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East Park Reservoir: A Haven for Waterfowl

by Jane Henderson

On December 16, 1998, as a representative of the Wyncote Audubon Society, I was invited by Keith Russell and Dr. Jan Gordon to visit the East Park Reservoir in Fairmount Park. Even though I had often passed by the gates to the reservoir at 33rd and Diamond Streets when I was still teaching high school in Philadelphia, I had never imagined what was on the other side of the berm and behind those high fences.

The East Park Reservoir complex has four sections, all of which used to hold treated drinking water when Philadelphia's population was larger. At present, only one section, the covered Northeast Basin, still serves as a source of drinking water for the city. The Northwest and South Basins have been drained and are marshy. But on December 16, our focus was on the exciting section, the long-abandoned 45 acre, 22 foot deep (presently with a water level of 6-7 feet) West Basin, which has been populated for years by diving ducks, loons, grebes and cormorants.

the flock of Canvasbacks more closely, we discovered a male Redhead. Later on we saw the female.

We drove on a bit and looked some more. This time we identified both Greater and Lesser Scaup and a large flock of Hooded Mergansers. We also saw Canada Geese, American Black Ducks, Mallards, Wood Ducks and Ruddy Ducks.

This, according to Keith Russell, who has monitored the West Basin for several years as a member of the Ornithology Department at ANSP, was not even a particularly good day there. For example, not too long ago, he said, a Red-throated Loon and a Tundra Swan were spotted there, as well as many more ducks.

Over the years, a great many species have been recorded in the West Basin, including Horned and Red-necked Grebes, Common Goldeneye, Common Loons, Ring-necked Ducks, and Red-breasted Mergansers. In fact, informal accounts by members of the DVOC, going back to 1901, and official records of the Philadelphia Mid-Winter Bird Census, begun in 1987, indicate that 30 species of waterfowl have wintered in the West Basin or stopped there in migration. The West Basin often hosts the largest regular wintering flock in the state of Pennsylvania, even larger than the flock on Lake Erie.

In the 30's, 40's and 50's, Dave Cutler and many other DVOC regulars made frequent visits to East Park Reservoir. The complex was not gated well then, and the fence was lower, so access was not as difficult as it is now. They routinely found huge numbers of birds, especially after storms. Dave told me that it was not uncommon then to find 40-50 Common Loons there. Red-Necked Grebes used to be regular visitors in March, he said.

In 1996, while doing his "Big Year," Ed Fingerhood heard rumors of potential problems at the reservoir. Keith Russell called the reservoir staff and found out exactly what was going on: the Philadelphia Water Department had begun emptying the West Basin with the intention of filling it with soil and turning it over to the Fairmount Park Commission for use as a ball field.

Keith wrote a letter to the Water Department and the Fairmount Park Commission, explaining the value of the West Basin and the risks involved in draining it. Dr. Robert Ridgely co-signed the letter. At Ed's request, Drs. Jan and Ken Gordon wrote a similar letter from DVOC to both agencies. As a result, the Water Department decided to stop draining the basin at which point the water level had reached 6-7 feet.



At several DVOC meetings I had heard Dr. Jan Gordon and the late Ed Fingerhood speak of the West Basin at East Park Reservoir and its importance to wintering waterfowl. But that had not prepared me for what I saw on that December day when Joseph Schultz, the reservoir's maintenance supervisor, unlocked and opened the gates of the two chain-link fences, and we and our cars were admitted inside.

Representatives from the DVOC, the ANSP, the West Chester Bird Club, the Valley Forge Audubon Society, the Delaware County Bird Club and the Wyncote Audubon Society set up scopes and began scanning the far end of the West Basin. We immediately counted at least 200 Canvasbacks and a large number of Common Mergansers. When we examined

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Field Trips

Officers and Councillors for 1998

For meeting times and locations, contact leaders. For information about possible additional trips, contact Bill Murphy, Field Trip Chairman (215) 885-2488.

