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An Exceptional "Fall" Migration of Shorebirds Along the Big Bend Reach of the Platte River

Introduction

The Big Bend reach of the Platte River extends about 80 miles from Overton to Chapman, Nebraska. This area is characterized by braided channels with numerous riverine islands bordered by cottonwoods (*Populus deltoides*) and willows (*Salix spp.*) along the high banks. Habitat between the high banks consists of open water, barren sandbars and mudflats, herbaceous islands, shrub islands, and floodplain forest.

Prolonged summer flows during 1983 were among the highest recorded this century; in excess of 20,000 cfs (cubic feet per second). Spring 1984 also consisted of high flows resulting in much scouring and shifting of alluvial sediments. By early July 1984, flows had dropped from about 3,000 cfs to less than 400 cfs by the end of the month. These low flows continued until 6 September then they increased to over 3,000 cfs. During the drawdown phase of these flows, large mudflats were exposed in low-lying and backwater areas. These nutrient rich sediments hosted multitudes of aquatic insect larvae, especially larvae of Chironomidae (midges). The abundance of both suitable habitat and an available food source coincided with the "fall" or southward migration of several species of shorebirds. These conditions resulted in an exceptional shorebird flight along the Platte River. The following species account summarizes our observations.

List of Species

- Snowy Plover (*Charadrius alexandrinus*) - Two individuals were observed on 25 July, 1 mile downstream from the Kearney Canal Diversion Dam in Buffalo County. The slim black bill, black legs, and lack of a breast band characterized them. This is apparently the first July sighting of this species in Nebraska (Johnsgard, P. 1980. *A revised list of the birds of Nebraska and adjacent Plain States*. Occ. paper N.O.U. No. 6, Lincoln, NE). On 24 May 1978 a pair was observed making nest scrapes on a barren sandbar along the Platte River in Sec. 16, T8N, R14W Buffalo County. They did not nest (Lingle unpublished data).
- Semipalmated Plover (*C. semipalmatus*) - This species was observed on 5 occasions between 10-20 August in Hall County. The maximum count was 2.
- Greater Yellowlegs (*Tringa melanoleuca*) - Observed on 11 occasions between 19 July - 28 August. Maximum count = 2.
- Lesser Yellowlegs (*T. flavipes*) - Observed on 7 occasions between 18 July - 24 August. Maximum count = 10.
- Solitary Sandpiper (*T. solitaria*) - Two individuals observed on 24 July.
- Willet (*Catoptrophorus semipalmatus*) - Ten individuals were sighted on 15 July.
- Whimbrel (*Numenius phaeopus*) - One individual was observed on 25 July near the Snowy Plovers. The long, decurved bill; head stripes; and uniform coloration between the body and underwings were diagnostic. This is the first July sighting in Nebraska and the first Whimbrel sighting in Buffalo County (Johnsgard 1980).
- Ruddy Turnstone (*Arenaria interpres*) - One individual was sighted on 25 July near the Snowy Plovers. This represents the first "fall" sighting of this species in Nebraska (Johnsgard 1980).
- Semipalmated Sandpiper (*Calidris pusilla*) - Observed on 11 occasions between 18 July and 28 August. Maximum count = 5.
- Least Sandpiper (*C. minutilla*) - Six sightings between 3-27 August. Maximum count = 3.
- Baird's Sandpiper (*C. bairdii*) - Observed on 18 occasions between 17 July to 28 August. Maximum count = 15.
- Pectoral Sandpiper (*C. melanotos*) - Seven sightings between 31 July and 23 August. Maximum count = 10. The earliest previous "fall" record was 3 August (Johnsgard 1980).
- Stilt Sandpiper (*C. himantopus*) - One observation of 6 individuals on 16 July. Johnsgard (1980) reported the earliest "fall" sightings on 21 July.
- Buff-breasted Sandpiper (*Tryngites subruficollis*) - Ninety individuals were observed in a recently cut alfalfa field adjacent to the Platte River in Hall County on 3 August. Johnsgard (1980) reported the earliest "fall" sighting on 17 August and did not mention Hall County relative to documented sightings. A more recent sighting of 1 individual was reported on

31 July 1980 (1980 (twenty-third) fall occurrence report. Nebr. Bird Rev. 49:14-30). (An incidental sighting of 2 individuals on 29 August at Harvard Marsh, Clay County was made by Paul Bedell and Gary Lingle).

Caspian Tern (*Sterna caspia*) - One individual was sighted in Hall County on 12 July. The earliest previous "fall" record was 20 July (Johnsgard 1980).

Forester's Tern (*S. forsteri*) - Two sightings were recorded; one each on 25 July and 15 August. Maximum count = 4. Johnsgard (1980) reported the earliest previous "fall" record on 1 August.

Black Tern (*Chilidonias niger*) - One observation in Hall County on 3 August of 1 individual. Six other species of Charadriiformes were observed in the area during this period however they are nesting species and therefore would not be appropriate to list relative to migration dates. These species are: Piping Plover (*Charadrius melodus*), Killdeer (*C. vociferous*), Spotted Sandpiper (*Actitis macularia*) Upland Sandpiper (*Bartramia longicauda*), Wilson's Phalarope (*Phalaropus tricolor*), and Least Tern (*Sterna antillarum*).

Early initial "fall" sightings were recorded for several species and several county and/or seasonal state records were observed. The importance and use of the Platte River as a fall stop-over area for shorebirds appears to vary from year to year but the potential of the river in providing suitable habitat exists. Lingle, G. and M. Hay (1982. A checklist of the birds of Mormon Island Crane Meadows. Nebr. Bird Rev. 50:27-36) provided a preliminary account of shorebird use along the Platte River near Grand Island. The observations reported in this study augments our knowledge of the Platte River system and elucidates this area's importance to a wide variety of migratory birds.

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