



OFO NEWS

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Point Pelee 2005 — A Big Year Like No Other

Alan Wormington

It was sometime in late March or early April (2005) when I realized that I had seen a good selection of rare birds for the year at Point Pelee. These included Greater White-fronted Goose, Eurasian Wigeon, King Eider and Gyrfalcon, to name a few. All good birds if one were doing a big year, I thought. Hey, maybe I should do a Point Pelee Big Year! Thinking forward I realized that for virtually the entire upcoming year I did not expect to be away from home for more than a day or two at any one time. Certainly a change from the previous four summers when I had been away for weeks at a time, working on various consulting projects. Yet another great excuse to do a lot of local birding at my favourite location.

Anyone who has ever attempted a Big Year in Ontario either locally or throughout the province, knows all too well that a major commitment of time and resources is required to be successful. This includes a lot of planning, extreme patience, and a willingness to spend many hours in the field. It's like a Big Day attempt, except it spans four seasons, 12 months and 365 days. And those unexpected telephone calls need to be acted upon at all times, without delay!

The Point Pelee Birding Area

The official Point Pelee Birding Area is a standard 15-mile diameter (7.5-mile radius) Christmas Bird Count (CBC) circle, which is relatively small compared to other designated local areas in Ontario. The Point Pelee area includes Wheatley Provincial Park, Wheatley and Wheatley Harbour, all of Leamington including Seacliff, and of course Point Pelee National Park and the adjacent waters of Lake Erie.

Help From Others

To keep everyone up-to-date on my progress, I sent out a weekly e-mail message that eventually grew to about 100 recipients. In my very first post on April 20 I offered to delete any person from the list who did not want to re-

ceive my messages. No one requested to be deleted, so I assumed that everyone was interested or simply just polite! The main purpose of this weekly post, *The Monday Report*, was to keep everyone informed as to what species I was seeing, in the hope that should someone find a new species, I would be contacted as soon as possible. But the reports also acted as an excellent record of a birding year at Point Pelee. From time to time I also included information on additional subjects, which I hope readers found of interest. For example, I compiled occurrences of tropical pelagic species that were appearing at various inland sites due to several hurricanes that were tracking towards the Great Lakes.

During the year numerous birders alerted me to the presence of various species, and I thank them all. A special thanks goes to two people in particular, Dean J. Ware and Adam J. Hall. Both kept me constantly informed about sightings in general and both telephoned me on several occasions that resulted in new birds for the year. *con't >*



One of the highlights for the 2005 Big Year was seeing this Neotropic Cormorant at Wheatley Harbour, a new species for Point Pelee and Ontario. It was seen here daily from May 3-6. Photo by Alan Wormington.

The Numbers—Historical

I maintain a spreadsheet that details the annual occurrence of all bird species at Point Pelee, starting with 1979. For the period 1979–2004 inclusive the lowest number of species recorded in a single year was 271 (in both 1984 and 1989) and the highest species total for any one year was 289 (in both 1981 and 2003). Years prior to 1979 might never be tabulated, but it is unlikely that any former year would reveal more than 289 species for the simple reason that the level of birding activity then was not as great as it is today. For this recent 26-year history the high/low difference is thus 18 species. And the average number of species recorded per year is 278, based on totals for these 26 years. For anyone contemplating a Big Year at Point Pelee, this high/low range provides a good indication as to how many species are likely to be recorded in any one year—namely somewhere between 271 and 289 species. Of course, how many of these species one person will see is another matter.

The Numbers—2005

In my weekly report that I sent out on April 20 I made the following statement: “With an average yearly total of 278 species [at Point Pelee], it might be difficult to break my 270 species that I found in 1987. But if 2005 is an above-average year, then perhaps 280 is possible.” Well certainly 2005 was an exceptional year. The total number of species recorded by all observers at Point Pelee was a staggering 301. *It should be noted here that the overall species total includes various documented sightings that have yet to be reviewed and accepted by the Ontario Bird Records Committee (OBRC); however, these records are currently considered valid for the purposes of this compilation.* Of this number I saw 292 species, which is 97% of the total.

During 2005 I reached 250 species on May 29; 260 on July 18; 270 on September 17; 280 on November 7; and 290 on December 20. I have a long-standing tradition of recording the first species I see each year. In 2005 this of course was on January 1, when the first bird seen was a Northern Harrier. Perhaps it is fitting that the last new species for the year (292) was Short-eared Owl on December 21, the nocturnal equivalent of Northern Harrier.

Prior to 2005, as described above, the difference between the highest and lowest years dating back to 1979 was only 18 species—a relatively narrow range. However, with the inclusion of 2005 the high/low range jumps to 30 species, a significant increase of 12.

Significant Observations

It is not possible to list all rarities I saw during 2005 at Point Pelee, since there were so many. But one measure is the number of OBRC Review List species that I encountered. In total I had 27 such sightings, representing 18 different species. The rarest of the rare included Tricolored Heron (June 13), Yellow-crowned Night-Heron



During the fall I was prepared to spend a lot of time at Seacliff in the hopes of intercepting a migrating Swainson's Hawk, but two juvenile birds that appeared on September 17 in the Onion Fields saved me a lot of time. Both remained for several days and I photographed this bird on September 20. Photo by Alan Wormington.

(May 13), Black Vulture (October 9), Ross's Goose (November 28), Swainson's Hawk (September 17), Piping Plover (May 4), Curlew Sandpiper (July 18), California Gull (November 22), White-winged Dove (May 7), Townsend's Solitaire (November 3) and Kirtland's Warbler (May 9).

Three additional OBRC rarities were species that I had never seen at Point Pelee before. One was the famous Neotropic Cormorant at Wheatley Harbour, which was present on May 3-6. The other two were species I discovered myself, which obviously were very exciting moments. One was the female Black-throated Gray Warbler, which was present in the Tip area on April 18-30. The other was a juvenile Northern Gannet, which was feeding offshore at East Beach on November 11.

Other rarities that I saw during the year were Red-necked Grebe (November 3 and December 11), American White Pelican (eight on May 12), Glossy Ibis (May 13), Greater White-fronted Goose (March 9), Eurasian Wigeon (March 17), Barrow's Goldeneye (December 20), Gyrfalcon (March 7), Marbled Godwit (May 7 and August 13), Ruff (June 28), Black-legged Kittiwake (October 11), Western Kingbird (June 5 and October 12), Boreal Chickadee (November 7), Yellow-throated Warbler (May 6), Harris's Sparrow (December 20) and White-winged Crossbill (December 13).

The massive amount of time I spent birding at Point Pelee resulted in multiple sightings of lesser rarities. Looking at these numbers now reinforces just how extraordinary the year really was. A sampling of these include Red-throated Loon (3 sightings/5 birds), Eared Grebe (2 sightings/15 birds), Little Blue Heron (3 sightings/3 birds), American Avocet (3 sightings/17 birds), Purple Sandpiper (3 sightings/3 birds), Red Phalarope (4 sightings/4 birds), Pomarine Jaeger (4 sightings/4 birds), Long-tailed Jaeger (3 sightings/3 birds), Laughing Gull (5

sightings/5 birds), Little Gull (many sightings/38+ birds), Lesser Black-backed Gull (many sightings/91+ birds including 14 on November 11 alone), Sabine's Gull (7 sightings/7 birds), Cave Swallow (6 sightings/28 birds), Le Conte's Sparrow (3 sightings/3 birds), Dickcissel (5 sightings/5 birds) and Brewer's Blackbird (2 sightings/3 birds).

In a different category was the "Richardson's" Merlin on September 18 (only the third Point Pelee record of this prairie subspecies), and an apparent Baird's x Pectoral Sandpiper on August 5 (a previously unreported hybrid).

Peculiar Sightings

Sometimes birds don't appear when they are supposed to, since during the year I encountered some species at unexpected times. Normally one thinks of King Eider as a fall species, but during 2005 the only recorded sightings were individual birds I found in winter (February 5) and spring (April 16). Despite the massive migration of Black-capped Chickadee during the fall, not a single Tufted Titmouse was reported during this season; the only one I did see was a ragged adult at the extreme Tip on July 14, a peculiar sighting indeed. The only Franklin's Gull I recorded during the entire year was a bird in full juvenile plumage on July 27—apparently an unusual plumage to see any distance away from the breeding grounds. Why no others later in the fall?

