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Gull Watching Guide

Ron Pittaway

Quiz: Identify and age the gulls in Peter Lorimer's drawing below of Niagara Falls. Answers in box on page 7.

Introduction: Gull watching is fast becoming the most popular and challenging aspect of birding. Gulls are the ultimate for many birders. Gulls come in a variety of plumages and are often easy to observe closely, making the challenge of finding rarities exciting. Ontario offers some of the best opportunities in the world to discover rare gulls. There are 20 species of gulls recorded in Ontario. This is about 40% of the world's approximately 50 species. In this article, I present information on all 20 species, including the best places and times to see each species with emphasis on southern Ontario, identification tips,

age/plumage/molt and taxonomic comments.

When To See Gulls: Passionate gull watchers study gulls at all times of the year. However, November and December are the best months to see the most species and highest numbers at hotspots such as the Niagara River. Winter gull watching is excellent in Toronto along the waterfront, especially after the inner harbours freeze over. Remember to dress warmly for cold and often windy weather during the best of the gull season.

Where To See Gulls: Some hotspots are the Niagara River, Van Wagners Beach in Hamilton, Toronto's Waterfront, Tip of Point Pelee, Wheatley Harbour on Lake Erie and Sarnia on

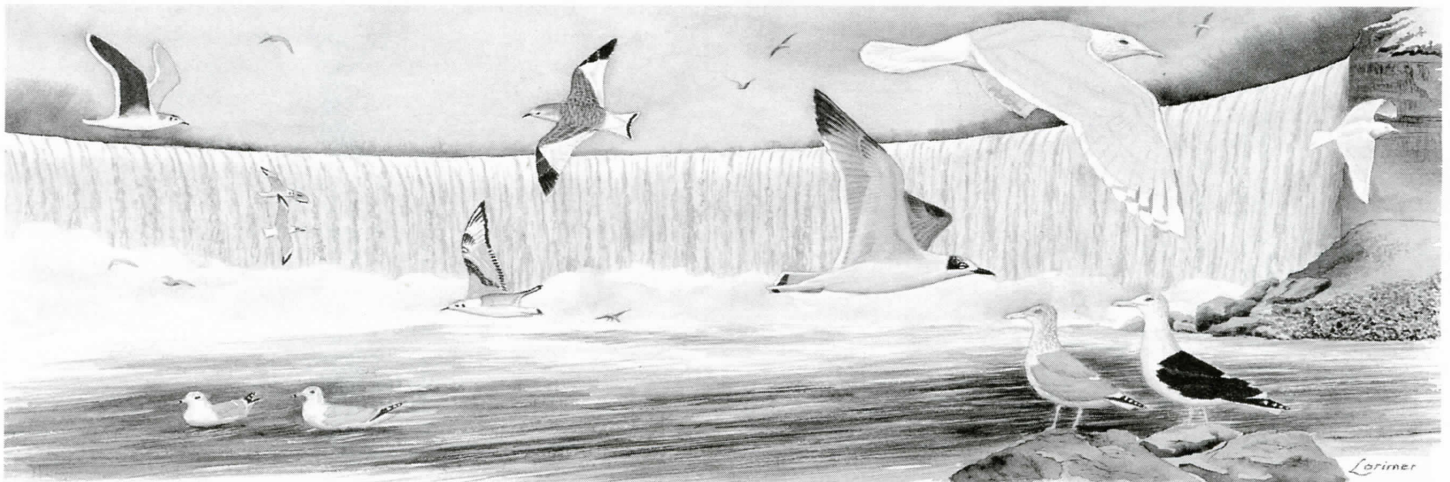


Figure 1: Gulls in late fall at Niagara Falls by Peter Lorimer

Lake Huron. Generally there are many other excellent gull viewing areas, especially harbours, along the Great Lakes, Lake Simcoe, Ottawa River at Deschenes Rapids and St. Lawrence River at the Cornwall Dam. Dumps and day roosts are excellent everywhere. Only a few choice hotspots are described below.

Niagara River: The late Peter Grant, author of the definitive guide to the *Gulls* (1986), said that the Niagara River was his favourite place in the world to watch gulls. The Niagara River along the Niagara River Parkway that runs from Niagara-on-the-Lake on Lake Ontario to Fort Erie on Lake Erie has many great lookouts to observe gulls. The best spot is the overlook at Sir Adam Beck Power Dam (Figure 4) just south of the Queenston-Lewiston Bridge. Other top spots are the Boat Launching Ramp in Queenston north of the bridge accessed off Princess Street, the Whirlpool Rapids Overlook, the gorge below the Falls, the rapids and rocks above the Falls on both sides of the Toronto Hydro Building, the Control Structure and weirs farther above the Falls, and Fort Erie on both sides of the Peace Bridge. Niagara is best following strong cold fronts in November and December when over 100,000 gulls feed along the river.

World Record: A record 14 species of gulls was seen from Ontario along the Niagara River on 25 November 1995 by birders from New York State and Michigan. The 14 species were Franklin's Gull, Little Gull, Bonaparte's Gull, Ring-billed Gull, California Gull, Herring Gull, Thayer's Gull, Iceland Gull, Lesser Black-backed Gull, Glaucous Gull, Great Black-backed Gull, Sabine's Gull, Black-legged Kittiwake and Ross's Gull. One group who saw all 14 species included Willie D'Anna, Dean DiTommaso, Rob French and Nancy French. This is a world record for the most species of gulls seen in one day. Top birders regularly see 9 to 11 species on good days in most years along the Niagara River.

Niagara Fly Past: The evening *Fly Past* at Niagara-on-the-Lake is a spectacular sight when there are high numbers of Bonaparte's Gulls on the river during the day. In late afternoon, thousands of Bonaparte's fly downriver to roost on Lake Ontario at night. The flight lasts about one hour just before dark. The tight streaming flocks of Bonaparte's look like shorebirds. Among Bonaparte's watch for Little, Black-headed,

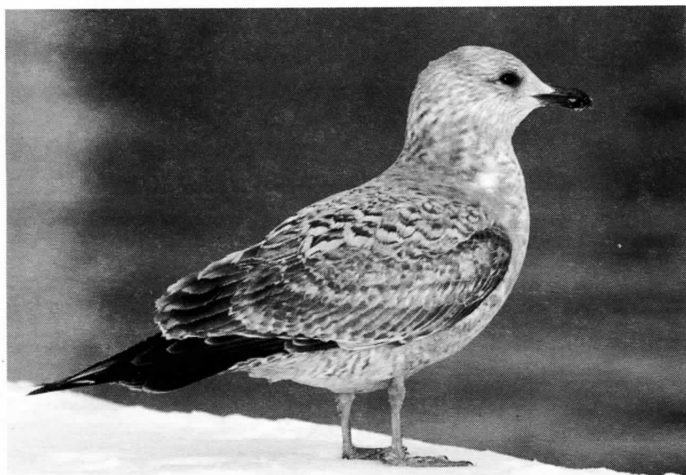


Figure 2: First basic Herring Gull in Toronto February 2000
Photo by Sam Barone

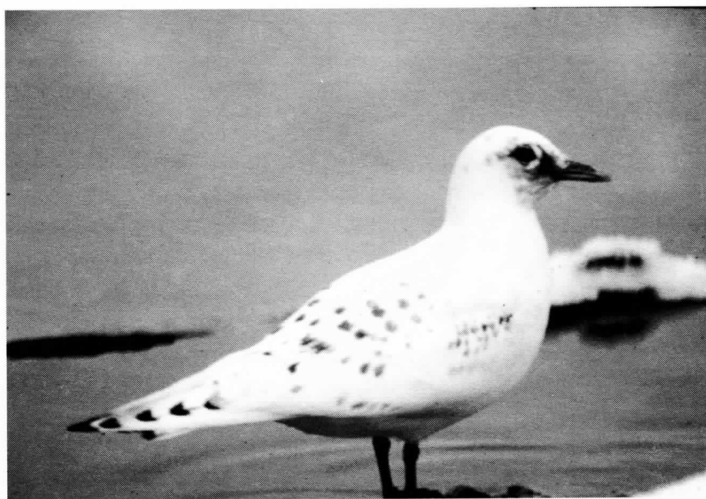


Figure 3: First basic Ivory Gull at London 22 December 1973
Photo by Richard Poulin

Franklin's, Black-legged Kittiwake and we once saw a pink adult Ross's Gull. Best place to watch the *Fly Past* is at Navy Hall National Historic Site. It has free parking and benches along the river to watch the gulls. Other laneways leading to the river just north of Navy Hall are also excellent to watch the *Fly Past*. The flight is best from November to mid-January and often extends into February in mild winters. The spring *Fly Past* is best from 25 March to 15 April to see Little Gulls and the occasional Black-headed Gull with the Bonaparte's. Adults of all three species are acquiring dark hoods at this time. **Note:** There is also a late afternoon flight of Bonaparte's Gulls that goes to Lake Erie.

For more information on the Niagara River, see Kayo Roy's (1998) guide and map to "The Niagara River" in *OFO News* 16 (3):2-3 and Gordon Bellerby's (1996) "Niagara Spring Fly Past" in *OFO News* 14(2):5.

Hamilton: Van Wagners Beach is the best place on Lake Ontario for rare pelagic gulls such as Sabine's Gull and Black-legged Kittiwake. Watch for Sabine's in September and October and kittiwakes from October to December on moderate to strong northeast winds. Ring-billed, Herring and Great Black-backed are regular along with small numbers of Bonaparte's Gulls.

Toronto Waterfront: The city's waterfront attracts large numbers gulls in winter. Best spots are Ashbridges Bay Park, Leslie Street Spit, Polson Street, Sunnyside and Humber Bay Park. Watch for Glaucous, Iceland, Thayer's and Lesser Black-backed Gulls among the thousands of Ring-billed, Herring and Great Black-backed Gulls. Mew, California and Slaty-backed Gulls have been seen too.

Point Pelee: The Tip is always worth checking for rare gulls. Go early morning before the beach walkers get there. Among the Bonaparte's, Ring-billed, Herring and Great Black-backed, watch for Little, Franklin's, Lesser Black-backed, Glaucous, Iceland, Thayer's and occasionally Laughing and Sabine's. A first basic Ross's Gull was at the Tip on 17-18 May 1999.

