

## FIELD NOTES FROM HERE AND THERE \_\_\_\_\_

### SOLUTION TO HOUSE SPARROW PROBLEM?

On the evening of June 27, 1986, I was casually observing the feeding activity at my neighbor's seed feeder. At approximately 6:30 P.M., I noticed an adult male Common Grackle (*Quiscalus quiscula*) and a young House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*) foraging on the ground beneath the feeder. As I continued to watch, the grackle suddenly moved over to the sparrow, grabbed it by the nape, and flew off when I moved outside to take a closer look.

During the preceding two days, I had noted some aggression on the part of the grackles toward the two young sparrows that had begun frequenting the feeder. This behavior consisted of the grackle chasing the young birds away from the immediate vicinity of the feeder, and then returning to forage. The entire chase was over a distance of no more than thirty feet. Initially I interpreted this display as defense of a food resource. Never had I witnessed anything resembling predation on the part of any member of the blackbird family. However, in *Song and Garden Birds of North America*, published by the National Geographic Society, Robert Storer mentions field mice, crawfish, minnows, small frogs, and eggs and young of birds as part of the diet of the Common Grackle. I would be interested to know if other birders have observed anything of this sort.

Vince Yurkunas, Arlington



**Massachusetts Glamour Bird:** Red-billed Tropicbird afloat in company of Great Cormorant off Gay Head, Martha's Vineyard, October 24, 1986.

Photo by Alan Brady, Newtown, Pennsylvania

## SHRIKE STRIKES FEMALE FINCH AT FEEDER

Kelvin Kindahl whose family lives in Pelham, Massachusetts, writes that his parents have had a Northern Shrike hanging around their feeding station throughout January 1987. They've seen the bird repeatedly and resent its presence as the other birds vanish when the shrike is around. On Sunday, January 18, at 11:45 A.M., Kelvin saw the shrike catch a bird just outside the breakfast window. It apparently had been hiding up on the roof, came down and caught the bird, and flew off into the woods with the victim held in its beak. In the heat of the moment, only tentative identification of the prey was possible. It was thought to be a female House Finch. Many of us who have fed birds have attracted a hawk, often an accipiter, to our feeding station. But very few can claim to have attracted a Northern Shrike.

Andrew H. Williams, Northampton

## TURKEY VULTURE AT SUET

On January 16, 1986, while driving on Summer Street near Route 3A in Marshfield, I observed a large bird passing over my car and heading northeast. I stopped to get a better look and realized that it was a Turkey Vulture (*Cathartes aura*). It appeared to drop into a residential section adjacent to the Massachusetts Audubon South Shore Regional Center. After joining David Clapp, sanctuary director, we drove to the area where I thought the Turkey Vulture had landed and discovered it in someone's front yard. The bird was under a large spruce tree from which hung a chunk of suet on a string. The vulture jumped and fluttered up to the suet and knocked pieces of it to the ground. It then dropped down and fed on the scattered bits and pieces of suet. This was repeated three times with the bird using its bill on two occasions to split off chunks of suet. A house cat appeared on the scene, and the vulture eventually hopped onto a rail fence and then flew off down the road. It was seen regularly in the neighborhood for about a week after that but not again at the feeding station.

