Fall Shorebird Migration

Rich Stellwag

In nature, migration of birds is the most astonishing and mystical event to take place on planet Earth. Twice each year, billions of avian creatures fly vast distances south to north, then north to south, in an endless parade of beauty and magic.

While spring shorebird migration is mostly compacted into a very small date span in the last three weeks of April, that of fall is broadly protracted to flow for more than five months.

During a normal year, the first southbound waders arrive in central California in the last few days of June! Greater Yellowlegs, Least and Western Sandpipers, and Short-billed Dowitchers are often in the lead, with most of the other regular species beginning to appear in early July. (Exceptions: the first Long-billed Dowitchers of any age don't show up until late July, and Dunlins, all of which molt into basic plumage on the breeding range, are first seen here in mid-September).

Waves and Ages

Except for the first few juveniles of Willet and Long-billed Curlew (which have a short journey from nesting spots in the Great Basin to the coast), all migrant shorebirds from late June through late July are adults, and all of those first waves are passing through to more southerly wintering spots, some to South America.

The first young of most species can be detected in the flocks at the very end of July, and by late August, most of all the migrant dowitchers, peeps, and Semipalmated Plovers here were hatched just a few months earlier.

Black-bellied Plovers and both turnstones during this same time period, though, are still nearly all adults. By mid-September, the age ratio for all species is more balanced.

Early August opens a window of time when we may expect to see some of the more scarce species like Lesser Yellowlegs and Semipalmated and Baird's Sandpipers, followed in late August by Pectoral Sandpiper and maybe a Ruff, then from late September into November, a chance for Sharp-tailed Sandpiper. (Similarly, all individuals of these sorts of birds moving down the West Coast are juveniles, and all these species are essentially absent from the spring migration here. They go down the coast and up the interior... Can you think of why that might be?)

By mid-October and certainly into November, the fall shorebird migration has really wound down, and most birds are where they will spend the winter. This is the peak period, however, for the passage of hundreds of thousands of Red Phalaropes, mostly unseen, far offshore, and there could still be a migrant American Golden Plover concealed in a wintering group of its cousins, Pacific Golden Plovers.

Thoughts on Identifying Dowitchers

Timing: As said above, any dowitcher on the coast in June or the first three weeks of July is a Short-billed.

Habitat: During winter, Short-billeds in California only inhabit large tidal estuaries, while Long-billeds may be found in any water habitat, coastal or inland. Such distinctions do not apply during migration, and while Short-billeds are rarely inland or at fresh-water ponds, they may be found at sewer ponds, river mouths, salt ponds, and any tidal situation.

Voice: Long-billeds speak (kee-kee), while Short-billeds whistle (too or tu-tu-tu). The voices are very different. Long-billeds are more vocal than are Short-billeds and they usually call when flushed or in flight. Short-billeds vocalize less frequently. Dowitchers that are silent when flushed are probably Short-billeds.

Adults by plumage—basic: Forget it. Identification by voice is the only way to separate dowitchers in basic plumage.

Adults by plumage—alternate: Ventrally orange Long-billeds can be told from ventrally pinkish Short-billeds with experience. Long-billeds in full alternate plumage are fully orange below, including the belly and undertail coverts, and identifiable. However, birds in alternate plumage with colored breasts but white bellies and undertail coverts may not be identified on this character alone: they could be Long-billeds not yet in full bloom.

Juveniles by plumage: Once you age a dowitcher as a juvenile in its first fall, specific identification is easy. Look at the scapulars and tertials (the long flexible feathers that cover the closed wings). If these feathers contain orange laddering or “tiger barring,” (see drawing), the bird is a Short-billed. Juvenile Long-billeds have unmarked gray instead of orange-black in the interior of those feathers.
PRBO People

Annual Meeting

PRBO's 1999 Annual Meeting took place on Saturday, May 8th, and was attended by nearly 200 members, volunteers and friends. In the morning, our Palomarim Field Station hosted an Open House with bird-banding demonstrations, while staff biologist Dave Shuford led a bird walk for early birders on Pine Gulch Creek. At noon, a catered lunch was served outdoors at PRBO's beautiful headquarters, and a program of speakers began. Brand new Executive Director Ellie M. Cohen greeted the crowd, and former Board President Ted Eliot introduced our special guest, Dr. George Archibald of the International Crane Foundation. Following his fascinating talk about the conservation of threatened crane species worldwide, PRBO presented our 1999 awards to the following recipients: Founders, C.J. Ralph, PhD; Farallon, Eric Yarborough; Volunteer, Elsie Jensen and Ann Stone; Special Service, Janet Wessel; Special Friend, Henry Corning; Research, Larry Spear; Terrestrial, The Nature Conservancy; Corporate Friend, PG&E; Fund-raiser, Pam Cook; Foundation, National Fish & Wildlife Foundation. Congratulations and thank you to one and all!

New Footbridge

The Daniel Evans Nature Trail at our Palomarim Field Station received a major improvement this spring: a 24-foot footbridge across the fern-lined canyon of Arroyo Honda Creek. Under the direction of Ed Pohlman, four volunteers from Bolinas helped with the construction. Special thanks to Billy Cummings, Colin Frie, Steve MacArthur, and Chris Whitefield.

Next steps for the Nature Trail include restoration work along the banks, improving the trail, and new interpretive signs along the way. Come and visit!—Aaron Holmes, Biologist

Focus, continued

Bill length: A long-billed Short-billed Dowitcher's bill is longer than a short-billed Long-billed Dowitcher's bill. There is overlap in size, and while experienced shorebird fanatics may identify birds at the extremes, it is best for novice observers to avoid considering this feature.

Fall Shorebird Migration is pretty amazing and best experienced if one sits still by a good wetland and simply watches the parade. The action is constantly changing, as age groups and species assemblages, and if you stay long enough something rare and wonderful will happen.

Comings & Goings

With the start of fall migration, Deena Wade, PRBO's Development Associate, has finalized a decision to pursue her master's degree in writing at Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado. In her two-and-a-half years at PRBO, Deena has done outstanding work in her role as grant writer and in coordinating many of our special events. Her commitment to conservation biology and the work of PRBO biologists in the field has been heartfelt. We know you join us in wishing Deena everything wonderful in her "next assignment." We'll miss you, Deena! — Valorie Snook, Director of Development

New to our staff is Matt Leffert who serves in our membership department and will likely answer the phone if you call PRBO (at extension 10). A recent graduate of Dominican College in San Rafael, with a bachelor's degree in history, Matt is extremely handy with computer database systems. He loves hiking and surfing and has worked as a seasonal State Parks ranger. Matt is a lifelong resident of Marin Beach, where he now lives with his wife, Jessica Grace. Welcome aboard, Matt!