

Fourth Annual Report of the Massachusetts Avian Records Committee

Marjorie W. Rines, MARC Secretary

This is the Fourth Annual Report of the Massachusetts Avian Records Committee (MARC). Previous summaries appeared in the October 1995, August 1997, and December 1998 issues of *Bird Observer*. In addition to these references, readers may find copies of these reports at the MARC web site at <http://Massbird.org/MARC/>.

The purpose of the MARC is to evaluate reports of rare, and difficult-to-identify species. These species are those designated by the MARC on its review list (<http://massbird.org/MARC/MARCreviewlist.htm>). In addition, the MARC evaluates any new state record, and records of species that are judged to be geographically or temporally rare. Massachusetts has a long and important ornithological tradition, and readers are encouraged to support this tradition by submitting written details or photographic evidence to the MARC whenever they observe an unusual bird in Massachusetts.

The Committee's actions in 1999 resulted in the acceptance of three new species. Pacific Loon was accepted for the first time; it had been included in previous lists, but only as part of the species pair "Arctic/Pacific Loon." Common Chaffinch had previously been included in the MARC's supplemental list ("the MARC believes that wild individuals of these species may have occurred in the state, however, a captive origin cannot be discounted"). A "large, fork-tailed swift" clearly represented a new species to Massachusetts. The net addition of two species (the change of Arctic/Pacific Loon to Pacific Loon resulted in no net addition) increases the MARC's state list to a total of 466 species. The Supplemental List has been reduced from six to five, with the elevation of Common Chaffinch to the main list.

MARC members include Steve Arena, Jim Baird, Rick Heil, Chris Leahy, Blair Nikula, Jan Ortiz, Jackie Sones, Richard Veit, and Trevor Lloyd-Evans (Chair). Since the last report of the MARC, Brad Blodget retired after serving the maximum of two consecutive three-year terms, and was replaced by Jim Baird. Wayne Petersen retired as Secretary, and was replaced by Marjorie Rines.

The MARC accepted the following reports. County names follow town or community names in parentheses.

Pacific Loon (*Gavia pacifica*). One in alternate plumage at Plum Island (Essex) on 10 May 1997 (#97-25, S. Perkins et al). One in basic plumage at Plum Island on 24 May 1997 (#97-26, S. Perkins et al). One in basic plumage in Sandwich (Barnstable), 5-6 December 1997 (#97-28, M. Sylvia, K. Anderson). One in basic plumage at Plum Island 28 February 1998 (#98-3, W. Petersen et al). Since its inception, the MARC has struggled with this species, due to the difficulty in differentiating between Pacific Loon and the closely related Arctic Loon (*G. arctica*). Until now, the Committee has taken the conservative approach of including only the species pair (Arctic/Pacific Loon) on the

state list. A growing body of knowledge on this species pair has convinced the MARC that Pacific Loon can be identified in the field under the right conditions.

Albatross species, #93-19, Gay Head (Dukes), 4 and 7 October 1993, T. Barksdale. One or two individuals videotaped off Gay Head on Martha's Vineyard were submitted as probable Yellow-nosed Albatrosses. The videotape was somewhat unclear, and the Committee agreed that the bird(s) could not be identified except as albatross species.

Little Egret (*Egretta garzetta*). One on Nantucket (Dukes) 8 July 1995 (#95-21, R. Lockwood et al). One on North Monomoy Island (Barnstable), 16 May 1998 (#98-8, W. Loughran, P. Trimble, B. Nikula et al). One on Nantucket (Dukes) 16 May 1998 (#98-25, S. Perkins). This species was first reported in the state only in 1989, yet has been recorded a number of times since then. It was recorded annually on Nantucket between 1992 and 1995, quite possibly the same individual. In 1994, there were two additional reports, one in South Dartmouth, and the second in Essex. Then, in 1998, there were reports from three locations (two on the same day), all on islands off Cape Cod. An individual on Tuckernuck Island 3 June 1998, may well have been the same bird reported in May on Nantucket.

Mississippi Kite (*Ictinia mississippiensis*) #98-24, Provincetown (Barnstable), 31 May 1998, J. Trimble. This well-described individual was seen for over a minute, and in direct comparison with a Broad-winged Hawk for a good size comparison.

Bar-tailed Godwit (*Limosa lapponica*), #98-7, North Monomoy Island (Barnstable), 15 May 1998, B. Nikula. A basic plumaged bird was well described by an experienced observer.

