



OFO News

NEWSLETTER OF THE ONTARIO FIELD ORNITHOLOGISTS

Birds and native trees

While birds will land in both native and nonnative tree species, how they interact with these trees is markedly different according to research by Eric Davies at the Faculty of Forestry at University of Toronto.

By Chris Woods



Scarlet Tanager.
Photo by Daniel Cadieux

Eric Davies loves watching birds, but he lives to look at trees. Fortunately, his PhD research at the University of Toronto's Faculty of Forestry allows him to combine these passions. Davies' research focuses on ecological integrity and rewilding North America's urban forests. This has led him to study the relationships between birds (and other fauna—primarily invertebrates) and native and nonnative trees.

Davies' work is informed by the groundbreaking efforts of Doug Tallamy, an entomologist and ecologist at the University of Delaware who has done much to popularize the crucial link that native plants play in the proper functioning of ecosystems and maintenance of biodiversity. In this vein, Davies sought to investigate how native versus nonnative trees might impact biodiversity in an urban setting (Toronto) from 2009 to 2012 under the supervision of Professor Sandy Smith.

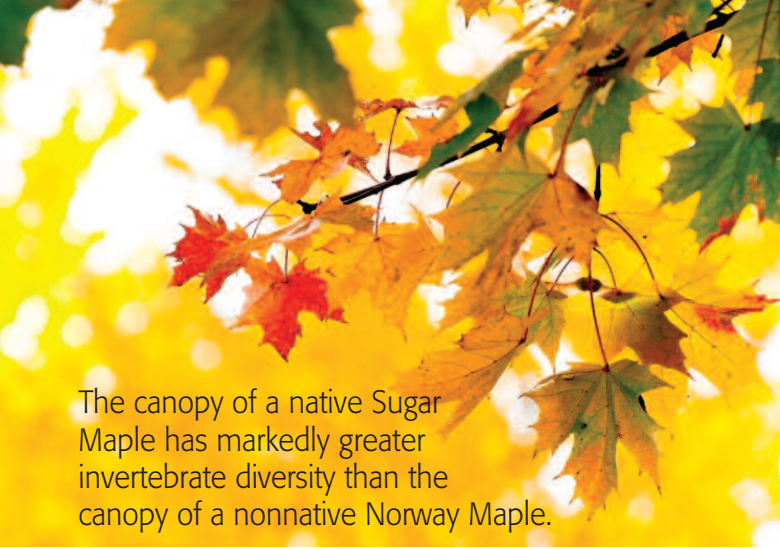
For his study, Davies first selected four native tree species—Silver Maple, Red Oak, White Ash, and American Elm—and four nonnative species—Norway Maple, Manitoba Maple, Scotch Elm, and Tree of Heaven. Several specimens of each are located in the University of Toronto neighborhood, and field work was primarily conducted in sites where native and nonnative trees were adjacent. Alongside the field observations that would be carried out to identify birds in the trees, Davies suspended Malaise traps (a form of insect collecting net) in their canopies, where much of these trees' invertebrate biodiversity can be found. He then checked on these traps once a week.

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The canopy of a native Sugar Maple has markedly greater invertebrate diversity than the canopy of a nonnative Norway Maple.

Davies' hypothesis was that there would be a discernible difference in the diversity of invertebrate species found in native and nonnative trees. The research verified this hypothesis, but the degree of difference was shocking to Davies. While native trees supported a wide array of pollinators, moths, beetles, and other invertebrates, the nonnative trees were virtually devoid of arthropod life in the canopies. Furthermore, there was an obvious absence of bite marks on the leaves of the nonnative trees, suggesting that the leaves were inedible. The inedibility of the leaves of nonnative trees for native invertebrates has been known for centuries and is one of the reasons these trees were planted in the first place. The notion that nonnative trees would be "pest-free" was precisely the point. Unfortunately, the result is actually biodiversity-free trees.

Worrisome sign

To Davies, whose MA research focused on foraging theory, the dearth of biodiversity in the nonnative canopies was a worrisome sign for birds that feast on invertebrates in trees. The field observations of birds, which Davies carried out with a team of expert birders from Southern Ontario, confirmed this. The difference between native and nonnative trees was not in the number of different bird species that visited each tree, but in the length of time that a given bird would remain in a tree. For example, while observing side-by-side Norway and Silver Maples, Davies would see the same birds land in both trees, but in Norway Maples the birds would land and then take off soon after. In Silver Maples the birds would land and then stay to forage for food. Simply put, they stayed longer in the native trees because there was something to eat, and left the nonnative trees because there was not.

Does it matter?

In the first half of twentieth century the pioneering conservationist and ecologist Aldo Leopold, a hero of Davies, pointed out that nonnative plants might interrupt the flow of energy through an ecosystem. Doug Tallamy's work has provided much needed empirical confirmation of this, both in the lab and in the field (in smaller, rural gardens). Davies has now provided further evidence of this, but in old trees in an urban habitat. The upshot is that the current large nonnative component of Toronto's urban

forest (and further invasive increase of nonnatives) has the serious potential to adversely impact migratory bird populations that use Toronto as an important waypoint on their journeys.

Davies is fond of quoting at length a passage of Leopold's from the 1940s decrying the ill-judged, widespread planting of nonnative trees:

The sugar maple is as American as the rail fence or the Kentucky rifle. Generations have been rocked in maple cradles, clothed from maple spinning wheels, and fed with maple-sweetened cakes served on maple tables before maple fires. Yet the demise of the maple forest brings us less regret than the demise of an old tire. Like the shrew who burrows in maple woods, we take our environment for granted while it lasts. Unlike the shrew, we make shift with substitutes. The poorest is the European "Norway maple," a colorless fast-growing tree persistently used by misguided suburbanites to kill lawns. Wisconsin has used Norway maples to shade its capitol. No governor and no citizen has protested this affront to the peace and dignity of the state.

Restore ecological integrity

Davies believes that we have the tools to rewild our urban spaces and thereby restore their ecological integrity (the native composition of species and their interactions, which promotes the healthy functioning of a whole ecosystem). Because trees are the foundation of ecological integrity in Ontario's urban areas, this is where our focus should lie. We should commit ourselves to planting native trees, steadily suppressing nonnative trees, identifying old native trees and subsequently propagating their seeds, and restoring extirpated native species. Birders have already demonstrated that they are excellent candidates to participate in the type of habitat restoration initiatives that Davies seeks to implement in the Toronto ravine network.

Aldo Leopold's land ethic underpins much of Davies' thinking and research. In his 1949 masterpiece, *A Sand County Almanac*, Leopold wrote that, "a thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise." While Davies' work on native and nonnative trees has made significant contributions to bolstering the concepts of ecological integrity and stability, it is the beauty that takes him into the field day in, day out, and he wonders whether that third and final element of Leopold's ethic isn't the most important.

It might be the most difficult to put a number on, but the beauty of the natural world in all its variety and intimate interconnections is that truly invaluable element that sustains birders and naturalists. Davies warns that this beauty itself is under threat because the ceaseless spread of nonnative species is leading to a homogenized landscape of Norway Maple, Dog-strangling Vine, Garlic Mustard, House Sparrows, and maybe not much else. That would be an unattractive, dull world about which nobody who delights in Sugar Maples and Scarlet Tanagers can remain indifferent.

Introducing **canBird**

Do you have an old shoebox full of bird checklists? Want to make a meaningful contribution to our understanding of birds in Canada? Read on!

By Mike Burrell, Dan Riley, Mike Cadman, Jon McCracken, Mark Peck, Jake Walker, Phil Taylor, and Denis Lepage

Since the advent of bird watching and ornithology in North America, observers have been documenting bird sightings in notebooks, journals and checklists. Recent developments in bird listing and data aggregation software have greatly simplified the task of collecting and analyzing vast quantities of data. At the forefront of this is eBird—the online observation and checklist program run by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, with Canadian partner Bird Studies Canada. It allows birders of all skill levels to easily record and track their bird sightings and explore data submitted by other users in real time. eBird has become the go-to database for bird sightings with over 400 million bird observations from around the world recorded as of April 2017.

