

A Birding Site Guide to Rainy River/ Lake-of-the-Woods

by
Ron Ridout

The Rainy River/Lake-of-the-Woods region is an area unique to birding in Ontario. This small parcel of cultivated land, sandwiched between the boreal forests of Manitoba to the west, Minnesota to the south and Ontario to the north and east, attracts western birds in numbers and variety found nowhere else in Ontario.

Situated in the southwestern corner of northwestern Ontario, this region, lying just off the Canadian Shield, has been farmed since the last century. The soil is too poor and rocky for agriculture and now much of the area is returning to its natural state or is being used for pasture. This type of habitat, interspersed with large aspen stands, sedge marshes, and tamarack bogs, provides ideal surroundings for many birds found much further west.

Black-billed Magpies, Sharp-tailed Grouse, Western Meadowlarks and Brewer's Blackbirds can be found in the scrubby pastures. Le Conte's Sparrows, Sedge Wrens, Sandhill Cranes and Yellow Rails frequent the large marshes. White Pelicans and Double-crested Cormorants nest

on isolated islands on Lake-of-the-Woods as have Piping Plovers and American Avocets.

The town of Rainy River is best reached by car travelling west from Ft. Frances on Hwy 11 or south from Kenora on Hwy 71, which meets Hwy 11 east of Rainy River. The region is best explored with the aid of the topographic map entitled Rainy River 52 D/15 and 52 D/10, Scale 1:50,000. Most of the species described herein may be found within the area of Ontario shown on this map.

The following description takes you on a driving tour of the region and points out many of the reliable spots for observing the specialties of this area. However, it may be said that any stop on any of the many sideroads crisscrossing the region can prove rewarding.

A word of caution at this point. It is wise to travel with an eye on the gas gauge from time to time and to have a spare tire and jack in the trunk. Gas stations are few and far between and most of the roads are gravel and some may be quite rough (depending on the time of year).

This tour of the area has its auspicious beginning at the Rainy River sewage lagoons. Turn north off Hwy 11 on the sideroad just east of the railway station. After crossing the railway tracks you will see a dirt road to the left. The lagoons are a few hundred metres down this road. Shorebirds and ducks are present in migration and in late May up to 450 Wilson's Phalaropes have been counted.

Returning to the sideroad, turn left (north) and drive to the first crossroads (1.3 km). Turn left again and travel (1.5 km) until you come to an aspen woodlot on your left and open fields to your right. Two singing Sprague's Pipits were found in these fields in June of 1980. The woodlot harbours Connecticut Warblers and Eastern Bluebirds in breeding season.

Another 0.5 km to the west you will come to Hwy 600, the main

north-south road of the region. Turn north and drive slowly, watching the fields and fence rows for open country species such as Western Kingbirds and (Krider's) Red-tailed Hawk which have been seen on numerous occasions. Western Meadowlarks are common throughout the region's open fields and Easterns are occasionally heard. In breeding season it is a good idea to stop often and listen. Upland Sandpipers are heard more often than seen and the Sprague's Pipits were discovered in this fashion.

North on Hwy 600 (3.2 km) you'll come to River Road. This is the beginning of a 30 km loop which leads west to the Rainy River and then north through various habitats before turning back east to rejoin Hwy 600. Go west on River Road (1.6 km) and you will pass an ill-defined



American Avocets have been found on Sable Island.

crossroad. The grassy track to the north leads into willow and alder thickets which may yield a few Golden-winged Warblers in late May and June. This track should be travelled only in dry weather.

Approximately 6 km to the west of Hwy 600 is the Rainy River. River Road follows the river north here for a short distance and it is an excellent point to scan for ducks and herons. As well, the oak woods along the bank here are a favourite with Red-headed Woodpeckers.

Going north from the river you pass through extensively cultivated fields which hold large flocks of longspurs in early spring. These should be scanned carefully for rare species. Smith's and Chestnut-collared Longspurs may yet be found in this way.

Approximately 4 km after leaving the river, the road turns left to cross Wilson Creek, then almost immediately turns north again. The marshy area of the creek and the woods along its banks are worth checking for migrants and breeding birds in their respective seasons.

North of Wilson Creek (1.8 km) a road runs west to Oak Grove Camp, which lies on the bank of the Rainy River. Migrants travelling along the river pass through the open oakwoods here and are more easily seen. A trail leading south from the camp through the woods along the river provides an enjoyable walk. Many varieties of western plants grow here, including Hill's Oak, a species rare in Ontario.

