OFO NEWS

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Portrait of an Artist
Andrea Kingsley

Matt Holder

Andrea's interest in nature grew from her childhood love of animals. She knew no other naturalists, but her family and teachers provided her with never-ending encouragement through her formative years. While in high school, Andrea began combining her interests in nature with her artistic talents, but a trip to the Hudson Bay lowlands in her late teens, where she finally met other birders, helped persuade Andrea to choose biology over art during her post-secondary education. Attending Trent University, she completed her Honours Bachelor's degree in biology, then a Master's degree, researching the effects of uniform shelterwood logging on Algonquin Park's forest birds.

Besides her research, Andrea has performed songbird surveys in northern and southern Ontario for the Canadian Wildlife Service, taken part in the Peregrine Falcon release program in Nipigon and worked as a park naturalist in Algonquin Park.

Brown Creeper by *Andrea Kingsley*

Although she draws and paints for the love of it, Andrea's art has been reproduced in a number of journals and books, (even a book on fish!), including *Ontario Birds* and *Birders Journal*. After finishing her Master's degree last year, Andrea is looking forward to devoting more time to her art and attempting to kickstart a career as a professional artist.

Raptor Quiz

Bruce Duncan

These questions refer to Ontario's raptors (including, at least for this quiz, Turkey Vultures).

1. Which species migrate entirely out of their summer range into their winter range?

2. What species is reported to have placed the following objects in its nests? A bleach bottle, a long white candle, a light bulb, a family photograph (not the bird's family), a newspaper and a pair of lace-trimmed pink panties.

3. What does "reversed sexual size dimorphism" mean and which species shows the greatest reversed sexual size dimorphism?

4. Which species was described by Thomas McIlwraith in 1894 as a very rare straggler to southwestern Ontario?

5. Conifer plantings have greatly benefited several species in recent years. Which ones?

6. Raptors vary in their nest defence; some are bold or even reckless while others will simply circle or perch nearby. What are examples of these extremes?

What's Inside

New Address

OFO now has a new postal address:
ONTARIO FIELD ORNITHOLOGISTS
BOX 455 STATION R
TORONTO ON M4G 4E1
We will hold the Burlington mailbox for at least a year.

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.

Land 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.

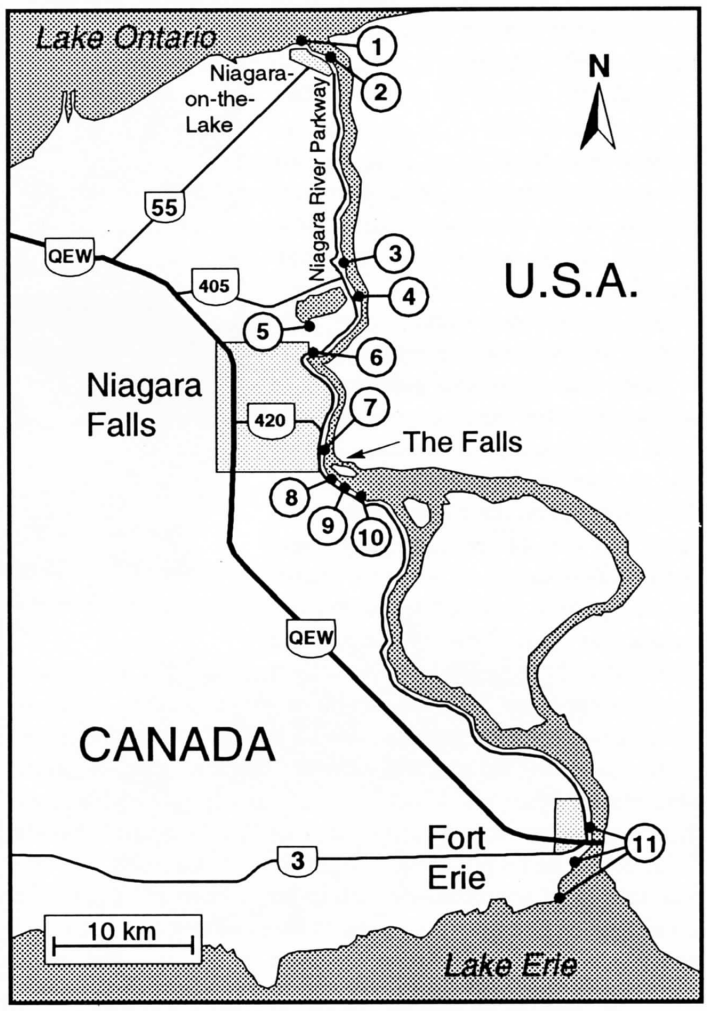
Niagara Parks Commission Butterfly Conservatory: On the grounds of the Niagara Parks Botanical Gardens is a glass enclosed 990 square metre butterfly conservatory. Open year round, this conservatory has over 2000 free flying butterflies from around the world flitting in a tropical rain forest setting. 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

I thank Bob Curry for his valuable suggestions and for his assistance in editing this article from a larger one so as to be more suitable for Ontario birders.

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

Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow
in The Birds of North America
Jim Rising

Growing up in the mid-west United States before the comforts of air conditioning and the distractions of TV, I developed a strong interest in nature which became focused on birdwatching by the time I was 12. After learning to identify the "easy" species I became focused on sparrows both because they represented a challenge and because they occurred commonly and showed great diversity in the region. One species that I never saw in my youth, however, was the Sharp-tailed Sparrow, as it was then called. It was not until years later, after I had moved to Canada and was doing research on geographic variation of birds, that I first encountered this species, lurking, along with LeConte's Sparrows and Yellow Rails, in the flooded sedges and grasses of the James Bay Lowlands.

