



OFO News

NEWSLETTER OF THE ONTARIO FIELD ORNITHOLOGISTS

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The Adventure of Yellow Rail Research on the James Bay Coast

By Audrey Nowicki

In the early morning of 28 June a team of nine met at the Yorkdale Shopping Mall in Toronto, loaded up a minivan and pickup truck and headed off for the wilds of northern Ontario. Our goal was to survey parts of the James Bay coast for the elusive Yellow Rail. Our purpose was to collect data to determine the distribution, abundance and habitat of the elusive Yellow Rail on the southwestern coast of James Bay, Canada. Our team would also collect data on Short-eared Owls, Northern Harrier and Black Terns and sample *Anurans* (specifically Wood Frogs) found on location.

Our team, led by Mark Peck, Royal Ontario Museum (ROM), was Chris Risle, Mike McMurtry, Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources (OMNR), graduate students Pat Hodgson and Kristen Keyes, recent graduates Amy Whitear and myself, student Sean Boyle and recent retiree Gerry Binsfeld. We were an eclectic but energetic team who bonded between the decades and got the job done while revelling in the experience.

We rode the Polar Bear Express from Cochrane to Moosonee. In Moosonee, our group of nine split into two and headed off in separate directions. My team headed southeast of Moosonee to an old

goose hunting camp near the mouth of the Missisicabi River, in Hannah Bay. We were dropped off by a de Havilland Beaver floatplane, with a small canoe and our gear for five days.

The first day of fieldwork is always an adventure as you get familiar with the area, your subjects, and your surveys. The canoe only held three people so that first evening Gerry, Kristen and I headed down the Missisicabi River to the coastal marshes while Sean and Mark headed to an inland site by foot. Aware of the tides, we arrived at our pre-chosen site, pulled

photographed the site, and recorded the vegetation and water depth in the area. Along the way we carefully made our way over streams that wound their way to the bay (our feet didn't stay dry for long). It's not easy going through this habitat — by the time we reached the end of the transect we had covered just



Chaffy Sedge Marshes at North Bluff Point.
Audrey Nowicki

inset: The author on the Missisicabi River
Lowlands. / Mark Peck



the canoe high up on shore, tied it off to some bushes and headed into the willows and alders. How people did this work prior to the availability of personal GPS units is a mystery to me. After struggling and sweating it out in this thicket recording habitat information for several hundred metres we finally pushed through into relatively open marshland interspersed with shrubs and driftwood.

We set a course for our transect straight into the marshland away from the canoe. Every 250 metres we stopped,

over 2 kilometres and were already tired. For all that effort, we hadn't detected any rails. After adjusting our equipment, removing binoculars and replacing them with head lamps, and applying another layer of bug spray, we started back for camp.

As I was bent over pouring the water from my boot Gerry and Kristen called out to me: "It's a bear, Audrey!" Only half an hour before had we laughed at our chances of encountering one. I looked around in the dusk and saw nothing.

Realizing I was in front of Gerry, the gun bearer, I shuffled back to stand beside my companions in time to see a young black bear come out from behind some willows about 50 metres from where we stood. At first it appeared not to have seen us, but picked up our scent; when he finally spotted us it was off like a shot.

It was dark now and as we approached the first stream we realized the tide had caused it to rise considerably. Though we were able to jump most, eventually we reached one we could not.

We didn't want to wade across as we would be wet and uncomfortable and still had a couple of hours of travel left before we reached camp. At length, Gerry proclaimed we would build a bridge. The next thing Kristen and I knew, Gerry was tipping a tree through the willows like Paul Bunyan, with the earth shaking at our feet. The tree landed solidly and we were across and on our way again.

With not much more than 500 meters to go to reach the canoe, the sound of tapping pebbles was heard nearby. Sure enough, when nearly all our energy was sapped, we finally began to hear rails. Their sound was unmistakable even though it was the first time I had ever heard the *tick, tick, pause, tick, tick, tick* in repetition, and it was like a shot of adrenaline in the dark. We found the rails in marshland with at least 10 centimetres

of water coverage. The vegetation was primarily Chaffy sedge, *Carex paleacea*, with willow and alder bordering the streams. They called out incessantly, staking claim to their territories and we quickly counted and recorded our first 12 birds.

The second night proved almost as challenging as more bridges had to be built and the walking proved just as difficult as the previous evening. However, it proved to be a spectacular location. Here, we spotted Short-eared Owls,

dined with Sandhill Cranes, experienced more Yellow Rails vocalizations and had several encounters with Nelson's Sparrows and nesting Le Conte's Sparrows. We were in a world where southern Ontario rarities had become common.

We also visited Shippensands Island, at the mouth of the Moose River, and North Bluff Point. It was at this latter site where we finally found a strong population of Yellow Rail. Our count rose to 51 in an area dominated by Chaffy sedge, in water 5-10 cm deep.

Our initial results indicate that there was little breeding of Short-eared owls along the southwestern coast of James Bay, due mostly to a poor small mammal year. Black Terns were found in only two sites during our surveys and there was no evidence of breeding in the areas we worked in. As for the Yellow Rails, our surveys will help define the specific habitat they require. With help from the Ministry of Natural Resources and GIS mapping we hope to be able to map specific Yellow Rail habitat, then, using abundance estimates from our surveys, estimate the Yellow Rail numbers across southwest James Bay. This number may fluctuate annually but unless research was conducted for several years it would be difficult to determine annual variation. Mark Peck speculates the Yellow Rail is more abundant than most people think and that their population extends farther north and inland than previous research suggests.

