

THE SANDY POND — SELKIRK SHORES SECTOR

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At the eastern end of Lake Ontario, a series of bays and marshes, separated from one another by long tongues of land and from Lake Ontario itself by a strip of barrier dunes, provide a remarkable and diversified complex of excellent birding terrain. The bays are actually the flooded broad, shallow terminations of the creek and river valleys that drain the western Tug Hill Plateau country. Sandy Pond — also known as Big Sandy, North Pond, or just the Pond — is the largest of these embayments and the central one. It possesses the greatest extent of open water and is ringed with a fine collection of cattail and grass marshes. The ponds to the south are South Sandy Pond, the Deer Creek marshes, the Salmon River marshes, Selkirk Shores State Park lagoon, and Sage Creek, north to south in that order; to the north are South and North Colwell Ponds, Goose Pond, the Sandy Creek marshes, and Lakeview Pond, south to north in that order. These northern ponds have a progressively greater percentage of marsh and red maple swamp with increasing distance from the central bay. The most distinct boundaries of the general area are Stony Creek to the north, Route 3 to the east, Route 104B to the south, Sage Creek and Lake Ontario to the west.

The land separating these bays from each other consists predominantly of a loose mixture of sand and glacial rubble. This condition, coupled with the rolling topography of these low ridges, accounts for the primarily agricultural use of the land for dairy farms and hay fields. Proximity to the lake and consequent more even spring and fall temperatures explains the admixture of various orchards and fruit farms here. The lakeshore ends of the gentle dividing ridges are sharply terminated and soil banks 40 to 60 feet high occur, especially on those ridges separating the southern bays. From the lake edge to one-half mile inland, these ridges have numerous woodlots, some of them of considerable extent, e. g., Selkirk Shores State Park woods. The nearness of these woods to the lake combined with the dominate marsh-farm habitat of the area make these small terminal wooded tracts phenomenal bird traps, both spring and fall, though the pattern at each season is quite different.

Resident human population is small, a situation consonant with the mainly agricultural character of the land use here, in view of the large land area and few personnel required for operation of dairy farms and orchards. However, the sand beaches of the barrier strip and the excellent fishing of the marshy bays attract a large summer population which, with increasing leisure and better roads, will almost certainly continue to increase. To date this large summer population has apparently affected only the birds of the dunes and outer beaches (Piping Plover, Common Tern, Bank Swallow), but with the rise of landfill operations for summer camps along Route 3, some of the more shallow marsh areas are already disappearing.

Lake Ontario governs the local weather with a wet and windy force. Characteristically these lakeshore areas are both cooler and drier through

the summer than areas 10 to 15 miles to the south or east. Summer thunderstorms originating on eastern Lake Ontario are usually blown east over the ponds and bays to result in cloudbursts on the western edge of the Tug Hill Plateau but the immediate lakefront may go for weeks without sufficient rain to wash the sand from the leaves of low-growing bushes and plants. Fall is chronically mild to mid-November, but sharp changes in temperature and wind velocity can be expected with any non-west wind. Winter in this area is dramatic with 30 foot high ice barriers and violent winds, rugged with low temperatures but little snow, and practically birdless. At this season open water, aside from Lake Ontario and the Salmon River, is virtually non-existent. Further, in the winter Lake Ontario is covered from one-fourth to one-half mile out from shore with a heaving sea of pack ice, a condition preventing decent duck-watching and duck-counting. Early spring migration suffers from the heavy inheritance of winter ice and frequently species of ducks reported from this sector in spring have been seen weeks earlier at Oneida Lake and other "inland" areas.

The woodlots of the area are mainly mixtures of ash, maple and beech with some hemlocks and yellow birch. Where wetter conditions prevail, red maple and elm predominate. In the Selkirk Shores State Park area, many native white birch and various introduced spruce, pine and fir provide seed and cone crops respectively for winter birds.

