



OFO News

NEWSLETTER OF THE ONTARIO FIELD ORNITHOLOGISTS

If the Great Spirit in His wisdom
could have created a more elegant bird
in plumage, form and movement,
He never did. Pottawattomie Chief Simon Pokagon

Passenger Pigeons.
Louis Agassiz Fuertes
(1874-1927)



In This Issue

- 1** Gone Forever
- 4** Yellow-throated Warbler
Confirmed nesting at Rondeau?
- 6** An introduction to
Shorebird Roosting
- 8** Bird Architects
Using Modern Man-made
Materials
- 9** eBird Update
- 10** Birding the Carden Alvar
Off-road Opportunities
- 12** Merlin Bird ID App Review
Long-lived Hummingbirds
- 13** Book Reviews
- 14** OFO Gull Weekend at Niagara
- 15** Photo Quiz
- 16** Changes to the OFO News
Editorial Team

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Gone Forever

By Cindy Cartwright

2014 marks the 100th anniversary of an ornithological tragedy—the loss of the Passenger Pigeon

Martha – the last of her kind

The official date of extinction is 1 September 1914 when the last captive Passenger Pigeon, Martha, died at the Cincinnati Zoo Garden in Ohio. It is possible that a few wild pigeons may have survived beyond this date in the vast, unpopulated forests of North America but if they were observed by humans, it was never documented. Reports documented by Fleming (1903) on 16 May and 18 May 1902 at Penetanguishene are the last reliably accepted sightings of wild birds in Ontario. (Mitchell 1935)

The first historical references to the Passenger Pigeon in the New World date back to the times of the earliest explorers. Both Cartier and Champlain make reference to the species with Champlain commenting on taking “a goodly quantity” in 1605.

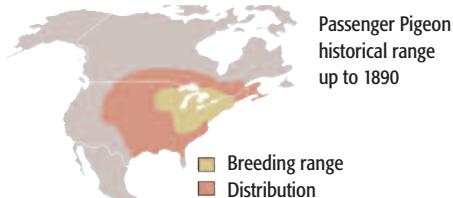
For two and a half centuries afterward travelers and settlers lived in harmony with the pigeons and relied on the species to supplement their diet, and fend off starvation.

All of Ontario was considered to be within their range with the primary breeding areas being located in the south below a line drawn roughly across the province from the Bruce Peninsula on Lake Huron to Glengarry County in the east.

Covering vast distances they swarmed across the landscape seeking mast, fruit, insects, and in later years, grain to feed their hordes, sometimes travelling 160 km to and from the breeding colony in a day. When a suitable source of food was located, unimaginable numbers of individuals would land to feed, quickly consuming everything available.

From a conservation perspective, I am humbled by the short-sighted human activity that perpetrated such an ecological atrocity.

Chris Wedeles

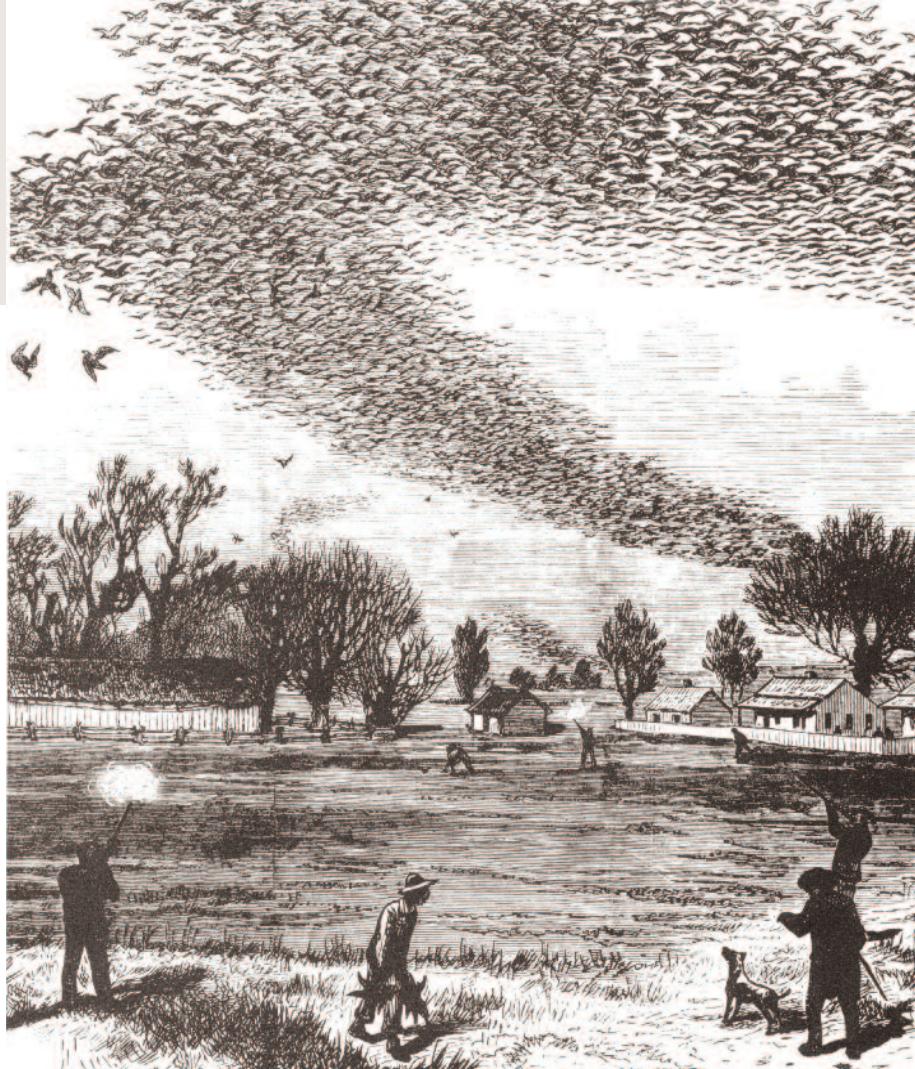


One feeding technique involved the flock moving forward in a rolling method similar to large flocks of snow buntings. One observer reported that "If they were approaching, there would be the appearance of a blue wave four or five feet high rolling toward you..." (Greenberg 2014)

At night, and during nesting, thousands of birds would congregate in huge roosts that filled large acreages of forest. In Ontario, the last known nesting colony was reported near Kingston in 1898 and consisted of no more than 20 birds and 12 nests (Mitchell 1935). In contrast, one of the largest in the province at roughly 143 square miles was reported about 18 years earlier in Huron County (*ibid*). Tree branches would be lined with nests and roosting pigeons would fill trees to the point where huge limbs broke off the tree. The forests would be filled with the sounds of limbs cracking and crashing to the ground, and disturbed birds squawking.



Passenger Pigeon Net, St. Anne's, Lower Canada, 1829
Library and Archives Canada.
James Pattison Cockburn (1779-1847)



Shooting Passenger Pigeons, 1875. *The Illustrated Shooting and Dramatic News*.

The road to extinction

Without the interference of humans, pigeon populations would have been controlled through natural means such as availability of food, disease, and predators. But the expansion of the human population in the mid 1800s was a major change to which the Passenger Pigeon simply could not adapt.

More people meant more food and fuel (e.g. wood) was needed in the cities and more habitat was destroyed to accommodate the growing population. Decreasing habitat concentrated the pigeons and made it easier for people to find and kill them. The pigeons were fast-tracked down the road to extinction.

