

# Point Pelee National Park Ontario, Canada

*Remarkably varied habitat and a unique geographic land formation makes Point Pelee one of Canada's best birding parks.*

G. Tom Hince

## Location

Point Pelee National Park: southern Ontario on the north shore of the west end of Lake Erie.

## Description

Point Pelee National Park, with a land area of only 16 km, is the smallest national park in Canada. Yet, the geographic

conformation and extreme southern location in Canada result in an extremely diverse and predominantly transient avifauna.



*The kilometer long marsh boardwalk and tower provide access to Pelee's large marsh. Photo/ D.A. Wilkes.*

Simply put, Point Pelee is probably the best migrant trap in inland North America. In spring, the peninsula juts far into the lake with an offering of food and shelter to tired migrants. In fall, Pelee acts as a funnel concentrating birds and migratory insects from a wide area to the north at the renowned tip. Though Pelee is famous for colorful spring migrants, in fall the waves of birds are equally spectacular though more challenging to observe and identify.

In addition to playing a major role in the Park's geography, Lake Erie has strong climatic effects on the peninsula's ecology. In spring, the moderating influence of the lake retards the growth of vegetation, affording great opportunities to see colorful migrants. In fall, birds can skulk in greenery several weeks later than in areas just a few miles to the north. Prevailing winds from Erie's western basin provide cooling relief from summer heat. In winter, the same winds drive across ice, not water, sometimes transforming light snowfalls into blizzards that kill many small landbirds.

The dominant factor attracting migrants to Pelee is the landform, but there are other factors, such as the fantastically varied character of the park. Five distinct biotic communities and a myriad of gradations in between cater to diverse avian needs. Adjacent lands in the Pelee Birding Area (CBC circle including Wheatley and Leamington) supplement this by offering additional habitats. The almost total absence of trees to the north (only 3% of the county is forested) further enhances the park's hold on migrants.

The largest community by area (2/3) is freshwater marsh, but diversity here is relatively low. Roughly half is a homogeneous cattail (*Typha* sp.) mat, the rest consists of large ponds filled with a variety of emergent and floating aquatics. The western and southern edges of the marsh blend into land through Buttonbush (*Cephalanthus occidentalis*) and Loosestrife (*Decodon verticillatus*) associations.

Forested communities are of two basic types: wetland and dryland. The dryland forest is very strongly dominated by Hackberry (*Celtis occidentalis*) with many species such as Red Oak (*Quercus rubra*) and Black Walnut (*Juglans nigra*) interspersed. This is the most common and widespread terrestrial association. A 'northern' variation has White Pine (*Pinus strobus*) and Eastern Hophornbeam (*Ostrya virginiana*) as major ele-



A spring migrant's view of Pelee from over Lake Erie. The attraction is obvious. Photo/D.A. Wilkes.

ments, but is restricted to the west and central areas of the park.

The wetland forest on the southeast of Pelee provides an excellent site for observing turtles, including the rare Spotted Turtle (*Clemmys guttata*), as well as White-tailed Deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*) and many birds. It is typified by a series of parallel scrubby ridges with relatively open sparsely wooded sloughs between. Dutch Elm disease started a domino affect which toppled most of the large canopy trees into the sloughs. Silver Maple (*Acer saccharinum*) and Sycamore (*Platanus occidentalis*) are major elements.

Old cottage sites throughout the park (200 or more) and beach/forest interfaces provide room for another interesting community. This habitat, termed cedar-savannah-field, is largely open grassy expanses with Cedar (*Juniperus virginia*) and sumac (*Rhus* sp.) thickets. It is here that Prickly Pear Cactus (*Opuntia humifusa*) can be found.

Ringed the mosaic of marsh, forest and fields is a continuous 20 kilometer stretch of sand beach, whose highest reaches are dominated by Hop-trees (*Ptelea trifoliata*).

A diverse avifauna is not the only result of this complex of communities. The park boasts over 750 species of flora, including 60 or more that are provincially or nationally rare. Herptiles include eight species of turtles and the quite local Fox Snake (*Elaphe vulpina*), which is a rattle-snake mimic. There are no poisonous

snakes in the park but Poison Ivy (*Rhus radicans*) is abundant and widespread. Among mammals, the high density of Eastern Moles (*Scalopus aquaticus*) is not equalled anywhere else in Canada.

