

Important Bird Areas (IBAs) within the Southwestern Zone, Ontario Parks

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Abstract

Of the 40 provincial parks in the Southwestern Zone, Ontario Parks, seven are associated with designated or nominated Important Bird Areas (IBA): Long Point Provincial Park (Long Point IBA), Rondeau Provincial Park (Greater Rondeau Area IBA), Lighthouse Point and Fish Point Provincial Nature Reserves (Pelee Island Natural Areas IBA), East Sister Island Provincial Nature Reserve (Pelee Island Archipelago IBA), Cabot Head Provincial Nature Reserve (Cabot Head IBA), Pinery Provincial Park (Port Franks Dune Forest Complex IBA). An IBA is a site providing essential habitat for one or more species of breeding or non-breeding birds. These sites may contain threatened species, endemic species, species representative of a biome, or highly exceptional concentrations of birds.

*This panel presents three IBAs within Ontario Parks, Southwestern Zone: Cabot Head boasts 126 bird species recorded during the breeding season and 19 regionally rare species. Port Franks Dune Forest Complex has over 300 bird species being recorded for its oak savanna and dune environment. The Greater Rondeau Area has 334 bird species recorded, 134 nesting there, including the endangered Prothonotary Warbler (*Protonotaria citrea*).*

Introduction

An Important Bird Area (IBA) is a significant habitat for breeding and non-breeding birds. Eight of 40 parks in the Southwestern Zone are part of designated or nominated IBAs which are internationally significant (Figure 1).

The important Bird Areas program began in Europe in 1985 in response to the European Economic Community's (EEC) request for the protection of such areas. The program is sponsored by Birdlife International (an NGO) and carried out by national organizations throughout the world, including Asia to Western Europe, Africa, India, the United States and Canada (Important Bird Areas of Canada, 2001). In 1996 the Long Point area was announced as the first globally significant Important Bird Area in Canada, followed closely by Point Pelee and Cabot Head Provincial Nature Reserves and Rondeau and The Pinery Provincial Parks (Important Bird Areas of Canada, 2001).

