

Philadelphia Larus

the newsletter of the Delaware Valley Ornithological Club

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Summer of Firsts in the First State

By COLIN CAMPBELL

The Logan Tract is one of the best bayside birding areas on the Atlantic coast.

Fact.

And that categoric statement was made by the Delaware Twitchers long before 18 July, 1993. Prior to that auspicious date, the location was virtually unknown to birders, even as its prolonged official title: The Ted Harvey Conservation Area, Logan Lane Tract.

A few Delaware birders — let's face it, there *are* only a few — visit this avian utopia in shorebird migration seasons, and the area was also known to Maryland, Virginia and Pennsylvania birders as the place where the White-winged Tern popped up in July and August 1988.

Fluctuating water levels in the past couple of years have given rise to moments of high elation (half a million shorebirds in spring 1993) and deep depression (one Killdeer in fall 1992). The future may be rosier with increased attention from the authorities, but extra high tides can devastate carefully laid plans for managed water levels.

So what was so special about 18 July? Let's start at the fuzzy beginning.

On 30 June, a young British birder who had just arrived Stateside caught a quick glimpse of a tern as it dropped out of sight into the South Cape May Meadows in New Jersey. He had enough of a look to have the name "Whiskered Tern" come to mind (he knew the species from India), but not to stake his reputation on it. After all, this would be a first North American record for that species.

On Sunday, 11 July, Cape May birder Vince Elia had an even briefer encounter with an odd tern.

The next morning, at 8:45 a.m., the mystery was resolved when two Brits, including our young friend above, finally saw the mystery bird at close range in the Meadows. They quickly agreed on the original call: Whiskered Tern.

And the word was spread.

This identification made the tern the first

"first" on the Atlantic coast since the Western Reef Heron in Nantucket (or was it the Azure Gallinule, victim of a feline predator on Long Island?).

The Whiskered Tern, a native of southern Europe (*Chlidonias hybridus hybridus*) also occurs in distinct subspecies in South Africa and the Malagasy Republic (*C. h. delalandii*) and South Asia (*C. h. javanicus*). The genus *Chlidonias* comprises the marsh terns, which include the Black Tern (*C. niger*) and



The Whiskered Tern on a favorite perch, a horseshoe crab shell. Photographed 19 July, 1993, by B.J. Rose at the Ted Harvey Conservation Area, Logan Lane Tract, in Kitts Hummock, Del.

the White-winged Tern *C. leucopterus*).

The Whiskered Tern's occurrence on the East Coast of America was one of those moments that stands out in birding memories — as astonishing as it was unprecedented.

Alas, its lifetime in Cape May was short-lived. On Tuesday, 13 July, at about 6 a.m., Delaware birder and DVOC member Bruce Lantz spotted the bird zipping past the

dunes at the Meadows headed for Cape May Point State Park. By 6:30, the scores of birders gathered on the hawkwatch were treated to excellent looks at the tern, both sitting and flying around Bunker Pond.

The next — and last — New Jersey sighting was Thursday, the 15th, when the Whiskered Tern made a brief fly-by at the hawkwatch at 6:15 a.m., continued on over Lighthouse Pond and Lily Lake, and then was gone.

The scene at the hawkwatch on Saturday, July 17, was reminiscent of the South coast of Britain in 1942 awaiting the German airborne invasion (not from personal experience, I hasten to add) or the Kent (U.K.) supermarket when the Golden-winged Warbler cropped up — several hundred heavily armed personnel, bristling with high-powered optics, imbued with a keen sense of anticipation.

Ellen Short and I called it a day that Saturday at 8:30 a.m. — we were a couple of the lucky ones who'd seen it on the Thursday fly-by (thanks, Helen Parker of Arkansas!) — and took the ferry back to our beloved Delaware.

We bagged a Wilson's Storm-Petrel en route. We just *knew* the tern had flown to the Small Wonder State. We'd looked before for all those goodies seen at Cape May that *must* have traveled through Delaware going or coming — Mississippi Kite, Swainson's Hawk, Western Kingbird, etc.

