

TASL News

TAKE A SECOND LOOK IS A
PROJECT OF BIRD OBSERVER
OF EASTERN MASSACHUSETTS

JULY 1981



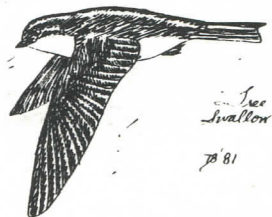
FINDING A PLACE TO RAISE A FAMILY

About a month after hundreds of Cliff Swallows return to San Juan Capistrano, to the delight of many tourists, numbers of swallows return to the culverts, drain pipes, old drive-ins and other abandoned buildings, as well as hollow trees and nest boxes of Metropolitan Boston. There is little fanfare made here concerning their arrival but their continued presence in all of these places is testament to the amazing adaptability of the swallow family.

Of the six species of swallows which are regularly found in the East, three -- Tree, Barn and Rough-winged Swallows can be found breeding in the Greater Boston area. Each of these species has adapted to using man-made structures for their nest sites and as long as there are still insects in the air, seem assured of continued survival.

Tree Swallows originally nested in hollow trees where they often can still be found, particularly when there are dead trees standing in water. However, they seem to prefer nest boxes when available and will forsake their former nesting sites. The provision of nest boxes has also been shown to substantially increase Tree Swallow populations.

Of the three species, Tree Swallows, although fairly common in the region, seem to be in the most danger. Historically, the House Sparrow has been successful in ousting Tree Swallows from their nest sites; since House Sparrows are now receiving major competition from House Finches in urban areas, they may start to move into areas now populated by Tree Swallows. A second threat to Tree Swallow populations is that in 1979 a cold, wet spell in August was estimated to have killed thousands of immature Tree Swallows. What effect this will have on further populations is unknown. Fortunately, people can substantially alleviate these problems by erecting and monitoring nest boxes in fields, meadows, and marshes where Tree Swallows may be found.



Barn Swallows are also common breeders in our area. Formerly cave nesters, they have adapted to using open buildings as sanctuaries for their nests of mud and straw. Although the number of barns is decreasing, our civilization seems to leave behind many abandoned buildings, which once vandals have broken into them, are accessible to Barn Swallows and are increasingly being used by them. Barn Swallows will also use other open structures -- pairs breed at both the fort on Castle Island and that on Georges Island, and a fairly large colony can be found nesting under the buildings of the Saugus Ironworks Historical Site. Persons wishing to provide them nesting sites can help by leaving access to outside garages or sheds in areas where Barn Swallows may be found.

The third species, the Rough-winged Swallow, formerly an uncommon bird, seems to be increasing its numbers. Originally river-bank nesters, they may still be found along rivers where the bank is left undisturbed. There is such a site along the Mystic River, across from the new MDC park and Rough-winged Swallows have apparently been using it for at least several years. They will also build in old culverts and drain pipes and may increasingly be found nesting among the remains of old drainage canals. There is a large colony of about a dozen pairs that nests in holes of the retaining wall that was built to direct the flow of the Neponset River near the old chocolate mill. The major threat that these swallows face is increased pollution of these waterways which may affect their food supply. We should act to keep these abandoned canals relatively clean and free of harmful waste products.

Craig Jackson,



Sunday, July 19

SALT MARSH ECOLOGY -- BELLE ISLE, EAST BOSTON

Belle Isle, the largest and most significant salt marsh remaining in the City of Boston, is owned primarily by the Massachusetts Port Authority. Here one can find tidal creeks, drainage ditches, and two salt pans which are used extensively by feeding herons and roosting shorebirds. A corner of this one-half square mile marsh is an abandoned drive-in theater that is currently being converted by the MDC into a park.

Prior to our salt marsh visit, we recommend that you read Life and Death of the Salt Marsh by John and Mildred Teal (Ballantine Books, 1969, \$2.95, paperback). At Belle Isle, we will identify the dominant marsh plants (*Spartina*, *Distichlis*, *Salicornia*, *Phragmites*), and invertebrates (mussels, butterflies). Naturally, the breeding birds of the marsh -- Sharp-tailed Sparrow, Killdeer, Black Duck -- will come under scrutiny also.

