

## **Four men in an R.V : - Birding Ontario & Michigan, May 2008.**

Well it was never going to be easy, four grown men spending two weeks in an elaborate camper van covering some 2000 km in the great Lakes area; however in truth this trip was a joy, yes there were 'niggles' – Flapper 'flapped', Jagger spent too much time in front of the mirror, "Mr Tony" was shockingly domesticated and brother Paul spent far too long in the 'bucket' seat sampling cheap Canadian Gin, but would we do it again..of course we would and plan too in September 2009 at Cape May New Jersey. Travelling in the R.V allowed us flexibility; it proved very economical and meant we could cover the vast distances we had planned without compromising valuable birding time.

We were visiting the best inland area for migrant birds in North America, and for those who haven't visited, the Spring migration along the Great Lakes is something that should be experienced, Pelee was everything we had heard, by its very nature, migration can be a hit and miss affair and we were wise enough to know that we should not arrive expecting the peninsula dripping with Warblers. However on our second day, dawn at 'the tip' greeted us with flocks coming 'in off' and on occasions we didn't know where to look next as every few metres shouts were going up of good birds in almost every area of cover, it was a 'decent' morning by Pelee standards but as first time visitors we found it an awesome experience. Yet Pelee was only three days of this trip and looking back great as it was, we found other areas just as good, Rock Point had potential and we were impressed with the hospitality of the group who run the bird ringing station here, Rondeau located an hour east of Pelee and the largest provincial park in the region not only gave us Prothonotary Warblers, but also one of the best hours birding I can remember at 'Pony Barn' when wave after wave of Warblers and Sparrows moved through an area of woodland no more than 30 m sq. We all enjoyed Long Point-the oldest bird observatory on the continent and thought that Obijbway Park Windsor would warrant more time than the couple of hours we spent there. With hindsight we could have spent 3-4 days at any of the sites mentioned above, but Michigan had to be visited a state with a great variety of habitats and still relatively underwatched. We worked our way along the vast Saginaw Bay visiting Maple River, Fish Point and the Yellow-headed Blackbirds at Nayanquing but it was Tawas Point that really 'fired up' the group, a much smaller, less wooded peninsula than say Pelee, and complete with a working lighthouse, Tawas had the 'feel' of an Spurn or Portland back in the UK. Three days here often in the company of the well known American birder Jon Dunn saw us witness some fabulous migration and without the crowds of Pelee.

Tawas also introduced us to the diner – Big Boy, brunch in this establishment throughout Michigan was a god-send and set us up for the day, excellent value and ridiculously filling. Armed with local gen provided by Jon Dunn we cleaned up in the Grayling area in no time at all and the we all found the Kirtland Warbler Festival enjoyable although a little uncomfortable at times . The Upper Peninsula of Michigan was wild and heavily forested, we would travel mile after mile on empty highways among breathtaking scenery. Tahquamenon Falls saw us face to face with Spruce Grouse in the pines, and Evening Grosbeak with a pint and evening meal, Whitefish Point greeted us with unfavourable weather and was quiet during the day, however seeing owls in the hand during a long evening fully compensated. Back into Ontario and Algonquin was bitterly cold and birding proved hard work, the park had the feel of early April back in the UK, with few newly arrived Warblers and no sign of the hoped for Empids. Our last stop Carden Alvar was tremendous, I wrote in my notebook that the area was reminiscent of Prestwick Carr back in Northumberland , a magical hour at dusk with booming Bitterns, roding Woodcock, calling Sora's, Whip poor Wills, and Saw-Whet Owls and several Common Nighthawks overhead brought a fitting end to the trip.

### **Chris Knox**



Foreword: Chris Knox   Trip Report: Tony Stewart   Images: The Lads

Participants: Chris Knox, Shawn Jagger, Paul Stewart, Tony Stewart

May 7<sup>th</sup> / 8<sup>th</sup> 2008

Departure day was finally here and our much anticipated trip was underway. Tony Stewart travelled out a day early ahead of the rest of the lads. United States and Canadian Insurance companies insist that drivers of R.V's must spend a night in a hotel to reduce the chance of having an accident due to jet lag.

T.S. took a Flybe flight from Newcastle to Gatwick to catch the Canadian Affair / Air Transat flight to Toronto.

Arrived at Gatwick on time to find that my bags had failed to make the carousel, panic ensued as calls were made back to Newcastle to see if they were at the airport. Incredibly, my luggage had fallen off the baggage car and was lying on the main taxi way outside the terminal. Reunited with my bag and swift couple of pints to calm my nerves i checked into the Canadian flight only to find i was three kilo overweight on my luggage allowance. The humourless Official directed me to a fine booth and 15 quid later i was sitting in departures. The Toronto flight departed on time and went very smoothly arriving forty minutes ahead of schedule

Canadian Immigration refused immediate entry and i was directed to an interview room to prove my reasons for visiting were genuine. I produced my hotel & R.V booking confirmations and details of our proposed route. Eventually i was granted entry and took a taxi to the Hotel at Centennial Park situated close to the airport.

### **Centennial Park [N43°39.131 W079°35.488](#)**

The hotel was deliberately chosen as it was very close to the park. After check in i went for a walk in the park, which had a variety of habitats including pond, reed beds, stream, grassland and mature woodland. A brief walk, near to the entrance produced House Finch, Savannah & White-crowned Sparrows, Red-winged Blackbird, American Robin, Double-crested Cormorant. Yellow-rumped Warblers were common and a couple of Yellow Warblers were also present. It began to rain heavily and i called it a day.

After a good night's sleep i was up and out for 05.30 for a pre breakfast walk. The weather was overcast and cold but there were plenty of birds around. Three species of Swallow were seen – 2 Tree Swallows, 6 Northern Rough-winged and 3 Bank Swallows (Sand Martins *Riparia riparia*). On the nearby Golf Course were four Kildeer, a number of Mallard, 6 Canada Geese and Sharp-shinned Hawk. Three more species of Sparrow were present with House, Chipping and Song Sparrow all added to the list. The stream area had six American Goldfinch, Northern Cardinal, Warbling Vireo, Baltimore Oriole, Nashville and a stunning adult male Black and White Warbler. An unexpected Eastern Meadowlark showed well in a nearby meadow.

I made my way back to the hotel as I was to rendezvous with my courtesy lift to take me to the Canadian Affair R.V depot, adding Peregrine Falcon and American Herring Gull as i left the park. I was processed quickly and efficiently at the R.V office and soon i was on my way back to Centennial Park. This was where the lads would be dropped off an hour or so later.



The lads arrived safely and a quick walk around the park enabled them to catch up with the local bird population to kick start their own lists new birds added included a stunning Magnolia Warbler, Palm Warbler and several Black-capped Chickadee.

We left Toronto and headed south taking the 403 to Hamilton then onto Niagara Falls and an evening meal at an all you could eat curry house. Niagara was over commercialised but well worth a stop. The base of the falls has a huge Gull colony mainly Ring-billed & American Herring. We left Niagara and took the 140 to Welland then the 58 to Port Colbourne and onto our first campsite of the trip – The Highland RV Park at Rock Point. Final ticks of the day were Blue Gray Gnatcatcher, House Finch and Black-capped Chickadee.

Home for the Holiday – the 7 berth beast

Friday 9<sup>th</sup> May

### **Rock Point National Park & the Bird Banding Station [N42°50:49 W79°32:52](#)**

Rock Point and environs comprises of a large Carolinian forest park on the shores of Lake Eerie, with a mixture of Shagbark, Hickory, Black Locust, Staghorn Sumac, Blue Beech and Bur Oak, habitats also includes great beaches, rocky shorelines, sand dunes and a series of wetlands. The Haldimand Bird Observatory approved the formation of Rock Point Banding Station in 1999 and this was to be the focal Point of our visit to the park. The Banding Station is run by James Smith and his wife and our visit coincided with an opening day.

We arrived at the park at 07.00 to find the park gates locked with signs indicating that opening time was 07.30. We explored the area around the entrance and soon located a pair of Downy Woodpecker, Veery, Eastern Phoebe and Black-throated Blue Warbler, Yellow Warblers seemed to be everywhere and this stunning bird was quickly consigned to the "pay no attention to folder".

Once inside the park we parked up and slowly made our way to the peninsula. The shoreline held Bonaparte's, Ring-billed, American Herring Gulls and 2 Greater Black-backed Gulls. Other birds included 6 noisy Caspian Terns and lots of Common Terns. A raft of approximately 100 Red-breasted Merganser was close inshore with a single Goosander. Also on the 'sea' were 10 Buffleheads, 4 Lesser Scaup, and 50+ Swallow species (mainly Barn Swallow) hawked insects with a lone Purple Martin. Kildeer were nesting on shore with one bird adopting the classic broken wing posture to lead us away from its nest. The point also had male and female Northern Cardinal, Belted Kingfisher, singing Savannah Sparrow and 1 probable Grey-cheeked Thrush, a handful of White-throated Sparrow, Ruby-crowned Kinglet and a flyover American Woodcock were also seen.

