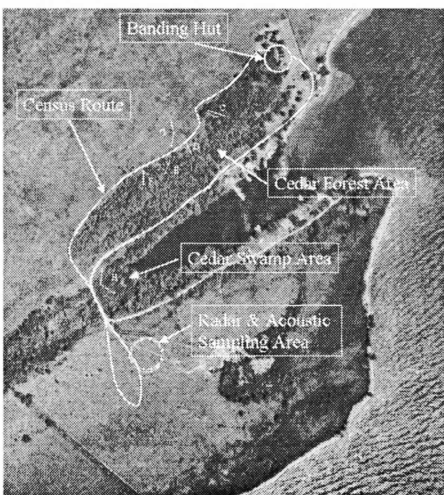


Figure 1. Sampling locations at Prince Edward Point. Birds were expected to cross the volume of sky sampled by the radar/acoustic system on route to the vegetative cover of the banding area. The census route transected both the diurnal banding site and nocturnal radar/acoustic sampling site.

Songbirds exhibit characteristic flight behaviour as they land and this "landing" behaviour will be used to determine and therefore preserve important stopover sites. The proposed system is automated, removing the subjectivity of a human observer and eliminating the need to handle or disturb the birds. The data are archived for long-term analysis of the impact of degraded habitat. My goal is

to improve the accuracy of population monitoring particularly for remote areas important to many priority species for conservation.

My purpose is to identify species and landing birds. This process typically involves detection, location and tracking. By combining radar and acoustic sensors, location and species identification can best be achieved.

Nocturnal migrants must land for the day to feed and rest, typically beginning shortly before dawn. It is pronounced at landscape barriers like the edge of a large body of water and is characterized by a reduced altitude, increased number of flight calls and reversed direction of flight. These types of areas are likely to be critical stopover habitat for nocturnal migrant birds and provide suitable areas to use the proposed system to monitor migration.

Through my research I hope to show that linking radar and acoustic tracking systems will improve location and identification of nocturnal migrants and will help us understand about birds landing, leaving and stopping over. Radar will locate more targets, but acoustic sensors will identify the species.

Methodology

Test scenario: Nocturnal migrant birds are the perfect test for linking radar and acoustic tracking systems. Birds are difficult to track because of their nocturnal flight, small size, short transient calls of unknown repetition, relatively rapid flight and potentially dense numbers (32,600 birds/km/hr). Researchers with radar or acoustic sensors alone have had limited success in identifying these targets.

Landing behaviour: The site selected for trials of the proposed radar-acoustic system must be relatively open, quiet, protected from human interference and exposure and provide landing habitat for nocturnal migrants. Prince Edward Point was selected because nocturnal migrants land there in large numbers. The landscape barrier of Lake Ontario was expected to induce reverse migration at dawn and birds were expected to cross the volume of sky sampled by the radar/acoustic system on route to the vegetative cover of the banding area (Figure 1).

Sampling was divided into three time periods: dusk, midnight and dawn. Target behaviour at dawn was expected to be significantly different from the other two time periods. At dawn landing birds reverse the mean direction of midnight samples and individuals drop in height. Birds at dusk climb in height and fly grouped in the same general direction as midnight targets. As the exact timing of landing was not known, sampling duration began one hour before dawn.

In order to obtain an independent measure of the identification of landing birds, the number of each species newly captured in mist nets and those observed on census were counted (Figure 1 and 2). These "arriving" birds were correlated with those determined to have landed on the radar/acoustic system.

Sensor selection: The sensors were chosen to best achieve the location and identification of night migrant birds and hence differentiation of landing birds. The acoustic sensor was selected to make use of the calling behaviour of the birds for identification. The radar sensor provided night and all-weather detection and

the location of flying targets during conditions of poor visibility. Because the targets of interest are night migrant birds and the location and identification must be performed in darkness, traditional visual identification is not possible. The radar system provides initial detection and location and then hands off the information to the acoustic system for target identification.

Radar system: To detect, track and identify nocturnal migrant birds, spatial resolution is critical and identification of the target signature optimal. Therefore parameters of the proposed system include wavelength, 3-D scan capability and pulse repetition frequency (PRF). The radar will be sighted perpendicular to the expected flight path to improve the likelihood of detection. A radar fence will be used and the antenna oriented 15-20° off vertical, which is expected to minimize ground clutter (Figure 3). Data will be digitized at source and the equipment powered by batteries to reduce noise contamination of the acoustic system.

Acoustic system: The signal to noise ratio is maximized by using microphones with directional sensitivity patterns optimized to receive airborne signals while minimizing ground interference (Figure 4). They must have a wide enough beam to allow tracking of individuals and interception by more than one receiver. Microphones must be sensitive to frequencies of most night flight calls in the experimental region. The equipment must be weather resistant (wind, dew, rain), time synchronized with the radar system and digitized at source. Maximum detection is expected to be <800m for thrushes and <400m for warblers and sparrows.

Meteorological effect on sampling: Weather conditions, particularly wind and temperatures, affect sound propagation and therefore the estimated location of the sound source. Weather conditions also influence the number of migrant birds and their flight behaviour, and therefore the ability to locate and track targets. Local weather conditions (temperature, relative humidity, wind speed and direction, rainfall, barometric pressure, gust spread) are collected hourly throughout the sampling period.

Radar Analysis: Analysis of data from the radar will indicate the density of birds, reverse migration, height, speed and direction.

Acoustic Analysis: A waveform of two types of night flight calls (thrush and warbler/sparrow) will be used to filter the data for a waveform from the sampled signal. Detections and wavelet analysis to determine location.

Summary: The goal of my research is the identification of vital migration feeding and resting areas. This information can be used by governments and agencies to conserve habitat for migrating songbirds.

Acknowledgements:

This research was possible because of the generous assistance of Jeff Robinson of the Canadian Wildlife Service and many volunteers. I am deeply grateful for the opportunity to work at Prince Edward Point and with such wonderful people. Specifically, I want to thank Barbara Barker, John Charlton, Susan Christie, Don Craighead, Stan Davis, Joanne and Sarah Dewey, Nancy and Jessica Fox, Sue Fraser, Don and Julie Holmes, Brian Joyce, Doris Lane, Eric and Lorna Machell, Lloyd Paul, Laura Pierce, Jean Roberge, Jeff Robinson, Peter Shearing, Bob Stuart, George Underhill and Joe Victor. Thanks also to Bob Woods for funding this research, Don Clark and Brian Jelly for providing regional weather data, Ron Reitsma for meteorological equipment, Larry Harvey for survey equipment and Doug McLellan for conducting the calibration flyover.

