

Birding in the Rainy River Area

David H. Elder

Introduction

This is an updated version of my bird-finding guide published in *Ontario Birds* in April 1991. It will give visitors to the area nearly all the information they may need to see the local specialties, whether their stay is only for a few hours or several days. Keep in mind, however, that circumstances, time of day and just plain luck affect the outcome of a visit to Rainy River.

The area around the small community of Rainy River in extreme northwestern Ontario presents some exciting birding opportunities. A combination of geographic location, topography, climate and land uses has resulted in a definite "western" condition that is reflected in the natural history of the area. In addition, the Rainy River empties into Lake of the Woods here, and together they provide unique and interesting habitats that are very attractive to birds as breeding and migration staging areas. And where there are birds, there are birders. A good day in the Rainy River area can be incredibly rewarding; a week, unbelievable!

Scope of the Guide

Through a series of maps and written descriptions, information on what to see and where to see it is provided. Assuming that most area

visitors will arrive from the south and the east, information from Thunder Bay (very general) to Rainy River (very specific) will be given. Although the entire region is of considerable interest, the area around the town of Rainy River will be given the most attention.

GENERAL INFORMATION

Weather

Assume the weather will be variable, and prepare for it, particularly in the spring and fall. The ground is usually snow-covered by mid November and remains so until mid April. Ice will be present on Lake of the Woods until early May, but the Channel between the Sable Islands and the mainland usually opens two weeks earlier. Each year is different, of course, but the Rainy River itself is usually ice-free by the second week in April. From mid May to early September, the days can be very warm with temperatures exceeding 30° C. Afternoon birding can be an effort in these conditions. Wind can be a problem and *extreme care* should be taken when boating or canoeing on the Rainy River, Lake of the Woods and the Channel. The lake, in particular, can blow up very suddenly, so keep an eye on the wind. Winter temperatures can drop to -40° C on occasion, but usually are more pleasant.

Most of the roads in the area are gravel and can get a little muddy in rainy weather.

Insects and Ticks

Mosquitoes, black flies, deer flies, moose flies, dog flies and the infamous wood tick combine to make life interesting for the birder. With some precautions, insects and ticks need not constrain birding activities. Early mornings and late evenings will generally be bad for mosquitoes since most of the area is low-lying and there is an abundance of breeding habitat. Use a good repellent and wear light-coloured clothing, including long-sleeved shirts. Head nets can be worn but tend to restrict vision and trap heat. In the open areas during the day, mosquitoes should not be a problem. Expect them in wooded areas and marshes all the time.

Wood ticks are present in the area from early May to August, and are found everywhere except in the middle of ploughed fields. Use of a repellent, tucking pant legs in socks, and a complete tick check (body search) at the end of each day are the best precautions to take. If you find a tick attached to you, it can be removed by gently pulling it until it comes free. Ticks take some time to become firmly attached and can usually be removed with no difficulty. If one is strongly attached, you may want to consult a physician. Publicity concerning Lyme disease has made people more aware of ticks. While the possibility of infec-

tion exists, common sense and a little care will generally reduce the risk. Wearing light-coloured clothing makes any tick that finds you easier to see. After a walk in grassy or brushy areas, look over your clothing carefully and remove any ticks you find. The wood tick of the Rainy River area is small, rounded (half a centimetre or less in diameter), flat and reddish brown.

Where to Stay

Accommodation in the Rainy River area consists of motels, hotels, rental cabins and rental campsites. In the town itself, there is one motel, the Roadrunner (807-852-3296) and a couple of older hotels. Cabins or campsites can be rented at Budreau's Oak Grove Camp (807-852-3702) and Camp of the Woods (807-852-1043), both located on the Rainy River, and also at Harris Hill Lodge (807-488-1116) on Lake of the Woods. Boats and motors can be rented at both Oak Grove and Harris Hill. In addition, rides out to and back from the Sable Islands or Windy Point can be arranged. Check with the owners in advance.

Also, there is a free campground on the river in the town of Rainy River, and a Provincial Park, Lake of the Woods, on Highway 621 north of Sleeman. There are numerous motels in Baudette, Minnesota, in the United States on the south side of the Rainy River. Be prepared for the usual border crossing procedures if you decide to stay there.

Bird Specialties of the Rainy River Area

Eared Grebe: sewage ponds at Rainy River and Emo

American White Pelican: Lake of the Woods; overhead anywhere

Ruddy Duck: Rainy River sewage ponds

Bald Eagle: Lake of the Woods; Rainy River

Sharp-tailed Grouse: fields and roadsides throughout the area

Yellow Rail: the Big Marsh off Fred's Road; wet fields

Sandhill Crane: fields and roadsides throughout the area

Piping Plover: Sable Islands; Windy Point

Marbled Godwit: fields throughout the area

Wilson's Phalarope: Rainy River sewage ponds

Franklin's Gull: Lake of the Woods; Sable Islands

Red-headed Woodpecker: throughout the area

Western Kingbird: throughout the area (irregular)

Yellow-throated Vireo: aspen and oak woods

Black-billed Magpie: throughout the area

Sedge Wren: wet fields throughout the area

Connecticut Warbler: aspen groves throughout the area

Clay-colored Sparrow: brushy fields

Le Conte's Sparrow: wet meadows; hay fields

Western Meadowlark: fields throughout the area

Yellow-headed Blackbird: Rainy River; Sable Islands

Brewer's Blackbird: fields and roadsides throughout the area

The town of Rainy River has all the stores associated with a small community, and food, gas, supplies and incidentals can be purchased there. Restaurant meals are available in Rainy River, but getting an early breakfast can be a problem. There are several restaurants in Baudette, across the border.

Getting to Rainy River

Rainy River is located in the extreme southwestern corner of northwestern Ontario at the western end of Highway 11, about 1900 kilometres from Toronto. Getting there is time-consuming. If you are not keen on driving for two and a half days (at least), you can fly commercially to Thunder Bay or Fort Frances and rent a car on arrival. The drive from Thunder Bay will take about five hours. Flying to Winnipeg and renting a car to drive through southeastern Manitoba and northern Minnesota (two border crossings) is another alternative that takes about four hours.

Private Property

Most of the land in the Rainy River area is privately owned. If you encounter a "No Trespassing" sign,

respect it. Farmers in the area are getting to know birders and will usually give permission to enter their property if asked. Most birding can be done from public roads or on unposted land.

The local people are friendly, helpful and quite willing to talk to visitors about birds. Farmers in particular are quite aware of the more obvious species and can be helpful in pointing out a field visited by Sandhill Cranes or Sharp-tailed Grouse. Don't abuse the rights of the landowners. If property is posted, assume there is a good reason for the posting. Don't make things difficult for everyone by selfish or inconsiderate actions.

