

A Quadding 2000 Diary

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Local listing may well be the most popular form of listing in birding. If you don't agree, think of the last time you saw a new bird in your yard; didn't it ring a little bell in your mind? Yardbird.

In 1998 I began a new form of local listing. My goal was to get the maximum number of species in an area defined by a topographic map. Topo maps are often called "quads," hence my new verb: quadding. My quad is an area defined on the northeast by the intersection of Routes 128 and 93, on the southeast by Fresh Pond in Cambridge, on the northwest by Great Meadows National Wildlife Refuge, and on the southwest by Sherman Bridge in Sudbury. In 2000, I kept a sporadic diary of my efforts for the year.

January 1. A clean slate, but pickings can be slim in January except for ducks. One of the tricks to quadding is understanding the ponds in your area, and what kind of waterfowl you can expect in each. Arlington Reservoir is easily the most productive pond in my area, but it was frozen, so most of the Res-type birds have come to Mystic Lake, right outside my door.

I cruised the entire lake, racking up many easy species, both land birds and water birds: Pied-billed Grebe and Great Blue Heron were good for New Year's day. On to the Brooks Estate in Medford, where I scored a woodpecker hat trick with Downy, Hairy, and Red-bellied. The Middlesex Fells in Winchester produced a Brown Creeper and Winter Wren. A Northern Shrike at Dunback Meadow in Lexington was a high point, although this has been an outstanding winter for shrikes, so it was to be expected eventually. A total of 49 species for New Year's Day. Next year I'll work at breaking fifty.

January 9. Went to Dunback Meadow in the morning, and it was one of those days that was just birdy. Walked to the bottom of the path, and there were birds everywhere, a cacophony of robins, sparrows, finches, chipping and chattering, scuffling leaves, flying around. I stopped and just stood there, watching, looking at every flash of movement, enchanted. A Fox Sparrow popped up to grab a crab apple. A Hermit Thrush flew across the path. Later, walking through the red pine woods, a couple of titmice started scolding, not an unusual event, but one always checks. Sure enough, a Barred Owl peered down at me. Can life get any better?



Barred Owl. All photographs by the author

Well, yes. I drove out toward Lincoln to look for bluebirds, and as I drove down Trapelo Road I found a couple of Wild Turkeys. Well, perhaps I should say they found me. I noticed cars in front of me slowing down, and as I drove along I realized there were two toms strutting by the side of the road. I pulled over on to a side street, and stopped to watch.



Wild Turkeys

Both birds rushed up to my car, and started circling it, pecking at the wheels, doors, and fenders, and leering at me through the window. As other drivers saw this happening, they would slow down or stop, and the turkeys would turn their affections to new arrivals, and if an impatient motorist dared to blow a horn, the turkeys would yodel their signature gobble, and rush at the offender. I had my camera with me, but it was difficult to get good shots because I was laughing so hard.

January 30. Two county birds in one day! I went to Waltham and found a Black-headed Gull that had been reported by another birder, and then went to Dunback Meadow, looking for owls. I was just coming out of the woods when I heard crows, and looked up to see them chasing a buteo. When I raised my glasses, I saw a white rump patch; could I have mistaken a harrier for a buteo? But then the bird banked to the side, and there were those big black wrist patches — a Rough-legged Hawk.



Black-headed Gull

February 11. There are rhythms to the year inland. Almost every year around the second week in February, Red-breasted Mergansers show up on Mystic Lake and the Mystic River. Today all three species of merganser puddled in the small, unfrozen section of water at the base of the dam on Mystic Lake. I will need to wait for other sea ducks until April (if I am lucky) or October, when they often drop into an inland pond or lake.

February 18. The weather has been relatively mild, and there is no snow cover, but there is a forecast of a large snowstorm, my last chance to do some serious daytime owling before the whitewash is buried under the white stuff. I scoured the pines at two favorite areas with no luck, then finally to Dunback Meadow. The Barred Owl was still in the upper pines, then I went to the lower white pine grove. I found a

couple of oldish pellets and whitewash, but finally noticed two small spots of fresh whitewash on the ground, and looked up. The tiny face of a Saw-whet Owl was peering down at me.

