

FIELD NOTES

A Memorable Experience: Ferry Hill Thicket, Marshfield, MA


Dan Furbish

On May 27, 2003, after four days of horrible weather, rain, and temperatures in the high 40's we caught a break on the south shore; about 4 p.m. on the fifth day the SUN came out!

After work I jumped into my car and drove to one of my favorite warbler spots, Ferry Hill thicket on Ferry hill road in Marshfield. It was still only about 54 degrees and a bit cloudy with breaks in the clouds letting in some sunshine. Only catbirds and grackles were stirring. Then at 5:45 p.m. the clouds parted, and the thicket came alive with birds.

I watched two of my favorite warblers – a beautiful male Canada and a gorgeous male Bay-breasted – side by side in the same Norway maple in full sunlight (although for *all* birds I see, I have adopted the Stephen Stills lyric: “love the one you’re with”).

I enjoyed the ascending song of a Swainson’s Thrush and the many musical Veerys singing. A female Rose-breasted Grosbeak was gleaning insects from under the leaves of the maple tree, hanging upside down to eat them.

A White-throated Sparrow’s head stripes were gleaming in the sunlight, while it skulked on the floor of the underbrush. Carolina Wrens, Great-crested Flycatchers, Northern Parula, Common Yellowthroat, Blackpoll, Canada, Black-throated Blue, and Redstart warblers were singing incessantly. A Red-bellied Woodpecker was calling from its nest hole in an old maple tree. A gray fox that slowly crossed the road and walked into the thicket rounded out the experience! 

Massbird at Its Best—Mystery Accipiter Caper

Carolyn B. Marsh

It was April 4, 2003 – late afternoon – downtown Wellesley. I glanced out the kitchen window and was startled to see what seemed to be a large accipiter perched on our backyard fence, roughly twenty-five feet away. After watching it for a few minutes, I ran for a camera and snapped several pictures through the kitchen window.

I assumed it was a Cooper’s Hawk. We’ve had several as yard birds over the years, and this candidate really seemed big. But as I studied it for the half hour it sat there, I became less and less confident of my assumption. The tail clearly was square; the crown had no visible peak. And was there a light nape band, or not? Did those lighter feathers at the back of the head amount to anything?

Inspiration struck. I would post the pictures to massbird, a Massachusetts birding listserv, and ask for identification help. And that's where I found massbird at its best. Here's what happened.




CAROLYN MARSH

On April 4 at 6:58 p.m. my post appears on massbird with pointer to photos on our web page. At 7:42 p.m. responder number one suggests that I measure the fence from the cross rail to the tip of the fence post and thus calibrate the size of the bird. (*Moment of truth; red face. I'd never thought of doing that.*) Result: the bird is 11.5 inches long. Quandary ended. It had to be a Sharp-shinned Hawk. It is 7:58 p.m.

This proved to be just the beginning of the information inflow! Over the next two days I received fifteen more messages, some focusing on points I had considered, others mentioning factors I hadn't – but all of them enjoying the exercise of sharing expertise (or guesses). Additional comments included the following:

- 1) This is a chubby accipiter with a clearly square tail; almost no white terminus to the tail band and the red eye of an adult bird. Conclusion: adult male Sharp-shinned Hawk.
- 2) Mama sharpie; nifty bird!
- 3) Low contrast in crown vs. nape makes me think female. Also sharpies have more orange extending around neck than Cooper's; this seems to have a lot.
- 4) Central eye = sharpie.
- 5) Primaries extend almost to second tail band. Cooper's primaries only reach third band (see Sibley's illustrations.)
- 6) Question: was it being harassed by Blue Jays? If so, is it a sharpie. Have never seen a Blue Jay risk closeness to a Cooper's.

All in all, I heard from sixteen people in communications ranging from one liners to two-page manuscripts. The verdict was sharpie fourteen to two (primarily focusing on the small head and straight tail), although male versus female was a matter of disagreement. The collegial sharing of information was a real treat as well as an education, and I was most appreciative of the time and effort made by so many and the kind spirit in which suggestions were offered. Such a range of input would not have been available to me any other way in such a short period of time. This was massbird at its best! I regret only that the replies all came to me rather than to the list at large, as I think subscribers would have enjoyed the fallout.

