



# OFO News

NEWSLETTER OF THE ONTARIO FIELD ORNITHOLOGISTS

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## Ontario Field Ornithologists

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# Snow Buntings

*"It is well named, for it comes just prior to the first snow squalls of late autumn; it revels all winter in the snowy countryside; and it departs for the North while there is still snow in the southland."* ~ Earl Godfrey (1986)

By Cindy Cartwright



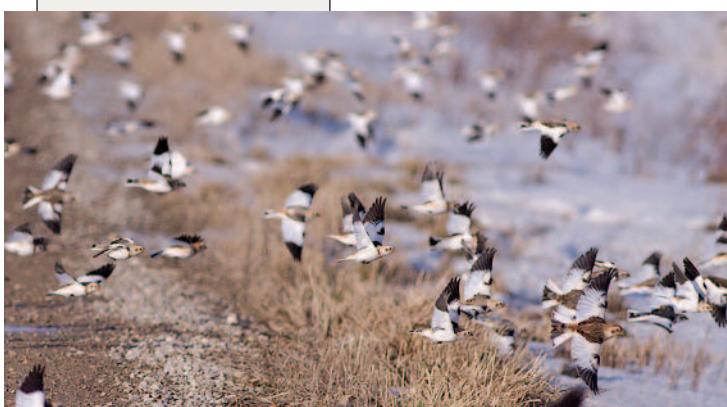
THE ARRIVAL EACH YEAR OF THE BEAUTIFUL SNOW BUNTING has different meaning to people living above and below the broad expanse of the boreal and northern temperate forests. Some interpret its return as a clear and reliable sign that spring is finally drawing nigh, others see its arrival as the first true harbinger of winter.

Snow Buntings begin arriving on the wintering grounds in southern Canada and the northern United States in October, spreading out in search of accessible food. Highly nomadic migrants, they are often 'here today — gone tomorrow' as they move restlessly across the landscape in search of adequate food.

Wintering flocks can vary from a handful of individuals to thousands of birds as they forage between plant stalks. As a field is worked, the buntings at the back leapfrog forward to the front of the feeding flock, creating an illusion of rolling. There is nothing quite like the sight of thousands of Snow Buntings rolling across an open field.

The song of the Snow Bunting, which has been described as "a most charming, musical song, which must be heard to be fully appreciated", is rarely heard by Ontario birders. The familiar *prrr-rrit, tirr-rrip* or *prrr* is the call most often heard as the birds wing high overhead, flickering white against the sky.

Photos by Ann Brokelman



It's easy to understand why the **Snow Bunting** was given its name — a small, mostly white bird that is only seen during the winter months in southern Canada and the United States. Early naturalists didn't understand that Snow Buntings don't tolerate deep snow and extreme cold very well. Even today, some people don't make the connection.

Other names for Snow Bunting include Snowflake, Snowbird and Amauligak.

*Photos by Ann Brokelman*

Snow Buntings spend the winter feeding in open weedy fields and grain stubbles. Occasional heavy snow pushes them onto roadsides and into farmyards. When particularly extended periods of heavy snowfall cover the plant stubble and weed tops, Snow Buntings are forced to move even farther south to survive the winter. During 2010-2011, an average snow depth of .6m-.9m feet in fields and constant wind off Lake Huron covered local food sources throughout Bruce County and made it impossible for these ground feeders to stay in the area. Birders in areas along Lake Erie and Lake Ontario were delighted with larger than normal numbers of buntings as a result.



The Snow Bunting has declined 64% in the past 40 years according to National Audubon Society, with the decline being attributed to climate change. Snow Buntings are rarely included on the list of impacted species when lamenting the loss of grassland and agricultural habitats in southern Ontario. The Snow Bunting has the most northern breeding range of any North American land bird but relies heavily on open, agricultural areas in the south to survive the winter months. Modern practices of destroying weeds along roadsides, pesticide use, the change from cattle to cash crops, and the reduction of spreading manure on fields during the winter months have all contributed to a reduction in available food for these seed eating foragers.

Many treeless, open habitats are not suitable for Snow Buntings and the continued move toward monocultures and weed control in agricultural areas will not benefit this species.

The Canadian Snow Bunting Network (CSBN) has conducted research from the breeding grounds in the Arctic to the wintering grounds of southern Ontario since 2007. Led by Dr. Oliver Love (University of Windsor) and Rick Ludkin (Haldimand Bird Observatory), students and volunteers on East Bay Island in Nunavut record and analyze bird song, plumage quality, breeding density, and mating strategies (among other things) during the short breeding season. From December to March, volunteer banders in the south capture and document Snow Buntings as they roam the wintering grounds to help understand the sex and age class structure of wintering flocks, movement patterns, feeding strategies and habitat use. Birders contribute important insights on wintering behaviours, numbers of birds, and sightings of colour marked individuals. The CSBN expanded east and west across southern Canada beginning with the 2012 season.

Over 1,000 Snow Buntings have been colour-banded by field crews on the breeding grounds at East Bay Island since 2007 and 90 light level geolocators have been deployed since 2010. Birders are encouraged to watch for flashes of colour bands and report them to Dr. Love at [olove@uwindsor.ca](mailto:olove@uwindsor.ca). Bands combinations are read top to bottom, and right to left (the bird's right).

There is still much to be learned about the migration and wintering strategies of this lovely species. Hopefully by beginning now, we can prevent them from joining the growing list of threatened and endangered species.



When we consult our field guides for bird names in English we are frequently confronted with names that contain hyphens.

Black-crowned Night-Heron, American Golden-Plover, Eastern Screech-Owl and Chuck-will's-widow are examples. What, if anything, do these hyphens mean?

Juvenile Black-crowned Night-Heron  
Photo by Homer Caliwag

# Hyphenation and Bird Names

By Robert Maciver

IS THE USE OF HYPHENS merely grammatical, or do they communicate additional information about an organism's natural history?

Perhaps this is not as gripping as the debate over the persistence of Ivory-billed Woodpeckers in the Big Woods of Arkansas. Nevertheless, the use of hyphens is a contentious issue in avian systematics and nomenclature, and the complexity of the problem will come as a surprise to some birdwatchers.

At one time the use of hyphens in English bird names was a matter of purely editorial significance. In the 19th century a naturalist like Audubon could choose to print meadowlark, meadow lark or meadow-lark at whim, but by the early 20th century there was a perceived need to regulate usage for the sake of consistency and to reduce confusion. In 1937, Cheeseman and Oehser made a proposal in the *Auk* creating rules to standardize the spelling of North American bird names. In general they sought to reduce the number of separate words in a bird's English name (i.e. bushtit instead of bush tit) as well as to reduce hyphenated names to single words whenever possible (i.e., ovenbird instead of oven-bird).

