Site Guide: Weyerhaeuser Settling Pond Site on the North Spit of Coos Bay

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Introduction

This relatively new birding spot has proven to be on one the most diverse birding locations on the south coast. In addition, its location adjacent to the beach makes it a prime spot to find rarities which can occur in practically any month. Over the past nine years, I have recorded over 220 species of birds at this site, and that is not counting pelagic species observed from the dike on the northwest end of the site or species observed just east of the site in Coos Bay. Bird numbers and species diversity peak during the fall period when this spot is a must visit location for Oregon birders provided access is once again granted to bird this spot (see sidebar).

This site is located in the deflation plain on the North Spit of Coos Bay, Coos County, Oregon (see map). It is directly adjacent to the beach and sandwiched between the beach and Coos Bay by a very narrow strip of land. The area was diked off and leased from the Coos Bay Bureau of Land Management (BLM) to be used as an industrial effluent pond by Menasha in 1959. The Weyerhaeuser Company (Weyco) eventually bought the site from the BLM in the early 1990s and continued to use it as an industrial settling pond. In 1996, Weyco stopped using the area as a settling pond and instead pumped their mill effluent out to the aeration pond where it was then released via pipe a mile out into the ocean. Weyco shut down its mill on the North Spit in 2004 and the aerators were subsequently removed from the aeration pond. Weyco still pumps water through the aeration pond and out into the ocean so the aeration pond stays filled with water all year.

Since Weyco stopped using the large pond as a settling site in 1996, the area has naturally begun reclaiming itself. The settling pond fills with rainwater in the winter when it essentially becomes a lake. As the rains let up in spring, the water level begins to drop and by May there are sandy islands and a few mudflats exposed. By late June and July much of the water is normally gone and extensive sand and mudflats appear with scattered ponded water. In August and September, the area is almost entirely dry with sandy areas predominating and cracked mud on the northern end of the large pond where the last of the main pond water remains with a small pond also still present south of the mitigation dike. By October and November the winter rains have usually begun filling up the site with water and by December it is normally completely covered with water again. Once devoid of vegetation, hooker willows have begun growing in various locations at the site particularly around the aeration pond and in the southeast end of the main pond. Various sedges and forbs also appear as the water level drops in spring and summer. A forest primarily consisting of shore pine and Sitka spruce surrounds the site on three sides. The main pond area is not managed and could be described as in the early stages of natural pond succession. All other fresh water marsh sites in the deflation plain on the North Spit are more heavily vegetated so the open sand and mudflats make this a unique site on the spit.

Spring Birds (April and May)

By mid- to late April all the swallows are back including Purple Martins which nest in boxes on pilings in Coos Bay right off the
Map of the Weyerhaeuser Settling Pond Site on the North Spit of Coos Bay
Map/S. Dowlan
BLM boat ramp site (see map). In mid-May this is the best spot to locate the rare but regular Bank Swallow in Coos County; I have seen all seven species of swallows that occur in Oregon in a single May morning here. Sora, Virginia Rails, and American Bittern breed here and can be heard calling early morning this time of year. Waterfowl, shorebird, and passerine migration really picks up in May. Hard to find species in the county like Greater White-fronted Goose, Redhead, and Blue-winged and Cinnamon Teal are fairly regular during May. If water levels are not too high and some sand and mudflats are exposed (varies from year to year), this is a good spot to see migrating shorebirds from late April throughout May. Since 2003, Wilson’s Phalaropes have been nesting here (late May to early-July), the only known coastal breeding location for this species in Oregon. Mid- to late May is also an excellent time to find less common to rare county shorebirds like Pacific Golden-plover (annual), American Avocet (almost annual), and White-faced Ibis (one record). Passerine migration is always busy at the site in May, with many species of warblers, vireos, flycatchers, and sparrows funneling through. Uncommon to rare county passerines seen at the site in spring include: Sedge Wren (only Oregon record), Sage Thrasher (one spring record), Northern Mockingbird (almost regular), Western Kingbird (regular), Gray Catbird (one spring record), Nashville Warbler (almost regular), Vesper Sparrow (almost regular), Chipping Sparrow (rare on the coast), and Yellow-headed Blackbird (almost regular). Ring-necked Pheasant are particularly noticeable here during spring when the males can be heard calling from grassy areas.

