

OFO Bird Finding Guide # 4

A Birder's Guide to the Moses-Saunders Power Dam Area

by

Bruce and Laurie Di Labio

11 October 1993 - Marbled Murrelet!!
A great flock of birders descended on the Moses-Saunders Power Dam (MSPD) to view this exciting vagrant which was new for Ontario and New York State. For many it was an introduction to a new birding destination.

Situated along the St. Lawrence River at Cornwall, Ontario, the MSPD (Figure 1) was completed as an Ontario-New York State joint hydro project in 1958, but was relatively unknown to Ontario birders prior to 1980. Since then, the few birders who have ventured here have uncovered a unique birding location for migrating and wintering water birds.

The uniqueness of the MSPD is due to its location on a major north-south flyway and on one of the largest bodies of water in the area. Also, the proximity of the Gulf of St. Lawrence to the east and the Great Lakes to the west attracts an exciting and diverse selection of birds - Ivory Gull, Razorbill, Atlantic Puffin are just a few of the notables that have made the area not only one of the best kept secrets but one of Ontario's most challenging and rewarding birding destinations.

In addition to the above, Ontario's first recorded Leach's Storm-Petrel was found in a weakened condition on 19 July 1939,

two miles below Cornwall along the St. Lawrence River; and on 19 November 1963, a Dovekie was picked up near Cornwall.

General Information

Autumn and winter are the most interesting seasons to bird the power dam and surrounding area. Water along this section of the St. Lawrence remains open year-round, drawing many wintering and migrating species. But be forewarned, as with most birding areas situated near large bodies of water, foggy and misty conditions are a constant threat to visibility.

Successful birding depends greatly on knowledge of weather systems passing through the region. The most interesting birding follows storms or high winds originating from the Gulf of St. Lawrence, and during the fall and early winter, cold fronts from the northwest. Other productive times follow cold snaps during the months of December and January. As calm waters freeze, many undetected late lingerers and other wintering birds are forced to seek the open water at the power dam.

Although weather affects the birding in this area, regular coverage can yield interesting finds. For example, both the Marbled Murrelet and the Atlantic Puffin were found on relatively clear days with no



Figure 1: Moses/Saunders Power Dam. Photo by B.M. Di Labio.

significant previous weather changes.

Most roads in the area are paved and make birding locations easily accessible regardless of the season. Cornwall and Massena are the two largest towns in this region and offer a variety of accommodations, restaurants and gas stations.

Depending on the season and weather conditions, birding this area requires at least one full day and possibly a second day to do it justice. Keep in mind that during the winter some of these locations may be frozen and snow-covered and less time overall may be needed to bird these sites.

Just two reminders. Firstly, when crossing the international border be sure that all optical equipment is registered in advance with Canada Customs. Secondly, most of the areas in this region have public access but remember to obey no trespassing

signs and other signs restricting public use.

Suggestions for Birding the Power Dam and Surrounding Area

The Robert Moses Power Dam (RMPD) and Hawkin's Point are the most important vantage points. If time is short, you should emphasize these two locations. Although the power dam can be birded from either side of the river, viewing is far superior from the American side. Afternoon lighting conditions should first be taken into consideration. From the American side, the sun is at your back whereas you must look into the sun on the Canadian side.

The most significant factor, however, is the availability of public access to the power dam facilities. On the Canadian side, viewing at the Robert H. Saunders Generating

