

# Update of the Status of Birds in the John Heinz National Wildlife Refuge at Tinicum and Adjacent Areas in Philadelphia and Delaware Counties, Pennsylvania 1995-2001

John C. Miller

There have been many environmental changes in this area since the last seven year report covering the years 1988-1994 (Miller 1996-1997). A new environmental visitors and education center has been established with staff offices, lecture room, displays and shop. Despite this belated encouragement for the population to enjoy their local environment, more habitat has been lost in the area due to the growing development of Philadelphia International Airport and the associated new hotels, restaurants, roads and parking areas. The 280 acre impoundment area is now a rather sterile lake with no islands and little vegetation. It previously had a flourishing, diverse habitat and vegetative islands with an abundance of nesting marsh birds. Lack of control of water levels lead to the erosion of the islands and aquatic plants were destroyed by carp or by herbicides used by the previous managers. It remains to be seen whether future management of the refuge can regain some of Tinicum's glorious natural history.

Since 1950, 303 species of birds have been seen in this area, with 265 species being found within the borders of the Refuge. New species not reported in the last status review (Miller 1996-7) are denoted by an asterisk.

## **Common Loon** (*Gavia immer*)

This species can be seen migrating overhead in May heading north and south in the fall each year. Best area for this species is on the Delaware River.

## **Red-throated Loon** (*Gavia stellata*)

One bird at the Delaware river back of the Philadelphia Airport Feb. 20, 1996 by Al Guarente. Six birds on the river Nov. 8, 1997 by Nick Pulcinella and one bird June 7, 1995 on the river by Bill Stocku.

## **Horned Grebe** (*Podiceps auritus*)

One record April 2, 1998 at the Fort Mifflin area by John Miller. This species is seen off and on in this area.

## **\*Eared Grebe** (*Podiceps nigricollis*)

One species found in the Refuge March 24-25, 1996 in good plumage. Found by Scott McConnell and seen by many other birders.

## **Great Cormorant** (*Phalacrocorax carbo*)

This species has increased in numbers in the area

along the Delaware River.

## **Great Blue Heron** (*Ardea herodias*)

There is a colony of this species nesting on the Jersey side on the Delaware River on an island which can be seen from the Lagoon Nightclub, in Essington, PA. There are about thirty-five nests in large trees on the island.

## **Great Egret** (*Ardea alba*)

There are a few wintering records since the last report. Two Feb. 26, 1998, two March 16, 1998, and two Dec. 19, 1998, all seen by J.C. Miller. 142 were seen in the Refuge by Ted Floyd, Aug. 9, 1998. Two birds were seen in Jan. and Feb. 1999 in the Refuge.

## **Yellow-crowned Night Heron** (*Nyctanassa violacea*)

One or two birds seen each year in the area, e.g. June 21, 1998 and Aug. 15, 1998.

## **Least Bittern** (*Ixobrychus exilis*)

Still breeds in small numbers in the Refuge each year. Numbers vary year to year.

## Status at Tinicum

### **Glossy Ibis** (*Plegadis falcinellus*)

Seen in small numbers each year. One July 25, 1996, one Aug. 26, 1996, one Sept. 24, 1996, one April 30, 1998, three June 6, 1998 and one May 8, 1999.

### **Snow Goose** (*Chen caerulescens*)

Large flocks (~3000) flying over the refuge March 28, 1998. One late bird seen on the Delaware River near Tinicum Island June 12, 1999.

### **Eurasian Wigeon** (*Anas penelope*)

One adult male bird was seen March 16, 1996 in the Refuge by J.C. Miller

### **Wood Duck** (*Aix sponsa*)

This species of waterfowl has increased as a breeder in this area due to the nesting boxes put up by the refuge employees. Large numbers can be seen in this area in the fall. Sixty five were seen June 6, 1995 and 675 Oct. 22, 1999, by J.C. Miller.

### **White-winged Scoter** (*Melanitta fusca*)

Look for this species after storms on the Delaware River. Six birds were seen by Nick Pulcinella Nov. 8, 1997.

