



Roseate Spoonbills over the westernmost Twin Lake

Brunswick Wildlife Summer's End

What better way to wrap up the breeding season than to make one last summer trip to Sunset Beach? A great mix of special birds is to be had.

Birds available may be categorized into three groups: fall migrants passing through or arriving for the winter, adult and first-fall birds (this summer's fledglings), and birds that have dispersed post-breeding into our area from the south. My focus will be on the latter two groups.

Most individuals in these two groups will soon migrate. Generally they head south; however, you may find an occasional one in the Lower Cape Fear during the winter.

On the last Friday in September, my sister and I journeyed to Sunset Beach to see the end-of-summer birds.

At the Twin Lakes, we stopped at the easternmost lake and were treated to 80 plus Black-crown Night-Herons...a mixture of adults and juveniles...that flushed and headed across the lake.

Immediately a juvenile Yellow-crowned Night-Heron flew in and perched close by. I edged closer and started taking photos. Each time I took a step, the guy exhibited a little nervousness; however, he quickly settled down and continued to pose. Fortunately, the "flight or fight" response in juveniles is generally not as strongly developed as in adults due to experience staying alive.

The Yellow-crowned Night-Heron was special because they are less common in our area than their Black-crowned cousins. Most will head south to Florida, the Gulf States, Caribbean, and Central America for the winter.

Post-breeding dispersal is the behavioral term for birds moving away from their nest and even the natal area once they are done nesting. Many birds such as Wood Storks and Roseate Spoonbills disperse into our area.

Almost annually there have been one or two spoonbills reported in Brunswick County. This year, however, we are included in an unprecedented northward dispersal pattern for the East Coast. Spoonbills have been reported as far north as New Jersey (first state record) and Maryland. The US Fish & Wildlife Service and National Audubon Society are documenting and studying the event.

North Carolina Spoonbills have been observed from Sunset Beach to Pea Island NWR plus a couple inland in Northern Duplin County and way west in Catawba County. At the end of the day, I expect the official totals will probably be records for us and other Atlantic Coast states above Georgia.

We returned to Leland via Carolina Shores and then north on US 17. After a few miles on US 17, my sister saw a small herd of cattle in a pasture just off the highway that were accompanied by a small flock of Cattle Egrets. Some of the egrets were standing on the backs of cows just as I described in a recent article. They sometimes stand on the cows and eat insects off their hides and I bemoaned the fact that I had never been able to photograph this behavior.

We turned around and parked on the shoulder so I could fill this void. To position the sun behind me, I walked away from my SUV, moving further away from the targets, thinking they would not be threatened given my direction. Unfortunately, they flushed and perched in trees ringing the pasture...and I think they were mocking me...and I knew they would not come down with us still there so we dejectedly headed home.

I returned a week later to take Nora and Carole, a couple of good friends from Sunset Beach, out birding. Yes, one of my targets was another try at a cattle egret with a cow under it.

Our birds made up for missed species during my first trip: a late-migrating Green Heron at the edge of the east lake plus a couple of Glossy Ibises, an immature Little Blue Heron (actually white), and a couple of Ospreys at Lake Medcalf.

Our last stop was for the Cattle Egrets. It was no sure thing that I would get a second chance. Serendipitously, the egrets had not migrated south between my visits!

I was more careful and we stayed in the truck, shooting out the window. Vehicles make great blinds. It paid off and I got my prize photo! Ye haw!

John Ennis



Some Cattle Egrets are accomplished bull riders!



Sunset's Roseate Spoonbills and most of the Wood Storks will soon depart for a Florida winter vacation.



A juvenile Yellow-crowned Night-Heron that will probably spend the winter somewhere south of Charleston to the Caribbean



Juvenile Yellow-crowned Night Heron