

August 16, 2005

## **The Wings of Summer**

When Henry David Thoreau observed “how early in the year it begins to be late,” he was not kidding. August is very much a month of summer becoming fall. I’m often hesitant to point this out, however, because some people get rather touchy on the subject of summer coming to a conclusion! One milestone of the changing seasons is the onset of bird migration. With thoughts of warm, South American beaches in their minds, shorebirds have already begun moving south. Commonly referred to as sandpipers or plovers, these are the small, often brown or gray wading birds that frequent the beaches and mudflats of shorelines and coastal regions. When you consider that the last tundra-bound shorebirds passed through the Kawarthas in early June, the turn-around time for accomplishing all of their reproductive duties is extraordinary.

Because the Arctic summer is so short, evolution has bestowed upon shorebirds a hurried lifestyle in order to complete nesting as quickly as possible. According to Dr. Erica Nol, a biology professor and shorebird expert at Trent University, most species engage in only a very brief courtship period. They also have extremely simple nests. Plovers tend to make shallow scrapes or depressions in the ground, while sandpipers often just fold the grass around in the shape of a nest. However, the time spent incubating the eggs is quite long, usually three weeks or more. This allows time for the chicks to develop more fully. When they hatch, they can leave the nest within a few hours and catch insects on their own by the next day. The role of the parents then is simply to provide warmth and protection. About 21 days later, the young will have already learned how to fly and will be totally on their own. In another couple of weeks, they will make the miraculous journey to Central or South America, without any guidance from adult birds. A case in point is the red knot. Breeding on Southampton Island at the top of Hudson’s Bay, the knot migrates all the way to Tierra del Fuego at the southern tip of Argentina.

So what has happened to the adults? One of the parents, usually the female, actually begins the southward migration shortly after the young are born. The second parent will depart after the young have fledged. For example, adult least sandpipers and greater yellowlegs typically arrive on their tundra nesting grounds in early June and depart no later than early August. However, individuals that fail to breed successfully may leave as soon as late June or early July. The young of these species don’t leave the nesting grounds until late August.

Shorebirds are extremely vulnerable. First of all, they have low fecundity. Of the four eggs they lay, only one or two of the young will survive even to the fledgling stage. Secondly, during migration, they concentrate in huge numbers at a small number of key stopover sites to feed such as the Bay of Fundy and Delaware Bay. A lot has been done in recent years to protect these sites from habitat destruction since the bird’s very survival depends upon them.

Because they often allow you to get extremely close and to take long, leisurely looks, shorebirds are especially interesting birds to study and observe. Their relative tameness is quite fortunate because some species can be a real challenge to identify. Among the most difficult are the so-called “peeps”, a group that includes the least and semipalmated sandpipers. Many times, I’ve had my scope or binoculars on one of these brown and gray enigmas, feeding quietly only metres away, and still not been certain of the species. Even after flipping through the field guide for five or 10 minutes and carefully checking all the plumages, the bird would still be standing there as if waiting for my decision. Identifying shorebirds is unlike any other type of birding. It demands time,

concentration and patience. Only a handful of species can be identified at a glance. The effort is worth it, however. There's a great deal of satisfaction when you finally feel sure about an identification, especially if you have found one of the rarer species. Also, the birds are incredibly beautiful in their own right, especially the finely detailed markings on the back feathers.

Feeding behaviour is one of many clues to their identity. Different bill lengths allow the various species to feed in different zones of the same habitat. For example, least sandpipers prefer feeding on the algae-covered mud; dunlins concentrate on the bare mud; dowitchers probe the mud in the shallow water; and greater yellowlegs take prey from the water's surface or use their long beaks to grab small fish. In this way, each species has its own niche and does not compete directly with another species for food resources.

Finding migrant shorebirds in the Kawarthas can be a bit of a challenge. Other than in the spring, when lesser and greater yellowlegs often turn up in flooded fields, we do not have a lot of quality shorebird habitat in this area. If you are lucky, you may find small numbers of fall migrants at local sewage lagoons or wetlands when low water levels expose the muddy, invertebrate-rich bottom. However, to be relatively certain of seeing a good mix of species, a trip to Presqu'ile Provincial Park on the shores of Lake Ontario at Brighton is recommended. The shoreline between Beach Three and Owen Point is managed specifically as shorebird habitat and often attracts large numbers of birds. Some of the species to be expected in August include lesser and greater yellowlegs, least, semipalmated and pectoral sandpipers and semipalmated plovers. Some of the other species that turn up regularly include short-billed dowitchers, Baird's sandpipers, white-rumped sandpipers and stilt sandpipers. Shorebird migration at Presqu'ile continues well into November when the much sought-after purple sandpipers begin arriving.

We do have five shorebird species in the Kawarthas that actually nest here. However, they do not gather in large flocks and, with the exception of the killdeer, tend to be rather inconspicuous. The spotted sandpiper, is quite common around lake edges and cottages. Its teetering walk and distinctive low flight with stiff, shallow wingbeats make this sandpiper an easy species to identify. The killdeer, a type of plover, can often be seen on shortgrass fields or bare dirt. It, too, is very distinctive with its double breast-band and loud "killdeer" call. The American woodcock, well known for its spring mating display, is a bird of dense cover within woods. With some searching, you can also find upland sandpipers. This is a bird of short grass fields that often perches on fence or telephone posts. Finally, the Wilson's snipe is another rather secretive species that frequents the grassy edges of ponds or the stubble of flooded fields. Like the woodcock, it has an amazing spring flight display.

Shorebirds have enormous aesthetic appeal, be it their tightly knit flocks that twist and turn on a dime, their restlessness or the vast distances they travel. These are birds that represent the ends of the earth. Watching a juvenile white-rumped sandpiper at Presqu'ile on an August day, you can't help but feel moved by a two ounce bundle of feathers that was born mere weeks before on Baffin Island and will fly all the way to southern Argentina, without the aid of adult birds to show the way.

What to watch for this week:

Other than the sporadic, half-hearted singing of a handful of species such as mourning doves, red-eyed vireos, song sparrows and northern cardinals, bird song has almost completely ceased and won't return until next February.

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