

# Philadelphia Larus



the newsletter of the Delaware Valley Ornithological Club

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## *Scoop From the Island of Attu*

by ALAN BRADY

The birder peered through his 500 mm camera lens, focusing on one of several Rufous-necked Stints in bright spring plumage. Inching forward, he finally came to within a dozen feet of the little group of birds when he suddenly found himself looking not at a stint, but a Spoonbilled Sandpiper!

Yes, two of these birds had spoon-shaped bills; he was looking at the rarest of all sandpipers, and they were only several feet away and dangerously close to flying.

What does it take to see one of these guys?

Try flying to Anchorage, Alaska, then hopping another plane almost 2,000 miles farther west along the Aleutian chain to the last island of Attu.

There, among the rusting residue of World War II wreckage live the 20 or so U.S. Coastguards who are the sole human inhabitants of the island.

Descending into this wildly beautiful mountainous terrain each year is a group of strange, possibly idiotic, birders who spend three weeks here searching for the rarest of all "North American" birds, the Siberian strays.

So, there's Ed Greaves, a California birder, in Attu as part of the ATTOUR group but separated from the rest of the birders. He was aware that anyone who flushed such a rare species would be summarily hanged by his own binocular strap.

Cautiously retreating, Ed saw in the distance one of the many persons who carried a walkie-talkie and, frantically rushing to him, put out the message: "Two Spoonbilled Sandpipers on Casco Beach."

The fortunate use of personal walkie-talkies kept almost all birders in close contact, and when the word came, instant pandemonium struck all of Attu from Alexei Point 10 miles away to Murder Point several miles across the rolling tundra in the other direction.

As the message crackled over the radio speaker at the base, where a number of persons were sitting around preparing for dinner, the front door was almost taken down by the rush for bikes, the most common form of transportation for birders on the island.

At the upper base dining hall, tour leader Larry Balch and all the birder-chefs poured out and leaped into the three-wheeled Honda and cart. Tearing down the road, Larry shouted out the frenzied message like an Attuvian Paul Revere.

From across the tundra, down the runway, all the way from distant Alexei, the birders came biking and running. Within half an hour, the entire cast of 71 was assembled on the bank at Casco Cove watching two little sandpipers unconcernedly feeding among the round, moss-covered rocks at the water's edge.

Several members of the DVOC were part of the Attu group that, in the spring of 1986, shared this magic moment. On the trip were Arthur Bergey, Alan Brady, Howard and Mary Brokaw, Sally Conyne, Paul Dumont and Alfred Driscoll.

Two days later, a third Spoonbilled Sandpiper was discovered and photographed at Alexei Point. The three birds seen on the trip equaled the total number of previous Spoonbill sightings in North America.

**Birding tour discovers 3 specimens of one of world's rarest shorebirds**



Spoonbilled Sandpiper

Photo by Alan Brady

# PROGRAMS

Meetings are held the first and third Thursdays of the month at the Academy of Natural Sciences, 19th St. and Benjamin Franklin Parkway. For information on meetings, call Rick Mellon, program chairman, 215-493-0697.

**MARCH 5** — BETSY JONES: "Seabirds, Shorebirds, Falcons and Finches: Rehabilitation at the Shore."

**MARCH 19** — CLAY SUTTON: "Black Warriors and Prairie Ghosts: In Search of Western Raptors."

**APRIL 2** — To be announced.

**APRIL 16** — RICK MELLON: "Shorebird Identification."

**MAY 7** — ELMER ROWLEY: "Australian Preview."

**MAY 21** — To be announced.

**JUNE 4** — MAY ROUND-UP REPORTS.

Informal summer meetings are held the first Thursday of July, August and September, at 8 p.m. Regular meetings resume in October.

## FIELD TRIPS

The Field Trip Committee includes Frank Windfelder, chairman; Don Jones, Earl Harrison and Mike O'Brien. For information, call Windfelder, 215-673-0240.

**Saturday, April 11: Pedricktown.** Meet on the causeway (the Ruff road) at 8 a.m. Trip leader: Frank Windfelder.

**Saturday and Sunday, May 2 and 3: Elliott Island and Pocomoke Swamp, Md., and Chincoteague, Va.**

**Saturday and Sunday, May 16 and 17: Presque Isle, Pa.** Meet Saturday, 6:30 a.m. at the first parking lot on the right at Presque Isle State Park. Trip leaders: Barbara and Frank Haas, 215-565-6319.

