

# Fourteen Years of Shorebird Surveys near Western Lake Erie by Michael R. Bolton and John Szanto

Here we present small but fascinating excerpts from a massive database of shorebird observations from northwestern Ohio and southeastern Michigan. This trove, now including over 700,000 sightings, has been accumulated continuously since 1989 in weekly field trips by John Szanto of Toledo and Michael Bolton of Columbus, and has never been published, in whole or in part. It comprises seasonal reports sent to the Manomet Center for Conservation Sciences under the protocols of the International Shorebird Survey, and shared locally with the US Fish and Wildlife Service and the Ohio Division of Wildlife. Long-time field partners who self-effacingly describe themselves as birdwatchers and their method as opportunistic rather than scientific, Bolton and Szanto nevertheless have turned countless hours of dedicated field experience into a record of the area's shorebirds unmatched for breadth and continuity.

Areas covered within the region varied each season, though the most productive shorebird spots—Ottawa National Wildlife Refuge (ONWR), Pointe Mouillée State Game Area in Michigan, and Metzger Marsh Wildlife Area in Ohio (at least until the latter's "improvement" in 1995) were most often covered. Bolton and Szanto are quick to say their censuses lack scientific rigor, but their valuable studies have been dedicated and prolonged in ways only enthusiastic amateurs can sustain. Rather than devoting reproducible coverage to the same locales, habitat types, or species, they are guided above all by their enthusiasm for shorebirds, whenever or wherever they may occur. Season by season they simply go where the birds are, or might be, identify them as to species, and count their numbers, including information on water levels, winds, disturbances, etc. for each location.

Untold hours spent afield over so many years lend special authority to their impressions. Asked about the most obvious decreases among species during the span of their work, they unhesitatingly cite that of the red knot, and mention that of sanderlings next. They regret the shortage of appropriate habitat for foraging migrant shorebirds in the region, especially in spring. Too often, they say, wildlife managers discipline the land into "teacups" of water, rather than "saucers"—shallower basins with gradients in depth and extensive muddy margins from which shorebirds and other organisms can benefit.

Asked about the best shorebird spot in the region, they nominate Pte. Mouillée, where actions taken by land managers to benefit shorebirds seem to have had a noticeable impact. This spot, it seems to them, may also be especially attractive to migrating shorebirds because of its location along a shoreline reassuringly parallel to their path. Similar factors may account for the huge numbers of migrant raptors following the same route in fall, relative to much smaller numbers seen only a few miles away in Ohio.

In their view, the most important change in observed shorebird numbers during the past decade has not arisen from any human intervention, but is part of a natural cycle. Lake Erie levels have fallen to near average in recent years, with positive effects on shorebird numbers, exposing foraging habitats at those few areas still open to natural fluctuations in water levels. During the past few years, numbers of birds counted in the undiked (hence susceptible to Lake levels) portions of the Clear Creek basin in ONWR have rivaled those at Pte. Mouillée in Michigan, and dwarfed those from other Ohio locations. Wind-driven fluctuations in water levels at remnant natural shorelines in the Western Basin are analogous to those of tides at coastal shorebird foraging sites, alternately recharging and exposing aquatic invertebrate prey.

Not included in their tables are sightings the pair has made during less formal forays, such as the sharp-tailed sandpiper observed on 2 December 1990 at Metzger Marsh, when bone-chilling winds were whipping snow by in horizontal streaks. Szanto and Bolton searched frantically for other birders nearby to witness this, Ohio's second record of the species, but everyone else was apparently warm at home on such a day. Another inhospitable December day found them staring in disbelief at a piping plover walking the ice of the frozen bay at Maumee Bay State Park.

Asked what lessons can be passed along from a decade and a half of observations, Bolton and Szanto urge birders to get out in the field as much as possible, and to leave roadside parking lots and viewing platforms to explore remoter and rougher habitats. Shorebirds, even huge numbers of them, can easily be overlooked, concealed from the casual eye in unexpected settings. Instead of regarding each species as a checkmark on a list, they urge us to go further, and report the birds' actual presence by getting an accurate count. Too many shorebirders, they say, are swept up by spring fever in May, but go afield less often in the heat of July and August, when favorable winds, lower Lake levels, a wider variety of species, and much increased overall numbers make shorebirding ultimately more satisfying. Confidence in identifying these birds comes only from repeated observations, which in turn come from taking every advantage of the chance to leave home to walk their haunts. What else in the way of advice would you expect from two shorebird addicts?

