

Juvenile Least Sandpiper at Crysler; August 7, 2014.
Photo by Jacques Bouvier.





How to Find **250**
Bird Species
in the
OFNC Study Area
in a
Single Year

Part 3: July to
September

Gregory Zbitnew

CONTENTS OF PART 3

- a. Introduction
 - b. How has the year 2018 progressed so far?
 - c. Key activities during this period.
 - d. Important target birds
 - e. Catching up on previous misses
 - f. The summer doldrums
 - g. Migration begins
 - h. The peak of migration
 - i. Longing for the shorebirds
 - j. Farewell to the summer songbirds
 - k. Some closing remarks.
-

INTRODUCTION

In 1977, a series of articles in *Trail & Landscape* described a strategy to see 200 bird species within the OFNC study area (which is the circle of a 50-kilometer radius centered on the Peace Tower, also called the 50K) in a single year. This, the third of a series of four articles providing an update/rewrite of that series, covers the period from July to September.

All the introductory material in the first two articles (published in T&L Volume 52, Numbers 1 and 2) is still relevant to this article, and if you haven't yet started your "big year" and plan to start one, it is highly recommended that you read it.

I have heard that a group of birders who bird once a week has plans, next year, to follow the recommended strategy in this series of articles. So, if you had not planned for a "big year" this year, there is always next year.

I will repeat the key points from that first article:

1. You should chase a rarity as soon as possible. The rarity *might* stay for weeks, but it is more likely to be gone the next day, or even the next hour.
2. Cover all the major habitats/areas at the prime time, if this is all you can do. Article #3 will describe the key habitats/times for July-September.
3. Focus your birding efforts on the uncommon-rare species, the "target" birds.
4. You should take full advantage of the very best birding tool available, which is an online database of bird sightings called eBird (www.ebird.org), to find the most up-to-date information on what is being seen and what is expected. Most of the OFNC's weekly report, issued every Thursday on ofnc.ca, is based on information from eBird.
5. Take advantage of birding information on the OFNC website (ofnc.ca), such as birding areas and the 1993 OFNC checklist.
6. Take advantage, as appropriate, of local birding guides, free field trips, and friendly local birders you see in the field. The sightings email (sightings@ofnc.ca) or identifications email (identifications@ofnc.ca) can offer advice and species identification tips.

HOW HAS THE YEAR 2018 PROGRESSED SO FAR?

How has the birding year progressed in 2018, as of “press time” in late April? I gave a lot of suggestions in Part 1 and Part 2. How good were they?

Of the target birds listed for January-March, 26 of the 29 have been seen, plus 9 of the 10 owl species.

Missing, however, have been HARLEQUIN DUCK (possible in the fall), AMERICAN THREE-TOED WOODPECKER (perhaps next winter), and HOARY REDPOLL (possibly next winter).

Of the birds listed for April-June, 23 of the 53 have been seen to date, but most of that group would not be expected until later in the year.

For the region, a cumulative 170 species had been seen by the end of April, with a few birders seeing over 130 species to date. Some significant rarities showed up in late April: SNOWY EGRET, RUFF, BLUE-WINGED WARBLER, and a first record for the 50K, a NEOTROPIC CORMORANT.

A late February thaw like last year brought a few early arrivals, and like last year, it was followed by a March cold snap. Modest flooding in the east brought good numbers of SNOW GEESE into the region, but not as many as some previous years. There was a reasonable number of the rarer geese. April was one of the worst in decades, and migration was significantly delayed until it improved markedly in the last week.

Only modest numbers of both CROSSBILL species were seen, and they were never widespread. REDPOLLS and PINE GROSBEAKS were almost non-existent. There is still next winter to find the WINTER FINCHES.



*Red-eyed Vireo, Larose Forest, July 14, 2010.
Photo by J. Bouvier.*

BIRDING FROM JULY TO SEPTEMBER

KEY ACTIVITIES DURING THIS PERIOD

1. You can relax a bit during July, since it is a rather inactive month for migration. Your focus would be on finding any of the nesting species you have not seen yet, particularly ones that become much harder to find later in the season.
2. In about early to mid-August, start looking for any missing SHOREBIRDS. The areas to visit depend critically on water levels, so your best bet is to monitor the weekly OFNC report and eBird to find out where birds are being seen.
3. In about mid-August, fall migration is in full swing, so it is time to start checking the migrant traps regularly.
4. Starting late September, look for NELSON'S SPARROW in the phragmites (tall grass-like vegetation) on the Ottawa River from about Ottawa Beach to Constance Bay.
5. In September, start visiting the Ottawa River for PARASITIC JAEGER.