The Good

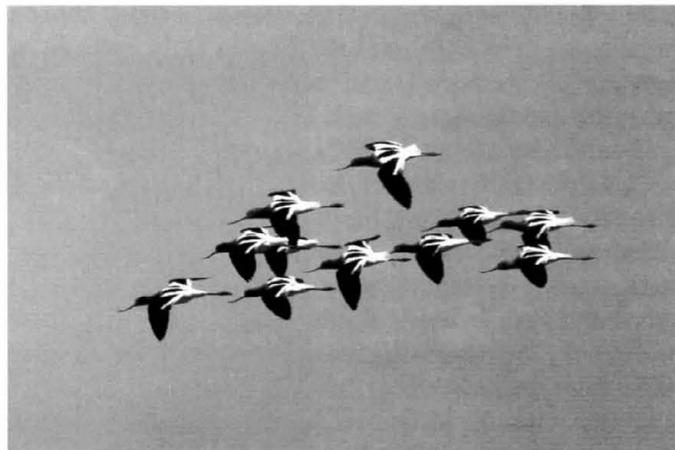
Several aspects contributed to an exceptional year. It was a fabulous year for shorebirds, due to the excellent habitat throughout the spring, summer and fall seasons. I managed to see every species on the Point Pelee checklist with the exception of Wilson's Plover and Sharp-tailed Sandpiper, two mega-rarities that have been recorded here only one time each. It was also an unprecedented year for herons, since for the first time ever all rare species were recorded at Point Pelee with the exception of the extremely rare White-faced Ibis and White Ibis; of these I only missed Snowy Egret. Pelagic species were superb during 2005 at Point Pelee and throughout the Great Lakes Region. An excellent breeding season was undoubtedly the contributing factor for both variety and numbers; jaegers and Sabine's Gull were particularly numerous. At Point Pelee I saw virtually every possible species during 2005, including a very unexpected Northern Gannet.

The Bad

Although many aspects of 2005 were exceptional, there were nonetheless some missing or below average elements. Southern overshoots during spring migration were far fewer than normal, with no reports whatsoever of Mississippi Kite, Chuck-will's-widow or Henslow's Sparrow. Only a single Blue Grosbeak was reported, which I missed; some years there are 3-4 occurrences. Acadian Flycatcher was problematic; despite considerable search-

ing I found but one individual. The southern warblers were dismal. I saw singles only of Worm-eating Warbler and Prothonotary Warbler, and neither was easy. Winter finches continue to be very elusive at Point Pelee, unlike past decades when the usual suspects were recorded annually and often in numbers. Although the month of December can sometimes be a good time of year for extreme rarities, this year virtually nothing of note was found during the month.

The longest period (by far) when not a single new species was added was a 22-day stretch from September 17 to October 9; since this time period is right at the height of fall migration, this statistic certainly seems odd.



During the year I saw American Avocet on three different occasions, totalling 17 birds. This flock of 12 was at Wheatley Harbour on April 28. Photo by Alan Wormington.

And The Ugly (Species Missed)

During 2005 I missed nine species that were recorded by others (301 minus 292 = 9). One of my stated goals for the year was to miss no more than ten species seen by others, so at least in this regard I succeeded. The nine missed species were Snowy Egret (August 22), Harlequin Duck (two May sightings), King Rail (June 14 and October 6), Kentucky Warbler (a below-average of only nine birds, spanning the dates of April 29–May 29), Lark Sparrow (May 16), Blue Grosbeak (May 25), Painted Bunting (May 26), Yellow-headed Blackbird (April 30–May 1 and May 16) and Common Redpoll (January 31). Some of these misses were quite depressing, especially those that I missed by mere minutes (such as the Lark Sparrow). Late in May, I looked intensely for *five* different Kentucky Warblers, without success; I did not expect to miss this species.

Species Not Recorded

Regular species *not* recorded by anyone at Point Pelee during 2005 were surprisingly few, which is perhaps not too unexpected considering the massive list of birds that were found. Of course the term "regular" is difficult to

interpret, but the following somewhat-expected species failed to put in an appearance: Brant, Mississippi Kite, Black-headed Gull, Snowy Owl, Chuck-will's-widow, Henslow's Sparrow and Evening Grosbeak.

Searching, Searching And More Searching

Throughout the year I envisioned a number of exotic bird species that might occur at Point Pelee, so various ideas were put into action. The remnants of several hurricanes approached western Lake Erie, but unfortunately none quite made it here. Nonetheless many hours were spent at the Tip watching for something, but no hurricane birds were seen. All sorts of tropical pelagic birds were found in such places as Tennessee and Kentucky, but it was especially frustrating when reading Internet postings about a Magnificent Frigatebird on Lake Erie in Ohio just east of Cleveland (September 5) and an apparent Lesser Frigatebird at the mouth of the Detroit River only 2-3 miles from the Ontario shore (September 11).

Throughout the summer months I regularly checked Leamington Beach below Seacliff Park, since large numbers of gulls and terns often gather there, especially during or after inclement weather. Unfortunately no Royal Tern, Least Tern or Black Skimmer.

The only Yellow Rail I have ever seen at Point Pelee (1995) was in the marshy meadow beside my house at Sturgeon Creek, so in the fall I checked this site several times but the only interesting sighting was a Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow. Also at Sturgeon Creek I envisioned the appearance of a White Ibis, especially since there had been a minimum of four different individuals in Ohio alone during 2005. But none appeared.

The species that I probably spent more time searching for, but did not find, was Black-headed Gull. I diligently searched innumerable flocks of Bonaparte's Gulls throughout the spring beginning in March, then all of the summering flocks of immatures on a constant basis, then the fall arrival of the big adult flocks that start to arrive in late July, but no luck. There are very few late fall records of Black-headed Gull at Point Pelee, but nonetheless I continued to examine flocks of Bonaparte's Gulls right to the last day of the year to no avail. It seems odd that I did find the species at Point Pelee in both 2004 and 2003.

These are but a few examples of species searched for without success. But there were others, and I spent a tremendous amount of time searching for Harlequin Duck, Snowy Owl, Henslow's Sparrow, Yellow-headed Blackbird and Common Redpoll, to name a few.

Crazy Days

There were many crazy days, but the most hectic was probably May 4, the day after the Neotropic Cormorant was found at Wheatley Harbour. On this day I absolutely had to complete a document to be mailed that day, and after birding the Tip early in the morning I went home to start working on it. But I wasn't home 10 minutes when



During 2005 I spent a tremendous amount of time looking for various gull species at Point Pelee, resulting in many sightings of Lesser Black-backed Gull for a total of at least 91 birds. This near-adult was at Wheatley Harbour on September 24. Photo by Alan Wormington.

the telephone rang indicating that the bird had returned. So off to Wheatley Harbour at the speed-of-light, ending in excellent views of this first Ontario occurrence. I returned home and then the phone rang again. This time it was for a Piping Plover, again at Wheatley Harbour! Ok, back in the car once more. Later in the afternoon I finally got my document delivered to the post office in Wheatley. Then another visit to (you guessed it) Wheatley Harbour; but this time nothing of note, just a few unhappy birders looking around for the missing cormorant.

How Much Time?

My notes indicate that during 2005 I went birding at Point Pelee on a minimum of 274 days. About 14 or so days were lost during the year since I was away and thus not in the Point Pelee Birding Area. January through March were relatively "normal" months, since this was before I decided to do a Big Year. However, once the idea was hatched (sometime in late March or early April) the amount of time I spent birding increased dramatically. During May I obviously birded on most days, either on my own, leading hikes for the park, or leading private tours. During the summer I was contracted by Parks Canada to conduct a formal breeding bird survey of Point Pelee, so during this period I again was birding most days.

When fall migration began, everything changed. Not only is this my favourite time of year, it is also when the potential for new and rare species is very high. There are those who said that I then became obsessed with finding new birds, and it is probable that they were absolutely correct! For example, in November I went birding every single day. October was also a busy month, with only two days missed. During September to November inclusive, a period of 91 days, I birded the Tip area on 73 of these days, almost always starting at sunrise or shortly thereafter. And on those few days when I did not go to this magical spot, it was probably due to unfavourable wind condi-

tions in which case I went elsewhere (such as Seacliff). In late summer some good mudflats developed at the Sturgeon Creek inlet, so starting on July 27 I checked this excellent location for 87 consecutive days (to October 21) with only one or two days missed. Thereafter I continued to check the area often, but not as frequently. Hillman Marsh had excellent shorebird habitat continuously from the middle of May to late August, so during this period I checked the area on a constant basis; rarely did I allow two consecutive days to pass without making a visit.

Despite many days in the field, I rarely went birding for the entire day. Instead I typically spent a portion of the day, often the morning hours, covering areas I thought would be the most productive. Occasionally there were days when I had planned to be out for only a few hours, but ended up spending the whole day birding due to various circumstances (an abundance of birds was the usual justification). How many hours did I spend birding at Point Pelee during 2005? Who knows, but one thing is certain—I spent *way* too much time birding! Other projects I was supposed to be working on either did not get done or were severely postponed.

