

BIRD NOTES FROM GREAT WHALE RIVER, QUE.¹

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THE WRITER was engaged in botanical work at Great Whale River, Que., from 16 June to 10 September, 1949. Circumstances made it impossible to spend much time on bird study, particularly in June and July. The random data gathered were largely from chance observations made in the course of other field work. The notes given below should be read with this qualification in mind and should not be assumed to give a complete picture of the status of any species. The data are mainly from the writer's observations, but include a few observations from Mr. J. R. Vockeroth and Dr. D. W. Jenkins. Thanks are due to Mr. W. Earl Godfrey for advice and assistance in the preparation of this report.

The settlement of Great Whale River is situated at the mouth of the river of that name, at 55° 17'N, 77° 47'W. The country consists of strongly glaciated granite hills, mostly 200 to 600 feet high, with summits almost unvegetated, but with every cleft filled with thickets of willow, alder and dwarf birch. The valleys contain abundant black and white spruce and some tamarack wherever sufficient soil has accumulated. A narrow coastal strip is almost completely treeless largely because of abrasion by driving snow. An elevated delta of almost pure sand occupies each side of the river mouth and spreads intermittently up and down the coast for several miles. The shore is composed of extensive sand beaches broken by rocky headlands. Such a shore provided little attraction to most shore birds, but the variety of habitats to which the sand contributed compensated for this drawback.

Of 69 species seen, 39 occurred in summer. Most of the latter probably bred in the area, but a heavy work programme in July

precluded the search for nests, and satisfactory proof of breeding was not often obtained. The spring migration was virtually over by mid June and the data for migrant species are, therefore, almost all for the fall.

ANNOTATED LIST OF SPECIES OBSERVED

1. Common Loon

Gavia immer.—Seen occasionally in June and July.

2. Red-throated Loon

Gavia stellata.—Seen regularly throughout the summer; fairly common.

3. Canada Goose

Branta canadensis.—Small strings seen 23, 24 and 29 June, and 27 Aug. and 7 Sept. We left before the main southward migration.

4. Lesser Snow Goose

Chen hyperborea hyperborea.—Frequent in small numbers from 24 Aug. onward. At least 95 on 5 Sept. Usually with blue goose and averaging about 10 per cent of the mixed strings. Juveniles seen 7 and 9 Sept.

5. Blue Goose

Chen caerulescens.—Abundant from 24 Aug. onward. Geese were reported two days earlier but were not seen by the writer and the species is in doubt. We were told that this year's migration started exceptionally early. It may have been hastened by a succession of strong northerly winds. Over 1150 seen in drizzle on 5 Sept., including a few juveniles and at least one snow-blue hybrid; several hundred more geese beyond range of positive determination. Of several hundred on 9 Sept., about 50 per cent were juveniles, and of about the same number on 10 Sept., over 50 per cent were juveniles.

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6. Pintail

Anas acuta tzitzihua. — Seen frequently from 14 Aug. in small numbers. Often seen to fly up the river, suggesting that some migrants break away from the coast here and follow a river and lake course through central Quebec.

7. American Golden-eye

Bucephala clangula americana. — A few seen in June, July and September.

8. Old-Squaw

Clangula hyemalis. — One pair seen 22 June.

9. White-Winged Scoter

Melanitta fusca deglandi. — About 50 to 150 seen off shore with American scoters during last week of June. A few seen in July and September.

10. American Scoter

Oidemia nigra americana. — About 150 to 700 spent the last week of June just off shore with smaller numbers of white-winged scoters. They were apparently feeding at a mussel bed some half mile from shore, since many mussel shells wash ashore here. From the date these must have been non-breeding birds although adult males of each species could be discerned in some numbers. They disappeared abruptly at the beginning of July and very few were seen later in the season.

11. Ruddy Duck

Oxyura jamaicensis rubida. — A single dead female was found washed up on the shore on 19 June.

12. Red-breasted Merganser

Mergus serrator. — A recently picked partial skeleton was found on the shore on 25 June. About ten were seen on 30 June and one on 20 July.

