

# Bird Wing Outing Report

Nipissing Naturalists Club



## Bird Wing Outing, Cache Bay

*By Renee Levesque, photos as indicated*

Every August since I began participating in Bird Wing – 10 years this September - the August outing has been to Cache Bay and it is an outing that never disappoints. There is always some surprise, one year a Sora, another year Black Terns. Neither was seen this year, but on our way to Cache Bay, in Sturgeon Falls at the corner of Ottawa Street and Hwy 17, there were about 40 Ring-billed Gulls flying around in circles obviously catching their evening meal, and what should be with them but 7 Common Nighthawks, one of my target birds for the outing! (Watching the show while sitting on a wire were two Ruby-throated Hummingbirds and a handful of European Starlings.)

The Common Nighthawk hunts aerial insects by night and day, most actively at dawn and dusk. It catches insects in its wide, gaping mouth as it flies about on its long wings with their flashing white patches. (Photo at right) If you have good ears, you might hear its buzzy *peent* call before you see it.

Often the best time to see Common Nighthawks is in late August when they start gathering to migrate south. Look for them during these warm summer evenings in cities and towns where there are bright lights that attract insects, but also look for them over treetops and grasslands.



*Ernie Frayle*



They are easily seen in the air when they are about in numbers, but once they land, you are lucky to find them because they are so well camouflaged in their drab, subdued feathers of streaky brown. A few years back, some of us saw one during the day roosting in a tree in Laurier Woods, thanks to Gary Chowns whose photo is at right.



Common Nighthawks belong to the family of Nightjars, but they are also known as Goatsuckers because it was once believed that their large mouths suckled milk at night from lactating goats. (Beware, Lori!)

Also on the way to Cache Bay, we saw a Broad-winged Hawk perched on the wire, bringing to mind Leonard Cohen's song, "Bird on a Wire", and recalling we saw one on the way to our destination during July's outing.

(Participants for this outing were Grant McKercher, Linda Stoner, Cindy Lafleur, Diane and Alvin Deagle, Dick Tafel and me. The Common Nighthawk was a lifer for Linda.)



*Diane Deagle*

As we came into Cache Bay, in the field behind the OPP station were 22 Canada Geese and many American Crows. And then we hit the ballpark (pun not intended) and there was one juvenile Osprey sitting besides its nest munching away on some fish. (photo at left) One of its parents was later seen flying over Lake Nipissing looking for a nice

catch. We didn't see it dive, but Stephen O'Donnell previously captured one catching its dinner and that photo graces the cover of this month's report.

Flying to and fro across the ballpark were at least 30 swallows, some Tree and some Barn.

However, not seeing the Osprey dive was more than made up by watching at least 7 to 9 Caspian Terns (photo of one below) kersplash as they hit the water, some of them successful in their efforts, some not. They could be seen at the trailer park and the boathouse sides. They weren't the only terns, though. Sitting far out in the Bay were 15 Common Terns with 5 Double-crested Cormorants, one a juvenile.



*Diane Deagle*

The Caspians were not the only ones busy diving for food. Two active Belted Kingfishers also were looking for their evening snack.

And out in the Bay were 2 Common Loons, some gulls, one Ring-billed just floating around close to the dock, 3 Northern Shovelers and 5 Wood Ducks, 4 at the trailer park side and 1 at the boathouse side more or less with the Shovelers.

As we viewed these ducks in our scopes, we saw a large cloud of Red-winged Blackbirds. They didn't give us a great look because no sooner did we spy them, then down they went into the marshy vegetation.





