



Take a Second Look
42 Baker Avenue
Lexington, MA 02173

TASL Shorebird Census:
Saturday, August 14 (details below)

Shorebird Census

On Saturday, August 14, TASL censusers will survey shorebird hotspots from Wollaston to Nahant. We will begin around high tide (9 AM) and finish six hours later, in order to cover these spots through a full tide cycle. If you have not been shorebirding around Boston, we might have a few surprises for you!

If you are interested in participating please call one of the three census leaders:

Jim Barton 354-7435

Maury Hall 268-7571

Soheil Zende 863-2392

Our Privilege of Place

At Point of Pines in Revere; at Snake Island in Winthrop; in the marsh at Belle Isle in East Boston: against a backdrop of blue subway trains; in front of a chain-link fence; across the street from lawns of small homes--you can often find in summer and early autumn a group of Hudsonian Godwits, large and elegant wading birds that few people in our country can see so easily and that most never see unless they travel far. Later in the fall, and sometimes on into early December, you can also find the larger Marbled Godwit, so elegant of form, and also of color when in flight, that many in our city drive an hour to see at Newburyport or two hours to see on the island of Monomoy, which can only be reached at a cost of \$10 for a ferry ride.

Feeding

At Point of Pines or at Snake Island, where shorebirds feed on a falling tide, look for dark birds at the water's edge who drive long bills down into the mud or sand with the steady, rocking motion of walking beams. Look, too, at the birds that feed the farthest out into the water. On their longer legs, the godwits go deeper than the Greater Yellowlegs or the Willet.

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REMINISCING:

TASL Shorebird Census— Thirteen Years Later

In 1980, our first full year of Boston Harbor censuses, we scheduled two summer counts (July 20 and August 3), to focus on shorebirds and herons. The scheme, as always with TASL, was elaborate and ambitious: Up to fifteen sites were designated census spots, and observers were to watch each for six hours--half of a full tide cycle--and keep records of the number of birds using each site at half hour intervals. The data was then supposed to be subjected to an analysis which yielded "bird-hours." (*Maury, are you having fun yet?*)

The two censuses documented what we more or less knew already: that a large colony of herons, particularly Snowy Egrets and Black-crowned Night-Herons, bred on Spectacle Island and flew in to various marshes around the city to feed as the tide dropped out; that one of the major stops in the path of feeding herons was Belle Isle Marsh in East Boston; and that Snake Island in Winthrop Harbor

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Shorebird Census (Continued)

was a focus for both roosting and feeding shorebirds at that time of year.

Murderous Yellowlegs

Several amusing and one particularly horrific tale from the censuses made the rounds. First, the horrific one.

George Gove was assigned a low tide shorebird spot in East Boston on the outskirts of Logan Airport—a place I call my Byron Street secret hot spot. As George watched a group of feeding yellowlegs, a Lesser Yellowlegs appeared to have its leg grabbed by a mud-submerged clam. The yellowlegs began to squawk and struggle, flapping all around in the mud but unable to free itself. Soon other yellowlegs began running up to it and proceeded to mob it and peck at it until it died!

Clouds of Shorebirds

Craig Jackson and I were to cover Snake Island in Winthrop. On August 3, we arrived at 5 AM by canoe, just as light began

filtering in through early morning haze. A large flock of chattering Ruddy Turnstones greeted us as we approached the island. We estimated over 300 birds.

