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THE SHORE BIRDS OF SANTA BARBARA

By J. HOOPER BOWLES and ALFRED B. HOWELL

WITH THREE PHOTOS BY J. H. BOWLES

SANTA BARBARA, although apparently presenting conditions no more favorable for a heavy migration of shore birds than most other parts of the southern California coast, seems to be a preferred stopping place for the members of this order.

Mr. Bowles has made numerous observations among the *Limicolae* of this region since November, 1909, and work was carried on by both authors with the waders exclusively from August 8 until September 18 of the present year. No observations are recorded after December 1, 1911.

Field work was done at a shallow brackish slough near the beach at Goleta, a point ten miles west of Santa Barbara, at a large, but very shallow fresh-water marsh within the city limits, herein designated as "the flats", and at an extensive tide marsh with miles of tide creeks near Carpenteria, some eight miles east of town. The intermediate beaches were thoroughly explored. There were no rocky stretches along the shore, but occasionally outcropping boulders, or reefs, that were for the most part covered with tar. This substance floats up from a few miles down the coast and is a source of annoyance to all the water birds, all too frequently adhering to their feathers and causing a lingering death.

It is an interesting and probably a well-known fact that the birds of this group are much more suspicious of danger threatening from above than of anything approaching on their own level. The Black-bellied Plover, for example, will take instant flight if there is the slightest movement of the tall grass or bushes at the top of a cliff overlooking their feeding grounds. It may also be of value to state that they pay far less attention to a movement in the water than to one on shore, as we found it an easy matter to approach within a short distance of the most wary by wading towards them in the tide creeks, submerged to our shoulders.

Mr. Bowles has made a careful examination of the contents of the stomachs of all specimens taken, and the number of injurious insects, beetles in particular, destroyed by this order of birds is surprising. Beetles, squash-bugs, etc., were

found in the following species: Red Phalarope, Northern Phalarope, Wilson Phalarope, Pectoral Sandpiper, Baird Sandpiper, Red-backed Sandpiper, Western Sandpiper, Killdeer, Semipalmated Plover and Snowy Plover; the plovers in particular had eaten very little else. Hence it may be seen how exceedingly beneficial these birds are from an economic standpoint, making it of doubtful wisdom to include them among the gamebirds.

Under each heading is given the earliest and latest dates, in both spring and fall, at which the species was observed.

We wish especially to acknowledge our indebtedness to Mr. Bradford Torrey, of Santa Barbara, for numerous important dates which are noted in our list. The illustration kindly donated by Mr. W. Leon Dawson is only one of many that he took in preparation for his coming work on "The Birds of California".

Phalaropus fulicarius. Red Phalarope. Irregular spring and fall migrant; rare, except during late fall of 1911. Spring: May 25, 1911 (Torrey) to May 31, 1911 (Torrey). Fall: September 26, 1910, to November 30, 1911.

Of the three phalaropes the present species is by far the most interesting; indeed its habits are more varied than those of any other shore bird. The fall of 1911 was a most unusual one for many of the *Limicolae*, including Red Phalaropes. Mr. Torrey recorded their arrival on October 29, and they gradually became more numerous until November 8 when the heaviest flight occurred. The day was overcast, with a strong southwesterly wind, and Mr. Bowles visited both Carpenteria and Santa Barbara flats. Phalaropes were everywhere, in the ocean kelp half a mile from shore, on the beach, and swiming about on the inside esteros, six or eight hundred being a very conservative estimate of their numbers. The flight was evidently a very large one, extending over a considerable stretch of coast, as a few days later they were found to be equally abundant at Goleta. This flight must have originated at a great distance, as all birds examined upon their arrival, were in a most pitiable state of emaciation, with the merest scrap of flesh on the breast. Many were so exhausted that they lay on the beach with only the smallest attempt to get out of the way, while several were picked up dead that showed no signs of injury. A careful examination of the intestines showed no evidence of tapeworm or disease of any kind.

Their feeding habits were varied and most interesting. They could be found on the wet mud flats with the Pipits and Least Sandpipers, on the ocean beach with the Sanderlings, or swimming and "whirling" on the esteros in true phalarope style. In obtaining their food in deeper water they frequently thrust their heads well beneath the surface, occasionally tilting their tails skyward and dabbling like so many little ducks. Neither of the other phalaropes were seen to much more than dip the tip of the beak below the surface. Their diet may truly be called animal, mineral and vegetable, for in their stomachs was found an abundance of beetles, bugs, flies, mud larvae, tiny snails, seeds, and small particles of sand. Considering that they are rather maritime, they show a great adaptability when ashore.

