

LIVING

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Island of the owls

Short ferry ride to Amherst Island also leads to hawks, water fowl

Several weeks ago, a friend and I had the pleasure of spending a day on Amherst Island, an internationally known mecca for winter birding. Located just west of Kingston on Lake Ontario, Amherst has long been noted for its large concentrations of wintering hawks and owls. Numbers are most spectacular in years when a lack of small mammals in the north forces birds of prey southward in search of food.

This is one of those years.

In addition to abundant food in the form of meadow voles, the owls in particular seem to be attracted to Amherst by the mix of tree species found here, especially red cedar, white cedar and jack pine. These trees all provide the birds with appropriate shelter for roosting during the day.



OUR CHANGING SEASONS
Drew Monkman

Many of the owls remain for several weeks or longer and therefore provide a wonderful opportunity for people to see and photograph a family of birds that is usually quite elusive.

Getting to Amherst Island involves a short ferry ride from Millhaven across to the island village of Stella. As we stood waiting for the ferry on that January morning, a huge bank of clouds towered above Lake Ontario, looking almost like a distant mountain range. We also watched a small flock of common goldeneye ducks and red-breasted mergansers as they dove for food in the small patch of water kept open by the ferry's comings and goings.

Arriving on the island, we headed eastward along the north shore. The road is bordered by open fields on both sides. Old barns, wooden fences and flocks of sheep create an ambiance not unlike parts of northern England. The first interesting bird species we encountered was a northern shrike perched atop an apple tree. A couple of minutes later, I pulled the car over onto the shoulder to check out a splotch of white perched upon a pile of rocks in the middle of an overgrown field. As I expected, it was an adult snowy owl. We would go on to see at least eight of these birds over the course of the day. A few have shown up in the Peterborough area this winter, too, but have not hung around.

Continuing eastward, we spotted a large, dark raptor flying low over a field. Through our binoculars, the black and white plumage stood out prominently against the snow. The bird was a "dark phase" rough-legged hawk, a species that presents itself in either a dark, light or intermediate colouration. As it patrolled over the field looking for prey, it suddenly stopped in mid-air and hovered, almost in helicopter fashion. The rough-legged breeds in the tundra and taiga of northern Canada but usually winters in extreme southern Ontario and much of the U.S.

Over the next hour or so, we found at least six more rough-leggeds as well as a nicely marked male northern harrier. The bird is easily identified by its white rump,



Karin Laine photo

silvery plumage, and habit of flying very low over fields and marshes. Moments later, an orange-brown coloured juvenile harrier also flew by, followed in quick succession by a red-tailed hawk and a kestrel. We enjoyed a great view of the kestrel perched upon a telephone wire as it dined on some hapless meadow vole that it had just caught.

After taking a moment to admire the impressive ice formations along the edge of Lake Ontario and checking out the large rafts of goldeneye and scaup ducks just off shore, we continued on to South Shore Road. Here, we took a narrow road inland that leads up to Owl Woods, the piece de resistance of a visit to Amherst.

As its name suggests, this is where most of the owls hang out. Part of the woods is owned by the Cataraqui Region Conservation Authority while the remainder is in private hands. The Kingston Field Naturalists maintain an information kiosk at the entrance to the trail leading into the woods, and club members also act as stewards of the property.

A well-travelled path leads through an open woodland, dominated by scattered red and white cedar, jack pine, sumac, and maples. Small side trails branch off in different directions, created by the many visitors who come here and check over the trees for roosting owls. The first owl we found was a tiny northern saw-whet, sitting somewhat concealed in the branches of a jack pine. This species, which isn't much bigger than a starling, has an attractive white V on the face and broad, brown streaks on the breast and belly. The black beak sets it apart from the somewhat similar boreal owl. Both of these owls are notoriously tame and – unfortunately in some respects – will allow you to get almost as close as you want.

Our next stop along the trail was a dense jack pine woodlot where long-eared owls typically roost together. It didn't take long before we found four of these rather comical looking birds as they peered down at us from the same tree. At first we only saw two. Five minutes later, we noticed a third. Finally, a fourth seemed to materi-

alize out of nowhere, a testament to this species' amazing ability to blend it with its surroundings. We were later told that as many as 20 long-eareds were in the woodlot that day. As a small group of people gathered to admire the owls, one of the birds struck an elongated pose, almost as if it had stretched itself out vertically. The strange posture, along with the combination of tall ear tufts, orangish face, and dark eye stripe, created a most comical impression. After taking a few pictures of this amusing quartet, we turned around to leave, only to discover that another saw-whet owl had been perched just behind us all along. This time, there were no branches in the way of getting a good picture. A code of ethics is displayed in the entrance area kiosk to remind visitors to respect the natural habitat of Owl Woods and to avoid harassing the roosting owls. Responsible conduct is especially important this year, given the large numbers of birders and photographers who have been coming. Despite the reminders, boorish behaviour has still been



Dave Heuft photo

Saw-whet owls (above) and boreal owls (left) can be told apart by the difference in beak colour and the dark V through the eyes of the boreal, which makes it appear almost angry.

Hopping to the island

Place: Amherst Island, in Lake Ontario near Kingston.

Directions: Take exit 593 from Highway 401, and proceed south on County Road 4 to Millhaven on Lake Ontario. The ferry dock is 200 metres west on Highway 33 (Bath Road).

Cost: A round-trip costs \$8.

Schedule: The ferry leaves every hour on the half hour from 6:30 a.m. onward.

occurring. A couple of weekends ago, several less than scrupulous photographers were roaming the woods with their outrageously large lenses, laughing and speaking loudly all the time, and even trimming branches off trees to get a better shot of the roosting owls. If this wasn't enough, one group spent over an hour taking flash pictures of a single boreal owl. Apparently, the bird did not enjoy a moment's peace all day. The cost to the birds could eventually be starvation if they are constantly stressed through this kind of harassment. Should you decide to go to Amherst yourself, remember to observe the bird with your binoculars from a respectful distance and then, if you want a picture, move in closer with your camera, take a few shots, and then leave the bird alone.

Before leaving Owl Woods, we managed to find several short-eared owls, our fourth owl species for the day. The birds were flying over a shrubby field adjacent to the jack pine woodlot. Short-eareds are relatively active during the day and have a floppy, almost moth-like flight. In many ways, they behave like northern harriers. In fact, the two species often occur together.

Small numbers of boreal, great horned, and barred owls have also been showing up on the island this winter. Northern hawk owl and great gray owls are a possibility, as well. Once again this year, great gray owls are turning up throughout central and southern Ontario. So, with a bit of luck, a trip to Amherst can produce as many as nine owl species. No wonder people have been coming from as far away as California this winter to witness the spectacle.

After we left Owl Woods, we headed down to the west end of the island. At least five snowy owls were perched on telephone poles and fence posts along the road. At one point, a snowy owl lifted off from its perch and flew straight ahead of us, right in front of our vehicle. Seconds later, a small flock of snow buntings flew along side the owl, almost like a group of escorts. Against the backdrop of snow-covered fields and a stormy Lake Ontario, it made for a memorable winter scene.

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