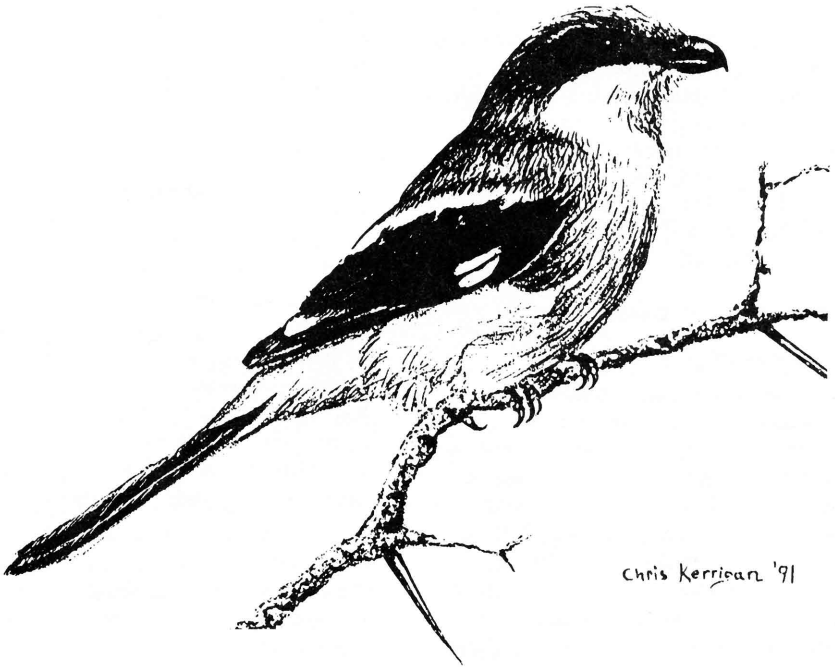


Ontario Field Ornithologists
BIRD FINDING GUIDE # 3

A BIRDER'S GUIDE
to the
CARDEN PLAIN



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Introduction

Tired of birding the same old places? Looking for somewhere new? The Carden Plain is one of the least known birding hot spots in southern Ontario. Located east of Lake Simcoe and bordering the southern edge of the Canadian Shield, the Carden Plain or Alvar hosts field-inhabiting birds such as Upland Sandpiper and Eastern Bluebird as abundantly as they were throughout much of southern Ontario half a century ago. The Plain or Alvar takes its name from Carden Township, in northern Victoria County, which occupies the central part of the area. Only 1 1/2 hours from Toronto, Carden is one of the last "lost corners" of the old rural Ontario landscape. Its remoteness and lack of human sounds offer a temporary break from our hectic life style. This site guide takes you through scenic backroads where the birds, vast meadows of wildflowers, butterflies, herptiles, mammals, and night sounds will bring you back again and again.

General Information

Background

An alvar is a geomorphological formation of flat limestone bedrock covered with thin soils and sparse vegetation. The Carden Alvar has a number of plant species that have western or prairie affinities (Catling *et al.* 1975). See Bowles (1991) for a checklist of vascular plants. Much of the alvar is ranchland. In fact, the open habitat preferred by Loggerhead Shrikes, Upland Sandpipers, Horned Larks, and Eastern Bluebirds is enhanced and maintained by cattle grazing (Pittaway 1991). The area is

lightly populated, with most human habitation concentrated in the cottage areas around Canal Lake and Lake Dalrymple.

Currently there are two large limestone quarries operating in Carden Township, and two others have recently been granted licences. Additional licence applications are expected because of public pressure to reduce mineral aggregate development on the Niagara Escarpment and Oak Ridges Moraine.

Season

The breeding birds and spectacular wildflower meadows are best seen in June, but anytime between mid-May and mid-July will be productive. After mid-July, the heat of summer desiccates the meadows, and many birds are more difficult to find.

Insects

Bring your insect repellent just in case, but biting insects are rarely a problem compared to many other birding areas. Blackflies are present in small numbers from mid-May to early June. They may be a nuisance on humid days, especially just before sunset. Fortunately, blackflies are not active at night! Mosquitoes are rarely a problem in open areas during the day. They are most active on humid days near wetlands just after sunset.