Lobipes lobatus. Northern Phalarope. Not common in the spring migration, but swarming in the fall. Rare in the tide marshes. Spring: May 8, 1911 (Torrey) to June 16, 1911. Fall: August 4, 1911 (Torrey) to November 16, 1911.

Soon after their arrival in numbers, which occurred late in August this year, they began the practice of "whirling" to obtain food. As would seem obvious, it was done only in shallow water in order that the miniature whirlpools thus created would disturb the food at the bottom and draw it to the surface. However, for this practice to be a success certain conditions must be propitious; for example, on

cloudy days little or no "whirling" was observed. These tiny whirling dervishes spin around so fast and so continuously that when a good sized flock is in full action, it makes one fairly dizzy to watch them. In the latter part of September fully a thousand of these dainty mites were congregated on the flats, and scores of them would weave busily back and forth among the clumps of water growth, where with a little patience, one could approach within a few feet of them. One individual was seen to indulge in quite a little play by himself, bucking up and down in the water, submerging his head, rolling upon his side, and tearing madly around in a truly ludicrous way.

Steganopus tricolor. Wilson Phalarope. Rather rare but regular spring and fall migrant. Seen only in fresh water. Spring: May 20, 1911. Fall: July 22 to September 8, 1910. This phalarope seems much less inclined towards swimming than either of the other two. Indeed, with few exceptions, all seen were walking

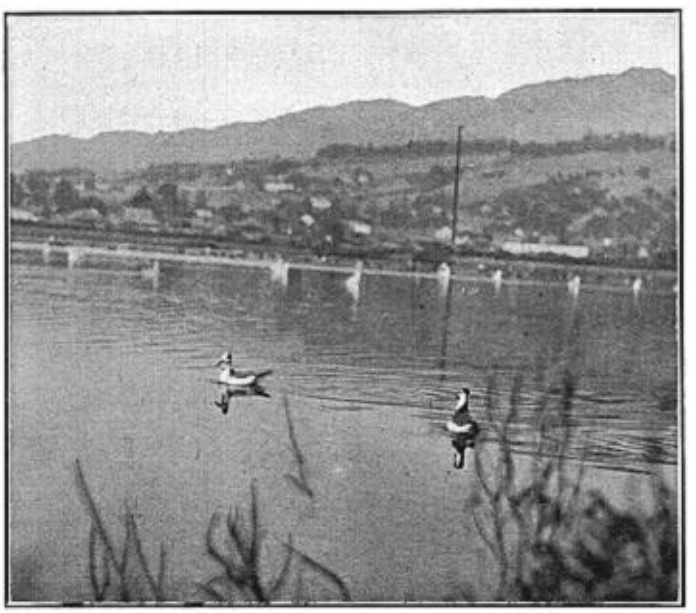

Fig. 2. RED PHALAROPES "WHIRLING"

about on the mud or in the shallow water. Their long yellow legs, together with the fact that they kept mostly by themselves, cause the fall birds to be easily mistaken for Western Solitary Sandpipers.

Recurvirostra americana. Avocet. Regular, but not common spring and fall migrant. Spring: one bird on March 18, 1911. Two others on May 20, 1911. The March bird was in winter plumage, and remained in the same locality for nearly two weeks. The last seen were in full summer dress. Fall: one seen September 20, 1911 (Torrey). Two seen October 12, and one November 1, 1911.

Himantopus mexicanus. Black-necked Stilt. Regular, but never a common, spring migrant. Never noted in fall. Spring: April 14 to May 4, 1911.

Gallinago delicata. Wilson Snipe. Regular but not common in fall, winter and spring. Spring: latest, April 27, 1911. Fall: earliest, October 27, 1911. There seems to be no good reason why these birds should not be abundant here, but such never appears to be the case.

Macrorhamphus griseus scolopaceus. Long-billed Dowitcher. Abundant spring and fall migrant. Spring: March 10 to May 2, 1910. Fall: July 18, 1910, to November 1, 1911. A specimen taken by Mr. W. Leon Dawson on August 11, 1911, was the only one seen by us this fall that was still in nuptial plumage. Nearly every day flocks of from three to forty-one individuals were present. They showed the greatest preference for the tide marsh, while none at all were seen on the ocean beaches. This was one of the tamest species noted, being almost, if not quite, as confiding as the Least and Western Sandpipers.

