

300 SPECIES IN MASSACHUSETTS IN ONE YEAR: JULY AND AUGUST

by Herman D'Entremont and Dorothy R. Arvidson

To the innocent bystander, it seems as though spring is the big birding season, but this is not true. And happily for the birder intent on a long year-list, in the period from the Fourth of July through September, it should be possible to check off 90 percent of the 350-plus birds listed on the Massachusetts Daily Field Card. The chief problem for beginners and for those still dependent on a field guide is to recognize them. As the summer wears on, more and more birds will appear in nondescript plumage. No longer sporting their breeding finery, adult birds are molting into basic plumage, which may be slightly, but often is vastly, different. Further confusion results from the presence of numbers of immature birds. All in all, this is a good time to seek the company of experienced birders, to look beyond the pictures in your field guide, and to read the text carefully.

The first shorebird migrants arrive in the state on their southward trek from the tundra breeding grounds about the Fourth of July. Short-billed Dowitchers, Lesser Yellowlegs, and Least Sandpipers arrive in substantial flocks with smaller numbers of Hudsonian Godwits and Stilt Sandpipers. Late July will bring large flocks of Semipalmated and Black-bellied plovers, Ruddy Turnstones, Whimbrels, Greater Yellowlegs, Red Knots, Semipalmated Sandpipers and Sanderlings. These July migrants are adults, often still in bright breeding plumage, and the peak of migrating adult shorebirds, in numbers not in species, is reached in early August. Shorebirds produce precocial young that are soon independent. Hence, the early departure of the adults from the arctic removes them from competing for food with their offspring and insures an abundant food supply for the growing young. Willets, American Oystercatchers, Wilson's Phalaropes, and Upland Sandpiper nest in Massachusetts, and one may find both adults and immatures together.

By mid-August, the arriving shorebird migrants are chiefly immatures or adults in winter plumage, creating a real challenge for beginners as well as for seasoned birders. Small numbers of western arctic breeders such as Long-billed Dowitchers and Western Sandpipers always appear, along with the less common Baird's and Buff-breasted sandpipers, Marbled Godwits, and Lesser Golden-Plovers late in August. The last four are often called "grasspipers" denoting their preference for feeding in recently mowed grasses or on dry, grassy flats. Even greater rarities may appear -- American Avocet, Ruff, Little and Rufous-necked stints, Spotted Redshank.

Rarities are exciting, but the ordinary shorebirds offer memorable spectacles -- the precise wheeling flight of any group of shorebirds, the

unbelievable concentrations of Semipalmated Sandpipers at Plum Island (try estimating their numbers), the varying plumage of Sanderlings at Scituate -- apparently no two alike, and Whimbrels streaming over Chatham by the hundreds as they fly to the evening roost on Monomoy. The greatest variety of shorebird species will be seen in early September.

Any tidal flat will attract shorebirds, but estuaries with extensive mud flats are the best places for large concentrations. The greatest variety will be found at Newburyport-Plum Island, Plymouth Beach, and Monomoy Island, but also very good is the shoreline at Lynn and Revere, Squantum, Scituate, Duxbury, South Dartmouth, and on the Cape -- Barnstable, First Encounter Beach in Eastham, Nauset Beach, and Provincetown. There are a number of good inland spots -- the edges of reservoirs and the shores and flats along the Connecticut River, for example. An ideal and very accessible spot for leisurely shorebird study, especially during an early morning high tide with the sun behind you, is the shorebird pool along the main road at Plum Island, where a great variety of shorebirds gather to rest after feeding on the extensive flats exposed in Newburyport Harbor during low tide.

Hérons become increasingly abundant in coastal marshes during the warm months, along with the young that have fledged in July, and one of the most spectacular sights of summer is the great stream of herons flying into a communal roost at dusk. There are such large roosts at Plum Island, on the Boston Harbor islands, and on Monomoy. The most numerous coastal heron is the Snowy Egret, but there are occasional sightings of Glossy Ibises, Tricolored Herons, and Little Blues. The young Snowys can be easily mistaken for immature Little Blues. Great Egrets are scattered but more often observed in the Westport-Dartmouth area. The Green-backed Heron is a common summer bird, as is the Black-crowned Night-Heron. There is a traditional night-heron roost by the dam on the Charles River at Watertown Square, and the roost at Hemenway Landing below Fort Hill in Eastham regularly has a few Yellow-crowned Night-Hérons in it. (Better learn to distinguish the immatures of these two species.) Great Blue Herons have several inland nesting areas in the state and are hard to miss. Cattle Egrets always accumulate in summer at Appleton farm on Route 1A two miles south of Ipswich center.

To "wipe out" the Ciconiiformes in Massachusetts, there are only two herons that you will have to work to find. Least Bitterns are sometimes present at Great Meadows or nest in the marsh at Hellcat Swamp on Plum Island. But often long hours of waiting on the dike at either place are necessary before the bird and occasionally the youngsters show themselves. American Bitterns are also present in both places, but not often seen. The best time to find them is when a very high tide at Plum Island brings them up close to the road.

Once their young have fledged, terns move away from the offshore islands where they nested. Postbreeding concentrations of Common and Roseate Terns should be studied for occasional wanderers from more southerly breeding areas, such as Black Skimmers or Royal, Sandwich, Forster's and Black terns. If Caspian Terns are around, the Voice of Audubon or the BBC hotline will surely carry the news.

Summertime pelagic trips to Stellwagen Bank from Newburyport, Gloucester, Boston, Plymouth and Provincetown will yield a number of birds for your list as well as exciting whale-viewing. Greater and Sooty shearwaters and Wilson's Storm-Petrels are usually found on these trips, whereas less frequently seen are Manx and Cory's shearwaters, Red-necked Phalarope, Parasitic and Pomarine jaegers (rarely a Long-tailed), Black-legged Kittiwakes, and Sabine's Gulls. The immature of the kittiwake is occasionally miscalled a Sabine's by the unwary. Longer trips to Hydrographer's Canyon will sometimes produce additional rarities: Audubon's Shearwater, White-faced, Band-rumped, and Leach's Storm-Petrels, or possibly a tropicbird.

Although chiefly shorebirds occupy birders in July and August, in mid-August each passing cold front with northwesterly winds brings numbers of landbirds to the coastal thickets as well as to inland areas. A general rule is the last to arrive in spring are the first birds back in the fall. Thus, insect-eating flycatchers arrive in late August. The look-alike *Empidonaces* are very hard to identify in the absence of song. Of them, only the Yellow-bellied Flycatcher can be recognized with some confidence. But this is the time to add Olive-sided Flycatcher to your list, and every dead snag should be checked for this bird. Coastal landbird traps such as Plum Island thickets, Eastern Point in Gloucester, Nahant Thicket and Marblehead Neck, the Glades in North Scituate, and outer Cape Cod are the places to visit.

These same areas will also hold a good variety of migrating warblers. A scarce species that is regularly seen in the fall is the Philadelphia Vireo. Bay-breasted, Tennessee, and Cape May are numerous, and Magnolia, Blue-winged, Canada, and Prairie warblers are usually present as are American Redstarts, Ovenbirds, and Northern Waterthrushes. The rarer southern warblers such as Prothonotary, Hooded, Yellow-throated, and Kentucky warblers may also be found in August. The Connecticut and Orange-crowned warblers are later arrivals to be looked for in September.

Listers should be aware that several other very rare landbird species can also be encountered in late August. These include Loggerhead Shrike, Lark Sparrow, Dickcissel, and Yellow-headed Blackbird -- all well worth spending some time in the field.