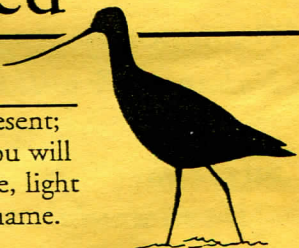
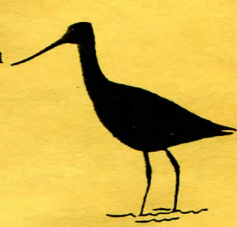
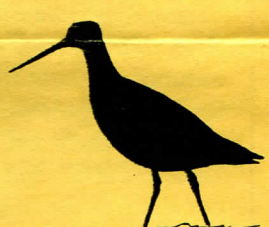

On the July 20 census, again at Snake Island, as we crawled over the edge of the berm that hides the center of the island from prying eyes, we realized that there were literally thousands of shorebirds roosting on the marsh grasses in the middle of the island. We estimated 5000 Semipalmated Sandpipers in that flock. By August 3 the size of flock was down a bit: "only" 3000 Semis!

These censuses were not followed up, whereas the winter TASL censuses took off and have been a source of steady information about Boston Harbor since 1980. We hope that this summer census will be a pilot for more to come.

Soheil Zende

If you have TASL anecdotes or reminiscences, please submit them for this publication. I will have another issue in the mail before November.

Large Shorebirds Compared

	Length	Bill length	Description of bill	General description	
Marbled Godwit	16-20"	3-5.5"	Long to very long; straight or markedly upturned; two toned	The largest shorebird in the group, if present; indeed, probably the largest shorebird you will see in Boston. Rich pinkish brown above, light brown below; and mottled--whence its name.	
Hudsonian Godwit	14-17"	3"	Long; straight or partly upturned; two-toned	Usually the largest shorebird in the group, for the Marbled Godwit is uncommon. In spring plumage, dark on the back above and russet on the breast below, where barred with black. In winter plumage, grey above and paler grey below; similar in tone and coloration to the large western race of the Willet. Like the Marbled Godwit, its legs are dark.	
Willet	14-16"	2-2.75"	Shorter; thicker and blunter; black or blue-black	<i>Eastern race:</i> Dull brown above and below; matte in finish. Far smaller than a Marbled Godwit. Legs bluish grey. The common race in spring. <i>Western race:</i> In size may equal or surpass the Hudsonian Godwit. Grey upon its back, like in texture to polished marble; pearly grey upon its breast. Legs bluish grey, like blueberries before they fully ripen. The common race in fall.	
Greater Yellowlegs	12.5-15"	2-2.3"	Shorter; thinner; straight or slightly upturned; black	In size may equal a small Hudsonian Godwit or Willet. Black above, speckled with white and grey; texture akin to granite. Pale below, breast often heavily streaked with black. Common in spring and fall.	

TASL (Take Second Look) is organized and staffed entirely by volunteers. Please mail TASL census data to Maury Hall, 849 East 3rd St. #2, South Boston, MA 02127 (268-7571). This newsletter is produced by Soheil Zende (863-2392H, 923-0941W). Shorebird table by Jim Barton. Illustrations by Denise Cabral.

Privilege (Continued)

Godwits often feed in one place for a time. They drive their upturned bills gracefully downward into sand or mud as if their necks and heads and bills were the forearms, wrists and fingers of dancers trained in Thailand or Bali. They probe deeply beneath the surface of the water, immersing their bills and heads like those of giant hummingbirds. The godwits conduct a ritual, first at one station, then at another.

The yellowlegs chase small fish back and forth in shallow water; erratically, from place to place, like children released from stuffy classrooms to recess in a schoolyard; aggressively, like tennis players at a doubles match. Because they feed on fish, on snails and crabs, on insect larvae and aquatic insects, the yellowlegs don't probe. They strike and snatch like herons and egrets.

The Willets graze methodically. They snatch, but not frenetically; they probe, but not deeply. Often they proceed steadily forward, as if digging a trench or preparing a furrow, with their bills partly opened like a pair of tongs, and immersed to half their length in water, in mud or in soft sand.

Resting

At high tide the godwits often rest at Belle Isle, standing close together in a roost with other long-legged shorebirds like the Greater Yellowlegs. To identify the godwits, begin by finding the largest waders in the group, then study their plumages, then study their bills. Rely on size and plumage to guide but not assure you. For confirmation, observe the length and color or contour of the bill (see table, page 2).

