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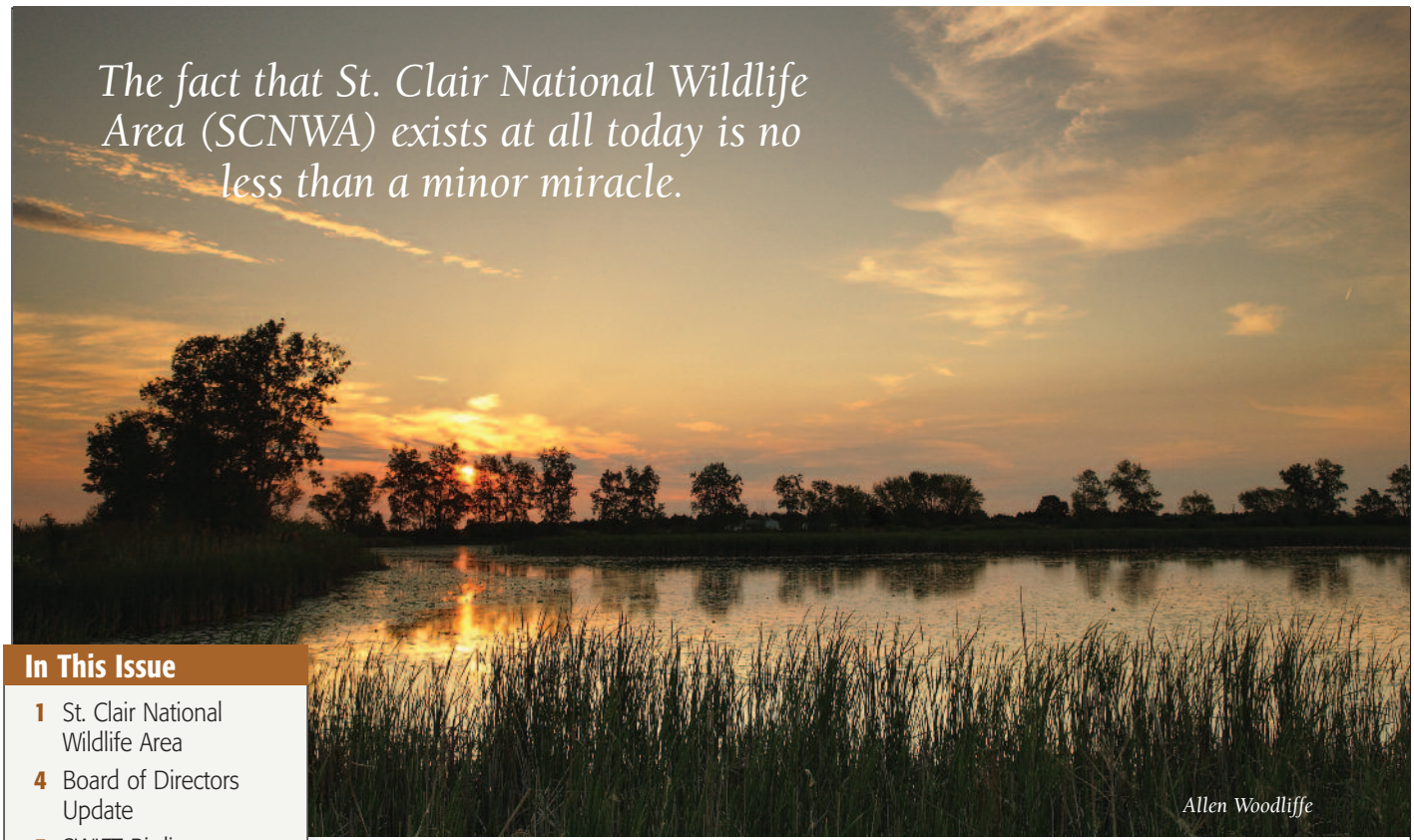
OFO News

NEWSLETTER OF THE ONTARIO FIELD ORNITHOLOGISTS



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St.Clair National Wildlife Area

By Allen Woodliffe

HISTORICALLY THE SHALLOW WATERS of Lake St. Clair and the marshes along the northern and eastern part of the lake were tremendously important to hundreds of thousands of waterfowl, especially on their twice a year migration. Some remained to breed in these extensive marshes, as did many other species of wetland birds.

The adjacent land was quite flat and poorly drained. During periods of highest water level, the adjacent land would become quite marshy. During periods of lower water levels, the landscape would be predominantly tallgrass prairie. Looking at soil maps for the area as well as early land surveyor notes, it is apparent that most of the land north of the Thames River as far east as present day Chatham, and north to about Wallaceburg, was predominantly either tallgrass prairie or wetland.

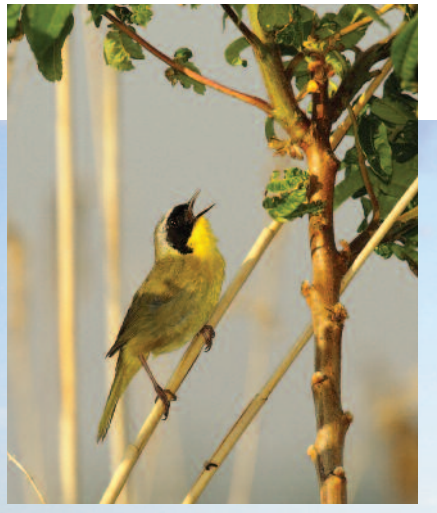
In the late 1800s, realizing how valuable this wetland/prairie soil was, drainage schemes were established in the former Kent County. Thousands of acres of prime agricultural land were now available to produce food for a growing local population as well as more distant markets. Fortunately there was a growing industrial base in Detroit, less than 50 kilometres away as the duck flies. Corporate business men who liked to hunt and conduct business with influential clients who also liked to hunt,

began acquiring tracts of wetlands along this eastern edge of Lake St. Clair to pursue their hobby and business interests. Many sizeable parcels of wetland were also acquired by various Canadian groups.

Of the several thousand hectares of wetland remaining within the geographical area of the former Kent County, now the municipality of Chatham-Kent, some of the largest are still owned by private hunt clubs. However that is no guarantee that these wetlands will persist forever. Owning, managing and maintaining such areas are costly. And with the rapidly rising values of agricultural land, some of which recently sold for approximately $14,000/acre ($34,600/hectare) in Chatham-Kent, there is increased pressure to sell and be drained for farmland.

Photos byAllen Woodliffe

Common Yellowthroat
Observation tower along trail



The remaining wetlands in this part of Chatham-Kent are significant in themselves. However they are linked ecologically to the massive wetlands and tallgrass prairies of Walpole Island First Nation (WIFN), a bird's foot delta of five main islands where the St. Clair River empties into Lake St. Clair. The WIFN is unceded territory of almost 24,000 hectares, almost half of which is wetland, and although not pristine, is a complex of one of the finest and most diverse natural areas left in southern Ontario. The historical and present-day landscape of tallgrass prairie and wetlands at Walpole and Chatham-Kent are more typical of the prairies and wetlands of the mid-western US.

