# SHOREBIRDING AT ELDORADO SHORES — A GEOGRAPHY AND A CHRONOLOGY

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Just south of the Lake Ontario estuary of Stony Creek in southwestern Jefferson County lies a rock-strewn area of shoreline, Eldorado Beach or Shores (henceforth EDB), now famous among northern New York birders as a prime shorebirding area. My initial introduction to the area occurred when John Belknap told me of an area north of Sandy Pond "better than the Sandy Pond inlet for shorebirds." As an ardent scolopacidophile, I had to see *that*. And I've returned regularly ever since.

As a shorebirding site, by appearance EDB is not a prepossessing section. A series of shelving, somewhat pitted rock sheets, a jumbled array of loose boulders, some shallow and weedy areas, a dry, grass-shy berm – and birds. An array of shorebirds, perhaps 24–28 species per year, are recorded from this "beach", and careful and regular scrutiny would, I'm sure, reveal traffic of all regular central New York species.

First – where is it? and what does it look like? By geography, southwest Jefferson County, just south of Stony Creek. It extends for approximately three-fourths of a mile around a low, rough, short-based peninsula in Ellisburg Township. There are two approaches to the area, one by a road leading west, then south from Alexanders Corners on Route 3, about three miles south of Henderson Harbor, and the second by an extremely poor road going west from Route 3 opposite a place called the Starlite Tavern. Frankly, don't try the second or southern road – it is extremely rough with a crown higher than a medicaid patient's tooth, very narrow, and almost entirely through private land. The northern route (Stony Point Road, then left on dirt road before crossing the creek) ends in weedy ruts by the last camp on Stony Creek and has the disadvantage of placing the birder at the north end of the beach, hence looking against the sun as he checks the various parties of collected shorebirds. My advice would be to use the northern entrance but walk through the cedar groves and thickets to the southern tip of the area, then work northward along the shore line.

The southern limit of EDB consists of an abrupt transition from shelving sheetrock to typical eastern Lake Ontario sand beach. At this point a large shallows or pan of algae collects, providing square yards of homesteading for invertebrates and a continuous source of food for transient shorebirds. Large collections of "peep" sandpipers, Ruddy Turnstones, Sanderlings, and Semipalmated Plovers can be observed feeding there on the fall migration. Going west from this green mat (Marge Rusk calls it "shorebird spinach"), the observer will see fissured shelving rocks studded with occasional glacial erratics and rich with small groups of shorebirds; both Yellowlegs are common in this stretch and many teal, both Blue-winged and Green-winged, feed in the shallow

areas here. The point, if such it can be called, separating this southern reach of rock flats from the north-south or main sector, is marked by a thicket of red cedar trees with a jumble of weeds and vines fringing it. The birder turning north around the thicket faces a series of shallow bays with many ridges of loose rock and windrows of algae, each windrow and each bay with groups of shorebirds – feeding, chasing, bathing, preening – esconced therein. At the northern end of this stretch of "beach", several dozen boulders (most of them glacial erratics) serve as perching sites for numerous gulls and terns and even the ducks that frequent the area. An area of comparable size but with few boulders and more windrows of "spinach" extends from a tiny rock point at the north end of the main section back toward the end of the northern entrance road.

The amount of exposed beach, of course, depends on the level of Lake Ontario; the amount of algal windrows on the luxuriance of growth of the algae and the bottom disturbance, hence detachment, ensuing from the winds off the lake. The algae, several species of Cladophora, grow in hair-like abundance from the shelving rock surfaces, from the wet edges of the glacial erratics, and the fissures and rock rubble that mark the rock slabs of the beach. Dr. John Gustafson of Cortland points out that the Cladophora are indicative of phosphate pollution of Lake Ontario and if the luxuriance of growth is any indication, a sizeable amount of phosphate pollution must be occurring. Two other facts about this shorebird spinach: the upper crust of the windrows soon dries and looks deceptively safe to walk on; it is not – it is extremely slippery and attention to where one steps is suggested – and it has, upon standing in the sun, the capacity to create a notable stench.

