

Significant Recent Nesting Records from Essex County, Part 1

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Essex County, in the northeastern corner of Massachusetts, has a rich ornithological history. Many have come here to observe rare birds, the most renowned being the pioneer Ross's Gull that wintered in Newburyport harbor in 1975. Many have also written about the county's birds. The most significant work to date is Charles Wendell Townsend's *The Birds of Essex County, Massachusetts*, published in 1905. He also published a supplement to that work in 1920. These two works provide a good picture of the county's bird life at the beginning of the twentieth century.

That picture has changed dramatically over the past eighty years. Many species have become either less or more common since Townsend's time, and quite a few species unknown to him as local birds have established themselves as breeders or even year-round residents. Other species, regular then but near the edge of their ranges, have withdrawn to the north or south. The causes of these changes are beyond the scope of this article, but clearly include things like the drastic alteration of the landscape by humans, the greater amount of forested land relative to farmland, the effects of chemicals on the environment (for better or for worse), the loss of wetlands, and the gradual warming of the winters over the past hundred years.

One of my primary interests is the nesting birds of the county, fueled by my work on breeding bird atlas projects in several states and my twenty-six years of filling out nest-record cards for the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology. In the spring and early summer of 2000, I was lucky enough to find the nests, or other nesting evidence, of several species that either do not often nest in the county, or whose nests are rarely found. I also learned of additional nesting confirmations from several colleagues who regularly bird in the county. What follows is a summary of these observations, plus a few more from recent years, with background for each species on previous nest records. Threads will be evident in the various summaries; one of the most obvious is that quite a few Canadian-zone species that nest fairly commonly in the next county to the north (Rockingham County, NH) and the next county or two to the west (adjacent Middlesex County, and beyond that Worcester County) are uncommon to rare nesters in this coastal county. The bulk of the species discussed fall into this category.

The primary source I have relied on, in addition to Townsend, is *Birds of Massachusetts*, by Richard Veit and Wayne Petersen. This definitive work on the state's birds, which includes many of the species maps that were intended for the unpublished Massachusetts Breeding Bird Atlas, was published in 1993 by the Massachusetts Audubon Society. Another important source is the sixth (1988) edition of the *Birds of Essex County, Massachusetts: A Field List*, published jointly by the Essex County Ornithological Club, the Essex County Greenbelt Association, and the Peabody Museum of Salem (now the Peabody-Essex Museum). This county checklist

has been extensively revised over the last few years, and the seventh edition is due out in the near future. I have also consulted Edward Howe Forbush's *Birds of Massachusetts and Other New England States* (three volumes: 1925, 1927, and 1929), Arthur Cleveland Bent's *Life Histories of North American Birds* (many dates), and Griscom and Snyder's *The Birds of Massachusetts* (1955). Finally, I have drawn on *Bird Observer* records as well as personal communications from birding companions, who have provided valuable information on some of the species discussed.

In Part 1 of this article, I cover five species in the first half of the AOU checklist order. Part 2, to be published in a future issue, will treat nine passerine species.

Common Eider, *Somateria mollissima*. Historically, Common Eiders nested south only to about the mid-coast of Maine (Bent 1925, Forbush 1925). In the 1970s, however, some eider chicks were introduced from Maine to Penikese Island in Buzzards Bay, and eventually these birds started to breed on this and others of the Elizabeth Islands (Veit and Petersen 1993). Since then there have been occasional nesting records from Buzzards Bay and Boston Harbor. Just this year (2000), Veit found a pair with three chicks at Muskeget Island off Nantucket (*Bird Observer*). Interestingly, however, nest records are hard to come by in Essex County, despite the presence of likely habitat on the several islands offshore from Rockport. I have heard first- and second-hand reports of eider chicks being seen in that area, and these are no doubt valid reports, but eiders often swim some distance with their young after hatching, so unless the young are very tiny or a nest is found, nesting confirmation is tricky.

