

Holiday Beach Provincial Park Ontario, Canada

*Exploring a little known park in Ontario
that just happens to be one of the
top hawk migration areas in North America.*

Allen Chartier



An Osprey or two will spend a few days, and sometimes the entire fall, in the extensive marsh area.

Location

Essex County, Ontario, Canada, about 6 miles southeast of Amherstburg. Twenty miles south of Windsor.

Description

The park is situated on the eastern shore of the estuary of Big Creek and the north shore of Lake Erie. The estuary, visible from several points in the park, is about one kilometer across. The water is mainly open with cattail marshes around the edges, with a stand of the quickly disappearing American Lotus. Occasional low water levels create good shorebird habitat.

The park proper is composed mainly of deciduous woods of varying densities and open areas. There are no densely wooded areas as the majority of the park is used for camping, picnicking and beach activities. Very little natural forest floor exists and most surfaces are grassy or gravel parking lots. The eastern end toward the beach has the tallest trees. In the fall, the far parking lot is the birders' focus of activities, with a row of willows along the southern edge that can be very productive. There is a good view of the beach, marsh, and, most important, the

Hawk enthusiasts crowd the parking lot during the fall, especially on weekends. Photo/Dick Benoit.



sky, from this parking lot. The road near the park entrance is lined with Red Cedars and Scotch Pines. The dirt road opposite the park entrance passes by another good pine plantation and through several corn and sod fields.

Access

The Windsor, Ontario, airport is the closest major airport. Metropolitan Airport in Detroit, Michigan, may have more frequent flights or more convenient schedules, but is about 20 miles from the Ambassador Bridge at the International border and over 40 miles from the park. You must pass through customs in both directions.

From the Ambassador Bridge proceed straight ahead to the left toward Highway 3. Go through Windsor 4 miles (6.5 km.) to Huron Line Road, also known as Essex County Road 7. Note that all speed limit and distance signs in Ontario are metrically measured. Follow Huron Line Road 4 miles (6.5 km.) to its end at Essex County Road 9. Turn right and follow this road for 9.4 miles (15.2 km.) until it ends at Highway 18. Turn right and go 1.7 miles (2.7 km.) to Essex County Road 50. Turn left and drive 1.25 miles (2 km.) to the park entrance on the right. Follow the park road for 1.25 miles (2 km.), bearing right at both forks in the road. At a cyclone fence bordering the marsh is the far parking lot used by the hawk counters.

An alternate route from the Ambassador Bridge is to veer right toward Highway 18, then left at the river following the signs for Highway 18. This route first passes the industrial area of Windsor and then follows the Detroit River for some distance to Amherstburg, about 18.5 miles (30 km.) away. Continue 2 miles (3.2 km.) through town and another 5 miles (8 km.) to Essex County Road 50. Turn right and follow the directions given above from this point on.

From late spring until early fall (mid-September) an entrance fee is charged. From mid-September until the third week in November, waterfowl hunters invade the park. If birding the park before dawn, please restrict your movements and be aware of the presence of hunters.

Accommodations

There are motels in Windsor and Amherstburg, Ontario. Windsor is about 20 miles from the park and Amherstburg is

about 6 miles. The park itself offers camping in summer and early fall, after which time the park is unattended. Restrooms are always closed by early September.

Birding

Winter, spring and summer data are relatively unknown compared to those of the fall season, when most birding occurs in the park. This is owing mainly to the fall hawk migration.

Winter birding along the shore of Lake Erie may produce many diving ducks, mergansers, Horned Grebes (*Podiceps auritus*) and maybe a scoter if there is open water. If there has been a good migration of winter finches, there may be a few Pine Siskins (*Carduelis pinus*), Evening Grosbeaks (*Coccothraustes vespertinus*), Purple Finches (*Carpodacus purpureus*), American Tree Sparrows (*Spizella arborea*) and Dark-eyed Juncos (*Junco hyemalis*) in the park. Great Horned Owl (*Bubo virginianus*) and Eastern Screech-Owl (*Otus asio*) may be resident through the winter with Long-eared (*Asio otus*) and Northern Saw-whet owls (*Aegolius acadicus*) rare possibilities. Occasionally the fall hawk migration will continue into December with Red-tailed (*Buteo jamaicensis*), Red-shouldered (*B. lineatus*) and Rough-legged (*B. lagopus*) hawks predominating.

In spring it may appear that there are no birds in the park. There are few bird-watchers since this is the least visited time of year. The few observations that have been made at this time indicate that little more than birds that commonly summer in the park pass through in migration.

