





# BIRDS ON THE BRUCE

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FALL MIGRATION IS IN PROCESS, and the science crew of Bruce Peninsula Bird Observatory (BPBO) is very busy. Every day, birds must be observed, identified, counted, captured, studied, banded, released and all data recorded.

Stephane Menu, head birder at Bruce Peninsula Bird Observatory, carefully untangling a Dark-Eyed Junco from the mist net prior to studying it.

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**T**HE BIRCH AND POPLAR are turning autumn gold. The forest is alive with bird song, feeding, and flight. Tiny Warblers, Thrushes, Juncos, Sparrows, and many other species are active at Cabot Head. You can hear them flitting among the Spruce trees. They are ground feeding all along the winding drive, storing fat energy for long journeys southward.

Cabot Head, the farthest northeast tip of the Bruce Peninsula, is designated as an Important Bird Area (IBA) of national significance. “It supports a continentally significant population of Red-necked Grebe,” states IBA Canada’s Cabot Head Conservation Plan. “Large numbers of White-winged Scoter, Long-tailed Duck (Oldsquaw) and Common Loon, a significant raptor and landbird migration, and the largest contiguous forest south of the Precambrian Shield in Ontario add to the significance of Cabot Head for birds. Its breath-taking landscape and physical, botanical and historical features make this truly one of the most outstanding sites in Ontario.”

### Bird Research

Fall migration monitoring is one of BPBO’s programs. The head birder and a dedicated volunteer crew work tirelessly from August 15 to October 31 at Cabot Head Research Station. They operate mist nets to capture, then identify, weigh, measure, and band

migrating songbirds. Many of these species breed and live in Canada’s remote boreal forests where monitoring is extremely difficult. The work at Cabot Head tells researchers something of what is happening far north. Birds from farther south also make surprise appearances. In October 2015, a rare Hooded Warbler well beyond its usual range was caught; only six have been banded at Cabot Head in the past 15 years.

The science crew also does a daily census of species present by sight and sound. This fascinating process requires intimate knowledge of bird species and powerful observation skills. Walking with the team is a lesson in mindfulness: a Catbird meows, a juvenile Bald Eagle rides high air currents, a lone Common Loon calls from Wingfield Basin, a Belted Kingfisher perches in a dead tree overlooking the water. Life surrounds us, and in our fast-paced lives, perhaps we barely notice.

Stephane Menu was working his 10th year as head birder or station scientist in 2015. His clear love for birds and Cabot Head shines through in the way he welcomes visitors. He writes a delightful weekly blog about happenings at BPBO, painting a vivid picture of life at the station.

He says, “The data collection we do here is critical for providing detailed baseline information on

bird species, populations, and migration patterns in Canada, and for monitoring changes over time. These details allow for sustainable land and resource decision making.” On quiet afternoons he often climbs the steep trail to Middle Bluff summit on the Escarpment for spectacular views over Cabot Head, to bird and wildlife watch, and to enjoy the serenity of place.

Two young volunteer scientists were also working at BPBO in October 2015. Annick Antaya from Montreal is pursuing a career in ornithology and ecology. She notes, “I am loving this beautiful landscape, and the diversity of birds. Stephane has taught me so much! Ecology and conservation are very important to me, and it feels like this work makes a difference in the world.”

Tristan Luxner from Virginia was on his first trip to Canada. “This is an incredible opportunity to learn about diverse species and habitats,” he says. “I have been able to take skills from school and apply them in the field. I am more confident in handling the birds, in banding and collecting data, and in recognizing many species.”

Whether you are a keen birder or simply a nature lover, you may admit to a fondness for birds. They add wonder and beauty to our lives. Birds also act as barometers of ecosystem health; ultimately what happens to the birds is likely to happen to humans.



▲ View from West Bluff on the Escarpment toward Wingfield Cottage on Georgian Bay, one of two cottages that are part of the bird observatory. In front of the cottage is the shipwreck Gargantua. The bay is Wingfield Basin.

► From left, Tristan Luxner, a volunteer, Stephane Menu and behind him, Annick Antaya, volunteer, on porch of Wingfield Cottage observing bird activity on Wingfield Basin.











◀ An open mist net is almost invisible in the shade but sunlight makes it clear to the human eye. At least one bird appears to be caught in the net. Birds get caught and are retrieved as quickly as possible, usually within 30 minutes to ensure minimum stress.

For these, and many other reasons, we are wise to pay attention to their welfare. There are a multitude of ways to get involved. If you feed birds in your backyard, notice what species come, learn about their preferred foods and habitats and be aware that a sudden stop to a regular feeding schedule may put them at risk.

### How to Help

The Internet has allowed for massive increases in citizen science opportunities for birders. Check out [feederwatch.org](http://feederwatch.org) and [ebird.org](http://ebird.org) as examples. Regular annual

bird counts, such as the Christmas Bird Count, are run locally by conservation and naturalist groups all over the world. Bird Studies Canada lists contacts along the Niagara Escarpment. Ontario Nature and the Audubon Society also provide great birding resources, information and events.

BPBO is more than a unique and beautiful place. It is a group of people and programs dedicated to studying and protecting birds and their habitats. You can help! Go to [bpbo.ca](http://bpbo.ca) to explore options. Become a member, make a donation, or volunteer



▲ Luxnor gently handles a Swainson's Thrush removed from the mist net. It will be taken to the lab for data collection, banded and released.



▲ In the lab, Stephane Menu and Tristan Luxnor measure, weigh and band the birds, and record data. Menu uses magnifying goggles while Luxnor records the numbers.



◀ A Nashville Warbler just removed from the mist net. Although the birds appear stressed by the handling process, it is quick and they seem to recover easily. Wing and tail plumage is checked to estimate the age of the bird, a numbered leg band is put on, and if the bird is already banded, the number is checked and recorded to track migration patterns.





▲ This Hooded Warbler was well north of these birds' usual territory.

## The “Adopt-a-Bird” program lets people donate to sponsor protection for particular bird species.

at Cabot Head Research Station. Get involved in education and outreach. Attend the annual fundraising dinner in November. Visit Cabot Head Lighthouse and Museum to understand the area's natural and cultural history. Join a BPBO-sponsored birding trip to Nicaragua. For connections to other environment, naturalist and birding groups see “Links” under “About Us” on the BPBO website.

The “Adopt-a-Bird” program lets people donate to sponsor protection for particular bird species. Detailed under “Support Us” on the BPBO website, this is a great gift idea for all ages. Choose your favourite bird and level of commitment. Perhaps you have a love of Chickadees or Juncos or little Owls. The birds continue to live wild and free. Your adoption fee





▲ Stephane Menu bird watching from West Bluff lookout.



▲ The Gargantua shipwreck is now home to a Beaver family. West Bluff is in the background.

supports monitoring, research, and education projects.

BPBO is “the voice of birds on the Bruce.” You are warmly invited to connect with and enjoy this special voice which calls us back to nature, beauty, and wonder. Birds can teach us gentle lessons of quiet and appreciation. They help us engage with forest, field, sky, and water. The majesty of a soaring Eagle, the mournful

cry of a Dove, the grace of a diving Duck: these things touch our hearts. To walk softly in the woods surrounded by birdsong is a precious gift. Let’s make sure this voice is heard and protected for generations to come. **NEV**

*Sandra J. Howe’s last feature for Niagara Escarpment Views was “Under Dark Skies,” Summer 2016.*