

Significant Recent Nesting Records from Essex County, Part 2

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Note: Part 1 of this article, covering significant recent nesting records in Essex County for several nonpasserine species, was published in the December 2000 issue of *Bird Observer* (Vol. 28 No. 6). Part 2 completes the article. Please refer to the introduction in Part 1 for background information on field ornithology in the county and the primary references used.

Blue-headed Vireo, *Vireo solitarius*. Townsend (1905) cited the Blue-headed Vireo as an “uncommon summer resident” in Essex County; his friend J. A. Farley told him “that this bird breeds not uncommonly in white pine woods throughout the County.” Forbush (1929) said the same. Veit and Petersen (1993) describe this species as breeding south to northern New Jersey, and as a “fairly common breeder from Worcester County west,” but “rare and local [as a nesting species] in eastern Massachusetts and absent from Cape Cod and the Islands.” There is a map accompanying the text, originally done for the unpublished Massachusetts Breeding Bird Atlas. The map displays the breeding distribution of the species in the state from 1974-1979, the years of the atlas field work. It shows not a single nest confirmation east of Worcester County except for one in Bristol County south of Boston. Essex County had two “probable” nestings during the atlas period.

This species is regularly seen in the county in summer in the right habitat, and it has no doubt continued to nest here throughout the twentieth century. However, few nests have been reported in recent decades. Tom Aversa found a male with a juvenile in Boxford on June 19, 1993 (*Bird Observer*). Jane Stein (pers. comm.) saw a Blue-headed Vireo on eggs low in a sapling at Crooked Pond in Boxford in the spring of 1998 or 1999. In the winter of 2000 Linda Cook (pers. comm.) found and photographed a suspended vireo nest three or four feet off the ground in an Eastern Hemlock along the Ipswich River in Ipswich that was most likely of this species, since other vireos are much less likely to nest in hemlocks or so low to the ground.

On June 26, 2000, I found a female Blue-headed Vireo on a nest in Willowdale State Forest in Ipswich, at the far west end of town almost on the Boxford line. The male sang nearby. This nest was twelve feet up in a bent-over red maple sapling, which is a typical height for the species. In fact, I found it by looking around at roughly eye level in the area where the male was singing, and I was able to pick out the suspended nest in the lower deciduous canopy. (There was no hemlock in the immediate area, but in my experience the species nests in both coniferous and deciduous trees.) The forest here was typical for the county: white pine, red maple, and northern red oak dominated in a mosaic of upland and swamp. I checked this nest again on July 6, and although the male was still singing in the area, there was no activity at the nest in almost an hour. Suspecting failure, I finally looked into the nest and found it intact but empty. Assuming that the bird on June 26 was incubating, it

was too early for the young to have fledged, so I expect that the eggs or young were taken by a predator.

Yellow-throated Vireo, *Vireo flavifrons*. Like the preceding species, the Yellow-throated Vireo is not a widespread breeder in eastern Massachusetts. In this case the birds are not common in the rest of the state either, although there were many more nesting confirmations in the western counties than the eastern during the 1974-1979 Breeding Bird Atlas period (Veit and Petersen 1993). East of Worcester County only five confirmations are shown on the atlas map for the species; four of them were in Essex County. Townsend (1905) called this bird a "common summer resident," but by 1929 Forbush was calling it a "formerly common summer resident, though rather local," which is a good way to describe it today. Rick Heil (pers. comm.) considers it a more common and widespread breeder in the county than the Blue-headed Vireo (at least three nests found in Groveland and Boxford in addition to the four nestings confirmed in the 1970s). But the nests are found infrequently enough to describe here.

I found two Yellow-throated Vireo nests on June 26, 2000, the same day I found the above Blue-headed nest. Both were at Bald Hill Reservation in Boxford. The first was suspended from a crotch—mandatory for vireos—about forty-five feet up in a half-grown red maple, only yards from Crooked Pond. Typically for vireos, the male sang from the nest while incubating, which was how I found it. (I have seen and heard incubating male Red-eyed, Blue-headed, and Warbling vireos do this as well.) A couple of hours later, in midday, I saw him relieve the female on the nest and sing from it again. At least two other male Yellow-throated Vireos were singing in the immediate vicinity, indicating a small breeding colony. In the intervening time I found a second nest about fifty-five feet up in a mature northern red oak on a hillside about two hundred yards away from Crooked Pond, out of hearing range from the first nest. At this nest, both adult birds were feeding two young. I could not determine whether the eyes of the young were open, but the babies were quite active.

