

# Canada

**12-27 May 1998**

**Participants:**

**Pete & Paddie Adams**

**John Allton**

**Peter & Fran Barlow**

**Steve Cawthray**

**Tony & Viv Codner**

**Dave Helliar**

**Eric Holmes**

**John Kirby**

**David Long**

**Barry Mathew**

**Keith & Ann Powrie**

**John Sanders**

**Barrie Widden**

**Leaders:**

**Vaughan Ashby**

**and Peter Lansdown**



**Picture: Evening Grosbeak**

**Day 1:** Left London Heathrow at 14.00 only slightly behind schedule, arriving Detroit at 16.30 local time. By 19.00 we were crossing the border into Canada at Windsor & by 20.00 we were checking into our hotel at Tilbury and watching 2 Northern Rough-winged Swallows in the car park! Accommodation around Point Pelee books up years in advance so this was the closest possible, about 30 minutes from Leamington.

**Day 2:** After an early breakfast & drive to Point Pelee, during which time we saw a number of the common species of the area including American Robin, Horned Lark, Common Grackle, Mourning Dove, Killdeer, Red-winged Blackbird & Great Blue Heron. Even at 08.00 the main car parks were full but this did have one benefit as, on our 10 minute walk down to the visitor centre from an overflow car park, we saw our only Golden-winged Warbler of the trip together with Blackburnian Warbler, Purple Martin, Eastern Towhee, Turkey Vulture, Grey Catbird, House Wren, Indigo Bunting, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Baltimore Oriole, Chimney Swift & Downy Woodpecker. Arriving at the centre, we took the first tram to the point and, almost immediately after disembarking, were surrounded by large numbers of migrant warblers. The short walk to the actual point, which should have taken only 5 minutes, took some 3 hours, during which time we recorded the majority of North American wood-warblers & vireos. Good numbers of Black-throated Blue, Chestnut-sided, Bay-breasted, Cape May, Nashville, Tennessee, Palm, Black-throated Green, Yellow, Yellow-rumped, Magnolia & Black-and-White Warblers were seen together with Northern Parula and single Wilson's & Blue-winged Warblers. Vireos were represented by Red-eyed, Yellow-throated, Blue-headed, Philadelphia & Eastern Warbling, while a single Yellow-billed Cuckoo caused excitement. The real highlight, however, was a little brown job: an American Tree Sparrow, which was a very late migrant. Other sparrows included Field, Lincoln's, Song, Savannah, Chipping, White-throated & White-crowned, whilst Scarlet Tanager, Northern Cardinal & Orchard Oriole added a little colour & Ruby-throated Hummingbird just little! When we finally reached the tip, 3 species of gull were present, Bonaparte's, Ring-billed & American Herring, but the only ducks encountered were a few Red-breasted Mergansers, with a solitary Great Northern Diver far out on the lake. There was some evidence of reverse migration for totally unknown reasons as the weather was fine & sunny; only the Blue Jays & Cedar Waxwings must have known why! A small charm of American Goldfinches was located at the top of a tree while we

were watching Tree Swallows and, before we started to head back to the tram, a Red-headed Woodpecker & several Red-breasted Nuthatches were seen, whilst flycatchers were represented by single Least & Acadian together with a couple of Eastern Wood-pewees & numerous Eastern Kingbirds. Whilst waiting for the tram, we were privileged to watch both Carolina Wren & Blue-grey Gnatcatcher nest-building. Returning to the visitor centre, we heard about a roosting Eastern Screech-Owl which was duly located and gave excellent views as it warily watched a Blue Jay. By now our lunch stop was rather late, with all the excitement, and was not taken until 15.30. Even then, however, we managed to add Black Tern as we queued for our food at the excellent Marsh Boardwalk Café. Returning to the visitor centre, we heard about a Prothonotary Warbler but it could not be re-found, so we had to make do with a couple of Swainson's Thrushes & a Veery together with a Northern Flicker. Leaving Point Pelee, we drove to a site for Sandhill Crane but could not find them but made do with looking at a Bald Eagle nest complete with adults & young! On the way back to the hotel to crown a superb day we found Northern Harriers, American Kestrels & 3 displaying male Bobolinks.

