



OFO NEWS

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Age Duck Tails

Ron Pittaway and Peter Lorimer

Ducks, geese and swans in the fall can be aged by the shape of the tip of their tail feathers. The growing first generation of juvenile tail feathers is tipped with down (Figure 1), which breaks off leaving square-ended, notched or V-shaped feather tips, depending on the species (Figures 2 and 3). The tail tip of a juvenile duck, goose or swan shows a ragged (versus smooth) appearance in the hand and at close range in the field. To see the difference in the field requires considerable practice and a close view with binoculars and/or a telescope. In young that have molted their tail feathers, a bird of the year can be told only if it still has at least one notched juvenile feather remaining, indicating that it is less than one year old (Figures 2 and 3). Older young that have replaced their tails and adults have smoothly pointed or slightly rounded tail feathers (Figure 4).

Using the tail feather method for aging is limited to before the first generation of juvenile feathers has been shed and

replaced by the second generation adult-like ones. The time the tail feathers are molted varies with the species and even within the same species, depending on if they are early or late hatched birds. The earliest dates of tail molt are poorly known. The references listed below are the best sources of information. Northern Pintails and Wood Ducks probably retain their juvenile tails until late August, Mallards and American Black Ducks to early September, while most other ducks keep their juvenile tail at least to mid-September or early October. Geese and swans molt their juvenile tails in late fall and early winter.

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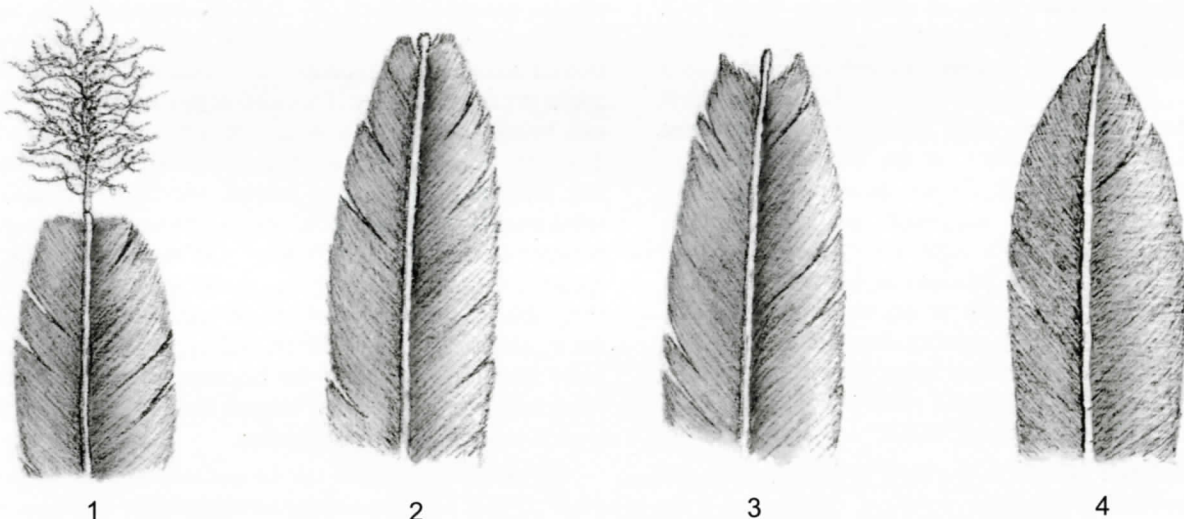


Figure 1: Newly grown juvenile tail feather with down tip still attached. **Figures 2 and 3:** Two variations of juvenile tail feathers after the down breaks off producing a notched or V-shaped tip. **Figure 4:** If no notches are present and the feathers are smoothly pointed or rounded, then the bird is an adult or a bird that has replaced its juvenile tail feathers. Drawings by Peter Lorimer.

Fall Birding in Elgin County along the Lake Erie Shoreline

Dave Martin

While most of our birding year is spent driving to migrant and wintering hotspots or chasing rarities throughout southern Ontario, fall is the time to take out the lawn chair, find a comfortable spot facing east and wait for the birds to come to us. The fall diurnal migration of raptors, some passerines and even butterflies and dragonflies is one of the greatest natural spectacles. We are lucky to live close enough to spend many autumn days drinking it in. The Lake Erie shoreline at the east end of Elgin County provides many locations to indulge in this passion. Although we visit several locations throughout the fall depending on our mood or how much time we have, our favourite birding location to watch the early fall migration is from the beach parking lots at Port Burwell Provincial Park. After the Canadian Thanksgiving weekend when the raptor migration is dominated by the larger buteos, eagles and vultures, we then shift our watching to the Port Bruce area.

Watching fall migration, especially hawk migration, from a fixed location has to be the most thrilling of all our birding pursuits. Watching diurnal migration evokes emotions that greatly surpass those that surface when standing on a cold shoreline and scanning overwintering ducks, or looking at hordes of gulls along the Niagara River, or even sorting through a flock of warblers at Point Pelee in mid-May. The only other phenomenon that closely rivals the thrill of watching the fall migration of raptors and passerines is a massive reverse migration day at Point Pelee. But then, we have only been there once or twice in 30 years when that happened.

By contrast almost any day spent at a hawkwatch brings that same kind of feeling albeit more intense for a number of reasons. First, there is the anticipation of the unexpected. Who knows what might show up: Swainson's Hawk, Black Vulture, American White Pelican, or any number of rare passerines. Hawk Cliff had its first Townsend's Solitaire last fall. Then, there is the challenge of identifying birds as they fly by in lighting or winds that don't allow a great look. There is a constant challenge to be vigilant lest anything slip by unnoticed, even on the coldest day when you are so numb that lifting your binoculars is a major achievement. Learning how to interpret weather patterns comes into play bringing with it some planning. Questions include where are the winds from today? Which direction tomorrow? Should we go down to the lake today or tomorrow? What happened yesterday greatly influences today's or tomorrow's flight. Even when you arrive you have to decide whether to be right at the lake or further inland. Are the hawks spread out or are they following the wooded corridors? Are the winds driving them out over the lake or are they traveling inland to avoid being blown out over the lake? Should we stay at the shoreline cliffs or move inland to see if the Golden Eagles are tracking inland?

While it is difficult to express the thrill and the reasons for the fanaticism evoked in migration watchers, reading the daily reports from the various hawkwatches along the Lake Ontario shoreline and on Lake Erie from about Port Burwell west to Holiday Beach along the western Lake Erie shoreline should



Kettling Broad-winged Hawks by Peter Lorimer

give you ample incentive to join them at the hawkwatches or find your own location closer to home. Many people I talk to think that you have to go to a hawkwatch such as Hawk Cliff to see the fall raptor and passerine migration in southern Ontario. This is patently false, of course. The waters of Lake Ontario and Lake Erie divert the southbound migration to the southwest until the stream of migrants can turn south again when they cross the Detroit River. Migrants, preferring not to cross open water, follow the shorelines and numbers build up as they move west. Hawkwatch reports show this well. A good day for Broad-winged Hawks at the Lake Ontario watches might be in the 3,000 to 5,000 range whereas Hawk Cliff, about half way to the Detroit River, might produce 10 to 20,000, and Holiday Beach might produce 30,000+. That new migration watching spots are still being discovered is demonstrated by Alan Wormington's discovery of an exciting location at Seacliff about 0.5 km inland just west of Leamington. Indeed, we have witnessed some substantial hawk migration while driving along Highway 3 between Blenheim and Wheatley. I'm sure if someone were to spend time anywhere along that stretch on a road that dead ends at the lake, the watching would be just as exciting as at any of the established watches. What makes the established watches more attractive, especially for beginners, is the camaraderie of being with others of similar interest and the many eyes that help to pick out and identify the rarities.

