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Some Notes on the Breeding Birds of Lake Nipigon, Thunder Bay District, Ontario

by

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Little is known about the birds that nest on Lake Nipigon, its islands and shores. The only systematic study was done by L. L. Snyder in the summers of 1923 and 1924 (Snyder 1928). The present study was undertaken, in part, to obtain data for the Ontario Rare Breeding Bird Program.

Six volunteer birders chartered a diesel cruiser out of Orient Bay for a five-day period in each of two consecutive summers: 16-21 June 1991 and 5-10 July 1992. During these two trips we circumnavigated the lake, visited the islands in the centre of the lake, and checked all the major bays and rivermouths.

Much of our time was spent on board, and the water, shores and islands were constantly scanned with binoculars. Nesting islands and other interesting sites, such as rivermouths and sand beaches, were approached more closely by outboard motor boats, permitting landing in many of these areas.

We recorded 107 species of birds during our two trips; this compares to 97 species found by Snyder during his two summers on the lake. The status of many of these species remains unchanged. Some species, however, appear to have changed in abundance. Several of these species are discussed in the following

annotated list. A few of the species recorded were considered migrants only, although two of these (Rusty Blackbird and Greater Yellowlegs) are known to nest in the general vicinity of Lake Nipigon. A complete listing of the species observed has been published elsewhere (Escott 1991, Bryan 1994).

Annotated List:

The species listed below have, in our opinion, definitely or probably changed in abundance since the 1920's. The order used is that of the American Ornithologists' Union (1983) checklist. In addition to our findings, including any evidence of nesting, we have included reference to Snyder's experience with each species.

Common Loon (*Gavia immer*).

This was a common species, with over 500 counted. They were single, in pairs, or in groups of up to thirty birds. Many were fishing far from shore and were likely non-breeders. A nest containing one adult and at least one tiny chick was found on 5 July 1992 at Rhea Lake, a small inland lake on the east side of Shakespeare Island. Snyder had found this species uncommon, with only singles or pairs at widely separated points.

American White Pelican (*Pelecanus erythrorhynchos*).

Thirty were seen in 1991, and forty-four in 1992. Nesting colonies were found on small islands in opposite corners of the lake. In 1991, three nests were found on Pretty Island, McIntyre Bay, two of which each had two eggs; one was empty. In 1992, two nesting colonies were found on small islands a half mile apart, west of Ombabika Narrows. The first colony held ten nests, six containing two eggs and four containing one egg. The second colony held four nests, three containing two eggs and one with a single egg. This species was not recorded by Snyder; nesting on Lake Nipigon represents an eastern range extension (Bryan 1991).

Double-crested Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax auritus*).

This species was abundant, with over 5,000 individuals counted. Fifteen nesting colonies were found, with an estimated 2,500 nests, mostly in the northern half of the lake. This species appears to have increased explosively. Snyder found only one nesting colony of this species (Ontario's first) in Lake Nipigon, and our guide, Mr. Odorizzi, knew of only one nesting colony when he first started travelling Lake Nipigon in 1955.

Great Blue Heron (*Ardea herodias*).

This was a common species, seen daily, with over 220 birds counted. Eleven breeding colonies were found with over sixty nests seen (other nests were almost certainly present, but hidden by foliage in the nesting trees). Remarkably, Snyder does not list this species at all!

Canada Goose (*Branta canadensis*).

This species was seen on both trips, a total of fifty-eight adult birds being counted. While we saw no evidence of nesting, MNR personnel had seen goslings on the lake in 1991. Snyder did not observe this species; its presence on Lake Nipigon may be secondary to reintroduction programs in Thunder Bay, and perhaps elsewhere.

American Black Duck (*Anas rubripes*).

Snyder saw only one of this species; we saw fourteen, all but two of them on Lake Nipigon itself. We found no evidence of nesting.

Mallard (*Anas platyrhynchos*).

This species was seen daily both summers, with over eighty-five adults present. A female with six downy young was at the mouth of the Ombabika River 20 June 1991. Snyder saw only four adult birds in two summers, but obtained evidence of breeding (a female with two downy young).

Blue-winged Teal (*Anas discors*).

We saw this species both years, a total of six individuals, all males except for a female in a pair at Windigo Bay 18 June 1991. This species was not seen by Snyder.

