Favourite Birding Hotspots

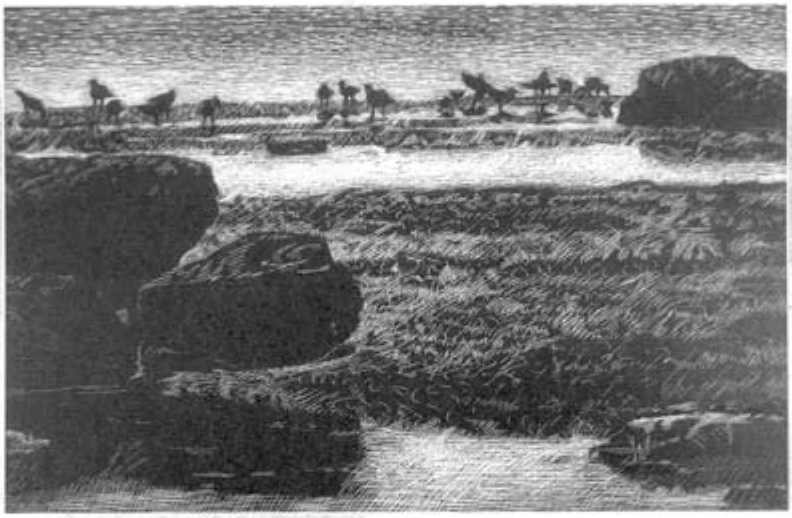
Lake Erie Shore

Summer Birding From Rock Point To Fort Erie

Willie D'Anna

Starting in mid-July, I regularly make the trek from Niagara Falls, New York, across the border to the Lake Erie shore. Despite having two of the Great Lakes close at hand, the shorebird habitat on "my" side usually is poor. While Ontario's Niagara Peninsula birders also suffer from the same deficiencies on their Lake Ontario shoreline, such is not the case along the north shore of Lake Erie. From Fort Erie to Rock Point Provincial Park and even beyond, most of this beautiful shoreline is highly favored by these long-distance migrants.

In addition to shorebirds, many other species of waterbirds pause to rest and feed along this stretch of the lake including herons, gulls, terns, and waterfowl. The shorebirds occasionally lure in a Peregrine Falcon or a Merlin, as well as the accipiter hawks. Although most of the songbirds have become rather quiet by the time the fall shorebird migration is in full swing, some uncommon southern breeders can add spice to your list. The latter include Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Red-bellied and Red-headed Woodpeckers, Carolina Wren, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Hooded Warbler, and Orchard Oriole.



Shorebirds at Rock Point Provincial Park
by *Betsy Potter*

Birding the Lake Erie shore is easy with most of it very accessible. Practically any shorebird is possible with about 27 species of regular occurrence during the fall migration. See Ron Pittaway's article, "Southbound Shorebirds" in the June 1999 issue of *OFO News*, Volume 17, Number 2 for an annotated list of species and when they are most likely to be found in southern Ontario. Although some shorebird species show a predilection for certain beaches, these preferences are usually slight. And while some beaches accrue a greater number of shorebirds on average, it seems that any shorebird is possible at any one of the beaches. Thus, if you want to be sure not to miss a species, you should check every accessible beach. On the other hand, a leisurely trip through Rock Point Provincial Park might prove just as rewarding.

In this guide I will highlight some of my favorite beaches, which are numbered on the map. Sites discussed in the guide are numbered on the map. There are many others that are also worth checking if you have the time. The latter spots are indicated on the map with an X. Please note that the productiveness of any beach depends on the water level. In recent years Lake Erie has been low with ample habitat throughout. In years with higher water levels, shorebirds will still be present in smaller numbers. However, the most productive beaches will change. Thus, as the water level changes, finding the best beaches becomes a learning experience. You need to be flexible.

Mats of algae are one of the main attractants for shorebirds. This decaying matter can create an unpleasant odor. The upside to this is that most beaches have few users as well as a tranquil beautiful shoreline. Along most of the shore, the birds will allow a close approach if done carefully. Still, a spotting scope will add greatly to your enjoyment as well as help you to identify more distant birds.