Three different kinds of sharp-tailed sparrows are commonly figured in field guides, the so-called "typical" sharp-tails of the saltmarshes along the Atlantic Coast, "Nelson's" sparrow of freshwater prairie marshes, and "Acadian" sparrows of the Maritime Provinces. Until recently, these were recognized as distinct subspecies of the Sharp-tailed Sparrow (*Ammodramus caudacutus*), namely *A. c. caudacutus*, *A. c. nelsoni* and *A. c. subvirgatus*, respectively. In addition to these, two additional subspecies have been described, *A. c. diversus*, of the south Atlantic Coast, which closely resembles *A. c. caudacutus*, and *A. c. alterus* of the James and Hudson Bay lowlands, which closely resembles *A. c. nelsoni*. Following the publication of several recent research papers on these birds (which I shall summarize below) the American Ornithologists' Union Check-list Committee split these sparrows into two species, and gave them the common names of Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow (including the Prairie, James Bay and Maritime birds), and Saltmarsh Sharp-tailed Sparrows (for the birds that breed along the Atlantic Coast, south of southern Maine). These long vernacular names are not popular with all birders, but were perhaps better than other logical alternatives: "Eastern" and "Western" sharp-tailed sparrows hardly seemed appropriate as the eastern-most occurring populations are of the "western" species; "Northern" and "Southern" could have been used, but the southern-most sparrows just barely get into what is generally considered the south. Also, none of these names had been used previously in connection with these sparrows. The name "Saltmarsh Sparrow" was proposed, but it seems more appropriate for the Seaside Sparrow in the east, and the Belding's Savannah Sparrow in the west, and historically the name "Nelson's Sparrow" was established for the prairie birds. In any event, the names are not as cumbersome as, say, Northern Rough-winged Swallow!

Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow at Point Pelee
Photo *Jim Flynn*

What evidence convinced the Committee to split these into two species, and why not into three (Nelson's, Saltmarsh, and Acadian)? Evidence from their breeding biology, behaviour, ecology, morphology, and biochemical differences all supports this split. Greenlaw (1963) did extensive research on the behavioural diversification of these birds. He carefully studied songs and singing behaviour, and found many differences between Nelson's and Saltmarsh sharp-tails. For example Nelson's sparrows have an elaborate flight song display in which the male rises from the marsh, often to a height of over 10 metres, gives his song once or twice, then glides back to the ground; this display is not given by Saltmarsh sharp-tails. The songs also differ: Nelson's song is, to my ear, louder and they sing more persistently than Saltmarsh sharp-tails, which have a continuous, muted, wheezy complex whisper song, which may last for more than a minute. Additionally, John Avise and I (1993) looked at biochemical and morphological differences between these groups. John was able to find consistent differences in the mitochondrial DNA between the two, and I was able to show that the Nelson's sharp-tails were consistently (albeit it slightly) smaller than the Saltmarsh sharp-tails. Nonetheless, where the ranges of the two join in a limited area along the coast of southern Maine, there is some hybridization between the two (i.e. Saltmarsh and "Acadian"), but less than would be expected if mating were completely random. Although the "Acadian" sharp-tails are distinctive in plumage, and can readily be separated from the others in the field, they are very like other Nelson's sharp-tails in other regards, and at least for now are included with them.

"James Bay" sparrows nest commonly in marshes along the coast of James Bay, and although the marshes in which they nest are along the Bay, they are freshwater. As mentioned above, they've been named as a separate subspecies (now *A. nelsoni alterus*). These birds as well as prairie birds migrate through southern Ontario. There is debate as to whether these two subspecies can be differentiated in the field. After looking at series of museum skins of breeding birds (and thus of known subspecific identity) I am convinced that they are very similar and am cautious about field identification of migratory individuals. *A. n. nelsoni* is perhaps more richly colored, on aver-

Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow in Smartweed by *Ron Scovell*

age, particularly on the crown, than *A. n. alterus*, but there is a lot of overlap in coloration. Although it is possible that these two are more distinct in nonbreeding plumage than in breeding plumage, unless there is some way that we can know from which population a migrant comes, we unfortunately can never be certain of this, and this remains a challenge for Ontario birders.

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Jim Rising is a professor in the Department of Zoology at University of Toronto who teaches courses in evolution and ornithology and does work on the evolution and systematics of birds (especially sparrows). He and David Beadle are the authors of *A Guide to the Identification and Natural History of the Sparrows of the United States and Canada* (1996).

Raptor Quiz Answers *from page 1*

Bruce Duncan

1. Osprey, Broad-winged Hawk, Rough-legged Hawk. Further west, Swainson's Hawk does the same. It is interesting that these species are quite dissimilar in their food and habitat requirements.

2. Bald Eagle. These items are all listed in a chapter entitled, "Odd Objects Found in Eagles' Nests" from *Eagle Man, the Biography of Charles Broley*. Broley visited over 1,000 Bald Eagle nests in Florida during a lengthy period of banding. Others have noted an interest by eagles in white objects as well as plastic bottles and metal cans of various colours. Nestlings frequently manipulate them.

3. The female is larger than the male (not usually the case in birds although in our area, some shorebirds and many owls do). Sharp-shinned Hawk has the greatest dimorphism of any North American bird. The male weighs 82-125 grams (average 102 grams) while the female weighs 120-210 grams (average 179 grams).

4. Turkey Vulture. These days, counts of vultures migrating out of the province along the north shore of Lake Erie get as high as 12,000.

5. Sharp-shinned and Cooper's Hawks in southern Ontario find pine and spruce plantations with trees of 15 metres or taller to be ideal nesting locations. Merlins in central Ontario now use mature spruce trees in yards and gardens in several towns and cities.

