

As a migration counter, I've often wondered what a land-dependent bird feels when it reaches a great water crossing. Last October, I looked down from a floatplane window at the meeting of Lake Superior and Ontario's mainland. We were en route to Michipicoten Island, and I understood, then, the feeling.

The slimmest span of water separating Michipicoten from Ontario is about 9.5 miles. The ice is infrequent; passage by boat often treacherous. Aside from unprofitable copper mines and a small fishery, both long defunct, human presence on the island—Lake Superior's second-largest—has been spotty, always. Today, most of Michipicoten is a provincial park, but HawkAir operates a private fly-in camp on the island's west side. We landed there, on Michi Lake, transferred our provisions from the plane to our backs. The Otter rose again, and Rhoda and I waved. For the next 11 days, it would be just her and I.

I've counted for Youngman's Copper Country Audubon projects at other Lake Superior points. Manitou Island off the Keweenaw; Au Sable Point near Grand Marais. All his gigs deliver the things that beckon me most: solitude and adventure, and at least one spectacular bird flight. Rhoda Johnson is my longtime friend. She can identify ducks, pitch a tent, and laugh through tribulations, so she's an ideal partner for endeavors like this. When I'd first asked if she'd join, her response was something like, "I don't even know what that [Michipicoten] is, but I'm in!"

Now, we *were* in, facing a wall of birch and spruce that most people would describe as impenetrable. I would've subscribed to this idea, but there was one little problem: we needed to penetrate it. Youngman's instructions read something like "We never made it to Cotton Cove – I wimped out. You won't." So Rhoda and I donned safety glasses and pushed forward into the wall.

Youngman suspected that Cotton Cove would provide the best vantage on waterbirds migrating southeast. As the raven flies, Cotton Cove is not that far from Michi Lake—less than 3 miles, in fact. But we did not fly. We hiked, and it took 7 hours. Hiking is generous terminology: Michipicoten's interior is trailless, rugged terrain never timbered. Walking isn't really walking. It's grabbing branches, crawling under blowdowns, and recovering from footholds that failed. Blunder, perhaps, is the best description of overland travel, and the word applies to both physical and mental navigations. Rhoda and I blundered along the bases of sheer granite faces, blundered through glades of dreadlocked yew, and blundered into soggy, beaver-engineered hells. But chickadee and kinglet flocks were always present, cheerful and encouraging. And even through foggy safety glasses, our surroundings were lush and primeval, the closest thing I've seen to a rainforest in the east. Moss carpeted everything; mushrooms diverse in color and texture sprang forth from the ground and the trees; delicate springs were ringed with stones and ferns. When, finally at Cotton Cove, I freed my body from the pack—which weighed at least half as much as I did—physical relief was profound.

Our camp at Cotton Cove was top-shelf, one of the prettiest I've ever had. We pitched the tent on the beach, anchoring the tarp to a weathered log that had been previously used by both beavers and sapsuckers. A clear brook tumbled into Superior; most the noise came from Red, the squirrel, who launched lengthy tirades about our intrusion. We did have use of the project's Inreach, which allowed us to tell Youngman what we were seeing, find out from HawkAir when we'd be extracted, and keep tabs on the weather. But otherwise, the rest of the world and its concerns felt very far away—we were even beyond the reach of foghorns. This was nice.

Camp to count was a ten-minute commute that sparkled with dew and agates. We named our lookout Chickadee Knoll to honor our frequent visitors. Chickadee Knoll is about 20 feet above Lake Superior. It's covered in lichens, junipers, and blueberries and it hosted a thriving spider population, too. These liked to rattle off our hats at inopportune moments and gave good startles. Chickadee Knoll was—as Youngman had suspected—a prime vantage for a waterbird count. The line of sight was superb, and we seemed to be at the place where birds approaching from the northwest came nearest to Michipicoten. We christened the flightline “Youngman Highway.”

We named other things, too. Just offshore were a few large rocks. They became Gull, Peregrine, and Pipit. The Peregrine Falcon we called “Junior.” Typically, Junior ate American Pipits and Horned Larks. One morning though, Rhoda exclaimed, “I think he’s on a kingfisher!” I looked to see a Belted Kingfisher streaking from the open lake towards shore, Junior in hot pursuit. The kingfisher hit the water several times to evade Junior’s stoops, rebounding well. We cheered when the kingfisher—the only one we saw on Michipicoten—made it to shore. Our cheers were not just for the kingfisher’s well-being, but for Junior’s too...