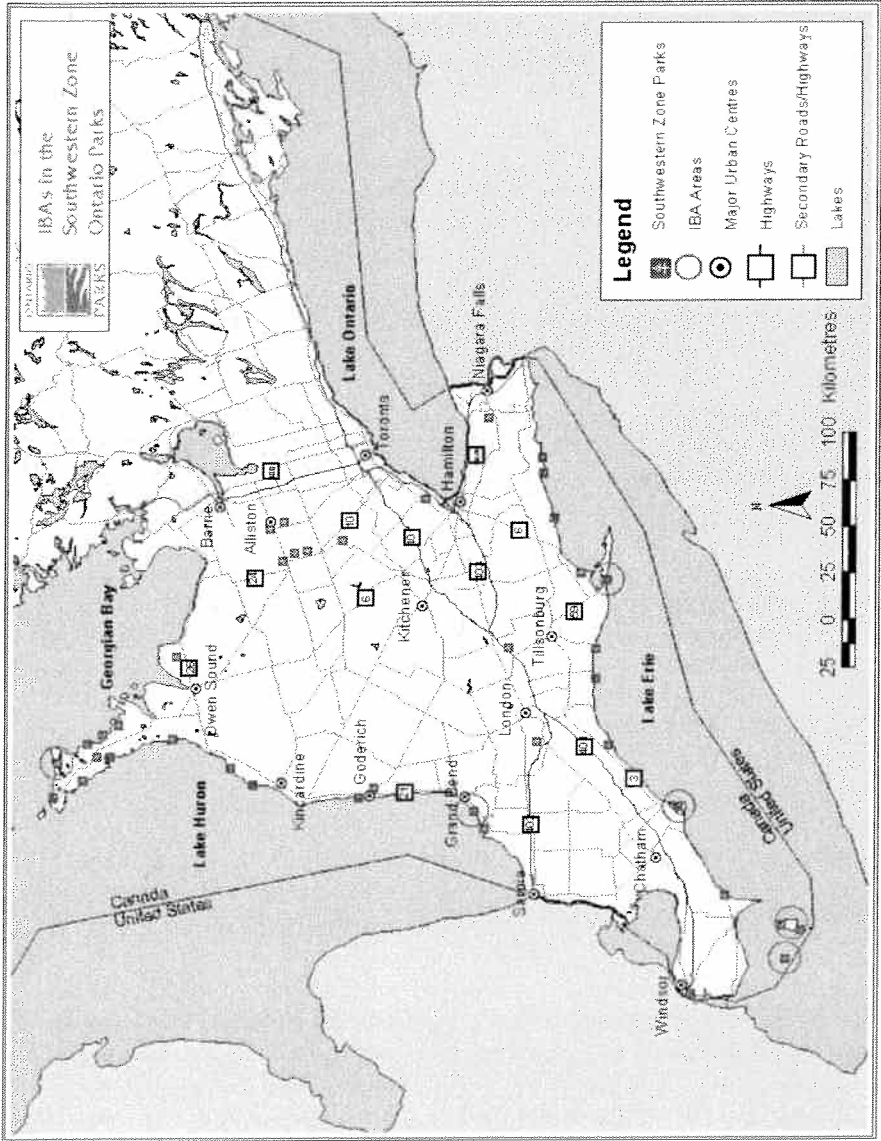


Figure 1: Map depicting the 8 IBAs in the Southwestern Zone, Ontario

“IBAs are beneficial because the identification of important bird habitat is a necessary first step in establishing habitat-based priorities in bird conservation. The designation of a network of sites can help decision-makers focus their efforts and protect the most critical bird habitat. The program is inclusive and identifies important sites for all groups of birds. It integrates aquatic and terrestrial habitat conservation by protecting seabird, shorebird, landbird, and waterfowl habitat. Most importantly, the program is community-driven, and cooperative. It relies on grassroots involvement to develop and implement effective conservation plans. The program will also help generate widespread public awareness about birds and will help build partnerships at all levels: international, national, provincial, and local.” (Important Bird Areas of Canada, 2001).

The Greater Rondeau Area IBA

Rondeau Provincial Park is approximately 3,254 hectares in size and is located in the western basin of Lake Erie, southeast of Chatham. The park can be accessed via Highways 3 and 401 and secondary highway 17. The park has traditionally supported the largest breeding population of Prothonotary Warblers in Canada. This species has since declined in numbers, with only 13 pairs being recorded in Canada during 1997, six of which nested at Rondeau. During the 1981 to 1985 surveys for the Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Ontario, the Rondeau area had the highest diversity of breeding birds in the province. Out of the more than 330 species recorded as breeding in Ontario, 134 were recorded in the Greater Rondeau Area (Bird Studies Canada, 2001).

Rondeau’s Natural Heritage Education (NHE) program focuses on Rondeau’s natural heritage values (Carolinian forests, marshes and wetlands, savanna and dune habitats and prescribed burning and Vulnerable, Threatened or Endangered species in the park) (Dobbyn, 2001).

Rondeau supports two annual birding festivals, The “Wings of Spring” in March and The Ridgertown-Rondeau “Festival of Flight” in May.

Long Point Peninsula and Marshes IBA

Long Point Provincial Park is approximately 150 hectares in size and is located on a peninsula in Lake Erie, 45km southwest of Simcoe, at the south end of Highway 59.

The Long Point region is a highly diverse landscape with dry uplands and wet lowlands, supporting an incredibly rich array of breeding birds. This is a place where “Carolinian” species often nest almost back to back with species more typical of the boreal forest (Bird Studies Canada, 2001). The Long Point Bird Observatory, founded in 1960, is North America’s oldest, and first of its type as a pri-

vately funded bird observatory (Ontario Parks, 2001). Long Point's Natural Heritage Education (NHE) program consists only of printed materials, i.e. "Bird Watchers Checklist", articles, newsletters and publications from Bird Studies Canada (Marchington, 2001).

