



Bermuda Audubon Society

NEWSLETTER

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Email: info@audubon.bm

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Common Eider – New to Bermuda *Andrew Dobson*



On December 19, 2016 my family and I decided on a drive to Clearwater Beach for a swim and a walk to Cooper's Point in the hope of adding to the Christmas Bird Count total. Close in the bay as we approached Clearwater was a large brown duck. My wife Katrina said "Eider?", somewhat optimistically, before I had even raised my binoculars. Sure enough, there was the distinctive shape of a Common Eider *Somateria mollissima* with its stout neck and distinctive long triangular (wedge-shaped) bill and head profile. I quickly took record

shots before sending messages in the hope of other birders seeing this first sighting in Bermuda. Peter Adhemar works in Southside and was with me in a few minutes, one of the best lunch breaks he's enjoyed! Unfortunately, within 15 mins of my seeing it, the bird flew off out the bay towards the northeast. It appeared to be disturbed by several Green Turtles that peered at this northern visitor. It was seen later in the afternoon off Ferry Point Park by Paul Watson.

This resilient sea duck, the largest duck in the Northern Hemisphere, is more closely tied to marine habitats than any other sea duck. It generally inhabits arctic and subarctic coastal marine habitats and has a circumpolar distribution. Common Eiders are diving ducks, feeding on mollusks and crustaceans from depths of up to 20 metres. Hunting almost extirpated the southern, or American, race (*S. m. dresseri*) from the eastern seaboard of North America by the end of the nineteenth century. Exactly 100 years ago, the Migratory Bird Convention designated special protection to eiders and stopped excessive commercial hunting. There are 6 or 7 recognised sub-species of Common Eider. The Common Eider at Clearwater was almost certainly *S. m. dresseri* which breeds from Groswater Bay, south-central Labrador coast south to Massachusetts. In winter, this race extends south to New England; also south in small numbers annually to Virginia; casual as far south as Florida.

The trip to Clearwater also provided a flowering Bermudiana, extremely unusual in December, and a Northern Gannet, first notice by Fiona as we got to Cooper's Point. Perhaps this bird was also driven south by freezing temperatures in northeast Canada?

Reference: Goudie, R. Ian, Gregory J. Robertson and Austin Reed. (2000).

Grey-headed Swamphen - New to Bermuda Andrew Dobson



In 2009 Bermuda recorded its first Purple Swamphen *Porphyrio porphyrio* which was identified as belonging to the race *P. p. madagascariensis* or African Swamphen (see BAS Newsletter 20.2). Thirteen subspecies are currently recognized and African Swamphen was recently added to the American Ornithologists' Union Checklist on the basis of the Bermuda record (AOU Checklist, 2016).

In the last week of October another swamphen was

discovered at Somerset Long Bay by Audubon member Tim White and several local residents. On 25 October 2016 Tim posted a photograph of the swamphen on the Bermuda Audubon Society facebook page (*photo above Tim White*). It was clearly different to the previous sighting, and was confirmed as a Grey-headed Swamphen *P. p. poliocephalus*. This purple coloured chicken-sized bird has huge red feet to enable it to negotiate reedbeds. It is highly likely that this bird came from the population of Grey-headed Swamphen in Florida which became established there in the late 1990s. It may well have arrived as a result of Hurricane Matthew. The bird appeared perfectly healthy and fed well in the public park and on the Audubon Society's adjacent nature reserve. At first it appeared totally oblivious to kite surfers, dog walkers and the local paparazzi but towards the end of its stay became more wary and often retreated to the safety of the nature reserve. It was last seen on 19 November 2016.



Subtle differences in plumage between Grey-head Swamphen *P. p. poliocephalus* (left) and African Swamphen *P. p. madagascariensis* (right). Photos Andrew Dobson

Mexican Free-tailed Bat - New to Bermuda

David Wingate

Photos Rohan Shastri



On 24 October 2016 I received a phone call from Dorte Horsfield, Education Officer at the Bermuda National Trust, reporting that a bat had just been found in Somerset in BNT Museum Manager, Rohan Shastri's chimney. This is not a rare occurrence in October, because five species of highly migratory forest roosting - as opposed to cave hibernating - bats are of regular occurrence in Bermuda, especially in late fall. This record was unusual, however, in that it was found inside the chimney of a house by workmen who were repairing the chimney and it was apparently injured during the encounter. As always in these circumstances I requested that it be put in a container and delivered to me for identification. When I received it an hour later at Waterville I got the surprise of a lifetime. This wasn't one of the regular species, but a new record for Bermuda and best of all a species that I had always predicted

might occur but had to wait almost a lifetime to confirm.

