

June 24, 2008

Rondeau 2008 Part Two

For many birders, spending a few days each year at the migration hotspots on Lake Erie is a much anticipated rite of spring. This, our second day at Rondeau Provincial Park on the Victoria Day weekend, began with a cold, northerly wind and cool temperatures. However, like many joggers, birders seem to thrive in inclement weather!

So, despite the steady rain, we left our B&B at about 7 a.m. and made our first stop at Bate's Pond where the dense phragmites grass had recently been burnt off, exposing a large mudflat. We began by checking out the beleaguered barn swallows on the telephone wire. Among them was a new species for the trip, the cliff swallow. Although somewhat similar to their fork-tailed cousin, cliff swallows have a short square tail. Minutes later, a green heron flew by and actually landed on the same wire, something I'd never seen this bird do before. And, as if to make sure our enthusiasm didn't wash away with the rain, an American bittern bellowed out its deep "bloonk-adoonk" call from deep in the cattails on the other side of the road.

After entering the park, our first stop was an area called Pony Barn. We soon heard a forceful but unfamiliar song. Although we couldn't name the species, we knew it was something interesting and different. After a bit of searching, we finally managed to locate a small bird of warbler size that was actively feeding close to the ground. Its loud, emphatic, four part song, however, was definitely not that of any warbler. Thanks to a good look at the beak and eye, it dawned on us that it must be a white-eyed vireo, common in the eastern U.S. but almost never seen in the Kawarthas. This rather comical looking bird has a very pale iris and almost looks like it's wearing yellow spectacles.

As we took some final looks at the vireo, the sun came out, and the weather became quite pleasant. We headed back over to the vicinity of the maintenance building where another vireo was singing. This time, however, there was no mystery as to the singer's identity. The slow, sweet phrases, interspersed with long pauses, were those of the blue-headed vireo. Not only is this vireo beautiful to look at with its blue-grey head and outrageously big white eye rings, but this species almost always responds to pishing and comes in quite close. Our pishing also attracted a northern parula which sang its wiry buzz of a song just above our heads. This small warbler is blue-grey above with black and rufous chest bands and is always a treat to see.

One bird that had eluded us so far was the scarlet tanager. Although never common, we do usually see about half a dozen on a two day trip. As the male's brilliant red and black plumage suggests, scarlet tanagers belong to a very colourful tropical family of birds. In fact, there are almost 240 species. Only four, however, regularly occur north of Mexico, and the scarlet nests the furthest north. Although we never did find a male, a female tanager finally made a showing. Dull green above and pale yellow below, it's hard to imagine that it is even the same species.

One of our favourite destinations at Rondeau is the Spicebush Trail. It is named after a Carolinian-zone shrub whose leaves give off an aromatic, spicy fragrance when crushed. Much of the trail winds through a swampy area where spicebush is everywhere. On the higher ground, stately mature beech and tulip trees grow. In May, however, the real attraction is the display of wildflowers and ferns. Sensitive fern, maidenhair fern and Christmas fern are only a few of the many species to be found. Among the wildflowers, Jack-in-the-pulpit is abundant along with Dutchman's breeches. The only new bird of interest we found here, however, was a late white-throated sparrow.

Because the birding had gotten quite slow, we decided to leave the park early and head

up to the town of Blenheim to the local sewage lagoons. As unappetizing a destination as this may sound, most modern sewage lagoons - sometimes called municipal waste stabilization ponds - do not smell and actually provide attractive habitat to large numbers of waterfowl, shorebirds and field birds. Lagoon habitat is especially important in southwestern Ontario where wetlands, ponds and meadows are almost non-existent in the endless ocean of cultivated fields.

The cool temperatures on this particular day had attracted huge numbers of swallows to the lagoon to take advantage of the insects emerging from the water. Sewage lagoons provide ideal conditions for the production of many aquatic invertebrates such as midges. These mosquito-like insects can be five times more plentiful in sewage lagoons than other aquatic habitats. More importantly, many midge species are active even in very cool conditions. In addition to the swallows that were feeding over the water, many were perched on trees and fences, while others were simply sitting on the ground. We easily found all six Ontario species, including several hundred purple martins.

A good number of duck species were also present. In addition to mallards, there were ruddy ducks, northern shovelers, gadwalls, lesser scaup and blue-winged teal. The ruddy duck is an especially attractive species. A small and stocky duck, its long, spiky tail is raised much of the time giving it a comical look. The male has a rufous body, black cap, white face and blue bill, while the female is uniformly brown. To me, ruddy ducks look like little tugboats swimming amongst the larger ducks and geese.

As for field birds, the long grass adjacent to the lagoons is one of the few areas around Blenheim where you can find bobolinks, savannah sparrows and meadowlarks. While we were watching the bobolinks off in the distance, another pair of birds in the foreground caught our attention. A pair of Wilson's phalaropes were feeding in a grassy ditch. Phalaropes, a type of shorebird, are distinctive in that parenting roles are reversed in this species. Females are both larger and more brightly colored than males. Behavioural roles are also switched. The females actively pursue males, compete for nesting territories, aggressively defend the nest, and leave the males to incubate the eggs and care for the young all by themselves!

Tired from the relentless wind, we headed back to our B&B at about 6 p.m., relaxed over a beer, and then headed out to enjoy some Lake Erie perch for supper. Thanks to the trip up to the lagoons, this second day of birding produced more different species than the first, bringing our trip total to 112.

Monday morning was ushered in once again by cold northerly winds and a temperature of only about 8 C. On our way to the park, we made the obligatory stop at Bate's Pond and immediately came across a small flock of semipalmated plovers. I then noticed a very large, greyish bird standing at the back of the mudflats. At first I assumed it was simply another great blue heron; however, the straight neck and red crown immediately spelled out sandhill crane. The bird had the typical rust-stained plumage of this species.

With the clock ticking unmercifully towards our 11 a.m. departure time and a 4 ½ hour drive back to Peterborough, we quickly headed into the park and made our first stop at Bennett Road. This is where we have seen prothonotary warblers in the past, but, unfortunately, this iconic golden-yellow warbler was nowhere to be found. Next stop was the South Point Trail, where we decided to try our luck on a little side path. It was a good decision. Mitch Brownstein flushed a great horned owl, a very difficult bird to find at Rondeau. While we tried to relocate the owl, a brown thrasher flew by - another new bird for the trip - and we even stumbled across a wild turkey. Turkeys have only recently begun to show up in the park.

Our lasting image of this cool but sunny morning is that of a beautiful male indigo bunting feeding right on the ground just in front of us. With the side light of early morning, the blue stood out like I've never seen it before. This is a much more common bird than people

think, but it really helps to know the call to find it. Quite often, indigo buntings sing from telephone wires and, against the light sky, appear almost black. They therefore go unnoticed.

In earlier years, I used to experience a real sense of let-down in the hours and days following these spring trips to Point Pelee and Rondeau. The return to Peterborough and work spelt the end of the spring migration, a time of year that I look forward to all winter long. However, ever since I began to broaden my interests to include all areas of natural history, I have come to welcome each season on its own terms and turn my attention to whatever types of flora or fauna take centre stage. The end of spring bird migration, for example, corresponds with the beginning of the butterfly and dragonfly season which lasts into the fall. As long as you have a modicum of curiosity, the natural world never ceases to present something of interest.

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