

Niagara Falls, Canada 1st -7th May 2005 by Howard Vaughan

1st May: Our long flight came in to Toronto at about 3:30pm local time and we were soon on our bus to Niagara for a week long break with no car and just legs and buses to get around. Despite being the first week in May spring had not really sprung yet with almost no leaves on the trees and temperatures for our stay rarely getting above eight or nine degrees and we even had fresh snow mid week!

My first birds on Canadian soil were **Starlings** and my beloved **House Sparrows** but we had not even left the airport when I got my first tick in the shape of a fine male **House Finch** in the same pine an **Eastern Phoebe**.

The drive itself was through a rather uninspiring landscape and to be honest it could have been anywhere; that was until we came to the vastness of Lake Ontario. It was so huge you could not even see the other side. **Grackles**, **Red-winged Blackbirds** and **Red-tailed Hawks** were the most obvious species en route along with several **Killdeers**, my first 'real' **Canada Geese** and singles of tiny **American Kestrel**, **Turkey Vulture** and **Chimney Swift** – the latter a new species for me.

We arrived at our basic hotel in Niagara (the Skyline Inn) in good time and were greeted by several **Rough-winged Swallows** and **Barn Swallows** hawking around the complex. After sorting ourselves out we ambled down for our first look at the falls. So much noise and movement! **Mourning Doves**, **Blue Jays** and stunning red **Cardinals** rounded off the day.



Cardinal by Sam Shippey

2nd May: A lazy day spent around town – trying to recover from the long flight. The gorge side provided good views of **Downy Woodpecker** (their Lesser Spot), several **House Finches** (their Rosefinches), countless **American**

Robins and a couple of calling but invisible Black-capped Capped Chickadees. Down on the river a little group of sawbills was comprised of five Red-breasted Merganser and 12 Goosander along with two male Goldeneye and a summer plumaged Great Northern Diver for company. Two Cedar Waxwings trilled from a front garden.

3rd May: After buying ourselves a day pass for the People Mover Bus, we trundled off down river towards Queenston Heights. It was far more natural up there with plenty of birds and a fantastic view. Northern Flickers and Downy Woodpeckers were vocal and American Robins were singing everywhere. Finally tracked down the Chickadees while Blue Jays and more Cardinals foraged low down. A dull streaky finch singing from the top of a pine proved to be a Pine Siskin and a repetitive trilling in the next tree was my first *Dendroica* of the trip – a Pine Warbler. Both were new to me.



The View from Queenston Heights

We caught the bus back down stopping so that the driver could have a crafty fag at the stunning Floral Clock. Turkey Vultures (TV's) cruised overhead and both the Swallows hawked nearby. Common Grackles and Starlings fed on the neat lawns.



Turkey Vulture by Sam Shippey

Botanical Gardens next and definitely the best birding area encountered on the whole trip. More trilling, from what I assumed to be Pine Warblers, turned out to be dozens of dapper Chipping Sparrows?? Sibley even says 'sounds

like Pine Warbler! Nice and stripy with a neat chestnut crown. More finchy-type singing attracted me to an immaculate male **American Goldfinch**. Probably one of the birds of the holiday. They also gave a call very reminiscent of Crossbill. Another seven **Cedar Waxwings** dropped in and a **Song Sparrow** proved that the species actually has a pleasing voice. They seem to fill the Dunnock niche.

Time for our trip on the Maid of the Mist. The boat was not overly packed and there was room to move around. Wind blowing...so loud that you can not hear anything else. Despite the seething water there were 1000's of **American Herring** and **Ring-billed Gulls** along with **Double-crested Cormorants** and even a female **Scaup** and a summer plumaged **Slavonian Grebe**. A **Night Heron** headed downriver out of the mist. Back on dry land and well impressed with our ride we made our way into town for dinner passing a singing male **Brown-headed Cowbird** and a flock of 15 high flying **Bonaparte's Gulls** on the way.



