



# OFO NEWS

Newsletter of the Ontario Field Ornithologists

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## Ron Pittaway Distinguished Ornithologist

Bob Curry

The Board of Directors is pleased to announce that Ron Pittaway will be the eighth recipient of OFO's Distinguished Ornithologist Award.

Ron's passion for birds began during the 1950s in the Ottawa area, where his mentor was the late W. Earl Godfrey, then curator of ornithology at the National Museum. Godfrey influenced Ron's interests in identification, taxonomy, subspecies, morphs, molts and plumages.

Ron is a founding life member of OFO, a co-editor of *Ontario Birds* since 1991, and the technical editor of *OFO News* since 1994. He has authored over 130 notes and articles in publications such as *Ontario Birds*, *OFO News*, *Ontario Field Biologist*, *Canadian Field-Naturalist*, *Birders Journal*, *Birding*, *Trail & Landscape*, and *Blue Jay*.

Ron was a voting member of the Ontario Bird Records Committee (OBRC) for a total of 11 years between 1984 to 2003, including three years as Chair of OBRC and one year as Secretary.

Ron strongly promotes conservation having served for five years as the Ontario government's representative on the Loggerhead Shrike National Recovery Team. His *Birding Guide to Carden Alvar*, first published in 1991, continues to play an important role in public awareness and the preservation of the alvar.

Ron brings an extraordinary breadth of knowledge to his articles, internet posts to *Ontbirds* and *ID-Frontiers*, discussions with other birders and field trips. He inspired many people to take up birding during his 10 summers as a park naturalist in Algonquin Park and during his 23 years of teaching conservation and resource management at the former Leslie M. Frost Natural Resources Centre north of Minden. Ron retired in July 2003 from the Ministry of Natural Resources.

I will present the Distinguished Ornithologist Award to Ron at the OFO Annual Convention and Banquet at Point Pelee on 10 September 2005.

## Final Season of the Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas

Mike Cadman, Atlas Coordinator

Work is well underway on the final season of the Atlas project. Thanks to everyone who has participated so far. If you're not yet participating, this is your last chance to be part of this historic project. There is still plenty that can be done in July and even in August if you're careful. Please join us and have fun while contributing valuable data that will help to make Ontario's bird populations, particularly in the south, among the best known on the planet.

This last year of the project is all about the challenge of filling gaps. The main goal of all our 1800+ participants is to find gaps and fill them. There are gaps of all sorts, including in species lists, in breeding confirmation, point counts, and even whole 10-km squares that haven't had much attention to date. There are gaps to fill in every square in the province, though some squares and regions have larger gaps than others.

The final year of the first atlas (1981-1985) was the biggest year of the project, and we're hoping the same will be true this time around. The more complete our coverage, the better the atlas database will be for bird and ecosystem conservation.

For up-to-date information on the atlas results or remaining gaps, see the Atlas web page:

<http://www.birdsontario.org/atlas/atlasmain.html>  
or phone us toll free at 1-866-900-7100. Happy atlassing!

# Book Review

Bob Curry

**Birds of Australia.** Sixth edition, 1999. Ken Simpson and Nicholas Day with Peter Trusler. Princeton University Press. Princeton, New Jersey. Soft (vinyl) cover, 440 pages, 132 colour plates. 16 x 22.5 cm. ISBN 0-691-04995-5.

Australia has about 770 species of birds and a culture and infrastructure quite similar to Canada making it a most desirable destination for birders. It also has several excellent field guides.

During a three-month motoring trip through Australia in fall 2004 we used, among other books, two major guides. These were the present volume and the Graham Pizzey and Frank Knight field guide. These books are so good you can't go wrong. I present here a brief review of the Simpson and Day guide (hereinafter SD) but with some comparisons to Pizzey and Knight (PK).

Some argue that SD is smaller and lighter than PK and thus easier to carry in the field. It is, slightly. However, my experience is that whilst foreign birding, your guide is in such constant use that you need a carrying bag anyway. Compared to the Sibley Guide (2000) familiar to all OFO readers, this book is somewhat smaller and lighter whereas PK is very close to Sibley in this regard. Nevertheless, the amount of information contained in SD is incredible.

Although SD has a very attractive paper cover this can be left at home as it also has a very practical and resilient flexible vinyl cover.

As always, the main part of the book is constituted of colour illustrations. The plates are good, certainly quite adequate for field identification by a visiting birder. Although they are a trifle stereotyped a bit of habitat is painted on most plates which make them more attractive, and in some cases, may even constitute an identification clue. The plates are rather busy with usually six and sometimes seven species per page. As sexual differences and subspecies (races) are usually illustrated, this can mean up to 17 different birds on a page. By comparison, PK, albeit with 140 more pages and thus heavier, usually covers three species per page, fewer total birds and with a little more open space that allows for easier finding of each species at a glance. The biggest difference between the two is that in SD each species has a number that refers to the text on the opposite page. This is not a problem for the local birders who will know the birds well, but as a birding tourist, I much prefer the PK system in which the names are printed beside each species. To make matters more difficult, the numbers on the SD plates do not necessarily match the number sequence on the text page opposite. This can be rather frustrating when there are more

than a dozen images on a plate.

SD seems to be more up-to-date on splits and lumps. We found that several subspecies in PK were treated as full species in SD despite the fact that PK was the newer book.

The number system drawback notwithstanding, SD contains an enormous amount of information on the text page opposite. Each species account has a small black and white illustration of a key identification feature such as in-flight pattern, posture, shape, proportions and many more. The authors are justifiably proud of their range maps. They illustrate breeding range, migration zone and wintering range. While this is not unusual, the maps also illustrate the ranges of the many subspecies into which Australian birds are divided. In this regard the maps are more detailed than PK.

A nice feature following the main set of plates is a section that treats vagrants known to have strayed to the Australian mainland, islands or offshore waters. Each of these has a small colour illustration, a map showing where there have been accepted occurrences, and a descriptive text which includes the information about the occurrence.

The main point to be made about SD is that it is far more than a field guide to bird identification. Following the plates and vagrants section is a 112-page section entitled *The Handbook*. This is a mini-manual something akin to the *Sibley Guide to Bird Life and Behavior*. Here are found quite detailed bird identification tips, Australian habitat descriptions, essays on Australian bird evolution and treatments of each Australian bird family. Each family section contains bar graphs illustrating breeding phenologies, pen and ink drawings of behavioral traits and fascinating textual information. At the end of each account are (usually several) literature references for further reading. Again, while the visitor from Canada might not get to these references, one can but envy such information available in a basic field guide. PK has a similar section but it is not a detailed. To compare, PK treats the superb Honeyeaters (*Meliphagidae*) with 67 species in Australia, in half a page while SD devotes five pages to them and has six references.

Here is my recommendation. Buy both books. After all you're already spending a great deal on your trip. Try to take both books, but if you can't, take Pizzey and Knight. Here is the key: in trip preparation before you go, read *the Handbook* section of Simpson and Day. It will give you a much fuller appreciation of Australia's avifauna and make your experience that much richer. There is now a seventh edition of Simpson and Day, obviously the one you should get.

# OBRC Notes

## Margaret Bain, 2005 OBRC Chair

The Ontario Bird Records Committee held its Annual Meeting at the Royal Ontario Museum on Sunday, 10 April 2005. Mark Peck, acting as ROM Liaison, once again provided expert administrative support for the proceedings, organizing the meeting room, producing specimens for examination, and even taking the obligatory group photograph.

