

A BIRDER'S GUIDE

to the

RAINY RIVER AREA



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Introduction

The area around the small community of Rainy River in extreme Northwestern Ontario presents some exciting birding opportunities. A combination of geographic location, topography, climatic conditions and land uses has resulted in definite “western” condition that is reflected in the natural history of the area. In addition, the Rainy River empties into the Lake of the Woods here and together they provide unique and interesting habitats that are very attractive to birds as breeding and migrational staging areas.

And where there are birds, there are birders. A good day in the Rainy River area can be incredibly rewarding; a week or longer – unbelievable!

This guide will give visitors to the area nearly all the information they may need to see the local specialities whether their stay is only for a few hours or several days. It must be kept in mind, however, their circumstance, time of day and just plain luck affect the outcome of a visit to Rainy River.

Scope of the Guide

Through series of maps and written descriptions, information on what to see and where to see it is provided. Assuming that most area visitors will arrive from the south and the east, information from Thunder Bay (very general) to Rainy River (very specific) will be given. Although the entire region is of considerable interest, the area around the town of Rainy River will be given the most attention.

General Information

1) Weather

Assume the weather will be variable, so prepare for it, particularly in the spring and in the fall. The ground is usually snow-covered by November (sometimes mid-October) and remains so until the beginning to mid April. Ice will be present on Lake of the Woods until late April or early May but the channel between the Sable Islands and the mainland usually opens two weeks earlier. Each year is different, of course, but the Rainy River itself is usually ice free by the second week in April. From mid May to early September, the days can be very warm with high temperatures exceeding 30Celcius. Afternoon birding can be an effort in these conditions. Wind can be a problem and extreme care should be taken when boating or canoeing on the Rainy River, Lake of the Woods or the Channel. The lake, in particular, can blow up very suddenly so keep an eye on the wind. Winter temperatures can drop to -40Celcius on occasion but are usually more pleasant. Most of the roads in the area are gravel and some can get a little muddy in rainy weather.

2) Insects

Mosquitoes, black flies, deer flies, moose flies, dog flies, sand flies and the infamous wood ticks combine to make life interesting for the birder. With some precautions, insects need not constrain birding activities. Early mornings and late evenings will generally be bad for mosquitoes since most of the area is low-lying and there is an abundance of breeding habitat.

Use a good repellent and wear light-coloured clothing, including long-sleeved shirts. Head nets can be worn but tend to restrict vision and trap heat. In the open areas during the day mosquitoes should not be a problem. Expect them in wooded areas and marshes all the time. Wood ticks are present in the area from early May to August and are found everywhere except in the middle of ploughed fields. Use of a repellent, tucking pant legs in socks and a complete tick check (body search) at the end of each day are the best precautions to take. If you find a tick attached to you, it can be removed by gently pulling it until it comes free. Ticks take some time to become firmly attached and can usually be removed with no difficulty. If one is strongly attached, you may want to consult a physician. The recent publicity on Lyme Disease has made people aware of ticks and while the possibility of infection exists, common sense and a little care will generally remove the risk. Wearing light-coloured clothing makes any tick that finds you easier to see. After a walk in grassy or bushy areas, look over your clothing and remove any ticks you find. The wood tick of Rainy River area is small, rounded (1/2 centimetre or less in diameter), flat and reddish brown.

3). **Where to Stay**

Accommodation in the Rainy River area consists of motels, hotels, rental cabins and rental campsites. In the town itself, there is one motel, the Roadrunner (807-852-3296) and an older hotel. Cabins and campsites can be rented at Budreau's Oak Grove Camp on the Rainy River (807-852-

3702) and at Harris Hill Resort (Formerly Windy Bay Lodge) on Lake of the Woods (807-488-1116). Boats and motors can be rented, or rides out to and return from Sable Islands or Windy Point can be arranged at both Oak Grove and Harris Hill Resort. Check with the owners in advance. There is a nominal fee campground on the river in the town of Rainy River and also Assabaska Ojibway Heritage Park on Highway 621 north of Bergland / Sleeman. There are numerous other motels in Baudette, MN just across the Rainy River in the USA. Be prepared for the usual Border Crossing procedures if you decide to stay there.

The town of Rainy River has all the stores associated with a small community and food, gas, supplies and incidentals can be purchased. Restaurant meals are available in Rainy River and notwithstanding the inconvenience, crossing the border to Baudette will give you an added selection.