The entire shoreline is backed by a thick hedgerow of annuals such as Smartweed, Blue Vervain, Joe-Pye-weed, Jewelweed, knotgrasses, and various goldenrods. This particular strip, rich with seeds in late September and October, abounds with sparrows and a walk through the thinner parts of this colorful display in August or September will often flush a Snipe or a rail. This hedgerow of annuals persists until the first frost and following that, the interested birder (or sub-rosa botanist) can delight in an array of seed heads and forms rivalling the intricacies of Indian art. Back of the hedgerow and paralleling the shore like a ribbon stands a four-foot high berm of loose rock and sand with sporadic xeric plants and grasses. The berm is widest (ten to thirty feet) at the southern end and becomes increasingly narrower and steeper as one walks northward toward Stony Creek. It drops off steeply inland, i.e. away from the actual shore, and low grassy swales, some several acres in size, extend eastward to the pigmy spires of the red cedars that first dot and then envelop the rest of the EDB tract, originally a dairy pasture.

Two features combine to make EDB a particularly favored lure for migrating shorebirds: an abundance of food and a most favorable geo-

graphical position. The position of EDB at the eastern end of Lake Ontario ensures its receiving at least samples of whatever species move from Arctic breeding areas, particularly low Arctic breeding sectors, via Hudson and James Bays to the Atlantic coast. There may also be a collecting effect on various species, and more particularly on immatures of various species, that drift into the Great Lakes from the Arctic and then work eastward and southeastward toward the Atlantic. The use of color-marked birds to designate previous site of capture as performed by the Long Point Bird Observatory Station on the north shore of Lake Erie in fall 1968 provides an exciting and relatively easy way to determine how much the eastward drift of immatures contributes to the passage population of shorebirds at EDB.

Second – when is the best time to observe the shorebirds? Fall shorebirds start to appear as early as the first week of July, joining the already increasing numbers of resident Killdeers and Spotted Sandpipers. By mid-July a reasonable "push" of shorebirds, mainly if not entirely adult birds, has arrived and it is at this time that one may see Short-billed Dowitcher, Stilt Sandpiper, Ruddy Turnstone, migrating south, still in good spring (i.e. breeding) plumage. Species variety and flock numbers go up gradually through July. By early August a sharp influx of immature shorebirds has produced near maximal tallies for the fall migration. Through August more of the adult birds depart and more and more immature birds arrive. With the rising tide of immature birds, a greater variety of shorebirds comes and maximal number of species is usually achieved either in the last week of August or in the first ten to twelve days of September.

Cool weather, especially the passage of fronts with strong northwest winds, pushes the flocking September shorebirds southward. By early October both number and variety of shorebirds have dropped but the opportunity for certain rare species such as Red Phalarope and Purple Sandpiper goes up steadily through October and November until freeze-up in late November or early December. Once the muddy shallows and algal windrows have been frozen, all but a few hardy Dunlin and occasional Purple Sandpipers depart and shorebirding is over for another season there. Robert McKinney of Rochester, who has mist-netted and banded shorebirds at EDB, has noted that the best variety and numbers appear after a change of weather, usually from hot, still summer days to days with brisk northwest winds and rock-splashing waves. Undoubtedly on calm, hot, fair days many of the birds, if disturbed, fly to the undisturbed larger islands off Stony Point Peninsula and checks on early morning number and variety versus late afternoon counts regularly show marked decreases on such days. The decline in numbers and species of shorebirds with days of hot, dry, windless weather in July and August is matched by a similar decline in numbers and variety of waterfowl, of which there are many, and gulls and terns.