Credit must be given to the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources, in particular Ken Abraham, Sarah Hagey, Rod Brook, Bill Crins and the helicopter pilots, who supported our research by providing critical logistical assistance and an element of comfort in Moosonee with the use of the staff house. Thanks should also be given to Moose Cree First Nation for welcoming us to do our research and for use of two goose hunting camps. Personally, I want to thank Mark Peck for including me in this unforgettable project and for his continual support on my journey as a bird enthusiast.

Surveying for Whip-poor-will

By Seabrooke Leckie

In the June 2009 issue of *OFO News*, I discussed the status of Whip-poor-will in the province in light of their recent designation as Threatened by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC). In the article I indicated that there were currently no provincial monitoring schemes in place to track the populations of this beautiful bird.

This summer, Bird Studies Canada (BSC) ran a pilot monitoring scheme in the Norfolk Forest Complex Important Bird Area in the Long Point region of southwestern Ontario, funded by OMNR Species At Risk Stewardship Funding. The purpose of the surveys was to test potential monitoring protocol for anticipated future expansion of the project through the province.

The survey routes were set up similar to the traditional Breeding Bird Surveys, as a series of counts at regular intervals along roadsides. Due to the nocturnal habits of the species, counts were made at dusk and the few hours following, on nights surrounding the full moon. A total of 91 point counts on ten routes were completed, and 44 Whip-poor-will were detected, an aver-

age of about 0.5 birds per count. Considering the fragmented nature of the landscape, this tally is very good.

The surveys completed by Frontenac Bird Studies, also mentioned in the June 2009 article, produced similarly encouraging results. Surveys followed a similar protocol to those used by BSC. In June and July, 45 counts were completed, detecting a total of 51 individuals, an average of 1.1 birds per count. The habitat through the Frontenac Arch is much more contiguous, allowing for a higher density of birds in the region.

Bird Studies Canada is working with the Northeast Coordinated Bird Monitoring partnership in the United States to address widespread declines in nightjar populations in eastern North America. With help from funding from the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources – Terrestrial Assessment Program, BSC plans to work in partnership with local and regional groups, such as Frontenac Bird Studies, to develop a Whip-poor-will study design for the province.

For more information, contact Debbie Badzinski, Ontario Program Manager, BSC.



Whip-poor-will. Tom Rook,
stockfull@rogers.com

Monitoring Chimney Swifts in Ontario

By Hazel Wheeler

Photos by John Emms



Ontario SwiftWatch is the story of a grassroots effort gone provincial

Chimney Swift monitoring has been going on in a number of communities in Ontario, due in large part to the efforts of local naturalist groups, for a number of years. For anyone who has watched the spectacle of Chimney Swifts entering a large roost against the backdrop of a fall sunset, often with birds numbering in the hundreds, it's easy to understand how people get drawn into watching these remarkable birds.

Bird Studies Canada (BSC) became involved in Chimney Swift monitoring and research in 2008 through a partnership with Nature London (McIlwraith Field Naturalists), who had been monitoring Chimney Swifts in London, Ontario since fall 2004. The monitoring season of 2009 saw the full launch of Ontario SwiftWatch, a large-scale volunteer monitoring program for individuals and organisations across Ontario.

Funded by the Ontario Trillium Foundation, Environment Canada's Habitat Stewardship Program, OMNR's Species at Risk Stewardship Fund, and the TD Friends of the Environment Foundation, the primary goal of Ontario SwiftWatch was to coordinate monitoring efforts across Ontario through the creation of a standardized protocol that could be adopted by Chimney Swift monitoring groups. An online data entry system was also developed so that any SwiftWatcher with an internet connection could enter their monitoring data directly into a centralized database, managed by BSC. This would create a large base of comparable data that could be used to increase our understanding of Chimney Swift population dynamics, behaviour, and ecology throughout the province.

The need for a greater understanding of Chimney Swift populations is serious. Chimney Swifts, like many other aerial insectivores in North America, are experiencing strong population declines across their range.

Breeding Bird Survey data indicate that the Canadian Chimney Swift population has declined 8.3% per year from 1968 to 2007 — an overall decrease of 96%. This alarming and rapid population decline recently led the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) to designate the swift a federally threatened species. Likewise, in early September 2009 the status of Chimney Swifts in Ontario was uplisted from Special Concern to Threatened by the Committee on the Status of Species at Risk in Ontario (COSSARO).

The primary causes of this drastic decline in Chimney Swift populations are as yet unclear, though decreases in habitat and prey availability, as well as an increase in unpredictable weather events, likely contribute. Several researchers agree that prey availability is of specific importance, especially when swifts are considered along with other shrinking aerial insectivore populations. As a whole, this guild of birds is declining across North America, with the



sharpest declines occurring in the northeast, a region of the continent most densely populated by humans. It is speculated that the large environmental 'human footprint' associated with the northeast had a particularly negative effect on insect populations, altering insect phenology, and decreasing the abundance and diversity of prey items available for Chimney Swifts and other aerial insectivores.

In this inaugural year of Ontario SwiftWatch, the monitoring protocol was

adopted by groups in London, Guelph, and Barrie, with scattered individuals putting the protocol into practice in nine other communities in southern Ontario. London and Guelph have been putting forth an organized Chimney Swift monitoring efforts for a number of years, and have each had approximately 20 volunteers regularly monitoring at least as many chimneys through this 2009 season. Major differences between London and Guelph arise when looking at major roosting activity, however. Guelph has

one major roost that peaked this season at approximately 90 birds in June, whereas London supports 13 known roosts, several of which consistently hosted hundreds of birds in late summer.

