

BIRDING IN ALABAMA

MARION, ALABAMA

Part I. Marion Fish Hatchery and Perry Lake

Marion is the county seat of Perry County in the Upper Coastal Plain of Alabama, approximately 75 miles from both Birmingham and Montgomery and 55 miles from Tuscaloosa. This Part I will cover the U.S. Fish Hatchery on Alabama Route 175 and Perry Lake, which is a backwater of the Cahaba River containing a cypress swamp to the rear (and east) of the hatchery. Part II will cover Lakeland Farms south of the city.

The hatchery is best known for its shorebirds, which find the mudflats in the drained fish ponds much to their liking and which can often be approached very closely by automobile on the pond dikes. Consequently, the best times to visit the hatchery are during spring and fall shorebird migration periods. In addition, large numbers of swallows may be seen in the spring. The main attractions at Perry Lake are the warblers and other birds fond of habitat near water, so the best time of the year to visit it is during the spring and early summer. More details on those and other avian families follow:

Shorebirds - Perhaps one of the most consistent attractions at the hatchery is the White-rumped Sandpiper that may be seen every year in early June (and often late May). Although its flocks are not large (the most seen being 17 in May '69 and June '68), the hatchery may well be the best place in the world to observe them since they nest far north on the arctic tundra but may be approached very closely at Marion when driving on the dikes around one of the drained fish ponds. There are usually large flocks of Least Sandpipers during migration that often remain into the winter in sizeable numbers, when they are accompanied by large numbers of Common Snipe. Large flocks of Semipalmated Sandpipers have been observed in the spring, and other common shorebirds include Semipalmated Plovers, both Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs, and Spotted, Solitary, Pectoral and Western Sandpipers. Among the rarities are an American Golden Plover (the first fall migration record for the coastal plain in September and October '71 after tropical storms hit the Atlantic and Gulf Coasts), Black-bellied Plovers (in October and November), two Ruddy Turnstones (second inland spring migration record for the state in May '69), an Upland Plover (in Sept. '71), Dunlins (in Mar. '70, Oct. '70 and '71, and Nov. '59), a Short-billed Dowitcher (in July '69), Stilt Sandpipers (single birds in winter plumage being seen in July '66, Oct. '71 and Nov. '57, with an impressive flock of approx. 30 in spring plumage in May '69), a Black-necked Stilt (second inland record for the state in May '71), and a Northern Phalarope (first spring record for the state in May '69).

Terns - Black Terns are commonly seen over the hatchery ponds during fall migration, which in their case is in late summer, and on rare occasions Forster's Terns have appeared.

Wading and other water and marsh birds - Large numbers of Little Blue Herons with Cattle Egrets and several Common Egrets may be found in the summer and into September. One or more Great Blue Herons are consistently present as are Green Herons except in the winter. Yellow-crowned Night Herons may occasionally be seen, and one immature wintered in '69. There is a cattail marsh at an end of one of the larger ponds and many water grasses in the center pond containing the trees where the herons roost. These areas have attracted the Least Bittern and Purple Gallinule (both in summer '71) as well as the Sora. In addition, on rare occasions during fall migration the American Bittern has been found; and an Anhinga, which is uncommon in this part of Alabama, was seen at Perry Lake in April '71. American Coots as well as a few Pied-billed Grebes may usually be seen throughout the year except in the summer, although a few coots often linger into June and even July and three young grebes in summer '70 and one bird smaller than the adults it was accompanying in Sept. '71 give indications of breeding of the grebes in the coastal plain.

Waterfowl - Blue-winged Teal are always present during their migration periods. Others seen on the ponds, but infrequently, include the Mallard, Gadwall, American Widgeon, Ring-necked Duck and Lesser Scaup, and on rare occasions Green-winged Teal, Canvasback, Bufflehead, Ruddy Duck and Hooded Merganser. Wood Ducks, our only resident duck, have been found at Perry Lake and on occasions at the hatchery.

