

# ONTARIO BIRDING NEWS



Vol. 6 Issue 2

A Newsletter About Birds and Birders

Spring 2001

\$2.60

## AMHERST ISLAND RETURN TO GLORY

STORY AND PHOTOS by BRUCE DI LABIO

In Arizona back in the 1960s, a birdwatcher stopped at a roadside picnic area near the town of Patagonia. It was here that he discovered a couple of rare Rose-throated Becards. Intrigued with his discovery, he began to check this area regularly and soon found more rare birds. As the news of his observations spread, this rest stop attracted more birders and with that, more rarities were found.

In the spring of 1971, two first records for the United States were discovered there. These observations inspired many a birdwatcher to check this location and coverage remained intense. This phenomenon of rare birds attracting more birdwatchers, who in turn find more "goodies" has been dubbed the "Patagonia Picnic Table Effect".

This past winter, the Amherst Island and Kingston area experienced the northern equivalent of the Patagonia phenomenon. During December, it became apparent that Amherst was going to have a significant crop of wintering owls. By late December, Boreal, Great Horned, Northern Saw-whet, Long and Short-eared and Snowy Owls were easily found. This prompted regular weekly coverage. Then, as the word spread through the internet, coverage became a daily event.

On January 3, an immature Ivory Gull was discovered, yet another rarity for the region. This discovery prompted even more attention to the area, which in turn produced

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*This is one of the regular Boreal Owls that were sighted in the evergreens on Amherst Island throughout the winter. They peaked in mid-March. Photo, Bruce Di Labio*

## Passenger Pigeons Sighted at Pelee

**LEAMINGTON (OBN)** For the first time since the late 1800s, birders at Point Pelee were treated to the sight of Passenger Pigeons. A small flock of the once extinct birds flew over the Tip at dawn to the delight of excited observers. While the birds had been recorded in parts of the eastern U.S. for several years, this was the first confirmed sighting in Canada. "It was only a matter of time," said one observer, who was eager to add it to his life list. (see page 2 for details)



*Photo, Point Pelee National Park*

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three Boreal Owls and a Northern Hawk Owl. In mid-January, a male Harlequin Duck and a male Barrow's Goldeneye were located along the south shore of Amherst Island. Further discoveries in late January netted a Gyrfalcon at the Dupont Plant on the west side of Kingston and a Great Gray Owl outside of Kingston in early February. Amherst's first Great Gray showed up in late March.

It was a fantastic winter season for owls at Amherst as well as other vagrants. If one had the time this winter, I'm sure 10 species of owls could have been found in one day in the Kingston area. In hindsight, with the interest generated this winter, a guest register should have

*The ferry trip to the island in January offered visitors a chance to check for the Ivory Gull. Once the Captain became familiar with the needs of birders, he began to obligingly slow down as he approached the bird. Often it waited until the vessel was on top of it before taking flight. Photo, Bruce Di Labio*



been available to visiting birders to the island. In the course of my eight visits to Amherst this winter, it was not uncommon to see a variety of license plates from the northern

U.S. Without a doubt, I am sure that it would have revealed that not only regional birders but birders from across North America made an effort to visit this spectacular area.

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## Welcome to The Twilight Zone

### Have we got your attention?

No, we haven't stooped to the creative journalism of tabloid newspapers. What you have just read about the Passenger Pigeon is a very real possibility. This scenario or some variation, could happen and soon, possibly within 20 years, thanks to incredible advances in the science of cloning.

Before that, you will be able to see formerly extinct birds such as this in zoos, not far from the latest clone of the woolly mammoth. For better or worse, the world we knew is being turned upside down. This is merely the tip of the iceberg of what lies ahead. We have entered the twilight zone.

We've all read about a variety of domestic mammals successfully cloned in recent years. The next step was to use the technology to clone an endangered species. A gaur, an endangered ox, died soon after birth due to problems unrelated to the cloning process. There will be other attempts and future successes. The experiment shows that cloning could be used to perpetuate rare species, but should not be considered

a replacement for efforts to preserve species and habitats.

Looking only a few years down the road, scientists are planning to use the tissues of select extinct species to give birth to a new generation of living, breathing creatures that have passed on. At present, that includes the New Zealand Huia, a bird that was killed off for its feathers and declared extinct in 1920. There are technical hurdles to surmount but a positive outcome should be possible. Could that mean the eventual rebirth of the Passenger Pigeon or other extinct North American species? Yes.

There are several approaches that can be taken to achieve the goal, beginning with a search for cells within bones and tendons of preserved specimens. Scientists could also remove the nucleus of a cell from a Passenger Pigeon specimen and join it with the ovum of another bird. In theory, they could even use "Jurassic Park"-like techniques to create a clone from a genetic template.

There are enough specimens in various collections to suggest that one of these options could be possible (including a bird in the Point Pelee

Visitor Centre). With sufficient time and money, the process may be successfully completed.

But don't hold your breath just yet. There are currently numerous obstacles to the cloning process, including a very low success rate, possible genetic complications with the individuals hatched and significant questions of reproductive viability. Genetic similarities of clones could present barriers to a species' long-term viability. And in the case of the Passenger Pigeon, the vast forests that gave rise to one of the world's most numerous birds have largely disappeared. But these challenges won't stop scientists from trying. It is a genetic mountain that can and will be climbed simply because it is there.

While very serious moral and ethical questions on the issue of human cloning make headlines, cloning certain extinct species offers exciting possibilities, giving man a chance to make good on past transgressions. Now if we can just come up with a designer virus that will wipe out the Starling in North America... and yes, that too may someday be possible.