

300 SPECIES IN MASSACHUSETTS IN ONE YEAR: MAY AND JUNE

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MAY. In May both the birds and the birders are in a hurry. The May migration is very brief. Birds are propelled quickly north by instinct and do not dally long en route. Ahead of them are survival activities (territorial competition, mate selection and nesting, incubation and development of the young) that must be carried out within the brief span of the warm season when food is plentiful. For tundra-nesting birds heading for the far north, these activities must be compressed to meet the transitory abundance of insects, chiefly mosquitoes, which will provide the primary food for young birds.

To catch a glimpse of migrating birds, birders (especially any who aspire to a year list of three hundred) must bird early and often and move quickly when word is received of a rarity or a species that is "needed" for the list. Nonbirding spouses and friends of birders afflicted with this Maytime mania must of necessity become very indulgent. This frenetic activity often arouses the curiosity of the uninitiated passerby who innocently inquires, "What are you looking at?" The ecstatic birder, who has just seen and heard a male Blackburnian, enthusiastically attempts to share his find with the interested bystander. The latter, who very likely hears nothing and sees nothing through the proffered binoculars, politely mumbles and soon withdraws, concluding that an entire group of citizens is in the grip of a shared fantasy. And such is the mental instability of birders in May that this conclusion is occasionally true.

A discussion of migration is beyond the scope of this paper, but an understanding of factors involved in this phenomenon is helpful to the birder in planning his strategy. An excellent summary can be found in *The Birdwatcher's Companion* by Chris Leahy (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982). Suffice it to say here that most warblers migrate at night, feed during the day, and sing best for an hour or two at dawn. In May, warm southwest winds will bring them northward to New England, where they remain only a day or two, and inclement weather will hold them in place, albeit briefly. Migration is not a steady flow of birds but usually occurs in waves, the first wave occurring around the tenth of May.

Where to bird in May. When a substantial wave of landbirds occurs, almost any area with trees and shrubbery is a good place for birdwatching, and the probability of finding a Nashville Warbler or Rose-breasted Grosbeak in your own yard is pretty high. Traditional sites in Massachusetts that attract birders in spring are the thickets at Plum Island, coastal migrant trips such as Nahant Thicket and Marblehead Neck wildlife sanctuaries, the cemetery at Newbury, the Glades in Scituate, the beech forest in Provincetown at the tip of

Cape Cod, Gate 40 at Quabbin, and, most famous of all -- Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge, which attracts the landbirds, from cuckoos to finches, like a magnet. To migrant birds, this expanse of greenery close to the Charles River and containing several bodies of water must appear a lush haven in the midst of the concrete and asphalt of the urban megalopolis. There are daily walks in May, and with so many birders about, there is a steady flow of information about what birds are present. A rarity can scarcely escape notice.

However, once the trees are in leaf, Mount Auburn and other inland sites can be frustrating places for birdwatching. One can search in vain for a glimpse of the Tennessee Warbler loudly singing in the dense foliage overhead. Then, coastal areas offer several advantages to birders. The cool ocean air delays the development of foliage, the trees and shrubbery are less abundant and lower, and the birds are concentrated in smaller thickets. Thus, the migrants are easier to see. Finally, the birder is nearer to the shore and can check the mudflats for shorebirds and the marshes for herons.

Remember as you rush about in May to see as many birds as you possibly can that over 200 (212-214) bird species nest in the Commonwealth and thus may be found in the month of June and throughout the summer. Consulting the *Massachusetts Daily Field Card*, published by Massachusetts Audubon Society (MAS), will inform you of which species are state breeding birds and will be here through the summer. This card also has information about how long any given migrant species will be passing through the Commonwealth.

Although most of the migrants will be quickly checked off the year list, there are some that require more effort to find for several reasons. These include the Yellow-billed and Black-billed cuckoos; barn-owl; Whip-poor-will; hummingbird; Acadian and Yellow-bellied flycatchers; Philadelphia Vireo; Golden-winged, Orange-crowned, Cape May, Yellow-throated, Bay-breasted, Prothonotary, Kentucky, Connecticut, and Wilson's warblers; Yellow-breasted Chat; Blue Grosbeak; Henslow's, Seaside, Lincoln's, and White-crowned sparrows; and Orchard Oriole.

The spring shorebird and heron migration barely gets a nod, but May is the month to watch for several less common of these birds: Least Bittern (Plum Island -- they nest near the dike at Hellcat) Yellow-crowned Night-Heron (on Plum I. and Hemenway Road in Eastham), Clapper Rail, displaying Willets (Morris Island, Chatham), Upland Sandpipers (Newburyport airport), Whimbrel, White-rumped Sandpiper, Ruff (Newburyport), Wilson's and Red-necked phalaropes (Plum I.), Caspian and Black terns, and Black Skimmer (coastal sites and coastal islands).

Pelagic bird trips are offered by the Brookline Bird Club and MAS, and whale-watching trips by MAS, the New England Aquarium and other organizations. In May or June these trips should yield Sooty, Greater, and Manx

shearwaters, Pomarine and Parasitic jaegers, and Leach's and Wilson's storm-petrels.

JUNE. Early June marks the end of the spring migration, but there is often a good movement of warblers, mostly females, at this time, and the peak of the Mourning Warbler migration occurs now. Late migrating flycatchers (Olive-sided, Eastern Wood-Pewee, Yellow-bellied, Acadian, Alder, and Willow) are readily found in appropriate habitats once you learn their calls. The best locations for seeing migrants is again along the coast. The shorebirds of June tend to be the common ones like Black-bellied Plover and Semipalmated Sandpiper, but Wilson's Plover may appear at the end of May, and the two rarities, Little Stint and Rufous-necked Stint, have both appeared in June.

Some of the loveliest wild places in the Commonwealth offer the best birding in June and a chance to see and hear many nesting birds (species you may have missed in April and May) in their finest plumage and fullest voice.

Where to bird in June. Go to coastal sites for herons -- Least Bitterns, Snowy Egrets, Tricolored and Little Blue herons, and Glossy Ibis. The islands off Cape Cod have American Oystercatchers, Willets, four species of terns, and possibly Black Skimmer. Occasionally, a vagrant Curlew Sandpiper will show up. Perhaps Chuck-will's-widow will appear on Martha's Vineyard. A walk in Gate 40 at Quabbin will provide a bounty of species. The summit of Mount Greylock is the breeding ground for Canadian Zone species as well as a place to hunt for the elusive Yellow-bellied Flycatcher. Hummingbirds nest in the Berkshire foothills. The Connecticut River Valley has several nesting locations for Acadian Flycatcher. Sedge Wren and possibly Henslow's and Lincoln's sparrows may be found at the Savoy State Forest in northern Berkshire County. The Westport/Dartmouth area has White-eyed Vireo and Carolina Wren along River Road, the Demarest Lloyd State Park has nesting Grasshopper Sparrows, and there are Blue-winged and Golden-winged warblers in the dry fields. Orchard Orioles may be found at Hears Pond in Wayland and on Pike's Bridge Road in West Newbury.

During June for obvious reasons nesting birds become secretive and reclusive. It behooves the birdwatcher to respect the birds' privacy and move unobtrusively when on or near any nesting grounds. As Andrew Williams aptly put it in a letter about how to insure the possible recovery of the vanishing Eskimo Curlew (see article in this issue): "The fewer people with the idea of seeing the birds on the breeding grounds the better....Let the CWS [Canadian Wildlife Service] manage it,...[in order to] keep the hordes of birders out of the birds' bedroom."