

THE JAMAICA BAY BIRD SANCTUARY

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The date is May 1st, 1958. The time is 7:00 P. M. Standing on the north shore of a large fresh-water pond are four bird-watchers. In the back of them, one can see the skyscrapers of Manhattan. All four observers had spent the day in that morass of concrete and steel, engaged in their various breadwinning tasks. Now they had binoculars and telescopes trained on seventeen spinning, whirling Phalaropes. The final tally proved to be fifteen Red Phalaropes and two Northern Phalaropes. According to other observers, the highest count during that day had been thirty-five Phalaropes at any one time.

While searching for more Phalaropes on the southern end of the pond, one of the party called attention, gleefully, to a European Teal, (pardon me, a Common Teal according to the new AOU Checklist — a change I do not think I will ever get used to). This rare visitor to our shores was in with a little group of Green-winged Teal. Also on the pond were Blue-winged Teal, Black Duck, Ruddy Duck, and some lingering Bufflehead, which had not yet departed for more northern climes.

Stalking their watery prey on the margins of the pond were several Common and Snowy Egrets.

A Green Heron had flapped away uttering an indignant "quawk," when they had taken their positions at the pond's edge.

Overhead, a Nighthawk rubbed wing coverts with several Tree Swallows, both species engaged in feasting on airborne insects.

Had more daylight been left, they no doubt would have gone searching for migrating warblers in the willow trees on the west side of the pond. But since the light was rapidly fading, these four reluctantly folded up their tripods, and stole away.

Several days later, a Wilson's Phalarope obligingly entered the same pond to complete the list of Phalaropes and a Glossy Ibis dropped in to keep company with the Egrets.

Where is this avian paradise in sight of the Manhattan skyline?

I have chosen the above paragraphs to introduce you to the Jamaica Bay Bird Sanctuary.

Jamaica Bay consists of some 18,000 acres of water, marsh and meadowland, bordered on the west and north by the Boroughs of Brooklyn and Queens, on the east by Nassau County, and on the south by the Rockaway Peninsula.

As far back as fifty years ago, there were plans afoot to transform this wild area into a vast industrial port and shipping terminal. Some thirty years ago, this plan still appeared on the official planning map of New York City. Fortunately, this grandiose scheme never got off the drawing board, even though now, one of the world's largest airports, The International Airport, or "Idlewild", dominates the northeastern portion of the bay area.

There were also plans to turn Jamaica Bay into the dumping grounds for the refuse and garbage of New York City's millions, to actually create a huge garbage island. This plan was also scrapped.

Probably the individual most responsible for the Jamaica Bay Bird Sanctuary as we now know the area, is Mr. Robert Moses, Commissioner of the

New York City Park Department. Mr. Moses also holds several other positions that have to do with the park systems and public works throughout the State of New York, and has always been in the forefront in the never-ending battle to conserve our natural resources.

The formal presentation of his plan for Jamaica Bay is dated July 1st, 1938. Work toward the full realization of this plan, is still going on right now, 20 years later.

The Jamaica Bay Bird Sanctuary, that part with which we are concerned, was officially opened in the Spring of 1954. Mr. Herbert Johnson was in charge, and he is still the man in charge of an area encompassing some 12,000 acres.

Mr. Johnson, incidentally, is a horticulturist by training. By his own admission, four years ago, he usually gave no more than a passing glance to even the more striking birds which entered his domain. Now, however, you are sure to find a pair of 7x50's in the cab of Mr. Johnson's light truck, as he makes his ceaseless rounds taking care of his numerous daily chores. The ornithological bug bit, and bit hard!

The heart of the sanctuary consists of two fresh-water ponds, separated by the six lane Cross Bay Boulevard, traffic artery to the Rockaways. These ponds are simply and unromantically called East Pond and West Pond. The West Pond is approximately 40 acres and the East Pond is about 100 acres.

Both ponds were created artificially and coincidentally with the extension of the New York City subway system to the Rockaways. A huge dredging operation had to be carried out to build the necessary roadbed for the subway tracks across the Jamaica Bay. For those not familiar with the area, we hasten to explain that part of the "subway" system, runs above ground. We would also like to point out, that the creation of the ponds was not an accident, but an interrelated project.

After the ponds were "manufactured", the work of creating a sanctuary began in earnest. Huge aquatic plantings were put in, such as Eel Grass, Widgeon Grass, Musk Grass, and Sago Pond Plant. These, of course, were to attract and feed ducks and geese. Artificial grain feeding is not resorted to except around the water traps used for the banding of waterfowl.

