

# Favourite Birding Hotspots

## The Manitoulin Island Narrows

Ron Tasker and Doreen Bailey

**Introduction.** Manitoulin Island is not a well-known birding destination. It is remote, distant from most large population centres, rural and thinly populated. Birding coverage tends to be limited to a small group of active resident birders and visitors from the Sudbury area.

**Island Specialties.** The following birds can be found: Sandhill Crane, Osprey, Upland Sandpiper, Eastern Bluebird, Red-headed Woodpecker in open country, Common Snipe and American Woodcock in the wetlands, vast numbers of Common Ravens, and in the boreal-like forests of the southwest of the island, Merlin and a disjunct breeding colony of Gray Jays.

To give some idea of the scope for rarities, the following have all been reported in the Narrows area: Eared Grebe, American White Pelican, Great Egret, Little Blue Heron, Cattle Egret, Greater White-fronted Goose, Harlequin Duck, Swainson's Hawk, Ferruginous Hawk, Mississippi Kite, Willet, Marbled Godwit, Laughing Gull, Black-billed Magpie, Chuck-will's-widow, Green Violet Ear, Varied Thrush, Northern Wheatear, Hermit Warbler, Prairie Warbler, Yellow-breasted Chat, Hooded Warbler, Cerulean Warbler, Dickcissel, Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow, Le Conte's Sparrow, Harris's Sparrow, Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch and Yellow-headed Blackbird. Though these are not likely to be encountered during any visit, this list should encourage the birder to be alert to the possibility for unusual vagrants.

**General.** The island presents a variety of beautiful, unspoiled birding habitats: the shores of the North Channel and Lake Huron, wetlands, hardwood forest, open ranching areas with roadside edges. But the premier attraction is the largest extent of alvar habitat in Ontario and, especially along the south shore in the west, boreal-like forest with extensive Jack Pine stands nurtured by the cold waters of Lake Huron.

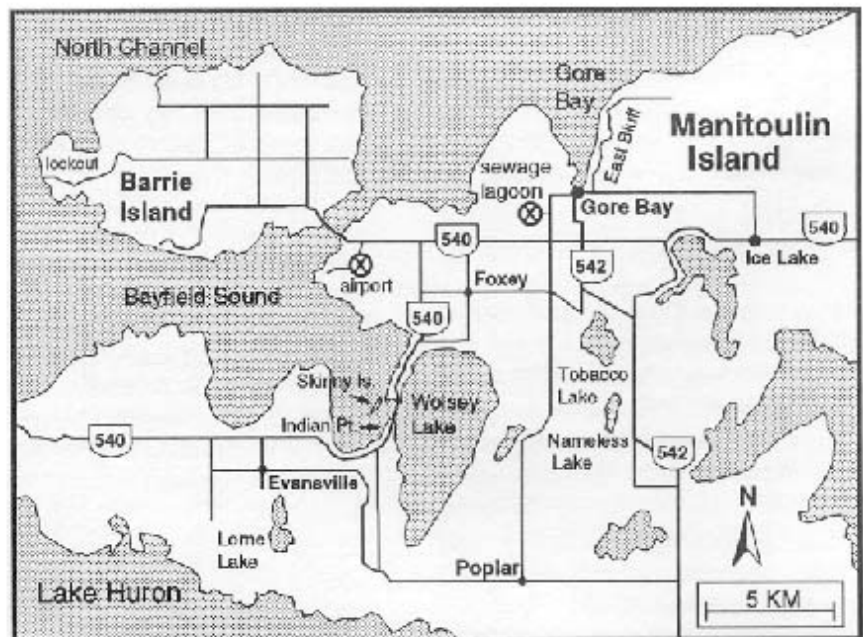
The Island is possibly equally interesting as a migration corridor cut off from the North Shore mainland by water, but connected to the south via Michigan and the Duck Islands in the west and the Bruce Peninsula and Georgian Bay Islands in the east. This ensures a steady stream of Carolinian wanderers.

In general, birds tend to concentrate on the south shore with prevailing northerly winds and on the north shore with southerlies during the migration seasons. Certain waterfowl stage off the north and south shores. The time to watch for thousands of Oldsquaws coming off Lake Huron to fly in a northeasterly direction at dusk is May 18 to 20. Horned and Red-necked Grebes and scoters, especially White-winged and Surf, can be numerous in spring migration in late May on Lake Huron, particularly in the west. Whimbrel are regular from 17 May to 2 June, while in September, raptors move from east to west in large numbers along

the Lake Huron shore with appropriate weather conditions. The fall migration of Sandhill Cranes is a spectacle, particularly towards the end of the third week of October.

The area is particularly interesting since the Island narrows down between the North Channel, Wolsey and Lorne Lakes and the Lake Huron shore, creating a narrow east-west corridor.

**Access.** It is a seven hour drive to reach the area from Toronto via Sudbury, Espanola and Little Current. In summer (early May to mid-October), the added attraction of sailing on the Chi-Cheemaun from Tobermory to South Baymouth is available (Owen Sound Transportation Company, 519-376-6601 or ferry terminals 705-859-3161 and 519-596-2510). The Narrows is then reached by driving west from Little Current along Highway 540 or from South Baymouth on Highway 542.



