



# OFO NEWS

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## Fall Birding in Canada's Capital

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### Ken Abraham Distinguished Ornithologist

Ron Tozer, Ron Pittaway, Bill Crins

The Board of Directors is pleased to announce that Ken Abraham will be the 2006 and ninth recipient of OFO's Distinguished Ornithologist Award.

Ken Abraham is respected worldwide for his knowledge of waterfowl and shorebirds, particularly Canada Geese, Cackling Geese, Brant, Snow Geese, and Marbled Godwits.

Ken did his doctorate in 1980 on the Ecology and Evolutionary Biology of the Snow Goose in northern Manitoba under Fred Cooke at Queen's University. This led to a job as district biologist at Moosonee with the Ministry of Natural Resources (MNR). Ken was responsible for an immense area of the Hudson Bay Lowland and northern coast. His current position is Waterfowl and Wetlands Research Scientist at the Ministry's main office in Peterborough. Every summer Ken returns to the Hudson Bay Lowland to lead MNR's long-term studies of waterfowl, shorebirds, wetlands and climate change.

Ken has authored several articles in *Ontario Birds* and *OFO News*. His most popular article, gaining international interest, was "Cackling Goose, Not New to Ontario" in the February 2005 issue of *OFO News* 23(1):2-6. Ken has published a number of papers in peer-reviewed journals such as the *Auk*, *Condor* and *Wilson Bulletin*.

Ken is the Ontario government's representative on international committees overseeing the management and conservation of waterfowl and shorebirds.

Jean Iron will present the Distinguished Ornithologist Award to Ken Abraham at the OFO Annual Convention and Banquet in Ottawa on Saturday, 30 September 2006.

Our National Capital area offers exciting birding. It is a premier birding location in the eastern region of our province. On both the Ontario and Quebec sides of our Ottawa Naturalists' circle, a 50 km radius from Peace Tower on Parliament Hill known locally as the 50 K, there has been an impressive history of birds and birding that continues to this day. To date, 346 species have been recorded within the 50 K, and more continue to be added almost annually due to the vigilance and enthusiasm of the local birding community.

Autumn birding can be enjoyed in two provinces within very close proximity of the downtown core of both Ottawa and Gatineau, mainly concentrated along the Ottawa River, but with several excellent peripheral locations. A few of these are described here, and hopefully visitors will be inspired to explore many more.

### Ottawa River

Although not as large or species-rich as the Great Lakes, the Ottawa River is the place to be in fall. Public parklands with facilities and recreational pathways managed by the National Capital Commission (NCC) provide easy access to numerous vantages along the river from downtown Ottawa to points east and west, as well as north on the Quebec side.

In late summer and early fall when the water levels of the river reach their lowest of the year, extensive mudflats, sand-bars and shoals form and provide feeding habitat for shorebirds as well as roosting and hunting grounds for gulls and raptors. The river is a major staging area for waterfowl—Britannia Bay, Crystal Bay and Lac Des Chênes—are great locations; 30 species have been seen here. Cackling Geese and Greater White-fronted Geese can often be found among the multiple 1000s of Canada

