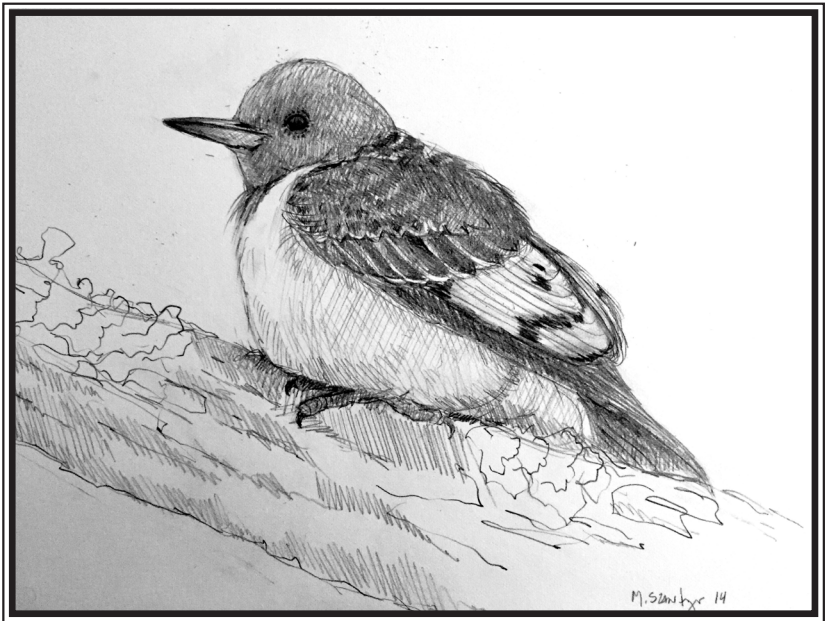


THE CONNECTICUT WARBLER

A Journal of Connecticut Ornithology



Volume 35 No. 1

January 2015

Pages 1-32

The Connecticut Warbler

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ON THE COVER

Red-headed Woodpecker

Truly a bird for all seasons, the enigmatic Red-headed Woodpecker is a fitting subject for any issue's cover, because we never know when or where an adult or immature (like this one so expertly depicted by Mark Szantyr), will show up in Connecticut.

AMERICAN BLACK DUCKS, MALLARDS AND HYBRIDS

By Min Huang

The American Black Duck is the iconic puddle duck of the Northeast. Due to a variety of reasons their numbers declined precipitously through the 1980's. Populations are now stable to slightly increasing, but the extent of the breeding range is shrinking. One of the many hypothesized reasons for the decline of black ducks is hybridization with Mallards. Mallards have a long history of hybridizing with many different *Anas* species and are the culprit for the seeming extirpation of the New Zealand Grey Duck. Other potential causes for black duck decline include habitat loss, changing agricultural practices and over hunting.

Here in North America, the American Black Duck and Mallard evolved in separate habitats and were once allopatric, occupying different geographic areas. Both mallards and black ducks are part of the recent New World radiation of the mallard clade. Black ducks evolved in a forested environment, thus their cryptic coloration. Mallards with their "pretty green head" evolved in more open, prairie habitats. Human induced introductions of mallards and natural range expansion (east) have resulted in sympatry (geographic overlap) between the two species. As the range of mallards has encroached upon that of black ducks, a fair amount of hybridization and introgression has occurred.

There has been much debate over whether mallards and black ducks are even distinct species. Studies looking at mallards and black ducks from museum specimens and contemporary samples have shown a gradual decline in genetic difference between the two, indicating an original separation. A well-documented treatise on the subject of whether mallards and black ducks were truly different was published in 1986. That paper questioned the integrity of black ducks as a separate species because of a lack of genetic distance between the two. Genetic distance is a measure of the divergence

between species and is based upon gene substitutions at specific loci. A value of zero is indicative of no divergence. The published value for mallard-black ducks is 0.0006. This value and the inference that reproductive isolating mechanisms between the two have broken down, have led some to question the veracity of black ducks as a separate species. Low genetic distance between bird species is well documented, so the published values are not indicative in and of themselves as a reason for lack of species status. Secondly, the variance in genetic distance values among bird species is also high, further invalidating reliance upon a single value for species determination. Other studies looking at mtDNA between mallards and black ducks show a clear difference in genetic structure. Although these mtDNA studies also show a very close degree of relatedness between mallards and black ducks, they do demonstrate a clear difference between the two species. Recent evidence indicates that the two diverged approximately 180,000 years before the present.



This is a typical American Black Duck wing. Note the lack of any buff or white above the speculum (the blue panel in the wing).



*This is an American Black Duck dominated hybrid.
Note the faint white line above the speculum.*

A lack of isolation of reproductive processes does exist. Work in the Chesapeake and in Maine has demonstrated that mallards and black ducks segregate during courtship, and that they both pair assortatively, favoring member of their own species. Another recent work has indicated that post-mating isolation still occurs in black ducks and mallards. This work, conducted in penned studies, also is evidence for specific species status between the two.

Where the two species do overlap, it seems that mallards do better than black ducks. This is likely due to the more generalist ecology of mallards versus black ducks and to mallards willingness to tolerate if not embrace humans and disturbance. Changing agricultural practices may also favor mallards over black ducks. Recent studies have demonstrated that as agricultural practices increase on the landscape, mallards become more prevalent than black ducks. There are few studies that definitively demonstrate competitive exclu-

sion by mallards over black ducks. Another cause for the decline of black ducks when co-existing with mallards may be genetic swamping and hybridization. Although there also seems to be little direct evidence that can attribute black duck decline to hybridization with mallards, it is an important factor to consider, given the history of mallard invasion and subsequent genetic swamping (e.g. grey duck).

