

Report on a Bird Survey of the west end of Michipicoten Island – May 2007

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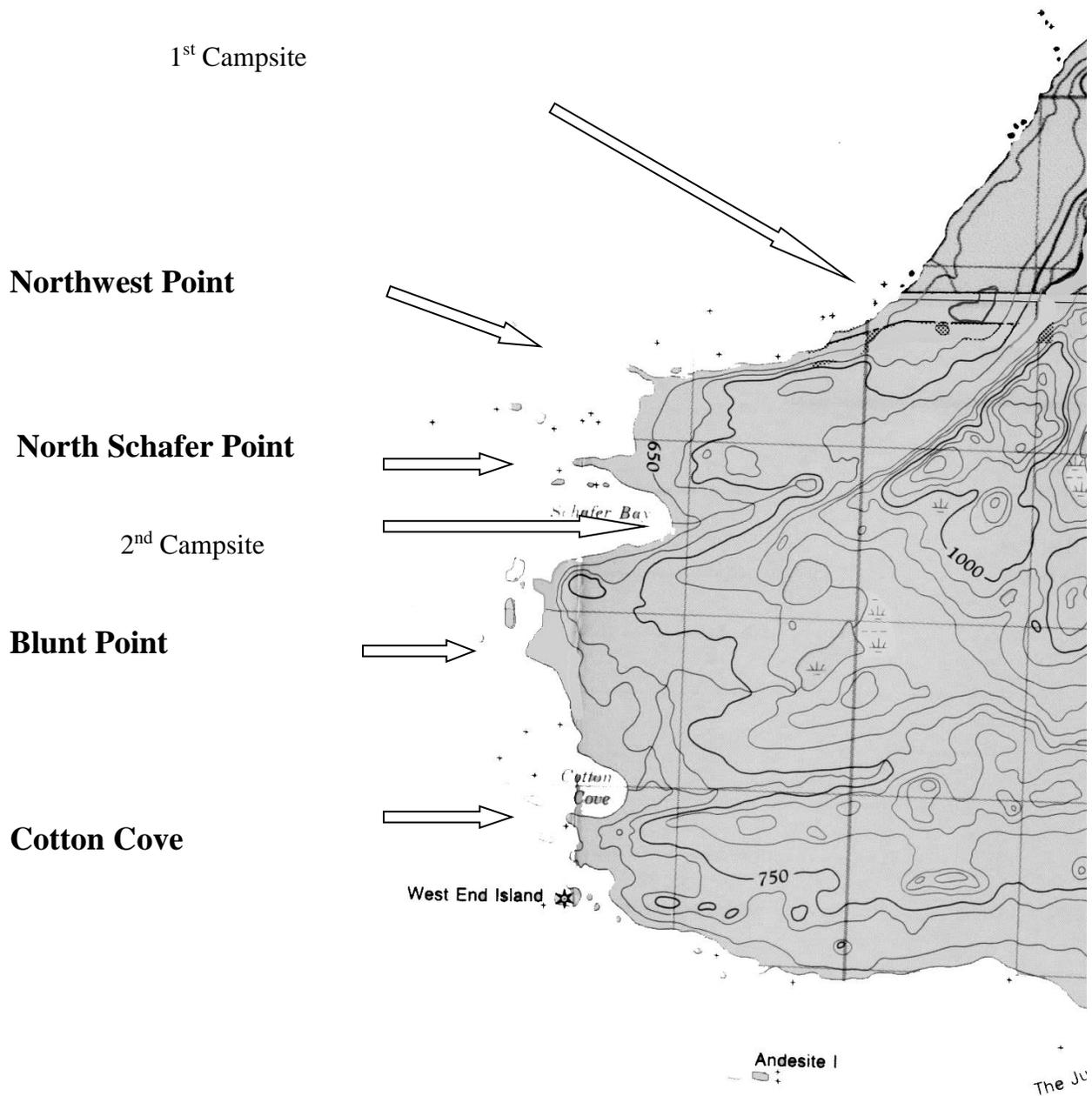
From the 13th through the 20th of May 2007 myself and Zach Gayk and Greg Cleary – all from Michigan's upper peninsula camped, hiked and observed birds on the extreme western end of Michipicoten Island. The main purpose for our being there was to watch for raptors flying into Michipicoten's west tip from across Lake Superior from the west. During five years of bird surveys at Manitou Island at the tip of the Keweenaw peninsula we'd seen small numbers of raptors leaving Manitou's eastern tip and *seeming* to cross Lake Superior in a east northeast direction. If such a cross lake migration was taking place we figured the west tip of Michipicoten might be the most likely place to see them finish their crossing. So our main purpose was to be in place at the points on Michipicoten's west tip for as many days as possible to watch for incoming raptors. Realizing that we might see few if any such raptors we were going to make a significant effort to watch for and document any waterbird migration past the west tip of Michipicoten and given the largely unknown nature of Michipicoten's bird life we planned to record pretty much every bird we saw.

