

WINGS FOR ALL SEASONS

BIRDING THE SEAWAY TRAIL

By Gerry Smith and Bob McNamara

Extending from the Pennsylvania Gamelands at the border with Ohio, to where the St. Lawrence River enters Canada, birding along the Seaway Trail is an adventure for all seasons and all levels of interest. The trail includes the near shore regions of two great lakes and one of the largest rivers in North America. The diverse habitats attract a great abundance of birds as migrants, breeders and

wintering species. Many sites throughout the region offer distinct birding experiences suitable for all levels of birders. Most of these sites are easily reached by car and once there, visitors can reduce their carbon footprint by hiking, canoeing, kayaking, or by observing migrating birds from a stationary site. The latter activity is ideal for casual birders such as those whose primary birding experience is at their feeder. A visit to sites such as the Ripley Hawkwatch, Braddock Bay or Derby Hill at the right migration season will thrill the most casual observer with the sight of large numbers of hard to observe migrants such as hawks streaming past. An added bonus for visiting

birders to these sites is the presence of experienced local birders who are usually very willing to assist visitors in identification and how to most effectively bird a given site.

The Seaway Trail region has active birding groups in most areas along Lakes Erie and Ontario. Most of these groups originate in the large cities of Erie PA and Buffalo, Rochester and Syracuse in New York.

Active birding groups are less frequent in Northern New York thus information on birds and where to find them is less available. Anyone contemplating a visit to the Seaway Trail Region may wish initially to do so during 2008-early 2009 when Seaway Trail Inc is sponsoring "The Year of the Bird". Events planned and informa-

tion being developed will enhance the opportunities of visitors interested in birds to explore the diverse avifauna of our region. Events will include speakers and field trips throughout the region. Many of these efforts will be conducted in partnership with birding groups from the area and will provide visitors and interested area residents with opportunities to interact with experienced local field birders. There will be a birding exhibit at the Seaway Trail Discovery Center in Sackets Harbor New York for the spring, summer and fall of 2008.

In addition to the many special events and opportunities for birders occurring in the region in 2008, Seaway Trail is developing tools that will assist visiting birders in the future. A guide to "Birding Hot Spots Along the Seaway Trail" is being prepared by authors Gerald A. Smith and Robert McNamara. This guide will be published in 2008 and will provide detailed information on where, when and how to visit the best birding areas throughout the region, from the Purple Martin extravaganza at Presque Isle, PA, to massive spring raptor and songbird migrations at Braddock Bay and Derby Hill to fall and winter gull concentrations at the Robert Moses power dam in Massena. This guide will aid birders in finding and enjoying these locations. This guide will be attractively illustrated with the artwork of Bob McNamara who is preparing a number of original paintings for the book. Many of these illustrations will also appear on 12 interpretive panels

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Carolina Wren artwork by Bob McNamara

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that will be built at sites along the Seaway Trail. These panels will provide education about the birds at a given site particularly for visitors that may be unaware of the ecological values of an area they may be visiting for other reasons.

Given the many wonderful birding areas in our region it was a hard task to choose the sites to be covered in these special interpretive panels. Birders should also take advantage of all the information posted on the Seaway Trail website including future links to birding groups and nature education groups in our region. Many of these groups offer field trips and other nature enjoyment activities suitable for all experience levels and age groups. Many will be working as partners on Year of the Bird efforts in our region. These efforts will help all interested persons to enjoy the many seasons of Birding the Seaway Trail region.

The birds present and the places

to see them ebb and flow through the seasons along the Seaway Trail. Sites that are wonderful birding in summer, may be dreadfully dull in winter while the reverse is also true. There is no season however when a trip through any part our region doesn't have the potential to generate many exciting observations. Birding the region is a twelve-month a year opportunity, with some of the best options occurring during the cold late fall to early spring months. For the hardy birder willing to endure some unpleasant weather they will be rewarded with often difficult to see northern bird species that winter in the great lakes region. Amongst these species are northern raptors, gulls and waterfowl that brighten cold days. The ebb and flow of a Seaway Trail year begins when we ring in the New Year.

Even amongst some less hardy local birders there is a tendency to not venture into a field during January, except on the first when year lists are begun. The true aficionado knows

however that a trip to the Niagara River in January may still yield large numbers of gulls and rare waterfowl for which the region is famous in birding circles. Dunkirk Harbor on Lake Erie and the Oswego River Region on Lake Ontario produce large numbers of wintering gulls and ducks. Species such as Iceland, Glaucous and Lesser Black-backed Gull as well as rare waterfowl, including Harlequin Duck, may reward the observer. These winter waterfowl concentration areas often attract a wandering Snowy Owl intent on diversifying its primary diet of rodents. Almost anywhere in the region where there is open water, wintering Bald Eagle may now be found in small numbers. Along the St. Lawrence River traditional open water pools maintained by current action attract thousands of Common Merganser, Common Goldeneye and the occasional Barrow's Goldeneye. As January wanes many of the wintering waterfowl are in bright breeding plumage and begin their courtship. Watching