13. American Rough-legged Hawk

Buteo lagopus s. johannis. — Several were seen 23 and 24 June and one on 2 August a few miles from the settlement. The latter bird called repeatedly with a powerful 'Kee-ee-ur' that started explosively and then dropped in pitch and volume; not such a squealing quality as in the calls of the red-shouldered and red-tailed hawks. From late August until we left one to nine birds were seen almost daily, usually soaring in the up-draft over the river bank and often hovering. By starting to squeak when it was headed toward us from a distance of some 300 yards,

one bird was attracted successfully and hovered some fifty feet over our heads for a minute or more. Although the species may breed in the area it is not surprising that it did not frequent the settlement during the summer when many natives are there. It would certainly be favoured as food and may well be disliked as a competitor for the food of fur bearers.

14. Marsh Hawk

Circus cyaneus hudsonius. — A female was seen repeatedly through the summer near the settlement and a male once; but no evidence of breeding was obtained, except that after mid August a second brown individual that might have been a juvenile was sometimes seen.

15. Osprey

Pandion haliaetus carolinensis. — A pair nested four miles up the river from the settlement on the platform made by the top of a fire-killed black spruce breaking off thirty feet from the ground. The nest was about three feet across. A pair, probably the same birds, occasionally fished at the river mouth.

16. Peregrine Falcon

Falco peregrinus anatum. — One each seen on 22 Aug. and 8 Sept.

17. Eastern Pigeon Hawk

Falco columbarius columbarius. — One, or occasionally two, seen at regular intervals during the summer. A female flushed on 13 July stayed close by, giving a repetitious rasping call, which suggested that it had young.

18. Spruce Grouse

Canachites canadensis. — Six seen in scattered locations. One flushed on 9 July stayed close repeatedly giving a low warning "kuk", but the young could not be found.

19. Ungava Willow Ptarmigan

Lagopus lagopus ungavus. — Seen occasionally in small numbers. Apparently breeding, as two seen showed injury feigning.

20. Semipalmated Plover

Charadrius hiaticula semipalmatus. — One seen on 22 June. One to 20 seen on 9 dates from 30 July to 6 Sept.

21. Golden Plover

Pluvialis dominica dominica. — Thirty-one in breeding plumage seen on 26 Aug.; several in varying plumage on 6 and 7 Sept.

22. Black-bellied Plover

Squatarola squatarola. — One seen on 4 Sept. and one on 7 Sept.; both in fall or juvenile plumage.

23. Ruddy Turnstone

Arenaria interpres morinella. — Four adults seen on 2 Sept. and two juveniles on 7 Sept.

24. Hudsonian Curlew

Numenius phaeopus hudsonicus. — On 9 July, three seen flying north. Eleven passed south and tracks of two others seen on beach 25 July. Several seen or heard on 28 July and one on 29 July. Not noted thereafter except for one each on 5 and 7 Sept.

25. Spotted Sandpiper

Actitis macularia. — The only shore bird proved to be breeding. Three nests seen along the river banks and birds noted regularly at several other points. Last seen on 30 Aug.

26. Greater Yellow-legs

Totanus melanoleucus. — One to four southbound birds seen or heard 24 July, 19, 21, 28 Aug. and 8 Sept. Four on 21 Aug. came down the coast and swung up the river as though to migrate inland. — (See under Pintail.)

27. Knot

Calidris canutus rufus. — One seen 24 August.

28. Pectoral Sandpiper

Erolia melanotos. — Thirteen seen on 6 Sept. and a few on 7 Sept., feeding in low mossy sand between old beach ridges or flying straight through.

29. White-rumped Sandpiper

Erolia fuscicollis. — One to 9 birds seen on five dates from 29 July to 9 Sept.

30. Baird's Sandpiper

Erolia bairdii. — Two to sixteen seen on six dates from 16 Aug. to 8 Sept. Most commonly flushed from grass near tent sites where insects may have been abundant.

31. Least Sandpiper

Erolia minutilla. — One to 8 or more seen on fourteen dates from 25 July to 9 Sept. These counts are probably considerably lower than they would have been if all 'peeps' had been identifiable; but in the absence of good feeding grounds they were usually seen in flight overhead when they could not be named unless they called. The

apparent absence of any semipalmated sandpipers was surprising to the writer who expected them to be fully as common as the least on sandy shores.

32. Red-backed Sandpiper

Erolia alpina pacifica. — One seen 7 Sept. We presumably left too early for this species.

