

AMBLE Ramble

Newsletter for Lake Michigan Volunteer AMBLE (Avian Monitoring for Botulism Lakeshore Events)

2011 • July & August

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AMBLE volunteer, Patrick Sullivan, observes a gull while monitoring his beach. Photo credit: Paula Sullivan

Botulism Confirmed in Gulls and Cormorants

Avian botulism testing was performed on a subset of bird carcasses sent from Door County, Wisconsin to the National Wildlife Health Center in Madison. Thanks to AMBLE volunteer Dale Konkol for shipping to us a cooler of bird carcasses from the Whitefish Dunes State Park freezer. One Ring-billed Gull collected on August 3 by AMBLE volunteer Linda Donovan was in this shipment and tested positive for botulism. A Double-crested Cormorant collected by park staff on August 5 also tested positive.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service periodically monitor islands around Door County associated with the National Wildlife Refuge system. They delivered bird carcasses to our lab. Two cormorants and one Herring Gull were tested and found to be positive for botulinum type E toxin.

Given the annual occurrence of avian botulism on the Great Lakes since 1999, the confirmation of botulinum toxin in birds this year is not unexpected. However, we would like to test more birds from Door County for botulism to better understand timing of the disease and species affected in this relatively low-level mortality event. Please keep collecting fresh (no smell, no maggots, feathers don't pull out) carcasses as you are able.

Data Summary

There were 87 walking surveys reported by AMBLE volunteers for July and 86 for August – fantastic consistency! A total of 86.4 miles were walked collectively in these two months.

During this period, one bird, a Canada Goose, was observed sick, five birds were reported in the “dead < 24 hrs” category, 12 in the “dead 24-48 hrs” category, and 28 bird carcasses were found decomposed (see pie chart below of species found sick or dead). It is important to keep in mind that not all of these birds were found fresh, collected, and tested so we don’t know if they all died from botulism.

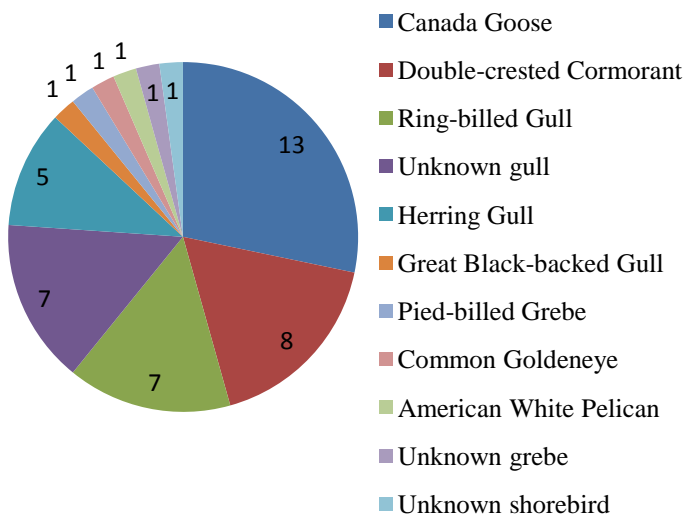
There were roughly three sick or dead birds reported per mile of beach monitored in July and August, compared to one per mile reported for June. 4,078 healthy birds were reported for July and August; that’s over 270 healthy birds per mile of beach monitored, up from May and June’s 227.

Correction: The sick bird reported as a Ring-billed Gull in the May & June edition of the *AMBLE Ramble* was actually a Herring Gull.

