

OFO NEWS

Newsletter of the Ontario Field Ornithologists

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OFO on the Net

by

David Cattrall and John Barker

Members and birders everywhere will enjoy OFO's Home Page. Watch for highlights of the latest field trips, future field trip reminders, summaries of articles from *Ontario Birds* and *OFO NEWS*, the OBRC Review List and decisions, Official Ontario Checklist, code of ethics, links to sites in Ontario and Canada, and much more. The combined knowledge of OFO will be available to birders everywhere...on our own Home Page on the World Wide Web! Birders can correspond with OFO using our Home Page address. Coming soon.

<http://www.interlog.com/~ofo>

Great or Greater?

We rarely heard birders say "Greater" Black-backed Gull before the Lesser Black-backed Gull became regular in North America, but this mistake is commonplace now. Greater applies to Yellowlegs and Scaup but not to gulls! Even the Peterson's guide is wrong!...It is **Great** Black-backed Gull. Perhaps for consistency the name should be Greater, but how about Greatest for the largest of all gulls!

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AOU DECISIONS

by Ron Pittaway

The "Fortieth Supplement to the American Ornithologists' Union Check-list of North American Birds" finally arrived in March (*Auk* 112 (3):819-830). Changes and comments affecting birds in Ontario follow.

Great Egret becomes *Ardea alba*, now in the same genus as Great Blue Heron to reflect its close relationship, but its checklist order is unchanged. Drop the modifiers "American" from **Swallow-tailed Kite** and "Common" from **Black-headed Gull**. Change the scientific name of **American Golden-Plover** from *Pluvialis dominica* to *P. dominicus*.

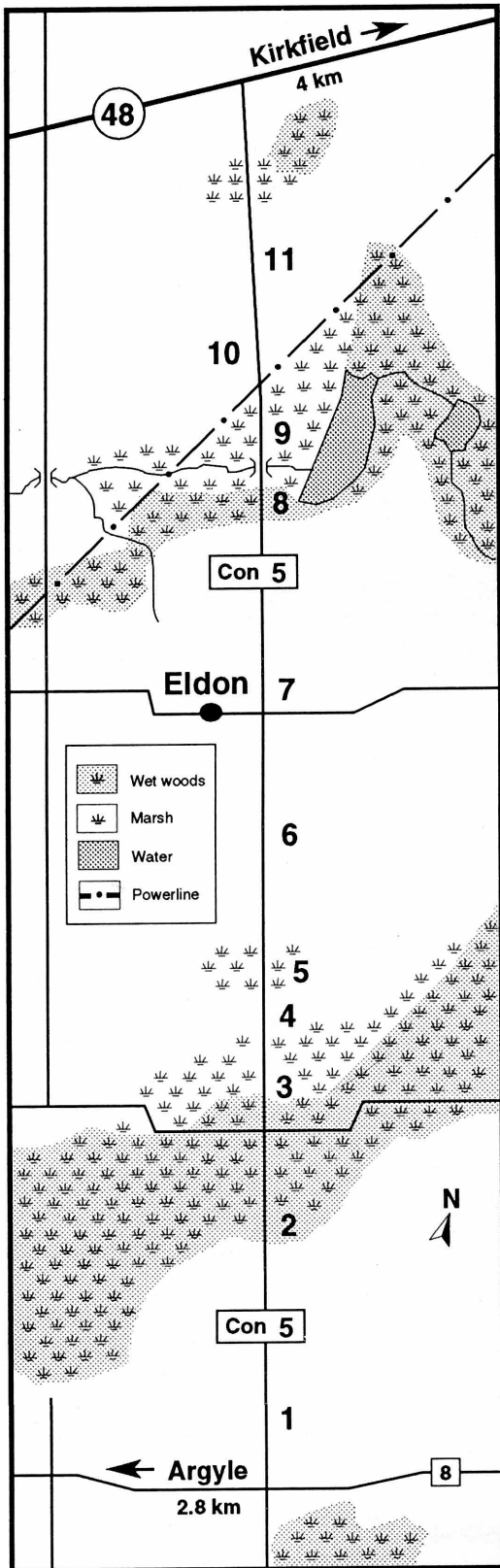
Bicknell's Thrush, formerly a subspecies of the Gray-cheeked Thrush, is now a full species based on the studies of Henri Ouellet (*Ontario Birds* 11(2):41-45; *Wilson's Bulletin* 105(4):545-572). There are two specimens (19 and 23 September 1979) from the Kingston area in the Canadian Museum of Nature (Michel Gosselin, pers. comm.). I've seen photographs by Doug McRae of a Bicknell's banded on 17 May 1980 at Prince Edward Point near Kingston. Bicknell's is probably a rare but regular spring and fall migrant in Eastern Ontario. Diagnostic field marks are still being tested. However, non-singing Bicknell's are probably identifiable in the field in Ontario, given a superb view by those who are thoroughly familiar with thrushes. Compared to the *aliciae* subspecies of the Gray-cheeked found in Ontario, Bicknell's is browner above and the throat is often buffier, the pale base of the lower mandible is more extensive and is a "bright pale yellow versus flesh or yellowish flesh." On Bicknell's, the tail is distinctly chestnut above, reminding one of a Hermit Thrush. The nominate subspecies *minimus* of the Gray-cheeked is browner and more like Bicknell's, but it breeds in Newfoundland and is unlikely to occur in Ontario. Bicknell's may be an earlier spring migrant than Gray-cheeked. Look for it earlier in May, before the main movement of Gray-cheekeds which comes after mid-May. The song of the Bicknell's is thinner and higher pitched and provides an accurate means of identification to the practiced ear. Also, Bicknell's song rises or remains constant in pitch near the end, Gray-cheeked goes down. You can hear Bicknell's song on Monty Brigham's *Bird Sounds of Canada*, Vol 2 CD #2 Track 15. It's a long shot, but listen for Bicknell's in June in mixed second growth stands with a high percentage of small spruce and fir up to 10 metres in height, and above 175 metres in elevation. This habitat follows forest fires and clear cutting, and is now its preferred habitat in Quebec. Try the

