

PEDDOCKS ISLAND BIRD LIFE, JUNE TO OCTOBER, 1984

by Polly S. Stevens, Somerville

This report was written to make available to the Peddocks Island Trust staff and my friends the results of a survey of birds on Peddocks Island during the summer and early fall of 1984. My original intention was only to visit the island a couple of times, see what birds were breeding there, and share that information primarily with some birdwatching conferees who intended to visit other Boston Harbor islands with the same purpose. The joint venture seems to have drifted apart, but I became addicted to recording the bird life on Peddocks, which has a pleasing diversity of habitats and lots of room for roaming (188 acres). As a result, enough information was collected to make the writing of a report worthwhile. Here, then, is my account of the bird life on Peddocks Island, including a summary of the breeding birds, some general impressions, and descriptions of some particularly memorable observations.

Two caveats are in order. The first is that the study was not begun until June 30, by which time much of the breeding behavior of courtship, mating, and nest building was already completed, and first broods may already have fledged. Consequently, some species that were undoubtedly breeding on the island are relegated to a category of lesser certainty simply because I did not visit when they were exhibiting breeding behavior. The second warning concerns the adequacy of the sample of observations. The small number of visits during the breeding season (generally considered to be June and July), the large area of the island, and the viewpoint of only one observer all tend to make the information in the following summary incomplete. On the whole, though, I am satisfied that I am offering a representative picture of Peddocks Island bird life.

My records of the birds observed at Peddocks Island between June 30 and October 19, inclusive, show that a total of sixty-eight species used the island and its shoal waters during that time. Included in this total are three entries for birds that I was not able to identify to the species level: dowitcher, an owl, and the group of small shorebirds known as "peep." Not included are any of the birds that I could only tentatively identify, including a possible Indigo Bunting seen briefly in very poor light, and some migrating fall warblers. Also omitted is White-winged Scoter, a wintering duck, seen some distance offshore.

Of the sixty-eight species "using" the island - that is (among other things) feeding, hunting, rearing young, holding territory, or just resting - twenty-one species were likely to have been breeding on the island. My criteria for breeding birds were those used for the Massachusetts Breeding Bird Atlas Project, 1974-1978, a cooperative venture of the Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Game and the Massachusetts Audubon Society. Under these criteria, likely breeding birds are divided according to their behaviors and other evidence into three classes: confirmed breeding, probable breeding, and possible breeding.

On Peddocks Island, there were seven species of confirmed breeding birds: American Black Duck, Gray Catbird, Yellow Warbler, Common

Yellowthroat, Northern Cardinal, Song Sparrow, and American Goldfinch. These birds presented, aside from suggestive behaviors such as the singing of males, at least one of the following decisive indications of breeding: feeding of young, nest with young, downy young of waterfowl (American Black Duck), recently fledged young, or distraction displays which involved in both observed instances - Common Yellowthroat and Song Sparrow - the feigning of injury. I have added to this list the feeding call of cardinal young, a distinctive sound that seems to me to be similar to the sound made by tapping crystal with a fork.

There were six species of probable breeding birds: Northern Bobwhite, Barn Swallow, Black-capped Chickadee, House Wren, Rufous-sided Towhee, Red-winged Blackbird. The characteristic behavior exhibited by these probable breeding birds on Peddocks Island included the visiting of likely nest sites, holding territory by chasing others of the same species, and agitated behavior or anxiety calls from adults. Further, for each of the species in this category, a singing male was present on two or more days at least a week apart in the same area.

The eight species of possible breeding birds were Rock Dove, Tree Swallow, American Crow, Brown Thrasher, European Starling, Red-eyed Vireo, Common Grackle, and House Finch. This group comprises birds seen during the breeding season in possible nesting habitat but not qualified for classification as confirmed or probable breeders. The evidence here was somewhat stronger than what the Massachusetts Breeding Bird Atlas project required, because each of these species was seen on different occasions at least a week apart in the same area, and all were close candidates for probable breeders. The European Starling, Common Grackle, and Rock Dove failed because of my inadequate note taking. A singing male Red-eyed Vireo was seen on consecutive days in early July in a wooded area on East Head. Another was seen two weeks later but in quite a different habitat - the meadow by the Quartermaster's Storehouse - and so did not qualify on the basis of these observations. The Brown Thrasher was seen frequently enough but never when singing. And so it goes.

Species that were seen regularly at the island during the nesting season but for which there was no evidence of breeding there were placed in the category of neighborhood breeding birds, which included the following: Double-crested Cormorant, Snowy Egret, Black-crowned Night-Heron, Ring-billed Gull, Herring Gull, Great Black-backed Gull, and Common Tern.

Finally, to tie up a few loose ends, it should be noted that Mourning Dove and Eastern Kingbird were plausible breeding birds, but they did not quite fit the criteria spelled out above. Other species, including Northern Oriole, needed some more study.

One of the nicest things to discover from this survey was how interesting it is to return regularly to the same birding area over a period of months. Most of my previous birding had been of the peripatetic kind, and, aside from my frequent visits to a tiny Cambridge woods, I had no sense of the continuity in birds' lives. One of the most striking things I learned from my summer birding at Peddocks was how faithful breeding birds are to their territories. They stay in their same, rightful places and are still there, say, two weeks later. There was a pleasure in

climbing East Head after an absence and listening for the towhee and cardinal families established there and in anticipating a sighting of the bobwhites around the administration building. The two broods of black ducks on the freshwater pond were there the weekend of June 30, and some were still there on August 18. But you always had to approach stealthily to see them, for they hid silently into the reeds at the slightest sign of intrusion.

