THE SHOREBIRDS OF MONTEZUMA NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

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I have birded the Montezuma National Wildlife Refuge for twenty-five years, with shorebirds as my special interest. Over the past sixteen years I have kept written records, upon which this paper is based. In all I have recorded thirty-four shorebird species. Four of these, the Killdeer, American Woodcock, Common Snipe and Spotted Sandpiper, are breeding birds, the rest migrants. One additional species, the Willet, has been reported at the Refuge, but has always eluded me—well, maybe next year!

This is not a survey in the conventional sense where the entire area is covered at intervals and counts of each species made every time. It is simply a record of my observations and the number of times each species was seen. I usually made counts, but not always, except when one of the rarer species was present, or when a common species was present in unusual numbers. Table 1 shows the number of days by month and year, on which I visited the Refuge. Table 2 indicates by months, the number of times I found each species present.

The number of species and the abundance of each has varied considerably from year to year. The controlling factor here appears to be the number of acres of exposed mudflats available for the birds' use. Small amounts of mudflats mean relatively few birds and, usually, relatively few species. Extensive acreage, such as when one of the pools is drained, will attract hundreds of birds of many species, including rarities. The ideal condition appears to be a large area of soft mud with many shallow pools of varying depths, and some grassy edges or islands. To keep the habitat in optimum condition, sufficient water must be added periodically, by rain or otherwise, to prevent the mud from drying out. When these conditions have occurred, shorebirding at Montezuma has been fantastic. A dry mudflat becomes an ornithological desert very quickly.

My records and personal impressions would indicate that there has been a decline in shorebirds over the past sixteen years. However, this may be more apparent than real. In the earlier years, management practice at the Refuge was to drain at least one pool in late summer and fall nearly every year, creating ideal conditions for maximum shorebird use. For the past three years no pools have been drained and the water levels have been held high throughout the entire

season. Predictably, with only minimal habitat available, shorebirding has been at a low ebb. Also, during the 1970's I had visited the Refuge on fewer days for two reasons. First, having retired eight years ago, I have had more opportunity to be away from home for extended periods. Second, when at home, I had made fewer visits due to the gasoline situation.

The migration in the fall has usually been more spectacular than in the spring. Again this is directly connected with available habitat. Mudflat areas are generally small in the spring. However, in 1973 the main pool was drained in early May to facilitate repair of the damage stemming from the inundation of the area by Hurricane Agnes in 1972. The response in terms of shorebirds visiting the Refuge was almost unbelievable. Hundreds of birds of eighteen species, including Ruddy Turnstones, a Whimbrel, record numbers of Red Knots, a breeding-plumaged Ruff, and an American Avocet stopped on the journey north showing that, given proper habitat, the spring migration can be as exciting as that of the fall. Spring migrants are usually gone by June 15. After a ten day break, when only the local breeding species are seen, the first trickle of returning birds appears in late June and, if suitable habitat is present, a full-blown southward movement is apparent by early July.

Semipalmated Plover

Spring: May 4-June 13 with three late migrants on June 19, 1977. Maximum 100 May 30, 1967.

Fall: June 27-Nov. 3. Numbers are heaviest from late July through Sept. and taper off in Oct. Maximum 60 Oct. 5, 1969.

Piping Plover

This plover, rare at Montezuma, was observed twice, two birds on Apr. 22, 1970 and one on May 2, 1971.

Killdeer

A common breeder at the Refuge with young appearing the first week in May. Arrives in March and departs in Nov. Earliest date Mar. 5, 1966 and latest date Nov. 29, 1964. Numbers rise rapidly in early July. Maximum 304 July 4, 1967.

American Golden Plover

Spring: Apr. 13-25 with one late date of May 24. Maximum nine on Apr. 25, 1965.

Fall: Aug. 14-Nov. 15. Maximum 71 Sept. 6, 1965.

Seen every year except 1979. Up to 200 were present during the last half of Sept. 1972, on a plowed field at Evans Corners one mile north of the Refuge.

Black-bellied Plover

Spring: Apr. 16-June 9. Maximum 45 May 22, 1973. None seen in 1970, 1974 or 1978.

Fall: Aug. 6-Nov. 14. Maximum 34 Oct. 2, 1966. Absent in 1977 and 1979.

Ruddy Turnstone

Spring: May 16-June 1. Maximum 19 May 22, 1973.

Fall: Aug. 3-Sept. 29. Maximum 20 Sept. 22, 1975.

This bird of the sandy and pebbly beaches seems out of place on Montezuma's mudflats, yet I have found it in twelve of the sixteen years during the fall, and three years during the spring.

American Woodcock

This species is listed as a breeder at the Refuge on the official checklist. It is undoubtedly more common than my observations would indicate, as my poor hearing does not readily detect the sounds of the nuptial flight. Also my time has been spent largely at the mudflats rather than in the moist brushy areas which the woodcock prefers.

Common Snipe

This is another breeding bird on the Refuge. The earliest spring arrival date is Mar. 21, 1970. The latest departure date is Nov. 14 when 21 birds were still present in 1964 and 17 in 1970. Maximum 55 Aug. 14, 1971.

