

# Birding Guide to Presqu'ile Provincial Park and Area

Don Shanahan

Presqu'ile Provincial Park is Northumberland County's prime birding area. In addition, the region offers other spots worth investigating. This guide provides an update to birding at Presqu'ile and describes some of these lesser known areas.

## Birding Ethics

Though some of the areas described in this guide are on private property, all can be birded adequately from the roadside. It is important to avoid trespassing and to park sensibly. This issue takes on particular significance in areas adjacent to Presqu'ile Provincial Park as recent years have seen unnecessary antipathy develop between birders and land owners. Birders can help facilitate good relations by behaving responsibly and visiting local businesses.

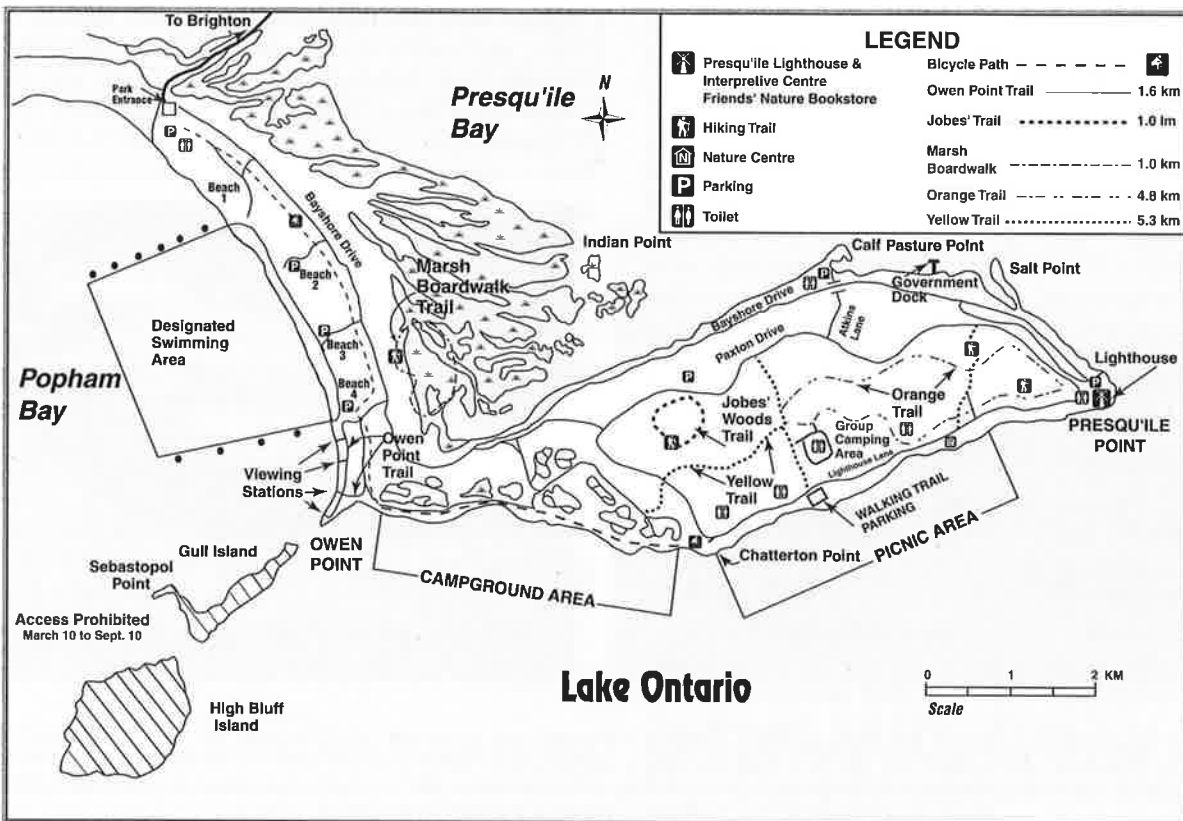
## Presqu'ile Provincial Park

Recently designated as an *Important Bird Area*, Presqu'ile is best known for its migrating songbirds, shorebirds and waterfowl—it is that kind of a place. Before visiting Presqu'ile, check *Ontbirds* or consult the Birding Page on the Friends of Presqu'ile Web Site: <http://www.friendsofpresquile.on.ca>. In order to find out what is happening once you are in the park, check the sightings board located beside the campground office. The Helleiner residence at 186 Bayshore Drive, very close to the Presqu'ile Lighthouse, offers a convenient and up-to-date

list of recent sightings. Visitors to Presqu'ile should also remember that a day or seasonal pass must be displayed on the dash of every vehicle.

