

Philadelphia Larus

the newsletter of the Delaware Valley Ornithological Club

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Chasing Owls: Invasion in Ontario

AN ALMOST UNPRECEDENTED natural phenomenon occurred this winter in Ontario, Canada: an irruption of DVOC members and other birders from throughout the northeastern United States.

On the last weekend in a bitter cold January, a carload of weary travelers, bundled under pillows and blankets, approached the Canadian customs station at Thousand Islands Bridge, from Interstate 81 in New York. At 6 in the morning, it was still dark.

The customs officer peered into the car and asked us our destination. We told him we were headed to Amherst Island and Ottawa.

"Do you have anything to declare besides your clothes and binoculars?" responded the customs man.

The first hint that something was happening up in the frozen north came during the Christmas Count period, when owls — particularly Boreal, Hawk and Great Gray — were reported to be converging on Amherst Island. It started sounding like a repeat performance of the winter of 1979, the last flight year of strigiforms.

The DVOC vanguard was led by Paul Guris, Frank Windfelter, Marv Hyett and Don Jones in one car (Group A) and John and Jay LaVia, Jim Meritt and Bill Tannery in another (Group B). That was the weekend of Jan. 14. Besides the Boreal and a Great Gray on Amherst, Group A had Barred, Short-eared, Northern Saw-whet, Great Horned and Snowy owls. The Hawk Owl reportedly wasn't seen after about mid-week prior to their visit, and some say that it might have been shot.

Jim said his group had six or seven saw-whets, six or seven Long-eared Owls, at least six snowies and the Northern Shrikes.

Bill and Naomi Murphy, who will be stopped by nothing, braved that ridiculous arctic air blast the weekend of Jan. 21. That Sunday they took the 15-minute ferry ride out onto Lake Ontario in an

all-out blizzard. With the temperature at a solid minus 25°F and winds of 35 miles per hour, they drove off to find the hedgerow that marked the beginning of the long walk toward the Boreal's roosting grounds. They almost couldn't find the hedgerow in the snow.

They eventually found it and proceeded to the area where the bird had been seen. It was snowing so hard that they almost gave up. "We turned around to leave," recalled Bill, "and saw two eyes three feet off the ground. It was three feet away. We could have touched it."

Other good looks were a Snowy Owl flying through the blizzard and Gray Partridges, which Bill described as looking like "little footballs."

Why did they not cancel and pick another weekend? Bill didn't hesitate as he answered. "You don't wait for a Boreal Owl."

He was right. The following weekend the Boreal was sighted at dusk Friday night — before the next DVOC contingent arrived — and wasn't seen that Saturday or Sunday.

For those of you who haven't had the neat experience of taking a car-carrying ferry into Lake Ontario in mid-winter, you should understand that the ferry acts somewhat as an ice breaker. A three-inch perforated pipe underwater sends up air bubbles at intervals, helping to keep the channel from freezing solid. Fishing holes along the way reveal blocks of ice almost a foot thick.

Our car included Sid Lipschutz, Erica Brendel, Ed Fingerhood, David Lauer and me.

Highlights of the ferry ride out to Amherst Island were a Snowy Owl, which sat on the ice until the boat came close and then flew, and a Red Fox, sitting far from shore. It was still there when we returned that afternoon.

We followed the directions given by earlier visitors, and arrived at a line of parked cars — Pennsylvania, New York, Massachusetts, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania, Ohio . . .

The first indication that the Boreal hadn't been spotted was that there were all these cars on the side of the road, yet, looking down the long hedgerow, no one was in sight. If the bird had been found, it seemed there should be lots of people heading back.

We tramped through snow already packed down by numerous heavy boots, in and out of a grove of cedars. Seven or eight saw-whets had been spotted, including one that was posed at eye level in the crotch of a tree. Birders were lined up eight deep to photograph this owl — five feet away, and it didn't even blink when the flash went off!

But no Boreal.