With Bob Curry's resignation a year prior to the end of his three-year term to devote more time to completing *The Birds of Hamilton* and the end of the terms of Dave Elder, Chris Escott, and Ron Tozer, there were four places to fill on the 2005 committee. Jean Iron had agreed to complete the remaining year of Bob Curry's term and the 2004 committee members elected Glenn Coady, Colin Jones, and Ian Richards to three-year terms on the new committee. Margaret Bain was elected Chair of the 2005 committee to replace Ron Tozer. Sincere thanks were accorded the retiring members for their hard work and their thoughtful approach to all the reports submitted, and a welcome was extended to their able replacements.

Thanks were also extended to Bill Crins who agreed to an unprecedented fourth year as OBRC Secretary. Speaking from experience, this is a truly unenviable job, but Bill remains cheerful whatever the circumstances. Over the last year, with the expert help of Sandra Eadie, he has completed the move to electronic circulation of reports and the recording of votes, and continues to upgrade and improve this process, adding greatly to the committee's efficiency. The gathering of rarity reports has also been facilitated by the gentle persuasion of Bill's assistant, Kayo Roy, charged with following up on reports of Review List species and encouraging observers to submit documentation.

With the rapidly growing use of digital photography and digiscoping we are now able to enjoy almost instant looks at wonderful photographs of many Ontario rarities. This makes the work of the Records Committee much easier in many ways, but has also resulted in a relatively new problem, "reports" which consist of a photograph or photographs, often gorgeous, with date, location, and photographer's name but nothing else. The purpose of collecting records of rare birds is to advance our knowledge of Ontario's avifauna, not just to say "Yes, this is a Such-and-such." So, even brief descriptions of the circumstances of the observation, weather, habitat, the bird's behaviour, any vocalizations, and so on, add hugely to the value of even the best photograph when submitting a report. A photograph may not necessarily show all the field marks observed either, which is why most birders prefer artists' representations of birds in a field guide rather than photographs. So again, a short written description of the bird is a welcome accompaniment to the crackerjack photo.

Multiple reports combine to provide the most effective dossier on a rarity. Don't assume that others will necessarily

send in documentation; taking the time to write your own report, including a sketch or photograph perhaps, is still very worthwhile. As Kayo Roy calculated in a posting to Ontbirds: "More than 2400 birders saw the Golden-crowned Sparrow in Whitby. In excess of 500 birders signed the Haines guest book when they came to see the Rufous Hummingbird in Niagara Falls. Several hundred birders saw the Pyrrhuloxia at Eagle, the Western Grebe at Fifty Point, and the Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch in Chelmsford." Yet OBRC received only a handful of reports on each of these.

Some 2004 rarity reports, including the Pyrrhuloxia, were not ready for review by the submissions deadline of 31 December 2004 and will be addressed by the 2005 committee. The Review List of species requiring documentation is readily available, along with an online report form, on the OBRC pages of the OFO website at <http://www.ofo.ca/obrc> and is also incorporated into the printed field checklist of Ontario birds produced by OFO Publications. Useful guidelines on documenting a rare bird sighting are also available on the OBRC web pages. Online report forms and electronic photographs should be sent by email to [obrc@ofo.ca](mailto:obrc@ofo.ca). Written forms, drawings, and photographic prints or slides may be mailed to Bill Crins, OBRC Secretary, 170 Middlefield Road, Peterborough ON K9J 8G1.

### Email to the Editors

27 February 2005

I may have told you this in the past, but I find *OFO News* the most interesting Canadian bird publication currently on the market, with its always relevant topics. The recent paper on the Cackling Goose by Ken Abraham is the most informative item on this topic I have seen so far, a welcome alternative to all the controversial information that circulates on the web. FYI, we have two *hutchinsii* specimens from Ottawa.

The tribute by Glenn Coady about the *Last of the Curlews* by Fred Bodsworth was also informative. I read the book as a youngster, a French translation by the Reader's Digest that my aunt ordered as part of a book club promotion. Although I cannot say that it influenced my "career" in any way, you have to remember that there were extremely few books on the topic of birds in those years.

Michel Gosselin  
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# Book Review

Geoff Carpentier



**Handbook of the Birds of the World. Volume 9: Cotingas to Pipits.** 2004. Edited by Josep del Hoyo, Andrew Elliott and David Christie. Lynx Edicions, Barcelona, Spain. E-mail: lynx@hbw.com. Hardcover 863 pages. \$185US. ISBN 84-87334-69-5.

My latest volume arrived right on time, and as in the previous eight volumes, meets a standard to which few can excel. Twenty-nine authors from Sweden, the United States, England, Australia, New Zealand, Spain, Africa and Denmark collaborated to write this volume. Seventy-eight plates and hundreds of photographs provide visual detail to support the text.

The book opens with essays on Ornithological Nomenclature (history, rules of application and naming) and describes a new tribe of tyrant-flycatchers (Contopini).

This is followed by detailed sections on each of the nine families described: Cotingas, Manakins, Tyrant Flycatchers, New Zealand Wrens, Scrub-birds, Lyrebirds, Larks, Swallows and Martins, and Pipits and Wagtails. Each family discussion follows a set format where an introductory section speaks to systematics, morphology, habitat, voice, food/feeding, breeding, movements/migration, interactions with man, conservation and a detailed bibliography. The detailed text is generously interspersed with photographs that explain or enhance the information provided. Following this section, each species is depicted by at least one painted image, a distribution map and information on taxonomy, subspecies and distribution, habitat, food/feeding, breeding, migration, and a species specific bibliography.

In total, 809 species are covered in the book, almost 8% of the world's birds. Included in this daunting task is an analysis of the 429 Tyrant Flycatchers. The introduction to that section alone takes 89 pages and is supported with 120 photographs. I won't go through all the families and genera covered, but if you've ever wanted to know about Umbrellabirds, Fruitcrows, Mourners, Flatbills, Hoopoe-larks, Saw-wings or Longclaws, you have now a definitive reference book you can trust.

One of the ways I like to test the quality of a book, beyond simply looking at its "curb appeal" is to review four groups of birds: (1) those I studied for many years and know well, (2) those I've studied only recently and with which I have little experience, (3) those completely

new to me, and (4) a random sample. I look for something different from each category.

I looked at the Horned Lark as a species I know well. I was impressed that 42 subspecies were identified and distributional information provided on each of them. I was equally impressed with the accuracy of the information provided except for one confusing statement. The author reports that Horned larks cannot survive periods of prolonged snow cover or low temperatures. In Ontario, many hundreds of birds overwinter under exactly these conditions. I can only presume the author was speaking about extremes where food or shelter was scarce. My Group 2 choice was Welcome Swallow, which I was fortunate to study on a recent trip to Australia and New Zealand. The information provided was exactly reflective of what I observed in my travels, right down to nesting information. The Rifleman, a New Zealand wren, represented a species I have never seen. I looked for them, on my recent trip, but was unsuccessful. I learned a great deal about behaviour from the information provided in the book, and now know where to look for it (habitat/altitude/preferred trees). Next time, I will be more successful. Lastly, I chose the Cave Swallow and was curious what it would tell me about late season migrational patterns. In this case, although specific Canadian detail was limited, it referenced recent trends where this species moves northward, occasionally to southern Ontario, as part of late fall dispersal.

