

Further Afield

by Rob Harlan

Think of it as a long road trip. And I mean a *looooooong* road trip—exactly a hundred *years* from start to finish. None of us was along for the entire ride, but we all rode shotgun long enough to get a good impression of where we had been and where we were headed. And now that we've finally made it to the year 2000, I think we've all earned the right to pull over into a nice shady roadside rest to reflect on the past hundred years, the century from 1900 to 1999, and the good birds that have graced our state during this tumultuous era.

But when I say good birds, I do our birding history an injustice. I should say GREAT birds, astounding, incomprehensible, cosmic mind-numbing birds—seemingly impossible, but here nonetheless. The time has come to break down this past century decade by decade, plucking out our ten “best” birds, one per decade, to finally decide which was the greatest of the great, the—drum-roll, please—Bird of the Century.

But how to accomplish this laborious and possibly presumptuous mission? Surely, we each have our own “best” birds, quality experiences all. And we've all heard of other sightings made by other birders over the years, sightings that just couldn't be true, but were. How to sort it all out? How to be fair to those who discovered a rarity early in the century, but have no contemporaries to vouch for them today? How to define what makes a bird *truly* rare? How to gauge a single-observer record versus a bird verified by many? With such a daunting task at hand, I concluded that this project should be of an objective rather than a subjective nature, and devised the following ranking formula. *Beware: at this point, you may wish to skip ahead to the first decade, as the following two paragraphs contain material that some may find overly technical and clunky. Parental guidance is strongly suggested.*

First of all, and importantly, only birds with three or fewer accepted Ohio records (as determined by the Ohio Bird Records Committee, or OBRC) during the years 1900 to 1999 were considered eligible. I then developed four scales for ranking sightings, scores for which, when added together, would give each bird a total score objectively comparable to those of others. The bird with the highest total score wins, either in determining the bird of each decade, or—drum-roll, again—the Bird of the Century. Simple enough.

The **first ranking** is based on the total number of accepted Ohio records since 1900. A sighting is awarded 3 points if it represents our only state record, 2 points for being one of two state records, and 1 point for being one of three or more state records. The **second ranking** is based on a touchy, yet scientifically-grounded basis. How sure can we be that the bird was correctly identified? We can be surest if we have a specimen to examine and re-examine, if need be. So, according to OBRC guidelines, I awarded 3 points to a record if the bird in question exists as a museum specimen, 2 points if the identification can be verified using an existing diagnostic photograph, and 1 point if only written details are available. If I were a rarity, I'd probably opt for the 2 points rather than the 3, but we cannot deny that our documentation techniques have changed over the years. The **third ranking** is based on how widely viewed the bird was, with the reasoning that a single observer is more likely to be in error than an entire group. This ranking also takes into account our communal sharing of a bird re-

