

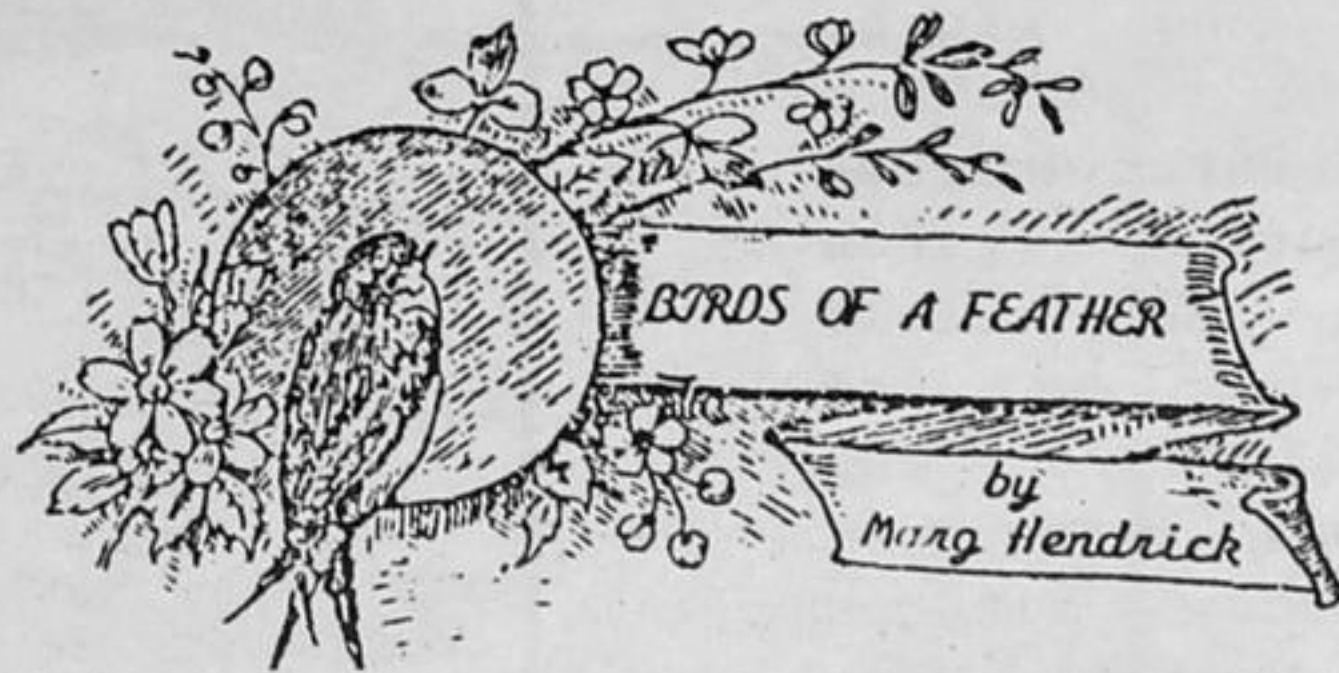
BIRDS OF A FEATHER

As far as most birders are concerned, the arrival of the first shorebirds from their northern breeding grounds ends the summer doldrums. Of course, a few species breed here, such as the American Woodcock, Spotted Sandpiper, Upland Sandpiper and Killdeer. But the majority are northern breeders and are only seen here during migration, so time is short, and the avid birder must make good use of it. In the area served by this paper, suitable habitat for many species is scarce, and so birders find themselves visiting Amherst and Wolfe Islands, sewage lagoons and similar spots where shorebirds gather.

Why this fascination with shorebirds? For me it is a combination of factors: their diversity grabs my imagination and their flight patterns thrill me; their interesting behaviour intrigues me and their calls touch my heart. To add to all this, they are a challenge to identify! Obviously, in an article this length, I cannot cover the subject in detail, but will just present a potpourri of facts to whet your appetite.

Shorebirds are often hard to see, even when they are close by, for they are well camouflaged by countershading, cryptic colouration and other factors. Many species are brown or grey above and white below, lacking the bright colours and distinctive markings that help in identifying many other species of birds. This is the case with most of the small sandpipers - or 'peeps' - as they are sometimes called. The differences between one species and another are often subtle, and this makes identification difficult even if one has a close-up view. To add to the confusion, individual members of the same species in the same flock may vary in plumage. At this time of year these birds could be in breeding plumage, transitional plumage as winter attire. And, of course, one still has to deal with the juveniles.

