

ONTARIO ENVIROTHON PRESENTS

Bird Identification Guide



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Introduction to Ontario Bird Identification Guide

Ontario is home to a wide range of bird species. The vast diversity of landforms and ecosystems found here provide excellent habitat and food sources. Everything from songbirds and shorebirds to owls and birds of prey can be found living among the forests, fields and wetlands of Ontario.

Learning to identify the birds of Ontario can be fun and rewarding. Developing field skills such as learning birds by sight and sound are important to help you become better acquainted with the natural world. Field skills are very important to scientists and researchers, who depend on their keen identification skills to obtain valid field data. This allows for a better understanding of bird populations and their associated biodiversity.

This bird identification guide is meant to help you become familiar with some of the more common species of birds in Ontario, and to help you succeed in the Ontario Envirothon competition! Along with this guide, it would be wise to bring a pair of binoculars or a spotting scope with you into the field, to facilitate viewing the birds.

There are many key identification features and characteristics that can help determine which bird species you are viewing. These include physical features, such as colour, size, beak shape and foot shape, as well as behavioural characteristics such as the location where the bird was spotted and the time of year.

Physical features are often the first characteristics noticed when birding. Colour can be very useful in determining species, especially when size is taken into consideration as well. However, precaution must be used when identifying birds by colour, as for some species colour can vary between males and females, as well as by season (for example, many male birds develop brighter plumage for the mating season). Features such as beak and foot shape can also be useful for identifying birds, as they vary greatly between species. Beak and foot shape are closely associated with the bird's habitat and niche, as they must assist the bird in fulfilling its ecological role within an ecosystem.

Location and time of year are also important factors to keep in mind while bird watching. Certain species prefer and depend upon stands of old growth forest, and are therefore very unlikely to be seen in a successional field. Likewise, a bird that frequents wetland areas would have little reason to visit densely forested areas. Time of year can also help with the identification of birds, as some species will migrate to a different seasonal range for part of the year, while other species inhabit the same range all year long.

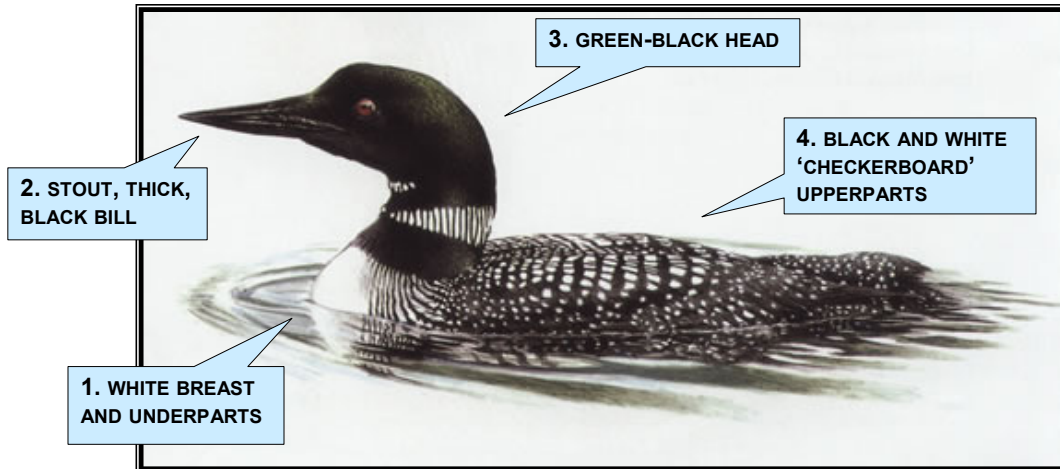
If you wish to learn how to identify birds by their calls, the CD "Natural Sounds of Eastern Canada" by Monty Bringham is an excellent audio resource. For more information on a wider range of Ontario bird species, "Birds of Ontario" by Andy Bezener is an excellent beginner-level guide.

Happy Birding!

SPECIES # 1

Common Loon

Gavia immer



Size:

- Length: 71 – 89 cm,
- Width: 1.2 – 1.5 m

Habitat:

- Non-Breeding – large, open lakes
- Breeding – large, open lakes and rivers with islands providing shelter

Food:

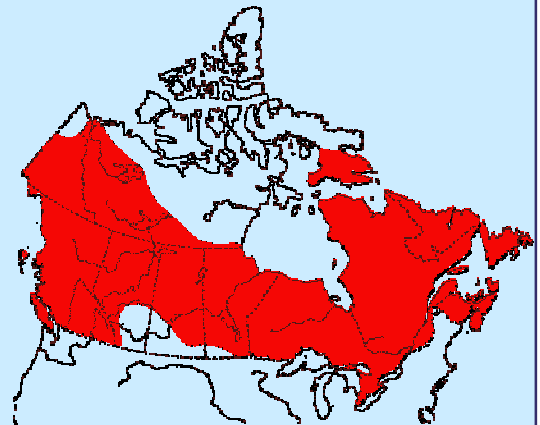
- Small fish up to 55 m underwater
- Occasionally eats invertebrates and amphibians

Nest:

- Always occur near, or on water, often on an island
- Made from aquatic vegetation
- Both parents share all responsibilities (nest building, egg tending, raising of young)

Similar Species:

- Pacific Loon more dusty grey and occurs only in very northeastern Ontario



Provincial Range:

- Throughout Ontario except in very southwestern Ontario

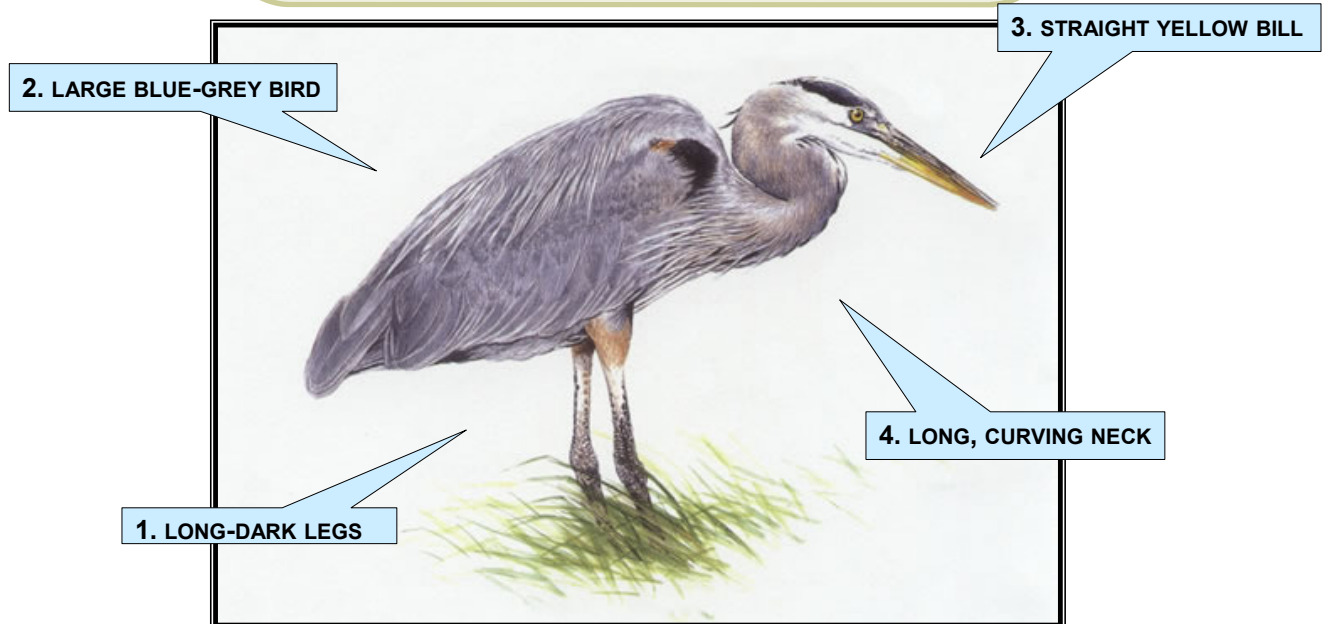
Fun Fact

Although the Common Loon is a graceful aquatic acrobat while in the water, on land it's more of a clumsy clown! Having rear-placed legs and a large heavy body is very beneficial for swimming and diving, but makes walking on land quite awkward. This is why the Common Loon spends as little time as possible out of water.

