

Favourite Birding Hotspot

Britannia Conservation Area and Ottawa River

Bob Bracken and Christina Lewis

For birdwatchers not familiar with the Ottawa area, this 5 km stretch of shoreline and conservation area bordering the Ottawa River represents the best year-round birding hotspot in Ottawa.

The following six sites form a corridor of varied habitats, heavily used by migratory bird species. All areas described are public lands and access is available all year long.

1. The Britannia Conservation Area (BCA)

This isolated island of "greenspace" located within city limits, offers incredible birdwatching during migration. Located at a constriction of the Ottawa River at the Deschenes Rapids, it is an obvious landmark with a great diversity of habitats. The pond (Mud Lake), the mature white pine stand and deciduous woods, and the surrounding urban landscape, all combine to make this a magnet for tired migrants. To date, 248 species of birds have been found in or seen from the BCA, representing 74% of all species recorded in the Ottawa District (the 50 km radius from the Peace Tower). Additionally, 52 species are known to have nested here over the years. For a site around 20 hectares in area, the BCA has hosted a truly remarkable number and diversity of birds!

To reach the BCA, take Pinecrest Road (exit 129) north off Hwy 417, then turn right (east) onto Richmond Road. After Richmond crosses Carling Avenue, turn left (north) onto Poulin Avenue. Poulin eventually ends at Britannia Road. Turning right onto Britannia will take you to Cassels Street. Britannia Road and Cassels Street form the BCA's western and northern boundaries respectively, and a National Capital Commission

(NCC) recreational pathway borders it to the south. Parking is easy along Cassels; however, there are no facilities in the CA.

The Pond (Mud Lake)

Along Cassels, there is a good overview of Mud Lake. Large numbers of ducks stage here in the fall. All of Ottawa's puddle duck species can be seen, and a Eurasian Wigeon returned here for several consecutive years. The pond also attracts herons. Great Blues are frequently seen along the pond's edge and check the dead trees for Black-crowned Night-Herons from mid-summer to early fall. A Little Blue Heron was present in August 1998.

