

Birds and Birders in Westport, Massachusetts, Then and Now

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There are at least four wonderful things about birding: (1) the beauty of the birds themselves, especially when seen up close through binoculars or a spotting scope; (2) the knowledge gained about the life of birds through observation; (3) the beauty of the places to which birders travel to see birds; and finally (4), the people one meets through birding.

This article focuses particularly on people from Westport, Massachusetts, with whom we have recently come in contact because of our interest in birding. Some folks are contemporaries, but the most intriguing are birders we have “come to know” who lived a century ago. A few of these birders left a remarkable legacy of historical records that gives us insight into their lives as well as the lives of their feathered friends. From these records we are able to confirm that most of the generally recognized changes in bird populations in New England over the past century have also taken place in the Westport area.

Our work with the Westport History Work Group, which was organizing historical materials at the town library, started us on this adventure that gave us a look into the ornithological history of the past. Hidden among the library materials were two notebooks containing the title “The Birds of Westport” by Smith Owen Dexter, dated 1918. One set of these notebooks had been given to the Westport Point Library, and the other set was presented to the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard University. The notebooks provided an introduction to their compiler that showed him to be a careful, thorough student and lover of nature. They also kindled our own strong desire to learn more about him. Fortunately, our friend and neighbor, Reverend Richard Loring, was the grandson of Smith Owen Dexter, and he possessed a collection of genealogical materials, testimonials, and eulogies that filled in some of the gaps in the notebooks, along with helping us gain a greater appreciation of this remarkable man.

Smith Owen Dexter — the Man and the Birder

On the first anniversary of his death, May 2, 1937, Reverend Smith Owen Dexter was eulogized by one of his parishioners and closest friends, the preeminent Harvard historian, Samuel Eliot Morrison. This eulogy alone was enough to indicate that Dexter was a very special person.

Smith Owen Dexter was born in 1872 in Nayatt, Rhode Island, the son of a manufacturer who expected him to enter the family business. However, from childhood Dexter wanted to be a naturalist — he loved birds, flowers, and all outdoors. But when his father’s business failed and his mother died, he was forced to work in a factory. At this point his thoughts turned to the ministry, and fortunately he was able to attend Harvard College and the Harvard Episcopal Theological School.

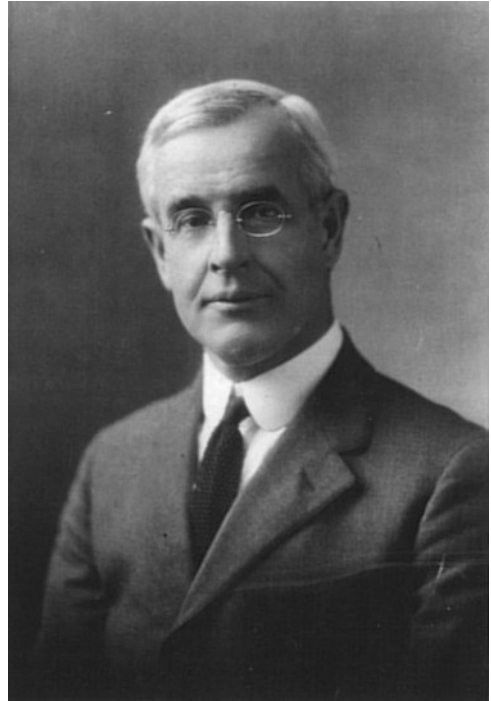
Following his graduation from Harvard, he took a position at a church in New Bedford where he met Helen Denison, whom he eventually married. His early ministerial positions took him to several places in the West, but he ultimately returned to the Trinity Episcopal Church in Concord, Massachusetts, where he remained for twenty-five years. During this period he also established a summer home in Westport.

Dexter's son, Lewis Dexter, who was an eminent heart specialist and owned a house at Westport Point from the early 1940s, wrote the following in 1984:

Dad was an authority on birds, could identify them by sight or song, kept a yearly list of each species he identified. I recall walks with him through the woods such as to Fairyland Pond or through the woods at Mr. [William] Brewster's. He took up many controversial causes but he couldn't do otherwise. Opposing him was like running into a stone wall. It's pretty hard to oppose a saint... On Dad's birthday in July, a fisherman, John Kenny, whom dad had once helped out in some way, would walk up the street in Westport with a gunny sack over his shoulder, go into the kitchen and deposit the sack in the sink and leave without a word. The sack was full of lobsters which were illegally short. I can still see dad, year after year, with a one-foot ruler, grasping the lobsters by claws and tail and pulling (probably dislocating every joint) until it measured twelve inches. I guess no one can be a 100% Christian but dad came very close.