Timing is a critical aspect of any Pelee birding trip. The peak (diversity) in spring is usually between May 7th and 22nd, but excellent movements have been seen from mid-April to early June. A fall visit should be given serious consideration by experienced birders who like less congested vacations. Fall migration is more prolonged, with the following highlights: insect-eating passerines (mid to late Aug.), Monarch Butterflies (*Danaus plexipus*) (Sept.), accipiters (mid to late Sept.), Peregrine Falcons (*Falco peregrinus*) (late Sept. to early Oct.), Blue Jays (*Cyanocitta cristata*) and hardier passerines (early to mid Oct.), waterfowl and gulls (mid Oct. to mid Nov.). While Pelee has some interesting breeding and wintering species, it is clearly best during migration.

#### Access

The nearest major airports to Pelee are Detroit (2 hrs.) Windsor (1 hr.), London (2 hrs.) and Toronto (4 hrs.). A full range of car rentals and accommodations are available at all these cities. To reach Pelee from Detroit, cross into Canada at the Ambassador Bridge. Take Highway 3 East from Windsor to Leamington and follow the national park signs. From To-



*The Prothonotary Warbler is a rare but regular sight. Photo/J.R. Graham.*

ronto or London take Highway 401 West to Highway 77 South (Leamington exit) and follow the national park signs.

Express bus and rail lines also service these major cities. Chatham (1 hr.) has express rail and local bus service. Leamington, the nearest community, is serviced only by local bus lines. However, car rental agencies, ferry service from Ohio (seasonal), 24-hour grocery and convenience stores, a 24-hour gas station, a hospital and numerous other services are available here.

Entry to the park is charged on a per vehicle basis (pedestrians/bicyclists free). A daily permit is \$4.00 (Can.), but for longer visits the \$10.00 (Can.) yearly permit is best. The park is open from 6am

to 10pm throughout the year, but during a three week period in May birders can enter at 5am. From April to August and on fall weekends a free transit service takes visitors from the center to the tip (no private vehicles). Hours of operation are usually 9-9, but in May service starts at 6am.

Two notes of caution. The southern parking areas (visitor center, west beach) regularly reach their capacity on mid-May weekends. It is essential to be at the park as early as possible to get a good parking spot. The entire park occasionally reaches capacity (1000 cars) and may close for several hours before vehicles can enter again (mid-May only). The bridge or tunnel between Windsor and

Detroit often have queues lasting over an hour. More than one birder has missed a flight because of this!

### Accommodations

If a visit for May is planned, accommodations should be secured *at least six months in advance*. There are a dozen motels within a half hour drive of the park, but most are booked solidly in May. Late planners will likely have to settle for lodgings as far afield as Chatham or Windsor. A number of good bed and breakfast lodgings are available in the Leamington area. Peak season rates (\$35-80 Can.) are charged in May.

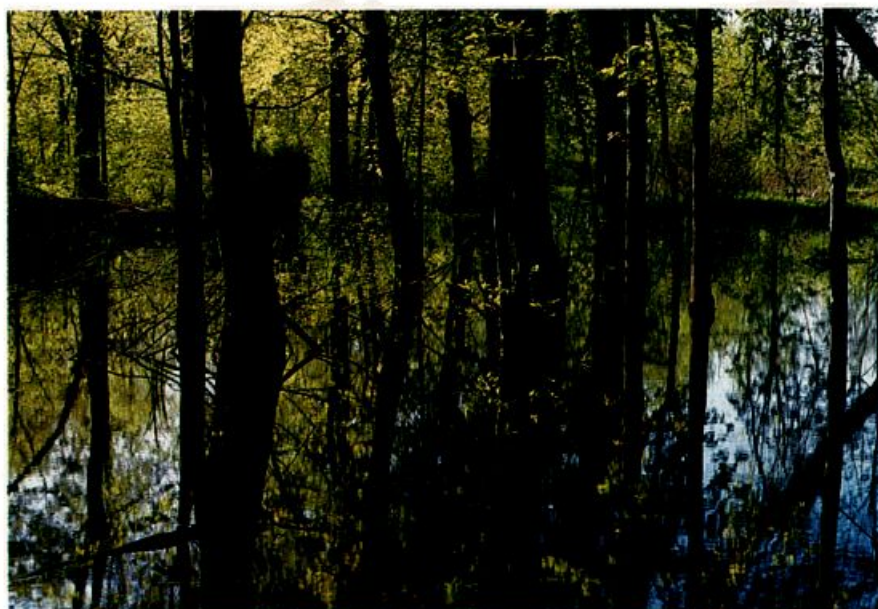
Only group camping is allowed in the park. Groups must be nonprofit registered organizations with objectives compatible with those of the park. There are two limited service sites with capacities of 30 individuals each (20 tents—no trailers).