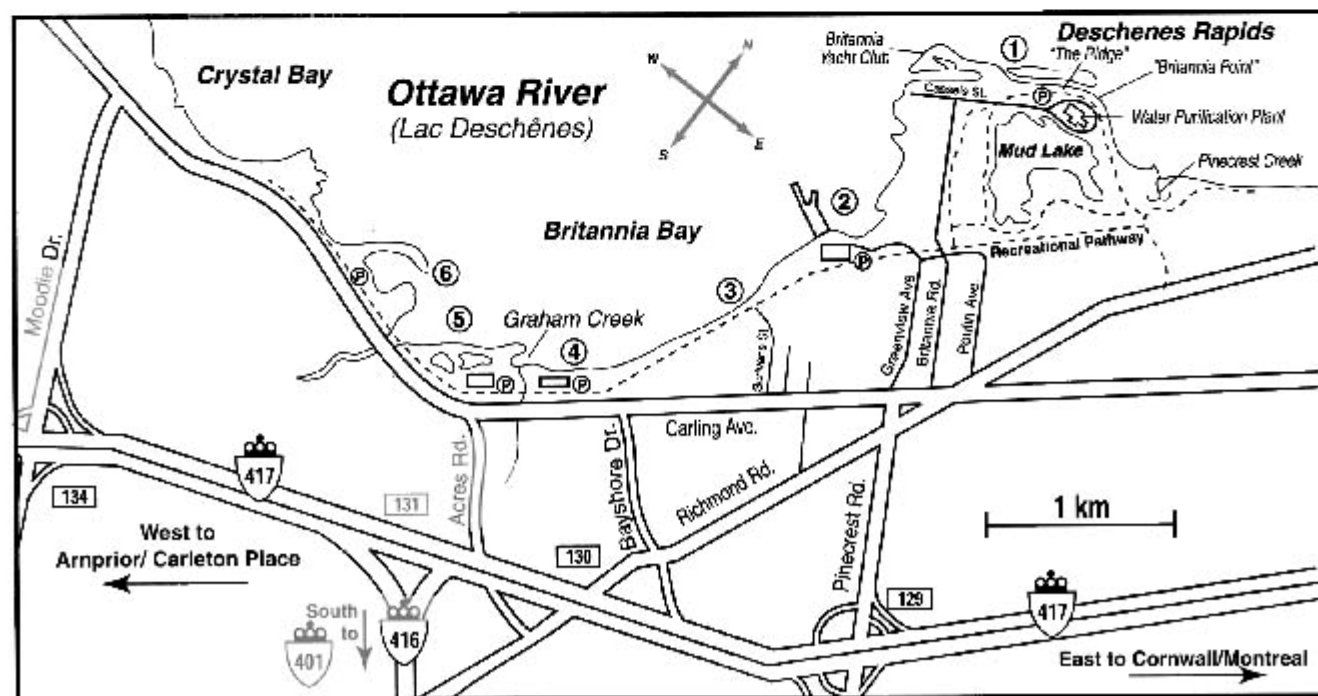
The Ridge

On the north side of Cassels, there is an elevated strip of land known as "the ridge". A trail runs along the crest, then follows the shore of the Ottawa River around the grounds of the Water Purification Plant. This ridge is one of the best places to start your birding day in spring and fall. Many migrants arrive first thing in the morning, and repeatedly circulate through the BCA in a north-south direction, winding up at the river. Thrushes, vireos, warblers and sparrows can be well-represented here.

The Woods and Fields

A pedestrian gate marks the entrance to a trail at the northwest corner of the pond, which leads to a network of well-used footpaths offering easy access to the many habitats found here. A counterclockwise tour of the BCA follows:

Upon entering the trail, a path to your right leads to a



scrubby old field with grassy areas and shrubs, mainly honeysuckle (*Lonicera*), buckthorn (*Rhamnus*) and staghorn sumac (*Rhus typhina*). This is a good area for flycatchers, thrushes and sparrows.

The main north-south trail continues south along the pond's west side through a hardwood stand of maple, oak and ash. Depending on the date of your visit, look carefully in the honeysuckle thickets bordering the pond for skulkers, including Mourning, Wilson's and Canada Warblers. Connecticut Warbler, a rarity in Ottawa, has been seen twice in this habitat.

The Pines

Further south, you will enter an impressive stand of mature white pine overtopping maple forest. Wood Duck, Brown Creeper and Pine Warbler nest here. Recently (since 1997), both Merlin and Cooper's Hawk have bred in this area in consecutive years.

A path running parallel to the fence marking the western boundary of the CA should also be covered. The east-west trail along the south side of the pond can also be good, but is typically less productive.

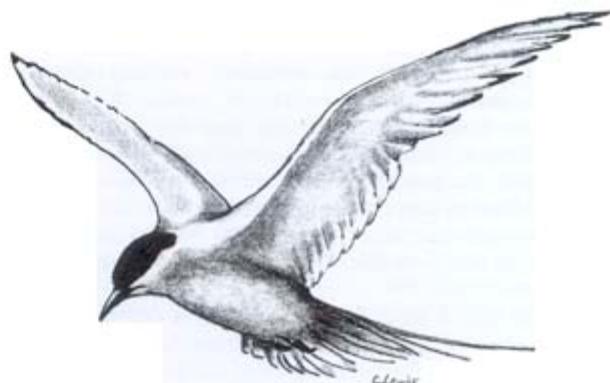
Remember, early in the morning, most of the birds move repeatedly back and forth in a north-south direction. Take your time! On good days after a fallout, a broad variety of songbirds of every family (except shrike) can be found *anywhere* along these trails. A total of 34 species of warblers has been found in the BCA, including (rare in Ottawa): Yellow-throated, Prairie, Cerulean, Prothonotary, Worm-eating, Connecticut and Yellow-breasted Chat.

At this point, return to Cassels via one of the alternate north-south trails (as most birders do) or continue on this counterclockwise route by taking the paved NCC recreational pathway along the southern edge. Access through a pedestrian gate to the fields in the southeastern portion of the BCA to search for scrubland birds; this approach will also lead to other views of the pond. Further east, again along the pathway before the settling ponds, another pedestrian gate near Pinecrest Creek indicates a right-of-way which takes you north through a narrow patch of scrubland bordered by a silver maple swamp. This area can be good for thrushes, vireos and warblers.

