

Birding Hot Spots of the Kingston Region: Amherst Island

Amherst Island is one of the best known spots in Ontario for wintering birding because the island regularly supports large populations of hawks, harriers, owls, shrikes and waterfowl. In spring and autumn Amherst Island can be a great place to see migrating waterfowl, shorebirds and passerines. During the summer months the island is home to a few notable breeding species like **Wilson's Phalarope**. Virtually all of the land on Amherst Island is privately owned, so most birding is done from the roadside. There are a few properties however, to which land owners kindly allow public access. Below is a list of some of the best birding spots on the island.

Directions: To get to Amherst Island, drive about 20 km west of Kingston on Bath Road (aka Loyalist Parkway or Highway 33) to the town of Millhaven. Follow the signs to the Amherst Island ferry dock. At the time of this printing the ferry runs between 6:00 a.m. to 2:00 a.m. daily. It departs Millhaven on the half-hour and the island on the hour. At present there is a \$9.00 fee for a round-trip crossing per vehicle. An up to date sailing times can be found on the Ministry of Transportation website (<http://www.mto.gov.on.ca/english/traveller/ferry>).



A. Front Road

Front Road runs the length of the island but it is the eastern end of the road between Stella (where the ferry docks) and Lower 40 Foot Road that is most heavily birded. Water views of Stella Bay, Preston Cove and the North Channel can provide views of good numbers of water birds throughout migration and winter. The extensive fields along the south side of the road provide a broad view of the island's northeast interior. Inland

views from the road are excellent places to spot **Rough-legged Hawk, Red-tailed Hawk, Northern Harrier, Snowy Owl** and **Short-eared Owl**, either in flight over the fields or perched on fence posts or in trees.

B. Kingston Field Naturalists' Property

The easternmost part of Amherst Island is owned by the Kingston Field Naturalists (KFN). This approximately 100 ha conservation reserve is home to breeding grassland birds, **Osprey, Purple Martin** and **Wilson's Phalarope**. During migration the shoreline, pond and spit can be excellent for waterfowl and shorebird viewing. For several weeks in autumn **Nelson's Sparrow** can be pushed out of the pond side vegetation. The ponds are also a good place to find **Black-crowned Night-Heron**. The spit is the best place to view the extensive **Double-crested Cormorant** colony on the Brothers Islands. Check among the cormorants for **Great Egret**, which roost and nest among them. The KFN property is probably the best spot in the Kingston Region for finding this fairly rare species. In winter several **Snowy Owls** can be often be seen on the ground fence posts or osprey nesting platforms. **Rough-legged Hawk, Short-eared Owl** and other predatory birds can be easily found here. An impressive number of rare birds have been recorded on this property over many years. These include **Eared Grebe, American White Pelican, Tricolored Heron, Glossy Ibis, Cinnamon Teal, Piping and Snowy Plovers, American Avocet, Marbled Godwit, Curlew Sandpiper, Laughing Gull, Arctic Tern, Northern Wheatear** and **Smith's Longspur**. Birders should always be on the lookout for rare species when visiting this part of the island! **Access Note:** You must be a member of the Kingston Field Naturalists Club (or be accompanied by a member) to access this property.

C. Owl Woods

The Owl Woods is arguably the best spot in Ontario to reliably see Northern Saw-Whet Owl and **Long-eared Owl**. Both species are present in most winters. **Barred Owl** and sometimes **Great Horned Owl** are resident in the immediate area and are also commonly encountered. In some years one or more **Boreal Owls** can be found here too. The thick jack pines and shrubbery also tend support a wide diversity of winter birds and lingering warm weather species such as **Hermit Thrush** and **White-throated Sparrow**. The bird feeders attract **Red-bellied Woodpecker, Red-breasted Nuthatch** and other species. During migration good numbers of warblers and sparrows move through the woods. **Access Note:** The Owl Woods are private property which birders are allowed to use by the good grace of the land owners. Please use respect and obey all signs. No dogs are allowed. No disruption to the owls or their habitat will be tolerated.

D. South Shore Road

The South Shore Road offers excellent views of Lake Ontario. During especially cold winters, the only open water visible from the island may be off the south shore. Large congregations of waterfowl may gather here including **Greater Scaup, Redhead, Long-tailed Duck, Common Goldeneye, Bufflehead** and mergansers. Also look for **Common Loon** as well as **Red-necked** and **Horned Grebe**. The vast open water may very rarely provide a vigilant observer the chance to see a jaeger or other seabird.

E. The Island's Western End

For a convenient birding loop head west on 2nd Concession Road from Stella 40 Foot Road. All along this road the open pastures on both sides may provide good views of **Rough-legged Hawk, American Kestrel, Red-tailed Hawk, Northern Harrier** and **Short-eared Owl**, either in flight over the fields or perched on fence posts or in trees. In winter, **Snowy Owls** can be also be seen. During the late spring and early summer it is common to see **Eastern Meadowlark, Eastern Kingbird, Savannah Sparrow** and **Bobolink** along this road. Other species that may be encountered in lower numbers include **Eastern Bluebird, Grasshopper Sparrow** and **Upland Sandpiper**. Continuing the loop, turn south on Emerald 40 Foot Road. Here you will find more open pastures and fields. About 1.5 km along you will enter a mature wooded area that stretches for about 2 km on both sides of the road. During migration these woods are a very important stopover for warblers, vireos, flycatchers and sparrows. In winter look for **Barred Owl** and **Pileated Woodpecker**. During the breeding season this area provides suitable nesting habitat for some rarer Amherst Island species including **Red-bellied** and **Pileated Woodpeckers, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Veery**, and in 2012 a pair of **Rusty**. Turning left on 3rd Concession Road offers water views of Amherst Bay and Nut Island. Throughout migration and winter good

numbers of water birds can be seen in this area. Continue along 3rd Concession Road to a large marsh on the south-side which is excellent habitat for herons, bitterns, **Swamp Sparrow** and **Marsh Wren**. During fall migrations this wetland is an important roosting sites for swallows and blackbirds. Further along the road the extensive fields along both sides provide a broad view of the island's south-western interior. With plowed fields fewer hawks will be present but in winter large numbers of **Snow Buntings** with some **Lapland Longspurs** can be seen.

F. Ferry

The ferry ride can provide views of water birds including **Common Loon** and numerous species of ducks. When the North Channel freezes over the strip of open water created by the ferry attracts gulls and waterfowl as well as predators. Occasionally a **Snowy Owl** can be spotted on the ice during a winter crossing. An **Ivory Gull** was seen here for about two weeks in 2001.

Please submit your sightings to the Kingston Field Naturalists database by email mark.conboy@queensu.ca or by sharing your checklists with us on [eBird](#) (user name Kingston FN).