What are the criteria for what comprises a mallard/black duck hybrid? The criteria on the following page were recently developed by biologists throughout the range of black ducks and are how birds are classified when banded. You will also note that there are now a number of different AOU designations for the gradations of mallard/black duck hybrids.

It is difficult if not impossible to truly gauge the extent of



This is an intermediate hybrid. Note the white line above and below the speculum.

Common Name	Species	Code	General Color	Anterior Line (to speculum)	Posterior Line (to speculum)	Neck Ring on Males
Black Duck ^a	ABDU ^a	133.0 ^a	Overall dark, no vermiculation on feathers	Absent or poorly defined or thin line of variable color (gray, brown or tan); no true white anterior to speculum.	Absent, faint, or white	Absent
Black Duck Dominant X Mallard Hybrid	ABDX	133.7	Overall dark, little to no vermiculation on feathers	Poorly defined or thin white line anterior to speculum	Absent, faint or white	Absent or Faint
Mallard-Black Duck Hybrid Intermediate ^b	MBDX ^b	132.5 ^b	Overall darker than true mallard	Narrower and less distinctive than true mallard	Narrower and less distinctive than true mallard	Absent, Faint, or Prominent
Mallard-Black Duck Hybrid ^c	MBDH ^c	132.6 ^c	-	-	-	-
Mallard-Dominant X Black Duck Hybrid	MALX	132.7	General color similar to mallard, but slightly darker	White; may be narrower and less distinctive than true mallard	White; may be narrower and less distinctive than true mallard	Faint or Prominent
Mallard	MALL	132.0	Overall brown; Feathers with distinct vermiculation	White	White	Prominent

^aABDU must be an overall dark bird and have no white anterior to speculum. ABDU often have >=11 dark underwing covert feathers, but this characteristic is variable and should not be considered a definitive characteristic.

^bIntermediate hybrid: characteristics are a combination of black ducks and mallards and do not favor one parental species over the other. Bander was able to assess characteristics of the bird.

^cUnknown hybrid: This code is to be used for birds that could not be identified as 133.0, 133.7, 133.5, 132.7, 132.0 due to escape, inexperience, or other reason

hybridization, but one metric that may reflect the true percentage of hybrids in the overall population is the percentage of hybrids that are caught through various winter banding operations. Winter banding operations have been ongoing throughout the Atlantic Flyway from New Brunswick to North Carolina for the past 5 years. Winter banding should reflect and be representative of the entire population, albeit after some annual mortality has occurred.

Based on the winter banded sample, approximately 14% of the black ducks banded in the Atlantic Flyway are hybrids. The range of hybrids that comprise the banded sample spans 45% in Connecticut to only 4% in Virginia. In the Canadian Maritime Provinces the percentage of hybrids is 14%. In New England and NY the percentage is 19% and in the Mid-Atlantic states the percentage is 8%.

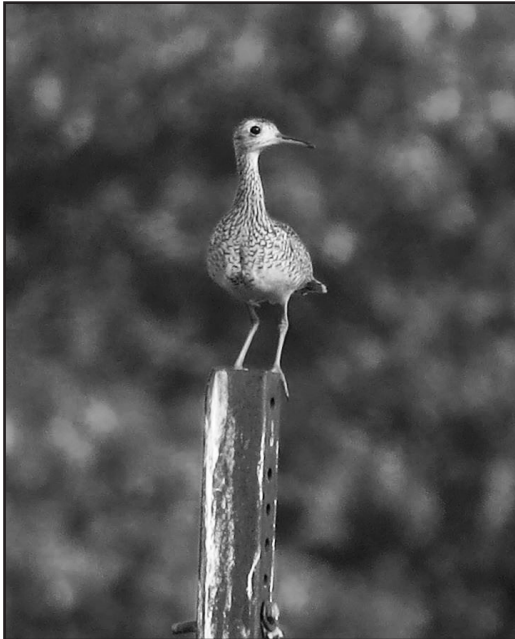
Currently in Connecticut, we have very few nesting black ducks. Our annual breeding surveys consistently pick up breeding birds in the larger coastal marshes such as Stratford Great Meadows, Barn Island, and Plum Bank. In recent years we have detected what would appear to be breeding black ducks inland, but without definitive nest searching it is difficult to say whether they are indeed nesting or not.

Min Huang-is the migratory bird program leader for the CT DEEP. Min received a Bachelor of Science in Natural Resource Conservation and a Bachelor of Art in English from the University of Connecticut, received his Master of Science in Wildlife Management from Frostburg State University, and his Ph. D. from the University of Connecticut. Current projects that the migratory bird program are involved in include an assessment of habitat restoration and wintering black duck energetics, nesting success of forest interior birds in relation to large scale disturbance, survival and habitat use of ruffed grouse, survival and dispersal of American kestrel, survival and dispersal of purple martin.

GRASSLAND BIRDS AT RENTSCHLER FIELD: 2014 AND BEYOND

By Patrick Comins

The spring of 2014 held much promise for both birds and birding at Rentschler Field in East Hartford. This former airfield owned by United Technologies Corp. had hosted rare and state-listed species of grassland nesting birds since at least 1999. Seeing these birds had been tricky though because of access restrictions and tight security enforcement. Birders watched and listened for the birds from behind fences and at a fairly long distance or hoped to catch views while the birds were foraging on the grassy area behind Cabela's. This spring we noticed many joggers, dog walkers and pedestrians walking along the tarmacs and getting quite close to the grassland habitat. This allowed unprecedented birding ac-



*Patrick Comins Photo
Adult Upland Sandpiper, during mowing June 9th*

cess, much to the delight of birders and photographers (often those are one in the same). You could now get great views of birds that are quite difficult to see in Connecticut, all while remaining on a paved or gravel surface with no worries of trampling sensitive habitat.