Swallows - All varieties, many in large numbers, may be found in the spring, particularly in April. These include the Purple Martin and Barn, Rough-winged, Bank and Tree Swallows. The martins breed in the gourds hung near the central hatchery building. There are now several Barn Swallow nests under culverts at the hatchery; and good numbers of these swallows, whose range is expanding southward, may be found on the wires in mid-summer.

Warblers and Vireos - Warbler activity is at its best in the month of April, and the brilliant Prothonotary almost invariably arrives the first week-end in that month. Parula Warblers are fond of using the Usnea lichen at Perry Lake for building their nests, and the Yellow-throated Warbler is almost always found there in the spring and early summer. Also in good numbers at Perry Lake are the Acadian Flycatcher and Blue-gray Gnatcatcher. Sometimes may be found the Louisiana Waterthrush, Kentucky and Hooded Warblers, Yellowthroat, American Redstart, and during spring migration the Palm Warbler. Rarest of the warblers at Perry Lake is the Swainson's Warbler (two birds in April '72). In addition, the Yellow-throated Vireo is often present, and a Philadelphia Vireo was noted in Oct. '71.

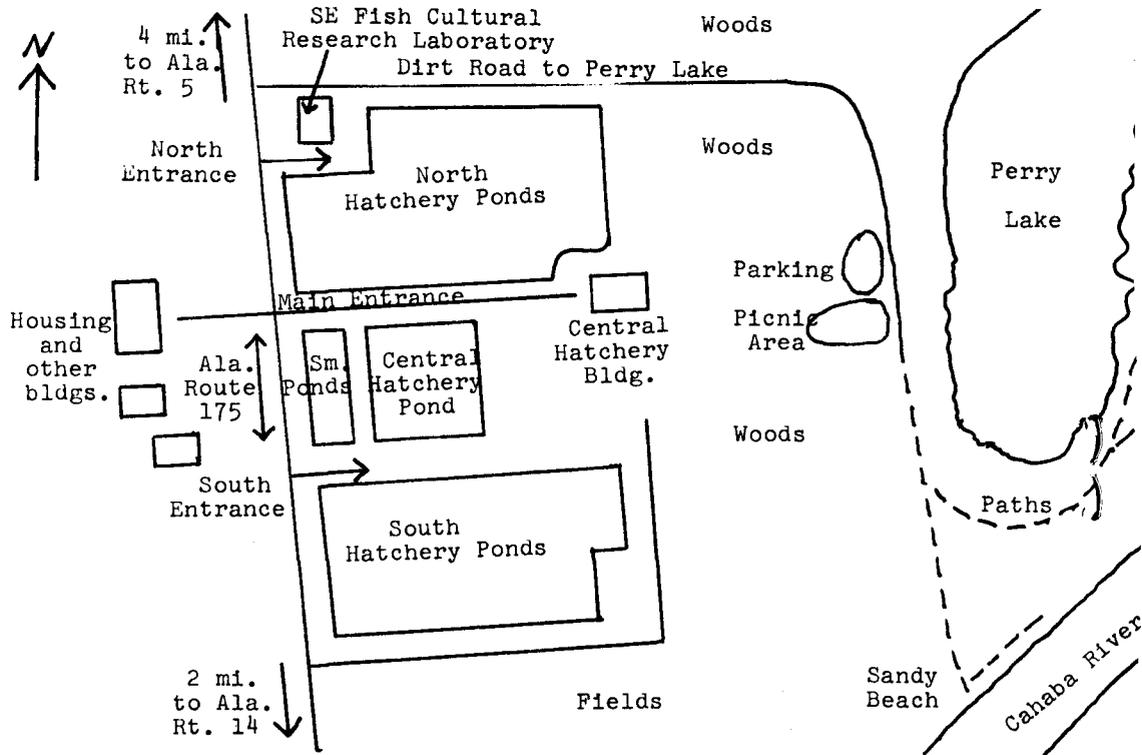
Sparrows and other ground birds - Savannah Sparrows are common along the hatchery dikes in the winter, early spring and late fall,

and Song and a few Swamp Sparrows may usually be seen then. Water Pipits are also present on the dikes and mudflats at those times, and a Sprague's Pipit from the western plains was found in March '72.

