

A Season's Study of Some of Our Water Birds

BY JULIAN K. POTTER

To introduce shop, the identification of some of the rarer and more difficult birds, which are strikingly similar to familiar species, might be likened to the detection of counterfeit notes. The bank teller picks up a handful of notes, runs rapidly through them and suddenly through sight, feeling, or intuition he becomes suspicious of one of them. Close examination proves it to be a counterfeit. To the depositor who has been victimized and has witnessed the detection, the teller's ability seems most uncanny and he immediately desires to know how it is done. This is sometimes most difficult to explain but one thing is certain, this ability is acquired only by long practice and through a perfect knowledge of the color, feel, design and clean cut appearance of every detail of a good note. As sight and feeling enter largely into the detection of a counterfeit, in a like manner sight and hearing enter into the detection and identification of similar but unusual birds. In both cases the senses are aided very materially by experience and aptitude.

Those who were on the Memorial Day field trip to Cape May (1923) very well remember how we became suspicious of a certain Yellow Warbler song and in searching for the author we actually saw a Yellow Warbler, but fortunately almost at the same instant Gillespie caught sight of a Warbler with a gray back which proved to be the author of the song and a Yellow-throated Warbler. It was only by being thoroughly familiar with the song of the Yellow Warbler in the first place, and the glimpse of the gray back of the bird by one man, in the second place, that led to the identification of the straggler.

Again the same day we came across what to all appearances was an ordinary Kingbird. Close examination showed the bird had no white band on the end of the tail, other details were discovered which quickly proved the bird without a doubt to be a Gray Kingbird. Only a thorough knowledge of the appearance of our Kingbird led to this interesting discovery.

In identifying and studying the shore birds, experience and a thorough knowledge of this class of birds, especially the smaller members, is more necessary than for any other group. The obvious reason being the striking similarity in size, coloration, actions, and even notes. The Pectoral, White-rumped, Baird's, Semi-palmated and Least Sandpipers and the Sanderling are really very similar and their identification consequently difficult.

During 1923, of over 200 species of birds observed by me, 24 were shore birds, which is a larger number than I ever before noted in any one year. This I think is due to two reasons—an unusual abundance of these birds this year and a more than ordinary amount of time spent in the field, especially along the shore, though no less than 13 species were observed at Camden.

From May 30 to September 30, I have taken some twenty trips (not counting short excursions near home) mostly to the New Jersey coast and eleven different members of the club have taken part in these expeditions though on many I was alone.

The White-rumped Sandpiper was a feature of the Club trip to Cape May on Memorial Day. The bird was spotted on account of slightly superior size among a flock of "Peeps" in the shallow pond near the light-house, but was not identified with certainty until it circled about directly in front of us, showing the white upper tail coverts to perfection. This is the only field mark which can be depended upon for definite identification and can only be seen when the bird is flying directly away from or circling about with its back to the observer. It must be remembered that all the smaller Sandpipers show considerable white on the sides of the rump.

June 17 found J. D. Carter and myself at Brigantine Beach. Compared with the year previous breeding birds were scarce, Least Terns being the only ones equally abundant. Three Skimmers, a few Common Terns and two or three pairs of Piping Plovers were noted. We searched diligently for the nest of the Piping Plover but only succeeded in finding three eggs which had been washed out of a nest. During a brief search back in the marsh, Carter located a deserted Clapper Rail's nest full of eggs. Quite a flock of Knots were seen on the beach at a distance. Knots and Dowitchers might be mistaken for each other but at close

range the long bill and brown back of the Dowitcher compared with the shorter bill and gray back of the Knot make identification easy. The call of the Dowitcher resembles that of the Yellow-legs very much, but sounds to me more rapid and less musical. In a flock of Knots great variation in color is noticeable, grading all the way from the "Robin Snipe" type—with a rusty brown breast, to plain gray birds. This variation in spring plumage is also apparent among the Dowitchers and to a lesser degree among nearly all the shore birds, due to the retention of more or less of the winter plumage and the duller color of the females.