Barrie efforts have a different story: This was the first season of formal Chimney Swift monitoring in the city, and from a list of potential chimneys compiled at the beginning of April, two active chimneys were found. One of these was a sizeable roost that was observed throughout the season, and another was a potential nesting chimney that was unfortunately demolished mid-season.

News of the loss of occupied chimneys begs the question: are there enough chimneys left to support swifts, with structures regularly being demolished or rendered unusable through modifications such as caps and metal liners? To answer this, BSC has undertaken a large-scale study, based in London, to inventory all the chimneys in the city, describe their physical and geographical characteristics, and observe what proportion of available chimneys are occupied by Chimney Swifts. This study has the potential to be repeated in many communities to compare chimney availability and occupancy across Ontario.

There is a lot of work to do towards understanding and solving the problem of Chimney Swift declines in North America, but Ontario SwiftWatch presents a concerted effort towards finding concrete answers to questions of best practices in conservation and stewardship.

BSC is looking for volunteers to observe and identify potential Chimney Swift nesting and roosting sites in Ontario, as well as take on leadership roles in initiating SwiftWatch in their communities.

Contact **Hazel Wheeler**, BSC Ontario Program Biologist, at hwheeler@birdscanada.org or 1-888-448-2473 x.165, if you would like to participate in identifying sites, know of any nesting/roosting locations, or would like to volunteer in a longer-term monitoring program in your community. This project is an excellent opportunity to directly contribute to Chimney Swift conservation efforts.

Birding Inland in Winter

For birders in Ontario, it is just a fact of birding life that birding in winter presents a greater challenge than birding in summer – and I don't just mean trying to keep your toes from freezing while you're out hiking. Ontario's fields and forests, so rich with bird-song during the summer months, become nearly vacant during the cold, dark season. The focus of birding during the winter tends to shift to coastal areas, where the open water of the Great Lakes and joining rivers, relatively quiet during the breeding season, begin to fill up with arctic migrants, ducks and geese and gulls. In the pursuit of birding bounty, it's easy to forget the joy of birding one's "home turf". The numbers may be smaller, but the rewards are just as great.

Here Pete Read and Mike Burrell mention some great locations to see birds in the interior of southwestern Ontario. If you don't live in that vicinity, however, habitats and locations similar to those they mention can still be found in your area.

An excellent way to discover some of the best sites for local winter birding is to sign up for your region's Christmas Bird Count. Participation is free for Bird Studies Canada members, or \$5 for non-members, which helps to defray administrative costs associated with organizing the event and managing the data. Usually these counts are well-attended, and experienced birders are happy to have people new to the area or to birding join them as they visit local hotspots.

To find a count near you, visit

Bird Studies Canada's list of Ontario CBCs at: <http://www.bsc-eoc.org/volunteer/cbc/index.jsp?targetpg=compilers&lang=EN&prov=ON>

Finding Raptors in Waterloo

By Mike Burrell

When I think of winter birding in Ontario, I think of feeder birds, waterfowl, and raptors. Unfortunately for me, where I grew up just north of Waterloo we were just a little too far south for interesting winter finches, just a little too far north for interesting wintering sparrows, and just a little too far away from any open water for waterfowl. So, perhaps naturally, I became interested in the winter birds that were around: raptors.

The agricultural fields north of Waterloo are perhaps some of the best in the province for wintering raptors. Our outings (typically a couple of hours) usually net us about 50 raptors, generally about half each of Rough-legged and Red-tailed Hawks, with a sprinkling of American Kestrels and the odd *Accipiter* or Merlin thrown in. The area is also an excellent one for wintering Snowy Owls. Last winter we had close to 15 individuals in our "regular" area. The Linwood Christmas Bird Count, which began a few years ago

to document the great numbers of raptors, has recorded an average of near 100 Rough-legged Hawks each year; regularly one of the best in North America. The area is also great for big Snow Bunting flocks and smaller numbers of Horned Larks and the occasional Lapland Longspur; the best way to find them is to watch for fields that the local farmers have recently spread manure on.

Our regular route through the region is sure to turn up ample numbers of hawks. Typically, we leave from our town of Heidelberg, and head towards the town of Linwood, meander a few roads to the north near the Conestogo Reservoir and return south along the Conestogo River through the fittingly named town of Hawkesville to look for the Red-shouldered Hawk that has wintered on the flood plains for the past six winters. Give it a try — I'm sure you'll find some hawks.

Mike Burrell lives in Waterloo County and coordinates the Linwood and Kitchener Christmas Bird Counts.



Snowy Owl / Mike Burrell



Birding London in Winter

By Pete Read

For those who live in London and vicinity, local winter birding doesn't have to be an unproductive outing.

There are a multitude of easy-to-get-to locations for winter birding. This is a result of the many varied habitats available, and certain local spots actually have multiple environments, so are more likely to hold lots of species of birds.

Fanshawe Lake Conservation Area, in the northeast part of London is particularly good for woodland species such as chickadee, nuthatches, and other such familiar winter birds but also opportunities for more unusual sightings. Both

sides of the man-made lake, composed of the dammed waters of the Thames River, are reforested with evergreens. In eruption years we find this place a magnet for winter finches and similar species. Also, waterfowl and gulls remain in the lake until it is frozen and often even later as the spillway, due to its rushing water, stays open most of the winter. Another close and similar spot is Wildwood CA, near St. Mary's, another heavily coniferous place that can attract winter finches.