IMPORTANT TARGET BIRDS

The introduction to this section is the same as in Part 2, so it is recommended that you re-read that section. As stated there, the list that follows includes the important birds to target during this period. They almost always occur in our area every year during this time, but are harder to find/easier to miss, so you should focus your efforts on finding these birds, and in the process you will see the more common ones. Even in this list, some are more difficult to find than others, so a * identifies that species as more difficult to find than the others.

The following is found on the Ottawa River:

1. *PARASITIC JAEGER (Ottawa River)

The following are found in shorebird habitat (see text for an explanation):

2. AMERICAN GOLDEN PLOVER
3. *WHIMBREL
4. *HUDSONIAN GODWIT (This species tends to peak a bit later in the year)
5. *RUDDY TURNSTONE (This species is more often seen on rocky habitat on the river)
6. SANDERLING
7. WHITE-RUMPED SANDPIPER
8. *BAIRD'S SANDPIPER
9. *STILT SANDPIPER
10. *LONG-BILLED DOWITCHER
11. *RED-NECKED PHALAROPE

These are found in woodland habitat/migrant traps:

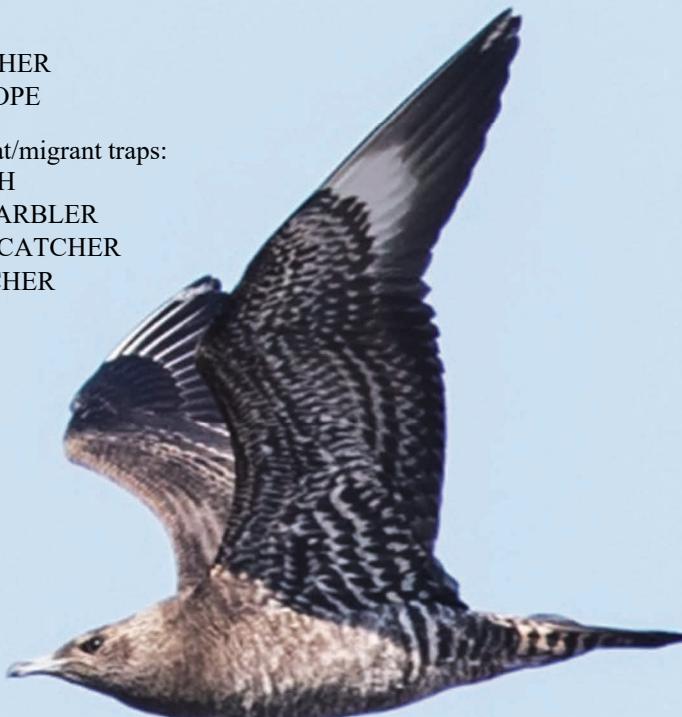
12. GRAY-CHEEKED THRUSH
13. *ORANGE-CROWNED WARBLER
14. *YELLOW-BELLIED FLYCATCHER
15. *OLIVE-SIDED FLYCATCHER

This bird has very local habitat.

See the text for details:

16. *NELSON'S SPARROW

Last year, all of these birds
were seen during
the year, 15 of them
during July-September,
and one in October.