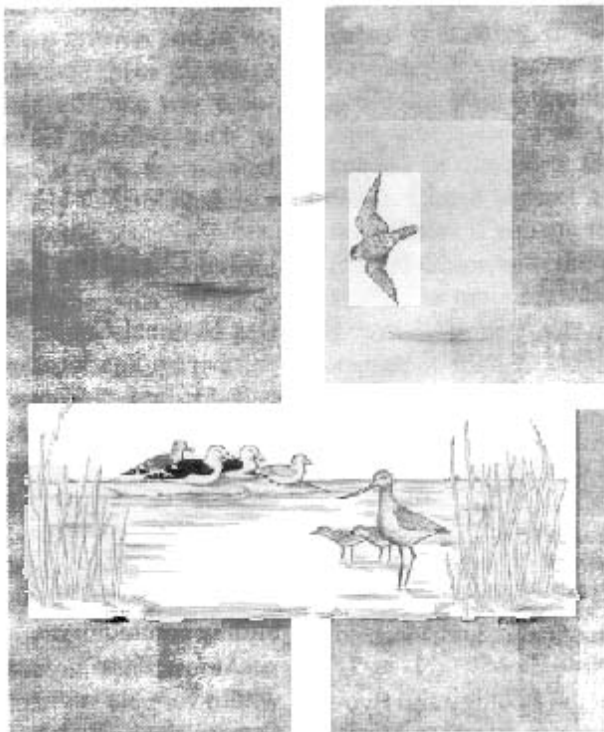


Geese that stage here each fall. Franklin's Gulls have appeared on occasion, Mew Gull has been documented (Oct. 1991), Lesser Black-backed Gulls are almost common here in recent years, and Parasitic Jaegers are seen flying downriver semi-annually. The east end of Andrew Haydon Park a.k.a. *Ottawa Beach*, a name that has stuck long after the demise of the Ottawa Beach Motel back in the 1970s, is a famous location to which shorebirds gravitate, including several rarities over the years such as Ottawa's 2nd record of Spotted Redshank (21 Aug. 1998), Marbled Godwit (also 1998), Western Sandpiper (Aug. 1993 and Oct. 1995), Buff-breasted Sandpiper (Sept. 1993), Red Phalarope and many others. Resident and migrant Cooper's and Sharp-shinned Hawks, Merlins and Peregrine Falcons can frequently be seen hunting along the shoreline, and later in the season it is nowadays not unusual to see a Bald Eagle or two acting as part of the "clean-up crew" of the gull and duck carcasses. A Northern Wheatear dropped in for 2 days (Oct. 1995) along the beach at Lakeside Gardens where the rocky breakwater structures may have reminded it of home. The strip of shoreline from *Ottawa Beach* to Lakeside Gardens is also the best location for seeking Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow. From mid-September through mid-October, this secretive migrant takes advantage of the lush shoreline community of Tall Cord Grass (*Spartina pectinata*) and Purple Loosestrife (*Lythrum salicaria*) and can usually be found with patience, persistence, and a good pair of tall rubber boots.

Although the shorebird habitat is best on the Ontario south side of the river, the Quebec north side can also be very productive, and offers different perspectives. Again, several public parking areas and a recreational pathway make access very user-friendly. Many "lookout" areas mirror the Ontario side, and often provide a better view of birds that may be too distant to identify from the south side of the river. The best location to check in early fall is the Des Chênes rapids from the end of Vanier Street in the community of Deschênes and surrounding trails. On one memorable day (8 Oct. 2001), a visit to both the Deschênes (Quebec) and Britannia (Ontario) sides of the river yielded a bizarre but exciting mix of species: in one afternoon, a Boreal Chickadee, a Carolina Wren, a Gray-checked Thrush and a Fox Sparrow were found between

these two locations...and to top it all off, a juvenile Northern Gannet cruised over the rapids...where else can you go on a Sunday afternoon...?!

Continuing along the north side of the river, the Aylmer Yacht Club has been productive for a few rarities, including a Piping Plover (2004), but the most interesting habitat along the river on the Quebec side is the area collectively known as the Masson-Thurso marshes. This huge wetland complex is most rewarding in spring and the breeding season, and is noteworthy for nesting Least and American Bitterns, Virginia and Sora Rails, Common Moorhens and American Coots, and a thriving colony of Black Terns. The various marsh "sectors" are well-signed along Highway 148 east from Hull (Gatineau) and are easily accessible by vehicle, with only a bit of footwork required. Among the best locations in this area are Petit Baie Clement and Marais aux Grenouillettes, fondly known as the *Froggy Marsh*.



Ottawa Beach by Christina Lewis

#### Gatineau Park

While in Quebec, a visit to Gatineau Park can be a refreshing change from the river. The geography of this beautiful park managed by the NCC is unlike anything on the Ontario side of the 50 K. Part of the Laurentians, these ancient hills are a favourite for hikers, mountain bikers and birders who enjoy mature woods with spectacular fall colours. Best known for breeding birds rather than migrants, this park has several stunning lookouts from atop the Eardley Escarpment, and is interspersed with myriad lakes and rapid streams. The ice storm of 1998 damaged major portions of the canopy, unfortunately opening up the woods to invasive undergrowth. However, a good selection of uncommon species continue to breed here, including Red-shouldered Hawk, Philadelphia Vireo, Swainson's Thrush and Cerulean Warbler (rare in Ottawa). In spring of 2004, 2005 and 2006 a male Louisiana Waterthrush ardently proclaimed its desire to find a mate, and who could blame him? The habitat below the Mackenzie King estate is ideal for this species. It is not known whether his singing paid off, but it was certainly convincing. The park is also a haven for other wildlife seldom seen so close to an urban area, including American Black Bear and Eastern Wolf. In winter, a huge deer-yrard attracts Coyotes as well as both Bald and Golden Eagles. An extensive and well signed trail network can be



accessed from well maintained roads and several public parking lots. Maps can be obtained from the kiosk at the intersection of Gatineau Parkway and Rue Garnelin or at the visitor centre on the Old Chelsea side of the park. At this time, there is no fee to enter the park, but some of the parking lots do charge a daily rate.