33. Hudsonian Godwit

Limosa haemastica. — On 4 Sept., the writer went out to the sand point at the river mouth in the late afternoon in a 30 m.p.h. southwest wind. By the greatest good fortune a single bird of this species passed within 20 feet a minute after the point was reached. Flying into the wind five feet above the surface at an estimated ground speed of 40 m.p.h. it afforded an excellent view. It was in fall or juvenile plumage; and, from the date, it was probably a juvenile. The deep, rather slow, driving wing beats gave an impression of great power. The species is probably less common on this coast than on the southwest coast of Hudson Bay where the main fall migration apparently occurs.

34. Sanderling

Crocethia alba. — Two to 73 seen on eight dates from 24 Aug. to 8 Sept. The one migrant shore bird that was really at home on the clean sand beaches.

35. Glaucous Gull

Larus hyperboreus hyperboreus. — One seen 18 June with herring gulls, presumably a late migrant.

36. Kumlien's Gull (?)

Larus leucopterus kumlieni. — A bird seen close to the river bank at the settlement on 25 Aug. might have been Kumlien's gull or Thayer's herring gull.

37. Great Black-backed Gull

Larus marinus. — One adult and four juveniles seen 13 Aug., and one adult and two juveniles 25 Aug.

38. Herring Gull

Larus argentatus smithsonianus. — Up to about 15 seen almost daily. Probably breeds on the islands off shore a few miles north.

39. Ring-billed Gull

Larus delawarensis. — A few seen on 18 and 25 July. Some of the gulls often seen at a distance were probably of this species.

40. Arctic Tern

Sterna paradisaea. — 11 birds seen fishing inside the river mouth on 20 June and three on 21 June were provisionally identified as

this species by the decided greyness of the bodies in comparison with those of the familiar common tern. No more was seen of these birds until a week or so later the wings and tails of at least five were found at an Indian camp site. No tarsi could be found, but Mr. W. Earl Godfrey was able to confirm the identity from examination of the wings and tails. Two more birds were seen on 25 Aug.

41. Short-eared Owl

Asio flammeus flammeus. — First noted 10 Aug.; seen frequently thereafter in numbers up to ten. Never seen in full daylight unless disturbed, which perhaps accounted for their survival, for they were very tame and squeaking would bring them close about one's head. They usually appeared at or just after sunset.

42. Flicker

Colaptes auratus. — Two seen 12 July a few miles up the river, where the forest was denser than near the coast.

43. Eastern Phoebe

Sayornis phoebe. — One was clearly seen and another heard a short way off on 28 June on a rocky wooded stretch of the river bank. At the time, the writer did not realize how far this station was from the normal northern limits of the phoebe. As this stretch of the river bank was of difficult access it was infrequently visited and it is not known what became of these birds. It can only be supposed that they were carried beyond their normal destination by a strong south wind during their spring migration. (See also Cowbird).

44. Northern Horned Lark

Eremophila alpestris alpestris. — Several pairs nested on the open sand delta near the settlement. Young not quite flying were seen on 14 July. The resident birds and the later migrants all showed the bright yellow facial markings of this race. Migrants from up the coast began to appear about 2 Sept. From 4 Sept. onward 200 or more were present each day on this single area. The peak of migration seemed to be 6 - 8 Sept., but the species was still plentiful on 10 Sept. and one or more later peaks may have occurred. On some days the flocks milled about the delta in a way that made counts impossible; but on 6 Sept., when they were moving steadily across the river, 2,500 were estimated to pass in a few hours. These migrants

employed two calls that were unfamiliar to the writer: a 'tee-ew' in quality much like the 'too-ee' of the semipalmated plover; and a dry, fast 'dit-dit-dit-dit' slightly like the buzzy call of the redpoll. It appears that many of the birds from the northern barrens funnel through this coastal strip of unwooded country.

45. Canada Jay

Perisoreus canadensis. — Plentiful wherever spruce was abundant. When we first arrived, the young were on the wing and with apparently fully grown rectrices, but were still in family groups with the adults and were a uniform deep slate gray. By the end of June, the family groups were tending to break up and individual juveniles were seen more often. During August, the plumage of the young birds became noticeably lighter and the head markings began to show.

46. Raven

Corvus corax principalis. — Several seen in June and late August, but not between. Possibly the summer concentration of natives at the settlement tends to keep them away.

47. Brown-capped Chickadee

Parus hudsonicus. — Seen in small numbers from 27 July on. Probably more abundant a few miles inland in denser forest.

48. Robin

Turdus migratorius. — A pair nested in willow scrub on the river bank near the settlement and others were seen in various small thickets in the area.