On July 28, 2000, I observed at least three young Common Eiders swimming and diving with adults off Straitsmouth Island in Rockport. Although these young were about two-thirds grown, this observation adds to the evidence of nesting in the county. Meanwhile, Steve Mirick (pers. comm.) is not aware of eiders nesting anywhere on the New Hampshire coast except at the Isles of Shoals, though he has seen small young along the mainland coast in Rye. It is probably only a matter of time until tiny young are reported in Rockport, or a nest is located on one of the islands.

Osprey, *Pandion haliaetus*. Historically, there has existed a large gap in the nesting range of the Osprey between Cape Cod and the southern Maine coast. Veit and Petersen (1993) speculated that this was "...perhaps due to a lack of suitable nesting sites or appropriate feeding areas." Townsend (1905) stated that "Many years ago, this Hawk bred at Ipswich and Georgetown, but it is now seen in Essex County during the spring and autumn migrations only." Thus until recently there were apparently no nesting records on the North Shore for perhaps 150 years, and it is not clear whether the species was ever a common nester here like it is farther north and south along the Atlantic coast. Forbush (1927) does not mention this gap in the nesting range, but says only that the Osprey was a "casual summer resident" in Massachusetts outside the southeastern counties and a "rare local summer resident" in New Hampshire and Vermont.

The first nesting attempt in the county in modern times was in 1989 when Bob Brophy of Essex erected a nest platform in the Essex salt marshes, and a pair of

Ospreys built a nest on it. They or their successors have tried every year since then, but have apparently never been able to bring off young (Bob Brophy, pers. comm.). Great Horned Owls are the primary suspects, since they nest commonly in the area, as close as Choate (formerly Hog) Island, within half a mile of the platform. It is also possible that some nestings have failed for reasons other than predation.

Whatever the reasons, Ospreys did not succeed in fledging young in the county until 1997, when, after a failed nesting attempt on Nelson Island in Rowley in 1996, the same or another pair carried off all the sticks from that platform and built a new nest on the platform at the marshward edge of Cross Farm Hill on Plum Island, a few miles to the south. (Both sites are on the Parker River National Wildlife Refuge; Cross Farm Hill is technically in Ipswich.) To my knowledge, this pair has succeeded in fledging young that year and every year since.

In 2000 I was able to watch the reproductive attempts on both platforms. While the established pair continued to add weight to their huge nest, which may eventually topple the leaning tower it occupies, a new pair set up housekeeping on the Nelson Island platform. The Plum Island pair got the earlier start, and by June 9 I could see at least two small young in the nest; these young looked large enough to fledge by July 20. The Nelson Island pair, in contrast, started later and built a pitifully small nest, with a layer of sticks only a few inches high, giving me the impression that they were first-time nesters. They seemed to incubate forever, and I was concluding that they had failed when I finally saw a single small chick on July 8. That chick looked large enough to fledge by August 6. (The young do not fly until they are 51-59 days old, per Baicich and Harrison 1997.) On August 30, I watched the fledged juvenile at Nelson Island both on the platform and flying in circles, at all times clutching a fish. I'd like to think she caught that fish herself (a significant darkish band on the upper breast indicated that the bird was a female), but her mother was in the area too, so the young one may have had help.



A footnote to this saga involves concomitant nesting attempts in the Great Bay watershed in Rockingham County. Dick Hughes (pers. comm.) has been monitoring the Ospreys around that huge saltwater estuary for a decade, and informed me that 1989 was also the first nesting year for Ospreys in coastal New Hampshire in modern times. At least five sites have been active, the most successful of which, in Durham, produced 20 fledglings in the eleven years from 1989 through 1999. Another site, in Stratham, fledged 16 young in seven nesting seasons through 1999.

A second footnote involves the nest platform in the Rumney Marsh in Revere, only yards outside Essex County on its southern border with Suffolk County. Birds nesting on this platform have also produced fledglings in the late 1990s (Geoff Wood, pers. comm.). In addition, I learned of two other 2000 nestings of Ospreys in

Gloucester (Jerry Soucy, pers. comm.). Collectively, these data show that the historical gap for nesting Ospreys between Cape Cod and southern Maine is filling in, and all indications are that the species will continue breeding in the area.