Britannia Point

At the northeast tip of the Water Purification Plant grounds, known as "Britannia Point", there is an excellent vantage of the Ottawa River and base of the Deschenes Rapids. From late May through June and again in the fall, this part of the river offers the best gull-viewing in Ottawa, with the possible exception of the Trail Road landfill site. The appearance of several emergent insect species, e.g. mayflies, attracts large numbers of larids. Ring-billed Gull is abundant, but many Bonaparte's and the odd rarity can be seen. Nineteen of Ottawa's 21 gull and tern species have been sighted here. Both Franklin's and Laughing Gulls were seen from "the Point" in May 1996. Other records include Black-headed, Little and Sabine's Gulls, Caspian and Forster's Terns, as well as all three species of jaegers. Look also for Red-throated Loon, which can be present on the river during October and November.

Britannia Point happens to be the only location in southern Ontario where *Arctic Tern* occurs almost annually. The best time to see this rare inland migrant is during the last week of May and the first two weeks of June. Typically, more than two



Arctic Tern by Christina Lewis

are seen at a time, with a high count of 14 on 29 May 1999. Weather is the key factor to success; strong winds and/or mid-day rain seem to be the best conditions, but when Arctic Terns are discovered, they often linger for more than a day.

The grounds surrounding the Water Purification Plant offer yet another good view of the pond. Rareities seen here in the past include Cassin's and Gray Kingbirds.

The Rapids

The rapids themselves are best viewed from the Britannia Yacht Club (permission is required from the management). From spring through fall when the river is low, the rocks can be good for interesting shorebirds. Below the rapids, especially in May, June and September, good numbers of larids can be seen (see Britannia Point, above). Barrow's Goldeneye is semi-regular here in winter and there are 3 records of Harlequin Duck.

On 6 December 1995, a Thick-billed Murre appeared briefly in the rapids. It likely would have stayed longer if it hadn't been taken by a Gyrfalcon.

2. Lakeside Gardens

This parkland environment can prove interesting during the autumn months, especially October to November. There is a sand beach (public swimming in summer) and a breakwall extending out some distance into Britannia Bay.

To reach this site, from the BCA, take Britannia Road south and turn right (west) onto Carling. The first street you encounter is Greenview Avenue. Turning right (north) on Greenview will lead to a large parking lot with public facilities.

Although not generally productive for rarities, Lakeside Gardens offers an excellent vantage of Britannia Bay and Lac Deschênes. Large numbers of waterfowl, particularly Canada Geese and the common puddle ducks, congregate here in the fall. Look for Snow Goose, Brant and the rare Greater White-fronted Goose. Scanning the water in late fall can turn up loons and grebes; some of the sea ducks (scoters and Oldsquaw) are easily viewed from here as well.

The beach is a good area for roosting gulls and while not productive for shorebirds, it has been a site for Purple Sandpiper. The breakwall has also attracted Purples. A Northern Wheatear was here in October 1995.

3. Scrivens Street

Continuing further west along Carling will bring you to



Scrivens Street at the second traffic light below the hill. Turn right onto Scrivens (there is a Harveys on the corner), drive to the end and park near the recreational pathway. Please be mindful: *don't park near laneways*.

At this location, scan the sand flats that extend west to Andrew Haydon Park and east to the break wall at Lakeside Gardens. In late summer through mid-fall, there is an extensive and rich feeding area for shorebirds and puddle ducks. Most of the shorebirds that can be viewed from Andrew Haydon Park can also be seen from this site; a Marbled Godwit spent several days here in June 1998.

Under certain weather conditions and at different times of the day, the birds frequently shift from one location to another. Any visit for shorebird viewing along the Ottawa River in the fall should include a stop here, as you may miss something by checking only the Ottawa Beach end of the flats.

4. Andrew Haydon Park East (Ottawa Beach)

Ottawa Beach is best defined as the narrow riparian zone with extensive emergent marsh vegetation from east of Graham Creek to a small viewing area surrounded by a split-log blind.

Access is from Carling Avenue, west from site #3 or by taking Richmond Road east or west to Bayshore Drive, then Bayshore north to Carling. Shortly after the Carling/Bayshore intersection, continue west along Carling to a small parkland with play structures and a view of the Ottawa River. The facilities are open until early fall and parking is available until the first snowfall.