One final thought. This was a caper that proved to be yet another humbling lesson about judging relative size – one I've heard preached many times, but didn't apply when the evidence was right at hand! 

Original Massbird Post

Subject: Help with accipiter identification

The accipiter in the photos at www.jocama.com/birds was perched on a fence in our yard for half an hour this afternoon. I can't say I didn't have great looks at the backside! The bird never turned around, but did swivel its head from side to side. It was fairly large, and I first assumed it was a Cooper's hawk, but the longer I looked at it I wasn't totally comfortable with that ID. For one thing, the tail isn't rounded, and if it ever had a white band, it's well worn off. Secondly, there is not much (if any) contrast of between a dark crown and lighter back, and there are only a few scattered lighter feathers at the back of the head. (No obviously lighter nape.)

I did not detect any peak in the crown on this bird. I then tried to decide if the eye was in the middle of the head or more toward the front. I'd say maybe the latter, but that wasn't totally clear to me. Complicating my thinking is David Sibley's comment in *Guide to Birds* that sharpies almost always perch in trees, while it's not uncommon for Cooper's hawks to be on fences or poles. (There are plenty of tree branches right there; this bird chose the fence.) I could not see the legs, and only now and then got a glimpse of some rust and white and white feathers ruffling in the breeze.

So I'm wondering what I had. Did I miss (or misinterpret) a clinching clue? Any input welcome!

Carolyn Marsh cmarsh@jocama.com Wellesley MA

A Birding Idol

Robert H. Stymeist

One of the very first bird books I ever owned was William Brewster's *Birds of the Cambridge Region*, an account of Brewster's travels and birding adventures in the "wilds" of Cambridge. It was a very special edition, beautifully bound in black and red leather, totally different from the original binding that was available. It must have belonged to someone who really enjoyed birds.

In my youth, like many of my classmates at Cambridge High and Latin, I hung out in Harvard Square. Not in front of the Harvard Coop but in the basement of the Starr Book Shop in the bird book section. I became friendly with Eva Thurman, the wonderful woman who ran the shop for Milton Starr. Everyone knew Eva, and she knew everything about books. She let me stay often and read the bird books in the cool basement of the Harvard Lampoon building where the bookshop was until just a few years ago. In fact Eva bought me my first pair of binoculars, knowing that it would improve my bird list. I had my eye on this particular copy of *Birds of the Cambridge Region*, and told Eva not to sell it until I had saved enough allowance to pay for it. I searched some of the areas Brewster mentions that remained wild a century later in the 1960s, like the Glacialis, where the Alewife T station is today. Most of the area near Little Pond and Alewife Reservation is still quite wild today. (However, the red maple swamp that Brewster refers to below encompassed the entire area now occupied by the two strip malls on either side of Fresh Pond Parkway/Route 2.)

I've always kept a Cambridge list; it was a thing to do for a city boy interested in birds. The birds of Cambridge according to Brewster in his introduction "have been studied longer and more continuously, as well as perhaps more carefully, than those of any other locality of similar extant in all America. As far back as 1832 they were intimately known to Thomas Nuttall." So, even today, over 170 years later, hundreds of birders continue to come to the Cambridge region to see the migration at Sweet Auburn, Brewster's name for the present day Mount Auburn Cemetery.

William Brewster was born in 1851, he went to Cambridge Latin, and because of poor health and impaired eyesight he chose not to enter college and was not enthusiastic about a business career like his father's, who was a very successful banker. He wanted to devote the rest of his life to the study of ornithology, an interest he developed early. Brewster was a member of the "shotgun" school of ornithology. He collected nests and eggs, shot birds, and prepared specimens. His skills in taxidermy led to one of the finest collections of North American birds, once kept in his own private museum and now at the Museum of Comparative Zoology (MCZ) at Harvard.

