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the BIRDS



of Isle Royale National Park

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of Isle Royale National Park

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Introduction

THIS BOOKLET is intended to serve as a reference and guide for the many nature lovers who visit Isle Royale each summer. Many of these people have indicated a definite interest in learning more about the diversity of birds which haunt this enchanting water wilderness. It is hoped that the material which follows will help people not only to identify more birds, but also to learn more about those birds they already know.

While the 15-mile expanse of open water between Isle Royale and the nearest mainland shore has been an effective barrier against the migration here of many kinds of amphibians, reptiles, and mammals, this water has posed no problem for most birds. However, two species, the ruffed and spruce grouse, appear to have been excluded from the island by the long over-water flight.

Most birds seen here in summer nest on Isle Royale and migrate south in the fall. A number of these — the loon, both mergansers, the pigeon hawk, and some of the warblers — breed only in the north; while others — the eastern kingbird and blue jay, for example — are generally found more to the south, with Isle Royale approaching their northernmost range. A few birds are year round residents on the island, including the bald eagle, sharp-tailed grouse, three woodpeckers, raven, both jays, and black-capped chickadee.

Since most people visit Isle Royale during the warmer summer months between the spring and fall migrations, this treatment is limited to those species that are resident throughout most of the summer. Birds present only during migration seasons have, as a rule, been omitted, since their inclusion would greatly increase the scope of this booklet. The more advanced bird watcher, interested in migrants, winter residents, and the more rare summer residents, should consult more comprehensive works such as Peterson's "Field Guide to the Birds" and Pearson's "Birds of America". For a complete listing of the birds recorded in the park, refer to the Isle Royale Natural History Association booklet, "The Vertebrates of Isle Royale National Park" by Johnsson and Shelton, which includes a brief statement as to abundance on the island for each species. The text that follows should, however, cover at least 90% of the birds seen by the average observer.

For those who are interested in seeing a greater variety of birds, several suggestions might be offered:

● Visit as many different habitats as possible. For example, the winter wren is usually seen in dense tangles of logs and brush, the sparrow hawk on high ridges, the sparrows in open brushy situations.

● Listen for birds' songs and calls. These will help you locate the birds, and with practice you can learn to identify them by their voice alone.

● Use binoculars to bring distant or small birds into identifiable range.

COMMON LOON

Gavia immer

Appearance: A large, long bodied, black and white water bird that rides low in the water. Head and neck all black except for narrow black and white striped necklace. Breast and underparts white. Back has a checkered pattern. Bill long, slender, and sharp pointed. (See front cover.)

Comments: If a single bird were to be selected as the symbol of the northern wilderness, the common loon would be a likely candidate. Shunning civilization and the company of other loons, it breeds on lonely northern lakes. The harbors and inland lakes of Isle Royale provide an ideal habitat, and here indeed the loon occurs as abundantly as anywhere. The weird laughing call of the loon, intensified by reverberations from the island's rocky shores and cliffs, will often pierce through the silence of the evening or prelude the coming of stormy weather. Another call is almost wolf-like, and undoubtedly many a visitor has little realized that the source of this sound was a mere bird. Often a loon will call and another bird will echo from some remote quarter of the lake or harbor.

Whether swimming or flying the loon excels in speed. It is most gifted in the art of diving, and once below the surface it swims with phenomenal speed using both wings and feet in hot pursuit of fish, its main diet. In flight, too, the loon is excelled by few. On takeoff it must acquire a high speed and skim a considerable distance across the water before its heavy body will elevate. For this reason they are never found on puddles or small beaver ponds.

The nest is usually in a hollow near the water's edge. The young, which can dive from almost the first days of life, frequently ride piggy-back on the parent's back.



GREAT BLUE HERON

Ardea herodias

Appearance: A very large bird with long legs, long neck folded into an S-curve, long, slender, sharp-pointed bill, and dark colored plumes projecting from behind the head. Body blue-gray; head white.

Comments: The great blue heron is Isle Royale's largest bird and is easily recognized in the air by its graceful, slow-motion wing beat, the S-curve neck, and long trailing legs. A wading bird, it is most frequently seen along the shores of quiet harbors or inland waters where it moves slowly or stands motionless awaiting its prey. When a frog, crawfish, snake, or grasshopper comes into range the heron suddenly becomes alive with a quick unfolding of its neck to grab the victim. Swallowing it whole, the bird returns just as suddenly to a motionless state to await the next morsel of food.

Though usually a solitary hunter, this heron is gregarious during the breeding season when it nests in large rookeries, two of which are located in secluded places on the island. The nests consist of large bundles of sticks placed among the tree top branches. The birds return to these nesting sites year after year.



BLACK DUCK

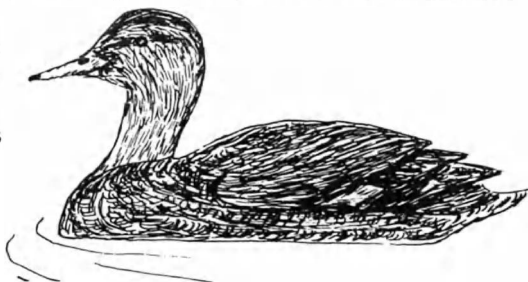
Anas rubripes

Appearance: Both sexes almost uniformly dark brown throughout except for a lighter brown head and white wing linings.

Comments: This dabbler, particularly the breeding female and its young, is probably the most frequently seen duck on the inland lakes, swamps, and beaver ponds of Isle Royale. They are also fairly common in the bays and harbors.

Feeding usually takes place at dawn or dusk. Both vegetable and animal foods are eaten, the latter becoming more important toward fall. Vegetation eaten consists of roots and shoots of aquatic plants, grass roots, seeds, hazel nuts, and berries. This diet is varied with frogs, minnows, newts, worms, leaches, and small shellfish.

Nesting is from late April to early May in bushy or reedy swamps or bogs. The young remain flightless until about August.

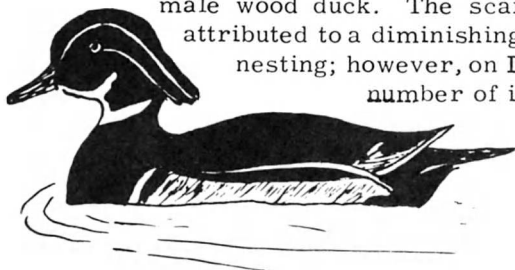


WOOD DUCK

Aix sponsa

Appearance: Male - brilliantly colored duck with a crest sweeping downward over the back of its neck. Head and back predominantly iridescent green and purple. Has a purplish chestnut upper chest, buff sides, and white lower chest and belly. Trimmed throughout with many patches and stripes of white, black, red, and other colors. Female mostly grayish with streaked breast and white eye patch and chin.

Comments: It is a real pleasure to behold one of these birds not only because it is uncommon, but also because it is one of the most beautiful creatures on the water. Though striking even at a distance, only a close inspection reveals the complexity of color patterns of the male wood duck. The scarcity of this duck elsewhere is attributed to a diminishing availability of hollow trees for nesting; however, on Isle Royale wood ducks inhabit a number of inland ponds. Look for it especially on beaver ponds. Nuts and insects are its main diet.



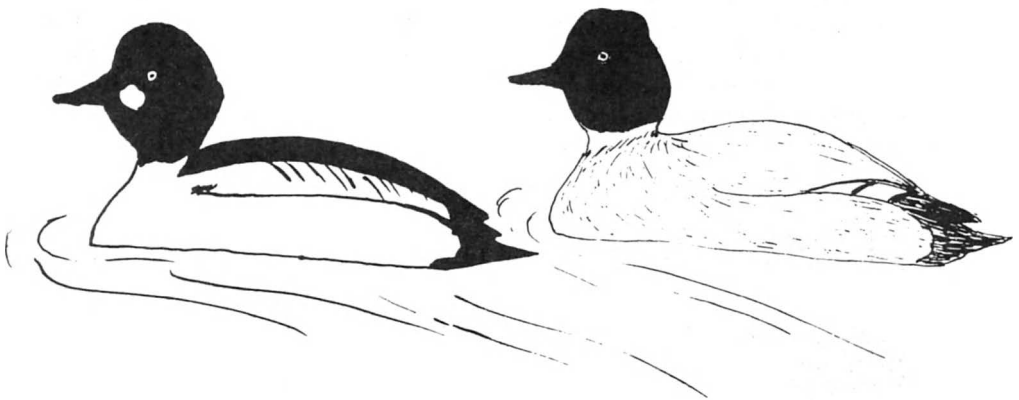
COMMON GOLDENEYE

Bucephala clangula

Appearance: Male - Black back, white breast and sides, dark green head with a conspicuous white patch below the eyes. Female - grayish back, white underparts and brown head. Both sexes have large white wing patches. On Isle Royale the female may be confused with the female merganser which occupies similar habitats. The goldeneye, however, is more plump and has a chunkier duck-like bill.

