



THE PLAIN DEALER

AERIAL VIEW

Shorebird migration gets going in Ohio

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The many subtleties of shorebirds were on display last weekend, and posed challenges during field trips to some of the best muddy habitats that Northeast Ohio has to offer.

Of course, it helps to have two of the sharpest young birders in the state, Jen Brumfield and Gabe Leidy, along as guides.

Although it may feel as if summer has just begun, the fall shorebird migration is already under way. Many of these sandpipers, plovers and phalaropes nested on the tundra or in northern potholes, and have thousands of miles to travel to reach their winter destinations in the Southern Hemisphere. So they need to get a head start to take advantage of feeding sites at wetlands along the way.

Two prime staging grounds are within an hour's drive of the Cleveland area. Flooded cornfields near Bellevue in Seneca County are attracting birders from across the state, including 10 of us who joined Brumfield and Leidy, leaders of the Local Patch birding tours. Birders from California and Great Britain were there also on Saturday, along with Northeast Ohioans Larry Richardson, Delores Cole and Bill and Ann Toneff.

The target birds were four black-necked stilts that have taken temporary residence for the past several weeks at one particularly extensive flooded field. These boldly marked black-and-white waders from the West and East coasts must have lost their way, but found enough familiar habitat and sufficient food in the rural Midwest to stick around for a while.

The variety of sizes and plumages paints a stunning landscape, with least, semipalmated, spotted and pectoral sandpipers, lesser and greater yellowlegs, semipalmated plover, killdeer and short-billed dowitcher.

My personal highlight from the site came after Brumfield picked out three stilt sandpipers moving in a group, weaving in and out among the weeds and corn stubble. These tundra breeders stand out from others with their tweedy barred breasts and striped heads, although they already had lost their distinctive chestnut cheek patches present during breeding.

Our biggest thrill of the day wasn't provided by a shorebird, although one played a role in the display.

We had moved on to another pond and were scanning the array of egrets, ducks and sandpipers when, out of the corner of my eye, I saw a blue-gray blur streaking toward the pond. Whoops of surprise came from our group as a peregrine falcon attacked, blasted an unsuspecting yellowlegs and retreated with its prey gripped in its talons.

Closer to home, shorebirds also are converging at the Lorain Impoundment just east of Lorain Harbor, with least, spotted and semipalmated sandpipers and plovers present.

And the conditions there should only get better in the coming weeks. A worker told Brumfield that he would

be pumping dredged mud and water into the wetlands over the next 10 days, which would provide ideal habitat for tired and hungry shorebirds just as the migration is reaching its peak.

So stay tuned for reports of rarities!

Sightings

Conneaut Harbor held whimbrel, marbled godwit and stilt sandpiper among a good mix of shorebirds, John Pogacnik reported. A yellow-crowned night-heron was a nice surprise at the Lake Metroparks beaver pond wetland on Conley Road in Painesville Township.

Bird news

Brush up on your shorebird ID skills in preparation for the fall migration at a refresher workshop at 7 p.m. Thursday, Aug. 14, at the Penitentiary Glen Nature Center, 8668 Kirtland-Chardon Road, Kirtland. The two-hour course will review field markings, behaviors and habits. Cost is \$5. Call 1-800-669-9226 to register.

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