I want to speak about the plates. Each is superb in quality and colour and filled with an average of 22+ images per plate. For each species, the male and female are depicted, unless they are identical to each other. In many cases, recognizable or significant subspecies are shown as well. I loved the ordering of the species on the plates where species most similar in colour and/or shape are grouped together for ease of comparison. In the flycatchers, in particular, this is a valuable feature. The cross reference to the accompanying text is accomplished by matching a numerical reference on the plate to one in the text. I found this confusing in a few cases as I couldn't tell which species was which on the plate. For example, which images were associated with #83 (Lesser Wagtail-tyrant) and which were #84 (Greater Wagtail-tyrant) on Plate 21? Maybe where confusion might arise, the images could be more widely separately or the numbers repeated above each image. For the most part, this was not problematic, but when it occurred, it took time to reconcile.

The book is impressive in its detail. One of many things I learned was that sightings of Superb Lyrebirds rarely involve more than one individual (25 - 33% of the time), so our recent sighting in Australia of two birds together may have been more significant than we thought.

In closing, this book continues a tradition of excellence that started with Volume 1. You won't be disappointed.

# Geese fouled Crawford Lake 700 years ago

## Iroquoian cornfields led to eutrophication

John H. McAndrews

Today Crawford Lake hosts only one breeding pair of Canada Geese, but in the 1300s the lake was alive with roosting geese. While roosting, the pellets they defecated fertilized the water with nitrates and phosphates and this stimulated algal blooms, most especially of diatoms. With the changing of the seasons, these masses of algae died and their decay produced stinky sulfur compounds; the people of the nearby Iroquoian village must have been annoyed. The evidence for this reconstruction comes from the lake mud.

The lake is in a Conservation Area (Halton Region Conservation) located along the Guelph Line 3 km south of Campbellville. Its small size (2.4 ha) and great depth (22.5 m) make it unusual. Firstly, it is meromictic (partly circulating) whereby only the water above 15 m circulates, producing a change in temperature and renewing dissolved oxygen; in contrast the water below 15 m does not circulate, remaining oxygen-free at a constant 6°C and accumulating toxic chemical compounds. In this biologically hostile bottom water, there are no sediment-disturbing detritivores such as insect larvae. Secondly, every year the lake deposits a millimetre of unusual sediment: a white layer of lime in June and a black organic layer in October. Unlike most lakes that circulate to the bottom and support detritivores, the two layers persist and in a sediment core can be counted and dated like tree rings.

In 1968, we began studying fossil pollen, and in sediment of the early 1400s found among abundant tree pollen grains a few pollen of corn and purslane. We assumed that the corn and purslane pollen blew into the lake from nearby cornfields. Following this lead, we commissioned an archaeological survey, which identified a dozen Iroquoian village sites within a few kilometres of the lake; the closest village was 150 m from the lake on deep soil where corn is grown today. Excavation showed the Crawford Village not only was the approximate age of the fossil corn pollen but the village soil also contained charred seeds of cultivated corn, beans, squash, sunflower and tobacco. The village was reconstructed, staffed by a half dozen interpreters and draws busloads of schoolchildren and German tourists.

In the 1990s, there was renewed interest in the fossil tree pollen, which showed rapid forest succession linked in time with Iroquoian farming. Computer modeling showed that the succession could have been caused by a cold period called the Little Ice Age. On the other hand, fossil charcoal peaks contemporaneous with Iroquoian farming suggested succession following forest fires pre-

sumably set to clear land for cornfields. This rich and contradictory paleontological—archaeological record has been discussed in no fewer than seven textbooks.

To resolve loose ends, in 2001 we lifted a new sediment core. High resolution imaging of the upper 70 cm, the last 1,000 years, showed that varving (yearly layering) was irregular and that below 58 cm the varves were disrupted, making them impossible to count. Instead of relying on varve counts as we had in the previous 30 years, we made multiple Accelerator Mass Spectrometry carbon dates, which showed that the varves could only account for 90% of the millennium. Further, we saw for the first time nodules in the sediment, and they were in the late 13th century when the varves ceased being bioturbated and became easily counted. In these varves, there were abundant corn and sunflower pollen as well as fossil diatoms and rotifers, which grazed on the diatoms. When the Iroquoian pollen disappeared in the 14th century, so did the nodules, although the varves continued to the top of the core.

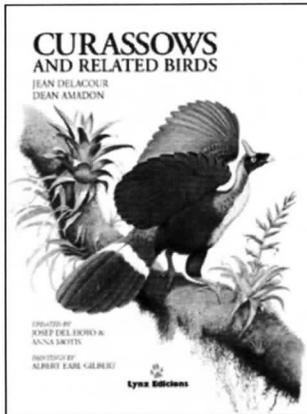
Microscopic analysis of the nodules showed them to all indicate Iroquoian cornfields because they had pollen of corn, sunflower, purslane and grass, spores of corn smut, grass epidermis and bits of herb charcoal. All of which suggests that the nodules are from Canada geese, which had been feeding in the autumn on the Iroquoian field. The charcoal indicates the Iroquoian farmers burned their fields, probably to remove organic debris. To test the nodules, we have submitted nodules to the Royal Ontario Museum for DNA analysis.

Our reconstruction indicates that at the beginning of the millennium, a fully circulating Crawford Lake was surrounded by virgin forest. About 1280 Iroquoians moved into the area, cleared forest, burned the clearings and planted corn, sunflower, squash and bean. Migrating Canada Geese and perhaps Mallard-Black Duck fed in the fields and roosted on the lake where they cast pellets. At first the pellets dispersed in the water to release nutrients and these nutrients caused algae, particularly diatoms to bloom. These nutrient-stimulated blooms from bird pellets are a form of eutrophication called eutrophication. Decay of the organic matter used up the oxygen in the bottom water to exclude bioturbating bottom fauna and allowing the varves and subsequent pellets to persist undisturbed.

*John H. McAndrews is Professor Emeritus in the Department of Botany at the University of Toronto, 25 Willcocks Street, Toronto, Ontario M5S 3B2. Jock has more bird stories for upcoming issues.*

# Book Review

Geoff Carpentier



**Curassows and Related Birds.** 2004. Jean Delacour and Dean Amadon. Lynx Edicions, Barcelona, Spain - in cooperation with American Museum of Natural History. E-mail: lynx@hbw.com. Hardcover 476 pages. \$75US. ISBN 84 87334-64-4.

I have always had a keen interest in this family of birds, often gaudy, noisy and boisterous in nature, but

most of all, always from exotic places where rainforest and unspoiled lands persist. I became interested in the group when I took my first trip to Venezuela and wasn't disappointed as I saw my first Guan high in a tree and true to form clambering about and uttering loud cries. I have never lost my interest.

This newest publication from Lynx Edicions, in cooperation with the American Museum of Natural History, is an interesting and revealing reprint and updated edition of the original 1973 publication. The 3500 copies of the first edition soon sold out and with about 30 years of history now past, enough information has been gathered to warrant this rewrite.

The original text in its entirety has been republished herein, as have all the original prints. So let's start with the original text; what exactly will you find in this book? It starts with a pleasing anecdotal perspective that spans 30 years and covers research efforts and successes and then quickly transitions to the introduction to the book and explanation of contents.

The body of the book is divided into 11 chapters that cover such topics as evolution, distribution, species/subspecies, hybridization, locomotion, food, roosting, vocalizations, sociability, predators, disease, protective coloration, display, adaptations to climate, wattles—form and function, sexual dimorphism, windpipe modifications, reproduction, nest building, incubation, courtship, and domestication. This is certainly an excellent introduction to this varied and interesting family of birds.

