

ONTARIO WINTER BIRDING WEEKEND

January 16-18, 2016

Trip report & photos by Adrian Binns



Day 1 / January 16 - Our DVOC Martin Luther King winter weekend birding trip to Ontario, Canada began at the bleary-eyed hour of 4am. Our group of 11 (*left to right*) - Patty Rehn, Deidre Asbjorn, Debbie Beer, Steve Mattan, Becky Laboy, Edie Parnum, Karmela Moneta, Barbara and Philip Stollsteimer and Butch Lishman - met at the Quakertown rest stop and piled into the van for the long drive to north.

Most journeys to the Canadian border are uneventful but it wouldn't be a birding trip without adventures to recount! Our first occurred early morning, when Patty misplaced her glasses at our breakfast stop. She realized it just as we were pulling away from McDonald's. We stopped for her to search the van, car park and bathroom without luck. Following the second pass through inside MickeyD's she came out holding a bag. It was Barbara's hand bag, with passport inside! Barbara was so lucky that Patty misplaced her glasses.....which were in the van all along!

McDonald's was also the site of our first trip bird - American Crow! Continuing up Rte 81, we noted numerous Red-tailed Hawks, a flock of Cedar Waxwings, and a beautiful Rough-legged Hawk that posed nicely on a tree in the median.

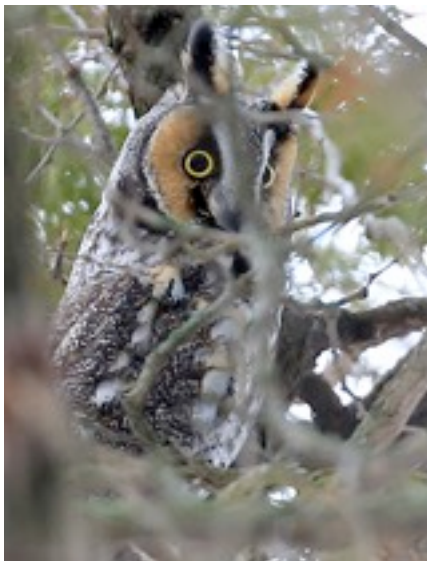
The border crossing into Canada provided a welcomed chance to use restrooms while customs staff reviewed our passports....a short delay while there was a question about outstanding library books - Debbie! Skies were cloudy, but no precipitation, and we were soon on our way towards Kingston.



We arrived at the late morning ferry to Amherst Island with a few minutes to spare. Open water hosted plenty of waterfowl, and we promptly noted the first of many Common Goldeneyes, Mallards, Long-tailed Ducks, Redheads and Common Mergansers during the 15-minute boat ride.



Blue skies briefly emerged, highlighting Amherst Island's picturesque landscape dotted with expansive fields, twisted trees, and a few small homes. We drove slowly down the main road, and soon spotted a handsome Rough-legged Hawk soaring over a field. Another appeared, followed by a Northern Harrier. American Kestrel perched on a wire, and flocks of starlings fluttered in tree tops. A large white bird arose at the back of a field, soaring in our direction. We all lifted our bins to admire the majestic Snowy Owl, one of Amherst Island's most famed birds. We found 4 others during our tour of the island, along with a dozen Rough-legged Hawks, and 7 harriers.



We looped to the southwest edge of the island, looking for birds in roadside vegetation and patches of woods. We found the previously-reported Vesper Sparrow foraging roadside, not far from a pair of male Ring-necked Pheasants trying to hide in tall grasses. Downy, Hairy, Red-bellied and Pileated Woodpeckers were active in woods, along with a few White-breasted Nuthatches, Blue Jays, and one American Tree Sparrow. Long-eared Owl roosted in evergreens. We spent ample time with more than a dozen friendly Black-capped Chickadees. The fearless little birds alighted on our hands to snatch seed, providing great photo ops for the quick-fingered!

With open water all around, we were pleased to find a Common Loon, Red-breasted Merganser, Bufflehead, and Tundra Swans.

We departed the island at sunset, delighted with the spectacular show of Rough-legged Hawks, owls, and a late lingering Vesper Sparrow, a first for the cumulative trip species list.

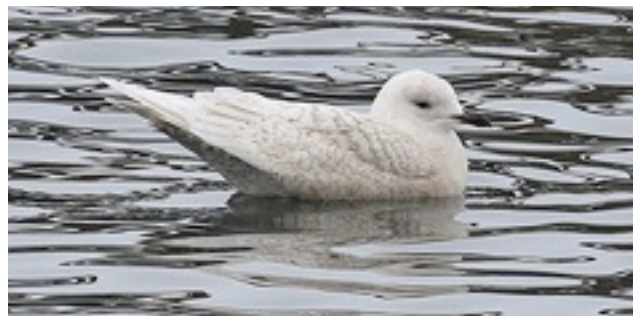
Day 2 / January 17 - The second day of our Ontario excursion began at the Princess Towers in downtown Kingston. On this quiet Sunday morning, we got out of the van in an icy parking lot, to scope the Peregrine Falcon perched high on the tower. Interestingly, this is the first sighting of Peregrine Falcon, on all the years of Ontario winter bird trips! The bird has plenty to eat, as flocks of pigeons and starlings swirled around the city.



We moved on to scan open water at Cataraqui Bay, from Lake Ontario Park. We enjoyed a nice variety of waterfowl including large numbers of Greater Scaup, with a few Ring-necked Ducks, Common Goldeneye, Redheads, American Wigeon and American Black Ducks amongst them. There were also Hooded Mergansers, Common Mergansers and two dozen Canvasback.



