Eagle-Eye Tours



Spring Birding in Southern Ontario 2022

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In the hopes that the pandemic is finally on the wane, many folks have turned their thoughts to travel in the hopes of making up for lost time over the past two years. Still a little wary of traveling outside of North America birders have signed up in droves to visit some of the continent's finest birding locations … and there are few better than southern Ontario in May! Over the course of our 10 days of birding we amassed a respectable tally of birds and such a total was possible primarily because of one important feature of the tour – the sheer number of different habitats that we visited. From the cultural coastal woodland of Colonel Sam Smith Park in Toronto to the Carolinian swamp forests of Pelee and Rondeau; the wide open alvar of the Carden Plain to the black spruce bogs of Algonquin. Although, as we often found, it could be difficult to see the birds for the various obscuring vegetations, it was rewarding to step back on occasion and simply enjoy the habitat for what it is. It was pleasing therefore to find that so many of this wonderfully diverse group of people took such enjoyment in so much more than the many rare or colourful birds that we encountered.
Day 1: A travel day with everyone meeting for a pre-tour chat and an excellent meal courtesy of our hosts at the Best Western. We were quite a bunch: nurses and doctors, librarians and engineers – diversity was to be a theme from the very start. **Day 2:** Up and at 'em nice and early, we'd pre-empted breakfast by purchasing sandwiches the day before and we were therefore able to reach our first birding destination by a respectably early birding hour. Colonel Sam Smith Park is one of the most consistently good migration stop-overs within the City of Toronto. It took us a while to find evidence of such but in the meanwhile we ogled a dozen courting **Red-necked Grebes** and scanned the inshore waters for **Long-tailed Duck** and **Red-breasted Merganser** – and a lone **Horned Grebe** that had to be scoped to afford any worthwhile looks. Then fortunately, a little back from the shoreline we bumped into our first warbler flock and were treated to great looks at fine-plumaged **Black-throated Blue Warblers**, "**Myrtle**" and **Nashville Warblers**. I had canvassed the group for any enthusiasm for a spot of "twitching" at the previous evening's supper and consequently I was occasionally checking for updates regarding a certain Asiatic shorebird that had turned up a week ago at some town lagoons somewhat off our intended itinerary. A birding trip to southern Ontario in the spring would not be complete without such a "twitch"; and once word had been received that the

mega-rarity was still in place, we switched gear, taking a last look at a very obliging **Green Heron** in the pond right next to our parked buses, and took the highway straight out of the City towards the little village of Thedford. Thedford is now very much on the birding map thanks to a local birder's discovery of Canada's and Eastern North America's first ever **Marsh Sandpiper**. Surely if it had been seen at 8:08am it would still be there for us when we arrived 3 hrs later? Sure enough, there were scopes aimed at the visiting celebrity in the far corner of one of the lagoons. We hoped it might decide to fly in as close as the handsome **Lesser Yellowlegs** and **Dunlin** that fed just yards away, completely unconcerned by the row of birders, but in the end these scope views had to suffice.



Marsh Sandpiper © Paul Prior

Having taken the first of many picnic lunches in the nearby village, co-guide Tim Lucas and I mapped out a route towards Leamington and Pelee that might allow us a little bonus birding on the way. A stop at Mitchell's Bay provided our only looks at **Forster's Terns,** while a brief walk along the main dyke at Lake St.Clair Marsh gave us great looks at **Western Palm Warblers** and a passing **Northern Harrier** but little else since the wind was just too persistently strong. **Day 3:** One doesn't always have to be up pre-dawn to "get the bird" but during migration, particularly at Pelee, it can make a huge difference. Many migrating birds, recently arrived will spend the rest of the day foraging, replenishing spent fuel supplies, ready for the next push north, and then are typically visible throughout the day. But to witness the actual flight of such birds, to see the spectacle of migration as it happens, one really does need to be at The Tip as early as possible. Unfortunately, our first Pelee dawn was provided with weather that simply didn't favour such a flight. But there were migrants left over from previous arrivals and of course there were the locals. Small numbers of migrant warblers kept us amply occupied as we walked back from The Tip, some of these species such as the dazzling **Black-throated Green Warbler** were new to the group's western contingent, and this was certainly true of the first "goodie" of the visit when we encountered a young male **Prairie Warbler** which entertained us with the occasional burst of song. We walked back from The Tip along West Beach where we were treated to undisturbed looks at a large group of 41 **Surf Scoters** squabbling and chasing each other around on the flat waters in the lee of the Point. After a picnic lunch adjacent to the beach we headed over to Tilden's Woods and Woodland Nature Trail. A rather uncooperative **Hooded Warbler** created a bit of a traffic jam early in the hike but only one or

two of our number managed to get onto the bird. Migrant activity was again low but nobody seemed to mind since the locally nesting **Prothonotary Warblers** put on such a fine show, feeding quite oblivious to their admiring audience. A slight detour along Redbud Trail proved worthwhile giving us our first looks at **White-eyed Vireo**.



