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LIVING

Birding at its best

International birding mecca lives up to its reputation

Even as we drove down the main road towards the visitors centre at Point Pelee National Park, it was clear that this internationally-famous birding mecca was going to



OUR CHANGING SEASONS
Drew Monkman

live up to its reputation. The clear, rich whistles of dozens of Baltimore orioles drifted through the car windows, but unlike Rondeau, the lively warbling of orchard orioles could be heard as well. Yellow warblers, common yellowthroats, American redstarts, house wrens, grey catbirds and red-winged blackbirds also joined in, creating a wall of avian sound. We were so excited by our prospects for the day, we didn't even take time to lock the car before heading over to a small stand of cedar trees at the edge of the parking lot. Within a minute or so, eight species of warblers were hopping about on the branches less than two metres away, drawn in by our insistent pishing. You now it's going to be a good day when it's hard to even draw yourselves away from the parking lot!

Like Rondeau, Point Pelee is a peninsula reaching out into Lake Erie to welcome thousands of northward-bound birds each spring, and Mexico-bound monarch butterflies every fall. Located at the southern tip of Canada near Leamington, it is a veritable oasis of forest and marsh bordered by lake, agricultural land and urban development. Pelee protects part of Ontario's Carolinian forest and Great Lakes marsh ecosystems, two habitat types that have almost disappeared in this province. The Pelee woods are dominated by hackberry trees from which wild grape, Virginia creeper and poison ivy vines hang rope-like. In May, the forest floor is a carpet of sweet cicely, columbine, wild geranium and Dutchman's-breeches. As you can imagine, the air smells wonderful.

We took the propane-powered shuttle train to the Point and joined the throng of birders already there. Standing shoulder to shoulder on the boardwalk that extends south from the train terminal, we were immersed in a sea of binoculars, scopes and colossal cameras. The somewhat crowded conditions were soon forgotten, however, for there were birds everywhere. This is what we had hoped for. It's not just the prospect of seeing new species that makes Pelee such an exciting destination. Just as importantly, the constant flow of birds to be looked at and identified can be electrifying.

It was difficult to know where to focus one's attention. A steady stream of warblers was slowly mov-



ing through the shrubbery as they made their way up the Point — black-throated blue, Wilson's, blackburnian, yellow-rumped, magnolia, chestnut-sided, to name a few. They just kept on coming. Fortunately, some would take a break from feeding and simply perch out in the open, trying to warm themselves in the early morning sunshine. Among these was a particularly co-operative male Cape May warbler that stayed put for at least five minutes on a dead branch less than two metres from the trail. It absolutely glowed in the early morning sunshine with scintillating oranges, yellows and blacks. The oohs and awes from the appreciative onlookers were many.

Four pairs of eyes would have come in very handy that morning. While the warbler parade was going on at eye level, numerous orioles were constantly calling from tree tops just above us, throngs of swallows were flying back and forth snatching midges in mid-air and a steady procession of red-winged blackbirds and blue jays was streaming by higher overhead. We could probably have seen three or four dozen species by just staying in this one spot alone.

Nowhere else in Canada can you find so many birders together in one place. They come from all over Canada, the United States and Great Britain. Quebec, where birding has become especially popular with younger adults, is particularly well-represented. With all of these eyes searching the vegetation, it's easy to understand why rarities are found on a routine basis.

Despite the somewhat crowded conditions on some of the trails, affection for the birds and courtesy for fellow birders are both very noticeable. Rarely do you hear anyone speaking in a loud voice or pushing their way past you on a trail. Most people will wait silently, giving you ample time to observe the tanager or cuckoo in the nearby tree. Most birders are always ready to help with an identification, as well.

Like the vines that climb and hang from the trees at Pelee, there is also an invisible grapevine of news that passes up and down the Point. People are constantly exchanging information about what rare or unusual birds have been found. This is how we found out about two species most of our group had never seen before, namely a Harris's sparrow and a Kirtland's warbler.

Because of extremely strong, cold winds that morning from the northwest, a lot of birds had taken refuge in the thick vegetation along the East Beach. Among these was a



Top photos, from left: The orchard oriole, a Pelee specialty, the eastern towhee and the Cape May warbler are seen in photos by Karl Egressy. Above, birders on one of the Pelee boardwalks (Drew Monkman photo).

beautiful male Harris's sparrow in full breeding plumage. The largest of our sparrows, the Harris's nests on the edge of the tundra, mostly in Nunavut and the Northwest Territories. Although it usually migrates through the western plains, individuals occasionally end up in southern Ontario, especially during the winter. Rarely are they seen in the spring. This particular bird was very co-operative, coming out of a jumble of vines and fresh leaves to sit and show itself on a dead cedar branch.

Later in the afternoon, we returned to this same general area and were able to find the Kirtland's warbler as well. The Kirtland's is one of North America's rarest songbirds, mainly because it has very rigid habitat requirements. It only nests in large stands of young Jack pines interspersed with clearings. When the trees become too large, the birds leave the area. As a breeding species, the Kirtland's is presently limited to a handful of counties in the state of Michigan. Measures are being taken to provide adequate Jack pine nesting habitat in this area and to control brown-headed cowbird numbers. Cowbirds are a serious threat

because they lay their eggs in the nests of these warblers.

In addition to the park itself, the Pelee area offers many other birding destinations. One of the most interesting is Hillman Marsh Conservation Area. A quick trip there at the end of the day produced about a dozen duck and shorebird species as well as 15 great egrets.

Driving back to our bed and breakfast just outside of Rondeau Provincial Park, we couldn't get over how great the birding had been. Our total for the day was 103 species. This is not a lot by Pelee standards, but our goal was to enjoy the birds instead of simply trying to run up a big total. We still had one more bird to find, however: the spectacular prothonotary warbler that we had eluded us on our first day at Rondeau.

By 7 a.m. Monday, we were posted at the forested pond where the prothonotary was probably nesting. Within less than a minute, the male sang and flew in close, affording us excellent views of his golden yellow plumage. He was soon joined by the slightly duller female.

Our Victoria Day weekend was quickly drawing to a close, and a five-hour drive back to Peterbor-

ough in heavy traffic awaited us. We decided to try the Southpoint Trail in hope of finding a mourning warbler, a relatively common species that had so far eluded us. As we walked along enjoying the pungent smell of chokecherry blossoms and listening to the songs of several towhees, a couple told us a mourning warbler was just ahead. Sure enough, the bird poured forth its "cheery, cheery, chorry, chorry" song right on cue and eventually came out of the shrubbery to give us a good luck. As an added bonus, an immature bald eagle flew by several minutes later, and became our last new bird of the weekend. With 126 species and several life birds for the group, we headed home fully satisfied and more than a little awed by how fortunate we'd been to see Rondeau and Pelee at their best.

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