

The Naturalists' Point of View on Cobourg Harbour and the West Headland, by Richard Pope and Margaret Bain.

The following material has been culled from various memos we sent to the former Mayor and Council (beginning 2013) and several presentations to Council (2013 and 2016).

Many species need sheltered waters so that such areas become crucial for birds. Our harbour is one such area and it is important to note that it is the only suitable extensive area of sheltered water between Presqu'ile and Oshawa, a distance of almost 100 km. of Great Lakes shoreline. The flocks of waterfowl and gulls can number thousands of birds and we have recorded 15 gull species in total, some extremely rare.

Our harbour is **MUCH VISITED** by naturalist groups from all over the province. Every year the Ontario Field Ornithologists have an outing to our harbour and Presqu'ile. At the OFO convention held in Cobourg at the Best Western in 2012, attended by 245 people for 3 days (economic benefits), we set an all-time high record of 178 area birds (beating even Point Pelee).

Cobourg and its harbour are extremely well-known on the Ontario birding map.

It is obvious that reduction of available space in the harbour will impact greatly upon the bird life. The area west of the centre pier is a haven for species that prefer less open water. In winter the gulls roost on the ice here often just where the Phase III expansion is suggested to take place; in spring and fall gulls and shorebirds also flock precisely on the short stretch of beach slated in the Marina Plan for gantries and expanded boat launches.

From memo to Gil Jan 21 2014 the naturalists' view BIRDS. The harbour is a favorite site of nature photographers (see, for example, the Weather Network) and birders, both from Cobourg and all over southern Ontario. Many reports of birds found in Cobourg Harbour, some extremely rare in Ontario, have been submitted to the Ontario Bird Records Committee (e.g., Mew and Common Gull, American Oystercatcher, and Snowy Egret). Over the last 20 years over 50% of the rarest species of birds found in the Cobourg area have been associated with the harbour.

We have 74,212 bird records in and around the harbour going back to 1948 of an astonishing 267 species (see appended list).

From a birding point of view, the significance of the harbour is a composite of a number of factors. Lake Ontario is a wilderness; no one lives there and human presence is transitory. As a result, it draws huge numbers of birds, especially waterfowl that winter there and species that use it as a highway twice a year in migration. Others nest on its shores. Many species need sheltered waters so that such areas become crucial for birds. Our harbour is one such area and it is important to note that it is the only suitable extensive area of sheltered water between Presqu'ile and Oshawa, a distance of almost

100 km. of Great Lakes shoreline. Migrant waterbirds regularly follow the lake shoreline – it is a major fly-line for both land and water birds - so the harbour offers an important way-station where the birds can find shelter and food. The shorelines of the harbour offer diversity as well, with sand beach to the east, rocky areas along the outer sections, the flat cement along the piers which many birds use for resting, and formerly a strip of mudflats and shrubby vegetation on the west side. Often, particularly along the west side, there is a build-up of waterweeds and algae, offering feeding mats for shorebirds and gulls. This variety can attract a corresponding variety of bird species.

It is obvious that reduction of available space in the harbour will impact greatly upon the bird life. The area west of the centre pier is a haven for species that prefer less open water. The gulls roost on the ice here; gulls and shorebirds also flock precisely on the short stretch of beach slated in the Marina Plan for gantries and expanded boat launches.

It is well-known that we have a large much-loved resident population of Mallard Ducks and Canada Geese. People are even prepared to defy the law to feed them. It may be less well-known that all fall, winter and spring we have a good mix of duck species (including rare Harlequin Ducks and King Eiders) and geese (including Snow Goose, Greater White-fronted Goose and Cackling Goose). Particularly in winter we find substantial numbers of wintering waterfowl feeding in the harbour, especially in bad weather. This is when the aspect of the harbour as refuge is most important.

In winter Cobourg is known as one of the two or three best spots in Ontario to see gulls. When the water is iced huge numbers of gulls often concentrate on the ice to rest and loiter, perhaps attracted by the good visibility and lack of disturbance. They like to roost on the open ice, often just where the Phase III expansion is suggested to take place. These flocks can number thousands of birds and sometimes as many as 10 species have been present, an astonishing total.

Over the years we have recorded 15 gull species in total, some extremely rare (e.g., Mew Gull, Franklin's Gull), but on any given day at least 5-6 species are present.

Our harbour is visited by naturalist groups from all over the province. Every year reports of various rarities bring birders flocking to Cobourg Harbour. Birders from the US visit us in winter because birds like Long-tailed Duck, readily seen here, are never seen in the south.

Every year the Ontario Field Ornithologists have an outing to our harbour and Presqu'île. At the OFO convention held in Cobourg at the Best Western on September 14-16, 2012, we set an all-time high record of 178 area birds (exceeding the previous high of 177 at Long Point in 2010), which was tied in 2013 by Point Pelee. Cobourg and its harbour are well-known on the Ontario birding map. 245 people came to Cobourg for the 2012 conference. The economic benefits of such events and of the more general attractiveness of the harbour to birders should not be ignored.

