

## **Algonquin Provincial Park, Ontario, Canada – Feb. 2007**

The winter of 2006 – 2007 was a good one for certain seed crops up north in Canada hence certain winter finch species were quite abundant in Algonquin, even to the point of nesting. Red and White-winged Crossbills, Evening Grosbeaks, and Pine Siskins were basically everywhere in the park and on the outskirts. Throw in a relatively mild winter with half the normal snow amount for up there and we had the makings for a first trip to the area.

**Participants** – The “Canada” Gang - Sandra Keller, Diane Boyd, David and Inga LaPuma, and our hosts for two nights in Kingston – Joel and Marian Ellis. We missed Chris and Ben from our last trip up here for the owl invasion two winters previous. Both had commitments they couldn't change. And let's not forget Diane's Dodge Caravan. It performed quite well on the drive and in the snow. We were thinking of renting a 4-wheel drive, but decided Diane's van would be fine. And it was.

**Directions** – Algonquin Park is about 3 hours NW of Kingston, Ontario. We did the trip in two days staying overnight at Joel and Marian's place both coming and going. For those driving direct from the Delaware Valley region, the trip is probably 9 or 10 hours at least depending on stops and road conditions. We encountered lake effect snow along Rt. 81 both going and coming back, and that delayed us. The most direct route from the Phila. area would probably be to take the PA Turnpike north to Rt. 81 north and cross the border – note that a passport is required. Then take 401 west to Rt. 62 north to Rt. 127 north to Rt. 60 west. There's also the option of crossing near Toronto and driving east to the park. A googlemaps search is wise.

**Accommodations** – We didn't find much close to the park in Whitney so reservations are highly recommended at any season. We were going to stay in a heated yurt inside the park, but they were all reserved. David did a great job finding us the Mad Musher. I have more info on this hostel below. We did have many food choices though. And there's a gas station in town. Bancroft – about an hour south – had more hotel and restaurant choices, but it is an hour south.

**Weather** – This year's weather was not the norm. Anyone going on a winter trip here in subsequent years would be wise to prepare for well below freezing temperatures, 2 or 3 ft. of snow to walk through if desired, etc.

**Web links** - here are some web links for more information –  
<http://www.algonquinpark.on.ca/index.html> - this is the official park web site. Lots of info on travel conditions, fees, books, nature, motels, restaurants, maps, etc.  
<http://www.ofo.ca/> - this is the Ontario Field Ornithologist's web site. Regional books and checklists can be had here.  
<http://birdingonthe.net/maillinglists/ONTB.html> - this is the link to the Ontario Birds listserv at Birding On the Net. Look for Ron Tozer's reports. He is a retired park naturalist and hence knows the birds and area quite well.

<http://www.ofo.ca/2006-7winterfinchforecast.htm> - the winter finch forecast from Ron Pittaway. He does one every year in Sept. or so. I just reread this forecast and it is dead-on! He also has some info on bumper crops and how crossbills find them. Fascinating reading.

**Photography Opportunities** – Can be good with the breeders for digiscoping. We had Evening Grosbeaks and White-winged Crossbills perched atop trees singing. Always a good picture op. The mixed flock feeding at the Visitor's Center makes for good pictures also. You are allowed to walk behind the visitor center. This makes for better photos of the birds coming to the feeders than standing up on deck and looking down over the railing. The mixed feeding flocks scattered around the roads and trails might require a hand-held digital camera. They were moving.

**Cell Phone Notes** – I could not access my voicemail from Canada. My missed calls list was a bit messed up also. I have no idea what was going on. As soon as we crossed the border, everything was working fine again. I have Verizon. Roaming charges were in affect in Canada for my plan. A friend two days later than us up there also had this same problem, so keep in mind when traveling up here.

**The Trip -**

We stayed with friends in Kingston – Joel and Marian Ellis – both before and after our birding at Algonquin. We are very grateful for the hospitality and look forward to another visit when we go back to Algonquin in a year or two. Marian makes the best oatmeal cookies and peanut butter and butter sandwiches. That last is a Canadian staple. Needed calories I presume for the long, cold winters! Give it a try!



