

# Rare Marsh Birds in the North Pool, Plum Island: Spring and Summer 2004

*Tom Wetmore*

The North Pool is one of three fresh water impoundments on the Plum Island portion of the Parker River National Wildlife Refuge (PRNWR) and is located in Newbury and Rowley, Essex County, Massachusetts. The northern end of the pool can be seen from the North Pool Overlook, a parking area located on the North Pool dike south of the maintenance buildings. The southern end can be seen from the central dike (separating North Pool from Bill Forward Pool) at the Hellcat nature area. The marsh loop boardwalk, part of the Hellcat trail system, provides access to some of the North Pool marsh. North Field, containing the granite boundary marker between Newbury and Rowley, is an extensive grassland area bordering the eastern edge of North Pool and is part of the habitat, which also includes much of the Hellcat maritime forest, that is now protected by the North Pool dike. The North Pool and the other two impoundments were created in the 1950s with the goal of increasing waterfowl breeding habitat.

During the spring of 2004, there was an unexpected influx of locally rare marsh-related bird species to the North Pool area. A total of six species listed by the Massachusetts Natural Heritage and Endangered Species Program as Endangered, Threatened, or of Special Concern used the North Pool and North Field habitats during the period. Two were confirmed breeding in the North Pool. These six species were Pied-billed Grebe, Least Bittern, American Bittern, King Rail, Common Moorhen, and Northern Harrier. Three of these species, Least Bittern, King Rail, and Common Moorhen, have not been reported from the area for a number of years. Two of the species, Least Bittern and King Rail, were confirmed breeding in North Pool. King Rails were also confirmed breeding in Bill Forward Pool. While the nesting of any state-listed species is noteworthy in and of itself, the fact that two species nested concurrently in the North Pool in 2004 is of particular interest.

The presence of high levels of fresh water in North Pool throughout the period is clearly one reason for the influx of these birds. The refuge staff did not draw down fresh water from North Pool this year, so by April, when the marsh birds were migrating, many were attracted to the North Pool environment. As a possible result of this change in management, 2004 had the best spring and summer in many years for these birds of special concern. The habitat conditions in 2004 were reminiscent of years during the 1960s and 1970s when the amount of fresh water and wetland conditions in the North Pool were at their zenith.

In addition to these six species, other species that have been scarce in recent years have had a strong presence in North Pool and the adjacent Bill Forward Pool this year. These species included both Sora and Blue-winged Teal. (Sora has been recommended for Special Concern status in Massachusetts.)

Here is a brief summary of the occurrences of a number of these species. The sightings supporting these summaries are all from amateur birders. Were it not for the diligence of interested naturalists, the status of many of the birds and other animals in this system would essentially be unknown. The species accounts that follow, such as they are, follow an order more temporal than taxonomic, and occasionally take on a personal flavor for which I beg indulgence.

**Sora (*Porzana carolina*),** Recommended for Massachusetts Special Concern Status.

My first indication that 2004 might be a special year for marsh birds at North Pool came on April 24, when I heard a Sora call from the pool. In years past I would often hear Soras during spring from North Pool, but it had been a while since I had heard the distinctive *soRA* and whinnying calls there. For the next four weeks Soras were heard calling from the North Pool by many observers, with reports of up to three calling simultaneously. After May 19, reports of calling Soras dropped off, but a few isolated reports continued through June.

Starting on July 13, juvenile Soras were seen feeding along the edges of the reeds of North Pool. Two juveniles were sometimes seen simultaneously, as were a few adults. Sightings of juvenile Soras continued through the rest of July and August. These are the first confirmed breeding records of Soras on Plum Island for a number of years.

The Sora is a rail whose numbers have precipitously declined in Essex County, and Massachusetts in general, over the past two decades, and therefore it has been recommended for addition to the list of Massachusetts Species of Special Concern.

**King Rail (*Rallus elegans*),** Massachusetts Threatened Status.

The next indication that something special was happening came on May 27. On that day large rails began calling from both sides of the central Hellcat dike, and some allowed occasional glimpses. The next couple of days were interesting because the rail seen most often, a female in Bill Forward Pool who became known as the “mystery rail,” could not be safely identified as either a King or a Clapper rail. Some of our most experienced field observers weighed in on the question of her identity, but there was no clear consensus. As the next few days passed, however, it became clear through both simultaneous vocalizations and sightings that there were multiple large rails in the



A NORTH POOL KING RAIL BY PHIL BROWN

area, and that most, if not all, were King Rails. May 31 was the peak sighting day, with one remarkable report by Dave Adrian of eight rails nearly simultaneously in sight from the central dike.

