

Little Creek: Delaware's Shorebird Hotspot for 2014

By a guest
blogger

Alan Kneidel received a B.A. in Biology from the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill in 2008. He has since contributed to a variety of research projects, spanning from the Arctic to tropical South America. He is currently a Master's student at Delaware State University, focusing on the spring stopover ecology of trans-Gulf songbird migrants on St. George Island, Florida. While at home in Delaware, he is most likely to be found working on his state list and trying to fire up the local birding community. Check out his travel blog at goodbykneidel.blogspot.com.

Shorebirds and Delaware. These two words go together like I, Love, and You.

Delaware is a hotbed for shorebirds year-round, both inland and along the Delaware Bay coast. The classic hotspots are forever imbedded in our mind: Bombay Hook. Prime Hook. Mispillion Inlet. The shorebirding is so good that Curlew Sandpiper and Ruff aren't on the state review list, and Sharp-tailed Sandpiper, Wood Sandpiper, Little Stint, Red-necked Stint, Black-tailed Godwit, European Golden-Plover, Pacific Golden-Plover and Northern Lapwing have all been recorded.

As with most birding, however, it is easy to get into a pattern of visiting the same general spots on a shorebird round-up. Sometimes we forget about all the other spots out there. This is a little story on the rediscovery of an off-the-radar hotspot and how fun it was to bird there this fall.

On August 27th, Alex Lamoreaux and I rendezvoused at the post office in Little Creek, Kent County with a couple free hours to bird. Where were we going to go? Bombay Hook? Port Mahon? Been there. Done that. After a brief pow-wow, we decided that it was time to cover some new territory.

I suggested that we check out the observation tower at Little Creek Wildlife Area. From the tower, you can look across the expansive flats of the south impoundment all the way to the bayshore. As we arrived there were hundreds of shorebirds, but most were distant. A hazy line of roosting terns and gulls lined the far edge where the mudflats met the *Phragmites* wall. The birds were too far to pick through thoroughly. Typical.



Pectoral Sandpiper (Photo by Alex Lamoreaux)

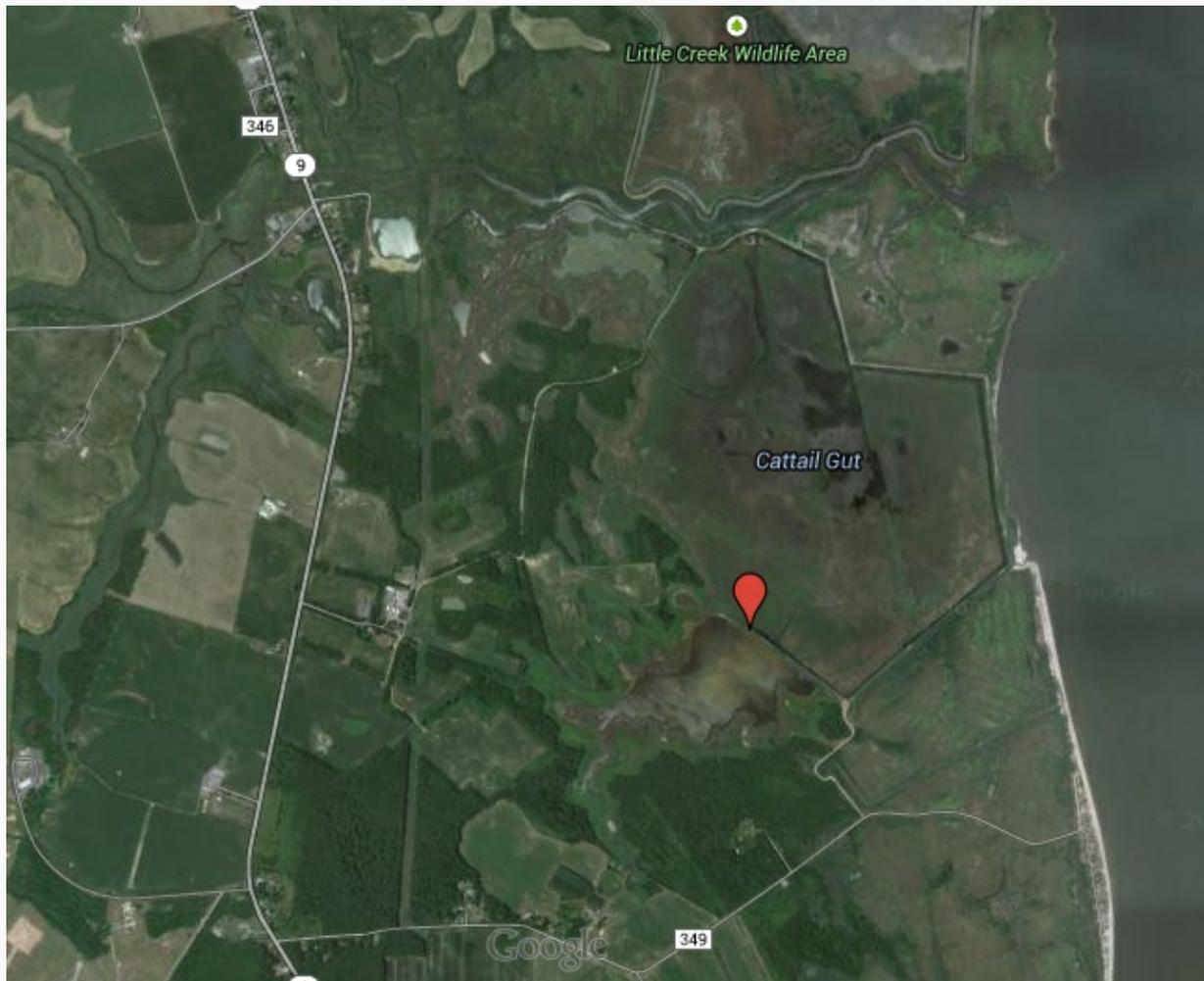
As our scopes scanned the horizon, something began to stand out. To the distant south, hundreds of shorebirds were picking up and letting down out of some short, reddish vegetation. They were too distant to identify, but the numbers were alluring.

