



# OFO News

NEWSLETTER OF THE ONTARIO FIELD ORNITHOLOGISTS

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*Hoary Redpoll by Seabrooke Leckie*

## Hidden in Plain Sight

*By Seabrooke Leckie*

**D**o you remember those *Where's Waldo?* books that were such a fad some years ago? Waldo, a tall, skinny guy dressed in a red-and-white striped shirt and hat, wearing glasses and carrying a cane, was illustrated in a crowded scene filled with hundreds of other people. You'd think it wouldn't be that difficult to pick him out, knowing which distinctive features to look for, but it was deceptively tricky. One could spend hours mulling over the dozen

images in each book. But what satisfaction when you finally spotted him!

One might almost believe that Waldo's creator, Martin Handford, was a birder drawing on his experience of trying to pick out a Baird's Sandpiper in a flock of Semipalmateds (Handford is actually British, so his birds would be of different species.), or a California Gull in a group of Herrings. Perhaps a Rusty Blackbird among a tree of Red-wings. Or, a Hoary Redpoll at a feeder full of Commons.

Every fall, Ron Pittaway tracks down information on seed and cone crops in Ontario and surrounding regions and forms a prediction of which nomadic finch species we're likely to encounter during the snowy months: the highly-anticipated Winter Finch Forecast.

Ron is uncannily accurate with his forecasts, the result of years of learning to read the many clues he compiles from helpful sources.



left: Figure 1. Hoary (front) and Common Redpoll. Both are hatch-year females. Note the paler colour of the Hoary, stockier head, and the distinct flank streaking.



below: Figure 2. Hoary (right) and Common Redpoll. Both are hatch-year females. Note the paler colour of the Hoary, stockier head, sparser and more distinct flank streaking, and especially the difference in bill length and shape.

This year he predicts that few finches are liable to wander south, and those that do will arrive in small numbers — with the exception of redpolls. Both species are expected to spend the winter in southern Ontario in fair abundance, gracing feeders with their active, quarrelsome flocks. And while they squabble over who gets to sit on the limited number of feeder perches, we, indoors, can play a *Where's Waldo?* game of our own.

The easiest individuals to pick out of a group of Common Redpolls are the distinctive, pale adult male Hoarys. With the sun shining brightly on them, older individuals might look nearly white. But very few Hoary Redpolls actually stand out so strongly. Females and young males will more closely resemble their sister species, and can often be difficult to separate.

Like with Waldo, the search requires time and patience, but knowing what you're looking for can help immensely.

Though generally speaking Hoarys look paler than a Common of the same age and sex (Fig 1), the variability of individuals makes this an unreliable trait to look for. In all Hoary Redpolls, no matter the age or sex, one thing that remains constant is the noticeably stubbier bill. The perception of stubbiness may be less through an assessment of length (since part of the bill may be hidden by feathers) than it is an observation of the angle of the mandibles — steeper in Hoarys than Commons (Fig 2). Perhaps in part due to the bill size, Hoarys often have a big-headed and thick-necked appearance.

Another feature to examine is the streaking on the flanks. This is typically

rather diffuse in Common Redpolls, but is thinner and more distinct in Hoarys (Fig 2). Although the birds are rarely in a position to oblige you by showing off their undertail coverts, these can be another plumage characteristic to look for. While females will show more streaking than males in both species, each age class of Hoary shows proportionally less than that of the same in Common. Figure 3 shows two hatch-year (first-winter) female birds. The Hoary, on the left, still shows some streaking in the undertail coverts, but it is much reduced compared to those of the Common on the right. Common Redpolls will also show streaky rumps while Hoarys have little to no streaking there, but this is another trait that is often difficult to observe.

Hoary Redpolls breed much farther north than Commons do. In Ontario, Hoarys can be found in only a few locations along Hudson Bay, while Common Redpolls occur throughout the Hudson Bay Lowlands. Most of the Hoary population breeds outside our province. In the winter, then, it's no surprise that Hoary Redpolls make up only a tiny fraction of any redpoll flock, but in a good irruption year it's still likely that you'll have at least one or two come to visit your feeders. You may just have to look closely in order to pick them out. Some, especially among the young females, may be nearly indistinguishable.

left: Figure 3. Hoary (left) and Common Redpoll. Both are hatch-year females. Note the pale, barely-streaked undertail coverts of the Hoary relative to the more heavily-streaked coverts of the Common.

right: Figure 4. The two subspecies of Common Redpoll – Greater (left) and Southern. Both are hatch-year females. Note the substantial size difference and the darker plumage of the Greater.

below: Figure 5. The two subspecies of Common Redpoll – Greater (left) and Southern. Both are hatch-year females. Note the stocky head, darker plumage and thicker flank streaking of the Greater.



Another long-distance traveler that arrives to hang out with our “local” Common Redpolls is the larger “Greater” subspecies (*C. f. rostrata*). Labelled the “Greenland” subspecies in the Sibley field guide for their primary breeding range, these birds are larger and darker than the nominate subspecies, *C. f. flammea*. They are perhaps easier to pick out of a group of birds than the Hoarys, but seem to be often overlooked.

The primary characteristic separating the Greater Commons from the Southern Commons is their size. Greater averages about 10% larger than the Southern (Fig 4), though the two subspecies do overlap in size range. This larger size gives Greater a chunkier, heavy-bodied appearance, and can also contribute to a longer-looking tail. Some can be quite large; while most Common Redpolls are roughly the same size as American Goldfinches, Greater Commons might be noticeably larger.

As with Hoary Redpolls, the plumage coloration of Greater Commons is variable, but within the subspecies typically males are paler than females, and older birds paler than younger ones. Overall, each age and sex class is usually darker than the same class in Southern Common. The two birds in Figure 5 are both hatch-year females. The Greater, on the left, lacks any of the pale markings in the face that the Southern, on the right,

shows. Greater will typically also be more heavily streaked along the flanks for their age and sex class, sometimes the streaking even forming a necklace across the breast, or converging into a nearly-solid patch near the tail.

