

Local Sightings (April & May, 2010)

## **Celebration of Biotic Rebirth in the Wisconsin Wilds**

by Michael Huebschen

April and May brought a wealth of avian summer residents back to this latitude along with a large number of transients moving back through on their way north.

In early April, there were still great numbers of Redbreasted and Common Mergansers noted along the Lake Michigan shores of Whitefish Dunes State Park and Cave Point in Door County during several visits there. On one occasion, numerous sizeable flocks of Double-Crested Cormorants were noted winging north past Cave Point. On several of those visits, I had a big time trying to capture on digital memory card the impromptu sculpture of incoming surf breaking on the rock outcrops and cliff bases of Cave Point.

Horicon National Wildlife Refuge was the focus of much of my observational adventure in April and May. Muskrat numbers (particularly smaller individuals) and the thinned appearance of many cattail stands on the refuge led one to postulate that the population of this industrious herbivore had a very good reproductive success in 2009. The sad distribution of Muskrat-burger along highway 49 this spring pointed toward the same hypothesis. I had much high adventure photographing a number of them at close range. In the cold days of early spring, they have the habit of dragging a heap of Coontail or stalk of freshly severed cattail ashore, and dining on those at length while drying their luxurious fur in the warming sun. Their skill in consuming the heart of a cattail stalk is impressive.

At the peak of the migration, hundreds of Scaups (more Lessers than Greater) were noted along Highway 49. A fair scattering of Canvasbacks were observed during the peak of the Scaup migration. Numbers of Redheads built as the Scaup numbers tapered down. Large numbers of Shovelers were present early on and are still there in significant numbers. (I have seen hens with broods there in previous years.) There are still significant numbers of Gadwalls and Redheads present, and will probably produce some broods. One of my greatest pleasures this year was to be able to photograph a pair of American Wigeon at fairly close range in late April. Large numbers of Ruddy Ducks were present during the migration of Scaups and Canvasbacks. Many pairs are still present, and presumably will produce a considerable number of broods. A few Greenwinged Teal were seen in April, but not for a very long time span. Wood Ducks and Hooded Mergansers were observed in various locations and are still there. A dozen or so Trumpeter Swans were seen early in April and probably one or more pairs are nesting. (As an update, a pair of Trumpeter Swans with five Cygnets was noted on one of the ponds along the drive-through trail on 10 June 2010. I had particularly good fortune photographing White Pelicans along the boardwalk on the southeast end of the drive-through trail in late April.

By May 1, many broods of Canada Geese were being escorted by their very protective parents. One is led to speculate that the parents' hissing with mouth agape and wings outstretched would be enough to keep even persistent troublemakers at bay. On my last visit (28 May), I

chanced upon a half dozen Mallard broods, and three Coots with broods. Some might opine that young Coots are a tad homely. I find their spectacular coloring and mild mannered behavior a refreshing alternative to the aggressive affect of their parents when in territorial interaction with various duck species. I had only one encounter with their close cousin, the Common Moorhen, along Ledge Rd. (I still find myself repeating the old name Gallinule to myself in deference to the phonetic pleasure that it has always brought me.) Hopefully, I will not have occasion to blurt that out at some future gathering with formal champions of A.O.U. propriety within listening distance. I have no quarrel with their periodic common name revisions, but cling to my personal nostalgia regarding phonetic beauty.