As we were about to pack up, Alex asked a simple question.

“Is there any way we can get closer?”

And in a moment of simple realization it hit me. **YES!** There is!

10 minutes later we were whipping down Pickering Beach Road, pulling into a gravel Little Creek entrance road. Due to vandalism and lack of policing power, the gate was locked. Fine. No worries. The numbers and the anticipation were more than enough fuel to make the walk.



Little Creek Wildlife Area – South Impoundment. The pin marks the dike that allows for 360 degree views of the impoundments. The dike is accessed from the the short Little Creek access road off of Pickering Beach Road (349).

Although I had been to the end of this road before, I had never gone far beyond it. The vegetation seemed impenetrable and I was all too used to having my vision blocked by it.

Spurred on by the dangling fruit of shorebird hordes, we forced our way out onto the dike. After a few minutes of bloodying our shins and feet, we emerged at our first discovery. A gap in the *Phragmites*. The gap featured a small wooden platform on our left, and a first glimpse to the right of our shorebird flock – lots of Lesser Yellowlegs (later estimated to be around 1,500).

The wooden platform to our left revealed something else entirely. Another impoundment that had been out of our view from the tower: half water, half muddy shoreline, and also packed full of birds.



The view from the dike looking over the southwest impoundment. Unlike Bombay Hook, these impoundments are not at the mercy of the tides. (Photo by Alan Kneidel)

After a few minutes of scanning here, we decided to push further along the dike. Maybe there was something even better. There was. A much more expansive, 360 degree viewing area. Perfect! [Here's the eBird checklist from that first day.](#)

For us, that first day began a cascade of visits to Little Creek. After a series of posts to the DE-Birds listserv, other birders finally began to check out the site as well. All of a sudden Bombay Hook NWR wasn't the only place to go in Kent County to look for shorebirds. From that first day on August 27th until the end of September, birders recorded 27 species of shorebirds at Little Creek, submitting 48 eBird checklists.

As our visits started to accumulate, we started to notice patterns. Little Creek consistently held big numbers of some of the more highly sought after species, including: Stilt Sandpiper, White-rumped Sandpiper, and Pectoral Sandpiper. As the water levels lowered and grass grew on the mudflats, it became a haven for American Golden-Plover and Buff-breasted Sandpiper. It also became the best spot to pick through hundreds of waders, gulls, and terns, drawn to the abundance of food. Since these impoundments weren't tide dependent, they were great all day, every day.

So how did Little Creek stack up against the venerable titan, Bombay Hook? Here's a table that compares some shorebird high counts from the two locations (taken from eBird).

So for this time period, Little Creek's south impoundment topped all of Bombay Hook for both shorebird diversity and high counts, despite much less coverage by birders. That's exciting!

But even more than the birds, the thrill of Little Creek had to do with the sense of discovery. It's not that Little Creek was an unknown entity to me or to the public. But this sort of prolonged, day-after-day spectacle was. We as Delaware birders had been driving up and down Route 9 all of July and August, never turning down this road. *Who knew?*

What's the take home message for me? Keep your mind open and be ready to freestyle any birding adventure. There's a lot of land in between your favorite hotspots. Every once and awhile, force yourself to check someplace new. You never know what you'll turn up.

| 8/27/14 - 9/30/14 | | |
|--------------------------------|-------------|--------------|
| Species | Bombay Hook | Little Creek |
| Black-necked Stilt | 1 | 18 |
| American Avocet | 623 | 15 |
| Black-bellied Plover | 500 | 15 |
| American Golden-Plover | 1 | 8 |
| Semipalmated Plover | 750 | 200 |
| Killdeer | 20 | 12 |
| Spotted Sandpiper | 3 | 5 |
| Solitary Sandpiper | 2 | |
| Greater Yellowlegs | 200 | 300 |
| Willet | 15 | 3 |
| Lesser Yellowlegs | 150 | 1500 |
| Whimbrel | 1 | |
| Hudsonian Godwit | 4 | 7 |
| Marbled Godwit | 17 | 1 |
| Ruddy Turnstone | | 5 |
| Red Knot | 6 | 1 |
| Stilt Sandpiper | 50 | 75 |
| Dunlin | 200 | 30 |
| Baird's Sandpiper | 1 | 1 |
| Least Sandpiper | 500 | 600 |
| White-rumped Sandpiper | 25 | 75 |
| Buff-breasted Sandpiper | | 3 |
| Pectoral Sandpiper | 25 | 150 |
| Semipalmated Sandpiper | 2600 | 2000 |
| Western Sandpiper | 150 | 25 |
| Short-billed Dowitcher | 350 | 300 |
| Long-billed Dowitcher | 30 | 40 |
| Wilson's Snipe | 2 | |
| Wilson's Phalarope | | 8 |
| Red-necked Phalarope | | 1 |
| Shorebird Species: | 26 | 27 |
| High Counts: | 14 | 15 |
| Total Bird Species: | 176 | 135 |
| Total ebird checklists: | 120 | 48 |

This table shows shorebird diversity and high counts for Bombay Hook NWR and Little Creek's south impoundment from 8/27/14 to the end of September. Data gleaned from eBird.