6. Northern Goshawks have slashed heads and necks, carried off hats, shredded shirts, gloves and jackets, and pulled hair from many people who have inadvertently or purposely ventured close to nests. Females are the usual attackers.

Red-tailed Hawks and Bald Eagles, on the other hand, will fly about or perch and sometimes call if people climb to their nests. Occasionally, eagles will fly at intruders. Many species stoop at intruders and call but do not strike. Cooper's Hawks and Peregrine Falcons are examples.

Bald Eagles with Adornments by *Andrea Kingsley*

Small Winter Loon ID

Ron Pittaway and Michael King

Every fall a few confusing small loons are seen whose identity stirs up debate among birders. Are they Pacific, Red-throated or just small Common Loons? In this article, we discuss the fine points of identifying small loons in juvenal (juvenile) and basic (winter) plumages.

Ontario Status: The Common Loon is Ontario's provincial bird. It is a common breeder in cottage country and northern Ontario and a common migrant on the Great Lakes.

The Red-throated Loon is a rare breeder along the Hudson Bay coast in northern Ontario. It is a rare to uncommon migrant in southern Ontario, but large numbers are sometimes seen.

Pacific Loons breed sparsely in Ontario along the Hudson Bay coast; they are a prized find in southern Ontario. The American Ornithologists' Union split the Pacific Loon from the Arctic Loon in 1985. The Arctic Loon is not treated in this article because there are no records of it close to Ontario.

Fall Migration: Adult loons generally migrate before the juveniles, but there is considerable overlap. The first adult Common Loons return to Lake Ontario in mid-August, joining the few nonbreeders in various plumages that have summered there. Adult Common Loon migration continues through September and October into November. Juveniles start appearing on Lake Ontario in late September and are common through October into November. Most Common Loons have left Ontario by December, but a few may linger into January.

Red-throated Loons, usually singles, can occur anytime during the migration period of the Common Loon. However, up to 1200 Red-throated Loons have been seen on Lake Ontario in October and there were over 2000 along the Ottawa River near Ottawa on 12 November 1984. Big loon movements occur one or two days after strong cold fronts out of Hudson Bay.

The eight fall records of Pacific Loon accepted to date by the Ontario Bird Records Committee range from 17 October to 26 December. These include three in juvenal plumage and five in basic plumage. Four of the eight fall records were away from the Great Lakes at Lake Simcoe, Niagara Falls, Waterloo, and Woodstock. There are also a number of spring records of basic plumaged Pacific Loons in southern Ontario.

Molt, Plumage and Sex: When identifying a loon, keep in mind its plumage and molt. There are three main plumage types to consider: juveniles, molting adults and winter adults.

Molts: Most adult loons are in body molt when seen in fall in southern Ontario. A few Common Loons acquire almost full winter plumage by late September, many by mid-October and most by November, but some are still mostly in breeding plumage in late November. After migration to the winter range, adult loons molt all their primary and secondary feathers simultaneously and the birds are flightless for several weeks. Adult Common and Pacific Loons molt flight feathers from mid to late winter. Adult Red-throated Loons molt their flight feathers in late fall, soon after arrival on the wintering grounds, much earlier than other adult loons. However, juvenile loons retain their full juvenal plumage until January or later before molting to first basic (first winter) plumage.

Plumages: Refer to the illustrations. Juvenile Common and Pacific Loons have distinctly scaly backs. Adult winter Commons have faintly scaly backs and adult winter Pacifics have plain blackish backs, but adults of both species usually retain scattered white-spotted alternate scapulars in the autumn.

Both adult winter and juvenile Red-throated Loons have backs finely speckled with white, whereas other loons have scaly or plain backs. In juvenile Red-throated, the white speckles on the back differ from those of winter adults: the juvenile's speckles are grayer (less pure white), longer and narrower, forming V-marks on the scapulars and wing coverts. The juvenile Red-throated's head and neck are washed with a variable amount of gray, sometimes extensively.

Contrary to some references, Red-throated Loons in juvenal plumage never have a reddish throat patch. However, molting juveniles can have a variable smudge on the throat suggesting the throat patch of alternate plumage.

Sexes: Male and female loons are similar in appearance in all plumages with females averaging slightly smaller.

Swimming Appearance: Keep in mind that loons (and other diving birds) can markedly alter their appearance under muscular control by raising or compressing their plumage. Extremes of the same individual often look like different birds! For example, loons swim low by sleeking their feathers. They also create the forehead bump by raising these feathers.

