

Yukon Warbler

Newsletter of the Yukon Bird Club

Spring / Summer 2008



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YUKON BIRD CLUB

Promoting awareness, appreciation, and conservation of Yukon birds and their habitats

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Yukon Warbler editor: Boris Dobrowolsky
Yukon Warbler - Spring Summer 2008

Cover Photo

Tundra Swan, by Cameron Eckert
2007-06-22, Hershel Island YT

Back Cover Graphic
From Jim Hawking Photo

AGM Report

The Yukon Bird Club Annual General Meeting was held February 4th. There have been a few changes. Helmut Grünberg takes over as President. Welcome to two new executive members Clive Osborne and Ben Schonewille. Clive takes over as Secretary and Ben will be a director. The proposed constitutional changes that were sent to all members, were passed.

Being a volunteer on a board like the Yukon Bird Club can be time consuming. We thank all these hard working volunteers and wish them the best of luck.

The position of newsletter director remains vacant if you would like to volunteer your time and skills please contact one of the Executive members.

2008 Board of Directors

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Submissions and Comments Wanted

Please send us your articles and photos. You can email to yukonbirdclub@gmail.com and put attention newsletter editor in the subject line. Or send your regular mail to the Yukon Bird Club post box and put attention newsletter director. We want your comments good or bad.



Field Notes: *Observations from the field* Summer 2007

Compiled by Cameron D.Eckert

Please report your observations to the Yukon Bird Club via the sightings coordinator, Cameron Eckert phone: 667-4630; email: cdeckert@northwestel.net, or Helmut Grünberg phone 667-6703; email: grunberg@northwestel.net. Include important details such as date, location, number, and observer(s). Please provide as much detail as possible for breeding records, and descriptions of rare sightings. All observations will be forwarded to the Canadian Wildlife Service for inclusion in the comprehensive Birds of the Yukon Database.

An ongoing surge of extralimital species across the north continues to fascinate and trouble northern birders. Reports of Magnolia Warbler, Ovenbird, Red-eyed Vireo, and Western Tanager added to the ever growing list of neotropical migrants appearing well beyond their ranges in the northwest. A highlight of the season was the Yukon's first American White Pelican. Two southern invaders bred for the first time in the territory this summer; an influx of American Crows in Watson Lake, Teslin, and Whitehorse culminated in the territory's first confirmed breeding record for this northward expanding corvid. While the crows were greeted with vague indifference; the territory's first nesting House Sparrows inspired even less excitement. The summer weather was warmer than average; glacial melt, heavy winter snow pack, and rain made for record flooding in the Yukon Southern Lakes. The Arctic regions were again increasingly warmer than usual this summer.

WATERFOWL THROUGH SHOREBIRDS

A couple of late Brant were seen at Nares Lake 6 June (CE, HG). A pair of Trumpeter Swans was again noted nesting this year in Tombstone Park 28 Jun; while 4 Tundra Swans were seen on the same day at Chapman Lake just north of Tombstone Park (BMA et al.). A male Hooded Merganser, very rare in central Yukon, was seen near Dawson 26 June (LD, KR). A noteworthy summer concentration of 77 Ruddy Ducks was recorded at the Whitehorse sewage ponds 27 July (BD, HG). A female White-tailed Ptarmigan with a brood of at least 5 chicks was seen on Keno Hill 6 July (ph. MOD). A casual stop to check a group of seemingly out-of-place swans at Nares Lake 6 June yielded the Yukon's

first **American White Pelicans** (DP); a quick call to other birders ensured that the 4 pelicans were photo-documented (ph. CE, HG). In response to subsequent media coverage of the pelicans it was learned that they had been seen at nearby Tagish for about a week (ph. LG).



American Pelicans Nares Lake 2007-06-05
Photo C. Eckert

An immature Bald Eagle at Herschel Island 20 June (ph. CE, DA, PF, LJM) established just the second record for the island. A fly-bye Black-bellied Plover at Wright Pass (Yukon/NWT border) 8 June (SF, DM) may have been the first record for the Dempster Highway. Nesting Wandering Tattlers are rarely reported and always noteworthy; a pair of adult tattlers with a small chick were found in an alpine wetland along the upper Ketz River 2 July (ph. BS). Late migrant shorebirds at Herschel Island included 1 Black-bellied Plover and 3&4 White-rumped Sandpipers 8-9 June (AK); also passing through at Pauline Cove on Herschel Island were 4



Buff-breasted Sandpipers 21 Jun, and 3 Red Phalaropes (2 fem., 1 m.) 18 June (ph. CE). An Arctic Fox made short work of most of the nesting Baird's and Semipalmated sandpipers during night time forays at Pauline Cove, Herschel Island on 21-23 Jun; however, it seems that the broken-wing trick works on foxes as the nesting Semipalmated Plovers survived (CE).

