

# Spring Migration in Eastern Massachusetts: Then (1886) and Now

*Editor's Note: The article on Birds and Birders in Westport, Massachusetts, also in this issue, includes an introduction to Smith Owen Dexter, who was a close friend of William Brewster. After his death, Dexter collected and edited selections from Brewster's diaries which were printed in two volumes by the Harvard University Press: October Farm (1936) and Concord River (1937).*

*Robert H. Stymeist*

In the following excerpts from William Brewster's journal we find some of his frustrations that birders today continue to share— nearly 120 years later. One of his ongoing comments still rings clear, “Apparently the late migrants have not yet come.” We fret that the weather is keeping the birds to our south; we see the first Tree Swallow and then wait weeks for the first Barn Swallow. Pine Warblers have arrived and the buzz is, “Where are the Palms?” Birders just can not get enough of spring migration.

Brewster complained in the following account that he had to take care of business in the city and was not able to see any birds except some Rusty Blackbirds while waiting for the train. In my working days, a core of spring migration watchers at Mount Auburn would have to leave for work just as the day was warming up and the birds burst into more song. The foliage: Brewster in this account states: “The country looks as if it were the last instead of the first week of May. I have never seen as early a spring before.” That trees ALWAYS seem to advance before the birds come is a familiar lament for birders today.

Finally, after a good day of birding, and especially after seeing an unusual bird, we often will celebrate our find over dinner or just by posting it on the internet to alert others. On May 7, 1886, Brewster and his friend Daniel Chester French celebrated the first specimen of Prothonotary Warbler taken in Massachusetts with a good cup of tea. At least today birders have a better chance that their discovery might still be around the following day!

## Gleanings from the Journal of William Brewster

**April 27, 1886 Concord, Middlesex County Massachusetts**

We moved to Concord this morning having taken the Old Manse for the summer. I was obliged to return to Cambridge in the afternoon, however, and to spend the remainder of the week there.

During the short time I was able to spend along the river bank and in the orchard this morning I saw several *Dendroica coronata* (Yellow-rumped Warblers) and a little company of Goldfinches. In the old elms near the bridge a Nuthatch (*Sitta*

carolinensis) was cork-screwing about and hanking loudly. A pair of Downy Woodpeckers were also hammering on the dead limbs. In the boathouse a pair of Pewees (Eastern Phoebe) had a finished but empty nest. A muskrat was swimming from place to place uttering his peculiar whinny cry. Redwings were singing over the green meadows and Bluebirds warbling.

### **May 2, 1886 a Sunday, Concord**

I came to Concord last night to spend Sunday only with business in Cambridge and Boston still uncompleted.

Early this morning there was a grand chorus of bird voices such as we used to hear in Cambridge before the wretched Sparrows came. Robins, Song Sparrows, Bluebirds, Purple Finches, Grass Finches etc made the air ring. About a martin box which was just put up only yesterday several pairs of *Hirundo bicolor* (Tree Swallow) and one pair of *Progne purpuria* (Purple Martin) held high carnival.

Early in the forenoon I went down to the boathouse and spent an hour sitting on its sunny western wall. Redwings singing in all directions, a Meadow Lark whistling out by the railroad station, the Pewees occasionally coming to see that their nest on a rafter inside the boat house still held its two rosy eggs. In the water beneath several species of fishes were feeding or playing. I compared them to boats; the red perch — long and narrow; swift of movement resembled a steam launch; the bream, deep, broad, and yet graceful — a schooner, while a great clumsy horned pout rooting along the bottom recalled a mud scow. The monitors of course were the turtles of which there were dozens in sight—all of the red banded (“soldier turtle”) species. One came past me feeding, it would raise its head above the water, look warily about for a moment, then sink and walk along the bottom exploring it inch by inch and feeding like a hen, pecking about on every side with a quick motion of the head and neck. I timed it repeatedly and found that it remained under water from 30 to 80 seconds, the latter period being the longest noted.

In the morning I walked to the top of Ripley’s Hill. The shad bush was in full bloom and the birches and maples dense with young foliage. Robins, Chipping Sparrows and Song Sparrows singing among the pines, Redwings in the Great Meadows, nothing else noted. Apparently the late migrants have not yet come.

### **May 3, 1886**

Clear and cool. In Boston all day; hence no observations except I saw and heard two Rusty Blackbirds by the railroad station.

### **May 4, 1886 In Cambridge and Boston all day; no observations**

### **May 5, 1886 Concord, Middlesex County, Massachusetts**

Cloudy and warm with a south wind; thunder shower in the PM.

There was a heavy rush of migrants to-day; in fact the county was fairly alive with birds. I heard several new comers singing at daybreak and saw a Wood Thrush hopping about on the ground under the lilacs after breakfast.

My day was doomed to be a broken one as I had an appointment in Boston at three o'clock so I did not attempt any collecting but merely took a drive in the forenoon going up around the "Parker Lot." Least Flycatchers were singing in the orchards, Brown Thrashers and Towhees in the pasture, Creepers (Minotitta), Nashville Warblers and Chestnut-sided Warblers in the woods. I also heard a Grosbeak and a Yellow Warbler. Doubtless there were many more new comers but I had little chance to detect them. Chimney Swifts flying about over the town in the evening.

