

The “Wellesley Boys” — Contributions to Continental Birding

David B. Freeland

The question: What do Black Noddy, Brown-chested Martin, Mangrove Swallow, and Red-footed Falcon have in common? Even the best-informed North American birder would have trouble unraveling this bit of ornithological trivia. Probably only an elite fraternity of birders in Massachusetts would have even a shot at answering this seemingly remote birding question.

The answer: All four species were initially added to the official North American list by four birders from the same public school background, who were guided by the same childhood mentor – Douglas B. Sands of Wellesley, Massachusetts.

If there is another town anywhere else in America or another teacher anywhere else at all who can claim such a success story, please let me know!

Here’s what the official box score shows for “The Wellesley Boys”:

In 1960, Charles A. Sutherland discovered North America’s first Black Noddy at Florida’s Dry Tortugas while recording bird vocalizations for the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology.

In 1983, Wayne R. Petersen identified North America’s first Brown-chested Martin at the southern tip of Monomoy Island, off Chatham.

In 2002, Murray L. Gardler found North America’s first Mangrove Swallow at Viera Wetlands, Florida, during the Space Coast Birding & Wildlife Festival.

In 2004, E. Vernon Laux discovered North America’s first Red-footed Falcon at Martha’s Vineyard, thus becoming the fourth Wellesley Boy to have his name associated with a first North American record.

Although I’m a Wellesley Boy myself, I feel somewhat removed from this august list in that my closest claim to fame lies in being at Attu Island when a Baillon’s Crake and a Eurasian Sparrowhawk were sighted, both potential North American firsts, but neither was accepted for official listing because they were not photographed or collected. Sometimes birding is a game of inches!

There is certainly no such despair, however, for my high school birding buddy, Murray Gardler, or subsequent Wellesley High School graduates Chuck Sutherland, Wayne Petersen, and Vern Laux. Their good fortune and well-honed field skills have indelibly placed their names in the annals of birding legend. They have done our late mentor, Doug Sands, proud, and North American ornithology is richer because of their historic achievements.

“Wellesley Boy” Profiles

Charles (Chuck) A. Sutherland

Black Noddy (*Anous minutus*), July 13, 1960, Dry Tortugas (Bush Key), Florida.

After moving to Wilton, Connecticut, Chuck Sutherland continued his Wellesley Boy birding tradition at Cornell University. “Paul Kellogg sent me and another undergraduate to do bird recordings on a summer trip down the East Coast,” Sutherland recalls. “Cornell provided a state car, gas, and money for food. We slept in sleeping bags for three months.”

The farthest point south on the trip was a boat ride to the Dry Tortugas, off Key West, to record Sooty Tern and Brown Noddy calls. “On one sortie, on foot on Bush Key, we were recording some Brown Noddies perched on a tree skeleton. After a few minutes, I shifted my gaze several feet to the left and suddenly noticed a smaller, blacker-appearing bird. There were graduate students there as well as us undergrads, and they knew more about the local birds than we did. They said it was a Black Noddy.”

Dennis Paulson subsequently collected the first Black Noddy, but we saw a second one there later in the week,” Sutherland recalls. Black Noddy is now almost annual at the Dry Tortugas, often seen in spring on the pilings of the old coal pier at Garden Key, outside the gates of fabled Fort Jefferson.

Perhaps almost as interesting was the fact that on the same bird-recording trip Sutherland visited what is now Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge. “Dusky Seaside Sparrows (now extinct) were abundant,” Sutherland says. “They came from across a meadow when we played a tape of them singing. They were at our feet, as common as dirt at the time.”

Sutherland, a retired pharmaceutical company biochemist, now lives in Green Lane, Pennsylvania, about an hour north of Philadelphia. He is an avid sea kayaker and is a frequent contributor to *Sea Kayaking* and other magazines.

Wayne R. Petersen

Brown-chested Martin (*Progne tapera*), June 12, 1983, Monomoy Island, Chatham, Massachusetts.

One of the better-known birders in North America, a former field ornithologist for the Massachusetts Audubon Society, and past vice president of the American Birding Association, Wayne Petersen grew up with the late Richard (Bitty) Forster, another - Wellesley Boy who was arguably one of the most skilled birders ever to benefit from Doug Sands’ tutelage. Coincidentally, and quite remarkably, Petersen, Forster, and Vern Laux — as well as two other Wellesley Boy birders, Clark and David Ewer — literally grew up on the same small street, Standish Circle, in Wellesley Hills.

“Blair Nikula, Denver Holt, and I had spent the night at the south end of Monomoy,” Petersen recalls of that day two decades ago, “when we noticed a martin flying with the Barn Swallows that nested in the lighthouse keeper’s building. It

periodically rested in the pines near the lighthouse then resumed its feeding over the marsh. It was too large for a Bank Swallow despite its brown back and dusky chest band. It also showed distinct dark teardrops extending down the mid-breast.”

