

Bird Observer

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HOT BIRDS

Jim Berry hosted a **Townsend's Warbler** (right) at his feeding station all winter. Tom Murray took this great portrait during the Newburyport CBC on December 26.



On December 25, Michele Sauter discovered a **Tundra Swan** (left) in Dover. On the next day, Steve Grinley digiscoped this photograph of the bird.

On January 21, Steve Grinley discovered a third-winter **Slaty-backed Gull** (right) at Gloucester Harbor. Margo Goetschkes took this photograph.



On January 26, Peter and Fay Vale found a **Spotted Towhee** (left) in Rockport. Jeremiah Trimble took this photograph on the next day.

Mark Faherty identified and photographed this **Lazuli Bunting** (right) at the feeding station at Mass Audubon's Wellfleet Bay Wildlife Sanctuary on February 4.



CONTENTS

MASS AUDUBON'S BROADMOOR WILDLIFE SANCTUARY, SOUTH NATICK, MASSACHUSETTS	<i>Elissa Landre and Marsha Salett</i>	65
ARTHUR CLEVELAND BENT AND HIS <i>LIFE HISTORIES OF NORTH AMERICAN BIRDS</i>	<i>William E. Davis, Jr.</i>	74
FIELD NOTES		
Gray Catbird Drinks Condensation from Underside of Car	<i>William E. Davis, Jr.</i>	84
Front Row at the Raptor Show	<i>David Swain</i>	84
MARSH BIRDING THE WEST MEADOWS WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT AREA IN WEST BRIDGEWATER	<i>Steve Arena</i>	86
ABOUT FILM		
Watching the Watchers Watch	<i>Mark Lynch</i>	98
BIRD SIGHTINGS		
November/December 2011		107
ABOUT THE COVER: Palm Warbler	<i>William E. Davis, Jr.</i>	119
ABOUT THE COVER ARTIST: Barry Van Dusen		120
AT A GLANCE	<i>Wayne R. Petersen</i>	121



RAZORBILLS BY DAVID CLAPP

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Bird Observer

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Mass Audubon's Broadmoor Wildlife Sanctuary, South Natick, Massachusetts

Elissa Landre and Marsha Salett



Overview

Mass Audubon's Broadmoor Wildlife Sanctuary covers more than 800 acres in South Natick and Sherborn that connect to 8,000 forested acres in the mid-Charles River watershed. The combined acreage forms significant habitat for Scarlet Tanager, Wood Thrush, Gray Catbird, Eastern Phoebe, Blue-winged Warbler, and Baltimore Oriole, species with more than 1% of their entire breeding population within Massachusetts, one of the criteria for designation as an Important Bird Area. Although not an official IBA, Broadmoor supports a variety of birdlife. A mixture of late-winter and early-spring migrants provides interest in March and April; by May resident breeders and spring migrants, nesting at or passing through Broadmoor, are abundant throughout the sanctuary. Early morning is typically the best time to bird, when walking most trails clockwise usually provides the best sun angle.

Broadmoor's habitats include fields, forests, fresh-water marshes, red maple and blueberry swamps, vernal pools, and Little Farm Pond. The Charles River and Indian Brook flow through the sanctuary. Such diverse habitats attract many animals: beavers, muskrats, mink, fishers, coyotes, red foxes, raccoons, white-tailed deer, red and gray squirrels, chipmunks, eastern cottontails, woodchucks; several species of snakes, turtles, and frogs; and red-backed, spotted, and blue-spotted salamanders. Spring is excellent for birding because mosquitoes, black flies, and other insects that make great bird food are flourishing. In spring and summer, fields are also filled with butterflies and dragonflies. Other dragonfly and damselfly species hunt along Broadmoor's streams. If you are birding along the boardwalk in early May, you might be treated to the phenomenon of mayfly emergence.

Also in May, Broadmoor's forests are habitat for pink lady's-slipper orchids and spring ephemerals including wood anemone, fringed polygala, starflower, and Canada mayflower. The understory is also filled with wild sarsaparilla and partridgeberry. Shrubs include witch hazel, beaked hazelnut, maple-leaved viburnum, highbush blueberry, and along wetlands, swamp azalea, speckled alder, winterberry, buttonbush, and silky dogwood. Ferns begin to unfurl: cinnamon fern, interrupted fern, bracken, hay-scented fern, sensitive fern, and others.

Broadmoor's flowing waters have attracted humans to the area for centuries, from Native Americans to colonial settlers to 20th-century dairy and vegetable farmers. The gristmill and sawmill sites are some of the evidence of Broadmoor's rich history that you will find along the trails.



Another reminder of Broadmoor's past, the Saltonstall Nature Center, is a one-hundred-year-old barn that was converted into the sanctuary's visitor center. It was Mass Audubon's first "green" nature center when it was renovated 29 years ago and is soon to undergo another renovation. The nature center is open Tuesday–Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., and Saturday, Sunday, and Monday holidays from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Maps and a species list of birds of Broadmoor are available in the nature center. The trails are open from dawn to dusk Tuesday through Sunday as well as Monday holidays. Parking is in the main lot off Route 16 (280 Eliot Street) for the nature center and most trails, or in the small lot for three cars at Farm Road for the Little Farm Pond section of the sanctuary. Directions and maps are on Mass Audubon's website:

<http://www.massaudubon.org/Nature_Connection/Sanctuaries/Broadmoor/index.php>.

Admission to Broadmoor is free to Mass Audubon members, \$5.00 for nonmember adults, and \$4.00 for children under 12 and seniors over 65.

Trails

Broadmoor has nine miles of walking trails—including a one-quarter-mile universally accessible trail—that are ideal for birding, wildlife watching, photography, or simply enjoying nature. The All-Persons Trail's wide path through the woods and the boardwalk through Indian Brook marsh accommodate wheelchairs, walkers, and baby strollers. Broadmoor's cell-phone tours of the All-Persons Trail in spring and autumn provide people who are blind or who have difficulty seeing with a seasonal self-guided audio interpretation of the trail, offering truly universal access. Anyone can download the audio guides from Broadmoor's website, or can call the cell tour number: 508-530-0002. The audio tours are operational April 1–November 30.

You could spend several hours exploring Broadmoor's trails, especially if you choose some of the less-traveled trails, such as the Charles River Loop or the outer loop of the Glacial Hill Trail. For optimal birding, we recommend a 1.5-mile loop through a variety of habitats that begins at the nature center, heads over the marsh boardwalk to the Marsh Trail and the historic mill sites, takes a side trail to the observation deck overlooking the Wildlife Pond, follows the Old Orchard Trail bisecting a 20-acre field, winds through mixed deciduous woods along both sides of Indian Brook on the Glacial Hill and Indian Brook trails, views the vernal pool overlook, then returns to the nature center along the edge of a field. Birding this loop should take between two and three hours. Please remain on designated trails at all



Historic grist mill site (all photographs by Dave Parish.)

times to avoid poison ivy and deer ticks, which can be found around field edges and in grasses any month of the year.

The Marsh Trail/All Person's Trail begins just outside the nature center at **signpost 1**. Before heading out, stop to look down at the birdfeeders near the back of the barn. The feeders usually host Downy Woodpeckers, Black-capped Chickadees, Tufted Titmice, White-breasted Nuthatches, Northern Cardinals, Song and White-throated sparrows, and American Goldfinches, with Mourning Doves gleaning seeds on the ground. In March and April you'll find a mix of migrants from the north that haven't left and migrants from the south that have just arrived, including Dark-eyed Juncos and Red-winged Blackbirds. American Tree and Chipping sparrows are known to overlap at Broadmoor in early spring and can be confused with only a cursory look. In May Carolina Wrens, Rose-breasted Grosbeaks, and flocks of Common Grackles appear at the feeders, and the goldfinches sport their splendid spring plumage. Turn around and scan the field in front of the nature center; the nest boxes usually host Eastern Bluebirds as well as Tree Swallows. Listen for a pair of exuberant House Wrens that sometimes nest in the box closest to the forest edge.

Follow the trail into the forest, around the bend, and to the left to access the boardwalk. Listen for Gray Catbirds, Yellow Warblers, and Common Yellowthroats that nest in the thickets in this area. Occasionally, Yellow Warblers nest at eye level in one of the shrubs next to the path; they are hardly disturbed by people walking by. It's worth stopping for a few minutes at the benches at the end of the boardwalk because many of the birds that frequent the feeders are also easily seen in the trees and bushes here.



Wood Duck

From the boardwalk over the Indian Brook Marsh you can see pairs of Canada Geese, Wood Ducks, and Mallards, their goslings and ducklings swimming behind them in May and June. Ring-necked Ducks and Hooded Mergansers visit in winter through early spring, and Pied-billed Grebes are occasional visitors in early spring. Red-winged Blackbirds return to Broadmoor sometimes as early as the end of February, filling the marsh with their hoarse *conk-a-reeees*. By the

first week of May, Baltimore Orioles are singing and building nests in the tops of the trees, typically oaks, that hang over the boardwalk; Blue-gray Gnatcatchers, Gray Catbirds, and Warbling Vireos frequent mid-level trees and taller shrubs. Goldfinches nest at the periphery of Indian Brook Marsh. Great Blue Herons and Green Herons hunt the marsh edges. Eastern Phoebe nest under the boardwalk, the main bridge, and the other bridges.

Look for signs of beavers and muskrats along both sides of Indian Brook from this boardwalk and all the way to the Mill Pond. Both these rodents are more active in

spring and chances are you will see muskrats swimming with vegetation in their mouths. It is easier to see muskrats because they are diurnal; beavers are crepuscular and shy. You should be able to see beaver chews and lodges. On warm sunny days, you can see dozens of eastern painted turtles swimming in and sunning along the marsh. The most common snake in the wetland is northern water snake; look for individual snakes sunning and balls of writhing snakes mating.

When you come to the end of the boardwalk, you'll turn left to follow the Marsh Trail through the white pine and oak woods. The All-Person's Trail turns right to head back to the nature center. Also to the right of the boardwalk near **signpost 2** is an old metal pump that was part of the irrigation system for the vegetable farm in the middle of the 20th century. When you return through the field, you can see irrigation pipes along the edge of Broadmoor's property line.

Entering the white pine and oak woods, you may hear Black-throated Green Warblers, Pine Warblers, and Chipping Sparrows. Chipping Sparrows and Pine Warblers have similar songs. Here's a chance to work on your birding-by-ear identification skills—provided you can ignore the incessant chipping of chipmunks that are common in this part of the forest. Listen here for Red-bellied Woodpeckers calling; they have been known to nest close to the trail.

When you get to the main bridge over Indian Brook (between **signposts 2 and 3**) you'll have another opportunity to watch the ducks, geese, and Red-Winged Blackbirds as well as Tree Swallows hawking over the water. See if you can figure out exactly where the Eastern Phoebes are nesting under the bridge. Red-tailed Hawks sometimes circle high overhead. Great Blue Herons may fly by, especially if they are nesting nearby. Once in a while a pair of Great Blues will nest along Indian Brook in a tree that can be seen from the bridge.



Great Blue Heron

You'll cross the main bridge onto a small upland island. The rock outcrops here are 600 million years old; they are andesite, a type of granite, and belong to the Mattapan volcanics. Another short bridge will lead you into the pinewoods.

Turn left at **signpost 3** to continue along the Marsh Trail. Look through the trees into the marsh if you haven't seen Wood Ducks. They are shy and may not allow a view from the bridges or boardwalk if they hear or see you coming.

This section of woods is not particularly birdy, but good for spring ephemeral wildflowers: starflower, fringed polygala (gaywings), wood anemone, pink lady's-slipper, wild sarsaparilla, and the common Canada mayflower. At **signpost 4**, cross the bridge over the Mill Pond, a historic ice pond that also powered a sawmill in the spring and a gristmill in the fall. Just over the bridge at the sawmill site, among the chickadees and Myrtle Warblers, you can find Blue-gray Gnatcatchers. Look for more

signs of beavers and for otter slides. These waterfalls are formed by the remains of the mill dams and foundations.

The trail widens and becomes an old cart road. Turn right at **signpost 5** and walk



Observation deck

to the site of the gristmill (not indicated on map). A pair of granite millstones marks the location. With the millstones on your left as you walk along the cart road, you will shortly come to a stone wall—also on the left—that marks the gristmill outflow from the Mill Pond that is on the right.

The gristmill was powered by water and the sluice gate at the end of the pond controlled the flow. The outflow walls and waterfall are all that remain today.

Depending on the season, the waterfall may be a rushing cascade or a thin trickle.

Looking down at the outflow, you'll notice a narrow trail that winds down from the right and parallels the stream below. This trail begins at **signpost 6**, several feet beyond the gristmill outflow on the downstream side of the cart road. Follow the trail to the bottom of the outflow, along the stream, and up to the observation deck at the edge of the Wildlife Pond. Approach the observation deck quietly. The deck has a bench and overlooks the Wildlife Pond. Eastern Phoebes regularly nest under the roof of the observation deck.



Downy Woodpecker

If you have a spotting scope, this is the place to set it up and scope the pond's edge. You might see muskrats and beavers or other mammals that come to the water to drink or hunt. Scan the sky over the pond and the adjacent field for soaring Sharp-shinned, Cooper's, and Red-tailed hawks. Listen for Chimney Swifts and then look over the fields and pond. Both Chimney Swifts and Tree Swallows can be hawking insects. How to tell them apart? The Chimney Swift has a dark cigar-shaped body with boomerang-like wings and flies with short wingbeats like a bat.

It is worth spending time at the observation deck because you have views over the wildlife pond, the edge of the tree canopy, the field, and the ancient sycamores across the field. The sycamores are perch trees and provide

great birding before they leaf out. Sometimes, so many birds fill the trees that they look like ornaments on the branches. Look for Red-bellied, Downy, Hairy, and Pileated woodpeckers, Northern Flickers, Great-crested Flycatchers, Scarlet Tanagers, and Baltimore Orioles.



Baltimore Oriole

When you step off the observation deck, turn left and follow the trail that heads uphill. At the 4-way intersection at **signpost 7**, you'll notice a large shagbark hickory, another perch tree for Tufted Titmice, White-breasted Nuthatches, and Eastern Bluebirds. Take a left between two historic stone walls that mark the old cart road along the edge of the former orchard. Follow the Old Orchard Trail that begins on the cart road, curves to the right where the path narrows, and bisects a 20-acre field where a few gnarled apple trees stand, the remnants of its former use as an orchard. Eastern Towhees call along the brushy edges of the field. Look and listen for warblers along this trail, including Blue-winged, Nashville, Black-throated Green, and Yellow warblers as well as Baltimore and Orchard orioles.

Northern Mockingbirds nest in the field, American Woodcocks display at dawn and dusk, and Wild Turkeys strut their stuff. Eastern Kingbirds and Field Sparrows are likely in the lower field, American Robins prefer the right side of the field near the woods, and bluebirds nest in boxes on both sides of the trail. Red-tailed Hawks hunt for snakes, voles, and other small rodents in the grass. Kestrels are in major decline in Massachusetts, so a kestrel box was mounted on the white pine in the field to the left of the trail in 2011 to attract a nesting pair. Although a male was seen in the area, he didn't stay.

As the trail gently slopes down to the end of the field, you'll notice a "wolf tree" on your right. A wolf tree is a very large, old tree with spreading horizontal branches that was a lone tree in a farmer's field and had room to grow outward as well as upward. April through May, this huge white oak becomes a perch tree that attracts an incredible variety of birds: Pileated Woodpeckers, Blue Jays, American Crows, Great-crested Flycatchers, Blue-winged Warblers, Scarlet Tanagers, Brown-headed Cowbirds, and more.



Northern Cardinal

The Old Orchard Trail ends at the Quacking Frog Trail—aptly named—where you might hear wood frogs in early spring sounding like a flock of Mallards.

Turn right and follow the Quacking Frog Trail for just a short distance until you come to **signpost 12**. Walk this section slowly: the shrubs and trees on your left can be quite birdy, often with the usual downies, chickadees, titmice, nuthatches, cardinals, and sparrows, but sometimes warblers other than Myrtles appear, as does the occasional Scarlet Tanager or Rose-breasted Grosbeak.



Black-capped Chickadee

At **signpost 12** you have two choices. If you are short on time and want to return to the nature center, go straight into the pinewoods and follow the trail to **signpost 3**, where you will turn left to cross Indian Brook over the main bridge and head back through the woods to the parking lot. To continue along the birding loop, turn left at **signpost 12** to follow the Glacial Hill Trail into the mixed pine and oak forest. No matter what you decide, take a couple of minutes to scan the white pines near the signpost for elusive Brown Creepers.

In the woods along the Glacial Hill Trail you may hear and sometimes see Scarlet Tanagers and Great-crested Flycatchers. Red-breasted Nuthatches are around some years. This is not a particularly birdy section of the sanctuary. Continue to **signpost 14** and turn right to stay on the Glacial Hill Trail.

If you have the time for a detour and are botanically inclined, the 0.8-mile Blueberry Swamp Loop may be of interest. Instead of taking a right turn at **signpost 14**, continue nearly straight in order to follow the loop counter-clockwise. You will quickly come to a small boardwalk framed by highbush blueberries, sweet pepperbush, swamp azalea, and tupelos. From here you can get a spectacular look at how beavers have transformed a small wetland and forested upland into open water. You will also find larch and a small stand of yellow birch along this loop. Pileated Woodpeckers and Great Horned Owls are occasionally seen in this area. The Blueberry Swamp Loop begins and ends at **signpost 14**; be sure to turn left at **signpost 13** to stay on the loop.

Back on the Glacial Hill Trail, you will soon re-cross Indian Brook where it flows out of a large marsh. Ducks and geese swim in this marsh on your left. Sometimes you can see Blue-gray Gnatcatchers and Rose-breasted Grosbeaks and can hear Common Yellowthroats. In a short distance, turn right at **signpost 15** onto the Indian

Brook Trail, which follows the brook to the vernal pool overlook. The overlook is a vantage point where you might see blue-spotted and spotted salamanders in the water in early spring and wood frogs throughout spring and summer either in the water or in the drying leaf litter. If the sunlight hits the water just right, you can see tadpoles, salamander nymphs, and even fairy shrimp swimming in the water column. If it is a good warbler day, Yellow-rumped, Black-and-white, American Redstart, and more species can dot the treetops picking off insects.

Turn left when you leave the overlook and head out of the woods. The trail continues along the edge of a field where you will hear a wide variety of birdsong belonging to American Robins, Northern Mockingbirds, Northern Cardinals, Indigo Buntings, Song Sparrows, Baltimore Orioles, and more, including an occasional Blue-winged Warbler or Orchard Oriole. You can see many of these species in the thickets along Broadmoor's property line. The nature center will be visible in the distance; continue walking straight on the Indian Brook Trail until it ends at **signpost 2**. Take a left onto a short stretch of the main trail where you began your walk. 🐦



Cedar Waxwing

***Elissa Landre** serves as director at Mass Audubon's Broadmoor Wildlife Sanctuary, where she operates a small bird-banding station and leads Fairweather Birding walks year-round along her favorite route, highlighted in this article. Farther afield, she guides natural history tours to destinations including Central and South America, Europe, and Asia. On tours, she takes special delight in seeing the Neotropical migrants that nest at Broadmoor in their winter habitats. Elissa currently chairs the Pamela and Alexander F. Skutch Award Committee of the Association of Field Ornithologists, which awards funds for life-history studies of little-known birds of the Neotropics. Please go to <<http://www.afonet.org/grants/index.html>> for details.*

***Marsha Salett** is a writer, editor, and environmental educator. She has been a teacher/naturalist at Mass Audubon's Broadmoor Wildlife Sanctuary for more than 20 years and serves on Broadmoor's Advisory Board. Marsha is on the editorial board of Bird Observer.*

Arthur Cleveland Bent and his *Life Histories of North American Birds*

William E. Davis, Jr.