The first Eastern Meadowlarks at Rentschler Field were reported in eBird on April 1, the first Upland Sandpiper on April 24 both by Bill Asteriades. Savannah Sparrows were recorded on April 8 by Paul Cianfaglione. Bobolinks and Grasshopper Sparrows were reported by multiple observers beginning on May 9. Peak conservative estimates for each species include: Upland Sandpiper, 3 pairs; Savannah Sparrows, ~50 singing males; Grasshopper Sparrow, 15 singing males (though some estimates are as high as 30); Bobolinks, 6 pairs; and 13 individual Eastern Meadowlarks. A Vesper Sparrow was seen on the property just before the Summer Bird Count (count period) by observers from the Massachusetts and Connecticut Audubon Societies, Jamie Sydoriak and Andy Rzeznikiewicz.



Patrick Comins Photo
Brown Thrashers also nested on the property near the old control tower and do not appear to have been impacted by mowing.



Patrick Comins Photo
Adult Upland Sandpiper engaged in frantic distracting behavior during mowing

On June 6 I received a message from Joseph Cala that mowing was occurring on the property. In my capacity as Director of Bird Conservation for Audubon Connecticut I began calling state and federal wildlife authorities and contacting the landowner and property development company in hopes of preventing further mowing. Agent Thomas Ricardi from the US Fish and Wildlife Service visited the property and asked that mowing be stopped because of potential Migratory Bird Treaty Act restrictions. Mowing stopped at that time but commenced again later that evening. I alerted Agent Ricardi and headed to Rentschler Field myself and arrived as the mowing activities were ending.

The next day (Saturday) mowing commenced early in the morning and again Agent Ricardi came to the site and requested that mowing stop. A buffer was established around the area where Upland Sandpiper activity had been observed the previous evening but mowing continued on other parts of the property. By the time I arrived on Saturday it was clear that the Upland Sandpiper activity had shifted about 100



Patrick Comins Photo

Adult Grasshopper Sparrow singing from tarmac

yards south of where we had observed three adult Upland Sandpipers acting defensively the evening before. It is likely that there were mobile chicks present rather than stationary nests and that the broods had moved outside of the buffer zone. Three adults were engaging in frantic distraction behavior above an area that had been freshly mowed. Only one adult Upland Sandpiper was observed in the area after this time.

On Monday, we were able to reach the company in charge of management of the property and the mowing came to an end. Much of the property had been mowed, but some areas at the eastern and southern end remained intact. The company explained they had intended to mow the property before the nesting season to deter nesting by grassland birds because of potential development activities planned for that nesting season, but excessive rain had delayed the start of mowing until well into the nesting season. They agreed to end mowing for the season and to coordinate with Audubon

Connecticut and the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection on any further management activities that season and to coordinate better in the 2015 season to ensure that no mowing occurred in the nesting season or to mow beginning well before the arrival of birds if development was to occur in the nesting season.

The 2014 season was not entirely lost to nesting grassland birds. It appears that most of the Eastern Meadowlarks had already fledged before the mowing commenced. The Bobolinks were apparently concentrated within the buffer zone and other areas that were not mowed. Grasshopper Sparrows (at least a dozen pairs) appeared to re-nest and many of the presumed nests were in areas that were not mowed. Several fledgling Grasshopper Sparrows were observed in the area later in the summer. Savannah Sparrows appeared to re-nest in great numbers after the mowing and many fledglings were observed. One adult Upland Sandpiper remained in the area, which is likely an indication that it had eggs or chicks remaining at the site, and one juvenile Upland Sandpiper was observed on August 24. It is not known if this bird was reared at Rentschler Field or if it was a migrant.

It is likely that the majority of the grassland habitat at Rentschler Field will be developed in 2015. No mandatory mitigation measures are likely to be required because the purchase of the Suffield Wildlife Management Area as part of the construction of Cabela's was considered mitigation for the development of the entire property. Audubon Connecticut, COA and our partners will continue explore ways to improve the availability of habitat for grassland birds in the state.

NOTES ON BEHAVIOR, STATUS AND DISTRIBUTION

A Cooperative American Bittern Family in Sherman



*Dennis Larkin photo
An American Bittern family portrait, July 18, 2014, at Wimisink
Marsh in Sherman.*

The Wimisink Wildlife Sanctuary in northern Sherman at the junction of Routes 39 and 55 comprises 57 acres and is protected by Sherman's Naromi Land Trust. It comprises a large pond and cattail marsh to the south and until this past winter a large marsh to the north. In addition to a viewing platform on the big pond, in 2013 a fully-accessible boardwalk was installed to the north, curling down into the marsh which was previously accessible only by bushwhacking. However, last winter beavers dammed the stream near Route 55, creating a new, smaller pond. I have been attending this marsh for many years, checking it frequently throughout the spring and summer for nesting wood duck, hooded mergansers, Virginia rails, green heron, kingfishers etc. On April 18, 2006, I found a very vocal American Bittern in the marsh, fishing along the stream and sometimes standing on a beaver lodge. On April 26 a second bird appeared; they were seen through May 14 and last heard May 22. Thereafter nothing; howev-

er, the owner of the house opposite says he heard one in July 2013 and another man apparently saw two then. Regrettably they did not tell me, and somehow I missed the birds despite frequent visits.