People quickly learned that these birds were very easy targets and if sold to city markets, easy money. Millions were slaughtered by knocking them out of the sky or the trees with sticks, blinding them with torches, asphyxiating them with burning sulfur, shooting with bow and arrows, guns and even cannon fire, and netting them.

Thousands were captured live to be used as bait birds or targets for trap shooters. Constant harassment in the breeding sites prevented successful nesting through damage to nests and eggs, loss of adult birds to feed and protect the nestlings, and the taking of squab (young pigeons) to eat. Pigeons that were killed and not eaten were left as refuse on the ground, fed to hogs, or plowed under as fertilizer.

Even if humans hadn't hunted these magnificent flocks to extinction for money, food, feathers, and sport, their numbers may eventually have been reduced below a sustainable threshold by habitat destruction alone. Mast was the preferred food for the Passenger Pigeon. The cutting of mature trees significantly decreased available sources of mast as well as nesting and roosting habitat.

While the bulk of this destruction was in the American states due to the much larger population and more advanced transportation methods, similar activities occurred in parts of Ontario on a smaller scale.

It's almost impossible to imagine a congregation of more than three billion creatures.

There are accounts of huge swarms of locusts numbering in the billions, but as far as I can tell, the flock of passenger pigeons King witnessed represents the largest massing of a single animal species ever recorded – and it was right here in Ontario. Chris Wedeles

Benedict Revoil, a French huntsman who visited America between 1840 and 1845 predicted the extinction of the Passenger Pigeon with alarming vision and accuracy:

As the reader will infer from the foregoing remarks, this variety of game is, in America, threatened with destruction... Everything leads to the belief that the pigeons... will eventually disappear from this continent; and if the world endure a century longer, I will wager that the amateur of ornithology will find no pigeons except in select museums of Natural History.

(Davenport 1874)

A grand migration

In 1866, W. Ross King, a soldier staying at Fort Mississauga near Niagara, witnessed this spectacle:

*I had one year, in the month of May, the gratification of witnessing a spectacle I had frequently heard of — namely, a grand migration of the Passenger Pigeon (*Ectopistes migratoria*)... Hurrying out and ascending the grassy ramparts, I was perfectly amazed to behold the air filled and the sun obscured by millions of pigeons, not hovering about, but darting onwards in a straight line with arrowy flight, in a vast mass a mile or more in breadth, and stretching before and behind as far as the eye could reach.*

Swiftly and steadily the column passed over with a rushing sound, and for hours continued in undiminished myriads advancing over the American forests in the eastern horizon, as the myriads that had passed were lost in the western sky. (Major W. Ross King)

King's account of the Passenger Pigeon and other species was published on his return to England. He went on to document that the flight lasted about 14 hours and was at least 300 miles long.

(King 1866)

Passenger Pigeon.
Alexander Wilson (1766-1813)

While researching his book, Wisconsin naturalist and writer A. W. Schorger (1955) calculated that King's flock contained at least 3,717,120,000 pigeons by applying a formula of two birds per square yard and a generally accepted speed of 100 km per hour in flight. In more recent years this result has been confirmed by at least three other scientists. Even flying at 56 km per hour, the speed assigned to the smaller and slower Mourning Dove, King's flock would have contained over 2 billion individuals according to Ken Brock. (Greenberg 2014) And this was only one of many flocks traversing the countryside.

In less than four decades, mankind managed to reduce a species that numbered in the billions to zero. That so many birds could vanish, never to return is a story of human destruction and greed.

The Passenger Pigeon needs no protection

Several American states tried to enact laws to protect this species with varying levels of success. Some were too late, others ignored the concerns. In response to a bill brought before the Ohio State Legislature, a report was filed that said in part:

The passenger pigeon needs no protection. Wonderfully prolific, having the vast forests



Stuffed Passenger Pigeon. Bird Gallery,
Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto.
GNU Free Documentation Licensing

Museum mounts of Passenger Pigeons are on display at the following locations in Ontario

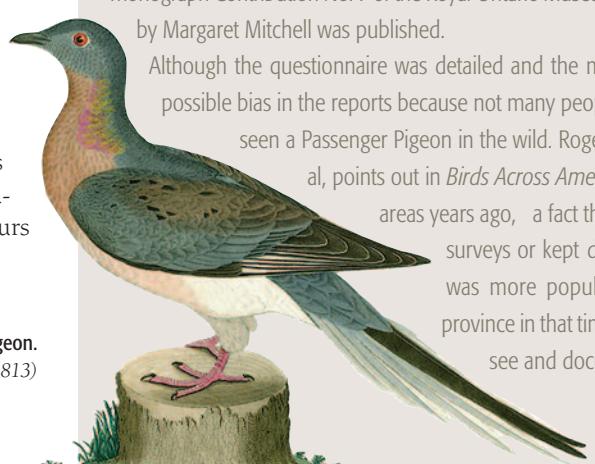
- Grey Roots Museum and Archive, Owen Sound
- Halton Region Museum, Milton
- Oxford County Museum School, Ingersoll
- Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto

of the North as its breeding grounds, traveling hundreds of miles in search of food, it is here today and elsewhere tomorrow, and no ordinary destruction can lessen them, or be missed from the myriad that are yearly produced. (Greenberg 2014)

It appears that legislation to protect this species in Canada was not introduced

Documentation in Ontario

In 1926 staff at the Royal Ontario Museum recognized the importance of gathering information from people who had observed live Passenger Pigeons firsthand. The information collected by the original questionnaire was then expanded by supplementary material obtained from early literature. In 1935 the monograph Contribution No. 7 of the Royal Ontario Museum of Zoology "The Passenger Pigeon in Ontario" by Margaret Mitchell was published.



Although the questionnaire was detailed and the monograph very thorough, Mitchell identified a possible bias in the reports because not many people who were still alive in 1926 would have ever seen a Passenger Pigeon in the wild. Roger Tory Peterson, speaking about birds in general, points out in *Birds Across America* that birding was not popular in subsistence areas years ago, a fact that may have influenced who participated in the surveys or kept detailed written records. Since southern Ontario was more populated and settled than northern parts of the province in that time period, there were more observers present to see and document the birds compared to northern areas.

until 1897, far too late to save the Passenger Pigeon. Margaret Mitchell summed it up succinctly:

In the early days of game laws, pigeons were apparently too numerous to conceivably need protection. Then the species became so commercially important that it was in the interest of market hunters and trap-shooters to keep it unprotected; and finally it was considered by many people in the same class as sparrows or blackbirds, either too common to notice or too destructive to warrant protection. (Mitchell 1935)

What have we learned from history?

Very little it seems. Habitat is still lost, here and elsewhere, at an alarming rate. We look to other cultures and condemn their forest cutting while we cut our own. We declare grassland habitat as threatened, then plough it under or fill it in with monoculture plantations. A hundred years from now, will our descendants mourn the extinction of those species that today are considered abundant or undesirable?

Men still live who, in their youth, remember pigeons. Trees still live who, in their youth, were shaken by a living wind. But a decade hence, only the oldest oaks will remember, and at long last only the hills will know. (Aldo Leopold 1947)

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Yellow-throated Warbler Confirmed nesting at Rondeau?



The Yellow-throated Warbler is quite rare in Canada. Most eastern Canada records are in spring, yet no birds have lingered long enough to provide any conclusive evidence of nesting.

