



# OFO NEWS

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## Late Winter Red-necked Grebes: A Mystery

Ron Tozer

### Introduction

Red-necked Grebes (*Podiceps grisegena*) made an unusual late winter appearance throughout southern Ontario during February and March 2003, with birds reported from more than 20 different locations (ONTBIRDS). Remarkably, individuals were also discovered north in the province to Elliot Lake, *Algoma*; Junction Creek, near Lively, *Sudbury*; and Tomstown, near Englehart, *Timiskaming* (ONTBIRDS, Bain 2003). Several of these grebes were found stranded on roads, frozen lakes and fields. Many sightings involved single birds, but over 50 were observed on the upper Niagara River on 1 March (Willie D'Anna, ONTBIRDS).

Red-necked Grebes were widespread and even more numerous during the same period in the United States, south and east of Ontario. "Hundreds of birds were found between central New York and West Virginia between late February and late March, including counts of over 250 on a single lake" and "smaller numbers to moderate-sized flocks were along the coast and south to North Carolina" (Lehman 2003). "An estimated 190+ individuals" were reported from Ohio this spring, where "fewer than five" is normal, and by 10 March, 717 Red-necked Grebes had been recorded in Pennsylvania (Whan 2003). The reported average spring arrival of the Red-necked Grebe in southern Ontario is not until early to mid April (Tozer and Richards 1974, Nicholson 1981, Weir 1989, James 1991, LaForest 1993). Consequently, the widespread appearance of many birds in February and March, especially during

an unusually cold winter, resulted in much interest and speculation as to their origin. Intrigued by this event, I began an extensive literature search and discussion with fellow birders to learn more about this phenomenon.

### Background

The primary Red-necked Grebe breeding range in North America is from northwestern Ontario across the prairies to British Columbia, the Yukon and Alaska (Stout and Neuchterlein 1999). This grebe is reported to winter mainly on saltwater along the Pacific and Atlantic coasts, with a few observed on larger inland lakes in some years (Clapp et al. 1982, Terres 1980). Root (1988) noted that along the eastern seaboard, most Red-necked Grebes winter north of Chesapeake Bay, where the average surface water is colder than about 50° F (10° C), and that the Bay of Fundy is an area of very high abundance. The main Red-necked Grebe spring and fall migration corridor in eastern North America extends between the breeding and winter ranges along a northwest-southeast axis through Lake Superior, northern Lake Huron, Georgian Bay and Lake Ontario.

Red-necked Grebes regularly linger during the latter half of December on Lake Huron and Georgian Bay, as reflected in recent Christmas Bird Count (CBC) data from the Bruce Peninsula area and on Manitoulin Island. During the ten-year period from 1993 to 2002, Red-necked Grebes were recorded fairly regularly on the Bruce Peninsula National Park, Meaford, Owen Sound, Wiarton,

Manitoulin Island, and Mindemoya CBCs, in numbers ranging from 1 to 89 birds (National Audubon Society website: [www.audubon.org](http://www.audubon.org)).

During most years in Ontario, Red-necked Grebes are reported very infrequently and only in low numbers during January and February, with most observations from Lake Ontario and the Niagara River. For example, the Lake Ontario Mid-winter Waterfowl Inventory, conducted during the first half of January over the last 57 years in the Toronto area, and along the entire Canadian shoreline of Lake Ontario for the last 13 years, has a high count of only four Red-necked Grebes (Edmunds 2003). Similarly, there were January reports of this grebe in only 15 of 37 years (1965 to 2001) from the Hamilton Study Area, involving just one to nine birds per sighting (Bob Curry, pers. comm.).

There have been occasional reports of Red-necked Grebes in southern Ontario during winter that may have been isolated occurrences rather than part of a widespread incursion. For example, 37 Red-necked Grebes that were found stranded in the city of Toronto after “a heavy sleet storm which glazed the pavements and snow-covered landscape” on the night of 12 December 1929 were presumed to involve late fall migrants (Snyder 1930). A bird was shot on the Thames River near London on 18 January 1910 (Saunders and Dale 1933), and a starving individual picked up at Kingston on 16 January 1929 became a Royal Ontario Museum specimen (Snyder 1929). In 1924, one of these grebes was reported near Ripley, *Bruce*, on 12 February and another was picked up on Essex Street in Guelph on 20 February, during a year when Saunders (1924) interestingly noted that “the lakes are not frozen over this winter, whatever may be the case in other winters”.

### Previous Winter Incursions

However, there have been previous reported instances of widespread late winter incursions by Red-necked Grebes in southern Ontario and southeastward through the United States, similar to the event in 2003. The most recent example was in 1994, when dozens of these grebes “were found grounded on roads across the s. part of the province in late January and early February” (Ridout 1994), with one bird found as far north as the Kaministiquia River in *Thunder Bay* on 25 March, “in the only open water for

miles around” (Henshaw and Kerr 1994). Hundreds of Red-necked Grebes were observed through the east-central United States during February 1994 (Kaufman 1994). Similar major Red-necked Grebe incursions during late winter occurred in 1934, 1963, and 1977 (Hickey 1935, De Vos and Allin 1964, Goodwin 1977, Smith 1977).

### Frozen Out Hypothesis

The most widely cited explanation for these periodic widespread late winter incursions of Red-necked Grebes is that large numbers winter on the upper Great Lakes and are forced elsewhere when these waterbodies freeze over during extremely cold years. Most of the birds then undertake a desperation flight toward the Atlantic coast winter range, with many becoming stranded on frozen lakes, roads and land, or starving before reaching the ocean. Early proponents of this explanation include Bent (1919), Forbush (1925) and Todd (1940), and it continues to be cited by more recent authors such as De Smet (1982), Kaufman (1994), Granlund (1994), and Stout and Neuchterlein (1999).



Red-necked Grebe at Wilson, Niagara County, New York on 8 March 2003.  
Photo Willie D'Anna

Evidence presented in support of the hypothesis includes the fact that each of the major Red-necked Grebe invasions in 1934, 1963, 1977, 1994 and 2003 occurred during unusually cold late winter periods when the upper Great Lakes froze over (see Hickey 1935, De Vos and Allin 1964, Bull 1985, and National Ice Center data: [Ftp://ftp.glerl.noaa.gov/ice/charts](ftp://ftp.glerl.noaa.gov/ice/charts)

Critics of this explanation have questioned whether large numbers of Red-necked Grebes would remain in the harsh environment of the upper Great Lakes in winter, and have noted the lack of observations there. For example, there has been only one January record ever on Lake Superior from *Thunder Bay* (a single bird, “identifiable by scope”, offshore at Cavers near Rosspport on 12 January 2003), and none in February (Nick Escott, pers. comm.). This argument has been countered with the suggestion that these grebes may spend the winter well offshore, beyond view from land, and where nobody has searched for them in winter. Although the species is regularly observed near shore during migration on the Great Lakes, some Red-necked Grebes have been reported to winter well offshore on the ocean (Palmer 1962, Oberholser 1974, Clapp et al. 1982).

## Early Migration Hypothesis

Another explanation suggests that some Red-necked Grebes regularly undertake an early migration during February and March from the Atlantic coast winter range to southern Ontario. In extremely cold years, these grebes may become stranded when they do not find open water. These movements may begin with the onset of the first significant mild spell in February, and continue for several weeks. During milder winters, with much more open water available, these early migrants may be more widespread and less conspicuous than when many stranded birds are observed in cold years.

The early migration of a species to staging areas where they fatten up and molt before migrating onward later toward the breeding or winter ranges has been called "two-tier migration" (Wormington 2003). Other species reported to undertake two-tier spring migration, with some individuals regularly coming northward even as far as southern Ontario in March, include Red-throated Loon (*Gavia stellata*), Horned Grebe (*P. auritus*), American Golden-Plover (*Pluvialis dominica*) and Pectoral Sandpiper (*Calidris melanotos*). Red-necked Grebes are known to follow this migration pattern in fall, with thousands of birds staging and molting on northern Lake Huron from late August to mid September (Stout 1995; Tyler Hoar, pers. comm.). Wormington (2001) described a similar two-tier fall migration for Bonaparte's Gull (*Larus philadelphia*).

