



Tinicum Dike, 1955, by Joseph Devlin. Etched on copper and printed in reverse. Artwork courtesy of Freda M. Rappaport

Update of the Status of Birds in the John Heinz National Wildlife Refuge at Tinicum and Adjacent Areas in Philadelphia and Delaware Counties, Pennsylvania, 1988-1994

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This report updates the status of birds in the John Heinz National Wildlife Refuge at Tinicum and adjacent areas in Philadelphia and Delaware counties, Pennsylvania. (The original report appeared in *Cassinia*, Volume 44, in 1959, and has been updated twice, in 1970 [Volume 52] and 1988 [Volume 62].)

Since the last update, a Breeding Bird Atlas Project was completed and all the blocks in this designated area were covered. The Glenolden Christmas Bird Count of Delaware County is also part of this reporting area.

A number of species have undergone dramatic breeding changes since the last update. These changes are due to the loss of habitat in the impoundment area. There has been a considerable loss of cattails, burr-reed, wild rice and many other plants that provide food, shelter and a place to nest for birds. The loss of the habitat, especially marsh vegetation, and the islands in the refuge impoundment and have also resulted in low numbers of wintering waterfowl. Dramatic changes have also taken place in the areas surrounding Tinicum. The ever-growing Philadelphia International Airport has gobbled more land, and the United Parcel Service building in Essington, Delaware County, also has taken up a large portion of a once-productive area. Additional areas along I-95 that border the refuge are currently under construction, with the erection of several new buildings and parking areas.

On the bright side, a new visitors center with display rooms is being planned for the refuge.

Since 1950, 295 species of birds have been

seen in the area covered by this paper, with about 260 species being found within the borders of the refuge. New species not reported in previous papers are denoted by asterisks.

Red-throated Loon (*Gavia stellata*): Only a few records in the past few years, all on the Delaware River in back of the Philadelphia Airport.

***American White Pelican (*Pelecanus erythrorhynchos*):** Only one record, an adult, present August 14 to 18, 1992, in the Fort Mifflin area, found by Bob Schutsky and seen by many visiting birders.

Great Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax carbo*): This species began appearing in the Tinicum area in 1983, with single birds on the Delaware River. Small numbers can now be found annually during fall and winter.

Double-crested Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax auritus*): Numbers have increased and can be found throughout the year. Largest numbers occur during the spring migration when numerous flocks can be seen flying up the Delaware River.

Least Bittern (*Ixobrychus exilis*): This species has decreased as a breeding bird in the Tinicum NWR due to loss of suitable nesting habitat.

Status at Tinicum

- Great Blue Heron (*Ardea herodias*):** During years when the water level at the Tinicum NWR was drawn down (1989-1994), counts of 200+ birds were noted; otherwise, number of this species have decreased.
- Great Egret (*Ardea alba*):** As with the previous species, during the years of the water draw-down at Tinicum NWR, high counts of 235+ birds were made during the months of July and August. No longer nesting at Fort Mifflin due to destruction of habitat.
- Snowy Egret (*Egretta thula*):** During years of the water draw-down at Tinicum NWR, large numbers were attracted to the area. Counts in July and August of those years were more than 100 birds.
- Glossy Ibis (*Plegadis falcinellus*):** This ibis was first seen in the Tinicum area in the early 1940s. It has been seen in the area in small numbers almost every year since.
- Tundra Swan (*Cygnus columbianus*):** This swan can be seen in the Tinicum NWR and near Tinicum Island in the Delaware River annually in the fall and winter. Smaller numbers stop in the refuge during the spring migration.
- Canada Goose (*Branta canadensis*):** Very common nester and abundant in all seasons.
- Wood Duck (*Aix sponsa*):** This species has increased as a breeding bird in the Tinicum area, using both natural and man-made (nesting boxes) sites. High count for the refuge was 1,000+ on October 18, 1988 (J.C. Miller).
- Northern Pintail (*Anas acuta*):** From the 1950s through the 1970s, numbers of 50,000 to 100,000 could be found at Tinicum. These numbers have dwindled drastically since. The most recent high count was 2,500 in 1992.
- Blue-winged Teal (*Anas discors*):** This bird is a rare breeding species in the area today, due to the loss of suitable breeding habitat. Good numbers continue to be found during migration.
- Canvasback (*Aythya valisineria*):** This species was being found in good numbers for a few years at the Tinicum NWR, with a high count of 400+ on February 23, 1988 (J.C. Miller). Since 1987, only a few birds have been seen in the area, and those are found during migration.
- Oldsquaw (*Clangula hyemalis*):** This bird is seen a few times a year on the Delaware River, from October to December.
- Surf Scoter (*Melanitta perspicillata*):** This scoter is a rare bird in the Philadelphia area. Only a few records exist. Look for it in bad weather from October to early December on the Delaware River.
- White-winged Scoter (*Melanitta fusca*):** This is a rare bird in the area. Look for it in bad weather from October to early December on the Delaware River.
- Hooded Merganser (*Lophodytes cucullatus*):** I found this species nesting in the Tinicum NWR during April and May 1992 in a Wood Duck box. This was the first nesting record of this species for Tinicum.
- Ruddy Duck (*Oxyura jamaicensis*):** In the early 1950s and 1960s, numbers of this duck would cover the Delaware River each winter. It was not unusual to have counts of 25,000 to 50,000 birds. After a series of large oil spills in the late 1970s near Tinicum Island, numbers have decreased dramatically. Today, one is lucky to see a wintering Ruddy Duck on the river. (For example, December 15, 1984, 3,056; December 6, 1994, only 2). High counts are between 100 and 300 birds.