The major spring songbird migration begins in May and peaks around the Victoria Day weekend. Presqu'ile's Lighthouse and Calf Pasture are the best places to find newly arrived migrants. These include Scarlet Tanager, Baltimore Oriole and Orchard Oriole, which produced the first evidence of successful breeding in the park during spring 2000. Also expect an excellent variety of northern breeders such as Magnolia, Cape May, Blackburnian, Bay-breasted and Blackpoll Warblers. Both Golden-winged and Blue-winged Warblers are seen each year and Brewster's Warbler is possible. Presqu'ile also regularly produces Carolinian specialties such as Hooded Warbler. The May 1999 Prothonotary Warbler was a first for the park. Red-headed and Red-bellied Woodpeckers and Carolina Wren are seen annually, and the latter is believed to have nested in the park.

At the peak of migration, particularly when weather has forced birds to land en masse, bird numbers can be astounding. Once refreshed, dispersing songbirds are best seen along the most easterly kilometre of Paxton Drive (the part nearest to the Lighthouse) or at the Calf Pasture. Subsequently, places worth checking include any trails that branch off Paxton Drive, the



Map 1

mature woods in the Jobs' Woods Trail loop, and in the various campgrounds. Occasionally, any of the four access roads leading to the beach can be surprisingly good.

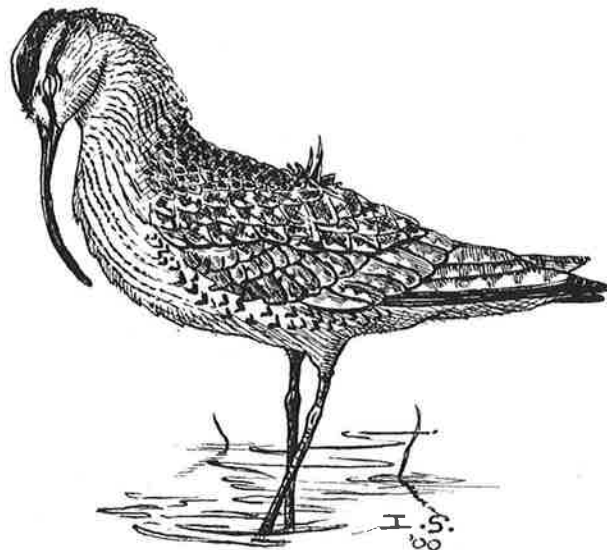
Though Presqu'ile's most notable shorebird, Canada's first Mongolian Plover, was seen on 4 May 1984, most shorebirds begin appearing at Presqu'ile during mid-May. Water level is one of the factors that determines if the birds distribute themselves along the recreational sand beaches or along the southerly natural beach. Dunlin are the main component of the 18 or so species usually seen in spring. Whimbrel and Red Knot are seen annually, as well as Black-bellied Plover, Ruddy Turnstone, Sanderling, White-rumped Sandpiper and Short-billed Dowitcher (both *griseus* and *hendersoni*). Major groundings can produce flocks of 5000 or more creating a "river of birds" flowing along the entire beach. A 24 May 1995 grounding also yielded two or more Purple Sandpipers. Groundings of one or two thousand birds are annual. By mid-June, most shorebirds have left for their breeding grounds.

Often overlooked at Presqu'ile is the more gradual autumn passerine migration which continues through balmy, bug-free weather from mid-August until about the beginning of October. This period produced one of Presqu'ile's best sightings: a Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher in late September 1986. The Lighthouse, Calf Pasture and Paxton Drive should all be checked during the fall season. Sharp-shinned Hawk is the most numerous raptor attending both migrations.

The peak southbound shorebird migration is from mid-August to Labour Day. Lingering adult shorebirds mingle with newly arrived brightly plumaged juveniles to make this period better than the spring passage. This time, when worn adults and fresh juveniles are seen together, offers the most species, highest numbers and best opportunities for interesting studies. During recent low water years most shorebirds accumulate about Owen Point. With 30 shorebird species possible over the autumn, Presqu'ile is worth checking any time until freeze-up, usually in late December. Birds expected include American Golden-Plover, Whimbrel, Hudsonian Godwit, Red Knot, Western Sandpiper, White-rumped Sandpiper, Baird's Sandpiper, Stilt Sandpiper, Buff-breasted Sandpiper, and in a good year, all three phalaropes. Purple Sandpiper is an annual visitor and the exceptional December 1998 peak of 57 birds was seen at close range by many on Gull Island. Irregular but possible are American Avocet, Willet and Long-billed Dowitcher. After Labour Day, if the lake level is low, Chatterton Point (see Map 1), situated on the south shore of the park, is productive for shorebirds.

