

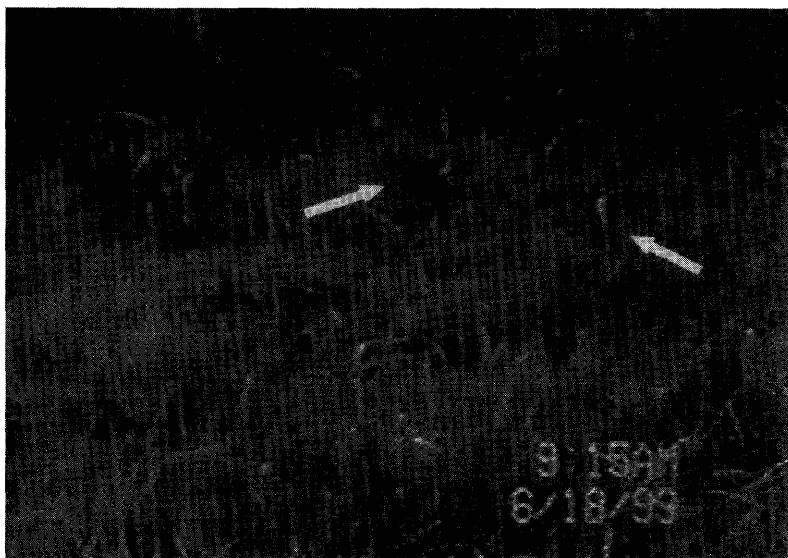
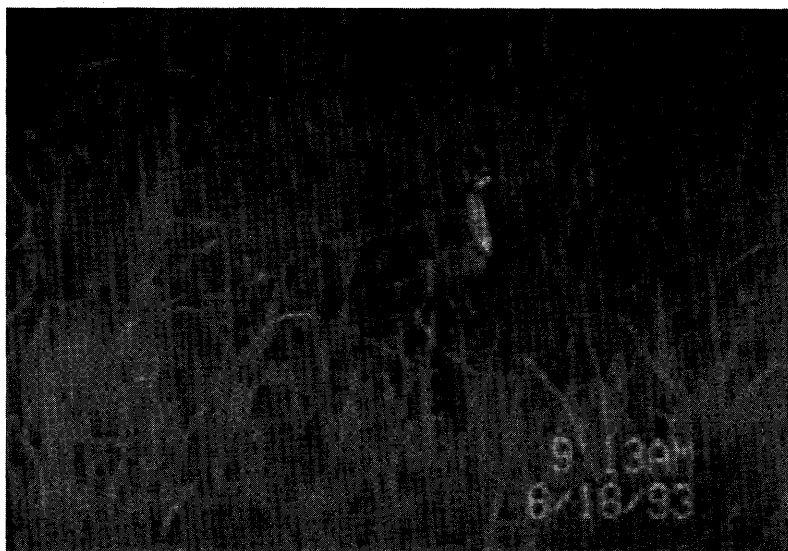


Figure 1. Male Wilson's Phalarope (above), and downy young (left arrow) with adult male (right arrow) Wilson's Phalarope (below) at Lake Champlain, Clinton Co., New York, 18 June 1993. Digitized frames from video by William Krueger.

WILSON'S PHALAROPE, A NEW NESTING SPECIES FOR NEW YORK STATE

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On the morning of 18 June 1993, Hal Klein, Charlie Mitchell, Roger and Judy Heintz, and I found and videotaped an adult male Wilson's Phalarope (*Phalaropus tricolor*) escorting three chicks toward Lake Champlain in Clinton County, New York. This is the first confirmed record of breeding for this bird in New York State.

The habitat was ideal. Lake Champlain reached an all time high level in late April but had gone down over 4.5 feet by the middle of June. The receding waters exposed successive areas of mudflats, which quickly grew to grass for cover and nesting. The area in which the family group was found, 100-150 feet from the lake, was an as yet unused pasture of long grasses that sloped almost imperceptibly eastward to the lake and northward to a ditch draining into the lake. This field was being used by a dairy herd on 22 June. The quality of the habitat here is indicated by the presence of nineteen other species of shorebird during the spring season, and Black Tern also bred here this year after a long absence.

The five minute video tape shows the adult phalarope leading the chicks (Fig. 1) by walking a few feet, stopping to wait for them to catch up, then moving another few feet. Over the wind and between the singing of Bobolinks, one can hear the male giving a constant soft two note call with a nuthatch like quality but not cadence. The downy young had a blackish median stripe from the crown down the nape. The cheeks were white as were the under parts that were visible. The back pattern was generally of brown stripes on a tawny background but the details were not evident on the tape. The birds were surely aware of our presence but did not seem to be unduly agitated as they made their way past us to the lake.

