

The Great Lakes Ornithological Club

The Origin and Early Years, 1905-1911

by
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The Great Lakes Ornithological Club (GLOC) played an important part in the development of ornithology in southern Ontario in the early years of this century. Although membership was restricted to a few enthusiasts, these men played an influential role in this development. This article deals with the beginnings of the Club, and the reasons for its importance.

Anyone with a serious interest in ornithology who resided near the western part of Lake Erie between 1894 and 1904 would have been in an excellent area to undertake field studies. Such studies, however, were confined to a few enthusiasts with rather locally focussed interests. Naturalists clubs already existed at Detroit, London, Guelph and Ottawa and had their own publications (see Table 1). The American Ornithologists' Union through its journal *The Auk* also printed articles and short reports of interest on the birds of this region. Very few bird books specifically related to the Great Lakes area existed (see Table 2). There were, however, a few networks of individuals active in the region at

this time which helped to compensate for the dearth of books. W.E. Saunders was collecting specimens and data around London and as far west as Point Pelee. P.A. Taverner and B.H. Swales were active in the vicinity of Detroit from 1904, and were in touch with Lynds Jones who was teaching at Oberlin College in Ohio. At Guelph, A.B. Klugh was the driving force in the Wellington Field Naturalist Club. Writing to Taverner early in 1904 he mentioned:

"In Detroit you will be among good ornithologists and will join the Michigan Ornithological Club. Their bulletin appears to me to be one of the best ornithological publications."¹

Also at this time J.H. Fleming in Toronto was in close touch with Saunders and Taverner by mail, exchanging all kinds of ornithological information. The necessary factors now existed for focussing the energies of these men more directly. This took place early in 1905.

W.E. Saunders invited Swales, Taverner and Klugh to a weekend meeting at his home in late

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February, 1905, to see his bird collection and to talk about ornithology in the London area. Luckily, information on this meeting was recorded by Taverner in his journal and in a letter to Fleming. The visitors learned that Saunders and J.E. Keays, whom they met, were preparing a list of

the birds of London. "Bird talk flew fast and furious," and the idea of organizing a group of men with similar interests was thoroughly discussed. In his journal for 27 February, Taverner wrote:

"This day we five laid the plans for a bird club embracing the Great Lakes region. We propose

Table 1. Naturalists' clubs and their journals in the vicinity of the Great Lakes (before 1905).

Name, Date of Founding and Location of Club	Name of Journal and Year of First Issue
Michigan Ornithological Club, c. 1890, Detroit/Ann Arbor	<i>Bulletin of the Michigan Ornithological Club</i> , 1897
Wilson Ornithological Club, 1888, journal edited from Oberlin College, Ohio	<i>The Wilson Bulletin</i> , 1888
McIlwraith Ornithological Club, 1890, London area	<i>The Cardinal</i> , 1940, no journal until then
Wellington Field Naturalist Club, 1900, Guelph area	<i>Ontario Natural Science Bulletin</i> , 1905
Ottawa Field Naturalists' Club, 1884, Ottawa	<i>The Ottawa Naturalist</i> , 1887

Table 2. Ornithological Publications Relating to Western Lake Erie Before 1905

McIlwraith, Thomas	<i>The Birds of Ontario</i>	Hamilton 1886, revised Toronto 1894
Cook, A.J.	<i>Birds of Michigan</i>	Michigan Agricultural Experimental Station, 1893
Jones, Lynds	<i>Birds of Ohio</i>	Ohio State Academy of Science, 1903
Dawson, William L.	<i>The Birds of Ohio</i> , with colored plates	Columbus, Ohio, 1903
Swales, Bradshaw H.	"A List of the Land Birds of Southeastern Michigan"	<i>Bulletin of the Michigan Ornithological Club</i> , 1903, 1904



Five members of the Great Lakes Ornithological Club in front of their shack on the main crossroad, Point Pelee, Ontario, 3 October 1909. Left to right: J.S. Wallace, B.H. Swales, W.E. Saunders, J.H. Fleming and P.A. Taverner (lower). Print from a photograph in the P.A. Taverner Manuscripts, Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, Ontario. Photographer unknown.

starting modestly on a correspondence basis and made Saunders Secretary and the only officer so far. When it gets running well we propose to take in all the *good* men of our territory expecting a final membership of between 25 and 30. None but *good* men to be admitted and the standard of membership to be kept as high as possible that membership may be considered as an honor and something worth attaining. We were all resolved on this point. Our plans are too embryonic to discuss fully now but we hope in the end to issue an annual on the lines of the proceedings of the Michigan Club. We planned a field trip together to the Point Pelee district some time in May.”²

Taverner gave a more detailed account of the origin of the “Club” in a letter to Fleming, explaining that they had only decided to go to London at the last moment, otherwise they would have invited him to join them.

