

Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas Expeditions Yield Additional Information on Solitary Sandpiper Nests

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The Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas projects (1981 to 1985, and 2001 to 2005) have provided a unique opportunity for ornithologists to survey northern Ontario. The primary goal of any Atlas is to provide information on avian distribution and, with the introduction of point counts during the second Ontario Atlas, an estimate of relative abundance for many bird species. The Atlas projects have also provided interested parties with an opportunity to access hard-to-reach areas, and produced greater breeding and nesting information on poorly known northern species (Cadman et al. 1987, Peck et al. 2004a, 2004b). An example was the third reported nesting in Ontario of Solitary Sandpiper (*Tringa solitaria*), noted last year by Jake Walker (2004). During northern Atlas trips in 2004, two crews each found a nest of Solitary Sandpiper and were able to obtain photos and supplemental information. Since the breeding biology of the Solitary Sandpiper is so poorly known (Moskoff 1995), we felt the additional information would be a relevant addendum to the details and historical summary previously provided by Walker.

Shamattawa River

At 1100h on 12 June 2004, after finishing point counts and while return-

ing to base camp along the Shamattawa River, an atlas team (Peck, Coady, Konze and Binsfeld) observed an agitated Solitary Sandpiper flush from a nest (ONRS 184530) in a tree, calling as it left. The nest was located at 16U 602237 6078061 (North American Datum 1983).

The nest tree was in an area of open muskeg near the edge of a large sedge wetland. Small copses and individual Black Spruce (*Picea mariana*) of varying heights were scattered throughout the area (Figure 1). The maximum height of spruce in the area was approximately 6 m. Ground cover consisted predominately of reindeer lichens (*Cladonia* sp.), mosses (*Sphagnum* sp.) and Labrador Tea (*Ledum groenlandicum*). The nest site was approximately 300 m from the edge of boreal forest running alongside the Shamattawa River. There were several small ponds within 200 m of the nest site.

The nest was situated 1.65 m up in a 3.3 m Black Spruce. It was placed against the trunk in between two horizontal branches in an area of the tree that had been previously disfigured. The nest blended in well and, although visible from most angles,



Figure 1: Solitary Sandpiper nest tree in foreground, and surrounding habitat located in muskeg near large sedge meadow (Shamattawa River), 12 June 2004. Photo (ROM 2117) by *Mark K. Peck*.



Figure 2: Nest and eggs of Solitary Sandpiper (Shamattawa River), 12 June 2004. Photo (ROM 2115) by *Mark K. Peck*.



Figure 3: Muskeg habitat near nest of Solitary Sandpiper (Ekwon River), 23 June 2004. Photo by *Patrick C. Hodgson*.



Figure 4: Nest and eggs of Solitary Sandpiper (Ekwon River), 23 June 2004. Photo by *Patrick C. Hodgson*.

was difficult to see. The diameter of the tree at breast height was 7 cm. The nest had an outside depth of 100 mm, inside depth of 46 mm, outside diameter of 125 mm and an inside diameter of 95 mm (Figure 2). It contained three pyriform eggs, pale buff with dark reddish brown blotching concentrated near the larger end. The eggs were warm to the touch. They were measured with digital calipers accurate to 0.01 mm and found to be 35.51 x 25.01 mm, 37.26 x 26.26 mm and 37.3 x 25.81 mm. The eggs were weighed using an electronic balance accurate to 0.1 g, and weighed 10.7 g, 12.0 g and 11.8 g, respectively. The adult bird stayed in the area during our 30-minute visit to the site.

Ekwan River

On 23 June 2004, Hodgson and Furino found this nest (ONRS 1004636), 1.7 km west of the junction of the Ekwan River and the North Washagami Rivers at 16U 631700 5962867 (North American Datum 1983). It was located in an area of open, wet muskeg with small scattered Tamarack (*Larix laricina*), spruce (*Picea* sp) and areas of open, shallow water (Figure 3). Ground cover was similar to the Shamattawa River nest. The bird flushed from the nest as we passed nearby but was not actually seen sitting. The nest was located 1.5 m off the ground in a 3-metre Tamarack, one of several growing fairly close together. The nest tree was scraggly, with a few short branches without a lot of needles, and the nest was visible from all angles at close range. At greater distances, the cryptic construction and

the placement of the nest between two lichen encrusted branches next to the trunk made it difficult to locate visually. As seen from the photograph (Figure 4), the nest was in good shape and the grass lining was still intact. The nest contained four eggs of similar appearance and colour to the Shamattawa River nest. The eggs appeared too large for the cup and left the impression the bird would be sitting more on top of the nest than in it. The bird stayed close by, remaining agitated, but did not return to the nest while we were there.

Nest Construction

Although American Robin (*Turdus migratorius*) cannot be completely ruled out, we believe that both nests were originally constructed the previous year by Rusty Blackbirds (*Euphagus carolinus*). In our experience, Rusty Blackbirds and American Robins construct similar-looking nests in muskeg areas, with some notable exceptions. The robin nests we have observed tended to be placed in more protected habitats and were more likely to be better hidden by live branches. The cryptic construction and the position of the nests against the trunk in a tangle of small branches further suggests Rusty Blackbird. In addition, both of these nests were constructed using decaying vegetation (Figures 2 and 4), which is usual with Rusty Blackbirds (Avery 1995). A female blackbird with a nest under construction near the Shamattawa River nest was observed gathering decaying material from the edge of a nearby small

pond. Decaying vegetation often looks like mud after it has dried.

It is interesting to note that Solitary Sandpipers were not seen or heard on any of the point counts in the general vicinity of the nests nor were they observed at any other time in the area of the nests. Although Greater (*Tringa melanoleuca*) and Lesser (*T. flavipes*) Yellowlegs would often approach both teams from considerable distances, this was not the case for Solitary Sandpipers, suggesting this species may be more difficult to accurately census in the north than other tringids.

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