With the mystery rail calling loudly through the first few days, it was only a matter of time before a male King Rail joined her. On June 4, things quieted down, and many visitors were treated to frequent views of a pair of rails, a large male King, and the smaller female. They chased and followed one another, swam, bathed, flew, fed, copulated, skulked, preened and allopreened, shared minnows, and just plain loafed, all in plain sight, time after time. These sightings continued until around June 8, when they began to drop off. However, the male King Rail was seen many more times after this date. Also during this period a pair of pure King Rails were occasionally seen and heard from North Pool on the other side of the Hellcat dike.

There were occasional sightings of adult King Rails throughout the rest of June and July, and on August 2 Wayne Petersen spotted three juvenile King Rails, about two-thirds of adult size, along the margin of Bill Forward pool. This family was seen by others during the next few days. Then on August 4 Rick Heil spotted two King Rail families, the first being the Forward Pool family, and another family of three chicks in the North Pool, these about half adult size. Juveniles were also seen on August 6, but there were no further reports, leading to the speculation that the birds had dispersed to inaccessible regions of the marsh.

#### **Least Bittern (*Ixobrychus exilis*), Massachusetts Endangered Species.**

On May 30 I arrived at Hellcat around 5:00 a.m. to the strident *kit kit krrrr* calls of the mystery rail. But I could also hear *poo poo poo* calls of Least Bitterns coming from North Pool in the reeds opposite the former blind. From that location there is a cut visible through the reeds, and there were two Least Bitterns, one calling from each side of the cut, and a probable third, further south. For the next few days these two or three birds continued to call from this area. A few observers managed quick views of the birds when they flew across the cut. After a few days, one of the birds moved closer to the Hellcat dike and was glimpsed occasionally from the central dike and the marsh loop boardwalk. This bird called incessantly for many days, while the bird nearer the former blind called only occasionally. After June 14, calling dropped off, though birds were occasionally seen at the edges of the reeds or making short flights. When all records were checked, we found two Least Bittern reports earlier than May 30, both from North Pool: one bird heard in the North Pool marsh on May 16 by Lodowick Crofoot, and one on May 28 by Brian Krisler.

During July there were infrequent, but tantalizing, sightings of Least Bitterns; sometimes two males, sometimes two females, and once Phil Brown watched a female repeatedly drive a male away from an area of the marsh. The Least Bittern's *rick rick rick* calls were heard a number of times in July. By mid July, adult birds had been seen numerous times feeding along the reed edges, and then flying deeper into the reeds, leading to speculation that they were feeding young birds. There were three destinations these adults seemed to head for: one in the southeast corner of the reeds,

one behind the old beaver lodge, and one behind the cove opposite the no-entry barrier on the dike.

Confirmation of successful breeding came on July 28 when Steve Grinley watched an adult bird feed a nearly full-sized juvenile. This sighting was followed by a number of others through August 9, including a sighting of three juveniles simultaneously by Phil Brown on August 1. Because of the near-certain presence of more than one pair, and because of multiple and definite destinations of adult birds into the marsh after feeding, I believe there may have been two successful nests of these birds in the North Pool reeds.



NORTH POOL JUVENILE LEAST BITTERN BY PHIL BROWN

**Common Moorhen (*Gallinula chloropus*), Massachusetts Threatened Species.**

Also on May 30, as I was walking the Marsh Loop looking for the spot nearest to the calling Least Bitterns, I heard a call from the North Pool in the direction of the water control structure. Because the Soras and King Rails were then in their calling heyday, I passed it off as an unusual call from one of them. While driving home later, and running the call through my head, I realized the call had probably come from a Common Moorhen. After checking my CDs, I was back at the former blind first thing the next morning. Following a wait of half an hour or so, the call came again from the area of the control structure, and I became confident of the identification. Fortunately, John Hoyer was recording the Least Bitterns at the time and caught the call on tape. Of course, when you do not see your bird, you may not be absolutely certain of its identification, so it was with a little relief when Dan Zimmerlin sighted a Common Moorhen on the North Pool dike on June 13. After this date, two Common Moorhens were frequently seen, usually near the control structure, through June 19. Infrequent sightings of the moorhens continued until July 6. There was no evidence of breeding.

**American Bittern (*Botaurus lentiginosus*), Massachusetts Endangered Species.**

American Bitterns put on a wonderful performance from North Pool this spring. Unlike the other birds reported on above, American Bitterns are not particularly rare on the refuge in migration, but the appearance of two, and probably three, thunder-pumping males in the North Pool at the beginning of the breeding season was a high point of the spring. Starting on April 17 and continuing to around May 17, American

Bitterns were seen and heard from the North Pool with frequency. One bird was often in the open in North Pool, in the reeds and mud just north of the central dike, fishing, preening, walking with excruciating slowness, and, especially, performing his thunder-pumping display. At times two birds were pumping simultaneously. Many visitors, birders and non-birders alike, were mesmerized by these displays.