Recent years have proven High Bluff Island (see Map 1) to be a passerine hotspot once access is permitted after 10 September. Northern Saw-whet Owl can also be found in good numbers among the island's cedar groves during late September and early October. High Bluff Island is only accessible by boat and extreme caution should be observed during any crossings from Gull Island.

Sightings of Parasitic Jaeger in autumn seem to be increasing at Presqu'ile. At least 14 sightings were recorded during September and October 1999. Most jaegers were traveling via Owen Point and Popham Bay to points westward in the lake. Jaegers are most often seen from Owen Point or Gull Island and usually herald their arrival by flushing gull



Whimbrel at Presqu'ile on 29 May 2000 by Ian Shanahan

flocks resting on nearby gravel bars.

Unfortunately, birders should remember that the much reviled Presqu'ile duck hunt continues to date and restricts access to Owen Point, Gull Island and High Bluff Island. The season begins after the third weekend in September and continues until mid-December. Hunting days are Monday, Wednesday, Friday and Saturday.

Recent mild winters have seen ducks return to Presqu'ile in January or February, or whenever ice opens up at the mouth of Presqu'ile Bay. As leads in the ice reach towards the Government Dock and then to the Calf Pasture, ducks follow. Thousands of Greater Scaup are joined by Canvasback, Redhead and Lesser Scaup. The more the ice opens up, the more the species total approaches the normal high of about 20. In recent years, optimum duck viewing occurred from late February until mid-March. Once ducks move west past the Calf Pasture, they are best seen from Bayshore Road which is outside the Park and runs parallel to Presqu'ile Bay. Close-range viewing is available along this stretch but respect for private property and sensible parking are essential. Eurasian Wigeon, Tufted Duck and Barrow's Goldeneye have occurred in recent years. From April through May, Popham Bay off the Presqu'ile beaches produces Red-throated Loon, Horned Grebe, Red-necked Grebe and large flocks of Green-winged Teal. Loons and grebes are more numerous off Popham Bay during September and October.

Presqu'ile is a wintering spot for Long-tailed Duck, Bufflehead and Common Goldeneye. These ducks flock wherever there is open water in the main body of Lake Ontario. Winter usually produces Snowy Owl sightings on Gull Island or on the ice in Presqu'ile Bay, and Northern Shrike is a regular winter species on Gull Island and in the panne area about the beach access roads.

Presqu'ile's spectacular water bird colonies are located on Gull and High Bluff Islands. These islands are closed to the public from 10 March until 10 September. Activity on or about the islands is best viewed from Owen Point, which is undoubtedly the best nonpasserine viewing area in the Park.

Ring-billed Gulls first stake out territories on the islands in early March. By May, legions of Double-crested Cormorants, gulls, Caspian Terns and Common Terns create an incredible visual and auditory display at the breeding colonies. Various juveniles from the colonies are abundant and easily observed on the beach and about Popham Bay into September.

Black-crowned Night-Herons nest on Gull Island and can be seen by spotting scope perched in the bushes of Sebastopol Point, the extreme northwestern tip of the island. Dawn and dusk are also good times to view Black-crowned Night-Herons commuting to and from the Presqu'ile marshes. Black-crowned Night-Heron, Great Blue Heron and as of 2000, up to three pairs of Great Egrets also nest on High Bluff Island. Single Tricolored Herons were sighted from Owen Point in late May 1999 and again in early May 2000, reinforcing the value of this lookout point.

A small but representative area of Presqu'ile's marshes is accessible by a boardwalk, Marsh Boardwalk Trail, (Map 1). From late April until autumn, this boardwalk offers opportunities to see or hear Pied-billed Grebe, American Bittern, Least Bittern (usually heard at night), Virginia Rail, Common Moorhen, Great Horned Owl, and Long-eared Owl (uncommon). King Rail nests occasionally; listen for its calls. Marsh Wren and Swamp Sparrow are abundant. A spring dawn on the boardwalk provides a treat as the rising sun spreads across Presqu'ile Bay. Evenings offer softer light and the onset of the marsh's night sounds. The Harbour Street causeway leading into the park also offers a limited view over parts of the marsh.

