



Lake Erie Spring Migration Trip Report (May 5 - 13, 2024)

[Link: Lake Erie Spring Migration Trip Report \(May 5 - 13, 2024\)](#)

The Lake Erie Spring Migration tour covered an amazing suite of birding locations along the north shore of Lake Erie in Ontario. Over the course of nine days, the tour was graced with beautiful weather, substantial bird diversity, and sightings of threatened amphibians and reptiles. Throughout the trip, we observed an impressive total of 174 bird species. This tour gave participants an exciting introduction into the ecology of spring migration and diversity and abundance of songbirds that move through southern Ontario in May.

Day 1: Toronto

At 6pm we gathered for our first group get together at our hotel in Toronto, Ontario. Together we introduced ourselves, discussed target birds for the trip, travel expectations, and how to use eBird.

Day 2: Toronto - Colonel Sam Smith, Pelee

At 7am we departed the Toronto hotel and ventured off on our first birding of this tour in Colonel Samuel Smith Park, a beautiful urban park in the Greater Toronto Area. The morning was sunny, but cool thanks to the breeze off Lake Ontario. We had great views of Red-necked Grebes, as we watched at least a dozen pairs build their nests on floating platforms in the harbor. The tour was introduced to our first of many Baltimore Oriole and Scarlet Tanager sightings. We also saw a Northern Mockingbird, a flock of Eastern Bluebirds, and large flocks of Red-breasted Mergansers and Long-tailed Ducks right off of the shore on the open lake. After our Toronto birding, we hit the road for Point Pelee National Park. Once we arrived in Point Pelee, we tried to milk the birding hours dry by exploring the Woodland trail by the Visitor Centre. Within minutes, our tour came across Cape May Warblers, Blue-winged Warblers, Blue-headed Vireo, American Redstarts, and many Yellow-rumped Warblers. This was just a taste of what was to come...



Birding at Point Pelee © Daniel Giesbrecht

Day 3 : Pelee

Early bird gets the worm! Our first birding morning at Point Pelee started at 5am as we departed from our hotel in Leamington. In the dark, we drove to the Point Pelee Visitor Centre, with the goal to catch the first shuttle to the tip of Pelee, Canada's most southern point. Upon our arrival in Pelee, we could hear American Woodcocks "peent"-ing in the fields and American Robins, Baltimore Orioles, and White-crowned Sparrows singing as daylight breaks. We arrived at the Tip for sunrise and watched the bird migration commence. Large flocks of Red-breasted Mergansers, Bonaparte's Gulls, Ring-billed Gulls, and Common Terns continuously flew by the Tip and would land on the sandy spit for rest. A Ruddy Turnstone and four White-winged Scoters were also seen during our viewing at the Tip.



Birding the tip © Matthew Fuirst



Bonaparte's Gulls © Daniel Giesbrecht

Eventually, we sought refuge from the cold winds at the Tip and began our hike back towards the Visitor Centre. We walked along the west edge of Point Pelee, enjoying the sandy trail, local native flowers, and listening to American Redstarts, Eastern Kingbirds, and a notable Prairie Warbler. We continued our hike through the Woodland trail where we observed an unusual sight...an American Bittern sitting in a tree! We continued to explore the trail, coming across large warbler flocks filled

with Black-throated Green Warblers, Black-throated Blue Warblers, American Redstarts, Yellow Warblers, Black-and-white Warblers, Blackburnian Warblers, Nashville Warblers, Cape May Warblers, and several Prothonotary Warblers. By 11am we took an early lunch break at the Visitor Centre and enjoyed watching Baltimore Orioles and Orchard Orioles frolic around the picnic area.



Prothonotary Warbler, female © Daniel Giesbrecht

After lunch, we continued on our birding hikes and explored the Tilden Woods trail from the Visitor Centre. Immediately after the start of this hike we saw a Golden-winged Warbler which was singing through the trees. Many flocks of neotropical migrants were passing through the forest with mixed species flocks including Yellow-throated Vireos, Warbling Vireos, Chestnut-sided Warblers, Blackpoll Warblers, and many more. We eventually rounded out our birding day at Hillman Marsh where we saw hundreds of Dunlin, several Semipalmated Plovers, Killdeer, Northern Pintail, Green-winged Teal, and Lesser Scaup along with an Endangered Blanding's Turtle.

Day 4: Pelee

Another early start to the day greeted us with a beautiful morning once again, with the winds switching slightly coming from the Northeast but not enough to hamper birding. We started slightly later than the previous day to avoid burnout, but still managed to make it out to the tip by shortly after 6 where we were greeted by some fleeting looks at a pair of young Little Gulls, a nice and cooperative Scarlet Tanager hanging out low in the trees, and some sporadic reverse migration overhead of various songbirds. Due to the wind direction we did not dally for too long at the tip, and worked our way back to the visitor center, seeing a nice mix of warblers along the way, including nice views of an Eastern Kingbird along the main tip trail.



