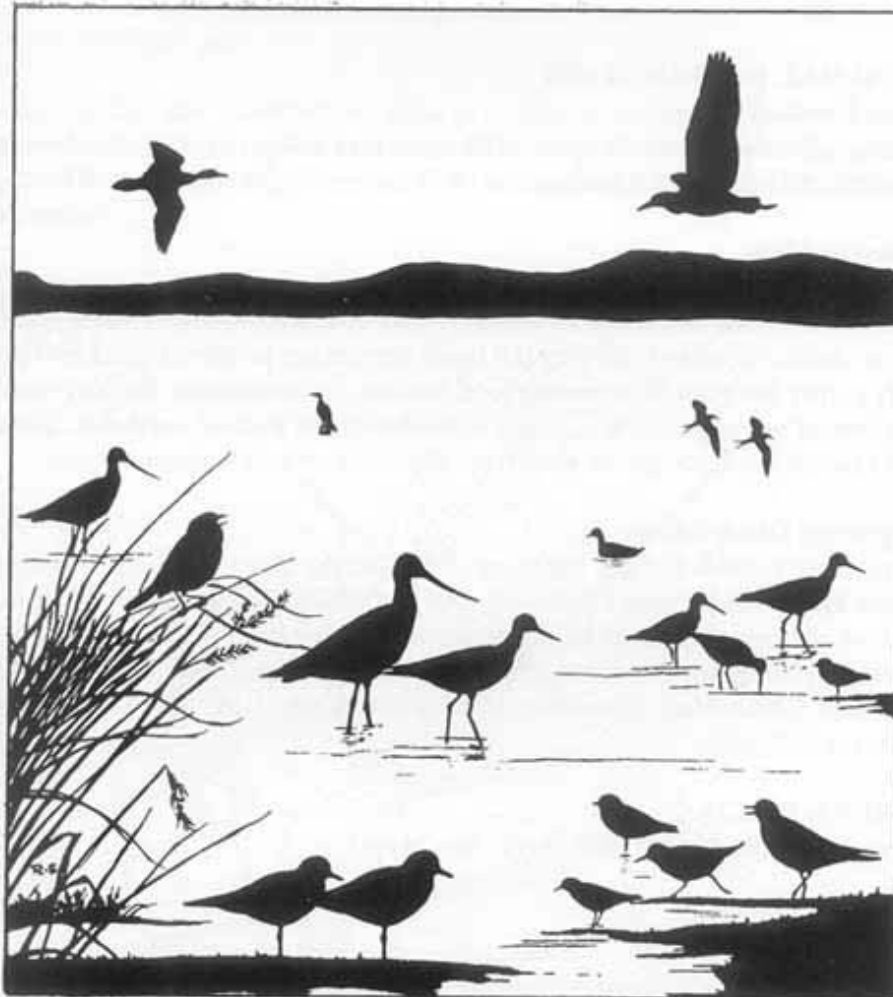


Birding in the Hamilton Area

John Olmsted and Ronald Scovell



VOLUME 20 NUMBER 1

Introduction

The purpose of this guide is to provide visiting birders with the information they require to make the most of a visit to the Hamilton area, and also to update our Hamilton site guide published 12 years ago in *Ontario Birds* (Olmsted and Scovell 1990).

This guide is best utilized in conjunction with two other sources of information: *Checklist of the Birds of the Hamilton Area* (Hamilton Naturalists' Club 2000), available from the Hamilton Naturalists' Club, Box 89052, Hamilton, Ontario L8S 4R5, which details the 377 species of birds that have been recorded in the area, and designates breeding species and those deemed to be rare; and *Date Guide to the Birds of the Hamilton Area* (Hamilton Naturalists' Club 1988), which gives additional information on the documentation required for each species on the checklist.

GENERAL INFORMATION

Area Covered

The *Checklist of the Birds of the Hamilton Area* states that the area covered is within a 25 mile (40.2 km) radius of Dundurn Castle, Hamilton, Ontario.

When to Come

Hamilton's main claim to birding fame is the fall migration (15 August to 15 December) along the shore of the west end of Lake Ontario. Loons, grebes, geese, ducks, shorebirds, jaegers (all three species are possible), gulls, and possibly a stray from the Atlantic lure local birders out in numbers. The key weather element we hope for is a strong wind out of the east or northeast. Such a wind brings the birds within view from the shore of Van Wagners Beach.

Reporting Observations

Immediate reports for any rarity on or not on the checklist should be made to the Hamilton Birding Hotline at (905) 381-0329. Any rare species or rare date of occurrence should be documented by a detailed written description, drawing, photograph or video. Please send your details to the Hamilton Bird Records Committee, Hamilton Naturalists' Club, Box 89052, Hamilton, Ontario L8S 4R5.

WHERE TO GO

Beverly Swamp Loop (Half Day). See Map 1.

1. Concession 8

- From Clappison's Corners, which is the junction of Highways 5 and 6, proceed north on Highway 6 for 11 km to West Flamborough Concession 8 W.