Beach grasses of several varieties were planted around the ponds as cover and to thwart erosion of the sandy soil. Additional terrestrial plantings included Russian Olive, Aronia, Rosa rugosa, Rose multiflora, and Hercules Club. In the way of trees, a large number of Willows and Poplars were installed.

Growing in their native state throughout the sanctuary are large stands of Bayberry, Wild Blackberry, Wild Cherry, and Poison Ivy. And of course, as is always the case in such areas, we have the omnipresent Phragmites.

The stocking of the sanctuary with plantings is an eternal task. Mr. Johnson and staff, maintain their own nursery for propagation and replacement of plantings. The staff of personnel varies from two to five persons, according to the season of the year.

We have above described an area which has all the makings of great bird country, but do we have the birds?

Well, as all bird students know, wild birds can read signs. No sooner

than the signs, "Jamaica Bay Bird Sanctuary," went up, than in they flocked. Of course, we are taking some poetic license in this statement, but let us present some breeding data gathered over the last four years.

The Black Duck bred on the sanctuary immediately. The next year, the Ruddy Duck and the Blue-winged Teal nested within the area. In 1956, two pairs of Shoveller raised their young on the West Pond. The breeding season of 1958 brought the successful nesting of two pairs of Florida Gallinule. It is certainly to be expected that the numbers and species will increase in the following years. It is hoped that Gadwall, which have bred with varying success over the last dozen years at the Jones Beach Bird Sanctuary, will branch out to Jamaica Bay. The Jones Beach Sanctuary is approximately twenty miles east of Jamaica Bay and unfortunately is at present allowed to "go to pot".

All in all, twenty-seven different species of ducks and geese have been recorded on sanctuary waters, including Blue Goose, Snow Goose, European Widgeon, and Common Teal. An active observer should be able to list most of these twenty-seven during his birding year.

The sanctuary also houses a considerable sized heron rookery. As regular breeders, the rookery includes Green Heron, Black-Crowned Night Heron, Yellow-Crowned Night Heron, Common Egret and Snowy Egret. The area is also visited by Little Blue Heron, Louisiana Heron, and, of course, the Great Blue Heron. A rare visitor has been the Glossy Ibis.

Special mention must be made of the breeding of a pair of Louisiana Herons in 1955, as reported by A. J. Meyerriicks in the *Wilson Bulletin*, Vol. 69, No. 2, June 1957.

Also worthy of special mention is the recording of Purple Gallinule on the West Pond, seen by more than a score of observers, during the first week of May 1958.

As for Rails, the normal checklist complement has been recorded in full. The Clapper Rail is an abundant breeder. The breeding status of the other rails must await an actual breeding census and study.

To this list of water and marsh birds, we then add an imposing list of shore birds. The shore birds are to be found on the margins of both ponds, as well as the tidal flats, adjacent to the West Pond. The list includes such rarities as Buff-breasted Sandpiper, Curlew Sandpiper, Ruff, Hudsonian Godwit, Marbled Godwit, American Oyster-catcher, Golden Plover, and all three Phalaropes as already pointed out. As a matter of fact, both Godwits, Ruff, and Curlew Sandpiper, have been recorded every year since the opening of the sanctuary. Those of us who can visit the area on a regular basis at the right times of the year have come to expect these birds, classing them as rare, but at the same time, regular visitors. Whether this is due to the close attention given to the area by scores of active watchers, or to other factors cannot readily be determined. Experienced observers have pointed out that it may be a mistake to put these birds in the "regular" class, as changing conditions may halt reoccurrences. This has happened many times in the East, causing unexplained absences for long period of time.

A complete listing of the shorebirds would total 32 species.

South of the West Pond, between the pond itself and the tidal flats mentioned previously, there is a large sand area which has been taken over by hundreds of Common Terns, Least Terns, and Black Skimmers, as a

breeding ground. In addition to these, the sanctuary is visited regularly by Black Terns, less often by Forster's and Roseates, and Royals and Caspians are rare visitors.

Did someone mention Gulls? Yes, we get them too, including Glaucous Gull, Iceland Gull, Kittiwake, and Little Gull. The Herring Gull breeds on islands in Jamaica Bay which are part of the sanctuary.

So far, no mention has been made of land birds. If the reader would consult a map of the area, he would realize at once that this area, located right on a migration flyway, is a sort of "oasis" both during the spring and fall migrations. Just to give a sampling of the diversity of land birds, we chose such migrants as Prothonotary Warbler, Connecticut Warbler, Blue Grosbeak, Lapland Longspur, and Cliff Swallow.

Again, we must state, that an accurate list of breeding land birds in the sanctuary, awaits further study.

