

PHOTO RECORD: AMERICAN WHITE PELICAN

October 6, 1990, Eastham, Massachusetts

Editor's Note. The following are field notes taken by Kyle Jones while observing an American White Pelican at Coast Guard Beach, Eastham, Massachusetts, on October 6, 1990.



*American White Pelican
Photo by Kyle Jones*

At 3:10 P.M., I was walking down the access road at Coast Guard Beach on my way to photograph shorebirds at a spring high tide roost. I observed a very large light-colored bird soaring over the Nauset Bay Bluff. By its size and heavy chest, I knew immediately that the bird was not a gull, raptor, or cormorant. With my binocular, it was quickly evident that the bird was nearly all white with solid black primaries and black on the distal secondaries. The large, yellow bill was easily seen: an adult American White Pelican. While the bird continued soaring, I took several photographs with a 300 mm lens. Using the binocular again, I saw its yellow face as the bird continued to drift northward in the west to southwest wind. I watched the bird for a total of seven minutes.

Additional species to consider in the identification of an American White Pelican include similarly patterned black and white birds such as Snow Goose, Wood Stork, and Northern Gannet. The Snow Goose shows no black in the secondaries, has an outstretched neck in flight, and has a short bill. The Wood Stork also flies with an outstretched neck and has a dark neck, head, and bill,

long legs, and completely black secondaries and outer rectrices. The Northern Gannet has a long neck, white secondaries, and a pointed tail and wings. Of the tens of thousands of Northern Gannets I have seen, I saw only one fly over land. The only other pelican species in the world with a similar white and black feather pattern while in flight is the Eastern White Pelican, which lacks the bare yellow face of the American White Pelican. Other outer Cape Cod records of the American White Pelican are: July 13, 1989 in East Orleans; December 8, 1963 in Orleans; October 1 through 14, 1961 in Chatham (two birds); April 23 and 24, 1953 in North Truro (two birds).

Kyle Jones, Cape Cod

OWL COUGHS UP A BOULDER

On February 20, 1989, I was leading a Brookline Bird Club walk on Crane Beach and Castle Hill in Ipswich, Massachusetts. When we came to the white pine grove on the hill that harbors Great Horned Owls, we found their pellets everywhere. One member of the group, Dottie Case, discovered the largest owl pellet I have ever seen. The pellet measured four inches by two and a quarter inches. How any Great Horned Owl could cough up such a monstrous pellet challenges the imagination.

But that isn't the best part. Protruding from the side of the pellet was the banded leg of a songbird. I took the pellet to David Rimmer, the wildlife biologist on the Crane Beach staff who bands birds on the property for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Sure enough, the leg was from a bird he banded in the vicinity: a Gray Catbird, hatched in 1988, banded on October 3, 1988, sex unknown, and weighing 40.9 grams at banding.

Because the recovery was in February, it is evident that the young catbird never migrated unless it arrived in Ipswich from farther north before October 3 and decided to stay. What we can never know is whether the owl caught a healthy bird, found a starving bird, or picked up a freshly dead one. Whatever the case, I doubt if I will ever again have such an unusual band recovery. My hat is off to these awesome predators.

Jim Berry, Ipswich

AN OBLIGING SHORT-EARED OWL

After spending most of a crisp and clear day in January 1989 on Plum Island looking for Snowy Owls (and getting photographs of an inquisitive immature sitting on a chimney on a home near the island bridge), I went to Salisbury State Park to search for a Short-eared Owl. I arrived at about three o'clock in the afternoon. I knew from past experience that chances of seeing a Short-eared Owl are best at dawn or dusk. I roamed around the open fields for a while and kept running into members of a Connecticut birding group who were also hoping to see a Short-eared Owl. Near the entrance booth of the park, two people further up the road were looking at something large flying over their heads. I quickly put my binocular on the bird: it was a Short-eared Owl. As I watched its swooping motions, I realized that another Short-eared Owl had joined it in flight, both owls flying low across the road and above the fields.