Prothonotary Warbler © Paul Prior

Day 4: A mini mutiny occurred even this early in the tour with some people opting to have a more leisurely and civilized breakfast at the hotel while the rest of us repeated our Day 3 early morning itinerary with sunrise at The Tip. We fared little better than the previous day, the lollygags missing out only on migrant birds that frankly the whole group re-encountered throughout the day. **Blackburnian Warblers** are always a firm favourite, and then there were the very obliging **Blue-headed Vireos**, **Chestnut-sided** and **Magnolia Warblers**, and a single **Blue-winged Warbler**.



Following up on a report of a Chat at one of the beach sites we drove north and tried our luck. No Chat but we did manage to rustle up a **Grasshopper Sparrow**. A personal highlight was a brief fly-by of an **Eastern Red Bat** next to the Visitors' Centre just before lunch! We shifted gear in the afternoon, taking a break from the sometimes rather long hikes along the network of woodland trails, to drive the roads just north of the park across an area called "The Onion Fields" en route to Hillman Marsh. Sadly, migrating shorebirds were still some ways to the south of Ontario and repeated scanning revealed little other than a few **Great Egrets**. In the evening, after another excellent fish-supper at Freddy's, a few of us back-tracked to the Park in the hopes of tracking down a night bird or two. A couple of **Wood Thrushes** serenaded us in the twilight as we waited for **American Woodcocks** to start their evening rituals, but the reported Whip-poor-will stayed all too quiet. **Day 5:** And then it happened! Thank goodness the "mini mutiny" had occurred on Day 4 and not on Day 5! Today we witnessed the sort of spectacle for which people keep returning to Pelee year after year. We joined the masses en route to The Tip but got waylaid by a large cottonwood on the west shore which hosted a constantly changing stream of migrants. Tim was in his element, calling attention to the flow of dots in the sky heading south – **Scarlet Tanagers**, **Orchard** and **Baltimore Orioles**, **Bobolinks**, **Indigo Buntings** and countless unidentifiable warblers (unless you're Tim). This was the rather unexplained "reverse migration" for which Pelee is famous. Meanwhile "our" tree presented great looks at **Northern Parulas**, more **Blackburnians**, **Black-throated Green Warblers**, **Cape May** and **Nashville Warblers**, both **Orioles**, loads of **Scarlet Tanagers**, and crazy numbers of **Red-headed Woodpeckers**! Tearing ourselves away from the decorated cottonwood we chanced in on an **Acadian Flycatcher** stopping to preen at eye-level near The Tip. Some of the more exhausted warblers were feeding on the erosion control boulders along the shoreline – **Common Yellowthroats**, **Chestnut-sided** and more **Blackburnians**.



Chestnut-sided Warbler © Paul Prior

We took the tram back to the Visitors' Centre and returned to Redbud Trail which had been productive the previous day. Sure enough, we were treated to repeat sightings of a couple of **White-eyed Vireos**, a lone **Clay-coloured Sparrow**, **Rose-breasted Grosbeaks**, **Swainson's Thrush** and **Wood Thrush**. After lunch sadly we needed to make a break for it, onwards to our next destination The two-hour drive to Ridgetown, our home base for tomorrow's visit to Rondeau, was broken however by an unscheduled stop to check out the reported gathering of hundreds of Lapland Longspurs in the corn stubble fields near Port Alma. When we got to this seemingly unremarkable location there were a couple of birders with scopes set up on a nearby puddle. The **Lapland Longspurs** were rotating through this drinking hole in groups of between a dozen and 75 birds. They would wheel in, take a few sips of water for a minute and then move back out into the vast fields. We reckoned, after a while that we'd seen several hundred Longspurs but then turned around to notice that some commotion had spooked birds across the entire field system – there was one tight "murmuration" of over a thousand birds, and then we realized, scanning across the sky that the air was full of Longspurs: perhaps as many as 5000!!



