

Toronto's High Park

Favourite Birding Hotspots

by Bob Yukich

High Park, situated in the west end of Toronto, has been well birded over the years. Strategically located close to Lake Ontario, it serves as an oasis for migrating birds that concentrate along the lakeshore in spring and fall. Including adjacent Sunnyside Beach, it boasts an impressive list of at least 275 bird species, including such rarities as King Rail, Vermilion Flycatcher, Kirtland's Warbler, Mew Gull, and Lark Sparrow which bred once in the 1930s! Thirty-eight warbler species have been recorded in the park.

High Park consists of 400 acres of partially manicured parkland with a variety of habitats ranging from wetlands to black oak savannah. This latter habitat, now rare in Ontario, originally covered much of the park but has gradually disappeared due to mowing and gardening practices, along with the introduction of non-native vegetation. Restoration plans are now underway for some of this unique habitat and for the wetlands of Grenadier Pond, so what is now good birding can only get better.

What follows is roughly a counter-clockwise walk through the park beginning at the northwest corner. Parking is available in the park, except on Sundays during the summer. Birding can be good at any time of year.

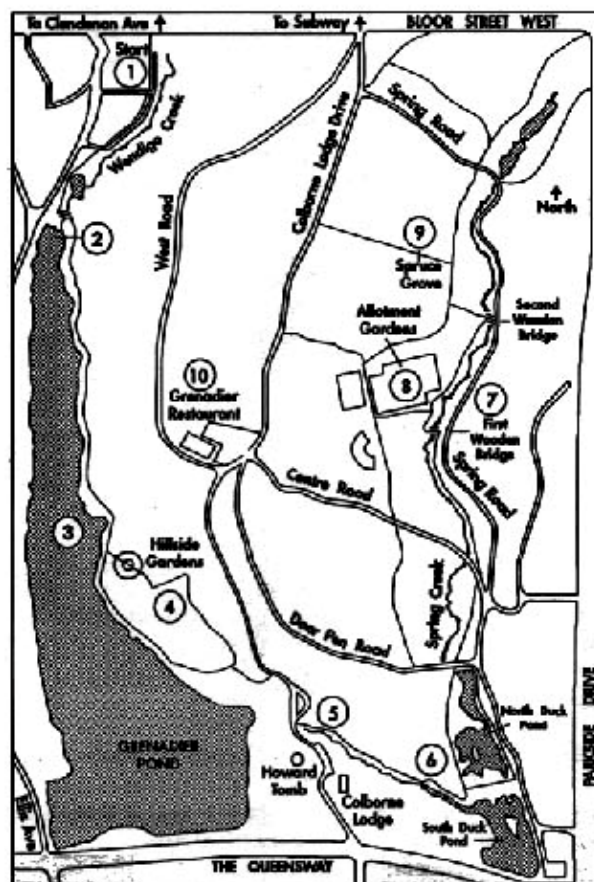
1. Wendigo Ravine. Access from Bloor St. at Clendenan Ave., a short walk west of High Park subway station. A stairway takes you down Wendigo Way. During winter, neighbourhood feeders and the open waters of Wendigo Creek attract land birds. In early spring look for Winter Wrens along the creek, flocks of kinglets, and later White-throated Sparrows. Rusty Blackbirds can sometimes be found in migration. In April and early May look closely at any waterthrush; Louisiana Waterthrush has occurred here. The east slope is the best place for Connecticut Warbler in late May (knowing the song will help you find this skulker), also Acadian Flycatcher. Look for all the thrushes; your best bet for Gray-cheeked is in late May. Continue along the creek south through the small playground to the north end of Grenadier Pond.

2. Marsh at the North End of Grenadier Pond. In winter scan the flocks of mallards in the cattails near the pumphouse for Wood Duck and Green-winged Teal. Also check the small sedimentation pond to the north. In spring and fall Virginia Rail or Sora can sometimes be seen along the marsh edges. Obtain good views by walking south along Ellis Park Rd. or from the paved path on the east side of the pond. From mid-summer to fall Great Blue Heron and Black-crowned Night-Heron feed here. Great Egret is occasional in May and rare in summer. From July onwards various dabbling ducks and shorebirds (mostly Lesser Yellowlegs, Solitary Sandpiper and peeps) can be found in shallow water and on mudflats. Check the trees on the west side for Osprey from late August through September. If you're into winter listing, check the cattails for a lingering Common Yellowthroat in early December, and a

singing Carolina Wren in the surrounding neighbourhood. Continue south following the paved path

3. Grenadier Pond. Interesting at any time of year, but it is most productive during migration. In spring and fall scan the west side for Pied-billed Grebe, Hooded Merganser and Ring-necked Duck. There is always a large flock of Northern Shovelers, many overwinter. All three merganser species can be found prior to freeze-up. Watch for your first Caspian Tern in mid-April, and all six swallow species a little later. From December through March scope the flocks of Ring-billed and Herring Gulls that loaf on the ice at the south end of the pond. A good vantage point is from Ellis Ave. and The Queensway. "White-winged" gulls are regular, more so in early spring. During the winter of 1990/91 a Mew Gull occurred and in 1993 a Laughing Gull spent part of the winter. Amongst hundreds of Canada Geese, Mallards and Black Ducks in the small patch of open water there are usually Northern Shovelers and sometimes a Wood Duck, Green-winged Teal and Northern Pintail.

