

Snowy Plover: Fifth Illinois record

by William H. Atwood

On Sunday, 27 April 2003 I decided to take one of my typical birding runs west of Jacksonville. For me, these outings usually consist of checking four to five local spots for some of the less typical breeding birds of the corn and soybean desert of central Illinois. Of course, in late April, I also hope to find a nice variety of returning migrants.

My first stop was at a bridge over Mauvaisterre Creek, in an area the locals call Noble's Swamp. Here, I usually look and listen for Pileated Woodpecker, Northern Parula, Yellow-throated and Prothonotary Warblers, American Redstart and Wood Thrush. In wet years, a pair of Hooded Mergansers with young may be present.

From Noble's Swamp I headed to a unique, sandy upland area north of Arenzville. In summer this area has a nice selection of butterflies, including the regal fritillary. Breeding birds in this area include woodcock, Blue Grosbeak and Yellow-breasted Chat. After Arenzville, I travel farther west to IDNR's Meredosia Hill Prairie which hosts breeding Yellow-breasted Chat and Bell's Vireo.

On these trips I usually end up at Meredosia NWR. The Refuge consists of 3,852 acres of mixed habitat and is bordered by the Illinois River on its western side. Habitat types include bottomland forest, seasonal floodplain wetlands, prairie and part of a large backwater lake, Meredosia Lake.

When the level of the Illinois River is near or below normal pool, the southern end of Meredosia Lake

Snowy Plover. 28 April 2003. Meredosia Lake, Morgan County. Photo by Travis A. Mahan.



will develop a fair sized mudflat. It's been my experience that there is almost something of interest present on this flat anytime from March through November. There is not any developed access to this part of the lake, but it's just a 30 yard walk through brush from Beach Road to the shoreline. The flat is nowhere near the size of Lake Chautauqua's lower pool, and doesn't host the vast number of shorebirds typically found there. However, its smaller size and proximity to the shore provide much better viewing. This is particularly true during the early morning, when the sun is behind the viewer.

On this day a quick scan of the flat turned up all of two shorebirds, one of which was an obvious Killdeer. The other appeared to be a Semipalmated Plover. For late April, things were looking unusually dull. I set up my spotting scope to scan the remainder of the lake and the bluffs to the west. Then I scanned the flat to see if anything new had dropped in. No new birds, but the Semipalmated Plover suddenly turned into a... well... not a Semipalmated Plover!

This bird was still definitely a plover, but it was noticeably paler than a Semipalmated, and the collar was incomplete. The gears in my rusty brain began grinding and finally spit out Piping Plover and Snowy Plover as the two possible

candidates for this bird's species. My only prior experience with either of these was with Snowy Plovers a number of years ago at Cheyenne Bottoms in Kansas; so it was clear that I was going to need a little help to make a definite determination. I retreated to my Cherokee, hoping that I had a field guide inside. Luckily I found both the Kaufman's and National Geographic guides, then went back for further examination of the mystery plover. In addition to the abovementioned field marks, the plover had dark legs, an all dark bill and a blackish ear patch. These marks combined with the fact that in late April it should be in alternate plumage, led to the final answer of Snowy Plover (*Charadrius alexandrinus*).

I figured a Snowy was a bit of a rarity, so I went into Meredosia and made a couple telephone calls to inform the area birders. After some additional birding around Meredosia I returned home and made a post to IBET, Illinois' online bird list serve. Tony Ward and Bob Randall were able to observe the Snowy Plover later that day. Myrna Deaton and Travis Mahan came over from Decatur and re-found it the following day. Travis also got a few photos. Craig Taylor was apparently the last birder to find the plover on 29 April.

Later I found out that this was only the fifth record of Snowy Plover in Illinois. It was a nice experience to have folks from across the state chasing a bird I found instead of the usual vice versa. I suppose it adds further credence to the saying "luck is being in the field."

The fourth record for Snowy Plover in Illinois was recorded 28 April 2001 at Grassy Slough Preserve, Belknap, Johnson County and