

Point Pelee and Michigan 8th – 23rd May 2013

Alan Rosney

Point Pelee has been on my wish list for some time. Having done some research we (Mike Wheeler, Gareth Jenkins and myself) decided that the best time to visit was May, as this was ideal to catch up with the spectacular movement of warblers through the Great Lakes region. Pelee is a promontory that juts out into Lake Erie and is a magnet for tired migrants looking to make land fall. Please excuse the quality of my photos – I only carry a point and shoot camera.

We researched the cost of flights, car hire, accommodation etc. but in the end decided to opt for a package with Birdfinders. This was very reasonably priced and had the added advantage of providing us with a local guide and driver. As it happened we knew the guide (Dave Milsom), having met him on a previous trip.



Map showing areas visited

Our flight from Gatwick to Toronto went without a hitch. Our first port of call was the small town of Kingsville, some 2 – 3 hours west of Toronto. Our base for the first few days was the Golden Acres Motel, just outside the town. En route we saw a few common species such as Red-winged Blackbird, American Robin, American Goldfinch, Tree Swallow and Yellow Warbler. The “real” birding was to come.

9th May – Point Pelee and Hillman Marsh

We were up early for our first visit to Pelee. Entrance fees etc. were all included as part of the package. This is an extremely well run reserve, which can get a little crowded. The Canadian Parks run a “ Festival of Birds” 3rd – 20th May to coincide with peak migration. Guided walks, talks etc are provided. Upon arrival at Pelee, we boarded the free shuttle bus that goes down to the tip (i.e. the tip of the promontory).



Reserve Sign – Point Pelee



Shuttle bus



The tip

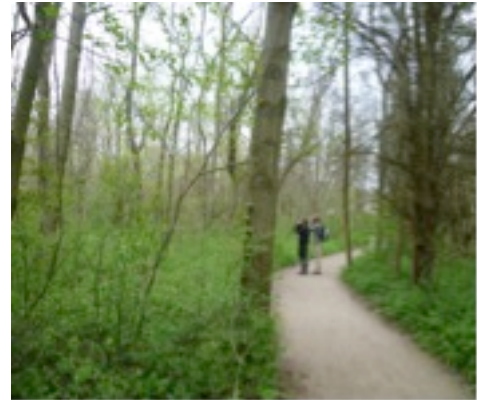
Around the centre were some very colourful birds - both Baltimore and Orchard Orioles, plus Rose-breasted Grosbeak and three species of woodpecker – Red-bellied, Red-headed and Downy. Red-winged Blackbirds seemed to be everywhere, as were Yellow Warblers. Our guide was a little disappointed in the number of warblers, however as newbies we were still keen to see what was about. We saw Black and White, Tennessee, Orange-crowned, Nashville, Cape May, Northern Parula and Black-throated Green Warblers on our first morning, plus Common Yellowthroat and American Redstart, which are also in the warbler family.

At the tip there were plenty of gulls and terns. Bonaparte's, Ring-billed, Herring and Little Gulls were seen, together with good numbers of Common Terns. On the lake Red-breasted and Common Mergansers (Goosander) were common, with plenty of Scaup, both Greater and Lesser off-shore. Double-crested Cormorants were very common.

In the afternoon we de-camped to Hillman Marsh, hoping to see some shorebirds (waders) and fresh water ducks. Waders here included Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs, Short-billed Dowitcher, Black-bellied (Grey) Plover, Semipalmated Sandpiper and Plover, Killdeer, Least Sandpiper and Dunlin (which appeared to be larger than "our" Dunlin). Ducks included Gadwall, Green-winged and Blue-winged Teal, Redhead and Mallard.

10th May – Rondeau and Blenheim Sewage Works

Our second full day was spent in the delightful Rondeau Provincial Park, about an hour east of Pelee. The feeders at the visitor's centre were alive with birds. Of note were Pine Siskin, American Goldfinch, Blue Jay, Chipping Sparrow, Ruby-throated Hummingbird, Black-capped Chickadee and Northern Cardinal. A notable visitor to the feeders was Yellow-throated Warbler, our only sighting of this species on the trip.



Carolinian woodland - Point Pelee



Rose-breasted Grosbeak on the feeders at Rondeau



Seeking Worm-eating Warblers from the boardwalk

In the woods at Rondeau we encountered our first Empidonax Flycatchers of the trip. I found these very difficult to ID but eventually we saw five species Acadian, Least, Alder, Willow and Yellow-bellied (not all in Rondeau). Hirundines seen here included Purple Martin, Bank (Sand Martin), Northern Rough-winged and Tree Swallows, plus “our” swallow - the Barn Swallow. Note we didn’t see the elusive Worm-eating Warbler at this site, despite a long search.