After the middle of May sightings of these birds dropped off, though a bird was seen on the edge of North Pool, from the North Pool Overlook on June 6, and another bird was seen at North Pool on July 19. There was no evidence of breeding.

**Northern Harrier (*Circus cyaneus*), Massachusetts Threatened Species.**

Northern Harriers are common migrants and winter residents on Plum Island, but they are extremely rare breeders in Essex County. Two and three years ago, a pair of Northern Harriers successfully nested in North Field near the margin of North Pool. There were nine sightings of female Northern Harriers in the North Field area in May and June 2004. On May 7, a pair was seen circling North Field. On May 22, a male and two adult females were seen simultaneously over North Field. One female was carrying a vole, dropped into the reeds, and did not reappear. The other female dropped into the area of the former nest and did not reappear. On May 27, a female was seen circling in, and then settling into the area of the former nest. Six other sightings of adult female Northern Harriers were made in the North Field area through June.

Starting on July 30, and every few days through August, there were sightings of juvenile Northern Harriers in North Field. However, none were the types of reports one would expect if these juveniles had been reared in North Field, and they probably represent birds raised elsewhere that had made their way to the Massachusetts coast. Based on the evidence available it seems plausible that there were one or two aborted nesting attempts in the North Field this year.

**Pied-billed Grebe (*Podilymbus podiceps*), Massachusetts Endangered Species.**

Pied-billed Grebes were sighted seven times in the Hellcat pools between April and August. Two adults were seen in the middle section of North Pool on August 19, when Rick Heil was permitted to walk the entire North Pool dike. This area is invisible from any public accessible point, so these two birds could have been present over a longer time period. However, there were no reports of Pied-billed Grebes calling from North Pool this spring or summer, and no evidence of breeding.

**Blue-winged Teal (*Anas discors*), former (and now again) Plum Island breeder.**

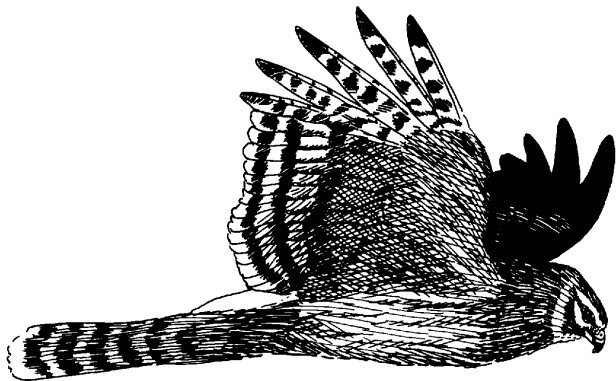
Blue-winged Teal were resident in North Pool and Bill Forward Pool throughout the period of this report. Up to eight individuals were seen at once through early July. Most birds seen were males, though an occasional female was spotted. These are the first breeding-season Blue-winged Teal I have observed on Plum Island in over a decade.

On July 6, Rick Heil reported eleven Blue-winged Teal from North Pool, and this included a female with four downy young. This may be the first breeding record from

Plum Island in fifteen to twenty years. This brood was reported twice more in July, and reports of Blue-winged Teal continued through July and August.

I have actively birded on Plum Island since relocating to Newburyport in 1982. Over those twenty-two years, this spring and summer at the North Pool have provided the most enchanting time I can remember. Yes, I can recall years past when Least Bitterns bred in North and Forward Pools, Blue-winged Teal bred in North and Stage Island Pools, and Common Moorhens bred in Stage Island Pool — but this year the North Pool held good numbers of all these species and more and has been a magical place. I end this account by reporting that the future of the North Pool is uncertain. The PRNWR staff is currently preparing proposals for the future management of the North Pool and North Field areas. Some of these involve breaching the North Pool dike and allowing the area to revert to its original salt marsh status. Because of the strong presence of state-listed bird species in the North Pool in 2004, these proposals, even though they are not yet formalized, have generated spirited reaction. The PRNWR will be pursuing its proposed course of action through a process that involves public scrutiny and comment. I hope anyone interested in the future of the North Pool will make efforts to stay informed. 🐦

*Tom Wetmore is a computer scientist who lives in Newburyport, MA. Interested in birds and nature throughout his youth, his passion for birding matured during his years in Alaska. While working for the University of Alaska's Geophysical Institute, he became involved in many birding activities. These included preparing a bird list for a new state park, monitoring migration in the Pacific Flyway, and service as a trip leader and CBC compiler for the Fairbanks Bird Club. He was living in Alaska in 1975 when the Bird of the Century appeared in Newburyport harbor. Though he had not previously heard of Newburyport, he decided that if he ever returned to the Lower 48, he would make his home there. He did. He has been birding Newburyport harbor and Plum Island ever since but has yet to see a Ross's Gull. He has a special attachment to Plum Island and birds there whenever he gets the chance.*



NORTHERN HARRIER BY GEORGE C. WEST