Belle Isle seems to be a stop over for herons dispersing from the Boston Harbor Islands in the early morning. Some stay and feed while others, after a short rest, move to other marshes north and west of here. Snowy Egret, Glossy Ibis, and Black-crowned Night Heron are the most numerous wading birds found at Belle Isle. Other species such as the Little Blue Heron and the Green Heron are seen occasionally. Watching the behavior of these birds at close range can be a great deal of fun.

Large numbers of migrating shorebirds feed on the mudflats of Boston Harbor at low tide. The incoming tide pushes these birds off the flats to their favorite roosting spots where they spend the high tide hours. Belle Isle, one such roost, is very important to the birds that feed in the northern sections of Boston Harbor. The dominant species in mid-July is the Short-billed Dowitcher. Other shorebird species present are yellowlegs, Red Knots, Hudsonian Godwits, and possibly some peep. Everyone can have fun learning to identify a dozen species of these "little brown jobs," especially when several species are found together tucked and dozing in the middle of the salt pans!

On July 19 low tide is at 7:15 am, high tide is at 1:15 pm. Our field trip will begin at 8:30 am at the Orient Heights MBTA Station on Bennington Street, East Boston. Those wishing to start at an earlier hour (e.g. 5:30 am) should get in touch with the leader, Soheil Zendehe (628-8990).



TASL and this newsletter are supported by contributions from participants and other interested persons, as well as by a grant from Bird Observer, Inc. Subscriptions to TASL News are nominally \$2 per year. If you have not contributed already, please do so today. Make checks out to TASL and mail to: Bird Observer, Inc., 462 Trapelo Road, Belmont, MA 02178.

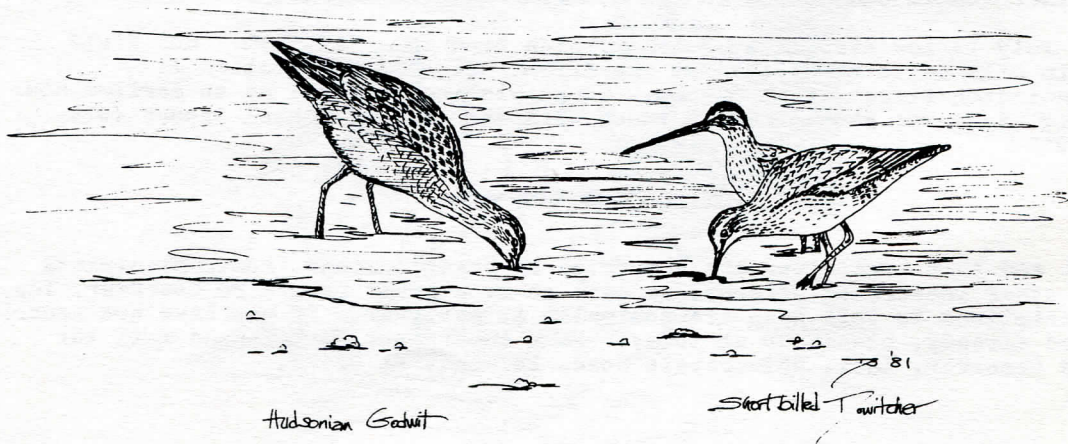
WATCH WHAT THEY DO

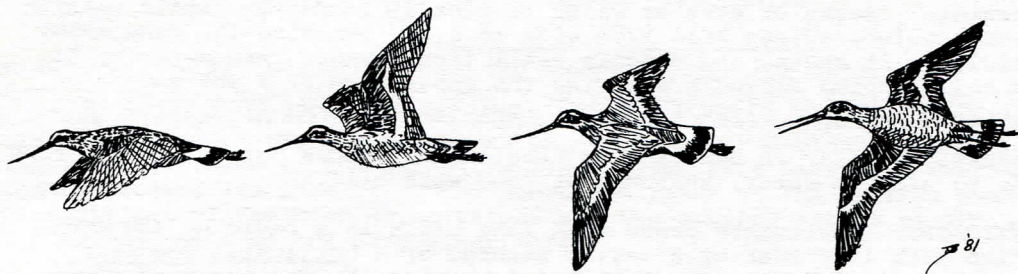
I can well remember trying to learn shorebirds by studying their pictures. When confronted with the live creatures during migration -- moving in tens and hundreds of thousands, feeding and flying and mixing with one another, on sandbars and mudflats and marshes, -- I would go into shock. I would give up on most of them and would seek only the unmistakable among them: the Ruddy Turnstone, American Oystercatcher, and Willet in flight.

