Notes

Northern Fulmar Sighting at Moosonee, Ontario

by
Bryan Merritt

On 30 November 1992, a Northern Fulmar (*Fulmarus glacialis*) was sighted in Moosonee. Mr. Redfern Whiskeychan, a resident of Moosonee, reported an injured "seagull" to Ministry of Natural Resources officials. Ministry Compliance Specialist Bryan Merritt attended the location and captured the then flightless fulmar. The bird was taken to the local Ministry office where positive identification was made by Doug McRae and District Biologist John Thompson.

Conditions at the time of capture were quite severe. Temperatures were well below freezing and there was approximately 2 feet (0.7 m) of snow on the ground. The day prior to the capture, the last of the Moose River adjacent to Moosonee had frozen. The capture location was less than 200 metres from the River but would have been one half mile from the last open water. The townsite of Moosonee is located approximately 12 km up the Moose River from James Bay (at 51° 17'N & 80° 39'W).

Figure 1: Northern Fulmar at Moosonee on 30 November 1992. Photo by *Doug McRae.*

The fulmar was euthenized at the district office due to the extremely weak and emaciated condition of the bird. The following data were recorded from the bird prior to preparation of the specimen: weight 491 gms, wing length 285 mm, culmen length 37 mm, tarsus length 58 mm, and tail length 113 mm. Other characteristics observed during the necropsy included: absence of body fat; one leg had a small injury; and there was a small hole in the web of one of the feet.

These measurements were taken according to Pettingill (1985). The study skin was prepared by Doug McRae and the fulmar was subsequently delivered to the Royal Ontario Museum.

This fulmar is the 17th reported in Ontario, although some of the other reported sightings are for multiple birds. All reported sightings in the James Bay area were recorded between 19 October and 15 January. These include two and three reports from East Point and Netitishi Point, respectively, in southern James Bay (McRae 1994). Interestingly, on 8 December 1974, a fulmar was captured inland from Moosonee in a spruce forest (Prevett 1975). The conditions appeared to be quite similar to those under which this fulmar was captured.

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Leg and Bill Colour of Purple Sandpipers

by
Ron Pittaway

On both 6 November and 14 November 1993, Jean Iron and I observed a single Purple Sandpiper (*Calidris maritima*) on the rock jetty at Whitby harbour, Durham Region. They were aged as being in first winter (first basic) plumage based on the contrasting pale fringes to their wing coverts (Cramp and Simmons 1983). Both birds (or perhaps the same bird) had fairly bright orange coloured legs as well as the base of the bill. Ron and Doug Tozer (pers. comm.) observed two Purple Sandpipers at Whitby harbour on 14 November 1993. They also described

the legs and base of the bill as being "quite bright orange" in colour. These observations are contrary to the colours of the soft parts as described in most of the literature (Bent 1927, Chandler 1989, Cramp and Simmons 1983, Godfrey 1986, Oberholser 1974, Peterson 1980, and Prater *et al.* 1977). A typical description is found in Hayman *et al.* (1986), the standard reference on shorebirds, who describe and illustrate the legs and base of the bill as "dull yellow often tinged brownish or greenish". Illustration 202b on plate 83 shows a first non-breeding (first winter) bird. The greenish legs remind me of a Least Sandpiper (*Calidris minutilla*), certainly not a Purple Sandpiper of this age!

Interestingly, Chris Lemieux (pers. comm.) observed 6-8 Purple Sandpipers on 11 November 1993 at Presqu'ile Provincial Park. He observed the birds using a 20x power scope and at a distance on an island. Occasionally he noted a flash of orange from the legs as the birds moved about on a log. As well, Lemieux (pers. comm.) had many close views of + 18 Purple Sandpipers over a ten day period on the Shetland Islands off the north coast of Scotland in late August and early September 1992. He found their leg colour reminiscent of a Ruddy Turnstone (*Arenaria interpres*), being more orange and vibrant in colour than expected.

