

## FIELD NOTES FROM HERE AND THERE

### Tit for Tat.

I was birding recently at the end of Forbes Lane in Milton above the Neponset River. While checking the large flocks of goldfinch and junco feeding on catkin, it was obvious that the local gang of crows was having fun with the resident Redtail or the Great Horned Owl, both of which have nested in this area. I found a Fox Sparrow and a towhee, and during a half hour or so of birding, the mob of crows grew to over a hundred in number. The noise level in the thick canopy above was very distracting, but I wasn't paying much attention to them except when the bird of prey moved and the chorus became frenzied. The besieged bird finally moved out over the marsh, and it turned out to be the owl. It swung in a big circle over the river with all hundred crows in pursuit and glided back toward the woods' edge, landing on the large bare limb of a deciduous tree. My view was poor so I moved to a position that gave a clear view of the perched owl through a tunnel of branches. With the owl in the open, the crows seemed to have it all their way. They were screaming around the big bird, diving at it in a steady stream that reminded me of gannets dropping on fish. One after the other, they would dive and then twist away from the crouching owl, some of them nicking its back. The owl could see them dropping and would duck down at each attack. With dozens of furious crows bombing it, the owl suddenly froze deep in a crouch, timed the charge of one of the crows, catapulted off the branch, and, twisting its talons upward, grabbed the unlucky crow by the chest. The owl flapped hard trying to land again on the branch, its victim also flapping in its grasp, but finally flew off through the tree tops to where it was when I first arrived, together with the mob of crows - now as mad as ever. A clear view was impossible, and I don't know if the owl held on to the crow for more than the few seconds that I had them in view. The instant that the owl grabbed the crow, the local nesting Redtail charged off a nearby branch, where it had been sitting all along unmolested, and flew straight through the mass of crows. It made no attack but just flew through the flock and then went back to its perch. The crows went on after the owl and paid no attention to the hawk. Off in the distance, I could hear the crow chorus slowly diminish, and during the next twenty or thirty minutes, they dispersed, leaving the woods silent. This was one of the more exciting experiences I've had while birding. We all know about the rivalry between these two species but seldom see the owl get the upper hand.

Bob Abrams, Milton

### A Mockingbird Calls.

On an evening in late May 1985, while walking alone through a nearly deserted Mt. Auburn Cemetery, I heard a familiar "pish, pish-h-h, pis-s-h-h-h" repeated five or six times - familiar but very emphatic. I looked about expectantly for a fellow birder. Not a soul in sight! The very loud pish-pish was repeated again

close at hand. The source - a mockingbird! Undoubtedly a Mt. Auburn endemic. When I related this episode to a skeptical friend, his question was: "Were the birds coming in to it?"

Dorothy Arvidson, Arlington

### Tale from a Tyro: Noon on a Nantucket Moor.

We were fledglings, my friend and I, both as birdwatchers and as explorers of Nantucket, but greatly elated at being on the island - biking the cobblestones, trudging along the endless beach, collecting, walking and savoring the moors, and floundering in a beginner's effort to keep the Savannahs straight from the Song Sparrows, to tell crows from hawks from gulls, and the like. Such distinctions taxed our limited birding know-how. Then one day, departure minus one, BROAD NOON, up out of the moor arose a bird we had not seen before. It was surely a hawk, flying gently and steadily, intimate with the scrub and grasses, sometimes soaring and flying higher with lazy intent. We had the bird easily in our glasses. It wasn't long before I realized that this hawk was really an owl! What I had already decided was a very stubby body ("short" head, short tail) finally veered and beelined toward me. At this point I saw the flat, round face and blackly encircled eyes. Back at the business of hunting, which even we amateurs could see it must be doing, it displayed again and again a leaning-from-side-to-side type of flight as it searched, watched, and then zeroed in close over some object below. Then moving into a calculated, complete stall, hovering first with its wings flapping in V-formation (butterfly on a leaf) and then, catching the wind just right, the wings flattened, and it stopped - mid-air - three feet above the tips of the tall grass! Moments went by watching this motionless-in-air position until the bird finally dove, head only slightly more first than feet (or so it seemed) onto the whatever-it-was. So many moments later that we wondered if the prey had instead caught the owl, it finally emerged with the flaccid morsel. Immediately a waiting crow came from nowhere and harassed the bird until the catch was dropped and lost to both of them, and the show was over. We felt bad about the owl losing its treat, but we certainly had ours. Still . . . , was it really an owl?

Cindy McElwain, Still River

### A Birthday Vow.

A trip to North Monomoy island in the late summer of 1983 left me so exhausted that I vowed I would never set foot on the slimy flats of that greenhead fly sanctuary again. I repeated this statement to some friends at a birthday celebration on August 7 while birding Plum Island but amended it with the waiver - "unless a James' Flamingo shows up there." A day or two later, I learned that a flamingo had appeared on Monomoy and was reported on August 7 - a Chilean Flamingo! Not the same genus as the James' (or Puna) Flamingo but close enough for me to try again next birthday. "I shall never set foot on North Monomoy again unless . . ." How about a Spoonbill Sandpiper?

Dorothy Arvidson, Arlington

## Brown Creeper Caper.

The Brown Creeper (*Certhia familiaris*), that tiny wonder of camouflage in color and pattern, that animated scrap of bark, has its own quite distinctive modus operandi. The method of working up and around a tree trunk is mentioned wherever the bird comes under discussion and hardly needs to be repeated here. Using his rather generously sized feet to hitch himself upward seems almost a compulsion. "Where there are no trees," Edward Howe Forbush tells us, "he still must needs climb and so he climbs the rocks, a sand bank, the brick wall of a city house, a fence post or a man's leg as the case may be. Down on Block Island, Rhode Island, Miss Elizabeth Dickens saw one climbing a cow's tail for want of a more promising prospect" (Birds of Massachusetts, Volume III, 1929, p. 354). Quite remarkable was a piece of behavior I observed at the Broadmoor Wildlife Sanctuary, South Natick, Massachusetts, on June 15, 1985. A bird that, on coming to rest, proved to be of this species was seen to spiral down around the trunk of an oak tree, in full flight. Thus, it not only reversed the usual direction of its movement but switched the means of progression as well. Four or five times, perhaps more, the little madcap pursued his vertiginous descent, circling with such precision that he seemed to be following some invisible spiral staircase. Only by an inch or two did his wingtips clear the bark. The flight was as rapid as could well be under such circumstances and was not interrupted to snatch up any insect prey, if indeed this could have been possible. One had rather the impression of a bravura performance in which the virtuoso was exulting in the sheer joy of his mastery of flight. After this was over, the tiny entertainer betook himself to the base of a nearby tree that he proceeded to ascend in more or less straight lines and in the usual pedestrian manner.

David C. Grindell, La Crescenta, California

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