

FINDING 300 SPECIES IN MASSACHUSETTS IN ONE YEAR

by Herman H. D'Entremont and Dorothy R. Arvidson

"Is it possible for me to see 300 birds in one year?" is a question a novice birder might ask. The answer is, "Yes, but it will take planning and a lot of field work." A new birder who is striving to attain a sizeable year's list -- one that will rival the achievement of the dedicated lister -- is really undertaking a crash course in learning to recognize bird species. The list provides a challenge, a goal, and a motivation to learn in a hurry how to distinguish most of the state's birds, to discover which are the migrants and which the residents, to learn something about weather and its effect on bird movement, and to begin to recognize different habitats. And there are numerous side benefits. Intensive birding is a good way to build friendships with a wide assortment of people, to get to know the experienced and dedicated birders who are out in the field at all seasons, and to get away, inexpensively, to some of the best natural places remaining on the Eastern Seaboard. Birding is often the first step along the road to appreciation of these areas and to understanding the need for preserving them.

The inexperienced birder embarking on a listing year must be equipped with good binoculars, a field guide to eastern birds, and have access to a telescope (helpful for sighting shorebirds, raptors, and seabirds). Find or get a friend who is equipped with one. And learn to hover nearby (yearningly) when you see a scope in the field. Most birders love to share their discoveries. Two items essential for the novice that cost little are available from Massachusetts Audubon Society (MAS). The first is *A Massachusetts Daily Field Card* (cost ten/\$2 postpaid) to carry in a pocket along with pencil and notebook. This card provides a convenient checklist and supplies necessary information about migration dates, nesting, frequency of occurrence, and the correct common names, orders, and families arranged in the standard (A.O.U. Check-list) sequence followed by most field guides. The other is a *Checklist of Massachusetts Birds* (cost: 2/\$1 postpaid) for recording the first sighting of each species throughout the year. One additional item, a *Massachusetts Bird List* by Brad Blodget, state ornithologist, is available through the Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife for \$1.50 (call 366-4479). Published in 1983, this is a complete list of all the birds that have been seen in the state through the year of the Western Reef Heron and also lists vagrants and problematical sightings.

To attain a good year's state list, you must know where to look and when to go. This is the first in a series of articles on where to look for birds of the season and covers the months, December through February. All of the subsequent references are drawn from *Bird Observer*, the traditional source in

Massachusetts for maps, directions, and specifics about where to bird. Although you won't be marking your list until January 1 of the counting year, it is necessary to begin scouting in December to know what is around.

Look for alcids and sea ducks at Andrews Point and Halibut Point on Cape Ann (*Bird Observer* February 1983, volume 11: page 5) and from the sea wall at Scituate (December 1980, 8: 220), at Race Point and Provincetown Harbor (February 1987, 15: 4) or on a ferry ride to Nantucket (October 1976, 4: 131). The last hour into Nantucket can produce great numbers of these species in winter. Birding at Plum Island (June 1985, 13: 116), Newburyport and Salisbury (February 1981, 9: 4) and in the Bridgewater/Lakeville area (February 1984, 12: 5) will provide ducks, raptors, gulls, and owls for your year's list. There are other good owling areas such as Ipswich (December 1979, 7: 208), The Grass Rides in Hamilton (October 1986, 14: 217), Plum Island pines (February 1978, 7: 194), and Lexington (October 1980, 8: 177). A trip to the Quabbin area (December 1983, 11: 297) (October 1987, 15: 220) will produce sightings of raptors, turkeys, owls, ravens, woodpeckers, and winter finches. Orleans and Eastham (October 79, 7: 172) on Cape Cod and the islands of Martha's Vineyard (April 1979, 7: 52) and Nantucket (see above) are places to visit for overwintering species and freshwater ducks in ice-free ponds. For land birds in winter, many species can be found in the Falmouth and Buzzards Bay area (December 1982, 6: 300 and December 1973, 1: 132), whereas inland, you might try the Fobes Hill area (April 1980, 8: 48).

Call the Voice of Audubon regularly (617-259-8805 for eastern Massachusetts birds and 413-569-6926 for western Massachusetts) to find out what species are around, for reports of special birds at feeders, and for rare strays or vagrants. Another useful technique for learning about "rare" birds -- and you will need some of these if you are to reach 300 -- is to associate yourself with a birding club that has regular trips throughout the year. The largest of these is Brookline Bird Club. A schedule of trips can be obtained by sending \$3 to treasurer Dorothy Davis, 115 Plymouth Street, Middleboro, MA 02346. But there is certain to be a bird club in your area. MAS publishes a Natural History Directory that may be useful in locating one. You don't have to be an expert to see 300 species in a year in Massachusetts, but you do have to work at it. Happy birding.

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