Rhonda Millikin is a Ph.D. Candidate in Physics at the Royal Military College, Kingston, Ontario



Figure 2. Mist netting was conducted each morning from ½ hour before dawn to 6 hours later as an independent measure of "landing" birds.

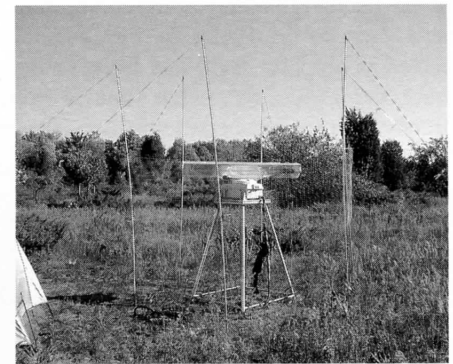


Figure 3. A radar fence was used and the antenna oriented 15-20° off vertical to minimize ground clutter.



Figure 4. Microphones were surveyed to a constant height above ground and protected with acoustic foam to reduce wind noise.

2000 Taverner Cup Winners

Congratulations to the *Lee Valley Sawbills* captained by Mike Runtz of Arnprior who with fellow birders Colin Jones, Don Sutherland, Peter Burke and driver Murray Borer won the Taverner Cup with a total of 183 species. Last year's winner, the *Bushnell Nighthawks* captained by Bruce Di Labio was a close second with 181 species.

This year 73 participants in 18 teams, 6 competitive and 12 recreational, competed in the 4th Annual Taverner Cup Birding Competition. This birding competition was held in eastern Ontario and western Quebec over a 24 hour period on Saturday 27 May 2000. A record total of 220 species was counted.

Meadowlarks in Ontario

Bruce Falls

Eastern and Western Meadowlarks are thought to have been separated during the Pleistocene glaciation. With the arrival of Europeans and the opening of the Eastern forests to agriculture the Eastern species increased and spread westward. By the turn of the twentieth century, distributions of the two species overlapped and the Western Meadowlark began to expand its range in a northeasterly direction.

In southern Ontario it seems likely that Eastern Meadowlarks occurred in prairie patches, burns and other forest openings before the landscape at large was cleared. In any case, by the early 1800s they were common in pioneer farmland and were seen in Muskoka in the 1860s. Somewhat later they arrived in the Clay Belt, and from Thunder Bay to Rainy River about the 1940s, by which time Western Meadowlarks were already well established in northwestern Ontario.

Western Meadowlarks no doubt occurred in extensions of prairie into Ontario near the Manitoba border from which they spread eastward reaching the Lakehead as early as 1917. The first confirmed breeding was recorded in the Rainy River District in 1929. Other incursions into northern Ontario may have come from Michigan reaching Sault Sainte Marie in 1921 and extending as far east as Sudbury and Lake Nipissing. Having earlier occupied Wisconsin and Michigan, the Western species appeared in southwestern Ontario beginning in 1935. Breeding was confirmed near Hamilton in 1947. Later Westerns arrived in Peterborough, Kingston and Ottawa (the first record for Ontario was actually a specimen collected there in 1900).

From 1958 to 1962, a graduate student, Laszlo Szijj and I conducted a comparative study of Eastern and Western Meadowlarks in southwestern Ontario. With the assistance of local naturalists, we located Westerns in 33 sites from Cottam in Essex County to Oshawa. In many cases what was reported as a singing male turned out to be a small colony of from two to eight individuals. There were small islands of Western Meadowlarks surrounded by a sea of Easterns. Altogether Szijj captured and examined 52 live Western Meadowlarks and noted or recorded their songs and calls.

In Wisconsin, Lanyon had earlier reported that Western Meadowlarks tended to occupy drier sites than Easterns. In southern Ontario, Westerns were most abundant in the drier climatic strip north of Lakes Erie and Ontario but this provided little clue as to which local sites they would occupy. Both

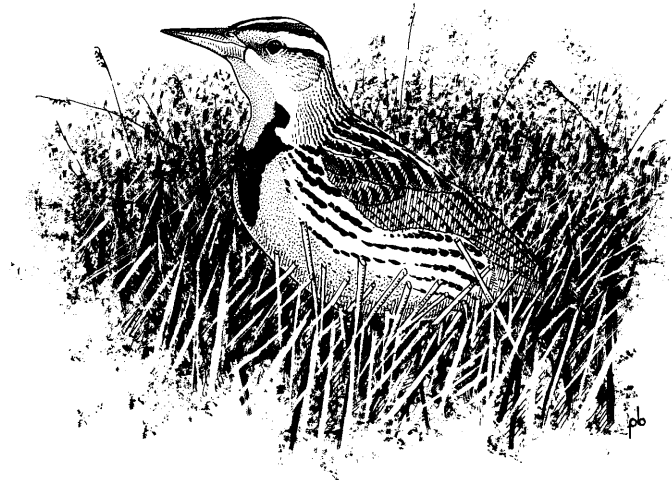
species were found in rough pastures; perhaps the presence of a singing Western bird was enough to attract others. As in Wisconsin, the two meadowlarks defended territories against one another. This prompted a field experiment in which we played recordings of both species to males of both species. Western males responded aggressively to either Eastern or Western songs. The same was true for Eastern birds that lived adjacent to Westerns. However, Easterns that lived elsewhere did not appear to recognize Western songs. Apparently a male had to learn from experience that the strange song came from a look-alike that was a natural competitor. After learning, males treated all other meadowlarks alike.

It is worth recalling here that although plumage differences between the two meadowlarks are subtle, their songs and calls are quite different. Western songs are lower in pitch (by about 2 kHz) and sound more mellow to our ears. They also change

pitch abruptly while Easterns tend to slur their whistles gradually. To use the terminology of earlier ornithologists, Eastern songs are all vowels while Western songs contain consonants. Perhaps that is why it is comparatively easier to fit words or phrases to Western songs. Another difference is that individual Westerns sing on average six or seven different songs while Easterns typically have ten times as many. Because they have so many similar songs it is not easy to keep track of changes. However, if an Eastern Meadowlark is

recorded singing for 2-3 hours and the songs are graphed it is soon apparent that the repertoire is very large and that the different songs come round again. Both species of meadowlark sing with eventual variety; they sing a bout of one song type before switching to another. The more excited they are, the more often they switch.

