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A Birding Site Guide to Prince Edward County

by
Terry Sprague

Location and Access

Prince Edward County lies just off the north shore of eastern lake Ontario between Brighton, Northumberland County and Napanee, Lennox and Addington County. Prior to the construction of the Murray Canal in 1889, which severed the northwest corner of the county to connect the Bay of Quinte to Presqu'ile Bay, Prince Edward County was a peninsula. It has a total area of 100,000 hectares or 1,000 square kilometres. The population of Prince Edward County is about 22,000. The largest centre is the Town of Picton, with a population of 4,800. In the Town of Wellington and Village of Bloomfield, there are 1,000 and 750 inhabitants, respectively.

There are four main access points to the county, three of which are from Highway 401. To the west, follow Highway 33 via the Wooler Road exit to Carrying Place. At Belleville, take Highway 62 (formerly Highway 14) across

the Norris Whitney Bridge into the county, or take the Marysville exit and follow Highway 49 near the east end of the county.

Access is also possible from Highway 33 at Adolphustown via the Glenora Ferry if travelling from Kingston.

Habitat and Ornithological Significance

Much of Prince Edward County is composed of shallow soils which result in an extensive hectareage of untilled pasture fields, ranging from barren flats to those either sparsely or densely populated with red cedar. These conditions provide excellent habitat for nesting populations of Upland Sandpipers, Grasshopper Sparrows, Savannah Sparrows, and Field Sparrows, as well as Clay-colored Sparrows in specific areas.

Elsewhere there is a mixed variety of habitat, from cultivated fields, hardwood forests and extensive marshlands to scrub cover consisting of field invasions

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by hawthorn, apple, sumac, prickly ash, dogwood, alder and low-growing varieties of willow.

Because of its location in Lake Ontario, Prince Edward County is a natural "catch basin" for migratory birds during both spring and fall migrations. Much ornithological work has been done in the area, from small private studies on individual species or families to more concerted efforts such as the 1930 faunal survey conducted by staff members of the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto (Snyder 1941). In more recent years, two publications, Sprague (1969) and the revised edition of the same name (Sprague and Weir 1984) have been made available to enlighten birders of the status of each of the 318 species that has occurred in the county.

Where to Bird

The description of some of the choice birding spots in the area is presented in the form of a tour, commencing on Highway 33 in the northwest portion of the county and exiting the county via Highway 62 at Belleville (Figure 1). The tour is given in a hypothetical sense only, as it would require several days of birding to cover all of the areas described. One must also be conscious of the fact that beyond the major centres of Wellington, Picton and Bloomfield, service stations may be few and far between. Motel accommodations are available in several locations including Lake-on-the-Mountain, West Lake, Bloomfield, Wellington and Picton. In addition, there are numerous private campgrounds and "Bed and Breakfast"

establishments. Sandbanks Provincial Park offers the only provincial park camping facilities in the county.

Consecon

Commencing at the northwest corner, proceed south on Highway 33 to the Village of Consecon. Take County Road 29 for 6 km around the Stinson Block. The south and west roads are particularly productive during the winter months, as they not only follow the Lake Ontario shoreline where winter ducks may be found, but pass through a dense hardwood forest with an intermixing of mature white cedar. Good birding can be had right from the roadside, but by exploring the interior, wintering populations of Yellow-rumped Warblers, American Robins and White-throated Sparrows can often be found in the tangles. Great Horned Owls, numerous woodpeckers, including Pileated, and other typical winter birds also frequent this woodlot. An open silage pit nestled amongst white cedars often harbour Dark-eyed Juncos, American Tree Sparrows and Mourning Doves.

Before crossing the fence, however, one must seek permission from the owner, McRae Danford, whose farm house, barns and silos are conspicuously located on a sideroad just south of the woods. The road past the Danford home eventually ends at the Lake Ontario shoreline and the extreme north end of North Beach Provincial Park. This road is not ploughed in the winter, but if it is a mild winter, both dabbler and diving ducks can often be found in adjacent North Bay. Scoters,

Oldsquaws, Common Goldeneyes, Common Loons and Double-crested Cormorants can be found on the lake, depending on the season. The latter species nests on Scotch Bonnet Island, which appears only as a small lighthouse on the distant horizon.

