



OFO News

NEWSLETTER OF THE ONTARIO FIELD ORNITHOLOGISTS

Spring Shorebirds at Hillman Marsh

By Jean Iron and Ron Pittaway

Dunlins often occur in the hundreds.
18 May 2005. Photo Jean Iron



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Late afternoon in May at the Hillman Marsh Shorebird Cell is a magical time when the calls of hundreds of Black-bellied Plovers increase in volume as resting birds stir, preparing to leave this important stopover site and continue their long migration. Suddenly they take off in groups, their haunting calls even louder as they circle above and head northwest towards their Arctic breeding grounds. This article provides information about experiencing spring shorebirds by sight and sound in all their splendour at Hillman Marsh.

Stilt Sandpiper is a rare regular spring migrant at the marsh. 17 May 2007.

Photo Jean Iron





Brightly-coloured *hendersoni* subspecies of the Short-billed Dowitcher in breeding plumage. 17 May 2007. Photo Jean Iron



New viewing blind at Hillman Marsh provides a panoramic view of shorebirds. May 2013. Photo Jean Iron

NEW VIEWING BLIND

To enhance shorebird viewing in the Point Pelee area, last year in 2013, the Ontario Field Ornithologists (OFO) partnered with Essex Region Conservation Authority (ERCA), Pelee Wings Nature Store, Point Pelee National Park and The Ontario Trillium Foundation to construct a viewing blind at the Hillman Marsh Shorebird Cell and to conduct regular shorebird viewing sessions during the Festival of Birds. These events will continue in spring 2014, with expert OFO members at the blind to help birders identify shorebirds.

WHERE AND WHEN

Hillman Marsh Shorebird Cell is strategically located beside Lake Erie near Point Pelee National Park in southwestern Ontario, where shorebirds traditionally rest on northbound migration. The cell hosts a continuous influx of migrants from mid-April to early June because its managed water levels create mudflats attractive to shorebirds. The cell is a birding hotspot. Early morning light is excellent for viewing with the sun behind in the east, and there is an increased chance of being first to find a rare shorebird. However, most birders visit in the afternoon to enjoy the greatest variety of species and highest numbers of shorebirds, which arrive throughout the day with numbers peaking in late afternoon.

HISTORY OF THE CELL

The popularity of the shorebird cell has grown tremendously since 2002 when Essex Region Conservation Authority purchased 86 acres of farmland and created the 42-acre shorebird cell. The visionary people who designed this site for shorebirds are to be commended. We have John Omstead of Family Tradition Foods in nearby Wheatley to thank for his initial generous donation of \$100,000, which allowed ERCA to purchase the land. ERCA then approached other partners and funding sources to raise the \$800,000 needed to construct the new wetland cell with habitat suitable for resting and feeding shorebirds on northbound migration. Grassland, meadow and reforested areas were planted around the cell to enhance the environment.

HOW IT WORKS

To manage for migrating spring shorebirds, essential components include the berm or raised bank around the cell to contain the water, and a pump to control water levels. In mid June after shorebird migration, the water remaining in the cell is drained and a farmer plants a crop that is harvested in early fall. Left over stalks and residue are chopped up to provide an organic base. The cell is flooded in fall, which speeds the decaying process and promotes growth of larvae, worms and other prey for spring shorebirds. Invertebrates are protected under a layer of ice in the winter. Then in late April, a gradual drawdown of water starts, which exposes mudflats rich in invertebrate prey for the shorebirds.

DIRECTIONS

From Erie Street in Leamington travel east on Oak Street East, which becomes Mersea Road 2. At about 7 km, just past intersection with County Road 37, the main entrance to Hillman Marsh is on right. Visitors must pay a daily parking fee at the self-serve kiosk at the entrance to the site. Have cash ready or purchase an annual parking pass from ERCA on line at <http://erca.org/conservation-areas-events/annual-passes/>

From the main parking lot, the shorebird cell is an easy 8 minute walk on a firm flat trail. A grassed berm around the cell allows birders to walk around and view shorebirds at any time of day. The shorebird blind is slightly elevated and provides shelter from the sun, wind and rain, but many birders watch from along the open berm.

Long-billed Dowitcher in breeding plumage. Most Long-billed Dowitchers occur from late April to early May before the main migration of Short-billed Dowitchers.

Photo Jean Iron



EXPECTED SHOREBIRDS

The cell often has hundreds of Dunlins, Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs, Least Sandpipers, Short-billed Dowitchers, American Golden-Plovers and Black-bellied Plovers. Also usually seen are Semipalmated Plovers, Killdeers, Spotted Sandpipers, Solitary Sandpipers, Ruddy Turnstones, Semipalmated Sandpipers, Pectoral Sandpipers and Wilson's Snipes. A few Long-billed Dowitchers are regular in late April and early May. Less common species such as American Avocets, Willets, Whimbrels, Marbled Godwits, White-rumped Sandpipers and Stilt Sandpipers occur in small numbers. Also watch for Wilson's and Red-necked Phalaropes. In 2013, the cell hosted two Black-necked Stilts.

OTHER BIRDS

Attracted to the cell are Bonaparte's Gulls, Forster's and Caspian Terns and a good variety of ducks. Little Gulls are rare but

regular. Great Blue Herons, Great Egrets, Sandhill Cranes, Bald Eagles, American Pipits and Horned Larks are often found. There is excellent birding for warblers and other passerines in the wet woods and shrubby areas that surround the cell.

Thousands of Black-bellied Plovers are attracted to the cell. 15 May 2013. Photo Jean Iron



The Enigma of Migration

Are birds migrating earlier each year? The answer is both yes and no.

