

Fall Birding in Elgin County along the Lake Erie Shoreline

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While most of our birding year is spent driving to migrant and wintering hotspots or chasing rarities throughout southern Ontario, fall is the time to take out the lawn chair, find a comfortable spot facing east and wait for the birds to come to us. The fall diurnal migration of raptors, some passerines and even butterflies and dragonflies is one of the greatest natural spectacles. We are lucky to live close enough to spend many autumn days drinking it in. The Lake Erie shoreline at the east end of Elgin County provides many locations to indulge in this passion. Although we visit several locations throughout the fall depending on our mood or how much time we have, our favourite birding location to watch the early fall migration is from the beach parking lots at Port Burwell Provincial Park. After the Canadian Thanksgiving weekend when the raptor migration is dominated by the larger buteos, eagles and vultures, we then shift our watching to the Port Bruce area.

Watching fall migration, especially hawk migration, from a fixed location has to be the most thrilling of all our birding pursuits. Watching diurnal migration evokes emotions that greatly surpass those that surface when standing on a cold shoreline and scanning overwintering ducks, or looking at hordes of gulls along the Niagara River, or even sorting through a flock of warblers at Point Pelee in mid-May. The only other phenomenon that closely rivals the thrill of watching the fall migration of raptors and passerines is a massive reverse migration day at Point Pelee. But then, we have only been there once or twice in 30 years when that happened.

By contrast almost any day spent at a hawkwatch brings that same kind of feeling albeit more intense for a number of reasons. First, there is the anticipation of the unexpected. Who knows what might show up: Swainson's Hawk, Black Vulture, American White Pelican, or any number of rare passerines. Hawk Cliff had its first Townsend's Solitaire last fall. Then, there is the challenge of identifying birds as they fly by in lighting or winds that don't allow a great look. There is a constant challenge to be vigilant lest anything slip by unnoticed, even on the coldest day when you are so numb that lifting your binoculars is a major achievement. Learning how to interpret weather patterns comes into play bringing with it some planning. Questions include where are the winds from today? Which direction tomorrow? Should we go down to the lake today or tomorrow? What happened yesterday greatly influences today's or tomorrow's flight. Even when you arrive you have to decide whether to be right at the lake or further inland. Are the hawks spread out or are they following the wooded corridors? Are the winds driving them out over the lake or are they traveling inland to avoid being blown out over the lake? Should we stay at the shoreline cliffs or move inland to see if the Golden Eagles are tracking inland?

While it is difficult to express the thrill and the reasons for the fanaticism evoked in migration watchers, reading the daily reports from the various hawkwatches along the Lake Ontario shoreline and on Lake Erie from about Port Burwell west to Holiday Beach along the western Lake Erie shoreline should



Kettling Broad-winged Hawks by Peter Lorimer

give you ample incentive to join them at the hawkwatches or find your own location closer to home. Many people I talk to think that you have to go to a hawkwatch such as Hawk Cliff to see the fall raptor and passerine migration in southern Ontario. This is patently false, of course. The waters of Lake Ontario and Lake Erie divert the southbound migration to the southwest until the stream of migrants can turn south again when they cross the Detroit River. Migrants, preferring not to cross open water, follow the shorelines and numbers build up as they move west. Hawkwatch reports show this well. A good day for Broad-winged Hawks at the Lake Ontario watches might be in the 3,000 to 5,000 range whereas Hawk Cliff, about half way to the Detroit River, might produce 10 to 20,000, and Holiday Beach might produce 30,000+. That new migration watching spots are still being discovered is demonstrated by Alan Wormington's discovery of an exciting location at Seacliff about 0.5 km inland just west of Leamington. Indeed, we have witnessed some substantial hawk migration while driving along Highway 3 between Blenheim and Wheatley. I'm sure if someone were to spend time anywhere along that stretch on a road that dead ends at the lake, the watching would be just as exciting as at any of the established watches. What makes the established watches more attractive, especially for beginners, is the camaraderie of being with others of similar interest and the many eyes that help to pick out and identify the rarities.