Spring Versus Fall

One aspect of birding at Point Pelee is the major contrast between spring and fall. I'm not referring to the birds, but rather to the number of birders. Everyone knows that Point Pelee is swarming with birders during May, the height of spring migration. But few realize that in fall there are simply few, if any, birders at Point Pelee on a daily basis! My Big Year reflects this pattern. During May virtually all of the very rare species I saw were found by others. But it was the complete opposite in the fall, when almost all rarities seen were birds I found on my own. Fall migration at Point Pelee is always incredible, and I infinitely prefer this season over spring. I often mention the following to any birder who will listen—just imagine how many rare birds would be found at Point Pelee in the fall if there were over 1000 birders here on a daily basis, like there is in spring. Yet even with few birders, every fall there is always an impressive list of rare species seen; 2005 was no exception.

Putting It Into Perspective

Only once before have I attempted a Big Year at Point Pelee, and that was in 1987 when I recorded 270 species. If in 2005 I had seen only 271 species, the year would

nonetheless have been considered a complete success. After all, that number would have represented a new record. But never once during the early part of 2005 did I imagine it would be possible for me to see over 290 species. And never once did I image that the overall Point Pelee list for 2005 would be in excess of 300 species. Such numbers simply were not conceivable based on the fact that the most species ever recorded in any prior year was 289—and for one person alone to see more than this number in one year just wasn't logical. However, by the middle of the summer it became apparent that 2005 was going to be a year like no other. It is worth repeating here that the number of species recorded at Point Pelee is often considerably less, such as in both 1984 and 1989 when only 271 species were found by all observers.



Seeing a single Laughing Gull per year at Point Pelee is cause for minor celebration, but during 2005 I found *five* different individuals. This first winter bird was at Sturgeon Creek on October 14-23. Photo by Alan Wormington.

I have in my possession a complete set of Point Pelee Bird Checklists, courtesy of William A. Martin who now lives in New Brunswick. One published in 1960 lists 288 species; the following edition (1968) lists 313 species. Thus the number of species recorded in 2005 *alone* (301) is equal to *all* species found at Point Pelee from 1877 (year of the first recorded sightings) to about the year 1964—a span of 87 years! This is a remarkable statistic. It reflects our current knowledge of bird occurrences at Point Pelee, and the level of recent birding activity compared to past decades.

It was an amazing year at Point Pelee, unquestionably the best ever. The driving force behind this year's activities was trying to find as many rare species as possible, but there is much more to consider. On many days I did not see any rare species, but that did not matter since looking at common birds or butterflies, or dragonflies, or whatever was equally rewarding. And throughout the year I continued to keep detailed notes on many aspects of Point Pelee birds including nesting data, late and early migration dates, high counts, etc., for my continuing compilation of a planned *Birds of Point Pelee* publication. Seeing 292 species at Point Pelee in 2005 is indeed a Big Year to remember.

Alan Wormington is one of North America's leading birders. He is an environmental consultant specializing in birds and butterflies. Alan has worked in Ontario, Northwest Territories, Louisiana and the Gulf of Mexico. He also is a spring bird guide for the Friends of Point Pelee. Alan is a founding life member of OFO.

Some Arctic Birds in Ontario for the Winter

Mark Pimlott

When some birds head south for the winter, Ontario is their southern destination on their long migration from north of the tree line, that area we know as the Arctic. These northern breeding birds inhabit southern Ontario during mid-winter, having spent their summers a great deal farther north. Arctic breeders that migrate to southern Ontario include such common 'southern winter birds' as Snow Bunting and Common Redpoll, Lapland Longspur, Rough-legged Hawk and ones seen occasionally such as Gyrfalcon and Hoary Redpoll.

Living as Barb and I do in Nunavut, we are much more aware of the summertime pursuits of some of the birds that we have seen in the south during the winter. The community of Igloolik is a couple of hundred kilometres north of the Arctic Circle, so almost everywhere else in the world is south!

During our long winters in the Eastern Arctic, we see very little birdlife. Here on Igloolik Island we seldom see any bird from about Thanksgiving until Victoria Day, other than that most hardy, intelligent and opportunistic of feathered beasts, the Common Raven. It amazes me that they can survive so far north in the dark and extreme cold of the mid-Arctic and even into the high Arctic. Most other birds migrate to avoid this season.

The wind, snow and cold arrived 10 days earlier in Igloolik last summer than in 2004. We have had snow on the ground continuously since 11 September 2005. "Greater" Snow Geese and Cackling Geese continued passing through in large numbers after that and the ponds and lakes were not frozen over for another 10 days or so. The Lapland Longspurs and Snow Buntings were the last land birds to depart the island in late September when the snow became so deep that there were few locations blown clear enough for them to forage on plants and seeds. There were still Thayer's Gulls around town on Thanksgiving weekend, but they departed soon after as the sea ice began to form.

Only 11 species of birds are capable of living in the Arctic year around and most of those birds cannot find enough food here on this barren, low-lying island during the winter. Of the landbirds, only Gyrfalcon, Rock and Willow Ptarmigans, Snowy Owl and redpolls are hardy enough to survive winters in parts of the Arctic. Of the waterbirds, Ross's and Ivory Gulls, Thick-billed Murre, Dovekie and Black Guillemot survive and actually thrive in winter on northern seas that are permanently ice-free in the Arctic Ocean oases known as *polynyas*, which are kept open by powerful tidal currents.

Most of the 11 species of birds that can survive winter in the far north shift their ranges somewhat south within the Arctic during winter in order to find food more readily

and probably to avoid the prolonged period of darkness.

Even then, not all these relatively few bird species necessarily spend each and every winter in the Arctic. Some of them move south in years when food is in short supply, causing what birders call irruptions of northern birds in more southerly latitudes. When you see good numbers of Snowy Owls in Ontario for example, you can be sure that it is a poor year for lemmings in the Arctic. Because these great white owls normally inhabit the treeless tundra, when they migrate south you often see Snowy Owls hunting rodents, rabbits and birds in open areas such as large pastures and shorelines.

Of those 11 species mentioned only the Gyrfalcon, Snowy Owl and two gulls have their summer breeding ranges almost wholly in the Arctic. The other eight species also breed in temperate latitudes south of the Arctic.

All of the other Arctic bird species of North America (about 100 of them) are migrants. Like Barb and me, they are temporary rather than permanent residents here, although we have stayed almost all winter for a few years.

Arctic migrants arrive in the far north in the late spring or early summer (some from enormous distances) for the short breeding season. Like most of us, they are not adapted to surviving Arctic winters. Much of the food that can be found by resourceful animals in relative abundance during the summer is either dormant or unavailable under the ice and snow in winter. Winter food is scarce or difficult to access in the Arctic, whether you are an eater of plants or of animals.

Most Inuit have adapted to this scarcity of winter food on the land by relying on the richness of the seas. Seal meat and Arctic Char (a close relative of Lake Trout) are local staples of the traditional diet, and walrus and whale meat are consumed with gusto.

Mark Pimlott works for Environment Canada in Igloolik (pop. 1300) which is on a small island in Nunavut between the Melville Peninsula and northwestern Baffin Island. Mark is the son of the late Doug Pimlott, world famous wolf biologist and professor at the University of Toronto, who studied wolves in Algonquin Park and on Baffin Island. Mark and his wife Barb have a southern cottage between Kinmount and Burnt River in central Ontario. They look forward to birding the nearby Carden Alvar this summer after a long winter in the Arctic.

OFO Annual Convention in Ottawa

September 30 & October 1, 2006

Mark your calendars for the 2006 OFO Annual Convention in Ottawa. On Saturday and Sunday, experts will lead groups to the best fall birding hotspots in the Ottawa area. Saturday evening's events include a banquet and keynote speaker from the Canadian Wildlife Service. Watch for registration information with future issues of *Ontario Birds* and *OFO News*.

