



OFO News

NEWSLETTER OF THE ONTARIO FIELD ORNITHOLOGISTS



Ontario's Mystery Scoters

By Rod Brook

Surf Scoters. Sandra and Frank Horvath

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Scoters can be seen during spring and fall migration on the Great Lakes and other larger bodies of water but during the breeding season they are gone from southern Ontario.

EVERY THREE OR FOUR YEARS, biologists from the Canadian Wildlife Service and Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources (OMNR) fly a July survey over James Bay and count thousands of Black Scoters (mostly males) and a few Surf and White-winged Scoters in huge moulting flocks. The birds move around with the tides and are probably feeding heavily on mussels in the shallow bay. But where are they nesting? They cannot be all coming from northern Quebec, a known breeding locale. The second Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas only showed 'possible' or 'probable' breeding in Ontario based on a very few atlas squares in the Hudson Bay Lowland. Granted the Hudson Bay Lowland is a huge area that is difficult to access but sea

duck broods are pretty darn conspicuous so why don't we know more about them? It wasn't until 2006 that a goose banding crew was able to confirm the breeding of a Black Scoter in Ontario. They managed to photograph a single brood on a boreal wetland and other observations were added the next year (Abraham *et al.* 2008 first documentation of Black Scoter breeding in Ontario. (Abraham *et al.* 2008).

As you may have guessed, there is very little known about scoter breeding biology — especially in Ontario. We do know that, in the north, scoters are widely dispersed and nest in very low densities. Biologists tend to miss breeding scoters because aerial surveys for other waterfowl are timed way too early to see



Technicians are currently counting scoters from aerial photographs taken over James Bay in July 2012.

Photo: Shawn Meyers CWS Ontario Region.

the breeding pairs of scoters and other sea ducks. With recent concern about declining numbers of scoters (Sea Duck Joint Venture: www.seaduckjv.org/), several projects that include satellite marking and surveys are now focussed on learning about and monitoring scoter populations. Satellite transmitters help identify breeding and moulting sites and correctly timed surveys also help biologists get a handle on their breeding ecology and abundance.

In 2009, we flew an aerial survey timed to count breeding sea ducks in an area near Peawanuck, Ontario, a small community about 40 km south of Hudson Bay on the Winisk River. This was the first dedicated attempt at quantifying numbers of breeding sea ducks in this

(big) part of Ontario. After flying >1000 km of transects by helicopter over boreal wetlands, we estimated breeding densities of Black and Surf Scoters to be as high as anywhere in North America. We found 59 breeding pairs of scoters, and looking closer at the habitat types where we found them, we discovered they preferred wetlands in the <100 hectare range and avoided the big lakes. They also preferred open habitats and avoided the treed wetland types (fens and bogs).

We followed up our breeding pair survey with a brood survey in August of 2009 but were hampered by poor weather and could not complete the survey. It was a struggle just to finish half of the transects. However, we observed three Black Scoter broods and two additional

lone females acting broody. That doesn't seem like much but remember the total cumulative observed number of broods in Ontario until 2006 was zero!

To really quantify the importance of Ontario's Hudson Bay Lowland for the continental scoter populations, we have to go back to the Lowland and test what we think we know about their breeding habitat preferences. If we can validate the habitat preference models with real observations, we should be able to extrapolate our knowledge to a bigger area within the Lowland and estimate a total Ontario breeding population for each species of scoter.

Technicians are currently counting scoters from aerial photographs taken



Black Scoter landing, June 2009, Churchill. Photo: Bruce Di Labio



Surf Scoters, June 2009, Churchill. Photo: Bruce Di Labio

over James Bay in July 2012. This task used to be a laborious process of manually counting dots from a fuzzy image but now, image stabilized digital cameras have amazing resolution and computers do the heavy lifting when it comes to counting. Some researchers believe that the James Bay moulting count might be the best way to index and monitor the breeding population of eastern Black Scoters. So far, it's the most feasible idea. Most Black Scoters nest at very low densities in the most inaccessible locations in North America (from Labrador to the Northwest Territories and Alaska) and winter offshore in the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans during the time of year when weather is the worst.

As far as ducks in North America go, we know least about the sea ducks but, with a new focus and a momentum from groups like the Sea Duck Joint Venture, we are learning more at an unprecedented pace. With the contribution of OMNR and CWS, we know more about scoters in Ontario than ever before, though we do not know enough to be confident about what the potential effects of threats like climate change, development, hunting or environmental disasters might be. There is still a lot to learn.

Literature Cited

Abraham, K. F., D. M. Filliter and D. A. Sutherland. 2008. First documentation of Black Scoter breeding in Ontario. *Ontario Birds* 26(2): 108-118.

News from OFO President

Greetings OFO members and welcome to the first issue of the 31st Volume of *OFO News*.

AS A REMINDER to anyone who has yet to renew their OFO membership for 2013, it is easier than ever with our quick and secure online renewal system available through the OFO website.

It has been a few years now since new OFO window decals were produced. We know how much birders love to adorn their vehicles with birding decals so we have produced new decals for your enjoyment. Enclosed with this newsletter is a complementary decal and additional decals are available for a modest fee.

I am pleased to announce that electronic versions of our past editions of both *OFO News* and *Ontario Birds* are now available on our website, dating back to 2007. It is also our plan to make future issues of both publications available online one year after the print publication date. As well, the Board of Directors is in the process of deliberating over the possibility of digitizing even older editions of both publications.

The planning is well underway for our Annual Convention to be held at Point Pelee in the fall. In order to build upon the momentum of last year's highly successful event, we plan to offer an expanded schedule again this year, with a wide assortment of activities to cater to many different interests.

As an update regarding the new shorebird platform and viewing blind to be built at Hillman Marsh Conservation Area, I understand that construction is currently underway and should be completed in time for the spring shorebird migration.

Finally, I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for your membership. It is because of you that our organization remains vital and prosperous. I also wanted to remind you that if you are in need of support for an initiative that you think would benefit the birding community in Ontario, do not hesitate to get in touch with me.

Best wishes for great birding,
Robert Maciver
OFO President
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OFO's Trip Organizer Dave Milsom

By Jim Coey

I FIRST MET DAVE “WARBS” MILSOM back in 1968 when we were both teaching in the same elementary school in Toronto. Back then neither of us would have believed that some 45 years later we would still be friends and sharing the same passion for birds and all their myriad wonders. A lot of water has passed under the bridge since then, promotion, marriage, children, travel, a lot of laughs, and most importantly a lot of birds.

