

1964 FALL SHOREBIRD MIGRATION IN CENTRAL NEW YORK

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No other birding phenomenon in central New York offers the variety and the duration, the potential for the unexpected, the possibility of the rare bird as does the fall shorebird movement. Beginning in early July and terminating in early December, the parade of species and their panoply of plumages provides to the observant birder a remarkable autumnal spectacle. This year's migration proved particularly impressive and was undoubtedly enhanced by the acres of available habitat engendered by the severe and protracted drought of late spring and early summer which persisted thru the fall into late Nov. While a disaster for most waterfowl and marsh species, the drought created shoreline conditions along Lake Ontario, Oneida Lake, and Onondaga Lake conducive to stoppage and loitering of the transient shorebirds. Most smaller marshes were unfortunately dry by the peak of the fall migration but the larger marshes with extensive areas of water, e.g. Montezuma National Wildlife Refuge — MNWR, Howland's Island Game Management Area, the Salmon River marshes, the Sandy Pond marshes, had acres of succulent mud at just the right time. The enormous exposure of shoreline along Lake Ontario created so much habitat that few concentrations on the open beach ensued, especially at disturbed shores such as the Sandy Pond beach, but the adjacent drying marshes had excellent numbers. The abundance of shorebird habitat and shorebirds prompted a census of most of the suitable areas in Region 5 and ElDorado Beach in Region 6 Sept. 4 to 7 with a recorded total of 19 species and 1205 individuals. Further, the extended warm weather of Oct. and Nov. contributed to the lingering of many individuals, particularly at Sylvan and Verona Beaches on Oneida Lake, Sandy Pond, and MNWR. Normally one could expect to find six to eight species of shorebirds in Nov.; this fall, very like the fall of 1963, an excess of species (11) was logged for Nov. in Region 5 and 12 species were detected in Nov. at MNWR.

The Syracuse Airport deserves particular comment re shorebird migrants. The extensive cropped-grass areas adjacent to runways and entrance roads, liberally sprinkled with some of the toughest of weeds, dried severely with the prolonged drought creating an extensive tract of ground not unlike frost-touched tundra. The dry, hot weather seemed to have favored a tremendous crop of crickets which appeared to be the mainstay of the many Killdeer and Golden Plover there. The attraction of both the area and the presence of the many shorebirds (Killdeer, Golden Plover) seemed to draw more aquatic shorebirds, especially Pectoral Sandpiper, but also Common Snipe (amazing, as the sun-baked lawns were porcelain hard), Semipalmated Sandpiper, and Dunlin. Similarly attractive and at a prime position in the Finger Lakes-Susquehanna River corridor was Montezuma National Wildlife Refuge. The drought-induced low water levels of the Main Pool proved very attractive to shorebirds and record numbers were observed in Sept. and Oct. with many lingering into Nov. During the cold weather of Nov., most of the marsh skimmed over with ice but sufficient thawing occurred to hold certain species to record departure dates.

The following summary of migrational data presents synoptically the major features of this most fascinating fall phenomenon. Several repetitive strains, like melodies in a fugue, reappear persistently. A possible explanation will be offered for the double and/or late peaking of numbers of some shorebirds and a tentative hypothesis will be broached for the now regular but largely unexplained appearance of certain rare species.

Semipalmated Plover: first noted July 13, Onondaga Lake; maximum of 35, Sept 5, Onondaga Lake and 35, Sept 12, Sandy Pond with 103 totaled Sept 4-7 on the panregional count; rapid decline after Sept 20; max in Oct, ten on Oct 4, Sylvan Beach; last noted Oct 30, Onondaga Lake; at MNWR the peak count was 50, Aug 16, with one, Oct 18 as the last. **Killdeer:** first

flocking noted July 13, Onondaga Lake; frankly abundant thru the fall with max of 397, Sept 4-7; frequent Sept counts of 60-125, mostly from Oneida Lake, Syracuse Airport, and Onondaga Lake; Oct numbers less with max of 50, Oct 18; last noted at Oswego, Dec 13; at MNWR a peak of 40, Nov 14, is testimony to the mildness of the fall and the attraction of the feeding conditions there; last noted MNWR Nov 29 when 18 were logged.

