

EXEMPLARY REPORTS OF RARE BIRDS FROM 2004

The documentation at the heart of NYSARC's work is a treasure trove of information that few people ever see. Although any report submitted to NYSARC is available upon request to interested persons, by arrangement with the Secretary and Chair, this seldom happens in practice. In appreciation of the hard work and skill of our many contributors, NYSARC will select two reports each year for publication in *The Kingbird*. Highlighting these reports is meant not only to reward outstanding work, but also to provide models of how documentary evidence can be presented in an effective manner. As emphasized each year in our Annual Reports, the format and medium of a report is secondary to its content. The two reports chosen for 2004 are rather different in organization, but they both provide superb documentation and thorough analysis for their respective records, both of which were remarkable inland occurrences of species rare even in coastal New York.

2004-22-A

Received 6-19-2004

Acknowledged 6-21-2004

SPECIES: Wilson's Plover

DATE: May 21, 2004

LOCATION: South spit of Sandy Pond outlet, Sandy Creek, Oswego County

TIME: First located at about 6:15 PM. Observed it steadily for 3 hours

LIGHT CONDITIONS: Clear and sunny

DISTANCE FROM BIRD: Less than 100 meters

OPTICS USED: Kowa TSN824 W/ 20x-60x zoom eyepiece, photos taken with Nikon Coolpix model 995 through scope

SUBMITTED BY: Kevin McGann, 7703 River Rd., Baldwinsville, NY 13027

Only one plover observed; appeared larger than nearby Semipalmated Sandpipers, although never seen together. The sandpipers preferred the wet shoreline and the plover the dry sand some 20-30 feet from the shore. No Semipalmated Plovers were on the beach when I was there. Shape, even through binoculars without any details undoubtedly plover like, thick necked and somewhat large headed. Primaries did not extend beyond tail. Brown back and wings, with no markings except very faint pale feather edges, not noticeable enough to say there was any, otherwise the brown was that of any Semipal Plover or Killdeer. Underside was clean, unspotted white up to the chest where a single and continuous black band went across the chest, starting from the shoulder. The band looked narrow, maybe even narrower than Semipal, but later with a little research found that the width of the band likely depends on the posture of the bird and as this bird was continually in a feeding posture and never seen in an alert posture can probably account for its narrowness. A white

band or collar went around the back of the neck, starting at a point adjacent to where the black chest band ended at the shoulder. The throat above the chest band was white to the base of the bill. The head had a white forehead and seemed less steep than either Semipal Plover or Killdeer and was edged by a faint bit of black on the top edge of the forehead (shows better in the pictures than in life). The white of the forehead extended around the side of the head over the eye tapering to a point a short distance behind the eye. Cheek, back of head and crown were the same brown as the back and wings. The eye was dark. The legs showed short visible tibia and long tarsus; color was a dull flesh color. Bill was all black and looked long for a small plover, shape and size seemed comparable to a Black-bellied Plover's; if the bill were folded backwards would come to near the back of the head.

I have no previous experience with this species but I am familiar with the other species of plover that migrate through this area including Semipalmated Plover and feel my description has eliminated that species, but might not eliminate all the world's plovers. Fortunately, I have included the attached pictures to reinforce the description.

This report written at 11:00 pm May 21, 2004 and re-edited June 9, 2004

Other observers: David Wheeler initially found the bird but was not present while I was there. To the best of my knowledge no one else saw the bird and it was not present the following day when David, Bill Purcell and myself were there.

2004-49-D

Received electronically 5-26-2005

Acknowledged 5-26-2005

Black Guillemot (first-winter) (*Cepphus grylle*)

Wells College boat house, Aurora, Cayuga County; New York

30 October 2004 seen briefly at 1:15-1:30 pm, but more consistently at 3:15-4:15 pm; full overcast, 10-15 knot breeze from the south, mid-60s

31 October 2004 briefly at 2:45 pm; full overcast, 15+ knot breeze from the west, mid-50s

Description by Curtis Marantz

also seen by Mike Harvey, Tim Lenz, Jesse Ellis, Kevin and Jay McGowan, Ken Rosenberg, Mark Chao, Meena Haribal, and many others