OBRC Notes

Margaret Bain, OBRC Chair

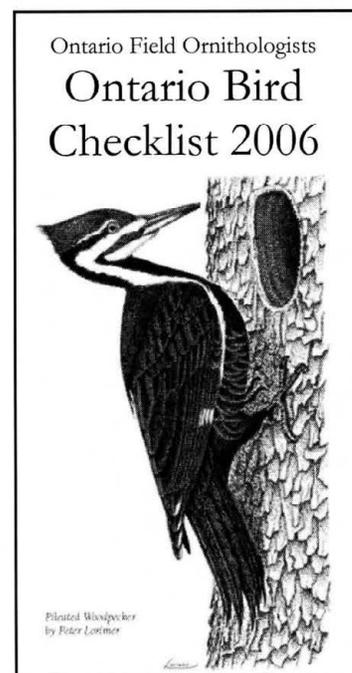
The Ontario Bird Records Committee has had a busy year reviewing well over 100 excellent reports provided by birders across the province, including many OFO members. The committee will hold its annual meeting at the Royal Ontario Museum on Saturday, 25 March to finalize discussion on recirculated reports that have not yet received a clear decision on acceptance. This meeting also usually provides an opportunity for the committee members to view and discuss any specimens of Ontario rarities found in 2005 and housed at the ROM. The 2005 OBRC report will then appear in the August issue of *Ontario Birds*. Not all rarity reports from 2005 were received by the cut-off date of 31 December, so we would urge the procrastinators among you to submit these as soon as possible, for review by the 2006 committee. The current list of bird species requiring documentation to the OBRC may be found at www.ofo.ca/obrc/review.htm

The current OBRC members are Margaret Bain (Chair), Glenn Coady, Bill Crins (Non-voting Secretary), Jean Iron, Colin Jones, Kevin McLaughlin, Mark Peck (Non-voting Museum Liaison), Ian Richards, and Alan Wormington.

Many thanks to committee member Glenn Coady for updating the Ontario Checklist to incorporate recent changes in taxonomic order published by the American Ornithologists' Union. Ongoing work in avian molecular genetics has resulted in a better understanding of the relationships of several bird families and a rearrangement of their order in the Checklist, so don't be too surprised when you now see Black-bellied Whistling-Duck heading the Ontario Checklist instead of the Red-throated Loon we have become used to! The AOU warns that continuing research may result in additional changes, but it appears as if further amendments will be relatively minor, apart from a possible reassignment of the position of the woodpeckers in future Checklists.

OBRC Secretary, Bill Crins, who has done such sterling work taking the OBRC report circulation and voting system into the electronic age, has agreed to stay on for another, but only one, final year, so we have already started looking for his replacement, hoping perhaps that whoever agrees to take on this job might act as Bill's assistant in 2006 before taking over full secretarial duties in 2007. This situation has become more critical because Kayo Roy who has acted as assistant to the OBRC Secretary, politely but persistently following up rarity reports that for various reasons have not been submitted to the OBRC, has announced his retirement too. We do thank Kayo for his very useful role in making the OBRC coverage of provincial rarities so much more complete, and hope that another OFO member will come forward to take over this task.

Again, we would urge finders and observers of rare birds in Ontario to submit a report to the OBRC. Don't always assume that someone else will do this. The committee actually values multiple reports of a particular rarity because they often add up to give more comprehensive and very useful information. Besides, it's good practice for when that mega-rarity pops up in your very own binoculars! Photographs of course can be crucial, and rapid advances in digital photography have vastly increased the number of photographs submitted and the speed with which they can be circulated around the committee. However, a written report, even a brief one, should always accompany a photograph with details to substantiate and elaborate the information supplied by the photo. Online report forms and electronic photographs should be sent by e-mail to obrc@ofo.ca Written forms, drawings, and photographic prints or slides may be mailed to Bill Crins, OBRC Secretary, 170 Middlefield Road, Peterborough ON K9J 8G1.



2006 Ontario Bird Checklist

OFO members receive a complimentary copy of the new 2006 Ontario Bird Checklist with this issue of *OFO News*. The addition of Cackling Goose, split from Canada Goose by the AOU in 2004, and Brewer's Sparrow bring the total species to 477. The total breeding species increased to 289 with the 2004 addition of Black-necked Stilt. New names such as Lesser Sand-Plover replace Mongolian Plover, following the 2004 AOU supplement to *The Check-list of North American Birds*.

The OFO Checklist is a handy reminder of which bird are reportable to the Ontario Bird Records Committee.

The cover and inside illustrations are by Peter Lorimer. Sandra Eadie, Glenn Coady, Chester Gryski, Jean Iron and Judie Shore produced this updated checklist. We thank Swarovski and Kindermann Canada Inc. for their sponsorship.

Additional copies of the checklist cost \$1.50 (includes postage). Ten or more copies cost \$0.80 each plus postage. Please contact Wendy Hunter of OFO Sales:

E-mail: wendy_hntr@yahoo.ca
Phone: 416-964-2853

Atlassing in Polar Bear Provincial Park

Don Sutherland

Between 7 and 21 June 2005, a crew of five veteran atlassers, Gerry Binsfeld and Glenn Coady from the Ontario Field Ornithologists, Mark Peck from the Royal Ontario Museum, and Colin Jones and Don Sutherland from the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resource's (OMNR) Natural Heritage Information Centre in Peterborough, participated in an atlassing expedition to Ontario's Hudson Bay coast. The goal of the trip was to complete basic coverage and point counts and to upgrade breeding evidence for as many species as possible in blocks LA, LB and MB within Polar Bear Provincial Park in the general vicinity of Cape Henrietta Maria. In order to accomplish the task of covering this vast area efficiently and cost effectively, it was arranged that we would be stationed at OMNR's Burntpoint goose research camp located near the Hudson Bay coast, about 85 km ENE of Peawanuck, and to have access to one of OMNR's helicopters.

Arriving in Peawanuck on the Air Creebec flight from Timmins on the afternoon of 7 June, we stowed our gear at the Polar Bear Provincial Park office and set out to explore. All the expected resident species seemed to be in place and singing and it wasn't long before the sharp-eyed nest-finders among us lived up to their reputations with several good finds, including Mark Peck's discovery of the province's third documented nest of Orange-crowned Warbler. The sound of a helicopter just before dinner indicated the return of MNR waterfowl biologist Ken Abraham and Canadian Wildlife Service (CWS) waterfowl biologists Ken Ross and Don Fillman from a day of aerial waterfowl surveys along the coast. Over dinner and into the evening we poured over the maps and formulated our strategy for covering the blocks. Despite some initial worries that the early spring might mean an advanced breeding season, Ken Abraham assured us that the timing was perfect and that most species, including the shorebirds, were still getting started.

We spent the following day, 8 June, shuttling our gear to Burntpoint Camp, erecting the electric perimeter fence and readying the camp buildings for our two-week stay. On 9 June, we awoke to what would become a morning ritual: the clatter of feet on the roof of the bunkhouse followed by the bizarre territorial calls of one of several male Willow Ptarmigan. Any rise in this otherwise flat landscape confers a territorial advantage and the slight elevation of the camp buildings seemed to serve as just such a strategic vantage. Over the course of our two-week stay we witnessed regular territorial chases and displays of these tame and at times comical birds. While awaiting the return of the helicopter, we spent the rest of the day atlassing the 'home' squares, 16FG62 and 72, conducting

point counts, general atlassing and nest searches. Each of us was equipped with an FRS radio and GPS receiver. These two gadgets proved to be indispensable, enabling us to keep in constant contact, reporting our relative locations and interesting discoveries. While exploring the long gravel ridge north of camp late in the afternoon of the 9th, our radios crackled with the report of the first of many interesting discoveries: Colin Jones had discovered a singing male and apparently territorial Northern Wheatear at the end of the ridge. A 'lifer' for several of us, we all hurried to Colin's location and enjoyed close views of this spectacular bird as it delivered its aerial display.

For the next 10 days we travelled to each of the target blocks and squares, interrupted only by occasional bouts of inclement weather. Each day we helicoptered to predetermined locations, dropping a crew of three in one square, with the pilot and two others carrying on to another square. The point counts and general atlassing completed, we would reconvene and move to another appointed square. In so doing, we were able to maximize our coverage of representative habitats. In block LA we covered typical tundra habitat in several squares as well as riparian spruce forest and taiga in others. The helicopter enabled us to survey sites and habitats otherwise inaccessible, such as the extensive lichen-covered palsa plateau, spruce-lichen woodland and quaking muskeg habitats characteristic of sites in the tundra-taiga transition near the Sutton River. Sites visited in block LB between the Sutton and Brant rivers, included wet coastal tundra, dry tundra on abandoned marine beach ridges and riparian willow thickets.

June 15 found us conducting point counts in the area of the large Snow Goose nesting colony near the Brant River. As luck would have it, while waiting for the helicopter to power down and contemplating the daunting task of bashing through chest-high willow thickets for an entire day, Glenn Coady exclaimed "Ross's Goose", then "two of them" and finally "there's a nest"! There, virtually right beside the helicopter, was the first documented nest of Ross's Goose for Ontario! Ross's Goose was known to have been nesting in the province since at least the first atlas, as flightless young were regularly encountered and banded by Snow Goose researchers, and in fact, Ken Abraham had estimated that the provincial breeding population might number several hundred pairs, but to this date no nest had ever been discovered. As we admired and photographed the nest, a flock of 24 Ross's Geese flew over, uttering their nasal grunting calls. The remainder of the day seemed an anticlimax, though there were other good finds including another 'pocket' of Ross's

Geese and a second nest.