American Wigeon (*Anas americana*).

This species was also seen both summers, a total of seven birds, without evidence of nesting. Snyder did not record this species.

Ring-necked Duck (*Aythya collaris*).

This was a fairly common species, with over forty birds seen. The majority were in a flock of males south-east of the Onaman River mouth. Nesting was strongly suspected in several areas, due to the extensive suitable habitat, although it could not be confirmed. Snyder did not record this duck, as his study preceded the eastward expansion of this species which began in the 1930's (McNicol 1987).

Turkey Vulture (*Cathartes aura*).

This species was seen on both trips, a total of ten individuals, most on the west side of the lake. A pair was seen landing in cliff-top trees in Gull Bay 18 June 1991; a nest may have been nearby. This species is expanding its range in Thunder Bay District; as recently as 1981-85, none was seen in any of the four 100-km squares bordering Lake Nipigon during the Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas (Cadman 1987). Not unexpectedly, Snyder does not list this species.

Bald Eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*).

This was the most common raptor, with sightings every day, for a total of over one hundred birds. Ten nests were found, four of them with fledglings visible. Nests were in tall trembling aspens (*Populus tremuloides*), except for one on Cattail Islands in a large birch (*Betula papyrifera*). Snyder saw only three eagles, and was aware of only two nests.

American Kestrel (*Falco sparverius*).

We saw only seven, four of them in the disturbed area around the settlement of Orient Bay. Few were seen around the perimeter of the lake, due to lack of suitable habitat. American Kestrels are abundant in clear-cut logged areas in northwestern Ontario, but we found no logged areas along the Lake Nipigon shoreline. Snyder found this species fairly common, perhaps because human habitations and clearings were more widespread at that time.

Peregrine Falcon (*Falco peregrinus*).

One adult bird was seen 6 July 1992 preying on nestlings at a Ring-billed Gull colony on the Tichnor Islands at the mouth of Humbolt Bay. This bird did not have any leg bands, and so could not be definitely traced to any of the Peregrine Falcon release programs along the Lake Superior shores of Ontario, Minnesota, and Michigan (Isle Royale). There was no evidence of nesting, although suitable habitat, in the form of vertical cliffs, was present. Snyder did not observe this species.

Killdeer (*Charadrius vociferus*).

We saw only four individuals of this species, in scattered locations. Snyder found a pair on many of the sandy beaches he visited; the beaches we walked were deserted.

Bonaparte's Gull (*Larus philadelphia*).

This species was fairly common and seen on both trips, with forty-eight individuals counted, in several areas, usually in small flocks. No evidence of nesting was seen, although this species is known to breed on smaller inland lakes nearby. It is likely that some of the birds we saw were nesting birds. This species was not noted by Snyder.

Ring-billed Gull (*Larus delawarensis*).

This common gull was seen daily, with a total of over 1,500 birds seen, in all parts of the lake. Three nesting colonies were found, on small low-lying rocks, holding approximately eighty, sixty, and one hundred and twenty nests. The Ring-billed Gull was not seen by Snyder.

Herring Gull (*Larus argentatus*).

While this species was fairly common in the 1920's, it is now the most abundant species on Lake Nipigon. Snyder found only four nesting colonies in his travels around the lake, one of which had twenty-five nests. We found Herring Gulls nesting on practically every island and islet, in all parts of the lake.

Common Tern (*Sterna hirundo*).

We only encountered this species twice. A flock of about forty was seen with Black Terns several hundred metres off shore on 19 June 1991; and two adults were seen perched on stumps at the Little Jackfish River mouth at the north end of Ombabika Bay, in 1992. No evidence of nesting was found. This species was not seen by Snyder during his two summers on the lake.

Black Tern (*Chlidonias niger*).

Nineteen Black Terns were mixed in with the Common Tern flock in 1991. No Black Terns, however, were seen at any of the grassy river mouths, and a nesting site was not found. This may have been a transient flock. Snyder did not report this species.

Downy Woodpecker (*Picoides pubescens*).

We encountered this species much less frequently than Snyder did. While he found it the most common woodpecker of the region in the 1920's, we observed only two individuals.

Olive-sided Flycatcher (*Contopus borealis*).

We heard only one individual of this species during both expeditions. Snyder found it well distributed in black spruce country, which is the typical vegetation around much of the northern half of the lake.

