

Strictly for the birds

by Bethsheila Kent

Osprey. The word does not conjure up a visual of a magnificent raptor. Nor does it bring to mind any specific characteristics that would set it apart from the numerous other bird species that are fisher birds. Yet osprey in Cape Breton is significant if for no other reason than, at one time, perhaps about 40 years ago, this relatively drab bird was a very common sight for local birders along the shores of the inland and protected waterways of the Bras d'Or Lake and the harbours and coves that make our open shoreline so interesting. As the American bald eagle population grew once it was designated a protected species, a battle of wits between the two species resulted in loss of suitable nesting sites for the osprey as well as heightened competition for its food resource, small fish found in the extensive shallows associated with such bodies of water. Today osprey numbers are once more on the increase in Cape Breton and are found both along the shore of the Bras d'Or as well as on the margins of other protected waterways such as St. Ann's Harbour.

Spotlight on the Osprey:

A member of a large family, Accipitridae which includes hawks, eagles and kites, the osprey is approximately 24" in length and, in adult plumage, is uniformly dark brown above and pale below with the exception of some streaking across the upper breast. (Female birds show darker



streaking than males or juvenile birds.) Its head is white with a slight cresting at the nape and a dark eye stripe extends into the neck and shoulders. Its sharply hooked bill is typical of all members of this bird family. In flight the osprey's long narrow wings, slightly arched while soaring, are bent back at the "wrist" and its dark carpal patches are conspicuous. Osprey, which build large, bulky nests, are attracted to nesting platforms near either fresh or salt water where it fishes for its main source of food by plunging feet first into the water to snatch its prey.

On the water:

Ring-necked duck males and some juvenile birds continue to gather on the small ponds adjacent to the Bras d'Or Lake near Nyanza and have been joined by small numbers of American widgeon and American black duck. A few mallard were noted at Baddeck Inlet and common loon have been heard and seen, already in drab winter plumage, at such locations as Big Harbour, St. Ann's Harbour and Baddeck Bay. Only a few great blue heron have been encountered so far this summer, mostly in shallows near Cheticamp and along the Mira Shore, very few noted here in our area. Both greater and lesser yellowlegs are returning to the open waters as are willet (noted at Jersey Cove). Both common and arctic tern are beginning to lose the distinctive black cap of breeding plumage and

have been noted in a wide variety of locations around the Island. All our gull species are present and accounted for - herring, great black-backed and ring-billed. A few Bonaparte's have been noted at Nyanza and a single, common black-headed gull was found resting atop a snag at the same location. Out on the open Atlantic waters, look for northern gannet, black guillemot and small rafts of both white-winged and surf scoter. Common mergansers females have been seen in several locations with young in tow, the largest brood of 23 juveniles was being closely watched and herded by 3 female birds. Osprey have been noted in a number of locations, as above. Canada geese and double-crested cormorant are likely the most common sightings on the water these days.

Land Lubbers' Report:

