

A Birding Site Guide to Amherst and Wolfe Islands

by

Paul MacKenzie and Ron D. Weir

Amherst and Wolfe Islands lie in the eastern end of Lake Ontario, near Kingston. Birding is good year-round, especially during the winter for hawks and owls, and during spring and fall for migration of waterfowl and shorebirds. Both islands consist of relatively flat farming country mixed with woodlots and surrounded by rocky shorelines, gravel beaches and cattail marshes. They are accessible by public ferry, but a motor vehicle is essential for birding the side roads as there is no public transport. Property is private and entry is by permission of the landowners, but much birding can be done from the side-roads and shorelines. Although it is possible to visit both islands in a day, there is plenty of scope for a full day's birding on either island.

Amherst Island

This island became renowned during the winter of 1978-79 when a build up of the meadow vole population attracted large numbers of owls, including 30+ Great Grays, as well as Northern Hawk-Owl, Boreal Owl and Snowy Owls. Once again, in 1984, the

vole population is high and, as of early winter, there have been large numbers of Rough-legged Hawks, harriers and at least two Boreal Owls, as well as Long-eared, Short-eared, Great Horned, Northern Saw-whet, Snowy and Northern Hawk-Owl.

From Highway 401, take Highway 133 south about 10 km to Highway 33 at Millhaven. Turn right and the ferry dock is about 0.3 km west along the Lake Ontario side of Highway 33. The ferry leaves the mainland hourly on the half hour, but the first one leaves at 0620 h, then 0730 h, etc. It costs \$1.50 for car and driver plus 25¢ per passenger and carries about 16 cars, so it is best to arrive early. The ferry returns hourly, leaving Amherst I. at Stella on the hour until late evening. It operates all winter. From the upper deck, loons and gulls may be seen when the water is open, and occasionally Snowy Owls sit on the ice in winter. In the last half of May, impressive flocks of Brant may be seen to the east of the ferry route.

For shorebirds and other waterfowl during migration, the most productive area is usually the

Paul Mackenzie, Box 84, R.R. #1, Kingston, Ontario K7L 4V1
Ron D. Weir, 295 Elmwood Street, Kingston, Ontario K7M 2Y8

sand bar at the east end of the island. From the ferry, turn left at the first road along the north shore and follow it to the east end of the island. At the northeast corner, stop just before the road turns south and scan the water for ducks in the bay. Drive to the southeast corner and park, watching along the way for Upland Sandpipers and hawks, or in winter for Snowy Owls. From the southeast corner allow at least one hour to walk to the bar and back, keeping within sight of shore. There is a marshy area at the east end of the island where Wilson's Phalaropes nest, and in late May, Brant may be resting along the shore. Oldsquaw are frequent offshore in spring and fall, and puddle ducks, waders and Black-crowned Night-Herons are often flushed from the marsh.

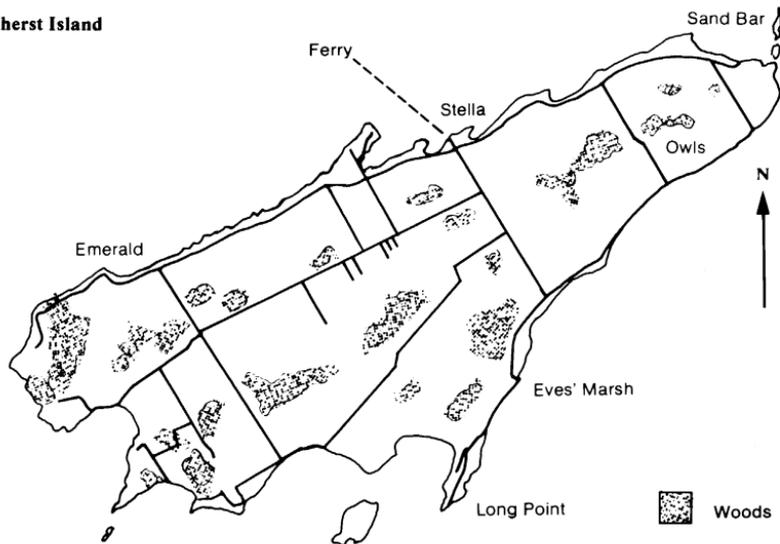
The bar itself may be exposed depending on water levels, and is a usual loafing site for gulls, terns, cormorants and shorebirds in season. In late May, Whimbrel

and Red Knot are possible. A number of uncommon birds have appeared here including: Snowy, Cattle and Great Egrets, Franklin's Gull, Little Gull, Piping Plover, Baird's Sandpiper, Hudsonian Godwit, Buff-breasted Sandpiper (August), Purple Sandpiper (November), Eurasian Wigeon, Harlequin Duck and Barrow's Goldeneye.

The most likely location for Northern Saw-whet, Long-eared and rarely Boreal Owls is a small woods in the east half of the island (see map).

From the ferry, turn left along the north shore for about 3 km watching for a road on the right. It is not ploughed in winter. This road, illustrated on the map, has a small jog in it about *midway across*. If the road is open, park just north of this jog and enter the woods on the east side of the road. If the road is impassable by car, the 1 km walk from the main road takes 10-15 minutes. (In spring

Amherst Island



and summer listen along this road and the road at the east end for singing Henslow's and Grass-hopper Sparrows, best heard at dawn and dusk).

Proceed east through the middle of the woods to find a track or path which leads by a few single junipers and, further east, by several clumps of cedars. Each evergreen tree requires careful inspection to locate the small owls, if they are present.