Undoubtedly, in the case of both Hoary and Greater Common Redpolls, it will be the individuals at the farthest ends of the spectrum that will be the easiest to separate from the typical Southern Commons — the older males and the hatch-year females. A good many birds may have intermediate characteristics and may be unidentifiable. Some irruption years will be better than others for these more northern redpolls. Still, it can be fun to examine your flock as they chase each other from your birdfeeders, seeing if you can discover a Hoary or Greater hidden in plain sight.

All of the comparison photos used in the figures here are of birds banded at the Tommy Thompson Park Bird Research Station in Toronto during November 2007. The birds were traveling in a single flock; of the 65 individuals captured, two were Hoary Redpolls, and four or five were Greater Commons.

Photos by Seabrooke Leckie

Ontario is home to many skilled and inspiring birders. OFO is fortunate to have quite a number of them involved with the organization. We'd like to introduce you some of these wonderful people through a semi-regular series talking to the people behind the binoculars.

# Behind the Binoculars

## Alan Wormington

**O**ur first interviewee is Alan Wormington, a familiar face of the Point Pelee area, and one of Ontario's top birders. Alan is a Consulting Biologist who lives in Leamington. He has worked on projects all over Ontario and North America, including an official search for Ivory-billed Woodpecker in Louisiana. He is proud to admit that he was kicked out of high school at age 16, since he preferred birding at Dundas Marsh to attending classes. He is a prolific writer who in the late 1970s wrote the "Birds" column for Toronto's *Globe & Mail*, and more recently is working on several major projects (as time allows) including a definitive "Birds of Point Pelee" publication.

### 1. How did you get into birding? How old were you?

Many might be surprised to know that I was very interested in butterflies long before I started birding. Often my mother would drop me off either alone or with a friend at a remote location like Beverly Swamp, and then we would slowly peddle our bicycles back to Hamilton. We were looking for rare butterflies to add to our collections, but along the way we of course noticed lots of birds too. Near Ancaster I remember sneaking up to a Least Bittern and actually catching it! One day when I was 13 years old my sister came home at lunch hour and described to me how her biology teacher went to some place called "Long Point" where he recorded all the birds he saw. I immediately announced "I can do that!" and the very next day I started to write down every bird I saw. That day was 1 November 1967, and I have kept daily records ever since.



Photo by Stephen T. Pike

### 2. Do you have a favourite place or time to go birding? Where/when and why?

That is certainly a loaded question! I guess since I live at Point Pelee by default that is my favourite birding place—and it is. Although most birders come here in May, few realize that it is a very dynamic place on a year-round basis. I love studying active migration (of both birds and insects), and this is the place to see it. Favourite places also include northern Ontario. Any trip to northern Ontario gets me excited, but I am particularly fond of Lake Superior and especially during fall migration. I also like birding in Texas—what

a phenomenally diverse state for both birds and other wildlife.

### 3. What's your most memorable birding experience?

Again I have many. In 1972 I suggested to Mark W. Jennings and Peter Modny that we should go to Moosonee and James Bay in October. Of course back then that was truly unexplored birding territory, and they basically thought I was nuts. Before we boarded the train at Fraserdale we found a Northern Wheatear at nearby Abitibi Canyon—and that was very exciting since at that time it was just a mythical species in Ontario. While camping on James Bay (at "White Top") a vicious storm blew in and a super high tide arrived during the night, which destroyed our tent and camping gear. But we saw lots of birds including numerous Gyrfalcons. Thankfully some native hunters kept us warm and fed until we could get back to Moosonee. What an amazing trip for a bunch of crazy teenagers! I would have to say that my time spent off south Texas on an offshore oil platform in the Gulf of Mexico also

ranks as one of my most memorable birding experiences. It was a massive migration study conducted by Louisiana State University out of Baton Rouge, and not only did I see a lot of amazing things, I also learned a lot.

**4. You're involved in many aspects of the birding community, from the OBRC to leading tours. What do you enjoy the most and why?**

Although it is very time consuming I enjoy the activities of the OBRC, or certainly what it has accomplished. Decades ago rare bird sightings were kept mostly by individuals such as James L. Baillie of the Royal Ontario Museum, but now such a task is too great for one person alone. With the establishment of OFO and OBRC there is now a systematic approach to recording rare bird sightings in Ontario, and the value of such records will continue to grow as more and more are archived at the ROM along with photographs and specimens.

**5. What do you envision for the future of birding in Ontario?**

I think we are now entering an era of "information overload" where it is basically impossible to keep track of sightings and other important information. And there will be more gadgets and gizmos for instant communication, etc., but I suspect this will just promote more "chasing of the latest rarity" amongst Ontario birders, which is an ongoing trend. I'd like to see more birders take better notes, and then submit their sightings to local compilers who will archive them for future researchers. I also see big changes ahead in access to birding areas. Of course, more protected sites will become available for birding on a slow but steady basis, but many other areas without such protection will simply be destroyed by burgeoning population sprawl. I think access to various other sites will be increasingly denied by landowners for a number of reasons, perhaps due to birder behaviour or perhaps due to overall changes in attitude. I painfully see these trends even here at Point Pelee.



*Photo by Seabrooke Leckie*

# Bird feeding as backyard wildlife management

*By John Prescott*

**T**here has been a huge growth in feeding garden birds in recent years, with movement from simple survival support for over-wintering birds to year-round feeding. What is the impact of large scale feeding on bird populations? Do the benefits of enhanced survival and breeding success offset the problems of emerging disease and of predation, and of the possible but unknown side-effects on non-target bird species? The United Kingdom was the site of a recent one-day conference on the science behind this large-scale, "do-it-yourself", unregulated experiment in wildlife management. I attended because of my interest in the topic ("Should we feed birds", *OFO News*, 20:9, 2002). The discussions and facts presented there are equally applicable to bird feeding here in Ontario and North America.

The bird food industry has come a long way in the last 25 years, improving the low-quality, inappropriate and sometime even aflatoxin-laced feed used at one time to today's high oil, low carbohydrate, and often easy-to-eat unshelled feed, and even live meal worms to support insectivorous species feeding their young. Bird feeding has expanded from a winter activity to year-round, with the number of species recorded using UK feeders rising from 20 in 1987 to a staggering up to 90 species in 2010.

