

FIELD NOTES

President's Day Special

Brooke Stevens

President's Day weekend. My birding colleagues were heading to Texas to tick Mexican vagrants or north to Canada in the hopes of finding Great Gray Owls and other boreal species. Tom was on the train to New York to take in Jeanne Claude and Christo's "Gates" extravaganza in Central Park. That left me and Nia (our indoor mackerel-tabby cat who loves watching the Yard TV channel).

So Friday, February 18 at around 6:30 a.m. as I put the water on to boil for coffee, I noticed that our entire satellite-big-baffle-and-hook feeder setup was gone. Then I remembered hearing a muffled thump the night before and figured that a raccoon was up and about. In gumboots and fleece bathrobe I walked around to the front of our large kitchen window and there it was, lying on the ground, a bit muddy around the feed hole but intact. I rehung it, shook the sunflower hearts down into the globe, and was rounding the corner when a large bird exploded silently out of our hemlock and landed, skidding, on top of the green hopper feeder that sits on a pole in the small wooded area behind the house. I froze, the bird found a purchase, and we looked at each other. A Barred Owl. It sat. I stood. The feeder birds had swirled off in an instant. Collecting myself, I slipped into the house and ran upstairs for my camera to try and document our one-hundredth yard bird species.

It was gone from the feeder when I grabbed the camera and glanced out of the upstairs window. Returning to the sunroom to search, I found the owl perched in the split trunk of our large cherry tree, but the light was too low for good photos. Silently it swooped again at the feeder, scattering the birds, then flew off. It tried to land on the hopper a third time and was briefly successful, but flew before I could zoom in for a shot. I took the opportunity to send a quick e-mail to local birders Bob Stymeist and Marj Rines, then returned to the sunroom, waiting for the light to improve. While I was sending the note, the owl swooped again on the feeder. A short while later the doorbell rang, and still in my bathrobe I greeted Bob who had come with his video camera in hand. The owl was now perched in clear view on a dead snag in a white pine at the bottom of the slope (my raptor birding friends refer to this as "bird on a stick"). Bob counted, I think he said twenty, cardinals and was almost as excited by them as by the owl. I watched as he walked slowly out into the yard to within less than thirty feet of the perched bird. He got some nice video plus stills. I changed into more reasonable stalking clothes and was able to get quite close for some shots of my own.

The owl stayed all day and was mobbed several times by crows as it sat exposed in my neighbor's apple tree. I was able to show it to the children next door who thought it was pretty cool. The bird's attempts on the feeder surprised me since they seemed clumsy, and it kept trying to perch on the hopper. It was swooping and



Backyard owl photographs by Brooke Stevens

slipping but did not seem adept at targeting its prey. The feeder birds did not disperse in the way they do when a Sharp-shin or Cooper's blasts through; there were no frozen birds in the thicket. When the owl flew, I could see that the underwings had a lemony wash.

Since having a Barred Owl in the yard is not an everyday occurrence, I decided later to log on to my on-line subscription to Birds of North America (BNA). There, following an easy-to-click sidebar, was everything you wanted to know about this species, including its great cacophonous dueting (which quickly got Nia's attention!). Under Food Habits "Microhabitat for foraging" were the words "few data;" but Habitat yielded "thought to prefer old mixed-wood forests." I concluded that our yard and its abutters form a microhabitat of large mixed oak/conifer woods, like a small slice of Mount Auburn Cemetery. The BNA account notes that Barred Owl is "an opportunistic predator, consuming small mammals and rabbits, birds up to the size of grouse, amphibians, reptiles, and invertebrates." The woodlot looked promising, and it must have been after the feeder birds, which were the usual mix of titmice, chickadees, and all those cardinals – every one a manageable size for consumption.

Although it is considered a "seminocturnal to nocturnal hunter," the owl was hunting in broad daylight, perched in the sit-and-wait fashion described by the BNA authors, scanning the area for prey. Scanning the bird feeder, or so I thought. However, later when I zoomed in on the digital photos I had taken of the owl on its perch, one showed a milky eye, another both eyes looking blank, and still another one eye open and the other partially so. What I thought at first might be an injury was the



nictitating membrane or “third eyelid” that, according to Chris Leahy in the *Birdwatcher’s Companion*, is “drawn obliquely or horizontally across the cornea to keep it moist and clean... In birds active by day the membrane is transparent, whereas in owls and other nocturnal species it is translucent.” So it was resting too.

Under Migration the BNA account notes that Barred Owls exhibit “strong territoriality where studied, thought to be linked to nest-site limitation. However, winters of low prey availability may result in periodic nomadism in search of prey.” Hence the owl’s attempt at an urban bird feeder. And again, under Behavior, “Daily Time Budget. Not well qualified. Crepuscular/nocturnal hunter, although will hunt in daytime. During daytime sits quite motionless in a tree, often next to the trunk.” Witness the cherry tree early in the morning, the white pine snag a bit later, and my neighbor’s apple tree during the day. Finally, under Behavior, taken from Bent, “. . . light, buoyant, and noiseless; can glide gracefully and skillfully among branches of trees.” Which indeed was the thrilling case.

