

NOTES ON THE STATUS OF SOME BIRDS IN SOUTH-CENTRAL ALASKA

JAMES E. HEMMING

As a result of the general scarcity of resident observers, the avifauna of much of Alaska is still incompletely known. In the course of field work carried on there during 1963–1964, I obtained several new records of occurrence or breeding of birds, particularly in the upper Cook Inlet area. It is the purpose of this paper to report these records. I am grateful to Francis H. Fay and Robert L. Rausch, Arctic Health Research Center, who read the manuscript and offered helpful suggestions. Information made available by other observers is acknowledged under the respective accounts of species. All names conform to the usage of the American Ornithologists' Union Check-list of North American Birds (1957).

LIST OF SPECIES

Mareca penelope. European Widgeon. Previous Alaskan records of this species are restricted almost entirely to the region from the Alaska Peninsula and the Aleutian Islands north to King Island, except for a male collected on the Stikine Flats of southeastern Alaska, on 10 November 1901 (Gabrielson and Lincoln, 1959:169), and a single male observed by Kessel (1955:372) near Fairbanks, 9 May 1954. Malcom E. Islieb and Steven R. Smith, of Anchorage, saw a male at Seward in April 1961, and Islieb saw a pair on Campbell Creek Marsh, near Anchorage, in May 1961. I observed a full-plumaged male on Chester Creek Marsh, Anchorage, in company with a flock of American Widgeon (*Mareca americana*) on 11 May 1964, and another (presumably the same bird) was seen feeding at the same place with five Pintails (*Anas acuta*) and 20 American Widgeon on 16 May 1964.

Aythya valisineria. Canvasback. The Canvasback was reported by Gabrielson and Lincoln (1959:180) to breed in the upper Yukon River Valley of east-central Alaska, and they suspected nesting in the Copper River Valley. Hansen (1960:137) suggested that this species has expanded its breeding range in recent years. He found nine nests on the Copper River Delta and 32 broods in the Tetlin area in 1959. Williamson *et al.* (1965:74) found a pair, suspected to be breeding, near the Knik River in May 1960. They also reported spring and fall migrants on Cook Inlet, near the mouth of the Susitna River, and two males at Kenai Lake in 1962. In the Anchorage area I saw a single male on a small pond near the International Airport on 10 May 1963. A nest of a Canvasback, with seven drab-green eggs, was found on Potter Marsh, nine miles south of Anchorage, on 16 June 1963. The incubating female allowed me to approach within 10 feet before flushing. The nest, constructed of rushes (*Scirpus americana*), was only partially concealed by emergent vegetation. I saw two males on a farm pond four miles southwest of Palmer on 14 May 1963, and three pairs on Lake Hood, near Anchorage International Airport, 16 May 1964. It now appears that the Canvasback is a rare but regular summer visitor in south-central Alaska, and that breeding may take place wherever suitable nesting habitat occurs.

Limnodromus scolopaceus. Long-billed Dowitcher. This dowitcher is a regular summer resident in Alaska, breeding in coastal areas from Bristol Bay, Alaska, to the arctic coast of Yukon Territory (Gabrielson and Lincoln, 1959:392). Migration appears to occur mainly along the coast; however, Irving (1960:73) reported large spring flights through Anaktuvuk Pass, in the Brooks Range, each year from 1948 to 1954. The only records for the south-central region are those of Friedmann (1935:35), who reported two specimens collected by Wossnesensky on Kodiak Island in 1842–1843; one additional specimen was reported by Pitelka (1950:25, 70) from Resurrection Bay, near Seward; Gabrielson (1959:393) saw two dowitchers, which may have been of this species, near Sheep Mountain, between Anchorage and Glennallen, on 6 September 1944. Malcom E. Islieb saw five dowitchers, at close range, near the small boat harbor in Cordova on 14 May 1964. The dorsal plumage of each was quite dark and the sides of the breast and belly were heavily barred, indicating *L. scolopaceus*. On 13 May 1964 I heard the distinctive *keek* of a Long-billed Dowitcher amid a flock of Short-billed Dowitchers (*L. griseus*) at Point Woronzof

TABLE 1
NUMBERS OF HUDSONIAN GODWITS COUNTED PER DAY IN MAY 1964*

Location	May 6	7	9	10	11	12	13	16	23	26	28	29
Chester Creek Marsh	—	—	—	12	6	56	—	20	—	2	—	—
Smith's Pond	—	—	—	20	4	66	—	8	—	—	9	—
Point Woronzof Marsh	52	43	44	75	—	82	66	22	20	—	2	1
Campbell Creek Marsh	—	—	—	20	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Total individuals	52	43	44	127	10	204	66	50	20	2	11	1

* Localities shown above are in the Anchorage area.