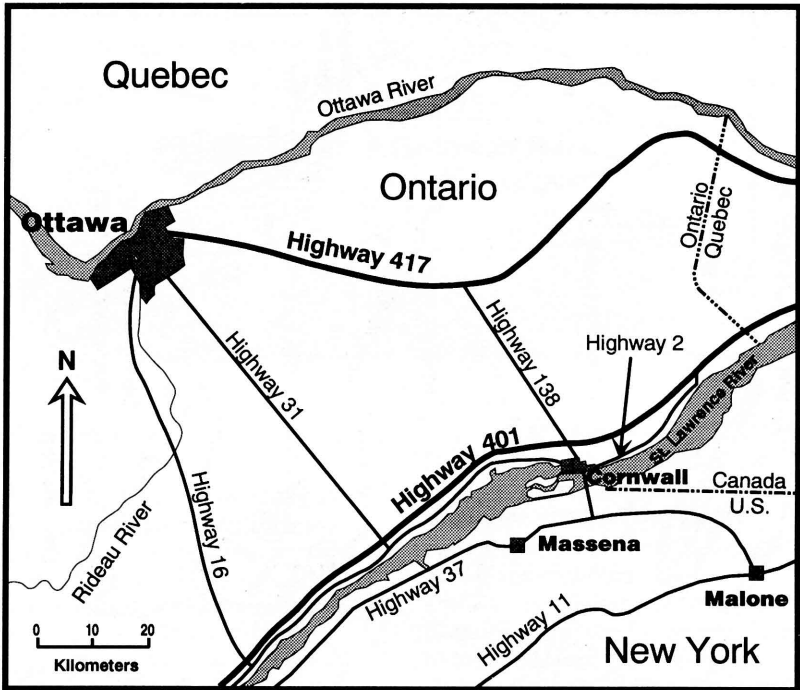


Figure 2.

Station (RSGS) is restricted to the months of June, July, and August. Because the centre's hours change during the year, you should first contact Ontario Hydro in Cornwall to gain permission to access the area. Ontario Hydro can be reached by phone at (613) 938-1518 or by mail at Ontario Hydro, R.H. Saunders Information Centre, P.O. Box 999, Cornwall, Ontario, K6H 5V1.

The RMPD on the American side is open year-round during the week from 9:00 am to 4:30 pm and on weekends from Victoria Day to the Canadian Thanksgiving. During the summer (June to September), public access hours are extended to 7:30 pm. However, for safety reasons, the observation deck is closed to the

public during strong winds and heavy rain or snow. For further information, call the New York Power Authority at (315) 764-0226, or write to the St. Lawrence F.D.R. Power Project, Community Relations Division, PO Box 700, Massena, New York, 13622.

Birding the Ontario Side of the Moses-Saunders Power Dam

Birders from Kingston, Toronto and other southern Ontario locations, follow Highway 401 east to Cornwall and exit south on Power Dam Drive (Figure 2). Continue south on this road, crossing Vincent Massey Drive (Highway 2), to Saunders Road and

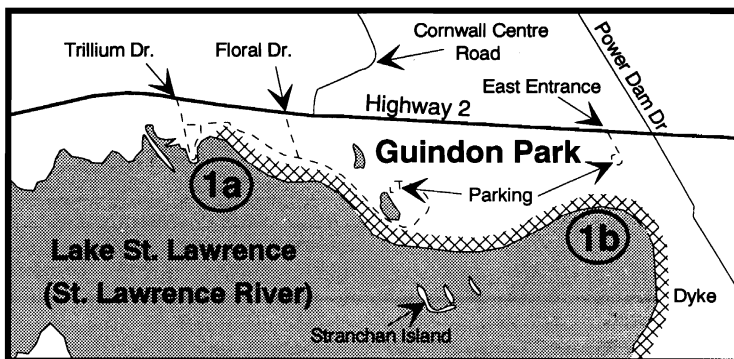


Figure 4.

Guindon Park

(Sites 1a and 1b)

Guindon Park is a large recreational area with many nature trails, cross-country ski trails, a boat launch, and picnic areas (Figure 4). From the generating station, retrace the route to Vincent Massey Drive (Highway 2). Turn left and drive to the sign at the western entrance of the park and turn left on Trillium Drive. Follow this road to the boat launch (Site 1a) which provides an excellent view of the headpond. Check for roosting gulls in the field. The most common ones will be Ring-billed, Herring, and Great Black-backed, but Iceland, Glaucous, and Thayer's are regular visitors during the fall and early winter. Also watch for Lesser Black-backed Gulls. Scan the open fields during the fall and along the gravel roads in winter for Gray Partridge.