Another good place to study birds is the Westminster Ponds complex, a series of kettle lakes running from Pond Mills CA in eastern London westward to Westminster Ponds CA. It has a rich number of habitats ranging from deciduous woodlands to bogs, and lakes to shrublands and open areas. Thus many passerines will find shelter and food there, including Carolina and Winter Wren, and White-throated and White-crowned Sparrow. Great Horned Owls nest in the woods. Waterfowl such as Hooded Merganser and others can be found in the many ponds until January freeze-up. The number of unusual birds found there over the years has been impressive.

A large multi-habitat area is Komoka Provincial Park, an undeveloped park, located just west of London. Woodlands, brushlands, old fields with hawthorn, various types of riparian and other habitats are home to many wintering species such as locally common winter birds like cardinals, chickadees, and jays, but can also be a source of such unusual species as Northern Shrike, Hermit Thrush, Brown Thrasher and Long-eared Owl.

Even waterfowl, including Redhead, Green-winged Teal and others linger along the river in the Park or at the nearby Komoka Pits, old gravel pits which are lakes and seldom freeze before January. A few gull species can be present and one never knows when a white-winged gull or other unusual gulls might be with them.

If a birder preferred to remain in the city, there are many public parks along the extensive trail system flanking the Thames River, which bisects the city. Walking any will afford good winter birding; due to three nests in the vicinity of London, one may even encounter Bald Eagles on outings. Greenway Park is one of our most productive areas, where a sewage plant dispenses warm water, keeping the river open and inviting all year. Many waterfowl and gulls will be found there throughout the winter. The site hosts primarily dabbling ducks, but divers such as mergansers are also often found. Red-necked and Pied-billed Grebe have also occurred in



Hugh Casbourn, Sue Southon and Garth Casbourn at the gate of Reservoir Park (the geographic centre of the London CBC). *Betsy Baldwin*

the area. With the number of gulls that loaf about there is always the chance of finding an unusual species. An Ivory Gull was located amongst the other gulls many years ago. In the surrounding vegetation we have found many familiar winter passerines. The warm

water from the sewage plant can cause hatches of insects, which have attracted even lingering swallows in December, and the Poison Ivy bushes along the hillside opposite the sewage plant attract many species to their berries, including Yellow-rumped Warblers.

Gibbons Park, on the north branch of the Thames, is another spot often with open water and good brushy habitat.

Carolina Wren and other wintering species might be lurking in the brush or coming to feeders on the hillsides along the river. Some waterfowl linger there such as mergansers, and recently a Long-tailed Duck shared their company. Kiwanis Park and Meadowlily Woods CA, both along the south branch of the river, also boast multiple habitats to attract a diversity of wintering species in the varied riparian habitats. Waterfowl and gulls can be found there as well when the river is open.

Outside the city, grazing land can attract raptors. The best roads to check

Coastal Winter Birding Destinations in Southwestern Ontario

by Pete Read

It seems more birds are found clustered along the lakeshores than inland during the winter

One of our favourite winter trips involves driving to the Pinery Provincial Park on Lake Huron and then working our way westward to Kettle Point, dropping in to the various harbours along the way. As with Lake Erie, woods and brushy areas host birds that are moving along the coastline. Gulls and waterfowl can of course be found on open water, and one can often spot Bald Eagles along the water-side to Kettle Point. Check local beach parking lots and the beaches themselves. Rarities such as Townshend's Solitaire and Varied Thrush have been found along the edges of Lake Huron. The Pinery often holds winter finches in its evergreens. The park visitor centre is open during the winter and can have Tufted Titmouse and a variety of winter birds at its feeders. There is often a wintering Red-headed Woodpecker near the maintenance buildings nearby.

Another highlight of outings with our local nature club, Nature London (McIlwraith Field Naturalists), is the winter trip to the St. Clair River. The excursion starts at Point Edward, near Sarnia, at the source of the river, where it derives its waters from Lake Huron. We drive southwards to Port Lambton, just north of Wallaceburg, keeping a look-out for passerines and raptors as we travel. We stop at most of the many parkettes and pull-offs, where we can observe the ducks and gulls that are found wintering in the river. One of the best spots is at the Lambton Generating Plant where the water is warm and thus open, attracting such species. As well, there are thousands of Canvasback, Redhead and other diving ducks usually wintering along the river, especially near Sombra.

We are lucky in London to be situated close to both Lakes Huron and Erie. Port Stanley and other ports on Lake Erie host gulls and ducks in their harbours. Look for smaller birds in wooded areas along the lakefront, and in the small towns and ports. Mockingbird, bluebirds, some kinds of blackbirds, Tufted Titmouse, and many other lingering species seem to enjoy the milder temperatures and food availability along the lake. Other Lake Erie locations include Long Point and Rondeau Provincial Parks. Large groups of diving ducks and some swans can be found at either place, until freeze-up.

are southwest of London; the area south of Longwoods Road, Road 2, from Melbourne south to the river, between Sutherland Road and Mayfair, may boast Rough-legged and Red-tailed Hawks, Northern Harrier and other open land species. Other species to be on the lookout for include shrike, meadowlark, and Short-eared Owl.

Another area with similar species is near Alvinston, north-west of London, particularly southward from the town towards Glencoe, and eastward towards Strathroy. Though anywhere where there are evergreens next to open grasslands can be investigated for Short-eared Owl, the area on Mayfair Road between Scotchmere and Inadale Roads can be particularly productive at dusk and dawn.

The roads in the vicinity of the town of Adelaide, between highway 22 and Cuddy Road, northwest of Strathroy, are a great location to try for Snowy Owl. The intersection and vicinity of Cuddy Road and Seed Road often produces Short-eared Owls as well. Another notable area is to the north-east of London near Lucan. In recent years up to five Snowy Owls have been found along the roads to the north of Lucan along the Roman Line.

