

Bird Visitors and Northeast Winds

by WILLARDE DILLEY

A VERY SATISFYING FEATURE of bird-watching is the ever present possibility of the unusual or unexpected. This is especially true in south Florida. Here, for reasons unexplained, the composition of bird populations varies greatly from one winter to the next. Normally the myrtle warbler is an uncommon winter visitor. Nevertheless, during the winter of 1950-51 the myrtle warblers were almost as numerous as the always abundant western palm warblers. At times the red-breasted mergansers may be the most abundant duck in parts of the park and another year may be almost entirely absent.

Rare stragglers may appear at any time of the year. However, the early part of the winter of 1952-53 was notable for a considerable number of accidentals. It is worthy of comment that this period coincides with an influx along the Florida east coast of the dovekie, a small member of the auk family. The dovekie normally winters well off shore from Cape Hatteras north.

The first of the interesting parade appeared at the Tamiami Ranger Station on October 30, 1952, when ranger Erwin Winte picked up a weakened starling. It was placed in a box and died before the next morning. Its skin is now in the Everglades National Park collection. The Tamiami District is far from the normal range of the starling, and it should not be assumed that the bird is now established in this locality. Early in the thirties the starling was observed in the vicinities of Sanford, Palatka, and Sarasota, but it seems to be reluctant to extend its nesting range farther south.

Early in November a number of sparrows unusual to our area appeared on the lawn about Royal Palm Ranger Station. Even by careful study with binoculars it could not be determined whether the birds were immature chipping sparrows or immature clay-colored sparrows. On November 18

one was collected and the matter settled in favor of the chipping sparrow. This species is a common winter visitor in north Florida but decidedly unusual in this area.

Waterfowl were next to provide surprise visits. On December 8, ranger C. Tyler Hotchkiss and ranger naturalist David O. Karraker observed a brant at Snake Bight. As late as January 3, what appeared to be the same goose remained in the area. This specimen lacked the white neck mark and may be presumed to be an immature. Again brant were seen, January 16, by ranger David E. Bogart, who reported two on Florida Bay. The brant is decidedly rare in south Florida. Arthur Howell, in his "Florida Bird Life," records brant being killed near Everglades in 1900 and again in 1917. Normally this species winters far north of this latitude.

An old squaw at Bear Lake provided the next rare occurrence. On December 27 the writer conducted a group of visitors on a nature walk down Bear Lake Road. Upon breaking out of the cover of trees, the entire group had the pleasure of seeing the old squaw. It was not entirely a surprise to the Park Naturalist as he had been informed that for about a week the National Audubon Society conducted groups had seen the old squaw in the same position. Florida records for this duck are few and chiefly from the northern part of the state. Arthur H. Howell records a specimen taken at Tampa in 1879. No prior park record is available.

There may be many reasons for unusual movements of birds. Locally the abundance or scarcity of food may be an important factor. Suitable food was probably the attraction for a number of glossy ibis which fed in Taylor Slough during the winter of 1952-53.

Weather conditions can affect birds over a much more extensive area. A look at the weather summaries for the months of October, November, and December of 1952 indicates precipitation and temperature to be sufficiently near to normal as to be of little significance. It is recorded, however, that for the period of October 20 to 22, strong northeast winds blew with velocities up to 50 and 60 miles per hour. All of the birds mentioned above are species which normally winter to the north of this area. This is perhaps the condition which brought so many rare birds into south Florida. Once reaching a certain locality, they may remain there for many weeks, as illustrated by the brant at Snake Bight.