In the afternoon we went to Blenheim sewage works. There wasn’t much on the lagoons apart from a couple of Pied-billed Grebes, but the filtration beds held lots of birds. For me the “best bird here was Wilson’s Phalarope, but there was plenty on offer. A Cackling Goose was a good find amongst the Canadas.



Semipalmated Plover



Wilson’s Phalarope



Bobolink



Least Sandpiper

In the evening our guide took to a local camping ground where American Woodcock were known to display. The light was dwindling fast and we weren’t hopeful. However true to form a male

Woodcock appeared on the grass next to one of the BBQ areas. The strange grunting calls were very audible and the display – a towering flight, was spectacular. In all we saw three.

May 11th – Point Pelee again

We re-visited Pelee on the 11th. The guide explained that the migration usually occurs in waves and that different species might be passing through. He was particularly keen to hit the tip as the weather had turned very cold and windy and he thought that many birds might be resting there. He wasn't wrong. At the tip we were greeted by the sight of hundreds of swallows sitting on the sand, desperately trying to warm up.

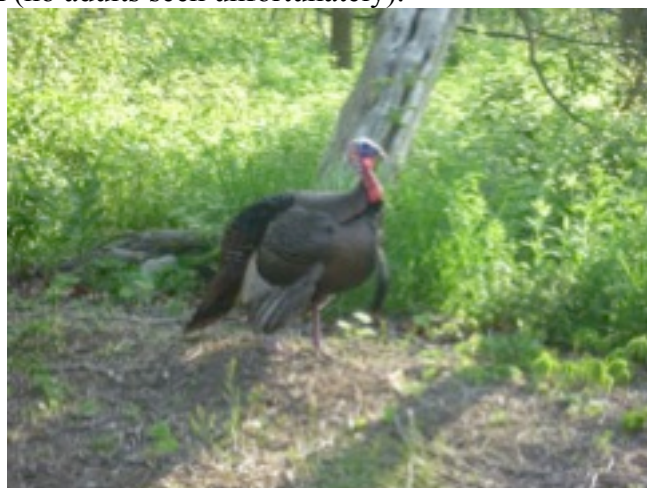


Tree, Cliff and Barn Swallows on the beach

Also on the tip we encountered our only Willet of the trip. In the woods, many of the warblers were keeping low, giving us great views. In addition to the species we had already seen we added the following warblers - Ovenbird, Northern Waterthrush, Blue-winged, Magnolia, Bay-breasted, Blackburnian, Chestnut-sided, Blackpoll, Black-throated Blue, Palm, Yellow-rumped and Wilson's. There are several trails around the park. We found the Blue Heron trail to be the most productive.

May 12th and 13th – Point Pelee and Rondeau

We birded Pelee again in the morning. Our first Bald Eagle of the trip flew over whilst we were waiting for the shuttle bus. Another raptor species was noted – Rough-legged Hawk (Buzzard). Also near the visitor centre was a Red-breasted Nuthatch and a brief view of a fly-over Eastern Bluebird. A Yellow-throated Vireo was a welcome addition to our vireo count. We had previously seen both Red-eyed and Warbling Vireos. A “new” warbler was added to our tally – Kentucky. We had previously only heard Swamp Sparrow but eventually got good views. Another species I had previously heard but not seen was Wild Turkey. One impressive male however decided to display right on the side of the road. On the tip was a lone Piping Plover. The guide then took us to see a Great Horned Owl chick (no adults seen unfortunately).



In the afternoon we returned to Rondeau. En route we saw Horned (Shore) Lark in the arable fields. On the feeders were a couple of Tufted Titmice and a White-breasted Nuthatch. Elsewhere we saw Cerulean, Hooded and Brewster's (Blue-winged x Golden-winged cross) Warblers.

May 14th - En route to Michigan, USA

Our itinerary meant that this was a "travelling day". A six hour journey via Detroit took us into the USA. We did manage some birding however, especially around the Mackinac Bridge.