*Juvenile light-morph Parasitic Jaeger;
Ottawa, September 18, 2015.
Photo by Jacques Bouvier.*

CATCHING UP ON PREVIOUS MISSES

These are the target birds mentioned in Part 2 that you can still find in July-September:

1. AMERICAN BITTERN
2. *LEAST BITTERN
3. BROAD-WINGED HAWK
4. VIRGINIA RAIL
5. SORA
6. *UPLAND SANDPIPER
7. *WILSON'S PHALAROPE
8. *SHORT-BILLED DOWITCHER
9. BLACK TERN
10. COMMON TERN
11. CASPIAN TERN
12. *YELLOW-BILLED CUCKOO
13. BLACK-BILLED CUCKOO
14. COMMON Nighthawk (Note: often they are seen migrating in small flocks at dusk starting about mid-August)
15. EASTERN WHIP-POOR-WILL
16. RED-HEADED WOODPECKER
17. WILLOW FLYCATCHER (Note: these are very hard to separate from ALDER FLYCATCHER if they do not call)
18. *YELLOW-THROATED VIREO
19. PHILADELPHIA VIREO
20. NORTHERN ROUGH-WINGED SWALLOW (Note: Often large flocks of mixed species of SWALLOWS are seen by the river and inland ponds starting about mid-August)
21. BANK SWALLOW
22. CLIFF SWALLOW
23. *SEDGE WREN
24. MARSH WREN
25. *BLUE-GRAY GNATCATCHER
26. NORTHERN WATERTHRUSH
27. *GOLDEN-WINGED WARBLER (Note: rarely seen in migration)
28. MOURNING WARBLER
29. CANADA WARBLER
30. GRASSHOPPER SPARROW
31. CLAY-COLORED SPARROW
32. VESPER SPARROW
33. *EASTERN TOWHEE (Note: this species usually sticks around in its nesting grounds well into September)
34. INDIGO BUNTING

In fact, if you have missed some of the birds on this list, you really need to be looking for them during this period, since they will almost certainly have departed by the end of September. With any luck you will not have missed many of them. As in the previous list, a * identifies that species as more difficult to find than the others.

Refer to Part 2 or the 1993 OFNC checklist for details on suitable habitat and whether they are nesting or only migrants. You can find the nesting birds in July. If any of the misses are strictly migrants, start looking for them after July. Of the birds on this list, virtually all were seen last year during July-September.



Blue-headed Vireo in Larose Forest, July 14, 2010. Photo by Jacques Bouvier.

THE SUMMER DOLDRUMS

Very active birders will probably have reached 90% of their yearly tally of species by the end of June. Less active birders will have missed some to a lot of the birds, but fortunately they have a lot of time to “catch up” during the month of July. July is not very active for migration, being perhaps the least active month after January. However, unlike January, there are a lot of birds around. Nesting is still in progress, and there are many young which cannot yet travel very far.

The 50K has records of 170+ nesting species of birds, although for some of them there are very few records. Almost all of those species will be present during the entire month. Identify the missing birds that nest in the region and their suitable habitat. Focus your efforts this month on the major nesting areas where the birds identified in Part 2 are present.

As was also mentioned in Part 2, expect to do a bit of travelling since the best areas are not particularly close to the urban core. This is certainly the time to look in more obscure, untrodden areas, for you never know what may be lurking there, although the chances of finding a rarity are small, of course. In July, there is always some place you can look, and it is recommended that you do so. What could be a better thing to do than spend a warm July morning in the forest?

Also, don’t forget to use eBird to find recent sightings. Early in July there can still be quite a bit of birdsong, especially very early in the morning. With the long days and the generally favourable weather conditions, late evening can also be a productive time to find birds.

MIGRATION BEGINS

Rare birds do show up even in July. Perhaps more importantly in terms of finding them, out-of-place birds can survive quite well almost anywhere here in the summer, unlike in the winter when they are tied to feeders or very restricted areas like open water. A rare bird could potentially have settled in a less popular area for 4-8 weeks by the time July rolls around. If nobody visits the area, it will never be found.

One phenomenon to remember at this time is “post-breeding dispersal”. Particularly among wading birds, many species disperse or wander to some degree after breeding, sometimes quite a bit north, east or west, before going to their regular wintering grounds in the fall. So some birds that do not nest here, like CASPIAN TERN, may become quite a bit more common during the summer.

While July as a whole has little migration, it slowly and steadily builds up during the course of the month. By early to mid-August it has become noticeable, and this is really the point when you have to start paying attention to migration.



*Pied-billed Grebe with young at the Embrun Sewage Lagoons, August 22, 2013.
Photo by Jacques Bouvier.*

THE PEAK OF MIGRATION

Migration is an all-encompassing term and every species of bird follows its own pattern. Fall migration in general really lasts six months (July-December), but for some species they are here and gone in a matter of weeks. You need to check the 1993 OFNC checklist for the seasonal status of each species you are looking for.

