## IBA PROGRAM LIFTS OFF

Healthy populations of birds are an important measure of the health of our environment. That's why the CANADIAN NATURE FEDERATION (CNF), BIRD STUDIES CANADA (BSC) and the NATIONAL AUDUBON SOCIETY (NAS) have partnered under the BIRDLIFE INTERNATIONAL program to promote the conservation and protection of IMPORTANT BIRD AREAS (IBA). The goal of the IBA program is to identify, conserve and monitor a network of sites around the world that are critical to birds for feeding, nesting, wintering, and during migration.

By working with community partners, we can safeguard essential sites used by birds while at the same time protecting a wide variety of other species of plants and animals. By identifying, monitoring and conserving Important Bird Areas, we can help ensure that the diversity of our natural areas is preserved — or even enhanced.

IBA sites are judged to be nationally, continentally or globally significant based on factors such as the presence of birds that are considered threatened or endangered, those with restricted breeding ranges or those which are restricted to a particular biome. Sites where large numbers of birds gather during nesting seasons or during migration — such as the Niagara River — are also a target for protection.

## *why* BIRDS?

Birds are an important measure of biodiversity. There are some 1,400 bird species native to North America and healthy, diverse bird populations can tell us a lot about the health of the ecosystems in which they — and we — live. Bird populations reflect the impact of habitat alteration such as pollution, deforestation, forest fragmentation, overgrazing, loss of natural grasslands to agriculture, draining of wetlands, and urban development. By closely monitoring bird populations, we can keep our finger on the pulse of our ecosystems.

# *gorgeous* Gulls

IMPORTANT BIRD AREAS OF CANADA

## *what* THE GULLS SAY

**The Herring Gull is a particularly interesting example of how birds can tell us a great deal about our environment. Since 1974, scientists have been measuring the level of more than 75 different toxic substances found in the eggs of Herring Gulls that feed and nest along the Niagara River and the Great Lakes.**

**Herring Gulls live year-round on the Great Lakes system, so they are a good measuring stick for what is happening in the ecosystem. The good news is that all of the toxins measured in the gull's eggs have declined over the past 25 years, especially levels of highly toxic hexachlorobenzene, dieldrin and PCBs, which have dropped 90% or more. It would seem that the Herring Gulls are telling us that our efforts to clean up the Niagara River and the Great Lakes are headed in the right direction.**

## *emperors* OF THE NIAGARA

**Named after a zoologist nephew of the Emperor Napoleon, the Bonaparte's Gull serves its namesake well with an elegant appearance and an adventurous spirit. Most Bonaparte's begin life in the far north — the breeding range of the bird stretches from Alaska and the Yukon across to the James Bay coast. But don't look for them on the ground — this species actually performs its courtship rituals and even builds its nests in trees in the boreal forest.**

**The birds start leaving their scattered northern nest sites in August and combine into larger and larger flocks as they wing their way south. By the time the flocks reach the Niagara River, they represent the largest single concentration of Bonaparte's Gulls in the world.**

**The tens of thousands of birds that gather on the river are generally stopping over to rest and feed before carrying on with their long journey to the Gulf of Mexico. Watch them as they drift down the river with the current, feeding along the way, before flying back upriver to start the cycle all over again.**

BONAPARTE GULL PHOTO: CHIP WESELOH

## *what* TO LOOK FOR

**Gulls are not the easiest bird species to tell apart, especially in their winter plumage. But with a bit of practice — and a good field guide — it is possible to develop a keen eye for the subtle details — wingtip colour, size, mantle colour (the back of the bird between the wings) and eye markings — that distinguish one species from another. And there is probably no better place to put your new-found identification skills to the test than the Niagara River.**

**It's important to keep in mind when identifying gulls that these birds change their appearance between summer and winter, and as they mature. Gulls take between two to four years to develop the full adult colour pattern of their species and may display distinctly different colour schemes each year until that point.**

**G — Globally significant species  N — Nationally significant species**

MARY TREMAINE, CORNELL LABORATORY OF ORNITHOLOGY

**BONAPARTE'S GULL** G
A graceful, small gull that congregates in huge flocks. Its most distinctive feature is a wedge of white edged with black on the top outer part of the wings. Mantle is grey; beak is short and black. In winter, the head is white with a dark smudge behind the eye.