I checked these nests again on July 9. Both were intact but inactive, and although I could not see inside them, they were almost certainly empty. In the first case the nest must have failed. This was thirteen days after I observed incubation. Since Ehrlich et al. (1988) and Baicich and Harrison (1997) both give fourteen days as the nestling period, it is extremely doubtful that the young could have hatched and fledged by July 9. At the other nest, where I would have expected fledging by the first few days of July, I heard alarm calls from both adults, as well as songs, and although I did not observe young birds, it is likely that one or both fledged.

Fish Crow, *Corvus ossifragus*. I thought that Fish Crows had not yet been reported to nest in Essex County, but I learned of two instances while writing this article. Rick Heil (pers. comm.) confirmed them breeding in the Puritan Lawn Cemetery in Peabody "around the early to mid-1980s." They are still regular summer residents there, and Rick believes that they are probably nesting annually in the Peabody-Lynnfield area. Fish Crows have also nested in Topsfield. Jim MacDougall (pers. comm.) watched a pair defend territory on his property against American Crows (*Corvus brachyrhynchos*) in both 1997 and 1998, each year returning daily to the same grove of white pines, where they almost certainly were nesting. Fish Crows have also been observed in downtown Gloucester and other places on Cape Ann for many years, where the probability of their nesting is high.

Nashville Warbler, *Vermivora ruficapilla*. Several warbler species are difficult to confirm as nesters in Essex County, and the Nashville is one of them. Townsend (1905) called them "not uncommon summer resident[s]," breeding "in several parts of the County as at Magnolia, Topsfield, Andover, and Swampscott." Griscom and Snyder (1955) called it "much less common [in Massachusetts] than it was a half century ago." Apparently this species has continued in this status through the latter half of the twentieth century, especially as a breeding bird in the eastern counties. The atlas map in Veit and Petersen (1993) shows only four nesting confirmations east of Worcester County, none in Essex County.

On June 21, 1980, I had a near miss when I saw and heard a pair of the birds calling in alarm in Willowdale State Forest in Ipswich, but I was not able to find the nest. I have seen few of these birds in the nesting season since then, until this year. On June 1, 2000, I heard two or three singing males (and saw one of them) in dry, shrubby, oak-dominated areas within the forest in the Manchester-Essex Wilderness Conservation Area. On June 4, in Willowdale State Forest in Ipswich, I saw a male Nashville Warbler carrying food and nervously waiting for me to go away before delivering it, perhaps to a sitting female at this early date. This habitat, at the edge of an extensive forest clearing, was also dry and shrubby. I revisited this spot several times but observed no further activity. This is the best evidence I have personally found for this species nesting in the county; carrying food is, for most species, a criterion for nesting confirmation in most if not all breeding bird atlas projects.

Blackburnian Warbler, *Dendroica fusca*. The Blackburnian Warbler is also rare as a breeder in eastern Massachusetts, and has been for the last century. Townsend (1905) called it a "rare summer resident" that "breeds sparingly in various parts of the County, as at Lynnfield, Middleton, and Andover." Forbush (1929) agreed with that assessment. Griscom and Snyder (1955) upgraded it to a "moderately common summer resident" in "many parts of Essex County," as well as the central and western parts of the state, though "greatly decreased since the hurricane of 1938." However, the atlas map in Veit and Petersen (1993) shows only two confirmations east of Worcester County, one in Middlesex and one in Essex, most likely in the town of Boxford.

This species has eluded me as a nester during my twenty-nine years of field work in the county. In 2000 I found two singing males near Crooked Pond in Boxford on the late dates of June 26 and July 9. I found four male Blackburnians in the same location on June 28, 1992, and the birds have been seen there well into the nesting season virtually every year, without more concrete evidence of nesting. So I was glad to hear from Steve Leonard (pers. comm.) that he observed a female Blackburnian Warbler gathering nest material at Crooked Pond in the spring of 1998. This confirms at least attempted nesting, and I look forward to eventually finding an actual nest.