Hart Rufe served as chairman of the 1999 Nominating Committee. The following officers were reelected for a second term:

President - Don Jones
Vice President - Ron French
Secretary - Colin Campbell
Treasurer - Naomi Murphy

Council: Two retiring councillors are Sally Conyne and Megan Edwards (January 1999). Sandra Sherman retired as immediate past president, but remains on Council as *Cassinia* editor. Remaining Councillors: Rick Mellon and Steve Kerr (to January 2000); Adrian Binns and Ann Bacon (to January 2001); and two new Councillors: Ellen Short and Bert Filemyr (to January 2002). Councillors serve a three year term.
Fellows: Megan Edwards, Louis Bevier, and Bert Filemyr

Committees:

Archives: Phil Street
Books: Ellen Short and Irene Goverts
Bylaws: Chris Walters
Conservation: Dr. Jan and Dr. Ken Gordon
Field Trips: Bill Murphy
Ornithological Studies: Open
Publications: Sandra Sherman
Trustees: Chris Walters, Steve Wing, Hart Rufe

Saturday, March 27 - Pedricktown and Mannington Marsh (southwest New Jersey.) Leader: Frank Windfelder. Call Frank at (215) 673-0240.

Sunday, May 9 (Mother's Day) - White Clay Creek with Andie Ednie. Meet at the Hot Shoppes Rest Area on Rt. 95 south of Wilmington at 6:00 A.M. Nesting Cerulean Warblers possible. Also Hooded Warbler, Pileated Woodpecker, Willow Flycatcher. For info, call Andy at (302) 792-9591.

Saturday, May 15 - Pennypack Creek Park with Frank Windfelder. All day trip for warblers and Bicknell's Thrush with I.D. tips. Call Frank at (215) 673-0240.

Sunday, May 30 - Pelagic trip in New Jersey and Delaware waters on Morning Star, out of Cape May. About 14 hours, 5:00 A.M. through 7:00 P.M. Call Armas Hill (Focus on Nature Tours) at (302) 529-1876 Cost: \$95 per person.

Friday, Saturday and Sunday, June 4, 5 and 6 - The Great Bicknell's Thrush Quest. Join Adrian Binns for this three-day blitz to the Lake Placid area. Other boreal species for which we will search are Black-Backed and Three-Toed Woodpeckers and Spruce Grouse. We plan to hire a van for the trip, so space may be limited. Departure will be early Friday morning and return will likely be late on Sunday night. Please call Adrian at (215) 364-1285.

Sunday, June 13 - Join Don Jones for this exciting trip to Hawkins Road and environs. Target species: breeding Prothonotary, Worm-Eating, Kentucky and Hooded Warblers. Call Don at (609) 859-0281.

Sunday, June 13 - Pelagic out of Lewes, Delaware. 4:00 A.M. - 4:00 P.M. Cost: \$95.00 per person. Call Armas Hill at (302) 529-1876.

Sunday, July 11 - Bombay Hook NWR and environs. Join Sandy Sherman to witness the annual spectacle of shorebird migration. Call Sandy at (215) 237-6814.

Saturday and Sunday, September 4 and 5 - Pelagic trips out of Cape May both days. 5:00 A.M. - 7:00 P.M. Cost: \$95.00 each trip. Call Armas Hill. (302) 529-1876.

Sunday, September 19 - Join Ward Dasey for fall birding at Palmyra. Migrating warblers, possibly early sparrows. Call Ward at (609) 953-1658.

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1999 Program Schedule

January 7 - Annual Meeting

January 21 - Birds of New Jersey - Jerry Bailey

February 4 - Churchill: Gateway to the Arctic - John Miller

February 18 - An Update on the Work of the Academy's Department of Ornithology - Leo Joseph

March 4 - History of the World Series of Birding - Pete Dunne

March 18 - Identifying Pelagic Birds - Paul Guris

April 1 - Dr. Mudd to the Brownsville Dump - Kevin Karlson, Nature Photographer

April 15 - To be announced

May 6 - The Color of Birds - Vincent Muehter, NAS

May 20 - Japan: Birding on the Other Side of the World with Spectacles of Cranes, Eagles and More - Armas Hill

June 3 - May Run and Bird-A-thon Reports

Summer: July 1 - August 5; September 2 and 16 -

Informal Meetings in Common Room

Some Notes on Bicknell's Thrush

by Frank Windfelder

Prior to 1995, there were three known races of Gray-cheeked Thrush, as listed below:

- 1) *Catharus minimus bicknelli* - New England, Upstate New York, S. Quebec and the Maritimes.
- 2) *Catharus minimus minimus* - Newfoundland
- 3) *Catharus minimus aliciae* - the widespread northern form which breeds across much of Canada

In 1995, the AOU made the decision to split *bicknelli* from Gray-cheeked Thrush, and name it Bicknell's Thrush. Thus began the usual frenzy on the part of "twitchers" to add the newly-recognized species to their lists.