Perhaps not as picturesque but certainly no less productive, the dump along Wellington Road South at Manning Drive is another good site for winter birds. Lounging on fields outside the dump or circling over the dump, one can see a large variety of gulls including white-winged gulls such as Glaucous and Iceland and perhaps some other unusual species. The dump can also host hawks, and other open field birds.

A great way to check out the London winter birding scene is to take part in our CBC, the longest continuously-run count in Canada. It is run on the first Saturday of the count period, 19 December, this year. We have many field participants and feeder watchers, but there is always room for one more.

Pete Read has birded the London area for over 35 years and keeps the bird records for London and Middlesex County on behalf of Nature London (McIlwraith Field Naturalists) and compiles the London CBC.



Legislative Update **Changes to Ontario's Species at Risk List**

By Rob Maciver

Acting on a report from the Committee on the Status of Species at Risk in Ontario (COSSARO) dated 11 June 2009, the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources is proceeding with a number of amendments to the Species at Risk in Ontario List (the SARO List). The amendments, which affect not only birds but other taxa, include such changes as: species to be added to the SARO List, species to be re-classified, species to be assessed as more than one distinct population, and species to be removed from the list.

Several of the amendments involve changes to the status of birds. Chimney Swift and Whip-poor-will are to be added to the SARO List under the designation of "threatened". Under this designation, the habitat of these species automatically becomes protected once the amended regulation is filed. In addition, a recovery strategy must be prepared for these species within two years once the amended regulation is filed.

An additional four bird species are to be added to the SARO List under the designation of "special concern". These four species are: Common Nighthawk, Olive-sided Flycatcher, Canada Warbler and Horned Grebe.

As well, there will be a re-classification of two bird species: the southern Ontario population of Bald Eagle is down-listed from "endangered" to "special concern", and Hooded Warbler is down-listed from "threatened" to "special concern".

These amendments are in addition to the protection for species already classified on the SARO List.

A complete version of the SARO List can be found at the following website: <http://www.mnr.gov.on.ca/en/Business/Species/2ColumnSub-Page/246809.html>

Olive-sided Flycatcher / Jean Iron

Taxonomic Update

50th Supplement to the AOU Check-list of North American Birds

By Rob Maciver



Nelson's Sparrow / Jean Iron

The American Ornithologists' Union Check-list of North American Birds is the authoritative standard of taxonomic classification and distribution of the approximately 2,000 bird species recognized to occur in the AOU area. For further clarity, the AOU area is that geographic area that includes North and Central America from the North Pole to the boundary of Panama and Colombia, including the adjacent islands under the jurisdiction of the included nations; the Hawaiian Islands; Clipperton Island; Bermuda; The West Indies, including the Bahama Islands,

the Greater Antilles, Leeward and Windward Islands in the Lesser Antilles (ending with Grenada); and Swan, Providencia, and San Andrés Islands in the Gulf of Mexico. Greenland is not presently included in the AOU area, although it was included in the past and will likely be included again in the near future. All species for which there is a published record or report of occurrence within the AOU area are included in the AOU Check-list.

The most current edition of the AOU Checklist is the 7th edition, published in 1998. Between editions, however, the

AOU periodically publishes supplementary information that represents taxonomic updates based on the latest scientific research.

In July 2009, the 50th Supplement to the AOU Check-list was published. This is the 9th Supplement to the present edition of the AOU Check-list. The Supplement contains a summary of decisions made by the AOU's Committee on Classification and Nomenclature — North and Middle America between 1 January and 31 December 2008.

Among the changes to the AOU Check-list in this most recent Supplement include seven new species occurrences added to the main list, three new generic names as the result of taxonomic splitting, the loss of one generic name as the result of a taxonomic merger, and English name changes for three species. In addition, there is a newly recognized family that has been added to the main list, and the family placement of six passerine genera has been modified. As well, the offshore limit for acceptable records has been changed from 100 miles (160 km) to 200 nautical miles (370 km) to conform to international convention regarding the jurisdictional limits of nations over offshore natural resources.

Of the changes included in the most recent Supplement, Ontario birders will be particularly interested in the changes to the English vernacular name of Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow, which is now known simply as Nelson's Sparrow. A similar change has been made with respect to the former Saltmarsh Sharp-tailed Sparrow which is now known as Saltmarsh Sparrow. These changes are meant to remedy the former names that were widely considered to be unnecessarily cumbersome and are not the result of taxonomic reorganization.

Also of particular interest to Ontario birders will be the relocation of the genus *Piranga* into the family Cardinalidae. The genus *Piranga*, which includes Scarlet Tanager, Summer Tanager and Western Tanager, has traditionally been included in the family Thraupidae (the true tanagers) however it was previously excised from this family and placed into a position of uncertainty. Primarily as

the result of comparisons of mitochondrial DNA, the consensus now is that the Piranga (together with two other genera formerly found within the family Thraupidae) have their closest affinity with the cardinals and grosbeaks of the family Cardinalidae, and have been positioned in this family accordingly. As a result, the species Ontarians would be most likely to recognize as tanagers are no longer classified among the true tanagers. The Committee considered and rejected a proposal to change the English vernacular names, such that, for example, Scarlet Tanager would become Scarlet Piranga. Future taxonomic rearrangement within this complex is anticipated.

