

Book Reviews

Birds of Algonquin Provincial Park. 1990. By *Dan Strickland.* The Friends of Algonquin Park, Whitney, Ontario. 40 pp., illustrated. \$2.95.

This first publication, *Birds of Algonquin Provincial Park*, is suitable for park visitors who are relative beginners to birding. It covers 77 species which the summer birder is most likely to encounter in Algonquin. The book is broken down by major habitats which include: spruce bogs, conifer forests, hardwood forests, beaver ponds, lakes and rivers, winter, and the sky (the last two do not really qualify as habitats). Each habitat is described and accounts are given of the various species characteristic of that habitat.

I get annoyed at some so-called regional bird books that only provide general information that is available elsewhere, and scarcely make any mention of the area that they claim to portray. Fortunately this is not such a publication. Wherever possible, Strickland includes information that is specific to Algonquin Park. In a few cases such as Nashville Warbler and Black-throated Blue Warbler, the accounts are general, saying little about the respective species, however these are the exception. The accounts often depict how a bird is likely to be

first encountered by the park visitor.

Strickland uses an easy readable style and the species accounts are packed with behavioural or ecological tidbits, some of which will be of interest even to the experienced. For example, I did not know that Ruby-throated Hummingbirds are dependent on the sap that oozes from sapsucker holes in spring before suitable nectar-producing flowers are in bloom. Nor was I aware that loons sometimes kill competing mergansers, or that Bobolinks nest in some of the large open bog mats in the Algonquin Park interior. The booklet can also be of value to the experienced birder by helping locate Algonquin specialties like Spruce Grouse or Gray Jay.

The text is a little repetitive in a few places. Most obviously, the diversity of feeding strategies employed by the various warbler species is noted in several places. This is a minor criticism, however. Excellent photographs of all 77 species are included with surprisingly fine colour reproduction for such an inexpensive publication.

Checklist and Seasonal Status of the Birds of Algonquin Provincial Park. 1990. By *Ron Tozer.* The Friends of Algonquin Park, Whitney, Ontario. 28 pp. \$1.25.

The *Checklist and Seasonal Status of the Birds of Algonquin Provincial Park* may be of more interest to the serious birder planning a visit to the park. All 258 species and 134 breeders that have been recorded from the 7600 square kilometres of

Algonquin Provincial Park are listed. Each species is assigned a status as either common, uncommon, rare, very rare, accidental, irregular and/or breeding. In addition, some of the best known birding sites along the Hwy. 60 and Grand Lake-Travers

Road corridors are described, guiding the newcomer to potentially productive sites.

The real value of the checklist is that bar graphs depict the seasonal occurrence of each species, based on years of tabulated data. A heavy bar is shown between average arrival and

departure dates for both migration periods, while a thin bar stretches between absolute earliest and latest arrival dates. The Algonquin visitor can therefore gauge what species he or she is likely to see at any time of the year, and can determine which sightings are unusual.

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Annotated Checklist of the Birds of Ontario. 1991 (second edition). By Ross D. James. Life Sciences Miscellaneous Publications. Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, Ontario. 128 pp. \$12.00.

One has but to read the opening paragraphs of this slim volume and turn to the 17 pages of references near the end to realize that there is an ever increasing mass of literature pertaining, directly and indirectly, to the avifauna of Ontario. This checklist is an effort to summarize that literature which pertains to the status of birds in the province, with particular emphasis on updating the situation since the first edition, produced by James, McLaren and Barlow (1976).

As James points out, this is no simple revision, with changes made to virtually every species in the checklist. A comparison of the totals from the first and second editions effectively emphasizes the dynamic nature of Ontario bird life. Eliminating those records considered to be "hypothetical", the first edition listed 394 species supported by documentary evidence (specimens or photographs) compared to 442 by early 1991. Similarly, the number considered to have bred has increased from 268 to 285. Certainly, these statistics testify to the need for such a revision.

Birders, being birders, will likely first flip through the species accounts to see how rarities have been handled. Accordingly, James has included, right after the introduction, a section on the treatment of rarities. Significantly, from the birder's point of view, James, in contrast to the first edition, now accepts well documented sight records which have been reviewed and accepted by the Ontario Bird Records Committee (OBRC). The only perplexing aspect of this is that he is not consistent in his citations of rarities, sometimes citing the OBRC reports and on other occasions citing *American Birds*. However, I wholeheartedly applaud the removal of the designation "hypothetical" for those species records in which the author lacks confidence. The term, borrowed from the language of experimental science, had no real place or universally understood meaning in ornithological literature. Instead, square brackets surround 13 species for reasons of errors in the literature, likelihood of escapes, or lack of convincing evidence.