GULLS THROUGH FINCHES

A concentration of 300 Bonaparte's Gulls on Drury Lake 6 June (PS) seemed odd for the date. A Great Gray Owl near Eagle Plains 8 June was a highlight for a couple of Dempster Highway travelers (SF, DM). A Short-eared Owl nest with 2 eggs was found at Pauline Cove, Herschel Island 21 June (ph. CE, DA, PF, LJM).



*Short-eared Owl nest, Herschel Island 2007-06-27
Photo C. Eckert*

A Barn Swallow well beyond its range was at Herschel Island 23 June (CE). Early June saw a few migrants still arriving at Albert Creek such as a Yellow-bellied Flycatcher banded 4 June (TMK); 4 were heard on the Mayo Lake Rd. B.B.S. 12 June (MOD). A Warbling Vireo singing at Tombstone Park 9 June (HG et al.) provided the first Dempster Highway record for the species. A Red-eyed Vireo, rare but apparently regular in the Watson Lake area, was seen at Albert Creek 4 June (TMK). American Crows are steadily gaining a foothold in the Yukon; small numbers were seen in Watson Lake and

nearby Albert Creek through the summer (ph. CE; TMK); 1 crow was seen in Teslin 10 June (BS); in Whitehorse 2 or 3 American Crows were seen through the summer and breeding was confirmed 16 & 26 July when recently-fledged crows were seen being fed by adults (BMu; ph. CE, PS).



*American Crow, Whitehorse 2007-07-26
Photo C. Eckert*

A displaying Northern Wheatear was right on cue for a group of birders on Goldensides Mountain in Tombstone Park 29 June (BMa et al.). An American Robin was rare on Herschel Island 8-9 June (AK, DR), and a female Varied Thrush provided a first island record there 20 June (ph. CE, DA, PF, LJM). A **Northern Mockingbird** was reported from the Takhini River valley w. of Whitehorse 3 June (wd. JM). A pair of Eastern Yellow Wagtails carrying food and alarm calling was a good indication that young were somewhere nearby at the Firth River delta 11 July (HM). Tennessee Warbler numbers have increased in the Yukon in recent years; this species was reported relatively high numbers across the south; further north, 2 were singing at Mayo 5 June (MOD), 2 were on the Wareham Lake BBS 12 June (MOD), and 1 was at Tombstone Park 27 June (BMa et al.). A Magnolia Warbler, well west of its Yukon range, was seen in Whitehorse 5 June (LC). A Bay-breasted Warbler, rare but apparently increasingly regular, was seen at Albert Creek 2-4 June (TMK). An Ovenbird, the first for southwest Yukon, was heard singing near the Auriol trail, south of Haines Junction 13 June (LC). Western Tanagers seen west of their normal Yukon range



included 1 in Haines Junction 5 June (ph. TH), and singles in Whitehorse 11 & 20 June (PS). A male



Harris's Sparrow, Hershel Island 2007-06-20
Photo C. Eckert

Harris's Sparrow singing on a wide-ranging treeless territory at Herschel Island 18-24 June provided the Yukon's second photo-documented record (AK, CK, ph. CE, DR); this species was reported without details from Herschel Island in 1987.



Harris's Sparrow, Hershel Island 2007-06-20
Photo C. Eckert

A vagrant Dark-eye Junco was at Herschel 8 June (DR). A cluster of about 10 Smith's Longspur at Surfbird Mountain km 97 on the Dempster 4 June was enjoyed by a group of visiting birders on a northern tour (ph. SF et al.).

A female Red-winged Blackbird on Herschel Island 18-21 June (AK, ph. CE) was just the second of its kind to wander to that Arctic island. Three Gray-crowned Rosy-Finches were seen on Keno Hill 7 July (MOD). Two fuzzy juvenile Common Redpolls in downtown Whitehorse 26 June (PS) indicated lowland nesting this year for this species. A rich White Spruce cone crop yielded an explosion of breeding White-winged Crossbills across southern and central Yukon in July (m.ob.).



House Sparrow, Whitehorse, 2007-07-22
Photo C. Eckert

A pair of **House Sparrows**, a species not previously known to breed in the Yukon, was found nesting in Whitehorse 19 July (ph. CE); by 22 July all 4 young had fledged and were being fed by the adults (ph. CE). A lone female House Sparrow was seen in Carcross through July (DK).

Picture HOSP

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At The Library

The Yukon Bird Club has a donated the following books to the Yukon Libraries Branch over the last year.