**RING-BILLED GULL** N
A gregarious gull with a bright yellow bill featuring a black band near the tip. Mantle is grey and wingtips black in adult. In winter, it develops a gray spotted head. Immatures have a narrow black band along the back edge of the tail. Often seen inland, foraging in tilled fields.

BRIAN MORIN

**GREAT BLACK-BACKED GULL**
The world's largest gull, with a slow, strong wingbeat, distinctive black wings, black mantle and pure white underside in adult. Younger birds have more contrast in colouring than Herring Gulls.

**LITTLE GULL**
World's smallest gull. In winter, adults have white heads with a black cap and ear spot and broad round wings that are black underneath. Bill is black in winter and dark red in summer. The species is rare in North America, but it is frequently seen along the Niagara River in relatively large numbers.

ROBERT BROCK

**GLAUCOUS GULL**
A large, pale gull. Close in size to Greater Black-backed and similar in appearance to the Iceland Gull, but has a larger bill. Pale gray mantle in adults with no black in wingtips. Immature birds are cream coloured and become paler as they mature.

**HERRING GULL** G
A larger gull (but not as large as the Glaucous Gull) with black wing tips and a red spot on the lower mandible of its yellow bill. Maturing over four years, the bird starts off uniformly dark and then becomes paler and paler. Grey mantle develops as it matures. Present year-round along Niagara.

JOHN MICHELL

**ICELAND GULL**
Close in size to Thayer's Gull and slightly smaller than Herring Gull. Slightly dark wingtips, but overall a pale gull with a pale gray mantle. Found around the world in arctic regions.

**THAYER'S GULL**
Thayer's Gull. Difficult to distinguish from the slightly larger Herring Gull. Black markings on wingtips are not as extensive as on Herring Gulls and it has darker, brownish eyes with narrow red rings. Mantle is slightly darker.

HEBERT CLARKE
CORNELL LABORATORY OF ORNITHOLOGY

**COMMON MERGANSER** G
The male has a green-black head and black back set off against white underparts and a dusty pink breast. The female is most identifiable by her reddish head and feather crest. The neat line of separation between the reddish head and the white breast distinguishes the female Common Merganser from other mergansers.

MIKE HOPIAK, CORNELL LABORATORY OF ORNITHOLOGY

**CANVASBACK** G
A sleek duck with a long sloping profile to the head. The male appears generally whiteish, but has a dark red head and neck. The female is more gray overall, but has a dusting of red on the head and neck.

Gull illustrations — John A. Crosby from *The Birds of Canada* reproduced with permission, Canadian Museum of Nature, Ottawa, Canada.

# *the niagara river corridor* — AN IMPORTANT BIRD AREA

**The Niagara River became the first site to be identified jointly as a globally significant IBA by organizations in Canada and the US. This binational IBA was dedicated by CNF, BSC, NAS-New York, and the American Bird Conservancy on December 11th, 1996.**

## *the mighty niagara*

### A PARADISE FOR GULLS AND WATERFOWL

Take a trip to the Niagara River and see for yourself why this area has been designated a globally significant Important Bird Area. Looking down on the river from the heights in fall or winter, the air above the river's turbulent waters can be so white with wheeling and diving gulls it is like a snowstorm on wing. The numbers are staggering — as many as 100,000 gulls and 50,000 ducks stop over on the river in the fall and winter months.

On a winter's day, there may be tens of thousands of gulls wheeling, floating and fishing along the 56 kilometres of river joining Lake Erie and Lake Ontario. Among them on any one day there may be 10,000 Bonaparte's Gulls and 20,000 Herring Gulls. The one-day record for the Bonaparte's Gull, which uses the river as a critical rest stop on its long migratory journey from the Canadian arctic and Alaska to the Atlantic coast, is 40,000 birds — 8% of the world's population!

