

## **Sherwood Island Diary**

**Richard L Soffer**

**1998**

### **January 12**

Today was my first time this year at the park and the weather was glorious, the Sound relatively placid. A major new sewerage system and new toilets are being built and installed and there is much drilling and noise near the east bathhouses and near the nature center and the dune.

There were plenty of birds comprising 43 species. I got an excellent look from the eastern extremity of the park at a drake Barrow's Goldeneye just off the westernmost part of Burying Hill Beach. The bird was with a female, presumably of the same species, and the pair was far (several hundred yards at least) from any Common Goldeneye.

Other birds of interest included 30 Canvasback, 12 Black-bellied Plover, 20 Turnstones, 22 Dunlin and 18 Snow Buntings.

### **January 14**

Today was clear, cold and breezy. It was one of those winter days, however, when the park was mysteriously devoid of birds. My total was 33 species and I missed both Starling and House Sparrow. A compensation for days like this that occur occasionally every January and early February is that, despite the paucity of species, some are inevitably new for the calendar year. The new ones today, i. e. the ones I didn't see two days ago were Common Loon, Bufflehead, Hooded Merganser, Killdeer and Swamp Sparrow.

### **January 16**

There was a "northeaster" with very high winds and heavy rain last night and this morning so I thought I'd go look for some seabirds that might have been blown in. Frank Mantlik had the same idea and we met at the point. We also covered the spruce trees in the center of the park since several observers had reported a Long-eared Owl there during the winter. Because coverage was more or less limited to the coast and these spruces, the total number of species is not meaningful. I saw six that were new for the year. There was a fine adult Snow Goose feeding with the Canadas on the private property abutting the eastern extremity of the east marsh and two Surf Scoters as well as seven Scaup were seen flying far out over the Sound. Single examples of Cooper's Hawk, Flicker and Red-breasted Nuthatch represented the other new species.

I did flush a medium-sized owl from a spruce amongst those that are arranged linearly. The particular tree from which it flew had considerable white wash, and underneath it were

many pellets, so perhaps I can approach this tree with caution and locate the owl there later in the winter. My brief glimpse did not allow identification. I especially hope to find it because I have not yet recorded Long-eared Owl in the park.

### **January 20**

This morning was nice and brisk with little wind at first and then becoming quite breezy from the northwest. I found 42 species including five, Gadwall, Turkey Vulture, Red-bellied Woodpecker, Goldfinch and Junco that were new for the year. As is often the case, however, I failed to identify the most interesting bird. I saw and heard a crossbill flying over and making the same sounds as the Red Crossbills that Charlie Barnard and I had at the park last month. That call confuses me, however, since it sounds the way the call of the White-winged is described in the guides (“chiff chiff”). Both crossbills are being reported at all shore locations this winter and it is a shame that I have seen neither well and have failed to learn either song. Winter is, however, far from over.

### **February 3**

Although two weeks have elapsed since my last recorded visit, I did go to the park twice briefly during that interval in a vain search for the Long-eared Owl and White-winged Crossbills, both of which have been seen on and off in the evergreens by other observers during the entire winter. I did see a seal on one of those outings.

This has been a very warm winter without a single really cold day. I'm not certain the temperature has yet gotten below 20°F. So perhaps it is not surprising that I saw eight Red-winged Blackbirds this morning and thought I heard others. I also added Great Cormorant, House Finch and Field Sparrow to the year's list. The park is being torn up to put in a major sewerage system so there is earth-moving equipment all over the place and lots of noise.

### **February 10**

This morning I finally got a good look at the Long-eared Owl that has been in the park all winter. It was in the same tree from which I had flushed it with Frank Mantlik on January 16th. As I approached the tree from the south, its shape suddenly loomed in a relatively open area deep within the tree about 25 feet away and 12 feet high. I couldn't believe it as the bird stared back at me, its conspicuous ears sticking straight up and perfectly parallel with its long narrow body. I was only able to enjoy this view for several seconds before it flew off to the next evergreen row to the west whence I flushed it again several minutes later. This is a new Sherwood Island bird for me and my sixth species of owl, four of which I have only seen once.

Otherwise the day was interesting only for the presence of Red-winged Blackbirds. I saw 15 flying overhead and heard other groups.