On the other hand, James says that it is not possible to agree completely with records committees now or in the past. I would argue that the consistent approach in such a work as this would be to follow the decisions of the OBRC. It seems especially perplexing that James would not follow the precepts of a group on which he was a founding member and on which he has served more often than not. Thus, he includes Barnacle Goose and Painted Bunting, neither of which was considered, at press time, to have occurred as a wild vagrant by the OBRC, by stating that several of the records are "probably wild birds", but cites none specifically. The inclusion of one newly documented species in 1990 (Wilson's Plover), but the exclusion of the four other new birds with acceptable documentation in the OBRC files: Ferruginous Hawk, Black Rail, Black-chinned Hummingbird, Cassin's Finch (Curry 1991), only adds to the confusion. Does this imply that he found only the plover to be convincing? If so, should not the others have appeared in square brackets? If James felt all the evidence was not in, better, in my view, to have stopped this checklist at the end of 1989 and not include any new 1990 species.

Thayer's Gull represents a similar case in which the decision of an internationally accepted arbiter, the AOU (1983) Checklist and supplements, and the OBRC, has been contravened, as James follows Godfrey (1986) in relegating this to a subspecies of Iceland Gull (*Larus glaucoides*). My point here is not whether they are right or wrong (indeed, the prevailing trend is to lump *thayeri* with *glaucoides*), but

that an official checklist should possess a consistency based upon the decisions of authoritative and recognized bodies; which begs the question, which is the official checklist of the birds of Ontario, this James version or the version that appeared in *Ontario Birds* (Wormington and James 1984, with annual additions in OBRC reports)?

The author explains at length the terms used to portray the status of each species in the province. "North", "south", "north coast" and "west" are adequately defined and are about as useful as they can be in describing distribution over such a far-flung province. James points out that everyone seems to prefer a different system of labelling frequency of occurrence and relative abundance. Not to disappoint him, I will offer some criticism. But first, I am in total agreement with the elimination of the term "accidental" used by many authors to designate rarities so extreme as to suggest that they will never occur again. Over the course of time, most of them have! I actually prefer his somewhat looser definition of "occasional", as it is not so bound by numerical criteria, and the definition of "vagrant" is a good one. My problem is with a separate set of terms to describe relative abundance. Surely, "occasional" (from the frequency list), not expected every year but to be expected in most years, and "rare" (from the relative abundance list), usually seen singly and difficult to find on any particular outing, are redundant. I would prefer a single set of terms describing status from "abundant" to "vagrant". There is also a set of terms to describe seasonal status. Most of these are

very useful, but James seems to have replaced his perfectly clear "visitant" with "straggler". The latter has a place in the list, i.e., to indicate that a species has been known to lag behind after the bulk of the population has left. Although the dictionary does allow for the interpretation of irregularly wandering into the province as "straggling", would it not be clearer to describe, to take just two examples, Say's Phoebe and Scissor-tailed Flycatcher as "occasional visitant" to the province, rather than as occasional or rare stragglers? Then, straggler could be reserved to describe birds like Northern Rough-winged Swallow and Barn Swallow that I would prefer to describe as "vagrant stragglers into early winter" rather than merely "vagrant in winter", which could be equally applied to Smew. I found that in a number of instances, James did not seem to adhere to his own system in labelling the status of species. Surely Yellow-billed Loon and Wood Stork are vagrant rather than occasional, and Indigo Bunting is not a winter resident at Thunder Bay!

James has chosen, in this edition, to forego dates of occurrence, except for vagrants. Some will argue that he could have used the published record to include specific dates for extremes of early and late occurrences, as he did in the first edition. Certainly, users of this book would have liked to know the outside dates of occurrence of birds in the province to set their own observations in perspective. Unlike some publications (e.g., Speirs 1985), he has, I believe correctly, not rigidly defined seasons by calendar months. Many species have occurred in December as late fall migrants, or attempt to winter,

but subsequently leave or die (see above discussion of stragglers).

One of the most useful features of the checklist is that the subspecies known to have occurred in the province are listed at the end of each species account. Moreover, an excellent appendix presents background on the subspecies. It is here that the amateur field ornithologist can find fascinating information on the range, morphological variation, and current status of subspecies. In addition to the generally understood trends in ornithological thinking (e.g., that American Black Duck may well be lumped with Mallard, and Hoary Redpoll with Common Redpoll), there is a wealth of information here for those interested in learning about bird identification and status beyond the species level. Taken together with the series by Ron Pittaway (1991), to be continued in *Ontario Birds*, this section will interest and challenge Ontario birders looking for a little more.