SPECIES # 2

Great Blue Heron

Ardea herodias

**Size:**

- Length: 1.3 – 1.4 m
- Width: 1.8 m

Habitat:

- Forages along edge of marshes, rivers and lakes
- Sometimes seen in meadows and wet fields

Food:

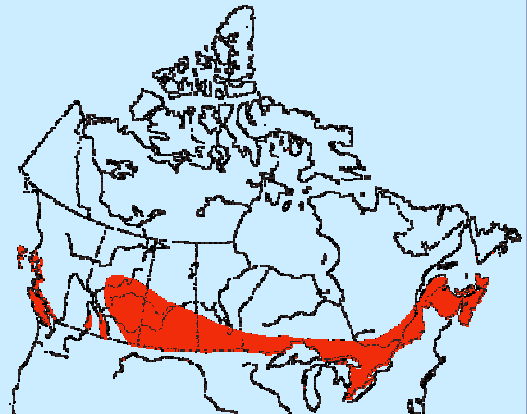
- Stand and wait predator
- Diet consists of small fish, amphibians, small mammals reptiles and invertebrates

Nest:

- Stick and twig platform in trees, added to each year
- Both parents incubate egg for 28 days

Similar Species:

- Egrets are very similar in stature, but are all white
- Little Blue Heron lacks yellow on bill and more purplish

**Provincial Range:**

- Throughout Southern, Central, and Southern Ontario

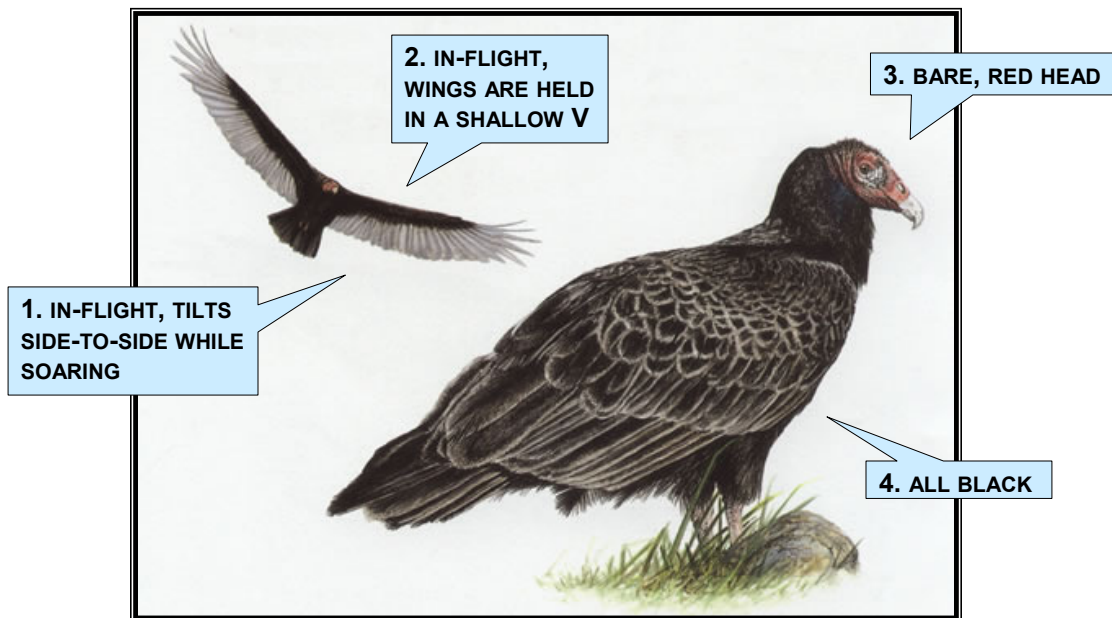
Fun Fact

Great Blue Herons are social birds who don't mind sharing their space with a few other room mates. They can be found nesting in treetop communities called "rookeries". These areas are sensitive to human disturbances however, and should only be observed from a safe distance with the help of binoculars.

SPECIES # 3

Turkey Vulture

Cathartes aura

**Size:**

- Length: 66 – 81 cm
- Width: 1.7 – 1.8 m

Habitat:

- Open fields, shorelines or roads
- Rarely seen in forested areas

Food:

- Diet consists solely of carrion, almost always mammal
- Young are fed by regurgitation

Nest:

- Caves, crevices or occasionally in hollow logs or trees
- No nesting material; eggs are laid on bare ground
- Both parents incubate egg for up to 41 days

Similar Species:

- Bald Eagle has white feathers on head, and is less visible in flight



Provincial Range:
Through Southern and
Western Ontario

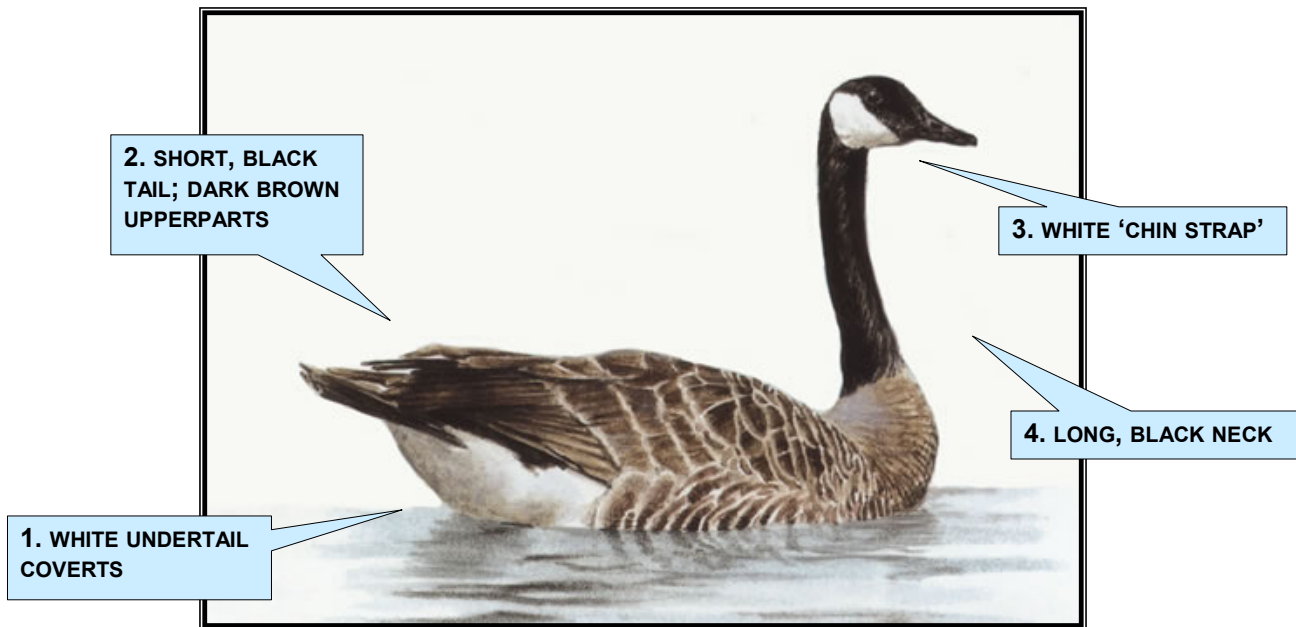
Fun Fact

Did you ever wonder why Turkey Vultures are bald? This apparently grotesque adaptation actually helps this bird stay relatively clean while digging through carcasses. Turkey Vultures have also been known to regurgitate their meal to repulse attackers or to lose some weight for an emergency take off when threatened.

SPECIES # 4

Canada Goose

Branta canadensis



Size:

- Length: 55 – 122 cm
- Width: up to 1.8 m

Habitat:

- Lakeshores, riverbanks, ponds and city parks

Food:

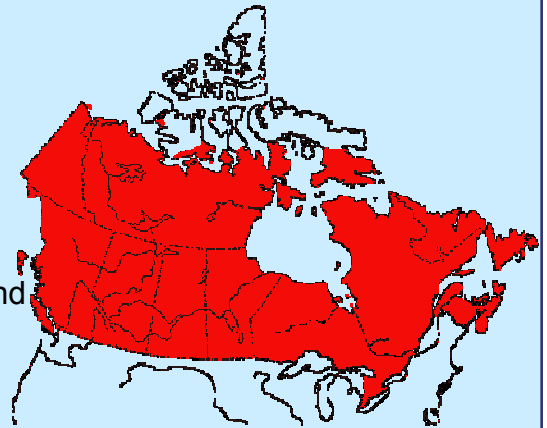
- Diet consists of aquatic vegetation, grass and roots

Nest:

- Found on islands and shorelines, usually on the ground
- Female lines the nest with down
- Females incubate 3 – 8 eggs for 25 – 28 days while male keeps watch

Similar Species:

- Brant lacks the white chin and has a black upper breast



Provincial Range:

- Throughout Ontario

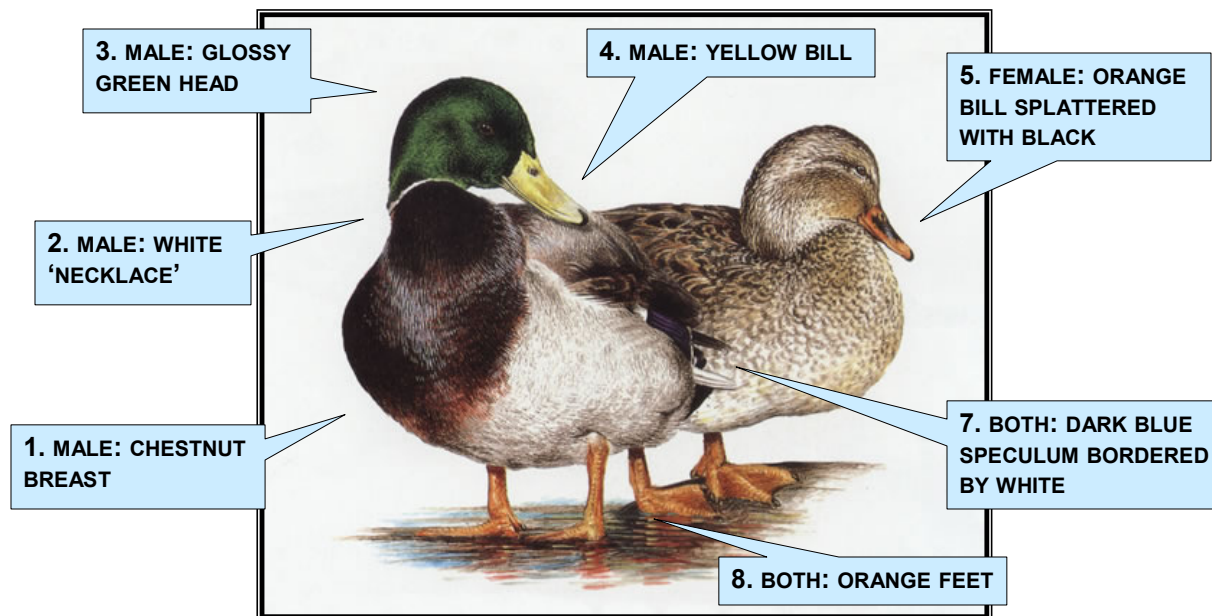
Fun Fact

Because of their preference for manicured grass, the Canada Goose is considered to be a pest by some. What many people do not realize is that this species was once nearly hunted to extinction in parts of Southern Ontario. Through reintroduction efforts and hunting limitations, the Canada Goose has made an amazing recovery!

