

A Birding Site Guide to Thickson's Woods, Whitby

by
Margaret Bain

Thickson's Woods is a small but very productive woodlot on the north shore of Lake Ontario in Whitby, some 50 km east of Toronto and 215 km west of Kingston. It is easily accessible from Hwy. 401. Exit south on Thickson Road — Interchange 68, Exit 412, and proceed south for 2 km to the lakeshore. To reach the area from the north, say from Ottawa, take Hwy. 7 west to its junction with Hwy. 12. Proceed south on Hwy. 12 to the start of Thickson Road, which branches off the highway on its east side, just south of the village of Myrtle and runs south to Lake Ontario.

The cottages on the lakeshore form a community known as Thickson's Point and are on a private road. While the cottagers are tolerant of birders, cars should be left on the main road and the area entered by walking east through the white gate. The cliff-top here gives good views over the bay. Early morning flights of Common Loons in May often achieve spectacular numbers and Red-throated Loons have been reported regularly between early April and the end of May. This is also a good place for

Brant in late May and early June when they can be seen flying eastward in the early morning or settling on the bay in conspicuous flocks. Evening flights of hundreds of White-winged Scoters occur in late May, with occasional Black and Surf Scoters among them. In summer, the sandy cliff is home to a large colony of Bank Swallows, and a few pairs of Northern Rough-winged Swallows.

The woods themselves are especially productive in spring, when the tall pines seem to provide a landmark for migrating passerines crossing Lake Ontario or moving east along the shoreline. Arrivals tend to be a few days earlier than in surrounding areas so this is a good spot for the "first" Hermit Thrush, Yellow-rumped Warbler or Scarlet Tanager. Several lanes and footpaths run through the woodlot, making it possible to see birds without encroaching on residents' backyards.

A good way to enter the woods is to take the first, or most westerly, lane between the cottages where from late April to late May the trees on both sides are usually alive with warblers. Common species peak in

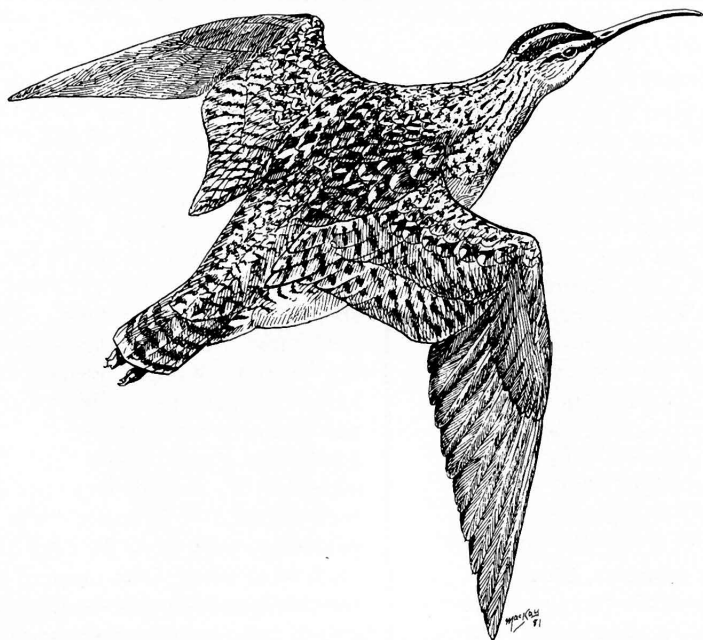
numbers about 20 May, but many of the rarer warblers such as Blue-winged, Prairie and Hooded are seen earlier in the month. One beautiful singing male Hooded appeared as early as 27 April in 1979. Orchard Oriole and Blue-gray Gnatcatcher can often be found here and a Brewer's Blackbird passed through in April recently.

