

1965 FALL SHOREBIRD MIGRATION IN CENTRAL NEW YORK

FRITZ SCHEIDER

How very short is summer! The last flocks of natty Ruddy Turnstones surge toward their tundra hills in early June, and by July 1 the returning tide of shorebirds has begun. Yet the protracted autumnal shorebird migration must not be considered a unitary thing. The double peak pattern of fall shorebird numbers alluded to in previous articles (Scheider, F. G. *Kingbird* 10(4): 159, 1960 and *Kingbird* 15(1): 15, 1965) and regional reports has this season achieved a modest documentation locally; from this, emerge a few crumbs of pattern and fact, and a host of speculations (see Ruddy Turnstone, Golden Plover, Baird's Sandpiper, Lesser Yellowlegs). The chronology of arrival and departure dates of both adult and immature birds can be readily established per year; a decade of observations would probably pinpoint these data very narrowly, but the major information desired would still not be obtained. The documentation desired revolves around the timing of the peak passage of the two general age groups of shorebirds (adults v. immatures or "birds of the year"). Two major facts of distribution affect data collecting; numbers of shorebirds and, therefore, their local distribution depend on suitable habitat available at the appropriate time; and the mobility of these world travelers makes movement from one area to another, e.g. Sandy Pond to Onondaga Lake, a trifle. Hence, the small number of, say, Short-billed Dowitchers seen locally each fall is no indication of the total numbers of the population or even of the population utilizing this inland migration route. But of those few birds that do migrate locally one should be able to ascertain the proportion of adults to immatures and thereby establish whether, numbers or no, a reproducible population sequence regularly occurs.

Variations in habitat: The protracted four-year drought, which finally ended in late September, dried out most local ponds and marshes. Weeds grew rankly and the numerous mud-rimmed ponds characteristic of late summer were generally unavailable. The drawdown at Otisco Lake, however, created acres of mudflats. Similarly, low water conditions in the Main Pool at Montezuma National Wildlife Refuge produced a muddy scolopacine paradise until early August when the Storage Pool's impounded water was released to the Main Pool, obliterating its extensive flats but engendering an even larger array of mudflats, silt bars, and shallow pools at the Storage Pool. The Lake Ontario shore, normally a rich shorebird area both in numbers and species, proved disappointing thru most of the fall. The lake began to slowly rise in mid-June and, by early August, only the outer beaches had open flats of any extent; except during a moon-eye kill in late July, these were usually devoid of shorebird food and heavily infested with people. The inner edges of the Sandy Pond dunes have become so extensively grown to weeds that less than 300 yards of open sand-mud shoreline are available over the 3½ mile length. Eldorado Beach in Region 6 near Henderson also suffered change; the water-edge weed growth, normally held in check by cattle pastured there, grew waist-high in the absence of these bovine lawnmowers this year.

The artificial short-grass prairie at the Syracuse Airport had tremendous variation; September rains and a non-mowing policy in late July and August rendered large areas of grassy lawns too vegetated for regular use by Golden Plover, Killdeer, and Pectoral Sandpiper. However, as soon as any one area was cropped, these species came in quickly and, where cropping was regular, persisted. The Onondaga Lake shore flats proved the most available (to birders) and productive area locally, particularly the extensive black mudflats at the southern end, known with Ruff affection as "Old Stinky." Sylvan and Verona Beaches had minimal shore area exposed and tremendous human use, precluding high tallies. In view of these variations in habitat, the majority negative, it is no surprise that numbers of shorebirds seemed to be

reduced; variety, however, was excellent, perhaps because of the intensive and frequent checking of local areas.

Numbers Present: The 1965 fall flight saw *no* species, except possibly Killdeer, Semipalmated Sandpiper, and Stilt Sandpiper in unusual abundance. Rather, the birds were widely scattered at the various areas of available habitat with greatest numbers at the more choice places (Montezuma NWR in Region 3 and Eldorado Beach in Region 6). Certain species, however, did stand out as being remarkably scarce, particularly when viewed with the 1964 fall figures in mind. Common Snipe were astonishingly scarce—maximum for Region 5 was only *ten* and on just one day! Greater Yellowlegs also were very scarce, and the tallies on Dunlin along Lake Ontario and at Sylvan and Verona Beaches were in the ten-25/day range, quite low for this often common late migrant. Why these three species, with markedly different breeding habitats (bog, muskeg, and tundra respectively), should all be low is quite hard to fathom. Or might it be coincidence?

