

# ONTARIO BIRDS

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Ronald Scovell  
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## Ontario Birds

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Material should be double-spaced and type-written if possible.

## Editorial Policy

*Ontario Birds* is the journal of the Ontario Field Ornithologists. Its aim is to provide a vehicle for the documentation of the birds of Ontario. We encourage the submission of full length articles or short notes on the status of bird species in Ontario, significant provincial or county distributional records, tips on bird identification, behavioural observations of birds in Ontario, location guides to significant birdwatching areas in Ontario, book reviews and similar

material of interest on Ontario birds. We do not accept submissions dealing with "listing" and we discourage Seasonal Reports of bird sightings as these are covered by *Bird Finding in Canada* and *American Birds*, respectively. Distributional records of species for which the Ontario Bird Records Committee (OBRC) requires documentation must be accepted by them before they can be published in *Ontario Birds*.

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## Letters to the Editors

Dear Editors:

Point Pelee National Park, without question, is deserving of its status as a Mecca for spring birders. But I question whether it is the most appropriate location for the spring field meeting of the OFO.

Unwilling to put up with the human hordes that overrun Pelee on May weekends, I planned my visit for a few weekdays immediately following the spring meeting. But I found that this offered no escape. The fact is that Pelee in May has just about reached the limit of its capacity to absorb the rapidly growing numbers of birders. "Operation Spread Out" was implemented to tackle the problem, but this voice of reason is barely audible over the din and clamour of the carnival atmosphere.

It is, of course, encouraging to see so many people sharing a common enthusiasm for birds. But, unfortunately, Pelee's reputation has outgrown its ability to deliver. Unrealistic expectations now draw crowds of once-a-year birders who would probably see just about the same variety of bird life in their own back yards if they only looked. What was a birder's paradise is fast being overtaken by a phenomenon most worthy of an anthropologist's investigation.

I certainly didn't mind being asked repeatedly to name the singing Tennessee Warblers which were everywhere, but seemed to have stumbled every second group I encountered. And I politely kept

my chuckles muffled when I overheard an elderly woman challenging the judgement of a staff naturalist who had just given the obvious explanation of her sighting of "a black bird with a yellow bill, poking its head out of a nesting hole." But finding "Catbird" entered in the Unusual Sightings Book was really too much. I suddenly felt as though I was on the wrong side of the bars in a zoo (Do the birds flock to Pelee to watch the antics of the humans?); I had to get out!

There are many other fine spring birding locations around Ontario. Rondeau, Long Point and Presqu'ile might even rival Pelee's long list of rarities if they received as much attention. I think it behooves the OFO to help focus attention on these "under-birded" parks while at the same time relieving some of the pressure on Point Pelee. This can readily be accomplished by holding the annual spring meeting at an alternate site. And I, for one, will make a point of attending instead of staying away, as I did this spring.

Virgil Martin  
Maryhill, Ont.

Dear Editors:

A minor alteration of my Guest Editorial in *Ontario Birds* 2:94-98, 1984 may leave perceptive readers puzzled as to how statements made in 1967

could become so engrained as to qualify as dogma and yet be refuted by the next year. In fact, the pioneer ethologist, O. Heinroth stated in a German publication in 1930 that birds do not yawn and his influence on the study of birds was so great that nobody questioned the statement. Even Konrad Lorenz commented on the taxonomic importance of the "fact" that neither birds nor reptiles yawn. This view held so firmly that the Sauers had a paper complete with documentary photographs on yawning in *Sylvia* warblers rejected. It was their discussion of the rigidity of this prevailing view that led Harrison to publish his evidence differentiating yawning from bill-stretching in the Greenfinch.

This, of course, does not alter the theme discussed in the editorial.

Martin K. McNicholl  
Port Rowan, Ontario

Dear Editors:

I should like the opportunity to reply to Ron Ridout's review in Vol. 3, No. 1 (1985) of *Our Heritage of Birds: Peterborough County in the Kawarthas*. This is not in the role of a bear defending her whelps. I feel the review was honest. But some matters of deeper import are involved, and these may affect others in a similar situation.

The book was sponsored by the Peterborough Field Naturalists, whose members gave invaluable input. I was allowed very wide powers of decision, and the onus is on me. Indeed, I walked deliberately with wide-open eyes into the situations which have concerned Mr. Ridout.

I believe very strongly that the purpose of the publication was only partly to contribute to the academic knowledge of an elite group of bird students. Perhaps more important was its role in reaching and indoctrinating the general public, since continuance of our natural 'heritage' largely depends on this. An attractive format, a semi-popular style, a variety of treatment and background material, and a low selling price were all part of this approach. An ambitious 3500 copies were printed of which around 3000 have been sold to date.