There are three provincial parks and six private campgrounds within an hour of Pelee. Rondeau Provincial Park (1 hr) has excellent spring birding, superb scenery and very few birders. Wheatley Provincial Park (20 min.) is close to Pelee, but does not open until May 10th. Holiday Beach Provincial Park (1 hr) opens later still (May 15th), but in fall offers truly spectacular raptor and diurnal migrant flights. (See page 32 this issue.)

More detailed information on accommodations and group campground bookings are available by writing: Superintendent, Point Pelee National Park, R.R.#1, Leamington, ONT N8H 3V4 Canada. The Park telephone number is (519) 322-2365.

### General information

An average of 75,000 visitors (nearly all birders) pass through the park gates in May alone. As a result, park personnel have strong management concerns due to the tiny land area and heavy use of the park. They have developed a management plan called "Operation Spreadout" to help give visitors a higher quality experience in the park. This includes providing information on: outside park birding areas, the potential consumptive nature (*e.g.*, floral trampling) of birder activities, and gaining access to private habitats outside the park. Please assist them while in the park by obeying all CLOSED FOR REGENERATION trail signs.



*The wetland forest is an excellent area in which to look for waterthrushes. Photo/D.A. Wilkes.*

The park also provides extensive birding information and interpretative programs, including an expert birder service in May. The visitor center is open 10-5 daily with early morning hours for several weeks in May (8-6 weekdays, 6-6 weekends). A sightings book with up-to-date bird records is also located here. The Nature Nook bookstore at the center provides a wide selection of field guides, birding gear, film and even binocular rentals for the forgetful!

May visitors should plan for cold weather in the first two weeks of the month. A heavy jacket, headwear and gloves are especially recommended for dawn trips to the Tip.

### Birding

Because the park avifauna is mostly transient, birding is very dependent on the progress of migration. On some occasions, there are distinct hot spots, while at other times activity seems high everywhere or occasionally low everywhere! The following accounts are, therefore, occasionally optimistic but as a whole accurate. All status references are for the peak of *spring* migration unless otherwise noted.

### The Tip

The extreme tip of the park is a focal point of bird activity. It is best in the morning. Birders generally pick a spot on the beach just past the end of the tip trail. Roosting gulls, terns and ducks congregate on the tip and offshore waters. A scan of the Bonaparte's Gulls (*Larus philadelphia*) and larger gulls will produce Caspian (*Sterna caspia*), Common (*S. hirundo*) and Forster's (*S. forsteri*) terns, often a Little Gull (*L. minutus*) and rarely a Franklin's (*L. pipixan*) or Laughing (*L. atricilla*) gull. In late May flocks of Whimbrel (*Numenius phaeopus*) often join the small groups of Dunlin (*Calidris alpina*), Sanderling (*C. alba*) and Ruddy Turnstones (*Arenaria interpres*) on the beach. Few waterfowl species occur in the offshore waters but up to 50,000 Red-breasted Mergansers (*Mergus serrator*) feed near the tip both spring and fall.

The sky is often full of blackbirds, warblers, woodpeckers, orioles and other passerines which are heading *south*! This phenomenon is called reverse migration and is apparently a response to the retarded development of spring vegetation. It affords an excellent chance to learn iden-



Pt. Pelee is an excellent place to catch a glimpse of the scarce and secretive Henslow's Sparrow. Photo/J.R. Graham.

tification on-the-wing. Rarities such as Summer Tanager (*Piranga rubra*), Blue Grosbeak (*Guiraca caerulea*) and Scissor-tailed Flycatcher (*Tyrannus forficatus*) have all been seen.

In fall, thousands of Blue Jays, Sharpshinned Hawks (*Accipiter striatus*) and other raptors fill the sky. An estimated 50 plus Peregrines pass the tip each fall and chances of good views are excellent.

