

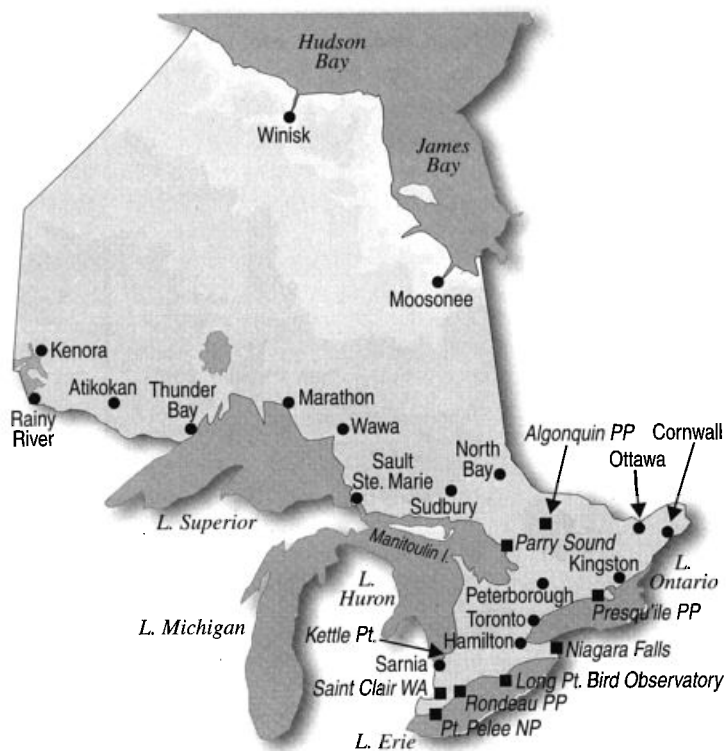
Throughout Ontario, it was “the summer that wasn’t.” The months of June and July were consistently wet, cool to cold, and cloudy. In many parts of the province, particularly the northwest, record low temperatures were recorded repeatedly. In other areas, extremely high amounts of rainfall caused localized but serious flooding. The adverse weather seemed to have had some effect on bird breeding activities. Again in the northwest, Tree Swallows simply gave up fighting the weather and did not nest. Common Loons were up to three weeks later than normal hatching young, and many observers commented on the general scarcity of young loons. Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas volunteers spent time along several of the far northern rivers that drain into Hudson Bay and James Bay, adding considerably to the understanding of bird numbers and species composition in the huge, remote, and rarely-birded northern parts of the province. Of note was the weather-related unprecedented early appearance of southbound adult shorebirds and subsequently rather small numbers of juvenile shorebirds. Also remarkable, but anticipated, was the first known attempted nesting of Black-necked Stilt in the province.

LOONS THROUGH VULTURES

Common Loons experienced a poor breeding season across the n. of the province, with observers reporting few young and late hatching into the 3rd week of Jul. Red-necked Grebes continued to nest in the busy Bronte Harbour, with 2 pairs present Jul+ (GE). American White Pelicans wandered widely in the province, with singles at Amherst I. 28 Jul (KH, CEG, JMcM), Presqu’île P.P. 25–26 Jul (FH), Point Pelee N.P. 5 Jun (AP), and Muddy Creek near Wheatley Harbour 21 Jun–9 Jul (EK et al.) Double-crested Cormorants continued to increase in Algonquin P.P., with 42 active nests counted on Gull I. in L. Opeongo 6 Jul (MR). In 2002, there were four nests in the colony. In Jun, 6000 Double-crested Cormorants were “removed” from islands in L. Ontario near Presqu’île P.P. as part of a controversial plan to reduce cormorant numbers in an attempt to retain habitat for other colonial nesting birds such as Great Blue Herons.

A single nest on the Leslie Street Spit, Greater Toronto Area (hereafter, G.T.A.) contained 4 young Great Egrets 1 Jul (RBSH, WP). Individual Great Egrets were found at Ottawa 16 Jun (JD) and at the Britannia C.A. 17 Jun (DM, m.ob.), while a total of 7 was seen on the Bruce Pen. during the period (JJ). A Snowy

Ontario



Egret was at Ashbridge’s Bay, G.T.A. 14 Jun (AD), and 3 in fine breeding plumage were noted at Kettle Pt. 6–9 Jun (AR). Rarely seen in the Ottawa area during the summer, an ad. Black-crowned Night-Heron at the Britannia C.A. mid-Jun–21 Jul was joined by another ad. 16 Jul (JS, m.ob.). A Yellow-crowned Night-Heron chose an unlikely place for a short rest: surprised observers noticed it on the balcony railing of a 6th floor apartment in Bronte (VMcN, GE).