We prefer not to drive too far and over the last 10 years have tried various locations along the Lake Erie shoreline between Port Burwell and Port Bruce. Port Bruce is only about 10 minutes drive east of Hawk Cliff and Port Burwell is about another 15 minutes east so the number of migrants is about the

same or perhaps slightly less than at Hawk Cliff. On the few occasions that we have been able to compare numbers, the difference is inconsequential; 15 Golden Eagles at Port Bruce say, versus 19 at Hawk Cliff. And, on the days when the Broad-winged Hawks move in colossal numbers it hardly matters whether you've seen 20,000 or 30,000. The thrill is the same.

Port Burwell Provincial Park

Of all the locations on the Lake Erie shoreline between Port Burwell and Port Bruce that we have tried, we like the beach parking lots at Port Burwell Provincial Park the most for watching migration in the early fall (September to early October). The beach parking lots are located in the sand dunes that extend about 0.5 km from the former shoreline cliffs. The sand has only been deposited in the last 70 years or so after a long breakwall was built on the west side of Otter Creek to protect the harbour. Otter Creek empties into Lake Erie at Port Burwell. In that short time period, several vegetation communities have built up including sloped forest, wet and dry thickets, damp interdunal meadows, cattail wetlands, grass-covered sand dunes and open woodland dominated mostly by non-native trees such as Scotch Pine and White Willow. The sandy beach is about 3 km long and 100+ m wide. The terrain is such that one can watch buteos soaring along the cliff to the north, catch the accipiters that wing by overhead, and not miss the falcons that follow the shoreline.

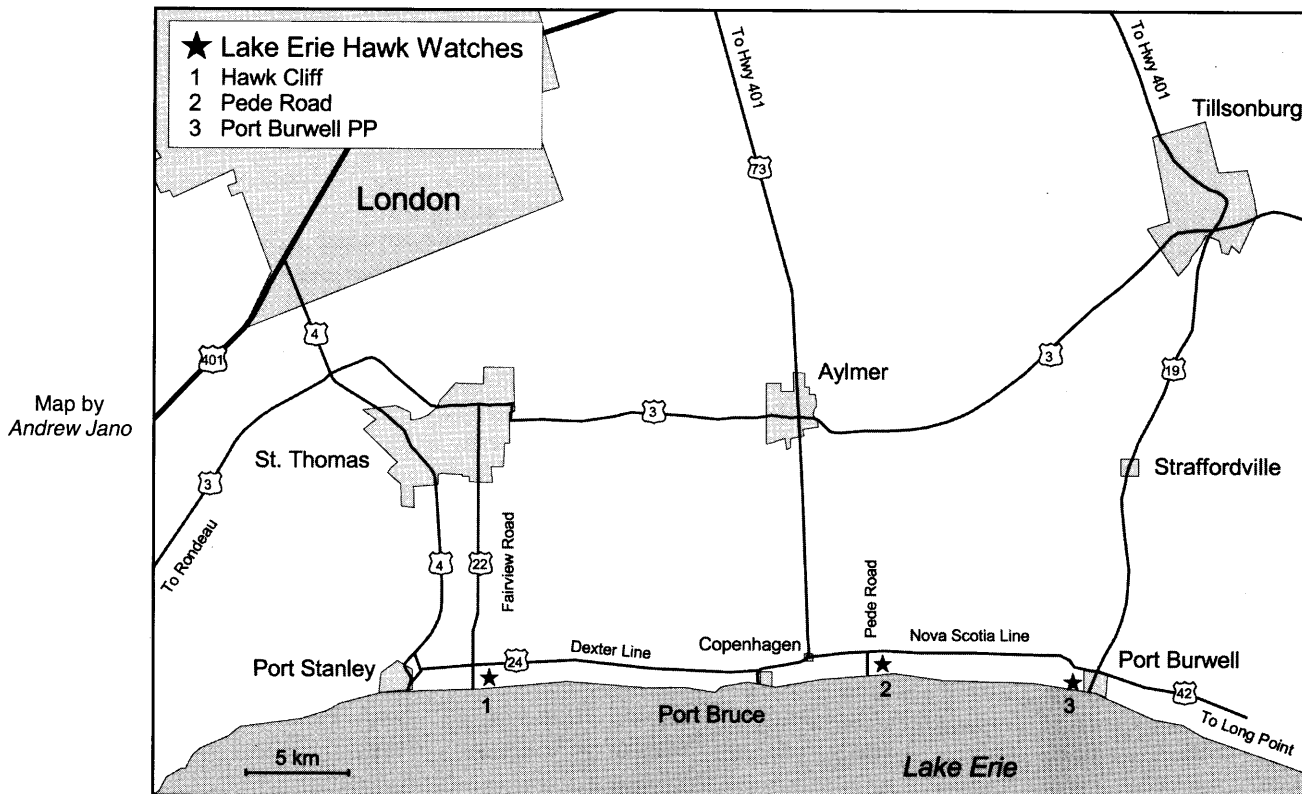
The great variety of habitats cramped into such a small space means that there are many birding opportunities besides hawk watching. Although our main reason for visiting is to watch migration, especially hawks, there are other highlights for days when there aren't many migrating hawks. Beginning in late July large numbers of gulls start congregating. Once, in late August we estimated that there were about 125,000 Ring-billed Gulls and several thousand Bonaparte's Gulls loafing on the beach. With this many gulls there are sure to be some rarities.

In the past four years, we have found Franklin's and Sabine's Gulls. And, there are almost always Little Gulls. Our highest count was 14 Little Gulls on 19 July 2001. Given the long stretch of sandy beach, we expected more shorebirds, but other than Sanderling, there are only a few scattered records of other species such as Black-bellied Plover. Spring, on the other hand, is good for Red Knot and Whimbrel which we see annually.

The shrubby thickets and isolated trees scattered around and between the parking lots are magnets for passerine migrants. After a morning of hawkwatching we walk the periphery of the parking lots and the roads joining them and often encounter flocks of warblers, which might include vireos and Blue-gray Gnatcatchers. In the wandering flocks of chickadees foraging in the slope forest, Carolina Wren is expected and Tufted Titmouse is an annual occurrence. In September, the dune meadows, both dry and damp, are covered with goldenrods and asters and are full of butterflies. In good Monarch years daily counts can be in the hundreds and on an exceptional day in the thousands. On 15 September 1997, we counted the Monarch migration and at its peak almost 3000 Monarchs per hour passed by our station.

What makes Port Burwell such a great place? It is the feeling of wildness, the view of accipiters and falcons over the parking lots, the buteos riding the ridge to the north, accessibility, washrooms, the French fry truck in the next parking lot, the anticipation of walking over the dune and finding some rare gull or shorebird on the beach, the huge migration of butterflies and dragonflies, the beautiful display of fall flowers including masses of Grass-of-Parnassus and lots of gentians of a couple of species.

