

# Modern Bird Study — Has It Changed?

*Robert H. Stymeist*

From their earliest accounts, naturalists and birdwatchers have marked the advent of spring with the appearance of certain birds; the journals of these early pioneers contain considerable evidence about the dates of the comings and goings for different species. In the following accounts from William Brewster's journal we find patterns and feelings that we can relate to today. We have pulses of migration followed by unsettled weather and, in early spring, a lag occurs before the next "installment." It is interesting to note that on April 26, Mr. Brewster recorded his last American Tree Sparrow; today we would consider it exceptional to find one of these sparrows on this date.

The breeding status of a number of birds in Massachusetts has certainly changed over the last hundred years, a trend which has continued since the Massachusetts Breeding Bird Atlas was conducted from 1974-1978. (The recently published *Massachusetts Breeding Bird Atlas*, edited by Wayne Petersen and Roger Meservey, is a must for every birder with an interest in the birds of our state.) In the following account we read of the Northern Harrier breeding in Belmont, in the area that today is still known as Rock Meadow — a spot much reduced in size from 1879. The species is now listed as threatened in Massachusetts. You can feel the excitement in Brewster's writing on discovering the nest of a White-breasted Nuthatch, a species that is listed in the new atlas as being confirmed or probably breeding in nearly fifty percent of the state. And then, some things have not changed. Brewster tells of the great numbers of nesting Black-crowned Night Herons before his time in the Fresh Pond marshes. He reports that when he began a serious study of birds in 1864 these herons no longer nested there, and they still do not today.

## Gleanings from the Journal of William Brewster

**May 3, 1879 Belmont, Mass**

A chilly, disagreeable morning with alternating cloud and sunshine, an occasional gust of hail, and many brief showers. Started off at about 9AM and took quite a long drive over the roads and thro' the lanes and by ways in Belmont. Birds of all kinds were exceedingly scarce and we saw almost none, save the earlier sparrows and a few Robins and blackbirds. If the Redpoll and Yellow rump Warblers have really all migrated, their stay has been brief and their numbers few this year. I, however expect that only the first detachment has passed and I shall look for another installment soon. I saw not a single individual of either species today. In "the Willows" we saw a small hawk, which I took to be *Accipiter fuscus*. (unknown). There was also a *Circus* (Northern Harrier) beating about over the meadows and I think, that another nest may be expected on the ground where I robbed them in 1875 and 1877. The season which was up to the average in development thro' April, is now at a dead lock. There may

however have been more birds about this morning than appeared, for I caught the notes of several species that I did not see. My hip has troubled me very much during the past week and this morning I enjoyed a novel experience, taking the field on crutches, and among other exploits, stumping after, and finally bagging a pair of Field Sparrows, in a rough rocky pasture. I have seen no Tree Sparrows since April 26 when I observed quite a number in "the Willows." Among the birds heard this morning was a Brown Thrasher, which however was observed by others earlier in the week.

I forgot to note under date of April 24, that I saw a *Sitta carolinensis* (White-breasted Nuthatch) in East Lexington. It must have had a nest some where in the vicinity as the eggs are laid — to judge by the date of the nest I found years ago in Cambridge — much earlier than this. Today, however, I visited the locality without finding it again. The apple orchard in which it was observed offered abundant suitable nesting places, as the trees were old and full of holes, and hollow limbs. I consider this bird exceedingly rare in this part of Mass. during the breeding season. Since finding the nest with eggs in 186-, I recall only three instances of its occurring in our vicinity: the first two of these are positive — a nest with young found in Belmont by F. P. Atkinson, about 1871, and one also with young found in Waltham near the Lyman Place by C.J. Maynard about the same year. The third case is suppositious, resting on my seeing a male in Waverly woods in May 1875.

#### **May 12, 1879 Belmont, Massachusetts**

A cloudless but rather hazy and exceedingly warm day with a soft south wind — one of those days when the air is filled with smoky haze and the dust "drives" in clouds along the streets, or waltzes along in miniature columns like water spouts; when the air is filled with the subtle fragrance of early flowers and growing things; when the trees burst almost simultaneously in leaf and one can almost see the progress that Nature makes hour by hour; one of the very rarest of days in short, when life seems almost too delicious to be true.

This morning I started off at 9:30 with Storm (his dog) taking my invariable drive. The country was very very beautiful, all the trees excepting the oaks and a few other kinds being veiled in diaphanous coverings of tenderest green. I did not feel in the mood for shooting and tho birds were very numerous I fired but a few times. There were no new species seen but those already with us were materially increased in number of representative individuals. Upon hobbling into a grove of Yellow pines among the cedars upon the highest point of Prospect St. I was much surprised to start four Night Herons. They were perched in the pines and althou' rather shy seemed very reluctant to leave the locality as I startled them several times before finally driving them off. Within the last few years they have almost entirely deserted their old haunts among the Fresh Pond Swamps, and have betaken themselves to secluded pine woods or upland and far distant from any water. Their first asylum of this character was Pro. Lowell's place which they took to some six or eight years ago. Since then they have been found in the autumn of 1876 among the cedars on the Coolidge Farm in Watertown by **A. M. Frazar** and again in the winter of 1879 in the same place by **H.**

**M. Spelman**; in April 1879 in the pine woods on Waverly hill by the same gentleman. Their wintering with us has become an established habit and they may now be found in small numbers at all times of the year. Those that pass the summer are however barren birds and no case of their nesting in this vicinity has ever come to my notice since I began to study birds (about 1864).

Tradition however assures us that a vast heronry once existed in the almost impenetrable Fresh Pond Swamps and Dr. Brown tells me that he visited it when in college, and found a large number of nests with eggs tho' the birds had then been very much persecuted and their numbers were said to be much reduced. During the autumn the Night Herons are now most numerous with us, as their numbers are swelled by migrants from the north. 🦢

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*Bob Stymeist is now beginning his second year of retirement from the corporate world and is enjoying his part-time job, which is preparing a database on endangered and threatened birds in Massachusetts at the Museum of Comparative Zoology.*



Fig. 5. Group of Club members, taken near the Brewster Museum in 1889. Listed as present (but their location in the photograph is not indicated) were William Brewster, H. W. Henshaw, C. F. Batchelder, F. Bolles, H. M. Spelman, J. A. Jeffries, W. A. Jeffries, Edward A. Bangs, A. P. Chadbourne, H. A. Purdie, A. M. Frazer, and Outram Bangs.

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