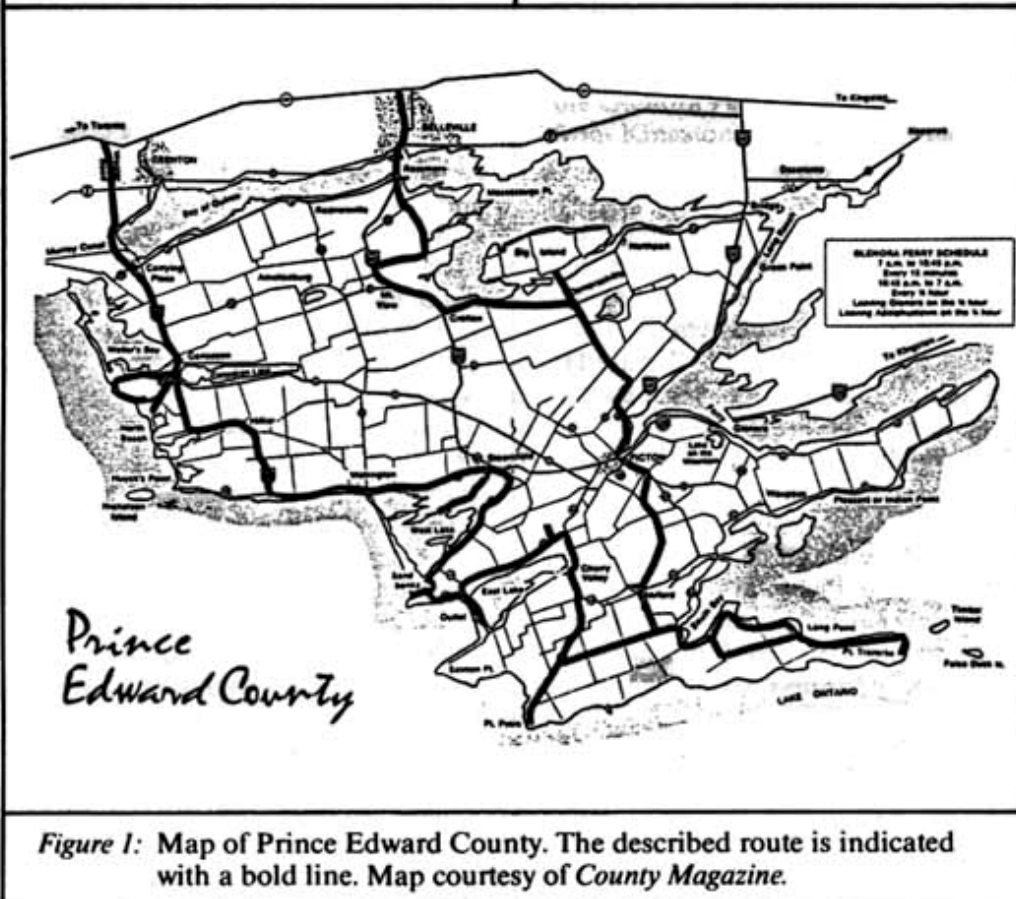
Wellington

Returning to Consecon, continue south on Highway 33 to the Town of Wellington, turn right at the L.C.B.O. building and stop at the wharf. Here, West Lake empties into Lake Ontario and during early winter much of the water near the wharf remains open. This provides good viewing for ducks. It is even more spectacular in spring when

the open water will be covered with migrant ducks. All three merganser species can be depended on, as well as Canada Geese, both diving and dabbling ducks, and Tundra Swans.

This is also the extreme northwest end of Sandbanks Provincial Park, the largest freshwater sand dune bar system in the world. The sand pit is 8 km in length and a walk down the beach will yield shorebirds in season, especially Ruddy Turnstones. Bank Swallows nest in the adjacent sand dunes.

Because of its length, it would be wise to arrange for a vehicle to be waiting in the parking lot at the far end. Although there is an inlet



separating the sand spit from the mainland at Wellington, the channel is narrow and can easily be crossed by either swimming or using a canoe.

Proceed east out of Wellington on Highway 33 to the Village of Bloomfield. Just a hundred metres or so past the Bloomfield sign there is a well marked sideroad to the south leading to Wesley Acres Church Camp. This dead end road passes through an area of marsh in West Lake where bitterns, rails, American Coots, Common Moorhens and Great Blue Herons can often be seen from the road. Dabbling ducks are common during migration and the usual smaller marsh birds can also be found.