Article and photos by P. Allen Woodliffe

During the Ohio Breeding Bird Atlas, Yellow-throated Warbler was relatively common, with 269 blocks reporting breeding evidence during the data collection period from 1982-1987. The greatest number was in the southern part of the state and while there were records for six blocks in counties bordering Lake Erie, not one was confirmed (Peterjohn and Rice 1991). By comparison the breeding bird atlas of Michigan (1983-1988) reported seven blocks with breeding evidence (Brewer *et al.* 1991) with only two of those records confirmed, and all records except for one were in the counties at the southernmost part of the state.

Yellow-throated Warbler is apparently a relative newcomer to Chatham-Kent. Woods (1949) did not include any mention of it in his thorough examination of the historical records in his unpublished manuscript *The Birds of Kent County, Ontario*. It is always possible that birds may have gone undetected in Chatham-Kent given the relative paucity of birders scouring appropriate sites prior to that time, and the contradictory historical abundance of this species in northern Ohio in the 1800s prior to a decline by the 1920s (Peterjohn 2001).

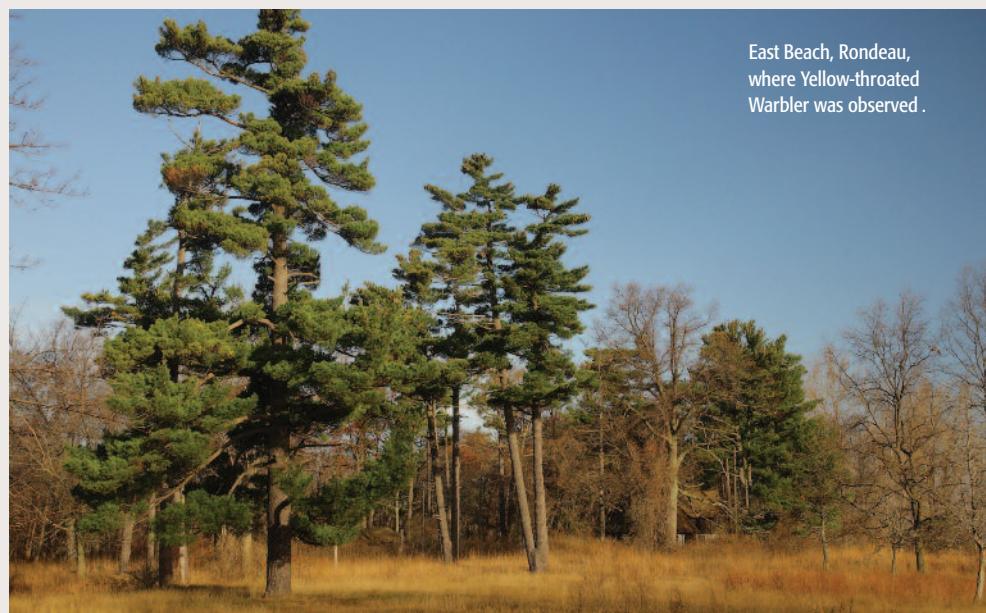
There have been more than a dozen occurrences of Yellow-throated Warbler at Rondeau over the last five decades according to park records. The first such record was on 16 May 1959. This record, as well as most of those since, was of a relatively brief occurrence. All were during the period from 25 April to 26 May. The records at first were very sporadic, happening only once every five years or so, but occurred with increasing frequency by the early 2000s. This undoubtedly was partially due to increased coverage as a result of more birders visiting Rondeau over the last several decades. Interestingly following the decline in Ohio in the 1920s, birders there observed a slow increase in the number of records northward by the 1940s to the extent that by 1975 summering pairs were seen in the northern counties on a regular basis (Peterjohn 2001). The regularity of this species occurring in northern Ohio combined with the periodic spring migration overshoots resulting from weather events, likely were factors in the increased frequency of it appearing at Rondeau.

The still infrequent presence of Yellow-throated Warbler at Rondeau was about to change in 2011. On 24 April of that year, a single bird appeared at a feeder in Rondeau Provincial Park and it remained in that vicinity until well into the summer.

Fast forward to 16 April 2012. Things got a little more interesting. Not only did presumably the same bird arrive, but it appeared to have a mate. The two birds persisted in the same area as in 2011, mainly between the same cottage and the Visitor Centre not much more than 400 metres down the road. Despite concerted efforts to confirm nesting over a six week period, no evidence was found.

Various references indicated that Yellow-throated Warblers often nest in swampy bottomlands, including floodplain woods with Sycamores, especially in the southern part of their range. However they also will inhabit pine forests, especially towards the northern limits of their range. The habitat in the general vicinity of where these birds were most often observed at Rondeau was a mix of open White Pine and Red Oak forest. Some limited swampy woodland was immediately adjacent to part of it. Nest heights are reported to range from 3-36 metres above ground, averaging about 14 metres. The pines in this area are in some cases, more than 30 metres tall, and

A single bird appeared at a feeder in Rondeau Provincial Park and it remained in that vicinity until well into the summer.



East Beach, Rondeau, where Yellow-throated Warbler was observed.

the birds were often observed in the upper third of such trees, making observing and following their activities somewhat challenging.

An additional challenge in determining what this pair was up to is that except for some very subtle differences seen only under excellent conditions and at close range, the male and female are indistinguishable. Therefore it was difficult to know whether it was the male being seen mostly or the female. Was it most often the male, perhaps searching for food, while the female was on the nest incubating the eggs or tending the young? Or was the female foraging as well, indicating an unsuccessful nesting attempt and the birds were just biding their time waiting to migrate south again?

On 2 July, a birder posted this message on Ontbirds: "I had a [the?] male Yellow-throated Warbler singing behind the Visitor's Centre on Tuliptree Trail. We watched the bird for a bit and saw it catch a caterpillar. It quickly scissored it in two, stuffed the bits in its bill and flew off to the east, presumably to feed nestlings/fledglings."

That was encouraging, and so more time was spent watching and listening in this area, but to no avail. The season came and went without finding a nest or fledged young which would have resulted in the first documented nesting of this species in Canada.

It should be mentioned that using the codes of the Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas, 'carrying food' is in fact a code for confirming breeding. With the evidence put forth by the posting on Ontbirds, one could make a case that the first confirmed record of Yellow-throated Warbler breeding was now in the books. Yet for such a significant record and with no guarantee that the adult was carrying food to young, one would expect more definite evidence before making this claim. Certainly 'carrying food' does not meet the criteria of the Ontario Nest Record Scheme to confirm nesting.

April of 2013 arrived with some anticipation. By mid-April, the presence of two Yellow-throated Warblers was once again confirmed at Rondeau. And again they stayed, being seen almost daily in the vicinity of the cottage, the Visitor Centre or somewherein between. This would be the year ...we hoped!

Even more effort was put into watching the birds as they came and went. Hours were spent traipsing back and forth along the edges of the narrow pine forest. One or more birds would appear and then disappear for long periods of time. Once in awhile they would seem to enter a pine bough where a nest-like structure could have been present, but then disappear again. On occasion one would move lower but usually they were in the upper third of the trees, making observation more difficult.

