

High Park

Birding Site Guide

Bob Yukich (revised November 2007)

High Park, situated in Toronto's west end, has been well birded over the years. Strategically located close to Lake Ontario, it serves as an oasis for migrating birds that concentrate along the lakeshore in both spring and fall. Including adjacent Sunnyside Beach, it boasts an impressive list of at least 285 bird species, including such rarities as King Rail, Vermilion Flycatcher, Kirtland's Warbler, Mew Gull and Lark Sparrow, which bred once in the 1930s! Thirty-eight species of warbler have been recorded within the park.

High Park's 160 hectares (400 acres) of partially manicured parkland includes a variety of habitats ranging from wetlands to black oak savannah. This latter habitat, now rare in Ontario, originally covered much of the park but had gradually disappeared due to mowing and gardening practices, along with the introduction of non-native vegetation. Ecological restoration efforts have been underway since the 1990's – so what is now good birding can only get better.

What follows is generally a counter-clockwise walk through the park beginning at the northwest corner. Birding can be good at any time of year.

1. Wendigo Ravine

This area can be accessed from Bloor St. at Clendenan Ave., a short walk west of the High Park subway station. A stairway takes you down to Wendigo Way. Alternately, take the nature trail running south from Bloor St. just east of the stairs and make your way down to Wendigo Way. During winter, neighbourhood feeders and the open waters of Wendigo Creek can attract land birds. In early spring look for Winter Wrens along the creek. Flocks of kinglets and later, White-throated Sparrows also frequent this area. Rusty Blackbirds can sometimes be found in migration. From early April through May look closely at any waterthrush: Louisiana Waterthrush has occurred here. The east slope of the ravine is a good place for Connecticut Warbler in late May (knowing the song will help you find this skulker). Acadian Flycatcher has also occurred here. Look for all the thrushes in migration; your best bet for "Gray-cheeked" is in late May. Continue along the creek south through the small playground to Wendigo Pond, a small storm water management facility at the north end of Grenadier Pond which often attracts waterfowl as well as songbirds in the surrounding vegetation, and the occasional shorebird in migration.

2. Marsh at North End of Grenadier Pond

In winter scan the flocks of Mallards in the cattails near the pumphouse on Ellis Park Rd. Wood Duck, Green-winged Teal and Northern Pintail have occurred here. In spring and fall Virginia Rail or Sora can sometimes be seen in the marsh at the north end of Grenadier Pond. Virginia Rail has bred. *For good views walk south along Ellis Park Rd. Another vantage point is from the paved pathway along the east side of the pond.* From mid-summer into fall Great Blue Heron, Black-crowned Night Heron and Great Egret feed here. From July onwards various dabbling ducks and the occasional migrant shorebird (mainly "yellowlegs" and Solitary Sandpiper) can be found in the shallow waters here. Killdeer and Spotted Sandpiper are regular. Check the trees on the west side for Osprey from late August through September. If you're into winter listing, check the cattails for the occasional lingering Common Yellowthroat or Yellow-rumped Warbler in early December and listen for singing Carolina Wren in the surrounding neighbourhood. *Continue south along the paved pathway.*

3. Grenadier Pond

Grenadier Pond can be interesting at any time of year, but is most productive during migration. In spring and fall scan especially the west side for Pied-billed Grebe, Hooded Merganser and Ring-necked Duck. At these times there is usually a large flock of Northern Shovelers present. All three merganser species can be found here prior to freeze-up. It's also a good spot for your first Caspian Tern in mid April, and all six swallow species can be found here a little later. From December through March scope the flocks of Ringed-billed and Herring Gulls that loaf on the ice at the south end of the pond. A good vantage point is from Ellis Ave. and The Queensway. "White-winged" gulls are sometimes present, especially in early spring, when the pond is partially open. During the winter of 1990/91 a Mew Gull was sometimes present, and in early 1993 a Laughing Gull spent part of the winter.

4. Hillside Gardens

The formal plantings and open spaces with scattered trees east of the pond can be good for a variety of migrant passerines, especially after a major fallout. Orchard Orioles nest in this area, often preferring the tall conifers as nesting sites. In winter waxwings and robins can be found feeding on berries here, and in some years winter finches take advantage of the various seed crops. The ornamental shrubs and feeders near the training centre and the former park supervisor's residence (white buildings) provide food and shelter for wintering sparrows. White-eyed and Red-eyed Vireo, Ovenbird, and Black-throated Gray Warbler have occurred here in December. The wooded slope to the north with its savannah openings can be excellent for migrating songbirds. Both Black-billed and Yellow-billed Cuckoo, as well as Yellow-throated Vireo have occurred here during the breeding season. Blue-gray Gnatcatcher breeds. *Continue south moving diagonally up the hillside past the white buildings until you reach the steep paved pathway that leads up from Grenadier Pond. From here walk up to Colborne Lodge Drive and turn right.*