I mentioned the shorebirds calls. Shorebirds don't sing like any other species, but some have hauntingly beautiful calls. To me, and this is a personal thing, certain of their calls exude a bittersweet quality. I have the feeling that if I am sad, they reflect my sadness; if I am happy the happiness seems to bubble over. Sad or joyful, the calls seem to revive my spirits, as if the lows and highs



of my life were understood - giving me a sense of well-being. The flight of many shorebirds is amazing! A flock of sandpipers may be feeding on the shore, when suddenly the whole group will take wing. They fly in formation as though held together by some secret force. Wheeling and turning, twisting and diving, they fly in absolute unison, until as with one accord, they land again, fold their wings and continue feeding. Shorebirds have weird and wonderful bills of varying lengths. Plovers have relatively short, stubby bills. Avocets have long recurved bills, and curlews have the reverse - long decurved bills. Each uses its bill to good advantage in its own unique method of feeding. The American Woodcock thumps the ground with its feet, causing earthworms to rise closer to the surface. Then, with its long bill thrust into the ground, it is able to feel unsuspecting worms with the flexible tip, and slurps them up whole. Solitary Sandpipers use their feet to stir up shallow water, then snap up the juicy morsels which appear as a result

of their action. Phalaropes spin around in the water, stirring up sources of food which they dab at with their longish bills. Dowitchers jab their long straight bills into the muck with a continuous sewing machine like motion, and thus obtain their nourishment. If you'd like to discover more about shorebirds, obtain a copy of Peter Matthiessen's book "The Wind Birds". It is sometimes disturbing, but it is beautifully written and crammed with interesting information. You will be glad you took the time to read it. Some people have been troubled by House Finches drinking at their hummingbird feeders. In my last column I asked my readers to let me know if the finches bothered with feeders without perches. Brys Scovill reported that when she removed the perches from her feeder, the problem was solved. The finches tried valiantly to hover like hummingbirds, but were unable to sustain enough momentum to get at the syrup. The House Finches at Leorene Hayes' perchless feeder are also frustrated! On the other hand Grace Kirkland's hummingbird feeder has no perches, but the finches

have managed to cling to the yellow plastic flowers, and amid great acrobatics manage to get the syrup. Grace also had to reposition her feeder in order to prevent chipmunks from wrecking it in their efforts to get at the syrup. The Kirklands were surprised to discover House Finches nesting in their hanging basket as was Hubert Summers to find a pair nesting in his.

Enid Soper heard a beautiful song in her yard and discovered it was a House Finch. People are often surprised that this species, which chirps like a House Sparrow, also has such a lovely song.

Eastern Bluebirds seem to have been quite successful this year. Harrison Peters, John and Helen Shepherd and Elaine Davies have had pairs nest successfully, some more than once.

Loree and Clifford Smith have had Common Snipe feeding in their yard. Earlier in the season, Cliff saw 4 young chunky birds fly off. From his description they were probably snipe or woodcock. Leorene Hayes has enjoyed watching Northern Flickers bathe in her bird bath. She also has had a good assortment of other birds there as well. Annette Mess came upon a male Ring-necked Pheasant, probably a released bird. it would be nice if a female could be released in hopes they would form a pair.

Dave Willison has had many interesting sightings, some of which were, Coopers Hawk, Northern Goshawk, Caspian Tern, Green-backed Heron, Yellow-throated Vireo and American Woodcock young. He and Lloyd Stone were responsible for the North Leeds Birdwatchers getting to see Solitary Sandpipers, Common Snipe and Lesser Yellowlegs. The birds were feeding at Lloyd's manure lagoon. Incidentally, many shorebirds nest on the ground, so I was surprised to read that the Solitary Sandpiper (a northern breeder) uses the old nest of a robin or some other bird in which to lay its eggs.

Ralph Furzer had great luck! A Northern Cardinal nested in a cedar tree in his yard, enabling him to observe the raising of the young without disturbing the nest.

A last piece of good news. Bob and Jacquie Wanless had a pair of Common Loons nest again this year on the nest platform Bob built a few years ago. One young was fledged. Migration will still be underway when you read this. Be sure to call in your sightings at 359-5178 and until next month.

GOOD BIRDING!

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