First Breeding Record of Canvasback for Toronto

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On 18 July 1999, a female Canvasback (*Aythya valisneria*) with three downy young was found on Toronto's Leslie Street Spit. This observation establishes the first breeding record for Toronto and constitutes one of only a handful of records of confirmed breeding in Ontario (Coady 2000).

It was not until 1983 that the Canvasback was officially added to the list of Ontario breeding species, when a brood was photographed at Luther Marsh by Liz Yerex (James 1984). Prior to that time, there had been reports of breeding at Lake St. Clair going back to 1897, but no material evidence (Peck and James 1987). There had also been a number of instances of summering at Luther Marsh, and brood sightings there in 1965 and 1981 (Coady 2000). During the Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas period (1981 to 1985), breeding was also confirmed at Berens Lake, north of Red Lake in northwestern Ontario, in 1984 (Cadman et al. 1987).

Since the Canvasback is primarily a prairie species, one would not expect there to be breeding records east of Ontario, but the Quebec Atlas mentions two possible occurrences (Tardif and Gagnon 1996). The first was at Lake Chicobi, Abitibi, in 1973, and the second from Lac du Milieu in Ashuapmushuan Wildlife Reserve in late summer of 1980. Both involved sightings of females with broods but lack substantiating documentation, hence breeding has not been officially confirmed for Quebec.

In the Toronto area, the Canvasback historically has been very rare in summer, while in winter only very small numbers (typically <10) are present along the Toronto waterfront. A century ago, it was described as a "rare winter resident" (Fleming 1906). Summering records are few and far between in the Greater Toronto Area, and during the period 1984 to 1996, there were only five such instances recorded in the Toronto Ornithological Club's database. These involved: a single male at Canington Sewage Lagoons (S.L.), *Durham*, on 3 June 1990 (Brian Henshaw); a male at the Holland River mouth, Cook's Bay, *York*, on 21 June 1991 (Alvaro Jaramillo); a male at Cranberry Marsh, *Durham*, from 1 to 11 July 1992 (many observers); a male at Nonquon S.L., *Durham*, from 9 June to 8 September 1996 (many observers); and a report of three (two females, one male) at Beaverton S.L., *Durham*, on 23 June 1996 (Norm

Murr, Larry Morse).

For Lake Ontario shoreline sites during the same years, the database had no records of Canvasback during the June and July period, but starting in 1997, a few birds summered at Leslie Street Spit, with up to five (two males, three females) being reported that year. Again in 1998, up to five were reported on various dates. In 1999, there were three reports (involving up to four birds) from the Leslie Street Spit, prior to the breeding record.

The site where the brood was found is known locally as the "Goldfish Pond". This is a small pond (about 30 m x 30 m), roughly triangular in shape, with some emergent vegetation at its north end. The banks consist of steeply sloping concrete rubble, such that the pond lies in a depression about 5 m below the surrounding landfill. On 18 July, the pond was about 30 percent covered with a floating mat of green algae, which had increased to cover about 50 percent of the area by 25 July. The pond is thought to be not more than about 2 m deep at its deepest points, and most of it is much shallower. The Leslie Street Spit itself is a man-made peninsula extending about 5 km into Lake Ontario, and was created by dumping of excavated soil and building rubble over a 30 to 40 year period.

It is likely that 18 July was the first date that downy young were actually present at the Goldfish Pond. On the previous evening, Glenn Coady had walked past this pond and had not noticed anything unusual. It seems unlikely that an experienced observer like Coady would have missed the birds had they been present. When found at 1130h on the 18th, the young were initially estimated to be two to three days old, but with hindsight it seems probable that they had hatched only that morning. Interestingly, they could dive well at that young age, but were reluctant to do so when aware of the observer. Neither were they seen feeding initially, but there were very few insects present on the water surface that day. A full description of the downy young was recorded, and photographs taken to document this record (Figure 1). That same evening, Glenn Coady visited the site and obtained about seven minutes of video to provide additional documentation. He also noted that the young could dive well, and found an eclipse (basic) male Canvasback in another pond nearby.

Some species of ducks, notably Redhead (*Aythya americana*), are known to "dump" eggs in other's nests, so we wanted to make sure that these ducklings really were young Canvasbacks. Both Smith and Coady noted that the brown of the crown extended across the forehead to the bill, forming a continuous band. This feature is reported to be diagnostic (Palmer 1976), and confirms the identification of the ducklings.

Figure 1: Female Canvasback with three downy young, 18 July 1999, at Toronto. Photo by *Roy B.H. Smith*.