4).How to get to Rainy River

Rainy River is located in the extreme south western corner of Northwestern Ontario at the western end of Highway 11, about 1900 Kilometres from Toronto. Getting there is time consuming, with two and a half days (at least) of driving, or you can fly commercially to Thunder Bay or Fort Frances and rent a car on arrival. Flying to Winnipeg and renting a car to drive through south eastern Manitoba is another alternative.

5) Private Property

Most of the land in the Rainy River area is privately owned. If you encounter a “No Trespassing” sign, respect it. Farmers in the area are

getting to know birders and will usually give permission to enter their property if asked. Most birding can be done from public roads or on unposted land. Keep in mind that although the land is not posted, you may be trespassing.

The local people are friendly, helpful and quite willing to talk to visitors about birds. Farmers in particular are quite aware of the more obvious species and can be helpful in pointing out a field visited by Sandhill Cranes or Sharp-tailed Grouse. Don't abuse the rights of the landowners. If property is posted, assume that there is a good reason for the posting. Don't make things difficult for everyone by selfish or inconsiderate actions.

6) Maps

The sketch maps used in the guide are based ON THE 1:50,000 National Topographical Series. These can be obtained from: The Canada Map Office, Department of Energy, Mines and Resources, 615 Booth Street, Ottawa, Ontario, K1A 0E9 or from most retail map outlets. The following sheets cover the Rainy River area:

52 D/15 & 52 D/10 – Rainy River

52 D/16 – Abor Vitae

52 D/9 - Pinewood

Bird Specialties of the Rainy River Area

American White Pelican – Lake of the Woods, overhead anywhere

Ruddy Duck – Rainy River sewage ponds

Bald Eagle – Lake of the Woods, Rainy River

Sharp-tailed Grouse – fields, roadsides throughout area

Sandhill Crane – large fields throughout the area

Yellow Rail – the Big Marsh off Fred's Road, wet fields

Piping Plover – Windy Point, Sable Islands

Marbled Godwit – fields throughout the area

Wilson's Phalarope – Rainy River sewage ponds

Franklin's Gull – Lake of the Woods, Sable Islands

Red-headed Woodpecker – throughout the area

Western Kingbird – throughout the area (irregular)

Black-billed Magpie – throughout the area

Sedge Wren – wet fields throughout the area

Yellow-throated Vireo – aspen and oak woods

Connecticut Warbler – aspen groves throughout the area

Brewer's Blackbird – fields, roadside throughout the area

Yellow-headed Blackbird – Rainy River, Lake of the Woods, Sable Island

Western Meadowlark – fields throughout the area

Clay-coloured Sparrow – brushy fields

Leconte's Sparrow – wet meadows, hay fields

BIRDING AREAS

Area #1 – Thunder Bay to Fort Frances

This is a 350 km drive on Hwy 17/11 west from Thunder Bay to Shabaqua and then west on Highway 11 to Fort Frances. The highway passes through typical Canadian Shield country with numerous rock outcrops, lakes and boreal forest. Stop occasionally at places that catch your interest such as black spruce stands, jack pine stands, cutovers, black spruce bogs and mixed aspen-conifer stands for Warblers, Sparrows and other Boreal species. Connecticut Warblers can be found in most of the more open black spruce bogs. They are easy to hear but hard to see. You may see a Great Gray Owl or Spruce Grouse along the highway right of way. Black-backed and Three-toed Woodpeckers are possible anywhere but not to be expected. Spend as much time as you wish birding as you travel. Just before Fort Frances, you will cross Rainy Lake on a causeway. There are several pull-offs along the causeway that give a good view of the lake and a good chance to see a Bald Eagle. A pair of Eagles has a nest in a large white pine on a small island on the right side about half-way across the causeway.

Area #2 – Fort Frances to Rainy River

This is about a 100km drive west on highway 11. West of Fort Frances, the rock of the Canadian Shield is left behind mostly. Flat country, farm fields and patches of aspen woods characterize the landscape. The change is sudden and is reflected in the birds likely to be seen. Near the west end