Although many population studies show that large-scale winter bird feeding encourages earlier breeding and improves reproductive success, the effect may be more at an individual than a population level. Teasing out whether "despotic individuals" which hog the food are the ones to primarily benefit is complex. Stable-isotope tracking is being used to try to determine the benefit to individuals of feed supplementation. Results show considerable individual variation within common garden bird species in their use of feeders. The effect of feed supplements on breeding outcome has been tested in different parts of a large woodland.

Although supplementation resulted in earlier egg-laying, it also disconcertingly reduced clutch size, brood size and (in Blue Tits) fledging success, but apparently increased survival. Stable isotope mapping of these birds showed that the unsupplemented "control" population were "cheating", by flying into and snacking in the supplemented zone. This suggests that the unexpected adverse effects of supplementation might have a behavioural rather than nutritional basis.

The reason behind the dramatic decline in urban House Sparrows in the UK has become a mystery of national concern. It is likely the result of a decline in urban insect populations. Supplementation with meal worms at feeders restricted to House Sparrows when they were feeding their young dramatically increased their survival, an effect that depended on providing sufficient meal worms (an expensive 150 per male per day). As similar declines in insect populations are suspected here in North America, providing meal worms or other insect food would also likely benefit our own breeding birds.

One of the criticisms of wide-scale bird feeding is that it may encourage infectious disease. The BTO's recent Garden Bird Health Initiative found that about 10% of participating gardens had cases of disease, of which the majority were trichomonosis and a quarter were salmonellosis. Incidence of disease was increased with use of tube feeders (possibly because the use of such feeders typically means more finches are present in the garden) and by bird baths. The larger the amount of feed offered, the greater the likelihood of reporting disease, though this relationship might simply be due to the fact that more seed attracts more individuals, increasing the odds of encountering a sick bird.

In the United States, studies of *Mycoplasma conjunctivitis* in House Finches over the last 25 years have shown that the disease has at times reduced the eastern population of this species by 60%. Greater competition for fewer feeders can reduce resistance to infection, whereas greater individual dominance status can increase immunity. Although more genetically-homogenous populations such as that of the east are more susceptible to infection, it is the increased virulence of the eastern bacterial strain that largely explains the more serious problem in eastern North America. Although Northern Cardinals don't develop symptoms, they are capable of carrying the infecting agent which also increases the likelihood of House Finch infection.

Scott McBurney at the Atlantic Veterinary College presented data on trichomonosis in the Maritimes in Purple Finches and to lesser extent American Goldfinches in 2007, an emergence that seemed to coincide with the increase in summer bird feeding in recent years. It is possible that the growing incidence of these diseases in summer is due to the ability of the bacterium to survive for longer periods in the warmer temperatures, combined with the increasing use of feeding stations by birds during the summer months. Cleaning and disinfection of feeders should be conducted even more regularly during this period than during the colder months to try to prevent the spread of disease.

**NOW AVAILABLE**

## Niagara Birds

by John E. Black and Kayo J. Roy

This 700 page book is intended for anyone interested in Niagara's varied avifauna. Features complete accounts of the 373 species of birds that have occurred in Regional Niagara during the forty-one year period 1966 to 2006. Full data on relative abundance, breeding evidence, and early and late dates of birds in the Region are compiled in each of the four seasons.

Fully documented as well are the details of numerous extremely rare stragglers that have made their way into the Region over the many years that records have been kept. Added to all of the above are numerous articles highlighting other avian activity that has taken place in Niagara. Highly qualified, prominent members of Ontario's birding community write these articles.

Beautifully illustrated with more than 500 colour photos and black and white drawings.

**For more information on the book and how to purchase *Niagara Birds* see [www.brocku.ca/tren/niagarabirds](http://www.brocku.ca/tren/niagarabirds)**



Garden bird feeding has shown impressive advances in recent years. The UK is a densely populated country with an intensive agriculture and large industrial base. There is consequently pressure on its abundant bird population, but fortunately for the birds, bird feeding is a national passion. As bird feeding moves to year-round with high quality feed, the number of birds flocking to feeders and supported by feeding is very large. It is predictable that infectious disease will emerge, as it has and that it will reduce populations.

My sense is that Canada and the United States are different since there is a greater buffer of natural food for wild bird populations. Nevertheless, we should increase our vigilance around the disease issue through activities such as "Project FeederWatch", perhaps expanding it to include the summer season and/or developing an alternative summer monitoring program. It is also important that we continue to emphasize feeder and bird bath hygiene and encourage the planting and cultivation of natural food sources. By offering food resources for wild birds, we are (often unwittingly) practicing wildlife management, and as managers of our local populations it is our responsibility to ensure that we take good care of "our" birds.

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*This has been adapted from a report on the conference Wild Bird Care in the Garden: A Scientific Look at Large-scale, Do-it-yourself, Wildlife Management at the UFAW International Animal Welfare Symposium, London, UK, May 2010.*

*John Prescott has a bird-friendly garden and feeds birds in Guelph, Ontario, where he works as a veterinary microbiologist at the University of Guelph.*

# Carden Alvar Bluebirds

by Herb Furniss

With the exception of one week in mid May the weather cooperated in 2010. We are however down by 30 birds this year because of a Merlin feasting on our feeding adults on Wylie Road. The Merlin even got the feeding parents at Bluebird Box 10. Nothing is sacred.

The final count from our 75 boxes was 112 fledged young. While a reduced number, it is much better than the next box trail east of us in Bexley township. They were only able to fledge two birds all summer due in largely to bears. Once bears learn there is food in the boxes they return time and again.

All in all it was a fairly good year and we will be back again in 2011 for our 26th season.



Herb Furniss (right) and Don Parkes received the 2010 Conservation Award at the Carden Festival on 5 June 2010 for their Eastern Bluebird box trails on Wylie Road. Photo by Jean Iron



Herb Furniss at Bluebird Box 10 on Wylie Road, Carden Alvar, the most famous bluebird box in Canada. Photo by Jean Iron

# 2010 OFO Convention sets

right: Shorebirding on the beach at Turkey Point on Sunday

Photos by Jean Iron

The 2010 OFO Convention was held on 25-26 September at Port Dover. A total of 241 registrants was treated to a weekend of birding a many of the Long Point hotspots with one or two of our 16 enthusiastic and knowledgeable trip leaders. A new all-time OFO Convention record was set with 177 species of birds observed over the two-day event, one greater than the previous record set at Point Pelee in 2009.