Although young raised in isolation develop songs suggestive of their species, songbirds need to hear adults singing in order to produce definitive song types prevalent in their population. This learning mechanism can go off the rails. Captive meadowlarks have learned to produce songs of both species as well as of other unrelated birds to which they have been exposed. This can also happen in the wild; some readers may remember a meadowlark in Port Credit that sang nearly perfect Northern Cardinal imitations (at least cardinals thought so). Perhaps it is not surprising then that meadowlarks turn up in the wild that have mixed repertoires of Eastern and Western songs. Since they could have learned these songs these birds are not



Eastern Meadowlark by Peter Burke

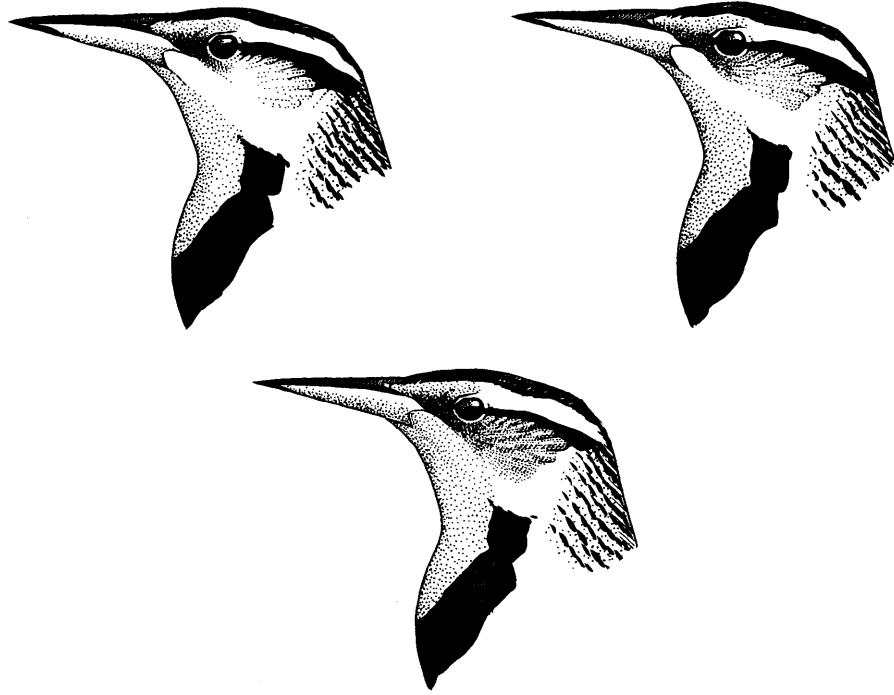


Figure 1. Top left: *Lilian's Eastern Meadowlark*, a southern form not discussed in the article. Top right: *Eastern Meadowlark* showing less extensive yellow (stippling) on throat and cheeks. Bottom centre: *Western Meadowlark* showing yellow (stippling) extending from throat to cheek. Illustration by *Peter Burke*.

likely hybrids. As one might expect they occur primarily where there is an unequal mixture of the two species. In Ontario, Szijj found eight otherwise normal Western Meadowlarks that had acquired from one to four Eastern songs. They did not increase their repertoires by adding Eastern songs; the alien songs were simply part of their normal output. The bird with four Eastern songs sang no Western songs at all. We did not find Eastern Meadowlarks in Ontario with Western songs. In Wisconsin, where Easterns were the less abundant species, Lanyon found one such bird. It is the minority species that picks up the wrong songs.

The two meadowlarks have several parallel call notes. There is a chattering “rattle” (Eastern) or “roll” (Western), an abrupt ‘dzert’ (Eastern) or ‘chupp’ (Western) and a wheezy whistle (Eastern) or ‘whoop’ (Western) that tends to precede flight song. As with songs, Western calls are lower in pitch (by 1 kHz or more). Calls of the two species are not as obviously different as the songs but with a little practice they can be told apart. A big surprise in Szijj’s study was that 16 of his Ontario Western Meadowlarks gave some Eastern call notes. Again, no Eastern birds had Western calls. Why are these observations surprising? We know that songbirds do not normally learn their calls. Young meadowlarks raised in isolation develop normal calls; we refer to these sounds as hard-wired. These Ontario Westerns all had normal Western calls to which they had added a few Eastern calls, in some cases from one year to the next when they were already adults. A few captive birds of both species, in addition to developing normal calls, learned one or more calls of the other species. A meadowlark’s songs and calls apparently depend partly on the company it keeps.

Despite the tendency for meadowlarks to learn each other’s

songs and calls, any meadowlark in southern Ontario that gives any Western songs or has Western calls is almost certain to be a Western.

We have seen that Western Meadowlarks in Ontario were defending territories against Easterns and being exposed to many more Easterns than members of their own species. They were learning songs and calls from the wrong tutors. Did they also choose the wrong mates? In all, Szijj found nine mixed matings of birds that built nests and raised young. Two males and two females of each species were involved, some in more than one year. Many other attempts were noted that did not reach the egg-laying stage. The breeding success of mixed pairs, in terms of eggs hatched, was about half that of normal Eastern or Western pairs. The literature suggests that hybridization is rare in the zone of overlap except where one of the species is very much in the minority. What usually prevents such matings? Lanyon argued that a combination of habitat differences and female choice were effective barriers (in Wisconsin as in Ontario males did not distinguish between species). Szijj showed that females of both species tended to respond only to ‘rattle’ calls of their own species, which suggests a possible isolating mechanism. In captivity, given no choice, Lanyon found that mixed pairings readily occurred giving rise to apparently healthy young hybrids. However, when he tried to breed pairs of these hybrids or backcross them to normal Eastern or Western birds 90% of the eggs were infertile. So this is a case of hybrid sterility. Thus, although a few hybrids may be produced on the fringe of the range they are unlikely to affect the gene pool. Partly because of arguments about hybridization, it took the AOU until 1908 to recognize the two meadowlarks as distinct species.

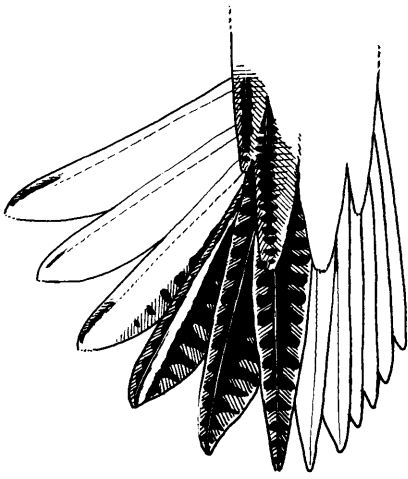


Figure 2. Eastern Meadowlark, subspecies *magna*, occurs in Canada. Drawings by Peter Burke

So far we have not said much about morphological differences between Eastern and Western Meadowlarks. There are a number of minor differences that are not obvious in the field. Szijj scored birds in the hand for four characters, each of which was divided into six classes. From these values a composite score was calculated for each bird using a method that weighted characters according to how much they contributed to separating the two species. The four characters were: barring on the tail (more open bars in Westerns, Figures 2 and 3), back feathers (less dark areas in Westerns), yellow extending from throat to cheek (more extensive in Westerns, Figure 1) and spotting on the sides of the upper breast (smaller, rounder spots in Westerns). Composite scores of either live birds or museum specimens showed two distinct groups representing the two species with very few intermediates (4 out of 156). Two hybrids raised in captivity also had intermediate scores and it is possible that the few birds that could not be classified readily were hybrids. One interesting finding of the morphological study was that the Western Meadowlarks that gave some Eastern songs or call notes mentioned earlier fell well within the Western group. They were clearly not hybrids.