It was initially thought by some that Bicknell's Thrush was readily separable in the field from Gray-cheeked Thrush. A number of field marks for Bicknell's were noted:

- 1) upperparts reddish-brown vs. olive-brown for Gray-cheeked Thrush
- 2) Tail and wings slightly rustier than rest of upperparts, but not nearly as contrasting as in Hermit Thrush
- 3) At least half the base of the lower mandible bright yellow to orange-yellow, vs. a more restricted area of flesh to flesh-yellow in Gray-cheeked Thrush
- 4) Buff wash on breast, as opposed to plain off-whitish background color in Gray-cheeked Thrush
- 5) Smaller size, with a small amount of overlap with Gray-cheeked Thrush

It was soon clear that these field marks worked well when comparing *bicknelli* to *aliciae*. However, we now realize that the nominate race *minimus* is virtually identical to *bicknelli*. Some authors claim that the extent and intensity of yellow on the lower mandible is reliable. It may be a situation similar to the one we face with the Traill's Flycatcher subspecies, but perhaps a bird on the extreme reddish-brown end of the spectrum, with extensive orange-yellow on the lower mandible, is visually identifiable.

Bicknell's Thrush is a lot more common in its migration through our region than is generally believed. A fall study done by Wilson and Watts at Kiptopeke, VA, bears this out. Kiptopeke is at the southern tip of the Delmarva Peninsula. Wilson and Watts banded 3,252 birds over a 27-year period. Approximately 1/3 were Gray-cheeked, 1/3 were Bicknell's, and 1/3 were unidentified because they fell in the range of size overlap between the two species. In our region, the bulk of the fall migration occurs from mid-September to early October, and in spring the peak time is about the third week in May. If you look religiously during these periods, and observe a number of *bicknelli-minimus* types (Graynell's), there is a high probability that you will have seen at least one Bicknell's Thrush.

In addition, the songs and nocturnal flight calls (NF's) of the two species are diagnostically different. Bicknell's song is higher pitched overall than Gray-cheeked and the latter's song has a Veery-like drop in pitch at the end. Listen carefully to any singing "Graynell" in the spring. The companion tapes to the Stokes Field Guide to Bird Songs, Eastern Region, have the songs of both species.

Bicknell's NF is higher-pitched and purer-toned than Gray-cheeked. In terms of pitch, Gray-cheeked's NF goes from low to high and back to low, whereas Bicknell's NF just goes from high to low. If you have a good ear, you might try listening before dawn for overflying migrants. The NF's of Bicknell's and Gray-cheeked Thrushes were a feature on the BirdSource Web site (<http://birdsource.cornell.edu>) for the week of September 29 to October 5, 1998. You can still download these calls if you explore the web site. Go into "Links," and then "Nocturnal Flight Calls."

You may want to visit the breeding grounds of Bicknell's Thrush. In the mountains of New England, it nests in tall shrubby areas in krummholz. Krummholz is an area of stunted conifers at an altitude near the tree line. A good strategy is to find a bald-top mountain that has easy access. Stand at a place where the krummholz meets the bald part of the mountain. In the early evening, about an hour before dusk, play a tape of Bicknell's song. It's worth a try at dawn as well. Two good places are Hunter Mountain in the Catskills and Ambersand Mountain in the Adirondacks. You could drive up during the day and be on site at the appropriate time.

Bicknell's Thrush winters primarily on Hispaniola (Haiti and the Dominican Republic) and also Puerto Rico, Jamaica, and perhaps Cuba.

For more information, consult Frank's extensive bibliography.

East Park, cont'd

Bob Ridgely, Keith Russell and Ed Fingerhood subsequently met with members of the Water Department and the Fairmount Park Commission to discuss the situation. This was the beginning of what was to become an ongoing dialog.