The book goes on to discuss each of the then recognized 44 species in detail. Information on classification, key to species, description, subspecies, distribution supplemented with an excellent map, habits, nesting and captivity concerns are provided. Each species is depicted in one or more poses on supporting plates, including several showing young birds.

Factoid: Did you know that only female Curassows “hug”

their babies. What do Guans and Chachalacas do?

And that was only the reprint of the first edition. New information has been gathered from all known sources and incorporated into the Update Chapter. This section of the book includes 154 pages of text and information on all the original 44 species previously discussed and the six new species not covered in the original book. Every species has an update chapter that speaks to some or all of the following topics: taxonomy, morphology, habitat, habits, vocalizations, status, breeding, distribution, taxonomy, and plumages. Species, not covered in the first edition, naturally received more detailed coverage.

So now you have it, an excellent compilation of new information built on a strong historical foundation. Are you going to like the book? I did, but I do have a couple of concerns about readability and formatting. These don't detract from the accuracy or relevancy of the book but merely demonstrate my personal preference. I like the way they formatted the first 12 chapters of the book such that all the original information from the first edition was offered first. However at that point, I would have intermingled the original text and update information for each species by printing the original information and then immediately providing the update on a species by species basis. It would have been much more useful to have all the information in one part of the book, rather than having to flip through pages to find the complete story.

The only other criticism I have is the glaring white spaces on the opposing pages for each plate. Each species is covered by a spectacular colour painting, but the facing page is often mostly bare. Perhaps, the distribution maps provided elsewhere in the book, and species key could have occupied this space rather than leaving them mostly blank.

The book incorporates the most current information from the Cracid Specialist Group, Birdlife International, and the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources. That said, should you own this book? If you have an interest in Guans, Curassows and Chachalacas, you must get this book. It is current and informative.

## OFO Annual Convention and Banquet Point Pelee National Park

Saturday & Sunday, 10 and 11 September 2005

Field Trips and Great Birding, Delicious Evening Banquet at the Roma Club, Expert Guest Speaker, Awards, Ron Scovell's Book Sale, Displays. Plan to attend the Annual Convention at Point Pelee. See enclosed registration flyer with this issue of *OFO News*.



Follow the eagle's path from right to left.

## Bald Eagle Flip

Brandon Holden

While watching migrating hawks at the lookout (the point) of Beamer Conservation Area near Grimsby on 27 March 2005, a Bald Eagle was spotted on the horizon following the edge of the escarpment. I changed my vantage point by moving to a different lookout and hoped for some photo opportunities. Soon the bird appeared, flying alone and fairly far from the edge. I followed the bird in the viewfinder of my camera and snapped a few shots despite the distance. It came as a surprise when the Bald Eagle did a complete flip, going right upside down. I snapped four shots while it happened, and expected to see another bird attack the eagle, causing it to do the flip to avoid the attack. However, there were no other birds around and the eagle soared off to the west with no other unusual actions. The whole event happened quickly, and it was evident from both my observations and photos that the eagle did a complete circle and was fully upside down at one point! Why did the eagle do the flip? I may never know!

## Learning Mistakes

Case of the Arctic Tern

Ron Pittaway

I wrote in my field notes of 21 July 1964, "Today around 10 o'clock, Monty Brigham, Dan Brunton and I identified two Arctic Terns at Ottawa Beach. We were within a hundred feet of them. We saw the red bill right to the tip. Both birds were in full adult plumage. There is absolutely no doubt in our minds." A few years later I took this observation off my list. At the time we were eager young birders and failed to take Peterson's warning that "some Common Terns lose the black tip" in summer. Also, we were so keen to get lifers that they just had to be Arctic Terns. The moral of the story is to learn by making mistakes, but the trick is to never make the same error twice.

I was a little nostalgic recently while reading through my field notes from 1964. As a young birder I was encouraged to keep a notebook of field observations, which brings up a question. How many birders nowadays keep field notes other than lists?

## New Publication

### Waterfowl of Eastern North America

Chris G. Earley. 2005. 166 pages. 200 plus photos. Hardcover and Softcover. Published by Firefly Books, Richmond Hill, Ontario. See Internet distributors for price.

This excellent guide is the latest in the fine series by OFO member Chris Earley. Its strength is the more than 200 spectacular colour photographs of adult males, females, and flight shots. Many photos are by Ontario photographers. The range maps show breeding, year round, and winter distribution. This guide covers all the waterfowl (swans, geese, ducks) likely to occur in Ontario, plus loons, grebes, pelicans, coot, moorhen, anhinga, and cormorants including a photo of a Neotropic Cormorant, a species new to Ontario and Canada this spring at Point Pelee. The text is well laid out and easy to use. Its slim size makes it ideal to carry in the field.

# Great Gray Owl Observations 2004-2005

Ron Pittaway

The fall and winter of 2004-2005 were notable for the largest irruption ever recorded of Great Gray Owls (*Strix nebulosa*) in North America, including southern Ontario. The flight followed a probable large hatch in 2003 (based on number of second year birds), and widespread vole crash causing almost no reproduction in 2004, similar to the “nearly continent-wide” irruption of 1995-1996 (Nero 2003). Here I discuss selected observations and ideas from watching more than 100 individual owls; many were seen on numerous occasions.

**Origin of Flight:** Most Great Gray Owls seen in southern Ontario likely originated from north of the Canadian Shield in the Hudson Bay Lowland of Ontario. The first reports on *Ontbirds* of irrupting Great Grays were in late September 2004 from Marc Johnson of Hearst in northeastern Ontario, suggesting that the flight came mainly from the Hudson Bay Lowland, which is about 110 km north of Hearst. I postulate that much of the forested Canadian (Precambrian) Shield is unsuitable for breeding because Great Grays prefer semi-open lowlands with a grass/sedge ground cover supporting Meadow Voles (*Microtus pennsylvanicus*). On the Shield’s contoured landscape, lowland breeding habitat is often confined, linear, fragmented and widely scattered compared to the extensive interspersions of forests and barrens in the Hudson Bay Lowland. This is discussed further under the next heading.

**Breeding Range Mystery:** Why do range maps show the Great Gray Owl breeding mainly west of James Bay and the Ontario-Quebec boundary? See maps in any field guide. A few breed in western Quebec (Morneau 1996), but for no obvious reason they are absent as breeders from most of Quebec, all of Newfoundland and Labrador, the Maritime Provinces and Maine. Why? Suitable breeding habitat may be limited by topography and precipitation because (1) most of boreal Eastern Canada is mountainous Canadian Shield and Appalachian Mountains with restricted lowland breeding habitat; and (2) the greater amount of precipitation in Eastern Canada, both in summer and winter, has broad-scale effects on vegetation structure (Michel Gosselin, pers. comm.).

**Prey Species:** The Meadow Vole of open grassy habitats is the chief prey in much of the Great Gray’s range (Brunton and Pittaway 1971, Bull and Duncan 1993). The Meadow Vole is called “field mouse” by most people. Voles differ from typical mice by their blunt noses, small eyes, short ears and particularly by their short tails (Banfield 1974). Voles, unlike nocturnal mice, are active both day and night, but seem to be most active around dawn and dusk. The Red-backed Vole (*Clethrionomys gapperi*) is a much less frequent prey because of its forest habitat.