After the Canadian Thanksgiving weekend (8 to 14 October) we move our hawkwatching post to the lake end of Pede Road which is just east of Port Bruce on Lake Erie. Here we can see farther inland and so determine whether to station ourselves at



the lake shore or, alternately, a kilometre or so inland depending on the flight line of the hawks on that particular day. We always start at the lake and spend about 30 minutes determining where the main stream of hawks is. Then we move accordingly, but always station ourselves so we are looking north at the bulk of the hawks and not into the sun. Land on both sides of Pede Road is private but there are several woodlots that abut the road so when the hawk migration is slow we can walk the road to see if there are flocks of passerines following the woodland edges.

The parade of species passing by the hawkwatch stations in early fall goes something like this:

Early September

Lots of dragonflies (Common Green Darner, Black Saddlebags); butterflies (mostly Monarchs, but also Buckeyes, American and Painted Ladies, Red Admirals, Question Marks); dozens to hundreds of Ruby-throated Hummingbirds; and hundreds of American Goldfinches, Cedar Waxwings and Tree Swallows. It's not unusual to get 5 to 10 Merlins per day; there are many days with 100+ American Kestrels and 400 to 500 Sharp-shinned Hawks.

Mid-September

The Broad-winged Hawks peak usually between 15 and 20 September with a peak one day total in the tens of thousands. Although Broad-wings often go through in "one fell swoop" some years there are several days in a row that produce numbers in the low thousands. The best time of day to see Broad-winged Hawks is between 10:00 a.m. and 11:30 a.m. At this time they are still quite low and the kettles of warming air are just starting to rise. While Broad-wings may stream through for another couple of hours or so they are usually so high as to be nearly invisible. Ospreys also peak in mid-September and the first Blue Jays appear.

Late September

The highlight at this time is the steady flight of Ospreys with numbers ranging from about 10 to 20 per day. The first Peregrine Falcons appear. Blue Jays peak with counts in the thousands per day and as high as 25,000 on a good day. Sharp-shinned Hawk numbers start to tail off just as Cooper's Hawks increase.

Early October

Peregrine numbers peak in the first week of October with at least 5 to 10 per day and upwards of 20 on good days. While Broad-winged Hawks are down to dozens per day, the first Red-shouldered and Red-tailed Hawks appear in low numbers. The first groups of American Crows show up in flocks of dozens but nothing like the third week of October when thousands pass per day. Finally, the first armadas of Turkey Vultures begin to assemble and float by in their great majesty.

Mid-October

In mid-October we shift our hawk watch to Pede Road just east of Port Bruce because the larger hawks don't tend to follow the shoreline as closely and we can see further inland. When the winds are from the northeast the hawks tend to be further inland. We can see this at Pede Road but not at Port Burwell because there we are below the cliffs. On days when the hawks are further inland we simply set up wherever we need to along Pede Road to intercept the stream of hawks. Flights of starlings and blackbirds are thick at this time.

Late October to early November

This is our favourite time of the year and we try to get down to the lake on as many days as possible. This is the time when the Golden Eagles and Northern Goshawks go through and the Red-shouldered and Red-tailed Hawks peak. It is not unusual to see 10 to 15 Golden Eagles, 3 to 5 Northern Goshawks, 250+ Red-shouldered Hawks, and 1000+ Red-tailed Hawks in 3 or 4 hours. But it's not just the hawks that attract us. This 10 day period is the best time to see Sandhill Cranes, usually in small groups, but occasionally in flocks of 20 or 30. The first Tundra Swans drift through and the last big flights of Common Loons pass overhead. Instead of watching only to the east where the hawks are coming from, our senses are besieged by swans moving east along the shoreline, hawks moving west and loons moving southeast over the lake. Finally, to top off the spectacle, in some years the first flights of winter finches arrive.

Location Information and Directions

Port Burwell Provincial Park is located on Lake Erie at the east end of Elgin County. Port Burwell is about 30 minutes west of Long Point and 20 minutes south of Tilsonburg. The park takes in the beach, dunes, and uplands on the west side of Otter Creek. The campgrounds are located on the upland portion of the park. An access road leads into the day use portion of the park on the sand flats below the upland and the five beach parking lots. We usually sit at the far west end of parking lot # 5 because it gives the best view of the lake, a straight through view to the east and the cliffs to the north. There are several "Merlin" trees in the vicinity which are often occupied in early September by Merlins waiting to dash out after migrating dragonflies. There's a small daily vehicle entrance fee to Port Burwell P.P. The campground closes after Thanksgiving. We've met birders who camp at Port Burwell and drive 40 minutes to Hawk Cliff when the hawk watching at Port Burwell is just as good. For camping information call 519-874-4691.

Pede Road (Port Bruce)

Pede Road is the first road ending at the lakeshore east of Port Bruce. Port Bruce is at the lake end of Hwy 73 (Imperial Road) and is about 10 minutes south of Aylmer. From the intersection of Imperial Road and Nova Scotia Line at the village of Copenhagen drive about 2 km east to Pede Road. Turn south (right) and drive to the lakeshore. Park well off the road so as not to obstruct farm machinery. Watch to the east for about one half hour so as to determine where the flight line is on that day and stay at the dead end or move inland along the road accordingly. The people who live along the road are friendly and often stop to ask what we are seeing that day.

Hawk Cliff and Points West

From Port Bruce, the well known Hawk Cliff is about 20 minutes further west along the Lake Erie shoreline and 10 minutes due south of St Thomas. Most London and St Thomas birders prefer Hawk Cliff because it is close and well attended so there is lots of help from experienced birders. Hundreds, even thousands of people show up on hawk viewing weekends, hosted by the Hawk Cliff Banders, Hawk Cliff Foundation and St. Thomas Field Naturalists. For those who live east of Port Burwell (Woodstock, Kitchener, Hamilton, Brantford,) and prefer a closer spot or smaller numbers of people, Port Burwell and Port Bruce are 40 minutes closer and have just as great a view of the migration and just as great a diversity and numbers.

Buffy Baldpates

Ron Pittaway

Baldpate is a former name of the American Wigeon. Baldpate aptly describes the shiny white crown of male American Wigeon in breeding (alternate) plumage. Most ducks acquire their breeding plumage in the fall, wearing it through the winter to late spring or early summer.

Almost every year in *October*, birders ask me about Eurasian Wigeon because they have seen male wigeon with buffy crowns. Some even wonder if they have seen a hybrid American x Eurasian Wigeon. Bird guides say that male American Wigeon have white crowns and Eurasian Wigeon have buffy crowns. Some books even say the buffy crown is one of the best field marks of the Eurasian Wigeon.

So why is there confusion about wigeon with buffy crowns? Most bird guides do not tell you that it is perfectly normal for male American Wigeon to have buffy crowns in early fall, when they have just acquired fresh breeding plumage. However, the buff fades rapidly to white, which is why it is not often seen or mentioned in most bird books.

If you see a wigeon before late October with a buffy crown, first suspect American Wigeon. Confirm it by seeing the broad green patch from the eye to the nape. If you see a wigeon after October with a buffy crown, suspect a Eurasian Wigeon, but confirm it by noting its reddish head and neck. Interestingly, the buffy forehead of the Eurasian fades to a pale cream in time.

American and Eurasian Wigeon occasionally hybridize, but rule out variations in each species before naming a hybrid. Eurasian Wigeon have a variable touch of green behind the eyes, which may indicate past hybridization with American Wigeon or a character of the ancestral form of both species.

Grass Fire Birds

Ron Pittaway

Has the huge decrease in grass fires in recent decades contributed to the puzzling declines in some grassland birds?

