



# OFO News

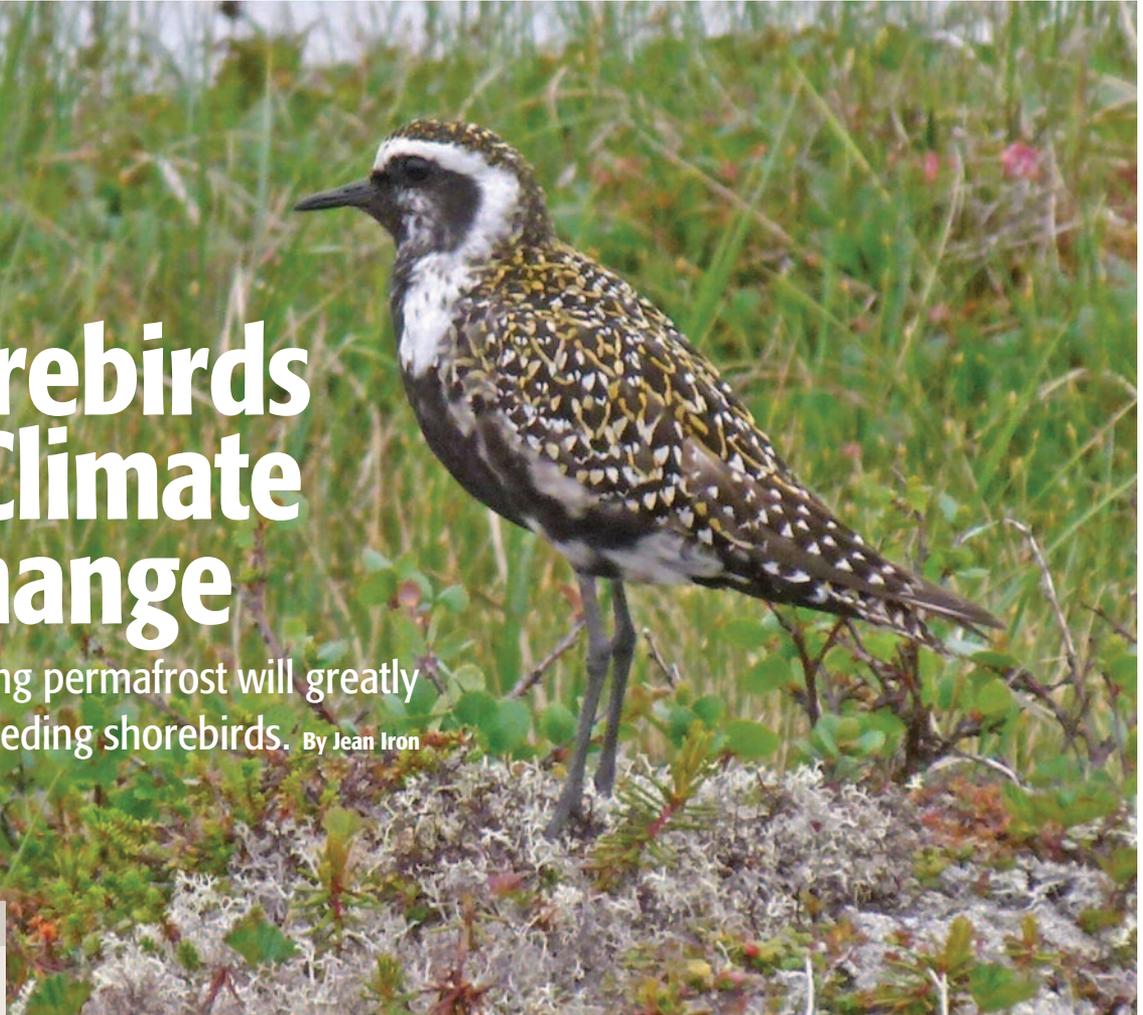
NEWSLETTER OF THE ONTARIO FIELD ORNITHOLOGISTS

## Shorebirds and Climate Change

Disappearing permafrost will greatly affect breeding shorebirds. *By Jean Iron*

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Female American Golden-Plover near its chicks on tundra ridge near Burntpoint Camp. 12 July 2012. *Photo: Jean Iron*

LAST SUMMER, from 22 June to 18 July 2012, I volunteered to take part in a new shorebird and wetlands project for the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources (OMNR) at Burntpoint Creek Research Camp on Hudson Bay. With advancing climate change and concerns about the loss of permafrost, the Ministry is undertaking a long-term study of Ontario's tundra ecosystem along Hudson Bay, the most southerly tundra in the world. In the study's first year we collected data about breeding shorebirds and other birds dependent on this narrow coastal tundra zone, which is underlain by continuous permafrost. There is concern that this southern zone of permafrost may disappear, which

will greatly affect breeding shorebirds. Under the direction of Ken Abraham, Research Scientist, OMNR is a partner in the Arctic Shorebird Demographics Network. This program, coordinated by Manomet Center for Conservation Sciences in the United States, connects breeding shorebird research sites across the Arctic to determine why many shorebird species are declining.

Aboard an OMNR de Havilland Twin Otter aircraft, we took off from Moosonee early in the morning of 22 June and flew out over the vast Hudson Bay Lowlands. No roads lead to Burntpoint Creek Camp. It is in the wilderness of Polar Bear Provincial Park, the largest provincial park in Ontario,



There was nothing but us, the wind, wildflowers, birds and other wildlife



# eBird Update

By Mike Burrell

THE USE OF eBIRD IN ONTARIO continues to be phenomenal. Ontario is now regularly one of the top three contributing states/provinces of data, usually only behind California and New York. Ontario eBirders should be proud of the comprehensive dataset of bird observations they are contributing to this worldwide archive. The data are already being used for research projects and publications and by many different organizations for a myriad of purposes.

Not only is the amount of data coming in impressive, the growth continues to be staggering. 2012 was by far the biggest year yet for Ontario (averaging several hundred checklists submitted each day). A very impressive 10 eBirders reported 300 or more species in 2012, while nine eBirders cracked the 1000 checklist mark. With the volume of real-time data now coming in we can watch fine-detailed avian events unfold live. Last summer's Dickcissel invasion and the fall 2012 finch irruption were both marvellously documented with eBird, as has been the irruption of Barred Owls south of their normal winter range. But don't take my word for it — check it out yourself. If you want to know what's happening with birds in Ontario you can almost certainly find the answer with eBird.

2013 is already on a pace for another great year of birding and eBirding. At the end of January 173 species have been reported, up from last year's 167 at the same time. Also impressive is a whopping 12 eBirders already over the 100-species mark and an even more impressive 100 birders with over 50 species. Not to be outdone, 12 eBirders are over 100 checklists for the year and 40 have submitted over 50 checklists — well done by everyone.

There have been a couple new eBird features since the last update in *OFO News*. Most notably, you can now embed photos, video, and audio links within your checklists. This is great for documenting rare species or just linking up your photos from a trip to your bird checklist. Be sure to check it out. Another big addition is "Did you Know?" Records submitted to eBird are permanently archived for the future and are already helping scientists and conservationists better manage the world's birds.