Marsh, Anchorage, but the individual making the call was not located. Three Long-billed Dowitchers were collected from a flock of 56 at Point Woronzof Marsh on 16 May 1964. Frank A. Pitelka, University of California, kindly verified the identity of the skins. The weight and reproductive condition of each of these were as follows: female (field no. HB-56), ova to 1 mm, 119.5 g; female (field no. HB-57), ova to 3 mm, 119.5 g; female (field no. HB-58), ova to 2 mm, 107.5 g. More than 1000 dowitchers of both species were present on the marsh when these were collected, and *L. scolopaceus* appeared to be the most abundant of the two species. On 29 May 1964, 200 Long-billed Dowitchers were seen on the same marsh. Apparently dowitchers of both species are regular spring and fall migrants along the Alaskan coast, but due to the great difficulty in field identification of the two birds, the Long-billed Dowitcher may have been often overlooked in south-central Alaska.

Limosa haemastica. Hudsonian Godwit. Although it has never been seen in great numbers, the Hudsonian Godwit has a long history of occurrence in Alaska, and its occurrence and breeding seem to be sporadic (Williamson and Smith, 1964). Snyder (1957:181) suggested that the Hudsonian Godwit may be increasing in abundance. Current data from south-central Alaska seem to support this hypothesis. Hudson (1954:51) saw 25 near the mouth of the Beluga River in 1951. Williamson and Smith (1964:41) reported one in the upper Cook Inlet area in 1955; one in 1958; approximately 12, 70, and 147 in 1960, 1961, and 1962, respectively. In the spring of 1964, I observed unusually large numbers in the Anchorage area. Censuses were made at several locations near Anchorage, the results of which are summarized in table 1. During this time definite pairs were observed and display was frequent. Certainly a relatively large population of Hudsonian Godwits must have nested in Alaska in 1964, but no breeding records were reported.

Little is known about migration routes into Alaska. Williamson and Smith (1964:49) suggested that "dispersal is primarily west and south around the coast after the birds arrive on the breeding grounds in northern Mackenzie." Recently reported records from interior Alaska (Kessel and Springer, MS) suggest that spring dispersal is primarily westward through the interior, with entry into Alaska via the Tanana River Valley. Birds entering the Tanana River drainage could easily move to western Alaska by following the Tanana River to the Yukon River, or to south-central Alaska via the Copper River. Movements through British Columbia seem to support this concept. Munro and Cowan (1947:112) indicated that migrants have been noted during May in the Peace River parklands and at Atlin, B.C. Specimens were taken at each location.

Sitta canadensis. Red-breasted Nuthatch. Until Williamson *et al.* (1965:77) reported the Red-breasted Nuthatch from the Anchorage and Homer area, it was known only from southeastern Alaska (Gabrielson and Lincoln, 1959:634). The above authors suspected that breeding occurs in south-central and southeastern Alaska, although no evidence for this had ever been obtained. Richard M. Hurd found the first indication of breeding by this species, near the Juneau Airport. His records are as follows: 13 October 1963, one seen and heard calling from the top of a Sitka spruce (*Picea sitchensis*); 19 October 1963, one, possibly two, with a flock of Pine Siskins (*Spinus pinus*) and Chestnut-backed Chickadees (*Parus rufescens*), feeding on spruce cones; 23 October 1963, dead Red-breasted Nuthatch found beneath livingroom window of his home; 23, 24, and 30 November 1963, one seen; 21 December 1963, one seen feeding with several *P. ru-*



Figure 1. Newly fledged Red-breasted Nuthatches at Anchorage, Alaska.

fescens; 19 January 1964, one seen chasing Chestnut-backed Chickadees from the feeder and caching peanut butter-fat mixture in bark crevices; 20 January 1964, to 4 April 1964, one seen daily at feeder; 5 April 1964, two seen exploring nearby bird houses; 11 April 1964, two seen; 24 April 1964, one seen removing old nest material from one of the bird houses; 22 May 1964, one seen gathering fireweed (*Epilobium* sp.) fibers from old seed stalks; 19 June 1964, adult feeding two young, and later in day two adults and four young were seen; later in month four young were frequent visitors to feeding station; 9 August 1964, heard calling; 10 August 1964 to 21 November 1964, no longer present.