To determine whether the West Basin would continue to attract birds at its diminished depth, Keith Russell, Ed Fingerhood and Louis Bevier began monitoring bird populations there three times a month, from September 1996 to May 1997, and again from October 1997 to January 1998.

Early in 1998, Keith wrote an extensive report, based on data from these censuses, for the Fairmount Park Commission and the Water Department. The study confirmed that large numbers of waterfowl were continuing to use the West Basin at its present depth. In the report, Keith stated: "Ornithologically, the West Basin is a unique body of water within the city of Philadelphia. It is currently the only location in the city where a large number of different species of diving waterfowl occur, and the only location where certain species of divers are now known to occur at all."

With this in mind, he asked the Park Commission and the Water Department to consider preserving the reservoir as a refuge. This effort was given a boost by a member of the Fairmount Park Commission who interceded with the Water Department on behalf of the wintering waterfowl.

The Water Commissioner has now provisionally agreed to turn the West Basin over to the Fairmount Park Commission for maintenance as a sanctuary. According to Jan Gordon's report to the Valley Forge Audubon Society, "the term 'provisionally' covers concerns for water safety in the Northeast Basin, integrity of the embankment surrounding the West Basin, and costs, all of which would have to be addressed before placement of a viewing blind or observation tower would be discussed with the Academy and the DVOC."

There has been no official letter yet confirming any of this, but the Fairmount Park Commission appears to be receptive to the idea of a refuge. A meeting of all interested parties has been promised, but, to date, has not materialized.

The representatives from area bird clubs who visited East Park Reservoir on December 16 were sent home with a mission: Write letters, and encourage others to do the same.

People to contact:

Mr. William E. Mifflin, Executive Director
Fairmount Park Commission
P.O. Box 21601
Philadelphia, PA 19131
(215) 685-0000

City Councilman Michael Nutter
(whose district contains East Park)
City Hall, Room #404
Philadelphia, PA 19107
(215) 686-3416

Points to include in your letter:

- Recommend establishment of the site as a sanctuary
- Oppose its use as a recreation area
- Stress its unique, critical importance to waterfowl
- Emphasize its educational potential

Cont'd next column

What do DVOC, ducks and the Larus have in common?? They all have Web sites!!

by Sandra Sherman

In between issues of Philadelphia Larus, check out what's happening at <http://www.acnatsci.org/dvoc/>. Thank-you's go out to the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia for providing the space, and to club members Jack Siler, Herb Thompson and Emmerson Bowes for start-up and maintenance.

Street Honored at Banquet

by Sandra Sherman

At the DVOC Annual Banquet in December, Phillips B. Street was honored with the Julian K. Potter Award for his article "Birds of the Pocono Mountains 1986-1996," published in Vol. 66 of *Cassinia* and co-authored by Richard E. Wiltraut. The award is presented to a club member for outstanding field ornithology. Louis Bevier chaired the Potter Award Committee.

Freda Goes North

by Jane Henderson

One of DVOC's most enthusiastic members, Freda Rappaport, has relocated to a retirement community in Ithaca, N.Y. to be near her daughter Carla. The late Gene Stern encouraged Freda to join DVOC in 1989, when Rick Mellon was president of the Club. She said one of the highlights of her experiences at DVOC was the slide presentation depicting the club's first 50 years. Freda particularly loved Alan Brady's slides that showed her dear friend Evie Kramer. Freda expressed gratitude to Charlie Wonderly and Chuck Hetzel for making sure she was able to get to DVOC meetings regularly, especially as she became increasingly incapacitated by arthritis.

Field Trips, cont'd

Sat., October 9 - Tuckerton with Frank Windfelder for Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow and ID of subspecies and Salt Marsh Sharp-tail. Call Frank at (215) 673-0240.

East Park, cont'd

Jan Gordon concluded in her report to VFAS: "Those in the Academy and the DVOC who have spearheaded this project are optimistic that with the help of other bird and nature clubs we can assure the establishment of a sanctuary with reasonable access to birders, scientists, students and others... The DVOC has offered to contribute funds toward an observation tower or blind at the site and is awaiting a promised next discussion with the two city departments."

Thanks to Keith Russell, Dr. Jan Gordon and Dave Cutler for their assistance in the preparation of this piece.

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