



## Point Pelee & Algonquin Park Trip Report ( May 9 - 20, 2024)

[Link: Point Pelee & Algonquin Park Trip Report \( May 9 - 20, 2024\)](#)

---

Spring migration is an exciting time for birds & birders alike, and nowhere showcases it better than southern Ontario. Our group of eleven enthusiastic birders, along with guides Jared & Rick, explored some of Canada's busiest and most well-known migration hot-spots along Lake Erie and the southernmost reaches of the boreal forest from May 9-20.

### May 9-10: Toronto & Lake Ontario

Our group met in Toronto - Canada's largest city and our launching pad for ten days of non-stop birds. Even in this urban jungle, we found delightful birding at Colonel Sam Smith Park and enjoyed our first taste of migrants like Blue-headed Vireo, Lincoln's Sparrow, Black-and-White Warbler and Blue-gray Gnatcatcher. Encounters with local breeders such as Northern Cardinal, Baltimore Oriole and Yellow Warbler would become familiar to us over the next few days. A Black-crowned Night Heron roosting in a tree was a surprise find, and our only sighting of this species on the entire trip. We were also entertained by some very vocal Red-necked Grebes nesting near the marina and lingering waterfowl such as Red-breasted Merganser and Long-tailed Duck. A special moment came as we spent time watching a pair of Blue-Grey Gnatcatcher diligently build their tiny, cup-shaped nest on an exposed limb just above our heads. We soon headed west towards our next destination at Point Pelee, breaking up the drive with a stop at the surprisingly lush Strathroy sewage lagoons. A provincially rare Black-necked Stilt was backed up by great sightings of an unusually cooperative Sora, Ruddy Ducks, Lesser and Greater Scaup, Short-billed Dowitchers and several other shorebird species. Buoyed by clearing skies and reports of a high solar activity, we decided to head out after dark in hopes of spotting aurora borealis - the "Northern Lights". Hillman Marsh provided the perfect vista, and we were awestruck as the sky turned psychedelic before our eyes and swaths of glowing colours reflected off the tranquil waters. Wow!!



*Red-necked Grebe © Jared Clarke*



*Northern Lights © Rick Szabo*

## **May 11-13: Point Pelee National Park**

After a late night and a forecast of morning rain, we agreed on a leisurely start and headed into

Point Pelee National Park shortly before lunch. As the park was already very busy we decided to skip the tram lineup, strolling instead along some of the park's many forest trails and racking up our first birds of the day. Our very first highlight was a roosting Eastern Screech Owl, expertly spotted as it slept in a hiding spot high up in a cedar tree. We spent the next few hours birding and soaking in the show (of both birds AND birders) at Canada's most southerly point of land. Despite it being a somewhat "slow" migration day, we spotted a great diversity of birds including gaudy warblers such as Nashville, Magnolia, Blackburnian, Black-throated Green, Chestnut-sided, Wilson's and Northern Parula among others. This was especially exciting for many participants and included numerous "lifers", followed by (respectfully quiet) cheers and high-fives! Not to be outshone, other dazzling birds such as Scarlet Tanager, Rose-breasted Grosbeak and Orchard Orioles popped in for regular visits. Great Crested Flycatchers sallied from the treetops, Barn & Tree Swallows dazzled us overhead, and brilliant Prothonotary Warblers shone like gems from their swampy haunts. It was the perfect introduction to this magical place!



*Our group at Point Pelee © Rick Szabo*



*Eastern Screech-Owl © Jared Clarke*



*Prothonotary Warbler © Jared Clarke*

The following two mornings started much earlier, and our group caught the famous tram to the “tip” for sunrise each day! While the winds were not especially conducive to migration, we did get to witness a little of the famed “reverse migration” - an intriguing phenomenon that occurs at Point Pelee when recently arrived birds funnel back to the tip and make (usually) short flights out over the lake. We watched dozens of birds do this - warblers, orioles, blackbirds, Red-bellied Woodpeckers,

Indigo Buntings and more. It was amazing to watch, and one of the main reasons we set out before dawn each morning. The tip was also host to several locally scarce species during our visits - Little Gull, Lesser Black-backed Gull, Common Loon and Common Merganser among them. Other highlights of our time at Point Pelee included Olive-sided Flycatcher, Red-headed Woodpecker, Philadelphia Vireo, several Black Terns and three (!) day roosting Common Nighthawks among many others - although it was the general abundance and diversity of birds encountered that really stuck with our group. After three days of birding & exploring Point Pelee, we had found 19 species of warbler -- and easily surpassed the 100 species milestone to earn our celebratory pins to brag about back home ;)