49. Ruby-crowned Kinglet

Regulus calendula calendula. — Seen in small numbers in June and July.

50. American Pipit

Anthus spinoletta rubescens. — A few pairs were seen on the barren hill tops and presumably bred although proof is lacking. The first definite migrants appeared on 12 Aug. They were present in great numbers (probably 500 to 1500 daily) on the delta from 18 Aug. to 5 Sept. fell abruptly to 30 on 9 Sept. and were not seen on 10 Sept. They and the northern horned larks made great inroads into a caterpillar "plague". Like the latter species, the pipits evidently funnel down the barren coastal strip, which would be almost ideal for large-scale banding.

51. Tennessee Warbler

Vermivora peregrina. — One seen on 27 June.

52. Yellow Warbler

Dendroica petechia. — A few occurred regularly on a portion of the river bank clothed in willow and alder scrub. Last seen 18 Aug.

53. Myrtle Warbler

Dendroica coronata coronata.—Occurred in small numbers, mainly in the stand of tall white spruce south of the river.

54. Black-poll Warbler

Dendroica striata.—Abundant; apparently breeding in almost every spruce thicket. Juveniles almost fully grown were seen on 13 Aug.

55. Northern Water-thrush

Seiurus noveboracensis. — A few seen or heard in wet alder thickets near the river. One seen feeding a juvenile just out of the nest on 16 July.

56. Wilson's Warbler

Wilsonia pusilla pusilla. — Several pairs occurred in wet willow-alder thickets. A male carrying food on 16 July provided breeding evidence.

57. Rusty Blackbird

Euphagus carolinus. — An adult and three juveniles barely able to fly were found on a gravelly stretch of river shore on 6 July.

58. Cowbird

Molothrus ater ater.—Two birds, clearly this species, were said to have been coming to the Hudson's Bay Company manager's house with white-crowned and savannah sparrows for crumbs for some time before we arrived. On 18 June, one male was seen clearly and a second bird of uncertain sex was seen at a distance in fog. From information received it also was probably a male. The birds were not seen again. This species was seen in small numbers at Moose Factory, Ont., which is probably near its normal limit. Possibly carried north by strong winds during migration.

59. Redpoll

Acanthis flammea.—Almost every clump of dwarf birch on the open ground yielded a pair of redpolls. Their behaviour indicated breeding but no nests were found. They were forming into flocks by 27 July.

60. Pine Siskin

Spinus pinus pinus. — A flock of eight seen 18 Aug.

61. White-winged Crossbill

Loxia leucoptera leucoptera.—One male

seen 18 July and one female or juvenile 29 July.

62. Savannah Sparrow

Passerculus sandwichensis. — Abundant on open ground. Mr. Vockeroth found one nest, and the writer saw a few carrying food. Probably about thirty pairs nested on roughly one square mile near the settlement.

63. Slate-colored Junco

Junco hyemalis hyemalis. — Occurred in small numbers, mainly on a rocky south slope with scattered spruce.

64. Tree Sparrow

Spizella arborea arborea. — Abundant, usually on open ground near water with a few trees or shrubs. Dr. Jenkins found a nest on 23 June with four eggs; it was on a sphagnum hummock a foot from a pool and was lined with white willow ptarmigan feathers.

65. White-crowned Sparrow

Zonotrichia leucophrys leucophrys. — Very abundant. Every gully big enough to support a few small spruce supported a pair, and they also occupied willow clumps along the river bank. Perhaps the dominant species of the area as a whole. Fully fledged young were seen on 30 July. By mid August the head stripes of the juveniles were becoming distinct.

66. White-throated Sparrow

Zonotrichia albicollis. — A few were seen through June and July mainly along wooded stretches of the river.

67. Fox Sparrow

Passerella iliaca iliaca. — Abundant, especially in slightly wet areas with Labrador tea and other low shrubs and a few spruce. At first counted almost entirely by song; but after 10 July, the birds suddenly became quite aggressive for a short period, suggesting that the young had hatched. Singing largely stopped about 20 July, but there was a slight recrudescence in September.

68. Lincoln's Sparrow

Melospiza lincolnii lincolnii. — Recorded regularly in small numbers through June and most of July, usually by song. Not found after singing ceased.

69. Lapland Longspur

Calcarius lapponicus lapponicus.—A single female was seen on the sand beach on 25 June.



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