

## Bird Observations from Some Southeastern James Bay Islands, N.W.T.

Y. Robert Tymstra

### Introduction

Ninety-three bird species were observed during a survey of fourteen islands and 'rocks' in southeastern James Bay from 14 to 26 June 1995. The expedition was undertaken as part of the James Bay Islands Avifaunal Survey, a long-term series of investigations designed to discover more about the breeding distribution and migratory movements of birds in and around the islands of James Bay. (Editors' Note: these islands are closely associated geographically and ornithologically with nearby mainland Ontario, and hence are of particular interest to the province's birders.)

Several species new to the James Bay island region were found, including Horned Grebe, Wood Duck, Yellow Rail, Great Black-backed Gull, Mourning Dove, and American Goldfinch. The Wood Duck sighting constituted the first confirmed record for the Northwest Territories. Several Common Eider colonies on islets north of Strutton Island were surveyed and a Double-crested Cormorant colony was discovered on McNab Rock in Rupert Bay.

Our expedition began in Waskaganish (formerly Fort Rupert), Quebec, where we hired a 7 m open freighter canoe with guides for transport among the islands. Participating in the project were Russell Bright, Darrell Parsons, and Robert Tymstra, with

assistance by Cree boatmen: Bernard Diamond and Richard Small of Waskaganish. On the afternoon of 14 June, we departed for a camp on the Quebec shore of James Bay, stopping briefly at Barboteau Rock in Rupert Bay. The following morning, we moved to Strutton Island where we set up a base camp for five days and made forays to four islets to the north. On 20 June, we moved camp to Charlton Island and explored nearby Danby and Carey Islands, as well as Wolf Islet and Cormorant Rock. The final base camp was established on Tent Island from 22 to 26 June. McNab Rock and Stag Rock were investigated briefly on the return to Waskaganish. Records are also presented from a short visit to Charlton Island, 11-14 June 1992, by Paul Tymstra and the author.

Weather was mostly sunny throughout the period with occasional fog or high winds; temperatures ranged from 3-27°C. James Bay was mostly ice-free south of the Strutton Islands but still had extensive ice cover north of the islands making navigation difficult.

### Descriptions of Islands Visited

The larger islands visited are essentially low-lying drifts of sand, typically ringed with White Spruce (*Picea glauca*), with interiors rising to open plateaus thinly scattered with spruce. Other habitats include

willow thickets, poplar stands, grassy marsh, tussock tundra, sand dunes, gravel ridges, and small ponds and lakes. Offshore, tidal mudflats and rocky shoals abound. The islets north of the Strutton Islands are typically long, treeless bars of unconsolidated sand and

gravel with scattered boulders and piles of driftwood; on higher ground, grasses sheltered numerous eider nests. Islands visited are listed below, followed by location, survey dates, km walked (where applicable), and duration of observation.

**Barboteau Rock** (51°41'N, 78°60'W) 14 June: 5 minutes observation. A small bare rock near the mouth of Rupert Bay. It supported a small Ring-billed Gull colony.

**East and West Strutton Islands** (Camp on West Strutton by channel: 52°06'N, 78°60'W). 15-19 June: 85 km/54 h. Wooded islands with small ponds. These islands are treated as a single island 12 km long by 2-3 km wide, bisected by a narrow channel.

**Scoter Island** (52°10'N, 78°57'W) 16 June: 30 minutes & 17 June: 2 h 30 min. A low, sandy, treeless island 2.5 km long with numerous shoals and exposed boulders offshore.

**Islet I:** (52°06'N, 78°53'W) 17 June: 45 min. A 700 m long treeless, narrow drift of sand northeast of Strutton Is. that contained many Common Eider nests.

**Islet II:** (52°09'N, 79°01'W) 17 June: 45 min. An 800 m long treeless, sandy, narrow drift with lots of driftwood, situated 4 km north of Strutton Island. The islet had many Common Eider nests in the higher grass as well as a probable colony of Black Guillemots nesting under boulders.

**Islet III:** (52°09'N, 79°07'W) 17 June: 1 h 45 min. A wide crescent-shaped isle of sand, gravel and low lying shrubs with many Common Eider nests. It is about 1.6 km long, 4 km north of Strutton Island.

**Charlton Island** (Camp at Charlton Depot: 51°57'N, 79°20'W) 20-22 June 1995: 28 km/13 h, and 11-14 June 1992: 41 km/31 h. James Bay's second biggest island, ca. 30 km in length, a large sandy, wooded island rising to 45 m. Only the coastal areas close to camp were surveyed.

**Carey Island:** (52°00'N, 79°13'W) 21 June: 12 km/12 h. Wooded island about 5 km long, with some small ponds.

**Danby Island** (51°57'N, 79°16'W) 22 June: 19 km/12 h. A low sandy, wooded island 8 km long with a small area of saltmarsh at east end where Yellow Rail and Leconte's Sparrow were found.