Daily Variation in Numbers and Species: Another aspect to be considered is day-to-day or even in-the-day turnover of individuals of the various species. A corollary of contradiction often paralleled the frequent checking, as counts of individuals and species would vary remarkably from hour to hour in the day. This variability, bane of data collecting, was most obvious at Syracuse Airport and Onondaga Lake where 10:00 AM and 5:00 PM counts were often worlds apart in both species and numbers of each. Probably the same thing is true at Sandy Pond Inlet and Eldorado Beach but the variability there does not achieve documentation. Similar day-to-day and diurnal variation can almost certainly be demonstrated at Braddock's Bay near Rochester, an area which has the Ontario effect of both migration direction and shoreline shifting of loitering birds. Contrariwise, certain individual shorebirds, identifiable by virtue of quirks of plumage or accidental marking, such as oiling, or by their rarity, would frequent certain places for days (e.g. the adult Hudsonian Godwits on Onondaga Lake and at Montezuma NWR, the Wilson's Phalarope there, the two Knots at Sylvan Beach) despite what were apparently major shifts in shorebird numbers. Whatever change of wind or passage of a front shifted the many Onondaga Lake "peep" and Pectorals and Yellowlegs left the Hudsonian Godwit there quite unmoved.

Anomalies and Speculations: Certain anomalies of the shorebird migration appear in sharper focus with each year of observation. Each August one or two spring-plumaged Dunlin appear three to four weeks before the first winter-plumaged birds arrive at Eldorado Beach or Sandy Pond Inlet. Are these early birds unsuccessful breeders which have left the Arctic tundra prior to molt or are they birds that have summered out of the Arctic and are simply wandering about? Also in almost any August one can find apparently full winter-plumaged (? post-breeding) adult White-rumped Sandpipers in larger collections of "peep" Sandpipers along Lake Ontario. Yet in this species, molt of body plumage is not supposed to occur until late August, September, and October (Bent, A. C. *Life Histories of N. American Shorebirds*, Smithsonian Inst., U.S. Nat. Mus. Bulletins 142-1927 and 146-1929). I cannot recall ever seeing an adult fall White-rumped Sandpiper in this area with traces of spring plumage, and years of back notes do not clarify this matter. What part of the population of White-rumped Sandpipers do these birds represent? Where do they come from? Have they bred in the recently terminated Arctic summer? Or are they wandering, non-breeding birds that have made the trip for practice but not for procreation? Certainly the later birds—late September thru early November—are almost entirely immature birds and obviously so—gray backs and wing-coverts with each feather delicately edged in silver-buff, rusty scapulars with pale buff trim, blurred breast marks, dark brown-black legs, and inordinately tame, even for "peep" shorebirds. But what and wherefore are those winter-plumaged adult birds of the August flocks?

Similarly, Baird's Sandpiper data shows that the adult is a very scarce bird in central New York with an adult to immature ratio of one:30-40; the few adults present are late July and early August birds. Are these Arctic returnees of an attempted but unsuccessful breeding season or are they possibly a counterpart of the early Dunlin or of those winter-plumaged White-rumped Sandpipers?