At the visitors centre there were Song Sparrow, 3 Baltimore Orioles, Warbling Vireo, Red-bellied Woodpecker, Nashville Warbler and a Sand Martin. We eventually arrived at the banding station where we met Jim and his wife both were very welcoming and seemed pleased to have us visit. There were plenty of noisy Blue Jays in the vicinity of the station and the first net round produced White-crowned Sparrow, Common Crackle and Grey Catbird. Sadly subsequent bags failed to produce the much hoped for Spring Warblers.



Ruby-crowned Kinglet & Grey Catbird & James Smith

We birded around the station and saw lots of Turkey Vultures, Northern Harrier, Red-tailed Hawk and a pair of Cooper's hawk. A stunning Male Chestnut-sided Warbler showed well and a Virginia Rail called loudly from the reed beds. At Rock Point Gravel Pits there 20+ Caspian Tern, 5 Great Blue Herons, 8 Least Sandpipers, 2 Lesser Scaup and 4 Buffleheads.



Red-winged Blackbird & Chestnut-sided Warbler



We left Rock Point late morning and headed off to Dunneville for lunch. Lunch was taken at the fabulously named Johnny Rottens Eatery and served by the gorgeous Annie. After Lunch we headed to Jarvis on route 3 & then took route 6 to Port Dover. The 24/42 took us into Port Rowan enroute we noted many Turkey Vultures, several Red-tailed Hawk and a single Sharp-shinned Hawk dashed across the highway.

At Port Rowan we stopped at the water tower where there were several Baltimore Orioles and two Orchard Orioles and 20 Purple Martins were overhead. We made our way to the Canadian Bird Study Centre built close to a large tract of water and a sewage farm. The centre's Pond held Eastern Willet, Ruddy Duck, Great Blue Heron and 5 Least Sandpipers. The sewage farm was relatively quiet and held only two Spotted Sandpipers and a Ruddy Duck. Consolation was provided by the nest box scheme for Tree Swallows providing excellent close views.



Tree Swallow

We then took route 59 and headed towards our next major birding destination of Long Point. We stopped at Big Creek to view the huge expanse of wetlands and reed beds. There were lots of now familiar birds and new ticks for the trip with Pied-billed Grebe, 5 Forsters Terns, Mute Swan, Eastern Kingbird and Palm Warbler all added to the list. We were also lucky enough to watch a Northern River Otter at close quarters. Eventually we arrived at Trillion RV Park our base for the next couple of nights.

A short walk around the park produced 5 Rose-breasted Grosbeaks, 4 American Goldfinches, Red-breasted Nuthatch, Northern Cardinal, Wood Duck, Downy & Hairy Woodpeckers and a Northern Flicker.

#### Saturday 10<sup>th</sup> May 2008

A 05.00 start saw us heading off for Long Point Bird Observatory. We again stopped off at the Big Creek Wetlands and the sewage farm. At the wetlands we heard lots of Marsh Wrens, Common Yellowthroat and a single Sandhill Crane. Chris picked up a Least Bittern in the reeds which sadly for Shawn went into cover before he could get onto it. The sewage farm had 3 Northern Shoveler, 6 Least Sandpipers, and a single Dunlin.



Common Yellowthroat & American Goldfinch

#### **Long Point Park & the Long Point Bird Observatory *N42°34:54 W80°23:20***

Long Point Park is part of a 40 kilometre long sand spit which projects into Lake Erie. It is recognized as a biosphere reserve by the United Nations and is a globally important refuge for migrating birds. Its delicate dune system and marshes teem with song birds, spawning fish, turtles and frogs. Bird Studies Canada founded the bird Observatory in 1960 and was the first organisation of its type in North America.

We arrived at Old Cut Boulevard home of the Observatory on the very day the Baillie Birdathon was to take place. This bird racing event takes place all over Canada every year. The place was very busy with lots of teams

out in the surrounding area. The locals welcomed us to the area and were particularly appreciative of our C\$50 donation to the cause which raises thousands of dollars each year for important research and bird projects. Chris immediately recouped his quarter of the donation by demolishing a couple of doughnuts and cream buns which were put out for the voluntary workers and participants of the race (you can't take him anywhere!)

The park itself was excellent. Migration was slow but there was still plenty to whet the appetite. We later found out that this was the slowest migration for years due to bitterly cold Northerly's. A splendid Brown Thrasher performed well and 2 Black throated Green Warblers were in the nearby the woods together with 2 Black and White Warblers (Wow!!!), Male American Redstart, Chestnut-sided Warbler, Northern Cardinal and Carolina Wren. The waterside had 2 Great Northern Diver (Common Loon).

The anticipated fall failed to materialise, so to get away from the crowds we headed for quieter areas of the shore. Here we saw an American Bittern take flight and passerines included Marsh Wren, House Finch, Eastern Towhee, and Warbling Vireo. Raptors included Turkey Vulture and Red-tailed Hawk. The reed beds also produced both male and female Swamp Sparrows. Two Black Rat Snakes were also seen in the reeds and Kildeer noisily patrolled the shoreline.

A local birder gave us a singing Prairie Warbler site a short distance away which despite an extensive search when we got there failed to be located. In the nearby Bachus Woods, just off highway 59 we had a stunning male singing Cerulean Warbler, 2 Yellow-throated vireos, 2 Wood Duck and a distant calling Pileated Woodpecker. Again the woodlands were very quiet with hardly any new arrivals.

We called it a day and headed off towards the town of St Thomas where we gorged ourselves at the local all you could eat buffet. We headed off down highway 3 to London joined the M401 to the outskirts of Chatham and took the 17 to the Rondeau Shores RV Park close to Rondeau Provincial Park.

Sunday 11<sup>th</sup> May 2008

### **Rondeau Provincial Park *N42°17:00 W81°51:59***

Jutting from the shores of Lake Eerie this enormous crescent shaped sandspit features delicate dunes with hardy grasses, marshland and Carolinian Forests of Sugar Maple, Hickory, Beech, Sassafras and Tulip tree. This is all supplemented by several meadows among the Oaks and Pines of the protected Oak Savannah. It is also home to two of Canada's rarest species the Prothonotary Warbler and the Eastern Spiny Soft-shell Turtle.

Rondeau is Canada's second oldest provincial park and remains to this day one of the crown jewels of the Ontario Parks System. Its size of 3254 ha extends almost 8 km out into Lake Eerie and it is (understandably) a migration hotspot.

An early start gave us Orchard Oriole and several familiar species at the camp site. The road to the park produced Shorelark.

We arrived at Rondeau at 07.30 and made straight for the visitors centre to view the feeding station. Whilst Chris was having a yet another tab break he saw Peregrine Falcon and Great Northern Diver overhead. The Feeding Station area was dominated mainly by Chipping Sparrows, but there were several Orioles, Chipmunks and Squirrels. We made our way to the Tulip Trail which was our first walk of the day. Swainsons Thrush was the first bird seen but we soon added Black throated Green Warbler, White-breasted Nuthatch, Rose-breasted Grosbeak and 2 Downy Woodpeckers. Passerines were again in short supply as the weather closed in and it began to rain heavily.



Chipping Sparrow & Rose-breasted Grosbeak

We had a tip off that the Pony Barn's area was producing several migrants so we made our way to the log pond where dozens of birders stood scanning the small marshy pool. For the next two hours we stood transfixed as wave after wave of passerines descended on the pond and proceeded to circumnavigate the pond in a clockwise direction. It was magical and the rain was doing its job in grounding our hopes for Warblers. We had stunning views of the little ball of fire which was the Blackburnian Warbler, 5+ Black and White Warblers, 4 Common Yellowthroats, 3 Black-throated Blues, 2 Black-throated Greens, 10 Yellow-rumped Warblers, 6 Yellow Warblers, Magnolia Warbler, Northern Parula and Canada Warbler. 3 House Wrens, Lincoln's Sparrow, Swamp Sparrow, 2 Warbling Vireo, 2 Grey Catbirds and 2 Baltimore Orioles were also on the water's edge, and all this in an area 30m sq.

A shout rang out just behind us of a female Mourning Warbler and as we scramble to see this scarcity we took position and soon got on this skulker, as we were admiring the female, a cracking male Mourning Warbler popped out to the delight of all present. It was high fives all round for the North Americans as they went whooping and a hollering. A single Hermit Thrush was almost overlooked in all the excitement.

The rain continued to pour becoming ever heavier and the temperature dropped causing the passerines to take cover. It went really quiet so we headed to Erieau to have lunch of eggy bread and sausage. The rain pounded down but did not deter the hundreds of Bonaparte's Gulls, Common Terns and Forsters Tern feeding in the harbour area.

