

Gordon Park Shorebirds

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In the early to mid 1970's the best of the limited shorebirding around Cleveland was at Cleveland's Easterly sewage treatment facility overflow pond and the adjacent White City Park beach area located north of Lakeshore Blvd near East 140th Street. This area had records of numerous species of shorebirds in small numbers. In addition, shorebirds could occasionally be found at Edgewater Park, East 55th Street Marina and Burke Lakefront Airport. The airport sometimes had large fallouts of shorebirds in July and August when a line of severe thunderstorms passed over Cleveland and if enough rain fell to create rainwater ponds, the shorebirds would stay long enough to be found.

Environmental Protection Agency legislation in the mid seventies forced the regional sewer authority to modify and enlarge waste treatment facilities in order to reduce the amount of pollution being discharged into nearby streams and Lake Erie. The Easterly sewage treatment facility and White City Park were closed to the public in 1979 so that required construction could begin.

However, another EPA ruling eventually brought a shorebird bonanza to Cleveland birders. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers dredge silt from navigable streams and harbors to maintain water depths necessary for navigation purposes. The silt was taken by barge a few miles out into Lake Erie and dumped. The EPA ruled that if the dredged silt contained a high level of pollution and/or toxic wastes it could not be dumped into the lake. The corps of Engineers then built several "Dredged Material Containment Areas" along the south shore of Lake Erie to hold the dredged silt. Two of these areas were in Cleveland: One north of the Cleveland Municipal Electric Light and Power Plant at East 40th Street and North Marginal Drive and the other north of and adjacent to Gordon Park located at the north end of Liberty Blvd. (now Martin Luther King, Jr. Drive) and the Lakeshore Freeway (I-90).

Beginning in 1977 the "munilite" site had received enough fill to produce some mud flats and shorebirds were attracted and at times a few hundred were noted. However, it was not possible to get close to the edge of the area because the only side connected to shore was against Burke Airport which was off limits. Birders who set up spotting scopes on higher spots south of the area could see a portion of the mud flat and identify larger shorebirds but most of the peeps were not identifiable. By mid 1980 the water had been mostly forced from the impoundment and weeds grew over the mud flats stopping use by shorebirds.

By late summer of 1981 the Gordon Park site had received enough fill to create a few islands and shorebirds were found in small numbers around the muddy edges. It was now worth the trip into the impoundment to check for the uncommon species. American Avocet, Willet, Hudsonian Godwit, Red Knot, Stilt Sandpiper and Wilson's, Red-necked and Red Phalaropes were among the many species of shorebirds spotted at Gordon during 1981. The Gordon Park saga had begun with no fanfare but sightings in the following years made the name Gordon Park known around the state and beyond. The pumping of dredged material into the impoundment in the summer of 1982 increased the size of the mud flats and attracted larger numbers of shorebirds for several days. More and more birders trudged down the hill, through the hole in the fence, over to the cement encasement of Doan Creek and out to the mud flats, with good prospects for seeing the birds yesterdays' birders had reported.

The impoundment mud flats did not change much in size between 1983 and 1985. During May thru July Knotweeds (*Polygonum*) grew profusely over the mud flats created the previous year changing that part of the surface from shorebird to sparrow, finch and blackbird habitat. New mud flats were created each summer by the fill being pumped into the impoundment. In 1986 the size of the mud flat increased greatly as the fill raised closer to the surface of the water in large areas. The water depth in much of the still covered sections was only one to six inches. The summer weather kept this shallow water very warm and botulism gained a foothold causing the death of many dozens of ducks, geese and shorebirds. Gulls were present on the mud flats but they did not feed in the water so were not affected by the botulism. A local birder, Mary Gustafson, notified the Corps of Engineers of the botulism outbreak.

The Corps of Engineers had clean water from Lake Erie pumped into the affected areas but this did not stop the botulism and death of birds. Then men were hired to scare birds from the impoundment. They fired blank shells from shotguns and set up several propane gas cannons of a type used to scare blackbirds from cropland. The resulting noise kept the ducks and gulls away but the shorebirds only flew to the other side of the impoundment for awhile. In a few weeks time they did not even flinch when the cannon fired. Shorebird deaths continued until most migration had past and autumn freezing temperatures killed the botulism. The shorebirding was good again in 1987 but continued filling brought the mud level above the water level of Lake Erie so most sections had no water once the pumping stopped. The mud flat soon became too dry for most of the shorebirds and by the middle of September only a few birds could be found. The year of 1988 may have some spring migrants but weed growth will probably end the wonderful shorebirding at Gordon Park.