## Conclusion

Actual proof of the origin of Red-necked Grebes that make occasional late winter incursions in southern Ontario and the east-central United States appears to be lacking. The correlation of major incursions with upper Great Lakes freeze-up does not necessarily prove causation. However, there is little direct evidence of these birds being early migrants either. Both hypotheses could be correct, depending on the timing of the event and the particular winter. Perhaps when incursions start in January (as in 1994), they may include frozen out individuals, whereas arrivals over several weeks during February and March following bouts of milder weather may be mainly early migrants. Research to solve this mystery might require banding or radio telemetry to determine Red-necked Grebe movements. In the meantime, we can all marvel at these amazing occurrences.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the following members of an e-mail "Red-necked Grebe discussion group" that I initiated for their valuable contributions to my knowledge and understanding of this topic: Bob Curry, Willie D'Anna, Nick Escott, Tyler Hoar, Dave Martin, Ron Pittaway, Pete Read, Ross Snider, and Alan Wormington. In addition, the following are thanked for their particular contributions

of information (shown in parentheses): Bob Curry (January and February records of Red-necked Grebe in the Hamilton Study Area from 1965 to 2001); Willie D'Anna (compilations of Buffalo Ornithological Society records of Red-necked Grebe from 1964 to 1997, and Great Lakes ice cover records from 1976 to 2000); Kim Eckert (winter records of Red-necked Grebe in the Minnesota portion of Lake Superior since 1990); Bill Edmunds (Lake Ontario Mid-winter Waterfowl Inventory records); Pete Read (winter records of Red-necked Grebe in Middlesex County, Ontario from 1987 to 2003); and Alan Wormington (Red-necked Grebe incursions and the "two-tier migration" concept). Reports of Red-necked Grebes were gratefully obtained from ONTBIRDS, the bird sightings listserv of the Ontario Field Ornithologists coordinated by Mark Cranford.

However, I am solely responsible for my interpretation of all the literature, unpublished data and discussion available to me, and hence any shortcomings in this article.

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## Cat-eyed Bird

### Ron Pittaway

Zusi and Bridge (1981) reported that the "Black Skimmer is the only bird known to close the pupil into the form of a vertical slit." This adaptation enables it to tolerate glaring sunlight while roosting on bright sand beaches and while skimming low over water (Terres 1980). Even when the pupil is fully open in low light, it is still not circular as in other birds because the upper and lower points of the pupil show distinct angles. There are two other species of skimmers in the same genus that are found in Africa and India. I wonder if the two other skimmers also can narrow their pupils into catlike vertical slits in bright sunlight.

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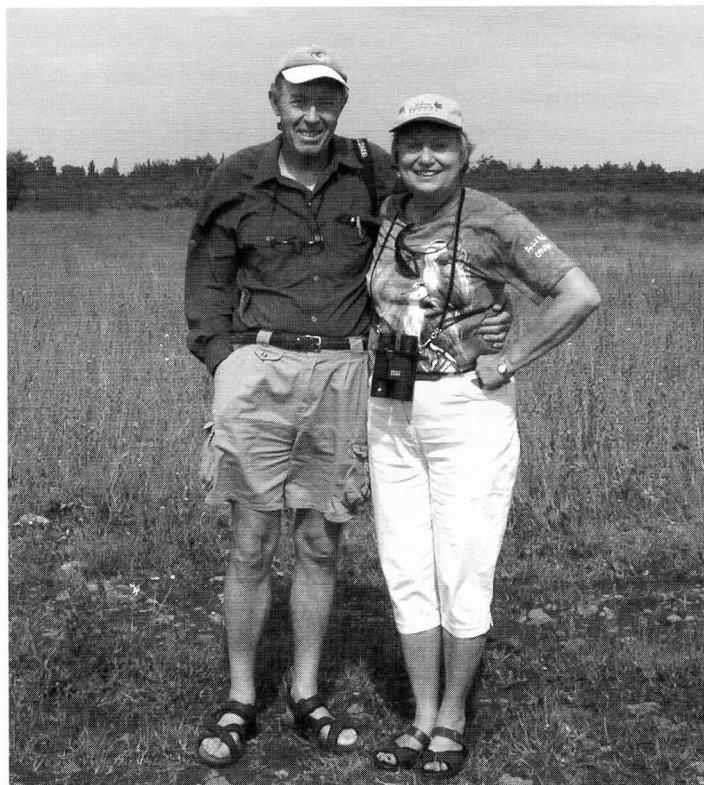
## Baillie Birdathons for OFO

### Chris Escott

OFO extends a warm thanks to all of our members who did a Baillie Birdathon for OFO this year. In particular our thanks go out to our Celebrity Birder Couple Bob Curry and Glenda Slessor, and their many sponsors, for raising more than \$3,240 in pledges. Two long-time loyal supporters, Maris Apse and Geoff Carpentier, continued their tradition of bringing in well over \$1,000, each into their second decade of Birdathons for OFO. Also bringing in significant donations were Ron and Lynda Valentine and Allen Woodliffe. Well done, each of you!

The estimated total raised will be about \$6,500 and the net contribution to OFO will be more than \$2,200.

Baillie Birdathon raises money to support Bird Studies Canada, Long Point Bird Observatory and banding stations such as Thunder Cape and Prince Edward Point, and the Baillie Fund which finances a wide range of projects in bird study and conservation. Important to OFO is the fact that the Baillie Birdathon is a source of income outside membership fees and direct donations. OFO gratefully acknowledges your support. Next year please sponsor our Celebrity Birder or do your own Birdathon for OFO.



Celebrity birders, Bob Curry and Glenda Slessor, attend the celebration for the Nature Conservancy of Canada's acquisition of the 2869 acre Cameron Ranch on the Carden Alvar on 27 June 2003. The ranch will protect habitat for the endangered Loggerhead Shrike and grassland birds. Photo by Jean Iron.

# A Beginning Young Birder

Anthony Miller

I'm 18 years of age and live in Waterdown, Ontario, where I attend Waterdown District High School. I'm in grade 12 and have one year left in high school. I would love to pursue a career studying birds.

My passion for birding began in the backyard when my mother put up feeders to attract the birds. At that time I knew nothing about birds until one day a stunning bright yellow bird landed on a feeder. As I glanced at the bird for a while I found it enjoyable, and when the bird left I rushed to the computer to find out what it was. To my surprise the bird was called an American Goldfinch. That's when I got hooked on the life of a birder.

I bought my first field guide when I went to Algonquin Park. It was called *Field Guide to Birds of Eastern Region* by Don and Lillian Stokes. But that did not satisfy me. I wanted to become more involved with the bird world, so when I got back from Algonquin Park I looked for a nature or birding club. I found the Hamilton Naturalists' Club. I joined this club so that I could hook into the birding world to find out where I could see the migration and where the birding hotspots around Hamilton and southern Ontario were. But I found something even better – friends. I met so many new friends at the club, but two people I have to thank are Bob Curry and Glenda Slessor who have put up with me asking them question after question. They always have an answer. They have been great friends for the last year, teaching me so much about the world of birds and sometimes inviting me to go with them. I have always enjoyed going on little hikes alone, but it's great to go with two legends of this amazing hobby. They have mass amounts of information that I have taken in and now I am more confident about the birds I see and feel better about identifying them.

I have made several other friends. I met Tom Crooks at the Club and have gone birding with him a few times. Dave Don is the funniest birder I have ever met. He makes me laugh every time I talk to him. He is a great birder and I look up to him. Gerard McNaughton and I have the same interests in photography. Another is Tom Thomas who has taught me so much about the hawks that he loves. I regularly bird with him since we both live in Waterdown. My birding mentors would probably have to be Bob Curry and Glenda Slessor who are in my books two of the greatest birders that I know. Why? Well, they have done so much to influence me. They made this hobby so interesting that it's never going to get out of my system. They have done so much with birding in Ontario. They have always been there in everything that has to do with birding, and are very passionate about it like me. They have been to some great places and seen some amazing birds.