When I was a young birder in the 1960s, I often returned home with charcoal on my pants and boots after roaming fields that had burned in spring. Grass fires and grassland birds were much more common then than they are today. Every spring many fields burned in southern Ontario. I haven't had charcoal on my shoes in many years.

Putting out grass fires is an ecological mistake because many plant and animal communities require periodic burning for renewal. Studies indicate that grass fires temporarily reduce bird numbers, but breeding grassland birds soon increase as invertebrates re-establish in the rapid new growth. Grasshopper Sparrows, for example, increase significantly 1-3 years after a burn. We must support resource managers who use controlled burns to enhance wildlife habitats.

Reference

L.R. Mitchell *et al.* 2000. Ecology of Grassland Breeding Birds in the Northeastern United States - A Literature Review with Recommendations for Management. Department of Natural Resources, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY 14853-3001. Available free. I thank Chip Weseloh for telling Jean Iron and me about this important publication.

Atlas Up and Flying

Mike Cadman

The new atlas isn't just up and flying – it's soaring like an eagle after the first year of field work. Results are pouring in to Regional Coordinators (RCs) throughout the province. RCs are summarizing their first year's results, providing the first glimpse of how the status of many species has changed over the past 20 years. A few examples follow. First the good news:

Charlie Whitelaw reports Sandhill Cranes in 18 squares in Sudbury West region, whereas there were only 5 reports in the whole first atlas. There are also reports from 3 squares in Muskoka Region, and confirmed breeding at Long Point and near Waterloo.

Merlin numbers and range are expanding south and east. Christine Hanrahan reports Merlins in 10 squares so far in Ottawa region, with 3 nesting pairs in one square alone; there was only one possible breeding record in all of Ottawa region during the first atlas.

Dave Martin reports that Pine Warblers have increased greatly in Middlesex County as pine plantations there are reaching maturity. Records are from 4 squares so far, with none during the first atlas.

Hooded Warblers are doing very well around Long Point, with over 50 nests discovered this year. There was also a territorial bird near Mono Mills. It will be interesting to see how far north the population extends.

Watch out for exploding Northern Mockingbirds in the Toronto-Richmond Hill area. Glenn Coady reports confirmed or probable breeding in 11 of Toronto's 16 squares, and Theo Hofmann reports 8 confirmed, 4 probable, and two possible breeders in a single 10-km square near Richmond Hill.

Unfortunately, all the news isn't good (and it is easier to detect expansions than contractions in range at this stage of the project). Red-headed Woodpeckers, Golden-winged Warblers (at least in the south), Loggerhead Shrikes, Henslow's Sparrow, and Northern Bobwhite all appear to be well down since the first atlas, and there are suggestions that some of the grassland sparrows are also a lot harder to find. There were no reports of breeding Purple Martins in Sault Ste Marie in 2001, though they were in 12 squares during the first atlas.

Everyone can participate in the atlas and help our efforts to define the current range and status of all breeding species in the province. If you're not already involved, sign up soon, there are only four more years of data collection. Help is needed everywhere, but particularly in central and northern Ontario. See the atlas web page www.birdsontario.org for more details about the project and how to get involved, or contact us:

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The American Oystercatcher

in

The Birds of North America

Erica Nol

I was privileged to do my doctoral thesis research on the biology of the American Oystercatcher (*Haematopus palliatus*), under the supervision of Dr. Allan Baker of the Royal Ontario Museum. This study followed up one begun by Michael Cadman, a biologist familiar to most ornithologists in Ontario. In the late 1970s Mike banded a large number of oystercatchers nesting on the salt marsh islands near Chincoteague, Virginia. As a student very interested in individual variation in behaviour (aka 'bird personality'), I was pleased to be able to work on a population where individuals were identified through unique colour-band combinations. This situation also saved me the trouble and agony of having to band the birds myself as this species is very large, but at the same time delicate to handle, and also very prone to disturbance at the nest site.

I studied the Virginia population for three years during the springs and summers of 1981 through 1983. In the winters of 1982 and 1983 I was able to travel to Patagonia, southern Argentina, to study and compare what I had learned in Virginia with the biology of the *dunfordi* race of this species. American Oystercatchers nest along with *Haematopus ater* (the Blackish Oystercatcher) along the pebbled beaches of a very large and famous Magellanic Penguin colony at Punta Tombo.

All populations (the two American and the Blackish) are very similar in their biology, although around the world, black oystercatchers tend to have smaller clutches (mostly 2 eggs) and the black and white oystercatchers, like the American Oystercatcher, lay mostly 3-egg clutches. American Oystercatchers and the other 'pied' species also generally forage on mudflats, whereas black oystercatchers forage on rocky intertidal areas. All species of oystercatchers have extensive parental care. Unlike most shorebirds where parental care is restricted to brooding young and warning the young to the presence of predators, oystercatchers feed their young for at least 6 weeks after hatch. Both the male and female contribute equally to this feeding. Predation rates are very high on the eggs, but oystercatchers can compensate by living very long lives. Adult mortality rates are low; over 90% of individuals return in subsequent years to breed. American Oystercatchers

also usually retain their mates from one year to the next, and show high site fidelity, continuing to nest in the same territory even after many years of unsuccessful nesting. The number of young raised successfully is very uneven among pairs, so that certain pairs consistently raised young, whereas others consistently failed.

Major causes of nest losses were predation by raccoons and red foxes and losses due to high tides. Interestingly, red foxes are not native to the coastal Virginia area. In most coastal



American Oystercatcher, Boca Chica, Texas, November 1997.
Photo by Alan Wormington.

nesting sites, trapping of these predators is routine, mostly to assist the endangered Piping Plover (*Charadrius melodus*), but of course, this trapping also reduces predation on American Oystercatcher nests. Because of the tidal cycle, with particularly high spring tides once per lunar cycle, timing is very critical for successful nesting. If the oystercatchers lay their eggs just after a high spring tide, then they have time to hatch the eggs (incubation periods of 24 d) prior to the next high spring tide, 28 days later. High spring tides are especially damaging if accompanied by offshore winds. The key to avoiding storm losses is placement of nests in elevated locations.

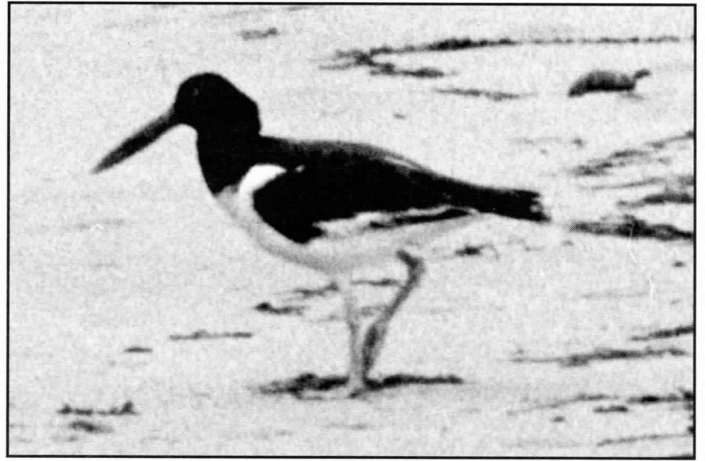
Unfortunately, like many coastal birds (e.g. Piping Plovers, Wilson's Plovers (*C. wilsonia*), Black Skimmers (*Rynchops niger*), Least Terns (*Sterna antillarum*), American Oystercatchers choose sites that are above the high tide line, but not so high on the dunes that their views are obstructed by dune vegetation. This makes them particularly vulnerable to changes in climate that will result in increases in the frequency of storm events, and/or increases in sea levels. While I was studying the birds, I did experiments with artificial nest platforms: three tires tied together and filled with oyster shells. The birds readily accepted these platforms and nested successfully there. In northern states, oystercatchers have additional problems that were not evident in Virginia. They appear to compete with both Great Black-backed and Herring Gulls for nest sites. These gulls are also a threat to the eggs and young.

