

## THE SOUTHERN DOVEKIE FLIGHT OF 1936

BY ALEXANDER SPRUNT, JR.

DURING the early winter of 1936-37, and apparently mainly in December 1936, there occurred a marked southern movement of Dovekies (*Alle alle*). While not comparable to the great invasion of 1932, it nevertheless assumed considerable proportions, running into "thousands" of birds. Certainly it was considerable enough to have attracted far more attention than it did, but the almost total lack of comment on it may be explained by the fact that a large percentage of the flight passed at sea. However, many birds did appear in Florida and since they occurred at a time when Florida is full of visitors, it seems passing strange that so few saw the invaders. Dovekies in Florida have not yet reached that degree of abundance which would cause one to pass them by as "just another bird on the list" but it would seem that few noted this remarkable flight except the people who could not well help it.

Studying the records which he has been able to gather, the writer has reached the conclusion that the flight followed over the ocean from the region of Cape Hatteras in North Carolina to a little north of Daytona Beach, Florida. Examining a map of the South Atlantic coast, one will note that there is a great bight formed along the Carolina coasts south of Hatteras, curving out again south of Jacksonville, Florida. The birds probably struck south from a departure in North Carolina and made the next landfall in northern Florida. This would account for the complete lack of records from South Carolina and Georgia; but south of Daytona Beach, the coast follows a fairly straight line down to Miami, and all along this route and curving westward into the Keys, the records are very numerous. It would appear then, that after reaching Volusia County, Florida, the flight followed down the east coast where it can be traced with hardly a break along the towns and cities which lie there. Following the curve of the lower peninsula, the birds hugged the land and travelled down the Keys in some numbers at least as far as Windley Key, which lies just to the eastward of the Matecumbes. There is but one record as far as the writer can gather, which bridged the gap between the Upper and Lower Keys, that of a single bird seen at Key West by W. W. Demerritt, Superintendent of the Seventh Lighthouse District with headquarters at Key West.

A glance at the following records will illustrate the above comments. For the North Carolina records, the writer is indebted to Professor H. H. Brimley, Director of the North Carolina State Museum at Raleigh, and Edwin L. Green, Jr., of the National Park Service. The former stated that one Dovekie was received in the flesh at the Marine Biological Laboratory

at Beaufort, and that "several specimens" were observed and reported from Pea Island by George Lay of the U. S. Biological Survey. All these were in December 1936. There do not seem to be any records for the area about Wilmington and Southport but Mr. Green writes:

"On December 3, 1936, a Dovekie was caught on the beach near the Cape Hatteras Lighthouse. The bird was partially covered with oil and could not fly. On December 4, the remains of three more were found between the lighthouse and the Cape point. On December 6, ten were found at the point just outside of the breakers. Daily from then until December 27, several were observed in the surf. Many birds were stranded on the beach and killed by the Herring Gulls. On December 24, at 3 p. m., I counted 75 in a group that was scattered near the point. On December 27, I was in a sailboat all day on Pamlico Sound near Buxton and Avon, North Carolina. The trip covered about thirty-five miles. Three or four birds were close to the boat the entire trip. There must have been several hundred on the Sound at the time. The birds were very abundant at Oregon Inlet on December 29 (this is thirty-five miles north of the Park). They were still in the Inlet on January 4. How long they remained I do not know as I was not able to get back there again. However, two were seen near Cape Hatteras on January 5, 1937." In this connection, it is most interesting that Mr. Green writes me of the recurrence of Dovekies early in the present season. On November 25, 1937, he saw a flock of twelve and on November 26 picked up two male birds near Cape Hatteras Light; both of the latter died a few minutes later. On the next day a bird of the same species was found dead near the same place, as well as five dead ones on November 29.

The Charleston Museum has no record for the South Carolina coast, nor has any field worker whom the writer has interviewed in that State. Ivan R. Tomkins of the U. S. Engineer Corps, stationed in the Savannah River, has no record for the Georgia coast. Should any have occurred in that area, he would have been certain to know of it.