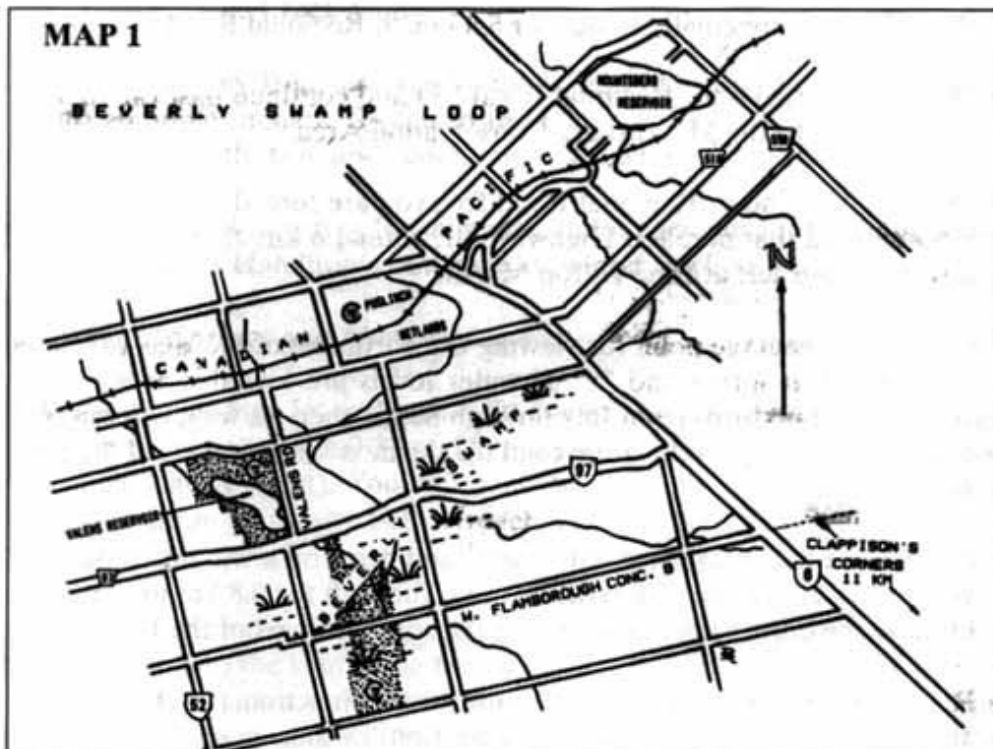
- Turn left and continue west for 8.0 km to the heart of the Beverly Swamp.

From the road, explore the areas of wet woodlands both to the north and south for nesting species such as **Yellow-bellied Sapsucker**; **Acadian, Willow** and **Alder Flycatchers**; **Winter Wren**, **Yellow-throated Vireo** and **White-throated Sparrow**.

2. Valens Reservoir

- Go west on Concession 8 to the first intersection, Valens Road, and turn right. Drive north to the next crossroads, Regional Road 97.
- Turn left onto Regional Road 97 and drive west for 1 km to the Valens Conservation Area.

Roads within the conservation area give access to vantage points on the west side of the lake, which may have 20 species of **waterfowl** in the spring. Walk through the campground area at the northwest corner of the lake for **passerines**.



- Return to the entrance of the conservation area, turn left on Regional Road 97, and drive back (east) to Valens Road.
- Turn left (north) for 0.4 km, and check the reservoir on the left and the marsh on your right.

3. *Puslinch Wetlands Reserve and Crief Bog*

- Continue north on Valens Road to the second crossroad.
- Turn right (east) and after 1.5 km, turn left (north again).
- Drive 0.3 km to the CPR rail line.

Park and walk along the road. Do not walk along the tracks or off the road. This is a good area for **rails**, and both **Willow** and **Alder Flycatchers**.

4. *Mountsberg Reservoir*

- Return south 0.3 km, then turn left (east) and travel 4.3 km to Highway 6.
- Turn right (south) on Highway 6 for 0.2 km and turn left (east) on Regional Road 518 (Campbellville Road) for 5.8 km, to Regional Road 559.
- Turn left (north) onto Regional Road 559 and continue past (at 1.2 km) the entrance to the Mountsberg Conservation Area.
- At the north end of Regional Road 559, you are forced to turn left onto a paved road that parallels Highway 401. After 1.6 km, there is a lookout tower on your left at Blue Heron Marsh.

This is a good vantage point for viewing the north end of the lake, excellent for **waterfowl** in spring and fall. If water levels are low, this area can be excellent for **shorebirds** from July through September. As well, you can bird the marshes on either side of the road for the next kilometre, until the road comes to a creek.

- 0.5 km past the creek, turn left (south) and drive on a winding road until you see a sign for the conservation area. Turn left for 0.8 km to a parking lot near the dam, a good lookout for the southern part of the lake.
- Retrace your route to the last left turn. At that junction, turn left (south), and drive for 0.5 km to the next intersection.

- Turn left and drive 1.6 km to Regional Road 518.
- Turn right (west) and drive 2.5 km to Highway 6.
- Turn left (south) and drive 16 km to the junction of Highways 5 and 6 to complete the loop.

