



*Field Guides Tour Report*

**Southeast Ontario: Winter Birds 2013**

Jan 12, 2013 to Jan 16, 2013  
Peter Burke & Jay VanderGaast

Planning a trip to see northern birds has many challenges. We have to forecast the likely presence of highlight species by what we know of historical patterns of the birds and their preferred food sources. As the crystal ball became clearer this past fall, the stage appeared to be set for a good flight year for many of the northern specialties that we birders love to see. And while the flight did materialize for most species, the big show stoppers, the northern owls, were slow to make an appearance. Complicating matters a bit more, the regional magnets for wintering raptors -- those islands in eastern Lake Ontario such as Amherst and Wolfe -- appeared to be experiencing lows in their rodent population cycle and failed to attract many birds.

However, birder and bander Bruce Murphy reported that the agricultural area of Timiskaming, closer to the breeding grounds of many of our target birds, was attracting a number of birds that would fill the gaps that the south seemed to have this year. So as a last minute choice we decided to make a run north and see what we could find in a brand new Field Guides destination.

What followed was a trip that was definitely about quality over quantity! For our long hours of driving and searching we were rewarded with a trip to a true Canadian winter destination, complete with donuts, coffee, snow squalls, and few pretty nifty birds! We hope you look back at the trip with some fond memories of beautiful pure winter colors, a warm coffee making it all feel better, the soft calls of an overhead Pine Grosbeak looking down upon you from its perch, and the feeling of relief when at last a Great Gray made an appearance.

We hope to see you all again some time, and all the best in birding!

--Peter and Jay



*Bright sunshine and warmer than usual temperatures made for some nice birding weather in the forest around New Liskeard. (Photo by guide Jay VanderGaast)*

**KEYS FOR THIS LIST**

One of the following keys may be shown in brackets for individual species as appropriate: \* = heard only, I = introduced, E = endemic, N = nesting, a = austral migrant, b = boreal migrant

**BIRDS**

Anatidae (Ducks, Geese, and Waterfowl)

**MALLARD** (*Anas platyrhynchos*) – A few birds in some open water near Kanata our last afternoon.

**COMMON GOLDENEYE** (*Bucephala clangula*) – One group of birds in open water along the TransCanada Highway near Pembroke on our way back to Ottawa.

Phasianidae (Pheasants, Grouse, and Allies)

**RUFFED GROUSE** (*Bonasa umbellus*) – A couple of birds seen our first afternoon up near Hilliardton; one bird on the road and another 'budding' up in Aspens.

**WILD TURKEY** (*Meleagris gallopavo*) – Many groups around the agricultural areas of Ottawa. [I]

Accipitridae (Hawks, Eagles, and Kites)

**BALD EAGLE** (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) – A deer carcass near North Bay along the Trans Canada attracted the attention of a couple of adults on our way north. There was an immature bird on the scene as we drove south a couple of days later.

**RED-TAILED HAWK** (*Buteo jamaicensis*) – Several birds in the agricultural areas of Ottawa.

**ROUGH-LEGGED HAWK** (*Buteo lagopus*) – One light morph bird soared over the highway in front of the lead vehicle near Pembroke. This is an uncommon bird this far north during winter.

Falconidae (Falcons and Caracaras)

**MERLIN** (*Falco columbarius*) – A quickly glimpsed bird atop a snag near Deep River on the way north. Merlins have increased in numbers in the East in the last couple of decades.

Laridae (Gulls, Terns, and Skimmers)

**GREAT BLACK-BACKED GULL** (*Larus marinus*) – A high flying adult in the middle of Ottawa was pretty much the last new bird of the trip our last morning. The gull's presence is a sign of the atypically warm weather that had been occurring the week before our trip.

Columbidae (Pigeons and Doves)

**ROCK PIGEON** (*Columba livia*) – Present sporadically the entire trip, even in the cold climate of New Liskeard.

**MOURNING DOVE** (*Zenaida macroura*) – A few birds around Ottawa, usually associated with feeders during the winter.

Strigidae (Owls)

**NORTHERN HAWK OWL** (*Surnia ulula*) – Jay picked out this bird along Wool Mill Road, perched atop a large aspen. We trudged across an opening to the back of a field where the bird remained for as long as we wanted, granting perfect views of this handsome owl. A life bird for many, well worth the cold and wind!

**GREAT GRAY OWL** (*Strix nebulosa*) – Our first bird, although close, didn't linger very long, especially when a Hawk Owl stole the show! Despite a lot of looking around Timiskaming, we just couldn't pull another one out. Even the Ottawa area proved tough for us and it wasn't until the last hour of birding that we pulled one out on the eastern side of the city. This bird was much more cooperative and posed well until some crows drove it into the pine forest.

Picidae (Woodpeckers)

**DOWNY WOODPECKER** (*Picoides pubescens*) – A singleton in Ottawa.

**HAIRY WOODPECKER** (*Picoides villosus*) – One bird visited the feeder at Hilliardton while we watched Redpolls. Otherwise a few others flew across the highway during our long drives.