Summer sees the peak of picnicking, camping and beach activities. In spite of all the people, one can find a few interesting birds. The marsh has many birds, including Marsh Wrens (*Cistothorus palustris*), herons, Great Egrets (*Casmerodius albus*), bitterns, Virginia Rails (*Rallus limicola*), Sora (*Porzana carolina*), coots and moorhens. Great Horned Owls and Eastern Screech-Owls probably breed in the park. Yellow-billed Cuckoos (*Coccyzus americanus*) nest occasionally near park headquarters. In July shorebirds become more numerous although the marsh rarely provides good mudflats near enough to 'scope, so many will be flying overhead. The real treasure in the summer and on into late fall is the nesting pair

of Bald Eagles (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*). The nest site varies from year to year and usually cannot be seen from the park. The hunting adults are easily seen as they fly over the marsh, lake, and sometimes wonderfully low over the far parking lot. They have several favorite perches across the marsh so they can regularly be spotted. When the young fledge it is not difficult to see three or four eagles at once.

August signals the beginning of the fall migration. Many species of swallow migrate now and Purple Martins (*Progne subis*) and Bank Swallows (*Riparia riparia*) reach their peaks in this month. Warblers often invade the park by the hundreds, especially in the last two weeks of the month when up to 20 species may be seen. The last week of August sees the beginning of the Ruby-throated Hummingbird (*Archilochus colubris*) migration which may be observed from the far parking lot where the hawks are counted. American Kestrels (*Falco sparverius*) and Sharp-shinned Hawks (*Accipiter striatus*) sometimes start migrating early at this time too.

September 1 marks the official beginning of the hawk watching season and hawk counters are on duty every day. Sharp-shinned and kestrels are the main migrants until sometime between the 10th and 20th when the Broad-winged Hawks (*Buteo platypterus*) peak in their migration. Approximately 90% of the Broad-wingeds come through within a 3 or 4 day period following a strong cold front with northwest winds following. A peak of 20,000 ± can be counted on and in recent years, peak days of 35,000 and 90,000 (a North American record outside of Texas) have been seen.

The entire month is good for warblers and vireos when a willow hedge on the south side of the far parking lot is often very productive. Swallows migrate throughout the month and Eastern Kingbirds (*Tyrannus tyrannus*) and other flycatchers are present and going through, as well as Cedar Waxwings (*Bombycilla cedrorum*), American Goldfinches (*Carduelis tristis*) and Rose-breasted Grosbeaks (*Pheucticus ludovicianus*). Bobolinks (*Dolichonyx oryzivorus*) fly through very high and can only be identified by call. The hummingbird migration peaks between September 7 and 10, with peak days of 300 and 500 being recorded. More typically 20-50 come through on an average day and are more or less finished by the 20th. Common (*Sterna hirundo*),

Forster's (*S. forsteri*) and Caspian (*S. caspia*) terns migrate through in moderate numbers. The end of the month sees more variety of later fall migrants, with kinglets and nuthatches appearing and Pine Siskins beginning to move through.

October brings the greatest variety of hawks, watch for Merlins (*Falco columbarius*) and Peregrines (*F. peregrinus*) in the early part of the month. Only a dozen or two of each come through each year so luck and persistence are important. Sharp-shinned and kestrels have peaked in late September, although 500-600 Sharp-shinned and 100± kestrels may still be seen on any given day. Cooper's Hawks (*Accipiter cooperii*) generally start now and the Broad-wingeds taper off until the middle of the month. Red-taileds, Red-shouldered, Turkey Vultures (*Cathartes aura*) and Northern Harriers (*Circus cyaneus*) predominate in the last half of the month with some migrating Bald Eagles, Ospreys (*Pandion haliaetus*), and maybe an early Northern Goshawk (*Accipiter gentilis*) to make things exciting. One thousand plus Red-taileds and 300+ Red-shouldered can be seen on a good day.

Tree Swallow is the predominant swallow during October and Yellow-rumped the most common warbler. Chimney Swifts (*Chaetura pelagica*), Northern Flickers (*Colaptes auratus*) and Red-headed Woodpeckers (*Melanerpes erythrocephalus*) pass through all month. Cedar Waxwings and American Goldfinches continue and, in an irruption year, Evening Grosbeaks, Pine Siskins and Purple Finches will fly over by the hundreds. Waterfowl numbers build up all month and impressive flocks can be seen. Late October sees the Canada Geese (*Branta canadensis*) and Snow Geese (*Chen caerulescens*) (mostly of the blue phase) leaving. Kinglets, creepers and chickadees appear.