For further information regarding the AOU Checklist of North American Birds including complete details of the 50th Supplement please visit:
www.aou.org/checklist/north/index.php

The Birder's Vocabulary

By Cindy Cartwright



For some people, birding is simply watching the birds outside the window. Adding ticks to a long life list is a priority for others. But for most OFO members, birding is much more. We want to know about life histories, habitats and conservation, plumage variations... the list goes on. And as we learn we come across words that we don't recognize. This quiz will give OFO members a chance to stretch their avian vocabulary.

Answer on page 16.

Quiz word: spicule

Clue: Ospreys have them, terns don't.

We are grateful to those OFO members who participated in this year's Baillie Birdathon with OFO as their sponsor organization.

Baillie Birdathon 2009

In particular we wish to thank the 2009 OFO Celebrity Birders, John and Victoria Carley. The Carleys conducted their Birdathon entirely within the urban parks and green spaces of the Greater Toronto Area, and tallied a respectable 102 species. In addition to the OFO Celebrity Birders, several individual OFO members conducted a Birdathon this year with OFO as their sponsor organization. Thanks are due this year to Geoff Carpentier, Maris Apse, Ronald Valentine and Chip Weseloh who each made a substantial contribution by naming OFO as their sponsor organization. We would like to recognize Geoff, Maris and Ronald for their ongoing contributions and their many years of Birdathon participation – we are grateful.

Despite some doubts regarding the ability to raise charitable funds under the current economic conditions, we are extremely pleased to report that OFO members raised \$13,302.69 for the 2009 Baillie Birdathon. Of this amount, \$5,649.35 will be redirected back to OFO for our activities. This is a fantastic result and the highest amount raised by OFO members to date.

The Baillie Birdathon raises money to support Bird Studies Canada, Long Point Bird Observatory and other bird research stations in the Canadian Migration Monitoring Network, as well as to contribute to the Baillie Fund. The Baillie Fund in turn provides important financial support to a variety of programs in bird conservation and scientific research. A portion of the funds that OFO members help to raise is redirected back to our organization, and the funds that we receive from the Baillie Birdathon are a key source of income that supplements our revenues from membership fees and direct donations. The funds generated through the Baillie Birdathon indirectly offset the cost to OFO members for items such as membership fees and special events such as the OFO Annual Convention. The continued support of the Baillie Birdathon by OFO members is a critical component of our club activities. Participation in the Baillie Birdathon is a fun and worthwhile way to take part in real life bird conservation efforts, and OFO members are encouraged to either support the OFO Celebrity Birder or to undertake their own Birdathon with OFO as their sponsor organization. Thank you for your financial support.

By Rob Maciver, OFO Birdathon Coordinator

Ontario Field Ornithologists 2008 Donations

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OFO Memberships

2009 has been an outstanding year for OFO memberships

Currently we have 126 Life and 964 Annual memberships. By the end of the year we will be well over 1100. Our growth is a testament to our great publications and to the many members who promote our club at every opportunity. Membership renewal forms and return envelopes are mailed with the October issue of OFO News. As noted on your mailing label, annual memberships expire on December 31. Please send your cheque or money order promptly in order to ease the work load and costs. Membership fees are not tax deductible, but tax receipts are issued for donations of \$10.00 and over. An OFO Gift membership makes a great Christmas present.

**Please ensure your address and email is current. Send all changes to etbeagan@sympatico.ca
Eleanor T. Beagan — OFO Membership Secretary**

Nikon Photo Quiz

Sponsored by Nikon Canada By Seabrooke Leckie



Photo by Glenn Coady

If a group of birds can be said to have a season, late autumn is the season of sparrows. The meadows and marshes turn brown, grass starts going to seed. Sparrows foraging amongst the weeds, around trees, under tangles and inside brambles, they're a common birding sight at this time of year. And they're infuriatingly good at staying out of sight, presenting just enough of themselves to conclusively say that you don't know what it is.

Every now and then, one will pop out into the open. It will stare you right in the eyes, as if challenging you to make an identification with your briefest of glimpses, before dropping back into the brush. Even when it obligingly hangs around in the open for a few minutes, identification isn't always easy.

Take this Little Brown Job, for example. The streaky plumage, thick beak and chunky body shape clearly identify it as a sparrow. But which one? For a bit of

instant gratification, it's easy to rule out juncos, buntings and towhees. A second fell swoop cuts all of the plain-flanked species from consideration — the *Aimophila*, *Spizella*, *Zonotrichia*, longspurs (except Lapland), Swamp and Lark Sparrow. Though there are many field marks that differ, Sage Sparrow is most easily eliminated by the brown head; female or nonbreeding Lark Bunting eliminated by the absence of white in the greater coverts. Fox Sparrow is out because of the striped crown of this individual.

That leaves us with the *Ammodramus*, the remaining *Melospiza* sparrows, Savannah and Vesper, and Lapland Longspur. This bird is the wrong shape for a longspur, which are long, slender

sparrows that resemble buntings; this bird resembles a lemon with a tail and legs. The bird's buffy supercilium and strong medial crown stripe rule out Vesper, which are also considerably paler with white rather than buffy undertones; Song and Savannah Sparrow, which tend to be more heavily marked along the flanks and also show whiter bellies; as well as Lincoln's Sparrow, which would also show fine streaking to the throat and a rustier crown.

That means this sparrow must be one of the *Ammodramus*, and indeed, the chunky body with relatively short tail, pale legs, narrow flank-streaking, and boldly-patterned back are all characteristics of this genus. Seaside Sparrows, members of the genus found along the

Atlantic coast, can be eliminated immediately because they are mostly dark-plumaged. Grasshopper Sparrows, an uncommon but widespread species in southern Ontario,

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can also be eliminated because they lack streaking across the front of the breast, which this bird shows. Henslow's Sparrows, which are rare in the province, have a slightly greenish-yellow tinge to their head, and more rufous in their back feathers. Baird's Sparrows, a species of the prairies, are overall more pale with a white belly, rather than the buffy colour of our bird.