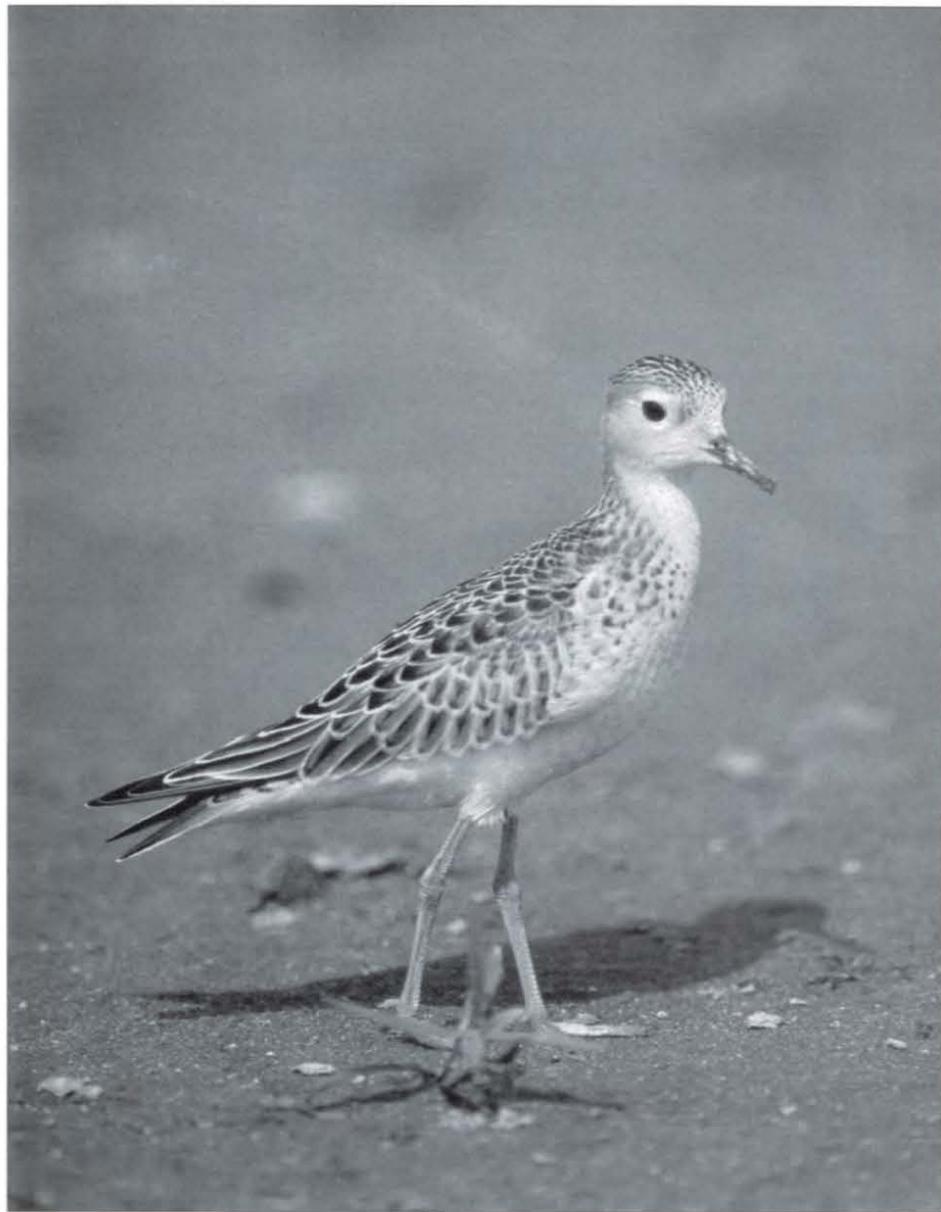
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Buff-breasted Sandpipers made an excellent showing in Ohio this season. This one entertained numerous observers at Buck Creek State Park, Clark Co., from 24 August to 4 September 1999. Photo by Bob Royse (29 August 1999).



Although more at home chasing tourist-thrown bread pieces on a warm, sandy beach, this juvenile Laughing Gull was photographed while lounging on the mudflat at Conneaut Harbor, Ashtabula Co., on 13 August 1999. Photo by Gary Meszaros.



Another one of this season's Buff-breasted Sandpipers. This individual was photographed at Conneaut Harbor, Ashtabula Co., on 28 August 1999. Photo by Gary Meszaros.



The mudflat at Conneaut Harbor, Ashtabula Co., was a favored location for photographer Gary Meszaros this season. It was also favored by the birds, as evidenced by this Merlin which was photographed by Meszaros on 1 October 1999.

