

Exploring Ontario's Southwest

There's a saying amongst birdwatchers that "birding is not a destination, it's a journey". However, for birds, birders and travellers in general who seek an inspiring vacation in an equally inspiring destination, you may be surprised to discover that the journey to Ontario's Southwest provides enticing, exciting and energizing options that include not only one of the greatest bird migration areas in all of North America, but also family fun, adventure, artisanal foods, cheeses, craft beers, wines, chocolates, ultra-friendly locals, and more.

While the region encompasses five Ontario counties along Lake Erie as well as Sarnia Lambton, Middlesex, London and Oxford, our journey honed in on the very southwest corner of the province where, particularly in the Spring and Fall, hundreds of thousands of visitors descend upon this very special area. Although many are energetic travellers, the majority are migratory birds that are seeking the trinity of vacation pleasures: relaxation, safety and food. And with the ideal of 'location, location, location' as their guide, both people and birds look to three migratory airports on Lake Erie: Point Pelee National Park, Rondeau Provincial Park and Long Point Provincial Park.

According to Tom Hince, a former Park Naturalist at Point Pelee, bird host and producer on the Discovery Channel and one of North America's top birding experts, "it's all about the songbirds...and the warblers are the gems". In early to mid-May, there are typically 36 species of Warblers in the three parks including the rare, stunning- yellow Prothonotary Warbler, of which there are only 20 mating pairs in all of Canada.

The Spring Birding Festival is concentrated at Point Pelee, which was conceived to be a park by nature lovers and ornithologists such as William Saunders and Jack Miner. Today there are beautiful trails throughout the Park for strolling, wandering and observing as well as bicycling and in warmer-months, swimming, canoeing and kayaking. A train is available for visitors who wish to go to the actual 'point', thereby minimizing the human footprint, and once there, the scenery is often dramatic, windy and ripe with bird sightings. The train departs from the Guest Centre which is a gathering place for visitors and serves as an educational resource with maps and displays as well as reports of recent bird and wildlife sightings. It also includes the 'Book of Lies', an inside joke amongst birders for the list of rare bird sightings that should be accurate and truthful, but sometimes are suspected of drifting toward wishful exaggeration!

But in the Leamington area, there are more than birds! This is one of Ontario's notable wine regions. We chose to visit Mastronardi Estate Winery where we sampled the Syrah, Pinot Noir, Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon, and then it was on to Aleksander Estate Winery to taste the Cabernet Franc and the Shiraz. In both wineries we bought tasty souvenirs to bring home.

Our hotel was the Best Western Plus Leamington Hotel, which is just minutes from the entrance to the National Park. We enjoyed an outside balcony room where we could relax and gaze at the nearby wetland to hear the calls of Red-winged Blackbirds and see Eastern Cottontails hopping about the property next door.

Birds, and therefore birders, are early risers so the Best Western offers breakfast starting at 5:00 am at peak birding times. But for those who prefer a more grounded lifestyle there is a recreational centre in the middle of the hotel with table tennis, billiards and water slides.

And in the vicinity of the hotel there are lots of stores and restaurants. We had a delicious lunch at Paula's Fish Place ("Fresh Fish Served with a Smile"), and on one of the evenings we had a very tasty dinner at Jose's Bar and Grill. Pelee Wings Nature Store and Kayak Shop is somewhat of a mecca for birders, photographers and souvenir seekers. Mike Malone and his staff are very knowledgeable about binoculars, field scopes, lenses, tripods, field clothing and all the amenities to make a visit to the region as memorable as possible.

Rondeau Provincial Park lies about a one hour drive east of Point Pelee. We arrived in time for the 7:00 am walking tour with Reuben who led a group of 15-20 birders on Harrison Trail where in actuality, very little walking was required. The trees were full of warblers, Scarlet Tanagers, Chickadees and more. In fact, Reuben warned us about "Warbler's Neck", one of the consequences from looking up into the trees for a prolonged period. But it's one of those pain/pleasure joys, as you spot one colourful songbird after another.

Back at the Visitors Centre, there are bird feeders so that nature lovers and photographers can take out their point-and-shoot cameras or their huge zoom lenses and tripods, and get up close and personal with Baltimore Orioles, Blue Jays, Hummingbirds, Cardinals, chipmunks and other drop-in visitors. It's one of the more popular park attractions.

In the afternoon we took a leisurely drive through Blenheim, Simcoe and Port Dover which led us to the tiny town of Normandale. Brenda Bennett, our extremely personable host greeted us with smiles when we arrived at the Normandale Century Inn. After showing us our accommodation, she introduced us to some of the local craft beers produced by the Rambling Road Brewery Farm in the hamlet of La Salette, only 20 miles to the north. Refreshing and delicious!

Homemade dinner at the Century Inn was a true treat, complemented by activity at the bird feeder just on the other side of the dining room window. And after a comfortable night's sleep, we left bright and early to meet Garret Reid of Long Point Tours, down the road at Turkey Point, for an excursion to the tip of Long Point.

We received our introductory talk at 6:15 am before boarding a zodiac for the 25 minute trip to the tip of Long Point Provincial Park, accessible only by boat. On the way Garrett noted his roots in the area where his family has lived since migrating from Pennsylvania in 1792. And once arrived at the tip we found ourselves in yet another bird(er's) paradise. While we spent about four hours at the tip, we wandered less than two kilometers and in the process saw close to 90 species of birds, including Red-headed Woodpeckers, a variety of Warblers, Scarlet Tanagers, Sparrows, Brown Thrashers, Red-eyed Vireos and Bobolinks. We even had the opportunity to visit the Tip Research Station and watch the staff collect and band birds. But it's good to know that the trails at the tip of Long Point, along with the wetland, the sandy beach and the lighthouse (you can even order a picnic lunch for the excursion) all add up to another one of Southwest Ontario's hidden adventures and photographic must-sees.

We celebrated the success of the trip with a lunch of delicious fresh, Yellow Perch tacos at the Sandbar Restaurant back at Turkey Point.

While the use of the senses comes into play for birders, especially hearing and seeing, the other senses of taste, smell, touch and even the sense of humour, play a big part in exploring Ontario's Southwest. We had the opportunity to meet some of the creative artisans from the region and each spoke passionately about mastering quality taste experiences that come from the heart. Pilgrimages might include Chocolatea in Ingersol with their Lime and Basil creation, described by

owner Cindy Walker as “life in your mouth”, or the Railway City Brewing Company in St. Thomas with their iconic Dead Elephant Ale, or a dining experience at ‘sixthirtynine’ in Woodstock where Chef Eric Boyar talks of his connection with local farmers that results in ‘backyard-to-fork’ freshness. And these guidelines seem to extend to other Southwestern Ontario establishments from The Combine in Simcoe to Mountainoak Cheese in New Hamburg, and on to Cooper’s Hawk Winery in Harrow.

Southwestern Ontario is not your typical travel destination. Like the migratory song birds looking for a value-filled oasis to rest and seek nourishment, human visitors will find a good dose of the same pleasures in the parks, small towns, cities and eateries.