**High Vole Populations:** Great Gray Owls concentrated in areas with high populations of Meadow Voles such as Ottawa, Peterborough, Simcoe County and Durham Region. How do Great Grays locate these areas? They possibly can visually detect vole urine and feces, which are visible in the ultraviolet light spectrum, allowing them to find high numbers of voles. This ability has been shown experimentally for Eurasian Kestrels and Rough-legged Hawks (Viitala et al. 1995) and is worth investigating for nomadic owls.

**Dull-tipped Talons:** The literature often mentions “razor-sharp” and “needle-sharp” talons. However, I was surprised when examining road-killed birds and specimens that some had dull-tipped talons as if filed down. One road-killed bird’s claws were so blunt-tipped it was as if they had been trimmed with cat nail clippers. I suspect this wear resulted from the Great

Gray’s habit of spending considerable amounts of time on frozen ground and hard snow cover. Stressed birds may be more susceptible to heavy wear.

**Diurnal and Nocturnal:** When Great Gray Owls arrived hungry in the south, they hunted during the day. After several weeks of regaining weight, they gradually became less diurnal, particularly at midday. For example, on 26-27 February 2005, sunrise was about 6:59 a.m. and by 8:00 a.m. the five birds hunting the fields along Halls Road in Whitby (Durham Region) went to roost for the day in a thick mixture of spruce, cedar and hardwoods on the east side of the road. They did not leave the woods to hunt the fields again until after 5:00 p.m. Sunset was about 6:02 p.m. The owls



Figure 1: Typical plumage of Great Gray Owl in Toronto, Ontario, 29 December 2004. Compare with melanistic (darker) individual in Figure 2. Note the plump short-tailed Meadow Vole in its claws. Photo by Jean Iron.

apparently hunted into the night as the moon was a full and light reflected off the snow, but they were probably inactive around midnight. As Great Grays became less diurnal and more crepuscular and nocturnal in late February and March, the best times to see them were dawn to early morning and late afternoon to dark. Winter activity periods were similar to those first reported by Godfrey (1967), Pittaway and Brunton (1969), Brunton and Pittaway (1971).

**Luminous White Bowtie:** Godfrey (1967) said that the narrow band of silvery white feathers on the foreneck just under the facial disk “may well be functional.” This white bowtie (but not its black knot) is luminescent to humans in dim light and probably easily seen by owls at night. The American Woodcock, another crepuscular and nocturnal bird, shows luminescent silvery white undertail coverts during spring strutting displays (personal observations). The large white tail sides of male Whip-poor-wills and pale patches on other goatsuckers also are probably functional in low light. Much remains to be learned about visual communication in night birds.

#### Interactions with Great Horned Owls:

It is overstated that Great Horned Owls kill adult Great Gray Owls because this happens only “occasionally”. In fact, Bull and Duncan (1993) stated that Great Gray Owls “share habitat” with Great Horned Owls and defend the vicinity of the nest site from them. The Great Gray Owls that spent January to March 2005 on the Leslie Street Spit in Toronto and along Halls Road in Whitby were in close contact with Great Horned Owls without an incident.

**Hunting by Sound and Sight:** This past winter I often heard people say that Great Gray Owls hunt by sound, suggesting that they hunt only by ear. Voles usually stay under the snow so are detected by ear, but Great Grays also are excellent visual hunters.

**Head or Feet First Dives?** Great Grays give the illusion of diving face first into the snow to catch prey, but just before hitting the snow they switch to feet first. The feet are folded like a fist which helps them break through a snow crust.

**Melanism:** Great Gray Owls exhibit varying degrees of melanism. Compare a typical individual in Figure 1 with the darker bird in Figure 2. A bird along Halls Road in Whitby in January and February 2005 was intermediate between the two birds pictured here. An almost black individual was photographed last fall in Minnesota.

**Concealment Posture:** Greats Gray Owls rarely use a sleeked upright “dead snag” posture in reaction to humans that is typical of Long-eared Owls and to varying degrees in other owls. However, one bird that roosted by day in a large roadside spruce displayed a moderately sleeked posture and further concealed itself by perching close to the tree’s trunk.

**Human Disturbance:** Some people expressed concern that Great Gray Owls were being disturbed by people getting too close to the owls. Peer pressure and gentle reminders kept most enthusiastic people at a reasonable distance from the owls. Actual problems were minor compared to the tremendous conservation and education benefits gained by those people, especially youngsters, who saw this exciting owl for the first time. The real mortality factor was collisions with vehicles.



Figure 2: Melanistic (darker) Great Gray Owl near Newmarket, Ontario, 19 February 1996. Compare with typical bird in Figure 1. Note darker plumage, dark area between eyes, and larger “black knot” of white bowtie. Photo by Albert Kuhnigk.

#### Acknowledgements

I thank Bruce Falls, Glenn Coady, Mark Cranford, Jean Iron, Marc Johnson, Doug Lockrey, Glenn Murphy (ROM), Mark Peck (ROM), Jon Pleizier, Rayfield Pye and Albert Kuhnigk. I particularly thank Michel Gosselin (CMN) and Ron Tozer for reviewing the manuscript.

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# More Relative Abundance Maps

Andrew Couturier

Bird Studies Canada and Atlas Point Count Committee Member

Sitting down? You will want to be when you hear about the phenomenal effort birders are making with the Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas. Ontario's atlas participants have amassed more than 47,000 point counts during the first four years of the project. With one field season remaining, it is entirely possible that this figure will climb to an incredible 60,000 by project's end. This impressive contribution is being carried out above and beyond the core work of the first Ontario Atlas, which was a precedent-setting volunteer effort in its own right. Ontario Atlas participants can indeed be very proud of their achievements to date. This final year of the project represents an opportunity to fill gaps in coverage, thus making the maps in the future Atlas publication as robust and accurate as possible.

Point count data are being used to create maps of relative abundance for many breeding birds of Ontario. See Figure 2 on opposite page for some draft examples. While the overall goal of the Atlas is to have 25 point counts per square, the Atlas Point Count Committee has determined that for the purposes of creating maps of relative abundance, squares should have a minimum of 10 point counts conducted. Any and all data collected will be useful for some purpose, but for mapping relative abundance, 10 points is the minimum. Squares achieving this minimum level of points so far are illustrated in Figure 1. As you can see from the map, we are well on our way to meeting this target in almost all of southern Ontario and in many parts of the road-accessible north.

The relative abundance maps, based on the point counts, can give quite a different picture than the breeding evidence maps. In the examples provided in Figure 2, notice how the Savannah Sparrow, though widely distributed across the province according to the Breeding Evidence map, shows its highest relative abundance along the Hudson Bay coast. Although the Breeding Evidence maps show that the Nashville Warbler is widespread in the southern Canadian Shield, the relative abundance map shows that it is most common in the Boreal Forest.