If you have a lot of time and energy, follow the dyke along the water's edge, from site 1a to 1b, as there are many bays and inlets that cannot be seen from the boat launch. With the rocky shoreline along the dyke, this is a good area for Purple Sandpiper from mid-October to mid-November. Anything is possible! On

the 1990 Massena-Cornwall C.B.C., a Northern Hawk Owl and a Gyrfalcon were observed. Stranchar Island should be checked for Ruddy Turnstone, Sanderling, Red-necked Phalarope and other shorebirds. During the breeding season, the island is occupied by nesting Ring-billed Gulls and Double-crested Cormorants. On 3 May 1991, an adult Great Cormorant was observed on the island with the other cormorants.

Continue by traveling east on Highway 2 to the east entrance of Guindon Park (Site 1b). From the parking lot you can see the dyke at a distance. Follow the trails to the dyke. (For a complete review of species, see Site 5b.)

Robert H. Saunders Generating Station

(Site 2a and 2b; Figure 5)

Proceed to the gate house and inquire whether access is permitted to the parking lot and observation deck. These are the best two vantage points to bird the dam. If access is denied, park in the western parking lot and walk up the embankment to view the headpond (Site 2b) or follow the fence line on the east side of the

gatehouse to the edge of the river and view the base of the power dam (Site 2a). You can also walk along the bicycle path which runs parallel to the river and stop at various spots to scan for birds below the power dam. (See Site 5 for details about the birds).

Birding the American Side of the Moses-Saunders Power Dam

Birders from the Toronto and Kingston region, take 401 east to Cornwall and visitors coming from the Montreal area, take 401 west to Cornwall. Exit on Highway 138 (Brookdale Avenue) and proceed south through the town of Cornwall

to the bridge to the United States. *The first bridge leads to the Akwesasne Indian Reservation on Cornwall Island, and a toll of \$2.25 (either US or Canadian) is collected upon entry and return. The second bridge is the border into the United States. After U.S. customs, proceed south to the traffic circle and take the first right onto Haverstock Road which leads to the Reynold's Aluminum Plant, the first stop on the route.

Visitors from Ottawa head east on Highway 417 for 60 kilometres to Highway 138. Travel 45 kilometres south on 138 to Cornwall and continue south until you reach the signs for the bridge to the United States (then proceed as above *).

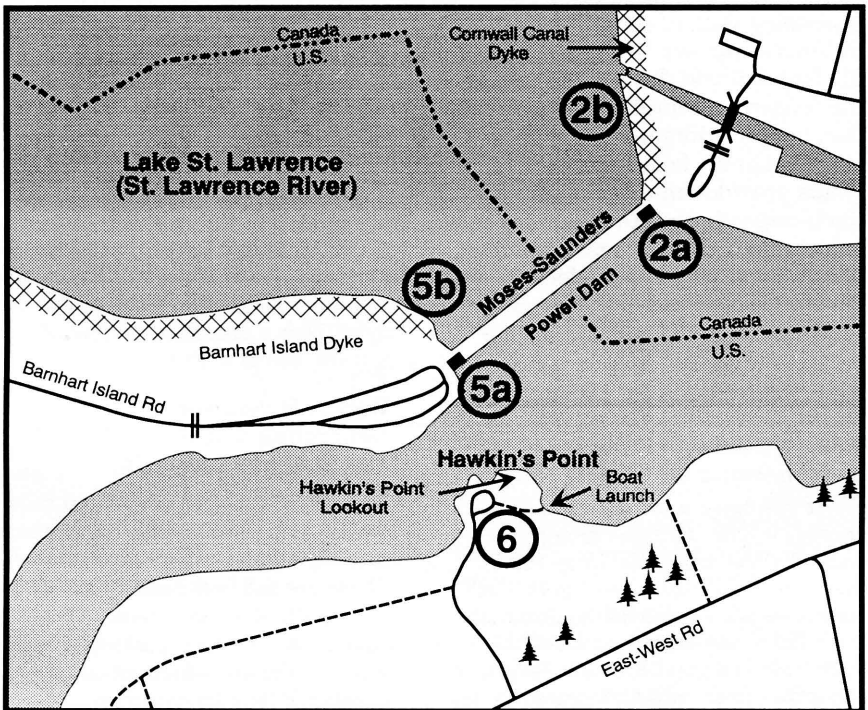


Figure 5.

