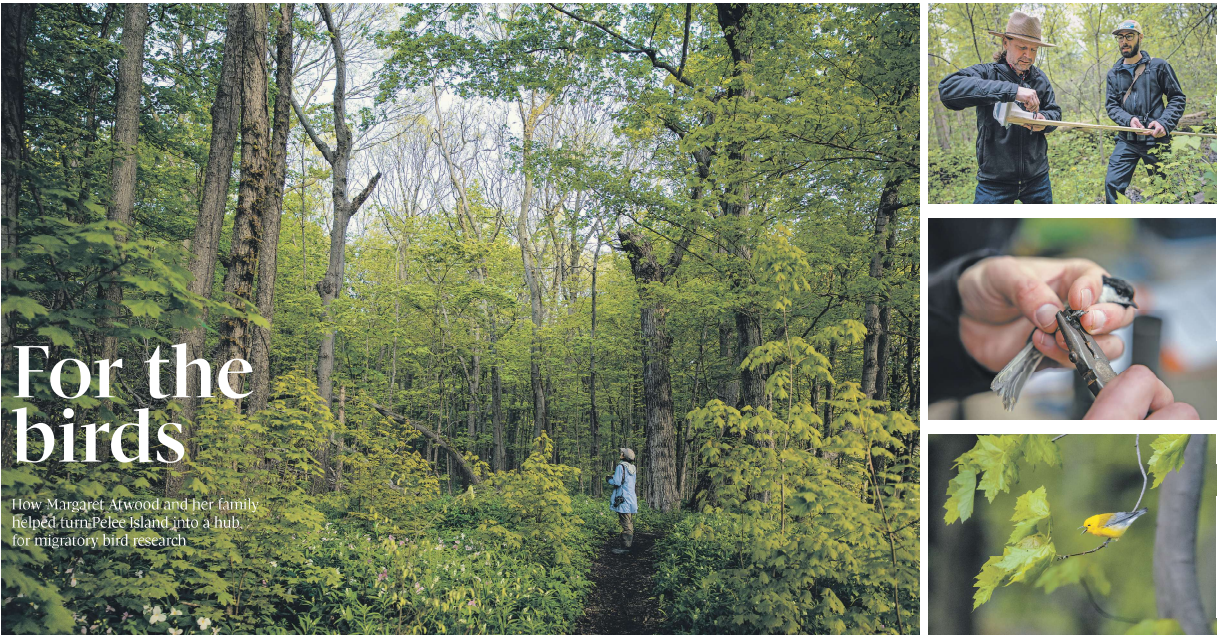




For the birds

How Margaret Atwood and her family helped turn Pelee Island into a hub for migratory bird research

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SCIENCE REPORTER

It's Saturday night on Pelee Island and the high light of Spring song has arrived. The event is billed as a three-day celebration of hooches and birding. Its location — a bucolic parcel of farmland surrounded by the waters of Lake Erie — is home to Canada's southernmost community. It may also be one of the country's least appreciated natural gems.

Every spring, the island serves as a temporary landing pad for hundreds of thousands of migrating birds arriving from as far away as the Amazon rain forest. They stop, feed and depart again, driven by a restless instinct to complete a journey they will then have to reverse in the fall.

Pelee Island is also a seasonal resort for Canada's best-known author. For nearly 40 years, Margaret Atwood has made a home away from home here, and she has left her imprint on island life. In 2022, Ms. Atwood helped to launch Spring song with her partner Graeme Gibson, who died in 2018.

Last month, at the Spring song 25th anniversary gala, Ms. Atwood stepped to the microphone and reprised her role as star performer, backed by the event's now-legendary rubber chicken choir. "Chickens on high," Ms. Atwood commanded with her signature deadpan delivery. The chorus line assembled behind her dutifully complied.

Ms. Atwood then launched into to the event's traditional opening number: a rendition of *Old MacDonald*, augmented by the sound of many rubber chickens squealed to the rhythm of the familiar tune. Squawking and laughter filled the island's eponymous winery, where more than 200 attendees had gathered for the dinner and the entertainment.

The unflappable Ms. Atwood then proceeded to her second selection, *When the Red, Red Robin Comes Bob, Bobbin' Along*. By the song's finale, the rubber chicken choir had reached its hysterical crescendo. Afterward, guest lecturer Tim Birkhead, an ornithologist from the University of Sheffield, elicited a round of applause when he summed up the experience with a laugh.

"This is the wildest bird event I've ever been to."

THE PINCH POINT

There is a purpose to the fun. Across North America, birds are in trouble. In a landmark study published in 2019, a team of U.S. and Canadian researchers estimated there were about three billion fewer birds on the continent than in 1970. The decline is especially pronounced among migrating species, whose populations have diminished by 88 per cent.