From Lewes, we checked the large tern flock at Gordon Pond — 25 Least, 20 Royals, 40 Forster's and an amazing 300 Commons around a residual puddle. A kind ranger escorted us through the Least Tern colony. His boss was in Cape May, looking for the Whiskered Tern.

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Cape Henlopen held a collection of non-whiskered terns on its sand spits.

Only grass at Broadkill Beach, no water,

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PROGRAMS

Meetings are normally held the first and third Thursdays of the month, beginning at 7:30 p.m., at the Academy of Natural Sciences, 19th St. and Benjamin Franklin Parkway, unless otherwise indicated. For information on programs, call Hart Rufe, 215-257-8677 (home) or 215-348-6708 (work).

Parking is available at the Logan Square Parking Garage, 1815 Cherry St., for \$3. This indoor, patrolled lot is between 18th and 19th Streets, with entrances on both Arch Street and Cherry Street. To park at this rate, you must have your parking ticket validated by a guard at the Academy.

SEPT. 2 and 16 — Informal meetings.

OCT. 7, 1993 — DR. STEPHEN RANNELS, "The Nature of New Zealand." Dr. Stephen Rannels has been making an annual journey to New Zealand for many years. He will share with us his collection of nature slides depicting many curious natural aspects of this country, with a particular focus on its rare and unusual birds.

OCT. 21, 1993 — DR. NOBLE PROCTOR, "Alaska, From Denali to Attu." Dr. Noble Proctor is professor of ornithology at Southern Connecticut State University. His Alaska slide program begins in Denali National Park, proceeds to the Pribilofs and then continues out the Aleutian chain to that birding mecca — Attu.

NOV. 4, 1993 — SECOND DVOC BONANZA AUCTION. In what has now become a biennial event, you are invited to bring your excess birding books, magazines,

binoculars, scopes, tripods or other such birding paraphernalia to be auctioned off. To donate material, call Bob Mercer, 215-785-1177 (work). All proceeds will benefit the DVOC Endowment Fund.

NOV. 18, 1993 — ANNUAL BANQUET, DR. JEROME JACKSON, "America's Endangered Woodpeckers: The Ivory-billed and Red-cockaded." The banquet will be held at Ilona Keller's Dugan's Restaurant, 7900 Roosevelt Blvd. See story below.

DEC. 2, 1993 — TOM SOUTHERLAND, "Birding in Southern Africa." Tom Southerland, of Princeton Nature Tours, will present a slide program showing the highlights and pitfalls of birding in southern Africa. His slides will take us on a birding tour of Zimbabwe, with its Victoria Falls and Zambezi River; Botswana, with the Okavanga Delta and Kalahari Desert; Namibia; and Capetown, which claims one of the highest number of endemics of any place in the world.

DEC. 16, 1993 — PETE DUNNE, "A Small-headed Flycatcher. Seen Yesterday. He Didn't Leave His Name." Pete Dunne is DVOC's most prolific present-day writer, featured in the *New York Times*, *American Birds*, *Birding*, *Bird Watcher's Digest*, *Birder's World*, and *Living Bird Quarterly*. He is the managing editor of *New Jersey Audubon*. He will tell us a tale of birding.

JAN. 6, 1994: ANNUAL MEETING. Election of new officers and recitation of Christmas Bird Count sightings. Refreshments will be served.

It's Not Too Early to Think 'Banquet'

The Delaware Valley Ornithological Club's Annual Banquet is scheduled for Thursday, Nov. 18, 1993, once again at Ilona Keller's Dugan's Restaurant, 7900 Roosevelt Blvd. (at Borbeck Street, just south of Rhawn Street.) A cash bar will be open from 6 p.m. to 7 p.m., with dinner being served at 7.