Previously, Ron Tozer and I have often observed Purple Sandpipers in November at great distances on the ledge rocks above Niagara Falls. They resembled European Starlings (*Sturnus vulgaris*) except for the occasional flash of their orange coloured legs! On 21 November 1993, Jean Iron and I watched three Purple Sandpipers at Niagara Falls. Their legs were usually covered by water, but showed yellowish-orange at times. The colour of the legs was more orange than yellow and quite bright. Kevin McLaughlin (pers. comm.) has seen Purple Sandpipers in southern Ontario a number of times. Most have been in first winter plumage and had "yellow-orange" legs.

The two most accurate examples of leg colour in the Purple Sandpiper are on page 220 in Jonsson (1993), — note the bright and decidedly orange coloured legs on the first winter bird; and the fairly bright yellowish-orange legs on the (first) winter bird on page 393 in Farrand (1983). No guide adequately describes the brightness of the legs, particularly when viewed against a dark background, or states that the orange leg colour is often visible at considerable distances. Is it possible that some of the early and inaccurate descriptions, for example, Bent (1927), have been repeated by subsequent authors? Another possibility is that considerable age, seasonal, and/or individual variations exist in the colour of the soft parts.

In summary, it appears that the rather bright yellowish-orange colour of the legs and base of the bill of Purple Sandpipers is poorly described in much of the literature. I encourage birders to carefully note the age, and leg and bill colours of Purple Sandpipers. I would be interested to hear of your observations.

Acknowledgements

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Short-billed Dowitcher Nest Found in Ontario

by
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Short-billed Dowitchers (*Limnodromus griseus*) nest primarily in central Canada, northern Quebec, and southern Alaska (Bull and Farrand 1977). In Ontario, their breeding status is poorly documented, but they are believed to be rare, probably restricted to the Hudson Bay Lowland (Harris 1987). In 1963, downy young and fledglings were found near the Winisk River on Hudson Bay (Tuck 1968). However, a nest was not recorded and their breeding status has remained "hypothetical" (Peck and James 1983).

On 10 June 1992, I found a Short-billed Dowitcher adult incubating a nest in northern Ontario, 20 km west of the Winisk River and 15 km south of the Hudson Bay coast (55° 27'N & 85° 50'W). The nest was near the edge of an open fen, which was 200 m wide and between 2 parallel black spruce (*Picea mariana*) ridges. It was on top of a 0.3 m tall sedge hummock surrounded by 0.1 m deep water

intermixed with other hummocks. It contained four buffy greenish-brown eggs with brown flecks. The nest bowl was lined with sedge. I photographed the nest and the adult, which calmly remained less than 20 m from the nest after being flushed. It appeared to be the *L. g. hendersoni* subspecies (Jaramillo *et al.* 1991).

This was the only dowitcher nest noted during a rather unique and intensive birding venture. From 5-20 June 1992, I assisted with a "ground survey" of Canada geese nesting within 50 km east and west of the former Cree village of Winisk, Ontario (destroyed by ice/flood in 1989). Survey participants were transported by helicopter from our base camp (55° 15'N & 85° 00'W) to 30 "lowland forest" and 29 "coastal tundra" survey transects (0.5 x 2.0 km) that were remote and otherwise inaccessible. Coastal transects were less than 5 km from areas influenced by Hudson Bay tides, and interior transects were less than 40 km inland from the coast.

A 16-person survey crew systematically walked and thoroughly searched a total of 59 square km of Hudson Bay Lowland comprising the 59 transects. In addition to geese, nearly all members concomitantly noted unique bird sightings; avid birders assisted others with unfamiliar species. Perhaps 15% of the study area was sparsely treed fen, similar to the dowitcher nest location. An additional 50% of the area searched was open or semi-open tundra/sedge-covered wetland near "the treeline". A number of interesting sightings were noted by the group, including additional dowitchers. Although we found only one Short-billed Dowitcher nest, the area of potential nesting habitat appeared vast. Short-billed Dowitchers may actually be regular breeding species in this transition zone (forest/tundra/sedge meadow), but because of the extreme remoteness of the Hudson Bay Lowland, nests have gone unreported.