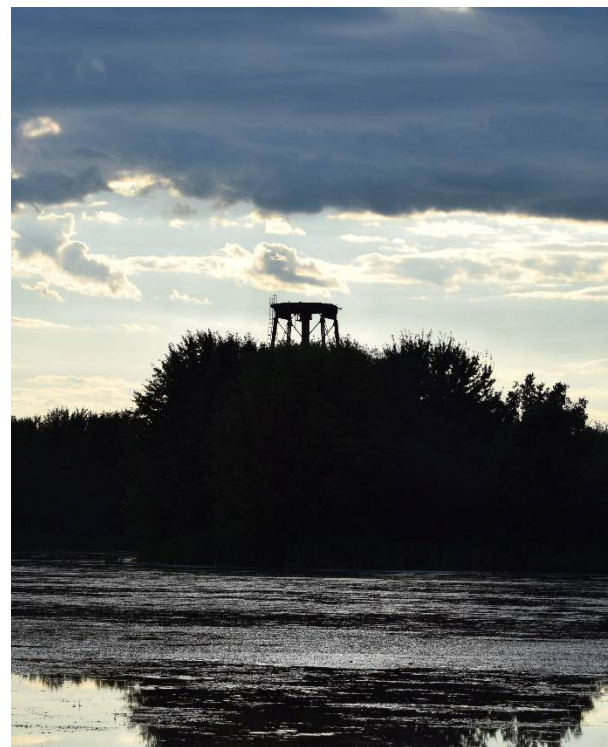
David Rooke

Some other passerines included 3 Great Crested Flycatchers (one at left), 3 American Robins, an Eastern Phoebe, a Black-capped Chickadee, a Common Yellow-throat, a Common Grackle, a White-breasted Nuthatch, a couple of large flocks of Cedar Waxwings, with 7 of them sitting nicely in a tree, and a Common Raven. Oh yes, and a sparrow that Grant pointed out that was sitting on the “turn buckle”. Linda and I were so busy trying to figure out what a turn buckle was that we didn’t get to identify the sparrow!

Birds were not our only amusement. We saw 3 otters splashing about on the trailer park side. And the tower (photo below) is always of interest,

especially after Dick and I told the rest of the group that we saw a woman climb to the top and then walk across it, while her husband stayed below and watched.

It was then off to Levac Road in hopes of seeing more Common Nighthawks because three of the party had not seen them earlier. We didn’t see any, but instead saw about 100 Sandhill Cranes (seen below) in the late evening sky. And not to be outdone by the flock of Sandhill Cranes, there was also a black bear in the field across the road. It ran from the field into the woods when Cindy got out of the car and because the rest of us were busy looking at the flying cranes – we were birding after all - she was the only one to see it.



We did not see any Trumpeter Swans this time round as we often do on our Cache Bay outing, but Cindy had one visit her at her workplace on Wallace Road. She sent me this photo (at right) of it outside her office. A bear sighting and a visit by a swan – not everyone is so lucky! (And she got even luckier during our recent Bird Bash! Stay tuned for Dick’s Bird Bash Report.)

