

## Anhinga Status in Ontario

Ron Tozer

The report of an adult male Anhinga (*Anhinga anhinga*) in a marsh near Delaware, Ontario, from 16 July to 16 September 2000 (Read 2000) has been accepted by the Ontario Bird Records Committee (Kayo Roy, pers. comm.). It could be considered the first fully confirmed and documented record of this species for Ontario, and Canada, since questions have been raised about the validity of previous reports. This note reviews the literature and expert opinion concerning these earlier occurrences, which are classic examples of the difficulties in evaluating some "historical" records, even when specimens are involved.

The Anhinga breeds from the southeastern United States through the lowlands of Mexico, Central America, and South America to northern Argentina, Uruguay, and Ecuador, and formerly bred north to southeastern Missouri and southern Illinois (AOU 1998). It has been recorded as a casual wanderer north of the breeding range from New Mexico and California to the Eastern Seaboard, including Wisconsin, Ohio, Pennsylvania, New York, Connecticut, New Hampshire and Maine (AOU 1998, Bain 2000). Large numbers of vagrants have sometimes occurred, with perhaps the most amazing recent record involving at least 33

birds observed and photographed at Hickory Hills, Maryland, in May 1996 (Iliff 1996). There are two old Anhinga reports from Ontario.

The first involved an adult female Anhinga specimen (#91960) in the University of Michigan Museum of Zoology (UMMZ) which was reportedly collected near Sault Ste. Marie about 1881. There has been debate as to whether the bird was collected on the Ontario or the Michigan side of the St. Mary's River, or even at that locality. The original specimen label, in Charles Dury's hand, reads: "Sault Ste. Marie, Mich. / Given me by / Patrick E. Roach / the year the canal / was finished at Ste." (Van Tyne 1950). Dury, of Cincinnati, Ohio, prepared bird specimens for the Cuvier Club, and Roach was a club member who "contributed to their collection a number of birds from widely scattered localities in the United States" (Van Tyne 1950). Roach was "one of the firm of contractors that built the first lock" at Sault Ste. Marie, "which was finished and opened for traffic September 1, 1881", and he "had purchased the specimen at the time it was collected" (Van Tyne 1950). The Cuvier Club bird collection was later deposited in the Cincinnati Museum of Natural History, and the UMMZ received the Anhinga

specimen in exchange with that institution in 1936 (Van Tyne 1950).

Barrows (1912) stated that it was "extremely improbable" that this *Anhinga* was actually collected at Sault Ste. Marie, "there being only the barest possibility that a bird of this kind, accustomed only to tropical waters, could have survived more than a few hours in the icy current of St. Mary's River, even had it in some mysterious manner reached that northern point". Instead, Barrows (1912) thought it was "far more probable that this was a Florida specimen included among the wares of some curio dealer who was willing to ascribe any locality to the bird which would secure its sale".

In a review of this record conducted in 1936 by Van Tyne (1950), Judge Joseph H. Steere ("an elderly amateur ornithologist of Sault Ste. Marie who knew about the specimen") stated that the bird had been shot by a native on the St. Mary's River at Garden River, *Algoma*, Ontario, 12 miles down the river from Sault Ste. Marie. Van Tyne (1950) concluded that "there seems to be no reason to doubt the authenticity of the record", but conceded that the bird could have been taken "on either side of the International Boundary line; the evidence, however, is in favor of Ontario".

Godfrey (1966, 1986) cited this record, the first *Anhinga* for Ontario and Canada, although he suggested in a 1969 letter to Sprague that there might be "the slightest doubt remaining" as to whether the bird was collected on

the Ontario or the Michigan side of the St. Mary's River (Sprague and Weir 1984). James et al. (1976) accepted the specimen as the first Ontario record, citing Van Tyne (1950). However, Payne (1983) rejected this record on the Michigan checklist, stating that the specimen "was probably a curio shop import (Barrows, 1912)", and did not mention Van Tyne's discussion of it. Dr. Payne (pers. comm.) has since confirmed that this was "a personal evaluation; there is no evidence one way or the other". In his revised checklist of the birds of Ontario, James (1991) cited Van Tyne again, but dismissed this specimen as an authentic Ontario occurrence, stating that it "has been rejected (see Payne 1983) as a valid record". James (pers. comm.) has since characterized this record as "likely, but not entirely without some doubt".