SPECIES # 5

Mallard

Anas platyrhynchos

**Size:**

- Length: 51 – 71 cm

Habitat:

- Lakes, wetlands, city parks, rivers and agricultural areas

Food:

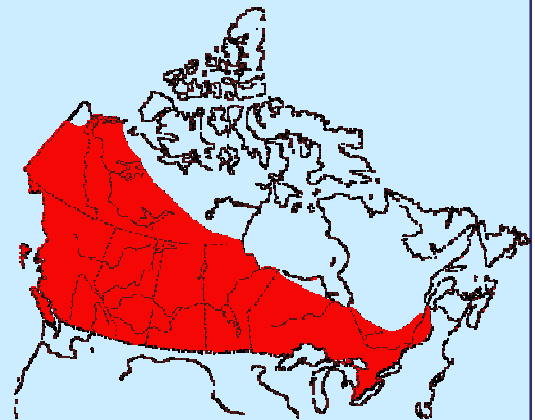
- Diet consists of sedges, willows and pondweeds
- May also eat aquatic invertebrates, larval amphibians and fish eggs

Nest:

- In tall vegetation or under a bush beside water
- Nest made from vegetation and grasses lined with down
- Females incubates 7 – 10 eggs for 26 – 30 days

Similar Species:

- American Black Duck is similar, but darker

**Provincial Range:**

- Throughout Ontario

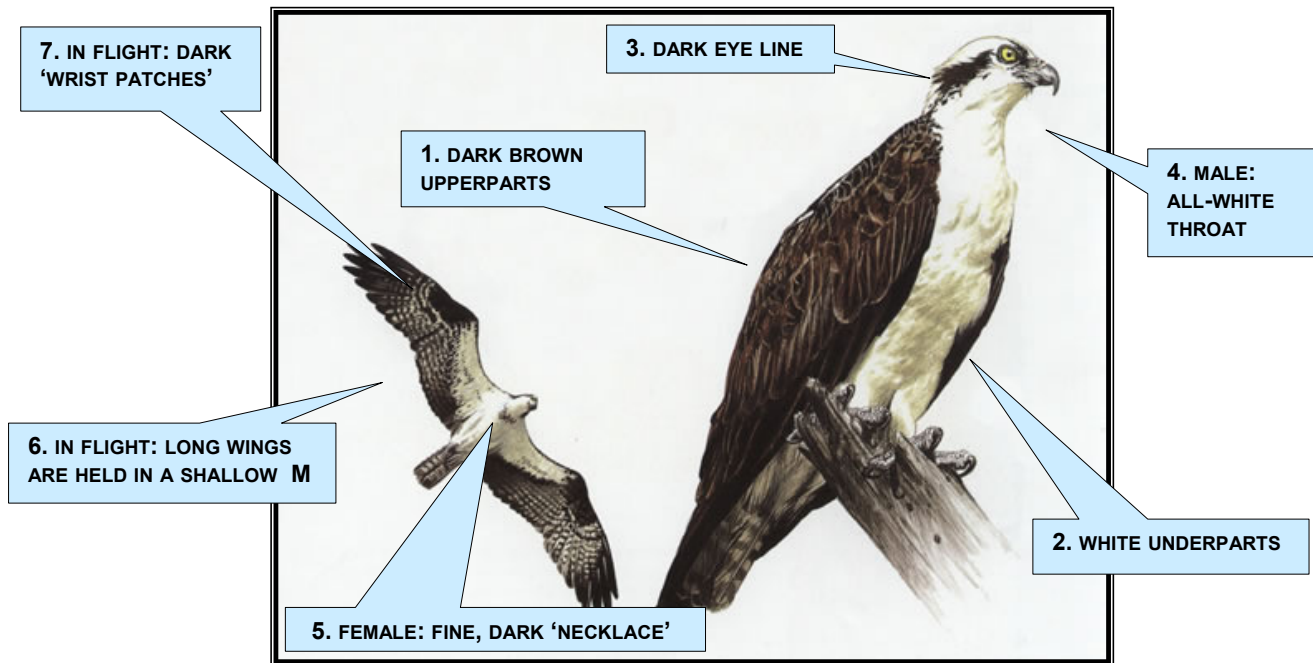
Fun Fact

The Mallard is a very opportunistic duck. It can survive in Ontario year round as long as it has access to open water. Wild Mallard ducks will often breed with domestic ducks, and the resulting offspring will have a mix of features from each parent.

SPECIES # 6

Osprey

Pandion haliaetus



Size:

- Length: 56 - 64 cm
- Width: 1.7 – 1.8 m

Habitat:

- Lakes and slow moving rivers and streams

Food:

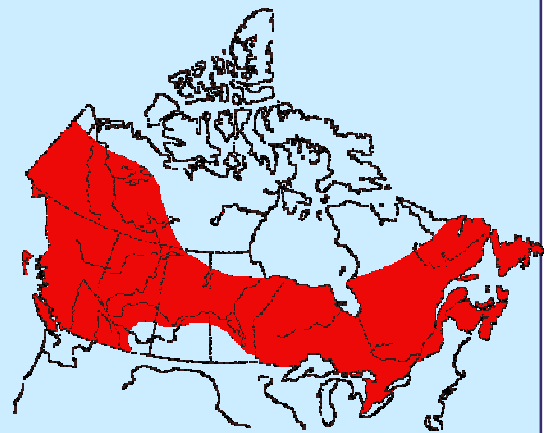
- Feet-first dives into water to catch fish averaging 1kg

Nest:

- Usually on treetop, or phone poles, near water
- Nest made of sticks reused for many years
- Both parents incubate 2 – 4 eggs for 38 days

Similar Species:

- Bald Eagle holds it wings straighter when flying and has a clean white head and tail



Provincial Range:

- Throughout Ontario

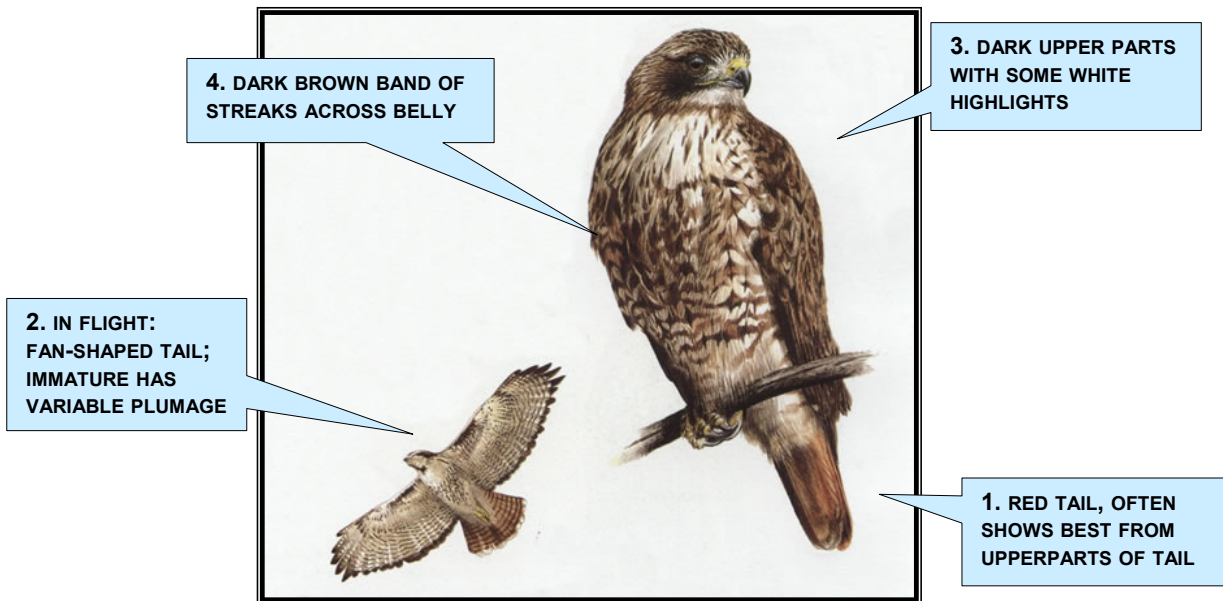
Fun Fact

The Osprey is equipped with tools that are specialized for catching fish... its feet! Each comes equipped with sharp spines, two talons that face forward, and two that face backwards. These tools not only help the Osprey to catch fish, they also help it to hold onto its slippery meal.

