Eagle-Eye Tours



Point Pelee & Algonquin Trip Report (May 9 - 20, 2023)

Link: Point Pelee & Algonquin Trip Report (May 9 - 20, 2023)

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

May 9-10: Toronto & Niagara Falls

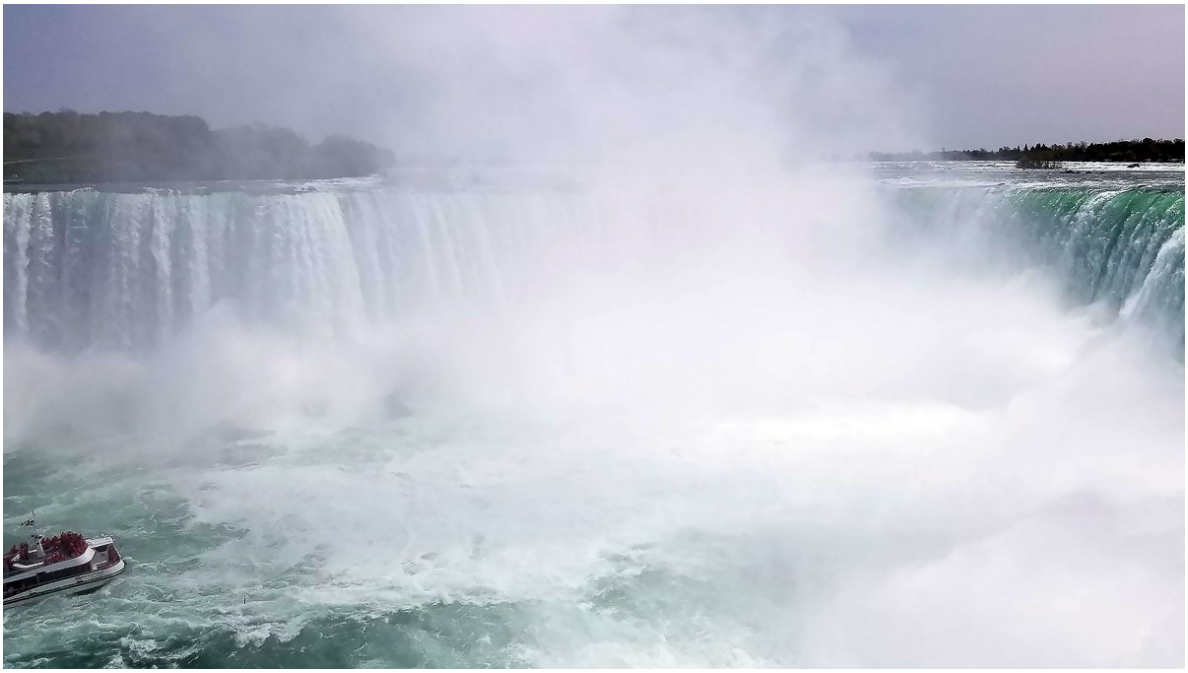
Our group met in Toronto – Canada's largest city and our launching pad into ten days of non-stop birds. Even in this urban jungle, we found delightful birding at Colonel Sam Smith Park and enjoyed our first taste of migrants like Blue-headed Vireo, Nashville Warbler, Black-and-White Warbler and Northern Parula. Encounters with local breeders such as Northern Cardinal, Baltimore Oriole and Least Flycatcher would become familiar to us over the next few days. Three Black-crowned Night Herons roosting in a tree were a surprise find, and our only sighting of this species 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. We even squeezed in a quick visit to the iconic Niagara Falls – always awe-inspiring, especially on such a beautiful afternoon.



Northern Cardinal © Jared Clarke



White-crowned Sparrow © Shivam Rajdev



Niagara Falls © Jared Clarke



Ring-billed Gull with fish © Shivam Rajdev

May 11-13: Point Pelee National Park

After a busy travel day, we were up well before the crack of dawn the next morning and excited to dig into the birding. Eager to experience the legendary migration of Point Pelee National Park, we

took advantage of our hotel's convenient location and arrived as the first hints of sun trickled in through the trees. As the park was already very busy we decided to skip the tram lineup and walk to the point, strolling leisurely along forest trails and racking up our first birds of the day. We arrived at the "tip" just in time for our first surprise of the day – a dozen American White Pelicans gliding in over the lake and landing right in front of us. 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 managed to spot a whopping 80+ species that morning alone – including 19 species of warblers such Black-throated Blue, Black-throated Green, Blackburnian, Bay-breasted, Chestnut-sided, Cape May 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. Blue-grey Gnatcatchers sallied from the treetops, Red-headed Woodpeckers dazzled us overhead, and brilliant Prothontary Warblers shone like gems from their swampy haunts. It was the perfect introduction to this magical place!