Thank you to all of our event organizers and trip leaders who ensured the weekend was a great success! We're already looking ahead to the 2011 OFO Convention, which will take place on 17-18 September at Point Pelee.

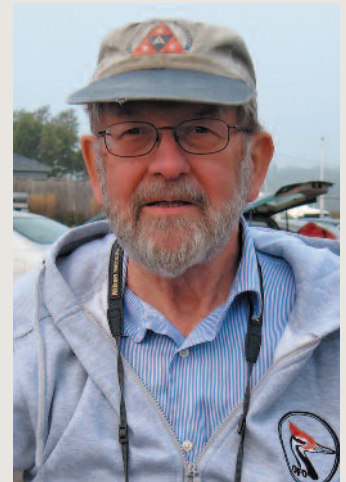


Dr. Bridget Stutchbury was the 2010 Banquet Speaker, and spoke to dinner guests about tracking migratory songbirds.



#### Eleanor Beagan

Eleanor Beagan is retiring as Membership Secretary, Vice President and Mailing Coordinator after being on the OFO Board since October 1995. In 1997 Eleanor became OFO Membership Secretary, and has provided prompt friendly service to our members for 13 years. As Vice President and Mailing Coordinator for the past three years, and on the mailing team for 11 years, Eleanor was key to the smooth operation of OFO. She enjoyed regular communication with members and made daily trips to the post office to pick up the OFO mail. She looks forward to having more time for birding and pursuing other interests. OFO thanks Eleanor for her countless hours of generous volunteer service and wishes her well in future endeavours.



David Hussell awarded the 2010 Distinguished Ornithologist along with his wife Erica Dunn (photo right).



Ron Tozer, MC for the dinner banquet, Saturday evening. Photo by Art Haines



# new record



Erica Dunn, 2010 Distinguished Ornithologist recipient (left), and Erica Nol at Turkey Point.



Richard Pope receives an OFO Certificate of Appreciation for his generous donation to OFO from the proceeds of his book *The Reluctant Twitcher*.

## Welcome 30 New OFO Members

Heather Bragg, Kitchener	Peter Monahan, Alliston
Mary Ann Bastien, Dundas	Bonnie & Harold Newman, Toronto
John Brett, Toronto	Robert Pinilla, Cumberland
Ann Brokelman, Toronto	David & Nancy Purcell, Thornhill
David Callaghan, Newmarket	Barb Robertson, Ottawa
Pearl Davies & Rod Banks, Harrow	Sachi Schott, Toronto
Michael Dawber, Devlin	Karen Smith, Bancroft
Justen Dralle & Zoe Brocklehurst, Toronto	Carole St. Amand & Elmer Lickers, Georgetown
Serge Gendron, Englehart	Kathie Story, Brampton
Moyra Hamilton, Guelph	Sarah Sullivan, Guelph
Emma Horrigan, Toronto	Theo & Fenny Tan, Markham
Michael Lam, Mississauga	Judy Wyatt, Waterloo

Membership renewal forms and return envelopes are mailed with the October issue of *OFO News*. As noted on your mailing label, annual memberships expire on December 31. Please send your cheque or money order promptly in order to ease the work load and costs. Membership fees are not tax deductible, but tax receipts are issued for donations of \$10.00 and over. An OFO Gift membership makes a great Christmas present.

**Please ensure your address and email are current.**

Send all changes to [of@of@of.ca](mailto:of@of@of.ca)

Doug Woods — OFO Membership Secretary

## Wanted Editorial assistance for Ontario Birds

With the departure of Ross James from the editorial production team of *Ontario Birds*, we are looking for one or more persons who would be interested in acting as a co-editor for our journal. The new team member would be required to start before December of this year. The editorial team presently consists of Ross James, Chip Weseloh, Glenn Coady (co-editors) and Judie Shore (layout/design).

If you are interested, or if you know of someone who might be interested, please contact John Black at [jblack3@brocku.ca](mailto:jblack3@brocku.ca)

**B**y the time this arrives in your mailbox, the autumn will be well along, meaning that bird migration is rapidly winding down. Neotropical songbirds, if they are going to survive the winter and have a chance of returning to their breeding grounds in 2011, are most likely several hundred kilometres or more from Ontario. The majority of raptors have also exited the province, as have shorebirds in their escape of the wintry elements just ahead. Hardy waterfowl, as long as there is some open water, and the resident seed-eating birds or wintering raptors are the species one is most likely to encounter in an average winter day.

With the vast majority of bird species and individuals having left for more southern climes, what is an Ontario birder to do during the onset of winter? Get ready for the upcoming Christmas Bird Count season, of course.

Christmas Bird Counts (CBCs) began on 25 December, 1900. It had been a tradition to go out and shoot as many birds as possible on that day, but in an effort to change the way wildlife was valued and birds in particular, some forward-thinking individuals decided to count birds instead.

In that first year, 25 CBCs were undertaken, mostly in the US.

# Christmas Bird Counts

## A Holiday Tradition

*By Allen Woodliffe*

Two of those counts occurred in Canada, with Toronto being the only Ontario location. These counts have been done for 110 consecutive years, now numbering well over 2100 across Canada and the US, and expanding into Central and South America. It is said to be the longest-running survey of birds in the world. Almost 60,000 observers get involved each year. These counts are all conducted in the narrow window between 14 December and 5 January.

Certainly the data that have been collected over those 110 years are useful to detect trends in bird species and populations. For exam-

ple, the population trend of the House Finch in Ontario can be easily observed through CBC data, from its arrival in the province in the late 1970s, through its fairly rapid increase and expansion and subsequent tapering off to stable levels. More recently, other analyses have involved shifts in species and populations as a result of the changing winter climate. Analyses of such trends are informative, and without the data of the CBCs would only be supported through anecdotal evidence.

However most of the people I know who participate in these counts do it for less scientific reasons. As birders, almost any excuse to get out and go birding is reason enough. A little bit of cold and snow isn't going to stop us.... we're Canadians!

CBC participant Hugh Vallee scans the St. Clair National Wildlife Area for waterfowl and other wintering birds.  
*Photo by Allen Woodliffe*



And the challenge of finding new species for the count circle, or our winter list, or trying to beat the number of species that we got last year or what a neighbouring count might get this year... well, we're competitive Canadians, in a friendly Canadian sort of a way.