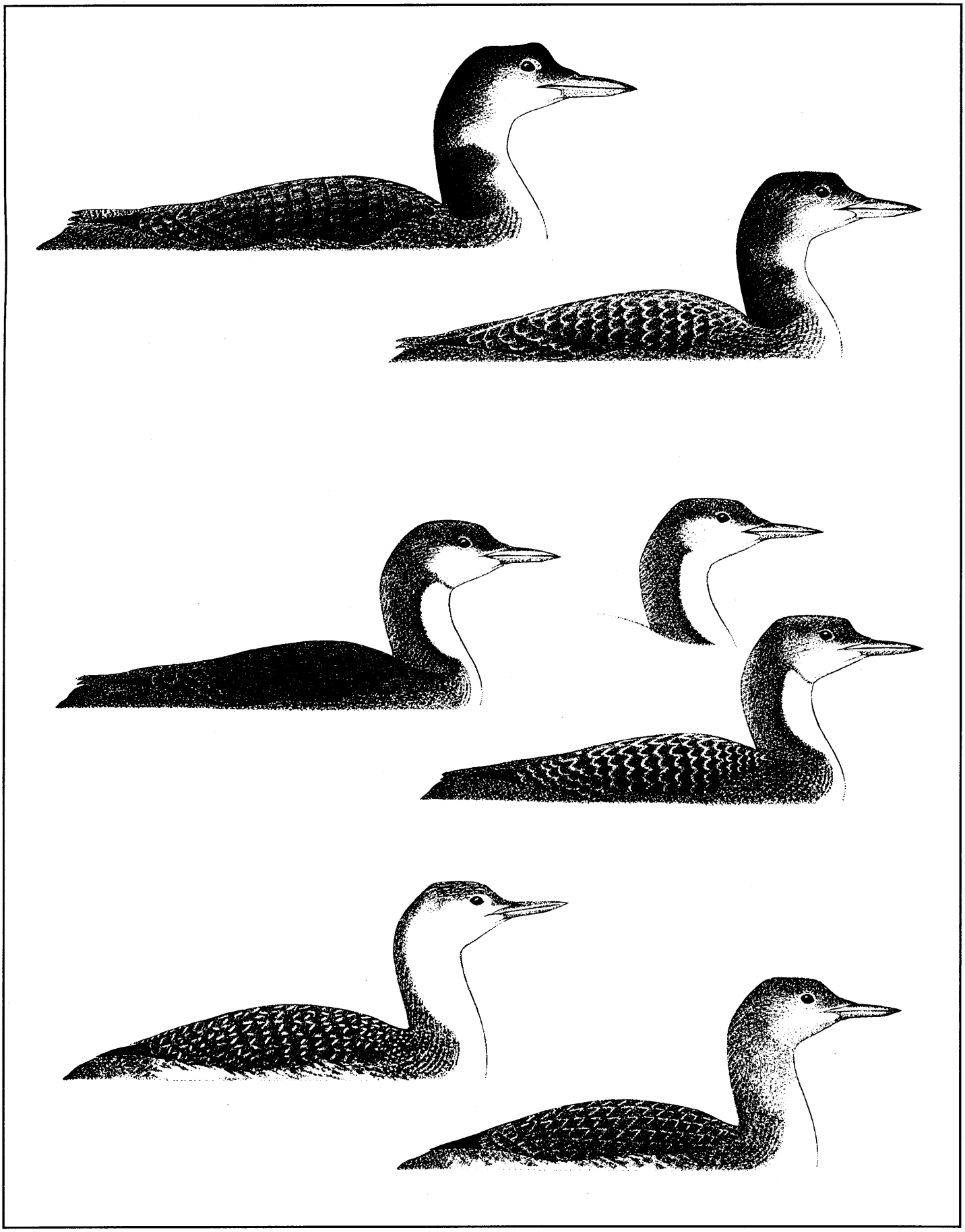
Common Loons are heavy set and big headed with a straight robust bill. They often have a bump on the forehead. Juveniles and winter adults have mostly pale gray bills.

Red-throated Loons are small, paler above than other loons, normally with a sloping head profile (sometimes angular as illustrated) and pale slender uptilted bill. Usually the small head and bill are pointed upwards giving them a snakelike appearance. Winter adults have gleaming white necks.

Pacific Loons are slightly larger than Red-throateds, but their darker coloration, thicker necks and straight bills make them look more like Common Loons. Pacifics often have a puffy rounded (cobra-like) head profile, but some show a flat crown and angular head shape suggesting a Common Loon.

Flight Appearance: Loons fly swiftly and directly with continuous wing beats. They are hunchbacked with the head and neck extended and feet held together sole to sole projecting beyond the tail. Common Loons are heavy with *large feet.* Red-throated Loons are slim with a snakelike neck/head and *small feet.* The difference between a Common Loon and a Red-throated Loon in flight is like the difference between a Common Merganser and a Red-breasted Merganser. The flight appearance of a Pacific Loon is somewhat in between!

Pitfalls: Correctly judging a loon's size, especially a solitary loon at a distance, is very difficult without a direct comparison with another bird or object of known size. As well, a few small Common Loons of all ages occur widely throughout its range. However, most identification problems arise with those juvenile Common Loons that are small in size with short bills.



Common Loon: adult (top left) and *small* juvenile (top right), **Pacific Loon:** adult (middle left) and two juveniles (head and middle right), **Red throated Loon:** adult (bottom left) and juvenile (bottom right) by *Michael King*

Be especially aware that Red-throated Loons (usually juveniles) are sometimes called Pacifics because they do not carry their heads and bills in the characteristic uptilted posture.

The bills of many juvenile loons may not have developed the characteristic shape of the adults by December or even later. Therefore bill size and shape are unreliable field characters for many juveniles.

Molting Common Loons can show dark spots on the neck suggesting the chinstrap of a Pacific Loon.

All three loon species usually have eyerings that are visible at close range as shown in the illustrations.

Finally, a few birders engage in "wishful thinking" when it comes to rarities and an odd looking small loon may be called a Pacific by default. Make absolutely sure that you see the diagnostic field marks before claiming a Pacific Loon. Be prepared to leave many distant loons unidentified.

Fine Points: The separation of Pacific from Common and Red-throated Loons is emphasized below. Refer to the illustrations when comparing the *key field marks* of the three loon species described below.

Common Loon: (top two birds) Small Common Loons can be identified by the *half collar* (less distinct in juveniles) at the base of the neck. The sides of the neck show an *uneven border* between the dark and white with indentations of white into the dark on the side of the neck, particularly where the white necklace is on breeding adults. Most Common Loons in basic plumage (less conspicuous in juveniles) show *a prominent pale area in front of and/or above the eyes* (top left), a feature not shown by Pacific Loons. In a published study of museum skins, 50 of 54 Common Loons had some white about the eyes, only four did not show a definite pattern. Caution: adult winter Red-throated Loons also have much white around the eyes, but they are unlikely to be confused with a Common Loon.