This year, our guest speaker will be Dr. Jerome Jackson of Mississippi State University, who will discuss "America's Endangered Woodpeckers: The Ivory-billed and Red-cockaded." Dr. Jackson is widely recognized as America's leading authority on these two most rare and endangered woodpeckers. His slide program will document the history and status of these birds.

Ed Fingerhood, returning as dinner chairman, has arranged for a choice of three entrees: roast prime rib of beef, at \$19 per person; flounder stuffed with crabmeat, at \$19 per person; or breast of chicken, at \$15 per person.

Send checks, payable to DVOC, to Ed at his new address: 70205 Delaire Landing Rd., Philadelphia, Pa. 19114. Please be sure to mark your dinner selection(s) on the check. Deadline for reservations is Nov. 8, but it's not too early to do it now!

For information, call Ed at 215-637-2741.

Send information you would like considered for publication in Philadelphia Larus to:

Sandra Sherman, editor
912 North St.
Collingdale, Pa. 19023
215-237-6814 (home)
215-893-5739 (work)

Philadelphia Larus

FIELD TRIPS

For information of field trips, call Earl Harrison, 215-842-6315 (work).

Saturday to Monday, Sept. 4 to 6: Labor Day weekend at Cape May. Meet at dawn in the parking lot of Higbee Beach Wildlife Management Area.

Saturday and Sunday, Sept. 18 and 19: DVOC Weekend. Barnegat Light to Cape May. Meet at Barnegat Lighthouse State Park on Saturday morning at 7:30. Leaders: Don Jones, 609-859-0281 (home) or 215-785-8010 (work), or Earl Harrison, 215-842-6315 (work).

Sunday, Nov. 7: Bake Oven Knob. Meet at the lookout parking lot at 9 a.m. for traditional day of hawk-watching. Leader: Chris Dooley.

Friday, Dec. 17 to Monday, Jan. 3: Audubon Christmas Count period. For information, call Sandy Sherman, 215-237-6814 (home) or 215-893-5739 (work).

Reading Society Displays Poole's Art

"Dr. Earl L. Poole, 1891-1972: Artist, Illustrator, Gentleman, Scholar," an exhibition of the life and work of an honorary member of the Delaware Valley Ornithological Club, will be on display at the Historical Society of Berks County through Feb. 6, 1994.

The society is located at 940 Centre Ave., Reading. Hours are Tuesdays to Saturdays, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Dr. Poole was born in Haddonfield, N.J., and was educated at Central High School, the University of Pennsylvania School of Industrial Art and Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts.

He joined DVOC in 1919. He also was a co-founder of the Baird Ornithological Club in 1922 and was a charter member and past director of Hawk Mountain Sanctuary Association.

Dr. Poole's illustrations were first published in *Birds of Virginia* in 1913. In 1964, he authored and illustrated *Birds of Pennsylvania*, which was published for DVOC by the Livingston Publishing Co., which was owned by club member Phil Livingston. In between, his work was printed in Witmer Stone's *Bird Studies at Old Cape May*, as well as *Birds of Malaysia*, *Birds of the Philippines*, *Birds of Columbia* and *Birds of Colorado*.

Dr. Poole was a Jessup scholar at the Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia and later a research associate in the academy's ornithology department. He also published books on the birds of Berks County, Pa.

It is his illustration of a Bonaparte's Gull, *Larus philadelphia*, flying against the Philadelphia skyline, that graces DVOC's centennial plate.

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no terns.

At Logan Tract, myriads of shorebirds, more Forster's, more Leasts and . . .

"Hey!" yelled Ellen, "I've got a Black Tern."

But as it turned sideways, it became a White-winged Tern in almost full breeding plumage, apart from a little white around the base of the bill and cheeks. Well, at least Delaware is living up to its reputation as the prime state for White-wings.

We put in on the DE hot line. It went to Bob Rufe, who had led a DOS (Delmarva Ornithological Society) trip to Kent County that day but had not visited the Logan Tract. At least he'd had a Ruff at Bombay Hook.

