# THE STATUS OF LONG-BILLED DOWITCHER IN WESTERN NEW YORK

DOMINIC F. SHERONY

By 1985, it had became apparent that Long-billed Dowitcher (*Limnodromus scolopaceus*) was a regular annual migrant in small numbers in western New York. Prior to 1980 the bird was rarely reported, except by a few observers. More thorough understanding of the plumage differences between Short-billed (*L. griseus*) and Long-billed Dowitchers have improved field separation. This paper summarizes dates and rates of occurrence and the nature of the fall migration through the western part of New York State.

## METHODS

I have used my own records along with those published in *The Kingbird, The Goshawk* (Genesee Ornithological Society), *The Little Gull* (Rochester Birding Association), *The Wood Duck, Prothonotary* (Buffalo Ornithological Society), and *American Birds* to understand the status of Long-billed Dowitcher in western New York. I have gone through the reports, and to the best of my ability, eliminated multiple records of the same bird and corrected any errors in dates. Aside from these adjustments, I have accepted the reports as being accurate. All are from experienced birders. Wilds and Newlon (1983) give an excellent account of the species differences between Long-billed Dowitcher and Short-billed Dowitcher as well as a description and photographs of the races of Short-billed Dowitcher. Hyman, *et al.* (1986) and Chandler (1989) provide further descriptions and methods of separating the two species by both sight and by calls. In my own observations, I have used both of these methods.

## RESULTS

Table 1 lists all western New York records covering the period of 1980 -1993, except for a few records from Buffalo in the 1970s. It includes all data from *Kingbird* Regions 2 and 3 and the only record after 1978 from Region 1. The total range of dates is 14 July to 19 November (Fig. 2). This plot shows the frequency of records versus the date of first observation. Seventy-five percent of all observations occur between

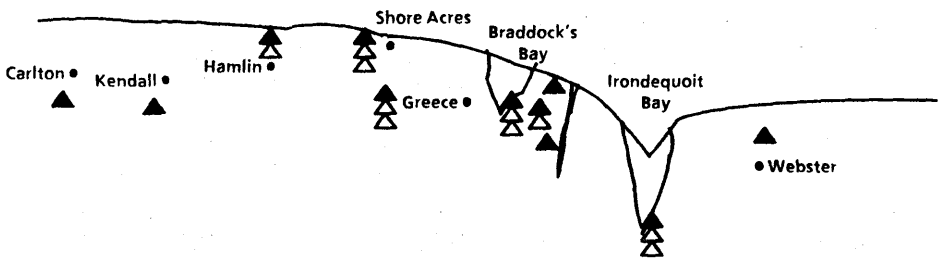


Figure 1. Location of Long-billed Dowitcher records in Region 2.

2 September to 20 October. The distribution of dates shows a strong peak in the week of 23 September. These records are summarized by Region below.

**Region 1**: The noteworthy records from the *Prothonotary* are summarized in a computer database (D'Anna, pers. comm.). Since 1970, there are a total of five fall records; two are almost certainly the same bird reported one week apart, thus leaving four records. Two of these are from Iroquois National Wildlife Refuge, one from the Lake Erie shore in Buffalo (Times Beach), and one from Eden. One might expect more records from the Lake Ontario shoreline and from Iroquois NWR. However, there are good reasons for lack of reports. The Lake Ontario shoreline is not heavily birded in Region 1. The northern part of Niagara County has many orchards and few estuaries for shorebird habitat. There is little doubt that the Iroquois NWR, along with the Oak Orchard and Tonawanda Wildlife Management Areas, have had other occurrences of Long-billed Dowitcher, but they go unreported because the viewing conditions are seldom good for shorebird identification. Shorebirds usually are not seen close enough to separate dowitcher species based on plumage or calls.

**Region 2**: In Region 2, there have been 23 fall records of Long-billed Dowitcher between 1978 and 1993. Most of these are documented. There are several spring reports, which will not be discussed in this analysis. The fall records are reported in *The Little Gull, The Goshawk,* and in *The Kingbird.* Figure 1 plots of the location of observations in Region 2. Long-billed Dowitcher has been found all along Lake Ontario, usually within five miles of the shoreline. Except for the Savannah record, there are no inland fall records. The birds are found in mud flats created by

**Table 1. Long-billed Dowitcher Records from Western New York.** Juveniles birds are indicated by a "j" after the number of individuals.