His daughter, Helen Dexter Loring, said that her dad's special interests were music, nature study, and social gospel. His outstanding characteristics were that he was easily depressed, mystical, practical in mechanical details, and un-administrative. She often told of family trips from Concord to Westport via a Model T Ford and Route 138. Smith, over the clatter of the car, could apparently hear a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker in Raynham Swamp, and they had to stop while he went into the swamp to find the bird.

Janet Gillespie, in her rhapsodic book about Westport, *A Joyful Noise* (1992, pp.107-8) recalls:



Reverend Smith Owen Dexter (1872-1936)

Pop (Robert Russell Wicks) called in Uncle Smith Dexter, his favorite bird friend at the Point and one of our favorite people.... We loved the way he looked — brown as an Indian with a cap of snow-white hair. Uncle Smith kept his eye on the bird. He was making a census of the birds of Westport, so when he was out on a field trip he didn't allow life to get in the way of ornithology. You had to be really good on birds to go out with Uncle Smith, and one of my dreams was to see my name in his notebooks where the Westport bird records were kept. These notebooks were filled with local names, as many sightings had been reported by gunners, fishermen and year-round residents. One of the lobster men, well known to us, brought in reports of oceanic birds — gannets off remote ledges, kittiwakes, eiders and other sea birds not visible from the shore. Uncle Basil (Hall) and Pop were both mentioned in the notebooks and so was our hill, under its real and full name of Eldridge Heights.

Uncle Smith very kindly consented to take me along on a projected trip to see some egrets... he allowed me to look through binoculars; I could hardly believe my eyes and drew back alarmed when the egret turned its dagger beak in my direction. After this revelation I let it be known that the only thing I wanted for Christmas was a pair of good binoculars.

Janet got the binoculars for Christmas, and the first thing she saw with them was a [Northern] Saw-whet Owl. Uncle Smith said that her sighting was the only sighting of this little owl in Westport, and he would put her in his book, which he did in an entry on December 28, 1926. "I had made it," Janet declared. Uncle Smith said that to celebrate this milestone in her life she could accompany him and Pop to Gooseberry Neck to see the Purple Sandpiper.

He spoke of this bird as though it were a personal friend with whom he had an appointment. I had noticed that real bird watchers talked this way... I don't know what I expected to see but I naturally thought it would be a purple bird. The purple sandpipers were stout drab birds, slate gray in color, with yellow legs... I was unimpressed. Uncle Smith explained that its fame rested on the fact that it is the only sandpiper that winters in New England.

Famous Birding Colleagues of Smith Owen Dexter

Smith Owen Dexter had many well-known and respected birding colleagues accompanying him on his rambles around Westport, but two of them stand out especially for their exceptional contributions to the birding world: Arthur Cleveland Bent and William Brewster.

Arthur Cleveland Bent

There are frequent references to the bird sightings of A. C. Bent of Taunton in Smith Dexter's notebooks. At first we passed over these simply as references to a local friend; however, a computer search revealed that A. C. Bent was no ordinary acquaintance. From the Internet we discovered that: "Arthur Cleveland Bent (1866-1954) was a successful businessman who became interested in birds during his

childhood in Massachusetts. A dedicated amateur ornithologist, he traveled extensively throughout North America and acquired a thorough knowledge of the avifauna. In 1910, at the request of the Smithsonian Institution, Bent commenced work on the monumental series of *Life Histories of North American Birds*. He devoted the remaining forty-four years of his life to the project.” Interestingly, A. C. Bent frequently went birding with Smith Dexter in Westport during this period.

A. C. Bent’s extraordinary *Life Histories of North American Birds*, published in a twenty-one volume series (1919-1938), provided a durable foundation for virtually every subsequent compilation of North American bird biology (including the contemporary *Birds of North America*, coedited by another Westport neighbor, Alan Poole).

William Brewster

Smith Dexter edited two books published by Harvard University Press that contained excerpts from the journals of his close friend and Concord neighbor, William Brewster. The first book, *October Farm*, contains no mention of Smith Dexter on the title page, and one only learns from the Forward written by Thomas Barbour that “The Reverend Smith Owen Dexter, for many years Rector of Trinity Church at Concord, was a friend of William Brewster and a frequent guest at October Farm.” Also, that Smith Dexter “suggested extracting certain parts of (Brewster’s diaries) which dealt particularly with observations at Concord and collecting them for publication.” Smith Dexter selected and edited these extracts, which were published after his death, as *October Farm* (1936) and *Concord River* (1937). Unlike *October Farm*, the latter book notes on the title page: “Edited by Smith O. Dexter.”