[www.ebird.ca](http://www.ebird.ca)



Semipalmated Plovers nested on dry gravel ridges close to the coast. 2 July 2012. *Left top:* Aerial view of Burntpoint Camp on 22 June 2012. *Centre:* Hudsonian Godwits perch in trees on the breeding grounds. 10 July 2012. *Left below:* Whimbrel on watch on 28 June 2012. *Photos:* Jean Iron

established to protect the denning area of Polar Bears. As we approached, our plane circled the camp situated on a long ridge covered with lichens and arctic wildflowers, 3.5 km from Hudson Bay, which was still covered with pack ice at the end of June. The camp, surrounded by a solar-powered electric fence to keep out Polar Bears, overlooks a small lake to the west and wide-open tundra wetlands to the east, both perfect breeding habitats for shorebirds and other northern birds. After unloading supplies for one month and bidding farewell to the departing crew that had been there since 5 June, we watched the plane take off south, leaving our small crew of four alone for the next four weeks. There was nothing but us, the wind, wildflowers, birds and other wildlife. As things settled, the air was filled with the songs of territorial Whimbrels, Hudsonian Godwits, and Dunlins. Red-throated Loons nesting on nearby lakes called overhead as they flew towards Hudson Bay looking for open water to catch fish. This was the beginning of our quest to document more about shorebirds and the breeding birds of Ontario's Hudson Bay coast. Years of future data will document the changing climate, allowing comparisons to base line information. It is expected that changes in abun-

dance, breeding range, dates of occurrence, habitat use, and more will occur.

Julie Belliveau was our crew leader in charge of the camp during this period. She was studying at Trent University and her thesis fit one of the project's objectives: to discover what shorebirds and other birds are eating in the tundra ponds and wetlands. Matt Birarda assisted Julie with her invertebrate research. For biodiversity studies, he also maintained other invertebrate traps and small mammal live traps. He regularly measured the depth from the surface to the permafrost.. Jim Sauer of Ottawa was a birder, volunteer and retired RCMP officer. He and I teamed up to complete three survey routes each about 12 to 15 km long over difficult marshy terrain and easier-walking tundra ridges. In one day we usually completed one of the routes, or at least much of it, the next day another route, and so on. Our job was to extend the work of the first crew by looking for nesting shorebirds and other nests they had found. We determined whether a nest was successful or had been depredated, found new breeding birds, and documented all the birds using the 50 or so tundra ponds on the three routes. Recording the temperature and pH levels of the study ponds will be used for comparison in future years.



Male Willow Ptarmigan were conspicuous around camp and on survey routes. 26 June 2012.



## We were treated to close views of specialty birds found in Ontario only along the Hudson Bay coast



Open tundra wetland is breeding habitat of Hudsonian Godwits, Whimbrel, Dunlin, Wilson's Snipe and Least Sandpipers. Distant Hudsonian Godwit on a hummock.

Photo: Jean Iron

In addition to three survey routes, we continued to inventory and track all nesting birds in two intensive study plots 400 m by 400 m square established near camp by the first crew. In July we also monitored southbound shorebird migration along the Hudson Bay coast. Already large flocks of post-breeding Sanderlings from the High Arctic were migrating along the coast, and Short-billed Dowitchers (subspecies *hendersoni*) from the Hudson Bay Lowlands gathered in flocks on coastal ponds.

We observed the behaviour of nest predators. Last summer (2012) the small mammal population was low, so predators such as Parasitic Jaegers, Herring Gulls, and Red Foxes most likely turned to ground-nesting birds for food, more so than they would in a normal year when there were small mammals to eat. Another sign of a low small mammal year was the absence of Short-eared Owls, but we had a few Northern Harriers which were probably taking birds.

It was a thrill to see shorebirds in full breeding plumage on their nesting grounds and to appreciate the camouflage their cryptic plumages create. For example, the black, gold and white upper parts of an American Golden-Plover match the colours and patterns of the lichens, mosses and vegetation on a tundra ridge where they nest. We monitored several territories of Hudsonian Godwits without finding a nest of this secretive species. We always knew where they were because they perched noisily in the few scattered trees, on the lookout for intruders. Whimbrel had breeding territories throughout the study area. Seeing these large shorebirds on their breeding grounds was especially fascinating

because of my involvement in the Whimbrel Migration Project in Toronto.

Other nesting shorebirds were Semipalmated Plover on dry gravel ridges close to the coast, Killdeer, which on Hudson Bay is close to the northern extent of its breeding range, Least Sandpiper, Wilson's Snipe, and Short-billed Dowitcher.

We were treated to close views of specialty birds found in Ontario only along the Hudson Bay coast. Willow Ptarmigan were the most engaging birds as they showed no fear and came to camp several times a day to dust bathe in the exposed gravel. Up to five males and eight females at the same time performed this ritual, which is believed to help keep their feathers in good condition by controlling mites and other parasites.

A big attraction was a pair of Pacific Loons that nested on a small tundra pond. These are some of the most easterly and southerly breeding Pacifics in the world. They were less common than Red-throated Loons.

White-crowned Sparrows have two subspecies that intergrade on the southern Hudson Bay coast: the western *gambelli* and eastern nominate *leucophrys*, so it was fun



Setting insect traps *left to right*: Jim Sauer, Julie Belliveau and Matt Birarda



Male Smith's Longspur on territory. 28 June 2012. Smith's Longspurs are a great rarity in southern Ontario, but were common breeders between camp and the coast. This longspur is at its most easterly distribution along Ontario's Hudson Bay coast. *Photos: Jean Iron*

looking for birds that resembled *gambelli*, and many did. In southern Ontario we see mostly *leucophrys*.

The mammals were very exciting. For several days thousands of Woodland Caribou of the migratory Forest Tundra ecotype moved past the camp, feeding on lichens and fresh vegetation. The herds comprised mostly females with calves, but there were some males with big growing racks of antlers covered with velvet. We saw several Gray Wolves that were following the Caribou. A pair of Red Foxes visited camp regularly and cleverly ducked the electric fence without getting a shock. They were either caching food or digging up previously stored food. Finally, two days before our departure, a Polar Bear coming from the coast wandered close to camp. It likely had just swum in from Hudson Bay to spend the summer on land, waiting for the ice to form again in late fall.

The camp was comfortable and the food was excellent, but one had to be ready to give up conveniences of home such as warm showers, indoor plumbing and internet. With no service for iPhones and Androids, expensive satellite phone calls were the only way to contact the outside

world. Daily chores such as cooking, washing dishes and cleaning up were shared. One quickly learned about the quirks of heating stoves and was thankful to have a sleeping bag good to  $-10^{\circ}\text{C}$  in case the stove in the sleeping cabin went out at night. The wilderness comfort station was within the compound but away from the living quarters, so it was a breezy walk on a cold night with the north wind clipping in off Hudson Bay. We heard about the heat wave in southern Ontario and across the USA, while we experienced cool, but mostly comfortable temperatures. Biting insects weren't usually a problem. They were manageable with the right protective clothing and spray during the day plus the strong northwest wind, and a mosquito net over sleeping bags at night.