We prefer not to drive too far and over the last 10 years have tried various locations along the Lake Erie shoreline between Port Burwell and Port Bruce. Port Bruce is only about 10 minutes drive east of Hawk Cliff and Port Burwell is about another 15 minutes east so the number of migrants is about the

same or perhaps slightly less than at Hawk Cliff. On the few occasions that we have been able to compare numbers, the difference is inconsequential; 15 Golden Eagles at Port Bruce say, versus 19 at Hawk Cliff. And, on the days when the Broad-winged Hawks move in colossal numbers it hardly matters whether you've seen 20,000 or 30,000. The thrill is the same.

Port Burwell Provincial Park

Of all the locations on the Lake Erie shoreline between Port Burwell and Port Bruce that we have tried, we like the beach parking lots at Port Burwell Provincial Park the most for watching migration in the early fall (September to early October). The beach parking lots are located in the sand dunes that extend about 0.5 km from the former shoreline cliffs. The sand has only been deposited in the last 70 years or so after a long breakwall was built on the west side of Otter Creek to protect the harbour. Otter Creek empties into Lake Erie at Port Burwell. In that short time period, several vegetation communities have built up including sloped forest, wet and dry thickets, damp interdunal meadows, cattail wetlands, grass-covered sand dunes and open woodland dominated mostly by non-native trees such as Scotch Pine and White Willow. The sandy beach is about 3 km long and 100+ m wide. The terrain is such that one can watch buteos soaring along the cliff to the north, catch the accipiters that wing by overhead, and not miss the falcons that follow the shoreline.

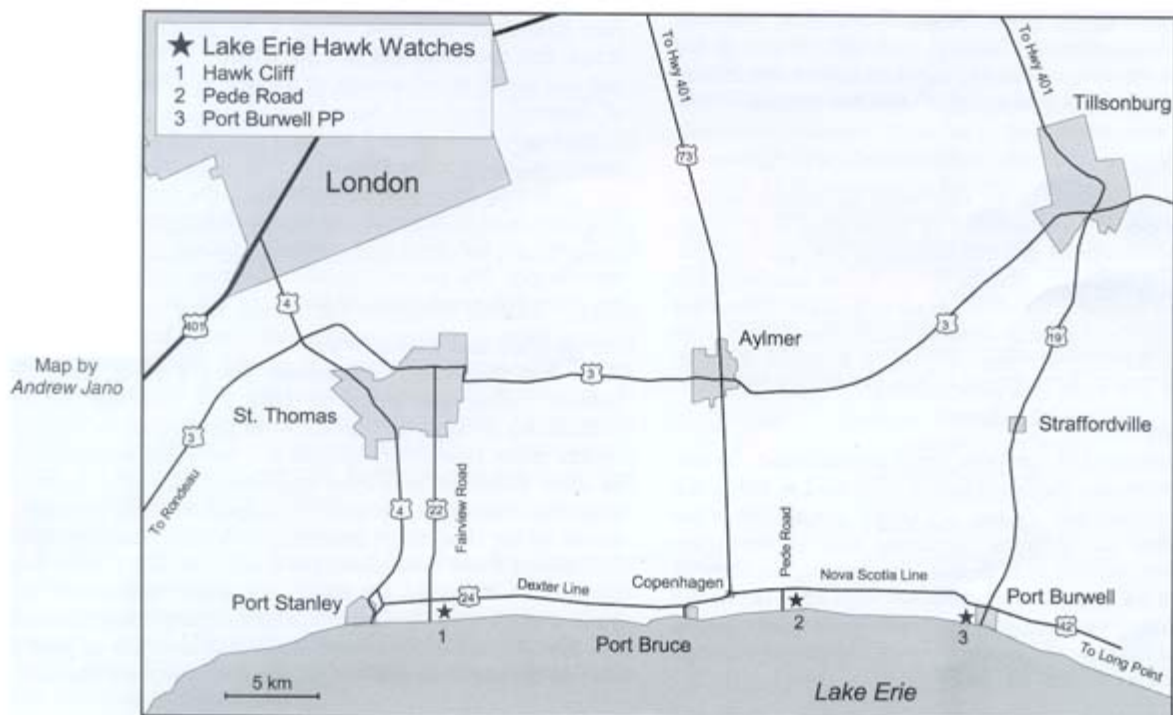
The great variety of habitats cramped into such a small space means that there are many birding opportunities besides hawk watching. Although our main reason for visiting is to watch migration, especially hawks, there are other highlights for days when there aren't many migrating hawks. Beginning in late July large numbers of gulls start congregating. Once, in late August we estimated that there were about 125,000 Ring-billed Gulls and several thousand Bonaparte's Gulls loafing on the beach. With this many gulls there are sure to be some rarities.

