

Articles

Changes in the Status of the Summer Birds of the Western Rainy River District

by
David H. Elder

Introduction

In 1929, L.L. Snyder (Snyder 1938), in association with the Royal Ontario Museum, carried out a faunal investigation of the western part of the Rainy River District. During the summer of 1929, from 31 May to 10 August, camps were established at Emo, Off Lake, the mouth of the La Vallee Creek on the Rainy River, and near the town of Rainy River. From these camps, observations and collections of birds and animals were made.

Sixty-five years have passed since Snyder carried out his work and current information reflects a significant change in the avifauna of the area. During this period, land use activities have changed the character of the landscape. There has been increased land clearing for agricultural purposes and a system of drainage ditches has changed the water table throughout large areas. Formerly wet meadows and

coniferous peatlands have dried out and have been converted to agricultural use. On the other hand, abandoned farmlands have grown up into willow thickets and aspen woods, creating habitat used by a wide number of bird species.

In addition, the area has come to the attention of birders and during the past 20 years in particular, increased observation has contributed to a better understanding of the bird species currently present in the area. (see James 1991).

The following annotated lists reflect the observed changes in the birds of the Rainy River area. The first list details species not recorded by Snyder. It does not include those species that can be considered accidental, having been recorded only as vagrants one or two times. The second list details species noted by Snyder that appear to have changed in population or distributional status.

Species Present Now But Not Recorded by Snyder

American White Pelican - *Pelecanus erythrorhynchos*

A common summer resident of the Lake of the Woods. Now seen regularly east to Rainy Lake. The population is estimated at about 15,000 birds (Austen et al. 1994). Often seen inland circling high overhead in varying-sized flocks.

Canada Goose - *Branta canadensis*

A common summer resident throughout the area. The species is present due to local introductions and emigration from other areas.

Northern Shoveler - *Anas clypeata*

A scarce summer resident, most frequently seen on the Rainy River sewage lagoons. Usually moulting males are seen but females with downy young have been observed.

Ruddy Duck - *Oxyura jamaicensis*

An occasional breeder on the Rainy River sewage lagoons. Not recorded every year.

Merlin - *Falco columbarius*

An uncommon summer resident. Pairs tend to return to the same general locations for breeding.

Yellow Rail - *Coturnicops noveboracensis*

An uncommon summer resident of grassy marshes and wet meadows. The species appears to be declining as habitat is lost as the wet meadows are dried out by ditching for agricultural use.

Sandhill Crane - *Grus canadensis*

One of the characteristic summer birds of the area, commonly seen and heard. Breeding has been confirmed by the observation of downy young with adults.

Upland Sandpiper - *Bartramia longicauda*

An uncommon summer resident, tending to use rough, grazed pastures with exposed rocks and an occasional willow shrub. In June of 1994, four pairs were noted in a heavily grazed pasture.

Marbled Godwit - *Limosa fedoa*

An uncommon summer resident. Breeding was confirmed in June, 1994 when a pair of adults was observed with four downy young on Worthington Road #3 (Elder 1994). Fifteen adults were noted on the Rainy River sewage lagoons also in June of 1994, and appeared to be flying in from the surrounding fields to feed in the lagoons.

Franklin's Gull - *Larus pipixcan*

An irregular summer visitor to the area. May be present in the thousands one year and totally absent the next. Weather conditions on the prairies to the west seem to have an influence on the numbers that visit the Rainy River area. When the prairies have a hot and dry spring and summer, the species is likely to be seen eastward in greater numbers.

Ring-billed Gull - *Larus delawarensis*

A common breeding summer resident of the area, often seen in fields being ploughed. Nests in large numbers on rocky islands in the Lake of the Woods and has increased significantly in the past 20 years.

Long-eared Owl - *Asio otus*

A rare summer resident that is usually seen just at dusk flying the edges of fields and brushy meadows. The one breeding record for the area was a pair that used an abandoned Black-billed Magpie (*Pica pica*) nest in a bushy willow, 27 May 1983.

Western Kingbird - *Tyrannus verticalis*

A rare and sporadic breeding summer resident. Four nestings (three consecutively at the same site) have been recorded and individual birds are seen in the area every year.

Black-billed Magpie - *Pica pica*

A fairly common year-round resident. Its large, barrel-shaped nests are often placed in thick willow bushes and abandoned nests are used by Long-eared Owls and Merlins. Magpie pairs tend to be faithful to a particular breeding location.

Common Raven - *Corvus corax*

Strangely enough, Snyder did not record this species, which today is a common permanent resident of the area.

Marsh Wren - *Cistothorus palustris*

A scarce summer resident of the cattail and *Phragmites* marshes.

Wood Thrush - *Hylocichla mustelina*

A rare summer resident. Found in the aspen and oak woods near the Lake of the Woods.

Yellow-throated Vireo - *Vireo flavifrons*

An uncommon summer resident of the aspen and oak forests. Most frequently found near the Lake of the Woods. Its burry song is usually the first indication of its presence.