Scarlet Tanager © Daniel Giesbrecht

After a quick granola bar and grabbing the tram, we decided to head back into the Tilden woods to see what new songbirds awaited us, and were not disappointed! A Golden-winged Warbler gave us a start by popping up at the side of the trail! It continued feeding at eye level within a few meters of the trail long enough for everyone to get more than an eye-full, and was a highlight of the morning. We also had good views of a Yellow-throated Vireo, Northern Parulas seemed to be in every other mixed flock, and a lone Sora called out to make its presence known. We ended up with a solid 17 warbler species in the 45 minutes it took us to do our loop, and just as we were headed back to the vehicles a fog rolled in seemingly out of nowhere, giving everything a bit of a surreal feeling with the birdsong all around.



A quick stop at the Sanctuary parking lot yielded a Clay-colored Sparrow, as well as a nice Giant Swallowtail that was sitting just off of the trail. From there we walked south along the trail towards sleepy hollow, where a nice gentleman was kind enough to point out a sleepy Eastern Screech Owl that we were all delighted to see.



Eastern Screech-Owl © Daniel Giesbrecht

From there we headed to the Delaurier Homestead Trailhead for one last hike before munching down on a well deserved picnic. The highlights of the trail included some cooperative Blue-Gray Gnatcatchers, a beautiful Eastern Fox Snake on a log that looked like it was a museum display, and a pair of Green Herons basking in the sun searching for their next prey. The heron's search for a snack did not last long though, as they were rudely interrupted by a pair of Bald Eagles that decided to perch directly above! This of course caused them to freeze still as can be, and imagine themselves to be no more than just another pair of pointy sticks swaying in the breeze. Needless to say, after all of our traipsing, lunch was well deserved and welcomed with open arms in the form of a picnic in the shade of a cottonwood tree. We had a brief flyby of a Red-headed Woodpecker, but as it was being chased by another passerine it did not stick around. After lunch our last stop was at the Marsh Boardwalk which was a nice change of pace and scenery. We were delighted by the sight of a good number of Painted Turtles quite close to the boardwalk, with a few Northern Map Turtles mixed in, as well as a fleeting Northern Watersnake. Bird activity was a little quiet due to the time of day, but we still managed to see four Swallow species including Northern Rough-winged and Cliff Swallows, and had a group of four Sandhill Cranes fly lazily by. This concluded our birding at Pelee, and as bittersweet as it was to say goodbye it was time to hop in the vans and head to our next destination Erieau for supper, and eventually some well earned zzz's. But by no means did this mean the birds were done with us! About halfway to our destination a strange large light colored hawk flushed from some roadkill on the shoulder, which caused us to pull over and investigate. This turned out to be the right call, as it was a light morph Ferruginous Hawk! Later we would learn this was only the 10th record for Ontario, and was definitely a highlight of the trip.



Ferruginous Hawk © Daniel Giesbrecht

We continued on our journey and stopped by the Erieau Marsh trail to finish off the birding before dinner. There we saw a mix of songbirds, Semipalmated Plovers, a Solitary Sandpiper, and a group of Willets. Next to the Willets were three Spiny Softshell Turtles, an endangered species and a very special species to find in Ontario.

Day 5 : Rondeau Point PP

Our morning at Rondeau started off a bit cool and overcast, so first things first we stopped by the visitor center for some trail information and more importantly, coffee. They had a few feeders set up, where we finally got some nice views of some cooperative Rose-breasted Grosbeaks, as well as a few Baltimore Orioles and a sharp looking Ruby-throated Hummingbird. We started the morning exploring the Tulip Tree Trail, which started out a little quiet, but yielded two Prothonotary Warblers which were singing and foraging right up to and over the boardwalk.



Prothonotary Warbler © Daniel Giesbrecht



Birding in Rondeau Provincial Park © Daniel Giesbrecht

From there we headed over to the “Warbler Woods”, but just before the trailhead we came across a very cooperative Red-headed Woodpecker that gave us quite the show, hopping along from tree to tree, stopping just briefly enough to manage a few photos before darting to the next tree. In the Warbler Woods we were indeed greeted with great songbird diversity once again! We had some good views of Blackburnian Warblers and a female Black-throated Blue Warbler, with both a Wood Thrush and Tufted Titmouse singing off in the woods, just far enough to elude our vision.