continued on back page

Eldon 5 in Victoria County

Favourite Birding Hotspots

by Eleanor Beagan and Jean Iron



Map by Michael King

General Description. Eldon 5 is an 11 km stretch of road near Kirkfield in Victoria County. It passes through open fields, scrub and bushy areas, mixed woodlots, and several significant marshes and swamps. A trip to the Carden Alvar can comfortably begin or end with a drive along Eldon 5 which should add several species not seen in Carden. From Highway 404 and 401 in Toronto, it will take about one hour and twenty minutes to reach the Argyle Bakery at the intersection of Highway 46 and Victoria County Road 8. To reach the bakery, take 404 north to Davis Drive, go east to Highway 48, turn left (north) and continue to Durham Road 15 (near Beaverton) and turn right (east). Travel for 8.8 km to the intersection of Victoria County Road 8 and Highway 46, where the bakery is on the southwest corner. Durham Road 15 becomes Victoria County Road 8 at the Victoria/Durham boundary. Continue east from the bakery along County Road 8 for 2.8 km and turn left (north) at the second road onto Eldon 5. The sign says Con 5 Eldon. Now set your odometer to 0 km. See map.

Time of Year. The best times are from late April to mid-July for migrating and breeding species. The most productive times of day are from dawn to mid-morning and from late afternoon to evening.

The Birds.

1. From the corner of County Road 8 and Eldon 5 as you travel north, right away look all along the road in open areas for Eastern Bluebird, Eastern Meadowlark, Common Snipe, Upland Sandpiper, Eastern Kingbird, Bobolink, American Kestrel and for many species of swallows and sparrows. Check the fence posts for perched Common Snipe and Upland Sandpiper. If you stay in your car you will be able to approach these birds very closely.
2. At 2.4 km, during migration, the wet woods of aspen, maple and evergreens produce an excellent variety of warblers, vireos, thrushes, flycatchers and other songbirds. The early morning chorus is enchanting.
3. At 3.5 km, the woods give way to a swamp of low alders and willows. Look on the right, though both sides can be good, for Willow Flycatcher, Alder Flycatcher, Common Moorhen, Blue-winged Teal, Yellow Warbler and Common Yellowthroat.
4. Continuing north, the road has open fields on both sides where Vesper Sparrow, Savannah Sparrow and Upland Sandpiper can be found.
5. The willows at 4.2 km provide more chances for songbirds.
6. At 5.2 km Grasshopper and Clay-colored Sparrows are often found in a small pine plantation on the right. (In spring 1996, the pines were about 2 metres tall).
7. Short-eared Owls have been seen at dusk sitting on the fence posts and flying low over the fields in the area north of the intersection of Eldon 5 and Eldon Station Road.
8. A little further at 8.3 km is a treed area on both sides of the road where Ruffed Grouse may be heard drumming and sometimes are seen.
9. The best spot on the road is at 8.5 km where the road crosses a creek running from the marsh on your right. Stop here to view this extensive sedge and cattail marsh. Regretably, the summer storms of 1995 destroyed most of the herons' nests. Listen for Sedge and Marsh Wrens and you may be lucky enough to see them. Regular in spring and summer are Virginia Rail, Sora, Common Moorhen, Swamp Sparrow, Pied-billed Grebe, Least and American Bitterns, Belted Kingfisher, Green Heron, Blue-winged Teal, Mallard, Wood Duck, American Black Duck, Black Tern, and an abundance of Red-winged Blackbirds. What marsh would be complete without them! In May 1994 and 1995 Yellow Rails (on migration in mid May) were heard here. The best time for hearing them is at dusk

