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MEJÍA LAGOON: GONE, BUT PERHAPS NOT FOREVER

by J. P. Myers

Mejía Lagoon lies in the desert coast of SW Peru, one of two wetland oases along this barren coastline and the only one encountered for over 800 miles south into Chile. Work by R.A.Hughes (1970, 1979) has shown this area of marsh, lagoon, river mouth, and sandy beach to be important as a wintering area for Nearctic shorebirds, as well as richly endowed with local breeding species.

Important, that is, until this past northern winter. In November 1981 the Peruvian Ministry of Agriculture began draining Mejía Lagoon in order to convert the land to rice paddies. I visited there in March 1982, and by then the lagoon had been transformed to hectares of salt-encrusted, polygonized mud. Instead of Chilean Flamingos Phoenicopterus chilensis, Moorhens Gallinula chloropus, Plumbeous Rails Rallus sanguinolentus, Lesser Yellowlegs Tringa flavipes, Stilt Sandpipers Micropalama himantopus, Pectoral Sandpipers Calidris melanotos, and the like, there were small flocks of Semipalmated Sandpipers C.pusilla, a dozen or so Least Sandpipers C.minutilla, a few Snowy Plovers Charadrius alexandrinus, plus stragglers of other species around the last remnants of standing water - 3 saline puddles occupying no more than one-quarter of a hectare.

When plans for draining the lagoon first became known, O.P.Pearson, M.P.Harris, and R.A.Hughes, among others, mounted a letter-writing campaign to the Peruvian government in protest. Their action didn't stop the drainage, but it did result in an important, positive step. The Peruvians declared Mejía Lagoon a bird preserve. This happened in mid-winter 1981/82, yet while I was there the draining continued: pumps were running, ditches were still under construction, and rice was already starting to grow in some areas.

The time is now ripe for a second round of letters, and I hope that members of the Wader Study Group will contribute to this effort. The goal is to encourage the Peruvian Government to stand by their decree and reflood Mejía Lagoon. I believe the best tactic will be to have the letters congratulate the government for its wisdom and foresight in declaring Mejía Lagoon to be a bird preserve, and wishing them success in their efforts to save this critical area for the avifauna of two continents. Letters should go to:

Sr. Fernando Belaunde Terry, Presidente del Peru, Palacio de Gobierno, Lima, Peru.

References

Hughes, R.A. 1970. Notes on the birds of the Mollendo District, Southwest Peru. Ibis 112: 229-241.

Hughes, R.A. 1979. Notes on the Charadriiformes of the south coast of Peru. Stud. Av. Biol. No. 2: 49-53.

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SYMPOSIUM ON THE DYNAMICS OF TURBID COAST ENVIRONMENTS, 24 SEPTEMBER - 1 OCTOBER 1981, DARTMOUTH, NOVA SCOTIA, CANADA

by P. N. Ferns

This conference was organized by Don C. Gordon on behalf of the Fundy Environmental Studies Committee (of the Atlantic Provinces Council on the Sciences) and was held at the Bedford Institute of Oceanography in Dartmouth. The main aim was to take an interdisciplinary look at ecosystems (mainly estuaries) with heavy suspended loads. Under half of the papers had any biological content and only one of them was concerned with birds (my own - on the effects of storm generated losses of fine sediment on the distribution of shorebirds in the Severn). In addition, there was a poster paper by G.R. Daborn and P.C. Smith on Corophium, fish and shorebird interactions in the Bay of Fundy.

The majority of the non-biological papers were concerned with the physical dynamics of particulate matter in estuaries. The various contradictions and controversies which surfaced made it clear that we still have much to learn about the behaviour of sediments, especially fine sediments. Since so many of the predictions about the effects of estuarine developments on shorebirds can be influenced by changes in sedimentation (especially those relating to the Severn Barrage), this is clearly an area of research which needs greater support.

During subsequent field trips I was struck by the similarity between the Bay of Fundy and the Severn Estuary. There was the same grey sky and the same murky brown water - even the birds seemed familiar, especially the Knots Calidris canutus, Black-bellied Plovers Pluvialis squatarola and Semipalmated Plovers Charadrius semipalmatus (can the latter really be a good species?). However, there are major differences too - notably the fact that the Bay of Fundy is fed by no major rivers, and that the waders are birds of passage only - ice being such a major factor in winter. Autumn passage numbers can be very large, however. Peter W. Hicklin of the Canadian Wildlife Service in Sackville, New Brunswick, showed me some very impressive slides of a Semipalmated Sandpiper Calidris pusilla roost, involving probably a million individuals. So many birds were involved that they spilled up off the beach and across the road. He also told me of the time when an unidentified motorist drove through such a roost killing several hundred birds after apparently turning his car round and driving back through the flock again and again.....

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