

LIVING

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Birding at Rondeau I

After a wonderful breakfast of muffins, eggs and sausage, I stepped out onto the balcony of our bed and breakfast to get a sense of the bird activity on this mid-May morning. Barn swallows were coursing back and forth over the



OUR CHANGING SEASONS
Drew Monkman

backyard and song was everywhere. Baltimore orioles, song sparrows, red-winged blackbirds, house finches and yellow warblers all were adding their distinctive voices to the morning chorus.

Jim Cashmore, Mitch Brownstein and I had once again chosen the May long weekend to do our annual

pilgrimage to Rondeau Provincial Park, situated on Lake Erie just southeast of Blenheim. Like all of the peninsulas on the lower Great Lakes, Rondeau attracts impressive numbers of northward-bound migrants in the spring, and we were here to take in the show.

As I waited by the car for the others to get organized — after all these years, I can still hardly wait on these trips to get started in the morning — I was able to jump start the day's bird list with a warbling vireo singing from some poplars, several late white-crowned sparrows feeding on the driveway and a killdeer calling from an adjacent field. Like the Blenheim area in general, huge, flat agricultural fields dominate the landscape around the Morrison Manor B&B.

Our first stop was a section of marsh which had just been burned to remove invasive phragmites grass. What remained amounted to a large mudflat, an attractive habitat to migrating shorebirds. A flock of about two dozen dunlin was feeding intently and paying us no attention. We were able to get excellent, close-up looks of these dramatically coloured sandpipers. Unlike most birds in this family, the dunlin is easy to identify thanks to its red back and black belly. A few minutes later, an adult bald eagle flew over and garnered some well-deserved oos and awes. Only seconds later, Mitch alerted us to a breeding plumaged short-billed dowitcher which had just flown in. It, too, seemed completely oblivious to our presence and had no objection to our approaching within a few metres. We also quickly added marsh wren, kingfisher and bank swallow to the day's bird roster before heading on.

Proceeding down the main road leading into the park, we stopped at an old field bordered by thick shrubbery and, further back, some mature forest. This type of edge habitat is usually good for warblers and it did not disappoint us. Within minutes, we were able to "pish in" — repeating the "pish" sound over and over — six different warblers, namely the magnolia, black-and-white, Tennessee, Nashville, yellow, and one of our least common birds of the day, the mourning warbler. This often secretive species came right out into the open, allowing us to see all of the field marks including the dramatic black patch



Clockwise from top: purple martin, eastern towhee, blue-grey gnatcatcher and red-headed woodpecker, all Rondeau Park 'specialties.'

across the breast.

Before we left the field, we were also able to add blue-grey gnatcatcher, grey catbird, American woodcock, Forster's tern, chestnut-sided warbler, yellow-rumped warbler and Philadelphia vireo to the morning's sightings. The latter bird required several minutes of close observation to be sure it was not the much more common red-eyed vireo. From the woods in the distance, the "teacher-teacher-teacher" call of the ovenbird could be heard along with the "I'm so lazyyyy" of the black-throated blue warbler. Also adding its distinctive voice was the Carolina wren. This wren's boisterous "tea-kettle, tea-kettle, tea-kettle" song is one you soon get to know on bird trips to this part of the province.

At about 9 a.m., after checking out a couple of very busy purple martin nest boxes, we finally entered the park. As we do every year, we immediately headed to the area around the park maintenance building. Here, a number of trails wind their way through open forest and along the edge of a swamp. As we were locking the car, a Cooper's hawk sailed over, carrying some hapless bird in its talons. Then, a red-bellied woodpecker flew into a tree just above us. This very vocal woodpecker can be seen and heard

throughout the park. It wasn't long, either, before the "chewink" call of an eastern towhee alerted us to the bird's presence. A little bit of pishing coaxed this member of the sparrow family into full view, allowing us to fully appreciate the dramatic orange, black and white colouration. A Wilson's warbler, too, popped up to see what all of the commotion was about. This species is easily identifiable by its black cap.