Golden Plover: arrival date, Aug 10, six, Syracuse Airport, all adults; peak of 19 in Aug but with Sept a magnificent display of plovers was regularly available; 76 on Sept 6 had 10% immatures present; numbers peaked in Sept to 118 on the 13th, the majority adults; in Oct numbers were higher still — 175 Oct 4, 360 Oct 15, 220 Oct 17, 300 Oct 18 (at least 75% immatures) with a decline, not an exodus in the next week, i.e., 87 Oct 22, 14 Oct 23, 22 Oct 24, 4 Oct 25, none Oct 26 or thereafter; oddly enough, Golden Plover away from this concentration were very scarce — total of five away from the Airport, Sept 12 to Oct 15; had the Airport collection of birds gone unnoticed, this flight, the greatest known to date, would have been labelled a near dud; birds were so abundant on some days at the Airport that they, along with numerous Starlings, had to be frightened off the runway approaches by noisy trucks and shotgun blasts before scheduled airplanes could depart; at MNWR the first Golden Plover appeared Sept 6 with max count 15, Oct 3; one, Nov 8, is a very late bird (?immature — or sick?).

Black-bellied Plover: fall arrival of adults, July 30, two, Onondaga Lake; first immatures Sept 9 at Syracuse Airport (note the five week gap between ad. and imm. birds); max eight (three ad., five imm.) at Sandy Pond, Oct 4; noted regularly in small numbers (three to seven) with the large flocks of Golden Plover at the Airport; MNWR had a max of 10, Oct 14 with last birds noted there Nov 3, and Nov 1, Sandy Pond.

Ruddy Turnstone: one, Aug 5, Sandy Pond was the first fall arrival; fall counts quite low; peak of six, Aug 16 to Sept 19 at Sylvan Beach and singletons only at MNWR; last birds reported were two, Oct 4, Sylvan Beach, a rather early departure date, especially in view of the mild fall weather.

Common Snipe: flocking birds noted as early as July 13, Onondaga Lake; numbers low thru early Aug and into Sept (under ten/day); in late Sept counts of eight to 11/day were prologue to Oct counts of 16-30/day with peaks of 51, Oct 14, MNWR, and 60, MNWR and Howland's Island Game Management Area Oct 17; birds were fairly plentiful thru early Nov with last dates Nov 15, three, Clay Swamp and Nov 14, 21, MNWR.

Upland Plover: this dry-land sandpiper collected at the Syracuse Airport in record numbers this fall; six on Aug 2 grew to 63 the next day and Aug counts thereafter ranged from 12 up to 87, Aug 30; the Sept departure was, like the Golden Plovers, a decline, not an exodus; 12 Sept 6, four Sept 7, two Sept 9, and last noted Sept 13, one, all at the Syracuse Airport.

Spotted Sandpiper: arrival date difficult to determine; counts of 20-40/day at Onondaga Lake July-Aug 10 form a peak period; a rapid decline in late Aug with a few Sept birds; departure date, Oct 8, Onondaga Lake and Oct 15, MNWR.

Solitary Sandpiper: one, Bolivar Swamp, July 26, was a late arrival (usually noted July 4 to 10); fall maxima only three, Aug 9 and Sept 7 and 9, all Otisco Lake; departure date of Sept 26, at both Otisco Lake and MNWR.

Willet: one, Oct 15, Sage Creek near Texas was an extraordinarily late bird (? possibly the western race?) and the only record this fall.