Lapland Longspur © Paul Prior

Day 6: We arrived at Rondeau Provincial Park in good time after our Tim Horton's breakfast stop and made straight for the outer reaches of the point. Weather was pleasant and still but it very quickly became evident that there had been no recent migrant activity – we were looking at local breeding birds: **Brown Thrasher**, **Carolina Wren**, **Blue-grey Gnatcatchers**. We retreated to the Visitors' Centre and headed out onto the Tulip Tree Trail where we found the reliable **Prothonotary Warbler** feeding right up against and even under the boardwalk! A couple of our number had missed out on the Pelee Prothons and so this was a sweet catch-up for them … and one can never see too many Prothonotaries! From here we regrouped and planned a new approach, making for the northern reaches of the Park in search of lingering migrants from previous arrivals. This proved worthwhile as we slowly amassed a series of good looks at several migrants: **Mourning Warbler**, **Swainson's Thrush**, plenty of **Grey Catbirds**, and a **Yellow-bellied Flycatcher**. A check of the local on-line birders' platform revealed that a pair of Stilts had turned up this very morning at Blenheim Sewage lagoons and so, since we were opting for a restaurant lunch today, we made straight for the lagoons. Sure enough, on the settling pond on the far side of the lagoon complex the pair of elegant **Black-necked Stilts** foraged by themselves, while a more rowdy bunch of **Dunlin** and **Lesser Yellowlegs** fussed about in the next-door pond. Meanwhile, a handful of **Bobolink**s fed and sang among the blooming dandelions in the adjacent meadow.



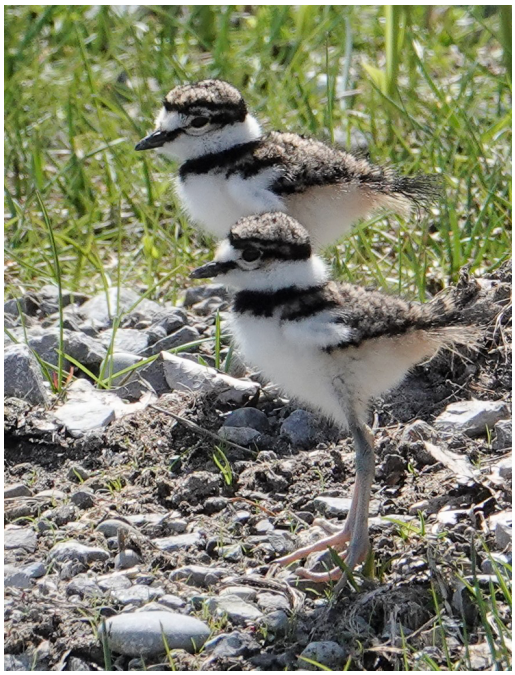
Black-necked Stilt © Paul Prior

Day 7: After a comfortable night in our Simcoe hotel, we headed straight down to Long Point Bird Observatory's Old Cut field station. We arrived just in time to see the banders releasing a fine male **Canada Warbler** and then spent a while watching the banding operation in the purpose built viewing facility. It's always informative to view such operations close up, but warblers in trees is what we really wanted to see. Fortunately, just a very brief stroll into the "back forty" put us right under a very productive couple of trees. All the usual suspects were on hand but joined now by a couple of species that move through a little later: **Bay-breasted** and **Tennessee Warblers**, while an obliging **Ovenbird** strutted through the adjacent woodlot. A particularly pleasant surprise was the pai of **Green Herons** that insisted on photographs as they patrolled the vicinity of what presumably was going to be their nest site. From here we walked to the Long Point Provincial Park but sadly – although the Park was accessible, there were no amenities available. We managed quick looks at a **Northern Waterthrush**, a pair of **Brown Thrashers** and more **Bobolinks**, but then headed back to the still productive trees at old Cut to ogle some more **Northern Parulas** and friends.