Arthur Cleveland Bent was born in 1866 in Taunton, Massachusetts, where he lived for most of his 87 years. As a boy his father encouraged his interest in natural history by frequent walks through the woodlands and forests that surrounded Taunton in that era. As did most young naturalists of that day, he developed an avid interest in collecting bird's eggs and nests, and joined forces with other boys who were similarly inclined. His interest soon increased to shooting birds and preparing study skins, an avocation that was continued well into adulthood, and resulted in substantial collection that he eventually gave to the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard University. He left his egg collection, numbering in the thousands, to the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. (Taber 1955). In 1896, while still in his 20s, his adventuresome fieldwork led to disaster. He fell while climbing a tree in an attempt to secure the eggs from a Barred Owl's nest. He managed to break his fall by wedging his arm in a crevice in the trunk, but he hung there for nearly a half hour before extricating himself and suffered a bad fall to the ground. He survived, but was left with a permanently shaky hand. Initially his writing hand was not affected, but with time it too became shaky, which left his handwriting permanently impaired (Figure 1).

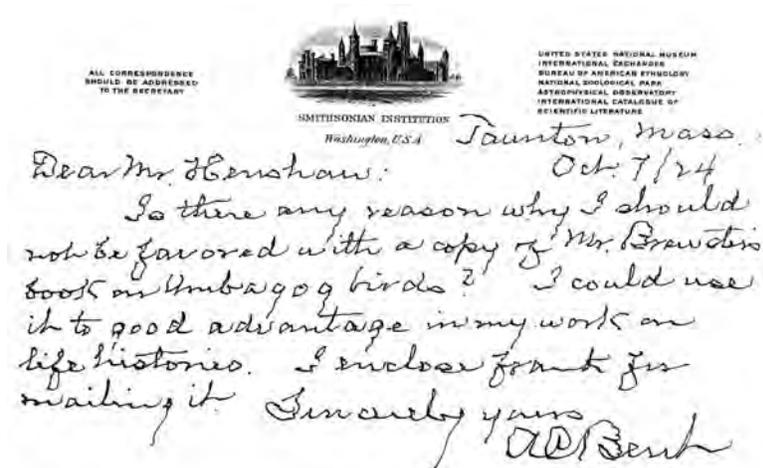


Figure 1. Letter to the Director of the Museum of Comparative Zoology, Harvard University from A. C. Bent, illustrating his impaired handwriting following his accident while tree climbing.

Bent attended Harvard College, receiving an A.B. degree in 1889. His bent nose resulted from his boxing career at Harvard (Figure 2). He then embarked on what must be considered a remarkable business career, which was important, because his business acumen played a significant role in enabling his ornithological life work, his

23-volume *Life Histories of North American Birds*. His first job was with the Massachusetts National Bank, begun after he graduated from Harvard, but he soon took a job with Crescent Mills in Fall River. In 1891, he took over Seamless Pocket Mill in Plymouth and management of the Atlantic Covering Company. In 1892, Bent and a partner bought the Plymouth Electric Company from General Electric, but it failed in the general financial collapse during the Panic of 1893. He managed to survive this setback, somehow resuscitated Plymouth Electric, and served as its President and Treasurer from 1900–1931. He moved back to Taunton, where he worked with the Mason Machine Works, rising to the position of General Manager, a position he held from 1900–1914 (Taber 1955). He still worked one day a week for the Seamless Pocket Company, which was now based in Lowell. He married in 1895, and following a divorce in 1911, he re-married in 1914 and settled down to family life and children, while making giant strides in the business world.



Figure 2. Portrait of Arthur Cleveland Bent, including his “bent” nose. Photo from Taber, 1955.

At one time or another, he was the Vice-president of the Campbell Printing Press and Manufacturing Company of New York, and Autoplate Company of America, and his directorships included Jager Engine Company and Corr Manufacturing Company. He moved heavily into the public utility field as President of Provincetown Light and Power Company and the Old Colony Light and Power Association. Directorships included Plymouth Gas and Southeastern Massachusetts Power and Electric Companies (Taber 1955).

Bent was also very civic minded, becoming at one time or another an Alderman of Taunton and a member of the School Committee. He served as President of the Bristol County Academy of Sciences, the Taunton Chamber of Commerce, and the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, among many socially responsible positions. Bent was also a joiner: a member of the Taunton Yacht Club, Taunton Rod and Gun Club, the Massachusetts and National Audubon Societies, the Massachusetts Fish and Game Protective Association, Massachusetts Forestry Association, and the American Forestry Association; also the Harvard Clubs of Taunton, Fall River, and Boston; the University Club of Boston; the Cosmos Club of Washington, D.C., and on and on it goes (Taber 1955). Without a doubt, many of

these memberships were related to his business ventures, but it does appear that he was a civic-minded individual.

Somehow, amidst all of these professional and civic activities, Bent found time to pursue his ornithological interests. His early collecting was directed primarily at birds' eggs. In a January 25, 1898, letter to William Brewster, Bent asks for Brewster's help in locating Bald Eagle eggs at a nest in western Massachusetts. "Perhaps you can advise me about the proper time to look for fresh eggs...I should also like to know the period of incubation of this species, which I suppose is 3 or 4 weeks."

This and all other letters quoted below are from the Special Collections, Ernst Mayr Library, Museum of Comparative Zoology (MCZ), Harvard University.

In another letter to Brewster, May 26, 1907, Bent requests Brewster's help in finding another Peregrine Falcon nest because the nest Bent had found didn't work out well. "Mr. Stapleton & I found the Duck Hawk's nest, containing 3 eggs, on Bear Mt., May 18th, but it was in an inaccessible ledge & we spent 6 hours in vain attempts to secure the eggs." But it wasn't all eggs that interested Bent. In a September 17, 1895, letter to Outram Bangs, Bent wants to take his new wife to Florida with him and get some collecting done at the same time.

"... I venture to ask your advice about some good localities in Florida to go to in November to find good shooting & at the same time find good comfortable quarters for a lady, as I intend to take my wife with me [,] & good board. I should like to find some little frequented place where I can shoot shorebirds & quail & collect bird skins. The large hotels I know about but the little known places are hard to find & they always prove the best."

Clearly, Bent was at that point a member of the shotgun school of ornithology, but later, when he undertook the task of writing about the life histories of birds, he became the consummate observer of live birds. Often he combined the two approaches. An example of his observational skills is found in a February 26, 1927, letter to Wilhelm Meise of the Zoologisches Museum in Berlin, Germany:

"Mr. Bangs has asked me to write you about my experience in the field with the northwest crow Corvus caurinus ...I am firmly convinced that it is a distinct species ...I have done some collecting in British Columbia and southern Alaska and have seen the species in life ... It is quite different in habitat and behavior from the common crow [American Crow]. It is confined almost entirely to the coast regions and is locally known as the 'Beach Crow' because it lives almost entirely on the shores of islands and the mainland.

Its voice is weaker, flatter, and hoarser than that of the common crow ... It seems to me that anyone who is familiar with these birds in life cannot regard caurinus as anything but a distinct species."

The Beginnings of Bent's Monumental *Life Histories of North American Birds*

Major Charles Bendire had begun a series of fancy books on North American birds (e.g., Bendire 1892), but his death prevented his completion of the work. It is

uncertain when Bent decided to carry on Bendire's work, and eventually expand and replace it. He had written to William Brewster on December 29, 1909, that he planned to start five to ten years of fieldwork in the Arctic and Pacific Coast region for his first volume, through the ducks, so his planning was well underway by this point. Certainly, he had begun to travel to all corners of North America to accumulate specimens and information on living birds long before he reached an agreement with the Smithsonian Institution to produce a series of volumes on the life histories of all North American birds.

In his Memorial to Bent (1955), Wendell Taber lists his major trips beginning with a 1901 trip to North Dakota with H. K. Job and C. G. Day. Then followed trips to Florida (1902); the Florida Keys (1903); the Magdalen Islands and Nova Scotia (1904); Saskatchewan (1905 and 1906); Cobbs Island, Virginia, and Nova Scotia (1907); and the Florida Keys with Frank Chapman and Louis Agassiz Fuertes (1908). These were followed by trips to Labrador with Charles W. Townsend (1909), Louisiana (1910), the Aleutian Islands and Alaska with Alexander Wetmore and collector Rollo Beck (1911), Newfoundland and eastern Labrador (1912), Manitoba (1913), California and the Canadian Rockies (1914), and South Carolina and the Magdalen Islands (1915). Bent also went to Virginia with H. Bailey (1916), northern Saskatchewan (1917), Quebec (1920), Arizona (1922), Texas (1923), central Florida (1924, 1925, 1926), California (1929), and southern Florida (1930). Although some of these trips were with his family, even those involved observation of, and usually collecting of birds. Although Bent was to rely heavily on the published literature and reports by other ornithologists, his natural histories of bird species were usually formulated around his own observations.

With the encouragement of Charles Foster Batchelder and William Brewster, in 1910 Bent entered negotiations with Charles D. Walcott, Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, about publishing the life history series on North American birds that Bent envisioned. After hearing back in the affirmative from Walcott, Bent wrote to William Brewster, a close friend and supporter, on May 21, 1910. In this letter, we see some of Bent's thinking about how he sees his project unfolding, and Bent the businessman comes across very clearly.

"I enclose the only two letters I have had from Dr. Walcott & I suppose I should consider them as accepting my offer to undertake the work, though they are not as satisfactory as I should like. I wrote him in reply to the first letter that I was willing to undertake the work, on his promise of cooperation, with the understanding that the scale on which the work is to be published will be dependent on the funds available at the time of publication.

Perhaps if I can make a good showing, some funds might be raised by private subscription, provided we could not get sufficient appropriations.

I am very anxious to publish a full series of photographs of nesting sites, colonies, nests, eggs & young, which, it seems to me, would be more valuable & less expensive than plates of eggs. I shall begin, as soon as I can find time, to study bibliography & work out breeding ranges."

In a follow-up exchange of letters, Brewster gave Bent advice, and then Bent replied to Brewster the same day that he sent a letter to Dr. Walcott at the Smithsonian, June 7, 1910.

“Mr. Brewster:

Thank you for your letter of May 25th & its good advice, on the strength of which I have thought out a letter to Walcott & enclose a copy herein. This may lead to further correspondence, which I shall be pleased to show you & discuss with you....

I hardly feel that I am in a sufficiently strong position yet to drive a hard bargain, especially as he has not seen any of my material, & I do not want to offend him or lose the chance of undertaking the work with the backing of the Smithsonian. What I really want more is their help & endorsement. Later on when I have accumulated a mass of valuable material, I may be able to dictate terms. Hence, perhaps my letter will cover the ground for the present & and give me the upper hand when the time comes.”

In the letter to Walcott mentioned above, we see Bent negotiating, and his years of business experience and success at work:

“My Dear Dr. Walcott:

Since receiving your favor of May 4th, I have given a month’s careful thought to my provisional agreement with you regarding the life histories of North American birds. There is one phase of the subject on which it seems to me we ought to have a little clearer understanding before we consider the matter definitely settled....

...I do not want to feel that I am under any agreement with you to turn over my material to the Smithsonian Institution, unless when the time comes for publication you are willing and able to publish it on a scale satisfactory to me. ...You need have no fear that I shall even consider the publication of the work through any other channels unless I find it impossible to do so through the Smithsonian Institution, as the prestige and standing which your Institution will give the work would be far too valuable to lose.”

Bent apparently felt that Brewster’s help, influence, and encouragement had been significant, as we see in a March 29, 1912, letter to Brewster:

“You have done me so many favors in so many ways that I can never repay you, but, if it is any gratification to you to know it, I can tell you that I know who stood back of me & pushed me along with all the weight of his priceless influence & that I appreciate it all with loving gratitude.”

Bent was successful in his negotiations, and his work on the life histories of North American birds was underway. Bent began in earnest in 1910. The Biological Survey of the Department of Agriculture, the precursor of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, put at Bent’s disposal its bibliographic index of publications on North

American birds, and together with Bent's own index, he had a bibliography of virtually all ornithological publications relevant to his life histories. He decided to follow the nomenclature of the American Ornithologists' Union (AOU). He decided to enlarge the scope of Bendire's work and arrange the various topics to be covered in each life history in a standard sequence. Each life history followed the sequence, where appropriate: introductory remarks, spring migration, courtship, nesting habits, eggs, young, sequence of plumages, molts, feeding habits, flight, swimming and diving, vocalizations, behavior, enemies, fall migration, and winter habits. Also delineated are the breeding and winter ranges. Bent included his own observations and quoted liberally from both the published literature and from correspondence with a wealth of ornithologists that he solicited. He also solicited photographs to be used in addition to his own. He used the bird collections of the major U.S. museums and a number of substantial private collections. The concluding paragraph in the introduction to Volume 1 (1919) states:

"No one is so well aware of the many shortcomings and omissions in this work as the author. Allowance must be made for the magnitude of the undertaking. If the reader fails to find mentioned in these pages some things which he knows about the birds, he can blame himself for not having sent them to THE AUTHOR."

With that aggressive statement, Bent was off and running on a project that consumed the remainder of his life.

The initial accounts were a bit purple prose, for example his first account in Volume 1, the Western Grebe:

"I shall never forget the picture, as I stood in water more than waist deep, of one of these beautiful 'swan grebes' sailing out from a dense wall of cat-tails, causing scarcely a ripple as it glided along, the body submerged, the long white neck sharply outlined against the green background, the glossy black crown, the fiery red eyes, and the javelin-like beak. Who could help admiring such a picture of aquatic grace, such specialized mastery of its native element?"

But what followed was an excellent description of the courtship dance with the pair swimming side by side, and other courtship displays by William L. Finley. The account is thorough and accompanied by photographs by Bent of nest and eggs, young, and general habitat. Bent used the literature, correspondence with ornithologists who had familiarity with the species, and his own observation to produce a thorough nine-page account plus two pages of photographs. This is typical of the way in which Bent molded his life history accounts—it was a groundbreaking endeavor.

Professional Societies, Publications, Prestige, and a Gift of Collections

Bent's extensive travels in North America gave him the opportunity to amass a substantial collection of bird skins, and, like many collectors of the time in Massachusetts, he became an Associate in Ornithology at the MCZ. He was on

excellent terms with Samuel Henshaw, Director of the MCZ, and he used the MCZ extensively in compiling his life histories. In a February 13, 1914, letter to Henshaw, Bent writes: "I enclose herein a list of books I need to use in my work on the Life Histories of North American Birds." In a May 16, 1914, letter to Henshaw he states, "Bangs [Outram Bangs in the Bird Department] tells me that you have stored away in the Museum a lot of metal cases which you would be glad to sell cheap. As I am fitting out a museum in my back yard I might be able to use some of these, if I can get them at a bargain...."

Much later, Bent formalized his arrangement with the Museum, and offered the Museum his extensive collection of skins. He discusses this in a December 30, 1925, letter to Henshaw:

"Confirming the general understanding which seems to exist between us, I am putting down in writing my ideas as to the basis on which I am willing to deposit my collection of birds in your museum.

I understand that you have set aside space in what was formerly the zoological laboratory on the top floor for the storage of my collection. This is quite satisfactory to me and will provide all the room needed for the present at least and probably for all time.

I understand that I am to have free access to it at all times, subject to the rules and regulations of the museum... The collection is to remain my property during my lifetime, but at my death is to become the property of the museum."

Bent, with all of his business acumen, knew how to make a deal.

As a result of his many far-flung collecting trips, Bent was able to publish a number of papers, many describing new subspecies. He published a two-part paper (1907, 1908) on his bird observations in southwestern Saskatchewan. The expedition to the Aleutian Islands produced several papers. He described a new subspecies of ptarmigan from Alaska (1912a), naming it for his friend Leonard C. Sanford of the American Museum of Natural History, *Lagopus rupestris sanfordi*. He also published notes on the birds he observed (1912b). The same year he also named a new subspecies of Red Crossbill from Newfoundland (1912c). Thus by the time Bent had begun his life history series he was already an established ornithologist.

Bent became a member of the Wilson Ornithological Society in 1893. In 1909, when he was just starting to formalize his plans for his life history series, he joined the Cooper Ornithological Club (now Society) and was elected an Associate Member of the AOU. In 1919, the first volume, *Life Histories of North American Diving Birds*, came out, and the following year he was elected an AOU Fellow. In 1929, when Volume 8 appeared, he was elected Vice-president, and in 1935, when the 12th volume in the series was published, he was elected President of the AOU. His life history series, and all the ornithologists with whom he had worked, traveled, and solicited information from, had propelled him to the top of the ornithological circles

of North America. He was elevated to an Honorary Member of the Cooper organization in 1933.

As the *Life Histories* continued to appear, honors were bestowed on Bent. In 1923 after only the fourth volume of the *Life Histories* had been published, he received the William Brewster Award and Medal, which, along with the co-equal Coues Award, is the highest award given by the AOU. He received the Daniel Giraud Elliot Medal from the National Academy of Sciences in 1949. Also, he was the recipient of the John Burrows Medal from the John Burrows Association and Honorary Membership in the Linnaean Society of New York. He eventually held the Asher Chair of Biology and the title of Collaborator at the Smithsonian.

Bent, the Nuttall Ornithological Club, and the Culmination of the Life History Series

Bent was elected a Member of the Nuttall Ornithological Club (NOC; Club) in 1888 when he was a senior at Harvard. He was precocious, as Batchelder suggests in his description of Bent (1937) at the time, "... his grasp of scientific matters put him far above his contemporaries... his serious attitude was equaled only by his activity." The by-laws of the Club necessitated his resignation when he graduated and left the Cambridge region, but he was re-elected in 1896 when the by-laws were changed, and he served on the NOC Council from 1902–1914, and from 1923–1925 and 1926–1932 (Root and Elkins 1973). Talks were given at the NOC meetings, and by 1919 Bent had given approximately 20 of them, including a 1909 talk on the Great Horned Owl, perhaps a precursor to the 1935 photograph, which showed Bent looking at a Great Horned Owl perched on a NOC sign (Figure 3). Bent got on well with Club members, including famed birder Ludlow Griscom. The cartoon that Bent modified to include himself and Griscom indicates a warm camaraderie and suggests that Bent had a well-developed sense of humor (Figure 4). The Club honored Bent on his 80th birthday, in 1946, with a dinner that included as guests the current President of the AOU, Hoyes Lloyd; James Chapin; Ludlow Griscom; Alfred Gross; Frederick Lincoln; Alexander Wetmore; and Harry Oberholser, all AOU Fellows and some of the most influential ornithologists in North America.

Bent's relationship with the Club culminated late in Bent's life when he recognized that he would be unable to complete his life history series, and turned to



Figure 3. Arthur Cleveland Bent looking up a Great Horned Owl perched on a Nuttall Ornithological Club (NOC) sign. Photograph courtesy of the NOC.