Launched in 2002, eBird usage has grown at an exponential rate. As a result, close to 85% of the observations recorded in eBird are from the past decade. A recent publication shows correlations between eBird and the North American Breeding Bird Survey, suggesting eBird can be used to analyse and forecast long-term population trends. The inclusion of more historical (pre-1970s) bird observations in eBird will make it possible to provide a clearer understanding of the status of bird populations in Canada from as far back as the late 1800s up to the present day. Other recent publications using eBird are starting to reveal the vast potential of the database for scientific purposes. Public enthusiasm for eBird is at an all-time high and is continuing to gain momentum, making this the ideal time to develop the historical component of the eBird database through a new canBird initiative.

Objectives

The canBird project is a joint initiative of the Canadian Wildlife Service, Bird Studies Canada, Acadia University, the Royal Ontario Museum, the Ontario Ministry of

Natural Resources and Forestry, and most importantly, many dedicated volunteers. As the project grows outside its Ontario roots, more partners will be added.

The aim of canBird is to create an archive of Canadian bird records within the eBird database through a network of dedicated volunteers. The database will be widely used for scientific analysis and will preserve and recognize the contributions of Canada's distinguished field ornithologists. A priority will be placed on sightings made prior to 1970 and from regions deficient in eBird data such as the boreal forest and the Arctic.

There are several canBird objectives.

- Inventorying sources of historical data.
- Developing a volunteer network to facilitate entering historical data into eBird.
- Encouraging Canadian birders to enter their own historical (and recent) observations to eBird.
- Archiving and preserving significant data and records for use by future generations.
- Paying tribute to deceased field ornithologists for their contributions to ornithology in Canada.
- Increasing awareness in the scientific community of the value of these data for ornithological research.
- Promoting public understanding of the importance of historical bird data.

The input of data and subsequent analyses will advance our understanding of bird status, population trends, phenological and

distributional changes over time, and many other aspects of importance to bird conservation. Additionally, the entry of historical checklists into eBird will preserve the information contained in these journals and notebooks, the life's work of many field ornithologists. The eBird database is stored in a secure facility which is archived on a daily basis, guaranteeing the preservation and protection of these valuable data. Through the promotion of canBird it will also be possible to achieve the important goal of spreading awareness of citizen science projects and increasing interest in protecting birds and the natural world.

Volunteers with the project are now entering historical lists donated by birders and many changes have already been documented. Did you know that at one time there was an abundance of Vesper Sparrows in the GTA? The cataloguing of that historic data has also been an early task. To date, we have catalogued an estimated 100,000 checklists from 70 observers back to 1870. The project collaborators are also working on instruction manuals to help guide participants.

Get involved!

Join eBird and start entering your historical (and current) data. If you know of historical bird data—preferably checklists containing a list of birds seen at a specific date and location—please contact Mike Cadman at mike.cadman@canada.ca.

A number of organizations are partnering to get pre-1970 bird records entered into eBird.

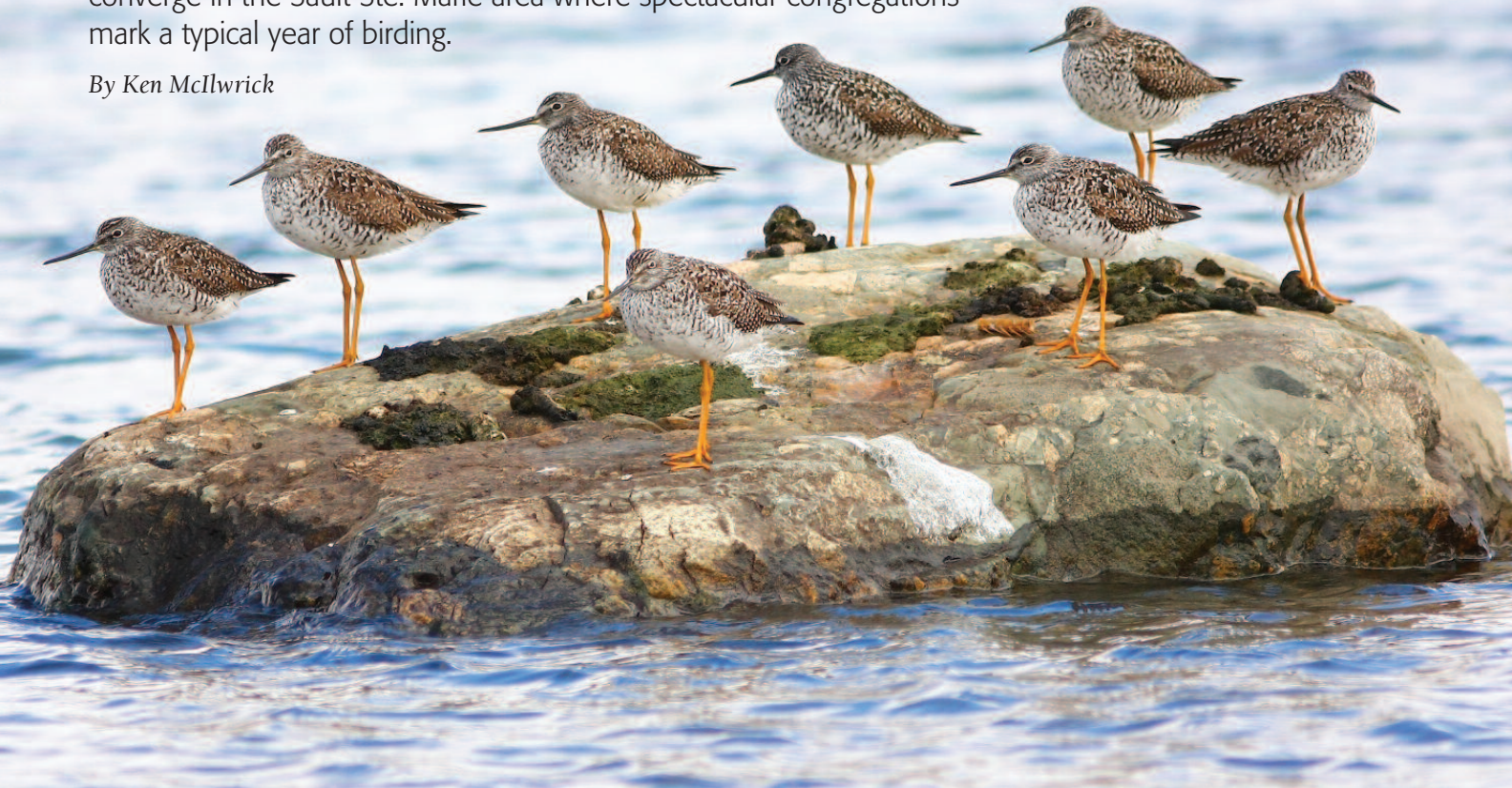
Photo by Paul Nicholson



Birding where the north begins

Two bird migration flyways, two Great Lakes and two forest regions converge in the Sault Ste. Marie area where spectacular congregations mark a typical year of birding.

By Ken McIlwrick



Large congregations of shorebirds like these Greater Yellowlegs create excitement for birders during migration.

Photo by Ken McIlwrick

If you have ever spent a day birding along the north shore of Lake Huron, the St. Marys River, or the eastern shore of Lake Superior, then chances are you were one of only a few individuals taking in the diverse birdlife that this special area has to offer. For those who have never been to this part of the Algoma District (from Spanish north to Wawa) where the northern waters meet the southern waters, or have never been off the main highway while passing through, do not feel alone—you are the majority. Situated between the Mississippi and Atlantic migratory flyways, this transitional area between the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence and Boreal Forest regions has diverse landscapes, ever changing shorelines, unique water bodies, and dramatic weather events. More than just a birding destination, this area is also a special place for wildlife photographers and wildlife-recording buffs, as there is always something new and exciting to discover.