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cord: if many are able to share the experience, the experience becomes richer. And so I awarded 1 point to a bird if seen alive in and in the wild by only one observer, 2 points to a bird seen only by the original group of observers, and 3 points to a bird that was widely viewed, that is, the original observer(s) were able to contact other birders who were subsequently able to observe it as well, preferably (but not necessarily) over a period of days. The **fourth ranking** is based on rarity on a larger scale. A bird might be rare in Ohio, but common a half-day's drive away. Accordingly, I chose to use the rarity scale adopted by the American Birding Association in their *ABA Checklist: Birds of the Continental United States and Canada* (1990). Their 6-point scale is devised thus: 6 points to an extinct species; 5 points to a species strictly accidental in the ABA Area; 4 points to species that occur more or less regularly in the Area, though there is no place where they can be expected to occur; 3 points to species that occur annually in the Area but are extremely local, difficult to see, or occur only for very short time periods; and 2 points and 1 point to species which occur routinely and are easily found in the Area, with 2 points awarded to those species which are a bit more difficult to find than "one-pointers." So, with all the technical mumbo-jumbo out of the way, I invite you to join me in a trip further afield, as we rediscover the best birds of the century just completed.

1900-1909

The year is 1900. According to Rand McNally, the world's population stands at 1.6 billion persons. William McKinley is our 25th President. The Union is 45 states strong. The largest cities in the US are New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, St. Louis, and Boston. Los Angeles is a distant 27th. In 1903, Lynds Jones published "The Birds of Ohio, a Revised Catalog," enumerating the roughly three hundred species identified in Ohio at the time; still waiting to be confirmed were such species as brant, surf scoter, red phalarope, 13 of our 19 gulls, and blue grosbeak. And, on 17 December 1903, the Wright brothers flew over Kitty Hawk, NC. But while one era of flight was just beginning, another came to an end on 24 March 1900. On this day a solitary passenger pigeon was shot by a small boy near Sargents in Pike County. This specimen, OSUM #2540, apparently represents the last authentic passenger pigeon taken in the wild anywhere on earth. We can only dream of the awe-inspiring colossal flights said to have been undertaken by this species across our area: here's a bird that no one is going to add to a life list any time soon. This then becomes the bird of the 1900-1909 decade, with a total score of 11 points (1 point for being one of three or fewer total state records, 3 points for being a museum specimen, 1 point for being a single-observer record, and 6 points on the ABA rarity code scale.

1910-1919

The year is 1910. William Howard Taft is our 27th President. Over 1500 lives are lost when the Titanic goes down in the north Atlantic on 15 April 1912. The assassination of Austria's Archduke Ferdinand on 28 June 1914 sets the stage for World War I. A young Babe Ruth hits the first of his 714 home runs on 16 May 1915. The US Army enters Mexico in 1916 in retaliation for attacks attributed to Mexican revolutionary

Pancho Villa. Could Pancho Villa somehow be indirectly related to Ohio's bird of this decade? Probably not, but it makes for interesting (if convoluted) conjecture. As detailed in my most recent "Further Afield" column (*The Ohio Cardinal* 22(4):122-124), Ohio's only Harris's hawk record comes from this decade, namely late December 1917. In brief, Thomas M. Earl, a Columbus taxidermist, received a parcel-post package from J.H. McKinley of Harrisburg, Ohio, on December 29. Although McKinley often sent taxidermy business Earl's way, the Harris's hawk was sent to Earl without written comment, which was uncustomary for McKinley. Due to these peculiar circumstances, Earl reflected, "I could not bring myself to think that [the hawk] had not been shipped in from the Texan border by a soldier friend perhaps" of McKinley (our Pancho Villa connection?). Several weeks later, however, Earl finally spoke with McKinley, who assured him that the hawk had instead been shot by a Harrisburg, Ohio farmer about 24 December, when the farmer caught this bird and another Harris's harassing his poultry. And so this specimen has ever since been an accepted Ohio record on the basis of the unnamed farmer's word. Make no mistake, this representative of the American desert southwest could certainly occur naturally in Ohio, and an article could likely be written persuasively advancing this premise. Even so, it still sounds funny (HAHA) to me. But back to our rankings: this Harris's hawk is awarded a total score of 8 points (3 for being our only state record, 3 for being preserved as a specimen, 1 for being a single-observer record, and 1 according to the ABA rarity code.