Bob had promised to call Sandy Sherman, who was to lead her DVOC trip to the same area the next day, Sunday, 18 July. She had promised B.J. Rose of Omaha, Neb., she'd find him his life White-winged Tern to add to his list of (then) 726 North American birds he's photographed. Sandy had already dragged him down to Cape May by alerting him to the Whiskered Tern, so she called B.J. there. The next day, he got his pictures . . . along with a mysterious tern sp. they couldn't identify.

Meanwhile, back in Cape May that night, B.J. and three birders from Tennessee who also had been at Logan Tract on Sunday independently mulled this over in their motel rooms: Should they continue searching Cape May or go back to DE to check out the dusky-bellied tern?

The answer seemed obvious, and the Cape May-Lewes ferry again had birder traffic. By 1:15 p.m., B.J. had seen, confirmed and photographed the Whiskered Tern in DE (number 728 photographed!).

The First State became the second state!

B.J. phoned Sandy (as well as the Cape May Bird Observatory and NARBA, the North American Rare Bird Alert), Sandy called me and DVOC, I reported to DOS and the D.C. tapes. I left work early, picked up Ellen and Earl Potrafke and flew down Route 13 to Kitts Hummock Road. Dust rose like a wind devil on the Logan Tract dirt road.

Eight Delaware birders scoured the marsh. Ellen picked up the bird first and fast, on a horseshoe crab shell at 100 yards.

Drool, slobber, and inanimate and incomprehensible speech ruled for several minutes. A few birders arrived — Bill Stocku, Nick Pulcinella amongst them — both speechless, having, as many did, waited hours at Cape May with no reward.

B.J. arrived with a smile as wide as the Platte River.

Not only that: Who's seen the latest and

best European field guide, Lars Jonnsen's *Field Guide to European Birds*? On page 292, the complete page is devoted to European marsh terns, all three *Chlidonias* spp.: Black, White-winged Black (as those peculiar Euros call it) and the Whiskered.

Here, on July 19, in the Small Wonder State, these three species showed up on one pond in one day, in the same order as they are on the page! All three birds have been seen together several times since, at both the Logan Tract and the Pickering Beach end of the Little Creek Wildlife Management Area.

At the time of this writing, 20 August, all three species of tern are still present, usually at Pickering Beach. Until mid-August, the Whiskered Tern had proved to be a classic, enigmatic, perverse, frustrating crippler. Birders from all over the country had devised every means possible to get the bird. Those who spent the longest continuous time searching stood the best chance; those who twitched before work, after work, just one day of the weekend, etc., were lucky if they got it.

The bird was totally without pattern — missing for three days after it was rediscovered in DE, seen much of the following weekend, sporadically during the week, disappeared for the 31 July-1 August weekend (the frustration could be felt!), arrived (of course) Monday, 2 August, and has been seen in bits and pieces ever since.

What a fantastic, tantalizing bird! Is the record of dipping out (missing it) 10 times, as I've heard? But the chap got it eventually!

So, with all these high-powered birders descending on our patch for virtually the first time, what else did they find? After all, not all birders wile away the time at one place waiting for the needed to arrive. The list is impressive:

As well as two White-winged Terns in differing molts and Gull-billed Terns, not a state regular, Delaware's usual crop of Curlew Sandpipers and Ruffs turned up at their usual haunts — Bombay Hook, Port Mahon Road, Little Creek and the Logan Tract. One or two of the Curlews were in superb, bright, brick-red (worn postbreeding) plumage, and the Ruffs and Reeves were in interesting, scabby plumage.

Two immature White Ibis were the first authentic records for the state since 1990 and an immature Reddish Egret, which arrived with a bunch of Tricolored Herons (due to the drought down South?) was only the second state record.

Wilson's Phalaropes at the Hook were well down compared with recent years, but the Sedge Wrens at Shearneck Pool in Bombay Hook and elsewhere were in good numbers. A young Scissor-tailed Flycatcher was seen briefly at the Hook on 24 July.

