



Treed swamp habitat/  
Habitat de marécage arboré  
Photo: Jenny Andrews

## Efforts to conserve Ontario forest birds are rooted in landowner stewardship BY IAN FIFE

Ian Fife is the Ontario Forest Birds Program Coordinator for Birds Canada.



The golden feathers of the Prothonotary Warbler seem to almost glow when reflecting on the sombre waters of the treed swamps where they nest. Tragically, these “swamp candles” and other equally dazzling forest birds have been flickering out in recent decades.

In southern Ontario in the 1980s and 1990s, Bird Studies Canada (now Birds Canada) and Long Point Bird Observatory began research on Prothonotary

Warblers, and continued a study on Hooded Warblers initiated by Mary Gartshore. Over the decades, concern for forest birds grew while their habitat declined, and these initiatives developed into the Ontario Forest Birds at Risk (OFBAR) program. Thanks to increased funding and dedicated staff, four more Species at Risk were gradually added to this program: Acadian Flycatcher, Cerulean Warbler, Louisiana Waterthrush, and Red-headed



Ontario Woodlot Association members hiking/Membres de l'Ontario Woodlot Association en randonnée  
Photo: John Pineau

Woodpecker. Happily, Hooded Warblers increased in number and, no longer considered at risk, are now outside the program's scope. Over the years, OFBAR has grown into a strong, foundational program of Birds Canada, working to protect and conserve forest bird Species at Risk and their habitat.

Our efforts are focused in heavily developed areas of southern Ontario where most species and their habitats are in decline. In particular, the Carolinian forest ecosystem of southwestern Ontario is where 80% of OFBAR's work takes place. Despite being one of the smallest ecosystems, the Carolinian forest is the most diverse in Canada. It also presents the greatest conservation challenge due to significant habitat loss. Some areas now have only 3-5% forest cover, whereas before European settlement, that proportion would have been 80-90%. The small portion of Carolinian forest that remains provides habitat for over 500 rare or endangered species in Canada. Despite these devastating numbers,

complete deforestation of woodlots by business operators continues today with very little response from local municipal council members. The OFBAR program is responding to the urgent need for forest bird management strategies in the Carolinian region and for collaborative efforts to address the habitat loss and species declines.

Over the past three years, the OFBAR program has been increasingly considering how we can protect the greatest diversity of other forest birds while protecting our five target Species at Risk. Results from monitoring our target species and other forest birds are guiding this approach. In addition to surveying to find out where and how many adult birds are present, we try to find and monitor nests of our target species to examine trends in the number of young produced annually. We also collect data on forest invasive species and tree diseases. We then share the information gathered on each property with the respective owners so they can become better forest stewards for their own woodlot and for birds.

"The Ontario Woodlot Association has enjoyed a fruitful and mutually beneficial partnership with Birds Canada in recent years. Birds Canada is helping us all to better understand how to manage our woodlots in the best possible ways to support healthy bird populations. We just see it as the right thing to do!"

- **JOHN PINEAU**, Executive Director,  
Ontario Woodlot Association



Indigo Bunting/  
Passerin indigo  
Photo: Trisha Snider



Prothonotary Warbler/Paruline orangée  
Photo: Sue Drotos

## “Working with private landowners has been a wonderful experience.”

OFBAR is enthusiastic to build our landowner base to begin applying these conservation efforts. It’s important to include private landowners because they own 90% of the woodlots in southern Ontario. Our engagement efforts with private and public landowners have surpassed my own expectations when I began in this position three-and-a-half years ago! Since 2018, we have improved our relationship with numerous Ontario Conservation Authorities and private landowners, including working closely with land managers and the forestry industry to discuss Species at Risk management practices to maintain habitat.

A particular engagement effort I’m proud of is being voted onto the Executive Committee of the Ontario Woodlot Association (OWA), a province-wide private landowner organization that strives to: “promote the sustainable management of Ontario’s forests by providing guidance, advice and best practices to woodlot owners that allows them to evolve as stewards of these most valuable lands”.

John Pineau, Executive Director of the OWA, states, “Many of our members are active birders and very much want their woodlands to provide good habitat and healthy ecosystems for a full variety of bird species.”

The OFBAR program has delivered numerous presentations on bird conservation to OWA members and contributes a “Bird Feature” article in their quarterly magazine, *The Ontario Woodlander*.

Working with private landowners has been a wonderful experience. Some of them do more for conservation than I could have imagined and are rightfully proud of their efforts. But how can we encourage even more landowners to take on our recommendations, and see how small changes can benefit them as well as the birds? OFBAR staff are seeking to better understand private woodlot management through our Landowner Stewardship Index questionnaire. Answers to the questionnaire will allow program staff to gauge the program’s performance and illuminate how

we might improve our engagement approach. We aim to identify for each landowner a particular issue that they may be overlooking and then work with them on that issue to increase their woodlot stewardship. With this engagement effort, we hope to inject a mindful conservation approach, focused on a healthy forest for birds and biodiversity, to woodlot management.

The OFBAR program’s work has progressed well in a short period of time to correct poor forest management decisions of the past. We are excited to keep moving forward with our partners to protect forest bird populations and their habitat. These efforts are inspired by the program’s five focal species, a varied and delightful handful of feathered gems. You can learn more about them, and why we’re so dedicated to their conservation, in the species profiles at: [birdscanada.org/bird-science/ofbar](http://birdscanada.org/bird-science/ofbar).

### VOLUNTEERS WANTED

We are looking for volunteers for a related program, the Forest Bird Monitoring Program (FBMP). Participants will visit specific properties in Ontario to monitor forest birds. This program is best suited to birders with intermediate-to-expert bird ID skills. To learn more about the FBMP or OFBAR programs, contact Ian Fife at [ifife@birdscanada.org](mailto:ifife@birdscanada.org) or visit [birdscanada.org/bird-science/ontario-forest-birds/](http://birdscanada.org/bird-science/ontario-forest-birds/).