A four days' stay at Cape May, June 18 to 21, yielded Greater Yellow-legs, Semi-palmated Sandpipers and Woodcock. A side trip some miles up the coast to Grassy Sound, June 20, added Knots, Least Sandpipers, Sanderlings, Black-bellied Plover, Turnstones and two Red-backed Sandpipers. The last named were the first I had ever seen on the Jersey coast in the spring. In spring plumage there is little trouble in identifying these birds. The brownish back and black belly being excellent field marks. It would be quite natural to think any Sandpiper with black under parts would be Red-backed. But is it? On one occasion I was going through a flock of "Peeps" searching for strays, when I saw a bird with an unmistakable black belly. My first thought was a Red-backed Sandpiper, but it did not look quite right, and careful investigation revealed the fact that it was a Semi-palmated Sandpiper that had squatted down in some oil and converted itself into quite a semblance of a Red-back. In the fall the Red-back is a different looking bird. The dark under parts are missing. The back is lead gray, and due to this the baymen call it "Lead-back," to distinguish it from Brown-back or "Dowitcher" and Gray-back or "Knot." At all seasons the bird can be told by its slightly decurved bill, if the observer can get close enough to see it. The call of those I have heard closely resembles that of other smaller Sandpipers, approaching the notes of the Sanderling more than any others.

On this occasion two colonies of Common Terns with about 200 birds each, and a colony of Skimmers with about 40 birds were found. Amid the whining of Terns and baying of the Skimmers a sharp musical note was heard resembling the "blink" of an

Oriole. It was the note of the Roseate Tern. To all appearances it had a black bill. The tail was longer and lighter in color than that of the Common Tern. The rosy color of the breast was not distinguishable. In addition to the Oriole-like call, the bird uttered a harsh Tern-like "T-e-a-r." A set of Tern's eggs was also discovered that would have made the eyes of an oologist bulge with excitement. The eggs were plain blue with the exception of one which had faint traces of spots. To make certain that the eggs belonged to a Tern the nest was watched until a Common Tern settled on it.

On a subsequent visit with Dr. Stone, July 8, nearly a hundred Terns' nests were found with eggs—also many eggs which had been washed out of the nest and were found lying about.

Two other trips July 15 and August 5, were taken to this point. Yoder, Gillespie, Keighton and Gaede participating. On the first trip Keighton banded some thirty young Terns that were found hidden in the grass. Though some were able to fly, as proven when released, they seemed to rely on the grass rather than their wings for safety. It was observed that the color of the feet of the young Terns varied greatly, ranging from almost red to light flesh color. On this trip Yoder and Gaede each found a Clapper Rail's nest while searching about in the tall marsh grass for Terns. One contained 10 eggs the other 11. This seemed rather a late date for eggs. On the next trip Gillespie banded 69 Terns and 12 Skimmers. A most amazing habit of the young Skimmer was discovered on this occasion. Some distance down the beach a youngster was seen running. As we started for him he crouched, and as we came up was found to be literally digging himself in. The sand was flying out behind as though propelled by a terrier digging for rats. The Skimmer remained squatting during the operation and his motions might be likened to a duck swimming. Lying in the hole thus made, his back was brought to the level of the surrounding sand and the bird was rendered as nearly invisible as possible. Indeed you might look directly at the bird in this position and miss him entirely.

Hudsonian Curlew were seen on both of these trips. They appeared in flocks resembling ducks both as to the formation of the flock and mode of flight. Their call is a far-reaching, loudly

uttered, rippling pip-pip-pip-pip, and to my ear very closely resembles the mellow bubbling whistle (Forbush) of the Upland Plover. Hudsonian Curlew were extremely common on the coast this year and I never saw so many before.

July 29 found us on the inland waterways back of Brigantine, our object being to visit the well known Skimmer colony there. The colony was found deserted and not a Skimmer was seen all day. However, we had a fine study of a large bunch of shore-birds feeding on an exposed bar—Dowitchers, Knots, Semi-palmated Sandpipers and Sanderlings and learned for the first time that the smaller fry were sometimes little grafters. Two "Peeps" seemed very much interested in the doings of a Dowitcher that had thrust his long bill down to the hilt in the sand. Presently he drew it out and immediately the little Sandpipers darted in and snatched tid-bits either from the bill of the Dowitcher or the edge of the boring. A fine bit of easy picking and an operation of which the Dowitcher seemed quite tolerant.