#### **March 4**

It's been close to a month since I have visited the park because I've been to Texas and to Philadelphia. Winter seems not to have come this year and I anticipated that the park would be full of spring birds today. It wasn't. There were three Robins, a few Grackles and a Snipe, the latter perhaps a bit earlier than usual but I searched diligently for Woodcock without success and failed to hear a single Flicker. Good economic times such as exist now mean bad news for birders at public facilities. There is a tremendous amount of disruptive noisy work going on in the park including blasting and a great deal of digging. Apparently new bathhouses and toilets are being built and necessitate construction of a large sewer system to connect the beach structures with the town of Westport's sewer facility. It seems obvious that this will be a poor year for birds there and perhaps it is just as well that I shall probably be away for most of May.

#### **March 25**

The park is being destroyed by installation of a new sewage system to support two new public toilets. Almost the entire western half and a substantial part of the eastern part have been torn up and ravaged by noisy land moving equipment. The baby is being thrown out with the bath water. It seems unlikely to me that the place can possibly recover from this insult within my lifetime. What irony that this should come about because of a flourishing economy that has allowed the state to fund the park generously for the first time within my memory. Oh for the bad old economic times!

This was my first visit in three weeks during which time it has been generally cold and rainy. I spent only two hours today and a good fraction of that was actually outside the park at Grove Point, the road of which has now been repaired. Most of today's birds were actually at Grove Point. I used most of my time in the park to look for Woodcock which was foolish since they couldn't possibly tolerate the noise and disruption near "Woodcock Woods". The only way to see birds in the western section of the park this year will be to arrive early, ahead of the land moving vehicles.

#### **March 27**

Yesterday was the first really warm one of the spring and today was predicted to have a record high in the afternoon. There was a strong southwest breeze at the park that rendered the Sound too choppy for seeing anything. There was also a distant haze. I still haven't decided how to proceed amidst all the noise and mayhem and this morning I again wasted time in the western section looking for Woodcock which I will surely miss because of the construction. I started at eight and the crews were already hard at work. Again I spent only two hours so my species totals don't mean anything. There were more (40) Baldpate than I've seen in several years and I saw my first Green-winged Teal (1), Phoebe(3) and Golden-crowned Kinglets (3) of the year.

## **April 2**

Since I last visited the park, there has been a four-day spell of exceptionally warm weather, well into the eighties, which ended yesterday with torrential thunderstorms followed this morning by heavy fog and high humidity. One could barely see the Sound and certainly no birds on it. I endured the unfavorable weather and horrific noise for three hours today and managed to add five species to the year's paltry list. Most interesting were three hen Turkeys in the West Woods. The others were two Great Egrets, a Clapper Rail that I saw and heard, a Greater Yellowlegs and a Ruby-crowned Kinglet.

## **April 7**

It has been cold and windy since my last visit but today wasn't too bad although the continued northwest winds did not bode well. For some reason that wasn't obvious to me, the park was relatively quiet today. There seemed to be less work going on than usual even though it wasn't a holiday. I recorded 46 species, almost a pretty average day for the date! Included were four Double-crested Cormorants, a Tree Swallow and a Pine Warbler, all new for the year.

The Horned Grebes are in spring plumage.

## **April 14**

Today was actually a pretty normal day for the middle of April and quite enjoyable so perhaps I have been unduly pessimistic. I managed to stay out for three and one-half hours and record 55 species, by far my highest total this year. I have a feeling anything over 50 will be good this year. There were seven species that were new for the year. A Snowy Egret; a flock of 80 Brant flying east over the middle of the Sound; an Osprey that appears to be constructing a nest on the artificial platform in the west marsh. There has never been the slightest approach to this platform by Ospreys since I have been birding regularly in the park. There were also two Bonaparte's Gulls in fine spring plumage; two Rock Doves; a nice flight of 20 Hermit Thrushes and a Chipping Sparrow.

## **April 16**

Why did I go out on a day like this one that is cold, misty and so foggy that I could not even see the Sound. Somehow, I expect it will facilitate my seeing secretive birds. And today it did! As I was walking on the embankment of the far eastern end of the east marsh, I came upon an adult Sora walking not 20 feet from me. I had a wonderful study. The previous four or five Soras that I have recorded here have all been individuals that I flushed so this was a very satisfying observation. I also heard a Clapper Rail. It certainly isn't often that I have two species of rails on the same day here. I had one other new bird for the year, a female Towhee. I also watched and heard singing, a Ruby-crowned Kinglet with an extraordinarily conspicuous ruby crown.