After observing the martin carefully, the group repaired to Nikula’s house in Chatham, where they identified the bird as a Brown-chested Martin, a hatch-year individual of the race *fusca*, the migratory race from southern South America and the most likely candidate for an overshoot migration to North America. “We photographed the bird on Monomoy, but it succumbed later that day,” Petersen says.

Fifteen years later in November, North America’s second Brown-chested Martin appeared with Cave Swallows at Cape May, New Jersey. I may hold the distinction of being the last person to see that individual alive (regrettably not the first), as it sat motionless and obviously moribund at the Rea Farm in West Cape May a week later.

Perhaps ironically, Wayne Petersen may also have been among the last birders to see a live Bachman’s Warbler, when he and Noble Proctor carefully observed one at South Carolina’s I’on Swamp in 1966. Petersen admits, however, that he’d much rather have a first continental record to his credit than a last.

Today, Petersen directs the Important Bird Areas (IBA) program for Mass Audubon.

Murray L. Gardler

Mangrove Swallow (*Tachycineta albilinea*), November 18, 2002, Viera, Florida.

When Doug Sands arrived at Wellesley Junior High School as an eighth-grade science teacher in 1950, Murray Gardler and I were among his first students and, soon enough, we became disciples. Time, college, and careers forced Murray and me apart, but we have reunited forty-five years after graduating from Wellesley High to bird together once again in central Florida. A few months before my arrival in Florida, Murray had confirmed the presence of North America’s first Mangrove Swallow at Brevard County’s Viera Wetlands, a nearby site that I now visit at least twice a week. Who knows what might show up there next?

The day after 2002’s outstanding annual Space Coast Birding & Wildlife Festival, Murray stopped in at Viera looking for a group of swallows that a Canadian birding team had located twenty-four hours earlier, but was unsure whether they were Cave or Cliff Swallows. “I saw a bird flashing a white rump,” Gardler recalls, “which at first looked like a Violet-green Swallow except for the absence of black splitting the white rump, and its odd face pattern.”

“I went to the desk at the facility headquarters and called Tampa birder and photographer, Lyn Atherton. She came and photographed it. I checked Wes Biggs’ copy of *Swallows of the World*, but nothing looked quite right.”

The swallow remained at Viera for four days, during which time so many birders came to see it that the facility, a wastewater treatment plant for a large section of Brevard County, had to restrict visitors to scheduled bus tours of the dikes in quest of the still not positively identified swallow.

“People were calling it Mangrove, White-rumped, and White-winged [swallow],” Gardler says. “I went up to the University of Georgia, where Paul Sykes had accumulated skins from many places, and a group of us were able to conclude finally that the bird was a Mangrove.”

Interestingly enough, the other swallows turned out to be Cave Swallows of the southwestern race, not Cliff Swallows, although their appeal quickly diminished compared with that of the Mangrove Swallow.

Gardler, still an active birder who regularly leads groups to the Dry Tortugas, Arizona, and Alaska, is retired from General Motors, where he opened and closed distributorships across the country.

E. Vernon Laux

Red-footed Falcon (*Falco vespertinus*), August 8, 2004, Martha’s Vineyard, Massachusetts.

When a bird that nests in Central Eurasia and winters in Africa shows up at your neighborhood airport, there is an inevitable inclination to wonder if someone “flew it in” or whether it arrived under its own power. Birds of prey, with their history of being captured for falconry, carry their own special baggage in this regard.

Vern Laux, a real estate broker on Martha’s Vineyard, was birding near Katama Airport last summer when he spotted a bird he first thought was a Mississippi Kite, in itself a fancy record for Massachusetts.

“But it was hovering,” Laux says, “unlike anything I had seen a Mississippi Kite do. So I returned the next day, studied it more carefully, and with the help of a friend, obtained some pictures.” Once Laux and his colleagues had a chance to examine the photos, it became clear that the bird was, in fact, a Red-footed Falcon.

Following the positive identification, Laux did some research on Red-footed Falcons. “There are four records for Iceland and ten or fifteen for the United Kingdom annually over the past decade, mostly in May or June, with a few in July,” he reports. Because Red-footed Falcon is an insect eater, not a small bird or rodent killer, it is seldom, if ever, kept by falconers. Consequently, natural origin seems likely—a fact supported by the willingness of the Massachusetts Avian Records Committee to accept the record as a first for Massachusetts. Time will tell how AOU and ABA Checklist decision-makers will rule.

Following its first appearance in the Western Hemisphere, the falcon attracted approximately 10,000 visitors to Martha’s Vineyard before it “was last seen by birders flying off the island to the south on August 29,” according to Laux. By then, it had made front-page headlines in newspapers across Massachusetts, as well as the *New York Times*. Laux himself was featured on *ABC News* on August 27 as the “Person of the Week” for his discovery of the rare falcon.