American Oystercatchers are striking birds with specialized feeding methods. In winter, in particular, they forage on the cultivated and wild American Oysters (*Crassostrea virginica*).

Their bills are shaped very much like oyster knives (whose idea was that?), and they pry open the two halves of the oyster shell, first by hammering briefly, and then by sliding their chisel shaped bill between the valves, turning the bill to sever the posterior adductor muscle, and then pulling out the soft meat. In winter, they are major predators of oysters, consuming up to 30 per hour. They are restricted, however, to foraging during the 5-6 hour period of every 12 hours when the tide is either rising or falling, and oysters have their valves partly open to forage themselves. At low tide when the oyster beds are fully exposed to air, the oysters close up tight, and at high tide, the oyster beds are inundated and oysters are inaccessible.

Mike Cadman had completed his M.Sc. thesis in 1980 on the foraging behaviour of oystercatchers at a time when the harvestable oystercatchers were quite abundant and large. The populations were then devastated by outbreaks of the parasite *Haplosporidium nelsoni* (MSX). They also suffered from severe overharvesting. Infected by parasites, oysters would grow to about 3-4 cm in length, then die. Prior to this it was common to have oysters 3 times this size. My former graduate student, Joanne Tuckwell, was interested in whether the oystercatchers continued to forage exclusively on these reduced oyster beds, or whether they had to supplement their diets with other prey. She repeated Mike Cadman's study in the mid-90s. She found that they did indeed forage on a greater variety of prey than they had when oysters were big and plentiful. The winter diet now includes several species of razor clams, and ribbed mussels, which have invaded and settled on dead oyster shells in the oyster bed. This diverse diet matches that of the species in the breeding season, where very few pairs rely solely on oysters for their own requirements and those of their chicks.

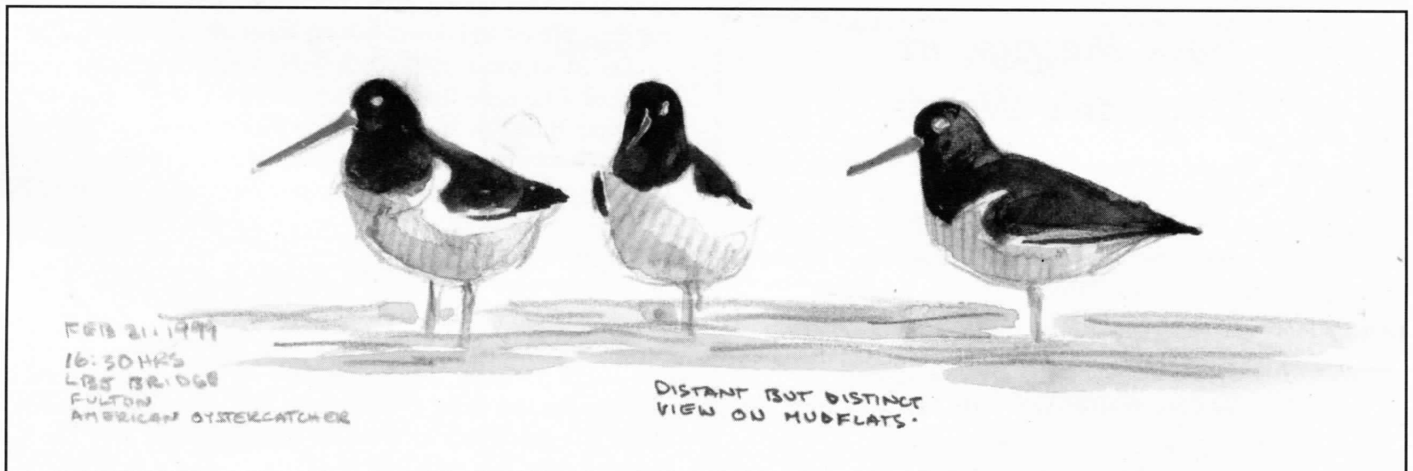
In the past few years both the U.S. and Canadian governments have produced conservation plans for shorebirds. As part of an attempt by U.S. biologists to obtain accurate estimates of population sizes for shorebirds, I organized, along with several government biologists, and Barry Truitt from the Virginia Coast Reserve Nature Conservancy, a fall survey of American Oystercatchers. Although extremely territorial in the breeding season, in winter this species roosts in very large (>300) flocks on raised shell piles in coastal marshes and beaches. Using boats, helicopters and walking, we surveyed



American Oystercatcher, Port Colborne, Ontario, 9 September 1996, one of two following Hurricane Fran. Photo Alan Wormington.

most of the coast from Georgia to Maryland. We conducted the surveys during the high tide when most birds would be concentrated on these large roost sites. Combining our counts with estimates from Christmas Bird Counts from non-surveyed locations, we estimated approximately 7700 as the population size for the *palliatu*s race of the American Oystercatcher. Most of these birds were concentrated in the states of Virginia, South Carolina, and Florida. The large flocks were composed of both local breeders and birds breeding further north (although the proportion of each was unknown because there are few estimates of breeding populations). These three states are critical for maintaining healthy breeding populations of this species throughout its range. American Oystercatchers depend on healthy populations of oysters and other marine bivalves for winter survival so that minimizing marine pollution and changes in sea levels that will change the distribution and abundance of this prey base is critical. Not surprisingly, other species of shorebirds, those that migrate from arctic nesting areas to winter in the southern U.S. and Middle and South America, also rely on sound stewardship of the ocean and intertidal areas for survival.

*Erica Nol is the co-author with Robert C. Humphrey of **The Birds of North America** (1994) account of the American Oystercatcher.*



American Oystercatchers on mudflats by Brenda Carter

Newsletter Review

Jean Iron

Point Pelee Natural History News

Published 4 times a year by The Friends of Point Pelee

Length: 24 pages. Subscription \$15.00

For more information contact:

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The first issue of *Point Pelee Natural History News*, published by the Friends of Point Pelee, made its timely appearance just before spring bird migration in 2001. Its goal is to promote the study and appreciation of the natural heritage of Point Pelee and nearby areas. This newsletter includes information about birds, butterflies, moths and reptiles of the Point Pelee area. There is also a section on upcoming events and outings. The newsletter is illustrated with drawings and photographs.

Point Pelee Natural History News will be of special interest to birders because a major section is about birds, reflecting the editor's strong birding background. It contains a summary of the bird records for Point Pelee for the period covered, as well as Christmas Bird Count results and additions to the Point Pelee area bird checklist. The birding articles are a major attraction as they are well researched and attractively presented. Examples of noteworthy articles in the first two issues are: "Eurasian Teal: A New Species for Point Pelee?" by Alan Wormington, "Colonial Waterbirds of Middle Island, Western Lake Erie" by Chip Weseloh, and "Early Fall Migration of Bonaparte's Gulls at Point Pelee" by Alan Wormington.

Another major section covers butterflies and moths. Enthusiasts will enjoy reading about the Point Pelee area sightings accompanied by photos.