**Wolf Islet** (52°07'N, 79°14'W) 21 June: 30 min. A grassy sand ridge about 500 m long, and 4 km off NE shore of Charlton Island.

**Tent Island** (51°49'N, 79°06'W) 22-26 June: 57 km/26 h. A squarish island about 3 km in diameter, with a variety of habitats: marshes, tidal flats, spruce forest, sandy beaches, open grassy areas, and small ponds.

**Cormorant Rock** (51°52'N, 79°03'W) 22 June: 5 min. A small bare rock formerly supporting a Double-crested Cormorant colony.

**McNab Rocks** (51°44'N, 79°06'W) 26 June: 10 min. A few small bare rocks in the mouth of Rupert Bay, 7 km south of Tent Island, one of which supported a thriving Double-crested Cormorant colony. Due to time constraints and to avoid undue disturbance, we limited our visit to ten minutes.

**Stag Rock** (51°35'N, 78°57'W) 26 June: 30 min. A small rocky island about 100 m in diameter in Rupert Bay ca. 15 km N of the mouth of the Rupert River, with some spruce and shrubby vegetation.

## Survey Methods

Direct counting was the main survey method employed, with some 400 m line transects completed where habitat allowed. Kilometres walked and party hours spent in observation were recorded. We walked the circumferences of West and East Strutton, Carey, Danby, and Tent Islands; several inland forays were made as well. Sightings made during boat passages were included with the nearest island. On long and narrow Islets I and II, we were able to make complete eider nest counts by walking five men abreast and flushing females from their nests.

## Species List

Ninety-three species from the 1995 expedition along with an addi-

tional eleven species from the 1992 Charlton Island visit are presented in Tables 3 and 4, with the order and common names following the American Ornithologists' Union Check-list (1983) and its supplements. Breeding status is based on criteria described for the *Atlas of the Breeding Birds of the Northwest Territories* (Cadman 1988). Nineteen species were "Confirmed" as breeders (\*), twenty species were found to be "Probable" breeders (+), and forty-one more were "Possible" breeders (#). Highest daily counts are given along with numbers of nests (n) and young (y) where applicable. All observational dates presented without the year indicated are from the 1995 survey.

## Noteworthy Observations

**Horned Grebe** (*Podiceps auritus*): A total of five birds was seen on small ponds on Carey Island 21 June for a first documented James Bay island record (Sirois and McRae 1994).

**Double-crested Cormorant** (*Phalacrocorax auritus*): Todd (1963) described a colony of 34 nests of sticks and seaweed on Cormorant Rock (formerly Way Rock) in July 1912. Lewis and Peters (1941) found 65 old nests in September 1940. In June 1942, Todd revisited the Rock and counted 200 nests (190 with eggs). Todd believed this to be the only nesting colony on Hudson or James Bay. When we visited Cormorant Rock on 22 June 1995, we found no sign whatsoever of cormorant activity; however, our boatmen told us of another colony on one of the McNab Rocks about 13 km to the south. We visited the McNab Rocks on 26 June. On one of the bare rocks, we counted 42 active nests, made of sticks and seaweed and laid on the bare stone in two terraced levels. On the upper level, there were 25 nests, and 17 more on the lower level. As seen in Table 1, upper level nests contained significantly more eggs and/or young per nest as well as more eggs hatched. We found individual adults ranging as far away as Charlton and Strutton Islands during our survey. The local Crees we talked to knew of no other cormorant colonies on James Bay.

**Table 1: Cormorant Nest Data**

	Total Nests	1e/y*	2e/y	3e/y	4e/y	5e/y	%eggs hatched	average#e/y
Upper Level	25	2	0	8	14	1	58.6	3.5
Lower Level	17	1	6	8	2	0	2.2	2.6
Total	42	3	6	16	16	1		3.1

\*e/y=#nests with eggs and/or young

**Wood Duck (*Aix sponsa*):** A male in breeding plumage was seen at close range on a small pond near our camp on West Strutton Island on 15 June 1995. This is the first confirmed record for the N.W.T.; there is an unconfirmed report from Fort Providence, May 1885 (Sirois and McRae 1994).

**Common Eider (*Somateria mollissima*):** Many nests with eggs were found on the islets north of the Strutton Islands, typically sheltered by grass on higher ground. Islets I and II and Wolf Islet were completely surveyed; we missed many of the nests on Islet III (150 males were counted).