My favourite bird is a toss up between the Gray Jay of Algonquin Park and the Loggerhead Shrike of the Carden

Alvar, which I saw last summer. Why the Gray Jay? I enjoy watching its behaviour. It likes to steal food from my campsite and it is probably the biggest bird that will come to your hand. The Loggerhead Shrike is the most beautiful bird in my opinion. It is coloured in a wonderful way. Also, the Loggerhead Shrike is interesting because it is like a hawk trapped inside a robin's body. I don't know why it stabs its food to barb wire, but I have heard it's because it has weaker legs and cannot hold the food while eating. This is what interests me and makes it a favorite bird.

My favourite area in Ontario for birding is Algonquin Park because there is so much to see. You can't go through the park in one day because it is way too big. But the main reason I love Algonquin Park so much is for Gray Jays and the Barred Owl, another favourite bird. I spent all night listening for the Barred Owl going off in the middle of the night, even when my mom thinks it's too dangerous to be gallivanting in the forest. I love the Barred Owl because of the call "who cooks for you, who cooks for you all?" Its call is so powerful and sends shivers down my spine every time I hear it. I like Algonquin Park for another reason. The second year I went to Algonquin, I met Michael Runtz, a wonderful man. Over the years, I have joined him on several hikes in Algonquin Park. He taught me how to do the Barred Owl call, but nothing like his. I called in my first Barred Owl at Sturgeon Bay Provincial Park. About 4 a.m. it arrived and found me, it was right above my tent.

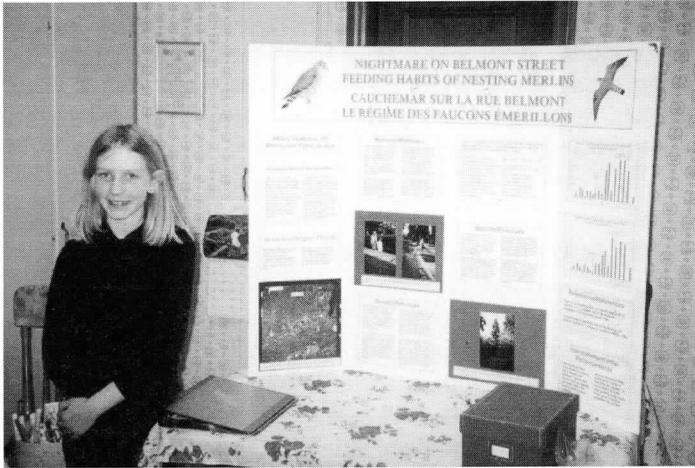
My most memorable moment in birding came on 3 November 2002, the day of the fall count that Tom Crooks, Gerard McNaughton and Dave Don invited me to go on. Tom Crooks called me and told me that we would be going a little early to catch a bird in London called the Scissor-tailed Flycatcher. They were at my house at about 3:00 a.m. to pick me up. We arrived at Fingal Wildlife Management Area, and went to where the flycatcher had been reported last. We stood there for about one hour and finally the bird came in with a bunch of other birds, high in the sky with his tail spread out like scissors. It came to rest on a branch alongside a field where we had amazing looks through the scope. That was the highlight of my birding so far.

My life list now stands at 247. In October, I'm taking a big birding trip to the Netherlands for two weeks. There I hope to add a few goodies, especially European gulls, to my life list and want to learn more about birds and their behaviour. Gulls are my most recent interest so I look forward to identifying them at Niagara this fall and early winter. Hope to see you there.

# Nightmare on Belmont Street

## Food Habits of Nesting Merlins

Hillary Dextrase



Nine year old Hillary Dextrase with her project about Merlins, which she took to the Peterborough Regional Science Fair at Trent University. Hillary was in Grade 3 at Westmount Public School in Peterborough when this photo was taken in March 2003 by Alan Dextrase.

### Introduction

A Merlin is a small falcon that breeds across Canada. Merlins prefer to nest away from humans, but recently they have been found nesting in cities in Ontario. In spring 2002 I found out there were Merlins nesting near my house and I wanted to find out what Merlins eat and how that changes throughout the nesting period.

### Study Area

My study area was Belmont Street, Hunter Street and Homewood Avenue in Peterborough's old West End. It is a neighbourhood with many large and old trees.

### Methods

I gathered feathers twice a week between 12 May and 23 July 2002. I followed the same route along the sidewalk and on the road each time. I put the feathers in a plastic bag with a piece of paper on which I recorded the date and what I observed. I brought the feathers home, and then counted and weighed them using a scale.

Feathers were identified with the help of Chris Risley, a member of the Peterborough Field Naturalists. We used the Peterson's Field Guide and bird specimens from Trent University to identify the feathers.

### Results

The Merlins nested in a large fir tree on Belmont Street. The eggs hatched on 9 June. Merlin eggs take 28-32 days

to hatch. This means the eggs were laid around 9 May. The young Merlins first flew on 7 July. Young Merlins normally start flying 25-30 days after hatching. In this Merlin family it took 30 days for the young to fly.

The Merlins ate at least 20 different species of birds. The most common species was the Cedar Waxwing. It was found in 13 of the 19 feather samples. It might have appeared to be the most common because its feathers are easy to identify. The birds that the Merlins ate are listed in the table below from most common to least common. I also found Merlin feathers. Many of the feathers I collected could not be identified.

|                        |                            |
|------------------------|----------------------------|
| Cedar Waxwing (13)     | Blue Jay (3)               |
| Barn Swallow (9)       | Unknown Flycatcher (2)     |
| American Goldfinch (5) | Eastern Kingbird (2)       |
| Unknown Sparrow (5)    | White-throated Sparrow (1) |
| American Robin (5)     | Downy Woodpecker (1)       |
| Northern Cardinal (4)  | Purple Finch (1)           |
| Rock Dove (4)          | Song Sparrow (1)           |
| European Starling (4)  | Yellow Warbler (1)         |
| Tree Swallow (3)       | Horned Lark (1)            |
| House Finch (3)        | Dark-eyed Junco (1)        |
| House Sparrow (3)      | Unknown Swallow (1)        |