BRIAN MORIN

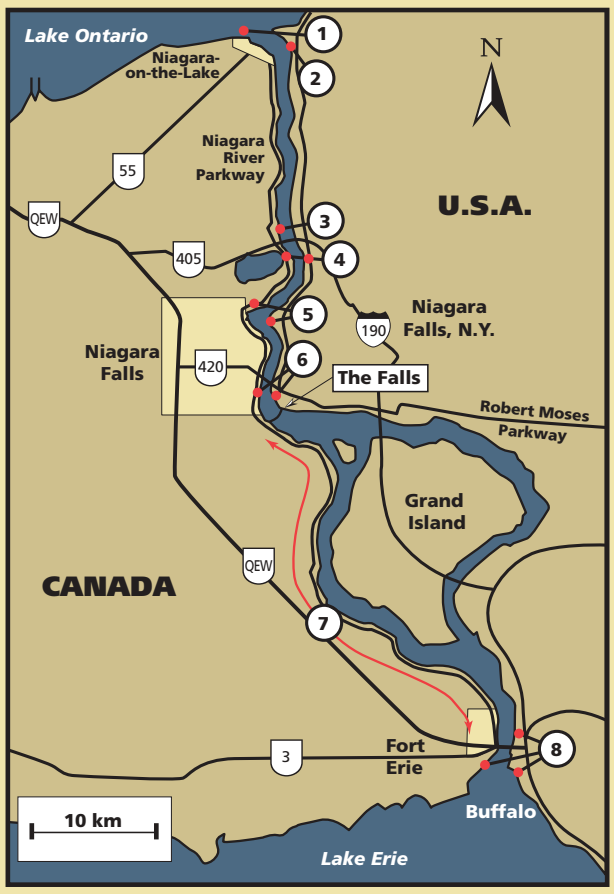
The Niagara River offers these huge populations of gulls both food and shelter. The roiling waters serve up a smorgasbord of small fish, stunned by whirlpools, rapids and upwellings. The river corridor also provides protection from the severe storms that can sweep across the Great Lakes in winter. The result is that the Niagara River corridor is a mecca for gulls — 19 different species have been seen here, more than half of all the species native to North America.

Gulls come to the river from the far corners of North America and beyond. Glaucous, Thayer's, Iceland and Sabine's Gulls come from the arctic; Great Black-backed Gulls, Laughing Gulls and Black-legged Kittiwakes fly in from the east coast; California and Franklin's Gulls arrive from the prairies and points further west; Black-headed Gulls fly in from Europe or the Maritimes.

The Niagara is also important for other birds, particularly waterfowl. Globally significant populations of Canvasbacks and Common Mergansers gather on the river each winter. Twenty-five species of waterfowl have been recorded along the Niagara.

While bird populations peak in winter, the Niagara is also an important summer nesting site for Black-crowned Night Herons, Common Terns and the threatened Peregrine Falcon — in fact, the Niagara is currently the only natural habitat nesting site for peregrines in Southern Ontario.

## *where* THE GULLS ARE




### 1. NIAGARA-ON-THE-LAKE

Queen's Royal Park at the foot of Regent Street offers an elevated view of the mouth of the Niagara River and there are also river overlooks at the bottoms of Nelson and Collingwood Streets. Gulls flying by to roost on Lake Ontario can be observed from these points at dusk. Waterfowl such as Oldsquaw, White-winged Scoter and Red-breasted Merganser can also be seen from late fall through early spring. The Niagara Parkway heading south from Niagara-on-the-Lake to Queenston has a few pull-offs where you can scan the river for gulls and waterfowl. Bald Eagles also winter along this stretch of the river.

### 2. FORT NIAGARA STATE PARK

The fly-past of gulls and waterfowl can be seen from this state park and from Old Fort Niagara in the late afternoon. The main disadvantage is that the sites face west into the setting sun.

### 3.QUEENSTON

At the end of Dumfries Street in the village of Queenston is a parking lot close to the river. A short walk down the hill to the dock offers good views of the river and leads to a trail heading south along the banks. This area is particularly good for smaller gulls, especially Bonaparte's Gull, and less common species such as Little, Black-headed or Sabine's Gulls.