Another time one of the birds was observed gathering what appeared to be nesting material. Unfortunately it couldn't be followed as it disappeared into the upper reaches of several pines. To ease the strain of peering so intently at the tree tops for long periods, I even employed a tilted back lawn chair in a likely spot on occasion. Serious effort was put forth by birders including Jim Burk, Steve Charbonneau, Blake Mann, Ric McArthur, Mark Peck and myself watching and searching on various occasions from early May through late June, both individually and collaboratively. Unfortunately we came no closer to finding a nest or observing fledged young than we had been at the end of 2012.

Will 2014 be more successful? By the time this issue has been released, it will at least be known if the birds have returned to Rondeau. We plan to continue our efforts to find breeding evidence.

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An introduction to Shorebird Roosting

By Christian Friis

As a birder, I've always thought of roosts as something pretty cool. It means bunking with other people in a safe place with a bunch of eyes on the lookout for trouble. If I were a bird, I would normally be touchy about anyone getting too close to my resources (food, shelter, territory), but when it comes to roosts, I don't mind sharing. Why is that?

We'll look for an answer in the context of shorebirds, and focus on migrants in Ontario.



Roosting Dunlin at Cobourg Harbour, May 2009.
Jean Iron

Shorebirds typically roost during predictable times of the year, and at predictable periods within those times. It normally occurs during the non-breeding season when their social nature comes to the fore. They will defend a small area around themselves while feeding, but when the time comes to head off to roost, these same birds will cozy up with individuals they may have just told to back off while feeding.

So, what gives? Birds fly to roost because nightfall is imminent or because feeding opportunities have been reduced, as in tidal areas. Birds will forage at night, but it's risky due to predators, and there is safety in numbers. With many eyes on the lookout, potential threats are identified early and everyone in the group is better off.



Roost sites are primarily on land. There are cases of aerial roosting, but the energy needs are clearly higher if a bird is constantly on the wing. Roost locations on wintering grounds are often the same sites year after year, while those along a migration route may be used sporadically. On staging grounds along James Bay, for example, shorebirds choose locations near foraging sites at or near fresh-water outflows like the Albany River or smaller tributaries flowing into James Bay. Roost sites are generally rather open, affording an unobstructed view of a potential threat.

The sites vary in quality, which can be gauged by such things as distance to foraging areas or level of predation risk. Within a roost site, quality may influence the fine-scale structure of the flock. Social structure and habitat supply play a role in both cases. Young or less fit birds are often pushed to poorer quality sites, or poorer quality areas within a roost site, by more dominant birds.

North Point, James Bay, July 2011.
Sempalmated Sandpipers, White-rumped
Sandpipers and Dunlin. Jean Iron

There are a few players in a roosting group: sleeping or inactive birds, preeners, and feeders. The one constant is vigilance. Birds positioned around the outside tend to be scanning more often than those in the middle of the roost. The outer birds sound the alarm for the inner section of the roost which is mostly occupied by preening or inactive birds. That preening is important because well-maintained feathers are crucial to a successful migration. Rest is equally important.

Ontario birders are most likely to see shorebird roosts during autumn and spring migration at sewage lagoons, wetlands or Great Lakes shorelines.

Longridge Point, James Bay, August 2010.
Sanderlings and Ruddy Turnstones.
Jean Iron

Ontario Shorebird Survey

You can contribute to the Ontario Shorebird Survey, coordinated by Environment Canada's Canadian Wildlife Service since 1974. Email me at shorebirds@ec.gc.ca for more information, or check <http://www.birdscanada.org/birdmon/prism/main.jsp> for sites and background available for download.



Bird Architects Using Modern Man-made Materials

By Ken Dance

Early naturalists noticed that some birds used horse hair and sheep's wool in their nests. Presumably Ontario birds had been incorporating hair of native animals into nests for millennia before the arrival of Europeans.

In the twentieth century, it was not uncommon to find a variety of manufactured materials as structural components of nests of certain bird species. For example, in 1985 I reported on Gray Catbirds using cellophane, plasticized paper, plastic sheeting, facial tissue and tinfoil in several nests built in urban parks.

This article was inspired by my recent discovery of many rural birds using polypropylene binder twine or fragments of plastic tarps as nest building material. (Dance 1985)

A neighbour who owns a grass-fed beef farm called to say that a Baltimore Oriole nest containing "plastic" baler twine had been found on the ground in one of her pastures. She asked if I would like it to see the nest. Much to my surprise, the nest was an artistic masterpiece, having been constructed from two colours of twine: see Photo 1. Harrison (1975) notes that a Baltimore Oriole wove the framework of its basket nest from pieces of monofilament fish line.

An examination of old nests on our Oxford County farm in the autumns of 2011 and 2012 revealed baler twine strands in several American Robin nests and in a Chipping Sparrow nest. Nest boxes used by Tree Swallows and Eastern Bluebirds on our farm also contained baler twine as a nesting material. Used baler twine had been left scattered around our farm by the previous owner. Robins were using strands of baler twine that had been discarded six or more years earlier. In addition to baler twine, I found strips of plastic tarp in several American Robin nests located near our buildings.



Photo 1. Baltimore Oriole nest viewed from above.
Kevin Dance



Photo 2. American Robin nest built on a polypropylene baler twine base. Kevin Dance

The American Robin nest shown in Photo 2 was found in winter in a shrub along a County Road in Brant County. The base of the nest had a five centimetre thick cushion of baler twine, some of it dangling from the bottom, with the typical mud and grass cup sitting on top.

It's not all good news

Online research revealed several other dimensions to the story. A variety of bird species have been documented using binder twine as a nest material, for example Barn Swallow, Mountain Bluebird, Bullock's Oriole, American Crow, Common Raven, Great Horned Owl, Osprey, House Wren, American Robin and House Sparrow. Undoubtedly, there are numerous other species that use binder twine in their nests.

The online research revealed a significant negative aspect to plastic binder twine use in birds' nests. There are several instances of large birds becoming entangled in the twine strands, e.g. Wild Turkey, Osprey and Great Horned Owl, where severe injury or death was the outcome. Presumably small bird species, which also use baler twine or polypropylene tarp strands in their nests, could and do become entangled in these materials.

What can be done?

In the Western U.S., some media articles have encouraged farmers to gather up used baler twine and properly dispose of it, so that birds are not put at risk. In Ontario, Clean Farms (an industry-funded organization) has run a pilot project that encourages farmers to return used/waste baler twine for recycling into new twine. Although many of the readers won't have baler twine in their yards, they may have a nylon rope or polypropylene tarps, known to pose an entanglement hazard. To make your yard bird friendly clean up and dispose of any loose or frayed nylon rope or plastic tarp to prevent injuries to the birds that we treasure.

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eBird Update

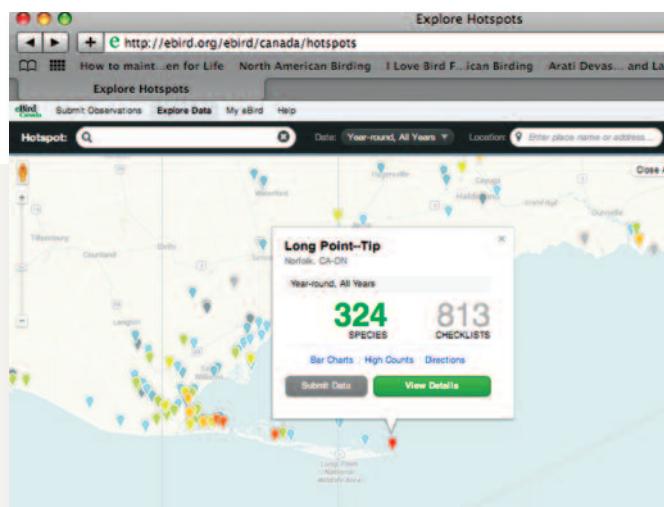
By Mike Burrell

The use of eBird in Ontario and beyond continues to grow and eBird itself gets better and better with new features added regularly. Here are a couple of them, and some recent highlights.