While Cheeseman and Oehser appeared to be content to restrict their consideration of hyphens to matters of orthography, later authors had a different agenda in mind. Culminating in the 1978 publication of "A guide to forming and capitalizing compound names of birds in English", Kenneth Parkes (the same Kenneth Parkes who co-authored "An approach to the study of molts and plumages" in 1959) proposed that certain group names be spelled as two hyphenated and capitalized words to reflect taxonomic relationships. For example, he proposed that the group name "Whistling-Duck" should replace "Whistling Duck" to distinguish members of this group from the remaining birds that end with the name "Duck", and to reflect that this independent grouping was supported by taxonomic studies. Subsequent adoption of Parkes' recommendations in the 6th edition of the AOU Check-list (1983), and the extension of this practice by Sibley and Monroe in their "Distribution and Taxonomy of the Birds of the World", has furthered the notion that hyphens ought to be used to reflect evolutionary relationships. While the AOU has persisted in its use of hyphens in this way, other taxo-

nomic authorities (notably the International Ornithologists' Union, formerly the IOC) advocate against such usage. The elimination of hyphens from various group names is one of the most prominent features of the IOC publication "Birds of the World: Recommended English Names" by Frank Gill and Minturn Wright.

The issue is complicated by the fact that hyphens are used in various ways in the naming of birds. Participants in this debate do not appear to be arguing about the usage of a hyphen when it appears within an attribute in front of a group name (i.e. Red-necked Grebe). The present debate is mainly focussed on the issue of whether to place a hyphen between the modifier and the basic group name (e.g. Screech-Owl vs. Screech Owl).

The argument in favour of inserting a hyphen into a group name such as Night-Heron is that it signifies that members of this group are evolutionarily more closely related to each other than they are to members of the much broader group of birds that shares the name "Heron". Thus the hyphen is supposed to reflect something about the evolutionary categorization of the birds in the Night-Heron group.



If, as in the Sibley and Monroe taxonomy, the Night-Heron group includes the genera *Nycticorax*, *Nyctanassa* and *Gorsachius* the hyphen is therefore purporting to show an evolutionary hypothesis linking these genera with a common ancestor (i.e. the supposition that they are a monophyletic group). By comparison, we find that Great Blue Heron and Little Blue Heron do not contain a hyphen, and do not constitute a group known as Blue-Herons precisely because these taxa are believed to be (relatively speaking) “unrelated”. The criticism from Gill and Wright is that monophyly of the three genera which belong to the Night-Heron group is a claim that has been experimentally shown to be open to considerable doubt. Thus, they say, the hyphen is misleading,

and should be eliminated. Similar problems arise for group names such as Wood-Pewees, Storm-Petrels and Ground-Doves. They have therefore recommended the widespread elimination of hyphenated group names.

Coming to the defence of hyphenated group names, AOU taxonomist J.V. Remsen, Jr. notes that all taxonomic decisions are provisional and open to future revision, and therefore if it can be experimentally shown that species sharing a hyphenated group name are not monophyletic, then the hyphen can be removed. This case-by-case approach is more in keeping with the principle of stability in nomenclature. Furthermore, Remsen points out that group names were already in use (without the hyphen) to reflect hypotheti-

cal evolutionary relationships. Parkes was not proposing any new evolutionary relationships between taxa, but rather he was attempting to better reflect the accepted taxonomic conclusions in the species' English names. Remsen also thinks it important to keep things in perspective and points out that only about 140 of approximately 2048 English names in North America are affected by the hyphenation of group names.

Naming birds in English, like much of avian taxonomy, is an imperfect discipline. Though it does not necessarily affect our ability to enjoy the birds we see, it does impinge on how we communicate with each other. If nothing else, it is a part of the culture that we belong to as bird-watchers.

## PROJECT SOAR Loggerhead Shrike Research and Shell Fuelling Change

By Dan Bone

WILDLIFE PRESERVATION CANADA could get a much needed grant of \$50,000 from Shell Canada for Eastern Loggerhead Shrike research if enough of us vote for their project (Project Soar) on the Shell Fuelling Change website at: <http://fuellingchange.com/main/page/more-shrike-info-now-available-2011-12-29-17-12-37>. Learn about the Shell Fuelling Change competition and register. You get some free votes right off the bat. Follow the links on the Project Soar page to see fascinating videos of the Loggerhead Shrike captive breeding and release program. You can go directly to this wonderfully informative website using the following link: <http://wildlifepreservation.ca/species-in-need/canadian-species/species-9/>

There are many reasons to participate in this Fuelling Change program. Here are some of my thoughts.

### Carbon Footprints

If you bird then, in all likely-hood, you have a large carbon foot print. Trips to Amherst Island, Point Pelee and Manitoulin Island all require fuel. Much of this fuel is used to conduct research and

help in volunteer bird survey projects and so there is no reason to feel guilty in the extreme and try to cycle all the way to Long Point but we must remain thoughtful and open to change. We are not going to stop using our cars. We are all trying to reduce our carbon footprint by driving fuel efficient automobiles and car pooling as much as possible.

### We can help Loggerhead Shrike Research by registering our Shell fuel receipts on-line and voting for Project Soar

### The Limestone Cowboys

Every time I think of the Carden Challenge, the 24 hour fundraising birding competition on the Carden Alvar, I have to smile and hum that old Glenn Campbell tune that gave rise to that wonderfully appropriate team name, The Limestone Cowboys. The Limestone Cowboys cycled the 24 kilometre circle, binoculars swaying, while most of the other teams roared past them in cars. They didn't win the competition — they didn't have a chance — but they won a place in our hearts for their creative energy and determination to make a point by sticking to

their conviction that nature and cars are not very compatible. Shell Fuelling Change narrows that gap a little.

On my last Christmas Bird Count we put just over 80 kms on our Honda Fit. But we were able to fill up with a tank of Shell gasoline and, then, turn the receipt into a vote for Eastern Loggerhead Shrike Research (Project Soar) on the Shell Fuelling Change website.

Of course, you might decide that Chimney Swift research is a better way to help out or perhaps projects designed to protect Boreal Forest Habitats will get your vote. Check it out at Shell Fuelling Change.

### Don't Get Too Cynical

Yes, Shell Canada is a large corporation with an eye to the bottom line and, of course, Fuelling Change is a strategy to “green up” their image so that they can sell more fuel.

But we continue to rely on their products. The electric car is way down the road for many of us. We are all complicit. Maybe birders need to “green up” their image along with Shell. And Project Soar needs the money. The Loggerhead Shrike is teetering on the brink of extirpation in Ontario and not doing well wherever it lives. Vote for your favourite Shrike. Hearts will soar if Wildlife Preservation Canada can help the Loggerhead Shrike complete a comeback.

# Loggerhead Shrike from Carden Alvar in Virginia

By Jean Iron and Ron Pittaway

THE WINTERING GROUNDS of Ontario's Loggerhead Shrikes have long been a mystery. On 20 November 2011, Ned Brinkley, editor of North American Birds, asked us about a colour-banded Loggerhead Shrike that was wintering at Virginia Beach on the Virginia coast of the United States. Elisa Enders found this shrike and noted the band combinations. Its right leg is marked with a blue band above a silver band and left leg is marked with a green band above a yellow band. Ned wondered if it might be from the Ontario population so we put him in touch with Wildlife Preservation Canada (WPC), the organization responsible for the recovery of the Loggerhead Shrike in Ontario.