The Horseshoe Falls

4th May: we spent most of the day in the USA on Goat Island after traversing the Rainbow Bridge and navigating the stringent and somewhat intimidating customs procedures. The island was almost deserted, which suited me and I was able to leave Andrea with her book while I ambled along the rapid edges, checking the scrub and trees for the migrants that should have been there. **Tree Swallows** swooped close by, shining metallic green in the cold sun. **Red-winged Blackbirds** sang from the small islands within the rapids and on the Three Sisters I found a nice **Brown Thrasher**, a singing **Song Sparrow** and a couple of smart **Dark-eyed Juncos**. Other sparrows were to be found under the bushes and included many **Chippings**, several **Songs** and variously plumaged **White-throats**.



Niagara town and Falls from the Rainbow Bridge

It started to rain and warblers began to appear – not many but enough to keep me happy. Several ground feeding **Palm Warblers** with their rusty crowns and yellow vents were found and a male **Black & White Warbler** suddenly materialised in front of me and scuttled along the branches like a stripy mouse. Five **Ruby-crowned Kinglets** joined in and a high feeding **Vireo** proved to be my first **Blue-headed**. Two **White-breasted Nuthatches** were a real treat. Quite obliging.

We caught the trundle bus/train and headed off to the Geology Museum, from where we could look down on the group of sawbills seen on the 2nd. This time there was also a fine male **Hooded Merganser** with them. With more rain on the way I persuaded Andrea to let me have one more look around Goat Island. Nothing extra special but a stunning **Coopers Hawk** (big Sparrowhawk) after **House Sparrows**, a **Great Blue Heron** struggling to gain height and head north and many **Common Terns** out over the rapids. Getting back into Canada is easy, just a smile and a wave! Two more birds on the river in the evening with a smart **Red-necked Grebe** and a female **Bufflehead**.

5th May: Another day on the buses – nice and early to the White Water Walk. Going down alongside the six rated rapids with house sized waves crashing past you was mind boggling. The woods were dead but two spotty **Spotted Sandpipers** bobbed along where they could. Deserted Andrea again in the Botanical Gardens and almost immediately found a **Black-throated Green Warbler** in a large Maple. I was quite speechless. **Chipping Sparrows** were all over the show and several **Dark-eyed Juncos** 'tsipped' from the pines. A pair of **Hairy Woodpeckers** (their Great Spot) showed very well and up above, **Red-tails**, **TV's** and a ringtail **Northern Harrier** (Hen) were seen.

Niagara Glen involves descending (and therefore climbing) a steep set of metal stairs but it is worth it to be amongst the trees and huge boulders that have been deposited there over the years. There were almost no leaves yet and very little in the way of birds bar some woodpeckers and two **Eastern Phoebes**. Carpets of lilies hinted at spring and I should imagine that the display later in the month would have been amazing. Cracking views of a Chipmunk!



Niagara Glen

One more stop all the way to the end of the bus route by the old Power Station above the main Horseshoe Falls. I popped further along the river but found nothing for my troubles but returned to find that Andrea had been watching a 'yellow' warbler. Five panic stricken minutes later I too was watching a **Yellow Warbler!** Bigger and chunkier than I would have imagined but it could not have been any brighter if it had tried!

6th May: Andrea graciously agreed to let me have a morning poodling down the valley again so I set off early via Victoria Gardens where I quickly found several newly arrived **Yellow Warblers** and a **Brown Thrasher**.



Victoria Gardens

This boded well for Queenston Heights and I was not to be disappointed.



Queenston Heights

On getting of the People Mover I was greeted with small flocks of **Palm Warblers** feeding on the ground with **Chipping Sparrows** and **Dark-eyed Juncos**. The usual three woodpecker species were all vocal and the male **Pine**

Warbler was still on territory. My second Black-throated Green Warbler popped into view shortly followed by my first breeding plumaged Myrtle. It was not a huge fall but I was very happy.

I started to walk back down and investigated the parkland opposite QH. Another Myrtle flycatched in the canopy with a cracking Black & White, Blue-headed Vireo and Ruby Crowned Kinglet for company. Chipping sprogs everywhere and four White-tailed Deer fed by the roadside.

