

Chickaloon Flats journal entry

by Sean Ulman



*Photo of Chickaloon Flats Short-billed Dowitchers.
Photo Credit: Sean Ulman*

Sean Ulman is assisting his graduate student wife Sadie Ulman with her research on migrating shorebirds on Chickaloon Flats on the south side of Turnagain Arm. Here are a few pages from his daily journal describing his impressions of the sunny days in late May out on the Flats.

All packed up to head back to cabin. Plane due in a half hour. Five full days of fun in sun here. What a May. Clouds to south today, NE wind.

Bloomed Paper Birch trees bundle up timber hillside like broccoli bunches, blended in pine green black spruce and hemlock, tundra gravel and thin snow-stripped peaks, half-leafed aspen trees lime sheen in between; so summer ascends into its verdure overture.

At this site we traded less birds for more beauty—Kenai Mountains proximity, panoramic pink sunsets, fast-flowing fresh creek. Took two dips. The frigid water zaps your breath away. Froze foot to nose, than sat in sun, slight breeze, regulated, ah.

We did a survey yesterday morning. Walked three transects guided by GPS. Didn't see much. Couple clouds of pectoral sandpipers—swaying swarms like schools of fish, dip tilt twitch drift, flash white bellies brown backs. Toward shore heard a train horn hoot and then optic-aided viewed a van vrooming along Turnagain Arm below bluff houses. I felt thankful to be out here on mud cake rather than in any auto.

17 days in I've missed way less about town life than I thought I would. I don't miss checking the internet, watching TV, making small talk, or spending money. I do miss a comfy bed, and I'd trade rolled up dungarees for a real pillow. Otherwise... perhaps a beer in the evening after long days trudging.

I will miss being here once we get back—the birds, grassy mud open country, getting a tan, returning to camp in the evening feeling exhausted and like a good help, wiped-out deep sleep, freedom, wandering around birding with a wandering mind.

Between walking to the next survey or mud collection point, there's a lot of time to think. I've tried to make use of it. Besides building new material for my book, I've enjoyed excavating my memory. At first I'd draw up choice topics: forgotten faces of pupils in elementary school classes, pro playoff games attended, JV soccer goals scored, part time jobs, vegetables my mom grew in her garden...

Eventually my mind got loose and it would mine memories on its own. I'd find myself reconstructing my grandparents' Brooklyn apartment in remarkable detail (red shag carpets, gilded faucet fixtures and photo frames, the hutch drawer with dice, decks of cards and a scrabble board); or in a cruise ship cocktail lounge (round pink chairs, fake plants, sea window) playing pitch with my brother and two friends; or vacationing with my family in Bar Harbor Maine or the Cape eating a seafood dinner then strolling the tourist town at twilight (barrels of salt-water taffy, buckets of creamy ice cream); or playing pickleball with friends in Florida, in the background a flock of white ibis and a sunning aninga statuette.

Back on the plot later that afternoon we set up the scope on the one 80m X 800m band of best habitat (green, marshy ponds) and recorded time budget activity for three shorebird species. We'd eyeball one pectoral sandpiper, lesser yellowlegs or red necked phalarope and note its activity every ten seconds until it moved out of view. Individuals foraged, walked, roosted, preened or were alert for up to twelve minutes. A lot of this scientific work seems tedious to me but the idea is that it adds up to useful data. Learning more about bird behavior was useful to me.

The red necked phalaropes, a new chickaloon species for me, shuttle skip skid and spin like bath toy boats. They'll let you creep pretty close, unlike both greater and lesser yellowlegs which bob their neck alertly and sound a digitized-like alarm when you step within 15 yards.

The northern shoveler drake is decoylike with its green bill, yellow eyes and crisply drawn patches of rust and white and like most female ducks, the hen's beauty—checkered gray plumage, orangey yellow big bill—is underrated.

Sadie found a sandhill crane nest on a crafted marsh-grass island—two spotty eggs, dinosaur-ish and bigger than baseballs.

Snacking along the marshy timber edge we saw a moose, a brown bear and four black bears—coats sheeny as the oily feathers of a raven carving in sunlight.



Photo of Chickaloon Flats Sandhill Crane eggs.
Photo Credit: Sean Ulman

For raptors here we only saw bald eagle and male and female Northern Harrier. But I saw Whimbrel every day. For new birds we picked up Lincoln's sparrow and live-sided flycatcher by its call ('quick three beers') and hermit thrush, which called often and is currently and sounds like a spell being cast or the magic flute in Nintendo's "Zelda."

I like adding species by sounds and listening to bird songs and calls in general. It involves imagination akin to listening to a ballgame on the radio. I picture the bird flitting to the next branch with one flap or perched in the forest in a shaft of light, beak agape.

"The shift is on for the lefty slugger and here's the pitch—crack."

Violet green swallows swang around camp by the dozen, twittering sweet whistles like fluttery whispering faeries.

"That ball was absolutely whacked. The centerfielder is tracking back."

My friend phones. Big Papi, my favorite hitter, finally hit his first homer of the season last night.

A sound like the phone ringing again, from far off in the forest though, or the slice of a sword being sharpened or electricity or, the varied thrush! A long buzz song from a bird we hear daily but still haven't seen.

"Back, way back, get up, get outta here, that ball is..."

An aerial motor sawing sky, machinelike chopping chugging.

Hey, our plane is here. Right on time.

Sean Ulman received his MFA degree in creative writing from the Stonecoast program at the University of Southern Maine. Previous Refuge Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.