

Ron & Janet's Big Year: June Update

The Green Fields of Rainy River

"Far-away fields look greener" certainly holds true for Rainy River. Nestled in the far corner of Ontario, with Minnesota to the south and Manitoba to the west, this untidy scrap of flat clay farmland acts as an eastward extension of the great prairies, at least in the minds of the birds that nest there. For birders on a Big Year quest, the Rainy River area is a Happy Hunting Ground of western species that occur in few other places in the province.

Getting there (and back) is NOT half the fun, at least for us. We were both deeply involved in the Carden Nature Festival, which meant three days of leading tours, manning booths, and limited sleep. And we needed to be back in time to take part in the Carden Challenge, another great weekend of good friends and good birds at the expense of sleep. So we had carved out a 10-day period for a trek to Rainy River in our camper van "Vanessa", with the thought that we could pick up a few needed boreal species like Crossbills and Black-backed Woodpecker on our way across the north.

So by early afternoon Sunday, after a final early morning bird tour and frenzied re-packing, we were on our way. We chose the northern Highway 11 route through Cochrane and Hearst, in the hope of fewer hills and more boreal birds. Wendell Ferguson has written the quintessential anthem for this route – "Trees and Rocks, Rocks and Trees" which nicely sums up the landscape. After two long days, 2000+ km, one wheel bearing replacement, and hundreds of Red-eyed Vireos and Alder Flycatchers, there we were in Fort Francis, gateway to our destination – perhaps the only birders to drive across the entire span of northern Ontario and not see a single Crossbill, much less a Black-backed Woodpecker!

But our luck soon changed. That flock of white birds cruising along the town waterfront proved to be the first of many flocks of White Pelicans. Barely out of sight (and smell!) of the Fort Francis paper mill, the forests opened up into verdant pasturelands and hayfields, with even a few areas of grain crops thrown in the mix. Bobolinks and Savannah Sparrows were everywhere, Eastern Bluebirds and Eastern Kingbirds re-appeared along the fencerows, and even a distant Upland Sandpiper made its presence known with its wolf-whistle call.

Within this familiar mix, we soon began to find some of the western specialists we had come for. LeConte's Sparrow was relatively easy to find by its distinctive buzzy call, though actually seeing one in the long grasses is more of a challenge. Black-billed Magpies swooped across the farmlands to disappear into poplar groves, and a pair of stately Marbled Godwits put on a show from atop wooden fenceposts. Western Meadowlarks, which look identical to their eastern counterparts but sing a more melodious song, were surprisingly scarce – we saw only two.

On one day of our visit, we were pleased to have the company of Ahlan Johanson, the president of the Rainy River Valley Field Naturalists, who showed us a lengthy boardwalk the club has built into a large area of open bog. This site yielded one of our top targets – the Connecticut Warbler which sports a greyish head and bib and a yellow body, as well as a loud and distinctive voice.



Our good luck held in finding a place to stay as well, for we ended up for three nights at the fabled Budreau Oak Grove park (well, fabled among birders at least for its reliable supply of Scarlet Tanagers and Red-bellied Woodpeckers and its friendly hosts). This allowed us to easily explore the wet fields nearby to detect Yellow Rails and Short-eared Owls, and the shores of Lake of the Woods just to the north.



Our first lakeside visit was disappointing – none of the gulls patrolling the sheltered bays were the prairie-based Franklin’s that we hoped for, and the supposedly reliable Yellow-headed Blackbirds were nowhere to be seen either. A second visit looked equally fruitless, but just as we finally gave up and were backing up Vanessa to leave, a spectacular male Blackbird flew right across in front of us and landed nearby. And a few moments later, a stop on a cottage causeway across a reedy marsh yielded a singing Nelson’s Sharp-tailed Sparrow, a bonus bird we hadn’t really expected to see.

One of the other Rainy River specialties which we thought might be a challenge to find is Sharp-tailed Grouse, a bird of weedy grasslands with, as the name suggests, a tiny little tail. But our expectations were way off; in fact we saw dozens – in singles on the roadside, in small groups in fields, even on their dancing grounds called “leks” where the males puff out in display and pop up and down in short flights. Over the course of two days, we saw all three grouse species of Ontario – Ruffed, Spruce, and Sharp-tailed – a birding triumvirate we don’t expect to repeat soon.