Once complete, the point count dataset will be the single most important bird monitoring database in the province, and will be mined by conservation scientists, students, planners, and others for decades to come. Point count locations can be revisited 20 years from now during the third Ontario Atlas to determine if the population centres of birds have shifted as a result of land use pressures, climate change, or other stressors. By being involved in this effort, you are making an important contribution to

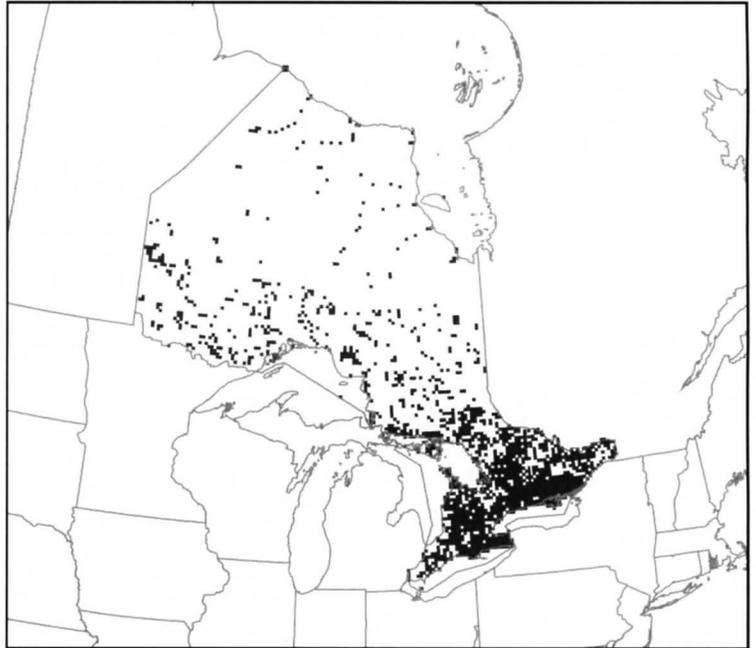


Figure 1. Atlas squares with at least 10 point counts.

the understanding of bird populations, their distribution and abundance, and ultimately to their conservation.

Thanks to everyone who has contributed point counts to the Atlas. You are helping us get the big picture!



Savannah Sparrow carrying food to young at Windmill Ranch on the Carden Alvar on 3 July 2004. Photo by Jean Iron.

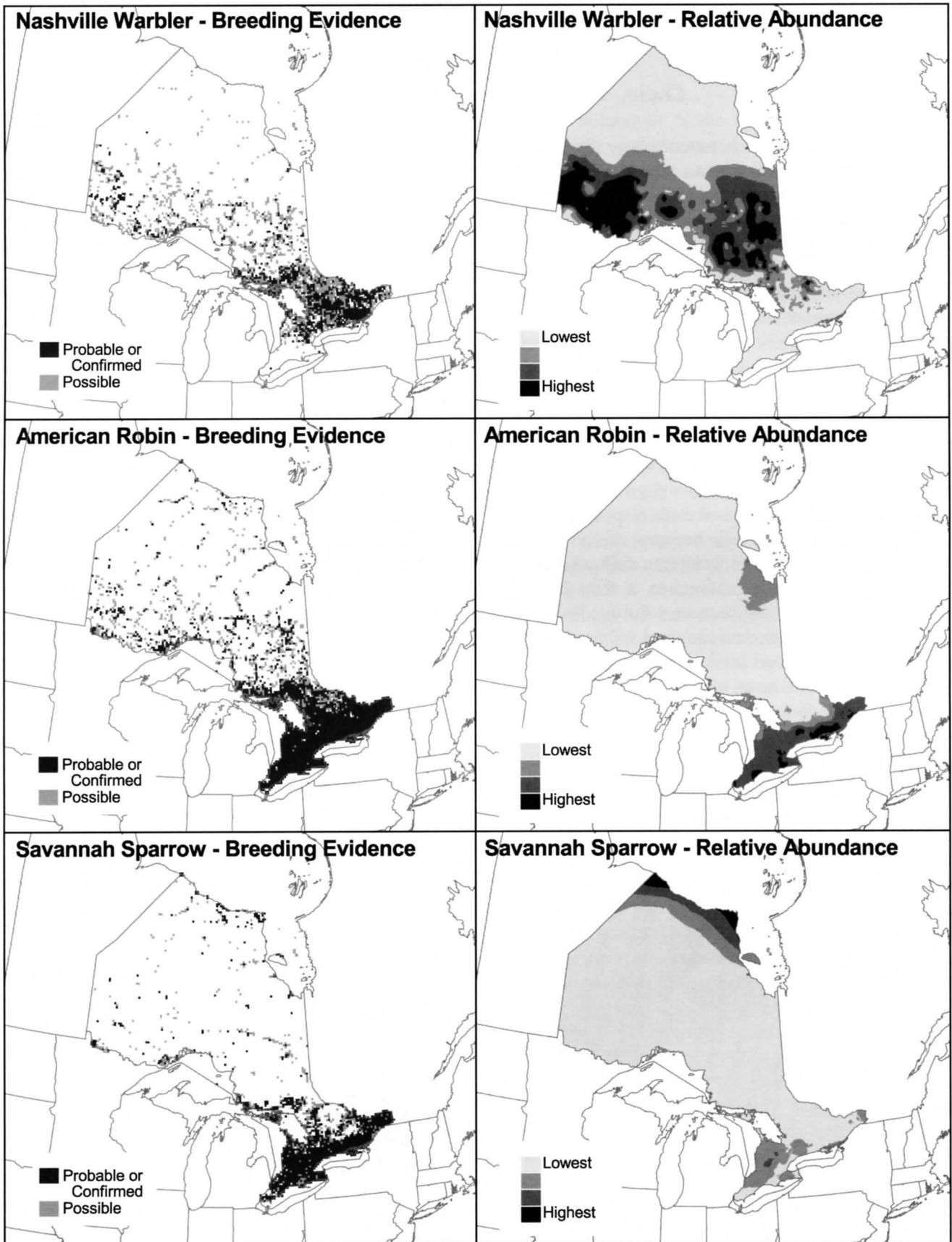


Figure 2. Draft breeding evidence and relative abundance maps for three example species. Note the radically different impression produced by the abundance maps as compared to the breeding evidence maps.

# Publication of the Atlas

## Al Sandilands

### Chair, Atlas Publication Committee

Planning for the new atlas has been underway since 2002 when the Publication Committee was struck. Since 2003, the committee has met regularly to discuss what the contents of the Atlas will be and what it should look like.

From the beginning, it was recognized that the format and content of the first Atlas was excellent. So that was our starting place and the objective was to see how we could make it even better.

One of the first decisions concerned species that occur only in northern Ontario. In the first Atlas, these were relegated to the back of the book and had shorter species accounts than those breeding in the south. In the second Atlas, northern species will be given equal weight and will appear in taxonomic order. Some of these species are very interesting and Ontario supports a significant portion of the global breeding population of certain species.

The contents of the book will be very similar to the first Atlas. There will be an introduction followed by a chapter on the biogeography of Ontario, a summary of how the fieldwork was undertaken and the results were analyzed, an overview of the results, and, of course, the species accounts. The second atlas will be slightly longer than the first, with approximately 700 pages.

For the most part, content of the species accounts will be similar to the first Atlas, but with two major additions. The completion of the second Atlas gives us the opportunity to compare the distribution of species now to the early 1980s. Each species account will have a section that discusses trends in distribution and abundance.

Atlassers have completed thousands of point counts during the second Atlas. This allows us to determine relative abundance of species within their range. A preliminary review of the abundance maps reveals many very interesting patterns. Whereas the first Atlas mapped only the distribution of species, this Atlas will map distribution and abundance.

Not only will most species have two maps (for distribution and abundance), but coloured photographs of each species will be included. For most, there will also be a photograph of the habitat, or other features relevant to the species. In the last Atlas Newsletter, Nicole Kopysh identified the types of photos that we would like to receive from atlassers. If you have photos that may be suitable for publication in the Atlas, I urge you to contact the Atlas office.