Tara Imlay of Wildlife Preservation Canada replied to Ned that the shrike was banded on the Carden Alvar in 2011 as a second year bird. It spent several days around WPC's enclosed field breeding station where captive shrikes were raising young and it was banded while there. The sex of this bird is unknown because it did not pair and breed. Although morphometrics sometimes can help determine the sex,

this bird's measurements fell within the overlapping range between males and females.

Site fidelity of shrikes on the wintering grounds is poorly known, but since the Virginia shrike banded last summer in Carden was a second year bird, Tara Imlay suggested it may have wintered at the same location in 2010-11. This is supported by observers at Virginia Beach who believe the shrike that overwintered at exactly the same spot in 2010-11 is the same bird (now banded) that is there this winter. This was the first Loggerhead Shrike to winter at Virginia Beach since 1978. Interestingly, a Loggerhead Shrike banded in Montreal (Hampstead) as a hatch year bird on 19 August 1945 was recovered (shot) at Bland Point, Virginia, on 19 February 1946. Bland Point is about 80 km north of Virginia Beach, both on coastal Virginia.

Two overall causes of the decline of the Loggerhead Shrike in Ontario are increasingly intensive row crop agriculture and



Loggerhead Shrike from Carden Alvar showing leg bands at Virginia Beach, Virginia, on 20 November 2011.  
Photo by Elisa Enders.

the almost complete disappearance of rough pasturelands with cattle grazing. The hawthorn dotted pastures with cattle make the Carden Alvar the choicest shrike breeding habitat in the province. Another important cause of the decline is road kills mainly during migration and winter. A study cited in *The Birds of North America* found that motor vehicles accounted for 29% of the fall and winter mortality of Loggerhead Shrikes in Virginia — the winter home of a Loggerhead Shrike from the Carden Alvar.

**Acknowledgements:** We thank Ned Brinkley, Steve Coari, Erica Dunn, Michel Gosselin, Tara Imlay and Ron Tozer for information.

## Appreciation for those involved at Darlington

Ron Pittaway and Jean Iron presented OFO Certificates of Appreciation to staffs of Beacon Environmental and Darlington Nuclear Generating Station for organizing the successful viewing of the Willow Ptarmigan for 150 birders on 12 June 2011.

**Top: Presentation of OFO Certificate of Appreciation to the staff at Beacon Environmental on 2 November 2011.** From left to right: Jean Iron, Brian Henshaw, Lindsey Waterworth, Donald Fraser and Ron Pittaway.

**Right: Presentation of OFO Certificate of Appreciation to the staff at Darlington Nuclear Generating Station on 4 November 2011.**

From left to right: James Wood, Ontario Power Generation (OPG) Darlington Security; Beverly Forget, Darlington Nuclear Public Affairs; Ron Pittaway, OFO; Jean Iron, OFO; John Peters, OPG Environmental Assessment; Sue Bragg, OPG Darlington Environment; and Brian Henshaw, Ecologist, Beacon Environmental.

Photo by Julianna MacDonald.



# YOUR LOCAL BIRDING CAN HELP CONSERVE CANADA'S **Boreal Birds**

Need another excuse to go birding? How about instead of just "birding" you go "eBirding" and help make the world a better place for birds, including some of our most poorly known species.

By Mike Cadman

Above: Cape May Warbler / Ken Newcombe  
Below: Evening Grosbeak / Ann Brokelman



MONITORING THE BIRDS of Canada's vast and globally important boreal forest remains one of the greatest challenges to bird researchers. The sheer size and remoteness of the boreal forest means that providing adequate on-the-ground surveys is so costly that it can't currently be done on an on-going basis or over large areas. Not having good information means these species can experience significant declines without our being aware of it.

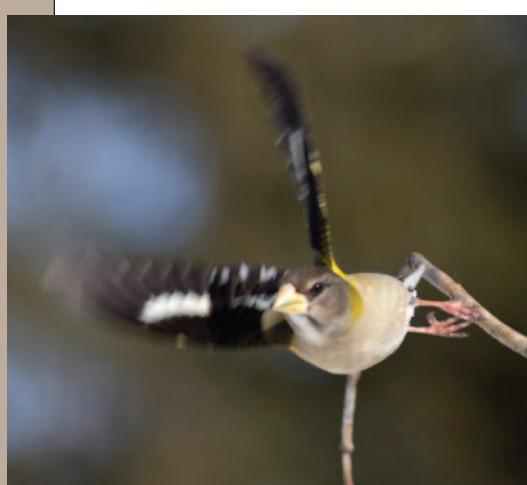
Fortunately, over 90% of the birds of the boreal region migrate south and north every year, many as far as South America, and then back again. This twice-annual massive migration of billions of birds passes through the populated areas of the continent, providing an opportunity for us to learn more about boreal bird numbers by counting them as they pass through.

**eBird** (see sidebar) is a new and rapidly expanding project of Bird Studies Canada (BSC) and the Cornell Lab of Ornithol-

ogy that makes it easy for birders to contribute to that process in unprecedented numbers — simply by going birding. The more that birders participate by contributing their birding lists from the migration period (primarily March through May and August through November), the more we will learn about these boreal populations.

eBirding is very simple. First, you go birding and then you enter your checklists to the eBird site. That's all that's involved. The more you go birding during the migration period, the more you contribute to our understanding of boreal populations. Never has simple birding been more meaningful or useful. Even if you don't get any boreal species on a particular trip, that too is valuable information.

Thanks to some smart people who have listened to birders, the data entry system works very smoothly and intuitively, and, while it definitely takes some time (rainy days and long winter nights



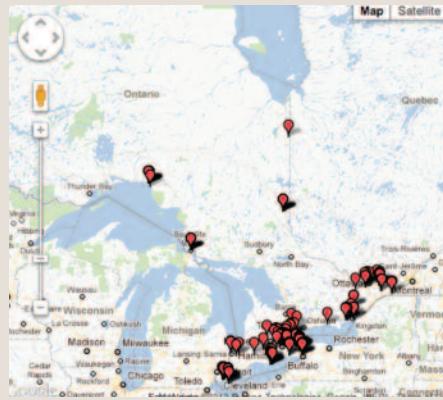
# eBIRDING

## Start by inputting checklist data from your old birding records.

I've really enjoyed reliving these trips (my first Sandhill Crane in Wellington County, those rare gulls that used to show up at the Guelph dump) and making them part of the permanent record. Already I've been surprised at how often I used to come across Evening Grosbeaks and Rusty Blackbirds. You can quickly see how combining the records from thousands of birders would help elucidate less obvious trends.

## eBird has many features useful to birders.

Of course, one primary use is for keeping your own lists for location, region, country, and/or your life list. Bar Charts showing relative abundance of each species by location and month are really handy, and they link to maps so you can zoom in on maps to get exact locations for many reports. Perfect for trip planning. Of course, the more data we all add, the more useful these things become. One recent innovation is that you can now sign up to receive an email whenever a particular species you are interested in is reported. It gets a little mind-boggling.



### Bird Observations



## eBird is run in Canada by Bird Studies Canada.

To get your own account, go to <http://ebird.org/content/canada> and register.

tend to work well for me), I've been very happy with it, especially the latest version. For your data to be most useful, you should keep a separate bird list for each visit to sites you bird and count the number of birds of each species in each site — a bit like the Christmas Bird Count, but warmer! You also need to note your starting time and how long you spent birding in each site. Repeated visits to particular sites are useful, but are by no means essential. You decide how much birding you want to do, for how long, and when.