| Date | No. | Region | Location | Observer/Source |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 19 Aug 78 | 5 | 3 | Montezuma NWR | GOS trip |
| 24 Sep 78 | 6 | 3 | Montezuma NWR | FNYSBC |
| 18-23 Oct 80 | 1 | 2 | Northup Creek | MD, RS |
| 20 Oct 80 | 4 | 3 | Montezuma NWR | *Kingbird* |
| 14 Jul 81 | 1 | 2 | Carlton | MD, RO, WL |
| 26 Jul 81 | 1 | 2 | Webster | WLloyd, MS |
| 17 Oct 81 | 1 | 2 | Genesee River | MD,WL |
| 25 Aug-31 Oct 82 | 1-2 | 2 | Northup Creek | KG, mob |
| 4 Sep 82 | 1 | 2 | Braddock Bay | FD |
| 25 Sep 82 | 1 | 2 | Hamlin Beach | MD, mob |
| 25 Sep 82 | 1 | 2 | Shore Acres | RS |
| 26 Sep 82 | 1 | 2 | N. Greece Rd. | MD |
| 5 Sep 83 | 2 | 2 | Kendell | MD, SH |
| 1-2 Oct 83 | 1-2 | 2 | Shore Acres | *Kingbird* |
| 27 Sep 84 | 1 | 3 | Corning Rd. | *Kingbird* |
| 29 Sep 84 | 1 | 3 | Montezuma NWR | CC, NB |
| 16 Sep 84 | 3 | 3 | Montezuma NWR | DS |
| 19 Nov 84 | 1 | 2 | Braddock Bay | CC/*Kingbird* |
| 31 Aug 85 | 1 | 3 | Montezuma NWR | ST |
| 21 Sep 85 | 1 | 3 | Montezuma NWR | *Kingbird* |
| 2-16 Oct 85 | 3 | 2 | Shore Acres | WS/*Kingbird* |
| 2 Nov 85 | 3 | 3 | Ithaca | *Kingbird* |
| 28 Sep 86 | 1 | 3 | Montezuma NWR | RS, SS |
| 3-30 Sep 87 | 2 | 2 | Irondequoit Bay | JS |
| 20 Sep 87 | 1 | 3 | Montezuma NWR | CC |
| 27 Sep-8 Oct 87 | 1 | 1 | Eden | *Kingbird* |
| 8 Oct-8 Nov 87 | 9j | 2 | Salmon Creek | SC, mob |
| 10 Oct 87 | 12j | 2 | Savannah | DT/*Kingbird* |
| 25 Sep 88 | 1 | 3 | Montezuma NWR | DS |
| 6-10 Oct 88 | 3 | 3 | Montezuma NWR | JC, TG, CC |

**Table 1. Continued.**

| Date | No. | Region | Location | Observer/Source |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 20 Jul 89 | 1 | 2 | Charlotte | CC |
| 4 Sep 89 | 1 | 3 | Montezuma NWR | MD |
| 17 Oct 89 | 1 | 3 | Montezuma NWR | CC |
| 8 Nov 89 | 1 | 2 | Hamlin Beach | WS, PM |
| 14 Sep 90 | 1j | 2 | Irondequoit Bay | mob |
| 23 Sep 90 | 6 | 3 | Montezuma NWR | JS, MT |
| 7 15 Sep 91 | 4 | 3 | Montezuma NWR | DS, MR |
| 5 Nov 91 | 1 | 2 | Greece | KG/*Kingbird* |
| 25 Sep 92 | 1 | 3 | Montezuma NWR | RM |
| 10 Aug 93 | 1 | 3 | Montezuma NWR | *Kingbird* |
| 11 Sep 93 | 3 | 3 | Montezuma NWR | DS, MT |
| 7-10 Oct 93 | 1j | 2 | Irondequoit Bay | mob |
| 4 Oct 93 | 6 | 3 | Montezuma NWR | *Kingbird* |
| 9 Oct 93 | 1 | 2 | Greece | KT |
| 14 Oct 93 | 1 | 2 | Salmon Creek | KT |
| 24-31 Oct 93 | 4j | 3 | Montezuma NWR | DS, MT |

Observers: NB - N. Boudrie, CC - C. Cass, JC - J. Claffey, SC- S. Carlson, MD - M. Davids, FD - F. Dobson, KG - K. Griffith, TG - T. Griswold, SH - S. Hazen, WL - W. Listman, WL - W. Lloyd, RM - R. McKinney, PM - P. Martin, RO - R. O'Hara, MR - M. Reinhardt, DS - D. Sherony, JS - J. Skelley, RS - R. Spahn, SS - S. Spahn, MS - M. Sunderlin, WS - W. Symonds, MT - M. Tetlow, ST - S. Taylor; FNYSBC - Federation of New York State Bird Clubs, GOS - Genesee Ornithological Society, mob - multiple observers.