But most of all, it is the enjoyment of being out birding with old friends, some of whom we might only see during these events, or making new friends. Some counts are like reunions for birders who return to an area they previously lived in or worked at. And the promise of a hot, tasty bowl of chili and goodies, or depending on the host, more elaborate fare, is something to look forward to after the darkness sets in. Another highlight of the day can be the friendly banter that goes along with the end-of-day tally, as well as the smiles of satisfaction when the numbers are all in, knowing that another successful count is in the books.

Chances are there will be a CBC taking place within an easy drive of where you live. Perhaps you have never participated on a count before. There is always a first time, and no matter what your birding skill level might be, there is likely a spot for you on a nearby count. Participants often have varying skills, but everyone can play a part. Many pairs of eyes are beneficial. New birders can accompany more experienced veterans and learn from them.

To add some enjoyment to your Christmas holiday season, I highly recommend that you join up with a CBC near you. You just might find it becomes a new Christmas season tradition.

Currently there are almost 130 established count circles in Ontario mostly concentrated in the south, but many urban centres in northern Ontario have a count circle as well. Most naturalist clubs in Ontario host a count, and if you subscribe to *Ontbirds*, you will likely see some mention of upcoming bird counts in late November or early December.

To find a list of counts taking place in Ontario, visit <http://www.bsc-eoc.org/volunteer/cbc/index.jsp> and click on "Find a Count Near You".



Black-throated Blue Warbler nestlings.  
Photo by Melissa Creasey

# ALGONQUIN

## Black-throated Blues

By Melissa Creasey

**F**or many in Ontario and around the world Algonquin Provincial Park is thought to be an ideal wilderness. Only a few hours from Toronto, it allows easy access to beautiful lakes, rivers and forests where wildlife like moose, bear and wolves are often encountered. Although known for its pristine wilderness, Algonquin also has a rich human history. Before park establishment, the area was considered a valuable logging area. Concern over logging practices in this breathtaking wild area prompted the park's establishment by the government as an example of upstanding forestry management. What surprises people the most is that logging continues today. In fact about 70 percent of the park is designated for logging. Aiming to be as sustainable as possible, the style of logging is dependent on the forest type. In the hardwood-dominated southern section of the park, single tree selection is used to mimic natural tree falls.

One bird found in Algonquin forests is the Black-throated Blue Warbler, a small insectivorous songbird that breeds in northeastern North America. I have spent the last two summers in areas of Algonquin's logged forests looking for their nests. It has been suggested that these birds prefer older forests with well-developed understories because they nest low to the ground in dense shrubs and saplings. The data I have collected for my M.Sc. thesis will, when finished, explore how Black-throated Blue Warbler nesting success is affected by logging. My sites were placed into four age classes depending on when the area was last logged: 1-5 years ago, 10-15, 20-25, and > 60 for the controls. This way I can get a long term perspective in two field seasons rather than 60.

As with most songbird research, the breeding season demands an early morning wakeup. Although tiring, driving past a misty Lake of Two Rivers at sunrise can make it all worthwhile. Walking through an uncut Algonquin hardwood forest can also be quite pleasant. The forest is very open, the understory rarely getting in the way, with a thick layer of leaf-covered duff making your step extra light. Once in a cut forest, especially a recently cut one, things change. The ground is torn up or compacted from machinery, and there is a great deal of slash that needs to be navigated. These slash piles make movement challenging and dangerous, especially when you are trying to keep an eye on a small bird with nesting material, or trying to escape an angry cow moose. Nevertheless, some birds are able to take advantage of these slash piles and use them for nest sites when no other shrubs or saplings are available.

Now that the fun part is done I have several months of data analysis and writing ahead of me. The raw data suggest that the nesting success was lowest in the control sites (>60 years after logging), but trends won't be fully evident until the data have been analyzed, and strong, statistically significant preferences will require two years of data to be clear. However, in the near future I should have a better idea of how Black-throated Blue Warblers handle logging in southern Ontario's largest provincial park.

The American Ornithologists' Union Check-list of North American Birds is the authoritative standard of taxonomic classification and distribution of all species recognized to occur in the AOU area.\*

In July 2010, the 51st Supplement to the AOU Check-list was published. This is the 10th Supplement to the most current edition of the AOU Check-list (7th edition, published in 1998). The 51st Supplement contains a summary of decisions made by the AOU's Committee on Classification and Nomenclature — North and Middle America, between 1 January, 2009 and 31 March, 2010.

The 51st Supplement represents a continuation of the trend towards new species splits and higher order taxonomic rearrangements and as the consequence of comparative DNA analyses. The following is a summary of the changes to the AOU Check-list as a result of the 51st Supplement.

The North American Black Scoter, until now considered to be conspecific with the Common Scoter (*Melanitta nigra*) of Europe, has been elevated to species status. The new species is known as *M. americana*, and will continue to be known in English as "Black Scoter". The European population will retain the name *M. nigra*. The two populations were separated on the basis of courtship display as well as morphological differences in bill colour, shape and feathering.

The English name for *Puffinus gravis* has been changed from Greater Shearwater to Great Shearwater to conform to general worldwide usage.

The 51st Supplement has resulted in significant rearrangements of the taxonomic orders Ciconiiformes and Pelecaniformes. The Heron & Bittern family (Ardeidae) and the Ibis & Spoonbill family (Threskiornithidae), formerly included in the order Ciconiiformes, have been relocated to the order Pelecaniformes. This relocation is the result of genetic analysis that indicates a closer genetic affinity between these families and the Pelicans, than with the Storks with which they were formerly associated.

# Taxonomic UPDATE

## 51st Supplement to the AOU Check-list of North American Birds

By Robert Maciver

Additionally, two sub-orders, Fregatae (Frigatebirds) and Sulae (Boobies, Cormorants, and Darters) have been removed from the Pelecaniformes and inserted into the newly created order Suliformes.