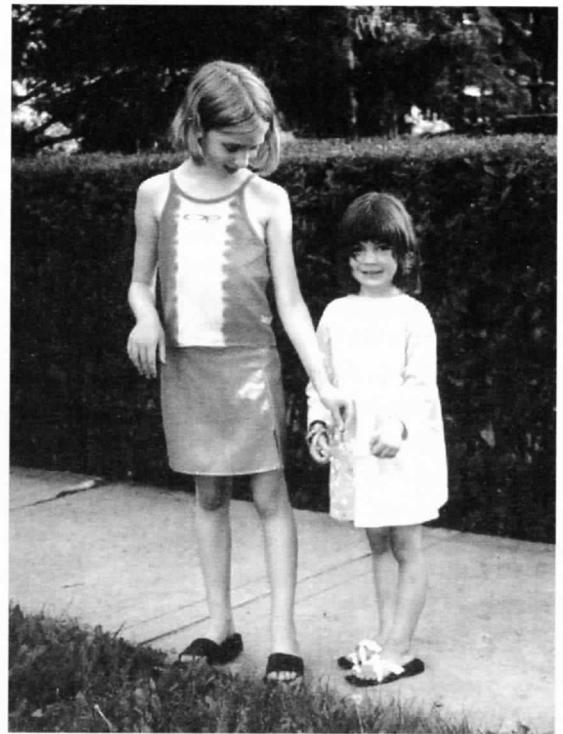
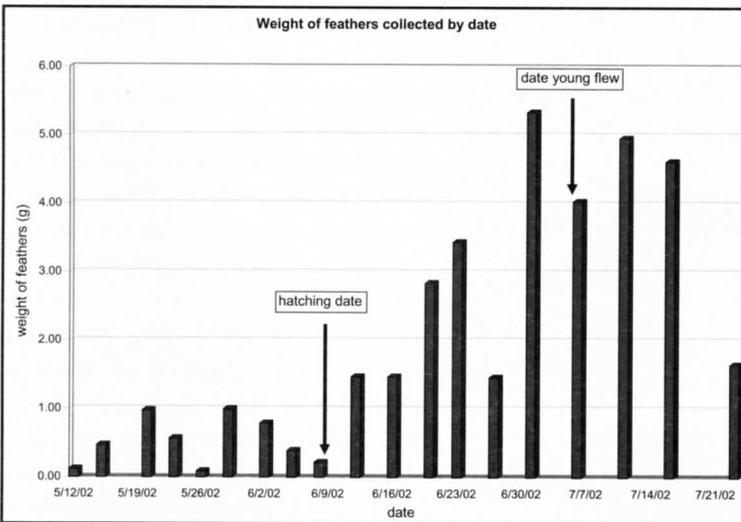
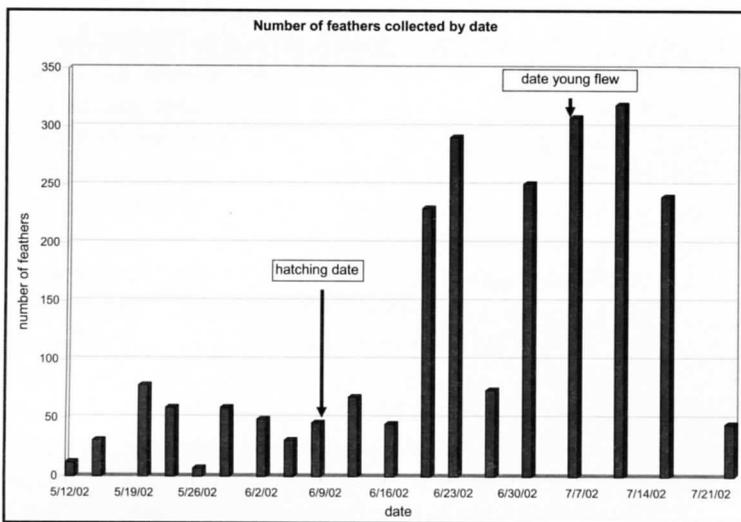
**Table 1.** List of feathers found including number of days they were found.

The largest number of feathers I found was 319 on 11 July. The smallest number of feathers I found was 7 on 26 May. The most that the feathers weighed was 5.34 grams on 1 July. The least that the feathers weighed was 0.09 grams on 26 May.

After the eggs hatched on 9 June, I started to find more feathers each time I collected. This is because the baby Merlins needed food, and as they grew, the more food they needed. The graphs show that the number and weight of feathers increased as the baby Merlins grew.

### Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Chris Risley for helping me to identify the feathers. I would also like to thank my parents and sister Avery for helping me to collect feathers.



Hillary and younger sister Avery collect feathers in June 2002. Photo by Alan Dextrase.

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# Yellow Warbler in Spider's Silk

Randy Horvath

The more time one spends birding, the more one sees interesting and unusual bird behaviour. Much of it may actually be typical for a given species and so is to be expected. But every so often one comes across something that is really out of the ordinary.

At about 1:30 p.m. on 28 May 2003, I was birding along the Ganatchio Trail in Windsor. I was in a gully that parallels an old creek when a flurry of movement ahead caught my eye. I focused my binoculars and was surprised to see an adult female Yellow Warbler spinning rapidly round and round on a branch about three metres above the bank. It was reminiscent of a dog chasing its tail.

I was some distance from the bird, and she was oblivious to me, so I had the luxury of watching her for a while. First she spun around about five times clockwise. Then she paused briefly before spinning around another four or five times counterclockwise. As she did so, I was able to

see why: a long thread of spider silk trailed from her retrices. She was determined to remove it with her bill.

I have no idea how long this warbler had been "chasing her tail" before I arrived. But as she resumed another clockwise whirl, a loud chip sounded from nearby and an adult male, no doubt her mate, appeared on the scene. He flew off quickly in the direction of a nearby pond and she followed him immediately, the wispy strand of spider silk still attached and glistening in the sun.

What had looked to be a rather dull morning was now anything but. I could not help chuckle to myself as I relived the sight I had just witnessed. Had I spun myself around so many times so quickly, I would have dizzily tumbled to the ground.

This Yellow Warbler clearly was conscious of her appearance. One can only imagine what her mate thought of it all.

# Changes to the AOU Check-list of North American Birds

Jim Rising

In the July 2003 issue of the ornithological journal *The Auk*, the American Ornithologists' Union (AOU) Committee of Classification and Nomenclature published the 44th Supplement to the AOU Check-list of North American birds. Starting with this year, these supplements will be published annually. This supplement is an annotated list of changes to be made to the Check-list, which generally is accepted as the "official" list of birds from the AOU area (Canada, Mexico, United States, and Central America). As such, the names, sequence of species, and classification of the Check-list generally is used in provincial and state lists, and many field guides, and is also followed by the American Birding Association.

The Check-list Committee meets once a year to discuss changes in classification and nomenclature that have been proposed in the literature or that are necessitated by errors in previous lists. In recent years, the members of the Committee have relied more and more on communicating their views about proposed changes via e-mail. This committee is chaired by Dr. Richard Banks of the U. S. Geological Survey and the National Museum of Natural History in Washington. Other members of the committee are: Carla Cicero (Museum of Vertebrate Zoology, Berkeley), Jon Dunn (Bishop, California), Andrew Kratter (Florida Museum of Natural History), Pamela Rasmussen (Michigan State University Museum), J. V. Remsen, Jr. (Museum of Natural Science, Louisiana State University), Jim Rising (University of Toronto, and Royal Ontario Museum), and Douglas Stotz (Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago).

Jon Dunn is the only member of the committee who is not an avian taxonomist, although he is quite knowledgeable about many taxonomic matters. His special and very important roll is to keep the committee informed about the validity of extralimital records and to help track range extensions for the next edition of the Check-list. Other members of the committee are responsible for assessing proposed changes in the taxonomy of specific groups. For example, I am responsible for making the initial assess-

ments of proposed changes in the taxonomy of sparrows, cardinals, finches, tanagers, and blackbirds. Thus, when several new papers were published on the affinities of many species in these groups, especially within the tanagers, I summarized information in those paper and other relevant papers for the committee, and recommend changes to the Check-list. Then, the committee members discussed these proposals and voted on the proposed changes. The committee is, and probably needs to be,

conservative, so unless there is near unanimous sentiment for a change, the status quo is maintained in the list. Below are some of the proposed changes that are published in *The Auk* as the 44th Supplement to the Check-list that may be of special interest to Canadian ornithologists and birders.

First I will highlight a proposed change in the sequence of families of birds that will probably be reflected in new field guides and lists. Following multiple lines of evidence, the Committee recognized a major grouping of birds generally known as the "Galloanseres," consisting of the species in the orders Anseriformes (ducks, geese and swans) and Galliformes (chicken-like birds). The best supported phylogenetic trees of birds show that the first branch in the tree of modern birds is the ratites, that is the tinamous, ostriches, etc. The next branch in the tree is the Galloanseres.

The relationships among all of the other orders of birds are quite unclear. Following this information, in future lists the sequence of North and Central groups of birds will be moved to a position between the tinamous and the loons, but otherwise unchanged. Thus, your lists and guides will be arranged: tinamous, ducks, grouse, loons, etc. Within the Anseriformes and Galliformes the sequence of species will remain the same as it is at present.