of Fort Frances, just west of the cemetery, is a small open wooded park. The park overlooks the Rainy River and the pulp mills located on both shores. The river is good for waterfowl and when low, for shorebirds. The park trees harbour Eastern Wood Pewee, Warbling Vireo and Northern Orioles while Chimney Swifts wheel overhead. None of these are found east of Fort Frances, except rarely. There are two alternative for driving west from Fort Frances. One is to follow Highway 11 west to Rainy River, checking fields and other interesting spots as you go. The other route takes a bit longer but is much more enjoyable. Just before the “McDonald’s Restaurant”, turn left on Highway 602 (also called River Road) and follow it to Emo. The road follows the Rainy River and a leisurely drive will produce Western Meadowlark, Clay-coloured Sparrow, Eastern Bluebird (check this one in case it is a Mountain Bluebird), Brewer’s Blackbird, Northern Harrier and occasionally a Black-billed Magpie. This 47 km drive is s good introduction to the country and the birds you can expect as you move west. At Emo you will again be on Hwy 11. Turn left and continue to Rainy River. West of Emo, you will pass through several small communities including Barwick, Stratton, Pinewood & Sleeman. At the west side of Pinewood, the highway crosses the Pinewood River. This is a good spot to stop and look for waterfowl, Herons, and to observe the large colony of Cliff Swallows that nest under the highway bridge. The open fields on either side of the highway can be checked as you drive or during occasional stops for open country species.

Area # 3 – Worthington Road and Highway 11

This is the first of the site specific introduction to the bird specialties of the area as a whole. The best time to be here is during the first couple of hours after sunrise any day in the last week of May and the first two weeks of June. This well-signed junction is about 4km west of Sleeman or 8km east of Rainy River. Turn right on Worthington Road #3, cross the railway tracks, park, get out, watch and listen. In the surrounding fields you will see or hear Sharp-tailed Grouse, Marbled Godwit, Upland Sandpiper, Horned Lark, Northern Harrier, Brewer's Blackbird, Leconte's Sparrow, Clay-coloured Sparrow, Western Meadowlark and Black-billed Magpie. The Magpies nest in the small aspen woods just ahead on the right. Watch for them flying over the fields or perched in the tops of trees in the woods. There is a Magpie nest in a willow tree right by the fence at the nearest corner of the woods beside the road. Move ahead (north) to the second group of farm buildings on the right. For three years, 1987 – 1989, Western Kingbirds nested in one of the willow trees in the farm yard. Opposite the farm buildings, turn left. The short grass field on the right has several stone piles in it and in 1990 the field was occupied by a Sprague's Pipit. Good ears are necessary to find this bird as it seems to spend most of its time high in the air, singing. Moving ahead, Connecticut Warblers nest in the first aspen woods on the left. Continue moving ahead to Highway 600, checking fields, woodlots and farm yards as you go.

Area # 4 – Rainy River Sewage Lagoons

This area can be very productive for waterfowl and shorebirds depending on the water levels present in the lagoons. They are easily reached by turning right on Government Road off Highway 11 opposite the Roadrunner Motel in Rainy River. Cross the tracks and take the first driveable dirt road to the left to the lagoons. There is the usual fence and “Keep Out” signs but entry to date has not been challenged. Use your own judgement. There are two lagoons and they should both be checked. Most of the common duck species are usually present with several species, including Ruddy Duck, breeding. In late May and early June it is not unusual to see up to 300 Wilson’s Phalaropes spinning around on the ponds. Soras frequent the cattail edge and when water levels are low in the lagoons, good numbers of shorebirds congregate. During spring and fall migration periods, all of the regular swallow species can be seen. If you are in the Rainy River area for several days, more than one visit to the lagoons is recommended.

Area # 5 – Highway 600 – Wilson Creek Road – River Road Loop

From Highway 11 at the west end of the town of Rainy River, turn right (north) onto Highway 600. Follow Highway 600 north past the garbage dump to Wilson Creek Road, on the left. As you travel along Highway 600, stop at any aspen woods and listen for the loud ringing song of the Connecticut Warbler. If you hear one, you can, with care, walk into the woods and see the bird. They are hard to find in the aspens; their colour