**May 30: Pelagic trip to Hudson Canyon.** Alan Brady is in charge of yet another boat trip on the *Miss Barnegat Light*. The trip will leave from Barnegat; cost will be \$40. Send checks, payable to DVOC, to Alan, Box 103, Wycombe, Pa. 18980.

# DON'T

you still owe your 1987 DVOC

# DUES?

Annual membership is now \$15. Life membership has risen to \$225, payable in three yearly installments of \$75 each. Send checks, payable to DVOC, to Barb Haas, treasurer, 769 E. Forge Rd., Media, Pa. 19063.

# Conservation Committee Report

by CLAY SUTTON

In October, the DVOC Conservation Committee met to reorganize and to come up with a plan for bringing important local conservation issues and information before our membership.

Bob Mercer is representing Pennsylvania, and Howard Boyd and I will bring New Jersey problems to the committee. Through the committee's reports, members will be briefed on crucial issues so they can write letters, vote, etc., on local issues of concern.

## N.J. WETLANDS BILL UPDATE

After a four-year struggle, legislation to safeguard New Jersey's remaining freshwater wetlands from development was approved by the State Assembly on Jan. 8.

This legislation represents a compromise bill agreed on by New Jersey environmental groups and development interests. The legislation now goes to the New Jersey Senate for approval. The New Jersey Home Builders Association has vowed to continue its fight against the bill.

The bill, if approved, would give the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection the authority to regulate the development of prime wetlands in the state. The legislation includes mandated buffer zones, mitigation requirements and the requirement that a developer demonstrate that no practicable alternative exists for a proposed project.

Estimates indicate that as much as 383,000 acres will be protected by the bill.

The New Jersey Freshwater Wetland Coalition, of which DVOC is a member, remains guardedly optimistic that the legislation will be approved in the State Senate, where a similar bill was passed last year before dying in the Assembly.

New Jersey DVOC members should write their state senators and urge rapid passage of this important legislation.

## TRENTON MARSH

Five New Jersey environmental groups have filed an appeal in Superior Court regarding the Department of Environmental Protection's issuance of the final permits for the construction of I-295 across the

Trenton Marsh. There seems little hope, however, of reversing this Department of Transportation project, which will do irreparable harm to these excellent freshwater wetlands.

## SMITHVILLE BATTLE ENDS

The new owner of the proposed 8,000-unit, 2,000-acre Smithville development in Atlantic County, directly adjacent to Brigantine National Wildlife Refuge, has agreed to scale down the project and institute environmental controls to end a six-year court battle.

Two thousand housing units and the 18-hole golf course will be cut from the proposal, about half the tract will be dedicated as permanent open space and strict water-quality controls will be implemented. The Smithville Coalition deserves praise for its long legal battle leading to this precedent-setting agreement that will protect waterfowl and endangered species in Brigantine.

## DICKINSON FARM

In October, the Pennsylvania/New Jersey Field Office of the Nature Conservancy announced the purchase for nearly \$1 million of the 200-acre Hidden Valley Ranch, just north of Cape May Point and directly adjacent to Higbees Beach Wildlife Management Area.

This landmark purchase is of inestimable value to migratory birds and to birders. The tract will be transferred to the NJDEP Nongame Division and become part of the Higbees Beach WMA. A no-hunting ban will deed-restricted; access to this wooded lowland, marsh and field area will be via the Higbees trail system.

The Conservation Committee is still looking for a Delaware representative. In lieu of membership, we are at least looking for some one to serve as a clipping service for Delaware newspapers — looking for environmental articles on issues of interest to the club. If anyone is interested, contact John LaVia, 609-877-8025, or Clay Sutton, 609-465-3397.

## Officers re-elected, honors presented

Dr. John T. LaVia was elected to his second term as president of the Delaware Valley Ornithological Club at the group's annual meeting Jan. 8.

Members of the Nominating Committee were Robert H. Sehl, chairman; Phillips B. Street and Charles A. Wonderly.

Other returning officers are Richard Mellon, vice president, and Brian Moscatello, secretary.

Barbara Haas was newly elected as treasurer.

New Council members, elected to three-year terms, were Donald Jones and Frank Windfelder. Continuing on Council are D. Lee Yoder and Judge W. Hart Rufe,

through 1988, and Sidney Lipschutz and Franklin Haas, through 1989.

Windfelder and Sandra Sherman were elected club fellows this year.

Other honors went to Patricia and Clay Sutton, who won the Julian Potter Award for outstanding contributions to ornithology, and Dr. John J. Harding, recipient of the Witmer Stone Award for publication of an outstanding paper on ornithological research. Harding won for his 1986 book, *Marsh, Meadow, Mountain*, which he edited.

