

Bay watch | EVERY THURSDAY THROUGHOUT THE SUMMER WE UNCOVER THE HIDDEN WONDERS OF HAMILTON HARBOUR

*Outstanding opportunities to see a variety of water fowl  
abound along the shorelines  
of Hamilton Harbour and Cootes Paradise.*

# Birds of the bay

BY MELISSA MEWDELL

Hamilton Harbour and Cootes Paradise are a birdwatcher's dream. The northeast shoreline is a great place to spot common colonial nesting birds. In fact, three islands just off the Skyway bridge — called North, Centre and South islands — were all constructed to give these birds a safe place to nest. Colonial nesting birds also make Farr and Neare islands their homes. Farr and Neare used to be old hydro platforms when hydro wires were run across the bay.

Other birds, like mute and trumpeter swans and mallard ducks, also reside in the bay and can be found along the quiet shoreline of Cootes Paradise and close to land in the bay.



### Ring-billed Gull

Originally, these birds had a colony at Tollgate Ponds, off Eastport Drive. Now, they can be found on all of the islands in the north-east harbour as well as the La Salle Park shoals. The latest count found 21,901 pairs in the bay.

These birds are scavengers. Most often, they seek out fish, insects, small aquatic animals, chicks, eggs and vegetable matter. However, they'll also eat garbage littering the shoreline.

Females usually lay three spotted eggs, which are blue or green in colour. Their common predators include red foxes, coyotes, striped skunks, raccoons, weasels and owls.

### Black-crowned Night Heron

Black-crowned night herons are difficult to find in the harbour. But the most recent count found 227 pairs all over the area. They tend to eat fish, frogs, crustaceans, small mammals and the young of other colonial-nesting waterbirds. Females lay three to four bluish-green eggs between February and March, and again between June and July. They often perch on logs and have a hunched over appearance. Almost nothing parallels their beauty when they're flying however.

During breeding season, the black feathers from their head and back have a blue-green gloss to them. During this time, their legs also turn colour, and look reddish.



### Mallard

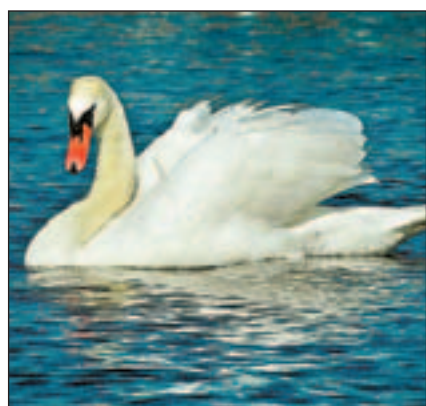
Mostly found in the harbour around the La Salle Park area, mallards are the most common duck in the world.

Unlike many of the other birds in the harbour, mallards have fairly short lifespans, and live two to three years. Males are much more colourful than the mostly-brown females. They stand out with their brilliant green heads.

Mallards are 90-per-cent vegetarian. Their diet consists mostly of seeds, grasses and aquatic vegetation. Every now and then, they eat snails, insects and small fish.

Females, who lay from five to 14 eggs, are abandoned by males when it comes time to incubate the eggs.

Their common predators are large mammals. However, many mallards are killed by pesticides and oil spills.



### Swans

There are three types of swans in Hamilton Harbour: the tundra swan, the mute swan and the trumpeter swan. While the tundra swan and trumpeter swan are native Canadian species, the mute swan is originally from Europe and Asia.

The mute swan is an exotic, undesirable species flourishing in the bay. It is aggressive, chasing other birds out of nesting areas. It is known for its beauty and its orange knobby bill.

Tundra swans are the most common type of North American swan. However, they spend their summers up north and only spend time in the harbour during winter.

Trumpeter swans are North America's largest waterfowl. They like marsh land and are much more timid than mute swans. This has been the first successful breeding year for this type of swan in the harbour. They can be found in Cootes Paradise and have black bills.

### Cormorant

It's hard to imagine that in the early '90s cormorants were nearly extinct in this area. Today, they crowd Hamilton Harbour in the thousands. Their increasing numbers are good news because it means toxic chemicals (like DDT and other pesticides) in the environment have decreased significantly.

But cormorants in great numbers can be destructive. Their feces, which tend to be very acidic, can kill plants. Both the Royal Botanical Gardens and Bay Area Restoration Council have built wooden platforms for cormorants to nest on. The idea is that the birds will localize their colonies to those islands to prevent any further defoliation.