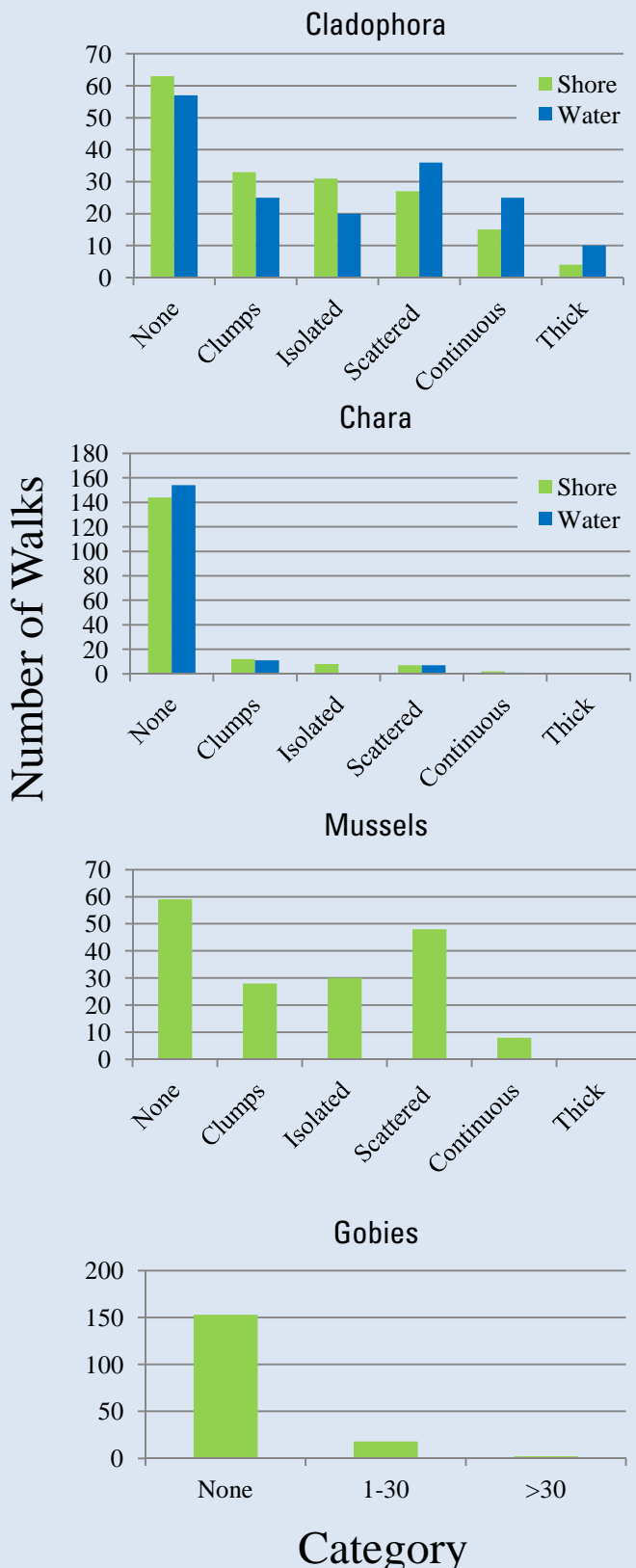
Data reported to USGS late, and an updated map of all beaches covered, will be included in the year-end summary.

Trash Count - AMBLE volunteers have removed another 605 items of trash from Door County beaches in July and August!

Species Found Sick or Dead

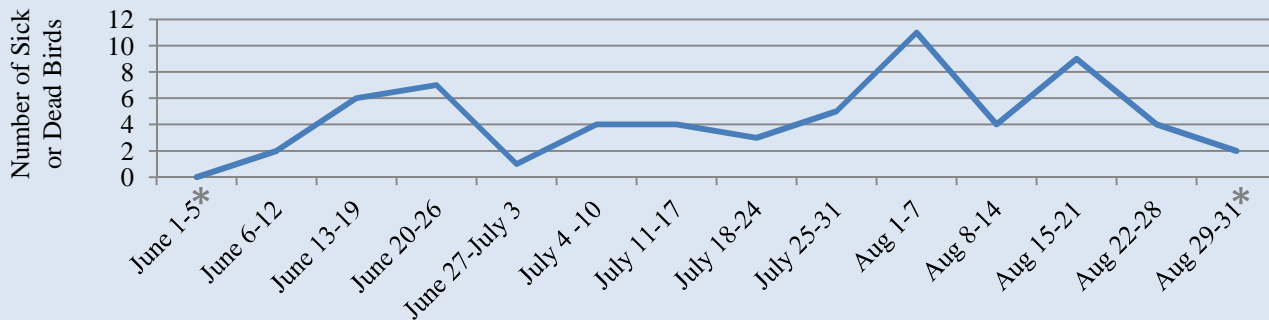


The four graphs below show the number of walks in July and August in which AMBLE volunteers reported these categories of Cladophora (algae), Chara (algae), Mussels (invertebrate), and Gobies (fish) along their beach.



