

Favourite Birding Hotspots

Algonquin Park's "East Side"

by Ron Tozer

General Description. Algonquin Park's "East Side" presents excellent birding in habitats of White Birch, poplar, Black Spruce bogs, and extensive stands of Red, White and Jack Pine. Consult the recently revised Park Checklist for frequency and time of occurrence of birds (Tozer 1994), and Runtz (1993) for more information on the area's fascinating flora and fauna.

Access to this part of Algonquin Park is via the Sand Lake Gate (see map): turn south off the Highway 17 bypass onto Renfrew County Road 26 (3.5 km west of Forest Lea Road, and about 9 km west of Pembroke); travel about 300 m, then turn right (west) onto the Achray Road (Renfrew County Road 28), and drive 26 km to Sand Lake Gate. From southern Ontario it is shorter to follow Highway 62 through Alice, then turn left (north) onto Renfrew County Road 26, and proceed to the Achray Road. It is easy to miss the turn off Highway 62 just after you pass a tall communications tower. Since there are no gas or food services inside the Park, fill up at the gas station on the corner or at the Algonquin Portage Store on the Achray Road, 21 km before Sand Lake Gate.

The Achray Road is paved for the first 9 km. Starting where the pavement ends, every kilometre is marked with a black and white sign. I will describe the location of good birding sites using these kilometre markers.

Time of Year. The "East Side" can be good for finding most of Algonquin's resident "northern" birds at all seasons. Highlights of spring and summer include 20 species of breeding warblers. In winter, the expected "finches" are regular, and Bald and Golden eagles, Great Gray Owl and Northern Hawk Owl have been seen.

Good Birding Sites. Stop at Sand Lake Gate (km 17.5) to buy and display on your dash a permit for Park use. Look for Red Crossbills around the gate, and watch all along the road for both crossbill species, Evening Grosbeak, Pine Siskin and Purple Finch picking up grit.

The 1.5 km long Barron Canyon Trail at km 28.9 goes along the top of a spectacular gorge bordering the Barron River. Listen for Yellow-bellied Flycatcher, Northern Waterthrush and Common Yellowthroat singing from the talus slopes in the canyon. Barn Swallows and Eastern Phoebe nest "naturally" on rock faces far below the trail.

Turn left (south) at km 37.8 and go 4.8 km to Achray Campground on Grand Lake which may have interesting waterfowl, gulls and shorebirds. Check the campground for Pine Warblers and Red Crossbills.

Stop at Pretty Lake (km 54.5) if you still haven't found Gray Jay or Black-backed Woodpecker. Listen here after dark for Great Horned and Northern Saw-whet owls, and try

howling for Timber Wolves.

The extensive stands of Jack Pine from km 65 to 70 are excellent for Spruce Grouse. At dawn they may be picking up grit right on the road. You should walk through the area searching and playing tapes since males become active in response to female calls. Other species here include American Kestrel, Hermit Thrush, Gray Jay, Lincoln's Sparrow and Dark-eyed Junco. After dark, Common Nighthawks and Whip-poor-wills are numerous, especially at km 66.

Park well off the road at km 69.4, and walk in 1.5 km on a road leading north to the old Pembroke Lumber Company mill site on Lake Travers, watching for Spruce Grouse all the way. Check the marsh on your left soon after you reach the open field area for grebes and ducks. The field usually produces Merlin, Eastern Bluebird, Brown Thrasher, Bobolink, Savannah Sparrow and Vesper Sparrow. Follow the road to a point overlooking Lake Travers, and scan for unusual waterbirds. The Park's only sightings of Great Black-backed Gull and Forster's Tern were made here on the same day!

Check the pond on the left (south) side at km 72 for Ring-necked Duck and Hooded Merganser. The Poplar Rapids Bridge over the Petawawa River just beyond km 72 marks the limit of public vehicular travel. Now you can turn around and head back the 54 km to Sand Lake Gate, looking for anything you missed earlier and enthusing over all the great birds you have seen, I hope!

References

Runtz, M.W.P. 1993. The Explorer's Guide to Algonquin Park. Stoddard Publishing Co. Ltd., Toronto.
Tozer, R. 1994. Checklist and Seasonal Status of the Birds of Algonquin Provincial Park. The Friends of Algonquin Park, Whitney, Ontario.