the annual fall drop in Lake Ontario's water level, which exposes areas normally flooded in the spring. West of Rochester, Long-billed Dowitcher is found in ponds or marshes which are close to the lake. The lack of mud flats in years of high lake water levels, of course, leads to fewer observations. Long-billed Dowitcher usually is found with mixed shorebirds, including Killdeer, Semipalmated Sandpiper, Pectoral Sandpiper, Dunlin and both yellowlegs. In the Rochester area, they are almost never found with Short-billed Dowitcher. The dates of fall observations range from 14 July to 19 November. Records of late occurrences, after mid October, are often of lone birds. Two-thirds of the observations have been of single birds. Because dowitchers do not pass through this Region on a continuous basis, we can conclude something about the duration of their stay. Birds sometimes remain at a single location for up to one week and, in three instances, they have remained for an entire month. There have been few records that separate adult and juvenile birds; most records that make that separation are of juvenile. The maximum number reported was 12 juveniles in Savannah on 10 October 1987.

**Region 3**: I have been able to locate 22 fall records from Region 3 for the past 15 years. I have used my own records from Montezuma NWR, those from *The Kingbird, The Little Gull,* and *The Goshawk.* Single records from Ithaca and from Corning Road are the only reports away from Montezuma NWR. Montezuma NWR is particularly good for shorebirds in the fall because the water level in May's Point Pond is lowered annually to attract migrating water birds. Opportunities for observation are reasonably good. The refuge biologist conducts shorebirds counts in the fall, but does not separate dowitchers by species. There has been no coordinated effort to census Long-billed Dowitcher. Therefore, the number of occurrences might be higher than those reported. Benning (1980) reviews the occurrence of all shorebirds at Montezuma NWR. Over a period of 16 years (1964-1980), he noted Long-billed Dowitcher between 15 August and 15 November with few records before 7 September. Long-billed Dowitcher occurrences range from 15 August to 14 November. He observed them on 76 out of 596 days during the range of dates when the species was present. Thus, Long-billed Dowitcher was present on 13% of his visits between August and November. He must have seen this species annually, and he averaged 5 sightings per fall season. The maximum observed was 25 on 13-15 October 1967. In my own observations of Long-billed Dowitcher at Montezuma, I have noticed small groups of this species in company with larger groups of Short-billed Dowitcher in early September. These

small groups are composed of adult and juvenile Long-billed Dowitcher. By October, the Long-billed Dowitcher present are predominantly juveniles.

## DISCUSSION

**Comparison with Migration to the West of New York:** Long-billed Dowitcher is a common fall migrant in eastern Ohio. Metzger Marsh Wildlife Management Area annually has concentrations in excess of 300 birds (reports in *American Birds* summarized in Table 2). The migration in western New York is considerably more sparse. Region 2 and Region 3 record between 1 and 5 occurrences annually. The number of occurrences is increasing, most probably because observers are more knowledgeable about separating Long-billed Dowitcher and Short-billed Dowitcher. Region 1 has an extremely low number of occurrences. Hamilton, Ontario, is almost directly north of Region 1. Figure 3 shows data of occurrences of Long-billed Dowitcher for the Hamilton study area, summarized by R. Curry (1993). There are 24 fall records for the period of 1980-1992, about the same incidence as seen in Regions 2 and 3. Records are distributed between 20 August and 3 November and the maximum count is 12 birds. Since the rate of occurrence of Long-billed Dowitcher in Hamilton is equal to that in Regions 2 and 3, we can assume that the density southbound migrants is essentially uniform across Western New York.

**Comparison with Migration on the Atlantic Coast:** On the Atlantic coast, Long-billed Dowitcher is a common fall migrant at Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge. Table 2 and Figure 4 summarize the data of Davis (1982-84) and Morris (1985-90). They regularly visited Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge in the fall, recording the number of all shorebirds. Since these observations do not allow separation of arriving and departing birds, I have plotted the average peak numbers seen in each week over the period 1981-1989. These data show two peaks in migration, one in the weeks of 5 and 12 August and another in the week of 7 October. The range of migration dates is from the week of 15 July to the week of 18 November. The earliest record is 12 July 1982. The peak number of birds over this 9 year period is 34. The number of fall occurrences is difficult to estimate, but ranges from no less than 7 annually to as many as 20. Morris (1986) notes the mean first arrival date of adults as 21 July and the mean first arrival date of juveniles as 26 September. Comparison of the data for western New York in Figure 2 with that of Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge in Figure 4 suggests several points.