This spring I continued to check the marsh several times a week but did not see or hear an American Bittern until 6:30 PM on June 16, 2014 when one flew across the upper pond, followed shortly by a second bird, dropping into the marsh below the pond. Visiting each day, I neither saw nor heard one until one was seen on June 21 by Russ Naylor, and again on June 23 sitting in a cedar bush a distance away at the edge of the marsh by Ray Belding, Marie Kennedy and myself. Then nothing, until.....

7/1 – 6:08 AM – one bird on tussock below boardwalk; caught 2 large fish; 6:55 flew north into marsh; 7:08 returned to tussock; also stood on beaver lodge.

7/2 – 6:15 AM– same spot, ate huge tadpole; 6:45 flew north to same cedar bush, preened; 7:20 still in bush.

7/4 -7/7– seen by several people. 11:20 in channel to left of pond; thereafter usually feeding further out on the pond, on one of several grassy mounds. Perhaps aware of us, but not bothered. Usually seen 6 AM to 11:30, but then disappears into reeds till late afternoon.

7/8 – bittern in distant cedar bush, joined by second adult at 10:45. Confirmed pair! Preening and checking ground below bush.

7/9 – adult seen feeding at 4:00 PM

7/11 – 6:30 AM – adult preening on island

7/11 - 11:00 AM - three babies seen, one fluffy body up in reeds plus two with downy heads hunkered in the grass close to end of boardwalk. Almost as big as parents, but a much richer brown, their fresh feathers standing out among the reeds where the adults blended. Parents seen threatening a juvenile Great Blue Heron.

7/12 – Many viewers: 5:45 first adult seen, first young one around

7 AM. Two of the young spent quite a while perched at the top of some cattails, but all eventually came down and started walking around the marsh edge. Both adults acted defensive for them, but eventually flew off leaving them on their own. Babies moved from close reeds to large grassy mound on far side of pond. Roy Harvey: "...saw on them the crouched-low-head-forward position and they had even less extension to the rear than the adults, quite blunt actually". Photos show "the faint white down atop the head of one of the young birds.....adults showed "raised hackles" at times when upset; this was different".

7/12 – Interesting behavior: the adult whacked a baby that begged to be fed, then flew off to the south pond. Did not return.

7/13 – three babies on same particular grassy mound, one adult in open pond. Mostly they stayed put, standing and crouching in the tall grass waiting to be fed, which did not happen often. Must have been Dad yesterday, whacking the baby. Today, Mom was more patient with two babies sometimes trying to feed at the same time; the third, smaller one hung back. One young one tried fishing while the other two still waited for a parent to feed them.

7/15 – 7:45-10:00 – one adult, three young; feeding frenzy reported.

7/17 - A Flying Lesson! Adult flew out of reeds at far end of pond and landed a short distance away. Two babies followed, scrambling and falling over each other; when they reached her, she flew another few feet. This happened three times and then she disappeared behind tall reeds, one baby actually flying after her. The third baby followed a little way behind

7/18 – "3 charismatic young continue to chase Mom demanding food; she sometimes feeds them, sometimes flies off. One of the young can fly and has fished (frogged?) on its own, the other two tend to just sit and chill, but all three get aggressive with Mom when she is willing to feed them. They all stab at each other, not so nice. Never see the second parent". The other two are starting to fish. Still a little down on their heads.

7/20 – 8-10:30 AM – 3 babies; 4:30 PM – none seen

7/23 and 24 – one adult and only one young seen, feeding itself. Man opposite says he has heard one calling very early, while walking his dog, 5:30 AM. I never heard one all season.

7/25 – no bitterns seen or heard subsequently.

Over this nearly 6-week period, to my knowledge over 75 people saw these bitterns, obviously many more came. For many, American Bittern was a life bird; for others, the babies were a thrilling first. Charming, entertaining, comic, funny, hilarious and, being so close, eminently photographable. The beauty of Wimisink was further enhanced by family parades of Geen Herons, kingfishers, Wood Ducks, Hooded Mergansers; also 4 species of swallow; singing Marsh Wrens, Swamp Sparrows, Willow Flycatchers and other avian species too numerous to mention.

Angela Dimmitt, New Milford

A Significant Banding Recovery

Connecticut Audubon Birdcraft Museum in Fairfield got some exciting news in September 2014 when the staff received a report of one of its bands having been found and reported to the Bird Banding Lab, a department of the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. The band had been found on a Herring Gull (presumably dead) in Southport, CT, on Aug.16, 2014. This bird had been banded as a nestling on Chimon Island off Norwalk on July 14, 1988 by Miley Bull, Carl Trichka and Pete Marra. This 26- year-old bird comes close to the record oldest Herring Gull, which is 28 years old, according to **Birds of the World**, (Marshall Cavendish Corporation, Tarrytown, NY, 2009).

Kathy Van Der Aue, Southport

A Huge Roost of Common Grackles at Exeter Marsh in Lebanon

By early November for the past three years I have witnessed mega flocks in the hundreds of thousands and this year of up to one million Common Grackles entering and exiting the

Exeter Marsh at dusk and dawn. The columns have been observed from more than three miles away at the Lebanon Green and stretch the entire way to the marsh at the intersections of Route 207 and Route 16. During the day they are completely gone. Typically they stream in around 4 pm in an orderly fashion and swirl around as they drop to roost along with fair numbers of Red-winged Blackbirds. Morning exodus can be sudden, or slow and chaotic if the birds have to fight the rain to go to their unknown destinations - probably surrounding cornfields in the greater Lebanon area.

