

YARD BIRDS

Fifty Years at Wolf Trap Hill

Kathleen S. Anderson

In November 1950 a young couple found an old farm in rural Middleborough, twenty-seven-and-a-half acres on a dirt road without other houses. Fifty years later the farm has grown to about 100 acres, the road is black-topped, and the neighborhood is filling with big suburban-type houses. How lucky we were!

Our backyard, from my point of view, includes the original purchase plus the wood lot and swamp lot acquired in later years, since I prowled those woods as if they were my own long before we bought the land.

My bird list now numbers 176, of which 68 species have been documented nesting and another 10 species I am certain have bred or do breed, although proof eludes me. In addition, I have records of 31 species of our state's 40 nonmarine mammals. Butterfly and herp atlas projects motivated me to begin more lists, and so I now list 38 butterflies and 32 reptiles and amphibians. The recent enthusiasm for odonates has challenged me to make tentative attempts to learn yet another new family. There are only 10 "dragons" on that list thus far, for I have neither the eyes nor swiftness with net to capture and identify all that have skimmed by me. But once I acquire the new book

In 1950 I could not have imagined that long before the year 2000, which in itself seemed an unimaginable distance into the future, Northern Mockingbirds, Northern Cardinals, Carolina Wrens, Tufted Titmice, House Finches, and even Wild Turkeys would be common residents, with Turkey Vultures and Red-bellied Woodpeckers regular if not common. On the other hand, Whip-poor-wills, Least Flycatchers, and Blue-headed Vireos have disappeared here as nesting species. Chimney Swifts no longer nest in the fireplace chimney, Woodcock rarely call from the pastures in the spring dusk, and I seldom hear the wistful song of the Field Sparrow from the hillside.

Some changes reflect changes made to the land. The seventy-year old white pine forest behind the house was logged in 1965 before we acquired the wood lot. Kestrels nested for a few years in a dead tree which stood above surrounding brush, but only until young trees grew up about the skeleton. Nashville and Chestnut-sided warblers discovered the gray birches and other saplings that followed the clearing until they were shaded out by growing pines, maples, and oaks. The young pines left uncut are now large and dominant trees along with lovely big oaks, yellow birches, red maples, and lots of holly. Pine and Black-throated Green warblers have returned. Hermit Thrushes and Ovenbirds are once again more common than towhees.

At least two pairs of Wood Ducks nest annually in boxes in the small pond at the foot of the lawn. Mallards and Black Ducks have nested some years. Occasional visitors to the pond have included Canada Geese, Blue-winged Teal, Hooded



Mergansers, Great Blue Herons, Green Herons, Black-crowned Night-Herons, American Bitterns, Virginia Rail, Spotted and Solitary sandpipers, and Belted Kingfishers. Muskrats, mink, and once, an otter are on the mammal list.

Nesting raptors are something of a specialty here at Wolf Trap Hill. Although I do not always find

the nests, Northern Goshawks, Red-shouldered and Broad-winged hawks, Great Horned, Barred, and Screech owls are all heard regularly, and several nests have been found. Saw-whet Owls nested at least once and I suspect Cooper's Hawks have nested in recent years.

Rarer birds have included a Worm-eating Warbler which sang on the north side of the hill for several weeks in 1994, Dickcissels at the feeders, and a Connecticut Warbler in the backyard lilacs this fall. Totally frustrating were the calls, whacks, and woodworking of a Pileated Woodpecker I heard but never saw and the Peregrine that I could, by a stretch, have added to the list by standing on my Fuller Street land and looking at the distant tree where it was perched on Cumberland Farms. Rare mammals include the Fisher I saw, and the Bobcat seen by others but not by me.

Flyovers include Bald Eagle and Black Vulture, Common Loons, and both cormorant species, Snow Geese and Goldeneyes, Caspian Terns, and Least Sandpiper. And then there was the Upland Sandpiper we taped as it flew high overhead but which we did not hear until we played the tape. Can I add that to my list?



Listers are scorned by some, perhaps rightly so when one contemplates all the problems about us needing attention while we spend sometimes enormous amounts of money dashing about locally and overseas to tick a few new birds. Many years ago Marcel Proust wrote "The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes." No less a visionary than Albert Einstein wrote "Not everything that counts can be counted and not everything that can be counted, counts." But what fun it is, particularly when we discover something new and unexpected right in our own backyard, be it one or 100 acres. I tally my lists as others count their gold, each name bringing memories: the spring morning when my first Orchard Oriole lit briefly on a feeder, the crisp

fall day when the maples were scarlet, and I found my first White-crowned Sparrow, or a bitterly cold morning when snow crunched underfoot and a Northern Shrike perched in the lilacs eyeing the bird feeders.

I rarely toss on a jacket to step out for a walk, but that I count my blessings to have found this bit of paradise while it was still affordable and to have been able to live here for so many years. My lists are a record of a thousand wonderful encounters on one small piece of the Massachusetts landscape. 🐦



Kathleen S. Anderson is a member of the South Shore Bird Club, chairs the Massachusetts Non-game Advisory Committee to the Division of Fisheries and Wildlife, and was the Founding Director of the Manomet Bird Observatory.

Minorities in Birding

An African-American birder from California, John C. Robinson, is researching the area of minority participation in birding. Robinson has previously published "An Annotated Checklist of the Birds of Tennessee" (1990), and he is the owner of LANIUS Software.

Robinson is exploring the fact that relatively few African-American birders exist in North America, and he is trying to offer inspiration and encouragement to all minorities to become more active in birding.

You can help in this research by filling out a short questionnaire, available online through <<http://www.americanbirding.org/newsbullet1.htm>>, and mailing it to: John C. Robinson, 1470 Creekside Dr., Suite 23, Walnut Creek, CA 94596. If you cannot obtain the questionnaire, please send answers to the following questions to the above address by February 28, 2001:

How many years have you been birding?

What is your state or province of residence?

Have you ever met an African-American bird watcher? (Y/N)

If yes, approximately how many?

If yes, of the above, how many in which states or provinces?

Have you ever met other minority birders in North America? (Y/N)

If so, please indicate the race/national origin of other minority birders you have met:

___ American Indian or Alaska Native, ___ Asian or Pacific Islander,

___ Hispanic, ___ Other (specify).

Comments are welcome!

Optional: Your name, phone number, mailing address and e-mail address.