

# Lake Ontario Pelagic Trap

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The west end of Lake Ontario near Hamilton is the best place in interior North America to see pelagic birds and other birds more typical of the ocean. Here is a sample of seabirds seen regularly on Lake Ontario: Parasitic Jaeger, Black-legged Kittiwake, Sabine's Gull, and Northern Gannet. Yet Hamilton is 915 km from Tadoussac, a seabird and whale spot on the St. Lawrence River at the mouth of the Saguenay River fiord, and 866 km from James Bay, the two main sources of oceanic birds seen on Lake Ontario. See map. Some birds using the **St. Lawrence Route**: Northern Gannets, probably a majority of Black-legged Kittiwakes, a minority of Northern Fulmars, Razorbills, Thick-billed Murres, most other Atlantic alcid, and Great Cormorants. **James Bay Route**: Jaegers, some Black-legged Kittiwakes, Sabine's Gulls, and a majority of Northern Fulmars as indicated by the 14 seen by Alan Wormington and Doug McRae at the south end of James Bay on 6 November 1981.

Why is Lake Ontario the best of the five Great Lakes for oceanic birds? Lake Ontario is connected directly to the Gulf of St. Lawrence. See map. Wandering seabirds, such as gannets, funnel along the St. Lawrence River into Lake Ontario. The second source of pelagics on the Great Lakes is Hudson and James Bays, which reach deep into the centre of the continent. More jaegers are seen on Lake Ontario than the other Great Lakes, because it is the most easterly and closest to the shortest route from James Bay to the Atlantic. See map.

Why too is Hamilton the best location on Lake Ontario for pelagics? On 8 June 1997, Jean Iron and I took a ferry crossing from Toronto to St. Catharines. Visibility was excellent and by scanning with binoculars, we could imagine what a lost seabird would see as a route out of Lake Ontario. From the middle of the lake, the entire shoreline on both sides appeared landlocked, except for the extreme western end near Hamilton where the Niagara Escarpment appears to dip out of sight in the background. The visual impression suggests an outlet at the far west end of the lake. Another factor favouring Hamilton is that pelagic birds, tend to concentrate more at both ends of the lake. From late August to December, Van Wagners Beach at Hamilton is the top spot on the Great Lakes to see oceanic birds.

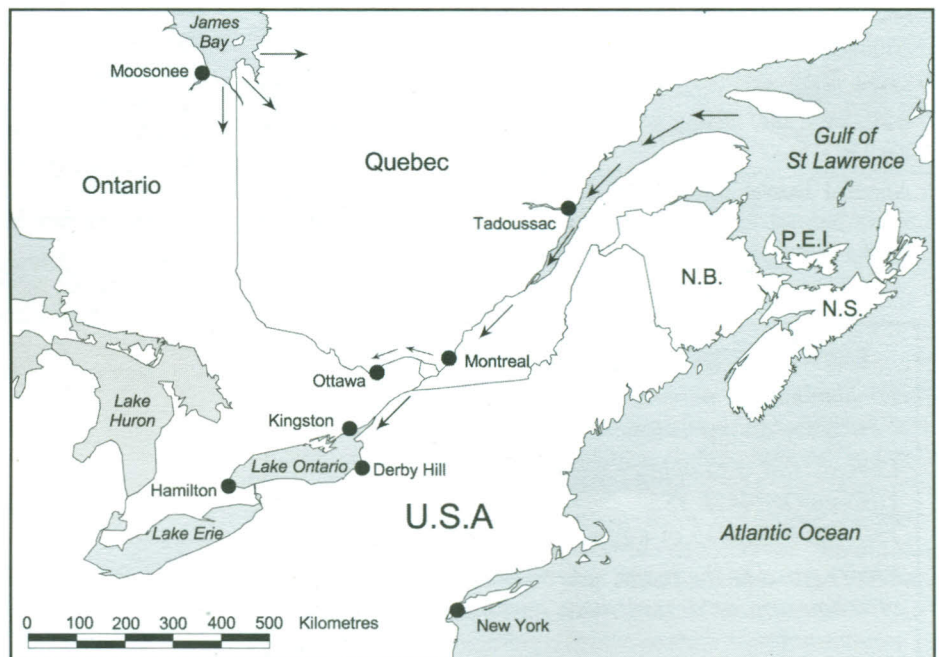
What happens to seabirds that get trapped on Lake Ontario? Let us examine two cases: Northern Gannet and Parasitic Jaeger. *Northern Gannet*: Probably 100% of the gannets seen on Lake Ontario funnel up the St. Lawrence River, because there is only one record for James Bay. In fact, more gannets are seen on Lake Ontario than all the other Great Lakes combined. Once on Lake Ontario,

gannets tend to circle the west end of the lake, sometimes into December before disappearing. A few may follow the Niagara River to Lake Erie, but others probably freeze and starve on Lake Ontario or are grounded trying to escape the lake, as indicated by several inland records for upstate New York. Gannets occasionally follow the Ottawa River Valley. One juvenile gannet was found west of Ottawa grounded in a farm field with domestic white geese, suggesting that it was attracted by their adult gannet-like appearance. *Parasitic Jaeger*: Jaegers seen on the Great Lakes come overland from Hudson and James Bays. Once on Lake Ontario, jaegers tend to collect at both ends of the lake, apparently looking for an outlet. Jaegers have been seen spiralling high on northwest winds at the southeast corner of Lake Ontario at Derby Hill, New York, and heading inland towards the Atlantic. There were 202 Parasitic Jaegers off Derby Hill on 7 October 1979. See map.

We are overdue for an invasion of *Thick-billed Murres*. The last big murre flight was in late November 1950 when hundreds, pushed by a strong northeast gale, funnelled up the St. Lawrence River (some up the Ottawa River) going mostly into Lake Ontario. Old-timers thought that murre wrecks happened when Hudson Bay suddenly froze over, but we now know that murres are very rare in southern Hudson Bay and that murre flights originate from the Gulf of St. Lawrence.

This fall when the wind blows from the northeast, go to Hamilton's Van Wagners Beach; you may see a jaeger, kittiwake, gannet, and some day even a wreck of murres.

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Map by Andrew Jano