



# Toronto Ornithological Club **Newsletter**

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First winter male Smew at Whitby Harbour on 28 December 2011. Photo by Jean Iron. Found by Jim Robinson on 26 December 2011. Smew is a rare duck from Eurasia with only two previous records accepted by the Ontario Bird Records Committee: one was a female on the Niagara River between Fort Erie and Chippawa from 21 February to 30 March 1960, and the other also a female was at Normandale near Long Point on 9 and 10 December 1973. (2000 OBRC Report by Kayo Roy in August 2001 issue of *Ontario Birds*).

## Smew and North America Big Year

*By Jean Iron*

On Boxing Day, 26 December, things felt a little dull. Christmas counts were done for another year, Toronto bays and harbours had no ice so winter gull watching was quiet, and days were overcast. Suddenly Glenn Coady's evening post on Ontbirds about a Smew at Whitby Harbour in Durham Region just a 20 minute drive from my house changed everything. Next morning with great anticipation I raced to the harbour where early birders were already engrossed in watching the first winter male Smew in their scopes and binoculars, at times so close you didn't need a scope to see it well.

At the same time, John Vanderpoel was planning the last days of his North America Big Year. He was within sight of tying Sandy Komito's published record of 745. John phoned Ron Pittaway to ask about the Whitby Smew, to which Ron replied: "Jean's looking at it now." He said "I'm coming to Toronto on Friday the 30th." Smew was one of his most wanted birds and had eluded him on Adak in Alaska. He was committed to search for the Hooded Crane in Tennessee on 28th, a pelagic off Cape Hatteras for Great Skua on 29th, and would finish his big year in Arizona on 31st with the Nutting's Flycatcher.

For two days, 27 and 28 December, the Smew delighted hundreds of birders at Whitby. The harbour was teeming with huge numbers of Red-breasted Mergansers and gulls feasting on the abundant emerald shiners (small minnows). Then Wednesday night, temperatures dropped and the harbour froze around the edges. The emerald shiners disappeared, possibly going out deeper into Lake Ontario (fide Tyler Hoar) and there were very few fish-eating ducks left. On Thursday 29 December, the harbour was quiet. No Smew.



John Vanderpoel (right) and Ron Pittaway at Whitby Harbour on 30 December 2011. Photo by Jean Iron.

As planned, on Friday morning, Ron and I met John Vanderpoel at Toronto Pearson Airport and drove to Whitby. We've known John since meeting him on the Niagara River in the late 1990s when he, Larry Roche and Jon Dunn were filming the Large and Small Gull videos, and have kept in touch ever since. Unfortunately, at Whitby Harbour the minnows, mergansers and the Smew were AWOL. But John took this well. Doing a Big Year makes one resilient and philosophical. He had spent many uneventful extra days stuck on Adak in the Aleutians because the flight monitoring system broke down, and that cost him the Dusky Thrush in Anchorage. John is great company and a good birder who can talk in depth about identification, taxonomy, splits, distribution, gulls and many other specialized aspects of birding. With modern communication he kept everyone informed about his adventures through his blog, and posted photos of many rarities he saw. His amazing achievement of 744 species of birds and a total 920 species of birds, mammals, reptiles and amphibians will be admired for a long time. Congratulations John.

John Vanderpoel's Big Year blog: <http://www.bigyear2011.com/>.

More information about the Whitby Smew: <http://www.jeaniron.ca/2011/smew.htm>.

## **Birding Newfoundland by the Seasons – Winter** *Text and photographs by Alvan Buckley*

*[Editor's note: The first half of this article was printed in the December 2011 issue of the TOC Newsletter.]*

In the winter months, alcids usually move farther away from shore than during the breeding season. Thus they are much more difficult to see. Nevertheless, Common Murres, Thick-billed Murres and Razorbills can be found with some effort – usually Cape Spear and Portugal Cove South to Cape Race are the best places for finding them. Black Guillemots are common in the winter and should be found in every bay. Atlantic Puffin is rare in the winter and usually goes undetected during the season.



Black Guillemot is a common breeding resident.

Dovekie (also known as the Little Auk) draws many North American birders to Newfoundland. Some winters only a few can be found, while in other winters

they can be in abundance (for example, in 1994 a legendary flight of more than 100,000 per hour was recorded from Cape Spear) – the best place to see them is between Portugal Cove South and Cape Race – but they can be found in almost any cove or rocky shore. They return to their breeding grounds farther north by early March.

As in every other city in North America, Rock Pigeon can be found in the downtown core year round. Mourning Dove on the other hand is much less common than in Ontario – usually some can be found with effort loyal to feeders on the Avalon Peninsula. White-winged Dove is much more rare but some have over-wintered around St. John's.

Considering Newfoundland's extensive boreal forest it is surprising that so few owls are seen or heard. Great Horned Owl, Northern Hawk Owl and Boreal Owl should be present every winter but are usually not seen or heard. In some years Snowy Owls irrupt into the region. Cape Race Road is the usual place to see them and they are recorded there every year. However, some years there are only a handful of sightings while in others one can see up to 20 in a few hours.

Hummingbirds are generally rare in Newfoundland and were never recorded during the winter until 2011. Newfoundland's first record of Anna's Hummingbird came in early February where it had apparently been loyal to a feeder for several months. The news got around just in time, as the bird was never seen again the next week.

The five breeding species of woodpeckers can be found during the winter months (Downy, Hairy, American Three-toed, Black-backed and Northern Flicker). Black-backed Woodpecker is sometimes seen around Long Pond in St. John's. Your best chance at finding this species is asking a local where the latest sightings have been.