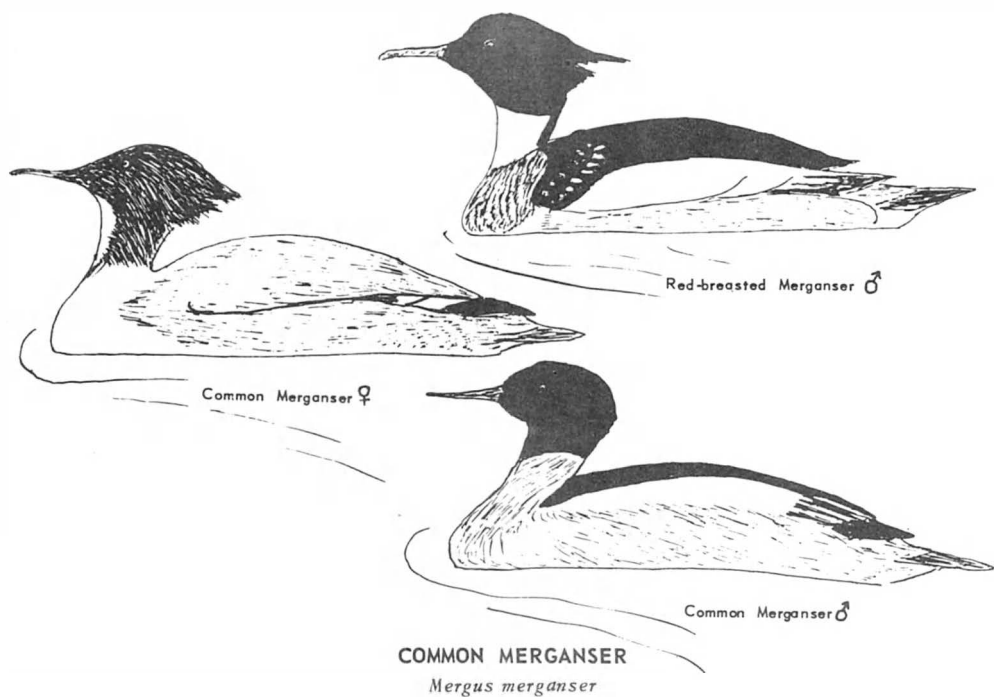
Comments: A duck whose wings seem to whistle in flight usually turns out to be a common goldeneye. It is accordingly known as the "whistler" by many. One of Isle Royale's most common diving ducks, it frequents such sheltered waters as Tobin Harbor and Duncan Bay. Here in summer the male is scarce, but the female and young may often be seen at close range. It is an excellent and swift diver, hence is quite at home on Isle Royale's deep waterways.

Its food is mostly animal matter, especially mussels, crayfish, and small fish. Nests are usually in a hollow tree near water and well above the ground.



Common Goldeneye ♂

Common Goldeneye ♀



Appearance: Male - A long bodied duck, white beneath with black back and dark green head (may appear black); no crest. Female - gray body and sides, white breast, rufous head and neck; crested. Red-breasted merganser, less common on Isle Royale, is similar, but male has rufous breast, white neck collar and is crested, while female is almost identical except that rufous neck blends gradually into the white chest.

Comments: Mergansers are the most frequently seen ducks in the harbors and more open waters of the park and present a splendid opportunity for visitors to observe the family life of a duck. During summer the male is seldom observed, but it is common to see the female with 5 to 20 ducklings trailing behind, even in the roughest water. The young may not all be her own, but may include some she has adopted. Generally mergansers are not too wary, but when disturbed they quickly scoot over the water with considerable pattering of feet, their bodies swaying vigorously from side to side. This is accompanied by a loud swishing of water and a wake that resembles that of a motor boat.

Both common and red-breasted mergansers feed mostly on minnows, chubs, and suckers which they dive for and pursue under the surface. The common usually nests in a hollow tree, brush or rock crevice, while the red-breasted is more of a ground nester.



RED-TAILED HAWK

Buteo jamaicensis

Appearance: Larger than a crow, mostly brown above and white below with some streaks near the belly. Adults can be recognized by their rufous red tail above, but this feature is lacking in immatures. Unlike many hawks, the tail is unbanded.

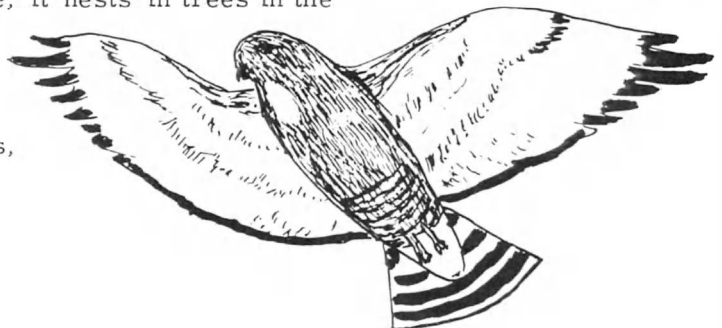
Comments: This bird is occasionally seen here soaring high and circling slowly over elevated rocky ridges with wings rigidly spread and tail expanded like a fan. Sometimes it will utter a shrill, screaming cry. On Isle Royale the red-tailed hawk hunts over open areas primarily for mice but will also indulge in squirrels, reptiles, rabbits, and grasshoppers.

BROAD-WINGED HAWK

Buteo platypterus

Appearance: Adult - A short tailed, stocky, crow-sized hawk with short body and long broad wings. Back and head brown, throat white, underparts white with red lateral stripes, tail brown with broad lateral white bands. Immature - Back brown; underparts whitish with longitudinal streaks; white stripes of tail narrower than adult.

Comments: A plaintive high pitched squeal heard over the tree tops of the deeply wooded areas of the park may reveal a broad-winged hawk, one of the commonest Isle Royale birds of prey. Preferring a solitary existence, it nests in trees in the more secluded upland forests. It feeds on mice, frogs, insects, snakes, squirrels, and occasionally birds.



BALD EAGLE

Haliaeetus leucocephalus

Appearance: Adult - A very large hawk-like bird of prey with a long wing span and a dark body with white head and tail. Immature - All dark except for some white on forward wing lining, but could be confused with golden eagle (rare on Isle Royale) which is either all dark without white on wing (adult) or else has a black-tipped whitish tail (immature).



Comments: This is the park's largest bird of prey. Being birds of water and wilderness, bald eagles are much at home on Isle Royale, yet even here they are thinly scattered. Once common throughout North America, they have retreated in numbers and range with the advance of civilization and today are threatened with extinction.

Bald eagles feed largely on fish. It may be difficult to imagine such a noble bird scrounging for dead fish along a shore, but that is their habit. They will even indulge in thievery by stealing fish caught by the more skillful osprey, forcing the osprey to drop the catch and then snatching the booty in mid-air. Eagles will occasionally kill rabbits, squirrels, mice, or snakes.

A male and female typically will mate for life, returning to the same nest year after year. The nest consists of a large bundle of sticks placed high in a tree, often a towering white pine. Bald eagle nests have been recorded on Isle Royale at Washington Harbor, Five Finger Bay and Malone Bay, but they rarely have been productive in recent years.

The bald eagle calls with a high-pitched, clear, yet subdued whistle (hardly what one might expect from the king of birds) or else a loud screaming call.

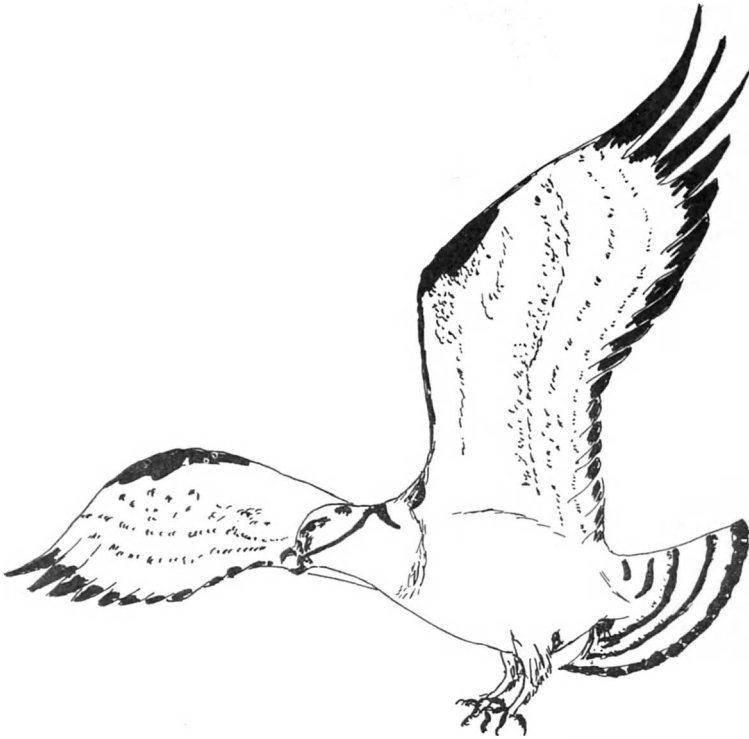
OSPREY

Pandion haliaetus

Appearance: An eagle-like bird of prey with a long wingspread, but somewhat smaller than the bald eagle. Dark brown on top and mostly white below with a black spot at the leading angle of the wings which appear crooked in flight (eagle's are straight). Black and white banded tail.