My understanding is that this bird was first found at Myers Point by Paul Hurtado on 23 October 2004, but that it was relocated at Aurora by Carol Schmitt on 27 October. Fortunately, I happened to be home checking my email this afternoon when a message was posted that Mike Harvey and Tim Lenz had relocated the bird from the cliffs south of Aurora at about 12:30 pm. I immediately left home and headed up to look for the bird. Because the bird, and the birders who were following it, moved north to the vicinity of the Wells College boathouse, it took me a short while to find the right spot. Unfortunately,

I arrived just after the bird had been up for a prolonged period of time, and it was now foraging actively and spending very little time at the surface. I managed to see the bird twice briefly between about 1:15 and 1:30 pm, after which, we lost it altogether. The difficult conditions resulted in its taking us nearly two hours to relocate the guillemot, which was now about 75-150 meters offshore to the northwest of the boathouse and not far north of where I had first seen it. Myself and many others then spent about the next hour observing this bird intermittently as it foraged actively. The guillemot spent little time at the surface, however, seemingly spending a few minutes at a time underwater and only 10-15 seconds at the surface. On a few occasions, the bird remained at the surface for a minute or two, but even then it was remarkably difficult to see. The overcast conditions facilitated our assessment of colors, but they also resulted in a moderate amount of glare off the water and they made the water appear gray instead of blue. Combined with the whitecaps that resulted from the wind and the bird's small size, this made it exceptionally difficult to locate and follow the guillemot even though it was not that far away. I suspect my views of this bird lasted no more than five minutes in all because most observations lasted less than 30 seconds and many were little more than brief glimpses of a few seconds. I used primarily my 20-60× spotting scope to observe this bird, often at a relatively high magnification.

I returned to Aurora on 31 October to word that the bird had been seen briefly mid-morning but subsequently lost. After about an hour-and-a-half of looking, we gave up and continued on to Montezuma. The guillemot had apparently not been refound as of our return at about 2:15 pm, but about a half-hour later, I spotted the bird as it flew in from the southwest, curving inward toward the shore and eventually landing 100-150 meters to the northwest of the boat dock. I obtained moderately good views of the guillemot in flight and briefly on the water, but I was unable to relocate the bird after its first dive. Only one or two others managed to even glimpse the bird during the next 45 minutes that we scanned the relatively turbulent waters. That the wind waves were even higher this afternoon than they were the previous day made relocating the bird on the water almost impossible.

This was a small, duck-like bird that was clearly smaller than the Mallards (*Anas platyrhynchos*) and American Black Ducks (*A. rubripes*) that were in the same general area. I suspect that the guillemot was instead about the size of a Horned Grebe (*Podiceps auritus*), but it was quite different in shape, with a somewhat shorter and definitely stockier neck. Even still, this bird seemed to sit higher on the water than do many alcids, and its neck was often outstretched, so the head was held higher than is typical of a murrelet. Rather characteristic was the bird's shape, which combined a moderately long and slim bill, a sloping forehead, a rounded crown, a relatively short and somewhat stocky neck, and a rounded body. The short, seemingly rounded tail was often obscured, but on occasion, the guillemot sat with its tail cocked upward. This bird was extensively white, but with black and possibly gray mottling scattered about the plumage. The bird had a distinctly capped appearance that resulted from the forehead and crown being blackish back to the junction of the crown and nape.

My impression was that there was fine mottling or scaling of white scattered through the black cap, but these markings resulted in little more than a somewhat frosted appearance to a generally well-defined cap that was rounded at its rear terminus. Contrasting with the black cap, the face and neck were whitish throughout. About the only contrast that I detected in the face was what appeared to be a short stripe or wedge of black that extended back from the eyes a short way across the top of the auriculars. I believed at the time of the observations that the lores were white, but by the time I typed this description I was a little unclear about this [that the lores were indeed white was confirmed by photographs taken by Kevin and Jay McGowan]. The nape and neck appeared entirely whitish, though possibly with some grayish clouding scattered about. I further believe that the breast was white to pale grayish with little in the way of markings.