It may surprise some of you to know that Dave was not always a bird watcher. It just seems that way and it may seem that he has been around forever. He is always at the OFO Convention where he finds time to assist with the convention, promote Flora and Fauna Field Tours and lead field trips. You will find him at each rare bird twitch all over Southern Ontario or at Pelee in May leading his small flock of sleep-deprived and jet-lagged “Brits” from each “good” bird to the next. You have not been seriously “sleep deprived” until you have been birding with Dave.

Dave only discovered bird watching in the early eighties. During a visit back to England, Dave went bird watching with his brother Paul and was smitten. On his return to Canada, I was recruited to introduce him to Ontario birds and true to form Dave threw himself into this pastime with exactly the same fervent enthusiasm with which he tackles everything, except getting up in the morning.

He enthusiastically embraced hawk watching at Beamer, becoming one of the veterans and for years could be found each weekend happily ensconced in his camp chair arguing the finer points of hawk identification with anyone who



Dave Milsom leading the April OFO trip to Minesing. Photo: Jean Iron

would care to listen. Birding gave Dave a hobby that could be pursued anywhere at any time except, perhaps, in the depth of winter. Never one to languish in the doldrums, Dave found winter listing and winters were never the same in the Milsom household.

At the risk of repeating myself, to say that he embraced winter listing whole heartedly would be severely understating the case. He held the early record for winter listing in Ontario back in the day when winters were winter. Very little stood between him and his winter list. He called me once to go to Windsor to look for a Green-tailed Towhee. I pointed out that it was snowing so hard I couldn't find my car in the driveway. I didn't go; he did and got the bird.

Jean Iron is a famous icon in the Ontario birding ranks. Most people would be surprised to learn that Jean Iron was first mentored in our great endeavour by Dave. Thereby making Dave almost single-handedly responsible, at least in the early days, for unleashing the whirlwind that is Jean upon the unsuspecting birding community. Dave and Jean first met when they were school principals in Toronto. Dave was running birding

workshops for Professional Activity Days and Jean attended one of these workshops, met Dave, found birds and the rest is history.

Dave spent many years as a teacher and principal in Toronto. His dedication to his charges was legendary and to this day he still coaches basketball in the schools.

Dave became a founding member of OFO and was one of those far seeing individuals who put up their \$50 on spec, to fund the fledgling organization. \$50 back then was not loose change. It is thanks to him and others like him that OFO got its start back in 1982.

Dave became a director in 2000 and has never looked back. He was then in charge of public relations and part of his duties was to organize the province wide field trips. It is a testimony to Dave's energy and dedication that the number of trips offered by members for members more than quadrupled on his watch. This is quite the task to coordinate all these trips and leaders. He (or an alternative) try to attend the many birding related events held in the province as representatives of OFO. He is also responsible for renting tables for exhibitors at the annual Convention, and soliciting

items from birding related donors for the door prizes. Dave is extremely generous with his time and sharing his knowledge. On more than a few occasions he has helped out young bird watchers with rides and food. It's a well-known fact that the young birder quite often skimps on the minor necessities of life, such as food, in order to bird.

Dave got his start in leading birding tours when he and a partner started Flora and Fauna Field Tours in the late 1980s. Dave still runs Flora and Fauna today with trips in place worldwide. Dave's dedication and attention to detail were rewarded when Quest Nature Tours asked him to lead some of their popular tours. If you are scratching your head and wondering where he finds the

time for all this then join the club. He currently lives in Peterborough with his wife Liz. Both his daughters also live in Peterborough so he will have to add looking after the grandchildren to all his other activities. He might even make a list.

During his birding days Dave has survived close encounters with Leopard Seals and mountain climbing in Antarctica, the infamous Drake Passage, Coral Snakes in Arizona, Chiggers in Venezuela, bobbing in a small boat off the Valdez Peninsula watching Southern Right Whales, pistol-toting gauchos on the Pampas, earthquakes in Costa Rica, a bear attack in California, giant bats in the Amazon, ticks in the High Andes, Alcabalas in the Llanos and Mountain

Gorillas in Uganda and the final insult, recently the People's Republic of China refused to give Dave permission to enter the country. Once, in a small coastal village in Venezuela, Dave took on the pride of Venezuela's Dominoes champions and became the undefeated Campeone del Mundo of Dominoes in a long and harrowing evening of playing, with British pride at stake. He and his playing partner narrowly escaped being trampled by celebrating mariachi bands that played outside his ground floor hotel room window all night!

And what about his nick name "Warbs", well you will just have to ask him yourself. Oh! and don't mention Hull City soccer club.

The OFO Convention You have spoken

By Lynne Freeman, OFO Convention Committee

At our recent convention we asked for feedback and got it. A total of 91 surveys were returned – a very high rate. Thank you to everyone who took time to respond. The convention committee will use this information to improve future conventions and to ensure that they meet the needs of OFO members. Here's a summary of what you said.

Location

Traditionally, we hold the convention at Point Pelee every two years. For about 65% of you this is about right. But 35% thought it was too frequent and there were many suggestions for other great locations, with Ottawa in the lead. Every once in a while we may consider a longer gap between conventions at Point Pelee so we can explore other regions in Ontario.

Convention Goers

Most respondents, 75%, consider themselves intermediate birders with others evenly split between experts and beginners. This was the first OFO convention for about 30% of the

attendees. Happily, most people who go to conventions keep going – it's an annual event for many of you.

Hikes and Workshops

We received a lot of comments on the hikes and other activities. Many people remarked on the excellence of the hike leaders. But we do need to improve how we manage larger hikes and convoys to ensure that everyone enjoys the outing. We received many practical suggestions and for the coming year we will make this a priority.

Many people said they want to attend workshops. We got excellent suggestions for topics (see sidebar).

Reception and Banquet

We asked for feedback about the reception and banquet. Overall, most people really enjoy the displays, reception and evening program. But we did get many comments on the facilities, food and drink. Birders like to eat and drink – a lot. We'll try to make sure that refreshments are tasty and plentiful in future.

With the growth of our convention has come the challenge of finding venues with enough capacity, especially when we hold the convention outside a large city. As a result we have had to book facilities farther away from the hikes and we have fewer choices in locations for our conventions. It's a tradeoff between longer driving times and great birding locations. So far we've opted in favour of the birding.

For this year we have booked the Portuguese Club in Leamington, a venue that comes highly recommended.