CLUB LIFE IN AMERICA

The Audubon Bird Walkers Add a Scarlet Tanager to Their List

*Better raise a set of whiskers before
next summer. A.C.B.*

Figure 4. Cartoon which Bent modified to include himself and Ludlow Griscom.

the Nuttall Club for help. In 1951, the Club was brought into the fold with the following motion from the council:

“Voted : to accept the suggestion of Alexander Wetmore [Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution] that the Nuttall Ornithological Club assume the responsibility of making nominations for the Committee to function to complete the three or more volumes of A. C. Bent’s *Life Histories of North A. Birds.*” (Quoted in Davis 1987).

Wetmore’s letter that precipitated the vote indicated that this idea met with Bent’s approval.

“As Mr. Peters [then President of the NOC] no doubt informed you, this is a matter that Mr. Bent has discussed with me on a number of occasions and one that has troubled him considerably. I am sure that the friendly action of the Club relative to this will be [a] relief to his mind.” (Quoted in Davis 1987).

Further action was taken in 1953 as evidenced in the minutes of the April 6, 1953, NOC meeting.

“The Secretary read a copy of a letter from Mr. A. C. Bent on the subject of the committee for the completion of the Life Histories of North American Birds. The President commented that the file of letters seems to be essentially complete. However, since Mr. Bent feels some action is needed the Secretary was instructed to look up and report what action has been taken in the past. It was then moved, seconded and voted, that regardless of the action taken in the past the Club conform to Mr. Bent’s request. Pursuant to this Mr. Taber was named chairman of the Committee with power to add to the numbers of the Committee, which post he accepted.” (Minutes of the NOC meetings, NOC Archives, Bird Department, MCZ).

It appears that Bent thought that the NOC was dragging its feet on this issue, so he wrote in an attempt to move things along.

Bent died on December 30, 1954, the completion of the life history series fell to the NOC Committee, and they dutifully shepherded the last four volumes through printing between 1958 and 1968. Thus was completed the 23 volumes of *Life Histories of North American birds* (1919–1968), the standard reference for North American birds during most of the twentieth century. Bent’s boundless energy, enthusiasm, and business savvy produced a lifetime of remarkable accomplishment. 🐦

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William E. Davis, Jr., is the Cover Art Editor of Bird Observer and the Memoir Series Editor of the Nuttall Ornithological Club. He thanks the staff at the Ernst Mayr Library of the Museum of Comparative Zoology, Harvard University, for its help in researching this biography, and the Library for permission to publish Figures 1 and 4.

FIELD NOTES

Gray Catbird Drinks Condensation from Underside of Car

William E. Davis, Jr.

On March 21, 2012, I was near the beginning of the boardwalk in Long Key State Park, Long Key, Florida. It was 9:45 a.m., and I was awaiting the start of a park ranger-guided nature walk. I had parked my RAV4 in the parking lot and was standing about 20 feet away. I noticed a Gray Catbird (*Dumetella carolinensis*) hopping about under my car and watched it in my binoculars as it moved to the middle of a foot-wide water stain. The stain was caused by condensation dripping from the air conditioner of my car. The bird then proceeded to flutter up and with its extended bill take a water drop forming on my car. It then waited a few seconds, repeated the maneuver, and took another drop. It repeated this more than a dozen times before it was scared off by a passerby. After the catbird had left, I got down on the ground and watched drops of water form and drip from my car onto the middle of the stain every few seconds.

Long Key has no standing fresh water. The only available water for birds is from rain and perhaps from early morning dew. Birds also get water from insects and fruit that they take. But resident birds on many of the Florida Keys may be hard pressed for water at times, and I think that the catbirds drinking condensation from my car illustrates the lengths they will go to when thirsty.

The *Birds of North America* species account of the Gray Catbird (Cimprich and Moore 1995) states “Nothing reported on drinking . . .” Catbirds do drink water, and as is often the case with a common behavior, catbird drinking is probably a seriously underreported behavior. 🐦

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Front Row at the Raptor Show

David Swain

On the morning of January 9 Will Martens and I met at the observation tower at Great Meadows in Concord. It was 8:30, and the adult Bald Eagle that had been frequenting the area had been dining on coot on the ice, a mere sixty feet from an open pool filled with nervous coots. Since early November 2011, Great Meadows had seen enormous numbers of American Coots, topping 400 in weekly surveys done by

Will, Kathy Dia, and Allan Bragg. Then a cold snap had caused several hundred to be concentrated in two large pools, and the eagle began showing up daily for a meal. Below the kiosk chalkboard, Cherrie Corrie had posted a memento mori, a coot's reptilian foot.

Little of the coot carcass on the ice was left, so the eagle lifted off and strafed the swimming coots into hysteria a few times to emphasize the point. It then flew off to perch by the river, out of view. Its place was quickly taken by a continuing Northern Harrier, who flew in to polish off the last of the coot. We had dubbed the harrier Spike (although it was a female) for an apparent twig lodged in feathers on its back. Spike tore into what was left for ten minutes, mostly coming up with black feathers. Then it, too, flew off. Will and I also left for a while to see if we could locate a roosting screech-owl down the rail trail (it was not at home), and on our return to the parking lot, we noticed a raptor in a shallow dive at a lone coot on the ice by the dike.

“Looks like the harrier is back.”

I took a look. “Uh, Will, I don't think that's a harrier ... “

“A peregrine!”

We scrambled up the tower while the adult Peregrine repeatedly came within inches of the feckless coot's head before pulling up. Playing with it. As we reached the platform, the bald eagle cruised in, low and fast over the ice, to engage the peregrine in a low-altitude dogfight in front of the tower, just above the agitated coot and two oblivious sleeping Mute Swans. Managing some impressively tight figure eights, the eagle attempted to evade the falcon, which pulled up into loops the eagle could not follow, harassing it with short, checked dives and swerves. Woefully out-matched, the eagle retired to the trees, and the peregrine flew a few scorching victory laps before perching briefly in a tree on the dike. Then, as if to make its point, it powered up and exited low over our heads.

Thrilled, and late for work, we had to leave. But the raptor show was not over. Fifty minutes later, photographer Roy Haddock got pictures of possibly the first goshawk ever recorded at Great Meadows. It came for coot, of course. 



Northern Goshawk with American Coot by Roy Haddock

Marsh Birding the West Meadows Wildlife Management Area in West Bridgewater

Steve Arena

Introduction

When the *Bird Observer* staff contacted me to write an article on freshwater marsh birding at the West Meadows Wildlife Management Area (WMWMA) in West Bridgewater, I was honored yet hesitant—honored because *Bird Observer* is a periodical that advocates for Massachusetts avifauna, hesitant because of my concern for disclosing the locations of sensitive breeding species and the methods used to locate them. Ultimately the opportunity to share my passion for marsh birds with the birding community outweighed my initial hesitation. This piece is not a typical article about where to go birding; it is an article about the hows and whys of responsibly studying marsh birds. It provides insight into the lives of some of the least understood breeding birds in the Commonwealth and highlights the status of several Massachusetts freshwater marsh birds along with some of the issues and pressures associated with their conservation. I hope that this article will provide an increased awareness of our wetland bird species and will encourage those who are passionate about conservation in Massachusetts to get into the field and enjoy what I have so much enjoyed for over 25 years—Massachusetts marsh birds.

Marsh Birding by Canoe

Reaching the West Meadows is straightforward. Birding the West Meadows for marsh species is an altogether different matter. If you come from Interstate 495 (I-495), take exit 7A-Route 24 North toward Boston; if you come from Interstate 93 (I-93)/Route 128, take exit 4-Route 24 South toward Brockton/Fall River. From Route 24, take exit 16A-Route 106 East (W. Center Street) toward West Bridgewater. Go 1.3 miles and turn left onto North Elm Street. Travel another 0.9 miles and turn left onto Spring Street. Proceed 0.9 miles down Spring Street and arrive at the parking lot of the WMWMA. The canoe launch area is well marked and readily accessible.

First, a brief description of West Meadows is in order. A large, freshwater cattail marsh at the northern end of West Meadow Brook Pond is the centerpiece WMWMA. The property is a portion of the Hockomock Important Bird Area (IBA). A shallow pond takes up 128 acres of the 222-acre tract. A single 1.25-mile loop trail in the southwest portion of the WMA provides a pleasant walk through a mixture of mature hardwoods and stands of white pine (*Pinus strobus*). West Meadow Brook is the primary feeder to the pond. After entering the cattail marsh at the northern end of the pond, the brook wends its way through the marsh, marsh pools, backwaters, and narrow channels that lace the marsh. These channels are constantly in a state of flux; the vegetation shifts from year to year, periodically opening up new areas and closing older ones. This dynamic activity is due, in part, to the fact that the extensive cattail tracts are actually on floating mats. The wetland appears to be in excellent health.

Pickerelweed (*Pontederia cordata*), arrowhead (*Sagittaria sp.*), duckweed (*Lemna sp.*), cattail (*Typha sp.*), water lilies (*Nymphaeaceae sp.*), sedges (*Cyperaceae sp.*), and buttonbush (*Cephalanthus occidentalis*) all flourish here. The water depth is variable in the main pond and by late in the season its surface has such a rug of lily pads that it becomes more difficult to navigate.



Tough going at West Meadows (all photographs by the author.)

To properly bird the marsh, a light watercraft is required. I use an Old Town Stillwater 12-foot canoe. I chose this canoe for several reasons. The Stillwater is lightweight so that it can be easily ported, it has a wide beam (width) that offers a reasonably stable platform, and the canoe's hull is flat, which readily enables navigation in shallow areas. On a summer's morning, I usually put the canoe in the water at 3:30 A.M. This gives me ample time to make the 0.6-mile paddle to the cattail stand by 4:00 A.M. This hour is somewhat early for marsh birding, but I particularly enjoy experiencing the waking of the marsh. Having spent an overnight in a canoe in this marsh, I appreciate the fact that it never goes to sleep. The various sounds, grunts, and croaks of the marsh's inhabitants are ever present. But it is not until the false dawn approaches that the true magic of the marsh is revealed. The dawn chorus of Red-winged Blackbirds (*Agelaius phoeniceus*), Marsh Wrens (*Cistothorus palustris*), Willow Flycatchers (*Empidonax traillii*), Swamp Sparrows (*Melospiza georgiana*), and, of course, rails and bitterns is an experience like no other.

I try to survey the marsh at various locations along the leading edge of the cattails, early in the morning being the best time to bird the area for marsh species. With increased air traffic and road noise, birding in the evening can be challenging, though not impossible. I typically use broadcast vocalizations with a cassette recorder. I don't use anything fancy because sooner or later it will go for a swim—guaranteed! More often than not, I use my own imitated vocalizations to elicit responses from the marsh birds. Several key factors, other than becoming acquainted with the vocalizations and plumages of rails and bitterns, help to maximize one's encounters with marsh birds.

1. Remember at all times that what you are doing is first and foremost about the birds. Do not over-tape, harass, or otherwise overly disrupt marsh birds in your attempts to see or hear them. Rails and bitterns are sensitive creatures that do not need unnecessary pressure added to their lives. A respect for the birds becomes a greater concern in wetland habitats that are generally more accessible to humans (including birders).

2. Marsh birding requires patience and excellent situational awareness. As railophiles can attest, rails and bitterns are notorious skulkers. Being alert at

all times when marsh birding will enhance your chances of catching a glimpse or hearing a grunt of one of these elusive birds.

3. Elevation. Elevation. Elevation. This is probably the most important factor in actually locating marsh birds—especially in response to rail vocalizations and for bittern short-hop flights. Unlike Wash Brook in Wayland, WMWMA does not have the advantage of being adjacent to an abandoned rail line, so one has to rely on ingenuity. Standing in the canoe while marsh birding is a must. Another method that works well at WMWMA is to stand atop existing hunting blinds. In my younger days, I would sometimes bring along a six-foot stepladder and climb atop to gain maximum elevation. Suffice to say that this method is not recommended and more than once I found myself in the drink—optics and all.

The Birds

The marsh birds of West Meadows include most of the typical cattail wetland species: Willow Flycatchers, Marsh Wrens, Swamp Sparrows, and Red-winged Blackbirds. These species are common or abundant in appropriate nesting densities, and all have been confirmed as breeding. Other wetland species that frequent the marsh in summer are Great Blue Heron (*Ardea herodias*, common), Green Heron (*Butorides virescens*, uncommon breeder), Black-crowned Night-Heron (*Nycticorax nycticorax*, uncommon visitor in late summer), Wood Duck (*Aix sponsa*, common breeder), Hooded Merganser (*Lophodytes cucullatus*, uncommon breeder), and Ring-necked Duck (*Aythya collaris*, rare in summer). Other species not found annually in the breeding season include Pied-billed Grebe (*Podilymbus podiceps*), American Coot (*Fulica americana*), Common Gallinule (*Gallinula galeata*, formerly Common Moorhen), and American Bittern (*Botaurus lentiginosus*). Over the course of my efforts at West Meadows, these four species appear irregularly at best and I have yet to confirm any of these species breeding at West Meadows. Expected marsh bird species at West Meadows are Virginia Rail (*Rallus limicola*) and Least Bittern (*Ixobrychus exilis*). King Rail (*Rallus elegans*), though present most years, is often heard only once or twice a season. Sora (*Porzana carolina*), on the other hand, formerly seemed to be an uncommon breeding bird but its numbers at West Meadows have apparently declined. This trend holds true at other wetland sites that I regularly visit.

Virginia Rail (*Rallus limicola*)

The Virginia Rail is the most common breeding marsh bird in Massachusetts of the four species that I will review in this article. At West Meadows, the Virginia Rail is also the most common nester. Virginia Rails are still listed as a game species in Massachusetts with a bag limit set at 10 birds per day during the appropriate hunting season. As breeding birds, their numbers and status are fairly stable. Virginia Rails are considerably smaller than Rhode Island Red chickens. They are wonderfully colored, yet are highly inconspicuous. They sport cinnamon-colored wings, breast, and neck; a white throat; gray cheeks; moderately barred black and white flanks; and a long,

slender, slightly down-curved, orange brown bill. Sexes are similar.

Virginia Rails breed in varied habitats with a decided preference for moderately sized cattail marshes—which describes West Meadows perfectly. Virginia Rails also have been known to breed in riparian wet meadows, in vegetated margins of ponds and streams, and even in the upper edges of salt marshes. These habitats tend to include suitable stands of cattails, sedges, bulrush, cordgrass (*Spartina sp.*), and reed canary grass (*Phalaris arundinacea*). Emergent vegetation aside, small pockets of open water with muddy areas often prove to be good places to search when looking for Virginia Rails. In my experience, this species seems to avoid extremely dense cattail stands. The locations of the well-concealed nests of Virginia Rails vary considerably. They nest on platforms made from cattails, on the ground hidden within the vegetation, or in a tussock of grass or sedge. A

Virginia Rail nest is an olio of grasses, cattails, sedges, and other readily available vegetation. Females typically lay a single clutch of five to twelve eggs. Breeding Virginia Rails can arrive as early as the end of March and are present in Massachusetts at least through the warm summer months; a few even overwinter near the coast.

Virginia Rails apparently breed quite successfully at West Meadows as evidenced by regular sightings of numerous pairs with many young. As with most secretive marsh birds, Virginia Rails are most often identified by their vocalizations, a task made challenging given the range of assorted sounds in their repertoire. The male's advertising song is a series of metallic notes often rendered as *ki-dik, ki-dik, ki-dik, ki-dik, ki-dik*. This vocalization is sometimes repeated incessantly through the course of the evening, the night, and even into the early morning. The classic contact call given by both the male and female is a nasal, pig-like grunting, *neep-neep-neep-neep-neep*, that starts off strong then falls in volume as it accelerates towards the end. The once enigmatic kicker call is thought to be given by females checking in on their mates. This call has been represented as *kick, kick, kick-McGreer* with the *McGreer* seemingly exploding at the call's conclusion. Less common calls include a single *ehhkk*, or double *eeep eeep* alarm notes, and a fun little noise that I call the squeaky balloon. On occasion, when I observe adults with young, the adults will give out a



Adult Virginia Rail



Juvenile Virginia Rail

very soft, chortled-cough *gha-gha-gha-gha-gha-gha* call to corral their downy young or alert them to danger. When I hear this, I listen for the soft *peep* of the chicks. On some outings I have noted 15–25 individual Virginia Rails at West Meadows.

What Virginia Rails lack in rarity, they surely make up in character. Their behavior and interactions with one another are most entertaining. Virginia Rails are curious birds, often poking in and out of the cattails with tails held cocked as they survey their surroundings. They dart, weave, and run through the cattails with the greatest of ease, occasionally swimming like other rails across little stretches of open water. A wonderful adaptation of all rails is their ability to laterally compress their bodies, making for a smaller cross-sectional area, in order to ease their advances through dense vegetation. Specially adapted feathers on the crown and face minimize the effects of abrasion during their wetland travels. The idiom “skinny as a rail” came about as a comparison of a slender person to a narrow rod, not in reference to the lateral compression ability of rails. However, the message is comparable.

Since West Meadows is accessible mainly via canoe, an intrepid birder can easily spend plenty of time in the company of these delightful little rails. For those interested in studying their plumage, molts, and vocalizations, West Meadows is the ideal classroom. From freshly-plumaged birds in the spring, to little black balls of downy young, to ebony-plumaged juveniles, to feather-worn molting adults and back again full cycle to winter-ready birds—you can experience it all at West Meadows!

Least Bittern (*Ixobrychus exilis*)

Least Bitterns are notoriously difficult to catalog as breeding species in Massachusetts due to their reclusive and shy nature. As such, their breeding numbers may be slightly higher than the expected one to three pairs per large tract of suitable habitat (personal observation). Even though this species is listed as endangered in Massachusetts, I believe that at least two to three pairs nest at West Meadows annually. This diminutive species is the smallest member of the heron family in North America and is one of the most retiring of all of our local marsh birds. Least Bitterns are slightly larger than an Eastern Meadowlark (*Sturnella magna*). Males and females are similar in size but they differ in plumage. Males are iridescent black on the crown, back, and tail whereas the females are a purple chestnut. The male’s neck, sides of the body and under parts are brown and white. Females are similar but have a streaked neck. In both sexes the wings are chestnut with contrasting and conspicuous pale yellow patches and grayish wingtips. The bill is thin and yellow and the legs and feet are a muted yellow.

An extremely rare morph of the Least Bittern, the “Cory’s” form, exhibits chestnut and chocolate colors in place of the pale feathering. This rare form has been recorded twice in the Commonwealth. A female was collected in Scituate on May 18, 1901, and on September 1, 1945, Ludlow Griscom and William Cottrell observed a bird in Marshfield. Amazingly, recent (2010) video footage from the Pantanal in Brazil shows “Cory’s” Least Bitterns to be alive and active! See: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kBVIUG3cIBs>.

Least Bitterns prefer marshes with a blend of dense, tall cattails, sedges, reeds, bulrushes, and arrowhead where woody aquatic plants are sometimes interspersed in the vegetation and where open tracts of water are usually nearby. Individual nests are built in dense stands of the emergent vegetation or woody shrubs. The nest platform is constructed primarily by the male. The male also builds a canopy over the nest by pulling down and dressing the surrounding vegetation. Short stems and sticks are sometimes added to the nest, probably to increase robustness and stability. Nests are well concealed and are usually located near open water. Females typically lay a single clutch of four to five eggs. Least Bitterns arrive in Massachusetts in the first weeks of May and are present at least through August.



Least Bittern

Published literature suggests that Least Bitterns sometimes nest in a semi-colonial setting, and based on my experiences at West Meadows and other suitable Massachusetts marshes, I tend to concur. Least Bitterns seem to thrive at West Meadows. I recorded up to three pairs (three males/three females) in the forward fringe of the cattails in 2011, similar to numbers recorded in the mid-1990s.