or just after sunset, but they have also been heard during the day. Use a scope to view the large dead trees to the east. Check any stick nests carefully for Great Horned Owl and Osprey nests. In 1995, the OFO field trip spotted a Pileated Woodpecker visiting a nest hole in one of the dead trees. Turkey Vulture, Red-tailed Hawk, American Kestrel and Northern Harrier frequent the fields to the north. On the left side of the road opposite the marsh, Baltimore Oriole, Gray Catbird, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Great Crested Flycatcher, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Cedar Waxwing, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, many species of flycatchers, warblers, vireos and thrushes, and Ruffed Grouse are likely. The winnowing of Common Snipe in spring cannot be missed. An evening at the marsh is delightful with all the marsh sounds interspersed with the songs of American Woodcock, Common Nighthawk, Whip-Poor-Will and maybe even a coyote.

10. At 9.1 km, on the left near the hydro lines, Grasshopper Sparrows can be found. Between here and 10 km, in the hawthorn field on the left, Loggerhead Shrike were present in 1994.

11. From here to the next small swamp on the right, suitable habitat produces a good selection of the previously mentioned landbirds, including Brown Thrasher. At 11 km, Eldon 5 joins Highway 48. Turn right for Kirkfield, 4 km away.

All birds can be seen well from the road. Please respect private land.

Acknowledgements: Many thanks to Andrew Jano for his help obtaining map information.

For a guide to the Carden Alvar, see the December 1991 *Ontario Birds* 9(3).

Ross James Retires

Dr. Ross D. James, associate curator of ornithology at the Royal Ontario Museum, is taking early retirement on June 30, 1996. Ross intends to maintain an association with the ROM, but will not be available at the museum on a regular basis. He will continue to be museum liaison for the OBRC.

Ross's retirement and the retirement of Jim Dick of the ornithology department last March, represent a great loss to ornithology in Ontario. We wish Ross all the best in his retirement and new endeavours.

Algonquin Warbler Quiz by Ron Tozer

1. Which two Algonquin warblers have larger leg musculature than typical warblers, and why?
2. Which Algonquin warbler molts rapidly from basic (winter) plumage to alternate (breeding) plumage during its migration northward in the spring?
3. Which Algonquin warblers are known as "budworm warblers"?
4. Which Algonquin warblers typically breed in groves of Eastern Hemlock?
5. The young of which Algonquin warbler leave the nest only seven days after hatching, rather than the normal 12 to 14 days of other warbler species?
6. Which common Algonquin warbler was seen only once by John James Audubon?
7. Which Algonquin warbler makes its living by flycatching, and competes directly with the Least Flycatcher?

Answers page 5

Notes from the OBRC by Rob Dobos

The Ontario Bird Records Committee held its Annual Meeting on March 2, 1996, at the Royal Ontario Museum. This all day meeting was devoted largely to the review and discussion of bird reports, and no major policy decisions were made this year. About 165 rare bird reports were reviewed by the Committee in 1995. Four new species were accepted for Ontario, those being White-faced Ibis, Prairie Falcon, Black-tailed Godwit and Varied Bunting. Details of these and many other rare bird occurrences will appear in the Annual Report to be published in the August 1996 *Ontario Birds*.

I would once again like to thank the outgoing 1995 members, Bob Curry, Ross James and Dennis Rupert, for service to the Committee. The OBRC members for 1996 are Margaret Bain, David Brewer, Peter Burke, Nick Escott, Kevin McLaughlin, Don Sutherland, Alan Wormington, and I will continue as Secretary. Oddly, at the Annual Meeting, we were unable to find a willing chairperson. Therefore, it was agreed that I would also serve as Acting Chair for this term.

As a general observation, the quality of rare bird reports submitted continues to improve, and the number of contributors is also on the increase. Many major rarities are documented by good photographs and sketches, in addition to detailed notes, and this certainly makes the work of the Committee much easier. Obviously, we do not receive reports for all provincial rarities encountered, and I would encourage OFO members not to hesitate about submitting a report, even for a bird that you know was seen by many others.

The OBRC has jumped into the information superhighway, and we are now able to receive rare bird reports by electronic mail (see my e-mail address below). The OBRC also has a section on the OFO Home Page, as described on Page 1, including a rare bird report form and the Ontario Review List of Species.

Please note I have recently moved. Your rare bird reports can be sent directly to me at my new address:

**Rob Dobos, OBRC Secretary, 1156 5th
Concession Road West, RR 2, Waterdown,
ON L0R 2H2.
E-mail: rob.dobos@cciw.ca**

Gray Jay

in

The Birds of North America

by Dan Strickland

I am one of at least eighteen Ontario residents who have volunteered to write species accounts for the American Ornithologists' Union series on the birds of North America. My treatment of the Gray Jay, co-authored with Henri Ouellet of the Canadian Museum of Nature, was the fortieth to be published (in 1993) but the count is now over 200 species and the project seems to be well on the way to its goal of covering the over 700 birds in North America by the year 2000. I am pleased to write a few words about my experience writing the account for OFO members.

