

# The Leslie Street Spit—Toronto's Pelee

## Favourite Birding Hotspots

by Norm Murr

The Leslie Street Spit (Toronto's Pelee), one of the best birding spots in southern Ontario, is a well known but under birded peninsula on Toronto's eastern waterfront. Along with the Toronto Islands, it is one of the first and last landfalls seen by migrating birds as they cross Lake Ontario in spring and fall. It is also an important wintering area for large numbers of waterfowl, gulls, and in some winters, many owls. *The Spit* has breeding colonies of Ring-billed Gulls, Common and Caspian Terns, Black-crowned Night-Herons and Double-crested Cormorants. A fair number of passerines and Common Snipe also nest. Rarities may show up at any time. *The Spit* checklist stands at 299 as of July 1, 1997.

Stretching five km into Lake Ontario, *The Spit* is a landfill area created from construction/demolition rubble and sand dredging in the greater Toronto area. It is closed on weekdays, but is open Saturday and Sunday in winter from 9:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. and to 6:00 p.m. in spring, summer and fall.

**The Base.** This can be good from August to June. The east side of the base has a small marsh that contains breeding Sora and Virginia Rail. The fence line is very good for sparrows; Le Conte's and Golden-crowned have been seen. At the east end of the fence is a small pond that does not freeze over in the winter where you may find Green-winged Teal, Wood Duck and sparrows.

The west side of the base can be more productive. It has a small pond, cottonwoods, willows, brush, muddy areas and open grassland. This is one of the most reliable places in Toronto for Ring-necked Pheasant, along with the east side. In migration you should find all the common flycatchers, vireos, thrushes, and warblers. Golden-winged, Blue-winged, Orange-crowned, Prairie, Cerulean, and Connecticut Warblers have also been seen. Check the wet areas for Common Snipe, American Woodcock and American Bittern. Watch for Common Nighthawks at dusk. All the eastern swallows occur in migration. Look overhead in early morning to see migrating Common Loons.

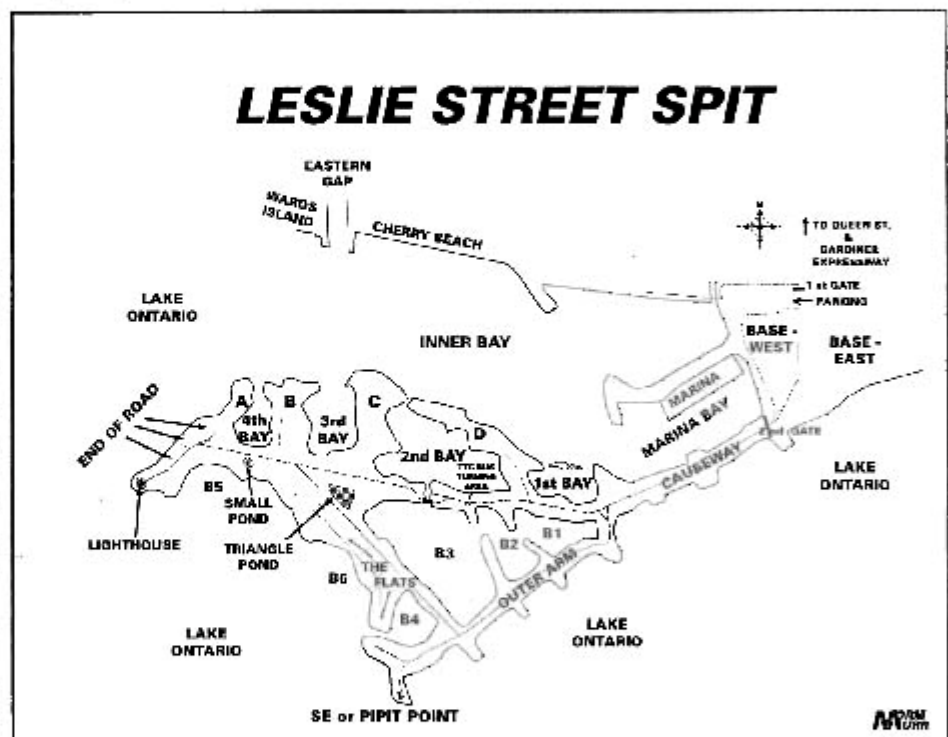
Check the sparrows as there can be a large number, including Fox, Lincoln's, Swamp, Field, Chipping, Song, White-throated, White-crowned and Eastern Towhee.