Greater Yellowlegs: first noted July 13, two, Onondaga Lake; very scarce thru July, Aug and early Sept; not until mid-Sept were counts above ten achieved, but Oct numbers were good, e.g. ten-16/day at Sylvan Beach and a whopping total of 122, Oct 14 at MNWR; last noted Nov 11, two, MNWR and Nov 15, one, Salmon River marshes.

Lesser Yellowlegs: nine, July 1, Onondaga Lake were early; a count of 50 individuals all adult, July 15, stands as an early peak figure but the species was scarce in the first two weeks of Aug; a second peak in late Aug and Sept (12-25/day with max of 85, Aug 29, MNWR); a gradual decline thru Oct with Oct 26, one, Sylvan Beach and Nov 3, one, MNWR as departure dates.

Knot: single birds only; an adult in nearly perfect breeding plumage

July 30, Onondaga Lake; single winter-plumaged birds Sept 6, ElDorado Beach and Sept 12, Sylvan Beach; one noted Oct 10-14, MNWR is very late as only three other Oct records are known in 15 years of observation.

Purple Sandpiper: only one fall bird noted — Nov 15, just west of Oswego; date range of this scarce but regular bird now extends from Oct 31 to Nov 23; in view of the enormous shoreline exposure along Lake Ontario, especially the rocky peninsulas between Henderson Harbor and Cape Vincent and again between Oswego and Texas, finding even one of these well-camouflaged and unobtrusive birds must be considered fortunate; most records heretofore have been from the Ontario inlets which had none this fall. **Pectoral Sandpiper:** two, July 16, Onondaga Lake were the first fall birds; July and Aug saw only a desultory flight, and even in early Sept, most areas had less than ten/day; after Sept 12, Pectorals were everywhere with peak counts of 30-40/day at Otisco Lake, 48-60/day at Sylvan and Verona Beaches, dozens with the Golden Plover at the Syracuse Airport; 45-60 were tallied daily at MNWR thru the third week of Oct; a rapid decline in numbers in the next week with departure dates Nov 1, five, Salmon River marshes and Nov 3, one, MNWR. **White-rumped Sandpiper:** first noted Aug 11, one, Sylvan Beach; very low counts thru Aug and it was not until Sept 18 that a count over five was achieved; between Sept 18 and Oct 4, five-seven/day were recorded; all birds detected after Oct 14 were immatures (rusty wash along scapulars, dark brown legs, sharply margined back feathers); last noted, Nov 1, one, Sandy Pond and Nov 14, two, MNWR. **Baird's Sandpiper:** not noted until Aug 13, two, Onondaga Lake; counts thereafter quite low (one-three/day) with maximum six, Sept 20, Sylvan and Verona Beaches; last noted Oct 4, three, Sandy Pond; record late birds spotted at MNWR were one, Oct 23, and six, Nov 29; these last birds, carefully checked, were associated with a flock of Killdeer and Snow Buntings; all individuals seen by myself this fall seemed to be immatures and it is my opinion that an adult Baird's Sandpiper is a rare bird in this sector (cf. Snyder's ARCTIC BIRDS OF CANADA). **Least Sandpiper:** arrived July 1, Onondaga Lake; 79, July 13, Onondaga Lake were mostly adults; 135 noted Sept 4-7, the majority immatures; the bright rusty juvenile birds, which retain the rusty feathers on the wing coverts, scapulars, and tertials after the partial post-juvenile molt, are quite distinctive and by checking for birds with this particular plumage, adult: immature ratios should be discernible; last noted Oct 18, one, Sylvan Beach and Nov 1, one, MNWR (very late). **Dunlin:** an extremely heavy flight this fall with frequent counts of 120-190/day Oct 15 to 30 (peak 328, Oct 17 at Sylvan Beach and 400, Oct 17 MNWR); first noted Sept 13 at ElDorado Beach — about one week late; last noted Nov 18, MNWR and Nov 28, Sylvan Beach.