“We take it for granted that you are one of us.”

The only item decided at this first meeting was the name of the organization – The Great Lakes Ornithological Club.

“We decided to start it at present and let it develop along the lines that seem most expedient.”³

A provisional constitution was



Aviation Inn, Point Pelee National Park, circa 1959–1960. The gabled portion of the building on the left, bearing the electrical wire entrance is the incorporated shack of the Great Lakes Ornithological Club. The building was demolished in 1961 after purchase by the National Park Service. Print from a photograph supplied by Mrs. Helen Wolfe, last proprietress of the Inn.

subsequently drafted by Klugh in seven articles and sent to the six members in the form of a circulating bulletin. Article 2 stated that the object of the club “shall be the advancement of ornithology in the Great Lakes region of North America.”⁴ No regular meetings were proposed, but field trips to Point Pelee would be held from time to time. Members would keep in touch with each other by means of the Bulletin which would contain Papers, Notes and Queries.

The first field trip took place from 13–14 May when Saunders, Swales and Taverner met at Leamington Station, and hired a buggy to take their camping and collecting equipment and themselves to the Point. In his bird journal for 1905 Taverner captures something of the excitement of their first experience of Point Pelee. They were listening to various bird calls when a sudden loud whistle made them halt the

buggy. As they listened a Yellow-breasted Chat appeared in the thicket. They all jumped out and played hide-and-seek with the chat in their efforts to collect it. At the same time they found a Bobwhite and a Whip-poor-will. It was a good start to exploring a challenging new area. They camped that night in the red cedars on the west side of the point opposite Tilden’s Woods. But first, they explored the eastern shoreline where they counted about 25 Piping Plovers.⁵ In their checklist of “The Birds of Point Pelee” Taverner and Swales state: “It is a common summer resident and regular breeder on the east beach. We have found them there on each May visit and usually discovered nests and eggs.”⁶ Among other birds recorded on that visit were a male Hudsonian Godwit in breeding plumage, numerous Orchard Orioles, Cardinals, a Connecticut Warbler, and a Bald Eagle with two young. The

threesome tramped back to Leamington on the second evening in the dark, arrived at a hotel by 2130 h, had a cold bath and slept soundly.

The next club trip to Pelee was scheduled for the fall of 1905, and lasted from 4-17 September. Klugh and Taverner pitched camp in the same place as in May, and were later joined by Swales. The name "Camp Coues" was given to the location where members of the GLOC had first camped in 1905. Taverner's entry in his "Journal of Bird Observations" for 4 September 1905 is headed "At Camp Coues, Point Pelee, Essex Co." The camp was named after Elliot Coues (1842-1899) author of *Key to North American Birds*. They found themselves in the middle of a wave of migrating birds and during the next 12 days were able to explore the area more thoroughly. Klugh, who was a botanist as well as a birder, made notes on the plant life of Point Pelee as it related to the bird life they found.⁷ From Taverner's detailed account of the camp they did a great deal of rewarding bird study and saw among other birds a King Rail, a Prairie Warbler, juvenile Carolina Wrens, Red Knots, Black-bellied and Lesser Golden-Plovers, and a constant procession of hawks.

The GLOC had now taken root and its members, though few, were experienced and enthusiastic. The studies that they carried out from 1905 through 1911, although closely linked to visits to Pelee, were also geared to a wider perspective. Lynds Jones had begun to bring members of his

ornithology classes on field trips to Sandusky Marsh, on the Ohio side of Lake Erie due south of Point Pelee, and to several offshore islands. He was camped on the islands early in September 1905 and co-operated with Taverner and Swales by observing the actions of diurnal migrants as they passed over the lake.⁸ As a result of this co-operation, Jones was invited to become a member of the newly organized club. In writing to thank the members for "the privilege of joining with you in this very effective way of keeping in touch with other bird lovers", he expanded on the value of an organization that was centred on the Great Lakes region. "My studies of the birds and plants of the islands makes it clear that the lake is a great climatic, levelling factor upon the portions of land bordering it. Therefore, in cooperating with you in the study of bird life I shall be but filling out the southern part of a remarkably homogeneous region."⁹

From their experience with the September migration of 1905, Jones and Saunders concluded that Point Pelee served as a migration funnel in the fall for the much wider hinterland at its base. In the spring, it again acted as a funnel for a concentrated mass of birds which then spread throughout the much wider area to the north. This idea of Point Pelee acting as a funnel for diurnal bird migration had not previously been recognized. It now needed stating with evidence to support it.¹⁰ To Swales and Taverner this concept presented an exciting challenge, one which would have to be

studied closely over several years.