After stocking up on Tim Horton's coffee and donuts, we ventured west through intermittent snow squalls to reach the city of Barrie by early afternoon. Thousands of ducks, gulls, and a few birders took advantage of Lake Simcoe's open waters, usually frozen by this time of year. Huge rafts of Common Mergansers paddled near the shoreline, mixed with Herring Gulls. We picked out several different ages of Glaucous and Iceland Gulls. Two American Coot and six Double-crested Cormorant were testament to the mild winter that had preceded this week.





Short winter days prompted us to keep moving, and we continued north to Centennial Park in Washago. A large flock of eighty Trumpeter Swans welcomed us with loud trumpeting as we pulled up to partially-frozen pond. Their presence reflects Ontario's successful breeding and re-introduction program; in the 1930's, Trumpeter Swan was considered one of the world's rarest birds! It was wonderful to hear their trumpet-sounding honks while watching family groups moving around the open channel. Juvenile birds, easily told by their dirty grey plumage and pink on the bill, would simultaneously bob their heads following their parents lead, a sign of bonding amongst family members. Local banders were counting the swans, and kindly answered our many questions. We were delighted for this opportunity to watch the swans up close, compare field marks, and see parents protect young cygnets.

We reached Huntsville in time for a delicious dinner at the popular restaurant, "Three Guys and a Stove." I enjoyed an outstanding Moroccan Meatball, and the Sawdust City's Ol' Woody Alt became my new favourite beer!

Day 3 / January 18 - Our third and final day was the coldest and sunniest of the trip! Minus 2-degrees F and stunning scenery took our breath away in Algonquin Provincial Park. Snow-covered trees and sparkling frozen lakes created a beautiful backdrop for birding.



We began at the west gate, traveling east into the rising sun. The highway through the park yielded no roadside passerines feeding on grit, but Deb spotted a Ruffed Grouse by silhouette, sitting in a deciduous tree. We attempted to traverse the snow-covered Arrowhon Road, but carefully backed out after failing to climb up a hill. We had better luck at Mew Campground, where Common Ravens flew overhead and a multitude of Blue Jays descended upon the seed that we spread out for them.



The Algonquin Park Visitors Center provided a brief respite from the bitter cold and a chance to shop at their excellent book store! Outside on the back deck, a dozen Evening Grosbeaks called from adjacent trees, before venturing to tray feeders for seed. One female Purple Finch joined them.

We got our exercise for the day walking the mile-long, snow-covered trails at Spruce Bog. The quiet was almost eerie, though we enjoyed avian activity at the two ends of our trek. Near the trailhead, a number of Black-capped Chickadees and inquisitive Gray Jays landed on heads and outstretched hands to help themselves to our offerings. Red-breasted Nuthatches worked their way down trees for a piece of suet while Red Squirrels stuffed as many sunflower seeds into their cheeks as quickly as they could!



Some of us had already reached the parking lot when Barbara called us back. We had just walked under a Ruffed Grouse! The bird was perched on a tree just a few feet from the trail, unconcerned about us tromping by. It was most cooperative as we watched it walking about the skinny branches of a birch tree, balancing precariously while delicately picking off buds! Five Purple Finches alighted briefly in the trees above the grouse, the only finches for the park!

Our last stop in Algonquin was at Opeongo Road, where we enjoyed our last encounters with lively Gray Jays. We exited a little after noon, and settled in the van for the long journey home.

We were surprised at the interest of the border crossing agent, when he peeked his head in the van and asked what was the rarest bird any of us had seen. Steve immediately said mockingbird....there was a look on the agents face of, I've seen that..... but Steve clarified it was the Floreana Mockingbird! He didn't realize what a serious question that was for a group of birders! He smiled and waved us on. Aside from a 50 mile stretch of patchy blizzard conditions around Syracuse, we avoided bad weather, and arrived in Quakertown before the clock struck midnight.

On our 3-day adventure in Ontario, we tallied a very respectable 65 species, close to a record, and considerably more than the low of 41! Vesper Sparrow, and Peregrine Falcon were new trip birds. Common Loon and Double-crested Cormorant had been recorded once before in Ontario, but that was on a Niagara Falls only trip.

I was especially pleased to guide a mixed group of veterans as well as many first-time participants of a DVOG weekend roadtrip. Many thanks for joining me and making this a most enjoyable trip.



Species Seen List:

Birds - Canada Goose, Mute Swan, Trumpeter Swan, Tundra Swan, Gadwall, American Wigeon, American Black Duck, Mallard, Canvasback, Redhead, Ring-necked Duck, Greater Scaup, Lesser Scaup, Long-tailed Duck, Bufflehead, Common Goldeneye, Hooded Merganser, Common Merganser, Red-breasted Merganser, Ring-necked Pheasant, Ruffed Grouse, Wild Turkey, Common Loon, Double-crested Cormorant, Great Blue Heron, Northern Harrier, Cooper's Hawk *, Bald Eagle, Red-tailed Hawk, Rough-legged Hawk, American Coot, Ring-billed Gull, Herring Gull, Iceland Gull, Glaucous Gull, Great Black-backed Gull, Rock Pigeon, Mourning Dove, Snowy Owl, Long-eared Owl, Short-eared Owl, Red-bellied Woodpecker, Downy Woodpecker, Hairy Woodpecker, Pileated Woodpecker, American Kestrel, Peregrine Falcon, Gray Jay, Blue Jay, American Crow, Common Raven, Black-capped Chickadee, Red-breasted Nuthatch, White-breasted Nuthatch, European Starling, Cedar Waxwing *, American Tree Sparrow, Vesper Sparrow, Dark-eyed Junco, Northern Cardinal, Purple Finch, House Finch, American Goldfinch, Evening Grosbeak, House Sparrow [65]

* in New York only

Mammals - Grey Squirrel inc. black morph, Red Squirrel, White-tailed Deer [3]