

# Historical Notes from Northern Frontenac County

by

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In the autumn of 1993, I received from Denise Wilkins, Park Naturalist at Bon Echo Provincial Park, a package containing field notes on 8 x 5 inch cards from northern Frontenac County. These notes were compiled by R. (Bob) V. Lindsay, who lived at Arden (44°43'N, 76°56'W) in Frontenac County. Most notes were of his own observations, but he also was in contact with numerous local residents or cottagers who contributed additional information.

He had consulted the diaries of Edwin Beaupre who lived at Sharbot Lake just after the turn of this century. From this source, observations by Beaupre and C.J. Young, some of which were included in Macoun and Macoun (1909), were noted on these cards, mainly from 1902 and 1903. Lindsay's own observations began as early as 1922, although there are very few notes recorded until 1931. He seems to have been most active during the first half of the 1930's. There are no notes of his own between 1935 and 1944 (he had apparently moved to Toronto), but observations resumed in 1945 and continued until 1963, rarely beyond.

From Lindsay's notes, I was able to make out nearly 350 nest record cards for the Ontario Nest Records Scheme (ONRS). In addition to those, I have gleaned a number of observations that are worth making available to a wider audience.

The area of his records was almost entirely confined to the northern part of Frontenac County. Trans Canada Highway 7 runs east-west through three

townships (Kennebec, Olden, Oso) and most of his observations were from these counties, although he made visits to other areas farther north. The original notes from which the following were taken have been deposited in the Archives of the Royal Ontario Museum.

## **Brown Pelican, *Pelecanus occidentalis*:**

On 26 September 1933, he reports watching one for several minutes flying about Big Clear Lake (44°43'N, 76°55'W) beside Arden, apparently looking for food. There seems a reasonable probability that the identity of the bird was correct as he notes the wide expanse of the wings, the neck drawn back, legs not trailing, and the enormous beak among other things. The main concern would be the origin of the bird. Might there have been birds in flying condition in a zoo at that time? Lindsay reports sending a number of species to the Riverdale Zoo in Toronto around this period, including American Bittern (*Botaurus lentiginosus*), Northern Goshawk (*Accipiter gentilis*), Peregrine Falcon (*Falco peregrinus*), Belted Kingfisher (*Megaceryle alcyon*), and Loggerhead Shrike (*Lanius ludovicianus*) as if it were a relatively common practice. I am unaware of a local zoo from which a Brown Pelican might have come. However, they are certainly capable of flying long distances. The species has occurred in Ontario a couple of times in recent years when a less common species than it was then, suggesting it may well have been a wild bird.

**Canada Goose, *Branta canadensis*:** Observations as late as 1963 give no indication of Canada Goose nesting in northern Frontenac County as they are today, with the ever burgeoning populations in southern Ontario.

**Mallard, *Anas platyrhynchos*:** None were noted in the area in 1935, and a note made in 1950 indicates that it was only "in recent years" that any were to be found nesting in northern Frontenac County.

**American Black Duck, *A. rubripes*:** It was reported breeding through the period of his observations.

**Common Merganser, *Mergus merganser*:** He found a nest with 9 hatched and one addled egg (a family of 9 young was within a couple of hundred metres) under a large slab of rock on a ledge only 6.5 m from an occupied Peregrine Falcon nest. An old cedar stump, 1.5 m from the merganser nest, was regularly used as a plucking station by the falcons. A few of the old bones left by the falcons had been incorporated into the merganser nest. This was in July 1932 at the northern end of Crow Lake (44°42' N, 76°37' W), at the same eyrie where Beaupre had collected peregrine eggs about 1904 (Beaupre, 1922).

**Turkey Vulture, *Cathartes aura*:** Lindsay considered it to be an accidental visitor in 1935. He was aware of only 2 occurrences, both immediately to the south of his area of interest. However, by 1946 it had become regular, but still scarce, near the Highway 7 corridor where it is a regular sight today.