The Great Horned Owl perched in the beech tree last month, directly in view from my office window, was more successful as a hunter, twice taking and dismembering gray squirrels in the neighborhood. In the case of the Barred Owl, after reading David Sibley’s statistics for the family Strigidae (“1st-year mortality high; adult annual survival 45-90%), I have to confess that it took willpower not to try and find a few frozen mice to tide it over. 🦉

Sources:

- Mazur, K.M., and P.C. James. 2000. Barred Owl (*Strix varia*). In *The Birds of North America*, No. 508 (A. Poole and F. Gill, eds.). The Birds of North America, Inc., Philadelphia, PA. <<http://bna.birds.cornell.edu/BNA/>>
- Sibley, D.A. 2001. *The Sibley Guide to Bird Life & Behavior*. National Audubon Society. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Leahy, C.W. 2004. *The Birdwatcher’s Companion to North American Birdlife*. American Birding Association. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Love is in the Air — But Not in the Water!

Paul Roberts


Historically, my favorite time on the Mystic Lakes and River is in the winter and early spring because you have an opportunity to see so many waterfowl so close and so well. The winter of 2004-2005 was the poorest for waterfowl in my experience (roughly fifteen years) on the watershed. Finally, in mid-March there were signs of

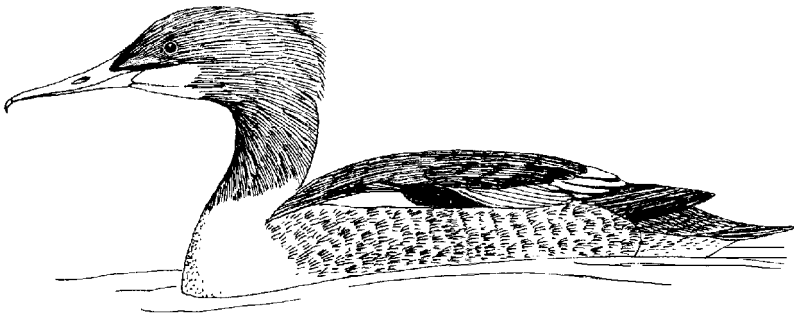
hope. On the 13th, I had five Ring-necked Ducks on the Lake and River, which to me is one of the strongest signs of spring on the way — the great thaw is beginning.

The following weekend there were Wood Ducks, a Green-winged Teal drake in almost inconceivable high plumage, Buffleheads, Ring-necked Ducks, a Red-breasted Merganser, Common Mergansers, and Hooded Mergansers.

What was most enjoyable is that most of these ducks often came quite close, so if one moved slowly, quietly, and then stood still, the views of the intricate plumages were incredible.

The highlight was a spectacular female Common Merganser who herded an equally mind-blowing drake with a tanager-colored bill off from the rest of the flock, driving him towards a corner close to shore where I was standing. Hormones were apparently raging so that they were both oblivious to me. The hen then went supine in the water, stretched out as in a medieval torture chamber, stretched as long as she could possibly be, and submerged just below the surface as would an alligator with a yen for a meal. She, however, was seeking something else. I was expecting to see an intense courtship ritual and mating, such as I had witnessed in the same spot in equally fantastic light two years earlier. As she came coursing by, I saw the finest vermiculation on her flanks and tail as I had never seen it before. She was also clucking, low and repeatedly. A lighthouse is subtle compared to a hen Common Merg on the make.

She swam loops around the drake. She cut him off, like a battleship in front of a destroyer (or is it the other way around?). This went on for minutes. I was almost ready to jump into the water myself, but the drake remained supremely aloof. I couldn't imagine if he was exercising tremendous will power, or just couldn't be bothered, or . . . No. He was so good-looking he must have had hundreds of opportunities like this. He never gave her a nod, not even the slightest. He just kept paddling, beak elevated slightly above the horizontal. She finally bounced to the surface, stood on the water and shook herself off, and then paddled over towards the other twenty-some males swimming on the other side of the lake. I had to leave for an appointment, so I don't know how she — or he — fared. I knew I was lucky to have something like this so close to my home. 



FEMALE COMMON MERGANSER BY GEORGE C. WEST

The Loss of Avocet and Curlew

Steve Grinley

In 2004, Essex County lost two of its most prominent birders, the honorable H. Lawrence Jodrey and Gerald L. Soucy. Larry's CURLEW and Jerry's AVOCET license plates on their respective vehicles were regular sights on Plum Island and anywhere in Massachusetts where birds and birders were found. The two were always together and they were simply known as "Larry and Jerry" or "Jerry and the Judge." I can't say that I ever saw one in the field without the other. Not ever. Back in the sixties, they sometimes had famed birder and author John Keiran riding in their back seat and often a new protégé, Tom Martin, now of Boxford and a great birder in his own right. In later years, it was their loving poodle "Brandy" who accompanied them.