Summer Birds (June and July)

This spot is the place to find waterfowl species that do not nest anywhere else in Coos County. Ring-necked Ducks have nested here every year but one since 1998 but nowhere else in the county. Other rare breeding records include: Blue-winged Teal (only county record in 2004); Cinnamon Teal (3 of 4 county records from here); Northern Shoveler (4 out of 5 county records from here); Green-winged Teal (only county record in 2004); Hooded Merganser (nest somewhere nearby; 2 of 3 county records from here); and Ruddy Duck (only county record in 2003). At least one pair of Black Phoebes now breed at the site and Yellow Warblers, absent as breeders in most areas of the Coos County along the coast, have recently been found breeding here. By June, Wilson’s Phalaropes and Spotted Sandpipers are on nest and in early July, downy young birds of these species can usually be seen feeding with other shorebirds. June is a transition month for shorebirds with most birds on their breeding grounds in the Arctic. However, there always seems to be a few lingering shorebirds around through mid-June (probably nonbreeders that never make it to the breeding grounds) including both species of dowitchers, Semipalmated Plovers (which have bred further south on the North Spit before), and both Western and Least Sandpipers. By late June and early July the main pond area has been reduced to a series of puddles with sand and mudflat exposed, just in time for the beginning of fall migration. Short-billed Dowitchers, Western and Least Sandpipers, and Greater Yellowlegs are all in by the first week or so of July and things start to really pick up by mid-month when the first Semipalmated Sandpipers can normally be careful picked out of the huge flocks of peeps and striking breeding-plumaged Ruddy Turnstones show up in mixed flocks. July is the month to look for rare stints at the site; a Red-necked Stint was found amongst a large flock of peeps on 15 July 1999.

Fall Birds (August through mid-November)

This area is HOT during the fall migration. Shorebird numbers can exceed 10,000 at the site (generally Semipalmated Plovers and Western and Least Sandpipers making up the bulk of the numbers) during mid-August, September, and early October particularly when the bay is at high tide. It is important to walk the large sandy area between the north and south dikes as the shorebirds are often invisible from the north dike. The open sandy area is particularly attractive to both species of golden-plovers (with Pacificics decidedly more common), Baird’s Sandpipers (mid-August is their peak), and Buff-breasted Sandpipers (last week of August through mid-September), the latter being fairly common here and often seen in multiple numbers including 13 on 28 August 2004! During this “dry” period in fall there is often little water except on the very northern edge of the main pond and south of the south mitigation dike. It can be rewarding to take the long walk to the pond south of the mitigation dike as this is a good way to jump Lapland Longspurs (September-October), Buff-breasted Sandpipers, golden-plovers, or to find rarities such as American Avocet (rare but regular) invisible from further north on the main dry pond area. Closely checking out the large flocks of peeps, often resting and well hidden in the dry cracked mud on the north-
west end of the main pond, is the best way to find Semipalmated Sandpipers (in August) which are regular in small numbers or other rarities such as Ruff (late August through mid-October), Sharp-tailed Sandpiper (mid-September through October), Stilt Sandpiper (mid-August through September), and Curlew Sandpiper (late September-October). Not only is the shorebirding outstanding this time of year, but passerine birding can be just as good. Check the willows around the aeration pond in early morning before the winds pick up, particularly in September. Yellow Warblers are thick in the willows during this time and rarities such as Magnolia and Virginia’s Warbler have been seen in recent years. Palm Warblers are regular from mid-October into mid-November and are also fond of the willows. Check the powerlines around the site for Tropical Kingbirds which are almost annual here in the fall (late September-October) and maybe you will get lucky and see a couple with a Scissor-tailed Flycatcher as was witnessed by several birders in early November of 1997! Other rare finds include: Sage Thrasher (one fall record), Gray Catbird (one fall record), Grasshopper Sparrow (August), Chestnut-collared Longspur (multiple records from October to early November), and Bobolink (late September-early October). Large flocks of American Pipits are present in the main pond area in September and October, check these closely for Lapland Longspurs, Horned Larks, and Asian rarities such as Red-throated Pipit (a probable was heard and seen briefly in late September of 2003). Regular fall raptor migrants at the site include Rough-legged Hawks and Short-eared Owls (October-early November) with one record of Prairie Falcon in early August of 1999. Parasitic Jaegers and Common Terns (September) have also been seen over the main pond, and a Little Gull was found in September of 1999. Jaegers, terns, and other pelagic species are more often seen over the open ocean which can be scoped from the west end of the north dike which overlooks the ocean.

