

Canada - Jun 2004

by Ray Reedman

The last place I had expected to see a Turkey Vulture was over the centre of Montreal, but Mary had spotted one circling in front of our hotel window: it was probably close to the northern edge of its range. Mind you, I hadn't expect to find a whole colony of Cliff Swallows building nests at the old docks either, but Montreal did produce some unexpectedly good basic birding. Red-winged Blackbirds were displaying in the parks alongside singing American Robins and Common Grackles. Dusky Chimney Swifts and shiny Tree Swallows were overhead. Black-capped Chickadees, Grey Catbirds and Brown Cowbirds graced the Botanical Gardens, where a drake American Wigeon joined some Mallards in a pool. American Crows were on the rooftops, Great Blue Herons flapped overhead and Ring-billed Gulls swirled over the line of the St Lawrence.

Spring came very late to Canada this year, as the wet, untilled fields showed. Travelling by rail to Quebec, it was easy to see Starlings, Grackles and displaying Red-winged Blackbirds along the fence lines. The open fields were dominated by the ubiquitous American Crow: no Rooks and Wood Pigeons, of course, just a few Mourning Doves in the woodland fringes.

We were lucky enough to catch up with a late winter flock of Cedar Waxwings as they stole apple blossom from a suburban garden in Ste Foy. As they did so, resplendent Yellow Warblers and American Goldfinches patrolled their new territories. In another garden, Purple and House Finches, Savannah and Chipping Sparrows were still using the winter feeders - and testing my ornithological French to the limits!

A week later, as we drove through New Brunswick, we came across the first of many Red-tailed Hawks and Ospreys over forest and lakes and saw a mass of Double-crested Cormorants along the St John River. When I spotted a Snipe over a marshy bit it was in the knowledge that this was the American race, but it was gone in a trice. Barn Swallows were arriving and still fairly scarce. Scarcer still were Canada Geese, as we were in the southernmost part of their breeding range: there were just a few pairs dotted along our way, with goslings visibly six weeks behind those back home. But at least these were the real thing! An occasional Belted Kingfisher sat on roadside wires.

A woodland margin in Prince Edward Island produced the first woodpecker, a Northern Flicker. More Yellow Warblers showed up in similar habitat, while the burgeoning deciduous canopy of Anne's "Haunted Wood" at Green Gables produced spectacular orange and black American Redstarts, as well as Ruby-crowned Kinglets and a Red Squirrel.

The many inlets on the island had more Great Blue Herons, Ospreys and the first Bald Eagle. A solitary pair of Blue-winged Teal was contemplating - rather forlornly, it seemed - a nesting site by a pool where the reeds were still brown and scythed low by a late and severe winter.

The more remote forested area of the island's northern tip seemed alive with Ravens, while Gannets, Great Black-backed Gulls and the scarcely-smaller American Herring Gulls fed offshore. A trio of Common Eiders was in full breeding plumage.

Next, we drove down into Nova Scotia, where a beautiful pair of Northern Harriers was hawking over a coastal farm. At a quiet rural house outside Truro we had a fleeting visit from

an early pair of Ruby-throated Humming-birds, while a neighbour's feeders hosted a Hairy Woodpecker.

In the lakeside park in Dartmouth, Black Ducks and Mallards were plentiful, but the woodland there swarmed with Black-capped Chickadees that came to the hand to feed, as did the Eastern Chipmunks and Red Squirrels. Blue Jays and American Crows were nearly as bold. But it was the less obvious that I really treasured: a Red-breasted Nuthatch with a jazzy facial pattern; a family of slate-coloured Dark-eyed Juncos feeding in the leaf litter; Song Sparrows singing and feeding in the marginal reeds; an Ovenbird flitting frustratingly and noisily inside dense bushes; finally the nuthatch movements of the spectacular Black-and-white Warbler. Equally memorable were the beautiful Lady's Slipper Orchids, Nova Scotia's Provincial flower, that were in full bloom on the forest floor.

The lakes there also attracted a pair or two of Common Loons - our Great Northern Divers - in their incredibly smart black and white summer plumage, as well as Ospreys and Bald Eagles. It was here that we saw a Common Tern, the only tern of the whole trip.

We saw a lot more of the large fishing raptors when we went north to the rugged Cape Breton Island. At Baddeck we watched them patrol the Bras D'Or Lake as we ate our meals. There was also a large breeding colony of Great Cormorants on an island there, this species becoming more prevalent in maritime and more northerly areas.

However, it was the woodland behind our hotel that gave me some of the best moments, with a singing male Blackburnian Warbler, a diminutive Yellow-bellied Flycatcher with a large moth, a foraging male Common Yellowthroat, and the hidden, but distinctive song of the Eastern Wood Pee-wee. American Crows, American Robins, Common Grackles and even Yellow Warblers seemed plentiful there. And the "kronk" of a disturbed Raven was well worth the dusk walks among the helicopter-sized man-eating mosquitoes!

It was while watching the antics of more feeding Gannets off the northeast coast in a chilling north wind that I spotted Bank Swallows - Sand Martins back home - feeding around the cliff edge. Summer was in some evidence after all. Earlier that same day we had seen another winter-style flock of Cedar Waxwings. The seasons were in a true mess! As we toured through the highest part of the Cabot Trail among the Ravens and Red-tailed Hawks, the deep red of the breaking maple leaves contrasted breathtakingly with the bitter greens of new aspen and birch. In the third week of June it was like an English April up there - and there was still reluctant grey snow on the northern slopes!

Was there a particularly memorable moment? I can't think of many motorway breaks that would produce a Bald Eagle, a pair of balletic Ravens and a Northern Flicker all within a minute. And the one that nearly got away? A Ring-necked Duck that, in a soporific moment, registered in my mind as a Tufty!

Canada is a vast country and the birds can seem to be thinly dispersed. The prime objective of our trip was to visit family and to tour the Eastern Provinces. Birding opportunities were secondary and my bonus was to find birds as we went. It was a great season for such a trip. I can only imagine what I might have found if I had been really trying!