Returning to Bloomfield, turn right at the Becker's Store and follow Highway 62-33 a short distance and turn right again at the sign pointing toward Sandbanks Provincial Park. Follow County Road 12 for 8 km and turn right at the Isaiah Tubbs Resort (one of several overnight accommodations in the county). This road leads to Sheba's Island (Tubbs Island on some maps). The causeway leading to the island passes over a marshland similar to the sideroad at Bloomfield and where the same species of birds may be found.

Sandbanks Provincial Park

Returning to County Road 12, follow it to the West Lake Sector of Sandbanks Provincial Park. Do not turn on County Road 18 at the second Sandbanks sign, as this directs summer traffic to the Administration Office and main campgrounds at Sandbank's East Lake Sector, an area which we will visit later. Instead, follow County

Road 12 to the first sharp corner just beyond the last private campground on the right, and turn into the small parking lot. Follow the gravel path (actually an old access road) at the base of the dune for a short walking distance until it leads to an open area. This section of the dunes was mined more than a decade ago by the Lake Ontario Cement Company near Picton. The removal of sand left behind a flooded panne which attracts numerous shorebird species during spring and fall migrations. Dowitchers, yellowlegs and Spotted Sandpipers are common. When water levels are sufficiently high Mallards and Blue-winged Teal may be seen. Scan the distant dunes, as Bank Swallows nest in the area.

Follow County Road 12 through the wooded area of the park to the four-way stop. Turn right and enter the Main Gate of the West Lake Sector. The abundance of pines makes this an excellent area in which to find chickadees and kinglets. In fact, it was here that Prince Edward County's first nesting record of a Ruby-crowned Kinglet was obtained in 1976. The parking lot is situated adjacent to an extensive panne area where ducks, shorebirds and other waterbirds may be observed in season. As the water recedes in late spring, the moist area supports a nesting population of Mallards, Blue-winged Teal, Common Snipe, Savannah and Field Sparrows.

Leaving the West Lake Sector, turn right again at the four-way stop and follow the dead end road to West Point, a distance of 1.5 km. At the burned ruins of the former Lakeshore Lodge one has a

panoramic view of the 8 km sandspit running toward Wellington. In season, numerous species of shorebirds may be found along the beach as well as large aggregations of Ring-billed Gulls, which also mill about in neighbouring fields. Continuing toward West Point the road deteriorates rapidly. The low bushes and trees which flank the road are excellent for warblers and other songbirds during migration. At West Point the road ends and from this vantage point diving ducks and Common Loons may be found during migration. A large luxury hotel and resort complex is planned for the entire West Point peninsula, so the area may be closed to traffic in future while construction takes place. At the moment, however, the plans have been put on hold until some legal problems have been worked out. Until construction takes place, the point is open to the public.

Returning to the four-way stop, turn right again and continue along County Road 12, which follows the lakeshore, and look for ducks, gulls and waterbirds along the way. Red-throated Loons sometimes occur along this stretch of water.

Approaching County Road 18, turn right at the stop sign and follow into Sandbanks Provincial Park's East Lake Sector (formerly Outlet Park). If one is expecting to camp here it is best to reserve ahead, as this is Ontario's second busiest park. There are, however, numerous private campgrounds adjacent to the park and a visit to the park's Information Centre, located just inside the Main Gate, can offer current information on

available accommodation. Park naturalists are also on hand at the Information Centre from May until October to provide visitors with an update on the birds in the park. The mixed habitat appeals to a wide variety of birds. Mourning Doves, Northern Cardinals, Northern Orioles, Great Crested Flycatchers, House Wrens, Red-eyed and Warbling Vireos can be depended on in the park. The mouth of the Outlet River is very favourable in the autumn, with yellowlegs, dowitchers, Sanderlings, and Semipalmated Sandpipers the most common shorebirds that appear. It is also a favourite loafing area in the fall for gulls and terns.