**Table 2: Common Eider Nest Data**

Location	Total # nests	3 eggs	4 eggs	5 eggs	6 eggs	7 eggs	Average#eggs
Islet I	24	2	8	9	3	2	4.8
Islet II	38	3	1	21	13		5.2
Islet III	70*	5	19	34	12		4.8
Wolf Islet	4	1	1	1	1		4.5
Totals:	136	11	29	65	29	2	4.8

\*not all nests counted

**Yellow Rail (*Coturnicops noveboracensis*):** An individual was heard calling in a grassy marsh on the east side of Danby Island, 22 June at 1000 h. First documented James Bay island record (Sirois and McRae 1994), but not unexpected as they are common on the mainland (Wilson and McRae 1993).

**Herring Gull (*Larus argentatus*):** Islet I:12 nests (fresh but empty nests: 9, one-egg nests:1, two-egg nests: 1, three-egg nests:1). Islet II: 1 nest with 3 eggs. Wolf Islet:7 nests (1 nest with 1 egg, 6 empty freshly-made nests). Cormorant Rock:1 nest with 3 eggs. Stag Rock: 9 nests (3 nests with 1 egg or young, 4 nests with 2 eggs or young, 2 nests with 2 young and 1 egg each).

**Ring-billed Gull (*Larus delawarensis*):** About 60 adults were counted in the vicinity of Barboteau Rock. Twelve nests were found (4 empty, 2 nests with 1 egg, 5 nests with 2 eggs, 1 nest with 3 eggs).

**Great Black-backed Gull (*Larus marinus*):** An individual was observed in the Strutton Islands channel on 15 June for the first documented James Bay Islands record (Sirois and McRae 1994). An agitated adult was found on Scoter Island, 17 June.

**Table 3: Observations from larger islands**

Date	Jn 15-19	Jn 16-17	Jn 20-22	Jn 21	Jn 22	Jn 22-26	Jn 11-14/92
Location	Strutton	Scoter	Charlton	Carey	Danby	Tent	Charlton
Red-throated Loon	(37	2	6	2	1		
Common Loon	8+	9	25#	3	2	4+	8+
Horned Grebe				5#			
Double-c. Cormorant	1		3	1		7	
American Bittern			1#		1#		1#
Snow Goose		1					2
Brant						5	260
Canada Goose	505#	282*	50	154	117	80*	500#
Green-winged Teal	28+	2	1	8+10y*	40	32*	2#
American Black Duck	183#	29	15#	82	45	65#	90#
Mallard	33+	1	25#	11+	39	30#	15#
Northern Pintail	20+			5	20+19y*	8*	6#
Northern Shoveler							1#
American Wigeon			2+	2+	4+	2	2#
Wood Duck	1						
Greater Scaup	2						2+
Lesser Scaup	29#	3	10#	8#	7#		
Common Eider	14+	22*	90		4		
Black Scoter	100	80	207	45	35	200	400
Surf Scoter	23		11		11	1	3
White-w. Scoter	8	15	30	200		20	20
Common Goldeneye	150	60	13	198	72	35	40
Bufflehead	3#						
Hooded Merganser						1	1#
Common Merganser	15+	1		11	14	40	2#
Red-b. Merganser	14+	3		6	6	8+	8+
Osprey	1*		2#		1		1*
Northern Harrier	1#	1	1#	2+	2+		1#
American Kestrel							1#
Merlin	1#				1#		
Spruce Grouse	1#						
Yellow Rail					2#		
Black-bellied Plover							1
Semipalmated Plover	1+	10+					
Killdeer	25*	2#	8*	3#	14#	9#	6*
Greater Yellowlegs	4	2	2		3	8	
Lesser Yellowlegs	1				2		
Solitary Sandpiper	1						
Spotted Sandpiper	6#	10+	20#	12+	8+		6+
Whimbrel	1					1	
Hudsonian Godwit						1	
Ruddy Turnstone		4					25
Red Knot							3
Semipalmated Sand.						2	
White-rumped Sand.						3	
Dunlin						1	
Common Snipe	12#		2#	4#	16#	10#	4#
Bonaparte's Gull							16
Ring-billed Gull	10	2+			2	2	6
Herring Gull	16	4+	5	7	10	25	8
Great Black-b. Gull	1	1+					
Arctic Tern	60	40	20		20	90	35