Conducting fieldwork anywhere on Ontario's Hudson Bay coast necessitates careful planning, but particularly for block MB. Given its location, surrounded by the cold, often ice-filled waters of Hudson and James bays, Cape Henrietta Maria is frequently enveloped in fog, wind or both. A 260 km roundtrip flight from Burntpoint Camp, it is important to pick just the right day to go. It was all the more remarkable, therefore, that when the crew visited the Cape on 16 June it was a relatively warm, clear and windless day. The pack ice, still tight to shore, could be heard grinding and booming, and the calls of such species as Semipalmated Plover, Semipalmated Sandpiper, Least Sandpiper, Dunlin,



Burntpoint Camp Crew at Cape Henrietta Maria on the Hudson Bay coast, left to right: Colin Jones, Glenn Coady, Mark Peck, Dan Steckly (pilot), Gerry Binsfeld. Photo by Don Sutherland.

and Lapland Longspur seemed to carry forever. In several locations we encountered displaying Common Eider with the males jostling for position and giving their soft, inflective *ooh-aah* calls, and from the air a nesting 'colony' on an island in a small lake, almost certainly the same colony reported to us by Ken Abraham, Ken Ross and Don Fillman. In 17MB11, a partial square and the northernmost in the block, we stopped at the Cape itself. In this barren, rocky landscape there was little in the way of vegetation and few species of birds save for the ubiquitous Savannah Sparrow, a few pairs of Horned Lark, American Pipit and several pairs of Semipalmated Plover. Atop the navigational beacon was a Common Raven nest with large young; the same nest site reported by atlasers David Hussell and Erica Dunn during the first atlas, 20-years previously. On our return to Burntpoint, we made a scheduled stop on Manchuinagush Island, 20 to 25 km west of the Cape. This was the site of Ontario's only nest record of Black Guillemot and despite a search from the air and on the ground, and though the boulder-strewn landscape still looked suitable, no guillemots were seen. Scattered individual Snow Buntings raised our expectations, but alas no convincing evidence of breeding was found.

By 20 June we had completed our mission. We had tallied 471 party-hours atlasing the three target blocks and the two 'home' squares, conducting 319 point counts

and raising the level of breeding evidence for many species. Nest searches resulted in the discovery of 357 nests of 41 species, including Red-throated Loon, Pacific Loon, Ross's Goose, Long-tailed Duck, Merlin, Willow Ptarmigan, Semipalmated Plover, Whimbrel, Hudsonian Godwit, Dunlin, Semipalmated Sandpiper, Red-necked Phalarope, Parasitic Jaeger, Arctic Tern, Orange-crowned Warbler, American Tree Sparrow, White-crowned and Fox Sparrow, Smith's and Lapland Longspur.

On 21 June, Colin and Don made an early morning departure with the helicopter, stopping en route north of the Ekwan River to spend several hours conducting point counts and filling in some gaps in coverage in block LV before heading south for Timmins. Mark, Glenn and Gerry caught the afternoon Air Creebec flight back to Timmins, where we reconvened one last time for a toast to a successful expedition, to Mike Cadman (CWS-Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas) for making the trip happen, to CWS-Ontario Region, OMNR, Ontario Nature and the James L. Baillie Memorial Fund for financial support, to Ken Abraham (OMNR Peterborough) and Lyle Walton (OMNR NE Regional Waterfowl Specialist) for planning and logistical support, to Ken Ross and Don Fillman (CWS-Ontario Region) for assistance in opening up Burntpoint Camp, and finally to Dan Steckly and Mary Ellen Pauli, our MNR helicopter pilots.

Remote Atlassing in Ontario's Boreal Forest

Pete Read

From 2 June to 11 July 2005, Josh Shook and I travelled to remote northern First Nations communities to study the Breeding Bird Atlas squares surrounding each reserve. Working through Ontario Nature (formerly FON), we were funded by the Canadian Boreal Initiative, an organization of companies, interest groups, and First Nations Peoples whose goal is protection of the Boreal Forest. Their mandate is to conserve and develop the boreal areas of Canada in appropriate ways.

Our task was to cover four Atlas blocks in Region 44. Three of them, XU, VU and WU, are part of the Severn River system as it winds north to Hudson Bay. Block CD drains through the Winisk River.

The First Nations people we visited were North Spirit Lake and the North Caribou Lake First Nation; Weagamow Lake, also known as Round Lake, and the Weagamow First Nation; and Summer Beaver at Nibinamik Lake and the Nibinamik First Nations. All were between Latitude 52 and 53, more or less even with James Bay.

There are special concerns when working in the bush of northwestern Ontario. Preparations reflected the difficulties we would encounter. Everything from supplies and equipment for survival and birding had to be organized and transported. Working with First Nations people required respect, cooperation and understanding of protocol. When planning transportation and accommodations, one has to be flexible, shrewd, lucky and have deep pockets.

A challenging task for remote atlassers in the northern woods is to navigate from the relative safety of a waterway through difficult, dense terrain, without trails or landmarks, sometimes for a great distance to get to a desired habitat. We often accomplished this without getting too far off track. In the field we use maps, GPS units, and compasses to find target habitats and their related species, and record data in field books, often with mosquitoes squished on the pages. Later, in the tent out of the reach of the buzzing hordes, we transferred the data to forms.

There are many reasons why sane people don't venture into the bush during bug season. Unfortunately to get the birds, one must brave mosquitoes, blackflies, deerflies, mooseflies, and even no-see-ums. This year the bug season seemed advanced and as a result insects were fairly tolerable. We took precautions with sprays, coverings, and lots of running and swatting.

We used First Nation guides to motor around quickly and complete point counts along the waterways. Sometimes we did clusters of point counts after being put ashore, and the guide came back later. Most guides had some knowledge of where habitats were located, and advised us about inland or remote squares when we were deciding where to out-trip.

Some habitats were easier to traverse and locate than others. It is relatively easy to access squares when a local road, winter road, or trap-line path infiltrates the forest for great distances. Sometimes we used trucks to travel on reserve roads, but usually we walked for many kilometres into squares using these byways.

Not all our accommodations up north were rough. In each reserve, our residences were superb. All had clean rooms, showers, kitchens and even satellite TV.

All Chiefs and Councillors we met were interested in our work and in helping accomplish our tasks. The people of the reserves were friendly and helpful. Some even came to our accommodations to talk to us about birds or ask questions about wildlife. We had good laughs about some common names of birds. The "sky-looker", American Bittern, which has that habit; the "counter of leaves", the vireo for its incessant singing; and the "piss-eater", the crossbills for eating the yellow snow, are examples.

The weather was mainly cool and windy. There were several periods of intense rain or cold fronts banged into summer heat, which caused the water levels to be high and river rapids to be almost at spring flood levels. It dampened our spirits at times, and played havoc with some nesting. The breeding season was affected by the weather. Southern Ontario suffered from cool wet conditions in May, but the northwestern region had very warm conditions, leading to an early thaw, which gave early birds a good jump on nesting. However, by the time we arrived in early June, the conditions changed to cool and wet. It was difficult to squeeze in point counts but we did when the rain stopped briefly, the wind died down, and the birds ventured out. Bird song was affected. Some nests failed, particularly exposed nests, including tern and gull nests on rocky islands. We noted many female ducks that had few if any young. Some early nests we found had cold, dead eggs. Later things progressed well, as the weather was fair, albeit cool and windy. Nestings were more successful and I am sure that there will be more or less normal numbers of young counted amongst the southward migrants.

Later, on 25 June, two Ruddy Turnstones turned up on Weagamow Lake. Were they returning or still northbound? We were in Summer Beaver on 30 June and found Least Sandpiper in the village feeding in puddles and at the sewage lagoons. By 9 July, they were joined by two Short-billed Dowitchers, which is the normal migration period for southbound females. All above birds were in alternate plumage.

Boreal regions used to mean to me an undisturbed expanse of coniferous trees. But the habitats were much more varied. The coniferous areas which varied from up-

land ridges and rocky outcrops to treed bogs gave us Spruce Grouse, Yellow-bellied Flycatcher, Merlin, Hermit Thrush, Boreal Chickadee and Gray Jay. We even got a good number of Black-backed and American Three-toed Woodpeckers. Only once did I get Red Crossbill, but White-winged were more common. We got few Evening Grosbeaks and Purple Finches. Pine Siskins were more widespread and in pairs for the most part.

Richer soils along the rivers and in pockets with aspen and poplar produced Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Broad-winged Hawk and Ovenbirds. Deciduous pockets harboured Least Flycatcher and American Redstart. A few heavily forested areas had Red-tailed Hawk, but in no areas could we find Northern Goshawk.