Friday Activities

The hikes and evening program on Friday were far more popular than we could have ever imagined. We were planning for 20-30 people, but in fact, over 120 people showed up! We will be offering more Friday hikes next year and will plan accordingly for the size of the evening venue.

What's Next?

Respondents were generous with ideas and suggestions and we will try to incorporate as many of them as possible so our convention continues to be an event that you look forward to each year.

Suggestions for Workshop Topics

- Bird ID: gulls, shorebirds, sparrows, empids, hawks, jaegers, immature and fall warblers
- Identifying birds in flight
- Bird Photography
- Digiscoping
- Butterflies and Moths
- Dragonflies
- Trees and Wildflowers
- Geology
- Trip reports from around the world
- Environmental issues and volunteerism

From blustery to balmy,
birders brave all kinds of
weather to participate in
Christmas Bird Counts

Crazy About CBCs

By Cindy Cartwright

EVEN BIRDERS WHO only participate in a single count can experience huge differences in weather from one year to the next, and sometimes even on the same date. Participants of the 103rd Wiar-ton Christmas Bird Count (CBC) began the day with cool rain then struggled through sleet and freezing rain in late morning. The afternoon brought six inches of snow and the day ended with snow squalls and almost zero visibility. It was all taken in stride by the participants and has become part of our “remember the year when...” tradition.

Little did he know...

When Frank Chapman held the first Christmas Count with family and friends in 1900, it's doubtful that he could even begin to imagine what he was starting. Since that time, counts have moved from odd amoeba-like shapes to actual circles, becoming more formalized with a central point, defined boundaries and specific guidelines for data reporting.

CBCs not only collect data that are important on the larger, continental scale but also provide interesting details and trends across local areas. When all the

data from the Bruce and Grey counts were reviewed for this article, it was noted that only 16-19 species have been observed every year on the long running counts but 28 species have been observed every year in the nine years since the Saugeen Shores count began. Trends in species that are new in recent years and species that are becoming hard to find quickly became apparent.

From time to time circumstances force a count to become inactive for a number of years (Collingwood, Wiar-ton), or the name changes (Cypress to Bruce Peninsula), or counts are merged (Arnprior and Pakenham). Although this can be a bit confusing to track, it doesn't reset the official starting date or decrease the value of data collected.

The first 100 CBC periods were held during a 17-18 day range that floated around the calendar and caused a great deal of confusion for compilers and birders alike. Beginning with the 101st CBC, the count period was fixed at 23 days running from 14 December to 5 January each year. This makes planning much easier for compilers and participants.

Christmas bird counts are more of a social event than any other birding activity. On count day, everyone is welcome no matter what their skill level and every bird is important. Unlike a Big Day where number of species is the ultimate goal, or woodpecker and waterfowl counts where passerines are excluded, even the multitude of chickadees, that are often overlooked, are counted on a CBC. This is satisfying for new birders who can't identify all the species seen but want to contribute to the day's efforts.

Something for everyone

Some birders participate in one single count every year. Doug Miller is one of these people. Doug's ID skills are still sharp and although, at 95 years old, he has difficulty getting in and out of the car, he has no difficulty remembering past years and birds we've seen. Doug has been doing CBCs since sometime in the 1930s with Jim Baillie and other notable birders. When a bottle of 'Christmas Census' wine was produced at the pre-count get-together in Tobermory last year and the dedication on the back was

read, Doug informed those present that he knew Major Alan Brooks, the man credited with organizing the first CBC in British Columbia. I am fortunate to be able to bird with Doug at the Tobermory CBC every year — it's the one count that I do not miss.

Some birders have a slate of counts to which they always commit, following the same schedule precisely each year. These birders are the backbone of any count. Compilers know that they can depend on them and often put them in charge of the same area every year for consistency. Many birders in Bruce and Grey fall into this group, partially because it is so far to travel to counts out of the area. Mac Campbell, Cindy Cartwright, Joe Johnson, and the late John Miles are the only birders to have participated in all seven of the open counts in Bruce and Grey Counties (Bruce Peninsula, Wiarton, Saugeen Shores, Kincardine, Hanover/Walkerton, Owen Sound, and Meaford).

While it's common to participate in the same counts all the time, some birders like to move around — meeting new people, birding new areas, and juggling a complicated schedule that changes from one year to the next. This is a great opportunity to meet other birders and see different parts of the province. I try to participate in at least one new count every year and have great memories of the many birders that I have met along the way. Compilers who are having problems getting enough participants due to location, aging birders, or other reasons should keep this in mind when planning their counts. Birders who love to travel are happy to help out when counts need extra participants.

A few birders are just 'crazy about Christmas counts' and squeeze as many as possible into their schedule each count season. John Miles was one of these birders and he passed his love of CBCs on to me. Birding "George North" style, driving to out-of-town counts located hours from home in the middle of the night, and juggling multiple counts continues every year and I wouldn't have it any other way. Every few years I return to one count or other

to refresh particularly good memories, and to visit with special friends. This year it was Fisherville because I miss John. It was nice to spend the day with birders who knew him well.

Some do, some don't

The end of the day is often a highlight of the count. Anything goes from a catered fundraising meal to potluck to donated chili and buns for the meal at the end of a cold winter day. It's a chance to chat with old friends and new acquaintances, catch up on the past year and find out how their day went. Funny stories and much teasing usually abound while birders have a bite to eat and prepare for the tally to commence. Some counts even give awards for a variety of situations (Algonquin and the Toilet Duck).

One frustrating practice that occurs at some counts is the withholding of good birds to the end of the tally. Frequently these birds are a rarity or lifer that many of the other participants really want to see. By the time the tally is over, it is too

dark to go searching and/or birders have to leave that night to work the following day or participate in another count (as happens on so many weekends). Organizers of some counts follow a more considerate practice and area leaders immediately call other area leaders when a 'good bird' is found so they and their assistants can find the bird. No CBC circle is so large that an area would not be covered if the team took a few moments to check out a good bird. In fact, many participants have covered their area and head back in by 2-3 pm anyway. And with a 24 km diameter, no bird is very far away.

Once the count is over, compilers still have work to do entering the data and beginning to plan for the following year. This is a great time to send photos to add to the information collected. And to offer a heartfelt "thank you" for their hard work.

Whatever style you prefer for participating in CBCs, one thing is certain — your efforts are appreciated and you should have a great time. I'm already tentatively planning the next CBC season. Hope you are too.