**Day 3:** After such a fantastic first day at Point Pelee, it was obviously going to be a hard act to follow. Wanting to spend more time at the point, we caught an earlier tram and on arrival found fewer warblers about. It didn't take us long to find our first new bird of the day, however: Ruby-crowned Kinglet. Shortly after, we added Canada Warbler before hearing about an Iceland Gull at the point. This turned out to be a second-summer Kumlein's Gull which was present with an immature Great Black-backed Gull, 4 Common & single Caspian & Forster's Terns with a Spotted Sandpiper nearby. The hot-line was now working well, with Hooded Warbler heard about & quickly seen, shortly followed by female Cerulean Warbler & Black-billed Cuckoo. Small numbers of Bay-breasted, Chestnut-sided & Blackburnian Warblers were seen plus Brown-headed Cowbirds & House Finches, although, as usual, the dominant species was Yellow Warbler. Returning to the tram & then on to the visitor centre at 10.30, we enjoyed a coffee & doughnut (the leader had selfishly reserved the last Boston Creme!). Once again to the point, but it was much quieter, with just Clay-colored Sparrow added, so we returned to the halfway point by tram. A few raptors were passing through with a single Cooper's & several Broad-winged Hawks joining the Turkey Vultures. A male American Redstart was a nice find & a skulking sparrow was eventually identified as White-throated. It was by now quite hot, so we made tracks to the Marsh Boardwalk Café for lunch and 'Heavenly Hash' ice-cream followed by a walk on the boardwalk. Swamp Sparrows & Common Yellowthroats were common &, with a little effort, we also saw several Marsh Wrens & American Coot. A male Black Tern eagerly chased the female around with his offering of a fish, whilst a lucky few members of the group had brief flight views of an American Bittern. Driving out of the park & into Leamington for an evening meal, a couple of American Kestrels were seen whilst those who ate fast saw a Common Nighthawk high above the Burger King! Once again back into the park this time to look for Yellow-breasted Chat which proved very elusive. Brief views of single Brown Thrashers & Northern Mockingbirds was had before we staked out our positions for the American Woodcock show at dusk. Unfortunately, no-one had bothered to tell the American Woodcock where to perform & they decided to do so elsewhere & we had only the briefest view of a bird flying quickly past.

**Day 4:** Today we visited our first sewerage pools, at Coomber, which, despite looking good held only 10 Spotted Sandpipers. Our next stop was Tremblay Beach where we saw Wood Thrush &, on the walk down to the sewerage pools, we flushed a Virginia Rail. On the pools were 3 Least & 2 Semipalmated Sandpipers, 11 Semipalmated Plovers, 5 Lesser Yellowlegs & Dunlins, Ruddy Turnstones & Black-bellied Plovers & Blue-winged Teals. 2 Buff-bellied Pipits were a nice find in an adjacent field. The walk around Tremblay Beach Conservation Area was fairly bird-less as it was so overgrown & we failed to see the Yellow-headed Blackbirds. By now it was getting hot (an unseasonable 34c) so we stopped at a very friendly local garage where we spent a very interesting half an hour. Continuing our journey, at Jeanette's Creek we found a small colony of Cliff Swallows under the bridge plus a Red-tailed Hawk before arriving at St. Clair NWA. These marshes are superb but, with the early spring, all the wildfowl except Pied-billed Grebe, American Coot, Common Gallinule, Mute Swan & Canada Geese (with young), had departed. Half the group stayed at the tower hide looking for Yellow-headed Blackbird while the rest continued along the trail and were rewarded with a couple of Acadian & a Yellow-bellied Flycatcher. Back at the tower hide, a couple of Least Bitterns gave good flight views.

