

Chickaloon Flats Journal II

by Sean Ulman



Biologist Sadie Ulman watches shorebirds with a spotting scope from a homemade tower on Chickaloon Flats
 Photo Credit: Sean Ulman

Sean Ulman has been 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 final days of fieldwork in late July out on the Flats.

It's the evening of the 35th day of our second stint at Chickaloon Flats studying shorebird migration. Within a week of our departure I feel brave enough to suspend my perspective of 'plod on, keep plugging' and reflect back.

The event that stands out is not the capture of our first bird (a miracle shot that I put on a greater yellowlegs juvenile with a net gun—a hefty 4-barrel pig of a gun that shoots a net up to fifteen yards when aided by wind), nor the next day when we trapped five more in a tensioned drop net. The following day, however, brought the first big tide (29.4')—boosted by gusty NE wind—which inundated the Flats and changed the country from mud to marsh. Sadie did a morning high-tide shorebird survey and ended up stranded atop the 9-foot tower we built out of driftwood. For two and half hours she dallied with delusional concerns above the deluge.

Our trapping site that had been two narrow slough drainage pools was now a full-fledged pool teeming

with foraging yellowlegs and dowitchers. A single black turnstone—a squat pudgy dove-like black bird with a white eye ring and my first lifer of the Fall—had also trickled in. Despite the riveting activity we failed to capture any birds and grew frustrated by the 90-minute hassle of moving our net. That night despite our exhaustion we decided to fetch water. We were down to half a day's worth, the tide was down, and the bigger tides due over the next three days would make the one-hour travel to the creek for water more than tedious.

That walk that night is the choice crux since it encompassed three elements that I've identified as integral to this field camp experience—morale, resourcefulness, and wise budget of time in relation to energy and elements—and due to my sense (aided by mist, storm clouds and swishing treetops) during the occasion that it had already occurred. That while within the experience I was already reflecting back upon it.

Both of our chest and hip waders were holey so we chanced it in Extra-Tuffs, a trusty boot true to its brand name. As the mushy marsh gave in above our ankles I thought about Lieutenant Dan's advice to Bubba and Forest, "Take care of your feet," and looked forward to a pasta meal from our meager rations, reduced to an amount I can consume in a lazy weekend. Trudging on we soon noticed that Pincher Creek, which links with a tidal slough, ran gray with brackish water. The morning's tide still hadn't funneled out. I scratched my mud be-grimed beard, gave up hope of taking an overdue dip and worried about whether we could even get to the water. We recalled simultaneously, "the beaver dam!" and sauntered on aware that the hike's length had just doubled.

We wound around oxbow bends that curled up to the timber. Beneath chest high sedges and grasses, parted here and there by black bear paths, the marsh grew mushier. The wind whipped up. Two rusty blackbirds flushed in front of us, gurgled a liquid call and looped into the woods.

The beaver dam was thatched with mud, gnawed logs, green-leafed boughs and grass. The freshwater pool was ledged like a shelf above the silted-clouded creek. We filled two five-gallon jugs and headed back.



A pond filled with shorebirds on the Flats. Photo Credit: Sean Ulman

Bolstered physically and mentally by a surplus of water, we would catch eight birds the next day, whereas following day we would set up another net and catch nothing but enjoy great birding. There was the usual traffic and symphonies of yellowlegs and dowitchers. A flock of twenty juvenile Bonaparte gulls bombed the pond and swung several circles before heading to shore. Four hudsonian godwits landed ten yards from us and with their carrot-stripped bills combed and preened their non-breeding plumage, a frosty gray shade like thunder clouds just after the storm clears. We caught three more shorebirds during each of the next three days.

The wind waned on our walk back to the cabin. The mist persisted. I kept expecting a bear to trudge out of the timber. The ambiance seemed to deserve a bear. Bear spray in hand, shotgun slung over my shoulder, I imagined several bears with clacking jaws and bluff-charges but no actual bears appeared.

I thought about the industrious beavers that had enabled our water re-supply. How nifty and multi-purposeful nature could be. I looked back at Sadie and said she looked pretty. As in life, compliments go a long way in the field. A kind word might tap energy.

“Your lips are very red.”

“That’s because I’m dehydrated,” she replied. “I know I am. I can feel it.”

Thankful that we now had water, I also noticed the irony of a dehydrated person hauling untreated water.



A band on the leg of a greater yellowlegs. Photo Credit: Sean Ulman

In the distance ahead perched between a span of verdant hills the buildings of Anchorage shone like a mirage in the late evening sun. The entire flats meanwhile remained shadowed in a sad, charmed, October-like gray hue. A raven called, ‘plonk, plonk.’ Waiting for Sadie to catch up, I picked out the raven’s nest we found back here in late May. I wondered if we would see the same pair using the nest next year when we return for the project’s second and final year.

We fell in stride side by side. I held my wife’s hand, not to practice being in public again, nor to brag to the birds. I reached out because her right hand, never quite the same since twelve-hour shifts on a cannery slime line, gets cold very quickly.

Our arms swung slightly as we gazed at the windows of homes on the bluff reflecting rectangular peach and pink flashes of the setting sun. I thought about how the drop nets worked and will keep working and that we were going to catch a lot of birds. Rather than laboring we seemed to be strolling now, not back to town or even to the cabin, but into next spring.

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/>.