Tringa canutus. Knot. Seen only during the fall of 1911. The first seen were two males that were collected by Mr. Bowles on the ocean beach August 21. Two more were seen on the 29th; one of them collected still had considerable reddish on the breast. One bird was seen on the 30th, another September 5, and still another on the 7th, which last stayed in the same locality for at least three days. There is no spring record for this species in southern California, and we have been unable to find any for the state.

Pisobia maculata. Pectoral Sandpiper. Rare, but evidently a regular spring and fall migrant. Mr. Bowles saw one April 14, and another September 8, 1910, the latter being collected on the following day. This bird was, on both occasions, feeding on the ocean beach with some Killdeer, a most unusual situation for this lover of the grassy marshes. On September 20, 1909, Mr. Torrey saw three together, his latest date being September 23, 1909 (CONDOR XII, 1910, p. 45).

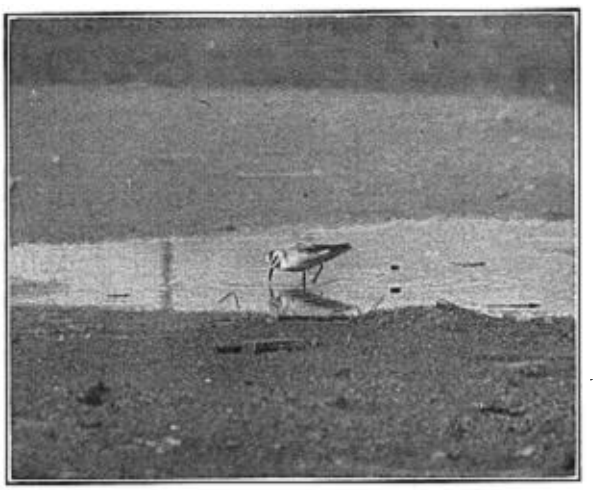

Fig. 3. RED PHALAROPE WADING

At least two individuals were seen in 1911, one August 18 on the beach, the other August 20 at Goleta. What we believe to have been the same bird as the last mentioned stayed at least until September 20.

Pisobia bairdi. Baird Sandpiper. Regular fall migrant; sometimes common. Not recorded in the spring. Fall: August 10, 1910, to September 7, 1911. Mr. Howell collected our first specimen of this species on August 11, 1911, feeding with a flock of Least Sandpipers.

During 1910 Mr. Bowles saw only seven, but this year they were common on the flats and at Goleta, though none were seen on the tide marsh. They fed with the smaller sandpipers at times, though perhaps more often off by themselves, while once at our arrival three of them left the slough with a party of Killdeer to feed on the higher beach. Three or four could be found at any time between August 11 and September 4, while at least twelve, of which nine were in one flock, were on the flats September 2. As with the Knot, there seems to be no state record of this bird occuring in the spring. There seems to have been very little systematic collecting of shore birds done in the spring on this coast, but there remains a strong possibility of these two species having a different spring route to the north than by way of the California coast.

Pisobia minutilla. Least Sandpiper. Abundant from late July until late March, though much less numerous in winter. July 18 to April 1, 1910. It seems strange that this, the smallest of the order, should be one of the few that remain to winter with us. One frequently finds single birds, or two or three together, pattering around the wet kelp on the ocean beach, often waiting to examine an intruder from under the very feet of the latter before taking wing.

Pelidna alpina sakhalina. Red-backed Sandpiper. Occurs in both spring and fall, but is never very common. Spring: March 10, 1910, to April 20, 1911. Fall, September 9 to November 23, 1911. A female was taken September 9, 1910, in almost full nuptial dress, after which none were noted until the 18th, when one was seen in winter plumage. It it hard to understand why these birds do not winter with us here, since Mr. Bowles found it nothing unusual to see them in winter in the vicinity of Tacoma, Washington.

Ereunetes mauri. Western Sandpiper. Very abundant spring and fall migrant. Spring: February 28, 1910, to May 16, 1911. Fall: July 11, 1910, to December 5, 1909. Sometimes these little gleaners fairly swarm in their favorite haunts, and it is a beautiful sight, when some Marsh Hawk in search of mice flaps over them, to see the whole flock rise as one bird and go through precise evolutions of wheeling and fleeing up the shore, all the time twittering blithely.