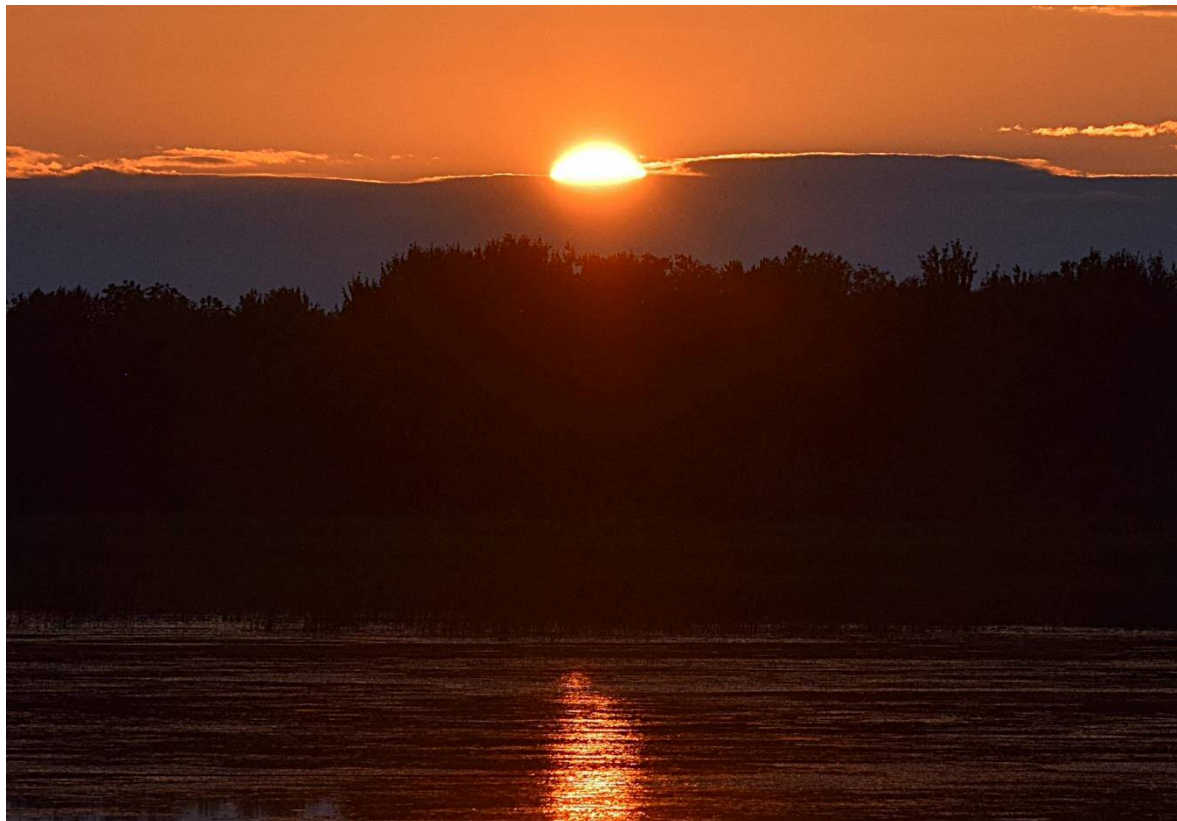


*Cindy Lafleur*

After seeing 26 species in total, we headed back to Sturgeon Falls for our annual trip to the Sturgeon Horton’s where two young people graciously gave up their seats for us.

On the way home, just past the hospital on Hwy 17, I saw a shooting star. Again, a song came to mind, Bob Dylan’s “Shooting Star”. And I remembered that a few years ago, I also saw a shooting star at the same location on the way back from Cache Bay. That could mean something – or it could not!

To end the evening at Cache Bay, we were rewarded with a beautiful sunset.



*Renee Levesque*



## More Powassan musings

*By Gary Sturge; photos as indicated*

### What do you call a flock of Baltimore Orioles – a ball team?

One morning in mid-August while we were sitting at the kitchen table, we suddenly saw a flock of about 12 Baltimore Orioles fly in and take over the hummingbird feeder beside the blooming honeysuckle bush. They filled the bush, fed at the feeder and ate the honeysuckle blossoms too. Some came back the next morning to get their fill again. (Photo of one, brilliant in the sun, above.)



*Gary Sturge*

### The south side chain gang

In mid-August on Hazel Glen Road, we encountered a “chain” of Bobolinks. There were well over a hundred all along the roadside and in the field on the south side of road. A cloud of over 50 took off at once. They were not in breeding colours and there were a lot of immatures. Neat seeing such a flock of birds.

### Tangled up in blue

During the July Bird Bash, Con and I discovered the “blue zone” on Hazel Glen Road – and I don’t tell you this to excite you! It was by the little brick farmhouse on the north side of the road before the quarry. Here we found Eastern Blue Birds, (photo at left), Indigo Buntings, Blue Jays and very blue Barn Swallows.



*Renee Levesque*

### If at first he doesn’t succeed, she does

We watched as mamma Hairy brought her two young to our seed feeders. She showed them how to jump onto the feeder from the adjacent spruce and pull seeds out of holes. So little Sister gives



it a try and wow it's so easy and it's free food to boot! But Junior can't seem to manage it and just stays in the spruce beside Mom and Sis, flapping away. He then decides to fly to the t-rail support where feeders are hung from a horizontal rail attached to two vertical ones at the ends. He wraps both feet around the rail, but starts sliding down. The more he tries, the further down he slides until he's grounded. With Mom and Sis having moved on to the next feeder challenge, Junior eventually figures it out.

The next day he's back and tries out different things. First off, he flies up to the brick on the house, clinging there and picking at the mortar. He does this several times over three days. He also decides to try corn as a staple and was at the feeder eating it for quite a while, just like the black birds. He also discovers the hummer feeder and after several abortive attempts, figures it out on the second day!

As in Gary's photos below, Junior finally gets it right!





# Another search for the Kirtland's Warbler

By Renee Levesque

I happened to be in the Barrie area with my husband for a couple of days in early August and decided to take advantage of that time to do some limited birding, specifically at the Packard Tract, Simcoe Forest Park. This particular tract is at the end of 9<sup>th</sup> Line Essa off Hwy 90.



