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OFO News

NEWSLETTER OF THE ONTARIO FIELD ORNITHOLOGISTS

Spring Shorebirds at Hillman Marsh

By Jean Iron and Ron Pittaway

Dunlins often occur in the hundreds. 18 May 2005. *Photo Jean Iron*

In This Issue

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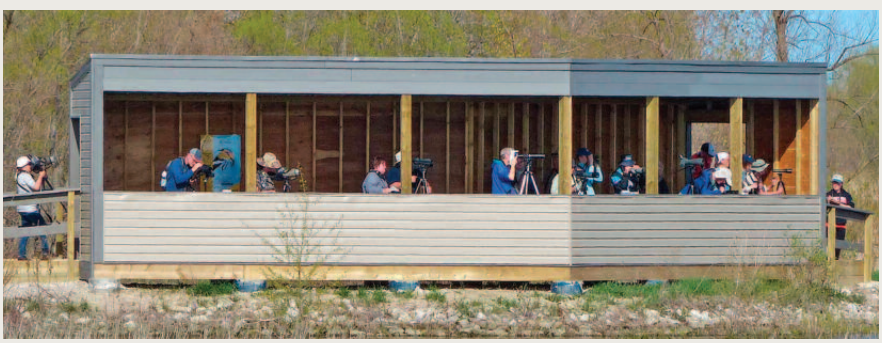
Late afternoon in May at the Hillman Marsh Shorebird Cell is a magical time when the calls of hundreds of Black-bellied Plovers increase in volume as resting birds stir, preparing to leave this important stopover site and continue their long migration. Suddenly they take off in groups, their haunting calls even louder as they circle above and head northwest towards their Arctic breeding grounds. This article provides information about experiencing spring shorebirds by sight and sound in all their splendour at Hillman Marsh.

Stilt Sandpiper is a rare regular spring migrant at the marsh. 17 May 2007. *Photo Jean Iron*

Brightly-coloured *hendersoni* subspecies of the Short-billed Dowitcher in breeding plumage. 17 May 2007. *Photo Jean Iron*



New viewing blind at Hillman Marsh provides a panoramic view of shorebirds. May 2013. *Photo Jean Iron*

NEW VIEWING BLIND

To enhance shorebird viewing in the Point Pelee area, last year in 2013, the Ontario Field Ornithologists (OFO) partnered with Essex Region Conservation Authority (ERCA), Pelee Wings Nature Store, Point Pelee National Park and The Ontario Trillium Foundation to construct a viewing blind at the Hillman Marsh Shorebird Cell and to conduct regular shorebird viewing sessions during the Festival of Birds. These events will continue in spring 2014, with expert OFO members at the blind to help birders identify shorebirds.

WHERE AND WHEN

Hillman Marsh Shorebird Cell is strategically located beside Lake Erie near Point Pelee National Park in southwestern Ontario, where shorebirds traditionally rest on northbound migration. The cell hosts a continuous influx of migrants from mid-April to early June because its managed water levels create mudflats attractive to shorebirds. The cell is a birding hotspot. Early morning light is excellent for viewing with the sun behind in the east, and there is an increased chance of being first to find a rare shorebird. However, most birders visit in the afternoon to enjoy the greatest variety of species and highest numbers of shorebirds, which arrive throughout the day with numbers peaking in late afternoon.

HISTORY OF THE CELL

The popularity of the shorebird cell has grown tremendously since 2002 when Essex Region Conservation Authority purchased 86 acres of farmland and created the 42-acre shorebird cell. The visionary people who designed this site for shorebirds are to be commended. We have John Omstead of Family Tradition Foods in nearby Wheatley to thank for his initial generous donation of $100,000, which allowed ERCA to purchase the land. ERCA then approached other partners and funding sources to raise the $800,000 needed to construct the new wetland cell with habitat suitable for resting and feeding shorebirds on northbound migration. Grassland, meadow and reforested areas were planted around the cell to enhance the environment.

HOW IT WORKS

To manage for migrating spring shorebirds, essential components include the berm or raised bank around the cell to contain the water, and a pump to control water levels. In mid June after shorebird migration, the water remaining in the cell is drained and a farmer plants a crop that is harvested in early fall. Left over stalks and residue are chopped up to provide an organic base. The cell is flooded in fall, which speeds the decaying process and promotes growth of larvae, worms and other prey for spring shorebirds. Invertebrates are protected under a layer of ice in the winter. Then in late April, a gradual drawdown of water starts, which exposes mudflats rich in invertebrate prey for the shorebirds.