The North American diurnal birds of prey have also undergone significant taxonomic rearrangement pursuant to the 51st Supplement. The families Cathartidae (New World Vultures) and Accipitridae (Hawks, Kites, Eagles, and Allies), formerly included in the order Falconiformes, have been relocated to the newly created order Accipitriformes. Also, the Osprey has been restored to its own family, Pandionidae, and positioned within the order Accipitriformes. With these amendments, the Falconidae (Caracaras and Falcons) remains the only family within the order Falconiformes.

*Caprimulgus vociferus*, formerly known by the English name Whip-poor-will is now recognized as two distinct species. The eastern population retains the existing scientific name however the English name is now Eastern Whip-poor-will. The southwest population has been split and renamed *Caprimulgus arizonae*, and is now known in English as the Mexican Whip-poor-will.

The 51st Supplement has implemented a long anticipated split in the Winter Wren species complex. *Troglodytes troglodytes* has been deleted and replaced by *T. pacificus* (Pacific Wren) west of the Rockies and *T. hiemalis* (Winter Wren) in

the eastern regions. The absence of free interbreeding in the contact zone where the populations overlap was a major justification for the species split.

The species formerly named *Vermivora pinus* is now to be known as *Vermivora cyanoptera*, however its English name, Blue-winged Warbler, has been retained.

Cassin's Sparrow and Bachman's Sparrow, both formerly merged with the genus *Aimophila*, have been relocated to the restored genus *Peucaea*.

As a result of DNA analyses, the four Longspur and two Snow Bunting species have been removed from the Emberizidae family and relocated to the newly created Calcariidae family. Also, McCown's Longspur has been removed from the genus *Calcarius* and restored to the genus *Rhynchophanes*. This also results in a change in the linear sequence of the Longspurs; McCown's Longspur has been repositioned from first position to last.

All other amendments to the AOU Check-list as a result of the 51st Supplement pertain to species that are extralimital to the Province of Ontario (i.e. there are no records of occurrence in Ontario). As a result of the 51st Supplement, the total number of species recognized to occur within the AOU area has risen to 2070.

The complete AOU Checklist of North American Birds including the full text version of the 51st Supplement is available online at: <http://www.aou.org/checklist/north/index.php>.

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\* The AOU area is that geographic area that includes North and Central America from the North Pole to the boundary of Panama and Colombia, including the adjacent islands under the jurisdiction of the included nations; the Hawaiian Islands; Clipperton Island; Bermuda; The West Indies, including the Bahama Islands, the Greater Antilles, Leeward and Windward Islands in the Lesser Antilles (ending with Grenada); and Swan, Providencia, and San Andrés Islands in the Gulf of Mexico. Greenland is not presently included in the AOU area, although it was included in the past and will likely be included again in the near future. All species for which there is a published record or report of occurrence within the AOU area are included in the AOU Check-list.

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## Book Reviews

### Niagara Birds

2010. By John Black and Kayo Roy  
Softcover. 704 pages, \$55.00  
ISBN 978-0-9811489-0-8

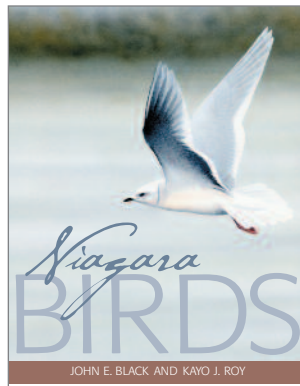
*Editor's Note: This review first appeared in The Buffalo News; the author has generously allowed us to reproduce it here.*

A major ornithological event took place on October 16: John Black and Kayo Roy's new book, *Niagara Birds*, was introduced to the public. This 704-page volume is about the 368 species of birds that occur in the nearby Niagara Region of Canada.

In one sense *Niagara Birds* relates only to a tightly restricted enclave: the Niagara Regional Municipality of Ontario. That region extends from the Canadian side of the Niagara River as far west as Stoney Creek along Lake Ontario and Long Beach along Lake Erie.

Don't be fooled. First, to ornithologists of this region on both sides of the Niagara River this is an important publication. The *Niagara Birds* coverage is nearly contiguous with the western half

of the region surveyed by the Buffalo Ornithological Society (BOS) and it updates that section since the publication of Clark Beardslee and Harold Mitchell's *Birds of the Niagara Frontier Region* in 1965 and the supplement to that book by Mitchell and Robert Andrlé in 1970.



In Ontario it incorporates and updates records gathered by Roy Sheppard's 1970 *Bird Life of Canada's Niagara Frontier*.

Clearly, every serious birder of this region will want a copy of *Niagara Birds*.



But remarkably, that is not all. I have read an advance copy of this book and I find it one that should be in the home of everyone who loves birds in particular or the out-of-doors in general. I have

reviewed hundreds of natural history books and in many ways this is the finest I have ever seen. It will serve non-specialists as well as it will specialists.

What is truly exceptional about *Niagara Birds* is its artwork. From that lovely cover painting by David Beadle of the Ross's Gull flying over the Niagara River with New York State a dim blur in the background to the photograph of the elegant Broad-winged Hawk, which is the last of the over 500 color photos that grace this book, the artwork is spectacular.

Canadian photographers and artists stepped forward to contribute their work to this all-volunteer project. I find it very difficult to pick out a favorite. There is the calling Red-necked Grebe taken by Raymond Barlow; Brandon Holden's Snowy Owl winging toward you through a snowstorm just inches above the ground; Harold Stiver's tiny Blue-gray Gnatcatcher singing up another kind of storm; an alert Spotted Sandpiper perched on a water-soaked log by Barry Cherriere; Jukka Jantunen's radiant Black-burnian Warbler; and many more images by Jean Iron, Sam Barone, Kenneth Newcombe and a host of others. The book is enhanced by the superb artwork of Seabrooke Leckie, Ross James and Barry Cherriere.

Every photograph and painting speaks to the quality of these professionals, but they are extremely well served by layout designer Judie Shore, who has worked them seamlessly into each page. Jean Black's and Arleane Ralph's editing contribute as well.

Of course this book has species accounts and you will learn a great deal from them, but it has much else. Among the essays is a history of regional ornithology (including Audubon's painting of Passenger Pigeons and an 1804 painting of early British soldiers shooting these now extinct birds), a description of this interesting region, and information about its natural history clubs. There are essays about Kay McKeever's Owl Foundation together with its problems with the devastating West Nile Virus, about the problems with birds in the region's vineyards, about hawk migration and Peregrine Falcon hacking, about radar tracking of birds, about the wintering gulls in the Niagara River gorge and about where to look for birds in the region.

