

Gleanings from the Northumberland Bird Database

THE 2008 BIRD YEAR IN REVIEW

By Clive E. Goodwin

What a difference a year makes! The drought and heat of 2007 left us with the lowest autumn lake levels in some 70 years. A huge swath of Cobourg harbour was dry and the beaches at Presqu'île seemed to have quadrupled in size. It all started to change in December, and by the end of the first week in February 2008 we already had a full winter's-worth of snow. Now [in January 2009] we seem to be well into the second severe winter in a row, and are looking back at a year that recorded some of the wettest weather on record. Cobourg harbour and Presqu'île beaches are relatively normal again!

So what has all this to do with birds? As it turned out, great deal. The wet spring resulted in very wet beaches at Presqu'île, which in turn attracted abundant shorebirds. It was the best spring shorebird migration there in years. Lush growth with the wet summer yielded optimal breeding conditions for birds, and abundant food for fall migrants as plant growth continued into autumn. On the other hand, by then relatively high water levels seemed to result in quite limited habitat for southbound shorebirds, and their movement then was lackluster.

Whether due to the higher water levels, the generally cooler summer or some other causes, the botulism outbreak was much less pronounced in 2008, and there was some recovery in the Great Black-backed Gull numbers. On the other hand Common Terns continued their long-term decline, with this summer's numbers the lowest we have ever recorded in 16 years in Cobourg, with the exception of 2001, when coverage was exceptionally poor. Worse still, the numbers of young, normally about 50% of the totals, were reduced to 2 or 3 birds. It is thought that competition with Ring-billed Gulls for nest sites is the main cause of the decline. At this rate, these elegant birds will soon be things of the past on the Great Lakes.

Common Tern was not the only tern species to make the news last year. The year's rarest bird was one of the few species even more graceful than a Common Tern: an Arctic Tern appeared at Presqu'île on May 22, and presumably the same bird made a couple of passes through Cobourg harbour on May 29, watched by a group of captivated observers, and then appeared at Port Hope three days later. We've had two or three prior reports of Arctic Terns, but only one was convincingly described. It's a bird that is particularly distinctive in flight, when its shorter bill, long tail and graceful flight give it a quite different 'look' to the familiar Common Tern, but an observer unfamiliar with the species can easily make a mistake.

Unlike 2007, last year yielded relatively few other 'extreme' rarities – usually considered to be birds that have been recorded 10 or fewer times in the County – and most were at Presqu'île. A Snowy Egret there on May 18 was our 9th, a Prothonotary Warbler on May 12 was our 10th, and a Kentucky Warbler on May 5, this time at Port Hope, was the 7th.

Just outside my arbitrary line was a Varied Thrush for the second year in a row, on October 2. This was another Presqu'ile sighting, and the 11th for the County.

This is not to say it was a boring year. As usual, there was a good showing of species that were noteworthy for one reason or another. 2008 started with a long-staying flock of 5 Greater White-fronted Geese in Port Hope. The birds obligingly moved around and then numbers finally grew to 6, a new high count for us. Then there were the usual rarer ducks appearing, mainly at Presqu'ile, with Eurasian Wigeon, Harlequin Ducks and Barrow's Goldeneye. The latter was present for an exceptionally long time before disappearing in early March. Our first Eared Grebe records in 5 years were birds or a bird at Presqu'ile in late September and on November 15. Another Gyrfalcon turned up – the 6th since 2000 – yet again at Presqu'ile in November. And a Western Sandpiper at Presqu'ile on April 29 was only our 9th for spring.

Then we had a King Rail report that turned the tables on location, because this time it was not at Presqu'ile, the site of most of our 17 records. King Rails are rare Provincially, and breed mainly in large marshes in the south-west, but birds have long been recorded from Presqu'ile, and we have historical records from the adjacent Murray Canal as recently as 1995, as well as on much earlier dates from Carr's Marsh and at Willow Beach. All of these are putative nesting records, and the date of the current record – July 24 - implies at least a summering bird. But the location is quite new, a marshy area west of Warkworth.

Some species were noteworthy for their numbers seen. Once again the continued increase in Mute Swans set new records: the 2008 high at Presqu'ile was 471 birds on December 14. This compares with the previous winter's high of 464, as this aggressive bird continues its expansion. Our first record was of two resident at Canton in 1940, and it was not until December 1995 that more than 10 were reported at one time, ominously then from Presqu'ile. The 27 Great Egret nests at Presqu'ile were signs of a more welcome expansion: our first nesting was in 2000. Golden Eagles continue to appear more often. We had a high of 9 in 1995, but it was not until 1999 that we were seeing consistently higher numbers, and 2008's 18 was our first total in double figures. It was the product of two counts of 10 and 6 at the end of October, which suggests there are many more eagles passing than we see. Undoubtedly this is mostly because the birds pass well north of the shoreline – for example, I have only seen four Golden Eagles from the Cobourg harbour area in 16 years.

There were a few outstanding single counts. Three Parasitic Jaegers off Coverdale Park in Cobourg on November 19 was remarkable for a species that many [most?] birders in the County have never seen. Then, in the light of the serious decline of Red Knot, the Presqu'ile count of 240 on May 29 was encouraging. Similarly, Purple Martins rarely provide good news these days, so a one-hour count of 175, while still far from earlier fall totals, was heartening.

Finally, to the winter incursions: flights were good at both ends of the year. Late winter brought good numbers of both Pine Grosbeaks and redpolls, and there were large numbers of Bohemian Waxwings. It was one of the largest flights ever, as counts of 150

were fairly common, and 175 were seen on March 20 from north of Port Hope. There was also a waxwing count of 500 birds near Brighton on January 27, which was very high for either species.

Later in the year movements of White-winged Crossbills were being seen as early as July 25 – hardly winter! The huge movement this winter is still continuing as I write, with flocks flying past the window – and its scale seems comparable with the enormous influx of 1985. It forms a fitting conclusion to the 2008 year.