

FIELD NOTES FROM HERE AND THERE

DECOY BEHAVIOR OF GOLDEN-WINGED WARBLERS AT NEST

At 12:15 P.M. on June 9, 1991, just off Uptack Road in Groveland, Massachusetts, I observed a male and a female Golden-winged Warbler foraging in a chickadee-like manner high in pine and deciduous trees bordering a high-tension powerline. They caught larvae and winged insects and carried them to bushes beneath the powerline about thirty feet away. They caught larvae and winged insects and carried them to bushes beneath the powerline about thirty feet away. After catching an insect, the birds would fly with the insects to several different places in the tall trees before flying to four-by-six foot high bushes or saplings.



The warblers may have exhibited a decoy behavior by flying with food to different bushes. Only one bird approached the bushes at a time; the other remained with its insect in the tall trees. Each bird typically flew to one of three bushes, where it paused in full view for a few seconds. Then it dropped down, out of view. After a few seconds, the bird reappeared, sometimes without the food, but many times with the insect still in its bill. When it reappeared without an insect, the bird was always on or near the same bush, thus indicating the probable location of a nest. I heard high-pitched chirping sounds coming from the base of the bush, possibly indicating young in a nest. However, when the bird reappeared still with an insect after dropping down into a bush, it either flew directly to another bush or flew back to the tall trees before flying to another bush.

Decoy behavior by these warblers could be an effort to keep predators from finding the nest. I did not approach close enough to see either the nest or young birds. I observed these warblers for about forty-five minutes, and saw the following other species (number of individuals) within about 100 feet: Brown-headed Cowbird (4), Blue Jay (2), Northern Oriole (2), Prairie Warbler, House Wren, Northern Mockingbird, and Red-winged Blackbird. At one point, a Blue Jay flew within about ten feet of the Golden-winged Warblers. An American Crow flew over. There was also evidence of heavy human activity within ten to fifteen feet of the bushes. The path was well worn, some saplings and bushes had been cut down, and there were large tire tracks in the muddy ground.

Robert C. Bradbury, Worcester, Massachusetts

HUMMINGBIRDS IN A HURRICANE

On August 18, 1991, the night before Hurricane Bob, I busily readied our North Kingstown, Rhode Island, home for the storm. We live less than three miles from Narragansett Bay, so I expected the worst. Knowing the energy needs of hummingbirds, however, I did not take down our hummingbird feeder, which hung on a long hook from the porch gutter. Instead I wrapped a thin piece of rope around the feeder's stem and tied the rope to a brick placed on the porch steps directly below.

The feeder had been regularly visited by at least one female Ruby-throated Hummingbird all summer. Judging from the storm predictions, I expected that she might feed for a few hours in the morning before the winds picked up, and then perhaps again before nightfall if the winds calmed sufficiently.

I watched her briefly at the feeder at 7:00 A.M. the day of the storm, and then got busy with other things. I do not know when she stopped coming before the height of the storm.

At 2:00 P.M. the eye of the storm was in the West Passage of Narragansett Bay. Within a half hour the eye had disappeared as the storm weakened, but damaging winds continued in our area. As the storm tore through our neighborhood, it downed several large pines, split an oak tree down the middle, and snapped off tree limbs, large and small. As I watched out the sliding glass doors to the porch, the torrential rain subsided and finally ended.

At 3:30 P.M., after the rain stopped, a hummingbird arrived back at the feeder. Rainwater had raised the fluid level, but the dilution was not enough to make the feeder unattractive. She perched on rather than hovered at the feeder, drank eagerly, and took off in a straight line to the south across the open area of our backyard. Quickly I prepared some high-concentrate sugar water, tilted the feeder to pour off some of the diluted liquid, and added the new mixture.

At 3:45 P.M. she was at the feeder again for the first of five visits in the next half hour. I was amazed at her ability to navigate the continuing gale force winds. (Although the center of the storm was in the Boston area by 4:00 P.M., the huge trunk of a white pine snapped in two in our neighborhood around that time, and a large oak limb broke off across the street as late at 5:30 P.M.)

Each time, she came directly from the south and took off in a straight line in that direction. Could she still have been feeding young? The latest egg-laying dates for the species (based on New York observations) is July 25 (*Rhode Island Breeding Bird Atlas*, undated, "Species Accounts," p. 8). Allowing for incubation time, I concluded she could indeed still be tending nestlings or new fledglings.

At 4:25 P.M., for the first time that afternoon, the female hummingbird at the feeder took off in a different direction. From then on, sometimes she made a beeline due south and at other times flew off in other directions. Not until 5:07

P.M., when I observed a brief skirmish between two females at the feeder, did I realize that since 4:25 P.M., I had probably been watching two birds.