After an hour or so the rain stopped and we headed for Bennett's Wood in the heart of Rondeau. This is a famous site for the elusive Prothonotary Warbler. After staking out the flooded forest floor we were rewarded with a stunning Male Prothonotary. Shawn dipped the bird but after staking out the site for over two hours had his patience rewarded with more great views of the bird. We were alerted to the presence of a rare for these parts, Worm-eating Warbler on the Spice Bush Trail and we headed off to try and locate it. But after a prolonged search we gave up failing to locate the bird our consolation was 2 Ovenbirds. We covered the trail in about 90 minutes and species noted along the elevated walkway were Veery, Magnolia Warbler, Common Yellowthroat, American Redstart, Eastern Wood Peewee, numerous Yellow Warblers, and 4 Black and White Warblers. 2 Chimney Swifts flew overhead.

We left Rondeau adding 2 Lesser Yellowlegs at the exit and began the drive to Leamington and our next RV Camp at Sturgeon Woods. We followed the Talbot Trail Road through Wheatley to Leamington arriving at our base for the night.

Monday May 12<sup>th</sup> 2008

### **Point Pelee National Park *N41°58:18 W82°31:22***

Point Pelee is a 10 km sandspit with its southern point equal in latitude to the northern borders of California. It is one of Canada's smallest and most unusual national parks. It is a thin triangle jutting out into Lake Erie and is the southernmost point of Canada. The 20 sq km habitat boasts a unique blend of marsh, jungle-like Carolinian forest, grassland and beaches. The base of sand and gravel is constantly changing due to the weather conditions. It is a world renowned Migration Hotspot and a magnet for birders from around the world. It is the most famous birding destination in Canada.

We arrived early at the Park and waited patiently for the tram to take us to the tip. The tram is a U.S Station wagon which tows two carriages behind it. We piled aboard and arrived at the tip at 08.15. Heavy Overnight rain had cleared and the tip was shrouded in fog, ideal conditions for migrants. Within minutes there was evidence of a large arrival of birds and the bushes were alive. We soon began racking up the species. During one twenty minute spell, there were so many birds coming in off the lake you didn't know which way to look. It was incredible and everything that we had hoped for. Birds were all over the place and birders were charging from bush to bush to catch a glimpse. We saw Scarlet Tanager, Indigo Bunting, Veery, Red-eyed, Yellow-throated & Warbling Vireo, Field Sparrow, 100's of hirundines including Barn, Bank, Tree & Cliff Swallows and Purple Martin, & Chimney Swifts. Warblers were all over the place with Yellow-rumped, Nashville, Palm, Black-throated Green, Canada, Cape May, Blackpoll, Ovenbird, Bay-breasted, Blackburnian, Chestnut-sided, Magnolia, and Northern Parula all seen within 50 metres of one another.

We made our way back up the point birding as we went. Although the main waves had went through the upper reaches held enough birds to keep you on your toes. Eventually we got back to the centre and grabbed a quick bite to eat.

At 11.30 we followed the woodland trail and saw a Least Flycatcher, 4 Cedar Waxwings, 4 Veery, 2 Swainsons Thrush and a Northern Waterthrush. An Empids Flycatcher caused an identification dilemma. The bird was either a Willow or Alder Fly but steadfastly refused to call thus denying any true chance to clinch the i.d.

The visitors centre had sold out of food for lunch so we made our way to the Cattail Cafe at the Marsh Boardwalk. After our break we headed off to Hillmans Marsh for a change of scenery. The marsh and



surrounding areas had a good selection of Waders and Wildfowl with Least, Spotted and Semi-palmated Sandpipers, Dunlin, Turnstone, Lesser Yellowlegs, Short-billed Dowitchers and 200 Grey Plover. Ducks included Lesser Scaup, American Wigeon, Gadwall, Pintail, Wood, Blue-winged & Green-winged Teals. We were also fortunate to be present to see a first for Canada in the shape of a Mottled Duck. Also on the Marsh were 'American' Black, Forsters and Caspian Terns and Great Egret. Gull species were 200 each of Ring-billed and Bonaparte's with a single Little Gull as an added bonus. Overhead a Bald Eagle patrolled the skies. A Tundra Swan, possibly injured, and hence summering fed in a nearby dyke.

We returned to Pelee and walked the Tildens Trail - 17.00 – 18.30. Almost immediately we picked up a belter :- Great Crested Flycatcher. Further along the trail we had our first Ruby-throated Hummingbird of the trip and a Green Heron foraged on the forest floor



Green Heron & Ruby-throated Hummingbird

The trail also produced a splendid male Indigo Bunting, 2 Swainsons Thrush, 3 Blackburnian Warblers, 2 Wild Turkey and a White-eyed Vireo. At West Beach there were 2+Magnolia Warbler, 3 Great Northern Diver, 18 Lesser Scaup, 8 Cedar Waxwings and Ruby-crowned Kinglet. Mammals observed were Rabbit, Raccoon and a Northern Water Otter. A delicious meal was enjoyed that night at Paula's Cafe on the outskirts of the park.

Tuesday May 13<sup>th</sup> 2008

Arrived at Pelee and took the 07.15 tram to the tip. It was immediately obvious that it was a lot quieter today, 10 Blue Jay flew high north and warbler species included 3 Bay-breasted, 4 Nashville, 1 Blackburnian and a Pelee rarity of Orange-crowned Warbler. 2 noisy Red-headed Woodpeckers put in an appearance and a Yellow-breasted Chat was spotted and seen by everyone on Pelee - except me!!!! We walked the woodland trail which was pretty quiet; however there were two Laughing Gulls on the beach which was an added bonus.

We left Pelee early and headed for Windsor by taking the McDonald Carter Freeway which bypasses a lot of the rural areas. Windsor is situated on the opposite side of Detroit on the Detroit River and we followed our maps to the Huron Church Road and turned onto Tecumseh Road which morphs into Matchette Road. Our destination was the Ojibway Prairie Provincial Nature Reserve which we eventually reached and parked up at the visitors centre.

**Ojibway Prairie Provincial Nature Reserve, [N42°15:41W 83°04:46](#)**

This is a 350 ha Prairie complex and is made up of 4 main municipal areas and a provincial nature reserve. It has gained a reputation as spring and fall passage migrant trap. The park itself comprises of tall grassland, scrub, thickets, Pin Oak and dry Black Oak. One part has over 52 ha of the finest Black Oak – Pignut Savannahs in Ontario. The visitors centre is open all year round and has a well stocked feeding station and a "recent sightings" board.



We had deliberately included a stop at this reserve as it is a well known spot for Tufted Titmouse which had recently been split from its Texan Counterpart Black-crested Tufted Titmouse. We soon located the bird at the feeding station and were rewarded with excellent views. The feeding station was very active with lots of now expected species birds. There was also a Ground Hog living in a burrow below the feeding station and lots of Chipmunks and Squirrels. It was also great to see local schoolchildren enjoying the reserve on a field trip.



Downy & Red-bellied Woodpeckers

We set out for a walk around the park and picked up several warblers mainly Yellow-rumped but two Blackpoll Warblers stood out. This species does not particularly have the wow factor compared to its more colourful counterparts but the views that we got allowed us to truly appreciate this handsome warbler. A male Eastern Towhee and Yellow-throated Vireo were feeding high up and a possible Pine Warbler was seen alongside a Chestnut-sided Warbler but we couldn't clinch the i.d.

There were also several Rose-breasted Grosbeaks, Least Flycatcher, White-breasted Nuthatch, Swainsons Thrush, Palm and Cape May Warblers. The pond area was alive with tadpoles and turtles and Northern Rough-winged Swallows were feeding over the water.

Back at the feeding station there was House Finch and Spotted Dove. A local birder tipped us off to the presence of a red phase Eastern Screech Owl which had taken up residence in a nest box sited in the small stream at the picnic area. We headed off to the nest box which was clearly visible from the visitors centre. We waited a short while and were rewarded with a view when the Owl popped its head out of the box to survey the area. An American Redstart fed on the banks of the stream and a couple of Black-capped Chickadees were on the opposite bank.



Northern Cardinal & Eastern Screech Owl

We left feeling we hadn't spent enough time at Ojibway because of the driving distance to our next stop. We had opted to cross into the United States at Port Huron instead of navigating the crossing and city of Detroit with the benefit of hindsight it was probably a mistake due to the lengthy detour to reach Port Huron.

We reached the border at Port Huron and were subjected to a shake down by Homeland Security and a particularly fierce female officer who proceeded to confiscate our family sized fresh fruit salad and 40 of Chris's much cherished Embassy Regal. Eventually we were cleared to cross and we made our way west to the Maple River Reserve where we parked up in a lay-by and bedded down for the night.