This is grave news for birds but also for wildlife conservation in general. Bird migration is not just a biological wonder but a key component in a continent-wide cycle of ecosystem renewal. Without it, Canada's biodiversity would be impoverished.

Even those who pay close attention to the phenomenon find its scale and impact hard to grasp. How could a species like the Black-throated blue warbler — an exquisite, thin-striped songbird weighing no more than 13 grams — possibly be better off travelling 8,000 kilometres from the foothills of the Andes Mountains to breed in the boreal forest? Yet evolution has honed this tiny bird and many others for precisely such an undertaking, because it optimizes their survival.

What they get in return is a chance to feast on something that even the most ancient nature lovers tend to despise: our bugs.

"There are lots of insects in the Amazon basin, but not like this," said Dan Mennill, a biologist at the University of Windsor who studies migrating bird behaviour and communication. "The seasonal bloom we have in Canada is unlike anything those birds can get anywhere else."



The Pelee Island Bird Observatory conducts bird migration research, a critical stop on a major Lake Erie route of Canada's southernmost inhabited point.

For nearly 40 years, the island has been a home away from home for Margaret Atwood, Canada's best-known author.

THE RAPTURE

"I came to the birds relatively late in life," began Mr. Gibson in the introduction to his *Birds of Birds*, a bestseller he first published in 2007. He went on to say that for 37 years, he did not understand what birds were but about. Their observation seemed eccentric and mysterious.

But through a series of bird encounters, including the chance sighting of an albatross on a family excursion to the Galapagos Islands, Mr. Gibson experienced something akin to a religious conversion.

"At its heightened moments, birdwatching can encourage a state of being close to rapture," he wrote.

He was hooked. But it wasn't until he and Ms. Atwood had fallen for Pelee Island and purchased a cottage there that his passion for birds turned into something larger.

It began with Spring song Weekend, a way to combine the couple's literary and birding interests in an event that could also raise money for the Pelee Island Heritage Centre. Ms. Atwood credits Mr. Gibson and the Heritage Centre's founding director, Ron Tieszen, with coining the idea.

Among the activities open to participants at Spring song is a 24-hour race to identify as many avian species as possible. The competition runs through the night to include owls and other nocturnal birds. This year's winning team checked off 92 species (a late spring led to a lower showing than in previous years).

The event also brings in special guests from the birding world, including scientists, naturalists and bird advocates such as the late Canadian artist and filmmaker Bill Lishman.

Writes Lishman on the other half of the offering.

Over the years, featured authors at Spring song have included Farley Mowat, Jane Urquhart and Lawrence Hill, among others. This year's literary guest was poet and author Ian Williams, winner of the Giller Prize for his novel *Reproduction*.

As Ms. Atwood wrote in her memoir, *Book of Birds*, the motivation for including writers was to offer something for partners who found themselves stuck on the island for a weekend, "because not every spouse of over-birded writers to crouch all night in a chilly ditch."

In 2024, Mr. Gibson and Ms. Atwood stepped up their commitment to the island's flying fauna when they co-founded the Pelee Island Bird Observatory. The not-for-profit effort is dedicated to the study and preservation of birds that depend on the island.

The observatory was initially headed up by Mr. Gibson's son, also called Graeme, and his daughter-in-law Sumiko Onishi. Both are full-time residents on the island. The younger Mr. Gibson suffered a stroke in 2018 and Ms. Onishi, together with seasonal staff, now handles the core of the observatory's activities. During migration season, this includes bird banding and a long-running daily survey of species. Data from the observatory are shared with a national scientific collective, the Canadian Migration Monitoring Network.

Michael Funnell, a wildlife biologist with the conservation organization Birds Canada, said that the consistent gathering of data over many years provides an invaluable record of bird activity on the island.

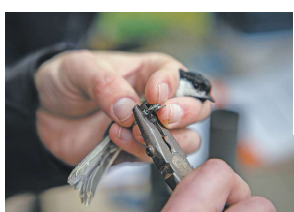
"The value of the long-term data is better understood how population trends of birds have changed over time," he said. "And by being able to understand that, we can drive deeper into the mechanics of why birds might be declining."

This September, the observatory is set to reach a major milestone when it opens its new Atwood-

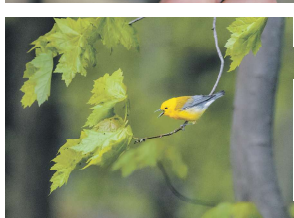
Dan Mennill, professor of ornithology at University of Windsor, left, installs a microphone in the forest on Pelee Island. PHOTOS BY WILSON TAIT/THE GLOBE AND MAIL.



Vincent Moreau, assistant bander, places a band on a black-capped chickadee.



The prothonotary warbler is endangered in Canada, where it sits at the northern edge of its range. Roughly a dozen breeding pairs are thought to remain in the country.