**Day 5:** An early start and long drive back into the US on our way to Whitefish Point. By mid-morning we were well into the Lower Peninsula with the scenery changing from flat open farmland to coniferous forests and then boreal and at lunch-time we crossed the Mackinac Bridge, in near gale force winds, into the Upper Peninsula. The highlight of our journey so far was an adult Bald Eagle being mobbed by American Crows. By mid afternoon having by now seen an Osprey & several Common Ravens, we were checking into our motel at Paradise, by which time it was apparent that there was a small raptor movement on so we eagerly drove the last 11 miles to Whitefish Point where we had excellent views of both Broad-winged & Sharp-shinned Hawks plus a Peregrine. Whitefish Point is like an inverted version of Point Pelee but, unlike its more famous Canadian counterpart, is substantially less well visited. A much smaller area to work & less cover, combined with an excellent observatory & extremely friendly staff, makes this a superb place to birdwatch. Turning our attention to passerine migrants, it was apparent that there had been a small fall and we were fortunate to find Boreal Chickadees (a very uncommon bird here) as one of our first birds. Black-capped Chickadees were very common & accompanied the migrant warblers which comprised Orange-crowned, Nashville, Yellow, Chestnut-sided, Magnolia, Cape May, Yellow-rumped, Black-throated Green, Pine, Palm & Black-and-White with American Redstart, Northern Parula & Eastern Warbling Vireo. White-crowned & Chipping Sparrows were very common around the feeders together with huge numbers of Blue Jays which made a spectacular sight as they massed to head out north from the point then 'chickened out'! The very helpful shop manager arranged for the restaurant to stay open until 21.30 for dinner so we were able to stay until 21.15 to look for the reported Great Grey Owl. Unfortunately the bird did not show & we had to satisfy ourselves with views of a Common Nighthawk.

**Day 6:** Having met our local guide, Jim, the night before, he accompanied us this morning for a search for Spruce Grouse near the Anders Campground. Never in our wildest dreams, however, could we imagine finding a superb male within just a few minutes & watching it for over an hour at ranges down to six feet. In fact, at one stage, it even displayed to one of the leaders! Also present was a singing Dark-eyed Junco. Armed with extra information from Jim, we sadly said goodbye, as he had a 300 mile journey home to teach the next day, and returned to Paradise to breakfast, which turned out to be a rather protracted affair. Returning to Whitefish Point, however, it didn't take us long to find the Piping Plover despite the strong wind. In fact, the lake more resembled the ocean, with large waves breaking on the shore! More Sharp-shinned & Broad-winged

Hawks continued to pass over together with an Osprey, Peregrine Falcon & a couple of Merlins & we were very pleased to have excellent views of a small flock of Sandhill Crane, the real surprise was however, a Mississippi Kite seen trying to fly out over the point then returning south. Numerically, there less warblers around today but, nevertheless, a good diversity included Blackburnian, Bay-breasted, Tennessee & Wilson's in addition to those seen the previous day. 3 Buff-bellied Pipits showed briefly on the beach & a Brown Thrasher was located. Another surprise, however, was an elusive sparrow which, after an hour of stalking, eventually gave itself up: Le Conte's Sparrow. After yesterday's exertions, this was a fairly laid-back day, with several periods spent relaxing in the warm sunshine in the lee of the wind behind the observatory building, overlooking the feeders. A male Evening Grosbeak gave exceptional views down to 6 feet with others passing over & Pine Siskin showed briefly but at equally close range. Eventually, we decided that we had to start looking for birds again, so we visited another nearby site where a Great Grey Owl had been seen. Unfortunately, the area was virtually birdless until we returned to the minibuses, where 2 Brown Creepers were found. Back to Whitefish Point & a pair of Eastern Bluebirds showed well in a roadside clearing en-route. We were disappointed by reports from a voluntary Warden that not only had the Great Grey Owl been seen 15 minutes after our departure the previous night, but that he had just seen another bird along a nearby road navigable only by 4 wheel drive (we didn't have one!). We therefore decided to remain at Whitefish Point &, fortunately, an enterprising local student had set up a hot dog stand where we promptly relieved him of his stock! A short 'seawatch' finally gave us a flock of 9 White-winged Scoters (shortly to be split from Velvet Scoter?) as well as excellent views of displaying Great Northern Divers & a huge distant forest fire. Even though the owl had not been seen until 21.30 the previous night we rather optimistically started to arrange viewing positions at about 20.30 expecting a long wait. It was, therefore, very much to our surprise when a shout went out at 20.55 when it was still extremely good light that the owl had just been seen & an even greater shock to find it only 30 yards away sat on a tree stump. Although it only remained there for about 30 seconds, the views were incredible of this almost mythical (for me anyway, as I have missed them many times before) 'phantom of the north' & left everyone totally awe inspired. Although it flew off all too soon, it, or another, re-appeared quickly and allowed us to watch it for some 40 minutes at ranges down to 60 yards so that we could see every detail in the good light. Its glaring yellow eyes frequently stared us out as it looked at us in a rather contemptuous fashion but how could you leave a bird like this so we stayed until it was almost dark & the owl eventually flew off. Returning to the vehicles to wait for the owl banding to start, we were in very high spirits & the first check of the nets at 22.15 brought a further surprise in the form of a rather aggressive Barred Owl. The second check of the nets at 23.00 did not give us our Northern Saw-Whet Owl but nobody was complaining as we returned to the motel!