“Wellesley Boys” Today

In Petersen and Richard Veit’s work, *Birds of Massachusetts* (1993), it’s hard to escape notice of the Wellesley Boys and their contributions to Massachusetts ornithology. Petersen’s name is prominent and is associated with such Bay State rarities and first state records as Band-rumped Storm-Petrel, Garganey, Red-necked Stint, Little Stint, and McCown’s Longspur, along with a multitude of other outstanding records.

Forster is credited for first Massachusetts discoveries of such species as Anhinga, Little Egret, White-faced Ibis, California Gull, and Boat-tailed Grackle, and he was largely responsible for correctly identifying North America’s first and only Cox’s Sandpiper (an enigmatic hybrid shorebird first described in Australia by Shane Parker in 1982). Laux is well known for discovering rarities such as Red-billed Tropicbird, Reddish Egret, Common Cuckoo, and Shiny Cowbird in Massachusetts, as well as what was likely one of very few sightings of Common Swift (*Apus apus*) on this side of the Atlantic Ocean. Gardler’s many published Bay State citations include a number of local rarities (e.g., Fulvous Whistling-Duck), many of them in the late 1950s and early 1960s, before some of the reported species were as regular in the state as they are today.

The “Wellesley Boys” (and One Girl)

Richard Chandler	David Norton
Boris Chevone	Kenneth Norton
Clark Ewer	Robert Peak
David Ewer	Wayne Petersen
* Richard (Bitty) Forster	Alan Railsback
David Freeland	Mark Saterthwaite
Murray Gardler	Steven Spang
Richard Gelpke	Charles Sutherland
Donald Gould	Christian Thompson
David Gulick	Susan Thurber (Cloutier)
* Kenneth Hamilton	Walter Tordoff
* Richard Howard	Thomas Warren
Glenn Jenks	* Richard Wisewell
Vernon Laux	
* Hollis Leverett	*Deceased

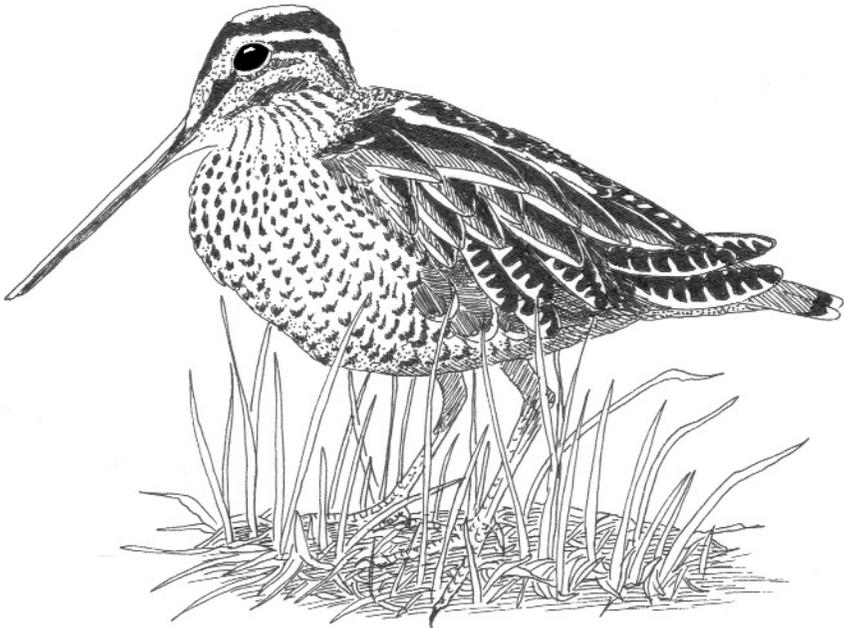
Other Wellesley Boys who were protégés of Doug Sands and whose natural history interests led them to areas of science besides birding included: H. Christian Thompson, a recognized expert in the systematics and nomenclature of syrphid flies; Walter Tordoff, a professor emeritus in the department of biological sciences at California State University; and Boris Chevone, a professor of plant pathology at Virginia Tech University. Other Wellesley Boys entered the world of business, yet retain to this day their passion for birds, thanks to their distinguished deceased mentor, Doug Sands. Sands was professionally honored as Mass Audubon’s Massachusetts Conservation Teacher of the Year (1983) and was a recipient of the

National Society of the Daughters of the American Revolution (NASDAR) Conservation Medal and Certificate. After his passing in 2001, Wellesley Boys helped establish a scholarship in his honor to which many contribute annually to this day.

Born in Rochester, New York, Sands earned a B.S. degree in biology at Boston University and later an A.M. degree in geology. Birds, obviously, were only part of his life, and among his other great loves were horticulture and gardening. When Doug Sands passed away on June 22, 2001, at the age of 85, he left a legacy of hundreds of former students who loved him and who will forever remember the influence he had upon their lives.

To quote Wellesley Boy Chuck Sutherland, “Doug Sands made a contribution to our lives that affected us and contributed to the fullness of our lives forever.” 

Dave Freeland is a Wellesley Boy himself, with over fifty years of active birding experience and a North American life list of 719 that is still growing.



WILSON'S SNIPE BY GEORGE C. WEST