### **April 21**

Although the new structures are not yet built, the park is definitely quieter than it had been and I think the birds are beginning to reflect this. This morning I had 59 species, quite respectable for the date. Five were new: a Glossy Ibis; a Barn Swallow; a House Wren; a mildly surprising female Yellowthroat. Usually it is a male that arrives a bit early. And two Meadowlarks. Nothing to rave about but at least about average.

The most exciting event is the obvious intention of the pair of Ospreys to nest on the raised platform built for exactly that purpose. They have already built a structure on the platform and one or both of them is always there although the female is not yet sitting.

### **April 23**

This was a miserable overcast drizzling morning. I can't imagine what impelled me to go to the park. I recorded two new species: Kestrel and Gnatcatcher. That's more than I had a right to expect.

### **May 5**

I've been incapacitated with the flu since my last visit and I'm going to London on May 11 so my May birding will really be truncated. It's probably just as well considering all the work that's still going on. Since I hadn't been out in two weeks there was plenty new today. I recorded 58 species including 12 that were new for the year. The only one that wasn't entirely expected was White-eyed Vireo. Last year two Willets were around all May and probably bred. Today I had two noisy Willets so perhaps it's the same couple and they've decided to make the east marsh their permanent breeding area.

### **May 7**

A tremendous thunder storm last night left the park about as wet as I've ever seen it this morning. That is, what I could see of it in the fog. Supposedly, it will clear temporarily this afternoon before raining again tomorrow.

There were some birds around despite the noisy earth moving vehicles that began to work at about eight, long after my own start. Amongst the 62 species recorded in three hours, were nine that were new for the year. A slightly early Cattle Egret was the only one not entirely expected. The warbler count was as follows: Yellow, 1; Parula, 2; Black & White, 2; Blue-winged, 1; Ovenbird, 2; Northern Waterthrush, 1; Yellowthroat, 2. Not impressive but definitely some migration. Two Orchard Orioles arrived and I had a nice look at an adult male. The pairs of Willets and Osprey remain and will likely breed, indeed the latter have erected an impressive structure on their raised platform.

## July 10

The two month period since my last visit is the longest for the past 20 years. My trips in May to London and San Francisco left me quite exhausted and that, combined with my general displeasure with the disturbance in the park this year, prevented any outings until today. The work in the park is still going on. The sewers seem to be finished but the new toilets are only partially constructed.

Nevertheless, there were plenty of interesting birds today especially considering the midsummer date. Of most interest was an adult Virginia Rail that I flushed from the creek that separates the parade grounds and model airplane field from the further eastern marshes and meadows. I had flushed one here in midsummer once before and Bob Winkler told me that he had also seen one in the same spot some summers ago. So I am convinced that Virginia Rail breeds here, even though the creek is an extension of the East (salt) Marsh. I also frightened a Clapper Rail that dashed ahead of me in the eastern section of the East Marsh and I heard another one in the West Marsh, so they also, not surprisingly, almost certainly breed here. Two Willets were much disturbed by my presence on the airplane field and adjacent marsh and meadows. They constantly flew around me calling and occasionally landing atop a juniper and squawking directly at me. I didn't see the young but the behavior was certainly related to reproduction. I believe a pair of Willets, presumably this one, first bred here last year.

Last year I frightened a Turkey from her nest. Today, I watched in astonishment as a female led six small chicks, certainly no more than 10 days old, along the meadow just west of the central oval. I had always heard that Turkeys were exceptionally wary but this mother certainly wasn't. She couldn't have been more conspicuous.

I had a particularly good look at one of the Sharp-tailed Sparrows and observed that it had a uniformly buffy ochre face save for the dark ear patch and that its throat and upper breast were the same buffy ochre with minimal fine streaking that was present only on the sides of the breast. The bird much resembled those that Frank Mantlik told me were nelsoni last fall. However, nelsoni is supposed to be mainly an inland breeding species so I am confused.

Altogether, I recorded 61 species, an exceptionally high number, probably my highest ever for July. Eight of these were new for the year including Green Heron, Virginia Rail, Lesser Yellowlegs, Spotted Sandpiper, Least Tern, Kingbird, Bank Swallow and Warbling Vireo. These would not normally be new for the year at this date save for my prolonged absence from the park this year.

## July 21

The only new species for the year that I recorded today was Willow Flycatcher which was still singing, if that's what one calls its characteristic notes. Some common birds were notably absent. In particular, I didn't see a single Grackle!