Comments: The osprey is the distinguished fisherman among birds of prey, in fact it is often called the "fish hawk". After hovering over its prey, readily spotted by ultra-keen vision, it suddenly breaks into a dive, and with a plunge disappears momentarily below the water. Soon it emerges with a fish held tightly in its talons which are specially adapted with spiny projections and curved claws for seizing and retaining prey.

Like the eagle, the osprey typically uses a nest consisting of a large bundle of sticks placed high in a tree. For many years, however, an osprey nested atop Monument Rock on the Lookout Louise Trail.





Peregrine Falcon

PEREGRINE FALCON (Duck Hawk)

Falco peregrinus

Appearance: A crow-sized falcon (about 18 inches) with long, pointed wings. Adult has slate gray on top extending down the sides of the face in sideburns effect. Yellowish and barred below. Immature similar, except brown above and treaked instead of barred below.

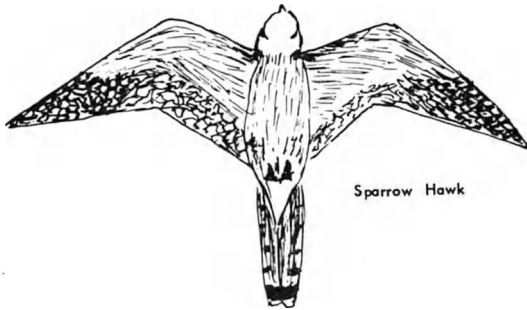
Comments: The peregrine falcon is generally rare, but it may be seen on Isle Royale. It has an affinity for water, and hence the island provides an ideal habitat. Nesting is on crags, cliffs or other high inaccessible places. It preys on shore birds, ducks, flickers and other birds.

SPARROW HAWK

Falco sparverius

Appearance: A small falcon not much bigger than a robin. Like all falcons it has long pointed wings. Adult male has bluish wings, rufous back and tail, pale rusty breast. Top of the head is bluish with a rusty crown and a black and white face. Female has rufous wings and back and a buffy streaked breast.

Comments: This is probably the commonest hawk on Isle Royale. It frequents the ridge tops and open fields where it perches on tall dead trees or rock outcrops with an unobstructed view. Most distinctive is its habit of hovering like a helicopter with rapidly beating wings. Also diagnostic is the nervous twitching of its tail while perching, particularly when first alighting. Its call may be described as "killy, killy, killy," etc. The sparrow hawk typically nests in hollow trees, often excavated by woodpeckers. It is especially fond of grasshoppers, but also takes mice, crickets and other insects.



Sparrow Hawk

PIGEON HAWK (Merlin)

Falco columbarius

Appearance: A small falcon with uniform blue-gray wings, back, and tail, and no striking facial pattern. (Commoner sparrow hawk has rufous back and tail, and a black and white facial pattern.)

Comments: Although more northern in distribution than the sparrow hawk, both species occur on Isle Royale. Unless seen in good light so that the color of the back and tail can be discerned, the two are difficult to separate. In general the two species differ in habitat preference. The pigeonhawk is most frequently seen around the larger inland lakes. It nests in live conifers rather than dead snags as the sparrow hawk does. Also, the pigeon hawk is more of a small bird predator, while the sparrow hawk is mainly insectivorous.

(not illustrated)

SHARP-TAILED GROUSE

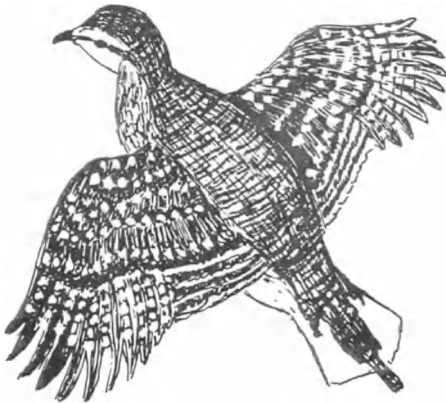
Pedioecetes phasianellus

Appearance: A chicken-like bird, mottled light brown throughout with white appearing on the tail in flight.

Comments: This is the only chicken-like upland bird on Isle Royale where it is a year-round resident. Hikers on the Greenstone Ridge are most apt to see one, especially on the more open brushy areas. Look for it among openings in the spruce woods.

The mating antics of sharp-tails form a spectacular and elaborate routine, taking place at dawn and early sunset in spring and sometimes early fall. The birds gather in an open field where the males are the chief performers and the females passing observers. With partly spread wings, lowered head, raised and spread tail, and distended air sacs, he runs across the ground beating the air with his wings, vibrating his tail and stamping his feet, producing a sort of drumming sound. All males soon join in, and the dance progressively becomes faster and more excited as the climax is reached.

A nest is usually built in the open, but the protective colors of the bird provide concealment. Food consists of weed seeds (especially bindweed), fruit, leaves, buds, flowers and grasshoppers.



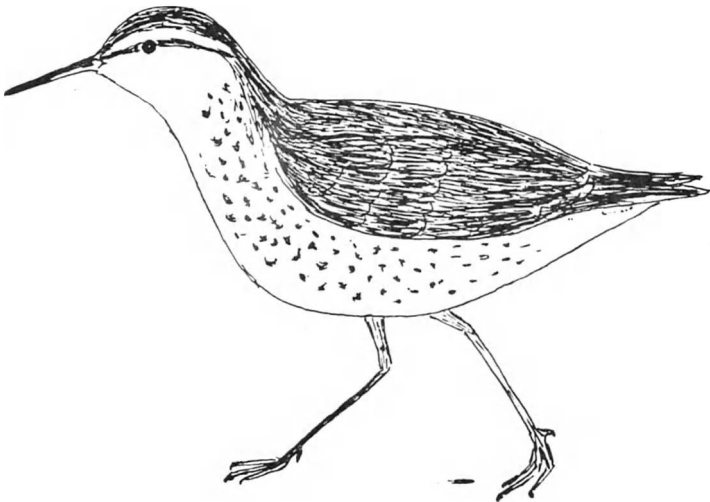
SPOTTED SANDPIPER

Actitis macularia

Appearance: A shore bird almost the size of a robin. Grayish brown above and pure white below with distinctive black spots which are missing in the fall and winter. Bill long and slender. A white stripe passes through the eye.

Comments: This sandpiper may be seen along any of the island's shores, flitting from rock to rock with its rapid, nervous movements of walk and flight. Even when standing it is in perpetual motion with a characteristic teetering action, an excellent clue to identification. Its wings appear to be angled downward in flight as it skims low over the water from one point on shore to another, uttering a shrill "peet-weet" call.

The spotted sandpiper nests near water, often in a hollow on a sandy or gravelly beach or on an upland field where the nest is usually hidden by grass or other vegetation. Eggs are laid in late May. The diet consists primarily of insects.



HERRING GULL

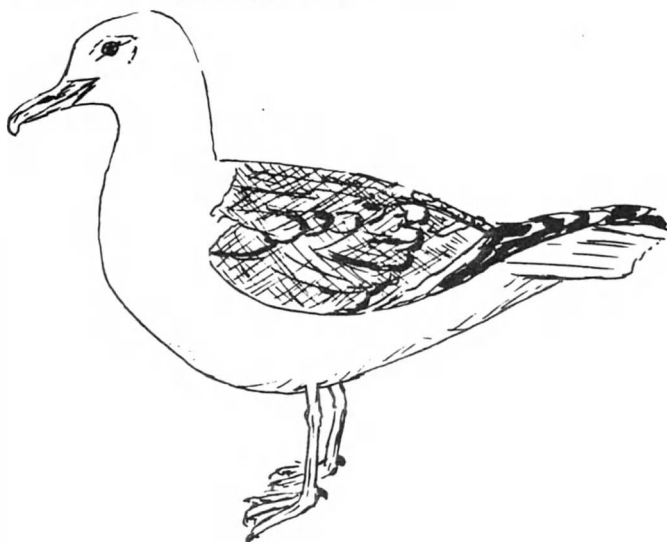
Larus argentatus

Appearance: A large water bird with a stout, slightly curved, medium-sized bill. It is snow white except for the gray back and wings which are tipped with black. The bill is yellow with a red spot on the lower mandible, and the legs are pink.

Comments: This bird is probably familiar to everyone who has spent any time on the east coast or the Great Lakes, and it is the most common water bird on Isle Royale. Almost anywhere along the harbors one can usually see a herring gull flying, soaring, sitting along the shore, or floating on the water.

