

Celebrate our Wetland Birds

By Ann Brightman

All photos and cover image by
Robert McCaw

When I was a kid, my family and I often went on wilderness canoe trips. Though we usually paddled the bigger lakes, our explorations occasionally took us across beaver ponds, through marshes and into other wetland areas.

I'll never forget the magic of drifting silently through tall reeds in the early morning mist, pausing to observe and listen to the rich birdlife that populate these unique natural settings. I can remember watching a great blue heron fishing for breakfast on the shores of a pond; spotting a marsh wren flitting elusively through a stand of cattails; and the first time I ever heard an American bittern.

For those with an interest in wetland birds, the Bruce Trail offers innumerable opportunities to see a huge variety of species, from geese and ducks to grebes and herons. "The Niagara Escarpment region is large and ecologically diverse and has a wide range of wetland habitat types, from large cattail marshes

to woodland swamps to wet meadows and fens," says Gregor Beck, chair and co-editor of the Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Ontario (www.birdsontario.org). "For example, large cattail marshes are found just below the Escarpment in the Niagara and Hamilton areas, and at inland locations farther north." In the spring and fall, thousands of migrants pass through the entire region, touching down to feed and rest in ponds and marshes, and any of these species remain for the summer to nest and breed.

When And Where Should I Go?

You can see wetland birds any time during the season, but the largest numbers occur in April, May, September and October, when

migration is in full swing. Fred Young, who recently donated a piece of land at Beaver Valley near Collingwood to the Bruce Trail Conservancy, says that the 25-acre beaver pond on the property is a very attractive place for migratory birds. "We get thousands of Canada geese, and a great variety of ducks, including mallards, wood ducks, hooded and common mergansers," he says, adding that many of the geese and wood ducks stay to nest.

"In early spring, coastal marshes and the adjacent open waters of Lake Ontario and Georgian Bay are great places to observe migrating waterfowl – often in the tens of thousands," adds Gregor. "The best times are mid-March to April before ducks migrate north, and then again in late fall."

Another excellent observation spot, advises Ryan Archer of Bird Studies Canada (www.bsc-eoc.org) is the Canadian Migration Monitoring Network station at Bruce Peninsula Bird Observatory. It's open to the public.



What Will I See?

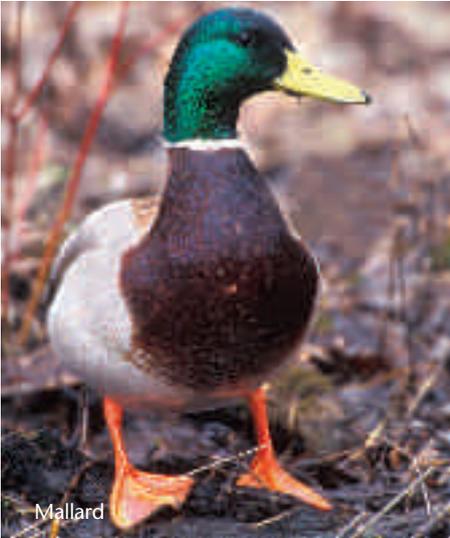
Whatever time of year you visit the Bruce's wetlands, you can be sure of seeing a diverse range of birds, depending on the specific location. Here's just a partial checklist to take along with you:



