

# **Report on Waterbird Migration Study at Au Sable Point - 2015**

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## **Introduction**

### **Methods**

We set up for observation next to the Fog Signal building at approximately 46 degrees 40.366" and 86 degrees 08.291(WGS84). This is about 100 yds east of the lighthouse at Au Sable Point.

A spotting scope and binoculars were used to spot, identify and count the passing birds, which were recorded on a data sheet on a clipboard 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 8 hours each day beginning at sunrise. Weather data was recorded as well, including wind speed, wind direction, barometric pressure, temperature and percentage of cloud cover.

Budget constraints would not allow a full three month count as has been done at Whitefish Point Bird Observatory since the late 1980's. We counted at total of 30 days. We split our count into two periods to try and cover early and later migrants. We counted from 23 August through 1 September to cover early migrants like Red-necked Grebe and Blue-winged Teal. The 2<sup>nd</sup> period ran from 1 October through the 20<sup>th</sup> of that month to cover later migrants. During those two periods we used two observers sequentially with Louie Dombroski counting from 23 through 29 August then Joseph Youngman counting from the 30<sup>th</sup> through the 1<sup>st</sup>. In the second period Youngman covered the first five days and Dombroski counted the rest.

## **Results**

In thirty days of observation we counted 13,969 waterbirds passing eastbound and 5,058 waterbirds passing westbound. Twenty-six species of waterbird were seen flying east and twenty-four going west. The most abundant East-bound species were: Red-necked Grebe (2223), Redhead (1637), Red-breasted Merganser (819), Greater Scaup (794), American Wigeon (570). The most abundant West-bound species were: Long-tailed Duck (3400), Green-winged Teal (334), Red-breasted Merganser (190), White-winged Scoter (116), Northern Pintail (100). On 26 August Louie kept counting past the official 8 hour count period. In six more hours he tallied 1,946 more Red-necked Grebes which are not included in official totals. The total count is given in Table 1 below.

The lake crossing migrants totaled 553. These included migrating geese: Canada Goose – 300, Cackling Goose – 15, Cackling / Canada Goose 10. Raptors totaled 23: Turkey Vulture – 6, Peregrine Falcon – 6, Northern Harrier – 5, Sharp-shinned Hawk – 2, Unidentified Accipiter – 2 and unidentified raptor – 2. Three Sandhill Cranes came south as well as one Great Blue Heron and five unidentified bats. The remaining lake crossers were various passerine species including warblers, sparrows, thrushes and finches.

An unidentified Jaeger was seen passing eastbound on 2 October and a single Black Tern passed westbound on 24 August.

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## Discussion

### Waterbird Migration

As expected, a large number of eastbound migrants were seen at Au Sable and a significant number of westbounds were seen as well but the westbound birds were not the species expected. Whitefish Point has virtually all its waterbird migration passing eastbound so the fact that the Au Sable count had over 1/3 of its total waterbird migrants passing westbound is noteworthy.

**Eastbound** - The most abundant family of waterbirds moving eastbound were the Aythya with 6,005 passing. Next were Red-necked Grebes at 2,223 and then dabbling ducks with 1,171, then the scoters at 618. The most abundant aythya species were clearly Scaup, mostly Greater with Redheads a close 2<sup>nd</sup>. The leading dabbling was American Wigeon and the leading scoter species was the White-winged. The number of Blue-winged Teal passing eastbound was much smaller than expected. The great majority of eastbound migrants were clearly following the shoreline as they came into view at Au Sable. A minority however were first seen angling in toward shore from the NW. Those birds turned and began following the shoreline as they passed the point.

**Westbound** - A three-day count at Au Sable in September of 2010 saw hundreds of aythya species ducks moving west past Au Sable but this year's longer count only saw 247 westbound aythya with a full 6,005 passing eastbound. The 2010 count was too early in the season to have Long-tailed Ducks moving but this year's count saw 3,400 Long-taileds moving west past Au Sable and only 23 moving east! This massive movement of Long-tails would seem to be in addition to the thousands of eastbound Long-tails seen each year at Whitefish Point just 56 miles to the east. This discovery coupled with the anecdotal accounts of Long-tails heard migrating N/S over the central UP at night indicates that Long-tails move from eastern Lake Superior south to Lake Michigan/Huron by at least two routes. Green-winged Teal also moved west past the point in fair numbers – 334. Three species showed higher numbers moving west past the point than east. Those were the Long-tails 3,400 to 23, Green-winged Teal 334 to 135 and Northern Pintail 100 to 20.

Our less than full season survey does somewhat skew our counts. The main consequence is that Common Goldeneye, Bufflehead and Long-tailed Duck are likely underrepresented because their migration period had just gotten underway by the end of our survey. Clearly doing another year of count, especially a full three-month count would help clarify some of the findings of our shortened count.

### **Raptor Migration**

No noticeable raptor migration was seen moving east or west along the shore but 17 raptors and 6 Turkey Vultures were observed migrating south off Lake Superior. The six Turkey Vultures are the most surprising species as they do not like large water crossings. The six Peregrine Falcons were the least surprising. Five Northern Harriers were not unexpected and two each of Sharp-shinned Hawk and unidentified accipiter's were fairly surprising. The closest land to the north of Au Sable is Caribou Island which is 50 miles to the NNE.

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## Passerine Migration

The movement of passerines crossing Lake Superior to come ashore at Au Sable was expected and the numbers were, if anything somewhat less than expected. Of course most passerine migration takes place at night and those seen during daylight hours are only a portion of the total migration.

## Acknowledgements

We'd like to thank the following people: Our great counter Louie Dombroski, Cindy Heyd of Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore, Copper Country Audubon for the funding

Table 1  
East / West Waterbird Migration at Au Sable Point - Fall 2015

Species	East	West	Species	East	West
Gadwall	66	0	White-winged Scoter	479	116
American Wigeon	570	5	Black Scoter	22	2
American Black Duck	25	3	dark-winged Scoter	41	0
Mallard	182	46	Long-tailed Duck	23	3400
Blue-winged Teal	81	1	Bufflehead	36	3
Northern Shoveler	5	14	Common Goldeneye	16	3
Northern Pintail	20	100	Hooded Merganser	2	0
Green-winged Teal	135	334	Common Merganser	10	12
unidentified Teal	45	7	Red-breasted Merganser	819	190
unidentified dabbling	42	23	unidentified Merganser	4	0
Redhead	1637	42	unidentified duck	2644	417
Ring-necked Duck	1	1	Red-throated Loon	24	2
Greater Scaup	794	55	Common Loon	208	47
Lesser Scaup	104	17	unidentified Loon	0	1
unidentified Scaup	2639	87	Horned Grebe	33	1
unidentified Aythya	830	45	Red-necked Grebe*	2223	30
Surf Scoter	117	21	unidentified waterbird	87	3
			Double-crested Cormorant	5	30
			Totals	13,969	5,058

\* - On 26 August, in a six hour extension to the normal 8 hour count, an additional 1,946 Red-necked Grebes were counted eastbound but were not included in above totals.