Earlier, we followed the history of meadowlarks in Ontario up to the invasion of the Western species that provided the opportunity for our study in the early 1960s. What has happened since? Some further eastward extensions occurred. Westerns reached Kingston in 1969 and over the next few years 18 singing males were found in that region. Subsequently this expansion waned. In the late 1970s I attempted to follow up our earlier study in southwestern counties but had difficulty locating more than half a dozen birds. The Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas reported Western Meadowlarks in 69 squares in southern Ontario, but breeding was confirmed in only seven and no nests were found. This seems like a lot until one thinks of the five-year period (1981-1985) and the many observers involved. The majority of records were of individual singing males and coordinators described them as erratic or accidental. No Westerns were found in Eastern Ontario but there was still a thriving population in the Kenora-Rainy River area. Since then Western Meadowlark numbers have gone from bad to worse. The Breeding Bird Survey in Ontario started in 1966, close to the peak of the Western invasion. From 1966 through 1996 they

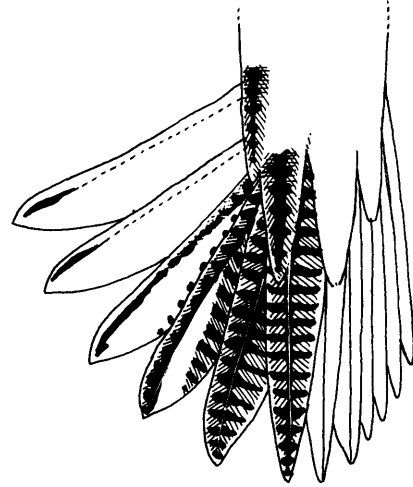


Figure 3. Western Meadowlark. Only one race is officially recognized in North America. Note more open barring on the tail than on Eastern.

declined at an average rate of 5.9% per year. In the last two years of this period no Westerns were detected. There is still a breeding population of Western Meadowlarks in northwestern Ontario, though Dave Elder thinks there are fewer than 15 years ago. The habitat does not seem to have changed. A few Easterns still occur there. Eastern Meadowlarks are still numerous in southern Ontario but have declined at a rate of 2.5% per year (BBS data).

What has been responsible for these declines? Numbers of Western Meadowlarks are also down in Great Lakes states suggesting that the source of new birds coming to Ontario is drying up. The Michigan Atlas (1991) reported a decline over the previous 20 years especially in eastern counties. Westerns were hanging on in the northwest of the lower peninsula where there were still large hayfields and well-drained sandy soils. Again quoting BBS data, numbers of Eastern Meadowlarks declined 2% per year continent-wide from 1966 through 1989. Meadowlarks are following a trend that includes many grassland species. While severe winter mortality may reduce numbers from time to time the loss of suitable habitat is likely the main culprit. The phasing out of grassland, hay crops and reduction in pastureland—the main habitats that allowed meadowlarks to increase and spread in earlier times is crucial. The Ontario Atlas revealed holes even in the Eastern Meadowlark map in Essex and Kent Counties where cultivation is intense.

Where does all this leave us birdwatchers? We will not likely see as many grassland birds in future and may have to visit marginal farmland to find them. Western Meadowlarks will again become rare accidentals in southern Ontario and Easterns will probably continue their slower decline. We will be lucky to hear the song of the Western Meadowlark and when we do we had better check its vocal repertoire as well as its appearance.

We thank Peter Burke and publisher A & C Black for permission to reproduce the meadowlark drawings in this article. Peter's drawings first appeared in *New World Blackbirds: The Icterids* by Alvaro Jaramillo and Peter Burke. 1999. Published by Princeton University Press.

Status of Cerulean Warbler in Eastern Ontario

Jason Jones

Over the last 30 years, researchers have become concerned with observed declines in regional populations for almost one-third of neotropical migrants. One species of special concern is the Cerulean Warbler. Throughout much of its range, this species is experiencing precipitous declines in numbers; estimates derived from Breeding Bird Survey data show as much as a 3.4% decline per year from 1966-1987. Within the United States, the Cerulean Warbler has been variously designated as threatened, critically imperiled, imperiled or rare; in Canada, this species is designated as vulnerable.

In general, Cerulean Warblers are thought to require large tracts of mature deciduous forest. However, its small-scale habitat affinities are poorly understood beyond a general conclusion that large trees with dense canopies are preferred as nesting habitat. In sharp contrast to continental trends, recent research indicates that eastern Ontario is home to a sizeable population of Cerulean Warblers that is experiencing high reproductive success. The overall goal of the research by our group at Queen's University is to explore the demographic, behavioural and ecological factors regulating the population of Cerulean Warblers in eastern Ontario.

Much of our research on the breeding grounds is undertaken in the Lake Opinicon region of eastern Ontario on or near the property of the Queen's University Biological Station (QUBS). Average nest success from 1994-1997 was 76.2% with an average clutch size of greater than three eggs. In these years, the birds suffered very low nest predation rates and there was scant evidence of brood parasitism by Brown-headed Cowbirds.

Unfortunately, the ice storm of January 1998 drastically changed the complexion of the breeding success of our study population. Over 60% of the habitat used by Cerulean Warblers in our study area suffered severe damage. In May 1998, returning birds attempted to nest in areas similar to previous years (i.e. nest height, nest tree species distribution, nest cover were all statistically similar to pre-storm nests). However, nest success in 1998 dropped to 8%.

There are several ways in which the loss of canopy habitat could result in a decrease in nesting success: alteration of nest microclimate, increased conspicuousness of parental movements around the nest site, and the direct and indirect effects of changes in insect prey populations. After running experiments and performing detailed behavioural watches at nest sites in 1998 and 1999, we are left with the conclusion that the most likely cause of decreased nesting success in 1998 was a reduction in insect prey populations due to ice storm damage to vegetation. A decrease in insect prey abundance could affect Cerulean Warblers directly by decreasing food availability for nestlings, or indirectly by causing a shift in dietary tendencies of Blue Jays from insects to baby birds.