Others - Fish Crows, which inhabit river valleys as far north as the coastal plain, may almost always be heard or seen during spring and summer at Perry Lake or the hatchery; this is probably the closest place these coastal birds come to the mountain region. There is also a large roost of Black Vultures nearby, which, when they flock around a fish pond, give it an appearance of the African veldt. Several miles north on Alabama Route 5 a Swainson's Hawk was seen in April '71, and a Turkey was spotted in the clearing west of Perry Lake in that same month. Not at the hatchery but in the City of Marion are noteworthy reports of two finches--Evening Grosbeaks (in Jan. '62 and Feb. '72) and a Painted Bunting (in Mar. '70).

The area is not only known for its birdlife but in spring presents an excellent array of wildflowers, including the brilliant Yellow Jessamine, which usually blooms the last of March.

For those who wish to picnic, there are cement picnic tables and water fountains at Perry Lake. The Steak House is a good restaurant at the junction of Alabama Routes 5 and 14, only a few miles distant, and there is also a Dairy Queen at that intersection. Further south on Alabama 5 toward Marion is the College Inn with restaurant and overnight accommodations.



MARION FISH HATCHERY AND PERRY LAKE

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THE SEASON, Summer

June, July, August, 1972

Thomas A. Imhof, editor

The weather this summer showed a deficiency in temperature and precipitation - a long-term trend. It appears though that our land is drying out and the effects of this shortage of precipitation are far worse than the weather data show. Fewer woodlands and swamps, more silt in the watercourses and reservoirs, more paving, more sunny instead of shady places, all add up to poor capacity to store water. Nowadays it takes only a small shortage of rainfall to be apparent in vegetation, even in crop failures; and conversely when it does rain hard, as with Hurricane Agnes, everything is flooded.

September is, as usual, too early to determine the effectiveness of the year's breeding activities. The Breeding Bird Survey, which measures the breeding stock not the results, is also hard put to provide any statistics this early. So, any indications of abundance or lack of it, are tentative.

County Bird Survey - This year, a few of us took part in the Tennessee Ornithological Societies Breeding Bird Foray in Lawrence County, Tennessee in which TOS attempts on Decoration Day weekend to find out as much as possible about its county of interest. We liked it so well that we decided Alabama needed something similar. So, in looking over a list of counties with no Breeding Bird Survey mileage, we found two adjoining ones in northwest Alabama, Colbert and Franklin. These were immediately chosen for a 2-3 year survey. It was further decided to make at least one trip per season into each county. The end result will be a revised county list with breeding birds notes.

PIED-BILLED GREBE--Many more of these birds summer in Alabama, seldom in the same place twice, yet few are known positively to breed. A new summering locality is L. Wehopka, Shelby Co. where seen June 17 (HHK).

HERON, IBIS, BITTERN--A Great Blue Heron at L. Purdy on July 9 (JVP) may mean that these birds breed closer to B'ham than we think. White Ibis reached a new peak of 1000 birds on June 4 in Faunsdale-Uniontown colony (RRR, EGR); 1-3 birds were at L. Purdy on Aug. 18, 19 (ALM, mob). A nest of a Least Bittern with 1 nestling was found July 25 at Eufaula Refuge (Julian Dusi).

DUCKS--A Mottled Duck was seen at Gulf Shores on July 31 (JVP). Blue-winged Teal, known positively to breed in all regions of the state but the Piedmont, bred again this year in the Tennessee Valley (see Spring Report). It occurs so regularly in June and July in the Mountain Region that no departure for spring or arrival for fall can be ascertained without being arbitrary. For instance, this year 2 were at L. Purdy on July 4 (HHK). First ones for fall