**Day 7:** An early start, with 2 Eastern Phoebes seen by the cabins, was frustrated by a rather protracted breakfast. We drove through some beautiful boreal habitat on the way to Newberry, during which time we nearly hit a Pileated Woodpecker but only a few in the front of the vehicles saw it. Stopping to try to relocate the bird we found singing Northern Parulas but we were nearly devoured by mosquitoes following a short shower of rain. Continuing on to Seney, a fruitful stop was made near the entrance where a nesting pair of Trumpeter Swans was seen together with several Ring-necked Ducks, a Lesser Scaup & a female Hooded Merganser. Whilst checking in at the information centre, a Common (Wilson's) Snipe was located & after gathering all the information we could, we went around the auto-route tour. During the next 3 hours we saw Great Northern Divers, Pied-billed Grebes, Double-crested Cormorants, Mallard, Blue-winged Teal & more Trumpeter Swans together with 4 Wood Ducks, 3 American Wigeon, 3 American Black Ducks, several pairs of Canada Geese with young & several male Hooded Mergansers. Of the raptors, 2 Bald Eagles & 3 Ospreys were seen together with single Sharp-shinned & Broad-winged Hawks, whilst several Sandhill Cranes gave excellent performances. A Spotted Sandpiper allowed itself to be photographed at close range & one of the leaders to cover himself in tar in the process of doing so! Further additions to the list included a pair of Belted Kingfishers & a Hairy Woodpecker. As we continued around the motor tour one of the regular stops gave us an unexpected bird in the form of a Yellow Rail heard calling but, not unexpectedly, remaining unseen. American Bittern gave 2 good flight views but passerines were rather thin on the ground with only a couple of Swamp Sparrows & Common Yellowthroat seen & Marsh Wren heard. Having done so well in the reserve, we headed to another site given to us by one of the wardens, which at first, with the exception of a Yellow-shafted Flicker at a nest hole, proved to be rather birdless. During our walk, however, we located at least 2 Brewer's Blackbirds amongst the Common Grackles which gave us considerable identification problems with young Common Grackles being present as well. The highlight, however, was 3 Sharp-tailed Grouse flushed from the meadow, one of which gave very good views sat on a grassy mound a couple of hundred yards away for about 10 minutes. Returning to the vans, a further 3 Sharp-tailed Grouse were seen, one of which gave remarkable views of it's 'sharp' tail! In addition, a Vesper Sparrow proved to be the only one of the tour. By now we were running well behind schedule & our short stops at sites for Gray Jay & Black-backed Woodpecker proved fruitless so we continued back over the Mackinac bridge, seeing Black-crowned Night-Heron flying from the Lower to Upper Peninsula &, arrived at Grayling rather late in the evening after stopping en-route for a meal where we found the most incredible moths around a floodlight.