Gibson Bird Centre. The nearly completed centre is intended as both an outreach facility and residence for visiting researchers, staff and volunteers. Its opening will bolster Pelee Island's role as a key centre for bird science in Canada at a time when information about migrating species has never been more important.

Close to \$2-million has been raised to fund the effort, including a donation of more than \$1-million from the organization's founding honorary chair, Ms. Atwood, who also serves as a board member, fundraiser and advocate.

"It is fair to say that without her extraordinary commitment, the Atwood-Gibson Bird Centre would likely still be in the planning stages. If it were possible at all," said Deborah Agan, who chairs the not-for-profit.

In an interview, Ms. Atwood said the support helps ensure the organization's long-term survival. When conservation efforts depend solely on government — "any government," she said — "they can always pull the rug up."

A WORLD APART

The word Pelee derives from French for pecked or bare. It was the word French missionaries used to describe the party treeless appearance of Point Pelee, a triangular peninsula that juts out into western Lake Erie, when they first reached the area in 1670.

On a clear day, it's possible to stand on the point and glimpse Lake Erie off in the distance. The island is built on a plateau of limestone that has been separated from the mainland for at least 4,000 years. For most of that time, it was a partly submerged wetland with a few higher patches poking above the waterline. That made the island a paradise for waterfowl and shore birds but not espe-

cially enticing for settlement. Traces of Indigenous activity on the island date back millennia. But there is a sense that the island has always been a world apart — a feeling that persists today.

The island's early modern history features a cast of characters that could inspire a novel and that reflects the complex interplay of Indigenous, British and American cultures and interests at what was once Canada's western frontier.

In 1788, Thomas McKee, the son of a prominent British official in the region, leased the island from two First Nations in the Detroit River area. Mr. McKee's descendants sold to William McCormick in 1822. Mr. McCormick, a local politician and militia officer, moved his family there the following year. Among the early residents was Mr. McCormick's mother, Elizabeth, who as a young woman had been taken during a Wyandot raid near Pittsburgh. As recounted in a family history published in 1890, she lived as a captive member of an Indigenous community in Ohio until she was noticed by Mr. McCormick's father, a Scottish fur trader, who engineered her escape.

By 1823, inhabitants included a government-appointed lighthouse keeper and his family. In the late 1800s, a Kentucky winemaker, disaffected by the outcome of the U.S. Civil War, saw potential in the island's mild climate and began cultivating grapes there, launching Canada's first winery.

The island, by then a small township, was further transformed in the late 1800s, when the construction of dikes and canals allowed for the conversion of its extensive marsh into farmland. By the eve of the First World War, the island's year-round population had peaked at about 1,000 residents.

Today, only about 220 people live on the island throughout the year, but the seasonal population can swell to 2,000 during the summer months when cottagers and tourists take the 30-minute ferry ride over from the mainland to experience the island's unique charm.

To raise additional tourist revenue, the township has staged an annual pheasant hunt since 1932. Thousands of pheasants are released for the event, which runs over several weekends in late fall.

Pheasants are not a native species on Pelee Island. But at least 314 other birds are — an astonishing number that comes mostly from the records of the observatory's volunteers and staff.

The island's avian richness was recognized as far back as 1910 after a visit by Linda Jones, an Ohio-born naturalist and professor at Oberlin College. It was Mr. Jones who seems to have first realized that the island might form part of a natural highway for migrating birds.

On the mainland, birds have always been an attraction at Point Pelee, which became a national park in 1918. Pelee Island, perhaps because it is less accessible to seasonal birdwatching crowds, has had a lower profile, but in recent years its beauty, and value to science, has increasingly come to light.

SPREADING THE NET

Early one morning during Spring song, I walked with a group of expert birders through a stand of Carolinian forest that covers the southern tip of Pelee Island. As we navigated a waterlogged path, I heard my boots would not be left behind in the squishy mud.

My expert companions pointed out the double-tone piping of a wood thrush, which can sing two notes at the same time. We soon encountered Ms. Onishi, who had been navigating a waterlogged path, I heard my boots would not be left behind in the squishy mud.

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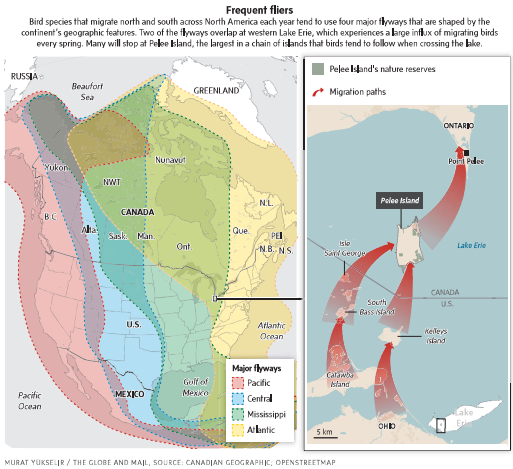
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