

Site Guide Update: Amherst and Wolfe Islands

Paul Mackenzie and Ron Weir

This article is meant to update but not replace *A Birding Site Guide to Amherst and Wolfe Islands* by Weir and Mackenzie (*Ontario Birds* April 1984, 2: 30-33). The suggestions on where to go and the driving directions are still valid and will not be repeated. Clive Goodwin in *A Bird Finding Guide to Ontario* (1995) devotes pages 229-232 to Amherst and Wolfe Islands with a map of each island. Two changes are that Gray Partridge have not been seen on the Wolfe Island for some years now, and Henslow's Sparrows are now seldom found on Amherst Island. Birders are reminded that all land on Amherst and Wolfe Islands is private.

Amherst Island

The Ferry

The ferry costs \$3.50 per car round trip and passengers are free. Crossing takes about 20 minutes.

From Millhaven on Highway 33 the first ferry leaves at 06:20 daily except Wednesday, then on the half hour from 07:30 to 23:30. It returns hourly on the hour from Stella on Amherst Island from 06:00 to midnight.

The KFN Property

The Kingston Field Naturalists owns 250 acres of property on the southeast corner of the island. Steps over the fences allow access to the marsh and sand/gravel bar. The marsh has been expanded with the assistance of Ducks Unlimited, by a dike along which one can walk. Nesting birds include Northern Shoveler, Northern Pintail, Common Moorhen, Wilson's Phalarope, Upland Sandpiper, Common Snipe and Marsh Wren. Osprey platforms and nest boxes have attracted Osprey, Purple Martin and Tree Swallow. Red Knot, White-rumped Sandpiper, Dunlin, Ruddy Turnstone and Sanderling may rest on the bar in late May. Baird's Sandpipers are regular in August and with luck Buff-breasted Sandpiper and Whimbrel may be found in the fields. Visitors since the 1984 article have included Great Cormorant, Tricolored Heron, Snowy Egret, Laughing Gull, Franklin's Gull, Arctic Tern, Forster's Tern, Willet, Hudsonian Godwit, Long-billed Dowitcher, Curlew Sandpiper, Northern Wheatear and Smith's Longspur. In winter the fields are favorite places for Rough-legged Hawk, Snowy Owl, Short-eared Owl, and a Gyrfalcon in 1996.

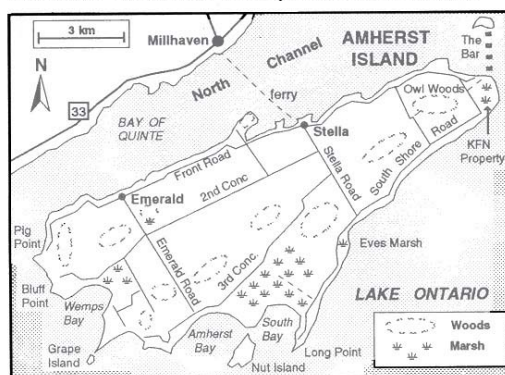
Other Marshes

Past Eves Marsh, which is private, the south road runs west toward Long Point. A huge marsh at the base of Long Point has been improved by the creation of a long dike. Parking at a gate seen on your right soon after the road leaves the shoreline allows access. Another very productive marsh can be scanned from the road near the west end of the Second Concession.

Owls

Owls are chief attraction of Amherst Island for visiting birders, and some years are far better than others. Saw-whet Owls peak in late October, but some are found each winter. They are lo-

cated by careful searching of all conifers. Boreal Owls are occasionally found this way. Great Gray Owls are sporadic and prefer tall deciduous woods. Peak numbers occur in February in years when they erupt such as 1996. The fate of the *Owl Woods* is currently unclear due to possible changes in ownership. Snowy Owls may be found in suitable open areas such as the KFN property and the flat fields on the Emerald Road, south of the "four corners" made by the Second Concession.



Map of Amherst Island by Michael King

Wolfe Island

The Ferry

The Wolfe Island ferry from downtown Kingston to Marysville on Wolfe Island remains free, but this may change, as the province is trying to download costs. There is a winter dock to the east of Marysville, used only when the ice is thick (late January to March) when a compressed air bubble system keeps the channel open. In summer one may need to be in line at least an hour before departure, and this applies to return trips too. Another option is to park at the dock and take a bicycle over.

Ferries leave Kingston at 06:15, 7:15, 8:30, 9:30, 10:30, 11:30 and 12:30, 14:00, 15:00, and on the hour until 22:00. Return ferries leave Wolfe Island at 09:00, 10:00, 11:00, 12:00, 13:15, 14:30, and on the half hour until 21:30. In winter the ferry schedule may change. Phone 613-548-7227 for information.

