



Northern cardinal. Photo by Sumiko Onishi 2024

Migration Summary

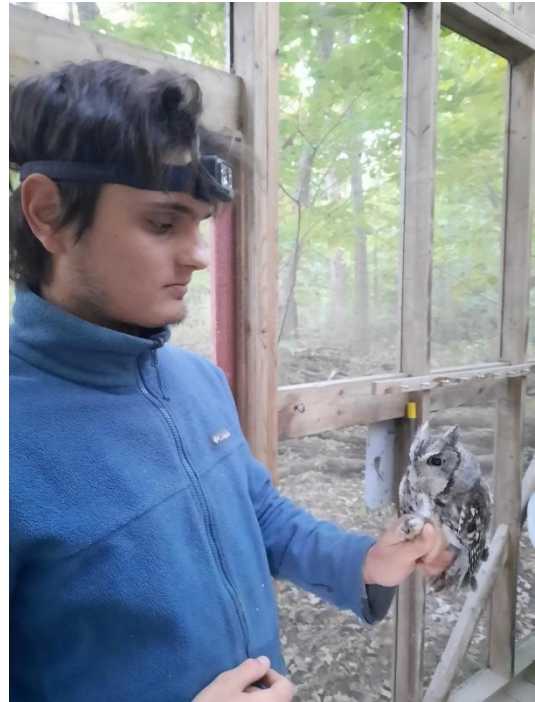
October 16-November 10

By Jamie Depolla

Here it is: the final stretch of the 2024 migration monitoring season. The fitting end to an incredible year of exciting, dazzling, colorful, waves of birds heading south. Because of the chaotic nature of any end-of-season, this summary also happens to span the longest timeframe of the year (almost a month!). So buckle up and get ready to be taken, one last time, through the ups and downs of the Pelee Island bird migration monitoring program.

If you remember where we left things in mid-October, kinglets and creepers were abounding around the station and Fish Point, and we were giving all we had to keep up with the banding demands. Well, things weren't about to quiet down any time soon. Indeed, we started off as strongly as we could possibly imagine. On October 16, although census resulted in only 36 species, our banding day tallied no fewer than an astounding 121 birds of 10 species! Not surprisingly, we handled lots of Ruby-crowned and Golden-crowned kinglets that day, but the real surprise came with our first beautiful Fox sparrow of the season! A real treat.

The following day was just as busy. The highly diverse census recorded 42 species, which included the first Brown thrasher of the season, three Tree swallows, three Blue-headed vireos and a fierce merlin scouring the tip of Fish Point for its next meal. But it was the activity at the banding station that left us speechless. It was still pitch-dark around the nets first thing in the morning as we divided up to open them for the day. Patricia and Kevin at nets 1 and 2, me at nets 3 to 5, and Sumiko as usual took charge of nets 6 to 10. As I was waking net 5 from its sleep, I heard a loud “Kevin! We caught an owl!” coming from net 1. I speedwalked as fast as I could towards the sound, and discovered that an adventurous Eastern-screech owl had flown into the mist-net. We carefully extracted the raptor and banded it under the expert eye of Sumiko, who said, “That’s cool, we don’t catch many of them around here.” What a way to start the day! We ended with 64 birds banded, including three late Black-throated blue warblers! They brought well-appreciated flashes of blue to days when we mostly looked at brown, yellow and orange hues around the forest. Needless to say, our hopes were high for the days that were to come. But bird migration has a unique way of acting in the most unpredictable ways.



*Jamie Depolla holding an Eastern screech-owl.
Photo by Sumiko Onishi 2024*

Avian diversity and abundance strongly dipped during the following days. We noted 38 species during the October 18 census, and banded 20 individuals of eight species, including two adorable Downy woodpeckers! Although we listed only 35 species for the census at Fish Point on October 19, the day offered us the chance to see six Red-necked grebes on the eastern side of

the island. An impressive 13 killdeers were also hanging out at the tip among the seabirds and waterfowl.

Things were quieter at the station. Only three birds were banded, and the forest was so silent in the afternoon that we closed nets half an hour early. Consistent southwesterly winds between October 19 and 23 yielded census totals under 30 birds and banding numbers under three birds, with the surprising exception of October 22nd, which saw 39 species at Fish Point, including Common loons and a Northern harrier, as well as 15 birds banded. Blackbird species, such as Red-winged, Rusty blackbirds and Common grackles, were increasingly moving through, and it became harder and harder to produce accurate estimates of their numbers because of the speed and volume at which they flew over the island. At this time of year, strengthening winds also meant we started extracting more dead leaves than birds from the nets, which is harder than it sounds! Twigs can be especially stubborn to remove. We were eager for busier bird days to come back.

October 24 proved that, sometimes, strong northern winds are all that are needed. Indeed, census registered the first 40-species list in days, and even gave us a new arrival on the island for the fall: the first Field sparrow of the season, which we spotted hanging out with White-throated and White-crowned sparrows on the western side of the beach! The activity at the station also shattered expectations, as we banded 82 birds of 10 species, including a fantastic Orange-crowned warbler and two Swamp sparrows. With the number of birds caught in the nets, it was our breaths we could barely catch that day.