In and among the trees that day was a group of 13 from the Academy, including Mark Robbins, Rob Cardillo, Andy Mack, Dan Brauning, Jeff LaBaron and David Spawn and his father, Wilman. Their boss, Frank Gill, had been more fortunate the previous weekend.

The Great Gray Owls were being seen near the Ontario towns of Colebrook and Moscow, as well as in Aylmer, across the Ottawa River in Quebec Province. As many as seven of the impressive

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This Great Gray Owl was one of at least five seen in a residential area in Aylmer, Quebec Province, just across from Ottawa.

PROGRAMS

Meetings are held the first and third Thursdays of each month at 8 p.m. at the Academy of Natural Sciences, 19th St. and Benjamin Franklin Parkway.

MARCH 15 — RICK MELLON. A club member since 1966, Rick is a field biologist and nature tour leader. He is the author of *A Dichotomous Key to the Shorebirds of North America*.

APRIL 5 — TED PARKER. DVOC is honored to host Ted Parker, the director of the Museum of Natural Science at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge. An expert on the birds of Peru, Parker is writing a book on the topic. He is a tour leader with Victor Emanuel Nature Tours, Inc., and has discovered new avian species in that country.

APRIL 19 — LARRY RYMON. Rymon, who is with the department of biology at East Stroudsburg State College, will discuss Ospreys in Pennsylvania.

MAY 3 — DR. FRANK GILL. Curator of ornithology at the Academy of Natural Sciences and a member of DVOC since 1969, Frank will lead a critique of the new field guides. He has asked members to come

prepared with comments and corrections, especially about the three-volume *National Audubon Society Master Guide to Birding*. Bring your books to the meeting.

MAY 17 — THE PHILADELPHIA ZOO. *NOTE: This program will be held at the Zoo, 34th St. and Girard Ave. At 6:30 p.m., we will be given a tour of the Bird House and the Jungle Bird Walk. Refreshments will be served at 7:30, followed by a slide presentation by Larry Shelton, curator of birds, on breeding and research at the Zoo.*

JUNE 7 — MAY ROUND-UP REPORTS. Results of the DVOC's version of the Big Day will be discussed. Participants in the round-up can choose any 24-hour period — midnight to midnight — from May 5 to 20. For information and round-up forms, call Bill Stocku, 215-586-2098.

Informal meetings will be held July 5, Aug. 2 and Sept. 6 and 20 at the same time and same place. Regular meetings will resume Oct. 4.

All programs are subject to change. Contact John LaVia, program chairman, for information: 609-877-8025.

FIELD TRIPS

April 1: Pedricktown, N.J. Be an April Fool and come welcome back the ruffs. Low tide at 7:30 a.m.; high tide at 1 p.m. Meet on the causeway at about 10.

April 28 and 29: Elliott Island, Pocomoke Swamp, Md., and Chincoteague, Va. Leader: Jim Stasz (tentative).

May 25 and 26: DVOC-Urner Super Pelagic Trip to Hudson Canyon. Alan Brady reports that the trip leaves from Barnegat Light Yacht Basin, 18th St. and Barnegat Bay, Friday, May 25, at 10 p.m., and returns Saturday at about 7 p.m. Capt. John Larsen

will host us on the *Miss Barnegat Light*. Cost: \$35 per person. Send checks to Alan, Box 103, Wycombe, Pa. 18980. Include your telephone number with registration. For information, call him at 215-598-7856 (home) or 215-968-2833 (work). Last year, the group had an incredible number of Wilson's Petrel, as well as Greater, Sooty, Cory's and Manx shearwaters, Northern Fulmar, South Polar Skua, Long-tailed and Pomarine jaegers and Arctic Terns. Non-avian species included several schools of Bottle-Nosed Dolphins, two Sei Whales, a Humpback Whale and 17 Finback Whales. Breakfast, lunch and beverages will be available on board for purchase. If you want to sleep on deck, bring a pad and sleeping bag.

Wednesday, May 30 and Thursday, May 31: Petersburg and Great Dismal Swamp, Va. Leader: Sidney Lipschutz. Looking for Red-cockaded Woodpecker and Swainson's Warbler. Added attraction: Annular solar eclipse (no rain date!). For information, call Sid, 215-232-8645 (evenings).