Calidris leucophaea. Sanderling. Abundant winter resident of Santa Barbara, but for some reason not common at Carpenteria or Goleta. Earliest arrival July 29, 1910; last seen May 26, 1911, when most were in nuptial dress. One collected August 25, 1911, was still in breeding plumage. In spite of their numbers it is only by the rarest chance that we see any of these little fellows on the mud flats, for all of their time is spent on the ocean beaches. Frequently they may be found sunning themselves on the warm, dry sand, with a large company of Snowy Plovers, but their most characteristic occupation is chasing the retreating waves oceanward after stranded sandfleas, and in their turn being chased back up the beach by the incoming breakers.

Limosa fedoa. Marbled Godwit. Common fall migrant, but rather rare in spring and summer. Fall: August 20 to November 1, 1911. Although local residents have reported them occasionally in spring and summer, we have not seen them at those seasons excepting a single bird June 15, 1911. This one was exceedingly tame and, although well able to fly, remained on the beach for several days in company with the gulls.

Totanus melanoleucus. Greater Yellow-legs. Regular, but not common, spring and fall migrant. Rare in winter. Spring: March 20, 1911, to May 16, 1910. Fall: July 18, 1910, to January 2, 1911. A female shot August 29 was the only one noted by us this fall until October 14. Contrary to custom she was in an untalkative frame of mind.

Helodromas solitarius cinnamomeus. Western Solitary Sandpiper. Rare spring migrant, and usually not at all common in fall. Spring: one seen April 30, 1910. Fall: July 22, 1910, to September 7, 1911. The Solitary Sandpiper, more than any other shore bird, is inclined to restrict itself to the grassy mud flats and wet meadows, in fact we have never seen it on the ocean beach or open flats. This species, and the Spotted Sandpiper also, will sometimes dive and swim under water when wounded, using the wings as propellers in the same manner as do the ducks.

Catoptrophorus semipalmatus inornatus. Western Willet. Rare in spring migration, but very common in the fall; casual in summer, one seen by Mr. Torrey on June 24, 1910. Spring: April 16, 1910. Fall: July 25, 1911 (Torrey) to Novem-

ber 1, 1911. As a rule these birds were less wary than any of the other large waders, often showing a considerable degree of curiosity.

Heteractitis incanus. Wandering Tattler. Rare fall migrant. Seen September 5 and 15, 1911, and a male collected September 14, 1910. These birds were all very wild. Their rarity here is doubtless due to the absence of suitable feeding grounds.

Actitis macularius. Spotted Sandpiper. Very rare in spring, and never really common in fall. Fall: July 18 to September 17, 1910. On the latter date twelve birds were seen. About equally distributed on the mud flats and the more rocky portions of the ocean beach.

Numenius americanus. Long-billed Curlew. Regular spring and fall migrant, but never common. Spring: May 2, 1911. Fall: August 25, 1911, to October 15, 1910. The August bird remained in the same locality for several weeks, no others being seen there. He seemed to greatly prefer the company of the Western Willets to that of the very numerous Hudsonian Curlews, but was most often found feeding alone in the marsh. He was much more wary than either of the above

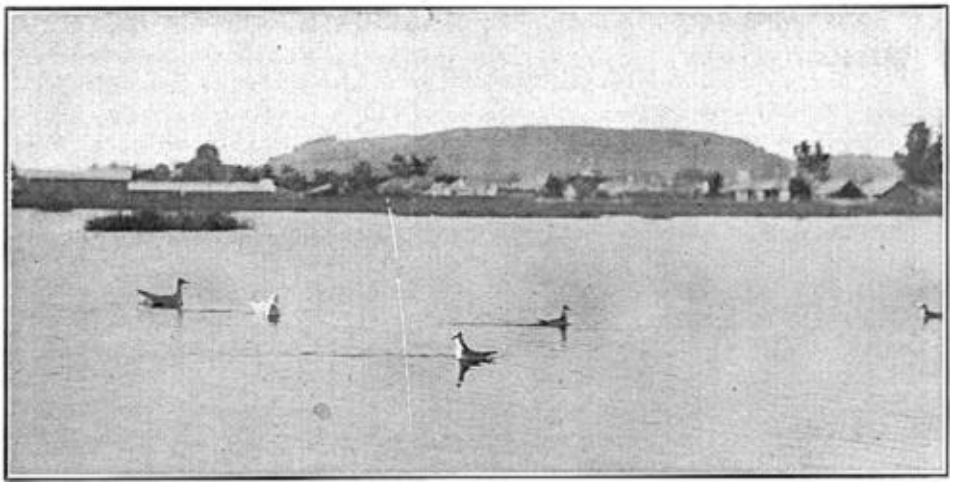

Fig. 4. NORTHERN PHALAROPES NEAR SANTA BARBARA

named species. As an illustration of how much the migration of this species is prolonged, it may be of interest to state that in central Washington Mr. Bowles found young out of the nest by the 12th of May.