I had a difficult time assessing the pattern of the upperparts. The back was extensively dark, but it did not seem to be entirely black. I could never be certain whether the upperparts were evenly dark gray, or instead, a combination of black and white that blended to appear grayish. If I had to guess, I probably would have gone with the latter. I further believe that there were whitish stripes on the back or scapulars, but I could never really be sure of their presence, much less their location. What I can say is that the pattern was unlike the braces evident on a *Brachyramphus* murrelet. The wings were more easily seen, but again, their pattern was difficult to assess. Clearly apparent was a white panel on the coverts that contrasted with darker remiges, but the finer details of this pattern were difficult to determine. The greater and median coverts were mostly white, but with a relatively narrow, black stripe that extended diagonally through the wing panel. I suspect that this stripe represented the bases of the greater coverts, but it is possible that it instead represented the tips of the median coverts. [Subsequent examination of photographs posted by the McGowans revealed two narrow stripes of black crossing the wing panel at a slight angle to one another. Even in the photos, which were remarkably good given the conditions, it was difficult to determine precisely which parts of the coverts were white and which were black.] The rear part of the wing appeared significantly darker than the coverts, so it accentuated the white panel in the middle of the wing. Although the rear part of the bird appeared dark, I was a bit unclear precisely which feather tracts were involved. The remiges appeared to be largely dark, but the rump was mostly if not entirely white. The uppertail and undertail coverts were also white, but the short, rounded tail was primarily dark gray to blackish. Given that the bird spent its entire time either under or at the surface of the water, it was difficult to see much on its underparts. This said, the breast appeared to be whitish, and the flanks and undertail coverts, the latter seen when the bird cocked its tail upward, appeared white in their entirety. The bird was therefore white along the waterline. Because I never saw the guillemot fly or even flap its wings on the first day, my views of the partially open wings occurred exclusively when the bird spread the wings slightly as it dove. The long, relatively slim bill tapered to a sharp point. I estimated that the bill was almost as long as the head was wide, so this bird appeared considerably longer-billed than do most murrelets. The bill appeared to be black throughout.

The eyes were dark and the legs (or feet) seemed to be pale (based on one brief glimpse when the bird scratched). I never saw the open wings nor the underwing coverts on the first day.

My views of the bird in flight on 31 October were brief, but nonetheless, they revealed several things that I had failed to note on the bird when it was on the water the previous day. In flight, this bird was relatively small and heavy-bodied, with the wings short and relatively rounded, the tail short and rounded, and the neck short and stocky. In essence, the bird looked typical of a medium-sized alcid (i.e., a small football with wings). Also like most alcids, it flew with rapid and relatively shallow wing-beats. The bird spread its tail and dropped its feet before plunging into the moderately turbulent water. In flight, the guillemot appeared mostly whitish but with regions of black or gray noticeable on the upperparts. The upperparts were somewhat uneven in appearance and the wings were characterized by the contrast between the mostly white panel on the coverts and the darker remiges. A similar contrast was also evident between the white rump and the blackish tail. My impression was that the undersides of the remiges were dark, but the underwing coverts were unmistakably white. I was also relatively certain that the feet, seen when the bird came in for a landing, were webbed and some shade of pinkish. My views of the bird on the water were so brief today that I could do little more than confirm that it was the same bird that I had seen the previous day based on its general patterns. I noted the capped appearance and a bit of contrast between white and black, but very little else at this time.

Not only was this my first Black Guillemot on Cayuga Lake, but it was also the first one that I have seen in New York. I know that I have previously seen the species in Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and in Maine, and I believe that I have also seen it in New Brunswick and/or Nova Scotia, the latter many years ago. Most of these birds that I have seen have been in alternate plumage, but I have seen at least a few along the Massachusetts coast during winter. I have far more experience with Pigeon Guillemots (*C. columba*) from the West Coast, mostly in California, but again, I have seen few in non-alternate plumages. I have seen all of the similar plumages of murrelets, including the Long-billed Murrelet (*Brachyramphus perdix*) that spent a few days at the south end of Cayuga Lake in 2001 (I saw it on 18 December).

Despite my lack of extensive experience with basic- and juvenal-plumaged guillemots, I have no doubt whatsoever that the bird that myself and others saw at Aurora in late October was indeed a Black Guillemot. The bird was clearly an alcid based on its small size, characteristic shape, and rapid flight. To my knowledge, all of the remaining Atlantic coast alcids are mostly, if not entirely, blackish above in all plumages, so Razorbill (*Alca torda*), Dovekie (*Alle alle*), Atlantic Puffin (*Fratercula arctica*), and both murres (*Uria aalge* and *U. lomvia*) are easily eliminated. More similar in plumage patterns, but a bit smaller in size are the *Brachyramphus* murrelets. Even still, only a basic-plumaged Kittlitz's Murrelet (*B. brevirostris*) is as white in the face as was the bird we saw. In addition to the remote possibility of this species ever appearing on a lake in upstate New York, Kittlitz's Murrelet is tiny and has a very short bill and a mostly white face, but dark upperparts with the white braces typical of the

