

Favourite Birding Hotspots

The Niagara River

Kayo J. Roy

Veteran Ontario birders know where to stop along the Niagara River. However, many OFO members are relatively new or have been on guided trips. This note will outline the River's major birding hotspots.

Birding is most rewarding from mid-November to mid-January when it is one of the very best areas in North America, and perhaps in the world, to view large numbers and a great variety of gulls. To date, 19 gull species have been observed on the River. Bonaparte's, Ring-billed, Herring and Great Black-backed Gulls are abundant while Little, Iceland, Glaucous, Thayer's and Lesser Black-backed Gulls are found on most days. Black-legged Kittiwake, Franklin's, Black-headed and Sabine's Gulls make brief annual visits. Laughing, Mew and California Gulls are occasional and there are three records of Ivory Gull, 1924, 1934 and 1973. In 1992, the first Ontario Slaty-backed Gull was seen by many. In 1995, a Ross's Gull was found at Fort Erie and then at several places between Queenston and the Falls, bringing the total to 19. On occasion, keen observers find 14 gull species in a single day.

With open water throughout the year, the River is a good source of food for gulls. Small fish such as alewives, gizzard shad, shiners and smelt are abundant in early winter and attract gulls to the area. As well, larger fish sucked into the hydro turbines are chopped into smaller pieces adding more food for gull consumption.

Niagara-on-the-Lake

1. Queens Royal Park: Located on Ricardo Street, this small park offers an excellent view of Lake Ontario and the mouth of the Niagara River. It is a great place to view gulls and waterfowl on the lake during the winter months. Hundreds of Oldsquaw can usually be seen as well as other ducks, loons, grebes, scoters, gulls and occasionally, jaegers. King Eiders are regular here.

2. River Mouth: At sunset from November to February there is a flypast of gulls heading out to roost on Lake Ontario. On peak days thousands of Bonaparte's Gulls pass by, challenging the birder to spot other gull species in the flocks. South of the marina off Ricardo Street, several laneways lead to the River from where it is best to observe the gulls as they fly by.

3. Queenston

Boat Launching Ramp: Accessed off Princess Street, there is a lower and upper parking area. Park at the upper lot and walk down the path to the lower lot. Here you are at water level and can observe the gulls feeding over the River. This is the best area to find Little Gull amongst the thousands of Bonaparte's. Both Franklin's and Sabine's Gulls are possible. Return to the upper lot and walk the path heading south along the River. About half way to the visible Queenston-Lewiston Bridge ahead, you will arrive at a clearing between the path and the River. This was a favourite area for one or two Black-headed Gulls in the 1980s and remains perhaps the best place to look for the species. A juvenile Northern Gannet spent considerable time in this area in December 1990.

4. Sir Adam Beck Hydro Overlook

From the Niagara River Parkway directly above the generating stations birders look straight down into the gorge offering both challenge and seminar in wing and tail patterns as the gulls forage below. This is the best place on the River to look for the white-winged gulls—Glaucous, Thayer's and Iceland (*kumlieni* is far more frequent, but nominate *glaucoides* is possible). Lesser Black-backed Gull is regular and Franklin's occasional. In the 1990s, Mew Gull occurred several times and California Gull each year since 1992. In 1995, the almost mythical rare Ross's Gull delighted birders.

5. Hydro Reservoir

This 740 acre reservoir stores vast quantities of water for periods of high power demand. It is most easily accessed from behind 2058 Stanley Avenue in north Niagara Falls. Large numbers of gulls loaf and feed here as do many ducks, geese and a few herons. When the water level is down, migrating shorebird flocks pause to rest. A good walking path goes around the reservoir.

6. Whirlpool Rapids Overlook

A stop here is worth the time for the view alone. Mingling with with the many feeding Bonaparte's Gulls may be an occasional loon or scoter, or something different like the 1995 Ross's Gull.

7. Niagara River Gorge

Many waterbirds gather under the Falls to feed on materials swept into the boiling rapids and deposited in quieter eddies. Among the common gulls look for Glaucous, Iceland, Thayer's, Lesser Black-backed and Little Gulls and many species of ducks. Sabine's Gull, Franklin's Gull, and Black-legged Kittiwake are almost annual, and two of the three records of Ivory Gull were from the gorge. Double-crested Cormorant and Common Loon are frequent, and a Pacific Loon made a brief visit in 1995.

8. The Old Toronto Hydro Building

The overlooks north and south of this building located above the Falls opposite the Horticulture Greenhouse (free parking in winter and rest rooms), provide a wide array of birds. Glaucous and Iceland Gulls, Little Gull and Lesser Black-backed Gull can often be found feeding or resting on rocks in the rapids. Rarities have included Purple Sandpiper, Harlequin Duck, Eurasian Wigeon, Barrow's Goldeneye, and Red-necked and Red Phalaropes.

9. The Old Pump House Building

The overlook behind this small building just south of the Old Toronto Hydro Building provides a broader view of the rapids and a further opportunity to look for gulls. Moreover, it is the very best location to scan the table rocks for Purple Sandpipers. Up to a dozen are occasionally counted and a few always winter. Beware of confusion with Dunlin which are also seen here in November and December. Look for several species of ducks, including Gadwall, in the quieter waters close to shore.

10. The Control Structure

This is a series of gates that allows Ontario Hydro to control the amount of water flowing over the Falls. Almost any gull can be seen here. On the north (downriver) side, Little Gull, Lesser Black-backed, Sabine's and the white-winged gulls may be mixed in with large numbers of Bonaparte's Gull. The 1992 Slaty-backed Gull was enjoyed by many as it sat on the breakwater in front of this site. Large numbers of diving ducks feed in the rapids, and a female King Eider spent over a month in the winter of 1989. A keen observer may find Purple Sandpipers feeding on the small islands.