Data Summary Cont...

Timeline of Birds Found Sick or Dead in Door County



Equipment Return and End-of-Season Potluck

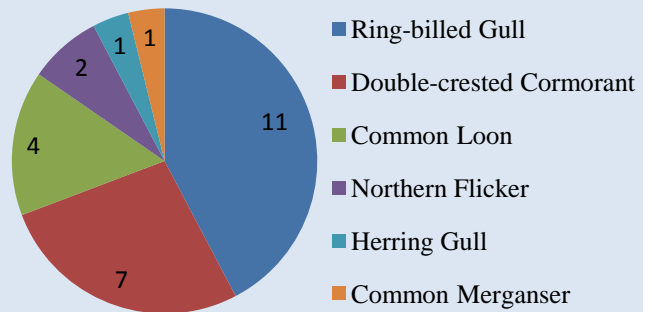
Please continue monitoring your beach until the end of November if possible; peak botulism season is still in front of us. Jenny Chipault plans to travel to Door County mid-December to pick up your equipment and have an end-of-season potluck (details to come). If you need to return your equipment before mid-December, you can drop it off at The Ridges Sanctuary in Baileys Harbor (ATTN: Marne) or Crossroads at Big Creek in Sturgeon Bay (ATTN: Coggin) or with Ham and Chari Rutledge on Washington Island. Please bundle your gear and label it with your name and "AMBLE" and also let Jenny (AMBLE@usgs.gov or 608-270-2473) know where you left it. Refer to your Equipment Loan Form to see what needs to be returned.

Upper Peninsula

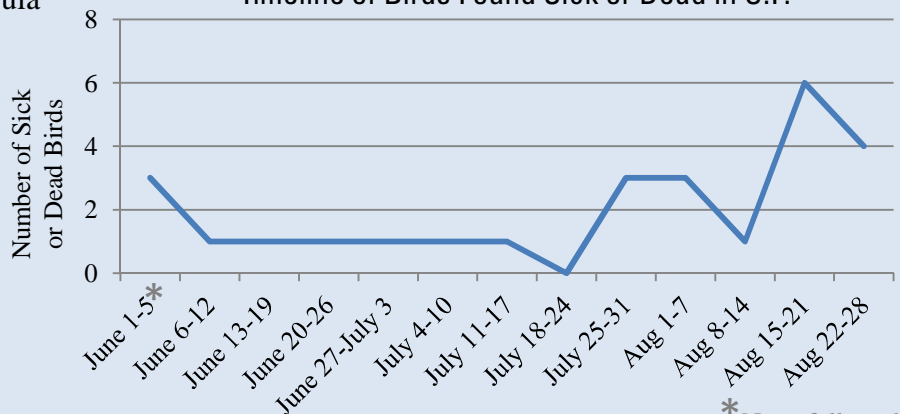
Damon McCormick, a biologist with Common Coast Research and Conservation, has been walking a 7 mile long segment of beach in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan (see map) every 7-10 days since the beginning of June. Damon found 26 sick or dead birds June-August (see graphs). AMBLers in Door County collectively monitor over 15 miles of beach and have found 62 birds during the same time period, making discovery rates of sick or dead birds similar in Door as in the U.P (roughly 4 birds/mile). Note - No birds from the Upper Peninsula have been tested for botulism yet.



Species Found Sick or Dead in U.P. June-August



Timeline of Birds Found Sick or Dead in U.P.



* Not a full week



Bully Swans

Swans are beautiful. And the whole mate-for-life thing that they do is very sweet. However, not all swans that you see in Door County are native. There’s an invasive species called... the Mute Swan (dah, dah, daaaaaah).

Mute Swan numbers on the Great Lakes have been increasing since they arrived in the area in the mid 1900s. Mute swans, native to Europe and Asia, out-compete the North American swans. They aggressively defend valuable nesting and foraging habitat, making it unavailable for native species. Mutes have killed other waterfowl (and even humans!) that intrude into their territories.