Nov. 6, 2013 - 300,000 at 4:30 pm

Nov. 7 & 8, 2013 - 500,000 at 4:00 pm

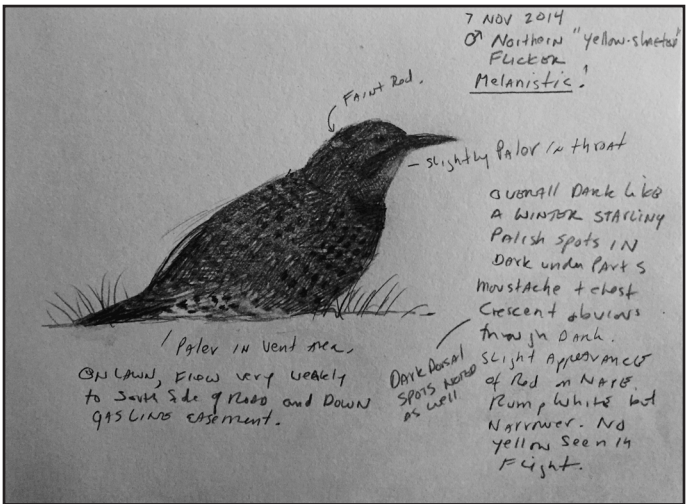
Nov. 3, 2014 - 1,000,000 at 6:15 am

Nov. 4, 2014 - Near Lyman Memorial High School, 300,000 in corn fields at 6:40 am

Nov. 24, 2014 - 400,000 6:50 am in rain

Dan Rottino, East Haddam

Observation of an Aberrant Northern Flicker



Mark Szantyr sketched this unusual Northern Flicker, displaying aberrant plumage, when it visited his lawn in Storrs on 7 Nov 2014. Most birds displaying aberrant plumage show varying amounts of atypical white feathers attributed to a lack of pigment, either total (albinism) or partial (leucism). Much less common, but apparently displayed by this bird, is melanism (an excess of dark pigmentation.).

The Eagle and the Loon

We were driving on River Road in Southbury at 9 a.m. Jan. 17, 2015, on our way to volunteer at the Shepaug Eagle Observatory when we saw a Common Loon trapped in the ice. While taking photos, we noticed an immature Bald Eagle land along side the loon. Immediately, the loon sounded a sorrowful wail and tried to escape from the ice. It lowered its beak, perhaps trying to hide. It then freed a leg, and then



Photo by Barbara Rzasa

It looks like a standoff between a grounded Common Loon and a sub-adult Bald Eagle on frozen Lake Zoar in Southbury on Jan. 17, 2015.

the other leg. The eagle flew over the loon and landed on the opposite side. It looked like the loon would soon be breakfast for the eagle.

Fortunately, for the loon, another photographer arrived and scared the eagle off. The loon tried to run along the ice for 80 feet and was almost able to take off, but failed and made a belly landing. Loons need open water on which to run before taking off. The river was frozen and no open water was nearby. There were trails on the ice showing where the loon was trying to run. We left for the observatory area and were told later that an adult and an immature eagle were after the loon. Another visitor said a Red-tailed Hawk went after the loon and scared away an eagle.

We returned to the loon at 11 a.m. to find it had a bloody neck and blood under its wing. We left at 1:15 p.m. to see the loon still alive and on the ice. Hopefully it survived the day and evening. Impending rain may have freed up some open water for the loon's escape.

Peter and Barbara Rzasa, Seymour

Life and Death of a Scoter

Every year a variety of waterbirds that nest north of Connecticut spend the summer in Long Island Sound. These include Common Loons, scoters, other diving ducks and a number of other species. The reasons are varied and usually not apparent – illness, injury, sexual immaturity are among the possibilities. In summer 2015 an adult male White-winged Scoter was conspicuous at Milford Point. Paul Fusco photographed it on 17 Aug, vigorously flapping its wings. (Note that the left wing appears to be damaged). On 15 Sept. he found it dead at the same location, presumably of natural causes, which is no doubt the fate of a certain portion of these out-of season lingerers.



CONNECTICUT FIELD NOTES

Summer Season June 1 to July 31, 2014

By Greg Hanisek

Birders historically have taken a breather after the intensity of spring migration, but summer increasingly produces interesting and significant finds as we come to appreciate its complexity. This column is divided into segments to help underline the seasonal cross currents that make this such an interesting two-month period. In summer 2014 one location in particular, Shell Beach marsh in Guilford, exemplified the range of possibilities, as sightings throughout this report illustrate.

Northbound Migration

Scoters typically move through Long Island Sound in mid-May, but a flock of 12 White-winged Scoters flying by Stratford Point on June 4 shows how protracted this migration can be (FMa). A late flurry of Black Scoters comprised one on June 9 at Hammonasset Beach State Park in Madison (hereafter HBSP - GH), followed the next day by four at Russian Beach, Stratford (FMa) and three at Milford Point (FMa). Three Black-bellied Plovers on June 14 in Stratford would seem to fit in this category, but barely (FMa). Two White-rumped Sandpipers, noted as late migrants, were at Fort Trumbull Beach in

Milford on June 2 along with 120 Semipalmated Sandpipers (SS). An adult Western Sandpiper, rare in spring but typically late when it does appear, was at Milford Point on June 6, also with 120 Semipalmated Sandpipers (FMa).

June produced reports of four Olive-sided Flycatchers, all in the narrow window of June 1-2. Single Yellow-bellied Flycatchers were in Torrington on June 3 (PCa) and Kent on June 8 (KF). A Magnolia Warbler was away from known breeding sites on June 7 at the Racebrook Tract in Orange/Woodbridge (CL). Mourning Warblers on the move were at East Rock Park in New

Haven on June 1-2 (MSc), in Bethany on June 1 (CZ, JZ), banded at Milford Point on June 3 (CW) and in Sharon on June 8 (KF). Nelson's Sparrows were still present on June 1 at Sandy Point in West Haven (JMu) and on June 7 at Barn Island in Stonington (CE).

