



OFO News

NEWSLETTER OF THE ONTARIO FIELD ORNITHOLOGISTS

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Conserving Ontario's Bobolinks

By Barbara Frei

*The Bobolink is gone
The Rowdy of the Meadow
And no one swaggers now but me...*

- Emily Dickinson

A CACOPHONY OF SOUND, an exuberant celebration of spring — there are many ways to describe the song of the Bobolink. I must confess, its place as a beloved bird song of mine likely stems from the beautiful memories of sunrises over hayfields, and the bubbly greetings of dozens of Bobolinks while I researched the species for my M.Sc. several years ago. At that time Bobolinks were one of many declining grassland birds and beyond the flush of research on the group in the last decade; little attention had trickled down to policy and protection. This changed in June 2010 when the species was listed as Threatened in Ontario.

The highest breeding density of Bobolinks was historically found in the extensive tallgrass prairies of Canada and the U.S., yet a smaller population in the patchy grasslands of the

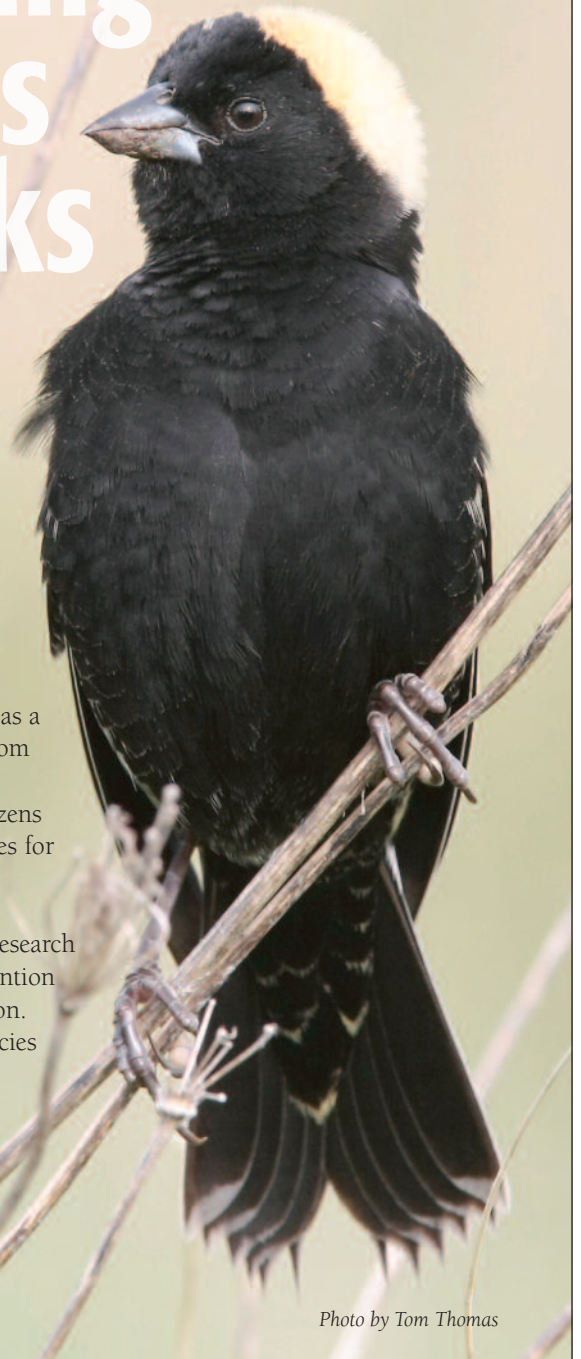


Photo by Tom Thomas

Northeast has been documented since the first arrival of Europeans. The latter population has grown in the last 150 years as the forests of the Northeast were converted to pastures and hayfields in tandem with the destruction and alteration of the tallgrass prairies. The Bobolink's ability to use the 'surrogate', anthropogenic grassland habitats allowed the species to survive the near complete destruction of the tallgrass prairies, of which today less than 4% (2% in Ontario) remain in their natural state.

Photo by Jean Iron



Declines in Bobolink populations were first noted in the early 20th century in anecdotal reports by naturalists. These reports were quantified with the inception of the Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) starting in the late 1960s. The species is declining across the board in both the United States and Canada. In the latter, there is an estimated population loss of an astounding 88% in the last four decades, with the sharpest decline in Ontario occurring just in the last 10 years. In the eyes of many ecologists, this is one of the most worrisome scenarios: a once common, widely distributed species facing severe and unabated declines.

Several factors leading to the recent species' declines are well known and documented. The primary threats likely consist of the range-wide loss and fragmentation of anthropogenic grasslands and the destruction of nests during routine haying operation. Additional threats include exposure to pesticides (on wintering grounds, breeding grounds, and during migration), direct persecution (including lethal control on flocks landing in agricultural land and the illegal pet trade in Latin America) and hazards encountered

during migration. The big question is concerning the contribution of these threats to both the overall and Ontario populations and how they can be mitigated. More than 25% of the Bobolink's breeding range is in Canada, 13% in southern Ontario alone. The measures put into place in the province can and will make a big difference to the species' overall sustainability.

Not all hayfields and pastures are equal from the perspective of a grassland bird. Heavily grazed pastures will not provide enough nesting cover for breeding birds, while those with short rotations may attract birds whose nests will then soon be trampled or exposed. However, if rotations last 65 days or longer this would allow time for vegetation growth and successful nesting by many grassland birds. Pure alfalfa hayfields are cut three or four times a summer and are not a good place for trying to raise young. Older hayfields on marginal lands, however, or a hayfield at the back of a property that gets cut later than the rest, those are likely a Bobolink bonanza. Sometimes even just a short delay from the last week of June to the end of the first week of July can make a difference between no nestling survival and as much as 70% of Bobolinks fledging successfully. Lastly, many public and private green spaces are continually mowed for aesthetic reasons. A field of grasses and wildflowers can be very attractive, both to the eye and to several species of birds, bees and butterflies. Anything smaller than 4 ha will likely not attract Bobolinks, but other species of grassland birds such as Savannah Sparrows would be happy nest in the area.

As an ecologist I often refer to hayfields and pastures as 'surrogate' or 'anthropogenic' grasslands but those who own the land typically have a simpler name: a living. We are both correct, of course. The announcement of the Bobolinks' designation led to unrest and worry within much of the farming community, something I could sympathize with having myself worked on a family farm. I have spent many hours in a tractor; chiseling the soil, picking rocks, bugging wagons. I have handpicked wild mustard and velvetleaf in the soybean fields, worried about the lack of rain at

planting or the stretch of rainy days at harvest. I have sympathized the loss of a harvest of wheat due to fusarium and rushed into the morning hours to finish drying the corn, covered in red dog (if you don't know what red dog is... ask a farmer!). In all, it's not always an easy and stress-free life. And, like any smart gambler, farmers don't want anything to decrease their odds of a good harvest.

