

RARE BIRD RESTED HERE



Over 200 egrets, above, were hanging out at NJMC's DeKorte Park last week. The big hit for area birders was a rare sighting of a Northern Wheatear, inset. See the story by Celeste Regal on Page 5. *Photos by NJMC's Jim Wright*

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Birds

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A little bird the size of a sparrow caused quite a commotion at DeKorte Park in Lyndhurst last week. Since the arrival of a Northern Wheatear last week, birders from the area, and across the Hudson River zoomed to the New Jersey Meadowlands Commission's ground for a glimpse and/or a photo of a very amiable Northern Wheatear. The bird makes its summer home on the Alaskan high-arctic tundra and winters in Africa. The bird prefers rocky area, often along the coast. Off course wheatears are found throughout North America in small numbers, especially during migration periods, according to the Sibley Guide to Bird Life and Behavior. The Eurasian species barely enter North America.

This is the first time the bird has had a documented sighting either in Bergen County or the Meadowlands.

A woman from Montclair thought she saw the Wheatear on Monday Sept. 14 and told someone at the Sandy Hook Bird Observatory about it and the word

got to Jim Wright from the New Jersey Meadowlands Commission communications office late Tuesday, Sept. 15. He went out from his office and took a photo of it to document when it was first spotted at DeKorte Park in Lyndhurst. He said he was joking to his boss, "Is this really a Wheatear?" and he received confirmation immediately.

If you had your Peterson's Field Guide handy, you'd know that the Northern Wheatear (*Oenanthe oenanthe*) is a casual stray from the muscicapidae (old world flycatchers) family. The 6-inch ground bird is "restless, flitting from rock to rock, fanning its tail and bobbing." The female resembles the autumn male, which is "buffier" with a brownish back and conspicuous white rump and sides of tail.

"It is a beautiful bird. I don't think it's ever been seen in Hudson County," Wright said with a great deal of breathless excitement from all the activity. "This is a rare bird. We three birders here this morning, (Sept. 17) people from just about every town in New Jersey, it seems."

At least 100 people have visited the park but currently

it appears the tiny dynamo has moved on to warmer climes. It's been a steady stream of people looking for the bird since last Tuesday when it was first reported. The bird's song has an unpatterned, level, rapid, warble; combines husky, sliding whistles with dry, crackling, toneless phrases, says the Sibley Guide to Birds. They often nest in Canada and Greenland.

"The appearance of this special little bird, who migrates thousands of miles each year, underscores what an oasis the Meadowlands is for wildlife in the midst of a very urbanized region," Robert Ceberio, the NJMC's executive director said. "The amazing numbers of migrating birds we are getting also shows how critically important it is to protect habitats like the Meadowlands — both for the birds and for the public."

Once Wright had confirmation that it was indeed a Wheatear he posted it on Jersey Bird, a Web site that alerts birders to the where any number of birds may be sighted throughout the state, especially rare ones, and within 15 minutes a rare bird alert beside a photograph of it, was sent out to birders across the country. You can

sign up for that at <http://www.virtualbirder.com/vbirder/realbirds/rbas/nj.html>.

The Wheatear was a Garret Mountain last year in Paterson and was there for just six hours.

When the alert went out, the bird alert noted that, "This is great the Wheatear is at DeKorte Park, but this is often a one-day wonder, don't get your hopes up, it might be gone before you get there." Such was not the case since so far it appears to have stayed for four days.

One of the interesting things about the bird is that patch of white on its rump, which is clearly evident when it's flying away. The name Wheatear is of uncertain origin but it is thought to stem etymologically from whiteceres, aka white arse.

"That sort of ads to the charm off the bird," he said.

As far as interested folks being able to get a shot of little Mr. white arse, he has been quite docile and unafraid to come close to the humans to take a good look at them.

"He comes up the trail sometimes eating crickets galore. My guess is he's mi-

grating and landed here for a few days while the weather isn't ideal in order to store up on food," Wright explained. "He's quite a little star."

There was a Wheatear in Connecticut for a week but it was very skittish by all accounts, so the photo opps were much less than would be desired.

"This guy, (the Wheatear in Lyndhurst) he almost flies up to you. He enjoys it and is very comfortable around people," he added.

Commission staff are also excited to have so many knowledgeable birders on site since they have been an asset by doing some of the bird sightings for them. They found out, through birders attentive watching and waiting that there was a Golden Plover at DeKorte. Wright said he's been at the Meadowlands Commission for 16 months and it's the first time he's seen one of those. Also another unusual bird sighted on Thursday, Sept. 15, was the Glossy Ibis. The rain did not stop anyone from getting out in the field to see the gathering of so many unique avian species.

The impoundment in front of the complex at the waters edge was drained that week so workers could have at the pilings that hold up the two buildings there by the marsh discovery trail (that's the boardwalk that extends out into the meadows.) Birds have been gathering there because of the low water levels. At one point there were 200 egrets hanging out on the exposed sandy soil.

All the activity at the meadowlands confirms what the NJMC has been trying to do for a long time and that is to get the word out that DeKorte Park is a great place to go birding. The Wheatear sighting and other birds gathering on the grounds magnified that objective many times over. The bird walks have increased to several times a month and there are many projects in progress that make the grounds more attractive to birds.

To keep abreast of what's going on at DeKorte Park check out their Blog at <http://www.meadowblog.typepad.com/>. There are many spectacular and sometimes amusing photos and information on the various birds.