Southbound Migration

The first three Semipalmated Plovers appeared on June 22 at HBSP (JSp). The shorebird species of the season was **American Avocet** with one found on July 14-15 at Milford Point (FG, JT) and one flyby on July 31 at HBSP (NB), later relocated in Guilford (PW). The first Solitary Sandpiper was at Great Pond, Simsbury, on July 5 (PDe). With Greater Yellowlegs present almost daily through June, migratory intentions become blurred, but seven at Shell Beach in Guilford on June 27 seemed to indicate a significant arrival (FG). The season's only Whimbrel turned up in Stratford Great Meadows on July 22 (FMa). Two Red Knots on June 17-19 at Sandy Point, West Haven, may have marked the first sign off southbound shorebird migration (JR, RS), but the date falls within a window when it's hard to tell who's coming, going or staying. One on July 27 at Milford Point was clearly southbound (GH). A few Semipalmated Sandpipers were stragglers through June, but 400 at Milford Point on July 13 were typical of this species' fast migratory build up (CL), followed by 3700 on July 22 (FMa) and 5000 on July 26 (FG). A Pectoral Sandpiper made the season's first appearance July 8 at Barn Island in Stonington (CE). Shell Beach produced two Stilt Sandpipers on July 15 (CL), and one was at HBSP on July 22 (MK). The first report of Short-billed Dowitcher came from Sandy Point on July 2 (RS). A Long-billed Dowitcher was a good find July 28 at Shell Beach (FMa). A Caspian Tern, uncommon but seasonally wide-ranging, was at Sandy Point July 22-23 (JR). One a day earlier in Fairfield may have been the same individual (PL). Two Common Nighthawks were seen moving south on June 28 in New Milford (JD), and one was in Meriden June 29 (PCo). A southbound flock of swallows contained 82 Bank



*Frank Mantlik photo
Few people have seen juvenile American Bitterns
as well as this one and its siblings, which
performed in the open repeatedly at Wimisink
Marsh in Sherman during July.*



*Frank Mantlik photo
This Sedge Wren, part of a nesting pair
found in Shelton, marked the season's most
unexpected breeding story.*



*Hank Golet photo
The season's only Common Moorhen was found during a kayak paddle at
Watch Rock in Old Lyme.*



*Charles Makarewich photo
This stunning adult male Rufous Hummingbird was a summer surprise at
a feeder in Kent.*

Swallows at Pleasure Beach, Bridgeport, on July 17 (FMa).

Lingerers, Wanderers and Strays

Two American Wigeon were present June 17-20 at HBSP (JF, JC et al.), and one turned up June 22 at Shell Beach (PW). A drake Blue-winged Teal on June 9 at Shell Beach was at a potential breeding site, but no evidence of nesting emerged from this closely watched location (GH). A drake Green-winged Teal on July 1 at Watch Rock in Old Lyme was likely a summering non-breeder (HG). A Canvasback was photographed on June 15 at Barn Island, Stonington (KD); a Ring-necked Duck lingered into June at Aspetuck Reservoir in Easton (TM); in addition to several singles, two Greater Scaup were present much of the summer at Sandy Point (RS et al.); and single Long-tailed Ducks were at the Westbrook Town Dock on June 8 (MK) and HBSP on July 3 (JC). Single Buffleheads were at Grace Salmon Park in Westport on June 8 (TG) and well up the Mystic River in Stonington on June 27 (GW); another summered at Ash Creek in Fairfield (JJ).

A Common Goldeneye was an unexpected find June 7 on a kayak trip through the Quinnipiac River marshes in North Haven (CL). A female Hooded Merganser was by itself on June 26 at Holly Pond in Stamford (PDU). Single Ruddy Ducks showed up June 10 at Frash Pond in Stratford (FMa) and July 14 at Batterson Pond in Farmington (PCi).

The season's only **Wilson's Storm-Petrel** was chummed to a boat off Old Lyme on July 29 (NB). A Pied-billed Grebe at Great Pond in Glastonbury on June 16 was an apparent non-breeder (BA), but a juvenile on July 15 at Stratford marina was inexplicable (FMa). A Horned Grebe in alternate plumage summered at Sandy Point and stayed well into fall (RS et al.). Four Snowy Egrets on June 9 at Roy Swamp in Sharon were a remarkable find for northern Litchfield County, where a single Snowy is hard to come by at any time (ZA). Multiple birds would be more expected in the post-breeding season rather than early June. A Tricolored Heron found on June 9 at Shell Beach marsh in Guilford remained



Frank Mantlik photo

This Pied-billed Grebe in juvenile plumage raised questions about its breeding location when it showed up on July 15 at Stratford Marina.

through the season (GH), with a second bird present on July 8 (CL). Others were at Duck Island, Westbrook, on June 29 (CL) and at Watch Rock in Old Lyme on July 27 (JSh). Hybrid Little Blue X Tricolored Heron, this year in adult plumage, was again a featured attraction at HBSP throughout the season (m.ob.), but of special interest was one at Shell Beach on July 28 (FMa), a day when there were also reports of the HBSP individual (JC). The season's only Cattle Egret was a one-day visitor to Shell Beach on July 31 (RS). A now-annual **White-faced**

Ibis, found on June 20 at HBSP (JG, m.ob.), was present through July. What was apparently a second individual was at Shell Beach in Guilford on July 6 & 8 (PW, CL). A female Northern Harrier flew west over the Milford Point salt marsh on July 17 (FMa).