However, despite my sympathy for their worry I remain very hopeful that what is good for Bobolinks may also be good for farmers. Two-thirds of the world's ecologically productive land is farmed, in one way or another. This means that farmers are not only stewards of their land and the wildlife on it, but also all the ecological services the land provides: clean water, clean air, and fertile soil. And they should not be alone to share either the risks or the privilege in owning and managing the land. I hope that the designation of Bobolinks as Threatened will be the turning point for Ontario, perhaps even Canada, to providing incentives, support, and education for sustainable, environmentally friendly farming in the country. Europe is decades ahead in this vital task and the United States has been improving leaps and bounds.

But it's not only the farmers who must be educated; it is the public who drive the economy and the desire for cheaper food, often resulting in foods that are unhealthy to the people who eat them, in abuse and extortion of the farmers producing it, and in the ravaging of the land and wildlife to grow it. Many birders are now enjoying shade-grown coffee, aiding producers thousands of kilometres away. How about supporting a local farmer employing bird-friendly rotational cattle grazing or late-cut hayfields? Widespread adoption of such policies could have a marked effect on grassland birds; "Eat Ontario beef and save a Bobolink" may yet become a slogan.

The Ontario government announced in April that there is a three-year exemption from the Endangered Species Act requirement on haying or using pastures. Although this means that for the next few years Bobolink nests and their habitat may continue to be destroyed in

the province, it allows for a strong foundation of education and research to be put in place before laying down the law. In my eyes, the number one priority is to aid and support farmers and other landowners in maintaining hayfields and pastures. All the best intentions in the world will not replace the habitat if it disappears, either plowed into row crops or left to regenerate into shrubland.

Targeted plans included funding for stewardship incentives and research projects that conduct applied conservation research in the province to described priority habitats and regions used by the species, understanding the socio-economic and conservation feasibility of various management regimes, and quantifying the habitat supply and various managements needed to bring about the species' recovery. Beyond the government, grassroots initiatives are needed to educate landowners, support local hay and pasture farmers, and inspire the public to place their strongest vote — where they spend their money — towards those products and services that provide wildlife habitat and the vital ecosystems we all need to live. The Bobolink Project, out of Rhode Island, has taken things one step further: by bringing residents together and pooling small payments together they help offset the cost of delayed hay cropping for nearby farmers. These residents believe the health of their immediate ecosystem is worth it.

Let us stand together to prevent the dreaded day when the rowdy of the meadow disappears forever.

If anything you have read here strikes a chord of inspiration in you, I urge you to take part in what I sincerely hope is the start of a reform helping birds, people and farmers. To learn more the details of Bobolink and grassland bird conservation and management, please visit the following links from Cornell University and the USDA.

- http://scnyat.cce.cornell.edu/grassland/pdf/Hayfields&Grassland_Birds.pdf
- http://scnyat.cce.cornell.edu/grassland/pdf/Pastures&Grassland_Bird_2MB.pdf
- http://scnyat.cce.cornell.edu/grassland/pdf/Fields&Grassland_Birds_3MB.pdf
- <http://www.info.usda.gov/OpenNonWebContent.aspx?content=27175.wba>

Distinguished Ornithologist Award 2011

David Brewer

By Ron Pittaway, Ron Tozer, Bill Crins (Distinguished Ornithologist Nominating Committee)



THE OFO BOARD OF DIRECTORS is pleased to announce that David Brewer will be the 2011 recipient of the Distinguished Ornithologist Award. The award is “granted to individuals who have made 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 many publications and a significant increase in new ornithological knowledge”.

David Brewer began birding about the age of 12 in England. He obtained his first bird banding permit from the British Trust for Ornithology at age 17 and has held a Canadian banding permit since 1971. He became an authority on molts, plumages and identification. David is a Life Member and Past President of the Ontario Bird Banding Association and a Life Member of

the Long Point Bird Observatory. He was senior author of the *Canadian Atlas of Bird Banding* (2000). He received the Janette Dean Award from the Ontario Bird Banding Association in 2001, which is presented annually for outstanding contributions to bird banding in Ontario.

David was a founding Life Member of OFO in 1982. He also was a founding member of the Ontario Bird Records Committee from 1982 to 1985, served as Chair in 1985, and was a member again from 1996 to 1998. David has published many articles, letters and book reviews in *Ontario Birds* and *OFO News*. He regularly attends the OFO Annual Convention and presented a popular bird quiz at the convention for several years.

David authored *The Birds of Wellington County* published in 1976 by the Guelph Field Naturalists. In 2001 he coauthored with artist B.K. MacKay the *Wrens, Dippers and Thrashers: A Guide to the Wrens, Dippers and Thrashers of the World* published by Yale University Press. David was an atlaser in the first (1981-1985) and second (2001-2005) Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas projects and wrote the species accounts for House Wren, Winter Wren and Sedge Wren in the second atlas.

David retired recently as a research chemist in Guelph. He now has more time to pursue his interest of birds in Ontario and worldwide. Bob Curry will present the Distinguished Ornithologist Award to David Brewer at the OFO Annual Convention Banquet at Point Pelee on Saturday 17 September 2011.

OFO's 2011 Birdathon

Although our tally of 140 species didn't break the record of 147 species, it was the second highest one day total on record for the county.

By Mike Cadman

THE 2011 OFO BIRDATHON TEAM (myself, Chris Earley, Paul Grant, Larry Staniforth, and Bryan Wyatt) did our Birdathon in Wellington County on May 20. Our plan was to make an assault on the 147 species Big Day record for the county, obtained on a historic day in 1988. Conditions seemed ripe. The cold April and odd May weather had constricted and slowed down migration and there seemed to be a lot more birds in the Guelph area than usual. With the expansion of some of the big birds (Trumpeter and Mute Swan, Bald Eagle, Wild Turkey, Sandhill Crane, Common Raven) along with others such as Red-bellied Woodpecker which weren't an option in 1988, things were looking good. Was this to be the year.....?

We started at 3:30 a.m. at my house in downtown Guelph, then stopped at a few owling spots on our way north, and were totally skunked on the owls. Our first bird was a Canada Goose, but things picked up. At dawn, we looked out over a wetland just south of Luther Marsh, and were surprised when a Common Nighthawk buzzed past us at head height. It was to be the first of three nighthawks in three different locations, which is quite unusual for Wellington County. At Wylde Lake, the bog at the south end of Luther Marsh, which is the usual stakeout, we got a singing Lincoln's Sparrow, but didn't get the Hermit Thrush we were hoping for, and there was little sign of migrant warblers — which are vital to a successful Wellington Big Day.

We then entered the Luther Marsh property (with special permission from Grand River Conservation Authority), working our way north along the west side. Things were OK but not spectacular as we birded the forest at the south end, but we were in for a disappointment as the forest opened up to reveal that the lake was completely fogged in, so we couldn't see into the open water we were relying on for waterfowl. Still, providence smiled on us as two Black Terns were foraging in the one small piece of marsh that we could see through the gloom, and Virginia Rail and Sora both responded to a Virginia Rail recording, the Virginia approaching to within three feet of us, giving us a wonderful look.



