

THE WINGED VANGUARD

By Morgan Bulkeley

LOCKED into an artificial and arbitrary calendar in our human way, we tend to think of summer as over after Labor Day. Not so with the birds, whose more finely tuned senses and cycles keep pace with eternal, celestial and meteorological phenomena. Our first warning that summer is on the wane comes from the passage of the shorebirds.

This slowly commencing, vast exodus is, of course, best observed along the Atlantic Coast on the sandy beaches, in the tidal marshes and fresh ponds, and on the off-shore islands. In Western Massachusetts, being almost equi-distant from the Connecticut and Hudson Valley flyways, we witness only token signs of this magnificent migration.

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HERALDED by the lesser yellowlegs, the hegira began in the first week of August. We watched a graceful three score of these waders dabbling in fertile pools at the Pittsfield sewage treatment plant at the edge of the Housatonic before midmonth. Belled in by native killdeer, others are still coming and going.

This bird is so briefly on its Hudson Bay breeding grounds that eggs incubated in June hatch young that are fully grown and ready to migrate without leadership in July. Oldtime gunners called it the "summer" yellowlegs because it appeared throughout the United States extremely early in contrast to the later greater yellowlegs.

Shorebirds in general are a fine example of how nature designs to the despair of art. One would not suppose that a bird with ungain-

ly bill, gawky neck and gangling legs could be the epitome of grace, especially when its habitat was mud and its color gray. Nevertheless, natural ballet is a dance of yellowlegs bowing and curtseying, pirouetting and coquetting, minueting in a mirror pool, while others primp and preen Narcissan images or doze like chaperones at the water's edge.

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OTHER shorebirds seen at the sewer beds, which are our nearest facsimile to rich estuarine tidal flats, include semi-palmated plover which may be seen mincing and parading along wet and dry shores with larger and more-belted killdeer. One ruddy turnstone appeared in the elaborate piebald regalia that has given its kind such nicknames as "calico birds" and "checkered snipe." Spotted sandpipers may be seen teetering along the water line or heard uttering their telltale peet-weets in the border grass. A single sanderling dressed in his seafaring whites was seen the past week; this marine waif was far from the crashing combers where he picks food left by the withdrawing surf.

Littlest of the littorals are the tiny "peep" sandpipers, the least or "mud peep" so difficult to distinguish from the semi-palmated or "sand peep." Near two of the latter, which conveniently flew in for comparison, we saw what appeared to be (by its heavier, longer, ~~down-curved~~ bill) a western sandpiper. This more typically Pacific Coast bird was a "loner" that fed near, but not close to, other waders. He persistently dabbled knee-deep and went his own way, hearing the drumming of a different ocean.

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MIXED COMPANIES of waders are the rule in the fall migration. Berkshire County always provides some surprises to satisfy sea fever and the salt taste. From now through September, it should pay to keep a weather eye on such favored shores as the inlet at the north end of Onota Lake, certain pools at the sewer beds, and that often-visited pasture swale off old Route 7 north of the Housatonic bridge in Ashley Falls. These will have to do -- until Monomoy looms on the horizon.