Lake Huron's north shore from Spanish west to the mouth of the St. Marys River

Those heading west to Sault Ste. Marie, the largest urban centre in the region, can start their birding adventure along the north shore of Lake Huron near the community of Spanish by catching a songbird fall-out, a raptor kettle, or a waterbird spectacle. After entering into the Algoma District, you can visit Spanish marina and lagoons, Serpent River Harbour, Blind River waterfront, Mississagi River, Thesselon waterfront and lagoons, and Bruce Mines waterfront and lagoons. As you continue westward, the mouth of the St. Marys River and the north-west corner of Lake Huron meet. The lands in this region (Desbarats, St. Joseph Island, Laird, Neebish, Bar River, and Echo Bay) are more open in character with a mix of agricultural fields, old fields, wetlands, watercourses, woodlands, and forest. During spring and fall migration, many thousands of Sandhill Cranes, geese and ducks;

myriad swans; and many shorebirds and waders make good use of the wet, low-lying open areas. Sites that are not so wet invite Horned Larks, Lapland Longspurs, Bobolinks, Eastern Bluebirds, meadowlarks, swallows, and sparrows. These open areas are also great places to watch thousands of pipits fall out of the sky during autumn migration or large flocks of Snow Buntings foraging on windblown seeds and grit during cold winter days. Throughout the year, all of these open areas are also great hunting areas for raptors.

Wetlands in and around the St. Marys River Important Bird and Biodiversity Area (IBA)

Even though the woodlands in this area are very productive for songbirds, these habitats often get overlooked as most attention is given to the coastal wetland habitats that exist along the St. Marys River. Well known wetlands include Milford Haven,

Hay Marsh, Desbarats Marsh, Pumpkin Point Marsh, Goertimus Island, Lake George Coastal Wetland, Echo Bay Marsh, and Little Lake George Coastal Wetland. Some of these wetlands are part of the St. Marys River IBA, but all of them support many bird species, including species at risk or species of special concern such as King Rail, Yellow Rail, Black Tern, Chimney Swift, Eastern Whip-poor-will, Common Nighthawk, and Rusty Blackbird. The two most notable and frequently visited wetland areas in this group are Pumpkin Point Marsh (201 species) and Echo Bay Marsh (216 species). Imagine the possibility of listening to eight Pied-billed Grebes, six Soras, four Wilson's Snipes, two American Bitterns, and a Virginia Rail all calling simultaneously, while viewing 1,000 Canada Geese, 500 Ring-necked Ducks, 400 scaup, 350 Mallards, 300 Sandhill Cranes, 250 Hooded Mergansers, 200 Buffleheads, 150 Tundra Swans, and 100 Rusty Blackbirds. Now, add on top of that 40 additional species. That could be a one-hour morning visit to Echo Bay Marsh in late April.

Whitefish Island off Sault Ste. Marie

Eventually, the St. Marys River becomes a single channel along the Sault Ste. Marie waterfront and the current becomes more and more noticeable. Whitefish Island exists along the rapids, and is the most birded locale in the area. It boasts a list of 232 bird species despite its small size and urban setting, and has many well-defined trails to explore. For the more adventurous wishing to get a better view of a Harlequin Duck in the rapids or a Gyrfalcon feeding on a Common Goldeneye on the ice, a pair of insulated rubber boots or snowshoes may be helpful. Whitefish Island can abound with birds in the spring, but during those dreary cold days in January and February it often becomes a ghost town, unless of course it is a Bohemian Waxwing winter. This past winter was one of those, and over 2,500 waxwings hung around feeding on every single fruit and berry bush they could find.

Sault Ste. Marie and area

For those looking for other parkland and natural areas within or close to the Sault to bird, areas like Algoma University Woodlot, Bellevue Park, Sault College Woodlot,



The winter of 2016-17 was a good one for large flocks of Bohemian Waxwings in the Sault. *Photo by Ken McIlwrick*

Hiawatha Forest, Fort Creek Conservation Area, Marks Bay Conservation Area, Point des Chenes, Shore Ridges Conservation Area, and Gros Cap are good choices. The Belleview Park area is a great place to observe many hundreds of raptors. Kettles of raptors build and cross at this location as it is a narrow crossing of the St. Marys River. Gros Cap is the source or headwater of the St. Marys River and is by far the best place to watch loon, grebe, scoter and Long-tailed Duck migration. On a good morning, many hundreds of loons can be observed at the end of the St. Marys River corridor. If gulls are your thing, then a trip to the local landfill may be productive if permission is granted by the manager. If you time it right you might see several thousand gulls, thousands of European Starlings, as well as Common Ravens, American Crows, and Bald Eagles here. Another bird spectacle one must observe in town is the gathering of over 2,000 Chimney Swifts in one chimney during the month of May. The two chimneys of choice are the courthouse chimney and the post office building chimney. Watching this many swifts funnel and swirl into a chimney in less than three minutes is a memory to hold onto.

Northward along Highway 17 to the southern edge of the Boreal Forest region

For those hoping to see species with a northern affinity like Evening Grosbeak, Pine Grosbeak, White-winged Crossbill, Black-backed Woodpecker, Boreal Chickadee, Gray Jay, or Spruce Grouse, then a trip north on Hwy 17 may be in order. Places like Goulais River, Searchmount, Haviland Bay, Batchewana Bay, Pancake Bay, Montreal River, Lake Superior Provincial Park, Michipicoten, and Wawa can often be productive. Every one of these areas is also a fantastic place to observe warblers on territory or during migration. About 20 species of warblers commonly breed in the area. If you are driving either north along Highway 17 or Highway 129 in the fall, you could encounter 100s to 1000s of American Pipits migrating south along these open transportation corridors, and it actually may be difficult to avoid hitting some of them. For those who make it all the way to Wawa, there is an added bonus of four lagoons near town and a view of the beautiful Michipicoten River. Those who came to see the Crested Caracara within the Town of Michipicoten in late 2016 would have had a great opportunity to spend some time along these river banks.

Neotropical migrants behave differently on their wintering grounds

By Geoff Carpentier



Millions of passerines abandon Canada each fall to spend the winter in various locations in Central and South America. Work by researchers such as Bridget Stutchbury have shed light on where these birds are going and what routes they follow when they migrate to and from North America. But what about their behaviours when down there?

I had the opportunity to travel to Cuba, Guatemala, Colombia and Belize during the past two winters where I spent considerable time studying passerines, both resident and migratory.

It struck me that the wood warblers and various other species behaved somewhat differently when down there than when in Canada. My observations were anecdotal and not part of a structured study so firm conclusions are difficult to draw, but these sightings are interesting nonetheless.

Vocalizations

While birdsong is expectedly minimal on the wintering grounds, the occasional outburst of song would be expected as the season progresses and the urge to migrate

On their wintering grounds, neotropical birds such as this Yellow-throated Warbler will frequently land just a metre away from people.

Photo by Geoff Carpentier

approaches. Of the 29 species of North American wood warblers seen on the trips, none sang even a hint of a spring song while I was there. This was a bit surprising as part of the trip extended into late February and as the days lengthen, the urge to migrate north strengthens. In fact, very few birds made any vocalizations at all, even when they appeared disturbed. The Common Yellowthroat, American Redstart, and Louisiana Waterthrushes vocalized when threatened and only the Northern Waterthrush vocalized regularly whether threatened or not. Other species noted on my trips including Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Baltimore Oriole, and Orchard Orioles were essentially silent at all times. The Gray Catbird occasionally let out a *mewing* call in the early dawn. Only once did I hear the Wood Thrush give its *bup-bup-bup* call in response to an unseen predator.

Behaviours

The birds seemed unafraid of guests along all the routes I travelled. In fact, it was not uncommon to be chatting on a deck and having several species of wood warblers working the deck and gardens for insects one or two metres away. On several occasions, I was standing on a deck and had warblers move near me in the bushes or on the rail less than a half metre away. Not even dogs deterred them. Only if one approached the birds directly did they fly off, but they returned moments later. Species such as Palm Warbler and Northern Parula fed in close proximity to people in every country I visited.

