







331-01-2005

**Red Phalarope (*Phalaropus fulicaria*) at Bald Knob, Allegheny County, PA, 5-Sep-2005**

**Observer:**

Geoff Malosh  
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**Facts:**

Temperature: 55 F  
Wind: calm  
Sky: clear  
Time: 7 AM to 9 AM  
Equipment: Leica 10x42 BN binoculars, Kowa TSN-824 (20-60X) spotting scope  
Camera: Canon 20D Digital SLR, 100-400mm IS  
Photos or audio recordings: 5 photos submitted, taken from a distance of 8-10 feet, attached to this message  
Accompanying observers: Dave Wilton, Ross Gallardy  
Documentation date: Various notes compiled by September 23, 2005  
Submission date: November 15, 2005

**Photos:**

- [RedPhalaropeSep-6-2005a7.jpg](#) - taken on the afternoon of the 6th, this is a closeup side view taken in perfect afternoon light
- [RedPhalaropeSep-5-2005b7.jpg](#) - taken in the bright daylight of the morning on the 5th, but shaded from the sun, this picture is slightly biased toward cooler color temperature but the low contrast allows for detailed examination of the subtle shadings of this bird
- [RedPhalaropeSep-5-2005g7p.jpg](#) - view from behind showing the single dark stripe extending down the neck from the crown to the mantle
- [RedPhalaropeSep-5-2005a7.jpg](#) - side view taken in the morning light on the 5th; as with the third picture labeled "g7p" the white balance in this picture looks biased toward warmer color but is actually correct as shown; the morning sun cast an orange glow on the bird, which accentuates the occurrence of buffy edgings on mantle, scapular, and flight feathers
- [PhalaropeBillSep-5-2005b.jpg](#) - a closeup cropped from the picture labeled "g7p" - this picture shows the subtle yellow base to the lower mandible, which is also visible in the first picture "RedPhalaropeSep-6-2005a7.jpg"

Please note: all submitted pictures are reprocessed and sometimes cropped down from the original camera file to reduce their file size. As with all JPEG compression of digital pictures, in some cases, subtle detail is lost. Uncompressed, full resolution TIFF images are available on request.

**Observation:**

This bird was found feeding in a coal pond in the Bald Knob area, one of the many ponds of the Imperial Grasslands. It was the only bird on the pond and was easily found in excellent morning light. Initially, we watched the bird from the opposite side of the pond from a range of 150 feet, but after about 1/2 hour, the bird had worked its way to our side of the pond and approached our position to within 10 feet. It was completely unconcerned by our presence, and we were not



hidden at all, standing tall and talking amongst ourselves as the bird approached. In total we spent most of an hour within 20 feet of the bird, which continuously fed and never flew.

This bird was found the day before on September 4, 2005 and initially identified as a red-necked phalarope, and it is true that the bird is in a transitional plumage superficially similar to red-necked that can cause confusion. When I encountered the bird on the morning of September 5, I spent my time trying to obtain photographs rather than considering whether the original ID was correct. It was only after reviewing pictures later that I day that I realized that I too had misidentified the bird that morning.

The bird remained for most of the next week, and I saw and photographed it again on September 6 and September 8.

### **Description:**

-- Mostly white, gray, and black, small to medium shorebird with a black, blunt-tipped bill. In the correct light, a very pale yellow base could be seen on the lower mandible. Dark eyes.

-- Very tame, seemingly completely unwary of nearby birders and often approaching stationary observers to within 10 feet.

-- In transitional plumage, with many feathers (crown, mantle, scapulars, throat) showing a mix of feathering, described below.

-- Plumage characteristics:

- Crown molting, with fresh, even silvery-gray feathers replacing darker brown or black feathers
- Broad white supercilium extending over a dark or black patch on the side of the face behind the eye including the auriculars
- Forehead, lores, chin, neck, and upper breast white except as noted: thin and tapering dark brown or black line running down the nape from the crown to the mantle, weak orange or buffy wash on the throat and upper breast, weak buffy wash on the forward part of the crown (forehead).
- White underparts from breast to undertail coverts except as noted: gray smudging on the sides of the upper and middle breast, very fine gray streaks on the flanks
- Mantle, scapulars, and wing coverts a mix of fresh, silvery-gray feathers and darker brown or black feathers. Some of the darker feathers had very thin buffy edges. Some of the incoming gray feathers showed a darker gray or black shaft.
- Primaries and tertials mostly black with thin buffy edging

-- Not seen in flight, never heard calling.