All Things Reconsidered

My Birding Adventures

by Roger Tory Peterson

The Birder's Companion

by Stephen Moss

Songbird Journeys

Four Seasons in the Lives of Migratory Birds

by Miyoko Chu (Author)

The Wind Masters

by Pete Dunn

The Big Year

A Tale of Man, Nature, and Fowl Obsession

by Mark Obmascik

Birds of Heaven

by Ben Okri

The Geese of Beaver Bog

by Bernd Heinrich

The Grail Bird

Hot on the Trail of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker

by Tim Gallagher

Return of the Osprey

by David Gessner

The Birds of Heaven

by Peter Matthiessen

Greystone Press, Generously Sent These Books to the Yukon Bird Club and they have been donated to the Yukon Libraries

An Enchantment of Birds

by Richard Cannings

Spotted Owls

Photos by Jared Hobbs

Shadows in an Old-Growth Forest

Text by Richard Cannings

Birds and Planes

A Peregrine Falcon while stooping (diving) to catch a prey, passed an airplane that was descending at 173 mph (280 km/hr).

On November 29, 1975 an airplane collided with a Rüppels Griffon, an East African species. The collision took place at 37,900 feet (11,560m).

In North America , the altitude record was set by a Mallard on July 9, 1963. It collided with a Western Airlines jet at 20,900 (6,000 m).



Your Pictures

This is your space. Please send us your pictures.

Send them to Newsletter Editor yukonbirdclub@gmail.com



A Red-breasted Nuthatch. At the feeder in Riverdale Photo by A.P.



American Three-toed Woodpecker, Tagish Photo Shyloh Van Delft, Jan 28, 2008



Fox on the feeder, Riverdale Photo AP



Mule deer at Pilot Mt. Sub. Div. Photo BD



The following is an excerpt from a field trip report prepared by Sam and Donna Fried of Flights of Fancy Adventures a birding guiding company. These excerpts are from the Dempster Highway and Yukon Arctic Coast portion of the trip which happened in May and June of 2007. Photos are by Steve Ballentine a participant on the trip.



Dempster Highway Photo Steve Ballentine

TRIP REPORT

At long last, we set off the next morning, June 4, 2007, for the full ride on The Dempster. Today our goal was to drive half the length of this arctic gravel ribbon of a road, arriving at the Eagle Plains Hotel by 7:00 PM for dinner. Not an easy task, covering about 250 miles from Dawson City, at an average birding speed of about 20 MPH. We proceeded pretty quickly to the Tombstone Campground and then took a side road winding steeply up into the tundra. A pair of Rock Ptarmigan sat about 50 yards out amidst the softly colored grasses, rocks, mosses, lichens and tiny alpine flowers that were just beginning to emerge. I walked above and beyond them, and ptarmigan being the intelligent creatures that they are, herded them back toward the van, getting them to within 40 feet or so before they started a guttural rasping conversation and flew off. 100 yards further down the slope, a pair of Willow Ptarmigan sat on a tussock right next to the road, making one participant nearly orgasmic with delight. Today the pool at the Jensen Corral had Least, Spotted and Semipalmated Sandpipers, Say's Phoebe and Semipalmated Plover. As we continued on through the Blackstone River Uplands, we encountered Arctic Terns at every stream crossing. As we plunged across a river canyon, a Peregrine Falcon shot through. We entered the barren gray hills of Windy Pass in the Richardson Mountains, part of an area known as

Beringia, which was not glaciated in the most recent ice ages. Many relict species survived here, including several insects that are not found anywhere else on earth. But we were not after bugs – our lunch stop put us right across the valley from an eroding cliff face with several precarious ledges, and on one of these ledges was a gigantic nest that has been in use by a pair of Gyrfalcons since anyone can remember. One of the pair was sitting quietly on the nest, apparently incubating eggs. We were extremely fortunate when the other Gyr flew in and perched majestically on a nearby rock promontory, looking for all the world as if it owned the valley. Which, as a matter of fact, it did. The remainder of the drive was through what had been dense and monotonous spruce forest – the Eagle Plains. However, in the past 4 years, there have been numerous forest fires in the area, and much of the land had been burned and was in a state of recovery. It actually made the drive more interesting. One particular viewpoint had not changed – a high overlook with a commanding view of the Ogilvie River valley framed by the Richardson Mountains. It was getting late, however, so we sped the remaining 50 miles to Eagle Plains and made it to the restaurant right on the money for dinner. Time wise, that is. Dinner itself, was not even close to the money. However, you can't often say that you ate at the best restaurant in a 500-mile circle. We did, and lived to tell the tale.