*Birding at the tip of Point Pelee © Jared Clarke*



*Festival of Birds 2024 pin © Rick Szabo*

Outside the park, we also visited nearby Hillman Marsh one evening - a managed wetland that provides an important stopover for many migrating waterfowl, shorebirds and other waders. Here we enjoyed a swarm of shorebirds consisting of five species - including Plovers, 90+ Dunlin, Short-billed Dowitchers, Black-bellied Plovers and a single American Golden Plover. We spied our first Trumpeter Swans of the trip and a variety of ducks including Gadwall, American Wigeon and both Green-winged & Blue-winged Teal. Three Blanding's Turtles were also spotted here, providing our only encounter with this threatened species. One evening we visited a well-known spot for American Woodcock, enjoying great views of this strange bird doing its equally strange territorial display - "peenting" and wheeling around in the skies. While it was difficult to say good-bye Point Pelee, more adventures and interesting places lay ahead. Enroute to our next stop at Chatham, we checked out the well-known lagoons at Blenheim and found our only American Coot of the trip, as well as our first good looks at Palm Warbler and Savannah Sparrows. The mixed flock of shorebirds included Semipalmated Plover, Dunlin, Least Sandpiper, Semipalmated Sandpiper, both Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs and Spotted Sandpiper among others.



*Blanding's Turtle © Jared Clarke*

## **May 14: Rondeau Provincial Park**

After a lovely evening meal and early breakfast in Chatham, we headed off to explore Rondeau Provincial Park - another migration hot-spot along the Lake Erie shore. This park may be popular with boaters, campers and cottage-owners but its lush Carolinian forests and magnetism for migrants makes it equally fun for birders. We spent the morning strolling several areas of the park, bumping into a variety of both migrating birds and local breeders. Migration had picked up a little overnight and we found 17 species of warblers including our first Cape May and Black-throated Blue Warblers. A morning walk in the flooded forest of the Tulip Tree Trail was especially beautiful, and we encountered several excellent birds including a very busy Pileated Woodpecker working a fallen tree, Eastern Wood-Pewees called out from above and a crowd-favourite Prothonotary Warbler. A colony of Purple Martins appeared very active as the birds flitted in and out of the gourd-shaped homes while we enjoyed a lakeside picnic, while a Field Sparrow posed along a sandy beach trail. Among other highlights were several Eastern Towhee, Swainson's Thrush and brief looks at the often furtive Black-billed Cuckoo - which, true to its skulky style, managed to elude most of our group. After lunch, we stopped to check out the nearby Keith McLean Conservation Area. Several Marsh Wren obliged us by popping up to the tops of the reedy hideaways, large carp rippled the shallow waters and a Blue-winged Teal was spied sleeping on a quiet riverbank. We also detoured to Shrewsbury, where a pair of Black-billed Magpies put on a great show for us - a rare record for eastern Ontario. From here we continued east along the lake to our next destination at Simcoe.



*Birding in Rondeau © Jared Clarke*



*Magnolia Warbler © Jared Clarke*

### **May 15-16: Long Point & area**

Over the next two days, we visited several important places and habitats in the Long Point area - from wetlands to Carolinian forests and meadows to woodlots. While Long Point may not have the fame and notoriety of Point Pelee, it can be just as magical during migration. The Old Cut Banding

Station is always a fun stop, and this time we enjoyed an excellent banding demonstration from Birds Canada staff that included handheld Blackburnian Warbler, Magnolia Warbler, Veery and Blue Jay among others. Seeing these birds up close and learning about the important research being done here is always exciting and enlightening. Strolling the trails of the Old Cut woodlot and nearby Long Point Provincial Parks (both old and new), we found a fun diversity of migrants that were (mostly) stopping by on their journey north. Notable among the many birds we encountered here were a nesting Bald Eagle, several Green Herons, a singing Blackpoll Warbler and intimate looks at numerous Cedar Waxwings feasting on spring berries. A late morning walk at Backus Woods produced our only looks at a gorgeous Hooded Warbler, a very cooperative Ovenbird and a much more elusive Cerulean Warbler singing from the treetops.