Green Heron © Paul Prior

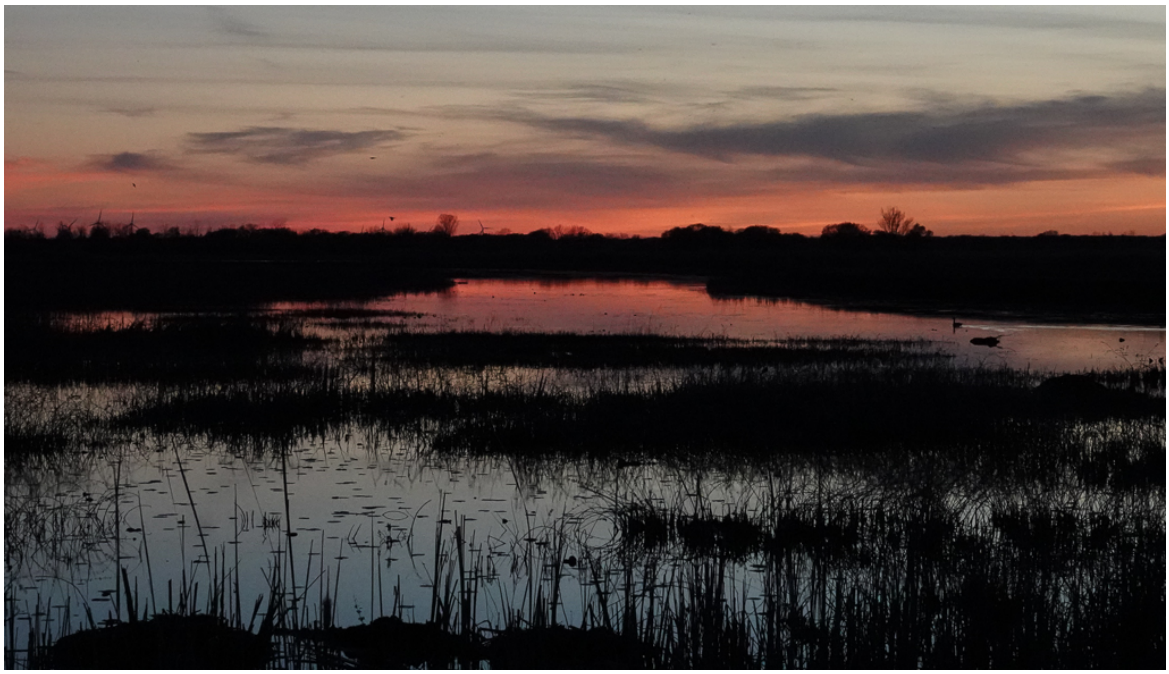
We decided now to try one of the closer walks along a nearby side-street – migrating birds are not averse to visiting cottage yards – which proved very pleasant affording us great looks at nesting **Purple Martins** and a family of recently hatched **Killdeer**. We picnicked at Old Cut, and then opted to return to our Simcoe hotel to allow a much-deserved siesta opportunity while the rest of us piled into one van to go and explore the nearby St.Williams sandroad.



Killdeer chicks © Paul Prior

Despite it being the traditionally birdless time of the day birds were indeed still active on breeding

territories along the sandroad – an unpaved route that goes through a series of conifer plantations mixed with more typical scrubby forest. **Pine Warblers** and **Scarlet Tanagers** were in good song, and we managed rather distant looks at a male **Hooded Warbler** setting up territory nearby. We had arranged an early supper at a Simcoe restaurant with the plan of then heading out to Big Creek Marsh for the evening. We arrived at Big Creek in good time, water levels looking ominously high – but straight away there was a pair of **Sandhill Cranes** chaperoning their two new colts along the nearby edge of the marsh. **Marsh Wrens** and **Swamp Sparrows** sang all around us but did not present themselves for easy viewing, unlike the **American Coot** which swam out to greet us. Further along, after some rather hesitant "ker-plunking" a pair of **American Bitterns** flapped low across the marsh and then somehow Tim managed to locate one of the settled birds striking a pose in the reeds. A pair of **Black Terns** flew low overhead. It really was a gorgeous evening; a couple of **Common Nighthawks** passed by at dusk, and a **Sora** started to whinny as we ambled back to the vehicles.



Big Creek Marsh at dusk © Paul Prior

Day 8: This was to be a big-drive day, heading all the way north of Toronto via Niagara (we had sidelined Niagara to "twitch" the Marsh Sandpiper on Day2!). But first we were going to visit a lovely tract of prime Carolinian forest – Backus Woods. An early start was essential, making the most of the coolest part of the day – when local birds would be most vocal. Sure enough, as soon as we tumbled out of the vans there were **Indigo Buntings**, **Blue-winged Warblers** and **Eastern Towhees** serenading us in the car park. We filed into the forest and were stopped straight away by a canopy bustling with migrant warbler activity. One of our targets here was **Louisiana Waterthrush** and sure enough an individual blasted out his song from close by - but try as we might, we simply could not get eyes onto the bird. **Eastern Wood-pewees** were a little easier to spot, as were **Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers** and **White-breasted Nuthatch**, and despite the lack of visuals on the waterthrush the forest and the gorgeous weather combined for a lovely hike, stopping to check-out a **Red-backed Salamander** and an **Eastern Pine Elfin** butterfly, along with a host of delightful spring ephemeral flowers.