Maps

More detailed maps are available in the 1:50,000 National Topographical Series. These can be obtained from: The Canada Map Office, Department of Energy, Mines and Resources, 615 Booth Street, Ottawa, Ontario, K1A 0E9, or from most retail map outlets. The following sheets cover the Rainy River area: 52 D/15 and 52 D/10 (Rainy River), 52 D/16 (Arbor Vitae), and 52 D/9 (Pinewood).

Birding Areas

Area # 1: Thunder Bay to Fort Frances

This is a 350-km drive on Highway 17/11 west from Thunder Bay to Shabakwa, and then west on Highway 11 to Fort Frances. The highway passes through typical Canadian Shield country with numerous rock outcrops, lakes and boreal forest. Stop occasionally at places that catch your interest

such as Black Spruce stands, Jack Pine stands, cutovers, Black Spruce bogs and mixed aspen-conifer stands for warblers, sparrows and other boreal species.

Connecticut Warblers can be found in most of the more open Black Spruce bogs. They are easy to hear but hard to see. You *may* see a Great Gray Owl or a Spruce Grouse along the highway right-of-way. Black-backed and American Three-toed Woodpeckers are possible anywhere, but not to be expected. Spend as much time as you wish birding as you travel. Just before Fort Frances, you will cross Rainy Lake on a causeway. There are several pull-offs along the causeway that give a good view of the lake and a good chance to see a Bald Eagle.

Area # 2: Fort Frances to Rainy River

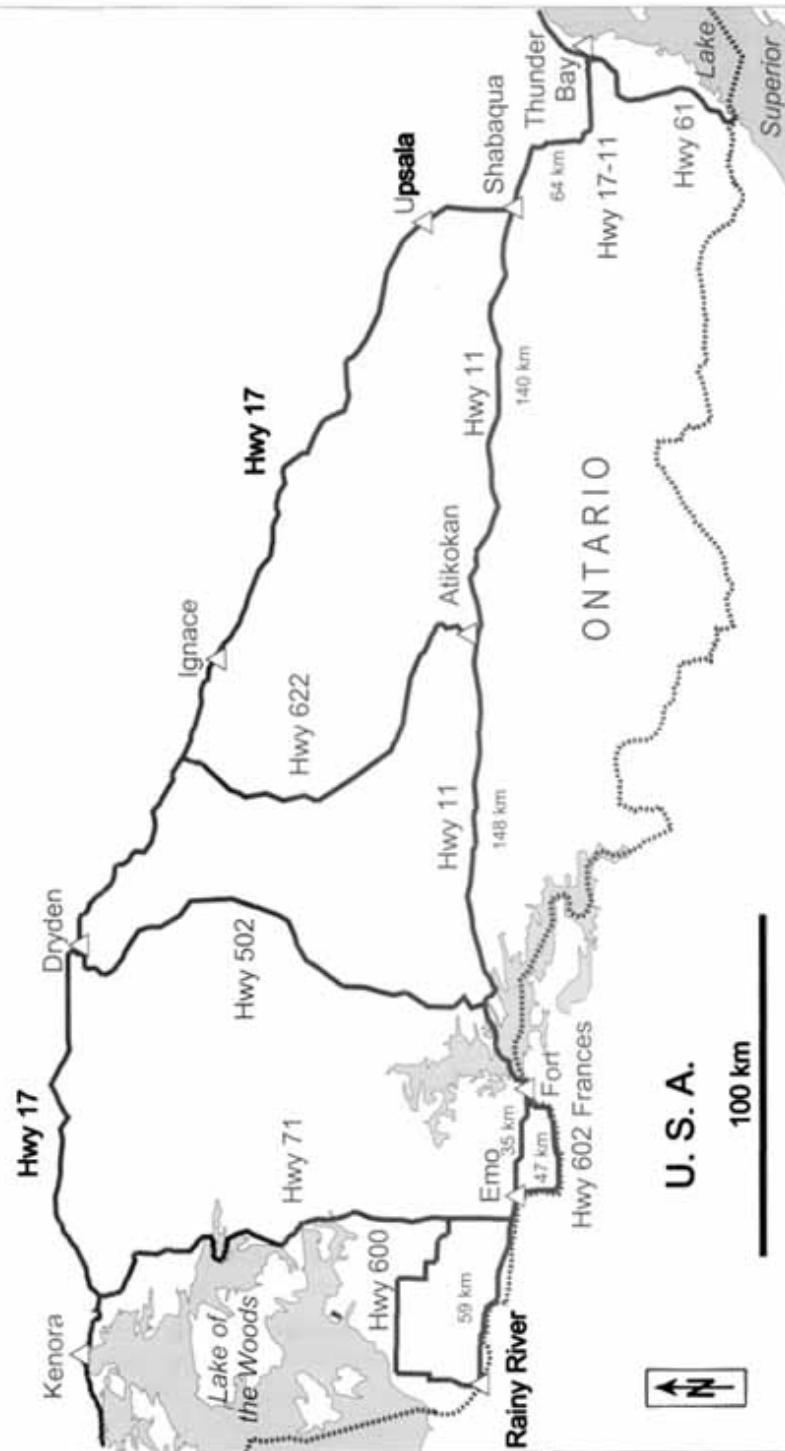
This is about a 100-km drive west on Highway 11. West of Fort Frances, the rock of the Canadian Shield is left behind. Flat country, farm fields and patches of aspen woods characterize the landscape. The change is sudden and is reflected in the birds likely to be seen. Near the west end of Fort Frances, just west of the cemetery, is a small, open, wooded park. The park overlooks the Rainy River and the pulp mills located on both shores. The river is good for waterfowl, and when low, for shorebirds. The park trees harbour Eastern Wood-Pewee, Warbling Vireo, and Baltimore Oriole, while Chimney Swifts wheel overhead. None of these are found east of Fort Frances, except rarely.