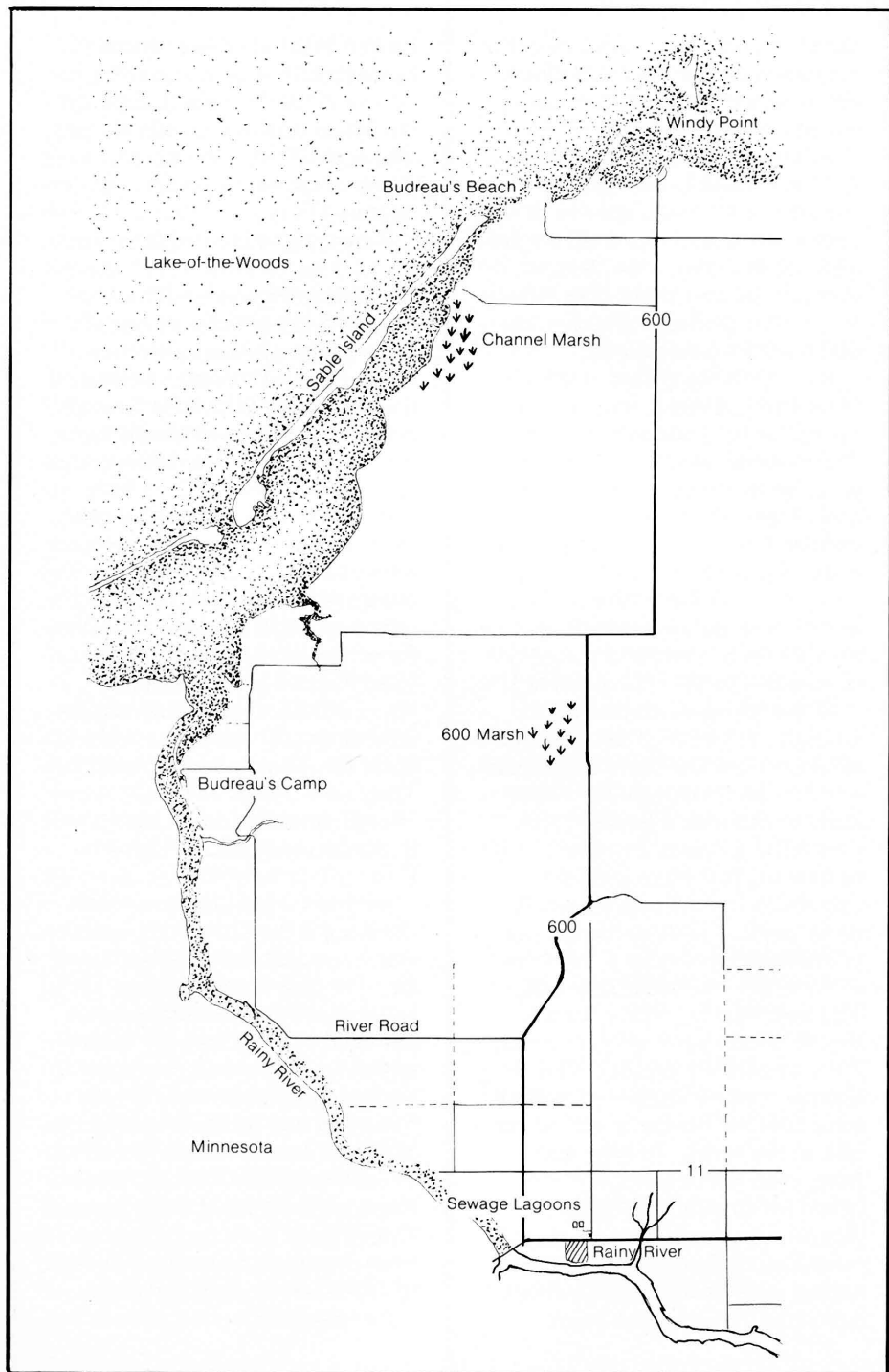
Back out on River Road and 2 km north of the Oak Grove Road,

a dirt track to the left leads down to a gas dock on the river. The marsh here is favoured by Yellow-headed Blackbirds. In April, when the ice is still on the lake, the open water here harbours large concentrations of ducks, cormorants and pelicans.

A few hundred metres to the north of this track, the River Road turns east for 2 km, then north for 0.8 km and then finally east again. At this second right turn, the fields on either side of the road usually contain feeding flocks of black-birds including Brewer's and Yellow-headed. Sandhill Cranes are often heard or seen flying on the north side of the road at this point.

Travelling east (6 km), you will rejoin Hwy 600 at the point where it makes a 1.6 km jog to the east before it turns north again. Two km north of this left (northward) turn in the highway, you will see a grassy clearing on the left (west) which often yields Sharp-tailed Grouse. A further 6 km north brings you to a sideroad leading west. This dirt road runs 5 km to Lake-of-the-Woods and provides an excellent view of Sable Island just across the channel. The extensive sedge marshes to the south have held Yellow Rails, Le Conte's Sparrows and Sandhill Cranes. An excellent article by Paul Pratt entitled, "Stalking the Yellow Rail" in the May 1981 issue of *Birdfinding in Canada* discusses the habitat requirements and proper method of seeing this rare and elusive bird.