June 8 to 13: Algonquin Park and Magnetawan, Ontario. Leader: Jim Meritt. A late spring trip to the North Woodlands, with breeding warblers as a highlight. For details, call Jim, 609-227-5948 (home) or 215-726-3240 (work). Participation is limited due to limited facilities in Magnetawan (population 200). Among species that should be seen are Golden-winged and Mourning warblers, Spruce Grouse, Pileated and Black-backed woodpeckers, Gray Jay, Alder and Olive-sided flycatchers and Winter Wren. Moose may also be seen.

For information on any trips, call Bill Stocku, 215-586-2098.

Harry Follows Harry As DVOC President

Harry Franzen of Oreland, a member of the Delaware Valley Ornithological Club since 1971, was elected president of the club at the annual meeting on Jan. 5. He succeeds Harry W. Todd.

Other new officers are Dr. John T. LaVia, vice president, and Richard Mellon, secretary. James K. Meritt was returned to office for a second term as treasurer.

New councillors, elected for a three-year term, are James Stasz and Dr. John J. Harding. Robert Ridgely has been elected to replace Alec Forbes-Watson, who returned last month from an extended stay in Kenya.

Elected as fellows of the DVOC were Stasz, Jesse Grantham and Edward Fingerhood.

The Julian K. Potter Award for outstanding contributions to the field of ornithology for 1983 was presented to Charles A. Wondlerly.

Also elected to the Board of Trustees to oversee the DVOC Endowment Fund were Stephen R. Wing, Arthur H. Bergey and Robert H. Sehl.

Honorary membership was granted to John T. McNeill Jr., a recipient of the 1979 Potter Award.

Philadelphia Larus

DVOC's newsletter is named for its official bird, Bonaparte's Gull (*Larus philadelphia*). The Bonaparte, in this case, is Charles Lucien Bonaparte, a nephew of Napoleon I. He spent eight years in the United States in the early 19th century classifying American avifauna.

Bonaparte's Gull was described and named by George Ord, a Philadelphian and a chief patron of Alexander Wilson's. Ord identified the bird in 1815 from a species taken somewhere near Philadelphia.

The black-headed bird, seen in the northeastern United States in the winter with just a black smudge on the head, graces the DVOC patch. Patches can be purchased from Tom Reeves at meetings.

Send information you would like considered for publication to the *Larus* editor, Sandra Sherman, 316-Rear S. Olive St., Media, PA 19063, or call her at 215-566-6569 (home) or 215-893-5739 (work).

CLASSIFIED

FOR SALE: BIRD PERIODICALS. Chris Caracino is selling the following:

The Ibis — Journal of the British Ornithological Union. 1967-1974, except Oct. 1971. 31 issues. Min. offer \$15.50.

The Wilson Bulletin. 1973-1982. 40 issues. Min. \$20.

The Auk — Journal of the AOU. 1975-1982. 40 issues. Min. \$20.

National Audubon Magazine. 1968-1982, plus several dozen from 1938-1953. Incomplete. Best offer.

For information, call Brian Moscatello, 609-261-2495 (day).

TO MEMBERS TRYING to obtain a complete set of *Cassinias*: Send me a list of volume dates you lack. I have some early volumes and will give preference to the person with most nearly complete collection. This refers to volumes not now on hand in the DVOC library collection. — George Reynard, 105 Midway, Riverton, NJ 08077.

LOST: Two rosy finches by member of 600 club. If found, please notify the AOU Committee on Classification and Nomenclature immediately.

Restoration Planned for Wilson's Grave

by DAVID LAUER

THE NAME OF Alexander Wilson is known to every birder in North America. It leaps from the pages of any field guide in the names of Wilson's Storm-Petrel, Wilson's Plover, Wilson's Phalarope and the genus *Wilsonia*, including Wilson's Warbler, *Wilsonia pusilla*. It is commemorated nationally by the Wilson Ornithological Society and locally by the annual Alexander Wilson Memorial Lecture, co-sponsored by the Academy of Natural Sciences and the Delaware Valley Ornithological Club.