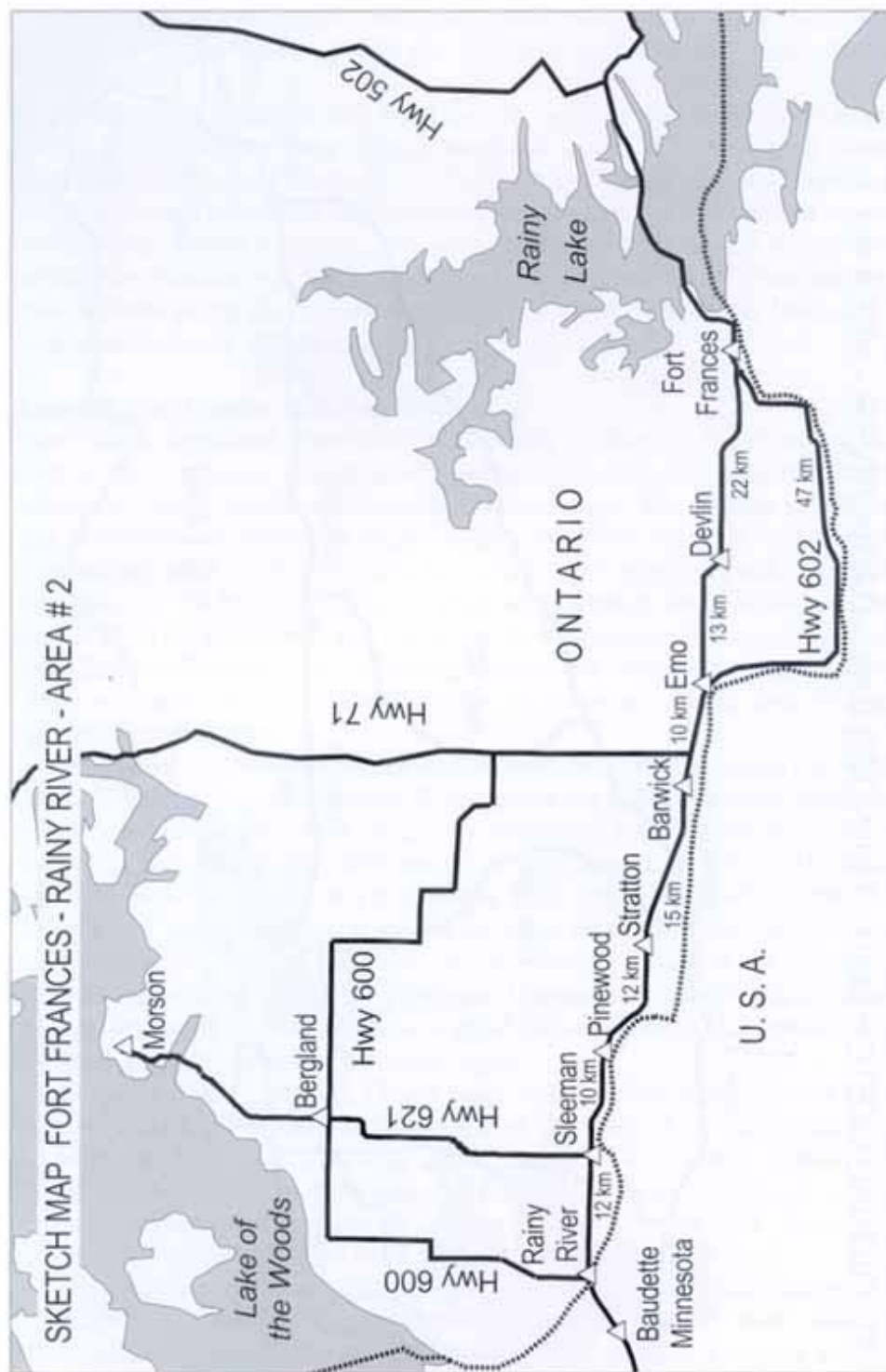
There are two alternatives for driving west from Fort Frances. One is to follow Highway 11 west to Rainy River, checking fields and other interesting spots as you go. The other alternative takes a bit longer but is much more enjoyable. Just before the "McDonald's" restaurant, turn left on Highway 602 (also called River Road) and follow it to Emo. The road follows the Rainy River and a leisurely drive will produce Western Meadowlark, Clay-colored Sparrow, Eastern Bluebird (check each one in case it is a Mountain Bluebird), Brewer's Blackbird, Northern Harrier, and usually Black-billed Magpie. This 47-kilometre drive is a good introduction to the country and the birds you can expect as you move west.

Directly across Highway 11 is a large stadium that is part of the Emo Fair Grounds. Cross the highway and follow the sides of the fair grounds to the west and then north. Straight ahead are the Emo sewage ponds. This area is excellent for waterfowl and shorebirds, and Eared Grebes are usually present. There are two ponds, one to the west of the first. Return to Highway 11, turn right (west) and continue to Rainy River.

West of Emo, you will pass through several small communities, including Barwick, Stratton, Pinewood, and Sleeman. At the west side of Pinewood, the highway crosses the Pinewood River. This is a good spot to

REGIONAL SKETCH MAP THUNDER BAY - RAINY RIVER - AREA # 1





stop and look for waterfowl and herons, and to observe the large colony of Cliff Swallows that nest under the highway bridge. The open fields on both sides of the highway can be checked for open country species as you drive or during occasional stops.