SPECIES # 7

Red-tailed Hawk

Buteo jamaicensis



Size:

- Male: Length: 46 – 58 cm, Width: 1.2 – 1.5 m
- Female: Length: 51 – 64 cm, Width: 1.2 – 1.5 m

Habitat:

- Roadsides, fields, woodlots, mixed forests

Food:

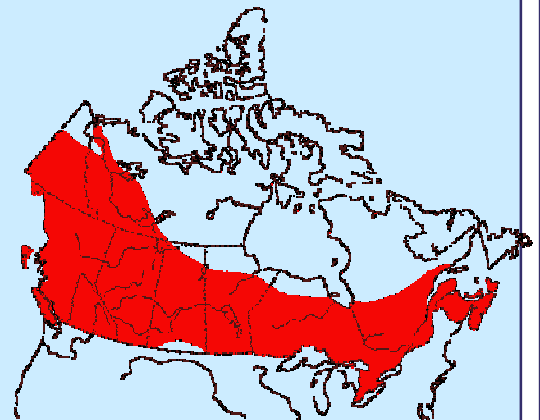
- Catches prey in flight, swooping down
- Small rodents, rabbits, birds, amphibians and reptiles

Nest:

- Deciduous trees, adjacent to open fields
- Nest consists of sticks and is added to yearly
- Both parents incubate 2 – 4 eggs for 28 – 35 days
- Male brings female and young food in nest

Similar Species:

- Broad-winged Hawk has boldly banded white tail and broader wingspan



Provincial Range:

- Throughout Ontario, except the extreme north

Fun Fact

If you're out for a walk in rural Ontario, and you think you've heard the piercing call of an eagle, chances are it came from a Red-tailed Hawk. It is so impressive that producers of TV commercials and movies often cheat and use its call with the image of an eagle.

SPECIES # 8

American Kestrel

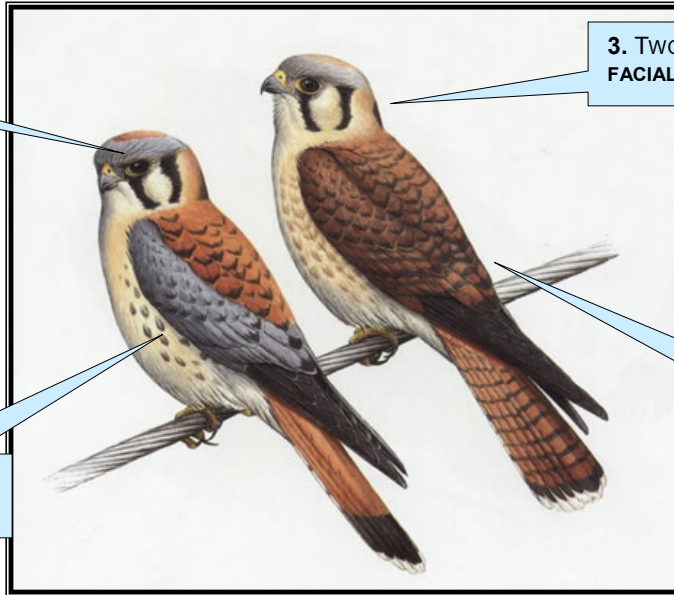
Falco sparverius

2. BLUE-GREY CROWN
WITH RUSTY CAP

3. TWO DISTINCTIVE
FACIAL STRIPES

1. MALE: BLUE-GREY
WINGS; RUSTY BACK

4. FEMALE: RUSTY
BACK, WINGS AND
BREAST STREAKING

**Size:**

- Length: 19 – 20 cm
- Width: 51 – 61 cm

Habitat:

- Open fields, forest edges, grasslands, croplands

Food:

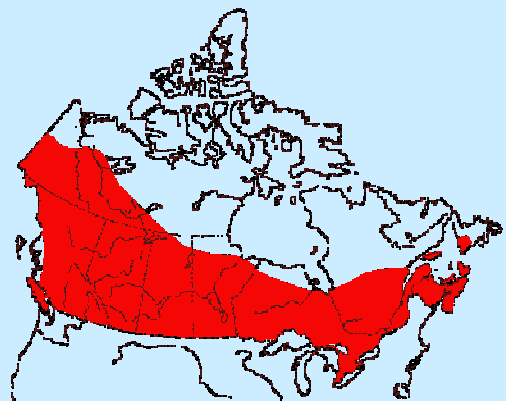
- Swoops from a perch
- Eats mostly insects, small rodents, birds, reptiles and amphibians

Nest:

- In cavity of trees
- Occasionally uses nest boxes
- Both parents incubate 4 – 6 eggs for 29 – 30 days
- Both parents raise the young

Similar Species:

- Merlin is less colourful and flight is more powerful and direct

**Provincial Range:**

- Throughout Ontario, except the extreme north

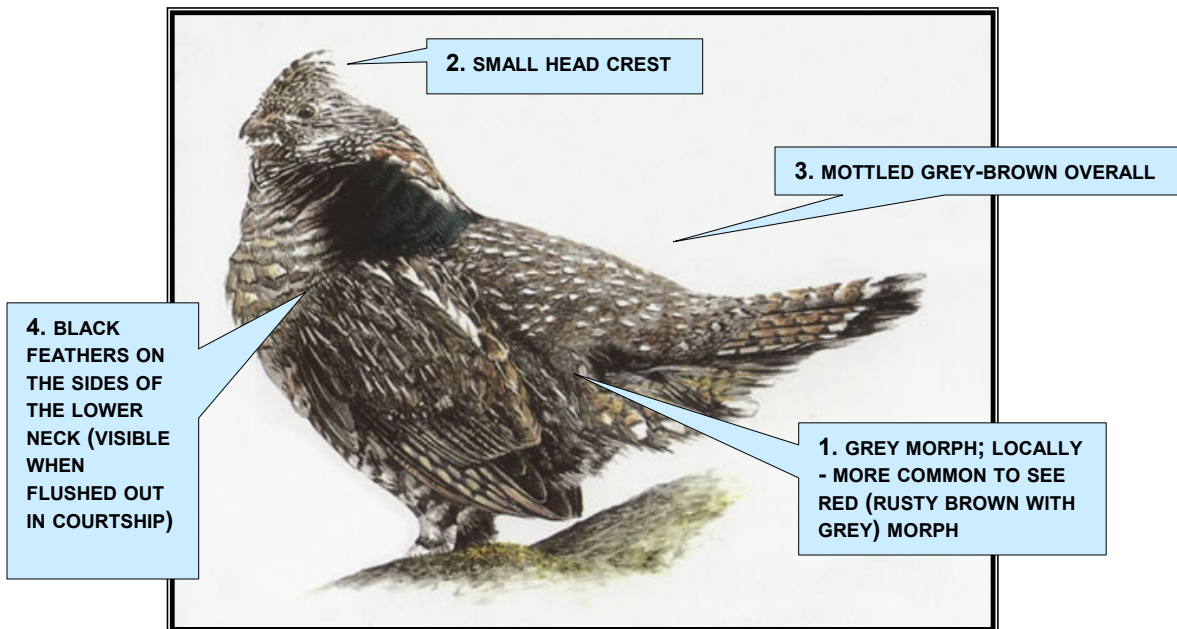
Fun Fact

Unlike woodpeckers, American Kestrels are not capable of pecking out their own homes in standing dead trees. These small falcons commonly take up residence in woodpecker cavities that have been abandoned. These second-hand homes provide the perfect place to protect defenseless young Kestrels from hungry predators.

SPECIES # 9

Ruffed Grouse

Bonasa umbellus

**Size:**

- Length: 38 – 48 cm

Habitat:

- Deciduous and mixed forests
- Favours second-growth stands with birch and poplar

Food:

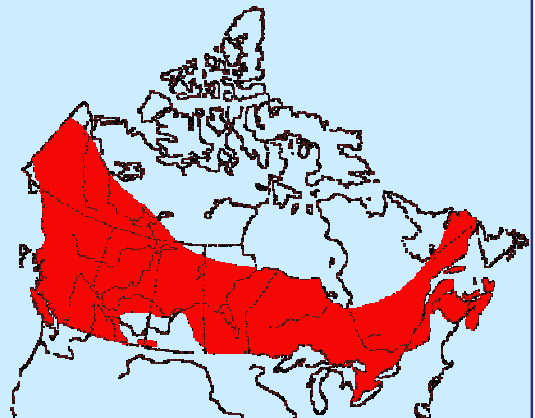
- Diet consists of seeds, berries buds, flowers, leaves, insects, spiders and snails

Nest:

- A shallow depression, usually beside a boulder, log or at the base of a tree, covered in leaf litter
- Female incubates 9 – 12 eggs for 23 – 25 days

Similar Species:

