

NEW ENGLAND REDISCOVERED THROUGH THE EYES OF A BIRDER

by Alden G. Clayton

Bird Finding in New England by Richard K. Walton. 1988. Maps by Adelaide Walton, illustrations by Barry Van Dusen. Boston: David R. Godine. 328 pages. \$14.95 softcover.

For many natural events and American cultural traditions, New England is a classic example of the familiar adage, "The whole is greater than the sum of its parts." When we complain (or Mark Twain jokes) about changeable weather, it is always labeled "New England" weather. Whether the subject is fall foliage, regional speech accents, American literature, or a whole range of human traits the two words "New England" evoke an image that is distinctive of the entire region. Surprisingly, field birding has not developed a regional quality. How do we account for the absence of an *all-New England* birding tradition, particularly within such a compact, albeit varied, geographical area?

Perhaps a clue can be found in American history. New England's individual states have a historical record of independent action with respect to each other and to national control. During colonial times territorial and boundary disputes were frequent. State conflicts flared even when under arms against a common foe. Washington's Continental Army was no more than an aggregation of individual states, each of which recruited and supplied its own line regiments. Vermont's Green Mountain Boys were simply a group of self-organized militiamen who fought only when they chose to (as in the defeat of General Burgoyne's British army). Independence of action was a particular privilege of New England seamen. Massachusetts fitted out its own navy in 1775. All the seaboard states and many seaside towns organized ships and crews for access to the enormous profits to be gleaned from privateering. (The Continental Congress issued 626 letters of marque to Massachusetts vessels alone.) When it came time to write a constitution for the victorious colonies in 1778, Rhode Island refused to send a delegate to the Constitutional Convention and agreed to ratify the new constitution only when the Senate passed a bill ending all commerce with Rhode Island.

Interestingly, this independence of action has characterized birding organizations and field birding activities in the six New England states up to the present time. In contrast to the rest of the nation, Maine, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Rhode Island have their own independent statewide Audubon societies rather than local chapters of National Audubon. In the birding literature only Edward Howe Forbush's classic *Birds of Massachusetts and Other New England States* transcends state boundaries. Perhaps it is not surprising then that many New England birders become so

absorbed in their own state birds, whether breeding bird atlases, year lists, or life birds, that they show little interest--except for rare accidentals--in the birds and birding habitats of neighboring states.

On the other hand, it may simply be that no one has identified and put together the parts that sum up to a greater New England whole. Dick Walton has now done so in his new book, *Finding Birds in New England*. It is an all-New England guide written with literary style, skillfully weaving together observations on geology, botany, local legends, and historical events, in addition to basic information about birds and their habitats.

In his descriptions of twenty-nine individual sites, Walton has sampled New England's richly varied habitats--its offshore islands, coastal salt marshes, and tidal flats, its river valleys, ponds, and lakes, deciduous and boreal forests, upland meadows, and mountains. His north-to-south journey starts at the most easterly point of the United States, Quoddy Head State Park. A side trip is included to Campobello Island, the only site not actually in New England but just across the New Brunswick border and of historical interest as the summer home of Franklin Roosevelt. Walton's birding trail takes us from there to Baxter State Park, Mount Desert Island, Monhegan Island, Biddeford Pool, and Scarborough Marsh in Maine; the Connecticut Lakes, the Pinkham Notch area of the White Mountains, Squam Lake, and Mount Monadnock in New Hampshire; on to Island Pond in Vermont's "Northeast Kingdom," Dead Creek Wildlife Management Area and Lake Champlain, Mount Mansfield, and the southern Green Mountains; through Massachusetts with stops at Newburyport/Plum Island and Salisbury, Marblehead Neck Wildlife Sanctuary, the Sudbury River Valley, and a variety of important sites on Cape Ann and Cape Cod. Rhode Island sites are Swan Point Cemetery in Providence, Point Judith, Quonochontaug, and Watch Hill along the south shore, and Block Island. Connecticut birding is represented by the woods and meadows of the White Memorial Foundation in the northwest corner of the state with Milford Point, Lighthouse Point Park, and Hammonasset Beach State Park on Long Island Sound.

Each site description includes a list (by season) of noteworthy species that may be found and a description of the habitat in which they are normally seen. Road directions are clear and concise. Site maps, prepared by Adelaide Walton, are particularly easy to read and understand, nicely avoiding the "too much" or "too little" syndrome that plagues many maps. Excellent black-and-white drawings by Barry Van Dusen are interspersed throughout the text. Each one portrays a single species in its typical habitat. Lodgings and restaurants of some particular local interest are noted. For birders seeking more information about individual states and additional sites, appropriate references are furnished.

Part Two of *Finding Birds in New England* is devoted to hawks and seabirds. The first chapter (on hawkwatching) covers site information for each of the New England states, along with expectations for hawk flights by season. The pleasures and rewards of pelagic birding on New England's ocean waters are described by Wayne Petersen in the second chapter. He discusses oceanographic causes for the diversity of species that may be seen, recounts species most probable or possible through the four seasons of the year, provides useful information on where to go for pelagic trips, and gives seagoing birders a number of helpful tips. This pelagic chapter should be of particular value for birders from outside the New England area.

A final section, Part Three, is an annotated checklist of sixty-five species that are, in Walton's words, "of special note in New England...primarily because the northeast is the best locale in which to find them [or]...simply because they represent typically, but not exclusively, New England phenomena..." Appendix material includes a listing of state organizations, rare bird alerts, floral and faunal references, and an exceptionally complete bibliography.

The sum of all the parts of this book is itself a remarkable whole. A naturalist with a bent for history, Walton gracefully blends visible present with historical past, as he did in his fine book, *Birds of the Sudbury River Valley*. In effect, the author offers his readers site descriptions that are a series of essays on the joys of birding. This is a book with broad appeal, a pleasure for leisurely reading as well as a source of specific information. It is highly recommended to birding enthusiasts of all skills wherever they may live.

ALDEN G. CLAYTON was born a New Englander, has lived equally in Rhode Island, Connecticut, and Massachusetts, vacationed in Vermont, New Hampshire, and Maine, and spent three years at sea in World War II aboard a U. S. Navy destroyer that was built in New England. Since retiring in 1986 from the presidency of the Marketing Science Institute in Cambridge, he has had more time to seek out and photograph birds in some of the world's remote places. These have included Lake Baikal and the Siberian taiga forest, the Gobi Desert and Altai mountains of Mongolia, and the ice floe edge in Baffin Bay, four hundred miles from the Arctic Circle. A lifelong interest in history traces back to a college major in that field. Alden enjoys books like Samuel Eliot Morison's *Maritime History of Massachusetts, 1783-1860*--"a classic of good reading."