

BEST BIRDS IN MASSACHUSETTS: 1973-1992

by Wayne R. Petersen

Since its inception in 1973, *Bird Observer* has served as a digest for eastern Massachusetts bird reports. These bird reports have included an astounding assortment of unusual vagrants. While vagrant records are by no means the most valuable bits of data in this twenty-year record, the discovery of unusual birds is often the motivation for the countless hours of field birding spent by many observers. In this age of superb field guides, high quality optics, detailed bird-finding manuals, and a steadily growing interest in international bird touring, an increasing number of people are gaining personal familiarity with more and more bird species. As a result the overall record of bird distribution in many parts of the world is more complete than ever before. With a state bird list of over 450 species to its credit, Massachusetts justifiably holds a prominent place as a leader of this trend in North America.

Massachusetts birders should be congratulated for their dedication to broadening our understanding of local bird populations and rightfully be proud of the serious ornithological tradition that has persisted in the Commonwealth for over a century. The extraordinary roster of vagrant reports that has appeared in *Bird Observer* is simply a manifestation of this rich legacy, as well as a tribute to the skill and persistence of the Massachusetts birding community.

The following summary of twenty years of unusual bird records should be placed in context. For many birders the "bird of the day," or even the "bird of the year," may not necessarily be a great rarity or an unusual sighting. Instead, such birding highlights may be a first encounter with an unfamiliar species, the observation of an interesting or novel bird behavior, the appearance of a previously unrecorded species at a favorite birding locality, or the sight of an especially astounding concentration of birds (e.g., Tree Swallows at Plum Island). Yet, despite the intensely personal nature of many bird sightings, certain bird records from the last twenty years are especially notable, either because of their rarity in the local area or because of the pleasure the birds themselves gave to so many people. These characteristics were kept in mind while compiling the list that follows.

During the past two decades approximately thirty new species were added to the state list, eight of which were first records for at least the lower United States. These additions represent species from many parts of the world. While the exact origin of most vagrants can never be determined with precision, it is possible to make valid predictions for some. For example, we know from specimen evidence that the Massachusetts Marbled Murrelet was of the Siberian race and that the Brown-chested Martin belonged to the migratory population from southern South America. Likewise, there can be little doubt that Black-browed and Yellow-nosed albatrosses in Massachusetts waters originate in the southern hemisphere, or that the Red-billed Tropicbird almost certainly came from the Caribbean Sea. For other species the route of arrival from the point of

origin is more questionable. For example, do Ross' Gulls that show up in Massachusetts arrive over land by way of Hudson Bay, or do they come "over the top" from arctic Canada? Or, did the Western Reef-Heron come directly from Africa or from somewhere in the Caribbean or South America? And what about the Steller's Eider and the Jackdaw? Could these birds possibly have been of captive origin?

To keep the twenty-year list of outstanding bird records at a manageable length, only two selections were chosen for each year, except in years when such a remarkable assortment of records occurred that it was impossible to single out only two. For each record the location of the sighting is indicated in parentheses, and a brief notation is included to explain why I selected the record.

- 1973** **Sharp-tailed Sandpiper** (Newburyport): second state record, third New England record, juvenile on the harbor flats.
Great Gray Owl (Gill): first in Massachusetts in over thirty years; attracted many birders, some of whom searched for several days as the owl moved unpredictably from deep woods to open pasture.
- 1974** **Black-browed Albatross** (Nantucket Sound): second state record, spectacular bird seen and beautifully described from the Hyannis-to-Nantucket ferry.
Fulvous Whistling-Duck (Rowley): seen by many and photographed, three birds appeared and lingered at the Rowley dump marsh.
- 1975** **Ross' Gull** (Newburyport): first in lower United States, seen by thousands and one of the great birding events of this century, written up in *Time*.
Ivory Gull (Salisbury): a rare extended visit by this arctic bird, seen and fed by hundreds at the Salisbury boat ramp.
Three-toed Woodpecker (Harvard): first in the state in many years, generally rare in eastern North America, spent many days leisurely foraging on a diseased American elm on a busy roadside.
Chestnut-collared Longspur (Orleans): first record since 1878, a rare prairie visitor among a large flock of Lapland Longspurs on North Beach.
- 1976** **Yellow-nosed Albatross** (Georges Bank): second state record, seen by only one observer.
Eurasian Curlew (Monomoy): second United States record, Old World counterpart of the Long-billed Curlew.
- 1977** **Steller's Eider** (Scituate): second East Coast record of this arctic specialty (first record was in Maine), beautiful drake.
MacGillivray's Warbler (Lexington): first state record; banded, photographed, and released unharmed; later enjoyed by many birders.
McCown's Longspur (Bridgewater): first record east of Illinois, dozens endured bitter cold to enjoy this western vagrant, banded and photographed.
- 1978** **Selasphorus hummingbird**, probably Rufous (Newton): first state record; only able to be identified from photographs taken before the bird departed from a suburban backyard, where it fed on early-blooming snowdrops.
Townsend's Warbler (Cambridge): first state record; unlike most western vagrants, this striking warbler appeared in May at Mount Auburn Cemetery, where it was photographed and seen by many.