March 2. Last night I went to Dunback Meadow to listen for woodcock dancing, an annual ritual that is one of my favorites. As the light dimmed, I waited in the middle of the meadow as the warmth of the day dissipated. I finally heard a single woodcock around 5:30, peenting, peenting, 67 times without launching, and then he shut up. I was about to give up, when he took up the call again, more emphatic and faster this time, and a second bird could be heard in the distance. Finally, the dance. The incredible twittering and whistling notes that on the one hand give me the shivers, while at the same time making me laugh.

Today, at Arlington Reservoir (the best damned duckpond per square foot in the state), much of the ice had receded, and there were 57 Ring-necks and three Canvasbacks. This is a difficult time of year for a birder. The first wave of early spring migrants is in — blackbirds, Killdeer, woodcock, and Turkey Vulture. This gets me all excited about migration, expecting something new around every corner, but it's a long wait for the next wave. It's another month before the phoebes get in, and even later for the swallows. In the meantime, however, waterfowl are on the move, so I shall enjoy that.

March 7. Looking for owls is always a good way to kill time at this time of year. I decided to poke around the pines at Horn Pond in Woburn. Working along the edge of the woods, I noticed whitewash here and there, but no owls, until I hit a mother lode of whitewash. I looked up, and a Long-eared Owl returned my gaze. A fine bird for Woburn.

The Carolina Wren Rule. In 1993 Bob Stymeist came up with a new birding game — find a Carolina Wren in every town in the Commonwealth. I joined him, and we had a ball. A particular coup was finding a wren on a town line, where we could count the bird for both towns — a twofer. For a while we would try to spish these birds over the town line, but we finally decided we could count the bird from wherever we were standing, so we could look at it in one town, then step over the town line and count it again.

So, what does this have to do with anything? On March 13 there was a Greater White-fronted Goose at Nine-Acre Corner in Concord. I went to look for it, and it was in a farm field barely outside the line of my quad. I drove up the street and parked just inside my quad and raised my binoculars. Ah, yes, the Carolina Wren Rule. Tick!



Long-eared Owl

April 2. Two glorious weekend days in a row. On Saturday phoebes were singing everywhere, and a few Tree Swallows here and there. Went to Hanscom Field on Saturday to check out the kestrels, and counted 26. This has become another annual ritual; for some reason, kestrels congregate here in large numbers, and can be seen perching on runway lights and towers, and hovering over the short grass. As if that were not enough, Eastern Meadowlarks sang, and an immature Northern Shrike posed for a photograph.

On Sunday, a breezy afternoon at Arlington Reservoir was wonderful. Swallows were zig-zagging across the sky and down to the water, and back again, little snaps of their calls including the raspberry-like call of Northern Rough-winged Swallow. There were at least three Rough-wings, and at least fifteen Tree Swallows. At one point it was touch and go for a swallow as a Merlin strafed it mid-sky, but the swallow won — this time.

April 22. Earth Day yesterday (and incidentally my birthday). Karsten Hartel had planned an Arlington Birdathon to celebrate (Earth Day, not my birthday), but it poured so we extended the count to the weekend. Today there were sporadic breaks in the downpours, so I went to Arlington Reservoir to look for swallows. On an overcast day in April there can be a huge build-up of swallows at the Res, and two years ago I had five species on April 20.

I set up my telescope on the bank, and scanned with my binoculars. Nice swallows. But my eye was caught by some movement on the surface of the water in the distance. I stared, a tiny gray figure skittering in an erratic circular movement — just like a phalarope! Shaking slightly I wiped the mist off my scope, and sure enough, it was. I rushed back to the car for my cell phone, and dialed Karsten's number. "Karsten. Get over here. Phalarope at the Res." Minutes later he showed up, and stared through the scope, and after a few more calls other birders showed up to enjoy this lovely Red Phalarope. Happy birthday to me

May 2. I admit it, I've been a little mad. I have resorted to counting the species I've heard the mockingbirds imitating. I've stared for hours at flocks of swallows hoping for something different. I've glared at the weatherman every night. But today, today . . .