WATERFOWL THROUGH SHOREBIRDS

An imm. male Harlequin Duck summered at Humber Bay Park, G.T.A. 5 Jun–25 Jul (MC, Toronto Field Naturalists), and a Bufflehead at the Amherstview S.T.P. 27 Jul was well s. of normal breeding range (BR). A flock of 100 Red-breasted Mergansers was found along an isolated section of the L. Ontario shoreline near McGlennon Pt. 23 Jun, an unusually high number for the time of year (CEG). Ruddy Ducks appear to be increasing in the Ottawa area, with up to 34, including several young, at the Alfred S.T.P. (DM, m.ob.), and up to 41, mostly ad. males, frequenting a pond at the Trail Road landfill (m.ob.). A molting Ruddy

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Duck was noted at Chub Pt. 18 Jun, the 4th summer record for the area (CEG).

A Swallow-tailed Kite was a very pleasant find 5 Jun near Copenhagen (WJR, RK). Two nests of Bald Eagle in Middlesex fledged a single young each (PR). A pair in Algonquin P.P. also fledged a single young, first seen in the nest 30 Jun and then perched nearby 21 Jul (GB, GF), only the 2nd breeding record for the park. A Peregrine Falcon was quite unexpected 4 Jul in the n. town of Pickle Lake (WM). The Yellow Rail colony in the Richmond Bog w. of Ottawa did well, with 5 singing males noted 21 May and 2 heard 4 Jun (BL, JD). Yellow Rails were also noted in early Jun in a marsh just n. of Dryden, with at least 4 heard at one time (DS). Another was heard 13 Jun and seen 16 Jun in a marsh at the mouth of the Wolf R. on L. Superior e. of Thunder

SA In early Jul, observers in the s. part of the province began seeing large flocks of southbound shorebirds, consisting of mainly adult birds. The return of these birds so soon after the spring northward movement was an indication that shorebirds in general may have had a poor breeding season in the Canadian Arctic. On 9 Jul, a flock of 150 Black-bellied Plover flew southward over the Blenheim S.T.P. (IW, DSm), an unprecedented date for the area. In a flock of 450 Semipalmated Sandpipers at the Townsend S.T.L. in early Aug, only a single juvenile could be found (KMCL). Similarly, 500 Lesser Yellowlegs at the Grand Bend S.T.P. in mid-Jul included only 4 juv. birds (AR).

The suspicion of a poor breeding year was confirmed by observers along the Hudson Bay coast and in the more northerly Arctic islands. The spring and summer weather conditions all across the Arctic were consistently and exceptionally wet, cold, and windy. Shorebirds that did attempt to nest were late starting and had very low hatching rates. In many areas, breeding was simply not attempted. Large mixed-species flocks of shorebirds were noted loafing at favored coastal sites on dates when they should have been spread across tundra breeding areas. In addition to weather conditions, shorebirds attempting to nest were subjected to greater-than-normal predation. Small mammal populations were coincidentally very low, and predators such as foxes, jaegers, gulls, and owls were hard-pressed to find food and exploited every opportunity, including shorebirds and their nests. Snow and Canada Geese also had a very low reproductive season. The effect of a poor breeding year on shorebirds in the long term is likely negligible, as Arctic species are well adapted to weather-related "boom-and-bust" cycles.

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Bay (BMo, NEG). Curiously, for the past two years, no Yellow Rails have been found n. of Rainy River, where they have been regular in the past (DHE). A King Rail was found in a roadside ditch 13 Jun near Wheatley (MKM).

Piping Plovers were not found this breeding season at the se. corner of the Lake of the Woods, the last known nesting site in the province. Two Semipalmated Plovers were noted near Hobo L. in Algonquin P.P. 15 Jun, a late date for the park (RT et al.). Observers were surprised to count 500+ Killdeer at the Grand Bend S.T.P. 23 Jul (AR); the flock had been building slowly throughout the month. First found 18 May at the Jarvis S.T.P., a pair of Black-necked Stilts attempted to nest in a nearby cornfield. The nest failed, and the birds were last noted 5 Jun (BJ). It was the first breeding record for the species in Ontario. Single American Avocets were noted at the Grand Bend S.T.P. 2 (AR) & 7 Jul (KE) and at the Tollgate Ponds, Hamilton 22 Jun (JH, m.ob.). A Willet was at Bluffer's Park, G.T.A. 28 Jul (GLKJ), and 5 were noted at Wheatley Harbour 31 Jul (MBR). A Whimbrel made an unexpected stop to feed on a front lawn at Minnitaki 2 Jun (CE). A pair of Wilson's Phalaropes fledged young in late Jun at the Grand Bend S.T.P., for one of a very few breeding records for *Lambton* (AR); an early southbound early migrant was found near Peter's Corners 18 Jul (RZD). Unexpected was a group of 7 ad. Red-necked Phalaropes at Des Chenes Rapids on the Ottawa R. 1 Jun (JDu).