Woodpile Marsh, located between the Pines and the High Bluff campgrounds, is a good place to see nesting Wood Duck and late spring Lesser Scaup and Bufflehead. Least Bittern is occasionally seen about the marsh's beaver lodge.

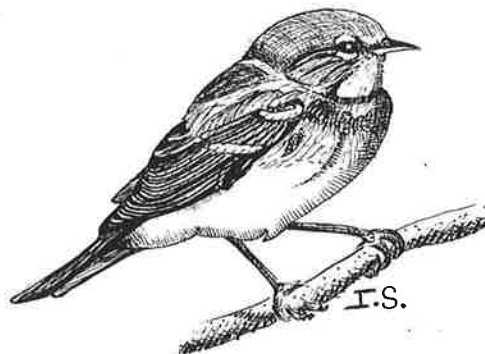
### Cobourg to Presqu'ile

Cobourg offers a surprisingly productive harbour and an interesting off season route to Presqu'ile. Cobourg is best accessed from Highway 401 exit 474. Drive south on Division Street to the intersection with King Street in downtown Cobourg. From this point, there are two ways of getting to the nearby harbour. The shortest route, by continuing south on Division Street, ends on the pier situated on the harbour's east side. To get to the west side of the harbour, drive west on King Street West and turn left at the second traffic light onto Hibernia Street. Follow Hibernia a short distance to where it ends at a marina. Parking is to the left. In winter when the harbour is frozen over, numerous gulls roost on the ice. On a frigid 26 January 1999 at least eight gull species were observed on the harbour ice, including a very intriguing Slaty-backed-like individual. Just which vantage point provides the best viewing, depends on the vagaries of weather, and in particular the wind. The west headland of the harbour can produce Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow in early October and Purple Sandpiper through December. On 4 January 1999, an unexpected but well seen American Oystercatcher spent a short time on this headland.

**Peter's Woods**, a Provincial Nature Reserve located 25 km northeast of Cobourg, contains a delightful mature woodlot, one of the nicest in eastern Ontario. Peter's Woods was profiled by Clive Goodwin in *OFO News*, Volume 15, Number 1.

### The Lakeshore Route

A route used by Clive and Joy Goodwin to travel from Cobourg to Presqu'ile is most productive during Presqu'ile's "off-season" from late fall to early spring. As Map 2 indicates, the general idea of the route is to travel as close to the lake as possible. Offshore species include loons, grebes and jaegers. Land birds possible along the entire route include American Kestrel, Rough-legged Hawk, Northern Shrike, Horned Lark, waxwings, and Snow Bunting in winter. Flooded fields in spring can produce early yellowlegs and puddle ducks.



Northern Parula by Ian Shanahan

The entire route is not described but is indicated on Map 2. However, several main roads that lead south from County Road 2 (also called Northumberland Road 2) to the lakeshore and provide good views of open water will be referred to. Distances stated after these road names are measured from the intersection of Division and King Streets in Cobourg. The first such road, Archer's Road, is located 8.3 km east of Cobourg. At Grafton (11.3 km), turn right at Old Danforth Road, which bears right and merges with Station Road. Station Road continues south until it dead ends at the lake at Chub Point. Patience here in autumn can produce Pomarine and Parasitic Jaegers. On 8 September 1996 during Hurricane Fran, Chub Point produced a Sooty Tern. Wicklow Beach Road (15.1 km) provides another lookout, and Wicklow Pond, slightly to the east, is worth a look for lingering spring puddle ducks, Hooded Merganser and Green Heron through the summer. A small heronry about one km west of the village of Lakeport has had a Great Horned Owl nesting among the Great Blue Herons for the last few years. Huff Road (32.8 km) is flanked by much open livestock pasture land and in recent years has had Cattle Egret, Wilson's Phalarope, Brewer's Blackbird, sparrows, Bobolink and Eastern Meadowlark.

### Goodrich-Loomis/Murray Marsh Route

The Goodrich-Loomis Conservation Area is located about 15 km north of Brighton and is operated under the stewardship of the Lower Trent Region Conservation Authority. Consisting of short grass prairie, mixed coniferous-deciduous woods growing on one of Ontario's largest eskers, and riverine woods, Goodrich-Loomis offers a pleasant mixture of breeding birds showing both northern and southern affinities. Birding is best from mid-May until mid-July. From June on, mosquitoes can become intense. As some of the trails are convoluted, pick up a trail map at the main entrance. Poison Ivy is abundant. Admission is free but a voluntary donation box is located near the pamphlet rack.