Wheatley Harbour: The commercial fishing fleet based at Wheatley Harbour on Lake Erie near Point Pelee attracts thousands of gulls. Check the shoreline and offshore by the harbour. Lesser Black-backed is regular. Watch for all the

species listed for Point Pelee. Some rarities frequent both Pelee and Wheatley.

Sarnia: This is the best spot in fall on Lake Huron for Sabine's Gull and Black-legged Kittiwake on strong northwest winds. Little and Franklin's Gulls are regular too. Sarnia harbour had an adult Ross's Gull in February 1992. See the February 1995 article with map by the late Dennis Rupert on "Sarnia Waterworks" in *OFO News* 13(1):2-3.

Dumps: Dumps are super places to study gulls at close range. Most dumps allow birders to drive in provided you stay out of the way machinery and people using the dump. Always check with the gate attendant and say you are watching birds. Keep in mind that dumps are usually muddy or dusty and your chances are increased of getting a flat tire. The payola is that gulls at dumps are tame and easily viewed with high chances of a rarity. Watch from your car.

Annotated Species List

Laughing Gull: Very rare visitor from May to October. Casual in winter. Best spots are the harbours and fishing ports on Lake Erie and less often on Lake Ontario. Usually associates with Ring-billed Gulls. Also seen at the Niagara River, Ottawa, Lake Simcoe and Hudson Bay. **Caution:** Year old Franklin's Gulls in spring and early summer in first alternate (first summer) plumage are often misidentified as Laughing Gulls. Franklin's bill is shorter, less deep and less hooked than Laughing's.

Franklin's Gull: Common migrant at the south end of Lake of the Woods in northwestern Ontario. Rare in southern Ontario. Singles associate with Bonaparte's or Ring-billed Gulls. Watch for it at sewage lagoons. A few Franklin's are regular in spring at Point Pelee and elsewhere in southern Ontario. A few juveniles are seen in August in southern Ontario. Franklin's in first basic plumage are seen most years on the Niagara River from September to November, rarely into December. Many birders remember the hurricane-like storm from the west on 10-11 November 1998 that displaced hundreds of adult Franklin's Gulls into southern Ontario. Some birds lingered to late November. Named for Sir John Franklin, Arctic explorer, who perished in 1847 searching for a northwest passage.

Little Gull: Rare to uncommon migrant in southern Ontario. Very rare in winter. Little Gulls are regular in fall with Bonaparte's Gulls on Lake Erie, Lake Ontario, Lake Simcoe and Niagara River. Numbers increase on the Niagara River from late March to mid-April when sightings are guaranteed at the evening *Fly Past* at Niagara-on-the-Lake. Numbers also gather at Oshawa's Second Marsh from mid-April to mid-May. Most Little Gulls migrate north with Bonaparte's Gulls to muskegs around James and Hudson Bays to breed. Occasionally breeds in southern Ontario. Scattered birds molting from first alternate to second basic plumage are found in summer in southern Ontario. **Dark-winged Variant:** A very rare variant having dark upper wings occurs in first year birds. **Note:** Little and Ross's Gulls are closely related species.

Black-headed Gull: The legendary Ludlow Griscom collected the first North American specimen of this Old World species on 30 January 1930 in Newburyport, Massachusetts. In southern Ontario, it is very rare from late August to December and from mid-March to May. Casual in summer and mid-winter. Usually singles are found with Bonaparte's Gulls. Best spot is Queenston along the Niagara River in November and December. Most birds are in definitive basic plumage. Doug McRae and I once picked out a Black-headed in definitive alternate plumage in a May flock of Bonaparte's at Presqu'île by its distinctive call. **Tip:** Watch for Black-headed and other small gulls wherever large numbers of Bonaparte's gather.

Bonaparte's Gull: Locally common migrant. Tree nesters that breed in the boreal forest around shallow lakes. Usually common into January on the Niagara River and Lake Erie, but most depart to the Atlantic Coast by mid-winter following severe freeze ups. It is a mystery why over 95% of the thousands of Bonaparte's Gulls along the Niagara River in late fall are in definitive basic plumage. Where are the first basic birds? They are likely spending their first winter on the Atlantic Coast. Bonaparte's concentrate in large numbers at favoured locations in southern Ontario such as the Niagara River, Lake Erie, Lake Ontario and Lake Simcoe. Some years, Lake Simcoe is a major summering area for year old nonbreeders in first alternate plumage. There is a major migration corridor from Georgian Bay and Lake Simcoe through Lake Scugog (Port Perry) and Sturgeon Lake (Lindsay) to Lake Ontario. Along this



Figure 4: OFO trip to Niagara River at Sir Adam Beck Overlook on 21 November 1999. Photo by Pat Tozer

corridor, Bonaparte's Gulls are common at sewage lagoons in Port Perry, Lindsay, Cannington, Sunderland and Beaverton. Their main food at sewage lagoons is aquatic insects such as Water Boatman and Back Swimmers that surface regularly for air. Smaller numbers of Bonaparte's are regular elsewhere on the Great Lakes, St. Lawrence River and Ottawa River. They are very rare on most interior lakes such as in Algonquin Park and Haliburton County. *Dark-winged Variant*: A very rare variant occurs in first year birds in which much of the upper wings is dark. A similar variant also occurs in the Little Gull. These dark variants are misidentified as Franklin's Gulls. Bonaparte's Gull was named for Charles Lucien Bonaparte, a nephew of Napoleon.

Heermann's Gull: Ontario's first Heermann's Gull was discovered by Bruce Massey in Toronto on 14 November 1999. Seen by hundreds, it stayed 10 months (with several short absences) in Toronto until it was last seen on 16 September 2000 at Polson Street and later flying east over the Leslie Street Spit. Dark plumage in the Heermann's Gull may be related to three functions: (1) thermoregulation, (2) camouflage against dark backgrounds and (3) fewer worn feathers because dark feathers wear less than light feathers. See Bob Yukich (2000) for his article "Heermann's Gull in Toronto" in *Ontario Birds* 18(1):3-7. This is the most easterly record for North America. Named in honor of Adolphus Lewis Heermann, MD, an American who collected birds and eggs in the mid-1800s.

Mew Gull: Casual fall and winter visitor to Ontario. Two subspecies are possible in Ontario, but to date only the more expected North American race *Larus canus brachyrynchus* has been recorded. The nominate European race *L.c. canus*, known as the Common Gull and perhaps a separate species, is regular on the Atlantic Coast of North America and should be watched for in Ontario. **Caution:** Runt female Ring-billed Gulls retaining considerable juvenal plumage in the fall are an identification pitfall. See Figure 9.

Ring-billed Gull: The most abundant gull in agricultural and urban areas of southern Ontario. Unlike most gulls, Ring-billed Gulls frequent school yards and fast food restaurants. In Ontario, this is the species seen following the farmer's plow.

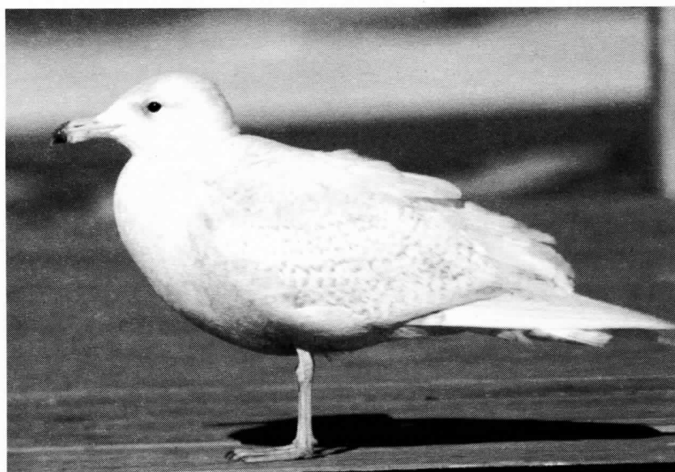


Figure 5: Juvenile Glaucous Gull in Toronto February 2000
Photo by Sam Barone

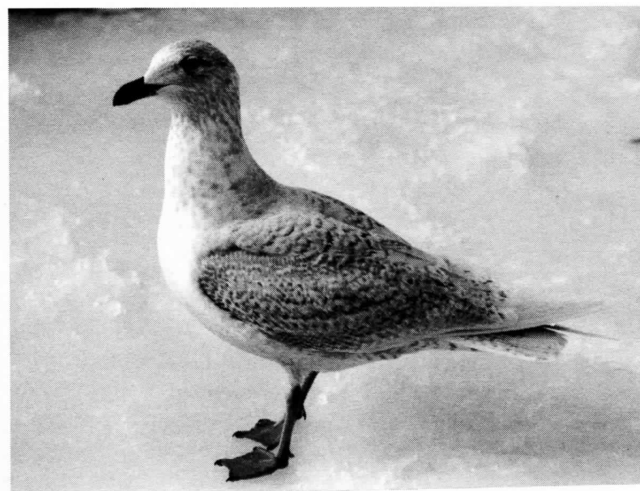


Figure 6: Juvenile Iceland Gull in Toronto 22 February 2000
Photo by Albert Boisvert

California Gull: Very rare visitor from the west. Best place to see a California Gull is the Niagara River where it is now annual in November and December, usually associating with Ring-billed and Herring Gulls. In the *Auk* 104:421-428, J.R. Jehl (1987) describes two well-marked subspecies of the California Gull. The southern nominate race *Larus californicus californicus* breeds in the Great Basin of the United States. The northern race *L.c. albertaensis*, named after the province, breeds mainly in the Prairie Provinces. The more common nominate race is smaller, smaller billed, with a noticeably darker mantle than Herring and Ring-billed Gulls. *Albertaensis* is told by its greater size, larger bill and paler mantle approaching or matching the shade of Herring and Ring-billed Gulls. Both subspecies have been reported in Ontario with *albertaensis* being the more frequent. *The Sibley Guide to Birds* (2000) has illustrations of adults of both subspecies on page 215, but the caption line pointing to the mantle shade of *albertaensis* should say *lighter gray* not darker gray.