Select species will have four-page species accounts. These are species that are of special interest, have much known about them, have significantly changed in distribution or abundance, or are Species at Risk.

Organization of production of the Atlas is well advanced. Many people have volunteered to write species accounts, and most species have a tentative author for their account. Finalization of authors will occur in late summer or early autumn. By September 2006, the Significant Species Committee will have finalized all records submitted on Rare Species/Colonial forms and the database will be completed and made available to authors. About a month later, the final maps will be made available to authors.

Authors will submit their first drafts of species accounts in late 2006 to February 2007. Final editing will occur from February to April 2007. Eleven editors will review the first drafts of the species accounts. These editors are: waterfowl, Ken Abraham (with assistance from Ken Ross); colonials and waterbirds, Chip Weseloh; raptors, Ted Armstrong; shorebirds, Erica Nol; other non-passerines, Al Sandilands; goatsuckers to flycatchers, Ron Tozer; shrikes to wrens, Bill Crins; kinglets to waxwings, Lyle Friesen; warblers, Don Sutherland; emberizids, cardinals, and finches, Jim Rising; and blackbirds, Mike Cadman. Final editing will be complete by April 2007 and proofs will be finalized in August 2007. Publication of the Atlas is scheduled for September 2007.

As an example, the distribution and abundance maps for the Savannah Sparrow are presented on page 11 in Figure 2. To do them full justice, imagine that the two maps take up an entire page, and that they are in colour.

The Publication Committee is committed to producing a very high quality book that will reflect the dedication of all the volunteers that collected the information that made it possible. Thanks to all of you for your hard work and effort!



Young Horned Lark on 19 June 2003 north of the Swan River along the coast of James Bay. Photo by Mark Peck.

# Late Season Atlassing

Mike Cadman

July and early August are key times for atlassing, especially in this final year of the Atlas.

Most birds, in particular neotropical migrants, are most active singing and nest building in late May and early June, so that's the best time to maximize your species count and find elusive birds. But some birds breed later than other species, and quite a few others have more than one brood or will re-nest following an unsuccessful first nesting attempt, so may still be involved in rearing young through much of July and into August. So when it comes to confirming breeding, late season is the way to go. And, as this is your last chance to record breeding evidence during this atlas, we're hoping atlassers will keep on atlassing into the later part of summer. You can obtain guidelines for breeding season dates for each species in your area from Atlas Regional/Square Summary Sheets on the Atlas web page:

<http://www.birdsontario.org/atlas/viewresults.jsp>

Armed with this information, you're all set to make some late season visits.

Atlassing in July and August is different from earlier in the year. Instead of the relatively frenzied activity of June, when every minute counts, atlassing in July and August is more relaxed, contemplative, and comparatively bug free! Song is much diminished, but that is amply compensated for by the increased visibility of both adults and young. Family groups are everywhere, especially in open habitats, wetlands and forest edges. The young are large enough that they make a lot of noise demanding food, and that can make the confirming of breeding relatively simple. There's special delight in tip-toeing through the scrub trying to find a noisy young bird, then waiting to see who arrives to feed it.

Pishing works especially well when birds have young. Late in the season, birds will often pop up with food in their bill when you pish. Carrying food for young is a confirmed breeding category for the atlas. Some ground- or low-nesting species will break into a distraction display if you happen to pish near their nest or young. I've had Chestnut-sided and Black-and-white Warblers do elaborate broken wing-type displays right around my feet.

Confirming breeding for a species in a square is hugely satisfying. You're proving that the species actually does breed in that square, which makes the record of greater significance. At the same time, it's challenging and enjoyable. The challenge is fairly obvious in that birds still go to some lengths to make it hard for you to see them well, especially the young, and the young are cryptic and often difficult to identify on their own. But the enjoyment of taking the extra time to watch and as-

sess the behaviour of the birds as they feed and protect their young connects you to the birds in a way that other birding doesn't.

Of course, caution is required, especially in August, because some species migrate early and birds may appear in your square though they bred hundreds of kilometers further north. If the species isn't known to breed in your area, and you haven't previously recorded breeding evidence in the square, then it's safest not to record that species if you find it in August. If you find compelling evidence that the bird did actually breed in that square, record what you find.

The general rule is that you should stick closely to the atlas codes. FY stands for Fledged Young, but to be safely counted for the atlas, the Fledged Young should be incapable of sustained flight. In the case of birds such as swallows, which often line up along wires, if you find one or two family groups (with visibly young birds – some downy feathers, etc.) of Barn Swallows adjacent to a barn, it's safe to count them as FY. But by the time large groups of swallows start to gather, they may well be migrating birds, so it would be best not to count them as FY.

So have fun in this final field season of the atlas and keep going as long as you can. You can have a well deserved rest later!



Sandhill Crane chick on 16 June 2003 north of the Swan River along the coast of James Bay. Photo by Mark Peck.

**2004 FINANCIAL STATEMENT**  
**Balance Sheet 31 December 2004**

**ASSETS**

	<b>2004</b>	<b>2003</b>
Cash in Bank	\$12,033	\$17,468
RBC T-Bill (Mutual Funds)	0	37,602
Ontario Savings Bonds	45,000	0
Convention Deposit	450	500
Accounts Receivable	4,424	3,366
Accrued Interest	<u>595</u>	<u>0</u>

**LIABILITIES**

	<b>2004</b>	<b>2003</b>
Deferred Membership Dues	\$17,288	\$13,490
Members' Equity		
Balance beginning of Year	45,446	37,542
Net Income for Year	<u>(232)</u>	<u>7,904</u>
Balance end of Year	45,214	45,446

<b>TOTAL</b>	<b><u>\$62,502</u></b>	<b><u>\$58,936</u></b>	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b><u>\$62,502</u></b>	<b><u>\$58,936</u></b>
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**INCOME and EXPENSE STATEMENT**  
**Year Ended 31 December 2004**

**INCOME**

	<b>2004</b>	<b>2003</b>
Membership Dues	\$24,330	\$22,710
Donations	6,873	6,418
Annual Convention (Net)	(575)	998
Baillie Birdathon	2,647	2,792
Advertisements	8,050	7,825
Sale of Merchandise	2,770	2,441
Interest	872	731
Sale of Publications	349	282
GST Rebate	<u>3,349</u>	<u>2,725</u>

**EXPENSES**

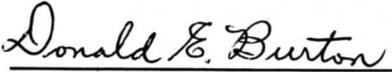
	<b>2004</b>	<b>2003</b>
Printing and Mailing		
- Journal Ontario Birds	\$24,006	\$21,224
- Newsletter OFO News	7,840	5,870
Liability Insurance	2,095	2,090
Field Trips	1,315	2,334
Purchase of Merchandise	1,444	796
Administration	5,012	2,820
Awards	574	134
Stationery and Printing	4,578	2,511
OFO Website and Ontbirds	1,033	649
Equipment Laser Printer	0	590
Donation (Thickson's Woods Land Trust)	<u>1,000</u>	<u>0</u>
<b>Total Expenses</b>	<b><u>48,897</u></b>	<b><u>39,018</u></b>
Net Income for Year	<u>(232)</u>	<u>7,904</u>

<b>TOTAL</b>	<b><u>\$48,665</u></b>	<b><u>\$46,922</u></b>	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b><u>\$48,665</u></b>	<b><u>\$46,922</u></b>
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 \_\_\_\_\_  
 Christopher J. Escott  
 President

  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 Eileen B. Beagan  
 Treasurer

I have examined the 2004 Financial Statements of Ontario Field Ornithologists and reviewed supporting documentation and information supplied by the Treasurer to the extent I deemed necessary. In my opinion, these Financial Statements accurately reflect the financial position of the organization as at December 31, 2004 and the results of its operations for the year then ended.