Then there was the isolation to deal with. If you love the wilderness and the calls of Whimbrel, Wolves and Caribou, this is the place for you, but if you are prone to homesickness and missing your family, a month is a long time. Good health and physical fitness are important as we were a long way from the nearest doctor and medical support. Physical conditioning improved with daily walking. We were

trained in Polar Bear safety and were comfortable in the field, but constantly alert and watching for them. Outside the camp enclosure, one member of the team always carried a firearm for safety.

Having a disciplined approach to covering the scientific protocols is a basic requirement. Even though each day was packed with required activities, it was possible to enjoy the fresh air and reflect on how fortunate we are in Ontario to have such biodiversity. Many times the only sounds were those of nature and our hearts beating. We felt satisfied knowing these studies will contribute to understanding the effects of climate change and help preserve this fragile wilderness.

*Acknowledgements:* Ken Abraham and Ron Pittaway provided helpful input into the preparation of this article. I thank Ken Abraham, Research Scientist with the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources, for inviting me to participate in this shorebird project. Rod Brook, Kim Bennett and Sarah Hagey of the OMNR provided logistical support. I appreciated the friendship and dedication of others in our crew: Julie Belliveau, Matt Birarda and Jim Sauer. Lastly, Ron Pittaway crafted our satellite phone conversations into informative posts on the Ontbirds and Shorebirds listservs for all to enjoy.



Sited at the head of a spectacular extension of Georgian Bay's waters, Owen Sound is surrounded by the ramparts of the Niagara Escarpment. The city is blessed by these natural features and the unique complex of ecosystems and species that they harbour. It is no surprise then that it is home to the Owen Sound Field Naturalists.



# Owen Sound Field Naturalists

By Peter Middleton

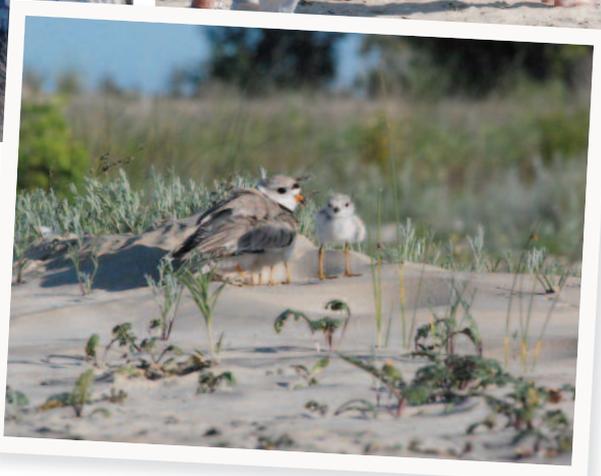
THE CLUB CAME INTO EXISTENCE following a presentation made by two local naturalists entitled Bird Watching in Grey County. The response to the presentation led to the formation of the Owen Sound Field Naturalists (OSFN). The club's first meeting was held in January 1989 with Dr. Doug Larson speaking about his recent discovery of ancient cedars along the Escarpment. Lorraine Brown became the first President. They both joined in the same roles at the twentieth Anniversary meeting

of the club in 2009. Among the early members were well-known birders, John Miles and Tom Murray (one of the last people to see both Bachman's Warbler and Ivory-billed Woodpecker).

Today, the OSFN boasts a membership of over three hundred, including over one hundred families. It supports, with the Grey Sauble Conservation Authority, an active Young Naturalists group.

Over the years the club has undertaken many projects. Early activity saw the OSFN

take the lead in constructing an interpretive boardwalk over an extensive fen at Oliphant, on the Bruce Peninsula and erecting an eagle viewing platform at Baie du Dore north of the Bruce nuclear facility near Kincardine. The number of Bald Eagles that may be observed from this tower has grown remarkably in recent years, with counts of over 60 individuals being tallied. In addition several Osprey platforms were installed at strategic locations supporting the resurgence of this spectacular species.



Club members have been active participants in various provincial programs to monitor birds. The first and second Breeding Bird atlas projects saw extensive field work done by people who are now members of OSFN. The results showed this area of Ontario to be one of the most diverse in habitats and species occurrence.

Since the re-colonization of Sauble Beach by Piping Plover in 2007 (the last successful nesting in southern Ontario had been in 1976) club members have been active monitors of the birds. Thanks to the efforts of current OSFN President Stewart Nutt, over one hundred volunteers were recruited in the first year to monitor the nests and young and to educate the public about this endangered species and the initiatives undertaken to protect them. Since 2007, Piping Plover young have successfully fledged from one of the busiest beaches in Ontario annually, due in large part to the diligence of these volunteers, under the direction of Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources (OMNR).

A very successful initiative of the club has been publication of seven field guides focussing on the riches of the Grey-Bruce area. The OSFN's Plant Committee first produced *A Checklist of Vascular Plants of Grey and Bruce Counties*. They went on to publish excellent guides on Orchids, and Ferns that

are ongoing best-sellers. Additional guides have focussed on Geology of the two counties, a guide to the notable trees of Owen Sound, endangered species in the area and a guide to Asters, Goldenrods and Fleabanes. These publications have over the years been extremely popular and have provided a source of funds for special projects undertaken by the club.

A committee of the OSFN and Saugeen Field Naturalists jointly published an updated *Checklist of the Birds* in 1998, adding breeding species to the list. The re-established Bird Records Committee met for the first time on 14 April 2013 and will again be updating the checklist. They are currently reviewing over 20 species new to the two counties since 1998.

The club is increasingly active as stewards of various Nature Conservancy of Canada (NCC), and Ontario Nature (ON) properties. It owns no property of its own, but has established a Conservation Trust

Fund aimed at supporting future conservation acquisitions, either by groups such as the NCC and ON, or by itself.

The club continues to be active with monthly indoor meetings and outdoor rambles. These focus on the wealth of the local natural environment that provides birds, plants and extraordinary landscapes at every turn in Grey and Bruce Counties. The Owen Sound Christmas Bird Count, along with seven others in Grey and Bruce counties are supported enthusiastically by local club members every year, as they have since the club's inception. These are a good example of engaged naturalists enjoying a passion, contributing to science and continuing to discover the changes and hidden treasures of the natural world. Through this type of activity they become a voice for ongoing conservation and environmental literacy. In a changing world that is of great importance.

*Clockwise:*  
**Western Tanager on the Bruce Peninsula.**  
*Photo: Rob Kearns*  
**Malcolm Bluff along the Niagara Escarpment, a recently protected area in conjunction with Ontario Nature.**  
**Observers of Piping Plovers, including the flagged off area where the plovers were nesting.**  
**Piping Plovers at Sauble Beach.**  
*Photos: Peter Middleton*

# Sarnia Lakewatch

The late Dennis F. Rupert produced quite a database of bird passages that remains unmatched to this day.