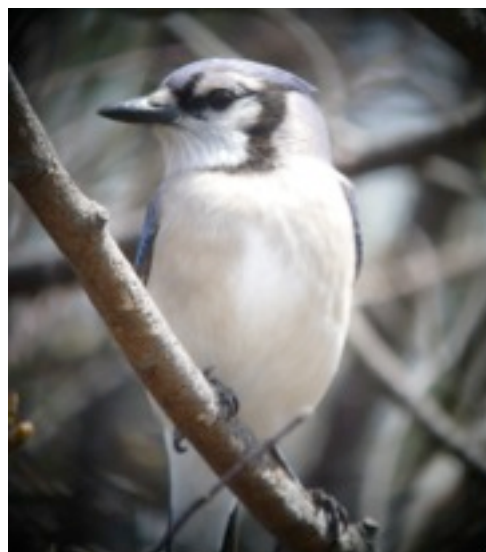
The Mackinac Bridge with Lake Michigan to the left and Lake Huron to the right.
(Apparently it's the third longest suspension bridge in the world.)

Here there were hundreds of Redheads, plus Bufflehead, Long-tailed Duck, Goldeneye and Shoveler. The colony of Ring-billed gulls was quite impressive, as were the 30 or so Forster's Terns that were fishing here. Two Belted Kingfishers were also present. Our first Sandhill Cranes of the trip were seen in this area. We also saw our only American Tree Sparrow here. We were lucky to spot an Eastern Meadowlark from the bus. It was rather distant but posed well on top of a fence post.

When we arrived at Paradise (incorrectly named town) near Whitefish Point, we had some time to do some birding. Whitefish is another migration hot-spot (not that hot, there was still snow lying). What really impressed were the dozens of Blue Jays and Sharp-shinned Hawks that were passing over. Near the visitor centre we saw our first Clay-coloured Sparrow and Dark-eyed Junco of the trip.



Need I say more!

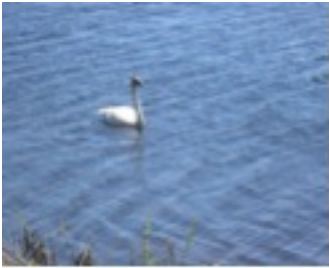


My best shot of a Blue Jay

May 15th - Whitefish Point and Seney Wildlife Refuge

Our morning was spent around Whitefish. The feeders were alive with birds - mainly White-crowned Sparrows as it happened but other goodies dropped in as well. After a fruitless search for Boreal Chickadee, we headed for Driggs Road, Seney. We were hoping to see Sharp-tailed Grouse here. (We had seen Ruffed Grouse the evening before). Despite quite a long walk, most of us dipped. We certainly heard one, as it crashed through the trees. We did see Vesper Sparrow, Upland Sandpiper and Wilson's Snipe here however.

The Seney Wildlife Drive was notable for firsts – our first Trumpeter Swans, Ring-necked Ducks and Cooper's Hawk of the trip. The guide knew a reed bed where Virginia Rail and Sora were breeding. We were lucky to get cracking views of the former but dipped on the latter.



Trumpeter Swan



Sandhill Crane on nest



Virginia Rail

We did manage to get the minibus stuck on a sandy track at Clark's Lake. But after a lot of hard work we were back on the road. We added Pine Warbler and Purple Finch to our list however.

May 16th – Whitefish Point and Tahaquamenon River

An early morning start saw us at an extremely blustery Whitefish Point. We had just missed a couple of Harlequin Ducks (doh!) but were delighted to see White-winged Scoter, Caspian Tern, Black Duck, Red-necked Grebe and Great Northern Diver there. A Merlin and a Peregrine were patrolling the shoreline waiting for tired migrants and a party of American Pipits and Evening Grosbeaks flew over. In the woods we were lucky to catch up with Brown Creeper, Golden-crowned Kinglet, Yellow-bellied Flycatcher and Northern Flicker plus in the nearby marshes, quite appropriately our only Solitary Sandpiper of the trip was seen. We did pass this school (one for the Welsh readers).



May 17th – En route to Grayling

We left Paradise for the 2 hour journey to Grayling, where the extremely rare Kirtland's Warbler breeds. En route we did look for the Black-billed Magpie that had been reported but failed to see it. We caught up with Eastern Bluebird, Rusty and Brewer's Blackbirds on our journey. We also saw a party of Evening Grosbeaks on a feeder – much better views than the fly-overs of the previous day.

At Grayling our main aim was to see Kirtland's Warbler. These birds have very specific habitat requirements. Over-wintering in the Bahamas, they return to the Michigan area and breed in young stands of Jack Pine trees. The trees at the site we went to appeared to be rather too big and the Cowbird traps (Cowbirds are trapped in the breeding area, as they lay their eggs in warbler nests) were in disrepair. However we were very lucky to see one – a cracking male, performing its typical tail pumping action.