You can tell mutes from other local swans by their orange bill with a black knob at its base; adult Tundra Swans and Trumpeter Swans have sleek black bills. Generally speaking, invasive species tend to be more showy than their native counterparts... think of the brilliant yellow of a honeysuckle bush or how buckthorn becomes green earlier in the spring than other forest plants. The Mute Swan also tends to swim with its neck in what most of us think of as classic swan posture – more of an “S” shape.

The laminated pamphlet entitled “Great Lakes Birds: An Introduction to Familiar Species” that some AMBLers checked out during training does not show the Trumpeter Swan. Trumpeters are rare in Door County. One distinction between Tundra and Trumpeter swans is their call. Tundras have a high-pitched call sometimes compared to dogs barking, while Trumpeter Swans, as their name implies, have a deeper, resonating call like an old car horn or French horn. More advanced birders might be able to tell the native swans apart by their size (Tundras are smaller than Trumpeters) or the shape of, and markings on, the head and bill (see the DNR link under “Internet Swan Sources”).

Your Beaches



Dale Konkol enjoys the company of two dogs while he AMBLs near Whitefish Dunes State Park. Photo credit: Becky Konkol



Given the thick vegetation, George Cobb has found it’s easiest to don waders as he monitors his shoreline. Photo credit: Sharon Cobb

Internet Swan Sources:

- http://dnr.wi.gov/invasives/fact/mutesw_issues.htm
- <http://www.ppulse.com/Articles-c-2010-08-12-94425.113117-The-Trumpeter-Swan.html>
- <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3784320>

Your Beaches Cont...



Bob Schutt and Sue Alt sporting the USGS volunteer gear while AMBLEing. Photo credit: Pat Schutt and Tom Alt

Rambling Thoughts While Ambling by Phyllis Zatlin

In the summer of 1922, a year after he met and married my mother in Chicago, my father bought her 200 feet of Lake Michigan shore property as a belated wedding present. My mother was born and raised on a farm in Jacksonport. It was my father's first visit to Door County and the city boy immediately fell in love with the place. Lake levels rise and fall. Our beach sometimes had rocks and sometimes not. But until the 21st century, the water was clear and our walk-out beach was mostly sand. Today I look at the ugly, foul-smelling Cladophora, dead fish, dead birds, weeds and endless rocks along our shore and wonder if my father would have thought the property worth the \$400 he paid for it had it been that way when he first saw it.

The house my husband and I built in 2006 on that beach off Lakeshore Road is located in the middle of the quarter-mile stretch I chose for AMBLE. This is an area that I have walked sporadically for some 70 years, since I was a toddler. Now, because of the rocks and weeds, most of my quarter mile is difficult to maneuver.

What have I learned from my AMBLE participation? Obviously I have noted periodic changes in the quality of the water and what washes up on shore, but I have also focused more closely on birds than ever before. Not all of these observations

are depressing. I was delighted one day to spot a white pelican in the mist on the lake as I walked toward the village; then the mist cleared a bit and I counted ten pelicans in the flock. Had I not become a novice birder because of AMBLE, I might have missed seeing them at all.



"In my memory and in my photo album, this was a clean sand beach!" Beach south of Jacksonport, Wisconsin in mid 1990s (top) and 2011 (bottom). Photo credit: Phyllis Zatlin



The IT Three

Meet Matt, Jim, and Tom. They are the three Information Technology (IT) guys who have been hard at work making the online data entry portal usable for you, and the underlying database efficient for me and other volunteer coordinators. Matt is the web developer and is a part-time USGS employee and full-time computer science college student. Jim is the database guru who crafts ways for me to easily check the data and create reports. Tom makes sure the different elements of the system play nice together and backs up the data.



USGS National Wildlife Health Center information technology team in charge of AMBLE online data entry portal and underlying database.

Sneak Peak: Loons!

A future issue of the *AMBLE Ramble* will feature Common Loons. If you'd like a jumpstart on the fun, go to the website below to follow the fall 2011 loon migration - this website is also linked to the AMBLE website.

http://www.umesc.usgs.gov/terrestrial/migratory_birds/loons/migrations.html



Common Loons often pass near the Door peninsula during their fall journey south; this website provides information on loon movements.

Thanks to AMBLE volunteers and partners!



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Unless otherwise noted, all writing and pictures in this newsletter are the product of Jenny Chipault, USGS National Wildlife Health Center.