That brings me to present time. I am currently spending my retirement days doing something new and for me especially gratifying. I'm helping out at the MCZ transcribing the bird collection into a database. No easy task: there are at least

343,000 specimens in the Bird Department. Brewster's notes on his collection are especially detailed, and in many instances each day in the field unfolds in a captivating account of the day's event. Gleanings from the *Journal of William Brewster* is a new series inspired by my work at the MCZ. This month, the Connecticut Warbler, a bird much more common in Brewster's day, is featured. Not much has changed! Birders today search out this elusive warbler in the exact type of habitat where Brewster found it, right up to the beds of touch-me-not, or jewelweed, that is abundant at places like Dunback Meadow

Gleanings from the Journal of William Brewster

September 16, 1881 Middlesex County, Massachusetts: Cambridge

A cool hazy day with faint sunlight and chill east wind. Yesterday evening Spelman [Henry M. Spelman] came in to report the arrival of the Connecticut Warblers in their old haunt the "Maple Swamp" He had seen eight there in the course of a few hours and had killed two, both females. His account fired my enthusiasm and I at once determined to visit the Swamp to-day and renew old associations as well as get four fresh specimens. The weather proving favorable this was carried into effect, Spelman accompanying me. . . . Now a word to record the mornings impressions and the present status of these warblers in the Cambridge swamps.

In 1870-71 when Henshaw [Henry W. Henshaw] and I killed so many then, the "Maple Swamp" as we used to call it, comprised three wooded islands separated from each other by narrow strips of open meadow and marked by broader stretchers of the same, interspersed with shallow pools and ditches.

The islands themselves were covered with five groves of red maple which cast a dense shade and kept the soil beneath damp and cool in the driest summer weather. Everywhere beneath there was a dense undergrowth of . . . [herbaceous plants]. Around the pools were the tangled stems of the Button Bush. There was also a few wild apple trees, an occasional Swamp White Oak and one cluster of Gray Birches . . . The whole place was intersected by a conglomerate of paths made – by heaven knows what – but possibly by hunters and collectors like ourselves. The ground in September bore a luxurious . . . growth of annuals which were the "Touch-me-not" (*Impatiens fulva*), the deadly nightshade and some others not known to me. This was the character of the place in 1870-71 and this was where we obtained most of our specimens by quietly following the paths and shooting them as they perched for a moment in the bushes after flying up at our approach.

To-day I found the haunt sadly changed: one island – the north east one – has been entirely cleared and only the undergrowth is growing up again: In another – the one nearest the railroad – the maples have been thinned and the bushes beneath are nearly all dead or gone. The third – the western one – remains precisely as of yore and I noticed only an increased area of Touch-me-not beds and some scattering of Cardinal flower which I did not remember in the old times.

We startled five *Oporornis* and I killed four of them [Specimens # 205552, 205553, 205554 & 205555]. They were all in the western Swamp and several were found in spots that I remember we used to consider choice places. They were very tame and all save one flew up into the bushes from the Night Shade or *Impatiens* whence we flushed them. The exception acted in a singular manner. It rose under my feet from a tangle of *impatiens* and after being shot at a wing dropped like a Rail into the rank bed. I again flushed it when again it dropped and although this time was shot at could not be again flushed. All the individuals seen today were silent. In the bushes they were awkward and slow of motion, sitting shyly like thrushes or slowly raising their tails like *Oporornis formosus* (Kentucky Warbler) which they greatly resemble in manners. Spelman tells me he heard many calling yesterday. They apparently spend nearly all this time on the ground among the matted tangle of Touch-me-not or nightshade. It is scarcely to be wondered at how few we see them or know of his fleeting presence in the September days when the harvests are ripening in the fields and Goldenrod and asters [are] blooming by the wayside.

We saw very few other birds of any interest: only an occasional Swamp or Song Sparrow and a little company of Cedar Birds.

Journal of William Brewster pages 272-273, Volume 2, MCZ Catalog Brewster collection. Reprinted with permission from the Museum Comparative Zoology, Harvard University.