

## Further Afield by Rob Harlan

For me, the seasons are defined thusly: Warblerless Season (November through March); Spring Warbler Season (April & May); Nesting Warbler Season (June); Shorebird Season (July & August); Fall Warbler Season (September); and Sparrow Season (October). From the above grand scheme of things, you may have surmised that I hold warblers in high regard, and you would be correct. But also note that shorebirds are awarded two months unto themselves, and for good reason. Warblers and shorebirds have that certain something—personality and pizzazz—and they have it in spades.

Don't get me wrong, I like swallows and cuckoos, grouse and grebes just fine, but I must confess that any extended period with these other groups leaves me glassy-eyed. "Rob—did you get the rough-winged in with that group of immature tree swallows over the mudflat? It's pretty late, actually." "Sure thing," I might say casually, as I mentally note the yellowthroat "checking" away in the cattails, or the Baird's sandpiper "kreeeping" overhead. "Did you get that Baird's?" would probably be my next response, only to be rebuffed by "Uh, no, I was scoping that young eagle in the old dead cottonwood over there—looks like a fourth-year bird, I'd guess." And so it would go: to each his own.

While warblers understandably catch the fancy of most any birder (spring warblers, at least), shorebirds just haven't attracted as big a fan club as yet. And this is a shame. They are imbued with a fascinating energy, and their variety in Ohio is even greater than that of the warblers. But where spring warblers almost scream out their presence with song and a riot of color, shorebirds are content with their own sense of subtlety. No neon-orange throats or "Beee-bzz-bzz-bzz's" here. What shorebirds may lack in plumage or song they make up for in energy and charisma, as anyone who has had the opportunity to spend some time with them can attest. Sure, they can be a challenge to identify, but the bigger challenge often seems to revolve around a much more basic issue—finding them in the first place.

While it is true that ideal habitat varies from species to species—a long-billed dowitcher might turn up its nares at the grassy edge favored by a buff-breasted sandpiper, and a least sandpiper would probably not swim through greater yellowlegs habitat—the bottom line is that the habitats preferred by shorebirds, are, in general, a scarce commodity. And if their habitat is scarce, then our opportunity to study and appreciate shorebirds is equally scarce. But I suppose this is too obvious to mention.

The sad part is, shorebirds don't ask for much—only a nice, juicy lakefront mudflat here and there, a drawn-down impoundment's edge, or a flooded field if all else fails. But when they do ask, they ask very quietly, and with no big-money special interest group trumpeting their cause. Even so, they still ask. And if we don't answer with at least some favorable habitat every year, they may simply pass us by, for good. I miss them already.

## Accidental Habitats, Benign Neglect: Shorebirds in Ohio by Bill Whan

Most of the subtle beauties of shorebirds are reserved for the connoisseur with a spotting-scope. Other people, if they notice them at all, tend to be aware only of drab brownish birds feeding far off on a malodorous mudflat, or fleeing before them on a beach. Shorebirds' economic value seems less than obvious, too; only snipes and woodcocks remain game in Ohio, and we haven't worked out a way to assess the value of animals we can't take home with us. Finally, only four of their species regularly nest in the state, reducing still more our sense of ownership of these mysterious wanderers. Wild, indifferent, and remote, animals without easy eye-appeal or commodity value, shorebirds are likely to be ignored as long as our conservation values are based upon popularity rather than a commitment to protect the full spectrum of native wildlife.

Our official state list of birds features forty-seven species of shorebirds, forty-one of warblers, and forty of waterfowl among the most numerous comparable species groups, making shorebirds the most diverse of Ohio's avifauna. Ohio, moreover, provides the largest expanse of potential stopover habitat in the eastern US between the Atlantic coast and the breeding ranges of most of these migrants. Hundreds of years ago the shore of Lake Erie, and to a lesser extent the wet prairies to the south, must have teemed with migrant shorebirds every spring and fall. That this no longer happens seems almost entirely the result of human ignorance in some cases, and human insouciance in the rest.