Ancaster Loop (4 hours)

1. Sulphur Springs

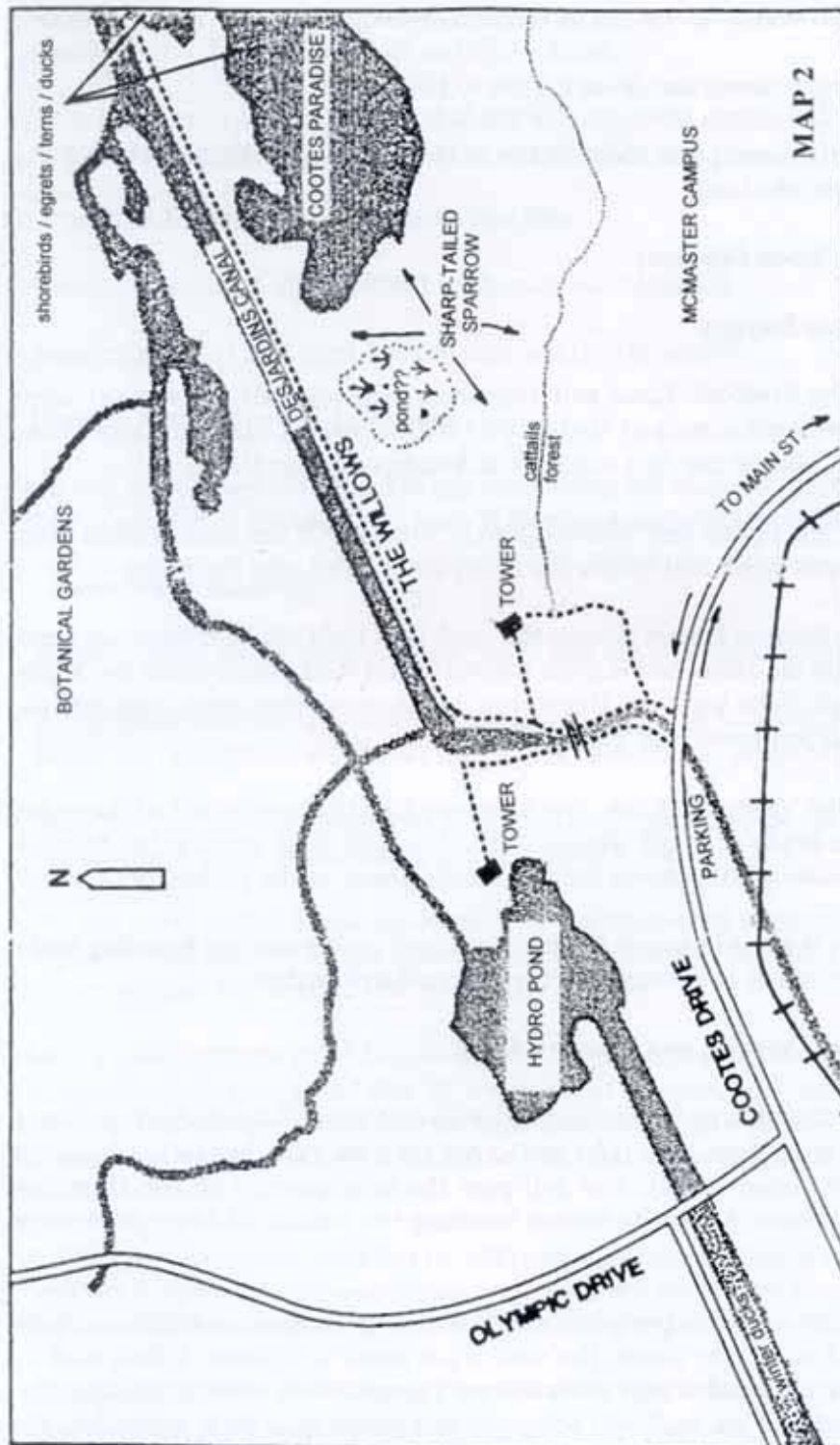
- Take the Mohawk Road exit west from Highway 403. Drive west along Mohawk until it ends at Highway 2 (Wilson Street). Turn left (south) and drive 1.5 km to the first stoplight at Sulphur Springs Road.
- Turn right (west) and follow Church Street for 2 km until it dead ends. Turn right again and follow the twisty road down into the valley.
- Where the first stream crosses the road, turn right into a parking area provided by the Hamilton Region Conservation Authority. Follow the Valley Trail out of the lot to the Hermitage, a large stone ruin, then down into the Sulphur Springs Creek Valley.
- From the Valley Trail, take the Monarch Trail that climbs out of the valley into an apple orchard. Switch to the Orchard Trail, passing the Merrick field house with its many feeders, circling back to the parking lot.

This area is good in spring for **migrants**, and in summer for **breeding birds**. In winter, this is Hamilton's best spot for **winter finches**.

2. Mineral Springs and Martin's Lane

- Leave the parking lot and turn right (west) along Sulphur Springs Road, which turns right after 0.3 km. Do not take the turn, but rather continue straight ahead (west). You will pass the headquarters of the Hamilton Conservation Authority before reaching the hamlet of Mineral Springs, at 3 km.

Park on or near the bridge to check the many feeders in the area. Walk Martin's Lane to the south. The road is not open to vehicles. After a walk of 2 km, you will reach a very sheltered area on your left, which is good in winter. A further 2 km walk will bring you to a more open area, just before the



road becomes suitable for vehicles from the south. This is an excellent area for **Blue-winged** and **Golden-winged Warblers**. In 2001, both **Lawrence's** and **Brewster's Warblers** were reported from this location. **Hooded Warblers** nest along Martin's Lane and in the adjacent areas of the Dundas Valley.