By Roy John

A recent study at the University of East Anglia (UEA) is helping us understand why birds only appear to be migrating earlier. Individual birds actually arrive on the same date every year, but climate change has meant they can complete nesting sooner. Dr Jenny Gill, the lead researcher, explained they have known that some species of birds are migrating earlier, but the exact reasons were unclear. Furthermore, species that do not migrate earlier are declining in numbers

From a study of Black-tailed Godwits the UEA found the spring arrival date on the nesting grounds had advanced by two weeks. This was not a change in the behaviour of individual birds but those hatched in more recent years benefit from early nesting and they are the ones that are arriving in April instead of May. The dates are changing because the younger birds are turning up sooner. This new behaviour is linked to climate change because godwits nest earlier in warmer weather. The earlier a birds hatches the more body weight it will gain, subsequently prompting a speedy departure to their winter quarters. This means they are in condition to advance their return to the breeding grounds.

Birds that migrate over long distances cannot take as much of this advantage as they arrive so late their timing is already very tight. This explains why long-distance migrants are declining compared to other birds that can move in to the prime habitat before the long-distance birds arrive. Birds that stay in their wintering grounds, even though spring in the north may be favourable, risk arriving after spring food sources are gone.

This research from Britain fits with the results we see in Ontario for our Neotropical migrants. However as birds move north and breed earlier they may face new prey, parasites, competitors, and predators for which they are not well adapted. Overall climate change is putting many species of birds at risk and the consistent timing of bird migration is critical for the overall health of the environment.



Two Black-necked Stilts were very rare visitors in 2013. 6 May 2013. Photo: Jean Iron

OFO SHOREBIRD VIEWING SCHEDULE MAY 2014

Note: The Shorebird Cell is accessible all day for people to come and go at their leisure. In addition, OFO experts will be available to help with shorebird identification on the following afternoons:

Time: 4:30 - 6 p.m.

Dates: May 2, 5, 7, 10, 13 & 16, 2014

SHOREBIRD WORKSHOPS BY JEAN IRON

Lunch and Learn Sessions at Point Pelee National Park Visitor Centre Theatre, included with Park admission.

Time: 12 p.m.

Dates: May 7 & 13, 2014

This workshop details 28 regularly occurring spring migrant and breeding shorebirds, plus 8 rarer species that migrate

through southern Ontario to their Arctic breeding grounds. It is loaded with tips to sharpen identification skills. The focus will be on Point Pelee area shorebirds, and we will visit Hillman Marsh Shorebird Cell in the late afternoon.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Kevin Money of Essex Region Conservation Authority is recognized for his continued support for shorebirds. Mike Malone of Pelee Wings Nature Store played a leading role, as did OFO's Dave Milsom and Sarah Rupert of Point Pelee National Park to provide birders with shorebird viewing opportunities at Hillman Marsh.

All photos were taken at Hillman Marsh Shorebird Cell.

American Avocet is a rare spring migrant. 16 May 2007.

Photo: Jean Iron



CALLING ALL BIRDERS

Rusty Blackbird Spring Migration Blitz

By Mike Burrell

Get rusty
this spring to
save a declining
blackbird



left: Like many blackbirds, Rusties molt once per year, in the fall, and sport new, rusty feathers. Photo: Sam Barone
above: By the spring, after the rusty edges wear away, males will appear glossy black. Photo: Heather Pickard

WHY? Over the past half-century, the historically abundant Rusty Blackbird has endured one of the steepest population declines ever documented among North American landbirds. Within the last 15 years, scientists have learned more about this bird's breeding and wintering ecology, and this knowledge allows us to target conservation initiatives during these periods of this bird's annual cycle. However, as with many migratory species, we know very little about Rusty Blackbird ecology, distribution, and habitat use during migration. Are there hotspots where many individuals congregate? Are there stopover areas that are used predictably each year, and are these locations protected? The Rusty Blackbird Spring Migration Blitz will address these and other questions to help focus future research and conservation of one of North America's most vulnerable blackbirds. We're recruiting an army of birders to participate in this effort to help conserve this fascinating songbird. Will you accept our birding challenge?

WHO? The International Rusty Blackbird Working Group, eBird, and the Vermont Center for Ecostudies are partnering with local organizations, including Bird Studies Canada, to recruit volunteer observers from across the southeastern U.S., East Coast, Midwest, Alaska, and Canada.

WHAT? Each participating state, province, and territory will have a 3 to 8 week target window during which birders will search for Rusty Blackbirds. Within this window, birders may explore favoured birding haunts or newly identified areas that they suspect may harbour Rusty Blackbirds. We'll provide some guidance on potential habitats to explore, but birders should feel free to get creative — and ambitious — with their searching.

WHEN? Spring 2014 kicks off the first year of this three-year Spring Migration Blitz. The Blitz window will span early March through mid-June, with more specific time frames identified for each state or province to account for the northward migratory progression. Target dates for Ontario are April to mid-May.

WHERE? Get ready for a continent-wide event! The Spring Blitz will span the Rusty Blackbird's entire spring migration range, from the wintering grounds in the southeastern United States, up the East Coast and through the Midwest to Canada and Alaska.

HOW DO I GET INVOLVED? Easy! If you'd like to contribute data to the Spring Migration Blitz effort, bird as you normally do, focussing on potential Rusty Blackbird habitat during the Blitz time frame established

for your region. You can seek out the best-known places for Rusty sightings or explore uncharted territory. Make sure to report ALL of your observations to eBird — we want to know both where you saw these birds and where you didn't. Check out the newly revamped website of the International Rusty Blackbird Working Group (<http://rusty-blackbird.org/outreach/migration-blitz/>) for information about identification, vocalizations, habitat preferences, and types of data to collect to support this initiative. Also, check with your Ontario coordinator Mike Burrell (mburrell@birdscanada.org) for additional ways you can help with the Blitz efforts in your region, or contact Spring Migration Blitz Coordinator Judith Scarl (jscarl@vtecostudies.org) to get involved in the broader Blitz initiative.

