

Gleanings from the Northumberland Bird Database

THE 2007 YEAR IN REVIEW

By Clive E. Goodwin

By February we hope all the significant bird reports from last year are in, so it's a good time to look back at the kind of year it was. What were the highlights, and are there any interesting trends we can see? Of course, one of the delights of birding is that everyone will have their own highlights: maybe a flock of Pine Grosbeaks, or perhaps one of the warblers in full spring finery in May. But one that will probably stay with many of us was the sight of gannets plunge-diving a few yards off Cobourg's main pier in November. Northern Gannets are exciting birds, particularly when actively fishing, and few of us ever expected to see them so well in Northumberland; with reason, as only three or four had been reported from the County before, and none provided prolonged views. I say gannets: while only one bird appeared to be present on each visit the 'photos and descriptions taken at the time suggest at least two and possibly three birds visiting, and indeed four were subsequently seen at once at Oshawa.

Rare though the gannets were, three other 2007 species have had fewer appearances here. Unfortunately the two rarest were seen by very few persons [I'm not including attributions in this article, as almost all the observations will have appeared in *The Curlew*]. In fact, the Cave Swallow reported from Brighton on Nov.10 was seen by only a single person, albeit an experienced one, and the sighting came at a time when the birds were being seen elsewhere. It would be our first ever. The Ross's Goose in Cobourg harbour on Nov.22 was our second. It was seen under atrocious conditions by a tiny handful of birders. Our third-ever record, the Glossy Ibis at the Brighton wastewater ponds, had the consideration to stay around for a few days, June 14-18, although at times it was hard to find.

The next four species in order of rarity returned to the pattern of being elusive for most of the County's birders. We had three Sabine's Gulls, two at Presqu'ile and one in Port Hope, our 4th to 6th or 7th to 8th depending on whether we count three birds reported in 1987 as one bird or three separate ones. But this year's trio barely made it into the list of birds seen, as two were birds found dead. And the third, while it was first recorded on October 16, was seen by relatively few before also being found dead on October 23. Our 6th Townsend's Solitaire was another one-observer sighting, in Cobourg on December 27. Then to round out this catalogue of rarities seen by few was a Varied Thrush in Candlewick Woods on April 29, our 10th, which was never found again.

The dead gulls highlight one very unpleasant feature of the fall, the serious outbreak [or perhaps I should say continuing outbreak] of botulism on Lake Ontario. While it has been around for a few years now, 2007 seemed to be the worst year so far, with dead Common Loons, Red-necked Grebes, White-winged Scoters, Long-tailed Ducks, and Red-breasted Mergansers, and an assortment of gulls all appearing along the shorelines. Possibly related to the outbreak, we had low numbers of diving ducks other than mergansers.

Some of this may have been no more than coincidence, but most of these species will feed on mollusks, and at present the disease is being linked to quagga mussels.

Probably the most dramatic consequence of this outbreak was the apparent collapse of the Great Black-backed Gull population. We went from a fall average of about 1500 between 1993 and 2003, to 48 in 2007. The decline started in 2004, when we had a fall total of only 700, but then in succession came 208 and 88. This coincides very closely with the botulism outbreak, and reflects the scavenging behaviour of Great Black-backed, which dominate other gulls feeding on dead fish and birds. Readers of the January *Gleanings* may recall that Great Black-backed usually reach their annual peak numbers in fall, so the prospects for the species looked gloomy. However, there was some recovery in December, with up to 15 being seen, which suggested some movement in – an interesting development in the light of the usual patterns as discussed last month.

The die-offs of loons and mergansers did not prevent those species from appearing in record numbers. Common Loon flocks yielded counts of 900 and 736, higher than any previous totals, and similarly with the much rarer Red-throated Loon, with fall counts of 11 and 8. While the mergansers did not produce any record highs, Red-breasted were present in large numbers from early October until the CBC and beyond.

Another feature of the autumn was the abnormally low water level on the lake. This followed the prolonged period of drought, and may have contributed to poor fall shorebird numbers – maybe the birds were simply more dispersed with an abundance of habitat available. But species such as Semipalmated Sandpipers and Plovers were already known to be in difficulty, and I think that their 2007 totals [the lowest ever] were a true reflection of this decline. However, it was probably the low water that allowed Cobourg to post a high of 3 Buff-breasted Sandpipers while Presqu'ile only managed a couple!

In fact, low numbers seemed rather a feature of the year. The early spring concentrations of waterfowl at Presqu'ile were down, more due to fluctuating ice conditions at the time the birds were moving than anything else. Neither Brant nor Snow Geese appeared in their usual numbers, and the spring Whimbrel flight seemed to pass west of the county.

Nevertheless, there were still many other noteworthy sightings, even though they did not fall into the 'extreme rarity' class. On January 1 two Cackling Geese appeared Cobourg harbour, and they increased to five on the 10th, the first of a dozen or more reports of this poorly differentiated species. There have now been 27 reports since our first in 2005. Then on January 7 the first two Harlequin Ducks of the year were found at Wicklow. I presume they were the birds that turned up a couple of days later in Cobourg harbour, and 7 more reports were to follow, although some of these could also be of the same birds. On February 17 a Greater White-fronted Goose was found at Salem, but apparently was gone in a couple of days. March 4 brought the long-staying Laughing Gull to Cobourg harbour, which was reliable until May 14, then less regular to August 20. May was relatively uneventful, but a White-eyed Vireo at Presqu'ile on May 14 and 16 was our 23rd, while Wilson's Phalaropes at Chub Point on May 31-June 1 yielded one of our few records of a pair.

Fall brought a Marbled Godwit to Presqu'ile, July 29-August 3, and again briefly on August 24. Presqu'ile was also host to the next noteworthy species, also a shorebird, with a Red-necked Phalarope on September 12-13, and finally a Black-legged Kittiwake appeared on November 19, appropriately enough again in Cobourg harbour.

The year did have some good news in the numbers area as well, although a further increase in the huge flock of wintering Mute Swans at Presqu'ile was hardly one of them. This alien bird is a very aggressive species that is intolerant of our native waterfowl. Wild Turkeys are another relative newcomer – this time a reintroduction – that seem to be doing well, as groups of 40 birds were reported from Peter's Woods, Roseneath and Wicklow. Raptors yielded some welcome positive news: the Summer Bird Count's 21 Ospreys were the most ever; Cobourg finally recorded its first confirmed Merlin nesting, as this expanding species continues to consolidate its numbers in the county; and the 24 Peregrine Falcon reports equaled the previous high, marking continued recovery from the lows of the 80's. Among expanding southerners, three Carolina Wrens were present at Presqu'ile over the fall, with more usual reports of birds further west as well.

Finally, winters were good to us in 2007. The year began with the influx of Three-toed and Black-backed Woodpeckers. By November we were watching movements of winter finches, and while most of the Evening Grosbeaks and Pine Siskins seemed to pass through, good numbers of Pine Grosbeaks and Common Redpolls continued into December, the flocks of the latter spiced by a few Hoaries as well. Barred Owls were moving, and Bohemian Waxwings provided an added zest to the early winter. Now let's just hope those wrens survived the severe winter weather we experienced in December!