Hairy Woodpecker
Photo: Ann Brokelman



Hanover/Walkerton (ONHW)
1976, 35 years of data
cumulative total of species: 103
35 year average: 45.
original compiler: Martin Parker

CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNTS

Bruce Peninsula (ONBP)
1973, formerly known as Cypress Lake, also known as Tobermory CBC
40 years of continuous data
original compiler: Martin Parker

Warton (ONWI)
1971, 39 years of data
inactive in 1973, 1974, 2010
cumulative total of species: 125
original compiler: John Miles

Saugeen Shores (ONSR)
2004, 9 years of data
cumulative total of species: 91
28 species have been observed every year
original compiler: Cindy Cartwright

Kincardine (ONKC)
1984, 28 years of data
cumulative total of species: 121
most unusual: Black-legged Kittiwake, Little Gull
original compiler: Martin Parker

Owen Sound (ONOS)
1971, 42 years of data;
19 species have been observed on every year of the count
original compiler: John Miles

Meaford (ONME)
1971, 42 years of data
cumulative total of species: 116
16 species have been observed every year
most unusual: Yellow-throated Warbler
original compiler: John Miles

Birding in Bruce Grey

A brief history of birding organizations and activities

By Cindy Cartwright

TIME PASSES, memories fade and details are lost, not searched out until a significant milestone occurs. Then it is difficult, sometimes impossible to find the original information. Birders are encouraged to record the history of their organizations and activities before it is permanently lost.

Chantry Island Migratory Bird Sanctuary

In 1954 the light on Chantry Island was automated, a lighthouse keeper was no longer required, and the island was left to the birds. Following six months of correspondence between local resident Howard Krug, members of the McIlwraith Field Naturalists, and the federal government, the island near Southampton was designated as a Migratory Bird Sanctuary in early 1957. Howard conducted banding research on gulls on the island for several years. The Canadian Wildlife Service, Chip Weseloh and Cindy Cartwright continue to conduct banding research on Chantry Island to this day.

Huron Fringe Birding Festival (HFBF)

Inaugural steering committee (1998): Judith King, Dorothy Kings, Barb Martin, Kathy Parker, Mary Rapati, Cindy Cartwright, and Norah Toth

The Friends of MacGregor Point PP were looking for ways to entice visitors to the park during the less busy shoulder seasons and the idea of a birding festival was proposed. The first, very small festival was informally coordinated by Kathy Parker as a trial run to test for interest among birders. The feedback was so good that an expanded steering and programming committee was formed and both Kathy Parker and Lynda Steinacker were hired to coordinate the 1999 festival. Since then, the HFBF has become a



Chip Weseloh and Cindy Cartwright banding Great Egrets on Chantry Island. Photo: CWS staff.

successful annual festival with a wide variety of birding and natural history trips. It is known across Ontario and even birders from the States have added it to their birding list of favourite places.

Bruce Peninsula Hawk Watch

Occasionally birders mention a hawk watching site somewhere within Bruce Peninsula National Park (formerly Cypress Lake Provincial Park) but the watch is currently inactive. Park staff have limited correspondence from an American teacher, Tim O'Day, indicating that he was involved in the hawk watch for at least five years between 1985 and 1989. Very little is known about this hawk watch and any additional information on its history would be appreciated.

Bruce Birding Club (BBC)

Founder: Cindy Cartwright (January 2000)

Bruce County has a small population compared to the rest of Ontario and very few birders are permanent residents. In order to participate in regular outings to share birding knowledge and learn more about birds, Cindy Cartwright started the Bruce County Birdfinding Club (BCBC). Seven local birders expressed interest in participating and the inaugural outing was held on 6 January 2000 to the tip of the Bruce Peninsula looking for Boreal Owl and other wintering species. The group continued to grow and the name

was shortened several times, first to Bruce County Birding Club, and then Bruce Birding Club. Just as the Warton CBC had a few inactive years, the BBC was inactive for approximately four months (May to August) in 2002 while Cindy was in northern Ontario working on the 2nd Breeding Bird Atlas. At her encouragement, Fred Jazvac stepped forward in September 2002 to begin organizing the club outings with the assistance of Mike Pickup. The club has grown from the initial seven members to over 40 in 2012. It remains an informal group with no membership fees or organizing structure.

Bruce Peninsula Bird Observatory (BPBO)

Founding board (April 2000):

President: Cindy Cartwright

Vice-President: Rod Steinacher

Directors: Edward Cheskey, Ethan Meleg, Marion Mosolf, Mark Wiercinski

The early beginning of BPBO is similar to that of the Ontario Field Ornithologists (see the *OFO News* article "Once upon a time..." Feb. 2007, Vol. 25 No. 1). For years, various birders talked about the potential of the Bruce Peninsula for research and occasionally small projects were conducted but nothing formal was organized. Mark Wiercinski took an initial step in 1995 by applying for a CWS banding permit using the name 'Bruce Peninsula Bird Observatory' and did some informal banding under the permit. Audrey Heagy used this permit in spring 1998 to test the

feasibility of conducting migration monitoring at the Cabot Head Lighthouse site. Beyond that, it remained just an idea. In late 1999, the right combination of people — to quote Jim Richards, “A group not willing to just talk about the idea”— fell into place and the dream finally became reality. Cindy Cartwright organized and led a team of local volunteers to clean, repair and furnish the abandoned cottages in the Cabot Head Nature Reserve. The site became known as the Cabot Head Research Station. Mark gave permission to use the name he had coined and the CWS permit was transferred to the newly formed group. A founding board was formed in early 2000. Cindy completed and filed the necessary documents with Revenue Canada, with the guidance of Audrey, for BPBO to apply for incorporation and receive charitable status. This was granted in March 2001.

BPBO officially began banding on 1 April 2000 with Audrey as the bander-in-charge and Cindy as the first BPBO trainee. Audrey was bander-in-charge of the observatory for the spring and fall of 2000, and the spring 2001 season. Spring and fall migration studies have

continued at the site and to date, 13 years of data have been collected. BPBO was accepted into the Canadian Migration Monitoring Network in 2003 after the banding protocol was modified in 2002 to meet CMMN guidelines.

