

A walk through the reeds, May 29, 2000 at The Beaverhill Bird Observatory

Staff Article - Tyler Flockhart and Richard Krikun

With a low snowfall the past winter, low water levels makes the flats harder to reach with many meters of mud in between. But without effort, there's no adventure. So Richard Krikun and myself grabbed our binoculars, our cameras and our rubber boots.

Our mission was simple, to get a closer look at the Black-bellied Plovers first spotted the day before. A lifer for both of us, we demanded a closer look at its bold black and white mottled plumage. However, with any mission other things always come up.

As we trudged through the reeds and mud towards the edge of the mighty lake of the Beaverhills, the sun beat down upon us. We were in too deep to turn back as the mud threatened to swamp us. A walk of about 500m through two foot deep mud and dead cattails takes about 30 minutes and anytime you spot to have a look through your binos you sink a little further in the mud. It makes it painful to start again and might make some turn back, we however, never turn back when it comes to birds.



Our first surprise came when we noticed two birds which appeared more brown than the others. Juveniles, or females? Neither, American Golden Plovers, a bird never before seen by our dinner plate sized eyes. A bird that historically was estimated to be as numerous as the Passenger pigeon but is now uncommon both spring and fall in Alberta.

The snatch and grab feeding technique that plovers are known for was very apparent and delightful to watch. Its hard to believe the level of activity provided by only a dozen birds on a small shallow beach. We observed as they frequently ran in pairs or threes for about 3 meters, then abruptly stop and watch momentarily before continuing in the direction of the next morsel of food. We found it interesting that the American Golden Plovers mixed freely and fed with the Black-bellied Plovers. The mixed groups were observed feeding and sunning in the technique previous described.

As Richard and I continually stopped to view the birds and become encased in mud, we decided to head for a gravel bar on the shore that we knew was hard packed and easier to walk on. This however was on the other side of the feeding birds, its a good thing that shorebirds are accepting of human presence and did not stray far, still within view of our binoculars. As we reached the gravel bar we watched the birds continue to feed, some in 6 inches of water, some where the waves washed up on the shore, and others on dry land. An occasional rock was inspected closely for small invertebrates which would fuel the last leg of the northern migration which would inevitably take these birds away from our eyes for the summer.



Suddenly a noisy pair of Willets arrived on the scene, announcing their presence with loud synchronized "Will-WILLET!". These large, drab looking birds are comfortable with humans being fairly close to them and paid little attention to us as they fed and playfully chased each other.

After watching all the shorebirds until they flew off, we decided to head back into the reeds to look for other birds. We heard Sora's calling so we headed in their direction confident that we would catch a glance of them. The going got slow as the mud was deep and the reed growth dense, preferred habitat of Sora's to avoid predators. As we slowly walked we caught our first good look of the year at a Marsh Wren as he popped up to the top of the cattails to inspect us and belt out a tune before dropping again into his tangled jungle home.

Every minute almost on cue, he would again perch atop a dead cattail and proclaim his presence, his territory, and his bachelor status. Upon closer inspection, we noticed that he was gathering nesting material and constructing nests when he dropped from our sight.

We also observed behaviour which one would expect, that being the Marsh Wren dropping from sight quickly upon the approach of a Red-winged Blackbird which too was building a nest. These two species (which are intra-specific competitors, or simply put wreck each others nests) were building nests less than 5 meters apart! Needless to say there was probably some neighbourhood tension later that summer.

As we stood watching the nest construction in progress we heard the Sora's again begin to call. Richard, who had never seen one began to inspect the reeds to locate the elusive bird. At times they were calling less than 10 feet from us, but alas a sight was never gained by either of us that afternoon. I guess that would have to wait till later in the summer.

An afternoon such as this; rare, uncommon, lifers, nest building, and territorial singing is not uncommon at Beaverhill Lake. Sometimes all that's needed is some walking, getting wet and muddy to have an afternoon that stays with you for a long time.

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