Third – what shorebirds can you expect to see there? An appendix listing approximate arrival times, peak numbers, and departure dates for each of the more common species is presented at the end of this article. A person versed in shorebirds should be able to pick up fifteen to twenty species of shorebirds per trip to Eldorado in the shorebird season provided there has been a recent passage of a cold front and no long sequence of summer doldrums. Pectoral, Least, and Semipalmated Sandpipers are the most common "peep" sandpipers, but White-rumped and Baird's are common enough to require counting to see how many are present. Western Sandpipers are also reported but numbers of individuals vary from year to year. Sanderlings appear in late July, are quite common for a few weeks along with the handsome Ruddy Turnstones, then numbers drop and replacement with equal numbers of immatures of these species does not seem to occur. Both yellowlegs are regulars with the Lesser usually far more common than the Greater, except at the end of the season in October and November. Killdeer and Spotted Sandpiper are ubiquitous, frequently flushing not only from the beach margin but also from the dry area of the berm and even from the long-grass areas of the swales. Interestingly enough, though Spotted Sandpipers are common there, Solitary Sandpipers are really quite rare, even in the grass swales. Short-billed Dowitcher and Stilt Sandpiper are usually noted clustered in feeding groups on the windrow edges, often with a few Lesser Yellowlegs to make comparisons easier. Hudsonian Curlew are most likely to be found feeding in the short grasses of the berm along with the occasional Upland Plover that passes through. One species that is most unusual there, undoubtedly because of the lack of deep enough mud to feed, is the Hudsonian Godwit which, of all regular Central New York shorebirds, is probably the rarest visitant there.

## A CHRONOLOGY OF SPECIES

Semipalmated Plover: adults arrive between 10–15 Jul, sometimes later if no mid-Jul fronts develop; numbers may increase to 20–35 per day thru early Aug; about 15–20 Aug immatures appear, readily recognizable by their finely scalloped-edged back feathers, dull legs, and small dark beaks; both forms decrease sharply 15–25 Sep, and Oct birds are few, scarce, and almost invariably very tame immatures or ill birds.

Killdeer: present by late Mar; undoubtedly nest in suitable sectors of the berm although I've never found a nest there; young would be out and about by early Jun; flocking occurs as early as first week of Jul; such flocks are usually fairly tame and given to much preening; numbers increase to peak tallies in late Aug (60–100 per day) with fall-off in first 15 days of Sep, but dozens of birds will persist to early Nov and a few stragglers to late Nov or freezeup in Dec.

Amer. Golden Plover: adults normally appear by 15–20 Aug in areas south of EDB; however, adult birds are really quite rare there and most birds are the tamer, more

speckled, small headed, old-gold colored immatures in the period 1 Sep–25 Oct; occasional Nov birds, invariably immatures, are noted, but late (i.e. Nov) Golden Plovers should be flushed for diagnostic proof of identification as some young Black-bellied Plover may look very small and dark at that season.

Black-bellied Plover: adults, some with much residue of breeding plumage, appear 10–15 Aug and persist to freezeup in Nov; immatures arrive about the end of Aug and remain in small numbers (three–eight per day) through mid-Oct; after mid-Oct Black-bellied Plover are usually noted only as singles but occasional small groups do occur and both adult and immature birds may be detected – this is one of the few species of shorebirds separable by plumage in which both adults and immatures stay until freezeup in late Nov.

Ruddy Turnstone: like its plumage, a very variable migrant – some years numbers (20–30 per day) will appear in the last two weeks of Jul and first two weeks of Aug, but in other seasons only a handful will appear; immatures and winter-plumaged adults are regularly fewer than the first wave of nearly spring-plumaged adults; despite abundant food in rich windrows it is unusual to see numbers of this species in Sep, and Oct birds are really scarce items – almost always departed by mid-Oct and a bird later should be suspected of being ill or injured.

Common Snipe: numbers and frequency are contingent upon how early the shallow areas are exposed and whether sufficient protective grass clumps develop; by 15 Jul one can usually find several Snipe in the weedy margin areas but larger numbers (groups of six–eight) do not appear until 10–15 Sep; Oct birds are usually singles and the species is scarce in Nov.

Whimbrel: usually seen as single birds only, from 20 Jul–10 Sep – as often on the dry berm as on the beach.