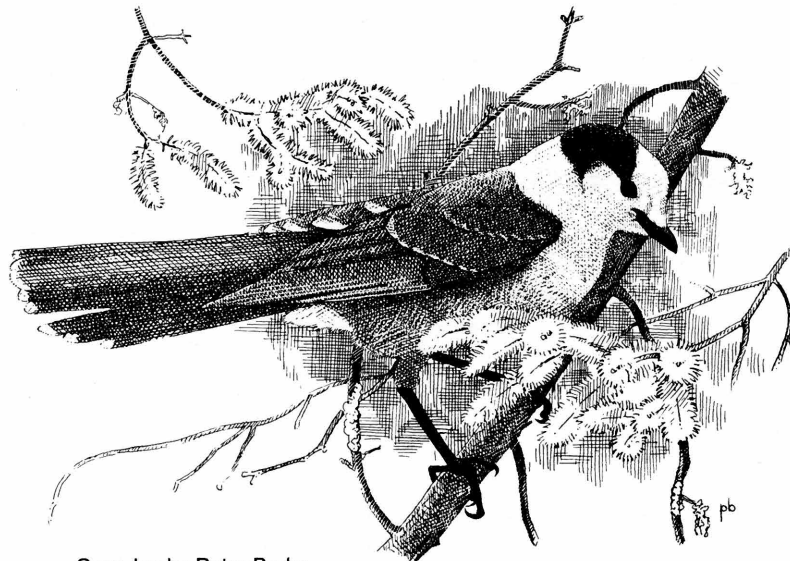
Each account in the series is intended to be a separate, comprehensive summary of current knowledge about its species, including a complete bibliography. The editors have largely overcome what would otherwise be tremendous variation in style and depth of coverage from author to author by supplying each of us with what amounted to a very detailed and complete style and organization manual. Adherence to these guidelines makes for a terse, telegraphic style which most people find harder to read than that of our illustrious one-man predecessor, A.C. Bent. Still, the accounts are as complete and up-to-date (for now) as one could hope for and, personally I am proud to have had the chance to contribute to so large and important a project.

With the format clearly laid out for me, and having already amassed considerable first-hand experience and a very complete bibliography on the Gray Jay, I actually found it fairly easy to put the account together. It was also very helpful to the extent that it spurred me into consolidating a great deal of data I had collected over the years, and it rekindled the realization that I should be preparing more scientific articles to make this information available for wider audiences.

In addition, the exercise made me address whole aspects of Gray Jay biology that I had never paid much attention to before. This quickly led to new questions and ideas for future research—a few of which I mention here. Two subjects in particular where I had little expertise were detailed plumage descriptions and the geographic variation of Gray Jays. I knew Henri Ouellet was looking at these areas however, and he agreed to write those parts of the account. Among other

things, Henri proposed reducing the number of recognizable subspecies from 13 down to 6 (only one found in the east) but pointed out that a truly definitive treatment must await the examination of many more specimens than are now available. In the meantime, devotees of “recognizable forms” will be pleased to know that the range of Gray Jay variation includes three recognizable extremes besides the one we see here in Ontario. Alaska birds are distinctly darker than ours, birds of the southern Rockies are much paler—indeed almost “white-headed”, while the “Oregon Jays” of the Pacific northwest in the United States (originally considered a separate species) have contrastingly pale underparts and conspicuous white shaft streaks in their back plumage.

Another somewhat related area that I enjoyed tackling personally was coming up with the most accurate possible range map. During the course of checking numerous regional bird books and corresponding with bird atlas co-ordinators across the continent to do this, several possibly quite instructive features of Gray Jay distribution emerged. One is the fact that, while Gray Jays occur in the



Gray Jay by Peter Burke

Rockies as far south as Arizona and New Mexico, they do not occur in more northerly areas of the snowy, coniferous, and superficially suitable Sierra Nevada of California. A possible key to this puzzle is that the jay populations in the Rockies are apparently closely associated with Engleman Spruce, whereas the Sierra Nevada has no spruce at all (only pines and firs). Could there be something about spruce (such as favourable chemical micro-environment under its bark flakes for long term food storage) which makes its presence critical for Gray Jay success, at least near the southern limits of its range?

In a somewhat similar vein, Gray Jays are present in Sitka Spruce right down to the coast of Washington and Oregon but completely absent from such coastal forests in British Columbia and Alaska. Are those forests too wet for the over-winter survival of stored food, at least in the north, or are the so-called Oregon Jays as different from other Gray Jays in their ecology as they are in their plumage?

