

National Park Dredge Spoils

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The dredge spoils at National Park have been recently discovered to host an impressive array of breeding marsh birds, many of which are rare and declining in New Jersey. Highlights from recent years include multiple pairs of breeding Pied-billed Grebe and American Coot, breeding Hooded Merganser, and several pairs of Sora and multiple American Bittern present during the breeding season. No records from the site were received by the New Jersey 1993-97 breeding bird atlas (Walsh et al 1999), which prompted this report.

The dredge spoils are located alongside the Delaware River adjacent to and south of Red Bank battlefield in National Park, Gloucester County, New Jersey (DeLorme p.54, F3). The area is 195 acres in size and has been owned by the federal government since 1965. The dredge spoils originated from deepening of the Delaware River channel by the Army Corps of Engineers. Three bodies of open water are currently present, surrounded mostly by *Phragmites*, but there are areas of cattails, rushes and other marsh vegetation.

Breeding species in 2003 included three pairs of state-endangered (breeding) Pied-billed Grebe and six pairs of American Coot. Common Moorhen, a species declining dramatically in the state, also bred. A female Blue-winged Teal and a male Hooded Merganser lingered into June.

In 2004, at least eight pairs of Pied-billed Grebe were present. Fifteen adults (two sitting on nests) and eleven young (comprising four broods) were counted on 24 June. This is probably the largest breeding population for this species in the state. Three individual

American Bitterns were present in May, and one could be heard pumping daily into early June. American Coot (three pairs) and Common Moorhen (at least three pairs) bred. A visit after dark in early June produced six whinnying Soras, and Virginia Rail and Least Bittern were also present. As if this was not impressive enough, a female Hooded Merganser with two young was found in late June.

Breeding atlas results in Walsh et al (1999) showed breeding confirmation for Sora in only 2 blocks away from northern New Jersey, which was considered "cause for alarm" and called for "locating new nest areas a high priority." American Coot was confirmed in only 4 blocks statewide. Hooded Merganser is a scarce breeder in northern New Jersey, and was not found breeding in southern New Jersey at all during the breeding atlas period.

There are several dredge spoil dumping sites along the lower Delaware River, all on the New Jersey side except for Reedy Point, Delaware. At Palmyra Cove several pairs of Least Bittern breed, and Virginia Rail, Sora and Pied-billed Grebe have bred at least until very recently. Areas suitable for marsh bird nesting are much smaller than at National Park however, with less open water. Other dredge spoil sites along the Delaware River are at or near Pedricktown, Carney's Point, Killcohook and Artificial Island. Little is known about these sites, and they would be worth further investigation.

The dredge spoils at National Park are not open to the public, but the municipal offices of National Park tell me that they can be visited by birders. Access is by walking alongside the river south from Red Bank battlefield.

Literature Cited

Walsh, J., V. Elia, R. Kane, and T. Halliwell, 1999. Birds of New Jersey. Bernardsville, New Jersey Audubon Society.

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