

GENERAL NOTES

Dovekie at Island Beach State Park, New Jersey: During our studies of shorebird ecology in New Jersey, we visited Island Beach State Park between December 2–30, 1987. On December 27, while performing a banding operation at night, we found a bird lying on the beach that was identified as a Dovekie (*Alle alle*). The bird was captured and immediately weighed and measured (weight, 125 grams; maximum wing length, 119 mm). The right side of its body was heavily contaminated with oil. The next morning, the oil was partially cleaned, and the bird was released. It appeared to be in good condition.

—Gonzalo and Jodi S. Castro, Department of Biology, Colorado State University,
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DOVEKIE (*Alle alle*) captured at Island Beach State Park, New Jersey,
December 28, 1987.

Photograph by Gonzalo Castro

Editor's note: The earliest record of Dovekie in New Jersey comes from George Ord, who, as editor of the ninth and last volume of Alexander Wilson's *American Ornithology* (1814), wrote that one "was killed at Great Egg Harbor in the month of December, 1811, and was sent to Wilson as a great curiosity" (Brewer, 1840:658).

William Turnbull must have known of other records when, in 1869, he wrote that the "Little Auk" was "occasionally shot at Egg Harbor and along the coast" [in winter] (p.48).

They may have become more common in the subsequent decades as Witmer Stone in 1894 considered the Dovekie a "regular winter visitant along the New Jersey coast, varying in abundance from year to year" (p.41). He notes specimens from Cape May and Camden [!]. In the author's classic *Bird Studies of Old Cape May* (1937), he concludes that this bird "seems to be the most frequent . . . Alcidae

to visit the New Jersey coast." He notes that its extreme dates are November 20 to February 14, and writes of certain "invasion" winters.

Some years later, probably reflecting increasing environmental degradation, David Fables was the first to note that "most specimens are dead and washed-up oiled birds (1955)." Unlike Stone, or reaffirming the environmental effects, Fables considered the bird "irregular."

The last to summarize the Dovekie's status in New Jersey, Charles Leck went a step beyond Fables and labeled it "rare . . . along our coast," but reaffirms "invasions," in certain years.

No evidence has come to my attention that the winter of 1987-1988 was a Dovekie invasion year. Thus Castro's record of this oiled bird is one of the increasingly "rare" reports of Dovekie on the New Jersey coast.

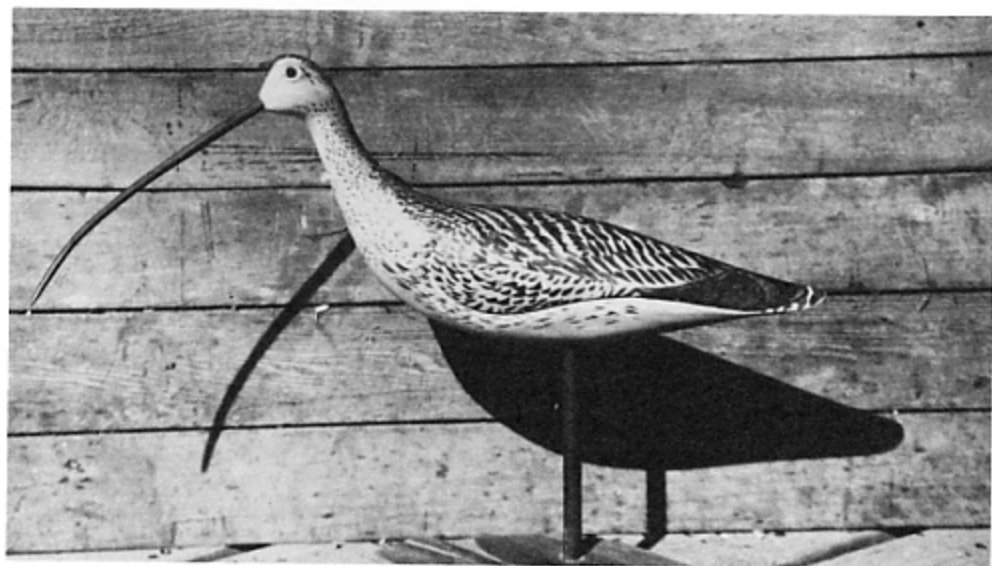
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Long-billed Curlew in New Jersey: On October 9, 1987, at 7:30 a.m., a Long-billed Curlew (*Numenius americanus*) was seen as it flew by the Cape May Point hawkwatch. The bird came down the beach, passed directly over the hawkwatch, and was last seen moving south over Delaware Bay. The Curlew was about 75 meters high, and well seen by Jeff Bouton, David Ward, and the authors. The overall buffy coloration, cinnamon underwing coverts, and lengthy down-curved bill were noted by all observers. The bird, probably an immature, based on the observed bill length, called repeatedly as it flew down the beach.

