A composite image of two Black-bellied Plovers in flight over the Muskegon Wastewater Treatment Plant. © Nathan DeBruine

The Sweet Smell of Checklist Success at Your Local Sewage Pond

BY KIRBY ADAMS

Returning from a field trip during a birding festival a few years ago in West Virginia, I was carpooling with some birders I'd just met. Their names are lost to the years, as well as where they were from. We made birder small talk for a bit, then all of us immediately swung our heads portside to look at a sign that proclaimed the next left as an entrance to a wastewater treatment facility. It wasn't part of the festival itinerary, but one of my passengers asked, not unlike a child passing an ice cream stand, "Can we check it out?" A sewage pond? Of course we can check it out!

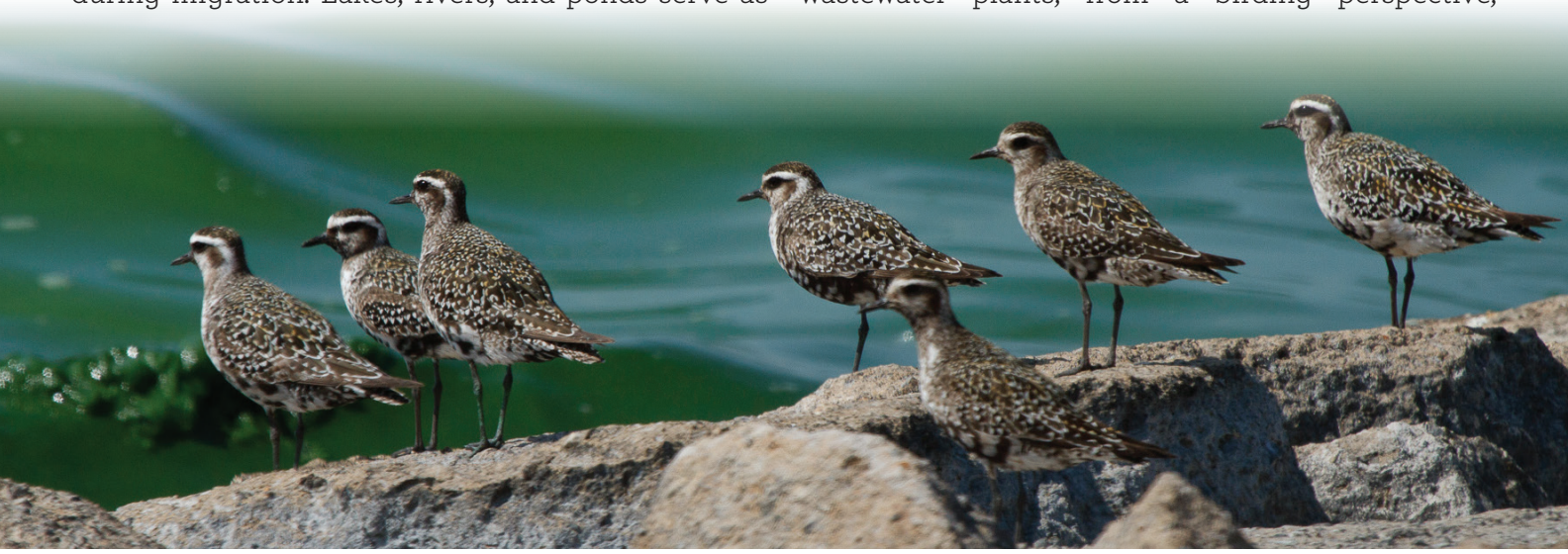
It's an inside joke with birders that we think it's fun to spend a hot afternoon at the sewage lagoons. There have even been birders that proposed marriage at such traditionally un-romantic locations. It's more than a quirk of an esoteric hobby to the birds, though. The artificial wetland that is a wastewater facility can be a matter of life and death for a migrating bird.