S. A. Grimes, of Jacksonville, Florida, reported a lack of records about the mouth of the St. John's River but as we reach Daytona Beach, the story changes! R. J. Longstreet of that city was more fortunate than the above observers because the birds came ashore in his area. Mr. Longstreet saw birds himself, and gathered the observations of others, combining these into a published statement which appeared in the 'Florida Naturalist' for April 1937, page 66. This is the single instance, as far as the writer knows, of the invasion finding its way into the printed record, other than the writer's note in 'The Auk,' vol. 54, p. 207, which dealt with the lower east coast and the Keys. Mr. Longstreet's article is here quoted in full:

"On December 10th, 1936, I found a living specimen (Dovekie) on the beach near Daytona Beach. I do not know of any other occurrences in the

state until Dec. 24th, when I saw one swimming in the Halifax River. On Christmas Day, I saw five living birds and twenty-four dead ones on a ten mile stretch of beach north of Ponce de Leon Inlet. Mr. W. B. Boardman of Minneapolis, Minn., reported several dead birds on the beach on Dec. 27th, and one living bird found twelve miles north of Daytona Beach [this is the farthest-north record in Florida,—Author]. Mr. W. Williams of New Haven, Conn., reported three Dovekies, two near Titusville on Dec. 24th and one near Melbourne. Miss Clara Bates of Fort Pierce, reported a flock of five flying south on Christmas Day, and several more during the week. Mr. W. W. Demerritt saw a living Dovekie near Key West during this invasion . . . Mr. Homer Townsend of Vero Beach reported four dead and one living Dovekie on Dec. 29th."

It is highly interesting to trace the regular sequence of localities, viz., Daytona Beach—Titusville—Melbourne—Vero Beach—Fort Pierce then in the writer's 'Auk' note, Jupiter Inlet—Miami—Card Sound—Key Largo—Plantation Key. It is worthy of note that at only two spots did the birds come ashore in any numbers on the Florida east coast. George Nelson of the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Cambridge, saw many hundreds at and near Sebastian, which is between Melbourne and Vero and here the birds got as far inland as the flatwoods. The other spot was the area about Jupiter Inlet where Jesse Griffin, of Marco, Florida, saw "thousands" on December 27. These were in the estuaries and sloughs near the coast, as well as up the Loxahatchee River which empties there. His observations were contained in the article in 'The Auk' by the writer, referred to above.

To arrive at a reason for this flight is difficult. There was no marked atmospheric disturbance in the Middle States or south at the time. Early December in the Carolinas was marked by much rainy and foggy weather but no high winds prevailed, nor had they. There was a cold snap about Thanksgiving which resulted in a freeze, the first of the season in the Charleston area, and the last until February 1937. Late December and all of January was summer weather, with the mercury often going to 80° F. and over. In the Keys and southern Florida, it was of course, very warm. The writer has not checked the weather in late November and early December in New England or the northern coasts.

That no Dovekies came ashore in South Carolina or Georgia would indicate that conditions at sea were favorable, and they certainly must have passed at some distance from land. There do not appear to have been a great many starving birds such as characterized the 1932 flight. Those in the surf at Jupiter were "exhausted" but this was probably because of battling with the water. This area seems to mark the end of the large numbers of birds. What became of the "thousands" seen here but which did not appear further south, is pure conjecture. The occurrence in the

Keys was of small flocks, and scattered individuals. These may have run into some hundreds but hardly more than three to five hundred, judging from the available records. It is of course possible that many birds did not make any landfall after leaving North Carolina until they reached the vicinity of Jupiter Inlet which is considerably south of Daytona.

So, while not attempting to explain this invasion, the writer feels that it is of sufficient importance as a southern mass movement to deserve a place in the ornithological record.

*Charleston, South Carolina*