

# Report on Waterbird Migration Study at Rainbow Point - 2017

Joseph Youngman, Copper Country Audubon

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## Introduction

In the spring of 2013 Copper Country Audubon ran a ten-day waterbird count at Blake Point to document waterbird migration moving north and northwest between Passage Island and the main island. A significant migration was observed. On the assumption that a similar movement might be seen at the SW tip of Isle Royale (IR) a short waterbird watch was planned for Rainbow Point in the spring of 2017.

## Methods

We planned on a two person watch at Rainbow Point for seven days in early May. Once on site we decided to try counting at Cumberland Point as well. We counted the first five days at Rainbow and counted at Cumberland for the last two.

On May 7, 2017, we set up observation on Rainbow Point at approximately 47 degrees 49.917" and 89 degrees 11.354". On May 12<sup>th</sup> we set up at Cumberland Point at approximately 47 degrees 51.161" and 89 degrees 14.119"

A spotting scope and binoculars were used to spot, identify and count the passing birds, which were recorded in a notebook with time of passing and notes on flight direction and species composition of flocks. Although migrant waterbirds (ducks, loons, grebes, cormorants, geese) were the main focus, it was expected that some raptor migration and passerine migration might be observed and notes were taken on those as well. The counts began at sunrise and lasted 8 hr/day. Weather data was recorded.

## Results and Discussion

### Waterbird Migration

In seven days of observation we saw 2,112 waterbirds pass N, NW or NNW past our points. Fifteen confirmed species of waterbirds were seen in migration with at least two more quite likely but unconfirmed. The most abundant species were Red-breasted Merganser (676), Common Loon (477), Red-necked Grebe (175). Along with Unidentified Scaup (160), Unidentified Aythya species (112) and Unidentified Duck (186), these made up 84% of the total flight observed. Table 2 gives the total spring count. Table 3 lists all waterbird species observed passing Rainbow and Cumberland Points during May 2017.

Based on what is known about the timing of waterbird migration at other locations on Lake Superior, a complete study of spring waterbird migration would entail at least six weeks of observation, so our short count gives only an indication of what's happening and one year is surely not enough.

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Whitefish Point Bird Observatory (WPBO) at the SE tip of Lake Superior conducted its usual spring waterbird count in 2017 and I was able to compare species counts from our IR count and for the total waterbirds for the seven day period. Our Isle Royale count (both Rainbow and Cumberland) totaled 2,112 birds compared to WPBO's 2,994 for the same seven days. The differences in counts for each species were interesting and showed similar ratios to previous spring and fall comparisons between WPBO and Isle Royale. For Long-tailed Duck – WPBO 820 / IR 14, White-winged Scoter – WPBO 297 / IR 68, Red-breasted Merganser – WPBO 473 / IR 676, Common Loon – WPBO 494 / IR 477, Red-necked Grebe – WPBO 106 / IR 175.

In the spring of 2013 Flaspohler and Youngman's study at Blake point had total waterbird count that was 62% of the WPBO count. This spring's count at the SW tip had 69% of WPBO's. Again, a short count for a single year isn't much to base strong conclusions on but, it does indicate that the SW tip of IR hosts a similar volume of passing waterbirds as does Blake Point and taken together (Blake and Rainbow) the number of waterbirds passing Isle Royale likely exceeds the number passing Whitefish Point in the spring.

The flight direction of most waterbirds passing Rainbow and Cumberland seemed to be WNW with a modest percentage (esp Loons) heading NW. In other words, most flocks were following the shoreline from the east as they reached the point while a lesser number were just reaching Isle Royale from the SE as they passed by the SW tip of the island. On a few occasions, I followed Common Loons in flight and determined that they passed north between Rock of Ages Lighthouse and Bottle Island. It is quite likely that virtually all birds adjusted their flight to a more northerly heading once they passed Isle Royale. We never saw birds maintaining their original WNW heading toward Minnesota.

### **Raptor Migration**

A small raptor migration was expected to be seen due to our experience at Blake Point in 2014. Over the 8 days (includes day of arrival) we recorded 27 sightings of raptors. While many of those seemed to be resident Bald Eagle, Osprey, Peregrine Falcon, Merlin and Kestrel, 11 appeared to have just crossed to Isle Royale across Lake Superior from the south. These birds were first observed up to ½ mile south of Isle Royale flying low over the lake coming north. This provides more evidence that there may be a significant migration of raptors from the Keweenaw Peninsula to Isle Royale. The species seen crossing included: American Kestrel – 3, Northern Harrier – 3, Sharp-shinned Hawk -2, Peregrine Falcon -2, Unidentified Falcon - 1.

