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Blow-out at Pelee By Bruce Di Labio

One of the most spectacular events that I have ever witnessed occurred on May 9, at Point Pelee National Park. While birding around the tip of Pelee, a vast movement of birds, numbering in the hundreds, were simultaneously working their way south, in reverse migration, down towards the point. Birds were everywhere – some were moving through vegetation, while other flocks were darting overhead.

The trees were teeming with birds ready to take flight over Lake Erie. With hundreds of birds in the air, viewing and identifying them was an almost impossible task. Warblers only landed for seconds, and if you were not “quick on the draw”, the birds quickly disappeared from sight as they flew south over the lake. This was birding war, with birds coming at you from every angle, non-stop. Birder casualties were heavy – in frustration, many people just gave up, put down their binoculars and watched in amazement at this truly remarkable sight. You had to be there.

(Ed Note: Bruce is a highly skilled observer. He felt humbled by the experience).

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Pelee's Twin

Point Pelee was not alone experiencing this phenomenon. At the same time, a number of observers were at Fish Point on nearby Pelee Island. This looks like a miniature Point Pelee and the birds treated the area pretty much the same way. Jim McAllister noted on the Ontbirds mailserv “Never in my thirty years of birding have I ever seen anything like what I saw this day. There were birds in every tree and bush, literally and many others on the ground. Overhead, there was a steady stream of birds flying nonstop past the tip heading toward Middle Island. . . This flight of thousands (tens of thousands?) of migrants continued for the next five hours without letup. Only after 1 p.m. did the numbers tail off but the reverse migration continued all day.”

Included in their observations were more than 50 Red-headed Woodpeckers, hundreds of orioles of both species, 6 Hooded Warblers and 5 White-eyed Vireos. They were dumb-founded.

Reverse migrations are a regular occurrence everywhere but they are most noticeable in locations such as these, where birds concentrate before moving across the water. They usually occur when weather conditions are not favourable for migrants to remain. This is particularly true of insectivorous species such as warblers. What made this episode so amazing is that a major fallout of migrants must have taken place previously, coinciding with colder windy weather. Another local factor contributing to the concentration is the southward-pointing geographic features. These two areas narrow to a point that funnels birds right past keen observers.



At rest, the Willet is a large but rather nondescript shorebird. In flight, its characteristic wing markings are a giveaway. 26 of this rare visitor were seen north of Point Pelee this spring, while a lone bird appeared at Sault Ste. Marie – a local first.
Photo, Jim Flynn