The generic relationships of many members of a group called the nine-primaried oscines often are not clear. These are a mostly New World group of birds with nine primary wing feathers, and includes the Wood-Warblers,

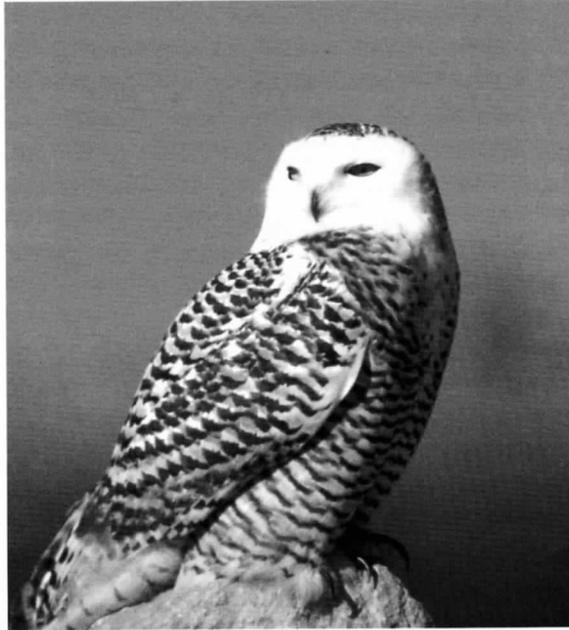


American Three-toed Woodpecker *Picoides dorsalis* is split from the Old World Three-toed Woodpecker. Illustration by Brenda Carter.

Bananaquits (only one species), Tanagers, New World Sparrows (called buntings in the Old World), Cardinals (including species such as the Indigo Bunting and Rose-breasted Grosbeak), and New World Blackbirds. These groups are commonly considered to be subfamilies in the same family or in several closely-related families. It has long been recognized that the distinction between the “tanagers” and others in this group, including the “finches” is not clear. Several recent molecular studies have shown that several species that have been traditionally classified with the tanagers are certainly not tanagers, although in many cases it is not clear just where they should be placed. Until their proper affinities are clearer the Committee decided to leave these species where they are for the time being, but to identify them as species with uncertain position (*incertae sedis*). These species of uncertain position include all of the North American Tanagers, e.g. the tanagers in the genus *Piranga*, such as the Scarlet Tanager, and those in the genus *Spindalis*, such as the Western *Spindalis*, as well as some other familiar species, such as the Bananaquit (it may be a tanager), Yellow-breasted Chat (not a warbler), the longspurs, and the Snow Bunting (they’re probably not sparrows or buntings). For those of you who travel to Mexico and Central America, the species in the genera *Euphonia* and *Chlorophonia* are clearly related to the siskins and goldfinches, and will be placed in their own Subfamily Euphoniinae (in the Family Fringillidae). We propose no new English names for these birds. Thus the Scarlet Tanager will remain the Scarlet Tanager even though it isn’t a tanager. After all, many species called “robins” aren’t robins, etc.

Several changes in Latin names of birds are proposed. These are necessitated by taxonomic changes. For example, the New World pigeons are now recognized as being in a different genus than the old world species, and are no longer in the genus *Columba*, but will all have the generic name of *Patagioenas*. Based on molecular data and vocal differences, the American screech-owls are treated as generically different from the Old World *Otus*, and placed in the genus *Megascops*. The Cuban Screech-Owl is an exception: it will be put in its own genus *Gymnoglaux*, and given the English name of Bare-legged Owl, a name already used in many recent guides. Molecular evidence shows that the Snowy Owl is a white relative of the Great Horned Owl without ears, and thus becomes *Bubo scan-*

*diacus*, not *Nyctea scandiaca*, and the American and Old World Three-toed Woodpeckers are split. Ours becomes the American Three-toed Woodpecker, *Picoides dorsalis*. Lastly, on the basis of vocal and morphological differences, the Hispaniolan Crossbill (now *Loxia megaplaga*) is split from our White-winged Crossbill (which retains the name *Loxia leucoptera*). The Rock Dove is now called the Rock Pigeon. This follows increasingly common British usage, and recognizes the fact that most of us generally call them pigeons anyway. As an Old World pigeon it remains in the genus *Columba*.



The Snowy Owl's scientific name changes to *Bubo scandiaca*, putting it in the same genus as the Great Horned Owl. Photo by Sam Barone.

Finally, the following name changes are necessitated by the rules of Latin grammar: *Vireo atricapillus* becomes *Vireo atricapilla*; *Poecile atricapilla* becomes *Poecile atricapillus*; *Seiurus aurocapillus* becomes *Seiurus aurocapilla*.

Why do we make so many changes to the Check-list? For the most part, they are suggested as we learn more about birds, their relationships and distribution. The emergence of techniques of rather routinely sequencing DNA rapidly and some other molecular procedures has led to a proliferation of studies clarifying the relationships among species, and to a lesser extent the relationships among the more inclusive groups (Families, Orders, etc.).

Another reason that changes occur is that philosophies of classification change. A period of “excessive” splitting started early in the 19th Century, and by 1920, many genera of birds were monotypic (that is, contained only one species), or contained only a few closely-related species. Starting with the 1931 Check-list a period of lumping started. The Bare-legged Owl is an example of a species that probably should have never been put in the genus *Otus* (so far as we know, there was never any published justification for this), but this took place during a period of excessive lumping. Thus, to a certain extent some changes have been made to compensate for the excesses of the past. To the extent that classification is subjective, we must anticipate that classifications will track changes in philosophy. However, modern methods, especially molecular methods, make it possible sometimes to produce what are probably accurate phylogenies, and these can be the basis of more objective and stable classifications. This is why we have moved the ducks and chickens next to the tinamous; and this is why many “tanagers” are now considered to be of uncertain affinity.

# William Henesey Carrick

## The Original Father Goose

1920 - 2002

Eleanor Beagan

OFO member Bill Carrick died on 7 October 2002, five days after falling from scaffolding while dismantling a wind tunnel at his Pickering studio. He was 82. Bill, a naturalist and cinematographer, was born on 14 November 1920 in Toronto and grew up near Monarch Park where he studied birds. Bill enjoyed reading the nature stories of Ernest Thompson Seton. Later he belonged to the camera club at his high school, Northern Technical School, where he trained as a machinist.

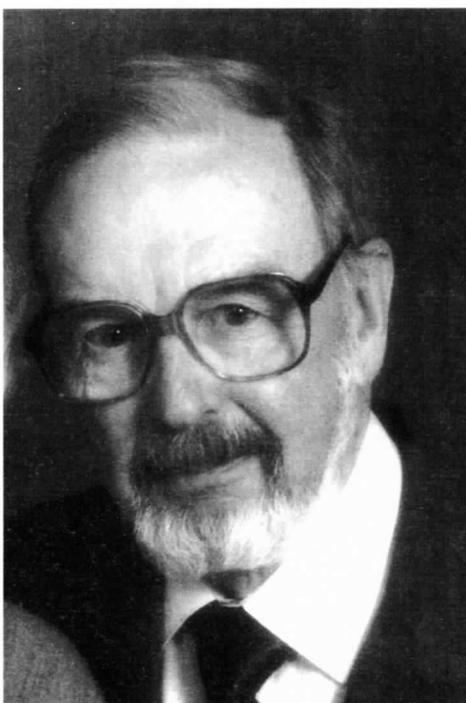
In 1939, Bill enlisted in the Royal Canadian Air Force and served for five years as armourer. He was part of a rescue patrol in the Atlantic Provinces and obtained his pilot's licence in 1945. After the war, Bill studied biology at the University of Toronto for a year.

Towards the end of the war, Bill acquired a sophisticated 16-mm movie camera, which changed his life forever. He got a leave from the Air Force to film in Churchill. Soon after, Bill went to the Delta Waterfowl Research Station in Manitoba to work for Ducks Unlimited. Thus began a long career in film making in Canada. His work took him from the Arctic Circle to Pelee Island and from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean and beyond.