### **Surf Scoter** (*Melanitta perspicillata*)

Look for this species on the Delaware River after storms. Six were observed May 8, 1999 by Doris McGovern.

### **\*Black Scoter** (*Melanitta nigra*)

A new species found on the Delaware River. Eleven birds Nov. 8, 1997 by Nick Pulcinella.

### **Ruddy Duck** (*Oxyura jamaicensis*)

This species of waterfowl has dropped off in numbers after all the oil spills on the Delaware River in past years. We used to observe thirty-five thousand each year; this number has dropped down to one hundred birds in the last few years.

### **\*Black Vulture** (*Coragyps atratus*)

Only two records for this bird in the area. One was seen in May 1997 and one Feb. 23, 2000 by J.C. Miller.

### **Northern Goshawk** (*Accipiter gentilis*)

One Dec. 16, 1997 by Ray and Marlene Miller, one Dec. 20, 1997 by J.C. Miller, an immature male Nov. 19, 1999 by Ray and Marlene Miller and two Dec. 3, 2001 by J.C. Miller.

### **Cooper's Hawk** (*Accipiter cooperii*)

First nesting record at the refuge for this hawk. A nest was found April 27, 2001 which hatched three young. One female was seen July 30, 1998 in the Refuge.

### **Red-shouldered Hawk** (*Buteo lineatus*)

This species winters each year in small numbers in the Refuge. An error was made in the previous paper stating Red-shouldered Hawks nested in the Refuge; this species has not nested in the area.

### **Broad-winged Hawk** (*Buteo platypterus*)

There are few late records for this hawk. One was seen by Ray and Marlene Miller Dec. 6, 1998 and another was seen Dec. 5, 1999 by J.C. Miller in the Refuge.

### **Rough-legged Hawk** (*Buteo lagopus*)

A hard hawk to find in the area due to loss of suitable habitat. One March 9, 1996, one Nov. 11, 1999 at the Philadelphia Airport, one March 9, 1996, one Jan. 28, 2001 all by J.C. Miller.

### **Bald Eagle** (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*)

Has been observed each year in the area. One pair may be nesting across the Delaware River in New Jersey which can be seen from the Lagoon, in Essington, PA. An immature bird was seen Aug. through Oct., 1995. One Nov. 8, 1995. Another immature eagle was seen April 21, 1996 and Jan. 11, 1997 all by J.C. Miller in the Refuge.

### **Northern Harrier** (*Circus cyaneus*)

This bird doesn't nest in the area any more due to the loss of habitat and to mowing of grass by airport personnel. A few birds winter in the area each year.

### **American Kestrel** (*Falco sparverius*)

Has declined as a nesting bird in the area. The wintering bird numbers vary year to year.

### **Ring-necked Pheasant** (*Phasianus colchicus*)

This species has declined due to fox and other predators in the area.

### **King Rail** (*Rallus elegans*)

A few birds still nest in the area each year. Two were found by J.C. Miller May 17, 1995.

### **Virginia Rail** (*Rallus limicola*)

Seen each year in the area, however breeding has not been confirmed in the last few years. Nick Pulcinella found two Nov. 21, 1996. One was seen May 19, 1997. Three were observed Oct. 10 1996. One was found April 16, 1998. Another was seen June 18, 2000 and one July 30, 2000. All birds were seen in the Refuge.

### **Sora** (*Porzana carolina*)

This rail can be seen each year in the area, spring and fall. Nick Pulcinella found two Nov. 27, 1996 and three Oct. 10, 1996. One was also observed April 16, 1998.

## Status at Tinicum

### **Common Moorhen** (*Gallinula chloropus*)

Rare. Once a very abundant bird in the marsh area. I used to find twenty-five nests in one day in the marshes in the Tinicum Preserve. Loss of habitat is a reason for the decline.

