

RARE BIRD ALERT AT OUTERMOST HOUSE

by Nan Turner Waldron

Note. The following pages are reprinted with permission from Nan Turner Waldron's Journey to Outermost House, published June 1991 by Butterfly & Wheel Publishing, Bethlehem, Connecticut; 112 pages; 16 color photos by the author and 28 black-and-white photos and sketches; \$12.95. This book is available at your bookstore (distributed by Parnassus Imprints, 21 Canal Road, Box 335, Orleans, MA 02653). Copies signed by the author can be obtained from Butterfly & Wheel Publishing, 145 Flanders Road, Bethlehem, CT 06751 (add \$4 for shipping and handling).

Nauset Marsh and the outer beach are known to Massachusetts birders for the oystercatchers, terns, and skimmers of summer, for the hundreds of migrants that stop over in spring and fall, and for the occasional spectacular vagrant. Those whose memories reach back beyond the great storm of 1978 will also recall Outermost House, the tiny house that stood on the sands of Nauset Spit at Eastham, a long mile south of Coast Guard Beach. Built as a working retreat in 1925 by author, editor, and lecturer Henry Beston and immortalized in his 1928 book, *The Outermost House*, this dwelling was designated a National Literary Landmark on October 11, 1964. In 1959 Beston had transferred the property to Massachusetts Audubon Society to be "a refuge and observation station for all good naturalists," with the condition that "there are to be no changes or building on to the house." Thus, Beston's two-room cottage, accessible only by foot or by four-wheel-drive vehicle in an area apt to be awash during high-course tides, remained small (sixteen by twenty-one feet) but could tightly accommodate four congenial folk. There was no electricity: a three-burner stove, light, and refrigerator were run on bottled gas. The well water, supplied by hand pump, was often salty. Every year from late May to mid-October the Society rented Outermost House for two-week periods to hardy members of naturalist inclination, i.e., to people "comfortable in the natural world and experienced in living on its terms." Such a one was Nan Waldron.

In the sixteen years after Henry gave it to Massachusetts Audubon, Nan Waldron "lived in Outermost House a year of weeks, made up of Septembers and Octobers, Aprils and Mays." What it was like to live there, close to the wild shore, is what her book is about. It is a good read—lively and informative, personal but perceptive, and mildly philosophical about nature. Well illustrated by the author's photos—Waldron is an exceptional interpretive photographer—the book offers an aesthetic tribute to the Nauset coast as well as an affectionate acknowledgment of Beston and the house he built.

Although Outermost House is gone, carried off in the great blizzard of

1978, *Beston's volume is still in book stores, issued by Viking-Penguin in paperback as recently as 1988, and the Nauset site still attracts his many admirers. In summer hundreds of visitors ascend Fort Hill to view the ever-changing sweep of the Nauset vista. And the untamed Nauset marsh and shore continue to beckon birders.*

Dorothy R. Arvidson

Nauset never lacked for entertainment. Inside the house or outside, it was always hard to concentrate on reading or writing because there was so much going on which shouldn't be missed. One day a Peregrine, taking less than ten seconds, streaked past the house, low over the grasses, then wheeled back to make a swipe at a tide pool; an explosion of flight and feathers ensued. Now, who would risk missing the next show after a performance like that! So, I filled hours, even days, waiting at a window, on the porch, near the house.

Nauset has always been famous for the number of birds which could be seen there during migration weeks in the spring and fall. The house attracted all kinds of birds. Being way out on the spit, it was one of the few features in that landscape which offered the birds refuge from wind, rain, or sun as well as a plentiful supply of food. It was a great place for insects, and the little birds would scurry in and out from under the house like the "return balls" I played with as a child. And the birds of prey knew a good hunting ground when they saw it; the harrier and the Short-eared Owl would swoop through the yard hoping to surprise one of the smaller birds in the open. Their sudden appearance always startled me. The birds escaped; I wouldn't have.