Poison Ivy

Poison Ivy (*Rhus radicans*) is abundant along roadsides. Wear long pants to avoid direct contact. The best prevention is to bathe or shower with lots of soap as soon as possible after your field trip. As well, be sure to wash your clothing before wearing

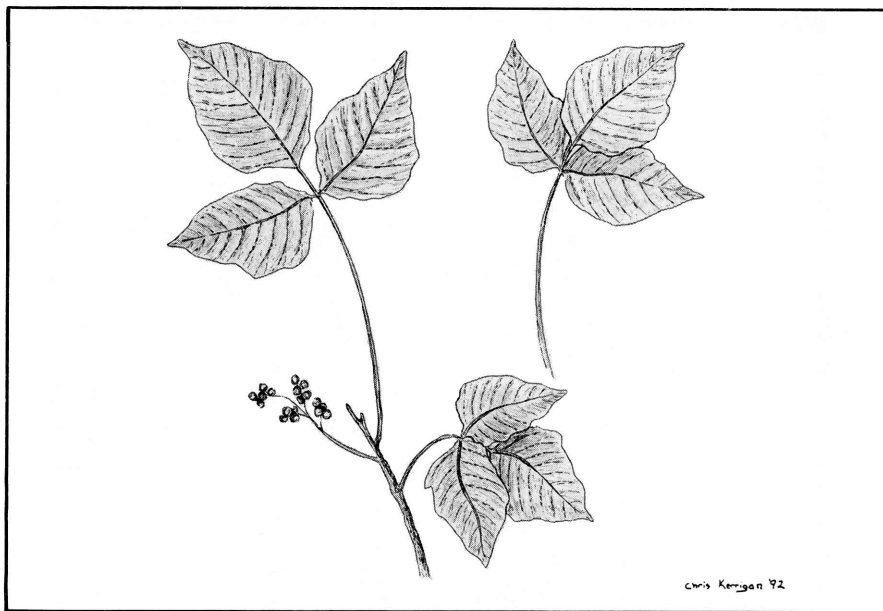


Figure 1: Poison Ivy. Drawing by *Chris Kerrigan*.

it again. Poison Ivy is easy to identify: learn to recognize its three distinctive leaflets, and avoid it. See Figure 1.

Backroads

The backroads are narrow. Fortunately traffic is usually light, but be careful not to block roads or laneways. There are some good spots to pull off or park, but be sure to check them on foot first. In spring and after heavy rains, some of the roads develop mud holes and washouts. Drive slowly, find a safe location to park, then bird the surrounding area.

Food and Accommodation

There are restaurants in Kirkfield, at the Lift Lock, and east of Highway 503 at Lake Dalrymple. Camping is

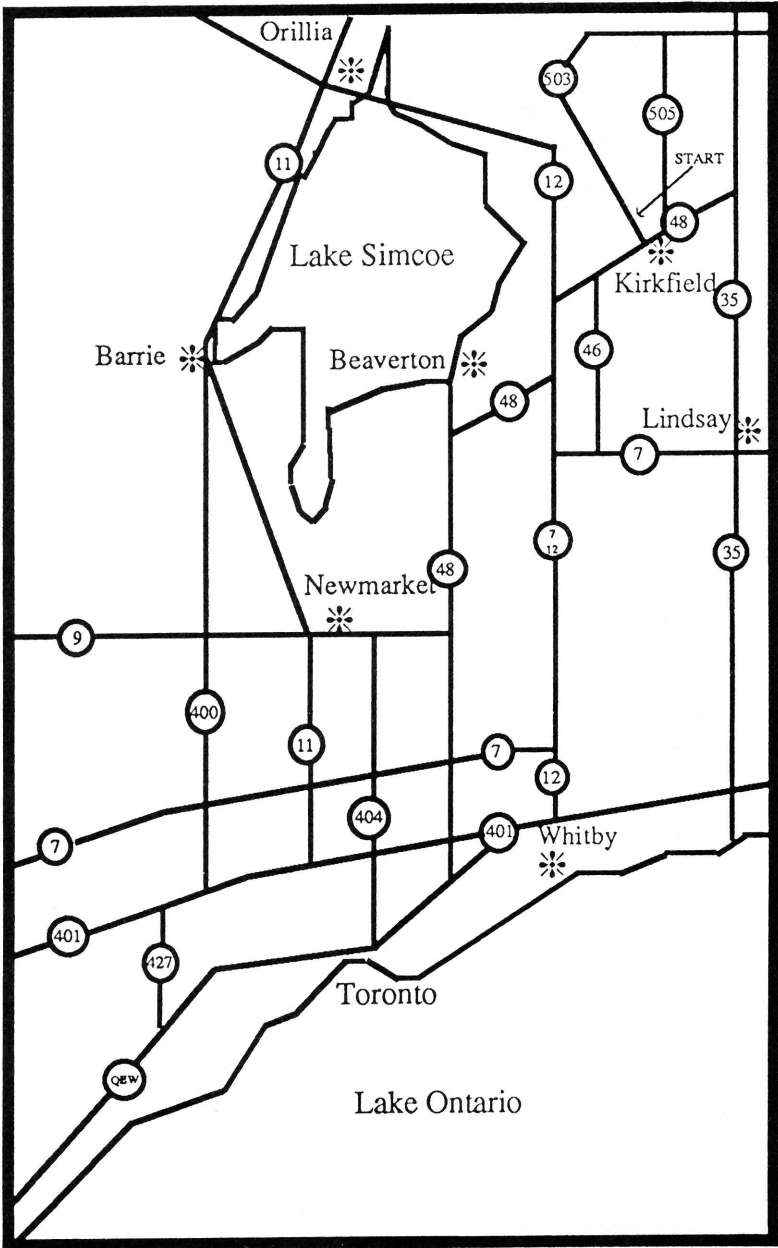
available at Balsam Lake Provincial Park, 12 km east of Kirkfield off Highway 48. Excellent motels are available nearby in Lindsay and Orillia.