- Spruce Grouse tail does not have white barring, and missing head crest

**Provincial Range:**

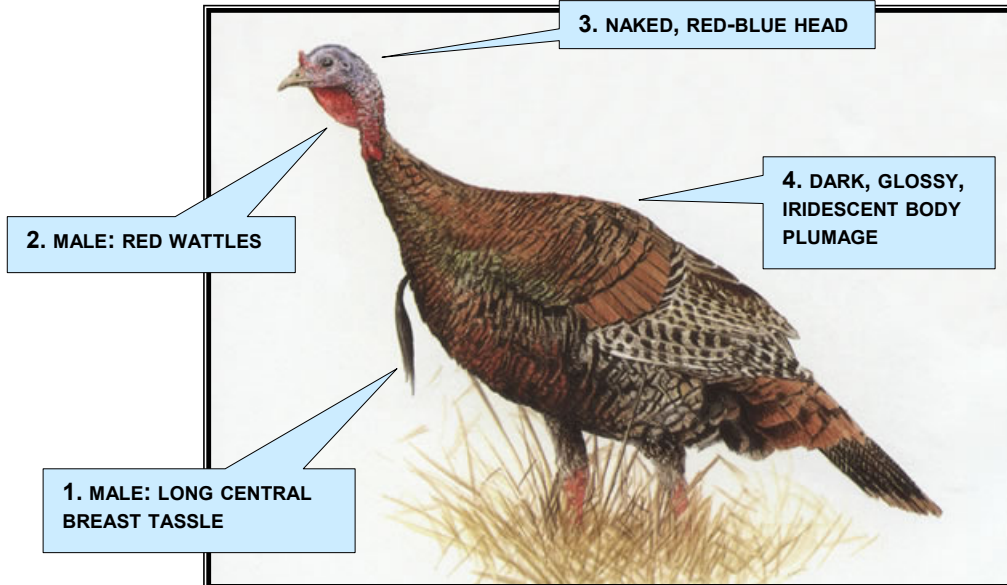
- Throughout Ontario

Fun Fact

During spring courtship (and sometimes in the fall), the Ruffed Grouse proclaims his territory by 'drumming'. Male grouse will vigorously flap its wings while strutting along a fallen log in hopes of attracting a mate. This display produces deep, accelerating booms that echo throughout the forest like a drum beating in the distance.

SPECIES # 10

Wild Turkey

Meleagris gallopavo**Size:**

- Male: Length: 91 – 112 cm
- Female: Length: 89 – 94 cm

Habitat:

- Deciduous and mixed forests

Food:

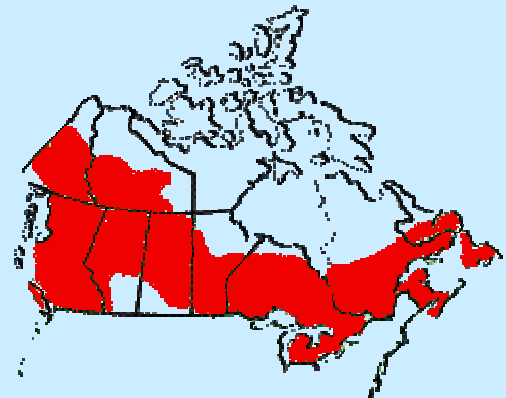
- Forages on ground
- Eats seeds, fruits, bulbs, sedges, insects and occasionally small amphibians

Nest:

- In woodlands or at forest edges on the ground
- Nest consists of a depression under thick cover lined with grass and leaves
- Females incubate 10 – 12 eggs for up to 28 days

Similar Species:

- All other grouse species are much smaller

**Provincial Range:**

- Southern Ontario

Fun Fact

If you have ever seen a wild turkey, you probably know that they prefer to travel by foot. What you may not realize is that they can reach running speeds of 30 km/h! Even though they have adapted well to life on the ground, they are still able to fly short distances so that they are able to roost in trees over night.

SPECIES # 11

Killdeer

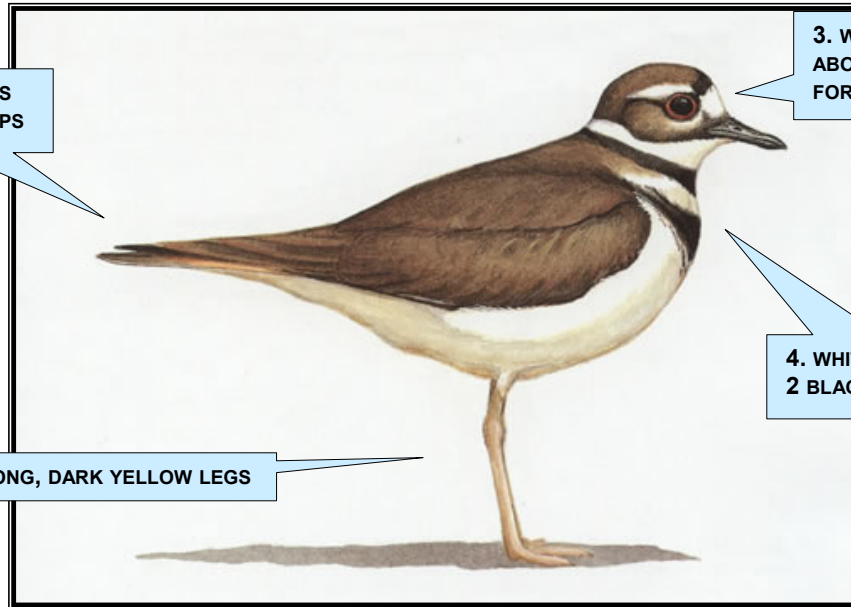
Charadrius vociferus

2. TAIL PROJECTS
BEYOND WING-TIPS

1. LONG, DARK YELLOW LEGS

3. WHITE FACE PATCH
ABOVE BILL; BLACK
FOREHEAD BAND

4. WHITE BREAST WITH
2 BLACK BANDS

**Size:**

- Length: 23 – 28 cm

Habitat:

- Open ground, lakeshores, sandy beaches, wet meadows and grasslands

Food:

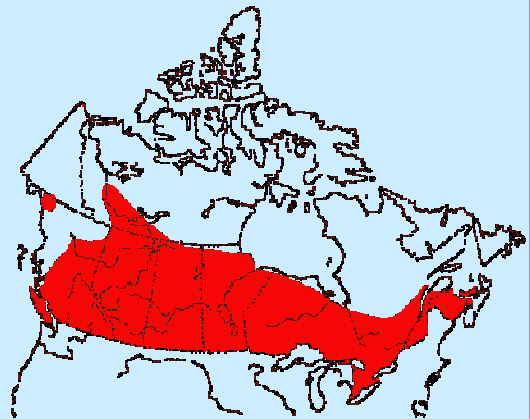
- Diet consists of insects, spiders, snails, earthworms and crayfish

Nest:

- On open ground, in a shallow, unlined depression
- Both parents incubate 4 eggs for 24 – 28 days
- Occasionally raises 2 broods per year

Similar Species:

- Semi-palmated Plover is smaller and has only one breast band

**Provincial Range:**

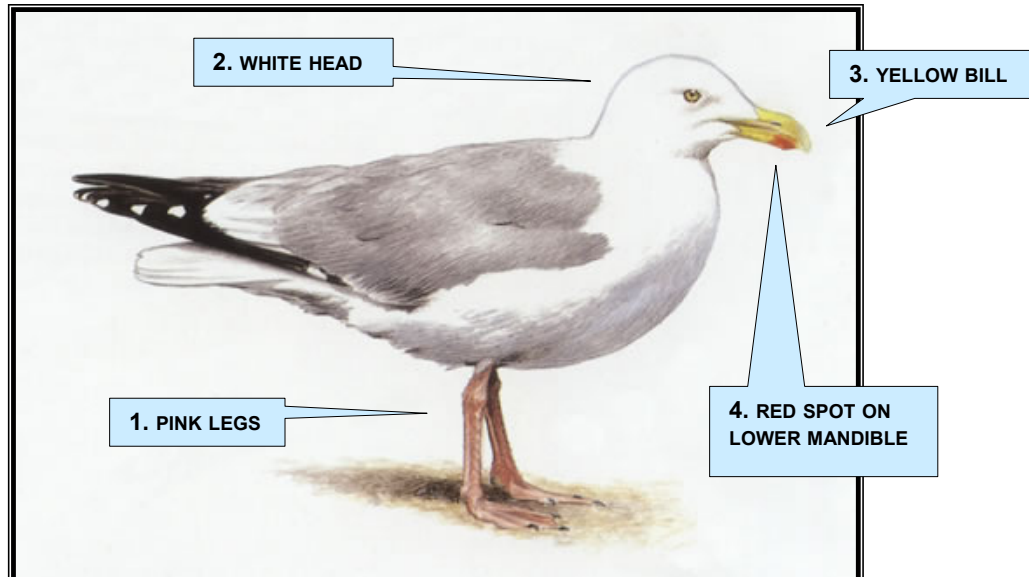
- Throughout Ontario

Fun Fact

Killdeer go to great lengths to protect their nests from possible predators, even using themselves as bait. When a threat approaches, a Killdeer parent will attempt to lure it away from the nest by making calls of alarm and faking a broken wing. This act is often quite effective, but can be lethal for the parent if it is not cautious.

