

# NEW YORK STATE BIRDS IN COLOMBIA

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## *Introduction*

Just as interesting as seeing the exotic antbirds, woodcreepers, parrots, etc., and tropical members of the flycatcher, hummingbird and wren families during a South American stay, is discovering familiar North American birds on their migration routes or wintering grounds, sometimes in strikingly different habitats from their breeding ones. These notes are presented merely as raw data, without interpretation, and as a general indication of which groups of northern birds may be seen in Caribbean South America and of how their numbers vary through the months.

Most of the following observations of New York State birds in Colombia were made by me from early September to early June 1956-1957, although some are from the same months of the previous year and some were reported to me by friends after I returned to the United States. Some of the records, as specified, are from the higher interior regions of Colombia which I visited on vacations, but most are from the Caribbean coast, centering on the Magdalena River port of Barranquilla.

This is a savannah (tall grass-scrub jungle) region with temperature ranging from 75°-85° F. The dry season, when the trade wind from the northeast lashes the low trees of the monte (jungle), lasts from November 'til May. During the rainy season, the remaining half of the year, deciduous trees, mostly varieties of locust, put out new leaves, and the monte changes from a desert of thorn bushes rattling in the wind to a green jungle with paths grown over by vines. The rain then comes every afternoon or every few days in the form of violent cloudbursts which turn paved streets into roaring canals and wash the sandy topsoil down to the swift and muddy Magdalena.

Flooding and wind action cause constant shifting of shore sands also. For example, what was in October of 1955 a small partly-submerged sandbar beyond the rather wide beach at Puerto Colombia (which used to be the ocean port for Barranquilla before the Magdalena was kept dredged to admit large steamers to the city 18 miles upstream, but is now nothing but a sleepy seaside resort) increased to a wide sand spit paralleling the shore for over a mile, with a lagoon behind it which cut into the width of the old beach. This created two different types of shorebird habitat on the two sides of the spit. The ocean side was strewn with small clams, pebbles, seaweed, and driftwood, and its sand was dry a little way in from the high tide line. (The inter-tidal section of beach is narrower here than is the case nearer the poles). On the lagoon side, the sand was wet and muddy, so that grass, cacti, and beach peas soon began to grow in the low dunes.

## *Part I — Water Birds*

Most of the records in the present first section of this article, which includes the species through terns in the AOU Checklist, were made at Puerto Colombia. In general, the "trips" there were of one-half day's duration, so that the numbers listed are in fact those seen in about two hours in covering a length of beach of approximately two miles, unless otherwise noted.

The highly migratory plovers and sandpipers, familiar in summer or during migration in various part of New York State, find types of habitat to their liking on the shifting dunes and beach of Puerto Colombia. In general, they are present in the months of the northern autumn, the period of their immigration to Colombia, in greater numbers than at any other time.

Semipalmated plovers run over the higher dry dunes and the dark lagoon-side sand. My counts averaged 15 per trip in Sep, 16 per trip Oct, 24 per trip Nov, 15 per trip Dec, 20 per trip Jan, then none until May: five per trip. With them were often some of the Wilson's Plover which is casual in New York: an average of four per trip in Sep, five per trip in Oct, seven or eight in Nov, one every other trip in Dec, none in Jan and Feb, one every other trip in Mar and May, one or two per trip in Apr. In the same areas I found Black-bellied Plovers averaging 22 per trip in Sep, 12 in Oct, 21 — Nov, five — Dec, six — Jan, one — Feb, three — Mar, one every other trip in Apr, and one in May.

Ruddy Turnstones are regularly seen, both on the seaweed and pebbles of the outer beach at Puerto, and on the rock embankment of the excursion railway which runs along palustrine beaches out to the point where the Magdalena flows into the Caribbean at Bocas de Cenizas. Average numbers per trip are: 17 — Sep, 13 — Oct, 19 — Nov, four — Dec, one — Jan, one — Feb, five — Mar, two — Apr, five — May.

In the taller grasses of the landward side of the dunes sometimes Hudsonian Curlew lurked: about one per trip in Sep and Oct, usually two in Nov thru Jan, no records after that.

The Spotted Sandpiper was seen much more regularly throughout the year: about seven per trip in Sep, Dec, Mar, and Apr; and about one per trip in Oct, Nov, Jan, Feb, and May. These fluctuations probably reflect nothing but very local changes in feeding conditions along the lagoon at Puerto and in similar habitat at other nearby beaches where I saw the Spotted. According to the AOU Checklist this species often remains far south during the northern summer, which goes to explain the regularity with which I saw it even in May.

However, another case of drop-off in numbers after the fall is the Willet: seen with the yellowlegs, about ten per trip in Sep, five — Oct, 12 — Nov, two — Dec, then no more than singles thru May. Lesser Yellowlegs on the muddy beach at Puerto averaged 12 per trip in Sep. Numbers dropped off sharply to one per trip in Oct and none were seen in Nov. Greater Yellowlegs ran about five, two, and three per trip, respectively, in these three months. I saw a few yellowlegs on ocean beaches in Mar also, but my only other records are for the Magdalena River in Dec, and for the marshes between the mouth of the Magdalena and the ocean shore in Feb, and a couple in Mar at Sabanilla beach near Puerto.

This drop-off in numbers observed in the months of the northern winter and spring is marked even though all the preceding species are known to winter in Colombia, according to the AOU Checklist. It seems that many shorebirds withdraw into the less accessible marshes where conditions are more tolerable as the dry season progresses. In general the northward migration is a much less spectacular affair than the autumn one when the

birds seem to spend much time on the beaches of their first landfall before continuing farther south or, more likely, moving a little way inland to spend their winter on the river flats or in marshes.