OFO Annual Convention 2011

Point Pelee
Weekend of
17-18 September 2011

This is a prime time of year for visiting this fabulous birding hotspot – all of the birds, with none of the crowds. The convention will include half- and full-day field trips to some of the area's best locales, led by knowledgeable and enthusiastic birders.

Information about the event, including speakers and trip leaders, will be posted as available at:

<http://www.ofo.ca/conventions/convention2011/>

Free New App iONTBIRDS

OFO member Ivor Williams has written a free app for the iPod Touch, iPhone and iPad called **iONTBIRDS** that interfaces with the ONTBIRDS ListServ.

To learn more, visit:

<http://iontbirds.wordpress.com/>

As usual, the best place for warblers at Luther was along the Bootleggers Road, near where it runs into the lake. We quickly added Bay-breasted, Tennessee, Chestnut-sided, and others, along with Blue-headed and Philadelphia Vireos, as the sun started to break up the mist. Tantalizingly, as the mist cleared, we could see a Bald Eagle perched just out of the county (the boundary runs through Luther Lake). Then Bryan finally picked out one sitting on Big Island in the county and countable! Over the lake we noted a distant Caspian Tern, lots of Ospreys and cormorants (which have taken over much of the old Great Blue heron colony, forcing the herons to start nesting in a nearby forested area and to spread out around the lake itself) but very few ducks (four species).

By the time we left Luther at noon, we had 101 species and we were feeling quite good about our day, but we were 19 species behind the 1988 total (though we'd stayed later at Luther on that day). The Arthur sewage lagoons were excellent, giving us five new species of ducks (including, oddly enough, a resplendent male Red-breasted Merganser) and almost all of the very few shorebirds we were to get. Wellington County remains a very tough place to find shorebirds.

From there we swept south to Guelph via various hotspots. In Guelph itself we picked out staked out Sharp-shinned and Cooper's Hawks on nests, Chimney Swift, House Finch, Eastern Bluebird, and the elusive White-breasted Nuthatch within the city limits. The best bird of the day was a singing Prairie Warbler in a fairly large rolling hawthorn savannah near a high school on the edge of town.

The north end of Mountsberg Conservation Area, as usual at this time of year, had too many fishermen in boats,

so there were no waterfowl, but we did get a Marsh Wren. Nearby Badenoch Swamp offered up our first Willow Flycatcher of the year (and another nighthawk) as darkness descended. It's handy to have a nature interpreter on your team. Chris did a marvellous Barred Owl imitation and managed to solicit a response from what must be the only Barred Owl territory in the county. After striking out at a couple of Screech-Owl spots, we went to our usual spot and Chris whistled a bird in no time. And that was it.

When we tallied up we had reached 140 species. While that didn't break the record of 147 species, it was the second highest one day total on record for the county (from numerous previous attempts, trust me). Of course, we missed a few seemingly easy birds. Given the decline of grassland birds, we should have staked out an American Kestrel and Vesper Sparrow: Upland Sandpiper appears to be gone. And it's always tough to find a Swainson's Thrush in Wellington County when you want one. Chris heard a Blackpoll Warbler just on the wrong side of the county line, and we had no luck on some of the other later migrants such as the cuckoos and flycatchers. While we could have used a few fortunate breaks, we did have a marvellous day out looking at birds, and who can ask for more than that?

Thanks to the team for their excellent companionship and for working so hard to make the day a success; to the OFO executive for choosing me as the Celebrity Birder for 2011 and making it all so easy; and to the generous OFO members who contributed over \$4000 so far for OFO and Bird Studies Canada through the Birdathon.

To contribute to OFO and BSC via Birdathon, please visit:

[http://www.gifttool.com/athon/MyFundraisingPage?](http://www.gifttool.com/athon/MyFundraisingPage?ID=1914&AID=1491&PID=191209)

[ID=1914&AID=1491&PID=191209](http://www.gifttool.com/athon/MyFundraisingPage?ID=1914&AID=1491&PID=191209)



One of the most southerly records of Willow Ptarmigan in North America. Photographed at the Darlington Nuclear Power Station. Photo by Jean Iron

Willow Ptarmigan at Darlington Nuclear

By Jean Iron and Ron Pittaway

LAST WINTER we were tempted to fly to Quebec City, rent a car, and drive to Lac-Saint-Jean where a huge irruption of Willow Ptarmigan (*Lagopus lagopus*) was underway. Photos of these white snowball birds and directions how to find them filled the Quebec listserv.

Then, on 8 June 2011, Margaret Carney, who writes a nature column in the Oshawa newspaper, sent us photos of a ptarmigan for identification. It was at first thought to be a Rock Ptarmigan by

employee Wayne Holroyd who photographed it at Darlington Nuclear Power Station. We made enquiries about visiting the site, but realized this was unlikely to happen at such a high security facility. Imagine our surprise when Brian Henshaw, contract biologist to Darlington Nuclear, phoned to say that birders had permission to go on the property on Sunday 12 June. We posted the invitation on Ontbirds to get the word out. The dream of birders to see a

Willow Ptarmigan in southern Ontario was about to come true.

To make this event a success, we met Brian Henshaw and Ontario Power Generation staff early Sunday morning in order to find the bird before everyone arrived. The team was under pressure as about 150 birders from across southern Ontario and three nearby American states were arriving to see this individual, which was one of the most southerly records of Willow Ptarmigan in North America. Luckily, Adele Labbe's sharp eyes first located it about 7:00 a.m. under an aspen beside Lake Ontario. Our job was to keep track of it until about 150 birders were bussed from the Visitor Centre to the site.

Ontario Power Generation's planning was absolutely precise. With everyone in position, Brian slowly approached the bird, clucking softly like a ptarmigan.

Looking about with an alert expression, it walked ahead of him and under the fence into full view for several minutes. When it realized it was being watched it scurried back under the fence where it resumed eating. The group applauded in appreciation.

Facts, Origin and Plumage

In Ontario, Willow Ptarmigan breed mainly on the Hudson Bay Coast, but the Darlington bird is unlikely to have originated from Ontario's relatively small population found mostly along the narrow tundra strip close to Hudson Bay. MNR staff told us that Willow Ptarmigan have not been seen at the south end of James Bay near Moosonee for about 20 years and ptarmigan did not irrupt south last winter in northern Ontario.

In contrast Quebec has a huge breeding population because that province extends much farther north than Ontario. Ptarmigan irrupt south irregularly to the Lac-Saint-Jean area and the north shore of the St. Lawrence River. Last winter, 2010-2011, there was a very large irruption of Willow Ptarmigan and even a few Rock Ptarmigan into south-central Quebec. The Darlington Willow Ptarmigan is likely an extreme overshoot or possibly a returning bird that went the wrong way following last winter's irruption. Darlington is directly south of Quebec. A Willow Ptarmigan that hit a building in downtown Quebec City in March 2009 was thought to be a migrant that went south instead of returning north (Michel Gosselin, pers. comm.).