Herring Gull: Breeds throughout Ontario and is the only gull breeding in Algonquin Park. Common year round on Lake Ontario, it is the second most common gull after the Ring-billed in Ontario. This species is the benchmark by which all other large gulls are identified. Know it cold. The pearl gray mantle shade of Herring and Ring-billed Gulls is virtually identical in colour, making it a good comparison character for finding rare species. **Caution:** (1) Herring Gulls growing outer primaries in fall show less black in the wingtips leading to misidentifications of Thayer's Gull. (2) Some adult Herring Gulls have Thayer's-like wingtip patterns, suggesting past introgression with one or more of the Arctic Gulls: Glaucous, Iceland, Kumlien's or Thayer's. These Thayer's-like Herring Gulls sometimes can be identified by a combination of characters: larger overall size and bigger bills for males, yellowish to bright yellow bill lacking greenish tones, clear yellow eyes (rare in Thayer's), yellowish orange orbital ring (purplish in Thayer's) and duller pink legs.

Iceland Gull (includes Thayer's Gull): Iceland Gulls are regular in small numbers in southern Ontario from October to April. Best places to see them are Ottawa until freeze up, Toronto and the Niagara River. I follow Godfrey (1986) who lists three subspecies of the Iceland Gull: (1) Nominate Iceland

Gull (*Larus glaucooides glaucooides*) that breeds in Greenland is casual in Ontario, including a specimen of an adult from Ottawa. (2) Kumlien's Iceland Gull (*L.g. kumlieni*) is the most common subspecies in Ontario. (3) Thayer's Iceland Gull (*L.g. thayeri*) is a rare migrant and winter visitor. Early Thayer's arrive in southern Ontario in late September, several weeks before the first Kumlien's. Adult Thayer's (like other Iceland Gulls) in winter usually have pale greenish yellow bills whereas Herring Gulls lack a greenish tone. **Caution:** A large number of Iceland Gulls seen in Ontario are intermediate (probably intergrades) between Kumlien's and Thayer's Gulls. See Pittaway, R. (1999) on the "Taxonomic History of Thayer's Gull" in *Ontario Birds* 17(1):2-21.

Lesser Black-backed Gull: This European species was first recorded in Ontario in 1971. Since then it has increased greatly throughout the province, usually found in association with Herring Gulls. It is now a rare to uncommon fall and winter visitor. Very rare in summer. The palest of three subspecies *Larus fuscus graellsii* is the usual race seen in Ontario. However, there are reports, photographs and specimens from Ontario that match the darker *intermedius* race (as dark as Great Black-backed Gull) and others that appear to be intergrades (intermediate) between *graellsii* and *intermedius*. These intermediates are known as 'Dutch Intergrades'. The darkest nominate race *fuscus* is not expected to occur in Ontario.

Slaty-backed Gull: There are two provincial records of this Asian species: an adult in Niagara Falls from 24 November to 29 December 1992 and a second adult in Toronto from 2 to 9 January 1999. Both birds had the classic field marks including the "string of pearls" primary pattern. For details and photographs of Toronto's first Slaty-backed Gull, see Yukich and Varella (2000) in *Ontario Birds* 18(2):73-77. More records of this species are expected in Ontario.

Glaucous Gull: This big white northerner occurs in southern Ontario from October to April. Best spots to see them are Ottawa, Toronto and the Niagara River. Any dump that attracts large numbers of gulls should have one or more Glaucous Gulls in late fall and winter. First year birds are easy to identify from Iceland Gulls by their pink, neatly black-tipped bills. Kevin McLaughlin of Hamilton first pointed out in 1996 a major difference between Glaucous Gulls in North America and Europe. European birds in definitive basic (adult winter) plumage are much more heavily and extensively streaked with dusky on the head and neck than North American birds; our birds are very lightly streaked to almost immaculate. This difference is *not* described in the ornithological literature.

Caution: Extremely small adult female Glaucous Gulls are misidentified as nominate Iceland Gulls.

Great Black-backed Gull: Largest gull in the world. Often incorrectly called "Greater" Black-backed Gull. Numbers of Great Black-backed Gulls have increased spectacularly in recent years. Large numbers, where they were once uncommon, are now seen in Ottawa as early as mid-August migrating to winter on the Great Lakes. Fairly common on Lake Simcoe, but generally rare inland away from the Great Lakes. It is a common fall and winter visitor to the St. Lawrence River, Lake Ontario, Niagara River and Lake Erie. Less common on Lake Huron and rare on Lake Superior and James Bay. Most birds return in spring to breeding colonies in the Gulf of St.

Lawrence. The first breeding record on the Great Lakes was in 1954 on Lake Huron. Why this species has not exploded as a breeder on the Great Lakes is a mystery. Many nonbreeding birds summer in southern Ontario. Adult Great Black-backed Gulls have dull yellow to gray eyes that often appear dark, especially at a distance, whereas adult Lesser Black-backed have bright yellow eyes, even at a distance. Great Black-backed Gulls in North America have a much higher frequency of hybridization with Herring Gulls than in Europe. Genetic studies show that Great Black-backed Gulls in North America have *smithsonianus* genes in the population, an example of evolution in motion.

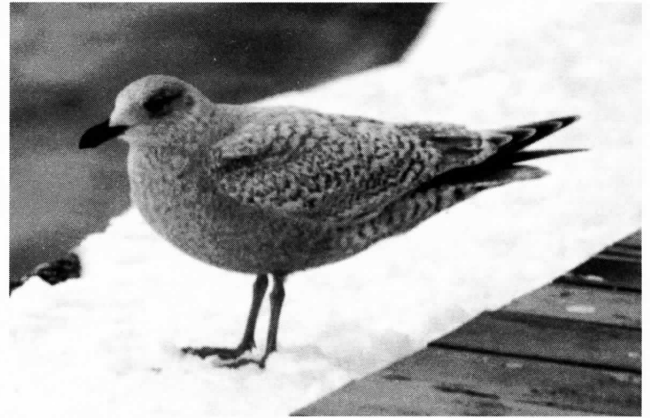


Figure 7: Juvenile Thayer's Gull in Toronto 16 February 2000
Photo by Jean Iron

Sabine's Gull: Rare fall migrant from late August to December. Most birds seen are in juvenal plumage. The molt to first basic plumage takes place on the wintering grounds. Occasional adults in breeding plumage are seen in late August to mid-September, but they are much rarer than juvenals. Adults also undergo prebasic molt on the wintering grounds. Accidental spring migrant. Best places to see Sabine's Gull are: (1) the Niagara River in October and November, (2) Van Wagners Beach in Hamilton on northeast winds in September and October, (3) Point Pelee in September and October on southwest winds with the birds passing from west to east. **Caution:** distant first basic kittiwakes are often misidentified as juvenile Sabine's. Look for the kittiwake's carpal bars and neck collar which the Sabine's lacks. Named for its discover, Captain Edward Sabine, who saw it in 1818 along the west coast of Greenland.

Black-legged Kittiwake: This North Atlantic saltwater gull is a rare fall visitor to Lake Ontario and the Niagara River. Most kittiwakes seen on Lake Ontario probably get lost by funneling up the St. Lawrence River into Lake Ontario. A few originate from James Bay where they are very rare. Best spots to see kittiwakes are: (1) Van Wagners Beach in Hamilton on northeast winds from October to December, (2) the Niagara River in November and December and (3) Point Edwards in Sarnia in November. They are very rare on Ottawa River and Lake Simcoe and casual on inland lakes. Most birds seen are in first basic (first winter) plumage, but adults are seen too. **Caution:** At a distance, Ring-billed Gulls in second basic plumage lacking white tips to the black primaries are misidentified as adult kittiwakes.



Figure 8: Toronto's Heermann's Gull. Gonys is ridge on lower mandible formed by the fusion of two sides (rami) of the jaw. Note moderate gonydeal angle in profile. Photos by *Jean Iron*

Ross's Gull: Very rare visitor. Recorded at Moosonee near James Bay, Niagara, Port Weller and Point Pelee. Watch for Ross's with Bonaparte's. Adults are often distinctly tinged with pink below. **Caution:** At a distance, Ross's can look like a Little Gull because its blue gray wing linings often appear very dark. Named in honor of Sir James Clark Ross, British explorer of the Canadian Arctic.

Ivory Gull: Very rare in Ontario. Breeds in the high Arctic. Breeding population may be only 15,000-30,000 pairs. It usually shows up in southern Ontario in December and January. Almost all birds seen are in first basic plumage. Ivory Gulls can turn up almost anywhere, but usually only singles are seen in Ontario. They normally do not associate with other gulls. Ivory Gulls are attracted to bright red. Use red meat coated with ketchup on snow or ice to attract them in close. Around food they are aggressive to larger gulls. **Caution:** Albino Ring-billed Gulls and distant Iceland Gulls have been misidentified as Ivory Gulls.

Hybrids: Hybrids are more common in gulls than in most other birds. The large white-headed gulls hybridize much more often than the small dark-headed gulls. The two most frequent gull hybrids in Ontario are Great Black-backed x Herring Gull and Glaucous x Herring Gull (Nelson's Gull).

New Ontario Gulls: Who would have predicted that Heermann's Gull would be the next gull added to the Ontario list? Many gulls are expanding their ranges because of new food supplies and probably dispersal related to climate change. The most likely new species and subspecies to be recorded in Ontario are: Black-tailed Gull, Yellow-legged Gull, Common (Mew) Gull, Vega (Herring) Gull, Kelp Gull, European Herring Gull and Glaucous-winged Gull. Be prepared to take detailed notes, sketches, photographs and get experienced birders to see and document it too.

Glossary

Gonys: From the Greek *genys* for chin. This term is very misunderstood and often used incorrectly. The gonys is the ridge on the lower mandible from the tip to where the two sides

of the jaw (rami) branch. See Figure 8. The *gonydeal angle* or *angle of the gonys* is the point where the bill turns upwards near the tip. The *gonydeal angle* is pronounced in some species such as many large gulls and loons.

Mantle: The mantle is the gray to black even coloration of the back, scapulars and upper wing coverts, suggesting a mantle covering the upper parts. Mantle shade or colour is one of the most important ID criteria in gulls. Some authors restrict the meaning of mantle to the small area of the upper back between the scapulars, but this is silly when applied to gulls.

Mirrors: Also called *subapical spots*, mirrors are usually enclosed white spots near the tips of the primaries on gulls with dark wingtips. Why they are called mirrors is a mystery because they do not reflect images.

Orbital Ring: The fleshy eyelids, often coloured.