On 23 July, Coady returned to the site but found only one duckling present, along with the female. It is suspected that Black-crowned Night-Herons (*Nycticorax nycticorax*) may have been involved in predation, since there is a large breeding colony on the Spit, and there were numbers of recently-fledged juveniles around. On 25 July, the pond was checked again. The single duckling was now about 1.5 times larger than a week prior, and the yellow tones in its plumage had faded considerably. The formerly yellow areas were now mostly off-white to buffish-white, with most of the remaining yellow being on the cheeks and ear coverts. The dark eyeline had virtually disappeared, while the bill had noticeably lengthened, such that the triangular head and bill profile, so distinctive in the adult, was starting to be detectable. Additional photographic documentation was obtained.

On 2 August, a second brood (female plus seven downy young) was found in "Bay A" by Verna Higgins and Harriet Davidson (pers. comm.). The young were estimated to be two to three days old, but by 8 August only one remained (Glenn Coady, pers. comm.), and later that

day it too could not be found. Unlike the protected, enclosed site provided by the Goldfish Pond, the relatively open waters of this bay probably left the ducklings highly exposed to gull predation.

Meanwhile, the situation at the Goldfish Pond had mysteriously changed. The initial surviving young was still present, now larger and browner and with its sloping bill profile quite obvious, but the female (assuming it was the same bird) was now accompanying a small downy young (still very yellow, so estimated to be three days or younger), and was acting somewhat aggressively toward the older youngster. Whenever the latter got too close to the duckling (typically 1 to 2 m), the adult female chased it off, but without making physical contact. Several possible hypotheses have been suggested to account for these observations. Firstly, the "new" downy young could have been a straggler from the Bay A brood which did not make it when the rest were led there, yet found its way into the Goldfish Pond and was "adopted" by the resident female. Or, perhaps it may have been the only survivor of a third brood which was never detected. Another possibility is that the female accompanying it was not the mother of the older youngster, but had supplanted that bird in residence at the Goldfish Pond. One point we are sure of is that it was not the single survivor of the Bay A brood, last seen and videoed by Coady on the afternoon of 8 August. Based on the timing of his observations, Coady is certain that different birds were involved.

On 15 August, another visit was made to check on the situation, which was basically the same as the previous weekend. The large young was now about one-third grown, very brown, but still with extensive down present on the back, although it had developed much more of the "adult look" to the head and bill proportions. The resident female was still acting aggressively toward it if it came too close to the duckling. The latter was much more yellow than the original young had been at that age, especially on the cheeks and flank spots. It seemed to be hardly any larger than the previous weekend, but was diving and foraging well.

A week later, on 22 August, the larger young was judged to be half grown and seemed to be acquiring a cinnamon wash on the head, suggesting it could be a male. The adult female was still acting aggressively toward it if it came too close to the smaller young. The latter had by now lost almost all yellow tones, but the brown and white flank spot pattern was still present, and the sloping bill profile was starting to appear.

By 29 August, the larger young was about three-quarters grown, and the smaller one had also grown significantly. It still showed a trace

of yellow at the base of the bill, but nowhere else. I was unable to visit the site again until 19 September. Sometime during the intervening period, the adult female had abandoned the two young birds, which were now staying close together and showing no antagonism toward each other. The larger one was just about adult size, with primaries and secondaries well developed. It was now at least 64 days old. The secondaries and tertials had prominent grey inner webs, and some grey merging to medium brown on the outer web. The smaller one still retained down on the lower back and rump, and seemed to be about two-thirds grown. Its primaries were still in pin, with about 1 cm of feathers emerged. On both birds, the legs and toes appeared to be olive-green (formerly dark grey or black), but the webs were still black. During two hours of observations (1100 to 1300h), the birds were not seen to dive once, nor to engage in any feeding activity except for casually snapping at a few damsel flies which hovered close by. This was not deemed to be a serious attempt to capture prey. They spent most of their time resting on the water, preening, stretching, yawning and sleeping. They completely ignored a Painted Turtle which several times came up to the water surface and basked nearby.

Sometime after 19 September and before 26 September, the larger young must have departed. Only the smaller one was present on the 26th; its primaries were then about one-third grown. On 10 October 1999, its primaries were over three-quarters grown, and there was a trace of red in the mainly brown eye colour. It was last noted on 16 October (Coady et al., pers. comm.). Since it was not present on 24 October, its fledging period lasted somewhere between 70 and 79 days, assuming it survived. This is slightly longer than the 56 to 68 day fledging period recorded for Manitoba (Bellrose 1976).

It is interesting to note that the Canvasback has recently started breeding in New York State. There have been brood records from the Montezuma Marshes in 1962, 1965, 1980, 1981, 1991 and 1992. Apparently, a release program was carried out at the Montezuma NWR during the 1993 to 1995 period, and "any birds hatched after 1993 should be considered to be from introduced stock" (Brock 1998). It seems possible that the summering birds found at Leslie St. Spit since 1997 could have originated from this stock.

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