THANKS FOR "GETTING RUSTY" WITH US THIS SPRING

Like us on Facebook
(<https://www.facebook.com/rusty-blackbirdspringblitz>) to follow
up-to-the minute information about
our Blitz, and happy birding!

The International Rusty Blackbird
Working Group, eBird
and the Cornell Lab of Ornithology,
Vermont Center for Ecostudies
Bird Studies Canada

For the last forty years birders from around the Golden Horseshoe and beyond have been trekking to the Beamer Memorial Conservation Area (Beamer) atop the Niagara Escarpment in Grimsby each spring. The main attraction is the passage of fifteen or sixteen species of raptors as they make their way north to breed from wintering areas as far south as Argentina.

Broad-winged Hawk adult.
Photo: Barry Cherriere

Ontario's Spring Raptor Watch Capital Grimsby

By John Stevens

TO MANY PEOPLE, Beamer also offers a chance to renew acquaintances with fellow birders after the winter and to encounter new people with similar interests. Certainly during March and through part of April until the passerines and shorebirds start arriving, Beamer offers the best migrant watching in the Golden Horseshoe.

SPRING FLIGHT CONDITIONS

Watching hawks differs from most other forms of birding in that instead of travelling around looking for birds, one only has to stand and wait and the birds will come along. They do so because Beamer is a local concentration point for the migrating raptors. These species rely on rising air currents to provide lift so that they can minimize the amount of energy that they expend to move. As the sun warms the earth during



Red-shouldered Hawk adult.
Photo: Barry Cherriere

the day, thermals or rising air currents develop, particularly above dark surfaces. The ground warms faster than the water and so a large body of water, like Lake Ontario, acts as a barrier to migration because there are no significant thermals above it. The raptors coming north thus move along the southern shoreline in spring (and conversely along the northern shoreline during the autumn flight south). Another source of rising air currents develops off the escarpment, when air currents coming across the lake plain are deflected upward when they meet the slope. This phenomenon occurs at most ridges, which is why the hawks tend to travel along such features.



Red-tailed Hawk adult. Photo: Barry Cherriere

BEAMER SITE LOCATION

The Niagara Escarpment is closest to the south shoreline of Lake Ontario at Beamer Point where the ridge makes a 90° turn. Beamer thus receives the benefits of both the shoreline and the ridge to concentrate the flight of the raptors. So we watch at Beamer because the probability of seeing birds is greatest. Since 1980, the flight has been monitored from a location about 250 m from the escarpment edge and 500 m from the point, selected after comparison studies discovered the greatest counts were obtained there. We now have an observation tower that affords longer views and a wider field. Counts are recorded hourly along with weather conditions, flight characteristics and observers. The data from 1991 to the present are available on-line at www.hawkcount.org.

In addition to the tower and the open area around it, there is also a well maintained trail through the woods that leads to a couple of lookouts at the escarpment edge near the point. Here it is possible to see some of the birds from above as they cruise along the edge of the ridge. At times here they will be very close, much closer than at the tower.

SPRING HAWK WEATHER

The migration season begins in late February and continues into early June with monitoring continuous from March 1 to May 15. Flights are very dependent on the weather and the better days at Beamer are often just before rain, which is not too helpful if one is deciding whether to go or not. As a general rule, in the spring, a warm day will produce more movement because of the increase of thermal activity. Some wind is also preferred although not from the north. Southerly and southeasterly winds are best, although the latter is usually associated with a storm. Days with precipitation are poor for migration and we don't bother counting most of those. It is fortunate that a private weather station is located about a kilometre to the east, also on top of the escarpment. Before coming, one can check the conditions, which are provided on-line at http://home.cogeco.ca/~cxgy/wx/Current_Conditions.htm

Beamer's observation tower affords longer views and a wider field. *Photo: Barry Cherie*



Sharp-shinned Hawk adult.
Photo: Barry Cherie

HAWK TIMETABLE

Weather considerations aside, the migration starts slowly, is strong for about five weeks following the vernal equinox and then slows markedly thereafter. For most species there is an optimal window of dates to see them. In early March, the dominant species is the Red-tailed Hawk with Bald Eagles and Rough-legged Hawks showing up in good numbers although the latter two species are much less common. Around the middle of the month, Red-shouldered Hawks start appearing and their rather concentrated flight peaks about March 24. Turkey Vultures and Cooper's Hawks also start around the middle of

March. The Turkey Vulture flight generally represents one of the largest number of birds of a single species reported and peaks about the first of April. Before March is over Sharp-shinned Hawks, Northern Harriers, American Kestrels and Ospreys have started to appear. The last species to show up is the Broad-winged Hawk, first seen around April 15 and often peaking by April 25th. The Sharp-shinned Hawks peak about the same time but not in such an obvious manner. The greatest total counts that we have seen have all occurred when a large flight of Broad-wings passed on warm days in late April.



Ontario Bird Records Committee Update

By Mike Burrell
2013 OBRC Chair

AT THE POLICY MEETING of the 2012 OBRC (26 January 2013) the 2006 operating guidelines were comprehensively reviewed. Two significant changes are certainly worthy of communicating to OFO members in *OFO News*.

Any OFO member can now nominate any other member for election by the committee. Please send you nominations to Brandon Holden (peregrine13@gmail.com), 2013 OBRC secretary by 31 March 2014. In 2014 we will be electing three new members as Mike Burrell, Ken Burrell, and Doug McRae complete their three-year terms.