*Bird banding demonstration © Jared Clarke*



*Magnolia Warbler in hand © Maggie Galbraith*

One evening we visited a nearby farming area to find a number of grassland and meadow-loving species such as Grasshopper Sparrow, Field Sparrow, and Eastern Bluebird - although a very showy Blue-winged Warbler was the hands-down highlight. We lingered until after sunset, when several Wilson's Snipe and American Woodcock began to display in the nearby fields and an Eastern Whip-poor-will sat briefly on a fence post for us to glimpse.



*Blue-winged Warbler © Jared Clarke*

A stop at Big Creek provided our only looks at several species during the tour - Common Gallinule,

Pied-billed Grebe and a family of Sandhill Cranes foraging on the berms. Black Terns zipped around over the marsh, and we enjoyed watching several Spotted Gar (a very unique fish) swimming around in the murky waters.

### **May 17: Carden Alvar**

Having made the pilgrimage north through Toronto the day before, we set out this morning to explore a new and very different landscape - the globally rare "alvars" (a unique type of grasslands with thin soil and poor drainage sitting atop limestone bedrock) of Carden Alvar Provincial Park. We started our visit at "Sedge Wren Marsh", where we watched Common Yellowthroats sing their reedy song, spied Swamps Sparrows showing off their rusty caps and even spotted a secretive American Bittern as it flew low over the wetlands and eventually across the road. A family of Virginia Rail, including a fluffy youngster, stalked into the open and allowed us rare yet incredible views. An unusually cooperative Black-billed Cuckoo also got in on the show, sitting atop the reeds for several minutes before heading back into the surrounding forest. The (mostly) former ranches and pastures of Wylie and McNamee Roads provided opportunities to watch a fun variety of birds - including Eastern Bluebirds, Eastern Meadowlarks, Bobolink, Grasshopper Sparrows and even some Wilson's Snipe. Upland Sandpipers and Brown Thrashers put in appearances, but we "dipped" on the provincially endangered Loggerhead Shrikes that maintain a stronghold in this region. A stunning Golden-winged Warbler was spotted at the forest edge, a Sedge Wren was seen and a lusty American Redstart sang its heart out in the roadside bushes and a Great Crested Flycatcher flaunted its stuff in an open treetop.



*Virginia Rail © Jared Clarke*



*Upland Sandpiper © Jared Clarke*



*Grasshopper Sparrow © Jared Clarke*

### **May 18-19: Algonquin Provincial Park**

Continuing just a little north, we spent the last two days of our tour exploring Algonquin Provincial Park - a large and breathtakingly beautiful area that represents Canada's southernmost enclave of boreal forest. This land of lakes, rivers and lush forests was very different from any of the habitats

we had experienced over the past few days and offered opportunities to find a whole new suite of birds. We encountered our first boreal specialist shortly after arriving – a moose that stared us down from the roadside before melting into the forest. This was the first of five moose we would see over our two-day visit! Boreal birds have reportedly been getting scarcer in Algonquin in recent years – presumably retreating from these southern fringes of their range due to climate change. We did, however, track down several of our other target species during our time here. A morning hike on the Mizzy Lake trail was a little quiet, but we still picked up a number of new birds for the trip including American Black Duck, Ring-necked Duck, Golden-crowned Kinglet, Red-breasted Nuthatch, and Pine Warbler. Our vans flushed a Spruce Grouse from the roadside – a fleeting glance that proved to be our only one of the trip. Other walks and trails produced both Red and White-winged Crossbills, Pine Siskin, Cooper’s Hawk and Hairy Woodpecker among many others. Numerous warblers were singing throughout the forest, and we managed better looks at several that evaded us during migration.



*Visitors Centre Overlook © Rick Szabo*



*Birding at Spruce Bog © Jared Clarke*

Even our homebase for the weekend, beautiful Spring Lake Resort, was home to several great birds. We spied a Ruby-throated Hummingbird visiting the feeders, a Brown Creeper creeping on the trail, and a rather exciting Canada Warbler - a much-anticipated lifer for many and our 27th warbler species of the trip! Our last new bird of the trip was equally celebrated - a Black-backed Woodpecker drumming out his territory in some burned out trees on an abandoned airfield. We left Algonquin Provincial Park and headed back to Toronto enamoured with both the birds and the places we visited.



*Spring Lake Resort © Jared Clarke*



*Black-backed Woodpecker © Jared Clarke*

At dinner we reminisced about our trip and shared our highlights, before bidding farewell to each other and heading off in our own directions. What a great trip, with a wonderful group of people!  
[Point Pelee & Algonquin Park bird list](#)