If you're like me, you'll be motivated knowing that, with every checklist you submit, you're adding to our accumulating knowledge of this continent's birds. As in atlassing or other formalized bird surveys, the eBird checklist is a permanent record that can be used far into the future by scientists and conservationists. Know-

ing that really adds to my enjoyment of birding, and I think you'll feel the same once you try it — it's kind of addictive, much like atlassing. In fact, checklists are being used in the B.C., Québec and Manitoba breeding bird atlases, and will be part of the next Ontario atlas.

Québec has a long history of using checklists to record data, through a program called Études des populations d'oiseaux du Québec (ÉPOQ). ÉPOQ data are already used in tracking population trends and assessing species status. eBird

is really just the rest of the continent catching up to Québec.

But using this brand new checklist data set to monitor boreal birds is a new concept, suddenly imaginable as eBird develops into a huge continental scheme. Birders from across Canada and the US can make meaningful contributions to this grand vision — just by going birding.

So, please join me in this. It's going to be fun!

Eastern Bluebird / Ann Brokelman



# BLUEBIRD RANCH GATEWAY TO THE CARDEN ALVAR AREA

On 31 October 2011 the Couchiching Conservancy took ownership of the Bluebird Ranch and by this means 206 acres of prime alvar habitat at the foot of Wylie Road north of Kirkfield have been preserved for future generations.

By Dan Bone

BUTTERFLIES, BIRDS, DRAGONFLIES and unique plants will thrive on this property now being referred to as the gateway to the Carden Alvar area.

Ron Reid of the Couchiching Conservancy was the facilitator of this Halloween treat for birders and he thanked the many organizations and donors that made the deal possible in this excerpt from the November issue of the *Conservancy News*:

"Financial support for this purchase came from a diverse range of sources. The federal Natural Areas Conservation Program, which is administered by Nature Conservancy of Canada, provided half of the overall project costs. The Carden Acquisition Fund, supported by a generous local donor, provided another 25%. This left about \$75,000 to be raised through other private donations.

In tough economic times, finding that amount of donated cash can be a challenge. But, piece by piece, the money came together. The teams taking part in the Carden Challenge contributed \$11,000. A dinner and silent auction, co-sponsored with the Ontario Aggregate Producers Association and their Carden member companies, raised \$12,000. An application to the McLean Foundation yielded \$15,000. The Kawartha Field Naturalists collected several thousand dollars from their members. The Toronto Ornithological Club, spurred on by matching grants provided by one of their members, contributed over \$16,000. And generous donors from the Conservancy membership and beyond sent in contributions for the rest — an amazing response from those who believe that the future of Carden's natural bounty is important."

Ron goes on to say that some cedars may be removed to connect grassland patches but little else will change. The cattle will continue to graze, the meadowlarks, sparrows and Bobolinks will continue to sing, the wildflowers will bloom and the Eastern Bluebirds will fill the nest boxes.

Wonderful.

Two building lots that had been legally severed from the property are included in the deal and will not be developed. Birders will not have to peer through back yards to see that elusive Grasshopper Sparrow.

## Some Local History

I wondered what the local ranchers thought about this transfer of ownership and I contacted Bill and Faye Duggan, the former owners of Bluebird Ranch. Bill told me that the ranch had been in the Duggan family since it was purchased by his Irish ancestors from the crown. He inherited the land in the 1980s from his relatives and as far as he knows, no one ever lived there but he can see stone piles that indicate that at some point someone tried to improve the land and perhaps grow crops there. There are no old foundations or stands of lilac trees which often provide evidence of habitation. He says that if you know where to look and know what you are looking for, you can see

where the railroad ran across the land years ago. Or, it could be an old beach ridge from the glacier lakes of 10,000 years ago. We will resolve this mystery, and many others, as the property is evaluated by historians, geologists, botanists, entomologists, grazing specialists and birders.

Generations ago, the Duggan home farm was at the intersection of McNamee and Shrike Roads and the ranch was used for summer pasture only. Later, Bill's relatives sold the home farm to the McNamee family and moved to another farm near Brechin but retained the ranch and continued to herd the cattle along the roads from Brechin to the summer pasture on the ranch.

Bill's father, Charlie, was a drover working out of the Woodville area and moved cattle on and off the land and back and forth to market in trucks. Bill grew up around the family business and now is a director of the Kawartha Lakes Cooperative at the sales barn in Woodville. After inheriting the ranch he used his sales barn connections to buy young cattle from out west and graze them on his ranch for the summer and then sell them in the fall. Bill repeats what many local ranchers have told me: the limestone and minerals provided by the alvar grasslands allow the cattle to thrive. He quotes statistics from the Community Pastures south east of Kirkfield, off the alvar, which indicate that his cattle on the Bluebird Ranch would gain over 300 pounds in a season while the Community Pasture animals would gain around 200 pounds.

In one way or another he has spent his whole life around cattle. Bill has signed a contract to continue grazing his cattle on

Bluebird Ranch for at least the next five years. As far as he is concerned it is a good deal for everybody.

### A Wylie Road Story

Susan Winter is a local rancher with a very strong connection to the land and the people who live and lived there. She will be co-leading a workshop called "Ranching on the Alvar" at the Carden Nature Festival in June.

She told me a story which speaks of the hard times and desperate events that tempered the lives of the human inhabitants of the Alvar. Wylie Road is named after the Wylie family who lived on property north of the Bluebird Ranch. Mary Anne Wylie lived in the cabin just north of the Bluebird Ranch for many years — without plumbing, electricity or a car. In her declining years neighbours looked out for her by providing shopping opportunities and battery operated appliances.

1946 was a very dry summer, and a great fire, started by lightning and fueled by old debris from the logging days of the 1880s, burned through much of the township. Most of the rail fences were turned to ashes. One can still see the evidence of that long ago fire in the old, charred snags and stumps of trees rising above the grass. The fire did create a lot of the present day grassland habitat by cleaning up the shrubs and for that, birders and ranchers are thankful. But Violet Wylie, Mary Ann's mother, was in her house on Wylie Road and in the path of the fire. She was isolated, desperate and afraid and turned to a source of strength that kept her going then and keeps many going to this day. She sprinkled holy water around the property. The grass was very short in the four acre plot due to the two or three cattle that grazed by the house and

sheds. So cattle and holy water may have spared the Wylies and their cabin. Some local farmers still sprinkle holy water around doorways and buildings at significant seasonal and personal events such as spring planting and births.

Ron Reid bought the Wylie cabin that was spared in the great fire of 1946. He bought it from Mary Anne Wylie's estate some years ago, before the Alvar was recognized as an important bird area. And where would we be now without Ron or Ron's cabin? The Carden Challenge starts at the cabin every spring. It is a 24-hour birding competition and this year the celebrity birder is OFO's own Jean Iron.

## The Carden Challenge

25 and 26 May 2012

The Challenge involves teams of four, competing to see the most species in a 24-hour period within the Carden CBC circle. This is our 7th year, and we generally have 10-12 teams participating (some competitive, some recreational). Last year's winners logged 135 species.

