

RED PHALAROPE

On November 19, 1994 the Wasatch Audubon Society (Ogden, Utah Chapter) went on a field trip to Antelope Island State Park. There were only a few traces of high clouds that morning and the sun was shining brightly.

As we arrived at the causeway around 8 a.m. we were all commenting what a beautiful day it was although it was soon evident that beautiful does not necessarily include warm. The wind was blowing across the causeway from the north side at about 15 - 20 miles an hour (24-32 Kilometers) and the temperature was below freezing. These two factors made it nearly impossible to stay out of the vehicles for more than a few minutes at a time.

The group (in four vehicles) had driven out along the causeway somewhere around 2 to 3 miles, (3 to 5 Kilometers) basically observing Goldeneyes, shovelers, and gulls, when we spotted a phalarope feeding along the causeways south side. It was against the light so we were having a difficult time deciding which type of phalarope it might be.

There were a couple of other vehicles stopped along the road so Keith Evans and John Bellman got out to talk with the passengers about the bird. One of them was an expert birder named Terry Saddler and he said the bird was a Red Phalarope; a rare bird in the state of Utah.

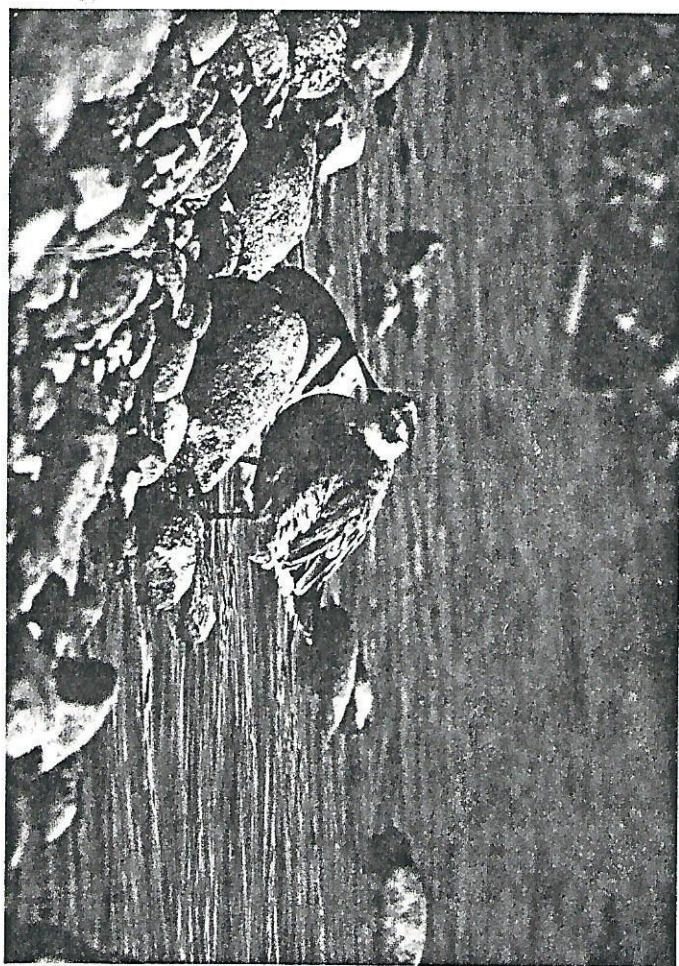
The Wasatch Audubon group continued the field trip on to Antelope Island, observing such uncommon birds as Oldsquaw, Bonapartes Gulls and Gray-crowned Rosy Finches. The Audubon group ate their lunches at the buffalo corrals on the island, then started back across the causeway again, observing birds along the way. When we got in the vicinity of where the Red Phalarope had been seen we started looking for it, but could not see it anywhere. We were just about ready to give up when a small bird was spotted foraging on the incline of the causeway. It turned out to be an American Pipit. After looking at this bird for a few minutes, I raised my binoculars straight up to the waters edge and to my surprise a phalarope came into view. Based on the plain gray back (later we realized we should have been paying more attention to the size of the bill) we agreed the phalarope did appear to be the red species, but I thought we should try to photograph it so we could make a more positive identification.

As I tried to approach it, the bird swam straight out from the shoreline to about 20 yards (18 meters) distance. It pulled its head down close to its body, which made it look as though it had no neck, and remained there motionless except for an occasional wave bobbing it around. I returned to the car and within five minutes the phalarope had returned to the shore. This time I approached it a little differently and was able to get a couple of photographs.

While I was still looking through my camera viewfinder at the bird, which was standing in the water on the shoreline about 10 yards away (9 meters), for no apparent reason, it took to the air. It made a low westward looping flight out around me returning to the shoreline about 25 yards (23 meters) behind me. To my astonishment it landed right next to another phalarope. It is totally amazing how small shorebirds can appear and disappear on the causeways rocky shore. The birdwatching group was in agreement that these two phalaropes looked exactly the same. We drove away about 2:30 p.m. leaving the two Red Phalaropes foraging together along the causeway.

Members of the Wasatch Audubon group who sighted the birds were as follows: John Bellmon, Tim and Suzzane Buntrock, Keith Evans, Joyce Overdiek, Jack Rensel and Arnold Smith.

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