Yellow-bellied Flycatcher (*Empidonax flaviventris*).

This species is another denizen of black spruce country, which we encountered only once. Snyder found them to be not common, but well distributed throughout the region.

Least Flycatcher (*Empidonax minimus*).

We found this species only at the Orient Bay settlement, with one or two found here each year. Snyder, however, found this to be the most common representative of its family, and found it in all suitable localities visited.

Bank Swallow (*Riparia riparia*).

A large colony was found nesting in the sandy bank just north of the Whitesand River, with at least sixty nest holes. Over one hundred birds were seen here; also two individuals at Gull Bay. Snyder did not record this species; the only swallow species he saw was Tree Swallow.

Cliff Swallow (*Hirundo pyrrhonota*).

A breeding colony with at least five nests was present both years around the buildings in Orient Bay.

Barn Swallow (*Hirundo rustica*).

These were seen both years around the buildings at Orient Bay, (maximum six birds in 1991).

Common Raven (*Corvus corax*).

This species was common, with almost 200 birds counted. They were seen every day, and three nests were found, two on cliff ledges and one, containing three large young, was in a large trembling aspen on the east shore of Rhea Lake, Shakespeare Island on 9 July 1992. Interestingly, Snyder's only observation of this species was of a group of six on 27 June 1924, and he states that they were not known by residents of the region.

Sedge Wren (*Cistothorus platensis*).

Two singing males were found on opposite sides of the lake. One was at the mouth of the Kabitotikwia River on 18 June 1991, and one was at the Onaman River mouth on 6 July 1992. This is close to the northern edge of its breeding range. Snyder did not record this species.

Ruby-crowned Kinglet (*Regulus calendula*).

We found this species fairly common and well-distributed, with twenty-one counted. Snyder, in contrast, found only one in two summers of field work.

European Starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*).

Only four were seen, all at the Orient Bay settlement. None was seen in uninhabited areas. Snyder did not report this species at all in the 1920's. It was not recorded in Thunder Bay District until the 1930's (Dear 1940).

Philadelphia Vireo (*Vireo philadelphica*).

We did not encounter this species at all; Snyder, however, thought it to be almost as common as the Red-eyed Vireo, based on the number of occasions in which it was positively identified.

Northern Parula (*Parula americana*).

Seven singing males were found at widely scattered locations, in heavy mixed woods along river banks or bays. Snyder did not record this species.

Yellow Warbler (*Dendroica petechia*).

This species was unexpectedly common, not only in willow thickets near river mouths, but also on small wooded islets, particularly at the north end of the lake. Some of these islets had scattered tall mature trees only. One bird was on the tiny rocky islet where one of the White Pelican nesting colonies was found. Snyder found this warbler uncommon and restricted to alder and willow flats, the habitat with which it is usually associated in the rest of Thunder Bay District.

Cape May Warbler (*Dendroica tigrina*).

Unlike Snyder, who found only one bird of this species in two summers, we found them to be common in cool spruce woods, with thirty-two counted.

Yellow-rumped Warbler (*Dendroica coronata*).

We found this species common and generally distributed, with seventy-five birds counted. Snyder states that this species was not common in the region as a whole, but in one or two localities it was seen in some numbers.

Black-and-white Warbler (*Mniotilta varia*).

We found only ten singing males of this species, in richer mixed and deciduous woods, at several locations. Snyder found it common in many locations.

Mourning Warbler (*Oporornis philadelphia*).

We found only four individuals of this species, near roadsides and clearings around Orient Bay. Snyder also found this species in clearings, but was surprised at how common they were, and he collected nine specimens.

Common Yellowthroat (*Geothlypis trichas*).

Nine different birds were found, in grassy river mouth marshes, and grassy stream edges, in various parts of the lake. Snyder did not record this species.

Canada Warbler (*Wilsonia canadensis*).

Only five birds of this species were heard singing. Snyder found it common in his survey.

Chipping Sparrow (*Spizella passerina*).

This species was common, in all types of habitat, with about forty birds counted. Many of them were around human habitations at Orient Bay, similar to the distribution of this species in the 1920's. In addition, however, we found many Chipping Sparrows in various natural habitats around the lakeshore.

Le Conte's Sparrow (*Ammodramus leconteii*).