Fall migration is also more drawn out for birds. There is not the spring rush to get to the nesting grounds. Also, adults and young often follow a different schedule, and the plumage differences in the fall are well known.

A Sabine's Gull is captured in mid-flight, angled downwards towards the left. The bird has a white head and breast, a dark cap, and dark wings with a prominent white patch at the base of the primaries. It is set against a background of dark blue, slightly rippled water.

*Sabine's Gull in breeding plumage
over the Ottawa River near the
Britannia Conservation Area,
September 25, 2013.*

Photo by Jacques Bouvier.

Generally speaking, the peak time for the insect eaters is late August-early September. This includes most of the songbirds and the flycatchers. Shorebird peak is about the same time, while the seed- and fruit-eaters peak much later. So in terms of sheer numbers and variety of species, this is definitely the peak time.

For nesting species near the northern edge of their range, like GRASSHOPPER SPARROW, you will simply notice that they quickly disappear, while other species with a large nesting range to the north will have some dramatic population peaks.

By mid-August, and especially in late August and early September, there is the potential for significant “fallouts”, similar in concept to those in the spring, meaning that varying weather conditions can result in a huge influx of birds. In the fall, the major differences are that northerly winds, not southerly ones, will bring the influx, and that the fallouts are not as dramatic as in the spring. Just like in the spring, storms can temporarily ground birds like SHOREBIRDS. This is now the time to head back to the migrant traps like Britannia, which can be truly excellent at this time of the year, or truly dead in the depths of a late summer heat wave.

For east-enders who are a bit miffed that Britannia takes all the migration glory, I can honestly say that Petrie Island is an excellent place for migrants at this time of year, as are the woods along the Ottawa River from there to about Bilberry Creek. Undoubtedly the woods on the north side of the river in Quebec are comparable.

I also want to remind everyone that during the peak of migration, migrants can show up even in your backyard, so never stop looking.

The peak of migration is also the time for real rarities to show up, so be prepared to look as soon as possible when a rarity is reported. Last year, two major rarities showed up in September: SABINE’S GULL and PROTHONOTARY WARBLER.

LONGING FOR THE SHOREBIRDS

Special attention will now be given to SHOREBIRDS. For most SHOREBIRDS in the region, the fall is a better time to find them. Migration is more drawn out, there are more birds (many of them young), and under ideal circumstances, habitat is far more suitable.

Starting in early August, birders carefully monitor the water levels of the



Moulting Semipalmated Sandpiper, below the Crysler Dam, August 7, 2014. Photo by Jacques Bouvier.

Ottawa River, longing for the perfect conditions, which seem to happen rather rarely. So most of the species in the “target list” are SHOREBIRDS, and all of them, more or less, can be found in the same general habitat.

Under ideal conditions, the mudflats west of the Shirley's Bay causeway can host hundreds of SHOREBIRDS, and 27 species may be seen during the season. On the very best days, 15 or more species may be seen.

The best days for SHOREBIRDS also require good weather conditions, like northerly winds and somewhat inclement weather.

Under conditions of low water, mudflats can be exposed from about Andrew Haydon Park almost to Britannia Pier. There is more limited habitat on the rocky areas east and west of the Champlain Bridge. Unfortunately, the Ottawa River east of about Parkdale Avenue has very little suitable habitat. In the east, the best useful spot on the Ottawa River is west of the causeway at Petrie Island, but that area is quite limited and much

more prone to being covered in higher water. Virtually all of the Ottawa River in Quebec has very little habitat, unfortunately, but in conditions of very low water there are some exposed areas of shoreline there.

Needless to say, ideal conditions are not the norm and are often quite temporary. Excellent habitat can disappear after a single heavy rainfall or following some adjustment in one of the dams upriver. So when conditions are good, you need to go to the good habitat as soon as possible.