This find came a month to the day after the pair was first discovered on 18 May, and was the culmination of three weeks' effort. The possibility that phalaropes might be nesting was entertained when both birds were seen again on 27 May. Our hopes rose with each succeeding visit, when the male was seen rising from the same small area of the grassy field on 31 May and on 3, 6, 11 and 15 June. We spaced our visits to minimize disturbance. Our searches for the nest were halfhearted and brief for the same reason. This caution was at least time saving, since a thorough search after the birds had departed failed to disclose the nest. At least two of the chicks fledged. We found two Wilson's Phalaropes in juvenile plumage on 15 July and one on 16 and 19 July within a hundred yards of the nesting area. Videotape of the single bird has one brief

segment which includes a Black Tern feeding young and a Killdeer wandering through.

According to one source (Stout, 1967) there is "scant information" on the breeding of Wilson's Phalarope. Sequential polyandry, where a "female mates with a male, lays eggs and then terminates the relationship with that male while she goes off to repeat the process with another mate" (Erlich, *et al.*, 1988), has been established for the Red-necked and Red Phalaropes but is less certain for Wilson's Phalarope (Hohn, 1980). Hohn states that there is no evidence of territorial behavior or supposed polyandry for the Wilson's. Another claims the hen is territorial and defends the immediate nesting area with distraction displays (Bent, 1962). The usual clutch is 3 or 4 eggs (Erlich, *et al.*, 1988).

We may have missed an opportunity to observe mating behavior between 18 and 27 May. The incubation period for Wilson's Phalarope averages twenty days. Allowing 24 hours for the precocial chicks to prepare for their trip to the lake, the eggs were probably laid on 28 May, four days prior to the last sightings of the hen on 31 May and 1 June. On neither occasion did we observe territorial behavior. We saw only one male on all of our trips and there was nothing to suggest that we were seeing two or more singly. There were no other sightings reported on the New York side of Lake Champlain. We called the Vermont Institute of Natural Sciences and the Province of Quebec Society for the Preservation of Birds to see whether the hen had a sailor in any other port. Vermont reported no sightings this spring; Quebec had reports from the Richelieu River, which rises out of Lake Champlain at the Canadian border eight miles to the north and where Wilson's is a rare but regular migrant. If the female did indeed leave to seek another mate she would have had to go farther north than the Richelieu, since breeding has not been reported from that area. However, Wilson's Phalarope has bred on Ile-du-Moine east of Montreal, at Riviere-de-Loup east of Quebec City and on the Madeleine Islands in the Gulf of St. Lawrence (Pierre Bannon, pers. comm.).

Breeding of Wilson's Phalarope in New York was not unexpected. Bull (1974) does not mention the possibility of breeding; but it had been confirmed prior to this year near Kingston, Ontario (Cadman, 1987) and Montreal, Quebec (Godfrey, 1986) just miles from the state's border. Since World War II there has been an eastward expansion of the breeding range of this bird that appears to be associated with the development of impoundments for waterfowl and lagoons for sewage treatment (Erskine, 1992). This movement has been documented in the breeding bird atlases of Ohio (Peterjohn and Rea, 1991) Ontario (Cadman, 1987) and the Maritime Provinces of Canada (Erskine, 1992).

In addition breeding has been confirmed as far south as Plum Island, Massachusetts (Peterson, 1992).

Nor was breeding completely unexpected here in Clinton County, even though sightings of Wilson's Phalarope are very rare in the Lake Champlain basin. The only other spring sighting in Region 7 occurred in 1981 during the atlas period, when a pair was seen from 21-27 May at a spot only a few hundred yards from the 1993 site and when, as Mike Peterson commented recently, "We did everything but confirm it." All Vermont sightings but one have been in the fall and away from Lake Champlain. The lone spring sighting was of an adult female on Grand Isle 20 May 1987. Since the one Vermont and the two New York spring Wilson's Phalarope were first seen between 18 and 21 May, we at least know when to begin looking next year.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author wishes to thank Judy Peterson, Editor of the Vermont Bird Records Committee, and Pierre Bannon of the Province of Quebec Society for the Preservation of Birds, who researched the records of their state and province and generously shared the results. Thanks are also due to Charlie Mitchell for his research on the mating behavior of the phalaropes and to Mike Peterson for suggesting improvements in the manuscript.

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