Island roost

How Margaret Atwood and her family helped turn Point Pelee into a birding hotspot, and Canada's hub

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It's Saturday night on Pelee Island and the highlights of Symposium have arrived.

Held every year on Mother's Day weekend, the event is billed as a three-day celebration of birds and nature. It's also a time for the island community surrounded by the waters of Lake Erie – to honor its Canada's smallest community. It may also be one of the country's least appreciated natural gems.

Every spring, the island serves as a temporary landing pad for hundreds of thousands of migrating birds, including some of the rarest in the country and forest. Then every fall and almost again, it serves as a resting station to complete a journey they will then have to reverse in the fall.

Pelee Island is also a seasonal home for Canada's best-known author. For nearly 40 years, Margaret Atwood has made a home away from home here, first in a cottage she rented and then, in 1982, a house she built with her husband Graeme Gibson with her partner Gordon Lightfoot.

Last month, at the Symposium 20th anniversary gala, Ms. Atwood stepped to the microphone and reprised the poem she had performed backed by the event's now-legendary rubber chicken chorus.

Author Margaret Atwood, who helped turn Ontario's Point Pelee into a birding hotspot, and Canada's hub, in the past year. Photo by Jennifer Roberts

"Chickens on high," Ms. Atwood commanded with her signature deadpan delivery. The chorus line assembled behind her dutifully complied.

Ms. Atwood then launched into the event's traditional spoonerism – a rendition of Gil McKinnon's arrangement by the sound of many rubber chickens squeezed in the rhythm of the familiar tune.

Squawking and laughter filled the island's spoonbrook refinery, when more than 1,000 people packed into the venue for the dinner and the entertainment.

The unflappable Ms. Atwood then proceeded to her second selection. When she had, And Rubber Ducks Bob And Bobbin' Along. By the early finals, the chorus had morphed into a Motown-inspired ensemble.

Afterward, guest luminary Tim Bellefeuille, an ornithologist from the University of Sheffield, elicited a round of applause by his impersonation of a Canada goose with a laugh. "This is the loudest bird event I've ever been to."

Listen to this robust climate story's opening number: a rendition of Old Macdonald.

Pelee Island is the largest and northernmost island in Ontario's archipelago that shelters Canada's southernmost point of land. Photo by Jennifer Roberts, Photo of Point Pelee Lighthouse courtesy of the Friends of the Lighthouse. The island is a crook with horns.

The pitch point

There is a purpose to the fun.

Across North America, birds are in trouble. In a landmark study published in 2019, a team of U.S. and Canadian researchers estimated there were about three billion fewer birds on the continent than in 1970. The decline is widespread and cuts across habitat and migrating species, whose populations have diminished by 29 per cent.

This is grim news for birds but also for wildlife conservation in general. Bird migration is not just a biological wonder. It is a complex process that is continuous with cycle of ecosystem renewal. Without it, Canada's biodiversity would be impoverished.

Even those who pay close attention to birds underestimate the scale and impetus travel in group.

How could a species like the Blackburnian warbler – an exquisite, tiger-striped songbird weighing no more than a Toonie – navigate from its breeding ground in the northern boreal forest to the foothills of the Andes Mountains in Bolivia in the blink of an eye?

Yet evolution has honed this tiny creature to perfection, with a stamina and impetus that is great.

What they get in return is a chance to feast on something that even the most ardent nature lovers tend to despise: mosquitoes.

"There are lots of insects in the Amazon basin, but not like this," said Dan Mennill, a biologist at the University of Windsor who studies migrating bird populations in Canada and Bolivia. "Mosquitoes are the most abundant. It's unlike anything those birds can get anywhere else."

Drawn by this massive surplus, many songbirds move northward in waves that typically peak in May and June. As they travel, they follow well-established flyways tied to geographic landmarks.

Support Row
Support Row is a free, self-paced peer-to-peer literacy and math tutoring program for low-income and at-risk youth in Canada's geographic heartland. Two of the flagship centres of student-led Row Foundation are located in Toronto's Regent Park and Jane-Finch. Support Row's tutors are drawn from Toronto's Regent Park and Jane-Finch. Click on the link to learn more. Support Row

Pacific Central Mississippi Atlantic

Bird species flock in from Mexico and Central America, and from the Caribbean and Bermuda, to Point Pelee National Park and Pelee Island, which are the southernmost points of land in Canada. Map by Jennifer Roberts

Point Pelee National Park, Pelee Island, Canada's southernmost

In the eastern half of the continent, one such route runs along the Mississippi River and then crosses the Great Lakes at its narrowest. The trip means resting at the Great Lakes, a vast barrier that feels much larger to anyone who crosses it.