**PILEATED WOODPECKER** (*Dryocopus pileatus*) – A pair flew directly over the first van our morning in Hilliardton.

Laniidae (Shrikes)

**NORTHERN SHRIKE** (*Lanius excubitor*) – We had a few during the trip, but our best views were of a nice adult our last morning in Ottawa, allowing us to examine some subtleties of shrike ID.

Corvidae (Crows, Jays, and Magpies)

**GRAY JAY** (*Perisoreus canadensis*) – A quartet of birds along Wool Mill Rd. offered some decent views as they skirted the trees and looked upon Peter's offerings of food with great suspicion. Gray Jays typically only have one helper allowed to stay in the pair's territory. So group of four together is unusual.

**BLUE JAY** (*Cyanocitta cristata*) – Seen occasionally crossing the road during our drives.

**AMERICAN CROW** (*Corvus brachyrhynchos*) – These soft-core corvids were confined to the southern part of the tour in the Ottawa Valley.

**COMMON RAVEN** (*Corvus corax*) – We saw these true northerners the whole trip. In just a few weeks they will start to think about nesting!

Paridae (Chickadees and Tits)

**BLACK-CAPPED CHICKADEE** (*Poecile atricapillus*) – Present throughout the trip. We had the wonderful opportunity to hold some mist-netted birds thanks to Bruce Murphy. Our fingers are still remembering those chickadees!

Sittidae (Nuthatches)

**WHITE-BREASTED NUTHATCH** (*Sitta carolinensis*) – A couple in the Ottawa Valley; these birds disappear from the north by the time you get to North Bay due to lack of suitable hardwood habitat.

Sturnidae (Starlings)

**EUROPEAN STARLING** (*Sturnus vulgaris*) – These hardy invasive birds were present in the agricultural areas of Timiskaming and parts further south. [I]

Calcariidae (Longspurs and Snow Buntings)

**SNOW BUNTING** (*Plectrophenax nivalis*) – A quick look near Hilliardton was replaced with better views near Arnprior in the Ottawa Valley, of a flock feeding along the roadside.

Emberizidae (Buntings, Sparrows and Allies)

**AMERICAN TREE SPARROW** (*Spizella arborea*) – A wintering bird at the Hilliardton Marsh feeder was unusual being so far north.

**WHITE-THROATED SPARROW** (*Zonotrichia albicollis*) – A couple of birds were seen by a few while searching for a reported Boreal Owl in Fletcher Wildlife Garden in downtown Ottawa. These are scarce winter birds this far north.

Cardinalidae (Cardinals and Allies)

**NORTHERN CARDINAL** (*Cardinalis cardinalis*) – Several birds at Fletcher were seen by some of the group.

Fringillidae (Siskins, Crossbills, and Allies)

**PINE GROSBEAK** (*Pinicola enucleator*) – Absolutely perfect views of this wonderful finch in Hilliardton Marsh. They visited the feeders with redpolls and sat above our heads as they waited to come in for more food.

**HOUSE FINCH** (*Carpodacus mexicanus*) – Several at Fletcher Wildlife Gardens in Ottawa, seen by a few of the group.

**COMMON REDPOLL** (*Acanthis flammea*) – We encountered Redpolls throughout the trip but our best views were at Hilliardton Marsh, thanks in large part to our friend Bruce Murphy who opened up his banding lab for us. We saw many birds in the hand, on the feeders at point blank range and even had the opportunity to see the scarce Greenland or 'Greater' (rostrata) Redpoll race in the hand! Greater are a larger bird with a darker overall appearance that sets them apart from others in a flock.

**HOARY REDPOLL** (*Acanthis hornemanni*) – For most of us, this was our best looks ever at what can be a difficult ID problem in Redpolls. We saw a few male Hoaries at the feeder in Hilliardton with ample opportunity to go over many of the finer marks to separate from Commons. As a bonus, we saw both North American subspecies of Hoary Redpoll, side by side! This includes the northern, Greenland-breeding subspecies, *hornemanni*, of which we saw one on the feeder at close range. It often sat right beside a male of the more southern race, *exilipes*, allowing us to see the size difference and generally paler look of *hornemanni*. Very few folks have seen this subspecies!!!

*Passeridae (Old World Sparrows)*

**HOUSE SPARROW** (*Passer domesticus*) – A few in Ottawa. [1]

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## **MAMMALS**

**SNOWSHOE HARE** (*Lepus americanus*) – Tracks near Hilliardton.

**EASTERN GRAY SQUIRREL** (*Sciurus carolinensis*) – Both Gray and Black morph seen in Ottawa.

**RED SQUIRREL** (*Tamiasciurus hudsonicus*) – A few throughout the trip.

**NORTH AMERICAN PORCUPINE** (*Erethizon dorsatum*) – Scope views during our first evening in Hilliardton.

**RED FOX** (*Vulpes vulpes*) – Tracks near Hilliardton.

**WHITE-TAILED DEER** (*Odocoileus virginianus*) – A few seen from the highway on our drive up and back.

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## **ADDITIONAL COMMENTS**

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**Totals for the tour: 33 bird taxa and 6 mammal taxa**