William Brewster was born in South Reading, Massachusetts in 1851. He graduated from Cambridge High School in 1869, but he was unable to move on to Harvard because of difficulty with his eyes. Subsequently, he devoted his attention exclusively to the study of ornithology. In 1885 he was appointed curator of ornithology at the Harvard Museum of Comparative Zoology. He had a large estate in Cambridge, where he maintained a bird sanctuary and museum, and a 400 acre farm in Concord along the Concord River. Brewster founded the Nuttall Ornithological Club of Cambridge and was a frequent contributor to the Bulletin of that club as well as other ornithological journals of the day. He was a cofounder of the American Ornithologists’ Union and the first President of the Massachusetts Audubon Society. One of Brewster’s best-known titles was a book called *Birds of the Cambridge Region of Massachusetts* (1906). His writings have been compared with those of Henry David Thoreau. Smith Dexter was responsible for bringing William Brewster’s writings to an audience wider than just the readers of ornithological journals.

Description of Bird Sighting Records

As noted by Smith Owen Dexter in his introduction to “The Birds of Westport” (1918): “Few places in New England are more suited to the study of wild birds than the township of Westport.” Dexter’s notebooks tell us a lot of what bird life in the Westport area was like in the last century, and to this end, provide a valuable resource

for comparing modern conditions with those of an era gone-by. Smith Dexter kept notebooks in which he recorded information about the birds that he had seen personally, or that had been reported to him by others as seen in and around Westport. His notebooks contained one page for each species along with a picture and description of the bird that he had cut out of the book, *Bird Guide* by Chester A. Reed (1909). He often added quotations from Ralph Hoffmann's *Guide to the Birds of New England and Eastern New York* (1904), which he typed onto the page below the pasted cutout from Chester Reed's *Bird Guide*. Finally, he typed in his own notes about the bird, indicating the common, or sometimes colloquial, name for the bird, along with notes as to whether it was common, uncommon, or rare; where it had been seen or was most likely to be seen; who had been with him when he saw the bird (especially for rare species); and who had reported to him their sightings of the species. In some cases his notes are quite extended, in others quite brief. They always end with a capital "D" indicating they were Smith Dexter's notes. On a few pages additional notes have been added by others.

We have two major sources for contemporary sighting records in Westport. The first is The Westport River Bird Surveys which have been conducted since 2002 on four private properties along the eastern shore of the West Branch of the Westport River, as well as at four sites overlooking the Westport River. These surveys combine observations from fixed points and open trail walks. The fixed-point observations are of two types. One set of observations is comprised of those made from points along the shoreline that give unobstructed, but not overlapping, views of birds in the river, on marshes, and along the shorelines. The other observations are stops made at selected points along trails where skilled birders with good auditory skills record all birds seen or heard within a fixed time period. The open trail observations record all birds seen or heard while walking on specified trails through the properties, including both woods and pasture. The open trail and point count surveys are done in the early morning.

The surveys are conducted by small teams of two to five persons and led by experienced birders. Each survey team includes a recorder who is familiar with the requirements of the reporting forms. In 2002-2003 the surveys were conducted monthly in the spring, summer, and fall, and bimonthly in the winter. The data collected are entered into an Avisys computer program that records where, when, and how the birds were identified and what they were doing at the time of observation. This information is then analyzed statistically to test for consistency and to identify significant patterns in the seasonality and prevalence of the species recorded. In 2002-2003, 151 species were identified.

The second important contemporary source of data is the sighting records of local birder Michael Boucher. These records are based upon Boucher's birding activities around Westport over the past twenty years. He leads frequent bird walks for the Paskamansett Bird Club and does bird counts for the Lloyd Center of Environmental Studies and Mass Audubon's Allen's Pond Wildlife Sanctuary. His information indicates the abundance, the seasonal patterns, and the local breeding activity of the 256 species that he has identified in the Westport area.

Apparent Changes in Westport's Bird Population

It is difficult to make any definitive statements about changes in the local bird populations over the past century; however, careful comparison of Smith Dexter's notebooks with subsequently gathered information about bird distribution and abundance does provide some insight. Smith Dexter's records are anecdotal, mentioning sightings of individual species but seldom indicating quantities or frequency of sightings. Dexter provides rough, qualitative measures of numbers such as very rare, rare, uncommon, common, and abundant, but he fails to provide any precise definitions for these terms. He also suggests that some species appear to be declining and others increasing, but again these are qualitative statements without any quantitative specificity.

The more recent sighting records of the Westport River Bird Surveys do provide firm numbers for sightings and frequency of species detection on each survey. Unfortunately, however, these recent surveys cover only three years of observation, and only within a limited area along the West Branch of the Westport River. Most importantly, they do not cover the adjacent ocean areas, which are included in Dexter's records through reports from fishermen and gunners who frequented the local ocean area. Michael Boucher's records also give qualitative indicators of frequency of sightings, and his only seabird observations were made from the shore or from Gooseberry Point.