In 1974, Environment Canada acquired a sizeable wetland from Dover Marshes Limited whose owners included the Stroh family of the Stroh Brewing Company fame; one of the remaining buildings at the site is still referred to the Stroh cabin. In 1978, the property became officially known as the St. Clair National Wildlife Area and is managed by Environment Canada – Canadian Wildlife Service. Other wetlands have been added over the years and the SCNWA now includes two parcels known as the St. Clair Unit (adjacent to Lake St. Clair) and the Bear Creek Unit (adjacent to The Snye along the Little Bear Creek) totalling 351.8 ha (869 acres). Ducks Unlimited (Canada) has been a valuable partner since the early years of the public ownership of this site.

The St. Clair Unit is a dyked marsh, maintained in several sections separated by dykes. Along the dykes are an increasing number and variety of prairie plants, some quite rare, as remnants of the historical landscape. Control and management of water levels is crucial to replicate the natural fluctuations that refresh coastal wetlands, and in particular is critical to control invasive species such as Common Reed (*Phragmites australis*).

Part of the St. Clair Unit is open to the public during daylight hours for the purpose of hiking and nature appreciation. The remaining area and the Bear Creek Unit are closed to the public to minimize disturbance to wildlife. There is a small parking lot at the entrance to a walking trail that follows the top of a dyke.

Open cattail marsh from hiking trail bridge
Red-winged Blackbird

A map of the St. Clair Unit along with brochures and a bird checklist are available at the trail entrance. The trail can be done in a loop, a total of about 5.5 km, following the cross dyke and linking up to a quiet road (Balmoral Line) along the south side of the NWA connectingback to the parking lot via the road entrance. Along the way, and somewhat in the centre of the marsh, is an observation tower that gives fine views of this wetland complex. For those with less time or energy, one can walk as far as the observation tower and return along the same trail, a total distance of slightly more than two kilometres.

In any healthy marsh, about half is open water and the other half is emergent vegetation such as cattail. There is little or no topographical relief except for the dyke, so looking into the numerous openings can be challenging. From the tower, however, which was replaced in 2011, one can more easily see into many of these openings away from the trail where ducks and other wetland birds are more active.

Birds are, of course, one of the highlights of this wetland. In the quiet of the early morning or evening quite a variety of species can be seen, or at least heard. At peak times the cacophony is impressive. The noisy hoots and clucks of American Coot, Common Gallinule and Pied-billed Grebe emanate from the edge of the cattails as do the chatterings of Marsh Wren and trills of Swamp Sparrow. Soras whinny throughout, and on occasion a Virginia Rail will be heard giving its *wak-wak-wak* call. Be vigilant, and you might even hear an endangered King Rail sounding much deeper and gruffer than a Virginia. The wetlands surrounding Lake St. Clair are considered as the stronghold for King Rail in Ontario, although the numbers are dwindling and it is indeed a rare event to hear one.

American Bitterns may be heard giving their guttural pumping call across the distance, and the smaller and much rarer Least Bittern can usually be heard giving its quieter *coo-coo-coo* amidst all of the other sounds. Black and Forster's Terns dance low across the marsh, surveying the open water surface for a minnow. Black-crowned Night-Herons, Great Blue Herons, Green Herons and Great Egrets are all likely species to be seen at the edges of shallow water. Various waterfowl species may linger or nest, including less common ones such as Ruddy Duck, American Wigeon, Northern Pintail, Redhead and Canvasback. Red-winged Blackbirds are abundant, of course, and for a few years Yellow-headed Blackbirds wereyears, however, the latter species has been virtually absent from SCNWA, but occasional in private wetlands a few kilometres farther north. A pair of Bald Eagles nests nearby and are sometimes seen perched in the area.

Surrounding the marsh proper is a collection of Eastern Cottonwood and Willow, with a mix of dogwood and

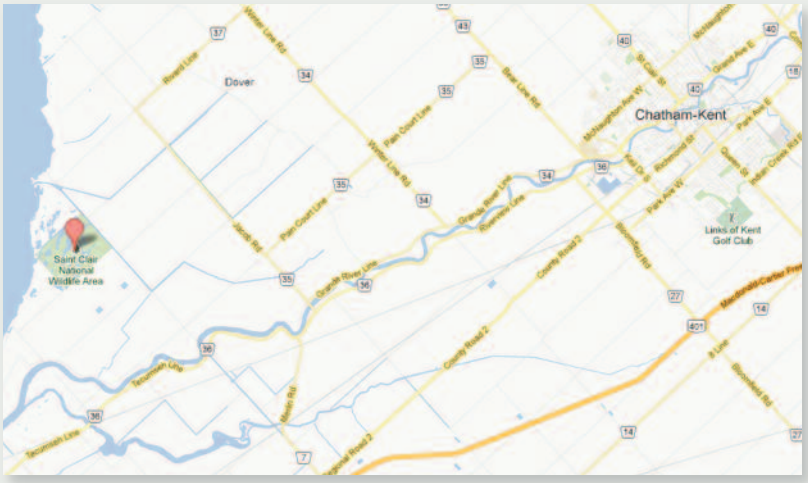
sumac at lower levels. This provides important additional habitat for passerines especially on migration. And one can never tell when a real rarity might appear: a Vermillion Flycatcher dropped in for a few weeks in late fall one year, and a White-winged Dove was observed for several days a few years later. Just recently a White-faced Ibis was reported flying over.

As impressive as the breeding avifauna are, the importance of SCNWA, the adjacent wetlands as well as the shallow, productive waters of Lake St. Clair is much greater during the spring and fall waterfowl migration. This area is considered the most important waterfowl staging area south of James Bay. Some birds stay for extended periods. Mallard is overall the most abundant duck species, but there are spectacular numbers of Blue-winged Teal in late summer, Green-winged Teal in October as well as Ring-necked Duck, American Wigeon, Gadwall and American Black Duck in early to late fall. The noise in late fall created by the thousands of mallards is spectacular and Tundra Swans can be heard for several kilometres from their resting areas. The most abundant goose species regularly seen from the trail. In recent is Canada, with an occasional sprinkling of Snow Goose and Cackling Goose. Greater White-fronted Goose is much less common.

It isn't unheard of to get more than 50,000 individuals of waterfowl on the Christmas Bird Count, which started in 1981, and on one occasion got almost double that. The additional birds beyond the CBC circle closer to WIFN are evidence for the significance on one occasion in early January when more than 50,000 Canvasback alone were recorded within sight of the mainland.

The SCNWA has been suitably recognized for its importance in several ways. In 1985 it was designated as an internationally significant wetland under the International Ramsar Convention on Wetlands. It is also recognized as part of the Eastern Lake St. Clair Important Bird Area, and in 1984 it was designated as part of the Lake St. Clair Marshes Area of Natural and Scientific Interest, as well as a Provincially Significant Wetland.

There are other prime birding sites in Chatham-Kent and Essex but for a pleasant change, and it is free, consider visiting St. Clair NWA.