GULLS THROUGH CROWS

An ad. Parasitic Jaeger 19 Jul at Van Wagners Beach, Hamilton was record early (EH). An ad. Laughing Gull, sick or injured, was at Wheatley Harbour 22 Jun (DW), and a first-summer bird was at Pelee I. 26 Jun (DW). Franklin's Gulls were common all summer at the se. corner of the Lake of the Woods (m.ob.), and

a first-summer bird was at Pelee I. 26 Jun (DW). A second-summer Lesser Black-backed Gull was at the tip of Point Pelee N.P. 5 Jun (STP et al.), and a first-summer bird was at Pelee I. 26 Jun (DW). A Glaucous Gull at Cobourg Harbour 2 Jun furnished the 2nd summer record for the area (CEG), and a Great Black-backed Gull on Caribou I. in L. Superior 2-8 Jul was well n. of usual breeding range (SB, MB). Caspian Terns are rare in the Ottawa area, so 2 at a pond near the Trail Road landfill 1 Jul (TB, m.ob.) and 4 on the Rideau R. 7 Jul were noteworthy (BMcB).

A White-winged Dove spent a short period 30 Jul at a feeder near Brighton after a night of heavy rainfall (FA). Great Gray Owls made sudden appearances n. and w. of L. Superior during the summer, but none appeared to be breeding (m.ob.). A Red-headed Woodpecker 21 Jun in Thunder Bay provided an unusual summer record. A Scissor-tailed Flycatcher was a very nice find 26 Jun at the St. Clair N.W.R. (CV). Cliff Swallows are considered rare breeders in the Point Pelee N.P. area; a concerted effort 12-15 Jun to locate colonies resulted in a total of nine found occupied by 36 pairs, an unprecedented number (AW). An example of avian adaptability was provided by a colony of Bank Swallows that had 325 nest holes in a huge pile of ash at a coal-fired electric plant in Toronto 6 Jun (GC).

TITMOUSE THROUGH FINCHES

Tufted Titmice continued to do well in n. *Lambton*, where an estimated 100 pairs reside (AR). A nest with six eggs found 6 Jun near Hobo L. in Algonquin P.P. was the first confirmed breeding record for the park (DT). A Northern Mockingbird, rare in the Ottawa area, was found 16 Jul near the Trail Road landfill, where nesting has occurred in the past (KH). A Northern Parula nest was found 26 Jun on Amherst I., well s. of the normal breeding range for the species in the province (RDW). An ad. and 2 juv. Palm Warblers

6-17 Jul at the Mer Bleue Bog provided the first Ottawa area breeding record in over 100 years (MB, LS). Hooded Warblers are rare e. of the G.T.A., so the presence of singing males near Codrington 26 Jun (RF) and near Grafton 21 Jul (CEG) was of interest. A Dickcissel sang persistently near Port Elgin 12 Jun (RJ) but could not be found thereafter. A territorial Eastern Meadowlark was very active at Sturgeon Creek most of the summer: it may have been part of the only breeding pair in the Point Pelee N.P. area, even though a female was not seen (AW et al.). Western Meadowlarks continue to decline in the Rainy River area. Since there has been no obvious change in habitat in the area, whatever is causing the decline may be occurring during migration or in wintering areas (DHE). A Yellow-headed Blackbird in Pickle Lake in early Jun was well n. of normal breeding areas (LC).

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State of the Region

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Ontario is a vast province with an extremely diverse array of biomes, from the Carolinian forest zone in the extreme southwest, through the Great Lakes deciduous forest, and north through the extensive boreal forest to the sub-arctic tundra of the James Bay and Hudson Bay coasts.

The primary challenge facing bird conservation in Ontario is habitat alteration, with much variation in the nature, cause, and impact of such alteration across the province. In parts of the Hudson Bay lowland area (Bird Conservation Region [BCR] 7), chronically high Snow Goose populations have resulted in severe degradation of coastal tundra habitat, to the detriment of breeding shorebird species. In southern Ontario (BCRs 12 and 13), the lowland plains around the Great Lakes have seen widespread changes in agricultural practices, including intensification of farming methods and a substantial decrease in the extent of agricultural grasslands, which have severely impacted the populations of almost all grassland-dependent bird species, including Upland Sandpiper, Northern Bobwhite, Vesper Sparrow, Grasshopper Sparrow, Eastern Meadowlark, and Bobolink among them. Urbanization in the extreme southern portion of the province meanwhile devours thousands of hectares of rural habitat each year. In the vast boreal forests of northern Ontario (BCR 8), considerable attention is now being focused on the impact that widespread forestry activities and other industrial development may have on birds and bird habitats.