During the years of 1981 thru 1987 thirty seven species of shorebirds were seen in the Gordon Park impoundment including two rare ones. On July 15, 1984 a breeding plumaged Curlew Sandpiper was found. This bird remained until the 18th and was the first confirmed Cleveland region record and the second Ohio record. On October 6, 1984 an even rarer bird was found, a Sharp-tailed Sandpiper. This sighting brought birders from many parts of Ohio and also some from surrounding states to see the Asian stray which stayed until October 23rd enabling large number of birders to see it. For more details on these sightings refer to the Cleveland Bird Calendar, Volume 80 numbers 3 and 4.

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Frequency of sighting of other shorebirds 1981-1987.

Black-bellied Plover: a few sightings in the last half of May; numerous sightings from late July through early November, highest count: 22 on 10/14/84.

Golden Plover: occasional in August-more often in September-fewer in October, highest count: 25 on 9/16/84.

Semipalmated Plover: common from mid May thru early June and from mid July to early October, highest count: 40 on 5/17/87.

Piping Plover: one April record, about a dozen sightings all together, most occurring between mid August and mid September, highest count: 2 on 9/8/85.

Killdeer: Common migrant and summer resident.

Avocet: one record in late April, eighteen other sightings mostly during July, highest count: 12 on 7/25/85.

Greater Yellowlegs: occasional from late March to mid May; more common from mid August thru October, highest count: 15 on 9/12/84.

Lesser Yellowlegs: uncommon from late March through late May; common to very common from early July to mid September, highest count: 165 on 7/28/87.

Solitary Sandpiper: this uncommon wetlands migrant was rarely found in Gordon Impoundment.

Willet: one early May and one May record; recorded on 19 dates between early July and early September, highest count: 24 on 7/4/83.

Spotted Sandpiper: common migrant and summer resident.

Upland Sandpiper: only one or two fly by sightings of this grassland species.

Whimbrel: one late May sighting; fifteen sightings between mid July and mid September, highest count: 10 on 8/11/85.

Hudsonian Godwit: fourteen sightings between mid August and early November most in September, highest counts: 24 on 9/10/84.

Marbled Godwit: eleven sightings between early April and mid September, highest count: 16 on 7/4/83.

Ruddy Turnstone: two May records; regular in small numbers from early August through mid September, highest count: 15 on 9/5/83.

Red Knot: seven May reports beginning the 11th, fairly regular from mid August through mid October usually numbering five or less, highest count: 43 on 9/9/84.

Sanderling: two mid April reports; one late May report, regular in small numbers from mid July through late October, one December record, highest count: 16 on 9/2/84.

Semipalmated Sandpiper: common in late May and early June; common to very common from late July to mid September; common to uncommon from mid September to mid October, highest count: 330 on 8/15/86.

Western Sandpiper: one mid May record; infrequent from early July through September; one December 14 record, highest count: 4 on 8/26/84.

Least Sandpiper: common from early May to early June and from early July through early October, highest count: 40 on 7/6/85.

White-rumped Sandpiper: several scattered records from May 5 to June 1. Most reports of this uncommon species from early September to mid October, highest count: 13 on 9/4/83.

Baird's Sandpiper: uncommon but regular from late August to mid October, highest count: 8 on 8/25/87.

Pectoral Sandpiper: rare in spring which is suprising considering its abundance in Wayne and Ottawa counties in spring, common from early July through October, highest count: 120 on 7/31/87.

Purple Sandpiper: 3 records: 11/12/83 - 12/10/83 - 1/1/85.

Dunlin: a few late April and early May reports, fairly common from mid May to early June. Common from mid September through mid November; a January 2 report, highest count: 300 on 10/28/84.

Stilt Sandpiper: one May 17 record, usually uncommon from mid July to late September, highest count: 65 on 8/7/85.

Buff-breasted Sandpiper: occasional from mid August to mid September; one October 14 record, highest count: 3 on 8/20/83.

Short-billed Dowitcher: uncommon in late May, common to very common from early July to late September, highest count: 130 on 8/25/84.

Long-billed Dowitcher: two August reports, several reports from mid September through October; a few of these birds remained for two or more weeks, highest count: 8 on 10/11/85.

Common Snipe: scattered reports of this marshland bird from spring to fall, highest count: 12 on 3/30/87.

American Woodcock: only a few reports.

Wilson's Phalarope: four May reports and three July reports, more numerous between mid August and mid September, highest count: 3 on several dates.

Red-necked Phalarope: several sightings between late August and early October, highest count: 10 on 9/1/81.

Red Phalarope: rare- less than ten sightings, some birds stayed several days, highest count: 2 on 10/31/83.