This whole subject of Gray Jay distribution and its possible link to the survivability of food stores raised the question of Gray Jay conservation. There is no reason to think

Gray Jays are threatened over the bulk of their range but, as Henri and I pointed out in our account, they are becoming less common at the southern limits of their range in Ontario and Quebec. Could it be that global warming is making southern fringe areas uninhabitable for Gray Jays, possibly hastening the rotting of food stored in the (warmer) summers and thus making it unavailable in the following winters? If so, can we expect the southern range limit of Gray Jays to shift north beyond places like Algonquin Park, and will isolated mountain-top populations in the southern Rockies go extinct?

If one of the purposes of a summarizing species account like ours is to raise questions for future research, one of its fates is to be proven wrong—and sometimes quite quickly. A year after our account was published and I had appeared in print saying that “Gray Jays do not breed cooperatively”, Tom Waite, now at Michigan Technology University, made the astonishing discovery of one of my nonbreeding yearling Gray Jays in Algonquin Park helping its parents feed recently fledged siblings. Since then, we have seen another example and believe that, in contrast to other species where helping has been observed, Gray Jay helpers begin to feed their younger siblings only after they leave the nest. This, and the fact that one year olds are normally expelled from the natal territory at the start of the breeding season, suggest why no-one had ever seen it before in the Gray Jay.

This is only the second Canadian bird in which helping has been observed (the Northwestern Crow was the other). Especially because of the apparently unique way it is expressed, we may reasonably expect studies of helping in the Gray Jay to make a significant contribution to the field of evolutionary biology.

I look forward to participating in those studies and helping, at the same time, to make my own account in *The Birds of North America* series even more out-of-date!

Answers to Algonquin Warbler Quiz from page 3

1. Northern Waterthrush and Ovenbird. They use their larger legs to kick over dead leaves while searching for invertebrates.
2. Yellow-rumped Warbler. Birds I have seen in mid-March in the southern states are in basic plumage, but most are in alternate plumage when they arrive in Ontario.
3. Cape May, Bay-breasted, and Tennessee Warblers. Their numbers soar during spruce budworm outbreaks, only to drop again when this food bonanza for their young crashes.
4. Blackburnian and Black-throated Green Warblers.
5. Ovenbird. They can't fly when they fledge, but can run effectively on their large legs. There is an adaptive advantage for young birds to leave a vulnerable ground nest as soon as possible.
6. Chestnut-sided Warbler. This early successional stage species was apparently rare in the mature forests of Audubon's day (1785-1851).
7. American Redstart. Some studies have shown that Least Flycatchers tend to displace the Redstarts, at least in sunnier, more open situations.

Ron Tozer retires as Algonquin Park Naturalist on June 30. He will still be active on the birding and OFO scenes. We look forward to his definitive book on the Birds of Algonquin Park.

Niagara Spring Fly Past by Gordon Bellerby

Most Ontario birders know about the dusk flight of Bonaparte's Gulls down the Niagara River to roost sites on Lake Ontario in late November and December. Watched from Niagara-on-the-Lake, sightings of Little and Black-headed Gulls are regular—but not always!

Less well-known is the spring fly past and this is the preferred time to see Little Gulls. Best dates for this fly past are between March 25 and April 15 when such sightings of Little Gulls are guaranteed.

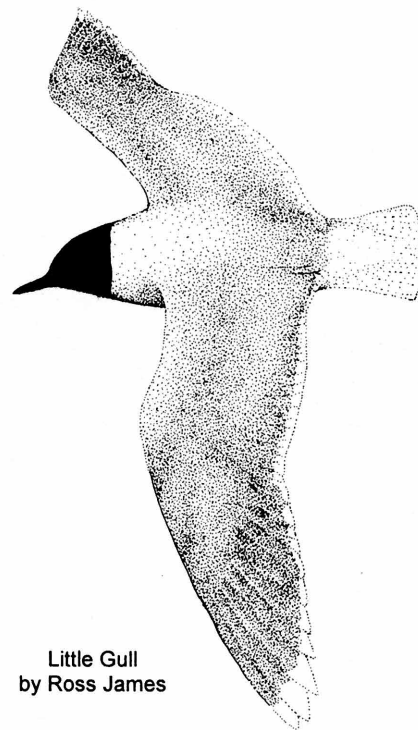
Counts from 1991-1995 have regularly given totals of 20-35 Littles with the added excitement of a Black-headed or two as well. Most birds are acquiring adult breeding plumage, allowing interesting comparisons of the different head markings.

Best location is just up-river from the yacht club at the foot of Nelson Street. Alas, a major condominium development is planned for this area, but the dock at Navy House just 250 metres further up-river should be equally good (free parking available too). Queens Royal Park down-river at the foot of King Street gives much less satisfactory viewing as by then the gulls tend to lift up and fly near Fort Niagara on the US side.

One caveat, if the winds are southerly, rare at this time of year, the gulls fly higher above the tree line on the US side, all then begin to look like Littles. On northerly winds, the birds fly low over the water, with the Littles generally at the front of each group of Bonaparte's. Check carefully any single gull flying just above a low group of Bonaparte's, it may well be a Black-headed, or to fool you, a stray Ring-billed!