blends in perfectly with their surroundings. Turn west on Wilson Creek Road and drive slowly along watching the big fields on either side for Sandhill Cranes, Sharp-tailed Grouse, Sedge Wren, Leconte's Sparrow, Black-billed Magpie and in the evenings, Short-eared Owl. This is one of the best areas to find Sandhill Crane, especially in the spring and early summer. Even though Cranes are large birds, they blend in extremely well with the ploughed fields and the vegetation of early summer. As you near the western end of the road, check the deciduous woods on either side; Wood Thrushes live in them. Brush up on your thrush songs because the Hermit Thrush is quite common in the area and can, at a distance, be confused with the Wood Thrush. Continue to the intersection with River Road (to the left and straight ahead). Go ahead past the metal building and the grey house on the right to the Wilson Creek culvert crossing. Check both sides of the creek for waterfowl, Grebes, Herons and land birds in the surrounding oaks. Continue ahead on River Road and take the next road on the left which leads past some houses and ends where Wilson Creek flows into the Rainy River. Waterfowl and White Pelicans like this area and the woods are great for land birds. Return to the Wilson Creek culvert and follow River Road south (if you go straight ahead you will be on Wilson Creek Road again). Ahead on the left, you will see a tall microwave tower. Opposite the tower is an open hay barn where Black-billed Magpies have nested under the eaves of the barn for many years and can usually be seen flying out of the barn or perched at the top of nearby

trees. The fields around the microwave tower are good for Sandhill Crane, Sharp-tailed Grouse and to look for Western Kingbirds.

Continue to the south until the road swings to the left & follows the Rainy River. Check the reed beds in the river for Yellow-headed Blackbirds, waterfowl, White Pelicans, Gulls, Grebes and Swallows. The oak woods and the small ponds near the residents along the road are excellent for yellow-throated Vireo and other land birds. Follow the River Road east to Highway 600, checking the fields as you go, then turn right and you will be back in Rainy River.

Area # 6 – North River Road

Starting at the Wilson Creek culvert, continue north along the River Road to the sign and road leading to Budreau's Oak Grove Camp on the left. Take this road and check the woods on either side for Warblers, Flycatchers, Sparrows and Scarlet Tanagers. Oak Grove Camp is a beautiful spot set in a stand of bur and red oaks on the Rainy River. The place usually abounds with birds. It's a great place to stay in a cabin or on a campsite, but if you are just visiting, stop at the office first and ask if you can do some birding there. Blue-gray Gnatcatchers have been seen several times as have Western Tanagers. Spend some time of the river bank as waterfowl, Gulls, Terns, and White Pelicans fly by. Return to River Road, turn left and proceed northward. The next small road on the left leads to a fisherman's dock on the river. If you want to check out this spot, (big stands of cattail), ask at the brown house on the right if you can go out to

the dock. Continue on until you cross McInnis Creek. The big trees near the houses are good for Red-headed Woodpecker.

After a left and a right turn, watch for Fred's Road on the left. Take this road to its end and turn left for a few car lengths and park (don't block access to the field on your right). In the field on your right, you will notice a single Ash tree. Beyond the tree is the south end of the big marsh. The marsh is the best place in the area to look for Yellow Rails. Check the stand of phragmites for Sharp-tailed Sparrows and watch and listen for Sandhill Cranes. The best time to check for Rails is in the evening. The marsh is wet; you will need rubber boots or runners and the mosquitoes will be bad. Walk out into the marsh and listen for the "tick-tick, tick-tick" calls of the rails. Good luck! Leconte's Sparrows and Sedge Wrens are here in good numbers also. Take a flashlight with you if you stay after dark. Return to River Road, turn left and follow it to Highway 600. If it is after dark, stop from time to time to hear the Whip-Poor-Will and Owls. At Highway 600, right to return to Rainy River. The big fields on the right are good for Cranes, Grouse and Short-eared Owls in the evening. Check any farm yard that has cattle; Yellow-headed Blackbirds like manure piles. The vast Tamarack and Spruce bog on the left, north of the Wilson Creek Road is almost inaccessible and for birders made of stern stuff, could be home to some interesting species.

Area # 7 – Harris Hill – Windy Point

This is a good area and a lot of time can be spent here. Again, proceed north from Rainy River on Highway 600 past River Road and Wilson Creek Road until you reach Kreger Road on the left. SS Spohn #2, a white historic one-room schoolhouse on the corner is a landmark. Turn left (west) and follow the road through the woods (good for land birds), past some fields (check for Cranes), until you reach the end of the shore at “The Channel”. To the south is the Big Marsh. Straight ahead across the Channel are the Sable Islands. This is a good spot to launch a boat or canoe if you want to go to Sable Islands. To the right is the “Oak Ridge” that gives an excellent view of the area. Remember, you are on private land here. From the Oak Ridge overlooking the Channel and the main lake, watch for White Pelican, Franklin’s Gull, Terns, waterfowl, shorebirds and raptors. The oaks around you are excellent for migrating land birds. Northern Mockingbird and Red-bellied Woodpecker are two rarities that have been found here.