I'm fairly certain that my wife and I missed this year's peak of the shorebird migration by being on vacation in Vilas Co. from May 8 through May 16. I noted four Dunlins on the mudflats south of "Federal Dike" road way back in early April. On 17 May, I chanced upon Dunlins, Least Sandpipers and Ruddy Turnstones. I spent about three hours trying to photograph a band of four Ruddy Turnstones that were foraging the riprap and cattail debris along the north shoulder of highway 49. Through that time period, I put quite a few images into the memory card. On processing one of the best of those images the next day, I discovered much to my chagrin that the gravel below my prize bird image was littered with the debris of leftover fruit salad. I suspected either a simple case of littering, or an attempt to entice the attentions of a foraging muskrat. There was some solace in the knowledge that the Turnstones had paid no attention to the grape, apple and orange morsels. They typically work the rocks and shoreline debris for invertebrates. Courtesy of the kindness of another birder I got to view a Glossy Ibis several times in the afternoon near the pumphouse. On a 27 May visit, I was blessed with great fortune. Around 5:50 A.M., I eased up on a shallowly flooded cattail flat just east of the overflow structures on Federal Dike Road, and spent the next 90 minutes or so playing telephoto tag with two Great Egrets and 10 or more Black Crowned Nightheronns that were having good success stalking small fish (likely minnows and darters). I have often observed Great Egrets catching Rainbow Darters in the pools of the marsh. As the heron numbers began to thin, a skyward glimpse caught the aerial grace and elegance of a pair of Black-necked Stilts passing fairly low overhead in tandem! With the aid of vehicle mirrors, I watched them circle and land further west, near the culverts' outflow channel. As I eased up in that direction, they took wing and headed toward the mudbars to the south. As great luck would have it, a third individual appeared and lit back toward the heron fishing flat fairly close to the road. For about the next 20 minutes, I crept back and forth with vehicle on the road as this individual fed in the mud and shallow water close by. With favorable light angle being scarce, I consumed a certain number of not completely proper incantations and mutterings while trying to frame a very mobile subject in DSLR viewfinder. As good fortune would have it, I managed the capture of a number of decent images (far superior to anything I'd gotten previously). I hope that the pair will nest there this year. There were still some Dunlins working that mudbar area to the south. That same day, I saw 2 Ruddy Turnstones still working the north shoulder of highway 49. By that date, many Forster's and Black Terns were working the shallow flats for their respective quarry.

Through my visits in April and May, I heard, but never got to see American Bitterns, Virginia Rails, and Soras.

I saw but one Eastern Meadowlark again this year. I'm wondering if they are becoming a species of special concern. In late May, I noted a good number of Bobolinks in some of the prairie uplands on the marsh's eastern periphery. I'm suspicious that a pair of Northern Harriers may well be nesting in one of those prairies just south of Old Marsh Road.

On two trips to Vilas Co. this spring, many Bald Eagles were observed on the likes of Trout Lake, Mielke Lake, Fallison Lake, Big Lake, Clear Lake, and Firefly Lake. Osprey were seen at Big Lake, Fallison Lake, & Deadwood Lake. Common Loons were present on many lakes. Among the many passerine songs that tickled my tympanums, the auditory jewel of the trip involved the eery trill of Wood and Hermit Thrushes. (I need to do a bit more work to be confident about certain I.D. of the two songs.) White-throated sparrows were heard in a number of locales. (We heard one in our neighborhood a couple of times this spring, but never got to see any. Six or eight at a time was commonplace in the backyard in years past for a period of a week or more.) Numerous Pileated Woodpeckers were seen and heard.

2 and 3 June found me engrossed in the entertainment of dragonflies at Deadwood and Little John Jr. Lakes. The species array included Common Whitetails, Chalk-fronted Corporals, Calico Pennants (predominantly females), Four-Spotted Skimmers, and some others which I have yet to identify from my photos. (On May 27, I had spent a solid hour photographing Four-spotted Skimmers along Ledge Rd. at Horicon N.W.R.).

One afternoon hike on the North Trout Nature Trail brought me the auditory comfort of passerine song, and the visual delights of Blueflag, Bunchberry, Canada Mayflower, Bluebead Lily, Solomon's Plume, and Columbine. A tiny bit of exploration at the juncture of Stevenson Creek and Trout Lake brought me my first introduction to Nodding Trillium.

Finally, the area northeast of Boulder Junction (Vilas Co.) brought us the delight of the white deer of that area. The debate may not be settled as to whether they are albinos in the most restrictive scientific definitional framework, but they are no less spectacular! Right now they are very wary of human presence because fawning season is at hand. That will probably ease off in about two or three weeks when the fawns gain good mobility. Anyone visiting that area can easily get directions as to which roads to tour early morning and early evening from local businesses or the Chamber of Commerce.