Our remaining options are Nelson's Sparrow (previously Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow), Saltmarsh Sparrow (previously Saltmarsh Sharp-tailed Sparrow), and Le Conte's Sparrow. All three species have rich orange-buff supercilia and malars, though some individuals are brighter than others. Nelson's and Le Conte's, though unusual, are both found in the province with some regularity as they migrate south from their breeding grounds in northern Ontario. However, all three of these species lack strong moustachial stripes.

Well, now what? We've eliminated all of our possibilities. Since the bird clearly exists, we need to go back and re-examine species we had previously ruled out. The moustachial stripes may

be key here. Let's look at the *Ammodramus* again, since we feel pretty good that it's at least in that genus. Of the seven species, three (Henslow's, Baird's and Seaside) bear moustachial stripes, while the other four (Grasshopper, Le Conte's, Nelson's and Saltmarsh) do not.

The Seaside is still too dark, which leaves Baird's and Henslow's for reconsideration. Baird's Sparrows, even juveniles, have whiteish throats, malars and bellies, and pale edging to their tertials. They have a scalloped look to the feathers of their back, and a streaked nape. Henslow's Sparrows are more buffy-toned than Baird's, particularly juveniles and young birds. Some birds, particularly first-year Henslow's, may not necessarily show the extensive olive tinge seen in adults. The feathers of their back are redder and less scalloped, and their tertials have darker edging than Baird's Sparrows. Finally, the nape, just visible here, is unstreaked.

This probable first-year **Henslow's Sparrow** was photographed by Glenn Coady in spring at Point Pelee in the late 1980s.

Book Reviews

The Migration of Birds: Seasons on the Wing

By Janice M. Hughes, 2009.

Firefly Books, Richmond Hill, Ontario and Buffalo, New York, 208 pages, www.fireflybooks.com, 22 cm x 28 cm, \$40.00. Publication date: September 2009. ISBN 978-1-55407-432-7

Every year millions of birds make the trip from their wintering grounds to their breeding grounds and back again. Some of these journeys, like the 40,000-kilometre round trip of the Arctic Tern, boggle the human imagination; others, like the movement of White-tailed Ptarmigan up and down the mountainsides of Colorado for only a few kilometres in response to the severity of the winters, go almost unnoticed. In *The Migration of Birds: Seasons on the Wing*, Janice Hughes describes the incredible range of the migratory behaviour of birds. Although she does not add anything new to the understanding of the process, she contributes, in this attractive book, a fresh, lucid and insightful interpretation of what is presently understood.

Hughes sets the stage in the opening chapter by discussing historic views of migration, some dating back to the ancient Greeks and Romans, as well as to the Old Testament. This is followed by four chapters on, in turn, the "how, what, when, where and why" of migration, the mechanism of flight itself, the fuel required, and the perennially fascinating puzzle of how migrants find their way. In the organization and presentation of this material, in the foregrounding of the essential details of her explanatory structure, in her nose for the appropriate example, Hughes's talents as an educator shine forth. Her explanations range from the traditionally scientific



Photo by Glenn Coady

to the homespun (as when the carving of the Sunday-dinner bird turns into an anatomy lesson). In addition to developing the topics mentioned above, each chapter features in-depth “profiles” of two migrant species that exemplify the themes of that particular chapter. Here and elsewhere throughout the volume, explanation is aided by revelation in the form of excellent photographs and helpful maps and diagrams.

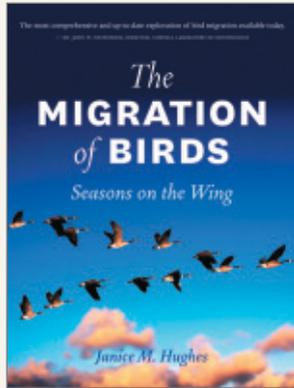
One of the reasons that bird migration continues to fascinate so many observers, this reviewer included, is that the means by which migrants find their way remains something of a mystery, one that Hughes appropriately saves for the next-to-last chapter of the book. New technologies have spawned new analogies. Old explanations tended to present the migrant as a traveler carrying a simple compass in his or her suit pocket. Now, however, I would suggest, as a more up-to-date analogy, a Global Positioning System (GPS), which offers us so much more in the way of accuracy and ease of navigating, as well as metaphorical power. How do we human beings use a GPS? When we set out on a trip, we key in the destination and then follow very specific instructions (e.g., turn left on Smith Street). If we fail to follow these instructions, we are given a new set. How does the GPS work? Inside the GPS box, there is a connection to a network of 24 satellites that tells where we are on Earth and a computer algorithm that combines where we are with where we are going and computes, on an ongoing basis, the direction we have to take in order to get there.

Does the GPS represent something akin to how the brain of the migrating bird works? Like the GPS, the bird has to know where it is on Earth, and it must compute, on an ongoing basis, the direction it needs to take in order to get to its destination. How a migrant does so is especially problematic when we consider that this is a skill not learned from the

parent species. Shining Bronze-Cuckoos raised by birds that are not of the same species travel without an adult Shining Bronze-Cuckoo from New Zealand to the Solomon or Bismarck Islands. This behavior cannot, therefore, have been learned; it must have been inherited. Any account of bird migration must take into consideration many other relevant ingredients: landmarks, odors, sounds, barometric pressure, gravity, sunlight, Earth’s magnetic field, the sun and the stars. Hughes works adroitly through each of these factors and their involvement in migration.