Rarely did I see foraging warblers above eye level in settled areas. Around resorts, Prairie Warblers and others often fed at or near ground level. In Colombia, the most common species seen foraging low to mid-canopy in or near gardens was the Tennessee Warbler. In many cases these birds frequently worked the grounds and pool areas at resorts searching for food. It was not uncommon to see a Yellow-throated, Black-throated Blue, or Palm Warbler standing on a table looking for insects. That said, some species such as Common Yellowthroat, Black-and-white Warbler, Swainson's Warbler, and Canada Warbler were never seen feeding on human structures and seemed to favour typical habitats for foraging.

Birds tended not to flock. Instead, I would observe them converging as food became available. One observation involved six species feeding in the same manner and in the same place on apparently the same food. There was no competition noted. Nearby both waterthrushes fed but didn't interact with the others or each other.

One observation occurred in Belize and did however involve a mixed flock of more than 60 orioles. They were seen on multiple days, moving and foraging together. They rapidly moved from tree to tree,

stopping only briefly to grab an insect and then move on. The Orchard Orioles seemed to be silently leading the Baltimore and Black-cowled Orioles to the forest patches where they fed.

Habitat preferences

While most species observed appeared to be oblivious to whether or not they were in habitats similar to their normal nesting habitat, they did have preferred locations where they fed daily. Both waterthrushes were rarely in deep cover and generally were on open heavily-shaded grounds. The Louisiana Waterthrush in particular seemed to favour bare gardens near heavy cover. Both species would flee to deep cover when annoyed or threatened but quickly returned. Yellow Warblers were only occasionally observed in wet habitats and often seemed to feed in quite dry places. Hooded Warblers were almost always seen at ground level to mid-canopy in damp to wet or flooded woods, more typical of what I'd consider suitable habitat for waterthrushes. However, they and Wilson's Warblers also frequently visited small manicured gardens near homes.

The winter behaviours of neotropical migrants appear to be different when one looks at feeding locations, response to disturbance, tolerance of people, vocalizations and habitat choices in many species. This could be partially explained when one considers that feeding opportunities are different in neotropical areas and the pressures of nesting and territoriality are removed, but assuredly it is a complex shift in behaviour that warrants formal study. These observations might also cause us to think more broadly about what causes a bird to behave the way it does. As we observe bird behaviour in Ontario, what are the specific factors in the temperate migration and breeding grounds that affect the behaviour here?

Young Birders

Birding when you're not "birding"

Sometimes we decide to go birding, and sometimes the birds decide for us.

By *Baxter Naday*

On a rainy September day last year while I was in the middle of writing a math test, a Bay-breasted Warbler appeared at the window I was facing. I was so delighted that I just happened to see this soggy little warbler that I stood up and told the math teacher about my sighting. He promptly told me, "I think it's better if you sit somewhere else", so I did, in front of another window, where I unfortunately could not spot any other soggy birds in the trees. That momentary sighting of something that I could spot fairly easily elsewhere during migration made that day a good one. Having these little birding breaks when stuck in places we do not particularly enjoy being can make these times bearable, and sometimes even fun.

I live in Toronto where there are a good number of natural spaces for birding; however, one can't be in these prime locations all the time because of work or, for me, school. When I cannot escape to a better habitat, I might take some time out of my lunch break to scour the school grounds for any possible bird life. So far at school, I have been able to turn up 49 species. With some, I had gone looking for them—such as looking up over the playing field for Broad-winged Hawks, Bald Eagles, and other migrating birds of prey during fall migration—while others, like that Bay-breasted Warbler, were incidentals.

Two years ago, another surprising bird encounter in the city made a typical weekday interesting, even though the story is a bit sad. On a late October morning, I was coming out of the garage and was about to ride my bike to school, when I nearly stumbled over an American Woodcock.



Finding this American Woodcock made a regular bike ride to school a special experience.

Photo by Pierre Naday

It was lying on the ground in a concrete, garbage-ridden alleyway, still alive. I figure it had hit a wire, building, or windshield. Unfortunately, there was no saving the poor bird as its neck seemed broken. All of this made me very late for school that morning, but fortunately my English teacher was understanding enough, especially after I had shown him my photographic evidence. Despite the bird's death, this event still makes me think about all the birds that must go overhead or near my little house crammed into this very urban part of Toronto.

When homework and general laziness prevent me from getting out for a couple hours at a time, I still try to take quick breaks in the local neighbourhood dog-walking park, with binoculars or at least a monocular in hand, especially during the migratory seasons. It's not a very appealing spot to go birding at all; it lacks many trees, and there's an abandoned warehouse beside a set of busy railroad tracks. Nonetheless, every time I go I say, "hey, you never know," and it is always a reliable spot for a melodious Northern Mockingbird.

Even when we don't have access to a birding hotspot or much time in our busy schedules, it is still worth it to take short birding breaks. Sometimes they are planned and sometimes they just happen when an unexpected sighting happens. Either way, they are always worth it, even if we do get a few strange looks from time to time.

One-in-a-million banding milestone

A point of reflection for Ontario's bird observatories

By Stu Mackenzie, *Bird Studies Canada*



Established in 1960, the Long Point Bird Observatory is the western hemisphere's oldest bird observatory.

Old Cut Field Station. Photo by Paul Nicholson

Ontario birders are blessed to have a bounty of bird observatories all across the province that provide a variety of experiences, places, and birds to discover. For those not familiar with bird observatories, they are institutions that support observation-based science primarily for the benefit of bird conservation. The intent of bird observatories around the world can be boiled down to assessing the needs of birds, using that assessment to educate a variety of different audiences, and ultimately supporting wildlife and wildlife habitat conservation. We can't conserve what we don't understand, so compiling long-term consistent data sets on bird life tends to be a common objective among observatories. Sometimes they'll take on other labels for one reason or another, such as Tommy Thompson Park Bird Research Station in Toronto and Hilliardton Marsh Research and Education Centre in Temiskaming, but for all intents and purposes, they're bird observatories.

Collaboration

Bird observatories tend to be located at strategic concentration points of migrating birds. Data from each of the locations are valuable, especially regarding the local

needs of the birds moving through them. With the advent of new technologies and the pressing need to address the impacts of climate change and development, bird observatories are seeing greater value in collaborative research on all aspects of avian ecology. By bridging the gaps, sites are able to work together in asking and answering bigger questions. This fall, collaboration will be a key theme as bird observatories around the world flock together at Cape May, New Jersey, for an international bird observatory conference.

While bird observatory activities and purposes vary somewhat from site to site, the primary project of many Canadian observatories is some form of migration monitoring which combines standardized counts and bird banding to estimate population trends of migratory species. Close to 30 observatories across Canada collect these data that are made available through the website of the Canadian Migration Monitoring Network.

Band recoveries provide important information on migration routes and winter and breeding origins. Other important metrics from banding and recaptures allow us to estimate birds' "fuel deposition rates" and stopover duration. These data

can be extremely valuable when paired with more advanced tracking methods such as stable isotopes, geolocators, GPS, and radio telemetry such as the Motus Wildlife Tracking System.

Most observatories actively promote education and are open to the public. Some however are in remote locations and take considerable effort to visit. Thunder Cape Bird Observatory in Sleeping Giant Provincial Park near Thunder Bay, and Long Point Bird Observatory's remote research stations are examples. Even these locations aren't totally inaccessible to Ontario birders and are certainly worth the time and effort required for a visit.

One million banded birds at LPBO

Established in 1960, LPBO is the western hemisphere's oldest bird observatory. It has been a model for the development of many observatories in Canada and it led to the creation of Bird Studies Canada. After nearly 60 years of research, training, and education, LPBO passes an incredible milestone this spring with its one millionth banded bird.

All of Ontario's bird observatories are non-profit charities dedicated to advancing knowledge and conservation of the province's birds. For more information, visit the Ontario Bird Banding Association website at ontbanding.org or go to birds.canada.org/volunteer/cmmn/.

And if you haven't yet visited a banding station, visit LPBO or any bird banding station near you, and support your local bird observatory.

EDITORS' NOTE: LPBO banded its one millionth bird, a female Tennessee Warbler, on May 29. Congratulations to the LPBO and Bird Studies Canada!