Remarkably, there was a spring specimen taken near Whitby close to Darlington on 15 May 1897 following a large irruption in the winter of 1896-1897. This specimen is in the Royal Ontario Museum. We will be examining its molt hoping for insights about the plumage of the Darlington bird.

The Willow Ptarmigan is a migratory grouse. It is thought that big irruptions occur when populations are high causing them to move farther south into the boreal forest than usual. The fully feathered feet evident in the photos act as snowshoes being an adaptation to their snowy winter habitat. Ptarmigan molt their foot feathers in midsummer when the toes appear bare for a short time.

"I cannot believe that the bird walked out and gave all the birders a show. I fully expected just to see a blob flush and be satisfied with that."

— Cheryl Edgecombe of Burlington

Michel Gosselin (pers. comm.) of the Canadian Museum of Nature said about the Darlington bird "There is a bit more white than average at this date, but it is not surprising for a bird which is outside its normal breeding and photoperiod area." At first we thought it was a first year male or an adult that had not acquired full summer plumage. However, Michel said in some ways it looks similar to males later in the summer when they are molting into winter plumage, which could be related to the

different photoperiod at this latitude. The day length at Darlington in mid-June is similar to Ungava in mid-August.

Some Southern Ontario Occurrences

Willow Ptarmigan occurred in the thousands some winters at Quebec City during Champlain's time in the 1600s and they were regular south to Montreal into the 1800s. Overall numbers are either smaller now or they are not wintering as far south or both. Some other reports in southern Ontario include Whitby and Welcome near Lake Ontario, Whitchurch just north of Toronto, and Bob Curry (2006) in the *Birds of Hamilton* cites a record by the legendary George North on 8 December 1945. Godfrey (1986) in the *Birds of Canada* cites a record from just north of Ottawa at Chelsea, Quebec. This record is now considered an error because there is no documentation on file in the Canadian Museum of Nature (Michel Gosselin, pers. comm.).

Acknowledgements

We are indebted to Susan Bragg, John Peters and Chris Wood of the Environmental Department of Ontario Power Generation at Darlington Nuclear who organized the viewing. Special thanks are extended to Bev Forget in Public Affairs, OPG Security, OPG Operations and OPG Management Team. Brian Henshaw, Adele Labbe and Ron Huizer of Beacon Environmental strategically planned how 150 birders would see the bird well. Michel Gosselin of the Canadian Museum of Nature provided valuable insights about ptarmigan.

About 150 birders from across southern Ontario and three nearby American states came to view the Willow Ptarmigan. Sunday 12 June 2011. Photo by Jean Iron



National Wildlife Areas of Ontario

Long Point and Big Creek

By Christian Friis

While most of us are familiar with the locations and attractions of Ontario's provincial and national parks and conservation areas, the network of National Wildlife Areas remains lesser-known. In this recurring feature we'll be highlighting some of these excellent birding destinations, sharing how to get there and what you'll find.

NESTLED ON THE NORTH SHORE OF LAKE ERIE in southwestern Ontario you'll find two of Ontario's ten National Wildlife Areas: Big Creek and Long Point (Figure 1). Near the town of Port Rowan the marsh complexes and surrounding landscape that make up these two National Wildlife Areas are vital to migrant and breeding waterfowl, waterbirds, shorebirds, and landbirds throughout the year. These two areas make for excellent birding most times during the year; though parts of each are inaccessible to the public.

Internationally, each is recognized as Ramsar sites — the Convention on Wetlands of International Importance, called the Ramsar Convention, is an intergovernmental treaty that provides the framework for national action and international cooperation for the conservation and wise use of wetlands and their resources. Each wildlife area is considered a provincially significant wetland and a Canadian Important Bird Area. Additionally, the Long Point area is designated a World Biosphere Reserve, highlighting the significance of the area not only as wildlife habitat, but also as integral to the surrounding ecosystem.

Long Point National Wildlife Area was established in 1978, after the land was donated to the people of Canada by the Long Point Company, a private club. If it was not for the efforts of the Long Point Company in the early part of the century to establish bag limits for waterfowl hunting on the point, and protect the marshes for waterfowl, Long Point would not be as it is today — a magnificent example of wetland and savannah-dune-swale habitat of the Norfolk Sandplain. Old-growth oak and maple ridges snake their way along the point, in amongst the ponds, swales and wetlands that make up the wildlife area.

Long Point National Wildlife Area is made up of two units: Thoroughfare Point (450 ha), which is sandwiched between Long Point Provincial Park and the Long Point Company lands; and Long Point (3,200 ha), which makes up most of the rest of the land to the tip of the point (Figure 1). The entire peninsula is roughly 32 kilometres long. The prevailing southwest winds deposit sand along the south shoreline, changing the make-up of the dune systems and the southern shore. People who have been around the point for many years will tell you the southern shoreline has changed considerably, and will continue to do so

at the mercy of Lake Erie and Mother Nature.

The Long Point National Wildlife Area is home to many rare and at-risk species. Plants such as cucumber tree and common hoptree, amphibians like Fowler's toads, and reptiles like eastern spiny softshell, Blanding's turtles, and fox snake, call Long Point home. Over 300 species of birds can be found in the Long Point area, and this list grows each

year with the discovery of new rarities. Some of these rarities include Swallow-tailed Kite, Snowy and Piping Plovers, Sabine's Gull, Kirtland's Warbler, and Hooded Oriole. A few of the more annual specialties include Mississippi Kite, Kentucky Warbler, Worm-eating Warbler,

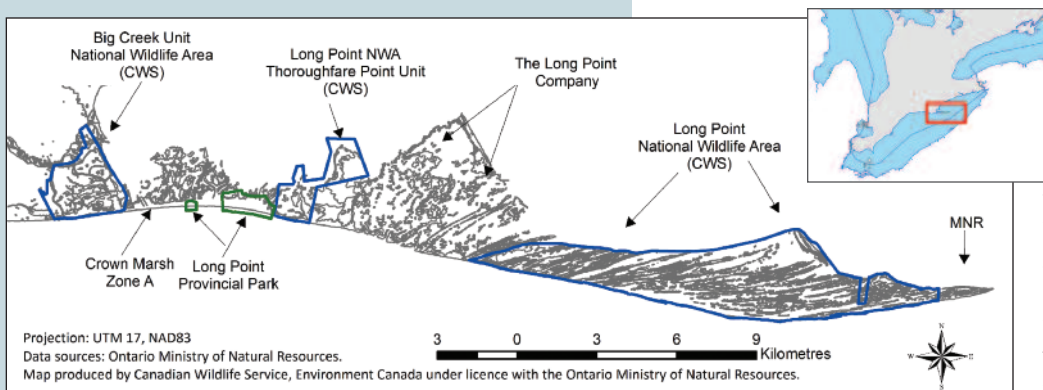


Figure 1. Long Point showing Big Creek and Long Point National Wildlife Areas, and other land ownership.