Birding Ethics

Most of Carden is private property. Please do not trespass. Luckily, birds are easily viewed from roads and rights-of-way. Be careful not to block the narrow roads. Loggerhead Shrikes are a rare and declining species. Do not disturb these birds, look for nests, or attempt close-up photography.

How to Get There

The site guide begins at the Kirkfield Lift Lock on the Trent-Severn Waterway. See Map # 1. The Lift Lock is about a 1 1/2 hour drive (135 km) northeast of Toronto. From



Map # 1: Location of Carden Plain in Southern Ontario.
Map produced by Mike Turner.

Toronto, take Highway 401 to Highway 404 north or Highway 48 north. If you take Highway 404, turn right (east) at the end of the highway (Davis Drive) to connect with Highway 48. Highway 48 can also be reached from the 401 via Highway 12 at Whitby. Follow Highway 48 to the village of Kirkfield. At the main intersection, turn left (north) on Highway 503 and follow the signs to the Lift Lock. The seven stops in this guide are marked on Map #2, and distances between stops are given in the route descriptions. The route is approximately 41 km in length, ending at Highway 48 about 2 km east of the junction with Highway 46 near Bolsover. The route takes you through many varied habitats. I recommend that you relax and go slowly to enjoy the birdlife at and between stops. Bring a picnic lunch and get set to experience an abundance of some of Ontario's less common birds.

Site Guide

1. Lift Lock: Km 0.0

Three km north of Kirkfield on Highway 503, you will see a visitors' parking lot on the right just after the underpass. The Trent-Severn Waterway connects Lakes Ontario and Huron by way of the Kawartha Lakes and Lake Simcoe. The facilities here include washrooms, a picnic area, and nearby restaurant. Check the swallows here for Cliff and Northern Rough-winged. Set your car's odometer at zero before departing. Distances are cumulative between stops.