Whimbrel

Spring: this large shorebird appeared on May 16, 1964, May 19, 1971 and May 29, 1973.

Fall: a single bird July 25, 1971.

Upland Sandpiper

This bird of the short grassy meadows breeds regularly in northern Seneca County, but disdains Montezuma's mudflats. I had one sighting there, in a grassy area on June 19, 1977.

Spotted Sandpiper

This common breeder arrives from Apr. 21 to May 5. While most birds of this species have left by early Sept., a few linger through the month. In 1966, two tarried until the late date of Oct. 10.

Solitary Sandpiper

Spring: May 2-15 with only four sightings. Maximum two May 11, 1969.

Fall: July 4-Sept. 27. Maximum four July 25 and 28, 1965. A regular fall migrant.

Greater Yellowlegs

Spring: Apr. 1-June 14 with most records between Apr. 16 and May 18. Maximum 32 Apr. 16, 1972.

Fall: June 29-Nov. 19. Maximum 122 Oct. 14, 1964.

Lesser Yellowlegs

Spring: Apr. 9-May 30. Maximum 66 May 3, 1969.

Fall: June 29-Nov. 25 with only nine sightings after Oct. 23. Maximum 259 July 30, 1967. Birds which appeared between June 19 and 21 in four different years were probably late spring migrants.

Red Knot

Spring: May 14-30. Seen in three years only. Maximum 29 on May 28, 1967 and 74 on May 21, 1973.

Fall: July 27-Oct. 14. Observed in seven years. Maximum six Sept. 1, 1965.

Pectoral Sandpiper

Spring: Apr. 2-June 11 with most sightings Apr. 9-30. Only three after May 17. Maximum 128 Apr. 27, 1978.

Fall: July 1-Nov. 19 with a noticeable increase in numbers in early Sept. Maximum 207 Sept. 2, 1976.

White-rumped Sandpiper

Spring: May 12-June 9. Normally fewer than ten birds at a time but May 30, 1971 produced an unbelievable maximum of 97.

Fall: July 29-Nov. 21. Maximum 13 Oct. 27, 1965.

Baird's Sandpiper

Spring: I have never found this species in the spring.

Fall: Aug. 25-Nov. 14, except for two very early birds on July 10, 1973 and one on Aug. 4, 1971, and six on the very late date of Nov. 29, 1964. Maximum 13 Sept. 18, 1965.

Least Sandpiper

Spring: Apr. 27-June 2 but mostly after May 8. Maximum 63 May 15, 1971.

Fall: June 30-Nov. 14 with most birds gone by Sept. 30. Maximum 125 July 16, 1971.

A very common peep.

Dunlin

Spring: Apr. 10-June 8 but largely during May. A bird on June 21, 1967 and another on July 1, 1971 were probably very late spring birds as I have not found fall Dunlins until Sept. Maximum 660 May 23, 1970.

Fall: Sept. 3-Nov. 29 with relatively few records prior to Sept. 18.

Maximum 647 Oct. 18, 1969. The most abundant fall migrant, often occurring in large flocks.

Short-billed Dowitcher

Spring: Apr. 12-June 5 with most sightings May 15-23 and very few later records. Maximum 46 May 22, 1971.

Fall: July 2-Nov. 14. Maximum 220 Oct. 13, 1965.

Long-billed Dowitcher

A fall migrant only. Aug. 15-Nov. 15 with few records before Sept. 7. Maximum 25 on Oct. 13-15, 1967 and on Sept. 27, 1969.

Stilt Sandpiper

Spring: only two records, two birds on May 10, 1968 and one on May 6, 1976.

Fall: July 8-Nov. 12 with few observations after Oct. 17. Maximum 69 Aug. 8, 1968.

Semipalmated Sandpiper

Spring: Mar. 28-June 14 but only four sightings prior to May 10. Maximum an estimated 500 on both May 25, 1966 and May 28, 1969. A bird on June 19, 1977 was probably a late spring migrant but one on June 27, 1971 is hard to place as it was halfway between the last spring and the first fall date.

Fall: July 11-Nov. 7 with most birds between July 17-Oct. 18. Maximum an estimated 1,000 Aug. 9, 1967 and 1,200 Aug. 14, 1975.

Western Sandpiper

Spring: May 21-31.

Fall: Aug. 15-Sept. 24.

I have observed a single individual of this species but nine times in sixteen years. This hard-to-identify peep is probably not nearly as rare as the above would indicate. If one were to consistently and thoroughly examine all flocks of Semipalmated Sandpipers, one would probably find an occasional Western among them. But, when flocks of Semipalmated Sandpipers number in the hundreds and are constantly on the move, it is a little like looking for a needle in a haystack.

Buff-breasted Sandpiper

This very rare migrant has appeared only in the fall with one present Sept. 21-23, 1966, two Aug. 24-27, 1975 and one Sept. 12, 1976.

Marbled Godwit

Has occurred only twice, one bird Sept. 7-16, 1966 and another Aug. 27-Sept. 9, 1970.