This is one of the best single locations for shore/water birding in Ottawa and has been the scene of many rarities. Generally not a productive area in the spring as high water levels preclude the emergence of the sand flats, it is nonetheless a good spot to scan for loons, grebes, bay and sea ducks. Under the right conditions, a good assortment of migrant songbirds can be found here in the cottonwoods and the surrounding lowland vegetation.

The water level of the Ottawa River fluctuates widely throughout the seasons, and is controlled from the Lac Des Chats power dam, located about 40 km upstream just outside Fitzroy Harbour. Depending on the number of rainfall events, the river may or may not be low by mid-summer.

Whereas Britannia is a dynamite place to visit in both spring and fall, Ottawa Beach can be fantastic during late summer and the autumn months for many reasons.

Waterfowl

From September through early December, search for loons and grebes out on the lake; 30 of Ottawa's 35 waterfowl species have been found here. During October-November, many thousands of Canada Geese stage here, and you never know what other surprises you may find with them. Richardson's Canada Goose (the mallard-sized subspecies) and Greater White-fronted Goose are semi-annual. Snow Geese are typically present, as well as Brant during their brief flight time.

Shorebirds

By late summer, the exposed shoreline of Britannia Bay offers a rich feeding and resting area. Of Ottawa's 38 species of shorebirds, 35 have been recorded here. Under ideal conditions (e.g. northwest winds, late summer downpours), these flats can be carpeted with plovers and sandpipers.

This is a good place to see American Golden-Plover, and during heavy rains in August, numbers of Whimbrel have landed here. Look for Red Knot August to September. During peak flight times from late August to early September, Western Sandpiper is occasionally discovered among the large numbers of Semipalmateds. Piping Plover, Willet, Hudsonian Godwit, Buff-breasted Sandpiper and Red Phalarope have all occurred at Ottawa Beach. A recent rarity for Ottawa was our second record of Spotted Redshank on 21 August 1998.

Post-breeding Merlins and Peregrine Falcons also frequently use this Ottawa Beach-Scrivens corridor for hunting. Peregrines have nested in downtown Ottawa since 1997.

Other Specialties

Similarly, if the sandbar is extensive, good numbers of loafing larids gather here, including Iceland, Lesser Black-backed and Glaucous Gulls. Rarities have included Ottawa's second Mew Gull.

Although not as productive as Britannia in the fall, a nice assortment of migrant passerines may be encountered at Ottawa Beach. From late September through early October, it is not unusual to find half-a-dozen species of sparrows. In 1976, the first modern record of Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow was banded at this site, and since that time, it has been semi-annual. Look for this secretive species by walking through the Tall Cord Grass (*Spartina pectinata*) and Purple Loosestrife (*Lythrum salicaria*) near the sand spit.

Note: Rubber boots are a good idea at any time of year for exploring Ottawa Beach. Also, if you visit during good i.e. *bad* weather and see no birds, visit the Scrivens site (#3) and return here later.

5. Andrew Haydon Park West

The remainder of Andrew Haydon Park, located north of the traffic light intersection of Carling and Acres Road, is a manicured parkscape of lawn with scattered trees and artificial ponds. It has not proved very productive for land birds, but has an expansive view of Lac Deschênes. From anywhere along the river's edge, scan for loons, grebes and waterfowl in the late fall. Large numbers of immature Ring-billed Gulls also concentrate around the ponds in fall. Although no rarities have yet been found among them, this is a good opportunity to check for any potentials.

6. Dick Bell Park

Proceeding still further west on Carling, you will very shortly encounter the Nepean Sailing Club on your right. The sign says Dick Bell Park and there is public parking.

Again, this is a site to visit in the fall. A good diversity of loafing gulls can be seen on the docks during November and early December before freeze-up and often Snowy Owl in November-December.

Walking along the break wall to the lighthouse, check the numbers of scaup for interesting *Aythya* species (Redhead and Canvasback are both scarce in Ottawa), as well as scoters. Picking through the sometimes large rafts of Common Goldeneye requires patience, but you may be rewarded with a Barrow's. Harlequin Duck has been seen here once. Be sure to scan out onto the river for jaegers and unusual larids, e.g. Black-legged Kittiwake in October-November.

The reason birders visit Dick Bell Park late in the fall is to search for Purple Sandpiper as this the most consistent location in Ottawa to find that species. In late October through November during strong northwest winds, check the break wall carefully. The rocks are large and these birds have a habit of hiding between them.