Acknowledgements

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Hour of laying of the House Finch and the Blue-gray Gnatcatcher

by
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Introduction

It is noteworthy that excellent summaries of the nesting biology of birds (e.g., Peck and James 1987) usually lack information on the hour of laying of common birds. This reflects the scarcity of records of laying times, a scarcity that results from the difficulty of recording laying times and also from the reluctance of observers to disturb a laying bird. As there is increasing interest in the time of laying in relation to the time of copulation (Birkhead and Møller 1992), it is worthwhile to record some laying times of some House Finches (*Carpodacus mexicanus*) and a Blue-gray Gnatcatcher (*Polioptila caerulea*), two species for which no precise laying times seem to have been reported. I recorded laying times for these species at London, Ontario.

Methods

To estimate laying times, I used Skutch's method (1952). I arose at dawn, well before sunrise, to visit a nest before laying had occurred for a given day and then observed or estimated the time at which the female arrived at the nest to lay. I then watched her until she had left after laying or I returned periodically until she was no longer on the nest. If the female had not left within about 30 minutes of her arrival, I forced her to leave the nest.

I observed three nests of House Finches. One found in 1991, was about 3 m above the ground at the tip of an overhanging branch of a 15 m-tall Blue Spruce (*Picea pungens*). Standing on a small portable ladder and using a mirror, I could inspect the contents of the nest. The other two nests, built in 1992 by apparently the same female, were on a lamp bracket about 2 m from the floor of the porch of my home, and could be readily inspected using a mirror. In each location, I could sit in my car and watch the comings and goings of the female.

I observed only one nest of the Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, a nest that was supported on a branch close to the trunk of a hawthorn (*Crataegus* sp.), about 2 m above the ground. Again, using a mirror and a kitchen step-ladder, I could inspect the nest's contents.

I relate time of laying to the time of sunrise (SR) which I extracted from Tables of Sunrise, Sunset, and Twilight in the supplement to the American Ephemeris, 1946, published by the United States Naval Observatory, Washington, D.C. All times recorded by me are Eastern Standard Time.

Results

House Finch

Nest 1

20 Apr - 0 eggs at 1200h EST;
21 Apr - Egg 1 present at 1000h;
22 Apr - Egg 2 laid at 0555h ± 15 min (SR + 22 ± 15 min);
23 Apr - Egg 3 laid at 0547h ± 15 min (SR + 16 ± 15 min);
24 Apr - Egg 4 laid at 0615h ± 15 min (SR + 45 ± 15 min);
25 Apr - Egg 5 (last of clutch) laid after 0602h (SR at 0528h).

Nest 2 (probably same female as for nest 3)

09 Apr - Egg 1 laid before 0630h (SR at 0554h);
10 Apr - Egg 2 laid at 0610h ± 18 min (SR + 18 ± 18 min);
11 Apr - Egg 3 laid at 0620h ± 15 min (SR + 29 ± 15 min);
12 Apr - Egg 4 laid at 0617h ± 10 min (SR + 28 ± 15 min);
13 Apr - Laying of Egg 5 (last egg of clutch) unobserved.

Nest 3

08 Jul - Egg 1 laid at 0544h ± 17 min (SR + 50 ± 17 min);
09 Jul - Egg 2 laid at 0527h ± 17 min (SR + 31 ± 17 min);
10 Jul - Egg 3 laid at 0530h ± 15 min (SR + 35 ± 15 min);
11 Jul - Laying of Egg 4 (last egg of clutch) unobserved.

The nine periods during which eggs were laid ranged in length from 20 min. to 36 min. As females probably spent a few minutes before and after laying (e.g., Prairie Warbler *Dendroica discolor* in Nolan 1978), the mid-points of the periods observed by me must have been close to the actual laying times. Thus, the eggs were laid about midway in the hour following sunrise.

Blue-gray Gnatcatcher

23 May - 1 egg (presumably the first egg of the clutch) present at 1000h EST;
24 May - Egg 2 laid at 0533h ± 13 min (SR + 39 ± 13 min);
25 May - Egg 3 laid at 0515h ± 15 min (SR + 22 ± 15 min);
26 May - Empty at 0435h.