The committee decided that the current review zone of north and south oversimplified the province and as such the former north review zone has been split into two zones, using the Hudson Bay Ecozone as the new boundary for the split. The pre-existing boundary between north and south (47 degrees latitude) remains in effect. The feeling of the committee was that this change wouldn't drastically affect prior records but would recognize Hudson and James Bays as having a very different avifauna than that of Lake Superior and the rest of northern Ontario. This change takes effect 1 January 2014. Look for the updated review lists and a map of the new review zones on the OFO website.

The committee is in the process, with the help of the Royal Ontario Museum and a team of volunteers, to digitize the OBRC archives with the goal of eventually making these available in a searchable online archive. If you are interested in helping out with this initiative please contact Mike Burrell (mburrell@birdscanada.org).

The 2013 committee wishes to thank all observers who took the time to submit their documentation of review species. If you still have outstanding reports please submit them to the secretary as soon as possible.



Adult female
Northern Harrier



Adult male Northern Harrier
Photos: Barry Cherie

Once the Broad-winged Hawks have started, it is possible to have days where all fifteen regular species can be seen, although that hasn't happened for a few years. While Merlins are regular in low numbers, primarily during April, and Peregrine Falcons and Golden Eagles can be seen occasionally throughout the season in very low numbers, Northern Goshawks are scarce. In years past there were modest flights of this species during irruptions that occurred every ten or eleven years when the population of one of their prey species dropped, driving them south in search of food. This hasn't happened since 1994 and considering how many were being seen heading south last fall, it won't likely happen this spring either. Most years there are a dozen or so days from late March onward when at least one bird of ten different species is sighted.

As a general rule, the biggest flights occur during the middle of the day between 11 a.m. and 2 p.m. However, because the weather and particularly the winds can have such an influence, that is only a generalization. The best flights can also happen during morning lift off or late afternoon down flights when birds come in to roost along the escarpment.

CLOTHING

Dress warmly. Because you are not walking and generating body heat, you can get cold in a hurry while hawk watching. If you think you will be warm enough, bring an extra sweater anyway. Atop the escarpment,

it is always colder than down below on the lake plain or further inland away from the lake. One can always remove something if you're too warm but it is no fun being cold. While hawk watchers are a friendly lot and are glad to help newcomers with identification, they are unlikely to cuddle so you would have to bring your own cuddler.

OPTICS

For hawk watching I recommend ten-power binoculars as providing the best combination of magnification, weight and field of view. A twelve-power pair would be better for picking up birds a kilometre or more distant but their weight may prove tiring. Seven-power binoculars can be nice and light but may leave you frustrated if the birds are very high or distant and you can't discern the field marks the person beside you is describing. A telescope can be useful for identifying distant birds but because they are moving, sometimes rapidly, following them as they come overhead becomes challenging.

I hope you will join us some time at Beamer where you can participate in the monitoring. The more eyes on the sky, the better chance we will find the birds in time to identify them. There is plenty of parking right near the tower. Bring your children or grandchildren along as their young eyes will find the hawks for you.

For more information and directions to the Niagara Peninsula Hawkwatch
<http://www.niagarapeninsulahawkwatch.org/>



Completing a breeding bird survey in northern Ontario can be a challenging but fun experience. Photo: Karen Timm

Boreal Birding Challenge

Breeding Bird Surveys in Northern Ontario

By Audrey Heagy, Bird Studies Canada

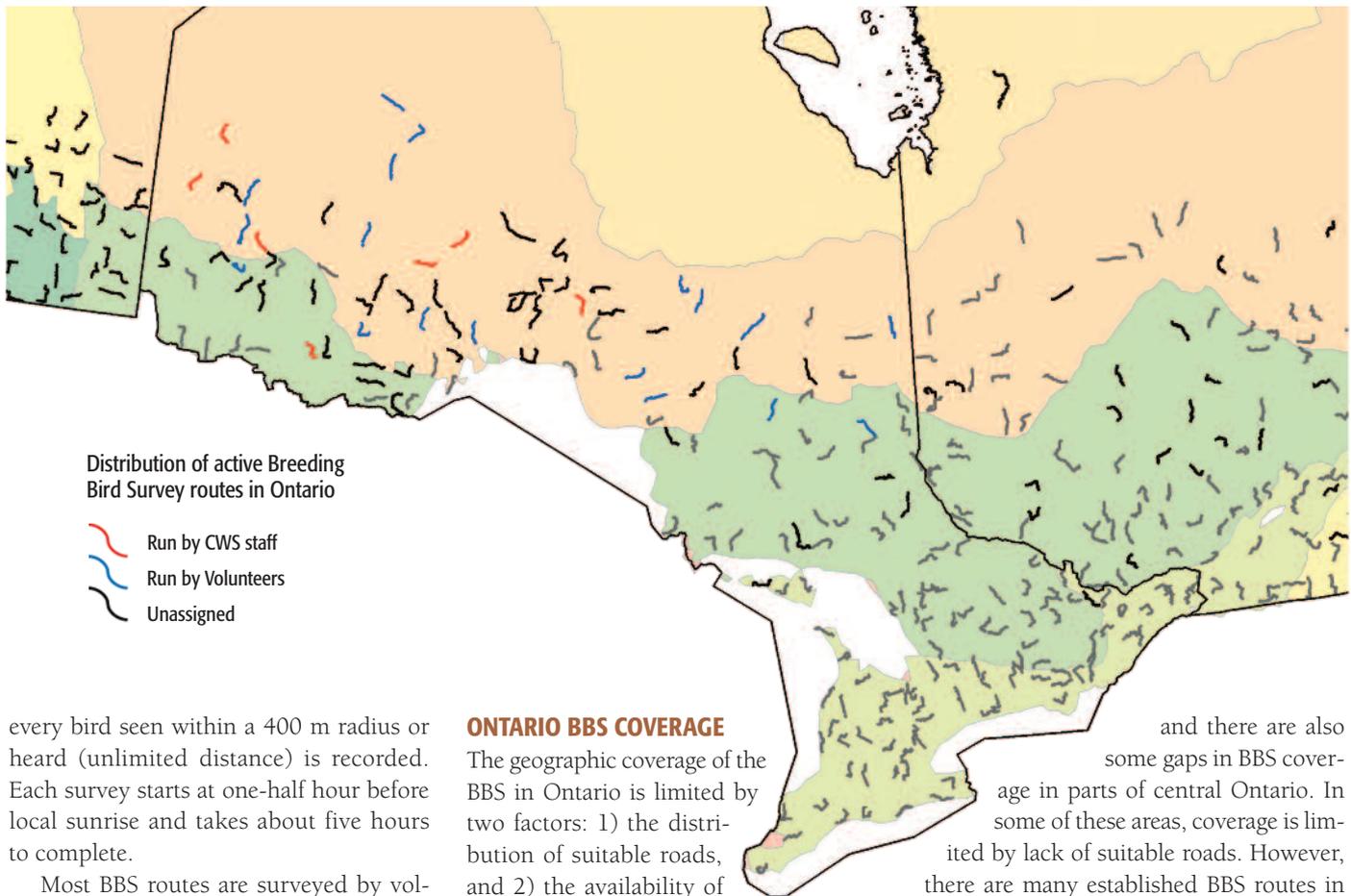
EACH YEAR IN JUNE, thousands of people across North America spend a very intense morning hopping in and out of their cars fifty times over a five hour period in the name of bird conservation. This somewhat bizarre phenomenon is not about fund-raising event or doing a big day. These people are participating in the Breeding Bird Survey (BBS), an annual survey of North American bird populations.