5. Colborne Lodge and Howard Tomb

This can be one of the more productive areas in the park for warblers in May and is the best spot for early arrivals in late April. Even when the rest of the park is quiet there is always something to be found here. This is one of the better areas for Cerulean Warbler. A female “Audubon’s” Warbler was seen here in early May 1995 and a young male Summer Tanager was found a short time later. Blue-gray Gnatcatcher breeds. In December 2004 a Black-throated Gray Warbler, a Wilson’s Warbler and a White-eyed Vireo frequented this area. In winter look for rarities amongst the mixed species flocks that frequent the sheltered, steep north/south slope leading down to the animal paddocks (this slope can also be viewed from Deer Pen Rd.) *Next, follow one of the trails running east from Colborne Lodge down to where the paved pathway crosses Spring Creek.*

6. South End of Park and Duck Ponds

This area can be good in migration, and in winter some park users maintain makeshift bird feeders that should be checked. Brown Thrasher has over-wintered. *Continue east along the walkway to the Lower Duck Pond. Best views are from the south and east sides.* Various herons feed and roost here most of the year (except in winter). Wood Duck breeds and Gadwall has bred. In spring and fall look for dabbling ducks as well as Hooded Merganser. Check the cattail marsh at the north end for wintering passerines. In spring check the wooded slope to the east. In May 2007 there was a singing Acadian Flycatcher here. Next check the Upper Duck Pond for various wetland birds, and the surrounding vegetation for songbirds in migration. *Continue north along the east side of the ponds, crossing Deer Pen Rd., to a low-lying wet area on the west side of Spring Creek.* Since this area is slow to freeze up in winter due to a ground seep, it is a good place to look for lingering migrants. The adjacent wooded slope has a wood-chip path running through it and can be good in migration. Listen for Pine Warbler in early spring. In recent years singing males have occurred here and elsewhere in the park during the breeding season. *Walk back to the paved pathway and continue north across Centre Rd. to the east side of Spring Creek.*

7. Spring Road Ravine

This stretch of the creek is best in migration and in winter, when the water remains open. Louisiana Waterthrush has occurred in spring, and a singing male was present during June 1992! The slopes on both sides of the road can be alive with migrants in both spring and fall. During the winter of 2006/07 a Pileated Woodpecker, Red-bellied Woodpecker and Carolina Wren frequented this area. One of the better spots along the creek is near the first wooden bridge as you walk north from Centre Rd. One of the few Veeries ever reported for Ontario in winter was found here on the 1993 Christmas Bird Count. This is one of the better places in the park to look for Winter Wren or the occasional Hermit Thrush in winter. Great Horned Owl can sometimes be found in one of the tall pines at this time of year. Eastern Screech Owl is resident but hard to find. Check the small cedars that line Spring Rd. *Continue along the creek to where Spring Rd. turns and rises sharply to the west. Cross the road.* Check the wet area on the east side of the duck ponds and the mature pine-oak woods to the northwest just below Bloor St. In spring, migrants moving north through the park sometimes concentrate here. Kentucky Warbler and Summer Tanager have both been found in this area. *Backtrack south on Spring Rd. to the shelter and cross the bridge here. Continue west up the pathway until you reach a wide north/south dirt trail*

(this is a heavily used dog off-leash area). Turn left (south) and continue a short distance to the fenced in allotment gardens.

8. Allotment Gardens

In spring, and especially in fall, look for sparrows: Fox Sparrows and Eastern Towhees can be found here in April, Lincoln’s Sparrows in the fall. Flocks of Eastern Bluebirds are regular in late October (look for them on the surrounding hillsides), and Eastern Phoebes often occur, and may sometimes breed nearby. Your best chance of finding Orange-crowned Warbler in the park will be here in October; check the gardens themselves and the surrounding weedy vegetation. A few very late juvenile Indigo Buntings have shown up regularly at the beginning of October. In winter check any feeders here. Field Sparrow has over-wintered, and a Nashville and Wilson’s Warbler were present in December 2006. *Continue northeast on the wide pathway along the northwest side of the larger of the gardens (this is one of the busier dog off-leash areas in the park). After the path descends, watch on your left for a grove of tall spruce trees.*

9. Spruce Grove

Here and in the nearby cedars and pines Saw-whet Owl can sometimes be found in late October and again in April. Look for the occasional Long-eared Owl in November. This area can be good for sparrows and warblers in migration. In May Yellow-breasted Chat and Kentucky Warbler have been seen. In recent years Yellow-billed Cuckoo has bred. *Walk west up the paved pathway to Colborne Lodge Drive. Turn right (north) to exit the park at High Park Ave. and Bloor St., or turn left (south) to reach the Grenadier Restaurant and Hawk Hill.*