I got excellent looks at three Sharp-tailed Sparrows in their usual location on the edge of the east marsh that abuts the plane flying field. All three resembled closely the individual that I described from my last visit.

The two Ospreys occasionally alit on the platform with their nest but I don't believe there are nestlings which I suspect fledged earlier in the season.

I had one spectacular sighting that was new for me although I see the species here often. In the east marsh that abuts the flying field, but further in than the edges where the sparrows were, I happened to notice an inert black bundle about 30 feet ahead of me. I knew immediately that it was the downy young of a rail and, sure enough, as I moved forward, a Clapper Rail flushed from the marsh grass. The downy young remained motionless and I examined it closely without using my binoculars at a distance of perhaps 15 feet. It was entirely glossy black save for its miniature bill which appeared pink. The head of the bird seemed disproportionately large. As I was watching it, another downy young scurried behind it into the marsh grass. I was not eager to disturb this family and as I advanced to where it was standing, the heretofore motionless downy young that I had been watching slipped under and adjacent tussock and I left quickly. I probably could have caught it had I been so inclined. I was surprised to see such small young at this late date. Surely, these young birds were not much more than a few days old. Yes, Clapper Rail breeds at Sherwood Island!

### **July 24**

This morning was beautiful and it was quiet in the park even though a few workmen were around as expected on a Friday. I started out very early, arriving at the Mill Beach flats at 6:00 A. M. The only new species I added for the year was an adult Little Blue Heron atop a tree on west side of the Mill Pond. But I did see some nice things. I found the Turkey family I had seen two weeks ago and the six young had quadrupled in size and exchanged their yellow down for brown feathers. Talk about growing up quickly! I flushed an adult Clapper Rail from near where I saw the family three days ago and thought I glimpsed a young bird slipping into the reeds just when the adult flew. I heard another bird in the west marsh. I enjoyed watching the swallows since many of them were sitting in the reeds where I had wonderful comparisons of immature Tree, Bank and Rough-winged at rest, all, of course, with brown backs.

It was a big day for animals. I saw two different does with spotted fawn about a third of their size. One of the does was almost entirely white and was, I believe, the same individual I saw frequently two or three years ago. Rabbits were all over the place and I also noticed two woodchucks and a muskrat.

### **July 28**

Today was a bit breezy and not so birdy as my previous visits this month. I did add Semipalmated Plover and Laughing Gull (sic) to the year's list, however. Of course, this year's list is out of kilter because I missed most of May.

I witnessed what I believe was the natural death of a bird for the first time. I noticed something fall a short distance from a small tree to the ground and went to investigate. It was a crow though I'm not sure which species. After falling, it righted itself and began walking in a dazed sort of way. Then it fell, turned to a supine position, and died.

I discovered today that there are two morphologically distinct, physically separated populations of Sharp-tailed Sparrows in the park. I got another fine look at an individual in the east marsh and it was identical to those I described on July 10 and of which I've seen as many as three. The face surrounding the dark ear patch is buffy ochre. The throat is unmarked buffy ochre. The majority and entire central portion of the upper breast is buffy ochre and unstreaked. However, there are a few faint streaks on the extreme sides of the chest on the buffy ochre background. I believe these are a form of Nelson's Sparrow.

I also saw two Sharp-tailed Sparrows in the west marsh behind the maintenanc building. I'd been avoiding the west marsh for fear of disturbing the Ospreys and today was my first time in there this summer. I had excellent views of both birds perched within about 30 feet. The face surrounding the dark ear patch was striking intense ochre orange. The throat was pure white. The upper breast was heavily and darkly streaked on a white background. I saw one of these birds singing. I use the word "saw" advisedly as the weak, short buzzy trill was barely audible even though I was watching the bird singing at very close range. I believe these birds are Salt Marsh Sharp-tailed Sparrows.

#### August 4

I recorded 66 species this morning, a rather high total for this date. Most interesting was a Woodcock that I flushed from the weedy field just west of the airplane field. I flushed the same bird again from the edge of the east marsh where it had flown. This is the second time I've had Woodcock in the park in midsummer. Also of interest were a male White-winged Scoter, a Cliff Swallow, three Least Flycatchers and 11 species of shore birds including Woodcock and Semipalmated Sandpiper which was new for the year.