Summer Tanager, and Yellow-headed Blackbird. Most of these species have been seen in or from publicly accessible areas.

Access to the fragile dune ecosystems of Long Point Unit is essentially forbidden to protect the area from human disturbance. About half of the peninsula is privately owned, to which there is no public access. From the Long Point Provincial Park, the Thoroughfare Point Unit is open to the public from mid-April to mid-September. Light recreational activities, like fishing and canoeing, can take place on the sandy beaches and in the marshes. Beach-goers must remain on the beach to prevent damage to the fragile sand dunes. Waterfowl hunting is also permitted along the northern perimeter of Thoroughfare Point Unit. The Long Point Unit has a section of beach on the north side of the peninsula that can be used by the public during the day but is only accessible by boat. There is no inland access to any part of the Long Point Unit. Some designated ponds are open for fishing from spring until Labour Day weekend, but only with non-toxic fishing sinkers and jigs.



Big Creek National Wildlife Area

is to the west of Long Point National Wildlife Area, at the base of the Point (Figure 2); this is a shining example of what a Great Lakes coastal wetland should be. Established in 1973, it's made up of two properties: **Big Creek Unit** (613 ha) and the **Hahn Unit** (160 ha). Together, they are open to the public from mid-May to mid-September. Big Creek hosts a lengthy, dyke-top walking trail, perfect for seeking out secretive marsh birds. A couple of viewing towers can be accessed from the trail, offering an excellent view of the vast marsh complex of Big Creek (Figure 3). Some of the marsh specialties that can be found breeding here include Least Bittern, Virginia Rail, Sora, and Common Moorhen. Although responsive to call playback, secretive marsh birds are also prone to disturbance. Please keep the OFO Code of Ethics in mind on all your birding adventures. Light recreational activities, like canoeing and fishing, with non-toxic sinkers and jigs, are permitted outside of the dyked area. Waterfowl hunting is permitted according to regulations. Parking is available just off the causeway into Long Point at the parking lot to the north of the CWS buildings.

The Hahn Unit is west of Big Creek, off Lakeshore Rd. (County Rd. 42; Figure 4). A parking area is available, and light recreational activities are permitted. The wooded swamps of the Hahn play host to breeding Prothonotary Warblers; they can sometimes be heard belting out their song from Lakeshore Rd. This area is also open to waterfowl hunting according to regulations.

Certainly, the surrounding Carolinian forests, like Backus Woods, have opportunities to find many good birds. Bird Studies Canada Headquarters is located in Port Rowan, and the Long

Figure 2. Big Creek National Wildlife Area, showing public parking locations.

Figure 3. Big Creek Unit, showing points of interest and the walking trail along the dyke.

Figure 4. Hahn Unit, showing the marsh complex and adjacent Hahn Woods.

Point Bird Observatory operates a banding station open to the public each day during the migration seasons; there's no shortage of birding opportunities in the Long Point area. Moreover, the wildlife areas are great spots to check out when they're open for public access, particularly for wetland birds during the breeding season, and waterfowl during the spring and autumn migrations.

FOR MORE INFORMATION about the wildlife areas of Long Point, check out the web at <http://www.on.ec.gc.ca/wildlife/nwa/eng/longpoint/default.htm> and <http://www.on.ec.gc.ca/wildlife/nwa/eng/bigcreek/default.htm>.

Ontario's Most Wanted Yellow Palm Warbler

By Seabrooke Leckie

While Western Palm Warblers (*Dendroica palmarum palmarum*) are common migrants through Ontario in the spring and fall, and widespread breeders across northern Ontario in the summer, the more brightly-coloured yellow subspecies (*D. p. hypochrysea*) barely sneaks in to the province. Most migrants travel along the east coast flyway so very few are encountered in Ontario during migration.

The subspecies remains a blank on the checklists of many birders.

Yellow Palm Warblers are annual nesters in Ontario, and with a little effort you could almost guarantee to check the bird off your list, but you have to know where to go. The species can be found in peatlands of the Ottawa Valley, and is most easily and reliably encountered in two in particular: Mer Bleue and Alfred Bog.

Mer Bleue is a boreal bog covering some 3500 hectares. Under the Ramsar Convention it has been designated a Wetland of International Significance; it's now a conservation area maintained by the National Capital Commission. Dozens of species of rare and significant flora occur there, as well as many animals that are otherwise hard to find in the Ottawa region. Hiking trails skirt the edge of the wetland, and a 1.2 km boardwalk loops through it.

The boardwalk is a good bet for encountering one or two of the 10–20 pairs of Yellow Palms that breed at Mer Bleue. To get there, take highway 416 north from the 401 and go east on the 417. Exit at Anderson Road and go north to Ridge Road. Take Ridge Road east to the very end, where there is a parking lot and access to the boardwalk and an upland hiking

loop. If you carry on a bit farther up Anderson Road there is another parking lot with access to the perimeter trails, and a third lot on Dolman Ridge Road, east off Anderson, provides another option.

Yellow Palms also breed at Alfred Bog, just a bit farther east. This spreading wetland has, over the years, been drained and turned into farmland and is now only about a third of its original size, but still covers some 4200 hectares. Most of this area is under the conservation protection of several organizations, though some remains privately owned and open to commercial pressures such as peat harvesting. The trail system is not as well developed here as at Mer Bleue, but a 3 km boardwalk does provide good birding opportunities. Lincoln's Sparrows can be a common sight here, as well.

Though the warblers are less frequently reported from Alfred Bog than from Mer Bleue, some 100 plus pairs are reported to breed there, so this might simply be due to the more remote nature of the site and difficulty of access. There are no straight-forward directions to the boardwalk, and access to areas

Birding ethically

Although these destinations are public places, it's still important to remember the birder's code of ethics when you're out birding, and especially when searching for a rare or elusive species. Most importantly, make sure the welfare of the bird and the environment come first. Stay on trails and try to minimize disturbance to the birds, such as playback or pishing, especially in heavily-birded places.

The Code of Ethics adopted as OFO's official policy can be found here:
<http://www.ofo.ca/aboutus/ethics.php>

other than the boardwalk are difficult. From highway 417 go north on county road 9 (exit 51). Turn east on county road 10, then north from the hamlet of Fournier on county road 15. Go east on concession road 11; there is a parking area and access to the boardwalk where the road turns north. The bog can also be viewed along the end of Giroux Road, south from concession 11, or from concession roads 3 or 4 on the bog's east side.

For more information.
www.jeaniron.ca/2010/palmwarblers.pdf



Photo by Bruce DiLabio

We want to hear from you...

What is your most wanted species in Ontario? Sharp-tailed Grouse? Yellow-headed Blackbird? King Rail? Prairie Warbler? We'll highlight the most popular species in future issues of *OFO News*. Send your response to Roy John at rjohn@rogers.com.

The Next Ontario Bird

By Robert Maciver

There are currently 483 bird species recorded on the Ontario checklist.