This is evidence of the honor that Wilson has been given for his pioneering work in establishing the scientific study of birds in North America. In less than 10 years, Alexander Wilson produced his *American Ornithology* — he wrote the text, completed 76 plates of more than 300 individual birds and helped with the hand coloring of the plates for each of the several hundred original sets. Then he personally sold subscriptions to the work by visiting "every town within 150 miles of the Atlantic coast from the St. Lawrence River to St. Augustine in Florida."

In the process, he made friends with Thomas Jefferson, William Bartram, Charles Willson Peale, John Abbot, Meriwether Lewis, Thomas Paine, Robert Fulton and many others.

He was unquestionably the "father of American ornithology."

Wilson also seem to have been the quintessential workaholic. This helped him accomplish his mammoth task, but it also contributed to his early death. In 1813, at the age of 47, Wilson contracted



Alexander Wilson

dysentery and died at his lodgings near Seventh and Spruce Sts. in Philadelphia. He was buried at Gloria Dei, Old Swedes Church, which still stands near the intersection of Delaware and Washington Aves., a small island of green in South Philadelphia.

Wilson's fame was beginning to grow even before his death, as evidenced by his election to the prestigious American Philosophical Society. As early as 1836 a proposal was published to erect a stone monument to Wilson in Laurel Hill Cemetery on the banks of the Schuylkill River, although there is no evidence that such a memorial was ever constructed.

Now, nearly 150 years later, an informal coalition of individuals from several local ornithological, natural history and Scottish groups has been formed to honor this famous Philadelphia resident.

The coalition's first objective is to restore the immediate grave site at Old Swede's Church, which has fallen into disrepair, despite the placement of a new headstone more than 10 years ago. The group intends to repair the original marker and the brick walkway surrounding the grave and to plant shrubs and trees to attract birds.

Wilson's biographer, George Ord, wrote that Wilson once expressed a desire to be "buried in some rural spot sacred to peace and solitude, where the charms of nature might invite the steps of the votary of the muses and the lover of science, and where birds might sing over his grave."

The coalition hopes, through its restorations and plantings, to help fulfill this wish. In addition, the group is seeking state or federal recognition of the site near Seventh and Spruce Sts. where Wilson lived while completing *American Ornithology*, and suitable marking of the site for the benefit and education of the public.

To reach these goals, the coalition will soon seek financial support from individuals and organizations influenced by Alexander Wilson and his work. Members will publicize the means by which donations will be accepted. It is hoped that generous support will permit a very worthy and long overdue memorial to be completed.

EDITOR'S NOTE: For information on the coalition, call David Lauer, 985-0354.

Chasing Elusive Owls . . .

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creatures were seen that weekend of Jan. 28-29. As we watched two way off in a field, Chris and Mike Danzenbaker pulled up.

Serge LaFrance and a friend drove up to Amherst for the Boreal. They stayed Saturday and Sunday: no luck.

Rick Mellon, Chris Walters and two non-DVOC types also were up there that weekend. Rick said he had found some voles on Amherst Island. "Apparently owls kill 'em. If they're not real hungry they hang 'em out," he explained. "We tied monofilament around the vole and reeled it in. The Great Gray came within 10 or 15 feet."

Jay LaVia's experience topped that. His carload — you remember, Group B — was escorted by Bruce DiLabio, an Ottawa birder who was most helpful to DVOC members all winter. Bruce took laboratory mice out into the field. No sooner had he released the mouse when a Great Gray swooped down silently and grabbed the animal, brushing Jay's hand as it went by.

Everybody had different stories, different experiences.

Rick Mellon and Chris had no Snowy Owls, but they saw a flock of 35 to 40 Snow Buntings sitting in top of a tree against a blue sky. The Lipschutz contingent missed the Boreal and the supposedly "guaranteed" partridges on the Experimental Farm in Ottawa, but had a fantastic view of about 1,000 Bohemian Waxwings in Aylmer and a Gray Jay at Moore's Feeders on Pink Road. We must have had 30 or 40 waxwings in the scope at one time.

