

FROM^{THE} FIELD

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MASSACHUSETTS YOUNG BIRDERS CLUB



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From The Editor

This issue, I hope, will mark the beginning of a new chapter in the Massachusetts Young Birders Club.

It is my goal for this publication to serve as a place for young birders across Massachusetts to share their experiences from the state and from afar.

From patch birding stories, to visits to other parts of the country, and maybe stories from other parts of the world, I'd like this newsletter to have a little of everything. Drawings and photographs, surveys and identification guides, I'm up for putting almost anything in here, as long as you are willing to devote a few hours to sharing your experiences and interests with fellow young birders.



Evan Lipton, Vice President

THE VOLATILITY OF BIRDING A DAY IN VIRGINIA

BY ANDREW BARNDT

So often, I go birding, come home, and think about the could-have-beens. Or maybe, “yes, that was good, but... I wanted to see more.” Still, one of the joys of birdwatching is the unsuspectingness of it all. Sure, we know that warblers migrate in May, sea ducks are best seen in winter, and that a fulmar won't be seen over a cornfield in Worcester. We even check eBird to learn of what we're most likely going to find at a certain location at a certain time of year. But aside from a few obvious givens, we never really know what we're going to see. So when I was brainstorming ideas for this newsletter, I kept flashing back to a memorable day that seemed to have all the birds I wanted. This is my recollection of it nearly 6 months later.

It was the evening of Friday, June 13th. The family had just finished an exhausting four-day speech and debate competition at Patrick Henry College in Virginia. This competition featured homeschooled teenagers from all over the country, ranging from 7th graders all the way to seniors in high school who had performed well enough within their respective parts of the country to make it all the way here—the national championship of homeschool speech and debate.

As the five members of my family piled into our minivan, it was getting close to 11 p.m., and we had almost an hour-long drive to our destination for the night—a house in Culpeper County, Virginia, owned by a place called Kellys Ford (yes, it is indeed Kellys and not Kelly's), that we had arranged to share with a college friend of my dad's and her family. This wasn't a new location for me—I'd been here 9 months earlier in late August/early September. The drive took us through winding back roads, and was generally uneventful except for the thud generated by a large moth hitting our van's windshield.

After getting somewhat of a good night's sleep (read: around 7 hours), we ventured out to Kellys Ford to do two main things: horseback riding and canoeing down the Rappahannock River—all just the day after a fun but exhausting competition. Birds were on my mind, but not very high on the priority list—after all, my previous trip here (recall, though, that it was

a completely different time of year) netted nothing really of note. While I seem to recall having my binoculars with me, they did not play a major role during the day.

After eating breakfast, the two families managed to pack into a pickup truck (with many of us riding in the bed) and took off to the canoe dropoff spot. Lots of Tree and Barn Swallows flew around the fields as we drove along, but those didn't surprise me in the slightest. The canoes were (somewhat) gently pushed into the river that had to be getting close to flood stage—the water level was extremely high from unusually wet weather. As I waited in my canoe for everyone to get into the river and start paddling, I caught for a split second a bird with a bright belly and dark head as it flew off a dead tree branch—it didn't take me long to realize I had a Red-headed Woodpecker. It had most certainly caught me off guard, and it was far from the last bird to do that. Not long after, I started to hear the descending song of a Louisiana Waterthrush—not too surprising given the habitat, but also one that I was unprepared for. Before long, another Waterthrush made its presence known. As I was taking this all in, what do you know, a couple of majestic adult Bald Eagles soared in view for a little bit—once again, a bird I had given no chance of being seen was right in front of me. It didn't take too long before a couple of Acadian Flycatchers started calling “peet-SAH” from the top of the riverside trees, staying hidden from view. Along with a few Blue-gray Gnatcatchers actually visible and the songs of Northern Parulas, it was clear that I had either underestimated an otherwise lackluster location or that I was simply lucky and a regular trip in June wouldn't have been as productive. Given that I had no experience with the location in June before, I think the former is correct.

But that was not the end of birding. After the canoeing came to a close, we hung around waiting to be picked up and driven back to the main building of Kellys Ford (the starting and ending points of the canoe trip were different). As we waited (and waited...), I heard numerous birdsongs emanating from

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all over the place. One of the singers remained hidden, but the song was unmistakably coming from a Yellow-throated Warbler. Another couple of unfamiliar songs were coming from smaller birds far lower in vegetation. It took some time for the birds to emerge, but once one gave me a view, there was no denying it—a beautiful male Indigo Bunting.

Finally, the same pickup truck that had dropped us off came to pick us up and drive us back to the lodge. After getting out of the bed of the truck (something you should absolutely not try at home), it was lunchtime. Our group ate lunch at the lodge's outdoor swimming pool; time passed fairly uneventfully until a large cargo plane owned by the Air Force appeared in the distance. As we were looking at it, a brown bird with a yellow underside and black on the breast flew overhead. A Dickcissel was out of the question, and that only left Eastern Meadowlark as the bird—while the habitat was good, yes, one does not simply expect to see a meadowlark in Maryland. This also marked the official end of an era—when I was around 5 years old, planes were my life. Now, birds clearly were higher on the list of priorities.



birds than I can. Maybe it's experience; maybe it's sheer luck. Whatever it is, I'm often jealous of them.