Area #3: Worthington Road #3 and Highway 11

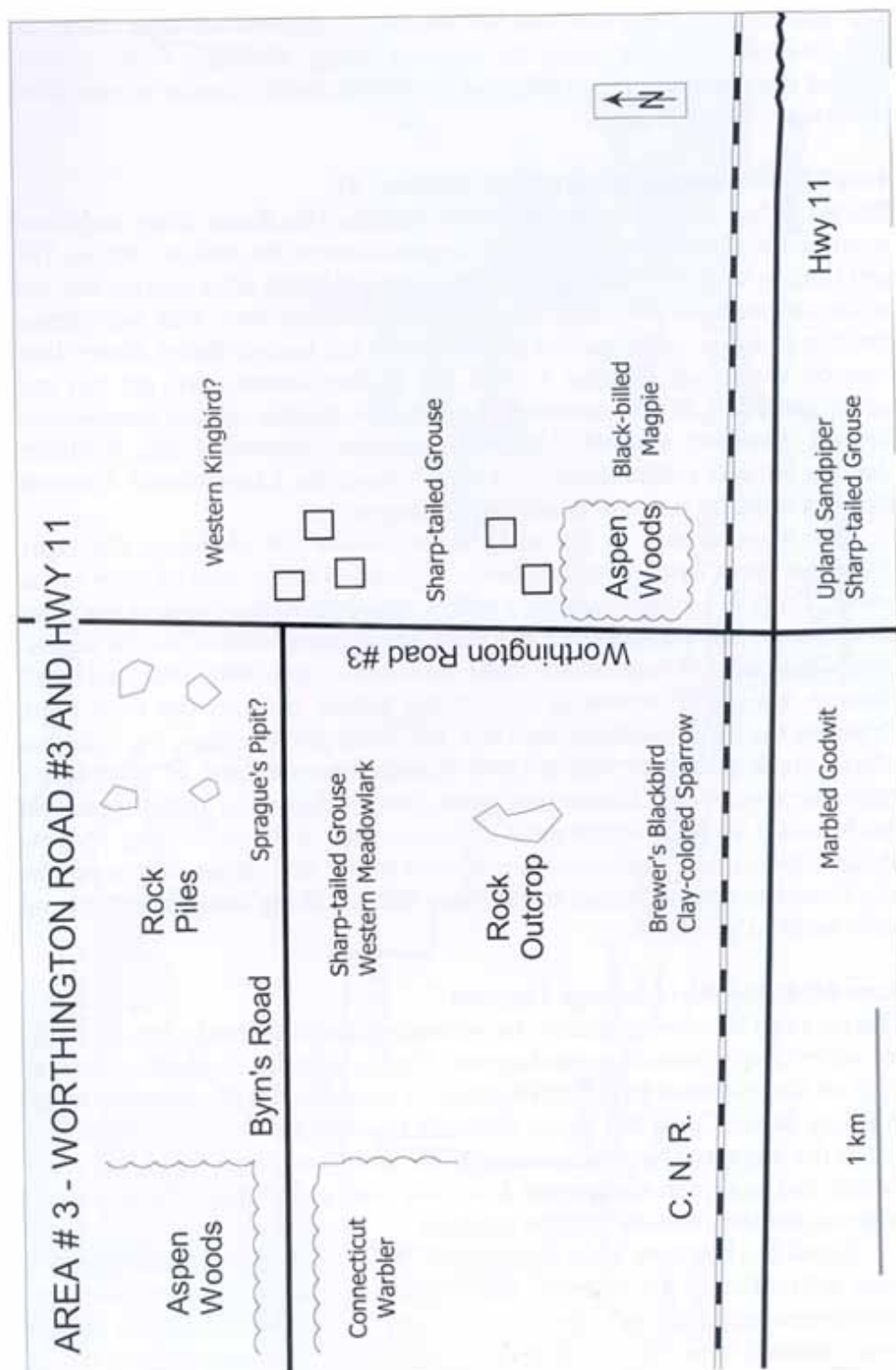
This is the first of the site specific areas described for Rainy River and it can be an exciting introduction to the bird specialties of the area as a whole. The best time to be here is during the first couple of hours after sunrise any day in the last week of May and the first two weeks of June. This well-signed junction is about 4 km west of Sleeman or 8 km east of Rainy River. Turn right on Worthington Road 3, cross the railway tracks, park, get out and watch and listen. In the surrounding fields, you will see or hear Sharp-tailed Grouse, Marbled Godwit, Upland Sandpiper, Horned Lark, Northern Harrier, Brewer's Blackbird, Le Conte's Sparrow, Clay-colored Sparrow, Western Meadowlark and Black-billed Magpie.

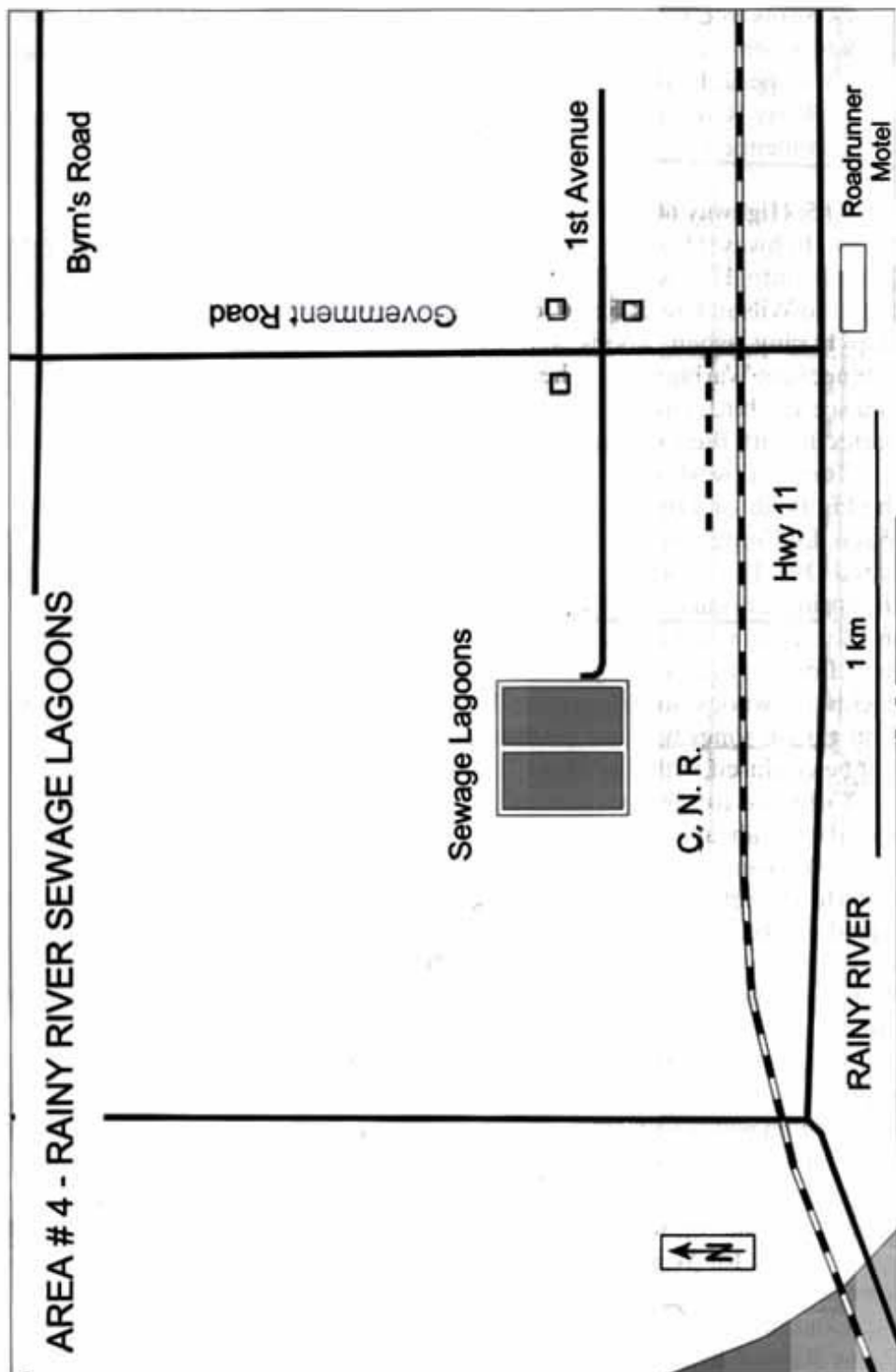
The magpies nest in the small aspen woods just ahead on the right. Watch for them flying over the fields or perched in the tops of trees in the woods. There is a magpie nest in a willow tree right by the fence at the nearest corner of the woods beside the road. Move ahead (north) to the second group of farm buildings on the right. For three years, 1987, 1988 and 1989, Western Kingbirds nested in one of the willow trees in the farm yard. Opposite the farm buildings, turn left. The short grass field on the right has several stone piles in it, and in 1990, the field was occupied by a Sprague's Pipit. The species could occur here again, but good ears are necessary to find this bird as it seems to spend most of its time high in the air, singing. Moving ahead, Connecticut Warblers have nested in the first aspen woods on the left. Continue moving ahead to Highway 600, checking fields, woodlots and farm yards as you go.