American White Pelican © Jared Clarke



Cerulean Warbler © Jared Clarke

Our early mornings continued, and our group was at the “tip” for sunrise each day! The winds had turned and migration increased overnight, resulting in lots of new arrivals and interesting “reverse migration” – an intriguing phenomena 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, woodpeckers, Indigo Buntings, Rose-breasted Grosbeaks, Scarlet Tanagers and even locally rare visitors such as Blue Grosbeak and Dickcissel. It was amazing to watch, and one of the main reasons we set out before dawn each morning. Perhaps the most exciting species during our visit to Point Pelee was a LeConte’s Sparrow that had been found in the aptly named “Sparrow Fields”. With time, patience and two visits our entire group was able to see this very secretive bird – a “lifer” for many!



LeConte's Sparrow © Jared Clarke



Birding the tip at sunrise © Jared Clarke

Other highlights included Cerulean Warbler, Blackpoll Warbler, Philadelphia Vireo, several Black Terns and a day roosting Common Nighthawk 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 the tip and exploring various other trails throughout Point Pelee, we had easily surpassed the 100 species milestone and earned our celebratory pins to brag about back home ;)



Philadelphia Vireo © Jared Clarke



Festival of Birds pin

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 ten species - including 200+ Black-bellied Plovers, 400+ Dunlin, dozens of Short-billed Dowitchers, a single American Golden Plover and a very obliging Wilson's Phalarope. We spied our first Great Egrets of the trip and a variety of ducks

including Gadwall, Ring-necked Duck, Lesser Scaup and Blue-winged Teal. While it was difficult to say good-bye Point Pelee, more adventures and interesting places lay ahead – and what is a birding trip without at least one sewage lagoon?!?! Enroute to our next stop at Chatham, we checked out the well-known lagoons at Blenheim and found our only Canvasback and Horned Lark of the trip, as well as our first good looks at Bobolink and Savannah Sparrows. The mixed flock of shorebirds included dozens of Dunlin and Least Sandpipers, several Short-billed Dowitchers, Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs and two Spotted Sandpipers among a few other species.



Dunlin © Jared Clarke



Least Sandpiper © Jared Clarke



Wild Turkey © Shivam Rajdev

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. Even on what felt like a slow morning, we found 14 species of warblers including a briefly viewed Cerulean Warbler. Two Green Herons were expertly spotted as they nestled tightly amongst the tangles of a cedar tree, and a colony of Purple Martins appeared very active as the birds flitted in and out of the gourd-shaped homes. Among other highlights were an Eastern Phoebe, Great Crested Flycatcher and great looks at the often furtive Grey-cheeked Thrush. An afternoon 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 and our first Ovenbird of the trip - which, true to its skulky style, managed to elude most of our group. From here, we continued east to our next base of operations in Simcoe.



Rose-breasted Grosbeak © Jared Clarke



Midland Painted Turtle © Jared Clarke



Grey-cheeked Thrush © 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 Cape May Warbler, Philadelphia Vireo, Indigo Bunting and Hermit Thrush among others. Seeing these birds so up close and learning about the important research being done here is always exciting and enlightening.



Bird banding demo © Jared Clarke



Cape May Warbler banded © Jared Clarke

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. We found a total of 23 species of warbler in this area alone! Notable were our first Tennessee Warbler of the trip, a singing Blackpoll Warbler and intimate looks at a cooperative Veery – but the number and diversity of birds found here was exciting. 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 the trail.



Blue-grey Gnatcatcher at nest © Jared Clarke

We visited a nearby farming area to find a number of grassland and meadow-loving species such as Grasshopper Sparrow, Vesper Sparrow, Field Sparrow, and Eastern Bluebird. The lush forest of Coppen's Tract rewarded us with Scarlet Tanagers, Ovenbirds and point blank views of a stunning Hooded Warbler. A very unexpected highlight came on our second morning, when we arrived at the banding station to find they had just caught a nationally rare Henslow's Sparrow – the first one banded here in nearly 30 years!!