### **American Golden Plover** (*Pluvialis dominica*)

Birds turn up each fall in small numbers in the Refuge. Five were seen by Nick Pulcinella Sept. 17, 1996. One was found Sept. 19 1998 and Sept. 17, 1999.

### **Killdeer** (*Charadrius vociferus*)

This shorebird is hard to find as a breeding bird in the area now.

### **Upland Sandpiper** (*Bartramia longicauda*)

This plover can be found each year from late July until September around the Philadelphia Airport. Eight were observed Aug. 6, 1996.

### **Spotted Sandpiper** (*Actitis macularia*)

Due to the loss of nesting habitat, this shorebird has declined as a nesting bird.

### **Baird's Sandpiper** (*Calidris bairdii*)

This little peep can be found each fall in the area. Two were found by Ted Floyd Aug. 16, 1997, also one Aug. 23, 1997. One was found Sept. 3 1998, and Nick Pulcinella observed one Sept. 7, 1998.

### **Wilson's Phalarope** (*Phalaropus tricolor*)

Not seen each season in the area. One was found in the Tinicum area by Andy Ednie Oct. 1, 1997.

### **Red-necked Phalarope** (*Phalaropus lobatus*)

Not seen every season in the area. One was seen July 18, 2001.

### **Glaucous Gull** (*Larus hyperboreus*)

We have a few records for this gull in the last couple years. J.C. Miller observed one Jan. 12, 1995 on the Delaware River and one Jan. 31, 1995 in Tinicum. One was seen Nov. 15, 1995 on Tinicum Island. Al Guarente was near the Delaware River when he saw one Jan. 21, 1996.

### **\*Lesser Black-backed Gull** (*Larus fuscus*)

A new gull for the area. One was found on the Delaware River on Tinicum Island Jan. 21, 1995 by J.C. Miller. Nick Pulcinella found one Feb. 17, 1996 at Darby Creek and one Sept. 17, 1999, after one was seen Sept. 9, 1999.

### **Forster's Tern** (*Sterna forsteri*)

Ca.180 were seen Sept. 28, 1997 by Ted Floyd in the Tinicum Wildlife Refuge, Delaware County.

### **Common Tern** (*Sterna hirundo*)

Six were seen May 11, 1996 by J.C. Miller in

the Refuge. On Sept. 9, 1996 seven were seen on the Delaware River after Hurricane Floyd.

### **Sooty Tern** (*Sterna fuscata*)

Nick Pulcinella had five birds Sept. 7, 1996 after Hurricane Floyd,

### **Barn Owl** (*Tyto alba*)

This owl is hard to find now due to the loss of nesting areas and Great Horned Owls using the Barn Owl's nesting area under I-95 bridges in Tinicum. Doris McGovern observed one Jan. 10, 1998.

### **Great Horned Owl** (*Bubo virginianus*)

This owl has become a bad thing for the refuge. First, it scared all the herons and egrets out of the rookery. Now the owls are nesting in that area. There are approximately five pairs in the Tinicum area.

### **Barred Owl** (*Strix varia*)

One was seen Jan. 10, 1998 by Doris McGovern in the Refuge. This is the first record of this owl in this area since 1950.

### **Long-eared Owl** (*Asio otus*)

This owl turns up each year in small numbers, but it is hard to find. Two were found Nov. 27, 1995 by Doris McGovern in the Refuge. Two were also found by J.C. Miller Dec. 28, 1995.

### **Short-eared Owl** (*Asio flammeus*)

This owl is hard to find in the area due to the loss of habitat. One was seen Jan. 29, 1996 in the Philadelphia Airport. One was also found Dec. 12, 1998.

### **Saw-whet Owl** (*Aegolius acadicus*)

There are about one or two owls seen in winter in this area. J.C. Miller observed one from Jan. 12 to Feb. 25, 1996. Ray and Marlene Miller saw one Jan. 8, 2000, one Jan. 9, 2000 and two Feb. 14, 2000.

### **\*Pileated Woodpecker** (*Dryocopus pileatus*)

First seen by Dennis Brennan May 11, 2002, one bird stayed in the Refuge for two weeks.