To reach SCNWA from Chatham, where there are various accommodations to choose from, follow River View Line west, along the south side of the Thames River, to the Prairie Siding Bridge. Go north across the bridge on to the Jacob Side Road/County Road 35, to the first stop sign which is Pain Court Line. Turn left (west) onto Pain Court Line, and at the next intersection, turn right (north) onto Town Line Road. After about three kilometres on Town Line Road you should see the entrance sign to the NWA.

Board of Directors Update

I HOPE YOU HAVE been enjoying the arrival of spring and the excitement of migration. Whatever amount of time you are able to devote to birding and regardless of your level of ability, OFO values your membership and seeks to encourage the appreciation of Ontario's avifauna.

Enclosed with this issue of *OFO News* is a copy of the newly updated *Ontario Bird Checklist 2012*. The checklist has been fully revised and includes all relevant taxonomic changes since the previous version was published in 2008. Additional copies can be purchased through the OFO website.

Our annual convention is scheduled for 15–17 September, in Presqu'ile Provincial Park and vicinity. I hope to see you there. This year for the first time, we are offering a registration rate for young birders at a significant discount, and we have introduced a number of activities specifically intended for youth. We hope this will promote birding as a family activity and reduce any financial reluctance on behalf of parents.

In the last newsletter, I reported that OFO had made a financial contribution to the Essex Region Conservation Authority towards the construction of an observation platform and viewing blind at Hillman Marsh Conservation Area. Although construction did not take place prior to May as anticipated, the work has been rescheduled for this summer. Also in connection with Hillman Marsh, I want to thank those OFO members who volunteered to assist others with the identification of shorebirds during the Point Pelee N.P. Festival of Birds. Your patience, helpfulness and enthusiasm go a long way to encourage others.

Finally, I want to thank all of our field trip leaders who are doing a tremendous job again this year with a very important aspect of OFO's activities. Our trip leaders generously contribute their time, effort and skills to make birding more accessible to others and to create an atmosphere where participants can enjoy birding as a group activity.

I hope to see you in the field soon.

Best wishes,
Robert Maciver
OFO President

SWIFT Birding Software

SWIFT offers many useful features and provides excellent customer service, but its user-friendliness needs improvement.

By Cindy Cartwright and Jay Fitzsimmons

Bohemian Waxwing
Photo by Saul Bocian

SWIFT Birding Software is a list-based application that allows birders to keep track of their sightings. More than one birder can have accounts, and each birder can have multiple lists (e.g., a 2012 list with Ontario, Québec, and Michigan sub-lists). Overall, we found that SWIFT offers many useful features and provides excellent customer service, but its user-friendliness needs improvement.

SWIFT bills itself as "the world leader in listing software for birders," and has users in over 45 countries (with most residing in England and the United States). SWIFT runs on Windows (and Mac with Windows emulators such as Bootcamp) and can be purchased and downloaded easily online. Free updates are made available regularly, which provide improvements to software functionality and updates to taxonomic revisions. Our review is for version 1.3.2.0, released March 2012.

SWIFT offers a number of useful features including:

- Allows users to import checklist data from other birder software formats, and allows data backup to preserve checklists.
- A "Regulars" tab that shows the most common birds you have observed in your list. This allows birders to quickly select frequently observed birds in new observation checklists. The threshold of how often a species must be observed before it appears in the Regulars tab can be changed easily by users.
- Allows export of lists to eBird.
- Excellent customer service.

  We found SWIFT staff to be prompt and receptive to feedback. In fact, we had written our original review based on the previous version of SWIFT (version 1.3.1.0 released in January 2012), and re-wrote the present review because SWIFT improved their software in response to our preliminary review's criticisms. SWIFT promises to release another version soon (perhaps by the time you read this review) that accounts for several of our remaining criticisms. Such rapid, positive response to criticism is laudable.

There were several opportunities for improvement with SWIFT that generally related to its layout and intuitiveness, especially for birders who are not computer savvy.

The tree-based structure of the program automatically recalculates the total number of birds in the higher branches on your list as new species are added but the actual species names do not appear. So if Snow Bunting is added as a new species to the Christmas Bird Count list, the totals on your Ontario, Canada and Life lists will all increase by one but Snow Bunting will not appear when these lists are opened. What we would like is a life list of species you have observed in all of your sub-lists.

The same name cannot be used for more than one list. For example, a list called "Ontario" cannot be included in a list called "CBCs" if it has already been used in a list called "Canada."

As the number of lists increases, the headings quickly disappear off the side of the screen and the user must scroll back and forth to find their lists. The spacing between the various lists is not adjustable to remedy this problem. According to SWIFT's president, an upcoming version of SWIFT should include a fix for this problem.

The User Guide is quite long and complicated. For example, there are 10 pages dedicated to creating lists. These pages are critical to successfully using the software and visually appealing as a result of abundant screenshots, but difficult to manage.

We found parts of SWIFT, especially parts with moving animations (e.g., icons popping out of list names), slow for our computers to process. Given that we have common computers and operating systems (e.g., Windows Vista) we assume others may also periodically encounter slow processing with SWIFT.

The President of SWIFT, Steve McAllister, has already addressed some of our original criticisms in the latest version of SWIFT, and is working on further improvements for an upcoming version. We are thus optimistic that SWIFT will soon improve further. At present, birders who want basic, functional lists should use more intuitive and less complicated birding software.

The Kingston Field Naturalists

A Brief History of Birding in the Kingston Region

By Mark Andrew Conboy

HISTORIC RECORDS OF THE BIRDS in the Kingston Region can be traced all the way back to Samuel de Champlain's travels through the area in the 1610s when he is thought to have visited Wolfe Island in addition to other locations. Among the more intriguing notes he made were of many "white cranes", perhaps Whooping Cranes. The first ornithologist to visit our area was the British military officer Henry Hadfield in 1857-1858. Other amateur and professional naturalists followed; most notably, Charles Young (active 1889-1914), Edwin Beaupre (mainly active 1914-1930), C.K. Clarke (active 1881-1905) and Robert Owen Merriman (active 1926-1934). They all left some records of their collections and observations.

It wasn't until the formation of the Kingston Field Naturalists (KFN) in 1949 that recreational birding and ornithological research became organized and a continuous record of bird observations was begun. Since its inception, originally as the Kingston Nature Club, the organization's mandate has been to record and share natural history information, encourage public interest in nature, and engage in conservation of plants, wildlife and habitats. Many of the KFN's activities focus on birds.

Since its inaugural year, KFN members have been involved in myriad counts, surveys and censuses including annual Christmas Bird Counts, the Mid-Winter Waterfowl Surveys, American Woodcock counts, Mourning Dove surveys (when that species was still a novelty in eastern Ontario), Short-eared Owl surveys, the Breeding Bird Survey, the Red-shouldered Hawk and Spring Woodpecker Survey, and both of the Ontario Breeding Bird Atlases. Data from these formal counts, club field trips, and other incidental observations collected by KFN members over the past 66 years has resulted in an impressive and continuous database of bird observations.