In summary, there is no question about the identity of the 1881 *Anhinga* (the specimen exists) and there is no evidence to support anything but wild origin. However, there is some doubt concerning the actual locality where the bird was collected, whether it was taken in Michigan or Ontario, or perhaps even elsewhere.

The other old Ontario record was of an *Anhinga* reported shot by a native, Billy Brant, on West Lake near the village of Wellington, *Prince Edward*, on 7 September 1904, and later identified by William Carrell, "a sportsman-naturalist, who is well acquainted with birds and who at that time lived in Wellington"

(Snyder 1941). Brant's dog mangled the bird but Carrell secured the head, one foot and some feathers, and described them as follows: "bill slender, sharply pointed and sharply toothed; eyes, red; feet, yellow with four toes, with web joined to all four toes" (Snyder 1941).

Godfrey (1966, 1986) cited this occurrence, the second record for Ontario and Canada. It was listed by James et al. (1976) as a valid Ontario record. James (1991) continued to accept the record, considering it "reasonable based on Snyder's comments".

In evaluating the 1904 Anhinga, there seems to be no reason to doubt the locality or its wild origin. The material evidence is missing (James et al. 1976), and apparently it was never examined by a professional ornithologist. However, Snyder did obtain some descriptive notes taken at the time (see above) in correspondence with the original observer of the specimen. James (pers. comm.) has concluded about the record, that "while not as well documented as we might like today, I think it is good".

### Acknowledgements

The following are gratefully acknowledged for their assistance with information and references: Allen Chartier, Michel Gosselin, Janet Hinshaw, Robert Payne, Kayo Roy and Don Sutherland. I want to thank Ross James for his valuable comments on an earlier draft.

### Literature Cited

- American Ornithologists' Union.** 1998. Check-list of North American Birds. 7th edition. American Ornithologists' Union, Washington, D.C.
- Bain, M.** 2000. An Anhinga in Ontario. *Birders Journal* 9: 182-185.
- Barrows, W.B.** 1912. Michigan Bird Life. Special Bulletin of the Department of Zoology and Physiology. Michigan Agricultural College, East Lansing, Michigan.
- Godfrey, W.E.** 1966. The Birds of Canada. National Museum of Canada, Ottawa.
- Godfrey, W.E.** 1986. The Birds of Canada. Revised edition. National Museums of Canada, Ottawa.
- Iliff, M.** 1996. Spring season. Mid-Atlantic region. National Audubon Society Field Notes 50: 262-266.
- James, R.D.** 1991. Annotated Checklist of the Birds of Ontario. Second edition. Life Sciences Miscellaneous Publications. Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto.
- James, R.D., P.L. McLaren, and J.C. Barlow.** 1976. Annotated Checklist of the Birds of Ontario. Life Sciences Miscellaneous Publications. Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto.
- Payne, R.B.** 1983. A Distributional Checklist of the Birds of Michigan. Miscellaneous Publications. Museum of Zoology, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan.
- Read, P.** 2000. Anhinga near Delaware, Ontario. *Ontario Birds* 18: 97-105.
- Snyder, L.L.** 1941. The birds of Prince Edward County, Ontario. University of Toronto Studies, Biological Series 48: 25-92.
- Sprague, R.T. and R.D. Weir.** 1984. The Birds of Prince Edward County. Kingston Field Naturalists, Kingston, Ontario.
- Van Tyne, J.** 1950. Old record of *Anhinga anhinga* taken on St. Mary's River, Ontario. *Auk* 67: 508-509.

Ron Tozer, 1017 Spring Lake Road, R.R. 1, Dwight, Ontario P0A 1H0