Whereas the late fall fly pasts last 60 to 75 minutes, the spring ones are over in 45 minutes or so, and the Little Gulls bunch up in the middle of the flying time. Fading light makes identification more difficult.

Clearly, the North American population of Little Gulls is doing well. There were significant numbers this spring peaking on 5 April with 78 counted, and on 7 April with 67. No Black-headed Gulls were recorded either last fall or this spring.



Little Gull
by Ross James

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Cormorants Explode!

by Heather Mackey

The Double-crested Cormorant has undergone dramatic changes in population in the Great Lakes over the last three decades. Birders of a "certain age" will recall when seeing a cormorant on the Great Lakes was a rare sight. The birds reached their lowest numbers in 1973, when only 125 nests were recorded in the Great Lakes. Now, with over 54,000 nests (as of the last lake-wide count in 1994), they are so plentiful it seems we're practically tripping over them, and some people are even asking, "Are there too many?"

Historically, it is thought that the cormorant first arrived as a nesting species in the Great Lakes around 1913. The first nesting occurred in the far western tip of Lake Superior, and was likely a natural expansion from populations in the Great Plains. The cormorants spread slowly eastward and by 1945 had nesting colonies throughout the Great Lakes. By the early 1950s they reached a peak of about 900 nesting pairs.

Once they had colonized the lakes, their numbers took a wide roller-coaster ride, which mirrored equally dramatic changes in the ecology of the lakes themselves. In the 1950s, cormorants in the Great Lakes began to exhibit symptoms of long-term exposure to toxic chemicals: thinning eggshells, eggs that rotted before they hatched, chicks born with crossed bills and club feet. Studies by the Canadian Wildlife Service found high levels of toxic chemicals, notably DDE and PCBs, in their eggs. Their diet of fish from the contaminated waters of the Great Lakes practically doomed the cormorants—their numbers plummeted to a mere 125 nests in the early 1970s.

In the mid-70s, the birds began a spectacular recovery. By 1994, the Great Lakes supported over 54,000 nesting pairs. Their rapid increase was due in part to new environmental regulations which sharply reduced the use of toxic chemicals in the Great Lakes basin. The cormorant explosion was also fueled by a sharp rise in the number of small fish in the Great Lakes. Smelt and alewife, their primary food source, have been particularly abundant since the 1970s.

Are 54,000 pairs too many? With such a meteoric population rise, concerns have been raised about the impact of cormorants on other nesting waterbirds, the trees that support their nesting colonies, and on the fish they rely on for food.

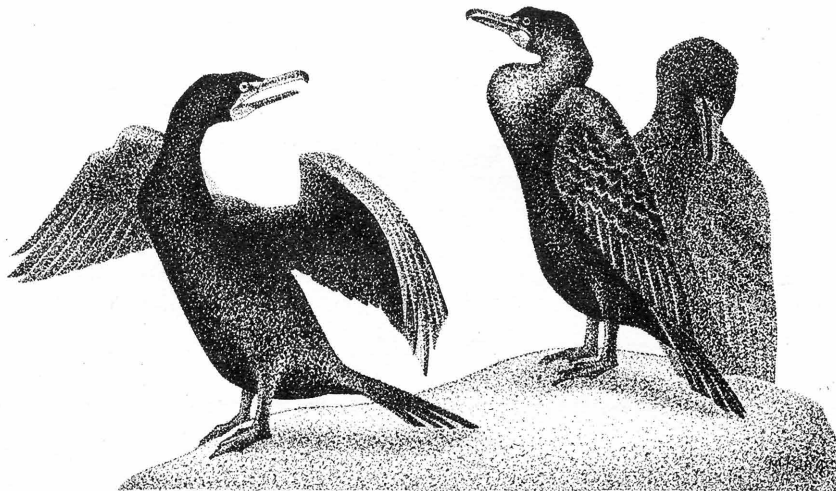
Cormorants nest in dense colonies, often in trees on islands or along shorelines. They can damage this vegetation by stripping leaves from trees. The combined weight of the birds and their bulky nests can even break branches. But perhaps most importantly, their droppings, which rain down to the ground from their nests, kill the ground vegetation and eventually kill the trees as well. On sandspits and barrier beaches, the loss of these trees can lead to increased erosion. Large cormorant colonies can also threaten significant ecosystems. There is particular concern for the rare stands of Carolinian forest found on the islands of western Lake Erie. Black-crowned Night-Herons tend to vacate a colony when cormorants move into their nesting trees. The cormorants' favourite trick is to nest above the herons and shower them with droppings!