Point Pelee is the finest birding area in Canada. Much information has been amassed over the years to form an extensive knowledge base. Now birders and other naturalists will have access to this information through the publication of articles and current sightings. *Point Pelee Natural History News* is an important contribution to our knowledge and understanding of the birds of Ontario.

Save Meadow at Thickson's Woods

Thickson's Woods Heritage Foundation has made an offer to buy the 8.5 acre meadow to the north of Thickson's Woods. The purchase price of \$531,125 will be paid over 5 years. The immediate urgency is to raise the \$100,000 downpayment by February 2002.

Please make tax deductible donations to:

Thickson's Woods Heritage Foundation
Box 54, Whitby ON L1N 5V3

For more information contact: 905-725-2116 or
nature@thicksonswoods.com

Visit our website: www.thicksonswoods.com

Redtail and Roadkill

George and Jean Fairfield

On 10 October 2001, we were driving south on Highway 50 north of Toronto. A few kilometres south of Palgrave we came upon a juvenile Red-tailed Hawk feeding on a roadkill on the west shoulder of the road. We braked but could not stop in time and the hawk flew up and hit the side of the car. As soon as the traffic allowed, we turned and drove back expecting to find a crippled hawk. However, it was nowhere to be seen. We turned the car south again and parked on the shoulder close to the roadkill—a small skunk. We had no sooner parked than the Redtail flew in and landed on the wire fence that separated the highway from the adjacent field. It walked awkwardly along the wire and stopped opposite the skunk. Since we felt that we were causing a traffic hazard, we drove off and continued our trip home.

Bent (1937) mentions carrion among the wide variety of foods of Red-tailed Hawks. With the expansion of our highway system in recent years, and the resultant growth in the number of roadkills, carrion probably forms an increasingly important source of food for the Redtail. Judging by our experience on Highway 50, it must also be a precarious source of food.

Literature Cited: Bent, A.C. 1937. Life Histories of North American Birds of Prey. Smithsonian Institution United States National Museum Bulletin 167. Washington D.C.

ID: Loon Bill Flick

Ron Pittaway

All five species of loons toss their heads and bills. Red-throated Loons, however, often can be picked out at a distance on the water and in flight because they *bill flick* much more often than other loons.

Loons eat underwater unless their prey is too large or they are feeding young. They often shake excess water off their bills after surfacing. Individual loons may head toss more than others, possibly because they are affected by a fungus such as *Aspergillus*. After diving, they clear their nasal passages by flicking their bill up and down, tossing water up over their backs.

On 31 October 1998, Jean Iron, Kevin McLaughlin and I watched a juvenile Red-throated Loon on Lake Ontario at Van Wagners Beach in Hamilton. This Red-throated flicked its bill 2-3 times after each dive. A nearby juvenile Common Loon did not flick its bill. Red-throated Loons habitually flick their bills more often than other loons, which is often a clue to their identification.

Red-throated Loons also even bill flick in flight. Anthony McGeehan of Northern Ireland wrote about the flight identification of divers (loons) in the November 1996 issue of *Birdwatch* 53: 36-39. He says "No matter how far away an approaching diver is, the first thing I watch for is its head being occasionally lifted in a quick jerk or twist. In my experience only the Red-throated does this with any regularity...using it as a control to detect just Red-throated Divers, it has never let me down—so why not give it a try?"

Lake Ontario Pelagic Trap

Ron Pittaway

The west end of Lake Ontario near Hamilton is the best place in interior North America to see pelagic birds and other birds more typical of the ocean. Here is a sample of seabirds seen regularly on Lake Ontario: Parasitic Jaeger, Black-legged Kittiwake, Sabine's Gull, and Northern Gannet. Yet Hamilton is 915 km from Tadoussac, a seabird and whale spot on the St. Lawrence River at the mouth of the Saguenay River fiord, and 866 km from James Bay, the two main sources of oceanic birds seen on Lake Ontario. See map. Some birds using the **St. Lawrence Route**: Northern Gannets, probably a majority of Black-legged Kittiwakes, a minority of Northern Fulmars, Razorbills, Thick-billed Murres, most other Atlantic alcid, and Great Cormorants. **James Bay Route**: Jaegers, some Black-legged Kittiwakes, Sabine's Gulls, and a majority of Northern Fulmars as indicated by the 14 seen by Alan Wormington and Doug McRae at the south end of James Bay on 6 November 1981.

Why is Lake Ontario the best of the five Great Lakes for oceanic birds? Lake Ontario is connected directly to the Gulf of St. Lawrence. See map. Wandering seabirds, such as gannets, funnel along the St. Lawrence River into Lake Ontario. The second source of pelagics on the Great Lakes is Hudson and James Bays, which reach deep into the centre of the continent. More jaegers are seen on Lake Ontario than the other Great Lakes, because it is the most easterly and closest to the shortest route from James Bay to the Atlantic. See map.

Why too is Hamilton the best location on Lake Ontario for pelagics? On 8 June 1997, Jean Iron and I took a ferry crossing from Toronto to St. Catharines. Visibility was excellent and by scanning with binoculars, we could imagine what a lost seabird would see as a route out of Lake Ontario. From the middle of the lake, the entire shoreline on both sides appeared landlocked, except for the extreme western end near Hamilton where the Niagara Escarpment appears to dip out of sight in the background. The visual impression suggests an outlet at the far west end of the lake. Another factor favouring Hamilton is that pelagic birds, tend to concentrate more at both ends of the lake. From late August to December, Van Wagners Beach at Hamilton is the top spot on the Great Lakes to see oceanic birds.

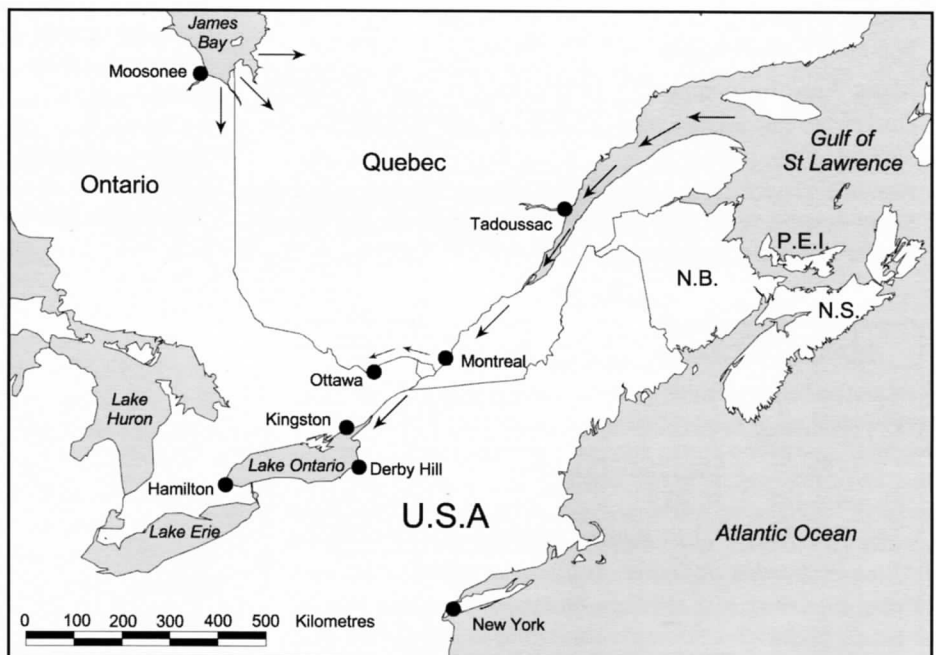
What happens to seabirds that get trapped on Lake Ontario? Let us examine two cases: Northern Gannet and Parasitic Jaeger. *Northern Gannet*: Probably 100% of the gannets seen on Lake Ontario funnel up the St. Lawrence River, because there is only one record for James Bay. In fact, more gannets are seen on Lake Ontario than all the other Great Lakes combined. Once on Lake Ontario,