Plumage, Molt and Age: A good knowledge of this subject is essential to becoming an expert on gulls. See Pittaway (2000) in the April issue of *Ontario Birds* 18(1):27-43 for a full explanation of the Humphrey and Parkes terminology. Adult gulls have two plumages: definitive basic (adult winter) and definitive alternate (adult breeding). Juvenal plumage is held for a short period in most small (except Sabine's) and medium sized gulls before having a partial molt into first basic (first winter) plumage. However, many large Arctic gulls such as Glaucous, Iceland and Thayer's retain juvenal plumage through the fall or later before molting. More studies are needed. By late spring many of these large first year gulls become very worn and sun faded, complicating identification. During summer and fall of their second calendar year, most gulls renew all their feathers in the second prebasic molt. By this molt, most small gulls acquire definitive basic (adult winter) plumage in their second year and are known as 2-year gulls. These small gulls next acquire definitive alternate (adult breeding) in spring of their third calendar year. These plumages are then repeated for life. Mew and Ring-billed Gulls are 3-year gulls, whereas Herring and most other large gulls are 4-year gulls, acquiring their first definitive basic plumage in their fourth calendar year at about 3.5 years of age.

Age Structure in Gull Populations: In large gulls that take 4 years to attain definitive (adult) plumage, it is important to know that the 2 most common age classes in the population are adults and first year birds, followed by second year with third year birds being the least common age class.

Albino Gulls: Albinism in gulls is fairly common. Albino Ring-billed Gulls have been misidentified as Iceland and Ivory Gulls. Albino Herring Gulls have been identified as Iceland and Glaucous Gulls. Often albinos can be correctly identified by size, structure and associating species.

Gull Calls: Many gulls can be identified to species by their calls: Learn the distinctive call notes of the Bonaparte's, Ring-billed and Great Black-backed Gulls. The *long call* or *trumpeting call* given by both male and female is species specific in most gulls. This call consists of repeated notes given while the gull lowers and then raises its head with the bill pointed forward or upwards, depending on the species. Learn the *long call* postures and call notes of common species such as Ring-billed and Herring Gulls in preparation for recognizing a rare species. *Long call* postures are shown for most species in the Sibley (2000) guide.

Videos: Two videos, one on large gulls and another on small gulls, produced by John W. Vanderpoel are highly recommended. Phone toll free 1-888-893-2287 or e-mail <jvanderp@peregrinevideo.com> or visit website <http:www.peregrinevideo.com>. Visa and Mastercard are accepted.

Internet: There are excellent websites on gull identification and e-mail discussions on ID Frontiers.

Mystery Gulls: No matter how well you know gulls, you will see birds that fit no known species (probably hybrids) and others from the Herring/Yellow-legged groups whose taxonomy is uncertain. Study mystery gulls closely, photograph them and keep detailed notes and sketches; some day you may be able to identify these mystery gulls as more information is gained.

Best Guides/Reference Books On Gulls

Godfrey, W.E. 1986. *The Birds of Canada*. National Museums of Canada, Ottawa. Most scholarly reference on Canadian birds. Contains excellent information on Iceland/Kumlien's/Thayer's Gulls with illustrations of all three subspecies.

Grant, P.J. 1986. *Gulls: A guide to identification*. Second Edition. Buteo Books, USA. Best guide to gulls with detailed descriptions, illustrations and photographs of every plumage.

National Geographic Field Guide to the Birds of North America. 1999. Third Edition. Washington, D.C. Excellent illustrations and text on North American gulls.

Sibley, D.A. 2000. *The Sibley Guide to Birds*. National Audubon Society. Alfred A. Knopf, New York. More illustrations than other guides. Only North American guide that illustrates the juvenal plumage of small gulls.

Svensson, L. et al. 1999. *Collins Bird Guide to Britain and Europe*. HarperCollins, London. Best field guide in the world. Text and illustrations of gull plumages are outstanding.

Acknowledgements: I thank Sam Barone, Albert Boisvert, Willie D'Anna, Michel Gosselin, Audrey Horbett, Jean Iron, Peter Lorimer, Kevin McLaughlin, Richard Poulin, Alf Raab, Pat Tozer and Ron Tozer for information and/or photographs. Peter Lorimer's illustration of Niagara Falls was inspired by John Yrizarry's painting in John Bull's (1974) *Birds of New York State*.

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Quiz Answers: Left to right are: definitive basic Little Gull in flight, two definitive basic Ring-billed Gulls on water, two distant definitive basic Bonaparte's Gulls in flight against Falls, first basic Bonaparte's Gull, juvenile Sabine's Gull, first basic Franklin's Gull, definitive basic Kumlien's Iceland Gull, definitive basic Herring Gull and definitive basic Great Black-backed Gull on rocks, definitive basic Glaucous Gull far right. Illustrated by Peter Lorimer.



Figure 9: Typical Ring-billed Gull (left) in first basic plumage. Small gull (middle) and same bird (right) suggest first basic Mew Gull of the race *brachyrhynchus* by its smaller size, smaller bill, slenderer legs and grayer underparts (probably stained). Identified as Ring-billed Gull by diagnostic dark anchor-shaped marks on worn wing coverts. Bright pink bill and sharply defined black tip with tiny pale tip and small eyes also ID Ring-billed Gull. Photos by Alfred Raab at Van Wagners Beach in Hamilton in November 1995.

Birding Guide to Presqu'ile Provincial Park and Area

Don Shanahan

Presqu'ile Provincial Park is Northumberland County's prime birding area. In addition, the region offers other spots worth investigating. This guide provides an update to birding at Presqu'ile and describes some of these lesser known areas.

Birding Ethics

Though some of the areas described in this guide are on private property, all can be birded adequately from the roadside. It is important to avoid trespassing and to park sensibly. This issue takes on particular significance in areas adjacent to Presqu'ile Provincial Park as recent years have seen unnecessary antipathy develop between birders and land owners. Birders can help facilitate good relations by behaving responsibly and visiting local businesses.

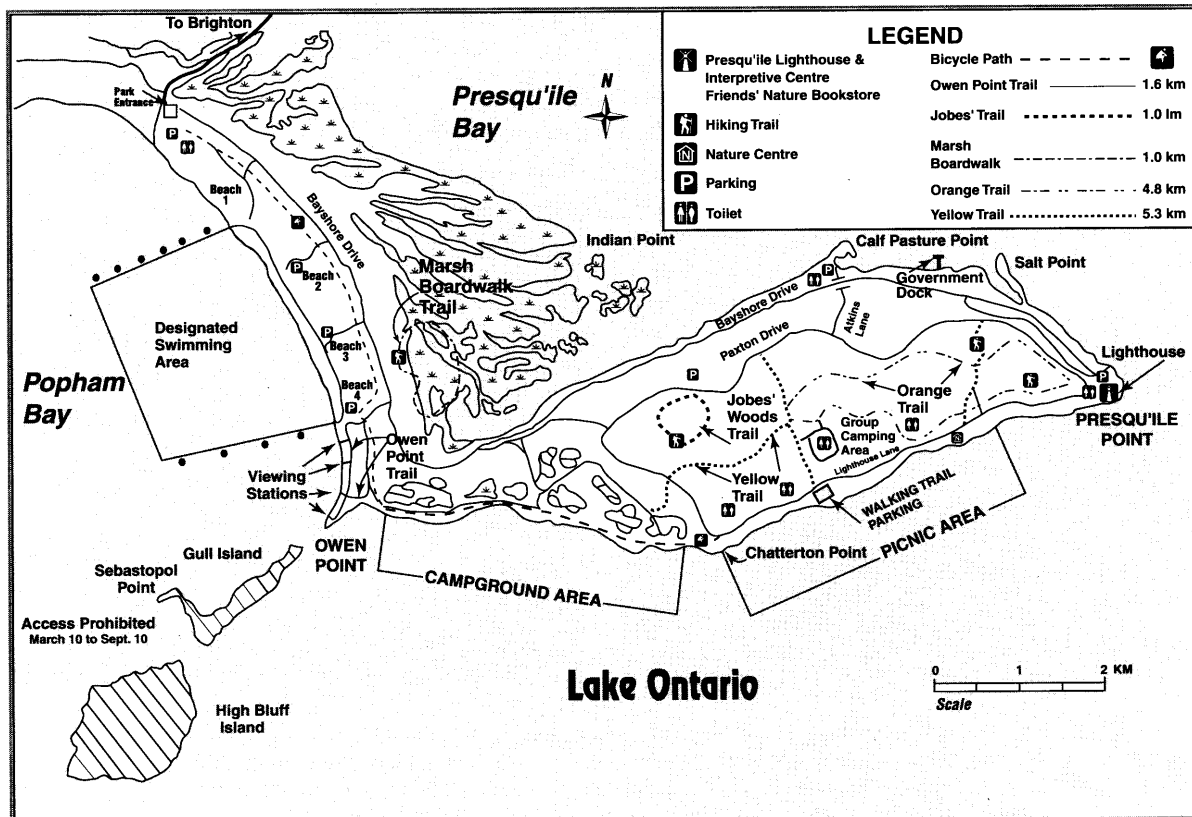
Presqu'ile Provincial Park

Recently designated as an *Important Bird Area*, Presqu'ile is best known for its migrating songbirds, shorebirds and waterfowl—it is that kind of a place. Before visiting Presqu'ile, check *Ontbirds* or consult the Birding Page on the Friends of Presqu'ile Web Site: <http://www.friendsofpresquile.on.ca>. In order to find out what is happening once you are in the park, check the sightings board located beside the campground office. The Helleiner residence at 186 Bayshore Drive, very close to the Presqu'ile Lighthouse, offers a convenient and up-to-date

list of recent sightings. Visitors to Presqu'ile should also remember that a day or seasonal pass must be displayed on the dash of every vehicle.

The major spring songbird migration begins in May and peaks around the Victoria Day weekend. Presqu'ile's Lighthouse and Calf Pasture are the best places to find newly arrived migrants. These include Scarlet Tanager, Baltimore Oriole and Orchard Oriole, which produced the first evidence of successful breeding in the park during spring 2000. Also expect an excellent variety of northern breeders such as Magnolia, Cape May, Blackburnian, Bay-breasted and Blackpoll Warblers. Both Golden-winged and Blue-winged Warblers are seen each year and Brewster's Warbler is possible. Presqu'ile also regularly produces Carolinian specialties such as Hooded Warbler. The May 1999 Prothonotary Warbler was a first for the park. Red-headed and Red-bellied Woodpeckers and Carolina Wren are seen annually, and the latter is believed to have nested in the park.