Northern Waterthrush, *Seiurus noveboracensis*. The Northern Waterthrush is another species whose nests have been very difficult to find in the county. It was unknown as a breeder in Townsend's time. Forbush (1929) listed it as a "rare local summer resident, chiefly in northern and western parts." Veit and Petersen (1993) cite it as a common breeder in certain swamps in the southeastern part of the state. The atlas map in that reference shows no nesting confirmations in Essex County during the atlas period, nor in the northeastern part of the state.

I was thus pleased to hear from Susan Hedman (pers. comm.) that she and Steve Leonard observed a Northern Waterthrush carrying nest material and calling constantly from low branches above a small stream tributary to Crooked Pond in Boxford on May 21, 2000. I was unable to find this nest later, but the habitat, along a small forested stream among hemlocks, was appropriate. Later, I learned from Rick Heil (pers. comm.) that he had found a Northern Waterthrush nest with eggs under a bank along the dirt road near Crooked Pond "about 15-20 years ago." These two observations confirm the nesting of the species in the county.

I would like to do additional work on this species, especially in Atlantic white cedar swamps, an endangered habitat in New England. Fortunately, there are remaining stands of this species in Willowdale State Forest in western Ipswich, among other places, where both Rick and I have heard Northern Waterthrushes singing during the nesting season. (Mike LaBossiere has reported, via *Massbird*, that he and his daughters found a nest in a white cedar swamp in Mattapoisett, Plymouth County, on May 26, 1999.) I have also heard quite a few of them in other nearby swampy sections of the forest that do not contain white cedars. I believe that concentrated nest-finding efforts may reveal this species to be a regular nester in small numbers throughout the county where the swamps are deep enough.

Canada Warbler, *Wilsonia canadensis*. The Canada Warbler is another swamp-nesting species, and its habitat ensures that few nests are found by humans. Luckily, breeding confirmation can be made by observing a bird carrying nest material, food for young, and so forth, so nests don't have to be found to confirm nesting. This is what happened this year, when on May 26 Karen Haley and I observed a female Canada Warbler carrying nest material (dead grass) in a swampy area of the Steer Swamp conservation area in Marblehead.

Canada Warblers are one of many Canadian-zone species of songbirds that breed mainly in western Massachusetts and northern New England, like the three preceding warblers. In contrast to those species, they are somewhat more common in the eastern part of the state, with a dozen nesting confirmations east of Worcester County in the atlas map in Veit and Petersen (1993), two of them in Essex County. Another "pair nesting" was reported from Boxford by Tom Aversa on June 19, 1993 (*Bird Observer*). Nevertheless, the bird has apparently been a rare and local nester here throughout the last century, and any nesting evidence is welcome. Like the waterthrush, it may be a more common breeder than we suspect, given its inaccessible habitat.

Orchard Oriole, *Icterus spurius*. The Orchard Oriole is an example of a southern species near the northern edge of its breeding range in northeastern Massachusetts, where it was a "rare and local summer resident," according to both Townsend (1905)

and Forbush (1927). From the viewpoint of Griscom and Snyder (1955), these orioles were more numerous during the nineteenth century, and apparently declined during the first half of the twentieth. In the 1970s the birds became more common, and in 1982 Rick Heil found four nesting pairs in Peabody (Veit and Petersen 1993). A decade later Dick Forster found a pair with young June 12, 1993, on Plum Island (*Bird Observer*). In recent years a pair reportedly nested more than once in the pines at the Plum Island maintenance area (Donna Jacques, pers. comm.). It is now found regularly in small numbers every year in the county, and is considered by Veit and Petersen to be a "local and uncommon breeder."

