

Two Red Letter Field Days

BY RICHARD O. BENDER

THIS is a chronicle of two supremely successful days afield. Brigantine, N. J. furnished the background for the first on September 15, 1929. Here a list of 22 shore birds was amassed by a party of D. V. O. C. members, augmented by Messrs. Donahue and William Howard Ball, of Washington, D. C. The lucky club members were Julian K. Potter, John A. Gillespie, Edward S. Weyl, Philip A. Livingston, William H. Yoder, C. Brooke Worth, Eliot Underdown, Ellis Cooke and the writer.

Potter initiated the quartette traveling as Ed Weyl's guests with an inspiring view of a Wilson's Phalarope at West Collingswood which also yielded Stilt Sandpipers and a number of other less exciting shore birds. Worth and Howard Ball, early afield, saw many Western Sandpipers and a Pigeon Hawk with which to begin the day. Underdown, Cooke and I were at the tender mercies of the Reading and the 9 o'clock Brigantine Bus. Even at that we *did* meet Worth and Ball after finding Mr. Donahue on that Bus. Waiting for the others grew tiresome so we strolled down the beach toward the point. Worth and I gained on the rest so that when we turned in towards the mud flat we were some distance down beach from them.

We were examining a large flock of Skimmers, Terns and Gulls when we noticed two large shore birds feeding along the near edge of the water. Worth exclaimed, "Godwits." Finally after a short study he amplified his statement identifying the two as Marbled Godwits. We wasted many a good breath trying to make Eliot and his group understand, but to no avail.

Subsequent developments showed that they had seen and identified the birds about the same time we had, while on the far shore Potter and Co. yelled themselves hoarse telling *us* about it. Communication was finally established whereupon it became evident that they wanted us to refrain from disturbing the birds until they could come around to see them.

We waited in patience being finally rewarded by having the rare privilege of seeing Gillespie and Potter running, Livingston splashing recklessly through water knee deep, with even Bill Yoder hurrying. Strange birds—to affect them so.

Those Godwits were quite tame, feeding quite oblivious of the thrill they were giving us. They immersed the whole head at times, feeding a good bit after the fashion of the Stilt Sandpiper. The black tipped bill was easily seen, while the cinnamon of the under wing coverts made the birds appear pink at a distance while flying.

Examination of the other shore birds of the place brought to light a Turnstone, many Western Willets, Yellowlegs, Dowitchers, and “peeps,” with one white-rumped Sandpiper occupying the spotlight for a time. We retired to the place where Ed left his car, ate our several lunches, and started via auto for the Golf Course. Ed made it all in one trip, one of the remarkable achievements of his car. At the Golf Course Buff-breasted Sandpipers have been seen, but on that day it was one of the few shore birds to elude us.

We did see a Hudsonian Godwit which, on calmer inspection, was voted a Dowitcher. Also there were Western Sandpipers, Stilts, Yellowlegs, Semipalmated Plover, both peeps, Pectoral and Red-backed Sandpipers, and Curlew. The Curlew with two Godwits and lesser shore birds were in the grass across a wide channel, a circumstance which prompted Underdown, Worth and Cooke to swim, crawl, and wade across. When they came too close the flock took wing. First the Curlew and the Godwits, then Willet, Dowitchers and seven Knot. The swim, it turned out, was at the expense of their unclad anatomies, mussel shells having left many long scratches, flies welts, and the sun a goodly coat of red. A perfect day!

The second red-letter day—to Fort Mott, furnished less variety but greater numbers, the attraction being the ducks which frequent the place. Weyl, Potter and I started from Collingswood on October 6. Each little pond and flooded meadow yielded shore birds so that by the time we were half way there, Ed was heard to remark, “Fort Mott is

some place." At Oldmans Creek an Arkansas Kingbird was identified after a remarkable chase. We saw, too, a Duck Hawk, two Sharp-shinned Hawks, a Cape May Warbler and a Jacksnipe. Fort Mott is *some* place.

The novelty of having the road drop out from under us passed by unheeded as did the many small birds we met. The immediate environs of Fort Mott are quite different from most of Jersey, so much so that later in the day when we saw our second Kingbird, it was necessary to convince Ed it *was* New Jersey. The password at the Fort is "Cross my palm with silver"—which Potter did.

A great stone jetty extends out into the river for about a mile, then it parallels the shore for nearly two, curving back again to land. The bare stretch inside is the "roost" for nearly all the ducks that travel the Delaware. Bare mud at low tide, water at high, protected by the jetty and by inaccessibility—no wonder the ducks come in to rest.

By estimating the main flock to be a mile long, 25 yards wide and containing one duck to the square yard, we reached the number of 44,000 as being a reasonable estimate of the ducks there. We feel that all three of the above suppositions are very conservative. Five species were identified. Pintails were most common, say 30,000, Blacks next, to the number of about 10,000, with small numbers of other species. Both Teal were identified, with one Ruddy Duck being seen in the river.

The presence of the Kingbirds together with the Ruddy Duck probably resulted from the Southern hurricane of a few days before. Ruddy Ducks were seen by other observers in South Jersey. Members of the West Chester Bird Club saw an Arkansas Kingbird at Claymont, Del. just across the river from Oldmans Creek, possible the same bird.

Ed had never seen a Sora Rail, I insisted we had heard several at Oldmans Creek and just for confirmation, on the way home we picked a dead one from a bridge culvert. That rail is now in the Academy's Collection. The trip produced 62 species in all.