A great deal of time can be saved — and neck strain avoided — by learning the calls and songs of the birds. For a May trip to Rondeau, the first songs to learn are those of the Baltimore oriole, grey catbird, yellow warbler and house wren. These four songsters make up at least half of the wall of sound that is present throughout most of the day. Knowing the songs is especially handy when it comes to secretive, skulking birds like the northern waterthrush, a species that only rarely shows itself. On this cool May morning, a very vocal waterthrush sang several times from the adjacent swamp but refused to be coaxed into view. A little later, an equally impossible to see black-throated green warbler broadcast its distinctive "pines, pines, whispering pines" song from the very top branches of a giant

oak.

As we were searching out birds, we also turned our attention from time to time to Rondeau's distinctive flora. Being in the Carolinian zone, species such as the tulip tree, American sycamore, spicebush and fragrant sumac are quite common. Wild phlox and wild geranium, too, grow throughout the park. Even poison ivy is different here, and usually presents itself as vine that snakes up tree trunks.

A little later, we ran into a group of birders that was doing a Baillie Birdathon, a special event to raise money for bird conversation. It was only 11 a.m., and they had already recorded 100 species! They told us there was an orange-crowned warbler feeding in a nearby patch of raspberry bushes. We immediately went over to the area, pished and a small bird immediately flew out. As it fed directly in front of us, we were able to clearly see a yellow wash under the tail, a daintily striped yellow breast, a drab olive back, and a blackish eyeline. After a quick check in the Sibley's bird guide, we concluded that it was indeed the orange-crowned, a species I'd only seen twice before and never this well. Finally, before leaving this very productive area, we also added a spectacular male bay-breasted warbler to the list.

It was now noon and time to get a coffee at the visitors centre, update our lists and see if any species of special interest had been put on the sightings board. While we enjoyed our coffee, we watched a steady stream of orioles, rose-breasted grosbeaks, hummingbirds and hairy woodpeckers coming to the feeders. Learning that a prothonotary had been seen on the Tulip Tree trail earlier that morning, we decided to give the trail a try. Although the warbler eluded us, a number of thrushes were present. These included a veery, a Swainson's thrush, and a pair of wood thrush, one of which was collecting nesting material. We also enjoyed a particularly good look at a blue-grey gnatcatcher, peering and prodding among the emerging leaves of a red oak and all the time giving its distinctive nasal call. This is one of the more common birds at Rondeau but a species we almost never see in the Kawarthas. The show of wildflowers was quite stunning along this trail, too, with jack-in-the-pulpit, bellwort, wild columbine, and white trillium growing everywhere. Since Rondeau's deer population was culled several years ago, the growth in the understory has been spectacular.

By now, the mid-afternoon birding doldrums had descended upon us, so we decided to check out the seemingly endless beach that runs along much of the Rondeau peninsula's perimeter. Numerous Bonaparte's gulls were sitting on the sand and, further out over the water, common and Forster's terns were flying by. These two terns are particularly hard to tell apart and we always end up having to relearn them each year.

The nearby South Point Trail offered up a brilliant male indigo bunting right where Jim said it had been all week. And, as we drove out of the park, he also spotted an immaculate red-headed woodpecker right at eye-level on the trunk of a tree.

Our 80th and final species for the day was a mute swan in the marsh where we'd seen the dunlin earlier in the same morning. Even though this was not an especially high number, it had been a satisfying day just the same. We were pleased with the 18 species of warblers — especially the mourning and orange-crowned — and it was reassuring to see such large numbers of swallows and purple martins. The decline in these birds does not seem to have affected the Great Lake population to the same extent as the inland populations.

We went to bed looking forward to Sunday and the hope that southerly winds would bring in new species. We also planned to visit the local sewage lagoons, where a good assortment of ducks, shorebirds and field species would almost certainly be present.

Next week: Part II.

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