Fog is common at Michipicoten, and it plagued our count before we ever left the mainland. For the first 3 days of what was supposed to be the count, Wawa was so socked that HawkAir couldn’t fly. Visibility for nearly half of our count hours was severely limited. In fact, on our first day at Chickadee Knoll, the fog was so unrelenting that we saw zero migrating waterbirds the entire count. Our exhaustion from hiking in mixed with exasperation. We’d toiled hard to reach our station—and, now finally there, we couldn’t see a darn thing. Perhaps, this enhanced our appreciation of the birds we *did* see over the next 10 days. My favorites: a flock of 25 distant Horned Larks/American Pipits migrating in a line like ducks; the occasional tidy flock of White-winged Scoters; two Northern Harriers way out over the lake, uninterested in land, just coursing south above the water like they do above marshland. Fog aside, the weather we experienced was not particularly favorable for migration. Only about a third of total count hours were not southerly. The temperature ranged from 53.6-65.0 degrees Fahrenheit. Mosquitoes were an annoyance in evening, but we stayed warm at night.

As Youngman’s counts dependably do, Michipicoten produced a noteworthy flight. It happened October 13<sup>th</sup>, delivering 839 loons—the most I’ve counted in a day, anywhere. This tally must come close to the fall Great Lakes daily high count. When this flight was at its heaviest, I counted 150 Common Loons in just 12 minutes. Most were low, scattered in loose flocks, the largest of these containing 24 individuals. Amazingly, 838 of these loons were Common. We saw only 2 Red-throated Loons during the entire Michipicoten stint. But we *did* have a Pacific/Arctic Loon\* on October 13<sup>th</sup>, close and in alternate plumage! This was the rarest species we recorded while there.

*\*When seen in flight only, separating these two species is nearly impossible.*

As a standalone, this flight is exciting. Amplifying that, though, is that Whitefish Point Bird Observatory recorded *their* largest loon flight of Fall 2021 the following day, October 14<sup>th</sup>. (WPBO numbers=493 Commons, 42 Red-throateds, 1 Pacific, 9 unidentified; WPBO’s Pacific Loon, not in alternate plumage, was not the one we saw at Michipicoten.) Despite the disparity between Michipicoten and WPBO’s Red-throated Loon numbers, it seems plausible that some of the Common Loons passing Michipicoten on October 13 were recorded at WPBO October 14. At the very least, these days represent a period of heavy loon passage across Lake Superior. Incidentally, exactly a year prior (October 13<sup>th</sup> 2020), I tallied over 13,300 waterbirds out on Manitou.

During the Michipicoten count, we tallied a total 1796 migrating waterbirds representing 25 species. In comparison, WPBO tallied 5104 migrating waterbirds during the same period (October 5-14\*). While the results from our time at Michipicoten don't suggest a huge duck flight passes by, any 2-week sample is a gamble. Perhaps, we just didn't receive the conditions that push ducks south.

*\*We were unable to pack all our food in on the first trip to Cotton Cove and resupplied at Michi Lake mid-hitch. This shortened our counts on October 7-8.*

Most numerous waterbirds recorded during Michipicoten count:

1. Common Loon (1109)
2. Herring Gull (143)
3. Red-breasted Merganser (120)
4. Canada Goose (83)
5. White-winged Scoter (78)

Raptors at Cotton Cove exhibiting migratory behavior:

- Northern Harrier (6)
- Sharp-shinned Hawk (7)
- Bald Eagle (3)
- Rough-legged Hawk (7)

- Peregrine Falcon (3)
- American Kestrel (4)

Other landbirds at Cotton Cove exhibiting migratory behavior:

- Belted Kingfisher (1)
- Golden-crowned Kinglet (2)
- Horned Lark/American Pipit (25 – 1 flock)
- Dark-eyed Junco (1)
- Myrtle Warbler (1)
- Rusty Blackbird (1)
- Unidentified passerine (2)

During our time on Michipicoten Island, we saw a total of 70 species. The most interesting of these were a Bohemian Waxwing and good numbers of White-winged Crossbills. Our most surprising mammal sighting was a wolf, which Rhoda saw while thrashing through Michipicoten's interior.

The night before we had to hike back to Michi Lake to meet HawkAir, the wind picked up and shifted west. Lake Superior, unusually calm for most the count, built swells that threatened our camp—as well as a safe passage back, for the first leg of the hike travels the coast. It's always bittersweet to close out a count, particularly on a west wind in mid-October. But, thanks again to the chickadee-kinglet cheerleaders, we persevered back to Michi Lake. I had a shin gash and we both had beves of bruises, but we felt very lucky, with all that blundering, to come out with only minimal wounds.

Youngman's Copper Country Audubon projects are dedicated to collecting data from sites many folks would write off as inaccessible. It's exciting to compare the results with places more conventionally studied—like Whitefish Point—and imagine the paths waterbirds travel when navigating Lake Superior. And it's exciting, too, to contribute to these gigs. Migration hits different in a place without roads, where comings and goings required rigorous effort. Rhoda and I loved Michipicoten and consider it an honor to have been tasked with this count.