After watching the owls for a few minutes, I left to look for the Connecticut group to tell them the owls were out. Unable to find the group, I turned around and started back towards the entrance booth. All of a sudden, one of the owls flew out of the grasses and landed on a white road post. The sun was low and the lighting was beautiful. A golden glow lit up the yellow eyes of the Short-eared Owl like those of a jack-o-lantern. He turned his head in different directions as he sat still on the post. I started taking pictures from my car window and slowly moved my car until I was directly across the road from him. The bird was not scared away by other cars driving by. (I once saw a Short-eared Owl land on a post near Parking Lot Number One in the Parker River National Wildlife Refuge but he flew off as soon as a car drove by.) After a few minutes, the Connecticut birding group arrived and watched the owl from forty feet away. They were very excited and gave me a victory sign.

The Short-eared Owl sat on the post, unafraid of people watching and cars passing him, for at least fifteen minutes. It was a wonderful sight. After the owl flew away, a fellow birder took me to a grove of trees across from the park entrance. Sitting in a pine tree no more than nine feet from the ground was a Long-eared Owl, a life bird. That was the end to a truly wonderful day: three species of owls in less than six hours and some memorable photographs.

Sandy Selesky, Westford

ANOTHER WILD GOOSE CHASE: ADDENDUM TO THE OSTERVILLE BARNACLES

Note. Reluctantly, I must share with Bird Observer readers the following letter, dated April 3, 1991, sent to me by Brian Dalzell, of Castalia, New Brunswick, Canada. It will be sad news for those birders who added another species to their life lists when they finally located (not an easy task) the family of six Barnacle Geese that were present in Osterville from January 18 to March 22, 1991.

Dorothy R. Arvidson

I don't think you are going to like what I have to say, but I have decided to say it anyway. . . . I was aware that the Barnacle Geese had been seen on Cape Sable, Nova Scotia, during the fall and early winter, and Ian McLaren had told me they later showed up on Cape Cod, much to the delight of local birders. During the Grand Manan Christmas Bird Count here, I saw three White-fronted Geese but did not include them as I knew a local goose-fancier that they probably belonged to. I think you know the rest.

Last night I phoned the gentleman involved and had a long chat. After convincing him I was not a game warden, he told me that several of his geese got out of their pens last summer for reasons he did not wish to elaborate upon. . . . Among these geese were two pairs of Barnacle Geese, one pair of which disappeared shortly afterward and the other of which stayed around and mated. According to him they produced a nest, which was predated by crows. However, a second nesting was attempted, and four young were seen in late July, The family remained around together until late August when they disappeared.

In view of this evidence I can draw no other conclusion: the family that turned up three weeks later on Cape Sable Island one hundred miles to the southeast was indeed the Grand Manan group. I see no reason to doubt these were the same birds that showed up at Osterville and attracted quite a few list-hungry birders. You can do what you want with this information, [but] give me a call first, as I'm not sure I want to be known as the bearer of bad news—the grinch that plucked Barnacle Geese from the life lists of hundreds of irate birders. . . .

REQUEST FOR OBSERVATIONS OF WETLAND BIRDS IN MASSACHUSETTS

The Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife and the Department of Forestry and Wildlife Management at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst began a project to monitor the abundance and distribution and examine habitat relationships of some wetland bird species in Massachusetts. We are soliciting information on observations of these species from birders around the state. Data gathered through the project will contribute to the conservation of these species and their habitats through the Massachusetts Wetlands Protection Act and the Massachusetts Endangered Species Act. Target species include:

Pied-billed Grebe
Clapper Rail
Common Moorhen
American Bittern
King Rail
American Coot
Least Bittern
Virginia Rail
Common Snipe
Green-backed Heron
Sora
Sedge Wren

We are interested in May, June, and July observations of individuals believed to be resident or breeding birds rather than migrants or transients. Breeding need not be confirmed for observations to be of value. The following information is requested:

Species observed
Date(s) of observation(s)
Location of sighting (photocopy of USGS topographic map showing exact location would be most helpful)
Brief description of observation (was bird seen or heard; how close; what was bird doing?)
Evidence that observation was of a resident or breeding bird (e.g., multiple observations during May through July; territorial behavior evidence of nests or young)

Observations may be forwarded to: Shawn Crowley, Department of Forestry and Wildlife Management, Holdsworth Hall, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, MA 01003, or to Dr. Scott Melvin, Natural Heritage and Endangered Species Program, Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife, Westboro, MA 01581 (508-792-7270).