Short-billed Dowitcher: the controversy over the specific date, range and general abundance of this and the following species will probably require a shotgun solution; **probably** most Dowitchers before Sept 15 are Short-billed — most after this date, **probably** Long-billed; most Short-billed Dowitchers (eight-12/day) occurred between Aug 26 and Sept 12, the majority immature birds; two birds, probably adults, were recorded as early as July 15; very few birds were detected thru July and Aug (a time when the Atlantic coast marshes are alive with adult Short-billed Dowitchers); last noted Sept 29, Otisco Lake. **Long-billed Dowitcher:** one bird, seen repeatedly and carefully checked, Sept 17 to 20, Sylvan Beach; unrecorded thereafter until Oct 17 when at least 20 individuals were observed at MNWR; three Dowitchers, unidentified as to species but probably Long-billed, were seen as late as Nov 3 there. **Stilt Sandpiper:** not reported before Aug 1, 12, ElDorado Beach, a rather late arrival date; surprisingly, this was also the maximum this fall; some three-five noted intermittently at Onondaga Lake with definite immatures there Sept 7 and 12; last noted Oct 5, Sylvan Beach and Oct 17, eight, MNWR. **Semipalmated Sandpiper:** usually the most common sandpiper but exceeded by both Dunlin and Golden Plover this

fall; max of 248, Sept 4 to 7 on Region 5 Shorebird Census, and many late Aug and early Sept dates had counts in excess of 100 and even 200/day; 300 were seen Aug 16, MNWR; a rapid decline after Sept 12 with last dates Oct 18, MNWR and Oct 24, one, Onondaga Lake, and two, Sylvan Beach. **Western Sandpiper:** very few birds; one-two/day, July 13 to Oct 3, Onondaga Lake and Sandy Pond. **Buff-breasted Sandpiper:** a single bird Sept 12, ElDorado Beach (netted and banded by N. Moon and G. Leubner of Rochester) was the only record. **Hudsonian Godwit:** one, Sept 12, Sylvan Beach was prelude to the largest collection of this species known locally in recent years; on Sept 15 three were noted, on Sept 17 four, on Sept 26, seven, on Oct 3 ten, and Oct 20, 12 (peak tally); last noted there Nov 2; both adults with chestnut-flecked ventral plumage and immature birds were detected; other reports include five, Sept 20 to Oct 17, MNWR, with last one there Nov 8 (a record departure date!) and one, Oct 4, Billington Bay Oneida Lake. Strangely enough, none were noted at Sandy Pond or ElDorado Beach thru the entire fall. Apparently a wide dispersal of this species occurred thru the northern and middle Atlantic States this fall, e.g. some 32 (a record tally) were noted at Bombay Hook National Wildlife Refuge on upper Delaware Bay. One wonders whether a major flight of the species was disrupted by the passage of a coastal storm in mid-Sept along the Atlantic seaboard with consequent scattering of storm-wafted individuals to various littoral areas. **Ruff:** see Field Note in this issue; also one noted Sept 20 to 23 at MNWR; this is undoubtedly the latest record locally. **Sanderling:** not noted until July 26, three, Onondaga Lake; counts throughout the fall extremely low, running ten-20/day at suitable areas (Sandy Pond, Sylvan and Verona Beaches); max of 85, Aug 5, Sandy Pond and 65, Sept 12, same place; last noted Nov 27, two, Sandy Pond, very late.

Red Phalarope: singletons observed twice, Oct 15, Onondaga Lake, and Nov 27, Sandy Pond Inlet; date range of occurrence locally over the past seven years Oct 5 to Dec 29 with the majority in Nov. **Wilson's Phalarope:** single birds only; July 1, adult female, Onondaga Lake; one in winter plumage Sept 22, MNWR, (very late) — locally it is much more likely to be seen in late July and early Aug. **Northern Phalarope:** an adult female Aug 12 to 13, Onondaga Lake, was the first noted; singletons only noted thereafter locally up to Oct 14, but ten were noted Aug 20 at MNWR; last reported there Sept 20.