#### **Britannia Conservation Area (BCA)**

The Britannia Conservation Area (BCA) is the "jewel in the crown" of Ottawa's birding sites at any time of year, especially for water birds and passerines. To date, a total of over 250 species of birds has been seen in or from the BCA and represents 72% of all species recorded in Ottawa—an impressive statistic for a small isolated area of green space within city limits, a mere 9 km from Parliament Hill. During fall migration, this area, located at a constriction of the Ottawa River on the south side of the Des Chênes rapids and encompassing a wooded area surrounding a large pond known as Mud Lake, continues to be the most consistently rewarding migrant trap year after year. Britannia Bay and the rapids have hosted numerous Red-throated Loons as well as rarities such as Northern Gannet, both Franklin's and Laughing Gull and Long-tailed Jaeger. This is a major viewing site for Arctic Terns (late May - early June), and in terms of larids in general, a total of 22 out of Ottawa's 24 recorded species has occurred here. In fall, Mud Lake attracts Black-crowned Night-Herons and a good variety of puddle and diving ducks. Both Great Horned Owls and Eastern Screech-Owls nested in the woods in recent years, and the first modern record of breeding Merlins occurred here in 1997. The urban Merlin explosion continues in Ottawa to this day. As of fall 2005, the NCC has created a new trail to provide improved access through the woods and around the entire circumference of the pond offering a fine walk through an interesting variety of habitats. Side trails throughout the Britannia Conservation Area lead to good habitats for finding flycatchers, thrushes, warblers and sparrows during migration, and some excellent rarities have been found here including Cassin's Kingbird (Sept-Oct. 1970), Western Kingbird (30 Oct. 2001), Gray Kingbird (31 Oct. 1982). Thirty-four species of warblers including Yellow-throated, Prairie, Prothonotary, Worm-eating, Connecticut and Yellow-breasted Chat have been found here. Rarities notwithstanding, the Britannia Conservation Area is the number one "magnet" for birds and birders alike during spring and fall migration. *A comprehensive site guide with to the BCA and some premier birding locations along the Ottawa River is found in the June 2000 issue of OFO News 18(2):2-5.*

#### **Shirley's Bay**

This is the number one "hotspot" during late summer and early fall. A panoramic view of Lac Des Chênes and the impressive escarpment of the Gatineau Hills across the

Ottawa River, together with woods for songbirds and a rich shorebird feeding area, make this a must-visit location! Watch for Horned and Red-necked Grebes, rafts of ducks often congregate in the bay and on Lac Des Chênes. The first record of Tufted Duck for Ottawa was found here in 2003 and most local records of Black-legged Kittiwake and Pomarine and Parasitic Jaeger have occurred here. Lightning can even strike twice in two days: On both 17 and 18 September 2005, a juvenile Parasitic Jaeger literally flew over the heads of birders gathered in the boat launch parking lot, then proceeded to put on a spectacular show as it harassed the Ring-billed and Herring Gulls on the river. The famous Shirley's Bay causeway offers a view of the "inner" bay and marshes of the Crown Game Preserve. In late summer and early fall the water levels of the Ottawa River often become extremely low. In 2005, the lowest level in 30 years was recorded, exposing marvelous mud flats, i.e. ideal puddle duck and shorebird habitat. This area also attracts herons and rails, including the first Ottawa record of a Tricolored Heron (2001) and a juvenile Purple Gallinule (28 Sept. 2003). Also, since 1996, Great Egrets are increasingly seen here in fall, culminating in a record high of 7 individuals on 19 September 2005. However, the biggest attraction for birders is the shorebird show. Hundreds take advantage of the exposed mud and the variety and numbers often change on a daily basis. Dynamic weather events sometimes bring in uncommon to rare migrants such as Whimbrel, Hudsonian Godwit, Red Knot, Western Sandpiper, Buff-breasted Sandpiper, Long-billed Dowitcher and all three species of phalaropes. The woods between Shirley Blvd. and the causeway can be productive for migrant songbirds. A nice mix of flycatchers, vireos, thrushes, warblers and other passerines is often found feeding along the trail, and rarities have included Varied Thrush (Nov. 1986) and Yellow-throated Warbler (Sept. 2005). Permission is required to access the woods and the causeway, as this is Department of National Defence (DND) property. A long-standing arrangement between DND and Ottawa Field-Naturalists' Club (OFNC) has provided this privilege. Access is rarely denied as long as we respect the rules. Call the range control office at 613-991-5740.