This book will, I predict, win international awards for both its artwork and the quality of its exposition.

For more information about it visit [www.brocku.ca/tren/niagarabirds](http://www.brocku.ca/tren/niagarabirds).

By Gerry Rising

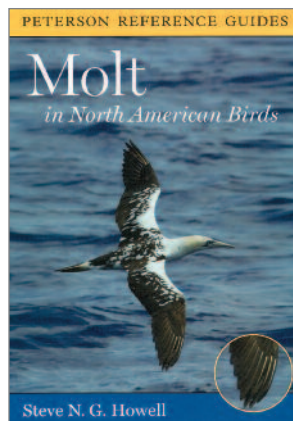
## Molt in North American Birds

Peterson Reference Guide Series. 2010. By Steve N.G. Howell. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, Boston & New York. Hardcover, 267 pages, \$35.00 Canadian. ISBN 978-0-547-15235-6.

This comprehensive reference guide by Steve Howell will answer your questions about why, when, where and how birds molt. Photos show hundreds of molting birds and the captions are packed with information. The bulk of the book describes the molt strategy or strategies used by each family of North American birds. You will gain insights about aging birds and how to name molts and plumages, which will improve your field identification skills.

**Humphrey and Parkes:** Howell endorses the Humphrey and Parkes (H-P) system of describing molts and plumages, which uses prebasic, prealternate and presupplemental for molts. Molts are named after the incoming plumages. Many birds wear more than one generation of feathers, but plumages are named after the last acquired generation of feathers. The H-P terminology is recommended when there is a need to describe precisely a bird's plumages and molts. For example, the Ontario Bird Records Committee has used the H-P terminology annually since the 1996 OBRC Report in *Ontario Birds*. H-P can be used anywhere in the world because it is not linked to age, season or breeding.

**Changes to H-P:** Howell has revised the original H-P terminology. First, he renamed the first prebasic molt and first basic plumage as the preformative molt resulting in the formative plumage. Formative follows the juvenile plumage. Second, Howell uses juvenile instead of juvenal for the first coat of true feathers. As long as juvenal and juvenile are used interchangeably no confusion arises. Third, Howell reclassified the juvenal plumage of H-P as the first basic plumage because the juvenal plumage is homologous with subsequent basic plumages. The concept that the juvenal plumage is the first basic plumage is generally



accepted. However, the elimination of the name juvenal is not widely accepted because juvenal has been entrenched in the North American literature since 1900. Even Howell in this book uses juvenile with first basic in parentheses. *The Birds of North America* series also retains juvenal and juvenile in its recently revised species accounts. Fourth, Howell renamed the "definitive" plumage of H-P as the "adult" plumage. For example, definitive alternate plumage = adult alternate plumage and definitive basic plumage = adult basic plumage. Birders

prefer using adult rather than definitive.

**Four Molt Strategies:** The key to understanding molt is learning the four strategies that are based on the number of molts in a cycle, which is a year in most birds. Molt cycles in adult birds go from the start of one prebasic molt to the start of the next prebasic molt. The four molt strategies are: *Simple Basic Strategy* — one molt in first year birds and one molt in adults — such as albatrosses; *Complex Basic Strategy* — two molts in first year birds and one molt in adults — such as waxwings; *Simple Alternate Strategy* — two molts in first year birds and two molts in adults — such as loons; and *Complex Alternate Strategy* — three molts in first year birds and two molts (very rarely more) in adults — such as most warblers. Adult birds that molt once per cycle have only a definitive basic or adult basic plumage, which is repeated annually. Adult birds that molt twice per cycle have two adult plumages: a definitive basic or adult basic plumage plus an added definitive alternate or adult alternate plumage, which are repeated annually. Most birds that have basic and alternate plumages such as the Scarlet Tanager breed in alternate plumage, whereas most birds that lack an alternate plumage such as the Blue Jay breed in a worn basic plumage.

**Application and Learning:** Study the four molt strategies. When you see or photograph a bird, read the family account and apply a plumage or molt designation using Howell's revised H-P terminology. Practice on photos in books and on the internet. Analyze plumage designations in field guides. You will see similar patterns in related species and with practice the mysteries of molts and plumages will unfold.

**Recommendation:** This is a reference book to be consulted when questions about molts and plumages arise. Every time you check this book you will learn new facts as I do. The guide is aimed at birders but banders will find much useful information to ponder. I recommend Steve Howell's book as a Christmas present for your favourite birder and treat yourself to a copy too.

By Ron Pittaway

# Nikon Photo Quiz

Sponsored by Nikon Canada By Willie D'Anna

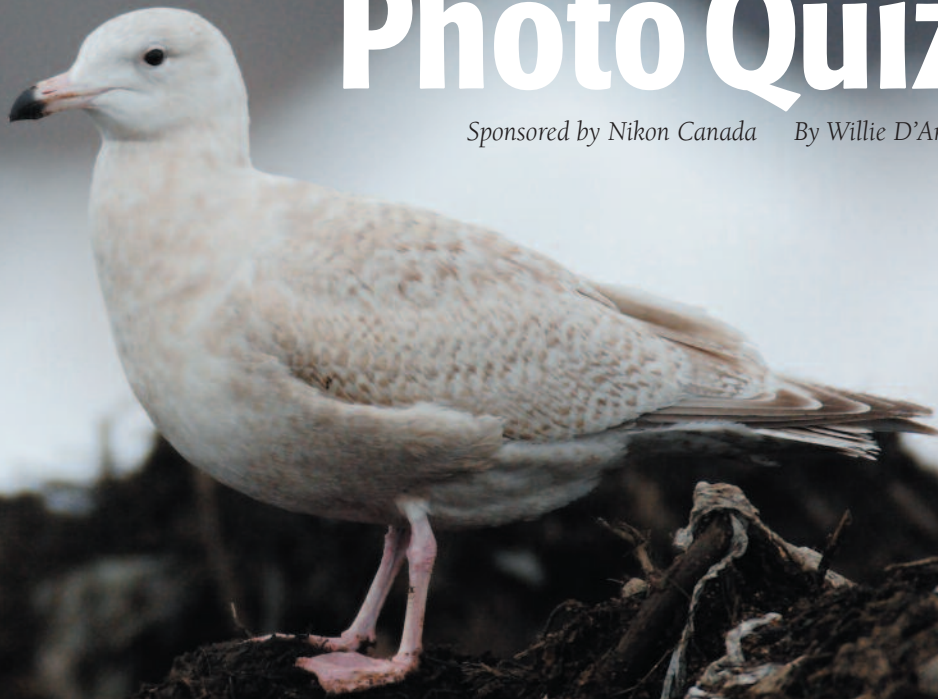


Photo by Brandon Holden

Gulls are abundant in Ontario, especially during the winter, and many birders like to look over flocks of gulls for rarities.