Dundas Marsh (Full Day). See Map 2.

1. South Shore: Princess Point to University Landing

- Exit Highway 403 at York Boulevard.
- At the first traffic light, turn right (south) onto Dundurn Street.
- At the next traffic light, turn right (west) onto King Street, and travel across a large bridge (over Highway 403).
- At the next street, Macklin, turn right (north) and go for 2 km. Macklin ends at the Princess Point parking lot. Park.

Check the mudflat and the Point itself. Look west up the marsh for **water-fowl**. You are able to follow trails along the south side of Dundas Marsh all the way to McMaster University. Check out Caleb's Walk, Kingfisher Point and University Landing. Kingfisher Point provides a good look at the southern portion of the marsh. East from the parking lot is a trail that goes under the High Level Bridge to provide access to the west end of Hamilton Harbour. This is a good fall and winter location for **ducks** and **gulls**.

2. Spencer's Creek, Dundas Hydro Pond, and The Willows

- Return on Macklin Street to King Street. Turn right and go one block
- Turn left (south) and go on Paradise Road for two blocks.
- Turn right (west) and go on Main Street (Highway 8) for 3 km, past McMaster University.
- After 3 km, turn right (north) at the traffic lights onto Cootes Drive.
- After crossing Spencer's Creek at 2 km, park on the shoulder of the road. Better still, park on the opposite side of the road by driving into Dundas on Cootes Drive and returning on the other side of this divided highway to a designated parking area (with a two hour limit).

Walk north on the west side of the creek. In 150 m, you will come to the hydro pond on your left. A bridge crosses the creek to the east bank. From here, it is a short walk to Paradise tower (no longer accessible) and a longer walk along the creek to the east, out to the centre of the marsh. At the end of "The Willows" (with low water) is a mudflat that attracts **ducks, gulls, terns** and **shorebirds**. A gap at the halfway point out to The Willows is just past an area of cattail marsh (on the south side) that is visited in early October by **Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrows**. It is the last area of cattail before the water, and is accessible from the end of the short tower trail (see Map 2) when water levels are low. "Walk" the area between the small open pond and the water's edge, and watch for small, "short-tailed" sparrows to flush ahead of you. During most falls, this area provides excellent opportunities for **godwits, phalaropes, American Golden-Plover, Long-billed Dowitcher, White-rumped Sandpipers**, and occasionally **Willet, American Avocet** and **Western Sandpiper**.

3. The Arboretum and the North Shore

- Continue west on Cootes Drive for 1 km to the first traffic lights, at Olympic Drive. Turn right (north) and drive 3 km to York Road.
- Turn right (east) again and travel 2 km to Old Guelph Road.
- Turn right (south) again, and travel 2 km to just past the railway bridge, and drive to the Arboretum on your right.
- Turn right (west now) yet again; the road dead-ends in a circular parking lot just past the Nature Interpretive Centre of the Royal Botanical Gardens.

In winter, the numerous fruiting trees here are good for **Cedar Waxwings** and **American Robins**. From the parking lot, take the trail to Bull's Point to view the north shore of the Dundas Marsh. A paved road running north from the circular parking lot leads to an area of fruiting trees. **Bohemian Waxwings** and **Pine Grosbeaks** have been seen there occasionally. Check the feeders and the path which runs from the Centre south and downhill to Cootes Paradise for **Tufted Titmouse**.

Hamilton Harbour

1. West End (Harbourfront Park, Valley Inn, The Cemeteries, La Salle Park)

- For birding the west end of Hamilton Harbour, it is convenient to start at the Harbourfront Park. To reach the park, exit Highway 403 at York Boulevard. Continue on York to Bay Street, roughly 4 km.
- Turn left (north) and drive 2 km.
- Cross over the major rail lines, then turn left (west) and travel to the first street, Strachan.

The park is on your right just before reaching the CNR rail lines and the shore. This is a **migrant trap** and a good viewing spot for the southwest end of the harbour.

- From Harbourfront Park, birding continues at Valley Inn. To get there, return to the High Level Bridge via York Boulevard.
- Cross the bridge, and take the second right, Valley Inn Road.
- Cross the bridge at the bottom of the hill, and turn left.
- Cross a second, smaller bridge and park 100 m ahead on the right.

To the right (east) starts the Toll Gate Trail. Below the beginning of the trail there is usually a large mudflat where there are often **shorebirds** in migration. Look for the short side path on the right which leads down to a crumbling viewing platform. Farther along the trail, under the large bridge and continuing up the valley, is a good spot for **late fall migrants**.

- When you leave the Toll Gate Trail area, drive over the small bridge, and take Valley Inn Road up the hill on your left to Woodland Cemetery.

There are several areas in the cemetery which provide viewing sites over Hamilton Bay. It is good in migration for **Tundra Swans**, **loons**, **grebes** (including **Western**), **geese**, and **ducks**. The tall trees attract **Bald Eagles** and **Ospreys**, as well as large flocks of **warblers**, **sparrows** and other **passerines**.

- From the Holy Sepulchre Cemetery to the east of Woodland, drive northeast along Plains Road for 2.5 km to La Salle Park Road.