Why this particular birding spot? Because it is “a Canadian-first restoration effort to create breeding/nesting habitat for the Kirtland’s Warbler, a globally rare songbird”, listed as endangered in Ontario. It is a bird I have never seen despite an attempt in the fall of 2019 in the McConnell Lake area with Dick Tafel, Marc Buchanan, Lori Anderson, Kaye Edmonds, Rose McClelland, Dan Burton and Marilee Koenderink. See: <https://www.nipnats.com/bird-wing/bird-wing-meetings-outings/>, October 2019 Bird Wing Report, “Our search for the Kirtland’s”, pages 8 to 10. (In looking over that report, I notice one photo in which you will find Marc, Marilee, me and Lori. However, it also states Dick is there. He isn’t, so don’t go searching for him hiding behind the bushes. He must have taken the photo and I did not notice in my proofreading efforts that “Photo by” was missing.)

From the Government of Ontario website: Kirtland’s Warblers have “very specific habitat requirements, typically nesting in well-drained sandy soils covered in large forests of young jack pine, a habitat often created by fire. They lay their nests on the ground, hidden away under low living branches of young jack pines with a thick cover of understory plants, such as grasses, sweet-fern and blueberry.” It is because they nest on the ground using the lower branches for cover that they prefer trees that are 5 to about 16 or 18 feet tall and at least six years old. Therefore, mature pines without branches near the ground are no longer of use to them. (Photo of the Packard Tract below.)

With such a restrictive and vanishing habitat, it is no wonder the Kirtland’s is rare. But in addition to its dependence on the type of habitat described above, it is a bird that is heavily parasitized by the Brown-headed Cowbird.



Photos by Renee Levesque

The Kirtland's Warbler is named after an Ohio doctor and naturalist, Jared Potter Kirtland. It is also called a Jack Pine Warbler for obvious reasons.



A warbler that constantly pumps its tail, the Kirtland's (photo at left) is large by warbler standards, 5 ¾ to 6 inches or about 15 cm, about the same size as an Ovenbird. The male is steel grey or blue/grey above with black streaks. It has a dark mark or black mask in front of its eye and a white eye crescent or incomplete eyering. It has a yellow throat and belly, dandelion yellow as one website descriptively states, with some black streaks along its sides. The female is, as one website states, a washed-out version of the male, grey/brown above with more extensive black streaking on its back and less intense yellow below, but with dark spotting. It does not sport a black mask. The male sings a boisterous, warbling song from high in the tree.

Joel Trick, Wikimedia Commons

The primary nesting area of the Kirtland's Warbler is in the northern Lower Peninsula in Michigan. Three decades ago in this area, there were 167 breeding pairs, and as of 2017, by controlling the habitat and trapping Brown-headed Cowbirds, that number increased to 2,000 breeding pairs, demonstrating it is a bird we are successfully able to bring back from the brink of extinction if we work at it, keeping up our efforts for decades to come. We camped in that area a couple of times in the past, but I knew nothing about the Kirtland's then and, in fact, not a great deal about birds in general.

Much later, I learned that the Kirtland's Warbler has nested at Garrison Petawawa, formerly the Canadian Forces Base. According to Tammy Richard in the December 2013 issue of *Ontario Birds*, nests were found there in 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, and 2012, producing at least 27 fledglings. The 2007 nest was the first in Canada in 62 years. I am unaware of the status of the Kirtland's at Petawawa since 2012.

The Kirtland's Warbler winters in the Bahamas, primarily in scrubby areas in the central Bahamas.

However, knowing I would not be going to Michigan this year and knowing I would not be allowed into Garrison Petawawa, and knowing I will probably not be going to the Bahamas this coming winter, I was hopeful that the conservation efforts at Packard Tract would render a view of this rare bird.