By Blake A. Mann



Sarnia lakewatch. Photo: Blake Mann

ONE OF THE BEST PLACES to view pelagic species in southwestern Ontario is at the mouth of Lake Huron where it feeds into the St. Clair River, north of the city of Sarnia. Located at the north end of Fort Street from Point Edward, it has been known by many names such as Sarnia Waterworks, Point Edward Lighthouse, or Point Edward Lakewatch. It is a misnomer since there is no lighthouse there, just a range light for incoming ships. As well, the parking lot (just north of the Sarnia water intake plant) is actually within the Sarnia city limits along a strip that extends inland for a couple of hundred metres to border the village of Point Edward.

Whatever you call it, birders will be stationed there in the autumn on strong northerly winds in hopes of seeing jaegers, uncommon to rare gulls and waterfowl. Best winds are straight from the north, or NNW and sometimes NNE. The stronger the better.

Birders can sit in their cars since the parking lot faces almost directly north onto Lake Huron. Often it is too unbearably cold and windy to stand outside for any length

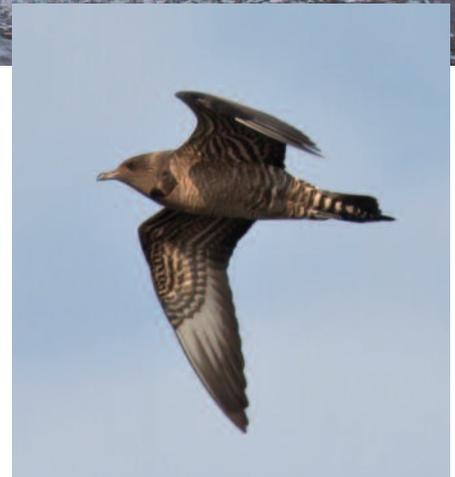
of time. Scopes can be set up on the lawn in less harsh conditions. Michigan birders often come here for better viewing as their lookout spot at Lighthouse Park in Port Huron does not provide as good of a vantage point.

The fall birding season extends from late August through the end of December, but peak times are late October into November when Black-legged Kittiwakes, Sabine's Gulls and jaegers are on the move in good numbers.

Many years ago some local birders at Sarnia decided to see if there was an advantage in going out into the lake on a boat during a suitable wind. It was found that birders who stayed onshore saw much more than those on the boat. Obviously one's position in a boat leads to a more restricted view.

This birding hotspot was well-covered in the past, as the late Dennis F. Rupert faithfully monitored birds here. He took every opportunity available to pursue one of his favourite pastimes.

As a result, he produced quite a database of bird passages that remains unmatched to this day.



Long-tailed Jaeger. Photo: Mike Bouman

In the February 1995 *OFO News* (vol. 13, no.1) Dennis wrote a short article entitled "Sarnia Waterworks" in which he listed some of his data. Analysing this information, one may come to the conclusion that things have changed in recent times as in some cases the numbers of today fall quite short. Perhaps it is the change in weather patterns, and/or fewer birders at the location that may explain the recent shortfall.

However, all three jaegers, Black-legged Kittiwakes and Sabine's Gulls are still recorded almost annually. An average of two Sabine's are seen each year, which correspond to the findings that Dennis listed.



Harlequin Duck. Photo: Blake Mann

Many rare birds have been documented here such as Common Eider, Pacific Loon, Northern Gannet, Magnificent Frigatebird, Gyrfalcon and Mew Gull. More recently an Ancient Murrelet (7 November 2004) was seen on a strong northwesterly wind. Less common birds often observed include King Eider, Harlequin Duck, Purple Sandpiper, Red Phalarope, Laughing Gull, Franklin's Gull, Little Gull and Eared Grebe. It is not uncommon in the fall to see a Short-eared Owl coming in straight off the lake from the north! In recent years, it is my observation that there are two to three really good days per autumn at the lakewatch.

Just last fall on 29-30 October, with probably the strongest north wind ever experienced there, there was a flurry of avian activity. As a result of the strong winds of Hurricane Sandy, waterbirds (especially ducks and gulls) concentrated at this funnel to the entrance of the St. Clair River; they were unable to travel any distance. The many birders present were able to witness the largest concentration of Brant ever recorded there on 30 October.

As many as 250 Brant were essentially grounded there.

Hundreds of waterfowl were present, and birders at the site had fun picking out various gulls. On those days, species recorded included Franklin's Gull, Thayer's Gull, Iceland Gull, Lesser Black-backed Gull, Glaucous Gull, "Nelson's" Gull, Sabine's Gull (2) and Black-legged Kittiwake (3) not to mention the four common species of gulls we normally see. At least two Red Phalarope were also in the mix.

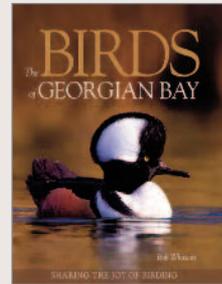
Last fall jaegers were rather scarce, but in contrast, the fall of 2011 was a banner year. The first day of October was the best in years with all three jaeger species being seen including a Pomarine, two Long-tailed, and about a dozen other jaegers, most being Parasitic. Black-legged Kittiwake and Sabine's Gull were noted as well.

This fall many birders will again be at the lakewatch on the next strong northerly wind to continue the Dennis Rupert tradition.

# Book Reviews

## **The Birds of Georgian Bay Sharing the Joy of Birding**

2012. Bob Whittam, Wye Marsh Wildlife Centre, Midland, Ontario. Hardcover, 240 pages. \$34.95 CDN. ISBN: 978-0-9880994-0-1A



The stunning Hooded Merganser photo on the cover will surely entice anyone with even the slightest interest in birds to pick up this book. Although the photos and illustrations are beautifully laid out,

it is through reading the quotes, anecdotes, and informative text in this engaging book that one understands the joy the author wants to share. Once you begin reading, it is almost impossible to put the book down.

*The Birds of Georgian Bay* provides something for everyone from the beginner to experienced birders. The 240 pages are packed with information on a wide variety of topics, including how to choose binoculars, where to go birding around Georgian Bay, what species to expect in which habitat, information on life history, status and conservation efforts.

Chapter by chapter the book draws the reader along from the basics of birding to the final chapter on the geology of Georgian Bay. Alternate names (scientific, French, and nicknames) for various species, historical facts, and identification tips add depth to the book. Insights into the rise and fall of various species helps everyone gain a better understanding of our human impact on population changes. Would birders be so willing to condemn cormorants if they considered our involvement in the extinction of species in the way that the author so eloquently states?

From Mozart's starling to Jean Chretien's duck, the book is filled with amusing anecdotes and tidbits that will make you smile, laugh, or say "I never knew that." Even long-time birders will find something new in the book as the author has included up-to-date research and facts.