Rarities

The list of birds along this stretch of Erie shore includes a great number of rarities. The most remarkable are the Black-capped Petrels at Morgan's Point in 1955 and at several beaches near Fort Erie in 1996, Wilson's Storm-

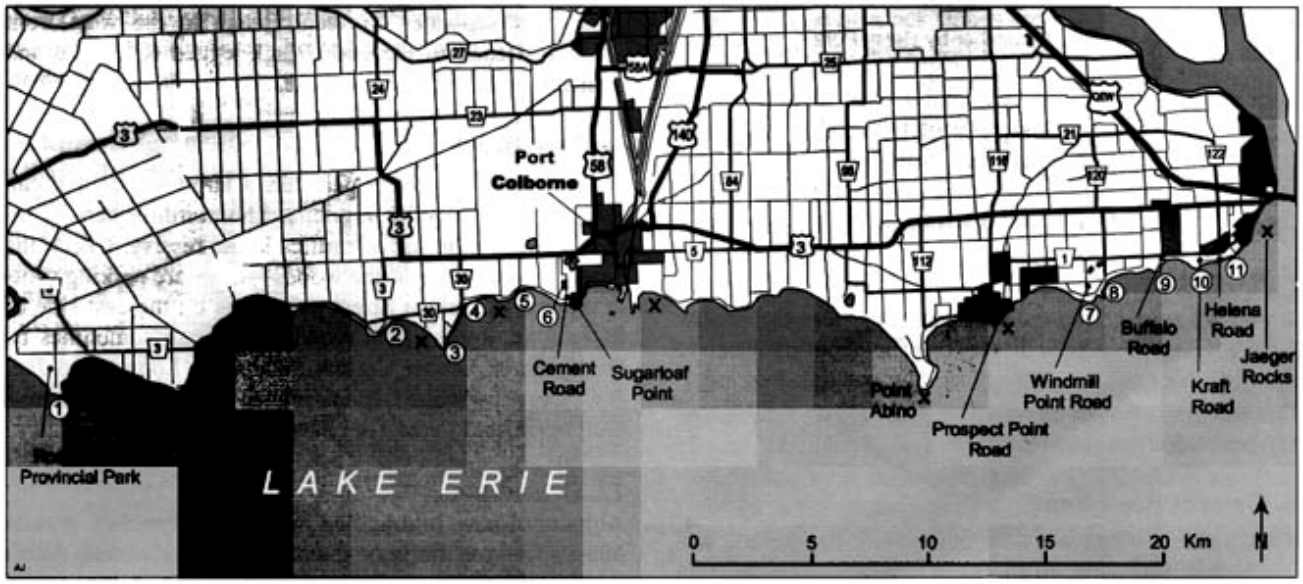
Petrels at Long Beach and Erie Beach, North America's only Slender-billed Curlew at Crescent Beach, and no less than three Wandering Tattlers, one at Sugerloaf Point and an incredible two records from Windmill Point. Other great summer rarities at sites not discussed below include Little Blue Heron, American Avocet, and Red Phalarope at Fort Erie, American Oystercatcher at Thunder Bay, and Acadian Flycatcher multiple times at Point Abino. Other rarities that are fairly regular or that have occurred multiple times at more than one location include Piping Plover, Willet, Hudsonian Godwit, Western Sandpiper, Purple Sandpiper, Buff-breasted Sandpiper, Ruff, Long-billed Dowitcher, Wilson's and Red-necked Phalaropes, Franklin's Gull (now much rarer), Little Gull, Loggerhead Shrike (now very rare), Connecticut Warbler, and Louisiana Waterthrush.