Hooded Warbler © Jared Clarke



Henslow's Sparrow © Jared Clarke

On one evening, some of our group headed out for an “after dark adventure” – starting at a cemetery on the banks of Port Rowan. While we “dipped” on an Eastern Screech Owl, we did spot a number of new birds such as Caspian Tern, Belted Kingfisher and our only Redheads & Northern Shovelers of the trip. Beaver, Muskrat and a large Snapping Turtle also entertained us as the daylight dwindled. After sunset, we strolled down a sandy forest road in St. William’s where we heard both Eastern Whip-poor-will and American Woodcock performing their very different nocturnal displays. A final stop at Big Creek provided our only looks at several species during the tour – Forster’s Tern, Pied-billed Grebe and Marsh Wren. Numerous Great Egrets were feeding in the marsh, and two Sandhill Cranes foraged on the berms on this cool and windy afternoon. A Blanding’s Turtle was spotted close by, providing our only encounter with this threatened species. We enjoyed a great lunch on a patio overlooking the marsh before hitting the highway north.



Chestnut-sided Warbler © Jared Clarke



American Woodcock © Jared Clarke

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, heard Virginia Rails calling and spotted a secretive American Bittern creeping through the tall grass and eventually across the road. The (mostly) former ranches and pastures of Wylie Road and Cameron Ranch provided opportunities to watch a fun variety of birds – including Eastern Bluebirds, Eastern Meadowlarks, Bobolink, Grasshopper Sparrows and even some Wilson’s Snipe. Eastern Towhees 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, and a very cooperative Black-billed Cuckoo put on a show as it watched and called from the roadside trees.



Eastern Bluebird © Jared Clarke



Black-billed Cuckoo © 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 spotted several new species as soon as we arrived at the beautiful Spring Lake Resort – Evening Grosbeaks at the feeder, a pair of Pine Warblers beside the tranquil lake and a Canada Warbler just down the trail from our rooms.



Evening Grosbeak © Jared Clarke

We encountered another boreal specialist early the next morning – two moose that mostly ignored us as they munched away in a roadside bog. These were the first of seven moose we would see over our two-day visit!

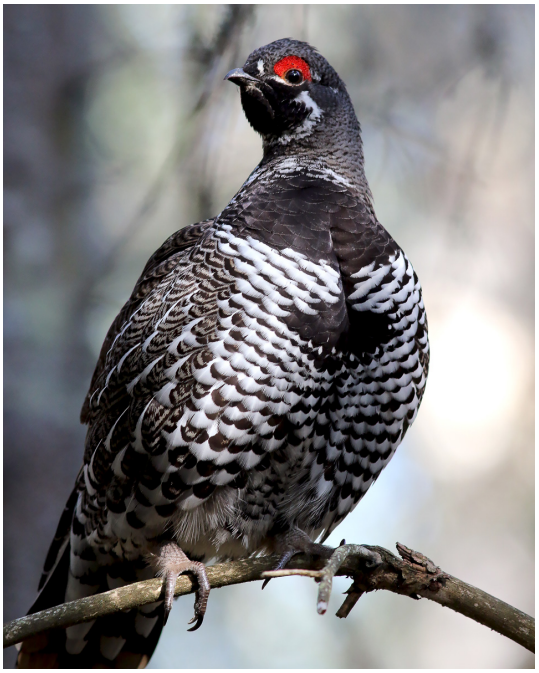


Moose © Jared Clarke



Taking photos of a moose © Tim Lucas

Next we set off in search of Spruce Grouse at the edge of a large bog, and we were not disappointed. With a little patience, one of two males that we found eventually trotted around in front of us and posed in shafts of sunlight for close-up views and photos – an awesome experience for the entire group.



Spruce Grouse © Jared Clarke

Other fun birds along this trail included American Black Duck, Swamp Sparrow, singing Nashville Warblers and a Brown Creeper doing its thing as it crept along the tree trunks. That evening some

of our group headed off to do some evening birding, highlighted by an American Woodcock displaying at a nearby picnic area. 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 on our last birding trek. At Mizzy Lake, a family of Canada Jays put in a great showing as they inspected us at very close range – not unexpected for these often curious and obliging birds.



Canada Jay © Jared Clarke

A Black-backed Woodpecker was also very cooperative as it flew in and worked on a dead tree just metres away. We a little surprised when an Olive-sided Flycatcher perched in the neighbouring tree – a typically late migrant that we hadn't really expected to see. Our last new species of the trip was a lone Solitary Sandpiper foraging across the marsh. What a fantastic end to our adventure!! We enjoyed a leisurely stop at the Visitors Centre and a final picnic lunch before making the drive south and back to Toronto.



Black-backed Woodpecker © Jared Clarke



Sunset © 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!
See trip checklist