

FIELD NOTES

The Stumped Naturalist

Marjorie Rines

I work part-time as a naturalist at Mass Audubon, answering questions from the public about wildlife. June is baby bird season. Most calls are from well-meaning people who find fledglings that have left the nest but cannot fly yet, and simply need to be convinced that the parents are there and will take care of the youngsters.

In mid-June of 2005 I received a more difficult call. A woman phoned to say she had had a dead tree removed, and as the crew was leaving, they showed her three chicks which had fallen out of a hole in the tree. I was just leaving work, and since she lived not far from me, I said I would drop by to see if there was a way to place the chicks in a way that their parents could find them.

When I arrived and looked at the chicks, I realized they were probably no more than a couple of days old. They had only the tiniest amount of gray fluff on their pink bodies, and they were completely silent, even when we jostled the area on the grass where they had been left. A pair of chickadees was in the area carrying food and looking around in the area of the stump.

We tried putting the chicks in a box on the stump, but they remained silent, and the parents kept landing nearby and looking around. It seemed hopeless; without the chicks calling, the parents would never find them.

I suggested to the homeowner that she contact the tree contractor and see if they could locate the section that had held the nest hole. I told her they should be careful because it was likely there were other chicks in the hole. I explained that it was a long shot, a million to one (I am given to hyperbole), because the parents would not be looking for the nest several feet below where they had left it. I left feeling rather sad. No matter how much I try to accept that things like this happen, it's difficult to see such a hopeless struggle for life.



The recovered stump. Photograph by the author.

When I arrived at work the next morning, my first voice mail message was from the homeowner. She was choked with emotion as she told me how the tree company delivered the tree section with the nest hole, along with two additional chicks which had fallen out. They had placed it on the stump (see photo), and no sooner had they stepped away than one of the chickadees flew into the hole, to be followed by a frenzy of feeding activity. I stopped by the

house on my way home that afternoon, and had the pleasure of watching the parents flying in and out of the oddly placed nest.

I have always assumed that parents mark a nest by its location rather than visual recognition. Yet these parents immediately found the nest despite the fact that it was replaced several feet below its original location, and there were no auditory clues. It seems obvious that in this case, at least, visual recognition of the nest site did play an important part in relocating the nest, and happily, the chicks. 🐦

Storm Bird

Brooke Stevens

She flew into the inkberry bush outside our kitchen window Saturday evening, May 21, 2005, carrying a bit of soft white stuff. I didn't give her or her bundle much thought and went about preparing dinner. The next day this female Northern Cardinal was working in earnest. By evening she was scrunching down, twisting and shaping the interior of a somewhat messy but expedient-looking nest that she had wedged into the exposed crown of a shrub that is twenty-five years old. The small evergreen leaves are supported by thick branching stems that rise eight feet into the air.

Monday passed uneventfully as the cardinal pair took command of the immediate space outside the window. At one point I noticed that she had her tail up quite a bit in a somewhat agitated fashion. She was still moving in and out of the nest and was gone for short periods of time. Tuesday she was settled in as a late spring Northeaster moved ashore. Winds increased to thirty-five miles per hour, and rain fell all day. That night the storm intensified. All day Wednesday the storm pounded the coast, with winds gusting to over sixty miles per hour, driving migrating Red and Red-necked phalaropes ashore. The surf off Andrew's Point was huge, and gannets hugged the troughs as they flew into the storm. Flocks of terns swirled in and out of the sheeting squalls. Fallen trees and large branches were strewn about the streets of the city.



Photograph by the author.

I awoke sometime early Thursday morning to lightning and thunder, wind and a deluge, and for a brief confused moment I was back in our concrete bunker on Attu. Listening to the chaos, I thought there's no way that flimsy hodge-podge of leaves and twigs can survive; it will be on the ground, and she'll be gone. So later that morning I was astonished to look out and see that cardinal sitting tight and snug. On May 24 two eggs could be seen from the upstairs window. On June 4 there were two naked chicks. And on the morning of June 17, the nest was empty. 🐦

Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife Management Efforts Create Nesting Habitat for Rare Bird

