

300 SPECIES IN MASSACHUSETTS IN ONE YEAR: FALL TO WINTER

by Herman D'Entremont and Dorothy R. Arvidson

The fall season is wonderful for birding. Birds are not in such a hurry as they were in the spring and will linger to fatten up. The pace is leisurely: fall migration lasts for several months. Immature birds, numerous in the fall flights, often go astray and wander outside their species' usual range, thus providing the happy birder with regional rarities. There are great northeast storms in this season that blow flights of seldom-seen pelagic birds in close to shore. And when the warm southwesterly winds of Indian Summer occur, they often result in reverse migration, bringing back migrants that have already gone by. Finally, the drab and confusing fall plumage of many birds, a feature often bemoaned by birders, provides a challenge that can only result in sharper identification skills.

September is for hawkwatching. The first clear days and cool winds from a westerly quarter mark the beginning of hawk movement southward and the fall "migration" of birders toward higher ground, where more of the sky can be seen. No longer is the birder's attention focused solely on the thickets or the shoreline.

The simplest way for the beginner as well as for the lister to insure that no raptors will be missing from the year's list is to volunteer in September and October for the weekend hawkwatches arranged by the Eastern Massachusetts Hawk Watch Association. The best locations for viewing hawks are Goat's Peak Tower atop Mt. Tom in Easthampton (the tower is small and can get pretty crowded on weekends) and the summit parking lot at Wachusett Mountain in Princeton, which accommodates more people and is only an hour's drive west of Boston. According to Leif Robinson (*Bird Observer*, June 1987, page 125), "In any year there should be two days between September 9 and 19 yielding 2000 or more Broad-winged Hawks....At least one superb flight day can be virtually guaranteed annually to anyone who sits atop that hill for a few days in mid-September."

Any hawkwatcher who likes a good steep mountain hike should choose Mt. Watatic (1832 ft) in Ashburnham. The only way to get to the hawkwatch site at the top is on foot. Another good spot is Plum Island, where a short comfortable jaunt from parking lot #4 toward the ocean (via boardwalk with minimal climbing) leads to an observation deck atop a dune. Round Top Conservation Area at Athol, Quabbin Tower atop Quabbin Hill, Blueberry Hill in West Granville, Fobes Hill in Windsor, Mt. Greylock and Mt. Williams (near Adams), and Mt. Everett State Reservation near Egremont are all fine observation posts where, if you're lucky, you will see lots of hawks. On September 13, 1983, a

total of 19,912 Broad-winged Hawks were counted over Massachusetts. Great sport!

In early September, when great kettles of Broadwings and Sharp-shins circle upward on a good rising draft or thermal, the numbers are impressive. Later in the fall, the numbers decline but there is greater variety, and the larger and less common hawks can be seen: Cooper's Hawks and Northern Goshawks, Red-tailed and Red-shouldered hawks, Golden and Bald eagles, Peregrine Falcons and Merlins, Rough-legged Hawks, Northern Harriers, and even, albeit rarely, perhaps a Gyrfalcon.

Departure of the shorebirds. September and even October offer a good variety of shorebirds but fewer numbers at staging areas, with an occasional spectacular visitor. In September of 1987, it was the Cox's. Most eagerly watched for in the fall are Golden Plovers, Baird's, Buff-breasted, and Western sandpipers, and a Marbled Godwit. (Fall of 1988 brought in a Bar-tailed!)

Landbird migration. When birders' eyes grow tired of watching distant specks moving in the sky or on the shore, their attention and binoculars are trained once again upon the low bushes. In September and October, the coastal thickets will provide the best landbirding. Fall migrants also occur inland in low shrubbery, but the birds are not as concentrated as they are along the coast and are harder to find. Unusual species to watch for are Philadelphia Vireo, Connecticut and Orange-crowned warblers, Yellow-breasted Chat, and a western stray -- the Black-throated Gray Warbler. (Three of this species appeared in New England in the fall of 1987.) Unusual flycatcher species that can be found in the fall include the Yellow-bellied and Olive-sided flycatchers. Western vagrants such as Western Kingbird, Fork-tailed, Scissor-tailed, and Ash-throated flycatchers, Say's Phoebe, Dickcissel, Blue Grosbeak, and Yellow-headed Blackbird may put in an appearance. Reliable birding areas to visit in the fall include Plum Island, Eastern Point in Gloucester, Marblehead Neck, Nahant Thicket, the Glades in North Scituate, Chatham, Monomoy, and Provincetown on Cape Cod, and the islands of Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard.