Anticipating September birds at Long Point

By Ron Ridout



September birding at Long Point is excellent for embracing the challenge and beauty of “confusing fall warblers” such as this Blackpoll Warbler.

Photo by Mich MacDougall

The two provincial park locations, the “old” and the “new” as they are known, rank highly as destinations for the same reasons as Old Cut. A walk through the new park slowly checking the pine groves all the way to the far eastern end of the campground can take up to two hours. The old park is much smaller and can be checked in less than an hour. Both parks allow access to the south shore to scan the open lake. Days with strong southwest winds will stir the lake up causing waterfowl and gulls to move west into the gale. If a hurricane is involved, the possibility of a storm-tossed waif adds excitement.

Hastings Drive is a good choice on many days. Its two kilometre stretch along the lakeshore provides numerous lake views and the Cottonwood-lined beach strip regularly concentrates migrants.

Late in September as waterfowl arrive, Long Point Bay can be viewed from the end of Rogers Ave. and the Inner Bay viewing stand on the point, or the Bird Studies Canada’s headquarters viewpoint or Lion’s Park in Port Rowan.

Fall hawk watching in the area warrants a mention. An observer watching from shoreline locations such as the Coves in late September can tally hundreds of accipiters and numerous falcons moving west off the point. Broad-winged migrations can approach ten thousand birds on a northwest breeze around mid-month. The trick is to move one to two kilometres inland looking for the “stream” of birds moving west across County Rd. 23.

If you haven’t done some fall birding in the Long Point area, you should put a circle around the OFO Convention dates. And if you have seen our September birds, you already know how rewarding they can be.

*Ron Ridout is the author of **A Birding Guide to the Long Point Area**, which is available at LPBO’s Old Cut Field Station.*

Tip of Long Point. Photo by Stu MacKenzie

Southern Ontario birders gravitate to Long Point on the north shore of Lake Erie in spring. The experience of colourful returning migrants after a long dreary winter draws birders like moths to a flame. Yet, move the calendar ahead a few months, and far fewer of us are as interested as these same birds begin to make the trip south to their wintering grounds. Despite numbers of birds that can be several times higher, some find that drab fall plumages or the lush foliage make the birding experience too daunting.

In spite of these challenges, September at Long Point is one of my favourite times of year. Early in the month, large numbers of flycatchers, vireos, and warblers move through the woodlots on the lakeshore and point. Mid-month brings the thrushes and first numbers of hawks such as Broad-winged and Sharp-shinned. Towards the end of the month, large numbers of sparrows appear along with the first flush of returning waterfowl. With the month’s all-time species total standing at 294, there is rarely a day without some action.

Unlike some other Lake Erie hot spots, Long Point is not a one-stop birding destination. A successful day’s birding in the area involves visiting a number of locations and habitats based on the knowledge of what can be expected where and when. Hence the need for *A Birding Guide to the Long Point Area*.

Birding the area in September is quite different than in the spring. The inland

woodlots and fields don’t hold the same attraction they do in the spring. South-bound migrants are concentrated on the shore of Lake Erie. With this knowledge, visiting birders are advised to focus their efforts on the point and a few shoreline locations.

Long Point Bird Observatory’s Old Cut Field Station is without doubt the premier destination for birders. The tiny woodlot regularly draws masses of migrants like no other similar location on the point. A visit early in the morning offers a good indication of the size of the previous night’s migration and the sightings board can be checked for recent action in the area. A search of the dense pine and spruce stand may require several passes to reveal all of its possibilities since there is often a constant turnover as the day goes on. Scanning the wetlands and park to the east from the observation platform on the dyke can be very rewarding when multitudes of birds reluctant to cross Lake Erie move west off the point.



Product Review

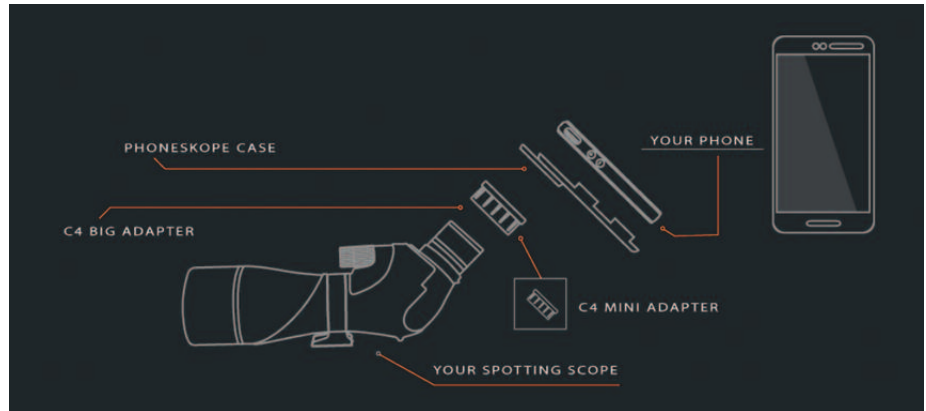
PhoneSkope smartphone adapters

By Mike Burrell

If you're like me, you've tried to awkwardly hold your phone in front of your scope with one hand while steadying and focusing the scope with your other hand and pushing the shutter button on your phone with your other hand. Yes, you need three hands!

If you want a sturdy, simple-to-use adaptor for your phone and scope, check out PhoneSkope. Their adapters hold your phone in place perfectly so you can capture great photos or share your scope's view with others through your phone's screen.

On the phoneskope.com website, you select the custom case for your phone model. The case is a simple hard plastic case that includes a locking ring on the back. You then select your scope or binocular model to specify the size of adapter that will fit snugly around your optic's eyepiece. There are also two "universal" adapters available.



The PhoneSkope system is a phone case and optic adaptor that lock your phone in place on the eyepiece, turning your scope into a super telephoto lens for your phone's camera.

Pros and cons

The system is incredibly easy to use. I leave the case on my phone and the adaptor on my scope and can click my phone onto my scope in a matter of seconds. (The universal adaptor isn't as quick to use since you have to tighten it each time.) With an additional Bluetooth shutter release button paired to your phone you can stand back and watch your phone and snap photos whenever you want. Since the system is interchangeable, anyone with a PhoneSkope phone case can use anyone else's PhoneSkope optical adaptor.

Some people will not like the phone case since it has to replace any other case you already have on your phone, and with the locking ring it is fairly bulky. Some people may also balk at the price. The cases go for approximately \$45 USD and the optic adaptor for \$28 USD—universal adaptors are \$40 USD—so you are looking at about \$100 for the whole system. Furthermore, you will need new hardware whenever you upgrade your phone or scope.

All in all, a PhoneSkope kit is a great addition to every keen birder's arsenal.



Dan Strickland is well known throughout North America for his ongoing research on Gray Jays at Algonquin Park where he is the retired Chief Park Naturalist. Alongside Ryan Norris and David Bird, Dan is working to have the name "Canada Jay" restored for this iconic species.

OFO's most prestigious honour, The Distinguished Ornithologist Award, is given to individuals who have outstanding and authoritative contributions to the scientific study of birds in Ontario and Canada, who have been a resource to OFO and the Ontario birding community, and whose research on birds has resulted in new ornithological knowledge. A full article about Dan will appear in the December issue of *Ontario Birds*.

OFO's Distinguished Ornithologist Award

Dan Strickland will receive this year's Distinguished Ornithologist Award at the OFO Convention in Port Rowan this September

OFO's Annual Convention 2017

Meet Dan and learn more about his achievements at the OFO Annual Convention from Friday, 22 to Sunday, 24 September in Port Rowan. It will be an exciting weekend of birding in the Long Point area, which currently has a checklist of 400 species.