SPECIES # 12

Herring Gull

Larus argentatus**Size:**

- Length: 58 – 66 cm, Width: 1.2 m

Habitat:

- Non-Breeding: lakes, wetlands, landfills and urban areas
- Breeding: Islands, peninsulas or cliffs

Food:

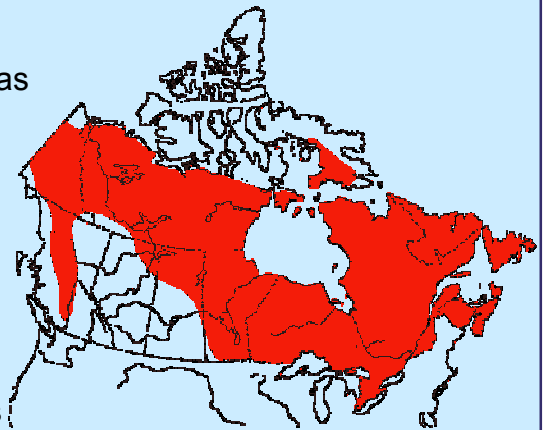
- Aquatic invertebrates and fish, insects, worms
- Scavenges dead fish, garbage, other birds' eggs and young

Nest:

- On open beaches and islands, on the ground in a depression lined with vegetation and sticks
- Nests singly or with other gulls, pelicans or cormorants
- Both parents incubate 3 eggs for 31 – 32 days

Similar Species:

- Ring-Billed Gull is smaller with a black band around the bill and yellow legs

**Provincial Range:**

- Throughout Ontario

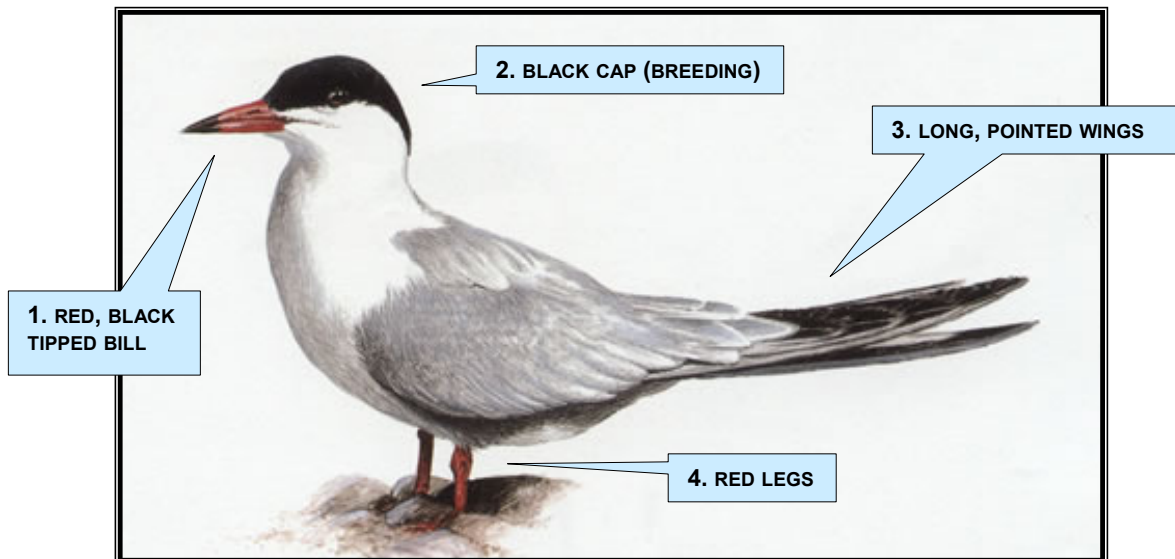
Fun Fact

The characteristic red spot on the bill of a Herring Gull actually has an important natural purpose. It acts as a “feed me” button for hungry chicks! When a chick pecks the spot it sends a signal to the parent’s brain to regurgitate a meal for the young. This is necessary for the chicks survival, though it may seem unappetizing to us.

SPECIES # 13

Common Tern

Sterna hirundo

**Size:**

- Length: 33 – 41 cm, Width: 76 cm

Habitat:

- Large lakes, open wetlands and slow-moving rivers

Food:

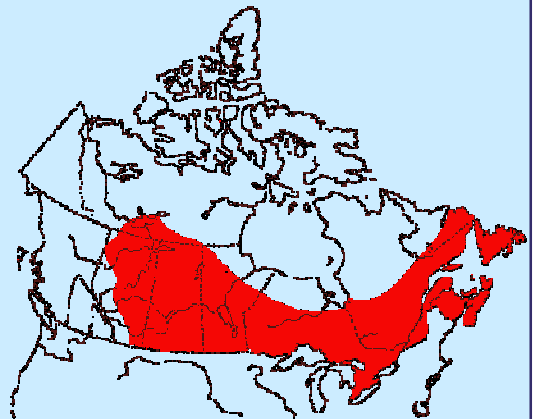
- Small fish and aquatic invertebrates

Nest:

- Primarily colonial
- On rocky islands, in depressions lined with pebbles, vegetation or shells
- Both parents incubate 1 – 3 eggs for up to 27 days

Similar Species:

- Foster's Tern has a grey tail with white outer edges
- Caspian Tern is much larger and heavier, with an orange bill

**Provincial Range:**

- Throughout Ontario except in extreme north

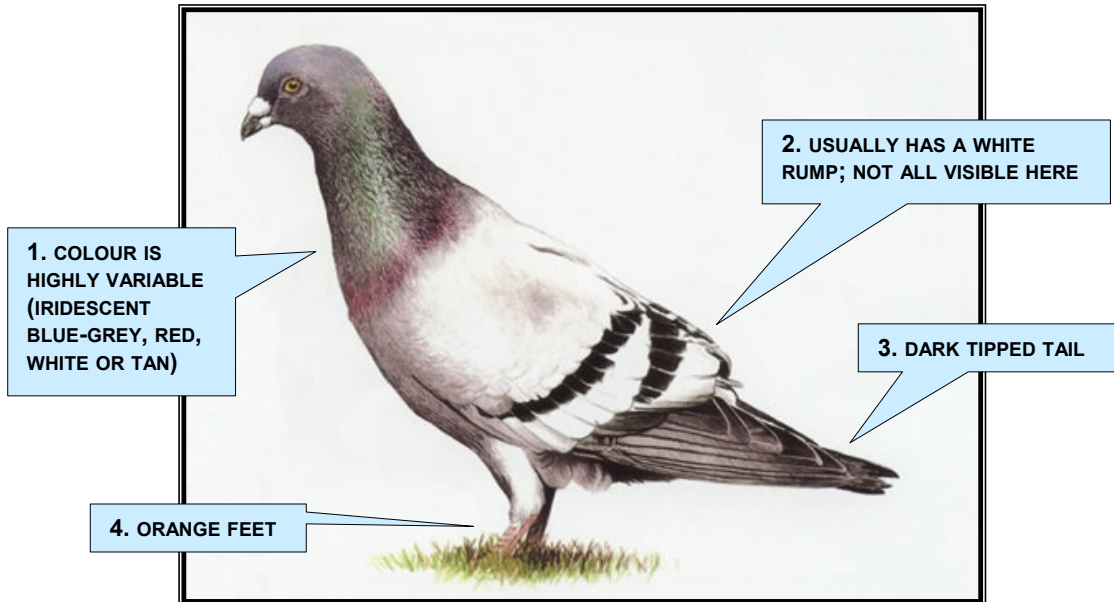
Fun Fact

It is never a good idea to get close to a nesting bird, but the Common Tern gives intruders their own form of a deterrent. When an unwelcome guest approaches, a parent will dive repeatedly at them, often defecating on them in the process. This sends a pretty clear message to trespassers that they should back off!

SPECIES # 14

Rock Dove

Columba livia

**Size:**

- Length: 31 – 33 cm (Males are usually larger)

Habitat:

- Urban and agricultural areas

Food:

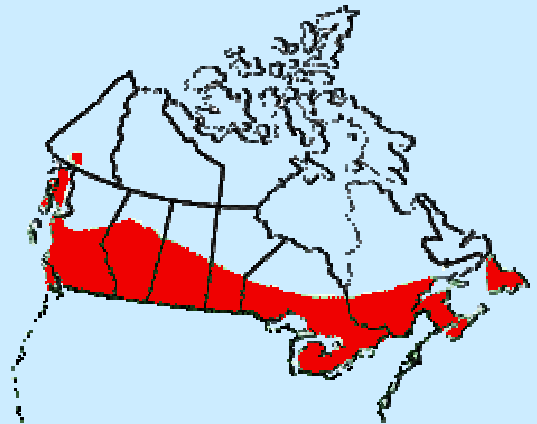
- Waste grains, seeds and fruits
- Occasionally eats insects

Nest:

- On ledges of barns, cliffs, bridges, buildings and towers
- Nest consists of sticks, grasses and vegetation
- Both parents incubate 2 eggs for 16 – 19 days
- Able to raise broods year round

Similar Species:

