

August 2008: Meditations on Shorebird Migration

The glow of goldenrod amid purple asters in the fields serves as a visual cue for me, a yellow light signaling that the end of summer is near. In my mind the seasonal blooming of goldenrod is intertwined with the southward migration of shorebirds. Unbeknownst to most of us, back in July sandpipers began to leave their Arctic breeding grounds, small flocks stopping over in our marshes and wetlands to fatten up for their continuing journey south.

Now their numbers are increasing, and flocks are more obvious on mudflats and in the salt pannes of such places as Weskeag Marsh in South Thomaston. Just hearing for the first time the three-note "too-too-too" call of the greater yellowlegs (a large sandpiper) conjures a strong sensory image for me that embraces the tangy, pungent tidal scent of salt marsh, the hum of crickets in the tall, dried grasses, and that particular rich quality of light that we only see in late summer.

This bittersweet image captures the essence of my favorite time of year. The transition of the seasons becomes so apparent now--the lush, floral abundance of summer has reached its peak, sere leaves and petals begin to brown and curl, and the very air vibrates with the restlessness of all those migrating birds. The passage of time, with the passage of the birds, is something tangible, to be savored, seasoned as it is now with a small regret for the end of our glorious, brief Maine summer. It's a time of both winding down and charging up. Fall begins to breathe down summer's sweaty neck, bringing goosebumps that make you shiver with a mixture of discomfort and pleasure.

In *The Wind Birds*, Peter Matthiesen's book celebrating shorebirds, he writes with great poetry of this sense of the season conveyed by the flight and calls of these migrating birds:

...in the wild melodies of their calls, in the breath of vast distance and bare regions that attends them, we sense intimation of our own mortality... Yet it is not the death sign that the curlews [another large sandpiper] bring, but only the memory of life, of high beauty passing swiftly, as the curlew passes, leaving us in solitude on an empty beach, with summer gone, and a wind blowing.

To feel this for yourself, you only need to visit Weskeag Marsh on a rising tide as shorebirds cluster in the salt pannes--up to 30 different species ranging from the occasional 18-inch godwit to the common, six-inch least sandpiper. Herons and egrets are often an added bonus, as are falcons and other birds of prey that follow the migrating flocks--their feathered meals--southward. Stirred by a hopeful hawk, the smallest sandpipers, "peeps," rise in shimmering flocks of dozens or hundreds that seem to move as a single unit. They shift, twist, and turn as one, an aerial magic that never ceases to amaze me, then eventually settle back down to feed, sometimes very close, leaving tracks like tiny hieroglyphics etched into the algae-covered marsh mud.

They feed with great intensity, ever watchful but ever probing, as they fatten up for the next leg of their flight to Central or South America. Many shorebirds use the Northeast as their staging area for a non-stop flight to their wintering grounds, so they need to develop a true layer of blubber. Given the distances these birds need to fly, stuffing themselves with is a life-or-death situation. Bar-tailed godwits migrate 6,000 miles, for instance. The Nature Conservancy recently tracked a whimbrel during her spring migration (by attaching a tiny satellite transmitter to her back) and were shocked to learn that she flew from the Virginia coast all the way to northern Alaska in six days, non-stop. When they first attached the transmitter, the biologists described her as a "chicken whimbrel," because she was as fat as "an oven-stuffer chicken." Once they realized what she had done, it became obvious why she was so beefed up.

The first migrants to pass through each summer, always seeming too early, are failed breeders. These early birds were the losers in love this summer, or else suffered nest failure. The breeding season in the Arctic is too short to try again. The second wave is usually of adult females, finally able to leave their nests behind, followed by adult males. The latest birds are most often juveniles. But this is not to imply that they gather in discrete flocks, and with many species, telling male from female is near impossible in the field. When observed close, a whole range of species and plumage may be visible in the feeding flocks. Young least sandpipers in bright, copper penny plumage are, to put it in scientific parlance, "wicked cute." These smallest sandpipers often mingle with other peeps: semipalmated sandpipers ("semipalmated," referring to their feet, means partially webbed), as well as the occasional white-rumped sandpiper, any of which may feed at the feet of their larger cousin sandpipers and plovers.



Least Sandpiper, juvenile. Photo credit: Don Reimer

The semipalmated plover, just a few inches larger than the least sandpiper and also regularly seen at Weskeag Marsh, displays a neat brown and white pattern with a brown ring around its neck. These birds drag their migration out over several months, and are often among the last shorebirds lingering in late fall. A few years ago, my husband and I were amazed to come across two of them during our annual Christmas Bird Count--held the weekend before Christmas--at the beach by the Rockland breakwater. These two birds were the only semipalmated plovers counted in the whole state during that Count, and we sincerely wished them a lot of luck getting south as fast as they could.

Generally brown or grey in color, with mottled patterns, shorebirds blend in with the dried grasses and sedges of the marsh, mainly visible only when feeding in shallow pools or open mudflats, or in flight, when their pale

undersides flash in the sun. If you pass the marsh on Buttermilk Lane, you might look out over the barrens and muddy channels of the late summer salt marsh and see few signs of animal life. But at ground level, the marsh brims over with activity as flocks feed frantically all around you or fly back and forth overhead, their chirring and whistling calls conveying true vitality of life even as you know they will move on that night and leave us here to face the winter alone.

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