At the peak of migration, particularly when weather has forced birds to land en masse, bird numbers can be astounding. Once refreshed, dispersing songbirds are best seen along the most easterly kilometre of Paxton Drive (the part nearest to the Lighthouse) or at the Calf Pasture. Subsequently, places worth checking include any trails that branch off Paxton Drive, the



Map 1

mature woods in the Jobs' Woods Trail loop, and in the various campgrounds. Occasionally, any of the four access roads leading to the beach can be surprisingly good.

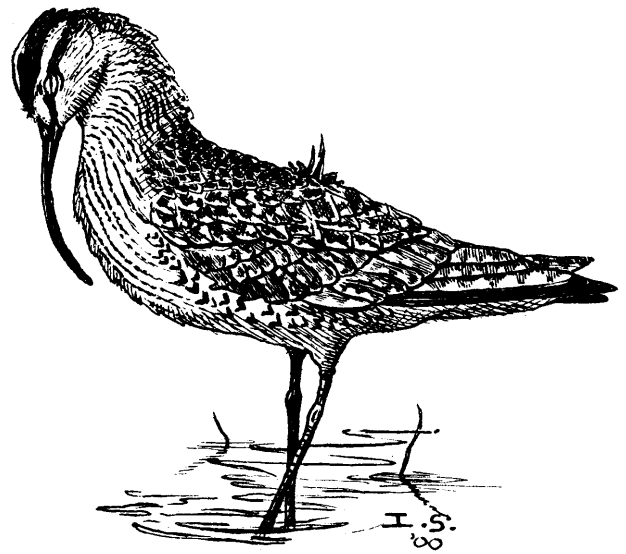
Though Presqu'ile's most notable shorebird, Canada's first Mongolian Plover, was seen on 4 May 1984, most shorebirds begin appearing at Presqu'ile during mid-May. Water level is one of the factors that determines if the birds distribute themselves along the recreational sand beaches or along the southerly natural beach. Dunlin are the main component of the 18 or so species usually seen in spring. Whimbrel and Red Knot are seen annually, as well as Black-bellied Plover, Ruddy Turnstone, Sanderling, White-rumped Sandpiper and Short-billed Dowitcher (both *griseus* and *hendersoni*). Major groundings can produce flocks of 5000 or more creating a "river of birds" flowing along the entire beach. A 24 May 1995 grounding also yielded two or more Purple Sandpipers. Groundings of one or two thousand birds are annual. By mid-June, most shorebirds have left for their breeding grounds.

Often overlooked at Presqu'ile is the more gradual autumn passerine migration which continues through balmy, bug-free weather from mid-August until about the beginning of October. This period produced one of Presqu'ile's best sightings: a Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher in late September 1986. The Lighthouse, Calf Pasture and Paxton Drive should all be checked during the fall season. Sharp-shinned Hawk is the most numerous raptor attending both migrations.

The peak southbound shorebird migration is from mid-August to Labour Day. Lingering adult shorebirds mingle with newly arrived brightly plumaged juveniles to make this period better than the spring passage. This time, when worn adults and fresh juveniles are seen together, offers the most species, highest numbers and best opportunities for interesting studies. During recent low water years most shorebirds accumulate about Owen Point. With 30 shorebird species possible over the autumn, Presqu'ile is worth checking any time until freeze-up, usually in late December. Birds expected include American Golden-Plover, Whimbrel, Hudsonian Godwit, Red Knot, Western Sandpiper, White-rumped Sandpiper, Baird's Sandpiper, Stilt Sandpiper, Buff-breasted Sandpiper, and in a good year, all three phalaropes. Purple Sandpiper is an annual visitor and the exceptional December 1998 peak of 57 birds was seen at close range by many on Gull Island. Irregular but possible are American Avocet, Willet and Long-billed Dowitcher. After Labour Day, if the lake level is low, Chatterton Point (see Map 1), situated on the south shore of the park, is productive for shorebirds.

Recent years have proven High Bluff Island (see Map 1) to be a passerine hotspot once access is permitted after 10 September. Northern Saw-whet Owl can also be found in good numbers among the island's cedar groves during late September and early October. High Bluff Island is only accessible by boat and extreme caution should be observed during any crossings from Gull Island.

Sightings of Parasitic Jaeger in autumn seem to be increasing at Presqu'ile. At least 14 sightings were recorded during September and October 1999. Most jaegers were traveling via Owen Point and Popham Bay to points westward in the lake. Jaegers are most often seen from Owen Point or Gull Island and usually herald their arrival by flushing gull



Whimbrel at Presqu'ile on 29 May 2000 by Ian Shanahan

flocks resting on nearby gravel bars.

Unfortunately, birders should remember that the much reviled Presqu'ile duck hunt continues to date and restricts access to Owen Point, Gull Island and High Bluff Island. The season begins after the third weekend in September and continues until mid-December. Hunting days are Monday, Wednesday, Friday and Saturday.

Recent mild winters have seen ducks return to Presqu'ile in January or February, or whenever ice opens up at the mouth of Presqu'ile Bay. As leads in the ice reach towards the Government Dock and then to the Calf Pasture, ducks follow. Thousands of Greater Scaup are joined by Canvasback, Redhead and Lesser Scaup. The more the ice opens up, the more the species total approaches the normal high of about 20. In recent years, optimum duck viewing occurred from late February until mid-March. Once ducks move west past the Calf Pasture, they are best seen from Bayshore Road which is outside the Park and runs parallel to Presqu'ile Bay. Close-range viewing is available along this stretch but respect for private property and sensible parking are essential. Eurasian Wigeon, Tufted Duck and Barrow's Goldeneye have occurred in recent years. From April through May, Popham Bay off the Presqu'ile beaches produces Red-throated Loon, Horned Grebe, Red-necked Grebe and large flocks of Green-winged Teal. Loons and grebes are more numerous off Popham Bay during September and October.

Presqu'ile is a wintering spot for Long-tailed Duck, Bufflehead and Common Goldeneye. These ducks flock wherever there is open water in the main body of Lake Ontario. Winter usually produces Snowy Owl sightings on Gull Island or on the ice in Presqu'ile Bay, and Northern Shrike is a regular winter species on Gull Island and in the panne area about the beach access roads.

Presqu'ile's spectacular water bird colonies are located on Gull and High Bluff Islands. These islands are closed to the public from 10 March until 10 September. Activity on or about the islands is best viewed from Owen Point, which is undoubtedly the best nonpasserine viewing area in the Park.

Ring-billed Gulls first stake out territories on the islands in early March. By May, legions of Double-crested Cormorants, gulls, Caspian Terns and Common Terns create an incredible visual and auditory display at the breeding colonies. Various juveniles from the colonies are abundant and easily observed on the beach and about Popham Bay into September.

Black-crowned Night-Herons nest on Gull Island and can be seen by spotting scope perched in the bushes of Sebastopol Point, the extreme northwestern tip of the island. Dawn and dusk are also good times to view Black-crowned Night-Herons commuting to and from the Presqu'ile marshes. Black-crowned Night-Heron, Great Blue Heron and as of 2000, up to three pairs of Great Egrets also nest on High Bluff Island. Single Tricolored Herons were sighted from Owen Point in late May 1999 and again in early May 2000, reinforcing the value of this lookout point.

A small but representative area of Presqu'ile's marshes is accessible by a boardwalk, Marsh Boardwalk Trail, (Map 1). From late April until autumn, this boardwalk offers opportunities to see or hear Pied-billed Grebe, American Bittern, Least Bittern (usually heard at night), Virginia Rail, Common Moorhen, Great Horned Owl, and Long-eared Owl (uncommon). King Rail nests occasionally; listen for its calls. Marsh Wren and Swamp Sparrow are abundant. A spring dawn on the boardwalk provides a treat as the rising sun spreads across Presqu'ile Bay. Evenings offer softer light and the onset of the marsh's night sounds. The Harbour Street causeway leading into the park also offers a limited view over parts of the marsh.

Woodpile Marsh, located between the Pines and the High Bluff campgrounds, is a good place to see nesting Wood Duck and late spring Lesser Scaup and Bufflehead. Least Bittern is occasionally seen about the marsh's beaver lodge.

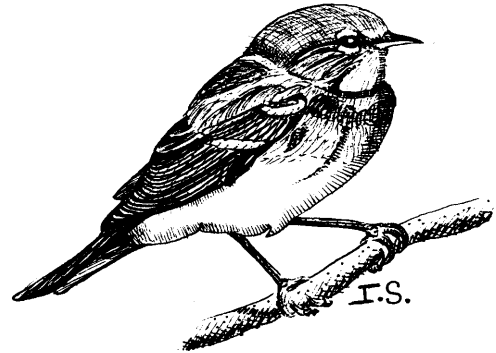
Cobourg to Presqu'ile

Cobourg offers a surprisingly productive harbour and an interesting off season route to Presqu'ile. Cobourg is best accessed from Highway 401 exit 474. Drive south on Division Street to the intersection with King Street in downtown Cobourg. From this point, there are two ways of getting to the nearby harbour. The shortest route, by continuing south on Division Street, ends on the pier situated on the harbour's east side. To get to the west side of the harbour, drive west on King Street West and turn left at the second traffic light onto Hibernia Street. Follow Hibernia a short distance to where it ends at a marina. Parking is to the left. In winter when the harbour is frozen over, numerous gulls roost on the ice. On a frigid 26 January 1999 at least eight gull species were observed on the harbour ice, including a very intriguing Slaty-backed-like individual. Just which vantage point provides the best viewing, depends on the vagaries of weather, and in particular the wind. The west headland of the harbour can produce Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow in early October and Purple Sandpiper through December. On 4 January 1999, an unexpected but well seen American Oystercatcher spent a short time on this headland.

Peter's Woods, a Provincial Nature Reserve located 25 km northeast of Cobourg, contains a delightful mature woodlot, one of the nicest in eastern Ontario. Peter's Woods was profiled by Clive Goodwin in *OFO News*, Volume 15, Number 1.

The Lakeshore Route

A route used by Clive and Joy Goodwin to travel from Cobourg to Presqu'ile is most productive during Presqu'ile's "off-season" from late fall to early spring. As Map 2 indicates, the general idea of the route is to travel as close to the lake as possible. Offshore species include loons, grebes and jaegers. Land birds possible along the entire route include American Kestrel, Rough-legged Hawk, Northern Shrike, Horned Lark, waxwings, and Snow Bunting in winter. Flooded fields in spring can produce early yellowlegs and puddle ducks.