The vegetation is remarkably advanced for the season. Cherry trees have been in blossom more than a week (they opened in Cambridge April 23 and by April 25 were in full bloom), pear trees are also out and the apple tree in the orchard here showed a few expanded blossoms this evening. In the woods the shad bush is still in full flower (I saw the first blossoms April 27), the poplars are dense with foliage, the birches cast a slight shade and even the oaks have already expanded a few leaves while their swollen buds give the trees a delicate pink tinge. The country looks as if it were the last instead of the first week of May. I have never seen as early a spring before.

#### **May 6, 1886 Concord, Massachusetts, Middlesex County**

A fair day, pretty sunny, with frequent intervals of cloudiness. Cool with rather high north wind.

Starting at 9AM, I rowed down river. A little below the stone bridge two snipe hunters asked to be ferried across. They had startled eight snipe and killed two. After I left them they fired two more shots but I was too far away to see at what or with what results.

I had only my 32 cal. Pistol and on the way to Ball's Hill shot only two redwings of which there were great numbers everywhere, more it seemed to me than I ever saw before.

Landing at Ball's Hill I found a small mixed flock in the oaks along the south slope. There were five Creepers, as many Yellow-rumps, three Palm Warblers, one Pine Warbler, and a single Canada Flycatcher. I made a good bag here in a short time and started to return.

On the way home I shot two Redwings, a Bluebird, a pair of Swallows (*Tachycineta bicolor*) [Tree Swallow] and a Solitary Sandpiper. The latter I startled from the river bank on my way down in the morning. It was back again in the same place when I returned but was very shy. Finally it alighted on the topmost twig of a brush heap where I shot it.

The meadows were very beautiful, the grass already a foot high in favored places. Along the river the maples and alders are dense with foliage. The marsh marigold is still in full bloom.

Orioles arrived this morning. I heard one at daybreak, and two others later. The apple orchard was in nearly full bloom this afternoon.

## May 7, 1886 Concord Massachusetts

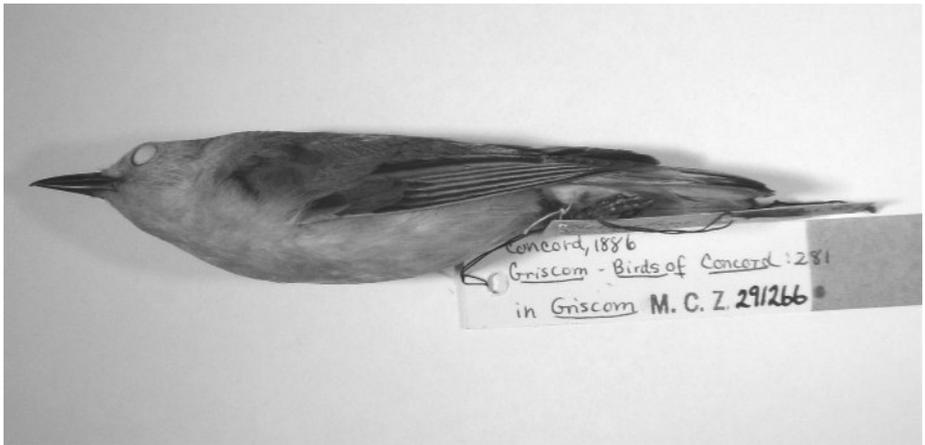
Clear and cool with high N.W. wind. A glorious day as bracing as October yet with the country wreathed in flowers.

In the forenoon I drove C [Caroline, his wife] to Sudbury. The roads are lonely and little used often passing through woodland, occasionally skirting broad meadows. The apple orchards were at their highest perfection and the shad bushes still in bloom boarded all the swampy thickets with patches of white. Birds were numerous but I saw nothing of any particular interest. Meadow Larks were common with one or more being seen or heard in every meadow. Bluebirds were frequently seen along the roadside and Orioles occurred about the orchard and elm shaded farm houses in apparently undiminished numbers. I neither saw nor heard any Bobolinks although we passed many places suited to their habits.

In the afternoon I rode up the Assabet with D.C. French. While midway of the straight reach above the hemlocks my companion asked "is that a Yellow Warbler" pointing out a small bird hopping about in some driftwood caught in the lower branches of the black willows lining the west bank. After looking at it intently for a moment I was amazed to recognize my old Mt. Carmel friend the Prothonotary Warbler. We had no gun but it did not take long to whirl the boat around and start back for one. Returning in about three quarters of an hour we found our little stranger gone but frequently I heard him chirp and then sing in an undertone near at hand. At length he emerged from beneath a mat of drift and I shot him, dropping him the water.

We afterwards rowed up as far as "the Arch" bridge and returned in time for tea.

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*MCZ 211462 Protonotaria citrea* adult male, rather fat; the stomach well filled with insects chiefly beetles. Shot about 5 PM on the banks of the Assabet River about 150 yards above the hemlocks. This is the first specimen ever taken in Massachusetts.

[Photograph by Miyako Fujiwara, Ornithology, Museum of Comparative Zoology]