

NOTES AND OBSERVATIONS

RAZORBILL AT THE NIAGARA RIVER MOUTH

On the morning of 19 November 2006, a group of Rochester birders joined with a group from the Buffalo Ornithological Society for our annual Niagara Falls field trip for gulls and whatever else we can find along the Niagara River. On the way over to our 9 AM meeting spot at Old Fort Niagara, the Rochester group made a brief stop at Willie D'Anna's yard near Olcott and had the good fortune to almost immediately locate the Summer Tanager that had been visiting there for some time—a great start for the trip.

As usual, we began the joint trip with a walk into Old Fort Niagara to view the mouth of the river from that vantage point. Almost immediately, while many were still wandering to the low point in the wall and setting up scopes, Norma Platt called out that she had seen an alcid just below us, not far out in the river. We started searching and shortly had glimpses, then better looks, in some of our scopes. Looking through my wife Sue's scope, it was instantly obvious that the bird was a Razorbill! In fact, whoever had a decent view first would have made that call. Fortunately, the bird soon stopped feeding for five minutes or more and many had great scope views of it resting on the water or preening. After that it went back to feeding along the "ripline" between choppy water and smoother water nearer the fort. The Razorbill usually surfaced very close to the ripline, no more than 10 ft or so on either side. This feature arose from the confluence of NNW wind off the lake, out-flowing river water, and eddies between the main current and the partially obstructed near-shore flow. Less than 100 ft off our vantage, the ripline served as a convenient reference for locating the bird between its frequent dives. Another help for directing people who had missed it during its resting period was that debris in the river remained relatively stationary at the line; a tree limb or chunk of wood would move a bit out toward the lake and then move back upriver along that line over the entire half hour or so we watched the bird. When feeding, the bird would be under water for 80% or more of the time, only coming to the surface for 10-15 seconds before diving again.

When we left to continue our trip along the river, Tom O'Donnell made a cell phone call to a local contact and the word was spread through both the Buffalo and Ontario rare bird networks. By the end of the day many had seen the bird not only from Old Fort Niagara, but also from a golf course and a car park on the Canadian side of the river at Niagara-on-the-Lake.

The bird continued at that general location until at least 7 January 2007 (the date of the last posting I can find). Judging from the many internet postings, this Razorbill was probably seen by hundreds of birders. It was viewed flying, resting, and, most often, actively feeding. It ranged from up the river a bit to out on Lake Ontario at least hundreds of yards, and on both sides of the river (i.e., it visited both sides of the international border). At times, the Razorbill flew or

drifted around Old Fort Niagara, some distance east off the Lake Ontario shore, where it was more difficult to find.

It was only after reading these later posts on the internet that we who saw it the first morning could appreciate how lucky we were. Some came several times before seeing it. Often it was much farther away. In late December, I returned with my wife and our older daughter, and the bird continued actively feeding throughout the 45 minutes we spent looking and trying to take pictures—a real challenge facing into a raw 20 mph wind with blowing snow flurries.

In context, this appears to be the third record for this location at the mouth of the Niagara River. A verification report by F. Bodsworth was accepted by NYSARC (*Kingbird* 34: 217; 33: 113, 116) for an individual seen on 27 November 1982 by several Canadian observers, and an individual was seen there for one day on 1 January 1985 (*Kingbird* 35: 122). Based on records cited in *Bull's Birds of New York State* (E. Levine, ed., Comstock Publishing Associates, 1998: p. 313) and from scanning the *Kingbird* issues since, this is the 5th inland record for New York State. Since the *Bull's Birds of New York State* cut off date of 1996, there has been a flyby at Derby Hill in the SE corner of Lake Ontario on 21 October 2006 and the bird of the present report. In addition, a specimen was collected from the Niagara Frontier (precise location unknown) labeled 11/16/1906 by Mr. J.A. Sjörgen, which now resides in the School Museum of Ystad, Sweden (Beardslee, Clark S. and Harold D. Mitchell, *Birds of the Niagara Frontier Region*, Bulletin of the Buffalo Society of Natural Sciences, Vol. 22, 1965: p. 469). A sleeping bird reported off Hamlin Beach State Park west of Rochester on 2 December 2004 (*Kingbird* 55:169, 172) is now thought more likely to have been a Thick-billed Murre, following review of the verification reports by others more experienced with the species under a variety of conditions than the original observers.

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SMITH'S LONGSPUR AT JONES BEACH WEST END, NASSAU COUNTY: NEW YORK'S SECOND RECORD

The past two months have been an education for me studying a bird that was, in truth, an accidental discovery. On 2 February 2007 I set out to photograph a Lapland Longspur seen previously. I was cold, and the bird uncooperative. While taking the last few shots, an oddly colored, sparrow-type bird moved near the Lapland. I dismissed it as an out of place, out of time, regularly occurring bird such as Dickcissel, or Bobolink. I took a few photos to document it and went home.

My computer revealed details I had not seen (or looked for). I returned the next day with camera in hand. The odd bird was re-found and photographed.

Its features led me to conclude it was a Smith's Longspur, a species with which I'd had no experience. Before putting my head on the block and alerting the RBA, I sought independent verification from some stellar birders. The pictures, they said, weren't clear on several points: overall color, definite eye ring, and median crown stripe. I returned, intending to cover these points and resend pictures, which I did. No response. (I later learned this person was out of town.)

I sent my information to Shai Mitra hoping he would remove that last bit of uncertainty I had. He wrote, "Wow! Looks good...but..." He wanted to see it in person. When I arrived the next day he was already there, and had confirmed the ID. All the features were there: buffy overall color, which set it apart from our winter regulars; bold eye ring; rufous streaking on breast and flanks; slimmer bill than that of Lapland's; thin white wingbars; and white outer rectrices. More detailed study showed its unique primary spacing on the folded wing, which was quite unlike the Lapland Longspur's more even spacing. Its habits, while similar, were subtly different from those of the other longspurs. Although undeniably a 'flock bird' in that it enjoyed safety in numbers and all those other eyes looking out for danger, it associated only loosely with the resident Horned Larks, Snow Buntings, and Lapland Longspurs. It would flush and fly with any of these but seemed to prefer the Laplands. The larks often picked on the longspurs, Smith's included, when they fed too closely. The frenetic activity of the Buntings was a bit much for this bird. The Smith's was a slower, more thorough feeder than the Laplands. They often outdistanced it in their searching for food. As well, this bird seemed less likely to flush. Perhaps 40% of the time when something flushed the group, it would maintain a flattened posture until the other birds settled. When it did flush, it would frequently cut out of the group, leaving them to do a few more laps around the field.

This vagrant from Texas/Oklahoma provided only the second documented record for New York State, following a bird from 22 September 1974, at Robert Moses State Park, just a dozen miles eastward along the beach.

The Jones Beach Smith's Longspur remained at least until 18 March, provided many observers with their first or best views of the species, and brought a great deal of excitement to a site seldom visited in winter.

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