

ASH-THROATED FLYCATCHER: FIRST FOR THE VINEYARD

by George Daniels

Editor's Note: The following letter to the editor is dated November 14, 1989, and is quoted (with modest editing) to demonstrate another excellent format for reporting a rarity. Just be sure to include, as this letter does, all the pertinent facts. According to Richard Forster, the record reported here is more likely the seventh, not the third, sighting for the state. But there's no question that it's a first for the Vineyard.

D.R.A.

"Though I have been reading your esteemed publication for several years, I have not attempted to contribute until now. Don't ask me why; a combination of being at once too busy and too lazy may be as good a reason as any. At any rate, we've just had a first for the Vineyard (wasn't it Dick Forster who penned the line, "the oft-blessed Vineyard?") and, I understand, only the third record for Massachusetts. The bird was Ash-throated Flycatcher. And the circumstances bring tears to the eyes of Vern Laux and the rest of the island birding community. It happened like this.

"On Sunday morning, November 5, I was birding with Allan Keith and his wife Winkie and daughter Lucy. The Keiths were making a quick weekend of it from New Jersey, and we were grabbing a couple of early morning hours around Gay Head. The day was fine; the winds had been light from the north the night before, and we had hopes. The area around the lighthouse was surprisingly slow, so at 7:45 A.M. we made our way to the Gay Head dump, which can be very interesting. But it was quiet also, with only a few White-throats, Song Sparrows, goldfinches, chickadees, cardinals, and such filtering through the brush and oaks along the western edge of the dump. We were chuckling over a gang of waxwings working hard to get plastered on grapes, when we noticed an odd-looking bird high in an oak about fifty yards away.

"I say odd-looking because all we could see of it at first was the side and back, facing away right. And that part was grayish-brown with a highly noticeable reddish streak, or rectangle, in the general area of the inner primaries. You may hoot if I say that we had our suspicions, but we did.

"Then the bird flew back left and down towards us, at which point we lost it behind the near shrubbery. We were spishing—as in prayer. And bingo! In it zipped, smack in front of us, into some grape at a range of no more than ten yards—regarding us coolly with a beady black eye.

"Ash-throated Fly (*Myiarchus cinerascens*). Every feather. A little smaller than Great Crested—big, bushy, darkish gray head with a relatively small black bill. The throat and breast were palest, whitish gray and blended smoothly into a very light, but distinctly yellow belly. Allan Keith pronounced it "a bright one." And so it was. Yet there was none of the strong yellow of a crested. And none of

the contrasting dark gray throat and breast that distinguishes crested. The tail was rufous, but we did not dwell on it. In fact, we did not dwell on much of anything. Lucy Keith eased forward and took a couple of pictures (in black-and-white, which was what she had in her camera) while the bird posed elegantly, after which we raced for the phone.

"Sadly, the bird did not tarry. Vern arrived within twenty minutes and beat the bushes, but to no avail.

"Could it have been something else? Not in our view. Not Great Crested—for size, bill, back and the above-mentioned characteristics. Not Brown-crested on bill and size alone, never mind that there's no sure eastern record that I'm aware of. (Wasn't it Griscom who observed, "Birds have wings and sometimes they use them?") Certainly not Western Kingbird for numerous reasons, including shape, bill, wing bars, tail, flight, and perch. We agreed that the bird was not Dusky-capped (Olivaceous) Fly. Size, bill, wing bars, throat/chest/belly definition, etc. Not to mention range.

"The light was perfect—sun at our backs. The glasses were Zeiss 10x40Bs. The record, as we all know, is not off-the-wall. The bird is in fact to be looked for at this time of year. Ash-throated Fly is an enthusiastic fall wanderer, having been recorded from most eastern seaboard states. Vern has a Cape Cod record, and I was among the m.o.b. that viewed one on the Cape Charles, Virginia, Christmas Count some years back.