Colonies were found in the extensive grass and sedge marshes at the mouth of the Kabitotikwia River, Gull Bay, in 1991 (five singing males), and at the mouth of a creek entering Humbolt Bay just south of the Onaman River, in 1992 (seven singing males). Snyder did not note this species, although he did search for them. He did not, however, visit the sites where we found them.

Bobolink (*Dolichonyx oryzivorus*).

Two territorial males were singing and displaying in the grassy marshes at the mouth of the Kabitotikwia River on 18 June 1991. Snyder did not record this species.

Red-winged Blackbird (*Agelaius phoeniceus*).

We found this species locally common in large grassy marshes, with thirty at McCann Creek, fifteen at the mouth of the Kabitotikwia River, twenty-five at the Onaman River mouth, and fifteen at Shadow Creek near Orient Bay. Snyder lists this species as an uncommon summer resident, and en-

countered only one breeding pair (at Humboldt Bay), and a male (on the northwest shore of Omababika Bay). At Humboldt Bay, he states that this was the only pair to occupy a reedy bay covering perhaps 100 acres.

Common Grackle (*Quiscalus quiscula*).

We saw several Grackles near Orient Bay, and an individual on Ells Island near an old commercial fishing camp. While Snyder saw this species in early June, he considered it a migrant, and did not see any at all during the breeding season.

White-winged Crossbill (*Loxia leucoptera*).

Small flocks were seen on both trips, a total of over seventy birds. These appeared to be transient flocks; there was no evidence of nesting. Snyder saw no crossbills of either species.

Evening Grosbeak (*Coccothraustes vespertinus*).

Over 120 Evening Grosbeaks were seen, on both trips. They were mostly in small flocks and many were around the clearings and buildings of Orient Bay. Others were seen at various locations on the lakeshore. Snyder saw none during his two summers on the lake.

Conclusions

There appears to be an increased diversity of bird species on Lake Nipigon now compared to the 1920's, since we recorded 107 species and Snyder recorded 97; this increase is despite the fact that Snyder spent two entire summers on the lake versus our two weeks.

The most striking change over the sixty-seven year interval is a marked increase in the numbers and diversity of colonial water birds. Great Blue Heron and Ring-billed Gull were not present on the lake in the 1920's. Loons, ducks, and Herring Gulls have increased. Double-crested Cormorant numbers have increased explosively. American White Pelicans are a recently arrived species on Lake Nipigon, with the first sightings in 1979. The discovery of nesting colonies in 1991 and 1992 established a significant eastward extension of their breeding range (Bryan 1991).

There have also been increases in large raptors, including Bald Eagles and Turkey Vultures. There appears to be an increase in the number and variety of swallow species; other species that have increased significantly are Common Raven and Evening Grosbeak.

It is more difficult to interpret the significance of the species which appear to have decreased in numbers. Some of these, such as the American Kestrel and the Mourning Warbler, are associated with clearings and disturbed areas, which were much more extensive on the shores of Lake Nipigon in the 1920's. We encountered these species on fewer occasions due to the reduction in the extent of their preferred habitat.

Other forest species, such as grouse and owls, were seen much less frequently by us, probably due to the fact that we spent much less time on land than Snyder did. Snyder made his observations over two entire summers, and spent most of his time on land, sleeping overnight in base camps, and exploring the countryside up to five miles inland from the lakeshore. We, however, restricted our terrestrial birding to the immediate shores of the lake, and spent most of our time, including nights, on board the cruiser.

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Observation of a Northern Harrier eating eggs

by
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The food habits of Northern Harriers (or Hen Harriers, *Circus cyaneus*), have been studied by numerous workers. However, the North American literature is virtually devoid of any reference to them eating eggs (Bent 1937, Hammerstrom 1986, Sherrod 1978, Palmer 1988, Johnsgard 1990). While egg eating is mentioned in European literature, references are very few, and generally without any specific details, so that the extent or even the

existence of such behaviour is far from clear. Witherby *et al.* (1943), without comment or source, include the eggs or young of ground nesting birds among the list of items eaten. Stephen (1967) concurred, but considered this exceptional behaviour "forced" upon them by food scarcity. Watson (1977) and Cramp and Simmons (1980) cite only one reference each to such behaviour, but give no details. While Doran (1976)