

OFO's Rare Bird Ambassadors

****Please send feedback to ambassadors@ofo.ca****

Overview

Birdwatching and bird photography have both become exceedingly popular in the last few decades and rare birds that show up in Ontario always generate a lot of interest.

When a rare bird appears on private property or public property where access and/or crowd control may become an issue, careful planning is required to ensure that the owner/host/property manager, birders, photographers and the bird all have a positive experience.

OFO's Rare Bird Ambassador plan is about empowering Ontario birders with the tools and resources needed so that they can coordinate with property owners to ensure the best outcomes for all parties. The goal is to promote positive relations between landowners, birders, and photographers ultimately resulting in happy people and happy birds. Birders can still decide if they want to share sightings or not; we just hope that this makes the decision easier and spreads out the workload related to managing rare bird observations. You don't have to belong to OFO to participate.

Do you have a rare bird on your property? [for landowners]

Congratulations! Having a rare bird is a very special experience; one that you may never have again.

With proper planning you can share the excitement with a lot of very grateful birdwatchers (birders) and photographers – OFO is here to help with all aspects involved. Please [contact the Ambassador panel](#) and they will set up a confidential consultation to:

1. Assist with identification and confirm your rare bird
2. Make sure it gets documented for the official record
3. Discuss possible visiting options for birders and photographers
4. Coordinate the viewing with the team of volunteers

What to expect

Many birders and photographers may be interested in seeing "your" bird. This can seem very daunting, but with careful planning this can turn into a very memorable experience while maintaining the bird's safety and your property. The vast majority of former rare

bird hosts cherish their memories of the bird and all of the people who came from far and wide to see it.

The team of volunteers can be on site whenever birders and photographers are, and can supply a guestbook for you to keep, along with a donation jar. The monies raised can be used however you see fit – past hosts have used it for personal expenses, bird food, or to make a donation to their favourite charity. It's your decision. Depending on your specific circumstances, organizers may set up a cordoned off area for birders to stick to and/or a set of visitation rules (e.g. restricted days/hours to visit, or even pre-booked time slots).

All decisions are ultimately yours and can be amended at any time.

Did you hear about a rare bird? [for birders]

The overarching goal of OFO's Rare Bird Ambassador program is to try to facilitate as many rare bird viewing opportunities for the Ontario birding community as possible, all while ensuring positive experiences for the hosts, whether they be private landowners or some other authority (e.g. a conservation authority).

If you hear about a rare bird, please [contact the Ambassador panel](#) and they will help you to arrange viewing for Ontario birders or have one of the local Rare Bird Ambassadors do the same. If you're in a position to negotiate access, then please do; the team is happy to offer support and guidance to help you.

Remember not to overwhelm the observer or host– a barrage of emails/messages from excited birders may overwhelm potential hosts. Whether the bird is on private or public property, [the Ambassador panel](#) can help with contacting the proper authority.

Want to become a Rare Bird Ambassador? [for prospective ambassadors]

We are always looking to grow the team of Rare Bird Ambassadors.

As a Rare Bird Ambassador, you are making yourself available to be called into action should a rare bird turn up in your area. The goal is to have enough Ambassadors to cover all areas of the province assuming that not everyone will be available when needed.

Rare Bird Ambassadors will make contact with hosts of rare birds, help present possible viewing scenarios to them, and/or coordinate the viewing – sometimes by themselves and sometimes by recruiting other local birders and bird photographers to act as Ambassadors to help with crowd control or other site-specific duties where needed.

A

Another aspect of being a Rare Bird Ambassador is to communicate information about rare birds, when appropriate, to other Rare Bird Ambassadors or to [the Ambassador panel](#) if you are not able to attempt arranging access.

With the role comes responsibility. Finding out about a rare bird that isn't public knowledge is a privilege, and Rare Bird Ambassadors are expected not to use the information they gain for personal viewing by themselves or their friends, unless it is in order to assess site logistics. Please keep a bird's presence confidential unless/until the landowner approves of a viewing plan. As well, as a representative of the birding community you are expected to adhere at all times to OFO's Code of Conduct (<http://www.ofo.ca/site/content/code-of-conduct>).