1920-1929

The year is 1920. Woodrow Wilson is our 28th President. The Union stands at 48 states strong. The 19th Amendment to the Constitution is ratified 26 August 1920, giving women the right to vote. In 1923, the New York Yankees win the first of their 25 World Series championships. Charles Lindbergh is the first to fly solo non-stop across the Atlantic on 20-21 May 1927. The US stock market crashes 29 October 1929. Just over five months earlier, Ohio's Leach's storm-petrel crash occurred. On 16 May 1929, a schoolboy picked up a dead bird on a Dayton city street and presented it to his teacher, who subsequently passed it to well-known Dayton naturalist Ben Blincoe. Blincoe identified the bird as a Leach's storm-petrel, and preserved the specimen for posterity. Although the bird's stomach was empty, it was not emaciated. Instead, Blincoe speculated that a bruise on the skull indicated the bird had been killed by crashing into an object while in flight. How this pelagic denizen of our Atlantic and Pacific coasts made it to Ohio is anyone's guess, and we have not had another of its kind since, although other records from New York, Vermont, and southern Ontario are at least in our general vicinity. So, according to our ranking system, this bird gets a total score of 9 points (3 for being out only state record, 3 for being preserved as a specimen, 1 for being a single-observer record, and 2 according to the ABA's rarity code).

1930-1939

The year is 1930. Herbert Hoover is our 31st President, with Franklin Delano Roosevelt soon to follow. The Great Depression is just beginning to make itself felt. Prohibition is repealed on 5 December 1933, providing some sort of relief for many. Jesse Owens wins four gold medals at the 1936 Olympics in Berlin. Germany invades Po-

*land in 1939. With FDR's New Deal in full swing, and food presumably scarce, perhaps we can forgive Cleveland sportsman George F. Dixon for eating one of Ohio's rarest birds ever. While woodcock-hunting along the wooded banks of a stream in Newbury Township in Geauga County on 6 November 1935, Dixon took a number of familiar American woodcocks, plus another very unfamiliar one. Dixon noted the latter bird was much larger and heavier, weighing 10 ounces before being dressed, versus 5-7 ounces for a typical American woodcock. At this point John W. Aldrich of the Cleveland Museum of Natural History became aware of Dixon's tale, and visited the hunter, who still had the carcass of the mystery bird, but by then had dressed and prepared it for cooking. At first examination Aldrich was impressed by the pale color of the flesh of the larger bird when compared to American woodcocks dressed in a similar way. After Dixon had consumed the rest of the bird, Aldrich was able to acquire its skeleton, minus the head, wings, and feet, for the Cleveland Museum. Enough bones remained "to show considerable difference in size from a normal American Woodcock skeleton." Enough difference, in fact, to allow both Aldrich and famed ornithologist Harry C. Oberholser to identify the bird as a Eurasian woodcock, our only state record. According to the *ABA Checklist*, this bird is a migratory species of Eurasian regions that was "formerly a casual visitor to eastern North America, with records from Newfoundland, Quebec, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Virginia, Ohio, and Alabama, mostly in the 19th century. One 20th century record: one [specimen] e. [of] Cleveland, OH, 6 November 1935." A rare bird certainly, but by the time Mr. Dixon had finished preparing it, we might say it was also well-done. This bird earns one of our highest rankings, with a total score of 12 points (3 for being our only state record, 3 for being preserved as a museum specimen [but more on this later], 1 for being a single-observer record, and 5 according to the ABA rarity code.*