The area between the tip and the north end of the transit loop could produce virtually any landbird on the park list. Be cautious, but keep an open mind, rarities such as Virginia's Warbler (*Vermivora virginiae*), Hermit Warbler (*Dendroica occidentalis*) and Cassin's Sparrow (*Aimophila cassinii*) have occurred. Walking the tip trail, train loop road and sea-

sonal birding trails should run up about 20 warbler species, a variety of flycatchers, vireos, thrushes, Scarlet Tanager (*Piranga olivacea*), Indigo Bunting (*Passerina cyanea*) and other passerines. Whatever is moving that day, they are sure to be found in this area. Later in May the trails often have both cuckoos, Connecticut (*Oporornis agilis*) and Mourning (*O. philadelphia*) warblers. The warblers are usually detected by song, and observation requires patient *slow* stalking.

If it is sunny or windy, one side of the tip will often have substantially more activity. After birding the tip, the snack bar at the transit dropoff is a popular spot. This is a good spot to meet other birders, socialize, and share the morning's sightings.



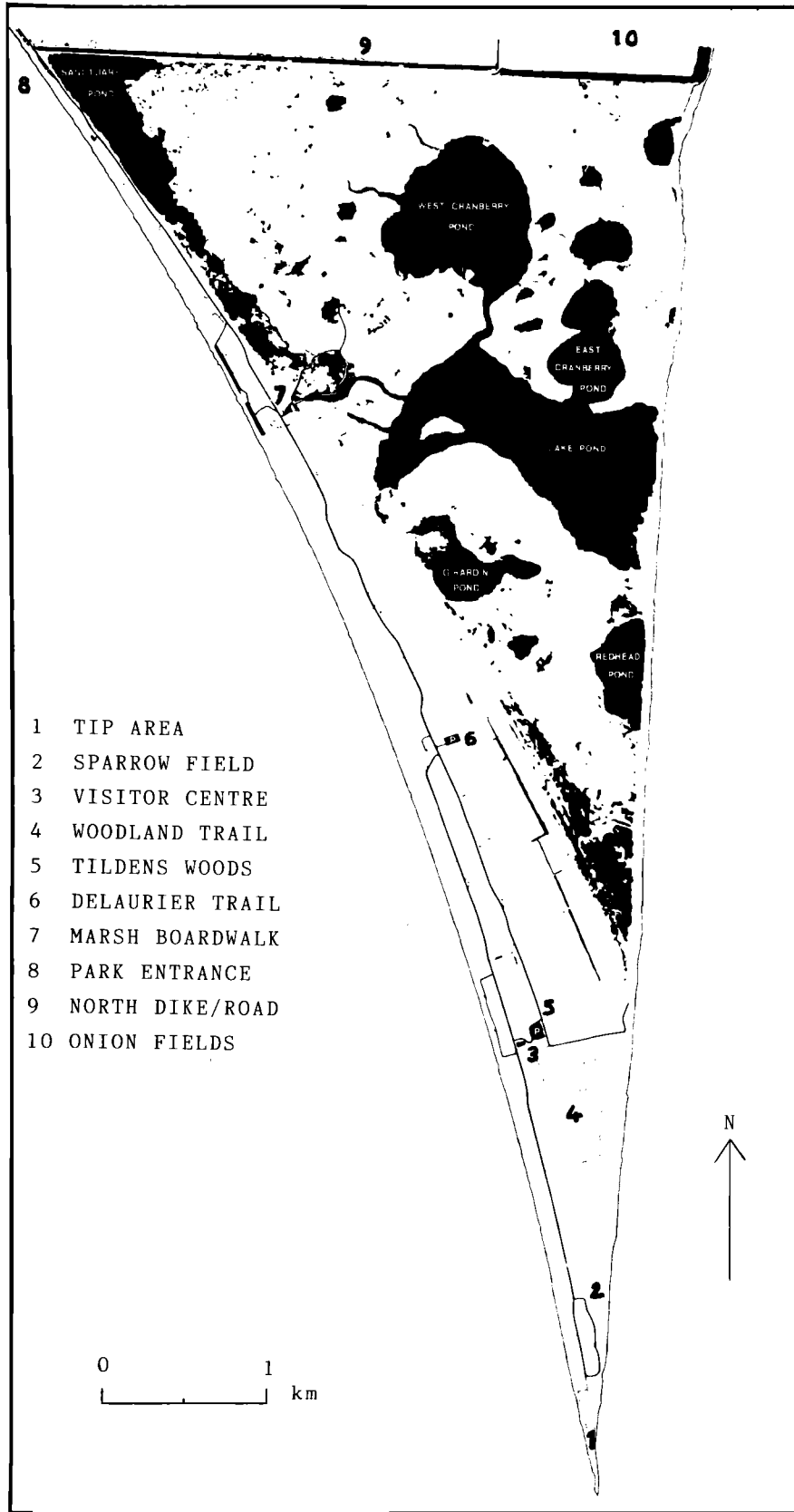
Among the congregation of birders, rarities can also be found. Here, Roger Tory Peterson accompanied by his wife, Virginia Marie Peterson, leads a group of birders on the tip road. Photo/J.R. Graham.