Wednesday 14<sup>th</sup> May 2008

**Maple River State Game Area, Gratiot County, Michigan *N43°8'46.54 W84°32'36.56***

This is a 9000 acre state game area located 27 mile north of the state capital. From Lansing we took the US-27 North past the town of St John's. After crossing the maple river we continued along Ranger Road and turned right. We followed the road for approx 1 mile east and turned right onto Baldwin Road. The habitat consists of flooded wetlands, cattail marshes, dry upland forest and grassland. It is split into units A & B. Maple River is an important northward stopover for many waterbirds including hundreds of Tundra Swans it is also a reliable site for Prothonotary Warbler and Great Horned Owl. Heavy overnight rain and cleared and we woke to a fine morning. The meadows were full of singing Bobolinks and Savannah Sparrows.



Bobolink & Savannah Sparrow

We headed off to Unit A and had 10 Wild Turkey in a field close to the car park. At the Milliander Wetland we were faced with a huge swamp and the place was alive with mozzies and this curtailed any meaningful birding. Species seen during a very brief walk were 4 Spotted Sandpipers, 1 Trumpeter & 4 Mute Swans, 4 Cackling Canada Geese, 10 Great Blue Herons and an unidentified Waterthrush species which took to cover as we approached. A female Hooded Merganser flew over and the only passerines of note were Palm Warbler and 2 Warbling Vireos.

We retreated back to the RV to escape the mozzies and gave up on finding the Prothonotary Warbler and Horned Owl. In a nearby field was a very pale Shore Lark. The nearby Unit B wetland was mozzie free and we scanned the reeds for activity and were rewarded with Northern Harrier, American Wigeon, Common Moorhen, and 2 American Coot. Overhead was a superb adult male Bald Eagle. Great views were also obtained of 2 Virginia Rails and a Sora Rail. Lunch was taken at a soon to be a favourite Big Boy Diner. After lunch we headed through Unionville and followed the M-25 west for 3 miles to Ringle Road turning right and proceeded approx 3 miles and parked up at our next stop.

**Fishpoint Wildlife Refuge, Saginaw Bay, Michigan *N43°42:15 W83°31:38***

This is a 3700 acre reserve of flat farm fields, diked floodings, coastal wetland and prairies. Biologists manage water levels and vegetation for the benefit of waterfowl. During the spring migration of waterfowl it is known affectionately as the Chesapeake of the Midwest. An observation tower and viewing trail provide great opportunities to see wildlife.

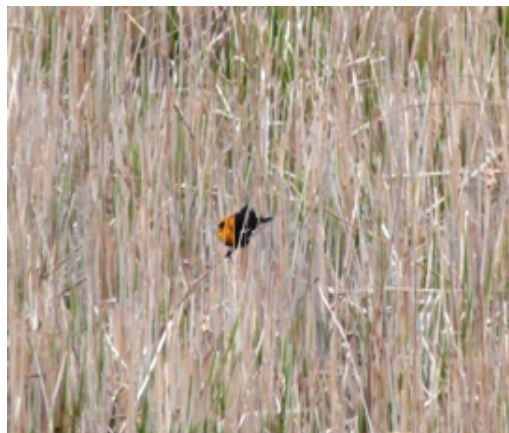
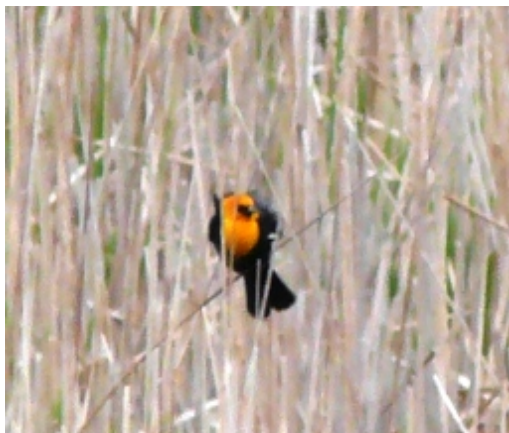
The weather was dreadful and the rain lashed down. We sat for an hour hoping for a break and eventually it eased enough to get out in the fresh air. The main waterfowl migration had long since passed but we decide to do a 360° loop to scan just one of the water ways. This area had 5 Caspian Terns, 5 Great Egrets, 4 Wood Duck and 10 Sandhill Cranes. There were booming Bitterns in the reeds but none were viewed. Not surprisingly passerines were in short supply, apart from a few Marsh Wrens & Swamp Sparrows there was only a single Palm Warbler and Eastern Phoebe. We cut our losses and headed for our next stop at the Nayanquing Reserve on the south west corner of Saginaw Bay. We reached this reserve by taking the I-75 to the Linwood exit and headed east to the M-13. The reserve is signposted at the intersection of the M-13 and Kitchen Road, 3 miles north of Linwood Road. We then followed Kitchen Road East to the Reserve.

**Nayanquing Point Wildlife Area *N43°47:10 W83°55:52***

This area is a 1400 acre reserve of coastal wetland and farmland. These are flooded in the spring and fall for waterfowl hunting. There are dyked permanent pools and the reserve offers some of the best shore bird habitat

in the state. It is also home to one of the oldest and largest colonies of Yellow-headed Blackbird – our target for the visit.

Again the weather was iffy, with a cold wind blowing and the constant threat of heavy showers. We stopped at the observation area and saw a nice Red-tailed Hawk. The wader scrapes were overgrown and devoid of any birdlife. They were apparently a favoured spot for Wilson's Phalaropes. The ponds held the usual Heron species including several Black-crowned Night Herons. The cattail reeds near to the observation tower produced our target Yellow-headed Blackbirds with at least 12 birds counted.



Yellow-headed Blackbird

We then headed off via Bay City north on the I-75 then north on the M-23 through Tawas City and onto our next campsite at Tawas Point State Park. We entered the camp and persuaded the lovely warden to allocate us a prime pitch. We dined in style that night with a home cooked meal of Baked Potato. After the meal we had a walk in the late evening sunshine.

#### **Tawas Point State Park *N44°15:10 W83°26:51***

The park covers an area of approximately 183 acres and is situated on the end of a sand spit that forms Tawas Bay which in turn is part of the Greater Saginaw Bay. The waters of the great Lake Huron spill into the bay and are a rich feeding ground for many waterbirds. The peak water bird migration is April when 4000 Long-tailed Ducks move through with many other species including White-winged Scoter. The park itself has gained a well deserved reputation as the best migrant trap in the area. The rarest bird ever found was a White-collared Swift by Jon Dunn (who is a regular) and his WINGS Tour Group.

Our first foray to the point was quite productive given the time of day. On a sand spit was a lone Bald Eagle and a Goosander was close inshore. There were 7 Short-billed Dowitchers and 3 Lesser Yellowlegs roosting at the water's edge and passerines in the scrub included American Redstart, Eastern Kingbird, Orchard Oriole, Blue Jay, House Wren and a cracking Brown Thrasher. Warblers included Yellow, Yellow-rumped and Palm.

#### **Thursday 15<sup>th</sup> May 2008**

100+ Blue Jay filled the sky seemingly reluctant to cross the bay, perhaps they sensed the presence of the Bald Eagle that flew nearby. We started off near the lighthouse and worked the bushes. In a short 25 minute spell we had amassed a good haul of birds with 5 Indigo Buntings, 4 Rose-breasted Grosbeaks, 3 Warbling Vireo, 2 Orchard Oriole, 6 Brown Thrashers, 4 White-crowned Sparrows, 2 Ruby-throated Hummingbirds, 1 Field and 5 Savannah Sparrows. There were also plenty of warblers with at least 2 Northern Parula, 3 Palm, 1 Black-throated Blue, 2 Magnolia, 2 Nashville, 2 Chestnut-sided, several Yellow-rumped and a single Tennessee Warbler. It was here we also managed to connect our first Blue-headed Vireo. The shoreline and bay had Great Northern Diver, 2 Short-billed Dowitchers, 4 Lesser Yellowlegs and a possible Greater Scaup.

As the morning progressed we saw many more migrants and birding was very relaxed with hardly any other birders for company. Before lunch we had 4 species of raptor – Sharp-shinned Hawk, Osprey, Merlin & Northern Harrier. There 50 Bonaparte's Gulls, 2 Caspian Terns and 10 Sandhill Cranes. 5 Northern Rough-winged Swallow came across the bay as did 2 Red-headed Woodpeckers. Two Northern Flickers fed in the trees and there were also several American Redstarts and a single Yellow-throated Vireo.

Next stop - an all you could eat spaghetti bonanza at the nearby Big Boy.

After lunch we went back to the Point and met the renowned Californian birder Jon Dunn. Jon was leading a WINGS tour. Jon Dunn is a major force in Californian birding and is considered one of the primary experts on field identification in North America, an expertise that would eventually earn him positions on both the American

Birding Association (ABA) and American Ornithologists Union (AOU) Checklist Committees. He was the "chief consultant" on the widely popular National Geographic Field Guide, a revolutionary volume at the time of its publication. This guy was incredible and actively encouraged us to tag onto his group – which we did. His knowledge and enthusiasm were infectious. We were later invited to join his group on a late evening visit to Tuttle Marsh which we duly accepted. We headed off to make ready for our trip to the marsh and saw 40+ American Buff-bellied Pipits on the dune system and 6 Least Sandpipers were foraging the shore.