Inga's pic – Marian, myself – Sandra, Joel, Diane, David, and Inga. We had nice breakfasts in their sunroom enjoying their bird feeders before heading out.

Algonquin is such a long drive that a trip up here lends itself well to birding both before and after in various spots. We hit Wolf Island on Lake Ontario for 3 ROUGH-LEGGED HAWKS afterwards on Sunday morning. We missed Snowy Owl, but they can usually be found on this island, some years more than others. The ferry to Wolf Island is free. Check online for a timetable, directions, and maps.

<http://www.citylifeontario.com/kingston/wolfeislandferry.html> Two years ago when we were up, we visited Amherst Island. Birding areas in NY State have possibilities as does the Toronto route back and Niagara Falls. I will concentrate on our visit to Algonquin Provincial Park for this report.

**Friday – Feb. 16, 2007** – We left Joel and Marian's early in the morning for the three hour drive NW to the park. Birding on the way was very slow. No Red-tailed Hawks like back here in NJ along the highways. AMERICAN CROWS in the towns and COMMON RAVENS much nearer the park itself caused us trouble as one of the bird books I bought said that the CROWS were not around in the winter! We all know how bird distribution can change, but this book was talking about the birds in Algonquin proper. Not the outlying areas. No, we weren't wrong with our ids! We were wondering for a bit there. The ubiquitous "SKY RAT" was everywhere. Not to be missed is the coffee and egg biscuits at Tim Horton's - the local doughnut joint. And "yes" they take American money.

Our first real birding stop was along Old Highway Rt. 127. It was plowed, so we decided to try it. Be sure to pull over though as we did have one other vehicle along here in our one hour of birding!



Here's a shot I took along Old Highway Rt. 127 showing the Spruce Tree habitat.

All the reports were saying the RED and WHITE-WINGED CROSSBILLS were coming to the road shoulders to get the sand and salt put down by the road crews. This aids in digestion by helping to grind seeds in their crops. And, yes, we experienced that driving along Rt. 127, but we couldn't stop as a main road. Same goes with Rt. 60 through the park. Along Old Highway 127 we could safely watch some birds coming to the road to feed. Our first winter finch? WW CROSSBILL! Quickly after came RED CROSSBILL and flocks of PINE SISKINS which were by far our most numerous winter finch. It became a quest toward the end to find the AMERICAN GOLDFINCH! They were being reported. We tracked some down at feeders.

Our afternoon began at the east gate for our park permit - \$10.00 a day and, yes, they take American money. I bought three books – Birds, Mammals, and Trees of Algonquin Park at \$2.95 each. The detail in each was great and I highly recommend this whole series of books published by the Friends of Algonquin Park. Also, pick up the newsletter which has a detailed park map on the back. Since we were unfamiliar with the area, we first hit spots in the park that Ron Tozer had written about in his weekly posts.

**The Spruce Bog Trail** – An EVENING GROSBEAK pair singing and probably setting up a territory right at the parking lot was a great start! The boardwalk trails here aren't plowed, but birders and hikers are here all winter and paths are made through the snow. Listen for the flocks. Even if you don't know the call notes, the flocks are noisy enough. With the bumper seed crop in Algonquin, WHITE-WINGED CROSSBILLS were plentiful. Look on Spruce and Tamarack trees for them feeding on the cones. When in these bog areas, the WW CROSSBILLS were always high in the trees. But in more open areas, we had the WW CROSSBILLS down at eye-level feeding on Cattail seed heads. GRAY JAYS are found mainly in the Black Spruce trees of these Algonquin Bogs. They weren't that common when we visited, our only sighting being here on our second search of the place. Although once we found them, they came to within 5 ft. of us. And yes, they were storing food.



David's shot of a Gray Jay. I believe he took this with just his Nikon Coolpix 4500. No scope. They came close.

We missed Spruce Grouse here. They are basically restricted to the mature Black Spruce forests of the bogs in Algonquin. They quietly feed on the Black Spruce tree needles. We searched and searched. This big bird can actually be quite hidden high in those conifers.