gannets tend to circle the west end of the lake, sometimes into December before disappearing. A few may follow the Niagara River to Lake Erie, but others probably freeze and starve on Lake Ontario or are grounded trying to escape the lake, as indicated by several inland records for upstate New York. Gannets occasionally follow the Ottawa River Valley. One juvenile gannet was found west of Ottawa grounded in a farm field with domestic white geese, suggesting that it was attracted by their adult gannet-like appearance. *Parasitic Jaeger*: Jaegers seen on the Great Lakes come overland from Hudson and James Bays. Once on Lake Ontario, jaegers tend to collect at both ends of the lake, apparently looking for an outlet. Jaegers have been seen spiralling high on northwest winds at the southeast corner of Lake Ontario at Derby Hill, New York, and heading inland towards the Atlantic. There were 202 Parasitic Jaegers off Derby Hill on 7 October 1979. See map.

We are overdue for an invasion of *Thick-billed Murres*. The last big murre flight was in late November 1950 when hundreds, pushed by a strong northeast gale, funnelled up the St. Lawrence River (some up the Ottawa River) going mostly into Lake Ontario. Old-timers thought that murre wrecks happened when Hudson Bay suddenly froze over, but we now know that murres are very rare in southern Hudson Bay and that murre flights originate from the Gulf of St. Lawrence.

This fall when the wind blows from the northeast, go to Hamilton's Van Wagners Beach; you may see a jaeger, kittiwake, gannet, and some day even a wreck of murres.

Acknowledgements: My appreciation to Andrew Jano for producing the map and calculating the distances. I thank Bruce Di Labio and Alan Wormington for advice.



Map by Andrew Jano

OFO Awards

2001

Each year the OFO Board of Directors recognizes individuals and organizations for their contribution to the birds and birding community of Ontario. This year the following people received an OFO Certificate of Appreciation.

- The crew of Frontenac II: Earl Willard, Senior Captain; Doug Shurtliffe, Captain; Helen Trotter, Purser; and Brent Wolfreys for assisting birders to see the Ivory Gull on the ferry crossing to Amherst Island, January 2001.
- Cataraqui Region Conservation Authority for maintaining habitat for wintering owls at The Owl Woods, Amherst Island, and allowing visitors access to see the owls.
- Gwen and Paul Lauret, Stella, Ontario, for maintaining habitat for wintering owls at The Owl Woods, Amherst Island, and providing access to visiting birders to see the owls.
- Rod Barr, Stella, Ontario, for maintaining habitat for wintering owls in The Owl Woods, Amherst Island, and for providing access to visiting birders to see the owls.
- Loyalist Township for maintaining habitat for wintering owls in The Owl Woods, and for providing access to visiting birders to see the owls.
- The Kingston Field Naturalists for maintaining habitat for wintering owls in The Owl Woods, Amherst Island, and for hospitality to visiting birders.
- Nancy Checko for significant assistance to Ron Tozer, co-editor of *Ontario Birds*, with formatting, layout and computer software.
- Sandra Eadie for significant assistance to Mike Street in the administration of *Ontbirds* in 2000.
- Graham and Sue Cranshaw, Pickering, for hospitality to birders coming to see the Harris's Sparrow, 17 December 2000 to 31 January 2001.
- Maris Apse for completing 10 consecutive years of Baillie Birdathon and raising over \$9,000, of which \$3000 came back to OFO.
- Amanda Derrig for posting daily updates on *Ontbirds* and being helpful to birders visiting Pelee Island for the Wood Storks in August and September 2001.

Nomination

To nominate a person or organization for an OFO Certificate of Appreciation, contact:

*Chris Escott, 1 Shouldice Court
Toronto ON M2L 2S3*

Tel: 416-444-8055 or e-mail: escott@user.rosecom.ca

Please provide the name, address and phone number of the person or organization and the reason for the nomination.

Notes From the OBRC

Peter Burke

On 14 October 2001, the Ontario Bird Records Committee (OBRC) met at the Old Cut Banding Station on Long Point for its Fall Policy Meeting. Among the items covered at the meeting were construction of a computerized database, voting for new members, the OBRC guidelines, and what to do with historic records in the literature that do not have supporting details.

We also updated the Review Lists for Northern and Southern Ontario, as well as the official Ontario Checklist. It was determined at the meeting that "Western" Red-tailed Hawk will be removed from the Southern Ontario Review List. "Pink-sided" Dark-eyed Junco was added to the list of Subspecies and Morphs. Heermann's Gull, Eurasian Collared-Dove, Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch were added to the south, while American Avocet has been dropped as of 1999. Northern Ontario adds Tropical/Couch's Kingbird, Bewick's Wren and Sharp-tailed Sandpiper. Townsend's Solitaire was removed as of 2000.

Bob Curry, past Chair, led a discussion on the topic of reports in the literature for which there are no or very few supporting details. These reports, mainly historical in nature, will likely be considered "unreviewable" by the OBRC. The committee hopes to reach a decision very soon about how to deal with such reports in our database.

As well, we aim to begin computerizing our database in the near future. The committee has wrestled with producing such a database for some time, and we hope to get things moving soon.

Our official guidelines will be available shortly for viewing on the OFO website. These guidelines were examined once more for completeness and our incoming Secretary, Bill Crins, has offered to help with their preparation.

The OBRC would like to thank Bird Studies Canada and the Long Point Bird Observatory for allowing us use of their facilities at Old Cut. Thanks especially to Ann-Marie Ridout and Ian Richards for helping with logistics.

By mid-October, the committee had received about 80 reports for 2001. We encourage observers to submit documentation of their rarities to the OBRC.

To obtain a rare bird report form, please see the OFO website:

www.interlog.com/~oforeport.htm

Please send reports to

**Kayo Roy, Secretary OBRC
13 Kinsman Court
Fonthill ON L0S 1E3**

E-mail: kayoroy@niagara.com

Great Crested Flycatcher and Red Squirrel

Jean Iron and Ron Pittaway

About 9:00 a.m. on 24 June 2001 in Toronto, Ontario, we observed a Red Squirrel near a Great Crested Flycatcher's nest in a screech-owl nest box. We did not see the squirrel leave the box, which was attached about 3 metres up a large Eastern White Pine located in Jean's backyard. Not long afterwards, the squirrel came down the nest tree and left the area on foot. There also was a Raccoon sleeping in the crotch of a nearby tree.

We noticed several House Flies around the entrance hole, making us suspicious that something was wrong. A few minutes later, an adult Great Crested Flycatcher, with an insect in its bill, landed on a nearby dead branch. It then flew and hovered just outside the nest hole, but did not enter. Then it flew up to a high dead branch and swallowed the insect. We now became more suspicious that something had happened at the nest, which we were watching from a house window.