The BBS is considered the premier source of information on population trends for more than 400 bird species. BBS data are used extensively in publications such as the State of Canada's Birds 2012 report (<http://www.stateofcanadasbirds.org/>) and the Status of Birds in Canada website (<http://www.ec.gc.ca/soc-sbc>). BBS data are also an essential resource for species at risk assessments, and bird conservation plans such as the Ontario Landbird Conservation Plans (http://www.bsc-eoc.org/PIF/PIF_Ontario.html).

The value of the BBS data set is based on several key factors: 1) careful survey design with rigorous quality control measures, 2) high standards for participants, 3) a very long time series (almost

50 years!) paired with its continent-wide scope, and 4) the data are all freely available online to anyone who wants them. The North American Breeding Bird Survey began in eastern Canada and United States in 1966. It quickly expanded across southern Canada and the entire continental United States. Northern routes in Alaska, Yukon and the Northwest Territories were added in the 1980s. Today, more than 4000 permanent BBS survey routes have been established throughout North America, including over 200 routes in Ontario.

BBS routes are established systematically, typically with 1-4 routes identified within each degree block (rectangular area defined by one degree latitude by one degree longitude). Each survey route is 39.4 km long and consists of 50 fixed stops at 0.8 km intervals situated along a secondary road. The path the route takes is determined using a random number generator to ensure a strong statistical design. Each active route is surveyed once a year at the height of the breeding bird season, between late May and early July. At each stop, a 3-minute point count is conducted, during which



every bird seen within a 400 m radius or heard (unlimited distance) is recorded. Each survey starts at one-half hour before local sunrise and takes about five hours to complete.

Most BBS routes are surveyed by volunteers rather than professional biologists. BBS surveyors must be able to identify all of the locally breeding bird species by sight as well as by sound. These folks should also be willing to commit to surveying the same route for at least three consecutive years (and preferably for longer periods), since the BBS data set is strengthened by every additional year a route is run by the same observer.

After each survey, the data are compiled in a central database, where they are thoroughly checked and screened before being analysed using the best available statistical methods. These methods calculate short- and long-term population changes for individual bird species at various scales ranging from continent-wide to regional (e.g., province/state and ecological regions). Population trend results are published annually on the Canadian (<http://www.ec.gc.ca/ron-bbs>) and American (<http://www.mbr-pwrc.usgs.gov/bbs/>) BBS websites. Raw data can be accessed through the main BBS website hosted by the USGS <https://www.pwrc.usgs.gov/bbs>

ONTARIO BBS COVERAGE

The geographic coverage of the BBS in Ontario is limited by two factors: 1) the distribution of suitable roads, and 2) the availability of qualified observers.

BBS routes have been established across the southern two-thirds of the province (see map above). BBS coverage across southern Ontario is excellent as there is an extensive network of suitable secondary roads and a large pool of skilled birders to draw from. BBS coverage in Ontario's Far North region is non-existent due to the lack of a road network. In between those extremes, BBS coverage in northern Ontario is quite sparse

and there are also some gaps in BBS coverage in parts of central Ontario. In some of these areas, coverage is limited by lack of suitable roads. However, there are many established BBS routes in northern Ontario that are currently not being surveyed because there are no skilled birders living nearby (see map above).

In 2008, Bird Studies Canada (BSC), the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources (OMNR), and Environment Canada's Canadian Wildlife Service (CWS) developed a joint pilot project to improve bird monitoring data for Ontario by increasing BBS participation in northern Ontario. Increased participation was to be achieved through two complementary strategies: 1) Compensate the travel costs of qualified volunteers who agree to survey one or more priority northern Ontario BBS route for at least three consecutive years, and 2) Encourage qualified OMNR and CWS staff to survey one or more routes in northern Ontario.

BSC was responsible for promoting and administering the volunteer compensation program, in conjunction with continuing to coordinate BBS route assignments throughout Ontario.