The mid-points of the observed laying periods, as for the House Finch observations, must have been close to the actual laying hour. Thus, the eggs were also laid close to 0.5 h after sunrise.

Discussion

The laying times of House Finches observed by me agree with observations reported previously. Bergtold (1913) in Colorado reported layings between 1900h and 0700h and Evenden (1957) reported that four eggs were laid before 0730h, the last being laid between 0545h - 0740h at Sacramento in late April, when the sun rose at about 0515h. Roe (pers. comm.) observed at Mendenhall, PA, that Egg 2 was laid on 2 Apr 1992 between 0645h and 1030h and that Egg 3 was laid before 0630h on 3 Apr; the combined records suggest that laying occurred well after sunrise which occurred about 0545 h.

House Finches seem to lay closer to sunrise than does a congeneric species, the Common Rosefinch (*Carpodacus erythrinus*), judged by the following records. Steinfatt (1937), in what was East Prussia, determined that the fourth egg of a five-egg clutch was laid between 0445h and 0545h on 8 June when sunrise was about 0300h. Stjernberg (1979) in western Finland found that eggs were laid in June between 0430h and 0600h (there, sunrise on 21 June was about 0239h).

My observations on laying times of the Blue-gray Gnatcatcher are apparently the first precise record of the hour of laying for any member of the genus *Polioptila*.

Laying soon after sunrise by the two species listed herein is characteristic of many other small birds, as pointed out by Skutch (1952) and Schifferli (1979).

Acknowledgements

I thank A.M. Roe for his record of laying by a House Finch.

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Breeding Habitats of Brewer's Blackbird in Central Ontario

by
Bill Crins and Steve O'Donnell

Brewer's Blackbird (*Euphagus cyanocephalus*) is a common and widespread, loosely colonial species of the prairies and agricultural areas of central and western Canada and the U.S.A. In the bulk of its breeding range, west of Ontario, it generally selects nesting sites in open scrubby woodland, sagebrush, or wet meadows and bushy swamps (Horn 1968, Walkinshaw and Zimmerman 1961). There is considerable variation

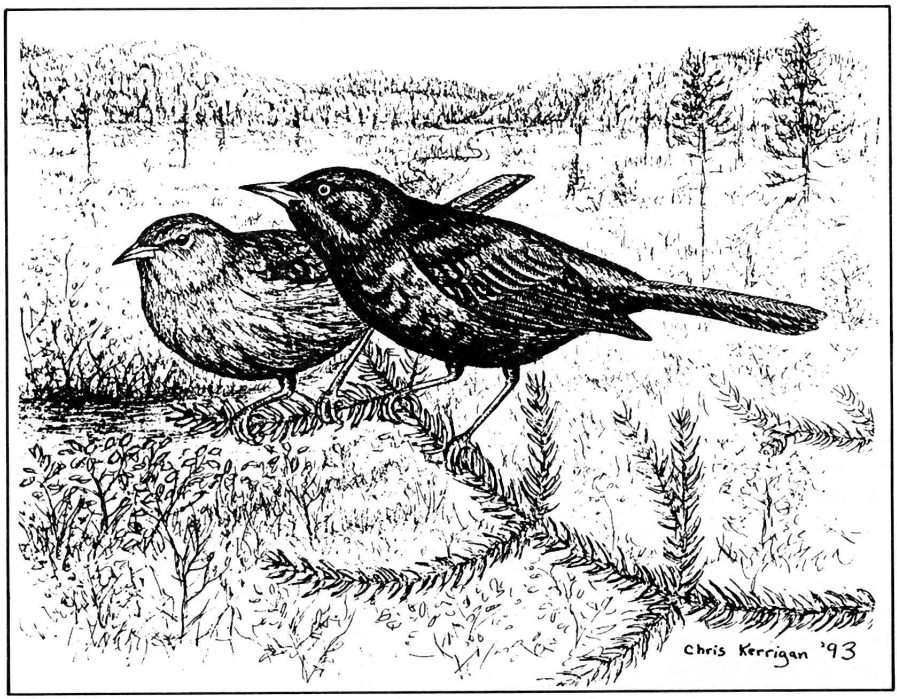

Figure 1: Pair of Brewer's Blackbirds in peatland habitat. Drawing by *Christine Kerrigan.*