Many birders approaching the Brighton/Presqu'ile area via Highway 401 will be tempted to stop at the Coffee Time immediately south of exit 509, so directions to Goodrich-Loomis and other points north will be given from this spot. At the entrance to Coffee Time set your odometer at zero and proceed north on County Road 30 (also called Northumberland Road 30). At 4.9 km, Donaldson's Road turns right and offers 0.6 km of pastureland. Drivers should note that the Donaldson's turn is hidden and quite sharp. This area usually offers easy access to habitat for Eastern Kingbird, Eastern Bluebird, Field, Vesper, and Grasshopper Sparrows, and Eastern Meadowlark. A pair of Upland Sandpipers, very uncommon in Northumberland, was seen at this site in early May 2000.

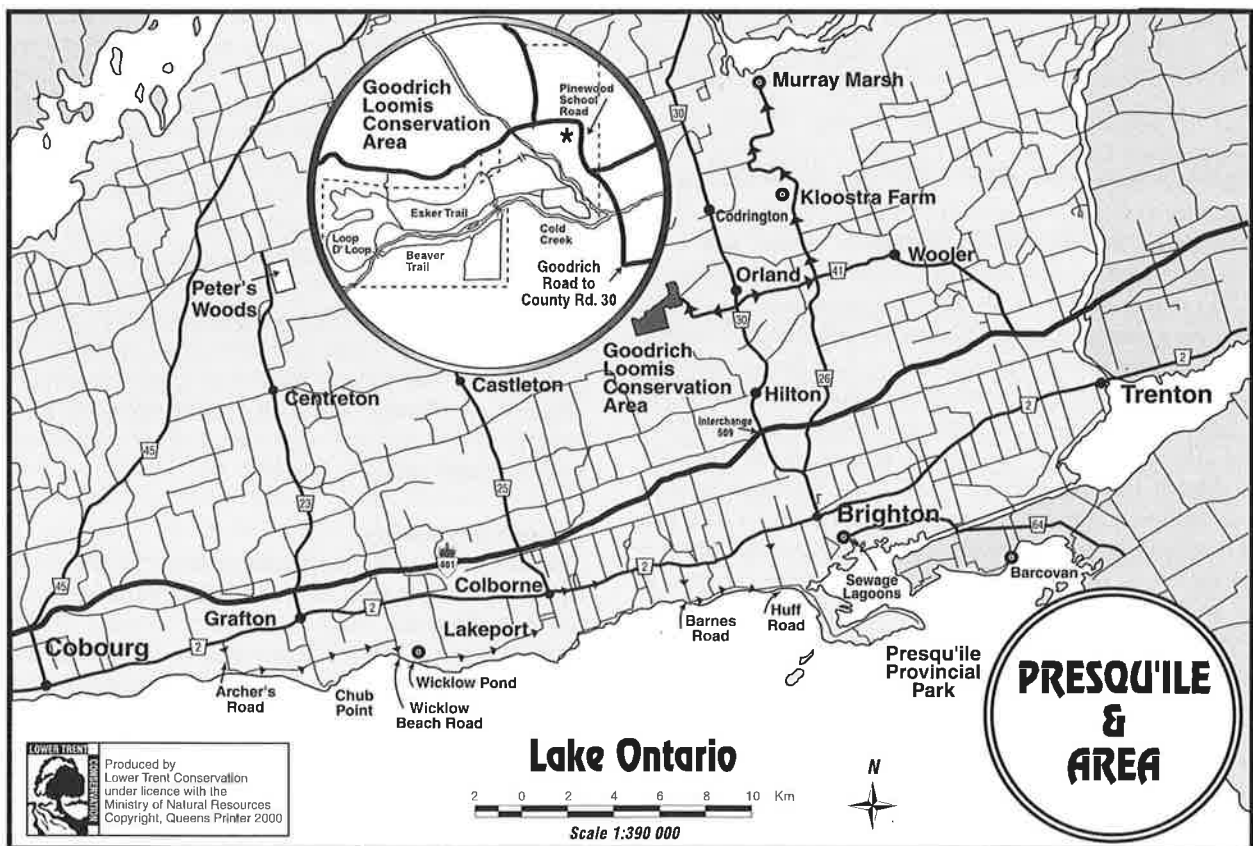
At 6.5 km, County Road 30 intersects with Goodrich Road on the left and Northumberland Road 41 on the right. Follow Goodrich Road west, where you will find mixed woods beside the road between 7.6 and 8.1 km. These woods can have Eastern Screech-Owl, Great Horned Owl and Barred Owl, which often can be heard from the roadside. Watch the fields on the right from this point until 9.0 km for Wild Turkey. Goodrich Road turns sharply right at 8.6 km and becomes Pinewood School Road. Continuing along Pinewood School Road you will encounter the conservation area's main entrance at 9.6 km. The parking lot area and adjacent fields for the next kilometre are good for American Kestrel, Black-billed Cuckoo, Eastern Phoebe, Eastern Kingbird, Eastern Bluebird, Indigo Bunting, and Vesper, Savannah and Grasshopper Sparrows. The Esker Trail can be accessed from the main entrance and at its beginning has Nashville and Yellow Warblers. Otherwise, this trail provides a scenic route to the more productive Loop D' Loop trail network.