### 4. HYDRO GENERATING STATION LOOKOUTS

The Sir Adam Beck Generating Station is located about two kilometres south of Queenston along the Niagara Parkway. From the parking area there are excellent views from above down onto the river and the water outflows from the generating stations (where gulls gather to fish). This area is especially attractive to larger gulls and makes for easier identification of closely related species as mantle colouration and wing-tip patterns can clearly be seen from above.

There are also lookouts on the east side of the river just off the Robert Moses Parkway by the Robert Moses Generating Station where the outflow from the reservoir flows into the river.

### 5. THE WHIRLPOOL

There is parking on both sides of the river at the Whirlpool, where the Niagara River makes a sharp bend. Interesting gulls can often be found foraging for fish in the eddies created by the Whirlpool.

### 6. HORSESHOE FALLS AND AMERICAN FALLS

The river below both falls usually supports a wide assortment of gulls and waterfowl in late fall and winter. There are several parking lots and roadside pull-offs and numerous observation sites on both sides of the river: Maid of the Mist, Power House/ Table Rock Point on the Canadian side; and Observation Tower, Prospect Point and Goat Island on the U.S. side.

### 7. ABOVE THE FALLS

There are lookouts north and south of the old Toronto Hydro building (across from the greenhouse along the Niagara Parkway), including an overlook behind the old Pump House building. There are good spots along the International Control Structure as well. At this point, the river widens and supports larger numbers of waterfowl and gulls. Also watch for Purple Sandpipers as well as Harlequin Ducks, and Red-necked and Red Phalarope.

Almost any species of gull common to Niagara may turn up in the vicinity of the control structure, while large numbers of diving ducks feed in the rapids here.

### 8. FORT ERIE AND BUFFALO

Both cities offer several vantage points over the river that are often very good for seeing Bonaparte's Gulls and waterfowl. The stretch of river north of the Peace Bridge can be particularly productive.

## *paradise* LOST OR FOUND?

Under the IBA program, a working group has developed a conservation plan for the Niagara River Corridor IBA. The plan defines conservation issues and challenges for this site, then identifies conservation goals and the actions necessary to achieve these goals. These goals range from research and observation of gulls, waterfowl and songbirds to creating greater awareness of the importance of the area to gulls and other birds. Adding to the complexity of these tasks will be the binational nature of the corridor and its long-term problems, such as toxic contamination and increasing urban development. More than 25 different community groups, government agencies, and conservation organizations may be involved in different aspects of this developing local program.

ROSS KLAGER

## NIAGARA RIVER IMPORTANT BIRD AREA PARTNERS

Bert Miller Nature Club of Fort Erie
Bird Studies Canada
Buffalo Audubon Society
Buffalo Institute of Urban Ecology
Buffalo Ornithological Society
Canadian Nature Federation
Canadian Wildlife Service, Environment Canada
City of Buffalo Office for the Environment
City of Niagara Falls Ontario
Federation of Ontario Naturalists
Great Lakes United
Lake Erie Alliance
Land Care — Niagara
Lower Great Lakes Fishery Resources Office (USFWS)
National Audubon Society of New York State
New York State Department of Environmental Conservation
New York State Parks
Niagara Falls Nature Club (Ontario)
Niagara Nature Tours
Niagara Parks Commission
Niagara River Restoration Council
Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources
Peninsula Field Naturalists Club
The Nature Conservancy
US Army Corps of Engineers, Regulatory Branch
USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service
US Fish and Wildlife Service — New York Field Office
Western New York Land Conservancy

**The Federation of Ontario Naturalists is the lead IBA partner in Ontario.**

IMPORTANT BIRD AREAS OF CANADA

CNF

BirdLife INTERNATIONAL

**The Canadian Nature Federation and Bird Studies Canada are the BirdLife International partners in Canada.**

For more information on the Important Bird Areas Program in Canada, contact the IBA Outreach Coordinator at:

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web site: **www.ibacanada.com**

For additional information on the Niagara River IBA, please visit the web site of Environment Canada's Canadian Wildlife Service, for *A Guide To Viewing the Gulls and Waterfowl — The Niagara River: An Important Bird Area*, at **www.cciw.ca/green-lane/wildlife**

For more information on the Important Bird Areas program in New York State, contact the:
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