I examined a group, probably a brood or family, of four Sharp-tailed Sparrows in the east marsh. They appeared quite different from those I had seen previously although they were variable amongst each other and fell into gradation between the extremes I saw last week. One individual had a fairly marked ochre face and white throat and breast with noticeable though not bold streaking and the beginning of a stickpin. The other three had buffy ochre faces and varying degrees of buffy ochre on the breast with rather faint streaking which was visible, however, on the breast as well as the flanks. I wonder whether it is possible that these are developmental stages and that some of these birds are the same individuals as I saw earlier in the summer that had a warmer buffy ochre and no streaking on the center of the breast. I consulted an article in a 1996 issue of birding and the picture it showed of an immature Salt Marsh Sharp-tail depicted an individual with pronounced streaking. Frank Mantlik visited the marsh on 30 July and found one typical Salt Marsh Sharp-tail. So I remain confused.



### **August 6**

I had 55 species this morning including one, a Tricolored Heron on a mud flat in the Mill Pond, that was new for the year. I also had a wonderful opportunity to study a pair of adult Clapper Rails that were foraging on exposed mud in the east marsh. Today's two Sharp-tails were almost certainly members of the group I saw two days ago, and were clearly of the Salt Marsh species. It is interesting that I have not found a single Marsh Wren this summer despite all my marsh tramping. It seems that they do not breed here every year.

### **August 13**

This was as uninteresting a morning as I have had here this summer. Perhaps the reason is that the weather has been pleasant and unremarkable during the entire past week. I found 56 species, none save Redstart new for the year, and that one obviously due to my absence in May. The two Sharp-tails were of the Salt Marsh variety and I am at a loss to explain the disappearance of the putative Nelson's, subspecies subvirgatus, that I thought I saw earlier in the summer.

### **August 21**

This was one of the dullest mornings of the summer despite the fact that yesterday, at least, there was a cold front with northwest winds. There were very few migrants today although a fine male Indigo Bunting was my first at the park this year. I recorded 53 species.

### **September 4**

This was an unusually birdless morning with only 48 species recorded. I did manage to add two to the meager year list, namely a single hummingbird and a single Marsh Wren. Evidently the latter didn't breed here this year. Today's single Sharp-tailed Sparrow was of the Salt Marsh species.

### **October 16**

I spent three weeks birding in Madagascar during the long hiatus since my last visit to the park. Madagascar has the depauperate fauna of an island and this morning provided quite a contrast since it was a good flight day. I recorded 60 species, eight of which were new for the year. These were a Harrier, two Sharp-shinned Hawks, a Winter Wren, a Pipit, two Palm Warblers, four White-crowned Sparrows and single examples of Lincoln's and Vesper Sparrows. The park was teeming with sparrows including 75 White-throated, 50 Song, 40 Swamp and 30 Savannahs.

I birded in "Wellington" boots this morning and it enabled me to walk through the marsh comfortably without soaking a good pair of leather boots and without dirtying my pants. It

seems that I learn something useful on each international trip I take. These rubber “Wellingtons” were required wear for the Madagascar rain forests.

### **October 27**

This was an overcast morning with an east wind. Not promising, except perhaps for Gannets which I didn't see. I recorded 45 species with two Horned Larks representing the only new one for the year. A flock of 16 Snow Buntings was attractive but overall the day was rather uninteresting.

### **October 29**

This morning was raw, overcast and windy and I spent only one and one-half hours and covered only the eastern half of the park. I only had 30 species and since my itinerary was so grossly truncated, I would not have entered the list save that I saw a beautiful tiny male Merlin that perched atop one of the bathhouses.

### **November 6**

A cold, windy morning with no birds. I had 33 species despite complete coverage.

### **November 11**

Another uninteresting morning, overcast, some drizzle, a northeast wind and 37 unremarkable species.

### **November 12**

This morning was more interesting than the previous two. Amongst the 40 species I recorded was a Bittern that I flushed from the tall grass adjacent to the east marsh. This was my first Bittern in the park since September, 1996 and the date was several weeks later than I have ever recorded it. Also of interest was a flock of 45 Laughing Gulls. In 1994, I had 55 on November 10, but usually there are only one or two to be seen by this time. A Turkey Vulture, while not earthshaking, is not an everyday bird in the park.

### **November 18**

A real clunker with only 33 species despite pleasant, if chilly, weather. The Snow Bunting flock is up to at least 100. On 16 November, Frank Mantlik had 500 Laughing Gulls here. Today, I had four. It is a species that might linger and would be nice for the Christmas count. Of course, I say the same thing every year.