American Three-toed Woodpecker.
Photo: Alan Wormington

RESULTS OF THE NORTHERN ONTARIO 2009-2013 BBS PILOT PROJECT

2013 was the final year of the five-year pilot project to enhance BBS coverage in Bird Conservation Region (BCR) 8 and 12 in northern Ontario (BCRs are ecologically defined geographical units that provide a consistent spatial framework for bird conservation across North American landscape). The overall results of this project were quite encouraging. The number of routes being surveyed in northern Ontario (BCR 8) increased dramatically from five routes in 2008 to 28 routes in 2013. The number of routes in central Ontario (BCR12) has remained stable (at about 45), but with some improvements in the distribution of the routes being surveyed. Virtually all of the 60 routes in southern Ontario (BCR 13) continue to be assigned and surveyed regularly. This fantastic increase in northern coverage is largely due to a handful of keen birders, including:

- A school teacher from southern Ontario who heads north as soon as the school term is finished to squeeze in seven BBS surveys before the 7 July cut-off date. This super-volunteer flies from Toronto to Thunder Bay, where he rents a car to access his routes and stays in motels.

Through careful planning, he is able to break even on his out-of-pocket expenses for this annual birding marathon, which he has now done for five consecutive years.

- A CWS employee who pairs his six remote BBS routes with other field work in northwestern Ontario. He has pulled this off successfully since 2010, and has been rewarded with incredible bird observations (and has seen Lynx as well).
- Two friends from Ottawa drive 3100 km over six days to survey four routes in northeastern Ontario each year. They make sure to fit in some fishing and wildlife photography at their campsites along the way.
- Two birders living in small forestry towns in northern Ontario who were already participating in the BBS were excited to take on additional routes farther from their home provided their travel costs were covered (higher gas prices are a fact of life in the north).
- In 2013, a father and son team from southern Ontario drove over 2000 km in three days to cover two routes in northeastern Ontario. The long drive paid off: they found breeding Connecticut Warbler, Black-backed Woodpecker, Spruce Grouse and Olive-sided Flycatcher. They also had good views of Lynx and a Gray Wolf. Next year they want to cover three routes!

Thanks to the tireless efforts of the hundreds of BBS volunteers who have collected data in Ontario over the past four decades, we have data on the abundance and distribution of 181 breeding bird species, including reliable population trend information for at least 65 species. However, in order to track bird population trends in the boreal forests of northern Ontario, we need to not only maintain the enhanced coverage achieved over the past five years, but find dedicated volunteers to cover at least ten additional routes. Improved coverage near Lake Nipigon is a particular priority, but there are many other areas where new volunteers are needed to fill vacancies or replace current volunteers who can no longer run their routes.

BBS VOLUNTEERS NEEDED

To find out if you have what it takes to be a BBS volunteer, please contact: **Audrey Heagy**,
**Ontario Breeding
Bird Survey Coordinator**,
aheagy@birdscanada.org
1-866-448-2473 x 166

BBS surveyors must be able to quickly identify and count all birds they hear or see in a 3-minute point count. *Photo: Martin Raillard*





American Bittern. Photo: Geoff Carpentier

Introducing the

North Durham Nature Club

The group has planned an aggressive program to better document and protect the wildlife of the area and to introduce it to area residents

By Geoff Carpentier

DURHAM REGION is well known as a wonderful place to view and study wildlife, with its myriad forests, fields and marshes. Often the spectacular habitats that border Lake Ontario attract most of the attention, but for years local naturalists have realized the potential and the importance of the more northerly parts of the Region. Much study has been undertaken in such favourable habitats as the Nonquon River Valley and sewage lagoons, Lake Scugog, the Durham and Glen Major Forests, Beaver River Wetland, the Seaton Trails, the shoreline of Lake Iroquois (really the edge of the Oak Ridges Moraine now), the Saintfield (Reach) Marshes and

the Osler Tract to name but a few. While no concise inventory has yet been conducted of the flora and fauna of this part of the Region, plans are afoot to fix that.

The seed to start the club began years ago, when birders started the Uxbridge Christmas Bird Count in 2004, with Kim Adams and Derek Connelly serving as the compilers. Uxbridge birders also started the spring Durham College bird study course, which ran from 2006 to 2010 and a wildlife course which ran in the fall 2006. The Durham College courses drew on the local natural history expertise by having guest lectures and leaders speak about the wildlife of the area and proceeds

often were donated to local conservation charities. Uxbridge birders participated in nest box projects and various other conservation initiatives in the Uxbridge area in conjunction with the Uxbridge town trails committee members.

Realizing the natural history importance of the area and wanting to provide a venue for more local people to study the offerings of the area, the birders got together with a group of local nature enthusiasts in September 2013 and formed the North Durham Nature Club, focussing on Brock, Scugog and Uxbridge Townships and the Oak Ridges Moraine.

ABA Checklist Committee Re-elects Ron Pittaway

Building on important work that has been conducted in the area by both professional and citizen scientists over the years, the group has planned an aggressive program to better document and protect the wildlife of the area and to introduce it to area residents, adults and children alike. The plan is to hold at least four outdoor events and four evening events per year, utilizing the expertise of local naturalists who have a wealth of natural history information they can share.

Additionally, the Club executive is in the planning stages of developing events that are kid-focussed. The first step towards ensuring this important initiative succeeds was realized last year when a "CBC4Kids" event was organized by community members. This Christmas Count for Birds for Kids is one of four in the province and builds on the success of the 110+ year old adult CBC. Ten kids, ages 5-13, made for a wonderful start for this planned annual event. The future of Ontario's nature rests with ensuing generations and it is fundamental that kids develop interest early in their lives so that wildlife will be protected for generations to come. Fostering this awareness at an early age is essential to the success of this objective and the protection of wildlife.