Bruce Grey Bird Studies (BGBS)

Founder: Cindy Cartwright (2004)

Initially known as Bruce Bird Banding, Cindy started this organization when BPBO dropped its support of the owl banding program at the Outdoor Education Centre (OEC) near Oliphant to focus on a Nicaraguan partnership. A program banding Northern Saw-whet Owls had previously been established in partnership with BPBO and the OEC staff did not want to see it discontinued. With the support and encouragement of Clive Card (OEC Principal) and local naturalist Joan Crowe, Cindy established the BGBS programs to “Reconnect children to nature through bird studies.” Owl banding at the OEC continued under BGBS until fall 2007. New programs were added, including a study of Eastern Bluebirds, cormorants and other colonial species on Chantry Island. The name was changed in March 2008 at the

suggestion of the children participating because the research was not restricted to banding and it was also being conducted in Grey County.

Cabot Head Important Bird Area

Steering Committee members: Fred Binding, Frank Burrows, Cindy Cartwright, Bill Crofts, Audrey Heagy, Ethan Meleg, Rod Steinacher, Norah Toth, Mark Wiercinski.

The Cabot Head area was designated as an internationally Important Bird Area to recognize its continental significance as a stopover area for Red-necked Grebe staging each year during migration. A dedication ceremony was held in April 2001 at the Cabot Head Lighthouse site. Birders had noted large numbers of grebes using the area in spring and Audrey began a biweekly survey in 2000 to document this activity. The biweekly surveys started by Audrey have been modified recently to cover both spring and fall, and continue to provide useful research data.

Huron Fringe, Owen Sound and Saugeen Field Naturalists

The history of these organizations is not included because they do not focus strictly on birds.



Spring Hawk Watching

By Cindy Cartwright

HAWK WATCHING IN ONTARIO is not quite as popular in spring as it is during the fall. The spring observation period traditionally runs from 1 March to the middle of May and many birders are not keen to stand outside for hours at a time during the colder months of March and April. Then once May begins, the majority of birders are off chasing warblers and other passerines.

Geography also has a significant effect on spring hawk watching because there are fewer high activity locations. The positions of the Great Lakes create leading lines along the southern sides of Lakes Erie and Ontario, and the western sides of Lakes Huron and Superior where raptors can catch thermals to help them conserve energy as they migrate. As a result, there are very few places where migrating raptors are concentrated in Ontario.

Birders have been gathering at Beamer since 1975 to watch the spring migration of many species of raptors. *Photo: Frank and Sandra Horvath*



Broad-winged Hawk at Beamer
Sandra and Frank Horvath

Once they enter the province, raptors quickly spread out across the landscape. The Niagara Peninsula Hawkwatch, at Beamer Memorial Conservation Area near Grimsby, is the only well-known spring hawk watching site in Ontario. An open house is held on Good Friday and this year it will be on 29 March. For more information about the open house, best time of day, and best weather conditions for spring hawk watching at Beamer, visit the website www.niagarapeninsulahawkwatch.org/ In the 1990s, there was a hawk watch at the tip of the Bruce Peninsula but limited information is available about this site. When the new 20 metre lookout tower was erected at Bruce Peninsula National Park a few years ago, several birders attempted to use it to count hawks but quickly found that the tower shakes too much in the wind and when people move around or climb the stairs.

Depending on where they live, some Ontario birders may find it easier to visit Eagle Crossing at St. Stanislas de Kostka in southwestern Quebec or even cross the border and visit Derby Hill, New York, or Lakeport, Mackinaw Straits and Whitefish Point in Michigan. Information about each of these sites is available on the Hawk Migration Association of North America website www.hmana.org/



Routes along the Great Lakes where raptors can catch thermals during spring migration.

Spring migration is a hurried affair as raptors rush north to secure prime breeding territories and mate. The older adults usually arrive first, followed by the young of the preceding year. Spring provides a great opportunity for beginners to learn to identify raptors. More experienced birders can challenge themselves by distinguishing juvenile hawks from the adults, and eagles can be aged according to juvenile, second year, third year and adults. And everyone can become hooked on raptors and look forward to visiting Ontario's many excellent hawk watching sites in fall.

Birding

By Caroline Biel, a 14 year old Toronto birder

As I walk down the forest lane,
I am drawn in a way that I cannot explain,
The sun's rays pour through the trees,
And sway gently with the rolling breeze.

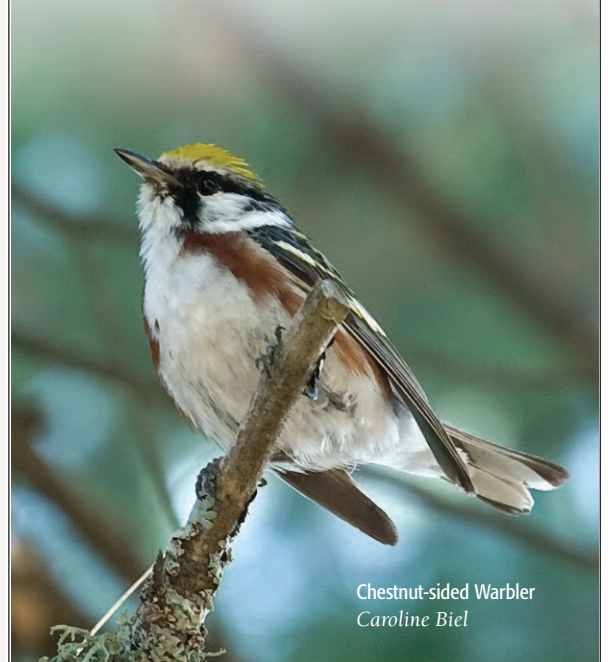
As I walk down the forest lane,
The songbirds speak a language, to us, arcane,
A language sung so harmoniously and sweetly,
The forest listens intently, completely.

As I walk down the forest lane,
Sudden water falls as rain,
Creating a deep puddle of water,
By which I quietly ponder...

As I walk down the forest lane,
The birds fly away and those that remain,
Are the brave blue jays,
Who only squawk and shriek to my dismay.

As I walk down the forest lane,
Sometimes the forest may be a sombre terrain,
However it holds much to discover,
And holds an orchestra to uncover...

Now as I wake from my dream,
I see nothing but dead trees and the snow a gleam,
And I bow my head, wishing winter was gone,
So birds may return here with
their chorus at dawn.



Chestnut-sided Warbler
Caroline Biel



Harris's Sparrow for the Holidays

Article and photos by Janice Melendez

Christmas came a few days early in the form of another potential lifer for me when Dan Bone phoned to advise me of a Harris's Sparrow (HASP) coming to a private feeder in the Kawarthas.

DAN ASKED IF I WOULD BE “at all interested” in joining him and a few others on Christmas Eve day to see this unexpected visitor who should be wintering in the central region of the United States. I reluctantly declined but secretly prayed that it would still be in attendance on Boxing Day. Thankfully, it was, not only for me but for several others whose Big Year was quickly drawing to a close.