In the past four years, we have found Franklin's and Sabine's Gulls. And, there are almost always Little Gulls. Our highest count was 14 Little Gulls on 19 July 2001. Given the long stretch of sandy beach, we expected more shorebirds, but other than Sanderling, there are only a few scattered records of other species such as Black-bellied Plover. Spring, on the other hand, is good for Red Knot and Whimbrel which we see annually.

The shrubby thickets and isolated trees scattered around and between the parking lots are magnets for passerine migrants. After a morning of hawkwatching we walk the periphery of the parking lots and the roads joining them and often encounter flocks of warblers, which might include vireos and Blue-gray Gnatcatchers. In the wandering flocks of chickadees foraging in the slope forest, Carolina Wren is expected and Tufted Titmouse is an annual occurrence. In September, the dune meadows, both dry and damp, are covered with goldenrods and asters and are full of butterflies. In good Monarch years daily counts can be in the hundreds and on an exceptional day in the thousands. On 15 September 1997, we counted the Monarch migration and at its peak almost 3000 Monarchs per hour passed by our station.

What makes Port Burwell such a great place? It is the feeling of wildness, the view of accipiters and falcons over the parking lots, the buteos riding the ridge to the north, accessibility, washrooms, the French fry truck in the next parking lot, the anticipation of walking over the dune and finding some rare gull or shorebird on the beach, the huge migration of butterflies and dragonflies, the beautiful display of fall flowers including masses of Grass-of-Parnassus and lots of gentians of a couple of species.

After the Canadian Thanksgiving weekend (8 to 14 October) we move our hawkwatching post to the lake end of Pedde Road which is just east of Port Bruce on Lake Erie. Here we can see farther inland and so determine whether to station ourselves at



the lake shore or, alternately, a kilometre or so inland depending on the flight line of the hawks on that particular day. We always start at the lake and spend about 30 minutes determining where the main stream of hawks is. Then we move accordingly, but always station ourselves so we are looking north at the bulk of the hawks and not into the sun. Land on both sides of Pede Road is private but there are several woodlots that abut the road so when the hawk migration is slow we can walk the road to see if there are flocks of passerines following the woodland edges.

The parade of species passing by the hawkwatch stations in early fall goes something like this:

Early September

Lots of dragonflies (Common Green Darner, Black Saddlebags); butterflies (mostly Monarchs, but also Buckeyes, American and Painted Ladies, Red Admirals, Question Marks); dozens to hundreds of Ruby-throated Hummingbirds; and hundreds of American Goldfinches, Cedar Waxwings and Tree Swallows. It's not unusual to get 5 to 10 Merlins per day; there are many days with 100+ American Kestrels and 400 to 500 Sharp-shinned Hawks.

Mid-September

The Broad-winged Hawks peak usually between 15 and 20 September with a peak one day total in the tens of thousands. Although Broad-wings often go through in "one fell swoop" some years there are several days in a row that produce numbers in the low thousands. The best time of day to see Broad-winged Hawks is between 10:00 a.m. and 11:30 a.m. At this time they are still quite low and the kettles of warming air are just starting to rise. While Broad-wings may stream through for another couple of hours or so they are usually so high as to be nearly invisible. Ospreys also peak in mid-September and the first Blue Jays appear.

Late September

The highlight at this time is the steady flight of Ospreys with numbers ranging from about 10 to 20 per day. The first Peregrine Falcons appear. Blue Jays peak with counts in the thousands per day and as high as 25,000 on a good day. Sharp-shinned Hawk numbers start to tail off just as Cooper's Hawks increase.