Like so many other books about wild animal species, this one ends on a sad note. What happens to migratory birds, Hughes asks, when the climate changes or the impact of civilization disrupts their migratory objectives? (Or, to return to the GPS analogy, when our GPS has not been updated to show road work or the fact that our destination has been hit by an earthquake) The final chapter, “Migratory Birds in Peril,” concentrates primarily on several species of migrants in danger of extinction from the effects of climate change and the impact of man-made structures.

Hughes has written a highly readable book that lends new perspectives on an old but still fascinating subject. There are just two weak features. The first is that a volume as dense in information as this one would benefit from the judicious application of headings and sub-headings within the text. These would help to clarify the inherently sound organization. The second, perhaps more serious, criticism is the lack of references within the text to source material elsewhere or to that listed in the back of the book under “Further Reading.” The reader is discouraged from carrying out further, independent investigations.



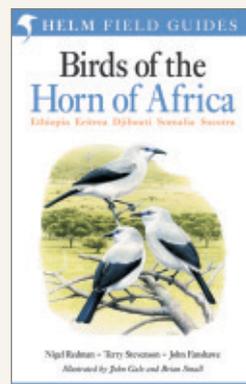
This book provides an excellent starting point for anyone wishing simply to learn more about bird migration. It should also appeal to a much wider range of readers — amateur and professional ornithologists, serious birders, students and teachers of biology, and, finally, that increasingly rare entity, the general reader who appreciates good science stories written in lively, effective prose.

John E. Black

Birds of the Horn of Africa

By Nigel Redman, Terry Stevenson and John Fanshawe, 2009
Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 08540. Softcover 496 pages. \$40.00USD.
ISBN13: 978-0-691-14345-3.

Princeton has once again sponsored a spectacular book — this time on the birds of the Horn of Africa. Covering over 1000 species, a daunting task has been successfully and admirably completed. For those of you who aren’t sure where the “horn” of Africa is, well it occupies the northeast part of Africa and includes the countries/ regions of Ethiopia, Eritrea, Djibouti, Somalia and



Socotra. Some of you will recognize the latter as the subject of a series of spectacular emails that were circulated last year showing unbelievable floral and faunal images.

The book is beautifully laid out, simple, concise, thorough and a joy to read. The plates are spectacular, concise and informative. Quite simply, this may be one of the best field guides I have reviewed in many years!

Okay, so maybe a bit of detail would be helpful. The introductory pages include several maps of the area of coverage, showing political, topographical, groundcover and protected areas maps. Each is concise and readable. Other information includes instructions on using the book, taxonomy and nomenclature, bird ID, plumage variations,

bird topography, a detailed glossary, geography, climate and habitat and a list of Important Bird Areas and references to related bird organizations.

Each family is treated in some detail at the start of each section of the species accounts. A brief descriptor of the attributes of the family is provided, followed by information for each species within that family. Information included for each bird covers common and scientific name, size (in both metric and Imperial units), plumage characteristics, habitat, habits, status, and voice. Accompanying each species is a detailed map, pictured directly opposite it for quick reference and a lovely painting showing adult, immature and subspecific plumages, where appropriate. Two hundred and thirteen plates are presented — each one is a piece of art in itself. A typical plate will depict 5 to 7

species and show 14-18 images of the species covered. Sitting and flying individuals are shown where necessary. The book closes with a checklist of the birds of the Horn of Africa, a list of endemics and a brief reference list.

I loved this book. It is well done, thorough, accurate and pleasing to look at. If I had to search for a criticism it would be that the checklist is not laid out in a format where I could fill in sightings, but is rather just a listing of the birds of that region, which in itself is redundant since the book itself provides that information. Other than that, I'm kind of at a loss for critical ideas. Simply, if you're thinking of going anywhere near NE Africa, get this book. And even if you're not, but love good bird books, buy it anyway.

Geoff Carpentier

Chipping or Clay-colored Sparrow?

By Roy John



On 13 May 2009, I was with an Ottawa Field Naturalists trip behind Ottawa airport, an area of shrub, grassland and tiny pockets of pine forest. It is a good habitat for sparrows and one can typically see Chipping, Clay-colored, Field, Vesper, Grasshopper, Savannah and Song Sparrows.

At one point we heard our first Chipping Sparrow song of the day. Several members of the group were experienced birders (Gord Belyea, Marilyn Ward, Dan Simpson, John Cartwright and myself) and we sang out, "Chipping Sparrow." A few novices wanted to see this bird so I looked and quickly found it in a young pine — except it was not a Chipping Sparrow, but a Clay-colored. I watched as it sang a Chipping song. Gord also identified it as a Clay-colored. His wife, Anne, played a Clay-colored song, but it did not respond. Our entire group, about 20 people, saw and heard it.

The next day Patrick Blake saw the same

bird singing the same song. On 7 June 2009, almost four weeks later, I went to the same locality and heard a Chipping Sparrow, confirmed by scope. However, a few hundred metres later, in the same tree where we saw the original bird, I found a Clay-colored Sparrow singing like a Chipping Sparrow. Having just heard a real Chipping, I thought the song was a little less rapid and hard, but these were subtle differences

On both occasions I photographed this bird and, on examination of the enlarged photo, I could find no evidence of a hybrid: it appears to be a pure Clay-colored Sparrow.

Answer to Birder's Vocabulary Quiz , page 11 : *Spicules:* tiny projections on the soles of the feet of some birds, especially fish-eating birds such as eagles and ospreys, that help with grip much the way the raised ridges of our fingerprints do.



**Ontario Field
Ornithologists**

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