My interest in birding began only five years ago but has quickly developed into a passion, and, if nothing else, I have learned to expect the unexpected in nature and that timing is everything. Recent examples of One Week Wonders (or less!) include Whitby Harbour's Smew in 2011, Presqu'île Provincial Park's Thick-billed Kingbird and Oshawa's Western Tanager in 2012, so

my initial fear was that this Harris's Sparrow would fall into this category, but at the time of writing, it is still enjoying a Canadian winter at an extremely well-stocked feeder in a sheltered yard, amongst numerous American Tree Sparrows, Dark-eyed Juncos, and the occasional Evening Grosbeak.

There was no immediate sign of the Harris's Sparrow on Boxing Day when John Stirrat and I first arrived at the feeders with Susan Blayney, but we didn't have to wait too long as we briefly saw it tucked away in some bushes, but clear views of it eluded us.

With more patience and the generous hospitality of the kind property owners who invited us into the warmth of their home, we quickly learned what to expect if there was a total absence of

birds: wait and watch for American Tree Sparrows to fly back in, one by one, then wait for them to drop down to the ground, also one by one. Eventually the chunky Harris's Sparrow would surreptitiously arrive, usually staying somewhat concealed in the bushes, but, with time, it would venture out into the open, affording better views as it foraged on the ground. At times during my second visit there, two days later, as part of the Kawartha Christmas Bird Count, it amused us by creating a snowy landscape, madly kicking away at the snow to forage for seeds using an effective “double-scratch” technique.

The Harris's Sparrow (as well as the Harris's Hawk) was so named by John James Audubon after his friend Edward Harris, an American amateur birder. It is



Editor's notes: Since Janice wrote this story the Harris's Sparrow has disappeared. Perhaps it just moved on or maybe the Sharp-shinned Hawk got it, but it has not been seen since early Sunday morning, 6 January 2013. It was first observed on 22 December 2012.

Despite the no-posting agreement and through the cooperation and trust of a network of birders, 15 birders recorded it as a life bird. Kevin Shackleton got it for #299 on his Ontario big year list and #970 on his life list. It is a new bird for the official City of Kawartha Lakes checklist. At least one birder completed the zonotrichia quartet for Ontario. (Can you imagine such a musical quartet? The Golden-crowned Sparrow could sing bass — the White-throated Sparrow would carry the air, as it always does.)

If the bird had stayed longer, a controlled-visit strategy was in place to include many more birders. The property owners did not want the bird to be posted for security reasons as the secluded residence could not be seen from the road and the driveway was narrow, winding and uphill with restricted parking. The strategy consisted of arranged visits at set times with parking away from the residence and carpooling in to reduce parking pressure. A member of the Kawartha Field Naturalists club was always on hand at the parking area to guide the groups to the feeder.

The property owners and all visitors had a very positive experience. All agreed they would use this strategy again in similar situations.

also one of only two Canadian breeding endemics (the other is the Ross's Goose) and is quite a striking sparrow, especially when in breeding plumage, with its black crown, face and throat. Based on the amount of black on its throat, this particular Kawarthan individual is an adult, and despite its non-breeding plumage was really quite lovely to see against a pure white backdrop of snow.

By coincidence two days later, I discovered a Durham region connection with this species when Doug Lockrey and I stopped in at Betty Pegg's home in Claremont during our Pickering Christmas Bird Count. Chance would have it

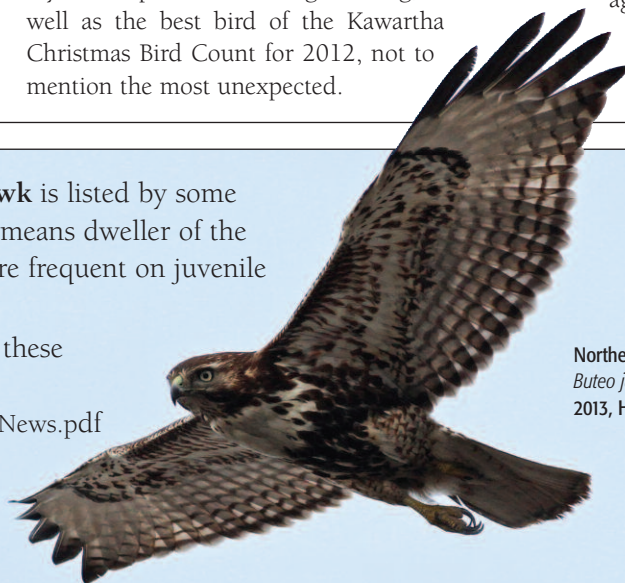
that Edge (co-founder of the Pickering Naturalists) and Betty Pegg also had an over-wintering Harris's Sparrow at their feeders for five months, between December, 1998, and May, 1999. Almost three hundred birders that year had views of it, and Edge and Betty were awarded a letter of recognition from the Ontario Field Ornithologists, signed by then-President Jean Iron, which was included in the photo album shared by Betty.

The Harris's Sparrow is now officially my 301st species since I began listing, as well as the best bird of the Kawartha Christmas Bird Count for 2012, not to mention the most unexpected.

Northern Canadian Red-tailed Hawk is listed by some authors as the subspecies *abieticola* (means dweller of the fir). Almost solid dark belly bands are frequent on juvenile Northern Red-tailed Hawks.

For distinctions and discussions see these two articles.

www.jeaniron.ca/2012/darkredtailsTOCNews.pdf
www.jeaniron.ca/2010/redtailsRF.pdf



Northern Canadian Red-tailed Hawk
Buteo jamaicensis abieticola. 12 January 2013, Hamilton. Janice Melendez

Book Reviews

By Geoff Carpentier



On Rare Birds 2011. Anita Albus. Greystone Books, Vancouver, Canada. Hardcover 276 pages. \$35.00 CDN. ISBN: 978-1-55365-477-3.

I WAS QUITE EXCITED when I was first asked to review Albus's book, but my enthusiasm soon waned, almost from the first moment I opened its pages. I must admit that I'm not even sure that I understand what she was trying to accomplish in writing the book. Her work is dutifully and accurately translated by Gerald Chapple, but one finds that the syntax of the original writing is often lost when one translates from the German verbatim. I found the text "flat" and often uninspiring and I truly had some difficulty staying focused as I progressed through its pages.