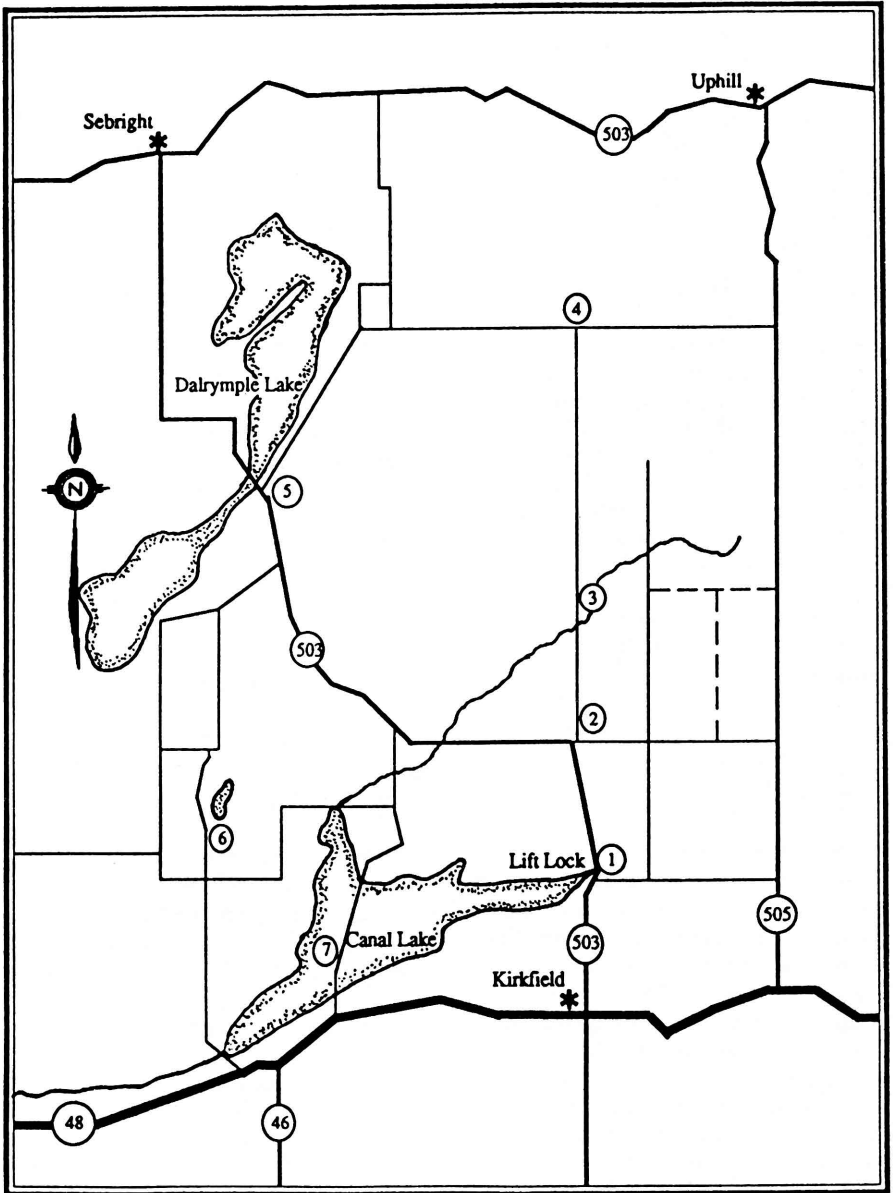
2. Concession Road 8 (unsigned): Km 2.6

From the Lift Lock drive 2.5 km north, turn right (east) onto the sideroad where Highway 503 turns sharply to the left (west). From the sideroad, turn left almost immediately on the first road and pull off on the shoulder. This unsigned road ends 9.4 km to the north at a "T" intersection (#4 on the map). You will soon discover why this is one of the most interesting birding roads in southern Ontario. At this stop, you should see Upland Sandpiper, Eastern Bluebird, Horned Lark, Vesper Sparrow, and perhaps a Red-headed Woodpecker. A pair of Brewer's Blackbirds spent several days at this corner in June, 1991.

Drive slowly north on this road, stopping frequently to enjoy the multitude of birds. Watch for Loggerhead Shrikes about 0.5 km north of the old house on the left. Carefully scan the tops of hawthorns and fence lines (Figure 2). A telescope is very helpful in viewing a distant shrike.

3. Sedge Wren Marsh: Km 5.4

You will see a pull-off on the left about 75 m before the bridge, or carefully park well to the side on the bridge itself to allow traffic to pass. This interesting wetland is one of the most reliable locations to find Sedge Wrens. They are most often found in the thick grasses and sedges north of the bridge. Walk slowly and listen for their "tip-tip-tip tittitittitititititititit" song. They are difficult to see, but being patient often pays off. Before mid-June, this is a good spot at dawn and dusk to hear and see Common Snipe



Map #2: Carden Plain Site Tour, showing numbered stops.
Map produced by *Mike Turner*.

and American Bittern. You may also hear Virginia Rails and Soras. The thick mats of white flowers floating on the creek are White Water-Buttercups (*Ranunculus longirostris*). On warm afternoons, Northern Water Snakes (*Natrix sipedon*) can often be seen basking near the bridge.