Gulls feast primarily upon fish and carrion, performing an excellent service in keeping the beaches and waterways clear of refuse, and swarms of them will hover about a commercial fisherman when he is cleaning fish. They also can catch fish themselves by making a shallow dive when a fish comes close to the surface.

Nesting takes place in colonies, usually on the more remote, offshore rocky islands. Here, in June and early July, nests with eggs and young of all ages are scattered over the rocks. The nest is made of grass and little attempt is made to conceal it. Young gulls are quite precocious and can run about and swim within a very short time after hatching. Gulls tend to be somewhat cannibalistic toward their young and a baby approaching the wrong mother by mistake may be pecked to death and eaten. The herring gull utters a wide variety of sounds ranging from harsh squawks to plaintive wails, and a flock of them can make a tremendous volume of noise.

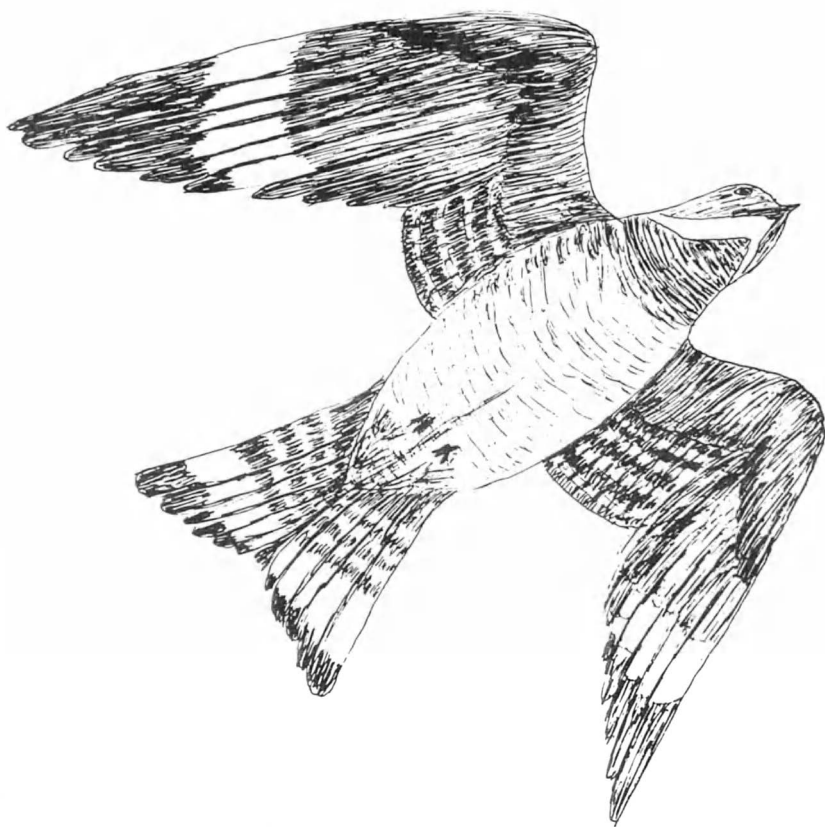


COMMON NIGHTHAWK

Chordeiles minor

Appearance: Slightly larger than a robin (about 12 inches) with long wings, small bill, and practically no neck. Mottled brown with distinct white wing patches, a white band across the tail, and a white throat.

Comments: Though called a night hawk, this bird is not a hawk, but rather is related to the whip-poor-will, which is rare on Isle Royale. It feeds primarily on flying insects which it catches on the wing. Its flight is much like a swallow — rapid and erratic — and is usually observed in this activity at twilight, especially near bodies of water. During the day it is primarily quiescent and lays on the ground, perfectly camouflaged by its protective coloration. The call is short and nasal.



Belted Kingfisher



BELTED KINGFISHER

Megasceryle alcyon

Appearance: A stout bird larger than a robin with a conspicuous ragged crest and a long sharp-pointed bill. Bluish gray on top extending as a belt around the chest. Predominantly white below with a white belt around the back of the neck. Female has a band of reddish brown beneath.

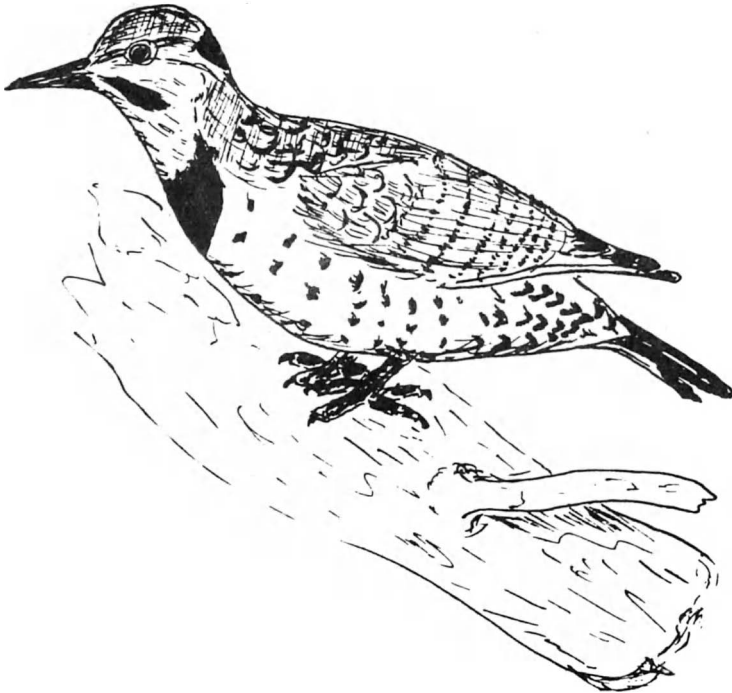
Comments: This bird is easily recognized, even from a distance, by the manner in which it follows the shores of lakes and streams. Swooping from one overhanging branch to another with a loud rattling call, it skims over the water in search of prey. If a fish is spotted, the kingfisher will dive, seize the fish in its bill, carry it to the nearest branch, and beat it to death. Its diet consists mostly of minnows, chubs, crawfish, frogs, and insects. The kingfisher usually nests in a furrow dug into the side of a bank.

YELLOW-SHAFTED FLICKER

Colaptes auratus

Appearance: A handsome brownish woodpecker larger than a robin. Back mostly brownish, barred transversely with black; back of head gray with a bright red patch; underparts tan with black spots on breast; a black "mustache" on side of face (male only) and a black necklace. In flight a white rump patch and yellow wing shafts are conspicuous (hence its name).

Comments: The flicker is one of the commonest woodpeckers of Isle Royale, but unlike most of the others it does not remain here throughout the year. Though flickers nest here during the early summer months, their numbers attain high proportions only during migration when sometimes many birds might be flushed from the ground in a single open field. Unlike most woodpeckers, it spends considerable time on the ground, probably in search of ants, its main diet. It also eats other insects as well as fruits and nuts. The flicker usually excavates its own hole in a dead tree, often a birch or aspen, and in so doing it provides nesting sites for many other birds, especially sparrow hawks and tree swallows.



PILEATED WOODPECKER

Dryocopus pileatus

Appearance: A black crow-sized woodpecker with a bright red crest and white markings on the side of its head and neck and underneath its wings (visible in flight).

Comments: As it sweeps through the deeply forested areas of the park this bird is a splendid flashing spectacle of black, white, and red. It is the largest woodpecker of the heavily timbered northern wilderness, but it has retreated with the advance of civilization. Today, Isle Royale is indeed a sanctuary for it.

The nest of the pileated woodpecker is typically built in a hole of a dead tree. It excavates large oblong-shaped holes which are often later used by sparrow hawks, wood ducks, and other tree hole nesters. Pileated woodpeckers feed on beetles, ants and wild fruits.



HAIRY WOODPECKER

Dendrocopos villosus

Appearance: Plumage pattern almost identical to that of the downy woodpecker (see next bird). It is considerably larger, however, being about the size of a robin.

Comments: The hairy woodpecker, like the downy, is a year-round resident of Isle Royale, and is about as common. It tends to be more shy than the downy, however, and is less easily observed. It feeds primarily on the larvae of wood boring insects and nests in holes in dead tree trunks.

(not illustrated)



Downy Woodpecker

DOWNY WOODPECKER

Dendrocopos pubescens

Appearance: A black and white woodpecker a bit larger than a sparrow. Black on top with a broad white strip down the center of the back, white spotting on the wings, white underparts and outer tail feathers. Males have a small red patch on back of the head. Similar to the hairy woodpecker, but is smaller and has a more delicate bill and a few black bars on the outer white tail feathers.