in nest placement. In some areas, nests are rarely located more than 3 m above ground, and nests situated directly on the ground, on dry sites in meadows, on banks above small creeks, or in dried, recently burned marshes, are frequent. However, there are also reports of nests in conifer snags and stubs up to 40 m high (Furrer 1975, Walkinshaw and Zimmerman 1961). Furrer (1975) has shown that, at least in eastern Washington, no particular nesting site type provides an overall advantage, with regard to fledging success.

Since about 1914, the Brewer's Blackbird has been undergoing a range expansion eastward (Walkinshaw and Zimmerman 1961). By 1950, it had reached Indiana and Michigan. The first nesting record in Ontario occurred in the Thunder Bay area in 1945 (Allin and Dear 1947), and it had begun to nest in the Sault Ste. Marie area by 1953 (Baillie 1953, Wood 1955). These early Ontario nesting sites were located in cleared areas with scattered dead trees and along roadsides lined with planted White Spruce (*Picea glauca*) (Allin and Dear 1947, Speirs 1954). Following the successful establishment of the species in the Sault Ste. Marie area, there has been a steady eastward expansion, and small colonies can now be found in all areas with cleared land between Sault Ste. Marie and Sudbury (Devitt

1964, pers. obs.). It has also nested at other scattered locations in central and southwestern Ontario (Devitt 1969, Richards and Peck 1968).

Walkinshaw and Zimmerman (1961) noted that Brewer's Blackbird will nest in peatlands, at least in the eastern part of its range, although this habitat preference would generally be considered more typical of Rusty Blackbird (*Euphagus carolinus*) (Flood 1987). Gordon (1987) made no mention of this habitat type for Brewer's Blackbird in Ontario.

In recent years, Brewer's Blackbird has established small colonies in the vicinity of Lake Nipissing, and southward to Sundridge and Magnetawan. Several of these colonies are situated in peatlands (Magnetawan, Powassan, South River), although others are located in disturbed habitats such as upland cut-overs with windrows (Trout Creek), hay fields (Sundridge), and rows of conifers (Verner). The South River site was in a peatland that had been logged a few years ago, and retains some typical peatland species, such as Labrador-tea (*Ledum groenlandicum*), Dense Cotton-grass (*Eriophorum spissum*), and Bog Laurel (*Kalmia polifolia*).

In June 1992, one of the authors (SOD), as well as Jann Atkinson (pers. comm.) and several other observers, independently noted Brewer's Blackbird adults in a peatland, and on an adjacent golf course, at Powassan. On 26 May 1993, sixteen birds were seen, all along Hwy. 11 and the above-mentioned golf course (SOD). On 8 June 1993, at least three pairs were present in the same peatland adjacent to the golf course. The adults (both sexes) were extremely agitated, and on several occasions, were observed carrying caterpillars and other larvae. Adults were also seen flying to and from the golf course and an adjacent drained beaver meadow. Although visits to nests were not actually observed, it was clear that nests containing young were located in the immediate vicinity. One flightless young was discovered (premature fledging) on a wet hummock of small Black Spruce (*Picea mariana*), Leatherleaf (*Chamaedaphne calyculata*), Bog Laurel, and *Sphagnum*. The nest was not found, but because of the flightless condition of the young bird, it was probably somewhere on that, or an adjacent hummock. The surrounding area within the peatland was characterized by scattered small Black Spruce and Tamarack (*Larix laricina*), with various ericaceous shrubs, Dense Cotton-grass, other sedges, and grasses. Although the site occupied by the blackbirds could be considered a bog, most of this peatland would be classified as a poor fen.

We often have preconceived notions about the habitat preferences of birds. However, the occurrence of Brewer's Blackbird in peatlands should serve to reinforce the idea that some species are opportunistic, nesting in various kinds of habitats, and are not as stereotyped in their nesting habitat preferences as we might expect.