Field studies of bird populations, distribution and migration was one of the major concerns of the GLOC. A second main function was to exchange bird information and ideas for discussion among the club's members. Distances made it difficult to attend meetings and return home the same day in spite of a good train service. It was agreed that the best method of communication would be by means of a manuscript bulletin circulating among the members. The first issue appeared in late March (1905) and contained a draft constitution in seven articles for comment. The article which caused most controversy related to the Bulletin where it stated that when the author of an article, or note had read the comments of the other members he should add his own and return it to the secretary to keep on behalf of the club. Saunders argued strongly that each item would be a joint one involving several members. "You must bear in mind that we are working for mutual and self improvement in our study. We are not writing for publication and no one has the right to publish except by vote of the club."¹¹ Fleming argued that if the secretary retained members' contributions indefinitely this would inhibit them from expressing their true feeling as the Bulletin circulated. In a 4-3 vote it was finally decided that members could retain their own contributions. As a result there exists no complete collection of contributions to the Bulletin, only bits and pieces.¹²

In contrast to the disagreement

over the Bulletin, the regulations for membership of the club did not cause a problem. Taverner, writing to Fleming with news of the original meeting, explained that the scope of the club was "the Great Lakes and tributary country." The intention was to include only 'reliable men' by which he appears to have meant serious ornithologists who could be relied on to report only sightings about which they were certain. He suggested excluding mere egg collectors. The quality of the members, not their quantity, was the credo they espoused in order to "command attention and respect from others."¹³ Lynds Jones became a member in the fall of 1905, Dr. William Brodie in 1906, and James S. Wallace in 1907. As no further members were recruited the total stood at nine.

Why was the membership so small? One reason is that it never developed into a 'club' in the usual sense of the word. It started with the enthusiasm and vision of William E. Saunders and was carried forward by the energy and dedication of Jones, Taverner, Swales, Klugh and Wallace. Brodie was an ill man and died in 1909. Keays was not very active, while Fleming made comparatively few visits to Pelee although he contributed regularly to the Bulletin. The problem was to find other enthusiasts living in the region who were knowledgeable and active ornithologists. Such men were not easy to find at that time. There existed professional collectors of birds and their eggs, and there were also naturalists with a special interest in plants or



Interior of Great Lakes Ornithological Club shack, Point Pelee, Ontario, looking toward front door. Bryant Walker and P.A. Taverner (right). Print from a photograph in the P.A. Taverner Manuscripts, Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, Ontario. Photograph by Detroit News Tribune, now Detroit News, 31 May 1909 and published by them on 27 June 1909.

insects. But the object of the members who started the group was to link up those who shared a common interest in birds and were congenial to each other.

We may well wonder what the GLOC achieved during its short existence. The heyday of the club only lasted from 1905 through 1909. Klugh had already moved to Kingston in 1906. Swales joined the Smithsonian Institute in

Washington in 1910, while Taverner became Head of Ornithology at the newly created Victoria Memorial Museum at Ottawa in 1911. In that year the Bulletin ceased publication. From then onwards Saunders and Wallace were the main visitors to Point Pelee. However, a permanent campsite with a wooden cabin had been established in 1908 and continued to be used

until the 1920s by members and visitors. Referred to as the Shack, it was built by members of the Club with the expert help of Taverner who was then an architectural draftsman in Detroit. In his Journal for 16 October 1908 he recorded that the Club now had a little house at Camp Coues with screened doors and windows, which was very comfortable. The club made Point Pelee known to a wider group of ornithologists by their published studies. "The Birds of Point Pelee" by Taverner and Swales, which appeared in the *Wilson Bulletin* between June 1907 and September 1908, contained a list of 209 birds recorded together with considerable annotation. It still reads well today. Through their observations several new birds were added to the Ontario list, for instance Chuck-will's-widow (May, 1906). The chief value of the work of the members of the Great Lakes Ornithological Club lay in their contribution to a better understanding of the migration routes, and the seasonal variations in the numbers and species of birds in the Great Lakes region. When compared with what was known before the club was founded, this represented a quantum leap in knowledge.