Snowy Owl irruption

There was help from eBirders during the 2013–2014 winter Snowy Owl irruption. From November through March, 869 different people reported at least one Snowy Owl to eBird in Ontario, for a total of 5,444 reports. There were reports in 43 of Ontario's 50 counties. Check out the eBird Snowy Owl map at <http://ebird.org/ebird/canada/map/snowowl>

To put it into perspective, this past winter saw almost seven times as many reports of Snowy Owls as last year. Thanks to eBird, all those sightings are archived to provide a baseline for comparison in future years.



The new eBird Hotspot Explorer, showing hotspots near Long Point colour-coded for species richness.

Changes to reporting Rock Pigeons

Each fall, eBird updates taxonomy so eBirders eagerly await any changes (especially when they can result in an "armchair tick"). This year saw a change to how we report Rock Pigeons. There are three options:

- Rock Pigeon (Wild Type) reserved for "real" wild Rock Pigeons in the Old World
- Rock Pigeon (Feral Pigeon) the catch-all for pigeons derived from wild Rock Pigeons seen worldwide mostly in urban areas
- Rock Pigeon – to cover uncertainty between the two previous options

With the 2013 update, all Rock Pigeon records were converted to one of these three where we could be sure. In Ontario and the rest of North America, this was the feral pigeon option. From now on you should see only the Rock Pigeon (Feral Pigeon) option when submitting checklists. This could help sort out populations of "real" Rock Pigeons still surviving in the wild, since in many cases they are becoming rare.

More new ways to explore eBird data

The "location explorer" is another eBird feature <http://ebird.org/ebird/canada/places>. It allows a user to explore a country, province, or county. You can see a list of Ontario counties and how many species have been reported and how many checklists have been submitted. You can also see a list of the top 100 hotspots for the region you are exploring (Point Pelee, Long Point, and Presquile are at the top of the Ontario list). This is a good place to start if you are planning a trip or if you just want to see recent sightings from any part of the world.

Hotspot explorer launched

A new eBird tool is called the "hotspot explorer" (<http://ebird.org/ebird/canada/hotspots>). It comes in two parts. The first is a world map divided into squares shaded for species richness based on eBird data. If you zoom in to an area, you'll see eBird hotspots displayed as pushpins. Each is colour-coded for how many species have been reported. Conveniently, you can tailor the date range of the map, so if you want to see the best June hotspots you can restrict the map to show just that month.

The second part of hotspot explorer lets you click a hotspot to bring up a page with a species list, bar chart, arrival and departure dates, top contributors (species or checklists), directions and map. Check it out for your next trip.

2014 Annual Convention

This year OFO's Annual Convention will be held in Ottawa from Friday September 26 through Sunday September 28.

For details, see the Convention brochure mailed with your April issue of *Ontario Birds*. The brochure may also be downloaded from the OFO website: www.ofo.ca



Birding the Carden Alvar

Off-road Opportunities

By Dan Bone,
Ontario Field Ornithologists Carden Representative

Bring a lunch and get set to experience an abundance of grassland and scrubland birds as they were 75 years ago in southern Ontario before intensive agriculture

... Ron Pittaway

So Ron Pittaway describes the Carden Alvar area in his must-read *Carden Alvar Birding Guide* as posted on the Ontario Field Ornithologists (OFO) website: <http://www.ofo.ca/site/page/view/articles.cardenalvar>

Upland Sandpiper and Wilson's Snipe posing on fence posts; Bobolink and Eastern Meadowlark bubbling and whistling over pastures and Eastern Bluebirds popping in and out of nest cavities—all this and more has made the Carden Alvar in late May and June a destination of choice for birders from around the province, the country and—increasingly—from around the world.

But this increasing popularity has led to some tension between local residents and visiting birders. Ron's guide to the Alvar addresses birding etiquette, so important everywhere and especially so on the Carden

Alvar. This reminder, along with new information and strategies, is presented to ensure that the Carden birding experience continues to be a positive one for all concerned.

At a recent Carden Forum meeting—a gathering of stakeholders that includes ranchers, local residents, real estate brokers, aggregate companies, local naturalists clubs and the Ontario Field Ornithologists—a resident described an incident in which a local volunteer fireman was impeded on his way to the fire hall in his role as a first responder. It was pointed out that this first responder could have been rushing to the aid of a visiting birder so let's make sure we continue to park carefully on these narrow roads, allowing other vehicles to get through.



Bobolink. Jean Iron

Eastern Meadowlark
Janice Melendez



Advice and information from David Hawke and Ron Reid of the Couchiching Conservancy

With Carden Alvar's increased popularity as one of Ontario's top birding and nature watching areas, we remind all visitors to stay on public property such as Wylie Road and Alvar Road. Much of the adjoining land is private property. In this way we will keep good relations with local property owners. The road allowances of Wylie and Alvar Roads are 66 feet wide. There may not always be a fence in place and property should always be considered private whether or not a red circle or no trespassing sign is evident. Of course, vehicles must never be left (even for a minute or two) blocking the travelled portion of the roadway.

Again this year, there have been a few instances of birders or photographers being confronted on the back roads of the Carden Alvar by individuals warning against trespass; but, there are several places where you are welcome to go off-road to stretch your legs.

Available Trails and Properties

There are a few large parcels of land in the area that are owned by Ontario Parks, Nature Conservancy of Canada and Couchiching Conservancy. However, some of that land is also off limits to walkers/birders/photographers due to the cattle ranching that takes place on these lands. Occasionally special field trips are guided by one of the agencies within these properties.

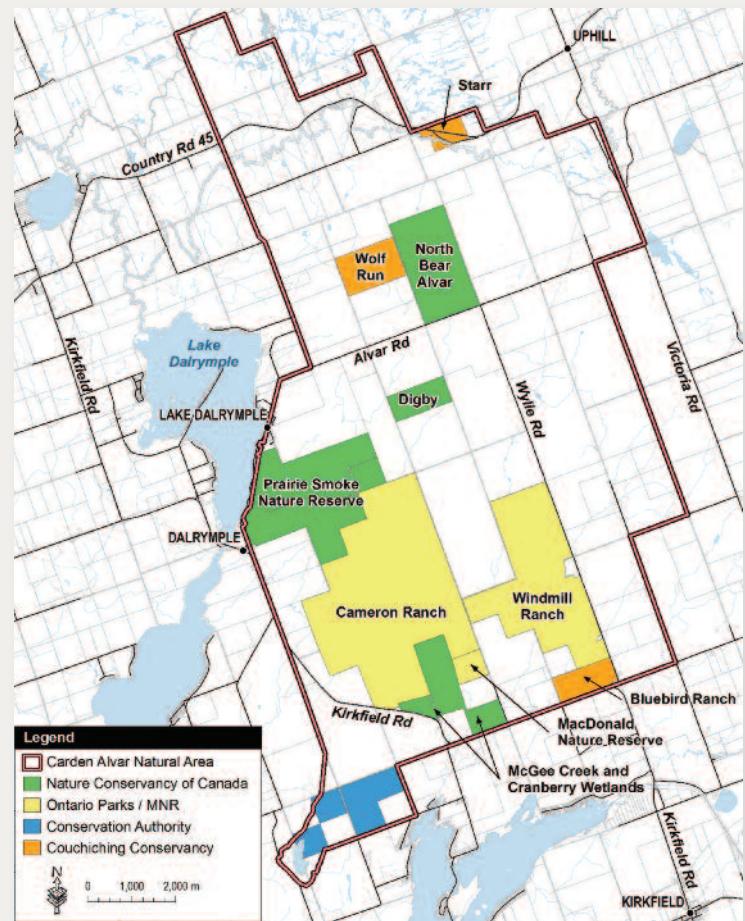
To allow visitors a chance get off the road, there are three trails established and one property that is fairly easy to access. A new brochure has been created, *Experience Carden Alvar on Foot*.