In 1948, Bill became a still photographer for the Royal Ontario Museum. While there, he photographed the fish for Dr. Beverly Scott's *Fresh Water Fishes of Eastern Ontario*. It was about this time that he met Farley Mowat through a mutual interest in birdwatching. According to Bill Gladstone of the *Globe and Mail*, Farley Mowat "still expresses regret that a lack of funding prevented him (Bill) from joining the tundra adventure that was the basis of his first book, *People of the Deer*." Just before Bill's death, he spoke with anticipation of the pending release of Farley's latest book, *High Latitudes*.

For 30 years Bill worked with the National Film Board on numerous nature projects from the *Birds of Canada* series to his classic *World of the Marsh* (1956), which is a masterpiece of cinematography and an excellent teacher's aid.

Bill's films bear proof of his infinite patience in getting the perfect shot of his subject. Early in his career, Bill filmed in the Arctic for Disney's film *White Wilderness*. Bill's innovative techniques can be seen in all the marsh bird filming he did for Ducks Unlimited and the *Birds of Canada Series* for the National Film Board. His videos are a testimony of his love of work and skills with a camera. Bill was a consultant for the Disney movie *Fly Away Home* and he provided beavers for the recent movie *Grey Owl* by Richard Attenborough.



Bill Carrick on his 80th birthday in 2000.

As a young man, Bill was very well known and active in local birding groups and naturalist clubs. He joined the Brodie Club of the ROM in 1947 and was a life-long member. Over the years, Bill made dozens of informative presentations in the form of illustrated talks, photos, slides shows and films.

Bill married Mary Hearst, a biologist, in 1954. They had a daughter Jess and a son James. Over the years, Bill and Mary also raised every manner of birds and mammals, from orphaned Polar Bear cubs, while they were in Coral Harbour on Southampton Island in the early 1950s to Sandhill Cranes more recently. The care and feeding of baby animals is time consuming and labour intensive. The entire family was involved in the projects. Bill always had a supply of animals for the films, television or research programs he was working on at the time.

I first met Bill in the late 1980s at the Pickering Naturalists where he spoke about the Ontario Trumpeter Swan Restoration Program. He was an associate of and raised birds for Harry Lumsden, who headed the program. Soon I was 'flying with the geese' from Bill's speed boat on Lake Scugog. Later I flew with the magnificent Trumpeters, while their wings fanned my face. Bill was preparing the Trumpeters to follow his ultra light airplane so that they could learn a migration route south.

Bill was very knowledgeable about birds, beavers and most wildlife. He learned from patient observations in the field and from his experience at the Kortright Waterfowl Park in Guelph, the Metro Toronto Zoo, and his association with the Royal Ontario Museum. Bill could fashion any type of tool needed for his work with birds, mammals or airplanes. He had a machine shop and constructed room sized aquariums for his underwater shots, shoulder high artificial ponds and beaver lodges. I once watched as he made an aluminum splint for a Sandhill Crane chick that had a weak leg.

Bill's interest in imprinting of birds allowed him to experiment and teach others how to have Canada Geese follow an ultra light plane. During the late 1990s, Bill assisted Wayne Bezzner-Kerr in successfully flying an ultra light accompanied by four Trumpeter Swans from Sudbury to a Midwestern state. The same four swans returned in the spring.

Bill was a quiet unassuming gentleman who enjoyed sharing his vast knowledge of animals and birds. It was fitting that during the celebration of his life on 12 October 2002, a flock of Canada Geese rose out of the Rouge Valley and made several passes over our heads as in salute to a kindred spirit.

# Three Years of Atlas Field Work

Mike Cadman

Thanks to the continuing effort and enthusiasm of Ontario's birders, the third year of the Atlas has gone very well. Records are pouring in from across the province, with more people starting to work a little further from home to make sure all the squares are properly covered.

Coverage in the north made a huge leap forward in 2003, with birders enjoying atlassing and feeding the flies in some of the most remote parts of the province. Ten blocks in the Hudson Bay Lowland were covered, with many exciting finds, including the first Bohemian Waxwing and Pine Grosbeak nests ever found in the province. There were also tantalizing breeding season records of a Barrow's Goldeneye and Black Scoters, neither of which are known to have bred in the province previously. Almost every 100-km block in the boreal forest region of the province got special attention from Bird Studies Canada's Boreal Forest research project. This initiative is a real boon to atlas coverage in this huge portion of the province, where it complements the efforts of the small but dedicated contingent of local resident atlasers.

The database is growing and patterns are beginning to crystallize. Expansions and contractions of range since the first atlas are becoming more evident. One emerging trend is an apparent reduction in the number of records of aerial foraging species. See Table 1. Of the 275 species for which breeding evidence has so far been reported in both atlases, the "average" species has so far been reported in 69% as many squares in the second atlas as it was reported in the first atlas. However, all members of the swallow family, as well as Chimney Swift, Whip-poor-will and Common Nighthawk are below average. Some of them are well below average.

The Purple Martin is showing an apparent retraction from the northern part of its range, with no second atlas records from the Sudbury and Sault Ste Marie areas, where it was reported during the first atlas. It is also showing a reduction in inland areas away from the Great Lakes shoreline. See Figure 1.

Of course, we're only part way through the atlas, and some of these patterns may change as more data come in from across the province. But still, reductions of this sort, if they are still evident when all data are in, might indicate something important about changes in our environment. In any case, the atlas is already providing considerable food for thought and giving some inkling to scientists and conservationists as to where their efforts might be needed when atlas data collection is complete, following the 2005 breeding season.

There are still two years of field work remaining in 2004 and 2005, and we need all the help we can get to reach our ambitious goal of covering the whole province in that time period.

| Species                       | # of squares 1st Atlas | # of squares 2nd Atlas | % of 1st Atlas |
|-------------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|----------------|
| Common Nighthawk              | 1317                   | 366                    | 28%            |
| Whip-poor-will                | 884                    | 287                    | 32%            |
| Chimney Swift                 | 1328                   | 471                    | 35%            |
| Bank Swallow                  | 1420                   | 562                    | 40%            |
| Purple Martin                 | 953                    | 413                    | 43%            |
| Cliff Swallow                 | 1336                   | 614                    | 46%            |
| Northern Rough-winged Swallow | 1136                   | 561                    | 49%            |
| Barn Swallow                  | 2052                   | 1310                   | 64%            |
| Tree Swallow                  | 2368                   | 1533                   | 65%            |

Table 1. Comparison of records from the first and second Atlas projects.

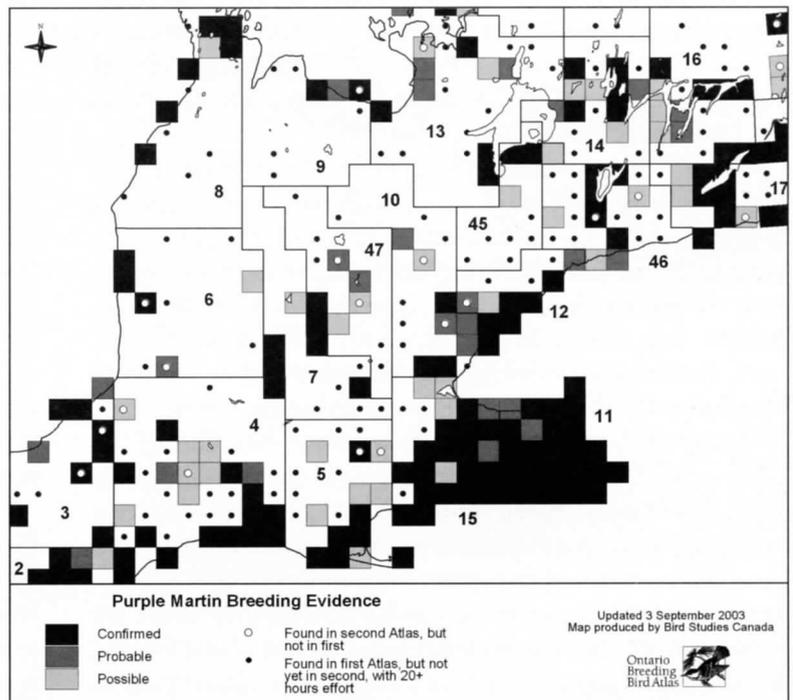


Figure 1. Atlas data for Purple Martin in southcentral Ontario. Black dots on map indicate it was reported in that square in the first atlas, but not yet reported in the second atlas though the square has received at least 20 hours of coverage.

