

SURVIVING AS AN INNER CITY BIRDER IN BOSTON

by J. M. Grugan, Boston

Most birders, understandably, would be hesitant to limit their peregrinations to a city. "Getting out" usually refers to an early morning start for the hinterlands of avian abundance. In Massachusetts this usually means a trip to Cape Cod, Cape Ann, or Newburyport. But if time is of the essence, at the most an hour or two is available, where does the inner city Boston Birder pursue his quest? Answering this question can be as much a part of adjusting to city life in Boston as becoming familiar with Storrow Drive, the Red Sox, or "coffee regular."

The Boston Common and Public Garden would perhaps be more relevant for a social tête-à-tête, but they nevertheless can provide decent early morning birding. While some might be surprised to hear that one can walk through the Common at night, or even in the early morning, I can honestly say that the greatest disturbance that I have experienced was the chanting of Hari Krishna followers. (To overcome fear of the Common I suggest a quick three minutes in Thompkins Park in New York City---at noon!)

The biggest disappointment of the Common for me was the total lack of strigidine visitors during my two-year tenure on Beacon Street. I had hoped for a Screech Owl or a Barred Owl in one of those big trees near the Rotunda, or around the Garden pond, and so on many nights I offered an owl imitation. The only response I ever got was a strange high-pitched whistle, that had me completely baffled until I remembered that our ever-present mascot, Rattus norvegicus, can climb trees.

One of the more amazing aspects of man-bird relations has always seemed to be the lack of interaction. I have never been able to understand how anyone can be oblivious to the yak of the flicker or the cacophony of the Mockingbird. It is dismaying to think that anyone could ignore the glorious song of a May Tennessee Warbler, given from a Garden dogwood. Among my favorite birds of the Common was a male Ruby-throated Hummingbird that boldly buzzed its rapid way through the hustle and bustle of morning city workers to taste the nectar of the potted flowers in front of a nearby sandwich shop. Though people were passing within feet of the bird, it went as unnoticed as a fly. And that Woodcock crouching on the bare dirt of the Common surely looked comically misplaced.

Although many city birders may not have a backyard from which to observe avian sights, some have rooftops from which to watch firsthand one of the most splendid events of the biological world, nocturnal migration. If you find yourself in even a moderately tall highrise, don't hesitate to make a midnight visit during spring or fall to the rooftop. My former building on Beacon Street was 11 stories high, and when the winds were right, the sounds of the passerines moving by night were sometimes incredible. Roof-nesting nighthawks, flashing through the "canyons" of Boston, provide a constant acoustical accompaniment by night, while the diurnal twittering of Chimney Swifts is a sure sign of spring in Boston.

Although the Common is good for a quick trip in spring or fall, it is

less so in winter, the time of the hardy, the time of the non-passerine. The Red Line subway passes over the Charles River, and on the way to Harvard Square one sees the Museum of Science to the east. Almost always there are Herring and Great Black-backed Gulls here, but my first inner city Bonaparte's Gull, seen from the train, was cause for further investigation.

On the northern side of the Charles, behind the Museum of Science, there is a warm water effluent in winter. Nine species of gulls have turned up here, including Glaucous, Iceland, and Black-headed Gull. Bufflehead, Barrow's Goldeneye and a pair of Hooded Mergansers have appeared both winters that I have observed, and I suspect that some of the same individual birds are returning year after year to this ice-free spot.

My most recent haunt has been Boston Harbor. The inner harbor, which is easily accessible from points along Commercial Street in the North End of Boston, is a great place to study the different plumages and the feeding behavior of some of the more common larids, including the Laughing Gull. The late summer of 1978 brought thousands of gulls to the inner harbor to feed on the dead menhaden that had been decapitated by the bluefish. Night herons roost on the abandoned piers that dot the innermost areas of the harbor, and other herons can occasionally be seen flying toward East Boston. My best sighting here occurred in the fall of 1978, when a possible Franklin's Gull was seen.

I would be remiss not to mention the Boston Harbor islands. From Long Wharf in Boston one can reach George's Island by taking a harbor cruise with one of the several companies that run such trips, usually from May to October. While George's Island ordinarily has little to offer in the way of birds, there is a free water-taxi that will drop you off on any of several harbor islands. At least one of these, Lovell's Island, is heartily recommended for fall birding. Camping is possible (the necessary permit can be obtained from the MDC office in Boston), and the experience can be quite worthwhile in many ways. You find yourself with only the distant skyscrapers of the city on the westward horizon. To the east there is nothing but ocean. Lovell's Island is unusually well-vegetated for an island of its size, and thus the attraction for birds. My only trip in the spring was uninspiring, but I have made two trips in the fall that constitute some of the most enjoyable birding I have done in Massachusetts.

So inner city birding is possible, at least as a last resort, when Newburyport, Cape Ann, and Cape Cod are out of reach. The warblers of the Public Garden, and the ducks and gulls of Boston Harbor-Charles River can provide many hours of entertainment, as can a trip to Boston's harbor islands. Seasonal populations compose the bulk of the species present, and a good spot for transients, e.g., the Common, can be quite dreary in dead of winter. But all in all I recommend it, especially to those with a sense of adventure and a need to be part of the changing outdoors while shouldering city life.

The following is a compilation of some of the more interesting birds that I have observed in the areas mentioned, together with dates of occurrence:

Boston Common and Public Garden
(44 species recorded)

American Woodcock	4/14/78
Ruby-throated Hummingbird	10/5/77
Yellow-bellied Sapsucker	10/20/77, 4/14/78, 5/14/78
Olive-sided Flycatcher	10/25/77
Hermit Thrush	10/25/77
Swainson's Thrush	10/20/77, 5/14/78
Veery	10/25/77
Red-eyed Vireo	10/5/77
Black-and-white Warbler	10/20/77, 5/14/78
Northern Parula	5/10/77, 5/14/78
Nashville Warbler	10/25/77
Cape May Warbler	5/10/77
Bay-breasted Warbler	10/25/77
Blackpoll Warbler	9/18/77
Tennessee Warbler	5/14/78
Pine Grosbeak	11/20/77

Charles River Basin

Gadwell	2/20/77
Barrow's Goldeneye	2/20/77, 2/8/78
Bufflehead	2/20/77, 2/9/78
Common Merganser	3/5/77
Hooded Merganser	3/5/77, 2/8/78
Glaucous Gull	2/20/77
Iceland Gull	2/20/77, 3/8/78
Black-headed Gull	3/8/78

Lovell's Island
(102 recorded species)

Merlin	9/10/78
Black-billed Cuckoo	9/9/78, 6/8/79
Whip-poor-will	9/21/79
Yellow-throated Vireo	9/20/79
Philadelphia Vireo	9/9/78
Orange-crowned Warbler	9/9/78
Connecticut Warbler	9/21/79
Yellow-breasted Chat	9/10/78
Rose-breasted Grosbeak	9/21/79
Clay-colored Sparrow	9/20/79
Lincoln's Sparrow	9/10/78