1. Rock Point Provincial Park

This park is often the best shorebird spot along the shore. At the entrance station (fee), pick up a map and a bird checklist and proceed to the southeast corner of the park. Park in the visitors parking area and walk east to the bluff, then south along it to the stairs on your left. Note that the trail you are on also continues to the right along the south bluff. This trail can be great for songbird migrants in late August and early September. After making your way down the stairs to the beach, you will work westward along the shore. But first note the mass of Double-crested Cormorants congregating on Mohawk Island to the south. Caspian and Common Terns also breed there. Check the bay to the east which has had many uncommon summer diving ducks and Horned Grebes. The first 300 metres or so of shoreline are prime shorebird habitat. The remainder beyond is usually sterile sandy beach. During the peak of migration in late July and early August, there can be hundreds of shorebirds. After this, numbers drop off rapidly but good concentrations can still occur and rarer species become increasingly likely as the season progresses. Yellow Warblers, one of the earliest fall songbird migrants, abound in the willows on the back side of the beach. Other warblers and songbirds are also seen, including the occasional Orchard Oriole. After scouring the beach and looking for songbirds if desired, you might want to visit Jim Smith's banding station. To do so, return to your car and drive to the west side of the park, parking in the last parking lot. Walk through the gate heading west, then go north at the T-intersection about 50 metres to a trail off to your left which leads to Jim's banding station. Jim is knowledgeable and congenial and enjoys showing his birds. Be aware though, that when the station is busy, he may not be able to devote much attention to guests. Still, just getting a look at birds in the hand can be a thrilling experience. Summer rarities found at Rock Point include Swainson's Hawk, Marbled Godwit, Black-headed Gull twice, Black-legged Kittiwake, Prairie Warbler, Western Kingbird, Dickcissel, and Western Meadowlark.

2. Grabell Point

About 250 metres east of where County Road 3 turns north, the lakeshore road (County Road 30) comes very close to the base of Grabell Point, which stretches off to the southwest. The algae mats here can be extensive with shorebirds often visible from the car. Unfortunately, the shoulders are very narrow and parking is not allowed. To bird Grabell Point, park along the side of County Road 3 and walk along the lakeshore road to the beach.



Map by *Andrew Jano*

3. Morgan's Point

Easily accessible at the end of Morgan's Point Road, this spot often has roosting gulls and terns, in addition to a few shorebirds. Uncommon summer waterfowl are found here most years. Curlew Sandpiper and Northern Saw-whet Owl have been recorded here. The private park on the west side of the road can be good for songbird migrants. Please maintain good relations with the owners by respecting the privacy of the campers there.

4. Base of Morgan's Point

At the eastern base of Morgan's Point, County Road 30 makes a big bend to the north. Turn onto the road that

Short-billed Dowitcher by *Betsy Potter*

goes south from here and proceed a short distance to the wide shoulder on the lake side of the road. The views from above the shorebirds, right from the car, can be exceptional. Just before returning to County Road 30, check the near corner of the beach that stretches off to the east.

5. Reebs Bay

A pull-off across from the cemetery provides easy access. Check the shore in both directions. The shoreline close to the road, between the pull-off and the cottages that are to the east, often has productive algae mats. American Oystercatcher has occurred here.

6. Cement Road Pond

This pond is often worth a quick look for herons and shorebirds. Pull over on the narrow shoulder as best you can and watch for fast-moving cars. If early in the morning, Marsh Wren or either cuckoo could be heard. Little Blue Heron and Yellow-crowned Night-Heron have been seen here. Back at the intersection with the lakeshore road, listen for Red-bellied Woodpecker and, in the northeast quadrant, Sedge Wren.

7. Windmill Point

Park at the end of the road next to the wooden fence. Scope the beach to the west, then walk about 200 metres east to the point, looking for shorebirds as you go. The point can have many resting gulls and terns. Check the small rocky islands for half-hidden shorebirds. Be sure to go slightly beyond the point as the next bay can be very good for shorebirds, though inconsistent. Look and listen for Red-headed Woodpecker in the entire area.

8. Stone Mill Road

Park at the end of the road near the sand without blocking access to the cottages on your right. Check the beach in both directions for shorebirds. The small rocky islands often contain herons, waterfowl, gulls, and terns.

9. Buffalo Road

The shoreline and the birds here are very similar to Stone Mill Road. This area is also known as Crescent Beach.

10. Kraft Road

This spot is often worth a look. Red-headed Woodpeckers may be seen as you walk to the beach from your car. Shorebirds hide in the depressions along the rocky weedy shore so look carefully. Continue west to the point, about 200 meters, where there may be gulls, terns, waterfowl, and shorebirds along the shore or on the rocky islands. This point separates Crescent Beach to the west from Waverly Beach to the east. Black-legged Kittiwake and Arctic Tern have been seen here.