Least Bitterns are truly masters of their habitat. They move with all the skill and agility of a spider monkey among the thick stands of cattails that are their home. More often heard than seen, their soft, coughing *coah, coah, coah, coah* can easily go undetected by the untrained ear. If you think you have a cuckoo calling from the cattails, double check—it may be a Least Bittern! Caveat: I have actually had Black-billed Cuckoos (*Coccyzus erythrophthalmus*) calling from cattails in May at Wash Brook in Wayland. Another common Least Bittern vocalization is a single *huuuUUURRRrrrr* call. With experience, one can pick up the sharp *HACK* flight call. Less common calls include variations of the fairly rapid *arnt arnt arnt arnt arnt* calls.

To look for these reclusive birds, scan the edge of a cattail stand where it abuts open water. It is in these places that Least Bitterns often search for food. Also, Least Bitterns, like American Bitterns, can readily disappear by assuming the typical bittern pose. In this mode, the Least Bittern will point its bill directly skyward and gently sway along with the vegetation in order to blend in. With their forward-set eyes they are ever watchful of their surroundings. Another way to spot this species is to patiently watch for their short-hop flights from one spot to another over the cattails. Sometimes they make more prolonged flights, but a 20-30 yard foray is typical. In the summer of 2011, I was treated to the discovery of two Least Bittern chicks. The chicks were no larger than Nerf footballs, covered in white natal down, standing stock still in a stand of reeds. At first glance, one could pass them off as exploded cattails—camouflage at its best! The two young chicks eventually climbed around in the reeds with their oversized feet and vestigial carpal claws, though they were always under

the watchful eye of the adults. Once I saw them, I paddled quietly away so as to not disturb them any further.

King Rail (*Rallus elegans*)

The largest rail in North America, the King Rail has never been a common bird in Massachusetts. At the periphery of its range in the Commonwealth, the King Rail's status and distribution are not well understood. There have been only a handful of confirmed breeding records of this species through the years and, as of this writing, a nest has never been documented in the state. The King Rail, which is state listed as threatened in Massachusetts, is a solitary and secretive marsh bird. For a bird of its size, it is remarkably unseeable. It is a rare day when one can catch a glimpse of this chestnut-hued marsh master. King Rails are beautifully slender rails and as such, Audubon called them the elegant rail, as reflected in their scientific name. King Rails are chicken-sized birds that superficially resemble Virginia Rails on steroids. On closer inspection, differences can be noted. The neck and under parts of a King Rail are a rich, rusty chestnut brown in sharp contrast to the crisply-banded black and white flanks and undertail coverts. The darker brown upper parts are highlighted by a warm, chestnut brown color on the fringe of the back feathers. The barrel-chested bird has a long, orange brown bill that is fairly straight for most of its length but droops toward the end. To me, the King Rail appears to lack a forehead due to its large flat bill whereas the Virginia Rail's forehead appears more angular and more pronounced. King Rails have some partial gray coloration on the upper part of their face, but it is strikingly different from the all gray-cheeked Virginia Rail. Sexes are similar.

King Rail habitat appears to be somewhat more specific than that of the Virginia Rail. A blend of dense cattails, grasses, sedges, and open water seems to describe an ideal King Rail marsh. Their nests are usually built on low tussocks of grass or on a mat of cattails that are near the water. They often form a canopy above the nest by bending and folding vegetation, making their nest extremely difficult to locate. King Rails typically lay a single clutch of eight to eleven eggs. Similar to the Virginia Rail, they probably arrive as early as the end of March or beginning of April; most King Rails probably depart for points south sometime in early fall.

I have been fortunate enough to record King Rails at various locations in eastern Massachusetts during the breeding season, but nowhere as often as at West Meadows. However, their presence is somewhat sporadic at this marsh. Unlike that of Virginia Rails, the density of breeding King Rails is undoubtedly much lower, and territorial songs and calls are not nearly as common or frequently heard. Why sing and call with great frequency when the pressure for territory is not high as it is in the heart of the species' range? Like Virginia Rails, King Rails have a repertoire of vocalizations. The song of the King Rail is a series of sharp, evenly-spaced *kek kek kek...kek* notes. Females are said to occasionally produce a *KICK KICK KICK grrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr* when contacting or attempting to locate their mates. Both males and females use the deep, slightly descending *JOOP-JOOP-JOOP* grunt or the sharply chortled *CHUFF CHUFF CHUFF* call. My favorite vocalization of the King Rail is the two part *AUNT-AUNT-AUNT gggggggrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr* call, with the first part of the call

reminiscent of a Pied-billed Grebe and the latter a low, strong growl that Popeye would give. King Rails also produce a variety of squeaks, clacks, and moans much like those of the Virginia Rail.

In the summer of 2011, I was pleased and fortunate to observe two full-sized ebony-plumed juvenile King Rails in the company of an adult. Confirming the breeding of any marsh bird is difficult, but I was especially fortunate to see evidence of a King Rail breeding in Massachusetts. The only confirmed breeding occurrence of King Rails in the state during the Breeding Bird Atlas I project was the observation of an adult King Rail and nine chicks crossing a road in Middleboro on July 17, 1976. There have been several confirmations since then, including birds breeding at the Parker River National Wildlife Refuge in Newburyport and in Eastham on Cape Cod. Consistent with the published literature, the three birds I observed at West Meadows were hanging around the vicinity of a muskrat (*Ondatra zibethicus*) house. King Rails are known to climb atop these structures to preen, eat, hack up pellets, and vocalize. With this information in mind, I never look at a 'skrat house the same way.

Sora (Porzana carolina)

Historically, Sora has been the most common rail in Massachusetts. As breeding birds, this species has witnessed a recent uptick in numbers as reflected in breeding bird survey (BBS) data. This has been somewhat supported by data collected from the most recent Breeding Bird Atlas II efforts over the past five years. It has been suggested that there may be a correlation between increased Sora numbers and the increase of American beavers (*Castor canadensis*) in Massachusetts. The literature suggests that Soras prefer the fresh emergent vegetation that beaver activity tends to foster. If true, this would be welcome news. I would suggest that a careful review of the two atlas efforts be undertaken to ensure that factors such as increased coverage (normalized sightings per hour in field), higher fidelity in electronic playback media, and possibly cyber enablers have not skewed the data since the 1970s. Today, Sora is still considered a game species in Massachusetts with the daily bag limit set at five birds during the appropriate hunting season. Due to its restricted distribution in Massachusetts, the Sora has recently been proposed for protection under the Massachusetts Endangered Species Act—a view that I share and a measure that I support. At West Meadows, Soras were uncommonly recorded breeding in the 1990s (personal observation). In the past few years, however, Sora numbers have diminished at West Meadows.

Soras are quail-sized marsh birds that are strikingly beautiful in all seasons. Breeding Soras have mottled brown and white upper parts with battleship gray under parts. The gray reaches up the sides of the neck and cheeks and surrounds the red eyes. A warm brown crown, nape, and hind neck give Soras smooth, clean lines. Soras have barred black and white flanks and underparts, as do King and Virginia rails. Like other rails, Soras walk with their short, stubby tails vertically cocked, providing a pleasing cream colored, ventral view. Soras sport extremely long toes set on yellow green legs. Their bill is bright yellow, stubby, and conical, quite unlike the down-curved bill of the Virginia Rail. The black on the Sora's face and throat makes one

think that the bird dipped its bill into an inkwell without getting the bill inked. Females have duller, less extensive black around the face and throat than males and their mantles exhibit whiter mottling; overall their plumage is drabber than that of males.

Soras primarily inhabit stands of moderate to extensive cattail growth. As with Virginia Rails, Soras prefer sedges and emergent vegetation near areas of open water. Soras seemingly prefer less woody, more herbaceous marshes; beaver-wrought wetlands are ideal. These compact quail-sized crakes arrive as early as the end of March or the beginning of April, and depart for parts south in the early fall. Soras' finely woven cup nests are typically located in grasses, reeds, and dense cattails. In some instances, a canopy is made over the nest to protect the young from the elements and from predators. Soras typically lay a single clutch of five to thirteen eggs.

The advertising song of the male Sora is the quintessential sound of a freshwater marsh. The song, a train of closely spaced *kerrr-whit kerrr-whit* two-part whistles, is incessantly delivered at the height of the breeding season in mid to late May. This song is complimented by the distinctive, 15 to 25 note contact/territorial call that has been popularly described like the sound of a descending horse whinny. This crisply clear, sweet call starts off with a series of rapidly whistled notes descending in speed and pitch that sometimes culminate in a bouncing-ball series of notes. Soras also have one and two note alarm calls that are similar to the Virginia Rails yet they have more of a squeaky balloon quality. I have also observed adult Soras at West Meadows use a low murmur *cut-cut-cut-cutta* call to rein in their chicks. The call is not unlike the Virginia Rail's chick-herding call but it is not as loud or as vibrant.

The Sora fills a slightly different niche than the longer-billed Virginia Rail. With their heavy, short beaks, Soras depend heavily on seed consumption. Some published literature suggests that a Sora's diet may contain up to 75% seeds by volume. Conversely, Virginia Rails with their long, slender, slightly down-curved bills may consume approximately 60% insects by volume. Could a reduction in seed-rich vegetation possibly be the rationale behind diminished numbers of Sora at West Meadows?

Like the Virginias Rails observed at West Meadows, Soras readily exhibit observable antics and behavior. Soras are adept at traversing the marsh. Their long toes enable them to walk, run, dart, and scurry over lily pads, menisci of algae, duckweed, and flattened grasses. Having long toes also enables them to climb atop vegetation in search of seed heads to eat—an adaptation more important in the late summer and fall months. Like most rails, Soras are excellent swimmers and divers. I have seen Soras swimming the little channels in the cattails more often than I have seen Virginias. They bob their heads in a dove-like manner while effortlessly gliding across the water's surface. I have also seen Soras dive under the water. This happens only rarely, but it is a sight to be seen. There are published reports of Soras walking on the bottom of small rivers and streams for distances of 10 to 15 feet! My most memorable experience with a Sora at West Meadows was on June 18, 1995. During an evening visit to the cattail marsh, I was treated to the continued whinny call of a

Sora. By slowly triangulating the sound's emanation point, I was able to quietly paddle up to a grass tussock and observe an adult sitting on a nest. I observed the bird for quite a long time without disturbing it. When the mate came by, the incubating adult left the nest momentarily. I was quickly able to see six eggs nestled comfortably in the grass cup. This was truly a marsh bird highlight for me.

Parting Thoughts

Marsh birds represent one of the least known and little understood groups of breeding birds in the Commonwealth. Not only are they shy and retreating by nature, but most breed in some of the most inaccessible habitats in the state. As a result, the gap in our understanding of marsh bird status and distribution is greater than for almost any other species group in Massachusetts. As a consequence, state scientists and biologists are challenged in their data-driven management decisions. The Natural Heritage & Endangered Species Program (NHESP) is *the* organization that needs data about our rare or endangered species. Sadly, marsh birds make up only a fraction of the birds that are listed in the state. I encourage anyone who cares about the preservation and conservation of marsh and other birds to visit the NHESP website and report your valuable, appropriate sightings.

We are fortunate to have richly diverse marshes such as West Meadows that offer safe haven for our shy and retiring marsh bird species. Due to its canoe-only access, the cattail marsh at West Meadows sees little in the way of disturbance. This does not hold true for all cattail marshes, however. I recommend exercising extreme prudence when attempting to see or hear marsh birds in more accessible locations. It is my hope that this article has provided some insight into the methods and means of responsible freshwater marsh birding. In addition, I hope birders have a better understanding of some of the marsh birds of Massachusetts—their habitat, identification, and status—as described by my efforts at West Meadows. I leave you with this parting question: If we are not the ones protecting the nature of Massachusetts, then who is? 🐦

Steve Arena was born in Hyde Park and began his bird-loving journey in first grade when a male Scarlet Tanager (Piranga olivacea) captured his attention on a mid-May morning while Steve was sitting in his classroom. Steve has been seriously birding for the past 25 years—taking a decade-long hiatus to raise his family. Steve currently lives in Westborough and is the proud, loving father of his son, Thomas, and his daughter, Rebecca. Steve would like to thank Wayne R. Petersen for his critical review of earlier drafts of this article. In addition, he thanks Wayne for his inspiration, dedication, and friendship.

\$3.7 Million for Neotropical Migratory Birds and Habitat Conservation

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Director Dan Ashe announced on April 11, 2012, more than \$3.7 million in Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation grants for 28 collaborative projects that will support bird conservation throughout the Western Hemisphere.

Matched by more than \$14 million in contributions from partners, the projects will support habitat restoration, environmental education, population monitoring, and other priority activities within the ranges of Neotropical migratory birds in the United States, Canada, Mexico and 23 Latin American and Caribbean countries.

“Migratory birds play so many roles in our lives and on the landscape—ecologically, culturally and economically—and they enhance our connection with our natural world,” said Service Director Dan Ashe. “The grant funds we provide under the Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Act, matched at least three-to-one by partner dollars, help to bring bird conservation to where it’s most needed, ensuring birds continue to enrich our lives.”

The more than 340 species of Neotropical migratory birds—which breed in Canada and the United States during summer and spend the winter in Mexico, Central America, South America or the Caribbean islands—include warblers, plovers, sandpipers, terns, hawks, flycatchers and sparrows, among others. The populations of many of these birds are presently in decline, and several species are currently protected as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act.

The Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Act of 2000 established a matching grants program to fund projects promoting the conservation of Neotropical migratory birds in the United States, Canada, Latin America, and the Caribbean. Funds may be used to protect, research, monitor, and manage bird populations and habitat as well as to conduct law enforcement and community outreach and education. By law, at least 75 percent of the money goes to projects in Latin America, the Caribbean and Canada, while the remaining 25 percent may go to projects in the United States.

Beginning in 2012, the NMBCA grant program initiated a pilot program to focus a portion of available funds on a group of particularly threatened Neotropical migratory birds. This new strategic direction emphasizes the need to attain measurable population gains in the highest priority migratory species. Long-term success will be measured as an increase in the abundance, distribution and viability of those populations.

The pilot program targets several species that are of high conservation priority; have an existing or soon to be completed conservation action plan; and are reasonably expected to respond in a measurable way to conservation activities within 5 to 6 years. The program seeks to fund projects that will help improve a

species' population status or significantly and measurably contribute—through research, monitoring or assessment—to understanding the factors limiting a species' population.

Examples of projects receiving 2012 Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Act grants include:

Protecting Critical Stopover Habitat for Buff-breasted Sandpiper II
(Bolivia)

Grantee: Asociación Armonía

Funded under the new NMBCA Pilot Program, Asociación Armonía will conserve a large area of ideal foraging habitat for the Buff-breasted Sandpiper and other migrant shorebird species in the Beni Savanna. Specific actions include expansion of protected savanna, improved savanna management to provide foraging habitat for this species, outreach to private cattle ranches through an education program, and monitoring of buff-breasted sandpiper population, movements and habitat usage in the Beni Savannas.

The Arctic Shorebird Demographics Network II (U.S. and Canada)

Grantee: Manomet Center for Conservation Sciences

The overall goal of the Arctic Shorebird Demographics Network, now in its third of five years, is to determine what limits populations of nine high-priority target species by developing demographic models that can guide conservation action. Network partners, spread across the entire breeding range of these species in the Alaskan and Canadian arctic, will measure demographic rates such as adult survival, productivity, and other demographic parameters.

Targeted Grazing Management to Conserve the Sprague's Pipit (U.S. and Canada)

Grantee: Wildlife Conservation Society

Funded under the new Pilot Program, the Wildlife Conservation Society and its partners will maintain and restore critical habitat for the Sprague's Pipit in northern Montana, North Dakota, and southern Saskatchewan. Specific activities include habitat improvement through grazing deferment, reseeding of croplands to native grasses and targeted outreach to ranchers and agencies on the conservation and management options for this grassland species. The partnership's goal over the next 5 to 6 years is to increase the habitat for the Sprague's Pipit population in this landscape by at least 1 percent.

Conservation of Cerulean Warbler in Eastern Ecuador

Grantee: Jocotoco Foundation

The Jocotoco Foundation and its partners will strengthen protection and management of a key wintering site for the Cerulean Warbler, the Jocotoco Foundation's Narupa Reserve in Eastern Ecuador, which covers nearly 600 hectares of forest. Public outreach and ecotourism will be used to increase public support for the conservation of migratory species and their habitats in eastern Ecuador.

ABOUT FILM

Watching the Watchers Watch

Mark Lynch

THE BIG YEAR. Directed by David Frankel. Written by Howard Franklin. 2011. Twentieth Century Fox Corporation and Dune Entertainment.

“It’s not what a movie is about, it’s how it is about it.” Roger Ebert

The 2011 movie, *The Big Year*, began, as so many Hollywood films do, as a popular, well reviewed book written years before. This book led to someone pitching a “film treatment.” The proposal became a script, and the project was green lighted by Twentieth Century Fox, which began a search for a suitable director and package deals on possible stars. The project ended, as is too often the case, as a poor to mediocre film that ultimately failed to convey to audiences what was special about the book. The film tanked at the box office. It’s a common enough tale.



The book, *The Big Year*, was written by Colorado newspaper journalist Mark Obmascik and was published in 2004. Tired of covering nightly stories about murder and theft and always having had a deep interest in stories about people who were “smart, fun and driven,” Obmascik started off trying to write a piece about Colorado law professor Thompson Marsh. Marsh was not only a true legal legend but also a “birdwatcher possessed” (p. ix). Because of Marsh, Obmascik developed not only an interest in birding but also a deeper fascination with birders.

“The truth is that everyone has obsessions. Most people manage them. Birders, however, indulge them.” (p. xiii)

It was inevitable that Obmascik would focus on that epitome of birding obsessions: the Big Year. His coverage of a particular Big Year quickly became a birding classic. But unlike most birding books, *The Big Year* also appealed to the non-birding audience and garnered many positive reviews. The reason *The Big Year* became so popular outside of birding circles was because of Obmascik’s considerable skills as a writer and journalist and his point of view as a passionate outsider. He wrote *The Big Year* as a way of generally exploring his favorite themes of passion and obsession, not as a birding book. There is a lot of back-story on the three protagonists. Sandy Komito, Greg Miller, and Al Levantin are three very different people with very

different life stories and approaches to birding, yet all three are possessed with a peculiar drive to win the Big Year. It's this *Rashomon*-like approach to the story that makes *The Big Year* such an entertaining tale. Obmascik also added lots of general details about local birding hotspots so the non-birder could get a sense of place. There are a number of amusing stories of when the quest went awry and some in-depth historical context so the non-birder could understand why these seemingly insane competitions happen in the first place. Obmascik makes it clear that the participants in a Big Year represent only a small, obsessed fraction of the birding community. Finally, *The Big Year* named names and dished dirt, so the inquiring birder learned why Larry Balch was nicknamed "Lawrence of Attu" and all the juicy details of Debi Shearwater's long running feud with Sandy Komito.

The book *The Big Year* was re-published in 2011 as part of a confused publicity program for the movie. The cover featured the movie poster of the three stars Jack Black, Steve Martin, and Owen Wilson, whose names are featured prominently at the top. Under their names is the phrase "The best-selling book by Mark Obmascik [name in red ink but only a wee bit larger than "Martin, Black, and Wilson"]". Now a Major Motion Picture." The title "*The Big Year*" appears on the film poster. Immediately underneath the book title is the phrase: "from the director of THE DEVIL WEARS PRADA," leading some who bought the book to possibly think that the author also had something to do with that film.