**Two Rivers Campground** – A BLACK-BACKED WOODPECKER was flaking bark from a Spruce Tree not too far in at Campsite number 94. We learned of this from a local birder we met. The bird was right where he said. We watched it for a good 10 to 15 minutes. It just stayed in that tree. More PINE SISKINS, BROWN CREEPER, DOWNY WOODPECKER, RED-BREASTED NUTHATCHES, and BLACK-CAPPED CHICKADEES in here. I consider this the main passerine feeding flock this winter. We encountered them everywhere. Our search for Boreal Chickadee was unsuccessful. That's a tough bird. Best to listen for that nasal call first and also search.



Inga took this shot of me waiting for the Black-backed Woodpecker to return. We watched it for a good while, and then it flew off to perhaps another tree for bark flaking?

It was hard to search for the woodpeckers. It's hard listening for soft tapping and noises when bundled up in cold weather gear like I am! Alas, none of us clicked off a shot of what the Spruce Tree looked like with this active flaking of the bark. It is unique.

**Whiskey Rapids Trail** – Our first singing WHITE-WINGED CROSSBILLS. David was in love with this trail as we had a steep descent from the road and down to a ravine. It wasn't the steep descent that he loved; it was us getting away from traffic so he could record those singing WHITE-WINGED CROSSBILLS without background noise. Check out his web site - <http://www.woodcreeper.com/> and scroll down to the winter finch trip report that he posted. He has links to some of the sounds he recorded up there. Check out that moose yodel! We had a family group of a male, female, and young MOOSE as we were driving back east along Rt. 60 at dusk. Dawn and dusk are the times to try and see them. None of us noted a mileage marker, but these groups move around a lot anyway.

**The Mad Musher** – Our hostel for Friday night. It was close to the east gate, very convenient. Good, clean, basic accommodations with shared baths and a shared full kitchen. We did all four of us in one room. It was just for one night! The rooms are well

heated – little did my roommates know that they put me by the thermostat. And tired me didn't think that the temps were in Celsius.... Hey, what's a sauna for a night? I slept well!

**Saturday – Feb. 17, 2007** – After a quick breakfast in the kitchen, we packed the van and headed back to the park. We wanted to hit new areas and if time permitted, re search at places we had been to before like the Spruce Bog Trail.

**Lake Opeongo Rd.** – PILEATED WOODPECKER, WHITE-WINGED CROSSBILLS feeding on Cattails, BLUE JAYS, plus the usual just along the main road. David had good success along here with his recordings. No car noise. We walked the main road and a side road here listening for the feeding flocks and singing Crossbills. Most of our WHITE-WINGED CROSSBILL sightings not on the road sides were in Spruce trees. I am not sure which variety though.

**Visitor's Center** – Give yourself at least 2 hours here. The exhibits on the natural history of Algonquin are a must. The gift shop is huge. Throw in the feeders and a small snack bar and we ran out of time!



I digiscoped this EVENING GROSBEAK waiting his turn at the feeders. Around 100 were in the feeding flock here. I believe this species can be found every year here and all-year long.



I also digiscoped this RED CROSSBILL at the feeders at the Visitor's Center. A pair was coming to the feeder area getting grit.

I wish I would have paid more attention to the RED CROSSBILLS we had out feeding on the trees. RED CROSSBILL is possibly nine different species - each with a bill size based on what type of tree cone it specializes in feeding on. Well, shouldn't be any problem seeing them up here when they are in, just watch the various pines, hemlocks, feeders, and road sides. David did get some tape of flying RED CROSSBILLS along Old Rt. 127. The best way to tell which RED CROSSBILL type is by flight call note. See "The Sibley Guide to Birds" – the big book – page 531 for a start on this.

Our bird species total was 35 – not bad for the season and area! For a full species list email David as my list is 32. Somewhere along the line I missed three! Our mammal list was RED SQUIRREL, GRAY SQUIRREL, MOOSE, WOLF tracks, and both EASTERN and LEAST CHIPMUNKS.

I welcome any comments and questions re our trip. David's email can be found at his website posted above.

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