We inspected the nest tree area and found a dead half grown nestling on the ground below the box, a clump of nest material, and three strips of shiny waxy paper each about 35-40 cm long, suggesting cast snake skins. The dead nestling flycatcher had been partly eaten around the face. It was fresh indicating that it had died less than two hours earlier. At 9:45 we saw an adult flycatcher with a small insect in its bill perched for about a minute on the flat top of the box, but it did not enter. Several flies were around the box too, but the flycatcher didn't go after them. At 10:00 an adult Great Crested was perched in nest hole entrance. It grabbed a fly and flew to catch another fly which it dropped, then it perched on top of the box.

About 10:30, we opened the top of the box. The nest depression was in the right corner on top of about 10 cm of pine needles, grasses, fox fur, leaves, and scattered old feathers. Only the stomach, full of insects, of a second nestling was in the nest, but no other flycatcher parts. It suggests the rest of the bird was eaten in the nest. Leaving the stomach sack (1 cm x 2.5 cm) does not suggest a Raccoon ate it in the nest box. The hole also was too small for a Raccoon to enter.

Raccoon or Red Squirrel? We asked Ron Tozer of Algonquin Park. He said "I would suspect the Red Squirrel, 'scourge of the north woods.' They are omnivores, really just like small bears. They eat just about anything, and really go after eggs and young. I agree that it appears the one young was eaten in the nest box. Verdict: Red Squirrel, guilty."



Photo by Jean Iron

CD Review

Jean Iron

The Diversity of Animal Sounds CD

The Cornell Lab of Ornithology, 2001

Cost US\$16.95

Available Cornell Lab Birding Shop toll free 1-877-274-3716

The Diversity of Animal Sounds CD features the songs, calls and sounds of mammals, birds, insects, frogs, whales and other animals from many parts of the world. Some are familiar, such as lions, monkeys, whales, Common Loon, and wolves in Algonquin Park. There are less well known animals like Yellow Buffalo Treehopper or Greater Sac-winged Bat. Each of the 62 species presented on the CD is individually tracked for easy access. Each track is about 40 to 80 seconds in length, allowing sufficient time to appreciate the sounds. The audio quality is good, with some tracks in stereo. Remarkably, no human voice intrudes into these haunting and evocative sounds. A few species are first at normal speed, and second slowed down (or speeded up), so that the human ear can pick up the finer qualities of the sound. This is done with Winter Wren.

The CD comes with an interesting booklet that explains about the diversity and complexity of animal sounds. The species are grouped according to the purpose for which they make the sounds, such as "promiscuous males" attracting a mate, monogamous pairs duetting, and males defending a territory. The species are listed, including scientific names, with an explanation about the sound, where it was made and the name of the sound recorder.

Birders will not use this CD to learn bird songs. Rather it helps us understand behaviour that causes different songs and calls. This CD is a celebration of the amazing sounds that animals make, with ample representation from the bird world. I was particularly taken by sound of the Screaming Pia on a small lek in Guyana, the Superb Lyrebird mimic from Australia, and the Dark-rumped Petrel of Galapagos with both sexes calling during pair formation.

The two last tracks are of extinct birds: a pair of Ivory-billed Woodpeckers tapping and calling in Louisiana in 1935, and a Kauai Oo in Hawaii in 1976, one of the last males on earth singing his heart out, but there was no female left to hear him. These poignant sounds remind us how fragile life is.

This CD has a delightful selection of animal sounds. It will make a good gift for those who enjoy nature.

Mailing

OFO News and Ontario Birds

The OFO Board of Directors and editors of *OFO News* and *Ontario Birds* greatly appreciate the time and effort of the following members who organize, stuff envelopes, and get our publications out quickly. It is a big job with six mailings a year. The mailing team comprises Eleanor Beagan, Eileen Beagan, Merle and Trevor Hamilton, Elisabeth Mihalj, Marilyn Murphy, John Barker, Pat Thomas, Barbara Mann, Jean Iron. If you would like to help with future mailings, please contact Jean Iron:

416-445-9297 or e-mail: jeaniron@sympatico.ca

Future OFO Trips

December 2 (Sunday) Niagara River Gull Watch. Leaders: Ron Tozer and Jean Iron. Meet at 9:00 a.m. in Niagara-on-the-Lake at Queens Royal Park at Regent and Front. Glaucous, Iceland, Thayer's, Lesser Black-backed and other gulls.

January 13 (Sunday) Petroglyphs Provincial Park.

Leader: Geoff Carpentier. Meet 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. Bohemian Waxwings are possible.

February 9 (Saturday) Fisherville Area, Haldimand-Norfolk County

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

OFO Gift Membership

Give an OFO membership to a birder this holiday season. Send the recipient's name, address and phone number, along with your cheque for \$22.00 (single membership in Canada) payable to OFO to: **Eleanor Beagan, OFO, PO Box 455 Station R, Toronto ON M4G 4E1**

Please specify the message you would like on the gift card. Questions? Contact Eleanor Beagan: Phone: 416-423-3535 or e-mail: etbeagan@wiznet.ca

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New Trip Reports

Palgrave, Tottenham, Schomberg.

Saturday 25 August.

Leader: Dave Milsom.

OFO's field trip to Palgrave Conservation Area, Tottenham/Alliston Sod Farms, and Schomberg Sewage Lagoons for early fall migrants, was attended by 25 participants, on a beautiful, sunny day. Eleven species of warblers at Palgrave and ten species of shorebirds, were the highlights. Excellent views were obtained of all the shorebirds, including Solitary and White-rumped Sandpipers, American Golden-Plover, and hundreds of Killdeer. We saw American Golden-Plovers and many Killdeer at the sod farms. The sewage lagoons were good for the other shorebirds.

The warblers were much more elusive in the dense foliage as they fed voraciously prior to their long migration south. The day's tally included 70 bird species, 10 butterfly, and 8 dragonfly species.

Durham Region and Lake Ontario Marshes. Sunday 26 August.

Leader: Rayfield Pye.

The OFO field trip to the lakeshore marshes in Durham Region was well attended by 15 participants. Hydro Marsh and Corner Marsh were very good, while Cranberry Marsh and Thickson's Woods were quiet.

At Hydro Park we studied a juvenile Common Moorhen. We also had a fine

flock of seven species of warblers near the parking lot, including Canada Warbler. Everyone had excellent views of seven species of shorebirds in the marsh.

At Corner Marsh, the views were truly excellent with the warblers and vireos at eye level along the bridge. Magnolia and Wilson's were the most common. The number one highlight of the day was the Green Heron that put on a fishing show at Hydro Marsh.

Day totals: 68 species of birds and 6 species of butterflies.

Amherst Island and Area.

Saturday 22 September.

Leader: Peter Good.

Ten OFO members took the 7:30 ferry to Amherst Island. The Owl Woods contained a few passerines but no Northern Saw-whet Owls as yet. The bar at the east end of the island was crowded with ducks; a Long-tailed Duck and a small flock of Lesser Scaup were noteworthy. There were 10 species of shorebirds including 25 Black-bellied Plovers, five American Golden-Plovers and five Baird's Sandpipers. There were hawks all over the island; highlights included one Peregrine Falcon, one Merlin, two immature Bald Eagles, one Rough-legged Hawk, and 75 Northern Harriers. In total we saw 76 species.

Amherst Island is a 20 minute ferry ride from the village of Millhaven just west of Kingston.

OFO Website

[Http://www.interlog.com/~ofo](http://www.interlog.com/~ofo)

E-mail: ofo@interlog.com

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