Readers of *The Ohio Cardinal* do not need a lengthy recitation of the plight of shorebirds—their numbers declining or still not recovered from market gunning of a century ago, their long migrations and precise habitat requirements along the way, and the widening gaps in the ancestral chain of foraging areas along their paths to and from the breeding grounds. What should be more widely known is how many shorebirds are now compelled to overfly Ohio without stopping, and why.

Ohio's great wetlands are nearly gone, the prairies mostly paved or plowed. As sad as the loss of these wetlands is, the loss of prime shorebird habitat within them—shallow sheets of water, mudflats, and contiguous dryer open ground, all rich in aquatic invertebrate food sources—is far more grievous. Private landowners too often regard this habitat as barren, unappealing, and unprofitable wasteland, begging for obliteration. In the primeval haunts of migrant shorebirds—in the Pickaway Plains, near Killdeer Plains WA, or in innumerable places along the western basin of Lake Erie—land converted to crops can still show its origins. If drainage tiles are broken up, or after a heavy rain, the land will reveal what natural forces destine it to be, and shorebirds will appear from nowhere to feed in sky-ponds in the vestiges of otherwise-invisible primeval contours. A few more intact shorebird havens in the hands of private owners have been suffered to remain—most often in the name of duck-hunting—but for the most part it is on public land that the hope for substantial shorebird habitat remains.

Here, at least in an earlier era, scientific principles of biodiversity mattered less than the tender mercies of the marketplace, and land managers were constrained by a system in which the husbandry of game species alone supplied the life-blood of their agencies. Non-game shorebirds were acknowledged only by ritual repetitions of the old canard that management for waterfowl automatically manages for shorebirds, a

recitation usually accompanied by pointing to a few spotted sandpipers and yellowlegs pattering around the muddy margins of diked impoundments flooded to a depth sufficient to float hunters' boats.

Times have changed of course, and wildlife managers have learned the language of biodiversity, noticing warblers, noticing raptors, most of all noticing the hordes who crowd the boardwalk at Magee Marsh, and the families who walk the windswept dikes at Ottawa hoping for a glimpse of an eagle. It will perhaps take a bit longer before they notice less showy species with their own urgent claims to a rightful share of the land's remaining bounty.

Centuries after the wetlands were drained, lonely bands of shorebirds—and the birders who follow them—have learned how to locate such isolated stopover areas as still exist. Inland reservoirs can be productive for a decent number of shorebirds, mostly in the fall when drawn down or depleted. In the spring, agricultural lands may attract birds in wet weather, especially in ill-drained fields and those where organic fertilizers such as manure are used. River channels sometimes accommodate shorebirds in shallows and along sandbars. Even impoundments in fish hatcheries can provide good habitat if managed appropriately.<sup>1</sup> Sewage settlement ponds—widely resorted to by shorebirds just north of here in Ontario—are seldom available in Ohio. Lakeside seiches, and larger climate-related changes in Lake levels, are less often a factor nowadays, most of the appropriate natural shoreline having been diked off to protect farms and roads, though prominent exceptions remain at Sheldon Marsh SNP and Conneaut Harbor.

As natural shorebird habitats disappeared, and public lands continued to be managed for other purposes, some highly artificial areas were sought out by birds and birders alike. Such was the case with dredge-spoil disposal basins—usually circular Stonehenges of boulders built by the Corps of Engineers to accumulate the sludge and muck from dredging operations in ports, channels, and marinas along the Lake—which for years were some of the best places to look for shorebirds in Ohio. Old-timers will recall the choice rarities—spotted redshank, sharp-tailed sandpiper, etc.—and the good numbers of commoner species found at these impoundments over the years. These places were not managed for wildlife—far from it. They were—fortunately, as it happened—mostly overlooked by humans except during dredging, but physiographically they were right for the formation of good shorebird habitat, and they lay in ancestral areas for stopovers by migrants.