This includes breeding species native to Ontario, established non-native species, regular visitors, casual visitors, and accidentals. The rare birds are the ones that can really pad a regional list; some birds are represented in the Ontario avifauna by only a single observational record or specimen.

BIRDS THAT ARE RARE IN ONTARIO may be quite common elsewhere, but even if they can be easily tracked down where they regularly occur, it is still fun and exciting to see them as a casual or an accidental occurrence in our home Province. When the species has never before been documented in Ontario then there is all the more reason for excitement.

We are currently in a period where a new species gets added to the Ontario checklist roughly every year. Twelve new species were added from 2000 to 2010, and this year is shaping up to be a big one with three potential first records under review by the Ontario Bird Record Committee (Yellow-nosed Albatross, Sooty Shearwater and Anna's Hummingbird). Obviously this pace cannot be sustained and eventually it will have to slow with diminishing number of possibilities as more and more birds are recorded within our bor-

ders. In this era when many tantalizing possibilities still exist, I offer the following predictions for which will be the next Ontario bird.

Eastern North America

There are a number of eastern North American species that are each a strong candidate for the next Ontario bird. A top contender among passerines is the Brown-headed Nuthatch which has occurred in nearby New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and even a 1971 record from Wisconsin. As for non-passerines, Reddish Egret has been documented in Michigan, New York and Ohio — that seems to be right on our doorstep! Perhaps the case is even stronger for Gull-billed Tern which has been recorded in Quebec, Pennsylvania, New York and Michigan. Ontario has already recorded a rich collection of alcids; how long before we can add Common Murre to the list? If Common Murre can be recorded in land-locked Vermont (which it has been) then perhaps it is overdue for Ontario.

A bird that has been documented in Quebec, New York, Pennsylvania, Michigan and Wisconsin but has somehow eluded Ontario birders so far is the Roseate Tern. Although it is a marine bird with the nearest breeding colonies found in coastal Nova Scotia and Maine, and even though the North Atlantic population is relatively small, I think there is still an excellent chance that this species will wander across our borders. I personally suspect that Roseate Terns have ventured undetected into Ontario in the past and difficulty in separating this species from the regularly occurring *Sterna* terns may partially account for the lack of confirmation thus far. I spent one summer working with a Norwegian birder who claimed to have seen a Roseate Tern in the Kingston area, so who knows?

Western North America

There are many interesting prospects when it comes to potential vagrant birds from Glaucous-winged Gull, which has been recorded in Manitoba, as well as

Michigan and Wisconsin and could very well wander into Ontario in the future. Meanwhile Western Gull has been recorded in both Quebec and New York; surely these individuals travelled near, if not within Ontario somewhere along their journey. Alas we will need convincing documentation from within our provincial boundaries to make it official. I like the chances of a gull aficionado finding either of these gulls in Ontario, but because gull watching is something of a specialty, and because both Glaucous-winged and Western Gulls could present identification challenges even if they did occur here, I have other favourites for the next western accidental.

Other Contenders

Another intriguing non-passerine possibility is Calliope Hummingbird which has been accounted for in Ohio, New York and Pennsylvania. Of the passerines, Hammond's Flycatcher or Cassin's Vireo would be a reasonable suggestion but the chances of a positive identification are diminished for the same reason as the gulls; they can be difficult to distinguish from some of their congeners. MacGillivray's Warbler was recently deleted from the Ontario checklist after doubts were raised about the actual site of collection of the specimen serving as the basis of the only Ontario record. Nevertheless, MacGillivray's Warbler has been recorded in New York, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin and remains a real possibility for Ontario. Steller's Jay seems like a slightly more remote possibility with a single record in each of Quebec and Vermont. Although the population of Baird's Sparrow may be unstable and declining, it is a strong contender based on the nearness of its breeding range to northwestern Ontario, its record of occurrence in Wisconsin, New York and Ohio, and its supposed nomadic habits.

Outside the North American realm, there are a number of possible vagrants from Eurasia that we have a decent chance of recording here in Ontario. Pink-footed Goose has been recorded

in New York, Pennsylvania and Vermont as well as Quebec, Newfoundland and the Maritimes. However, consistent with the approach that the OBRC has taken with respect to Barnacle Goose, I think that reviewers would be reluctant to accept a record of Pink-footed Goose without some water-tight evidence that the bird is not a domestic escapee, such as a European leg band. Northern Lapwing is another good possibility, with a long and consistent record of observations from the east coast and even a record from Ohio. Red-necked Stint is also a tempting choice with records from New York, Ohio and Quebec. Redwing is an ABA Code 4 bird which reflects some pattern of occurrence in North America. Although accepted records show a distinct bias along the Atlantic coast, I think with some fortuitous weather we could definitely host a Redwing in Ontario.

I am sticking my neck out and going on the record.

- The next vagrant from eastern North America to be added to the Ontario checklist will be **Roseate Tern**;
- the next from western North America will be **Baird's Sparrow**;
- and the next from Eurasia will be **Redwing**. Of course, these are only speculations and informed guesses.

As an incentive for readers, if any of these predictions prove false and you are the first to bring it to my attention then I will buy you a drink at the next OFO Convention. **I look forward to your discoveries.**

Book Review

Handbook of the Birds of the World Volume 14: Bush-shrikes to Old World Sparrows

2009. Edited by Josep del Hoyo, Andrew Elliott and David Christie. Lynx Edicions, Barcelona, Spain.

E-mail: lynx@hbw.com.

Hardcover 893 pages.

\$265.00 US (ISBN 978-84-96553-50-7)

I'M NEVER QUITE SURE what to expect when my next volume of the *Handbook of the Birds of the World* arrives. Sometimes, the anticipation is as much fun as the reading. This time the book opens with a fascinating essay on the history of birding across the globe. It is certainly a challenge to take such a broad subject and condense it into 28 pages, but of course the font is small and the pages large, so maybe it's really 75 or so pages in a normal size book – still a daunting task. Logically the story is broken into components – birding, past, present and future and covers such diverse subjects as the impacts of WWI and WWII, birding in developing nations, the impact of technology, kingpins who changed our thinking about birds (read R.T. Peterson here for one), citizen science, twitching and world listing, birding and the media, economic importance of birding, demographics of birdwatchers and environmental issues and impacts.