Salient points from the brochure:

- **Cameron Ranch** (Kirkfield Road 6) has a parking lot and 3 km walking trail that takes you through alvar, wetland and shrubland.
- **Sedge Wren Marsh Trail** (Wylie Road) is a 1.5 km loop trail that visits a creek, swamp and woodland.
- **Prairie Smoke Nature Reserve** has two access points, the first being at the parking lot at the south end of Lake Dalrymple Road, and the second being at the Carden Recreation Centre.
- **The North Bear Alvar** is accessible to the north side of Alvar Road, starting northwest of the Wylie/Alvar Road intersection. Travel west bound and you will see NCC boundary signs. There are no formal trails established here, so use caution if venturing into the interior. Note that the property does not extend for the full length of Alvar Road; a new parking area is being planned.

The brochure, *Experience Carden Alvar on Foot* usually is available at the birding blind on Wylie Road or online at the Couchiching Conservancy website <http://www.couchichingconserv.ca/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/SMSDesign-CardenTrails-finalREV.pdf>

I hope this information helps you enjoy your visits to the area. We are working diligently with both landowners and visitors to ensure enjoyable outings to the Carden Alvar.



Conservation Lands on the Carden Alvar
(Map Courtesy of Nature Conservancy of Canada)

I thank David Hawk, Jean Iron, Ron Pittaway and Ron Reid for information in the preparation of this article.

Merlin Bird ID App Review

By Sarah Rupert

One of the newest apps on the block is Merlin Bird ID by the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology. At first glance, more experienced birders will likely think it's too basic, but some great features make it useful for all, especially birders who lead hikes and teach bird ID.

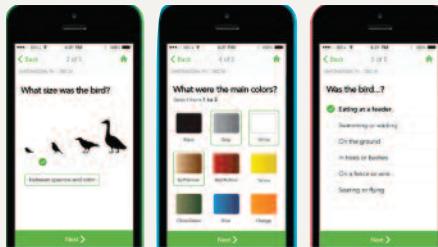
Overview

Merlin is a free app currently available for Apple devices, with an Android version to be released in June and a web version planned for those without smart phones. The website allaboutbird.org calls it "a birding coach for beginning and intermediate bird-watcher." It's designed to guide the user through the identification of a species, just like a human instructor.

Currently, the app includes 285 commonly seen North American species, a list which will expand in the future.

The observer is asked to answer five easy questions that lead to a list of possible species. The first screens ask for the observer's location and date of the observation. The app is powered by eBird and uses local data to narrow the list of possible species.

Next, the observer answers questions about the bird's size, colour and behaviour. The sizes are relative to species most people can use as a reference point. The wide choice of basic colours is simple, not fancy. The list of potential things the bird could be doing includes eating at a feeder, soaring, flying and the like.



Then Merlin generates a list of potential species images to scroll through until the right one pops up. Observers can then view information about the species based on the Birds of North America and All About Birds websites, including range maps, sounds, and images of the species in different plumages.

Strengths

The app is very user friendly. I've shown it to non-birding friends and they had no trouble navigating through the questions. Image quality and species information are top-notch. I will be using this app to train new staff with limited birding experience and interact with beginning birders and non-birders alike.

The biggest strength of this app? It's continually learning and evolving. Some readers may remember a "game" on the Laboratory of Ornithology website a couple of years ago. It asked experienced birders to

look at images of species and classify the identifying features they saw by colour, size, etc. The program then suggested a species identity which the participant confirmed or rejected.

Data collected through this game was the basis for Merlin. Since all of us see colours differently, I love it that this app is built on people data, rather than just computer analysis of an image's dominant colours. Since observers share the time of sightings, they contribute to the evolution of the app. Every time a user presses "This is my bird!" the data refines the ID skills of the app.

Drawbacks

This is a big app. It takes up 581 MB on my iPhone (more than the Sibley app) maybe more space than you want to assign on your device.

Another drawback is the system's reliance on a continuous connection to a network. So in remote areas you could be out of luck. Since it uses location services, it can also drain battery power if left on all the time.

Since the lists generated are based on eBird data, there can be gaps if the species hasn't been reported in a region regularly. When testing it, we entered data for a large, goose-size white and black bird and got no swans in our list of possibilities. I'm sure this will improve as more people use the app and contribute to the eBird database.

Summary

This is a solid app for novice and intermediate birders. It's a great tool for teaching and learning about birds. As more data are collected and eBird grows, this app will evolve and change and be a relevant and useful tool in the future. I definitely recommend it.

By Cindy Cartwright

Long-lived Hummingbirds

The Ontario Hummingbird Project (OHP) was the first project in Ontario to specifically study the longevity of hummingbirds on the breeding grounds. Hummingbirds are rarely recaptured during migration monitoring so longevity data is very limited to date. As a result most reference materials state that Ruby-throated Hummingbirds have short life spans of two to three years.

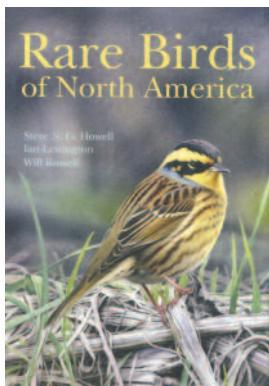
Two male and two female Ruby-throats banded in Ontario as adults were recaptured at the same site over the following seven years, making them a minimum of eight years old each (Cartwright, unpublished research). These are the first hummingbirds documented in Ontario with a life span of at least eight years and until recently, were the

oldest known longevity records for Ontario and Canada. Due to a change in property ownership, further banding at this site was not possible. There is no way to predict how many more years these hummingbirds would have continued returning to this breeding site. Other OHP research sites have not yet reached the eight year mark.

In 2013, a researcher in Quebec also documented an eight-year-old Ruby-throat. As more hummingbird researchers focus on long term breeding studies and the database is increased, it is hypothesized that reference materials will be adjusted to reflect a higher average life span for the Ruby-throated Hummingbird.

