

## SHORT-BILLED AND LONG-BILLED DOWITCHERS

Donald Shephard

Short-billed  
Dowitcher



Let us eavesdrop on Becky Bowen as she stands beside Inglenook Creek Lagoon and pursues her passion – shorebirds. She has been standing at the water's edge taking shots of a Great Egret and a Spotted Sandpiper. When Becky looks at the water by her feet she sees a dowitcher – so hungry that he doesn't noticed the SOS volunteer next to him. Dowitcher identification was a big part of Ron LeValley's training session for SOS volunteers this spring. It comforts Becky to know that even experts sometimes get confused between a short-billed Long-billed Dowitcher and a long-billed Short-billed Dowitcher, if that makes sense.

There is a good shorebird guide with a telling title, *The Shorebird Guide*, by Michael O'Brien, Richard Crossley, and Kevin Karlson. You may consult it as you assist Becky in this tricky identification or you may prefer your trusty field guide. If you use Sibley's you will read: *Dowitchers are stocky long-billed sandpipers. Found in flocks that stay relatively tight together, they move methodically across ponds or mudflats, hunched over and probing erratically in the mud. All have an entirely white rump.*

You study the bird's sewing-machine-like probing as it stands up to its belly in water sometimes submerging its head. It is not in a tight flock, but it does have a white rump. Sibley gives statistics for both species: Long-billed Dowitcher length 11.5 inches, wingspan 19 inches, weight 4 ounces; Short-billed Dowitcher length 11 inches, wingspan 19 inches, weight 3.9 ounces. Even up close and personal, none of us can see the difference in length or weight. So far we have made no progress.

Sibley tells you these related species often mix, but goes on to give you a hint. The Short-billed Dowitcher is more often found around fresh water. Well, that's something, but is not conclusive. It would help if breeding plumage arrayed our specimen, but such finery is rarely seen here on the coast. The winter plumage is largely grey on adults and juveniles of both species.

**Long-billed  
Dowitcher**



The field guide describes the Long-billed Dowitcher neck as *dull rufous with dark streaks* and the Short-billed Dowitcher neck as *orange with dense spotting*. Depending on the light, the generosity of the bird in exposing its chest or, as is more likely, its fickle habit of hiding its chest while bending to feed, and your distance from it, you may not find these words illuminating. Your difficulty differentiating between these two species is not surprising when you consider they were lumped together as one species until 1950.

Less helpful, perhaps, is the information that a flock of long-billed gives a constant soft chattering while short-billed flocks are silent. In my birding experience, this is when the bird flies off as if to let you know birds fly and humans do not. You despair. A call penetrates your sadness, *keek* or *pweek*, a sharp note. The Short-billed song is a lower, rapid, liquid *kew-tu-tu-tu*. Once more, the ears trump the eyes for the birdwatcher.

Becky tells me dowitchers are special. We don't see a great number of them here. At this time of year, SOS volunteers usually spot a few at Virgin Creek and at Ten Mile Beach at the Inglenook Creek lagoon. They see them mostly in the water at the edge of a pond or creek, wading and foraging. Dowitchers are very quiet. These shorebirds get that way this time of year. When they drop down from the migration, they are famished and can't do anything but eat because Long-billed Dowitchers have flown from Quebec or Alaska and Short-billed Dowitchers may have traveled from eastern Siberia. In spring, they come from as far south as Chile and Brazil.

The insect-rich tundra provides them with ample food to raise their young. Dowitchers nest on the ground, usually near water, in shallow depressions in clumps of grasses or moss. They line their nests with fine grasses, twigs and leaves. The female lays four, sometimes three, olive-buff to brown eggs. Incubation, by both sexes, lasts for twenty-one days. Only the male takes care of the young once they hatch.

The downy juvenile birds leave the nest soon after hatching. Young find all their own food then, twenty to thirty days later, off they go to winter in the south. At four ounces and with a journey of several thousand miles, it is no wonder they gobble up every scrap of nourishment they can along the way. And if a SOS volunteer wants to record their passage so much the better, but don't interrupt the feeding frenzy.