The book itself is a work of art — beautifully written in easy-to-read fonts, full of gorgeous photos, with visually appealing maps and lists.

The only (small) drawback is that the list of organizations devoted to bird research, and the conservation and stewardship of habitat is heavily weighted to the eastern side of Georgian Bay. People who live on or visit the west side and want to become involved in these activities might have found it helpful if more of the organizations on the Bruce Peninsula had been included.

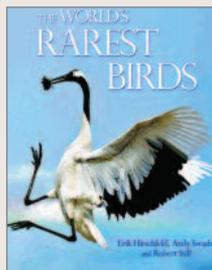
Anyone who reads this book will surely have a better understanding and appreciation of birds and their intricate connection to the natural world.

Cindy Cartwright

### The World's Rarest Birds

2013. Erik Hirschfeld, Andy Swash & Robert Still. Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 08540. Hardcover 360 pages. \$45.00 USD. ISBN: 978-0-691-15596-8.

How does one go about finding photos of the world's rarest birds – specifically the 590 species of



birds classified as Endangered or Critically Endangered? Well, simple – sort of – hold an international photo contest and invite the best photographers in the world to provide their photos of the selected species. Oh yeah – and hope some of them have photos of species for which no previous photographs exist. Small order! This netted photo documentation for 515 of these species. The authors then commissioned Tomasz Cofta, a renowned artist, to illustrate the remaining 75 species for which no photographic evidence could be found.

Well, what is the book really about and did it accomplish its goal to provide up-to-date information on these species at risk? The book seeks to provide current information on conservation challenges, threatened birding hotspots, distribution, population estimates, status, conservation needs and key threats. Recognizing that the pressures species face vary geographically, they subdivide the world into seven regions:

(1) Europe and the Middle East, (2) Africa and Madagascar, (3) Asia, (4) Australasia, (5) the Oceanic Islands, (6) North America, Central America & the Caribbean and (7) South America.

The introduction to the book is thorough and encompassing, starting with a chapter that deals with endemic species and important bird areas, diversity and distribution and bird/human interactions. The second chapter explains how the species were chosen for the book and how birds are classified by BirdLife International. Deeper in the chapter, they reveal an analysis of which species are truly gone vs. those that likely are extinct and they describe the consequences of this simple designation as it impacts conservation efforts. After all, there's no need to fund a species' recovery if there are no birds left. The next chapter deals with threats birds face from various human or naturally induced activities, such as agriculture, aquaculture, logging and plant harvesting, hunting and trapping, residential and commercial development, fire and fire management, climate change, severe weather, geological events,

### The Crossley ID Guide – Raptors

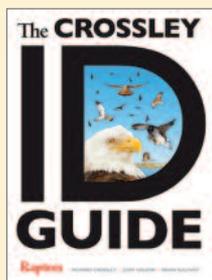
2013. Richard Crossley, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 08540. Softcover 286 pages. \$29.95 USD. ISBN 13: 978-0-691-15740-5.

In Crossley's *ID Guide: Eastern Birds*, he states that current field guides may be making it too easy for birders by leading them to the identification by using "proven" techniques, such as Peterson's arrows or depicting only select postures and backdrops that reflect the author's biases. He believes that birders are taught to rely too much on colour, and therefore tend to ignore the gross features of the birds. In contrast he strives to teach the reader by placing the bird into its natural environment, doing the things it does. I must admit that I had misgivings about the precursor to this book, but these have been allayed in this volume. The basic difference is not in a change of his style or approach, but merely in the scope of this book versus the other. This one only deals with raptors, not all the birds in eastern North America.

The inside front cover forces the reader to immediately start learning for it is filled with aerial displays of 34 species of raptors. The only thing I didn't like about this was that Crossley did not provide the names of the birds but rather used the breeding bird code identifiers for the

species, without first adding a key or explaining what they meant. The brief introductory chapters deal with migration, moult, grouping of raptors (e.g. accipiters, buteos, etc.), bird topography – and that's it – five pages total, but that's all you need in my opinion for the book is about raptors not myriad other peripheral topics.

Let's look at how he covers the species he discusses in the book. For example, the Turkey Vulture receives three full pages of dedicated space in the plates section and it shares a couple more with the Black Vulture from a comparative perspective. In all, over 35 images (plus about 50 more where they appear as specks in an ascending kettle) are presented in various postures, in varying light, from varying distances for this



species and for each age class. Eastern and western birds are treated separately to show known morphological or plumage differences. Assuredly, almost any sighting the reader has ever had of a Turkey Vulture will be represented by one or more of these images. The text accompanying the species account is detailed and includes length, wing span, and a cross reference to the detailed account that follows later in the book. It also speaks about identification, similar species, ageing, habitat, migration, and food. As the plates continue to be revealed for each of the 34

species covered, with each turning page, every species receives similar detailed treatment. After about 162 pages of plates, he offers more information for each species, including a very detailed range map, which thankfully includes Canada, flight style, plumages, geographic variation, moult, comparison to similar species, status and distribution, voice and migration.

The plates deserve mention for their artistic attributes as well as their scientific value, for each depicts habitat and places everything in perspective. I particularly liked the ones that showed the Northern Harriers over a mustard field, the Red-tails over an old farmstead, the White-tailed Kites along a coastal shore, and the Prairie Falcon in a red rock canyon.

Scattered throughout the book are 32 interesting pictorial quizzes where several hawks are depicted in varying flight poses, good and bad light, coming and going, demonstrating various age classes and at various distances from the observer. The reader then has to identify each in turn to test his or her skill level. This is a great learning tool for the novice and wonderful refresher for the experienced hawk watcher.

Well, I must say that I thoroughly enjoyed the book and see it as a wonderful addition to the growing library of knowledge on North American birds of prey.

Geoff Carpentier

human disturbance, pollution, transportation, energy production, mining, dams and water abstraction, and fishing. This chapter alone may be worth the price of the book as it is well researched and written and nicely presented.

From here, they dive into the task of providing the information that is the focus of the book, in seven regionally defined areas. Each regional report starts out with a table that outlines each of the BirdLife partners for each country in each region. For example in the chapter dealing with the Middle East and Europe, they list 52 partners. This is a handy reference for those seeking information from sub-regions as well. Region specific conservation challenges are described, with specific examples offered to the reader. For each of the 590 species, they provide a great deal of information in a small space, including: common and scientific name, status, population estimate and whether it is declining, stable or increasing, threats, a statement describing its status and the reasons for its decline. Each species is represented by a photo or original painting, a nicely detailed map showing its range and every account is linked to the species account in BirdLife International's website via a QR code. In all, 970 photos, 103 illustrations and 610 colour maps grace the pages of this book.

The book closes with a section on data deficient species where 60 more species are described. Appendices then list 130 species known to be extinct at the time the book was published and provide analyses for globally threatened bird families.

All in all this is an excellent and current book that adds greatly to the information found on BirdLife International's website, the *Threatened Birds of the World* tome published by Lynx Edicions and the *Handbook of the Birds of the World* series, also by Lynx Edicions. If you have any interest in why the birds of the world are declining or which species are most threatened, this is the book for you. I encourage you to consider adding it to your library.