"Those freakin' birds!" Kevin Pollack as Jim Gittleston in the film version of *The Big Year*.

Buzz about a film version of *The Big Year* started showing up on birding list serves at least a year before the actual release of the film (October 14, 2011). When the cast particulars were released, some apprehension was expressed in the birding community. The idea of Steve Martin, Owen Wilson, and particularly Jack Black as the leads in this "birding" film caused some birders to wonder if this was going to make birding look silly and frivolous, like *Three Amigos II* with binoculars. Hollywood insiders and box office geeks were looking for *The Big Year* to be another of Director Frankel's unexpected hits like *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006) or *Marley and Me* (2008).

Almost immediately after the film opened in October 2011, birders chimed in with mostly positive and glowing reviews of the movie. "Finally a film that got it right!" was the sentiment of many birders. Part of the fun of the film was that it included so many potent signifiers of birding. *The Big Year* features a flash of the Sibley guide, a cover of Birding magazine, many well-known birding locations, and, of course, all those birds, all correctly identified. Glowing reviews were written on several birding blogs or posted on list serves. Groups of birders attended screenings *en masse* making a birding event of seeing the film. Some well known birders even posted photos of themselves on Facebook and other sites posed like the poster. (*Nota bene*: I know who you are but will not name you.) The few birders who expressed negative feelings about the film were generally ignored. For myself, I was often confronted in the field by excited exclamations of "Have you seen it yet?" or "You have got to see it." I resisted and waited for the inevitable DVD release.

What was interesting at the time was the contrast of the birders' enthusiasm for the film with the reviews in papers, journals, and on-line film blogs. Some reviewers gave *The Big Year* a tepid positive review, but others, particularly film bloggers, trashed the film savagely.

This excerpt from the discussion section of the film on the Internet Movie Database was typical:

"I saw a pre-screening of this movie in Orange County, CA several months ago. I watch about 5 movies per month—this was the most boring movie I have ever seen, and I'm 46 years old. All of the comedic lead actors play it straight, and I would have never imagined a movie starring Steve Martin, Jack Black and Owen Wilson could be such a snoozer. Save your hard earned money and wait until this shows up in Netflix or your premium cable channel."

And the non-birding audience agreed. *The Big Year* tanked at the box office. According to the website Box Office Mojo, the movie had the 83rd worst opening weekend per theatre (averages adjusted) and the 13th worst opening (very widely adjusted). In other words, general audiences stayed away from *The Big Year* in droves. The Production Budget for the film was 41 million dollars, but the film's domestic total gross was a mere \$7, 204,138. In other words, the movie brought in far, far, far less money than it cost to film. Verboten in Hollywood. *The Big Year* was declared by several sources as one of the biggest flops of the year. What were birders seeing in this film that the general audience wasn't?

Box office gross is a narrow way to judge a film. There have been many cases of artistically interesting and quirky independent films that do not find a wide audience. But *The Big Year* was not an indie film outside the Hollywood system. So, were the general audiences right and was *The Big Year* a "Big Waste of Time," or had birders discovered a neat film that finally presented the birders' case before the world, and the rest of humanity missed out seeing it?

"I know this makes me look like a world class asshole, but I gotta go."
(Owen Wilson as Kenny Bostick to his long suffering wife)

For a movie-goer who is not a birder, *The Big Year* is a confusing and ultimately boring film. It is not an extremely bad movie like *Fire Maidens from Outer Space* (1956), a low budget knock off. *The Big Year* has decent production values; passable acting, and colorful locations. In some ways, *The Big Year* is more like a modern *Ishtar* (1987), an expensive but mediocre and boring film that packs no emotional punch.

Like *Ishtar*, *The Big Year* has what would seem to be a dream cast, and the public cannot be blamed for expecting a uniquely funny film. Jack Black, Owen Wilson, and Steve Martin have all been in popular films, have had their share of box office and popular successes, and bring a lot of comic punch to any project. Of course each of the actors has also been in his share of really bad films. They each have radically different comedic styles that don't necessarily mix, so any film with all three actors

would need a great script and a director with a vision that would make their different talents play off each other. But in *The Big Year* the leads are given little comedy to do, and contrary to expectations, they mostly play their roles straight.

Jack Black plays Brad Harris, the Greg Miller character in the film. In the book, Miller is a complicated figure and stands out as the most sympathetic person in the whole sordid tale. Jack Black as an actor is one of the most rambunctious and unpredictable of performers. His best films like *The School of Rock* (2003) barely harness his explosive big personality, and it is that tension that makes those films enjoyable. Of course, he has also been in a number of excruciatingly dumb films. In *The Big Year*, he has few moments to show off his well known outsized humor and is instead given material better suited for a less anarchistic, more serious actor. Veteran actors Dianne Wiest and Brian Dennehy play Brad's caring parents. Some of the best, most human moments of *The Big Year* are found in their scenes together, and a much better film could have been made that concentrated only on the Harris story.

Owen Wilson is a quirky actor whose best performances are found in unique, small films like *The Royal Tenenbaums* (2001). He can also play outsized funny roles, like when he cranks up his surfer/slacker inner self in films like *Zoolander* (2001), but these are an acquired taste. With the exception of *Midnight in Paris* (2011), he has not made great project choices lately. In *The Big Year*, Wilson plays Kenny Bostick, the Sandy Komito character. In the book, Komito is singularly driven, and at times abrasive, but he is also funny and thoughtful. The film character of Bostick is saddled with an over-worn Hollywood backstory, a crumbling marriage with a non-birding wife who is desperately trying to get pregnant. In the field he is shown to be consistently obnoxious and self-centered, traits that collide with his personal life.

In a deadly serious moment when his wife, played by Rosamund Pike, complains of feeling like a golf widow, Kenny responds:

“Kenny: Golf is just like a hobby
Jessica: And what is birding exactly?
Kenny: It's like a calling...you know this is like my calling.
Jessica: Like Gandhi?
Kenny: Oh, c'mon! I'm not comparing myself to Gandhi. That's ridiculous.
It's more like I'm Mozart!”

And later in the film, when Jessica has told Kenny she loves him but is leaving him:

“Kenny: I'm in pain because I really love you, and I'm scramblin' to make this work.
Jessica: Enough not to go to Arizona?
Kenny: Well....I HAVE to go to Arizona
Jessica: Why?.....Why?”

These may have been meant to be humorous give and takes in the script, but on screen and in the context of what has been shown before, these conversations seem cruel and damningly self-centered. Kenny shows no real sensitivity to his wife's needs. He doesn't need another tick; he needs some intense couples counseling or at

least a swift kick in the ass. To the non-birder movie-goer the character of Kenny on-screen in *The Big Year* is that of an unappealing schmuck.

Steve Martin is the most mature actor of the three. He has been in films that range from dumb slapstick (*The Jerk*, 1979) to more subtle and sophisticated comedies (*Roxanne*, 1987) to playing a serious bad guy (*The Spanish Prisoner*, 1997). In *The Big Year* he plays Stu Preissler, Hollywood's over-worn corporate executive type who is looking for more meaning in his life. We have seen this character before in far too many films. But in *The Big Year*, Martin is given little to do and nowhere to stretch his talents. Martin seems to be phoning it in throughout *The Big Year*, sleep walking through the film. His role could have been played by any number of lesser actors. His one really unexpected comic moment comes after he and Jack Black have survived the kamikaze Himalayan Snowcock outing. For a few heartbeats, Martin is shown celebrating with Black as he bursts into the classic moves of the "Two Wild And Crazy Guys" from his early days on *Saturday Night Live*.

There is a lot of talent wasted even in minor roles in *The Big Year*. Kevin Pollack and Joel McHale play Steve Martin's exasperated underlings. Both are given far too little to do. Anjelica Huston plays Annie Auklet, the Debi Shearwater stand-in character. She gives an amusing performance compared to what is going on around her, but it isn't anything she hasn't done before and much better. Perhaps one of the saddest misuses of comic talent is Jim Parsons as Crane. Parsons is best known for his inspired characterization of uber-geek Sheldon in the hit TV series *The Big Bang*. If there was anyone who could have really done something with a role of a know-it-all nerd birder of the type we are all familiar with, it would have been Crane. Sadly, he barely has any screen time or lines, and if you blink, you will miss his performance.

Monty Python alumnus and film actor John Cleese is the narrator in *The Big Year*. For good reason, not many films use the contrived device of a narrator. For the most part, whatever the narrator could add to the furthering of the plot should instead be shown to the viewer or explained in the dialogue of the characters. This is a film, not an audio book. There are few films, like Orson Welles' classic *The Lady From Shanghai* (1948), in which the narration actually adds color commentary to the film, but for the most part it's a cheap gimmick, a short cut to furthering the plot. There are a few times in *The Big Year* when Cleese's narration adds to the impact of the film, most notably in describing the migratory journey of the Ruby-throated Hummingbird. But for the most part, the narration describes what is already obvious to the viewer. At the end of the film (*N.b.*: spoiler alert), we see Kenny Bostick in China looking sadly and wistfully at a young Chinese family. This should have been a quiet scene without dialogue of any kind. We know what he is thinking, but the narration, stating what is obvious to us all, chimes in, "Only he knows the price he has paid to be the greatest birder in the world."

The Big Year rapidly propels its cast from one birding location to the next, typically with not enough background information to let the general audience know why the birders are heading there. The same lack of explanation goes for the birds. Yes, some scenes like that of the Ruby-throated Hummingbird migrating, or the brief

scene of Bald Eagles locking talons and tumbling, are given enough screen time and background dope to give a non-birder a taste of why these birds are so fascinating. For the most part though, it's a rapid-fire list of names and CGI (Computer Generated Image) birds that just run together in movie-goers' minds. There is no explanation as to why birders would seek out a Pink-footed Goose. We as birders know of course, but to the larger non-birding audience it's just another wacky name on a seemingly never-ending list. Yes, many of the elements of the book are included in the movie, but the stories are shortened, given the Hollywood treatment, or misrepresented. The explanation of how *Big Years* came about, which is well done in the book, is compressed in the movie to appear that Christmas Bird Counts directly generated *Big Years*. The Attu section of the film is cheaply goosed up to include a newlywed couple. The woman, not a birder, has no idea of what to expect. She has an unsurprisingly bad time, and finally meets her match when she is beset by kittiwakes while rinsing fish chum from her scarf as the rest of the birders look on. This gives Kenny the chance to utter, "Positively Hitchcockian." The non-birding audience is left to think what a bunch of asses birders are, especially the new husband who thought his wife would enjoy such an experience.

What was surprising to me is how *The Big Year* fails as a birding movie for birders. Yes, many of the names and places of the book are there, but I was surprised how many trivial errors occurred. On Brad Harris' first day attempting the Big Year, he is shown looking out at a body of water. In the scene at least three species of gull are obviously present, yet he ticks only one species. Is he that poor at gull identification? In a montage of birds to be searched for on Attu, two domestic Crested Ducks are shown walking across the ice. When Brad's love interest is shown vocally imitating a raven, it is most certainly not a raven. Trees are shown fully leafed and green in Chicago in early winter. Simultaneously, the foliage in New Jersey is non-existent. Don't get me started on the Great Spotted Woodpecker found by chance by Kenny. The list of annoying errors goes on.

But that is bird trivia. More important is the warped and negative view *The Big Year* gave the general public about birding. Like this from the comments section on the film at the Internet Movie Database:

"It's not only an expensive hobby, it's an incredibly dull and boring hobby. I'd rather poke my eye out with a sharp stick than watch this film again. If there's anything more boring than bird watching, it's watching a movie about bird watching. What a wasted film for Jack Black, Owen Wilson, and Steve Martin to be in."

Time and again in reviews of *The Big Year* and on film websites you will find comments that birding is a hobby for the privileged, that it entails a profligate waste of money, and that it is boring beyond belief. This is the most troubling legacy of this movie. The film of *The Big Year* did nothing to elevate the public's view of birding. Few people walked out of that film with a desire to start birding, and that, for me, is a tragic waste of an opportunity. We, as birders, know why birding is fascinating, thrilling even, but *The Big Year* did not communicate those feelings on screen.

Even Greg Miller himself had this to say about the film on his blog:

“You know what? I’ve seen the movie 4 times now and...I still really enjoy it. But, I am in the minority. Yeah, and I’m totally biased, too. Minority, you say? Yes. Most folks have totally ignored the movie. How do I know? Have you looked at the box office numbers yet? Have you seen the news? Terms like ‘flop,’ ‘tank,’ ‘fail’ are being used with some regularity about *The Big Year*. How bad can it be? Well. Very, very bad. In fact, record-setting bad.

Why am I upset? Am I not making a ton of money on royalties for Jack Black playing my character in a movie? Nope. No royalties. Not a penny. I don’t make any money on whether or not this movie soars or sucks. So why am I complaining about low numbers? Simply put, it’s bad for birding. Not the end of birding. It’s just that we are losing this vehicle of promotion for our hobby. If another movie is made soon about birding, it will not be kind to our hobby.” From the blog GMB: Greg Miller Birding

With a much better script, more interesting direction, and the input of someone who was genuinely passionate about birding, *The Big Year* could have been a much more successful movie for birders and non-birders alike. Given the actors involved, *The Big Year* should have been funnier by a damn site. At the least, *The Big Year* should have conveyed a better understanding of why we scour hill, dale, swamp, and seashore for birds. It could have given a glimpse of what we get out of birding so the non-birders in the audience would get it. It could have least been interesting. It was an epic fail in all those regards.

Coincidentally, while re-watching *The Big Year*, I had the pleasure of seeing a pre-release DVD of a documentary called *Epic Journeys* by Migration Productions and Shawn Carey. This short film focuses on the trials and tribulations of migrating Red Knots, Piping Plovers, and Semipalmated Sandpipers. It is a film with superb photography, great interviews and a wonderful way of explaining why we should care about these birds. Anyone watching *Epic Journeys* (review next issue) is left with a real understanding of why birds are amazing and fun to watch. In other words, *Epic Journeys* does everything that *The Big Year* doesn’t. What a shame for *The Big Year*. 🐦

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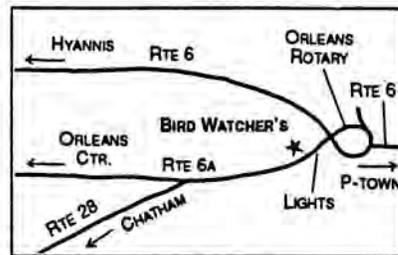
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BIRD SIGHTINGS

November/December 2011

Seth Kellogg, Marjorie W. Rines and Robert H. Stymeist

November and December were exceptionally warm, providing comfortable birding conditions especially for the Christmas Bird Counts. November was warm and sunny with an average temperature of 50.4° in Boston, nearly six degrees above normal; it ranked as the second warmest November on record. In Boston the high was 69° on November 8 and dipped below the freezing mark on just one day, November 24. Measurable rain fell on just seven days and only a trace of snow was noted.

December was also mild with normal rainfall and no measurable snow. It was the second warmest on record since the Blue Hill Meteorological Observatory began record keeping in 1835. Twelve days during December had temperatures reaching 50° plus, with a high of 63° recorded in Boston on December 5. Christmas Bird Counts went off without a hitch although the coldest day of the month was on Sunday, December 18 when several counts were held. This was only the fifth time on record that there was no measurable snow recorded in the November to December period.

R.H. Stymeist

WATERFOWL THROUGH ALCIDS

The first appearance of **Pink-footed Goose** in Massachusetts was only in 1999 and at the time was considered of “questionable origin” by the MARC (Massachusetts Avian Records Committee). In the twelve succeeding years, occurrence of this species has increased in the Northeast, and Pink-footed Goose is now considered a vagrant from Greenland. The second Massachusetts record was in 2009, and the third was in November 2010. In November/December 2011 two individuals were reported, one in Saugus and Lynn, and the second in Rutland. This follows an individual seen and photographed at Turners Falls in October. Although it is possible that the three reports are of the same individual, the distance among them makes it extremely improbable.

A **Barnacle Goose** was discovered in West Newbury in early November, and obliged birders by staying through the end of December. This is another species that at one time was considered potentially of questionable origin, but has increased in frequency over the past 20 years. **Cackling Geese** now occur annually in the Connecticut River Valley, but an individual in Dorchester and Jamaica Plain was unusual for Suffolk County. A **Tundra Swan** in Dover was discovered on Christmas day and stayed through the end of the year.

A **Tufted Duck** at Manchester Reservoir in Attleboro was originally discovered in October and continued through the end of the reporting period. **Barrow's Goldeneye** was well reported, including individuals at three inland locations.

A **Pacific Loon** was discovered on Nantucket on December 5. A **Brown Booby** that was originally discovered on August 31 in Dennis is presumably the same individual that continued through the end of December in Provincetown.

There were a number of unusually late heron sightings during the period. There were reports of Great Egret from four locations during December, plus three reports of Snowy Egret. A Green Heron reported from Great Meadows NWR in November was similarly late. It is possible that these are due to the unseasonably mild weather throughout the reporting period.