Cabot Head IBA

Cabot Head Provincial Park is approximately 4,514 hectares in size and is located on the northeast side of the Upper Bruce Peninsula. The park consists of several unconsolidated land holdings and is part of the Niagara Escarpment Parks System and the Niagara Escarpment Biosphere Reserve. The northern part of the park is located within the boundaries of Bruce Peninsula National Park (Ontario Parks, 1996).

There is no formal NHE program within this park. As a Nature Reserve, it has no full-time staff on-site (Toth, 2001).

Pelee Island Archipelago IBA

East Sister Island Provincial Nature Reserve, approximately 53 hectares in size and part of the archipelago, is located 26 kilometres out from the Lake Erie shoreline and is accessible by private boat only (Fawdry, 2001).

The islands in the archipelago are significant migratory bird stopover areas and large numbers of migrants make use of them (Bird Studies Canada, 2001).

There is no formal NHE program within this park because as a Nature Reserve, it is non-operating with no full-time staff on site (Fawdry, 2001).

Pelee Islands Natural Areas IBA

Pelee Island is located 25 kilometres from the mainland in Lake Erie. Passenger and vehicle ferries leave Kingsville or Leamington, on Lake Erie's north shore, at regular intervals. The crossing to Pelee Island takes about 75 minutes (Ontario Parks, 2000).

Pelee Island supports large concentrations of songbirds during the spring and fall migrations, especially in the Fish Point and Lighthouse Point Provincial Nature Reserves. In addition to the more abundant species such as warblers and sparrows, several threatened species, such as Henslows Sparrow (near Threatened globally, nationally Endangered), Prothonotary Warbler (nationally Endangered), and Hooded Warblers (nationally Threatened) are present (Bird studies Canada, 2001).

Although there are no Ontario Parks staff working at the two reserves on a regular basis, NHE programs are made available to the public through a Heritage Centre on the island provided by the Municipality of Pelee (Fawdry, 2001).

Port Franks Dune Forest Complex IBA

The Pinery Provincial Park is approximately 2,532 hectares in size and is located on Lake Huron, 6 kilometres south of Grand Bend on Highway 21 (Ontario Parks, 2001). The Port Franks dune complex supports at least six species identified as threatened in Canada, and historically two additional threatened species have bred here. The forest complex is generally comprised of a series of wooded dunes (oak and pine) that extend inland from the Lake Huron shoreline (Bird Studies Canada, 2001).

The Pinery has ten trails that lead birders into a variety of habitats. Interpretive programs that include birds and habitat are part of the NHE program including children's programs, conducted hikes, evening programs and displays in the visitor Centre. They conduct a nocturnal owl survey and have eight forest bird monitoring plots. Pinery staff participated in the original Breeding Bird Atlas and participate in the current Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas program, Christmas Bird Count, North American Woodcock survey, Project Feeder Watch survey, as well as maintain seasonal records on all sitings. 311 species have been recorded, including 124 breeding species.

Twelve Mile Creek Headwaters

Short Hills Provincial Park is approximately 661 hectares in size and is located 4 kilometres southwest of St. Catharines, along the Niagara Escarpment (Ontario Parks, 2001). Short Hills supports a significant breeding population of Hooded Warblers, first discovered there in 1993. The Twelve Mile Creek and its tributaries dissect most of the valley, creating a series of uplands, ridges, and valleys.

There is no formal NHE program within this park because as a Nature Reserve it has no full-time staff on site (Custers, 2001).

Conclusion

The status of an IBA within a Provincial Park serves to identify and protect the natural habitat of the rare bird species that inhabit them, allowing the properties to be managed to regain or retain their natural state. It also increases and enhances the opportunity for natural heritage appreciation and education of the species and habitats within the IBAs and their associated Provincial Parks and Nature Reserves.

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