The phenomenon was even more noticeable with the Knot and the Short-billed Dowitcher. In Sep the Knot averaged six per trip, and in Oct nine per trip with a peak number of 35 on Oct 4, lined up resting on a flat stretch of sandbar at Puerto Colombia. I saw single Dowitchers probing in the muddy landward shore there on more than half the Sep trips and somewhat less than half the Oct trips. Outside of these two months I have no records of either Knot or Dowitcher.

I was unable to identify any "peep" besides Least and Semipalmated Sandpipers. The former averaged six per trip in Sep, four — Oct, three — Nov and Dec, and five — Jan. Numbers of Semipalmateds for the same months were 42, 34, 60, ten, and ten. Since the observations are mainly from Puerto which is chiefly a sandy beach, it is understandable that the numbers of the "mud peep" would be lower. My other records are of flocks of unidentified peep on flats up the Magdalena from Barranquilla in late Dec and for the above-mentioned coastal swamps near Bocas de Cenizas in Feb; the peep too seem to withdraw into interior swamps and mudflats of Colombia during the dry season, and then trickle north largely unnoticed in spring.

Finally, of the shorebirds known to winter in Colombia, Sanderlings, found typically on the outermost sandy beaches at Puerto, averaged six per trip in Sep, 11 — Oct, 18 — Nov, then down sharply to about one every other trip in Dec, up again to 20 in Jan, but no records later than that.

There remain to be mentioned the two sandpipers I saw which pass through, but winter south of, Colombia. The Pectoral was a spectacular: on Oct 12, 1956 some were feeding on the lawn of the Barranquilla country club golf course, and then on the following day about 500 of them were there — with Eastern and Gray Kingbirds but no other shorebirds as far as I could determine. It was a field day, over that Columbus Day weekend, for small boys with slingshots. These are my only records for Pectorals in Colombia.

Lastly, the other shorebird of long-range migration is that "tall-grass-sandpiper", the Upland Plover. I located one by its call in unmowed lawn grass or tall stubble near Barranquilla once each in the months of Sep, Oct, and Nov only.

Among ducks, the most numerous Colombian migrant is the Blue-winged Teal. Many a Barranquillan duck hunter tells of bagging one with a U. S. Fish and Wildlife band on its leg, of sending the band to Washington as directed, and of receiving such a courteous letter in reply, telling the ducks' previous whereabouts as known from the band. According to the AOU Checklist's listing of ranges of subspecies, it is improbable that the Colombian Teal are of the subspecies that sees New York State, but I yielded to the temptation to include this picturesque migrant among the New York birds in Colombia. I have no Sep records of this duck, but in Oct have seen them flush up from a roadside marsh near Santa Marta as I passed by auto, and in Dec saw them along the Magdalena; also I have records of from one to four on the Puerto beach in Oct, Nov, and Jan.

The other New York State duck I saw was a wing-injured Baldpate, too swift of foot to allow himself to be caught, on the ocean beach at Sabanilla in April.

I shall do no more than mention the New York heron species seen in Colombia, as these herons occur here in numbers the year round, so that sight records without banding or extensive rookery censuses give no evidence as to the proportion of migrants from the north. Probably the majority of the Great Blue Herons, Cattle Egrets, Little Blues, the numerous Snowy and American Egrets, and the Louisiana Herons which one sees are year-round local residents. The same is true for the Glossy Ibis, vastly numerous in Colombia.

Of the hawks, the Kestrel and Turkey Vulture in Colombia are local, not New York, sub-species. I have probable sight records of the Peregrine and Merlin, both on the ocean beaches. According to the AOU Checklist, these could have migrated from the Empire State. The Broadwings, viewed from my city apartment, boiling out of a thunderstormy sky in the last week of Oct were probably migrants from the Eastern States just in off the Caribbean. And the Osprey — chances were good of seeing one on a trip to Puerto any of the months I was there — may well have come from New York State too.

Laughing Gulls and several New York State terns appeared at Puerto and along the Magdalena. In Sep Laughing Gulls averaged nine per trip at Puerto Colombia, in Nov five per trip, in Dec one every other trip to the beach. In Nov I saw numbers of them in Cienaga Grande, a large saltwater lake behind the barrier beach near Santa Marta, which is also on the Caribbean coast but east of the Magdalena River. Also in Nov and Dec I saw them in Barranquilla harbor. I have a Feb and an Apr record of one at Puerto, and in Apr saw 30 riding the waves in Santa Marta harbor.

I saw several Black Terns at Bocas de Cenizas in Sep and one at Puerto. Apparently they also do not stay the winter right along the coast: the only other record I have is of numbers seen at Cienaga Grande in Nov. I have Caspian Tern records for Puerto starting in Nov when they averaged two per trip among the Royal Terns. In Dec there were six per trip there, and I saw 15 on the first day out of Barranquilla on a boat trip up the Magdalena. Then again in Apr there were two or three per trip at Puerto. The Royal Tern could be seen every month I was in Colombia — probably New York birds together with more near-by breeders. At Puerto counts were of around 30 per trip in all months except Jan, Feb, and Mar when there would be only from two to five facing into the wind on the mudbars. They were always to be seen in numbers over the Magdalena near its mouth, and fishing over Barranquilla harbor.

For the Common Tern I have only Nov and Dec records of one or two on the Puerto beach. Least Terns were common there in Sep, as many as 15 per trip, but were fewer in Oct, the last month with Puerto records. But in Dec I saw them in numbers in the Magdalena, some distance above Barranquilla, where they must winter away from the coastal beaches, as do the greatest numbers of most of the species recorded in the present section of my notes.

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