1940-1949

The year is 1940. FDR is still our 32nd President. Japan attacks Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941. Allied forces invade Normandy on 6 June 1944. The US drops an atomic bomb on Hiroshima on 6 August 1945. Jackie Robinson breaks Major League Baseball's color barrier on 11 April 1947. In 1948 the north-south division of occupied Korea is made permanent due to tensions between the US and the USSR. It is not surprising that this decade offered limited birding opportunities stateside. Accordingly, our lowest-ranked Bird of the Decade comes from this troubled time. This said, I still suspect most of us would be satisfied to discover a great gray owl in Ohio, as Milton B. Trautman did on Starve Island, Ottawa County, on 30 October 1947. As Trautman approached tiny Starve Island in his boat at daybreak, he noticed a group of herring gulls harassing this huge and impressive boreal/montane species as it perched on a tree limb near the trunk. Although Trautman probably would have preferred to turn this bird into a specimen, he did not, but was nonetheless able to observe it carefully and describe all the salient field marks for this virtually unmistakable species. This observation thus earns a total score of 7 points (2 points for being one of two accepted Ohio records, 1 for being a sight record only, 1 for being a single-observer record, and 3 according to the ABA rarity code).

This concludes the first half of the century. The second half (and our winner) will follow in the next issue. Heck, you've already waited a hundred years...

Some Additional Thoughts on Dowitchers

by Jon L. Dunn

The two species of dowitchers have long been considered among the most difficult of our shorebirds to distinguish. Fortunately, much has been written over the last couple of decades that has led to major breakthroughs in making accurate identifications, which have in turn led to further elucidations of their complex distribution patterns. A seminal paper by Claudia Wilds and Mike Newlon (1983) was the first to set out in detail the field characters of the dowitchers, and it remains the single most important reference. Other important sources containing extensive identification information include Paulson (1993), Jaramillo *et al.* (1991), and Hayman *et al.* (1986). It is not the intention of this paper to rehash all the information in the above papers or in other uncited sources, but to focus instead on some additional aspects, especially concerning distribution and the timing of molt, that have not yet been focused on in the literature.

Both dowitcher species—short-billed dowitcher (*Limnodromus griseus*) and long-billed dowitcher (*Limnodromus scolopaceus*)—are regular visitors to Ohio, and their status is detailed by Peterjohn (1989). Briefly, in spring long-billed is rare, and occurs on average earlier than short-billed. Personally, I have only seen three spring long-bills in the Midwest, two in Ohio—a basic-plumaged bird in March and an alternate-plumaged bird at the end of the second week of May—plus another mid-May bird near Point Pelee. Short-bills usually arrive in Ohio in early May and can be fairly common to abundant around Lake Erie; they are much scarcer well inland (Peterjohn 1989). The great majority of sightings involve the more colorful interior race *L. g. hendersoni*, but I have seen more than a handful of birds showing characters of the nominate, more easterly race *L. g. griseus*, in the western basin of northwest Ohio, with additional birds in southeastern Michigan (Erie Marsh) and in the Point Pelee area. These sightings have been from late May, particularly after the 20th of the month.

In fall, adult short-bills arrive here by early July, often in force, while the first trickle of adult long-bills begins a couple of weeks later. Adult short-bills pass through Ohio primarily during July, with smaller numbers until about the middle of August. Adult long-bills build in number through the summer and reach maximum numbers during August and early September. Juvenile short-bills arrive by the first week of August, whereas juvenile long-bills are exceptional even by the end of the month. I have personally seen only three juvenile longbills in the last week of August south of Canada, only one of which was from eastern North America (in Ohio). They typically don't arrive until mid- or even late September, and peak during October. They are routinely found into November. The last juvenile short-bills depart during early October.