I knew at the time that this policy would induce some academics to dismiss the book as lightweight and superficial ("for the novice birder"). Fashion rules in these things, and we buck the trend at our peril. So I understand the somewhat patronizing conclusions of your reviewer.

However, I must rebut the implied charge of factual carelessness, a serious and damaging matter, as was pointed out. *A great deal of research, checking and heart-searching went into every entry*. Here again a policy decision had to be made—whether to omit everything not documented or approved by an 'official' body. Anyone who has taken part in the current Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas project for the past five years has confirmed that the books and the experts were woefully inadequate. At first, anything which did not fit the accepted body of knowledge or opinion was often rejected or downgraded ("Must be a migrant

or non-breeder"). We have all, I suppose, been guilty at some time of prejudging the facts and dismissing what does not fit our theories.

Yet there always remains the question of reliability, and it is not a clean, open-and-shut one. Many data were in fact rejected in preparing the book. But in other cases I felt that I should not be the one to reject arbitrarily what might well be a fact, albeit an inadequately supported one. Some of us remember the time when Jim Baillie was (rightly) rejecting all of the steady stream of Blue Grosbeak reports for Ontario. I felt then that the cumulative effect of these might prove significant (as it did) and should not be denied the light of day. Some of the earlier observations were almost certainly accurate. They were not decisive but they were useful in directing attention to possibilities. Bird study is rarely an exact matter, but rather one of informed but wary judgement.

When I felt it would be presumptuous on my part to drop an entry (although the evidence was less than 100% convincing), I decided to include it, while indicating the level of support behind it. The reader was then free to take it on its merits. Mr. Ridout has made this point in his review. I think we do this with any publication of this sort, however impressive. None is perfect. (In my extensive correspondence with Ross James he acknowledged this very point, in connection with the *Annotated Checklist of the Birds of Ontario*).

The February Scarlet Tanager

was apparently submitted by the observer to a previous record committee. Dr. James (in litt. April 13, 1983) wondered why I would question it, so it was included.

With regard to the Western Tanager entry, the *timing* of this observation by two experienced observers independently was unfortunate. But it appeared from any information I could gather at the time to fulfill criteria for this species, even though other possibilities have been raised since. Indeed, it is still a legitimate possibility, as has been acknowledged.

I agree with Mr. Ridout that the use of a combination of weeks and days in the individual species summaries has proved confusing. The usage was explained, but I should have remembered that few people read instructions! I must question whether use of specific dates would have been 'more accurate'. In many cases the body of available data would not have supported such a statement. Peterborough has historically been a rather neglected area ornithologically.

Future authors of local bird books may wish to consider the pitfalls I have pointed out, and make their own informed decisions. I hope they will not dismiss my work as trivial, careless or unconsidered.

Doug Sadler  
Peterborough, Ontario

Dear Editors:

Ron Ridout's comments on use of the term "hypothetical" in his review of Doug Sadler's book on the birds of the Peterborough area (*Ont. Birds* 3:37-38, 1985) embrace two separate issues— inclusion of unsubstantiated records and the use of the term itself.

Most state, provincial and regional works contain either a "hypothetical" list or include "hypothetical" species in brackets, smaller print, or some other manner differentiated from substantiated records. Some compilations include *all* species for which reports exist even if no details are available, while others include only records by reputable observers who provide documentary detail, but who were unable to obtain substantiating evidence or have other observers verify their sighting. Such probable, but unverified records may prove useful in future compilations, and outright rejection of them may obscure some pattern of range expansion not recognized until later. Species for which no details are available should certainly be rejected, but if the records have been published or cataloged elsewhere, a separate section or appendix indicating that these records have been rejected, similar to that used in the annual report of the Ontario Bird Records Committee, will save future researchers from unnecessary duplication of effort.

The term "hypothetical" in itself has long seemed inappropriate to me, as dictionaries characterize it in terms of supposition or

conjecture, and a few regional bird works use it in that sense. *Birds of Pacific Rim National Park* by Hatler *et al.* is one exception, where "hypothetical" species included those whose known range in surrounding areas suggested that they should occur locally. Except in the case of species currently undergoing a range expansion in the direction of the area in question, such speculation strikes me as out of place in such books.

In short, I feel that there is a place for probable, unsubstantiated records in regional works, provided that they are so labelled.

"Unsubstantiated" or some similar term would be better than "hypothetical" in labelling such records.

Martin K. McNicholl  
Port Rowan, Ontario