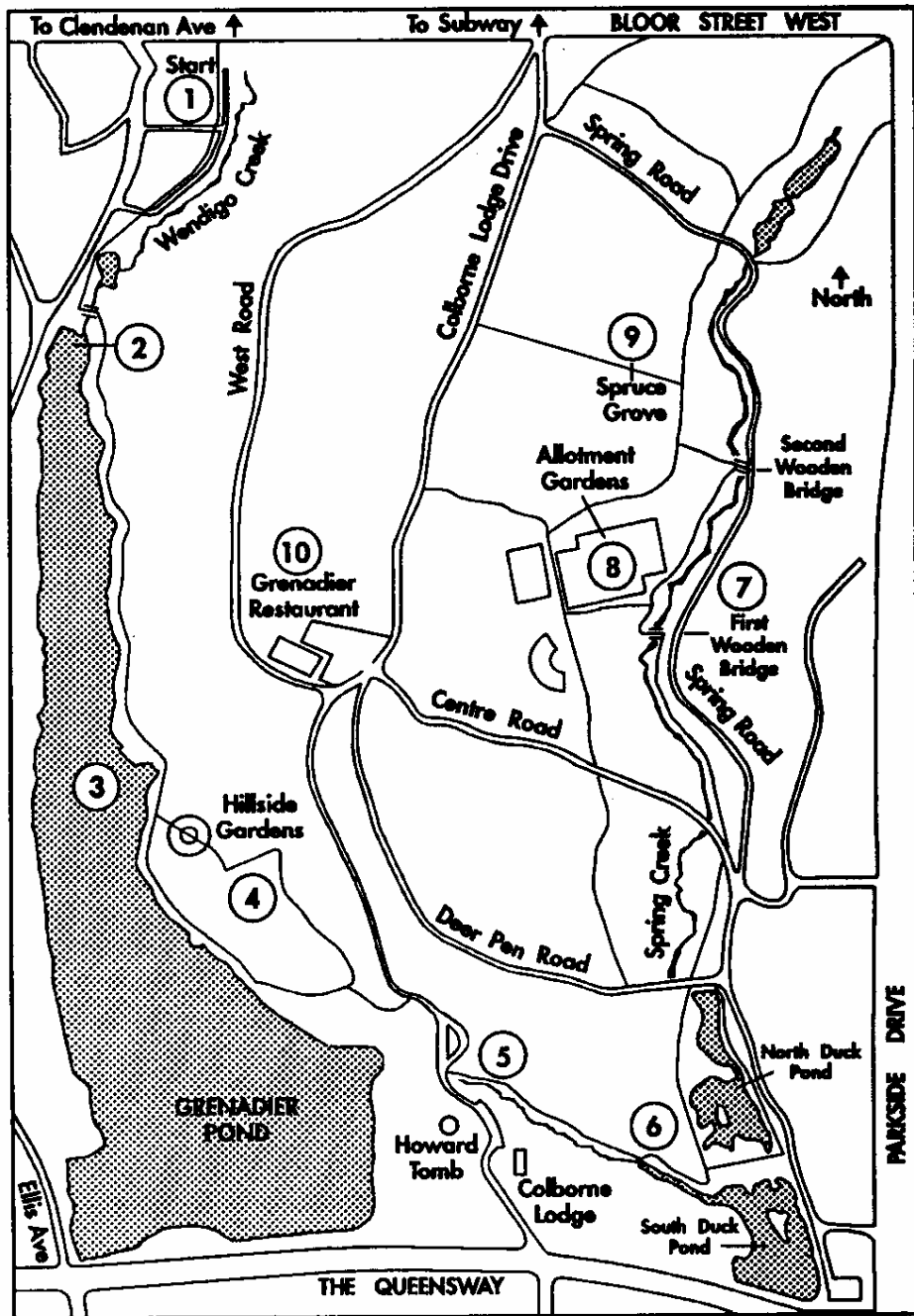
10. Grenadier Restaurant/Hawk Hill

This is a very popular site for observing hawks and other diurnal migrants in the fall. From early September into November hundreds of migrating raptors moving westward along the north shore of Lake Ontario pass directly over High Park. Numbers of birds recorded here rival those of other well-known hawk watches, with single-day counts of more than 6000 “Broad-wings” and 1200 “Red-tails”. Both Bald and Golden Eagles can be seen, and all three accipiters are well-represented. Amongst the many passerines, 273 Eastern Bluebirds and over 1800 migrating House Finches have been tallied in a single day. Thousands of Blue Jays pass overhead. In some years migrating winter finches can be seen. Come on cool days with northwest winds and a few clouds. *Hawk Hill is a small rise on the north side of the Grenadier Restaurant parking lot where hawk migration is monitored daily from September 1 to November 30 each year. The official counters welcome new observers, no matter what their expertise. When hawks are moving closer to the lake, you can watch from the hilltop overlooking the floral maple leaf and Grenadier Pond south of here. Access to the restaurant by car is either from Bloor St. via West Road, or from Parkside Drive via Centre Road. There is no access from the Queensway.*

Good birding!

NOTE: Ongoing restoration in High Park may result in changes to the above-mentioned routes and birding sites.

© 1995 Bob Yukich



Map by Michael King