Nice start to a great book, but let's see what else it includes. Detailed treatments are offered for the following: Bush-shrikes (48 species – Africa & Arabia), Helmet-shrikes (8 species – Africa), Vangas (15 species – Madagascar & Comoro Islands), Drongos (26 species – India, Australia, Oceania, Africa), N.Z. Wattlebirds (3 species – New Zealand), Stitchbirds (1 species – New Zealand), Mudlarks (2 species – Australia, New Guinea & Timor), Mudnesters (2 species – Australia), Woodswallows (11 species – Orient, Micronesia and Australia), Butcherbirds (12 species – Australia & New Guinea), Bristlehead

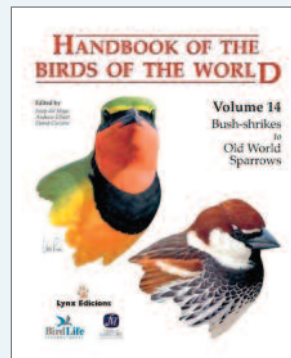
(1 species – Borneo), Bowerbirds (20 species – New Guinea & Australia), Birds-of-Paradise (42 species – Moluccas, New Guinea and Australia), Corvids (123 species – almost cosmopolitan), Oxpeckers (2 species – Africa), Starlings (112 species – Africa, Asia, Australia, Oceania and widely introduced across the world), and Old World Sparrows (40 species – Africa, Palearctic & Orient).

The format of the family and species accounts follows the success of previous volumes, where text, photographs, paintings and maps describe field marks, habitat, status, range, breeding, food/feeding, taxonomy, conservation and migration. As I continue to study these

volumes, I find I'm drawn to them for varying reasons. Obviously they are great as a source of information, and certainly as they are published they are current with the science of the day. I also look to them as a pleasurable read – each chapter is a wonderful essay in itself, and I learn so much about the families as I peruse the

pages. I also love the photos as somehow, each one is perfect and useful in describing behaviour and field marks. I'm not sure how they find so many wonderful photos of rare and exotic species – they certainly have a great network of authors and photographers at their disposal. Lastly, I find the book brings back fond memories of my travels. In this volume, for example, I was pleased to read about the Borean Bristlehead, a rare endemic species found only in Borneo. I've had the opportunity to see them twice, but knew little about them until now, as they are elusive and rare. What a wonderful adjunct to my field observations to read about them in this volume. For those of you that don't travel too frequently, here's a chance to live vicariously through the pages of the book and the eyes of the authors. Check out the chapter on bowerbirds and birds-of-paradise – wow! As in the past, I highly recommend purchasing, not only this volume, but also the entire set – either for your reading pleasure or as a valuable reference series.

Geoffrey Carpentier



Welcome to our new Editor

AFTER THREE AND A HALF YEARS of involvement with *OFO News*, I am sad to say that I am resigning as the newsletter's lead editor in order to focus on other career pursuits. However, I am glad to announce that longtime birder Roy John will be taking over the position. Roy's name may already be familiar to many of our members through his role as review editor for the *Canadian Field-Naturalists* or his involvement in the Ottawa birding and naturalists communities. I hope all of you will join me in welcoming him to the editorial team; I know he'll do an excellent job of continuing to provide interesting and informative articles about birding and birds in Ontario.

Happy birding,
— Seabrooke Leckie

Roy John

Roy has led short- to long-term trips for birds, mammals, reptiles and wildflowers to several parts of North America (including pelagic trips) as well as many day trips in several provinces. As a professional leader he guided tours for Saskatchewan Migration, Best of the West (for wildflowers), In search of Whoopers and India. He has travelled to the Antarctic, Arctic, Argentina, Brazil, Canada, China, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Egypt, Europe, India, Yugoslavia, Kenya to Tanzania, Madagascar, North Africa, Peru, South Africa, Ukraine, Russia, U.S.A. He has taught several nature courses to adults and children. He has a strong interest and commitment to conserving Canada's natural heritage and have held numerous volunteer executive positions in environmental organisations at local and provincial



levels. Currently he is the Book Review Editor for the *Canadian Field Naturalist* journal.

He had a thirty year career in government and industry mostly as an environmental scientist, manager and consultant. Roy's experience covers such industries such as mining, oil refining, airports, fisheries, shipbuilding and fishing fleets, real estate, chemical production facilities and the nuclear fuel cycle. He taught courses in auditing and hazardous materials management at university, and has completed numerous environmental audits.

You may contact Roy at r.john@rogers.com. Queries about potential submissions and comments about newsletter content are welcomed.

Thank you to all of our 2010 Donors

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Avibase

the world bird database

By Mike Burrell

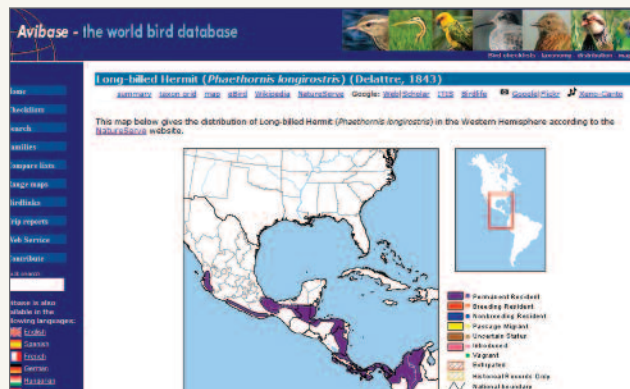
The internet is full of interesting and useful websites for birders, and in what we hope may become a regular feature, we would like to highlight sites that may be of interest to many of our members. This issue's featured website is Avibase; it can be accessed online at: <http://avibase.bsc-eoc.org/>. If you have ideas for other featured websites please contact any of the editors.

Avibase is the work of Bird Studies Canada senior scientist Denis Lepage and is hosted by Bird Studies Canada. Already a very popular source of information for birders, with about 10,000 visitors each week, it is an online Avian database that includes bird names, checklists, trip reports, links and more.

Searchable taxonomy and more

Denis began the Avibase project as a personal tool to keep track of regional checklists of birds and to track nomenclature changes according to various authorities. This is still the main focus of Avibase. Currently, you can go to the website and type in a scientific or common (in many different languages) bird name and instantly have the most up-to-date taxonomic information about that species. Personally, I think this is especially handy for the travelling birder, who may not keep up on decisions of lumping and splitting away from their home territory. As an example, this winter I visited Costa Rica; my field guide had been printed in 1990, and I knew several species had been split since then. Instead of sifting through checklists and supplements, a quick search on Avibase revealed what the "old" species were split into, and helped clarify that I had seen Cocoa Woodcreeper and Long-billed Hermit – two species that didn't even "exist" 20 years ago.

Keeping track of all of these taxonomic changes involves a lot of hard work, especially to create and maintain a system of identifying species and subspecies around the world. Denis has taken the information from about 137 different authorities, representing some 627,000 species entries, plus another 514,000 subspecies entries. Obviously, there aren't 627,000 different species on earth so this number



includes a lot of duplicate entries, but for good reason, Avibase has 262 names in 106 languages for Barn Swallow, for example.

While maintaining a searchable database of bird names is the core function of Avibase its usefulness by no means stops there – this is in fact just the framework for much of the rest of the website. Not only will searching for a species (or subspecies) show you the current classification, it brings you to the second aspect of Avibase, a part I like to call a "super database". Here the site brings together the species-specific information many other websites have already gathered. This includes links to range maps, photos, sound recordings, Wikipedia articles, and Google web and scholar searches. The range maps include detailed maps by NatureServe for North and South American species, plus eBird maps and maps created by Denis for every other species. Clicking on the link for sound recordings will take you to a list of recordings of that species at Xenocanto, one of the best online sources for bird recordings. The photo links are also very handy, bringing up photos from either Google or Flickr that are tagged with the species' name.