Many burned areas were regenerating with young deciduous, coniferous or mixed trees. The standing and/or fallen dead trees had many woodpeckers, including three-toeds, but in Summer Beaver, there was an abundance of Northern Flicker. Sometimes we got Fox Sparrow, particularly in burns. Deciduous thickets in disturbed habitats or along waterways held Orange-crowned and Wilson's Warblers, seeming to replace Nashvilles in these habitats.

We found several nesting colonies of Herring Gulls. In one, a Red-necked Grebe had planted its nest, and suffered for it, as a gull egg appeared in it.

On the bogs and treed wetlands, Palm Warblers were common and we found lots of Lincoln's Sparrows and some Connecticut Warblers. Greater and sometimes Lesser Yellowlegs were often at the bogs, and we found some Bonaparte's Gulls. Only one Great Gray Owl and one Northern Hawk Owl were located. In the many beaver ponds we found Solitary Sandpiper, yellowlegs and Olive-sided Flycatcher. Once an American Kestrel was in an old Pileated nest in a snag over a beaver pond.

In marshes associated with wetlands or along a waterway, we found Common Goldeneye, Ring-necked Duck, and a pair of Wood Ducks and a pair of Northern Shovelers. A pair of Green-winged Teal was in a settling pond in the dump at North Spirit and a pair of Blue-winged Teal was at Patwan Lake on the Flanagan River near North Spirit Lake.

Only once did we get a Rusty Blackbird, and only a few times were the cattails encouraging enough for Red-winged Blackbird. I played tapes at many spots, and only got Sora at one marsh. But while doing a Point Count near the Winisk River on a small inland lake with a sedge/grass marsh, I heard a Virginia Rail, pretty far from its



Bonaparte's Gulls (perched on tree top) nest in trees in the Boreal Forest. Photo by Pete Read.

usual range. While we didn't get any response to our tapes, American Bitterns are known to the First Nations People and several wetlands had that bird. In the same marshes, we got Wilson's Snipe and rarely Le Conte's Sparrow. No Sedge Wren were encountered this year.

By far our best wetland was the sewage lagoon at Weagamow. Built on a bog, the centre of each pond is vegetated, making it a duck nursery. Open water rings the central vegetation, and a high gravel berm encloses each cell. We found fledgling Mallards, American Black Ducks, Green-winged Teal, and Buffleheads, a pair of Greater Scaup and Blue-winged Teal, and a male American Wigeon. Many species of

shorebirds use these lagoons including yellowlegs, Solitary and Spotted Sandpipers, and many Swamp and Lincoln's Sparrows were in the vegetated part. Our tapes wouldn't get a rail or bittern, nor were there any blackbirds. The sewage lagoons at Summer Beaver produced many shorebirds and ducks, but it seemed to be just a feeding area. Josh got a Black Tern on one visit and I got two Short-billed Dowitchers on another. Best bird was a female McCowan's Longspur, which will be the first record for Ontario if accepted by the OBRC.

Each reserve had disturbed habitats. At the dumps we looked for Turkey Vultures, but we only saw them at North Spirit. Barn Swallows and European Starlings were in each community, but no other southern species was noted in the villages. Summer Beaver people said they had a Mourning Dove the year before. Airports produced Savannah Sparrow, and in two cases, Clay-colored Sparrow in the disturbed habitats along the runway. The gravel runways almost always had Killdeer.

We recorded about 120 species in the boreal forest between 52 and 53 latitudes. We got acquainted with boreal birds and studied the behaviour of many migrants that I see passing through southern Ontario. Being in the wilderness away from big villages exploring on our own, challenged by adventures, was rewarding. Working with First Nations People was fun. Taking part in this project to help with future planning for sound ecological development of the boreal region is a valuable use of my time despite the risk to my blood supply by little vampires.

I thank the Canadian Boreal Initiative for sponsorship, and the First Nations People, Meegwitch, for helping us fulfil our tasks and being excellent hosts. I thank Ontario Nature and the Breeding Bird Atlas for helping with the project and allowing me to take part in this wonderful, fulfilling life experience.

Two Big Black Birds Going In Different Directions

Common Raven and Turkey Vulture

Mike Cadman and Peter Blancher

Now that birders have had their fun collecting field data for the atlas, the fun can begin for scientists and conservationists. One of the key things those groups want to look at is how species distributions have changed over the past 20 years. This article outlines results from some initial analyses undertaken on behalf of the atlas for a couple of species showing different trends.

Because more effort was put into atlasing during the second atlas (149,000 hours) than during the first atlas (124,000 hours), we couldn't properly make the comparison by simply adding up the number of squares in which each species was reported in each atlas. So, we first selected only "matched" squares that were adequately covered during both atlases, and then used statistical techniques to remove the effect of the difference in effort. Though many of the changes are fairly evident on atlas maps, this analysis sometimes reveals statistically significant changes that might not be apparent from viewing the maps alone.

Common Raven

It's become evident over the course of the atlas that the Common Raven has expanded considerably south and east of the Canadian Shield. A closer examination (Table 1) shows that the percentage of squares in which the raven was found during the second atlas has increased in three of the 4 regions chosen for this analysis, and stayed about the same in the other. But the increase on the Hudson Bay Lowland is not statistically significant and the number of squares is unchanged in the Northern Shield area. The increase in the Southern Shield, though small (6%), is actually statistically significant, as is the larger increase (29%) to the south of the shield. This suggests that rather than a shifting of the whole population to the south, which should have revealed a reduction in squares with ravens further north, the population is increasing in the southern part of its range and expanding its range at

Table 1. Changes in Common Raven between atlases, using squares matched for effort (preliminary data). **Bolded** values are statistically significant.

Common Raven			
Region	1st Atlas	2nd Atlas	Difference
Hudson Bay Lowland	77%	86%	9%
Northern Shield	94%	94%	0%
Southern Shield	86%	91%	6%
South of Shield	12%	41%	29%

the same time.

Atlas data from squares matched for effort tell us that the calculated mean of the Ontario breeding range of the Common Raven during the second atlas has shifted significantly to the south and east. The eastern shift is reflected in the large number of new records in eastern Ontario.

The reasons for the expansion of the Common Raven's range are uncertain. Expansion of the species into areas where forest cover has increased, such as in Grey and Bruce Counties, down the Niagara Escarpment and across the Oak Ridges Moraine (Map 1), suggest one explanation. But the species is found well north of the tree-line across Canada's arctic, so forest cover alone doesn't seem to be enough of an answer. Perhaps the species is still rebounding from the effect of the wolf poisoning and trapping campaigns of the early- to mid-twentieth century, and may be benefiting from less direct human persecution over time. The species is now nesting frequently on silos and other locations that might not have been safe at one point in time.

Maybe by the time of the next atlas, they'll be common again in the Niagara River Gorge as reported by Alexander Wilson (1814).

Turkey Vulture

The Turkey Vulture is another species that is a lot easier to find these days in much of Ontario. The assessment based on squares matched for effort in each atlas (Table 2) shows an increase between atlases in all four regions in which the species was reported, with the larger increases coming in the northern part of the species' range. In the Carolinian Region, where the species was found in 70% of matched squares during the first atlas, there wasn't as much opportunity for expansion in number of squares, though a 6% expansion was still reported. Elsewhere south of the shield, particularly in the southeast (Map 2),

Table 2. Changes in Turkey Vulture between atlases, using squares matched for effort (preliminary data). **Bolded** values are statistically significant.

Turkey Vulture			
Region	1st Atlas	2nd Atlas	Difference
Northern Shield	15%	36%	21%
Southern Shield	54%	72%	18%
South of Shield	65%	79%	14%
Carolinian	70%	76%	6%

there has been a marked expansion of 14% of squares. But on the shield, where it was quite uncommon during the first atlas, the number of squares has expanded the most: 18% more squares on the Southern Shield and 21% on the Northern Shield during the second atlas.

From the map, the whole range appears to have expanded to the north compared to the first atlas. Compare this with a range map in any field guide you own and you can clearly see how the range in Ontario is changing. Analysis of matched squares from the 2 atlases shows a statistically significant shift in mean range to the north and also to the east. Expansion into eastern Ontario fills a gap within existing range.

The reasons for the expansion of the Turkey Vulture are also unclear. Perhaps it's still rebounding from the last ice age which made Ontario inhospitable for Turkey Vultures (and almost everything else). Or perhaps climate change is resulting in better conditions for the species in Ontario or elsewhere in its breeding range. It may be that the continuing expansion of the road system is providing more road-kill, or the increase in the provincial deer population is helping this species (and maybe the Common Raven, too). Peck and James (1983) state that the Turkey Vulture "Breeds on cliffs and rocky outcroppings of shield and escarpment areas as well as in deciduous and mixed woods." Over the past two decades, the species seems to have expanded its selection of nesting location, and is now nesting more frequently in abandoned buildings, small woodlots, and even large hedgerows (P.A. Woodliffe, pers. comm.).

