

SUMMERING WATERFOWL IN BIRMINGHAM

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During the summer of 1964, several species of waterfowl remained on East Lake which is approximately four miles from downtown Birmingham, Alabama. There have been other summer records of water fowl in and around Birmingham, but the summer of 1964 is probably unique in that individuals of three species of duck that normally migrate north were observed throughout the summer on this lake well within the city limits. East Lake is located in a small park most frequently visited by fishermen for whose convenience there are a number of spits extending out in the water. There is no boating and the waterfowl are protected to a degree from other disturbances by the fact that the park is located in a populated area. The lake, which is stream-fed and contains a sufficient amount of submerged vegetation to make it attractive to waterfowl, is usually host in winter to a reasonably large number of Canvasbacks, Ring-necked Ducks, American Coots, and Pied-billed Grebes.

Since the ducks stayed through the summer, there was an opportunity to observe some of their changes into and out of the eclipse plumage. This is a change in plumage unique to male ducks of the northern hemisphere; it does not occur in swans or greese or in ducks of the southern hemisphere. The change takes place just after the breeding season when the males lose their flight feathers, making them thereby virtually flightless, and acquire a plumage like that of the female of the species. The moult out of the eclipse plumage begins in the early autumn and takes place over a considerable period of time with the result that in many species the breeding plumage is not reacquired until well into the following winter. The moults into and out of the eclipse plumage are discussed in detail with color illustration in Kortright (1942:22-24 and 414-430).

The particular waterfowl observed in 1964 on East Lake were the following:

Shoveler

One male appeared in full breeding plumage the second week in February and, with a few exceptions, was noted on the lake until October. It was seen with a female on March 28. During the spring migration, it apparently visited other nearby bodies of water for it was observed only intermittently during April but was accompanied by a second male when seen on April 11. A single male was observed regularly, however, from the last week in April until the third week in October. During its stay at East Lake, it generally kept close company with a large white Pekin Duck that had been released on the lake. On the basis of information in Imhof (1962) this is the first record of a Shoveler summering in Alabama south of the Tennessee Valley.

There is a great difference between the plumages of the male and female Shoveler. The male in its eclipse plumage had taken on a mottled brownish color very similar to that of the female by the fourth week in July and still had that general appearance in October. By that time it

had acquired the semblance of a reddish breast but its head was dull, light brown with no sign of the bright green of the breeding male. Kortright (op.cit.:215-221) reports that the male does not begin to acquire its green head feathers until November and that most do not regain full breeding plumage until January.

Ring-necked Duck

Observed also throughout the summer was one male Ring-necked Duck (or ring-billed Duck as it might more appropriately be called because its conspicuous field mark is the ring on its bill rather than the indistinct ring on its neck). It stayed on the lake after the wintering and migrating birds had left during the second week in April. Apparently other ducks of this species may have been summering on nearby bodies of water, for two males were seen on the summer bird count conducted by the Birmingham Audubon Society on June 27, 1964.

The male seen throughout the summer reached its eclipse plumage by August. In this plumage it was generally all dull brown, being darker on the head and back. By October, when joined by other Ring-necked Ducks arriving from the North, it had acquired most of its breeding plumage so that it might then be clearly recognized as a male.

Lesser Scaup

One male appeared the fourth week of April and was noted throughout the summer. As was the case with the preceding species, apparently other ducks of its kind summered nearby for two males were seen the fourth week in May and second week in June.

The bird observed during the summer had reached full eclipse plumage by the fourth week in July. In the early stages of the eclipse, when it spread its wings showing the white stripe along the rear edge of the secondaries, the lack of some of the primary flight feathers was noticeable. When in the eclipse, the bird retained a semblance of the barred back feathers of the breeding male but acquired a white face patch like the female and otherwise turned generally brown, darker above than below. As noted in Kortright (op.cit.:252-259), the male diving ducks when in eclipse retain more traces of the breeding plumage than do the pond ducks, which in the eclipse plumage may be almost indistinguishable in the field from the females.