Migrations

In spring the south shore of Lake Ontario serves as a great collecting barrier to northbound migrants, particularly small land birds. The majority of these pass eastward along the lakeshore reaching maximal concentrations south of and in the Selkirk Shores State Park area. The lakeshore up to this point (going from west to east and then north) is liberally blessed with many lakeside woods but along the south edge of the Salmon River, the extensive marshes of that river create an abrupt drop in the woodland habitat. Because of this abrupt transition, large numbers of sparrows, thrushes and warblers jam into a narrow strip of wooded and brush-covered barrier dunes separating the Salmon River marshes from Lake Ontario. At times every bush may seem alive with birds. North of the Salmon River, however, the land birds follow the wooded (inland) edge of the Deer Creek marshes, gradually swinging away from the exposed, food-deficient shore area and passing northward along the eastern edges of the remaining northern bays. Because of this migrating small land birds are frankly scarce in spring along the Sandy Pond dunes and those north of it, despite the wooded slopes of those areas, and small-land-birding there typically proves unrewarding.

Quite the reverse situation, however, obtains in the fall, especially when autumn cold fronts advance across the area from north or northwest. Then thousands of warblers, chickadees, vireos, thrushes and sparrows migrating south and south-westward collect in the thin line of woods along the more northern of the barrier dunes and funnel down this sparsely wooded strip in flight after flight. Because of the abundance of migrants here, the scant cover the woods provides, and the treetop elevation the dunes make available, this narrow flight lane is outstanding as a spot where one can easily observe and study the "confusing fall warblers." This same strip in late October

through November may be inundated with winter finches (Redpoll, Pine Siskin, Evening and Pine Grosbeaks) passing south, which usually appear days to weeks in advance of their initial appearance at inland localities.

Migrant waterfowl with the exception of Ring-necked Duck, Red-breasted Merganser, Common Loon, Horned Grebe, and Bufflehead are notoriously scarce each spring, largely because of ice conditions and high water levels. A noteworthy feature of the spring flight in the past few years is the appearance of small numbers of American Brant from mid-May to early June on the more extensive beaches of the area. This species also occurs in the October-November flight in the same habitat but numbers at that season fluctuate widely from year to year. Fall waterfowl flights more than compensate for the spring paucity for during September, October, and November thousands of ducks, mergansers, geese and loons with lesser numbers of grebes and scoters migrate south just offshore, usually within easy viewing distance of the beach or dunes. Sometimes enormous collections of resting waterfowl gather offshore from the dirt banks or higher dunes between the Sandy Pond inlet and the Salmon River. The best flights come with a strong north, northwest, or west wind. East winds invariably kill any flights and water birding from the beach in such a wind is useless. South winds rarely produce a good flight or decent conditions for observation if one should occur.

A prominent feature of mid- and late May along these bays is the dying off of moon-eyes, which are cast ashore in glistening, smelly windrows, a fishy feast which draws thousands of gulls and terns. The rotting forms of these fish with their attendant insect life attract at that season many shorebirds, notably Ruddy Turnstone, Red-backed Sandpiper, Knot, Sanderling and Black-bellied Plover, all of which occur at the inlets to the bays, mainly at the Sandy Pond inlet. Spring shorebird numbers are usually somewhat better than fall counts but species variety is smaller. In late summer and fall (mid-July to mid-October) the inlet at Sandy Pond regularly attracts uncommon migrants as Hudsonian Curlew, Northern Phalarope, Baird's and Western Sandpipers plus small numbers of practically all the shore-frequenting group. The Selkirk Shores State Park lagoon also serves as a major shorebird attraction: numbers of species and flock counts are usually greater than at Sandy Pond but are quite variable depending on whether or not the lagoon-to-lake channel is open and ultimately on the level of Lake Ontario itself, for with high water few or no shorebirds are present. The fall shorebird flocks may be attended by either Merlins or Peregrine Falcons and the sudden flushing of all the shorebirds may signal the approach of one of these birds.

The fall gull and tern flocks which congregate at the various inlets often attract uncommon species to their ranks and thorough checks of these loitering flocks may turn up Forster's Tern, Brant, or Hudsonian Curlew. Singularly the Bonaparte's Gull is not a conspicuous bird either in frequency or numbers in these flocks. Occasionally a jaeger may appear to harass the omnipresent gulls and terns.