It was a Mexican Free-tailed Bat *Tadarida brasiliensis*, a cave or building roosting species that ranges from northern South America, up through Mexico and the West Indies and into the southern United States as far north as South Carolina. This is a super abundant species with some caves in New Mexico and Texas holding as many as 10 million individuals. It is also a very strong flier and somewhat migratory which had led me to believe it should occur here. In this particular case, I strongly suspect that it was a wind driven victim of hurricane Mathew which had just skirted up the American coast from Florida, going ashore in South Carolina and then back out to sea to merge with Hurricane Nicole that formed near the Bahamas and hit Bermuda direct on 13 October. The bat had to be euthanized because its wing was broken during the chimney encounter, but it has since been prepared as a museum specimen by the very talented young taxidermist volunteer at BAMZ, Ava Botelli. It will be available for examination in the collection there by anyone who is interested. Some natural history records are worth waiting a lifetime for, but consider the extraordinary combination of circumstances that had to come together for this record to come to my notice. There are thousands of chimneys in Bermuda but this one housing the bat just happened to be worked on that day. It also happened to be found by a family who were sufficiently interested to pass on the information to a mutual friend who knew I would be interested enough to want to examine the specimen.



Bird Report Aug to Nov 2016

Andrew Dobson

Highlights include the first record of Grey-headed Swamphen and first Rusty Blackbird for 41 years. Tropical Storm Karl produced an unprecedented number of Pectoral Sandpipers.



An imm. **Brant** was discovered at Cloverdale Pond 11 Nov (TW) but did not appear healthy and died 26 Nov. A **Hooded Merganser** at Port Royal GC 6-7 Aug was very unusual (AD). November wildfowl arrivals included two **Bufflehead** at Coney Is. 12 Nov (NM), two **Common Goldeneye** at Mangrove Lake 29 Nov (PW) and two **Red-breasted Merganser** at Mangrove Lake 14-30 Nov+ (PW). A **Double-crested Cormorant** in Mangrove Lake 8 Aug was the earliest fall record (MM). Spittal Pond hosted the earliest fall record of **Least Bittern** (*photo left*

Andrew Dobson) 8-15 Aug (PW). A **Grey-headed Swamphen** at Somerset Long Bay 25 Oct-19 Nov (TW) was the first record for Bermuda. Two likely sightings of a **Sandhill Crane** were made over Pembroke Marsh 29 Oct (JN) and Stocks Harbour 31 Oct (PA). A **Hudsonian Godwit** was at Spittal Pond 26-28 Aug (PW). A **Red Knot** was at Devonshire Marsh 11- 26 Oct (PW). A **Ruff** was on Port Royal GC 17 Sept (AD). A **Baird's Sandpiper** was discovered at the Airport 25-27 Aug (PW) and another at Port Royal GC 4-5 Sept (AD). A flock of 5 **Buff-breasted Sandpipers** was on Port Royal GC 6 Sep (AD). Following the passing of T.S. Karl, about 500 Pectoral Sandpipers were counted at the Airport 24 Sept (PW, AD). A **Long-billed Dowitcher** was well observed at Devonshire Marsh 1-6 Nov (PW, AD). A **Wilson's Phalarope** was on Spittal Pond 6-8 Oct (AD). Two **Red Phalarope** were found alive but unable to fly at Warwick Long Bay 20 Nov (DC) and Glebe Hill 21 Nov (PC) but died shortly after being taken to BAMZ.