On the south side of the control structure large numbers of gulls rest on the breakwater. Beyond the breakwater, large numbers of scaup and Canvasback rest and feed here, among which are usually a few Redheads and Ring-necked Ducks. Less common sightings have included Eared Grebe, Parasitic Jaeger, Red-necked Phalarope and Snowy Owl.

11. Fort Erie

The drive from Niagara Falls to Fort Erie along the very picturesque Niagara River Parkway allows close views of many duck species. Canvasback, Redhead, Bufflehead, Common Merganser, Common Goldeneye, American Black Duck, American Wigeon, Greater Scaup and others will be evident. Incredibly, a female Smew occurred in this stretch of the river in February 1960. In Fort Erie and west to Jaeger Rocks just south of Old Fort Erie, the open waters, shorelines and even the grassy lawns collect birds that have drifted or blown down Lake Erie especially on westerly gales. Many remember exciting days here in September 1996 watching Black-capped Petrels, Sooty Terns, jaegers of all three species and Laughing Gulls in the aftermath of Hurricane Fran. Most years Franklin's and Sabine's Gulls appear in September and October. In December and January, Little Gull can usually be found, and sometimes a Black-legged Kittiwake. In 1994 a pair of Harlequin Ducks wintered on the River at the foot of Bertie Street. In 1995 a very pink Ross's Gull drew a large number of birders in search of this rare Arctic specialty.

Lund Birding

Although the prime attraction is the myriad gulls and water birds of the Niagara River, birders may vary their diet with a little land birding especially on rare occasions when the river is quiet.

Niagara-on-the-Lake

Shakespeare Avenue: This street and its crossroads are good year round for Tufted Titmouse, Red-bellied Woodpecker, Carolina Wren, and in winter, Pine Siskin and possibly other northern species. During spring and fall migration this area can be very rewarding.

Niagara Shores Conservation Area: Located along Lakeshore Road less than a kilometre west of Shakespeare Avenue, this 41 acre conservation area on the Lake Ontario shoreline is well worth visiting. Look for Red-bellied Woodpecker, Red-headed Woodpecker and Tufted Titmouse. In December 1994, Hoary Redpolls were with Common Redpolls.

Niagara Falls

Niagara Parks Botanical Garden: Located about 9 km north of the Falls on the Niagara River Parkway and just south of the Hydro generating station, the beautiful grounds and gardens are

worth a visit at any time of the year. Anyone with an interest in flowers and trees would find this 100 acre garden housing the Niagara Parks School of Horticulture to their liking. Half hardy wintering birds find shelter here.

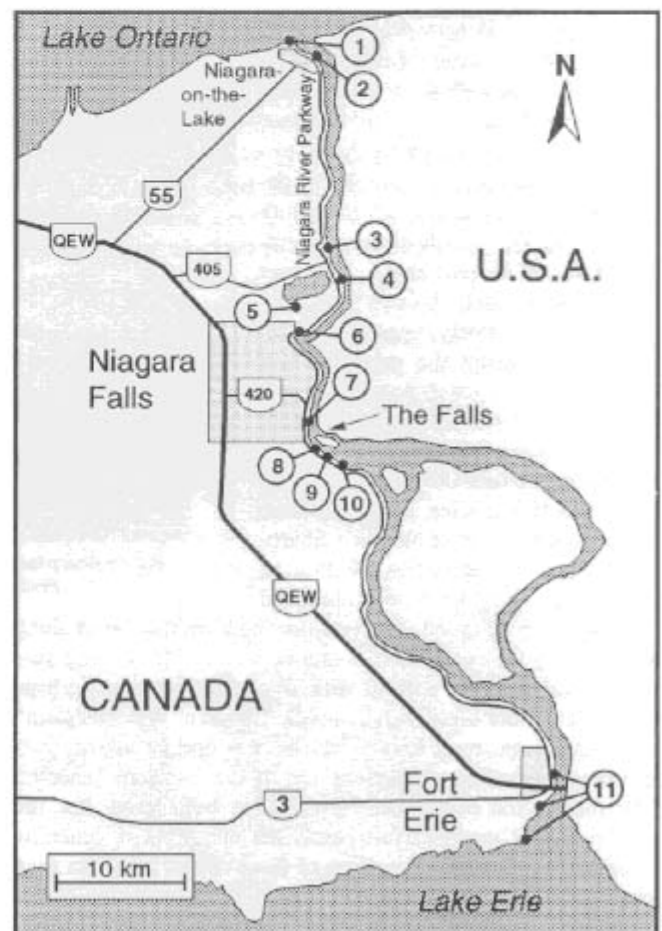
Niagara Parks Commission Butterfly Conservatory: On the grounds of the Niagara Parks Botanical Gardens is a glass enclosed 990 square metre butterfly conservatory. Open year round, this conservatory has over 2000 free flying butterflies from around the world flitting in a tropical rain forest setting. A 200 metre network of paths leads visitors through the forest where they can wander among and photograph the butterflies.

Dufferin Island: This 40 acre park with a winding stream is located less than a kilometre above the Falls, opposite the Old Pump House Building. The milder conditions created by the proximity of the River and Falls make this an excellent spot for lingering fall migrants and a fruitful area for vagrants.

Acknowledgements

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Kayo Roy, a resident of the Niagara area for 23 years, is a past president of the Niagara Falls Nature Club, a former board and executive member of the FON, and has compiled the Niagara Falls Christmas Bird Count for the past 12 years.



Map by Michael King