Geoff Carpentier

# Blackbird Migration Spectacle

By Larry Monczka

LATE IN THE AFTERNOON of 17 March 2013 my wife, Kathy Pickard, and I arrived at the viewing platform at Big Creek Marsh just off the causeway to Long Point. The weather was sunny, with only scattered clouds, and minimal to no wind. The temperature was hovering around the freezing mark. The weather forecast for the next day predicted the arrival of a large cold front with snow, freezing rain, rain and higher winds

From the platform we could hear a large number of Tundra Swans in the inner bay, just across the road to the east. The cottonwoods and marsh grasses obstructed our view of Lake Erie, but small groups of swans occasionally flew overhead from the bay toward the marsh. Sandhill cranes were noisily calling in the marsh to the west.

Not long after our arrival, we had a very large mixed flock of Red-winged Blackbirds and Common Grackles pass overhead, moving south at tree top level. We were amazed by the size of the flock and could hear their flight calls and the sound of their wing beats. For the next three hours until sunset, we witnessed a broken but steady stream of these same species passing by.

It was interesting to observe the precision of the movement over time. Although some birds flew independently alongside the mass of birds, for the most part, the dense flocks exhibited remarkably similar flight behaviour. They funnelled along the causeway, streaming from north to south in a narrow band. The flocks were concentrated and flowed quite precisely over and around the crowns of the trees, for all intents and purpose with one mind. The sheer numbers were astonishing. We couldn't begin to enumerate the individual birds in these dense formations over the hours we were there. A hundred thousand plus, plus, plus?

Serendipity led us to being in the right place at the right time to observe this seemingly endless spectacle of thousands and thousands of blackbirds moving en masse overhead. It was a thrilling experience and brought to mind the records from days gone by of the now extinct Passenger Pigeon.

For the next three hours until sunset, we witnessed a broken but steady stream of these same species passing by.

Photo: Latry Monczka



Cave Swallow from Point Pelee National Park,  
November 13, 2012: year bird #343.



# An Ontario Big Year

Article and photos by Josh Vandermeulen

THE YEAR 2012 WAS SHAPING UP to be a great year for me to attempt an Ontario Big Year. What is a Big Year? Essentially, it is an attempt to see as many bird species as possible in one calendar year, in a particular geographic area. It takes commitment, time and depending on the area, money to be successful. I was graduating from the University of Guelph in April, giving me eight months without school obligations. I was also not yet working full time but in very good shape financially. In addition to exploring new areas in the province, I was looking forward to seeing species that are found in the far reaches of Ontario, such as Black-billed Magpie and Franklin's Gull in Rainy River or Black Guillemot and Northern Fulmar along the James Bay coast. While Glenn Coady's long standing record of 338 species seemed a tall task, I was ready.

When January 1 rolled around, I was in Nova Scotia, visiting my girlfriend Laura and her family for the holidays. During the last few days of my trip I was using as much willpower as I could muster to refrain from checking Ontbirds every five minutes, especially with news of a Mountain Bluebird and Black-throated Gray Warbler not far from my home in Guelph.

I came away with a greater appreciation of Ontario's wild spaces and the exceptional species that call them home.

My plane touched down in Ontario late on January 6 and I drove home to Guelph, stopping at several locations to try for owls. Year Bird #1 was a calling Eastern Screech-Owl late on that cold, crisp night — a great way to start the year. The early months of 2012 were fairly hectic as I raced around the province, trying to see as many rarities as I could, while missing as few classes as possible. To beat the record I estimated that I would need to see around 25 rarities as well as all the regularly occurring species. Highlights from the first few months included Mountain Bluebird, Black Vulture, nearly all the “winter specialties,” eight species of owls, and self-found Fish Crow while birding the Niagara River with Andrew Keaveney. The Fish Crows were the first winter occurrence for the province, and the 100th species for my Big Year. The real highlight though was a whirlwind trip with Barb Charlton that covered 4000 km over six

days in northern Ontario, in our successful bid to see Gray-crowned Rosy Finch, Harris's Sparrow, and Spotted Towhee. It was my first taste of the north, and I could not wait to go back.

During March and April I struggled to balance my priorities at school with the urge to chase rarities. Fortunately I still attended class at least one day a week, and I was successful seeing species like Smew, Varied Thrush, and Scissor-tailed Flycatcher. The Smew, seen at Long Point a few days after it was found by Ron Ridout, was my second Ontario Smew in two and a half months.

Free of my obligations with school by mid-April, I revved up my birding a notch and lived out of my car (and the homes of generous birders in the Point Pelee area) for six weeks. During this time I birded dawn to dusk and racked up a solid list of rarities including Western Tanager on the Bruce Peninsula, Curlew Sandpiper at Hillman Marsh, and Bell's Vireo at Point Pelee. Species #300 was Piping Plover on a warm, calm evening in mid May. It was a fitting species for #300 with its conservation success story in recent years in Ontario. Additionally, I was successful seeing several tough breeding species in early June — Kirtland's Warbler in eastern Ontario, and both King Rail and Northern Bobwhite on Walpole Island.

Between early June and mid October my list climbed from 314 species to 335 species. I was employed by a consulting company that happened to need bird surveys done in Rainy River. This gave me the opportunity to visit some prairie-like habitats for the first time and see some of the specialty birds, like Black-billed Magpie and Franklin's Gull, which can be found there. Additionally, I was invited by Mark Peck from the Royal Ontario Museum to join the crew surveying shorebirds along the coast of James Bay. This was undoubtedly a highlight of the year. I added birds like Black Guillemot, Nelson's Sparrow, and Arctic Tern to my year list, and had an opportunity to observe other wildlife like Gray Wolves, Belugas, and Hudson Bay Toads, a poorly known subspecies of the American Toad. Luck also played a role in my success during the summer. Despite being away from southern Ontario for several weeks, Little Blue Heron, Magnificent Frigatebird, the once in a lifetime Thick-billed Kingbird, and a few other unusual species were conveniently found on the few

days that I was in the south. Netitishi Point in southern James Bay is a place of legendary birding fame in the autumn. On the few times that birders had visited, rarities such as Ivory Gull, Dovekie, Sooty/Short-tailed Shearwater and dozens of Northern Fulmars had been found. That was why I was ecstatic to spend two weeks there with Alan Wormington in late October. And while we missed the best birding that southern Ontario had seen in years because of Superstorm Sandy, the Netitishi trip was everything I hoped it would be. Within a few days of our arrival, I had already tied the big year record of 338 after exciting finds of Common Eider, Gyrfalcon, and Northern Gannet. October 29th was probably the best day of birding I have ever had. An impressive migration was underway that included 24,100 Brant and 6,600 Northern Pintail. Rarities observed that day included King Eider, Pomarine Jaeger, Red-necked Grebe, and Horned Grebe. But the biggest highlight came early in the morning when a gull-like bird,



Molting adult Hudsonian Godwit, southwestern James Bay, 12 August 2012.

shearing over the waves, flew through my scope view. It was the record breaking bird: a gorgeous Northern Fulmar. Needless to say this was the highlight of the trip for me, but we still added Black-legged Kittiwake, Great Cormorant, and Western Kingbird before our helicopter arrived in early November. Superstorm Sandy may have been responsible for many of our rarities, as we were blasted with north winds between 50 and 100 km/h for several straight days.