Another interesting, unanticipated phenomenon was the appearance, disappearance, or flocking of the different species. Red-winged Blackbirds were almost drearily omnipresent through July 22, but from August 4 on, I saw less than a handful. I don't think they were skulking - they were gone. Almost simultaneously, the Common Yellowthroat and Yellow Warbler dropped out of sight, although here the change was not so abrupt, and silent adults were seen later in the season. The goldfinches, in contrast, were merrily present into the fall, the males doing their engaging roller coaster flight overhead, and a nest with downy young was found on September 8. The catbirds also continued through the summer, eventually changing their multilingual songs of imitation to more mournful angst calls.

While some of the songbirds were dropping out, new visitors were arriving. Shorebirds that breed in the Arctic began arriving in July - the dowitcher the first to migrate through, then Greater and Lesser yellowlegs, Solitary Sandpiper, Semipalmated and Black-bellied plovers, and Ruddy Turnstones passing through in August and September. By October 19, few shorebirds were left, and wintering ducks had appeared - Red-breasted Merganser in the shoals by Prince Head and White-winged Scoter well off in Quincy Bay.

The flocking of birds started early in August with a swarm of starlings wheeling over the salt marsh, and a cloud of nearly seventy Barn Swallows sliding in for a dip and sip at the freshwater pond. There were family groups, too, with a covey of seventeen bobwhite flushed in the meadow by the flats. But most stunning was the flock of Cedar Waxwings. In the golden slanting afternoon sunlight on September 1, I caught sight of these elegant birds in a tree by the Quartermaster's Storehouse. I started counting the sleepy birds soaking up the rays, and as leaves shifted and the light played on the shadows, more quiescent forms were revealed. I kept on counting as birds arrived and left and foraged for berries in a nearby tree, and I did a final confirmatory count as the whole flock lifted off, calling their contact notes and starting another leg of migration. There had been upwards of eighty birds, adults and immatures.

In addition to the routine occurrences, there were some gripping behavioral displays. One of the most dramatic took place over the salt marsh in late July. On the south side of the marsh, where the outlet flows from the large saltwater pond, a sizable mixed flock of gulls had settled on the beach, and four Common Terns were circling. Snowy Egrets preened on the beach grass, and a Black-crowned Night-Heron stalked the pond - bird heaven until absolute bedlam set in as a Red-tailed Hawk drifted in from East Head. The birds scattered in a violent flurry - except for one Common Tern. The tern, despite its small size, took off after the hawk, loading it upwards with side swipes and a rat-a-tat clatter. As the hawk

ponderously gained altitude, the tern followed, harassing with its furious cries until, just visible as a sliver of white light high overhead, it drove the hawk off, and the Redtail, catching a thermal, escaped back to East Head.

The first kestrel I found on Peddocks launched an equally dramatic display. One late afternoon, a female kestrel appeared above the forest canopy of East Head and, uttering the "klee" call, repeatedly dive-bombed into the tree tops. Her manner was so agitated and the call so urgent that I felt her distress. The underbrush was too impenetrable for me to get near enough to discern the cause, and the behavior remains unexplained. One natural interpretation would be that she was attempting to drive a predator away from a nest; but aside from the presence of a male (?) kestrel the next morning, there were no more sightings of kestrels on the island until October and no further signs of nesting.

One of the more pleasant moments of birdwatching on the island was seeing a female flicker pop her head out of a possible nesting hole by the gym, while a male held forth from Officers' Row. Despite all the hours of Peddocks birding, finding a bird's nest was a rare accomplishment and very satisfying. However, like the kestrels, the flickers were not seen again until fall.

One night, I went on an owl prowl, playing a tape of calls in the hopes of eliciting an owl's answering call or its appearance. The night was lit only by a quarter moon and starlight, and the only sounds were rustlings. Listening to the quavering, eerie recordings against the unfamiliar night sounds, my nerve failed. Perhaps an owl might assume I was edible or think that I was a rival and attempt to drive me off - if my suddenly wobbly legs would carry me. I turned off the tape, told my knees to behave, and tottered along toward a harbor lookout and Boston's bright lights. There, swooping low over the bluff, head down, intent on hunting was an owl who had not deigned to answer the artificial hoots coming from a two-legged creature that was too big to eat and no threat at all.

From the noise and bustle of the late June birds to the quiet beauty of the birds of October, Peddocks was a continuing feast of great diversity, interest, and amusement. We are awfully lucky it is there. This report is my way of thanking the Peddocks Island Trust for their stewardship of the island and the staff for their interest and hospitality.

POLLY STEVENS, a staff attorney for the Massachusetts Appeals Court, got her first binoculars in 1980, took them along on a winter holiday in the Yucatan, and became a confirmed birdwatcher. Her activity was limited for awhile by a serious back ailment, but despite this incapacity, she had herself carried up Mt. Watatic on a mattress to participate in a hawk-watch in the fall of 1981. When fit once again, Polly censused birds at Norton Woods in Cambridge and spent the summer of 1984 studying the birdlife on Peddocks Island, from which this paper resulted. She has repeated her Yucatan visit and has also birded in Florida, Texas, and Arizona.