The birdwatcher will be hard pressed to ignore the Blue Jays (*Cyanocitta cristata*). Although a common bird, it puts on an impressive show beginning the third week of September. At first hundreds, then thousands, then tens of thousands per day come through. On many days in the first two weeks of October 20,000 can be seen. In 1985, a record 350,000 passed through from September 21 to October 15, with over 30,000 being seen on three different days. Typically, 200,000 to 250,000 come through in a season and rarely, as in 1984, the birds remain to the north with an excellent berry crop. Only

28,000 came through in the entire year. Northern Saw-whet and Long-eared owls may be found in the conifers near the park entrance and the conifers across the road adjacent to the fields.

By November the hawk migration is by no means over and 1000± Red-taileds per day can still be seen along with many Red-shouldered and, in an irruption year, Northern Goshawks become easier to see. Cooper's and Sharp-shinned hawks have dwindled, but Rough-legged Hawk migration is just beginning. The real prize of the month will be a Golden Eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*). If the winds are strong from the northwest, one has a fair chance of seeing up to seven or eight in one day out of the 25± that pass through every year. They often wait until afternoon to fly over and often quite high so bring a spotting scope. The winter finches continue through the month. Add Horned Larks (*Eremophila alpestris*), Water Pipits (*Anthus spinoletta*), Lapland Longspurs (*Calcarius lapponicus*) and Snow Buntings (*Plectrophenax nivalis*) to the list. Learn their calls as they will be flying over quite high. All four of these species may be seen in the fields opposite the entrance to the park. Juncos, several sparrow species and an Eastern Phoebe (*Sayornis phoebe*) may occur in the far parking lot. Listen for Eastern Bluebirds (*Sialia sialis*) migrating high over the park. American Crows (*Corvus brachyrhynchos*) fill the skies,

and a special treat may be a beautiful "V" of Tundra Swans (*Cygnus columbianus*) heading southeast high against the blue.

Obviously fall is the best season to bird in Holiday Beach Provincial Park and a tally of migrating species as well as the official hawk count has been going on for over nine years. A checklist has been compiled of the fall birds only, and now has well over 200 species. About 10 species were added to the list in 1985, including Sandhill Crane (*Grus canadensis*) and a very cooperative Black-backed Woodpecker (*Picoides arcticus*) that hung around for two days.

Seasonal Rating

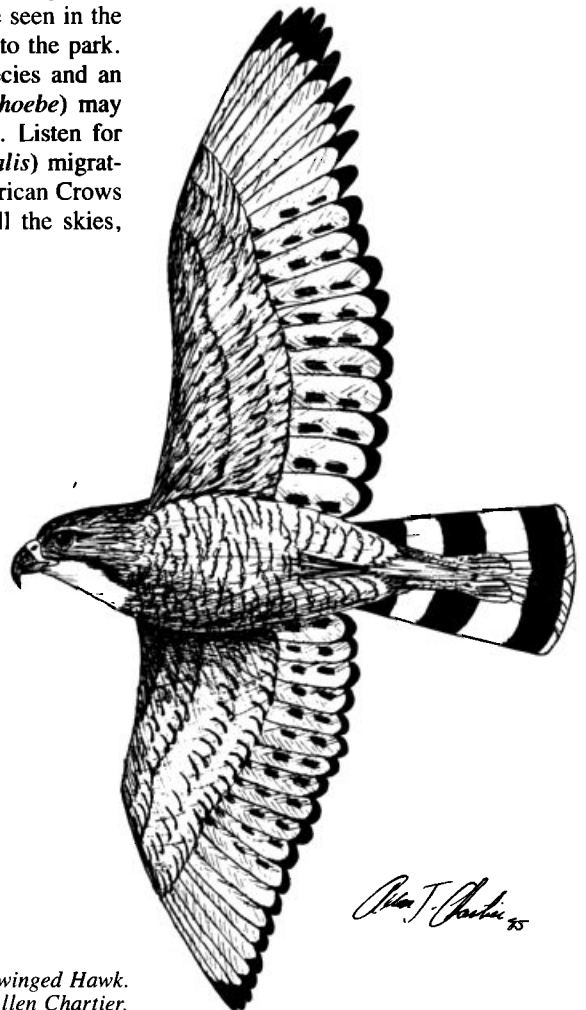
Spring (April-June) ★★

Summer (July-August) ★★★

Fall (September-November) ★★★★★

Winter (December-March) ★

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Adult Broad-winged Hawk.
Illustration/Allen Chartier.