October is the month for sparrows, which fortunately for birdwatchers can be found on the coast or inland, anywhere in the proper habitat. Weedy fields, field edges, and community gardens are the places to look. Most of the common sparrows are easily found, but coastal locations seem to be the best for unusual species like Vesper, White-crowned, and Lincoln's sparrow and for vagrants like Blue Grosbeaks, Lark Buntings, Lark Sparrows, LeConte's Sparrows, and Dickcissels.

November is waterbird month. Inland ponds and lakes after storms with heavy rains provide a variety of species -- Common Loon, Ring-necked Duck, scaup, Goldeneye, Bufflehead, Ruddy Duck, and Hooded and Common

mergansers. The best duck ponds in eastern Massachusetts are the Lakeville ponds but others to watch are Great Pond in Braintree, Horn Pond in Woburn, Fresh Pond in Cambridge, Cambridge Reservoir on the Lincoln/Waltham boundary, Billington Sea in Plymouth, and Lake Nagog in Littleton. Worcester County has Wachusett Reservoir and Quabaug Lake in Brookfield. And birders that live in the Connecticut River Valley frequent Congamond Lake in Southwick and Hampton Ponds in Westfield.

Fall coastal storms sweep pelagic birds in close to shore. Leach's Storm-Petrels, shearwaters, Northern Fulmar, jaegers, kittiwakes, phalaropes, and alcids, especially Dovekies and Razorbills, as well as the usual scoters, loons, gannets, goldeneyes, common eiders, oldsquaws, mergansers, gulls, and kittiwakes are brought within viewing distance of birders on land. The best vantage points for experiencing these storms are at Plum Island and Rockport (Andrews Point and Halibut Point) on the north shore, Manomet Point and Plymouth Beach on the south shore, and on Cape Cod, Sandy Neck in Barnstable, First Encounter Beach at Eastham, and Race Point at Provincetown. If northeast storms are diminishing in frequency (as many oldtimers insist), the number of pelagic boat trips has increased, thanks to efforts to monitor endangered whale species. If you don't see the birds from land, you will have to sign up for one of these many fall sea trips.

Birds of winter. In November, landbird watching is scanty. Tree Sparrows arrive for the winter, and flocks of Snow Buntings show up on coastal beaches. Fox Sparrows continue to migrate through the first half of November. If it is to be a good winter for irruptive finches, the first individuals arrive in November. But the appearance of Evening and Pine grosbeaks, redpolls, siskins, and crossbills is even less predictable than the uncertain pattern of occurrence of the Snowy Owl, Rough-legged Hawk, and Northern Shrike.

Birders do not give up their avocation during the winter. There are feeder birds to watch with the possibility of a Pine Warbler at the suet (unusual but increasing in frequency), or a Varied Thrush, a regular vagrant, or occasionally, a real rarity like a Golden-crowned Sparrow. Short-eared Owls may be found huddled quietly in the lea of a grass clump or a low pine at Salisbury, and other owls are present in the Grass Rides at Hamilton. There are great rafts of scaup and Common Eider in the outer reaches of Boston Harbor and King Eider, Harlequins, and Barrow's Goldeneye to search for. A few Bald eagles disport along the Merrimack River and feed on deer carcass at Quabbin. There are white-winged gulls and Black Guillemots at Cape Ann. Prayers for Gyrfalcon, Ivory Gull, Northern Hawk-Owl, Boreal Owl, and Bohemian Waxwing are routinely offered. And finally, the challenge and excitement of the Christmas Count, which always turns up a rarity or two, carries birders along over the hump into a new birdwatching year.

Hawkwatching Information

To obtain an information packet on hawkwatching that includes a six-page silhouette guide to the hawks of the northeast, a copy of *The Beginner's Guide to Hawkwatching*, information on where and when to watch hawks in Massachusetts, and a complete report on the Fall 1987 hawk migration in eastern Massachusetts, send a check for \$4 (made out to EMHW) to Eastern Massachusetts Hawk Watch (EMHW), 254 Arlington Street, Medford, MA 02155.

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This chaffinch was seen and photographed in Windsor, Massachusetts on March 26-27, 1988.

Photo by Jim Rockoch.