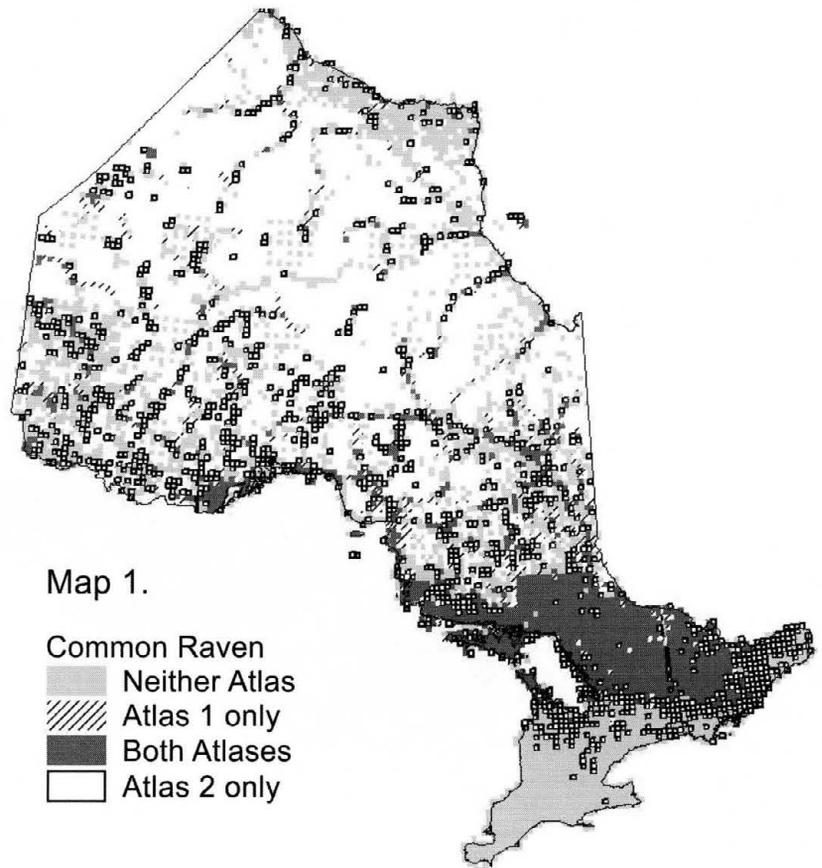
So, in Ontario, while the Common Raven is expanding south, the Turkey Vulture is expanding north, and both species are moving into eastern Ontario.

Analyses such as these, along with colour maps, will be part of the atlas book, due out in the fall of 2007. If there are any particular species you'd like us to deal with in *OFO News*, please let us know.

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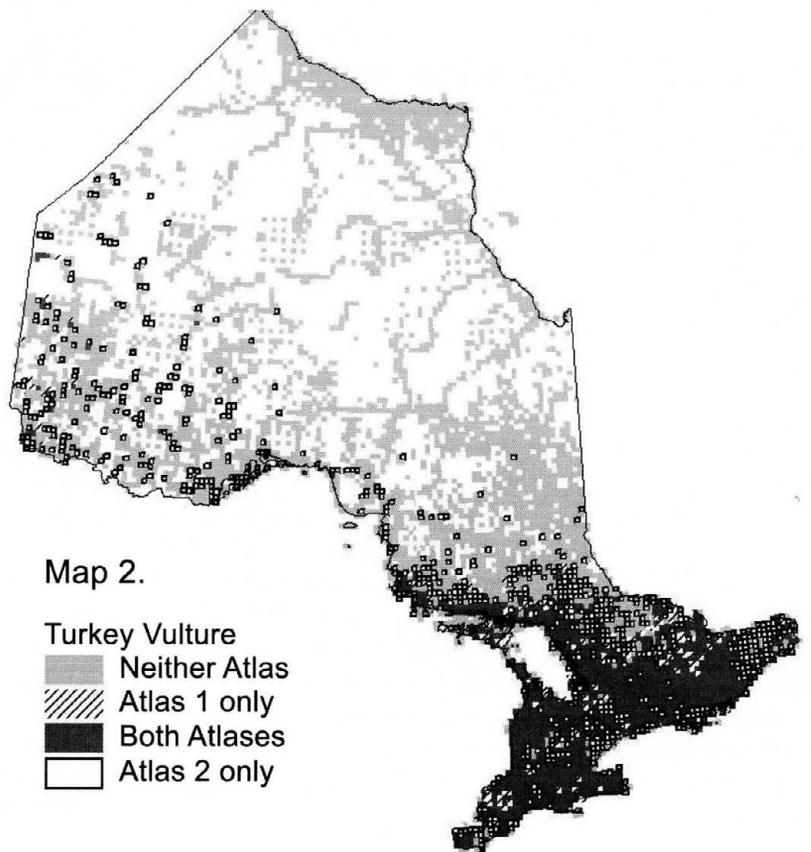
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Map 1.

Common Raven
 ■ Neither Atlas
 ▨ Atlas 1 only
 ■ Both Atlases
 □ Atlas 2 only



Map 2.

Turkey Vulture
 ■ Neither Atlas
 ▨ Atlas 1 only
 ■ Both Atlases
 □ Atlas 2 only

Fossil Gizzard Stones of Passenger Pigeon

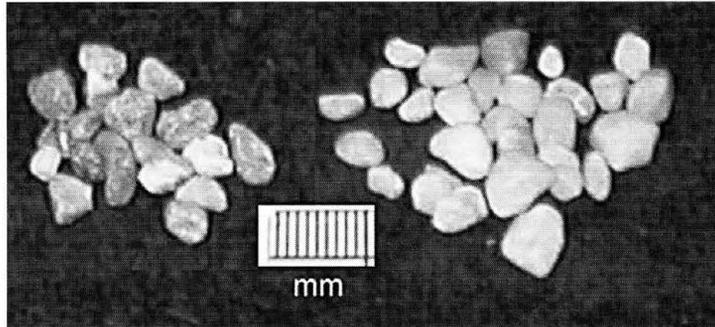
John H. McAndrews and Janet Y. Chau

The now extinct Passenger Pigeon was the most common bird in eastern North America from before colonial time to about 1870; the last bird died in 1914 (Mitchell 1935, Schorger 1973). Most of what remain of these birds apart from paintings and written accounts are museum mounts and stuffed skins; less well known are their fossil bones and gizzard stones. Like other seed-eating birds, they ingested hard stones and held them in their gizzard, the muscular stomach, where they ground seeds into small digestible pieces. Sometimes they ingested limestone pebbles that dissolved to supply calcium for eggshell production. These gizzard stones (a.k.a. grit, gastroliths, stomach stones, crop stones) range from sand to marble-size, which correlate with the size of the bird species, sand for sparrows and marbles for the ostrich (Gionfriddo and Best 1999). We became aware of gizzard stones when, as volunteers, we helped excavate post-glacial peat at the Hiscock paleontology site.

The Hiscock site, a wetland near Buffalo, New York, has long attracted animals because of its saltwater (McAndrews 2003). A lower layer of mastodon dung has yielded ice age bones of condor, caribou, mastodon, peccary, stag-moose, giant beaver, etc. (Laub 2003). In the overlying younger postglacial peat of the last 12,000 years are the bones of deer, elk and Passenger Pigeon together with pebbles presumably gizzard stones from Passenger Pigeon. Bird delivery of these stones to a stagnant-water swamp peat is reasonable because wind, water and people were unlikely to have moved them from the upland. Sure identification was a problem because Passenger Pigeon stones are rarely found.

In southern Ontario, fossil Passenger Pigeon bones are common on archaeological sites that range in age from 4,000 years ago to the 18th century (Sadler and Savage 2003). Of special interest is the Grimsby Neutral Iroquois cemetery dating to the 1640s (Kenyon 1982). Accompanying a burial was a clay pot containing the bones of three Passenger Pigeons and 48 gizzard stones. Here was an opportunity to describe these pigeon stones, their size, weight, color and mineralogy but locating them was a problem.

The artifacts had been divided between the Royal Ontario Museum and the Woodland Cultural Centre on the Six Nations Reserve in Brantford, Ontario. The ROM had the reconstructed soccer ball-sized pot and the rather fragmentary pigeon bones. The stones, curated in the Woodland Cultural Centre, ranged widely in color—white to grey and often with a pinkish cast; most stones were opaque but six were translucent and one was almost transparent. They were 3 to 7 mm in diameter, and weighed an average of 70 milligrams (20 to 200 mg). They were rounded with a smooth but dull surface. All of them were quartz, a common hard mineral that is often colored by mineral impurities. The likely source of these quartz crystalline rock of the Pre-



Passenger Pigeon gizzard stones from the Grimsby Neutral Indian cemetery dating to the 1640s. Photo by Janet Chau.