Individuals such as the subject bird here can be found among flocks of gulls every year during the fall and winter in Ontario. A birder's curiosity being what it is, if you found it, no doubt you would want to identify it. So, let's get started.

While this bird is clearly a gull (jaegers are dark-plumaged, and fulmars and shearwaters bear salt-extruding tubes at the base of the bill), the first question to ask is which type of gull? The stocky body and stout blunt-tipped bill, along with the lack of any dark markings on the head, indicate one of the larger white-headed gulls. Viewing the bird in person would likely confirm this assessment through a comparison of size.

When dealing with gulls, it is a good idea to age the bird first, if possible, as this greatly helps to narrow down possible species. Almost all gulls have a mostly solid-colored back when they acquire second-winter and

subsequent plumages. The back of this bird is pale with darker barring and no solidly colored feathers. Thus, it is still in juvenal, or first-winter, plumage.

Now we can flip through the field guide, looking only at the gulls in juvenal plumage. We have already eliminated the black-headed gulls and other small species from consideration based on the shape and build of this bird. Using the thick bill and the extensive white in the upperparts, we can also quickly rule out the following gulls known to have occurred in Ontario: Black-tailed, Mew, Ring-billed, Lesser Black-backed. That leaves California, Herring, Thayer's, Iceland, Glaucous, Slaty-backed, and Great Black-backed Gulls.

Although juvenal California Gull can have a similar bill-pattern, its bill is much thinner, and its upperparts are noticeably darker. Herring Gull can also show a similar bill-pattern though its bill is usually not this thick.

A graphic advertisement for Nikon binoculars. It features a pair of binoculars on the left, a butterfly in the center, and a yellow background on the right. Text includes: "Nikon BINOCULARS", ".clearer, brighter image", ".highest quality materials", ".heavy duty construction", ".superb handling", "Nikon", "www.nikon.ca", and "Naturally BETTER!".



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The species can also be quite pale on the upperparts, though to this extent would also be unusual. The wingtips of this individual, however, are too pale and so we are safe in ruling out a Herring Gull, which have dark black wingtips even in juvenal plumage. Thayer's Gull can be quite pale in the upperparts and the darkness of the primaries is within range as well. However, a Thayer's Gull's bill is never this thick nor would it show such a bill-pattern.

Even though a dark Kumlien's Iceland Gull could show primaries almost this dark, they can be ruled out by the thick bill, the unusually strong demarcation between the pale bill-base and black tip, and the relatively short primary projection. On a typical Iceland Gull, the primary projection beyond the tail is longer than the length of its bill, unlike that shown by the quiz bird.

This bird would look pretty good for Glaucous Gull were it not for the dusky primaries, which would be white if it was, and therefore that species is ruled out. Although a first year Slaty-backed Gull has never been confirmed in Ontario, this species can look surprisingly whitish by spring and it has a short primary projection. However, the pale plumage is caused by fading of the already pale areas, resulting in a greater contrast between dark and light on the upperparts than is shown here. In addition, Slaty-backed Gull does not show such a strong pattern on the greater coverts. These feathers would appear rather plain and contrast with the more strongly-patterned median coverts. The bill pattern would also be unusual for Slaty-backed. Great Black-backed Gull shows a much stronger pattern of dark and white on the upperparts, an all- or mostly-black bill, and darker wingtips.

Since we have eliminated all of the species that have occurred in Ontario, it is time to consider the possibility of a hybrid. Hybrids can show a range of plumage and structural characters, appearing very similar to either parent, somewhere in between, or in rare cases, like another species altogether. Since we cannot use DNA analysis, we have to assume that this bird has a mix of traits contributed by both species. The quiz bird looks quite a lot like

a Glaucous Gull, except for its dark wingtips, so we will start by assuming that Glaucous is one parent. Features that support this assumption are the thick bill with a pink base and a strongly demarcated black tip, the beady eye in a pale head, and the extensive white in the upperparts.

Species that are known or presumed to hybridize with Glaucous Gull are Herring, Glaucous-winged, and Great Black-backed Gulls. A Glaucous x Glaucous-winged hybrid has never been recorded in Ontario and would seem unlikely to occur here given the more western occurrence of the latter parent. These hybrids typically show paler wingtips and lack the strongly bicolored bill. Glaucous x Great Black-backed hybrids are annual in Newfoundland and have been found in Ontario. These hybrids typically show more contrasting spangled upperparts and a more expanded bill tip.

Herring x Glaucous hybrids, also referred to as "Nelson's Gulls", are probably the most frequently observed hybrid gull in eastern North America. These birds are seen on the Niagara River every fall and winter and occasionally in other parts of Ontario, especially at dumps. These hybrids typically show wingtips that are paler than on a Herring Gull, like those of the quiz bird. Without comparison to other gulls, we cannot get a precise sense of the size of this bird, which typically is closer to the Glaucous parent than the Herring. However, from what can be seen in the photo, all the features are consistent with this type of hybrid, so we can presume that this is a "Nelson's Gull". It was photographed by Brandon Holden at a dump in Waterdown, Ontario on 23 December 2008.

It is worth contemplating what some other hybrids might look like. Although the ranges of California and Glaucous Gull do not overlap, making a hybrid unlikely, such a bird might come close to matching the quiz bird. Comparisons with other gulls would be necessary to determine size, which should be close to a Herring Gull. Could a Glaucous x Thayer's hybrid look like the quiz bird? That also has never been recorded but the ranges of these two species do overlap. I will leave it to you to consider what that creature might look like.