Alan Brady chaired the Potter Award Committee, and Frank Haas chaired the Stone Award Committee.

# A Big Year: Pennsylvania Mania

by BARB and FRANK HAAS

**T**wice before we had done Big Years: Pennsylvania in 1977 and Delaware in 1981. Neither had been preceded by a lot of preparation.

So, in 1985, when we decided to attack the record set by Sam Stull of Erie County for most birds seen in Pennsylvania in one calendar year — 278 species in 1979 — we devised a plan. This would be an organized Big Year, appropriately named “PABY.”

First, we coded the birds in terms of difficulty to find in the state from 1 to 7, after the fashion of James Vardaman (1979) and Benton Basham (1983) in their quests for American Ornithologists Union Big Years.

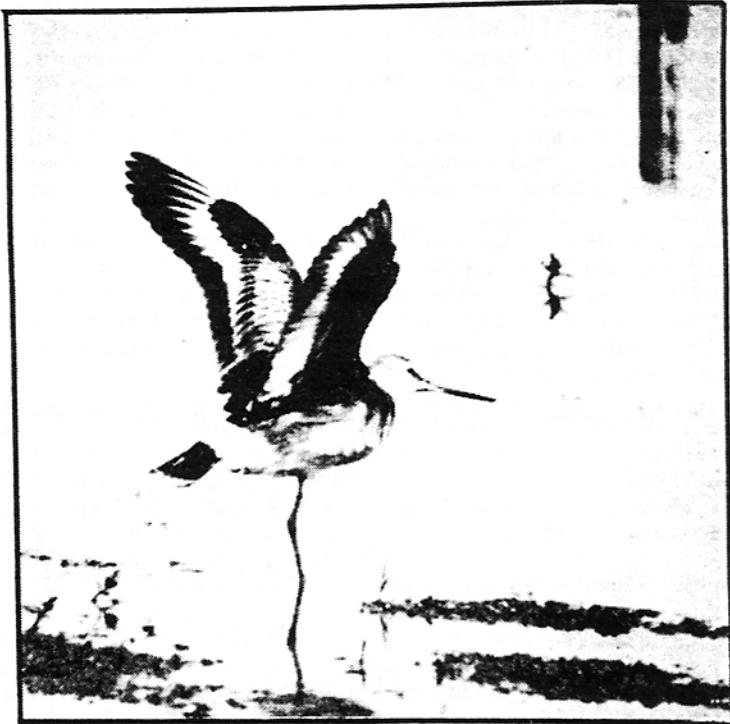
Then we sent out a preliminary letter to many birders in Pennsylvania outlining our goal to set a new record and asking for their help by calling us if an unusual bird — Code 4 or above — were seen in their area. We remained in contact with these birders by sending a monthly newsletter about our sightings and status. The positive reinforcement we received about the newsletter made the effort worthwhile.

We determined that it was paramount to document all unusual sightings, either with photographs or witnesses. We were able to accomplish this goal for all but one species, a Sandhill Crane at Presque Isle State Park. We were particularly pleased with some of the shorebird photographs. Our new scope with the ability to have the camera “on-line” at all times made this possible.

With almost three months still left in 1986, we broke Stull’s record with the sighting of a Red-Necked Phalarope on Oct. 5. We ended the year with a total of 288 species.

Each month was exciting, and we added new birds in all months except December, so the year seemed to fly by. All species coded 1 through 3 were seen. We missed seven of those coded 4 through 6 and saw 16 Code 7 species. Our bird-of-the-year had to be the Snowy Plover at PISP. This was the first record for Pennsylvania in 100 years!

Any Big Year is grueling and entails a lot of traveling. To do a PABY, Erie County in the northwestern corner of the state is an absolute must, and we live in the southeastern part of the state. As it turned out, we spent 141 days birding, not including backyard birding, and put 22,940 miles on the new car. Contributing heavily



Hudsonian Godwit at Tinicum, Oct. 12, 1986.

to that total was nine trips up to Erie County, where we spent 30 days birding the peninsula. Each trip covered more than 1,000 miles.

We missed 20 species reported for the year, although not all were substantiated sightings. As it turned out, we saw 94 percent of all species reported. We saw six species that were only seen one day: White Ibis, Black-legged Kittiwake, Purple Sandpiper, Buff-breasted Sandpiper and Sharp-tailed Sparrow.

We missed 13 species seen by Stull in 1979, but saw 23 species he did not find that year. His bird-of-the-year was a Surf-bird at PISP, the only record that exists for Pennsylvania!

