

Marbled Godwits On The GO

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You may have read about the incredible migrations of the Bar-tailed Godwit (*Limosa lapponica*) between Alaska and New Zealand, including a non-stop 9 day fall migration that covered 12,000 km (7200 mi). However, in our own backyard another fascinating tale of godwit migration is unfolding, that of the Marbled Godwit (*Limosa fedoa*) of James Bay. In a cooperative project among the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS) and the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources, satellite transmitters were placed on Marbled Godwits on Akimiski Island, Nunavut. One of them left James Bay in August and gave us a real surprise. See more below.

The Marbled Godwit is listed in the Canadian and U.S. Shorebird Conservation Plans as a "species of high concern". It has a global/continental population of about 140,000-200,000 and may be declining (Birds of North America No. 492. Gratto-Trevor 2000). There are 3 discrete breeding areas: about 170,000 birds breed in the northern prairies, with a few in extreme western Ontario, about 2000 birds breed on the Alaska Peninsula, and about 1500 birds breed along the shores of James Bay in Ontario, Nunavut and Quebec. About 60% of the total population nests in Canada and most winter along the Pacific coast and Gulf of California from central California to central Sinaloa, Mexico. Others winter on the Gulf of Mexico coast and the southeast Atlantic coast.

Migration routes and wintering areas of individual populations are poorly known. The Alaskan birds are thought to follow trans-oceanic or coastal routes to Pacific coast wintering sites. The northern prairie birds are thought to winter on the Pacific coast of California and Mexico and the Gulf of Mexico, following relatively direct routes from breeding areas through the interior of the continent. The wintering areas and migration routes of the James Bay breeding birds are unknown, as no marking has been done on either the breeding area or the wintering area until now. The wintering areas are thought to include the southeast Atlantic coast and possibly the Gulf of Mexico.

The Conservation Plan for the Marbled Godwit (Melcher et al. 2000, see website at end) identified the lack of knowledge about the degree of interconnectivity and genetic relatedness among the three breeding groups as key problems for conservation planning. Are they all part of one global population or is there geographic, behavioural and genetic discreteness among them? Do they share migration stopover areas and where are the most important sites? Thus, a program of marking godwits with

satellite or radio transmitters and colour bands, and a program of collecting tissues for genetic or stable isotope analyses was recommended to answer questions about site and habitat use, dispersal and migratory connectivity.

To help answer these important questions, Adrian Farmer, a research scientist with the USGS in Colorado, and Bridget Olson, a refuge biologist with the USFWS at Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge in Utah, placed lightweight, solar-powered transmitters on Marbled Godwits that they captured on staging areas at Bear River and on wintering areas in Mexico (see website at end). In May and June 2007, they joined me on Akimiski Island to expand the scope of the study. Over the course of 3 weeks we went out daily to attempt to capture godwits. Unsuccessful at first with net-firing capture guns, we moved on to try noose-mats, catching one bird, and mist-nets catching a second bird (Figure 1). Frustratingly, numerous birds exceeded our grasp by only a feather's width.

The results so far are more than worth the effort. We got locations of both birds for several weeks during the breeding season and learned that while using coastal marsh for feeding and pair activities early on, they both spent the majority of the summer inland in freshwater sedge fens. One bird left James Bay in the late afternoon of 17 August and proceeded south, crossing Lake Superior just 8 hours later. It was in South Dakota from 20 to 25 August and in New Mexico by 29 August, but there the signal was unfortunately lost. In 12 days, it travelled over 3500 km. The projected route suggests it was heading for the Pacific coast of Mexico, perhaps to Sinaloa or Baja (Figure 2). This surprised us all. It is only one bird and too early to draw conclusions. The transmitter on the second bird is still sending a signal, but it is stationary on the island near the activity area from the breeding season. It has either fallen off the bird, or the bird is dead. There is no way to know for sure until we return and look for it next spring. With more transmitters and a greater degree of both knowledge in capture methods and confidence in ourselves, we can hardly wait for 2008 to learn more about the migration of the James Bay Marbled Godwit.

Melcher et al. 2000 Conservation Plan website:

www.nbii.gov/images/uploaded/8496_1156424362432_Marbled_Godwit_Plan.pdf

US Fish and Wildlife Service Marbled Godwits website:

www.fort.usgs.gov/Resources/GoGodwits/

Continued on next page

Acknowledgements

I thank Bridget Olson of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Adrian Farmer of the U.S. Geological Survey and Rod Brook of the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this article.



Figure 1. A 326 gram male Marbled Godwit being fitted with solar-powered transmitter on Akimiski Island on 6 June 2007. Photo by Ken Abraham.

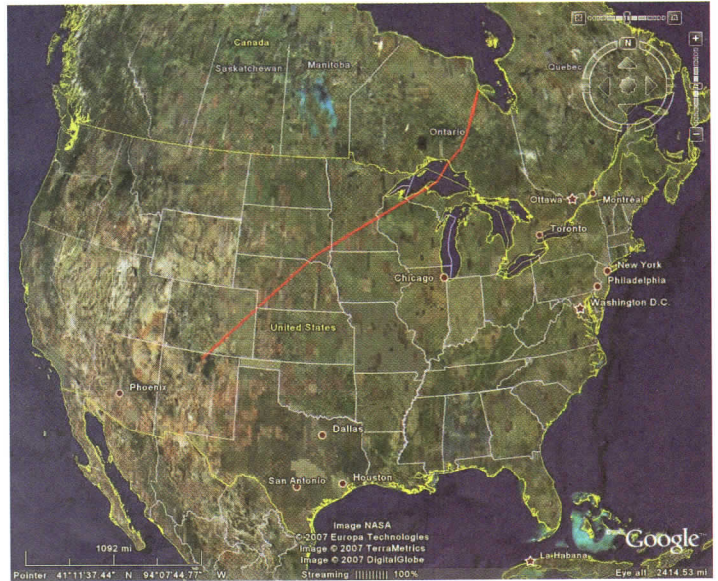


Figure 2. Route of one Marbled Godwit from Akimiski Island to New Mexico, where the signal was lost. Bridget Olson provided the map.

OFO 25th Anniversary 1982 - 2007



Fred Bodsworth celebrated his 89th birthday with Dorothy Andrews at the OFO 25th Anniversary Convention on 13 October 2007 at Point Pelee. Photo by Janice Haines.

Right photo: Reid Wilson (left) and Alan Wormington at the inaugural OFO Annual Meeting on 13 November 1982 at Aldershot High School in Burlington. Photo by Ron Ridout.

In 1982 there were 36 Life Members and 31 Annual. In October 2007 there are 124 Life and 942 Annual for a total of 1066.