### **Red-bellied Woodpecker** (*Melanerpes carolinus*)

This woodpecker has been a nesting bird in the refuge for the past few years.

### **\*Hammond's Flycatcher** (*Empidonax hammondii*)

This flycatcher was mist-netted and banded in the Refuge May 14, 2002 by Ray and Marlene Miller. This is the second record for the state of Pennsylvania. This bird was identified from measurements and reference to Pyle (1997).

### **\*Flycatcher Unknown**

A small Empidonax flycatcher was seen Jan. 2, 1997 in the refuge area.

## Status at Tinicum

### **Horned Lark** (*Eremophila alpestris*)

This species no longer nests in the area due to the grass-cutting procedures at the Philadelphia Airport. This is a hard bird to find in winter.

### **Tree Swallow** (*Tachycineta bicolor*)

This swallow is a very common nester in the Refuge area due to the nest box program started in the late fifties. There are approximately 400 boxes in this area. These boxes produce from 1000 to 1300 young birds each year. Most of the young from the boxes are banded each year.

### **Bank Swallow** (*Riparia riparia*)

There has been a small nesting colony in the Fort Mifflin compound area in Philadelphia since 2000. There are about twenty nesting holes in this area.

### **Northern Rough-winged Swallow** (*Stelgidopteryx serripennis*)

There are approximately eight pairs of swallows nesting in the Fort Mifflin area in the pipes in the bulkheads where the boats dock.

### **Sedge Wren** (*Cistothorus platensis*)

There are a few records for this wren over the last few years in the report area. One was seen May 1, 1995 in the back of the airport by Bill Stocku.

### **Eastern Bluebird** (*Sialia sialis*)

The largest flock of bluebirds (ca. 30) ever seen in the Refuge was by Doris McGovern Oct. 18, 1995.

### **Blue-gray Gnatcatcher** (*Polioptila caerulea*)

This bird nests in the refuge now with a few wintering records. Bill Stocku found one Jan. 2, 1996. Ed Fingerhood saw one Jan. 3, 1997. Nick Pulcinella observed one Dec. 19, 1998 in the back of the Philadelphia Airport. One was seen Dec. 16, 2000 by J.C. Miller.

### **Red-eyed Vireo** (*Vireo olivaceus*)

A few birds have nested in the refuge in the last few years.

### **Warbling Vireo** (*Vireo gilvus*)

This vireo has made a large jump in nesting pairs in the Refuge in Philadelphia and Delaware Counties. On June 1, 2000, Nick Pulcinella counted fourteen singing males from Rt. 420 to the new mitigation area in Delaware County. In 2001, I estimated twenty pairs of Warbling Vireos nesting in the Refuge. In the last paper on the Refuge, we said that there were only eight pairs nesting in the area.

### **Orange-crowned Warbler** (*Vermivora celata*)

One was found Jan. 8, 1995 in the back of the Philadelphia Airport by Nick Pulcinella, one was seen

Sept. 7, 1997 in Tinicum. Robert Miller and Nick Pulcinella saw one Dec. 19, 1998. J.C. Miller observed one Nov. 26, 1999 in Tinicum. He also saw two Dec. 18, 1999 and one April 13, 1999 in the back of the airport. One was seen Jan 3, 2000 and May 12, 2001, all in the Tinicum Wildlife Refuge. Ray and Marlene Miller saw one Sept. 25, 2001.

### **Yellow Warbler** (*Dendroica petechia*)

Due to the mild winter in 1998, one bird seen Jan. 10. This is the first wintering record in this area for this species.

### **Cerulean Warbler** (*Dendroica cerulea*)

A rare warbler in the area. One male seen May 11, 1996 in the Refuge by Skip Conant was the second record for the bird for this area.

### **Prairie Warbler** (*Dendroica discolor*)

Doris McGovern observed one Nov. 8, 1997 and another was seen Jan. 8, 2000 at the Fort Mifflin area. These are the first and second records for this warbler in the winter season.