The season's only **Common Gallinule** was found by kayak July 1 at Watch Rock in Old Lyme (HG). At least one American Coot again summered at North Farms Reservoir in Wallingford, but with no sign of breeding (JR). Almost all recent **Little Gull** reports have occurred



Zachary Adams photo

These two (of four) Snowy Egrets were unexpected visitors to the Northwest Corner on June 9 at Roy Swamp in Sharon.

in March-April, so one seen July 25 from a ferry off Waterford was unexpected (SMi). An adult Lesser Black-backed Gull was seasonally unusual on June 10 at Short Beach in Stratford (FMa). A Black Tern was a good mid-summer find July 10 at Milford Point (SS). The first five post-breeding Forster's Terns were at Lords Cover in Lyme on July 24 (HG). The season's only Royal Terns were at Griswold Point, Old Lyme, on July 8 (EH, fide PCo) and at Penfield Reef, Fairfield, on July 31 (JP). Despite a flock of 11 Black Skimmer on June 5 at Milford Point (SS), this species again failed to breed

in the state. Other reports included 11 still at Milford Point on June 10 (FMa), five at the Farm River mouth in Branford/East Haven on June 7 (CL) and 13 off East Haven on June 11 (WB). A brilliant adult male **Rufous Hummingbird** appeared at a Kent feeder on July 29 and stayed into the fall season (CM). A typically enigmatic Red-headed Woodpecker turned up on June 14 in North Greenwich (fide SMa). A Merlin carrying a bird into woods in Woodbridge on June 7 will remain as an ambiguous entry in this category until there's proof that Connecticut has been added

to the southward expansion of its breeding range (FG).

A Yellow-throated Warbler on June 16 at Bent of the River Audubon in Southbury was in good breeding habitat along the sycamore-lined Pomperaug River but apparently did not linger (KE). A Yellow-breasted Chat found in late May at Housatonic Wildlife Management Area in Kent (RB et al.) was present into early June but apparently did not find a mate - not unexpected for a species that has seldom been confirmed breeding in the state. Another was briefly present at Little Pond in Litchfield after discovery on June 22 (MD). A male **Blue Grosbeak** found on June 6 at East Rock Park in New Haven was seen and heard occasionally thereafter but without sign of a mate (DB). One was in New Milford on July 4 (DM). An adult male **Painted Bunting** was an exciting find July 8 at a feeder in Brookfield (fide MR).

The Breeding Season

Hooded Merganser hens with broods of eight and 10 small ducklings were on a pond in the Cream Hill

section of Cornwall on June 8 (GH). A hen with seven ducklings was on Great Pond in South Glastonbury on June 14 (BA), and a hen with six ducklings was at Wimisink Marsh in Sherman on July 5 (RH). Three juveniles were unexpected in a coastal marsh July 1 at Watch Rock in Old Lyme (HG). A Ruffed Grouse on June 14 in Naugatuck State Forest was a welcome find well-removed from the northern Litchfield County areas that produce almost all of the few current reports (JSw). American Bitterns were at two possible breeding sites in Cornwall on June 7 (GH). A successful breeding at Wimisink Marsh delighted dozens of birders, when an adult and three fledglings proved remarkably unwary as they fed in the open on tadpoles and fish for several days (AD et al.). A Least Bittern was a nice find by kayak on June 7 in the Quinnipiac River marshes (CL). A **Mississippi Kite** on June 10 in Simsbury was the first of several single-bird sightings in an area where breeding has been confirmed in the recent past (PCi).

Milford Point held 37 Piping Plovers on June 30 (SK).



Russ Smiley photo

For the second year in a row, Boat-tailed Grackles nested successfully at Hammonasset Beach State Park in Madison.

A Barred Owl sitting atop a traffic camera along I-84 in Waterbury during the afternoon of June 17 was quite a surprise (PCo). At least one Common Nighthawk, seen periodically in June in a New Haven neighborhood, may represent the last of the state's vanishing nesting population (MA). June Eastern Whip-poor-will reports, away from their southeast Connecticut stronghold, came from Durham (NM), Plymouth (GH), Glastonbury (JSc), Madison (JR) and three each in Southington (JSw) and New Hartford (FZ). Pushing their south-

ward expansion closer to the limit, a pair of Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers were seen June 27 on Mount Archer in Lyme. The male was drumming and aggressively responded to a drumming imitation (DP).

Away from known breeding areas, an Acadian Flycatcher was in Meriden on June 14 (PCo). A pair of Red-breasted Nuthatches at Maltby Lakes in Orange June 7 were unexpected after a winter without irruptive numbers (CL). The breeding birds of the season were a pair of **Sedge Wrens** found to be nesting at an undisclosed location in Shelton after one was initially found

singing on June 20 (CB). At least two birds were present, and they were seen carrying food and a fecal sac. It was undetermined if young were successfully fledged. A Lawrence's Warbler was in Hamden on June 17 (CZ, JZ). A singing male Kentucky Warbler in Stamford on June 7 was a noteworthy find (fide SMA). A count of nine Cerulean Warblers on June 14 on Pumpkin Hill Road in Chaplin ranks it with River Road in Kent as the state stronghold for this scarce breeder (PR.) Male Black-throated Blue Warblers on June 12 in Naugatuck State Forest in Bethany (JOs) and on June 17 in Hamden (JZ) were potentially rare breeders for New Haven County. A count of five Grasshopper Sparrows on June 2 at Suffield Wildlife Management Area was a welcomed find at a spot counted on to help offset the loss of breeding habitat with development at Rentschler Field in East Hartford (JW). Two also were reported singing in June at Windham Airport (fide PR). Noteworthy were 13 Eastern Meadowlarks at Rentschler Field on June 20 (PCo) and three family groups comprising 12

birds on June 29 at Windham Airport (PR).