Near the heliport four Killdeer called mournfully while the bizarre calls from American Goldfinch and Song Sparrows kept me on my toes. The Botanical Gardens again proved their worth with an obvious fall of migrants that include four ticks. A Sharp-shinned Hawk (their Sparrowhawk) whizzed through White-throated Sparrows kicked and scratched among the leaf litter and it was whilst identifying my only American Tree Sparrow that a vision in black and blue appeared. A Black-throated Blue Warbler, what else could it be? Possibly the most heart stopping little bird I have ever seen. Two minutes later another cute tiny warbler came alongside it looking like a blue-headed, yellow Goldcrest with a big eye ring. Sibley helped me identify this as a Nashville. Behind me my only Canadian Empid in the shape of a tiny Least Flycatcher briefly sallied after an insect. Pine, Yellow and Black-throated Green added interest. A different species of small 'red' squirrel was also seen.

The next section from here to the Spanish Aerocar proved rather birdless (bar Chipping Sparrows, TV's and a couple of Cardinals) but I imagined that within a week or two it would have been buzzing.

Later on and still restless I wandered up through Old Town finding many sparrows, four more Yellow Warblers and down by the river a Night Heron, three Bonaparte's Gulls and the Red-necked Grebe. Two Chimney Swifts chittering through the rooftops rounded up an excellent day.

7th May: Home day but not before a last look round. Nothing new in Old Town bar the Chimney Swifts and TV's and the usual hoards of multi-coloured squirrels. The bus ride back to Toronto was quiet although several Caspian Terns, a pair of Mute Swans (?) and hundreds of Double-crested Cormorants were seen as we bisected the Great Lakes. Unsurprisingly my last bird was the same as my first... *Passer domesticus*.

Check out the two sites below for more info on the sites we visited around Niagara and the hotel we stayed in. It was basic accommodation but was clean and tidy and cleaned every day and was within walking distance of everything in the town. As a bed for the night it was more than satisfactory. You could stay in the more impressive hotels across the way but with the casinos below I suspect it was not as quiet as our abode! Anyway it put us next to Perkins for breakfast (and any other meal we fancied!) which was just fine by us!

<http://www.tourniagara.com/geologynature>

<http://www.niagarafallshotels.com/skyline/amenities.php>



Trip List	
Great Northern Diver	Blue-headed Vireo
Slavonian Grebe	Blue Jay
Red-necked Grebe	American Crow
Double Crested Cormorant	Tree Swallow
Great Blue Heron	Northern Rough-winged Swallow
Night Heron	Barn Swallow
Mute Swan	Black-capped Chickadee
Canada Goose	White-breasted Nuthatch
Mallard	Ruby-crowned Kinglet
Scaup	American Robin
Goldeneye	Brown Thrasher
Bufflehead	Starling
Hooded Merganser	Cedar Waxwing
Goosander	Yellow Warbler
Red-breasted Merganser	Black-throated Blue Warbler
Turkey Vulture	Myrtle Warbler
Northern Harrier	Palm Warbler
Cooper's Hawk	Pine Warbler
Sharp-shinned Hawk	Black-throated Green Warbler
Red-tailed Hawk	Black-and-White Warbler
American Kestrel	Nashville Warbler
Killdeer	Northern Cardinal
Spotted Sandpiper	American Tree Sparrow
American Herring Gull	Chipping Sparrow
Ring-billed Gull	White-throated Sparrow
Bonaparte's Gull	Dark-eyed Junco
Common Tern	Song Sparrow
Mourning Dove	Brown-headed Cowbird
Feral Pigeon	Red-winged Blackbird
Chimney Swift	Common Grackle
Northern Flicker	House Finch
Hairy Woodpecker	Pine Siskin
Downy Woodpecker	American Goldfinch
Least Flycatcher	House Sparrow
68 species seen including 17 lifers and 35 North American ticks	