Northern Parula by Ian Shanahan

The entire route is not described but is indicated on Map 2. However, several main roads that lead south from County Road 2 (also called Northumberland Road 2) to the lakeshore and provide good views of open water will be referred to. Distances stated after these road names are measured from the intersection of Division and King Streets in Cobourg. The first such road, Archer's Road, is located 8.3 km east of Cobourg. At Grafton (11.3 km), turn right at Old Danforth Road, which bears right and merges with Station Road. Station Road continues south until it dead ends at the lake at Chub Point. Patience here in autumn can produce Pomarine and Parasitic Jaegers. On 8 September 1996 during Hurricane Fran, Chub Point produced a Sooty Tern. Wicklow Beach Road (15.1 km) provides another lookout, and Wicklow Pond, slightly to the east, is worth a look for lingering spring puddle ducks, Hooded Merganser and Green Heron through the summer. A small heronry about one km west of the village of Lakeport has had a Great Horned Owl nesting among the Great Blue Herons for the last few years. Huff Road (32.8 km) is flanked by much open livestock pasture land and in recent years has had Cattle Egret, Wilson's Phalarope, Brewer's Blackbird, sparrows, Bobolink and Eastern Meadowlark.

Goodrich-Loomis/Murray Marsh Route

The Goodrich-Loomis Conservation Area is located about 15 km north of Brighton and is operated under the stewardship of the Lower Trent Region Conservation Authority. Consisting of short grass prairie, mixed coniferous-deciduous woods growing on one of Ontario's largest eskers, and riverine woods, Goodrich-Loomis offers a pleasant mixture of breeding birds showing both northern and southern affinities. Birding is best from mid-May until mid-July. From June on, mosquitoes can become intense. As some of the trails are convoluted, pick up a trail map at the main entrance. Poison Ivy is abundant. Admission is free but a voluntary donation box is located near the pamphlet rack.

Many birders approaching the Brighton/Presqu'ile area via Highway 401 will be tempted to stop at the Coffee Time immediately south of exit 509, so directions to Goodrich-Loomis and other points north will be given from this spot. At the entrance to Coffee Time set your odometer at zero and proceed north on County Road 30 (also called Northumberland Road 30). At 4.9 km, Donaldson's Road turns right and offers 0.6 km of pastureland. Drivers should note that the Donaldson's turn is hidden and quite sharp. This area usually offers easy access to habitat for Eastern Kingbird, Eastern Bluebird, Field, Vesper, and Grasshopper Sparrows, and Eastern Meadowlark. A pair of Upland Sandpipers, very uncommon in Northumberland, was seen at this site in early May 2000.

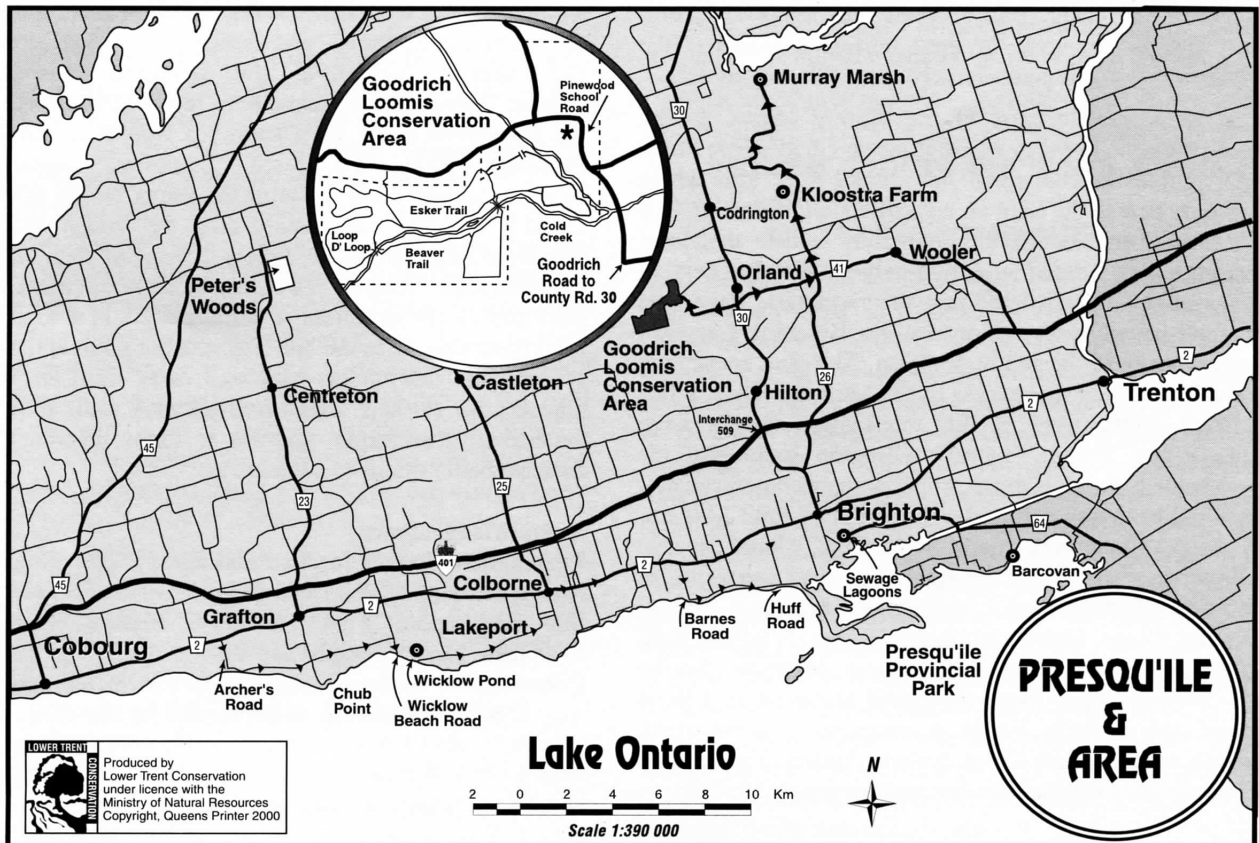
At 6.5 km, County Road 30 intersects with Goodrich Road on the left and Northumberland Road 41 on the right. Follow Goodrich Road west, where you will find mixed woods beside the road between 7.6 and 8.1 km. These woods can have Eastern Screech-Owl, Great Horned Owl and Barred Owl, which often can be heard from the roadside. Watch the fields on the right from this point until 9.0 km for Wild Turkey. Goodrich Road turns sharply right at 8.6 km and becomes Pinewood School Road. Continuing along Pinewood School Road you will encounter the conservation area's main entrance at 9.6 km. The parking lot area and adjacent fields for the next kilometre are good for American Kestrel, Black-billed Cuckoo, Eastern Phoebe, Eastern Kingbird, Eastern Bluebird, Indigo Bunting, and Vesper, Savannah and Grasshopper Sparrows. The Esker Trail can be accessed from the main entrance and at its beginning has Nashville and Yellow Warblers. Otherwise, this trail provides a scenic route to the more productive Loop D' Loop trail network.

A short cut to the Loop D' Loop trails can be accessed by

driving past the conservation area's main entrance on Pinewood School Road. Spring nights in the vicinity of 11.5 km usually produce singing Whip-poor-will. This area is also good for short grass species. On the left at 11.9 km, you will encounter a maintenance road leading to the junction of the Esker Trail and the Loop D' Loop system. This road is rough and it is best to park on Pinewood School Road. Using a trail map, turn right at the trail junction and follow the winding Loop D' Loop circuit. Starting on the forested esker, you will descend into wet hemlock woods, walk parallel to Cold Creek, then ascend to rejoin the Esker Trail.

Birds nesting in or about this area include Cooper's Hawk, Northern Goshawk, American Woodcock, Black-billed Cuckoo, Barred Owl, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Pileated Woodpecker, Yellow-throated Vireo (uncommon), Blue-headed Vireo, Winter Wren, Hermit and Wood Thrushes, Black-throated Blue Warbler (uncommon), Black-throated Green Warbler, Blackburnian Warbler, Northern Waterthrush, Mourning Warbler, Canada Warbler, Scarlet Tanager, White-throated Sparrow, Rose-breasted Grosbeak and Purple Finch. The upper reaches of Cold Creek appear to be a prime spot for the discovery of breeding Louisiana Waterthrush.

The Loop D' Loop system passes a bridge that crosses Cold Creek to join the wetter Beaver Trail. The wet area across the creek is good for American Woodcock and Mourning and Canada Warblers. The Beaver Trail follows the creek downstream to another bridge crossing Cold Creek. The pines to the south of this junction are good for Hermit Thrush and Pine Warbler, and the area immediately around the bridge is dependable for Willow Flycatcher and Mourning Warbler. Great Blue Heron, Spotted Sandpiper and Belted Kingfisher can be encountered anywhere along Cold Creek. Once the bridge is



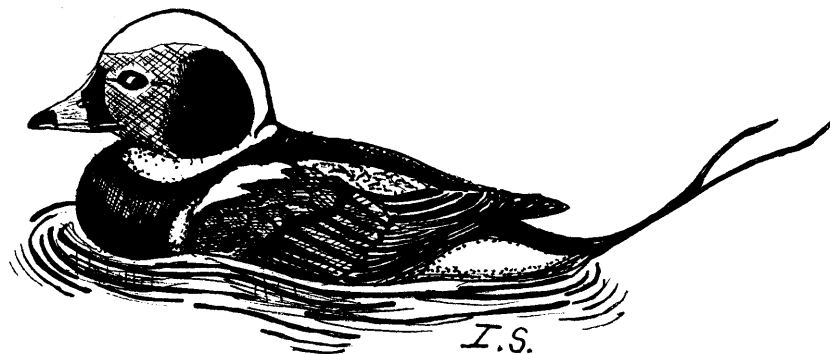
Map 2

crossed, the trail parallels the creek moving upstream to reunite with the Loop D'Loop system.