Later, I redoubled my efforts to match the still pictures with the moving birds. I made progress -- I advanced from shock to confusion. Seeking godwits, I was instructed to look for large wading birds with up-turned bills. I found yellowlegs, which often have slightly up-turned bills. Still seeking godwits, I was told to look for large wading birds with two-toned bills. I found Willets with two-toned bills. Instructed to look for large wading birds with bills that were both, I discovered that Hudsonian Godwits sometimes have straight two-toned bills, and that the rare Black-tailed Godwit from Europe normally has a straight two-toned bill.

Recently, I have come to wish that someone had told me to spend as much time watching shorebirds feed as trying to get a fix on their color, size, bill length, bill color, bill shape, leg length, leg color and their primaries, scapulars, axillaries, rumps and tails. Armed with a libretto like the one presented here, I would have come to enjoy the performance faster.

Here is a brief guide which would have helped me. The quotes are from the sources listed at the end of the article. I have not cited them in the text because I wanted to avoid cluttering it with footnotes. The analogies are mostly mine.





To begin sorting out a large number of small birds which are moving about on land, consider the following:

PLOVERS. Plovers run about on the beach like robins, with their heads up. They stop, appear to look around and listen, then dab quickly at the surface. See the book once you know that you have one. Pictures will help.

PEEP. Peep include five species of "small, look-alike sandpipers" which move along with heads down like sparrows, probing or picking at the surface with short bills. They commonly move in groups. Peep include the Semipalmated Sandpiper, Western Sandpiper, Least Sandpiper, White-rumped Sandpiper, and Baird's Sandpiper. To sort out the peep note these differences in feeding behavior:

*Semipalmated: occasionally probes in one spot but mostly "runs along and snatches at food here and there; often found just above the wave line."

*Western: similar in behavior to Semipalmated but tends to "probe in deeper water" and "sometimes feeds with head immersed."

*Least: both "picks from the surface" and "probes in mud or shallow water."

*White-rumped: "inclined to be slow and deliberate; probes deeply and repeatedly in one spot, often standing up to its belly in water with the whole head under when feeding."

*Baird's: "feeds by itself" rather than in groups; "moves about quickly in various directions;" and "picks rather than probes."

To begin sorting out a small number of large birds which are moving about in the water, consider the following:

GODWITS. Godwits probe with a rapid forward motion of their long bills, in deeper water than other waders. Reminiscent of a divining rod in the hands of a dowser. Hudsonian Godwits often plunge their whole heads into the muck as well. See the book once you know you have one. Check the rumps and underwings of the birds in flight.

YELLOWLEGS. Yellowlegs have long bills but do not probe, rather they pick and dab, and snatch in the manner of herons. (Small fish are a major component of their diet.) Yellowlegs include the Greater Yellowlegs and the Lesser Yellowlegs. To distinguish between them note the following differences:

*Greater: "Pecks or dabs at water to pick up food; also while walking through water, swings bill from side to side, skimming it; runs about rapidly as it chases and catches small fish;" wades into water up to its belly; spins around presenting the appearance of a phalarope; "sprints about" from place to place, "quickly striking from right to left."

*Lesser: similar in behavior to Greater, but "does not swing bill from side to side in water; snatches at food with bill."

DOWITCHERS. Dowitchers probe with long bills in a rapid up and down motion much like that of a sewing machine or a horizontal woodpecker. Dowitchers include the Short-billed Dowitcher, by far our most common species, and the Long-billed Dowitcher. Short-billed Dowitchers "usually feed on marine mudflats." During migration Long-billed Dowitchers "prefer freshwater habitats."

DOURLES. The two birds discussed below exhibit behavior which is often very similar to that of other, larger shorebirds. But these two "doubles" are far more graceful, precise and delicate in their movements. Among the waders you may find a small bird behaving like a yellowlegs.