Northern Shrike, Snowy, Long-eared, Short-eared and Great Horned Owls can be found from October to April. Look for Glaucous and Iceland Gulls passing by.

**The Causeway.** Check the bushes for spring migrants as some days good numbers move towards the base. In 1996, a Hooded Warbler was found. Fall through spring, the marina bay sometimes has all the common ducks, White-winged Scoter and Horned Grebe. When the bay is frozen, look for Lesser Black-backed Gull on the ice. A Little Gull sometimes accompanies the Bonaparte's Gulls in fall.

Check the lake side for Common and Red-throated Loons and overhead for all the "white-winged gulls".

On the causeway, look for Snowy Owl, Short-eared Owl, Snow Bunting, American Pipit and Lapland Longspur. You may be rewarded with a sighting of a Coyote on the road; they are resident on *The Spit*.



**The 1st Bay and area:** As you come to the end of the causeway it widens out to a point on your right and beyond is the 1st Bay. Check the point at all seasons as it may hold a surprise among the usual migrants. This is particularly good for all the regular warblers, plus Prairie and Connecticut, and for sparrows; Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow has been found. It can have both cuckoos, Eastern Meadowlark and Bobolink. In fall through spring, look for Northern Shrike, Great Horned, Short-eared and Long-eared Owls.

The 1st Bay is a loafing area for gulls and terns. Ten species of gulls have been spotted including Franklin's, Mew and Lesser Black-backed. If it is not frozen, you can find all the common waterfowl, and all three scoters on the lake beyond. In some years if the water level is low, many shorebird species feed here on migration.



It is always wise to stop here on your way out and back as birds move in and out of the bay all day.

**The Outer Arm.** At times, the walk is very cold and windy, but well worth the discomfort. On the lake side in spring and fall you may see 50+ Common Loons and Red-necked Grebes. White-winged Scoters flying past are a common sight from October to April, and Red-throated Loons are seen in fall.

In the bays B1, B2, and B3 you should find most of the common waterfowl with 100+ Redhead and Ring-necked Duck on some days. If the bays are frozen, check the gulls sitting on the ice. Snowy Owl is often found on the ice and anywhere along the arm.

Snow Bunting, American Pipit and Lapland Longspur can be overhead or along the road. Glaucous and Iceland Gulls commonly fly alongside the arm. Look for Thayer's Gull with them.

**Pipit Point.** As you walk onto this point watch for Snowy and Short-eared Owls, American Pipit, Snow Bunting, Horned Lark and Lapland Longspur. In the bay on the right (B4) you may find all three scoters, Horned or Eared Grebe, Harlequin Duck, King Eider, Red-throated Loon or any of the commoner waterfowl. On the way to the tip, in season, watch for Brant, Whimbrel, Red-necked Grebes and white-winged gulls flying alongside or sitting on the lake.

If you are patient or can stand the cold winds at times, then spend some time on the left-hand tip watching the lake as waterfowl pass by. Last winter (1996-97), thousands of scaup, Oldsquaw and White-winged Scoters, as well as Surf and Black Scoters, King Eiders, Common and Red-throated Loons, Black-Legged Kittiwake and Lesser Black-backed Gull were seen.

Pomarine and Parasitic Jaegers also occur and I believe that this point during favourable weather conditions (easterly winds) from September to December should produce most of the pelagics seen at Van Wagners Beach. Sabine's and Black-headed Gulls, phalaropes and gannet are good possibilities. I'm going to be there in 1997 to see if this is so.

