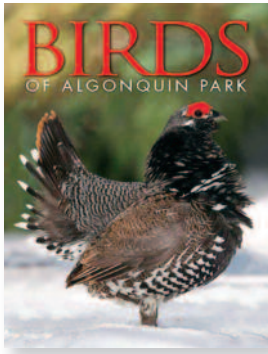


# Book Review



## **Birds of Algonquin Park**

By Ron Tozer. 2012. The Friends of Algonquin Park, Whitney, Ontario. 474 pp. ISBN 978-1-894993-51-7. \$49.95

As one of eastern Canada's most famous birding spots, Algonquin Provincial Park has been a magnet for amateur and professional field ornithologists for decades. A vast piece of Boreal-like landscape geographically displaced into southcentral Ontario, Algonquin has provided the first taste of The North for virtually all southern Ontario birders and millions of other visitors.

Having spent the majority of his adult life involved in investigating the avifauna of Algonquin, author Ron Tozer is universally recognized as the individual best situated to produce the long awaited treatment of Algonquin's birds. So the million dollar question is, does this book do that?

Let me cut to the chase: this *is* the comprehensive, authoritative and definitive treatment of the birds of Algonquin

Park for which we have been waiting for literally decades. It is a magnificent achievement and must be in the library of anyone serious about the ecological values of Algonquin Park or ornithology in southern and central Ontario. Now let me say why that's the case.

At its core, *Birds of Algonquin Park* is a traditional regional bird treatment, providing a species by species accounting of all 278 species of birds known to have occurred here (144 breeding) to the end of 2011. It stands out from every Canadian regional bird treatment that preceded it, however, by the sheer volume of data reviewed. The species reviews are founded upon the tens of thousands of individual sightings by park interpretive staff, researchers and park visitors that have been dutifully recorded at the Algonquin Park Museum since the 1960s. This unprecedented richness of data permitted Tozer to produce accurate and detailed observational histories and status statements for each species. The data base is so rich, in fact, that seasonal activities are analyzed in two 25 year segments (1961-1985 and 1986-2010), illustrating changes in bird behaviour and status over half a century. This provides insightful, statistically significant assessments of the importance of these changes.

Each species treatment is organized seasonally, with remarkably detailed discussions of changes in the behaviour and status of that particular species through

the year. This is followed by a review of historical status as determined from published and manuscript records going back into the 19th Century. Following the review of breeding and migration data through the two 25 year periods, each species treatment is concluded with a discussion of population trends. The latter not only uses original park data but employs a comparative analysis of the two sets of Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas data (1981-1985 and 2001-2005).

The species treatments are quite spectacular in their depth and authority. The observation data for all secondary reports are supported by citations to published sources. A concerted effort has been made to place the Algonquin population of each species into a larger regional, national and continental perspective. This is all achieved very successfully. Masterful pen and ink sketches by Dawn Sherman also greatly enhance the visual appreciation of many species treatments. Tozer includes often fascinating sidebars throughout the species accounts (once a park interpreter always a park interpreter?). This eclectic collection of taxonomic, ecological, physiological and behavioural 'nuggets' highlights Algonquin research in particular and the special biological nature of birds in general.

Key observations that support patterns and trends are listed in a table at the end of each species treatment, identifying the appropriate site(s) and observer(s). This not only is useful factual documentation but will be especially interesting for long-time park birders.

They will enjoy seeing the names of individuals they might not have heard from in decades, sobered by the listing of others no longer with us and reminded of their own experiences (did I really see 225 flickers one day in August 1989? And why was I counting them anyway?). We may have long forgotten some of the details but Tozer wrote them all down and so here they are.

The book is beautifully designed and presented with clear, readable type on good quality paper and in an easy to follow layout. The photography is quite stunning, with a variety of photographers contributing amazing images of both representative and rare species. The text is virtually free of typographical or labelling errors. I found only a single misspelled word in all of the species accounts (on page 345, Ron).