By proceeding back to the junction of County Road 30 and the Goodrich Road or by heading there directly from Coffee Time, birders can drive to the area's most dependable spot for observing Wild Turkey. Simply re-set your odometer to zero at this point. The eastbound route from this intersection is called Northumberland Road 41. Drive 3.6 km east and turn left at Grosjean Road. At 4.7 km, Grosjean Road changes to Cowan Road which proceeds north for another kilometre, where at the intersection with Jamieson Road (or 5.7 km), Cowan Road turns into Cameron Road. This area opens up into corn fields that usually produce Horned Lark and Vesper and Savannah Sparrows in spring and early summer. A hydro transmission line crosses the road at 6.2 km, and from here on Wild Turkeys may be seen on both sides of the road. At 7.0 km, farm buildings are located by the edge of the road on each side. The hill on the left leading from the forest's edge down to a small pasture is particularly dependable for Wild Turkeys that often forage in the pasture with a variety of barnyard animals.

From 7.7 to 10.0 km, Cameron Road can have Northern Saw-whet Owl in winter and Eastern Screech-Owl, Great Horned Owl and Barred Owl at other times of the year. All property adjacent to the road is private; however, owling at night can be done quite adequately from the roadside. Towards the end of this stretch, the large **Murray Marsh** is visible to the right. Though Green Heron, Wood Duck, Red-shouldered Hawk, Black-billed Cuckoo, the above mentioned owls, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Fox Sparrow and Rusty Blackbird have been seen in this area, the most intriguing aspect of the Murray Marsh is that it remains largely unexplored by birders.

To get to accessible parts of the Murray Marsh, follow Cameron Road until 10.9 km where it meets Goodfellow Road. Turn right and drive past farm fields until 12.4 km, where Osprey usually nest to the right on an artificial platform. At 13.0 km, a farmhouse on the left has numerous feeders that have produced both Red-headed and Red-bellied Woodpeckers in winter. The edges of cornfields past the farmhouse have nest boxes that are usually occupied by Eastern Bluebird. Cameron Road turns sharply to the left at 13.2 km. The lane continuing straight ahead provides foot access to the Murray Marsh. When fallow, fields to the right of this intersection usually have Horned Lark and Vesper Sparrow. Cameron Road past the "Murray Marsh Natural Habitat Area" sign becomes rougher and should not be driven before April. From 13.7 until 14.0 km, the road passes through wet woods. At 14.5 km, a large expanse of cattail marsh is visible on the right. The road dead ends at 15.2 km at the Habitat Area's parking lot. American Bittern, Least Bittern, Green Heron, Northern Harrier, Virginia Rail, Sora, Common Yellowthroat and Swamp Sparrow can be readily encountered in or about the cattail marsh. A trail leads uphill from the parking lot to a promontory overlooking Bradley Bay on the Trent Canal system. Turkey Vulture and Osprey can usually be seen from this vantage point.



Long-tailed Duck by *Ian Shanahan*

Points East of Brighton

Distances to the remaining sites begin at the double set of traffic lights in the centre of Brighton. High water usually limits the effectiveness of the Brighton sewage lagoon. However, the lagoon is worth a look in the spring for lingering Gadwall, both species of teal, Northern Shoveler and Lesser Scaup. In autumn, the lagoon often has late Bonaparte's Gulls and swallows. To get to the lagoon from Brighton, drive south on Prince Edward Street and bear to the left as Prince Edward becomes Northumberland Road 64. At 2.3 km the lagoon driveway is to the left. Most of the lagoon can be scanned from outside the gate. A natural water filtration system recently constructed immediately south of the existing facility has an observation station and could bear watching for marsh birds and gulls.

Because **Barcovan Beach** to the east of Brighton often has open water when Presqu'ile and Popham Bays are iced up, it is worth checking in winter until late February. All three swan species can be seen at Barcovan during winter, and early teal, Canvasback, Redhead and scaup are often present with overwintering Bufflehead and Common Goldeneye. Two Greater White-fronted Geese were recorded at Barcovan during the late 1990s and a male Barrow's Goldeneye on 12 and 14 February 2000. To reach Barcovan, continue along Northumberland Road 64 until the swing bridge at the Murray Canal (7.2 km). Immediately after the bridge turn onto the Barcovan Beach Road and follow its winding path until the road parallels Lake Ontario. Watch the fields to the north for Snowy Owl and Northern Shrike. Continue until 11.4 km, where the road turns sharply to the left. The lookout point is to the right. It is important that birders park well away from this corner and adjacent *No Parking* signs. A short walk leads to trouble free waterfowl observation that on a sunny February day can indicate better things to come.

Acknowledgements

I thank the following for their assistance in preparing this guide: Margaret Bain, Albert Boisvert, Bill Gilmore, Clive Goodwin, Sid Hadlington, Fred Helleiner, Martha Robinson, Ian Shanahan, Don Tyerman, and staff at the Lower Trent Region Conservation Authority. Presqu'ile Provincial Park provided Map 1. Special thanks go to Ian Heales for his work on Map 2.

Urban Hawks

Ron Pittaway

Expect to see more hawks breeding in towns and cities of Ontario in the near future. I make this prediction based on trends taking place in western North America.

Merlins now nest in Ottawa, Thunder Bay and other urban areas. Large spruces and pines in parks, cemeteries and estates provide ideal nest sites. Merlins often use old crow nests. House Sparrows, robins and waxwings provide an abundant food supply. Even Toronto is likely soon to have breeding Merlins.

In 1999 a pair of Sharp-shinned Hawks raised four young near the hawk watching station at Cranberry Marsh in Whitby. Last summer Sharp-shinned Hawks nested in High Park in Toronto.

The Cooper's Hawk is the next hawk poised to increase as a breeding species in urban areas of southern Ontario. Cooper's Hawks declined during the DDT era that ended in Canada in 1971. Recovery has been slow, but numbers are increasing every year. Both Sharp-shinned and Cooper's Hawks are increasing in winter where there are bird feeders.

Northern Goshawks are increasing slowly as breeders in pine plantations and large woodlots in southern Ontario. However, goshawks are unlikely to breed in urban areas because they do not like people near their nests. Screaming goshawks attack and sometimes strike people who approach their nests.

More hawks breeding in urban areas will benefit both hawks and birders alike.

Hawk or Grouse?

Ron Pittaway

Who would think that a Ruffed Grouse could be confused with a hawk? But it happens every year, usually in September and October when family groups of grouse are breaking up and young grouse go on their "dispersal flights." Many dispersing grouse are killed when they fly into cottage windows.

Every fall I get phone calls at my MNR Frost Centre office from cottagers who ask me to identify a dead hawk that has flown into a window. Most callers describe a medium sized bird with strong feet, claws and a curved beak. Based on size, some have identified their hawk as a Cooper's or Broad-winged Hawk. One person was convinced that he had a Swainson's Hawk because it had a dark tail band as shown in his field guide. His cottage is in a heavily wooded area. When I suggested that it was probably a Ruffed Grouse which also has a dark tail band, he insisted that it was a hawk because he knew grouse well (known locally as partridge) around his cottage.

If the caller keeps insisting that it is a hawk, I have a test for them. I have them open the crop at the base of the neck. It is easy to tear open the crop of a grouse. A crop full of green leaves, buds, beechnuts or other vegetable matter quickly brings most doubters to their senses.

Michel Gosselin of the Canadian Museum of Nature tells me that he also gets calls every fall about hawks that have flown into windows. They usually turn out to be Ruffed Grouse.

Birders know that a bird in the hand is harder to identify than a bird in a bush.

Ontario's Second Breeding Bird Atlas 2001-2005

Mike Cadman

Ontario's second Breeding Bird Atlas project will get underway in the spring of 2001 and will run through 2005. OFO is one of the sponsors of the project along with FON, MNR, CWS and BSC. Like the first atlas (1981-1985), the project's goal is to produce detailed maps of the distribution of all the bird species breeding in the province. Volunteer birders, known as atlasers, take on one or more 10 km squares and look for breeding evidence of every species breeding in the square. This time, you will also have the option of collecting information on the abundance of each species in each square.

Atlassing is fun and challenging and the results are valuable. The first project was a great success, with over 1300 birders logging over 100,000 hours of field work, and amassing more than 400,000 records. *The Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Ontario* is the standard reference book on bird distribution in the province, and the atlas's computer data base has been used for numerous conservation and research projects.

If you would like to get some preliminary background on the project or register to participate, please visit the atlas web page at: <http://www.birdsontario.org>. A thorough description of the new atlas project will be provided in the winter issue of FON's *Seasons* magazine.

Key to the success of the atlas project are the regional coordinators who help find, inform and motivate volunteers, assign 10 km square coverage, and help check the data for their region. If you are interested in being a regional coordinator, please contact: Mike Cadman, Atlas Coordinator, Canadian Wildlife Service, 75 Farquhar St. Guelph, ON, N1H 3N4. Phone 519-826-2094; e-mail: Mike.Cadman@ec.gc.ca. The list of Regional Coordinators already in place is on the web page.

House Sparrow Kills Cicada

Wolfgang Luft

On 1 August 1998, my wife and I were walking along a street near where we live in Burlington. We had just heard our first cicada of the year and were commenting on that fact. We then noticed that the noise of the cicada was travelling rapidly towards us. A female House Sparrow landed on the sidewalk about 2 metres ahead with the cicada in its beak. She started to rearrange it in her beak when the cicada managed to fly away. The sparrow immediately dashed after it and brought it back down to the sidewalk. After some fussing about, she then managed to kill the insect and started to dismember it. First she very neatly removed the wings which we later picked up to examine and keep, then she severed the head from the body followed by the abdomen from the thorax. She removed the legs and then broke the shell of the several body parts by battering the parts with her beak against the sidewalk. Stuffing all except a small piece of head into her beak, she flew away. It is interesting that the cicada was large compared to the sparrow yet she was able to dismember the insect so expeditiously as if this were a common occurrence.

OFO AGM and Banquet 16 September 2000



The Distinguished Ornithologist Award accepted on behalf of J. Murray Speirs.
Left to right: Margaret Wilson, Rayfield Pye, Bruce Falls, Jean Iron. Photo Sam Barone



Pete Read left and Ann White right received awards for the Anhinga at Delaware. They also accepted an award for the Delaware Sportsmen's Conservation Association who agreed to delay hunting at their marsh until the Anhinga departed safely. Photo Sam Barone

OFO Board of Directors Changes

We welcome new Board member, George Prieksaitis.

David Cattrall and Gavin Edmonstone recently retired from the OFO Board of Directors. We thank them for their work on OFO's behalf and their contribution to its success.