Reynold's Aluminum Plant

(Site 3; Figure 6)

Follow Haverstock Road past the Reynold's Plant and over the railroad tracks. At this point the road curves to the left and you can park anywhere along the guard rail to view the channel and banks of Cornwall Island directly across the river. The best time to check this area is from November through March. Depending on ice conditions, December, January, and February are those with the highest concentrations of waterbirds (the more ice, the more birds but only up to a certain point -- too much drives them away). As this section of the river remains open during the winter, it provides a good location for roosting waterbirds. Common Goldeneyes and Common Mergansers are the most abundant winter ducks. However, carefully check for occasional wintering Barrow's Goldeneyes, Buffleheads, Greater Scaups, Canvasbacks, Oldsquaws, Red-breasted Mergansers, and Hooded Mergansers. During the winter of 1990-91, an immature male Harlequin Duck overwintered until 3 March 1991. On the Massena-Cornwall Christmas Bird Count of 23 December 1990, a female King Eider was observed at this location. Remember to watch along the breakwall for Snowy Owls in the winter and cormorants in the fall. During early fall, it is also worthwhile to check for Bonaparte's Gulls and Little Gulls that frequently feed along this channel.

Once you have checked this area, continue west along Haverstock Road. From late fall through winter, investigate the tangles of grape vines along the road for American Robins, Bohemian Waxwings and roosting

Northern Saw-whet Owls. Upon entering the open fields and woodlots, look for Northern Shrikes, Snow Buntings and overwintering Northern Flickers as they frequent this area. Also watch for Red-tailed and Rough-legged Hawks, American Kestrels, Gray Partridge, Horned Larks, and occasional Lapland Longspurs, particularly if manure has been recently spread in the farm fields. After passing the farm, take the first right, and follow South Grass River Road. Don't forget to check the residential feeders. Watch for American Tree Sparrows, Common Redpolls, Evening Grosbeaks, Mourning Doves, and overwintering blackbirds, particularly Red-winged Blackbirds, Brown-headed Cowbirds, and Common Grackles.

At the stop sign, turn right onto Trippany Road and proceed to the dead-end sign where you turn left towards Highway 37 (Figure 3). At this junction, turn right onto 37 and continue to Route 131, located directly across from the St. Lawrence Shopping Centre. Turn right and continue on 131, the main road crossing over the Grass River. Watch for Bohemian Waxwings and Common Redpolls during the winter, and in the fall, check any pine plantations along this route for wintering owls.

Continue along Eisenhower Lock Road (formerly Route 131) passing beneath the Eisenhower Lock which is the boundary to Robert Moses State Park. Go past the Information Centre, cross over Barnhart Island Bridge, and take the first left. This is also a good area to listen for Eastern Screech Owl at dusk or dawn. Three were heard along this stretch on 18 December 1993 and 16 February 1995.