Wait, if need be. When resting, a godwit often conceals its long, distinctive bill among the feathers of its back. The bills of godwits are striking: two-toned, pink at the base, darkening towards the tip, dusky at the tip. Long to very long; sometimes straight, often upturned; often markedly recurved in the Marbled Godwit.

The Greater Yellowlegs will sometimes show you a slightly upturned bill, but never a two-toned bill, while Willets will have straight dark bills that are both shorter and thicker than godwits or yellowlegs.

Flying

In flight, in winter plumage, three of the four species are studies in contrast between the black of wet shingle, the white of fresh snow, and the grey of cold clouds. The Greater Yellowlegs presents dark wings and a white rump. On the wings of the Willet, bands of black and white contrast sharply above and below; its back is grey. The Hudsonian Godwit presents a thin white stripe on a dark wing, and a

white tail ending in a broad black band; the underwing is strikingly black. On their bodies, all are as light as a pale overcast.

Above and below, on its wings, body and tail, the Marbled Godwit presents the brown colors of fallen oak and maple leaves—contrasting, on its raised wings, with linings of cinnamon or amber that gleam in strong sun like chestnut freshly opened, or the fur of a seal. The Marbled is magic to see in flight. To see it so, at close range, in strong light, is to make with your eyes a work of art, perfect, in an instant.

Few Marbled Godwits visit our state—perhaps ten birds a year at most. For every Marbled we probably record a hundred Hudsonians. But both are a privilege to see.

At the end of summer, in northern Canada, Hudsonian Godwits gather in great numbers on the shores of James and Hudson Bays. In late August, 3000 to 4000 adults at a time may set out on migration in flocks of 70 to 350 birds. We usually see

them here in far smaller groups of 10 or 20 or 50 birds. We rarely see more than 100 at a time. But at least we see them.

In most of the United States, the Hudsonian Godwit can be very hard to find; so hard, indeed, that several years ago a national organization of avid bird observers, all of whom had seen at least 500 of the 700 species seen in our country, listed the Hudsonian Godwit among the 10 species they most wanted to see. Apparently, nearly the entire population flies directly over the Atlantic and the Caribbean from Canada to the eastern coast of South America. Only in Argentina and in Chile is the bird found in the great numbers seen departing Canada.

Our privilege is to see many of the few that choose to set down on our land. You can exercise our privilege to see them by taking the subway, and by walking to a small, shallow pool at Belle Isle called Rosie's Puddle. To see them there, roosting at high tide with other shorebirds, under the old blue MBTA trains, reminds us that our civilization and our city came long after these birds established the sky trails that they use to traverse the hemisphere.

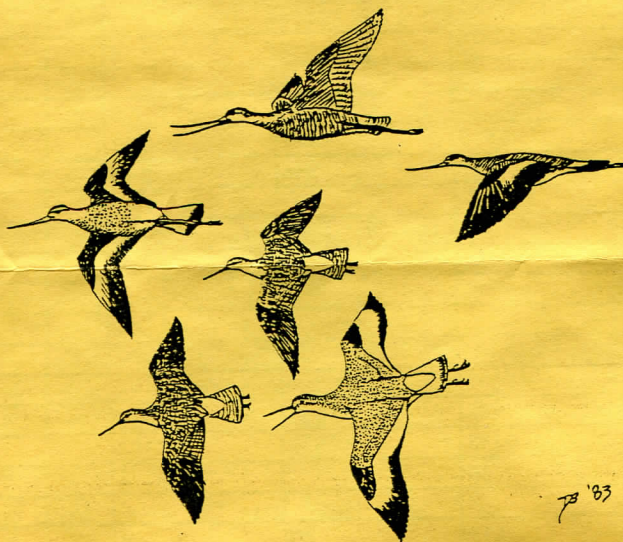
J. H. Barton

Sources:

Peterson, R. T., *A Field Guide to the Birds*, Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston 1980.