The WBFN Advisory Committee could obtain impressive support for protection of our wild birds from many Ontario naturalists' clubs and qualified experts, as well as local voices, should this become necessary.

COBOURG HARBOUR – AN APPRECIATION

Clive E. Goodwin

For over five years we have watched the development of the plant life on the western side of Cobourg Harbour, and over the past three years I have chronicled these changes in *The Curlew*. It is rather ironic that this association of pioneer plants is the thing that has been the subject of all this attention, as it is something that started to interest us only incidentally. In some ways it is one of the less noteworthy aspects of the place. This article is an attempt to redress that imbalance, at least in part.

Readers of the plant life accounts may recall that we started visiting the headland because we found good birds there. But the headland is an integral part of the harbour as a whole. Some 40% of the rarest species of birds found in the Club area in 1998 were associated with the harbour, and if one looks only at the more exceptional rarities the figure rises to 50%! This was not a chance string of events, a freak year which is not likely to recur. Before the end of January 1999 there were already reliable reports of several extreme rarities there that brought birders flocking to Cobourg.

All this emphasizes just what a valuable asset we have in the harbour. In a submission some time ago I stated that it was the most important natural area in Cobourg, but it got edited out, the editor possibly feeling that this was a rather improbable claim. And of course, it is not a natural area of the kind most of us customarily visualize. From a birding point-of-view, its significance is a composite of a number of factors. One is that it is the only extensive area of sheltered water between Presqu'île and Oshawa, a distance of almost 100 km. of Great Lakes shoreline. While Port Hope harbour would seem to have similar potential, Ted McDonald tells me that it is not in the same class. There are probably several factors at work, including its enclosed nature, the lack of natural habitat and the degree of disturbance it receives.

Migrant waterbirds regularly follow the shoreline – in fact, it is a major fly-line for both land and water birds, as I discussed previously (*The Curlew*, September and October 1997) - so the harbour offers an important way-station where the birds can find shelter and food.

There certainly seems to be an abundance of food to be found, and in winter we find substantial numbers of all the regularly wintering waterfowl feeding in the harbour, especially in bad weather. This is when the aspect of harbour as refuge is most important.

When the water is iced huge numbers of gulls may concentrate on the ice to rest and loiter, perhaps attracted by the good visibility and lack of disturbance. These flocks can number thousands of birds, and in January 1999 reports suggested as many as 10 species could have been present, an astonishing total.

The shorelines offer diversity as well, with beach to the east, rocky areas along the outer sections, and the flat cement along the piers which many birds use for resting. Often there is a build-up of waterweeds and algae, offering feeding mats for shorebirds and gulls. This variety can attract a corresponding variety of bird species.

So much for waterbirds. Until the west headland developed heavy cover it was a different story for landbirds, apart from open-country species like Horned Larks and Snow

Buntings. These still occur regularly, but now this relatively small area along the west side has become productive out of all proportion to its size. In 1998, with heavier cover and reduced disturbance from automobiles, it really came into its own, and about half of the noteworthy records came from there.

For landbirds, unlike the waterfowl, the huge expanse of Lake Ontario presents a serious barrier. Southbound migrants arrive at the shoreline, and many will either turn along it or seek shelter. For them, this dense tangle of plants near the water's edge is a welcome final refuge, and they plunge into its depths to rest and feed before continuing on. Migrants can, of course, arrive at the shoreline anywhere, but here there is nowhere in the surrounding area that offers the same degree of safety, and birds arriving, say, after an overnight flight, are drawn to it.

Although much migration is along the shoreline, radar studies have shown a significant amount does cross the lake, particularly in the nocturnal movements of small landbirds. A small bird, flying north over the lake in spring as light dawns, is very vulnerable and will head for the nearest cover as quickly as possible. And again, for some significant number that nearest cover will be the headland.

Let's return now to the plants. They don't migrate twice a year, but the plant communities still have great interest. In fact, the remarkably rich assortment of species found on the landfill area – 191 to date – is quite unusual, as is the opportunity it has presented to keep track of the progressive changes.

There are rare plants here as well. The Great Lakes *Potentilla* is wholly confined to limited sections of the Great Lakes shoreline. Add the immediately adjacent west beach, and we find a vulnerable and fragile beach strand community with Sea Rocket and Seaside Spurge. This plant association is limited to certain beaches along the Great Lakes, and it adds enormously to the value of the harbour area as a whole.

It all adds up to a natural area of outstanding significance, a draw to birders from far afield and a perpetual source of fascination and surprise to those of us who are fortunate enough to live here. A hearty vote of thanks to the Town of Cobourg for allowing this to happen, and may it long continue!