Alas, things happened to these neglected spots. Some were eventually filled to a level at which they could no longer hold surface water, and some have been overrun by *Phragmites*. Others have been closed to public access after someone happened to ask the legal department about liabilities, and received the predictable answer. While these hotspots were immune to the interventions of commercial developers, they were also ignored by wildlife managers—for shorebirds, at least, an instance of benign neglect.

The Lorain dredge-spoil impoundment having last year finally been filled above

<sup>1</sup> That there are fully 34 shorebird species on ODW's checklist for the tiny Hebron Fish Hatchery, far inland in Licking County, is almost entirely due to the efforts of "Fritz" Griffith, the Hatchery's manager till it left Federal for State hands in 1982. Griffith loved shorebirds, and carefully managed the routine draw-downs of ponds at the Hatchery to accommodate migrants for many years. The checklist is less useful these days, as the Hatchery is attractive to shorebirds less frequently and more often by happenstance.

Lake level—and with toxic spoil from the Black River, to boot—there now exists no spot in Ohio that has consistently produced significant numbers of migrant shorebirds year after year over the nineties. Nor is there any assurance that there will ever be one, unless strategies change in management regimes on our public lands. For some hints about how this change might take place, it is worth looking at some numbers—among the relatively few available—on this much-neglected group of Ohio species.

Inconsistencies in stopover locations (weather, management practices in place, etc.) mean that season-by-season surveys of shorebird numbers at single sites (such as the monthly bird counts taken for years for the Ohio Division of Wildlife at Magee Marsh, and at Ottawa for the US Fish & Wildlife Service—in both cases by volunteer birders) tend not to reflect overall shorebird abundance in the region so much as habitat availability at such sites. One set of counts, more flexible as to areas surveyed in the interest of a better overall picture of shorebird migrations, is that conducted by the Black Swamp Bird Observatory.<sup>2</sup> These surveys, devoted exclusively to shorebirds, take place in varying selected locales near the Lake's western basin, between Pointe Mouille in Michigan to Old Woman Creek in Ohio. Intended as they are to reflect overall numbers of birds, the following results nevertheless reveal much about stopover sites in general, or the lack thereof:

1994	Spring: 19,170 shorebirds of 24 species
	Fall: 61,742 shorebirds of 32 species
1995	Spring: 34,331 shorebirds of 26 species
	Fall: 17,396 shorebirds of 28 species
1996	Spring: 27,013 shorebirds of 22 species
	Fall: 24,075 shorebirds of 31 species
1997	Spring: 20,656 shorebirds of 20 species
	Fall: 9,606 shorebirds of 23 species
1998	Spring: 22,162 shorebirds of 20 species
	Fall: 16,155 shorebirds of 31 species

Most eye-catching is the number of birds found in the fall of 1994. This extraordinary count arose, BSBO notes, because 51,000 shorebirds were counted at a single spot—the Turtle Creek unit of Magee Marsh Wildlife Area. Shorebirders will surely recall this event: major dike construction at Turtle Creek created, as an unintentional and temporary side-effect, a large mudflat in an area which had been either flooded or dry for decades, and thousands of birds dropped out of the air, including remarkable numbers of scarcer species. The birds began arriving in spring; gradually realizing the significance of the event, beginning in August the Division of Wildlife provided limited access for the public to the area, and again the following spring before the area was reflooded. Some of the peak numbers of shorebirds counted on single selected days on

<sup>2</sup> Data courtesy of the Black Swamp Bird Observatory, P.O. Box 228, Oak Harbor, OH 43449.

that autumn, as reported to *The Ohio Cardinal*, follow: black-bellied plover 30, American golden-plover 100, semipalmated plover 450, killdeer 1600, American avocet 2, greater yellowlegs 26, lesser yellowlegs 800, willet 7, spotted sandpiper 12, whimbrel 1, Hudsonian godwit 3, marbled godwit 2, ruddy turnstone 30, red knot 6, sanderling 86, semipalmated sandpiper 3098, western sandpiper 2, least sandpiper 185, white-rumped sandpiper 10, Baird's sandpiper 34, pectoral sandpiper 500, dunlin 450, stilt sandpiper 200, buff-breasted sandpiper 8, short-billed dowitcher 620, long-billed dowitcher 50, Wilson's phalarope 15, red-necked phalarope 8, red phalarope 1—a total of 29 species.