Spotted Sandpiper: undoubtedly breeds – usually present by first week of May, next two weeks with abundant courtship display with wings thrown up, chases, aerial maneuvers; non-breeding or fall-flocking birds show up as early as the first week of Jul and dozens are present by mid-Jul; numbers build to a peak in first half of Aug, then sharply drop and singles only, rarely two or three, are in evidence until 20 Sep.

Solitary Sandpiper: actually a rare bird at EDB – if seen, usually as singles 20 Jul–10 Sep, and invariably these are imm birds, readily recognized by the huge eye-ring, the solid-colored back and the "unbuttoned jacket" of olive gray down the front.

Greater Yellowlegs: regular fall migrant in small numbers; first appears around 20–25 Jul, regularly adults with remnants of breeding plumage; numbers are usually small – two–five per day; by 15–20 Aug immatures with yellow-spangled backs and gray-washed chests have appeared and a mixture of adult and imm are present to late Oct; this and Lesser Yellowlegs appear to be most sensitive to the wind effect at EDB – continuous observation thru a hot Sep day shows fewer and fewer yellowlegs there and by mid-afternoon the beach which had 30 yellowlegs in the morning will have none – presumably these birds move to the L Ontario islands but it would require color-marking or banding to prove this.

Lesser Yellowlegs: after Killdeer, the most common "large", i.e. non-"peep", shorebird at EDB; adults in small numbers, two–six per day, arrive in first week of Jul and build to peak numbers in last week of Jul and first week of Aug; just as adult numbers are beginning to wane the immatures appear and numbers (20–30 per day) are maintained until mid-Sep; unlike the Greater Yellowlegs, Oct numbers are low and Nov birds unusual.

Knot: never a common bird at EDB – usually singles or small groups (two–four per day) from early Aug to late Sep; frequently there will be a hiatus between Aug and Sep birds, yet at both times the birds appear to be immatures as no traces of adult plumage are evident; with large flocks of Dunlin in Oct an occasional imm Knot may also show up and such a late individual moves with and follows the Dunlins as if it were regularly part of the Dunlin flock.

Purple Sandpiper: a late migrant with numbers very variable – usually noted only in Nov and numbers may range from a single bird to groups up to 40 (exceptional) – see D. C. Gordon's note *Kingbird* 17(1):22, Jan 1967; birds present to freezeup in late Nov or early Dec; I consider this an extremely difficult bird to detect – its somber plumage matches the rock rubble well and it frequently sits as close as a Snipe before flushing; when found, it is so tame that one can usually see all plumage details well; all that I have aged in the field, using wing covert and scapular pattern, appear to be immatures.

Pectoral Sandpiper: a few adults in by 15–20 Jul; numbers normally build up to peak thru Aug if large expanses of Cladophora and grass clumps appear; though regularly present, numbers vary considerably from year to year; by mid-Sep numbers are decreasing but single birds or a small group may persist to late Oct; occasionally large groups (20–40 per day) appear in Oct but they rarely persist and early Nov birds are scarce.

White-rumped Sandpiper: winter plumaged adults, usually only one–two per day, may be found anytime from mid-Jul to late Sep; by mid-Sep a few of the distinctively marked immatures appear and this is uniformly the plumage present, usually with flocks of Dunlins, to freezeup.

Baird's Sandpiper: uncommon at EDB with usually one–three per day only, almost always immatures; first appear around 15 Aug and largest counts are in first ten–15 days of Sep; numbers very variable from year to year as is departure date; some years reported thru Oct and in areas more favored by it, such as Sandy Pond inlet, may be seen to Nov.

Least Sandpiper: first birds appear in first week of Jul; numbers increase quickly and 40–100/day can be seen thru Jul; by last week of Jul bright rust-colored immatures appear; in early Aug, adults move on and numbers fall progressively to stragglers by mid-Sep; surprisingly, a few individuals are present to mid-Oct and occasionally later.