Red-headed Woodpecker © Daniel Giesbrecht

Our last stop was at the Spicebush Trail, a nice loop through old growth Carolinian forest with a bit of marsh habitat mixed in. The trail yielded all of the usual suspects, in addition to different nests. One Robin nest with the fledglings already looking quite large, and a Northern Cardinal flushed from her nest adjacent to one of the boardwalks, complete with three eggs! Our last surprise of the afternoon came after lunch at a restaurant near the lakeside. As we were leaving we started to spot some strange round rocks in the parking lot, which we were quick to realize were in fact hatchling Snapping Turtles! We rounded them up, and took them out of harm's way to some vegetation at the water's edge.

Day 6 : Long Point

Our first day at Long Point! We started off the morning by visiting Long Point Bird Observatory, the oldest bird observatory in the Western hemisphere. This remarkable location allowed our tour to view bird banding close-up, a research method used to monitor migratory bird populations. When we arrived at Long Point Bird Observatory's Old Cut Research Station, the banding crew was in the middle of processing a few birds in the lab. They gave us a nice presentation as they worked, and we got some nice close up views of a Blue Jay, as well as a few warblers such as Magnolia and Yellow-rumped Warblers.



Demo at bird banding station © Daniel Giesbrecht

From there we took a walk around the woodlot that is adjacent to the station, and stopped by the viewing platform that looks over the marsh. Perched just across the causeway from the platform just so happened to be a nice cooperative male Orchard Oriole singing his best, and everyone was able to get great views from the scope. Our next stop was just around the corner in the Long Point Provincial Park, where we had a very nice leisurely hike through the dunes and mixed woods that populate the park. The combination of sporadic cottonwood trees mixed with lower shrubs turned out to be a great combination for picking out individual warblers, as they were finally down at eye level. We had fantastic views of Magnolia Warbler, Northern Parula, Blackburnian Warbler, and even a Green Heron perched in a low Pine. We continued our morning heading back towards the mainland, with a stop at the Crown Marsh trail. Here we had another couple of Green Herons, as well as a lone Lesser Yellowlegs and our first Belted Kingfisher of the trip perched in a dead tree. A brief downpour interrupted our birding, and we headed back to the vehicles for a few minutes while we waited for the rain to pass. Not far down the road we stopped at the Big Creek Marsh, which also happens to be a National Wildlife area. There were quite a few Canada Geese and fuzzy goslings already scattered throughout the marsh and along the trails which were a nice sight to see. Highlights included close views of a Great Egret, a pair of Sandhill Cranes, and a Common Gallinule that decided to pop out of his hiding spot in the reeds and say hi. A few birds that were heard only include several Soras, Marsh Wrens, and a Virginia Rail which was not so cooperative and only called once. By the time we were on our way back there was quite a storm rolling in, so we decided to call it a day and get some well deserved rest for the afternoon.



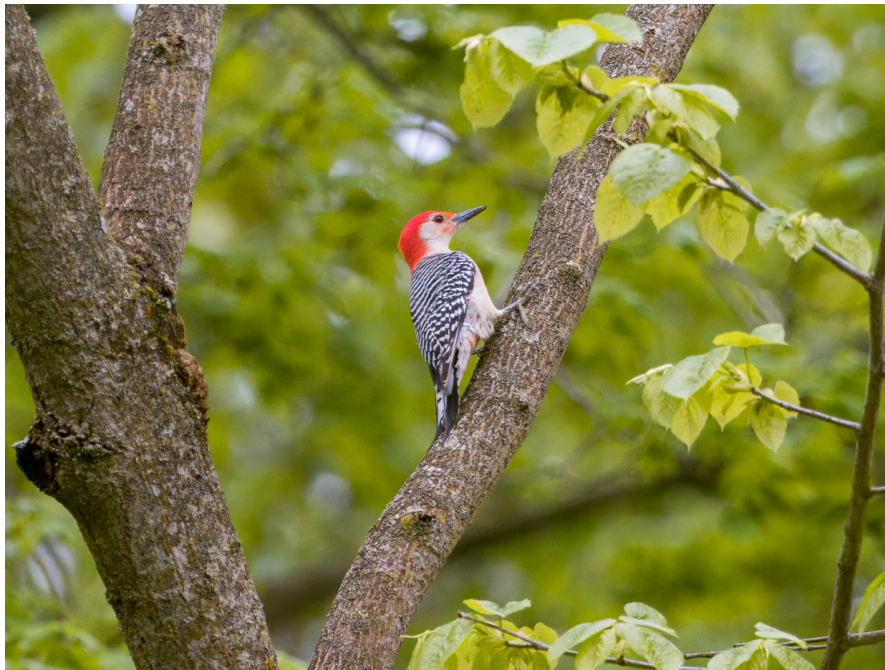
Matthew pointing out a bird to the group © Daniel Giesbrecht

Day 7 : Long Point

A birding trip to Long Point would not be complete without a visit to Backus Woods, an old growth hardwood forest within the Carolinian Zone. Immediately after parking the vans, we were welcomed by the song of a Hooded Warbler on its breeding territory. A few participants ventured off trail to get a look at the warbler and succeeded. We hiked through the forest and tallied up some more species for the tour such as Pileated Woodpecker, Broad-winged Hawk, Red-bellied Woodpecker, Veery, Common Raven, Indigo Bunting, and Pine Siskin.