The expedition that was most productive, of the actual number of water birds noted, was the one taken to Little Beach Island August 19. After having failed to find the Skimmers back of Brigantine July 29, I consulted McMullen as to their whereabouts and was informed that they had all moved over on Little Island, hence the reason for going.

Yoder, Gaede and I left Atlantic City at 7 A. M. Our means of transportation being one of Jake Brown's famous row boats. We knew that it was going to be a long hard pull and I assure you that we were not disappointed in this respect. We carried no map of the puzzling channels, sand bars, shoals, blind bayous, and thoroughfares. I think it safe to say that at no point along the Jersey coast are there more confusing salt marsh areas than back of Brigantine Island, and probably for that very reason it is also one of the very best places for the water birds. Shortly after leaving the dock we spied a shore-bird on Absecon bar. We were undecided as to whether it was a Sanderling or a Knot but thought that it must be a Knot. However, when we had approached quite close we found that it was a Sanderling. The Sanderling is not always an easy bird to make out in the brilliant sunshine of the beach and frequently looks abnormally large,

its plumage, especially in the spring and early summer, is often quite rusty in appearance making the bird look very dark. At a short distance it is not difficult to determine and very easy if one is familiar with the characteristic note of the species, which it invariably utters when rising from the strand. A short distance farther on while rowing along near a sod bank we had a fine view of two Least Sandpipers at very close range, the brown legs of the birds being made out with ease. The Least and Semipalmated Sandpipers are usually a rather difficult problem to solve. Fortunately it is often possible to get pretty close to them and make out the brown legs of the Least and the black legs of Semipalmated. Of these two "Oxeyes" the Sand Oxeye (Semipalmated Sandpiper) seems to be much more common than the Meadow Oxeye (Least Sandpiper). This may be due to the fact that the Semipalmated as a rule keeps more in the open than the Least though they frequently may be found together. In looking at a flock of "peeps" in a salt pond it is an easy matter to overlook the Least entirely, for while the Semipalmated Sandpipers are feeding out in the open, the Least are liable to be up along the edge and even in the grass surrounding the pond.

After about an hour's row we passed all familiar land marks and out into the water of Grassy Bay and later Little Bay which looked to us to be about the size of the broad Atlantic itself. The sun was shining brightly and heat waves were rising over the meadows and water all about us. Distances as well as objects were very deceiving. Forty Great Blue Herons on a far-away bar to the north, stalked about, as large as Ostriches. The Coast Guard station on Little Island looked about twenty miles off the coast and was finally considered, after a lengthy debate, to be a schooner. Buildings, trees and other objects were all conceded to be buildings and were so numerous on what we believed to be Little Island that we were fully convinced that we had rowed past our objective point and were up opposite Beach Haven. Surely we had done enough rowing to be there and farther, anyway by following the inland waterways we had gone some distance out of our way, yes! we were sure of that! So we turned about and headed toward the eastern shore of the bay. We saw a launch over there and we thought at least some one

on board might tell us how to get to our destination. We had already hailed several skippers but none knew there was such a place as Little Beach Island.

We finally reached the east shore and by some piece of dumb luck happened to strike a gut leading into Little Mud Thoroughfare (the names given to all these waters, navigable and otherwise, were looked up on the map after the trip) and about 1:30 P. M. we landed on Little Island. We hurried toward the beach but even before we got there we knew that McMullen was right, as usual, for a small cloud of Skimmers and Terns was being stirred up by a party from a launch who were walking about in the midst of the colony examining the eggs and young, but as we found, doing them no injury.

