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LIVING

Birds of Pelee and Rondeau

The Kirtland's warbler was the icing on the cake. In the tangled brush bordering the beach, the stocky yellow and gray songbird was all but invisible as it sang emphatically and gleaned insects in a jumble of windfallen trees and leafy vines.

Only when it flitted out onto a leafless branch for a second or two was there any hope of seeing it — and it didn't flit often!

Word of the rarity had spread like wildfire along the trails of Point Pelee National Park. Over the course of the day, hundreds of birders had taken up position along the



OUR CHANGING SEASONS
Drew Monkman

east beach, hoping to get a glance of this sparrow-sized bundle of feathered life. When Jim, Mitch, Rodney and I arrived in late afternoon, only a dozen or so observers remained. The bird had not been seen for at least half an hour. As had been the case the entire weekend, however, luck was on our side. The elusive Kirtland's almost immediately came out into the open, showing the handsome black streaking on the back and the band of dark spots across the breast. Seeing a life species that numbers less than a thousand individuals was very satisfying.

We had chosen the Victoria Day weekend to make a trip to southwestern Ontario to observe spring bird migration at its best — at the Lake Erie peninsulas of Rondeau and Point Pelee. Our first day was spent at Rondeau Provincial Park. Located near Blenheim, the park consists of an eight-kilometre-long sand spit which extends into Lake Erie. Visitors can see Carolinian forest species such as sassafras, mulberry and tulip trees; birds like the prothonotary warbler and the yellow-breasted chat; mammals such as the Virginia opossum; and rare reptiles like the spiny softshell turtle and the Fowler's toad. All of these species reach their northern limit in southwestern Ontario, being more common further south.

However, in the spring and fall, most people flock here to see birds. The Rondeau peninsula and bay attract migrating birds in huge numbers and offer some of the best bird-watching in Ontario. Tundra swans and a wide variety of ducks lead off the parade in March, but the warblers of May were what we were there to see. We did not leave disappointed.

Arriving at the park shortly after 7 a.m. on Saturday, it was immediately apparent by the intense and varied sound around us that the birds had arrived as well. Baltimore orioles, rose-breasted grosbeak, house wrens, red-bellied woodpeckers and yellow warblers filled the air with their songs. We began by trying a trail near the park maintenance building. It took nearly an hour to cover 50 metres! The birds just kept on coming. Before we knew it, we had seen 15 species of warblers and enjoyed great views of nearly all of them. These included southern Ontario specialties like the hooded warbler and the often hard-to-find northern parula.

It was soon clear that the park held an unusual mix of both early



Counterclockwise, from top right: The Kirtland's Warbler, the prothonotary warbler and the rose-breasted grosbeak, in photos by Karl Egressy, and, left to right, Rodney Fuentes, Mitch Brownstein, Jim Cashmore are seen on the Tulip Tree Trail at Rondeau Provincial Park in a photo by Drew Monkman.

and late migrants. Birds like yellow-rumped warblers that would have usually moved further north by this time were still present in large numbers. At the same time, late May arrivals like blackpoll and Wilson's warblers were also common.

The presence of equal numbers of both male and female warblers was also interesting. As a rule, males arrive earlier in the spring than females. By late May, female warblers usually outnumber males by a large margin. Many of these female birds are quite challenging to identify. The female hooded warbler was one species that really put our identification skills to the test.

In addition to the sheer diversity of species, the cool weather and wind over the weekend tended to keep the birds down low. This allowed us to enjoy superb views of the birds as they warmed themselves in the sunshine or hunted near the ground for insects. Side lighting in early morning and late afternoon was an added bonus. One of the problems with warbler watching in the late spring and summer is that you rarely get leisurely, close-up views. Many species are shrouded by leaves in the tree tops.

After checking the sightings

board at the Visitors Centre, our next stop was the Tulip Tree Trail. Rodney and Mitch were hoping to find a Rondeau specialty, the prothonotary warbler. A nesting pair had been seen earlier in the day at one of the slews along the trail.

Carpeting the ground below the towering tulip trees and muscular-looking blue beech, wildflowers of half a dozen species added nearly as much colour as the birds. Wild columbine, wild geranium, white trillium, bellwort and Jack-in-the-pulpit grew in profusion. The dappled light filtering through the half-open canopy gave the whole scene a truly spiritual quality — almost like being alone in a church as the morning sun shines through stained-glass windows. Despite large numbers of birders, the only sounds to be heard were those of the birds themselves — warblers, grosbeaks, blackbirds and especially orioles.

As we stopped on the boardwalk to look and listen for the prothonotary, veeries and Swainson's thrushes quietly probed the forest floor for insects. Hoping to attract this elusive golden warbler by pishing — making various "sh" sounds to attract birds — our efforts consistently brought in close to a dozen different species,

but no prothonotary. This bird would have to wait for another day.

Returning to the Visitors Centre, we allowed ourselves a few minutes of relaxation — something rare when birding is this good — and took in all of the activity at the feeders. Located right in front of a large viewing window, the feeder area includes an artificial pond along with a variety of native plants and shrubs. It was obviously to the birds' liking. Several Baltimore orioles were busy drinking at the nectar feeder; two rose-breasted grosbeaks were perched on a cylinder eating sunflower seeds; a red-bellied woodpecker was enjoying the fat from a suet log and half a dozen white-crowned sparrows were scouring the ground for smaller seeds. Every once in a while a ruby-throated hummingbird would fly in, too.

As in any sport or activity, there are days when everything comes together. As we piled into the car, Jim predicted that we'd find both a red-headed woodpecker and a northern mockingbird on the road leading to the next trail. Almost immediately, a medium-sized bird flashing large patches of white and flying in the typical undulating fashion of a woodpecker shot

across the road. It was indeed the red-headed. The deep crimson of the head — richer in colour than even that of the cardinal — was truly impressive. The mockingbird, too, with its conspicuous white wing patches and long tail, showed up right on cue.

We ended the day with a short walk down the Harrison Trail. Once again, the bird activity was intense. In addition to the dozen or so warbler species that were seemingly everywhere, blue-grey gnatcatchers and a yellow-throated vireo were two new birds for the day.

Although we had seen a respectable 95 species in the park, it had been the sheer abundance of birds and the long, leisurely looks at so many species that made the day memorable...and whetted our appetite for Point Pelee the following morning.

To be continued next week

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