

Spring Shorebird Survey Results

We are grateful to the Black Swamp Bird Observatory (BSBO) for a compilation of their shorebird survey results for the spring of 1999, results that BSBO customarily publishes, along with surveys of songbirds and raptors, in its annual report each April.

We offer a word on the methodology of this survey. These surveys are designed to study the timing of shorebird migrations and the birds' use of available habitat, as well as to get a sense of their overall abundance regionally. At each survey visit to an area, all shorebirds present are surveyed as to species and numbers, as are certain variables of the habitat present. No attempt is made—because without capturing and marking each bird no reliable attempt could be made—to avoid counting the same bird (or birds) on more than one occasion. Thus, while the method used produces results comparable from year to year within the aims of the study, it is inevitable that nearly all its counts accumulated over time—by species, location, or season—will be higher than the actual number of birds involved. In this system, if a thousand birds stayed put during three visits to an area, or moved within surveyed areas during this period, the survey would show a count of three thousand of that species, or even more.

In all, 257 visits were made, with a total of more than 256 hours of observation, to promising shorebird areas near the western basin of Lake Erie between Old Woman Creek in Ohio's Erie County to Point Mouillee in Monroe County in Michigan. Visits were made between 11 March and 20 June, with those between 1 April and 31 May accumulating over 99% of the birds found. This spring the survey areas most productive of shorebirds were flooded fields near Park Colony Road in Lucas County, Magee Marsh Wildlife Area, and the Winous Point Shooting Club on western Sandusky Bay.

Readers may wish to test their memories of the past spring season, and their knowledge of Ohio birds, by guessing, before looking at the figures below, which were this spring's three most numerous shorebird species in the western Lake Erie marshes.

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| Black-bellied Plover—9 | Sanderling—0 |
| American Golden-Plover—4952 (all 21 Apr-10 May) | Semipalmated Sandpiper—364 (321 from 21-31 May) |
| Snowy Plover—0 | Western Sandpiper—0 |
| Semipalmated Plover—253 (all in May) | Least Sandpiper—176 (all 21 Apr-31 May) |
| Piping Plover—0 | White-rumped Sandpiper—6 |
| Killdeer—795 | Baird's Sandpiper—0 |
| Black-necked Stilt—0 | Pectoral Sandpiper—2092 (nearly 70% 1-10 Apr) |
| American Avocet—0 | Dunlin—9732 (nearly all 21 Apr-31 May) |
| Greater Yellowlegs—382 | Curlew Sandpiper—0 |
| Lesser Yellowlegs—462 | Stilt Sandpiper—1 |
| Solitary Sandpiper—26 (all 1-20 May) | Buff-breasted Sandpiper—0 |
| Willet—3 | Ruff—0 |
| Spotted Sandpiper—119 | Short-billed Dowitcher—71 |
| Upland Sandpiper—0 | Long-billed Dowitcher—0 |
| Whimbrel—0 | Dowitcher sp.—3 |
| Long-billed Curlew—0 | Common Snipe—430 (nearly all in Apr) |
| Hudsonian Godwit—0 | American Woodcock—0 |
| Marbled Godwit—1 | Wilson's Phalarope—1 |
| Ruddy Turnstone—208 | Red-necked Phalarope—1 |
| Red Knot—83 (75 from 21-30 Apr) | Red Phalarope—0 |

(Details on this and other BSBO surveys are available from Black Swamp Bird Observatory, P.O. Box 228, Oak Harbor, OH 43449).

16,776 birds, or 83% of the total, involved only three species. One of them, dunlin, was at the lowest count of the six springs surveyed; in previous years, dunnings averaged over 75% of the total shorebird count, and as many as 23,953 birds in 1995. American golden-plover numbers, on the other hand, had never risen above 100 birds until 1998, when 221 birds were counted. The number of pectoral sandpipers this past spring was close to 90% of its six-year average. To some extent a dry spring this year may have favored the more facultative migrants, which are just as happy with fields as mudflats. Water levels in the many impoundments in the study area are less subject to vagaries of the weather than to management decisions, it is true, but this spring even fewer than usual seemed managed in ways beneficial to migrant shorebirds than in 1998.

Black-bellied plovers had their lowest count yet—there were 226 in 1998—as did lesser yellowlegs, whose count was 1498 last year. Spring knots are always scarce—in four of six years, none appeared in BSBO surveys—and the species is in decline regionally, so this spring's numbers are likely anomalous. More meaningful figures for all our shorebird species will emerge over time in this ongoing study, and explanations for them will become more meaningful even more slowly, but even now those who control so many of the habitats available to migrant shorebirds in the region are aware of these surveys and their results. Those who care about these birds can contribute their time and expertise by volunteering their help to these surveys. *Bill Whan*



Ruddy Turnstone - Crane Creek SP, Lucas Co., May 1998. Photo by Bob Royse.