Accessibility

In addition to being easily accessible by car, all of the above sites are connected by a paved NCC pathway. This path can be used as a conduit for visiting any or all of these sites on two rather than four wheels or on foot for a full day's outing. All areas except the BCA trails are accessible by wheelchair. Any mode of transportation will do to cover the best birdwatching

strip in Ottawa!

Overnight accommodations are available along Carling Avenue and there are numerous restaurants nearby, ranging from fast-food to fine dining. Refer to current tourist guides, e.g. the CAA's Ontario Tour Book, and be sure to call the Ottawa Field-Naturalists' Club Bird Status Line 613-860-9000 for the most recent bird sightings. The Environment Canada Weather Line 613-998-3439 provides recorded weather forecasts and frequent updates throughout the day.

Acknowledgements

We thank Bernie Ladouceur for his assistance with statistical information.

Reporting Banded or Marked Birds

Marcie Jacklin

Improved optics and an increasing number of field observers result in more banded or marked birds being seen. Within the last few months *Ontbirds* has reported banded Trumpeter Swans, Peregrine Falcons, Bald Eagles, Canada Geese and Osprey. Also, birders are asked to look for banded Tundra Swans and colour-banded juvenile Great Black-backed Gulls. Birders contribute to research and monitoring programs by accurately recording band information. Recoveries of bands or sightings of colour bands/markers are low especially for nongame birds and each report adds another piece to the puzzle of bird behaviour and migration.

Any species of birds can be banded from vultures to hummingbirds. Birds are banded (or ringed) with aluminum bands or coloured bands on the leg, or they are marked with neck bands or collars, nasal markers, dyes, web tags, radio transmitters or tail streamers.

When birds are banded the bander records information about where and when the birds is banded, how old it is, what sex it is and other information. Banders are trained to handle birds in ways that minimize stress and injury.

Since 1923 the Canadian Wildlife Service and the United States Department of the Interior have jointly administered the North American Bird Banding Program (NABBP). This program administers the permits, provides bands and coordinates marking projects. The Bird Banding Laboratory, which is part of the NABBP, has a data file of 54 million bandings and 2.9 million recoveries. They estimate that annually over 1 million birds are banded with about 65,000 recoveries. Most bandings are of nongame species; however, most recoveries are for game species. Anyone can use data bank information free of charge.

Data collection

Data may be collected by either observing birds in the wild and recording enough information to send in a report or by recovering a band from a dead bird. Note the following:

1. Your name and address
2. The band number
3. The date the band was found or observed
4. The exact location where it was found or observed

5. The species of bird, if known
6. How the bird was found
7. The condition of the bird (alive or dead)
8. Any other markers on the bird e.g. colour bands

Reporting a banded bird

Call 1-800-327-2263 toll-free in North America

fax 301-497-5717 or write to:

Bird Banding Office, National Wildlife Research Centre

Canadian Wildlife Service, Hull PQ K1A 0H3

Or

USGS Patuxent Wildlife Research Center, Bird Banding Laboratory, 12100 Beech Forest Road, Laurel MD 20708-4037

or fill out one of the forms at:

<http://www.pwrc.usgs.gov/bbl/homepage/call800.htm>

or email: bbo_cws@ec.gc.ca or bandreports@patuxent.nbs.gov

You will receive a Certificate of Appreciation telling you where and when the bird was banded and who banded it. A good example was the Piping Plover found at Van Wagners Beach last fall. Birders reported the coloured bands (yellow over red on the right leg) to the 1-800 number. A check of records showed that the bird was banded that summer at Whitefish Point in Michigan by researchers from University of Minnesota. Fascinating!

Acknowledgements

Information for this note was gathered from several helpful participants on the *Ontbirds* e-mail listserv and the following:

<http://sites.netscape.net/tntcomm/obba/OBBA.htm>

Ontario Bird Banding Association

<http://www.cws-sc.gc.ca/nwrc/bbo/birdband.htm>

Environment Canada - Migratory Bird Populations Division - Bird Banding

<http://www.pwrc.usgs.gov/bbl/>

The North American Bird Banding Program - Bird Banding Laboratory

<http://www.bsc-eoc.org/cmmn.html>

The Canadian Migration Monitoring Network