**Day 8:** This was the day of the Kirtland's Warbler tour meeting at 07.30 at the Holiday Inn where it proved difficult to locate the actual assembly point. When we eventually found it (tucked away at a side entrance) the slide show was already halfway through which was no great loss as the room was too small for the group anyway! As is always the case, we were told that the previous day a male had been performing to photographers down to 20 feet but today it was rather elusive. By the time we left the site at 10.30, however, every member of the group had seen the bird & others well. Other birds seen at the site included Nashville Warbler & a pair of displaying Upland Sandpipers. Returning to the vehicles we were surprised to hear another Kirtland's Warbler on the opposite side of the road which gave us more prolonged views. As we were returning to Grayling an Upland Sandpiper was seen perched on a telephone wire & was watched for some considerable time flying around displaying & even landing in a tree! After brunch in Grayling, we drove towards different habitat south west of the town. En-route we noticed other areas with restricted entry posted because of nesting Kirtland's Warblers & large numbers of nestboxes for Eastern Bluebirds which were almost common here. With the threat of storms we quickly located our target species here, Eastern Meadowlark, & headed south. This was a fortunate move, as shortly after our departure, there were severe thunderstorms! Seeing Great White Egret en-route & arriving in the city of Midland, we looked for Henslow's Sparrow around playing fields in the northern outskirts but without success, locating only Song & Savannah

Sparrows. We therefore returned to Detroit & across the international bridge into Canada to our motel for the next 7 nights in the delightful town of Kingsville.

**Day 9:** After a good night's sleep at this excellent motel, with most units have a full kitchen, we went to Harrow Sewerage Farm via breakfast & a Green Heron as we were still short of waders. There were certainly plenty of birds present with good numbers of Grey & Semipalmated Plovers together with large numbers of Ruddy Turnstones & Dunlins. Amongst all these were 2 Lesser Yellowlegs, single Short-billed Dowitcher & Red Knot, 6 each of Semipalmated & White-rumped Sandpipers, 35 Least Sandpipers & 2 Wilson's Phalaropes as well as another Green Heron. Returning to Point Pelee to see what we had missed over the previous few days, it was apparent that migration had quietened down a bit. Nevertheless, we saw 2 Yellow-billed Cuckoos, our first Great Crested Flycatcher & Grey-cheeked Thrush of the tour & a small selection of warblers including Chestnut-sided, Magnolia, Black-throated Blue, Blackpoll, Wilson's, Canada & Blackburnian Warblers & American Redstart, although Mourning Warbler managed to evade us once again.

**Day 10:** Today we visited Rondeau Provincial Park in search of the Prothonotary Warbler. On arrival, we walked to the south trail seeing a few migrants including Least Flycatcher, Grey-cheeked & Swainson's Thrushes and Chestnut-sided, Magnolia, Wilson's & Canada Warblers, together with Scarlet Tanager & both Black & Yellow-billed Cuckoos. At the southern tip, a Hudsonian Whimbrel was seen to fly past & land on the lake but there was no sign of the elusive Prothonotary Warbler. With the Tulip Tree Trail being the best 'stake out', we spent a couple of hours there, but birders already there had been waiting 3-4 hours without success which did not bode well & we only saw Wood Duck! The feeders around the information centre were, however, more productive with Red-headed, Red-bellied, Downy & Hairy Woodpeckers plus the other speciality we were seeking, White-breasted Nuthatch. Giving up on the Prothonotary Warbler, we left the park & were rewarded with excellent views of a juvenile & 2 adult Great Horned Owls at a regular spot.