**The Flats.** After you pass bay B4 you are on The Flats, which are good in winter for Snowy and Short-eared Owls and the birds mentioned as you walk onto Pipit Point.

If water is present, look in spring and fall for migrating shorebirds; 18+ species have been seen over the years including Buff-breasted, Baird's, Western and Stilt Sandpiper, Hudsonian Godwit, both dowitchers and American Golden-Plover.

This is another great area to observe all six swallows as they migrate and in fall is a good vantage point for spotting raptors including hundreds of Sharp-shinned Hawks.

**The Small Pond, End of Road and base of Peninsula A.** All of these areas are good from spring to fall for flycatchers, thrushes, vireos, warblers, both cuckoos, Whip-poor-will and American Woodcock. This is the best place to check for Purple Sandpiper. In late fall and winter, watch for Great Horned, Saw-whet and Long-eared Owls. *Please do not disturb the owls.*

**Peninsula B.** This is the best birding spot on *The Spit*. Expect most the birds mentioned at the previous site plus a good number of sparrows in the clearing on the east side; 15 species have been seen including Nelson's Sharp-tailed and Clay-colored. Watch for Le Conte's. This is probably the best place

for Connecticut and Mourning Warblers and Yellow-breasted Chat.

Boreal Owls wintered on the base of this peninsula and on Peninsulas C and D, hopefully returning this winter (1997/98).

**Peninsula C.** All the birds found on Peninsula B can be found here with the exception of the large number of sparrows, but look for Fox Sparrow.

The woods on this point are more extensive than B but not as good for owls, though Great Horned and Long-eared can be found. Both Labrador (dark) and Snyder's (pale) races of the Great Horned Owl have wintered here.

This point has a breeding colony of 1000+ Black-crowned Night-Herons, and twice recently a Yellow-crowned Night-Heron has been found.

**Peninsula D.** The birds are similar to Peninsula C but with the chance of a large number of land birds along the road to the sailing club including Gray-cheeked Thrush, Yellow-throated Vireo and Pine Warbler.

Black-billed Cuckoos and Brown Thrashers breed on this point. Sometimes it can be tough to find birds here but don't forget the water on both sides.

A Barrow's Goldeneye was found on the 2nd Bay in the 1996-1997 winter. All the scoters, thousands of Common Goldeneye, Greater Scaup, and many Bufflehead winter off this point. Many gulls rest on the ice so check for Lesser Black-backed Gull and the occasional Bald Eagle.

Before I close, I would like to mention the owl problem on *The Spit* or more precisely the people problem. A few photographers, a few amateur birders and some birders who should know better were seen to harass the owls. Why, if they have long lenses or binoculars, they feel they have to get within 5 or 6 feet is beyond me. These owls have enough problems surviving the winter without being flushed or having a flash bulb popped in their faces. If you spot an owl, stand back and enjoy, if you see others bothering them, ask them please to back off.

As you can see there are birds all over *The Spit* so get out and enjoy them. You can't spot a bird from your couch.

Good birding,

Norm Murr

### Directions

*The Leslie Street Spit, officially called Tommy Thompson Park, is operated by the Metro Toronto Region Conservation Authority. Entry is free. From downtown Toronto, go east on the Gardiner Expressway to the Leslie Street exit and make a left turn onto Leslie Street. (From eastbound Lakeshore Boulevard, make a right turn onto Leslie.) Follow Leslie south to where it ends at the park gates. Unwin Avenue is on your right. Park on the street or in the parking lot inside the park. Be sure to remove your car from the parking lot before closing time as they lock the gates! Cars are not permitted on The Spit, so prepare for a long walk (5.5 km from park gates to the lighthouse). You may ride a bike. In winter, dress very warmly as it can be bleak. A scope is an asset, but remember the long walk.*