The rest of the year was somewhat anticlimactic. I only added two more year birds — Cave Swallow and Pacific Loon — giving me a total of 344.

In addition to trying to break the big year record, I also attempted to photograph as many species as possible throughout the year. My focus switched to bird photography as the year wound down. On December 20th I finally photographed a Northern Hawk Owl near Peterborough, my 300th species photographed in 2012. I never did photograph a Rock Pigeon.

Many people have asked me since the year has ended what the biggest highlight was. True, I had seen mega rarities like Smew, Magnificent Frigatebird, and Thick-billed Kingbird. I had “found” other rarities like Great Cormorant, Yellow-crowned Night-Heron, Fish Crow, and Scissor-tailed Flycatcher. And while all of these moments were incredible, it was the little things that truly made 2012 a success. Things like falling asleep in my car on a lonely logging road near Marathon in early April with Northern Saw-whet and Boreal Owls serenading me. Hearing the whirr of thousands of White-rumped Sandpipers skimming over my head on a mudflat in James

Bay. Snowshoeing with Michael Butler and Barb Charlton in a beautiful spruce-lichen forest while Pine Grosbeaks fed on Bush Honeysuckle. And watching a family of Sharp-tailed Grouse eyeing me carefully on the edge of a bog somewhere near Rainy River. In truth, these experiences and more made the year “Big” for me. I went into 2012 hoping to break a record, rack up a huge species

total, and see some life birds. While I experienced these things, what my Big Year really did was enable me to take a whole year and fully immerse myself in Ontario’s unique natural areas. I definitely came away with a greater appreciation of Ontario’s wild spaces and the exceptional species that call them home.

Thank you to all of you who helped me out at some point during the year, whether it was a place to crash, companionship on a birding trip, or words of encouragement. I’m looking forward to what 2013 and beyond will bring.

# Whooping Crane Legal Cases

## Editor’s Note

Whooping Cranes breed in Wood Buffalo National Park, Northwest Territories and Alberta, and winter along the Gulf coast of Texas, especially in the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge. The OBRC has reviewed only one record of the species, involving two birds at Ennismore, Peterborough County, on 15 April 2006. I have heard of a few other sightings that were not reported to OBRC, so I think it is safe to say they make occasional appearances in Ontario. All modern sightings in Ontario, however, are derived from captive and release programs, such as the primary one located in Wisconsin.

## There were three recent important decisions taken by U.S. courts that affect Whooping Cranes:

- A Texas man was found guilty of shooting a juvenile Whooping Crane (supposedly mistaking it for a Sandhill Crane). He was fined \$5,000, ordered to make a \$10,000 community service payment to the Friends of Aransas and Matagorda Island National Wildlife Refuges
- A South Dakota man was sentenced for shooting an adult Whooping Crane and ordered to pay \$85,000, placed on probation for two years and lost hunting rights anywhere in the U.S. for two years.
- The most important decision was against the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ) which is responsible for controlling fresh water flow into the San Antonio Bay/Guadalupe Estuary. As about 23 wintering Whooping Cranes have died around Aransas NWR from drought, the TCEQ was found to continue to violate of the Endangered Species Act. The TCEQ cannot grant new water permits until the court is assured that the Whooping Cranes will have adequate fresh water. TCEQ must develop a Habitat Conservation Plan designed to minimize and mitigate risks to the cranes while balancing the interests of other river users and water rights holders.

Thanks to Chip Weseloh for raising this issue.

Birds and the birding world lost a great friend with the passing of Ross Snider on 19 October 2012 at the too early age of 59.

# A Life with Birds

By Dave Martin

ROSS WAS WELL-KNOWN and respected in many “bird” circles: bird watching, bird banding, raptor rehabilitation, waterfowl breeding, Loggerhead Shrike breeding and Species at Risk and bird surveying. His vast knowledge, experience, connections and his know-how around birds allowed him to financially support himself and his family by doing what he loved and wanted to do: living “a life with birds.”

Ross was a widely known and well-respected bird rehabilitator. His Tamarack Raptor Rehabilitation Centre, located

on a 20 acre wooded and naturalizing gravel pit property near Ingersoll, cared for and released 100s of injured and orphaned hawks and owls over the years. His most common patients were American Kestrel, Red-tailed Hawk, Eastern Screech-Owl and Great Horned Owls. Nestling Northern Harriers were often brought in after the first cut of hay although that dropped off in the early 1990s as the species became an increasingly rare breeder in southwestern Ontario. A Barred Owl that was brought in with a permanently damaged eye in the late 1980s became his star performer at talks. Spring was his busiest time and no injured or orphaned bird or mammal, turtle or snake was turned away. He had many scars that showed the damage he incurred from handling so many toothed and clawed creatures. The most dramatic was inflicted by the powerful beak of a Great Blue Heron that didn't appreciate the attention it was receiving for a badly injured wing. Generous donations from multiple supporters covered the cost of vet bills, mice and insect food for his patients, the ongoing construction and repair of pens and gas money for the 1000s of kilometres he drove every year to pick up injured birds.

As a spin-off from raptor rehabilitation, he was much in demand for his exciting and informative presentations with live birds. Over the years, he spoke to 1000s of students in schools and at service groups, church groups, naturalist clubs and youth organization meetings. Speaker's fees brought in a modest portion of his annual income.

Ross spent the first ten years of his “career” working at Kortright Waterfowl Park near Guelph. He started as the waterfowl



Ross Snider (right) and Dave Martin showing grey and rufous morph Eastern Screech-Owls to a visiting naturalist group in fall 1989 at the Tamarack Raptor Rehabilitation Centre. Photo: Jack Mayos

caretaker and eventually rose to site manager. In the mid 1980s, he decided that he wanted to strike out on his own as a waterfowl breeder. He was very successful, eventually breeding more than 60 species of waterfowl in the caged ponds on his property. He sold the offspring to collectors from across North America and Europe who couldn't match his skill at raising some of the more demanding species. Among his specialties were South American sheldgeese including Ashy-headed, Ruddy-headed and Andean Geese. Two of his favourite

species were Emperor and Red-breasted Geese.