  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 Donald E. Burton, Auditor

## Thank You OFO Donors

OFO is a registered charity. Donors receive a tax receipt for donations over \$10. Donations are an important source of revenue for OFO. They support our publications, *Ontario Birds* in colour and *OFO News*, *Ontobirds*, the OFO website, field trips, and other services to birders. We are grateful to the following members for their generosity in 2004.

Ken Abraham	Janet Kellan
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Ross James	Verie Jacobs & Doug Woods
Colin D. Jones	Terry Wurdemann
Ian Jeffrey	Kenneth Wyllie
	Arlene & Dennis Young

## In Memory

OFO received special donations in fond memory of John Poon.

## Future OFO Field Trips

Dave Milsom, Coordinator

Phone: 905-857-2235

Email: [milsomdave@hotmail.com](mailto:milsomdave@hotmail.com)

Check trip details on the OFO website: [www.ofo.ca](http://www.ofo.ca)

### August 6 (Saturday) Rock Point Provincial Park and Eastern Lake Erie Shore

**Leader: Willie D'Anna.** Meet 8 a.m. at entrance to Rock Point Provincial Park near entry kiosk. Park entrance fee.

Directions: *From the west on Highway 3*, drive into Dunnville. Where Highway 3 curves left, continue straight on Main Street, staying along the river. When you reach the bridge that crosses the river, do not cross the bridge but continue straight onto County Road 3 eastbound. Go through Stromness and turn right onto Rymer Road, about 8 km from the bridge in Dunnville. Take the first left onto Downy Road. At next intersection turn right. Park entrance comes up shortly on your left. *From the east on Highway 3*, drive into Dunnville and turn left onto Inman Road. Turn right onto the next road, Mumby Road. Follow this to County Road 3 and turn left. Follow directions from bridge in Dunnville above. Shorebirds and early fall migrants.

### August 14 (Sunday) Durham Region and Lake Ontario Marshes

**Leader: Rayfield Pye.** Meet 7:30 a.m. at Lynde Shores Conservation Area parking lot on Victoria Street in Whitby. Exit Hwy 401 at Brock Street (Exit 410). Turn left (south) onto Brock Street. Turn right (west) onto Victoria. Continue 2.5 km to Lynde Shores Conservation Area on the south side. Visits to Cranberry Marsh, Oshawa Second Marsh, Corner Marsh and Frenchman's Bay. Early fall migrant warblers, vireos, flycatchers, shorebirds and butterflies.

### August 21 (Sunday) Palgrave, Tottenham, Schomberg

**Leader: Dave Milsom.** Meet 8 a.m. on Patterson Sideroad just off County Road 50 in Palgrave to visit Palgrave Conservation Area, Tottenham area sod farms and the Schomberg sewage lagoons. Early fall migrants and shorebirds.

### September 18 (Sunday) Presqu'ile Provincial Park

**Leaders: Don and Ian Shanahan.** Meet 8 a.m. at Owen Point Trail (formerly Beach 4) parking lot. Park entrance fee. Fall migrants, shorebirds, hawks.

### October 8 (Saturday) Hamilton, Burlington and Vicinity

**Leader: Tom Thomas.** Meet 8:00 a.m. in Hutch's Restaurant parking lot at Van Wagners Beach on Lake Ontario in Hamilton. From Niagara on QEW, exit Centennial Parkway, turn left onto North Service Road and follow to Van Wagners Beach Road. Continue to Hutch's Restaurant. From Toronto on QEW, exit Woodward Avenue, turn right at lights, then right at next lights, go under bridge, turn right onto Van Wagners Beach Road, and continue to Hutch's Restaurant. Jaegers, gulls, shorebirds, fall migrants.

### October 22 (Saturday) Hawk Cliff and Area.

**Leaders: Pete Read and Ian Platt.** Meet 9:30 a.m. From Hwy 401 interchange 177, take Hwy 4 south through west St. Thomas until it becomes Sunset Drive. Continue about 8 km to Union. Turn east onto County Road 27, Sparta Line Road. Go east one road, about 3 km, to County Road 22 (Fairview Road). Head south. The second road south is County Road 24, (Dexter Line) and you will meet a stop sign. Looking south you will see the sign for Hawk Cliff. Continue south on the dirt road to lake. Park along road allowance. Hawks, waterfowl, gulls and late migrants.

# Turkey Population Catapulting

Ron Pittaway

The Eastern Wild Turkey (*Meleagris gallopavo silvestris*) was extirpated from southern Ontario about 1902 (Clarke 1948). The current successful reintroduction program began in 1984. Now the population is catapulting beyond all expectations. In 2000 there were 35,000 Wild Turkeys in Ontario (Bellamy 2000). By 2005 the population had more than doubled to over 80,000 birds despite an estimated hunter kill of 8,245 in 2004 (MNR Fact Sheet). Turkeys continue to increase and spread. What might be the effects?

**Northern Range Limit:** Historically turkeys occurred mainly in southwestern Ontario (Clarke 1948). They are now common well north of their former range in parts of central and eastern Ontario with records north to Algonquin Park. An isolated population near Sudbury survives in winter primarily on clovers, asters, goldenrods and the fertile fronds of Sensitive Fern (Nguyen et al. 2004), indicating that turkeys can continue to spread northward.

**Do Turkeys Eat Ground Nesting Birds?** Turkeys are omnivores and opportunists (Eaton 1992). I recently watched a flock of turkeys, lined up side-by-side, advancing across a field. They scratched the ground like chickens, pecking and eating plants, invertebrates, and probably small vertebrates. Declining ground nesting birds are vulnerable to cats, foxes, raccoons, skunks, squirrels, crows, and possibly to increasing numbers of turkeys.

**Farm Pest:** One reason for the increasing populations of turkeys is agricultural crops. Some farmers are complaining that turkeys are eating and damaging crops. The problem will worsen.

**Urban Areas:** Turkeys are spreading into conservation areas and large urban green spaces as in Ottawa. They may even spread to Toronto's ravines, High Park and the Toronto Islands. Turkeys will wander into neighbourhoods, particularly in winter, looking for bird feeders. Their droppings are a nuisance (Bennett 1994).

**Road Hazard:** A few years ago my car almost hit a low flying adult male turkey and I have seen several road-killed turkeys.

Because of a turkey's large size and weight, collisions could cause serious accidents, injuries and loss of lives.

**Species At Risk:** In sensitive areas such as Pelee Island in Lake Erie, naturalists fear that large turkey populations could affect salamanders, a regular food item of turkeys (Eaton 1992).

## Acknowledgements

I thank Ron Tozer and Mike Turner for insightful comments.

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## Ontbirds

**Mark Cranford - Coordinator**

*Ontbirds* with over 1800 subscribers is OFO's successful listserv for reporting and getting bird sightings. *Ontbirds* has revolutionized birding in Ontario.

To subscribe, go to this website and follow the directions

<http://mailman.hwcen.org/mailman/listinfo/ontbirds>

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