

A Hoot of an Adventure

By Cathy Keddy

*MVFN's Program Chair writes about a recent Mississippi Valley Field Naturalists' birding adventure—
'Winter Owls and Rough-legged Hawks'—on Amherst Island*

On February 20, 2010, a hardy group of seven naturalists, led by Cliff Bennett, boarded the Frontenac II for her 10:30 am shuttle to Amherst Island, a 70 km², 16.5 km long island in Lake Ontario just west of Kingston.



Photo Cathy Keddy

The thin, open channel marking the ferry's track was all that broke the smooth white surface from shore to shore. Eight-inch thick ice chunks bobbed in our path, crashing into the hull like thunder and rebounding like billiard balls. We disembarked and began driving along the north shore road, soon spotting our first Rough-legged Hawk—way off in a field, accompanied by a crow. Awaiting us at the island's east end was our first owl. This Snowy Owl was nestled in a field and it took some care to distinguish its face amidst the pale, withered grass shoots. This cheered the crowd on and our adventure continued.

Soon after we rounded the tip of the island, we came upon a raft of over a thousand ducks flowing past in a smooth, sinuous motion about 75 m off shore (photo on next page).



Photo Steve Miller

Watching it for some time, we noticed birds in particular segments of this plume would dip their heads to feed. Five species of ducks were thoroughly integrated in this activity: Redhead Duck, Greater Scaup, Lesser Scaup, Bufflehead, and Ring-necked Duck. Here the water was relatively calm and the low waves parted smoothly around a large erratic poised on the brink of the shoreline limestone ledge. The scale in the photo below indicates this bolder, carried here by glacial action, is more than 4' 10" high. Traveling farther along this shore, we added Common Goldeneye and Long-tailed Ducks (Oldsquaw) to our list.



Photo Steve Miller

Having seen hardly anyone on our travels, we were surprised to come upon tremendous activity at the next juncture—vehicles filled with birders poured onto the road in front of us. “Owl Woods,” Cliff calmly informed us. We too turned onto the narrow, muddy track bordered by fields and bumped along until we came to a sign identifying the Owl Woods Nature Reserve and providing owl-watching conduct guidelines. “Woods?” Well, they weren’t our Lanark County kind of woods—these trees seemed rather short and sparse. Taking a closer look, we knew they were certainly not Lanark County woods—Shagbark Hickory, Bitternut Hickory, Red Cedar and Ironwood. After following the birders’ beaten path for several tens of meters, someone returning from the woods was kind enough to ask if we would like to be shown where the owls were. Soon we came upon two sleeping owls. Both were perched about 4 m off the ground in cedar trees, nestled right against the trunk. Within a few meters of one another we laid eyes on a Northern Saw-whet Owl (at just over 15 cm, our smallest owl) and a Boreal Owl. Search for them in the photos below.

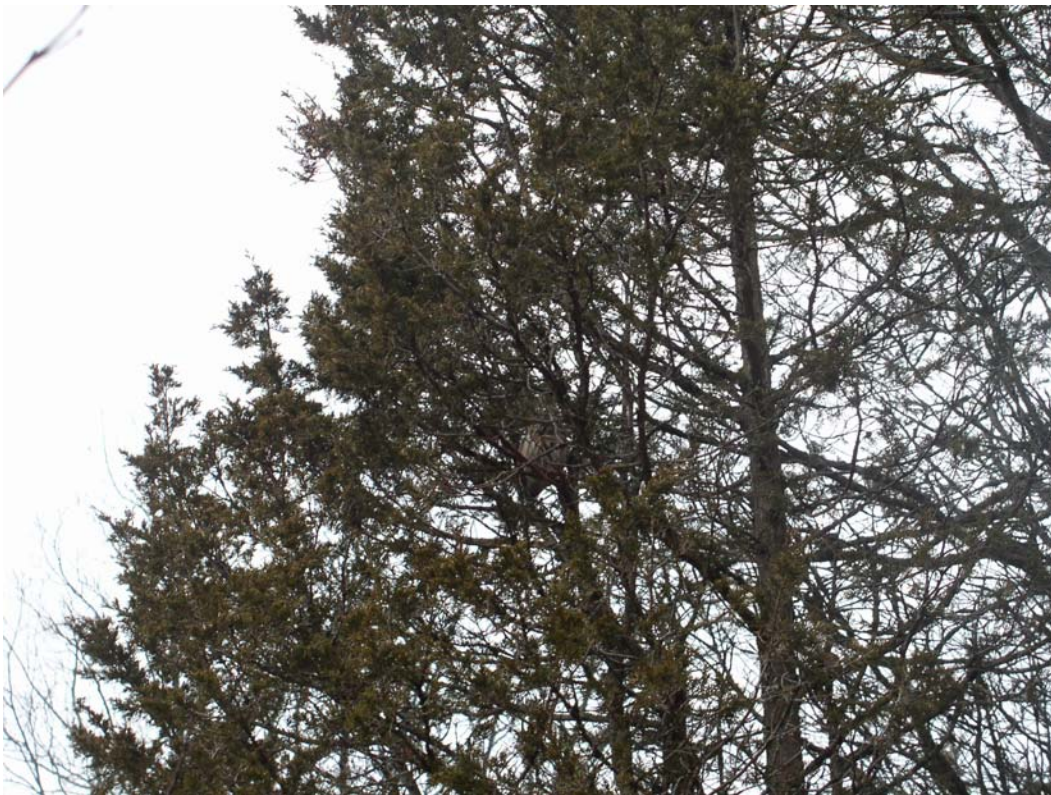


Photo Cathy Keddy



Photo Steve Miller

Due to time constraints, we did not walk to the far end of the woods to see the Barred Owl reported. We were familiar with them from our own neighbourhood. Perhaps next year we will be lucky enough to see Long-eared and Short-eared owls too.

Returning to the main road from Owl Woods, we glanced briefly across a bay on the south side of the island looking for two species of swans. An island resident had informed us on the inbound ferry ride that they were there the day before. We missed them, but we spotted a pair of Red-tailed Hawks already apparently checking out a nest for this spring.

All in all, we counted 30 bird species on our adventure. This includes three species of owls, four Rough-legged Hawks, three Red-tailed Hawks, a Kestrel, eight species of ducks, two gulls, and Canada Geese.

Hooting and Hawking—plan to join the Mississippi Valley Field Naturalists in 2011!