

SOME NOTES ON DOWITCHERS

by Soheil, Zende, Cambridge

I had the opportunity to study Short-billed and Long-billed Dowitchers extensively this fall at both Plum Island and East Boston. I found that the great waves of Short-bills seemed to melt away by mid-August, while in September, both species were equally uncommon. I also spent a fair amount of time and energy reading and asking questions of many and sundry observers concerning species differentiation in the genus Limnodramus. At least 80% of the birders consulted -- novice and expert alike -- cursed and said that the two species ought to be "relumped." But until that miracle happens, observers must make the best of a confusing situation.

In my opinion, minute details of plumage and its progress during the post-breeding molt simply are not very useful for field identification. Heavy barring on the sides of the upper breast, attributed to the Long-billed Dowitcher, may or may not be visible, and in many individuals looks more like either spotting or duskiness. The presence of barring versus spotting on the under-tail coverts as a means of differentiating Long-bills from Short-bills was visible in my experience in only one instance at 15 foot range. That, "There is (in Long-billed) never the white belly so characteristic of the Short-bill" (quote from Wayne Petersen's article for Birder's Kit #7) leaves the question of what looks "white" in the field up to the discretion of the individual observer.

My observations:

1. In a group of mixed dowitchers in mid-September the Long-bills tend to be noticeably larger and chunkier; at that time they are also definitely browner. But it is the combination of size and color that makes for field differentiation. Later on in October and November, when Long-bills are to be seen almost exclusively, size comparison with Greater Yellowlegs is very useful: the bodies of the two birds are almost exactly the same size and shape. The Short-billed is only slightly larger than the Lesser Yellowlegs and has the same lean look.
2. When a group of dowitchers takes off calling and you fail to hear any Lesser Yellowlegs-like double whistles, you have just flushed Long-bills. Actually, the Long-bills, thin "pik" whistle is fairly distinctive, but can get swallowed up in the similar calls of dozens of smaller peep. The Lesser Yellowlegs-like call of the Short-bill, however, stands out in any such context.

BOOK REVIEW

A Season of Birds, by Dion Henderson, illustrated by Chuck Ripper; published by the Tamarack Press, Madison, Wisconsin; copyright 1976. 88 pages.

The title would imply a treatment of the ways various species adapt with the seasons, carrying out their basic life-sustaining functions in balance with natural forces. Although the artistic aspirations of Chuck Ripper remain pleasing, in pen and ink, somehow the reputation is marred when associated with text which is often out of phase, ambiguous and awkward. Each pair of pages, consisting of a drawing and a bit of prose, is a complete entity, apart from that which appears when the page is turned. Each illustration is annoyingly footnoted by some contemplative suggestion, which tries to relate the two. Unfortunately, these abstract suggestions are displayed as bold chapter titles as incongruous as, "Spring/rain, Summer/Blue Grosbeak, Summer/fullness, Autumn/grasshopper, Winter/mischance, Winter/peach log," and the like.

It seems odd that a book devoted to birds should not concentrate its theme on them, regardless of whether the work is poetic, figurative or factual in nature. Disertations on spiders, grasshoppers, winter constellations, peach logs and a skunk thrusting its head into a can and starving, clearly have their place elsewhere.

If all of this is nonsensical, thus is the overall impression of A Season of Birds. Although the book provided the reader with hearty amusement, it is imagined that this is not the author's sincere intention. The attempt at creating a visual and emotional identity with nature as a whole is appreciated. It is unfortunate that this aim is not fulfilled.

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