Many shorebirds, if not most, follow a pattern of migrational departure from the Arctic and boreal breeding grounds of adults first, young later (usually weeks to a month later). This migrational sequence, so evident along the coast, appears inland also, permitting the careful observer in July and early August to see many "fall" birds in adult spring plumage. With daily observation at locally favored places, one can readily follow the post-nuptial molt in the various individuals that traffic thru the area. Such a series of observations would quickly demonstrate the tremendous variety possible in shorebird plumages each fall in central New York. Further, the "adults first, immatures later" may well account for the often suspected, occasionally documented double peaking of fall numbers mentioned over past seasons and undoubtedly contributes to the protracted character of the fall flight. The repeated occurrence of dates of shorebird peak numbers in this area after the middle Atlantic coastal peak dates farther south (Maryland and Virginia) would suggest that the majority of the fall birds passing thru this inland area derive from the later portion of the flight, i.e. the immature birds. As determined by observation, the great majority of Aug., Sept., and Oct. birds that can be age-assigned are immatures (this may not be true of Pectoral Sandpiper and Dunlin). It would be of considerable interest to determine whether the late-staying individuals were regularly immature birds; certainly the late Sanderlings all appear to be immature birds. Probably most observers feel that the identification of shorebirds, especially the notorious "peep" sandpipers, is difficult, but with careful study and recourse to several afternoons in a good museum collection, one

can readily familiarize oneself with the differences between adult and immature of most of the more common migrants that move thru this area. Undoubtedly the two best source books for data on plumages and molt sequence readily available — and transportable in a simple “traveling library” — are T.S. Roberts’ *A MANUAL FOR THE IDENTIFICATION OF THE BIRDS OF MINNESOTA AND NEIGHBORING STATES — 1955* and L. L. Snyder’s *ARCTIC BIRDS OF CANADA — 1957*; the latter has excellent range maps of the Canadian Arctic breeding species discussed.

Certain species have now occurred often enough, some with striking regularity, that they must be considered scarce but regular fall migrants. The Hudsonian Godwit, formerly one of the rarest of shorebirds locally, has been recorded in recent years so regularly that the first weekend in Oct. is referred to as “godwit weekend”. The Golden Plover probably is also increasing as a fall migrant locally but it will require years of observation to document this as the variability amongst serial years and the extreme gregariousness of the species do not permit the easy accumulation of interpretable data such as might ensue with other species, e.g. Ruddy Turnstone, Upland Plover, or Spotted Sandpiper.

Most peculiar in the entire fall flight are those few individual Purple Sandpipers and Red Phalaropes that are seen in late Oct. and Nov. along Lake Ontario. Normally one thinks of both of these species as strictly Arctic or maritime in character; indeed, the Purple Sandpiper is scientifically labelled *Erolia maritima*. It is my opinion — and I emphasize that it is only an **opinion** — that such individuals represent tardy, or possibly sick, birds lingering in southern Hudson Bay and James Bay, said individuals being forced to an overland flight by the southward advance of the Arctic winter. For the Purple Sandpiper, this may be a regular flight line as a small population is known to breed in the Belcher Islands on the southeast side of Hudson Bay. An overland route would provide a considerably shorter course to open salt water for any late-lingering shorebird than turning north and then east — over 1500 miles — around the Labrador Peninsula. The lack of records of these two species from the middle St. Lawrence River area most likely represents a hiatus between James Bay funneled, overland birds and the coastal and/or pelagic movement; however, it may reflect the paucity of observers and/or habitat in that sector also. The correlation of the appearance of these rare individuals with cold fronts and northwest winds rather than after northeastern Atlantic storms further suggests the Hudson and James Bay, rather than Atlantic, origin of such birds. A parallel situation might occur in some low Arctic larids and jaegers, explaining the regular fall appearance of jaegers and the irregular fall occurrences of Sabine’s Gull and Black-legged Kittiwake on Lake Ontario.

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