"But it's nice enough and adds luster to the Vineyard's already gleaming reputation as a flycatcher catcher. You will remember that last fall we had a Gray Kingbird at Squibnocket and this spring hosted a Scissor-tailed Flycatcher at Chappaquiddick. The Scissor-tail was our third or fourth record. The island also has logged two Fork-tails and that stunning Sulphur-bellied/Streaked at Squibby perhaps five years ago. Western Kingbird is a regular; last year Vern and I had three in one day, with two in the glasses at once.

"Both Allan Keith and I are familiar with Ash-throated from many trips west. You undoubtedly know Keith's credentials: President of the American Birding Association, winner of the NJ World Series of Birding, among the top twenty world listers, etc., etc. Mine are more modest, though I've been an avid birder for forty-odd years starting at Harvard in 1946 reporting to Ruth Emery.

"Regards,

George (Gus) Daniels"

GUS DANIELS is the retired Executive Editor of Time Life Books and now writes and edits from the Vineyard. "Hallelujah!" says Gus. A past board member of the American Birding Association, he serves at present as Sanctuary Committee Chairman/President of the Felix Neck Sanctuary Wildlife Trust. His most cherished bird list is 321 for the Vineyard. His best bird(s) "ever, ever" were two Eskimo Curlews at Black Point Pond on August 6, 1972, published in *American Birds*.

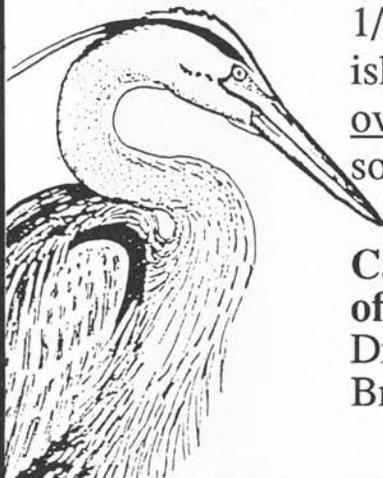
MBO HOSTS PROGRAM ON SHOREBIRD RESERVE NETWORK

The Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network (WHSRN) has been described as a model for innovation and international cooperation in conservation programs. Led by the Manomet Bird Observatory (MBO) and the National Audubon Society, WHSRN unites wildlife agencies and conservation groups in a effort to identify and protect critical wetland sites from Canada to Argentina. More than ten sites of hemispheric importance are now recognized, each harboring more than half a million shorebirds in migration, and hundreds of additional sites are being evaluated.

WHSRN will be the focus of slide/talk presentations by scientists from MBO and other agencies involved in shorebird research from 6:00 to 8:30 P.M. at the New England Aquarium on Tuesday, May 22, 1990. There will be a cocktail buffet and an opportunity to visit the Aquarium's exhibits before the program. The cost for the evening is \$15. Please reserve your seats by May 16 by calling MBO at 508-224-6521.

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VOLUNTEERS NEEDED FOR A SURVEY OF THE GREAT MEADOWS WETLAND IN ARLINGTON AND LEXINGTON

The Mystic River Watershed Association is sponsoring a survey of the flora and fauna of the Great Meadows wetland in Arlington and Lexington. This survey will include a bird census, conducted over a one-year period, to determine the species and number of birds using the area and to document how it is being used. Volunteers are needed to help conduct this census. Those interested in participating should contact Barbara Przybylska, 10 Governor Road, Arlington, MA 02174, telephone: 617-646-1852. This is a great opportunity to observe the habits and haunts of some of our more common species.

BIRD CARVING EXHIBITION: JUNE 2 AND 3, 1990

The Massachusetts Audubon Society's eighth annual bird carving exhibition will be held at the South Shore Regional Office on Saturday, June 2 (10 A.M.-5 P.M.) and Sunday, June 3 (10 A.M.-4 P.M.). An array of decoys, shore birds, song birds, and birds of prey, both life-size and miniature, will be on display. Carving tools and natural history books will be on sale. Admission is \$2 for MAS members and \$3 for nonmembers. The South Shore Regional Office is located at the North River Wildlife Sanctuary located off Route 3A (Main Street) in Marshfield. For more information, contact Ellyn Einhorn at 617-837-9400.

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