There were about 200 adult Skimmers and perhaps 100 young, also a few nests still with eggs. The notes of the young Skimmers flying about were entirely different from the baying calls of the parent birds. It was some time before we located these calls which might be described as a high pitched "cheep." Earlier in the day we had seen a young Skimmer flying about ploughing the main after the manner of his kind though his mandibles were so nearly even that no difference was perceptible. Skimmers do not seem to wander far from their breeding ground. In fact I never remember seeing an adult Skimmer more than three-quarters mile from home during the breeding season nor can I recall our seeing a Skimmer on our coast at other than the breeding season.

We spent about an hour on the Island studying hundreds of Skimmers, Terns, Gulls and shore-birds. We found a Knot with a shot wound in the back unable to fly, a Semi-palmated Sandpiper with a wing shot off, two dead Skimmers and one flying with two shattered primaries hanging from his wing, all no doubt the work of a shore-bird gunner the season for the unprotected species having opened August 15. This incidentally shows the lack of foresight in opening any gunning season while some birds are yet nesting; for the average gunner lacks that love of fair play and sense of justice which would prevent him from taking a crack at almost anything that moves. Soon we were on our way back and presently found to our great discomfort that the coming,

though tough, was not a circumstance to the going. We ventured a short cut through a nameless gut and slipped into Brigantine Inlet where the tide was running out like a mill race. To add to our pleasure the wind came up dead against us. It was utterly impossible to force the boat with oars against the tide and wind. At the suggestion of Yoder we all got out on the sod bank and towed the boat along by the anchor rope. We made about two miles in as many hours this way, but were quite sure if we had not done this we would have spent the night some where in "no man's land," or no man's marsh, to speak more accurately. The wind and tide had now abated somewhat and we were making fair progress when suddenly Gaede with not the least warning announced that he felt sick, and further stated that he had not felt well all day. This was news to us, and bad news for we had depended on his six feet of brawn to a large extent for motive power, and for him to get sick was a calamity indeed. If I only had some water, I thought, I believe I could make him feel better but I had none, the bottle we had brought had been lost overboard early in the day. Then I had a happy thought. I reluctantly pulled an orange out of my pocket that I had been hoarding for emergencies, peeled it, ate half, and reluctantly passed the other half to Gaede. This brightened him up considerably and he took one oar, I took the other, Yoder concocted a rudder out of a small shovel we had for bailing purposes, and we literally pulled for the shore. The shades of night were falling, a flock of Black Ducks flew over-head, Herons passed us bound for evening fishing grounds, flocks of Curlew filed by calling as they passed, many smaller shore birds were active, a small bunch of Pectorals passed near the boat. The scene was attractive but the dock was more interesting, and finally, about 8:30, we reached the wharf after having passed it in the gloom. We lost our water, we missed our train and Yoder lost his iron-bound Reed's 'Bird Guide,' a treasure that always was a part of his bird trips. Iron-bound it really was, bound in sheet iron to keep it intact and ready for all emergencies—except loss. We covered 18 miles by boat, gained a lot of blisters and three severe backaches but we reached our Island and saw the birds, so what did the other trivial matters amount to?

The list and approximate number of the water birds seen on this trip were:

Herring Gull, 30	Least Sandpiper, 5
Laughing Gull, 200	Semipalmated Sandpiper, 200
Common Tern, 60	Yellow-legs, 2
Least Tern, 2	Willet, 5
Black Tern, 100	Spotted Sandpiper, 10
Black Skimmer, 200 and 50 to 100 young	Hudsonian Curlew, 100
Black Duck, 10	Sanderling, 10
Great Blue Heron, 40	Dowitcher, 2
Little Blue Heron, 1	Knot, 100
Green Heron, 30	Black-bellied Plover, 10
Night Heron, 1	Killdeer, 1
Clapper Rail, 2	Semipalmated Plover, 300
Pectoral Sandpiper, 5	Piping Plover, 4
	Turnstone, 10

Some time ago I gave an account of Camden's shore-bird meadow. At that time the area covered by water was a square mile in extent, but this is far from the case today, as it has dwindled to one small pond of perhaps half an acre. I was not aware of the existence of this until I happened on it August 24. I had been wandering about regretting the changes that improvements had accomplished when I came upon it; a little pool with a wide muddy rim circled about by water loving plants, hemmed in on all sides by the steep embankments of the filled in area. Just why it had not suffered the fate of the marsh all about was a puzzling question, but there it lay and furthermore the muddy rim was fairly teeming with shore-birds. It was evident they had located this spot with its abundant food supply without difficulty.