Limited space prevents us from presenting more than a tiny fraction of the hundreds of pages of these data made available to the *Cardinal*. We have chosen here tables of shorebirds counted by month (Table 1) and year (Table 2) over the entire history of surveys at all Western Basin sites, and a table of Ottawa National Wildlife Refuge survey results by year (Table 3), largely because ONWR results represent over 62% of all shorebirds sighted during the period. Censuses were not regularly conducted anywhere in January and February, and these months are therefore not included.

We invite readers to study these data on their own, but cannot resist calling attention to a few trends of apparent interest:

- Overall numbers of birds seen have increased markedly in recent years, concurrent with more normal Lake Erie water levels, even though only a few sites are directly influenced by Lake levels, and despite the loss of Metzger Marsh WA as such. For example, note that ONWR sites averaged 8122 birds yearly during the first seven years of surveys and 50,787 yearly during the second seven years, when lower Lake water regularly exposed mudflats along Crane Creek and ONWR managers increasingly came to value the habitat requirements of shorebirds and other non-game species.
- Sightings have also increased significantly among commoner species better able to benefit from grasslands, drier margins of mudflats, and even some agricultural settings: American golden-plover, black-bellied plover, killdeer, and pectoral sandpiper.
- Large yearly swings in total numbers likely reflect short-term habitat availability. For example, when dike construction during 1994 at the Turtle Creek unit of Magee Marsh WA incidentally produced mudflats there, 64%+ of that year's surveyed shorebird numbers came from that site alone.

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Table 1. 1989-2002 western Lake Erie shorebird survey results (by month) from Michael R. Bolton and John Szanto.

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Total
Black-bellied Plover	0	0	0	136	2,405	125	19	435	1,092	1,888	1,113	0	7,219
American Golden-Plover	0	0	0	2,102	2,828	2	6	102	389	221	67	0	5,717
Snowy Plover	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	2	0	0	0	0	3
Semipalmated Plover	0	0	0	139	11,702	405	212	3,533	1,999	128	0	0	18,118
Killdeer	0	0	80	1,372	2,240	863	14,994	13,305	7,936	3,005	455	1	44,251
American Avocet	0	0	0	27	14	0	4	16	14	3	2	0	80
Greater Yellowlegs	0	0	0	2,681	879	3	600	1,730	1,105	668	89	0	7,555
Lesser Yellowlegs	0	0	1	3,432	5,958	446	17,075	24,062	6,375	2,067	45	0	59,461
Solitary Sandpiper	0	0	0	13	247	32	73	61	3	3	0	0	432
Willet	0	0	0	7	45	4	4	17	5	5	4	0	91
Spotted Sandpiper	0	0	0	32	627	117	727	521	121	5	1	0	2,151
Upland Sandpiper	0	0	0	3	5	3	0	2	0	0	0	0	13
Willet	0	0	0	0	328	2	1	0	7	0	0	0	338
Hudsonian Godwit	0	0	0	0	1	3	0	14	9	30	7	0	64
Marbled Godwit	0	0	0	1	6	0	0	16	9	5	1	0	38
Ruddy Turnstone	0	0	0	0	917	421	18	108	13	3	0	0	1,480
Red Knot	0	0	0	75	70	7	3	42	95	10	0	0	302
Sanderling	0	0	0	0	33	288	136	94	498	1,087	58	0	2,194
Semipalmated Sandpiper	0	0	0	1	9,751	3,239	14,024	29,113	5,673	132	0	0	61,313
Western Sandpiper	0	0	0	0	15	0	9	20	10	17	0	0	71
Least Sandpiper	0	0	0	144	11,976	258	10,635	5,911	957	312	8	0	30,181
White-rumped Sandpiper	0	0	0	0	162	183	4	47	48	44	7	0	495
Baird's Sandpiper	0	0	0	0	4	0	8	78	159	34	3	0	286
Pectoral Sandpiper	0	0	160	22,748	1,283	2	2,166	20,403	7,114	4,511	127	0	58,514
Dunlin	0	0	3	25,263	190,811	2,737	47	31	286	34,514	51,090	6	304,788
Curlew Sandpiper	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	3	1	0	0	0	8
Stilt Sandpiper	0	0	0	1	15	8	568	2,266	998	78	0	0	4,034
Unidentified <i>Calidris</i>	0	0	0	0	247	0	500	1,405	40	0	0	0	2,192
Buff-breasted Sandpiper	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	17	32	1	0	0	50
Ruff	0	0	0	0	2	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	5
Short-billed Dowitcher	0	0	0	39	3,097	91	18,843	11,443	2,831	109	0	0	36,453
Long-billed Dowitcher	0	0	0	0	1	1	6	196	684	2,741	572	0	4,201
Unidentified <i>Limonas</i>	0	0	0	3	4	4	0	0	882	625	100	0	1,618
Wilson's Snipe	0	0	13	852	8	0	14	56	72	227	50	2	1,294
American Woodcock	0	0	0	3	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4
Wilson's Phalarope	0	0	0	0	19	1	29	233	55	14	0	0	351
Red-necked Phalarope	0	0	0	0	19	0	2	76	65	1	0	0	163
Red Phalarope	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	9	0	0	0	0	10
Total Individuals	0	0	257	59,074	245,723	9,230	80,733	113,468	38,977	52,468	53,799	9	655,738
Total Species	0	0	5	21	32	26	30	34	31	29	18	3	36