Terres, J. K., *The Audubon Society Encyclopedia of North American Birds*, Alfred A Knopf, New York 1980.

[This article originally appeared in the January 1984 issue of TASL News.]



1992-93 TASL Census Totals

SPECIES	11/22/92	1/24/93	2/21/93	3/21/93
RED-THROATED LOON	11	5		11
COMMON LOON	6	11	11	16
HORNED GREBE	243	184	37	145
RED-NECKED GREBE	28	3	3	9
NORTHERN GANNET		1		
GREAT CORMORANT	36	8	9	9
D-CRESTED CORMORANT	57	2	4	
GREAT BLUE HERON	28	1		2
MUTE SWAN	9	13	6	9
BRANT	1516	1018	772	1778
CANADA GOOSE	141	246	243	185
GREEN-WINGED TEAL				2
AMERICAN BLACK DUCK	1376	1508	1148	1198
MALLARD	155	183	160	216
NORTHERN PINTAIL		2		
NORTHERN SHOVELER			1	1
GADWALL				3
AMERICAN WIGEON	2			
GREATER SCAUP	448	681	939	819
COMMON EIDER	5438	10537	7387	9821
OLDSQUAW	36		4	2
BLACK SCOTER	3			
SURF SCOTER	159	20	8	52
WHITE-WINGED SCOTER	440	517	337	652
SCOTER (SP)	1250	20		265
COMMON GOLDENEYE	998	899	751	1631
BARROW'S GOLDENEYE				1
BUFFLEHEAD	3164	1745	1105	2134
COMMON MERGANSER				2
RED-BRST'D MERGANSER	2981	1023	662	1207
COOPER'S HAWK	2		1	
RED-TAILED HAWK	1	1	1	2
AMERICAN KESTREL		1		
LARGE FALCON	1			
BLACK-BELLIED PLOVER	13			
KILLDEER	1			4
GREATER YELLOWLEGS	7			
SANDERLING	324	10	66	410
PURPLE SANDPIPER	13	237		25
DUNLIN	272		13	87
C. BLACK-HEADED GULL	4	17	2	3
BONAPARTE'S GULL	863	322		
ICELAND GULL			2	2
LESSER BLACK-BACKED GULL				1
SNOWY OWL	5	4	3	
LARGE OWL (SP.)			1	
HARBOR SEAL	12	4	26	8
HARBOR PORPOISE				1
WEATHER	Clay, rain PM	Sunny, clr.	Snow	Clay, lt rain/snow
WIND	SW 5-10 mph	S10 mph		SE-10 mph
TEMP	55-60 F		18 F	55 F
HI TIDE	9:00 AM	12:20 PM	11:08 AM	10:07 AM

Participants:

Nahant: Lainie Epstein, Mike & Toby Gooley, Todd Ongaro, Margery Rines, Bob Stymeist

Winthrop: James Aliberti, Wayne Barron, Ted Mara, Jane Nalwalk, Pat Randall, Ed Sullivan, Diane Teta, Fay & Peter Vale

Boston: Harvey Allen, Jim Barton, Joan Campbell, Michael Fager, Kathy Foley, Susan Pacsoza, Jim Powers, Barbara & Syd Smith, Robert Weiner, Soheil Zende

Quincy: Fred Bouchard, Ron Donovan, Steve Ells, Paul FitzGerald, Winty Harrington, Mike McInnis, Mimi Murphy, Bert Nickerson, Dave Petrie, Althea Phillips, Leif Robinson, Brooke Stevens, Eliot Taylor, Kathleen Winkler

Weymouth/Hull: Kenton Griffis, Maury Hall, Dave Lange, Bob Meyers, Dennis Oliver, Barbara & Syd Smith, Polly Stevens, Craig Walker

Thanks to all censusers, and apologies to anyone whose name was inadvertently left off this list.

