Fall Shorebirds: Census Results from BSBO

Good habitats for shorebirds were widespread enough in Ohio this fall, at least in the north, to give us a much better idea of the true number of migrants passing through the state. Birders tend to concentrate on rare species in the field, rather than scrupulously counting and reporting all the commoner ones, so for estimating the real magnitude of the migration systematic censuses are more useful. We are fortunate that the Black Swamp Bird Observatory* censuses shorebirds in the area it covers, and willingly shared with us their results (said to be "probably final") for the fall 1999 season. No active birder will be surprised that the BSBO tallied record numbers; here they are, with this spring's results for comparison.

Species	Spring	Fall	Total
Black-bellied Plover	9	1,009	1,018
American Golden-Plover	4,952	356	5,308
Semipalmated Plover	253	1,038	1,291
Piping Plover	0	1	1
Killdeer	904	18,168	19,072
American Avocet	0	26	26
Greater Yellowlegs	382	1,161	1,543
Lesser Yellowlegs	462	9,604	10,066
Solitary Sandpiper	26	61	87
Willet	3	20	23
Spotted Sandpiper	120	306	426
Whimbrel	0	6	6
Hudsonian Godwit	0	56	56
Marbled Godwit	1	38	39
Ruddy Turnstone	208	6	214
Red Knot	83	9	92
Sanderling	0	367	367
Semipalmated Sandpiper	364	4,974	5,338
Western Sandpiper	0	18	18
Least Sandpiper	176	4,591	4,767
White-rumped Sandpiper	6	44	50
Baird's Sandpiper	0	108	108
"Peep" sp.	0	42	42
Pectoral Sandpiper	2,092	6,465	8,557
Dunlin	9,732	26,456	36,188
Stilt Sandpiper	1	304	305
Buff-breasted Sandpiper	0	25	25
Ruff	0	5	5
Short-billed Dowitcher	71	6,688	6,759
Long-billed Dowitcher	0	591	591
Dowitcher sp.	3	531	534
Common Snipe	430	34	464
American Woodcock	0	6	6
Wilson's Phalarope	1	16	17
Red-necked Phalarope	1	33	34
Red Phalarope	0	1	1
TOTAL	20,280	83,164	103,444

Readers should be aware that the census methods used here require a complete count by species on each visit to a site, and that this can result in multiple counts of an unknown number of individual birds. Without capturing and marking each bird, however, such misrepresentations of the actual number of birds are inevitable.

The fall 1999 census surpassed by well over one-third the previous high number of birds, as well as surpassing by an eighth the previous high number of species, both set in fall of 1994. Shorebirders will remember 1994 as the year in which dike work at Turtle Creek in Magee Marsh WA incidentally created a big mudflat where one had not existed for decades. This year's total of over a hundred thousand shorebirds censused surpasses one of the thresholds set by the Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network for an International Site. Such a designation, if granted, would bring considerable attention to the marshes of western Lake Erie and to local efforts to protect their migratory habitats.

We are aware of no evidence that significantly more shorebirds than usual survived or hatched this year, but it is clear that more normal Lake Erie water levels exposed a lot of mudflat in the censused region. Mudflats also extended farther than usual up drought-diminished creeks and rivers. Birders' traditional belly-aching about the lack of management on behalf of shorebirds in the public wild lands of the region fell silent as larger forces had their way, and shorebirds dropped down out of the sky outside the diked impoundments of Ottawa, Metzger, Toussaint, and Magee. It was as if the Lake had regained its natural edge habitats after decades of being itself a sort of diked impoundment, and life abounded.

That things were returning to normal was also evident in the BSBO findings: for only the second time in seven years the fall shorebird census numbers exceeded those of spring, a seemingly natural result since more species appear in fall (see the Table), and their numbers are considerably augmented by young-of-the-year. This difference has in recent years been masked by high Lake levels, which made mudflat-loving species more reliant upon human-influenced areas. These influences included agricultural fields which in spring have little vegetation to hide flooded areas, and management regimes on public wildlife lands that require draw-downs in spring to encourage summer growth of forage plants, coupled with flooding in the fall to invite waterfowl.

But shorebirds this fall were less confined by these human manipulations, because of the return to normal of Lake Erie levels, a factor thus far beyond human intervention. In August, during the official count at the heavily-managed Magee Marsh WA, a full-day census yielded 114 migrant shorebirds of 10 species; 99 of the total were of only three species. At much smaller areas at Berlin Reservoir, by contrast, a single observer found 219 birds of 19 species in August. On the 17 October census of Magee, 57 migrant shorebirds of only five species were found, but only a mile away birders walked past the usual shorebird-unfriendly impoundments to find, on 3 Oct, 287 birds of no fewer than 18 migrant species on the comparatively unmanaged estuary of Crane Creek in Ottawa NWR. It seems that lessons are here for those willing to look for them. *Bill Whan*

* Black Swamp Bird Observatory, P.O. Box 228, Oak Harbor, OH 43449, tel. (419) 898-4070, is always interested in the help of volunteers confident of their shorebird ID abilities to help with these censuses, as well as assistance with its other projects.