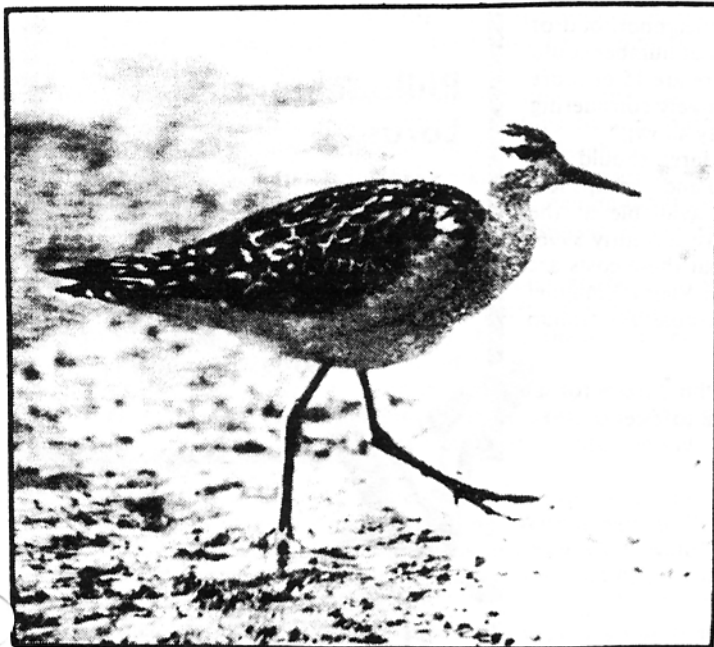
Other highlights for the year include: Barnacle Goose, White-fronted Goose, Black Rail, Willet, Whimbrel, Baird’s Sandpiper, Ruff, all three phalaropes, both white-winged gulls, Chuck-will’s-widow, Say’s Phoebe, Western Kingbird, Scissor-tailed Flycatcher, Clay-colored Sparrow, Western Meadowlark and both crossbills. Our biggest miss may have been Orange-crowned Warbler, as there were several sightings in at least two locations.

Throughout the year, the lead often changed hands as one of us had the opportunity to go birding while the other was committed to work, etc. But it never became a crucial issue until September, when Barb was birding with John Ginaven at Tinicum National Environmental Center, where they found a Connecticut Warbler. So, for 11 days, Barb had the lead until another Connecticut was found in State College — not an easy time in the Haas household.

Two additional birds have not been officially listed: Chukar and the mystery heron of the Susquehanna River. We are awaiting verification of these species. It is not clear if the Chukars we saw are a viable, ongoing, wild-breeding species or simply released birds. Photographs of the heron, a white bird with a three-quarters-yellow bill, are in the hands of international heron experts. We are expecting it to be a Snowy Egret.

We have a significant amount of data entered or to be entered into our computer regarding expenses, locations for sightings, chronological listing of species, checklists, etc. We would be willing to share this information with interested birders.

Would we do it again? Not right away, for sure. We know the record, as is the case with all records, will be broken some day; we can only hope that the same stringent criteria for sightings will be kept when that attempt is made. Our PABY was fun, exhausting, frustrating, rewarding — and now over.



A basic-plumaged Ruff at Tinicum National Environmental Center, Oct. 11, 1986.

Photos by Barb and Frank Haas

# LOCAL NOTES

**ALL IN THE FAMILY:** Dr. Joel Abramson of North Miami, Fla., needs the ground roller family of Madagascar to complete his quest to see all 159 families of birds in the world. Abramson, who first joined DVOC in 1955, got the Kagu of New Caledonia recently to get to 158. Peter Kaestner of Washington, D.C., beat Abramson to the world record of being the first in the world to see all the bird families, but Abramson, an internist and head of Bird Bonanzas Inc. touring service, is not giving up — he is leading another tour to Madagascar in November. As of mid-January, his life list stood at 5,812.

**OVER THE TOP:** Congratulations to Art Bergey, who got his 700th ABA North American life bird in Attu on May 30, 1986 — the Spoonbilled Sandpiper seen elsewhere in this issue. Bergey also got great photos of the bird. By now, Erica Brendel is working toward her next century mark, as she topped 600 with a Pigeon Guillemot on Monterey Bay in October.

**SPEAKING OF CENTURY MARKS:** Armas Hill is busy working on the club's plans for its centennial anniversary in 1990. It was determined, through some detective work done by Ed Fingerhood, that the club's constitution was adopted and officers were elected on Feb. 3, 1890. Gene Stern was elected treasurer of the Centennial Committee. Just after his election and just before the November annual banquet, Gene was sidelined with a heart attack. He's recuperated so well that he is still planning a birding trip to Israel in March.