Birding

The main attraction of Wolfe Island for birders is waterfowl and winter birding. The sites of waterfowl concentration shift depending on food sources, and zebra mussels have led to some recent shifts. Canada Geese use Wolfe Island as a major staging area from March to May, and use the cornfields for rest and feeding. It is not unusual to see 50-100 flocks pass over in a few hours when winds are west or northwest. Small numbers

of Snow Geese accompany these flocks in early spring and late fall. Gray Partridge are no longer present. Horned Larks, Snow Buntings and Lapland Longspurs may be found in open fields. Wolfe Island is the most reliable place in Ontario to find Snowy Owls in most winters.

Bayfield Bay

In the past few years a tightly packed flock of diving ducks has been feeding in Bayfield Bay as soon as there is open water in March, and in the same area in late fall (peaking about mid-November). The flock often consists of thousands of Greater Scaup, mixed with Canvasback, Redhead, Lesser Scaup, Ring-necked Duck, Bufflehead, and sometimes Ruddy Ducks. There are often Bald Eagles in the area when the ducks are present, and if the flock takes flight, look for an eagle in the air. Bayfield Bay may be viewed from the north by taking County Road 96 east to the 12th Line Road then south (right) to a road that overlooks the bay. However, the ducks may be far out, and the light may be bad. With the aid of a map, it is possible to approach Bayfield Bay from the south and drive along the south-west side but do not enter the private hunting property at the end of the road. Tundra Swans may feed close along the rocky shore. Oldsquaw, White-winged Scoters and Black Scoters are more often seen off the Hornes ferry dock.

Reeds Bay

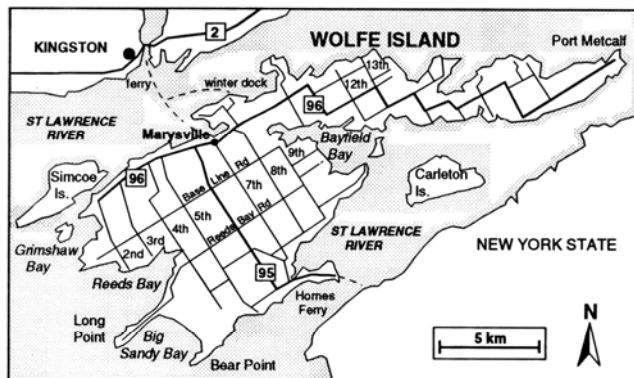
Reeds Bay may be viewed from the Reeds Bay Road just west of the 4th Line Road. Gulls and plovers often roost on the rocky spit where the road curves south. On occasion Little, Franklin's and Sabine's Gulls have been seen there. Tundra Swans may be found in November and December at the east end of Reeds Bay. In winter, flocks of Common Goldeneye and Common Mergansers are scattered around the island. King Eiders and less often Common Eiders have been seen in November and December, and Barrow's Goldeneye in March. Please avoid approaching duck blinds on hunting days.

Snowy Owls

Snowy Owls can often be seen from County Road 95 on telephone poles, isolated trees or fence posts. The rectangle bounded by Base Line Road, Reeds Bay Road and the 4th and 9th Line Roads has much suitable habitat. The fields along the 11th to 14th Line Roads on both sides of County Road 96 may also have Snowy Owls. Rough-legged Hawks, Short-eared Owls and Snow Buntings, and Lapland Longspurs also frequent these locations.

Reports and Information on Sightings

Please phone the KFN information line 613-549-8023 to report birds seen and to hear reports of recent sightings. Written reports may be mailed to: Kingston Field Naturalists, P.O. Box 831, Kingston ON K7L 4X6



Map of Wolfe Island by Michael King

Goose Quiz

Ken Abraham

These questions refer to North America's goose species.

1. What species, which nests in Canada, regularly winters in Europe?
2. What is the only subspecies listed under the US Endangered Species Act? Hint: it does not regularly occur in Canada.
3. What is Ontario's most numerous nesting species? A bonus for naming the populations or subspecies that occur (not just nesting) in Ontario.
4. What is the only North American species that does not now annually occur in Ontario?
5. What Ontario species have plumage polymorphism?

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Membership Renewal 2000

Please renew your OFO membership right away by completing the enclosed pink form and sending it to:

Eleanor Beagan, OFO Memberships
Box 455, Station R
Toronto ON M4G 4E1

Questions about your membership or to send change of address:

E-mail: etbeagan@wiznet.ca
Phone: 416-423-3535

Gift Membership

Give an OFO membership to a birder this holiday season. Send us the recipient's name, address and phone number, along with your cheque for \$22.00 (single membership in Canada) payable to the Ontario Field Ornithologists to Eleanor Beagan (address above). Please specify the message you would like on the gift card. Questions? Contact Eleanor Beagan.

1-800-327-BAND

If you find a dead bird with a band, you can use this toll free number for reporting bird bands, 1-800-327-BAND, from Canada, the United States and most of the Caribbean. After they trace your bird using the reports submitted by banders, you will receive a letter telling you about where your bird was banded, its sex, age, etc.