The database has been constantly evolving. During the earliest club meetings, bird records were kept on a large piece of cardboard which was updated each time members met. That record system soon became obsolete and for subsequent decades the KFN kept all of its bird records on a series of recipe cards. As of 1 January 2012, the club began moving forward with uploading its historical and current bird records to eBird. We encourage members to submit their observations directly to eBird, or to our bird records keeper who then uploads the records for them. Between January and April 2012, club members submitted some 800 checklists and counted some 200,000 individual birds.

The KFN has a long history of direct conservation action from erecting and maintaining Wood Duck boxes and Osprey nesting platforms, to more ambitious endeavours such as land acquisition and actively monitoring bird populations. The club owns and manages two private conservation reserves. The Helen Quillium Sanctuary was purchased in 1965 with expansions added on over subsequent decades. Now this 200 ha parcel of land next to Frontenac Provincial Park protects forest, wetlands and shorelines in the biologically diverse Frontenac Arch.

Long-eared Owls in the Owl Woods
KFN members examine pondlife on the KFN property on Amherst Island
David Okines explaining banding procedures at the Prince Edward Point Banding Station
Photos by Gaye Beckwith, Kingston Field Naturalists

A second nature reserve, on the east end of Amherst Island was purchased in 1986. This 100 ha patch of grassland, wetland and Lake Ontario coastline protects Bobolink, Wilson's Phalarope and overwintering raptors. Also on Amherst Island is the famous Owl Woods, an exceedingly popular winter birding hotspot that the KFN and other partners have worked hard to conserve. The KFN was also instrumental in establishing the Prince Edward Point National Wildlife Area in eastern Prince Edward County. The area came into being in 1978 and has since ensured that migrant birds have always found natural stopover habitat on their annual peregrinations. Some club members had been prime movers in the creation of the Cataraqui Region Conservation Authority and the Queen's University Biological Station.

One of the most ambitious projects the club has taken on led to establishing the Prince Edward Point Bird Observatory. The project began with daily surveys of migratory birds at the Point in 1971 and again in 1972.These surveys revealed that the Point was a migration hotspot. Over the years, club volunteers banded thousands of birds, including hundreds of Northern Saw-whet Owls. The observatory is now a separate entity and continues to band significant numbers of birds annually.

The list of other scientific and conservation activities untaken by the KFN is long. It includes a Chimney Swift banding program at Queen's University taken up by the club in the 1950s. It was in part because of a band recovery from a Kingston bird that the wintering grounds of this now at-risk species were discovered in eastern Peru. A project to survey Pigeon Island's colonies of herons, gulls and terns helped to reveal the negative impacts of pesticides on waterbirds in the Great Lakes Basin. KFN volunteers diligently collected thousands of dead birds from below the 200 m tall chimneys at the Lennox Generating Station. The documentation provided by this effort resulted in changes to the way the chimneys were illuminated, which in turn led to reduced migratory bird collisions and mortalities. Hundreds of dead birds collected by the club were sent to museums.

Club bird records and conservation initiatives are summarized quarterly in the *Blue Bill* which has been in press since 1954. In addition, a series of excellent books have been published, beginning with Helen Quillium's *History of the Birds of Kingston, Ontario* in 1965 and ending with the 2008 publication of Ron Weir's *Birds of the Kingston Region*, 2nd Edition.

Presently the club continues to be active in recreational birding, including holding two annual 24-hour-long competitions: the Spring Round Up and the Fall Round Up. Our current conservation projects include opposing industrial wind farm development on Amherst Island and Prince Edward Point, monitoring Short-eared Owl populations on Amherst and Wolfe Islands, participating in Chimney Swift research and making contributions to local land preservation initiatives.

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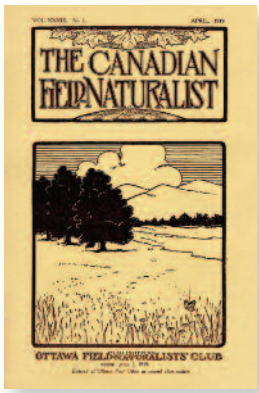
Baltimore Orioles / *Saul Bocian*

The Ottawa Field-Naturalists' Club

150 years of Ontario Ornithology

By Daniel Brunton



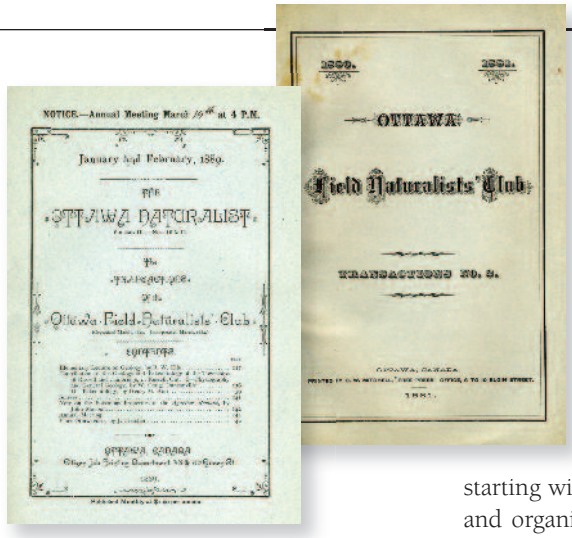
Canadian Field-Naturalist, 1919

THE OTTAWA FIELD-NATURALISTS' Club (OFNC) has long provided documentation of important, field-based ornithological information in Ontario and Canada. It is a venerable institution, tracing its origins back in a direct line to the pre-Confederation establishment of the Ottawa Natural History Society in 1863. The OFNC was originally a creature of the Victorian age and perhaps not surprisingly, then, had a somewhat bureaucratic origin. It only became a significant contributor to ornithological knowledge 15 years later after its reorganization and formal identification under its present name in March 1879.

Beyond the continuing contributions of its more than 1,000 individual members and subscribers, the major institutional contribution of the OFNC is through the publication of two important periodicals. The more local of these is the semi-scientific quarterly journal *Trail & Landscape*. Begun as a Centennial project in 1967, *T&L* has published innumerable reports of field observations, research activities, recreational birding and conservation initiatives. The other is the internationally recognized *Canadian Field-Naturalist* (CFN) which has documented ornithological research in Ontario, Canada and throughout northern North America since 1880. CFN began as an annual *Transactions of the OFNC*, evolving into monthly issues of *The Ottawa Naturalist* in 1889 and finally, becoming the nationally focussed *Canadian Field-Naturalist* in 1919. Such an unbroken record of research documentation on a national scale is without parallel by a volunteer-administered publication in Canadian history.

In the early days of the OFNC there really wasn't such a thing as a bird watching community, let alone a vehicle for the study of field ornithology in the Ottawa Valley. Encouraging the development of such ornithological knowledge and a comparable understanding of all aspects of natural history was the primary objective of the small, prescient group of keen young men who were the indefatigable force behind the establishment of the OFNC. Although there were no professional biologists in Ottawa in the 1870s or early 1880s to assist them, that began to change when the Geological Survey of Canada (including what would become the Canadian Museum of Nature) was transferred from Montreal to the nation's capital in 1880. But well into the second decade of the OFNC's existence there was only a tiny handful of what might be recognized today as field ornithologists in this region and they were all in the OFNC.