- Turn right (south) and follow the road to its end at the La Salle Park dock. This is a good viewing point for **waterfowl**, especially to the east where there are several islands.
- Return to North Shore Boulevard, and turn right, through the park.

In the northeastern portion of the park, on the north side of North Shore Boulevard, there is a mature woodlot that has had interesting species such as **Tufted Titmouse**, **Varied Thrush**, **Black Vulture** and **Carolina Wren**.

2. East End (Hydro Islands, Toll Gate Ponds and Windermere Basin)

- Coming along the QEW from the direction of Toronto, take the exit for Eastport Drive, which is after the Highway 403 interchange and just before the Skyway Bridge.
- The harbour is on your right. When you first come to it, look for the Hydro Islands, three small islands that once bore hydro towers. Check for **gulls**, **terns**, **ducks** and **shorebirds**. Take care parking and viewing from the road-side along this route. Several larger islands have nesting **Common** and **Caspian Terns**, and **Double-crested Cormorants**.
- After scanning the islands, continue straight along the road and you will pass the Centre for Inland Waters. There is an accessible area for viewing the bay from the north end of CIW.
- Cross the lift bridge over the canal.

Three kilometres farther south, on your right, are ponds separated from the main harbour by low dikes. These are the Toll Gate Ponds. Adjacent to them is a landfill site. The northern pond is home to **Double-crested Cormorant** and **Black-crowned Night-Heron** colonies. Both ponds are favourites for **ducks**. The south end of the south pond often has mudflats, good for **shorebirds**. The landfill area has large **gull** and **tern** colonies. This is the site of Ontario's first **Snowy Egret** nesting. These ponds are being filled in and will eventually disappear.

- Continuing about 1 km south of the Toll Gate Ponds, you will come to the Pier 25 entrance and Windermere Basin. PLEASE NOTE: this is accessible on weekends only.

This is a favourite spot for large flocks of wintering **ducks**. There are several records of **Tufted Duck** at this location. At the south end of the basin, Red Hill Creek empties into the harbour. In winter, this is a good spot for **Pied-billed Grebe, ducks** (notably **Northern Pintail** and **Green-winged Teal**) and **herons**. Both **Great Blue Heron** and **Black-crowned Night-Heron** are possible here. This location can be viewed from Eastport Drive just before it ends at Woodward Avenue.

Lake Ontario Shoreline: Oakville to Hamilton

1. Bronte Harbour (mouth of Bronte Creek)

- Take Bronte Road south off of the QEW, down to the lake in the centre of Bronte.

Check the lake on both sides of the pier. The harbour is good for wintering **gulls** and **ducks**. The area to the left (east) has had nesting **Red-necked Grebes** in recent years.

2. The Shell Pier

- Leaving Bronte Harbour, turn left (west) on Highway 2 and drive for 2 km until you come to the pier of the Shell Refinery. There is parking here on the lake side of the highway.

The Shell Pier is another spot to look for **gulls** and **ducks**. On the north side of the highway, Shell Park can be good for **landbirds** during all seasons.

3. Appleby Line

- The shoreline can be reached by turning left off of Highway 2 and proceeding to the end of the road. Appleby Line is 1.5 km west of Shell Park.

4. Shoreacres Creek and Paletta Park

- If you feel like a short walk to look at the lake and check for **waterfowl**, stop here, halfway between Appleby and Walker's Lines. You can walk from Highway 2 to the lake. Large numbers of **Red-necked Grebes** congregate in the bay to the west of the creek each spring.

5. *Walker's Line*

- The shoreline can be reached by turning left off of Highway 2 and proceeding to the end of the road. Walker's Line is 2 km west of Appleby Line.

6. *Sioux Lookout Park*

- Located 1.1 km from Walker's Line, there is a parking lot on the south side which affords an excellent viewing area for **ducks**.

7. *Guelph Line*

- The shoreline can be reached by turning left off of Highway 2 and proceeding to the end of the road. Guelph Line is 0.9 km west of Sioux Lookout Park.

Appleby, Walker's and Guelph Lines are good lookout points for the lake. In April, Appleby and Walker's are especially good for **Red-necked Grebes**, and there have been several records of **Western Grebe**.

