

Shorebird Fallout at Grand Lake St. Marys

by
David Dister

Grand Lake St. Mary's - Then and Now

Prior to the 1830's, the area known as Grand Lake St. Marys (Mercer/Auglaize Counties) was the largest inland marsh and sedge meadow complex in Ohio. In 1843, during lake construction, a spillway was completed at Coldwater Creek. In 1845, this tremendous wetland was dammed and permanently inundated, creating a reliable source of water for the Miami-Erie Canal, as well as for local and industrial use. After the flood of 1913, a new spillway was constructed in 1914 at Beaver Creek. At more than 14,000 acres and with an average depth of 5-10 feet, the state's largest inland lake is more suited to recreation than for wildlife and birding opportunities. Warm and silt-laden waters developed with the disappearance of standing timber and mosses had reduced wave action. The Mercer Waterfowl Management Area in the southwest corner does provide a staging area for Canada Goose and supports a large Great Blue Heron rookery. Nonetheless, there is virtually no shorebird habitat, except for the usually disturbed small public beach at the State Park along the lake's northeast shoreline. In a fortuitous twist of engineering, the new concrete spillway at the lake's western end may provide critical habitat for the more coastal-oriented shorebirds during migration. This became dramatically clear on the late afternoon of 18 May 1997.

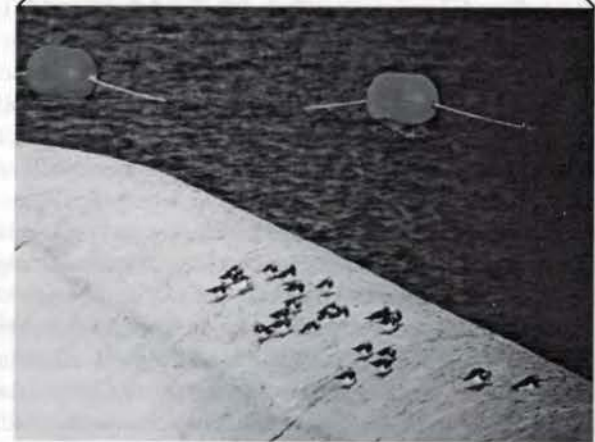
May 1997 Occurrence

For many months, the west perimeter road (West Bank Road) around Grand Lake St. Marys had been blocked for construction activity where the lake empties into Beaver Creek. It became evident that a new 500 foot long spillway had been built and was just a few weeks away from an official state dedication 1 June 1997. As I approached the horseshoe-shaped structure, it was obvious that a small flock of shorebirds was resting on the southern lip the spillway, which was 12 to 18 inches above the current lake level. They were Ruddy Turnstones, and more than just a few, about two dozen. A closer view into the spillway, some 19 feet below lake level, revealed several groups along with scattered individuals everywhere in the shallows waters and dry edges. This was suddenly a seasonal 'best day', and a good chance for a local high count of Ruddy Turnstones. As these shorebirds were constantly moving, it took about 20 minutes before I was satisfied with a total of 56 Ruddy Turnstones, 1 Dunlin, and 1 Sanderling. Perhaps another 20 minutes passed when I noticed a tight flock of small shorebirds circling way out over the northwest end of the lake, presumably looking for suitable shallow water habitat. The flock soon flew out of sight, however, after another 15 minutes, the mystery flock suddenly flew



The new spillway at
Grand Lake St. Mary's
May 1997

... and some
Ruddy
Turnstones



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Interpretation cont.

† = substantiating details provided.

Overflight : a biological phenomenon whereby a bird overflies, in time and space, its anticipated arrival by fully one migration wave. Spring migration waves are closely associated with weather fronts. Spring frontal passage through Ohio averages 6 days, therefore the occurrence of one or two birds 8 days, in time and space, ahead of the general arrival for the species, provided overflight conditions exist, is conservatively given as an overflight. In the example of Barn Swallow, there are 5 temporal days, and 3 spatial days for a total of 8 between the appearance of an individual on strong SW'ly winds in C Ohio, and the apparent arrival of the species in the SW. There is a minimum 3 day difference in average migration dates between southern and C Ohio; again conservative.

down to join the other shorebirds in the spillway basin. Wow! Many more turnstones, as well as Sanderlings. A reassessment of the numbers of all three species brought the final count to 82 Ruddy Turnstones, 25 Sanderlings, and 4 Dunlin. This assemblage might be expected along Lake Erie, but not in west-central Ohio!