To register: <http://www.ofo.ca/site/page/view/convention.programs>

Book Review

By Bob Curry

HBW and BirdLife International Illustrated Checklist of the Birds of the World, Volume 2, Passerines (2016),

Editors Josep del Hoyo and Nigel J. Collar. Lynx Edicions, Barcelona. 1,013 pages. Hardcover. 225 Euros. ISBN-13: 9788496553989

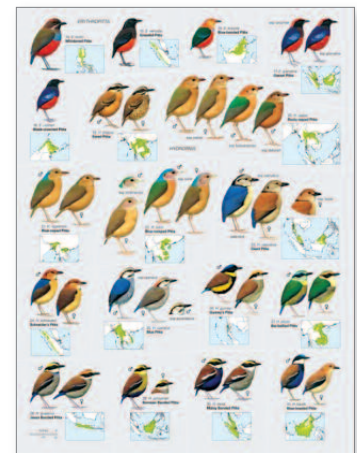
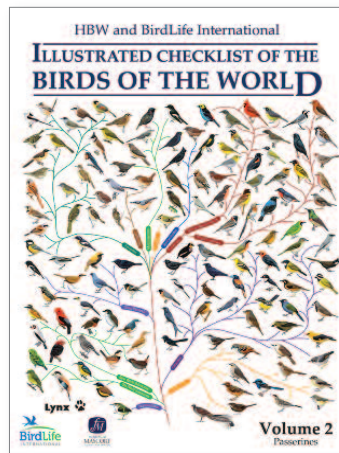
In 2015 I reviewed the first volume (Non-passerines) of this two-volume set (*OFO News*, Volume 33, Number 2, June 2015). With this new volume the project to provide an illustrated revision of the taxonomy of the birds of the world, at the time of printing, has been achieved. In fact, this checklist is the editors' assessment of published evidence up to 31 August 2016. Volume 2, Passerines is necessarily even larger than Volume 1. It contains 890 magnificent colour plates treating 6,592 passerine species. Added to the 4,372 non-passerines this brings the total number of bird species in this treatment to 10,964.

As with Volume 1 each right hand page illustrates 11 to 14 species in full colour, many with numerous subspecies also illustrated. This volume contains a total of 12,629 bird illustrations.

The editors claim that the 6,649 range maps (always included immediately adjacent to the bird) "are probably the most accurate set of maps for any complete class of animals." An attractive and useful addition in Volume 2, found on the inside front and back covers, is a visual index to all the bird families with a colour illustration of a representative of each family. The total effect of the book is akin to "eye candy" for the birder.

I include here a paragraph from my review of Volume 1 that describes the salient features of the left hand facing page: On the left, facing page are species accounts numbered in taxonomic order and to match the illustrations. Information includes: Scientific names, common names, International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) status and other features. The colour-coded two-letter code for IUCN Status provides an immediate snapshot of rarity status of all species. There is a pointer to the volume and page in HBW where complete details of the species may be found. There is no description per se of the species but the Taxonomic Notes section provides, for closely related species, a condensed analysis as to why said taxon has been described as a separate species and ipso facto describes the salient features of the bird. Subspecies are listed and their geographic ranges described. Finally, a detailed written distribution indicates countries and renders the range map on opposite page more understandable.

At seven pages the introduction is much shorter than in Volume 1, which necessarily, needed to explicate in detail the Tobias System for defining a species. Simply put the checklist assesses all types of evidence including plumage pattern and structure, bare parts colours and formations, morphometrics, vocalizations, ecological factors, behavioral traits and molecular findings. Differences in DNA are used but are not quantified with a score. More than ever and, especially with the passerines, differences in voice are used as one of the distinguishing criteria (and assigned a numerical score).



The Tobias Scoring System has many critics. Indeed, I pointed out at least some of its flaws in 2015 ("What is a Species?", *OFO News*, Volume 33, Number 2, pp. 9-11). Nevertheless, using a score to determine differences adequate enough to split species, the editors say in their defense, "at least standardizes arbitrariness."

As with Volume 1, *OFO* readers of Passerines will be most attracted to taxonomic decisions or nomenclature that pertain to North American birds. Some examples of splits and name changes:

- Northern Grey Shrike (*Lanius borealis*) whose range includes North America but also large portions of the Eastern Palearctic, is split from Great Grey Shrike (*L. excubitor*), the latter found exclusively in the Old World.
- Brown Creeper is re-named American Treecreeper (*Certhia americana*).
- Fox Sparrow is split into four species: Red Fox-sparrow (*Passerella iliaca*); Sooty Fox-sparrow (*P. unalaschcensis*); Slate-colored Fox-sparrow (*P. schistacea*); and Thick-billed Fox-sparrow (*P. megarhynca*).
- Yellow-rumped Warbler is (re-)separated into Myrtle Warbler (*Setophaga coronata*) and Audubon's Warbler (*S. auduboni*).
- The West Coast form of Swainson's Thrush is split off as Russet-backed Thrush (*Catharus ustulatus*).
- Yellow-breasted Chat is treated herein as a subfamily of *Icteridae*, the New World Blackbirds. It is the sole member of this new subfamily *Icteriinae*, and given the specific epithet, *Icteria virens*. One fewer warbler for your May list?

However, not all taxonomic decisions are liberal. There is no further splitting of the Red Crossbill complex; all the redpoll forms are lumped as Redpoll (*Acanthis flammea*); and Woodhouse's Scrub-jay and Island Scrub-jay are re-subsumed under Western Scrub-jay (*Aphelocoma californica*).

In summary, these are huge books with huge prices. However, these volumes are at once scholarly treatises and beautiful art books that will provide countless hours of dreaming about potential birds or reminiscing about past experiences.



The author and Monika Landoni mount a nest box facing away from a little travelled country road before installing predator protection.

Photo by Merri Lee Metzger

The Eastern Bluebird is one grassland species that in the last 30 years has actually increased, largely because of well placed, well monitored, predator-proof nest box trails, combined with its adaptability to urban edge areas, its extensive range across Ontario, and increasingly warmer weather during the winter and during the breeding season. The only impediment to it becoming more of an urban edge breeder as it is in the Southern United States is the House Sparrow. Even the unusually cold winters of 2013-2014 and 2014-2015 had little long lasting effects on the population.

Tree Swallows have also fared well on most of the nest box trails overseen by the bluebird society. This is especially true if the nest boxes are not at high elevations where cold and wind can affect them, and if there are lots of water sources nearby where they can glean insects that hatch out of the water. The two grids of 100 nest boxes at Windermere Basin in Hamilton initially set up by Environment Canada are examples of this ideal habitat.

Some Tree Swallow nest box trails placed in inappropriate areas that result in high adult mortality and poor breeding success can become 'sink populations' that do not produce enough young to keep the population at its current level without immigration from other areas. In these cases the only solution is to move the nest boxes to more suitable locations.

Nest box programs

The idea of a nest box program or trail is to provide protection from predators so that target species can produce more young than they would in natural cavities. Natural cavities are chosen at random, which makes them less susceptible to predation as opposed to a nest box grid where all the nest boxes are close together.

For many businesses and organizations that put together these nest box building workshops, public perception is highly

Do nest box trails really help cavity nesting birds?

Perception and reality don't always match when it comes to some nest box building programs.

By Bill Read, President, Ontario Eastern Bluebird Society

In most cases, nest boxes have had a very positive effect on native cavity nesting birds. Many organizations and businesses promote nest box workshops as a way to help cavity nesting birds and to provide a positive image for their organization. Unfortunately, many of these workshops are well intentioned, but poorly planned—the only criteria being that everyone in the project gets to build a nest box. After the boxes are built they usually get put up on the nearest tree or fence post and that is the end of the project. These unmonitored nest boxes can become breeding grounds for House Sparrows and Deer Mice—big negatives for native cavity nesting birds and the reverse of what was intended. More understanding is needed on how to properly set up and run one of these workshops so that they actually help the target species for which they were intended. The bluebird society is proposing that a protocol be developed to assist organizations that put on these workshops.

Impediments to breeding success

As President of the Ontario Eastern Bluebird Society (OEBS) I receive hundreds of emails over the course of a year concerning both Eastern Bluebird and Tree Swallow nest boxes all over Ontario. Many are success stories, but countless others relate stories of predation by both raccoons and House Sparrows. Raccoons can be prevented from reaching nest boxes by providing adequate predator controls. Stove pipe baffles, metal cone guards, and grease are all very effective at stopping climbing mammals from reaching nest boxes. House Sparrows, however, present different challenges. Understandably, the major concern from many of the emails I receive involves how to prevent House Sparrows from taking over the nests of Tree Swallows and bluebirds by killing their young. In over 30 years of "bluebirding" I have removed hundreds of adult Tree Swallows killed by House Sparrows, which also prey on Cliff Swallows and Barn Swallows by evicting their young and taking over their nests.

important—having the public perceive these workshops as a positive action for the target species is often more important than having the target species nest in your box. The perception, then, is greater than what is actually accomplished, especially when it comes to projects that are funded by private enterprise.

