



A young Piping Plover, in only its fifth or sixth day of life, blends in well with the light-colored sand on Whale Point.

Coastal Steward's Letter, May 27 - June 2, 2021.

The big news this week comes from the island's east end, where Mark Souza spotted a **Black-bellied Whistling-Duck** on Wednesday. This is an incredible find for several reasons. Not only is it the first record for Tuckernuck, but it is also just the second or third record for Nantucket County after one to two birds spent the summer on the big island in 2019. This species, which is native to the neotropical regions of the New World and is resident in parts of Texas and Florida as well, is currently undergoing a tremendous range expansion. In just the last few years, they have even been recorded nesting as far north as southern Illinois, and an increase in sightings well north of there has been indicative of this population increase. In the last week, groups of six have shown up in central Connecticut and coastal New Hampshire. There are several recent records from Nova Scotia as well. Like the **White-winged Dove** that showed up for a few days last year, this is a vagrant that we should expect to see with increasing regularity here in the outerlands.

Aside from the excitement caused by the duck, this weekend was characterized by a heavy Nor'easter that hit the island on May 29th and lasted into May 30th. These unseasonal weather events have been known to spell disaster for beach-nesting shorebirds like our local **Piping Plovers**. Fortunately, it appears that the island came out with only two nest losses from this storm, both of which involved re-nesting pairs that had already seen at least one nest failure this year. The fencing along the north shore was hit particularly hard. I spent much of the day on May 31st digging up poles from beneath the storm wrack. Even if symbolic fencing is down, it is important to be vigilant of shorebirds by making sure you are keeping a considerate distance at all times and not disrupting their activities.

The heavy northeast winds on Saturday did bring in some new visitors to the island. **Arctic Terns**, seven adults and one immature, made landfall on Whale Point along with nearly 1,200 **Common Terns**. Arctic Terns are known for their incredible long-distance annual migration, which brings them to the waters around Antarctica and back each year. Seeing eight of these birds together was an incredible experience, considering I usually see just one or two individuals in a spring. They move far out at sea during their northbound migration, so it requires quite a serious storm to bring them this far inshore. On Monday, a quick trip out to Muskeget produced one immature Arctic Tern, along with several hundred Common Terns and one adult **Black Tern**.

Other likely storm-driven birds included a few dozen **Lesser Black-backed Gulls**, a beached **Sooty Shearwater**, and a few migrant shorebird species, including the globally threatened **Red Knot**. The steady decline of this latter species has apparently been exacerbated in recent years, as reflected in surveys conducted along the Atlantic flyway. This year, observers in Delaware Bay counted only 6,880 birds for the entire month of May. For some perspective, in 2020 the count produced about 19,000 birds. In both 2019 and 2018, the total number of Red Knots seen for the month of May averaged around 30,000. The sharp declines in 2021 and 2020 are likely the result of the Atlantic population of **Horseshoe Crab** spawning later than normal, due to unseasonably cool water temperatures.

Contrastingly, the presence of Lesser Black-backed Gulls this late in the season is reflective of a steady increase of young birds that over-summer on the islands. Genetically pure Lesser Black-backed Gull pairs are not known to nest anywhere in North America, so it is likely the birds we are seeing on the beaches (particularly Whale Point) are from populations in Greenland or Iceland. They can be easy to pick out in a large flock of gulls. They are usually the ones closest to the immediate shoreline, and they appear fractionally smaller than both **Herring Gulls** and **Great Black-backed Gulls**.

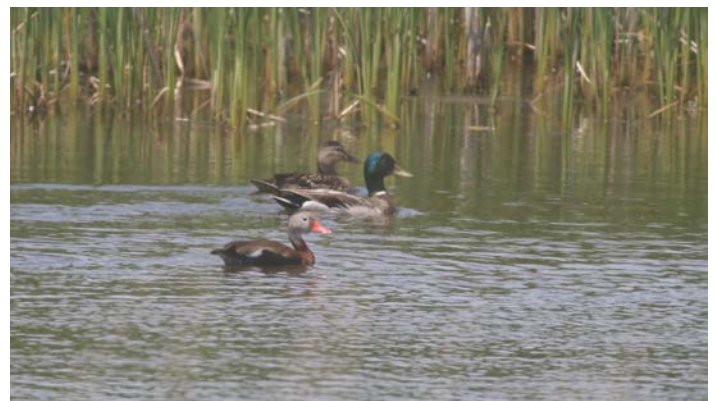
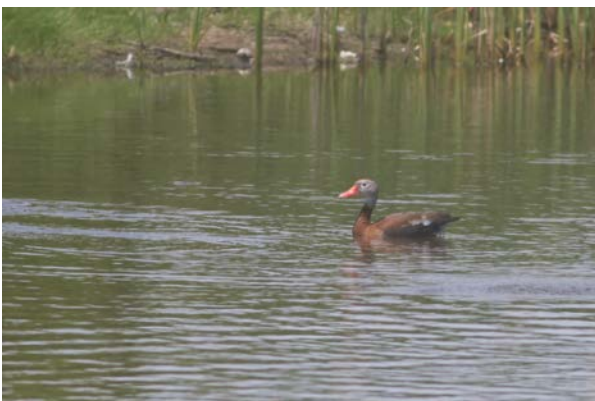
That's all for now. This has been another fantastic week on Tuckernuck!

Best,

Skyler Kardell

"It is science alone that can solve the problems of hunger and poverty, of in sanitation and illiteracy, of superstition and deadening custom and tradition, of vast resources running to waste, of a rich country inhabited by starving people... who indeed could afford to ignore science today? At every turn we have to seek its aid... the future belongs to science and those who make friends with science."

-Jawaharlal Nehru



On Wednesday, Mark Souza spotted Tuckernuck's first ever record of Black-bellied Whistling-Duck, a species that is usually found in Texas and Florida. Interestingly, this is one of a handful of reports in New England this year alone.



The mystery Brant, first seen on 5/24, is still hanging around the island's east end this week. Great Black-backed Gulls are nesting in abundance this year, so watch your head!



A two-egg Piping Plover nest turned into a three-egg nest over this year's stormy Memorial Day weekend. I found this shell fragment from a hatched egg a considerable distance from the nearest nest.



A weather balloon device found on East Pond a few days ago will be returned to NOAA on Nantucket. A Sooty Shearwater washed up on Whale Point following the Nor'easter.

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