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TERN CATASTROPHE

by Wayne Hanley, M.A.S.

A sudden wave of death this summer wiped out almost all the young birds in a Common Tern colony on Jeremy's Point in Wellfleet. Dr. I. C. T. Nisbet, who heads field research into tern problems for the Massachusetts Audubon Society, witnessed the unexpected die off.

Dr. Nisbet said, "There were 1500 young terns in the colony. About 100 of them progressed to the point where they could fly. At about the same time, all other young in the colony just sat there on the beach and died.

"Death among young terns is not uncommon. But this is the first time we have witnessed such a die off without any clue as to why it happened. In years when fishing is poor, many young terns die because their parents cannot find enough food for them. But these young birds were fat. We have had pathological examinations made, and no disease was found. The pattern of death did not indicate chemical or pesticide poisoning. The whole thing still is a complete mystery."

There are four species of terns along the New England coast. Three species are doing very badly, while one has begun a slow comeback. Least Terns, the small terns with yellow bills and white foreheads, hit a low ebb about five years ago, but now are recovering. The Massachusetts population of Least Terns is estimated at about 1200 pairs.

Common Terns, which were estimated at 9000 pairs in Massachusetts five years ago, had declined to 6000 pairs this summer. Roseate Terns have dropped about 50% in five years and now are down to 2000 pairs. Part of their decline locally was caused by a major defection of Massachusetts birds to Long Island, N. Y., colonies.

Arctic Terns, which use Massachusetts as the southern rim of their breeding range, seem to be in the worst condition of all the terns here. Their population of 300 to 400 pairs five years ago now has dropped to 50 pairs. Dr. Nisbet said, "Most Arctic Terns along the Massachusetts coast now are old birds. Some are over 20 years old, according to their bands. They seem to lack the deep urge necessary to keep them feeding their young. Perhaps it is something akin to senility."

Part of the four species' difficulty comes from a lack of options. Given a choice, terns prefer to breed on offshore islands where ground predators are few. The recent population explosion among Herring Gulls and Great Black-backed Gulls has forced terns from most of the desirable islands. Gulls nest first and occupy all sites before the terns return from the south. Meanwhile coastal construction and hordes of bathers have evicted the terns from their only alternative breeding grounds, the mainland beaches.

NOUNS OF ASSEMBLAGE

The English language contains a rich variety of words known as nouns of assemblage or nouns of multitude. Each is a term to be used for a group of animals or humans, all of the same type. Some of these words are still in common use: we speak of a gaggle of geese, a kettle of hawks, of a clutch of eggs, or a raft of ducks (raft = a large and motley collection, as in the word ruffraff).

The heyday for the formation of these words seems to have been in the fifteenth century, and birds received their full share of attention. James Lipton has collected these terms and published them in his beautifully illustrated book, An Exaltation of Larks (Grossman Publishers, New York, 1968). He gives the following as authentic to the early period:

A siege of herons, a skein of geese (in flight), a gaggle of geese (on water), a spring of teal, a badling or a paddling of ducks (on water), a cast of hawks, a rafter of turkeys, an ostentation of peacocks, a covey of partridges, a nye or a bouquet of pheasants, a mustering of storks, a deceit of lapwings, a congregation of plovers, a fall of woodcock, a walk or a wisp of snipe, a pitying of turtledoves, a dule of doves (from the French deuil = mourning), a parliament of owls, a descent of woodpeckers, an exaltation of larks, a flight of swallows, a tidings of magpies, an unkindness of ravens, a murder of crows, a building of rooks, a watch of nightingales, a murmuration of starlings, a charm of finches, a host of sparrows---all of which together would certainly form a dissimulation of birds.

Lipton adds two more examples in his chapter on the more modern formations: a gulp of cormorants and a stand of flamingoes. But this is a game we can all play! I'll start by contributing nine more: a plunge of gannets, a sneeze of flycatchers, a blaze of tanagers, a storm of snow buntings, a quagmire of bitterns, a dump of gulls, a rain of migrants, a complaint of catbirds, and a confusion of warblers. Now let us have your contributions.

J.T.L.

MARbled MURRELET NEST FOUND

On August 8, 1974, a tree trimmer at Big Basin State Park, Santa Cruz, California, solved the mystery of the nesting location of the Marbled Murrelet in the Western Hemisphere, a secret that has eluded ornithologists for more than 100 years. The trimmer, Hoyt Foster, discovered the nest 145 feet high in a redwood tree, while he was lopping a branch that threatened to fall on a campsite. He found the fluffy chick sitting on a nest of sparse moss. He brought the chick, as well as the nest, to the local Fish and Game office. Unfortunately, the chick died, possibly because it was given the wrong food.

The Marbled Murrelet was the last of those bird species breeding regularly in North America whose nest had not been found on this continent. The species is nocturnal in its passage to and from the nest site, making it impossible to follow its flights directly inland from the Pacific Ocean to the nest. Nevertheless, the evidence for the tree nesting of the species was extensive. The first hint came in 1898 when Indians of the Prince of Wales Archipelago reported to Cantwell that the species nests in hollow trees high up in the mountains. In 1953, W. Feyer and another man felled a large hemlock in the Queen Charlotte Islands; from the debris they removed a dazed Marbled Murrelet and some eggshells that contained blood. Unfortunately, it was impossible to determine whether the nest site was actually in the tree or simply in its path as it fell. In 1961 in Russia Kuzyakin found a nest of the race Brachyramphus marmoratus perdix in a taiga larch tree about 20 feet above the ground. The tree was located some 4 miles in from the sea. The search for the Marbled Murrelet's nest was further publicized in Audubon Field Notes 24:654, with a \$100 reward being announced for the first description with photographs. Congratulations to Mr. Foster!

R.H.S. and J.T.L.



THE SANDHILL CRANE
ON CAPE COD (HARWICH)

Photo by Dr. Herbert Whitlock
of Eastham