Status at Tinicum

- Bald Eagle** (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*): This bird still can be found each year, usually during migration. Sometimes a bird may winter along the Delaware River for a few months. Two seen October 7, 1991, at Tinicum NWR (J.C. Miller) and one April 26, 1992 (J.C. Miller).
- Northern Harrier** (*Circus cyaneus*): One or more pairs have been nesting at the Philadelphia Airport. Small numbers also winter in the area.
- Northern Goshawk** (*Accipiter gentilis*): An uncommon bird in the area during fall and winter. More likely to be found during an invasion year.
- Red-shouldered Hawk** (*Buteo lineatus*): No longer a regular breeding bird in the area due to loss of habitat. Seen more regularly during migration.
- Broad-winged Hawk** (*Buteo platypterus*): A common bird in fall migration. One bird was found wintering in the area of the Tinicum NWR from December 17, 1991, through January 10, 1992.
- Red-tailed Hawk** (*Buteo jamaicensis*): There has been at least one pair nesting in the refuge off and on in the past few years. Overall, this bird's numbers are down in the area as hunting and roosting areas have disappeared. For example, 50 on December 20, 1952; 38 on December 15, 1987; 21 on December 15, 1984; and 18 on December 16, 1995.
- Rough-legged Hawk** (*Buteo lagopus*): No longer a regular winter bird in the Philadelphia area due to loss of habitat.
- Peregrine Falcon** (*Falco peregrinus*): For the past ten years, this species has been nesting successfully on the three local bridges that span the Delaware River. The birds visit the Tinicum area regularly year-round.
- Ring-necked Pheasant** (*Phasianus colchicus*): This bird has decreased in numbers in the area due in part to the increase in the red fox population.
- Northern Bobwhite** (*Colinus virginianus*): This is a rare bird in the area today because of habitat loss. Only a few records in the past ten years.
- King Rail** (*Rallus elegans*): This rail has been nesting in the refuge and Fort Mifflin area for the past ten years. Two or more pairs nest each year.
- Common Moorhen** (*Gallinula chloropus*): This bird has decreased in numbers as a breeding bird in the Tinicum NWR. Only one or two pairs have nested in the refuge area in the past ten years. The decrease is due again to the loss of nesting vegetation. A few birds have attempted to winter over the past twenty years. The nearby Philadelphia Sewage Treatment Plant still hosts a number of nesting pairs. High count 75+ June 30, 1989 (J.C. Miller).
- American Golden-Plover** (*Pluvialis dominica*): Formerly found at the Philadelphia Airport during the fall in numbers as high as 300+. Today, it is found only in small numbers. There are a few spring records in the area.
- Black-necked Stilt** (*Himantopus mexicanus*): I found two pairs nesting at the Philadelphia Sewage Treatment Plant on May 20, 1990. This was the first nesting record for Pennsylvania. Other sightings include nine on May 9, 1990; three on May 7, 1991; and two on May 21, 1992 (all J.C. Miller).