Paul reported seeing the Great Gray on Amherst hunting at dusk. Also on the island, he said, his group had two or three Common Redpolls sitting on a fence with Tree Sparrows and Snow Buntings. The guys also had a Northern Goshawk in Ottawa.

John Frink headed up to Amherst the weekend of Feb. 4-5, saw two Boreals, went to Moscow, got some Great Grays and went home.

Pat and Clay Sutton wandered through Ontario the following

weekend. They were told that two Boreals had been seen Feb. 13, but they weren't showing themselves when the Suttons were there.

Pat and Clay did see an island flooded by melted snow, evidence of an overwhelming population of rodents and approximately 60 Rough-Legged Hawks, 20 to 30 Red-Tailed Hawks and an assortment of other owl species, including 11 snowies.

The final chapter of Amherst-Ottawa for this edition of the *Larus* was written on President's Day Weekend. Joining Al Kronschnabel in his van were repeater Frank Windfelter, Bob Sehl, Gene Stern and his wife, Sylvia, Mike Logan, Bill Toffey and Brian Logan.

The group arrived on the 6:30 a.m. ferry and searched till well into the afternoon. Not finding the Boreal, they headed to a different spot, where Short-eared Owls had been seen. When they were ready to leave, only Brian didn't show up.

HE WAS BUSY methodically checking each cedar tree. When he showed up, he claimed to have found a Boreal. He was grilled up and down, and the decision went against him when he reported having seen a bird with a black bill. The group got on the ferry and headed back to the mainland, when they met another group of birders who had seen Brian's owl — and confirmed the sighting.

They told the ferry men they'd left something on the island and had to return. "We did," said Bob Sehl, " — a dream!"

"Brian was really the hero of the day," Bob reported. "The bird was deep in the branches — not in by the trunk, but it was dark.

"I could see how he thought it was a black bill. It was too close to use binoculars. Might have been a first-year male. It had black facial discs, spots on the face and a flat-topped head, just like Peterson shows. It was a good bird."

For those DVOCers who got the birds we were chasing, the 1,000-mile ride was satisfying. For those who missed our target birds, so be it: Maybe next year, maybe in 10 years. They'll be back, and this will give us a good reason to return. — SLS

LOCAL NOTES

FLASH! FROM NEW ENGLAND: **Alan Brady** comes in just under deadline with super tales of the DVOC annual New England trip on President's Day Weekend. Good weather and "a grand slam" — all possible eastern alcid on the pelagic trip from Portsmouth, N.H. Not to mention 80 Northern Fulmar, King Eider, white-winged gulls, a Peregrine Falcon diving on a Snowy Owl, kittiwakes and gannets. Land birds included Great Gray Owl, one Varied Thrush, Pine Grosbeaks, Ruffed Grouse, 32 Bald and one Golden eagle, Northern Goshawk and lots more. . . . **Kate Brethwaite** has agreed to chair the DVOC annual banquet this year. Date: Nov. 15. Now Alan will have more time to plan pelagic trips.

FAR AFIELD: DVOC members already are lining up their warm-weather birding trips. **Alan** will be heading back to Colorado seeking the Mountain Plover. He has two daughters who live in the state, one of whom has Rosy Finches in her backyard. . . . Alan also will join **John LaVia**, **Jim Meritt** and **Bill Tannery** for a three-day trip in May to the Florida Keys. The guys are going to charter a boat and visit the Dry Tortugas. LaVia is hoping for more than one species of booby, a tropicbird and Brown Noddy.

Brian Moscatello, **Serge LaFrance** and **Mark and Bill Stocku** took an almost 2,000-mile weekend trek to St. Louis recently to add the Eurasian Tree Sparrow to their life lists. While there, they failed to find the reported Slaty-backed Gull. . . . **Armas Hill** mastered the tricky technique of snowshoeing while hiking the Swiss Alps in search of Rock Ptarmigan.