If any of this interests you, please complete the registration form. [link will be provided]

Detailed instructions for Ambassadors

These are guidelines, please [contact the Ambassador panel](#) if you have any questions or would like help with any steps.

Contacting the landowner

- Be courteous. The owner does not "owe" you access and you should not pressure them into allowing it.
- Introduce yourself, emphasize the privilege of having a rare bird and how much fun sharing it with others can be. Birders are really respectful, the team has experience doing this.
- To help with brain-storming and to connect others who may know about the bird, [contact the Ambassador panel](#) with the general information (species and general circumstances).

- Ensure others aware of the bird know that you are the single point of contact. This could entail posting publicly to let everyone know that the bird is currently being investigated by an Ambassador.
- Consider posting publicly to state that the bird viewing is already being arranged.
- Consider recommending to the property owner that they add a statement along with a post (e.g. if they had posted on Facebook) that access is being arranged.

Site visits

- Typically it is helpful to do a site visit to talk to the owner in person and/or to assess the site-specific situations:
 - What's parking like?
 - Will tripods be an issue?
 - Consider where people will stand. Does an area need cordoning off?
 - If there are adjacent neighbours, it may be important to discuss with them too.
- Whenever possible have the site visit conducted by no more than two people. Do not invite more birders with you.

Finalizing access

- Ensure you have all the rules clear.
- If sign-ups are required, create a booking form (remember that sign-ups for time slots are the most work for everyone to manage, but are effective in some situations)
 - Think ahead of time how you will handle the situation if the bird is a no show for a time slot.
- Be sure to post news of the bird and instructions publicly (e.g. Ontbirds, Birdnews, Discord) and share in as many places as possible.
 - Do not allow people to sign up until the sign-up form is posted publicly. No one should have "inside access".
- If there is a finite number of people allowed (e.g. one time only access to a relatively small number of people) discuss with [the Ambassador panel](#) to come up with the most equitable approach. A lottery (could be weighted by things like distance from bird, whether they have seen the bird already, size of Ontario list, etc.) or first-come, first-served are two approaches that offer fairness and transparency.
- If the location is to remain a secret, ensure this is communicated with people clearly. Have a way to share the location before it is their turn to visit.

- If the location is to be public knowledge, contact [the Ambassador panel](#) to create an eBird hotspot. If the location is to remain a secret, save this for after the bird/birders have gone.

Expenses

- Some expenses (e.g. caution tape, guest book, donation jar) will be reimbursed by OFO. Please save your receipts then [the Ambassador panel](#) as soon as possible or to discuss other potential expenses before you purchase them.
 - Caution tape can be purchased at most hardware stores (e.g. Home Depot, Canadian Tire, Home Hardware).

After the bird/birders have gone

Remember to thank the hosts again. Ask for their feedback - was there anything that they think we could improve on? Would they be willing to do a testimonial for the Ambassador Program web page? Fill out an [OFO Certificate of Appreciation nomination form](#). Please [pass on any feedback](#) you have to [the Ambassador panel](#) so they can ensure they are incorporated into future situations.

If the location remained a secret, [contact the Ambassador panel](#) to create an eBird hotspot and once it is created inform the visitors that they may now enter their eBird checklists and/or share the location publicly elsewhere.

Sightings that should be discussed with the Ambassador panel

- Please [contact](#) the OFO Rare Bird Ambassador coordinators for advice when dealing with these species/scenarios:
 - Any species exhibiting breeding behaviour
 - Barn Owls
 - Any other bird you think could generate controversy

What about owls?

- Rare owls such as Burrowing Owls or Barn Owls fall under the same consideration as other birds treated here. If it is believed that they can be shared in a way that is not negative for the property owner or the birds, an attempt to share them can be undertaken. Potential ambassadors are encouraged to discuss owls with [the Ambassador panel](#) though as sharing owl sightings is rarely simple.

- Most Ontario owls aren't rare but they elicit such a frenzy of interest that they deserve their own discussion.
- For common owl species that will entice a large following, we can also attempt to use the ambassador approach. Local ambassadors can use various methods such as taping off an area to keep people back from a known roost site, setting observation schedules and providing information to educate viewers. OFO will consider creating informative signs about owl species that can be put up at select sites that are amenable to viewing.
- Give it some thought and brainstorm with the ambassador committee if you want to try to take on a responsibility like this.