Red-throated Loon: (bottom two birds) Red-throated Loons sometimes hold their bills horizontally and/or have less upturned bills (especially juveniles), often appearing to have straight bills as on Pacific Loons. The division of white and dark on the sides of the neck in juvenile Red-throateds is diffuse, not sharp as on Pacifics. However, adult Red-throated Loons have a sharper division of white and dark on the neck, but this border is much farther back than on Pacifics. Most adult winter Red-throateds have white in front of the eyes unlike Pacifics. However, juveniles and some winter Red-throateds have dark around the eyes as on Pacifics. Red-throated Loons often show more noticeable whitish flank feathers (bottom left) than do Pacific and Common Loons. Difficult Red-throated Loons are best identified at close range by the *diagnostic fine white speckling or V-marks on their backs*, thus differing from all other loons.

Pacific Loon: (middle three birds) Pacifics usually show *a straight or smoothly curved vertical dark border* dividing the white foreneck and gray hindneck. There is often a dark point on the side of the neck that is almost level with the top of the throat patch on breeding adults. On winter adults (middle left), this dark point on the side of the neck usually connects to a narrow *chinstrap* forming a brownish line across the throat. In juvenile Pacifics, the chinstrap is fainter (middle right) or absent (head), but the aforementioned dark point (if present) on the side of the neck creates a different look compared to other Ontario loons. Neck markings on loons are best judged on alert birds whose necks are extended. Pacifics have dark feathering around most of the eye; they lack the light area in front of and/or above the eyes present on many Common Loons. Caution: Pacifics usually show a narrow eyering at close range. Also at close range, adult winter Pacifics have plain blackish backs, but adult Commons can look similar at a distance or in poor light. Juvenile and basic Pacific Loons have a paler nape and back of neck, usually appearing grayer than the back, whereas in the Common Loon the nape and back of the neck are usually darker than the back.

Further Reading: In this brief account we have highlighted the principal characters used to identify Common, Red-throated and Pacific Loons in juvenal and basic plumages. We recommend the following references as *essential reading* on the identification of loons.

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Acknowledgements

For much valuable advice and information, we thank Geir Sverre Anderson, Jack Barr, Bob Curry, Bruce Di Labio, Rob Dobos, Christine Eberl, Earl Godfrey, Michel Gosselin, Jean Iron, Judy McIntyre, Kevin McLaughlin, Mike Turner and Ron Tozer.

OFO Launches ONTBIRDS

Mike Street

With the launch in September of ONTBIRDS, OFO has ventured into another area of new technology. When someone sends an electronic mail (e-mail) message with a new report about birds seen in Ontario, ONTBIRDS automatically relays that message to everyone who is subscribed. There is no charge for the service.

All Ontario birding hotlines, major birding hotspots and hawkwatches have been invited to post their regular updates, and especially rare bird reports, to ONTBIRDS. In addition, hotlines in cities/areas bordering our province, which regularly carry information about sightings in Ontario, have been invited to do the same. Any subscriber can post a notice about Ontario bird sightings (subject to the rules, see below).

Archiving messages relayed by ONTBIRDS is being arranged. Details are included in ONTBIRDS introductory messages.

The Hamilton-Wentworth Community Network is providing the software and server through which ONTBIRDS operates. Mike Street, who has looked after the Hamilton Birding hotline since its inception in 1989, is coordinating ONTBIRDS for OFO.

Subscribing to ONTBIRDS

Any interested birder can subscribe. Membership in OFO, while encouraged, is not mandatory. To subscribe to ONTBIRDS, send an e-mail (NB: be sure to use lower case letters) to:

majordomo@hwcn.org

Leave the subject or title of the e-mail blank. In the body of the e-mail, type: **subscribe ontbirds**

and on the next line type: **end**

Send the e-mail. In a short while you will receive a message asking you to authenticate your subscription by sending a specific confirming message back to the server. After confirming, you will receive another e-mail with information on how to post sightings and other details. The authentication process is in place to prevent misuse of the service.

Rules

The rules for ONTBIRDS are simple:

1) Only sightings of birds seen in Ontario, or immediately adjacent to Ontario in other provinces or states, are to be reported. To save extra work, non-Ontario hotlines may include non-Ontario sightings that are part of their regular updates.

2) Rarity reports must include the name of the birder making the identification, good directions to the site, viewing restrictions if any, and contact information (name, phone number, hours for calling) if available.

Honesty is important. If there is doubt about the identification this should be clearly stated. Third or fourth hand or hearsay sightings are not to be posted. Many birders are willing to travel, sometimes at considerable cost, to see a rare bird. It is not fair to them to post inaccurate information.

3) In addition to regular birding hotlines and their updates, the following should be reported: vagrants, birds on the Ontario Review List, regional rarities, outstanding numbers or species mixes (e.g. shorebird or warbler concentrations) and birds out of season.

DO NOT REPORT any endangered species on breeding territory.

4) When reporting a rare bird, specify its sex, age and plumage, if known.

5) ONTBIRDS is NOT, repeat NOT, a "chat" line, i.e. it is for bird sightings only, not for discussions about birds or birding.

6) Messages sent to ONTBIRDS must include your real name, location (city/town and province/state) and e-mail address, e.g.
Joe Birder
Anytown ON
Joebird@xyz.com
People should know who you are and where you are from. Include your street address and phone number if you wish.