We left at 17.00 for our rendezvous with Jon and headed north from Tawas City on Monument Road North to Wilber Road. We then turned right and drove c3 miles to Galion Road. We turned right again and did a short ½ mile drive to Sherman Rd, turned left and continued 1 ½ miles to May Rd. Another right turn and a half mile to Brooks Rd and a right turn and followed the gravel road to Tuttle Marsh Road.

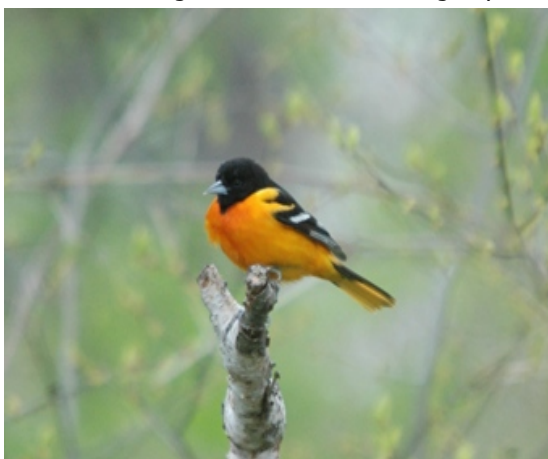
#### **Tuttle Marsh Wildlife Area *N44°21:17 W83°28:19***

A 400 acre impounded wetland is at the heart of this site, which in turn is surrounded by hundreds more acres of seasonally flooded wetlands. There are no facilities or developments but visitors are actively encouraged to use the raised dykes as hiking trails. The marshland is famed for waterfowl migration during the early spring and is a great site for shorebirds and Bitterns.

We arrived at 17.45 and did a short walk along the dyke. The marsh was fairly quiet but there were 2 pair of nesting Osprey. Other birds included Sandhill Crane, Ring-necked and Wood Ducks, Great Blue Heron and 4 American Black Terns. Jon was on Tuttle Marsh Road and had taped lured a superb Least Bittern into the open. By this time Jon's group had grown from 8 to 22 with several eager birders joining him. We followed him to a site further down the road and as the night closed in we had at least 4 calling Whip-poor Wills. Eventually we got back to camp where an American Woodcock was heard to call with another Whip-poor Will close by.

#### **Friday 16<sup>th</sup> May 2008**

We were out early today as we were due to leave late morning for our next stop. A quick walk around the site revealed 5 Purple Martin, 2 Ruby-throated Hummers, Veery, Brown Thrasher, 4 American Redstarts, 2 Scarlet Tanagers, 2 Great Crested Flycatchers, 5 Bobolinks, Hairy & Downy 'Peckers, Northern Flicker and an excellent singing Clay-coloured Sparrow. Warblers present were 2 Black-throated Greens, Tennessee, Palm and Magnolia. Waders at the point included 2 Wilson's Phalaropes, 20 Dunlin and 2 Semi-palmated Plovers. The Bald Eagle was still on the spit and we had a fly over Merlin. There was lots of activity at the feeding station with several Blue Jays and 9 Baltimore Orioles feeding on the grain and fruit which had been put out for them. We met up with Jon to say farewell and he gave us some excellent site information for the next leg of our journey north through Michigan. Lunch was again taken at the local Big Boy.



Baltimore Oriole & Great-crested Flycatcher

After lunch we called into Wal-Mart for some critical supplies – Budweiser, Gin etc. A Bald Eagle flew over the car park and 10 Cliff Swallows were nesting under the supermarket sign. Stocked up, we joined the M-55 and headed west to the junction of highway 33 and turned north and on through the town of Mio. We drove north past West Cherrycreek Rd, past West Kittle Rd and then turned left onto West Kneeland Rd where the 33 turns into the 72 around Biggs Settlement. We drove west to the junction of North Galbraith Road to the site Jon had given us.

#### **North Galbraith Road Junction, Mio *N44°42:40 W84°10:10***

We parked at the school house and scanned the area for our target species – Upland Sandpiper. This site is on the WINGS itinerary for their tours. It wasn't long before we connected with the birds, in the very field we were told they would be. The birds kept low in the grass and proved difficult to photograph.





Upland Sandpiper & Blue Jay

Also in the field were 4 Sandhill Crane and 'bird of the day' for Chris, a stunning male American kestrel overhead on the telephone wires. The Identity of two displaying Meadowlarks was confirmed by the singing male and the Eastern was added to our lists. A single Lesser Yellowlegs, Savannah Sparrow and 7 Turkey Vultures were also seen. We headed off along Miller Road to the north and drove east to join I-75 north to Hartwick Pines State Park. We exited at junction 259 and headed along the M-93 Rd.

#### **Hartwick Pines State Park *N44°45:02 W84°39:22***

Hartwick Pines State Park is the largest state park in Michigan's northern Lower Peninsula covering some 9500 acres. Fittingly, it also contains the largest stand of virgin white pines remaining in the Lower Peninsula. Hartwick Pines is rich in scenic beauty and different habitats. The principal features of this park are the 50-acre forest of Old Growth Pines and logging museum. The park's rolling hills, which are built of ancient glacial deposit, overlook the valley of the East Branch of the Ausable River, four small lakes and unique timber lands.

We slowly drove the parks roads keeping a careful eye out for anything that moved. A single Black-capped Chickadee was spotted and three Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers, including 1 stonking male, squabbled amongst each other oblivious to our presence. A Raven flew through the valley as we reached the top of the road and a Northern Flicker and more Blue Jays were seen. Back at the car park we disturbed a secretive Broad-winged Hawk and two Pine Warblers were feeding in the pines. We left Hartwick and headed to Roscommon and the Kirtland Community College by taking the I-75 south to Roscommon exit 244. Turn left on M-76 going into Roscommon (about three miles). Turn left at the traffic light on M-18 East going about eight miles to County Road 603, turn right (there's a sign indicating Kirtland). Go to the stop sign, turn right, go to the blinker and turn left. Administration building is on your right. This is where the annual Kirtland Warbler Festival was due to take place the following day. We found the college and then headed for South Higgins Park Camp Site.

Saturday 17<sup>th</sup> May 2008

#### **Kirtland's Warbler Festival, Kirtland Community College *N44°29:30 W84°24:39***

The jack pine forest provides the primary nesting habitat for the Kirtland's warbler. This Warbler is adapted to dry land conditions and has been present on the sandy outwash plains of northern Michigan since the retreat of the Wisconsin ice sheet about 14,000 years ago. A narrow, band of jack pine habitat can be found across the north central states and the province of Ontario. The Kirtland's warbler has very restrictive habitat requirements. In addition to being ground nesters, Kirtland's warblers prefer jack pine stands over 80 acres in size. Those stands, which are most suitable for breeding, are characterised by having dense clumps of trees interspersed with numerous small, grassy openings, sedges, ferns, and low shrubs. The birds nest on the ground under the living branches of the small trees. Jack pine stands are used for nesting when trees are about five feet high or about five to eight years of age. Nesting continues in these stands until the lower branches of the trees start dying, or when the trees reach a height of 16 to 20 feet (about 16 to 20 years of age). A breeding pair of warblers usually requires about six to ten acres for their nesting territory, although as little as 1.5 acres may be adequate under optimal conditions.

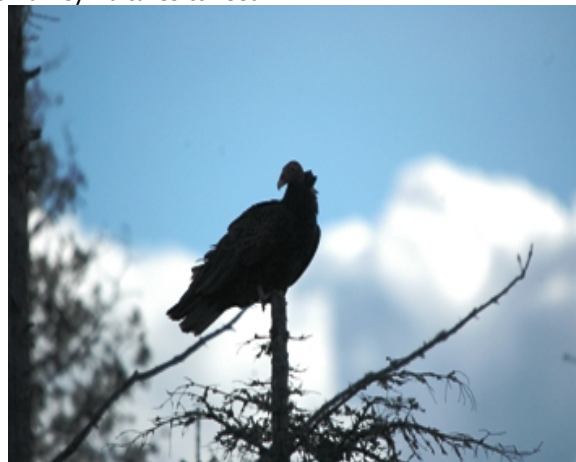
The festival was what we had expected with a number of Marquees erected around the field. The college had opened its doors and food was served inside. There were a number of stalls and exhibitions and several lectures were scheduled. (<http://warbler.kirtland.edu/schedule.htm#>). The festival organisers provided two traditional American School buses to ferry birders to sensitive sites.