BIRDING SPOTS ALONG THE SEAWAY TRAIL

Presque Isle State Park

Box 8510 Erie PA 16505 • 814 833-7424 • www.dcnr.state.pa.us

Jamestown Audubon Society

1600 Riverside Road, Jamestown NY 14701 • 716 569-2345
www.jamestownaudubon.org

Roger Tory Peterson Institute

311 Curtis Street, Jamestown, NY • 14701 800 758-6841 • www.rtpi.org

Beaver Meadow Audubon Center

1610 Welch Road, North Java, NY 14113
800 377-1520 • www.buffaloaudubon.com

Penn Dixie Fossil & Birding Site

4050 North Street, Blasdell, NY 14219
716 627-4560 • www.pennnixie.org

Iroquois National Wildlife Refuge

1101 Casey Road, Basom, NY 14013 • www.iroquoisnwr.fws.gov

Genesee Country Village Museum

Flint Hill Road. Mumford, NY 14511
585 538-6822 • www.gcv.org

Montezuma Audubon Center

2295 Route 89, Savannah, NY 13146
315 365-3580 • www.ny.audubon.org/montezuma.htm

Sterling Nature Center

15870 Jensvold Road, Sterling, NY 13156
315 947-6143 • www.cayuganet.org/sterlingpark

Derby Hill Bird Observatory

5 Miles North of Mexico, NY 13114 315 963-7366
www.greatermexicochamber.com

Minna Anthony Common Nature Center

44927 Cross Island Road, Wellesley Island, NY 13640
315 482-2479 • www.nysparks.com

NYPA Hawkins Point Visitors Center

Barnhard Island Road, Massena, NY 13622
315 764-0226 • www.nypa.gov

New York State Audubon Society

200 Trillium Lane, Albany, NY 12203
518 869-9731 • www.ny.audubon.org



The map above depicts birding spots along the Seaway Trail. Artwork by Bob McNamara

their courtship antics from a sheltered spot is well worth the time spent.

The late Fritz Scheider, a longtime Syracuse area birder, once referred to February as the longest birding month because of the relatively few birds present in mid-winter. However many areas of our region still offer very good birding at this time of year. In the Cape Vincent-Point Peninsula Region, for many years, large concentrations of wintering Rough-legged Hawk, Red-tailed Hawk with lesser numbers of Short-eared Owl, American Kestrel and Northern Harrier occur. These concentrations are generally higher than anywhere else in the northeastern United States. In addition large numbers of Horned Lark and Snow Bunting along with small groups of Lapland Longspur are present here. In other areas of open farmland along the Seaway Trail, smaller concentrations of these wintering open land birds

occur, particularly in areas that receive lesser amounts of Lake Effect snow. Open water areas along the lakes may produce small numbers of wintering loons and grebes as well as a myriad of courting ducks. By mid-February, or even Late January, northbound migrant Horned Lark and high courtship activity in many species provide signs of spring,

Depending on weather conditions, spring migration in our region may be well under way in early March or delayed past the middle of the month. Sites along the Pennsylvania and New York Lake Erie Shores often experience an influx of American Robin, blackbirds, Turkey Vulture and early migrant waterfowl before sites farther east and north. This is dependent on the tracks of storms that bring warm air into our region. If these storms pass regularly to our north March is a spring month, If these low pressure

areas pass to our south we remain in winters grip. Those springs where March is a spring month are well remembered amongst birders. Strong bubbles of warm air pouring north bring some of the most memorable days to sites along the south shores of Lake Erie and Lake Ontario. Thousands to hundreds of thousands of Blackbirds, American Robin, Snow Goose and other species pour past well known sites such as Presque Isle, Ripley, Braddock Bay and Derby Hill. Somewhat lesser but still impressive numbers of raptors and other species ride southerly tempests north to their breeding grounds. While the several sites mentioned here are well known for these impressive concentrations it is likely other lesser known sites harboring significant diurnal migration concentrations occur throughout the Seaway Trail region. Birders anywhere

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near the shoreline on southerly winds should look to the skies and they may be rewarded with a Red-shouldered Hawk, Northern Goshawk or other species that occur in numbers at the well known observation sites.

By late March the floodgates of the most impressive period for birding the Seaway Trail have opened. From then through early June the northbound flood of both diurnal and nocturnal migrants will build to a crescendo peaking from late April to mid-May. While the well-known hot spots may be the best places to observe northbound birds almost any site near the shore is suitable for songbirds resting and feeding during the day or diurnal migrants feeding and roosting in early morning or evening hours. For the birder trying to take in this spectacle there are not enough days in April and May. Birders seeking to witness good flights should try to spend a week or at least a few days in the area so that the odds of a suitable weather system occurring are enhanced.