Hooded Warbler © Daniel Giesbrecht



Red-bellied Woodpecker © Michael Kennedy

After our hike through Backus Woods, we continued on to West Quarterline Road where there are high-quality grasslands and forest edge habitats. While walking the road, we saw Grasshopper Sparrows, Eastern Bluebirds, Blue-winged Warblers, Field Sparrows, and Brown Thrashers. The winds picked up as an incoming storm approached and we adventured through the Coppen's Tract where we heard many Great-crested Flycatchers, Wood Thrush, Pine Warblers, and Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers defending their territories.

Day 8 : Long Point and return to Toronto

Our final day at Long Point once again started at the banding lab at Old Cut, where we rendezvoused with Stu Mackenzie who was to be one of our Captains for the boating trip out to the tip. After briefly checking out the birds in the lab, we split into two groups as not everyone was up for the choppy boat ride to come. Eight of us in total headed to the Tip of Long Point with Stu and Daniel, and the other six opted to bird the Long Point area with Matt.



Boat ride to the tip of Long Point © Daniel Giesbrecht

The trip out to the Tip typically takes just over an hour depending on the boat, wind and water conditions, and this trip was no exception. One could say we lucked out with the weather for the trip, but the truth is we had been watching the forecast like a hawk for days waiting for the opportune moment to make the trip, as the waters can become quite treacherous given the wrong conditions, and the wind seems to be able to change almost instantly on a whim. The ride out was good, and everyone was in high spirits with the fresh breeze in our faces and soft spray from the lake in our faces. On the way out we were graced by the presence of several Red-throated Loons flying quite close overhead, and we flushed a small group of White-winged Scoters. Once we arrived and had our feet back on sandy ground, we stopped to scope out the birds that were perched on the final sand spit of sand that is the Tip. The flock mostly consisted of Double-crested Cormorants and Herring and Ring-billed Gulls, though several Ruddy Turnstones made an appearance and didn't seem to mind our presence as they came almost too close for the scope to be of any use. From there we hiked down the south shore to the Tip cabin, where the Long Point staff had so graciously carted our cooler for us and where we set up a nice picnic lunch on the porch. While snacking on our well earned morsels, the bird banding crew showed us their last birds captured of the morning, which included a Baltimore Oriole and a Tree swallow. Orioles, in fact, were one of the most abundant birds that day numbering 12, which seemed to be a trend for the week. We were also happily surprised to see a late Rough-winged Hawk fly by almost directly overhead, and a Scarlet Tanager made a brief show of itself in the cedar trees before continuing down the tip. After lunch we mozied our way back along the sand dunes to the Tip to embark once again, and were treated to a small group of shorebirds that included our first Sanderlings and a few Dunlin. Meanwhile, while half of the tour was adventuring the Tip, the other half was milking the rest of Long Point's birding hotspots dry. The 'mainland' crew decided to return to the 'New' Long Point Provincial Park, where we managed to see a female Summer Tanager and amazing close-up views of a male Black-throated Blue Warbler and Blackpoll Warbler, along with many Least Flycatchers. After adventuring around the Provincial Park, we continued to the Port Rowan Wetlands where we managed to see some new species for the trip! There, we saw a breeding pair of Pied-billed Grebes, a family of Ring-necked Ducks, several Ruddy Ducks, a Red-headed Woodpecker, and hundreds of Tree Swallows. The tour was lucky enough to encounter some researchers that are working with Long Point Bird Observatory

to monitor the Tree Swallow nesting boxes and we got an intimate look at their data collection and even got to see them measure the heart-rate of some of the Tree Swallow eggs. After birding the wetlands, we continued to Hastings Drive, where the winds picked up and bird diversity was low, but we managed to see some more Dunlin and Bonaparte's Gulls. We later met up with the boat crew back at Old Cut field station and soon after got on the road for Toronto.



Our group at Long Point Bird Observatory

On our way to Toronto we stopped for a rewarding scoop of ice cream in downtown Port Rowan and eventually made it back to the Toronto airport hotel. There, we had a farewell dinner, shared our trip highlights, and said our goodbyes.

Day 9 : Toronto

On this last day, clients departed from the Toronto airport hotel. [Lake Erie bird list \(May 5 - 13, 2024\)](#)