The local, i.e. Lake Ontario, distribution of the three maritime shorebirds we get presents equally abundant material for speculation. The late October-thru-November records of Purple Sandpiper and Red Phalarope are largely immature birds. Both species are remarkably tame and allow inspection at such close range that details of the wing, back, and flank plumage and the bill markings can be studied carefully. It is my opinion that these few individuals represent lingering birds, usually immatures—and possibly sick ones at that, which tarry in the southern reaches of Hudson and James Bays and are forced to overland migration by the freeze-up of the Arctic areas of the northern half of Hudson Bay. However, Northern Phalaropes, a species in which the time and sequence of exodus from the Arctic is known (Snyder, L. L. *Arctic Birds of Canada*, Univ. of Toronto Press, 1957), probably represent low Arctic, i.e. Hudson Bay-James Bay breeders that regularly traverse the interior on their autumnal passage to the sea. Regularly the flight is much, much earlier than the Red Phalaropes' (usually 15 August to 1 October for Northern, usually 5 October to 30 November for Red) and the flight of Northern Phalaropes includes both adults and immatures (Witherby, H. F. et al *The Handbook of British Birds*, Vol. V, H. F. & G. Witherby, LTD. 1938) and at nearly the same time.

Over the past decade, the Hudsonian Godwit has been observed so regularly each fall that observers now count on seeing the bird at least once/season in the area. Initially they were usually noted in late September thru mid-October and were regularly immature birds. Now one can see them as early as mid-July (cf Hudsonian Godwit below) and individuals may stay into late October if the weather remains mild. Oddly enough, the Whimbrel, the other large Arctic wader one might see locally, appears to be increasingly scarce and one feels lucky if one/fall is noted.

The last of the speculations revolves around the now famous Onondaga Lake Ruffs. Dr. D. B. Peakall (*Wilson Bulletin* 77: #3, Sept 1965) has suggested that the Ruff may be breeding in North America and the flurry of individuals observed at Onondaga Lake, including carefully observed immatures, supports this inference. Why some five different Ruffs, including immatures, should select a small and polluted crescent of graceless mud at an inland locality *regularly* is beyond my understanding. The concentration of observers, I feel, has little to do with the numbers of Ruffs observed for certainly better areas such as Eldorado Beach and Montezuma NWR have virtually as thorough coverage and the number of Ruffs tallied is markedly less. Why is Onondaga Lake so graced with Ruffs? This remains quite unexplained. And the next question is—"When will a spring Ruff be found?"

Fall migration data is summarized below by species.

Abbreviations: Airt—Syracuse Airport; EDB—Eldorado Beach in Region 6; imm—immature, L—Lake; max—maximum; MNWR—Montezuma National Wildlife Refuge; Onon—Onondaga; SB, VB—Sylvan and Verona Beaches; SP—Sandy Pond.

PIPING PLOVER: none! SEMPALMATED PLOVER: first July 1, one, Onon L; max 50 July 31 SP, and 36 Aug 26 Onon L; last, two Nov 5 Onon L. At MNWR—first July 1, three; peak counts 45 July 28, 34 Sep 6, 65 Sep 14, 35 Sep 15; last Nov 2. KILLDEER: buildup at Onon L apparent by July 10; flocks 30-50 thru July and Aug; max 260 Airt Sep 16; some 125 Aug 26 EDB; MNWR max 100 Aug 18; last, one Nov 20 Onon L. GOLDEN PLOVER: adults arrived Aug 17, Airt; max 105 Airt with quick decline thru mid-Sep; last, two imm Nov 14, Airt, a record late date. At MNWR—first Aug 14; max 71 Sep 6; Oct tallies ten-15/day; last Nov 6

(late). **BLACK-BELLIED PLOVER**: first migrants Aug 10 SB, VB; tallies very low (one-eight/day) thru Sep, but widely reported (Airt, Otisco L, etc.); last Nov 11, an imm at SP. At MNWR—first Aug 13 but peak figures of ten-14/day, all imm, not reached til late Oct; last, one Nov 14. **RUDDY TURNSTONE**: first July 31 SP; some six-15/day thru first two weeks of Aug, primarily from Onon L, SB, VB; max 55, all adults (see chart) Aug 19 EDB; Sep and Oct, scarce (two-three/day); last Oct 12 Onon L and MNWR.