It is also a fundraiser, with teams getting sponsors, which last year raised \$22,000 that went towards purchase of the Bluebird Ranch at the foot of Wylie Road plus stewardship money for looking after conservation properties in Carden. Some of the money raised may help fund a prescribed burn that the Couchiching Conservancy, working with Ontario Parks, is planning just down the road from the Bluebird Ranch.

For details contact Ron Reid at [ronreid@couchconservancy.ca](mailto:ronreid@couchconservancy.ca)



## Bird the Bluebird Ranch

Sunday, 10 June 2012 and Wednesday, 13 June 2012

Kyra Howes of the Couchiching Conservancy has extended an opportunity to birders, particularly members of Ontario Field Ornithologists, The Toronto Ornithological Club, The Kawartha Field Naturalists and the Carden Field Naturalists to get out on the land at the Bluebird Ranch and help build up a bird list. Keep in mind that a Henslow's Sparrow was seen by many birders on this property in 2006. There will be a 15 person limit for each date.

Please contact Dan Bone at [dan.bone@xplornet.com](mailto:dan.bone@xplornet.com) to reserve your place.

Eastern Kingbird at Carden Alvar / Ann Brokelman



# BIG DAY BIRDING at RONDEAU



**Yellow-throated Warbler** seen on the Big Day at Rondeau last May. Photo by Blake Mann

Above: The observation tower along the Marsh Road of Rondeau. Photo by Allen Woodliffe

By Blake A. Mann

is set aside in which dedicated birders seek out as many species as possible.

At Rondeau Park, a Big Day Birding Competition is held usually on the second weekend in May. It all began in 2003 as organized by the Friends of Rondeau. The original boundary was the Rondeau Christmas Bird Count Circle. Anything within that fifteen mile diameter circle was fair game. In 2009, the competition was changed to include species seen only within Rondeau Provincial Park. This was to create a more level playing field since local birders always had an advantage outside the park with regards to hotspots or known birds at certain locations.

THE MONTH OF MAY is one of the most exciting times during the year for birding. Migrant birds pass through quickly and on some days a wide range of species can be seen. The potential for rarities makes things even more exciting. During the month some birders do a "big day" or a Baillie Birdathon (as sponsored by Bird Studies Canada). Usually a 24-hour period

The first annual competition was held 8-9 May, 2003. The top team was Stephen R. Charbonneau/Malcolm (Mac) McAlpine tallying an impressive 153 species. I was a fairly close second with 144 species. The trend was set, as in subsequent years Steve and Mac always led the way often chased by me. Best bird in 2003 was a Western Sandpiper (*Calidris mauri*) at Blenheim Sewage Lagoons.

The following weekend, an evening event with refreshments and an entertainment presentation was held in the park visitor centre. An award plaque was presented to the top team. This evening gathering continued for two more years until it became cost ineffective.

In 2009 when the competition was held only within the park boundary, total species for the top team was 132. In fact I tied with Steve and Mac.



**Total species seen by the top team (Steve and Mac):**

Year	Species	2007	152
2003	153	2008	164
2004	152	2009	132
2005	157	2010	131
2006	152	2011	142

**A male Prothonotary Warbler** visiting its nest cavity at Rondeau. Photo by Allen Woodliffe

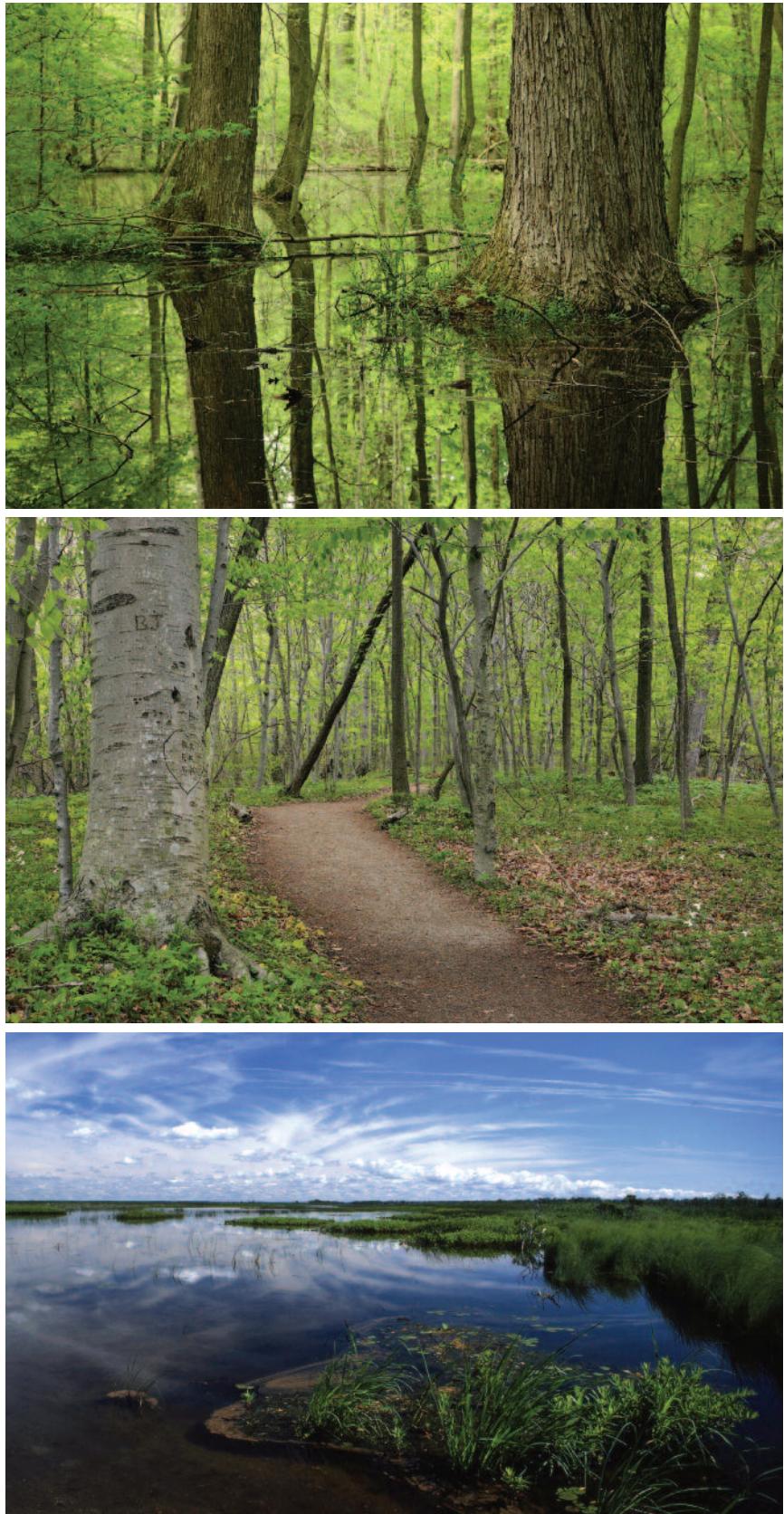
Total species seen or heard depends much upon many factors. Needless to say, weather is a major factor. Rain, fog and high wind do not help and those have all happened at some point. A good fall-out of passerines certainly makes things exciting. And of course, the biggest factor is luck. Some birders just get lucky. One needs to be at the right place at the right time when it comes to finding some birds.