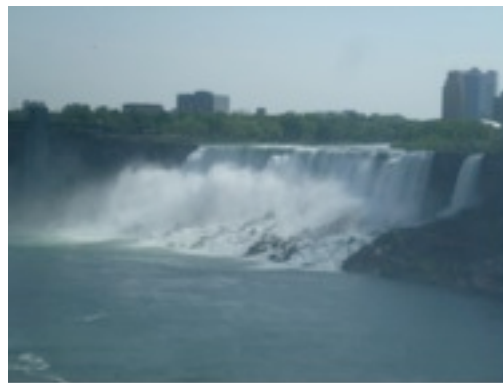
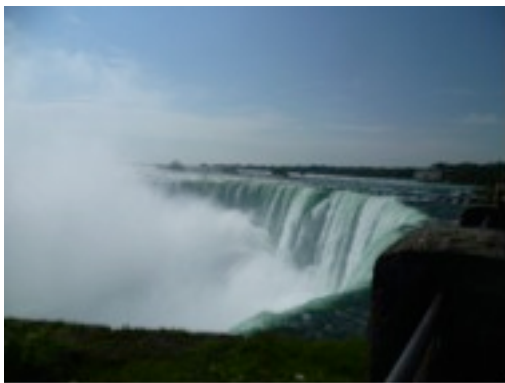
May 18th – Tawas Point and Nayanquing Marsh

Tawas Point is a lovely little reserve on the shores of Lake Huron. There were plenty of campervans there and I would imagine it gets very busy later in the season. Here we added Northern Mockingbird, Indigo Bunting, Surf Scoter, Northern Harrier, Pileated Woodpecker, Cedar Waxwing and Golden-winged Warbler.

At the marsh we encountered our first Marsh Wrens, Yellow-headed Blackbirds, and Black-crowned Night Herons. We were rather underwhelmed to see Ring-necked Pheasant and Common Gallinule (Moorhen), although I believe the latter has now been split from "our" Moorhen.

May 19th - 22nd – Back at Pelee, Hillman and Rondeau

We returned to Kingsville for the last few days of our tour to pick up species we'd missed first time around. There were Chimney Swifts and Common Nighthawks over the town at dusk. In the park we found an Eastern Screech Owl (Red morph), Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, White-eyed Vireo, Mourning and Canada Warblers and Field Sparrow. At Hillman Marsh we added Pectoral and White-rumped Sandpipers and a flurry of Black Terns. At Rondeau we were very lucky to catch up with two Prothonotary Warblers, which had only just arrived. In the evening we saw Eastern Whip-poor-will. On our way back to Toronto we stopped off at a couple of sites adding Philadelphia Vireo to our sightings and a couple of the group were lucky enough to catch sight of a Connecticut Warbler. We couldn't go to this area without doing a bit of sight-seeing and we decided to call in at Niagara Falls en route and we actually added Horned Grebe (Slavonian Grebe) to our list at the falls.



List of species seen (by me – the group total was higher)

Great Northern Diver	Map Turtle
Horned Grebe	Painted Turtle
Pied-billed Grebe	Spring Peeper
Red-necked Grebe	Leopard Frog
Double-crested Cormorant	Chorus Frog
Great Blue Heron	Bullfrog
Great White Egret	American Toad
Green Heron	Wood Frog
Black-crowned Night Heron	Garter Snake
Trumpeter Swan	Five-lined Skink
Mute Swan	Cottontail Rabbit

Canada Goose (inc. Richardson's)
Cackling Goose
Wood Duck
American Wigeon
Gadwall
Green-winged Teal
Mallard
Black Duck
Northern Pintail
Blue-winged Teal
Northern Shoveler
Canvasback
Redhead
Ring-necked Duck
Greater Scaup
Lesser Scaup
Surf Scoter
White-winged Scoter
Common Goldeneye
Bufflehead
Long-tailed Duck
Ruddy Duck
Red-breasted Merganser
Common Merganser
Turkey Vulture
Bald Eagle
Northern Harrier
Sharp-shinned Hawk
Cooper's Hawk
Broad-winged Hawk
Rough-legged Hawk
Red-tailed Hawk
Osprey
American Kestrel
Merlin
Peregrine Falcon
Ruffed Grouse
Ring-necked Pheasant
Wild Turkey
Virginia Rail
Common Gallinule
American Coot
Sandhill Crane
American Golden Plover
Black-bellied Plover
Semipalmated Plover
Killdeer
Piping Plover
American Woodcock
Wilson's Snipe
Upland Sandpiper
Greater Yellowlegs
Lesser Yellowlegs
Solitary Sandpiper
Spotted Sandpiper
Willet
Ruddy Turnstone
Short-billed Dowitcher (hendersonii)

