



# OFO News

NEWSLETTER OF THE ONTARIO FIELD ORNITHOLOGISTS

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Adult Red Knots with Ruddy Turnstone at Longridge Point on James Bay, 9 August 2010.

## Volunteering for Bird Conservation on James Bay

*Article and photos by Jean Iron*

Many people ask me how I got to be on Mark Peck's Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) team studying the endangered *rufa* subspecies of the Red Knot at Longridge Point on James Bay. This is how it happened. My fascination with the Hudson Bay Lowlands began in 2001 when I was the Ontario Field Ornithologists (OFO) representative on the Ontario Shorebird Conservation Plan Committee. Here, I met Ken Abraham, a research scientist with the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources (OMNR). The committee frequently discussed Polar Bear Provincial Park and the coasts of Hudson and James Bays as critical to breeding and migrating shorebirds. I had never heard of Polar Bear Provincial Park before but was enthralled by mental images of what it must be like. Daringly I asked Ken about volunteer positions with OMNR to help with bird research. In summer 2002 he invited me to join a Canada Goose and Snow Goose banding crew in Polar Bear Provincial Park. Closeness to geese and seeing spectacular wildlife such as breeding Whimbrels, Pacific Loons and Willow Ptarmigan, Polar Bears and Woodland Caribou on Ontario's tundra landscape drew me back year after year. This led to several seasons on Akimiski Island and the western James Bay coast.

Red Knot with lime green flag KUL on upper left leg was banded in Delaware Bay, USA. In 2010, we sighted over 250 individuals with flags from USA, Argentina, Chile, Brazil and Canada.



*Left.* Red Knots at high tide. 18 July 2010., *Centre.* Adult Red Knot in good body condition. Some Red Knots spent two and a half weeks fattening up on James Bay's rich food resources. 13 August 2010.

My past two summers were spent at Longridge Point on James Bay, most recently, five weeks from 14 July to 17 August 2010. Led by Mark Peck, our crew surveyed the endangered rufa subspecies of the Red Knot and other shorebirds. We walked the coast in twos or alone up to 14 km a day searching for knots being pushed towards the shore by the rising tide. Patience and concentration were virtues as we crept up on a flock, close enough to read and record the letter and number codes on leg flags without flushing the birds. We also made daily counts of Red Knot flocks to determine how many were using the coast as a migratory stopover. Mark took mud samples in favourite feeding areas to find out what the knots were eating.

We counted and aged shorebirds as either adult or juvenile, noting their plumage. Some shorebirds molt in Ontario on southbound migration such as Hudsonian Godwits, Red Knots and White-rumped Sandpipers, while others do not molt here in Ontario like Short-billed Dowitchers and Pectoral Sandpipers. Noting first dates of juvenile arrival and ratios of adults to juveniles

over several years of data collection will give an estimate of breeding success and recruitment. Aging shorebirds is fascinating and it hones identification skills in preparation for finding that vagrant Little Stint.

Great fun at the end of each day was the checklist roundup. My job was keeper of the daily list. We made sure our counts were accurate, knowing that they will be used for shorebird conservation, for example protection of essential staging areas along the coast.

Several million shorebirds depend on the rich food resources of the extensive unspoiled mudflats of Ontario's James Bay and Hudson Bay coastlines to fatten up before continuing their long migrations (*Ontario Shorebird Conservation Plan*, 2003, page 5). James Bay is situated strategically between shorebird breeding areas farther north in boreal and Arctic Canada and wintering areas to the south. Many species such as the Red Knot, Hudsonian Godwit, White-rumped Sandpiper and Ruddy Turnstone fly thousands of kilometres from James Bay to southern South America, often nonstop. Sixteen Important Bird

Areas are already established on James Bay and Hudson Bay, but it is amazing that Longridge Point and significant shorebird locations along Ontario's western James Bay coast have not yet been designated under the Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network (WHSRN). See Rob Maciver's timely article, *Where Are Ontario's Shorebird Reserves?* in the June 2010 *OFO News*.

**What it takes to be a volunteer in the North**

1. A good basic knowledge of bird identification, habitats, nesting and migratory behaviour
2. Good physical condition
3. Openness to learning about birds and benefiting from the experience
4. Getting along with a small group of people in close quarters
5. Working hard and sharing the load
6. Initiative and enthusiasm
7. Enjoying wilderness, quiet and isolation
8. Tolerance of mosquitoes and moose flies



*Right.* This fresh juvenile Marbled Godwit likely came from the small population that breeds on the west coast of James Bay. 9 August 2010.

9. Not being afraid of Polar Bears or Black Bears

10. Roughing it with no cell phones, TV, radio or internet, no electricity or running water, no showers or flush toilets, no refrigeration when temperatures reach 30°C and no heat when it drops to 0°C.

11. If you have the opportunity to volunteer in the north be sure to interview someone with northern experience to find out what to take along. This includes appropriate clothing for wide temperature fluctuations and footwear for long hikes through marshes and creeks and over mudflats and rocky shores. Personal comfort depends on having essential medications, sunscreen and bug repellent. Duct tape repairs many mechanical problems and protects feet from blisters — don't be without it. To be guaranteed a restful night's sleep, Doug McRae, Lisa Pollock and I recommend fat air mattresses

available from Canadian Tire that fold up for light transport and inflate easily with a built-in air pump.

Not everyone who loves birds and nature can venture into the North. This is why Ron Pittaway and I bring the North south through reports on Ontbirds and photo essays on my website. We will only save this vast wilderness if many know it and care about its future.

**For more photos and information, please see:** <http://www.jeaniron.ca/2010/JamesBay2010/index.htm>



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*Left to right:* Christian Friis (Canadian Wildlife Service), Mark Peck (Royal Ontario Museum), and Lisa Pollock (ROM volunteer).