This season has been a very poor one for flycatchers. A **Great Crested Flycatcher** was on Nonsuch Is. 21 Nov (PF, KS, TJ). A **Philadelphia Vireo** was seen in the Arboretum 16 Oct (AD, E&JH). Record numbers of **Cliff Swallows** appeared in Aug with a maximum flock of 40 at Spittal Pond 12 Aug (IP, WF). Migrant thrushes were almost absent this fall. An **American Robin** was feeding at Fort Scaur 6 Nov (AD). Two **Snow Bunting** were discovered on Cooper's Is. 20 Nov (AD, E&JH). A late **Louisiana Waterthrush** was at BIOS 10-18 May and another provided the first returning fall warbler at Compston's Pond 31 Jul-2 Aug (PW). A big fall-out of **Blackpoll Warblers** followed the passage of Hurricane Nicole (a direct hit on Bermuda on 13 Nov) with hundreds of birds noted 15-16 Nov (AD). A **Dickcissel** was at Fort Scaur 18 Oct (AD). A **Rusty Blackbird**, the first since 1975, was a surprise on Turtle Hill GC 25-26 Nov (AD) (*photo left Andrew Dobson*). A **Common Redpoll** was seen at Coney Is. 23 Oct (NM).

Observers: Geoff Bell, Peggy Corrao, Dave Curnow, Andrew Dobson, Peter Flood, Erich & Janice Hetzel, Kate Sutherland, Tom Johnson, Jeremy Madeiros, Leila Madeiros, Miguel Mejias, Neal Morris, Jeane Nikolai, Ingela Persson, Paul Watson, Tim White, David Wingate.

Photos Andrew Dobson

Society News



Thirty members boarded the *Explorer* for an evening cruise around Hamilton Harbour and islands on 25 August, ending with a swim in the dark to appreciate the amazing bioluminescence. Thank you Capt. Hayward.



A very successful field trip to Spittal Pond on 6 September recorded 34 species in 2 hours, including 15 shorebird species to add to the World Shorebird Count on that day. Four species of migrant warbler were also seen.

Society President Andrew Dobson gave a lecture on Bermuda birds for the Linnaean Society at the American Museum of Natural History on 11 October.



The annual Paget Island camp in October was cancelled due to a lack of power on the island following Hurricane Nicole, but Audubon members braved a wet day ashore to search out migrant birds as part of the annual IMBD (International Migratory Bird Day).

Rough weather meant the cancellation of several of the Cahow-watching boat trips scheduled this November, but two were able to go ahead and those attending were treated to some excellent sightings of our national bird.

A large team of volunteers from Deloitte cleared hurricane debris at Seymour's Pond Nature Reserve on 4 November for their annual Impact Day. With a chainsaw, hand-saws and loppers they tackled large fallen trees and many branches blocking the trails. Deloitte 'adopted' Seymour's Pond earlier this year.



Members of Audubon's Committee of Management met on 16 November to update the society's strategic plan for the next three years. Among the priorities are restoration projects at Paget Marsh and Somerset Long Bay West and trail enhancements at Stokes Point. For a copy of the Strategic Plan please email info@audubon.bm or call 238-8628.

In memory: the new bird hide at the Seymour's Pond nature reserve was built as a tribute to the late former Chief Justice Sir Richard Ground. Lady Ground (centre) visited the hide on a recent trip to Bermuda. She was accompanied by Audubon Society member Geoffrey Bell (left) who was instrumental in the creation of the bird hide, and Audubon President Andrew Dobson



There was a good turnout of members for a work party on Sunday 4 December at our Alfred Blackburn Smith nature reserve in Paget. The volunteers pulled up hundreds of casuarina seedlings and saplings which have become an invasive problem in coastal areas.

Students of Mount Saint Agnes made bluebird boxes and bagged box kits for the Bermuda Audubon Society as part of the 'Dollars For Hours' initiative sponsored by PartnerRe. These boxes and kits are now available at Aberfeldy Nurseries, an ideal Christmas present if you have a garden with bluebirds. The students gave a presentation of their project at BUEI on 7 December.



Work has recently begun to restore the society's latest land acquisition at Stokes Point, St. Georges, with the clearing of fan palms and rubble along the roadside of the property just east of Mullet Road after the swing bridge. A row of Palmettos and Cedars has been planted there instead. The 2.5 acres of land was gifted to the society by an anonymous donor in 2015.

Birds and People in Bermuda lecture by Andrew Dobson at BUEI

Thursday 26 January 7:30 pm

6pm: Harbourfront opens for dinner; 6:30pm: Cash bar at Harbourfront (Happy hour prices)

BUEI and Audubon members \$20; Non-members \$25. Tickets available by calling #294-0204 or visiting Oceans Gift Shop. Ticket holders are entitled to 20% off dinner at the Harbourfront before or after the lecture. Please call #295-4207 for reservations and be sure to mention the lecture.