Muskrat
Raccoon
Grey Squirrel
Red Squirrel
Snowshoe Hare
Chipmunk
White-tailed Deer
Spring Azure butterfly
Small White butterfly
Eastern Long-tailed butterfly
Morning Cloak
Henry's Elfin butterfly
Clouded Sulphur butterfly
Black Swallowtail butterfly
Pipe Vine Swallowtail butterfly
American Painted Lady
Common Green Darner
Widow Skimmer
Four-spot Skimmer
Juvenal's Duskywing

Short-billed Dowitcher (grisius)
Semipalmated Sandpiper
Least Sandpiper
White-rumped Sandpiper
Pectoral Sandpiper
Dunlin
Wilson's Phalarope
Bonaparte's Gull
Little Gull
Ring-billed Gull
Herring Gull
Lesser Black-backed Gull
Great Black-backed Gull
Caspian Tern
Common Tern
Forster's Tern
Black Tern
Feral Pigeon
Mourning Dove
Black-billed Cuckoo
Eastern Screech Owl
Great Horned Owl
Common Nighthawk
Eastern Whip-poor-will
Chimney Swift
Ruby-throated Hummingbird
Belted Kingfisher
Red-headed Woodpecker
Red-bellied Woodpecker
Yellow-bellied Sapsucker
Downy Woodpecker
Hairy woodpecker
Northern Flicker
Pileated Woodpecker
Olive-sided Flycatcher
Eastern Wood-pewee
Yellow-bellied Flycatcher
Acadian Flycatcher
Alder Flycatcher
Willow Flycatcher
Least Flycatcher
Eastern Phoebe
Great Crested Flycatcher
Eastern Kingbird
Horned Lark
Barn Swallow
Tree Swallow
Purple Martin
Northern Rough-winged Swallow
Bank Swallow
Cliff Swallow
Marsh Wren
Carolina Wren
Winter Wren
House Wren
Grey Catbird
Ruby-crowned Kinglet
Golden-crowned Kinglet

Blue-grey Gnatcatcher
Black-capped Chickadee
Tufted Titmouse
Red-breasted Nuthatch
White-breasted Nuthatch
Brown Creeper
Blue Jay
American Crow
Common Raven
White-eyed Vireo
Blue-headed Vireo
Yellow-throated Vireo
Philadelphia Vireo
Red-eyed Vireo
Warbling Vireo
Eastern Bluebird
Veery
Grey-cheeked Thrush
Swainson's Thrush
Hermit Thrush
Wood Thrush
American Robin
Northern Mockingbird
Brown Thrasher
Common Starling
American Pipit
Cedar Waxwing
Ovenbird
Worm-eating Warbler
Northern Waterthrush
Blue-winged Warbler
Golden-winged Warbler
Brewster's Warbler
Black and White Warbler
Prothonotary Warbler
Tennessee Warbler
Orange-crowned Warbler
Nashville Warbler
Mourning Warbler
Kentucky Warbler
Common Yellowthroat
Hooded Warbler
American Redstart
Kirtland's Warbler
Cape May Warbler
Cerulean Warbler
Northern Parula
Magnolia Warbler
Bay-breasted Warbler
Blackburnian Warbler
Yellow Warbler
Chestnut-sided Warbler
Blackpoll Warbler
Black-throated Blue Warbler
Palm Warbler
Pine Warbler
Yellow-rumped Warbler
Yellow-throated Warbler

Black-throated Green Warbler
Canada Warbler
Wilson's Warbler
Yellow-breasted Chat
Scarlet Tanager
Northern Cardinal
Rose-breasted Grosbeak
Indigo Bunting
Song Sparrow
Lincoln's Sparrow
Swamp Sparrow
White-crowned Sparrow
White-throated Sparrow
Savanna Sparrow
American Tree Sparrow
Chipping Sparrow
Clay-coloured Sparrow
Field Sparrow
Vesper Sparrow
Eastern Towhee
Dark-eyed Junco
Bobolink
Red-winged Blackbird
Eastern Meadowlark
Yellow-headed Blackbird
Rusty Blackbird
Brewer's Blackbird
Common Grackle
Brown-headed Cowbird
Baltimore Oriole
Orchard Oriole
Purple Finch
House Finch
Pine Siskin
American Goldfinch
Evening Grosbeak
House Sparrow

221 bird species