For more information on the Atlas project, including how to get involved or to view maps and data summaries, see our website:  
[www.birdsontario.org](http://www.birdsontario.org)

# Knots from Argentina

Don Shanahan

A shorebird grounding at Presqu'île on 29 May 2003 yielded about 1000 birds, most of which were Dunlin. The next morning, the numbers on the misty beach had at least doubled and the frenetic behaviour of the shorebirds exuded a palpable aura of urgency. Among the throng containing 10 or so species, I began to find Red Knots, a favourite. Scrutiny of the knots soon revealed that three of them were banded. Knowing that Red Knots are vulnerable 'mega-migrants', I tried to discern the colours and patterns of the various bands worn by the birds. Given the anxious state of the shorebirds (as well as the observer), this took a while. Fortunately, by the time I had to leave I had the banding patterns scrawled in a note book.

At home, I realized that I did not know what to do with the information I had recorded. However, knowing that banded birds are infrequently observed (I had never before seen three banded birds in one day), I was determined to find out what to do with my observations. An appeal for assistance over the ONTBIRDS listserv produced a flurry of suggestions. Surprisingly, the same appeal yielded a high level of interest in the origins and travels of the Red Knots.

Soon I was e-mailing the banding observations to Mark Peck at the Centre for Biodiversity and Conservation Biology at the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM). In this process, I was reminded that Mark had written a comprehensive article on shorebird migration and banding, including Red Knots, in the June 2001 *OFO News*. It took me a couple of days to re-read the article as my preferred location at the time was the Presqu'île beach.

Most of the birds referred to above left during the night of 30 May. However, for the next couple of days the species variety at Presqu'île remained impressive. Along with Fred Helleiner, I looked for more banded birds. On 2 June, Fred observed two more banded Red Knots. On the morning of 3 June, Fred and I met at Beach One where we found a bonanza of six banded birds among about 25 Red Knots. Recording the banding patterns was challenging as the knots foraged in running groups among lumpy algae mats. After cross-referencing our results, we felt confident that we had the colours and combinations right. Shortly thereafter I e-mailed the information to Mark Peck.

Coincidentally, Patricia Gonzalez, an Argentine shorebird researcher, was visiting the ROM at the time and her analysis of the banding results yielded a wealth of amazing information. Three of the Red Knots carried orange flag tags, indicating that they had been colour-banded at San Antonio Oeste (SAO) by the Rio Negro on the central Argentina coast. One had been banded on 20 March 2003,

while staging at SAO, probably after arriving there from points further south. Gonzalez had been with the team that had banded this bird. A second bird had been banded at SAO in early March 1998. Considering that a one-way trip for a Red Knot flying from its southernmost wintering grounds in Tierra del Fuego in southern Argentina to its breeding grounds in the Canadian Arctic may be 15,000 km or longer, this bird had made a round trip of about 30,000 km at least five times. The third bird had lost some tags and could be identified only as having been banded in San Antonio Oeste.

The other three birds carried green flag tags, indicating that they had been banded on Delaware Bay, the vitally important spring shorebird staging area between the coasts of Delaware and New Jersey. One of these birds had been tagged at Delaware Bay in 1997 and thus in all probability had made the prodigious 30,000 km round trip at least six times. The logistics of a 135 gram bird flying distances in the order of 180,000 km are inconceivable.

This achievement becomes more astonishing when one considers that Red Knots, which cannot swim, fly large segments of these distances, i.e. northeastern South America to Delaware Bay, over the Atlantic Ocean. One of the other birds was probably banded in 1997 and the other in 2003. The imprecision of the information regarding the latter two birds was related largely to the occupational hazards of band wear and band loss.

Many birders are familiar with the long distance travels of Red Knots and other migrants. Despite having read much about these journeys, I was moved and felt very fortunate to observe birds whose bands verified the epic proportions of their travels, both past and present.

Mark Peck's (2001) article in *OFO NEWS* offers a thorough overview of steps being taken in our hemisphere to conserve vulnerable shorebirds. The article is well worth re-reading and tells what to do with any banding information you collect. With this in mind, I will offer a few tips on getting the band information right for, as alluded to above, this important process is tricky.

If you can convince someone on the scene to jot down your observations, recording becomes immeasurably easier. If not, take pencil and paper and focus on the bird's upper left leg. This sequence is important because it follows the official order in which banding results are tabulated, and will enhance the accuracy of your observations. Determine if the upper leg (tibia) is banded and then check the lower leg (tarsus). You will be looking for metallic bands (which can be hard to see when they fade), coloured bands and coloured flag tags (both of which can

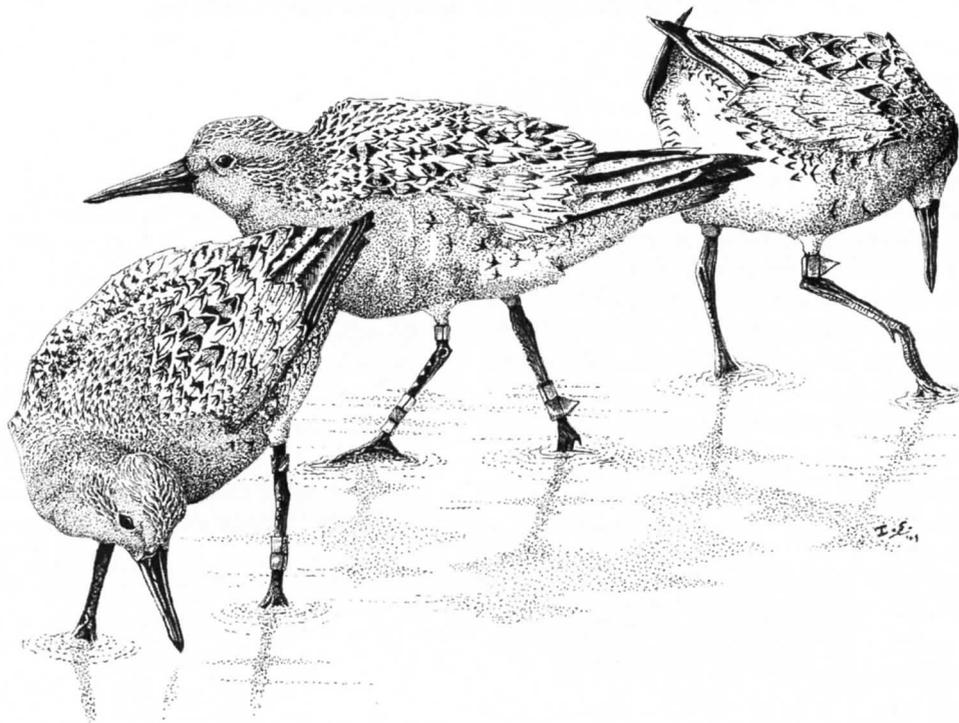


Figure 1. Red Knots at Presqu'île Provincial Park on 3 June 2003, including colour-banded birds referred to in the article. Illustration by Ian Shanahan.

also fade). Flag tags are particularly important because, as mentioned above, they are colour-coded to particular countries. Leg segments can have more than one band and the band sequence, taken from top to bottom, is important. Next, move to the right leg (and make sure that it really is the right leg) and record information for the upper and lower leg. If possible, cross-reference your observations with those taken by someone else.

The middle bird in Figure 1 represents the Presqu'île Red Knot banded at San Antonio Oeste by Patricia Gonzalez's team on 20 March 2003. Its banding pattern was as follows: upper left leg – metallic band, lower left leg – white band over yellow band over white band; upper right leg – no band, lower right leg – yellow band over orange flag tag. Inserting this information into the format outlined in Peck (2001) produces the formula: m,WYW;-YFo. The unique pattern of the multiple bands placed on this bird identify the individual as well as give the year and location of its banding.