Greater Scaup (continued)				11/5	Fairhaven	460	BBC (R. Stymeist)
11/20	S. Boston	140	BBC (R. Stymeist)	11/6	Pittsfield (Onota)	3	B. Bieda
11/26	Falmouth	725	SSBC (GdE)	11/27	Boston H.	978	TASL (M. Hall)
Lesser Scaup				Ruddy Duck			
thr	P.I.	65 max	v.o.	thr	P.I.	130 max	v.o.
11/5	Acoaxet	23	E. Nielsen	thr	W. Newbury	422 max	v.o.
11/26	Lakeville	14	S. Arena#	11/3	Randolph	140	P. Peterson
12/3-4	Cape Cod	22	CCBC	11/26	Marlboro	120	B. Black#
12/27	Amesbury	10	R. Heil	12/3-4	Cape Cod	130	CCBC
King Eider				Northern Bobwhite			
thr	Gloucester	1-2	v.o.	11/18	WBWS	7	M. Faherty
11/25-12/31	Chatham	1 f	v.o.	11/20	Falmouth	1	E. Dalton
Common Eider				Ring-necked Pheasant			
11/9	Nantucket	100,000	S. Perkins#	11/10	Wellfleet	1 m	P. + F. Vale
11/25	Chatham	2000	R. Schain	11/20	Douglas	1 m	Sughrue-Yacino
11/27	Boston H.	4642	TASL (M. Hall)	12/4	Saugus	1	S. Zende#
Harlequin Duck				12/28	Sutton	1 m	R. Brady
thr	Rockport	75 max	v.o.	Ruffed Grouse			
11/21	Sandwich	2	P. Kyle	11/27	Moran WMA	3	B. Zajda
11/26	Manomet	2	M. Faherty	12/1	Royalston	1	N. Beauregard
12/19	P'town	4	D. Fox#	Red-throated Loon			
Surf Scoter				thr	P.I.	480 max	v.o.
11/4	Turners Falls	4	J. Smith	11/6	Pittsfield (Onota)	2	B. Bieda
11/6	P.I.	800	D. Bates	11/10	Rockport (A.P.)	215	R. Heil
11/8	Cape Ann	340	R. Heil	11/20	Eastham (CBG)	350	G. d'Entremont#
11/17	E. Boston	136	R. Stymeist	11/23	Manomet	725	I. Davies
12/30	Nant. Sound	600	G. d'Entremont#	11/27	Boston H.	244	TASL (M. Hall)
White-winged Scoter				Pacific Loon			
11/4	Wachusett Res.	2	A. Marble	12/5	Nantucket	1	T. Pastuszak
11/17	Revere B.	2000	P. Peterson	Common Loon			
11/20	P.I.	420	R. Heil	11/16	P.I.	95	T. Wetmore
12/30	Nant. Sound	250	G. d'Entremont#	11/16	Pittsfield	6	E. Neumuth
Black Scoter				11/19	Marshfield	40	E. Dalton
11/4	Washington	1	E. Neumuth	11/23	Rockport (A.P.)	35	R. Heil
11/6	P.I.	2000	D. Bates	11/27	Boston H.	130	TASL (M. Hall)
11/29	Cape Ann	360	R. Heil	Pied-billed Grebe			
Long-tailed Duck				11/2	GMNWR	8	S. Perkins
11/5	S. Quabbin	18	L. Therrien	11/3, 12/14	Randolph	8, 3	P. Peterson
11/23	Rockport (A.P.)	230	R. Heil	11/7	Winchester	5	R. LaFontaine
11/27	Boston H.	299	TASL (M. Hall)	11/8	W. Newbury	5	J. Berry
12/30	Nant. Sound	425	G. d'Entremont#	11/26	Lakeville	18	S. Arena#
Bufflehead				12/3-4	Cape Cod	74	CCBC
11/4	Wachusett Res.	103	A. Marble	12/13	P.I.	3	R. Heil
11/19	Hingham	360	M. Iliff	Horned Grebe			
11/27	Boston H.	2477	TASL (M. Hall)	thr	P.I.	38 max	v.o.
12/3-4	Cape Cod	1898	CCBC	11/5	Fairhaven	34	BBC (R. Stymeist)
Common Goldeneye				11/8	Duxbury B.	40	R. Bowes
11/5	Acton	6	D. Swain	11/16	Ipswich (C.B.)	33	J. Berry
11/27	Wachusett Res.	33	G. Kessler	11/26	Manomet	91	I. Davies
12/3-4	Cape Cod	200	CCBC	11/27	Boston H.	817	TASL (M. Hall)
12/4	Richmond	26	S. Surner	12/2	Westport	50	P. Champlin
12/27	Amesbury	26	R. Heil	12/31	Quabbin	13	L. Therrien
Barrow's Goldeneye				Red-necked Grebe			
11/6	Camb. (F.P.)	1 m	A. Gurka	11/25	P.I.	26	T. Wetmore
11/26-12/5	S. Boston	2-3	v.o.	11/27	Boston H.	59	TASL (M. Hall)
11/27	W. Newbury	1	J. Hoye#	11/29	Cape Ann	22	R. Heil
12/3-4	Cape Cod	3	CCBC	12/4	P'town	43	M. Iliff
12/17	S. Quabbin	1	L. Therrien	Northern Fulmar			
12/22	Nahant	1 f	L. Pivacek	11/5	P'town (R.P.)	82	J. Trimble#
Hooded Merganser				11/23	Rockport (A.P.)	350	R. Heil
thr	P.I.	50 max	v.o.	12/4	Chatham	2	B. Harris#
11/8	Medford	41	R. LaFontaine	12/29	Stellwagen	46	CBC (S. Perkins)
12/3-4	Cape Cod	754	CCBC	Cory's Shearwater			
12/24	Ipswich	115	R. Heil	11/5	P'town	6	J. Trimble#
12/24	Wakefield	50	P. + F. Vale	Great Shearwater			
Common Merganser				11/5	P'town (R.P.)	135	J. Trimble#
11/12	Worcester	330	J. Shea	11/23	Rockport (A.P.)	1620	R. Heil
11/16	Pittsfield	122	E. Neumuth	11/27	Orleans	70	W. Petersen#
12/17	Ludlow	173	B. Platenik	Sooty Shearwater			
12/24	Lynnfield	203	P. + F. Vale	11/27	Orleans	1	W. Petersen#
12/27	Halifax	189	J. Sweeney	Manx Shearwater			
Red-breasted Merganser				11/27	Orleans	2	W. Petersen#
thr	P.I.	550 max	v.o.	12/16	Chatham	1	R. Schain#

Brown Booby				Sharp-shinned Hawk			
thr	P'town	1 imm	v.o.	11/thr	Barre Falls	20	Hawkcount (BK)
Northern Gannet				11/3	Randolph	2	P. Peterson
thr	P.I.	400 max	v.o.	11/6	Malden (PR)	3	Hawkcount (CJ)
11/10	Eastham (F.E.)	175	P. + F. Vale	11/12	P.I.	2	E. Nielsen
11/23	Rockport (AP)	1750	R. Heil	12/27	Amesbury	2	R. Heil
11/26	Manomet	30	I. Davies	Cooper's Hawk			
12/4	Wellfleet	36	J. Hoye#	11/1-20	Barre Falls	13	Hawkcount (BK)
Double-crested Cormorant				11/5	Fairhaven	3	BBC (R. Stymeist)
11/5	P.I.	250	P. + F. Vale	11/20	Boston	2	BBC (R. Stymeist)
11/6	Salisbury	197	J. Berry	Northern Goshawk			
11/19	Wellfleet	190	M. Faherty	11/9	P.I.	2 imm	K. Elwell
11/20	P'town	750	G. d'Entremont#	11/12	Barre Falls	2	B. Kamp
12/24	Gloucester H.	10	R. Heil	12/27	Wenham	1	F. Vale
Great Cormorant				Red-shouldered Hawk			
11/5	Acoaxet	22	E. Nielsen	11/1-5	Barre Falls	12	Hawkcount (BK)
11/20	P'town	15	G. d'Entremont#	11/26	Lakeville	2 ad	S. Arena#
11/29	Cape Ann	76	R. Heil	12/25-28	Easton	pr	K. Ryan
12/13	Duxbury B.	8	R. Bowes	Red-tailed Hawk			
American Bittern				11/1-21	Barre Falls	51	Hawkcount (BK)
thr	P.I.	3 max	v.o.	12/1	Granville	27	J. Weeks
11/11	Nahant	1	L. Pivacek	Rough-legged Hawk			
11/16	P'town	1	D. Clapp	thr	P.I.	4 max	v.o.
11/20	S. Dart. (A.Pd)	1	E. Nielsen	11/5	Cumb. Farms	1 dk	S. Arena#
11/24	Eastham	5	S. Arena	12/2	Hanscom	1 lt juv	S. Perkins
Great Egret				12/24	Ipswich	3 lt	R. Heil
thr	P.I.	16 max	v.o.	12/27	Cumb. Farms	1 lt	J. Sweeney
11/8	Gloucester	3	R. Heil	12/29	Rowley	1 lt	J. Berry#
12/2	Scituate	3	MAS (J. Galluzzo)	Golden Eagle			
12/24	Ipswich	1	R. Heil	11/11	Quabbin (G35)	1 ph	J. P. Smith
12/24	Westport	8	D. Jones	11/12	Barre Falls	1	Hawkcount (BK)
12/30	Nantucket	1	T. Pastuszak	11/24	S. Quabbin	1	M. Lynch
Snowy Egret				11/26	Easton	1 imm	K. Ryan
thr	Nantucket	1	v.o.	11/26	Newbury	1 imm	S. Grinley#
12/2	S. Dart. (A.Pd)	1	P. Champlin	12/1	Barre Falls	2	Hawkcount (BK)
12/24	Westport	1	D. Jones	American Kestrel			
Cattle Egret				11/20	Westboro	2	S. Arena
11/5	Newbury	1	BBC (I. Giriunas)	12/4	Saugus	2	S. Zende#
Green Heron				12/17	W Springfield	2	M. & K. Conway
11/2	GMNWR	1 ph	D. Bernstein	12/17	Hadley	2	D. Norton
Black-crowned Night-Heron				12/17	Agawam	2	J. Zepko
11/27	P.I.	1 imm	N. Landry	Merlin			
12/11	Hyannis	1	J. Trimble	11/3	P.I.	2	D. Chickering
Black Vulture				11/6	Bourne	1	BBC (R. Stymeist)
12/16	Fall River	2	P. Champlin	11/16	Melrose	1	D. + I. Jewell
12/17	Bourne	1	M. Iliff	11/25	Wayland	1 ph	G. Dysart
12/17	Westport	12	CBC (P. Champlin)	12/1	Barre Falls	1	Hawkcount (BK)
12/29	Sheffield	2	J. Drucker	12/17	Hull	1	J. Galluzzo#
Turkey Vulture				12/31	Newbury	1	P. + F. Vale
11/27	Bourne	12	M. Keleher	Gyr Falcon			
11/30	Westport	55	P. Champlin	11/27	Orleans	1 ph	W. Petersen#
12/11	Nantucket	12	K. Blackshaw#	Peregrine Falcon			
Osprey				11/12	P.I.	4	J. Offermann#
11/2	Pittsfield (Onota)	1	T. Collins	11/20	Boston	2	BBC (R. Stymeist)
11/4	Attleboro	1	J. Sweeney	12/2	S. Dart. (A.Pd)	2	P. Champlin
11/19	Rochester	1	G. d'Entremont#	12/10	Ipswich (C.B.)	2	J. Berry
11/24	S. Quabbin	1	L. Therrien	12/11	Rockport	2	J. Young#
Bald Eagle				Virginia Rail			
11/6	Lynnfield	2 ad	D. + I. Jewell	11/24	Truro	1	T. Lipsky
11/12	Barre Falls	3	B. Kamp	12/4	Harwich	4	B. Harris#
11/12	Wareham	3	G. Gove#	12/21	GMNWR	1	D. Swain
12/10	Mashpee	2	M. Keleher	12/22	Swampscott	1	R. Heil
12/24	P.I.	3	T. Wetmore	Sora			
12/27	Amesbury	4 imm	R. Heil	11/25	Marshfield	1	S. Arena#
12/30	Medford	2 ad	R. LaFontaine	12/11	GMNWR	1	C. Corey#
12/31	Cambr. (F.P.)	2	N. Givens	Purple Gallinule			
Northern Harrier				12/31	Gloucester	1 imm	B. O'Connor
thr	P.I.	11 max	v.o.	Common Gallinule			
thr	Cumb. Farms	6 max	v.o.	11/6	Nantucket	1	E. Ray#
11/6	Northampton	3	I. Davies	American Coot			
11/25	Marshfield	4	S. Arena#	thr	Wakefield	190 max	P. + F. Vale
12/29	Rowley	3	J. Berry#	thr	Randolph	300 max	v.o.
				thr	GMNWR	369 max	A. Bragg#

American Coot (continued)				Purple Sandpiper			
11/5	Acoaxet	162	E. Nielsen	11/26	Manomet	5	M. Faherty
11/6	Richmond	206	B. Bieda	12/6	Nahant	5	L. Pivacek
12/3-4	Cape Cod	386	CCBC	12/11	Rockport (A.P.)	120	J. Young#
12/27	Amesbury	550	R. Heil	12/17	Winthrop B.	11	P. Peterson
				12/25	S. Boston	5	S. Zende
Sandhill Crane				Dunlin			
11/25-12/17	Rowley	2	J. Keeley + v.o.	thr	Duxbury B.	2300 max	R. Bowes
12/18	Newbypt H.	1	T. Wetmore	thr	P.I.	525 max	v.o.
Black-bellied Plover				11/25	Chatham	450	R. Schain
11/4	Revere B.	58	R. Stymeist	12/13	Marshfield	1000	G. Gove#
11/1-12/3	P.I.	300 max	v.o.	Long-billed Dowitcher			
11/8	Gloucester	130	R. Heil	thr	P.I.	7 max	v.o.
11/25	Chatham	116	R. Schain	11/2	Duxbury B.	1 ph	R. Bowes
12/26	Ipswich	5 imm	J. Berry	Wilson's Snipe			
American Golden-Plover				11/4	Easton	6	K. Ryan
11/9	Nantucket	1 juv	S. Perkins#	11/6	W. Newbury	2	E. Nielsen
Semipalmated Plover				11/24	Cumb. Farms	4	S. Arena
11/5	Acoaxet	2	E. Nielsen	12/1	E. Boston (B.I.)	9	P. Peterson
11/8	P.I.	5	J. Sender	American Woodcock			
11/12	Duxbury B.	2	A. Kneidel	11/5	Salisbury	3	BBC (I. Giriunas)
Killdeer				11/8	Quabbin	2	T. Pirro
11/4	W. Bridgewater	32	K. Ryan	11/13	Nantucket	2	K. Blackshaw#
11/19	Rochester	23	G. d'Entremont#	11/24	Cumb. Farms	3	S. Arena
American Oystercatcher				Black-legged Kittiwake			
11/13	Nantucket	9	K. Blackshaw#	11/23	Rockport (AP)	1550	R. Heil
Solitary Sandpiper				11/24	Eastham (F.E.)	900	J. Trimble
11/4	Nantucket	1	V. Laux	12/29	Stellwagen	66	CBC (S. Perkins)
Greater Yellowlegs				Bonaparte's Gull			
thr	P.I.	27 max	v.o.	thr	P.I.	162 max	v.o.
11/11	Duxbury	30	MAS (J. Galluzzo)	11/16	Ipswich (C.B.)	300	J. Berry
11/12	Eastham	12	M. Keleher#	11/24	Eastham (F.E.)	500	J. Trimble
12/9	Yarmouth	17	E. Hoopes	12/15	Gloucester	110	J. Berry
Western Willet				Black-headed Gull			
11/18	Westport	1	M. Iliiff	11/6	Plymouth H.	1 ad	A. Kneidel
12/1-26	Chatham	1	v.o.	11/7-30	Hyannisport	1-2	E. Hoopes#
Lesser Yellowlegs				11/19	Hingham	1 1W	M. Iliiff
12/27	Harwich	1	E. Banks	11/19	Scituate	1	J. Zepko
Whimbrel				11/28	Eastham	1	K. Sattman#
11/8	Duxbury B.	1 ph	R. Bowes	12/14	Lynn B.	1	J. Quigley
Hudsonian Godwit				12/24-31	Gloucester (E.P.)	1 1W	S. Sullivan
11/2-17	P.I.	1-4	v.o.	Laughing Gull			
11/11	Chatham	1	J. Trimble	11/5	Acoaxet	2	E. Nielsen
Marbled Godwit				11/20	Gloucester (E.P.)	1	J. Quigley
12/thr	Chatham	1	v.o.	11/20	P'town	8	G. d'Entremont#
Ruddy Turnstone				Iceland Gull			
11/2-08	Duxbury B.	2	R. Bowes	11/12-12/31	Gloucester (EP)	11 max	v.o.
11/29	Woods Hole	16	R. Lash	11/24	Marshfield	2	S. van der Veen
12/25	S. Boston	7	S. + C. Zende	11/30	Cambr. (F.P.)	1	J. Trimble
Red Knot				12/15	Turners Falls	1	J. Smith
11/1, 12/12	P.I.	95, 1	T. Wetmore	12/17	Plymouth H.	1 2W	R. Bowes
11/25, 12/12	Chatham	143, 1	Schain, Iliiff	12/17	Agawam	3	J. Zepko
12/24	Ipswich	1 juv	R. Heil	12/29	Stellwagen	10	CBC (S. Perkins)
12/27	Dennis (Corp. B.)	1	P. Bono	Lesser Black-backed Gull			
Sanderling				thr	Reports of indiv. from	10 locations	
11/4	Revere B.	268	R. Stymeist	11/20	Nantucket	167	E. Ray#
11/16	Ipswich (C.B.)	275	J. Berry	12/15	Turners Falls	2	J. Smith
11/20	P.I.	800	R. Heil	Glaucous Gull			
11/28	Duxbury B.	160	R. Bowes	12/10	Gloucester (E.P.)	2	C. Turnbull#
Semipalmated Sandpiper				12/17	Agawam	2	J. Zepko
11/2	Westport	1	M. Iliiff	Common Tern			
11/6	Nantucket	1	K. Blackshaw#	11/4	P.I.	3	D. Logan
11/11	P.I.	1 ph	S. Sullivan	11/5, 12/4	P'town	255, 3	Trimble, Iliiff
White-rumped Sandpiper				Forster's Tern			
thr	P.I.	20 max	v.o.	11/5	Acoaxet	3	E. Nielsen
11/8	Rockport (A.P.)	3 juv	R. Heil	11/11	Duxbury	3	MAS (J. Galluzzo)
11/9	Nantucket	5	S. Perkins#	11/11	P.I.	1	S. Sullivan
Baird's Sandpiper				11/13	Kingston	15	J. Young
11/8	P.I.	1 ph	S. Sullivan	12/1	Welfleet	1	M. Faherty
Pectoral Sandpiper				Great Skua			
11/1	P.I.	4	M. Halsey	11/23	Rockport (A.P.)	1 ad	R. Heil
11/6	Newbury	2	J. Berry	Pomarine Jaeger			
11/6	Northampton	1	I. Davies	11/12	P.I.	1	P. Hunt
11/9	Nantucket	1	V. Laux#				

Pomarine Jaeger (continued)				Razorbill			
11/23	Rockport (A.P.)	22	R. Heil	11/23	Rockport (A.P.)	51	R. Heil
Dovekie				11/25	Eastham (F.E.)	573	R. Schain
11/5	P'town (R.P.)	185	J. Trimble#	12/4	Nantucket	30	K. Blackshaw#
12/4	Wellfleet	10	J. Hoye#	12/4	Wellfleet	120	J. Hoye#
12/29	Stellwagen	138	CBC (S. Perkins)	12/28	P.I.	80	T. Wetmore
Common Murre				Black Guillemot			
11/23	Rockport (A.P.)	19	R. Heil	11/19	Gloucester (B.R.)	4	D. + S. Larson
12/11	Manomet	2	D. Bates#	11/26	Marshfield	37	I. Davies
12/29	Stellwagen	56	CBC (S. Perkins)	12/4	P'town	2	M. Iliff
Thick-billed Murre				12/22	Nahant	2	L. Pivacek
11/14	Gloucester H.	1	C. Haines	12/30	Duxbury B.	4	R. Bowes
11/23	Rockport (A.P.)	2	R. Heil	Atlantic Puffin			
11/25	P.I.	1	N. Landry	12/29	Stellwagen	2	CBC (S. Perkins)
11/26	P'town	1	A. Burdo				

CUCKOOS THROUGH FINCHES

Snowy Owl reports rebounded from last winter's dismal five reports for the November/December period to reports from more than 16 locations this year with multiple birds noted from Plum Island, Ipswich, Duxbury, and Logan Airport in Boston. A high count of 58 Eastern Screech Owls was noted from Westport on the Westport-Newport CBC, and three Long-eared Owls were tallied on the Mid-Cape CBC on December 27. The Northern Saw-whet Owl migration began later than in past years and most banding sites recorded fewer birds this season. The peak migration night was on November 1 at Lookout Rock in Northbridge when 11 owls were netted and also at Hopkins Forest in Williamstown with 21 captures. Two Common Nighthawks were noted from Nantucket, only the third November record for this species. When hummingbirds are reported at this time of year they are almost always vagrants, and this was true of the two female **Rufous Hummingbirds** that were carefully banded and measured in Wareham and in Lunenburg. Identification of the *Selasphorus* hummingbirds can be difficult in the fall because more often than not they are immature birds, and in-hand measurements are more reliable than photographs.