Cormorants are overwhelming Farr Island. Scientists plan to make the island less suitable for cormorants, and encourage common terns instead. The birds are also found on the man-made islands in the north-east part of the bay. They're good swimmers and usually catch their prey by diving into the water from the surface, snatching a fish, and then swallowing it whole.

Females lay from three to five eggs and both parents incubate and care for the chicks. They are often seen perched with their wings spread out to dry off.



### Canada Goose

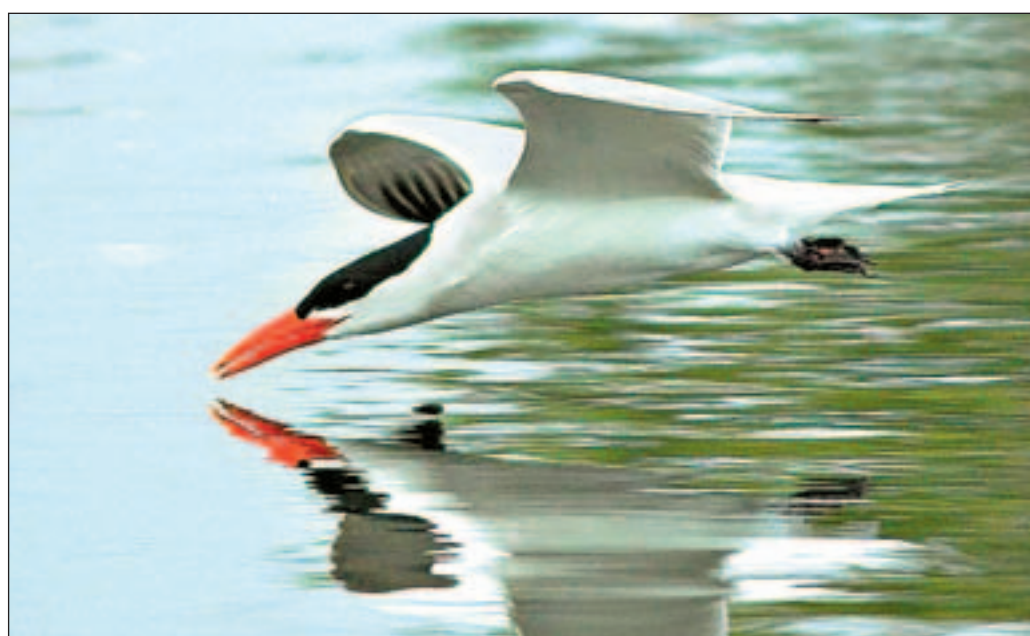
This well-known (and well-fed) Canadian bird may be responsible for many of last year's E. coli warnings at harbour beaches.

The beach at Bayfront Park had excessive E. coli levels for 14 weeks and Pier 4 had high levels for 12 weeks between the Victoria Day weekend and the week before Labour Day.

Tests on the E. coli collected last year show that the bacteria isn't resistant to antibiotics. This means it is likely from wild birds, like the thousands of Canada geese that flock to the bay every year, and not people.

The city's public health department as well as parks maintenance and the Canadian Centre for Inland Waters designed some techniques to keep Canada geese off of the beaches to help improve water quality in the area. A line of buoys to keep them from swimming up onto shore as well as shrubs on the shoreline and wires suspended over the swimming water will hopefully be in place this summer.

These geese tend to eat grass, but will eat food people give to them. Females lay between four and 10 white eggs in nests on the ground. The birds, which tend to be migratory, fly in large V-shaped formations. However, experts say Canada geese are starting to stay in the harbour all the time because people feed them.



### Caspian Tern

Caspian terns, regarded as one of the most beautiful birds in the harbour, have a colony on the north centre islands. The most recent count found 415 pairs.

They usually eat fish, diving from the sky to catch their prey. Females lay from two to three eggs a year. Young Caspian terns or eggs are often abandoned when the area close to a nest is disturbed. Humans are one of the tern's biggest predators, in a sense, because any disturbances could mean young are abandoned and left defenceless.

Caspian terns are the largest of the tern species in the world.



### Common Tern

Common terns, like their Caspian tern brothers, are found in the north-east part of the harbour. They are also in colonies in the Windermere Basin, on South Island and on the La Salle Park shoals. The most recent count found 529 pairs in the bay.

Like Caspian terns, common terns enjoy a steady diet of fish.

Females usually lay three olive or brown coloured eggs, and their predators include great horned owls, minx, red foxes and raccoons. Human disturbances are also a great threat to common terns.

There are fewer common terns in the bay. While they used to occupy the harbour in the thousands, the most recent figures show the bay is lucky to see pairs in the hundreds.