Returning to Hwy 600 continue north for 1.6 km. The highway



turns east here but you will want to continue north on the road which leads back to the lake and the government wharves.

Scan the lake here for White Pelicans, Double-crested Cormorants and various species of ducks. In the autumn, Bald Eagles often sit in the trees on Windy Point to the northwest. The Windy Bay Lodge provides accommodation from May to October.

Back at the stop sign where Hwy 600 goes east, turn right on the gravel road which goes west. Travel as far west (2.6 km) as it goes before turning north to the lake (1 km). The road eventually ends at a rocky hill. Park here and walk over the hill to a windswept view of Lake-of-the-Woods. The woods here are known as Budreau's Woods and yield a variety of migrants in the spring and fall.

In the spring when conditions are right, hawks migrate overhead as they follow the shore of the lake north. A path through the woods leads to Budreau's Beach which runs off in a crescent to the southwest. It is often good for shorebirds in both migrations. A rocky point, visible at the far end of the beach, provides a fine view of the north end of Sable Island. The land here is private, so it is best to obtain permission to cross, if the owners are present. This is another spot for waterfowl concentrations when the ice is still on the lake in the spring. In May and June, scan the beaches of the island for shorebirds. Piping Plovers are usually present though somewhat difficult to see and rare waders such as Marbled Godwits, American Avocets and Black-

necked Stilts have been found. Later in July thousands of Franklin's Gulls loaf on the beaches of the island. It's best to allow a good deal of time to cover this spot as it is one of the best stops in the region.

Returning to Hwy 600, go east for 11.6 km to Hwy 621. Lake-of-the-Woods Provincial Park is located 5 km to the north on Hwy 621. Campsites are available there. Hwy 621, south of its junction with Hwy 600, runs through several kilometres of boreal forest which offers such northern species as Common Raven, Gray Jay, Boreal Chickadee and three-toed Woodpeckers. You will eventually return to Hwy 11 by travelling straight down Hwy 621. Here you turn west (right) to return to Rainy River. All of the sideroads between Hwys 621 and 600 can prove fruitful. One should always be scanning the woodlots and fields for Black-billed Magpies. They have nested along Worthington Road 3, which is three sideroads east of Rainy River.

Another important spot worth checking is the Hwy 600 marsh, which borders Hwy 600 for 2 or 3 km. The best access point is 13.5 km north of Hwy 11. The marsh has been more or less dry for three or four years but still produces Sharp-tailed Grouse, Le Conte's Sparrows and Sedge Wrens in late May and June. It is easily walked to the west of the road. To the east lies a large tamarack bog. Sandhill Cranes have been heard calling from it and may nest here. In April of 1982 two Great Gray Owls were heard calling at this spot.

These are just a few of the spots worth birding in the area and they have proved reliable over the years. However, half the enjoyment of birding in the Rainy River district is the chance to explore new areas and actually play a part in expanding the knowledge of the region.

Most of the Rainy River area is private property, so the usual rules of owner's rights and respect for them should be observed.

Whenever possible, you should obtain permission to enter from the nearest residence. All of the specific spots mentioned have tolerated birders in the past and should continue to do so in the future as long as common sense and courtesy are used. Most of the region can be covered adequately from public roads by driving slowly and observing carefully.

Hazards are few, with the exception of insects. Mosquitoes and black flies are prevalent in season but by no means intolerable. Perhaps the worst are the wood ticks, which are teeming in the fields and marshes and tenacious when they dig in. The best way to fight them is to tuck your pants inside your socks before venturing into any field.

Accommodations are available in Rainy River at the CN Hotel. Oak Grove Camp and the Windy Bay Lodge have light housekeeping cabins, which should be reserved ahead of time and camping is available at Lake-of-the-Woods Provincial Park and Oak Grove. It bears repeating that this region of Ontario is sparsely populated so birders should travel with a first aid kit and an emergency parts kit

in the car.

As for the time of visit, each season seems to bring a different group of birds to the area. Early spring has its buildup of waterfowl on open stretches of water, raptor movements up the shore of the lake and flocks of longspurs in the fields. Late spring sees the movement of passerines through the aspen and oak woodlands and shorebirds flock along the beaches of the lake. Summer hosts a variety of nesting western species unusual in Ontario, as well as occasional summer wanderers such as Black-necked Stilt. Autumn follows with the fields full of sparrows, each flock seeming to contain half a dozen Harris' Sparrows. Double-crested Cormorants mass on the lake before suddenly leaving for the south in groups of two to three hundred.

The surface of the avifauna of Rainy River has just been scratched and continued investigation should turn up species not only rare but quite possibly new for Ontario.

A similar version of this site guide will be appearing in the forthcoming book, *A Guide to Birding in Canada*, edited by J. Cam Fin-dlay, published by Hurtig Publishers, Edmonton.