

## BIRD NOTES FROM WHITEFISH POINT, MICHIGAN.

BY W. BRYANT TYRRELL.

WHITEFISH POINT is located in Chippewa County, in the upper peninsula of Michigan. It is a point of land bounded on the east by Whitefish Bay and on the north by Lake Superior, with the hazy blue hills of the Canadian shore, about eighteen miles away, visible on clear days.

My attention was first called to Whitefish Point as a migration route by a reproduction of a photograph in one of the Detroit Sunday papers, in the Spring of 1927. The photograph was of Curren Hawkins standing beside a waist-high pile of Hawks which he had shot in one day for the bounty of fifty cents per head. That bounty has since been recalled.

A glance at the map will show why Whitefish Point is a natural migration route. The birds coming north through the lower peninsula of Michigan concentrate at the Straits of Mackinac. From there they continue north across the fifty miles or more of the northern peninsula, follow the shore of Whitefish Bay to the Point, cross the eighteen miles of Lake Superior to the Canadian shore, and then on to their nesting grounds further north.

To reach Whitefish Point one can go either by rail or automobile to Eckerman; if by rail, the mail truck will take you to the Point.

When I arrived at Eckerman I was surprised to see a flock of Evening Grosbeaks, (*Hesperiphona v. vespertina*) feeding on the ground in front of one of the stores. On inquiring, I was told that the birds are there the entire year and that there are often as many as eighty at one time. The parent birds are said to often bring their young, indicating that they must nest in the region. The finding of five nests at Whitefish Point is reported by J. S. Ligon in 'The Auk,' 1923, pp. 314-316. The people about the store are in the habit of tossing out to these birds coffee grounds and, what seemed strange to me, coarse granular salt. I questioned several persons, but they all said it was quite true and at their suggestion I myself threw out a handful of salt. The birds came and appeared to be eating it. I did not collect any of the birds to prove by chemical

examination that they actually ate salt but the people were positive that the birds were attracted more by the salt than by the coffee grounds.

The distance from Eckerman to Whitefish Point is only 37 miles. For the first seventeen miles, to the town of Emerson, the road is fairly good, though narrow and winding, and runs for the most part through virgin hardwood forest, where may be found the home of the Northern Pileated Woodpecker (*Ceophloeus pileatus abieticola*). Frequently a doe or a fawn is seen feeding along the road and at the approach of the car will stop alert, head up, ears thrown forward, with one fore foot raised ready to bound off into the dim depths of the forest. From Emerson to Whitefish Point the road is one of the worst I have ever travelled. It is merely two zigzag, bumpy, sandy ruts, over which the car bumps and stalls in the soft sand. Most of the country has been logged and some of it has recently been ravaged by fire. What a desolate place this burnt over area is, with its charred stumps and fallen logs standing out black against the sparse green vegetation on the sandy ground. At Sheldrake, about two-thirds of the way between Emerson and Whitefish Point, the road crosses the Sheldrake River, which winds off to the west through a series of sandy ridges with swamps between, where Wilson's Snipe (*Capella delicata*) nests, as well as the Sandhill Crane (*Grus canadensis tabida*) a bird not as rare as some people seem to think—we saw six in one afternoon.

The town of Whitefish Point is about two miles south of the actual point and is a most peculiar place, consisting of about twenty houses and a few stores, most of which are spread out through the woods along two or three miles of a winding sand road which parallels the Lake Superior shore. The people are mostly fishermen, and a number of the houses are set in little clearings and often as far as half a mile from the nearest neighbor.

The Point itself is a sand spit running out into the Lake, on which Herring Gulls (*Larus argentatus smithsonianus*) can usually be seen. To the south the shore of Whitefish Bay is of fine sand, on which shore-birds throng. There as late as June 5, 1930, flocks of Sanderlings (*Crocethia alba*), Least Sandpipers (*Pisobia minutilla*), Ruddy Turnstones, (*Arenaria interpres morinella*), Black-bellied

Plover (*Squatarola squatarola*), and Knots (*Calidris canutus rufus*) were seen, with a few Spotted Sandpipers (*Actitis macularia*) and many Killdeers (*Oxyechus v. vociferus*).

To the west, along the Lake Superior shore, which is mostly gravel from pebbles to stones a few inches in diameter, few birds are to be found. There I saw only a few Least and Spotted Sandpipers. Back of the Point are the lighthouse and the Coast Guard station and beyond these along either shore, are a few sand dunes, the height of which does not exceed sixty feet.

Extending south, back of the dunes, along the Lake Superior shore, is a wooded region composed mostly of Jack pine, broken by small swampy areas. In this wooded region the birds congregate by the thousands before migrating north across Lake Superior.

It was in these Jack pines that I saw hundreds—if not thousands—of Blue Jays (*Cyanocitta c. cristata*) on the morning of June 5, 1930. It was a dull cloudy morning with a chilly northwest wind blowing off Lake Superior. When we arrived at the Point, soon after daylight, the birds, mostly Blue Jays, though there were a few Evening Grosbeaks (*Hesperiphona v. vespertina*), White-winged Crossbills (*Loxia leucoptera*), Cedar Waxwings (*Bombycilla cedrorum*), Sparrows and Warblers; were exceedingly restless, apparently waiting to go north but not caring to venture across in a northwest wind. The Blue Jays made very little noise but were constantly milling around, usually in flocks of varying size. A flock would form and fly off towards the lighthouse, circling and rising all the time until when they were over the lighthouse they were several hundred feet high. There they would continue to circle and then would come quietly but quickly back into the pines, only to repeat the same procedure in a short while. By the middle of the morning they had broken up into small flocks and gone off into the woods for the day to feed, congregating again in the evening. Each morning the same maneuvers took place until the morning of June 11 when the wind changed to the northeast and the weather became much warmer. On this date the birds were again circling though flying so high that at times they were almost out of sight. I did not see a single flock actually start and fly off across the lake, but on the morning of the 12th there was hardly a bird to be found in the Jack pines.