Once while I was sitting quietly on the porch, a handsome Palm Warbler, who was hunting flies under my chair, hopped to the shelf at my elbow and eyed me quizzically, taking my measure, creature to creature. It wasn't the first time. Once, while I hid in the tall marsh grasses, three Sharp-tailed Sparrows had patiently examined me. Years ago I had had a fondness for Dr. Doolittle and became intrigued with remote possibilities. Now that I have read Michael Road's *Talking With Nature*, perhaps I should omit "remote." In any case, it was just such a mood which enveloped me when I had my first encounter with a "rare bird" whose visit to Henry's "Eastham Sands" became one of my favorite tales from Outermost House.

An October northeast storm had begun to build. The air was filled with spray carried in the wind, and I could hear the thunder of the huge rollers as they piled onto the beach. The marsh was being swept by soggy winds, and the entire scene was a frothy gray—not cold, just heavy and rough. My husband had gone out to look at the surf while I tried to decide whether to curl up with a book or to brave the elements.

Suddenly Ted was yelling from the dune as he raced toward the end of the house where his fishing gear was stored. "The stripers are in!" he shouted. "Right in the waves!" and he was gone.

I grabbed my cameras and ran for the beach—never mind proper lighting, never mind the water. What a sight! There were three excited fishermen, Ted, Dave Getchell and his friend, "Old John," who were out every day, wading into the turmoil where the silver stripers streaked through the waves. The strike was made, and the contest began. I raced back and forth snapping pictures, in and out of the shallows, trying to avoid being hit by a breaker, up on the sand, then into the water. Then I slipped in the liquid sand and collapsed sideways holding my hands over my head to save the film. I headed for the house.

Another outfit solved my problem—I wasn't so sure about the cameras. The little house reeked of wet boots and clothing draped over the chairs. Towels spread on the table served as a drying rack for the cameras after I carefully cleaned them with fresh water. They looked in good shape. Despite all the excitement it was a gloomy day, and rain began just as I finished drying one of the cameras. I could hear it washing down the windows on the north side of the house. Then something landed on the porch.

I listened.

Whatever it was flipped around for a few seconds out of my sight. Then it popped up on the window sill outside, a wet pathetic looking bird. But what bird?



Outermost House

Photo by Nan Turner Waldron

I didn't move.

It was trying to catch flies. Smaller than a robin. A thrush, not one I knew. Then I thought I saw blue—blue! But it wasn't right for a bluebird.

Swish and it was gone. What had spooked it? Was someone calling from outside in the storm? From the marsh road?

I went to the window. There in the wet wind was one huge figure in a yellow slicker (Wallace Bailey wasn't hard to identify) and another person, whom I later learned was staying in a cottage nearby and upon seeing the bird had gone out to call Wellfleet Bay Sanctuary where Wallace was director. I couldn't make out what he was saying so I went to the door.

"A wheatear has been reported. Have you seen it?"

"Does it have any blue on it?"

"Yes."

"You just scared it away. It was right here on the porch."

Wow! A wheatear! Detoured on his flight from Greenland to Europe. I'd never seen one!

I pulled my rainshirt over my head, grabbed the dry camera, and joined the search. FOUND, one wheatear perched on a post a short distance south of the Outermost House. I snapped pictures for the record; the sighting was "authenticated" by Wallace, and the two men trudged back to their cars parked at Coast Guard beach, back to civilization where the "rare bird alert" could be sounded. And then the fun began.

If you readers have never joined a group of avid birders intent upon a sighting for their yearly/life list, let me acquaint you with the symptoms of the Rare Bird Alert syndrome. The various Audubon societies have a special phone service for daily recorded reports of bird sightings. A rare bird confirmation is quickly added to the recording and, in addition, key birders are notified to spread the word. That night of October fourth, the news had gone out. The bird became an instant priority.

While we slept the night away, others cancelled conferences, appointments, and luncheons; checked maps; called airlines or bus terminals; coordinated pickups; packed their cars, drove all night or stayed in motels; and of course studied the field guides, discussed plumage and behavior, and readied equipment: scope, binoculars, camera, tape recorder, reference books, note pad and pencils, and the all important LIST.

The day broke—exploded would be a better word, considering the events—clear and warm, ushering in a spell of glorious weather. A rosy hue was just beginning to spread across the sky when I heard what I thought must be whispering somewhere outside.

"Somebody lives here."

"No, they don't."

"Maybe it isn't the Outermost House."