The book comprises a series of ten essays reportedly about rare or extinct birds: Passenger Pigeon, Carolina Parakeet, Great Auk, Glaucous, Lear's or Hyacinth Macaw (it is unclear which species she was writing about), Waldrapp (Northern Bald Ibis), Corn Crake, European Nightjar, Barn Owl, Northern Hawk Owl, and Common Kingfisher. Well let's see — the first three are unquestionably extinct (so I guess they are not really rare any more?), but of the other seven, only three are truly rare (i.e. Corn Crake, any

of the three macaws discussed and Northern Bald Ibis). So we're left with a book that talks about three of the best documented extinct species known to scientists, three rarities and four common birds. So the basic premise of the book, to me, is already severely flawed.

I found several of the accounts confusing and poorly structured. In the chapter on Waldrapps, it took me several pages to really even understand that she was not writing about a fictional bird, as she implied, but was really discussing the Northern Bald (which she calls Crested) Ibis. Once I did understand, I must admit I enjoyed the part of the chapter where she described the misguided attempts to help the species recover from near extinction. The report on the Passenger Pigeons was interesting only in that it described, in a few words, the pressures the pigeons faced daily from hunters. The Carolina Parakeet piece really didn't add much to help me understand their plight and ultimate extinction. As implied above, the chapter about macaws is confusing as I wasn't even sure what species she was discussing! And so the book continues.

The book closes with an afterword that started well but soon digressed into a discussion of ants (I think). The last chapter was entitled "Discourse on the Nature of Birds (1770)" — interesting but what did it have to do with the focus of the book as it really had nothing to do with rare birds at all and I'm not even sure if she was the author of that chapter.

The book closes with pages of endnotes, a bibliography and credits. To me the endnotes were more confusing than they were helpful as they often provided little in the way of explanation but really often just expanded on citations.

Well, I guess you figured out that I didn't really enjoy or understand the book. But you decide — maybe you'll see much more in it than I did.

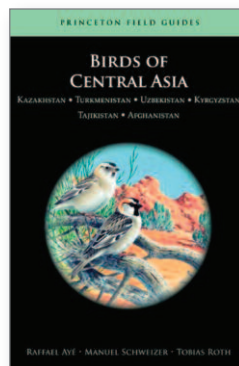
Birds of Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Afghanistan). 2012. Raffael Ayé, Manuel Schweizer and Tobias Roth, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 08540. Softcover 336 pages. 39.50 US\$. ISBN: 978-0-691-15337-7.

IN KEEPING WITH Princeton University Press's recent guides, this book meets the high standard they've set — a quality book, with accurate information, complete and informative text and an attractive appearance. It tackles a part of the world with which I have little familiarity since most of these countries didn't even exist when I was growing up. To help a bit for us old folks, the area covered is bounded by Russia to the north, China to the east, Pakistan/India to the south, Iran to the southwest and the Caspian Sea to the west.

This vast area is altitudinally lowest in the west, gradually increasing from sea level to over 4000 m. in the Pamir region of the south-east. The climate is mostly arid, but significant rainfall (>1500 mm) falls in the Altai in the northeast. This of course leads to a great diversity of birds — 618 species of 79 families to be exact.

The now familiar format of the book leads off with introductory chapters on how to use the book, bird topography, taxonomy and nomenclature, geography and biogeography, biomes and habitats, bird focused organizations, and databases for recorded vocalizations. Each species account includes an excellent illustration of the species in at least one plumage and/or age class. This is augmented with information on field marks, plumage characteristics, voice, races and forms, similar species, geographical variation and habitat. A very clear map also accompanies each account.

The book ends with an odd insert on "old vagrant (pre-1950) undocumented records and doubtfully recorded records." This is an interesting analysis in that it puts to bed some old controversies but shows that claims had been made and it reminds readers that some historical



records were validated even though the species has not been seen in over 60 years. The last entry in the book is a moult and aging guide to large raptors and gulls. I'm not sure why this is here except perhaps to illustrate that they have trouble with these complexes over there. Personally I'm not sure how valuable these sections are as the gull one, for example, only speaks generally about four year gulls. The raptor insert is much more informative and compares families and species much more effectively.

The species accounts are very good and certainly will assist birders in identifying most of the species in the field. A few things jump out for me — why was only the grey morph of the gyrfalcon illustrated? Many authorities are now separating or considering separating the

Great Egret and Cattle Egret into two species each. No mention is made of this in the text even though for most species the authors discuss races and forms. This would be a helpful addition to the book. The immature male Hen (=Northern) Harrier looks nothing like any juvenile I've ever seen — perhaps they should call it a sub-adult and show a typical juvenile plumage in the plates. The painting of the Common Tern makes the bird look artificially dark, but the text contradicts and correctly describes it as white to pale grey on the breast. The old name, White-winged Black Tern is used for the White-winged Tern and the Rock Pigeon is called Rock Dove. The Winter Wren complex was recently separated into three species — the wrong common name is assigned to the Eurasian one pic-

tured in the book. These aren't critical errors, but they illustrate that the authors should have made efforts to be more current in their analysis of the species covered. One other concern, which is not the fault of the authors, but is evident nonetheless, is the use of different names in Europe and Asia for birds known to westerners (e.g. goosander for merganser, skua instead of jaeger, diver for loon, etc.).

There are other errors of this ilk in the book, but by and large it is a great book that fills a gap in the ornithological literature covering a previously poorly-covered region of the globe. Having seen this new guide from Princeton, I'm anxious to go and explore its avifauna. If you're going to travel to this part of the world, you will assuredly need this book.

Update from the 2012 Ontario Bird Records Committee

By *Brandon Holden, 2012 OBRC Chair*

THE ONTARIO BIRD RECORDS COMMITTEE (OBRC) began voting on records related to 2012 bird observations in October of 2012, thanks to the continued hard work of Secretary Mark Cranford and the assistant Alan Wormington. Committee members (Mark Gawn, Doug McRae, Don Sutherland, Mike Burrell, Ken Burrell, Peter Burke and I) receive all information related to a rare bird sighting in a single package.

After reviewing all materials, each individual can choose from one of three voting options (no abstentions) Yes, No, or Origin Questionable. In short, we are trying to decide if a bird is a natural occurrence and if it has been documented thoroughly enough to be accepted by the voting members. The key point to this initial round of voting is that no member of the committee can consult with any other sitting member, to ensure seven unique viewpoints are given on the presented documentation. In the future, any record that receives a mixed vote (e.g., four yes, three no) will be recirculated in a second

round of voting. The key to the second round is that all members of the committee can now read each other's comments and consult with one another prior to casting a vote. This process usually resolves most issues, and later in 2013 the committee will hold its annual meeting at which time we can conduct a third and final round of voting, where required. This time, we are all in the same room and can really hash out a decision. If any remaining reports are not accepted (those that did not get a positive vote of six to one or seven to none), they are nevertheless filed at the ROM. There is a lot of work to be done yet though.