If you see an OBRC Review List bird, please complete a rarities report and send it to the secretary of the OBRC. You can download the form from the OFO web page:

www.interlog.com/~ofo/report.htm

Bird Songs in Your Computer

Josh Eagle recently posted on BIRDCHAT a suggestion how to increase your ability to identify bird songs. In an e-mail, he provided me with the step-by-step instructions. I can attest to the fun and instructional value of this procedure. The songs of Tennessee Warbler, Whip-poor-will and Swainson's Thrush echo from my computer. Jean Iron

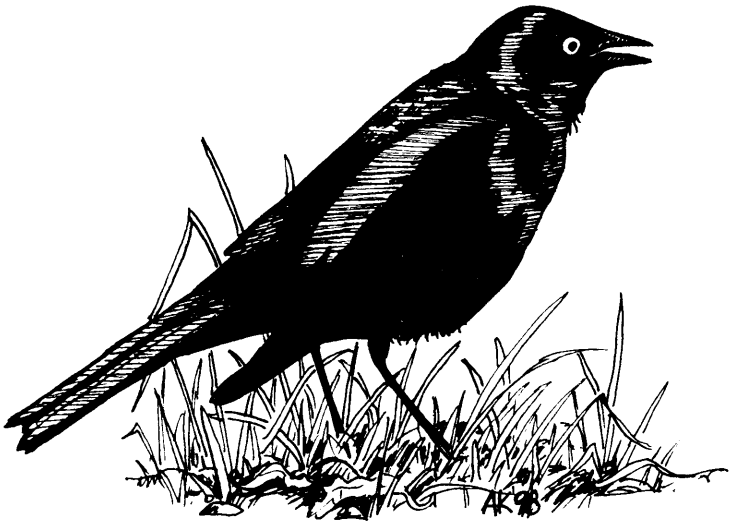
Josh Eagle writes:
If you want to hear great bird songs all the time, you can set your PC to make a variety of bird sounds at particular functions, e.g., opening and closing programs, receiving e-mails, etc. This is entertaining and educational, and it can drive your co-workers nuts. What you need to do is download songs from the internet and then assign them to functions using your Control Panel Sounds icons on Windows 95 (or Windows 98). I have about forty songs on my machine, which I rotate often. Since putting them on, I have greatly increased my ability to id birds from calls.

The best site is **www.mbr.nbs.gov/id/songlist.html**, although if you search the web you can find more. These files need to be downloaded and saved on your *c:/windows/media* directory as .wav files. When you are in Control Panel ("Start" then "settings" then "control panel") choose "sounds". Once in "sounds", click on the functions under Windows, such as "asterisk", "close program", etc. These are the functions that will trigger sounds. After you click on a function, click on "browse". This will bring up the list of available sounds in *c:/windows/media*. From there you just have to go down the list of functions and assign sounds to them. At the end, save the scheme and apply it. Have fun and happy birding.

Josh Eagle <jeagle@audubon.org>

Brewer's Blackbirds: On Hold?

Jean Iron



Brewer's Blackbird by *Andrea Kingsley*

The Brewer's Blackbird first bred in Ontario in 1945 and rapidly expanded along the north shore of Lake Huron and Georgian Bay reaching Sudbury in 1963. It seemed that the Brewer's Blackbird would spread and colonize southern and eastern Ontario, but it didn't. There appears to be an invisible barrier preventing its expansion in Ontario. What is it?

The Brewer's Blackbird is a welcome sight in Ontario, but southern Ontario birders generally have to travel to find it. It is rare over most of the province, though locally uncommon from the Manitoba border to Sudbury, and in isolated pockets on the Bruce Peninsula, in Simcoe County and occasionally elsewhere. In western North America, Brewer's Blackbirds are so common that they probably don't get a second look. They inhabit roadsides, open spaces and areas close to human habitation. In the early 1900s, they expanded east to Minnesota and the eastern Prairies, then in mid-century to Michigan and Ontario as far east as Sudbury and Oshawa. They spread along roadsides, railway tracks and where forests had been cleared. Plentiful habitat was present in eastern and southern Ontario and the conditions seemed right. Ornithologists Jim Baillie and Ott Devitt expected them to continue expanding east and south.

However, in the mid-1970s the Brewer's Blackbird population stopped expanding. *The Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Ontario* (1986) reported: "Only two squares supported the bird in southwestern Ontario during the Atlas period." It failed to establish permanent breeding populations away from north of the Great Lakes and the Bruce Peninsula, except for a few isolated nestings. Brewer's are doing best at the most northern part of their Ontario range where conditions are cooler.

Several factors could affect the Brewer's Blackbird expansion in Ontario: habitat, natural barriers, predators and competition with other species. Habitat seems plentiful. Natural barriers are the Great Lakes, but the birds expanded on three fronts: from Manitoba across northern Lake Superior, through northern Michigan and from southern Michigan. Forested areas also could be a barrier, but the Brewer's had already crossed major forest barriers along the north shore of Lake Huron and Georgian Bay and around Sudbury. Competition from Common Grackles has been postulated as a reason for the lack of expansion, but Brewer's Blackbirds and Common Grackles share habitat in large parts of their range.

A recent observation of Brewer's Blackbirds got me thinking about why they aren't more abundant in southern Ontario. On 21 June 1998, I watched nine Brewer's Blackbirds north of Coldwater, Simcoe County, Ontario. They were on wires, fence posts and walking about in the farm fields. They searched the shoulder of the road for dead insects that had been hit by cars. Nesting was suspected but not confirmed. Two birds became very agitated if we approached too closely a spot in the ditch where there may have been a nest. The temperature in mid-afternoon was quite warm at about 27°C according to Environment Canada in Barrie. The Brewer's Blackbirds were *panting*. Common Grackles and Red-winged Blackbirds in the same area showed no evidence of heat stress such as panting.