Dave King, Jeff Collins, and Jill Liske-Clark

In June 2005 a pair of Yellow-breasted Chats was found in the Leyden Wildlife Management Area. This 375-acre tract in Leyden, Massachusetts, is managed by the Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife for early-successional wildlife. Brian Harris and Michelle Labbe made the initial observation on June 14. Brian and Michelle are Massachusetts Audubon technicians participating in a cooperative research effort. The project, conducted by the Division and Mass Audubon, is directed by the USDA Forest Service Northeastern Research Station. Since the initial discovery, the male was observed by others, including Bob Packard and Ben Mazzei, on June 22, 25 and 30, after which the bird surveys largely ceased. During the June 22 visit, the observers witnessed courtship feeding. The male flew to the female and fed her in a ritualized exchange that many birds use to maintain the pair bond. Despite repeated visits, the observers could not locate a nest, and although the courtship feeding indicated that these birds were a breeding pair, it is not known how far they had progressed into the nesting cycle.

The Yellow-breasted Chat is easily recognized by its green back and yellow breast, as well as its large size, which distinguishes it from the relatively abundant Common Yellowthroat. Chats are Neotropical migrants, a designation for species that winter south of the Tropic of Cancer and breed north of it. The center of their breeding range is in the southeastern part of the United States, although substantial populations breed in the western states as well. Their breeding habitat includes large patches of old field habitat, regenerating clear-cuts, and other habitats with dense shrubby thickets. The number of chats in the eastern United States has declined in the Northeast during the past four decades, according to the North American Breeding Bird Survey. This trend continues as the shrub land habitats required for breeding revert to mature forest. Chats have never been abundant in Massachusetts, and sightings during the breeding season have become increasingly rare. The last probable nesting record was noted on June 13, 1996, at a power line cut in Lexington, where a male was seen carrying food. Subsequent visitors to the site, however, failed to make additional observations.

Yellow-breasted Chats and other early-successional shrubland species are of conservation concern because they occupy ephemeral habitats that require regular disturbance by fire or mechanical means. This group includes other bird species, such as Prairie, Chestnut-sided, and Blue-winged warblers, Indigo Buntings, and Field Sparrows. Some of the state's listed invertebrates, such as the barrens buckmoth and chain-spotted geometer, also thrive in these habitats. The Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife actively maintains early successional habitats on public and private properties for the benefit of these species. Currently the Division, together

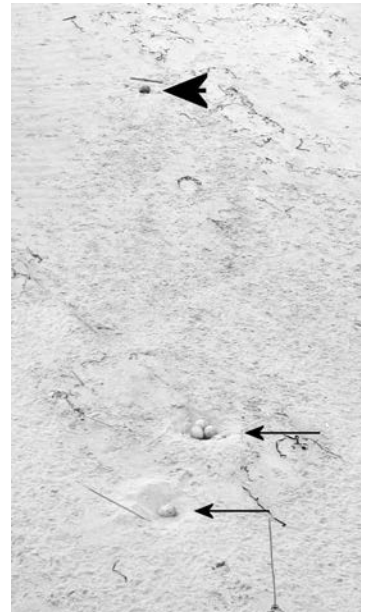
with Mass Audubon and the USDA Forest Service, is conducting intensive field surveys to evaluate the success of the program. The discovery of a locally rare species indicates clearly that their efforts are on the right track. 🐦

Piping Tern? Arctic Plover? Unusual Species Interactions on Plymouth Long Beach

Tony Dalisio

The summer of 2005 was an unusual season for nesting shorebirds on Plymouth Long Beach. For one thing, they were unable to successfully hatch any eggs. Due to early season storms and a high depredation rate, coastal waterbird nesting species — Piping Plover, Common, Least, and Arctic terns — fledged no new young.


The most curious event occurred toward the end of the nesting season. On June 29, there were very few nests left on the beach. Although there already had been nearly forty Piping Plover nests attempted from sixteen pairs of plovers, as well as ten Least Tern nests, twenty Common Tern nests, and a couple of Arctic Tern nests, all failed. This day, however, while making daily observation checks, Mass Audubon Plymouth Beach shorebird monitors observed something unusual. It appeared, at first glance, that a new Arctic Tern nest had been attempted at the tip of Plymouth Beach within two feet of a Piping Plover nest already containing three eggs. However, upon closer observation, the monitors realized that each Arctic Tern of the pair was incubating a nest — one on its own nest, and the other on the Piping Plover nest. During this time, the Piping Plovers stayed within the area. Eventually the female



Above: Face-off of Piping Plover and Arctic Tern on adjacent plover nests. **Right:** Piping Plover nests at bottom (arrows) and Arctic Tern nest (arrowhead) at top. Photographs by the author.