Table 2. 1989-2002 western Lake Erie shorebird survey results (by year) from Michael R. Bolton and John Szanto.

	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	Total
Black-bellied Plover	1,030	39	518	172	691	172	125	141	30	297	751	669	2,324	390	7,219
American Golden-Plover	372	11	79	0	326	168	107	1	0	70	1,868	2,172	533	10	5,717
Snowy Plover	0	0	0	0	2	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3
Semipalmated Plover	1,880	397	3,806	128	1,878	1,351	383	230	131	353	171	3,267	2,614	1,529	18,118
Killdeer	2,440	1,422	2,484	868	1,231	2,036	675	955	1,014	691	10,332	2,253	11,999	5,851	44,251
American Avocet	26	1	16	0	4	8	2	2	3	2	6	5	5	0	80
Greater Yellowlegs	485	312	839	241	323	464	455	251	340	510	614	1,128	1,302	691	7,555
Lesser Yellowlegs	11,441	2,506	9,507	610	863	4,302	824	1,231	2,813	1,494	5,173	4,770	9,041	4,886	59,461
Solitary Sandpiper	51	25	57	7	65	16	8	8	12	7	9	63	96	8	432
Willet	12	6	35	0	2	7	5	5	0	0	9	9	1	0	91
Spotted Sandpiper	335	258	322	85	178	144	47	125	79	37	100	119	223	119	2,151
Upland Sandpiper	0	3	2	2	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	3	0	2	13
Willet	328	0	0	0	5	2	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	0	338
Hudsonian Godwit	23	2	1	2	5	2	0	0	0	0	7	4	6	12	64
Marbled Godwit	11	5	1	1	1	10	0	0	0	0	1	5	0	3	38
Ruddy Turnstone	648	22	128	93	185	245	0	40	7	26	4	31	30	21	1,480
Red Knot	106	2	11	0	7	14	0	0	0	0	31	77	16	38	302
Sanderling	238	12	87	0	8	88	25	164	0	137	117	179	1,132	7	2,194
Semipalmated Sandpiper	10,246	3,251	5,675	412	2,183	6,062	1,679	5,366	331	3,458	2,001	5,177	5,479	9,929	61,313
Western Sandpiper	8	7	22	0	7	12	1	0	4	1	4	1	3	1	71
Least Sandpiper	2,724	344	3,613	148	1,371	660	162	475	622	277	2,751	0,540	4,988	2,506	30,181
White-rumped Sandpiper	193	29	31	1	25	5	17	4	35	10	14	46	58	27	495
Baird's Sandpiper	96	9	23	2	10	34	3	2	0	42	35	3	53	14	286
Pectoral Sandpiper	5,781	455	10,609	246	669	4,099	2,685	450	666	2,421	3,875	3,863	18,921	3,774	58,514
Dunlin	27,521	4,323	12,904	3,386	20,618	2,589	15,574	19,331	12,357	7,623	20,945	37,205	61,660	57,752	304,788
Curlew Sandpiper	4	1	2	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	8
Stilt Sandpiper	799	224	414	8	90	1,006	74	65	12	33	99	32	655	613	4,034
Unidentified <i>Calidris</i>	21	1,177	394	0	100	0	50	200	0	0	0	250	0	0	2,192
Buff-breasted Sandpiper	1	1	4	0	2	20	0	4	0	10	0	6	2	0	50
Ruff	1	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	5
Short-billed Dowitcher	7,019	1,902	4,093	1,394	1,615	3,975	1,495	1,338	1,581	452	4,857	1,819	2,955	36,453	
Long-billed Dowitcher	182	582	443	720	5	537	160	27	1	8	281	124	319	812	4,201
Unidentified <i>Limonas</i>	73	61	83	750	0	0	40	120	0	0	488	0	3	0	1,618
Wilson's Snipe	149	60	247	18	18	206	81	17	55	4	137	153	49	100	1,294
American Woodcock	0	3	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4
Wilson's Phalarope	135	73	51	2	6	18	1	6	2	4	0	1	4	48	351
Red-necked Phalarope	36	21	42	0	0	26	14	2	1	6	3	0	7	5	163
Red Phalarope	10	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	10
Total Individuals	74,295	16,546	56,545	9,276	32,495	28,238	24,693	30,591	20,999	18,006	54,764	72,948	123,269	92,062	655,738
Total Species	33	32	33	22	32	28	25	26	21	28	28	29	30	25	36