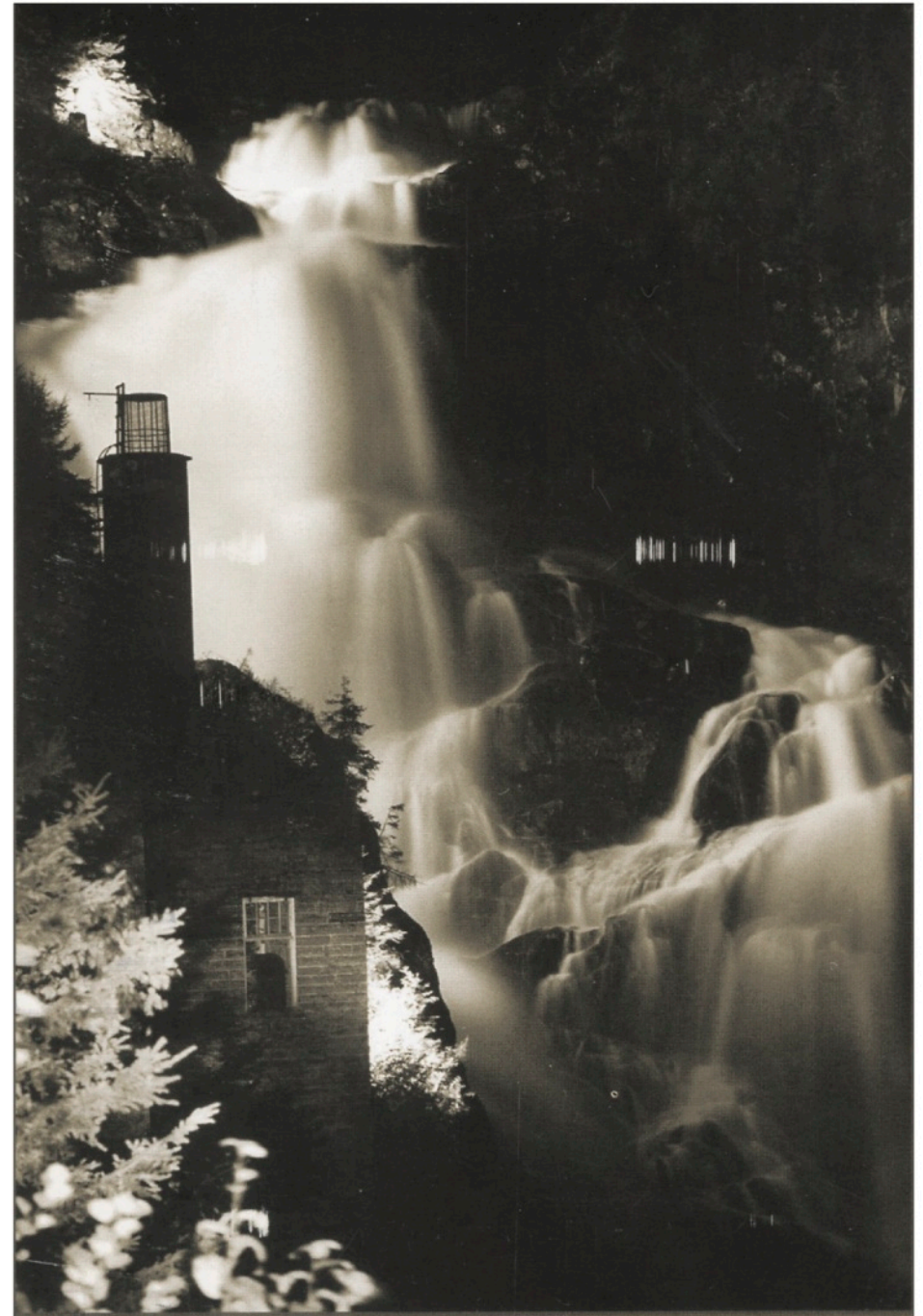
Wood warblers continue to dominate the passerine scene with numerous species noted in suitable habitat, all with young nearby - yellow-rumped, magnolia, yellow, common yellowthroat, American redstart, northern parula, Blackburnian, black and white, a fabulous chestnut-sided at Uisge Ban and mourning warbler near the cut over woodlots. Alice MacLellan, St.

Patrick's Channel, reported an indigo bunting; Bonnie and Bruce Nunn (Baddeck Inlet) reported white-winged crossbill at Uisge Ban Falls; Fenella Nicholson

North Shore, assures me that evening grosbeak are alive and well and definitely enjoying summer on her farm there. Thrush activity remains high with all three common species still singing and feeding young - hermit, Swainson's and American robin. Both golden and ruby-crowned kinglet are much in evidence as are red-breasted nuthatch, dark-eyed junco and other sparrows such as song, chipping, white-throated and Lincoln's. Both our common vireo - solitary and red-eyed have been noted in many locations as have grey and blue jay, common grackle and red-winged blackbird, cliff swallow near water and both tree and barn swallow in upland areas. American goldfinch, purple finch and pine siskin numbers are excellent and even a female pine grosbeak was noted this reporting period. Mourning dove have returned to feeders as have black-capped chickadee, although boreal remain aloof and in woodland areas with brown creeper, another species seen widely. Woodpeckers? Why of course! Black-backed, downy, hairy and pileated, many noted with young, were observed in suitable habitat. And on the ground, both ovenbird and ruffed grouse were noted recently. What a great list of sightings!

My thanks to Alice MacLellan, Fenella Nicholson and Bonnie & Bruce Nunn for sharing their sightings. I can be reached at 295-1749 with your birding news.

Postcards from beyond the County lines



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Adieu, Sail H.

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