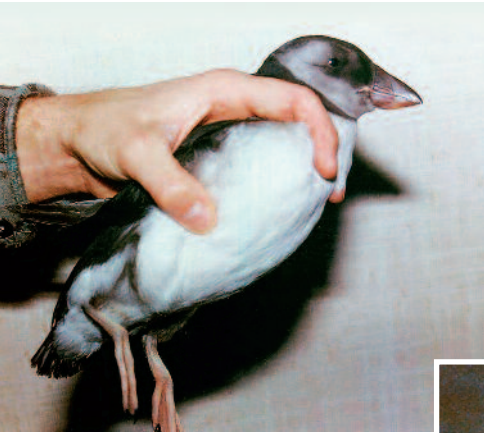


Reviewing the Records

Mark Peck



Above: Atlantic Puffin, 1985.

Photo: Jacques Bouvier

Right: Snowy Plover, 1987.

Photo: Edmund D. Johns

It is a difficult and thankless task being a member of the Ontario Bird Records Committee (OBRC). Being the Royal Ontario Museum Liaison and a non-voting member is much more enjoyable. So, when the editors of *Ontario Birds* asked if I would choose some of the more interesting records for the 100th Issue, I was more than happy to comply. The records sent to the OBRC contain not only the particulars related to a rare bird find but also provide a glimpse into the excitement and determination of the observer. These are a few of my favourites.

Atlantic Puffin (*Fratercula arctica*),

immature, 15 December 1985

Westmeath, Renfrew Co.

Ontario's first documented record of Atlantic Puffin was not without mystery. The bird was found moribund and partially frozen on a roadside in mid-December, 3 km from the Ottawa River (see *Ontario Birds*, April 1986). How does a marine bird, rarely found inland and almost never out of sight of water, end up on a road? Did the puffin finally collapse from exhaustion, did it mistake the road for a suitable waterbody and land, only to find itself stranded?

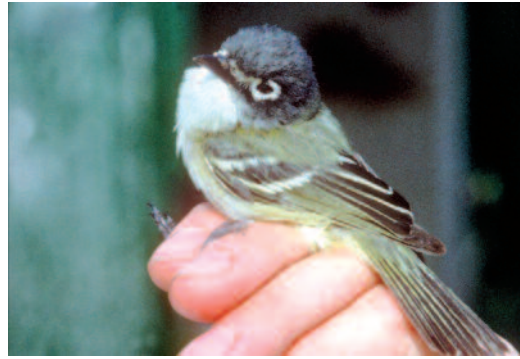


No one knows for sure but puffins ending up on roadsides is not as uncommon as you might think. In Newfoundland, fledgling puffins are often found along coastal roadsides and backyards in the fall. They are apparently confused by weather and artificial lights. This issue has led to the formation of the “Puffin Patrol” in Newfoundland which has now banded and released over 1,500 birds in the last five years. Ontario’s first puffin had a similar fate. The bird was rescued, sent to Verona, Ontario, for rest and rehabilitation and then was sent back healthy to Newfoundland on a commercial flight in January of 1986.

**Snowy Plover (*Charadrius nivosus*),
adult, male, 4-9 May 1987**

Long Point Flats, Haldimand-Norfolk R.M.

Digital photography has certainly made confirmation of rare bird sightings easier than ever and made the work of the OBRC panel more decisive and less divisive than previously. Take for example, the “first record” of Snowy Plover found at Long Point in 1987. The report for the bird was carefully written up, photographs accompanied the report and plover experts from outside the province had been contacted to see if they could assist with sexing and identification of subspecies. The record was subsequently accepted as the first record for Ontario. However, there had in fact been two other reports previously considered but rejected. The first was of a bird reportedly collected at Toronto in May of 1880. Unfortunately, the specimen was destroyed and no description was left at the time. Another specimen, also missing, was reported to have originated from an unreliable collector and was not accepted.



Black-capped Vireo, 1991. Photo: Julian R. Hough

**Black-capped Vireo (*Vireo atricapilla*),
adult, female, 27 April 1991**

Long Point Peninsula, Haldimand-Norfolk R.M.

Have you ever wondered how many rarities pass through the province undetected? Banding laboratory results provide some interesting insights into the question and would suggest that the numbers may be greater than we think, despite the number of birders searching their favourite haunts regularly. In most years, the OBRC will decide on a number of records sent to them from banding labs across the province. One of our best records was a female Black-capped Vireo, the first record for Canada, mist-netted at the Breakwater Field Station, part of the Long Point Bird Observatory on Lake Erie. Only three volunteer migration assistants ever had a chance to see the bird before it was measured, banded and released back into the wild.

The bird was originally observed during a busy day of banding but not confidently identified. It was not until the bird was passively caught in a nearby mist net that the identification was confirmed. A fast moving northerly weather system was correlated with the arrival of this endangered, locally-restricted vireo from the southwest United States (*Ontario Birds*, December 1991).



Heerman's Gull, 1999-2000. Photo: Kayo Roy

Heerman's Gull (*Larus heermanni*)

first basic/first alternate

14 November 1999 – 16 September 2000

Toronto Harbour and Humber Bay Park,
Toronto; Lasalle Park, Hamilton-Wentworth R.M.
and Bronte Harbour, Halton R.M.

If you were a birder in 1999 and didn't see the Heerman's Gull, it was not for lack of opportunity. This first record for Ontario was fed, photographed and fawned over for 10 months. The famous bird was written up extensively on Ontbirds and in newspapers. Bob Yukich wrote an article in *Ontario Birds* detailing the finding and movement of the bird during its stay and Jean Iron and Ron Pittaway followed that with a detailed article on its molt pattern. Ten people submitted descriptions and photographs of the bird to the OBRC. Even the committee was impressed. Comments from committee members included; "Extensive documentation including excellent photos and video... Excellent photos and descriptions. I have seen the bird three times." And, my favourite; "How will we handle (this bird) if it stays six years?"

Most of the time, when rarities show up, birders must move quickly to even have a chance to see the bird. Every so often though, when a bird sticks around for a while, it is wonderful to see the birding community take the time to really enjoy and learn from the opportunity.

Manx Shearwater (*Puffinus puffinus*),

female, 26 August 2001

Shirley's Bay (along dike), Ottawa R.M.

The role of the OBRC is to adjudicate and accept provincial bird records supported by material evidence. This includes sighted, heard, collected or banded birds. In rare circumstances, this may include birds that will never be added to anyone's provincial bird list or big year. The first provincial record for Manx Shearwater is one such example. In the afternoon, Bruce Squirrel found a dead shearwater along the dike of Shirley's Bay. The bird was fresh and in good condition indicating it had died in the last 24 hours. The bird was carefully identified and photographed and then left with Bruce Di Labio. The bird was made into a study skin, the identification confirmed by Michel Gosselin of the Canadian Museum of Nature (CMN), and then deposited into the CMN collections (CMNAV 77920). Birders in the province would have to wait another five years before a live Manx Shearwater was observed and documented in Hamilton on 1 September 2006.

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