Together, they were "birders extraordinaire" and key mentors for me in my early years of birding. In fact, they encouraged many a novice birder. Jerry gave Tom Martin his first bird feeder and got him hooked onto birding as a lifelong passion, just as their encouragement and guidance had helped me. Larry and Jerry belonged to an era of birding that helped foster its popularity to what it is today. Together with people like Ruth Emery (the Voice of Audubon), Arthur and Margaret Argue, Dick and Dora Hale, and Dick and Mary Lou Barnett, they helped shape the appreciation for birds and the hobby, sport, or pastime now referred to as birding. They were birders before the term was ever popularized. Back then we were all just "bird watchers."

If there was an unusual bird in Massachusetts, they always knew about it and they made sure that others did as well. They kept a year list, but only to compete with their own previous year's list. They were as unselfish birders as there can be. They would stop along the road to tell you of the birds they saw, or of any other bird that they knew about in the area. If there was a "hot" bird, they would make repeated phone calls, including one to Ruth Emery to get it on "the Voice." They always seemed to be in the know, and they were always where the birds were. They shared their birds, and they shared their enthusiasm.

Jerry and Larry led numerous Newburyport and Rockport trips for the Brookline Bird Club, and they were always birding Essex County on their own. I especially remember the Nantucket trips that the Brookline Bird Club would have every year on Columbus Day weekend. Jerry and Larry, who had their cottage "Big Enuf" on the Island, would help lead the group around, showing us specialty birds like oystercatchers and Barn Owls that they had scouted the week before during their vacation stay on the island. You could always feel their love for Nantucket, and anyone attending those BBC trips would know why. I still remember the breathtaking colors of the moors in the autumn sunlight while searching for short-eared owls or other special birds. Jerry and Larry knew the Island intimately, and they could always recommend the best places to eat, like the Jared Coffin House. They helped everyone feel at home on Nantucket.



Jerry (white jacket), Larry (sweater and sunglasses), and other birders enjoying a pelagic birding trip out of Gloucester in 1963. Photograph by Warren Harrington.

Professionally, Larry was a Gloucester District Court judge, and Jerry was an Assistant Registrar of Deeds for Essex County. But the work they are best remembered for by fellow birders is their long tenure as Directors for the Brookline Bird Club. Jerry was the field trip coordinator and editor of the “blue book” — the Brookline Bird Club Bulletin — for what seemed like forever. His charisma helped encourage people to lead trips, which in turn grew the number offered by the club. I don’t remember the first field trip that I led, but I am sure that it was due, at least in part, to Jerry’s persuasion. If you ever received correspondence from Jerry, you would always recognize, and envy, his perfect cursive handwriting. Just as his handwriting was meticulous, so was the accuracy of the BBC Bulletin that he published. He even interspersed his favorite bird poetry in the blue book, to further inspire its readers.

Larry’s two year term as President of the Brookline Bird Club came early in my BBC history. I can remember Larry’s talks while he presided over the club meetings at the Boston Museum of Science. He was truly the Master of Ceremonies. His accounts and slides of BBC trips and members made for great entertainment, and Larry’s dry sense of humor was always a joy. To this day, I still remember one slide of Clara de Windt dressed in a big, red parka, which was accompanied by Larry’s comment “Here is Clara de Windt in winter plumage.” He would always leave us smiling. The past couple of years when he and Jerry would ride in their convertible with the top down, Larry, approaching eighty years old, would still make references to “cruisin’ for chicks.” Larry minced no words. He would refer to someone as an “ol’ battleax” as readily as he would talk about some “sweet young thing.”

Larry had a fantastic store of knowledge and an equally astounding memory. He knew, thoroughly, the law he practiced, but he also had a love of language and literature, of history, especially local history, and of course, birds. His slow, emphatic speech, accenting appropriate words to make his point, always caught the interest of all within earshot. In conversation, he would sometimes pick up on a word or phrase that someone mentioned, and then recite a quote from Shakespeare, or a verse from Kipling's or Dickinson's poetry to emphasize a point. His command of the English language and ability to recall and recite from great authors and poets always captivated my interest and my respect.

But it was Jerry and Larry's knowledge of and fondness for birds that are best remembered. They were two of the top birders in the state, yet they always took the time to share their expertise. They would each take pains to explain details of the birds we were looking at and how a given bird was different from similar species. This helped beginners like me learn more quickly. They would provide historical sighting data on the bird if it was a rarity. Larry's accounts would often be punctuated by an emphatic comment such as "A fine specimen." They would always share their sightings and birding knowledge with all who would listen. And listen we did.

Even in his last weeks, after losing his lifelong companion months before, Jerry found comfort in birds. He watched the birds at his feeders, always hoping for a Dickcissel or other rarity, but still appreciating the cardinals, Blue Jays, and goldfinches that visited. When I tried to talk about his health, he only wanted to know about what birds I had seen or what birds were around.

Curlews and avocets, like the two gentlemen whose license plates bore their names, are highly regarded in the Massachusetts birding community. Now, these birds will always be a reminder of two great birders and dear friends who had a keen appreciation and contagious enthusiasm for the beauty of these, and all birds. 🐦

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FOGGY ESSEX COUNTY SCENE BY DAVID LARSON