**Bald Eagle, *Haliaeetus leucocephalus*:** It was a regular resident in the southern part of the county early in this century

(Weir 1989), but was obviously scattered about the northern part as well, where none was present in the 1980s. Lindsay had reports compiled from various people indicating they had seen nests at Buckshot Lake (45°00' N, 47°04' W), Miller Township (prior to 1960); Norcan Lake (45°10' N, 76°52' W), North Canonto Township (until about 1955); and Kennebec Lake (44°44' N, 76°58' W), Kennebec Township (in the period 1945 to 1947). Observations of birds at Long Schooner Lake (45°06' N, 76°59' W), Miller Township, and "Burle" Lake (Brule - eds.), Miller Township (prior to 1930), suggest it may have nested there. Definite evidence of nesting came from Sharbot Lake (44°46' N, 76°41' W) where a nest was reported in 1903 (Young 1904); Big Gull Lake (44°50' N, 76°57' W), Clarendon Township, where a pair was noted on a nest in the spring of 1933; and from Crotch lake (= Cross Lake, 44°55' N, 76°48' W), Palmerston Township, where it was reported for many years prior to 1933, and again prior to 1938, and for many years prior to 1960 when two young were seen in a nest there.

**Red-tailed Hawk, *Buteo jamaicensis* / Red-shouldered Hawk, *B. lineatus*:** The Red-tailed Hawk was obviously considered quite scarce in the early 1930s. Lindsay was making notes at that time of individual birds seen. The Red-shouldered Hawk was considered more plentiful. By 1962, he reports greatly reduced numbers of Red-shouldered Hawk and that Red-tailed Hawk had become about as common. Today, Red-tailed Hawk greatly outnumbers the other.

**Ruffed Grouse, *Bonasa umbellus*:** From about 1924 to 1928, it was apparently so scarce that "few hunters would think of shooting any". But by 1932 and 1933, he reports it was again abundant and that thousands were illegally shipped to outside points, including hundreds to three of the largest hotels in Toronto.

**Spruce Grouse, *Dendragapus canadensis*:** It was "fairly well known" to pioneers, and could usually be found in "heavy coniferous swamps" throughout the northern part of the county until the mid thirties. He considered that it could still be found in some spruce swamps in 1935, and cites a bird shot in 1933 within 16 km of Arden. It is doubtful if there is any breeding population there today.

**Gray Partridge, *Perdix perdix*:** Small groups of eight birds were apparently released near Arden and Sharbot Lake in July of 1933, but declined and disappeared in succeeding months. More were seen in 1959, probably from another local release.

**Mourning Dove, *Zenaida macroura*:** Although nesting reports in the area go back to 1903 (Macoun and Macoun 1909), Lindsay considered it very uncommon in 1933 and still quite uncommon in 1961, where it is plentiful today.

**Passenger Pigeon, *Ectopistes migratorius*:** Lindsay interviewed several older inhabitants of the district who remembered large flocks in spring and autumn in the 1870s, but had no recollection of nesting in northern Frontenac County.

However, one of the most interesting notes came from a letter (no

indication of where it might now be found) written to C.W. Nash by Dr. C.K. Clarke (for biographies see McNicholl 1994), dated 7 August 1903. It says "Yesterday, I saw the Rev. C.J. Young of Sharbot Lake, and he gave me the following note regarding wild pigeons - 'I heard that a few wild pigeons had been seen near Clarendon (44°50'N, 76°39'W), on the Kingston and Pembroke Railroad. I investigated the matter and interviewed several regarding it. From what I learned the pigeons have bred in that locality for some years. Three years ago yesterday, (Aug. 6th) nine were observed by Mr. Bowles in a field. I went with Mr. Bowles to the same field and saw one mature bird. There was not the slightest doubt about its identity. I am familiar with the Mourning Doves and could not confuse the birds'."

This rather clearly suggests that Passenger Pigeon probably did nest in northern Frontenac County at one time, and that a few birds were still present in 1900. Although that was only two years prior to the last reliable report for the species in Ontario (Fleming 1903), the latest known nesting for Ontario (two years previously in 1898) was apparently also in Frontenac County in the Kingston area (Mitchell 1935), making the above seem quite a reasonable observation.