Currently, banders in Argentina and the U.S. are testing a new system whereby combinations of two or three letters are being inscribed on flag tags. It is hoped that these letter codes will facilitate the accurate tracking of individual birds and therefore streamline and increase the accuracy of the entire data gathering process. Shorebirds will no doubt approve of this step as it should reduce the amount of banders' jewellery they are forced to wear.

As stated in Peck (2001), this information can be

mailed to the Bird Banding Office, National Wildlife Research Centre, Canadian Wildlife Service, Hull QC K1A 0H3. Other options include phoning toll-free 1-800-327-2263 or faxing information to 1-301-497-5717. Sightings can be reported to the Western Atlantic Shorebird Association at

◇ <http://www.vex.net/~hopscotc/shorebirds/>

Other useful websites include:

◇ <http://www.mb.ec.gc.ca/nature/migratorybirds/pasp/dc29s01.en.html> (on reporting shorebirds with coloured bands),

◇ <http://www.mb.ec.gc.ca/nature/migratorybirds/pasp/index.en.html> (for more information on shorebird banding), and

◇ <http://www.pwrc.usgs.gov/bbl/homepage/paspflag.htm> (regarding colour codes for shorebirds).

Checking these websites leads to other useful links. The more forgetful among us might wish to jot down some of this information on the inside cover of a field guide.

#### Acknowledgements

Thanks to Patricia Gonzalez, Fred Helleiner, Mark Peck and Ian Shanahan for assisting me in putting this article together.

#### Literature Cited

Peck M. 2001. Shorebirds Show Their Colours. *OFO News*: 19(2): 2-3.

# Markham's Coyote Pond

Stan Long

There is a dearth of marshland in the Markham region and during migration periods, when shorebirds fall from the sky at the mere sight of water, they are found mostly at puddles on construction sites and dewponds in rain-soaked fields. This situation changed in 1995 when a stormwater pond was built in the cornfields east of town. From under the fertile acres, earthmovers dug up the gravels of an ancient till plain and shaped them into great berms to the north, east and west. In the northwest corner, they left a conical hill, where at its foot, the original brook entered the pond through a steep sided gut.

It became evident from the start, that a major venue for waterbirds had come into being and over the years, the list of birds found within its bounds has kept on growing. Over one hundred species covering more than 20 genera have been recorded among which, Great Egret, Bald Eagle and Ross's Goose have been the more notable, the latter showing up for the first time this last winter when it flew in with a flight of Canada Geese. Sixteen species of shorebirds have been listed so far, and some, such as Ruddy Turnstone and Red-necked Phalarope, had not been recorded in this area before. Ducks, as can be expected have been well represented with 20 species seen.

The pond is an unprepossessing place and some people, especially those with a political agenda, consider it an eyesore. My view is quite different. I see it as a promise that time could make good, the erstwhile preservationist in me crying "let it be, nature will take care of its own." It is too easily dismissed as an ecological disaster for in the present scheme of things, is it any more so than the surrounding housing divisions or the gas station and commercial buildings that will shortly be built over it?

Farfetched though it may seem, I bolster my argument for keeping the pond with the fact that there is no greater dislocator of ecosystems than glaciation and what we see here in the pond and its environs is the human equivalent of the aftermath of glaciation. It is only a matter of time before the sore heals itself. See the multitudes of wild flowers, weeds, grasses and self seeding poplars that are greening its banks and look at the fauna it attracts: mink, muskrat, fox, coyote and deer. It was named Coyote Pond in memory of two coyotes seen restlessly quartering the ice one wild winter day, their faint hope, the securing of a duck or goose from the hundreds that swam sequestered in an

open lead.

The pond froze over last winter because of an immense, municipal sewer project that demanded the dewatering of the surrounding countryside. Previously, the upwellings of an aquifer from the Oak Ridges Moraine kept part of the pond icefree throughout the season, this phenomenon making it a safe haven for great numbers of wintering ducks and geese. The surrounding cornfields sustained them and their numbers were always highest after a wet fall when farmers had to let their crops stand and rot.

But I admit there are arguments against the pond's present dysfunctional fecundity for there is a huge imbalance of forces at work there. After all, its

main purpose is to filter out the sediments in the runoffs from the construction sites which, along with the enormous excretions of ducks and geese, both summer and winter, contribute a reserve of nutrients unparalleled in a stable environment.

You can see this at work in the resultant blooms of algae, insect life, fish stocks and the hordes of amphibians during the summer months. I have walked though hopping multitudes of frogs, seen even the mallards in eclipse feed upon them, though they may have been



Stan Long (right) and Ron Pittaway at Coyote Pond on 13 July 2003.  
Photo by Jean Iron.

catching only one in fifty.

After six years, the raw berms still weather and are deeply scarred like moraines laid bare in the aftermath of a retreating glacier, the resurgent weeds and grasses slow to take hold. Yet the pond lies perfect as a mirror in the midst of this upheaval and like water lying anywhere, attracts birds from seemingly empty skies.

Migration periods are the best times to see birds at the pond, these in March/April after the ice melts and again near the end of August when returning shorebirds begin to show. Mild winters are also good for then a part of the pond remains ice-free and there is always a good chance to see wintering waterfowl as open water coupled with the surrounding cornfields, proves a great attraction.

The village of Markham lies northeast of the city of Toronto, just north of Highway 407 on Highway 48. To find Coyote Pond, turn east at the junction of Highway 48 and Highway 7. The third traffic light east is at the Ninth Line. Coyote Pond lies 1 km east of the Ninth Line on the north side of Highway 7.

# OBRC Notes

## Bob Curry

The 2003 Ontario Bird Records Committee comprises: David Beadle, Bill Crins (secretary) Bob Curry (chair), David Elder, Chris Escott, Nick Escott, Ron Pittaway, and Ron Tozer. We recently elected two replacements who will begin their three-year terms in 2004. We are pleased to announce that Kevin McLaughlin and Alan Wormington are returning as voting members. Both bring to the Committee a wealth of experience in the study of Ontario birds. The Committee feels it is important that reports of today be examined by a records committee that understands the temporal context and pattern of records of rarities.

Most of you have read Bill Crin's fascinating OBRC report for 2002 in *Ontario Birds* 21(2). Bill is circulating packages of 2003 rarity reports. He urges OFO members to submit reports of review list species that you have seen this year. Because someone else discovered a bird does not mean that your report is superfluous. Additional reports lend weight to the documentation of a rarity. The Committee needs photos that help document a rarity. Photographers will be credited in the annual report.

We are currently working on an improved Rare Bird Report Form. Look for it on the OFO website: <http://www.ofo.ca/obrc/obrcform.htm>. We also plan to have hard copies available at hotspots such as Point Pelee, where it will be available at the Visitor Centre.

Please send your rarity documentation to:

Bill Crins, OBRC Secretary  
170 Middlefield Road  
Peterborough ON K9J 8G1  
e-mail: [bill.crins@sympatico.ca](mailto:bill.crins@sympatico.ca)

# What is a Raptor?

## Ron Pittaway

The Toronto Raptors basketball team is named after the predatory dinosaur in the movie *Jurassic Park*. Until recently, birders used raptor to mean a "bird of prey" that included both hawks and owls. But now the terms raptor and hawk are being confused. For example, there is the Cranberry Marsh Raptor Watch on Lake Ontario and the Hawk Cliff Hawkwatch on Lake Erie. Most raptor watches report only hawks and relatives, yet owls are raptors too. In the December 2003 issue of *Ontario Birds*, I will review the new book on *Raptors of Eastern North America* by Brian Wheeler. Again there is no mention of owls. So now raptor is used mainly for birds in the order Falconiformes: Osprey, hawks, eagles, kites, falcons and caracaras, but excludes owls. Recently the New World vultures and condors were removed from the order Falconiformes and placed with herons and storks. Are vultures and condors still raptors?

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