The School Trip (Note the sandy ground & small Jack Pines to the right)

Despite the best efforts of the organisers, pandemonium broke out once the doors of the bus were open and the 'punters' spilled out. It was comical as locals ignored the pleas of the guide and tramped over the open ground clamouring for a sighting of a Warbler. Eventually an Amish Birder picked up a distant male but the views were poor. Chris nearly knocked him to the ground as he pressed his eye firmly to the poor lad's scope (again...you can't take this man anywhere!) We'd had enough of the crowds and disturbance and left to find our 'own' Kirtlands, and were quickly rewarded with crippling views, down to 3 feet of a singing male. We also managed a further two Upland Sandpipers and a Vesper Sparrow. We beat a hasty retreat from the festival to lose the crowds and went off on our own to search for our own birds, which we did with relative ease. Several Brown-headed Cowbirds were caught in a trap. Scientists operate Brown-headed Cowbird traps throughout the area. These parasitic birds target the Kirtland's and are humanely trapped and relocated to distant parts of Michigan. We left the area and after a quick stop at Hardwick Pines where we added Brown Creeper we returned to the I-75 for the long drive north to Mackinaw City and Michigan's Upper Peninsula.

We crossed the bridge at Mackinaw, where Lake Huron meets Lake Michigan and continued north to the Tahquamenon Falls State Park along the M-123. As we neared the town of Paradise we saw a Northern Harrier and a Raven. A roadside kill of a Deer had attracted three Turkey Vultures to feed.



Turkey Vultures

We drove through the Paradise and continued west along the M-123 towards the entrance of the park. Close to park, we stopped to enjoy several Purple Finches and were lucky enough to see a huge Pileated Woodpecker which flew in whilst watching the finches. We caught last food orders at The Tahquamenon Brewery Restaurant. The establishment had a small feeding station. We had just missed Pine Grosbeak but were lucky enough to see six Evening Grosbeak's at close quarters. At 21.30 en-route to Lower Falls camp we came across a roding American Woodcock and had the beauty down to six feet on the grass verge.





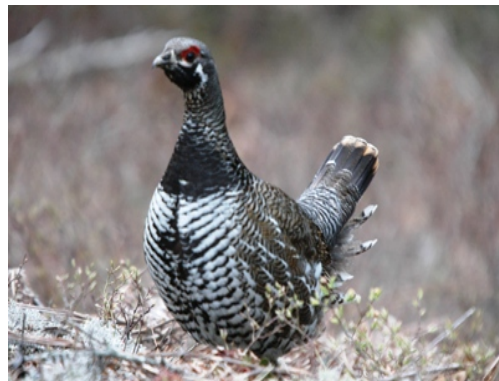
Evening Grosbeak

Sunday 18<sup>th</sup> May 2008

**Tahquamenon Falls State Park** *N46°35:46 W85°13:49*

Tahquamenon Falls State Park encompasses close to 52,000 acres stretching over 13 miles. Most of this is undeveloped woodland without roads, buildings or power lines. Centrepiece of the park, and the very reason for its existence, is the Tahquamenon River with its waterfalls. The Tahquamenon River was made famous in the Longfellow poem Hiawatha. According to Indian lore, the origin of the name Tahquamenon is attributed to the water's amber colour, which is the result of leaching of tannic acid from the cedar and hemlock swamps that feed the river. The Tahquamenon is special in many ways. One little known fact is that it is the second largest waterfall east of the Mississippi, with Niagara being the largest.

We spent the previous night at the Lower Falls Camp enjoying a free night courtesy of the U.S Government. The new day brought a biting north wind and it was with extra layers we set off for a walk along the Clark's trail just off the M-123 between Upper and Lower Falls. We set off along the trail towards Clark Lake. We saw Brown Creeper, 2 Pine Warbler, Golden-crowned Kinglet, 6 White-throated Sparrows, Swainsons Thrush and 4 Hermit Thrushes. The undoubted highlight of the walk was a very confiding male Spruce Grouse which showed brilliantly.



Spruce Grouse

After Clarks Trail we headed back to Paradise and took the road north to Whitefish Point on the shores of Lake Superior. The lake had 20 Red-necked Grebes, 4 White-winged Scoter, 1 Goldeneye, 5 Great Northern Divers and a couple of Ring-billed Gulls. A single Buff-bellied Pipit fed on the shore. One of the best locations in Michigan to search for Grays Jays, and which is easily accessible is the Hulbert Bog in western Chippewa County. This location is found by following the M-28 six miles west of the junction of M-28 and M-123 at Eckerman Corners to Hulbert Corner. But sadly, perhaps because of the weather conditions, we failed to locate any of the jays



## Raco Airfield, M-123 **N46°21:10 W84°48:45**



We drove to Raco Airfield which was east along the M-28 past Eckerman Corner. What an unusual site this turned out to be. The long-abandoned Raco Army Airfield is also the subject of some interesting internet conspiracy theories about it being a New World Order Concentration Camp, someone suggests that it is another Alien Area 51 or perhaps it is a drop off zone for the Canadians to flood the U.S with Cannabis – who knows ? But more likely the truth is that it is the former site of Raco AAF/AFB. The airfield was originally built during WWII to provide protection for the Sault Sainte Marie Locks. No threats to the locks materialised, and the airfield fell into disuse. Later, it was used as a site for a US Army Skysweeper radar-guided anti-aircraft artillery battalion.

During the Cold War, this was a launch site for the US Air Force's long-range BOMARC anti-aircraft missiles, intended to stop incoming Soviet bombers with nuclear blasts. This mission ended in approximately 1972. No original military buildings remain, other than concrete foundations for the BOMARC launcher shelters. Three vast runways form a triangle and it is clear that there is an underground facility of some sort but it's the birds we came for, not the specimen jars full of aliens.

The site has, over the years, become quite reliable for Sharp-tailed Grouse. We arrived at the airfield in a flurry of driving snow. We drove slowly along the runways scanning the edges and rough grass for the grouse. The Western Edges had four Upland Sandpipers and despite an extensive search we failed to locate any Grouse. We parked up at the south western edge of the runway and walked into an area of heath land. Slate-coloured Junco was one of the first birds seen amongst a row of Aspen. Here we also had American Robin, 5 Vesper Sparrow, 1 Palm Warbler and 2 cracking Eastern Bluebirds.

We left Raco and headed for Paradise beach where we added 15 Goosander, 5 Buffleheads and 2 Sandhill Cranes, but little else. At Whitefish Point in bitterly cold weather a single Merlin was the only bright spot. We rustled up a homemade chilli in the RV for tea and came up with the bright idea of heading back to Raco and camping on the runway for an early crack for the Grouse. On our way to Raco a single Whip-poor-Will lifted from the road surface as we approached.

Monday 19<sup>th</sup> May

I would like to get my hands on the bright spark who suggested we camp overnight at Raco (It was me). It had to be the coldest night ever, with driving rain and sleet. With no electric hook up and a low oil supply, it was a night with no heating. Paul slept with two lots of clothes on!!! The first two hours were spent cruising the airfield, but again our luck was out with no grouse seen. The only birds of note were 2 Upland Sandpipers, 2 Red-tailed Hawk and 3 Northern Flickers. At 09.00 we gave up and headed west along the M-28 to Seney National Refuge. The refuge Headquarters and Visitor Centre are located on Highway M-77 approximately 3 miles north of Germfask, Michigan and 15 miles northwest of Curtis, Michigan.

## Seney National Wildlife Refuge **N46°16:47 85°56:39**

Created by Franklin D Roosevelt in 1935 Seney National Wildlife Refuge was carved out of the Great Manistique Swamp by the Civilian Conservation Corps for the protection and production of migratory birds and other wildlife. The refuge is composed of a rich mosaic of marsh, swamp, bog, grasslands and forest, with nearly two-thirds wetlands, it covers nearly 96000 acres. Today, it protects habitat for threatened and endangered species, as well as a variety of wildlife. A diversity of wildlife species utilise the refuge with over 200 bird species, 26 fish species and 50 mammals recorded. This diversity of wildlife is maintained through wetland, fire and forest management. It is also home to the Yellow Rail and the Parks management organise guided walks to locate this secretive species. Sadly we had arrived too early in May for the rail excursions and with 96000 acres it was the proverbial needle in a haystack job to find our own.

After checking out the visitors centre and armed with some red hot gen from the staff we headed back to the entrance and bagged a confiding Ruffed Grouse. Also here were Least Flycatcher, Nashville Warbler and American Redstart. There is a circular drive of some 7 miles called the Marsh Drive. This trail weaves its way around some excellent habitat with plenty of birdlife. There were two Bald Eagles, Northern Harrier and 4 Ospreys. Waterbirds included 20 Trumpeter Swans, Hooded Merganser, and Ring-necked Duck, 15 Caspian Terns, 4 Forsters Terns, 4 Sandhill Cranes and 2 Short-billed Dowitchers were other highlights. Warblers included Black and White, Nashville and Pine also a Blue-headed Vireo and a possible Sedge Wren.