Eastern Pine Elfin © Paul Prior

By mid-morning it was time to hit the road for the eastbound drive to Niagara. Today being Friday the 13th, we were joined on the roads by a continual parade of bikers, Harleys et al, as they made their way to Port Dover. In Niagara, with some deft navigation by my co-pilot, we found our way to the biggest carpark right next to The Falls and spent an hour in awe as so many visitors have before. Well-practiced by now in setting and dismantling the picnic lunch we were soon on the road again, anticipating some gruesome Friday pm traffic as we passed to the west of Toronto. Not a great deal we could do about this but people were in good spirits (or asleep) and finally we made Orillia in time for an excellent supper and a quick spot of grocery shopping.



Niagara Falls © Paul Prior

Day 9: Yes, another early start but necessarily so since our destination today was the Carden Alvar and with a very hot day in the forecast it would be important to get as much birding in before the heat was upon us. Fortunately, the drive to the famous Wylie Road which runs right through this recently designated Provincial Park was easy and soon enough we were being treated to the special sights and sounds of this unique ecosystem. **Wilson's Snipe** were displaying over fields next to the first stop (even perching on nearby telephone wires!), and **Eastern Meadowlarks** sang sweetly all around. We moved on to Sedge Wren Marsh but were treated instead to excellent looks at a **Marsh Wren**. Several **American Bitterns** played games of very slow tag across the marsh, and a **Virginia Rail** called unseen from the sedges.



Wilson's Snipe © Paul Prior

Piling back into the vans we then stopped further along the road to try to get looks at one of the several **Golden-winged Warblers** which sang from the northern side of the marsh. **Brown Thrashers** and **Eastern Towhees** were easy to spot, as were a quartet of **Blue Jays** which stopped by to indulge in some weird bobbing dance which I gather is part of their nuptials! But the Golden-wings stayed well away from the road, affording only rather unsatisfactory scope views. But then just a little further on we lucked-in when a bird sang very close to the road, initiating a quick exit from the vans and allowing great looks at this most handsome of warblers. Driving on, the trees cleared for more open meadow habitat and here at last we encountered the real star (in my book at least) of the alvar: **Upland Sandpipers**. They sang and foraged around us, perching up on the tops of the sparse shrubs to afford excellent looks. Meanwhile, **Grasshopper Sparrows** and **Savannah Sparrows** were being equally cooperative. We took our picnic at nearby Kirkfield Lift Lock, facilities closed and picnic tables chained up for Covid, but we managed very well in the company of **Eastern Phoebes** and **Northern Rough-winged Swallows**. There was just one Carden speciality that we had failed to encounter and so, despite the late hour we decided to try just once more. This time, led by Mike and Ken Burrell's excellent Ontario book, we headed straight for the Cameron Ranch. It looked a little barren but we stuck with it until at last there in the middle distance, in the heat haze, was a **Loggerhead Shrike**. It was a brief look … but then a few minutes later the bird returned to one of its higher perches and posed for scope views.



Picnic at Kirkfield Park © Paul Prior

Now we could head for Algonquin buoyed by a successful Carden experience. We arrived at the lovely Spring Lake Resort in Dwight, the west entrance to the park, by mid-afternoon, greeted by **Pine Siskins** at the feeders, and **Pine Warblers** singing around the buildings.



Pine Warbler © Paul Prior

Day 10: Equipped with our Spring Lake packed breakfasts, all but a handful of us headed out early on our first quest for Moose – simply driving slowly along Highway 60 in the first couple of hours of daylight seemed the best approach but sadly we returned mooseless (although we did have a

