

Report on Waterbird Migration Study at Blake Point - 2014

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Introduction

The authors designed and carried out a three month waterbird count from a point near Copper Harbor in Keweenaw County and are presently working to summarize these data and to compare them with similar data from Whitefish Point Bird Observatory's fall waterbird count. We thought that having seven days of data from Isle Royale's Blake Point would provide insight into differences between the two south shore count sites and overall patterns of movement through open water in the Lake Superior watershed. It seems highly likely that the birds passing south and southeast (SE) past Blake Point join the flow of waterbirds moving past the Keweenaw Peninsula and would add to the numbers of birds seen at WPBO.

Methods

We set up for observation at approximately 48 degrees 11.335" and 88 degrees 25.360(WGS84). This was on the SE tip of Blake Point about 800 feet SSW of the navigation light located near the point. This is the same location we used for a pilot survey in 2013.

A spotting scope and binoculars were used to spot, identify and count the passing birds, which were recorded in a notebook with time of passing and notes on flight direction and species composition of flocks. While migrant waterbirds (ducks, loons, grebes, cormorants, geese) were the main focus, it was expected that some raptor migration and passerine migration might be seen and notes were taken on those as well. The counts were to last about 7 to 8 hours each day beginning at sunrise. Weather data was recorded as well.

Results

In seven days of observation in October J. Youngman counted 1,520 waterbirds passing south-southeast or south-southeast between Blake Point and Passage Island. Thirteen species of waterbird were seen flying past. The most abundant species were: Red-necked Grebe (449), Common Loon (252), Canada Goose (121), White-winged Scoter (118), Red-breasted Merganser (117). Unlike last year's fall count, most birds were identified to species. The total count is given in Table 1 below.

Discussion

Waterbird Migration

Most waterbirds seemed to be moving S, SE and most often SSE past Blake Point. This year, there was one day with strong west winds when many birds seemed to be actually

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flying ESE. The total numbers of birds seen passing Blake were just over 20 % of the number seen passing Hebard Park at Copper Harbor during the same period. However the numbers of RBME at Blake represented 92% of those at Hebard, for White-winged Scoter it was 73%, for Common Loon it was 65%, for Red-necked Grebe it was 47%. These numbers may show a significant difference in pathways of species movement through Lake Superior. These figures may also highlight the unique role that Isle Royale and surrounding waters play in regional waterbird migration. The species that were far more abundant at Hebard relative to Blake were Redhead and Greater Scaup.

Raptor Migration

During the count at Blake, Bald Eagles were seen all seven days. These were quite likely local birds. Five out of seven days, at least one Merlin was observed. A point like Blake is an excellent place for a Merlin to hang out during fall migration feeding on the incoming passerines that are fairly susceptible to capture when out over the lake. On two days, we/I witnessed an immature Peregrine Falcon flying in from Passage Island and returning that way. That could be one of the birds that hatched there this year or just a migrant. A single immature Northern Goshawk was seen crossing from Passage to Blake. There were two sightings of brown (either immature or female) Northern Harriers flying from Passage to Blake and a separate sighting of a brown Harrier flying S across Lake Superior. These birds were clearly migrants and it's possible that the last mentioned was starting a flight south across the lake to the Keweenaw. At our three month waterbird count a Hebard Park near Copper Harbor this fall, a single Harrier was seen migrating southward off the lake and its quite possible that a modest number individuals of select species of raptors cross south from Isle Royale each fall.

Passerine Migration

During every day with decent visibility, passerines were seen flying in to Blake Point from over the lake. The great majority were pretty clearly coming from Passage Island. Over 1,010 small passerines were seen coming in over the 7 days. Most of those seemed to be Pine Siskins. Identification of these birds is difficult due to their small size and distance from the observer. These observations are in line with our own observations from 2009, 2013 and with other observers as far back as 1905, showing a general movement of passerines from NE to SW through the Isle Royale archipelago each fall.