It started with rain, and I was leading a club trip. Only three people showed up, and we spent over an hour slogging through the Middlesex Fells, trying to appreciate the two Yellow-rumps and single Ruby-crown. Then at 7:15, all of a sudden something happened. One, two, four, ten Yellow-rumps, a Black-and-White, a Nashville. Wow, a Canada — really early for that! Zit, zat, they flew over our heads, and we tried to follow them, tried to pick out different birds through our rain-blurred binoculars. Within two minutes it was over. The small river of birds had flown out of sight, and there was no way to follow.

We gloated and laughed, elated by the experience. This was what we were waiting for. Migration is underway.

May 23. I haven't sat down to update this diary for three weeks. Why? Birds.

I can't remember a better spring migration. Sure, I remember some times when

there have been a few good days strung together, but this has been spectacular. The Brooks Estate has been teeming with birds — day after day, clumps of them, singing or silent, hidden or in blazing color. Try to imagine; the sun behind me and three male Indigo Buntings, together, foraging at the top of a tree. A Wood Thrush perches at the top of a dead snag, silhouetted against the sky, and singing his heart out, with the feathers of his throat vibrating in concert.

Four days ago the weather turned after a nice stretch. Two days of rain and wind, and then yesterday was OK. A long walk in the Middlesex Fells yielded Yellow-bellied and Acadian flycatchers, nice birds any day, but the Acadian is particularly neat; I rarely get to see them in migration.

Today, I went birding with Renee LaFontaine, and when I arrived at her house, the woodlot across the street was alive with song. Redstarts, Magnolias, Blackpolls, Bay Breasts, Chestnut-sided. Two Alder Flycatchers were calling. Later, at Wildwood, another Yellow-bellied, this time singing. A good weekend for flycatchers.

May 25. As I write this, it is 6 p.m., and I am listening to an Orchard Oriole singing outside my window.

May 28. By the end of May your expectations lower a bit. There is still some migration going on, but the bulk of it is over, and you don't really expect any sort of fallout. Yet, in the past three days, I've seen seventeen species of warbler, including my third Mourning of the year, six Swainson's Thrushes (for some reason, a difficult bird in my area), five Yellow-bellied Flycatchers (including three all audible at once in Burlington), and an Olive-sided Flycatcher.

June 13. Switch from migration-bird mode to breeding-bird mode. On June 3, Red-bellied Woodpeckers in the Fells were feeding young which were visible in the nest hold. They will fledge within a day or so, and with any luck the adults will bring up a second brood, as they have been doing for at least six years.

I have begun my weekly grassland bird censuses at Hanscom Field with Ron Lockwood, which affords me two more "ticks," with Grasshopper Sparrows and Upland Sandpipers.

July 13. A good time of year to look for bad misses. I can only do so much in terms of finding migrants, but it is always a shame to miss a breeding species. I have missed both cuckoos, but since the Middlesex Fells is the best place I know for these in my area, there is nothing more I can do.

I have also missed Northern Goshawk. I spent a fair amount of time in March and April searching in areas I have found them in the past, but no luck. By July, young should be fledged and hopefully active, so, today I decided to take a walk at Sandy Pond in Lincoln to look for a Gos, or a Pileated, or anything else to stir the soul. I walked down the path, eyes high, ears alert.

A short distance along I heard a scrabbling in the leaves, then a clicking against the bark of nearby trees. Expecting a squirrel I glanced to the right, but saw a large, brown creature scrambling up the trunk of the nearest tree. Fisher! But there was movement at a nearby tree, too, and I looked into the eyes of a second fisher. My soul was stirred.



Fisher

August 4. I have been spending a lot of time looking for butterflies and exploring, looking for interesting habitat. This has turned up a new area which I can't wait to explore in breeding season next year. A couple of weeks ago Renee called me to report a conservation area in Woburn she had just read about, so we went there in the rain to check it out. It's an uphill path along a brook that moves swiftly through a rocky bed, first through mixed coniferous and deciduous woods, then through a hemlock monoculture. Louisiana Waterthrush? Acadian Flycatcher? It's fun to dream a little.

August 12, 9:15 p.m.: A Screech-Owl sings outside my window.

September 11. Fall migration for songbirds is in full swing. People look at me as if I'm crazy when I say this is my favorite season of the year, asking "not spring?" Well, not only do you get warblers, but you also have much better chances to find sparrows.