Even though the area is well covered by the competitors, other birders within the park do find or report birds that the competitors do not. It is always interesting to try and determine how many species were seen within that 24-hour period. For example, this past May we estimated about 155 species within Rondeau Park. That is quite impressive when one thinks about it.

In 2006 when we were still doing the Rondeau circle, it was estimated that 178 species were within the area. Best bird at that time was the Chuck-will's-widow (*Caprimulgus carolinensis*) heard from the visitor centre!

Big Day birding is always a friendly competition. In fact we are all good friends and exchange tips throughout the day. Most of these events come down to a contest between me and the team of Steve and Mac. A mutual effort of birding between us is when we work the marsh trail. In the evening, we all go out the Marsh Trail to find marsh type birds, as well as crepuscular species like American Woodcock (*Scolopax minor*) and Eastern Whip-poor-will (*Caprimulgus vociferous*). Birds such as Sora (*Porzana carolina*) and Virginia Rail (*Rallus limicola*), Marsh Wren (*Cistothorus pallustris*) and Sedge Wren (*Cistothorus platensis*), American Bittern (*Botaurus lentiginosus*) and Least Bittern (*Ixobrychus exilis*), various duck species and some raptors are birds that quite often will not be tallied elsewhere. There are always other birds that pop up as a bonus. Sometimes a Merlin (*Falco columbarius*) or Peregrine Falcon (*Falco peregrinus*) may easily be spotted out the Marsh Trail.

I would encourage anyone with an interest in a big day to participate in Rondeau's event this year. It becomes interesting when more people are involved, and as a bonus you can combine this event with your Baillie Birdathon.



*Top:* Bennet Slough is one of the many sloughs of Rondeau, which is not only Prothonotary Warbler habitat, but also a location for observing many migrants.

*Centre:* The Spicebush Trail, taken in May. It is one of the more popular trails for birders in the spring.

*Bottom:* Rondeau Marsh. Photos by Allen Woodliffe

# SNOWY OWLS

By Cindy Cartwright



YOU SEE THEM IN WINTER in flat, open areas. Cars parked on the side of the road – their occupants looking up with heads held at awkward angles trying to watch something on the top of the telephone pole. Given that the Snowy Owls' summer breeding grounds are the flat tundra above the Arctic Circle, it seems out of place to see them perched on telephone poles, fence posts, barns, TV towers, and so

many other man-made objects. But you are more likely to see them on a high perch than on the ground during the winter months in southern Ontario.

Big, bold, beautiful...the Snowy Owl is a species that even non-birders recognize and stare at in awe. And they are a highly desired species for most birders' life lists. Some Snowy Owls are migratory, coming back to the same wintering ground year after year but most stay in the north year-round. Recent work with satellite transmitters has shown that some owls wander hundreds of kilometres in an east-west movement – a surprise for everyone involved in the research.

Snowy Owls are found on Christmas Bird Counts every year but not all areas in Ontario are fortunate to receive a visit from this northern denizen. Generally, an average of 35 Snowy Owls are located across the province during the CBC season. Most years, a few can be found in a patchy band from Bruce County on the Lake Huron shoreline, through Simcoe and the Carden Alvar, Kingston area, and eastward to Glengarry or Prescott Counties.

Occasionally an irruption occurs and Snowy Owls are found farther south and in larger numbers than usual. It was always believed that these irruptions were caused by a crash in the lemming population which contributes 90% of the Snowy Owl's diet in the north. Researchers in the Arctic are suggesting that the opposite may also be true. In 2011, the lemming popula-

tion was at an historic high and this resulted in a very successful breeding season for species that depend on them for food, like the Snowy Owl. Once the breeding season was over and winter arrived, competition for food among the increased population of owls forced many to move south to survive.

The Snowy Owl is one of Canada's largest owl and females, like most raptors, are larger and stronger. With a wingspan of over 1.6 metres, an adult female can weigh 2,000 grams or more. A common misconception among birders is that male Snowy Owls are white and females have black barring. This is only partially true and not a reliable way to separate the sexes. Snowy Owls take up to four years to reach the completely white plumage that positively identifies them as males. Until that time, there is a high degree of overlap in plumages. Sub-adult males can be very similar to adult females, and immature males are usually more heavily barred. It takes an experienced eye to definitively distinguish age and sex from a distance and most birders do not see enough Snowy Owls in their lifetime to be able to recognize these subtle differences.

In many cultures, owls were considered bad omens – harbingers of doom, death, and bad luck – particularly if seen in the light of day. Obviously, these cultures were not familiar with the ghostlike Snowy Owl.

Adult male Snowy Owl / Bonnie Patterson-Collins

## The birding word

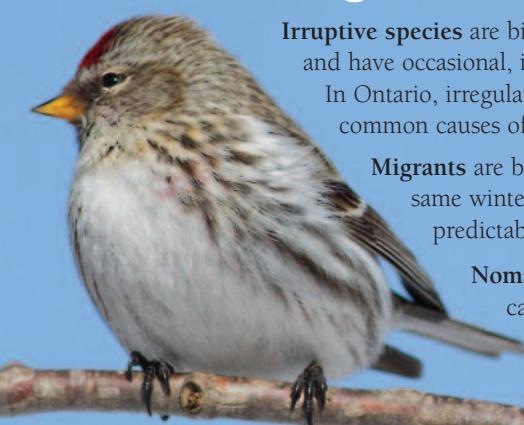
### Irruptive — not true migrants or nomads?

**Irruptive species** are birds that normally live in the same location year-round and have occasional, irregular movements. Irruptions do not occur every year.

In Ontario, irregular fruiting or population crashes of food sources are the most common causes of movement by irruptive species. *example:* Common Redpoll

**Migrants** are birds that move at the same time each year between the same wintering and breeding areas. Migrants are regular and predictable. *example:* Ruby-throated Hummingbird

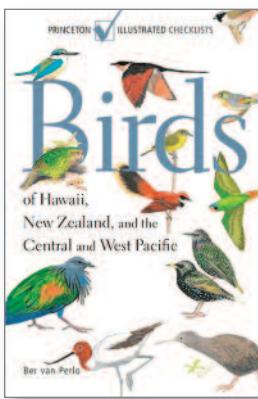
**Nomads** (or irregular migrants as they are sometimes called) are species that migrate at a predictable time each year but do not return to the same wintering and breeding areas.  
*example:* Northern Saw-whet Owl



By Cindy Cartwright

Common Redpolls / Ann Brokelman

# Book Reviews



**Birds of Hawaii, New Zealand, and the Central and West Pacific.** 2011.  
Ber van Perlo, Princeton University Press,  
Princeton, New Jersey, 08540. Softcover  
240 pages. \$29.95US.  
ISBN13: 978-0-691-15188-5

Princeton University continues to produce top quality field guides, targeting areas of the world where guides are sub-standard or missing all together. In this instance they have produced a guide that covers a vast geographic area that includes Fiji, Tonga, Nauru, Samoa, American Samoas, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Tuvalu, Tokelau, Niue, Cook Islands, Guam, Wallis and Futuna, Pitcairn Islands, Northern Marianas, Palau, French Polynesia, New Zealand and the State of Hawaii.

