

**TOP TEN:  
A PREDICTION OF FUTURE VAGRANTS IN MASSACHUSETTS**

by Richard A. Forster

In the December 1988 issue of *Birding*, 20 (6): 353, Don Roberson presented an article on the next ten most likely additions to the American Birding Association (ABA) checklist area. Roberson polled ten well-known North American birdwatchers to solicit their responses. The results made interesting reading and prompted thoughts about how this might be applied to Massachusetts.

In years past, I had drawn up a rather comprehensive list of species that I thought would in the future be recorded in Massachusetts. In the early 1980s Dick Veit and I independently selected the ten species most likely to be the next additions to the state's bird records. These two compilations were taped without ceremony side by side on a cabinet door. Although both lists have long since been relegated to the paper shredder, suffice it to say that some species on both lists have since been recorded in Massachusetts.

A number of other states have conducted polls similar to Roberson's, and it certainly seemed reasonable that with a little effort, we could produce such a "dream" list for Massachusetts. Hence, I solicited from a handful of well-known state birdwatchers their speculations (for publication in *Bird Observer*) about the next ten species of birds to be recorded in the state. The lack of an up-to-date "official" Massachusetts state list posed a slight problem. This was dealt with by providing the respondents with an arbitrary list of questionable sightings, fortunately very few in number, that should or should not be considered to have occurred in the state.

The game players were Bruce Hallett, Richard Heil, Blair Nikula, Wayne Petersen, Simon Perkins, Robert Stymeist, Richard Veit, and the writer. Expatriate Massachusetts birders Veit, transplanted to the West Coast, and Hallett, now resident in the Deep South, provided a continent-wide perspective, their participation justified by years of birding in the state (and Hallett's continued loyalty to the Red Sox). Few specific instructions were given the participants except that there was to be no discussion among them regarding possibilities until all "ballots" were in and that they could supply a rationale for their choices. Some chose to list their species according to a decreasing likelihood of occurrence.

Forty species received at least one vote as one of the next ten species to be recorded in the state. An additional fifteen species were mentioned in the runners-up section. With such a diversity of opinion, who is to say what is possible and what is not? The final tally is skewed somewhat by Veit's

selections, his rationale apparently being, if it can occur in California, it can occur in Massachusetts. Our understanding of the nature of vagrancy being what it is, who is to say that he is wrong? Who would have predicted an Azure Gallinule in New York, a Brown-chested Martin (of the southern South American race) in Massachusetts, a Variegated Flycatcher in Maine and Tennessee, or a Cox's Sandpiper anywhere in the Northern Hemisphere? My personal favorite for the off-the-wall vagrant of all time is a Siberian Flycatcher found in Bermuda in September 1980. Too bad it was not seen when it passed through Massachusetts.

The top-ten list is presented here in descending likelihood of occurrence. In cases where different species received the same number of votes for the top ten, the number of runner-up votes determined the rank. If species received the same number of votes for top ten and for runner-up, the rank of these species in the top ten was arbitrarily, perhaps whimsically, assigned. In the results given below, the number of top ten votes is given after the name with runner-up votes in parentheses. Comments, both verbal and written, of the respondents are incorporated in the discussion. The list was finalized as of April 1, 1990.

### Results and Comments

**1. Greater Golden-Plover:** seven. This species (*Pluvialis apricaria*) is the winner, a near unanimous choice as the vagrant most likely to be recorded next in Massachusetts with Veit being the only dissenter. Its selection is based on the frequency of spring occurrences in Newfoundland, most recently in April/May of 1988 when 350+ were seen. However, the unusual and infrequent weather conditions that bring Greater Golden-Plover to Newfoundland in spring may lack sufficient intensity to bring one to Massachusetts. The magnitude of the most recent flight may indicate that 1988 was our best chance. On the other hand, the species may have already occurred in the state. A godwit discovered in Dartmouth, Massachusetts on April 23, 1967, was accompanied by a "Golden Plover." By the time that the godwit's identity was established as a Black-tailed, the plover had already departed and could not be critically identified as to species. Too bad.

**2. Cave Swallow:** five (one). Cave Swallows (*Hirundo fulva*) are expanding their range in Texas and are increasingly recorded in Florida (Caribbean population), where they now breed. It has been recorded at least twice in Nova Scotia and will most probably occur as a spring overshoot.

**3. Redwing:** five (one). *Turdus iliacus* breeds in Iceland and has now occurred on four occasions in Newfoundland. This species has also been recorded in Nova Scotia (fall 1989) and New York (winter 1959) and would most likely be seen in late fall or winter.