Status at Tincicum

- Willet** (*Catoptrophorus semipalmatus*): Since last update, one additional record of a single bird August 14, 1992.
- Upland Sandpiper** (*Bartramia longicauda*): No longer nests at the Philadelphia Airport, but is still a common fall migrant there, starting in July.
- Hudsonian Godwit** (*Limosa haemastica*): This godwit turns up each fall at the the Tincicum NWR and in the Delaware River area.
- Marbled Godwit** (*Limosa fedoa*): This remains a rare shorebird in the area. Last recorded in 1981.
- White-rumped Sandpiper** (*Calidris fuscicollis*): A regular migrant in the spring and fall. High count in the area 250+, May 18, 1977 (N. Pulcinella).
- Baird's Sandpiper** (*Calidris bairdii*): A few birds seen each fall. Two from September 29 to October 31, 1992 (N. Pulcinella) and two September 1991 (J.C. Miller), both at Tincicum NWR.
- Buff-breasted Sandpiper** (*Tryngites subruficollis*): Only one record for this bird since the last update: one bird on October 4, 1988, at Tincicum.
- Common Snipe** (*Gallinago gallinago*): A very common bird in the tidal marshes in early March and April, when hundreds of these birds can be seen in the refuge area. Common in the fall. 210 on March 27, 1990; 150+ on April 5, 1991; 100+ on March 27, 1992; and 125+ on March 25, 1993 (all J.C. Miller).
- Wilson's Phalarope** (*Phalaropus tricolor*): This phalarope turns up in small numbers in the fall.
- Red-necked Phalarope** (*Phalaropus lobatus*): One bird seen September 10, 1988, at Tincicum.
- Black-legged Kittiwake** (*Rissa tridactyla*): One record, a single bird found on the Delaware River near Tincicum Island on December 13, 1992, after the passage of a strong storm (R. Schutsky).
- Gull-billed Tern** (*Sterna nilotica*): I had three birds, two adults and one juvenile, in the Tincicum NWR on August 13, 1992. This is the first record for Pennsylvania in the 20th century.
- Common Tern** (*Sterna hirundo*): This tern has been seen more frequently in the area in the past six years. High count of 12 on May 12, 1992, on the Delaware River (N. Pulcinella).
- Least Tern** (*Sterna antillarum*): Still a rare bird in the area, with only a few more records in the past six years.
- Barn Owl** (*Tyto alba*): This owl is still nesting and wintering in the area, but its numbers are decreasing due to loss of nesting areas.
- Eastern Screech-Owl** (*Otus asio*): This is a rare owl in the area today, due to loss of good habitat.
- Great Horned Owl** (*Bubo virginianus*): This owl can be seen each year at Tincicum NWR. Its nesting in the refuge heronry has caused the abandonment of this area by the herons and egrets.
- Snowy Owl** (*Nyctea scandiaca*): This bird was seen once in this reporting period in the Philadelphia Airport area, December 15, 1989 (J. Carroll).
- Long-eared Owl** (*Asio otus*): This bird has been seen with increasing frequency in the past six years in the refuge, with a few birds wintering some years.

Status at Tincum

- Short-eared Owl (*Asio flammeus*):** This owl's numbers are down as a wintering bird in the area, due to loss of habitat. One pair has nested on the Philadelphia Airport for the past 12 years.
- Northern Saw-whet Owl (*Aegolius acadicus*):** This bird passes through each year in migration with a few birds staying through the winter months. One on December 13, 1990 (J.C. Miller); two on December 15, 1990 (J.C. Miller, R. Miller); one January 17, 1991 (J.C. Miller); one January 18, 1991 (N. Pulcinella); one February 3, 1991 (N. Pulcinella); and one January 23, 1992 (J.C. Miller).
- *Ash-throated Flycatcher (*Myiarchus cinerascens*):**
An addition of an old record, one bird found June 6, 1982 (C.E. Gerow).
- *Alder Flycatcher (*Empidonax alnorum*):** Regular migrant through the area.
- Western Kingbird (*Tyrannus verticalis*):** A few sightings of this bird in the area. One bird September 15, 1990 (S.L. Sherman).
- Horned Lark (*Eremophila alpestris*):** This bird has become rare, both as a nesting bird and as a winter visitor. Again, loss of good habitat due to land management, is the reason.
- Sedge Wren (*Cistothorus platensis*):** This is another rare bird in the area; only a few have been seen in the past six years.
- Blue-gray Gnatcatcher (*Poliptila caerulea*):** A few birds have attempted to winter in the area in the past few years. One seen October 29, 1988 (S. Conant).
- Loggerhead Shrike (*Lanius ludovicianus*):** This shrike has become a hard bird to find in the area and in the state.
- White-eyed Vireo (*Vireo griseus*):** Has become a nesting bird in the area in the past 12 years.
- Warbling Vireo (*Vireo gilvus*):** Has become a common nesting bird at the Tincum NWR. There are about eight pairs nesting in the refuge now.
- Philadelphia Vireo (*Vireo philadelphicus*):** This vireo can be seen each fall during migration in the area. One reported September 10, 1990 (S. Conant) and one September 7, 1992 (J.C. Miller).
- Lawrence's Warbler (*Vermivora pinus x chrysoptera*):**
This hybrid warbler was seen in the refuge area in May 1993 and 1994 (S. Conant).
- Orange-crowned Warbler (*Vermivora celata*):** This bird is seen almost each fall in migration, with a few wintering records in the area. One, November 10, 1989 (R. Ridgely).
- Yellow-rumped Warbler (*Dendroica coronata*):** An abundant warbler during migration. More than 600 were seen in one day in October 1994 (J.C. Miller).
- Connecticut Warbler (*Oporornis agilis*):** This bird moves through the area each fall, but, because of its shy habits, is not easily located. One September 4, 1989 (N. Pulcinella); one October 6, 1989 (J.C. Miller); two September 7, 1992 (J.C. Miller); one September 29, 1992 (N. Pulcinella).
- Blue Grosbeak (*Guiraca caerulea*):** This grosbeak continues to nest each year in the Tincum area. I found nine pairs nesting in 1990.
- Dickcissel (*Spiza americana*):** A rare migrant in the area. Most records are of birds heard flying over in the fall. There are a few spring records at the Philadelphia Airport.