Past examples of birds handled by unofficial ambassadors:

1. **Calliope Hummingbird.** This hummingbird was found by the homeowners and after the identification was confirmed (first for Ontario!), they were not sure they wanted to invite birders onto the property. The feeders were in the backyard which was relatively small and because of the time of year, having potentially hundreds of birders standing around would likely destroy or damage the lawn. Eventually a visitation schedule was arranged with open hours on a set of six days. You can read the rules [here](#). There was a roped off area of the backyard, and because it was a tight space, no tripods were allowed. Parking restrictions were communicated and birders were expected to deposit a donation before entering the backyard. All in all, over 700 birders visited and everyone was left happy.
2. **Rock Wren.** This was a particularly difficult bird to share. It was at the height of covid and inside a building. The homeowners were initially against sharing but coordinators brainstormed and came up with a workable solution that they were happy with. Only 5 people were allowed to visit at a time and the homeowners determined the times for visits, often on short notice and typically once per week or less. Because it was clear that not all birders would get a chance to see this bird, it was decided to only allow birders who had never seen the species before in Ontario to visit. People from eastern Ontario were first invited and then the eBird top 100 list was used to create a list of others to contact who might be interested. Visitors were allowed to tell friends and the list grew organically this way. A sign up sheet was established and people were communicated with via a dedicated whatsapp group. In the end, exactly 100 people got to see the bird.

Many did not as it died before everyone scheduled could make it. The main changes that could be considered for a bird in such a limited viewing situation would be: 1. to consider establishing a lottery to visit. The main concern with this would be to be able to roll it out quickly. Not all birds linger for weeks so a slow start could mean that no one sees the bird. 2. Make the information about the program available to everyone on as many platforms as possible. This is the most important change that the Ambassador program will facilitate. It will even the playing field so everyone has an equal chance to visit.

3. **Groove-billed Ani.** This was a situation where birders found the bird on a private property owned by a friend. The situation was discussed with the finder and they discussed options with the owners. Although there were initial concerns about sharing, a plan was created and it worked out very well for almost everyone. Parking was an issue in this particular case (along a busy road with no shoulders so parking had to be on the private property). A schedule was thus created that would allow a maximum of 5 cars per hour to visit. Carpooling was strongly encouraged to maximize visitation. The opportunity to visit was widely circulated through the birding community and people signed up with the ambassadors. Viewing was initially restricted to two dates which meant that some people could not go because of work or personal obligations. A third date was opened up later but the bird had disappeared by then. A donation jar was placed out and over \$1700 was raised for a local charity (with matching funds from another donor).
4. **Rufous Hummingbird in Oakville in 2021.** This was very similar to the Calliope Hummingbird in Goderich. The bird was visiting feeders in the backyard of a private residence and access for birders and photographers was negotiated and a set of visiting hours was established, along with other ground rules. Because this was during the Covid-19 pandemic, extra restrictions were implemented such as mask wearing and proof of vaccination requirements. Over the course of about ten days of viewing nearly 400 people came to view the bird and over \$1700 was raised which the home owners donated to Birds Canada. You can see the full set of rules [here](#).
5. **Willow Ptarmigan at Darlington.** In June 2011 a Willow Ptarmigan was discovered on the property of the Darlington Nuclear Station. The area where it

was found is under heavy restrictions for access but Ontario Power Generation agreed to make arrangements for a one time viewing opportunity. Birders were required to meet at the Visitor Information Centre at 8:45 and to bring government-issued photo ID and wear close-toed shoes for security/safety. Once everyone was registered they were bused from the visitor centre to the site where the bird had been seen and eventually the crowd of 150+ birders was treated to a good showing by the bird. The details of the arrangements are available [here](#) and the acknowledgements are posted [here](#).

Ambassador code of conduct

- As a representative of the birding community you are expected to adhere at all times to OFO's Code of Conduct (<http://www.ofo.ca/site/content/code-of-conduct>).
- All information is to be kept strictly confidential.
- Don't use this as an opportunity to allow special access for your friends to see the bird.
- Respect the process and the work of other ambassadors.
- If you agree to help, you will have to drop everything and move quickly as birds don't always stay for long. The Ambassador panel can help you find alternates so that you don't have to be on the hook for too long.