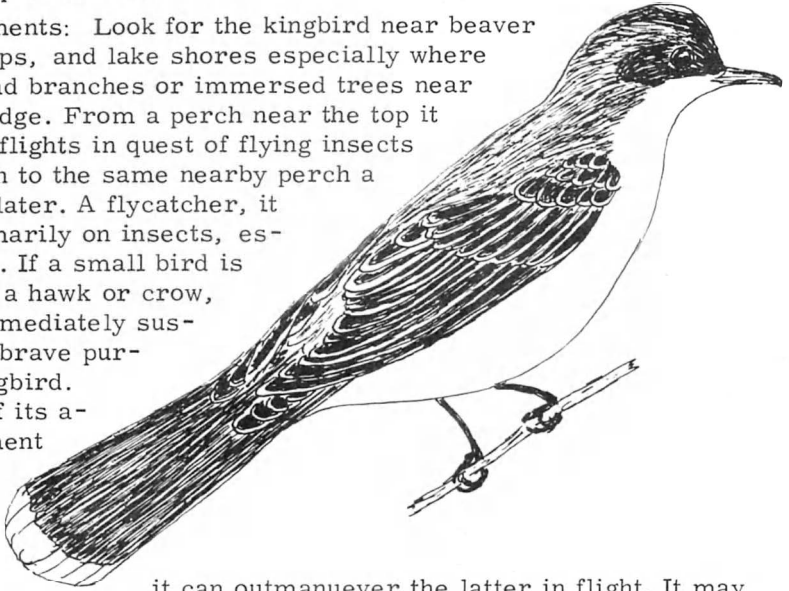
Comments: This widely distributed Isle Royale bird probably is our most abundant woodpecker. Furthermore, since it is not shy of mankind, it is easily observed here. Downy woodpeckers live here all year and nest in holes which they excavate in dead trees, usually aspen or birch. They food on scale insects, moths, and caterpillars. Listen for their piercing, chattery call as they undulate in flight from one tree trunk to the next.

EASTERN KINGBIRD

Tyrannus tyrannus

Appearance: A robin-sized bird, black on top and pure white beneath with a red patch on the crown (not always seen) and a white band at the tip of the tail.

Comments: Look for the kingbird near beaver ponds, swamps, and lake shores especially where there are dead branches or immersed trees near the water's edge. From a perch near the top it makes short flights in quest of flying insects only to return to the same nearby perch a few instants later. A flycatcher, it subsists primarily on insects, especially bees. If a small bird is seen chasing a hawk or crow, one might immediately suspect that the brave pursuer is a kingbird. The secret of its ability to torment a much larger bird undoubtedly lies in the fact that



it can outmaneuver the latter in flight. It may peck at its victim or alight on its back but is not equipped to do any real damage.

Its call is a sharp shrill chattering cry. Nests are in bushes or trees.

OLIVE-SIDED FLYCATCHER

Nuttallornis borealis

Appearance: An olive brown color completely enshrouds the upper parts and extends like a vest along its sides. Underneath it is all white. The vest and a white patch above each wing near the rump set this bird apart from other flycatchers. Slightly smaller than a robin.



Comments: A typical perch for the olive-sided flycatcher is atop a dead tree or in a dead limb, especially near swampy areas. From here it will make short excursions on the wing after insects and then return to the same or a nearby perch. Its call is loud and distinctive, a clear "quick — three beers!!"

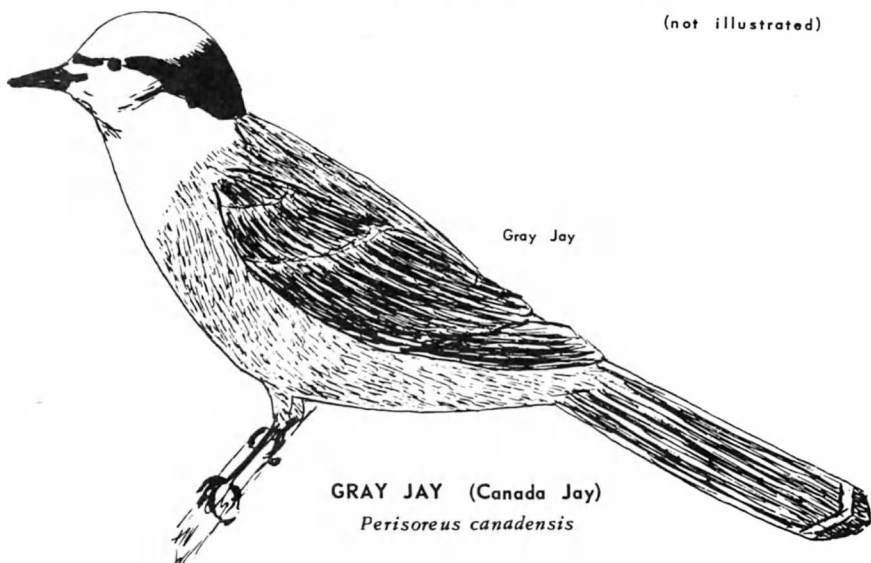
TREE SWALLOW

Iridoprocne bicolor

Appearance: Slightly smaller than a sparrow, with long, slim wings and a darting, graceful flight. Has a bluish or greenish-black back, wings and tail and brilliant white underparts. The only other swallow likely to be seen on Isle Royale is the barn swallow which has a deeply forked "swallow tail" rather than the shallow notched tail of this species.

Comments: Tree swallows nest in holes, usually made by woodpeckers, in dead trees. They feed on flying insects over open areas. Beaver ponds, where trees are often killed by flooding, offer ideal conditions with their opening of the forest canopy and the many dead snags. These ponds probably increase the production of insects as well, and few beaver ponds lack tree swallows.

(not illustrated)



Appearance: A grayish bird somewhat larger than a robin. Dark gray above, lighter beneath. Head and neck white with a black patch on top of the head. Bill short, tail quite long.

Comments: This jay is well known to the camper of the north woods, and its popular name, "camp robber" is well deserved. Stealing quietly into camp, it will perch innocently on a nearby tree limb and wait there for the appropriate moment to snatch a piece of bread from the table. Or it may even have the audacity to perch on a hot fireplace and grab a piece of bacon out of the frying pan.

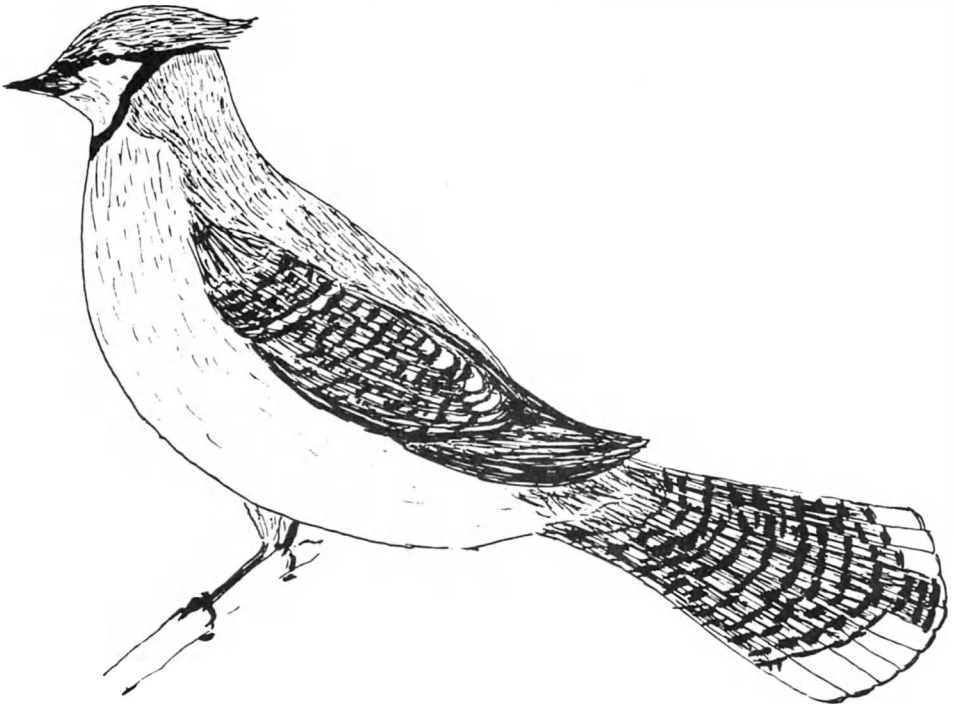
The Canada jay is found on Isle Royale throughout the year where it nests in early spring or even late winter, usually in a conifer. The dark gray young are therefore almost full size by summer.

BLUE JAY

Cyanocitta cristata

Appearance: A bluish bird about 2 inches longer than a robin, with a long tail and a well-defined crest. Upper parts are various shades of blue and purplish blue; lower parts are white and light gray. A black necklace extends around the neck, and the wing and tail are edged with white.

Comments: The familiar blue jay is intelligent and comical, but at the same time noisy, belligerent and mischievous. This bird is a nest robber and will eat both the eggs and young of other birds. The blue jay feeds primarily upon vegetable matter, especially nuts and berries, but it also eats some animal matter, such as beetles, grasshoppers and scale insects.