An area which is now becoming quite good is the Carp River reclamation area (in Kanata), the best spot in the region when the Ottawa River is high. Other spots along the Carp River, and to a lesser extent any of the new storm water ponds dotting the city, have the potential for hosting shorebirds. Last year, one such pond near the Carp River hosted a HUDSONIAN GODWIT for several weeks, and an obscure spot in south Kanata had a LONG-BILLED DOWITCHER for a few days. I had mentioned in the last article that



Juvenile Buff-breasted Sandpiper at Andrew Haydon Park, Ottawa, September 1, 2012. Photo by Jacques Bouvier.

the sewage lagoons have declined in quality/and or also have access issues, although the Almonte Lagoons are visible via an observation tower, and the former Richmond Lagoons are now a conservation area.

Birders need to be creative when looking for shorebird habitat. The edges of some inland ponds, like on Moodie Drive and Giroux Road, are sometimes productive, as are flooded fields. The turf farms south of Ottawa can be quite active at times during and after heavy rain.

The other thing that needs to be remembered is that shorebirds, particularly the larger ones, are quite strong flyers and usually keep flying if conditions are suitable. A storm or bad weather has the potential to ground a few or large numbers of birds temporarily, so unfortunately, if you are really keen, you may have to hit the field in bad weather conditions.

Two species in particular, BAIRD'S and STILT SANDPIPER, are easy to miss even when they are around. They are not rare, just very uncommon, but they are mentioned not just because they come through in rather small numbers earlier in the season, but because they are smaller and have more subtle field marks.

Keep looking for SHOREBIRDS throughout September. Like all birds, each species follows its own schedule. Some have left by the end of September, while others are at their peak.

FAREWELL TO THE SUMMER SONGBIRDS

After early September, it will become quite apparent that many of the bird species are disappearing for the season. If you are missing anything on the target list by early September, your window of opportunity is closing rapidly. WARBLERS are around longer than FLYCATCHERS, but every species follows its own schedule. Every week has a different mix of birds. By the end of September, the vast majority of FLYCATCHERS and WARBLERS have departed for the season. One exception is that ORANGE-CROWNED WARBLERS peak in late-September to early October, so this is the best time to be looking for this scarce migrant.



*Juvenile Pectoral Sandpiper near Crysler, August 7, 2014.
Photo by Jacques Bouvier.*

*A House Wren bringing food to its young at
the Reveler Conservation Area, August 3, 2015.
Photo by Jacques Bouvier.*



Some of the THRUSHES are easier to find in September. This is especially so with GRAY-CHEEKED THRUSH, but only if you know the nocturnal call. On favourable nights, thousands of SWAINSON'S and dozens of GRAY-CHEEKED THRUSHES fly over the city, and you can hear them just by stepping out of your house.

During September, keep on searching the migrant traps, the Ottawa River, and any suitable SONGBIRD habitat.

One last bit of advice is that late September is the best time to find NELSON'S SPARROW. Starting late September, look for it in the phragmites (tall grass-like vegetation) on the Ottawa River from about Ottawa Beach to Constance Bay. Unfortunately, Nelson's Sparrow seems to prefer this location and is rarely seen elsewhere, including near the river on the Quebec side.

By the end of September, many of the birds on the target list that you have not yet seen are likely gone for the season. Take a look at the 1993 OFNC checklist as the season progresses so as not to waste much time looking for birds that have already left. There are exceptions of course, where very late, out-of-season birds can sometimes be seen, but you obviously cannot count on this.

SOME CLOSING REMARKS.

As we mentioned in the previous two articles, while we have outlined the hot spots and times for these birds, don't neglect inspecting any suitable habitat that is convenient if it is near your home or near where you often go. Rarities and just ordinary good birds are sometimes not at the hotspots.

One final note: Remember that access to Shirley's Bay, a premier spot in the Ottawa area, is vital starting about mid-April, and requires that your OFNC membership be up-to-date and that you had specifically requested that your name be placed on the access list for this area. The updated list was sent out to Shirley's Bay in early April, but there may be another one later. ☺

The editor wishes to thank Jacques Bouvier, once again, for providing these beautiful bird pictures to complement the article. You can follow Jacques's work (Oiseaux EEO Birds) on: <http://jacques-miroiseur.smugmug.com/> and <http://jacquesbouvier.blogspot.ca/>.

*Field Sparrow at the
Reveler Conservation Area,
August 3, 2015.
Photo by Jacques Bouvier.*