The open wooded area south of the marsh is a terrific spot at dusk to hear and see Common Nighthawks and Whip-poor-wills. Nighthawks boom immediately overhead, a fantastic experience on a quiet evening. Taped calls of the Whip-poor-will will bring them right to you!

4. Carden "T" Intersection: Km 12.0

It is 6.6 km from the Sedge Wren Marsh to where the road ends at what is known in Carden as the "T". This section goes through a variety of dry and wet meadows and scrub forest rich in birds. Drive slowly and plan to stop several times. Listen and watch for Grasshopper Sparrows in the dry short grass meadows. Rufous-sided Towhees and Field Sparrows are frequent in the scrubby areas, and occasionally a Golden-winged Warbler or Clay-colored Sparrow can be found. Watch for patches of Prairie Smoke or Long-plumed Purple Avens, a characteristic alvar wildflower (Figure 3). The abundance of wildflowers attracts a variety of butterflies to the area. At night along this section of road, watch for the bright eyeshine of Common Nighthawks and Whip-poor-wills on the road in your headlights. Listen for coyotes or brush wolves, and if you do not hear them, try giving long, throaty wolf-like howls to get a response. (Tip: Once you are familiar

with this road in daylight, try birding it in late afternoon and early evening!).

5. "T" to Highway 503: Km 21.0

Turn left (west) at the "T" towards Lake Dalrymple. It is 4.7 km to the next left turn at the Dalrymple Road. This section takes you through a coniferous forest of pine, spruce, cedar and juniper. Listen for the beautiful flute-like song of the Hermit Thrush. This evergreen forest with its Hermit Thrushes, Yellow-rumped Warblers, and White-throated Sparrows lends a distinctly northern flavour to the area. Turn left at the intersection with the Dalrymple Road, and soon you will enter a cottage area on the east shore of Lake Dalrymple. There is a store here, if you need a drink, snack, or washroom break. Continue southward to the junction with Highway 503, where there is a Purple Martin colony at the house on the left.

6. Cranberry Lake: Km 29.4

Turn left onto Highway 503. The Dalrymple General Store on the left (0.5 km) has refreshments, and there are washrooms at the side. Turn right one km south of the store and proceed 1.7 km to where the road forks. Loggerhead Shrikes have frequented this area in recent years. Continue straight ahead (left) at the forks. As you proceed you will see the Miller quarry on the left. About 0.6 km south of the quarry entrance, the road crosses a creek. Sometimes this is a worthwhile stop. About 1.7 km ahead, the road turns sharply to the right. Proceed a very short