Sharp-shinned Hawk, *Accipiter striatus*. On March 24, 2000, Linda Cook and I visited Choate Island in Essex in hopes of finding a winter roost of Long-eared Owls. Linda had experience with this species, and we thought that the forest of mature Norway spruce on that island, planted around the 1930s by the Crane family, might be a good place to find such a roost. We didn't find any Long-eared Owls, but we did find Great Horned Owls and Red-tailed Hawks nesting within a hundred feet of each other! In view of the owls' propensity to eat everything within range, including baby raptors, this was remarkable. It appeared that the owls had taken over the hawks' nest from previous years, and the hawk pair had chosen not to move far to make their next attempt. In any case, we knew we wanted to monitor those nests.

With the encouragement and support of the Trustees of Reservations (TTOR), the land trust that owns Choate and two adjacent islands and manages them as a wildlife refuge, we made several return visits to the island. The next was on May 12, by which time both nests had visible young. More significantly, we found a pair of adult Sharp-shinned Hawks that day, which seemed to be holding a hunting territory some distance away from the horned owls (logically enough). This was exciting, since I knew that there were no modern nest records for this species in Essex County, and I was hopeful that they would stay to nest (although their lack of alarm at our presence made me wonder about this). So we made additional visits on May 19, June 8 and 28, July 7, 12, 18, and 26, and August 3, each time via one of the TTOR launches.

Finding the Sharpshin nest proved to be very difficult. During each visit in May and June, we saw the birds hunting in the same small area. Our intensive searches revealed two candidate nests, but we never saw the birds visit these sites, making us suspect that those nests could have been Sharpshin nests from previous years. It wasn't until July 7 that we found the active nest, when the female went to it with food, despite my standing only about 20 yards away. It was well concealed about 70 feet up in the canopy of a mature Norway spruce, which is on the high side for a Sharpshin nest (Bent 1937, Forbush 1927). We then found a good place from which to view the nest, and on the next couple of visits I took a scope so we could set up on the three young. Remarkably, the adults continued to be unalarmed by our presence: neither bird ever gave alarm calls, which I had heard in no uncertain terms from both adults on three other occasions in Ohio and New Hampshire when I had been near Sharpshin nests. This pair continued to engage in food exchanges and feeding visits in our presence. The male seemed to do all the hunting, which is typical (Ehrlich et al. 1988); he would hand the luckless bird off in midair to the female, who made all the food deliveries. This also is typical behavior (Baicich and Harrison 1997.)

The young were branching on July 18, and by July 26 they had fledged. We were entertained watching the young chasing the adults around for food on that date and on August 3, and it seemed, though they were hard to count, that all three had fledged. This chronology would have put the hatching dates in the latter half of June, since the

young fledge at about 23-28 days (Bent 1937, Baicich and Harrison, 1997, Forbush 1927). One can infer from the two older sources that this was a rather late nesting for the species.

Late or not, it was a rare nesting for Essex County. Forbush (1927) and Bent (1937), as well as Townsend (1905), all suggest that Sharpshins were not uncommon as nesters in Massachusetts, including Essex County, in the nineteenth century and earlier. However, I have not found evidence of any other county nest records in the twentieth century (this one just made it); the last I am aware of was the collection of two nests in Peabody in 1896, one with four eggs and one with five, by one E. B. Meade (Tom French, pers. comm.). And if it were not for the planted spruce forest on Choate Island, this nest would be much less likely, since the birds prefer dense conifers, especially spruces (Bent 1937, Baicich and Harrison 1997). This is also my own experience for three of the four nest locations I have found, the fourth having been in a dense white pine grove.

Forster's Tern, *Sterna forsteri*. David Rimmer and Russ Hopping first found Forster's Terns nesting in a salt-marsh colony of Common Terns near the mouth of the Parker River on the Parker River National Wildlife Refuge on June 10, 1991. The nest contained two eggs but could not be revisited, so the outcome is unknown. This was the northernmost nesting record for the species on the Atlantic coast, and apparently the first nest ever found in New England (Rimmer and Hopping 1991, Veit and Petersen 1993). Rick Heil (pers. comm.) informed me that he and Simon Perkins had seen three territorial adult Forster's Terns in the same location a year earlier on June 23, 1990, including one in courtship flight with a Common Tern, *Sterna hirundo*. He also found and photographed a Forster's Tern nest with three eggs in the same place on July 11, 1992. An adult aggressively defended the nest and later returned to it to incubate.