We headed off for a walk to Driggs River Road. We parked up and initially we took the wrong path and headed off deep into the countryside, along the way we heard a couple of Ruffed Grouse. After a while we realised our

error and returned towards the car park. We then followed the path that ran parallel to the stream. After approx 500 metres the area opened up and we were lucky enough to connect with a couple of Sharp-tailed Grouse. Also here were 4 Vesper Sparrows, 2 Nashville Warbler, 4 Brewer's Blackbirds, Eastern Bluebird, Upland Sandpiper and 2 Sandhill Cranes. After Driggs River Road we headed back to Tahquamenon Falls to see if we could view the Pine Grosbeaks. We were out of luck but around the restaurant feeders were 20+ Purple Finches, 2 Pine Siskin, 2 Evening Grosbeaks, White-breasted and Red-breasted Nuthatches and 2 Ruby-throated Hummingbirds. It was getting late and anticipation was building as this was the night we were going to witness the Owl Banding at Whitefish Bird Observatory.

### **Whitefish Point Bird Observatory *N46°44:16 W85°00:11***

Situated on the north eastern tip of Michigan's Upper Peninsula, on the shores of Lake Superior, Whitefish Point is a phenomenal site for migrating raptors, waterbirds, and song birds. The surrounding land and water features create a natural corridor, funnelling thousands of birds directly to the Point each spring and fall as they travel thorough the Great Lakes region. This makes for spectacular bird-watching and provides tremendous opportunities to study and monitor bird populations. It is also the home of the Whitefish Bird Observatory which is famous for its Owl projects and banding. Regular Owls observed at the Point include Northern Saw-whet, Boreal (Tengmalms), Long-eared, Short-eared, Great-Horned, Great Gray and Northern Hawk Owl. Ongoing research programs are conducted by the WPBO in spring, summer and fall. The object of this research is to monitor owl populations over time, and to gain an understanding of how these populations fluctuate and change over the years. This program also gathers valuable data on little known owls such as Boreal and Great Gray. We were made welcome at the observatory (<http://www.wpbo.org/index.html>) by Chris Neri and his partner. He explained his role and work – a real labour of love. From 22.30 to 02.00 we hung around the obs hoping for a clean sweep of Owls in the nets. We didn't get the full house but an incredible evening was had by all with 10 Northern Saw-whets, 3 Long-eared and a single Boreal. It will be a night that will live long in the memory and to show our gratitude we left a \$50 donation for the Obs.



Northern Saw-Whet, Boreal and Long-eared Owls with Chris Neri of W.P.B.O

We slept overnight in the bird obs car park and the following morning awoke to the incredible sight of 1000's of Blue Jays crossing the point and heading out over Lake Huron. After breakfast we set off for the Canadian border at Saulte St Marie and the final stage of our holiday. We crossed the border at 09.15 and made our way towards Manitoulin Island via Espanola on highway 17 E.

Tuesday 20<sup>th</sup> May

### **Manitoulin Island, Ontario *N45°39:54 W82°01:15***

Manitoulin Island is the home of the great god "Manitou", and is the jewel of North America's Great Lakes. Manitoulin Island is 180 km long and the world's largest freshwater island. It is dotted with lakes, woods, farms, and small communities including many first nation communities. The Island has unusual flora and extraordinary wildlife, such as Whitetail Deer, Bear, Divers, and a large variety of bird species.

With hindsight this was a mistake. We completely under estimated the sheer size of the place, and the chances of finding the breeding Great Gray Owls were very remote, if not impossible. We only spent 4 hours on the island, in a howling gale which demolished the RV door, but we did see some good birds such as Merlin, Bald Eagle and 3 Northern Harrier. Waders included Wilson's snipe, Wilson's phalarope, 5 Least Sandpipers, 4 Lesser Yellowlegs and 2 Short-billed Dowitchers. Ducks seen were both Teal sp and Gadwall. Other species of note were Eastern Meadowlark, Swamp Sparrow, Chestnut-sided Warbler, Shore Lark and Great Northern Diver. At South Baymouth we enjoyed Fish and Chips with lashings of salt and vinegar – not Cod but Yellow Perch.

Back on the road we made our way to our next major stop via Sudbury and a Seven hour drive – Algonquin National Park. Overnight at the Lake of Two Rivers Camp

Wednesday 21<sup>st</sup> May

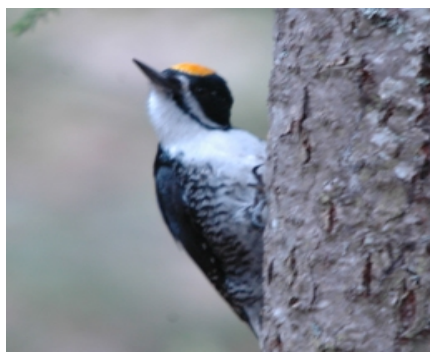
### **Algonquin National Park, Ontario *N45°33:14 W78°34:53***

Algonquin Provincial Park lies in a transition zone between deciduous forests typical of areas to the south of the Park, and coniferous forests, more typical of areas to the north. The result is that both forest types are found within Park boundaries. It is a provincial park located between Georgian Bay and the Ottawa River in Central Ontario, Canada, mostly within the South Part of Nipissing District. It is the first provincial park in Canada having been established in 1893. It covers about 7500 square kilometres. Its size, combined with its proximity to Toronto and Ottawa make it one of the most popular Provincial parks in the province and the entire country. Highway 60 runs through the south of the park, while the Trans-Canada Highway bypasses it to the north. Over 2400 lakes and 1200 kilometres of streams and rivers are located within the park.

Having heavily seeded our camp site the previous night, we were hoping for a good selection of birds first thing. Heavy Rain put a damper on things and the only birds seen around the camp were Blue Jays, Common Grackle and American Crow. There were also a few Squirrels in attendance.

At the Kilometre 43 mark we set off along the Spruce Bog Trail for a 2 km walk it was cold and as a consequence little if any bird song. The only birds entered in the log were Blue-headed Vireo, Common Yellowthroat, Belted Kingfisher, 2 Nashville Warblers and a few White-throated Sparrows.

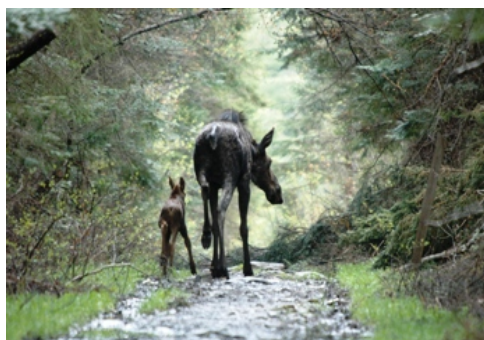
We drove to the Beaver Pond Trail which is located at km 45.2 from the West Entrance of Algonquin Park on highway 60. This is a relatively short 2km walk. This was more productive with a showy American Bittern, Ruby- & Golden crowned Kinglets, 5 Yellow-rumped Warblers, Solitary Sandpiper, Semi-palmated Plover and 2 Goosanders. There were 3 Black Ducks on the Lake and on the far shore we saw our first Gray Jay. We also observed an excavating Yellow-bellied Sapsucker and warblers included Nashville, Black and White, Blackburnian and a Black-throated Blue with a very unusual song. Further along the trail we found a stonking Black-backed Woodpecker and a Hairy Woodpecker



Yellow-bellied Sapsucker & Black-backed Woodpecker

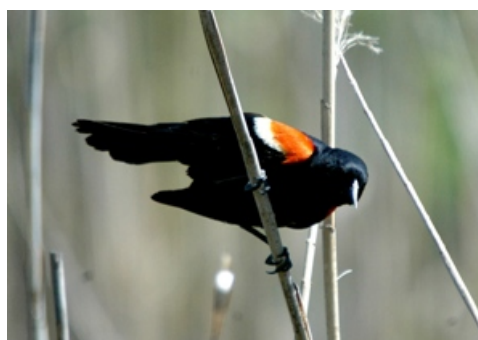


There were plenty of Beaver in the park and were quite easy to see also a few Moose but no Bears.



Beaver Lodge & Moose with Calf

We made for the visitors centre where we enjoyed a lunch of homemade soup and Chilli. We retired to the RV and snoozed the afternoon rain away. At 17.45, with a glimpse of late afternoon sunshine (was it really spring), we reached the Opeongo Road. Here we stopped by the side of the road and immediately 2 stunning Gray Jay appeared from nowhere. We also had 2 attractive Boreal Chickadees – the Sibley guide doesn't do these birds justice. There were 5 Great Northern Diver, 3 Pairs Goosander, 2 Yellow-rumped Warblers, 3 Red-winged Blackbirds, 1 Ruby-crowned Kinglet and 2 more Beaver



Gray Jay & Red-winged Blackbird

Back on highway 60 we headed towards the town of Whitney. More Moose were seen on the road to and from the town. We grabbed a giant 18" Pizza in Whitney and headed back to the Lake of Two Rivers Camp site and a possible Barred Owl flying across the road.