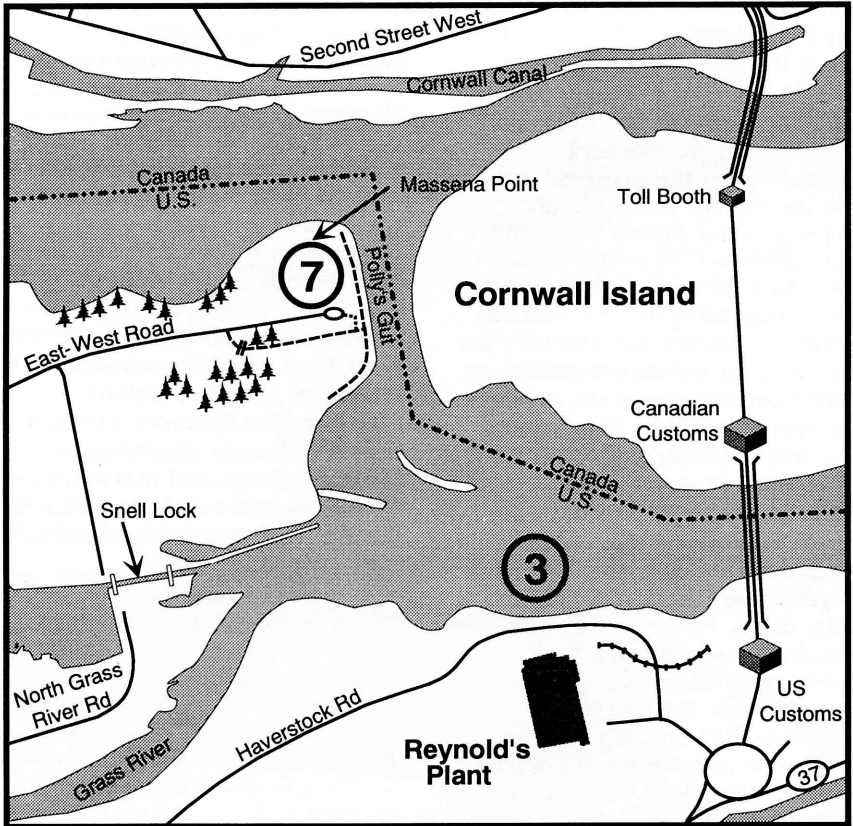


Figure 6.

The Marina/Beach

(Site 4; Figure 3)

Proceed north to the marina/boat launch area. From this vantage point, scan the open water for loons, grebes, cormorants, diving ducks, and gulls. As the water is frozen in the winter, the most advantageous time to bird this area is during the fall and early winter. Check the islands off the marina for Snowy Owls which can be found on exposed rocks. Also check the islands for roosting Bald Eagles. To exit this area, turn left onto

Barnhart Island Road to RMPD. A variety of species, including Bohemian Waxwing, Pine Grosbeak, and American Robin can be found feeding on the oriental crabapple trees along this stretch of road. One of the few New York State recorded Sage Thrashers was found feeding in these trees at the entrance to the dam on 27 December 1971, the date of the first Massena-Cornwall Christmas Bird Count.

Robert Moses Power Dam

(Site 5a; Figure 5)

Once through the dam's main gate, proceed to the parking lot. You can view the river from the parking lot and from the observation deck on the top floor of the power dam. It is highly recommended that both viewing sites be checked.

Over the years, the RMPD has hosted an impressive total of 16 species of gulls and four species of terns. Gull and tern numbers begin to increase in mid-August, and consist mainly of Ring-billed and Bonaparte's Gulls and Common Terns. Carefully scan below the dam for Little Gulls which appear anytime from early August on. In September, there is a general increase in gull numbers as the first migrants move through the area. At this time, Bonaparte's Gull numbers can range anywhere from 100 to 1000. Although not a frequent visitor, the Sabine's Gull is a good possibility during the latter part of September, most often observed feeding below the dam. Little Gull numbers generally peak at the end of the month. Eight were observed on 30 September 1990 and six on 25 September 1991. Common Tern numbers peak in late September and early October. Usually numbering in the hundreds, this species can be found actively feeding below the dam or sitting on the dam structure itself. Also watch for Arctic Terns which have been observed twice during early October, feeding amongst the Common Terns. Black Terns are regular visitors in August to mid-September. Also watch for an occasional Caspian Tern migrating during the early fall.

October marks the increase in the

numbers of larger gulls such as the Great Black-backed, Herring, and Ring-billed Gulls. Carefully check through the gulls as they feed on the water or rest on the power dam structure. With the influx of the larger gulls, an occasional Lesser Black-backed Gull may be found. Patience can be rewarded as the first New York State recorded Mew Gull was found feeding below the dam on 4 and 5 October 1986. Subsequent observations have been made on 27 December 1992 and 26 November 1994. The California Gull, another western rarity was also found feeding in this same area on 23 October 1990. Franklin's Gull has only been recorded once at this site with a first winter plumage bird present from 12 September to 24 October 1986. Black-legged Kittiwakes are rare but regular visitors to the dam in small numbers. Usually one to three birds can be found feeding below the dam during November and occasionally in late October. Carefully scan the large raft of Ring-billed Gulls resting on the water for first winter Black-legged Kittiwakes. The majority of Kittiwakes recorded are first-winter birds, but on 6 November 1986, two adult Black-legged Kittiwakes were observed feeding below the dam.