Area #4: Rainy River Sewage Lagoons

This area can be very productive for waterfowl and shorebirds depending on the water levels present in the lagoons. They are easily reached by turning right on Government Road off Highway 11 opposite the Roadrunner Motel in Rainy River. Cross the tracks and take the first drivable dirt road to the left to the lagoons. There is the usual fence and "Keep Out" signs, but entry to date has not been challenged. Use your own judgement. There are two lagoons and they should both be checked.

Eared Grebes have been observed at the lagoons each breeding season since 2001. Most of the common duck species are usually present, with several species breeding, including Ruddy Duck. In late May and early June, it is not unusual to see up to 300 Wilson's Phalaropes spinning around on the





ponds. Soras frequent the cattail edge, and good numbers of shorebirds congregate when water levels are low in the lagoons. During spring and fall migration periods, all of the regular swallow species can be seen. If you are in the Rainy River area for several days, more than one visit to the lagoons is recommended.

Area #5: Highway 600, Wilson Creek Road, and River Road Loop

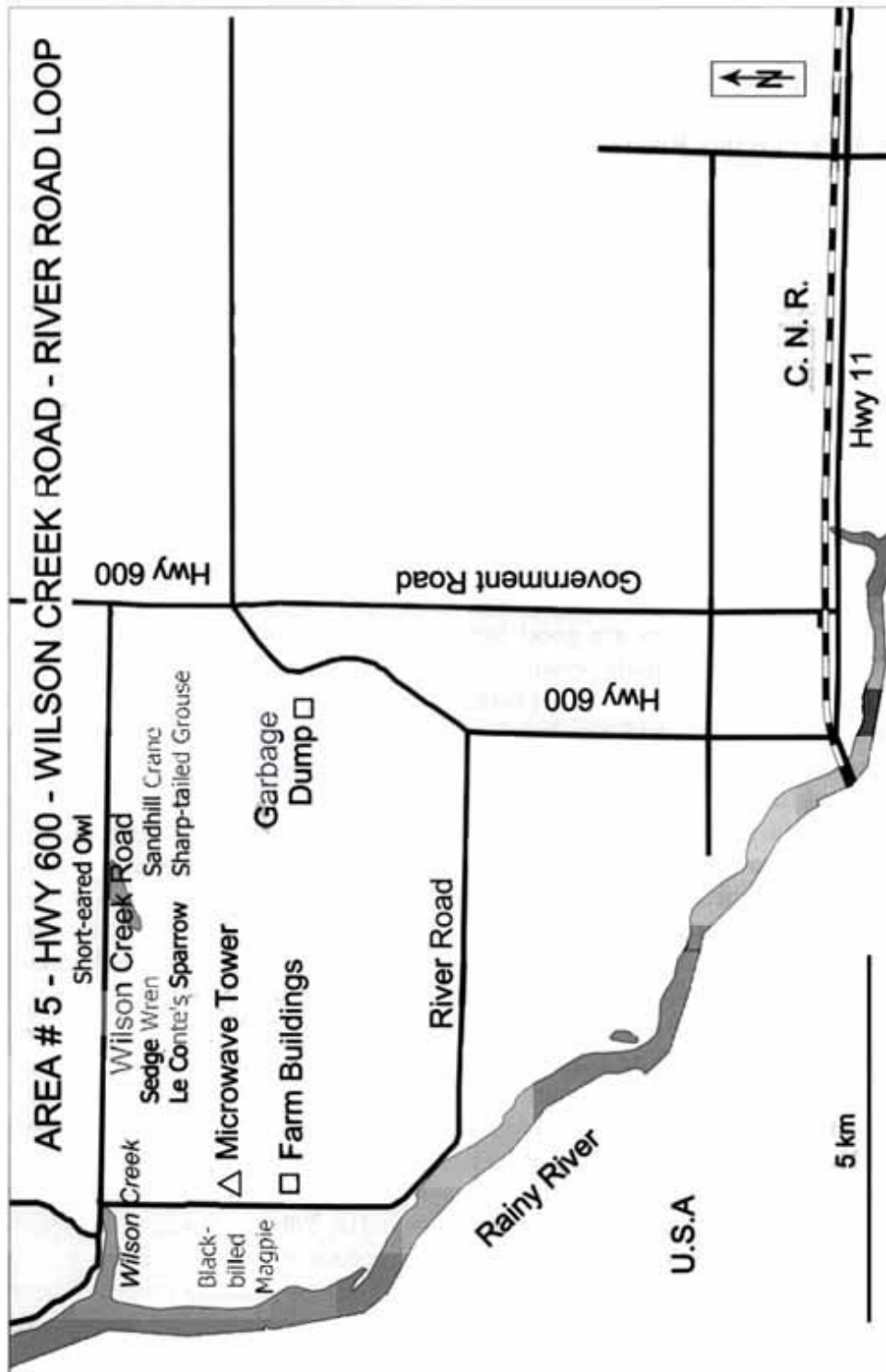
From Highway 11 at the west end of the town of Rainy River, turn right (north) onto Highway 600. Follow Highway 600 north past the garbage dump to Wilson Creek Road, on the left. As you travel along Highway 600, stop at any aspen woods and listen for the loud ringing song of the Connecticut Warbler. If you hear one, you can walk into the woods with care and see the bird. They are hard to find in the aspens; their colour blends in perfectly with their surroundings.

Turn left (west) on Wilson Creek Road and drive slowly along watching the big fields on both sides for Sandhill Crane, Sharp-tailed Grouse, Sedge Wren, Le Conte's Sparrow, Black-billed Magpie and, in the evenings, Short-eared Owl. This is one of the best areas to find Sandhill Cranes, especially in the spring and early summer. Even though cranes are large birds, they blend in extremely well with the ploughed fields and the vegetation of early summer. Look carefully. As you near the western end of the road, check the deciduous woods on either side; Wood Thrushes live in them. Brush up on your thrush songs because Hermit Thrush is quite common in the area and can be confused with the Wood Thrush at a distance.

Continue to the intersection with River Road (to the left and straight ahead). Go ahead, past the metal building and the grey house on the right, to the Wilson Creek culvert crossing. Check both sides of the creek for waterfowl, grebes, herons and landbirds in the surrounding oaks. Continue ahead on River Road and take the next road on the left which leads past some houses and ends where Wilson Creek flows into the Rainy River. Waterfowl and American White Pelicans like this area, and the woods are great for landbirds.