Despite these variations, by comparing the bird sightings recorded in Smith Owen Dexter's notebooks with those of the Westport River Bird Survey and Mike Boucher, we can still gain some insight into the changes in Westport's bird population over the past century. The most clear-cut evidence of change pertains to birds that were not recorded by Smith Dexter, but which are relatively common in the recent records. Species in this category include the following:

Snowy Egret	Great Crested Flycatcher
Glossy Ibis	Marsh Wren
Mute Swan	Tufted Titmouse
Turkey Vulture	European Starling
Wild Turkey	Northern Mockingbird
American Oystercatcher	Blue-winged Warbler
Forster's Tern	Northern Cardinal
Black Skimmer	House Finch
Red-bellied Woodpecker	

Veit and Petersen, *Birds of Massachusetts* (p. 26), tend to confirm that all of these species were either absent or extremely rare in the early part of the twentieth century in Massachusetts.

The following seventeen species appear to have increased significantly in recent times compared with a century ago. Some of these species may still be recovering from previous temporary declines, while others could possibly be responding to global changing climate. They are:

Great Egret
Canvasback
Bufflehead
Piping Plover
Short-billed Dowitcher
Dunlin
Ring-billed Gull
Great Black-backed Gull
Mourning Dove

Eastern Phoebe
Carolina Wren
House Wren
Northern Mockingbird
White-breasted Nuthatch
White-eyed Vireo
Baltimore Oriole
Canada Goose

Thirty-two species appear to have declined significantly since Smith Owen Dexter was observing birds in Westport. These include:

Green Heron
Black-crowned Night Heron
Long-tailed Duck
White-winged Scoter
Common Goldeneye
Red-shouldered Hawk*
Northern Bobwhite
Spotted Sandpiper
White-rumped Sandpiper
Purple Sandpiper
Roseate Tern*
Snowy Owl
Chimney Swift
Least Flycatcher
Bank Swallow
American Pipit
Ruby-crowned Kinglet

Veery
Northern Parula*
Chestnut-sided Warbler
Black-throated Green Warbler
Golden-winged Warbler
Pine Warbler
Palm Warbler
Black-and-white Warbler
American Redstart
Northern Waterthrush
American Tree Sparrow
Field Sparrow
Vesper Sparrow*
Savannah Sparrow
Bobolink*
Purple Finch

Note: species marked with * are also listed in Veit and Petersen, p. 28, as declining in Massachusetts.

The endangered species, as reported by American Bird Conservancy (2004), that are currently important in the Westport area include:

Endangered: Piping Plover, Saltmarsh Sharp-tailed Sparrow.

Declining: Horned Grebe, Brant, American Black Duck, Whimbrel, Sanderling, Semipalmated Plover, Dunlin, Least Tern, and Wood Thrush.

Of special concern in the Northeast: Red Knot, Red-bellied Woodpecker, White-eyed Vireo, Brown Thrasher, Blue-winged Warbler, Pine Warbler, Eastern Towhee, Seaside Sparrow.

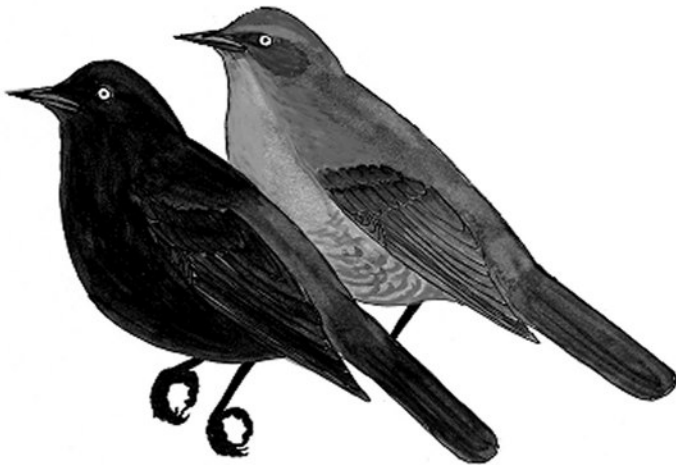
Now that Allens Pond and the Westport River Watershed have been designated as an Important Birding Area by the Massachusetts Audubon Society, hopefully new attention will be directed at the bird populations of the area and, hopefully, there will be renewed efforts to carefully monitor local bird populations. It is this type of

comparative exploration of birding records over long spans of time that makes possible the charting of bird conservation efforts in the future. 🐦

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Betty Slade and David Cole have been birding for ten years after their retirement from Harvard University. They both had been divers, doing underwater photography, but had become interested in birds after a short course at a local environmental center. Betty is interested in genealogy and local history, while David monitors the Ospreys on the Westport River. The article resulted from the combination of interests in local history and birds.



RUSTY BLACKBIRDS BY GEORGE C. WEST