A significant fluctuation in gull numbers occurs during November and December, depending on weather conditions. If temperatures during late fall are cold, the Bonaparte's Gulls will as a rule have migrated out of the area. If the conditions are mild, this gull will remain though in reduced numbers. Carefully check the flocks of 'bonys' for Common Black-headed Gull as they have been recorded four times, three of which were in November. All birds were

adults in winter plumage feeding below the dam. Ring-billed Gulls follow a similar pattern to that of the Bonaparte's. They tend, however, to linger in the power dam area longer, sometimes into late December. Numbers in the fall usually range from 1000 to 5000 birds, whereas in December, if conditions are favourable a few hundred may remain. Early November also marks the arrival of the "white-winged gulls". Two northern species, the Glaucous and Iceland Gulls usually appear at the dam site at about the same time, in response to the freezing of lakes farther north. As the season progresses, their numbers increase. Record numbers are generally noted in January or February with a high count of 67 Iceland Gulls on 6 February 1991 and 53 Glaucous Gulls on 3 February 1992. It's interesting to note that no two years are the same. Data gathered over the past 10 years have shown that either species can outnumber the other, with no single factor controlling this fluctuation. Another "white-winged gull", the Thayer's Gull, is a rare but regular visitor, appearing anytime between early November and late February. With usually only one bird found each season, one must scrutinize the flocks of Herring Gulls to locate this elusive gull. Great Black-backed and Herring Gulls are regular winter residents at the power dam. Their numbers also vary with weather conditions, particularly when severe cold hits the area as this can reduce numbers of a few thousand to a few hundred overnight. There is only one record of the Ivory Gull, an immature found off Hawkin's Point on 8 December 1977 and 13 January 1978. More sightings of this species

are definitely overdue!

Depending on weather conditions, by late February or early March the diversity of species decreases rapidly as wintering gulls move north or down to the Gulf of St. Lawrence and are replaced by thousands of Ring-billed Gulls which breed on numerous islands above the power dam.

Lake St. Lawrence/Headpond (Site 5b; Figure 5)

From the observation platform at the RMPD, survey the headpond located above the dam. This area can be very rewarding from August through to early January. Two of the rarest birds have been a Marbled Murrelet (11-13 October 1993) and a juvenile Atlantic Puffin (14-16 October 1994). Lake St. Lawrence is usually frozen by January and occasionally as early as mid-December. This location can net a variety of species, most notable being the Red-throated Loon, Red-necked and Horned Grebes, Brant, White-winged, Surf and Black Scoters, all of which can be found during October and November. A Parasitic Jaeger was observed roosting on the water on 15 September 1991 and, on 11 November 1989, three immature Pomarine Jaegers spent the afternoon feeding and resting in this area. The observation deck is also a good location for hawk watching. Regular migrants included Red-tailed, Rough-legged, Red-shouldered, Cooper's and Sharp-shinned Hawks. Bald and Golden Eagles, Peregrine Falcon and Merlin are occasionally observed. From late December through mid-March, overwintering Bald Eagles from the Ivy Lea Bridge area, west of Brockville, wander

downriver to the open water at the dam in search of food. During late fall and winter watch for Snowy Owls resting on the power dam structure or sitting out on the ice.