AMER. WOODCOCK: one Nov 21, Nine Mile Point near Scriba, Oswego Co, is late. **COMMON SNIPER**: extremely scarce all fall; first migrants July 25 Howland's Island; counts of one-four/day thereafter with max ten in mid-Oct at Howland's Island; last, one Nov 18 Clay Swamp. At MNWR the picture was somewhat brighter—26 July 18 (probably local birds); peaks 17 Sep 29 and 31 Oct 31; last Nov 13. **WHIMBREL**: scarce, one report only, two SB in mid-July (fide DWA). **UPLAND PLOVER**: two July 5 Airt; up to 19 there July 6, with max 94 Aug 25; by early Sep most had left. Only two-eight/day until last Sep 10, three. **SPOTTED SANDPIPER**: 75 plus July 8 Onon L and 78 July 4 MNWR show how early flocking and migration occur; by mid-July Onon L tallies had fallen to 50/day, Aug counts were 20/day; four-six/day thru first third of Sep, one-two/day to Sep 21; last Oct 26, one, SB, VB (very late). **SOLITARY SANDPIPER**: first July 1 Morrisville and July 5 Camillus; scarce, max six (all imm) Sep 17 Otisco L; scarce even at MNWR, no count exceeding four/day; last Oct 2, an imm, Onon L. **GREATER YELLOWLEGS**: first July 3, one Onon L; very scarce thru July and Aug, Sep numbers extremely low with max nine Sep 21-24 Onon L; at MNWR, scarce though conditions seemed excellent, all counts low, 12-14/day Oct 3-31; last one Nov. 13, a bit early, Howland's Island. **LESSER YELLOWLEGS**: first July 1, 12 Onon L and two MNWR: see chart for numbers pattern; last Oct 31, an injured bird, SB. At MNWR—176 July 31, quite impressive; Aug and Sep 25-40/day; last Oct 12, very early. **KNOT**: first July 17, one Onon L; one-two/day then to Sep 25, last date; numbers too small to suggest age sequence, but all personally observed Sep birds seemed to be imm.

PURPLE SANDPIPER: only record, one imm Oct 30-31, Fair Haven Beach State Park breakwater (M. S. Rusk). **PECTORAL SANDPIPER**: first July 1, one Onon L; July and Aug tallies low (three-30/day); in Sep a heavy flight (? imm); at Onon L 24 on Sep 26, 30 Sep 27, 40 Sep 28; max tallies from Otisco L in this period also, e.g. 41 Oct 3; last Oct 29, four Onon L. At MNWR major numbers not in until early Sep with 94 Sep 6, and 25-29/day thru Sep and first week Oct; thru Oct two-12/day; last Nov 14, seven (very late). **WHITE-RUMPED SANDPIPER**: first Aug 1, one SB, VB; some eight adults, all in winter plumage, Aug 19 EDB; Sep numbers very low, one-two/day until Sep 28 when imm began to augment them; six-eight/day thru Oct (virtually all imm); last, an imm, Nov 4 SP. At MNWR—first Aug 11 with buildup in numbers to six-eight/day not until last third of Sep; late Oct counts six-13/day (? all imm); last, one Nov 14. **BAIRD'S SANDPIPER**: only two adults reported all fall—one July 31 SP and one Aug 19-20 Airt; Aug 26-Sep 16, two-11 imm/day with best tallies from EDB, SP and Onon L; very scarce at SB, VB (reason?); last, an imm Oct 28 Onon L. At MNWR—first Aug 25, two; max 13, Sep 17 and 18; late Sep and early Oct counts two-four/day; last, one Nov 14, quite late. **LEAST SANDPIPER**: first July 1, two Onon L; see chart for distribution of adults/imm and numbers; last Oct 16, an imm Onon L. At MNWR—first July 8; max 117 July 18 and 105 July 31, probably mainly adults; last Nov 7, one, very late. **DUNLIN**: first (but is it really?) Aug 14, one in breeding plumage, Onon L; next not until Sep 16 SP; counts very low, none over 28/day even in Oct; last Nov 24 SB, VB. At MNWR—first Sep 18; Oct numbers much better than elsewhere, 150-239/day Oct 2-27; 100 Nov 7 attests to mildness of fall weather; last 22, Nov 14.