The first observations of the Red-breasted Nuthatch in the Cordova area were made by Cliff Collins, at his Eyak Lake feeding station. His records are as follows: 13 May 1964, one seen at feeder; 15 May 1964, two seen; 16 May 1964, three seen at feeder; 17-19 May 1964, three seen; 20-22 May 1964, one seen. A single bird was seen on 7 June 1964, near Tonsina in the Copper River Valley, by Mrs. Joy Morgan of Copper Center. On 7 May 1964, I collected one of a pair in Anchorage. The bird (field no. HB-48) was a male, with testis measuring 3×4 mm, and weighed 11.0 g. A nest was found on 3 July 1964, in Anchorage. Five newly fledged young were sitting in a white spruce (*Picea glauca*), which was approximately three feet from an aspen (*Populus* sp.) containing the nest cavity (see fig. 1). Two adults were present and, although alarmed, one repeatedly flew to the nest with food, indicating the presence of one or more unfledged young. The forest here was dominated by black and white spruce (*P. mariana*, *P. glauca*) and paper birch (*Betula papyrifera*). In the Aleknagik area, 25 miles north of Dillingham, Laurence N. Ellison, of the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, saw several Red-breasted Nuthatches in a white spruce-paper birch forest, on 25 April 1964. This is the westernmost record of *S. canadensis* in Alaska. Ellison saw birds of this species regularly until 28 May 1964. They generally occurred as singles, occasionally in pairs, and rarely in threes. None was seen during June, July, or August, but on 19 September 1964, one was observed, and birds were seen daily from that date until Ellison departed on 16 October 1964. His notes suggest that the birds were most numerous in the last week

of April and in the first two weeks of October. Mrs. Rick Houston saw one Red-breasted Nuthatch feeding with a group of chickadees and kinglets at Snowshoe Lake, Mile 147 Glenn Highway, on 20 August 1964. Others were heard in the area at the time.

The observations above indicate that the species may be resident in southeastern Alaska, although numbers may vary greatly from year to year. In south-central Alaska they appear to be summer residents only.

Regulus calendula. Ruby-crowned Kinglet. The Ruby-crowned Kinglet is a common summer resident in south-central Alaska, arriving in the Anchorage area in early April and remaining through September. George Velikanje noted a flock of five Ruby-crowned Kinglets at his feeding station in Anchorage from 20 December 1964 to 8 January 1965. This is the first winter record of this species in Alaska. The latest record reported previously was 19 October 1920, on the Chena River (Gabrielson and Lincoln, 1959:685).

LITERATURE CITED

- AMERICAN ORNITHOLOGISTS' UNION. 1957. Check-list of North American birds. Fifth ed. (published by the Union, Baltimore, Md.).
- FRIEDMANN, H. 1935. The birds of Kodiak Island, Alaska. Bull. Chicago Acad. Sci., 5:13-54.
- GABRIELSON, I. N., and F. C. LINCOLN. 1959. The birds of Alaska. Wildl. Mgmt. Inst., Wash., D.C.
- HANSEN, H. A. 1960. Changed status of several species of waterfowl in Alaska. Condor, 62:136-137.
- HUDSON, G. E. 1954. Hudsonian Godwits on Cook Inlet, Alaska. Murrelet, 35:51.
- IRVING, L. 1960. Birds of Anaktuyuk Pass, Kobuk, and Old Crow. A study in arctic adaptation. U.S. Nat. Mus. Bull. 217. vii + 409 pp.
- KESSEL, B. 1955. Distribution records of waterfowl from the interior of Alaska. Condor, 57:372-373.
- KESSEL, B. 1960. Additional distribution records of some birds in interior Alaska. Condor, 62:481-483.
- MUNRO, J. A., and I. McT. COWAN. 1947. A review of the bird fauna of British Columbia. Special Publ. No. 2. British Columbia Provincial Museum, 285 pp.
- PITELKA, F. A. 1950. Geographic variation and the species problem in the shorebird genus *Limnodromus*. Univ. California Publ. Zool., 50:1-108.
- SNYDER, L. L. 1957. Arctic birds of Canada. Univ. Toronto Press.
- WILLIAMSON, F. S. L., and M. A. SMITH. 1964. The distribution and breeding status of the Hudsonian Godwit in Alaska. Condor, 66:41-50.
- WILLIAMSON, F. S. L., L. J. PEYTON, and M. E. ISLIEB. 1965. New distributional and overwintering records of birds from south-central Alaska. Condor, 67:73-80.

Arctic Health Research Center, Public Health Service, U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Anchorage, Alaska. (Present address: Department of Zoology, University of Montana, Missoula, Montana.) 26 March 1965.