This American woodcock allowed itself to be photographed at Killdeer Plains Wildlife Area in Wyandot County in March 2003. Photo by Ron Sempier.

Table 3. 1989-2002 Ottawa National Wildlife Refuge shorebird survey results (by year) from Michael R. Bolton and John Szanto.

	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	Total
Black-bellied Plover	137	17	243	156	134	33	8	81	17	61	781	572	2,230	359	4,819
American Golden-Plover	122	8	10	0	76	74	0	1	0	0	161	525	533	10	1,520
Sensory Plover	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
Semipalmated Plover	113	70	634	54	948	153	94	130	122	46	121	2,540	2,604	1,514	9,143
Killdeer	521	662	745	628	993	573	183	563	669	161	9,876	1,654	11,620	4,991	33,849
American Avocet	25	0	0	0	4	0	0	1	2	0	6	0	5	0	43
Greater Yellowlegs	229	152	251	209	293	300	157	194	318	108	443	334	1,043	639	4,672
Lesser Yellowlegs	363	538	696	484	807	266	207	912	2,718	313	4,607	1,246	9,027	4,652	26,836
Solitary Sandpiper	17	12	35	6	61	16	4	8	12	1	5	52	96	6	331
Willet	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	7	9	1	0	19
Spotted Sandpiper	78	104	145	60	147	122	34	94	41	10	85	77	216	107	1,320
Upland Sandpiper	0	3	2	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	9
Wormbird	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	3
Hudsonian Godwit	11	0	0	2	2	0	0	0	0	0	7	4	6	12	44
Marbled Godwit	4	0	0	0	1	2	0	0	0	0	4	0	3	0	14
Ruddy Turnstone	13	15	1	0	54	17	0	33	7	11	2	30	30	19	232
Red Knot	2	0	0	0	5	2	0	0	0	0	2	6	38	0	55
Sanderling	30	10	4	0	3	0	0	152	0	0	117	134	1,132	7	1,589
Semipalmated Sandpiper	761	302	192	8	1,265	79	30	4,460	284	17	1,396	512	5,578	9,658	34,755
Western Sandpiper	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	3	0	4	0	3	1	0	12
Least Sandpiper	133	135	188	71	642	61	47	352	263	8	2,465	8,063	4,921	1,624	18,973
White-rumped Sandpiper	8	1	3	0	4	0	0	4	35	0	10	32	58	27	182
Horned Sandpiper	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	35	0	53	13	115
Pectoral Sandpiper	443	212	1,293	231	604	1,599	1,716	43	575	1,203	3,566	1,776	18,466	3,510	35,237
Dunlin	6,228	2,699	2,102	714	10,795	819	5,084	18,136	12,265	1,410	17,836	13,842	60,638	55,731	228,293
Curlew Sandpiper	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Silt Sandpiper	46	20	0	1	89	0	0	65	3	0	99	11	655	613	1,602
Unidentified <i>Calidris</i>	21	125	64	0	100	0	0	200	0	0	0	0	0	0	510
Buff-breasted Sandpiper	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	2	0	8
Ruff	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	3
Short-billed Dowitcher	323	236	230	236	964	112	22	1,015	520	179	4,672	718	1,919	2,150	13,236
Long-billed Dowitcher	53	570	410	260	0	205	0	27	1	0	281	123	319	812	3,041
Unidentified <i>Limonastrea</i>	40	4	0	350	0	0	0	120	0	0	488	0	3	0	1,005
Wilson's Snipe	116	55	213	14	12	160	2	2	27	2	81	0	16	100	800
American Woodcock	0	3	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4
Wilson's Phalarope	10	2	4	0	5	0	0	6	2	0	0	0	4	45	78
Red-necked Phalarope	0	0	0	0	0	3	0	2	1	0	2	0	7	4	19
Total Individuals	9,828	5,959	7,467	3,486	17,953	4,578	7,588	26,596	17,905	3,534	47,352	52,264	121,208	86,636	412,354
Total Species	25	25	22	17	28	26	15	23	21	15	28	22	30	25	35