DIRECTIONS

From Erie Street in Leamington travel east on Oak Street East, which becomes Mersea Road 2. At about 7 km, just past intersection with County Road 37, the main entrance to Hillman Marsh is on right. Visitors must pay a daily parking fee at the self-serve kiosk at the entrance to the site. Have cash ready or purchase an annual parking pass from ERCA on line at http://erca.org/conservation-areas-events/annual-passes/

From the main parking lot, the shorebird cell is an easy 8 minute walk on a firm flat trail. A grassed berm around the cell allows birders to walk around and view shorebirds at any time of day. The shorebird blind is slightly elevated and provides shelter from the sun, wind and rain, but many birders watch from along the open berm.

Long-billed Dowitcher in breeding plumage. Most Long-billed Dowitchers occur from late April to early May before the main migration of Short-billed Dowitchers. *Photo Jean Iron*

EXPECTED SHOREBIRDS

The cell often has hundreds of Dunlins, Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs, Least Sandpipers, Short-billed Dowitchers, American Golden-Plovers and Black-bellied Plovers. Also usually seen are Semipalmated Plovers, Killdeers, Spotted Sandpipers, Solitary Sandpipers, Ruddy Turnstones, Semipalmated Sandpipers, Pectoral Sandpipers and Wilson's Snipes. A few Long-billed Dowitchers are regular in late April and early May. Less common species such as American Avocets, Willets, Whimbrels, Marbled Godwits, White-rumped Sandpipers and Stilt Sandpipers occur in small numbers. Also watch for Wilson's and Red-necked Phalaropes. In 2013, the cell hosted two Black-necked Stilts.

OTHER BIRDS

Attracted to the cell are Bonaparte's Gulls, Forster's and Caspian Terns and a good variety of ducks. Little Gulls are rare but regular. Great Blue Herons, Great Egrets, Sandhill Cranes, Bald Eagles, American Pipits and Horned Larks are often found. There is excellent birding for warblers and other passerines in the wet woods and shrubby areas that surround the cell.

Thousands of Black-bellied Plovers are attracted to the cell. 15 May 2013. *Photo Jean Iron*

Two Black-necked Stilts were very rare visitors in 2013. 6 May 2013. *Photo: Jean Iron*

OFO SHOREBIRD VIEWING SCHEDULE MAY 2014

Note: The Shorebird Cell is accessible all day for people to come and go at their leisure. In addition, OFO experts will be available to help with shorebird identification on the following afternoons:

Time: 4:30 - 6 p.m.

Dates: May 2, 5, 7, 10, 13 & 16, 2014

SHOREBIRD WORKSHOPS BY JEAN IRON

Lunch and Learn Sessions at Point Pelee National Park Visitor Centre Theatre, included with Park admission.

Time: 12 p.m.

Dates: May 7 & 13, 2014

This workshop details 28 regularly occurring spring migrant and breeding shorebirds, plus 8 rarer species that migrate through southern Ontario to their Arctic breeding grounds. It is loaded with tips to sharpen identification skills. The focus will be on Point Pelee area shorebirds, and we will visit Hillman Marsh Shorebird Cell in the late afternoon.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Kevin Money of Essex Region Conservation Authority is recognized for his continued support for shorebirds. Mike Malone of Pelee Wings Nature Store played a leading role, as did OFO's Dave Milsom and Sarah Rupert of Point Pelee National Park to provide birders with shorebird viewing opportunities at Hillman Marsh.

All photos were taken at Hillman Marsh Shorebird Cell.

American Avocet is a rare spring migrant. 16 May 2007. *Photo: Jean Iron*

The Enigma of Migration

Are birds migrating earlier each year? The answer is both yes and no.

By Roy John

A recent study at the University of East Anglia (UEA) is helping us understand why birds only appear to be migrating earlier. Individual birds actually arrive on the same date every year, but climate change has meant they can complete nesting sooner. Dr Jenny Gill, the lead researcher, explained they have known that some species of birds are migrating earlier, but the exact reasons were unclear. Furthermore, species that do not migrate earlier are declining in numbers

From a study of Black-tailed Godwits the UEA found the spring arrival date on the nesting grounds had advanced by two weeks. This was not a change in the behaviour of individual birds but those hatched in more recent years benefit from early nesting and they are the ones that are arriving in April instead of May. The dates are changing because the younger birds are turning up sooner. This new behaviour is linked to climate change because godwits nest earlier in warmer weather. The earlier a birds hatches the more body weight it will gain, subsequently prompting a speedy departure to their winter quarters. This means they are in condition to advance their return to the breeding grounds.

Birds that migrate over long distances cannot take as much of this advantage as they arrive so late their timing is already very tight. This explains why long-distance migrants are declining compared to other birds that can move in to the prime habitat before the long-distance birds arrive. Birds that stay in their wintering grounds, even though spring in the north may be favourable, risk arriving after spring food sources are gone.

This research from Britain fits with the results we see in Ontario for our Neotropical migrants. However as birds move north and breed earlier they may face new prey, parasites, competitors, and predators for which they are not well adapted. Overall climate change is putting many species of birds at risk and the consistent timing of bird migration is critical for the overall health of the environment.