Observers: Zachary Adams, Mark Aronson, Bill Asteriades, Bill Banks, Charles Barnard, Dan Barvir, William Batsford, Ray Belding, Nick Bonomo, Alex Burdo, Jim Carr, Paul Carrier (PCa), Paul Cianfaglione (PCi), Patrick Comins (PCo), Kenneth Deeds, Paul Desjardins (PDe), Angela Dimmitt, Mike Doyle, Jim Dugan, Patrick Dugan (PDu), Ken Elkins, Chris Elphick, Jack Faller, Kevin Finnan, Paul Fusco, Frank Gallo, Hank Golet, John Gondek, Tina Green, Greg Hanisek, Roy Harvey, Ewa Holland, Julian Hough, Jalna Jaeger, Mickey Komara, Scott Kruitbosch, Chris Loscalzo, Preston Lust, Charles Makarewich, Frank Mantlik (FMa), Stefan Martin (SMA), Florence McBride (FMc), Dan Mercurio, Jamie Meyers (JMe), Shai Mitra (SMi), Nancy Moran, Tom Murray, Jake Musser (JMu), Russ Naylor, John Ogren (JOg), John Oshlick (JOs), Dave Provencher, James Purcell, Jason Rieger, Margaret Robbins, Phil Rusch, John Schwarz (JSc), Mark Scott (MSc), Jannie Shapiro (JSp), James Sherwonit (JSh), Russ Smiley, Steve Spector, Jack Swatt (JSw), Mark Szantyr (MSz), Jesus Tirado, John Weeks, Charlotte Weston, Glenn Williams, Paul Wolter, Sara Zagorski, Carol Zipp, Jim Zipp, Fran Zygmont.

PHOTO CHALLENGE

By Nick Bonomo

You're walking down the sandy road that runs through the East River marsh in Guilford during a blistering mid-July heat wave. What better way to spend a humid day than searching for migrant shorebirds along the coast? The sounds of screeching terns and boisterous Willets fill the air. Out of the corner of your eye you see a small passerine teed up in the grasses that line the road. The bird is sitting in plain sight a mere ten feet from you; your views could not be better! And yet something in your brain just does not compute. You know you're looking at a sparrow – the small streaky brown songbird with a conical bill perched on a stem of grass confirms that – but not one that you're familiar with.

After your initial state of confusion you settle down and note that this bird has a relatively large bill, flat crown, and short tail that you associate with the genus *Ammodramus*. You're familiar with this genus from the Grasshopper, Seaside, Saltmarsh and Nelson's Sparrows you see at various times of year in Connecticut, but this bird looks different to you. Now you're wracking your brain for alternatives. "What does Henslow's Sparrow look like," you wonder. "Or how about LeConte's..."

Then you snap back to reality and remind yourself that this is



July, *not* October; sparrow migration is still over two months away and you do not want to jump to conclusions. Are you overlooking a species that is *supposed* to be here in July? You pause to soak in your surroundings - a road through the middle of a marsh. So you decide to revisit Connecticut's two saltmarsh-breeding *Ammodramus* sparrows, Saltmarsh Sparrow and Seaside Sparrow.

Superficially the bird does recall Saltmarsh Sparrow, so you start there. You have a streaked supercilium, a grayish crown, a hint of a gray nape, and a buffy breast and flanks with bold dark streaks. Those few features do mesh pretty well with Saltmarsh Sparrow, but you just saw an obvious Saltmarsh Sparrow earlier that morning on this very same road and noted how that bird had white braces down its back and a clear gray cheek surrounded by a bright yellowish malar, supercilium, and rear auriculars - all of which are lacking on this duller bird. And while a Saltmarsh Sparrow does have a long bill, this bird's bill is strikingly massive!

You are now forced to reconsider Seaside Sparrow, which you quickly ruled out from the beginning. After all, Seaside Sparrows along the Atlantic coast are a dingy gray-brown overall with a yellow spot in front of the eye...not crisply patterned and streaked below like this bird!

As you continue to stare puzzlingly at this cooperative bird, a second sparrow pops up right beside it.



An adult Seaside Sparrow, dingy and gray, just as you had remembered...and then you appreciate just how large its bill is. Ah ha...the Seaside's size and structure, especially that bill, are identical to the mystery bird that's perched next to it! You pull out your trusty field guide and see that, sure enough, your mystery bird is no vagrant. It is a juvenile Seaside Sparrow, which makes perfect sense given the habitat and time of year.

This plumage of Seaside Sparrow is not often seen by Connecticut birders because this is a briefly held plumage of an uncommon and local breeding species. This quiz bird illustrates how understanding status and distribution, such as time of year and habitat, can be a significant aid in bird identification.

This juvenile Seaside Sparrow was photographed by me in Delaware in July. The adult Seaside Sparrow was photographed by Mark Szantyr in Connecticut in July.



Photo Challenge No. 88

THE CONNECTICUT WARBLER

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The Connecticut Warbler (ISSN 1077-0283) is devoted to the study of birds and their conservation in Connecticut and is published quarterly (January, April, July, and October) by the Connecticut Ornithological Association.

Send manuscripts to the Editor. Please type double spaced with ample margins, on one side of a sheet. Submit a copy on a computer disk, if possible. Style should follow usage in recent issues. All manuscripts receive peer review.

Illustrations and photographs are needed and welcome. Line art of Connecticut and regional birds should be submitted as good quality prints or in original form. All submitted materials will be returned. We can use good quality photographs of birds unaccompanied by an article but with caption including species, date, locality, and other pertinent information.

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Connecticut Ornithological Association
314 Unquowa Road
Fairfield, CT 06824
www.ctbirding.org

Printed at Yale University

– Address Service Requested –

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