This Wilson's snipe was one of several utilizing a wet field in Scioto County this spring. Digiscoped photo by Joe Hammond on 15 March 2003.

## Recent Actions of the Ohio Bird Records Committee

James S. McCormac

ODNR-DNAP, 1889 Fountain Square Court, Columbus, OH 43224  
jim.mccormac@dnr.state.oh.us

The Ohio Bird Records Committee exists to increase knowledge of Ohio's birdlife by validating records, maintaining archives for researchers of Ohio records of occurrences of rare bird species, and establishing the official list of Ohio bird species. The OBRC relies vitally on help from Ohio's field birders who send in details of their sightings of rare birds. Birds unsatisfactorily documented or not subjected to peer review by the Committee cannot be added to official Ohio records, nor will they be attributed in *The Ohio Cardinal*. The OBRC establishes the Review List, which includes all species encountered infrequently enough in the state as to require documentation (specimen, photo, sound recording, and/or full written descriptions from witnesses) for their inclusion in the scientific record. As customary for a spring issue of the *Cardinal*, the full Review List appears at the end of this report.

The OBRC does not review sightings as such, of course, only documentations of sightings. The Committee cannot decide if a given species was seen and correctly identified, but only if the documentation made available from those present at the sighting verifies, for the historical record, the species' occurrence at the time. All documentations received, together with Committee actions thereon, are archived for researchers. All these records—with the sole exception of the identities of Committee members on vote sheets—are available to the public upon request of the Secretary.

Current members of the OBRC are Micki Dunakin (Antwerp), Joe Hammond (Columbus), Rob Harlan (Parma Heights), Ned Keller (Clevés), Jay Lehman (Cincinnati), Greg Links (Temperance, Michigan), Jim McCormac (Columbus), Kevin Metcalf (Chardon), Sue Tackett (Brookville), Elliot Tramer (Whitehouse), and Sean Zadar (Parma Heights). A summary of actions taken since the last published report follows. Names of observers submitting acceptable documentation are supplied in each case.

### Accepted Records

In order to be accepted, records require a minimum of nine accept votes from the 11-member committee.

**Northern Gannet** *Morus bassanus*—Lorain Harbor, Lorain County, 10 January 2003. Observer: John Pogacnik. This record comes right after last fall's invasion, and is the 16<sup>th</sup> record since 1980.

**Ross's Goose** *Chen rossii*—Montgomery County, 11-12 January 2003. Observer: David Dister.

**Ross's Goose** *C. rossii*—Hueston Woods State Park, Butler County, 7 March 2003. Observers: David and Jill Russell. Ohio now averages two or three reports annually, and this species may soon be removed from the review list.

**Black-headed Gull** *Larus ridibundus*—Lakeshore Reservation, Lake County, 19 January 2003. Observer: John Pogacnik. There have been over 30 records in the last two decades, and this species may soon qualify for removal from the list of review species.