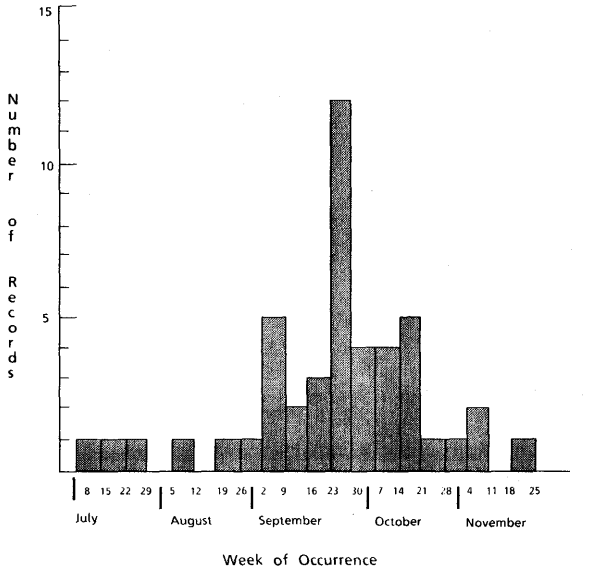


Figure 2. Dates of Long-billed Dowitcher records in western New York 1878-1993.

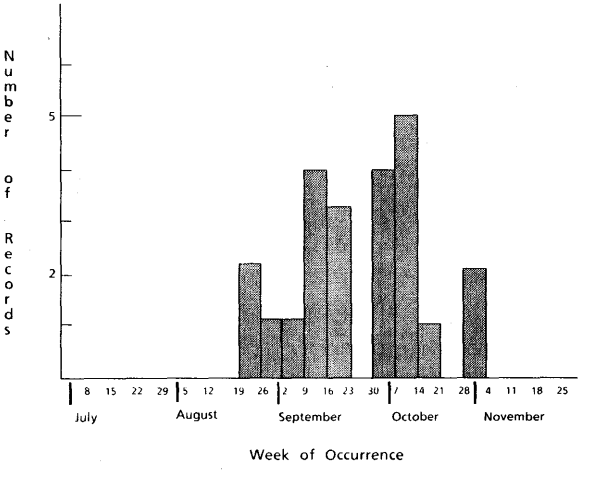


Figure 3. Dates of Long-billed Dowitcher records at Hamilton, Ontario, 1980-1992 (Curry 1993).

The movement of Long-billed Dowitcher at Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge has two broad distributions in time: the first, with a peak in the distribution about 5-12 August and extending between 15 July and 9 September, represents primarily adult birds. The second distribution is primarily juveniles and ranges from 23 September to 25 November, with a peak in migration the week of 7 October. In contrast, the movement of Long-billed Dowitcher in western New York dates have one primary distribution, with a range of 9 September to 25 November. Like Jamaica Bay, these records are primarily of juvenile birds. Between July 8 and September 2, records in western New York are too few to show a peak, but adult birds are found in these groups. The first distribution seen at Jamaica Bay and discussed above is missing or weakly represented in the data for western New York. The interior migration is similar to the second distribution seen at Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge. It is likely that these records represent the fall migration of juvenile Long-billed Dowitcher through western New York.

## SUMMARY

These data suggest that the migration of Long-billed Dowitcher in western New York is composed primarily of juveniles and that the adults moving east from their breeding ground generally seek a more coastal route. They represent a small fraction of the total southbound migration, which occurs farther west. To a first approximation, the interior migration in each of Region 1 (primarily data from Hamilton, Ontario), Region 2, and Region 3 run between 10 and 25% of the birds seen at Jamaica Bay, based upon the rate of occurrence.

In Region 2, birds are widely distributed on the Lake Ontario plain and are more concentrated at locations in Region 3 at Montezuma NWR. They are scarce in Region 1, but data from Hamilton, Ontario, indicate that the migration at that longitude is about the same as in Regions 2 and 3. It remains to be determined where birds migrating along the Atlantic reach the coast.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Bob Curry, William D'Anna, Dave Strong, Robert McKinney, and Nancy Miller for assisting in collecting these records.