Most prominent of these locally and important nationally was George R. White (1856-1927) who along with younger brother Ted White (1870-1960) collected vast quantities of bird migration data and amassed a remarkably comprehensive reference collection of Ottawa Valley bird specimens. These are now mostly housed in the Canadian Museum of Nature specimen collection. Given that bird "watching" in that time was largely accomplished along the barrel of a shot gun, there was no such thing as field guides and portable optical equipment was of poor quality and cumbersome in the field, their compilation of comprehensive, accurate migration data was all the more remarkable.



Ottawa Naturalist, January / February 1889

Transactions of the Ottawa Field Naturalists' Club, 1882

The core group of Ottawa area Victorian naturalists interested in observing birds and collecting specimens (skins and eggs) initially coalesced around George White. They formed an Ornithology Section (a study group) within the OFNC in order to organize and document their records and observations. The OFNC, like all significant professional and cultural organizations of Ottawa in that era, was a somewhat stuffy affair, peopled with senior bureaucrats in stiff collars (literally) and mightily constrained by social and political conventions. There was a cadre of 'young rebels', however, who in their democratic zeal for discovery and wildlife adventures burst through these conventions and opened windows. The key members of the bird group were amongst these youthful keeners.

Producing a list of the known species birds in the Ottawa area was their first major achievement. It was published in the *Transactions of the OFNC* in 1882. "Senior" author George White was 26 and his co-author William L. Scott was only 19 years of age. Keep in mind that within only five years and starting with nothing, they had gathered and organized the data for this remarkably accurate annotated list of 169 species without training or mentors to guide their way. Their tools consisted of their shot-guns, field sense and limited access to reference literature such as Elliot Coues un-illustrated *Key to North American Birds*. There was no useful regional reference literature as McIlwraith's *Birds of Ontario* was still several years from publication. It is possible that White and Scott consulted the copy of James Audubon's *Elephant Folio* that was and remains in the Parliamentary Library, but even this would hardly have been an adequate replacement for a field guide, let along Taverner's or Godfrey's versions of *Birds of Canada* which were still decades off.

It is understandable, then, that some problems crept into the first list. Like the report of Chestnut-backed Chickadee for Boreal Chickadee and Black-tailed Godwit for Greater Yellowlegs. But it was a tremendous beginning, forming the foundation for all subsequent regional studies and spawning numerous articles and notes on the observations by the Ornithology Section's members.

Birding remains a major focus of the contemporary OFNC

An active Birds Committee maintains records, up-dates checklists, oversees the operation of a series of public bird feeders throughout the National Capital Region and participates in both local and regional field trips. The careful review and documentation of rare bird observations has been a significant part of their efforts since the 1970s.

Virginia Rail / *Saul Bocian*

While specimen collecting remained critical for the acceptance of new or important records, visual observations slowly became more acceptable and more frequently reported in the pages of the CFN. Indeed, the idea that birds could be reliably identified alive by characteristics observed through 'opera glasses' rather than only as collected specimens was promoted as far back as 1889 in an *Ottawa Naturalist* article by W. A. D. Lees (1859-1941) and James Ballantyne (1835 - 1925). To them, perhaps, goes credit for being the Ottawa Valley's first birders in a contemporary sense.

There has traditionally been a close relationship between the OFNC and scientists with the National Museum of Canada/Canadian Museum of Nature. That was particularly important in the early years. *Geological Survey of Canada* naturalist John Macoun (1831 - 1920) and both his sons, James (1862 - 1920) and William (1869 - 1933), for example, played important roles in developing the OFNC and supporting field investigations in their day. Although not particularly knowledgeable about birds, John Macoun maintained an extensive network of field contacts and assembled a four-part *Catalogue of Canadian Birds* between 1900 and 1904 from their observations. He relied almost exclusively on OFNC members' observations for eastern Ontario and western Quebec reports, as McIlwraith had a decade or so earlier when preparing his *Birds of Ontario*. Not surprisingly, the subsequent arrival of professional ornithologists such as Hoyes Lloyd (1888-1978) and Percy Taverner (1875-1947) greatly upgraded the quality of observations and the ornithological reports appearing in the *Ottawa Naturalist* and *CFN*.

Increasingly comprehensive Ottawa area bird lists were later produced and published in the *CFN* by the Rev. C. W. Eifrig (1910-1911), Hoyes Lloyd (1923-1924), Lloyd again in 1944 and by Ron Pittaway in 1969 (in *T&L*), all based on OFNC members' observations. In addition to local observations and an ever widening range of research and observation papers from across the country, Christmas Bird Counts throughout Ontario and then Canada were published in the *CFN* for decades. *T&L* now is the vehicle for reporting most Ottawa Valley bird reports.

After almost a century and a half of documentation, research and appreciation of the natural world, the OFNC remains Canada's largest and oldest regional natural sciences organization. Birding and field ornithology have both played major roles in its programs and activities, inspiring the development of many important professional and amateur careers in the process. There is every indication that this is far from over and that both ornithological knowledge and bird conservation in Ontario will continue to benefit from this remarkable organization into the foreseeable future.

If not already OFNC members and/or CFN subscribers, readers are encouraged to consult the OFNC's web page (http://www .ofnc.ca) for information on up-coming programs and initiatives. Joining the OFNC or becoming a CFN subscriber are perhaps the best ways for an individual Ontario birder to help sustain the important ornithological documentation role of *The Canadian Field- Naturalist* as it moves well into its second century of publication.

Black Vultures

By Willie D'Anna

THE FIRST BLACK VULTURES ever found near the Niagara River were four individuals, observed by Gerry Binsfeld and friends in Queenston, Ontario on the unexpected date of 5 December 2010. Likely these same birds were seen on 27 December that month by Marcie Jacklin, Drew Campbell, and others while working on the Niagara Christmas Bird Count. Black Vulture is a very rare migrant through the Niagara Region of Ontario, with only four records prior to Gerry Binsfeld's sighting. The four records were all in spring, in the vicinity of the Beamer Hawkwatch, so these December reports were particularly interesting. However, there were no other reports for the rest of the 2010-11 winter season so the December sightings were considered an anomaly.

Two Black Vultures were seen by the American Falls in May 2011 and in September, two were seen farther down river. Up to six have been seen along the lower Niagara River every month since. In December 2012, while scoping at a great distance from the escarpment in Queenston, Jean Iron showed me some vultures roosting in large spruce trees across the river in Lewiston, New York. The next day, I drove through the streets of Lewiston in search of this vulture roost, which I happily found. In talking with one of the local residents, I found out that this vulture roost had been first occupied during the previous winter. In the winter of 2011-12, this roost held up to six Black Vultures and 16 Turkey Vultures. In recent weeks, there have been occasional reports of two Black Vultures in the vicinity of the Niagara River, causing speculation that they will be or are already nesting in the area.