Since then, although one or two birds have been seen in spring in the refuge area in several different years (*Bird Observer* records), only one other nest has been discovered. This was on May 26, 1997, when Jim MacDougall and I were kayaking along Pine Island Creek in Newbury, a bit north of the Parker River. As we were passing a colony of nesting Common Terns in the salt marsh, a single Forster's Tern came off a nest within our sight and attacked us until we left the area. The mate was not in evidence in the few minutes we observed the nest; we could not determine whether it contained eggs, and we did not wish to land and disturb the bird any further. This nest was not revisited. In combination with the early-90s nestings, however, this observation provides evidence that Forster's Terns may have nested on the refuge all during the 1990s,



although it remains to be seen whether the species will consolidate its nesting toehold in the region.

Red-bellied Woodpecker, *Melanerpes carolinus*. The Red-bellied Woodpecker, unknown in Townsend's time and still a rare vagrant from the south in the mid-1950s (Griscom and Snyder 1955), has invaded northern Massachusetts over the last 10 to 15 years. My opinion is that this northward range expansion is probably connected with climatic changes, namely warmer winters. The species has established itself as a nonmigratory, nesting member of the county's avifauna, and it will likely stay with us as long as the winters continue to be mild. It has also begun to colonize the northern New England states: Red-bellieds have nested as far north as Plymouth, New Hampshire (Susan Fogleman, pers. comm.).




Despite the birds' increasing presence in the area, however, Red-bellied nests in Essex County have mostly evaded discovery. The first nests in Massachusetts were found in Natick and Attleboro in 1977 (Veit and Petersen 1993), but it was not until 1993 that Rick Heil found a pair nesting in West Newbury, and I observed a pair at an active nesting cavity in a friend's yard in Ipswich. These records finally established the

species as nesting in the county. I fully expected reports of nests to become more frequent since then, but no nests were reported in the county in the *Bird Observer* records through 1999. The closest was a report from Jim Brown of an adult with a juvenile in Boxford in August 1996.

Then, on June 27, 2000, Linda Cook and I observed a male working on an apparent nest cavity beside the Ipswich River in Ipswich — apparent because the pair later copulated on the top of the snag containing the cavity. I watched subsequent activity, such as the birds entering or leaving the hole, several times over the next four weeks. I did not see any activity on July 28 or August 2. Since I never saw the adults carrying food, or heard young calling from within the nest (and baby woodpeckers can be very loud), it is likely that the nesting attempt failed. Nevertheless, there is no question that Red-bellieds have become well established as a resident species; in my opinion, they are now almost as common as Hairy Woodpeckers, *Picoides villosus*.

A delightful footnote has been provided by Marjorie Rines (pers. comm. and *Bird Observer* records), who has found them to be double-brooded in the Middlesex Fells Reservation in Medford, in adjacent Middlesex County, through most of the 1990s. This was apparently the first documented instance of this phenomenon in New England, and has surprised some observers in view of the literature (e.g., Ehrlich et al. 1988), who posit that the birds raise one brood in the north, although they raise as many as two or even three in the south. However, Baicich and Harrison (1997) simply

assert that the species is “double-brooded, rarely treble-brooded,” without regard to geography. Although the nest I observed this year seemed to be of brand-new construction, the late dates indicate that it might have been a second nesting, or a second attempt after a failed first nesting. 

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Jim Berry, who lives in Ipswich, is a member of the Bird Observer staff. He is currently working on a new book on the birds of Essex County to update and replace Townsend's seminal work of a century ago, now long out of print. He would like to thank Marta Hersek and Rick Heil for reviewing a draft of this article, and Wayne Castonguay, Don Paquin, and David Babson of The Trustees of Reservations for being so generous with their time in facilitating the many visits to Choate Island to monitor the nesting Sharp-shinned Hawks. Finally, he is grateful to the many birding companions who graciously shared their observations of nesting birds in Essex County.