Over the weekend I went birding with Peter and Fay Vale, with the express goal of finding a Connecticut Warbler. We went to Dunback Meadow, and had a wonderful time, tallying 14 species of warblers. Afterwards, we went to nearby Hayden Woods, where we were thrilled to hear a Winter Wren singing, and a couple more nice flocks of warblers. When we walked back to our cars, I offered to give them my day list, but discovered it had fallen out of my pocket, undoubtedly when I had made a pit stop just before leaving the woods.

Peter and Fay had errands to do, so we said goodbye, and I traipsed back into the woods to retrieve my notebook. I stopped at the last spot we had seen a couple of Nashville Warblers, and spished a bit, just to have another look. Sure enough, up popped a bird with a yellow breast and eye ring. But the hood was brown and extended down to the chest, and — whoa — look at the size of that thing! Looong undertail coverts. Connecticut Warbler.

October 7. Here are four reasons I like fall birding: Orange-crowned Warbler, Yellow-breasted Chat, Vesper Sparrow, and Dickcissel.

Some species are just easier to find in the fall than in spring, and sometimes you have a day when you just hit the jackpot. That's what it was like today. Any one of these species can be missed in a year, but today I saw all of these, including three Orange-crowneds and two Dickcissels.

Most were at the Waltham Street Farms in Lexington, which is farmed for corn. This is a magnet for birds at this time of year. As I walk between the rows of corn, Savannah and Chipping sparrows scatter like shrapnel, and the gentle ticks of Palm

and Yellow-rumped warblers surround me, and the lure of discovering “good” birds is enticing.

October 27. 12:15 p.m. phone conversation with Wayne Petersen. “Wayne, is there any plumage of Eastern Bluebird with no rufous at all on the breast?” Long pause.

“Marj, are you trying to tell me you have a Mountain Bluebird?”

“Yup.”

Wayne was at work, not too far from the Concord wastewater treatment plant where I had discovered this bird, and was able to come over, with two other friends from work. We delighted in watching the bird as it moved to a nearby tangle to forage for pokeberries. High fives all around. [Note: see Field Note in this issue.]

November 1. A trip to Cambridge Reservoir in Waltham is excellent — both Horned and Red-necked grebes, and three Surf Scoters. Any one of these would have been a good find inland, but three are excellent. It is important to check these larger bodies of water regularly at this time of year, since this is prime time for finding migrating seabirds.

November 22. Today I worked some areas outside Route 128, and as I passed a conservation area cornfield, I stopped to test my luck. Walking across the field, I noticed the flutter of a large flock of birds rising and alighting again a short distance away. Pipits maybe? As I raised my glasses, I saw the unmistakable masks of Horned Larks, but as they periodically flew and settled, I could make out a rattling chatter that made me look even closer. Sure enough, a Lapland Longspur, not easy to find in Middlesex County.

I wasn't far from the Concord sewer beds, so I ventured in. I scanned the flock of bluebirds at the far edge, hoping perhaps the Mountain Bluebird had returned, and was startled to see a bright yellow breast on a slightly larger bird in the same tree. Clearly a kingbird, but what kind? My mind wandered back a week or so when I traveled out of my quad to see the first state record of Tropical Kingbird in Hingham, but this bird was clearly different, and the white outer tail feathers quickly identified it as a Western Kingbird. Love those sewer beds.

December 31. Not much action the past few weeks, but that isn't very surprising. A total for the year of 208 species, and since my goal was 200, I am extremely pleased.

No New Year's party tonight. Going out at the crack of dawn with Renee to nail down every species we can drag up in my quad tomorrow. We have a good list of target species we have lined up. We have a chance at Snow Goose, Orange-crowned Warbler, chat, and Clay-colored Sparrow. Tomorrow, a clean slate. 🦋

Marjorie Rines is a part-time naturalist at Massachusetts Audubon Society, President of Bird Observer, and Secretary of the Massachusetts Avian Records Committee. To watch her progress on her year 2001 quad list, plus a link to her complete 2000 list, visit <<http://mrines.com/Birds/Quadding/>>.