Lapland Longspur Photo by Steve Ballentine

June 5: No early start today. Flat tire must be fixed before hitting the road. Once we do get going, however, it's a wonderful day. 25 miles up the pike, we cross the Arctic Circle! Official "crossing" certificates are handed out as we officially enter "The Land of the Midnight Sun". Only two ferries and 200 more miles of The Dempster stand between us and Inuvik, Northwest Territories. The sun is shining and the country is spectacularly beautiful. The only problem is that the wind is howling, making



birding rather difficult. We tried a walk at the YT/NWT border, but conditions made birding almost impossible. Continuing down to lower ground provided some cover, so we got out on the tundra and found our first Lapland Longspurs, with a few pairs nesting in a broad sweep of golden grass that went on to distant mountains. It was quite easy walking down the hill, but coming back up was quite another thing, like walking on a deep, wet sponge full of holes.



Smith's Longspur, Photo Steve Ballentine

At Wright Pass, just before descending to the Arctic coastal plain, we took another walk up a new microwave relay station road. Still quite windy, but we were able to pick out a few Horned Larks and American Pipits nesting in the higher areas. Prior to the ferries opening, about the only traffic on this stretch of road is from the First Nations people who live here. When the caribou gather near the road they are hunted. It seemed as if much of the skinning was done near the road, so we found enough parts to almost put together a whole caribou. We then dropped down off the tundra to the Peel River ferry crossing, where the ferry was waiting for us like we had called ahead with reservations. The river was quite low for the season, so the earth ramps extended out into the river about 50 feet further than normal to allow boarding on this cable-run ferry. Crossing was swift and we continued about 70 miles to the second ferry crossing at the mighty Mackenzie River, second largest river in North America, stopping only for a pair of Pacific loons that seem to nest on every lake through this stretch. We had to wait a bit for the ferry, but made good use of the time with a reading of "The Shooting of Dan McGrew", another great Robert Service poem. The Mackenzie was running low as well, but the wind and swift current made it very difficult for the ferry captain to land on the opposite shore before being swept downstream. Several attempts were necessary for a

successful landing. We were entertained in the meantime by watching a pair of Pacific Loons and numerous Glaucous Gulls feeding along the river. Try as we might, checking every shaggy spruce top for hundreds of miles, we could not come up with a Northern Hawk-owl, but Steve did spot a lovely Short-eared Owl, first perched and then flying back and forth like a huge moth, as it hunted a large wet meadow. Finally, at about 9:30 PM, we pulled into the town of Inuvik, the end of the road (literally). My wife, Donna, had flown in to Inuvik to meet us and she was stoically waiting there for us as we arrived at the Arctic Chalet Inn two hours late. Blame the tire. Donna had scouted the place, though and had just the late night Canadian/Chinese/Palestinian restaurant for us. Good food and good night.



Willow Ptarmigan, Photo Steve Ballentine

Now the excitement level rose a notch or two. After breakfast, June 6, we drove to the Inuvik airport and boarded a charter flight that would take us to Herschel Island and Shingle Point, both in the Yukon Territory and on the Beaufort Sea, part of the Arctic Ocean. We had a twin-engine De Havilland Otter, the plane made famous for its use rescuing people from places as remote as Antarctic science stations. For about an hour, we flew north over the vast Mackenzie River delta, its channels weaving crazily throughout like tangled vines. Every



color of water could be seen, from silt-laden main rivers to clear-running streams and interior lakes. Pairs and sometimes dozens of Tundra Swans could be seen



Stilt Sandpiper, Photo Steve Ballentine

setting up housekeeping where the waters had receded enough to open their nesting areas. Ice was still present in the slower backwaters, where the recent melt-off hadn't yet washed it out to sea. As we approached the Beaufort Sea, brilliant white pack ice filled the mouth of the delta, pushed in by the wind and extending for miles into the sea. What amazed me was that 10 miles offshore, the ice stopped and the sea was wide open unfrozen water. Here we are, in the Arctic Ocean, in early June, and there is no pack ice? The perfectly clear blue water sparkled in the morning sun, but this was the most profound evidence of global warming I have seen. The pilots told me that although the spring had been cold, last fall was so mild that the pack ice had been very late in forming. As a result, it was thawing and breaking up much earlier than ever this spring. We're in major trouble here, folks. Greenhouse gases aside, we continued on our way and approached the shores of Herschel Island, made famous in the 19th century as an arctic whaling station. Up to 2000 men would spend their long dark winters here; wooden ships locked in the ice, waiting for spring break-up to begin chasing whales again and then a long ride home. Now a Canadian National Heritage Site, private planes can land on the beach, once it is cleared of ice and snow. Unfortunately, there was still too much snow on the beach for us to land, so we proceeded to circle the island, flying low enough that we could identify Common Eider and Snowy Owl. A herd of Barren Ground Caribou galloped across the frozen plain, but what was most amazing and certainly one the highlights of this great adventure, was a herd of about 20 Musk Ox feeding on the tundra. We circled around them, flying sideways at time so that each side of the plane had a perfect view, and watched