American bittern



Red-winged blackbird



Mallard



Sandhill Crane



Hooded merganser



Common Yellowthroat



Canada Goose



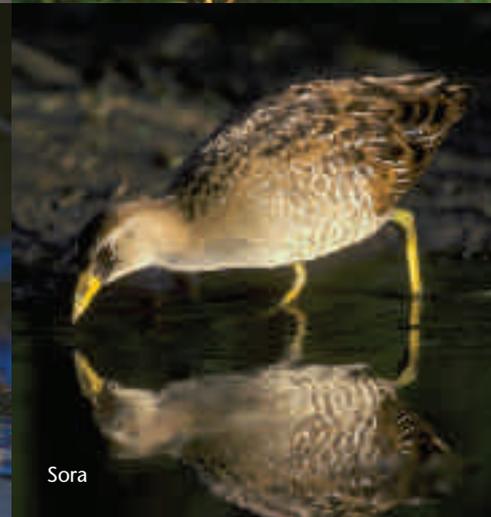
Common Moorhen



Marsh Wren



Sandpipers



Sora





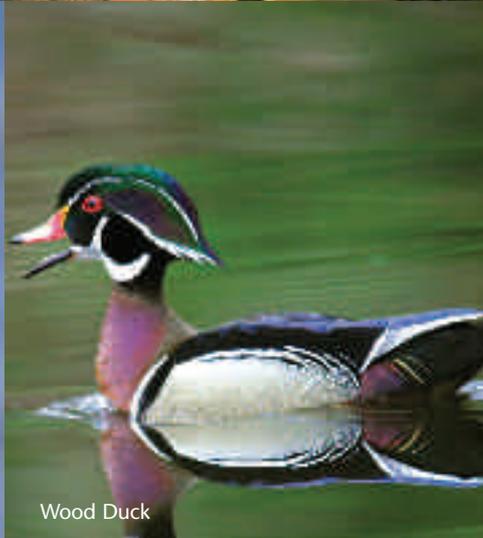
American Coot



Cormorants



Great Blue Heron



Wood Duck



Pied-Billed Grebe



Virginia Rail



Swamp Sparrow



Yellow Warbler

8 Tips For Wetland Bird-Watching

- 1 Go early in the morning or later in the evening; birds are most active during these times.
- 2 “Try to visit locations with trails, boardwalks or observation platforms that take you into the wetland habitat,” advises Gregor. You can also explore many areas by canoe.
- 3 Avoid dressing in bright colours.
- 4 Wear rubber boots or hip waders. The edges of ponds and marshes are often soggy, and you might want to wade out to get a closer look at something.
- 5 Remember to bring bug repellent and a hat. Wetlands are a haven for mosquitoes, especially in spring.
- 6 Don’t forget binoculars, guidebooks, sun protection, and drinking water.
- 7 Be patient. Find a place where you’ll be least visible, and keep still and quiet.
- 8 “If you get the opportunity to hike with a local birder or go on a naturalists’ trip, take advantage of it,” adds Ryan Archer of Bird Studies Canada. An expert can help you identify your sightings.



Sandpipers



“Species like the wood duck and hooded merganser are great examples of waterfowl that nest in tree cavities or nest boxes in flooded forests and stream margins,” says Gregor. “Both are relatively common in suitable habitat along parts of the Escarpment.” He adds that although the Virginia rail also occurs along the Niagara Peninsula, it’s more often seen than heard because it’s so secretive. The same applies to the common moorhen and pied-billed grebe.

Birds that are easier to both see and hear include swamp sparrows

and common yellowthroats, which are quite common along the central and northern parts of the Escarpment. Another vocal songbird that frequents wetlands is the marsh wren, which can be found in many areas along the Bruce Trail.

Will I Spot Any Rare Birds?

You might! One bird that used to be relatively rare in the region, but which is now seen more often, is the sandhill crane. “As recently as twenty years ago, this species wasn’t known to breed in many loca-

tions along the Escarpment or in southern Ontario,” says Gregor. “It’s a good example of a large, spectacular bird making a big splash in southern Ontario now, and can be found relatively commonly on the Bruce Peninsula.”

Less conspicuous, but just as exciting if you manage to see one, is the northern waterthrush, which occurs in parts of the Escarpment between Hamilton and Collingwood. The Louisiana waterthrush, meanwhile, though rare in Ontario, nests along streams in mature forest at several locations along the Escarpment.

For Fred Young, the highlight of his many years living near the pond at Beaver Valley was when a great egret nested there. This magnificent bird can sometimes be seen in the Hamilton and Niagara regions, but usually outside the breeding season, says Gregor. Fred’s former property has also been honored with visits from relatively unusual species like the black-crowned night heron and green heron.

Whether you’re a novice or seasoned birder, the Bruce Peninsula is a superb place to look for and study wetland species. It’s been awhile since I’ve done any bird-watching from a canoe, but I’m looking forward to hitting the trail this year, with binoculars and bird book in hand, to see what I can spot. •

Ann Brightman is a writer living in Cobourg, Ontario. She is also Managing Editor of Animal Wellness Magazine, and a member of the Willow Beach Field Naturalists. Ann enjoys bird watching, nature and gardening.

The Bruce Trail Conservancy has just secured a large wetland on the Bruce Peninsula, preserving this important habitat for waterfowl and other fauna, as well as securing several hundred metres of Bruce Trail forever – see the Land Securement article on page 9-10 for more information.