8. *Travelodge Hotel and Spencer Smith Park (foot of Brant Street)*

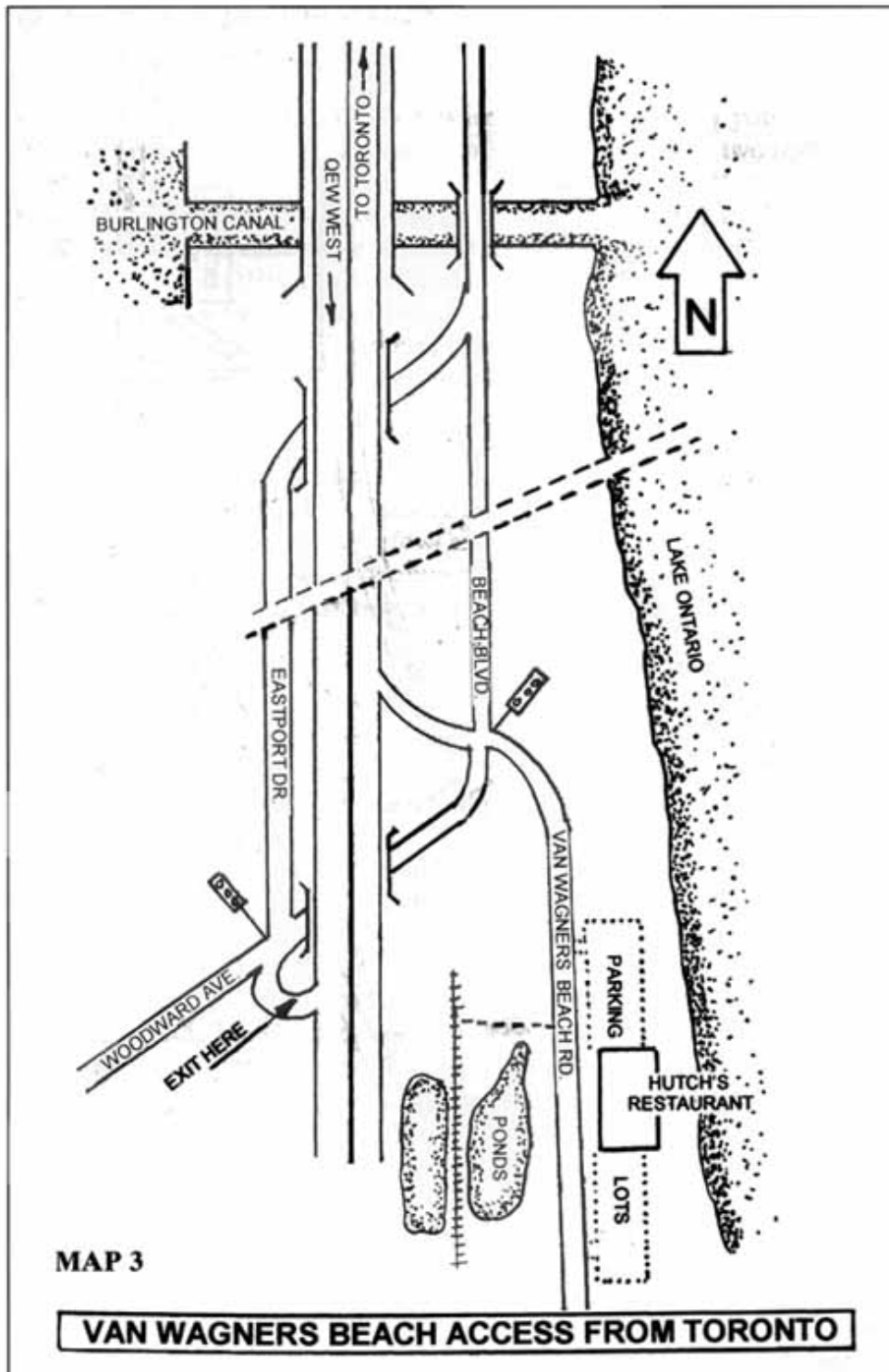
- About 2 km west of the Guelph Line, turn left off Highway 2 to the parking lot. **Dabblers**, **coots** and **Trumpeter Swans** frequent the shores around the parking lot during the winter.

These are two more locations for checking Lake Ontario. They are good for **ducks** and for **gulls** if there are strong northeast winds in the fall.