The core of species accounts is followed by a seasonal status bar graph that economically summarizes the patterns described in the previous 350 pages and then a statistical analysis of the wealth of migratory data for the two 25 year study periods. The latter valuable analysis was compiled by Douglas Tozer, the author's son and a significant contributor in his own right to Algonquin bird data. (I can't resist noting that Doug wasn't even a fledgling when the elder Tozer started this project).

A thorough review of the important contribution of Algonquin's Christmas Bird Counts is welcome, reminding readers what a *real* winter bird count is all about. The glossary of terms, gazetteer of Algonquin place names and a

review of introduced species that follow, however, are less successful. The need for the first two in a regional guide is unconvincing and the content of the latter, describing the thankfully failed effort years ago to introduce various game birds, would seem more appropriate in the body of the text. A section with photos supporting various rare bird reports is a nice feature, however. *Birds of Algonquin Park* is wrapped up with a thorough list of cited references and an effective index to the species accounts.

This book is very much written by a keen birder for keen birders. The “Where to Go Birding” section underscores that, as do birding stories that are sprinkled through the text. Like the one about the author missing the Yellow-breasted Chat in October 1981 by mere

seconds — an event that clearly still rangles him!

In conclusion then, it’s all perfect, right? OK, darn close. But since Tozer is no longer critiquing my interpretive presentations I will hazard identifying some issues that would have benefited from additional consideration.

For starters, the “Where to Go Birding” section seems overly optimistic. While Spruce Grouse is indeed “likely to be found on the Opeongo Road” (pg. 14), for example, that’s unlikely to be the experience with the majority of birders searching for this elusive species. And since the “Finding Specialities” that follows this casts its net so broadly as to include the ubiquitous Common Raven, would it not have been consistent to include treatments of less easily found breeding northern species such as Lincoln’s Sparrows and Yellow-bellied Flycatcher? And as the Park presents a physically challenging landscape even along the Highway 60 corridor, readers should have been advised to exercise safety considerations appropriate to travel and investigation in such an expansive, wild landscape.

The introductory portion of the book is surprisingly slim. That’s a shame as such material is valuable for putting a particular place into a larger context. The ecological make-up of Algonquin is summarized in half a page of text (pg. 7), for example, offering little insight into the make-up of the landscape upon which this complex avifauna depends. Similarly, the rich history of ornithological investigation here (pg. 41-42) is rushed through in a



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page and a half. A whole lot more of both would have put contemporary birding activity into a much better context.

There is almost no mention of voucher specimens supporting Algonquin Park bird records. At one time there was a substantial bird specimen collection preserved at the Park. It would have been good to have the scope of that collection identified and its location provided, if it is no longer preserved in the Park Museum.

Most importantly, I would have appreciated more exploration and synthesis of some of the major themes that come up over and over again in the comprehensive species' accounts. How about stand-alone discussions of such things as the conservation needs and trends for Algonquin's birds? The implications of climate change (not just the reporting of migrational and breeding date shifts)? The ornithological implications of the forestry industry — by far the most ecologically negative and controversial human influence on Algonquin Park birds? Future expectations/ predictions for the state of Algonquin bird life? The role of fire and other natural agents of change?

To be fair, Tozer did not set out to address these and he very successfully accomplishes all of the goals he did establish. That's quite remarkable. Still, it is the success of what was accomplished that makes me wish he had expanded those goals further.

Ontario birders and field ornithologist have been blessed in recent years by the production of arguably some of the best regional bird guides ever published on this continent. Bob Curry's 2006 *Birds of Hamilton* is one of these, John Black and Kayo Roy's 2010 *Niagara Birds* is another and now Ron Tozer's *Birds of Algonquin Park* makes it a hat trick. The only negative I could imagine coming from this is that they've set the bar so high that others may be intimidated to attempt their own contribution. It's a wonderful problem to have, isn't it?

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