#### **Trail Road Waste Facility and Environs**

Until a few years ago, the Trail Road Waste Facility a.k.a. *Nepean Dump* was our prime gull viewing hot spot where, with permission, one could drive among the dump trucks and get up close views of hundreds of gulls. Uncommon species such as Thayer's Gull as well as multiple Lesser Black-backed Gulls, Iceland and Glaucous Gulls were often seen here. Rarities included Laughing, Franklin's and California Gull. Unfortunately access is now prohibited, and Trail Road is gated. However, another location just south of the dump is still viewable and is excellent for fall birding. A large pond on the east side of Moodie



Drive is on private property (active sand and gravel operation) but most of the pond can be seen from the road. Aside from the multitude of waterfowl that stage here, a good variety of raptors, shorebirds and gulls are frequently encountered. Highlights in recent years include Greater White-fronted Goose, Ross's Goose (Oct. 2000 and 2005), Tundra Swan (rare in Ottawa in fall), Gyrfalcon (Nov. 2001), Peregrine Falcon (commonly), Laughing Gull (1997 and 2002) and Sabine's Gull (Sept. 2004). This is also a great location for shorebirds with Hudsonian Godwit and Long-billed Dowitcher seen here virtually every year. The agricultural fields south and west of this location are also worth checking for waterfowl, gulls and shorebirds including Buff-breasted Sandpiper (Sept. 2000).

### Sewage Lagoons

Several sewage treatment ponds within the 50 K are located south and east of Ottawa and can be phenomenally productive. Apart from the Alfred lagoons (about 20 km outside the eastern boundary of the 50 K) there is no formal arrangement for public access to these sites. Officially, entry to the lagoons is verboten, therefore specifics regarding locations are not given here. Nevertheless, these eastern "waste lands" have hosted numerous breeders, migrants, and some fantastic vagrants. Ruddy Ducks and Wilson's Phalaropes breed, hundreds of Greater Snow Geese pass through annually, and other migration spectacles occur such as an influx of at least 320 American Golden-Plovers (Oct. 2003). Rarities such as Eared Grebe (1990, 1997 and 2001) have been found at the Embrun and Casselman lagoons and Ottawa's second record of Scissor-tailed Flycatcher (July 2001) visited Embrun. Spotted Redshank (1990), Little Stint (1992) and Curlew Sandpiper (1996) all were at Casselman lagoons—no wonder it is called the *Siberian Connection*! Furthermore, the agricultural fields surrounding many of these lagoons are among the last strongholds of Gray Partridge in Ontario.

Historically, Ottawa has been home to many of Canada's best known naturalists and ornithologists, many were or still are associated with the Canadian Museum of Nature. With its rich legacy in field ornithology and incredible species diversity, the Ottawa area ranks as one of the premier inland birding locations away from the Great Lakes. We hope that you will attend the 2006 OFO Annual Convention on 30 September and 1 October to enjoy the birding, parklands and special places in our Nation's Capital. Local experts will be leading field trips to the hotspots mentioned in this article.

*Excellent directions to birding areas can be found on the OFNC website [www.ofnc.ca](http://www.ofnc.ca). Larry Neily's comprehensive Ottawa Birding website provides detailed directions, latest updates on rarities, and a wealth of information on*

*birding in Ottawa: [www.neilyworld.com/birding/htm](http://www.neilyworld.com/birding/htm). You can listen to latest local rare bird alerts and sightings summaries in English by calling the OFNC Bird Status Line 613-860-9000. For information about the Quebec side, the Club des Ornithologues de l'Outaouais (COO) operates its website in French at [www.coo.ncf.ca](http://www.coo.ncf.ca), and the COO bird line 819-778-0737.*

## Birds At Risk - COSEWIC

Updated April 2006

Ron Pittaway

This update covers only changes to birds on the official Ontario Bird Checklist (OFO 2006) whose status was changed by *Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada* (COSEWIC) at its April 2006 meeting.

**Red-shouldered Hawk** was down listed from Special Concern to *Not At Risk* because it has been stable or increasing over last 10-20 years. Also, populations are stable or increasing in most parts of the United States. **Ivory Gull** was up listed from Special Concern to *Endangered*. Breeding population declined by 80% over the last 20 years. Reasons for decline uncertain, but may include contaminants, hunting in Greenland, disturbance by mineral exploration and climate change. **Golden-winged Warbler** was up listed from Special Concern to *Threatened*. It has declined by 79% over last 10 years because of competition and genetic swamping (hybridization) with the Blue-winged Warbler, which is spreading north. Fortunately, the Golden-winged Warbler is maintaining small pure populations within the Blue-winged Warbler range. **Louisiana Waterthrush** met criteria for Threatened but remains *Special Concern* because Canadian population of about 200 pairs was stable over the last 20 years. Habitat degradation, particularly from ATVs, may be threat at some sites. **Rusty Blackbird** was up listed to *Special Concern*. Severe decline is ongoing, but at slower rate. Threats primarily on winter range include habitat conversion and blackbird control programs.

**Endangered:** Faces imminent extirpation or extinction.

**Threatened:** Likely to become Endangered if limiting factors not reversed.

**Special Concern:** May become Threatened or Endangered.

**Not At Risk:** Evaluated and not at risk of extinction.

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COSEWIC website [www.cosewic.gc.ca](http://www.cosewic.gc.ca)