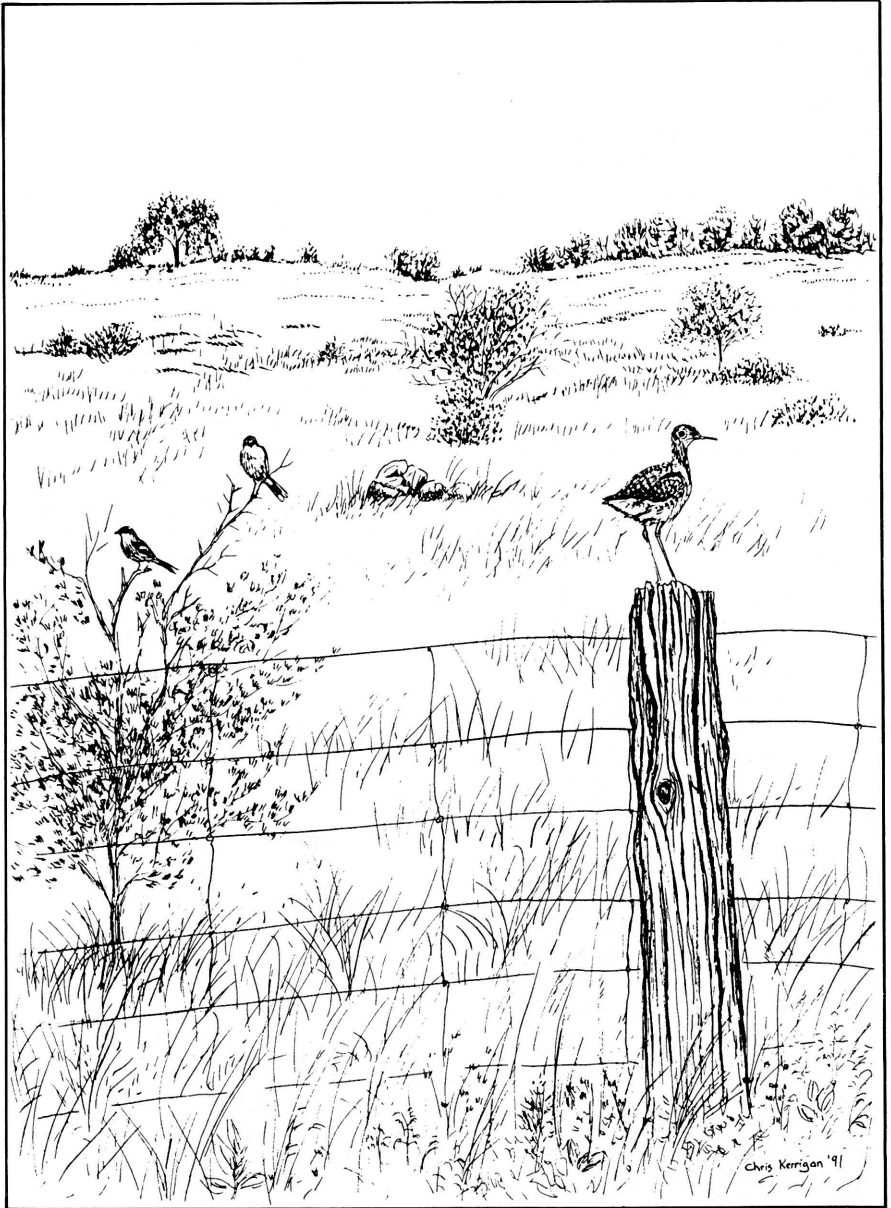


Figure 2: Typical alvar scene, with a pair of Loggerhead Shrikes in a hawthorn (*Crataegus* sp.), and an Upland Sandpiper on a fence post.
Drawing by Chris Kerrigan.

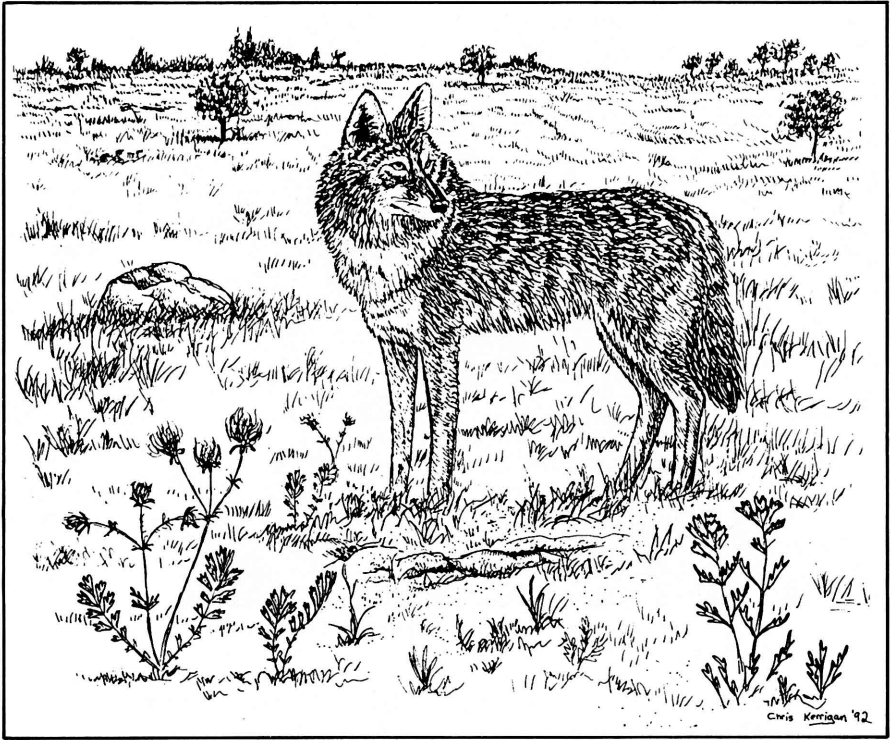


Figure 3: Carden alvar, showing Prairie Smoke (*Geum triflorum*) on left, coyote (*Canis latrans*) in centre, and Indian Paintbrush (*Castilleja coccinea*) at right. Drawing by Chris Kerrigan.

distance (0.2 km), and take the first very narrow road on your left. Cranberry Lake is visible in the distance. Go approximately 1.5 km to a point where the lake can be viewed from the top of a wooden-framed rock crib along the fence line. The tree immediately to the right of the rock crib is marked with two large spots of blue paint. Be careful, but standing on the crib allows a good view of the marsh and lake. You should see Black Terns flying over the lake. Listen for Marsh Wrens. Least Bitterns breed here and are occasionally seen flying over the

marsh. The Gormley quarry is on the right as you proceed another 1.5 km to the next intersection. A new quarry was licenced in 1991 for the area to your left (east). It may not begin operations for several years.