The book is compact in size [5" x 7.5"] with a stiff paper cover and glossy pages, which will withstand normal field wear. The layout of the book is simple and follows an easily read and understood format. The pre-amble to the book is brief, to the point and includes information on island habitats, reef formation, tectonics and habitat types. I must admit that I would have preferred that some of the information, although interesting (e.g. tectonics and the geology of New Zealand), could have been eliminated and the space used to expand on species reports or other matters of interest.

Following this introduction, the author introduces something I really liked — he summarized each of the main geographic areas showing a detailed map, total number of species, and a complete list of endemics (with a small picture for each) for each location covered by the book. So very quickly, one learns that Hawaii has 304 species and 33 endemics and Fiji has 149 species and 28 endemics, etc. You also know instantly on which plate each of the endemics is illustrated because he lists them beside the picture of the birds. I know of no other field guide that takes this approach — and it is an excellent one!

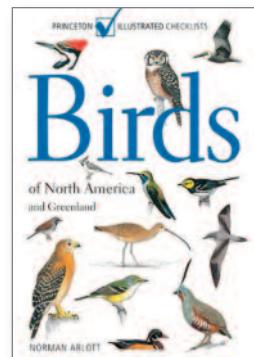
The book is illustrated with 95 colour plates covering over 750 species. Each account includes common and scientific names, paintings showing plumages of males, females and immatures, where relevant, and provides information on size, but little else, relying on the accompanying paintings to show the salient identification points. A map showing the species range accompanies each account. The book closes with a brief, but helpful, reference list, a list of species that became extinct since the beginning of the 19th century and a compilation of selected national and international bird organizations. The author also includes End Notes that detail updates and clarifications re speciation and plumages. One thing that jumped out at me was the reference to the Brown Kiwi on Page 234. Here he refers to plumage coloration differences under spotlighting conditions. What he fails to reveal is that Kiwis should never be directly spotlighted, but rather should be viewed with diverted light shaded by a red filter. This is a grievous error in my opinion.

I found the plates to be extremely busy but the paintings are simple and detailed enough to generally provide concise field marks for the species covered. I believe that certain species would be hard to identify based on the pictures provided. The albatrosses are but one example of where the small size of the images would be problematic. In many other cases however the images are clear and easily identifiable from the features provided. The author variously includes updated and outdated information on speciation. For

example, he has the New Zealand Storm-petrel included and refers to the two species/subspecies of both the Great and Cattle Egret, but fails totally to mention the genetic work on the great albatrosses and molymawks (medium-sized albatrosses). When reading the book, I found the font altogether too small. I don't usually wear reading glasses but I could not read much of the text without assistance. The maps that accompany each species are minuscule and impossible to read. I would have preferred increasing the font to 10 or 11 and adding a few more pages to the book so it is more readable. I found the brevity of the species descriptions limiting and would have preferred more information on identification features and similarity comparisons.

For me this is a good book and it will be useful in assisting birders who travel over wide geographic areas in Oceania. In a single volume, I have a reference that will assist me in my travels through many countries. The good information provided outweighs, in my mind at least, any shortfalls I found with the book. I would recommend buying the book if you are planning to visit this part of the world.

Geoff Carpentier  
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**Birds of North America and Greenland**  
2011. Norman Arlott, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 08540. Softcover 239 pages. \$15.95US.  
ISBN13: 978-0-691-15140-3

My first reaction to the book is "disappointing". Arlott has produced a book that I feel was put together quickly and somewhat carelessly. It was not updated

with current, readily available information, prior to publication. The text is Spartan, as in his other recent books, and, although many of the plates supporting the text are good, others poorly represent the species depicted.

He has included information on over 900 species that occur in the region covered by the book, but the information provided is minimal. This is a book touted to be about all North American and Greenland species, but one has to carefully search for the Greenland species, as few are identified as such. According to Avibase, 432 species have been recorded in Greenland. Arlott has included all of these save the Ruddy Shelduck, Common Gallinule and Scaly Thrush, but he has also added Great Knot and Little Crake. However, if you search the text, only 66 species are specifically mentioned as being found in Greenland. It's hard then for him, in my opinion, to claim this book to be a guide to the birds of Greenland, when so few are mentioned as such.

Within the scope of the North American species, there are many omissions involving extralimital records. In some cases he describes vagrants, but in others he ignores them completely. The Heerman's Gull and Magnificent Frigatebird, to mention but two species, are not acknowledged as being a vagrant to eastern North America, nor is the Yellow-nosed Albatross or Smew identified as having occurred in Ontario. Likewise, the Spotted Redshank and Lesser Sand-Plover have occurred in Ontario and elsewhere, but are not mentioned... and the list of omissions goes on and on.

The information is not current in the book in many instances as well. For example, he mentions that the Winter Wren may be split into separate species — well, guess what? It has already been split. It's called the Pacific Wren in western North America and the Winter Wren in the rest of the continent. He fails to recognize the recent split of the Common Moorhen and Common Gallinule as well, or the Atlantic and Indian Yellow-nosed Albatross. His treatment of the redpolls is confusing. In his previous book, *Birds of Europe, Russia, China and Japan*, he splits the Common Redpoll into the Lesser and Common Redpoll, but here he treats

them as a single species. I wonder why he didn't follow one discipline or the other for consistency, or at least acknowledge that different authorities treat the complex differently.

He often cites incorrect names for species. For example, he refers to the Rock Dove, which is now the Rock Pigeon, the Crested Caracara is now the Northern Crested Caracara and the Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow is now correctly called the Nelson's Sparrow. His information is often simply inaccurate — did you know that the Cave Swallow never reaches Ontario, or that the Red-bellied Woodpecker does not occur in Canada? Really? The White-throated Sparrow is depicted in the book as having only a white morph, whereas the tan morph is equally common in breeding populations, at least in eastern Canada. Many other similar examples exist in the book as well.

Arlott has introduced a European bias into the book that seems inappropriate. He uses European names, such as divers and skuas, etc. first and then adds the North American equivalent. Since I believe this book is aimed at the North American market, I would have used the locally accepted name and then supplemented with other names from other regions. Lastly, I found the maps to be extremely difficult to read, as they are very small and jammed in along the centre spine of the book.

In a nutshell, I must in good conscience, caution purchasers that this book has serious limitations but, coupled with other guides, it will still have some benefits in that the European species are shown in a single volume with the North American ones.

*Geoff Carpentier*

## OFO Board Biographies

### **Jeff Harrison**

Jeff recently moved to Toronto from Montreal. Born and raised in Toronto, Jeff took up birding as a teenager, a passion that he has pursued in numerous places he has lived including Australia, England and various cities in Canada. He has sat on boards of natural history and birding clubs since the mid-1970s. This has included positions as Vice President of the Newfoundland Wilderness Society, and Presidencies of the Ottawa Field Naturalists and Bird Protection Quebec. Jeff has been directly involved in many birding-related activities including founding the Taverner Cup Birding Competition (1997-2004), co-founding the Fletcher Wildlife Garden in Ottawa (with Peter Hall), tour guiding with Nature Travel Holidays, and most recently as compiler of the Montreal Christmas Bird Count.