The one visitor which has caused the most excitement since the opening of the sanctuary was the European Redwing (*Turdus musicus*). This species has never been recorded on the North American mainland before. It was first spotted on February 21st, 1959, and stayed at the sanctuary until February 25th. It was seen by hundreds of people and received nationwide notice thru an article published in the New York Times. Sunday, February 23rd, brought three hundred observers for a glimpse of this unusual visitor. About a week after the bird departed for parts unknown, a carload of bird-watchers showed up bearing a Texas license plate. This is probably the longest trip made by any sanctuary visitors, to date.

By now, some of the readers who are familiar with the general area, might be saying, "So what, the place was always wonderful for birds". Let those readers not overlook the simple fact that before the Jamaica Bay Bird Sanctuary was created, actually encompassing an area of some 12,000 acres, this whole water and marsh wilderness was "up for grabs", with speculators and real estate developers, waiting for the signal. Once again, we must stress how much, we, who are conservation-minded, owe to Mr. Robert Moses.

Here, the bird-watcher has a place "to hang his hat". He can park his car in a lot provided for that purpose, just adjacent to the West Pond. The West Pond is completely encircled by a gravel walk. By departing from the path for a very short distance, the mud flats can be easily birded. With just a little more effort, the East Pond can be readily worked.

There are not many places in New York City where the amateur ornithologist can pursue his hobby in such sympathetic surroundings. The hazards in some places run the gamut between actual molestation by vandals, to suspicious questioning by the police. There is also one sanctuary near New York City, which is impossible to enter.

If all this sounds as though the sanctuary was created for the watchers and not for the birds, this is only because I, and countless others, are delighted to have an area so readily accessible and so rewarding. This is a most unusual combination, in this age of urban development.

The sanctuary can be reached by auto or subway. Any map will show it. If one is going to spend any length of time there, and most of the day can easily be spent in the sanctuary, it is a good idea to bring lunch, since there are no eating places in the immediate vicinity.

Officially, one must possess a permit to enter the sanctuary. To date,

more than one thousand permits have already been issued by the Park Department, which officially administers the sanctuary. Some of the permits have been issued to persons in New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Washington, D. C. A weekend rarely passes without at least one out-of-state car finding its way into the parking lot.

I would like to stress the official permit, even for those of us who visit the sanctuary regularly, and are well known to Mr. Johnson and his staff. As already pointed out, the sanctuary is officially attached to the New York City Park Department, and is dependent upon that body for funds with which to run and maintain the sanctuary.

The best way in which we can show our appreciation, and our need, and our continued interest, is to renew our permits every year, and to see that others do likewise. I am quite sure that the most regular visitors, including the writer, have not renewed their permits since they first obtained them. I am going to take care of that chore just as soon as I finish typing this article.

You may obtain your permits by writing to:

The Department of Parks
Arsenal Bldg.
Central Park
New York City, N. Y.

Besides regular maintenance of the sanctuary, work is constantly going on to improve the existing plant, and to develop some new area within sanctuary bounds. The present project centers on Canarsie Pol. Canarsie Pol is an island which lies in the bay about a mile west of the West Pond. It is the largest of several islands in Jamaica Bay. Sludge is being dredged out of the bay and being deposited on to Canarsie Pol. After chemical treatment, the sludge will be converted into artificial topsoil. Once this has been accomplished grain will be planted for the feeding of migratory waterfowl.

Projects such as these need your support and we once again ask that you write for your permits, or renew them if they have expired.

Another project on the docket, is the lowering of the water level in the East Pond. Primarily, this pond is to attract waterfowl, for breeding, feeding, and wintering. However, the abnormally high water level of the last two years has cut down the visiting shore bird population. The water-level can and will be lowered without affecting the status of the waterfowl, and at the same time exposing more marginal area for shorebirds.

Those of us who live in New York City or environs, are indeed fortunate to have such a wonderful place at our disposal. I am sure that many bird-watchers come to New York City on business or for other reasons. I am also sure, that like myself, they never travel without a pair of binoculars. Each new place brings new birding experiences. In a strange place, one always wants to find the "best spots". Left to one's own devices, the birder will eventually find the "best spots", but waste many valuable hours doing so. I recommend the Jamaica Bay Bird Sanctuary, not only for the varied bird life it offers, but also as a place for meeting others interested in the same thing as he is. After all, will any of us deny that one of the reasons we enjoy birding so much, is the cultivation of friends with the same interests?