Return to the Wilson Creek culvert and follow River Road south. (If you go straight ahead, you will be on Wilson Creek Road again.) Ahead on the left, you will see a tall microwave tower. Just south of the tower are some farm buildings and some tall spruce trees. Black-billed Magpies nest here and can usually be seen after a short wait. The fields around the microwave tower are good for Sandhill Crane and Sharp-tailed Grouse. It is also a good spot to look for Western Kingbird. In 2001, a pair built their nest on the tower.

Continue to the south until the road swings to the left and follows the Rainy River. Check the reed beds in the river for Yellow-headed Blackbird,



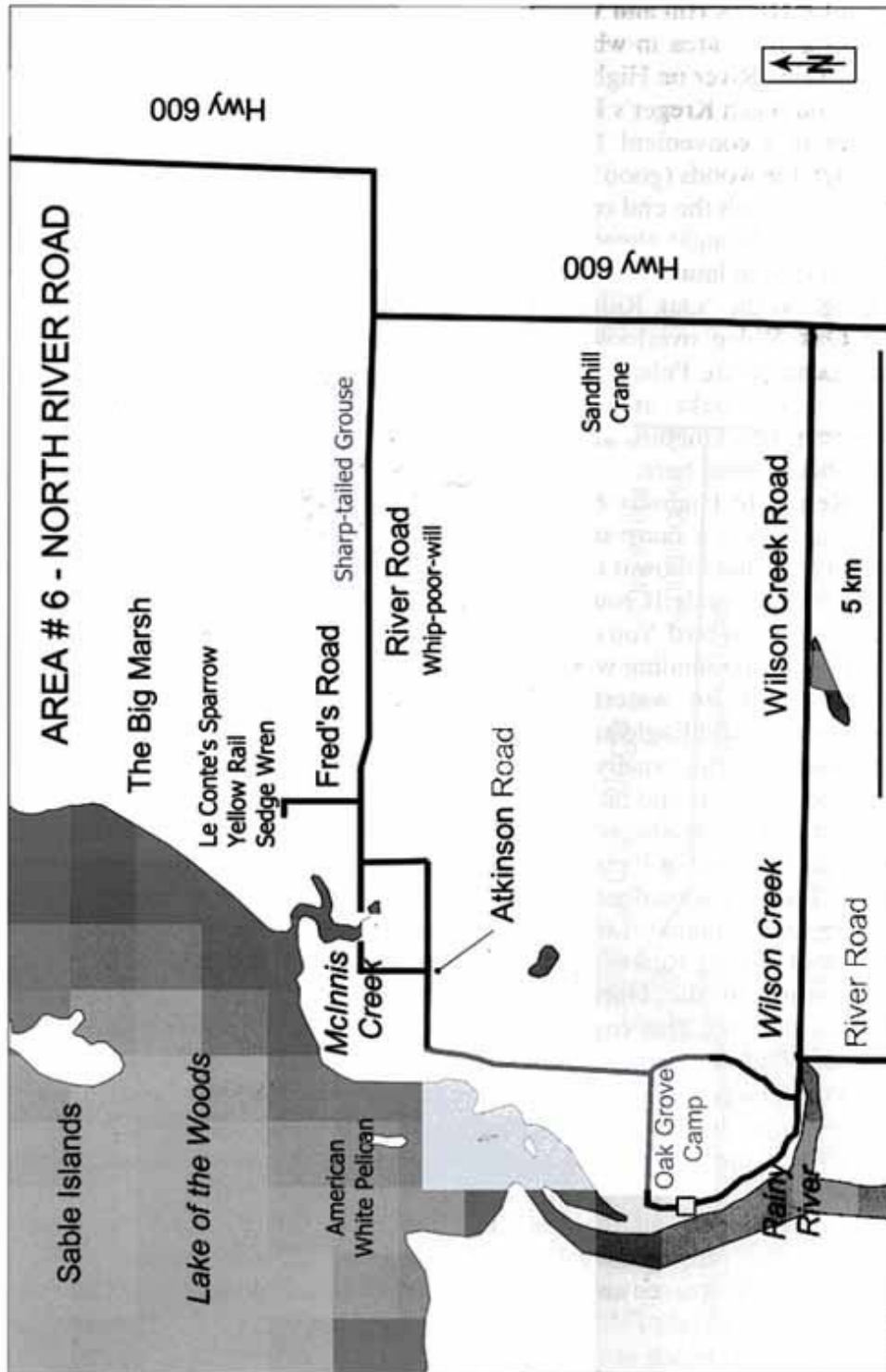
waterfowl, American White Pelican, gulls, grebes and swallows. The oak woods and the small ponds near the residences along the road are excellent for Yellow-throated Vireo and other landbirds. Follow River Road east to Highway 600, checking the fields as you go; then turn right and you will soon be back in Rainy River.

Area #6: North River Road

Starting at the Wilson Creek culvert, go north along River Road to the sign and road leading to Budreau's Oak Grove Camp on the left. Take this road and check the woods on both sides for warblers, flycatchers, sparrows and Scarlet Tanagers. Oak Grove Camp is a beautiful spot set in a stand of Bur and Red Oaks on the Rainy River. The place usually abounds with birds. It's a great place to stay in a cabin, but stop in the office first and ask if you can do some birding if you are just visiting; there should be no problem. Blue-gray Gnatcatchers have been seen here several times, as have Western Tanagers. Spend some time on the river bank as waterfowl, gulls, terns and American White Pelicans are constantly flying by. Both Western and Eared Grebes have been on the river several times. Return to River Road, turn left and proceed northward. Continue on until you cross McInnis Creek. The big trees near the houses are good for Red-headed Woodpecker. The culvert under the road is usually occupied by a large colony of Cliff Swallows.

After a left turn and a right turn, watch for Fred's Road on the left. Take this road to its end and turn left for a few car lengths and park; don't block access to the field on your right. In that field, you will notice a single tree. Beyond the tree is the south end of the Big Marsh. The marsh is the best place in the area to look for Yellow Rails. Check the stand of phragmites for Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow and watch and listen for Sandhill Cranes. The best time to check for rails is in the evening. The marsh is wet; you will need rubber boots or runners, and the mosquitoes will be bad. Walk out into the marsh and listen for the "tick-tick, tick-tick" calls of the rails. Good luck in seeing one! Le Conte's Sparrows and Sedge Wrens are here in good numbers also. Walking in the marsh is very strenuous. Take a flashlight with you if you stay after dark so you can find your way back to your car.