Kevin Ryan, North Easton

## MARSH BIRD RESCUED FROM HARVARD SEWER

About 9:00 o'clock on the morning of Friday, October 3, 1986, Hugh Geoghegan of Cambridge was walking his three pet greyhounds along Memorial Drive. He had just crossed Boylston Street and walked past the main gate of Harvard's Eliot House when he noticed a small bird staggering across the sidewalk in front of him. The bird struggled over the grass on the left of the sidewalk and disappeared through the grating of a storm drain close to the main gate of Eliot House. Hugh tied his hounds to the gate, removed the grating, and plucked out the bedraggled bird. He then ran to the Charles River to look for similar birds, because he thought it might be part of a group. But no like bird was about. This good samaritan then gathered firmly in one hand three leashes (with dogs attached) and, with the bird gently secured in the other, walked for ten minutes to 44 Brattle Street, to the offices of Sert, Jackson and Associates. There he removed human hair and other debris from the bird's feet, placed it in a large xerox carton with holes for air, and left it in a quiet office to recover from the adventure, especially from the trauma of being sniffed over by three lively dogs. After two hours of peace, the patient then drank some water and was offered and tested a lunch of mixed bird seed, supplied by a person from the nearby E. R. Sage Co., birder Dennis Oliver (who unfortunately never got to see the survivor). Martha Vaughan of Gradient Corporation, another bird-person in the neighborhood, arrived and identified the bird as a Virginia Rail. She volunteered to drive it to the Natural History Services of the Audubon Society in Lincoln. In the offices there, the creature promptly escaped the confines of its carton, several naturalists in frantic pursuit, and was retrieved just at the point of disappearing (thin as a rail) into the haven of a narrow space behind a file cabinet. Firmly in hand once again, the rail was then examined, admired, declared fit, and was last seen being carted away by a delighted ornithologist (Richard A. Forster) for release in a quiet marsh nearby.

Joyce Wasson, Cambridge

## COURAGEOUS CASSIN'S

In August of 1986, while traveling in southeast Arizona, some friends and I had driven to a spot near Globe intending to look specifically for Black-chinned Sparrows and Gray Vireos. We pulled off the road onto a turnout overlooking a hillside where we thought the sparrows might appear. During the wait, a Red-tailed Hawk flew leisurely past in front of us just about at eye level. At the same time, a Cassin's Kingbird zoomed up to intercept the hawk. I expected a little dive-bombing -- and that would be it. But this kingbird **landed** on the back of the Red-tail and started aggressively pulling at the hawk's nape feathers. The hawk's attitude suggested outrage that I felt was similar to mine when a greenhead fly lands on the back of my neck. The entire scene lasted only a few seconds until the kingbird returned to its perch. He was given a well-deserved ovation from the admiring onlookers.

Bruce Hallett, Brookline

## NORTHERN HARRIER PROVIDES DATUM FOR LLOYD CENTER

On January 30, 1986 at 9:50 A.M., I flushed a female Northern Harrier from the grasses near the salt marsh surrounding Allens Pond in South Dartmouth, Massachusetts. Because my research project at the Lloyd Center for Environmental Studies (LCES) involves habitat utilization by Northern Harriers, I searched the immediate area for a possible kill. Feathers and a disarticulated bill were all that was left of the fresh kill. Some of the skull and facial plumage remained with the upper half of the bill. The research staff (Mark Mello, Robert Marshall, James Lyons, and I) and other avid birders at LCES (Bob Maker and Bob Deegan) concurred in the identification of the remains as that of a Sora. These remnants were kept and are available for further examination.

A weekly bird census of Allens Pond was initiated in March 1985, but this is the first recorded occurrence of the species at Allens Pond in that time.

Dave Christiansen, LCES Research Intern

## LIVE ETCHINGS

As if etched in glass, details on seabirds this February day stood out with a clarity I don't remember having seen before. The air and water temperature were perfectly matched, about 41 degrees Fahrenheit, and the afternoon light at Andrew's Point was bright, though subdued by cirrus clouds running ahead of an approaching storm. So still was the view in my 45-power Spacemaster II that I would be startled whenever an atmospheric tremor wrinkled the image's perfection. (The usual power of a spotting scope is 20 to 30.)

Just how good was that view? The white flank patch of a distant Great Cormorant caught my attention. Later, Fred Hamlen determined that the bird was 1.7 miles away. And from the flight profile in Peter Harrison's *Seabirds*, I found that the patch covers about three by four inches. (I probably saw less than that because the bird was not squarely broadside and because the white patch may have been partially covered by black feathers.)

A simple calculation shows that the patch subtended an angle of seven arc seconds or less. Although this resolution is about three times less than the Spacemaster II's theoretical capability, I have no doubt that this scope can reach that level of performance. What amazes me is that the atmosphere can sometimes become so stable along horizontal lines of sight that such tests are possible.

Serendipity truly dogs the birdwatcher -- unexpected species sighted or sometimes just an unexpected sighting.

Leif J. Robinson

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