FARTHER AFIELD: **Dr. Peter Hall**, DVOC's only member with an international address, is alive and well and back in Grenada, West Indies. Chairman of the department of physiology at St. George's University School of Medicine on the island, Professor Hall says things are settling down after the political turmoil last fall. He finished out the semester in Livingston, N.J., but said he had to leave so quickly he failed to bring names and addresses of old birding friends. Of the island, he writes, "We have a few special birds on Grenada, but only a very few that aren't much more easily seen on Trinidad. The super-specialty, the Grenada Dove, has been ominously silent for several years now. I've never seen it: The closest I came was 50 feet of dense thorn scrub between me and a calling bird."

A big thanks to **Roy Imsick** for passing along a copy of the first edition of *The DVOC Crow*, a newsletter started in January 1950 by **Harvey Moore**. Moore sought to have members send him "ideas; funny things they have run across in their birding; bird verses (my own pet failing); good-natured, but scurrilous remarks about fellow members; dissenting opinions; or even a serious, but abbreviated bird study — anything that will help preserve and encourage 'the

delightful association of men of kindred interest.'" The last quote is from Dr. Witmer Stone's *Birds of Old Cape May*.

OTHER PUBLICATIONS: **Ed Fingerhood** is expecting to have DVOC's journal, *Cassinia*, in the mail sometime in the spring. Ed took over the editorship of the biannual magazine from **Dick Bell**. . . . *A Field List of the Birds of the Delaware Valley, 4th Revised Edition* is coming down the home stretch. The committee in charge of the revised checklist — **Alan Brady**, **Dick Bell** and **Sid Lipschutz** — are hoping to have a finished product by the summer.

THE REALLY BIGGEST DAY: DVOC will field at least one team in New Jersey Audubon's "Biggest Day," **Pete Dunne's** latest scheme to bird for 24-hours behind the wheel of a fancy-shmancy car. It's May 19, and Pete has **Roger Tory Peterson** on his side. Did you see the big ad for the competition in *American Birds*? . . . **Pat Sutton**, an interpretative naturalist at Cape May State Park, is spending her winter vacation documenting the ownership of the Delaware Bay shore from Cape May County north of the canal. The study is aimed at preserving what is left of the land for the protection of migrating birds using that important stretch of surf and turf. . . . **John Danzenbaker**, by the way, passed 5,000 on his most recent trip.

DOWNHILL ALL THE WAY: This year's Annual Slide Contest began with **Dick Bell** introducing a new category: DVOC members at play. It ended with **Tom** and **Margaret Southerland's** extended presentation. Following are the three categories and winners in each. Birds: **John Harding**, for his super close-up of a White-tailed Ptarmigan; honorable mentions to **Sandy Sherman**, for seven six-week-old Barn Owls, and **Harry Todd**, for Red-Necked (Northern) Phalarope. Natural history: **Dick Bell**, for his 13-line Ground Squirrel; honorable mention to **Lucy Tyrrell**, for starfish in a tidal pool, and **Naomi Murphy**, for fringed gentians. Scenery: **Lucy** captured this category with her shot of Mount Rainier, and **Dick** took honorable mention with his slide of Monument Valley. **Lucy's** slides just made it under the wire — she moved to Columbus, Ohio, last year, and mailed her entries to **Erica Brendel**. They arrived the day of the contest, and Erica almost didn't stop at home before coming to the meeting. Incidentally, did you notice judges **Frank Windfelter**, **Paul Guris** and **Bob Sehl** using their binoculars during the slide presentation to get a better look?

DVOC welcomes the following new members elected in January and February: **Robert D. Barber**, of Millville, N.J.; **Ruth Bergery**, of York, Pa.; **Daniel Brauning**, of Philadelphia; **William Church**, of Swarthmore; **Robert R. Cook**, of Elverson, Pa.; **Joseph Engler**, of Upland, Pa.; and **Howard Spendelow**, of Marlton, N.J.