Return to River Road, turn left (east) and follow it to Highway 600. If it is after dark, stop from time to time to listen for Whip-poor-wills and owls. At Highway 600, turn right (south) and return to Rainy River. The big fields on the right are good for cranes, grouse and Short-eared Owls (in the evening). Check any farm yard that has cattle; Yellow-headed Blackbirds like manure piles. The vast Tamarack and spruce bog on the left, north of Wilson Creek Road, is almost inaccessible, but for birders made of stern stuff, it could be home to some interesting species.



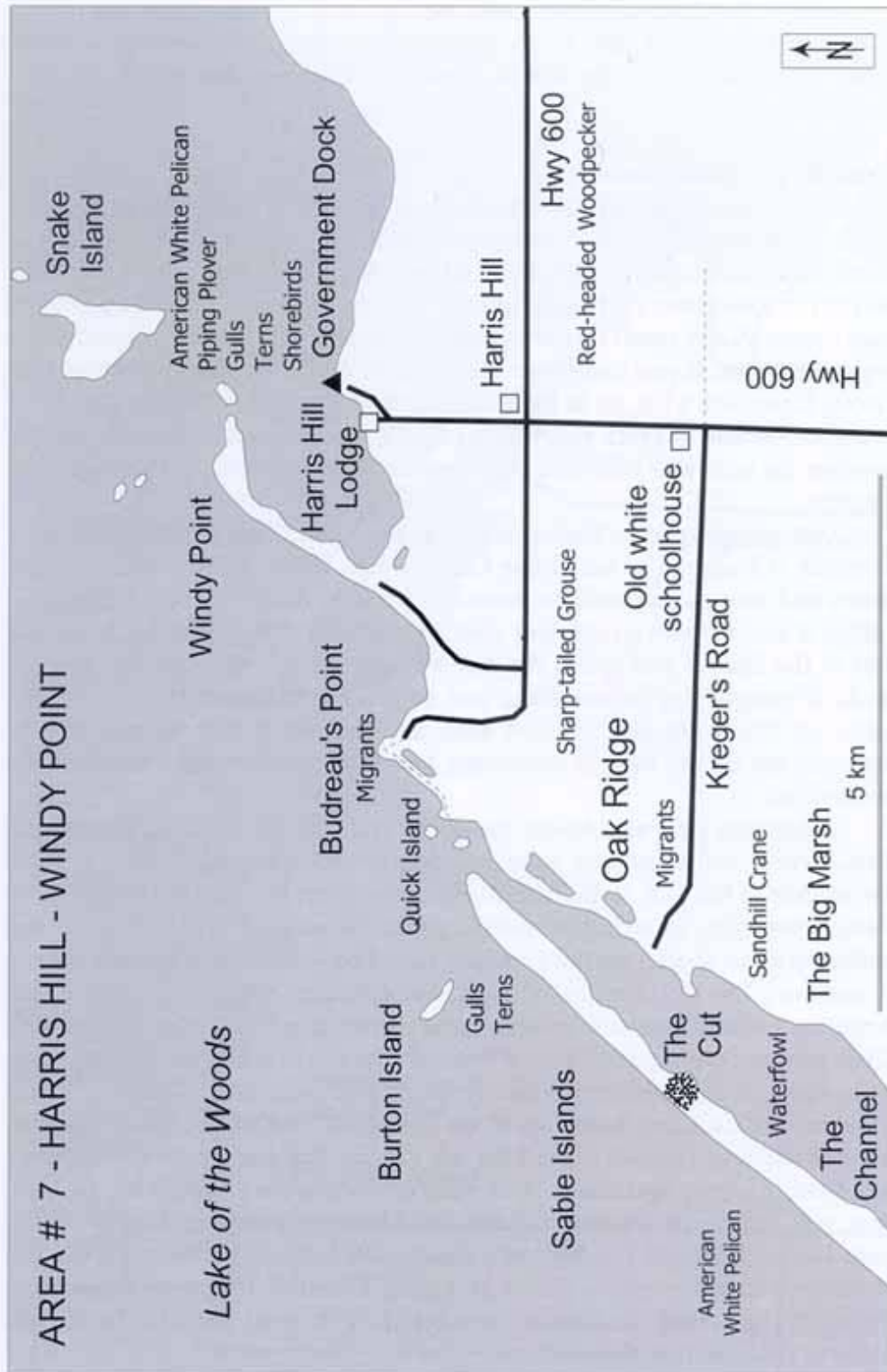
Area #7: Harris Hill and Windy Point

This is a good area in which to spend a lot of time. Again, proceed north from Rainy River on Highway 600 past River Road and Wilson Creek Road until you reach Kreger's Road on the left. An old white schoolhouse on the corner is a convenient landmark. Turn left (west) and follow the road through the woods (good for landbirds), past some fields (check for cranes), until you reach the end on the shore of "The Channel". To the south is the Big Marsh. Straight ahead across the Channel are the Sable Islands. This is a good spot to launch a boat or canoe if you want to go out to the Sables. To the right is the "Oak Ridge" that gives an excellent view of the area. From the Oak Ridge overlooking the Channel and the main lake, watch for American White Pelican, Franklin's Gull, terns, waterfowl, shorebirds and raptors. The oaks around you are excellent for migrating landbirds. Northern Mockingbird and Red-bellied Woodpecker are two rarities that have been found here.

Return to Highway 600 and turn left (north) to Harris Hill. Here the highway makes a sharp turn to the right. Instead, go straight ahead on the gravel road and follow it to Harris Hill Lodge and the Government Dock on Lake of the Woods. If you ask, the lodge owners will let you go down to the water's edge to bird. You can see the same area from the Government Dock. Check the surrounding woods for landbirds and look over the lake toward Windy Point for waterfowl, American White Pelican, Double-crested Cormorant, Bald Eagle and Great Blue Heron. Windy Point is worth a visit, and boat rides can usually be arranged at the lodge for a reasonable fee. Ask to be dropped off and picked up a couple of hours later. The point is excellent for gulls, terns, shorebirds and American White Pelican, and is often frequented by a pair of Piping Plovers. If you see the plovers, give them lots of room. They occasionally try to breed here and should not be disturbed. The cattails and phragmites on the Windy Bay side of the point contain a large colony of nesting Red-winged and Yellow-headed Blackbirds.

Return to the Harris Hill corner and turn right (west) towards Budreau's Point. This road leads through an interesting woods and to the base of Windy Point and Budreau's Point. The first road to the right (north) leads to some private cottages at the base of Windy Point. The extensive cattail stands are home to both Yellow-headed Blackbird and Marsh Wren. Do not go near the cottages unless you see someone there and can ask permission.