Many fish-eating birds, and cormorants in particular, arouse suspicion and hostility. Anglers and commercial harvesters claim that cormorants consume large quantities of desirable fish. Studies have repeatedly shown that in a natural environment, cormorants feed primarily on small, largely non-commercial shallow-water fish. Sport fish, such as salmon or

trout, make up less than 1% of their diet. However, there is some evidence that the birds may deplete local stocks of panfish (sunfish, crappies, rock bass, etc.).

Concerns over the impact of the relentlessly rising numbers of cormorants have prompted calls for a control program. However, because the cormorant colonies are so widely distributed, and their numbers so large, the Canadian Wildlife Service feels it would be very difficult to carry out an effective large-scale control program.

Can these birds increase forever? Any species colonizing a new area shows a period of initial unrestricted growth and then reaches its limit. Eventually, the birds will outstrip their food supply or nesting habitat or be reduced by disease. The largest cormorant colony in the Great Lakes, on Little Gull Island in Lake Ontario, did show a decrease in 1993-1994, but in 1995, the cormorants rebounded and doubled their numbers to 7,500 nests! It now seems difficult to predict what will happen to their numbers in the future, but one thing is certain—they will remain an easy tick on the checklist for some time to come!



Double-crested Cormorants by Michael King

OFO trips

Rondeau by Allen Woodliffe

Future Field Trips

September 22 (Sunday) Lake Ontario Pelagic. Leader: Glenn Coady.
Departure 8:00 a.m. aboard Klancy II at Queen's Quay and Jarvis in Toronto. \$60.00. Call Jerry Guild (905) 823-1973.

October 6 (Saturday) Presqu'ile Provincial Park. Leader: Doug McRae.
Meet at Beach 4 Parking Lot at 8:00 a.m. Fall migrants, shorebirds, raptors.

October 20 (Sunday) Van Wagner's Beach, Hamilton. Leader: Rob Dobos.
Join Rob and the local birders at 8:00 a.m. for jaegers, if winds are favourable, and fall migrants. **TRIP for the AGM**

October 26 (Saturday) Holiday Beach. Leader: Paul Pratt. Meet at the hawk viewing tower at Holiday Beach Conservation Area on County Road 50 (3 km south of Malden Centre - 30 km west of Kingsville) at 9:00 a.m. Migrating raptors. ****NEW TRIP**

Twenty-seven OFO members arrived at the Rondeau Visitor Centre on May 4, 1996, cautiously optimistic about glimpsing some early migrants. Given the weather and migration up to that point, the prospects looked somewhat grim, but the unsettled weather helped hold down some of the birds that were passing through. More than 100 species were collectively noted by the group that day. The South Point Trail produced Yellow-breasted Chat, a close but brief encounter with Hooded Warbler, Common Yellowthroat, Green Heron, Oldsquaw, Forster's Tern, Chimney Swift, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Brown Thrasher, and Field Sparrow.

Tuliptree Trail had several warbler species, including Black-and-white, Northern Waterthrush, Black-throated Blue, Black-throated Green, Ovenbird, Magnolia and Chestnut-sided, (Prothonotary showed up later!) as well as White-eyed Vireo, Wood Thrush and Rose-breasted Grosbeak. After lunch, a brief stop at the north end of the Park provided great views of Red-bellied Woodpecker, Grasshopper Sparrow and Great Crested Flycatcher.

The Marsh Trail was a highlight, and included Yellow and Palm Warblers, nesting Bald Eagle, Osprey, Virginia Rail, Sora, Marsh Wren, American Coot, Lesser Yellowlegs, Caspian Tern, Savannah and Swamp Sparrow and a most perplexing raptor which turned out to be a very pale Rough-legged Hawk.

The end of the day saw us scoping a large pasture for a Western Meadowlark reported earlier in the day, but the brisk winds prevented us from hearing anything but Eastern. Let's do it again next year!

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Blenheim Sewage Lagoons. Due to major construction, the Town of Blenheim is denying access to the lagoons at this time. Completion will occur this summer, hopefully before fall migration. Plans include a "birder's gate" for those who have written permission from the Town. If you are planning a visit later this summer call the Town Clerk's office before you visit, at (519) 676-5405. Please send a letter of appreciation for past (and hopefully future) access to: Town Clerk, 35 Talbot St. West, Blenheim, ON N0P 1A0.

Owls at Amherst Island by Bruce Di Labio

On March 2, 1996, OFO members had a remarkable trip to Amherst Island near Kingston. Though it was a windy day, the sun kept everyone warm and in good spirits as we hiked the owl woods. Mild temperatures in the area melted most of the snow, making the hike even more enjoyable. Those experiencing their first owling adventure were met with incredible success as four species of owls were found in the woods, including five Boreals, five Great Grays, three Northern Saw-whets and one Barred. Small birds were difficult to find but the ever-friendly and tame Black-capped Chickadees kept the group busy feeding from their hands. Due to the high winds, very little was found in the open fields; even the ever-present Red-tailed and Rough-legged Hawks and Northern Shrikes were difficult to locate. We were fortunate, however, to find one Red-tailed and 5 Rough-legged. After much effort, 4 Snowy Owls were located in the interior portion of the island. Once again, high winds forced most of the Snowys to take cover; most were found sheltering behind tree trunks or wood piles. Our final stop was at the Dupont Plant at Kingston where we observed the male Tufted Duck, present since late January.