- Merlin has a longer tail and is heavier bodied

**Provincial Range:**

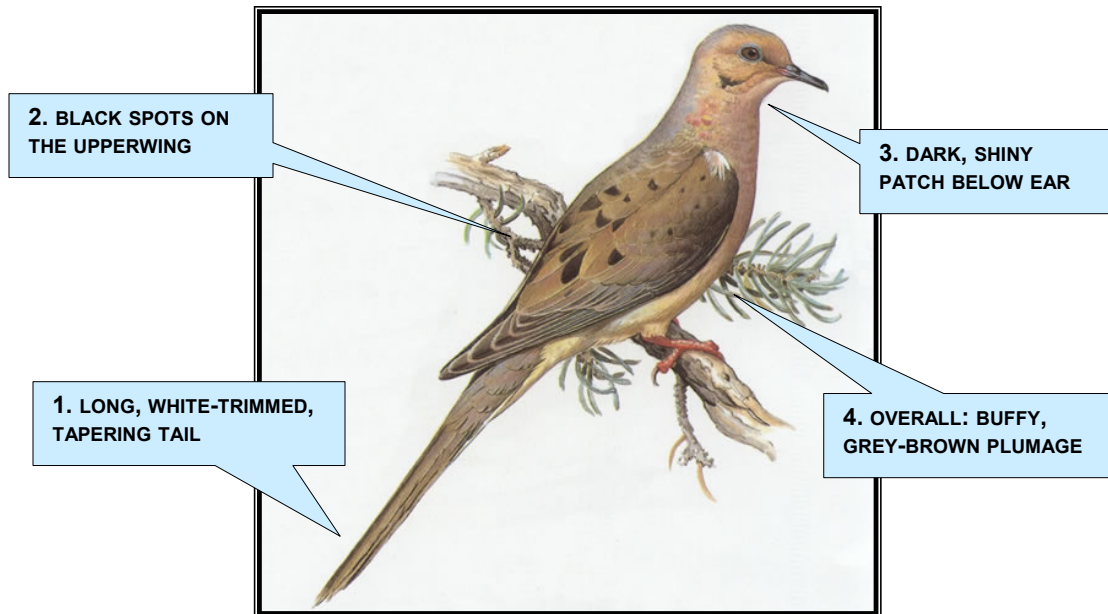
- Throughout Southern Ontario

Fun Fact

The Rock Dove, more commonly known by the name Pigeon, has an extensive history with mankind. They were first believed to be domesticated for meat about 4500 B.C., but since then have been used as message couriers, scientific subjects, and even as pets. They were first introduced to the wild in North America in the 17th century.

SPECIES # 15

Mourning Dove

Zenaida macroura**Size:**

- Length: 28 – 33 cm

Habitat:

- open woodlands, forest edges, open parks, suburban and agricultural areas

Food:

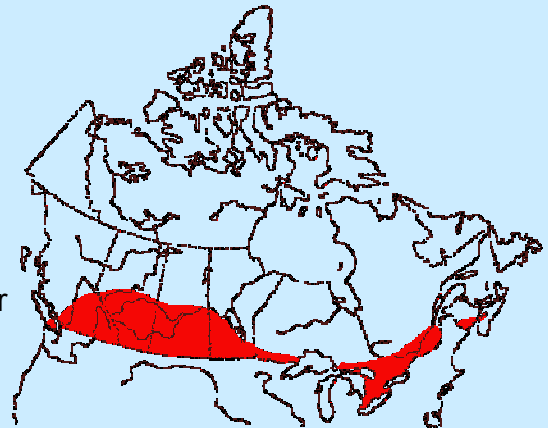
- Mostly seeds, visits feeders

Nest:

- Occasionally on the ground or in the fork of a shrub or tree
- Female builds a nest from sticks and twigs brought to her by the male
- Both parents incubate 2 eggs for 14 days

Similar Species:

- Rock Dove has a shorter tail and white back

**Provincial Range:**

- Throughout Southern Ontario

Fun Fact

All chicks in the pigeon family (in which doves are included) drink a special kind of 'milk'. Unlike mammals, birds do not have mammary glands that produce milk for the young. Instead, the milk-like substance that is high in nutrients and protein comes from glands in the birds crop, which chicks access by sticking their heads down the parents throat.

SPECIES # 16

Great Horned Owl

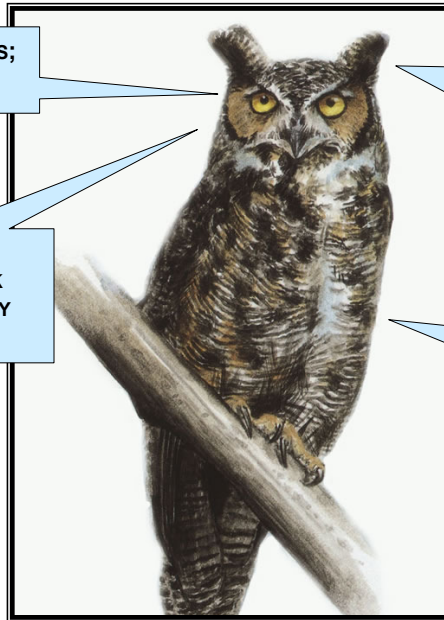
Bubo virginianus

1. YELLOW EYES;
LARGE OWL

2. TALL EAR TUFTS
SET WIDE APART
ON THE HEAD

3. FACIAL DISC IS
OUTLINED IN BLACK
AND OFTEN A RUSTY
ORANGE COLOUR

4. FINE HORIZONTAL
BARRING ON BREAST

**Size:**

- Length: 46 – 64 cm, Width: 91 – 152 cm

Habitat:

- Fragmented forests, meadows, suburban parks, and edges of landfills

Food:

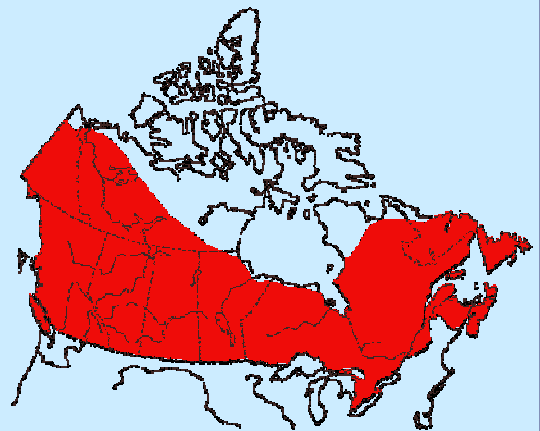
- Swoops down from a perch
- Eats small mammals, birds, snakes, amphibians and sometimes fish

Nest:

- In abandoned stick nests of other birds, adding little to no material to it
- Female incubates 2 – 3 eggs for 28 – 35 days
- Male brings female and young food in nest

Similar Species:

- Long-eared owl is smaller with vertical breast streaks and closer ear tufts

**Provincial Range:**

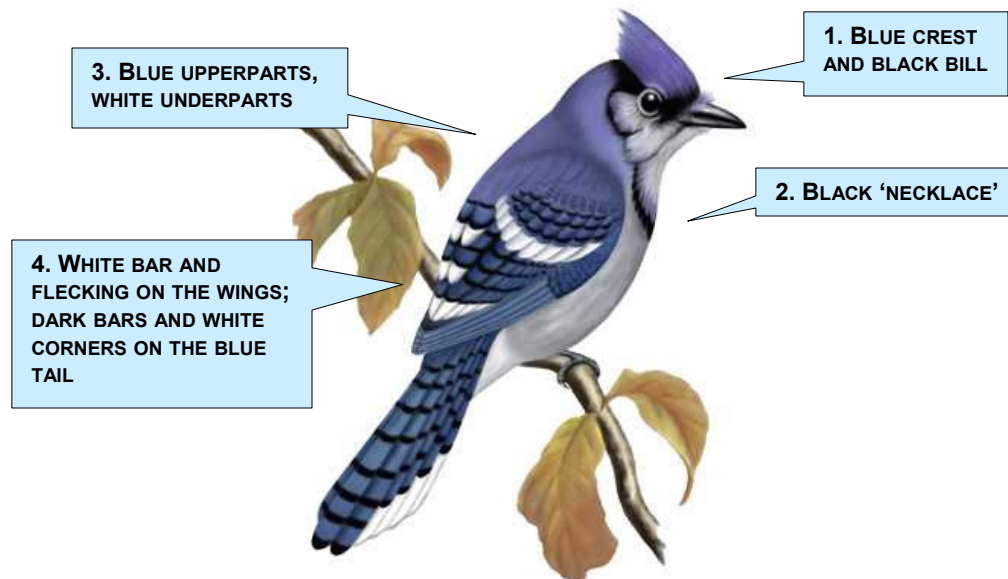
- Throughout Ontario

Fun Fact

The Great Horned Owls advanced sense of hearing and vision make it a great nocturnal hunter. Its sense of smell however seems to be quite poor, which might explain why it is one of the few predators of skunks. Also, its eyeballs are fixed in place so in order to look around it must move its entire head (up to 180 degrees around!).

SPECIES # 17

Blue Jay

Cyanocitta cristata**Size:**

- Length: 28 – 31 cm

Habitat:

- Mixed deciduous forests, agricultural areas and cities

Food:

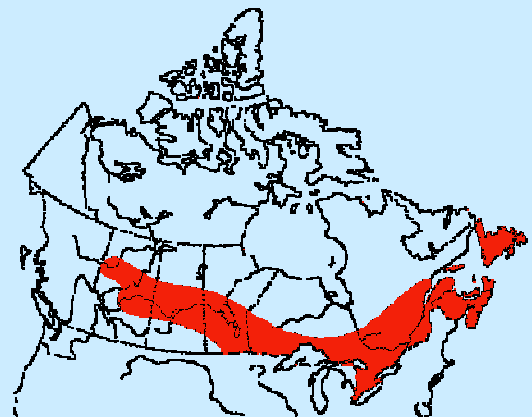
- Forages on the ground
- Diet consists of nuts berries, eggs, nestlings and birdseed
- Some insects and carrion

Nest:

- In the crotch of trees or shrubs
- Both parents incubate 4 – 5 eggs for 16 – 18 days

Similar Species:

- None

**Provincial Range:**

- Throughout Southern and Central Ontario

Fun Fact

The Blue Jay is a member of the corvid family, which also includes the crow, raven and magpie. A common trait of this family that the Blue Jay shares is its willingness to drive away other birds, squirrels and even cats if it feels threatened. This tough character will even stand up to dangerous predators such as the Great Horned Owl.