Status in Ohio

The Sanderling is one of the more conspicuous shorebirds along the Atlantic and Gulf coasts during migration and winter. This energetic species forages for invertebrates such as crustaceans, mollusks, worms, and insects along breaking waves coastally, and on mudflats and sandy shores inland. The Ruddy Turnstone forages for similar prey along beaches, breakwaters, and mudflats. The turnstone breeding range overlaps that of the Sanderling in the high latitude tundra, while wintering along Pacific, Atlantic, and Gulf coasts south to Argentina and Chile.

In Ohio, the largest spring movements of Ruddy Turnstone occur between 20 May and 5 June (Peterjohn 1989), being "accidental to locally rare migrants through the northern and glaciated central" counties. Most inland sightings are of 1 to 10 birds, while and inland maximum of 125 were observed in Wayne Co. 17 May 1978.

The largest spring movement of Sanderlings takes place during the last half of May, wherein "they are considered accidental to casual migrants in groups of 3 or fewer" and along Lake Erie "1 to 6 daily" can be expected. There is an obscure report of 62 Sanderlings seen at Firestone Conservation Reservoir in Summit Co. 2 June 1966 [J. Laughlin, *Cleveland Bird Calendar* 62 (3): 28]. In checking the *Birds of the Lake St. Marys Area* (1970), the Sanderling is considered an uncommon migrant with spring occurrences 8-30 May, although none are annotated with maximum numbers. The Ruddy Turnstone is considered fairly common as a migrant and uncommon as a summer visitor from 10 May, but again maximum numbers are not given. Both species are given as very rare spring transients at Buckeye Lake by Trautman (*Birds of Buckeye Lake*, 1940). During his survey period of 1921 to 1934, there was only a single Sanderling, and the spring maximum for Ruddy Turnstone was three.

Conclusions

The new spillway at Grand Lake St. Mary's is definitely worth checking for those already birding the vicinity. Given the right conditions, other unusual shorebird concentrations are possible, as well as rare gulls and terns on the lip of the spillway. The 1997 Ruddy Turnstone flock becomes the 2nd largest inland concentration in spring for Ohio. The Sanderling flock reported here becomes the second largest spring concentration noted in the interior of Ohio.

Notes on Cleveland's spring jaegers

by

Kevin Metcalf

In the spring 1997, birders had the opportunity to spend time with a species that usually puts in only a fleeting appearance in Ohio. Five Pomarine Jaegers lingered near the mouth of the Cuyahoga River from 12 April into May. Even the most experienced lake watchers found much to learn from these five birds as they sat in the water, chased gulls, and flew over observer's heads.

The five birds shared many characteristics. All had the Pomarine "double flash" created by whitish bases to the primaries and primary coverts on the underwing, all were about the same size, roughly the size of a Ring-billed Gull, and all had short, blunt-tipped central tail feathers. After spending many hours with these birds, I learned that, when faced with a jaeger to identify, look first to the underwing pattern, look next for a nearby gull to confirm the relative size, and hope the bird comes close enough to see the tail projection. Overall shape and jizz is also useful as one gains experience.

On the Great Lakes, jaegers are usually seen in autumn, and are typically juvenile birds. The Cleveland jaegers were apparently in first-spring plumage. They differed from fall juveniles in that they had whitish, barred uppertail coverts. Some field guides state that, if the jaeger in question has tail coverts paler than the nape, it is probably a Pomarine, while tail coverts darker than the nape indicate a Parasitic. This is in reference to fall juveniles. The word of caution here is that in spring plumage, both species will have paler uppertail coverts, so the field mark is not valid beyond the first fall birds, if it is valid at all.

Although these jaegers shared many traits, they also showed remarkable variation in color. Eventually, I came to know them as individuals and tracked them by name. Two of the birds were dark morphs, two were intermediate, and one was very pale. Below are brief descriptions of each.

"Blondie" - Blondie was the palest of the group, having an evenly pale beige head. The lower neck and chest had indistinct barring. The back was dark brown with tan feather edges. The undertail coverts were whitish with blackish barring. The wing coverts were dark brown and tan edged.

"Dark morph 1" - The two dark morphs were distinct, being a dark chocolate brown overall. This bird had pale, brown edging to the back feathers, which the other dark morph lacked. The upperwing coverts did not show the obvious pale edging seen on the paler birds. The folded primaries were blackish, showing no pale edge to the tips. Dark morph 1 differed from the other dark morph bird in that the dark barring on the undertail was not as broad, being about the same width as the pale barring.