This is the first modern-era Long-billed Curlew to be documented in New Jersey, although recent records from Massachusetts, Long Island and Virginia suggest that this species was overdue on the 20th-century New Jersey list. There are only two previous published records from Cape May County: birds shot on Five Mile Beach (Wildwoods) on September 14, 1880 (a specimen in the collection of the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia), and on September 8, 1898. The 1987 sighting is the first published in 89 years for all of New Jersey. While actual records or specimens of Long-billed Curlews are rare for New Jersey, Witmer Stone's Bird Studies of Old Cape May (1937) recounts that this bird was a regular and "frequent" migrant in Wilson's and Turnbull's accounts. The bird was regular enough on our coast that Long-billed Curlew decoys were carved by 19th-century gunners. The bird was known as the "Sicklebill."

There is, however, one unpublished recent record of the Long-billed Curlew for New Jersey. In May 1978 (exact date not recorded), a Long-bill was seen by Anthony Hillman near the Brigantine Bridge (Brigantine Island, Atlantic County), feeding with Whimbrel (*Numenius phaeopus*) on the salt marsh. Tony Hillman, currently a resident of Seaville, New Jersey, is a decoy carver and the author of several books on shorebird decoys, including one on painting shorebird plumage patterns. While Tony is not a photographer, he did document and commemorate the bird in a carving from memory of the bird he witnessed. This carving is illustrated below, and is now in the authors' collection. The bird was no doubt an adult, due to bill length. This record constitutes one of the very few spring sightings for the mid-Atlantic states.



LONG-BILLED CURLEW—Carving by Tony Hillman

Photograph by Clay Sutton

Records of Long-billed Curlew are becoming more frequent on the East Coast—the bird is now being seen annually from North Carolina south—and should be looked for during peak shorebird movements in July, August and September. The October 9, 1987 date is judged as late for a Long-billed Curlew to appear on the mid-Atlantic coast.

—Clay and Patricia Sutton, 129 Buck Avenue, Cape May Court House, NJ 08210

Peregrine Falcon Food Habits: Native populations of continental form Peregrine Falcons (*Falco peregrinus anatum*) became extirpated in the eastern United States by the mid-1950s. Some of the last nesting pairs were in Pennsylvania (Poole 1964), including City Hall in Philadelphia. The Peregrine Fund, based at Cornell University, reintroduced Peregrine Falcons to the eastern United States from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s. Some of the most successful reintroduction sites were on the coastal marshes of New Jersey and in urban areas, including Philadelphia. As a result of these reintroduction measures, approximately 40 pairs were known to be nesting in the eastern United States by 1985 (Temple 1985).

On May 30 and June 6, 1986, Janet Sheridan, a civil engineer and bird enthusiast, discovered adult Peregrines while conducting structural inspections of the Commodore Barry and Walt Whitman bridges. At least one of the adults was banded, suggesting that it was part of the Peregrine Fund's reintroduction effort. As a result of her observations, nesting Peregrines were discovered on these two bridges. A search of other bridges on the lower Delaware River produced another pair on the Delaware Memorial Bridge.

Ms. Sheridan photographed prey remains and collected regurgitated pellets throughout the bridge superstructure. With the help of Mark Robbins of the Ornithology Department of the Academy of Natural Sciences, 10 prey species were identified. This is not a complete list of prey items taken by the Peregrines at these sites, nor does it reflect the relative abundance of prey. However, the list documents the diversity of prey taken by these reintroduced birds at the edge of a large metropolitan area. The following table lists Peregrine Falcon prey remains found on the Commodore Barry and Walt Whitman bridges:

Horned Grebe (*Podiceps auritus*)
Lesser Golden-Plover (*Pluvialis dominica*)
Gull sp.

Rock Dove (*Columbia livia*)
Mourning Dove (*Zenaida macroura*)
Northern Flicker (*Colaptes auratus*)
Blue Jay (*Cyanocitta cristata*)
American Robin (*Turdus migratorius*)
European Starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*)
Red-winged Blackbird (*Agelaius phoeniceus*)

The presence of millet in the pellets indicates that some of the prey, probably the Mourning and Rock Doves, were using feeders. The Lesser Golden-Plover carcass, photographed on the Commodore Barry Bridge, was in relatively good condition and molting into breeding plumage, indicating that this bird was taken as a spring migrant. This bridge is located near tidal flats in New Jersey where Lesser Golden-Plovers are occasionally reported—the best known location being the Pedricktown marshes. Even there, however, it is a relatively uncommon bird and it is surprising to find it as a prey item.