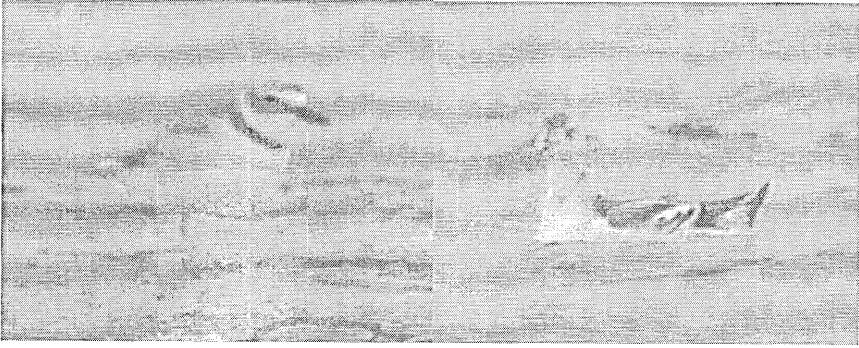
genus. Both Marbled (*B. marmoratus*) and Long-billed Murrelets are likewise smaller and mostly dark above with braces running down the scapulars instead of white patches on the coverts. None of the other alcids are even as similar as the above species, with one exception. Pigeon Guillemot is very similar to Black in all plumages. Moreover, the dark band across the coverts that is so distinctive on Pigeon Guillemots in summer is much less useful for identification in fall and winter because immature Blacks have dark spots across the covert panel that produce a pattern not unlike that of a Pigeon Guillemot. The possibility of a Pigeon Guillemot ever appearing in New York is remote, but even still, the white underwings on the Aurora bird served to identify it unequivocally as a Black Guillemot. On average, Black Guillemots are also paler above than are Pigeons, but I'm not sure that my views of the Aurora bird were sufficient to have identified it with confidence had I not seen the underwings.

Based on the text in Cramp *et al.* (1985. Handbook of the birds of Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa: the birds of the Western Palearctic. Vol. IV. Oxford University Press, Oxford), it appears that aging and the subspecific identification of these birds can be challenging. This results in part from the fact that the same characters used to age these birds also vary geographically (such as the extent of white on the upperparts and of the black in the wing panel). Based on my read of the BWP account, it would appear that the Aurora bird was too extensively black above, in the face, and on the covert panel for an adult from a high Arctic population, but the determination of whether it was an adult or a first-winter bird from a closer population may be more difficult. It still appears, however, that the obvious dark cap and, especially, the dusky band across the wing panel are indicative of first-basic plumage, at least if this was a North American bird. It was less clear to me from the BWP account whether adult birds from Europe can show a similar pattern on the head and coverts during winter (because birds from these populations were said to be more extensively black in each plumage-class than are North American birds).

A quick check of Levine (1998. Bull's birds of New York state. Comstock Publishing Associates, Ithaca) revealed only one previous record for Black Guillemot in upstate New York, which involved one bird seen on Lake Champlain at Westport, Essex County, on 7 January 1978. Moreover, Veit and Petersen (1993. Birds of Massachusetts, Massachusetts Audubon Society, Lincoln, Massachusetts) listed only two inland records in Massachusetts (neither in the recent past), and Zeranski and Baptist (1990. Connecticut birds. University Press of New England, Hanover, New Hampshire) listed only one for Connecticut (at Hartford on 1 January 1934) but with the comment that several more birds were seen upriver in Massachusetts the following day (these not mentioned by Veit and Petersen). Although the number of inland records in the region may have been fewer than I had expected, I was not surprised that the species was an extreme rarity anywhere inland. More surprising to me was the rarity of this species even along the coast of Long Island, where it appears that there have been only a few dozen records in all.

The bulk of my description was typed from memory on 30 October 2004 after I returned home from seeing this bird but before I consulted any field guides or other references. I added a few additional notes the next day following

my observations of the bird a second time and after I had a chance to look at the photographs taken by the McGowans. I eventually completed this account on 10 April 2005 after I began to free up some time following the completion of my dissertation. My understanding is that this bird was last seen at Aurora on 12 November 2004.



Left: Wilson's Plover, Sandy Pond outlet, Sandy Creek, Oswego County, 21 May 2004, copyright Kevin McGann. Right: Black Guillemot, Aurora Bay, Cayuga County, 30 October 2004, copyright Jay McGowan.