David Cattrall came on the Board in 1995. In 1996, He designed the OFO Web Page, maintaining it to the present. In 1997, he compiled the *Index to Ontario Birds* from 1983 to 1997. David has promised to complete the next installment of the *Index* in two years time. He was Recording Secretary.

Gavin Edmonstone joined the Board in 1997. He supported OFO initiatives and assisted with the Burlington mailbox.

We had a very successful Annual General Meeting at Kortright Centre near Toronto on 16 September 2000 with 135 in attendance. Ron Tozer was Master of Ceremonies. Quiz masters, George and Mark Peck, set a very challenging eight-part quiz that included ID questions, history, estimating numbers of birds, breeding bird questions, trivia and examination of bird specimens. Rob Dobos won the quiz. Mike Cadman gave an inspiring presentation on the upcoming Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas. Our trip leaders: Glenn Coady, Bill Edmunds, Norm Murr, Dan Stuckey and Ron Tozer provided expert guiding to Toronto area birding hotspots. We appreciate the help of Dan Stuckey and Kortright Centre staff. OFO thanks the exhibitors and Ron Scovell for his very popular book sale.

The OFO Distinguished Ornithologist Award was presented to J. Murray Speirs for his outstanding contribution to our knowledge of birds in Ontario, his influence on the development of new birders and for his dedication to conservation. Margaret and Reid Wilson and Bruce Falls provided information about Murray. Nominated by Rayfield Pye. Margaret and Reid Wilson accepted the award for Murray who was unable to attend for health reasons.

OFO Certificates of Appreciation were presented to:

1. Stephen Davis for welcoming birders to his property at Fishers Glen near Long Point to see the male Mountain Bluebird, November 1999 to March 2000. Nominated by Maris Apse and the OFO Board. Accepted by Chris Escott.
2. Bev and Bruce Stewart for welcoming birders to their home and neighbourhood near Brighton to see the Lewis's Woodpecker, 13 to 18 June 2000. Nominated by Don Shanahan and Chris Escott. Accepted by Maureen Riggs.
3. Pete Read for regular updates on ONTBIRDS and hospitality to visiting birders for the Anhinga at Delaware, July to September 2000. Nominated by Dave Martin and Jim Richards.
4. Ann White for frequent updates on ONTBIRDS and hospitality to visiting birders for the Anhinga at Delaware, July to September 2000. Nominated by Dave Martin and Jim Richards.
5. Delaware Sportsmen's Conservation-Association for delaying the start of hunting at the marsh in order to protect the Anhinga, and for being friendly to the birding community throughout the stay of this bird. Nominated by Mike Street, Floyd Deiter and Alan Wormington.
6. Doug Lockrey for regular updates on ONTBIRDS and helpfulness to visiting birders for the Red Crossbills and White-winged Crossbills at Cranberry Marsh, November 1999 to March 2000. Nominated by Jim Richards.
7. Craig McLauchlan for regular updates on ONTBIRDS and helpfulness to visiting birders for the Heermann's Gull in Toronto, November 1999 to September 2000. Nominated by Jim Richards.
8. Jean Iron for providing information and helping visiting birders enjoy the Heermann's Gull in Toronto, January to September 2000. Nominated by Jim Richards.

The AOU Committee on Classification and Nomenclature

Jim Rising

The AOU Committee on Classification and Nomenclature is the committee that has been selected by the American Ornithologists' Union to pass judgment on proposed changes in the classification and nomenclature of the birds that occur within the area covered by the AOU *Check-list of North American Birds*, that is to say, birds that have been reported in North and Central America and in the Hawaiian Islands.

At the present time, the committee consists of eight persons: Richard Banks (Chairman) from the US National Museum, Carla Cicero from the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology at Berkeley, California, Jon Dunn from California, Andy Kratter from the Museum of Natural History at the University of Florida, Pamela Rasmussen from the Smithsonian Institution, Van Remsen from the Museum of Natural Science, Louisiana State University, Doug Stotz from the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago, and Jim Rising from the University of Toronto and Royal Ontario Museum. Henri Ouellet served on the committee until his recent and untimely death. The committee meets during the annual AOU meetings, usually for an entire day just before the meetings. This year we met in Newfoundland. In the past there have, from time to time, been other meetings. However, the advent of computers and e-mail makes it unlikely that that will happen in the future as we are in frequent electronic contact and discuss many decisions by e-mail.

In general, the committee does not initiate changes, but passes judgment on changes that have been proposed in the literature. Sometimes we consider issues when we have been specifically requested to do so even if there is no new published information. For example, recently the committee was asked by a group of biologists with the US Fish and Wildlife Service in

Alaska to change the English name of *Clangula hyemalis* from the Oldsquaw to the Long-tailed Duck. This request was made because the species is declining in numbers in Alaska, and conservation plans required the help and cooperation of Native Americans. The biologists feared that the name "Oldsquaw" might be offensive to these people, and we decided to make this change at least in part for that reason. Needless to say, this has been one of the most unpopular moves that the committee has made as most of us (including everyone on the committee) are fond of the rather picturesque name "Oldsquaw."

Each member of the committee is given primary responsibility for different groups. For example, sparrows, blackbirds and carduelines are my groups. When someone proposes a change, the person in charge of the group studies the proposal then submits a written recommendation to the committee, and this recommendation forms the basis of the committee's deliberations. After full discussion, the committee votes on the proposed changes, and if there is substantial disagreement about a proposed change we do not put forward the change as the committee is and I think should be extremely conservative. Better to stay with the status quo than to make a change prematurely. Jon Dunn is especially charged with monitoring changes in ranges and new additions to the Check-list.

Because the classification and nomenclature forms the basis of that used in most field guides and bird books as well as checklists, changes are generally of interest to any student of North American birds. The latest list of changes was published in the 42nd Supplement of the ornithological journal, *The Auk*, 117 (3):847-858, July 2000.

In Memoriam

Terry Pratt 1949 - 2000

Ron Tozer

We were deeply saddened by the tragic death of Terry Pratt in a plane crash in Costa Rica on 26 August. Terry was one of the Founding Life Members of OFO in November 1982. With her former husband, Paul Pratt, she lived in the Blenheim-Leamington area during the 1970s and 80s, and led many birding tours to Point Pelee National Park and nearby sites. For the past 10 years, Terry resided in Costa Rica and worked in ecotourism. Several OFO members went on birding trips there with Terry. She was marketing director of Horizontes, a tourism company in San Jose, at the time of her death.

Her lively spirit and indomitable determination will be fondly remembered and sorely missed by Terry's many friends here in Ontario.

Ontario Checklist

The official Ontario Checklist is maintained by the Ontario Bird Records Committee. Classification and nomenclature follow the American Ornithologists' Union (AOU) *Check-list of North American Birds* and its supplements. The latest edition of the *Field Checklist of Ontario Birds 1999* was published in cooperation with Federation of Ontario Naturalists. Changes to the Ontario bird checklist are published in *OFO News* and *Ontario Birds* and on the OFO web site.

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Long Point Trip

Ann White

On Saturday 10 June 2000, John Miles led an excellent trip to the Long Point area. About 12 birders started at the St. William's Forestry Station at 6.30 a.m. We explored the Backus woods area where we saw the Prairie Warbler well, but not the Worm-eating Warbler on its territory. A Blue-winged Warbler obligingly sat on a wire, and Scarlet Tanager, Eastern Towhee, Great Crested Flycatcher, Eastern Wood-Pewee and Rose-breasted Grosbeak made their presence known. A large shape in a tree was a Turkey Vulture not the reported Black Vulture, as its red head showed well in the sun. Chimney Swifts flew high above it.

A lack of warbler song turned into a bonus because we looked at trees, butterflies and ferns. We smelled the Sassafras leaf, the Spicebush, then the Carrion flower and Skunk Cabbage. John introduced us to the Dwarf Chinquapin Oak at its only location in Canada. Mature oaks barely 2 metres tall! In contrast were the Tulip Trees, tall and stately, reaching high into the canopy before branching. Tiger Swallowtails were the most prevalent butterflies along the sandy roads. However, the best sighting was that of Red-spotted Purples. A group of three very fresh ones clustered together on a tree trunk and became a photographer's dream, all the field marks in view. Then there were the ferns. We saw 10 species through the day including Cinnamon, Interrupted, Lady and Ebony Spleenwort.

But back to birds. An Acadian Flycatcher in a wooded creek/ravine was heard then seen well by all. We drove to a spot where Prothonotary Warbler and Cerulean Warbler were nesting. The Prothonotary sang quite close by and the Ceruleans started to sing overhead! We had brief looks at them high in the canopy. We went to the Gartshore-Carson farm for our picnic lunch and picked up Ruby-throated Hummingbird and Grasshopper Sparrow.

We heard secret mutterings about a treat in store for us. This was to be the highest highlight of the day. Three by three we went into the woods where a scope was trained on a Hooded Warbler nest with young. We watched male and female feeding the young. Many thanks to those who planned that. On the way we saw a Blue-headed Vireo nest and listened to the male singing.

Next we visited the Big Creek Marsh on the Causeway and saw Black Terns with young, Marsh Wrens and an American Bittern doing an obliging flypast. Visits to Port Rowan lagoons, the lake overlook in town and to the field behind Bird Studies Canada for Sedge Wrens ended the day with 103 species in total. Great for a breezy June day. Thanks to John Miles for leading us and to George Pond for his assistance.

Future OFO Trips

December 3 (Sunday) Gulls on the Niagara River. Leaders Jean Iron and Ron Tozer.

Meet at **9:00 a.m.** at Queens Royal Park on Ricardo Street in Niagara-on-the-Lake. The Niagara River is one of the world's finest areas for watching gulls. Glaucous, Iceland, Thayer's and Lesser Black-backed Gulls are expected. **Note change of date.**

January 14 (Sunday) Petroglyphs Provincial Park, Peterborough.

Leader: Geoff Carpentier. Meet at **9:30 a.m.** at the park entrance: Go north on Hwy 28 from Lakefield to Burleigh Falls then Woodview. Just north of Woodview turn right on Northey's Bay Road and go 11 km to the park entrance. Bald and Golden Eagles, Common Raven, Gray Jay, winter finches, possible Bohemian Waxwings.

February 10 (Saturday) Fisherville Area, Haldimand-Norfolk County

Leader: John Miles. Meet at **9 a.m.** in the parking lot of the high school in the north end of Cayuga on County Road 54. Hawks and Owls.

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