

Gleanings from the Northumberland Bird Database

WATERFOWL MIGRATION

By Clive E. Goodwin

Usually by mid-March we can really begin to see that spring is on its way. There were glimmers before, of course, and we'll probably still have some more snow, but by mid-March flocks of migrant blackbirds are flying over, Song Sparrows are back and beginning to sing and other early arrivals – Tree Swallows, robins and meadowlarks – are appearing daily.

But above all the waterfowl are on the move, and that movement, in its hundreds and thousands, is the event that defines the month. Presqu'ile has its Waterfowl Festival, and waterbodies throughout the county, just emerging from their bonds of ice, play hosts to flocks of geese and ducks. At its best, the waterfowl movement is one of the great spectacles of the natural year.

In Northumberland County there are several localities where waterfowl can congregate in numbers in spring. Pre-eminent among these is Presqu'ile, with totals far in excess of any other location [the aggregate over the years far exceeds one million birds for the month]. This total is even more striking when one realizes that coverage at Presqu'ile is relatively irregular: many persons visit, but very few try to count the ducks! In fact, the first recorded count of 1000 waterfowl anywhere in the County was in 1976, when 1000 Canada Geese were recorded at Port Hope. It was not until 1977 that a similar number appears for Presqu'ile [1000 scaup], and only in 1979 do we begin to see records of the kind of numbers we now know are commonplace there. The Park at its best is one of the leading waterfowl staging areas in the Province.

But there are other areas. Readers of the October 'Gleanings' may not be surprised to find that Lake Ontario off east Cobourg comes next in the database totals, although with fewer than 10% as many birds, with the Wensleys counting over 108,000. Species that favour the open waters of the lake predominate there, with Long-tailed Ducks and Red-breasted Mergansers comprising the majority of the birds seen. Both species continue their migration well into May, and in fact merganser numbers peak in that month. The March Long-tailed Duck totals are about half of those at Presqu'ile, but the Red-breasted numbers off Cobourg far exceed those from other locations. In fact, this species is the only one in which the Presqu'ile totals do not exceed those from all other localities, a reflection, I suppose, of the mergansers' strong preference for the open waters of the lake.

Finally Cobourg harbour and its environs yielded 80,000+ birds, but this figure, like that of the Wensleys, is the product of almost daily counts over many years, and the harbour is noteworthy more for its variety rather than its numbers.

Two other places are fairly well represented in the database for March. We have some 12,000 birds recorded from Barcoven Beach, at the mouth of Weller Bay, which is often free of ice before Presqu'ile Bay, and over 8000 from Garden Hill ponds. There's no

doubt that added coverage would yield many more records from these two excellent localities, and I'm sure there must be other places in the County that would also be productive. For example, during the Breeding Bird Atlas we found impressive numbers of Common and Hooded Mergansers on the Trent River, together with Ring-necked Ducks, Bufflehead and goldeneye. That was in April, and it seems likely that numbers would already be building up in March.

But for dramatic concentrations of waterfowl, go to Presqu'île. Scaup usually predominate, often in thousands, with smaller numbers of Redheads and Canvasbacks. The common wintering waterfowl [Long-tailed Duck, Common Goldeneye and Bufflehead] are still well represented, and Common Mergansers and Ring-necked Ducks can be quite numerous as well. Then there's a wide range of other ducks that are usually present in smaller numbers.

The flocks offer more than simply the sight of thousands of ducks. Many of the birds are actively courting, and it's a wonderful opportunity to watch the often bizarre courtship behaviours of the various species. Even when the birds are only feeding their behaviour is interesting: often the Redheads, Gadwalls, wigeon and American Coots all forage together. The Gadwalls and wigeon exploit water plants dislodged by the diving Redheads and coots, and they are also adept at stealing food from their neighbours. It all makes for a lively spectacle!

Then, of course, large gatherings of birds often attract other, rarer species. Three in particular have appeared in the spring concentrations; Presqu'île has yielded 15 out of the 19 Eurasian Wigeons seen in the County, both Tufted Ducks, and 2 of the 8 Barrow's Goldeneyes [the web site shows higher totals of all three, because some individuals had prolonged stays]. Other, less unusual species making fairly regular appearances include Ruddy Ducks and all three species of scoter.

It would be nice if the database showed a coherent pattern of the birds' numbers over the years. Unfortunately it shows nothing resembling a pattern: I've already mentioned the irregular coverage at Presqu'île, and that doubtless is one major reason for the lack of a clear picture. But perhaps even more important is the irregularity of the birds' abundance each year over the period of their migration. Ice conditions can vary dramatically from one day to the next; Water that is teeming with ducks one day can be an open expanse of ice the next. In a warmer period the ice can vanish early and the flocks disperse over the entire expanse of Presqu'île Bay, or even depart altogether on the next leg of their flight.

One particularly irritating ambiguity relates to the scaup numbers. We have over 172,000 Greater Scaup on record for March, but only 5402 Lessers. The largest single total for all waterfowl, however, is the 227,410 for scaup, which is the category used by observers when they do not [or cannot] separate the two species! It's really impossible to be sure that even the Greater Scaup figures are accurate, as many observers simply assume the birds are all Greaters. There's no doubt that virtually all the earlier flocks are indeed Greaters, or that the bulk of the birds later in the season, when they are feeding in smaller numbers close to the marshes, are Lessers. These birds, in April, add another 20,000

Lessers to the total. Still, I'm left with a nagging suspicion that we're seriously underestimating the number of Lesser Scaup at Presqu'île.

One of these days, I keep telling myself, I'm going to do some careful counts. But somehow it never happens. It's much more fun looking for Eurasian Wigeon!