

Gleanings from the Journal of William Brewster

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William Brewster's wonderful manuscripts, diaries, and field notes were given to the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard shortly after he died in 1919. In the second reprint of this new series, we visit Concord, where Brewster spent much of his time when he was not in Cambridge. It was a bit more of a journey back in 1881 than it is now. In his journal Brewster provided careful accounts of his many trips to Concord, where eventually he purchased about 300 acres of woodland along the Concord River in 1891. Brewster restored the house on the property and called his home October Farm. The time is mid-October 1881, but it could be October 2003: not much has changed in the bird calendar; Hermit Thrushes and Winter Wrens are moving in peak numbers as they were then. I can easily see those Winter Wrens along the old stone walls covered with Virginia creeper, the same as Brewster witnessed over one hundred years ago.

It is also satisfying to know that birders' attitudes haven't changed much in 122 years: read Brewster's account of October 15, 1881—I bet you have heard the same story countless times today!

October 12, 1881, Middlesex County, Massachusetts, Concord

Cloudy with high piercing north-west winds.

After breakfast I started in the buggy with C. [Carolyn, his wife] and drove up the Estabrook road to the "Lime-Kiln"[road] where I spent several hours in the woods. I first hunted for Grouse, but although "David" [Brewster's dog] worked beautifully I could find no trace of one so turned my attention to collecting.

Hermit Thrushes were especially numerous: some of them occurred among barberry bushes along stone walls but the greater number were in the second growth oaks and birches. They uttered the usual chuck and a firm ze-e-e-e-e common to all the members of the genus. I collected two birds, they were both very tame, flying up from the ground to some low limb and sitting quietly or jerking up their tails [MCZ#205597, 205598].

There were a good many Dend. [Dendroica] striata [Blackpoll Warbler] and a few D. coronata [Yellow-rumped Warbler] while in a wood-lot grown up to chestnut sprouts I found a little company of Zon. [Zonotrichia] albicollis [White throated Sparrow].


I saw three Winter Wrens all of them along old bush grown stone walls in the woods. They were not especially shy, but were rather hard to shoot as they kept on the further side of the walls and flitted along ahead quite rapidly. I several times heard this alarm note which sounds almost precisely like the noise produced by winding a clock.

In the afternoon I again went out for an hour or so starting on foot and going as far as the “Davis-dale” woods. I saw nothing but a few Chipping Sparrows and a large troop of Chickadees. The afternoon was very gloomy and the light in the woods so dim that it was difficult to see distinctly. In an old wood-road I saw several yellow moths about as large as field butterflies, darting madly about in zig-zag courses, now disappearing again, reappearing and always flying with great swiftness! I have never seen these moths before.

In the early morning I hear Bluebirds around the house as well as Yellow-rumps and occasionally a flock of tit-larks [American Pipits] flying up river from the Great Meadows. But the afternoon has been so windy and cold that the life and beauty peculiar to a still October morning has been generally suppressed.

October 15, 1881, Middlesex County, Massachusetts, Concord

Cloudy with fine rain through the forenoon.

In the forenoon I went off in the buggy with C. [Carolyn, his wife] driving down the turnpike to “Halls” [an area with many birch trees] where I beat pretty closely for Woodcock but without seeing a trace of any game bird. The morning was gloomy and dismal and the woods seemed utterly deserted. I saw no birds of any interest whatever. 

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HERMIT THRUSH BY GEORGE C. WEST