The route goes left (east) from here to Canal Lake. However, if you have not seen a Loggerhead Shrike yet, it is worth spending a little time checking the surrounding area before continuing. First, from the intersection go straight (south) for 1.3 km. Scan the tops of distant trees on the left for shrikes, which nested in this area in 1991. Second, return to

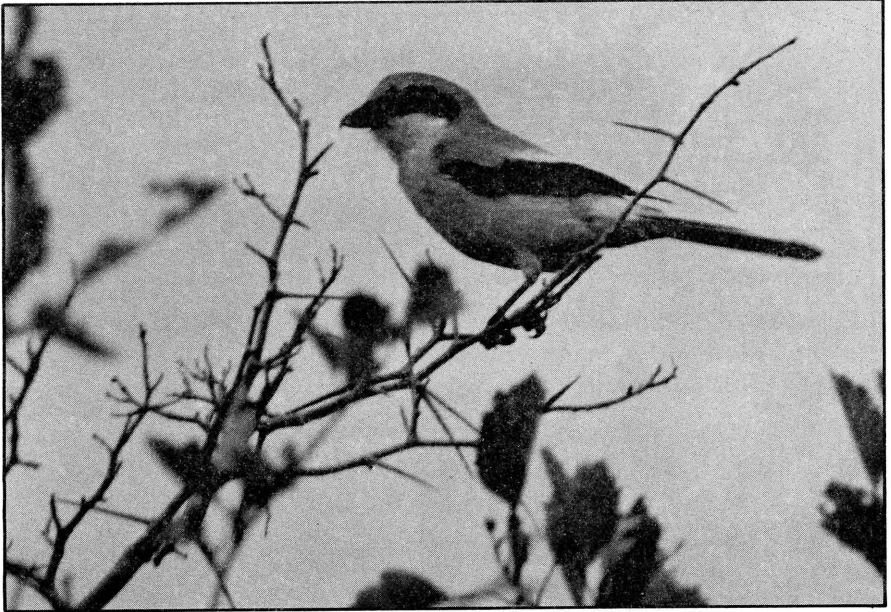


Figure 4: Loggerhead Shrike in a hawthorn on the Carden Plain.
Photo by Ron Pittaway.

the intersection and go left (west) one km to the sharp corner. Again, scan for shrikes. Brewer's Blackbirds nested near this location in 1989. Western Meadowlark is also a possibility in this area. Now, return to the intersection to continue your tour.

7. Canal Lake Causeway: Km 38.7

Proceed left (east) at the intersection, going 5.7 km to where the road ends at a "T". Turn right (south) going 2.3 km to the Osprey's nest on top of the hydro pole at the middle of the causeway across Canal Lake. You can obtain excellent close-up views of adult and young Ospreys on the nest, right from your car. Common Terns nest on the lake and can often be seen from the causeway. Also watch for Caspian Terns and Common

Loons. Continue 3.0 km to Highway 48, where the trip ends. I hope that you enjoyed the birds and will come back again.

Postscript

Another side trip to see more of the Carden Plain, or perhaps find that Loggerhead Shrike (Figure 4) which may have eluded you so far, involves turning left (east) on Highway 48 at the end of the tour described above. Proceed through Kirkfield to the junction of Highways 48 and 505. Turn left (north) on Highway 505, and bird northward to where 505 meets Highway 503 at Uphill. Then you can turn around and proceed southward again on 505, to retrace your route (and watch for birds which you may have missed the first

time). You should see many Upland Sandpipers, Eastern Bluebirds, Horned Larks, Turkey Vultures, Vesper Sparrows, Bobolinks, and Eastern Kingbirds, with a good chance for Red-headed Woodpecker and Loggerhead Shrike, as well.

Acknowledgements

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FIELD NOTES
