

# The Legend of May 24<sup>th</sup> Adds its Finest Chapter

## Young Celebrity Birders Enjoy a Rare Spectacle at Presqu'ile

It's never a good omen when the bird bath is covered in a thin layer of ice on the morning of a late May birdathon. Such was the case at Presqu'ile Provincial Park on Saturday, May 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2015 when a dramatic shift in weather the night before had plummeted temperatures slightly below freezing on account of the formidable northwest wind. Taking advantage of the built-in flexibility of the 24-hour schedule within which we had to work, we decided that our best course of action was to start as late in the day as possible on Saturday so as to maximize our time on Sunday when temperatures were set to gradually return to more seasonal levels.

With songbird migration essentially a wash-out on Saturday, we set out to target breeding birds, with our fingers crossed that warmer weather would help us pad our list with migrants on Sunday. The first target was a resident Barred Owl, which had been staked out by Bill Gilmour in the mixed forest adjacent to his family cottage. Using the sighting of the owl as our official starting point and time, the birdathon began at 1:40pm as the Barred sat backlit amongst the hemlocks.



One of the plusses of doing a bird count in the Presqu'ile/Brighton area is the diversity of surrounding habitat, much of it quite extensive. Amid the patchwork of farm fields

and meadows are several large tracts of mature mixed forest. An intricate network of streams feeds myriad wetlands. Armed with the local knowledge of traditional breeding sites of target species, we ventured north of Presqu'ile and succeeded in finding Cliff Swallow, Virginia Rail, Veery, Blue-winged Warbler, Bobolink, Eastern Meadowlark and Wild Turkey.

One location we heavily banked on was Trent Valley Road—a hilltop stretch just northwest of the Park which offers stunning views of Lake Ontario and Presqu'ile's western islands. Known by local birders as the "one-stop shopping" site for field species, we made a sundown visit with hopes of Eastern Bluebird, Eastern Whippoorwill, and a trio of sparrows: Field, Grasshopper and Vesper. Fully exposed to the wind, none of the sparrows were vocalizing when we arrived. Were it not for the resident male bluebird repeatedly singing, it would have seemed like a shutout was in store. In short order, however, the wind died down and the target sparrows all sang. The always-elusive whippoorwill's jarring refrain signalled that it was time for sleep.

At 5:00am, 3 nighthawks greeted the new day as another chilly night gave rise to a brisk morning with clear skies and a strong west wind—not ideal conditions for a late May fall-out, but an improvement nonetheless. We made a pre-sunrise stop at shorebird and water bird hotspot Owen Point, hoping to catch some historical magic. May 24<sup>th</sup> is a popular date in many circles, but has a particular prevalence at Presqu'ile where several memorable spring

shorebird events—among them some of the biggest groundings of Dunlin and Whimbrel, as well as a rare Snowy Plover in 2001—have occurred on this date.



It's the sound one first notices when a massive shorebird grounding is afoot—a chaotic jumble of harsh and pointed call notes set against the constant barrage of wind and waves. When we crossed the threshold of willows to Owen Point, there was a stirring frenzy of sound, movement and energy as thousands of Dunlin fed in shape-shifting flocks seemingly everywhere. As some marvelled at the flocks extending north along the sand beach, others gazed westward over Gull and High Bluff Islands where innumerable Dunlin appeared and disappeared behind rocky shoals in beautifully cohesive clusters. It truly felt like anything could and would happen. A small group of Whimbrel came and went, 50 Red Knots flushed from a concealed nook on Gull Island, Ruddy Turnstones dotted the island's rocky shoreline, White-winged Scoters coursed overhead. As one young birder put it, "this is amazing" and it very truly was. Seeing upwards of 10,000 transient shorebirds at a single site in southern Ontario is a fleeting privilege for birders at but a precious few select locations. Of these, only Presqu'île offers a uniquely wild experience where the wind, waves, sound and even smell make it seem like one is at the edge

of the ocean. This was shorebird migration at its most raw and exhilarating.

The early morning climax to our 24 hours of birding gave way to an increasingly warm day where the influx of songbirds alone would have made for great excitement. Almost all reasonable targets were located, including 20 species of warbler. A late morning foray north of the Park to the Wilkinson Tract forest and adjacent wetland bore us a Least Bittern and a surprise pair of Sandhill Cranes drifting above.



When the clock struck 1:40pm on Sunday, May 24<sup>th</sup> (after a few last-minute finds by a remarkable group of young birders determined to use every last waking second of their 24 hours), 145 species were in the books, as was one of the greatest shorebirding events in Presqu'île's recorded history—not bad for a birdathon which began with ice on the bird bath.