By October the scaup too had regained most of its breeding plumage so that it would be clearly recognized as a male. It was joined the third week in October by a female, and the two were observed on the lake into the winter when several other birds of this species arrived. It is interesting to note that the two diving ducks, thus, regained their breeding plumage earlier than the Shoveler which was still in eclipse the last part of October.

Others

Two American Coots also were noted on East Lake from the time the wintering coot population left around the last of April until

they returned around the first of October. In addition, two Pied-billed Grebes were observed from the fourth week in May until joined by wintering birds in the autumn. Earlier in the year, during the fourth week in April, one grebe was observed apparently attempting to nest on some hay that had been dropped at the end of one of the spits extending into the lake. However, because of the proximity of dogs and people, this attempt was, as might be expected, unsuccessful. It may also have only been a demonstration of breeding instinct and not an actual attempt to nest.

While not seen on East Lake, flocks of Blue-winged Teals are regularly seen on migration near Birmingham; and the flocks observed on Lake Purdy, a relatively large lake about 12 miles from the city, during September and the first half of October, 1964, seemed to contain only female birds. However, in the eclipse plumage the male Blue-winged Teal is virtually indistinguishable in the field from the female. Consequently, while some of these migrating birds undoubtedly were females, others may well have been males in eclipse plumage.

Literature Cited

Imhof, Thomas A., 1962. Alabama Birds, Univ. of Alabama Press, 591 pp.

Kortright, Francis H., 1942. Ducks, Geese and Swans of North America, Wildlife Mgmt. Inst., 476 pp.

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A BREEDING POPULATION OF HORNED LARKS IN CALHOUN COUNTY, ALABAMA

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On May 22, 1955, Dr. William J. Calvert of Jacksonville State College, discovered a small population of Horned Larks, Eremophila alpestris Linnaeus, in an open area approximately one mile northwest of the Jacksonville city limits. Dr. Calvert had observed the same area for a number of years prior to 1955, but had never recorded Horned Larks outside their normal wintering period. He has since observed the birds each spring, including singing males, and concluded that Horned Larks were in all probability nesting in Calhoun County.

Following directions given by Dr. Calvert, the winter was successful in locating the nest of a Horned Lark on April 17, on Dean Edwards' farm, one mile northwest of Jacksonville. The nest was a neat cup of grasses lined with cattle hair and sunk into a depression excavated by the birds in a weathered cow dung pile. Bur clover hung over the mouth of the cup so that the three heavily incubated eggs were well hidden from above.

The following day, on April 18, Dick Ambrose, Jerome Couch, Jay Johnson and the writer visited the area and two additional Horned Lark nests were discovered, one by Dick Ambrose and the second by a combined effort of Couch, Johnson, and Summerour. The former nest contained three eggs and the latter two eggs and one newly hatched nestling. Pictures were taken of all the nests and the first, found on April 17, was collected for the Jacksonville State College Museum.

On April 24, two more nests, both under construction, were found by Dr. Calvert, the writer, and Gary Collier, a student at Jacksonville State College. However, both of these nests were thought to be re-nesting attempts or second broods by the pairs already noted. All five nests were located in dung piles. The soil in the area was shallow and hard and the manure piles evidently offered a spot where the birds could excavate a cavity in which to place the nest.

The area, totaling approximately 100 acres, was estimated to have ten nesting pairs of Horned Larks. These birds represent the southernmost breeding population of the Horned Lark in the State (Imhof, 1962: 358). No specimens have been collected so the local race remains an unsettled controversy among the local observers, but it presumably is E. a. praticola (Henshaw), since this is the subspecies listed by the American Ornithologists Union (1957:354) as nesting in or near Alabama.

Literature Cited

American Ornithologist Union. 1957. The A.O.U. checklist of North American birds. The Lord Baltimore Press, Inc., Baltimore. 691 pp.

Imhof, Thomas A. 1962. Alabama Birds. Univ. of Ala. Press. 591 pp.