One program that endeavors to meet both success with the target species and create a positive public image is the Clean River nest box program. Clean River administers Project Nest Box which connects students with nature by supplying bird house nest box kits made from 97% post consumer recycled plastic to K-12 schools across North America. Students monitor the nests bi-weekly from April to July and report to Bird Studies Canada's Project Nest Watch. To date, over 1,000 nest box kits have been donated by Clean River. Another 350 kits will be given out for the 2018 season. Each school will receive three nest box kits.

Youth engagement

Getting younger people involved in organizations involving the natural environment is presently one of the biggest challenges for most organizations. There are fewer youths today, and with increasing urbanization, many young people from all cultural backgrounds lack initiation in natural history appreciation. Having youths be part of a successful nest box project where they can see the target species up close and follow its progress until the birds fledged might provide the spark for those students to want to learn more about their natural environment. If the project is school-based, a camera could be set up in the nest box so the students could follow the progress in the classroom. This creates a memorable experience for students, and also helps the target species—a win-win for all.

Developing a nest box protocol

The OEBS can be a contact for providing information on how to develop a nest box project. Our mandate is to be successful with all cavity nesting species, especially bluebirds and Tree Swallows. When asked to give advice on any proposed nest box project, I tell the participants that building the nest boxes amounts to only 5% of the total project—the placement, predator protection, monitoring and record keeping

make up the other 95%. The OEBS will not endorse any nest box program that does not have adequate predator protection.

The OEBS has developed a protocol that can be followed when designing a nest box program for all cavity nesting species. It is hoped that by following this protocol, groups running these workshops will have a greater chance of success attracting and being successful with the target species.

1. Plan all phases of the project before starting.
2. Decide on a target species and learn all about that species before starting.
3. Determine nest box locations.
4. Determine what kind of predator protection will be used.
5. Decide who will monitor the boxes.
6. Decide who will keep the records.
7. If boxes are to be located in areas with high House Sparrow populations, decide how this risk will be mitigated.
8. Decide how many nest boxes to build.
9. It is best to start small with a few nest boxes and do it properly. More can be added the following year.

Note: The 2016 nest box results from Ontario for Eastern Bluebirds and Tree Swallows can be viewed on the Ontario Eastern Bluebird Society (OEBS) website (oeps.ca) under Newsletters.

President's Message

In June and July your listening skills are more important than ever

June is the height of the breeding season for most birds in Ontario. Resident birds such as robins and cardinals may be on their second brood. Many migrants are feeding their young. Late nesters like American Goldfinches and Cedar Waxwings are starting their breeding cycles.

OFO is promoting responsible observation and recording of breeding bird activity. Birds are not as easy to see at this time of year—trees are fully leafed out and birds are trying to stay hidden to avoid leading predators to their nests—but if you look and listen there is much to keep a birder happily birding at this time of year.

In June and July your listening skills are more important than ever. Birds may still be singing, especially early in the morning, but keep your ears open for subtle chip notes which will alert you to a bird's presence.

Most of all, join an OFO walk, or go to a local hotspot—get outside and enjoy birding!

Lynne Freeman, OFO President
president@ofoc.ca

eBird update

2016 was another banner year for eBird growth around the world and Ontario continued to be a leader.

By Mike Burrell

There are about 125,000 complete checklists with the observation date in 2016. That's about 340 for each day of the year! Impressively, 73 observers in Ontario submitted at least an average of one checklist a day. On the four-day eBird blitz that is the Great Backyard Bird Count held on the February long weekend, Ontario had 7,158 checklists submitted, second only to New York State.

There were a handful of new features added to eBird in 2016. To complement the new photo tools users can now rate photos which will make it easier to search for high quality images. There were also upgrades to the mobile apps including the addition of breeding codes for both Android and iPhone versions. The Android app has a new "My eBird" feature that allows you to see your current list totals. Another nice upgrade is the target species search now includes the option to search for a list of species you don't yet have a photo for.

The most exciting new feature is the addition of eBird profile pages which allows users to display information about themselves and show off maps showing their various stats (species, checklists, photos, audio) to others. It's a really cool way to visualize the data you have entered into eBird.

Eastern Ontario IBAs benefit from Caretaker network

By Amanda Bichel, Ontario IBA Coordinator, Bird Studies Canada



OFO member Peter Fuller who volunteers for the Prince Edward Point Bird Observatory is part of the small but critically important Caretaker team supporting the Prince Edward County South Shore IBA.

Photo by Amanda Bichel

A small but dedicated band of biodiversity Caretakers across Eastern Ontario is part of an important worldwide network. Each Caretaker plays an active stewardship role at one of the Province's internationally significant IBA sites.

The Important Bird and Biodiversity Areas (IBA) Program identifies, monitors, and conserves the world's most important sites for birds and biodiversity. With over 12,000 sites identified in 200 countries, IBAs form the world's largest network of sites for biodiversity. The 600 IBAs in Canada, including 70 in Ontario, are designated due to bird congregations that represent at least 1% of a species' continental or global population, or species at risk on the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) or Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) lists.

IBA Caretakers are local volunteers who act as site stewards, but they are so much more. Our eyes and ears on the ground, they are passionate and devoted champions who co-ordinate volunteers, organize events, advocate for IBAs, and

generally promote the IBA Program. They should be issued superhero capes.

In the first days of spring, I was fortunate to meet and bird with seven Caretakers on an Eastern Ontario IBA tour.

Prince Edward County South Shore

Peter Fuller and Cheryl Anderson representing the Prince Edward Point Bird Observatory carted me around the muddy flats of the IBA. At Point Petre, our first stop, we glanced out at a wavy Lake Ontario to see Long-tailed Ducks, one of the species that depend on this IBA. Approximately 225,000 of these birds—a remarkable 5% of the North American population—have been counted in a single day. White-winged Scoters, another important species here, flew in dotted lines above the water at Ostrander Point. The lakeshore offered a handful of views high on the bluff, perfect for conducting their annual spring and fall IBA waterfowl surveys. This IBA contains National and Provincial Wildlife Areas, private land, Conservation Areas, and the Miller Family Nature Reserve. Its management is complex and offers many opportunities for collaboration. Each year Caretakers, volunteers, and partner organizations lead on initiatives such as Bobolink banding, Eastern Whip-poor-will surveys, and BioBlitzes.

Napanee Limestone Plain

Renowned for hosting the federally endangered Loggerhead Shrike, this IBA also boasts rare alvar grassland habitat and rare plant, snake, and butterfly species. James Barber, this IBA's Caretaker, and Kurt Hennige who is part of the Kingston Field Naturalists (KFN) IBA Committee were eager to find the first 2017 Loggerhead Shrike. Up to 40% of Ontario's eastern subspecies breeds in this IBA however we were just two days too early. Wildlife Preservation Canada heads the Shrike Recovery Program and The Nature Conservancy of Canada manages more than 700 ha in this IBA. KFN is also a member of the Napanee Plains Joint Initiative, a group that focuses

on workshops to help landowners become informed stewards for grassland species.

Wolfe Island

Wedge between the St. Lawrence River and Lake Ontario, this island is covered by a mix of arable land, pastures, and woodlots. The IBA was designated to benefit congregations of Redhead and Greater Scaup—up to 16,000 and 20,000 in a day respectively—but it is also notable for owls, wintering raptors, and a swallow roost. The Caretaker of Wolfe Island, Mark Read, hopes to unite stakeholders including landowners, private companies, hunting clubs, and local residents, and to teach students about biodiversity through Citizen Science projects. He is optimistic that this will help residents understand the surrounding ecosystem and encourage them to protect it. IBA waterfowl surveys, Marsh Monitoring, and a BioBlitz at Big Sandy Bay are ongoing.