Red-necked Stint (*Calidris ruficollis*), #98-15, Plymouth (Plymouth), 21 August to 7 September 1998, D. Ludlow et al. (details submitted by R. Fox). A breeding plumaged individual was discovered in the Saquish area of Plymouth, at the end of Duxbury Beach. Shuttle buses run to this location allowed it to be viewed and photographed by many individuals, despite the difficult location.

Thayer's Gull (*Larus thayeri*), #99-8, Provincetown (Barnstable), 15 February 1999, R. Heil, J. Smith. Acceptance of Thayer's Gull by the MARC was delayed while the American Ornithologists' Union considered lumping this species with Iceland Gull (*L. glaucooides*). When it became clear that Thayer's Gull was considered a full species, the MARC added it to the state list in 1997. The first-winter gull described in this report (#99-8) was viewed in flight for fifteen minutes, and at a distance as close as 100 feet. As one committee member said, it was "a convincing description of an unconvincing species."

Mew Gull (*Larus canus*), #99-4, Winthrop (Essex), 16 January 1999, D. Larson, S. Carlson. This adult in winter plumage was observed roosting on the beach with Ring-billed Gulls, and a careful comparison of these two similar species was included in the description.

Ancient Murrelet (*Synthliboramphus antiquus*), #99-6, Rockport (Essex), 5 February 1999, R. Frechette. The first state record of this species occurred only in 1992, with a second record in 1998.

***Selasphorus* hummingbird species**, #98-19, Leicester (Worcester), 29 October 1998, W. + C. Gardener (details submitted by M. Lynch). *Selasphorus* hummingbirds (primarily Rufous, but most immature Allen's and Rufous cannot be differentiated in the field) are now reported almost annually in Massachusetts. Any hummingbird reported after mid-October, in fact, is perhaps more likely to be a vagrant than our native Ruby-throated.

Large, fork-tailed swift, #96-21, Chappaquiddick Is. (Dukes), 14 July 1996 (A. Keith, G. Daniels, et al.). This intriguing bird was seen by a number of experienced birders, yet there was no consensus as to species. The original observers identified it as a Black Swift (*Cypseloides niger*) of the West Indian subspecies, but later observers believed it to be an *Apus* swift, most probably Common Swift (*Apus apus*). Photos were taken, but the Committee felt there was not enough resolution in the photographs to make a clear identification. This record remains frustrating, since whatever species was involved, it was clearly new to Massachusetts.

Black-backed Woodpecker (*Picoides arcticus*), #98-26, Uxbridge (Worcester), 16 March 1998 (B. Kimball). A male was convincingly described and sketched.

Fork-tailed Flycatcher (*Tyrannus savana*). One, a young bird on Ram Island in Mattapoisett (Plymouth) 29 June 1993 (#93-27, B. Blodget et al.). One, an immature bird on Plum Island (Essex), 8 August to 13 September 1998 (#98-9, S. Perkins, E. Nielsen et al. (details submitted by S. Hennin).

Ash-throated Flycatcher (*Myiarchus cinerascens*), #98-23, Barnstable (Barnstable), 20-26 December 1998, R. Pease, B. Nikula, J. Trimble. Initially identified as a Great Crested Flycatcher, the timing of this discovery in late December suggested that Ash-throated should be suspected. Further viewing by experienced observers confirmed this suspicion.

Townsend's Solitaire (*Myadestes townsendi*), #97-18, Truro (Barnstable), 2 November 1997, J. Hoye, A. McCarthy. While other reports of this unusual vagrant have come slightly later in the year, the description included convincing details of plumage, posture, and behavior.

Townsend's Warbler (*Dendroica townsendi*), #98-14, Chilmark (Dukes), 4 October 1998, A. Keith. An adult male in near-breeding plumage was carefully described, including the elimination of a potential hybrid *dendroica* warbler.

MacGillivray's Warbler (*Oporornis tolmiei*). One in South Peabody (Essex) 5 October 1998 (#98-10, R. Heil). One in Boston (Suffolk), 13 December 1998 (#98-21, R. Stymeist, M. Rines). The Peabody bird was discovered in the same location as a MacGillivray's Warbler in 1990, and by the same observer. Details by the single observer placed particular emphasis on the plumage distinctions and call notes differentiating the various *oporornis* warblers. The Boston MacGillivray's was seen sporadically over four days at the Audubon sanctuary in the Mattapan section.