### **Passerine Migration**

Every day at our two count sites a few lake-crossing passerine migrants were detected coming in to Isle Royale. As is normal for this type of migration the vast majority of the incoming birds came in during the first couple of hours after sunrise. A total of 73 passerines came in over seven days. The biggest day was on the 13<sup>th</sup> when 39 came ashore in light south winds. Table 1 gives a species list of all non-waterbirds seen flying in to Isle Royale from the south.

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## Acknowledgements

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Data was shared by Whitefish Point Bird Observatory

Copper Country Audubon Club gave us funding to hire our observers

Lynn Murphy for help in data processing

Mark Romanski of the Isle Royale staff

## Table 1

### Non-Waterbirds seen coming in to Isle Royale from south

Sharp-shinned Hawk (*Accipiter striatus*)

American Kestrel (*Falco sparverius*)

Peregrine Falcon (*Falco peregrinus*)

Northern Harrier (*Circus cyaneus*)

Short-eared Owl (*Asio flammeus*)

Mourning Dove (*Zenaida macroura*)

Winter Wren (*Troglodytes troglodytes*)

American Crow (*Corvus brachyrhynchos*)

Brown Thrasher (*Toxostoma rufum*)

Ruby-crowned Kinglet (*Regulus calendula*)

Savannah Sparrow (*Passerculus sandwichensis*)

## Table 2

### Waterbird Species Observed migrating past Rainbow and Cumberland Points, May 2017

Canada Goose (*Branta canadensis*)

Wood Duck (*Aix sponsa*)

Blue-winged Teal (*Anas discors*)

Green-winged Teal (*Anas crecca*)

Lesser Scaup (*Aythya affinis*)

White-winged Scoter (*Melanitta fusca*)

Long-tailed Duck (*Clangula hyemalis*)

Bufflehead (*Bucephala albeola*)

Common Goldeneye (*Bucephala clangula*)

Red-breasted Merganser (*Mergus serrator*)

Red-throated Loon (*Gavia stellata*)

Common Loon (*Gavia immer*)

Red-necked Grebe (*Podiceps grisegena*)

Horned Grebe (*Podiceps auritus*)

Double-crested Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax auritus*)

| Common Merganser (*Mergus merganser*) were seen but not observed migrating.

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**Table 3 Waterbird Migration at Rainbow and Cumberland Points 7 – 13 May**

	7th RP	8th RP	9th RP	10th RP	11th RP	12th CP	13th CP	TOTALS
DABBLER SPECIES				3				3
WOOD DUCK			1					1
GREEN-WINGED TEAL		2						2
BLUE-WINGED TEAL				5				5
TEAL SPECIES				2				2
AYTHYA SPECIES				112				112
LESSER SCAUP	2							2
SCAUP SPECIES	1	1	11	121	24	2		160
BUFFLEHEAD		2	4	2				8
COMMON GOLDENEYE	1		4	7				12
WHITE-WINGED SCOTER		1	4	3	53	7		68
DARK-WINGED SCOTER*						36		36
LONG-TAILED DUCK			2	11		1		14
RED-BREASTED MERGANSER	14	43	82	185	140	150	62	676
RED-NECKED GREBE	1	2	20	144	4	4		175
HORNED GREBE				3				3
RED-THROATED LOON	1	2	12	3			3	21
LOON SPECIES	1	4	2		2	2		11
COMMON LOON	47	45	100	161	55	45	24	477
UNIDENTIFIED DUCK	4		28	78	35	28	13	186
UNIDENTIFIED WATERBIRD	11	1	5	14	38	8	10	87
DC CORMORANT	15	6	10	3		7		41
UNIDENTIFIED SHOREBIRD					6			6
CANADA GOOSE		3	1					4
	98	112	286	857	357	290	112	2112

\* Seen after 8 hour count

Counts were conducted at Rainbow Point on the 7th through 11th and on Cumberland Point on the 12th and 13th.

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