COMMON RAVEN

Corvus corax

Appearance: Similar to crow, but larger and has a more wedge-shaped tail and shaggy throat feathers.

Comments: Ravens are permanent residents on Isle Royale (crows migrate), often forming flocks of five to fifteen birds. Their scavenging habits lead them to the carcasses of wolf-killed moose, where they feed, often within a few feet of the wolves. Although wolves sometimes chase ravens, it is usually with half-hearted effort and appears playful. The ravens wait until the wolf is almost upon them, then fly up only a few feet, usually landing again close by to resume feeding when the wolf retires.



Appearance: A large (about 20 inches long), shiny, all black bird with sturdy bill and feet. Only other all black bird this large on Isle Royale is the common raven, which is larger and has a huskier call.

Comments: Little need be said about the crow, for nearly everyone is familiar with it. It is common in summer on the island where it feeds on a wide variety of food including birds, frogs, toads, snakes, miscellaneous insects, seeds, fruits, and carrion.

(not illustrated)



BLACK-CAPPED CHICKADEE

Parus atricapillus

Appearance: A robust little bird the size of a small sparrow. Top of head and throat black, side of head and nape of neck white, back of wings gray, underparts white. Bill stubby and pointed.

Comments: Whether it be a warm, balmy day in summer or a cold blustery day in winter, the hearty chickadee seems ever present and active. Its exuberent "chickadee-dee-dee" call can be heard from almost any location on Isle Royale. It is a nervous little bird and is typically seen in small flocks flitting rapidly from branch to branch and chattering as it goes. Unlike most birds, it will alight on the trunk of a tree or hang upside down from a branch. It is friendly and trusting, often alighting within a few feet of a human.

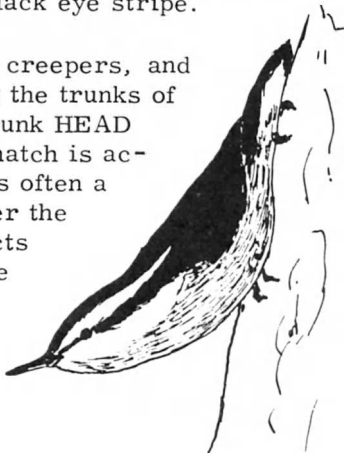
The chickadee typically nests in old stumps or in holes in trees. It feeds mostly on caterpillars and moths and their eggs, but also includes other insects, seeds, and fruits in its diet.

RED-BREASTED NUTHATCH

Sitta canadensis

Appearance: A small, chunky, short-tailed bird with a blue-gray back, lighter underparts, and dark cap. Has a rusty breast and belly with a black stripe through the eye. The larger White-breasted nuthatch, rare on Isle Royale, has only a faint rusty wash on the breast and belly and the white facial area has no black eye stripe.

Comments: Although woodpeckers, creepers, and some of the warblers regularly creep along the trunks of trees, only nuthatches creep down a tree trunk **HEAD FIRST**. The voice of the Red-breasted nuthatch is accurately described as a tiny tin horn, and is often a means of detecting the bird as it creeps over the trunks and limbs of trees, looking for insects or their larvae and eggs in the cracks in the bark. Listen for them in the spruce-fir forests.



BROWN CREEPER

Certhia familiaris

Appearance: Much like a nuthatch in size and habits, but with a lightly striped brown back, a longer, curved bill, and a much longer tail, which is used as a prop while climbing.

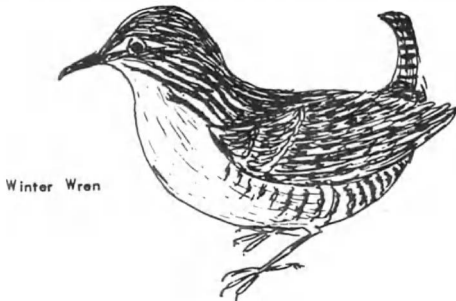
Comments: The high, thin, "see" call note, or the more rarely given song, which is longer and clearer than the call note, may call your attention to this mouse-like little bird as it spirals up tree trunks searching for insects under the loose bark. (not illustrated)

WINTER WREN

Troglodytes troglodytes

Appearance: A very small brown bird with a slender pointed bill and short tail which is held erect in typical wren-like fashion.

Comments: The winter wren's tingling song is long and continuous, in fact is probably the most prolonged utterance of any bird on Isle Royale. Once heard, it will never be forgotten. Few people actually see the bird, however, because of its inconspicuous coloring, small size, and habit of dwelling among the cover of brush and shrubbery. When perched, it habitually bobs or wags from side to side, a habit which helps in recognition. It prefers well shaded tangled undergrowth in the damp island forests, and the nest is usually under logs or roots.



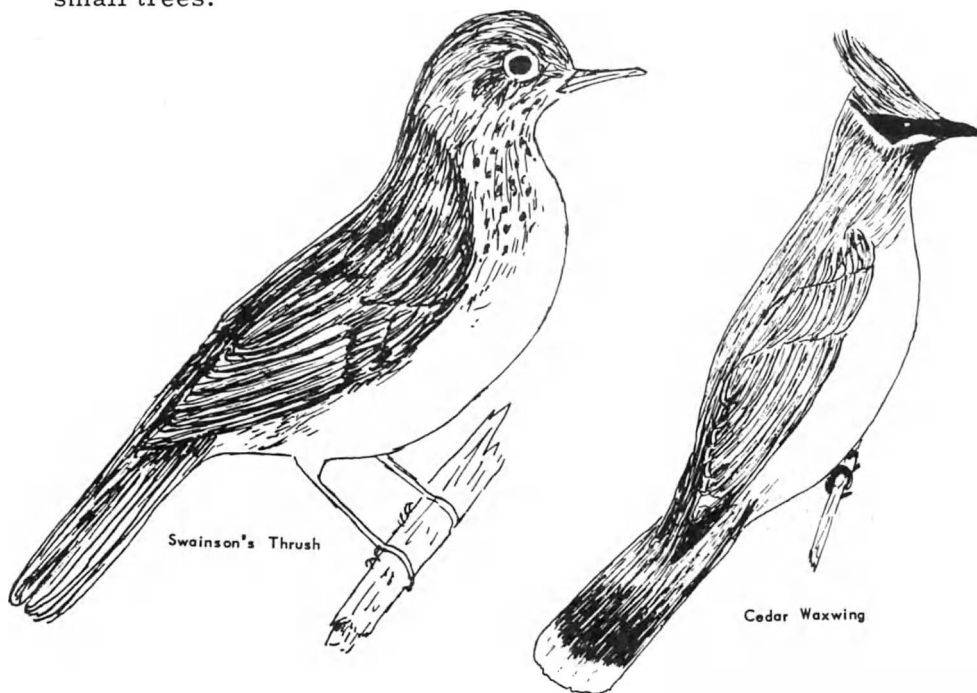
Winter Wren

SWAINSON'S THRUSH (Olive-backed Thrush)

Hylocichla ustulata

Appearance: A thrush between the size of a sparrow and a robin. Back and head plain olive brown; underparts white with dark spots near the front. Buffy ring around the eye. The only other thrush likely to be seen here in summer is the hermit thrush which has a bright rust-colored tail.

Comments: This bird is best observed in the evening hours when its song is often loud and clear as it spirals up the musical scale. The song of the hermit thrush, also flute-like, begins with a long sustained note, lacking in the song of the Swainson's. When not singing it moves unobtrusively through the shrubs and low branches of the forest. It is a ground feeder, subsisting on worms, snails, insects, and some fruits. Its nest is also low, usually in shrubs and small trees.



CEDAR WAXWING

Bombycilla cedrorum

Appearance: A slender, trim bird somewhat larger than a sparrow with soft blending coloration and a conspicuous crest. Pinkish brown above toward the head blending into gray toward the tail; yellow-brown below. Trimmed with a splash of red at the wing tip, bright yellow at the tip of the tail and a jet black mask through the eyes.

Comments: A soft ringing sound from the trees may turn out to be a cedar waxwing, and if there is one bird, there are probably more nearby. It is a common summer resident here, nesting in spreading trees or shrubs.

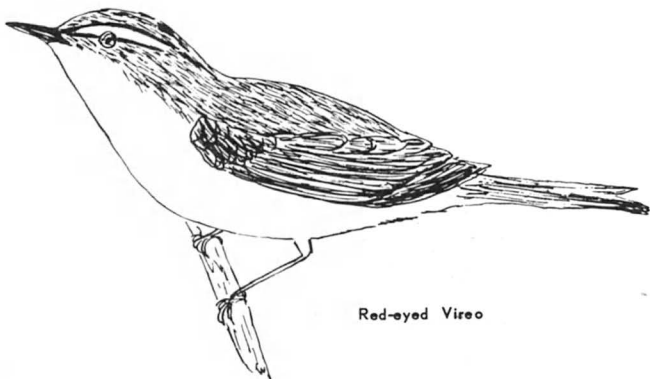
Fruit, especially berries, is the favorite food, but they also take insects such as caterpillars and beetles. They often perch atop a dead tree making short flights to catch flying insects.