*Wilson's Phalarope: picks at insects on the surface of water or mud with a long, needle-like bill; "whirls about on water dabbing at surface with bill forward or backward, with or against whirling motion of its body;" unlike yellowlegs, "probes bottom with head submerged."

Also among waders you may find a small bird behaving like a dowitcher.

*Stilt Sandpiper: "feeds with dowitchers; wades belly deep as they do, and often uses same rapid up and down movement of bill and head;" unlike dowitchers, "sweeps bill from side to side along the bottom."

Jim Barton

Sources

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TAKE A SECOND LOOK: SUMMER FIELD TRIPS

On Sunday, May 31, the marshes of the Saugus River came under the scrutiny of Take a Second Look (TASL) participants. The field trip, led by Craig Jackson, started at the fresh marshes in Breakheart Reservation, continued on to the Saugus Ironworks where the river begins to turn brackish, and ended in the extensive Pines River salt marshes. Participants studied and identified the flora and fauna of the various wetlands. The highlight of the bird observations was the amusing antics of two pairs of Virginia Rails in the Camp Nihan marsh.

Three other field trips to Boston area rivers and estuaries have been scheduled for this summer. A June 21 trip, "Checking Out the Charles," will have taken place by the time this is in your hands. The remaining trips are listed below. We urge you to call the leaders for further information (starting times, meeting places, car pooling).

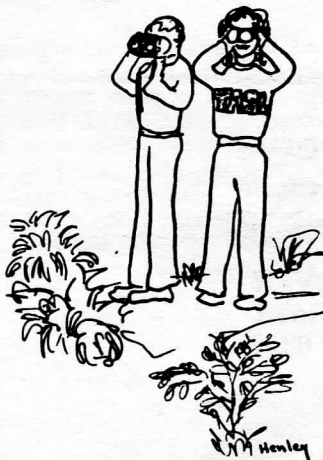
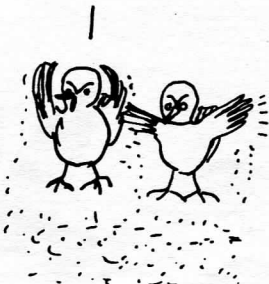
July 19: "Salt Marsh Ecology -- Belle Isle, East Boston"

Leader: Soheil Zendeh (628-8990)
Starting: Orient Heights MBTA Station,
Place: Bennington Street, East Boston
Starting
Time: 8:30 am

August 9: "Investigating the Neponset River System"

Leader: Dave Brown (328-3533)
Starting: Moswetusock Hummock,
Place: Squantum
Starting
Time: 6:00 am

I DIDN'T MIND IT SO
MUCH WHEN THEY JUST
CAME AND COUNTED
US, BUT NOW THEY
HAVE TO STARE AT
EVERY @!!!*
THING WE DO!



Since 1973 BIRD OBSERVER, a bimonthly magazine, has been publishing records of eastern Massachusetts bird-sightings. Each issue features an article on where to find birds in this state (and elsewhere). The June 1981 issue focuses on the terns of Massachusetts. Other pieces on field problems, ornithological research, and controversial subjects such as birding etiquette also appear in the magazine. Annual subscription to BIRD OBSERVER is \$7.50. If you are interested in subscribing, please mail your check to: Bird Observer, Inc., 462 Trapelo Road, Belmont, MA 02178.

This issue of TASL News was produced by Craig Jackson, with assistance from Jim Barton, Elizabeth Bell, and Barbara Gard. Artwork for this issue was contributed by Denise Braunhardt and Nancy Henley. We would also like to thank Martha Reinstein for retyping our mailing list.

TASL's Boston Harbor winter bird censuses will resume in November. To keep fully up-to-date on TASL activities, you may wish to subscribe to TASL News. Please send a check for \$2.00 to: TASL News, 462 Trapelo Road, Belmont, MA 02178.

Inquiries about the Harbor Censuses, as well as other TASL activities, should be addressed to TASL Coordinators:

Craig Jackson, 22 Almont Street, Malden 02148: 321-4382.
Soheil Zende, 380 Broadway, Somerville 02145: 628-8990.

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