No Wake Zone

St. Catherines Island — Research, Conservation, Education Volume 8, Issue 1 January 2013

Photos by: Steve Matildi

Flying through the water

26th Christmas Bird Count, December 15th, 2012

Friday, December 14th, on a cold afternoon, 38 birders hopped on boats eager to get to St. Catherines and check out their assigned areas in preparation for Saturday's 26th Christmas Bird Count (CBC) on SCI. This is part of The National Audubon Society's 113th CBC, with the count taking place in over 2,000 locations from December 14th—January 5th.

This year we recorded 131 species and 28,835 individuals on count day. While this is not our highest count, not in species or individuals, it was certainly an exciting year. We had the first-ever sighting of a Razorbill on SCI (photos left), and the first Clay-colored Sparrow spotted on the CBC (that species has been seen once before on the Fall Migration Count 2006— *No Wake Zone Vol. 1, Issue 9*). We were also lucky that a highly elusive Yellow Rail appeared for the second time (CBC 2010 was the first sighting). Finally, there was an unusually high count of 124 Red-breasted Nuthatches.

A Razorbill is certainly an uncommon sighting for Georgia. Sightings have been as infrequent as 1967, 1977, and 1984. They usually spend their lives anywhere in the Northern Atlantic Ocean (with surface water temperatures below 15 Celsius) and are sometimes seen off-shore as far south as Virginia. Anything further south is considered "accidental.' In the last 5 years they have been sighted as far south as Florida.

Razorbills fall into a family of sea birds, *Alcidae*, more commonly called Alcids or Auks. Razorbills are the closest living relative to the now extinct Great Auk, a bird whose demise is similar to the Dodo. Auks are often considered "cousins" of penguins. Although they are not actually closely related they share similar features; black & white coloration, upright posture, primarily sea-living (coming mostly on land to breed), and wings that make for a stronger swimmer than a flyer. So, if not related, how do they share so many traits? This is a great example of convergent evolution; the development of two geographically separated species evolving the same traits in response to similar environmental conditions.

Razorbills breed in colonies starting at 4-5 years of age, along rocky shores or atop cliffs, in cracks and crevices or making a small pebble nest. These birds remain mated for life and breeding begins after a month of courting each year, resulting in one egg per nest. The oldest known Razorbill was a female banded as a nestling in 1962 and resighted, breeding, in 2000, 38 years later (Cornell Lab of Ornithology). Average lifespan, however, is typically 12-15 years.

Exploitation of these birds for food greatly decimated their populations until the early 20th century. In 1918 these birds became protected in the United States under the Migratory Bird Act.

Editor-in-Chief Jenifer Hillburn

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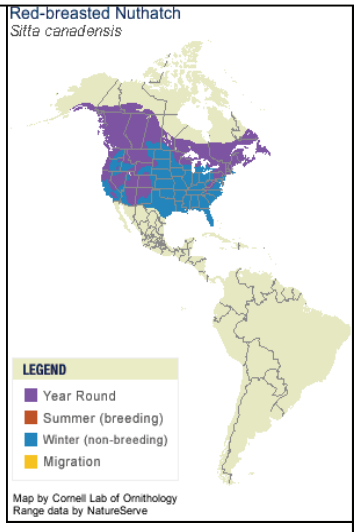
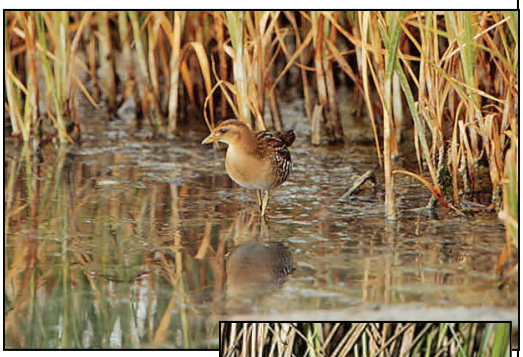
Another species bringing excitement to our CBC was the Red-breasted Nuthatch; while we see these birds most every year, we have never counted them in these numbers before. Red-breasted Nuthatches are tiny, compact 'intense little bundles of energy' that one can see travelling through tree canopies with chickadees, kinglets and woodpeckers. They are often seen probing around tree trunks and branches looking for insects in the crevices or under the bark. They move up and down, along and around limbs and branches, paying no mind to whether they are right-side up or upside-down.

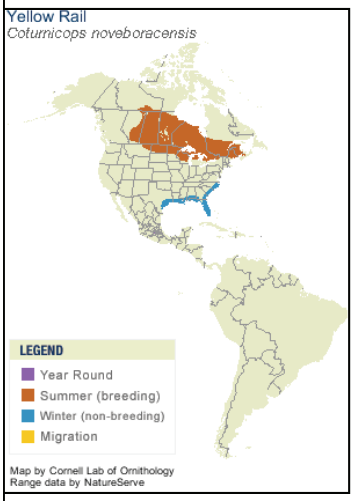


Red-breasted Nuthatches are almost always found in conifer trees, where they typically live in pairs. Often, one can hear the male and female "talking softly" to each other with single, nasal-sounding contact notes, while they forage a few meters apart along the trunks and branches of pine or spruce trees.

The Red-breasted are the only North American nuthatches that regularly migrate. Their migration patterns are often called "irruptive": some years they've headed south, some years they haven't. During irruption years their southerly migration may begin as early as late summer and extend through fall and winter. These irruptions maybe closely tied to the extent of the pine-cone crop in the birds' breeding area.

As the map provided by Cornell shows, these birds are found on St. Catherines Island in the winter, and are listed as an "irregular transient and winter resident" with high winter counts in irruptive years in the mid-thirties in the *Annotated Checklist of Georgia Birds*. Winter 2012-2013 came with an explosion of the these birds throughout Georgia, with the SCI Christmas Bird Count recording 124, the highest number ever counted in a day in Georgia.





For the second time on the St. Catherines CBC, a fabulous Yellow Rail came out of the marsh for a moment and let itself be counted, (unintentionally, I suspect). These are notoriously elusive, secretive wetland species, so much so that their life history is still mostly unknown. Considered a very rare winter resident on the Coast of Georgia, this bird is rarely seen and more often detected by the "ticking" call it makes, primarily at night. If the bird is seen, as on our CBC, once spotted this bird tends to run rather than fly from threats. This strategy works very well in wetlands areas where the Rail can quickly run out of sight and not be found again, which can be attested to by many birders whom both times the Yellow Rail has been seen on the Islands' CBC made multiple attempts to re-sight it have been, without success.

A relative of coots and cranes, this rail is found primarily in Great Plains in breeding; with a disjunct population in Oregon; season and along the SE Coast in the winter (see map). The Yellow Rails' migration, wintering, and breeding habitats have been shrinking. With an estimated global population of only 17,500 individuals, conservation efforts have focused on saving the bird's habitat (Audubon Society).

The 26th CBC was a great success and many thanks go out to the SCIF staff and birders that participate!

Darlene Moore birding at King New Ground Dock
Photos by Bruce Hallett