Those that do may be rewarded by the sight of thousands of Broad-winged Hawks in swirling boils headed north in late April. Equally spectacular are early May flights of Blue Jays in the thousands streaming along the lake. Also in May, many songbirds that are primarily nocturnal migrants continue feeding and flying for several hours. Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Northern Oriole and many warbler species fly past lookouts by the hundreds offering the challenge of warbler identification in flight for observers. It is hard to describe the spectacle of these flights to those who have never seen one, but it is well worth the effort to be on a lookout on the right day. For the lookouts

in immediate lakeshore areas an added bonus offered are numbers of spring plumaged loons and waterfowl calling and courting.

Spring migration comes to an end in early June with an influx of southern breeding Bald Eagle, many immatures less than six months old, headed north for a "summer vacation". Many of these birds will loaf along shores and wetlands as our breeding birds pursue the serious matter of reproduction through the long summer days. In a region as diverse as that covered by the Seaway Trail the breeding bird fauna is extremely variable. While many of small lakeshore woodlands



Barred Owl, photo by Bob McNamara

harbor a limited number of species, including Hooded Warbler and Carolina Wren, other areas have diverse breeding avifauna. The extensive wetlands of the region harbor rare and declining species such as Black Tern and both bitterns. Water bird species breeding on offshore islands and man made structures occur at many sites throughout the area. Common and Caspian Terns and several Gull species as well as Double-crested Cormorant are commonly observed during the breeding season. Breeding landbirds along the south shores of the lakes have a southerly flavor with Tufted Titmouse and Red-bellied Woodpecker being common. Red-headed Wood-

pecker, a species in severe decline, also occurs in these areas. To the east and north of Lake Ontario and along the St Lawrence River a more northerly flavor develops in the breeding bird fauna. Hermit Thrush and Blackburnian Warbler are common breeders in the diverse Indian River Lakes bird community. This area also harbors Whip-poor-will, Golden-winged Warbler and declining grassland species. Late May to mid-July is a wonderful time to bird any part of our region as songbirds are in full voice and one can be serenaded at any site.

The breeding season is relatively short and by late June-mid July migrant arctic shorebirds are headed south. Water levels affect the numbers and variety of these birds seen. Sites such as Presque Isle PA and the dune lands of eastern Lake Ontario can witness good movements from July to November. Boaters often see shorebird groups on small offshore islands and man-made structures throughout the region. Shorebirds seek secluded spots and those birding by kayak and canoe should look for small flocks. By mid July

early migrant land birds are headed south. Most noticeable amongst these species are concentrations of several swallow species often noted on wires near water. Point Peninsula NY and Presque Isle PA are among the areas well known for concentrations. By mid-August the concentrations of Purple Martin number in the tens of thousands a sight unparalleled in the northeast. Other early migrant landbirds such as Least Flycatcher, Yellow Warbler and Eastern Bluebird are appearing in small flocks along shorelines. At banding stations such as the Braddock Bay Bird Observatory banders are planning for the long fall to come and trapping these early migrants. Birds

are captured and data taken on each bird and a small US Fish and Wildlife band is placed on a leg. The bird is then released unharmed and if it appears again valuable scientific data is gathered. BBBO has a strong educational mission and visitors are welcome with pre-arrangement.

By mid-August the southbound songbird migration has once again become a flood. While the fall movements are less intense and of a longer duration than spring, they offer equally good birding opportunities. While greatest concentrations occur at traditional concentration areas, significant migrations occur along the St. Lawrence River and other parts of the lakeshores. Visitors to or camping in the many state parks throughout our region will find small groups of songbirds quietly drifting through the woods feeding as they go. As in spring, visiting major hot spots will be productive until at least late October, and observers should look for songbirds whenever they are near the shores of lakes or rivers. As with May, September is a peak month for songbird migration, and visits to wetland areas are often productive for early ducks and geese and late shorebirds.

Beginning in earnest in mid-September, but underway since at



Bald Eagle, photo by Mary Ellen Barbeau

least mid-August, many waterbirds and waterfowl are passing through the region. Of particular interest to birders are flights of waterfowl and gulls observed on strong northerly winds at sites including Derby Hill and Hamlin Beach State Park. These flights can continue into early December and produce species such as all three jaegers, Black-legged Kittiwake, Sabines Gull, King Eider and other rare to uncommon species. For those willing to dress warmly and bird in the teeth of a northerly gale they may be well rewarded. These flights also include large numbers of Brant, 3 species of scoters and other waterfowl. Given the extended nature of fall migration, observations of migrants is productive from mid-July into December along the Seaway Trail.

With the arrival of November many winter sites once again become productive. While most migrant and breeding songbirds are headed south other northern species are arriving. If it's a good finch year, species such as Pine Grosbeak and Bohemian Waxwing may be regularly found on fruiting shrubs in northern and eastern regions and less regularly in western sections. Northern raptors return to wintering grounds and northern Bald Eagles increase in riparian areas. Birders give thanks in November and December for the Niagara River and its spectacular feast of gulls with 10-15 species possible. Until freeze up begins waterfowl are plentiful in the large bays of the lakes. Thereafter birds move out and remaining ducks and geese concentrate in traditional wintering areas. Visiting birders in December can end their birding year by joining locals in participation on a Christmas Bird Count to explore birding areas off the beaten path. ♦

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