Numenius hudsonicus. Hudsonian Curlew. Very abundant spring and fall migrant. Spring: March 2, 1910, to June 2, 1911. Fall: August 2, 1911, to October 15, 1910. These birds undoubtedly occur here in fall earlier and later than the above dates, but lack of time has prevented any personal records. In fact, large flocks were said to be present some two weeks before our August date. Upon their arrival from the north they were very wary, but gradually became less so, as was the case with several other species.

Squatarola squatarola. Black-bellied Plover. Regular migrant in spring and fall, but irregular as to numbers. A few probably winter. Spring: May 2, 1911. Fall: August 29 to November 25, 1911. This species was very common along a certain stretch of beach this fall, and on September 5 a flock of well over a hundred

individuals was seen, which would allow no closer an approach than two hundred yards, even by the most careful stalking. This flock remained a couple of weeks, dwindling slightly in numbers and becoming very much tamer. A male taken September 16 was still in almost complete nuptial plumage. By the first of October they had become so tame that one could readily walk on the open beach to within thirty yards of them.

Oxyechus vociferus. Killdeer. An abundant, noisy, and suspicious resident, serving as an alarm for all the feathered folk within hearing. A flock of these birds spent the nights on the lawn in front of the Potter Hotel during the first part of September, and always maintained an intermittent outcry until past midnight. There are occasionally heavy migrations, one of which occurred on October 10, 1911, when Mr. Bowles counted sixty-seven in a small pool on the mud flat, with many others in the vicinity.

Ægialitis semipalmata. Semipalmated Plover. Regular and fairly common spring and fall migrant. Spring: April 18 to May 16, 1910. Fall: July 12, 1910, to November 1, 1911. These immaculate little gentlemen were usually to be found in pairs and quartets in the vicinity of the sandpipers, but were considerably less inclined towards human company.

Ægialitis nivosa. Snowy Plover. Common resident, but much more abundant in winter than in summer. Appears in large nnmbers about the middle of December, at which times flocks of fifty or more individuals may be seen. The nesting season is a long one, as heavily incubated eggs were found from April 18 to July 28. They colonize to a very considerable extent, sometimes as many as six or eight pairs nesting within a small area of sandy beach. In the number of sets laid during the season it is probable that these birds are largely governed by the number destroyed. Owing to the small tidal waves that frequently sweep across the beaches, as well as sand drifted by the wind and eggs destroyed by animals, it seems a wonder that the poor creatures are able to bring up any families at all.

Aphriza virgata. Surf-bird. Mr. Howell took one male and one female on September 16, 1911, and Mr. W. Leon Dawson secured another. These were part of a flock of five that was feeding with two marbled Godwits. The remaining birds were remarkably tame and unsuspicious, allowing a close approach. At a distance we mistook them for Black Turnstones, being unable to see their breasts clearly because of the glare of the sun and sand. They seemed too large, however, and for the same reason, as well as because they were too stocky, they did not resemble Knots. This comparison of size is really the only way they can be identified at a distance, except when on the wing.

Arenaria interpres morinella. Ruddy Turnstone. Rare, as a rule, but not uncommon during the fall of 1911. Mr. Howell took the first specimen on August 28, 1911, and about a dozen more were seen in the next three weeks, the largest number noted at one time being a flock of five on September 12. This is unusual for Santa Barbara, as in 1910 none at all were observed, and it seems to be unusual for the rest of the state as well.

Arenaria melanocephala. Black Turnstone. Regular, but never common, fall migrant. None noted in spring. The earliest seen was one on July 29, 1910; the latest a flock of seven on October 15, 1910, in company with fifteen Hudsonian Curlew and two Marbled Godwits. Only two birds were seen in 1911; in fact the Ruddy Turnstones seemed to have almost entirely replaced *melanocephala* this fall.