However, this story does appear to have a happy ending. Reproductive success in 1999 rebounded towards pre-storm levels and this resurgence in success was accompanied by a significant shift in nest site selection patterns. This implies that Cerulean Warblers possess a degree of plasticity in their habitat affinities and that this plasticity rendered the population relatively resilient to the particular disturbance. This apparent resilience bodes well for the future health of the Cerulean Warbler in eastern Ontario.

In closing, I would like to pass along a special thank you to all who have contributed greatly to this research over the last seven years, especially volunteers from the Kingston Field Naturalists and the Rideau Valley Naturalists and all the landowners in eastern Ontario who have allowed us to poke around on their land looking for these wonderful birds.

Jason Jones is with the Cerulean Warbler Monitoring Project, Department of Biology, Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario.

OFO Trip to Kingston Area

Paul Mackenzie

On Saturday 7 May, about 22 keen OFO participants birded the Opinicon Road in the morning and the east end of Amherst Island in the afternoon. The weather was excellent, the mosquitoes few, and the birds very cooperative.

On Opinicon Road, good looks were obtained of three target species: Cerulean Warbler (both male and female), Golden-winged Warbler and Yellow-throated Vireo. Other warblers included Pine, Yellow-rumped, Black-and-white, Magnolia, American Redstart and Ovenbird. In addition, Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Red-shouldered Hawk, Broad-winged Hawk, Eastern Bluebird, Indigo Bunting, Scarlet Tanager and Purple Finch were seen. Common Ravens, which are nesting in an old barn along the road, were seen by some. After lunch at Queen's University Biological Station, Professor Allen Keast gave a short description of the area.

While waiting for the Amherst Island ferry, a flock of about 80 Brant flew by fairly close. On Amherst we saw Wilson's Phalaropes, White-rumped Sandpipers, Black-bellied Plovers, Black, Common and Caspian Terns, American Coot, Northern Pintail, Gadwall, Northern Shoveller and nesting Osprey. In a flock of Dunlin, a partially albino Dunlin stood out all white except for some pale rufous on the back. Some saw a distant Whimbrel on an adjacent island.

In all, the group recorded about 105 species and everyone was very pleased.

Spitfire Birds

Ron Pittaway

At this time of year we often see hawks, vultures, crows and ravens being pursued and dive bombed incessantly by smaller birds. Usually only one or two small birds attack the larger bird, driving it away.

In my experience in southern Ontario, there are two species that do 99% of the chases. They are the Eastern Kingbird and Red-winged Blackbird. Why don't most other birds engage in these spirited chases?

Return of the Wild Turkey in Ontario

Karen Bellamy

The success of Ontario's Wild Turkey reintroduction program has been remarkable and unprecedented. For 75 years at the beginning of the last century, the Wild Turkey was completely absent from the Ontario landscape. Now, over 24,000 of these magnificent birds roam the forests of southern Ontario. The re-introduction of Wild Turkeys in 1984 marked the beginning of a new era of cooperation between a government agency, non-government organizations and members of the public.

Few species on the verge of extinction have been as lucky as the Wild Turkey. Wild Turkey populations reached their lowest numbers across North America between 1900 and 1930, surviving only in the most inaccessible habitats. As the landscape was cleared and settled, their habitat changed dramatically and turkeys were hunted year round as a food source for pioneers. Wild Turkeys disappeared from Ontario around 1909. After decades of failures trying to re-introduce Wild Turkeys using game farm or pen raised birds, the use of the cannon net to capture some of the few remaining wild birds put the turkey on the road to recovery. The cannon net was first used to capture Wild Turkeys in South Carolina in 1951. Trapping wild birds with rocket or cannon nets and moving them to new areas of good habitat increased their numbers and distribution across North America. Trap and transfer programs quickly caught on in many states and finally in 1984, Ontario received its first Wild Turkeys from Missouri and Michigan. Over the next 3 years, Ontario also received Wild Turkeys from Iowa, New York, Vermont and New Jersey. A total of 276 eastern Wild Turkeys was released at six sites in southern Ontario.

Today, Wild Turkeys are found from Chatham to Cornwall and north to the Canadian Shield. An active trap and transfer program in the province has helped to speed up the spread of the birds and the dramatic growth in their numbers. Since 1987, Ontario has trapped over 2300 birds from within the province and moved them to over 150 new release sites. Wild Turkeys occupy an area of at least 30,000 square kilometres in the province and it is estimated that about 100,000 square kilometres of suitable habitat may exist.

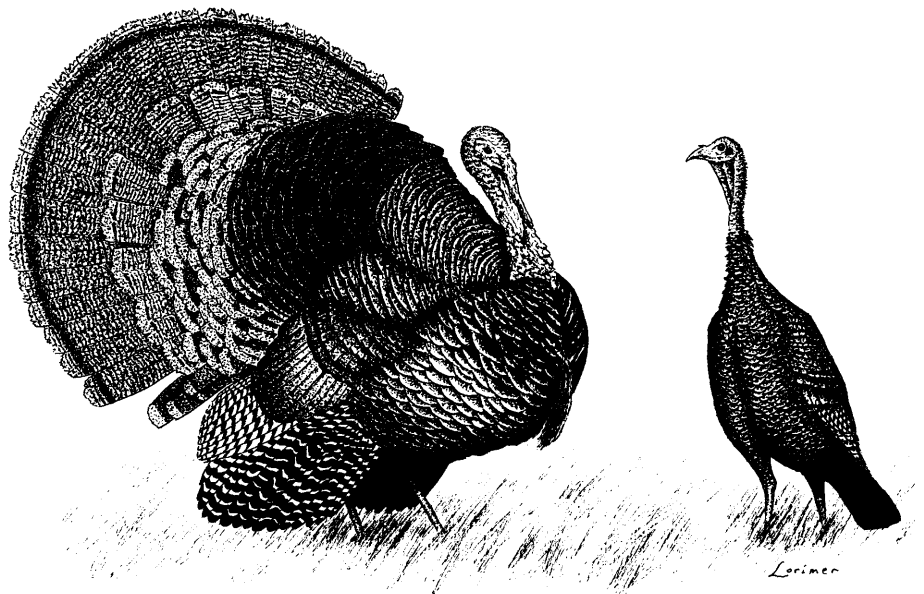
In March of 1999, an experimental release of 35 Wild Turkeys was made in an agricultural area southeast of Sudbury. This site is well beyond the historical range of the Wild Turkey in Ontario. All hens were fitted with radio transmitters and researchers are monitoring their reproductive success,

survival and feeding habits. The results of this experiment will help us to determine the northern limit of the birds in the province.