A short cut to the Loop D' Loop trails can be accessed by

driving past the conservation area's main entrance on Pinewood School Road. Spring nights in the vicinity of 11.5 km usually produce singing Whip-poor-will. This area is also good for short grass species. On the left at 11.9 km, you will encounter a maintenance road leading to the junction of the Esker Trail and the Loop D' Loop system. This road is rough and it is best to park on Pinewood School Road. Using a trail map, turn right at the trail junction and follow the winding Loop D' Loop circuit. Starting on the forested esker, you will descend into wet hemlock woods, walk parallel to Cold Creek, then ascend to rejoin the Esker Trail.

Birds nesting in or about this area include Cooper's Hawk, Northern Goshawk, American Woodcock, Black-billed Cuckoo, Barred Owl, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Pileated Woodpecker, Yellow-throated Vireo (uncommon), Blue-headed Vireo, Winter Wren, Hermit and Wood Thrushes, Black-throated Blue Warbler (uncommon), Black-throated Green Warbler, Blackburnian Warbler, Northern Waterthrush, Mourning Warbler, Canada Warbler, Scarlet Tanager, White-throated Sparrow, Rose-breasted Grosbeak and Purple Finch. The upper reaches of Cold Creek appear to be a prime spot for the discovery of breeding Louisiana Waterthrush.

The Loop D' Loop system passes a bridge that crosses Cold Creek to join the wetter Beaver Trail. The wet area across the creek is good for American Woodcock and Mourning and Canada Warblers. The Beaver Trail follows the creek downstream to another bridge crossing Cold Creek. The pines to the south of this junction are good for Hermit Thrush and Pine Warbler, and the area immediately around the bridge is dependable for Willow Flycatcher and Mourning Warbler. Great Blue Heron, Spotted Sandpiper and Belted Kingfisher can be encountered anywhere along Cold Creek. Once the bridge is



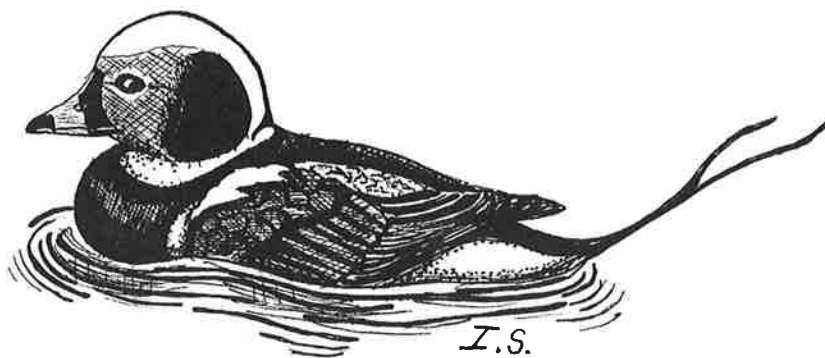
Map 2

crossed, the trail parallels the creek moving upstream to reunite with the Loop D'Loop system.