When temperatures become very warm, panting is essential to a bird's survival. Birds increase their normal breathing rate to panting, which cools them down and gets rid of excess body heat. My observation of panting Brewer's Blackbirds may indicate they are unable to tolerate heat and humidity, the same reason that appears to limit the eastern expansion of Black-billed Magpies (Pittaway, *OFO News* 15:3, October 1997). Differences in the ability to thermoregulate have been suggested as a factor in the population distribution of other species. Thermoregulation in birds is a little studied physiological process that may be more important in controlling the distribution of birds than is presently known.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Ron Pittaway, Don Sutherland and Ron Tozer for help obtaining reference material on Brewer's Blackbirds.

Letters...

Young Birder Learns From Veterans

Dear OFO,

I would like to thank OFO for the wonderful activities you run. Because of my young age (13) and relative inexperience, I am very grateful to club members for their helpfulness in teaching me new and interesting things. OFO is a great service to the budding birders and ornithologists of this province. I would like to thank you for introducing me to Clark and Wheeler's *A Photographic Guide to North American Raptors*. Since purchasing a copy it has been extremely helpful. Thanks again for the great club. Keep up the good work!

Sincerely,

Chris Kimber

Ontario Artists in New NGS Guide

Congratulations to Ontario artists and OFO members, Peter Burke and David Beadle, who have been commissioned to draw some of the plates in the upcoming revision of the *National Geographic Society Field Guide* to be published in the spring of 1999.

Peter is illustrating the orioles, tanagers, towhees (now two plates instead of one) and *Myarchis* flycatchers. David is illustrating the *Empidonax* flycatchers. Both Peter and David will do *fill ins* of species that the editors will digitally *plop* into existing plates, totalling about 15 species each. All in all, 40 plates are being redone by about seven artists from Canada, USA, Britain and Ireland.

The publishers hope to have the revised field guide available for sale next spring. Jon Dunn will redo much of the text and the maps will be redrawn as well.

High Park Hawkwatch

Don Barnett

On 12 September 1998, a new OFO field trip went to Hawk Hill which is located in High Park in west central Toronto. Hawk Hill is a regular fall monitoring site for raptors migrating along the north shore of Lake Ontario and operates from 1 September to 30 November. The hawk migration is westerly.

The OFO visit to Hawk Hill coincided with the end of a spectacular week of raptor observations with 14,400 raptors passing over the site in six days. Fifteen visitors saw a total of 281 raptors including 8 Ospreys, 2 Bald Eagles, 132 Sharp-shinned Hawks, 92 Broad-winged Hawks and 21 Northern Harriers.

Hawk Hill is just north of the parking lot at the Grenadier Restaurant. Visitors are invited to come any day during the fall season. Ideal flight days usually follow the passage of a cold front with northwest winds.

Retiring Directors

OFO gratefully recognizes the contribution of retiring directors Jim Coey, Jerry Guild and Bill Holding.

Jim Coey has been active on the OFO Board for the past nine years as a former recording secretary, and more recently as vice-president. We wish Jim every success in his new birding ventures. He will be missed.

Jerry Guild retires after seven years on the board. Members know him well for organizing field trips and OFO awards. Jerry has volunteered to continue coordinating the field trips.

Bill Holding retires after three years on the OFO Board. Bill has been responsible for advertising and publicity. He has promoted OFO by taking the OFO display to many birding festivals and open houses.

OFO on the Net

www.interlog.com/~ofo

E-mail: ofo@interlog.com

maintained by David Cattrall and John Barker

***Field Trip Reports, Field Checklist of Ontario Birds* and *The Ontario List of Reviewable Species*, including the taxonomic changes of the Seventh Edition of the AOU Check-list (1998).**

Reports of OFO's very popular field trips are posted on our Web Page after each outing. See reports about Westmeath Dunes, High Park and Presqu'ile.

OFO trips

Future Field Trips

October 24 (Saturday) Holiday Beach. Leader: Paul Pratt. Meet at the hawk viewing tower at Holiday Beach Conservation Area on County Road 50 (3 km south of Malden Centre–30 km west of Kingsville) at **9:00 a.m**. Migrating raptors.

October 25 (Sunday) Grand Bend Area. Leader: Tom and Jill Hayman. Meet at Colonial Hotel on Hwy 21 in Grand Bend at **9:00 a.m.** Fall migrants, also possible: Red-throated Loon, Brant, jaegers and rare gulls.

November 22 (Sunday) Niagara Gull Watch. Leader: Ron Scovell. Meet in Niagara-on-the-Lake at the mouth of the river at **9:00 a.m.**

January 10 (Sunday) Petroglyphs Provincial Park, Peterborough. Leader: Geoff Carpentier. Meet in the parking lot at the north end of Riverview Zoo in Peterborough at **8:30 a.m.** Bald and Golden Eagles, Common Raven, Gray Jay, winter finches, possible Bohemian Waxwings.

February 13 (Saturday) Fisherville Area. Leader: John Miles. Meet in the parking lot of the high school in the north end of Cayuga on Highway 54 at **9:00 a.m.** Hawks and owls.

New Rules at Niagara Dump Discourage Birders

Kayo Roy reports that the Niagara Falls Landfill Site, located at the corner of Mountain Road and Mewburn Road, is accessible with permission in advance of any visit from the landfill supervisor (905-356-1355). At the site, a waiver must be completed. New rules also require birders to wear safety hats and steel toe boots (green label affixed to boot) and an approved safety vest with an "X" on the back.

The dump may be closing in about 18 months.

1999 Membership Renewal

Please renew promptly your 1999 OFO membership. You will continue to receive *OFO NEWS* and *ONTARIO BIRDS* without interruption. Your membership provides you with the best information about birds and birding in Ontario. Renewing promptly will also help our volunteers and save OFO money

At close to 950, our membership continues to grow. Please tell your friends about OFO and all it offers.

OFO is a registered charity. You will receive a tax receipt for donations.