Continuing ahead, the road ends on a rocky ridge at a gate near some cottages. Park outside the gate, not blocking the road. Walk past the gate and the cottages. If you see anyone at the cottages, say hello and explain that you are birding. From the ridge, you can walk ahead to Budreau's Point on a trail from the small beach at the bottom of the ridge. The big trees on the point



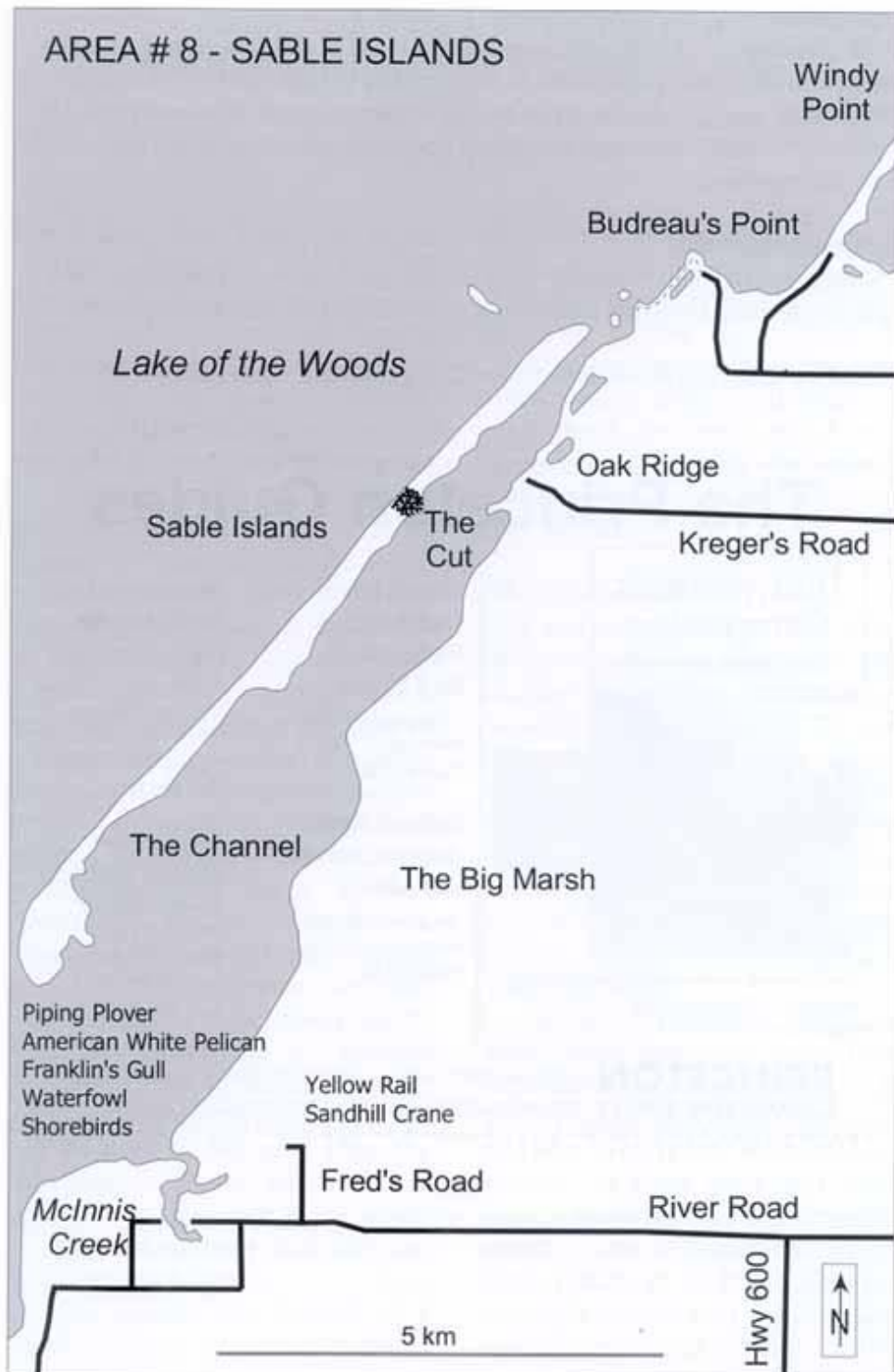
are great for landbirds, and the rocks on the far side of the point are attractive to waterfowl and gulls. Be careful on the trail because there is an abundance of Poison Ivy in the woods. Return to Highway 600 and go back to Rainy River.

Area #8: The Sable Islands

These sand barrier islands at the mouth of the Rainy River are like a magnet to birds. The islands have a total length of about 9.5 km and consist of a south island and a north island, joined by a sand bar (The Cut) that is high and dry in low-water years and covered with up to two feet of water in high-water years. A day spent on the islands can be very interesting. Getting there is the hard part. If you have your own boat or canoe, you can launch at Oak Grove Camp for a fee, or at the Oak Ridge at the end of Kreger's Road or at the Government Dock near Harris Hill Lodge, for free. *Always watch the weather* on both the lake and the Channel as conditions can change very quickly.

Arrangements for a boat ride out to the Sables and a later pickup can be made at Budreau's Oak Grove Camp and at Harris Hill Lodge, for a fee. Boats and motors can also be rented at Oak Grove Camp and Harris Hill Lodge if you wish to go on your own. You can be dropped off at the south end of the islands and spend the day walking the length of the islands and back, or simply stay in one place and be picked up later. The best birding areas are the south end, the Cut area, and the north end. No matter how long you are on the islands, make sure you have ample food, water and sun protection.

Depending on water levels, the south end has extensive sand and mud flats. Expect any shorebird, tern, gull or waterfowl. Piping Plovers nest on the islands in the U.S. to the south and quite often fly over to the Sables to feed. If you plan to walk the islands, go on the outside (the lake side) and make periodic checks on the Channel side. The outside beaches are easiest to walk on. The Cut, if exposed, is used as a loafing area by gulls, terns and American White Pelicans. In some years, there are hundreds of Franklin's Gulls present; other years there few if any. The north end is also favoured by gulls, shorebirds, American White Pelicans and waterfowl. If you are short on time, two or three hours spent on the south end of the islands will be most rewarding. Instead of walking the islands, you can travel the Channel in a boat or canoe and check both sides of the islands as you wish. In addition, you can check the shore of the Big Marsh and also the stands of bulrush in the Channel for Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow. Western Grebes have been seen at various places along the Channel. If you encounter any Piping Plovers along the islands, give them lots of room. This may be the last place in Ontario that they nest.



Conclusion

With any degree of luck and cooperation from both the weather and the birds, you will have good looks at most of the special birds of the Rainy River area, and good chances of seeing what you want. Not every road, field and woodlot has been described and exploration on your own could turn up anything.

Acknowledgements

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David H. Elder, 23 Birch Road, Box 252, Atikokan, Ontario P0T 1C0

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