SHORT-BILLED DOWITCHER: first July 3, one Onon L; numbers low throughout season (see chart); last definite date Sep 26, one Onon L (see Long-billed D.); MNWR, 17-30/day in early Sep. **LONG-BILLED DOWITCHER**: only record at

	Chart											
	July			August			September			October		
	1-10	11-20	21-31	1-10	11-20	21-31	1-10	11-20	21-30	1-10	11-20	21-31
Golden Plover.....Ad Im	*											
						5	90 2	40 10	0 15	2 15	7	2
Ruddy Turnstone...Ad Im			4	10	50	34 4	2 4					
Lesser Yellowlegs...Ad Im	25	45	30	30 5	25 6	15 20	6 20	3 30	2 25	10	5	3
Least SandpiperAd Im	7	25	12 2	30 45	70 100	15 100	6 20	5	2	2	1	
Short-billed Ad Dowitcher.....Im		8	5	3	2 5	10	10	2	2			
Semipalmated Ad Sandpiper.....Im	6	20	120	500 30	350 100	120 85	15 80	15 35	10 25	2 20	8	2
Sanderling.....Ad Im			40	100	110	150	15 4	15	5	5	2	5

* Average number of birds/day for the indicated 10 or 11 day period compilation made from Region V data plus available ElDorado Beach figures; Montezum NWR figures not included.

Onon L, one Sep 6-7. At MNWR, some 11 noted Sep 12 and 2-20/day present thru remainder of Sep and all of Oct on the Storage Pool; a Nov 14 dowitcher (last date) was almost certainly a Long-billed. STILT SANDPIPER: first adult July 8, one Onon L; tallies low one-three/day; max seven Aug 8 SB and eight Sep 1 Onon L; first imm Aug 8; last, an imm Oct 3 Onon L. At MNWR—first Aug 15 (late) but a rapid peaking in early Sep to 61 Sep 6 (adult: imm ratio unknown); numbers dwindled rapidly, two-five/day only Sep 20-29; last, one Oct 13. SEMIPALMATED SANDPIPER: most abundant scolopacine migrant; first July 10 SP; very heavy late July to late Aug flight with marked decrease by Sep 13 (see chart); late Sep only 12-45/day, in Oct three-eight/day; last, one Nov 4 SB, VB (very late). At MNWR—first July 17, rapid rise to max 540 July 31; sharp drop in mid-Sep, but late Sep—early Oct counts higher (50-75/day) than at Syracuse; last, two Nov 7, very late. WESTERN SANDPIPER: rather scarce, total of six Aug 17-Sep 16; some years two-four/day are reported in Oct. BUFF-BREASTED SANDPIPER: singles only, both imm, Sep 6-7 Onon L and Oct 6-7 Airt, our first Oct record. HUDSONIAN GODWIT: first, one adult Aug 25 Onon L; seen there until Sep 2, then none seen despite daily checking until another (? same) adult appeared Sep 16-25; Sep 27 one very nervous imm; none thereafter. At MNWR—four adults July 14 (remarkably early) to July 21; one (? age) regularly Sep 5-Oct 2, last date, with two reported Sep 6.

RUFF: at least five individuals at Onon L; first, an adult male with black ear tufts, mottled brown back, and brown-and-white barred ruff July 1-4; second, another adult male with black ear tufts, black back, and solid black ruff, July 3, 6 and 8; third, an imm male, judging by patterning of underparts and size, July 8 and 12 (July 12 bird may have been a second imm male but imm plumage markings not distinctive enough to differentiate); fourth, an adult female July 30; adult males in advanced molt July 17 and Aug 11 could not be definitely categorized as new birds; last was a very small imm female Aug 20; this veritable rash of records from an 8-acre mudflat seems almost incredible, but dozens of observers saw these various birds. At MNWR—a single winter-plumaged adult male was present Aug 22-Sep 15. SANDERLING: first July 19, one Onon L; late July tallies only 40/day and max 100 Aug 7 SP; a rapid decline to 15-40/day thru late Aug and early Sep at SP but EDB much better (125 Aug 19, 170 Aug 26); late Sep and all Oct tallies very low; last Nov 21, two SP Inlet; as expected, very scarce at MNWR, date range Aug 15-Sep 29, max four Sep 29.