### **Mourning Warbler** (*Oporornis philadelphia*)

One was seen by Ray and Marlene Miller in the refuge May 28, 1998.

### **Wilson's Warbler** (*Wilsonia pusilla*)

One was seen Jan. 10 1998 in the refuge area in Philadelphia and another was seen by Doris McGovern Dec. 15, 1999 in the same area.

### **Eastern Meadowlark** (*Sturnella magna*)

This bird no longer nests in the area due to the practices at the Philadelphia Airport. This species can still be seen in small numbers during migration.

### **Brewer's Blackbird** (*Euphagus cyanocephalus*)

One female seen by Ted Floyd April 17, 1998 in Refuge. Sam Orr and J.C. Miller had two females on the Christmas Count Dec. 12, 2000.

### **Common Redpoll** (*Carduelis flammea*)

One record Dec. 16, 1995 by Nick Pulcinella.

### **Evening Grosbeak** (*Coccothraustes vespertinus*)

Three Nov. 4, 1999 at the Refuge in Delaware County by J.C. Miller.

### **Summer Tanager** (*Piranga rubra*)

A difficult bird to find in the area. One male was seen May 11, 1996 in the Refuge by Skip Conant.

### **Blue Grosbeak** (*Passerina caerulea*)

This grosbeak has declined in the area because the loss of nesting habitat. On May 12, 1996, one was found. On May 16, 1998, a male and a female were seen in the Refuge and two females were seen May

## Status at Tinicum

18, 1998 in the same area by J.C. Miller.

### **Dickcissel** (*Spiza americana*)

This species has been in the area the last few years. On Nov. 26 and 27, 1995 Helen McWilliams saw an immature male at the Refuge. J.C. Miller saw a male at the Philadelphia Airport Oct. 15 and 22, 1996. There was a male that came to Ray and Marlene Miller's feeder in Lester, PA from Dec. 27, 1998 to Feb. 22, 1999. Also, a female came to the same feeder from Feb. 23, 1999 to April 21, 1999.

### **Savannah Sparrow** (*Passerculus sandwichensis*)

This bird may be nesting in the Philadelphia Airport area. Al Guarente had a flock (ca. 40 birds) of this species April 13, 2001 and a singing bird at the airport June 17, 2001.

### **American Tree Sparrow** (*Spizella arborea*)

This sparrow has decreased in the area. There is only a small number that can be found in the area now.

### **White-crowned Sparrow** (*Zonotrichia leucophrys*)

A few winter in the area and a few are also seen in migration each year. One was found by Ted Floyd May 18, 1997 at the Tinicum Wildlife Refuge.

### **Lincoln's Sparrow** (*Melospiza lincolni*)

This sparrow migrates through the area each spring and fall. One was found Nov. 1, 1997 and Nov. 30, 1997 at the Tinicum Wildlife Refuge. On May 18 and 19, 1997 one was found. Also one May 26, 1998 by John and Ray Miller. On Sept. 13, 1998 and on May 9, 1999 one was found found by Al Guarente.

### **Snow Bunting** (*Plectrophenax nivalis*)

This bird turns up in the Philadelphia Airport area each winter. One hundred and fifty were there Jan. 13, 1995; 52 on March 2, 1996 (J. C. Miller); 2 on Dec. 21, 1996 (N. Pulcinella); 100+ February 3, 1997 (J. C. Miller); 40 December 20, 1997 (N. Pulcinella); and 42 February 10, 2001 (J. C. Miller).

220 Prospect Avenue  
Prospect Park, PA 19076

## References

- Miller, J.C. 1996-7, Update of the Status of the Birds in the John Heinz National Wild life Refuge at Tinicum and adjacent areas in Philadelphia and Delaware Counties, Pennsylvania, 1988-1994 Cassinia Volume 67 (1996-1997), 3.
- Pyle, P. 1997. Identification Guide to North American Birds, Part 1, 1997. Slate Creek Press.