Connecticut Warbler - *Oporornis agilis*

An uncommon summer resident found in stands of second growth trembling aspen and balsam poplar. The habitat requirement for this species seems to be quite specific and is limited to aspen and poplar woods that are fairly open with a low ground cover of grasses and a few scattered dogwood, willow and alder shrubs (Elder 1991).

Le Conte's Sparrow - *Ammodramus leconteii*

A common summer resident frequenting grassy wet meadows and hay fields.

Yellow-headed Blackbird - *Xanthocephalus xanthocephalus*

A common breeding summer resident of the cattail and *Phragmites* stands along the Rainy River and the shores of the Lake of the Woods. A large colony co-exists with Red-winged Blackbirds (*Agelaius phoeniceus*) on Windy Point.

Brewer's Blackbird - *Euphagus cyanocephalus*

The common blackbird of the area. Found throughout the area, seemingly in every field.

Species Recorded By Snyder That Appear To Have Changed In Status**Double-crested Cormorant** - *Phalacrocorax auritus*

Apparently this species was present on the Lake of the Woods at the time of Snyder's visit but was uncommon. Today it is a very common summer resident, seen mainly on the Lake of the Woods and the Rainy River.

Turkey Vulture - *Cathartes aura*

Rare at the time of Snyder's study, it is an uncommon summer resident of the area.

Bald Eagle - *Haliaeetus leucocephalus*

Snyder did not record this species although local residents indicated eagles were in the area. Today it is a common spring and fall migrant through the area and an uncommon summer resident with several active nests along the Lake of the Woods shoreline.

Piping Plover - *Charadrius melodus*

Seen by Snyder on Sable Island. It still occurs in very small numbers annually on Sable Island and Windy Point. These birds may represent the last breeding population in Ontario and their presence can be described as tenuous at best.

Mourning Dove - *Zenaidura macroura*

This species was apparently just moving into the area at the time of Snyder's study and he did not see it, relying on observations of local residents to include it in his list. Today it is a common summer resident throughout the area.

Eastern Screech Owl - *Otus asio*

Snyder includes this species in his list on the reports of small, eared owls submitted to him by local residents. There have been no other reports of this species from the area.

Whip-poor-will - *Caprimulgus vociferus*

This species was considered scarce by Snyder. It is presently a common bird of the area.

Red-headed Woodpecker - *Melanerpes erythrocephalus*

Considered a relatively common species by Snyder, it appears to have declined and is continuing to decline to the point where it can be described as scarce.

White-breasted Nuthatch - *Sitta carolinensis*

This nuthatch is fairly common now, particularly in the oak and aspen woods along the shores of the Rainy River and the Lake of the Woods. Snyder considered it rare.

Sedge Wren - *Cistothorus platensis*

Found commonly throughout the area in wet meadows and hay fields today; Snyder considered the species uncommon.

Loggerhead Shrike - *Lanius ludovicianus*

Uncommon according to Snyder, it is at best rare today. A pair was reported to have nested at the south end of Sable Island in 1992.

European Starling - *Sturnus vulgaris*

The starling apparently arrived in the Rainy River area just after Snyder carried out his study. It is now a common species found throughout the area.

Vesper Sparrow - *Poocetes gramineus*

A common species, according to Snyder. Today it is a scarce bird and is difficult to find. Land use changes have adversely affected it.

Bobolink - *Dolichonyx oryzivorus*

Snyder made only one possible record of this species, near Emo. It is a common bird today found throughout the area in meadows, pastures and croplands.

Acknowledgements

Nick Escott of Thunder Bay kindly reviewed the paper in preparation and provided comments.

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Banding, movements and adult biometrics of Ontario Ospreys

by
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Introduction

There have been few studies of Ospreys (*Pandion haliaetus*) in Ontario. Previous work has focused mainly on the declines during the DDT era, and levels of contaminants in eggs (Grier et al. 1977; Postupalsky 1971, 1977). One reason for this scarcity of information on such a widespread and large, visible bird is the inaccessibility of many nests, at the top of large, dead trees, often in swamps (Poole 1989; pers. obs.). However, in some parts of Ontario, Ospreys now breed in more accessible sites, on low stumps in flooded lakes, artificial nesting platforms, hydro poles, navigation aids and other towers (Ewins, in press).

In 1991 the Canadian Wildlife Service, in conjunction with the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources, Michigan Department of Natural Resources, and the Georgian Bay Osprey Society, began a study to investigate the suitability of Ospreys as sensitive indicators of contaminant-related biological effects in the Great Lakes aquatic ecosystem. This paper presents up-to-date information (as of April 1994) on bandings and recoveries of Ospreys banded as nestlings in Ontario. Biometrics are presented for adults trapped at nests (the first published for Ontario or the Great Lakes basin), and these will assist anyone wishing to determine the sex of adult Ospreys.