Ruby-throated Hummingbird. Janice Melendez

Book Reviews



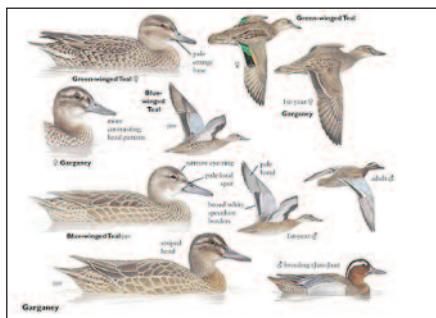
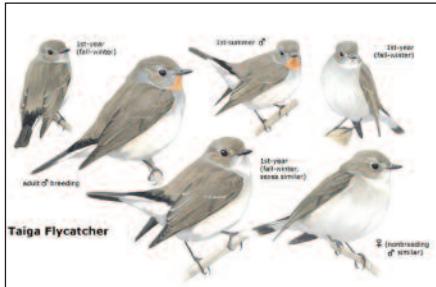
Rare Birds of North America. 2014.

Steve N.G. Howell, Ian Lewington and Will Russell. Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey. Hardcover. 428 pages. \$35.00 USD (ISBN 978-0-691-11796-6).

Any student of North American birding literature knows who Steve Howell is, for he has authored many books on birds: *Petrels, Albatrosses and Storm-Petrels of North America*, *Molt in North American Birds*, *Gulls of the Americas*, *Hummingbirds of North America* — the Photographic Guide and A Guide to the Birds of Mexico and Northern Central America, to name a few. Add to this his expertise as an expedition guide and his teaching abilities and you have a formula for success. Ian Lewington, also a professional bird guide, is a renowned artist described as “one of the finest bird illustrators of his generation.” Will Russell is the managing director and co-founder of WINGS — one of the premier birding tour companies in the world.

Birders, by nature, like to observe and count birds, see rare stuff and study behaviour. This book may be the ultimate one for those interested in the most uncommon species that might be found in North America. Certainly Jack Black and Steve Martin, in *The Big Year*, would have loved to have this book at their disposal.

The authors offer several introductory chapters that answer pressing questions such as what classifies a bird as ‘rare’. Why rarities show up, how they get here, and seasonal influences that make vagrancies more frequent at certain times of the year are also discussed at length. I think what I



enjoyed most was the discussion about where the vagrants come from. In this chapter, the authors provide an insightful analysis of Old World, East Asian, Western Eurasian/ African, Island and Mainland North American, Temperate Southern, Subtropical and Equatorial vagrants.

There are 262 species covered in the book and each is treated with equal care, whether they are represented by one or 100 North American records. Each account offers extensive, useful information such as — a statement of its typical range followed by a summary of vagrancy records in North America, information on taxonomy and which [sub]species is/are likely to occur here, and a discussion (sometimes) of anticipated or recommended splits. Generally a comment is provided that deals with aspects of the vagrancy, including patterns and influences unique to the species.

Finally, a section on field identification and comparison to similar species offers helpful insights to assist the observer. Each report is beautifully illustrated by Lewington, often showing the species in various stances and in flight. Where appropriate, additional drawings show similar species or subspecies.

I checked several of the species accounts to see how they dealt with our records, here in Ontario, or with birds found by Ontario birders elsewhere. I was delighted to see Alan Wormington’s records of Amazon Kingfisher and Kelp Gull (unclear if authors

consider the latter a hybrid), not only cited, but also properly attributed to him. Many rare birds have been identified over the years in our province, and all or most all seem to have been correctly acknowledged in the text. For example, the two 1985 Eurasian Jackdaw records, the Western Yellow-nosed Albatross, White-winged Tern, Lesser Sand Plover, Black-tailed Godwit, Spotted Redshank, Siberian Rubythroat, Fieldfare and Variegated Flycatcher are reported accurately. Others, such as Garganey, Black-tailed Gull and Green Violetear, although not inaccurate, are only referenced as sightings within ‘the Great Lakes Region’. I think that’s too large an area and offers little advice to the reader. Though perhaps not full species, there is no mention of Vega Gull or Common Teal — both widely accepted as distinct or likely distinct species throughout much of the world. The authors may consider at least including these and similar important subspecies in future updates.

With the recent sighting of a hybrid Canvasback x Redhead in the GTA, it was interesting to see an analysis of the very similar Common Pochard. Advice is offered regarding how the pochard might be distinguished from this hybrid. There is also a nice discussion on Smews, speaking to male vs. female frequency and the status as escapees or wild birds.

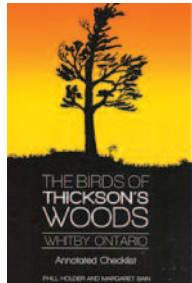
I would have liked to see a more detailed Table of Contents. I could not find an actual list of species covered in the book. I had to go to the index at the back of the book and look at several referenced pages before I could determine the primary reference page for an individual species. Also I think the authors should have either given some references as to how one might explore the individual records of the various species reported. A list of websites or some other link to a published repository of this information would help readers find details of individual records more easily.

It is an intriguing concept to write a book that only deals with the rarest of the rare and the market will likely be small. That said, for those with an interest, this is a great find — a rare treat so to speak. In a nutshell, I like the book, its concept and the usefulness of the information.

Geoffrey Carpentier

The Birds of Thickson's Woods - Annotated Checklist. 2014.

Phill Holder and Margaret Bain.
Hawk Owl Publishing,
Bowmanville, Ontario.
Softcover xiv + 98 pages. \$18.00
ISBN: 80237 8620 RT0001.



This volume would appear to have had its genesis, in part at least, in a desire to inspire younger birders, to encourage their birding activity. The book is dedicated to the memory of Matt Holder, himself encouraged to start watching birds while still in a stroller! And all proceeds from the sale go to the Matt Holder Environmental Education Fund to encourage "students, groups or schools to conduct environmental studies or projects within the Thickson's Woods Nature Reserve Area." It is hoped that these grants will inspire, in persons younger than 18 years of age, the passion for nature Matt had, encouraging environmental understanding and protection in the future. A brief biography of Matt and reference to where to get further information about the Fund appear in the introductory pages.

The book also commemorates the 30th anniversary of the start of the effort to save what remained of Thickson's Woods as an urgently needed refuge for migratory birds, an island of green in an increasingly urbanized and industrialized shoreline of Lake Ontario. A chapter outlines the recent history of the woods and those who played

key roles in saving the woods and subsequently the adjacent meadow. The book itself consists mainly of photographs of all 313 species recorded within 1.6 km of the centre of Thickson's Woods. Indeed, it might have been called and illustrated annotated list. The photographs, compiled from a number of photographers, usually three or four to a page, are typically clear close up pictures. While single pictures cannot replace a field guide with multiple plumages, that more experienced birders would desire, the photographs would certainly be inspiring and helpful to younger or inexperienced birders.

Each photograph is accompanied by the common and scientific name of the species, and a short annotation indicating the status

of birds in the area through the year. For rarer species, specific dates of occurrence, with some comments, are provided. Among the annotated photographs there are pages devoted to various topics, including: lake-watching off Thickson's Woods; fallouts at Thickson's Woods; a mystery warbler in southern Ontario; and pictures of the woods, the meadow and Corbett Creek.

The book covers a very small part of Ontario, though an interesting one, of greatest interest to those that have gone or do go birding there. The short annotations give only a general idea of status; terms used are not defined and the completeness is variable. However, for those interested in birding at Thickson's Woods, to inspire others to bird there, and to those wishing to contribute to environmental awareness among younger persons, it is a colourful and interesting book. Thickson's Woods is an increasingly important habitat for birds along the Lake Ontario shore. It has been an inspiration to many already, and this book is a tribute to those who have worked hard to preserve the area. May it inspire many more in future.