Amherst Island

Amherst Island is largely pastured land interspersed with woodlots, all outlined by coastal marshes. Janet Scott, a new eBird inductee, and Bonnie Livingstone tag-team the Caretaker role. They held their inaugural IBA waterfowl survey this April and have spearheaded a Grassland Bird Study of Bobolink and Eastern Meadowlark habitat. KFN owns the Marten Edwards Reserve, a migratory bird stopover and grassland habitat, and stewards other areas such as the well-named Owl Woods, home to wintering northern owl species.

Treasured habitat, treasured birds

Why do our Caretakers work so diligently? They are supporting the protection and appreciation of some of our most treasured spaces. Thanks to them, we are aware of happenings on the ground at IBAs, including partnerships, research projects, bird population trends, and threats. Without them, an IBA would be a boundary without a voice.

You can help by simply submitting eBird checklists when you visit an IBA. To become more actively involved you can step up as many OFO members already have as a Caretaker or as part of an IBA monitoring program. For more information, visit www.ibacanada.org or email ontarioiba@birdsc



Photo by Mark Peck

Photo Quiz

By Jon Ruddy

You're out on a beautiful summer day. Above you, fluffy white clouds float along in a sea of blue. You begin to hear the *sweet-sweet-shredded-wheat* of Yellow Warblers and the cheery, fast-paced carolling of Warbling Vireos and know that you're getting close to your favourite bench in the park. Both species are especially common near your bench and they've both been singing their hearts out as of late. Just before you arrive at your destination you spot a bird working its way through some shrubs. Taking up your binoculars, you walk a bit closer to get a better look. You peer right and left, raising and lowering your bins, and eventually spot the bird low in a shrub. It's perched on the side of its nest!

Your first impression is that the bird is relatively small. It's smaller than a Northern Cardinal but bigger than a Black-capped Chickadee and it is slender in build. You also notice that it is big-headed and has a proportionately large bill. You note the wing bars and the greyish-green ground colour to its upperparts then switch your binoculars for your camera and snap a quick photo. The bird perks up and darts off into the distance.

Excited but puzzled, you reach into your backpack for your field guide that is always with you for head-scratching moments just like this. Leafing through your field guide you consider which features you'll focus on to help you make mass eliminations. You decide to focus on the long, flat bill with a hooked upper mandible, and the posture and shape of the bird.

This turns out to be an excellent approach to mass eliminations as you flip through your field guide. Finches, blackbirds, buntings, tanagers, thrushes, sparrows, warblers, and wrens all lack the long, flat bill with a hooked tip and the GISS (General Impression of Size and Shape) of your mystery bird, and, as such, are relatively straightforward eliminations. You next consider the vireos. The vireos have a hooked tip to the bill, such as your mystery bird, but only Red-eyed Vireo shares the impression of length seen on your bird. A Red-eyed Vireo's grey crown bordered by black, white supercilium, dark eyeline, and red iris readily eliminate it as a possibility by its face and face alone.

You continue in your search for your bird's identity and flip the pages of your guide to the section covering the Tyrant

Flycatchers. Here, you immediately find matches with your mystery bird's shape, size, and proportions. You decide to narrow your options and eliminate Tyrannids that are both completely unlike the appearance of your mystery bird and completely out of range in what is the heart of the breeding season in the Northern Hemisphere. You begin with the flycatchers in the genus *Tyrannus*. Western Kingbird, Cassin's Kingbird, Couch's Kingbird, Tropical Kingbird, Eastern Kingbird, Gray Kingbird, and Scissor-tailed Flycatcher are ruled out. You next consider the flycatchers in the genus *Myiarchus*. You decide to skip the process of eliminating every flycatcher in your North American field guide, and focus on the probable species by their breeding range. The expected *Myiarchus* flycatcher in the northeast is the Great Crested Flycatcher. You happen to recall reading that the Great Crested is a cavity-nesting species of flycatcher and on this account alone they are eliminated as a possibility. Just to be sure, however, you decide to eliminate this species by its appearance as well. The combination of its grey face and breast, yellowish belly, and extensive reddish tones throughout the tail does not

match up well with your mystery bird so it is safely dropped as a possibility.

Moving along, you encounter Eastern Phoebe in your guide. Again, a clue is provided by the fact that you've observed and photographed your mystery bird visiting a nest that was built in a medium-sized shrub. Eastern Phoebes nest almost exclusively on man-made structures. You decide to play it conservatively and also attempt to eliminate Phoebe as a possibility based on its appearance. You note that the dark head and tail and proportionately smaller, all-black bill of an Eastern Phoebe is in no way a match for your mystery bird. Next up, you consider Olive-sided Flycatcher and recall that it is a breeder of the boreal forest. At any rate, you ponder its appearance. It is a massively-built, dark flycatcher with a huge head and bill, and dark flanks. You also consider that an Olive-sided's tail projection beyond the undertail is quite short and, in the end, conclude that none of these features rings true regarding your mystery bird.

Eastern Wood-Pewee is next on your list of considerations and after a single glance you realize that you are now "getting warmer." You feel that you must proceed more slowly with your analysis. You shift your focus to finer details such as proportional bill size, the colouration of the lower mandible, the characteristics or absence of an eye ring, the shape of the head, and the length of the primary feathers beyond the tertials, which is referred to as the primary projection. Eastern Wood-Pewees are quite dusky overall, and are typically "dark-vested." The undertail region of this species also happens to be patterned with smudgy markings. You note that the bill of an Eastern Wood-Pewee carries a similar visual "weight", although the lower mandible is a bit duskier on average. An important distinction lies in the length of the primaries beyond the tertials. In Eastern Wood-Pewees, the primary projection is very long, with the primaries reaching well down the tail. In our quiz bird, we see a moderate primary projection, certainly nothing striking in terms of length. The wing tips appear to fall even with the undertail region. You next consider that Eastern Wood-Pewees typically nest in mature, primarily deciduous forests, not among scattered shrubs in open habitats.

With all of these considerations in mind, you move along to your final list of candidates, the *Empidonax* flycatchers. This final list of possibilities includes Yellow-bellied, Acadian, Willow, Alder, and Least Flycatchers. For these devilishly-hard-to-identify birds you decide to key in on breeding habitat. The Yellow-bellied Flycatcher, nicknamed the "Moss Tyrant", builds its nest on the forest floor in mossy, sloped environments throughout the boreal forest. Least and Acadian Flycatchers are arboreal nesters, with the former building neat and tidy nests using larger branches as a support structure while the latter typically builds a rather messy nest on the outer drooping limbs of large deciduous trees.

This leaves us with only two remaining possibilities, either the Willow or the Alder Flycatcher. The field identification of silent "Traill's" (Willow/Alder) Flycatchers is fraught with pitfalls. It involves correct interpretation of multiple characteristics and must always involve a healthy dose of caution. All this said, there are some subtle differences that a practiced eye may at some point observe through field study. Willows average a narrower eye ring, with some examples showing a very narrow, slightly disjunct appearance. They tend to be more gently sloped to the forehead and crown, leading to a slightly crested appearance. Their crowns average lighter in colour and they average less olive green to the upperparts, being duller green, with more grey throughout. Finally, on average they show a lower cheek to throat contrast.

Luckily for you, your mystery *Empidonax* flycatcher returns after its brief foray and utters an emphatic *whit* as it nears its nest. Alder Flycatchers have a *pip* call note and you recall that it's not possible for either species to perform the other's songs or calls. This happens to be a characteristic of suboscines—birds of the suborder *Tyranni*—which are born with their songs hardwired. To further eliminate Alder Flycatcher as a possibility, you consider that Alder Flycatchers are usually more northerly in their distribution. Tommy Thompson Park would be an unlikely breeding location for this species. With all of this considered, you correctly identify your mystery bird as a **Willow Flycatcher**.

This Willow Flycatcher was photographed by Mark Peck at Tommy Thompson Park in Toronto, Ontario on 23 June 2007.



OFO News

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Mark Cranford – Coordinator
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