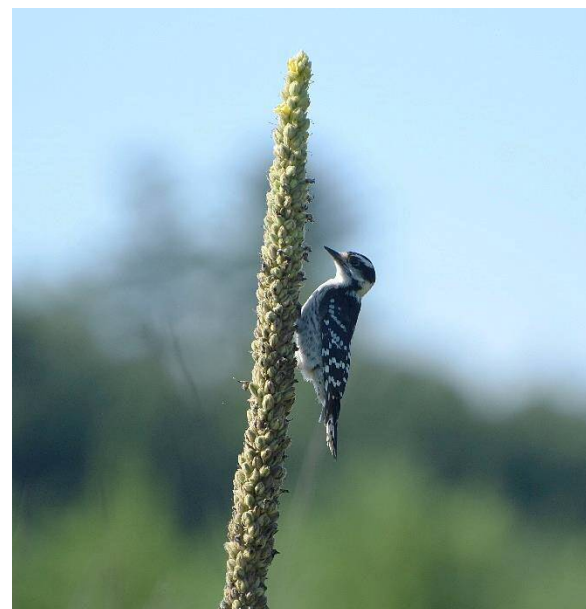
We arrived fairly early on a sunny, mostly cloudless day (photo above), hot even at that time of the morning. Beforehand, I had read the rules and regulations: Do not park in the turn-around area; do not block traffic or park in front of private driveways; do not use playback or vocal imitations of the Kirtland's Warbler or playback or imitations of owl calls or other sounds that might draw birds out; do not make any sounds that might agitate the birds; stay on the access road and out of closed areas; minimize noise; do not leave anything behind, including eaten fruit which can attract predators; and restrict visiting hours to between 6:00 a.m. and 6:00 p.m., May 1 to September 30. (Predation nestling rates are high among Kirtland's, with the main predators being squirrels, chipmunks, foxes, feral cats and Blue Jays.)

We were told there was a guest book to sign, but we did not see one, and that an OFO volunteer would be on hand, but while we were there, we did not see a soul.

We followed the rules and stuck to the trail/road that goes around the perimeter of the site, going halfway around and returning and then taking the other half and returning to optimize each half of the viewing road/trail.

There were jack pines in various stages of development, oak trees and a large field of Common Mulleins. (*Verbascum thapsus*) The Monarch butterfly certainly liked them, as did the Downy Woodpecker. I had never seen a Downy on a Common Mullein before, so it was a nice little treat, and although I didn't carry my camera around the whole perimeter, I did manage to get a photo of it, at right. (Other butterflies seen were the White Cabbage and the American Copper.)

We did not see any Kirtland's Warblers and according to eBird, I don't think any had been seen in some time. Yes, a disappointment, but it gives me a lifer for which to aim and an excuse to return to Packard Tract next May/June and perhaps even to Michigan. (And why not consider a winter trip to the



Photos by Renee Levesque



Bahamas where I have also been, but way before I even thought of birding.)

Despite not seeing our target bird, the walk itself yielded many other birds, three in particular I was happy to see, the Vesper Sparrow (at right) and the Field Sparrow (photo at end of article.) and the striking Eastern Towhee. It has been three years since I have seen a Vesper Sparrow in our area, two years since I have seen a Field Sparrow, and four years since I have seen an Eastern Towhee.



*Snowmanradio, Wikimedia Commons*

The two sightings of the Vesper Sparrow that I well remember were at South River's airport in August 2016 and Beaucage Park Road in April 2019. The one sighting of the Field Sparrow was on Cranberry Road and at Callander Lagoon in May 2020. And the two sightings of the Eastern Towhee were in my yard for two days in May in 2013 and one day in May in 2018.

Plan for next May and June to go to Simcoe Forest Park, Packard Tract, if it remains open to the public, or plan to go to Michigan. Michigan Audubon offers tours in Hartwick Pines State Park, near Grayling, and Forest Service offers self-guided tours out of the town of Mio in Oscoda County, Michigan.

For more information on Michigan Audubon tours, see:

<https://www.michiganaudubon.org/kirtlands-warbler-tours/>, and for information on the Forest Service self-guided tours, see:

<https://www.fs.usda.gov/recarea/hmnf/recarea/?recid=19002#:~:text=The%20Jack%20Pine%20Wildlife%20Viewing,and%20the%20watchable%20wildlife%20symbol.>

References: All About Birds, The Cornell Lab, Kirtland's Warbler; American Bird Conservancy, Kirtland's Warbler; All About Birds, Jack Pine Juggernauts, by Greg Breiwing, June 8, 2017; Birdwatching, Kirtland's Warblers in Ontario, October 2, 2018; Michigan Audubon, Kirtland's Warbler Tours; Ontario.ca, Kirtland's Warbler; Ontario Birds, August 2018, "Reflections on searching for and finding Kirtland's Warbler in Ontario and Quebec, 1976-2016", by Paul Leet Aird.