The usual crop of superb DE shorebirds

at this time of year did not disappoint, with White-rumped Sands fiercely protecting their square yard of mud. Westerns in bright rufous plumage. Stilt Sands full of stripes, juvenile Least Sands in immaculate feathering, causing a stir with Little Stint searchers. Short-billed Dowitchers of the year with their buff-blotched scapulars and tertials standing out from the adults. Hudsonian Godwits causing more than a second glance for those who had missed the Black-tailed Godwit earlier this summer on Cape Cod. And Red Knots and Sanderlings on the coast in superb plumage, the latter giving momentary palpitations to the Rufous-necked Stint bashers (e.g., me).

Then, . . . I guess it had to happen. On 8 August, three birders from Chicago, rediscovering the best state on the East Coast, found an adult Sharp-tailed Sandpiper in breeding plumage at Bear Swamp pool, Bombay Hook.

I was privileged to be 50 yards down the road at the time with the DE Twitchers (right place, right time — you never know) and this was a bird I'd chased in Scotland and other foreign spots — Brigantine, Tinicum — and was hoping for on my first trip birding in California in October of this year.

The euphoria was deafening. Tangible. Cardiac. Whatever. We took pictures. Videos even. We eulogized, wet our pants, then proceeded to phone all we could think of. Birders arrived quickly that Sunday afternoon, which made me suspicious: Why aren't these guys out birding Sundays? Are they watching the ballgame on TV awaiting word from the Delaware Twitchers? Perhaps the state is stuffed full of even more rarities at this very moment, dear readers; they just want discovering!

Okay, you lot don't need convincing that DE is brilliant. But tell others. And thanks to Frank Buhl of the DOS and Lisa Gelvin-Innvaer of the Delaware Non-game for setting up the Whiskered Tern log at Logan Tract, to Delaware Twitchers for their W.T. update sheets, to all those from near and far who kept us (the DE Twitchers) up to date with sightings.

Birding — I love it!

EDITOR'S NOTE: Major thanks, too, go to Joan Walsh of the Cape May Bird Observatory for getting the word out quickly when the Whiskered Tern was first confirmed on 12 July; to Vince Elia of the Villas, N.J., who shared his recollections of early events; and to Christine Bush at the Academy of Natural Sciences, who filled in in Armas Hill's absence to update the Delaware Valley Birdline during this rush of rarities.

Hot lines and telephone trees work — but only when they're kept current. Please take time to fill out the telephone tree form on Page 4.

LOCAL NOTES

IN THE FIELD: Several club members and area birders have figured out ways to combine an avocation with a vocation, whether full- or part-time. **Mitch Smith** of Cape May and **David Githens** of Salem County have joined forces to offer wildlife boat tours along the coastal salt marshes. Jersey Cape Nature Excursions will take parties of up to six along the back bays and out to Champagne Island, off Anglesea, where sightings over the years have included 22 migrant Piping Plover in one square meter and a Wilson's Plover. For information, call 609-898-9631. . . . **Chris Danzenbaker** will be leading a six-week trip to Kenya and Zimbabwe in November 1994 in conjunction with Terry Stevenson and Rhett Butler, expert leaders in those two countries, respectively. For information, contact Chris, 928 Knollfield Way, San Jose, Calif. 95136; 408-264-7582 (home) or 408-974-6889. . . . **Mike Danzenbaker** is headed in quite a different direction at the same time. He'll be manning one of six Zodiacs for Cheesemans' Ecology Safaris on a 25-day cruise to the Falklands, South Georgia and the Antarctic, beginning Nov. 21, 1994. To bird Antarctica with Mike and his camera equipment, call 1-800-741-5330. By the way, both Chris and Mike got the Whiskered Tern on their second trip in from California on Aug. 7. . . . And, of course, **Armas Hill's** Focus on Nature Tours go as close as Delaware and as far as Japan. For information on Armas' scheduled trips, call him at 302-329-1876.