Checklists and trip reports from around the world

Another two incredibly useful features of Avibase are tools designed to be essential to travelling birders. The first of these was another cornerstone of Avibase's creation: checklists from around the world. Currently, you can pull up a checklist for any one of about 2,400 regions around the globe. Not only

that, you can choose the taxonomic authority you want to follow, or one of about 16 languages to display the list in. It gets better too, because thanks to the previously mentioned links to photos and recordings, you can display the checklist with a photo and a link to sound recordings – a pretty handy tool for study-

ing up before that big trip. Another option when displaying your checklist is a printable pdf version that is all ready to print to take out into the field with you.

If you still want more information about your destination Avibase also offers a huge database of birding trip reports from around the world. You can search for reports based on location, season, length of trip, number of species, number of endemics... the list goes on. There is enough information here to make your mouth start watering just by thinking about where you want to go. Just don't blame me if you can't stop reading trip reports from Ecuador.

Bird Links

Avibase's final feature, which may be the most useful one yet, is the list of birding websites around the world. This isn't just a mishmash of links though; they are nicely organized by geography and topic. If you haven't already found the information you were looking for on the other portions of Avibase, then you should find what you are looking for in the links. If not, it probably isn't on the internet yet!

Avibase offers many useful tools for birders from around the world. It has grown vastly since it began and promises to be a hub of information into the future as the internet continues to become more and more important for information about birds and birding. It nicely synthesizes many sources of information that are available throughout the internet and should be at the top of every birder's favourites list.



Nikon Photo Quiz

Sponsored by Nikon Canada

By Willie D'Anna

Photo by Jean Iron

YA GOTTA LOVE SHOREBIRDS. Delicate, beautiful, approachable, and with a propensity to wander, I eagerly anticipate their spring and fall migration every year. With southbound passage already underway by mid-summer, it is time to bone up on these enigmatic creatures. This photo quiz features two birds with long legs, long bills, and relatively chunky bodies that are standing in water — not a bad, if over-simplified description of shorebirds in general and indeed, that is what they are.

The bill and legs are often the first thing one notices on a shorebird and they provide an ideal way to start the identification process. The front bird has a very long heavy straight bill while the bill on the rear bird is shorter, not as heavy, and very slightly decurved. Noting that only the tibia (the part of the leg above the “knee”) is visible above the water line on the front bird and both the tibia and much of the tarsus (the part of

the leg below the “knee”) are visible on the rear bird, it appears that the latter has longer legs. We should take this observation with a grain of salt, however, as the submerged ground surface may be uneven. Both birds look pot-bellied, especially the front bird, but that is about all of the major shape features that we can discern from this photo. If these birds were in more of a profile view, we might also look for the primary projection beyond the tail and beyond the tertials. In terms of body size, the front bird looks rather noticeably chunkier.

Even though we have not yet considered plumage, let's try to narrow down the possibilities for these two shorebirds, starting with the front bird. That long bill rules out a lot of possibilities. The godwits have a longer bill that is more tapered with a finer tip and which usually appears upturned, unlike this bird. A Willet's bill is not quite this long and it would

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not appear so pot-bellied. Finally, while an American Woodcock has a similar bill, its tibias are much shorter. As a result one rarely sees woodcocks in water this deep, nor do we find them in such an open situation. This leaves us with the two dowitchers and Wilson's Snipe. We can quickly rule out Wilson's Snipe by plumage. Our quiz bird lacks the pale central crown stripe and the long dark stripe on the lower side of the head that is shown by a snipe. Also, the latter would be more heavily barred on the flanks than our bird.

We are now down to the two dowitchers, a classic ID problem. If we can age this bird first, the solution becomes easier. The feathers of the upperparts are dark with broad bright buff edging and below the bird is extensively bright buff with a whitish belly. Overall, the plumage appears quite neat and uniform. Adult dowitchers in alternate (breeding) plumage would never appear so uniform and even in faded plumage would usually show more of a red-orange tone on the ventral body. In addition this individual appears to be more extensively fringed with buff on the upperparts than even the brightest adult dowitcher so we can be assured that this is a juvenile (first-year) bird. Comparing the juvenile plumages of the two dowitcher species leads to the conclusion that this is a Short-billed, as juvenile Long-billed Dowitchers are not nearly so brightly nor broadly edged with buff above, and their breasts are duller as well.

For the rear bird, some species can be ruled out by the long curved bill. Purple Sandpiper has a shorter bill and shorter legs, the latter feature also eliminating Western Sandpiper. The only possible species left are Dunlin, Curlew Sandpiper, and Stilt Sandpiper. One look at those yellowish legs quickly convinces us that this must be a Stilt Sandpiper, as neither of the other two species ever shows legs that color. The bird's uniform appearance and the pale edgings on the upperparts, which impart a scaly look, help to age this bird as a juvenile. While we considered Dunlin as a possibility for this quiz, the excellent photo shows that the tibias on this Stilt Sandpiper are longer than on the

former species. Indeed, short legs impart a much dumpier look to the Dunlin than the elegant long-legged Stilt Sandpiper. Dunlin also lack such a prominent white supercilium or "eyebrow". A Curlew Sandpiper is more similar in shape to our quiz bird, as it has longer legs than a Dunlin. Typically, its bill would be slightly more decurved, and, as already noted, it has dark legs, but otherwise a juvenile Curlew Sandpiper has many similarities to a juvenile Stilt Sandpiper.

One of the great things about studying shorebirds is that different species often forage together, allowing for comparison of size, shape, plumage, and behavior. If you can identify one bird, identifying the bird next to it gets a lot easier. Keep in mind the importance of relative size and shape. While plumage can certainly be helpful, there is a lot to remember when birds can be in juvenile, alternate (breeding), or basic (non-breeding) plumage. The features of size and shape are much less variable.

Short-billed Dowitcher and Stilt Sandpiper are uncommon to fairly common migrants through southern Ontario, appearing at lake shores and mudflats. This outstanding photo, which compares and contrasts a **juvenile Short-billed Dowitcher** and a **juvenile Stilt Sandpiper**, was digiscoped by Jean Iron at Frenchman's Bay, Pickering, 4 September 2010. You can check out Jean's website at: www.jeaniron.ca

I have been remiss by not including the website addresses of recent photo contributors. Here are the others:
Brandon Holden, who photographed the "Nelson's Gull": www.peregrineprints.com
Brendan Toews, who photographed the Orange-crowned Warbler: btoewspotos.zenfolio.com
Sandra and Frank Horvath, who photographed the Downy Woodpeckers, and **Barry Cheriére**, who photographed the Swainson's Hawk, do not currently have websites for their photos.



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Publications Mail Agreement Number
 40046348
 ISSN 1200-1589 © OFO News 2011