Obviously it was too dark to read the sign in front of the house at the edge of the road. Whoever they were, they must have driven for hours last night to have hiked all the way out here before dawn. They must be really determined to see this bird.

I dressed quickly and went out—I love the predawn hours anyway. Three people were circling the house—no, make that six, or better yet, once I could see down the road, an open-ended twelve. We were about to be inundated by the greats of the birding world.

The night before I had joked with Ted about whether the fleetest of the BBC (Brookline Bird Club) would be the first to arrive. Not that it mattered, for eventually everybody came. Searchers were everywhere—on the marsh road, around the buildings, scanning the dunes—calling, checking, signalling, persisting. When I found the wheatear I hated to disturb his peace, but that bird performed for weeks, much to everyone's delight. The birders, on the other hand, performed for me.

The report broadcast on the Rare Bird Alert had stated that the wheatear had been seen near the Outermost House. That translated into encyclopedic fact: the bird was HERE! Some groups were so intent upon arriving at the Outermost House that they marched up the road almost as if they had blinders on—right past the favorite perch of the wheatear on the roof of a cottage located a good half mile before this house. I marched them back. As birder of residence, despite the lack of any previous acquaintance with wheatears, I felt inordinately responsible for the success of this entire affair, including the safety of the bird. I became the local custodian for the oral Wheatear Journal, updated hourly and daily. Actually, it was great fun meeting birders. I admired them. For one thing, almost all came on foot, not an easy hike. And they listened politely to my lectures about the fragile terrain, the need for the wheatear to remain undisturbed, the concern for the survival of our native birds, the protection of the marshes then being filled at alarming speed, and the resource value of insects upon which the wheatear was feeding. It has been my experience that birders have been at the forefront of environmental concern, and I have been proud to be counted in their numbers. But after ten days of dawn to dusk patrol, my enthusiasm flagged—for crowds, not for the bird. I pleaded with the gods of the Nawsets to discourage the public by sending great rains. Now I can't remember whether or not it worked. But maybe the bird understood—it departed.

When no one else was around, I had loved watching the wheatear. It was so beautiful in the soft sunlight. I would sit on the sand a few yards away from his perch. He would dash out to catch a moth or cricket, return to his post, tear off the wings and legs and eat. Bird from another land, are these insects familiar to

you? Do you have to improvise or taste-test? What sands were home to you and are you homesick? Can you determine your direction from our unfamiliar heavens? Perhaps you are a vanguard exploring new territory because yours is being destroyed—your last chance to live. Perhaps storm winds caught you as they catch us all. The odds for survival were changed by forces beyond your control. If so, you adapted gracefully within your instinct's pattern. We humans think we are in control. We think your survival matters little in the scheme of things.

You are alone, wandering and feeding, moving among species similar but strange, different from the ones which have filled your life. How have you made your peaceful adjustment, your connection for your survival?

Are you living "by voices we shall never hear"?
Could I, given time, hear them?
Could I wander alone through the winds,
Gathering old connections,
Like a minstrel interpreting old harmonies?
You may be commonplace to some
But if you are gone,
Who will come to Nauset's golden grass
To open a mind to wondering?

NAN TURNER WALDRON spent childhood summers on a farm in the north woods of Maine that led to an addiction to wild places. She became in adult life an active conservationist, a naturalist and birdwatcher, and a nature photographer. For the past twelve years she has communicated to groups throughout New England her enthusiasm for nature by a warmly received annual series of lectures, illustrated by her own photographs screened from twin slide projectors. Born in Malden, Nan graduated from Wheaton College and attended Columbia University School of Engineering. Nan and husband Ted made their home, while their four children grew up, in Sharon, where both served on the advisory board of the Moose Hill Wildlife Sanctuary. In 1974 Nan's work (public programs, bird walks, and lectures) in support of conservation was recognized by Massachusetts Audubon Society with an Audubon A award, and for ten years as a full-time volunteer, she organized and directed the cataloging of the Natural History Services' slide and print photographic library. Although Sharon is home, Nan and Ted spend off-season months on Cape Cod and Nantucket, pay annual winter visits to Sanibel and Jekyll islands, and spend several weeks in spring and summer in the north woods of Maine.