Golden-crowned Sparrow (*Zonotrichia atricapilla*), #98-17, Weston (Middlesex), 9-15 April 1998, M. Hunt (details submitted by M. Rines). An adult visiting a private home in Weston was observed by a number of experienced observers.

Bullock's Oriole (*Icterus bullockii*). One in Sterling (Worcester), 3 November to 31 December 1998 (#98-20), P. + G. Tosi (details submitted by M. Lynch). One on Nantucket (Dukes), 2 January 1999 (#99-1), R. Fox, D. Duxbury. An adult male in Sterling was well described and photographed. The Nantucket bird was a female, which is similar to the female Baltimore, but the report drew attention to important criteria such as eye line and jagged wing bar which help differentiate these species.

Common Chaffinch (*Fringilla coelebs*), #97-12, Scituate (Plymouth), 3-5 April 1997, R. Faust. This individual appeared at a feeder shortly after a snowstorm, and a photograph eliminated any question of its identity. Prior to this record, Chaffinch had been included on the MARC's supplemental list, which states that captive origin cannot be excluded. This species is migratory, and there is a pattern to the sightings in North America which cluster into the end of March and early April, coinciding with their migration in Europe. The Committee believed this was compelling evidence to accept this as a true vagrant.

The following records were **not accepted** by the MARC.

Pacific Loon (*Gavia pacifica*), #99-3, Plum Island (Essex), 10 January 1999. Details submitted lacked sufficient details to positively identify this bird.

Arctic Loon (*Gavia arctica*), #98-6, Plum Island (Essex), 16 May 1998. This basic plumage loon was seen and identified independently by two groups of observers. While both descriptions and circumstances are intriguing, this would have been a first east coast record, and the Committee believed that the highest standard for acceptance should be kept for such a difficult-to-identify species.

Little Egret (*Egretta garzetta*), #98-11, N. Monomoy Island (Barnstable), 9 September 1998. The details submitted were insufficient to differentiate this bird from juvenile Snowy Egret.

Crested Caracara (*Caracara plancus*), #99-2, 3-9 January 1999, Middleboro (Plymouth). The bird that loitered for nearly a week in the Cumberland Farms fields was unquestionably a Crested Caracara, and was enjoyed by many birders. This species, however, is highly sedentary, and its natural occurrence is questionable.

Franklin's Gull (*Larus pipixcan*), #96-26, 23 April 1996. The details on this sighting were incomplete and could not definitely eliminate other species.

California Gull (*Larus californicus*), #99-5, Easton (Bristol), 23 April 1996. Details on this observation did not include a size comparison, and the observer was unable to see the bird in flight, and therefore lacked a description of the wing pattern. The Committee felt that the details of this observation could not rule out Lesser Black-backed Gull (*L. fuscus*), and that the rarity of this species in the state required the most stringent standard for acceptance.

Thayer's Gull (*Larus thayeri*), #99-7, Newburyport (Essex), 13 February 1999. This bird was seen in flight at a distance through a telescope. The Committee felt the details were insufficient to differentiate it from a dark "Kumlien's" gull.

Black Swift (*Cypseloides niger*), #96-21, Chappaquiddick Is. (Dukes), 14 July 1996. Under reports accepted, please see "large, fork-tailed swift."

Violet-green Swallow (*Tachycineta thalassina*), #98-16, Plum Island (Essex), 11 August 1998. A juvenile swallow was observed carefully by experienced observers, but the Committee felt that its similarity to juvenile Tree Swallow required a particularly high standard to be met.

Plumbeus Vireo (*Vireo plumbeus*), #93-26, Cambridge (Middlesex), 16 May 1993. This observation was made prior to the split of Plumbeus from the Solitary Vireo complex. While intriguing, the Committee felt that the observer did not have enough time to study (and describe) the bird in sufficient detail to eliminate other vireo species.

Bewick's Wren (*Thryomanes bewickii*), #99-10, Acoaxet (Bristol), 6 January 1999. The observers were not able to see the tail pattern which is the most distinctive field mark. The rarity of this species in the east made the Committee decide on a conservative approach to this report.

Brewer's Blackbird (*Euphagus cyanocephalus*), #98-13, Rehoboth (Bristol), 22 October 1998. While the bird described was consistent with Brewer's Blackbird, and the timing correlated with the typical appearance of this species in Massachusetts, the report did not address comparisons to either Common Grackle or Rusty Blackbird. 