RED-EYED VIREO

Vireo olivaceus

Appearance: Warbler-like, about the size of a sparrow. Upper parts olive-tan; underparts white. A white stripe through the eye is bordered by 2 dark stripes. The eye is red, a feature seldom noticed from afar.

Comments: Though difficult to see as it moves quietly through the cover of tree branches, it can be detected by its loud clear robin-like song. Probably no other bird in these parts sings as incessantly as this vireo. Its nest suspends from a branch 5 to 15 feet above the ground.



Red-eyed Vireo



Nashville Warbler

NASHVILLE WARBLER

Vermivora ruficapilla

Appearance: A small bird with a bright yellow throat, breast and belly; a slate gray head; and olive green back, wings, and tail. White ring around the eye.

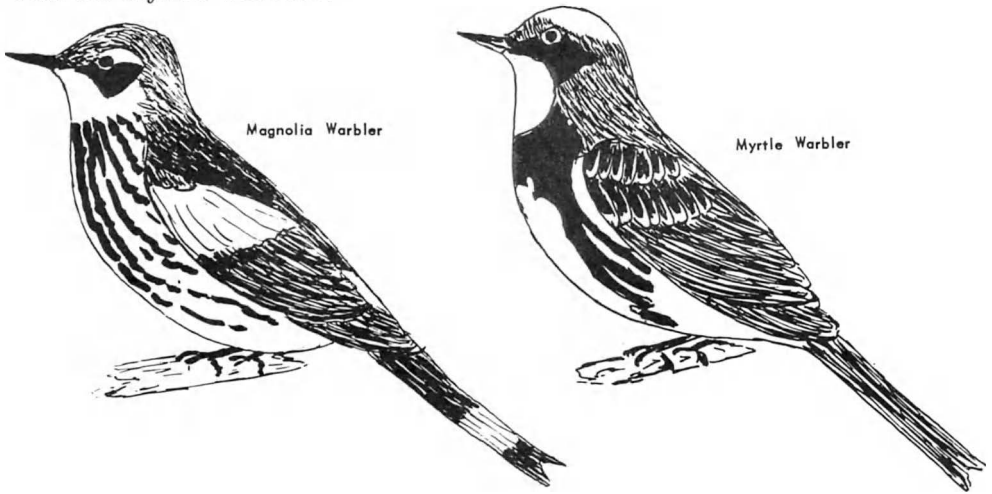
Comments: The name would seem to indicate that it is a Tennessee bird, but it only migrates through the south. On Isle Royale it is one of the most common summer warblers. Heard more often than seen, it utters a loud "teetsit, teetsit, teetsit" followed by a trill. Its song can be heard from most any forest opening in spring and summer, though it prefers aspen and birch trees and it will nest in either of these.

MAGNOLIA WARBLER

Dendroica magnolia

Appearance: A slate and yellow bird adorned with black and white. Upper parts slatey except for large white wing patches, a wide white band midway across the tail and a yellow rump. Yellow below with heavy black streaks extending from the lower throat to the belly.

Comments: This is one of the more brilliant of the island's warblers, and its unique plumage coloration is difficult to confuse with any other. Look for it among dense spruce and fir foliage in summer, especially on the offshore islands, where it frequently is associated with the myrtle warbler.



MYRTLE WARBLER

Dendroica coronata

Appearance: Small and beautifully adorned with striking splashes of color. Predominately slate gray back with bright yellow patches on the crown of the head, shoulder, and base of the tail. Mostly white below, with black streaks on the sides which coalesce into a single heavy band below the white throat. Has 2 white wingbars and a black patch on each side of the face. Female and immatures are similar but less striking.

Comments: This common bird on Isle Royale and throughout eastern North America is so named because of its preference for myrtle berries in some parts of the country. It is one of the first warblers to arrive in the spring and last to leave in the fall. Its movements are more deliberate than most warblers. It feeds and nests in most forested parts of the island.

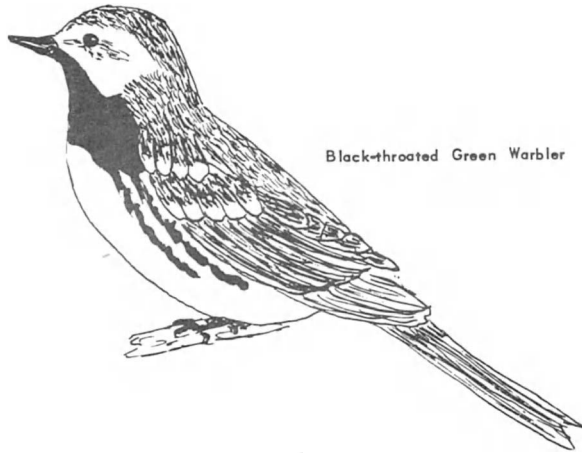
BLACK-THROATED BLUE WARBLER

Dendroica caerulescens

Appearance: Male - Blue-gray upper parts, black throat and sides, white breast and belly. Female -- plain brown-backed bird with a small white wing spot.

Comments: Except for stragglers during migration, this warbler is restricted to the high, warmer ridges of the southwestern third of Isle Royale where the sugar maple-yellow birch forest occurs. Hikers on the upper part of the Island Mine trail, or on the Greenstone Ridge between Windigo and Lake Desor will hear this bird during the breeding season in early summer. The song has much the same quality as the black-throated green warbler, but is more lazy, lower pitched, and often shorter. It is of interest to compare this species with its close relative, the much commoner black-throated green which inhabits the more widespread spruce-fir-birch forest type.

(not illustrated)



Black-throated Green Warbler

BLACK-THROATED GREEN WARBLER

Dendroica virens

Appearance: An olive-green backed, white-bellied warbler with a brilliant patch of yellow on the sides of the head, and a jet black throat. The wings are grayish with two white wing-bars.

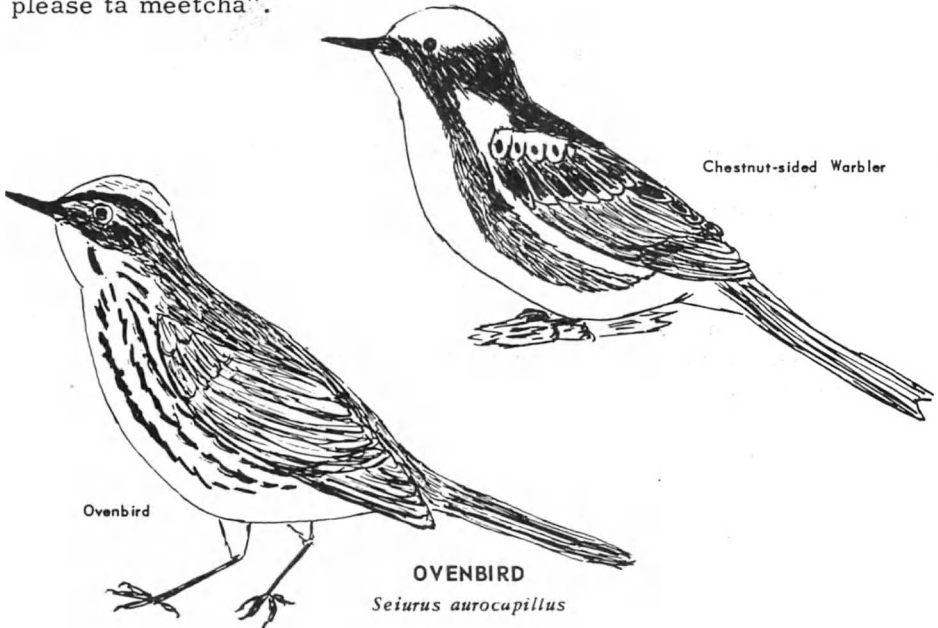
Comments: This common inhabitant of the upper treetop strata of the spruce-fir-birch forest is most often recognized by its call which sounds like a "see see see suzee" uttered with a lazy inflection. Nests are typically built in coniferous trees.

CHESTNUT-SIDED WARBLER

Dendroica pensylvanica

Appearance: A striking warbler with chestnut sides and a yellow crown. Longitudinal streaks of black, olive, and white above. Underparts white except for the chestnut side stripes. Two light bars on the wings.