What are my conclusions from these observations? Hummingbirds will brave the rigors of a hurricane except during the peak hours of the storm. Amazingly, these tiny dynamos can cope with even gale force winds to meet their need for high-energy food. Maternal instincts may even shorten the period in which they ride out the storm without feeding. The first hummingbird, which may have still been tending a dependent brood, ventured out into the storm almost an hour earlier than the second bird.

While sugar water is not a balanced diet, it is a high-energy supplement that can help hummingbirds through those critical hours when finding natural food is very difficult. The hurricane season begins early enough to impact the survival of hummingbird young as well as adults. It continues throughout the migration period, when maintaining peak strength is especially important and hummingbird energy needs are very high.

So, do not take down your hummingbird feeder in a storm. Secure it in position instead. While hummingbird feeders are more for human enjoyment rather than for hummingbird survival at other times, they may mean the difference between life and death in a hurricane.

Richard F. Graefe, North Kingstown, Rhode Island

FORSTER'S TERN NESTING IN PLUM ISLAND MARSHES

On June 10, 1991, while censusing breeding Common Tern (*Sterna hirundo*) colonies in the marshes behind Plum Island, we discovered a single pair of Forster's Terns (*Sterna forsteri*) on a nest within a small Common Tern colony. We were within a colony situated around several small salt pans on the open marsh near the mouth of the Parker River counting Common Terns overhead, when we heard a series of calls clearly different from those of the Common Terns. Training our binoculars in on this higher pitched, more abrupt call, we observed what we suspected to be a pair of Forster's Terns. Returning to our boat at the colony's edge, we saw the pair land at an apparent nest. We confirmed the two birds as Forster's Terns, with their distinct orangish bill and pale body. We quickly went to the spot where the birds landed and found a nest with two eggs. The nest was built on a small pile of wrack (dead grasses and leaves deposited during a flood tide) and was almost identical in appearance to the Common Tern nests surrounding it. Back at the boat we again observed the two Forster's Terns land at the nest site and resume incubation. Unfortunately, we had no camera to record the nest or adults and were unable to return to the

nest to determine productivity. However, based on the above criteria, we are convinced that this pair of Forster's Terns was nesting.

According to Brad Blodget, Massachusetts state ornithologist, this observation would represent the first nesting record for the Forster's Tern in Massachusetts and most likely in New England. Reviewing *Bird Observer* Field Records from past years, Forster's Terns are observed in small numbers most years in Massachusetts, and are usually found around Monomoy Island off of Cape Cod. Also, *Bird Observer* (Vol. 18:5) reported in the Field Records from June 1990 that "an apparently mated pair" of Forster's Terns was observed at Plum Island. This observation, combined with our own sighting, will prompt us to look harder for breeding Forster's Terns in the Essex County marshes in 1992.

David Rimmer and Russ Hopping, Beverly, Massachusetts

LEUCISTIC BLACK-CAPPED CHICKADEE

Having read the article on aberrantly pigmented goldfinches in the December 1990 issue of *Bird Observer*, I thought the enclosed photo of a leucistic Black-capped Chickadee (*Parus atricapillus*) would be of interest to your readers.

It appeared in my yard in the company of several normally colored individuals on an overcast mid-20s°F day in January 1991, and fed with seeming familiarity from a hanging sunflower seed feeder. The other chickadees frequently acted aggressively toward it, beyond the normal pecking order interactions of the species. I observed it for perhaps ten minutes and have not seen it since.

The typical black cap, and to a lesser extent the black bib, have been largely replaced by white feathers. It is interesting to further note that the bill pigmentation is also abnormal, with the outer portion of the lower mandible and the entire upper mandible very light in color.