Working north, the grassy edges of the train loop and the "sparrow field" can be productive for field species. Walk the field slowly and thoroughly for Grasshopper (*Ammodramus savannarum*), LeConte's (*A. lecontei*) and Clay-colored (*Spizella pallida*) sparrows, all of which are rare but regular. This is one of the few places where excellent views of Henslow's Sparrow (*A. henslowii*) can be obtained. The scrubby edges of the sparrow field can have Sedge Wren (*Cistothorus platensis*) and White-eyed Vireo (*Vireo griseus*) is regular.

Though the tip area is intensely birded in morning, few observers go there later in the day. The extreme tip can be worth checking at any time, especially towards evening.

### Woodland Trail/Visitor Center

The parking lot at the center is a good site to look for raptors and diurnal movement. On days with a strong north wind, this is a good place to spend some time just scanning, as Mississippi Kite (*Ictinia mississippiensis*), American Swallow-tailed Kite (*Elanoides forficatus*) and Black Vulture (*Coragyps atratus*) have all passed this spot. Going south from the center, the woodland trail crosses a variety of habitats which provide good birding. The west arm of the trail has Mayapple (*Podophyllum peltatum*) patches which are a favorite haunt of Lincoln's Sparrow (*Melospiza lincolni*), Ovenbird (*Seiurus aurocapillus*) and Kentucky (*Oporornis formosus*), Connecticut and Mourning warblers. If you watch the plants carefully for movement, your patience may be rewarded. Look to the east on this section of trail for fallen cedars and thick understory, favored spots for Golden-winged (*Vermivora chrysoptera*) and Blue-winged (*V. pinus*) warblers at about eye level. As the trail winds around to the east it reaches the wetland forest Green-backed Heron (*Butorides striatus*), Solitary Sandpiper (*Tringa solitaria*) and Northern Waterthrush (*Seiurus noveboracensis*) occur in the sloughs. In the last half of August this area can literally be alive with hundreds of warblers, vireos and flycatchers. As you loop back towards the center, you cross through scrubby habitats which, if worked slowly, can produce thrushes, wrens, sparrows, White-eyed Vireo and sometimes Connecticut Warbler. The visitor center where the trail starts and ends is an excellent resource which should be visited



Key to location of recommended birding sites at Point Pelee. Illustration/Parks Canada.

## Tilden's Woods

Tilden's Woods is one of the few relatively mature forest areas in the park. To reach it go to the northeast corner of the center parking lot and cross the road. Follow the seasonal birding trail signs into a productive combination of wetland forest in sloughs and dryland forest on ridges. Hooded (*Wilsonia citrina*), Kentucky and Worm-eating (*Helmitheros vermivorus*) warblers are rare but worth looking for along the dry ridges. The canopy is a good place for Cerulean Warbler (*Dendroica cerulea*), Yellow-throated Vireo (*Vireo flavifrons*) and Blue-Gray Gnatcatcher (*Poliophtila caerulea*). The sloughs have Green-backed Heron, both water thrushes and often Prothonotary Warbler (*Protonotaria citrea*) in the big pond at the north end. The scrubby northern edge of the woods is very good for White-eyed Vireo and Yellow-breasted Chat (*Icteria virens*), which is secretive but vocal.

## Delaurier Trail and adjacent fields

This trail provides good opportunities to see open field and scrub species. It is a nice site to picnic and also scan the sky for raptors and Turkey Vulture (*Cathartes aura*). The grassy parking lot edges can harbor an excellent selection of sparrows including Field (*Spizella pusilla*), Savannah (*Passerculus sandwichensis*), White-crowned (*Zonotrichia leucophrys*), White-throated (*Z. albicollis*) and Chipping (*Spizella passerina*), and more rarely Grasshopper, Henslow's and Clay-colored sparrows.