Even so, I am aware of no recent nest records other than those above; there were only two nesting confirmations for the county during the 1974-1979 atlas period. Also, the species rarely nests north of this county. Only three nestings were confirmed during the New Hampshire breeding bird atlas project (1981-1986), all either on the coast or near the Massachusetts border (Foss, ed. 1994); only one during the Vermont atlas project (1976-1981) (Laughlin and Kibbe 1985); and none during the Maine project (1978-1983) (Adamus undated). My own experience is limited to two nests: one being built about twenty feet up in a maple sapling alongside the railroad tracks in Rowley on May 25, 1981, and the other in the copse at the end of Stackyard Road, also in Rowley, which Fred Bouchard and I found on July 4, 2000. This basket nest was directly over the road, about thirty feet up in a hickory (sp.), and was constructed entirely of grasses, which is diagnostic for the species (Harrison 1975). I had seen and heard a male Orchard Oriole in this area for several weeks, including one time when he was singing and peering down at me from a branch that turned out to be quite close to the nest. Although I saw no activity at the nest itself, it was satisfying to finally find another nest after a hiatus of nineteen years.

Pine Siskin, *Carduelis pinus*. This nest is the last in checklist order but the most precious, because it is apparently the first nesting record for Pine Siskins in Essex County. The species was unknown as anything but a wintering bird or a migrant in the county at the turn of the last century, and that status held into the 1950s (Griscom and Snyder 1955). No nestings were confirmed during the atlas period, although there were no fewer than fourteen (!) in neighboring Middlesex County. This meant that finding a nest in Essex County was just a matter of time. In fact, Russell ("Ozzie") Norris banded a Pine Siskin with a brood patch in Rockport on July 13, 1982 (*Bird Observer*). In addition, Rick Heil (pers. comm.) has seen siskins gathering nest material three times over the years, twice at the Ipswich River Wildlife Sanctuary (IRWS) in Topsfield and once in the Bald Hill Reservation in Boxford. One of the IRWS incidents was on April 2, 2000, when he saw a siskin, accompanied by the mate, collecting strips of bark from bittersweet vines.

That pair got an earlier start than the pair I found building a nest almost four weeks later on April 28 and 29. The nest site was in typical mixed-forest habitat in Willowdale State Forest in Ipswich, almost on the Topsfield line. In each delivery the female brought grasses to line a fairly complete-looking nest about sixty feet up in a tall white pine only yards off a dirt road, while the male sang or twittered nearby.



He accompanied her on the trips back and forth, like the male at IRWS did. Ehrlich et al. (1988) report that the species often nests semi-colonially, with nests sometimes only a few feet apart, but I did not see or hear any other siskins at this site.

Unfortunately, the nest appeared to have been doomed from the start: only ten minutes after I found it, a female Brown-headed Cowbird, *Molothrus ater*, also found it, and no doubt started plotting to lay eggs in it. When I arrived at the site on May 10, a Blue Jay, *Cyanocitta cristata*, was in the process of inspecting the nest. If any eggs had been laid, by either the siskin or the cowbird, they were no doubt history. And sure enough, I did not observe any activity at the nest on several subsequent visits over the next three weeks. Nevertheless, the birds did build a nest and filled a long-standing gap in the county's breeding-bird records.

Conclusion

There are certainly many more species I would like to confirm as nesters in Essex County. Those for which there are few or no nest records, or only very old records, and which I think one might have a reasonable chance of confirming, include the following:

Yellow-crowned Night Heron	(suspected on Plum Island on occasion)
Clapper Rail	(ditto)
Black Guillemot	(slim chance on offshore islands)
Long-eared Owl	(a long shot, but can nest anywhere)
Acadian Flycatcher	(has nested at Pawtuckaway S.P., Rockingham County, NH)
Alder Flycatcher	(probably several groups, including one in W. Boxford)
Common Raven	(increasing in county; suspected to nest in Willowdale S.F.)
Hermit Thrush	(historical nester; fairly common in many forests in county)
Black-throated Blue Warbler	(nests in adjacent counties to west and north)
Yellow-rumped Warbler	(ditto)
Cerulean Warbler	(fairly regular presence in Boxford S.F. and Pawtuckaway)
Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow	(both sharp-tailed sparrows now regular in Rockingham Co.)
Seaside Sparrow	(some records but no recent ones; has nested in Rockingham Co.)
White-throated Sparrow	(one confirmation and several probable nestings in atlas period)
Dark-eyed Junco	(nests in adjacent counties to west and, especially, north)
Evening Grosbeak	(tantalizing May presence some years; regular at Pawtuckaway)

These are some of the target species for my future field work. Any information that birders can provide on their nesting in Essex County will be greatly appreciated. 

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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.

