

Book Review: *The Nature of Massachusetts*

by Mark Lynch

The Nature of Massachusetts by Christopher Leahy, John Hanson Mitchell, and Thomas Conuel. 1996. Boston, MA: Addison-Wesley. (Pages?), illustrated. \$40.00 (hardcover).

If you live and bird in Massachusetts, you know the importance of the Massachusetts Audubon Society. We've all visited an M.A.S. sanctuary, taken one of the Society's field trips, or called the Voice of Audubon. The M.A.S. blue and white triangle logos are as common on passing cars as gulls are in Gloucester Harbor. 1996 marked the Society's centennial year, and this volume was published as part of the celebration. This book has to be one of the most all-encompassing volumes on the wilds of our state ever published. It could easily have been a dry recitation of facts and figures, but instead this book entertains, surprises, and inspires, brilliantly fusing the scientific and the aesthetic.

The opening chapter sums up the history of the Massachusetts Audubon Society, starting with the lives of Minna B. Hall and Harriet Hemenway and ending with Jerry Bertrand and the creation of the Center for Biological Conservation in 1993. The next section, "Rooms in the House of Nature: a Guide to the Natural Communities of Massachusetts," forms the bulk of the book. Introducing this section, the authors gently throw a gauntlet down to many natural history enthusiasts, admonishing the "stamp collector" approach to nature that has trapped many birders (or butterfly-watchers, etc.). We have become experts in narrow fields, having lost knowledge and even interest in the rest of the wealth of our natural heritage:

More that a few promising naturalists have gotten so stuck on birds, for example, that while their life lists grow and their keenness ever sharpens, they remain forever oblivious to the delights of whales and alewife runs—to say nothing of tway blades, hairstreaks and mudpuppies. (p. 24)

We have all been guilty of this, especially in the heat of the pursuit of some rarity. How many of us can name the butterflies or damselflies that pass as we search for some species of bird near a wooded pond? Can you name most of the plants listed by the state as endangered? How many of us can name the obligate species of a vernal pool? Addressing this shortcoming leads to Massachusetts Audubon's mission to promote what the authors call "environmental literacy." At the fundamental level, this means recognizing the different habitats that are found around us and knowing at least the common organisms that inhabit those spaces. (It is humbling to realize that birds species are a small minority.) Gaining environmental literacy will help us understand the complexity and interrelatedness of ecosystems, as well as the need to preserve these

environments. But beyond this political end, the aim of the authors is to help us regain some of the awe and wonder that many of us felt for the natural world when we were children.

Each chapter in this section describes one type of natural community, and the chapters are arranged to suggest an imaginary trip from Stellwagen Bank west to Mount Greylock in the Berkshires. Some of these communities are familiar to birders: if you've birded Plum Island of Fort Hill, then you've seen a saltmarsh. But do you know what makes this habitat tick? What non-avian species are found there? Other communities hold even more surprises for birders—like the calcareous fen, for instance.

The authors explain clearly how each habitat works and what makes this place unique. Each chapter ends with a list of "indicator species" for each community: plants and animals strongly associated with each place. Depending on the community, indicator species might include trees, shrubs, ferns, wildflowers, grasses, sedges, crustacea, mollusks, dragonflies, beetles, flies, fish, reptiles, amphibians...and, of course, birds. Each chapter also explains the distribution of the habitat in the state, describes its conservation status, lists several examples to visit, and ends with a concise bibliography. It is no exaggeration to say that *The Nature of Massachusetts* is the textbook for environmental literacy for this state.

The writing is always interesting with a somewhat chatty and casual tone. Yet the book never loses sight of the hard science behind our understanding of natural communities. Each chapter seems determined to create in the reader a desire to go immediately and see these places firsthand. This is accomplished by writing that conveys a veritable sensual portrait of each habitat:

Anyone who lives near these seadrowned prairies has internalized a host of indelible impressions: canoeing into the silent heart of the marsh via a meandering creek; squadrons of tree swallows hawking for mosquitos in August; a snowy owl perched on a hay straddel in January; an unmistakable sweet tang in the nostrils; the dawn song of the seaside sparrow; the surprisingly painful bite of a greenhead fly; catching mummichogs with a dip net; watching a merlin plunge into a mixed flock of shorebirds; the mechanical jousting of fiddler crabs; the October scarlet of samphire... (p. 63)

It would take a jaded birder to read that passage and not feel an impulse to pack up scope and binocs and head post haste to Nauset Marsh.

A final chapter is titled "Wildlife Sanctuaries of the Massachusetts Audubon Society." This section offers thumbnail sketches of the habitats, plants, and animals found in each sanctuary and gives good directions to each spot.

The frosting on this very rich cake is, of course, the superb watercolors and pencil sketches by Lars Jonsson that generously pepper the book. Jonsson visited Massachusetts several times specifically to execute these illustrations.

During these extended visits, Chris Leahy and company dragged Jonsson hither and yon across the state so he could create these wonderful illustrations *in situ*. There is plenty of good nature photography around, so the use of hand-done artwork is a pleasant surprise. Jonsson's watercolors convey a sense of the ephemeral; much of the work has a quiet, intimate feel, which dovetails nicely with the personal style of the writing. The paintings are clearly the result of direct observation of these natural habitats, not just studio painting. It's this palpable sense of the personal experience of nature, combined with the immediacy of the watercolor medium, that gives Jonsson's work its appeal.

For those familiar only with Jonsson's bird illustrations, this body of work is a revelation. Here he renders subjects as diverse as a Northern Lobster, a Marbled Salamander, and Blunt-lobed Hepatica. But it is his landscapes that especially surprised me. Jonsson's mastery of light and technique places him firmly in the tradition of the great American watercolorists like Winslow Homer and John Singer Sargent. Many of the larger compositions achieve an almost impressionistic style: the background of a Northern Harrier becomes an abstraction of color; a dark and somber timber rattlesnake is perfectly set off by the brilliant yellows of a few fall leaves and some green fern fronds; a curling wave is done with such attention to subtleties of grays and greens that you half expect to hear the crash against the shore.

Of course, there are numerous birds: a preening Greater Yellowlegs in a saltpan; a singing Grasshopper Sparrow in a rank field; three Whimbrels in flight over a hazy barrier beach; a meadowlark, its breast orange-yellow against the less riotous green of a meadow. Because these works were all painted in Massachusetts, there is a sense of recognition: these are locations we know through birding, but we see them freshly through the eyes of the artist.

Fine writing and superb artwork combine to make *The Nature of Massachusetts* more than just another coffee table book. This is a reference book that is also a feast for the eye, heart, and mind—a primer on the beauty, wonder, and complexity of the natural world in our own backyard.

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