Map by Michael King

**Seasons.** Birding is interesting at any time of year with spring migration best between 16 and 30 May, and fall migration between 15 August and 15 September. Winter owls can be numerous and Sharp-tailed Grouse lek in March and early April. Accommodation may be a problem in winter and the "shoulder" seasons.

**Birding Sites.** Beginning at Gore Bay, one route heads east and north up East Bluff past the lookout to the two east-west concession roads that can be good in migration. The northern one is a dead-end, the southern allows a loop back through Ice Lake. Both pass through open ranchland and scrubby wet roadside forests. Gore Bay sewage lagoon is one of the few good places for ducks and sometimes shorebirds.

The "causeway" to Barrie Island is productive for wetland birds, waterfowl and variably for shore-birds. The roads on Barrie



Dancing Sharp-tailed Grouse  
by Andrea Kingsley

Island pass mainly through alvar, ranching country and the lookout at the west end affords a good view out over the North Channel. Just before the causeway, a road leads off to the left to Gore Bay Airport, a site excellent for Sharp-tailed Grouse and alvar species in general, including Clay-colored and Grasshopper Sparrows, possibly Short-eared Owl, and in winter, Gyrfalcon.

Returning to Highway 540, the latter leads up to the bridge across the entrance of Wolsey Lake where waterfowl may be seen. It is worth stopping on the right immediately before the bridge to inspect Bayfield Sound to the north for waterfowl, the long low "Skinny Island" and the thin peninsula containing the Twilight Isle cabins. In winter, Bald Eagles frequent this area and gulls unusual to Manitoulin, Great Black-backed and Glaucous. Across the bridge, a tiny park at Indian Point with picnic and boat launch facilities contains a thin strip of trees paralleling the highway and the shore which can be excellent in spring

migration. Common Terns are numerous here.

Just past Indian Point, a road leads up a steep hill on the left giving access to several rural roads, all with good birding. One alternative is to drive south and then turn east (left) to pass through Poplar and then back to Gore Bay. An excellent route intersects the Poplar-Gore Bay road north of Nameless and Tobacco Lakes, leading west into Foxey. At the Foxey site, the Gordon municipal buildings and their parking lot lie on the northeast corner of the first intersection to the west. Immediately west of this (and sometimes east of the intersection) is a productive wet area for shorebirds in May and early June. Where the Foxey Road rejoins 540 in the west, the alvar is good for Clay-colored Sparrows.

Another alternative after climbing the steep hill mentioned above is to take the first road to the right (west) to a "T" intersection. Turning to the right leads to a series of concession roads around the old Evansville townsite which can be productive, eventually connecting with 540 again.

#### More Information

Birders with extra time are encouraged to visit the **Friends of Misery Bay Nature Reserve** located about 8 km west of The Narrows. For information about accommodation and other useful facts, please contact: Doreen Bailey, PO Box 55, RR 1, Evansville ON P0P 1E0 Tel: 705-282-2208.

#### Reading

Nicholson, John C. 1981. *The Birds of Manitoulin Island and Adjacent Islands within Manitoulin District*. Second Edition Revised. Acme Printers, Sudbury, Ontario. This helpful book has an annotated checklist of the birds of the Manitoulin district and contains information about resident, migrant and vagrant species.

(Editor's Note: In addition to the birds in Nicholson (1981), the Ontario Bird Records Committee has accepted American White Pelican, Ferruginous Hawk, Chuck-will's-widow, Hermit Warbler and Northern Wheatear. Please document "reportable" species for submission to the OBRC.)

#### Letter from W. Earl Godfrey

Dear Jean,

31 October 1997

It makes me very happy to be the recipient of **The Distinguished Ornithologist Award** as well as an **Honorary Membership** in the Ontario Field Ornithologists on the occasion of the Annual General Meeting on 18 October 1997. I take this opportunity to express my grateful appreciation of these precious treasures.

As I look at these handsome treasures and read again the kind messages in that little red book, I regret all the more that I wasn't able to attend the meeting. However, I am feeling much better and my doctor assures me I'll soon be back to my usual good health.

Again, my heartfelt thanks. I am looking forward with much pleasure to my honorary membership in the Ontario Field Ornithologists.

Gratefully yours,

*Earl*  
W. Earl Godfrey

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OFO Certificates of Appreciation are awarded to the following people and organizations for their helpfulness, courtesy and hospitality to the Ontario birding community.

**Presqu'ile Provincial Park**  
Managing the habitat for shorebirds by creating a natural beach

**The Town of Blenheim**  
Providing access to the Blenheim Sewage Lagoons

**Larry and Linda Budreau**  
10 years of welcome to OFO birding tours at Oak Grove Camp near Rainy River

**Region of Durham Works Department**  
Providing birders with access to the Nonquon Sewage Lagoons, Port Perry

**Colin and Heide Isaacs**  
Maintaining a raptor preserve in Fisherville

**The Friends of Misery Bay**  
Hosting the OFO field trip 18 April 1997

**Gore Bay-Manitoulin Island Airport**  
Preserving habitat for Sharp-tailed Grouse and allowing birders access to their property.

**Gordon Bonham**  
Leamington  
Glossy Ibis May 1997

To nominate a person or organization for an OFO Award, please send a description of the outstanding hospitality, help or service given to the Ontario birding community, the date, and the person's name and address to: Jerry Guild, 2147 Jenner Court, Mississauga ON L5K 1N3 Tel: 905-823-1973