Material relating to the Great Lakes Ornithological Club, selected and xeroxed by George M. Stirrett, has been deposited in the Royal Ontario Museum as the "Stirrett Collection". This material was copied mainly from the correspondence of Fleming, Saunders, Swales and Taverner, and the record books of the Club.

It also includes copies of photographs taken between 1909 and 1911.

A Partial Listing of Ornithological Publications Concerning the Great Lakes Region Stimulated by the Activities of the GLOC, 1905-1912.

(In addition to Taverner and Swales "The Birds of Point Pelee")

Fleming, J.H. 1906-1914. Birds of Toronto, Ontario. *Auk* 23: 437-453; 24:71-89; 30:225-228.

_____.1906. The Chuck-will's widow and Mocking Bird in Ontario. *Auk* 23:343-344.

Jones, L. 1909-1910. The birds of Cedar Point and vicinity. *Wilson Bulletin* 21:55-76; 115-131; 187-204; 22:25-41; 97-115; 172-182.

Saunders, W.E. 1906. Birds new to Ontario. *Ottawa Naturalist* 19:205-207.

_____.1907. The Carolina Wren, an established resident of Ontario. *Ontario Natural Science Bulletin* 3:28-30.

_____.1907. A migration disaster in western Ontario. *Auk* 24:108-110.

_____.1907. Ring-billed Gull. *Wilson Bulletin* 19:73-74.

_____.1908. The Sharp-shinned Hawk in migration. *Ontario Natural Science Bulletin* 4: 5-7.

_____.1908. The Worm-eating Warbler in Ontario. *Auk* 25:319.

_____. 1909. Summer Birds of the southern edge of western Ontario. *Wilson Bulletin* 21:152-155.

_____. 1909. The Sharp-shinned Hawk in migration. *Ottawa Naturalist* 23:156-160.

_____. 1909. Rare birds at Point Pelee. *Ottawa Naturalist* 23:160-162.

_____. 1910. Winter birds at Point Pelee. *Ottawa Naturalist* 24:35-36.

_____. 1912. The Yellow-breasted Chat and Carolina Wren in Ontario. *Ottawa Naturalist* 25:152-153.

Swales, H.B. and P.A. Taverner. 1907. Recent ornithological developments in southeastern Michigan. *Auk* 24:135-148.

Taverner, P.A. 1905. A hyperlaken migration route. *Bulletin of the Michigan Ornithological Club* 6:3-7.

_____. 1911. Some raptorial migrations in southern Ontario. *Ottawa Naturalist* 25:77-81.

Wood N.A. 1910. Bird migration at Point Pelee, Ontario, in the fall of 1909. *Wilson Bulletin* 22:63-78.

End Notes

1. Letter from A.B. Klugh to P.A. Taverner, 31 March 1904, quoted in part in Taverner's "Journal of Bird Observations, 1903-1904". Royal Ontario Museum (ROM), Taverner Papers.
2. P.A. Taverner "Journal of Bird Observations, 1903-1904". p. 67.
3. Letter from P.A. Taverner to J.H. Fleming, 28 February 1905. ROM, Fleming Papers.
4. Great Lakes Ornithological Club - Circulating Bulletin No. 1. March 1905. ROM, Taverner Papers.
5. P.A. Taverner "Journal of Bird Observations 1904-1905", 13 May 1905. ROM, Taverner Papers.
6. Taverner, P.A. and B.H. Swales. 1907. The Birds of Point Pelee. *Wilson Bulletin*, 19: 89-90.
7. *ibid*, 19: 40-45.
8. *ibid*, 19:45-48. See also sketch map in 20:106, 1908.
9. Letter from L. Jones to "The Members of the Great Lakes Ornithological Club", 16 Dec. 1905. ROM, Taverner Papers - GLOC Bulletin.
10. Taverner, P.A. and B.H. Swales. 1908. The Birds of Point Pelee. *Wilson Bulletin* 20:117-129. The authors give a summary of their conclusions to the study.
11. Memo by W.E. Saunders in Circulating Bulletin, dated 31 August 1906. ROM, Taverner Paper, GLOC Bulletin.
12. The late George M. Stirrett, formerly Chief Parks Naturalist Ottawa and author of *The Spring Birds of Point Pelee National Park, Ontario* (1960), compiled a typescript index to the Bulletin. However, quite a number of the contributions were removed; presumably by the authors. The contents of each issue rarely coincide fully with the lists which have survived.
13. Letter from P.A. Taverner to J.H. Fleming, 28 February 1905. ROM, Fleming Papers.