**Table 3: Observations from larger islands (continued)**

Date	Jn 15-19	Jn 16-17	Jn 20-22	Jn 21	Jn 22	Jn 22-26	Jn 11-14/92
Location	Strutton	Scoter	Charlton	Carey	Danby	Tent	Charlton
Black Guillemot			19			1	
Mourning Dove			1				
Northern Hawk Owl							1#
Short-eared Owl							1#
Three-t. Woodpecker	2#						
Northern Flicker	11+		2#	3#	6#	2#	1#
Alder Flycatcher			1#	3#	14#	3#	5#
Eastern Kingbird	1						
Horned Lark	2#	21#				8*	
Tree Swallow	2#		1#			1#	
Gray Jay	21*		7*	34#		2#	5*
American Crow	4+	1	4#	4#	5#	2#	6#
Common Raven	7*	2	2#		3#	2#	1#
Boreal Chickadee	4#			1#		1#	
Red-b. Nuthatch			1#				
Winter Wren	10#		1#	8#	2#	8#	2#
Golden-cr. Kinglet							2#
Ruby-cr. Kinglet	7#		6#	14#		5#	15+
Swainson's Thrush	3#		3#	6#	4#	1#	
Hermit Thrush	3#		6#	4#	2#	2#	5#
American Robin	6+		3#	16#	4#	2#	8#
American Pipit	1#						
Cedar Waxwing	44#	1	4#		6	120*	2#
Northern Shrike	1#						
European Starling							4
Tennessee Warbler	6+		1#	1#	11#	13#	
Orange-cr. Warbler	2#		2#		1#		2#
Yellow Warbler	8+	7*	4+	3#	31#	5#	4#
Magnolia Warbler							1#
Cape May Warbler	2+						
Yellow-r. Warbler	34+		5#	13#	2#	3#	10#
Palm Warbler			1#				1#
C. Yellowthroat	1#			4#	1#		
Wilson's Warbler	4#			2#	2#	2#	
Chipping Sparrow	1#						
Savannah Sparrow	35*	42*	2+	11#	80#	39#	16*
LeConte's Sparrow					3#		
Fox Sparrow	1#						4#
Song Sparrow	2#		6#	6#	3#	2#	
Lincoln's Sparrow	6#			4#	11#		
Swamp Sparrow	8#		8#	10#	14#	3#	4#
White-thr. Sparrow	35*	1	10#	41#	22#	10#	15*
White-cr. Sparrow		3#	4*	1			2#
Dark-eyed Junco	26+		24#	25#	19#	8#	10#
Red-winged Blackbird			2+			4+	4+
Rusty Blackbird							1#
Pine Grosbeak					2#	2	1
White-w. Crossbill	35#		12*	8#	11	148	
Common Redpoll	20+		2#	5#			4#
Pine Siskin	4#	1		8#		30#	
American Goldfinch	1						

Symbols: y = young; (x = offshore; \* = confirmed breeding; + = probable breeding; # = possible breeding

**Table 4: Observations from smaller islands and rocks**

Date	Jn 14	Jn 17	Jn 17	Jn 17	Jn 21	Jn 22	Jn 26	Jn 26
Location	Barbotreau	Islet 1	Islet 11	Islet 111	Wolf Is.	Cormorant	McNab R.	Stag R.
Common Loon						(2		
Double-c. Cormorant							42n*	
Brant								(2
Canada Goose			1n*	(70	(200			
American Black Duck			1	2				
Mallard								1n*
Northern Pintail				2+				
Common Eider		24n*	38n*	150/70n*	4n*			
Oldsquaw					1			
Black Scoter		(150	(180		(450	(190		
Surf Scoter					(450			
White-w. Scoter					(125			
Common Goldeneye		30	50		(50			
Common Merganser				1				
Red-b. Merganser		4	6	2		(2		
Osprey					(1			
Semipalmated Plover				1				
Killdeer				2#				
Spotted Sandpiper				10#				1
Hudsonian Godwit					1			
Red-n. Phalarope				2+				
Ring-billed Gull	60/12n*							
Herring Gull		12n*			15/7n*	2/1n*		9n*
Arctic Tern		30#	70#	30#	25#			
Black Guillemot			11#	85#	(21			
Horned Lark		2#		4#				
Ruby-cr. Kinglet				1				
Cedar Waxwing								6
Yellow Warbler				1				
Savannah Sparrow			20#					
White-w. Crossbill								8
Common Redpoll				1				
Pine Siskin								10

Symbols: n = nests; (x = offshore; \* = confirmed breeding; + = probable breeding; # = possible breeding

**Black Guillemot** (*Cephus grylle*): This species was common in the vicinity of Islets II and III where numerous boulders provide suitable habitat for nests (Todd 1963).

**Mourning Dove** (*Zenaida macroura*): One was observed 1 km west of Charlton Depot on 20 June. This is the first documented James Bay island record (Sirois and McRae 1994).

**Eastern Kingbird** (*Tyrannus tyrannus*): An individual was found on 18 June on East Strutton Island. There is one previous record from North Twin Island on 3 July 1973 (Manning 1981).

**European Starling** (*Sturnus vulgaris*): Four were observed feeding on tidal mudflats on 13 June 1992 on Charlton Island. Sirois and McRae (1994) report this species as a regular migrant in the islands.

**American Goldfinch** (*Carduelis tristis*): One female was seen on West Strutton Island, 16 June. First documented record from the James Bay islands (Sirois and McRae 1994).

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Y.R. Tymstra, 1209 Nottingham Drive, Sarnia, Ontario N7S 5B1