breathlessly as they gathered their four youngsters and formed a circle, massive horned heads facing out, to defend themselves against attack. What a fantastic thrill to see these true mega fauna of the high arctic! We continued on, flying low over the ice, seeing many ringed seals lying next to their breathing holes (aiglus) and landed at Shingle Point on the mainland. This runway is paved and permanent to service the DEW line station here, which is completely computer operated and rarely needs human visitation. With plenty of time to wander, we walked down the bluff to the shore of the Arctic Ocean to see what we could see. In the shoreline mud, there were fresh grizzly tracks, keeping us all on our toes. Overhead, brilliantly white Glaucous Gulls rode the air currents off the bluff, framed by an equally stunning arctic blue sky. A dark morph Parasitic Jaeger slowly flew by, long pointed tail feathers prominent along with its white wing flashes. A Rough-legged Hawk also slowly glided by. There were numerous Common Redpolls in the willow thickets and we called out a couple of Hoary Redpolls as well. Interesting – the Commons are always in groups and never respond to recordings, but the Hoarys are usually singles and did have the good manners to visit when I played their song.



Red-necked Phalarope, Photo Steve Ballentine

Wilson's and Orange-crowned Warblers also nest here and the Wilson's is a unique tundra-breeding race. Red-necked Phalaropes spun in small melt water pools near the runway. We then walked about a mile to the DEW station. Willow Ptarmigan were EVERYWHERE! All males, since the females were apparently on their nests, leaving all the "Willies" with nothing to do except chase each other around and generally act stupid. We flew back to Inuvik after a fantastic day in the air and on the ground.

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Coastal Sailing and Birding in Southeast Alaska

Pelagic: Of, relating to, or living in open oceans or seas rather than waters adjacent to land or inland waters: pelagic birds.

Well using that adjective I guess you could say that most of my sail trips in Southeast Alaska are more in the nature of coastal. But sometimes on the outside coast by some of the big Capes you do get to see pelagic birds such as petrels, shearwaters and albatrosses. I am drawn there by the beauty and the wildness. The birds, fishes and marine mammal are drawn there by a rich source of food produced by the mixing of tidal currents and ocean currents.



View from Coronation Island with Baranof Island, Chatham Strait, Kui Island and Sumner Strait in distance

This summer we cruised for a month and a half. The most exciting area we sailed through was where the waters of Chatham Strait and Sumner Strait meet the ocean, in the vicinity of Coronation Island.



Common Murres

Birding on the high seas can be challenging. The ocean is moving the boat is moving and the birds are moving and all this motion can be detrimental to getting a decent view much less a decent picture. On this occasion the ocean was windless, like glass, as we motored from Cape Ommaney in the North to Coronation Island to the south.

With the boat on autopilot and only a gentle 5 foot swell, conditions were perfect to view birds. We were treated to views of Shearwaters, Common Murres, Rhinoceros Auklets, Ancient Murrelets, Marbled Murrelets, Pelagic Commorants, Tufted and Horned Puffins, Glaucous-winged Gulls and the holy grail of birds, the Black-footed Albatross.

Black-footed Albatrosses are known to undertake journeys from Hawaii to the West Coast of North America (sometimes traveling over 15,000 km round trip) to find food for their

young. I truly felt privileged to see one soar by the boat and land on the sea close by.



Tufted Puffin

As we approached the idyllic anchorage of Egg Harbour we viewed Humpback Whales, Steller's Sea Lions, Dall Porpoises and Sea Otters. A large colony of Pelagic Commorants guarded the entrance to the anchorage. Though we didn't hoist a sail all day it was a memorable trip. After anchoring the boat in a perfect anchorage under the watchful eyes of families of sea otters we spent the afternoon climbing nearby Pin Peak. A two hour climb up this steep bare crowned peak rewarded us with panoramic views of Cape Ommaney, Chatham Strait, Cape Decision, and Sumner Strait and the Pacific Ocean stretching into the distance.

Now most cruising stories would finish with the happy couple relaxing in the cockpit while drinking a glass of wine and watching the fresh caught salmon cooking on the barbeque. Unfortunately the wine box was empty and we never got around to fishing that day.

Photos and Story by Boris Dobrowolsky



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