

Biologists to study shorebirds on Chickaloon Flats this summer

by Sean Ulman



View of Chickaloon Flats on the south side of Turnagain Arm. Photo Credit: Sadie Ulman

Sandhill cranes' rattling purrs, purl earthward. In this music I sense a fleeting nexus between the natural world and an ancient species of birds—a piece of peace—and then reflect on how, in birding, the ear may meet the value of the eye. Audibly concentrating on the peeling wooden bugles, I remind myself that in the field my hearing, perhaps extra-sensitive from compensating for meager vision, may be an asset.

I gladly crane my neck to watch a three-armed V-formation of 65 Sandhill cranes collapse and overlap. The clustering birds nearly collide as they jam up and swirl in differing directions above the shoreline. Three

mini V's join the traffic and the tall long-winged symbols of survival, endurance, and grace, peel into formation. As they soar across Cook Inlet toward Mt. Redoubt, fog shrouded and steaming, I imagine watching time steps of peeping shorebirds swarm and swing over muddy pools on the Chickaloon Flats.

Sadie Ulman, a wildlife ecology graduate student at the University of Delaware is conducting her first field season this spring in cooperation with the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge on Chickaloon flats. Her project will focus on the value of the site as a stopover grounds for migratory shorebirds such as long-billed dowitchers and greater yellowlegs.

Since little research has been done on this area of mud, grasses and tidal sloughs since 1971, a range assessment of the habitat (the stats of the flats, if you will) will also be of interest. We will be at the remote field site this summer and next when the birds push north in May and return for a similar stint for the migration south in July and August.



Sadie Ulman scanning the landscape for her shorebird study on Chickaloon Flats on the south side of Turnagain Arm. Photo Credit: Sean Ulman



Aerial View of the Chickaloon Flats study area where Sadie Ulman is conducting research for a shorbird study as part of her master's thesis. Photo Credit: Ulman

I am her field technician and her husband. In preparation for the rigorous demands of the job I have become accustomed to considering myself her technician or employee first and spouse second. While Sadie has worked field seasons studying wild turkeys, grassland-nesting birds, sandhill cranes and Steller's eiders, two days of reconnaissance on the flats last August is the extent of my field experience. It's fair to say nepotism facilitated my hiring but it is my more than occasional opinion that fieldwork of this variety is no favor.

We'll mud-tromp ten-plus hour days across the flat terrain of this exposed section of Turnagain Arm vulnerable to frequent wind, rain, cold, heat, bugs... And the list of ordinary pleasures one surrenders is extensive (showering, shooting hoops, dining out, hanging out with friends, watching Bruins NHL play-off games...). When the numerous challenges grow daunting my mind seeks solace in birding.

I was not interested in birds as a child. My mom kept three porch birdfeeders stocked with seed, but I can't recall noticing the colors or chittings of flitting goldfinches, titmice, black-capped chickadees or northern cardinals. I have always been a collector. I hoarded sports cards and figurines longer than I care to admit and bought 'original game' sports and college caps by the dozens. By college I yearned to glean more words to use in my short stories, so I collected books and soon entire catalogues of my favorite authors. Being a veteran collector, the magic of binoculars (super-hero vision) and having so many chances to tag along on birding walks eased my evolution into a

birding hobbyist. I see birding as many things now—a way to process some world processes, a calming connection with nature, a surplus of new color and sound, scientific study, eye exercise, inspection of intricate details... but I first understood it as collecting.

After a birding session birders jot down in journals the names and behaviors and numbers of birds they heard or saw. They add to their hallowed life lists every time they see a bird they've never seen. By accumulating sights and sounds rather than objects, birders are collectors in a pure unselfish sense.

I'm elated and always aware when I see a life bird, but it's funny, I've yet to begin tallying my life list. I think I've been holding off until I feel worthy of the respected title 'birder.' I like birding so I like to call myself a birder, but this self-imposed label is hardly certified. Liking birding and wanting to become a better birder as well as hanging out with my wife, I mean working with my boss, are three reasons why I think I will be fine, even happy, living on the Chickaloon Flats for weeks at a time.

One night as we were rolling into park on Cannery Road to glass the vast puddle-riddled fields, I compared the unrest in my stomach to opening a pack of baseball cards. There could be a short-eared owl or another Pedro Martinez insert-card-equivalent out there.

We watched 61 sandhill cranes feed among 48 greater white-fronted geese, smaller rapid-honking birds with speckled bellies and orange legs. I noticed a couple dozen of the cranes had feathers that were stained a rusty orange. I had learned this was caused by properties of mud further north. I had a question. When I'm birding I always have a lot of questions, but I've learned to stockpile them and wait to ask after Sadie is done recounting individuals and rejoicing, at least until that sacred first-look phase of arrival has passed.

For several weeks I have been helping collecting gear (rainwear, waders, layers, gloves...), tools (banding pliers, needles, sample containers, waterproof notebooks...), groceries (oatmeal, bars, soups, sauces...), as well as collecting my mind. Now the initial indicative collection period phase of the project is upon us. I will help capture birds in nets (whoosh, drop, mist, gun) in order to collect blood and feather samples. Each bird will be individually banded so if another bander collects it later on, the bird's information can be shared.

I'll also help collect mud samples from which collections of invertebrates, which the birds stop here to

feast on, will be extracted. I have a lot of questions about collecting data and other curiosities about possibilities and potential problems. Soon there will be some answers. Then I'll have more questions. I'm learning this is normal in science. I'm looking forward to being in the field learning about the scientific quest. The amount I don't know is overwhelming at times. But it's okay. I have a good ear. I might start writing

my life list. I'll be fine. I like birding.

Sean Ulman received his MFA degree in creative writing from the Stonecoast program at the University of Southern Maine. He is writing a novel about Seward and assisting his wife Sadie Ulman in studying shorebirds on the Chickaloon Flats this summer. Previous Refuge Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.