A LOSS TO WORLD ORNITHOLOGY: Ornithologist **Ted Parker**, senior scientist for Conservation International, died Aug. 3 in a plane crash in the coastal mountains of Ecuador while surveying biological diversity in unmapped areas of the tropics. The *New York Times* reported that Parker, a Lancaster, Pa., native who had been a guest speaker at DVOC and was known to many club members, was able to identify more than 4,000 species of birds by call.

Mark Robbins, who has spent his share of time in small planes hovering over Ecuador as collection manager at the Academy of Natural Sciences, roomed with Parker both in Arizona and at Louisiana State University. Mark says he and Parker had discussed the perilous conditions of using local planes and pilots down there.

In a brighter vein, we wish Mark the best of luck as he leaves the Academy in mid-September to return to the Midwest (he grew up in northwest Missouri) — he'll become collection manager at the Museum of Natural History at the University of Kansas. Mark says he'll still get a chance to do neo-tropical work there. . . . Also preparing to depart the Academy by year's end is **Fred Sheldon**, assistant curator of ornithology, who will be headed to LSU.

If **Clay Sutton**, New Jersey's entry in the DVOC Conservation Committee, shows up at more meetings this season, we can thank the Environmental Protection Agency. On loan from Herpetological Associates for a little more than the next year, he'll be creating a "characterization document" that will summarize many areas of scientific information known about the Delaware Estuary, as part of the Delaware Estuary Planning Process. The field work's been done, so Clay will mainly be writing — and attending EPA meetings, some of which may be in Center City. . . . And speaking of Cape May, New Jersey Audubon/Cape May Bird Observatory has closed a deal on 26 acres of property in South Dennis Township, just off Route 47. **Paul Kerlinger**, CMBO director, has big plans: Besides preserving most of the varied habitat from development, CMBO will build an education and resource center there. Some trails will be

created, as well as an ambitious backyard-habitat demonstration area. The Cape May Point center, former home of **J. d'Arcy Northwood**, will remain open.

WHAT'S HOT IN MAINE (an oxymoron): **Ann Bacon**, formerly of Bucks County and now of Mount Desert, Maine, has begun the Downeast Birdline to cover her area's rarities. The number: 207-288-2829.

TRAVEL TIME: **John LaVia** and **Bob Sehl** summered in Malaysia, and **Jim Brett** of Hawk Mountain spent time this summer in Guatemala and Belize. He was in Belize, the former British Honduras, as a guest of the government, helping to design its new research and education center.

SEARCHING FOR SNOWIES: If you're out in the field this fall and notice what appears to be a Snowy Egret with the coloration of an oversexed Cattle Egret, you probably have found a bird banded this summer at Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge in Virginia. The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service says it has color-marked Snowies with yellow dye in an effort to track their postbreeding dispersal, but the birds look orange to me. Anyway, if you see such individuals, note date, time, name of area, and colors of leg bands (your choices are aluminum, blue, pink, red and yellow) and notify Dr. Mike Erwin, 11410 American Holly Drive, Laurel, Md. 20708; 301-498-0380. One of two birds seen at Tinicum in early August was "Cattle Egret orange" on all but the head.

2nd Call for DVOC Telephone Directory

After all this summer's excitement of a Whiskered Tern at Cape May — no, now it's in Delaware — wow, there's an adult Sharp-tailed Sandpiper there, too! — we realized it's time to update the DVOC telephone directory that Paul Guris revived in 1990.

Whether you want to chase or just chat, return the form to Paul by Oct. 1, and his computer will do the rest. Check the box if you want to be a part of the telephone tree.

Feel free to call if you have questions, suggestions or constructive criticism: 215-348-HAWK. But, as always, save abuse for the meetings, where it can be enjoyed by all.

Return the form to Paul A. Guris, 402 Ferris Lane, New Britain, Pa. 18901. *Please print neatly.*

NAME(S) _____

ADDRESS _____

HOME PHONE _____

WORK PHONE(S) _____ EXT _____

I would be interested in participating in a telephone tree:

YES NO