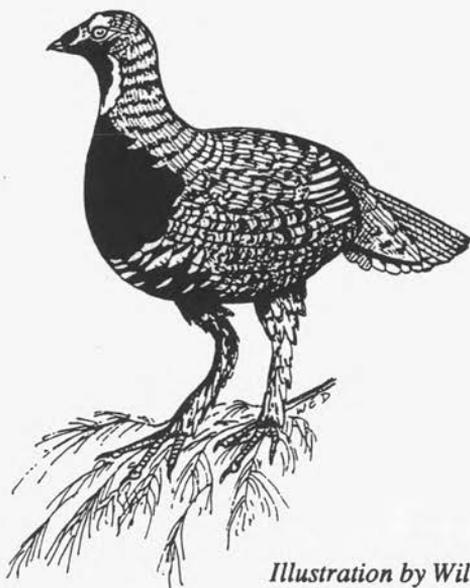
Michael Onyon, Haverhill, Massachusetts



THE SPRUCE GROUSE

It was a cool and breezy August afternoon in Algonquin National Park, in the vast wilderness of Ontario, Canada. The fluffy clouds moved along from horizon to horizon, now and again blotting out the sun and laying a blanket of cool shade on the shaking aspen leaves and the dark green spruce and pine. A hint of fall was in the air. The 3:00 P.M. shadows were growing longer, and the birds were quiet and still, although at one point my eyes were drawn to movement a few feet away as a Red-breasted Nuthatch slowly spiraled its way up the trunk of a small spruce. A single Yellow-rumped Warbler flashed from the dense ferns through which I was walking and peered at me from behind a spruce bough. I followed a deer trail through the ferns and entered a small open glade near the edge of the spruce bog. In the clearing a few stumps and small saplings poked above the dense fern carpet, and to my right the clearing was bordered by a pine tree, perhaps thirty feet tall. As I passed this tree, which dwarfed the others in the clearing, my eye caught a silhouette that froze me in my tracks. About halfway up the tree a Spruce Grouse stood outlined against the sky.

In my binoculars the silhouette became a pattern of black, white, and brown, the white breast sporting a black bull's-eye, a puff of fiery red above the eye: a male bird. As I watched the grouse, he watched me, craning his neck to get a better view. Spruce Grouse have a reputation for being absurdly tame, and this individual was certainly no exception. He stopped looking at me, and as he began to walk slowly along a branch, I approached to within twenty feet,



Spruce Grouse

Illustration by William E. Davis, Jr.

stopping when I reached the focusing limit of my binoculars. He was beautiful with his chocolate colored back and gray tail with buffy tips. The black chin, breast band, and spot were set in white which melted into the wavy browns and russets of his contour feathers, all highlighted by the flashes of brilliant red bare skin patches above each eye. He was very conspicuous in the tree, but would have been virtually invisible among the brown twisted ferns and sphagnum hummocks on the ground.

When he walked, his tail drooped, giving him a distinctly hump-backed appearance. I could see his outer toes sticking out to the sides as he walked steadily along a narrow branch, perhaps the size of my finger. His thigh feathers were long, extending all the way down between his toes, providing insulation against the bitter cold of the Ontario winters. He walked like a tightrope walker, slowly, one foot in front of the other with his middle toes pointed directly along the branch. Once he took a few quick steps, breaking the rhythm of his walk.

Eventually he stopped and began to eat the pine needles. Spruce Grouse have digestive systems adapted to the processing of spruce and pine needles, which, in winter, may constitute nearly 100 percent of their diet. They are not often hunted by man because their flesh is considered virtually inedible, their taste reflecting their diet of spruce and pine. He would work over one leaf in a spray of the long-needled pine, taking perhaps a half-inch of needle with each clip. Sometimes he worked on an entire spray at the same time, taking turns on the needles, resembling someone clipping a hedge. He never finished a spray, but typically, after eating about halfway down four or five needles, stopped and with great deliberation, walked on to another bough. Once he stopped and scratched his chin with the toes of his right foot, his head fully extended, reminding me a great deal of my dog. He was very deliberate in his feeding, often taking a minute or two between feeding bouts. As he walked up and through the tree, I circled around to keep him in good light. At the edge of the tree he walked out onto two small tangled boughs, each with a stem about the thickness of a pencil and a few small open cones among the sprays. He fed from spray to spray on one of the boughs, then scratched his chin again and hopped onto the second bough. The two boughs separated, one snapping up and above him, leaving him flapping wildly to maintain his balance on the sagging second bough. Undaunted he began to snip away at the new sprays of needles. I glanced at my watch. It was 3:45 P.M., and I had been watching this fascinating bird for more than a half hour. I decided that I had bothered him enough, and quietly slipped back onto the deer trail and continued on my way through the spruce bog. When I passed this tree on my return a half hour later, the grouse was gone. The silhouette across the clearing had melted into the lichen-decorated boughs of spruce and pine, and faded into a memory.

William E. Davis, Jr., Foxboro, Massachusetts

Late Winter–Spring Workshops

Raptor Rapture – a workshop on hawks, owls, and wildlife

The stark landscape of late winter is often accented by the appearance of a solitary hawk perched in a leafless tree or the methodical coursing of a hungry harrier gliding over a grassy meadow. After dark, these images are replaced by the sinister glare of the Great Horned Owl and the booming cadence of a hooting Barred Owl. These are raptors—predators whose very presence help keep natural populations in balance.