For those that cross at Lake Erie, Pelee Island can provide a crucial safe haven. Measuring roughly 12.5 by 20 kilometres, it is the largest island in a Northern archipelago that runs north from the Ohio shore – a bead chain of rocky outcrops that can gather the strength they need to complete the journey.

During migration season the island acts as a "pitch point," in the lingo of birders, a hub, concentrating a wide array of species into a relatively small area.

Pelee Island's Lighthouse Point is a hot spot for birders and a popular hiking trail. Photo by Jennifer Roberts

The capture

It comes to the birds relatively late in the ballgame. Mr. Bellefeuille's participation in the Rubber Duck of Bobs, a favourite for the prelude to Symposium.

He went on to say that for 37 years, he did not understand what birders were all about. Their obsession seemed eccentric and mysterious.

But through a series of bird encounters, including the chance sighting of an albatross on a family excursion to the Galapagos Islands, he became a birder himself, able to a religious conviction.

"It's in biological moments, biodescribing can encourage a sense of awe to capture," he wrote.

He was hooked. But it wasn't until he and Ms. Atwood had fallen for Pelee Island and built a cottage there that the island's birds turned into something larger.

It began with Symposium. Wishing to avoid a combine the couple's history and birding interests in an event that could also raise funds for the island's community, Ms. Atwood and Ms. Gibson and Ms. Hilary Hortigan Gibson's daughter, Rosie Tennant, with cooking on the side.

Among the activities open to participants at Symposium is a 24-hour race to see who can log the most bird species. Participants are allowed to use any sight or include ends and sites to record birds. This year's winning team checked off 92 species (a lot being led to a lower showing than in previous years).

Symposium's language is as quirky as the event itself. Ms. Atwood's library and binding mission, while using a mass for the Symposium Birding Society. Today, the statement being a secret species found from the binding week, including a positive, calculation and bird education. On one occasion, participants were asked to write a poem about a bird species.

The event also brings in special guests from the birding world, including education, naturalists and bird advocates such as the late Canadian artist and filmmaker Bill Lishman.

Writers make up the other half of the offering. Over the years, featured speakers have included Ms. Atwood, Ms. Gibson, Ms. Tennant and Ms. Lawrence Hill, among others. This year's literary guest was poet and author Ian Williams, winner of the Giller Prize for his novel Reproduction.

Ms. Atwood has donated more than $1 million to the Friends of the Lighthouse, which she helped found. Photo by Jennifer Roberts

Ms. Tennant, who is a Toronto chef, is a regular participant. Her mother, Ms. Hortigan Gibson, is a Pelee Island resident and a longtime birder.

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Rather than, a wildlife biologist with the conservation organization Birds Canada, said that the contribution of the Symposium to the island's economy is an invaluable record of bird activity on the island.

"The value of the long-term data is to better understand how population trends of birds have changed over time," he said. "And by being able to compare them, we can also deepen into the mechanics of why birds might be declining."

This September, the observatory is set to reach a major milestone when it opens its new Atwood-Gibson Pelee Island Bird Observatory, which will be intended as both an outreach facility and residence for visiting researchers, staff and volunteers. Its partnership with Pelee Point Island's only, and it opens the bird science in Canada at a time when information about migrating species has never been more important.

During this year's Symposium weekend, participants could visit the Pelee Island Bird Observatory's temporary location, a cottage on the island's Lighthouse Point, to see how researchers and volunteers working for the observatory. "We are trying to build up the capacity of the observatory to be a hub for bird research," said Ms. Tennant.

Close to 313 million has been raised to fund the effort, including a donation of more than $1 million from the organization's founding honorary chair, Ms. Atwood, who also serves as a board member, fundraiser and advocate.

"It is fair to say that without her, there would not be a Symposium," said Ms. Tennant. "Margaret's generosity has been the big enabler for us. It's possible at all," said Atwood, Lynn, who chairs the not-for-profit.

In an interview, Ms. Atwood said the support helps ensure the organization's long-term stability. She said the Symposium has become a community event "very grassroots," she said. "Time can always get the way of

The road of its history, Pelee Island has been a carefully submerged and without after a long, a Symposium is a gala. The coastal environment and the island's geographical prominent along the Niagara path make it a classic spot for bird watching and avian studies.