Early October

Peregrine numbers peak in the first week of October with at least 5 to 10 per day and upwards of 20 on good days. While Broad-winged Hawks are down to dozens per day, the first Red-shouldered and Red-tailed Hawks appear in low numbers. The first groups of American Crows show up in flocks of dozens but nothing like the third week of October when thousands pass per day. Finally, the first armadas of Turkey Vultures begin to assemble and float by in their great majesty.

Mid-October

In mid-October we shift our hawk watch to Pede Road just east of Port Bruce because the larger hawks don't tend to follow the shoreline as closely and we can see further inland. When the winds are from the northeast the hawks tend to be further inland. We can see this at Pede Road but not at Port Burwell because there we are below the cliffs. On days when the hawks are further inland we simply set up wherever we need to along Pede Road to intercept the stream of hawks. Flights of starlings and blackbirds are thick at this time.

Late October to early November

This is our favourite time of the year and we try to get down to the lake on as many days as possible. This is the time when the Golden Eagles and Northern Goshawks go through and the Red-shouldered and Red-tailed Hawks peak. It is not unusual to see 10 to 15 Golden Eagles, 3 to 5 Northern Goshawks, 250+ Red-shouldered Hawks, and 1000+ Red-tailed Hawks in 3 or 4 hours. But it's not just the hawks that attract us. This 10 day period is the best time to see Sandhill Cranes, usually in small groups, but occasionally in flocks of 20 or 30. The first Tundra Swans drift through and the last big flights of Common Loons pass overhead. Instead of watching only to the east where the hawks are coming from, our senses are besieged by swans moving east along the shoreline, hawks moving west and loons moving southeast over the lake. Finally, to top off the spectacle, in some years the first flights of winter finches arrive.

Location Information and Directions

Port Burwell Provincial Park is located on Lake Erie at the east end of Elgin County. Port Burwell is about 30 minutes west of Long Point and 20 minutes south of Tilsonburg. The park takes in the beach, dunes, and uplands on the west side of Otter Creek. The campgrounds are located on the upland portion of the park. An access road leads into the day use portion of the park on the sand flats below the upland and the five beach parking lots. We usually sit at the far west end of parking lot # 5 because it gives the best view of the lake, a straight through view to the east and the cliffs to the north. There are several "Merlin" trees in the vicinity which are often occupied in early September by Merlins waiting to dash out after migrating dragonflies. There's a small daily vehicle entrance fee to Port Burwell P.P. The campground closes after Thanksgiving. We've met birders who camp at Port Burwell and drive 40 minutes to Hawk Cliff when the hawk watching at Port Burwell is just as good. For camping information call 519-874-4691.

Pede Road (Port Bruce)

Pede Road is the first road ending at the lakeshore east of Port Bruce. Port Bruce is at the lake end of Hwy 73 (Imperial Road) and is about 10 minutes south of Aylmer. From the intersection of Imperial Road and Nova Scotia Line at the village of Copenhagen drive about 2 km east to Pede Road. Turn south (right) and drive to the lakeshore. Park well off the road so as not to obstruct farm machinery. Watch to the east for about one half hour so as to determine where the flight line is on that day and stay at the dead end or move inland along the road accordingly. The people who live along the road are friendly and often stop to ask what we are seeing that day.

Hawk Cliff and Points West

From Port Bruce, the well known Hawk Cliff is about 20 minutes further west along the Lake Erie shoreline and 10 minutes due south of St Thomas. Most London and St Thomas birders prefer Hawk Cliff because it is close and well attended so there is lots of help from experienced birders. Hundreds, even thousands of people show up on hawk viewing weekends, hosted by the Hawk Cliff Banders, Hawk Cliff Foundation and St. Thomas Field Naturalists. For those who live east of Port Burwell (Woodstock, Kitchener, Hamilton, Brantford,) and prefer a closer spot or smaller numbers of people, Port Burwell and Port Bruce are 40 minutes closer and have just as great a view of the migration and just as great a diversity and numbers.