

Wallace Bailey: The Passing of a Giant

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I first met Wallace Bailey in 1958 when, as a youth of 14 years, I participated in my first Massachusetts Audubon Society (MAS) Cape Cod Campout. We were on a boat trip out of Hyannis and Wallace was one of the leaders. I can still remember his imposing size, his oversized 10X60 German binoculars, and his prominence at the bow as the boat plowed through flocks of milling shearwaters off Monomoy. Not only was it my first pelagic trip, it was the first time I'd ever been thrown together with a large group of adult birders, most of whom knew far more about birds than I thought was possible. Wallace's distinctive, high-pitched voice was reeling off the names of distant birds, most of which to me were only dim images in a field guide at the time. "*Cory's Shearwater, settin on the wata!*," announced Wallace in his distinctive Maine accent, the initial proclamation soon followed by a string of field marks that somehow distinguished the subtly-plumaged seabird from all the other shearwaters seen that day. Spellbound, I tried to stick as close as possible to this birding giant with the oversized binoculars in order to glean every nugget possible about seabird field identification during the trip. Fortunately for me, there were plenty of shearwaters that day, as well as jaegers, terns, and tiny phalaropes — all new and unfamiliar to a wide-eyed youth on his first pelagic trip.

On the day that followed, the Campout group headed for Morris Island and Monomoy. I recall seeing my first Cape May Warbler while standing in Wallace's shadow, and later, watching in awe as he deftly picked out the many shorebird species assembled on the vast Monomoy flats that morning. He was like a birding Pied Piper as he strode across the sand, an eager band of followers trailing dutifully behind. During periodic stops, Wallace would graciously point out some distant treasure — a flock of rare Hudsonian Godwits extracting small clams from the sand, a line of drilling dowitchers, and a dancing Wilson's Phalarope — all lifers for a boy whose previous birding experiences had primarily focused on the birds of woodlands and fields near his home. For me, this was the first of a long association and friendship with Wallace Bailey — a friendship punctuated by respect, admiration, and numerous laughs through the years.

Wallace Bailey was born in Bangor, Maine, in 1924, although most of his adolescence was spent in Stoneham, Massachusetts. It was in Stoneham that Wallace discovered birds, and soon his passion for things feathered was exceeded only by his life-long interest in a willowy, out-going brunette named Priscilla Hale — the love of his life who remained his partner until his untimely passing on September 20, 2000. As a young man Wallace worked as a trouble-shooter for Westinghouse Electric — a job for which he was ideally suited given his exceptional creativity and mechanical ability. It was during the Westinghouse years that Wallace began carrying a "little black bird book" — a book that was to be the genesis of his first publication.

Ever creative, it was during the post-World War II years that Wallace decided to purchase a "duck" — an amphibious military surplus vehicle. What better way to reach prime birding areas, such as Crane Beach in Ipswich or Monomoy Island on Cape Cod? With his little black bird book for keeping records and his amphibious

duck to help him reach prime, yet inaccessible birding areas, Wallace began systematically gathering information and records about the status of birds in the Commonwealth. The years following the war were critical in galvanizing Wallace's understanding and appreciation of Massachusetts bird life, and with Priscilla's literary skill as a backup, in 1955 he completed his first publication, *Birds in Massachusetts — When and Where to Find Them*. This modest volume for the first time in the venerable history of Massachusetts ornithology provided Bay State birders with precisely the information they needed in order to put their field observations into an historical context, and guided them in their pursuit of birds throughout the Commonwealth. This book, subsequent publications notwithstanding, is practically as valuable in the year 2000 as it was the day it was published.

Ruth Emery, the original Voice of Audubon at the MAS, described young Wallace Bailey as "always appearing somewhat uneasy and looking too big for his clothes," hardly surprising considering his gangly, 6'6" stature and his sometimes retiring personality. Despite his occasional reticence, Wallace had a marvelous sense of humor and was a gifted field ornithologist whose contributions to Massachusetts ornithology were considerable. In addition to adding Wandering Tattler and Cassin's Kingbird to an already impressive Massachusetts state bird list, Wallace's many discoveries of rare and unusual birds, especially on Cape Cod and at his beloved Monomoy, filled the record books for more than half a century. Besides his birding accomplishments, two additional publications appeared during his tenure at MAS — *Birds of the Cape Cod National Seashore* (1968) and *Monomoy Wilderness* (1972). For many birders active today, however, his discovery that Cape Cod Bay can provide a treasure trove for rare and unusual seabirds following severe northeasterly storms will possibly stand as one of his most enduring legacies.

In 1959 Allen H. Morgan, MAS Executive Vice President, invited Wallace Bailey to assume directorship of the Society's recently acquired Wellfleet Bay Wildlife Sanctuary. Wallace's mechanical ability, combined with his passion for coastal birds, made him a natural for the job. Among his most important contributions during those early years on Cape Cod was the establishment of beach buggy wildlife tours (an activity no longer sanctioned by MAS, but perfectly appropriate in their day) on Nauset Beach and Monomoy National Wildlife Refuge. With the development of the beach buggy wildlife tours, many hundreds of people were introduced to Wallace's birding skill, along with the knowledge that he had garnered from years of watching shorebirds on Cape Cod.

Almost as significant as the beach buggy wildlife tours was Wallace's institution of hiring summer interns to run these popular coastal birding trips. Through the years this corps of youthful summer naturalists spawned some of the keenest field ornithologists in New England during the last half century. Familiar names such as Brad Blodget, Richard Forster, Brian Harrington, Rick Heil, Blair Nikula, Kimberly Smith, and Vernon Laux are but a few of Wallace Bailey's alumni. All of these luminaries, including the author, have an immense sense of gratitude to Wallace Bailey for giving them the opportunity to experience Cape Cod during the Golden Years of the 1960s and 1970s, as well as to having been privileged to benefit from his knowledge, guidance, and good humor. Wallace, the birding community salutes you! 🐦