Long-eared, Barred or Great Horned Owls may be flushed along the way. The open fields adjacent to the woods may have Short-eared (best seen in late afternoon) or Snowy Owls.

The other woodlots on the island are also worth exploring for owls if the vole population is high as evidenced by multiple tunnels in grass and snow.

The south shore road follows the lake closely from the southeast corner to Long Point. Loons, scoters, ducks and shorebirds may be seen from the road. There is a productive marsh (Eves' marsh) about 2 km west of the north-south road from Stella, on the way to Long Point, and another marsh at the base of Long Point itself. The overgrown area beside the marsh at the base of Long Point may be good for warblers in migration. Sora and Virginia Rails nest in these marshes in season.

The north-south side road through Emerald passes through a variety of habitats. Starting from Emerald, there is a field overgrown with junipers on the west, and further south, a small marshy area on the east. After the "4 corners" the road slopes down into open

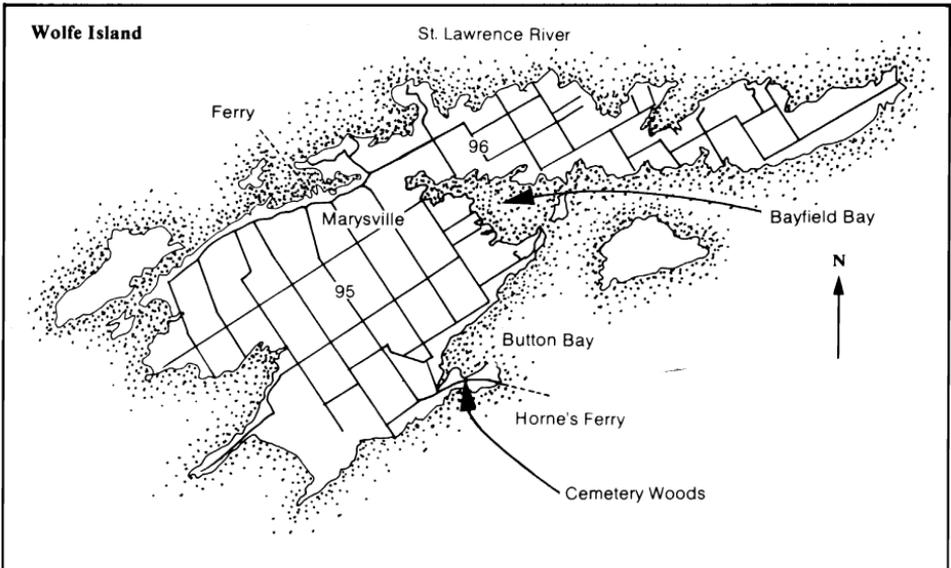
fields which are favourites for Rough-legged Hawks in winter, and sometimes have plovers in season. Further south, there is a wet wooded area which attracts spring and fall migrants, and sometimes Rusty Blackbirds.

Wolfe Island

Wolfe Island is probably the most reliable place in southern Ontario, perhaps anywhere, to see Snowy Owls in winter. Numbers may vary depending on food supply. It is a haven for wintering Rough-legged Hawks, Snow Buntings and some Lapland Longspurs. There are several local coveys of Gray Partridge. In spring and fall, large numbers of waterfowl are seen in migration, with thousands of Greater Scaup in the bays and Canada Geese in the corn fields. Much of the land is posted and most birding is done by driving the side roads. The roads in the west half of the island (west of Bayfield Bay) are the most productive.

From Highway 401, exit Highway 15 south to Highway 2 (5 km) then turn west (right) across the Cataraqui River bridge into Kingston (1 km). The Wolfe Island ferry leaves from the dock in downtown Kingston one block east of the foot of Princess Street, opposite the police headquarters. The ferry is free and has a large capacity for cars but in summer the queue may be long so it is best to arrive early. From the bow or upper deck scan the water for loons, bay ducks, and gulls, and in winter for Snowy Owls on the ice.

Take Highway 95, the paved highway south across the island, stopping periodically to scan the



open fields. About 6 km south of Marysville the road crosses a marshy area which often has teal, pintail and shoveler in spring. At about 9 km this road curves east and provides a view on the left over a marsh and the end of Button Bay. Stop and scan Button Bay for waterfowl. The road then enters a woodlot, called the Cemetery Woods, which harbours Eastern Screech and Great Horned Owls, and migrant passerines in season.

Highway 95 ends (about 12 km from Marysville) at Horne's Ferry, a good place from which to scan for ducks and gulls along the Great Lakes shipping channel.

Returning from Horne's Ferry, go straight ahead onto the south shore sideroad which begins where Highway 95 turns north to Marysville. The fields here are good for ducks and geese. Take the next sideroad north, working around to Reed's Bay for ducks and shorebirds. Continue driving the sideroads along the northwest corner of the island where open

fields are frequented by Snowy Owls, hawks, Lapland Longspurs and Snow Buntings. Return to Marysville along the north shore road looking for waterfowl.

The sideroads leading east off Highway 95 to the 7th, 8th and 9th concessions to Bayfield Bay and Button Bay are worth checking in winter for Snowy Owls and hawks.

There is no single location where Gray Partridge can always be found. Sightings are most frequently made along the roads north of the Reed Bay Road on both sides of Highway 95 and north of Highway 96 from Brown's Bay to Dawson Pt.

APPEAL FOR SUBMISSION OF RECORDS

Visitors birding Amherst I., Wolfe I. and the Kingston area are requested to submit their list of sightings for the files of the Kingston Field Naturalists, P.O. Box 831, Kingston, Ontario, K7L 4X6.