roadside encounter with a foraging **Red Fox**) to the Spring Lake Resort to fetch the remainder of the group and our packed lunches. Now our intent switched to the avian and we opted for a pleasant hike along the railbed at the end of Arowhon Road. A couple of boreal species were our main targets but simply re-acquainting ourselves with warblers that we'd encountered as migrants at Pelee and Rondeau now in "home" territory was very special. Birds such as **Rose-breasted Grosbeak**, **Blackburnian Warbler**, **Black-throated Green Warblers** and **Blue-headed Vireo** were in fine voice, vying with the more accomplished thrushes – **Swainson's**, **Hermit** and **Wood**. A distantly calling **Olive-sided Flycatcher** was rather too elusive and we were teased by fly-over **White-winged Crossbills**. On the main pond a pair of **Hooded Mergansers** loafed on a log alongside variously painted **Painted Turtles** – part of a long-running and ongoing turtle research project. A chorus of **Spring Peepers** and a **Compton Tortoiseshell** butterfly added to the non-avian aspect of the hike. We now drove the rest of the distance across the park (ever watchful for moose) to the excellent Visitors' Centre where we broke open some of the left-over picnic fare to augment the tasty wraps that Spring lake had provided. **Pine Siskins** were hanging out in front of the Centre but given the lovely weather we opted to drive the short distance to the Spruce Bog Boardwalk still with boreal species in mind. Before heading out on the actual boardwalk we scoured the network of narrow footpaths through the conifers at the trailhead again encountering more warblers, although this time the mixed party were behaving more as migrants – no song just a busy flurry of feeding, perhaps with a view to moving further north into the boreal proper: **Bay-breasted Warblers**, **Cape Mays** and **Myrtle Warblers.** We broke out of the forest onto the boardwalk, stopping for a little botanising, some **Green Frogs** and an obliging **Beaverpond Baskettail** dragonfly, hawking over the open water. At the end of the boardwalk we were again serenaded by **Hermit Thrushes** and were treated to excellent looks at first a handsome male **Purple Finch** and then an unusually confiding **Ovenbird**. Distracted by foraging **Black-and-white Warblers** we were suddenly alerted to the distinctive "yickering" of a male **Merlin**, apparently making a food pass at a presumed nearby nest since in the next instance the lower pitched female could be heard responding. We were afforded somewhat obscured views of one of the pair perched with food but they had other business in mind and we left them to it, returning to the vans for the slow (and again mooseless) drive back to Spring Lake. An early supper allowed some of us to head out again in the early evening in the hopes of rustling up some additional birds. First, we called in at the trailhead of the West Highland Backpack trail where **Northern Waterthrushes** sang loudly from the riparian shrub cover and **Blue Jays** teased us with imitations of Canada Jay! But then as we returned to the carpark, the distinctive "peents" of **American Woodcocks** waylaid our plans somewhat as we tracked the calling birds down and caught them in our flashlight beams, hiccupping comically and then taking flight to begin their aerial displays, returning repeatedly to the same traditional arena. It was amazing just how habituated and oblivious the birds seemed to be – perhaps too caught up in their own affairs to worry about the extra light – their arena was located, after all, right next to a fairly busy carpark!



American Woodcock © Paul Prior

Thrilled with this unexpected spectacle we then headed back to Arowhon Road where we'd earlier noted the best-looking deciduous forest – nice large mature trees – and here Tim performed his surely irresistible hooting display. Sure enough, albeit rather distant, a pair of **Barred Owls** were persuaded to respond. **Day 11:** Our last day of birding began again with a somewhat smaller portion of the group heading out early on another mooseless moose hunt. These animals were now beginning to take on the aspect of fabled beasts. We did however manage to spot a couple of pairs of **Common Mergansers** and **Ring-necked Ducks** chilling in a wonderfully tranquil looking beaver pond. The **Beaver** then broke said tranquility with a sharp slap – the first we'd heard from this Canadian icon on the entire trip! Once we'd picked up the late risers, we set out again, first for a look at Mew Lake and the adjacent airport. **White-throated Sparrows** were in full song and a passing flock of **White-winged Crossbills** got the group somewhat excited, but all in all the site was rather birdless. It being our last day, we opted to make the most of the deteriorating weather and head to the Visitors' Centre for a proper look at the various displays and for a spot of retail therapy, but not before a quick look at a young **Moose** disappearing into the bush as we drove the highway to the VC.



Young bull moose © Paul Prior

The rain – pretty much the first of the entire tour – was really setting in now and it seemed our only option was to start the long drive back to Toronto but of course driving slowly enough along Hwy 60 just in case … and indeed, we got lucky. Just before we reached the Algonquin Art Centre there in a roadside marsh was a large young bull **Moose**. Tim and I u-turned our respective buses in the Art Centre carpark and headed back to a convenient pull-off just a hundred metres past the marsh; then, alert to the occasional passing truck, we trooped back and stood on the hard shoulder just 50 metres or so from the apparently completely unconcerned animal. A perfect way to end the tour (although the weather could have been kinder).