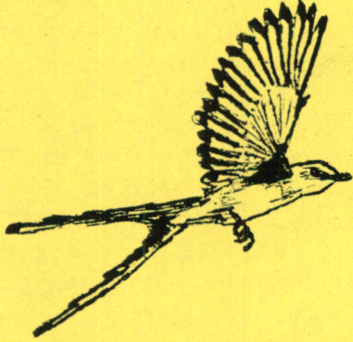


Often, while travelling to a province in Canada where I have never set foot, the first glimpse I get of that province's birds is from inside an airplane. Mind you, the birds are not all that spectacular, usually gulls, starlings, crows and the like - but it is sufficient to get a bird listing started for that province. Occasionally fortune will smile upon you, but usually you are leaving the ground, not the other way around.



The best example I can recall involved Dwayne Sabine, a New Brunswick birder whom Islanders may remember did quite a lot of fieldwork on P.E.I. over the past five years, both for the Maritimes Breeding Birds Atlas and the Department of Energy and Forestry. On May 9, 1991 as Dwayne's plane was taxiing for takeoff at the Fredericton airport, he spied a Scissor-tailed Flycatcher! Needless to say, by the time he reached his destination and alerted local bird watchers, it was gone.

Last August I was contracted by Transport Canada to conduct bird counts at seven airports in Atlantic Canada in order to document bird patterns of occurrence, and evaluate possible hazards to aircraft. I eventually sub-contracted the work, but from late August until early October, I personally surveyed three airports in New Brunswick as well as the Charlottetown airport. I was especially interested in the latter location because I knew that Upland Sandpipers regularly nested there.

I knew this because my father, who was an air traffic controller there in 1986, told me of seeing their courtship flights at dusk from the new control tower. He had also talked to field maintenance crews who's descriptions of young birds seen while mowing grass around the airport perimeter could only be this species. Although this evidence was sufficient to include them in the Breeding Bird Atlas as "probable breeders" at this location, I was unable to gain access to the airport to confirm this report due to some kind of security problems at the time.

My first survey at the airport was on August 26, 1992, and one of the first bird sightings I noted was six Upland Sandpipers. A subsequent visit on September 9th turned up four birds, but they were not seen again after that date. It is obvious that my visits occurred right at the end of the breeding season, just before the sandpipers left on their direct flight over the Atlantic Ocean to South America, and eventually to the pampas of Argentina and Paraguay where they winter. There is a possibility the surveys will be extended to cover the breeding season this year, if so, the question of how many pairs breed at this location, their arrival dates and breeding success may finally be answered to my satisfaction.

The sandpipers seemed to prefer one corner of the airport where some plowing had been carried out (but nothing planted) and it had come up in a mix of clover and weeds with lots of bare ground in between. If so, it would appear likely that no more than two pairs breed here. However, it must also be remembered that Upland Sandpipers begin to migrate in early August, so the numbers I saw there late in the month may have represented only a fraction of those present earlier in the summer. At any rate, the Charlottetown Airport probably represents the largest and most permanent population of these sandpipers on Prince Edward Island. I suspect they also nest at the now moth-balled Summerside airbase, but some other intrepid will have to undertake to make that discovery.