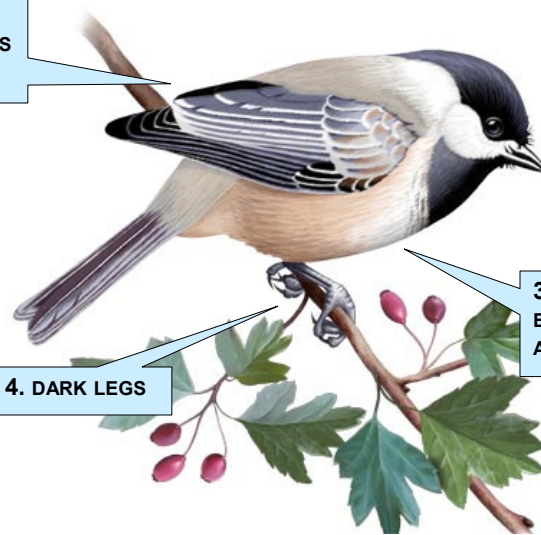
SPECIES # 18**Black-Capped Chickadee***Poecile atricapillus*

2. GREY AND BLACK
WINGS WITH CONSPICUOUS
WHITE EDGINGS

1. BLACK CAP
AND BIB; WHITE
CHEEK

3. LIGHT
BUFF SIDES
AND FLANKS

4. DARK LEGS

**Size:**

- Length: 13 – 15 cm

Habitat:

- Deciduous and mixed forests, wooded urban parks and backyards

Food:

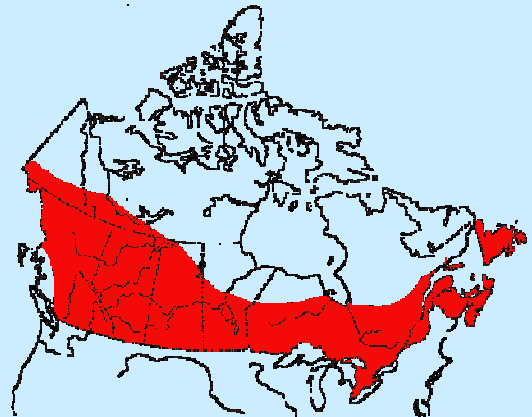
- Diet consists of insects, spiders, conifer seeds and birdseed

Nest:

- Cavity in rotting stump or tree lined with fur, feather, grass and moss
- Both parents incubate 6 – 8 eggs for 12 – 13 days

Similar Species:

- Boreal Chickadee has a grey-brown cap and sides

**Provincial Range:**

- Throughout Ontario

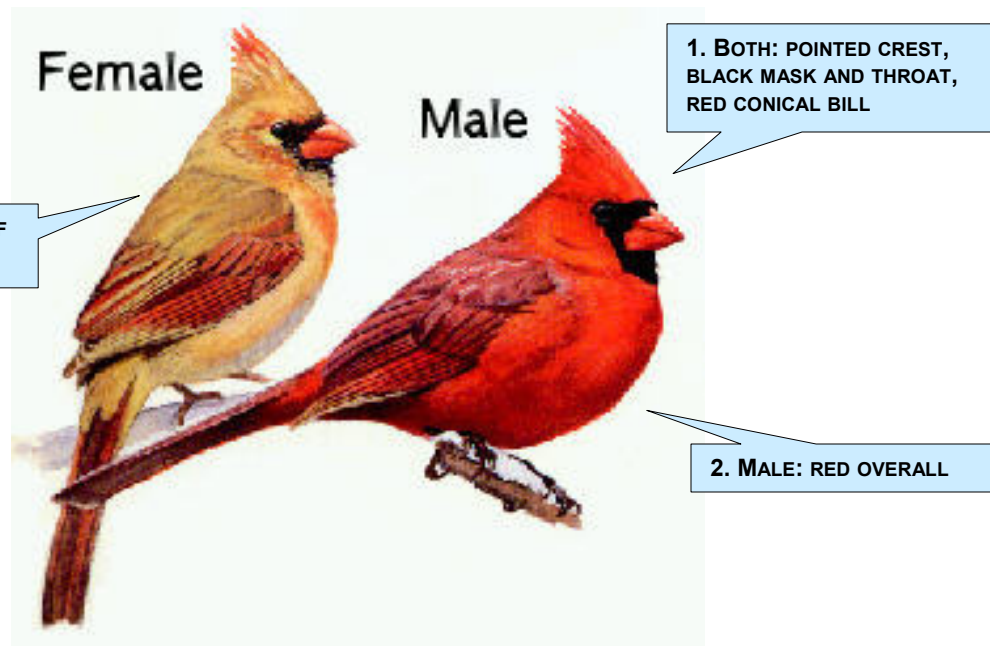
Fun Fact

Black-capped Chickadees are agile and energetic foragers who can often be seen hopping from branch to branch in the treetops, sometimes even swinging upside-down in pursuit of insects or berries. They have two main calls: a long drawn out swee-tee for mating, and the characteristic *chick-a-dee-dee-dee* used to maintain contact in flocks.

SPECIES # 19

Northern Cardinal

Cardinalis cardinalis

**Size:**

- Length: 19 – 23 cm

Habitat:

- Brushy forest edges, backyards and urban parks

Food:

- Seeds, insects and berries gathered from ground

Nest:

- In dense shrubs or thickets, or in low coniferous trees
- Nest consists of twigs, bark, weeds, grass and leaves, lined with hair and fine grass
- Female incubates 3 – 4 eggs for 12 – 13 days

Similar Species:

- Summer Tanager lack the head crest, black mask and throat

**Provincial Range:**

- Throughout Southern Ontario

Fun Fact

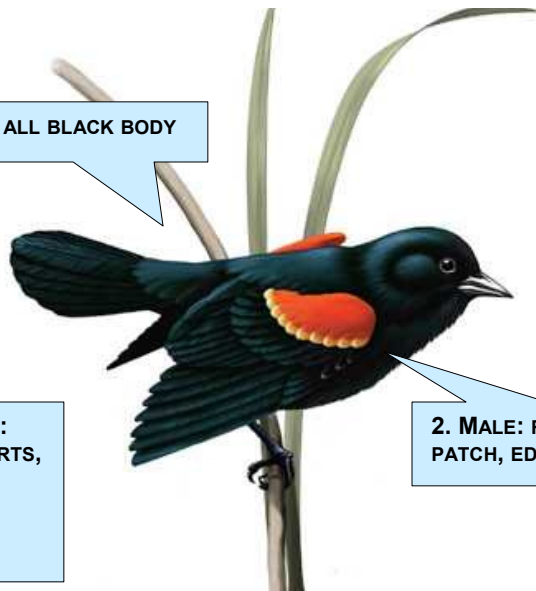
A relative newcomer to Ontario, the Cardinal has expanded its range northward mostly due to backyard bird feeders, warm urban microclimates, and forest fragmentation (which is their preferred type of habitat). A pair of cardinals will form one of the strongest lifelong mating bonds in the bird world.

SPECIES # 20

Red-Winged Blackbird

Agelaius phoeniceus

1. MALE: ALL BLACK BODY



3. FEMALE (NOT PICTURED):
MOTTLED BROWN UPPERPARTS,
HEAVILY STREAKED UNDER-
PARTS; FAINT SHOULDER
PATCH; LIGHT EYEBROW

2. MALE: RED SHOULDER
PATCH, EDGED IN YELLOW

Size:

- Length: 18 – 24 cm

Habitat:

- Cattail marshes, wet meadows, ditches and croplands

Food:

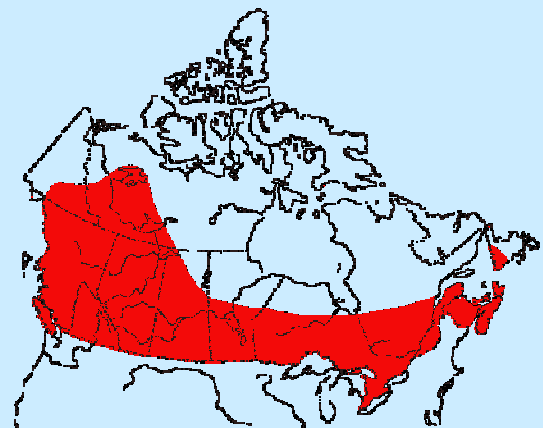
- Gathers seeds, insects and berries
- Occasionally visits feeders

Nest:

- Colonial and polygamous
- Nest consists of woven dried cattail leaves, and grass, and lined with fine grass
- Female incubates 3 – 4 eggs for 10 – 12 days

Similar Species:

- Male is distinctive
- Brewer's Blackbird females lack streaked underparts



Provincial Range:

- Throughout Ontario, except the extreme north

Fun Fact

A male Red-winged Blackbird sets out his territory in the early spring by sounding out his raspy call and showing off his flashy wings. Once he has attracted a female, she immediately begins the task of weaving a nest amongst the cattails. The colour and pattern of the female helps her blend in to her surroundings perfectly.

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