RED PHALAROPE: first, an imm Oct 3 (early) Derby Hill, riding lightly in the angry surf tossed up by a 45 mph NW gale; next report, two, both imm, Nov 6 SP; last Nov 13, two (? age) EDB. WILSON'S PHALAROPE: singles only July 19, Aug 11, Sep 23-25 at Onon L, the last a definite imm and a record late date; one Aug 19 EDB also imm. At MNWR—an adult female June 27, none thereafter until Aug 8, one-two/day (? age) Aug 8-25, last date. NORTHERN PHALAROPE: first, one Aug 29 SP; max six (one adult, five imm) Sep 2, SP and Onon L; at EDB, two (? three) Aug 29 and seven (one adult, six imm) Sep 5 with max ten Sep 4; a hiatus until Oct 2-9, one (? age) SB, VB; at MNWR, rather regularly seen from Sep 1, one, thru to Oct 2 with max four Sep 5-6.

Observations and data were obtained from the many local birders who deserve abundant thanks for careful checking of the many areas over many days. Specific thanks are due to the following observers—at Onondaga Lake, Jean W. Propst, M. L. Estoff, J. R. Bart, David B. Peakall, Margaret S. Rusk, Stuart Hosler Jr., and Thomas Riley; at Sylvan and Verona Beaches, Dorothy W. Ackley, M. S. Rusk, Paul and Sylvia Paquette, Ruth and Sally White; at Sandy Pond and Sandy Pond Inlet, most of the above observers; at ElDorado Beach, M. S. Rusk, D. C. Gordon; and at Montezuma NWR, a phenomenal series of observations by Walter E. Benning, also Dorothy McIlroy and R. J. Smith. I would like to request for 1966 similar efforts and

observations with particular attention to species and numbers of each, and if possible, age determinations (adult v. immature) from the central New York shorebird sites, particularly from the ElDorado Beach area and the Montezuma National Wildlife Refuge and Howland's Island Game Management sector; the ElDorado Beach site is probably the best site for sampling those migrants that regularly use the Great Lakes as a stop-over point on migration and the Montezuma NWR-Howland's Island GMA complex is admirably placed at the top of the Finger Lakes-Susquehanna River corridor. Another sector that should be regularly checked because of both its position on the aforementioned corridor and its Great Lakes shore character is the Sodus Bay area.

427 South Main Street, North Syracuse, N.Y. 13212

Additional reference:

Roberts, T. S. *A Manual for the Identification of Birds of Minnesota and Neighboring States*, University of Minnesota Press, 1955.

CONSERVATION NEWS — FOREVER WILD WETLANDS?

MAXWELL C. WHEAT, JR.

A conservation victory celebration! A week before the November elections the Hempstead Town Board announced that it was entering into a cooperative agreement with the State (which would provide half the funds and personnel) to manage the Town's 10,000 acres of salt wetlands for conservation and recreation. The Federation's official support was utilized many times by the Hempstead Town Lands Resources Council, which spearheaded and coordinated the fight, to show the state-wide concern for these wetlands which are a key waterfowl and shorebird area.

After the agreement has been signed, it can be terminated only by mutual consent of both Town and State. This, of course, doesn't assure the perpetuity essential for protection of natural resources against mounting pressure. But it represents a dramatic and welcome change in policy.

The most permanent and forceful kind of protection for natural areas is found in Article XIV, Section I of the State Constitution which provides the "forever wild" protection of the Forest Preserve. Now there is an opportunity to expand this protection to other natural areas — marshes, underwater lands, etc.

The crucial decision will be made at the Constitutional Convention of 1967 which will revise the present State Constitution and present it to the voters for approval or disapproval. By then it will be on a "take it or leave it" basis. The delegates, who will be elected this fall, could eliminate the "forever wild" protection. On the other hand, they could expand its coverage. Impossible? Not when you consider recent conservation achievements — the Hempstead wetlands, Fire Island National Seashore, Golden Eagle protection (all of which the Federation supported).

Why couldn't this be known as the "Conservation Constitutional Con-