More scientifically, the Club will start to compile inventories of flora and fauna, with the goal of developing annotated lists of flowering plants, trees, insects, birds, mammals and herptiles over time. Additionally, the Club will host or support such local initiatives as the Durham Summer Bird Count, bluebird nest box projects, butterflies and odonate counts, the Christmas Bird Count, eBird and the Fall Wildlife Round-up.

The Club's Executive is led by President Alan Wells who brings a lifetime of experience to the group. Derek Connelly, Mark Stabb, John McLean, Nancy Melcher, Pat Asling and Geoff Carpentier round out the Board's membership, each bringing their own experience and knowledge to this new initiative.

The Club will play an important and essential role in documenting and protecting the flora and fauna of North Durham.

To learn more about the Club's programs and to get information on joining, visit the North Durham Nature Club website:
www.northdurhamnatureclub.com.

OFO member Ron Pittaway was recently re-elected to the American Birding Association's Checklist Committee for a second four-year term which began 1 January 2014. Ron is the fourth Canadian to serve on the ABA Checklist Committee following Alan Wormington (1985-1991), Stuart Tingley (1992-2001) and Bruce Mactavish (2002-2009). Alan and Bruce are also OFO members.

The ABA Checklist Committee was formed in 1973. It comprises eight voting members including the chair. There is no secretary. The chair's duties include those normally done by a secretary in state and provincial committees such as the Ontario Bird Records Committee. Once a species is added to the checklist, further reports are not reviewed. The committee does not consider sight reports for additions to the ABA Checklist.

The committee publishes and revises the ABA Checklist. The checklist area is North America north of Mexico including the United States (except Hawaii), Canada, French islands of St. Pierre et Miquelon, and adjacent waters to a distance of 200 miles from land or half the distance to a neighbouring country, whichever is less. The current ABA checklist contains 981 species.

Birding Carden Alvar on Foot

The Carden Alvar is Ontario's second most important birding destination according to John Riley (2013) of the Nature Conservancy of Canada in his new book *The Once and Future Great Lakes Country—An Ecological History* published by McGill-Queen's University Press. New trails now allow us to enjoy the alvar on foot. Link to a trail brochure by the Couchiching Conservancy. Scroll down to view all four pages of maps and points of interest. <http://www.couchichingconserv.ca/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/SMSDesign-CardenTrails-finalREV.pdf>

Or you can also experience the Carden Alvar by car. Link to Ron Pittaway's birding site guide with directions and maps on the OFO website. www.ofo.ca/site/page/view/articles.cardenalvar



Carden Bluebirds

By Herb Furniss

2013 was not a good year for Eastern Bluebirds on the Carden Alvar. My bluebird boxes only fledged 88 Eastern Bluebirds from 76 boxes, compared to 168 fledged in 2012. There were fewer nesting pairs. In May 2012, 23 boxes were active, whereas in May 2013, only 14 were active.

I hope this is just a blip and look forward to the 2014 nesting season with my usual optimism.

Eastern Bluebird. Photo: Janice Melendez



Ontario's Important Bird Areas Program

By Mike Burrell

The Important Bird Areas Program is a global initiative coordinated by BirdLife International to identify, monitor, and conserve the world's most important sites for birds and biodiversity.



Several locations in southern Ontario qualify as IBAs because a globally significant number of Tundra Swans regularly use the site. Photo: Mike Burrell

THE PROGRAM uses scientific criteria to identify potential IBAs. Sites can qualify based on the regular presence of significant numbers of species at risk, species with restricted ranges, habitat-specific species and the presence of large concentrations of congregatory species (greater than 1% of their continental or global population). In Canada the IBA Program, managed jointly by Bird Studies Canada and Nature Canada, has designated nearly 600 sites. Most sites in Canada qualify based on the criteria of regularly hosting globally or continentally significant numbers of congregatory species.

IBAs are found throughout the country. Some are extremely remote, while others are located within our largest urban centres. These sites are not only critical for birds, but also for many other species, including people. Ontario's 70 IBAs cover more than 23,000 km², largely along the coasts of the Great Lakes and Hudson and James Bays. Most sites regularly host large concentrations of birds, or significant numbers of species at risk. The majority of IBAs have no formal protection.

An initial wave of funding provided the opportunity to identify sites across Canada; however, since about the early 2000s the program in Ontario has been relatively quiet. Over the last few years other provinces have secured funding and partnerships to be able to re-invigorate their IBA program. Ontario has followed suit as a three year grant from the Ontario Trillium Fund has been secured with this purpose in mind. One of the recent

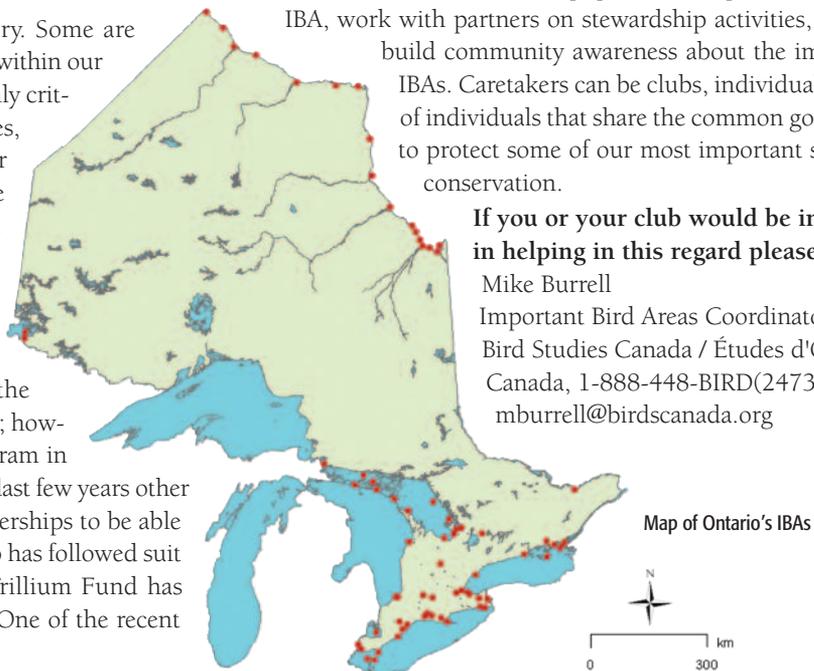
accomplishments of the IBA program in Canada is the development of an excellent website (www.ibacanada.org) which allows people to explore maps and data summaries and much more about Canada's Important Bird Areas.