Wild Turkeys are big birds and a good sized gobbler may weigh over 12 kilograms (27 pounds). Given their size, you might think that they would be easy to find, but turkeys are extremely wary and have excellent eyesight, giving them the advantage. One of the best times of year to see Wild Turkeys is in winter, when they tend to congregate in larger flocks and are more visible against the contrasting snow. Turkeys love to scratch for waste corn, so cut corn fields (not ploughed) adjacent to mature woodlots are likely spots to watch for turkeys in winter. By mid-March, flocks break up and males begin to travel over larger areas in search of females. In March and April, male birds will gobble and perform spectacular strutting displays characterized by wing dragging and tail fanning. Keep an eye for small clearings or fields where these displays often occur.

Since locations of winter flocks tend to change from year to year because of crop rotation patterns, disturbance and other factors, your best bet to locate some of these winter flocks is to contact your local Ministry of Natural Resources office. Staff often track sightings of birds and they can direct you to some good areas for seeing Wild Turkeys.

In March and April, turkeys will gobble spontaneously around sunrise in their search for hens. For the early birder, it can be exciting to drive through good turkey habitat on backroads and listen for birds. This is best done from one-half hour before sunrise to one-half hour after sunrise. Stopping

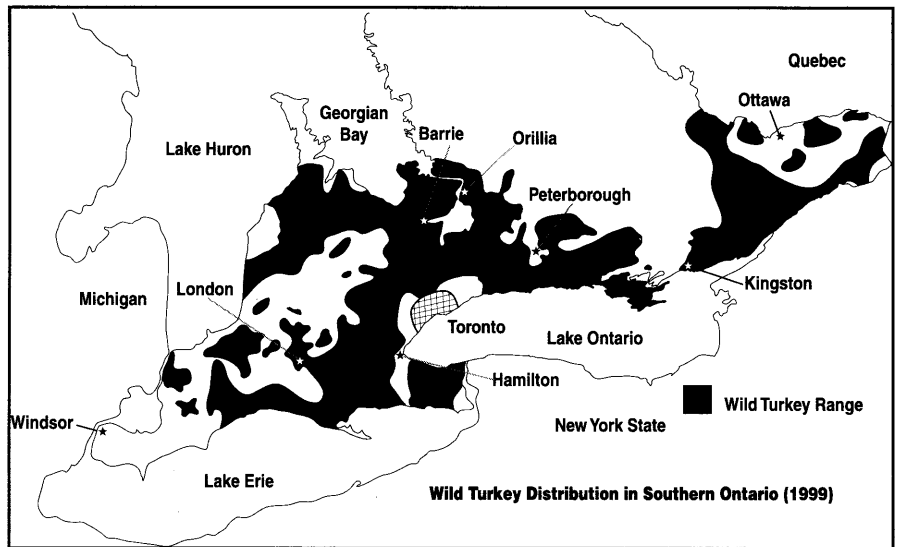


Male and female Wild Turkeys by Peter Lorimer

every kilometre or so and getting out of your vehicle to listen for 3 or 4 minutes should pick up any gobblers in your area.

Because of an active reintroduction program we again have the opportunity to see these magnificent birds in many parts of southern Ontario. Good luck in your search for this elusive bird.

Karen Bellamy is a biologist with the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources in Peterborough.



Notes from the OBRC

Bob Curry

The Records Committee Annual Meeting took place at the Royal Ontario Museum on 25 March 2000. Members spent a full day taking final decisions on difficult records. As always, submitters of observations that were not accepted will receive a written explanation prior to the publication of the Annual Report. Submitters sometimes query members as to when they will be notified that their submission has been accepted. A reminder that the Committee does not inform submitters of acceptance; the accepted record will be included within the Annual Report. Look for the 1999 Annual Report by secretary Kayo Roy in the August 2000 *Ontario Birds*.

Some problematic records were deferred pending further investigation. Members are researching information and acquiring expert opinions on particularly difficult species such as Bullock's Orioles, non-adult California Gulls and "White-winged" Juncos. These will be discussed at length at the fall policy meeting.

Note that beginning January 2000, the Committee no longer requests reports of American Avocets in southern Ontario as they have met the criterion of 25 records over the past five years. Observations of this species from past years that have not been submitted are still welcome. Reports from northern Ontario are still required.

We have been asked what is the official status of Trumpeter Swans. Our position is that there is not yet a viable population of breeders in the province. At present the population is sustained by annual infusion of raised birds. The situation may change over the next few years.

We are pleased to announce that Mark Peck is the new Royal Ontario Museum liaison. We are extremely grateful to have enjoyed excellent support from Ross James over the past 20 or so years but Ross has retired from the ROM to work on other endeavours. We look forward to continued support and

cooperation from Mark.

As I noted in the last newsletter, we thank Doug McRae and Ron Tozer whose terms have just ended for another three years of yeoman service to the Committee. Voting members for 2000 are Margaret Bain, Peter Burke, Bob Curry (chair), Rob Dobos, Kevin McLaughlin, Ron Pittaway and Alan Wormington. Kayo Roy will be secretary.

If you have questions about the operating guidelines or procedures of the OBRC, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Bob Curry, Chair OBRC: 905-637-2022

E-mail: glenda_slessor@chat.haltonbe.on.ca

Send rare bird reports to:

Kayo Roy, 13 Kinsman Court, Fonthill ON L0S 1E3

kayoroy@niagara.com

Urban Crows and Nighthawks

Ron Pittaway

American Crows are generally wary birds. It is hard to get close to crows in rural areas where hunting is allowed and crows are not protected by any laws. The season is open year round and there is no bag limit. That is why country crows are wary of people.

About 25 years ago, crows started increasing in urban areas. Now they are common in every town and city in southern Ontario. Why? Because there are large trees for nesting and roosting, lots of food and no shooting. Urban crows are much tamer than rural ones, having learned that they are safe in most cities.

Not long ago, birders remember warm summer nights hearing the *peenting* and *booming* dives of Common Nighthawks in their neighbourhoods. Today it is rare to hear a nighthawk in most Ontario towns and cities where they were once common.

Have urban crows (and gulls too) developed an easy *search image* for nighthawks nesting on open gravel roof tops?

Confessions of a Big Day Addict

How to do a Big Day

Tom Hince

I know, I know... I've heard it all before. Big Days are trivial, they contribute little to our understanding or appreciation of birds, and nothing to conservation. Well, to naysayers I say read on and lighten up! The objective of a Big Day is to positively identify by sight or sound as many birds as possible in one calendar day. Birding is done in teams that must follow clearly defined rules. Efforts generally focus on a political region such as a province, county or country, and in most cases on the prime spring migration period. A lot of people think you have to be an expert to try a big day, but that is definitely not true. This is a great learning exercise for all of us. I can vouch that big days have made me a much better birder. And it isn't just my identification skills that have steadily improved.