4. Hillside Gardens. The formal plantings with open grassy areas and scattered trees are good for a variety of migrant



Map by Michael King

passerines, especially after a major fallout. For years a pair of Orchard Orioles nested, preferring the tall conifers as nesting sites. In certain winters, winter finches take advantage of the various seed crops, and waxwings and robins feed on berries. The ornamental shrubs and feeders near the caretaker's residence provide food and shelter for wintering sparrows. Ovenbird has occurred in December. The wooded slope to the north with its savannah openings can be excellent for migrating songbirds. Continue south moving diagonally up the hillside along the various paths until you see the Purple Martin House down by the pond on your right. Walk up to Colborne Lodge Drive and turn right.

5. Colborne Lodge and Howard Tomb. This is one of the more productive areas in the park for warblers in May and is the best spot for early arrivals in late April. When the rest of the park is quiet there is always something to be found here. This is one of the better areas for Cerulean Warbler. A female "Audubon's" Warbler was here in early May 1995 along with a young male Summer Tanager. Blue-gray Gnatcatcher breeds and is more easily found here than elsewhere. Next, follow one of the trails running east from Colborne Lodge down to where the paved path crosses Spring Creek.

6. South End of Park and Duck Ponds. This area can be good in migration, and in winter some park users maintain makeshift bird feeders that should be checked. One year a Brown Thrasher overwintered. Continue east along the walkway to the North and South Duck Ponds. Best views are from the east side along Spring Rd. Black-crowned Night-Herons feed and roost much of the year. Among the barnyard geese and ducks look for Hooded Merganser and Wood Duck year round. Continue north along the east side of the ponds and cross Deer Pen Rd. to enter a low-lying wet area, slow to freeze due to ground seepage, on the west side of Spring Creek. Look for lingering migrants in early winter. The adjacent wooded slope has a wood-chip path running through it and can be good in migration. Listen for Pine Warbler in early spring. Walk back to the paved path and continue north across Centre Rd. to the east side of Spring Creek.

7. Spring Road Ravine. This stretch of the creek is best in migration and winter when the water remains open. Louisiana Waterthrush is rare in spring; a singing male was present much of June 1992! The slopes on both sides of the road can be alive with spring and fall migrants. One of the better spots is near the first wooden bridge as you walk north. One of the very few Veeries ever reported for Ontario in winter was here on a recent Christmas count. Check for Winter Wren in winter and Great Horned Owl in the tall pines. Screech Owl is resident but hard to find. Continue along the creek to where Spring Rd. turns and rises sharply to the west just below Bloor St. Spring migrants moving north sometimes concentrate here. Kentucky Warbler and Summer Tanager have been found. Walk back to the first wooden bridge mentioned earlier.

8. Allotment Gardens. Cross the bridge and walk west up the pathway until you reach a wood-chip path. Turn right and watch for the large fenced vegetable gardens on your left. In spring and especially in fall look for sparrows. Fox Sparrows are almost certain in April, as are Lincoln's in the fall. Flocks

of Eastern Bluebirds are regular in late October (look also on the surrounding hillsides) and Eastern Phoebes can be seen. Your best chance for Orange-crowned Warbler will be in October in the gardens and the surrounding weedy vegetation. A few very late Indigo Buntings turn up regularly at the beginning of October. In winter check the bird feeders. Field Sparrow has overwintered. Follow the wood-chip path that begins on the north side of the larger fenced garden. After it descends, turn left (north) on the next main path and continue to a grove of tall spruce trees on your left.

9. Spruce Grove. Here and in the nearby cedars and pines look for Saw-whet Owl in late October and again in April, Long-eared in November. This area can be good for sparrows and warblers in migration. In May, Yellow-breasted Chat and Kentucky Warbler have been seen. Continue up the paved path to Colborne Lodge Drive.

10. Grenadier Restaurant and Hawk Migration. This is becoming a very popular site for observing hawks in the fall. From early September into November, hundreds of migrating raptors moving west along the north shore of Lake Ontario pass directly over High Park. Numbers of birds recorded here rival those of other well-known locations. There have been single-day counts of more than 6000 Broad-wings and 1100 Red-tails. Both eagles can be seen and all the accipiters are well-represented. Come on cool days with northwest winds and a few clouds. A good spot to watch is from the small rise on the north side of the restaurant parking lot. When hawks are moving to the south you can watch from the hilltop overlooking the floral maple leaf and Grenadier Pond just south of here. Access to the restaurant is from Bloor St. via West Rd. or from The Queensway via Colborne Lodge Drive. Good birding!

OFO Certificate of Appreciation

OFO Certificates of Appreciation were awarded to the following people for their courtesy, hospitality and helpfulness to the Ontario birding community:

Jean & Eric Niskanen
Parry Sound
Band-tailed Pigeon
September 1994

Barbara Horth & Eugene Kideres
Thunder Bay
Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch
January 1995

Helen & Murray Sutherland
Queensville
Varied Thrush, January 1995

Daniel Johnstone
Area Superintendent
Niagara Region Environmental
Services
Port Weller Pollution Control Plant
Ross's Gull, February 1995

Bill Hutch
Hutch's Restaurant
Van Wagner's Beach, Hamilton
For warmth and protection on
jaeger days

Special awards were presented to the following OFO members for their outstanding contribution to OFO:

Peter Burke
For designing the new OFO Logo
of the Pileated Woodpecker
May 1995

Jack Crammer-Byng
Co-Editor of *Ornithology in
Ontario* (1994)
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Phill Holder
Publisher of *Ornithology in
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Co-Editor of *Ornithology in
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Bill Walker
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