One under-appreciated fact about long-bills is that the adults in fall migrate to staging areas and then undergo a complete molt before continuing their migration. These birds will remain for a month or more, and the flocks at these locations number into the hundreds or even the thousands, especially at favored locations in western North America. In eastern North America the known staging areas are few. One location is at Bombay Hook National Wildlife Refuge in Delaware. Another is, or at least used to be, the Metzger Marsh/Ottawa National Wildlife Refuge area in the western basin of Lake Erie in northwest Ohio. I have seen nearly 500 adult long-bills there during August on several occasions in the early 1990s. It is, or was, the only known

staging area I know of for molting adult long-bills in the entire Midwest. As Ohio birders well know, Metzger Marsh has gone from one of the premier shorebird stopping points in the Midwest to a marsh choked with introduced *Phragmites* and purple loosestrife, along with saplings of native trees, with few if any shorebirds. Can anyone rationally argue that the four million-dollar scheme to dike off Metzger Marsh has been anything other than an environmental disaster?

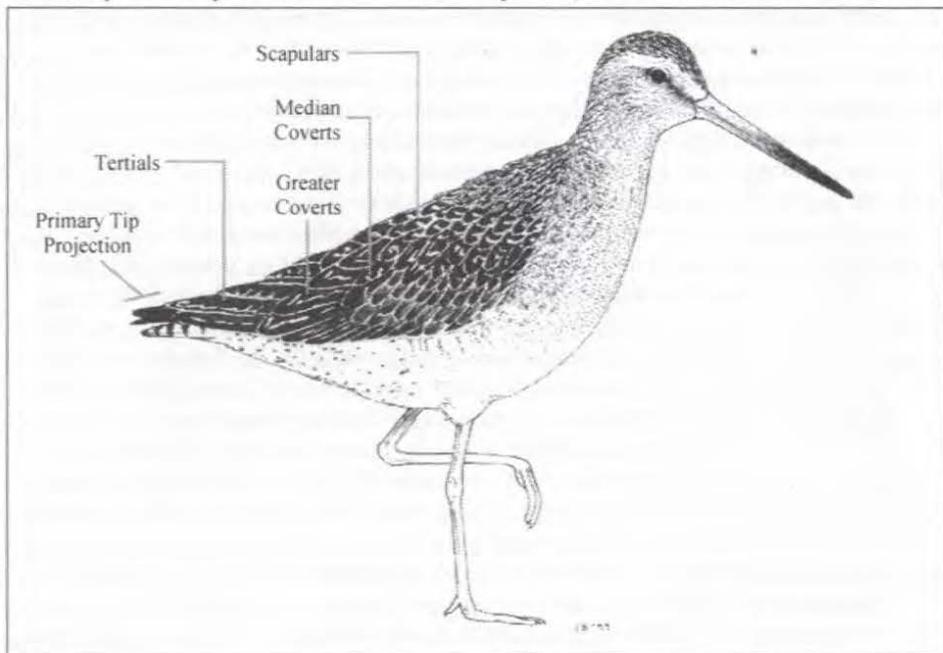
I offer a few more words on Metzger Marsh. In addition to hosting thousands of shorebirds during migration, Metzger apparently provided a thriving environment for thousands of native mussels, all of which were killed with the construction of the dike. Metzger Marsh was one of their few refugia on Lake Erie from zebra mussels, which kill these native bivalves. Apparently there was no proper environmental assessment performed before the dike was built, and the native mussels were found after the fact as skeletal remains. This entire sorry story should cause all to question the wisdom of the duck lobby in general, which seems all too often to push its own pet projects without assessing their overall impact on the environment. Probably the best course now would be to remove the entire stone dike, but that would require admitting the project was a mistake in the first place, and how often does this happen?

Returning to the fall molt of long-billed dowitchers, I will add that on a trip to the northern Great Plains (central and western North Dakota, northeastern Montana, southeastern Saskatchewan and southwestern Manitoba) with Sue Tackett in late August of 1996, the only location where we had any long-bills was Medicine Lake National Wildlife Refuge in northeastern Montana. There on 19 August we counted 300 birds, most of which were in extensive molt, including missing chunks of flight feathers on the wing. At that date we were simply too late for adult longbills just passing through on the first leg of their migration, and a few weeks too early for the first juvenile long-bills. We certainly did see thousands of migratory shorebirds at other locations on our trip. The factors that influence adult long-bills to pick a location and stay to molt are not yet detailed in the literature, but clearly these birds are very picky. I'll offer the thought that the locations I know of involve premier shorebird locations with extensive areas of shallow water, such as at playas, for feeding. Perhaps more transitory habitats in other locations are avoided as birds don't want to be caught in disappearing—i.e., evaporating—habitat during a time when they have lost many of their flight feathers.