Peregrines are known to take a wide variety of prey (Ratcliffe 1980), generally in response to availability. Prey selection changes with the seasons in response to the relative abundance of available birds. The abundance of Starling feathers in pellets indicated heavy use of this common bird. Since its remains had deteriorated considerably, the Horned Grebe had probably been taken earlier in the spring, when this species is more common along the river. Despite the abundance of Rock Doves and Starlings on the bridges, native species in areas surrounding the bridges also provide an important source of prey for these Peregrine Falcons.

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—Daniel Brauning, Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia,
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—Janet Sheridan, Ammann & Whitney Consulting Engineers, Philadelphia

Hammond's Flycatcher in Kent County, Delaware: On December 21, 1986, while participating in the Bombay Hook Christmas Bird Census, I observed an *Empidonax* flycatcher. The bird was found in a privately owned game area just south of the town of Woodland Beach.

At 10 a.m., David and Ben Cadbury, Terry Serrano and I were observing small birds along the edge of a dense planting of spruce and fir trees when I saw the bird sitting in a bush along the edge of the grove. For the following 20 minutes, the entire party observed the bird at a distance of 35 feet in direct sunlight.

The bird appeared no larger than several Dark-eyed Juncos (*Junco hyemalis*) that were present in adjacent bushes. Its very small size, upright posture, overall grayish coloration, narrow eye ring, and wing bars identified it as an *Empidonax* flycatcher. It actively pursued flying insects, often landing high up in the coniferous trees and sometimes even landing on the ground, where I saw it eat something bright red. It flicked its tail sharply throughout the period of observation but never vocalized.

The following details were noted: The bird's head appeared unusually large, and its bill unusually small for an *Empidonax*. The bill appeared entirely black from most angles, but occasionally from underneath one could see that the lower mandible was actually pale. The back of the head was medium gray. The head contrasted noticeably with the back, which was an odd bluish-greenish gray. The throat and remaining underparts were pale gray with darker diffuse streaking across the breast and along the sides. The flanks were washed with a very weak yellowish tint.

Although many *Empidonax* are not identifiable by sight alone, the plumage and behavior of this bird appeared so different from any *Empidonax* I had seen before that I became interested in the possibility that it was a western species. Later in the day an examination of the field marks of all of the North American *Empidonax* was made using the National Geographic Society's Field Guide to the Birds of North America. The only species found whose coloration, size, proportions, behavior and

habitat preference all matched the bird that had been observed was the Hammond's Flycatcher (*Empidonax hammondi*).

On December 24, 1986, the bird was found again at 10 a.m., about 100 yards from where it had originally been seen. The bird was not feeding and appeared considerably weaker. This was not surprising, considering the fact that it was raining and the temperature had dropped 25 degrees in several days. As it appeared to be on the verge of starvation, the bird was collected and brought to the Academy of Natural Sciences for identification.

After careful measurements and comparisons with other specimens, Mark Robbins identified it as a Hammond's Flycatcher. The specimen, an immature female with a 70 percent ossified skull, was deposited in the collection of the Delaware Museum of Natural History (#76370) and is the first record of this species for Delaware. Only four other records exist for this species east of the Great Plains. There are two records from Louisiana, one from Pennsylvania and one from Maryland (Gibson 1987). The possibility exists that many of the winter *Empidonax* found in the East that go unidentified may be this species. The large head, small bill and tail flicking are all traits that may indicate Hammond's Flycatcher.

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Gibson, Daniel D. 1987. Hammond's Flycatcher (*Empidonax hammondi*) New to Maryland and the Atlantic Coast. *Wilson Bull.* 99:500.

—Keith Russell, The Academy of Natural Sciences,
19th and The Parkway, Philadelphia, PA 19103

Acknowledgements. I would like to thank Mark Robbins for providing information about this sighting to Daniel Gibson and for his expertise and valuable input in identifying this bird.

December Swainson's Thrush in Cape May County, New Jersey: On December 24, 1985, while participating in the Cape May Christmas Bird Census, I observed a Swainson's Thrush (*Catharus ustulatus*). The bird was seen along a section of Route 9, approximately one-third of a mile south of the Stone Harbor Causeway, in the town of Cape May Courthouse.