There were three reports of **Red-headed Woodpeckers** during the period unlike last year when none were reported. The big surprise for the period was the "invasion" of **Ash-throated Flycatchers** with an astonishing five individuals noted. Including birds reported in the September and October period, there was a total of nine reports during fall migration. Speculation for this occurrence, not only in Massachusetts but throughout the East Coast, is that the record-setting drought in Texas and northeast Mexico, an important breeding range for the Ash-throated, may have caused these birds to go farther afield to search for food. With the strong southwesterly winds that were widespread this past October many Ash-throateds ended up in the Northeast. For a complete report on the 2011 Ash-throated Flycatcher movement throughout the country see: <<http://ebird.org/content/ebird/news/ash-throated-flycatchers-fleeing-the-drought>>.

Ash-throateds were not the only exciting flycatchers of the season. A **Cassin's Kingbird** discovered in late November in West Newbury was only the fourth record for the state. It delighted many viewers and lingered into early January. The previous record for Cassin's Kingbird was a bird from the Whatley/Deerfield area that was only present for two days. There were four reports of **Western Kingbird** this season compared to none during the same period last year. A very late Eastern Kingbird was photographed in Newbury on November 3; the only later report was in Falmouth in December 1973. Rounding out the rare flycatchers were two **Scissor-tailed Flycatchers** on Nantucket and in Orleans.

There were a number of reports of birds lingering well past their normal migration window, quite possibly caused by the mild late-fall weather. A Philadelphia Vireo was photographed in Truro on November 6, the latest date for the state beating out two November 5

reports. A Red-eyed Vireo was seen in Rockport on November 30, the latest date ever, surpassing the previous late date of November 29, 1957 in North Middleboro. A Blue-gray Gnatcatcher was reported on Christmas Day. An impressive twenty species of warbler were reported during the period including exceptionally late Nashville (12/22), Northern Parula (12/5), Black-throated Blue (12/31), and Prairie (12/31).

It was another good year for Northern Shrikes with reports from more than ten locations. Since 2003 it has become routine to get reports of Cave Swallows in late fall, but no reports were received in 2011. During 2010 we recorded the largest number of sightings since these swallows started to appear in the Northeast and we also recorded a high mortality rate when temperatures dipped well below freezing. A large concentration of Fish Crows was noted in the Mattapan-Dorchester area with as many as 300 individuals. Common Ravens continue to spread into eastern areas of the state.

In addition to all the rare flycatchers, birders found many other rare and unusual birds this fall: a Sedge Wren in Harwich; a **Henslow's Sparrow** in Dorchester; **Summer Tanagers** in Chatham and Manomet; a cooperative **Western Tanager** in Falmouth; **Painted Buntings** in Eastham, Nantucket, and Methuen; a **Yellow-headed Blackbird** on Nantucket; and a Christmas morning surprise present for Jim and Nat Berry in Ipswich when a **Townsend's Warbler** appeared at their feeder. The Berrys invited hundreds of appreciative birders to visit and enjoy their guest.

The winter finch flight at this period appears to be a bust. There were no reports of Pine Grosbeaks or Evening Grosbeaks from anywhere in the state and only a handful of reports of Common Redpolls, Pine Siskins, and Purple Finches.

R. Stymeist

Yellow-billed Cuckoo	11/5	S. Dart. (A.Pd)	1	E. Nielsen	11/thr	Sharon	2 b	fide N. Smith
	11/5				11/thr	DWWS	25 b	fide N. Smith
Eastern Screech-Owl	11/5	Fairhaven	2	BBC (R. Stymeist)	11/thr	Williamstown	86 b	fide D. Jones
	12/17	Westport	58	CBC (P. Champlin)	11/thr	S. Hadley	26 b	fide A. Hill
	12/27	Barnstable	5	R. Schain	11/thr	DFWS	23 b	fide K. Seymour
					11/thr	Northbridge	20b	fide B. Milke
Great Horned Owl	11/5	Cumb. Farms	2	S. Arena#	Common Nighthawk			
	12/3	Belmont	3	R. Stymeist#	11/1-02	Nantucket	2	V. Laux
Snowy Owl	thr	Boston (Logan)	5 max	N. Smith	Rufous Hummingbird	thr	Wareham	1 f b ph C. Roy
	11/8-12/31	Duxbury B.	1-2	R. Bowes	11/1-7	Lunenburg	1 f b ph	M. Andella
	11/15-12/31	P.I.	1-2	v.o.	Belted Kingfisher			
	11/16-12/31	Ipswich (C.B.)	1-3	J. Berry	11/19	Lakeville	2	G. d'Entremont#
	11/17	Saugus	1 ph	J. Rowley#	12/25	Wakefield	2	P. + F. Vale
	11/25	Westport	1	F. Figueiredo	12/30	Taunton	2	K. Ryan
	11/30	Chicopee	1	M. Ricciardone	Red-headed Woodpecker			
	12/2	Mt. Wataatic	1 ph	T. Delaney#	11/11-20	Eastham	1 imm	J. Lawler
	12/6	Somerville	1 ph	R. Stymeist#	11/14	Sturbridge	1 imm	B. Zajda
	12/14	Plymouth B.	1 ph	G. Harriman	11/28	Scituate	1 ph	J. Galluzzo
	12/18	Cumb. Farms	1	J. Carlisle	Yellow-bellied Sapsucker			
	12/27	Barnstable (S.N.)	1	J. Trimble#	11/9	Manomet	1 imm b	T. Lloyd-E
Barred Owl	11/20	Sudbury	1	G. Dysart	11/27	Ipswich	8	R. Heil
	11/28	Winchester	1 dead	A. Hines	12/4	Nantucket	4	K. Blackshaw#
	12/17	Boston (A.A.)	1	B. Mayer	12/27	Cumb. Farms	3	J. Sweeney
Long-eared Owl	11/thr	DWWS	2 b	fide N. Smith	Pileated Woodpecker			
	12/27	Barnstable	3	CBC (J. Trimble)	11/2	Ipswich	2	J. Berry
Short-eared Owl	11/5-08	Cumb. Farms	1	S. Arena	12/21	W. Boylston	2	J. Holm
	11/13	Nahant	1	L. Pivacek	Eastern Phoebe			
	11/13-12/31	P.I.	1-2	v.o.	11/1	P.I.	1	D. Chickering
	11/20	Duxbury B.	1	B. deGraaf	11/2	Lexington	1	M. Rines#
	12/3	Newbury	1	K. Elwell	11/3	Sandwich	1	P. Kyle
	12/11	Saugus	2	P. Peterson	Ash-throated Flycatcher			
Northern Saw-whet Owl	11/6	Cumb. Farms	1	E. Dalton	11/1-04	Salisbury	1 ph	S. Sullivan + v.o.
					11/11-12/19	Eastham	1 ph	J. Trimble#
					11/25	Nantucket	1 ph	V. Laux#
					11/29	Melrose (Mt Hood)	1	D. + I. Jewell

Ash-throated Flycatcher (continued)	12/9	Rockport (H.P.)	1	C. Leahy	12/17	Braintree	5	G. d'Entremont#
Cassin's Kingbird	11/25-12/31	W. Newbury	1 ph	P. Ruvido + v.o.	11/5	Fairhaven	24	BBC (R. Stymeist)
Western Kingbird	11/8	Marstons Mills	1	A. Curtis	11/20	Lexington	5	M. Rines
	11/9-15	New Salem	1	B. Lafley + v.o.	11/26	Falmouth	12	SSBC (GdE)
	11/26-12/10	Manomet	1 ph	I. Davies	12/3	Manomet	15	G. d'Entremont
	12/10-31	Orleans	1	R. Schain#				
Eastern Kingbird	11/3	Newbury	1 imm ph	S. Grinley	House Wren			
Scissor-tailed Flycatcher	11/1-8	Nantucket	1 ph	V. Laux + v.o.	11/1	Cambr. (Danehy)	1	R. Stymeist
	12/5	Orleans	1	E. Hilley	11/20	S. Dart. (A.Pd)	1	E. Nielsen
Northern Shrike	thr	P.I.	1-2	v.o.	Winter Wren			
	11/5	Barre Falls	1	D. Grant	11/4	S. Dart. (A.Pd)	6	MAS (Champlin)
	11/11-16	New Salem	1	J. Drucker	12/17	Falmouth	4	M. Keleher
	11/17, 12/19	Concord	1, 1	S. Perkins	12/21	Lexington	3	P. Peterson
	11/23	Westboro	1 imm	R. Schain	12/22	Marblehead	7	R. Heil
	11/24	Burrage WMA	1 imm	J. Sweeney	12/30	Newton	2	P. Peterson
	11/26	W. Newbury	2	J. Berry#	Sedge Wren			
	11/27-12/31	Truro	1	T. Lipsky	12/4	Harwich	1	B. Harris#
	12/6	Templeton	1 ad	T. Pirro	Marsh Wren			
	12/10	Ipswich (C.B.)	1 imm	J. Berry	11/3	W. Roxbury (MP)	2	M. Iliff
	12/27	Cumb. Farms	1 ad	J. Sweeney	11/27	P.I.	3	B. Harris#
White-eyed Vireo	11/13	Plympton	1	J. Young	12/27	GMNWR	5	K. Dia#
Blue-headed Vireo	11/1	P.I.	2	S. Sullivan	Blue-gray Gnatcatcher			
	11/6	Gloucester (E.P.)	1	S. Hedman#	11/26	P.I.	1 ph	D. + S. Larson
	11/6	Lexington	1	R. LaFontaine#	11/29	Plymouth	1	M. Faherty
	11/6	S. Peabody	1	R. Heil	12/2	S. Dart. (A.Pd)	1	P. Champlin
Philadelphia Vireo	11/6	Truro	1 ph	J. Trimble#	12/25	Quincy (Nut I.)	1 ph	S. Courtney
Red-eyed Vireo	11/1	P.I.	1	S. Sullivan	Golden-crowned Kinglet			
	11/5	P'town	1 ph	J. Trimble	11/13	Arlington Res.	7	K. Hartel#
	11/29-30	Rockport	1 ph	R. Heil + v.o.	11/15	Braintree	5	P. Peterson
American Crow	12/16	Ipswich	80	J. Berry	11/07	Chestnut Hill	7	P. Peterson
Fish Crow	11/8	Mattapan (BNC)	350	P. Peterson	12/9	P.I.	4	T. Wetmore
	11/11	Bourne	75	P. + F. Vale	12/13	New Bedford	4	A. Wilson
	12/2	Dorchester	110	M. Garvey	Ruby-crowned Kinglet			
	12/10	Jamaica Plain	90	P. + F. Vale	11/1	Boston (A.A.)	2	P. Peterson
	12/17	Chicopee	4	T. Swochak	11/8	Cape Ann	3	R. Heil
Common Raven	11/2	Melrose	2	D. + I. Jewell	11/19-30	Wayland	5 max	B. Harris#
	11/7	GMNWR	2	A. Bragg#	12/24	Essex	1	R. Heil
	11/13	Randolph	2	SSBC (V. Zollo)	12/27	Sandwich	1	M. Keleher
	11/18	Malden	2	C. Jackson	Eastern Bluebird			
	11/21	Concord	2	S. Perkins	11/4	Attleboro	18	J. Sweeney
Horned Lark	11/11	Northampton	250	J. Drucker	11/5	Harwichport	22	A. Curtis
thr	11/16	Ipswich (C.B.)	18	J. Berry	11/20	S. Dart. (A.Pd)	18	E. Nielsen
	11/18	Saugus	15	P. Peterson	11/24	Burrage WMA	20	J. Sweeney
	11/22	Plymouth	40	S. Perkins#	11/27	Ipswich	38	R. Heil
	12/27	Cumb. Farms	60	J. Sweeney	12/5	GMNWR	17	A. Bragg
Tree Swallow	11/19	Salisbury	1	MAS (D. Larson)	12/16	Wellfleet	20	R. Schain#
	12/11	Reading	1	D. Williams	Hermit Thrush			
Swallow species	11/18	S. Dart. (A.Pd)	1	P. Champlin	11/1-11	Manomet	50 b	T. Lloyd-Evans#
Red-breasted Nuthatch	11/3	P.I.	3	J. Sender	11/2	Lexington	5	M. Rines#
	12/13	Baldwinville	8	T. Pirro	11/10	P.I.	5	T. Wetmore
Brown Creeper	11/25	Wayland	3	G. Long	11/20	Boston (PO Sq)	4	BBC (R. Stymeist)
	11/27	Nantucket	4	K. Blackshaw#	12/17	Falmouth	6	M. Keleher
	11/28	GMNWR	3	A. Bragg#	12/31	Southwick	2	J. Zepko
	12/13	Baldwinville	2	T. Pirro	Gray Catbird			
					11/20	S. Dart. (A.Pd)	3	E. Nielsen
					11/26	Falmouth	4	SSBC (GdE)
					11/29	Cape Ann	3	R. Heil
					12/25	P.I.	2	N. Landry
					12/31	Southwick	3	J. Zepko
					Brown Thrasher			
					11/5	S. Dart. (A.Pd)	3	E. Nielsen
					11/18	WBWS	1	M. Faherty
					American Pipit			
					11/7	Northampton	20	B. Hodgkins
					11/13	Carlisle	15	D. Brownrigg
					11/24	Acton	15	S. Perkins#
					11/24	Burrage WMA	12	J. Sweeney
					11/29	Amherst	17	J. Drucker
					12/27	Cumb. Farms	20	J. Sweeney
					Bohemian Waxwing			
					11/6	Truro	2 ph	J. Trimble#
					11/26	W. Newbury	1	R. Heil
					12/17	N. Berkshire	11	CBC

Cedar Waxwing				Pine Warbler			
11/26	W. Newbury	80	R. Heil	11/24	Burrage WMA	6	J. Sweeney
11/26	Falmouth	30	SSBC (GdE)	12/16	Wellfleet	53	R. Schain#
12/3	Plymouth	40	G. d'Entremont	Yellow-rumped Warbler			
12/27	Westboro	80	D. Mushrush	11/1	Burlington	10	M. Rines
12/29	WMWS	24	N. Beaugard	11/5	S. Dart. (A.Pd)	39	E. Nielsen
Lapland Longspur				11/6	Bourne	48	BBC (R. Stymeist)
11/4	Revere B.	2	R. Stymeist	11/13	Nantucket	75	K. Blackshaw#
11/27	Hadley	1	L. Therrien	11/20	Eastham	18	G. d'Entremont#
11/27	P.I.	3	T. Spahr	12/24	Essex	17	R. Heil
11/28	Duxbury B.	1	R. Bowes	Prairie Warbler			
11/5-8	Hyannis	1	P. Crosson#	11/1	Boston (A.A.)	1 m	P. Peterson
12/15	Fitchburg	1	T. Pirro	11/11	Eastham	1 ph	J. Trimble#
Snow Bunting				12/thr	Marblehead	1 ph	D. Noble
11/6	P.I.	240	E. Nielsen	12/4-16	Orleans	1	M. Iliff
11/11	Northampton	350	J. Drucker	Townsend's Warbler			
11/16	Ipswich (C.B.)	125	J. Berry	12/25-31	Ipswich	1 ph	N. + J. Berry + v.o.
11/28	Duxbury B.	150	R. Bowes	Black-throated Green Warbler			
11/29	Hadley	200	P. Yeskie	12/4	Marstons Mills	1	M. Iliff
Ovenbird				Wilson's Warbler			
11/16	Boston (Fens)	1	R. Schain	11/20	Sunderland	1	B. Thompson
11/17-12/5	Boston (PO Sq)	1	J. Young + v.o.	12/11	Medford	1	D. Lounsbury
12/4	Eastham	1	M. Iliff	12/16-20	Brighton	1 f	P. Peterson + v.o.
Northern Waterthrush				12/18-20	Brookline	1	R. Martel + v.o.
11/13	Wayland	1	S. Miller#	Yellow-breasted Chat			
Black-and-white Warbler				thr	Reports of indiv. from 10 locations		
11/20-30	Osterville	1 ph	J. Trimble	11/26	Manomet	3	I. Davies
12/1-4	W. Barnstable	1	v.o.	11/29	Gloucester	3	R. Heil
Orange-crowned Warbler				12/11	Nahant	2	L. Pivacek
11/6	Truro	2	J. Trimble#	12/17	Falmouth	2	M. Keleher
11/27	Ipswich	2	R. Heil	Eastern Towhee			
12/16	Wellfleet	2	R. Schain#	11/5	Fairhaven	3	BBC (R. Stymeist)
Nashville Warbler				11/20	S. Dart. (A.Pd)	3	E. Nielsen
11/1	Amherst	1	I. Davies	12/23	Falmouth	3	G. d'Entremont
11/9-12/18	Boston (Fens)	1	R. Schain	12/31	Westfield	1	S. Svec
11/25	Boston (BNC)	1	T. Aversa#	American Tree Sparrow			
12/22	Marblehead	1 ph	R. Heil	11/13	Wakefield	33	P. + F. Vale
Common Yellowthroat				11/18	P.I.	38	R. Schain
11/2	Lexington	1	M. Rines#	11/20	Westboro	18	T. Spahr
11/8	Rockport	1	R. Heil	12/27	Cumb. Farms	42	J. Sweeney
12/2	Boston (Fens)	2	J. Trimble	Chipping Sparrow			
American Redstart				12/4	Mashpee	6	M. Keleher
11/1	Amherst	1	J. Rose	12/16	Wellfleet	8	R. Schain#
Northern Parula				12/17	Wayland	4	B. Harris
11/1	Stoneham	1	D. + I. Jewell	Clay-colored Sparrow			
11/11	Amherst	1	J. Drucker	11/1-02	P.I.	1	T. Wetmore#
11/11	New Salem	1	J. Drucker#	12/11-31	Cataumet	1	J. Kricher
11/21-12/5	Boston (Fens)	1 f ph	R. Schain#	12/30-31	Nantucket	1	T. Pastuszak
Magnolia Warbler				Field Sparrow			
11/2	Amherst	1	J. Drucker	11/5	S. Dart. (A.Pd)	2	E. Nielsen
11/6-7	Boston (Fens)	1 ph	P. Peterson	11/6	Bourne	5	BBC (R. Stymeist)
Yellow Warbler				11/24	Burrage WMA	4	J. Sweeney
11/1	Burlington	1	M. Rines	Vesper Sparrow			
Blackpoll Warbler				11/16	Milton	1	R. Donovan
11/1	Amherst	2	I. Davies	12/25	Northampton	1	A. Magee
11/2	DFWS	2	P. Sowizral	Lark Sparrow			
11/2, 22	Boston (Fens)	7, 1	R. Schain	11/1-2	Cambr. (Daney)	1	v.o.
11/7	Chestnut Hill	2	P. Peterson	11/5	P'town	1 ph	J. Trimble#
Black-throated Blue Warbler				11/6-12/31	Lexington	1	v.o.
11/1	Boston (A.A.)	1 f ad	P. Peterson	Savannah Sparrow			
11/9	Manomet	1	T. Lloyd-Evans	11/27	Ipswich	15	R. Heil
11/17	Lenox	1	D. Ferren	12/17	Agawam	2	J. Zepko
12/31	Wellfleet	1 m	Steve Burke	Ipswich Sparrow			
Palm Warbler				11/8	Gloucester	2	R. Heil
11/8	Mattapan (BNC)	4	P. Peterson	11/16	Ipswich (C.B.)	6	J. Berry
11/13	Burrage WMA	2	J. Young	12/13	Duxbury B.	9	R. Bowes
11/18	S. Dart. (A.Pd)	3	P. Champlin	Grasshopper Sparrow			
11/25	Eastham	4	R. Schain	11/15	S. Dart. (A.Pd)	1	P. Champlin
12/16	Wellfleet	5	R. Schain#	Henslow's Sparrow			
Western Palm Warbler				11/17	Dorchester	1	R. Donovan
12/18	Dorchester	1	P. Peterson	Nelson's Sparrow			
				12/12	Saugus	1	R. Schain