585 Mead Terrace, South Hempsted, New York

BIRDS OBSERVED IN JAMAICA BAY — 1958

Loon, Common
 Grebe, Horned
 Pied-billed
 Eared
 Cormorant, Great
 Double-crested
 Heron, Great Blue
 Egret, Common
 Snowy
 Heron, Louisiana
 Little Blue
 Heron, Green
 Black-crowned Night
 Yellow-crowned Night
 Bittern, American
 Bittern, Least
 Ibis, Glossy
 Swan, Mute
 Goose, Canada
 Brant
 Goose, Snow
 Blue
 Mallard
 Duck, Black
 Gadwall
 Widgeon, European
 American
 Pintail
 Teal, Common
 Green-winged
 Blue-winged
 Shoveler
 Duck, Wood
 Redhead
 Duck, Ring-necked
 Canvasback
 Scaup, Greater
 Lesser
 Goldeneye, Common
 Bufflehead
 Duck, Ruddy
 Merganser, Hooded
 Common
 Red-breasted
 Hawk, Broad-winged
 Eagle, Bald
 Hawk, Marsh
 Osprey
 Falcon, Peregrine
 Hawk, Sparrow
 Pheasant, Ring-necked
 Rail, King
 Clapper
 Virginia
 Sora
 Gallinule, Purple
 Common
 Coot, American
 Oystercatcher, Am.
 Plover, Piping

Skimmer, Black
 Dove, Mourning
 Cuckoo, Yellow-billed
 Black-billed
 Owl, Short-eared
 Nighthawk, Common
 Swift, Chimney
 Hummingbird, Ruby-throated
 Kingfisher, Belted
 Ficker, Yellow-shafted
 Sapsucker, Yellow-bellied
 Kingbird, Eastern
 Flycatcher, Great Crested
 Phoebe, Eastern
 Flycatcher, Alder
 Least
 Lark, Horned
 Swallow, Tree
 Swallow,
 Bank
 Rough-winged
 Barn
 Cliff
 Martin, Purple
 Jay Blue
 Crow, Common
 Fish
 Chickadee, Black-capped
 Titmouse, Tufted
 Creeper, Brown
 Wren, Carolina
 Long-billed Marsh
 Short-billed Marsh
 Mockingbird
 Catbird
 Thrasher, Brown
 Robin
 Thrush, Wood
 Hermit
 Veery
 Kinglet, Golden-crowned
 Ruby-crowned
 Pipit, Water
 Waxwing, Cedar
 Shrike, Northern
 Starling
 Vireo, Red-eyed
 Philadelphia
 Warbler, Black-and-white
 Blue-winged
 Orange-crowned
 Nashville
 Yellow
 Cape May
 Myrtle
 Black-throated Green
 Blackburnian
 Chestnut-sided
 Blackpoll
 Pine

Plover, Semipalmated
 Wilson's
 Killdeer
 Golden
 Black-bellied
 Turnstone, Ruddy
 Woodcock, Am.
 Snipe, Common
 Whimbrel
 Sandpiper, Spotted
 Willet
 Yellowlegs, Greater
 Lesser
 Knot
 Sandpiper, Purple
 Pectoral
 White-rumped
 Baird's
 Least
 Dunlin
 Dowitcher, Short-billed
 Long-billed
 Sandpiper, Stilt
 Semipalmated
 Western
 Buff-breasted
 Godwit, Marbled
 Hudsonian
 Sanderling
 Phalarope, Red
 Wilson's
 Northern
 Gull, Glaucous
 Iceland
 Great Black-backed
 Herring
 Ring-billed
 Laughing
 Bonaparte's
 Little
 Tern, Forster's
 Common
 Roseate
 Least
 Caspian
 Black

Warbler
 Prairie
 Palm
 Waterthrush, Northern
 Warbler, Kentucky
 Connecticut
 Yellowthroat
 Chat, Yellow-breasted
 Redstart, American
 Sparrow, House
 Bobolink
 Meadowlark, Eastern
 Blackbird, Redwinged
 Oriole, Baltimore
 Grackle, Common
 Cowbird, Brown-headed
 Tanager, Scarlet
 Cardinal
 Grosbeak, Rose-breasted
 Blue
 Grosbeak, Evening
 Finch, Purple
 House
 Goldfinch, American
 Towhee, Rufous-sided
 Sparrow, Ipswich
 Savannah
 Sharp-tailed
 Seaside
 Junco, Slate-colored
 Sparrow, Tree
 Chipping
 Field
 White-crowned
 Sparrow
 White-throated
 Fox
 Swamp
 Song
 Longspur, Lapland
 Bunting, Snow

MONTEZUMA REFUGE RESTRICTS DIKE TRAVEL

Waterfowl are at the lowest numbers of the last two years. To increase waterfowl production, the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service is restricting public use of Federal refuges during the nesting season.

Organized groups may arrange for conducted tours by contacting the refuge manager in advance. Simply, address a letter to: John S. Morse, Refuge Manager, R. D. #1, Seneca Falls, New York.