Adult short-bills, by contrast, do not molt during their southward flight, and probably don't initiate molt until they reach their wintering grounds. The fall migrants seen in July and August are in alternate (breeding) plumage, though they appear more worn and faded from May on, especially the August adults. Therefore, adult dowitchers clearly in molt seen in the Midwest are almost certainly long-bills. I should add, though, that I've seen nearly full breeding-plumaged long-bills as late as mid-September, long after the last adult short-bills have passed through. Neither dowitcher species molts its flight feathers during the first year of life, but juveniles will molt body feathers, including mantle, scapular, and tertial feathers. Reflecting the pattern of adults, juvenile short-bills migrate through the Midwest in full juvenal plumage and even the latest migrants in early October haven't yet molted. Juvenile long-bills can arrive in full juvenal plumage, but careful checking will often reveal first-basic feathering, especially on the mantle and scapular regions. This patchy appearance is again a great character in separating juvenile long-billed from juvenile short-billed.

Clearly, correctly aging dowitchers in fall is a key in making a correct identifica-

tion. The various dowitcher plumages as well as their distinguishing characters are shown well by Jonathon Alderfer in the third edition of the National Geographic guide (National Geographic Society 1999). Without detailing all the differences, I would call attention to two features. First, on fresh alternate adults (i.e., in spring), the white-tipped scapulars on long-billed form the single best character on breeding-plumaged birds. Later in summer, when dowitchers' plumage is more worn, this feature is less useful. Secondly, on juveniles of both species the inner greater secondary coverts are extremely useful. They are patterned like the tertials, the tract of feathers that in classic fashion serves to separate the two species (extensive internal markings indicate short-billed), but since they are somewhat broader, the pattern is easier to discern. To find this tract of feathers, look at the group of feathers just up (toward the bill) from the three long narrow tertials. Note that in dowitchers, the projection of the uniformly blackish primaries past the tertials is extremely short, a few millimeters at most.



Juvenile Short-billed Dowitcher
by Jenny Brumfield

A couple of additional comments are in order. First, some short-bills do spend the brief summer period (June) on the wintering grounds, as close to Ohio as the Gulf Coast. These normally involve second calendar-year (i.e., one-year old) birds, normally in complete or nearly complete basic plumage. Long-bills are strictly casual from anywhere in North America south of Canada in June, and those few that are recorded appear to be transients in alternate plumage. When both dowitcher species are present, I have often noted that short-bills tend to stand in shallower water, or even on the shore. If both are on the shore, the longer legs of long-bills might be apparent, but when in the water the legs' length can be hard to assess, as the observer cannot easily discern the water's depth. Finally, I wish to reiterate that other than the "di di da doo" song, heard year-round and extremely similar in both species, the calls of each species

are completely diagnostic. The high-pitched "keek" call of long-billed is certainly distinctive. It is given in a rapid series when the bird is disturbed, as when flushed, and if hundreds are flushed at once the overall effect of these excited calls is impressive. On the whole, long-bills seem to be more talkative than short-bills, frequently calling even while feeding. The much lower "tu-tu-tu" call of short-bills is infrequently given when feeding, and isn't dependably uttered even in flight.

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An autumn shorebird scene at the old Cedar Point causeway showing Marbled Godwit, Hudsonian Godwit, and Semipalmated Sandpipers. Lake Erie is beyond the trees in the background. Artwork by Jenny Brumfield.