Cambrian Shield. Pleistocene glaciers transported them southward where they became concentrated on gravel bars of rivers.

The most accessible modern bird for comparison is the Rock Pigeon. It turns out that their gizzard stones are similar but much smaller, perhaps reflecting their crop contents of wheat seeds and corn kernels. The larger stones of the Passenger Pigeon correspond to their diet of the larger acorns, chestnuts and beechnuts.

How did Passenger Pigeon stones come to the elm, ash and maple swamp forest of the Hiscock site; the swamp tree seeds were not edible? Perhaps flocks came to drink the salty water (Mitchell 1935) or maybe they used the swamp forest for colonial nesting (Schorger 1973). Natural mortality would supply bones and release gizzard stones to the accumulating peat. Next year when we again volunteer at the Hiscock site, we will collect these gizzard stones from the peat. If we find not only quartz but also limestone pebbles, then we would conclude that the swamp forest was a nesting site of Passenger Pigeon.

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Fossil Gizzard Stones continued

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Future 2006 OFO Field Trips

Dave Milsom, Coordinator

Phone: 905-857-2235

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Check trip details on the OFO website

www.ofo.ca

March 18 (Saturday) Long Point Area
Leaders: George Pond, Barry Jones, Jim Heslop, Bob Stamp. Meet 9 a.m. at main parking lot of St. Williams Forestry Station on Highway 24 west of intersection with Norfolk County Road 16. Waterfowl, Tundra Swans, Sandhill Cranes, early spring migrants.

April 8-9 (Saturday-Sunday) Gore Bay, Manitoulin Island.

Leader: Steve Hall. Sharp-tailed Grouse lek. Cost: \$20 per person payable at the site. Trip limited to 18 participants. You must register by March 1st. OFO members receive priority. Accommodation at Gordon's Lodge in Gore Bay arranged through Don Barnett. No ferry service to Manitoulin Island in April, so drive via Sudbury. For information and/or to register, contact Don Barnett: phone 416-588-9724, email: dwb126@yahoo.ca

April 22 (Saturday) Algonquin Provincial Park

Leader: Ron Tozer. Meet 9 a.m. at the WEST GATE of the park. Park entrance fee. Spruce Grouse, Black-backed Woodpecker, Gray Jay, Boreal Chickadee.

April 23 (Sunday) Tiny Marsh Provincial Wildlife Area

Leader: Ron Fleming. Meet 8:00 a.m. at commuter parking lot on southwest side of Highways 9 and 400 interchange, or meet 9:00 a.m. at Tiny Marsh Nature Centre. Take County Road 27 north past Elmvale to Simcoe Road 6 and turn left (west). Proceed to 1st Concession Road, Tiny-Flos Townline. Turn left (west) for about 4 km to the Nature Centre. Waterfowl and early spring migrants.

May 6 (Saturday) Rondeau Provincial Park

Leaders: Blake Mann, Larry Cornelis. Meet 8:00 a.m. at the park Visitor Centre. Park entrance fee. Spring migrants.

May 14 (Sunday) Prince Edward Point National Wildlife Area

Leader: Terry Sprague. Meet 7 a.m. at bird sightings board at Ducks Dive Cottages & Charters, just outside entrance to Prince Edward Point National Wildlife Area. From Picton, take County Road 10 (Lake Street at the LCBO) for 8 km to Cherry Valley, turn left at stop sign and follow for 6 km to Milford. At the post

office, turn right and follow County Road 10 to Mariners Park Museum at South Bay. Turn right and follow County Road 13 for 17 km to Prince Edward Point. Spring migrants.

May 27 (Saturday) Opinicon Road Area North of Kingston and Amherst Island

Leader: Bud Rowe, Bruce Ripley. Meet 6:30 a.m. in Denny's Restaurant parking lot next to Days Inn just south on Division Street, Kingston (exit 617 from Hwy 401). In morning, breeding birds north of Kingston: Golden-winged and Cerulean Warblers, Yellow-throated Vireo, Black-billed and Yellow-billed Cuckoos. Afternoon on Amherst Island (ferry fee) for shorebirds and waterbirds.

May 28 (Sunday) Leslie Street Spit, Toronto

Leader: John Carley. Meet 8 a.m. at base of the Spit (Tommy Thompson Park) parking lot near intersection of Leslie Street and Unwin Avenue. Late migrants, breeding birds and butterflies.

June 4 (Sunday) Carden Alvar

Leader: Ron Pittaway. Meet 9 a.m. in Kirkfield in parking lot of Lady Mackenzie School on right side of Kirkfield Road 6 about 1/4 km north of Kawartha Road 48. The trip consists of some driving and comfortable walking. Loggerhead Shrike, Sedge Wren, Upland Sandpiper, Grasshopper and Vesper Sparrows and other grassland specialties.

June 17 (Saturday) Long Point Area

Leader: John Miles. Meet 6 a.m. at main parking lot of St. Williams Forestry Station on County Road 24 west of intersection with County Road 16. Carolinian specialties and breeding warblers, vireos, sparrows, flycatchers, rails.

June 24 (Saturday) and June 25 (Sunday) Bruce Peninsula

Leader: John Miles. On Saturday meet 7 a.m. at Tim Hortons in Hepworth about 12.5 km south of Wiarton on Highway 6. On Sunday meet 7 a.m. in Tobermory Airport parking lot, west of Highway 6 on Warner Bay Road. Brewer's Blackbird, Common Raven, Virginia Rail, Clay-colored Sparrow, Sandhill Crane, Upland Sandpiper, breeding warblers. Also wildflowers and ferns. *Arrange accommodations early.

Art Auction

Wood Ducks by Robert Bateman

The Burlington Art Center (BAC)

18 February 2006

www.burlingtonartcentre.on.ca

Phone 905-632-7796

In September 2006, Bob Curry and the Hamilton Naturalists' Club (HNC) will publish a 600 page authoritative book about the *Birds of Hamilton and surrounding areas*.

HNC member Robert Bateman is donating an original painting of Wood Ducks for the frontispiece of this book. The Burlington Art Center (BAC) will include this painting in its annual art auction in February 2006 with the proceeds coming back to the HNC. Absentee (proxy) bids can be provided ahead of time to the BAC if you will not be able to attend the auction but have always wanted to own a Bateman original!

For more information call Glenn Barrett 905-525-2142.

A portion of globally rare alvar habitat on the Carden Alvar is protected within the 1,116 hectare Cameron Ranch. Alvars are sparsely vegetated limestone bedrock plains with shallow soils.

These individuals and organizations have contributed generously to the designation of the Cameron Ranch as a protected area:

Estate of Roy Clark
 Casino Rama Community Wellness Fund
 The Couchiching Conservancy
 The EJLB Foundation
 Hamilton Naturalist's Club
 The Hamlin Family Fund
 Nancy K. Ironside
 Mountain Equipment Co-op
 The Nature Conservancy of Canada
 Ontario Field Ornithologists
 John and Joan Rosebush
 Dr. John and Mrs. Betty Speakman
 Toronto Ornithological Club
 U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service
 Others wishing to remain anonymous

The Cameron Ranch will be managed in co-operation with a stewardship committee. The assistance of the members is acknowledged with gratitude. They are:

Carden Field Naturalists
 City of Kawartha Lakes Environmental Advisory Committee
 The Couchiching Conservancy
 The Nature Conservancy of Canada
 Ontario Field Ornithologists
 Ontario Ministry of Agriculture and Food
 Ontario Parks, Ministry of Natural Resources
 Toronto Ornithological Club
 Wildlife Preservation of Canada

Due to space limitations, the names of donors who gave up to \$10,000 do not appear here. We sincerely appreciate support at all levels.



Cameron Ranch

Carden Alvar

North America's Largest Protected Alvar

When birding the Carden Alvar visit the new sign commemorating the purchase of the 2869 acre Cameron Ranch. With additions of the adjacent 1600 acre Windmill Ranch and soon to be acquired adjacent 725 acre Prairie Smoke property, these three core purchases total 5194 acres. The Nature Conservancy of Canada's goal is "to create the largest protected alvar area in North America". We encourage OFO members to use the modern precise term "alvar" instead of the general term "plain" to emphasize the global importance of the Carden Alvar.

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Ontbirds

Mark Cranford - Coordinator

Ontbirds with over 1800 subscribers is OFO's successful listserv for reporting and getting bird sightings. *Ontbirds* has revolutionized birding in Ontario.

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