We couldn’t visit this area without jaunts into the Rainy River and Emo sewage lagoons, but except for the usual waterfowl and a single Wilson’s Phalarope, they weren’t helpful. The Rainy River lagoons are under construction for a new cell, so our walk there gave us first-hand (or maybe first-foot) experience of the dreaded “gumbo” that clings to your boots in weighty layers. And on exactly the same days that the much-heralded Eared Grebes were missing from these lagoons, a fine specimen of the same species was being viewed by many in Cobourg harbour!

One of the odd juxtapositions about the Rainy River area is that hayfields on one side of the road may be matched by extensive conifer bogs on the other side. So as our target list of western birds left to find dwindled, we thought we would try to fill in some of the blanks on our northern list. One of those northern birds even threatened marital harmony, for Ron had found an Olive-sided Flycatcher near Washago during migration, but by the next morning when Janet visited the same spot it had gone.

This seemed to be the place to put that disparity right – Olive-sideds are known to frequent the bogs and wooded streambanks of the Rainy River area, they are boisterous and noisy on their breeding grounds, and their call is unmistakable – a ringing “Quick, three beers!” that sticks in the mind of all who hear it. Dozens of stops later, in habitats that looked ideal, our confidence of ever hearing that call was

dwindling. We did find several Yellow-bellied Flycatchers, another welcome boreal species, but we were running out of time, and the curse of the Olive-sideds seemed to be holding strong.

And then, in mid-afternoon when all sensible birds are deep into their song-less siesta, there it was – that bracing call for three beers in a hurry! We tumbled from the van and set up the scope, hoping to get a look at the scoundrel, but all was quiet. While we waited to see if it would re-appear, our attention was distracted by something dark almost at the tip of a tall tamarack tree, causing it to sway wildly. That something turned out to be a pair of young bear cubs – but wait, what was that dark flash across the field of view? There, not 25 feet in front of us, an elusive Black-backed Woodpecker had swooped in to add to our excitement!

So in a happy frame of mind, we turned southwards to cut across the Great Lakes to southwestern Ontario, to use our remaining time picking up a few of the southern specialties we had missed in May. Two tedious border crossings, three States, and thirty hours later, we were in Pinery Provincial Park for the night, where we found a Yellow-billed Cuckoo but missed Prairie Warbler. Then on to Rondeau – no Prothonotary Warbler there, but a visit to Backus Woods and Spooky Hollow in Norfolk County brought us both Prothonotary and Blue-winged Warblers, as well as Acadian Flycatcher.

Hilton Falls Conservation Area near Milton was on our way home, so early the next morning we showed up there in search of a Louisiana Waterthrush that had been reported recently. We hadn't really counted on three-kilometre walk in to the secluded valley, but the walk was pleasant and we found the bird easily enough. Unfortunately, the three-km walk back out to Vanessa was marred by a drenching rain, which tested both our raincoats beyond their limits! But a change into dry clothes, a hearty breakfast, and a final detour to Wasaga Beach to successfully spy a Piping Plover, and we could declare our final day a success.

After all that, we expected the Carden Challenge might be anti-climactic, with new birds very unlikely. But to everyone's amazement, the winning team put together by Dan Bone turned up a singing Chuck-will's-Widow, a cousin to our Whip-poor-will which should be down in the Carolinas! Birders from across Ontario, and at least a few from Quebec, have been able to hear this persistent singer from a gravel road near Kirkfield over the past two weeks. For us, it became Big Year species #264, and undoubtedly our most unexpected bird of the year.

As we head into our final few months, some of you have been asking what species we have yet to see. In reality, our "hit list" of likely species to add has grown pretty short, but there are a few that still should be possible – Moorhen, King Rail and Cackling Goose continue to elude us; we hope to pick up a few added migrant shorebirds, especially Sanderling, Willet and Purple Sandpiper; and Prairie Warbler, Dickcissel and American Pipit would round out our list nicely. Saw-whet Owl is still on our list, along with Gray Partridge and Red-throated Loon. Because Janet has less time to be in the field, she is still missing a few species that Ron has seen, including Red-shouldered Hawk, Horned Grebe, and Eurasian Wigeon. And if finches choose to show up before our October 31 deadline, we would welcome Redpolls, Crossbills, and Pine Grosbeak.

It will be tougher from here on in – the songbirds have gone quiet and soon will moult into their "confusing fall plumage". But with the help of many friends, we hope to yet expand our Big Year list a little, and to raise a little more cash for the all-important purchase of Wolf Run Alvar.