

# A Northern Adventure

by Bruce Di Labio

Most southern birders seldom think about birding in Northern Ontario. This can be attributed to unfamiliarity with the region, concern over access and a lack of knowledge about local birds.

Surprisingly, **Moosonee** is a lot easier to bird than most would assume. Despite the fact that it is accessible only by train or air, the trip north can be very rewarding.



"Are you sure that was a Di Labio?"

On Sept. 8, I led a **Federation of Ontario Naturalists** trip to the area. Departing from Cochrane (10 hours northwest of Ottawa) we headed by road to Fraserdale, a rail siding 120 km further north. The group observed Gray Jays, Common Ravens and numerous flocks of White-winged Crossbills. Birding the sparrow fields in the area netted Savannah, Song and most notably Le Conte's Sparrow.

At Fraserdale we boarded the train to Moosonee and spent the next four hours birding by rail. Our sightings were largely limited to Red-tailed Hawks and Ospreys but northern specialties such as Hawk Owl can sometimes be observed.

Our group of 13 began birding the Moosonee area on Sept. 10. For the next five days we concentrated on Moosonee, Moose Factory and made two trips to nearby Shipsands Island via freighter canoes.

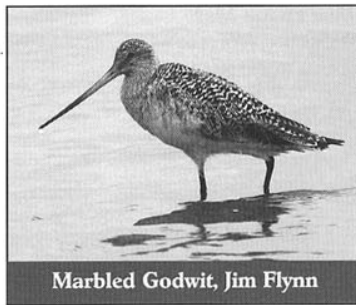
Moosonee and Moose Factory offered a variety of boreal forest birds - Three-toed Woodpeckers Gray Jays and Boreal Chickadees.

Small numbers of warblers were lingering in the area and there were migrating White-crowned and American Tree sparrows.

By far the most common bird was the Savannah Sparrow - it was everywhere!

There was always bird movement along the Moose River, particularly gulls and shorebirds, which fed or rested on exposed mudflats during low tide (Remember, there's salt water here!) One morning, while the group was waiting for the freighter canoes to arrive, we were rewarded with an immature Sabine's Gull, which lazily flew along the river. For most participants, this was a lifer.

The highlight of this trip, however, was birding Shipsands Island. Though the terrain was somewhat unfriendly, involving much walking, the bird life more than made up for it. An impressive list of species included Snow Geese, Parasitic Jaeger, Little Gull, Marbled and Hudsonian godwits, flocks of American Golden Plovers and a Peregrine Falcon.



Marbled Godwit, Jim Flynn

Although September weather in Moosonee can change quickly, we were fortunate to have mild and sunny days, even if the mosquitoes were still irritatingly present. Even the persistent winds from the north, which made birding more challenging



The group disembarks on Shipsands Island in James Bay after a 20 km ride up the Moose River.

by forcing many birds to take cover, was no deterrent for the pesky bugs.

The Moosonee area is a must for both the novice and the seasoned observer. Not only does this region play host to a number of northern species, uncommon in Southern and Eastern Ontario, it also offers birdwatchers of all levels a chance to experience a different style of birding. Participating in an organized field trip such as this one is your best option.

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