### **Christian Friis**

Christian joins the OFO board as Director, Membership. He's your go-to guy for new memberships, renewals, and membership related queries. Christian became serious about birding after a volunteer stint at Long Point Bird Observatory during his undergraduate degree. Eventually volunteering turned into a job at LPBO, where Christian worked, until moving to Toronto.

Currently working for the Canadian Wildlife Service on boreal birds and shorebirds, Christian splits his time in boreal and south-western Ontario, with the occasional trip to the James Bay coast. Christian, his partner Ana, their new baby daughter Sabine, and dog Toby enjoy walks at High Park when in Toronto. They make regular trips to Long Point and eastern Ontario, now with the challenge of bumping up Sabine's life list.

# Nikon Photo Quiz

Sponsored by Nikon Canada

By Willie D'Anna

When I started writing these photo quizzes, I had some ideas about “keeping it real”. That is, I wanted the photo quizzes to replicate what we see in the field so that they illustrated how birders identify birds. This ideal has proven difficult at times, due in large part to the static nature of a photograph.

WHEN WE SEE BIRDS IN LIFE, we almost always see a lot more than a simple snapshot and if that really is all that we see, we often let that bird get away unidentified, as agitating as that can be. However, with the ubiquity of modern photography equipment, birders frequently are not only able to take home a mental snap shot but a good physical image, as well. That physical image may show additional details that we were unable to see in the field.

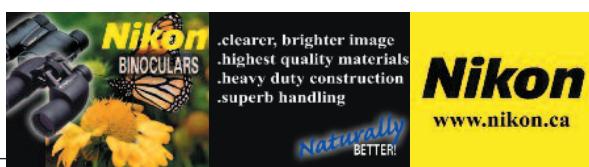
What stands out to me on this bird is that it has fairly long wings, an ample tail, long legs, and what appear to be talons. Based on the latter, let's assume that we are dealing with a raptor and try to confirm that assumption. The primaries on the left wing appear to be pale gray with thin black barring.

The tail also looks banded. A lot of raptors show banding on their flight feathers (the primaries, secondaries, and tail feathers) so I am gaining confidence with this assumption. No doubt, the first thing that many of you noticed was the lovely rich rusty colour of the body, from at least the upper breast all the way down to the tips of the undertail coverts. The list of raptors that at least occasionally show a rufous underbody include juvenile

Northern Harrier, adult Sharp-shinned and Cooper's Hawks, adult Broad-winged and Red-shouldered Hawks, and rufous morph Swainson's, Red-tailed, and Ferruginous Hawks. The challenge now is to narrow the field of choices down to one.

Let us start with the left wingtip, which looks rather pointed. That could be a function of the odd angle that the bird is at, relative to the camera, but if not, it suggests that this could be a Northern Harrier. Although known for having broad rounded wingtips like the other species under consideration, Harriers are more likely than the rest to show rather pointed wingtips on occasion. Thinking along these lines, we can now find several characters to support our guess and rule out the other species. On the left wing, the secondaries appear darker than the primaries. If we can convince ourselves that the secondaries are not in shadow, then this a strong field mark in favor of a Harrier, as none of the other species would show this. Now, take a look at the outer pair of tail feathers.

Although not easy to see due to the oblique angle, in contrast to the other rectrices, the dark barring is comparatively pale on these feathers. While the other species under consideration may or may





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not show barring on the outer rectrices, they normally show the same pattern as on the other tail feathers. The evidence is mounting for a Northern Harrier.

Adult Sharpies and Cooper's and Broad-winged Hawks always show white undertail coverts, unlike the orange rufous on the quiz bird. In addition these three species usually show much more white mixed in with the red on the underbody than the bird in question. Swainson's Hawks always have dark remiges (secondaries and primaries) such that the barring on these feathers is hard to notice. Ferruginous Hawks have whiter remiges that have barely discernable barring. A rufous-morph Red-tailed Hawk would show a darker belly than breast and, of course, a red tail. An adult Red-shouldered Hawk could have an underbody that is quite similar to the quiz bird. However, it would show a dark tail with narrow white bands, a strongly checkered pattern on the remiges,

and a translucent white patch on the outer primaries. I think it is safe to say that we have ruled out all of the other possibilities. This tricky photo of a juvenile Northern Harrier, no doubt just recently out of the nest, was taken by Roy John at Longridge Point, James Bay, Ontario in late July 2011.

You know, it used to be that a bird photograph would rarely show more than what we perceive in the field. But now that high quality portable digital cameras are ubiquitous, that is no longer the case. On more than one occasion I have been amazed by what my digiscoped images revealed, which I had not perceived in the field. So, in a sense, the new photography is bringing us back to the days of the museum ornithologist, who had to collect a bird in order to identify it. That is, in the hand the collector looked for clues that could not be discerned otherwise. Now, we can look at photographs to see some of the same things.

## Board of Directors Update

On behalf of the OFO Board of Directors, greetings and welcome to the 2012 inaugural issue of *OFO News*. This year marks the 30th anniversary of OFO, which is a significant milestone. As OFO moves into its fourth decade, the other directors and I share a vision for the organization that involves respect and appreciation for longstanding active members that we rely on from year-to-year for our various activities. Our vision also involves an effort to reach out to the broader membership and to strive to renew an interest in Ontario's avifauna amongst the general populace. In that regard, if there is anything we can do to serve the birding community better we would like to know about it, and we encourage you to get in touch.

As a reminder to anyone who has yet to renew their OFO membership for 2012, you now have the option to join or renew online. To access online registration and pay your 2012 membership fees you can visit our website at [www.ofo.ca](http://www.ofo.ca) and look under the "About Us" tab for further instructions. Payment requires you to open a PayPal account, and the entire process is quick, easy and secure. By joining or renewing online you also reduce the amount of paperwork and administration for us, which we would greatly appreciate!

Preparations are already underway for our annual convention which has been scheduled for 15 – 17 September. Organized birding activities will take place in Presqu'ile Provincial Park, and the surrounding area, including Prince Edward County and the banquet will take place at the Best Western in Cobourg. More details are coming soon.

In an effort to engage the younger demographic we have initiated a search for young birders who would be interested in forming a new committee to advise us about how we as an organization can serve you better. This could include, among other things, organizing events aimed at children or young adults, opportunities for social networking, and the identification of print and online resources of special interest to our younger members. If you are interested in being part of this or know a young birder who might be, please contact Vice President Lynne Freeman at [lynne.to@gmail.com](mailto:lynne.to@gmail.com).

Finally, if you are planning to visit the Point Pelee area this spring, and you happen to visit Hillman Marsh, watch out for a brand new shorebird platform and viewing blind currently scheduled to be built in April. OFO has made a \$2,000 donation towards this new structure and we are working to organize a schedule of interpreters who will be on site during the month of May to assist visitors with shorebird identification.

Robert Maciver, OFO President