-- Continuously swimming and feeding except for a brief time when it stood in very shallow water to preen. Often spinning in circles, pivoting its tail end around 360-degrees while feeding.

### **Discussion:**

Given the continuous swimming, spinning behavior of this shorebird, and the overall plumage pattern featuring the crown and cheek patch, white underparts, gray and black upperparts all described above, this bird must either be a red-necked phalarope or red phalarope in non-alternate plumage. As I stated earlier, this bird was originally identified as a red-necked, but red-necked can be eliminated by the deeper, blunt-tipped bill (red-necked is more needle-like), the

yellow base of the mandible (red-necked is completely black in all plumages), and the very even, silvery-gray of the basic plumage feathers molting in (red-necked tends to be a more streaked and varied gray rather than a smooth uniform gray).

Further, this bird can be identified specifically as a juvenile red phalarope molting to basic plumage based on the presence of the buffy wash on the throat and forehead (which is the remainder of the buffy coloration that dominates these areas of the plumage of a fresh juvenile), by the buffy edgings on the otherwise dark flight and mantle feathers, and by the very limited yellow on the base of the bill - an adult transitioning to basic would probably show more obvious yellow.

In retrospect, the behavior of the bird is also something of a clue to its identity. Red phalaropes, even more so than red-necked phalaropes, are true pelagic birds in all seasons other than the short nesting season and are much less frequently encountered on land than red-necked phalaropes, which mass in great numbers on inland lakes during fall migration. As such, red phalaropes behave very much like other truly pelagic birds, often with little or no fear of humans, even appearing oblivious to human presence, perhaps due to their limited historical experience with our species on land. Perhaps the fact that this bird allowed such close approach is not indicative of red vs. red-necked *per se*, but this particular bird did allow closer approach than any red-necked phalarope I have ever personally seen.

It seems rather likely that this phalarope found its way to Allegheny County by way of Hurricane Katrina, the remnants of which passed through western Pennsylvania three days prior to the original sighting. Whether it was dragged up from the Gulf Coast or knocked out of the sky by the storm while on a southbound flight is indeterminable, but having been dumped here, it found a food source it liked, and remained for the next several days, all of which were dominated by high pressure, clear skies, and almost no wind. Perhaps not coincidentally, the bird was first discovered to be missing following an afternoon of showers and cooler winds out of the west-northwest.

#### **Prior experience:**

I have seen only a few red phalaropes in my lifetime, most of which were basic adults encountered on the open seas of pelagic bird outings. I have also seen an alternate adult on land in Alaska. This was the first time in my life that I had seen a red phalarope in this transitional plumage - the plumage of red phalarope that is most similar to red-necked - which is probably why it occur to me until after the fact that it was not a red-necked as originally identified by myself and others. This was the first time I have seen any red phalarope in Pennsylvania and was the second record for Allegheny County.

# Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee

## Voting Tabulation – Round One

Species: Red Phalarope (Phalaropus fulicaria)  
 Date of Sighting: 4 September 2005 to 8 September 2005  
 Location: BALD KNOB  
 County : ALLEGHENY  
 Observer(s): Geoff Malosh et al.

Date of Submission: 2005  
 Submitted by: Geoff Malosh

Written Description: Yes

Photo: Yes

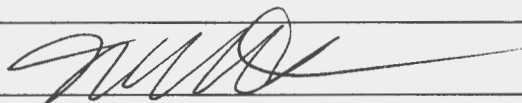
Specimen: No

Recording: No

Member	Class I	Class II	Class III	Class IV-A	Class IV-B	Class IV-C	Class V	Abstain
R. Wiltraut								
A. Guarente	X							
P. Guris	X							
J. Stanley	X							
E. Witmer	X							
J. Heller	X							
M. Sharp	X							
TOTALS	6							
DECISION	X							

Comments: 6/0

Signature (Secretary)



Date:

7/24/02