Why do a Big Day?

Since I started participating in Big Days, my whole observation process has changed. When I'm not doing big days, I watch birds with more interest and intensity, and I am much more aware of what birds do—all day long. For me, this has been the greatest benefit. In the end, this has given me a much deeper understanding of all birds, and that certainly is not trivial.

As an example, one common trend in birding is to ignore the commonplace and seek out that rare oddball. Much of what we talk about, read about and discuss is what we want to see or haven't seen. An unfortunate consequence is that many common and uncommon species are poorly known even by birders with decades of experience.

Big days play no favourites. A Black Rail and a Black-capped Chickadee both count as one. Five accidentals on your list will be overshadowed by 10 common and uncommon species that were missed. This equality forces you to refocus on common and uncommon breeding and resident species, and for all but the best student of bird study there is lots to learn.

On a Big Day time is your enemy, so efficiency in coverage is essential. On an all out effort you may only have a few minutes in the right habitat for any particular species. You can't be everywhere at prime activity time, so you have to know in great detail what common birds do all day long. When I started doing big days in earnest about a decade ago, I quickly learned how little I knew about the habits of many birds. Where did Belted Kingfishers go in nesting season? How do you find a Cooper's Hawk? When do owls stop singing? Where do shorebirds roost? Over the years, I've learned that the best way to find a Cooper's Hawk is by rising early and listening for their dawn courtship calls, that shorebirds don't normally roost in sewage lagoons, that certain owls only sing at dawn during spring, and that no matter how many kingfishers you have the week before, they will always be elusive on almost any big day!

Big day birders also learn a lot about the effects of weather. Be it rain, wind, cold or heat they push on, and through the process they learn. Each big day teaches lessons about how birds react to different weather patterns, and because every bird counts, you really notice the effects. This knowledge becomes

extremely useful in every birding outing.

In short, Big Days provide a lot of promotion and press for birding. They are also an ideal vehicle for raising funds for conservation. More critical is that this aspect of birding often appeals to non-birders. In this age of excesses, the concept seems to fit the bill. Even from afar, people respect the passion and enthusiasm birders have for this hobby, and Big Days are a glowing example. Many of this continent's largest conservation fundraisers are built around Big Days. The Baillie Birdathon, the World Series of Birding and the Great Texas Bird Classic are just a few examples.

Your First Big Day

Your first big day should be something special. As you gain experience, you will spend lots of time planning future big days, but to start I'd keep the planning to a basic level. Experienced big day birders always scout their routes for days if not weeks in advance, and adapt the route according to what birds are present at one location or another. But I don't recommend this for novices. To understand well the benefits of scouting, you need to have a big day under your belt, and the thrill of an unscouted effort is simply impossible to match. You just never know what is around the next corner.

The Route

Always, always, always, pick your own route. Spend as much time in the field as possible and pick sites that have a high diversity of breeding birds. Select locations that have distinctly different types of habitat such as a grassland, freshwater marsh, bog and fen, shorelines, sewage lagoons, deciduous forest and coniferous forest. Think carefully about the times when each of these vegetation types is most productive, and try to develop a route that maximizes activity at each location. For example, grassland and wetland sites should be visited before sunrise. Open habitats such as these brighten up and come alive with song much earlier than shaded woodlands.

It used to be thought that *migrant traps* such as Point Pelee were key to Big Day efforts. But in recent years, virtually all of the top Big Day efforts in Ontario have been based upon *breeding birds*. The key seems to be visiting a wide variety of habitats during the first three hours after dawn to maximize access to chorus and activity for a wide range of breeding species, particularly passerines. Once established, breeders are easy to 'truth' and build a predictable route around. Waterfowl and shorebirds can be found just as easily during midday when songbirds become tough. This fundamental shift in strategy seems common across most of the continent. Our traditional Ontario Big Day route uses several southern migrant traps, simply because these also have southern breeders such as Red-bellied Woodpecker and Orchard Oriole, while adding the possibility of migrants.

Another big decision is choosing the date of your effort. *Mid-May* used to be considered prime time for migrant based routes, but the shift to a breeding bird strategy seems to favour

late May. The hitch is not being too late or shorebirds and waterfowl quickly disappear. The other approach is to do a monthly Big Day and this again will stretch your knowledge of the seasonal changes in bird behaviour and activity patterns.

Take these generalities to tailor your own route based upon your personal experience. One of the most rewarding (and challenging!) aspects of a big day is sitting with your team mates planning a route.

Changing on the Fly

Some people think it's bad birding luck, but we always keep a running tally of the list of birds during the day. That way we can review the gaps in the list and discuss possible route changes. By late afternoon, you may find you don't need to visit one or two locations because you've aced these habitats, or you may need to add a habitat type to compensate for some misses. So change your route on the fly and add a new location. It's allowed.

Day Length

Remember this is your big day, and you can do what you want. Spend any amount of time you want in the field, up to the maximum of a full 24 hour calendar day. If you decide to cut your day short, I recommend finishing early rather than starting late. Most of us have deprived ourselves of the night world. It is a magical place full of discoveries. If you start your big day at midnight or in the wee hours, you will experience something special. Surviving the darkness and watching the world come to life is an experience you will never forget.

Pick The Team Carefully

Big days must be done with friends. But keep in mind that even your most hygienic buddies will start to smell after 24 hours. Of course, you will too. Friends don't have to be like minded, but they should have a sense of humour, particularly when it comes to the shortcomings of other members. It's a good idea to decide up front how you are going to make decisions during the day, or you may not be friends at the end. This also helps to avoid skirmishes which take away from precious birding time.

'Ringers' Are Not A Good Idea

It helps to have one or two members who are more experienced, but one expert and three novices is not a good mix. The idea of a big day is to challenge and develop the skills of every team member. Everyone has to identify each bird independently, so it makes sense to have team members of roughly the same skill level, be they novice or advanced. If you follow the local birding guru from bird to bird and nod in agreement, you are missing the point. You are also breaking a fundamental tenet of all big days; individual honour is the only referee.

Invited Guests

It would not be unusual to find a media representative wanting to join you for the day. This is fine, but they should know that they are along for the ride, and that for 24 hours birds dictate all. I generally instruct media as follows: 'You must have a cell phone before you can get in the car. This is a safety precaution. If we don't get along, we'll want to drop you immediately at the side of the road, and we want to be sure you can call for help.' I haven't had to yet, but it keeps them in line.