Waterfowl, waders, shorebirds, many raptors, and some songbirds are drawn to watery or wet spots during migration. Lakes, rivers, and ponds serve as stopover habitat, but those natural features are in short-supply in many areas, at least in an undeveloped condition. They also lack a couple key attributes that wastewater ponds just happen to have.

The most obvious aspect of sewage treatment water is nutrients. The water is laden with nutrients, because that's simply what wastewater is. There's no need to spell out the particulars of that. Water that is full of nitrogen grows a lot of plant biomass that feeds aquatic invertebrates that in turn feed the birds. Some of the algae and aquatic plants feed birds like dabbling ducks directly.

Some large WWTPs (wastewater treatment plants) have outdoor aeration tanks where the water is constantly agitated to oxygenate it and promote aerobic bacteria for decomposition of solids. This leads to water that is unfrozen in winter when many other wetlands are frozen over. That's quite a boon to waterfowl, especially in cold winters.

Michigan is lucky to have one of the nation's best wastewater plants, from a birding perspective,



American Golden-Plovers at Muskegon Wastewater Treatment Plant © Thomas Gass

in Muskegon County. The Muskegon County Wastewater Management System (usually called Muskegon Wastewater by birders) rivals hotspots like Pointe Mouillee and Whitefish Point for rare bird sightings in Michigan. Muskegon Wastewater encompasses 11,000 acres of treatment cells, storage lagoons, farms, forest, and grassland. The two 850-acre storage lagoons are big enough that each would be in the top 100 of Michigan's biggest lakes – not bad in a state with thousands of lakes.

American Pipit at Muskegon Wastewater Treatment Plant © Thomas Gass

At various times of the year, Muskegon Wastewater provides birders with looks at Upland Sandpipers in the grassy areas, Eared Grebes in summer on the lagoons, thousands of Northern Shovelers in fall, and Snowy Owls sprinkled about the flat expanse in the winter. The raised dike splitting 5 billion gallons of water into the two big lagoons often holds enough gulls to overwhelm even the most dedicated gull watcher hoping to pick out an Iceland Gull or something even rarer.

Muskegon Wastewater is certified by the Wildlife Habitat Council and won the organization's "Rookie of the Year" award in 2014 at a symposium called Celebrating Corporate Conservation. That may sound like an oxymoron, but in this era, conservation has to be embraced wherever it can be. Treatment of wastewater is necessary, and if it can be conducted in a manner that provides and protects habitat for wildlife, everyone wins.

There are too many WWTP's with good birding opportunities in Michigan to name them all. Your county likely has at least one that's accessible. It's important to check that visitors are allowed before heading out to bird a WWTP. They are, as a rule, sensitive about trespassing, mostly because of the danger that large bodies of water and heavy machinery pose. When in doubt, don't enter! Most facilities want visitors (birders) to check in at an office and only bird during office hours. Muskegon provides biannual passes, yellow placards that you'll find in the glove boxes of most of the avid birders in the state. Sometimes the rules can seem draconian, but it's critically important that birders follow them, so as not to lose access to a WWTP for everyone else. These facilities aren't required to let birders in, and more than one has rescinded a visitor policy after the rules were disregarded.

A final note about birding wastewater plants concerns the question all non-birders ask: doesn't it smell bad? The short answer is, yes. On a humid day in July, they can smell absolutely awful, while at other times they aren't so bad. A day at a sewage pond isn't for the faint of heart. Sludge is ugly. If you stand near a solids deposition cell, you'll see all the things that everyone in the county flushed down their toilets, from plastic to organics. The upshot is, you might also see a Red Phalarope in breeding plumage. You take the unexpected wonders along with the unpleasant realities of a large human population with a throw-away mentality. Birding is a metaphor for conservation in that sense. Southern Michigan will never again be dotted with pristine ponds in oak savannas. In lieu of that, we have wastewater facilities where a flock of American Pipits can rest en route to the tundra. It may not be perfect, but the pipits, like birders, take what they can get where they can get it.

Red Phalarope © Mick Thompson

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