**Northern Flicker, *Colaptes auratus*:** In the spring of 1960, a neighbour reported finding a fledgling flicker at the base of a poplar stub. There were three other fledglings in a cavity located 2.5 m high. All had their throats cut open, presumably the work of a weasel.

**Bank Swallow, *Riparia riparia*:** A deep gravel pit near Mountain Grove (44°44'N, 76°51'W) had attracted a large colony in 1962. There were approximately 200 holes on the west wall and 350 on the east. A pair of Red Foxes (*Vulpes vulpes*) had dug a den about 200 m from this colony. This den was visible from the window of a farm house where the owner, Percy Gray, had watched the foxes raise five young. The foxes were sometimes seen coming to the Bank Swallow colony and digging holes down from the top to the swallow nests. Lindsay counted 28 holes at the top of the west bank on 4 July where the foxes had raided the nests.

**Cliff Swallow, *Hirundo pyrrhonota*:** On 23 June 1963, when visiting a farm close to Arden, he heard a commotion at a Cliff Swallow colony which had a row of nests under the eaves along the south side of a barn at a height of 8.5 m. There, Lindsay found a Milk Snake (*Lampropeltis triangulum*) clinging to the wall of the barn with its head inside a nest, eating the downy young swallows. He destroyed the snake (22 rifle) that measured about 73 cm long. He was informed that several days later a second snake was seen at the nests. No one interfered with the second snake, and the swallows abandoned the colony apparently because of the snake predation.

**Common Raven, *Corvus corax*:** According to an elderly resident, interviewed in 1963, ravens were once fairly common all through northern Frontenac County. However, once the White Pine (*Pinus strobus*) was logged out in the 1870s, the ravens soon disappeared. Others began reporting ravens near Arden again about the mid

1950s, and today it has reoccupied northern Frontenac County (Cadman et al. 1987).

**Tufted Titmouse, *Parus bicolor*:** Lindsay reports one for two days in late March 1962 at his feeding station, with chickadees and nuthatches. This was evidently one of numerous sightings through southern Ontario during that winter.

**Eastern Bluebird, *Sialia sialis*:** On 8 July 1933, he examined the body of an adult bird that a cottager had forcefully removed from the gullet of a large Bullfrog (*Rana catesbeiana*) that had been swallowing it. How the frog had been able to catch the bird is open to speculation. Although Bullfrogs are known predators of birds, a bird of this size and this species in an open marsh situation seems rather unusual.

**Gray Catbird, *Dumetella carolinensis*:** He reports a bird in apparent good health at his feeder on 19 February 1961. At that point, assuming it had been in the area all along, it had survived temperatures of -33°C and -35°C.

**European Starling, *Sturnus vulgaris*:** Lindsay found the first nest in the Arden area in 1926, the same year the first nest was reported for the Kingston area (Weir 1989).

Peck and James (1987) report starlings in a near-colonial situation with five nests in the same tree. Lindsay reports it in an even more colonial situation with five nests in the same 40 room Purple Martin (*Progne subis*) house at his place in Arden in 1963.

**Prairie Warbler, *Dendroica discolor*:** On the north side of Kennebec Lake for over two miles, rises a steeply inclined shore for upwards of 30 m. Fires had

swept across this slope sometime early in the century, removing most of the trees. It had then become overgrown with low scrubby oak, poplar, juniper and viburnum, providing good habitat for Prairie Warbler. Lindsay was aware of a colony there at least as early as 1933. He visited on 4 and 19 June 1933, hearing three males on each occasion. His next entry was in 1947 when he notes three visits in June. On 29 June in a walk of "less than a mile" he reports 26 adults (presumably both males and females) and saw 8 young representing at least 3 broods. In 1948, he attempted to census the colony on 20 June and counted 12 singing males in a "half mile" walk. This would work out to 48 pairs over 2 miles (3.2 km), but he then says he estimated a pair "about every 100 yards over a distance of 2 miles" or only about 35 pairs. In 1950, on 11 June, he again counted birds and noted 20 singing males within a "one mile stretch" (therefore perhaps 40 all together).