Saltmarsh Sparrow				11/3-12/31	Amherst	1	J. Drucker
11/20	Duxbury B.	3	B. deGraaf	12/11-18	Watertown	1 ph	A. + G. Gurka
11/24	Eastham	3	S. Arena	Bobolink			
Seaside Sparrow				11/6	Eastham	1 ph	J. Trimble#
11/11	Eastham	2	J. Trimble#	Red-winged Blackbird			
11/24	Duxbury B.	1	I. Davies	11/12	Haverhill	1000	J. Fenton
11/25	Marshfield	1	S. Arena#	11/26	W. Newbury	1000	R. Heil
Fox Sparrow				Eastern Meadowlark			
11/2, 20	Lexington	5, 20	M. Rines#	11/12	Eastham	19	M. Keleher#
11/18	WBWS	4	M. Faherty	11/20	S. Dart. (A.Pd)	11	E. Nielsen
11/18	S. Dart. (A.Pd)	5	P. Champlin	11/25	Marshfield	6	S. Arena#
12/12	Sandwich	3	J. Sweeney	12/4	Cumb. Farms	3	C. Nims#
Lincoln's Sparrow				12/23	DWWS	3	MAS (J. Galluzzo)
12/17	Agawam	1	S. Kellogg	Yellow-headed Blackbird			
Swamp Sparrow				11/21	Nantucket	1	J. Blyth
11/19	Wayland	9	B. Harris#	Rusty Blackbird			
11/20	S. Dart. (A.Pd)	16	E. Nielsen	11/13	Cumb. Farms	5	D. Furbish
11/20	Lexington	5	M. Rines	11/13	Wayland	5	S. Miller#
12/27	Cumb. Farms	4	J. Sweeney	11/20	Lexington	20	M. Rines
12/27	Sandwich	12	M. Keleher	12/4	Lenox	10	G. Hurley
White-throated Sparrow				12/10	Wakefield	5	P. + F. Vale
11/5	S. Dart. (A.Pd)	75	E. Nielsen	Common Grackle			
11/27	Ipswich	40	R. Heil	11/6	W. Newbury	2300	E. Nielsen
12/17	Falmouth	103	M. Keleher	Baltimore Oriole			
White-crowned Sparrow				11/9	Truro	2	T. Lipsky
11/1	Cambr. (Danehy)	1 m	R. Stymeist	11/12	Eastham	4	M. Keleher#
11/5	Concord	2 ad	M. Rines#	11/27	Cambridge	2	R. Stymeist
11/6	Nantucket	1 imm	K. Blackshaw	12/20	Woods Hole	2	J. Hoye#
Dark-eyed Junco				Purple Finch			
11/5	P.I.	122	P. + F. Vale	11/20	Lexington	2	M. Rines
11/27	Ipswich	60	R. Heil	12/17	Athol CBC	37	CBC
11/27	Moran WMA	22	B. Zajda	Red Crossbill			
12/1	Royalston	100	N. Beauregard	11/15	Concord	1	S. Perkins
Summer Tanager				12/24	Hinsdale	10	K. Ryan
11/6	Chatham	1 f ph	J. Schurmann	White-winged Crossbill			
11/26	Manomet	1 f imm	M. Faherty	12/17	N. Berkshire CBC	7	CBC
Scarlet Tanager				12/31	Quabbin CBC	2	CBC
11/1	Woburn (HP)	1	M. Rines	Common Redpoll			
Western Tanager				11/8	Gloucester	3 ph	R. Heil
12/17-31	Falmouth	1	C. Dalton#	11/24	Newbypt	3	S. McGrath#
Indigo Bunting				Pine Siskin			
11/6	Eastham	1 ph	J. Trimble#	11/9	Washington	25	E. Neumuth
11/3-12/17	Amherst	1	J. Drucker	11/16	Milton	4	R. Donovan
Painted Bunting				12/11	Ashfield	32	S. Sauter
11/26-12/31	Eastham	1	E. Labato#	12/13	Littleton	5	G. Marley
12/2-4	Nantucket	1	E. Andrews#				
12/20-31	Methuen	1 m ph	B. LaGrasse	Errata: The following records from March and May of 2011 were printed in error:			
Dickcissel							
11/1-2	Cambr. (Danehy)	1	R. Stymeist	Red-shouldered Hawk			
11/12	Essex	1 ph	P. Brown	3/29	N. Truro	44	Hawkcount
11/26	Manomet	2 ph	I. Davies	Pileated Woodpecker			
11/28	Scituate	1	J. Galluzzo	5/29	Nantucket	6	K. Blackshaw
11/29	Plymouth	1	M. Faherty				



SURF SCOTERS BY DAVID CLAPP

ABBREVIATIONS FOR BIRD SIGHTINGS

Taxonomic order is based on AOU checklist, Seventh edition, up to the 52nd Supplement, as published in *Auk* 128 (3): 600-13 (2011) (see <<http://www.aou.org/checklist/north>>).

Locations		Newbypt	Newburyport
Location-#	MAS Breeding Bird	ONWR	Oxbow National Wildlife Refuge
	Atlas Block	PG	Public Garden, Boston
A.A.	Arnold Arboretum, Boston	P.I.	Plum Island
ABC	Allen Bird Club	Pd	Pond
A.P.	Andrews Point, Rockport	POP	Point of Pines, Revere
A.Pd	Allens Pond, S. Dartmouth	PR	Pinnacle Rock, Malden
B.	Beach	P'town	Provincetown
B.I.	Belle Isle, E. Boston	Pont.	Pontoosuc Lake, Lanesboro
B.R.	Bass Rocks, Gloucester	R.P.	Race Point, Provincetown
BBC	Brookline Bird Club	Res.	Reservoir
BMB	Broad Meadow Brook, Worcester	S.B.	South Beach, Chatham
C.B.	Crane Beach, Ipswich	S.N.	Sandy Neck, Barnstable
CGB	Coast Guard Beach, Eastham	SRV	Sudbury River Valley
C.P.	Crooked Pond, Boxford	SSBC	South Shore Bird Club
Cambr.	Cambridge	TASL	Take A Second Look
CCBC	Cape Cod Bird Club		Boston Harbor Census
Corp. B.	Corporation Beach, Dennis	WBWS	Wellfleet Bay WS
Cumb. Farms	Cumberland Farms, Middleboro	WMWS	Wachusett Meadow WS
	Drumlin Farm Wildlife Sanctuary	Wompatuck SP	Hingham, Cohasset, Scituate, and Norwell
DFWS	Delaney WMA		Worcester
DWMA	Stow, Bolton, Harvard	Worc.	
	Daniel Webster WS	Other Abbreviations	
DWWS	Eastern Point, Gloucester	ad	adult
E.P.	First Encounter Beach, Eastham	b	banded
F.E.	Fort Hill, Eastham	br	breeding
F.H.	Fresh Pond, Cambridge	dk	dark (morph)
F.P.	Franklin Park, Boston	f	female
F.Pk	Gate 40, Quabbin Res.	<i>fide</i>	on the authority of
G40	Great Meadows NWR	fl	fledgling
GMNWR	Harbor	imm	immature
H.	Halibut Point, Rockport	juv	juvenile
H.P.	Horn Pond, Woburn	lt	light (morph)
HP	High Ridge WMA, Gardner	m	male
HRWMA	Island	max	maximum
I.	Ipswich River WS	migr	migrating
IRWS	Ledge	n	nesting
L.	Mass Audubon	ph	photographed
MAS	Millennium Park, W. Roxbury	pl	plumage
MP	Martha's Vineyard	pr	pair
M.V.	Martin Burns WMA, Newbury	S	summer (1S = 1st summer)
MBWMA	Marblehead Neck WS	v.o.	various observers
MNWS	Myles Standish State Forest, Plymouth	W	winter (2W = second winter)
MSSF	Mount Auburn Cemetery, Cambr.	yg	young
Mt.A.	Nine Acre Corner, Concord	#	additional observers
NAC			

HOW TO CONTRIBUTE BIRD SIGHTINGS TO *BIRD OBSERVER*

Sightings for any given month must be reported in writing by the eighth of the following month, and may be submitted by postal mail or email. Send written reports to Bird Sightings, Robert H. Stymeist, 36 Lewis Avenue, Arlington, MA 02474-3206. Include name and phone number of observer, common name of species, date of sighting, location, number of birds, other observer(s), and information on age, sex, and morph (where relevant). For instructions on email submission, visit: <<http://massbird.org/birdobserver/sightings/>>.

Species on the Review List of the Massachusetts Avian Records Committee (indicated by an asterisk [*] in the Bird Reports), as well as species unusual as to place, time, or known nesting status in Massachusetts, should be reported promptly to the Massachusetts Avian Records Committee, c/o Matt Garvey, 137 Beaconsfield Rd. #5, Brookline, MA 02445, or by email to <mattgarvey@gmail.com>.

From The Birding Community E-Bulletin, April 2012

More Spruce Grouse Plans

In January 2009, we reported on the release of the “Continental Conservation Plan for Spruce Grouse” that had appeared the previous fall:

<<http://refugeassociation.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/sbc-jan09.pdf>>.

Earlier this year, the state of Vermont released its companion state-wide plan for Spruce Grouse <<http://wdfw.wa.gov/publications/01323/wdfw01323.pdf>>.

Although considered common in Canada, Alaska, and Maine, in Vermont the species is near the southern edge of its range. Most of the area where the birds are found in the state is managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department.

Vermont surveys between 1991 and 2003 suggested a stable population of 150 to 300 adult Spruce Grouse, but surveys conducted since then indicate there may be a decline in numbers. Since 2008, about 130 Spruce Grouse from Quebec and Maine have been translocated to appropriate black spruce wetlands and mixed spruce-balsam fir-larch habitat in Vermont.

Removing the Spruce Grouse from Vermont’s “Endangered and Threatened Species List” could be recommended if, on average for five years, there are increases in self-sustaining populations and dispersal between populations.

Good Fun: Sh*t Birders Say

Finally, a little video that was released in late March is a must-watch for any birder with a sense of humor. It was done by Boulder Oak Films, the same outfit that produced “Opposable Chums: Guts & Glory at The World Series of Birding,” Jason Kessler’s award-winning documentary as seen on PBS. This little video is produced and directed by Jason Kessler, and stars him as well. Don’t miss it!

After all is said and done, this may end up as an essential contribution to the playbook that summarizes our modern birding culture:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NaX7i1Q7-Rw&feature=player_embedded#>.

You can access an archive of past E-bulletins on the website of the National Wildlife Refuge Association (NWRA): <<http://refugeassociation.org/news/birding-bulletin/>>.



USFWS

ABOUT THE COVER

Palm Warbler

The Palm Warbler (*Setophaga palmarum*, until recently *Dendroica palmarum*) is a largely ground-feeding warbler with a habit of continuously wagging its tail. Male and female Palm Warblers are similar in appearance: mostly or partly yellow or yellowish below, especially the under tail coverts; a dark red crown and ventral stripes; an olive back and wings; and a gray face patch with yellow or whitish supercilium. The closely related Prairie Warbler also wags its tail, but it has white under tail coverts, black facial markings, and black flank stripes. Two subspecies of Palm Warbler are generally recognized; the “Yellow” Palm Warbler (*S. p. hypochrysea*) with all yellow underparts and the “Western” Palm Warbler (*S. p. palmarum*) which has little yellow below except for the undertail coverts and sometimes the throat. Palm Warblers breed from central western Canada in a broad swath east across the country to southern Hudson Bay, Labrador and Newfoundland, and as far south as the Western Great Lakes and central Maine. “Western” Palm Warblers nest from the western part of the range to eastern Ontario. “Yellow” Palm Warblers nest from Ontario eastward.

The two subspecies migrate to substantially different wintering areas with different timing and pathways. Yellow Palm Warblers spend the winter predominately along the Gulf Coast from Louisiana to Florida and migrate earlier in spring and later in fall than the “Western” subspecies. Western Palm Warblers generally winter from the southeastern United States through the Caribbean to Yucatán, Belize, and Costa Rica; a few also winter along the West Coast of the United States. Yellow Palm Warblers migrate in both directions along the Atlantic Coast; Western Palm Warblers migrate west of the Appalachians in spring and along the Atlantic Coast in fall. In Massachusetts the Palm Warbler is considered a common migrant in spring and fall but a rare resident in winter. It is an early migrant in spring, peaking in late April. The Yellow subspecies is more common in spring, the Western in fall.

The Palm Warbler is monogamous with rare cases of bigamy reported. They produce a single brood per year. Their breeding habitat is open boreal forest with undergrowth and bogs. They have a limited song repertoire for a wood-warbler, a continuous sputtering trill, similar to that of the Chipping Sparrow, variously described as *tsee tsee tsee...*, *peacie peacie, peacie...*, or *sawee, sawee, sawee...* The song apparently serves for both mate attraction and territorial advertisement. Males will chase males that intrude into their territory, but they apparently lack threat displays. Little is apparently known about their breeding biology because they breed in inaccessible areas such as bogs. In winter they may defend a local food resource.

The nest is a well-hidden cup, usually in *Sphagnum* under a conifer, birch, juniper, or shrub. It is made of bark, grasses, sedges, bracken fronds, or other plant materials lined with fine grass, deer hair, or feathers. The usual clutch is four or five white eggs, spotted reddish-brown. Only the female has a brood patch, and she alone incubates the eggs for the 12 days until hatching. She then will brood the chicks for

an additional 12 days until fledging. The chicks are altricial—totally helpless with eyes closed and only wisps of down. Both parents feed the chicks, but the female does most of the work.

Palm Warblers are diurnal visual feeders, active and versatile. Though they sometimes hawk insects, their usual foraging behavior is to glean or peck the ground, branches, foliage, or beach wrack. In winter they may join small intraspecific or interspecific foraging flocks. During summer they are entirely or mostly insectivorous, taking beetles, grasshoppers, flies, butterflies—just about anything small that crawls or flies. In winter they remain largely insectivorous but will take tiny seeds, fruit, and nectar.

All the usual nest predators such as snakes and weasels prey upon Palm Warblers as well as accipiters and owls. Their nests are occasionally parasitized by Brown-headed Cowbirds, and many are killed in tower strikes during migration. But Breeding Bird Survey data suggest increasing population trends—so this little warbler of the northern bog country appears to be secure. 🐦

William E. Davis, Jr.

About the Cover Artist: Barry Van Dusen

Once again, *Bird Observer* offers a painting by the artist who has created many of our covers, Barry Van Dusen. Barry is well known in the birding world, especially in Massachusetts, where he lives in the central Massachusetts town of Princeton. In the spring of 2009 Barry had an exhibition at Massachusetts Audubon's Joppa Flats Education Center in Newburyport, MA, and during the 2010 season he was artist-in-residence at Fruitlands Museum in Harvard, MA. Barry continued his association with Fruitlands during the 2011 season, when he conducted several workshops and displayed his work in the museum's store. In July 2011 Barry was an artist-in-residence again, this time at the Coastal Maine Botanical Gardens in Boothbay, Maine.

Barry has illustrated several nature books and pocket guides, and his articles and paintings have been featured in *Birder's World*, *Birding*, and *Bird Watcher's Digest* as well as *Bird Observer*.

Barry is currently at work on illustrations for the second volume of *Birds of Brazil* by John Gwynne, Robert Ridgely, Guy Tudor, and Martha Argel, published by Comstock Publishing, a division of the Cornell University Press. For this work he is illustrating the shorebirds and their allies along with the gulls and terns. In addition, Barry continues to enjoy teaching workshops at various locations in Massachusetts.

For more information about Barry's many achievements and activities, see <<http://www.barryvandusen.com>>. 🐦

AT A GLANCE

February 2012



David Larson

This issue's "At a Glance" once again offers only a partial view of the mystery species and only a limited view at that! After a careful examination of the printed image, readers will see that there really is a bird in the picture showing only its tail. If the mystery species happened to be a Magnificent Frigatebird or a Scissor-tailed Flycatcher, this might not be so bad, but unfortunately it's neither of those species. Even a Mourning Dove or a Winter Wren might be a little more obvious, but it's neither of those species either.

So what do we have to work with? Let's start with the vegetation since plants sometimes provide useful clues either because of what they are or because they exhibit a particular botanical characteristic. In this case the tree or shrub concealing most of the mystery bird is prominently thorny. Although we have no way of knowing where the picture was taken, it is certain that the bird has to be quite small to be virtually eclipsed by the leaves on the tree. Compared to the size of the thorns on the vegetation, the hidden bird's tail is strikingly long and slim, noticeably longer in fact than the conspicuous thorns. Most thorny plants have relatively short, straight thorns, under an inch long, like the thorns in the picture. It is true that a hawthorn tree (*Crataegus* sp.) has thorns longer than an inch, but hawthorn leaves have a different

shape than those in the picture. If we use the thorns for reference and take a closer look at the bird's tail—the only tangible clue to its identity—it is obvious that the tail is longer than the thorns.

If you're not botanically inclined, and all this gibberish about thorn length doesn't resonate with you, you can still identify the mystery bird. Close scrutiny of the tail shows that underneath it is white throughout its length. Note that there is also black showing the length of at least one of the inner rectrices (tail feathers). It is important that the white feathers appear to extend the length of the tail as opposed to being located only on the outer corners or tips, as in an American Robin or in many warbler species. There is only one tiny, long-tailed bird species found in Massachusetts whose tail is white and black on the undersides along its entire length and whose tail is visibly longer than the thorns on most shrubs or trees other than hawthorns. The mystery bird can only be a Blue-gray Gnatcatcher (*Poliophtila caerulea*).

Blue-gray Gnatcatchers are fairly common early spring and early fall migrants in Massachusetts. They are also fairly common breeders in moist woodlands at lower elevations throughout the Commonwealth. David Larson photographed this Blue-gray Gnatcatcher in Belize in February 2012. 🦅

Wayne R. Petersen



SNOWY OWL BY DAVID LARSON (NOTE THE EAR TUFTS)

AT A GLANCE



WAYNE R. PETERSEN

Can you identify the bird in this photograph?
Identification will be discussed in next issue's AT A GLANCE.

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VOL. 40, NO. 2, APRIL 2012

MASS AUDUBON'S BROADMOOR WILDLIFE SANCTUARY, SOUTH NATICK, MASSACHUSETTS	<i>Elissa Landre and Marsha Salett</i>	65
ARTHUR CLEVELAND BENT AND HIS <i>LIFE HISTORIES OF NORTH AMERICAN BIRDS</i>	<i>William E. Davis, Jr.</i>	74
FIELD NOTES		
Gray Catbird Drinks Condensation from Underside of Car	<i>William E. Davis, Jr.</i>	84
Front Row at the Raptor Show	<i>David Swain</i>	84
MARSH BIRDING THE WEST MEADOWS WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT		
AREA IN WEST BRIDGEWATER	<i>Steve Arena</i>	86
ABOUT FILM		
Watching the Watchers Watch	<i>Mark Lynch</i>	98
BIRD SIGHTINGS		
November/December 2011		107
ABOUT THE COVER: Palm Warbler	<i>William E. Davis, Jr.</i>	119
ABOUT THE COVER ARTIST: Barry Van Dusen		120
AT A GLANCE	<i>Wayne R. Petersen</i>	121

<http://massbird.org/birdobserver/>