Curiously, this extraordinary foraging opportunity produced the only survey results in which fall birds outnumbered those counted in spring in the surveys. Normally, far more shorebird species occur in fall than in spring in Ohio, and there are more birds, augmented as their numbers are by young of the year. Why are more birds being counted in these surveys in spring during most years? Is it because by late summer and fall wetlands are so often intentionally flooded in anticipation of the coming migration of game waterfowl?

These phenomena, in which shorebird numbers seem so extravagantly affected by unrelated interruptions—such as dike construction—in business as usual in our publicly-owned wetlands, are not restricted to the Lakeshore. Birders who keep an eye on Killdeer Plains WA, for example, have noticed huge fluctuations in the numbers of shorebirds stopping at this area of primeval wet prairie. After an accessible area was drawn down for carp control in 1995, and again in 1998 when summer dike work resulted in the draining of the same impoundment, strikingly large numbers and variety of shorebirds were easily noted—29 species in 1995, an exceptional number for an inland spot in recent years.

At places like Killdeer where water uptake depends upon rainfall, severe drought can also have unintentional good consequences for shorebirds. Many will remember the autumn of 1991, when a summer-long drought benefited at least 35 species of shorebirds statewide, but especially at Killdeer, where managers were unable to flood the impoundments in the traditional early welcome to waterfowl. For the season, shorebird reports to *The Ohio Cardinal* included the following for Killdeer (bear in mind that certain species almost certainly present—spotted sandpiper, sanderling, white-rumped sandpiper, short-billed dowitcher, dunlin, and Wilson's phalarope—weren't in sufficient numbers to merit mention in *The Ohio Cardinal*): 50 black bellied plovers on 7 Sept, 100 American golden-plovers on 7 Sept, 40 semipalmated plovers on 24 Aug and 5 Sept, 1200 killdeer on 6 Aug, 25 greater yellowlegs on 19 Aug, 400 lesser yellowlegs on 12 Aug, 77 solitary sandpipers on 6 Aug, 8 willets on 26 Aug, one marbled godwit on 15 Aug, 3 ruddy turnstones on 5 Sept, 18 red knots on 5 Nov, 100 semipalmated sandpipers on 12 Aug, 3 western sandpipers from 6 Aug to 2 Sept, 150 least sandpipers on 12 Aug, 12 Baird's sandpipers on 2 Sept, 850 pectoral sandpipers on 16 Aug, 56 stilt sandpipers on 6 Aug, 8 buff-breasted sandpipers on 11 Sept, from 3-8 long-billed dowitchers 15 Aug-21 Oct, and one red-necked phalarope 19 Aug and 18 Oct. The parallels with Turtle Creek are inescapable.

That occurrences of shorebirds in Ohio should be so closely linked with unrelated marsh management raises questions. Is a large percentage of the local migrant shorebird population being forced to fly over Ohio without stopping because significant

stopover habitats are not permitted to exist? If our land managers were to create good shorebird habitat at the appropriate times *on purpose*, wouldn't these migrants benefit from the restoration of important stopping-points on their long journeys? Would doing so conflict with other management aims, or impose unacceptable costs?

There are hopeful signs that Federal and State land managers increasingly recognize the legitimacy and the importance of these questions. This is over half the battle, for the answers are not hard to come by.

(The above is based in part on a presentation given to National Audubon Society/Ohio this spring.)



**Pectoral Sandpiper**, Turtle Creek Unit (Magee Marsh WA), Ottawa Co., 1995. Photo by Len Powlick.