9. *Burlington Canal*

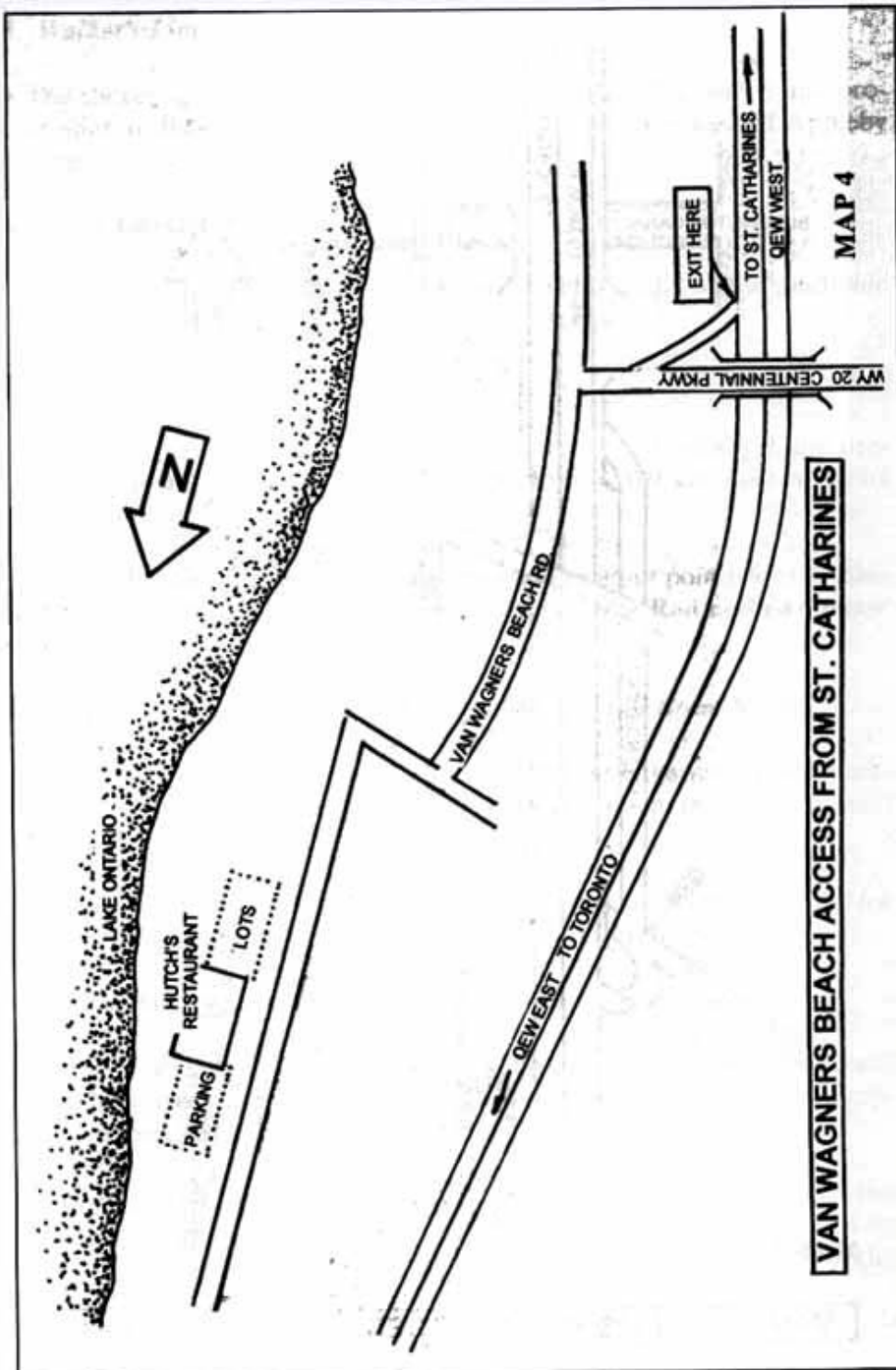
- At the west end of Spencer Smith Park, turn left along Beach Boulevard and drive about 2 km until you reach the shipping canal. Park on the property of the Centre for Inland Waters.

Walk along the pier out into Lake Ontario. Check the small woodlot on the Burlington (east) side of the canal for spring or fall **migrants**. The beach on this side is often good for **shorebirds**. Check the piers on both sides of the canal in late fall for **Purple Sandpipers**.



MAP 3

VAN WAGNERS BEACH ACCESS FROM TORONTO



10. Van Wagners Beach (Southern Ontario's Pelagic Birding Hotspot).
See Maps 3 and 4.

- From Toronto, take the QEW towards Hamilton. When you reach the North Shore Boulevard / Eastport Drive cutoff, you have two options.
- The fastest route is to stay on the QEW over the Skyway Bridge and exit at Woodward Avenue. Turn right at the stoplight at Woodward and proceed under the QEW to the next stoplight (about 200 m) where you will turn right onto Van Wagners Beach Road. Stay on this road for approximately 1 km until you see Hutch's Restaurant (the fish and chips are fabulous) where you can park on either side of the restaurant in the spacious parking lots.
- The second option is to take Eastport Drive which goes under the Skyway Bridge and eventually takes you by the Tollgate ponds and Pier 25, where you can stop to look for waterfowl and shorebirds. Eastport Drive ends at the stoplight at Woodward Avenue where you will turn left and go under the QEW to Van Wagners Beach Road. See above directions to complete the trip.
- From St. Catharines / Fruitland etc., exit at Highway 20 / Centennial Parkway, and go north to the traffic lights. Turn left (west) onto Van Wagners Beach Road and follow the winding road past Confederation Park until you see Hutch's Restaurant on your right.

The term "pelagic" means "pertaining to the ocean", so a novice birder might wonder why this term is used in reference to Van Wagners Beach. The truth is, this site is a haven for stray pelagics starting in mid August and continuing through to mid December. Those "in the know" watch the weather reports for strong east or northeast winds, and when they are forecast, Van Wagners outside Hutch's Restaurant will be lined with rows of scopes scanning the horizon for pelagics. The birders set up their scopes on the north and south sides of the restaurant. The owner is quite friendly to birders and was awarded an OFO Certificate of Appreciation for his generosity several years ago. The list of oceanic species seen at this site is truly amazing. All three **jaeger** species are possible each fall, starting with the rarer **Long-taileds** in mid August to early September, followed by the more numerous **Parasitics** which arrive in September along with an occasional **Pomarine**. Although jaegers are the prime target, other pelagic species which have occurred include immature **Northern Gannets**, **Great Cormorant**, **Sabine's Gull**, immature **Black-legged Kittiwakes** (over one hundred were seen in

several flocks of as many as 25 individuals on 10 October 1982), **Red-throated Loon**, **Common** and **King Eiders**, three **scoter** species, **Purple Sandpiper** and **Northern** and **Red Phalaropes**. On 14 December 1999, Bob Curry spotted an **Ancient Murrelet** in Burlington, and there have been a few reports of other **alcids** flying by, mostly too far out for positive ID. In the fall of 1997, a recently perished **Northern Fulmar** was picked up on the beach.

