

Gleanings from the Northumberland Bird Database

THE 2009 BIRD YEAR IN REVIEW

By Clive E. Goodwin

The winter of 2008-9 started with two quite exceptional events. Both were flights of winter finches, and both were among the largest ever recorded, not only in Northumberland, but in the Province as a whole; and indeed were noteworthy on a continental scale, with *North American Birds* proclaiming one as the 'greatest' flight ever recorded, and the second as 'maybe having outdone every previous flight on record'.

Readers with exceptional memories may recall that the 2008 account ended with flocks of White-winged Crossbills flying past the window as the article was being written. It turned out that movement was among the last in a major flight that really peaked before 2008 ended. But I also found that we had one isolated earlier event that reported even higher numbers than last winter's flight. In 1985 a huge movement was seen at Presqu'ile, where on February 27 'about 100 flocks of approximately 25-100 birds each [were seen] moving north from the fingers over a period of 90 minutes'. Huge movements are difficult for record keepers to deal with, simply because they're rarely seen and are usually described by words like 'about' and 'approximately'; but it seems clear that by any measure this was a substantial movement. Probably there are events like this in any major incursion, but only rarely is anyone around to see them. In fact, the 1985-89 period seems the only one that was comparable to last winter in terms of the extent of the White-winged Crossbill invasion, not only here, but over a wide area of eastern North America.

This is true also of Pine Siskins, the second finch that moved in huge numbers last year. This time the flight really was last year, as there were only a few suggestions of exceptional numbers in December. Siskins are much commoner than crossbills and a few turn up in most winters, but on the 2008 C.B.C. only 97 were seen in all. By January the birds were hard to miss, and unlike the crossbills there were siskins around well into June. By then they had generated an exceptional 117 records, a remarkable total for one species in one year. I suspect nesting was widespread, but unfortunately we have only one report of young birds.

Apart from the finch movements 2009 was a rather uneventful year. There was an average movement of redpolls, but other finches were scarce; however, a small flight of Bohemian Waxwings was reported. Meanwhile at Presqu'ile the wintering Mute Swan flocks continued their seemingly inexorable increase, to a new high of 552 birds.

Another winter bird that appeared in numbers was Snowy Owl. Snowies supposedly move at four-year intervals, but in fact matters are usually not so clear-cut, and a few birds are reported in most years. It's some time since our last big invasions, in both 1991-2 and 1992-3, although there was a fair flight in 2004-5. In the intervening winters the birds were rather scarce. But there were lots around last winter, although as usual the flight started in the preceding fall, in 2008. Sometimes it's the accessibility of an

individual bird that helps fix the image of a movement in people's minds, and last year the memorable bird was a Snowy that took to sitting atop a power post along Lakeshore Road opposite Theatre Rd., between Port Hope and Cobourg, to be seen by many!

Boreal Owls have never appeared in 'numbers' as far as we know - which isn't very much; our 15 records are scattered over 19 decades! But last year we had an 'invasion' of sorts - two! We've only had two in a year once before, and in both years one of the birds was found dead, not unusual for this elusive little owl.

King Eiders are usually late fall visitors, and mainly at Presqu'ile. However, Cobourg harbour runs a close second, so a bird first seen off Coverdale Park on January 11 was maybe not too surprising in terms of location, but the date was noteworthy: one of only three or four January records. The species is a rarity, and increasingly so since the zebra mussel invasion, as fewer birds are reported from Presqu'ile now than formerly, probably because the birds' feeding patterns have changed.

Winter has taken a lot of space, which maybe is appropriate for the long, severe season we experienced! Spring finally arrived with the usual waterfowl concentrations appearing at Presqu'ile, and also as usual [the species is now almost annual] a Eurasian Wigeon joined the flocks in March, with it - or a second - appearing again on April 27. But it was the other end of the County that yielded perhaps the most interesting waterbird sightings, as Lake Ontario off Candlewick Woods hosted a flock of Red-necked Grebes from March 31 on that finally grew to 620 birds on April 10. There is only one higher spring total [in 1996], and Candlewick is close to Willow Beach, where we had reports of 1500 to 3000 birds staging in the 1920's to 1940's. But these concentrations were always in fall, not spring, and in those days there was only one spring record in total!

May is the month for peak spring migration, and in 2009, for the second year in a row, it was the shorebird flight at month-end that caused the most excitement. May 22 yielded some 6000 Dunlin at Presqu'ile, while Cobourg harbour had 1000; only to be followed two days later with 10,000 and 4000 respectively! With them were smaller numbers of Semipalmated Sandpipers and the other commoner shorebirds. As usual in big flights some rarer species appeared as well: a Marbled Godwit and some 60 Whimbrel at Presqu'ile on the 24th, and in a smaller flight on the 28-29 Presqu'ile had 91 Red Knots while Cobourg had 60, plus a rare spring Purple Sandpiper and a Laughing Gull! Spring rarities not associated with these groundings were a Hudsonian Godwit on May 16 and Prothonotary Warblers on April 27 and May 19, all at Presqu'ile.

The summer started with a fairly equable June, followed by a cold and wet July, but as usual summer is also the period with the smallest number of reports. Since 1997 the perennial bright spot in this period has been the Summer Bird Count, which is becoming one of the most important initiatives in local birding, giving as it does a picture of breeding numbers and distribution across a broad section of the County. This year's count seemed exceptionally productive, with over 14 species in record-high numbers and a good cross-section of more unusual species. Roger Frost gave an excellent summary of the count in the September 2009 *Curllew*, so I'll simply note that three species -

nighthawk, Whip-poor-will, and martin – continued earlier declines, and while other swallow species showed some recovery aerial feeding birds continue to be in trouble.

Later there was perhaps a glimmer of hope for nighthawks at Cobourg, when at least 36 passed over on August 23, followed by smaller numbers on subsequent days, with 15 as late as September 23. But it's still a far cry from the 400 seen there on August 28, 1964! Fall brought a small mix of less common birds, mainly 'one-day wonders' that were seen by few before vanishing. There was a Yellow-headed Blackbird at Brighton on September 7, then a Hudsonian Godwit at Presqu'ile on the 20th, followed by another at Cobourg a month later. October also yielded a Prairie Warbler at Presqu'ile on the 6th and a Ross's Goose appeared near Codrington on the 20th, followed by 2 Greater White-fronted Geese in the same location on the 27th, with the Ross's again on November 21. Finally the Harlequin Duck appeared in Cobourg harbour on November 26 and did stay around, but still missed by many.

One species found in record numbers on the S.B.C. and actually common at Presqu'ile through fall was Barred Owl, and the species continues to dominate the early winter reports with an astonishing 11 on the Presqu'ile C.B.C. Mockingbirds were features of the Cobourg C.B.C, together with a count-week flock of Sandhill Cranes, our first ever winter records of this expanding species. Finally, on December 28 a Peregrine Falcon was seen, our 26th of the year and a new record-high count for a bird that once seemed almost gone. Conservation efforts really can work!