Status at Tincum

- American Tree Sparrow** (*Spizella arborea*): This sparrow has decreased in the past twenty years. Only small numbers are now found in the winter.
- Clay-colored Sparrow** (*Spizella pallida*): The second record for this sparrow in the refuge area. Two, April 15, 1989, at Tincum NWR, seen by many birders.
- Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow** (*Ammodramus nelsoni*): Now a separate species; one, October 18, 1988 (J.C. Miller). The only other report of Sharp-tailed Sparrow (*Ammodramus caudatus*) was included in the 1959 publication of this list (E. Finkel). It was not identified as to subspecies.
- Seaside Sparrow** (*Ammodramus maritimus*): A rare and hard-to-find sparrow in the area. Only one record, a single bird, May 14, 1974, in back of Philadelphia Airport along the Delaware River (N. Pulcinella).
- Lincoln's Sparrow** (*Melospiza lincolni*): This sparrow migrates through the area each spring and fall, with most records from fall. There is one wintering record for the area, December 21, 1990 (J. Carroll).
- White-crowned Sparrow** (*Zonotrichia leucophrys*): Still seen in good numbers during migration, but winter numbers have decreased.
- Lapland Longspur** (*Calcarius lapponicus*): Look for this longspur at the Philadelphia Airport in winter. It is becoming increasingly difficult to find because of loss of favored habitat, due to expansion of the airport.
- Snow Bunting** (*Plectrophenax nivalis*): This bird winters at the Philadelphia Airport annually in fair numbers.
- Bobolink** (*Dolichonyx oryzivorus*): Once an abundant bird in the area, but large flocks of these birds are no longer found because of the loss of the wild-rice habitat in the marshes. The most recent large flock seen in the area was 8,000+ September 9, 1982 (J.C. Miller).
- Eastern Meadowlark** (*Sturnella magna*): This bird no longer nests in the area due to loss of habitat and the indiscriminate cutting of grasses at the Philadelphia Airport. Small number can be seen in migration and a few birds can be found during the winter.
- Yellow-headed Blackbird** (*Xanthocephalus xanthocephalus*): This bird has been seen more frequently in the past ten years. Found both at feeders and in the marshes. One male, May 1992, at the Philadelphia Airport area (B. Schutsky); and one April 17-18, 1993, and one April 13, 1994, both at a feeder in Lester (R. Miller).
- Brewer's Blackbird** (*Euphagus cyanocephalus*): Two males and one female at a feeder in Lester, January 11 to February 9, 1994 (R. Miller).
- Red Crossbill** (*Loxia curvirostra*): A rare bird in the area. Irruptive winter visitor.
- Common Redpoll** (*Carduelis flammea*): During years when this species invades from the north, it can be quite common. One at a feeder January 9-23, 1994 (R. Miller).
- House Finch** (*Carpodacus mexicanus*): This finch has become an abundant bird in the area year-round. A common nesting bird.
- Evening Grosbeak** (*Coccothraustes vespertinus*): This bird can be found in the area during winter invasion years. Seven at a feeder in Lester in December 1993 (R. Miller).