So this little report will be broken into the following parts

- Discussion of the logistics of our trip – where we were and how we got there
- Discussion of raptors seen at Michipicoten
- Discussion of waterbirds seen at Michipicoten
- Discussion of passerines at Michipicoten
- A species list

How we got there, where we were

We flew into Michi Lake with Hawk Air at 9:25AM on the 13th of May. We hauled our camping gear north on a trail made by Hawk Air toward the Quebec Mine. We took a short-cut (very bad move) but eventually camped on the gravel beach near the outlet of a tiny creek that drained a small lake west of the north part of Michi Lake. We'd hoped to camp right down at the western tip of the island but had underestimated the difficulty of getting our gear there. Our plan was to spend hours each day sitting on one or more of the several rocky points that protrude westward from the blunt west end of the island. For the first several days we would hike from our campsite to and from these points. On the afternoon of the 17th we moved our camp to the head of Schafer Bay and operated from there till our last night on the island. We gave names to several of the points on Michipicoten's west tip - to help us communicate about them and generally keep things straight. On the next page I've put a map with labels indicating the points we "named", our campsites, etc. On our first day, the 13th we only spent an hour at the Northwest Point. The next day we spent more time at Northwest Point and began to cover the North Schafer Bay point as well. It became clear very quickly that for observing waterbirds the points toward the south would be better locations – the birds were closer to shore at the south and the direction of their flight (somewhat west of north) moved them farther away from the northern points.



So as the week went on we spent more time at Cotton Cove and Blunt Point and less at Northwest Point. Since we were hoping to see inbound raptors we always tried to have people at one of the northern points as well as Blunt Pt or Cotton Cove. For purposes of watching the movement of migrating waterbirds the point we called Cotton Cove was the best.. Its location at the south side of Cotton Cove and on a elevation about 20 feet above the water seemed ideal. Unfortunately for us it was by far the hardest to get to. It was more than a one hour hike from the camp at Schafer Bay. Most days we manned two points and let the third person hike inland or along the shorelines looking for birds. Many of the passerine species we recorded were spotted or heard on those walks. We did basically no “owling”. One evening I hiked eastward up the valley behind Schafer Bay and whistled twice for saw-whet owls in what seemed like suitable locations. At both spots a saw-whet whistled back.

Raptors

Michipicoten Island had a surprising small number of raptors. We estimated that during the week we spent there we saw perhaps 15 total raptors (not counting Turkey Vultures). We saw one immature Bald Eagle, one adult Bald Eagle, one dead adult Bald Eagle, one territorial Broadwing, one territorial Sharpshin, four or five Merlins, two Peregrines and a couple unidentified accipiters near the extreme west tip of the island. That's IT. The living eagles were seen during our relatively brief times at Michi Lake. The dead eagle was found a little way into the forest near the shore of Cotton Cove. The lack of eagles at Michipicoten seems really strange. The habitat seems so great for them, the flight out from the mainland would surely not intimidate an eagle. Where are they? Perhaps there were a few breeding pairs on the island and they had no need to stray far during their foraging and our location out at the far west tip was just not in any hunting territory. Still, in comparing my experience at Manitou and living in the Keweenaw, I would expect to see a bunch of immature Bald Eagles using that shoreline at Michipicoten. We didn't.

We went to Michipicoten hoping to see tired raptors approaching its western tip from the west. We didn't really see any. The following direct quote from my notes is the only possible lake crossing raptor we had. 17 May Cotton Cove 11:21 AM "1 raptor prob. accipiter S of West End light island flying from W to island a very short look at it" That's what we were looking for and that could indeed have been a raptor that just finished a flight across Lake Superior from Manitou that morning. It could have been a raptor that had been on Michipicoten and flew out to the west a bit and turned around. What we'd hoped to see was raptors (especially Sharpshins because they are the birds most often seen leaving Manitou) far out to the west and follow them as they finished their long translake flights. That 11:21 sighting of a "prob. accipiter" was the best we had. Later that same day we saw two unidentified accipiters flying north over Michipicoten near the west tip. We do NOT conclude that the small cross-lake migration that we seemed to be seeing from Manitou is not taking place, only that we didn't see any evidence of it during our week at Michipicoten. The weather was not especially conducive to raptors moving eastward across the lake and if any raptors do cross it is possible or perhaps likely that they would be drifted northward by winds during the 80 mile crossing and would then make landfall along the Pukaskwa coast.

We did see Peregrine Falcons and Merlins everyday on the island. It was impossible to tell how many we were seeing but our guess was we saw about 4 – 5 different Merlins and at least 2 Peregrines. As we were used to seeing at Manitou both falcons made extensive use of the tip of the island to hunt for various passerines, shorebirds, etc that were coming in off the lake to the island. We saw many hunting forays off that west end. Perhaps the most interesting was watching a Merlin persistently harass another Merlin to give up its passerine prey, which it finally did. One second later a Peregrine dove on the 2nd Merlin which quickly dropped its pilfered prize into the lake. The Peregrine plucked it out. In our travels we passed near a few cliffs and kept eyes and ears open for nesting Peregrines - no luck.