*Renee Levesqu*



## A brilliant bird of the swampy woodlands

*By Denise Desmarais; photos as indicated*

This past spring, my husband and I visited Point Pelee National Park for the Festival of Birds to witness the birds touch down on Canada's most southerly strip of land (photo below), something I've had on my to-do list for a while. I consider myself an "advanced beginner", and my husband considers himself a "bird finder" rather than a birder. In other words, he finds them, and I *attempt* to identify them. We decided that a trip to Point Pelee National Park would propel our birding skills and be a fun, relaxing holiday.



*Renee Levesque*

Ultimately, we didn't see the birds land. To do that, you need to be at the tip of the peninsula at dawn, which would require a ridiculously early wake-up call. We decided to let the early birds get the worm, and when we arrived around 8:00 a.m. we were able to drive right up to the park gate. Apparently at 6:00 a.m. there had been a long wait to enter the park.

An interesting part of the experience was participating in what I'm calling birding culture. The park was packed with people of every age (yes, there were some young people there) carrying enormous cameras, some of them so heavy they were being touted about in carts that looked a lot like baby carriages. Virtually everyone was carrying binoculars and peering and pointing into the woods, and every





*Parks Canada*

conversation was about birds. Almost everyone seemed to be an expert, but they were very friendly and polite, happy to share their knowledge with newbies like us.

My favourite memory is of coming upon the legendary Prothonotary Warbler, a warbler known to be found in Point Pelee National Park, as well as neighbouring Rondeau Provincial Park. We saw it in its habitat, flitting about in the marsh beside the boardwalk.



It is a beautiful small bird, brilliant yellow underneath with blue-grey wings and beady black eyes, wonderfully described in *All About Birds* as a “brilliant warbler that bounces along branches like a golden flashlight in the dim understory of swampy woodlands.” (photo at left)

The Prothonotary breeds in bottomland swamps and flooded woodlands and is primarily found in southeastern United States. It is unique in its nesting habits in that it is one of only two warblers that builds its nest in holes in standing dead trees. (The other is the Lucy’s Warbler found in desert southwestern United States.) The Prothonotary will also make use of nest boxes like those

*Mdf, Wikipedia*



installed over standing water in Point Pelee National Park.

Conservation problems include habitat loss from the draining of swamp forests and competition for tree cavities.

In Ontario, the Prothonotary is found primarily along or near the Lake Erie Shoreline. It is protected in Ontario under the Endangered Species Act, and in Canada, under the Federal Species at Risk Act.

On the boardwalk near where we saw it, there was a group of about a dozen birders, all sporting very large lenses and all actively following the Prothonotary. And I do mean actively! They ran from one end of the boardwalk to the other, relentlessly pursuing the little fellow. Anyone who was not a birder would have found it entertaining, perhaps even a bit bizarre. To be truthful, for a short time, I was a part of the throng, and I have a couple of poor quality photos to prove it. However, the warbler didn't seem to be at all bothered by the crowd as it continued to go about its business.

There is a reason why so many people flock to Point Pelee National Park during spring and also fall migration. It is a birder's paradise and in terms of migrating birds - the number of migrants are astounding!

I was satisfied with the roughly 60 species we saw over two days, but more experienced birders identified well over 100. Some of the other species I saw, like the Red-headed Woodpecker (photo at right) and the Blue-Gray Gnatcatcher, do not make their way to our area, so visiting the park provided an opportunity for me to add to my life list.

Other birds we saw included a Red-Bellied Woodpecker, a Red-Breasted Merganser, a



Wood Thrush, a Black-Throated Blue Warbler (photo below), Cliff Swallows, a Cooper's Hawk, a Wilson's Warbler, Canada Warblers, Indigo Buntings, Northern Cardinals and Baltimore Orioles galore, among others.



*Renee Levesque*

Visiting Point Pelee National Park was an enriching and even relaxing experience despite the throngs of birders, and if anything, the crowds added to the experience. We're looking forward to going back again and we might even make it a yearly event.

For more information on birds to be found at this significant Important Birding Area (IBA), see: <https://www.ibacanada.ca/site.jsp?siteID=ON006>.