Hawkin's Point Lookout

(Site 6; Figure 5)

Retrace the route taken to the power dam. After crossing Barnhart Island Bridge, turn left on East-West Road at the Information Centre. Follow east along this road checking the pine plantation on the left for owls, finches, Ruffed Grouse, Red-breasted Nuthatches and Golden-crowned Kinglets. At the transmission line towers, 3.8 kilometres from the turnoff, turn right onto the dirt road which leads to two ponds. A variety of waterfowl can be found here, but most notable were the 500 Redheads and 350 Ring-necked Ducks viewed on 3 November 1991. During the late fall and early winter the berry and fruit trees along this road are a haven for Bohemian Waxwings, wintering American Robins and Pine Grosbeaks. Carefully check any flock of robins because a male Varied Thrush was found feeding with a small group of 17 robins on 15 January 1991. Towards mid-winter and early spring, Ruffed Grouse can be observed just before dusk "budding" in nearby poplar or aspen trees. It is also during this time that Northern Shrikes can be found perched high in the deciduous trees. At the 4-kilometre point, turn left at the sign to the boat launch. During winters of heavy snowfall, the road leading to Hawkin's Point may be inaccessible. Under these conditions it is best to walk to the point, a distance of about one kilometre from

the turnoff. Located directly across the channel from the dam, the lookout site provides one of the best vantage points for birding. From this location thoroughly check the base of the dam as well as down river towards the bridge. A few Red Phalaropes have been recorded here during October. All gulls and terns highlighted in the section under RMPD can be seen here as well. The sheltered bay, just east of the lookout, is a good spot for wintering ducks and gulls. Scan the roosting American Black Ducks and Mallards for other unusual visitors, such as an occasional Green-winged Teal, Gadwall, or Northern Pintail. Snowy Owls are sometimes found during the winter resting on the ice or along the shore. Viewing from Hawkin's Point is at its best during late fall and winter. Diving duck numbers begin to increase during early fall and by mid-November thousands and sometimes as many as 10,000 Common Mergansers may converge on the area below the dam and in the bay. The Harlequin Duck has overwintered here twice and Barrow's Goldeneye is a rare but regular winter visitor. Annually, since 1985, a few Barrow's have been found amongst the 500 to 2,500 overwintering Common Goldeneyes. Storms from the northeast from October to early December have produced a few rarities including an immature Razorbill on 27 November 1987, a juvenile Northern Gannet, that stayed from 22 November to 3 December 1986, and a second Northern Gannet on 3 November 1991.

Loop Road Area

(Site 7; Figure 6)

To reach the loop, exit Hawkin's Point and turn left onto East-West Road. Take the left side of the fork in the road and continue up the hill. From the road, check the bays and inlets for waterfowl and the open fields for Red-tailed and Rough-legged Hawks, American Kestrels and Northern Shrikes. At dusk, watch for Short-eared Owls. The spruce woodlot on the right, about 300 metres from the road, can also be rewarding. During the winter of 1987-88, at least five Northern Saw-whet Owls and one Long-eared Owl were seen roosting there. The dense protection of this sole coniferous lot in the area attracts a variety of finches such as the White-winged Crossbill, and Pine Siskin, as well as Northern Cardinals, Ruffed Grouse, Golden-crowned Kinglets, and the occasional Carolina Wren. The end of the loop marks the entrance to the woods that leads to a number of vantage points, the most accessible being Polly's Gut and Massena Point. Parking along the loop is permitted but do lock all valuables in car trunks as the vantage points are a distance from the road. Polly's Gut is located directly across from the Reynold's Plant, therefore the birds found at the plant can be seen here as well. The advantage of this site is that many of the birds can be observed more closely. From Massena Point on the other hand, you can see many bays and inlets that cannot be observed from other locations. To reach these locations, follow the trail and turn

left at the service road. At the T-junction, turn left towards Massena Point or right towards Polly's Gut. Don't forget to walk through the woods to look for a variety of landbirds. Northern Flickers have been overwintering in this area for the past 10 years and up to five have been found there annually.

Conclusion

It is hoped that this site guide will generate further interest in this region, for much is yet to be learned about the frequency and diversity of species that pass through or winter in this area. For those who get the opportunity to bird the RMPD area, please forward a copy of your observations to the authors.

Acknowledgements

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Editors' Note:

Since receiving the manuscript for the site guide, Bruce Di Labio found two Northern Fulmars and two juvenile Northern Gannets at the RMPD site 5b on 15 December 1994. One of the fulmars was found dead the following day. The other fulmar was again observed flying over the headpond during the Massena-Cornwall CBC 17 December 1994! What next?

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