The best time for viewing the vultures at the winter roost depends on the weather and the time of the day. Generally, early morning and late afternoon provide the best opportunity to see the vultures. Not surprisingly, wintry weather causes the vultures to use the roost trees for longer periods. On cold mornings, the vultures can sometimes be seen warming themselves on the chimneys of nearby homes. Many local birders visited the vulture roost to add Black Vulture to their New York list. We will be watching to see if they return in the fall of 2012.

eBird update

By Mike Burrell

eBird use is growing incredibly fast with an increase of more than 65% in the number of checklists from 2010 to 2011 submitted for Ontario

IN ONTARIO in 2011, eBird saw 1,039 users submitting 56,861 checklists for over 6,000 different locations containing more than half a million bird observations of over 340 species.

Congratulations to Barb Charlton, Ken Burrell, Brandon Holden, Mike Burrell, and Tyler Hoar for the top five lists on eBird in 2011 (number of species). Equally impressive were the number of complete checklists submitted by the top five of Tyler Hoar, Patrick Mooney, Steve Thorpe, Mike Burrell, and Peter Blancher.

The 2012 eBird season is already well underway

As of the end of April, 273 species had been reported to eBird, up eight from where we were last year at this point. April saw Ontario eBirders submit over 12,000 checklists, averaging just over 400 per day. 2012 is currently on pace for over 100,000 eBird checklists submissions for Ontario making this the most complete annual bird record for Ontario ever. At this time, Josh Vandermeulen, Andrew Keaveney, Brandon Holden, Ken Burrell and Barb Charlton have all reported over 200 species to eBird. Similarly, Mike Burrell, Tyler Hoar, Donald Sutherland, Kingston Field Naturalists and Patrick Mooney have all submitted over 500 complete checklists. Congratulations to them all.

New eBird feature – email alerts

While eBird is constantly expanding with new features, the following will be of interest to all. Late in 2011, eBird launched rare bird and year needs alerts. These two alerts compliment the already existing life needs alert. All three of the alerts send you an email alert either daily or hourly (your choice) if something triggers your settings. The alerts can be specific for the entire province or can be narrowed to a particular county (or equivalent). The needs alerts work by comparing ebird reports with your life or year lists for the region you specified. If you don't have a particular species on your life or year list, you'll get an email alerting you to the report. The rare bird alert works by sending you an alert via email whenever a rare bird is reported (both seasonal and geographic rarities) to ebird for the region you subscribed.

Now easily import your OBBA point counts into your eBird account

You can now very quickly and easily download your point count data from the second Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas in a format that can be easily and quickly uploaded to your eBird account. Just visit Nature Counts and click on the "ebird exports" link.

Did you know? Records submitted to eBird are permanently archived for the future and are already helping scientists and conservationists better manage the world's birds.
www.ebird.ca

In Memoriam

Jim Griffith

By Jean Iron

Left **Jim Griffith,** *Right* **Harry Kerr in Thickson's Woods in the fall of 2006.** *Photo by Eleanor Beagan.*

JIM GRIFFITH, a former OFO treasurer, passed away on 8 February 2012 in his 88th year. Born in Toronto on 2 February 1924, Jim began birding in his late 40s and travelled the world in pursuit of birds. He joined OFO in April 1989 and became Treasurer after the Annual Convention in the fall of 1995. Jim was a chartered accountant by profession, and brought these skills to the management of OFO's finances. He encouraged the Board and committee members to develop a vision for OFO with goals, objectives and budgets for each portfolio. A stickler for detail, Jim was also practical in all respects. For example, Mike Street called me as President with a proposal to form the Ontbirds listserv and that it would belong to OFO, but we had to decide quickly whether to accept and agree to pay its operating costs. I called Jim, who saw the tremendous potential of a province-wide birding listserv and said "Let's go for it — now." After conferencing with other Board members, Ontbirds was launched in September 1998 under OFO's ownership. Throughout his six and a half-year term as Treasurer, Jim's advice and guidance were highly valued.

An active member of the Toronto Ornithological Club (TOC), Jim was its Treasurer prior to taking on that role for OFO. He loved birding with veteran OFO and TOC member Harry Kerr, and they were often seen early in the morning on the Leslie Street Spit, in the Rouge Valley, Thickson's Woods in Whitby, and other Toronto area birding hotspots. Jim's many birding friends will greatly miss his friendliness, good sense of humour and funny stories. Jim is buried in Toronto's Mount Pleasant Cemetery beside Joanne, his wife of 63 years. OFO sends condolences to his son Michael and daughter Laura.

Building your list from your couch with your eyes closed

A little known tool of the trade

By Jeffrey H. Skevington

Today (25 March 2012) I added Red-shouldered Hawk to my year list without leaving the house.

I DIDN'T SEE IT and I didn't have the windows open to hear it. Last weekend I ran outside whenever I heard geese flying over and in a couple of days of these forays I added Greater White-fronted Goose and Cackling Goose to my yard list. It wasn't warm enough to have the windows open, so what's the trick?

When my son was old enough that we no longer needed to have the baby monitor in his room (about six years ago), I hung it up outside under our eaves where it is out of the rain. It has remained there ever since, dutifully reporting every sound in the yard to the wireless receiver that I can move anywhere inside the house. This would be a drag if you lived near a busy intersection, but if your place is relatively quiet, it's a lot of fun. I turn it off when it's windy but otherwise it's usually on. The result is an amazing number of yard birds that we would never have noticed otherwise including the aforementioned geese, Brant, Golden Eagle being mobbed by ravens, Solitary Sandpiper at night, Northern Saw-whet Owl, Eastern Screech-Owl, Tufted Titmouse and a variety of warblers. In addition to the new yard birds, we pick up a lot of year birds as well as interesting bird interactions like two fighting Pileated Woodpeckers last weekend, frogs and a few visiting mammals.

In addition to being a great tool for the home naturalist, this is something that I highly recommend for park interpretive centres.

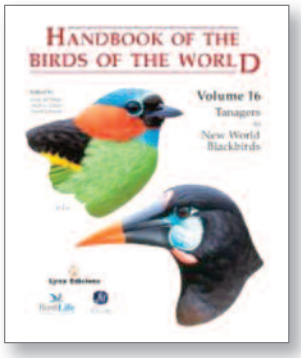
Eastern Screech-Owl / *Ann Brokelman*

I was excited by our monitor and decided to pick up a different model that I saw at a garage sale for my parents. It didn't work. It turned out not to pick up high-pitched sounds and had poor amplification, things I thought would be standard to most baby monitors. The model that we have not only has excellent pitch range and decent sound clarity, it also amplifies the sound. When I run outside to listen, I often find that the species singing or calling is much harder to hear than it was on the speaker inside the house. The model (made by Safety 1st) that we purchased over eight years ago is no longer available but I assume that others made by this manufacturer are equally good. Given the variation that experienced between brands, I suggest buying one somewhere that you can exchange it in the event that it does not capture the full range of sound that you are after. Cost is approximately $50.