At 9:45 a.m., I saw the bird sitting in low vegetation along the edge of a wooded stream. As an unusually high number of Hermit Thrushes (*C. guttatus*) were present in the area that day, I assumed that this was yet another Hermit Thrush. After examining the plumage for some time, however, none of the Hermit Thrush field marks could be found. The back and tail were both olive grey and indistinguishable in color. No trace of rustiness could be found on the tail. A narrow buffy-colored eye ring was present, and spots were present on both the breast and upper belly. The legs were pale with reddish tints.

I observed the bird for 20 minutes at a distance of 25 feet while it sat quietly in the same sunny spot. During this time, I also noticed that the secondary coverts of the left wing were slightly disheveled. Other than this, and the redness of the legs, the bird did not appear to be sick. No vocalizations were heard from the bird during the period of observation.

One-half hour after leaving the area I returned with Dr. Robert Ridgely of the Academy of Natural Sciences. The bird, still present in the same spot, was observed thoroughly by Dr. Ridgely, who also concluded that the bird was a Swainson's Thrush.

—Keith Russell, The Academy of Natural Sciences,
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GREEN-TAILED TOWHEE (*Pipilo chlorurus*) near New Hope, Pennsylvania,
January 1988.

Photo by Robert Mitchell

Green-Tailed Towhee in Bucks County, Pennsylvania: On December 23, 1987, several staff members of Bucks County Audubon briefly saw an unusual bird at our feeding station outside the office. They described the bird to me as having a greenish-gray back, no streaking, white throat and rufous crown. After some discussion, we concluded that the bird may have been a Green-tailed Towhee (*Pipilo chlorurus*). However, the view was so brief and the visibility so poor, we wanted to confirm the sighting.

We continued to keep an eye out for the bird over the holidays. On January 6, 1988, the bird reappeared on the ground at the feeding station in full sunlight around 10:30 a.m., confirming our sighting. From that date on, the Towhee appeared regularly at our feeding station approximately every hour, allowing hundreds of birders to get a good look over the next several weekends. The bird stayed mainly in several thick tangles of brush near the feeding station, often coming in with White-throated Sparrows (*Zonotrichia albicollis*) to feed on cracked corn. This period of regular feeding continued through cold weather until a warm spell starting on January 18 melted the remaining snow. From then until last sighted on May 2, 1988, the Green-tailed Towhee appeared much more sporadically, approximately once or twice per day.

To our knowledge, this is the first sighting of a Green-tailed Towhee in Pennsylvania.

—Bruce McNaught, RD 1, Box 263, New Hope, PA 18938

Melanistic Northern Cardinal (*Cardinalis cardinalis*) in Delaware County, Pennsylvania: In a series of articles in 1965, A.O. Gross reported upon his studies of albinism and melanism in North American birds. He noted that melanism, by far, was the rarer of the two aberrant conditions. ("The Incidence of Albinism in North American Birds," "Melanism in North American Birds," *Bird-Banding* 36, pp. 67-71, 240-42.) Gross found 304 species exhibiting some form of albinism, but only 29 species showing melanistic traits. Melanism usually appears as the dark form of certain birds as in the Rough-legged Hawk (*Buteo lagopus*). Various passerine species, such as the American Robin (*Turdus migratorius*) and Northern Cardinal, also have been reported as "melanistic."

Because of their general rarity, the following note is of interest. While searching for the Clay-colored Sparrow (see *Cassinia* 61, (1986): 92) on January 3, 1986, with my brother, I noticed a very dark bird foraging on and near the ground in a leafy and scrubby area just east of the intersections of Knowlton and Linville Roads. The bird, first seen from the rear, appeared all black and I had the impression that it was a Common Grackle (*Quiscalus quiscula*) or male Red-winged Blackbird (*Agelaius phoeniceus*.) But I then noticed deep red streaking along the feather vanes in the wings and

was puzzled. The red appeared like the "frosting" in the wings of a Black-capped Chickadee but less prominent and less extensive. It was not until I saw the bird in profile with its bright orange cardinal bill, that I realized its identity. Except for the bill (I did not see eye or leg color) and the faint red streaking in the wings, the bird, including the crest, was entirely black.

It associated with a nearby normally plumaged male Northern Cardinal, but under the circumstances, I could not determine its sex. The bird was seen the following day by Mike Logan.

—Edward D. Fingerhood, 541 W. Sedgwick St., Phila. PA 19119