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BIRDFINDING IN CANADA

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YELLOW RAIL ➔ MUCH WANTED BIRD

Secretive, unpredictable, elusive. Any bird with these qualities is sure to provide a challenge for birdfinders.

The yellow rail is all of these -- and more.

So, it will not be surprising when we publish our ratings of Canadian birders' 20 most-wanted species (scheduled for the May issue) that this almost invisible bird will be in the top five.

Several birders, filing Information Sheets, referred to having been birding intensively for over 20 years (one of them over 30!) without ever yet having had even a glimpse of a yellow rail.

It seems almost impossible that such a relatively plentiful bird can stay out of sight all year, every year. It summers regularly in marshy areas in Canada with a breeding range from eastern Alberta to Nova Scotia and from the U.S. border to the sub-Arctic. With this enormous range, plus the bird's colonial habits, its ability to remain unseen is positively astounding.

To see a yellow rail, one needs to do three things. Locate an active breeding territory. Visit it frequently. Get lucky.

Yellow rails can be quite vociferous at times. They may be heard frequently and distinctly one day. The next day they may be silent. They may be present in good numbers on a territory one year. The next year they may be absent.

One piece of good news is that if you do find an active, populated location, and visit it persistently, you should have no trouble hearing the birds. But seeing them is another matter.

Yellow rails' calls are easy to learn and simple to imitate. Take two pebbles and tap them together fairly loudly in a "tick-tick tick-tick-tick" sequence four or five times. Often a bird will respond. But, true to their unpredictable nature, often they will not.

Some literature leads the reader to believe that they call only at night. This is by no means true. We have heard them in broad daylight lots of times.

Several techniques are used to see a bird once it is heard. Some birders have been able to track them down at night with a flashlight. Dragging a heavy rope across the area may flush the bird but, more often, it is ineffective. (It may also cause wasteful destruction of other birds' nests.) A group of birders may surround a calling rail and close in hoping for a quick look. Again, only moderate success may be expected from this approach. The birds' voices have a ventriloquial quality that adds one more inhibiting complication.

There are several places where yellow rails have been found in recent years.

In Manitoba, an extensive stretch of suitable habitat at the junction of #340 Highway and the railroad tracks south of Douglas is well-known locally as yellow rail country. However, Dave Mark searched the area in the summer of 1980 and was unable to find one, even by sound.

Douglas is just south off the TransCanada Highway about 16 kilometres east of Brandon. Anyone visiting this area who needs Baird's sparrows or Sprague's pipits should spend some time exploring roadsides between Douglas and Shilo for a few kilometres southeast of the yellow rail tract. Listen overhead for the pipits.

In Ontario, at least four yellow rail spots come to mind: the marshy edges of Lake Simcoe; the Richmond swamp southwest of Ottawa; an expanse of wet fields north

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STATISTICAE CANADENSIS

Two months ago we promised to review Ontario life lists in March and, at the time, this seemed like a relatively easy assignment. However, with a sandhill crane wintering in the Toronto Zoo area, a gyrfalcon at Whitby, the Etobicoke fieldfare, reports of ptarmigan around Ottawa, a tufted duck in Hamilton Bay and a Townsend's solitaire at Ajax, some 50 or so birders' numbers keep changing every few days.

Numbers shown below are based on those originally reported plus any changes of which we're aware up to Feb.15/81. Undoubtedly several totals do not reflect additions of the above rarities but we're not in a position to start guessing who saw what.

A total of 52 birders reported Ontario figures above our suggested minimum. Here they are:

Bob Curry	366	Doug McRae	319
Alan Wormington	363	Alan McTavish	319
Norm Chesterfield	362	Richard Poulin	319
Don Perks	358	Fred Bodsworth	318
Bill Smith	356	Hugh Currie	317
Ron Scovell	350	Anne Macdonald	314
Gerry Bennett	350	Roger Foxall	313
Keith Burk	345	Jim Mountjoy	310
Lou Marsh	340	Fred Helleiner	309
Dave Fidler	339	Ted McDonald	309
Paul Pratt	338	Margaret Bain	303
Luke Fazio	337	Edge Pegg	303
Alex Gray	334	Ron Harcourt	302
John Kelley	334	Martin Parker	302
Tony Mason	334	Bill Zufelt	302
Jo Ann Murray	334	David McCorquodale	300
Don Gunn	332	Eric Tull	296
Bruce Di Labio	331	Peter Gilchrist	295
Hue MacKenzie	329	David Mark	294
Herb Elliott	328	Bruce Mactavish	288
Mark Gawn	325	Robert Tymstra	283
Ron Ridout	325	Barry Cherriere	278
Dan Brunton	324	Robert Anderson	270
William Crins	323	Reid Wilson	266
Terry Pratt	321	Kathie Rettie	258
Geoff Carpentier	319	John Thomson	257

There'll be a new form in the May issue to use in updating all lists. So, if your numbers above are out of date they won't be for long.

Ten birders have reported one-year lists for Ontario of 275 species or more. These are:

Luke Fazio	1978	311	Alan McTavish	1980	287
Alan Wormington	1978	311	Gerry Bennett	1980	287
Ron Harcourt	1978	302	Lou Marsh	1973	280
Norm Chesterfield	1973	300	Geoff Carpentier	1976	275
Ron Ridout	1978	289	Mark Gawn	1978	275

David Stirling's list of 319 in British Columbia in 1979 is the highest one-year provincial list of which we are aware.