In addition to being a great tool for the home naturalist, this is something that I highly recommend for park interpretive centres. As long as you can get it away from where people are walking and talking, it will pipe in the sounds of birds to visitors and will likely stimulate lots of visitor interest and questions. This beats the usual CDs of bird sounds that you hear in park museums that invariably include birds not native to the park or out of season.

There is definitely a market here for an entrepreneur. A waterproof bird monitor that has excellent range and superb sound quality could be placed farther into large properties to pick up birds down at the pond, etc. I know I would be the first in line to buy upgrade.

Book Reviews



Handbook of the Birds of the World. Volume 16: Tanagers to New World Blackbirds.

By Josep del Hoyo, Andrew Elliott and David Christie [Eds]. 2011. Lynx Edicions, Barcelona, Spain. E-mail: lynx@hbw.com. Hardcover 893 pages. $271.45 US.

As this monumental project winds down, I'm saddened as each year I looked forward to reading the next volume, anticipating its content and reliving past experiences as I study the species featured. Well that is about to end — only one more book after this — the update volume. If you've always wanted to buy the series, now may be the time as Lynx is offering a 20% price reduction if you buy the full set. Of course you'll also have to build some new shelves to host these incredible books.

Let's do a walk through Volume 16, which opens with a timely 27 page article on climate change and its effect on birds. It covers topics such as impacts to the annual biological cycles for singing, territory establishment, nest building, egg laying, size and number of clutches, duration of incubation, reproductive success and post breeding dispersal. It then deals with migration cycles, such as timing, duration, geographical variation, and phenotypic plasticity. Following this are sections on changes in body size, colour, population impacts, range expansion, conservation impacts and mitigate measures. This certainly is a very thorough treatment of this complex subject.

Now we jump into the body of the book, starting with the tanagers. This is an exciting family, consisting of 283 species, all found only in the western hemisphere. Twenty-three species are threatened, and surprisingly, none has gone extinct since 1600 A.D. This is shocking when one considers how poorly so many other families of birds are doing, particularly where the native forest is being ravaged, as it is in much of Central and South America. Fully 169 stunning photographs adorn the 211 page introduction to this large family, which includes tanagers, hemispingus, bush-tanagers, Pardusco, shrike-tanagers, ant-tanagers, mountain-tanagers, dacnis, honeycreepers, conebills, flowerpiercers, Plushcap, euphonias, chlorophonias, palm-tanagers, chat-tanagers, spindalis, Bananaquit and hepatic-tanagers. Following this are 34 colour plates depicting all the species discussed in the book.

The next section of the book deals with the cardinals — 42 of them, again all in the western hemisphere. This is an odd mix of birds, which includes typical cardinals, grosbeaks, saltators, buntings, and the Pyrrhuloxia. Perhaps the oddest member is the Dickcissel — which some authorities prefer to move to the blackbirds, but morphologically it is more similar to the cardinals, so here it stays. Again myriad superb photos and detailed text describe this complex family.

This section deals with a huge and diverse array of species and handles large complex families extremely well. The buntings and New World sparrows are dealt with in over 250 pages in the book. The 326 species encompass the buntings, longspurs, juncos, sparrows, brush-finches, towhees, ground-sparrows, sierra-finches, diuca-finches, inca-finches, warbling-finches, mountain-finches, yellow-finches, pampa-finches, grass-finches, grassquits, orangequits, seedeaters, seed-finches, bullfinches, warbler-finches, tree-finches, cactus-finches, and ground-finches. HBW has endorsed the position that the Fox Sparrow should be split into four separate species and the Savannah into three. This is still a bit controversial, but mitochondrial evidence seems to support the splits.

The book ends with the blackbirds — 111 species, comprising caciques, oropendolas, orioles, troupials, blackbirds, grackles, cowbirds, marshbirds, baywings, Bobolink, and meadowlarks. I've heard chatter about this for some time and now HBW supports splitting the Eastern Meadowlark into two separate species — Eastern and Lillian's.

So what's the outcome of all this — well let's look at two groups of birds - the juncos and Darwin's finches for example. First the juncos — I was a little disappointed that more effort wasn't made to better describe how to tell the subspecies/races part. This has always been a challenging area for me as I struggle with the intergrades between Oregons, Pink-sided and the typical Slate-colored Juncos. The paintings in the book are great, but I'm still not much closer to being confident in all my observations of birds that are not "picture-perfect". The Darwin's finches are in a group of birds I recently studied as I travelled to Galapagos with my wife, Kim. I worked hard to identify these critters and took tons of photos and I was still confused somewhat as they are so variable in plumage and coloration. Then along came HBW — better plates and better descriptions that Fitter's "Wildlife of the Galapagos" — the standard reference for those visiting the islands. The fourteen species are treated well here. Wait — 14 species you say! I thought there were only 13. HBW has adopted the protocol that the Warbling-finch is actually two species — the Green and the Grey Warbling-finch. I checked several plates against my photos and they are spot on for the most part. I really wish I could have had these plates with me on my trip. I think it would have simplified things a lot. This is a terribly difficult complex of birds and some overlap occurs in plumage and size. As Kaufman cautions in his new *Field Guide to Advanced Birding,* don't expect to identify every bird you see. The Galapagos finches are a good example of that.

Closing thoughts — don't miss this one. Again it is the benchmark others will strive to match.

By Geoff Carpentier

Field Guide to the Birds of Colombia.
By Miles McMullen, Thomas M. Donegan and Alonso Qevedo. 2010, ProAves, Colombia. Softcover, $29.95 US ($38.00 USD with checklist), 259 pages.

Since 1986, the standard field guide for Colombia has been Steven L. Hilty and William L. Brown's *A Guide to the Birds of Colombia,* Princeton University Press (1986). Like many other guides to neotropical countries, such as Ecuador, Peru and Venezuela, the Hilty & Brown guide is a weighty book to carry around in the field, but for each species listed it gives detailed information on identification, similar species, voice, behaviour, breeding, status, habitat, and range.

The new guide by McMullan et. al. is a smaller book with fewer pages than the Hilty & Brown book. In the section on using the book, the authors of the McMullan guide say that they consulted with over 200 visitors to the neotropics, and on this basis decided to "limit [themselves] to those features which will be important to identification of each species in the field." This means that they do not give all the detail contained in Hilty & Brown, but rather focus on what they deem most important. Up to 20 species are presented on each two-page spread with key information to permit comparisons among species. For each species, they provide common and scientific names, a drawing of the bird, a map, information about elevations at which each species is found, status (endangered, endemic, etc), and key features for identification.

The McMullan guide starts with 12 pages of introduction (compared with 38 in Hilty & Brown) and six of these are devoted to maps, which provide information about the physical and political make-up of Colombia, vegetation, rainfall, endemic bird areas and protected areas and reserves in a readable and understandable format that helps the reader determine bird distribution. The maps of the political make-up and the protected areas and reserves are less useful because they are presented using small print and the text for some species refers to places that cannot be found on the maps.

The two guides have distinctly different objectives, and so one cannot say that one guide is better than the other. The new guide has some clear advantages, especially in the field:

It fits easily in a pocket and is less expensive. The low cost has made it easier to produce and market a Spanish version for the local community, thereby encouraging local interest in birds.

