

PHALAROPES IN WINTER

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In late fall and winter Ohio birders have an opportunity to discover lingering phalaropes. Wilson's Phalaropes departing from the northern prairies have normally passed through Ohio by October (Trautman), and are easily distinguished from the other phalaropes. Outside the breeding season, Red and Northern Phalaropes usually remain at sea, but a few are found, spinning and dabbing, on Lake Erie and inland waters. By this time most Northerns are also gone from Ohio, but sometimes stragglers occur. This is also the most common season for Reds.

Though Red and Northern Phalaropes are strikingly different in breeding plumage, they are quite similar in winter. They are especially difficult to identify when only a single bird is found, as is most often the case. The similarity of plumages is made more problematic by the cursory treatment given them in the standard field guides, and confusion often results.

Contrary to most of the field guides, the bill of the Red Phalarope may show no yellow. Most immature birds have an all black bill and the majority of adults quickly lose any trace of yellow (Russell). The bill of the Red is shorter and stouter than that of the Northern, but this is most helpful when the birds are seen together.

The following points, taken together, may assist in differentiating Red and Northern Phalaropes. First, the Red has a plump, round body, short, thick neck and large, round head. In contrast,

the Northern is flatter bodied with long, thin neck and smaller, flatter head. Second, the dark marking on the hindneck of the Red generally extends very little onto the head. This gives it a "bald" appearance rather than the "receding hairline" of the Northern. Third is the coloration of the back. A Red Phalarope will have some dark markings around the shoulders, but the back is a uniform pale gray. The back of the Northern is a darker gray, interrupted by pale stripes which form a "V" pattern. This striping is normally quite distinctive. Even in changing plumage these characteristics should be helpful.

Care must be taken in identifying winter phalaropes. They are very uncommon, but do occasionally appear. Red Phalaropes have been of annual occurrence the last five years with sightings ranging from October through February, once even in May. Northern Phalaropes are more common earlier in the fall, but have been seen December through February.

Bibliography

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