It is noteworthy that in situations where Brewer's Blackbirds do nest in peatlands, there are usually open fields, roadsides, golf courses, and other open habitats in the immediate vicinity. Perhaps these peatlands provide a more constant breeding habitat than hayfields and pastures,

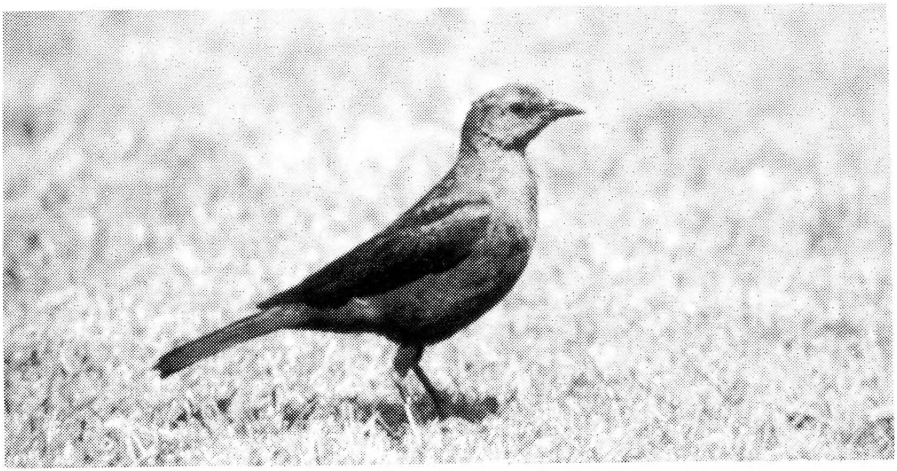

Figure 2: Female Brewer's Blackbird foraging on grass. Photo by *Don Gunn.*

where the probability of disturbance causing nesting failure is much higher (due to mowing or grazing and associated trampling). Thus, the peatlands may provide good nesting habitat, and the open grasslands and roadsides nearby may provide the necessary foraging habitat.

Acknowledgements

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Book Review

Birds of Presqu'ile Provincial Park. 1993. By *Steve M. LaForest.* The Friends of Presqu'ile Park and the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources, Brighton. (softcover) XII + 436 pp. illustrated. $21.95 + $3.00 Postage and handling from The Friends of Presqu'ile Park, P.O. Box 1442, Brighton, Ontario K0K 1H0.

Presqu'ile Park is one of Ontario's premier birding areas. Like all major promontories along the Great Lakes, it is a migrant trap, bottling up landbird migrants both spring and fall on the hook-shaped peninsula. Offshore ducks congregate, while the long beaches provide shorebirds with some of their best foraging along the lower Great Lakes. In the breeding season the marshes, deciduous and evergreen woodlands and old fields attract a rich array of nesting birds, and in winter Snowy Owls sit on the ice ridges and winter finches chatter in the conifers. In all 312 species have been recorded here, and 126 have nested.

This book is the account of this rich birdlife. The first published list of the birds of the park was by Ron Scovell in 1960, and in 1982 Doug McRae's *Birds of Presqu'ile* appeared. That booklet was 74 pages long; the present book has 436 pages, an indication of both the amount of field work summarized here, and the completeness of the treatment.

For those accustomed to regional bird listings, the format of this present book will be familiar. The account for each species covered starts with a brief one-to-three line statement of overall status. Subsequent treatment then varies. For those birds that are regular in the park, the author traces their seasonal status from spring through winter, giving the first and last dates, high counts and any other information of interest, including egg dates when available. In the case of Ring-billed Gull, a three page account gives details of the history of the huge colony, with banding data and population counts.

Rare species are accorded similarly thorough coverage. For the rarest full details of the record are given, with mouth-watering verbatim quotes from the (often dazed) observer! More regular vagrants have all their occurrences listed, while the simply unusual have their outside dates and high counts given. In all cases any changes in status are discussed, and there are references to occurrences in adjacent areas (such as Brighton) where relevant. Seven species are listed separately, in a category of "Unacceptable Records, Extinct Species and Escapees".