

## Further Afield by Rob Harlan

For me, the seasons are defined thusly: Warblerless Season (November through March); Spring Warbler Season (April & May); Nesting Warbler Season (June); Shorebird Season (July & August); Fall Warbler Season (September); and Sparrow Season (October). From the above grand scheme of things, you may have surmised that I hold warblers in high regard, and you would be correct. But also note that shorebirds are awarded two months unto themselves, and for good reason. Warblers and shorebirds have that certain something—personality and pizzazz—and they have it in spades.

Don't get me wrong, I like swallows and cuckoos, grouse and grebes just fine, but I must confess that any extended period with these other groups leaves me glassy-eyed. "Rob—did you get the rough-winged in with that group of immature tree swallows over the mudflat? It's pretty late, actually." "Sure thing," I might say casually, as I mentally note the yellowthroat "checking" away in the cattails, or the Baird's sandpiper "kreeeping" overhead. "Did you get that Baird's?" would probably be my next response, only to be rebuffed by "Uh, no, I was scoping that young eagle in the old dead cottonwood over there—looks like a fourth-year bird, I'd guess." And so it would go: to each his own.

While warblers understandably catch the fancy of most any birder (spring warblers, at least), shorebirds just haven't attracted as big a fan club as yet. And this is a shame. They are imbued with a fascinating energy, and their variety in Ohio is even greater than that of the warblers. But where spring warblers almost scream out their presence with song and a riot of color, shorebirds are content with their own sense of subtlety. No neon-orange throats or "Beee-bzz-bzz-bzz's" here. What shorebirds may lack in plumage or song they make up for in energy and charisma, as anyone who has had the opportunity to spend some time with them can attest. Sure, they can be a challenge to identify, but the bigger challenge often seems to revolve around a much more basic issue—finding them in the first place.

While it is true that ideal habitat varies from species to species—a long-billed dowitcher might turn up its nares at the grassy edge favored by a buff-breasted sandpiper, and a least sandpiper would probably not swim through greater yellowlegs habitat—the bottom line is that the habitats preferred by shorebirds, are, in general, a scarce commodity. And if their habitat is scarce, then our opportunity to study and appreciate shorebirds is equally scarce. But I suppose this is too obvious to mention.

The sad part is, shorebirds don't ask for much—only a nice, juicy lakefront mudflat here and there, a drawn-down impoundment's edge, or a flooded field if all else fails. But when they do ask, they ask very quietly, and with no big-money special interest group trumpeting their cause. Even so, they still ask. And if we don't answer with at least some favorable habitat every year, they may simply pass us by, for good. I miss them already.

## Accidental Habitats, Benign Neglect: Shorebirds in Ohio by Bill Whan

Most of the subtle beauties of shorebirds are reserved for the connoisseur with a spotting-scope. Other people, if they notice them at all, tend to be aware only of drab brownish birds feeding far off on a malodorous mudflat, or fleeing before them on a beach. Shorebirds' economic value seems less than obvious, too; only snipes and woodcocks remain game in Ohio, and we haven't worked out a way to assess the value of animals we can't take home with us. Finally, only four of their species regularly nest in the state, reducing still more our sense of ownership of these mysterious wanderers. Wild, indifferent, and remote, animals without easy eye-appeal or commodity value, shorebirds are likely to be ignored as long as our conservation values are based upon popularity rather than a commitment to protect the full spectrum of native wildlife.

Our official state list of birds features forty-seven species of shorebirds, forty-one of warblers, and forty of waterfowl among the most numerous comparable species groups, making shorebirds the most diverse of Ohio's avifauna. Ohio, moreover, provides the largest expanse of potential stopover habitat in the eastern US between the Atlantic coast and the breeding ranges of most of these migrants. Hundreds of years ago the shore of Lake Erie, and to a lesser extent the wet prairies to the south, must have teemed with migrant shorebirds every spring and fall. That this no longer happens seems almost entirely the result of human ignorance in some cases, and human insouciance in the rest.

Readers of *The Ohio Cardinal* do not need a lengthy recitation of the plight of shorebirds—their numbers declining or still not recovered from market gunning of a century ago, their long migrations and precise habitat requirements along the way, and the widening gaps in the ancestral chain of foraging areas along their paths to and from the breeding grounds. What should be more widely known is how many shorebirds are now compelled to overfly Ohio without stopping, and why.

Ohio's great wetlands are nearly gone, the prairies mostly paved or plowed. As sad as the loss of these wetlands is, the loss of prime shorebird habitat within them—shallow sheets of water, mudflats, and contiguous dryer open ground, all rich in aquatic invertebrate food sources—is far more grievous. Private landowners too often regard this habitat as barren, unappealing, and unprofitable wasteland, begging for obliteration. In the primeval haunts of migrant shorebirds—in the Pickaway Plains, near Killdeer Plains WA, or in innumerable places along the western basin of Lake Erie—land converted to crops can still show its origins. If drainage tiles are broken up, or after a heavy rain, the land will reveal what natural forces destine it to be, and shorebirds will appear from nowhere to feed in sky-ponds in the vestiges of otherwise-invisible primeval contours. A few more intact shorebird havens in the hands of private owners have been suffered to remain—most often in the name of duck-hunting—but for the most part it is on public land that the hope for substantial shorebird habitat remains.

Here, at least in an earlier era, scientific principles of biodiversity mattered less than the tender mercies of the marketplace, and land managers were constrained by a system in which the husbandry of game species alone supplied the life-blood of their agencies. Non-game shorebirds were acknowledged only by ritual repetitions of the old canard that management for waterfowl automatically manages for shorebirds, a