Dunlin: single adults with vestiges of spring plumage are irregularly seen as early as Aug 15–20; however, most adults do not show up til Sep 5–10 and the large numbers (flocks of 50–200 per day) not until Oct; these Oct flocks have a scattering of birds wth rust-barred rumps, clearly immatures, but since the majority of this species molts in the Arctic, prior to southward migration, a pattern or sequence of adult and immature flight could not be ascertained unless collection or netting were utilized. Nov tallies are usually of six–12 per day but singles may remain into early Dec.

Short-billed Dowitcher: like the Least Sandpiper and Lesser Yellowlegs, one of the first fall shorebirds; adults are usually on the beach by Jul 7–10 and small flocks of three–12 per day, mostly in breeding plumage, are present thru Jul and early Aug; by 5–10 Aug they are joined by the rusty-backed, gray-blue wing-coverted immatures; adults soon leave (rare to see one after 1 Sep) and most immatures are gone by late Sep; interestingly enough, Long-billed Dowitchers are virtually unknown from EDB and this species, like Hudsonian Godwit, may be absent there

because the rocky shelving shoreline precludes their deeply probing feeding technique.

Stilt Sandpiper: adults are regularly found with groups of Short-billed Dowitchers and Lesser Yellowlegs after 15 Jul; these are frequently in full breeding plumage; often a single bird will remain thru several weeks such that one can follow an individual thru the most obvious features of body plumage moult; immatures arrive by early Aug (they are best distinguished by a pale wash across the chest and the perfectly feather-shingled back) and persist to approximately mid-Sep; a Stilt Sandpiper after mid-Sep at EDB is most unusual, yet in the muddy areas at Fox Ridge near Port Byron and Montezuma National Wildlife Refuge it is not uncommon to find them up to 15 Oct.

Semipalmated Sandpiper: the Song Sparrow of shorebirds, usually first noted around 10–15 Jul; numbers quickly swell to the hundreds by late Jul; by 25–30 Jul immatures are already present and with their buffy feather margins and slim look are frequently called Baird's by those unfamiliar with this plumage; note that the Semipalmated's wing tips do *not* go beyond the tail as they do in the Baird's; also the young Semipalmated is washed with buff on the chest but the Baird's definitely has streaks in the buffy chest band.

Western Sandpiper: numbers vary widely from year to year – usually one or two individuals show up with the big flock of Semipalmated in the latter half of Aug; as the Semipalmated decrease in Sep, a few more Western seem to put in an appearance (or is it just easier sorting them out?); by late Sep and first week of Oct, all peep should be scrutinized as possible Western, particularly single peep feeding belly-deep with Dunlin; most Westerns depart by 10–15 Oct but occasional hardy birds persist to late Oct.

Sanderling: arr 15–25 Jul in numbers, but numbers vary widely; greatest numbers in late Aug with many immatures present; mid-Sep sees a sharp drop in numbers, but this species may be almost as hardy as Dunlin in persisting beyond initial freezeup.

Phalaropes: this group of avian desiderata are never present in large enough numbers to indicate a population pattern; however, if they are going to appear one can usually expect the following sequence: Wilson's appear as singles 15 Jul–30 Aug; Northern as singles to four–five per day, rarely higher, 15 Aug–early Oct; Red appear almost always as single birds rarely in Sep but regularly in Oct and Nov – these late Red Phalaropes like the Purple Sandpiper are singularly tame.

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Ed. Note: About half of the purchase price for Eldorado Shores had been received or pledged as of June 1. Contributions may be sent to The Central New York Chapter, The Nature Conservancy, Box 175, Ithaca, N.Y. 14850. Checks should be made out to "The Nature Conservancy."

## SURVEY OF GREAT BLUE HERONRIES 1964–1968

WALTER E. BENNING

For five years the author has, with the help of the Bird Clubs of the State and many interested individuals, conducted a survey of the nesting colonies of the Great Blue Heron (*Ardea herodias*) in Upstate New York to ascertain the breeding status of the bird in the State.

Since the survey is being terminated with this report, we have compiled the data gathered over the five year period in Table I. In all we received reports on 41 heronries which were active for at least one year during the survey period.