**Day 11:** We spent the whole day at Point Pelee where Mourning, Kentucky & Connecticut Warblers were present the previous day. With raised hopes we took the tram to the tip, where small numbers of warblers were still present including Chestnut-sided, Black-throated Green, Blackburnian, Bay-breasted, Black-and-White, Wilson's & Canada plus American Redstart & Common Yellowthroat. Off the point was a Little Gull with the hundreds of Bonaparte's Gulls & 5 Great Black-backed Gulls. Again, Mourning Warbler eluded us, so we tried for White-eyed Vireo which was more co-operative. We returned to the Marsh Boardwalk for lunch (& our favourite heavenly hash ice cream!) then back to the information centre again, where we failed to see both Mourning & Kentucky Warblers. As we were giving up, an Olive-sided Flycatcher gave good, if brief, views to everyone. Having booked an evening meal at the fish restaurant, we first joined Peter Coe & walked around the De Laurier trail. The two cuckoos were seen side-by-side and this time, Yellow-breasted Chat proved far more obliging with superb views of 3 males. With dusk approaching, we moved to a site Peter had discovered for displaying American Woodcock about 400 yards away from the previous one. At least 3 males were displaying, one of which landed only some 20 feet away & was seen on the ground by torchlight.

**Day 12:** Today the group split into 2 with the majority going on a sightseeing trip to Niagara Falls and 5 remaining around Harrow S. F. & Point Pelee. The highlights of the Niagara group were a Franklin's Gull over the breakfast stop, huge numbers of gulls at Niagara Falls together with 6 Black-crowned Night-Herons & a Common Merganser & another White-breasted Nuthatch in the park. At Harrow S. F. there were plenty of waders again but nothing new except Ruddy Duck! Returning to Point Pelee, migrants were extremely thin on the ground & much effort yielded little reward. The sparrow field proved much more productive however, with a Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow giving excellent views for this secretive species.

**Day 13:** We returned to Point Pelee again today but there had been no sign of the Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow. Migration was almost at an end & there were very few warblers about so we decided to head straight for the Mourning Warbler site again. Whilst we were waiting for one bird, one of the leaders moved to another site & it was here that the walkie talkies came in very useful when the bird was quickly located & it was eventually seen well by everyone. News then broke of a male Summer Tanager towards the tip so we boarded the next tram &, shortly after arrival, we were watching it, sometimes close to a male Scarlet Tanager. The only other migrants of any significance here were Blackpoll Warbler & Eastern Warbling Vireo. Returning to the information centre, there was more news, this time of a Connecticut Warbler. After waiting at the site for an hour, however, it was obvious that the viewing conditions were very difficult so we gave it up & walked around the woodland trail, seeing the Eastern Screech Owl again. After leaving the park, we visited Hillman Marsh, where we found quite a few waders around the muddy margins. Whilst waiting for dusk, we walked around one of the trails & it was here that we experienced our worst weather of the tour with most people getting soaked! With very little being seen & the weather so poor, we called it a day.

**Day 14:** We still had 2 important birds to see so we headed straight for Rondeau Provincial Park again & took our positions on the Tulip Tree Trail. After an hour, things were not looking good again & people began drifting off to the feeders & information centre. As is often the case, this is when the bird turns up & exactly this happened! The majority of the group got good views of a Prothonotary Warbler but it was a further nail-biting half an hour before one showed again & the rest saw it. Pileated Woodpecker put in a brief appearance together with breeding Winter Wrens. Back at the feeder a Pine Siskin showed well. Driving towards St. Clair NWA we came across a field full of Grey Plovers which on scrutiny, contained an American Golden Plover. The canal by the entrance to St. Clair was low & had muddy margins with lots of waders including 3 Solitary Sandpipers & a Greater Yellowlegs which flew off all too quickly. Walking down to the tower hide, we prepared ourselves for a long wait & some of the group explored further along the trail. The Yellow-headed Blackbird showed at this time, of course, & when the rest of the group returned it was a while before it showed again but, eventually, everyone got reasonable, if distant, views. During this time, a couple of Least Bitterns gave good flight views & a Ruddy Duck was seen at long range.

**Day 15:** We decided to spend our last morning at Point Pelee though in the knowledge that there would be very few migrants around. It was very pleasant seeing once more many of the species with which we had become familiar. We heard an Ovenbird and then one final new bird: Willow Flycatcher, singing its distinctive call from a dead tree on the De Laurier Trail. Sadly saying farewell to Point Pelee, we returned into the USA & departed from Detroit airport, arriving back in the UK on day 16.