**A COLD RECEPTION?** Rob Cardillo of the Academy of Natural Sciences' Project VIREO (Visual Resources in Ornithology) thinks maybe the program, which is attempting to gather slides of all the world's avian species, needs a name change. After receiving mail addressed to Project VIRUS, VIRGO, VIERO and VIRO, he's of the opinion that the word "vireo" is not always understood by non-birders. The staff has suggested Project TOUCAN (Thousands of Unnecessary Copies Are Needed), Project PUFFIN (Photographs Under Foot, Filing Is Needed) or STILT (STaff Is Leaving Town). Any serious suggestions? . . . By the way, the latest of acquisitions for VIREO: a Spoonbilled Sandpiper on nest, taken by Russian

ornithologist Pavel Tomkovich, and a Bachman's Warbler, photographed near Charleston, S.C., in the '50s by John Henry Dick. While we're discussing the esteemed Academy, Larus wishes the best of luck to Pete Myers as he moves from being associate curator of the Academy's Ornithology Department to being senior vice president for research at National Audubon Society. Word seems to be that he'll continue his Pan American Shorebird Program.

**BUT WHAT'S AT HIS FEEDER?** Gull expert Jim Stasz, spotted on a recent visit to Conowingo Dam, his "northernmost limit these days," has a nifty backyard list. Now living in Calvert County, Va., on the shores of the Chesapeake, Jim says he's seen Little Gulls, kittiwakes, gannets and storm-petrels from his porch.

Slide contest judges Don Jones, Marv Hyett and John Harding had some tough choices this year at the Feb. 5 meeting. Honors were accorded in three categories. For birds: Dan Brauning, first place, courting gannets; Brian Moscatello, second place, Red Phalarope in Churchill; Sandy Sherman, third place, Pyrrhuloxia in South Texas; and Clay Sutton, honorable mention, nighthawk on a post. Top three in natural history went to Pat Sutton, Hickory Horned Devil, Goshen, N.J.; Howard Spendelow, caribou; and Brian Moscatello, Zebra Butterfly. Honorable mention went to Harry Todd for his Buckeye. In the scenery category, Howard Spendelow's magnificent shot of Mount McKinley at 1 a.m. on a summer morning won first place. Naomi Murphy took second prize for her phragmites shot; perennial postal participant Lucy Tyrrell, now living in Columbus, Ohio, was awarded third place for her Wisconsin scenery. Dan Brauning was given honorable mention for his shore scene along Cape Breton.

Dr. John Royal Moore of Stone Harbor, a member of the club since 1952, died Nov. 16. A newer member, Sandra Weiss of Medford, N.J., also died recently. The club offers condolences to both families.

DVOC welcomes new members: Eric Anderson of Maple Shade, N.J.; Jeffrey Hawk of Mercerville, N.J.; John McCarthy of Lansdale, Pa.; Linda Mills of Havertown, Pa.; Michael O'Brien of Pine Hill, N.J.; Dale Souder of Perkasia, Pa.; Andrew Thurber of Media, Pa.; and Mary L. Varley of Gainesville, Fla.

## 'A' Team: Action Is in Australia

Having conquered Argentina in 1985, DVOC's "A" Team is now setting its sights on Australia. Dates are Nov. 5 to Dec. 1, 1987, and arrangements and itinerary have been planned by Bird Bonanzas, which is headed by fellow club member Joel Abramson.

The tour starts in Melbourne and continues clockwise around the continent and terminates at Cairns, with optional extensions to Brisbane and Sydney.

Some highlights are the penguins at Phillip Island; a pelagic trip; the outback at Alice Springs and Ayers Rock; extensive birding in the far north around Darwin and on the seldom-visited Cape York Peninsula; and a visit to islands on the Great Barrier Reef.

Abramson estimates that the surface costs in Australia will be in the neighborhood of \$2,075, excluding meals. That number could be reduced to \$1,755 if there are 15 or more participants, which seems likely considering the advance interest already shown.

Australian domestic airfares should run between \$1,350 and \$1,550 and perhaps less if promotional fares are available at the time. Trans-Pacific fares are currently \$996.

Abramson points out that these costs are more than \$2,000 less than Victor Emanuel is charging for a comparable Australian tour.

For information, call Phil Street for a detailed brochure: 687-6542 (office) or 363-7776 (home).

## Philadelphia Larus

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