Unfortunately, that boom in bird numbers was short-lived. The very last stretch of banding activities for the fall season mostly gave us plant matter in the nets, with fewer than 10 birds banded each – with the exception of 34 individuals on October 27.

However, a few surprises still managed to ignite our curiosity. On October 25, a gorgeous Black-throated green warbler appeared on census, hopping around in the understory close to Fox Pond. On October 26, a Pine and a Tennessee warbler were spotted along the trail at Fish Point. October 27 gave us our first Northern pintails of the

season, flying above the waters of Lake Erie, and even offered us our first Red-bellied woodpecker of the season! Continuing the happy waterbird



Red-bellied woodpecker.
Photo by Sumiko Onishi 2024

day

theme, the first bufflehead of the fall was seen dabbling about in the waters of the tip, and a Greater yellowlegs was heard flying above the station on October 28.

The last three days were awfully quiet, and we couldn't keep the nets open for too long as leaves kept pouring down into them. Excitingly, we still managed to notice the first three scaups of the season on October 30th; it seemed they had no time to stop even for a second as they hurried past the tip of Fish Point.

October 31st marked the last day of the 2024 year for banding efforts. We banded one single bird, the last for this year's migration monitoring efforts: a Downy woodpecker. From this point on, we conducted only owling nights and morning censuses.

November 1st and 2nd gave quiet censuses. At Fox Pond on November 1st, I admired 12 scaups as they flew above its waters, and even the first Wilson's snipe of the season! But the real attraction of those early November days were what we all associate with fall: public owling nights! One goal: to band Northern saw-whet owls. This takes a whole different approach than regular banding. We deployed five mist-nets in a circular pattern in Sumiko's backyard, with a speaker in the middle playing owl calls to lure the nocturnal raptors. We hoped that Great-horned owls and Gray foxes, potential predators of our focal species, would steer clear of the area. To attract folks, a tent was set up, and warm apple cider, chai, and chocolates were served. All that we needed was for the public, and of course owls, to show up.



Northern saw-whet owl. Photo by Sumiko Onishi 2024

And show up they did! Young and old, people came to enjoy the wonders and mysteries that owls have represented in wizard tales since time immemorial. And we banded four owls on November 1st and six on November 2nd. What a wonderful time this was.

The following days brought southerly winds upon the island. As such, censuses were rather quiet and consistently yielded around 25-30 bird species at Fish point. Blackbirds were

still migrating in vast numbers and showed no sign of slowing down. Many days had their little quirks that set them apart from other quiet November mornings. A few sanderlings were noticed at the tip on November 3rd; an Eastern phoebe and a Gray catbird were recorded on November 4th; October 5th marked the return to the pond of the famous, white-feathered Great egret; the first Black scoters of the season were observed enjoying the waves at the tip of Fish Point on November 6th; the first Hooded merganser of the season was seen on the eastern shore along with Red-breasted mergansers and Wood ducks on November 8; November 9 gave us a few American tree sparrows hopping around on the western shoreline as well as a couple of Common loons that flew over the forest.

Finally came the very last day of the season, November 10. It was a day to remember. That morning brought its own bag of tricks: 29 species recorded, among them a Gray catbird and a Common loon. But the real showstoppers of the season finale were the first Snow buntings of the year, which showed up at Fish Point! What a tremendously satisfying way to end a wonderful migration monitoring season.

The end of the season is a time to look back on all that happened throughout the year. The nets have been battered by rainy storms, capricious winds, and angry raccoons and squirrels; nonetheless, they achieved their duty until they were folded for some well-deserved rest for the winter. The Birdhouse hosted many souls, each one more determined to contribute to bird conservation than the others. This fall will most definitely have been one of the warmest on record for Pelee Island. As such, even as Sumiko and I cleaned Prothonotary warbler boxes, we couldn't help but be astounded by the height of grasses at this time of the year, and the new growth of various perennial annual plants.

Thousands of birds were banded, from warblers to thrushes to kinglets to owls. Hundreds of thousands of birds were observed flying through Pelee Island's Important Bird and Biodiversity Area. Dozens of folks, from budding young birders to seasoned, long-time visitors have come to say hello to our beloved winged creatures at the banding station.

Now is the time to rest. To recharge batteries. To spend some quality time baking cakes, making lentil soup, and enjoying duck watching on clear, sunny winter days. We look back on a beautiful 2024 year grateful for all the birds that have granted us the privilege of handling them, watching them, loving them. They have been the essence of the Pelee Island Bird Observatory since its inception; without them, our work would lose its meaning. So let us all strive to keep fighting for their protection. To uphold the diversity of birds and the habitats upon which they rely throughout their migration journey. So we can safeguard our wonderful heritage for many generations to come. From the bottom of the entire PIBO team's hearts, we say to the birds and the people who work to protect them:

Thank you. See you next year!



Northern flicker. Photo by Sumiko Onishi 2024