Return to Highway 600, turn left (north) to Harris Hill. Here the highway makes a sharp turn to the right, but you go straight ahead on Fishery Road and follow it to Harris Hill Resort on Lake of the Woods on the left. You may choose to stay at Harris Hill Resort, or if you ask, the lodge owners will let you go down to the water’s edge to bird.

Harris Hill Resort is also an excellent place to stay & plan your trips from. The yard is always teeming with birds of many varieties. Some of these

species are: the Orchard Oriole, Red-headed Woodpecker, Red-bellied Woodpecker, Indigo Bunting ... just to name a few. A Red Cardinal was also seen and photographed here.

Check the surrounding woods for land birds and look over the lake toward Windy Point for waterfowl, White Pelican, Double-breasted Cormorant, Bald Eagle and Great Blue Heron. Windy Point is worth a visit, so rent a Boat; or a boat ride across can usually be arranged at the Harris Hill Resort lodge for a reasonable fee. You can ask to be dropped off and picked up a couple of hours later. The point is excellent for Gulls, Terns, shorebirds, White Pelican and is often frequented by a pair of rare Piping Plover. If you see the Plovers, give them lots of room. They occasionally breed here and should not be disturbed. The cattails and phragmites on the Windy Bay side of the point contain a large colony of nesting Red-winged Blackbirds and Yellow-headed Blackbirds.

Return to Harris Hill corner and turn right (west) towards Budreau's point. This road leads through an interesting woods and to the base of Windy Point. This road and the base of the point are privately owned and permission is needed to be there or park there. If lake levels permit and the sand is drifted in again, you may access Windy Point from this end; and again, only if you have arranged permission from Harris Hill Resort to be there, as Windy Point is private property.

Continuing ahead, the road ends on a rocky ridge at the lake, near some cottages. From the ridge, you can walk ahead to Budreau's Point on a trail

from the small beach at the bottom of the ridge; again private property. The big trees on the point are great for land birds and the rocks on the far side of the point are attractive to waterfowl and gulls. Return to Highway 600 and back south to Rainy River.

Area # 8 – The Sable Islands

These sand barrier islands at the mouth of the Rainy River are like a magnet to birds. The islands have a total length of about 9.5 km and consist of a south island and a north island joined by a sand bar (the Cut) that is high and dry in low water years and covered with up to feet of water in high water years. A day spent on the islands can be very interesting – getting there is the hard part. If you have your own boat or canoe, you can launch at Oak Grove Camp (for a fee), at the Oak Ridge on Kreger Road (free), at Harris Hill Resort (for a fee). Always watch the weather on both the lake and the Channel as conditions can change very quickly.

Arrangements for a boat ride out to the Sables and a later pick-up can be made at Budreau's Oak Grove Camp (for a fee), or from Harris Hill Resort (for a fee). You may also rent a boat at either camp. You can be dropped off at the end of the islands and spend the day walking the length of the islands and back or simply stay in one place and be picked up later. The best birding areas are the south end, the Cut area and the north end. No matter how long you are on the islands, make sure you have ample food, water and sun protection.

Depending on the water levels, the south end has extensive sand and mud flats. Expect any shorebird, tern, gull or waterfowl. Piping Plover nest on the islands in the USA to the south and quite often fly over to the Sables to feed. If you plan to walk the islands, go on the outside (the lakeside) and make periodic checks of the Channel side. The outside beaches are easiest to walk on. The Cut, if exposed, is used as a loafing area for gulls, terns and White Pelicans. Some years there are hundreds of Franklin's Gulls; other years there are few if any. The north end is also favoured by gulls, shorebirds, White Pelicans and waterfowl. If you are short on time, two or three hours spent on the south end of the islands will be most rewarding. Instead of walking the islands, you can travel the Channel in a boat or canoe and check both sides of the islands as you wish. In addition, you can check the shore of the Big marsh and also stands of bulrush in the Channel for Sharp-tailed Sparrow. In 1990 a pair of Western Grebes were seen throughout the summer at various places along the Channel.

If you encounter any Piping Plover along the islands, give them lots of room. This may be the last place in Ontario that they may nest.

Conclusion

With any degree of luck and cooperation from both the weather and the birds, you will have good looks at most of the special birds of the Rainy River area and good chances of seeing what you want. Not every road, field and woodlot has been described and exploration on your own could turn up some very interesting sightings.