11. Erie Beach

This former amusement park has a large woods that can be good for songbird migrants. Shorebirding here is inconsistent but the list of rarities is impressive. Check the beach on both sides of the woods—there are parking spots at the end of Helena Street as well as on the east side of the woods. Red-headed Woodpeckers can sometimes be found. Eared Grebe, Curlew Sandpiper, Long-tailed Jaeger, Laughing Gull, Black-legged Kittiwake, Sabine's Gull twice, and Least Tern have all occurred here.

12. Other spots

Although I have highlighted my favorite beaches, several other spots can be very interesting. Other access points that may be worth checking are indicated on the map with an X. These include, from west to east, Belleview Beach,

Piping Plover by *Betsy Potter*

Rathfon Point, the west end of Nickel Beach in Port Colborne (just east of the Welland Canal—parking fee until September), Point Abino (no access until September—permission from guard required), Prospect Point Road, and Jaeger Rocks. For those who like to explore and discover their own places to bird, just look for other access points. You never know what reward awaits you. As always, please respect the private property of the landowners.

Conclusion

The Lake Erie shore harbors a great diversity of birds in a beautiful landscape. Your chances of finding a rare bird are very good. Due to my greater experience in the summer, this guide has focused on birding at that season. However, spring and fall can be just as exciting. Simply check out the spots highlighted here or explore some of the other access points indicated on the map. You will not be disappointed.

Acknowledgements

I thank Brendan Klick for reviewing this article and providing many useful suggestions which greatly improved it. Peter Yoerg gave me helpful information on several beaches. I thank Jim Smith for being so welcoming to birders at his banding station and for the informative discussions on banding that we had. Jean Farnan kindly provided maps and information for the city of Port Colborne. I also thank Andrew Jano for the map and Betsy Potter for the artwork that accompany this article. Last but not least, I thank Betsy Potter for joining me on my frequent trips to the Erie shore and for sharing my enthusiasm for this wonderful birding region.

Some Forest Bird Changes

Ron Pittaway

When I moved to Haliburton County 22 years ago, I often heard Whip-poor-wills on warm moonlit evenings in June. I rarely hear Whip-poor-wills now. Early results from the Breeding Bird Atlas confirm this change. What has happened? Whip-poor-wills prefer young woodlands with openings, but Haliburton's forests are filling in and maturing. Forest fires (last big fire was more than 50 years ago) and heavy logging in the past created habitat for Whip-poor-wills, but wildfires and heavy cuts are not acceptable in cottage country today. Keeping things in perspective, today's forests came about after settlement, pine logging and wildfires in the late 1800s and early 1900s. The primeval old growth forests before settlement had different bird populations than today.

Plant succession is a powerful force. As Haliburton's forests mature, trees that need sunlight to establish such as ashes, aspens, basswood, birches, oaks and others will die out and so will their associated birds. As these trees die, they are replaced by shade tolerant trees from the understory, usually Sugar Maple or Balsam Fir, not by a tree of the same species. In time we will see reductions in acorns, beechnuts, cherries, birch seed and more.

Here are more facts about trees in Haliburton, which also apply to many other areas of southern Ontario. The youngest stands of White Birch are 60 years old. This short-lived birch soon will become ecologically extinct, which will impact wintering redpolls. As other trees such as aspens die out, we will see declines in birds such as the Yellow-bellied Sapsucker. One of the commonest conifers in Haliburton is the Eastern Hemlock. The youngest hemlock stands are 120 years old. Hemlock is long-lived so some will live another century or more, but hemlock, being adapted to a cool and wet environment, may decline faster with climate warming. Blackburnian and Black-throated Green Warblers and Blue-headed Vireos will decline when hemlock disappears. Many other bird changes are coming too.

I also see forest changes taking place in Toronto's famous ravines. As Eastern Hemlocks (some have died prematurely because of drought) and Eastern White Pines die, they are being replaced by Sugar Maples. Other Toronto trees such as ashes, basswood, beech, birches, cherries, elms, hickories, ironwood, oaks, poplars and willows are giving way to the extremely shade tolerant Sugar Maples. Future Toronto ravine forests will be dominated by a monoculture of maples, which will support far fewer bird species.

Haliburton's and Toronto's forests are losing biodiversity. One remedy would be more controlled fires.