11. Van Wagners Beach Ponds

Opposite the beach lookout are two ponds dissected by an old railway bed. Check the ponds for **shorebirds**, **ducks** and **herons**. The areas around the ponds are often good for **passerine** migrants in the fall. There is a good birding walk between the ponds, along the old rail line. It can be reached by walking east around the near pond and proceeding around an old residence at the east end of the pond. There is also a path through the rushes and cat-tails directly across from the west end of Hutch's Restaurant which leads to the old rail line.

12. Fruitland Road

- Exit the east end of Van Wagners Beach area via Highway 20 to QEW, heading east toward Niagara Falls.
- After 5.2 km, take Fruitland Road to the lake.

13. Fifty Point Conservation Area

- Head east on the QEW for 6.1 km to 50 Point Road.
- Take this road north to the North Service Road.
- Then drive east to the entrance of the Conservation Area.

Check out the marina area for **ducks** in winter. There is a wonderful vantage point to the east of the mouth of the harbour for spring and fall **water birds**. The woodlot east of the marina is good for **passerines** in the spring and fall. Tell the attendant at the toll booth that you are going in to look for birds. They will probably not charge admittance.

Hawk Watching in the Hamilton Area

1. Beamer Conservation Area

- Located 9.2 km east of Hamilton via the QEW. Take Christie Road exit south through town and up the escarpment.
- Turn right at the top of the hill and drive west 1.6 km to the Beamer Conservation Area, located on the east side of Quarry Road.
- Turn right to the parking lot area. This is the location of the well known Grimsby Hawk Watch.

The best months are March, April and May.

2. Woodland Cemetery

The best viewing is the eastern end, with the open fields along the bluff. See Hamilton Harbour: West End for location.

3. Ministry of Transportation Parking Lot

- From Highway 403, exit onto Highway 6, heading north toward Guelph.
- At the traffic light, 400 m up, turn right (east) and drive 100 m; park in the adjacent lot on the right.

4. Top of Clappison Cut

- From the parking lot, turn right (north) onto Highway 6 and drive 1.9 km to the top of the escarpment.
- Turn right (east) at the first road, that then turns south to the edge of the escarpment. Park just past the long white commercial building on your left (east).

5. High Level Bridge

- Exit from Highway 403 at York Boulevard.
- Once on York Boulevard, cross the bridge and pull off to park in the lot on the right (west) side. Park in the adjacent cemetery if it is no longer possible to park in this lot. Areas on the other side of the bridge are also good.



September and October are the best months of the year for these last four locations.

Lake Ontario Winter Ducks. See Map 5.

In recent years, a new phenomenon has taken place in Lake Ontario's southwest end. Wintering **ducks**, sometimes in the hundreds of thousands, have been appearing in amazingly large rafts on the lake off Stoney Creek. The rafts are mostly pure, with a few "strangers" mixed in. The three main flock types consist of **Greater Scaup** and **Common Goldeneye** (both of which are reasonably close to shore), and **Long-tailed Duck** (which stay far out toward the horizon). The incredible sight of these rafts alone is worth the trip, but the number of scarcer and even rare species that may also be seen make it a must. **Lesser Scaup**, **Canvasback**, **Redhead**, all three **mergansers** and all three **scoters** can be expected, as well as the possibility of **Harlequin Duck**, **King** and **Common Eider**, and **Barrow's Goldeneye**. **Northern Gannets** also have been seen on a number of occasions. There are four accessible viewing areas in Stoney Creek:

- From Hamilton via the QEW, exit at Highway 20 and go north to the North Service Road. Turn right (east) and drive to the east end of Confederation Park. Just past the Grays Road overpass, turn left (north) onto Drakes Road; then turn left (west) onto Frances Avenue for 100 m; and then turn right (north) onto Grays Road. The viewing area at the foot of Grays Road has been greatly reduced by a recently erected chainlink fence, but with a little effort you can look west along the shore to see if there any rafts of ducks present.
- To get closer to ducks to the west, drive back up Grays Road about 200 m and you will see an entrance to a road into the park, with a closed gate, on the right (west) side. At the south end of the gate, there is a pedestrian entrance. This leads to a service road going west into the park. The road intersects with a paved bicycle path which leads north to the lake. Follow this path to a bridge over a lagoon and a short distance later you will have full viewing access to the lake and the ducks.
- To see birds to the east of Grays Road, go back north from the Confederation Park entrance on Grays Road to Lake Gate Drive. Turn right (east) and proceed to the traffic circle at the end of the street. Sayer's Park is on your left, and there is full access to the waterfront. There is "No Parking" on the circle, so you will have to park on Lake Gate or Oceanic Drive, and walk back.

- To see ducks farther east, drive south on Drakes Road, and turn left (east) onto Frances Avenue. Proceed over to Green Road. Turn left (north) on Green Road and drive to the end of the street. There is unlimited viewing from this point. If the ducks have drifted farther east, return to the North Service Road and drive east about 1.5 km to Dewitt Road and turn north to the lake. There is ample parking and unlimited viewing.

Conclusion

Hamilton records 285 to 300 bird species in any given year. With the information in this guide, we hope you will come and join us at some of the many enjoyable locations for birding. Please let us know about any discoveries that you make in our area.

Hamilton Area Birding Hotline: (905) 381-0329

Hamilton Naturalists' Club Website:

www.hwcn.org/link/hamnature/index.html

Acknowledgements

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