

1974 ANHINGA SIGHTING IN MASSACHUSETTS

On May 14, 1974, I was birding off Stackyard Road looking across the Parker River to Plum Island, taking advantage of the superior light conditions. I spotted a large bird beginning to spiral up in the sky much as buteos do on migration. I immediately recognized it as a female Anhinga because of several familiar characteristics. First, it has what I refer to as a Greek cross look; that is, the tail is as long as the neck and head with the wings in the middle of the body. The buffy head and breast contrasted sharply with the black body. Since owning a house in the Florida Keys, I had been birding in the Keys and the Everglades at least twice a year. Needless to say, Anhingas were totally familiar birds to me. That same day I called Dick Forster at Massachusetts Audubon to report a bird that I was aware might be new for the state. I was amazed when Dick questioned the identification and asked if I realized that cormorants soared also. I called Alexander Sprunt, one of Florida's most respected ornithologists, and described my sighting to him. He said that it could be nothing but an Anhinga.

Nancy Claflin, Belmont

**Editor's Note:** Nancy Claflin's sighting was duly reported in *B.O.E.M.*, July-August 1974, 2: 114: "A possible sighting of an *Anhinga* was made on May 14th at Hellcat Swamp, Plum Island, by Nancy Claflin and Mary Baird. Details were received on this bird, but, unfortunately, it will have to go into the records as a hypothetical sighting since it would constitute a first state record and no photograph was obtained."

Richard Forster's statement that the *Anhinga* he observed on May 25, 1987 (*Bird Observer*, October 1987, 15: 263) is the "first documented sighting of the species in Massachusetts" appears to be incorrect.

## EAGLES IN THE NEWS

On January 8, 1988, the Division of Fisheries and Wildlife held its twelfth annual eagle survey. It was a stormy day, with near blizzard conditions by midday. Ground observations were difficult, but project leader Jack Swedberg conducted a helicopter survey of the Quabbin Reservoir. He found 36 Bald Eagles, 24 adults and 12 immatures. Massachusetts began its eagle surveys in 1977, when 13 Bald Eagles were recorded. The state survey has been part of a nationwide program conducted since 1979. Eagle numbers in Massachusetts have fluctuated from a low of 8 eagles in 1979 to a high count of 56 eagles in 1986. In 1987 a total of 43 Bald and 2 Golden eagles was reported. Thirty-five of the Bald Eagles and both Golden Eagles were found at Quabbin. In the current census, 8 Bald Eagles were spotted along the Merrimac River in addition to the 36 birds that were logged at Quabbin.

On January 22, 1988, a young Bald Eagle was turned over by quarantine authorities in New York to Brad Blodget, state ornithologist of Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife, and taken by car to the Wildlife Clinic of the Tufts-New England Veterinary Medical Center in North Grafton. This bird is the famous eagle Iolar found in debilitated condition in a field in Killarney, County Kerry, Ireland, on November 18, 1987, by wildlife ranger Pat O'Connell of the Irish Department of Forests and Wildlife, who nursed the bird back to health on a diet of venison from his freezer. After it was finally identified as an immature Bald Eagle, wildlife officials could only speculate about its origin. Had the eagle flown three thousand miles across the Atlantic from North America or was it an escaped captive bird from some place in Europe? This issue remains unsettled.

On December 22, the Irish Prime Minister Charles Haughey chose Aer Lingus to fly the bird to New York, where its health continued to improve during a thirty-day quarantine. It was then taken to the North Grafton clinic where Doctor Mark Pokras, wildlife veterinarian, tested Iolar to determine the bird's fitness for release.

A few weeks later, on February 17, a large crowd of Irish and American dignitaries, wildlife biologists, and media folk gathered at Quabbin for the eagle's return to the wild. Upon release, the bird flew to a tall pine tree and perched quietly for about fifteen minutes while an apprehensive audience wondered whether it would ever move. At last, to the immense relief of all, the bird took off moving along the tree tops and then "soared and soared and soared." The eagle, estimated to be eight months old, has been equipped with a radio transmitter and can be tracked and studied until the tail feathers molt and the device is lost. By that time, we should know more about the success of this Irish-American rehabilitation effort.

Robert H. Stymeist, Watertown

## MYSTERY SOLVED: DEATH OF BABY WRENS

[Editor's Note: A field note by Barbara Hoglund (*Bird Observer*, August 1987, 15: 186) reported the discovery of nestling wrens, too young to fly, on the ground below a wren nest box. The baby wrens were ignored by the parents and subsequently died. She wondered how the nestlings had gotten out of the nest.]