Notes from the OBRC

Ron Tozer

The 1998 Ontario Bird Records Committee now consists of: Peter Burke, Bob Curry, Rob Dobos (Secretary), Nick Escott, Ross James (ROM Liaison), Doug McRae, Ron Pittaway and Ron Tozer (Chairperson). Richard Knapton has resigned from the OBRC and departed the Ontario scene to accept an academic appointment at University College of Cape Breton. We thank Richard for his insightful participation on the OBRC, and wish him well in Nova Scotia. The committee is very fortunate that Doug McRae agrees to complete Richard's membership term (for 1998 and 1999). Doug brings great experience to OBRC, both as a birder and former committee member.

The Seventh Edition of the American Ornithologists' Union *Check-list of North American Birds* (1998) has now been published. As previously noted in this column, there are significant changes in taxonomic order, common names, and scientific names in the new check-list that affect Ontario's birds. Consequently, a revised *Checklist of the Birds of Ontario*, reflecting all these changes plus up-to-date species and breeding information for the province, will be published in a coming issue of *Ontario Birds*.

Rob Dobos is currently preparing a revised OBRC Provincial Review List to update the most recently published version of this document, which appeared in December 1996. The review list outlines the bird species in Southern Ontario and Northern Ontario, as well as selected subspecies and morphs for which the OBRC requests documentation. The revised list will be mailed with a future *OFO News*.

OBRC members always welcome the opportunity to discuss any aspect of OBRC and the documentation of Ontario's rare birds with fellow birders. Please feel free to contact any of us in the field or elsewhere (such as the AGM) in order to chat about your interests and concerns.

Finally, I would like to take this opportunity to sincerely thank all the local compilers and regional records committees who forward reports to the OBRC. This is of great assistance to us and we really appreciate your efforts. I would like to remind all contributors that reports received by our Secretary after 1 December will normally not be published in the OBRC report for that year since there is not sufficient time for circulation and voting by mail prior to our "final vote" meeting held the following March. To avoid disappointment, please try to get those reports in promptly!

Visit the OFO Web Page: www.interlog.com/~ofo for a Report Form and to see the current Review List. Rare bird reports should be sent directly to:

Rob Dobos, OBRC Secretary
1156 5th Concession Road West, RR 2
Waterdown ON L0R 2H2
E-mail: rob.dobos@ec.gc.ca

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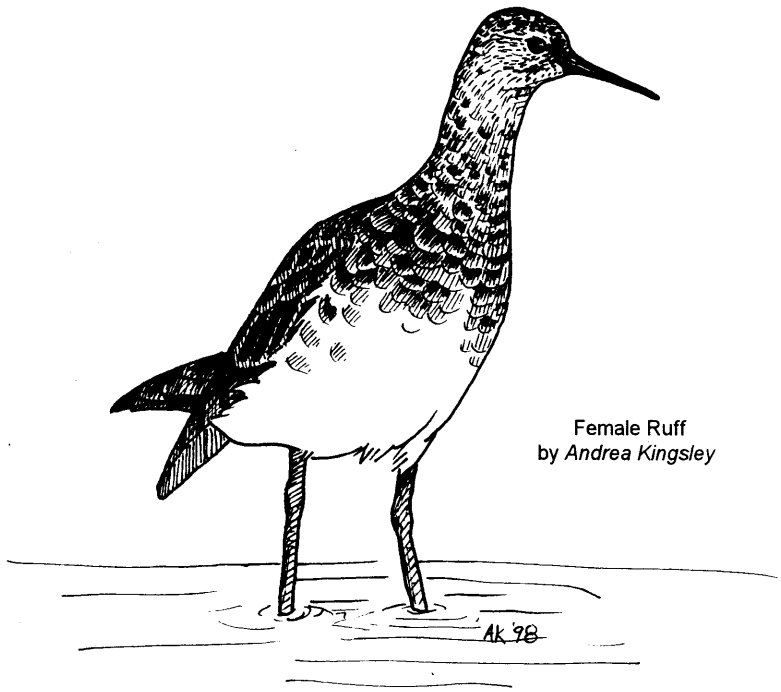
Editorial assistance: Michael King and Ron Pittaway

Reeve or Female Ruff?

Jean Iron



Female Ruff
by *Andrea Kingsley*

What's in a name? The recent female Ruff, also known as Reeve, at Port Perry's Nonquon Sewage Lagoons prompted me to look into the name Reeve. I looked up the name in a number of popular field guides and specialty books. In the majority, Reeve does not even appear in the index, in the others the reader is directed to look under Ruff.

Not mentioned in:
AOU (1998) *Check-list of North American Birds* 7th Edition
British Ornithologists' Union (1998) *The British List*
Farrand (1983) *The Audubon Society Master Guide to Birding*
Godfrey (1986) *The Birds of Canada*
Harris et al. (1989) *The MacMillan Field Guide to Bird Identification*
Jonsson (1992) *The Birds of Europe*
Paulson (1993) *Shorebirds of the Pacific Northwest*
Scott (1987) *National Geographic Society Field Guide*

Mentioned in
Chandler (1989) *The Facts on File Field Guide to North Atlantic Shorebirds*
Hayman, et al. (1986) *Shorebirds: An Identification Guide*
Peterson (1980) *Peterson Field Guides: Eastern Birds*
Bent (1929) *Life Histories of North American Shore Birds*

Why is *Reeve* not used by so many leading authorities to describe the female Ruff? The situation is explained in the *Audubon's Encyclopedia of North American Birds*: "females so much smaller than males and so different in plumage during the breeding season that she is known in Europe as the *reeve*; however, the species is called *ruff*."

In summary, the term Reeve has no taxonomic or official standing. The species name is Ruff whether the individual is a male or female.