

FAREWELL
TO THE
WESTERN REEF HERON
by Martha Vaughan,
Newton



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Excerpt from a report dated June 11, 1983, from Edith Andrews on Nantucket Island to Richard Forster of Massachusetts Audubon Society (MAS):

. . . . Another thing of interest is an adult Little Blue Heron with yellow feet! On 26 April we had 2 Ad little blues out front on the salt marsh. One of them had a white throat and I assumed that it hadn't completed the molt from the im. plumage. We saw it off and on but not regularly and I figured it was over in Polpis Harbor. Anyhow, this morning an ad little blue was out front and it still has the white throat, pure white. I was watching it catch and eat fish and then as it lifted its feet and moved along I saw that the feet are a nice, bright yellow and the legs are black, not as dark a black as a Snowy but, black. The bill is the size of a little blue and two-toned but not quite as sharply defined as some, or as the book shows. All in all a very interesting-looking bird. . . .

Thus, in the course of one of the most exciting spring migrations Massachusetts has experienced in many years, the most extraordinary bird of all quietly took up residence in Quaise Marsh on the very doorstep of the University of Massachusetts Field Station. Toward the end of his Nantucket vacation in June, Rob Cardillo, a photographer associated with the VIREO project of The Philadelphia Academy of Natural Sciences, met Edith during a visit to the Maria Mitchell Museum and, at her request, photographed the "interesting-looking" bird in Quaise Marsh [see "A Visitor from Afar," by D. Arvidson, *BOEM* 11 (3): 124]. In July, Philadelphia ornithologists familiar with African species viewed these pictures and informed Edith Andrews and Massachusetts Audubon that they had a superstar in their backyard.

Two months and 3000 visitors later, the superstar disappeared. At sunset on Tuesday, September 13, Clinton Andrews at the Field Station by Quaise Marsh saw the now famous Western Reef Heron (*Egretta gulularis*) flying high with a flock of 67 Snowy Egrets (*E. thula*), then alighting restlessly on the marsh.

The flock did not follow its usual procedure of flying off to the regular roost. The reef heron was not seen again. To date, there have been no reports from more southern birders of this West African species which began its Cape Cod visit on April 26, 4000 miles from home.

There is some controversy as to the "legitimacy" of this bird as a vagrant. The Western Reef Heron is not listed as a captive species on the International Species Inventory System (ISIS) according to the people at MAS who thoroughly checked and ruled out the possibility that the heron could have been an escape from a North American zoo or aviculturist. There are, however, apparently several of these birds in European collections. It seems unlikely that the Nantucket bird would be a European escape as opposed to a wild bird of the dark-phase nominate West African race.

There are some who claim the bird must have been a stowaway on a ship. In fact, Cramp says the reef heron is "often trustful of man; recorded perching on masts of moored boats." As long as the bird was not "man-assisted," i.e., fed, captured, or handled by people, a ship-assisted bird would still be considered an acceptable record by all but a few extremists. In either case, surely the considerable publicity given the heron by The New York Times, Boston Globe, and national and local television news coverage might have prompted witnesses to the bird's long boat ride to speak up. So far, not one peep (so to speak).

The third possibility is that the reef heron is a real vagrant, caught up by a tropical storm and blown westward. (Studies on weather patterns during early and mid-April are underway.) In a paper titled "Thoughts on Reef Herons and of Ships" dated August 21, 1983, by Don Roberson of Pacific Grove, California (a copy of which was sent to MAS), the writer states, "With Western Reef Heron, the case for true vagrancy is so weak as to be implausible." (Roberson is the author of Rare Birds of the West Coast, Woodcock Press, 1980.) Although the evidence is slim, the heron appears to be a wanderer, but not a highly migratory bird. Bannerman (1968) says, "It is subject to local migrations on the African mainland and in April is said largely to disappear from the sea-coast to breeding grounds behind the mangrove swamps. It may have been remarked that it was just at that time - the end of March and mid-April [emphasis mine] - when the birds are reported to move from the mangrove belt farther afield, that the specimens were secured in the Cape Verde Islands" (p. 234).

Strays have reached not only the Cape Verde Islands, but also the Azores and Spain during spring (March-June) and the Mediterranean coast of France during summer (June-August) - all roughly due east of Cape Cod. As far-fetched as the true vagrant theory might seem to some, it is a fact that long before boats existed, birds were blown across large expanses of open ocean to colonize islands and other new areas. Since it must take more than one or two rare vagrants to establish a healthy breeding population, maybe the trip is not so

miraculous after all. (See also in this issue the article by Richard Veit, "Escapes Versus Vagrants: A Comment.")

California skepticism notwithstanding, thus far the American Birding Association has accepted the record. The final ruling of its Checklist Committee will come in early 1984. The September-October 1983 issue of American Birds has included the record and contains a feature article on the reef heron by the Philadelphia group who originally photographed and identified the bird.

Massachusetts has played host on the islands off Cape Cod to three North American records this year: in addition to the Reef Heron, there was a Brown-chested Martin on Monomoy and a Streaked Flycatcher on Martha's Vineyard - both South American species. Only the Reef Heron was seen by more than a handful of birders, including Benton Basham who is chasing "703 in 1983" (and saw number 711 on New Year's Eve in Florida - a Masked Duck), and Roger Tory Peterson who called it the "bird of the century," even overshadowing the Ross' Gull of 1975. According to Edith Andrews, the heron guest register at the Field Station recorded 1866 signatures before the bird disappeared, and as many as 3000 people may have watched it prance and lunge and parasol as it fed on small fish, crustacea and mollusks at Quaise Marsh.

Call it heron addiction or reefer madness or whatever you will, that tapdancing "show-off" thrilled a lot of birders' hearts last summer and fattened the pockets of many accommodating Nantucket cab drivers and local airlines.

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MARTHA VAUGHAN has worked on the staff of Bird Observer for six years. Recently she and Robert Stymeist spent a day with Benton Basham while a crew from Channel 4's "Evening Magazine" filmed a story on the Ultimate Listing Experience, to be aired sometime in January 1984. Martha's more prosaic hours are spent trying to "comptrol" several small firms of architects and urban planners in Harvard Square. She lives in Newton with ten-year-old Sarah, who thinks her birding mother is weird.



Photo by J. L. Heywood



*Viewing *Egretta gularis*, July 16, 1983.
(l to r) A. Forbes-Watson, E. Andrews,
P. Alden, R. T. Peterson*



*Western Reef Heron feeding.
Quaise Marsh, Nantucket
Photos by D. R. Arvidson*

WESTERN REEF HERON



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*Quaise Marsh
Nantucket, 1983*

Photo by Townsend Dickinson



Photo by J. L. Heywood

*Signing the guest register.
Edith Andrews, Roger T. Peterson*