Safety and Drivers

If you decide to do an all out effort, a non-birding driver is essential. However, it is recommended that you thoroughly brief

your victim first. Most importantly, they need to know that a big day can indeed be 24 hours long, that you may not be stopping to eat and that birding is the only activity.

Knowing Your Competition

Most people tell you that big days are competitions between teams of birders. Don't let this scare you off, because they have missed the mark. Big days are competitive, but the competition is between the *birds* and *birders*. Remember this is a game of your team versus the birds. You know they are out there, but can you find them on the appointed day? Yesterday and knowing they have to be there don't count. Even in an event with lots of teams, never let yourself spoil the day with thoughts of how the 'competition' is doing. While you are wasting energy on this, the real competition is flying over your head, darting across the road or calling from the brush behind you.

Future Efforts

To keep heading up the learning curve, you will likely have to invest more time in scouting and preparation. The bottom line is 'them that scouts is happy, them that don't ain't!'

Another strategy is to squeeze more birding sites into the route and that means saving time. To do this, make sure all food and liquids are prepared in advance, scout traffic, fine tune route choices and focus on team work. For example, on our team each member has specific responsibilities at a site. If it is a scoping stop, Paul scopes left to right, Bruce scopes right to left and I watch the sky for birds in flight. *I would be amiss if I didn't reference the advantage of a good knowledge of bird vocalizations.* This increases the efficiency of a team in covering a given area because it is so much easier to hear most birds than see them, in spring, at least. All the more reason to get out there and listen and learn.

A Final Warning

I would be remiss if I didn't provide a final warning. Once you've survived a big day, your whole life may begin to revolve around this activity, your spouse might question your sensibilities and your non-birding friends will consider you a prime candidate for therapy. None of this will matter because you'll already be planning your next plan of attack!

On Saturday 29 May 1999, Tom Hince and Paul Pratt, with designated driver Glenn Gervais, set a new Ontario Big Day record with 200 species. Tom and Paul set the previous Ontario record of 194 in 1994. Their basic route went from Algonquin to Point Pelee with their 200th bird a calling Yellow-breasted Chat in the dark at Pelee.

In 2000, Tom Hince with long time friends Bruce Di Labio and Paul Pratt, and designated driver Ethan Melag, won the gruelling Great Texas Birding Classic. Their team also nicknamed "The Canadians" has entered numerous Big Day events including the World Series of Birding in New Jersey and more recently, the Great Texas Birding Classic. They have been generously sponsored by Kowa Optics for 10 years. Team members have also included Michael Carlson (birder, 1989 - 1992), Ethan Meleg (driver, 1993) and Glenn Gervais (driver, 1994 - 1999). Their efforts have earned Team Kowa the Urner Stone Cup (overall World Series) three times (1993, 1995, 1997), the Edwin I Stearns Award (top out of state team) nine times (1989 - 1997) and the LGA and Cape Island Cups in 1998 (best single county). Bruce has also captained teams to victory in the Taverner Cup on two occasions.



On 28 May 2000, President Jean Iron (left) presented Art and Noreen Hawtin with the OFO Certificate of Appreciation for "Maintaining habitat on your ranch in Carden for Loggerhead Shrikes and for being friendly to visiting birders." Photo by *Ron Pittaway*.

Bird-Finding Guide To Canada

Ron Pittaway

A revised *Bird-Finding Guide To Canada*, edited by J. Cam Finlay, has just appeared in major bookstores. The guide book builds strongly on the first edition in 1984 with most of the contributors updating their sections. In fact, this guide is written by knowledgeable birders in each province/territory. It's packed with valuable information including names, addresses and telephone numbers of birders and birding clubs to contact. It has essays and directions to many of the best birding areas in each province and territory. For example, there are 55 pages for birding in Ontario. Other provinces get similar treatment. I used the previous edition in Quebec and the Atlantic Provinces, finding it particularly helpful. The guide has a Checklist of the Birds of Canada that includes the number of species for each province/territory, breeding and migration status and accidentals.

The revised 2000 edition is published by McClelland & Stewart Inc., Toronto. Soft cover, drawings, line maps, 449 pages. It retails for \$24.99 in Canada. I recommend this guide book to anyone who is birding in Ontario or travelling to another province or territory this summer or anytime. Keep it in your car.

OFO NEWS Editor

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

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

© OFO Pileated Woodpecker logo is a copyright registered with the federal government of Canada. The OFO logo and material published in *OFO News* may not be reproduced without permission.

Ontbirds

Coordinated by Mike Street

Ontbirds with almost 1000 subscribers is OFO's successful listserv for reporting and receiving bird sightings. *Ontbirds* is very popular with Ontario birders and birders from many other places.

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

Future OFO Trips

August 26 (Saturday) Leslie Street Spit, Toronto. Leader: Norm Murr. Meet 8:00 a.m. at the base of the Spit near the intersection of Leslie and Unwin Avenue. Early fall migrants. ****NEW TRIP****

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

September 10 (Sunday) Presqu'île Provincial Park. Leader: Don Shanahan. Meet 8:00 a.m. at Beach 4 parking lot. Park entrance fee. Fall migrants, shorebirds, raptors.

September 23 (Saturday) Amherst Island and Area. Leader: Peter Good. Meet at 7:15 a.m. for 7:30 ferry (1999 cost \$3.50/car). The ferry dock is in Millhaven, about 20 minutes west of Kingston on the Loyalist Parkway (Highway 33) near where County Road 4 (formerly Highway 133) meets the lakeshore. Shorebirds, gulls and fall migrants. ****NEW TRIP****

October 7 (Saturday) Hawk Hill, High Park, Toronto. Hosts: Don Barnett and the Greater Toronto Raptor Watch. Meet at 11:00 a.m. in the Grenadier Restaurant parking lot. Use only the Bloor St. entrance at High Park Ave.

October 8 (Sunday) Leslie Street Spit, Toronto. Leader: Norm Murr. Meet 8:00 a.m. at the base of the Spit parking lot near intersection of Leslie and Unwin Avenue. Fall migrants and waterfowl.

October 21 (Saturday) Holiday Beach, Essex County. Leader: Paul Pratt. Meet at 9:00 a.m. 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). Possible entrance fee. Migrating raptors.

October 22 (Sunday) Grand Bend Area. Leaders: Tom and Jill Hayman. Meet at 9:00 a.m. at Colonial Hotel on Highway 21 in Grand Bend. For further information or accommodation suggestions phone Tom Hayman at 519-439-4905. Fall migrants, also possible: Red-throated Loon, Brant, jaegers and gulls.

OFO on the Net

www.interlog.com/~ofo

E-mail: ofo@interlog.com

Maintained by David Catrall