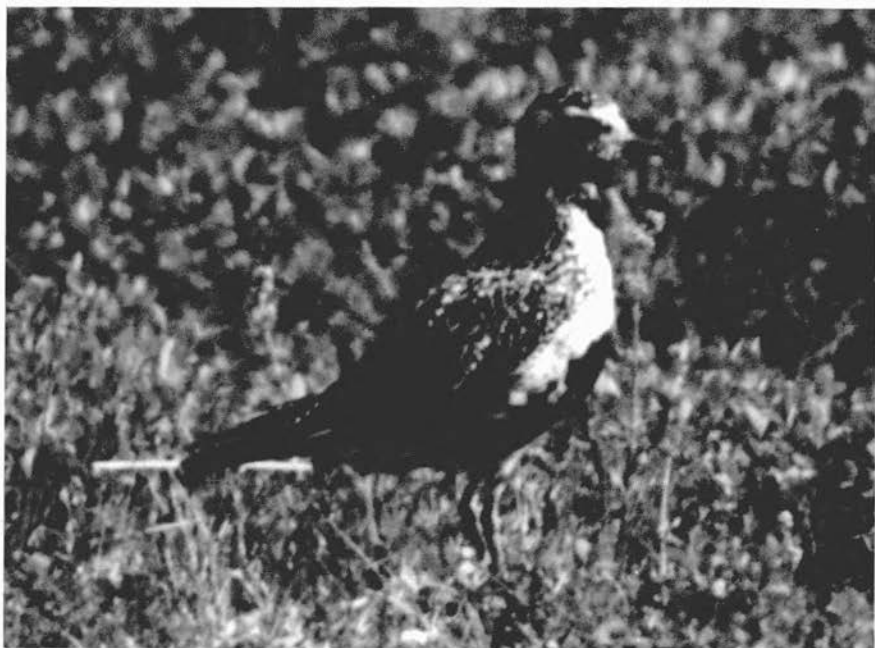
**4. Ross' Goose:** five. There are an increasing number of reports of *Chen*

*rossii* for the eastern seaboard from New Jersey south to Florida. The species was first recorded in New York in spring 1983 and again in spring 1984. It could be found with migrant Snow Geese in either fall or spring—if one would only put down in Massachusetts.

**5. Cassin's Sparrow:** four (one). A nondescript sparrow of the southwest, Cassin's (*Aimophila cassinii*) is occasionally found far out of its range. It has been recorded in Nova Scotia, New Jersey, and four times recently in Ontario. Records seem to indicate that it is most apt to occur in spring, but I would opt for fall, the season of rarities.

**6. Yellow-billed Loon:** four (one). *Gavia adamsii* winters only casually along the Pacific Coast of the United States. In recent years it has been recorded inland south as far as Nevada and Oklahoma. Additional sightings have been made recently in Colorado, Minnesota, Michigan, and Illinois. There is a record of one found dead on Long Island, New York, in 1930. This species will very probably be recorded in winter. The spate of recent extralimital sightings is possibly the result of greater awareness of diagnostic field marks.

**7. Lazuli Bunting:** four. *Passerina amoena* is a species with a widespread breeding range in western North America, including southern Canada. The predominant west-to-east weather flow in autumn would seem to favor this species, which has been recorded in Maine, Pennsylvania, and Maryland.



*Greater Golden-Plover*

*Photo by Wayne R. Petersen*



*Great-tailed Grackle*

*Photo by Richard A. Forster*

**8. Bell's Vireo:** four. Although *Vireo bellii* has been recorded in New York and New Jersey and breeds not too far away in the Midwest, that population has seriously declined so perhaps it is now becoming less and less a viable candidate for vagrancy to Massachusetts.

**9. Great-tailed Grackle:** three (one). The range of *Quiscalus mexicanus* has expanded tremendously in the West and Southwest and continues to do so. Concomitant with the range expansion has been a plethora of extralimital sightings, including reports from Nova Scotia and New York. This one could be right around the corner, but its similarity to Boat-tailed Grackle could prove to be a problem.

**10. Black-capped Petrel:** two (four). *Pterodroma hasitata* occurs in numbers in the Gulf Stream waters off the coast of the Carolinas in late summer and early fall, and there are no barriers to hinder its presence in Massachusetts offshore waters. It is apt to be hurricane-driven as was true in Rhode Island in 1985. There are five specimen records for New York.

That concludes the selection of future vagrants by our panel of experts. It now remains for the sharp-eyed observers of Massachusetts (and visitors) to prove or disprove the merits of these choices.

The following species were tied with Black-capped Petrel with two votes each for placement in the top ten but failed to qualify because they received fewer votes, if any, as runners-up:

**Masked Booby** (*Sula dactylatra*) (two) is now regular in summer off the

Carolina coast and a potential hurricane waif.