- 1979** **Black-chinned Hummingbird** (Cohasset): first Atlantic Coast record north of Florida; this southwestern bird attempted to survive in a greenhouse, where its identification was confirmed after it died.
Lucy's Warbler (Ipswich): only Atlantic Coast record, probably arrived under the same meteorological influences as the Black-chinned Hummingbird.
- 1980** **Rufous-necked Stint** (Monomoy, Scituate): first and second state records, photographed.
Little Stint (Monomoy): first state record and one of very few recorded in the United States at the time, appeared on Monomoy at the same time as the Rufous-necked Stint, photographed.
Burrowing Owl (Plymouth, Monomoy, Martha's Vineyard): first state records since 1875.
- 1981** **Common Cuckoo** (Martha's Vineyard): one of the most remarkable birds on the state list, this Old World vagrant was netted, photographed, and released, thus eliminating confusion with the similar Oriental Cuckoo; only North American record outside Alaska.
Townsend's Solitaire (Martha's Vineyard): second state record of this Rocky Mountain visitor, spent several weeks enjoying winter berries, photographed and seen by many.
- 1982** **Marbled Murrelet** (Middleboro): first Atlantic Coast record, freshly dead specimen brought in by cat, a Pacific alcid belonging to Siberian population.
Jackdaw (Nantucket): first United States record, eventually joined by a second individual, the two birds survived for several years on Nantucket.
Swainson's Warbler (Provincetown): first state record, heard singing and well photographed.
- 1983** **Western Reef-Heron** (Nantucket): first continental record; spent spring and summer on Nantucket, where birders from all over North America came to see and photograph the bird.
Myiodynastes flycatcher, probably Sulphur-bellied (Martha's Vineyard): first state record, color photographs could not definitively eliminate the South American Streaked Flycatcher as an alternative possibility.
Brown-chested Martin (Monomoy): photographed alive in the company of Barn Swallows, later obtained as a specimen, extraordinary record was first record north of Costa Rica.
- 1984** **White-faced Ibis** (Essex): first state record; started more careful searches for this species, which has resulted in several additional state occurrences.
Long-billed Curlew (Monomoy): fourth twentieth century state record, seen by many during a brief stay.
- 1985** **White-tailed Tropicbird** (Chatham, Byfield): a hurricane carried two of these striking seabirds to Massachusetts; Byfield bird captured, flown to Bermuda, and released.
Brown Pelican (Martha's Vineyard, Nantucket): first state records in twenty-five years, sighted in the wake of the same storm that delivered the tropicbirds.
- 1986** **Red-billed Tropicbird** (Martha's Vineyard): first state record, adult seen off Gay Head cliffs for several weeks in September and October, presumably the same bird returned for several years in succession, seen by hundreds.
Fieldfare (Concord): first state record and one of few in the United States, discovered in a large flock of migrating American Robins at Nine Acre Corner,

excellent example of careful birding.

- 1987** **Anhinga** (Nahant): first state record, a soaring bird reminding future observers to check all high-flying cormorants especially carefully.
- Cox's Sandpiper** (Duxbury): first continental record; the most mysterious bird ever to appear in Massachusetts, the specific identify and precise taxonomic status of this shorebird remain a mystery; whatever a Cox's Sandpiper is or is not, its appearance in the state is apparently the first such event outside of Australia; photographed.
- 1988** **Allen's Hummingbird** (Nantucket): first Atlantic Coast record, captured in a mist net, eventually died, the presence of this California hummingbird established that at least two species of *Selasphorus* hummingbirds are possibilities in the eastern United States.
- Gray Kingbird** (Martha's Vineyard): third state record, well photographed.
- Sprague's Pipit** (Provincetown): first state record, discovered by a diligent team of observers who had the land detail in an otherwise pelagic Stellwagen Bank Christmas Bird Count.
- 1989** **Little Egret** (Plum Island): first United States record, found among Plum Island's late summer egrets, lingered for several weeks and eventually seen by hundreds.
- Le Conte's Sparrow** (Newbury): obligingly posed for dozens of birders and photographers for several weeks in midwinter.
- 1990** **Spotted Redshank** (South Wellfleet): second state record, photographed and seen by many while it rested during high tide in Goose Pond at the Wellfleet Bay Wildlife Sanctuary.
- Terek Sandpiper** (Plum Island): first record for lower United States, Old World shorebird appeared in Plum Island salt pans for less than one hour in mid-June, four observers saw this distinctive vagrant.
- 1991** **Black-capped Petrel** (Stellwagen Bank, Cape Cod Bay): second and third state records of this Gulf Stream pelagic species, identifiable photographs were obtained of the April bird on Stellwagen Bank.
- Rock Wren** (Orleans): second state and Atlantic Coast record, survived through the fall and narrowly missed being recorded on the Cape Cod Christmas Bird Count.
- 1992** **Reddish Egret** (Martha's Vineyard): third state record, photographed and seen by many, second state record had occurred in 1991.
- Ancient Murrelet** (Rockport): first Atlantic Coast record, seen and meticulously documented by a large group of out-of-state birders.

The decades ahead offer increasing threats to bird populations and their habitats. John Terborgh in his recent book, *Where Have All the Birds Gone?* (1989), has graphically articulated these threats which, if true, should serve as grim reminders to birders and conservationists alike that the next twenty-year list of "best birds" may not be as rich as the present list. Let us all strive toward ensuring that such will not be the case. Good birding in the decades ahead!

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