Waterbirds

From my experience in the Keweenaw and knowledge of waterbirds moving through Lake Superior, I had thought it quite likely that the west tip of Michipicoten might well be used by migrating waterbirds as a navigational point. That surely is the case. During the six days we sat out on the west tip we saw a total of 1602 waterbirds pass by in about 36 hours of observation. Due to location and not always having a scope at each observation point the largest number of individuals was in the "Unidentified Waterbird" category. There were 1041 of them. Next up came Common Loons at 191, Red-breasted Mergansers at 135, then White-winged Scoters at 98. Below is a table showing dates, numbers and species. The count location varied by day. The count locations were all at the west tip of the island, from one of the points shown on the map on page 2 of this report.

Dates	14th	15th	16th	17th	18th	19th	TOTALS	
Unidentified Waterbird	320	2	27	5	61	626	1041	UN W
Canada Goose					1		1	CANG
Mallard					5		5	MALL
Teal Species	2						2	Teal Sp
Scoter Species					2	4	6	Scoter Sp
White-winged Scoter	13			4	80	1	98	WWSC
Surf Scoter					2		2	SUSC
Long-tailed Duck	2	1	4	22		23	52	Longtailed
Bufflehead		7					7	BUFF
Common Goldeneye						2	2	COGO
Common Merganser		8		1	2		11	COME
Red-breasted Merganser		2		6	114	13	135	RBME
Merganser Species			1	11	1	2	15	Merg Sp
Red-throated Loon				3	2		5	RTLO
Pacific/Arctic Loon					1		1	PALO
Common Loon		2	25	91	59	14	191	COLO
Unidentified Loon				5	2		7	Un Loon
Double-crested Cormorant			1		19	1	21	DCCO
	337	22	58	148	351	686	1602	
Observation Hours	6.5	4.5	4	6	8	7	36	

The large number of Unidentified waterbirds on the 14th and 19th are due to two factors:

Those counts were taken from the NW point - farthest from the flow of birds and on the 19th the observer there only had binoculars, no scope.

Passerines

The only fact that seemed noteworthy was how much behind the passerine migration seemed to be compared to the Keweenaw peninsula where we came over from. Michipicoten seemed to have very few passerines in the first days we were there. By the end of our week a couple nights had brought in significant movements of passerines, especially warblers. The fact that passerine migration at Michipicoten Island is a couple weeks later than our upper peninsula of Michigan migration may well be already known. It was very noticeable to us.

Bird Species List for Michipicoten Island 13 – 20 May 2007
Greg Cleary, Zach Gayk, Joseph Youngman

Canada Goose	Least Flycatcher	Lincoln's Sparrow
Wood Duck	Eastern Kingbird	Swamp Sparrow
Mallard	Blue-headed Vireo	White-throated Sparrow
Blue-winged Teal	Blue Jay	White-crowned Sparrow
Surf Scoter	American Crow	Lapland Longspur
White-winged Scoter	Common Raven	Rose-breasted Grosbeak
Long-tailed Duck	Tree Swallow	Indigo Bunting
Bufflehead	Black-capped Chickadee	Common Grackle
Common Goldeneye	Red-breasted Nuthatch	Baltimore Oriole
Common Merganser	Brown Creeper	Purple Finch
Red-breasted Merganser	Winter Wren	White-winged Crossbill
Red-throated Loon	Golden-crowned Kinglet	Pine Siskin
Pacific / Arctic Loon	Ruby-crowned Kinglet	American Goldfinch
Common Loon	Veery	Evening Grosbeak
Horned Grebe	Hermit Thrush	
Red-necked Grebe	American Robin	
Double-crested Cormorant	Gray Catbird	104 Species
Great Blue Heron	American Pipit	
Turkey Vulture	Golden-winged Warbler	We were only on the west end of
Bald Eagle	Tennessee Warbler	the island.
Sharp-shinned Hawk	Orange-crowned Warbler	
Broad-winged Hawk	Nashville Warbler	
Merlin	Northern Parula	
Peregrine Falcon	Chestnut-sided Warbler	
Sandhill Crane	Magnolia Warbler	
Semipalmated Plover	Cape May Warbler	
Killdeer	Black-throated Blue Warbler	
Greater Yellowlegs	Yellow-rumped Warbler	
Lesser Yellowlegs	Black-throated Green Warbler	
Spotted Sandpiper	Blackburnian Warbler	
Least Sandpiper	Palm Warbler	
Dunlin	Bay-breasted Warbler	
Wilson's Snipe	Black and White Warbler	
American Woodcock	American Redstart	
Ring-billed Gull	Ovenbird	
Herring Gull	Northern Waterthrush	
Mourning Dove	Mourning Warbler	
Northern Saw-whet Owl	Common Yellowthroat	
Belted Kingfisher	Canada Warbler	
Downy Woodpecker	Scarlet Tanager	
Hairy Woodpecker	Chipping Sparrow	
American Three-toed Woodpecker	Clay-colored Sparrow	
Northern Flicker	Lark Sparrow	
Yellow-bellied Flycatcher	Savannah Sparrow	
Alder Flycatcher	Song Sparrow	