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Shorebird Migration in the Eastern Rainwater Basin—Spring 1997

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SHOREBIRD MIGRATION IN THE EASTERN RAINWATER BASIN-SPRING 1997

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The Rainwater Basin is arguably Nebraska's most productive area for observing migrant shorebirds, especially in spring. After several years of irregular shorebirding in the region, in 1997 I decided to perform regular shorebird censuses in the eastern portion of the RWB (eRWB).

CONDITIONS

High-water conditions were present at many basins during the fall of 1996. Presumably, these conditions persisted through the winter, as slightly higher than average water levels were noted at several basins in March. Good water levels during the winter apparently scoured many basins of old vegetation. Besides a snowstorm that occurred on 12 April, little precipitation fell during April and May. Therefore, since the basins' only source of water is rainfall and occasionally pumps at certain Waterfowl Productions Areas (WPAs) during waterfowl migration, water levels were decreasing throughout the spring. This created excellent shorebird conditions, but some basins dried too quickly and many dried up before migration was over (see below).

METHODS

Shorebird censuses were conducted on seven occasions during the spring of 1997, three times in April and four times in May. A minimum of five days was allowed to pass before another census period began. Each location was visited officially once during each census period. During each visit, shorebird numbers were counted or rarely estimated, the latter only occurring when very large flocks were encountered. The locations visited during each census are listed below. Several basins are private and no official name for them is known. I have given these basins arbitrary names to make record-keeping easy. Their locations relative to nearby towns is given. Otherwise, federal Waterfowl Production Areas (WPAs) and state Wildlife Management Areas (WMAs) can be found in the Sportsman's Atlas, Delorme Atlas, or County Road Maps. If a site dried up, the date on which that basin became dry and more or less had no shorebirds is given in parentheses following the locale.

Adams County Basins - Ayr Lake (23 May), Hastings Basin (se edge of Hastings on Elm St.)(23 May).

Clay County Basins - Bluewing WMA (3 May), East Harvard Basin (3 mi. e & 1 mi. n of Harvard), Great Little Basin (5.5 mi. n & 1 mi. e. of Ong), Hansen WPA, Harvard WPA, Hultine WPA (includes

the former Sandpiper WPA)(16 May), Kissinger Basin WMA, Long Basin (7 mi. n & .5 mi. e. of Edgar)(3 May), Massie WPA, Moger WPA, North Harvard Basin (.5 mi. w. & 2.5 mi. n. of Harvard)(16 May), Pine Tree Hill Basin (3 mi. w & 2.5 mi. n. of Ong)(3 May), Roadside Basin (.5 mi w. & 6 mi. n. of Edgar)(15 May), Smith WPA, Theesen WPA.

Hamilton County Basins - Aurora Pond (1.5 mi. s. of Aurora), Gadwall WMA, Pintail WMA.

Fillmore County Basins - Griess WPA, Island Basin (2.5 mi. s. & 6 mi. w. of Geneva), Little Wilkins Basin (3 mi. e. of Grafton), Marsh Hawk WMA, Mallard Haven WPA (23 May), Miller's Pond (WPA, 2.5 mi. s. of Shickley), Pearson Basin (3.5 mi. s. & 2 mi. w of Shickley), Rauscher WPA, Real WPA (17 May), Rolland WPA, Wilkins WPA (10 May), Willet Basin (3 mi. n. & 1.5 mi w. of Shickley).

Seward County Basins - North Lake Basin WMA, Tamora Basin (.5 mi. s. of Tamora), Goehner Basin (WMA, 2 mi. n. & 1 mi. w. of Goehner).

York County Basins - Barn Basin (4.5 mi. e. & 1 mi. s. of McCool Junction)(3 May), County Line WPA, Kirkpatrick WMA, Sinniger WPA (both basins), Spikerush WMA/Waco WPA.

Thayer County Basin - Father Hupp WMA.

RESULTS

SPECIES	APRIL			MAY				TOTALS
	3-4	18-19	25-26	2-4	7-10	16-17	23	
Black-bellied Plover			1	3	41	146	26	217
American Golden-Plover	2	28	11	20	280	708	36	1085
Snowy Plover				2	2	1		5
Semipalmated Plover		1	35	113	115	65	2	331
Piping Plover				3		2		5
Killdeer	276	112	110	63	86	85	59	791
American Avocet		30	13	79	28	42	1	193
Greater Yellowlegs	82	56	88	22	1	1	1	251
Lesser Yellowlegs	3	46	898	344	70	116	10	1487
Yellowlegs, unident.	1		5					6
Solitary Sandpiper			1	2	1			4
Willet		3	53	153	29	1		239
Spotted Sandpiper					7	18	7	32
Upland Sandpiper				2	2	9		13
Whimbrel				1		1		2
Hudsonian Godwit		38	12	12	75	122	41	300
Marbled Godwit		1	6	10		3		20
Ruddy Turnstone					5	35		40
Sanderling				1	19	1	3	24
Calidris species				29	24	20		73
Semipalmated Sandpiper		29	22	915	907	968	557	3398
Western Sandpiper				8				8
Least Sandpiper		2		117	329	469	86	1003
White-rumped Sandpiper			1	348	1648	5544	1442	8983
Baird's Sandpiper	24	175	299	253	50	58	44	903
Pectoral Sandpiper	12	50	270	54	160	166	61	773
Dunlin	2	2	42	14	16	70	13	159
Stilt Sandpiper			1	10	257	1119	207	1594
Buff-breasted Sandpiper				9	169	32	6	216
Short-billed Dowitcher					10	95	1	106
Long-billed Dowitcher	1	2	104	2306	602	85		3100
Common Snipe	130	7	7	5				149
Wilson's Phalarope			11	266	231	201	89	798
Red-necked Phalarope					4	12		16
Totals	533	582	1990	5164	5168	10,195	2692	26,324

DISCUSSION

Brief comments on the occurrence of certain species are mentioned here.

American Golden-Plover: The largest flock was 273 at Freeman L. on 17 May. An additional flock (not officially recorded) of 81 was found in a field on 17 May in Fillmore Co.

Piping Plover: Total number of birds recorded was lower than expected; higher numbers have been encountered in previous springs.

Lesser Yellowlegs: A genuine "wave" was observed. The species was abundant and ubiquitous on 25 April when most of the 898 were tallied. On the following days, most of the sights were unofficially revisited and very few Lesser Yellowlegs were found.

Ruddy Turnstone: A large flock: 21 at the Cattle Yard Basin, Sinniger WPA.

White-rumped Sandpiper: A large flock: 3600 at Freeman L. on 17 May.

Dunlin: A large flock: 36 at Mallard Haven on 25 April.

Buff-breasted Sandpiper: An additional flock (not officially recorded) of 116 was found in a plowed field on 17 May in Fillmore Co.

Short-billed Dowitcher: Like the Lesser Yellowlegs, a "wave" was also noted with this species. Most of the 95 totaled 16-17 May were found on 16 May; few could be seen the following day and only a single could be found on 23 May. Large flocks: 31 at Mallard Haven on 16 May, 22 at Father Hupp WMA on 16 May, and 16 at South Basin, Sinniger WPA.

CONCLUSION

Totals of 26,324 individuals and 32 species of shorebirds were recorded during the spring of 1997. The numbers recorded this spring may seem large, but from my experience, they are probably close to what can be expected during a typical spring. In fact, greater numbers of shorebirds were present in April and early May of 1994 than during the same period in 1997.