*51 Lambeth Loop, Fairport, New York 14450-9718*

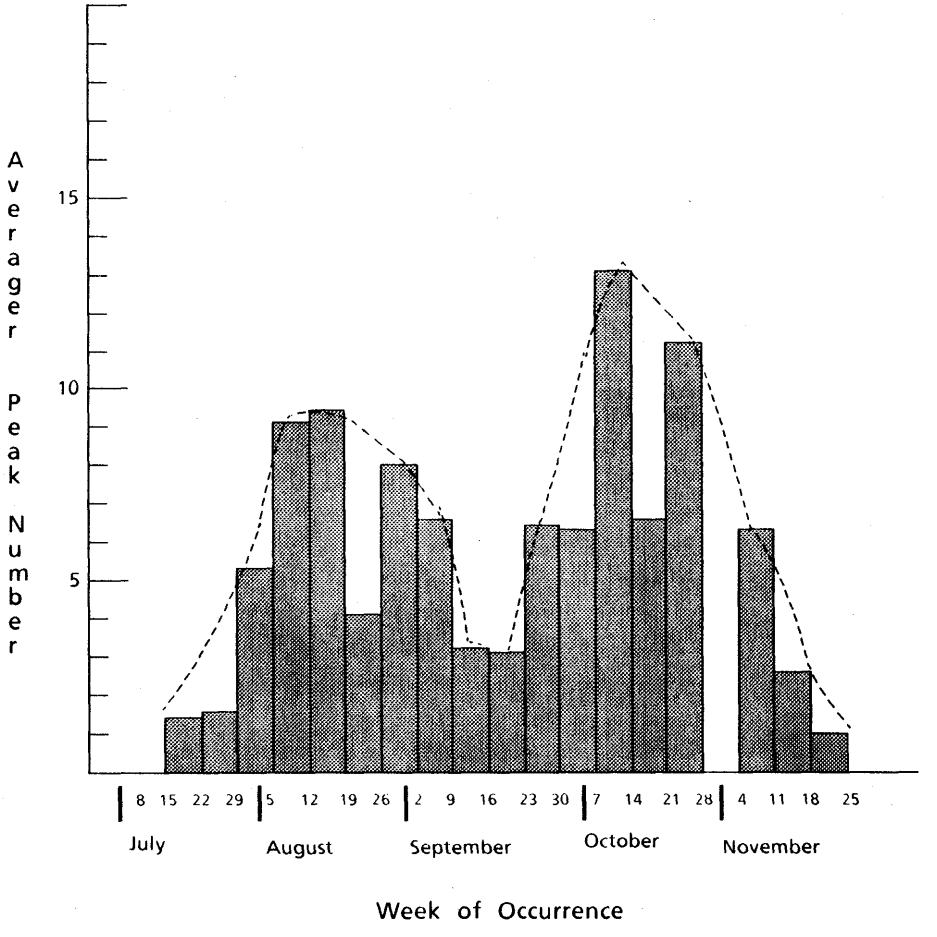


Figure 4. Dates of Long-billed Dowitcher records at Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge 1982-1990.

**Table 2. Comparison of Western New York with Adjacent Areas.**

| Area | Number of Records | Time Span per Year | Records | Range of Fall Dates |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Region 1 | 4 | 1970-1993 | 0-1 | |
| Region 2 | 23 | 1978-1993 | 1-5 | 7/14-11/19 |
| Region 3 | 22 | 1978-1983 | 1-4 | 8/19-10/31 |
| Montezuma NWR | | 1956-1980 | 5 | 8/15-11/15 |
| Hamilton | 24 | 1980-1992 | 0-5 | 8/26-11/3 |
| Jamaica Bay | | 1982-1990 | 7-20 | 7/12-11/19 |

## LITERATURE CITED


Benning, W. E. 1990. The Shorebirds of Montezuma National Wildlife Refuge. *Kingbird* 30:68-75.

Chandler, R. J. 1989. *The Facts on File Field Guide to North Atlantic Shorebirds.* Facts on File, New York, pp. 136-140.

Davis, T. 1982. The 1981 Fall Shorebird Season of Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge. *Kingbird* 32:85-96.

_____. 1983. The 1982 Fall Shorebird Season of Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge. *Kingbird* 33:94-102.

_____. 1984. The 1983 Fall Shorebird Season of Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge. *Kingbird* 34:74-86.

Hyman, P., J. Marchant, and T. Prater. 1986. *Shorebirds,* Houghton-Mifflin Co., Boston. pp.180, 360-61, 397.

Morris, A. 1985. The 1984 Fall Shorebird Season at Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge. *Kingbird* 35:74-90.

_____. 1986. The 1985 Fall Shorebird Season at Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge. *Kingbird* 36:54-72.

_____. 1987. The 1986 Fall Shorebird Season at Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge. *Kingbird* 37:106-118.

_____. 1988. The 1987 Fall Shorebird Season at Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge. *Kingbird* 38:81-94.

_____. 1989. The 1988 Fall Shorebird Season at Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge. *Kingbird* 39:80-95.

_____. 1990. The 1989 Fall Shorebird Season at Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge. *Kingbird* 40:133-148.

Wilds, C., and M. Newlon. 1983. The Identification of Dowitchers. *Birding* 15:151-165.