The southern portion of this series of ponds and marshes, in particular the Sage Creek area, has an excellent March through May hawk flight; mainly accipiters and buteos, a concentration produced by the Lake Ontario

water barrier coupled with strong south, southwest, and, infrequently, southeast winds. Further along, like the small land bird flights, this stream of raptors scatters northeastward over Selkirk Shores State Park, expanding into an ever-widening fan of birds, and passes around the eastern side of the sequence of bays. Only a few of the falcons, ospreys and harriers do follow the shoreline closely and small numbers of these may be seen passing north along the outer beach in April and early May. In September and October a light but definite falcon-osprey-harrier flight occurs over the barrier dunes. This latter migration is best observed from the high dunes at Sandy Pond on days with strong north or northwest winds.

Breeding Birds

The abundance of cattail marsh throughout the area supports large populations of bitterns, Florida Gallinules, rails, and resident ducks (Mallard, Black, Blue-winged Teal) but unquestionably the most abundant and conspicuous marsh-nester is the Black Tern, whose colonies occur on all but the two southernmost bays. The wet grassy areas sandwiched between the cattails and the dairy farms provide habitat for Wilson's Snipe, rails, Swamp Sparrows, and, formerly, Short-billed Marsh Wren. The hay fields and dairy agriculture of the area is ideal habitat for all the meadow sparrows (Vesper, Savannah, Grasshopper, Henslow's) along with Eastern Meadowlarks, Bobolinks, and Upland Sandpipers.

The breeding birds of the open beach and sand dunes have perhaps undergone the most marked changes. Hyde (1939, Roosevelt Wildlife Bulletin 7:68) in 1935 estimated 12 to 15 pairs of Piping Plover near the Sandy Pond inlet. Today that much picnicked area is occupied by a single pair and no other nesting areas are, at present, known along this strip. Bank Swallows and Belted Kingfishers nesting in the shallow banks of the higher dunes suffer regularly from the depredations of the exploring youngsters of picnicking families. The Common Tern was apparently scarce as a breeder along the Sandy Pond stretch in 1935 and 1936 (Hyde). Numbers had increased strikingly in the late 1940s but with the recent rise of the summer human and gull populations, these same colonies are again on the wane.

As to the breeders of the wooded areas, the Red-eyed Vireo, Redstart, Veery, Ovenbird, Wood Pewee combination numerically prevails. However, the mixture of conifers, especially the native hemlock and the plantation spruce and fir, along with the frequent swampy woods hold a conglomerate of warblers (18 species), Vireos, flycatchers and thrushes. One can find at Selkirk Shores State Park (the area most intensively searched for breeding land birds) Myrtle, Mourning, Pine, and Hooded Warblers, all nesting within hearing distance of each other, so closely are the varying habitats juxtaposed.

The recent advance of southern species has to date only lightly touched this section. Carolina Wrens have been reported at both Selkirk Shores State Park and the Sandy Pond dunes but other southerners such as the Cardinal and Blue-gray Gnatcatcher are unknown. The Golden-winged Warbler, though occurring as far north as Williamstown in the Tug Hill Plateau country, has only very recently become established near Selkirk and is yet to be recorded from the Sandy Pond area.

The many roads through this area give birders access to practically all major beaches, barrier dunes and woodlots. The two best areas unquestionably are the Sandy Pond dunes and inlet and Selkirk Shores State Park. Routes to the latter can be obtained from any road map and fortunately the "shorebird" lagoon is located just to the south and the "warbler" woods just to the north of the main parking lot there. To reach the Sandy Pond barrier dunes, go north from Port Ontario on Route 3 to Sandy Pond Corners. Take the Sandy Island Beach Road west across the marshy southern end of Sandy Pond to the base of the large dunes. Then walk north up the beach one and a quarter miles to the inlet. An inspection of the woods and marshes on the east side of the dunes makes a rewarding return trip from this inlet in late summer and fall.

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