His ability to successfully raise and care for birds brought him to the attention of the Loggerhead Shrike Recovery Team. Wildlife Preservation Canada (WPC), the field program manager, hired Ross to set up and run the main overwintering facility for the captive adults that were the source of the 100s of juvenile shrikes that were released each year. In mid to late April most of the breeding pairs were sent up to breeding cages on the Bruce and Carden Alvar but a few were held back to breed in cages scattered across Ross's property. Over the years he raised several dozen shrikes at his facility that supplemented the released young that were raised at the Bruce and Carden Alvar breeding sites. Each summer he mentored the interns who cared for the shrikes at the breeding sites. His success and caring manner with the interns and the birds earned him the apt nickname “Shrike Whisperer.”

In recent years, he added another revenue stream to his income. He worked on many bird inventory contracts for both the private and public sectors. His favourite surveys were searching for Acadian Flycatchers and Hooded Warblers in heavily wooded ravines along the Lake Erie shoreline and at large woodlands such as Skunk's Misery and Lambton County Forest in southwestern Ontario. Best of all, though, he enjoyed the challenge and thrill of searching for unbanded Loggerhead Shrikes on the Bruce, Carden Alvar and Manitoulin Island; a sign that the wild population was still present and intact.

Ross truly lived “A Life with Birds.” His gentle manner with people and the creatures he loved will be greatly missed.

# Nikon Photo Quiz

Sponsored by Nikon Canada

By Willie D'Anna

It is early summer on Lake Ontario and you spot this tern on a pier. It does not seem that big and it lacks the large red bill of a Caspian Tern. The options are pretty limited so it must be a Common Tern, right? In birding, it can be just that easy. But here in the photo quiz world, it never is.



Photo: Willie D'Anna

FIRST LET US CONFIRM that this is a tern, which may not be obvious to the beginner. The pointed bill, relatively short legs, slender body, and long wings combine to give this bird a streamlined appearance. The plumage is mostly gray and white with black on the head and dark gray in the wingtips. The legs and base of the bill are orange-red. Just using the bill shape, we can rule out all of the passerines (perching birds), shorebirds, gulls, and most of the alcids. Throw in the orange-red bill color with black and now everything is ruled out except for the terns. Note that Black Skimmer, an extreme vagrant to Ontario, is ruled out by virtue of its shorter upper than lower mandible, as well as other features.

Of the terns that have reddish or orange on the bill for at least part of the year, we are left with Caspian, Royal, Elegant, Common, Arctic, Forster's, and Roseate. As already noted at the beginning of the quiz, Caspian Tern has a larger thicker bill. The same can probably be said for Royal and Elegant Terns and, in any case, their bills would never show this much black. The four species that are left are commonly called the medium-sized *Sterna* terns, with "Sterna" referring to the genus of these birds. Note that the phrase, "medium-sized", is no longer necessary to distinguish these four species from the larger crested

terns — Caspian, Royal, Elegant, and Sandwich Terns — which have been recently moved out of the *Sterna* genus by the American Ornithologists Union (AOU).

Although there are no records of Roseate Tern in Ontario, we consider it here because hey, you never know. Though a Roseate Tern in Ontario would be something to get very excited about, unfortunately, this bird has a much thicker bill than that species. Also, only an adult Roseate would show red on the bill and their legs would be redder and the tail would be longer, projecting well beyond the wingtips.

While early June would be unusual for an Arctic Tern on Lake Ontario, it would not be unprecedented. However, it can be ruled out because it has a shorter bill and legs than the quiz bird. We are now down to Common and Forster's Terns.

Common Terns are locally common in many areas of the lower Great Lakes during the summer. However, checking the Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas reveals that Forster's Tern is restricted to isolated breeding colonies on Lake Erie, Lake Simcoe, and especially, Lake St. Clair. Therefore, a Forster's Tern in summer on Lake Ontario would be much less likely than a Common Tern. However, as we all know the axiom, birds have wings and they frequently use them. In fact, Forster's Tern is probably annual in small numbers on Lake Ontario. Before we get into the details that separate these two species, it is a good idea to have some idea of this bird's age first. Common and Forster's Terns show a similar age progression. For example, in first-summer plumage (when they are about one year old), both have shorter tails than adults, more black on the bill (sometimes all black), more dark gray in the outer primaries and secondaries, and much white on the forehead. In second-summer plumage (when they are about two years old), the bill and plumage appear even more like that of an adult but usually retain some dark gray in the outer primaries and white mottling in the black cap. As for our quiz bird, the white mottling in the forehead and crown, dark gray primary tips, and the relatively large amount of black in the bill all indicate that this is not an adult. Since most first summer

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Common and Forster's Terns show less colour on the bill, I believe that this bird is in second-summer plumage.

The tail appears to end either right at or just beyond the wingtips. It would be unusual for a Common Tern to have a tail this long at this age so this suggests that we are dealing with a Forster's Tern. I referred to the leg and bill colour earlier as orange-red but it seems more orange than red and this, too, suggests Forster's Tern. Although we have relied upon some fairly subtle differences up to this point to identify this bird, there is one character that is a clear indicator that this is a Forster's Tern. Many experienced birders know that Forster's Tern shows an isolated black oval-shaped mask on the ear coverts in winter plumage. Although the quiz bird clearly lacks an isolated face mask, the area where the mask would be is the blackest part of the head, lacking any white mottling. This is a clinching field mark that would never be shown by a Common Tern. No doubt, some experienced birders probably identified this bird right away using this character. Keep in mind, however, that some second-summer Forster's Terns show a more solidly black cap that lacks any suggestion of a mask, making such an identification even more challenging.

One more field mark concerns the colour of the underparts. This bird appears to be grayish below, which would be a point against its identification as a Forster's Tern, which is known for being white below, and a point in favour of it being a Common Tern. This is a field mark that can fool a birder. Light and shadow can completely change how this character appears. In a photo we are dealing with a split second in time when

such an evaluation needs to be done over time in the proper light conditions. Although it can be a helpful field mark at times, it needs to be used with a large dose of caution. In the quiz bird, the grayish colour is the subtle effect of shadow.

I photographed this second-summer **Forster's Tern** on Lake Ontario in Olcott Beach, New York on 9 June 2012. Although not in Ontario, it was only 29 km (18 miles) away from the border and this plumage has been seen in Ontario before. Forster's Terns are localized colonial nesters in Ontario, with the largest population being on Lake St. Clair in the southwestern part of the province. Reports of colonies on Lake Ontario (Graham *et al*, 2002; Moore *et al*, 2010) were refuted by Glenn Coady (Coady 2011), who stated that Forster's Terns have never been confirmed nesting anywhere on Lake Ontario. More of my photos can be found on the web at [www.betsypottersart.com](http://www.betsypottersart.com). I thank Glenn Coady and Chip Weseloh for clarifying the nesting status of Forster's Terns in Ontario.

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## 2012 Carden Bluebirds

By Herb Furniss

It was a good year for Eastern Bluebirds on the Carden Alvar. An early, warm spring and no cold periods in May resulted in only six failed nests. The first nesting was 23 March — three weeks early. Twenty-seven of seventy-six boxes were occupied, resulting in 155 successful fledglings. I'm looking forward to 2013.



Eastern Bluebird. Photo: Ann Brokelman