Thursday 22<sup>nd</sup> May

Confession time – we did a runner without paying for our camp.( there wasn't an official to be seen anywhere) It was raining heavily again as we set off and a quick stop at the Spruce Bog Trail produced Chestnut-sided & Yellow-rumped Warblers, Common Yellowthroat and White-throated Sparrow.

Noon at Arrowhorn Road on the track east of the 5km mark we had Blue-headed Vireo, 5 Ruby-crowned Kinglets and 2 Golden-crowned. Warblers included Magnolia, Northern Parula, Black-throated Blue, Black-throated Green and Blackburnian. Other notable birds were 3 Hooded Mergansers, Ruffed Grouse, Raven, Red-tailed Hawk, Pileated Woodpecker and 2 Ruby-throated Hummingbirds.

15.00pm at Mizzy Lake 2 Red-eyed Vireos were seen singing with a Blackburnian Warbler and a Black throated Blue Warbler. We departed Algonquin at 17.00pm and drove 75 miles to Carden Alvar situated north east of Toronto close to Lake Simco.

### **Carden Alvar *N°44 39:06 W79° 01:16***

The Carden Plain is a unique and largely unknown area of the South Central Ontario Landscape, and all agreed was an excellent birding site. Located between Lake Simcoe and Balsam Lake, the Carden Plain features North Americas most accessible Alvar. The Plain is comprised primarily of wildflower rich grassland, shrub-land, and features an extensive network of provincially significant wetlands. According to *Bird Studies Canada* - Carden is one of the very best birding areas in North America. In 1999 the Carden Plain was designated as a "*Nationally Significant Important Bird Area*". Carden is one of the last strongholds of the Eastern Loggerhead Shrike (sub species *migrans*) in Canada and it has high populations of grassland and scrubland birds. The Carden Alvar is a 1.5 hour drive (125 km or 75 miles) northeast of Toronto. From Toronto, take Highway 401 or Don Valley Parkway to Highway 404 north to Newmarket. Exit to Davis Drive and go right (east) to Highway 48. Turn left

(north) on 48 and continue to where it meets Highway 12. Go left (north) on Highway 12 about 12.5 km and exit right (east) to Durham Road 48, which becomes Kawartha Road 48.

We arrived late evening and enjoyed dinner at J.C'S at Kirkfield Lock where our host Rob was most welcoming. After dinner we caught the last of the daylight on the Alvar. The place was alive with birds and we saw at least 15 Bobolinks, 5 Eastern Bluebirds (nest box scheme in place), and 5 Savannah Sparrows. Wilsons Snipe were common as were Eastern Meadowlarks. We also had a calling Northern Saw-whet Owl, ( an uncommon bird here) Whip-poor Will and several Booming American Bitterns. Dusk at Sedge-Wren Marsh produced a single Common Nighthawk. We camped that night in the car park of J.C'S courtesy of Rob.

Friday 23<sup>rd</sup> May

The day was spent exploring the roads and tracks of the Alvar. It was a beautiful place with carpeted meadows of wildflowers and an abundance of insects. Chris described it as Prestwick Carr with Brass Knobs. The Alvar was a last minute addition to our itinerary and we were pleased that it had paid off.

We saw lots of birds throughout the day including the rare Eastern Loggerhead Shrike, Grasshopper Sparrow, (down to two foot) Eastern Kingbird, close views of Ruffed Grouse and lots more besides – Vireos, Bluebirds, Meadowlarks, Snipe, Sparrows, Warblers and Hummingbirds.



Grasshopper Sparrow, Eastern Kingbird, 'Brewster's' Warbler, Wilsons Snipe

Other highlights were Sedge Wren down to 5 foot and a Golden-winged x Blue-winged Warbler hybrid – 'Brewster's' Warbler. Over the marsh were male and female Northern Harriers which were observed food passing a handful of Brown Thrashers, Wild Turkey, Scarlet Tanager and several displaying Upland Sandpipers.

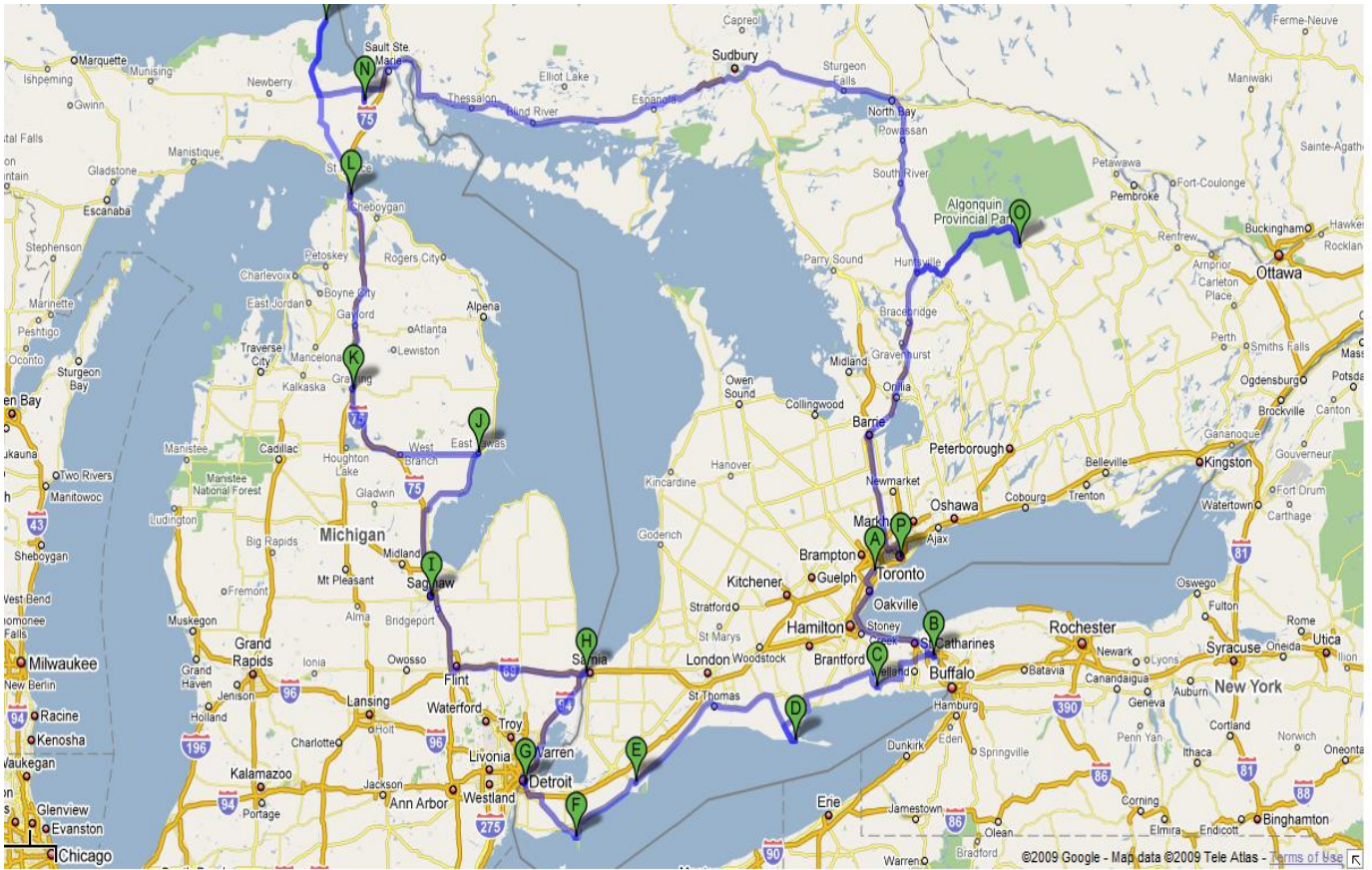
From 21.00 we waited by the main marsh for the elusive Yellow Rail a speciality of this area, as we half expected no sight nor sound, however we were informed that several birds were noted a little earlier in the month so this area is certainly worth a visit for this elusive species. An America Bittern showed well and we heard at least 3 different Sora, several roding American Woodcock, calling Whip-poor Will and 5 Common Nighthawks squawking overhead. The night will also be remembered for dreaded Mozzies which ate us alive.

Saturday 21<sup>st</sup> May.

Our final day of a wonderful though tiring trip. We returned to Toronto making occasional birding stops, however we were all 'birded out' and now ready for home, the drive from Carden Alvar took just under 2 ½ hours and we duly returned our filthy though trusty RV back to the depot and headed off for our uneventful flight home more than happy with our trip list of 211 species.

Tony Stewart





## The Route