Our total for the day was 33 species. This is certainly a field trip to remember.

OFO extends grateful thanks to Alex Scott, the owner and our gracious host at the owl woods, for his hospitality and helpfulness.



Chris Kerrigan '96

Boreal Owl by Christine Kerrigan

Shorebirds with Jon Dunn

Jon Dunn is returning in November 1996 to Toronto with a presentation on shorebirds, particularly peeps and dowitchers. Date to be confirmed. Registration form in the August Ontario Birds.

AOU Decisions from page 1

Madawaska Highlands, the east side of Algonquin Park or even the Temagami region because Bicknell's occurs in summer north of Ottawa in Quebec. Interestingly, reports of Gray-cheeked Thrushes in northeastern Ontario during the Breeding Bird Atlas (1981-1985) were dismissed mainly because they were so far south (Don Sutherland, pers. comm.). Were they Bicknell's? Don't miss meeting ornithologist Henri Ouellet and hearing all about Bicknell's Thrush at the OFO Annual General Meeting on 19 October. Official acceptance of Bicknell's Thrush to the Ontario list awaits review by the OBRC.

Rufous-sided Towhee is split back into two former species: **Eastern Towhee** and **Spotted Towhee**. The split is based mainly on a re-evaluation of the original evidence used to lump them in 1954! Spotted Towhee records still await official review by the OBRC.

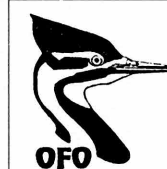
Sharp-tailed Sparrow is split into **Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow** and **Saltmarsh Sharp-tailed Sparrow**. The Saltmarsh species occurs from Maine southwards and has not been recorded in Canada. Two subspecies of the Nelson's, nominate *nelsoni* and *alterus*, occur in Ontario. *Nelsoni* breeds on the prairies and *alterus* breeds along the Ontario coasts of James Bay and Hudson Bay. *Alterus* is more frequent in most of southern Ontario, except in the extreme southwest where *nelsoni* is more frequent. Ken Parkes reports that fall birds in basic plumage of the two subspecies are readily separated in the hand, and possibly in the field given a close view (*Pennsylvania Birds* 6(1):13-14). The third Nelson's subspecies, *subvirgatus*, breeds in Quebec and the Maritime Provinces. In recent years, *subvirgatus* has spread upriver to Montreal. It frequents low islands with *Phalaris* grass (Michel Gosselin, pers. comm.). Watch for it in similar habitat during the breeding season along the St. Lawrence east of Cornwall. Note, *subvirgatus* is incorrectly listed as a subspecies of the Saltmarsh species in the new Stokes Eastern field guide. The range maps are wrong too; *subvirgatus* and *alterus* are shown on the range map of the Saltmarsh species, not on the Nelson's where they belong! Finally, Nelson's is a rather unfortunate and confusing name for the new species because it has long been associated mainly with the prairie race. See David Sibley's excellent article in *Birding* 28(3):196-208.

Northern Oriole (lumped in 1973) is split back into three former species: the return of the **Baltimore Oriole** (East) is welcome news; **Bullock's Oriole** (West); and **Black-backed Oriole** (Mexico). The OBRC will be reviewing reports of Bullock's before it can be added to the provincial list.

We are in a splitting era. Expect more splits as work on DNA progresses and as the AOU moves away from its previous narrower interpretation of the biological species concept to wider interpretations that allow for limited hybridization between closely related species. Watch for Solitary Vireo to be split into three species: Blue-headed (Ontario), Plumbeous and Cassin's Vireos (Ross James, pers. comm.).

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What to know when Buying Binoculars

by Vitus Schilling of Leica Camera

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Twilight performance of binoculars refers to their performance under low light conditions. Comparing regular sized 8x42 with compact 8x20 binoculars, the twilight factor (T) is computed by extracting the square root from the product of the magnification x objective lens diameter. In our example, an 8x42 calculates to $T=18.3$ and an 8x20 calculates to $T=12.6$. What do these numbers tell us? If we eliminate the decimal point, we get 183 and 126. Then we associate each number with a unit of length, such as metres. Therefore, under low light conditions, an observer with 8x42 sees the same details at 183 metres as an 8x20 sees at 126 metres. Using an 8x20 requires you to close in at 126 metres, while using an 8x42 maintains viewing at 183 metres under low light conditions.

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OFO NEWS Editor

Jean Iron, 9 Lichen Place, Don Mills, ON M3A 1X3.
(416) 445-9297 Email jeaniron@globedirect.com