

# ALABAMA BIRDLIFE

## AN UNPRECEDENTED MOVEMENT OF DUCKS ALONG THE NORTHWEST FLORIDA-ALABAMA COASTS

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On 21 March 1995, between 7:45 and 10:15 a.m., I watched line after line of ducks move west in the Gulf of Mexico from surf line to a few hundred yards offshore from my vantage point at Ft. Pickens, Gulf Islands National Seashore, Escambia County, Pensacola, Florida. The movement was comprised predominately of Blue-winged Teal (Anas discors) with a good number of Northern Shovelers (Anas clypeata) mixed in. One line contained scoters (Melanitta sps) and another line had two large orange-tan ducks with white crescents at the base of the tail bringing up the rear, Fulvous Whistling-Ducks (Dendrocygna bicolor). The lines were made up of about 50 birds on average, spaced about three to four minutes apart. I estimated 1800 to 2500 ducks passed by while I was there. Movements tapered off toward the end of the observation period.

On 22 March 1995, I stationed myself at the end of the Gulf Shores, Baldwin County, Alabama, fishing pier between 6:30 and 8:45 a.m. expecting a duck "bonanza." It failed to materialize. However, Phil and Betsy Tetlow (pers. comm.) observed about 300 Blue-winged Teal at Ft. Pickens moving west between 8:00 and 8:45 a.m. I proceeded to Ft. Morgan, Baldwin County, Alabama, where I watched offshore from about 10:30 a.m. Ducks began appearing about 11:00 a.m. and continued to about noon, again in about the

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same numbers and intervals as seen at Ft. Pickens the previous day. I estimated 750 to 1000 birds passed by during that time. All birds appeared to keep moving west toward Dauphin Island, Mobile County, Alabama, and not moving north toward the Mobile Bay delta.

These movements have been observed in previous years along our coasts but not in the magnitude experienced in 1995. Flocks paralleling the coastline have been observed as far east as St. Marks, Leon County, Florida (Stevenson, H.M. and Anderson, B.H., 1994, *The Birdlife of Florida*, University Press of Florida, Gainesville, FL). It is possible that the large numbers of ducks in 1995 are a result of increased breeding success from habitat improvement as a result of the midwest flooding during the summer of 1992 (Field Notes, 1994, 48:5). I learned from a fisherman who fished every morning from the Gulf Shores fishing pier that the duck movement had started 17 March. On 4 April 1995, between 2:30 and 3:30 pm, I observed about 800 to 1000 Blue-winged Teal resting on the surface of the Gulf in rafts of 50 to 100 birds along a five mile stretch of beach along Santa Rosa Island, Escambia County, Florida. Sporadic movements of teal continued into mid-April.

Blue-winged Teal winter from North Carolina and the Gulf Coast south to Argentina and the West Indies (Stevenson and Anderson, 1994). The movements along our coasts were always westerly toward the Central or Mississippi Flyways. Ducks are both diurnal and nocturnal migrants (Gill, F.G. 1990, *Ornithology*, Freeman and Company, N.Y.) and the timing of observations at Ft. Pickens and Ft. Morgan on 22 March suggests that the birds

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seen earlier in the morning at Ft. Pickens and reaching Ft. Morgan by midday were nocturnal migrants originating their journey the night before from somewhere in peninsular Florida. These birds could have wintered there or stopped over from movements out of the West Indies or South America.

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### IN MEMORIAM

#### JOHN FINDLAY III, 1920 - 1995

John Findlay III, born in Wakefield, Massachusetts, was such an anticipated son (after the birth of many girls), that in his honor a local street was named "Findlay Street." Seventy-five years later, true to form, "John Findlay III Drive" was the name given to the main road through Oak Mountain State Park, the largest state park in Alabama. This time the road was so named because his Bluebird Trail and dedication had made a real difference in the recovery of the Bluebird population in the northern Shelby County area.

When a child in Massachusetts, Boy Scouting was the vehicle that developed his interest in birds. John won an award for identifying the most species of nesting birds in the area. His adult life took him to Michigan and Illinois, where he became a member of both Audubon Societies. As a salesman supporting a wife and three children, he nevertheless expanded his knowledge of birds and began his first Bluebird Trail in Illinois with seven nest boxes. In 1977, in Alabama, he again began a Bluebird Trail with seven nest boxes, which increased to 180 nest boxes before his death in January, 1995. His trail