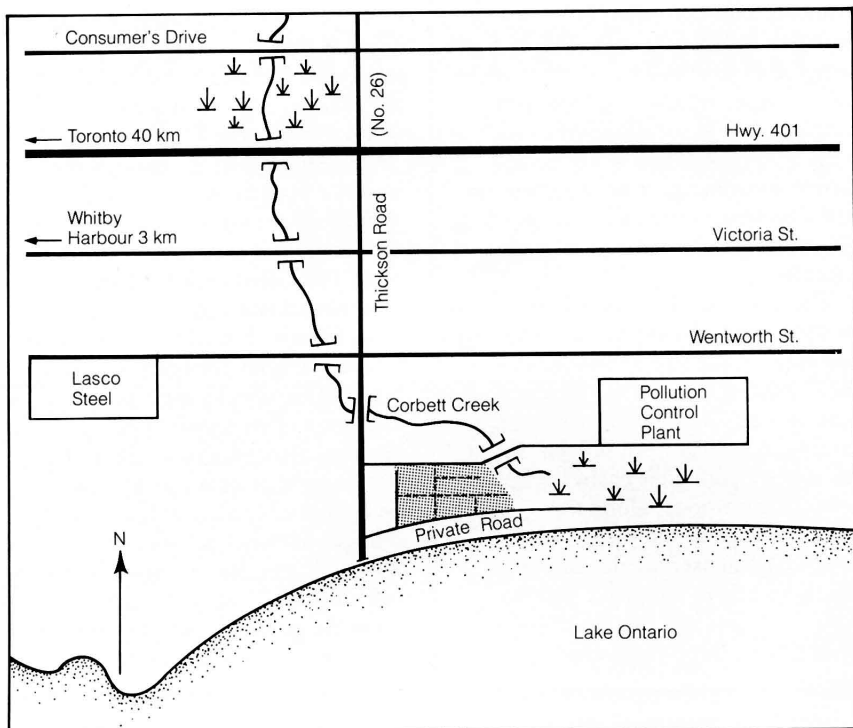
There are nearly always Pine Warblers to be found in the grove of red pines at the end of this lane — they arrive at the end of April and have stayed singing into June, though nesting has never been proven. From the pines a path goes eastward into a gully in the woods, along the southern edge of the white picket fence. The denser tangles of vegetation here have produced Yellow-breasted Chats and two Worm-eating Warblers — three years apart but

both on 9 May. Mourning Warblers are fairly easy to find here towards the end of the month, but a Connecticut Warbler may need more patience and perseverance.

Fox Sparrows pass through the woodlot in early April, a Tufted Titmouse — only the second record for the area — was found here in May, 1982. Red-breasted Nuthatches have nested and there is a resident pair of Great Horned Owls. Northern Orioles, Scarlet Tanagers and Rose-breasted Grosbeaks are numerous in migration often resulting in the morning discovery of a "Pelee-tree" after a night of heavy migration. Well-stocked feeders at the nearby cottages have helped wintering Winter Wrens, Rufous-sided Towhees and a Brown Thrasher to survive.

On the north side of the woods a road runs east to the Corbett Creek





Pollution Control Plant. The bridge on this road gives a good view of the marsh which often has egrets in spring and sometimes good shorebirds if water levels are low — Willet and Marbled Godwit have been seen here in May and June. This is a good spot for Least Bittern and Sora and Virginia Rails, especially before the marsh vegetation grows too high. Birding along this road can often be surprisingly good later in the day, when the afternoon sun warms up the trees on the north side of the woodlot. The small treed valley running north from the bridge is also excellent for warblers in spring and in winter for lingering sparrows. Chipping, Field and Lincoln's Sparrows have all been found here in winter, with

Swamp and Song Sparrows occurring regularly every year.

On leaving this area, follow Thickson Road north, over the 401, to Consumer's Drive, the first road running west (see map). The "ponds" on the south side of Consumer's Drive are often excellent for shorebirds in spring, but the marshy field grows over too thickly to attract fall migrants. Wilson's Phalaropes have been found here in late May and White-rumped and Baird's Sandpipers often stay into June. The occasional Western Sandpiper has also been recorded — fortunately it is possible to walk along the edge of the field to within close range of the shorebirds to document the finer details of these less common species.