By proceeding back to the junction of County Road 30 and the Goodrich Road or by heading there directly from Coffee Time, birders can drive to the area's most dependable spot for observing Wild Turkey. Simply re-set your odometer to zero at this point. The eastbound route from this intersection is called Northumberland Road 41. Drive 3.6 km east and turn left at Grosjean Road. At 4.7 km, Grosjean Road changes to Cowan Road which proceeds north for another kilometre, where at the intersection with Jamieson Road (or 5.7 km), Cowan Road turns into Cameron Road. This area opens up into corn fields that usually produce Horned Lark and Vesper and Savannah Sparrows in spring and early summer. A hydro transmission line crosses the road at 6.2 km, and from here on Wild Turkeys may be seen on both sides of the road. At 7.0 km, farm buildings are located by the edge of the road on each side. The hill on the left leading from the forest's edge down to a small pasture is particularly dependable for Wild Turkeys that often forage in the pasture with a variety of barnyard animals.

From 7.7 to 10.0 km, Cameron Road can have Northern Saw-whet Owl in winter and Eastern Screech-Owl, Great Horned Owl and Barred Owl at other times of the year. All property adjacent to the road is private; however, owling at night can be done quite adequately from the roadside. Towards the end of this stretch, the large **Murray Marsh** is visible to the right. Though Green Heron, Wood Duck, Red-shouldered Hawk, Black-billed Cuckoo, the above mentioned owls, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Fox Sparrow and Rusty Blackbird have been seen in this area, the most intriguing aspect of the Murray Marsh is that it remains largely unexplored by birders.

To get to accessible parts of the Murray Marsh, follow Cameron Road until 10.9 km where it meets Goodfellow Road. Turn right and drive past farm fields until 12.4 km, where Osprey usually nest to the right on an artificial platform. At 13.0 km, a farmhouse on the left has numerous feeders that have produced both Red-headed and Red-bellied Woodpeckers in winter. The edges of cornfields past the farmhouse have nest boxes that are usually occupied by Eastern Bluebird. Cameron Road turns sharply to the left at 13.2 km. The lane continuing straight ahead provides foot access to the Murray Marsh. When fallow, fields to the right of this intersection usually have Horned Lark and Vesper Sparrow. Cameron Road past the "Murray Marsh Natural Habitat Area" sign becomes rougher and should not be driven before April. From 13.7 until 14.0 km, the road passes through wet woods. At 14.5 km, a large expanse of cattail marsh is visible on the right. The road dead ends at 15.2 km at the Habitat Area's parking lot. American Bittern, Least Bittern, Green Heron, Northern Harrier, Virginia Rail, Sora, Common Yellowthroat and Swamp Sparrow can be readily encountered in or about the cattail marsh. A trail leads uphill from the parking lot to a promontory overlooking Bradley Bay on the Trent Canal system. Turkey Vulture and Osprey can usually be seen from this vantage point.



Long-tailed Duck by Ian Shanahan

## Points East of Brighton

Distances to the remaining sites begin at the double set of traffic lights in the centre of Brighton. High water usually limits the effectiveness of the Brighton sewage lagoon. However, the lagoon is worth a look in the spring for lingering Gadwall, both species of teal, Northern Shoveler and Lesser Scaup. In autumn, the lagoon often has late Bonaparte's Gulls and swallows. To get to the lagoon from Brighton, drive south on Prince Edward Street and bear to the left as Prince Edward becomes Northumberland Road 64. At 2.3 km the lagoon driveway is to the left. Most of the lagoon can be scanned from outside the gate. A natural water filtration system recently constructed immediately south of the existing facility has an observation station and could bear watching for marsh birds and gulls.

Because **Barcovan Beach** to the east of Brighton often has open water when Presqu'ile and Popham Bays are iced up, it is worth checking in winter until late February. All three swan species can be seen at Barcovan during winter, and early teal, Canvasback, Redhead and scaup are often present with overwintering Bufflehead and Common Goldeneye. Two Greater White-fronted Geese were recorded at Barcovan during the late 1990s and a male Barrow's Goldeneye on 12 and 14 February 2000. To reach Barcovan, continue along Northumberland Road 64 until the swing bridge at the Murray Canal (7.2 km). Immediately after the bridge turn onto the Barcovan Beach Road and follow its winding path until the road parallels Lake Ontario. Watch the fields to the north for Snowy Owl and Northern Shrike. Continue until 11.4 km, where the road turns sharply to the left. The lookout point is to the right. It is important that birders park well away from this corner and adjacent *No Parking* signs. A short walk leads to trouble free waterfowl observation that on a sunny February day can indicate better things to come.

### Acknowledgements

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