Of course, the species accounts are the meat of this publication. The inclusion of a four-letter code for each species, fashioned after, but not strictly adhering to those used by the United States Fish and Wildlife Service bird banding manual, is a useful addition which may help with field notes or computer records. The status description format has already been discussed. It remains to comment on the status James assigns to the individual species. Certainly, the seasonal status of many species is open to criticism. In the first edition, James gave specific dates of occurrence whereas this time he divides the months into three parts ("early", "mid", and "late"). I would

like to have seen the outside dates for each species, and even the location, as surely these data were available in the sources James used to give the part of the month.

Reviewers and readers will entertain themselves by finding what they take to be errors in the principal dates of occurrence in the province, or labels of seasonal status. Certainly, these should be as accurate as possible, but the reader, especially if from a peripheral extreme, is to be cautioned against trying to criticize from a parochial perspective. Species such as migrant hawks and warblers will regularly occur earlier than James' dates, which indicate when "nearly normal numbers are usually found". Thus, average dates of first arrival and records at migration hot spots do not indicate when the bulk of the population has arrived. Having said this in defence of James, I believe that there has been an amelioration of climate which has resulted in birds arriving earlier in spring and lingering on into winter in larger numbers than heretofore, whereas he has tended to stick to the principal dates given in the first edition.

I found incomplete dates and places for extreme rarities to be particularly annoying, especially as they are given for some species, and as they can be found in *American Birds* or *Audubon Field Notes*. To sample a few: only the specimen date and collecting location of the 1960 American Oystercatcher are given, when in fact, it was seen at Toronto and Presqu'île from May onward. Similarly, only the photographed date is given for the 1981 Spotted Redshank, the 1977 Wandering Tattler, the 1973 Lewis' Woodpecker,

and both Sprague's Pipits, as well as only the collecting date of the 1949 Vermillion Flycatcher. And why could not all of the places and dates be included for vagrants such as Yellow-billed Loon and Black-throated Gray Warbler?

Understandably, the author had to consult and cite various sources; until OBRC has reviewed all historical records there will be no single arbiter for the status of rarities. Unusual date records are equally problematic. This made James' job more difficult, and it is perhaps understandable that he would have missed records that have appeared in *Audubon Field Notes*, *American Birds*, or local publications (e.g., *The Wood Duck*), such as two separate Hamilton Bell's Vireos, Arctic Tern in November at Niagara, and Semipalmated Plover near Port Credit in January. The Black-headed Grosbeak has occurred from early December (at Dundas in 1973).

Whether you agree or disagree with James or these comments on the Checklist, the book is an excellent summary of the status of birds in Ontario, and a compilation of data available nowhere else. It is really a must for all students of Ontario birds, from the beginner who wants to know where her/his sighting fits into the picture, to the experienced who can't quite remember where that Sooty Tern was seen or how many records there are of Black Skimmer.

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Photo Quiz

by
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Answer to Photo Quiz in *Ontario Birds 9 (3)*: **White-crowned Sparrow.**

This bird is one member of a family that traditionally causes various forms of mental trauma for many birders -- the sparrows. Due to reproduction problems, some of the field identification points discussed below can't be seen in our photograph -- but it is an immature White-crowned Sparrow! Before going into the fine details as to why, there are a few general points on sparrow identification to keep in mind that may be helpful.

Just over twenty species of sparrows have occurred in Ontario. Most have distinct plumages for adults and immatures, and some have different plumages in winter and summer and between male and female. All told, that's a lot of plumage possibilities and this is why some birders, especially those who

are starting out, find sparrows to be a bit of a nightmare. Sparrows in juvenile plumage (the first set of body feathers they attain) are hard and that's all there is to that, but fortunately the plumage is held briefly! Also, when in this plumage, they are often attended by adults which can help facilitate identification -- but there is no shame in letting some go unidentified.

Despite this initial hurdle, sparrows are not so bad once you get used to them. Some, like the Dark-eyed Junco, are really quite easy and shouldn't present a problem once out of juvenile plumage. If you can take the time to learn five or ten common species well, most others will fall into place surprisingly quickly. To learn them well, however, means watching different individuals of the same species over and over, and not for just a few seconds. For example, find a Song Sparrow and then follow it.