This workshop will investigate the many adaptations that make hawks and owls such remarkable hunting machines and that contribute to their success as predators. Aspects of population regulation and breeding biology will be considered at a time of year when both winter survival strategies and courtship and nesting activity are occurring simultaneously. A full-day field trip beginning before dawn will provide the chance to see local raptors and observe some of the behaviors discussed during the indoor session. Seminar: Friday, March 6, 1992. Field Trip: Saturday, March 14, 1992. Cost: \$35.

Vagrants and Vagrancy, Records and Rarities – a workshop for serious birders

The search for and discovery of unusual and out-of-range bird species is a challenge that sparks and sustains the interest of many birders. Enjoyable as the quest for finding vagrants may be, developing an understanding of the dynamics of vagrancy can be equally intriguing. An examination of the factors that may explain the occurrence of accidental avian visitors in Massachusetts will provide background for a roll call discussion of the approximately 150 vagrant species on the Massachusetts state bird list.

In addition to summarizing existing rarity records, thoughts will be provided on what future vagrants should be expected in Massachusetts and where and when they might occur. Also, guidelines for documenting unusual bird sightings will be suggested, and background on the recently created Massachusetts Avian Records Committee will be provided. A field trip to the Plum Island area (while not promising to locate any vagrants!) will help participants become more proficient at making observations and taking field notes when unusual birds are discovered.

Seminar: Friday, March 27, 1992. Field Trip: Sunday, March 29, 1992. Cost: \$35.

The Coming of Spring – a workshop on the return of spring to Massachusetts

Spring is a season eagerly anticipated by birders and naturalists. With lengthening days and rising temperatures, the ice and snow of winter disappear, and southwest winds usher in returning migrant birds. Spring wildflowers bloom, pussy willows pop, and long-hidden amphibians make their way to vernal breeding ponds. Such are the rites of spring.

Participants will examine the ecological factors and elements that make spring such an exciting season for the naturalist. More than just a season of returning waterfowl, migrating hawks, and early warblers, April provides a host of natural phenomena that often go overlooked by zealous birders. This workshop will take birders beyond the bird list and into the realm of field natural history during a season when there is lots to see.

Seminar: Friday, April 24, 1992. Field Trip: Sunday, April 26, 1992. Cost: \$35.

These workshops are cosponsored by *Bird Observer* and the Needham Bird Club and will be presented by Wayne R. Petersen. Seminar sessions will be held in Needham, MA, from 7:30-9:30 P.M. Directions to the seminars will be sent to registrants. Details about the field trips will be announced at the seminars preceding them. If you have questions, please call 617-666-8934 (evenings). Preregistration is required. To register, send your name, address, and phone numbers with your check payable to Bird Observer to Bird Observer Workshops, P. O. Box 236, Arlington, MA 02174.

SUBMISSION OF ARTICLES TO *BIRD OBSERVER*

Bird Observer is intended for both amateur and professional audiences. We encourage articles that enhance our readers' knowledge and enjoyment of birds and that are easily understood by amateurs. Scientific and technical articles are peer-reviewed and are abstracted for *The Auk's* "Recent Ornithological Literature." *Bird Observer* wishes to encourage strongly submission of original papers by both amateurs and professionals, and the entire *Bird Observer* staff stands ready to assist authors in completing a final manuscript.

Bird Observer solicits articles in the following areas:

- where to bird in New England and, occasionally, elsewhere in the United States or foreign locations of interest to New England birders
- species distribution
- field studies and population surveys
- avian behavior, ecology, adaptation, evolution, and genetics
- bird identification
- where and when to find a particular species coveted by New England birders
- birding techniques, behavior, and equipment
- profiles of New England ornithologists, interviews with wildlife scientists, and profiles of local or regional ornithological organizations in New England
- field observations, notes, and reports
- vagrancy and extralimital observations
- reviews of bird-related literature, books, videotapes, and recordings.

Papers of general interest will be considered regardless of their geographic origin, but particularly desired are papers dealing with New England birds (residents, breeders, migrants, and vagrants) and with studies accomplished in or pertaining to the New England states. Guidance on the length, format, and other information for submitted material is given on the masthead of each issue. *Bird Observer* will make every effort to publish articles as quickly and as timely as possible, and will keep authors informed of the status of their articles.

Bird Observer has prepared a style guide and a list of points which should be covered in a "where to find birds" article, either of which potential authors may wish to use while writing an article. If interested, please ask for copies from the editor in chief.

The entire *Bird Observer* staff wishes to thank everyone who has contributed articles in the past and encourages both amateurs and professionals to contribute material for publication. We look forward to working with you.

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