GET INVOLVED

Getting involved in the IBA Program can be as simple as visiting an IBA and using eBird Canada (www.ebird.ca) to report the bird species you find there. Or, you can join the network of volunteer caretakers who monitor bird populations, report on threats to the IBA, work with partners on stewardship activities, and/or help build community awareness about the importance of IBAs. Caretakers can be clubs, individuals, or groups of individuals that share the common goal of helping to protect some of our most important sites for bird conservation.

If you or your club would be interested in helping in this regard please contact:

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Nikon Photo Quiz

Sponsored by Nikon Canada By Willie D'Anna



Photo:Bernie Monette

ONE OF THE GREATEST things about birding for me is when I get a super close look at a bird that I don't see that often or a species that I rarely see well. The more feather detail I can see, the better I like it. The quiz bird for this issue fits that role nicely. Of course, a close-up like this may not provide all the details needed for a proper identification. Here, we cannot see anything from the legs on back so we cannot get a good sense of the total shape of the bird.

What we can see on this bird tells me that it is probably a perching bird. That assumption takes the first half of the field guide out of consideration, everything before the flycatchers. The bill seems rather pointed but since the mandibles are parted, it is difficult to get a good handle on it. It does not look particularly thin to me. The eye is very pale, which should help to rule out many species. There are no wing bars, which should rule out many more.

A pale eye is only shown by a handful of perching birds and even fewer have occurred in Ontario. These are White-eyed Vireo, Northern Mockingbird, Brown and Sage Thrashers, Phainopepla, Spotted and Eastern Towhee, Brewer's and Rusty Blackbirds, Common Grackle, and Great-tailed Grackle. The vireo, mockingbird, Brown Thrasher, and Spotted Towhee have wing bars, unlike our quiz bird. Sage Thrasher usually has wing bars but those that do not can be ruled out by that species' pale underparts and thinner bill. The Eastern Towhee with its rufous flanks and the crested Phainopepla really do not look anything like this bird. That leaves the four blackbirds. Great-tailed Grackle is easily eliminated, as males

would show an iridescent head and body while females would show obvious patterning on the head, unlike the uniform appearance on this bird. A young female Common Grackle could look similar if it attained a pale eye before losing its juvenile plumage but the eye would be unlikely to look this pale. In addition the plumage is never quite this gray.

So, our bird is either a Brewer's or a Rusty Blackbird. The plumage is unlike a male in breeding plumage of either species, so we either have a female or a male in non-breeding plumage. A female Brewer's normally has a dark eye but that feature is variable and it can sometimes be pale. The bill is often a good character to help distinguish these species with Brewer's showing a straight and rather conical shaped bill, whereas Rusty's bill is thinner and slightly decurved. I think the upper mandible looks better for Rusty but again, it is a

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bit risky assessing the bill with the mandibles parted. Most readers have surely noticed the rufous edging on the wings and back, which might have you thinking that this must be a Rusty. Again, however, Brewer's Blackbird is variable, and some non-breeding males do show similar pale edging on the upperparts. The pale eye fits for a male Brewer's also. Confused by all this variation? It is what we love about birds and yet it can drive us crazy on some species.

Fortunately, there is one character that seals the deal for **Rusty Blackbird**. Although Brewer's can show pale edging on the upperparts, they never show strong pale fringing on the tertials. The tertials are the innermost secondaries of varying length, just visible above the rump on this bird. Now that we know this is a Rusty Blackbird, we can assess some of the "softer" characters that support this identification. Breeding female Rusty Blackbirds, which this bird is, are very gray birds while female

Brewer's are grayish-brown. If this had been a non-breeding male Brewer's, the feather edging would be more grayish-buff and not quite so strongly rufous. In addition it would not be so extensive. These differences are slight but in combination, especially with the pale fringed tertials, we can be confident in identifying this Rusty Blackbird. This lovely close-up was taken by Bernie Monette on 29 April 2013 at Tommy Thompson Park in Toronto.

Rusty Blackbird breeds in Ontario from the Southern Shield north to the Hudson Bay lowlands. It is a fairly common though declining migrant throughout the province. Brewer's Blackbird on other hand, is a rare to uncommon local breeder in Ontario with the largest concentrations in the Rainy River District and near Lake Huron, including Manitoulin Island and the Bruce Peninsula. Elsewhere it is a rare to very rare migrant and certainly would make the birding email and text lists, if it occurs in Toronto.

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Kawartha CBC Fenelon Falls, 2013

By Janice Melendez

The weather (little snow, two degrees Celsius) on 28 December 2013 provided safer driving conditions than experienced on numerous other Ontario CBCs. For the twenty-five participants, the mist and falling ice from tree branches meant less than satisfactory conditions for viewing and hearing birds. Despite a ten year low for individual birds recorded, a new species was added to the count — a female Lesser Scaup in downtown Fenelon Falls.

One hundred and thirty-nine Purple Finches frequenting feeders and road grit, along with two beautiful Barred Owls were ten year highs for both species. One of these Barred Owls was miraculously found through the mist by fellow Kawartha Field Naturalist, Anne Irwin.



The Barred Owl is always a beautiful sight.
Photo: Janice Melendez