

Report on Waterbird Migration Study at SW Isle Royale - 2019

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Introduction

In the fall of 2018 I traveled to Isle Royale with hopes to document movement of waterbirds migrating south past the southwest tip of the archipelago. Bad weather prevented the park service from delivering me to the SW end to do the count. So this fall I traveled to and from the SW tip on the Voyager from Grand Portage.

I had planned on doing the count from the SW tip of Washington Island. I had planned on reaching that SW tip by either canoe or walking the length of the island if weather prevented safe canoe access. Indeed, on 25 September as I paddled from Windigo the waves were too big to attempt going ashore at the SW tip and I landed in the bay near the NE end of Washington. The rocky terrain and thick vegetation slowed my progress to .37 mile in one hour of heroic struggle. I gave up and set up camp there. Due to a miscommunication with my wife, she called the Coast Guard in the early evening and both NPS personnel and a Coast Guard helicopter came looking for me that night. I apologize for the trouble I inadvertently caused.

On the 26th I paddled back to the main island and hiked out to Cumberland Point and conducted the count there.

Methods

On 27 September 2019, I began observation at Cumberland Point at 47° 51.161' 88° 14.117'. Counts were conducted on the 27th, 28th, 29th of September and the 1st of October. On the 30th of September steady rain cancelled the count. Count hours varied somewhat but generally began each day near sunrise and continued for 5 to 7 hours.

A spotting scope and binoculars were used to spot, identify and count the passing birds, which were recorded on paper, with time of passing and notes on flight direction and species composition of flocks. Although migrant waterbirds (ducks, loons, grebes, cormorants, geese) were the main focus, it was expected that some raptor migration and passerine migration might be observed and notes were taken on those as well. Weather data was recorded.

Results and Discussion

Waterbird Migration

In four days of observation I saw only 307 waterbirds move south past Cumberland Point. Only six species of waterbirds were seen in migration. The most abundant species were Canada Goose (160), Common Loon (16), Red-necked Grebe (16). "Unidentified Duck" totaled 47 and "Unidentified Waterbird" came in at 15. Table 1 gives the total count of waterbirds.

The waterbird count this fall was surprisingly low. Many counts conducted previously in western Lake Superior (including Blake Point on Isle Royale) during the last days of September generally had daily counts of 100+ waterbirds. It may well be that the SW tip of Isle Royale does not get a significant

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movement of fall waterbirds but making a judgment from only one count effort of four days is obviously a bad idea.

Raptor Migration

At 8:25AM on the 28th of September I saw two Sharp-shinned Hawks move out from Isle Royale just south of my location at fly off to the south over Lake Superior. On many waterbird counts at Isle Royale and Porphyry Island over the years I've always seen a small number of Sharp-shinned Hawks (and over raptor species) coming in from the south across Lake Superior. This is the first time I've seen raptors leaving the 'north shore', apparently crossing Lake Superior in the fall. It is well known that most species of raptor will avoid long water crossings in migration but at Isle Royale I've seen a modest movement of raptors, esp Sharpshins, crossing to and from the island.

Passerine Migration

The results of the major effort made in the fall of 1905 to document bird migration at Washington Harbor led me to believe I might see a significant movement of all types of birds moving SW and W off the archipelago. I did see modest numbers of small passerines moving off the island but never had large numbers. The short count period was likely why I never saw days of big movement.

On the 28th of September I saw two Pileated Woodpeckers leave the island and fly west out of sight across Lake Superior. I don't know what to think of that! I've never seen Pileateds migrating before, nor heard of it. I don't understand why they didn't head NW or WNW where the north shore was clearly visible, instead of heading straight west where no land was visible.

Breeding Birds

At about 3AM on 1 October I heard a Great Horned Owl calling a few times at Cumberland Point. That could indicate a breeding pair in the area.

On 2 October I walked underneath a very large Bald Eagle nest not far from the shore of Grace Harbor. The nest is in a large aspen tree in Section one at 47° 53.219' 88° 12.291'. I'm not certain this is an active nest but I suspect it is.

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South bound waterbirds counted at Cumberland Point Fall 2019

	27-Sep	28-Sep	29-Sep	1-Oct	Total
Canada Goose		36	8	116	160
Goose Species	17		24		41
Red-breasted Merganser			4		4
Red-necked Grebe	8	1	6	1	16
Common Loon	5	2	7	2	16
Surf Scoter		2			2
White-winged Scoter	1		2		3
Un Dabbler			3		3
UnDuck	16	8	21	2	47
Un Waterbird	9		6		15
Daily Totals	56	49	81	121	307
Totals minus geese	39	13	49	5	106