Beaver Meadow Wildlife Management Area

Leaving Sandbanks Provincial Park, go west on County Road 18, past the County Road 12 junction which we came out on earlier, and turn right on County Road 11, just past the Parkside Place Convenience Store and gas bar. Follow this road for about 8 km and watch for the Beaver Meadow Wildlife Management Area on the left. Take the access road past the first parking lot and park at the second lot near the trail sign. The walking trail goes through a wooded swamp which in more recent years has been flooded by beaver. The dead trees provide excellent habitat for Northern Flickers, Red-headed Woodpeckers and Great Crested Flycatchers. Tree Swallows, which nest in the hollow tree limbs, may be seen coursing to and fro over the open areas. Wood Ducks nest in the many nest boxes that have been erected for this species, and other species of dabbling

ducks may be found here during migration. At the end of the trail scan the trees to the left for a heronry used by Great Blue Herons. This is but one of six active heronries in the county.

Point Petre

Leaving Beaver Meadow, follow County Road 11 to the stop sign and turn right on County Road 10, which leads to Cherry Valley. Watch carefully for the intersection of 10 & 18, where 10 curves sharply to the left and up a small grade. Follow County Road 10 for about 2 km to County Road 24. This road leads to Point Petre. Entering the Point Petre Recreational Area there is a woodlot and picnic area which overlooks Soup Harbour. This area provides good viewing for waterfowl. Large concentrations of hawks and Turkey Vultures have been noted in the fall at Point Petre, as well as Bald Eagles on occasion. This area still needs more coverage, but the potential of the area is being recognized by such groups as the Quinte Field Naturalists, whose members are just now starting to explore this peninsula.

Prince Edward Point

To reach Prince Edward Point, proceed back on County Road 24, turn right and drive east on the Royal Street sideroad. This sideroad comes out on County Road 9. At this point it might be a good idea to check your fuel gauge and turn left and follow County Road 9 north to Milford, as there are no service stations south beyond Milford. From Milford, follow County Road 9 south to the stop sign at the Mariner's

Memorial Park and Lighthouse. Turn right and continue along County Road 9 toward Prince Edward Point for 3.6 km. At this point one can take an alternative route to Prince Edward Point by following Rose's Lane. Near the two sycamore trees on the right check the fields of low cedars. Clay-colored Sparrows are generally here in the summer. The road then crosses a creek and passes a wooded area (check for waterbirds and passerines) before turning left and heading back to County Road 9. Along the way check the neglected pastures for hawks and Grasshopper Sparrows, which are fairly common. Yellow Rails are fairly regular but a very rare spring visitor in the weedy areas along this road. Sharp-tailed Grouse are present but rarely seen.

Upon entering the Prince Edward Point National Wildlife Area check the woods on either side for migrants. Prince Edward Point is a major staging area in spring and autumn for migrating birds. The geographical features of the point cause birds to concentrate in very large numbers. There is no other location on the Canadian side of Lake Ontario where the density and abundance of migrants are known to compare with those at Prince Edward Point.

Heading toward Point Traverse, the woods here often seethe with spring migrants such as warblers, flycatchers and vireos. Red-headed Woodpeckers and Blue-gray Gnatcatchers can usually be found along this stretch of road. The adjacent open fields host flocks of Bobolinks, Red-winged Blackbirds and swallows. The waters of Prince Edward Bay and Lake Ontario

provide rich feeding areas for migrating waterfowl. During autumn migrations, scaup numbering 100,000+ will be common in October and November. These will be augmented by large numbers of Horned Grebes, goldeneyes, Buffleheads, Oldsquaws, Black, Surf, and White-winged Scoters, Common and Red-breasted Mergansers, and loons.

The shorelines are not suitable for large concentrations of shorebirds, and there is a shortage of suitable habitat for migrant waders due to habitat succession; however, all common species can usually be found. The dry, grassy fields provide feeding areas for Upland Sandpipers, Black-bellied Plovers, Whimbrels and Buff-breasted Sandpipers.

The road curves at Point Traverse and heads towards the Long Point Harbour and Prince Edward Point proper. The small, swampy woodland on either side of the harbour is productive during periods of migration.

The prevailing WNW winds tend to sweep migrant raptors from the mainland areas of the county toward the east along the shoreline leading to Prince Edward Point. Hawk flights can be spectacular, as the raptors change direction to move west again to avoid being swept over Lake Ontario. Hawk numbers during fall often number a few thousand per day.

Night banding has shown that Prince Edward Point is a major point of concentration for migrating owls, particularly the Northern Saw-whet Owl. This point is unequalled in North America for numbers of this species. Over 4,000 Northern Saw-



Upland Sandpiper, Prince Edward Point, June 1980 / photo by R.D. McRae.

whet Owls have been banded since operations began in 1975. During this time, Screech and Long-eared Owls also move through.