By 1960, he notes that trees had become much larger and were densely clothing the slope, and because of succession, the warblers were much less common. On 11 June 1960, he heard only 2 singing males and on 19 June also only two. His final note was in 1963 when on 22 June he heard 3 males and found a total of only 6 or 7 pairs.

This colony, then, was most active for a period of 30 to 40 years during the appropriate stages of succession. The Ontario Rare Breeding Bird Program has reports of a few birds still present in 1989, so birds may persist for many years after the habitat has become less than ideal at a traditional site.

In his typed notes, Lindsay always refers to this colony as being on

Kennebec Lake. However, in the speech he gave to the Toronto Ornithological Club in 1935 (copy of part with the field notes), he refers to it as being on Cross Lake. Bob Trowern, who was noted to be with Lindsay in 1947 at the Prairie Warbler colony, also referred to it as being on Cross Lake (on ONRS cards). The only Cross Lake listed in the gazetteer near Arden, is only an embayment of the Salmon River, and not nearly large enough or of the appropriate topography to have been the location of this colony. Lambert and Smith (1984) speculate that the Cross Lake locality was the same as the Kennebec Lake site and Lindsay's notes seem to confirm this.

Lindsay also reports finding a small colony at a place called Evergreen Mountain (45°08'N, 76°55'W), in North Canonto Township. He visited there on 27 May 1961 and heard three singing males, but speculates that there may have been more. This is a previously unreported site.

**Northern Cardinal, *Cardinalis cardinalis*:** The first report Lindsay had for Arden was "about 1935", but then not again until "probably May 1949", more than a decade later. The third date he listed was 20 April 1963. There are still relatively few cardinals in northern Frontenac County.

**Common Grackle, *Quiscalus quiscula*/  
Red-winged Blackbird, *Agelaius phoeniceus*:** Common Grackles were reportedly somewhat scarce about Arden early in the century. Around 1925, the grackle definitely was outnumbered by the Red-winged Blackbird. However, by mid century the reverse was true.

### Other observations:

To the ever growing documentation of the destruction of birds by house cats could be added the following item. In 1932, a neighbour reported that their cat "often" brought back young American Bittern from a marsh near their house. In 1933, a Ruby-throated Hummingbird (*Archilochus colubris*) nest with 2 eggs situated 3.6 m above ground in a poplar tree was destroyed by a cat. In 1948, a neighbour informed him their cat had apparently killed an adult Northern Flicker. A fledgling Barn Swallow (*Hirundo rustica*) from a nest in a front entryway was killed by a cat while the other five young escaped.

Lindsay notes quite a few species taken in leghold traps. These were usually muskrat traps set in the wetlands, but others were noted. Such occurrences were no doubt fairly common in the early 1930s. Among the birds taken were American Bittern, Turkey Vulture, Northern Goshawk (mink and muskrat traps), Virginia Rail (*Rallus limicola*), Sora (*Porzana corollina*), Eastern Screech-Owl (*Otus asio* - weasel trap), Great Horned Owl (*Bubo virginianus* - pole trap), and Red-winged Blackbird.

And to the list of passerine birds singing inappropriate songs, he has four examples. On 12 May 1963, he noted a Chestnut-sided Warbler (*Dendroica pensylvanica*) singing similar to a "Myrtle Warbler" (*D. coronata*). On 10 June 1961, he heard a Black-throated Blue Warbler (*D. caerulescens*) singing so much like a Black-throated Green Warbler (*D. virens*) that he almost passed it off as the latter. On 20 June

1948, he heard what he took to be a Prairie Warbler singing its usual song, but ending it with a near-perfect rendition of a Field Sparrow (*Spizella pusilla*) song. On locating the bird he was astonished to find it was a Field Sparrow. On 11 July 1953, he heard a Song Sparrow (*Melospiza melodia*) that ended its usual song by adding on a very good rendition of a Northern Parula (*Parula americana*) song.

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