

SHOREBIRDS

If you have walked along the sandy beaches that line the coast of the Northumberland Strait you have without doubt chased (inadvertently) small but quick-footed birds feeding in the sand and seaweed where the waves lap along the shore. Perhaps after a bit, a small flock will take off into the breeze, swing out to the sea, come around, their wings flashing in the sunlight where seemingly as one, they turn sharply and land behind you to resume feeding. And feed they must. These birds, collectively thought of as “shorebirds” are more than likely resting and feeding to resume their very long migration between breeding grounds far to the north and winter homes far to the south. Only a few such birds actually call the Northumberland Strait or even New Brunswick their summer home.

Perhaps one of the best known shorebirds that breed here is the threatened Piping Plover. If you visit Kelly’s Beach in Kouchibouguac National Park you will have seen signs prohibiting human activity in areas where this bird nests. The reason for this is that the Piping Plovers nests on the beach and can be disturbed during the nesting process, threatening their continued survival. In 1996 only 146 adults were reported in New Brunswick and it seems that this number hasn’t improved since then. Other shorebirds (although not restricted to the sea shore) that can be local New Brunswick summer residents are the Spotted Sandpiper and Killdeer.



Juvenile Piping Plover (Kouchibouguac NP)



Ruddy Turnstone (Cap Lumiere)

Now is the time when we will start to see the migratory shorebirds passing through our region. Recently we spotted a dozen or so Ruddy Turnstones feeding quite frantically near Richibucto at Cap Lumiere. Where there are small stones in the inter-tidal zone these colourful birds can be found at this time of year and they are amazing to watch as they turn small stones over to gobble up the little animals they find. Turnstones breed in the summer in the high Arctic and winter far to the south along much of the coast of South America. No wonder they seemed to be frantic about eating at Cap Lumiere! Last fall we saw Semipalmated Plovers and Sanderlings darting back and forth between the incoming and outgoing waves as we walked along the

beach at Kouchibouguac National Park, south of Kelly's Beach. They were finding their dinner in the sand on their way also from the north to south where they will spend the winter.



Semipalmated Plover (Kouchibouguac NP)



Sanderlings (Kouchibouguac NP)

Many thousands of Semipalmated Sandpipers visit Mary's Point on the Fundy shore (near Fundy National Park), a "hot spot" for migratory birds. They rest and feed on the inter-tidal mudflats that the renowned Fundy tides create. They are quite a spectacle for a few weeks every August. After this feed during which they can double their weight, they fly thousands of kilometers non-stop in two to three days to get to the northern coast South America to spend winter. The mud shrimp at Mary's Point and other nearby locations is the only source of food available for this migration. Amazingly these birds are only 6 inches long and weigh less than an ounce before "fattening up" for their long journey.



Semipalmated Sandpipers (Mary's Pt., Bay of Fundy)

What is interesting about the annual migration of birds is that families do not always travel together. In some species often the females start their journey first, followed weeks later by the males and then the juveniles can be the last to leave on the long journey, (relying, it is thought, on instinct to find their way!).

Good places to see shorebirds nearby are Escuminac, Tabusintac, Neguac and or any sandy shore along the Miramichi River estuary. Most spend their time along salt water shores but some do make visits to fresh water ponds and rivers.



Juvenile Sanderling (Kouchibouguac NP)



Solitary Sandpipers (Miramichi Marsh)

Other seasonal transient birds include: Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs (appropriately named and differing only by in beak length and voice), Least Sandpipers, Semipalmated Sandpipers, Semipalmated Plover and Solitary Sandpipers. (semipalmated means partially webbed feet).

Although the Semipalmated Sandpiper flies directly to South America, other migrants such as the already threatened Piping Plover, will visit the Gulf of Mexico this fall. Let's hope they can find clean and fresh shores on which to land to feed and rest!

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