Piping Plover laid her fourth egg in a new scrape right next to her previous nest and began incubating it. Now if you can imagine, this was quite a sight!

One Arctic Tern incubated the plover nest, as the female plover was incubating the completion of her clutch, maybe eight inches away. All the while the male Piping Plover circled around the Arctic Tern on the plover nest. Just two feet south of all this activity, the other Arctic Tern incubated its own nest! At feeding time, both Arctic Terns came off their respective nests. At this point one of the Piping Plovers rolled the fourth egg into its original nest and began incubating all four eggs. Upon the return of the Arctic Terns, the Piping Plover flushed off its nest, at which point one of the terns began to incubate the plover nest again. However, the other tern did not resume incubating its own nest, and winds brought sand which began to cover the nest. At this point, the most interesting part of this sequence took place, indicating perhaps a relationship of some form between these two pairs of birds. One of the Piping Plovers approached the Arctic Tern nest and rebuilt the cup so that it did not get buried by sand. These actions were observed for most of the remaining daylight hours.

Both of these nests were depredated on the night of June 29, leaving observers to wonder what might have come from them, and why this connection took place. Those who were there will remember that day for some time. 

Song Sparrow Riding on a Chairlift Cable


Jeffrey Boone Miller

While on summer vacation (July 17, 2005, at about 11 a.m.), I rode the chairlift up Spruce Mountain near Stowe, Vermont. As I ascended, I noted that the meadow beneath the lift was home to multiple Red-winged Blackbirds and Song Sparrows. The meadow had several streamlets and about a one-to-two-foot-high cover of mixed grasses and flowers.

Roughly a third of the way up the mountain (the lift was 1800 feet long), I spotted a singing Song Sparrow in the meadow about fifty feet to the right of the lift. I was utterly charmed when this sparrow flew up and landed on the chairlift cable about twenty feet behind the chair I was on. The bird rode the cable up the mountain around 150 feet (delivering about five complete songs in the process). Then, as if traveling up the mountain wasn't surprising enough, the bird hopped smoothly over to the downward traveling cable and descended (again while singing) back to approximately where it had first hopped on, at which point it flew down to the meadow and was lost to view.

Song Sparrows are highly territorial, and will use their songs to establish and maintain their territory, which is often about an acre (i.e., a circle about 235 feet in diameter) in extent (reviewed in Nolan Jr., 1968). Typically, Song Sparrows seek singing perches at about seven to fifteen feet above the ground (the chairlift cable was about fifteen to twenty feet above ground). Though I was unable to carry out multiple

observations, the seemingly practiced movements of this Song Sparrow tempt me to conclude that the bird had incorporated the chairlift cable into its territory as a convenient perch from which to sing. Use of the moving cable might perhaps have lessened the energy cost of defending the territory by eliminating the necessity for flights to the territorial boundaries. Also, as suggested to me by Jane Stein, riding on the cable might have allowed the bird to expand its territory.

It is, of course, not unusual for birds of various species to land on moving objects, ranging from oxpeckers on hippopotamuses to warblers on sea-going boats, but I don't recall ever hearing of a bird riding a chairlift. I'd be glad to hear if others have had similar experiences. (The author can be reached by email at: miller@bbri.org.) 

Reference

Nolan Jr., V. 1968 . Song Sparrow. *Melospiza melodia* [Eastern Song Sparrow]. In Bent, A. C. and collaborators (compiled and edited by Oliver L. Austin, Jr.). Smithsonian Institution United States National Museum Bulletin 237 (Part 3): 1491-1512. (Available online at <<http://birdsbybent.netfirms.com/ch31-40/ssparrow.html>>)



MAY 2005 STORM BIRDS: RED-NECKED AND RED PHALAROPES AT SANDY POINT STATE RESERVATION, PLUM ISLAND, BY TOM MCCORKLE.