**Winter Birds (mid-November through March)**

Winter is the “slow” season at this site. Duck hunters use the large pond throughout the fall/winter hunting season so waterfowl numbers generally drop off as soon as the season starts. Hunting is not permitted on the aeration pond, so whatever ducks remain tend to congregate here. The aeration pond is one of the

_Gyrfalcon at the North Spit of Coos Bay 20 February 2006. Photo/R. Namitz_
most regular spots for wintering Eared Grebes in the county. Out
on the main pond a Snow Goose or two are occasionally seen and
there is one record of a Ross’ Goose in December of 2005. If
the main pond area has not filled
up with water late fall rarities
can sometime be found such as
Snow Bunting (seen once in early
December) and Lapland Long-
spur (more common in October).
The willows around the aeration
pond often host an overwintering
Palm Warbler or two and should
always be checked for rarities
such as American Tree Spar-
row (seen twice in recent years).
“Myrtle” Yellow-rumped War-
blers are abundant in the willows
during winter and a few Black
Phoebes are usually around. Bald
Eagles, Red-shouldered Hawks,
White-tailed Kites, Peregrine
Falcons, Merlins, Osprey, and
Northern Shrikes are seen off and
on throughout the area during this
period. Snowy Owls have been
seen at the site during irruption
years and Burrowing Owls have
wintered in the area on more
than one occasion. During recent
winters, this has been a good
location to spot the occasional
Barn Swallow during December
and January. After major Decem-
ber storms, it is not uncommon
to find tens or hundreds of Red
Phalaropes bobbing around on
the main pond after being blown
in off the ocean. Gyrfalcons have
overwintered further south on the
North Spit the past few years and
have been seen on occasion at this
site. By March the first swallows
appear and some years a Say’s
Phoebe can be found flycatching
from open perches along the north
dike from mid-March through
early April.

Directions to the Site and Bird-
ing Tips:

From Coos Bay, take Highway
101 north through North Bend
and over the mile long bridge
spanning Coos Bay. Just north of
the bridge is the signed Horsfall
Beach turnoff on the west side
of Highway 101. Follow this
diked road just over a mile until it
crosses over some railroad tracks.
Just past the railroad tracks stay
left on Transpacific Lane. Follow
Transpacific Lane 2.7 miles and
park near the gate on the right
(west side of the road, do not
block the gate). This puts you at
the north dike which passes along
the north end of the aeration
pond and then along the north
end of the main pond. There is
a diked trail around the aeration
pond also. I’ve always had my
best luck by getting down off the
dikes and walking the main pond
area. This gives you good birding
access to the willows where pas-
serines can be found and enables
you to walk the sand and mudflats
where many shorebirds cannot
be seen from the dike. Birding
the willows is best accomplished
first thing in the morning, before
the winds begin howling out of
the north by late AM on a typical
sunny late spring/summer day.
The main pond is generally not
walkable until late spring or early
summer when water levels have
dropped enough to permit ac-
cess. Mud is not a problem except
in the far north end of the main
pond; otherwise it is mostly easy
walking on sand. Mosquitoes are
thick in spring and early summer
especially in the morning before
the winds have picked up, a repel-
lant of some sort is almost always
needed.