**Common Greenshank** (*Tringa nebularia*). One individual wintered in Newfoundland for two consecutive years.

**Violet-green Swallow** (*Tachycineta thalassina*) (two) has been reported from Nova Scotia and New Hampshire.

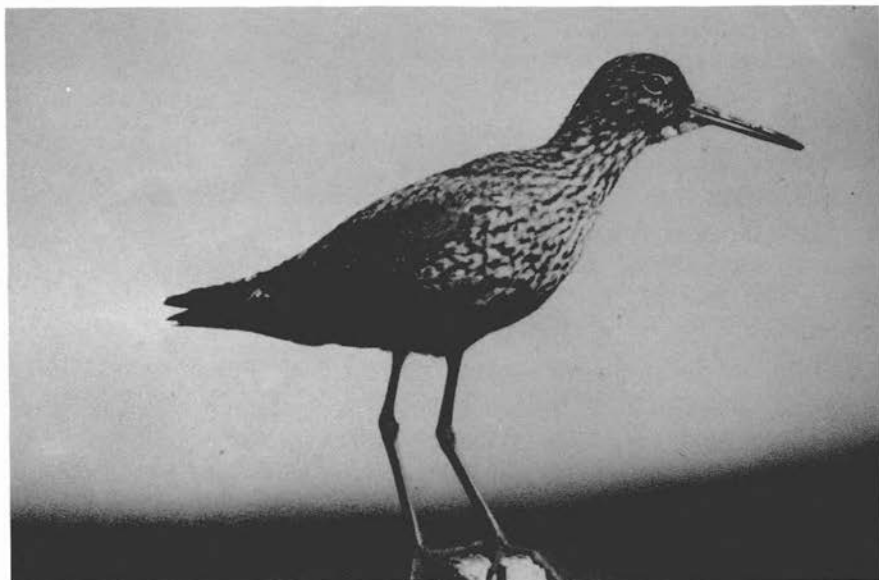
**Band-tailed Pigeon** (*Columba fasciata*) (one) has been recorded numerous times in northeastern North America.

**Northern Lapwing** (*Vanellus vanellus*) (two). There are several early winter records including recent sightings in northeastern North America.

**Common Redshank** (*Tringa totanus*) (one) is unrecorded in North America. It breeds in Iceland but may be recorded in spring migration as a vagrant that overwintered in the Caribbean area.

**Pacific Golden-Plover** (*Pluvialis dominica fulva*) is as yet unrecognized as an official species, but specific status looms imminent. "They seem to occur almost everywhere else in the world" (Nikula).

The following species all received one vote each to place in the top ten, and some received runner-up votes, the number of which appears in parentheses along with the person nominating the species. **Virginia's Warbler** (Forster) (two) has been recorded in Ontario and New Jersey twice. **Shiny Cowbird** (Veit) (two) has undergone rapid expansion in the Gulf states and might be the Cattle Egret of the twenty-first century. **Ferruginous Hawk** (Hallett) (one) has been recorded twice in New Jersey. **Azure Gallinule** (Veit) (one): Was the New York record a fluke? **Common Ringed Plover** (Nikula) (one) is quite plausible but as Perkins states "is in the top twenty, but we'll never know it." **Tropical/Couch's Kingbird** (formerly Tropical Kingbird) (Perkins) (one): Although it has been recorded in Maine, identification is now a real problem. **Calliope Hummingbird** (Heil) is "my 'off-the-wall' long shot. It breeds widely and commonly as far north as British Columbia, making it susceptible to eastern displacement August-September, and recent winter records along the Gulf Coast make it susceptible to reverse migration during strong prolonged southerly airflow November-December." **Laysan Albatross** (Veit). **Soft-plumaged Petrel** (Veit) is seemingly inconceivable, but it breeds in the North Atlantic, and Great Britain recorded its first five (!) sightings in August of 1989. **Dotterel** (Veit). **Long-toed Stint** (Veit). **Elegant Tern** (Veit). **Coue's (Greater Pewee) Flycatcher** (Veit). **Variiegated Flycatcher** (Petersen). **Black-throated Sparrow** (Nikula). **White Wagtail** (Nikula). **Yellow Wagtail** (Hallett). **Smew** (Hallett): Remember the Rhode Island bird? **Slaty-backed Gull** (Hallett): If it can occur in Missouri, why not Massachusetts? Unless we miss it. **British Storm-Petrel** (Stymeist) has occurred in Nova Scotia in August. **Hobby** (Stymeist). **Dusky Flycatcher** (Heil).



*Common Redshank*

*Photo by Peter Alden, Courtesy of MAS*

The following species received no votes for the top ten most likely to occur but were mentioned as runners-up, sometimes by more than one reviewer. Groove-billed Ani (3), Little Shearwater (2), Dusky-capped Flycatcher, Western Bluebird, Bachman's Sparrow, Black-bellied Whistling-Duck, Whooper Swan, Wood Sandpiper, Mediterranean Gull, Snowy Plover, Temminck's Stint, Common Sandpiper, Vermilion Flycatcher, Common House Martin, and Western Flycatcher (now split into two species).

So there you have it—ten species to anticipate as the most probable vagrants to occur in the state. In all, our eight knowledgeable respondents listed a possible fifty-five species with fully forty of these receiving at least one vote for inclusion in the top ten. A quick perusal of the list reveals that with few exceptions most of these are difficult to detect or to identify. However, if detecting and identifying birds were a simple straightforward pursuit, then most of the fun and excitement of birding would be lacking. Our ever changing world extends to our avian friends. It is easy to predict what is likely, based on past history, but to accurately predict what is likely in the future in this rapidly changing world is an inexact science at best.

**RICHARD A. FORSTER**, who has devoted years to analyzing bird sightings and observing migration, believes he has already seen in Massachusetts two of the species mentioned in this presentation but leaves the guesswork as to what they were to the reader.