Ross James

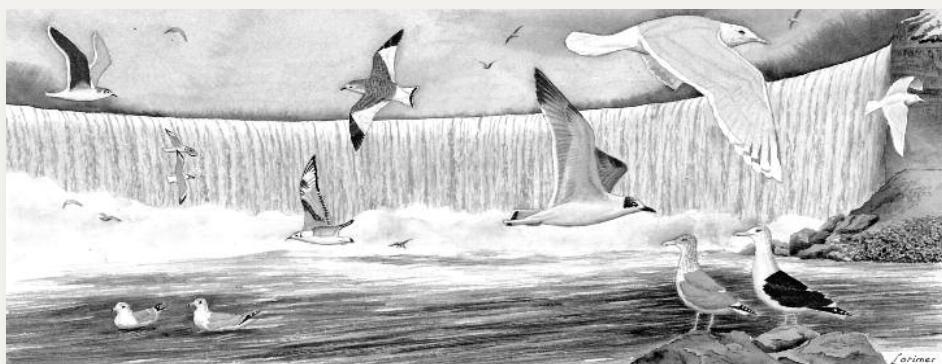


Illustration:
Gulls at Niagara Falls. Peter Lorimer

OFO Gull Weekend at Niagara

29-30 November 2014

Gulls of Niagara by Jean Iron

Gull ID Workshop
Saturday 29 November New

4:30 to 6:00 p.m.
Hampton Inn Riverside opposite
the Whirlpool Bridge, Niagara Falls,
Ontario.

Gulls are fascinating and challenging. The Niagara River is one of the top places in the world to see gulls. This presentation will help you appreciate the 21 species of gulls in Ontario and at Niagara, with tips on identification, plumages, and where and when to see rare gulls.

Everyone Welcome.

No charge for this event.
Please register on the OFO website at www.ofo.ca.
We need to know how many plan to attend.

For more information:
jean.iron@sympatico.ca

OFO Gull Trip

Sunday 30 November

Meet leaders Ron Tozer and Jean Iron at 9:00 a.m. at Sir Adam Beck Lookout.

Staying Over?

A group hotel rate for the OFO Gull Trip has been arranged at Hampton Inn Riverside, Niagara Falls, Ontario. **905-358-5555**.

Tell them you are with the OFO Birding Group and request the special rates. Book early to avoid disappointment.

Rates (including breakfast)
Thursday Night, 27 Nov.
to Sunday Night, 30 Nov.:
\$55 each night

For more information about the hotel, please contact Claire Nelson:
mcnelson@rogers.com

Nikon Photo Quiz

Sponsored by Nikon Canada

By Willie D'Anna



Photo: P. Allen Woodliffe

Ah, this one should be easy for a change.

I mean, how many headless birds can there be in the field guide anyway? Well okay, maybe not so easy. In fact, where do we even start? Well, when the quiz has a headless bird, you start anywhere you can. Although there is only a little bit of the greenish legs showing above the water, I can see more of one leg extending deep into the water. This bird is not standing in just an inch or two of water so that means it is not a small songbird or even a small shorebird because if it was, well, it would be drowning. So, our quiz bird has rather long legs and it obviously has a long neck, which is fully stretched out in search of some prey item, such as a fish. The tail looks short and so do the wings which may not even reach beyond the tail tip. The body seems rather large, further confirming our impression that this cannot be a small bird.

The snow and ice on the edge of the water suggest that this photo was taken during the cold-weather months. Knowledge of the seasonal status of Ontario's birds can help us to at least tentatively rule out several possibilities. I say tentatively because we know that there can be exceptions to the rules when it comes to unseasonal birds. An obvious clue that we have not discussed so far is the habitat choice — a bird standing or walking in water might be a wader (heron, egret, or ibis), a gull, a tern, a shorebird, a swan, goose, or duck, or even a pelican. With the long legs and long neck that we can see on this bird, the only realistic possibilities seem to be a wader or a large shorebird. Knowing

that shorebirds do not usually linger in Ontario when there is snow and ice along the water's edge, I would lean heavily toward this bird being a wader of some kind.

This bird's overall brown upperparts and broad brownish streaks on the underside of the neck and body further reduce our options to just a few species — American and Least Bittern, Green Heron, and juvenile Black-crowned and Yellow-crowned Night-Herons. The colour and pattern is really not right for a Least Bittern, which would show a darker back, a richer more yellow brown colour, and less streaking on the underside of the body. The colour of the side of the neck and of the back does not match a

Green Heron. American Bittern is rather similar to the quiz bird but it lacks the bold white spotting on the wing coverts that is obvious on this bird. We are left with the two night-herons.

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Knowing that Yellow-crowned Night-Heron is a rarity in Ontario and unlikely to be found during the winter months, my inclination would be to think that this is a Black-crowned. Can we be certain? Is there a way to rule out Yellow-crowned based only on the plumage information contained in the photo? I think there is and it involves those large white spots on the wing coverts. Both species show white spots on the wing coverts in juvenile plumage but white spots as large as those on the quiz bird only occur on Black-crowned Night-Herons. This **Black-crowned Night-Heron** was photographed by P. Allen Woodliffe who took the shot at just the right moment when the head was underwater and the cool clear water was splashing into the air. It was taken on 21 January 2012 at Erieau, Ontario, adjacent to Rondeau Provincial Park. And just in case you are not convinced by my analysis, I have included another shot by Allen

of the same bird, taken just moments later. One can see the longer relatively narrower shape of the bill as well as the extensive palleness on the lower mandible, both features that are typical of this species and unlike a Yellow-crowned Night-Heron.

Black-crowned Night-Herons are colonial breeders in southern Ontario with most colonies on islands and shores of the Great Lakes and the St. Lawrence River. Yellow-crowned Night-Heron is a rare but nearly annual visitor to the province, primarily in the spring and summer. The species has never been confirmed breeding in Ontario. Looking just at records accepted by the Ontario Bird Records Committee, we see a date range of occurrence for Yellow-crowned Night-Heron from 31 March to 23 October. My assumption that this species would not likely be found with snow and ice on the edge of the water was not a bad one but certainly not iron-clad!

Photo: P. Allen Woodliffe



Changes to the OFO News Editorial Team

Cindy Cartwright has accepted the position of Editor-in-Chief of *OFO News* starting with this issue. Many birders will recognize Cindy. She has been a member of OFO since 2000 and joined the editorial team of *OFO News* in 2009. Previously, Cindy was the newsletter editor for the Ontario Bird Banding Association for nine years ending in 2010, and editor of the *Hart's-Tongue Herald* (Owen Sound Field Naturalists) for three years until 2009. Cindy will lead the editorial team in planning content, soliciting articles and editing each issue.

We also welcome a new member to the editorial team. OFO Vice-President Lynne Freeman was fortunate to meet **Roger Bird** while birding at Presqu'ile and he generously offered to help with *OFO News*. Roger is not familiar with OFO (yet) but has a great deal of editorial experience with *Diplomat Magazine*, *Ottawa Outdoors, Style*, and the *Carleton University Magazine*. He will be involved with editing articles and production.



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Articles and notes are welcome.
Contributors should check the OFO website under publications for deadlines and submission guidelines.

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Ontbirds, with over 3000 subscribers, is OFO's successful listserv for reporting rare bird sightings. Now the largest birding listserv in North America, *Ontbirds* has become an integral part of the Ontario birding community. Follow the instructions on the OFO website to subscribe to *Ontbirds*.
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