The most spectacular migrants at Whitefish Point are Hawks. It has been reported that at times there have been hundreds and even thousands of these beautiful and majestic birds in view at one time—a thrilling sight. I have never seen the Hawk migration at its height, but the information which I have about it is from one who has seen it for years, who is a keen observer of nature and whose word and observations are to be trusted. The man of whom I speak is Mr. Curren Hawkins. I have had a good many enjoyable field trips with him and he has often talked of his experiences while collecting Hawks for the bounty.

Mrs. Hawkins writes as follows:

“The flight starts in the spring, about the last of April, when the warm south wind blows. Then come the big Hawks by thousands, the Rough-legs and Red-tails first. Some days they fly low in heavy wind while at other times they are high and circle like swarms of bees in the air. The Broad-wings are also among the first to fly, then the Cooper’s, Duck Hawks, Swainson’s and Red-shouldered straggle along with the rest, though not in great numbers. The last to fly are the Sharp-shinned and a few Goshawks, but the Sharp-shinned come by thousands. Great Blue Herons and Night Herons also come in the Hawk flight, and to wind up the procession are the Blue Jays and the Canada Jays, which also come by thousands before the Sharp-shinned flight is over.”

As Mrs. Hawkins wrote, the smaller and more predacious Hawks arrive last, following the hordes of small birds on which they prey. With a change in the weather of several days duration, and especially with a chilly northwest wind, the Hawks working up from the south congregate in the Jack pines near the end of the Point. There they wait for a return of favorable weather with a northeast wind, for they seldom cross with other than a head wind. When such a change comes they sail out of the pines one or two at a time and, flying low over the tree tops and dunes, circle off towards the Point and on across Lake Superior. Mr. Hawkins tells me that he has, on favorable days, stood practically in one spot and killed an unbelievable number. His record is over 300 Sharp-shins in one day. Hawks that have been taken at the Point include Marsh Hawk (*Circus hudsonius*); Sharp-shinned Hawk (*Accipiter v. velox*); Cooper’s Hawk (*Accipiter cooperi*); Goshawk (*Astur a.*

*atricapillus*); Red-tailed Hawk (*Buteo b. borealis*); Red-shouldered Hawk (*Buteo l. lineatus*); Swainson's Hawk (*Buteo swainsoni*); Broad-winged Hawk (*Buteo p. platypterus*); Rough-legged Hawk (*Buteo lagopus s. johannis*); Duck Hawk (*Falco peregrinus anatum*); Sparrow Hawk (*Falco s. sparverius*); and the Osprey (*Pandion haliaetus carolinensis*). The Bald Eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus alascanus*) has also been seen.

About noon on June 11, 1930, a beautiful clear warm day with a gentle northeast wind blowing, while Hawkins and I were getting ready to eat lunch on the banks of the Sheldrake River, some seven miles southwest of the Point, we saw what were very likely the last stragglers of the Hawk migration. We were at a bend in the Sheldrake River where bird life was more abundant than anywhere I had been, except at the Point itself. Circling high above us were six Hawks, one Rough-legged, one Duck Hawk and four Broad-wings. We watched them as they continued to circle until they were lost to view in the northeast.

Another interesting bird to be seen on Lake Superior in the spring and which is found nesting on most of the inland lakes is the Common Loon (*Gavia i. immer*). Hundreds of these birds are destroyed annually by the fishermen, though in a good many cases unintentionally. The Loons steal the herring that are used as bait on the set lines and usually get the hook lodged, not in the aperture of bill or throat but externally through both nostrils, piercing the septum. I saw three that were caught in this way. Thus caught they soon drown though not until they have managed to tangle up a good many feet of line. I collected one that had about eighty feet of line wound around its leg.

On one occasion we watched a pair of Loons from a bluff above the water. The wing of one of them had been injured for when he rose with his tail resting on the water and fanned his wings, as they often do, we could see that part of one was gone. As we watched them we saw a dark area moving in the water—a school of fish. Soon the birds found the fish and kept diving and pursuing them until the school disappeared.

Another time I was walking along the shore and did not notice a pair of Loons three or four hundred feet off shore. I stopped to wipe my glasses with a white handkerchief and in the operation

more or less waived it. When I put the glasses on I noticed the Loons swimming toward me, I stood still, waving the handkerchief and watched them, to see how close they would come. They came slowly to within about one hundred feet of me, decided that I would do them no harm, and went about their feeding. They would swim along with their heads under water for a way, raise up, look around, and then swim on again. Back and forth they went, sometimes diving and coming up some distance away, but always more or less together. They were no doubt a mated pair. When I moved, they both dived and came up several hundred yards away and widely separated. They soon swam together and went off down the lake, paying no more attention to the handkerchief I continued to wave.

There are many other interesting birds at Whitefish Point, such as the Short-billed Marsh Wren (*Cistothorus stellaris*) which I believe nests there though we were unable to locate a nest. An immature Raven (*Corvus corax principalis*) was taken on July 9, 1929. The beautiful song of the Hermit Thrush (*Hylocichla guttata faxoni*) was heard every day and a nest with three eggs was found under the low spreading branches of a small spruce. More than one hundred Snowy Owls (*Nyctea nyctea*) were reported seen in one day in the spring of 1931 by Mr. Hawkins while visiting his traps.

Thus you may readily see why I am always looking forward to the next visit to Whitefish Point.

*Catonsville, Md.*