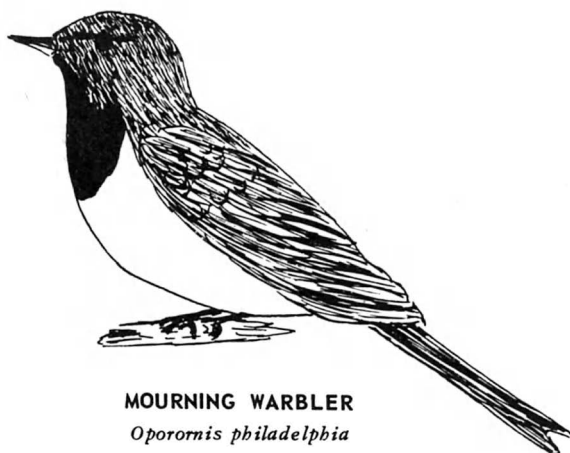
Comments: One of the commonest warblers of Isle Royale's brushy woodland borders. Its call is distinctive and once heard is easily remembered; it may be crudely described as "please, please, please ta meetcha".



Appearance: A large warbler with a thrush-like appearance. Olive-brown above, pale buff with dark stripes below. Has a black stripe above the eye and an orange crown.

Comments: Though classed as a warbler, the ovenbird looks and acts more like a thrush. It is not a bird of the treetops, but rather lives on the ground walking a great deal and bobbing its tail as it moves. Its easily recognized call is a "teacher, teacher, teacher, teacher, teacher", becoming progressively louder with each syllable uttered. In spite of the distinctive call and ground habit, it is seldom seen by man because the ovenbird is extremely shy.

It builds a nest of grassy weeds, leaves, and small roots on the ground with a side entrance like an outdoor oven, hence the name ovenbird.



MOURNING WARBLER

Oporornis philadelphia

Appearance: Male - upper parts olive except for head which is slate gray. Underneath yellow with a black throat and bib. Female - same except throat and bib are slate gray.

Comments: This bird lacks the highly nervous flitting movements through the upper treetops characteristic of most warblers; instead it moves more quietly and deliberately through the dense underbrush, where it also nests. Hazel thickets seem especially preferred on Isle Royale.

RED-WINGED BLACKBIRD

Agelaius phoeniceus

Appearance: Male black with red patches trimmed below with a line of yellow at the bend of the wing. Females and young uniformly brown above, striped below. All have sharp, slightly conical bills, and are about a third larger than sparrows.

Comments: The red-wing's song is a mellow, liquid, o-ka-reee, the first two notes staccato, the third higher and sustained. There is also a sharp call note, and a high, downward slurring call similar in quality to the last note of the song. These are birds of open wet places, frequenting bogs, beaver ponds, and the rush-lined shores of inland lakes on Isle Royale. Nests are built a foot or more above the water in a clump of reeds, cattails, or small semi-aquatic shrubs.

(not illustrated)

COMMON GRACKLE

Quiscalus quiscula

Appearance: Larger than a robin. Iridescent black, with relatively long, sharp bills, and long, wedge-shaped tail which, in the males, has a crease in the center, giving a V-shaped appearance. Females are slightly smaller, less iridescent, and with shorter tails.

Comments: If you should hear a bird that sounds like an old, rusty hinge, it probably is a grackle. This is as close as they come to song — a husky, rasping, double-noted call, rising on the last syllable. They are often seen in flocks around open water, particularly old beaver ponds with muddy shores and dead trees for perches.

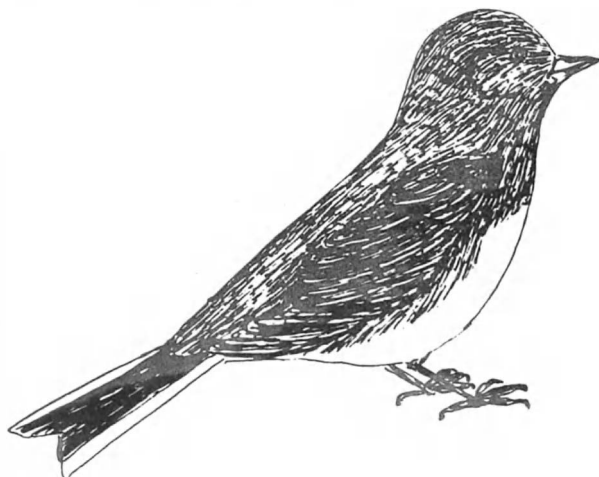
(not illustrated)

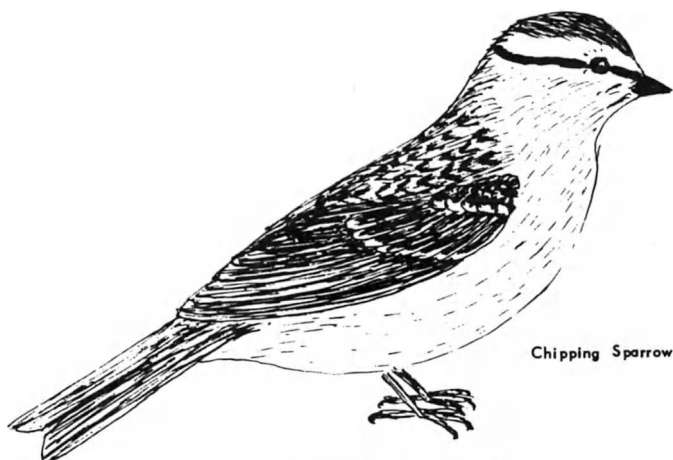
SLATE-COLORED JUNCO

Junco hyemalis

Appearance: Resembles a sparrow in size and form. A rich slate gray color covers the entire top and sides, and extends around the upper chest like a bib. A sharp line of demarkation separates this from the white lower chest and belly. White outer tail feathers are conspicuous in flight.

Comments: Although the junco is not a common summer resident of Isle Royale, visitors are apt to see many of them in late summer and fall during migration. If one is seen, there are probably dozens more close by, flitting among the low tree branches and shrubs. Here they feed upon seeds, caterpillars, and other insects.





Chipping Sparrow

CHIPPING SPARROW

Spizella passerina

Appearance: A small sparrow with streaked brownish upper parts and pale gray under parts, the gray extending around the nape of the neck. Has rufous red crown, below which a white and a black stripe extends through the eye. White wing bars.

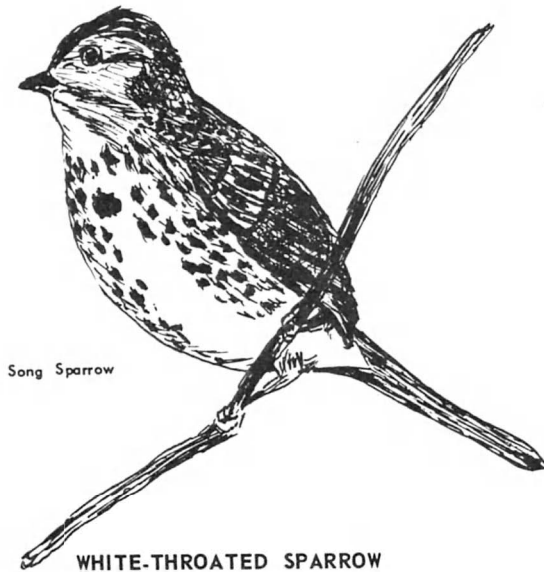
Comments: This sparrow is common throughout all of North America, and although only a few nest on Isle Royale it is frequently seen during migration. Not a timid bird, it is one of the easiest sparrows to inspect closely. Its call is a simple trill. It nests on the ground or in low bushes and, like other sparrows, spends much time at the shrub level. It is more of an insect eater than most sparrows, with insects constituting about 40% of its diet. Seeds make up the rest.

SONG SPARROW

Melospiza melodia

Appearance: A moderately large sparrow, black and brown streaked above, and white with brown streaks below. A dark spot on the center of its streaked breast sets it apart from any other bird on the island.

Comments: On Isle Royale the song sparrow is commonly found in shrubby places — especially along the shorelines. The bird is not at all timid and spends most of its time on the ground. It has a loud and unmistakable song usually issued from a low perch on a shrub, boulder, or tree branch. It holds its head high, opens its mouth wide and seems to sing to the whole world. It nests on the ground or in bushes and is primarily a seed eater but will also indulge in berries or insects.



Song Sparrow

WHITE-THROATED SPARROW

Zonotrichia albicollis

Appearance: More brightly marked than most sparrows and with a white throat. Has a black and white striped crown, a bright yellow spot between the bill and eye, a clear, pale breast, a brown back, and white wing bars. May be confused with the white-crowned sparrow, seen occasionally on Isle Royale, which has similar markings but lacks the white throat and yellow face dot. Immatures are similar to the adults except that markings are not as well defined and the breast is streaked.

Comments: This handsome sparrow is best known for its striking song which consists of slow, deliberate whistled notes on two or three different tones. Since the white-throated sparrow typically breeds in the coniferous woods of northeastern North America, Isle Royale is ideally suited to its tastes. It is the most common sparrow in the park.



White-throated Sparrow

Like most sparrows, the white - throated spends much of its time near the ground among the brush and ground cover. Here it nests and feeds, mostly upon seeds, insects and wild fruit.

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Cover: Common Loon — A scratchboard Illustration
by Nadine Janke



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