

Gleanings from the Northumberland Bird Database

RARE BIRDS

By Clive E. Goodwin

Some would argue that the search for rare and unusual birds is what birding is really all about. To some extent, they're right: the report of a rare bird draws would-be viewers like a magnet! It's also true that some individuals pursue rarities with a single-minded, no-holds-barred approach, and will happily throw responsibilities out the window if a 'good' bird is reported. Most of us are not so addicted to the chase, but most active birders would probably be reluctant to miss a local rarity.

So I thought it might be interesting to look at the rare birds in the database. Of course, 'rare' is a relative thing. Probably everyone has their own idea of rarity, and we'd all be correct; and Yellow Warblers are rare in December but not in May. But with the database it's simply a matter of selecting those species with the smallest number of records, so the question is then one of selecting a suitably small number. We have well over a quarter of a million records in all, so if we selected the bottom 1% we would have 2600+ records. This seems very high, and in any case even the computer might have trouble figuring out which birds would cumulatively have a total of only 2600 records! So I decided to select birds with fewer than 10 records each, and then work upwards in increments of 10.

I found we have 64 species with fewer than 10 records each. At the next step, with between 10 and 20 each, there are 22 species. So by going from 10 to 20 records the number of species only increases by a little over one third. This was a little surprising, and I wondered what would happen at the next [20-30] step. It turned out that only 7 species were added then, and in fact only 39 more species were added in moving from 20 to 100 records per species. So we have a cluster of records at the bottom – the rarest of all – and then birds are gradually added as the number of records increases.

The group with between 10 and 100 records each are certainly not common birds: it includes such species as King Eider and Cerulean Warbler, but also Yellow-billed Cuckoo, which in some years can be quite widespread. This illustrates a theme that runs through the entire selection; there are, it would seem, a lot of ways of being rare! Most King Eiders winter along the seacoasts, and they are mainly rare visitors here in late fall and early winter. They used to be almost predictable at Presqu'ile at those times. Since the advent of zebra mussels the distribution of diving ducks on the Great Lakes has changed, and now the eiders are no longer so predictable. Cerulean Warblers, on the other hand, are rare and declining summer residents in the Province [there is a small population nesting north of Kingston, for example], and the occasional birds have summered in the county and possibly nested – but most of our records are of migrants. The cuckoo numbers fluctuate with tent caterpillar outbreaks, and they add to their apparent rarity by being very elusive. Uncommon as these birds are, the rarest species are confined to the set with fewer than 10 records, and really to the 36 species that have only one or two records apiece.

There are 17 species with only two records, and 19 with only one each. These birds include the really off-beat sightings, so we'll look more closely at them now. Again, we find a mixture. Who would ever expect a Willow Ptarmigan, a bird of the arctic tundra, in this county? And we have a Brambling, a Eurasian species. Sulphur-bellied Flycatchers live mostly in Mexico and points south, but one made it to Presqu'ile one year. The selection also includes our Passenger Pigeon records,

The other 32 are not quite so improbable, but they come from all points of the compass. Those great wanderers, the shorebirds and gulls, account for almost one third of the 36 species [Lesser Sand-Plover, Snowy and Wilson's Plovers, American Oystercatcher, Black-necked Stilt, Curlew Sandpiper, Long-tailed Jaeger, Mew and California Gulls, Sandwich and Sooty Terns]. Among locations Presqu'ile pops up very often. Like Point Pelee, it seems to draw rarities disproportionately.

There is a sizeable group of westerners: Band-tailed Pigeon, Lewis's Woodpecker, Spotted Towhee, Golden-crowned Sparrow, and Black-headed Grosbeak. These are all birds that have some history of wandering. Scissor-tailed Flycatcher, Mountain Bluebird and Lark Bunting are in a rather different class as they are mainly prairie species, but they too have a history of vagrancy to our province.

The southerners are Tricolor Heron, Purple Gallinule, Chuck-Will's-Widow, Barn Owl, and White-winged Dove. Ontario is at the extreme northern range limit of the Chuck-Will's-Widow and the owl, young herons often disperse north, and the gallinule has a formidable reputation as a wanderer. The dove's range, on the other hand, is expanding north and I'm sure we can look forward to more in the future!

For the rest, the birds are a diverse assortment. There's not much commonality to the list of Pacific Loon, Northern Fulmar, Ross's Goose, Tufted Duck, Common Eider, Thick-billed Murre, Razorbill, and Northern Wheatear,

Patterns of wandering or not, it's a small miracle that these rarest vagrants were seen at all. Some, like the fulmar, murre and Barn Owl, were birds that were picked up dead – but someone knowledgeable still had to find them. Most of these birds ought not be here, and few of us can ever hope to find such stranded waifs unaided. Even very good birders in very good locations can hope to find no more than a handful over the years. Of course, many of us will have seen one or more of these species, thanks to the excellent communications among birders nowadays. Every year or two a 'mega-rarity' pops up and is found by someone, and somehow gets reported. I certainly wouldn't want it any other way, but it can tend to diminish our appreciation of the sheer improbability of these birds appearing here, and being seen by someone interested enough to report them.

Given that improbability, one wonders just how many vagrants pass us all by, seen by no one. And it's the possibility of coming across one of them, in spite of all the odds, that's one of the perennial fascinations of birding.