In committee news, it was decided that a potential rotation of people as OBRC secretary could help improve the voting process. As a job that requires a lot of volunteer effort, we cannot thank Mark Cranford and Alan Wormington enough for the help they have provided doing this job over the last several years. Mark has agreed to continue with all duties related to the 2012 secretary position,

right through to the publication of the 2012 annual report in a 2013 edition of *Ontario Birds*. However starting on 1 January 2013 — it was decided that a new secretary would start working on tasks related to the 2013 voting year. After a call for nominations from the committee members, I was elected to fulfil the position for 2013 — as my expiring term as a voting member in 2012 would provide no conflict in doing so. If the plan goes forward as hoped, we will be voting on a "new" secretary for the 2014 voting year several months from now.

The other major news involves a January 2013 policy meeting that is currently planned, and will have been conducted prior to the publication of this newsletter. The goal is to improve operations and relations regarding the OBRC as a whole, and various venues were used to poll for opinions (Ontbirds and the OFO convention were very valuable to this process). Look to a future OBRC update here for news on any potential changes.

Enough thanks cannot be given to the Ontario birding community for your continued support of the OBRC through your comments and submissions on rare bird documentation. Without your support, it would not be possible to try and archive these amazing observations for future generations of birders and ornithologists.

Nikon Photo Quiz

Sponsored by Nikon Canada

By Willie D'Anna



Photo: Bruce Di Labio

TO MOST ONTARIO BIRDERS it will be obvious that the quiz photo is of one of two species. It is a meadowlark but which one — Eastern or Western? Let us backtrack briefly to make sure everyone is on equal footing. The striking character of this bird is its yellow underparts with a black patch on the breast. That alone should make one consider a meadowlark. Combine that yellow ventral body colouring with the brown, black, and white plumage on the rest of the bird, along with a strongly patterned crown and black spotting and streaking on the flanks and there is really no doubt about it. While a Dickcissel also has a black patch on a yellow breast, it lacks the black flank markings and the strong patterning on the wings. In almost all of Ontario where meadowlarks occur, The Eastern is the species that is expected and the Western is a rarity. The Rainy River District is the only region left where the Western maintains a viable breeding population.

To distinguish these two species, most field guides emphasize the song and the presence or absence of yellow coloring on the malar, the area on the head adjacent to the throat. Unfortunately, the head is turned (or, fortunately, for dastardly quiz writers), keeping the malar out of view. And, of course, song is of little help in a photo quiz. We will have to find another way to identify this meadowlark.

There are a few characters that we can use. One is the black streaking along the lower flanks. On the Eastern it tends to be thicker and more continuous, forming true streaks. On the Western, it tends to look more spotted, forming discontinuous streaks. This feature favours the Western Meadowlark.

Astute readers of this quiz will note my frequent usage of words and phrases such as “usually” or “tends to” when referring to field characters. That is because I like to emphasize the variability of birds. Relying on a single “field

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mark” is a recipe for misidentification. If you are only interested in identifying common birds, then such an approach will work most of the time. However, you will have to accept being wrong on occasion.

Now, let us get back to the flank streaking. As noted before, the relatively few spots on the quiz bird favour the Western Meadowlark. From viewing images on-line, however, I have found this character to be quite variable, so we will need additional support to clinch the identification. One excellent character is the barring on the wings. On the Eastern the dark bars on the wing coverts and the tertials expand at the feather shaft such that adjacent dark bars touch each other at the shaft. This makes the entire feather shaft dark. On the Western, these bars may expand slightly at the feather shaft but they do not touch the adjacent bars. In the photo, these bars can be seen on the greater coverts, which are visible above the sparsely marked flanks. They also can be seen on one tertial, which is visible posterior to (behind) the inner greater coverts, or just over the rump. In both cases, the bars do not touch each other, a field mark that strongly supports the identification as a Western Meadowlark.

The Western tends to be paler and more gray-brown on the upper parts while the Eastern is slightly darker and more rufous-tinted. The head patterning on a Western is

usually less sharply defined than on an Eastern. Without another meadowlark for comparison, it is difficult to use these field marks with much confidence. That said, I think the upper parts do look paler and less rufous-tinted than on photos of an Eastern.

To summarize, we have found three field marks in favour of the Western Meadowlark — the flank markings, the wing barring, and the overall color of the upper parts. If you discovered this bird and it was not vocalizing, such as most meadowlarks found in winter, would this be enough to clinch the identification? While I would be leaning heavily toward Western Meadowlark for this bird, I would feel a lot more confident with one more field mark, such as the yellow malar that this species is known for.

In this case the quiz bird was seen during summer and the observer was also able to hear it sing, clinching the identification as a Western Meadowlark. This species is normally found in Ontario during the summer when males are most likely to sing. However, silent Western Meadowlarks have also been found in the East during the winter. Although difficult and requiring a good view or photograph, a firm knowledge of all the field characters will enable you to identify a silent individual of this species in winter. This **Western Meadowlark** was photographed by Bruce Di Labio at Panmure in eastern Ontario on 20 July 2011.



OFO News

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Ontbirds, with over 2000 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*. Email: ontbirds@ofa.ca

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Editor's Note (Article courtesy of Geoff Carpentier)

Building owners not responsible for deaths of birds

LAST NOVEMBER an Ontario Justice of the Peace dismissed three charges against Menkes Developments under the federal Environmental Protection Act and the Ontario Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act. This means that owners of large buildings are not responsible for the death and injury of birds that fly into its windows.

An environmental consortium claimed more than 800 birds were killed or crippled after crashing into Consilium Place, a cluster of high rises near Highway 401 and McCowan Rd. The prosecution said sunlight reflected off mirrored glass windows was considered radiation and, therefore, a contaminant under the Environmental Protection Act. This light mis-oriented birds causing them to hit the windows.

Although the decision is disappointing, this building has been retrofitted with window film and the number of collisions is actually much lower. However there are other cases that will be affected by the ruling. Clearly environmental groups need to encourage the use of outer-layer film designed to steer birds away from the glass that was used by Consilium Place.