Milford

Leaving the Prince Edward Point National Wildlife Area, proceed back along County Road 9 to the Village of Milford. At the T-junction in Milford turn right and drive across the bridge and then take the first left. This is the Old Milford Road, which winds its way through mixed habitat and comes out on County Road 8 leading into

Picton. Just past the first set of woods at the township dump (5 km) the road comes out into an open area. This is one of the more dependable areas in the county for nesting Upland Sandpipers. They can usually be found perching on the utility poles or seen in the open fields on either side of the road. Check the various swampy wooded areas that this road passes through, as both migrants and resident birds may be found.

Picton

At County Road 8, turn left and head into Picton. Just on the outskirts of Picton lies the Macaulay Mountain Conservation Area on the left. Of some interest is Bird House City, which flanks the entrance to the conservation area. The 90 or so detailed reproductions of historic buildings in the county have been erected to resemble a small city complete with streets and avenues. There is even a McDonald's Restaurant, although it must be noted that it is the only McDonald's Restaurant to be found in the county! While the ambitious project has failed to meet its goal of attracting many Purple Martins, the detailed miniatures are worth a stop.

At the base of Macaulay Mountain is the start of several kilometres of interconnecting walking trails which lead through a mixed topography of lowlands, escarpment and plateau. The wide diversity of habitat will yield Pileated Woodpecker, Winter Wren, Ovenbird, Eastern Wood-Pewee, Northern Cardinal, Black-capped Chickadee and Red-eyed Vireo. The upper plateau area,

which can be reached by taking any one of the trails up the escarpment, has been known to host a small number of Clay-colored Sparrows.

Big Island Marsh

Follow County Road 8 into Picton via Union Street and turn left on Bridge Street at the Tip of the Bay Motel. Turn right on Highway 49 at the top of the hill and proceed north out of Picton. Just past the railroad tracks turn left on County Road 6 and then right on County Road 5 and follow it for about 10 km to the Village of Demorestville. Turn right at the stop sign and follow County Road 5 down the steep hill for 1.5 km. Turn left and follow the causeway which leads to Big Island. The Big Island Marsh, which lies on either side of the causeway, is spectacular in the early spring for migrating marsh birds, as the air is filled with the songs of Common Snipe, Soras, Virginia Rails, American Bitterns, Marsh Wrens, and Swamp Sparrows. Tundra Swans are regular in spring in the more open areas of the marsh.

In 1986 a co-operative project among Ducks Unlimited, the Prince Edward Region Conservation Authority and the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources was initiated to create a number of interconnecting channels in an effort to improve the habitat for nesting waterfowl. The east marsh is now completed and the west side is due for completion in 1987. The channels provide attractive canoe routes that can give an observer a close up view of some of the marsh's regular inhabitants.

Access to the marsh can be made right at the causeway. Historically, this was an area where the King Rail could be found in the 1930s. The species has since been seen here on only three occasions.

The Big Island Marsh is the major marshland in the county, extending from the eastern tip of Big Island to Huff's Island and through the eastern portion of Ameliasburgh Township, a total distance of 19 km, broken only by 2 km of open water at Muscote Bay. The Huff's Island Marsh is also very productive, with past records of Great Egret and Glossy Ibis. To reach it, follow County Road 5 back to Demorestville and turn right on County Road 14 at the top of the hill. Take this road for 10 km and turn right on Highway 62. Follow 62 for about 5 km and turn right on the Huff's Island Road.

This road crosses a small section of marsh where open conditions exist. The most profitable birding, however, is to be had on a seldom travelled road that crosses the major portion of the marsh from the island and heads north, eventually connecting up with the County Road 28 and Highway 62 near Rossmore. It must be cautioned, however, that this road is often flooded during periods of high water and great care must be exercised if a decision is made to take it.

Returning to Highway 62, which leads into Belleville, the birding tour as described is completed. Good birding can also be had on the many sideroads which interconnect throughout the county. The sideroads, county

roads and highways are generally well marked for those who wish to explore further.

More details on these and other birding sites in the county, as well as information concerning available accommodation may be obtained by contacting the author.

Appeal for Submission of Records

Visitors birding Prince Edward County are urged to submit a list of their sightings, complete with dates and locations, for the files of the author. He may be contacted at the address provided or telephone (613) 476-5072.

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