Hudsonian Godwit

Spring: two in breeding plumage on May 19, 1974 was my only record.

Fall: July 13-Nov. 1. An almost unbelievable maximum of *40* on Sept. 30, 1967. Normal numbers are one or two. This large shorebird was seen in eleven years.

Ruff

Spring: males in breeding plumage were seen on Apr. 29, 1972 and May 18, 1973. An immature-plumaged bird was noted on May 11, 1974.

Fall: July 2-Sept. 27 in the years 1964, 1965, 1966, 1969 and 1979.

All observations of this Old World bird have been of single individuals only. I first found this species in 1963, the year before these records were started. I saw two distinct birds, one on Aug. 17 and the other on Sept. 6.

Sanderling

Fall: July 14-Sept. 29 and one very late bird on Nov. 2, 1974. This bird of the seashores was seen in eight years but in the fall only. Maximum four Sept. 29, 1965.

American Avocet

I have found this large handsome western bird three times, one Oct. 22-29, 1966, one Sept. 24, 1971 and one May 21-24, 1973.

Red Phalarope

The only sighting of this oceanic phalarope was of a single bird on Sept. 30, 1967.

Wilson's Phalarope

Spring: May 9-June 7.

Fall: June 27-Sept. 27. Most frequent in Aug. Missed entirely in 1979.

Northern Phalarope

Spring: May 29-June 2. Rare in spring. Maximum two May 29, 1968.

Fall: Aug. 13-Oct. 4 with most observations from Aug. 26-Sept. 20. Maximum 17 Sept. 1, 1975.

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Table 1 Observation Days

	Mar.	Apr.	May	Jun.	Jul.	Aug.	Sept.	Oct.	Nov.	Total
1964	*	9	12	10	10	7*	11	10	12	81
1965	9	10	10	9	15	12	13	11	9	98
1966	14	14	10	9	17	15	20	15	14	128
1967	7	13	10	10	10*	13	15	15	8	101
1968	9	9	12	11	13	9	7	11	7	88
1969	6	11	13	7	11	12	8	10	8	86
1970	4	12	16	12	16	15	13	2*	12	102
1971	4	11	16	9	19	15	7*	11	7	99
1972	*	16	3*	*	*	2*	13	10	8	52
1973	4*	*	11*	9	11	10	10	9	2	66
1974	7	8	11	7	1*	12	11	6	5	68
1975	5	8	14	2*	12	12	15	6	5	79
1976	7	6	11	2*	*	8*	12	4*	6	56
1977	10	9	10	5	12	7	7	7	5	72
1978	*	2*	12	6	8	12	9	5	5	59
1979	5	3*	5*	2*	5	4	4	7	4	39
Total	91	141	176	110	160	165	175	139	117	1274

* No trips were made to the Refuge for an appreciable number of days due to illness or to being away from home.

Table 2 Observation Days per Species for the Sixteen Years

	Mar.	Apr.	May	Jun.	Jul.	Aug.	Sept.	Oct.	Nov.	Total
1. Killdeer	29	99	145	93	129	128	148	78	50	899
2. Greater Yellowlegs		37	52	5	60	136	140	116	31	577
3. Lesser Yellowlegs		32	60	10	113	113	127	52	4	511
4. Spotted Sandpiper		7	136	88	127	93	44	3		498
5. Pectoral Sandpiper		42	12	2	60	122	104	77	14	433
6. Semipalmated Plover			69	24	37	129	115	32	2	408
7. Semipalmated Sandpiper	2	2	39	12	49	141	107	35	3	390
8. Short-billed Dowitcher		4	22	1	77	100	127	45	12	388
9. Least Sandpiper		3	61	4	94	120	77	17	8	384
10. Common Snipe	3	37	13	5	66	100	95	41	12	372
11. Dunlin		17	87	11	1		41	77	37	271
12. Stilt Sandpiper			2		26	60	59	27	3	177
13. Black-bellied Plover		6	28	4		27	49	39	12	165
14. White-rumped Sandpiper			17	5	1	18	35	27	6	109
15. American Golden Plover		6	1			15	29	22	7	80
16. Long-billed Dowitcher						7	36	28	5	76
17. Solitary Sandpiper			5		26	21	19			71
18. Northern Phalarope			2	2		14	37	3		58
19. Wilson's Phalarope			5	3	6	25	12			51
20. Hudsonian Godwit			1		4	8	14	20	1	48
21. Ruddy Turnstone			12	1		18	13			44
22. Baird's Sandpiper					1	7	14	5	6	33
23. Red Knot			6		1	5	4	3		19
24. Ruff		1	2		5	6	5			19
25. Sanderling					7	4	4		1	16
26. Marbled Godwit						1	14			15
27. Western Sandpiper			2			5	2			9
28. American Avocet			3				1	3		7
29. Buff-breasted Sandpiper						3	3			6
30. Whimbrel			3		1					4
31. American Woodcock		1	1				1			3
32. Piping Plover		1	1							2
33. Red Phalarope							1			1
34. Upland Sandpiper				1						1