The trail leads through a display and restored homestead portraying early human history of the park. Trees around the buildings are good for Orchard Oriole (*Icterus spurius*), Red-headed Woodpecker (*Melanerpes erythrocephalus*) and Yellow-throated Vireo. Heading southeast along the trail, you pass through scrubby overgrown fields that were once apple orchards. Yellow-breasted Chat, Eastern Meadowlark (*Sturnella magna*), Bobolinks (*Dolichonyx oryzivorus*) and Eastern Bluebird (*Sialia sialis*) might be seen. The eastern edges of the trail are excellent places to listen for both Willow (*Empidonax traillii*) and Alder (*E. alnorum*) flycatchers. Prothonotary Warbler has pleased crowds for several years by nesting next to the observation tower at the northeast corner of the trail.

## Marsh boardwalk

The marsh boardwalk is good for common wetland species such as Marsh Wren (*Cistothorus palustris*), Swamp Sparrow (*Melospiza georgiana*), Common Yellow-throat (*Geothlypis trichas*) and Virginia Rail (*Rallus limicola*) and Sora (*Porzana carolina*). The tower at the base provides a site to scan at dawn and dusk for Black-crowned Night-Herons (*Nycticorax nycticorax*), Northern Harrier (*Circus cyaneus*) and rarely Short-eared Owl (*Asio flammeus*). Least (*Ixobrychus exilis*) and American (*Botaurus lentiginosus*) bitterns and King Rail (*Rallus elegans*) are possible but very rare and irregular on the boardwalk. Please do not use loud or repetitive recordings which might cause birds to desert their territories.

## Park entrance

The narrowing western landbase at the park entrance often collects migrants as they slowly move north out of the park. It is a good site for Cerulean (*Dendroica cerulea*) and Palm (*D. palmarum*) warblers. Rarities such as Summer Tanager and Clay-colored Sparrow are sometimes found along the edges of grassy openings. The large pond adjacent to the entrance may hold Ruddy Ducks (*Oxyura jamaicensis*) and other dabblers.

## Other park areas

All of the park, especially the picnic sites, can provide excellent birding. The best way to plan is to consult the sightings book and share information with other birders.

## Outside park birding areas

Within the Pelee birding area other excellent birding sites exist. Ask at the center for directions to Hillman marsh, Wheatley Harbor and areas further afield. Two excellent sites close to the park are the north dyke and the "onion fields."

The north dyke road can be driven or walked for flocks of warblers and sparrows, Belted Kingfisher (*Ceryle alcyon*), and raptors roosting in the large trees. In fall there is always a good selection of passerines and this is the best local spot for Sharp-tailed Sparrow (*Ammodramus caudacutus*).

The fields on the northeast side of the park are drained marshland, which are now used for onion cultivation. They may contain concentrations of gulls, terns and shorebirds both spring and fall. Large numbers of Ruddy Turnstones, Black-bellied (*Pluvialis squatarola*) and Golden plovers, Dunlins, Whimbrel, Sanderling and dowitchers occur in spring, especially on days of heavy rain. In August and early September, Buff-breasted (*Tryngites subruficollis*) and Upland (*Bartramia longicauda*) sandpipers are regular in small numbers.

## Bird list

A total of 346 species of birds have been recorded in the Pelee Birding Area. Bird checklists are available free of charge from the visitor center. A seasonal status list is available from the Friends of Point Pelee, R.R. #1, Leamington, Ontario for \$0.50 (Can.) per copy.

## Seasonal Rating

Spring (April-June)★★★★  
Summer (July-August)★  
Autumn (September-November)★★★★  
Winter (December-March)★★

—Point Pelee, R.R. #1, Leamington,  
Ontario N8H 3V4

For those readers interested in three additional Canadian site guides published previously in AMERICAN BIRDS, we refer you to: Bird Island, Witless Bay, Newfoundland by William Threlfall in AB (27) 574-575: June 1973; Stanley Park, Vancouver, British Columbia by Brian M. Kautesk in AB (31) 287-291: May 1977; and Pond Inlet, Baffin Island, Northwest Territories by Wayne E. Renaud in AB (35) 132-134: March 1981.