I swept my glasses over a flock of small Sandpipers and back again. "What's that?" A small buffy Sandpiper came into the field. It was somewhat larger than the Semi-palmated Sandpipers close by. It was somewhat smaller than the Pectoral Sandpipers just as near. I was certain the bird before me was either a White-rumped or Baird's Sandpiper but was unable to decide that evening as the bird gave no plain view of its rump. August 26 found me at the pond in the morning but the bird was not there, I returned again about noon and found it quietly feeding in almost the

exact location of the previous day. It was very tame and I had no difficulty working up as near as the soft mud would allow, about fifteen feet from the little fellow. I studied it for about two hours and satisfactorily identified it as no other than the Baird's. Most of the time it kept by itself but frequently other Sandpipers approached sometimes within a few inches. The possibility of a White-rump was eliminated by the bird showing that the middle of the rump was dark not only once but several times. Besides being larger than the Semi-palmated the light portions of the feathers of the back were light buff instead of gray. The breast was buff-colored and darker and the line of demarkation between it and the belly more abrupt. From the Pectoral besides being smaller the back and breast appeared lighter. The feathers of the scapulars appeared rounded almost like scales. In most of the smaller Sandpipers they appear pointed, this is not always so much due to the shape of the feathers as to the pointed dark portion next to the shaft. The note resembled that of the Semi-palmated Sandpiper, the legs brownish like a Least.

The bird was last seen August 28. On this date another surprise was in store for me. I was looking at the Baird's when a bunch of small shore-birds appeared coming into the pond, and among them a larger bird dodging about in a most erratic manner much like a Solitary Sandpiper. The group lit close by and I saw almost at once that the large bird was neither a Solitary nor a Yellow-legs but a Stilt Sandpiper. While in general appearance it looked like a Yellow-legs, close examination showed the plumage to be streaked rather than spotted, a light line passed over the eye, a dark streak ran through it. Compared to a Dowitcher feeding nearby, the body of the Stilt looked about the same in size. The bill slightly decurved at the tip was of course much shorter and also noticeably thinner. The legs were much longer and more slender. In color they were brownish. The actions of the bird were quite different from the Yellow-legs. While feeding, the Stilt frequently forced its bill down into the mud until half of the head disappeared. The bird was under observation for a half hour and during that time it did not bob its head once in the characteristic manner of the Yellow-legs or Solitary Sandpiper. No note was heard nor was the bird seen again after

this date. It fed in the shallow water and apparently was an immature bird in gray plumage, no bars could be seen along its sides. The Reed-bird season opened on September 1, and on the night previous a heavy rain covered the mud around the edge of the pond. Either was sufficient reason for the shore-birds to depart for regions unknown.

Water birds noted in and around this pond were:

On August 24, 1923.

Wilson's Snipe (earliest fall record for Camden)

On August 26.

Blue Heron (flying over)

Green Heron

Night Heron

Sora Rail (flushed in grass on edge of pond)

Pectoral Sandpiper

Least Sandpiper

Semi-palmated Sandpiper

Yellow-legs

Greater Yellow-legs (one bird among bunch of Lessers)

Solitary Sandpiper

Spotted Sandpiper

Baird's Sandpiper (first record)

Killdeer

Semi-palmated Plover

On August 28.

Stilt Sandpiper (first record)

Dowitcher (first record for Camden)

On August 30.

Upland Plover in field nearby

On September 3.

Two Blue-winged Teal (first record for Camden)

August is usually a dull month for the bird students yet there is no better time in the whole year for the study of this most interesting group of birds, and no doubt there are many small pools and ponds in the neighborhood of Philadelphia worth keeping an eye on at this time. To secure a good list of water birds means getting out to some favorable locality frequently and as often as possible during August.