Barbara Hoglund's account of the mysterious death of baby wrens matches an experience I had with wren nest boxes. I suspect the problem is House Sparrows or starlings that are pulling the young birds out. Wrens are particularly vulnerable to this problem if the nest box is not wide enough from front to back to let them place the cup of the nest sufficiently far back from the entrance hole. Most other cavity-nesting birds place the cup of their nest low in a nest box so that the depth of the box offers protection. But since wrens often stake out several nest sites to use for successive broods during the summer, they always fill each nesting site with twigs right up to the level of the entrance hole to make it unattractive to chickadees and other native cavity-nesters. This helps the wrens to keep control of unguarded nest sites. However, it also makes the nestlings vulnerable to jays, starlings, and House Sparrows if the shape of the box forces the wrens to place the cup of the nest too close to the entrance hole. Even if an intruder is too large to enter the nest box, he may be able to reach in far enough with his beak to grab hold and pull out small nestlings. Even if nestlings that are pulled from the nest are still alive, the adult wrens will not tend them on the ground.

I suspect the culprit in Barbara Hoglund's case is a House Sparrow or starling, not a jay, because jays pull young birds from nests to eat them, not to try to take over the nest site. The solution is to replace the current nest box with one that enables the wrens to position the cup of the nest well back from the entrance hole. I did that eight years ago and never had the problem again.

Richard F. Graefe, North Kingstown, RI

## A SLEEPING CHICKADEE

On a cool afternoon in the fall, I was visiting Crooked Pond, Boxford, in search of a Barred Owl or Northern Goshawk. The path was rather silent except for distant aerial Golden-crowned Kinglets. Suddenly a small, familiarly patterned, black-and-white form flitted left to right across the road and disappeared just above eye level under a little spruce frond beside the path, not twenty feet away. It was a Black-capped Chickadee, and I pished at it gently as I approached softly. The bird was totally immobile, instantly frozen in his shaded spot. I came closer, gave a buzzy "dzeee-zee" -- no reaction. At three feet, I hissed a little; the bird ignored me totally. In the fading light, I could not tell whether his eyes were shut. I looked about me to see whether some nearby raptor had put the little fellow into this catatonic state but saw none. Nor was there evidence of other chickadees. Not wanting to bother the bird further, I made my rounds of the place and had another look some forty-five minutes later in deep dusk. The bird was in the same spot, evidently asleep. A mild screech-owl imitation had no effect. I asked myself whether birds are able to fall asleep in a matter of five seconds.

Have other observers had occasion to watch a passerine go to sleep?

Fred Bouchard, Dorchester

**Editor's Note:** When starlings fly into a roost tree at dusk, there is a period of much flying about accompanied by a great din until each bird finds a roost. Then, as if a switch is flipped, the conversation ceases in a moment. This abrupt silence was also observed when watching Jamaican Euphonias coming into a roost. One envisions several hundred sleepyheads nodding off at once.

After consulting J. C. Welty's *The Life of Birds* (Knopf, 1963, pp. 125-130), I think this abrupt quietude may be an adaptative reflex of small birds to conserve energy during the cool of the night. The smaller the bird, the greater the fluctuation in body temperature during a twenty-four-hour period. The House Wren has a variation of eight degrees C., the robin six degrees, and the domestic duck only one degree. In the cool dusk, as soon as a small bird ceases physical activity, its body temperature rapidly falls, and metabolism slows, producing somnolence as a reflex. This results in an adaptive lowering of energy requirements. A small bird alone like Fred's chickadee in the field note above would drop off at once. Communally roosting birds like the starlings can maintain body temperatures longer before sleep because of the heat produced by crowding. Hence there is a brief period of activity and chatter, but the same principle applies, and they fall abruptly silent.

D.R.A.

## CRABBING HERON

At dawn one day in late summer I was driving by a salt water creek and saw there the lone silhouette of a heron. I stopped and scoped and found myself looking at an adult Yellow-crowned Night Heron (*Nycticorax violaceus*). Other than an occasional Greater Yellowlegs quickly passing by, the view in my scope remained motionless. There was no breeze, and for fifteen minutes the bird was frozen in position, upright and surprisingly long necked. Once every few minutes a drop of water dripped from the tip of its stout bill. Its head turned slowly right, craned out a bit, and after three quick steps, the heron plucked a green crab the size of a walnut from the shallow pool. It shook it many times never seeming hurried, and several of the crab's legs were broken off. The heron dropped its prey once, casually picked it up, and continued maneuvering it. The legs of the crab that were missing were all on the same side of the shell. When it swallowed this morsel, the heron adjusted it so that the legless side went down first. I thought -- could this have been done intentionally to allow easy passage or was it haphazard? I continued watching the bird, its neck feathers protruding out where the crab bulged in its throat. One upward stretch and the plumage of the neck was again smooth. The heron remained still but only for a moment. It quickly strode out of the water onto the mud bank where it turned to face the creek, then readjusted its posture to a more night-heronlike crouch. It stood among the old pilings and periwinkles, bold orange eyes staring with a level gaze across the stream and marsh. Again the bird was still, an occasional drop of water falling from the tip of its bill.

Robert Abrams, Milton

## CORRIGENDUM

**CORRIGENDUM** to "Birding Duxbury Beach" by Mark J. Kasprzyk in *Bird Observer*, December 1987. The **Acknowledgments** paragraph on page 281 should read

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