Over the past 20 years, there has been a significant and widespread decline in many species of aerial-foraging insectivores in Ontario. This guild contains several diverse species, including swallows, Purple Martin, Chimney Swift, Common Nighthawk, and Whip-poor-will. Negative population trends for these birds as detected by the Breeding Bird Survey are echoed strongly by decreases in distribution being reported by the ongoing second Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas project. Causes of the observed declines in common species such as Barn Swallow and Bank



Annual outbreaks of Type E botulism on the lower Great Lakes between 1999 and 2004 resulted in the deaths of tens of thousands of fish-eating birds, such as this Common Loon at Long Point, Ontario in 2002. In the past, such outbreaks were very rare; the increase in such catastrophes has been tentatively linked to the spread of exotic species of mussels and fish. Photograph by Steve Timmermans.

Swallow are not known, but aerial foragers as a group are particularly vulnerable to severe weather events that reduce their food supply or ability to forage. The fact that species in this guild utilize diverse habitats, are mostly very widespread in Ontario, and winter in different parts of Central and South America suggests that habitat factors are not the primary cause of these recent declines. Are overall insect populations declining—and, if so, why?

The spread of exotic species presents another major threat to Ontario's birds. The introduced Mute Swan population is expanding rapidly in southern Ontario, to the detriment of

wetland habitats and wetland birds. Perhaps more worrying, there have been a series of avian botulism outbreaks on the lower Great Lakes in recent years, tentatively linked to the spread of exotic species of mussels and fish. In the past, such outbreaks were very rare events. Annual outbreaks of Type E botulism on the lower Great Lakes between 1999 and 2004 resulted in the deaths of tens of thousands of fish-eating birds, primarily Common Loons, Red-breasted Mergansers, and several gull species. The introduction of exotic insect pests into the province's forests is another growing threat. Most recently, considerable attention has been focused on the potential havoc that the Asian Long-horned Beetle and the Emerald Ash Borer may have on Ontario's deciduous forest communities. West Nile virus and other avian diseases also continue to be of concern.

Another emerging regional concern is the rapid expansion of the wind-energy industry. Over the next few years, the number of wind turbines in Ontario is expected to increase from a handful of pilot installations generating some 15 Megawatts (MW) of electricity to encompass several wind farms, each with 10 to 100 turbines, with a total capacity in excess of 300 MW, and the provincial government has set a target of generating 10% (2700 MW) of Ontario's energy capacity from renewable resources (including hydro, solar, and wind) by 2010. Due to the favorable combination of high winds and high demand, most proposed wind farm developments are located on or near the shorelines of the lower Great Lakes. As do the ocean coastlines, these shorelines concentrate millions of migrant birds, especially raptors and passerines, which funnel through the Great Lakes each spring and fall. Although the impact of wind-farm developments on migratory birds is believed to be relatively benign compared to some other threats, there is growing concern about the cumulative impact of the proliferating communication towers, wind turbines, large glass-walled buildings, and other structures that are known to be deadly obstacles to migratory birds.

Two species currently of particular management concern in Ontario are Loggerhead Shrike and Double-crested Cormorant. Small numbers, now fewer than 30 pairs, of the *migrans* subspecies of Loggerhead Shrike continue to breed in southern Ontario. A captive breeding program has been underway for several years. In 2004, some 35 pen-reared young shrikes were released to augment the wild population, but we still do not have a firm understanding of why shrike populations in Ontario and elsewhere are doing so poorly. By

contrast, Double-crested Cormorants are of management concern because the species is increasing exponentially. Various non-lethal management techniques, including oiling of eggs, have been used in recent years to curb this expansion—with limited success. In 2004, a cull of adult cormorants was carried out at one nesting colony on Lake Ontario, but the effectiveness of this method remains doubtful.

Weather records and climate change models indicate that weather patterns in Ontario have changed and will continue to change. Alterations in mean temperatures are expected to particularly affect very large water bodies such as the Great Lakes, James Bay, and Hudson Bay, which in their turn influence weather and precipitation patterns across the entire Region and beyond. Although the net impact of climate change on bird populations is unknown, the potential for major

problems is real, particularly since many bird species reach their northern or southern range limits in Ontario.

In broad perspective, we feel strongly that insufficient scientific attention is devoted to understanding the forces that drive bird populations to increase or decrease—on both the regional and continental levels. Identifying cause and effect should be a fundamental first step in the science that supports bird conservation. Until we are able to firmly "connect the dots," we will probably continue to watch species decline without knowing why.