All the information about a species is in one place, whereas in Hilty & Brown the written descriptions are separated from the colored plates which are between pages 562 and 563, and the distribution maps at the end of the guide.

Hilty & Brown covered 1,695 species with line drawings rather than coloured images for some species, whereas McMullen covers over 1,880 species and is more current on species that have been split or discovered since 1986. McMullen also looks ahead by including some species that have not yet been observed in Colombia, but have been seen close to the border.

In order to pack over 1,880 species into a slender book of 259 pages, obviously some compromises have been made. A consistent map has been used for distribution, but for species of limited range the light green colour for resident birds is almost impossible to discern. Little information is given about vocalization, but one can argue that written descriptions of vocalization are often not satisfactory or that one should obtain recordings. Nevertheless, vocalization is important in tropical birding to help locate and identify birds. Although much of the key information for identification is included, in practice one needs, in some cases, to go to the more detailed information in Hilty & Brown to confirm details before making a final decision.

The index uses only the last part of the common name and it is inadequate for species such as flycatchers (pp 153-168) and tanagers (pp 190-202 and 210-211) where too many pages are referenced.

The information is remarkably well organized given the space available, and the overall appearance is clean. For the most part, the drawings are well done, although the colours may not always match what one sees in the field as in the case of the warblers, although one can normally identify most species. Often this can be a problem in the printing rather than in the artist's rendition. We had the chance to see some of the original paintings at one of the Pro Aves reserves and they were spectacular, so certainly some printing issues were encountered during the production of the book.

Overall the guide has succeeded in meeting the objective of providing a portable and easy-to-use guide for those in the field. The authors are actively seeking input from users of the guide to ensure improvements to future editions. This is certainly a field guide to have on a trip to Colombia, but it is still desirable to have access to the somewhat dated Hilty & Brown guide.

By Alexander (Sandy) L. Darling

Nikon Photo Quiz

Sponsored by Nikon Canada

By Willie D'Anna

Photo by Jean Iron

THIS PHOTO QUIZ BIRD may not appear very distinctive to the reader. When faced with a mystery bird, bill shape is often a good place to start the identification process.

The conical bill on this bird shows well and that narrows the choices down to the finches, sparrows, buntings, grosbeaks, towhees, and a few others. The upperparts are not visible well enough to see if this bird has the brown, black or tan streaks of a sparrow, so there are a number of birds to consider. We should start by describing what we can see and then ruling out species one at a time. This is a large-headed bird with a buffy supercilium (eyebrow), a black lateral crown stripe above that, and what appears to be a thin white median crown stripe. The side of the head shows a gray cheek patch, which is separated from the supercilium by a narrow black eyeline that gets thicker at the end. The remainder of the head below the cheek patch and the base color of the underparts are a light buff. There are thin distinct black streaks along the sides and across the breast.

Northern Cardinal and grosbeaks have larger bills and differ in plumage aspects as well. The finches and buntings are also ruled out by the color and the pattern of streaking on the underparts. All of the longspurs show a darker border to the cheek, which is lacking on our bird. The unstreaked sparrows are ruled out, as are the more heavily streaked Fox, Song, and Savannah Sparrows. Vesper Sparrow has a more prominent eye-ring and lacks the extensive buffy tones of this bird. Lincoln's Sparrow is grayer about the head, especially the supercilium. That leaves us with the Ammodramus genus of sparrows, plus female and winter-plumaged Bobolinks. Bobolinks can be quite similar to the quiz bird, at least superficially. However, they are never streaked across the breast, even in juvenal plumage, and while it can be difficult to judge without comparison to other birds, my impression from these photos is that we are dealing with a smaller bird. So, we are left with the Ammodramus sparrows — Baird's, Grasshopper, Le Conte's, Henslow's, and Nelson's Sparrows.

Ammodramus sparrows are known for having relatively large flat heads, spiky tail feathers, and secretive behavior. Fortunately, the latter behavior is not a concern for us in this quiz. Baird's Sparrow is the easiest to rule out with its broken eye-line and dark lateral throat stripe giving it a very different appearance. Although adult Grasshopper Sparrows are

unstreaked below, juveniles are not. However, they lack thebuffy supercilium and usually have a more noticeable eye-ring. Henslow's Sparrow has an olive-green tone to the head, a dark lateral throat stripe, and a dark mustache stripe. That leaves us with Le Conte's and Nelson's Sparrows. The barely visible white median crown stripe, fine streaks on the breast, pale grayish lores, and lack of gray on the sides of the nape support the identification of Le Conte's Sparrow. Nelson's Sparrow would show a gray median crown stripe, blurrier streaks, darker lores, and we would likely see some gray on the sides of the nape.

But wait, are not Le Conte's Sparrows supposed to be brighter and more orange on the head and breast? Adults surely are but this bird is a juvenile, as judged by the pale fleshy gape (the corner of the "mouth"). Juvenile Le Conte's Sparrows are not likely to be seen in most of Ontario, as they usually molt out of juvenal plumage before migrating. Note that I said "usually". There are exceptions and juveniles of this species have been known to confuse experienced birders. This **juvenile Le Conte's Sparrow** was photographed by Jean Iron at Longridge Point, Ontario on James Bay on 2 August 2010.

News from the Ontario Bird Records Committee

By Glenn Coady

Membership Changes

With the completion of another annual meeting of the Ontario Bird Records Committee (OBRC) on 1 April 2012, the present terms of Ross James and I as voting members have come to completion. The OBRC has elected Peter Burke and Mark Gawn as our replacements as voting members.

The 2012 OBRC will therefore be comprise the following members:
Brandon Holden (voting Chairperson), Mark Cranford (non-voting Secretary), Alan Wormington (non-voting Assistant to the Secretary), Mark Peck (non-voting Royal Ontario Museum liaison), Peter Burke (voting member), Ken Burrell (voting member), Mike Burrell (voting member), Mark Gawn (voting member), Doug McRae (voting member) and Don Sutherland (voting member).

Review List Changes

At the annual meeting the following changes to the provincial review lists were made:

South Review List

Black Vulture and Lark Sparrow have been deleted from the list of reviewable species in the south. Documentation will no longer be reviewed for these species for occurrences effective 1 January 2012. The OBRC will still review any pre-2012 occurrences of these species.

North Review List

Eastern Towhee and Lark Sparrow have been deleted from the list of reviewable species in the north. Documentation will no longer be reviewed for these species for occurrences effective 1 January 2012. The OBRC will still review any pre-2012 occurrences of these species.

Recognizable Forms Review List

The following recognizable forms have been deleted from this review list:
"Bewick's" Tundra Swan, Dark morph Broad-winged Hawk, "Western" Red-tailed Hawk, "Richardson's" Merlin, "Coastal" Willet, "Greenland" Iceland Gull, "Scandinavian" Lesser Black-backed Gull, "Red-shafted" Northern Flicker, "Appalachian" Black-throated Blue Warbler, "White-winged" Dark-eyed Junco and "Purple" Common Grackle.

Ontario Field Ornithologists

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