A world apart

The wind-swept dolomite limb French for pochet is least. It was the wind that helped Canadian Pacific Railway construct a lighthouse on Point Pelee, a triangular peninsula that juts out into the western Lake Erie, when they first reached the area in 1870.

On a clear day, it is possible to stand on the point and glimpse Pelee Island off in the distance.

The island is both an a placement of limestone that has been separated from the mainland for at least 4,000 years. For most of the time, it was a partly submerged reef, a shallow shoal that was inhabited by Ojibway people. That made the island a popular for mainland and clays birds but not especially enticing for settlement. Traces of Indigenous activity on the island date back millennium. But there is a sense that the island has always been a world apart – a feeling that persists today.

Pelee Island's isolation has made it a destination for hundreds of thousands of people. Its geography and the Pelee Island Bird Observatory's mission, this includes bird banding and a long-running daily survey of species. Data from the observatory are shared with a national scientific collective, the Canadian Migration Monitoring Network.

Author Margaret Atwood, who helped turn Ontario's Point Pelee into a birding hotspot, and Canada's hub, in the past year. Photo by Jennifer Roberts

Point Pelee National Park, Pelee Island, Canada's southernmost

Pelee Island's Lighthouse Point is a hot spot for birders and a popular hiking trail. Photo by Jennifer Roberts

Rosie Tennant, who is a Toronto chef, is a regular participant. Her mother, Ms. Hortigan Gibson, is a Pelee Island resident and a longtime birder.

Sumiko Onishi, field supervisor, wades through the swamp on her way to the PIBO banding station.

To avoid predators, songbirds migrate at night, often in mixed flocks. This makes their movements harder to discern, though they can now be tracked in bulk using radar.

To provide a more granular understanding of which bird species is moving when, Dr. Mennill, the University of Windsor biologist, uses acoustic devices to capture soft sounds that night-flying songbirds make as they call out to each other while airborne. During our walk, he put up a tall pole with a funnel at the top designed to feed bird sounds down to a tiny battery-powered microphone.

He and his students are erecting identical poles across the country to build up a national acoustic database of bird migration. Pelee Isand marks the network's southernmost extent.

"The long-term goal is we compare the data to what the banding teams have got and find out if they're catching similar species," Dr. Mennill said.

University of Windsor biologist Dan Mennill and PIBO's Vincent Moreau install a microphone in the forest on Pelee Island. Dr. Mennill has been working on a new project, Motus Audio, which uses microphones pointed skyward to identify the songs of migrating birds that fly overhead by night.

The data could help determine whether birds are all using the same stopping points as they move across the continent, in order to better inform conservation efforts.

The observatory is increasingly building ties with other projects and facilities, including Birds Canada, whose headquarters is near Long Point about 150 kilometres to the east.

On the island, the observatory's presence also dovetails with the work of organizations such as the Nature Conservancy of Canada and Ducks Unlimited, which are seeking to preserve the island's existing natural habitat and restore some of its former wetlands. At present, about 18 per cent of the island has been set aside for nature, including land gifted by Ms. Atwood and Mr. Gibson.

"Our goal is to take the lands that the NCC owns and turn those into the best habitat that we can," said Jill Crossthwaite, acting program director for the conservancy's southwestern Ontario operations.

A long-time fan of Springsong and the chicken choir, Ms. Crossthwaite said the creation of trails and other ways for people to interact with Pelee Island's natural spaces add to its growing attraction as an ecotourist destination.

Not long after Ms. Atwood and Mr. Gibson first showed up on the island, Mr. Gibson managed to get stuck on the roof of their cottage after a ladder slipped and he had to call out for someone – anyone – to help him get down. When an islander happened along who could facilitate the rescue, the episode proved to be an icebreaker.

"You're not really accepted in a small community unless there's a story about you," Ms. Atwood said.

The observatory is set to reach a major milestone when it opens its new Atwood-Gibson Bird Centre, four decades after Ms. Atwood and Mr. Gibson first made landfall.

Four decades later, their story has grown into a lasting legacy for the island's human community and a helping hand for its avian visitors. With luck, the work of Ms. Atwood, Mr. Gibson and their island allies will mean the birds' epic flight continues for generations.

The sun sets over the Lake Henry marshland on the northern tip of Pelee Island.

Editor's note: This article has been updated to correct the first name of Matthew Fuirst, a wildlife biologist with Birds Canada.

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