This day was different. It wasn't a day of could-have-beens. It wasn't a day that came away as, "yes, it was good, but... I hoped for more." It was a day that I saw 36 species—in the middle of June, at a location not designed for birders, a place I knew next to nothing about, and without the aid of a scope or much binocular help. I always feel like I never see something as unexpected as a meadowlark—a bird I'd only seen twice before—fly over while I'm chilling

out next to a swimming pool. Those are the things you see people report all the time, but seem to never experience yourself.

The unique thing about birding is that it is both predictable and unpredictable. People don't go plantwatching and then report what they found to ePlant—there's absolutely no challenge. In the birding world, however, challenges abound. It takes no searching to see a Gray Catbird on Plum Island in the spring and summer, but it will take effort to find a Brown Creeper anywhere. And even it seems certain that a creeper will run across your path at some point, one can never be sure. And even when it seems impossible for a pair of Bald Eagles to show up in front of you, such an event can never be out of the question. While we can spend hours just figuring out what we think we're going to see, there are no guarantees.

Unpredictability drives many people crazy. For me, it's the best aspect of birding. ♦

THE NEW YEAR

Most of us keep year lists and we always look forward to the new year when we start fresh. At the stroke of midnight our lists start at zero, we have a clean slate, and any bird we see will be new; from a Mallard to a House Sparrow. Starting all over again is one of my favorite things about birding and I keenly look forward to it each year.

On January 1st I crawled out of bed at 6:00am and headed outside. I was greeted by extreme cold and a gelid wind that cut through all five of my layers. I birded despite the weather. My first birds were a flock of Dark-eyed Juncos under my feeders. The list grew slowly and I added Morning Dove, American Crow, Blue Jay, Black-capped Chickadee, Tufted Titmouse, and Eastern Bluebird. My youngest brother joined me and we birded our yard until we were compelled to go inside because of the cold.

Later in the day, when it had warmed up, we went to our local hotspot, a power line cut. There are always fantastic birds here. The highlights included Common Raven, Winter Wren, Field Sparrows, American Tree Sparrows, Coopers Hawk, and Red-tailed Hawk. The whole time we had been walking over all the frozen puddles in the road down the power line cut and the ice had just barely held. Right before we were going to be picked up I had seen a sparrow over in some reeds and went to check it out. The ice wasn't very firm around the reeds and I knew that it was pretty deep in the area I was walking on. My younger brother called to me saying that our ride had come, so I started hurrying out of the swamp. Then it happened. CRASH! I went down to my knees in icy cold swamp water. I slogged my way out and jumped in the car. Yikes! That ended New Years day and we had a nice start to our year list. If you don't keep a year list, then I highly suggest doing so. It is great fun and even if you don't do it very seriously, just do it for the experience of starting all over again on New Years Day. Happy New Year!

Jonathan D. Eckerson

- Jonathan Eckerson, President

2015 YEAR LISTS

This section contains no total numbers, but instead highlights from the year.

Evan Lipton

I gained 158 lifers in 2014, most of them in New Zealand and Australia. Some of the most notable of these birds were Southern Brown Kiwi, Yellow-eyed Penguin, Musk Duck, Superb Lyrebird, and Australian King-Parrot among many other fantastic birds. Back home I gained several uncommon birds for MA such as Hooded Warbler, Prothonotary Warbler, Black Skimmer, Acadian Flycatcher, Marbled Godwit, Western Sandpiper, Common Gallinule, Eurasian Wigeon, Cackling Goose. I also found several rarities including a Western Kingbird and an Ash-throated Flycatcher.

Jonathan Eckerson

2014 has been my best year for birds yet. A trip to FL in the spring gave me 32 lifers and along with several other great bird trips, I ended up with 40+ lifers. I got lots of common stuff finally checked. There are not many common birds left for me to see in MA. Rarity wise I didn't get many. Highlights include all the FL birds (best birds from that trip include Short-tailed Hawk, Western Kingbird, and Gray Kingbird), Northern Saw-whet Owl, Barn Owl, Wilson's Warbler, Red Knot, Clay-colored Sparrow, Worm-eating Warbler, Lapland Longspur, Snow Bunting, Eurasian Wigeon (2), and Dickcissel.

EXPLORING NEW ZEALAND

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY EVAN LIPTON



INVESTIGATING THE COAST OF KAIKOURA - A ROCKY
PENINSULA JUTTING INTO THE PACIFIC OCEAN - HOME
TO FUR SEALS AND OYSTERCATCHERS



A Pacific Reef Heron pauses momentarily between loping strides to watch for fish. A small heron, this species can easily clamber across seaweed-covered rocks in search of food. I had trouble photographing this bird, not because it wasn't trusting of me, but because I was not as agile as it was in the rocky shallows and on the slippery bubble-like seaweed.

The Kaikoura shoreline is an amazing place to explore. Getting away from the tourists, you can find sheltered coves filled with treasures to observe and photograph. The shoreline is diverse in its habitat. Pebble beaches abut vast platforms of rock which in turn border sheltered sand beaches. New Zealand Fur Seals litter the offshore rocks and some of the more expansive mainland platforms. High tide often covers huge areas of rock, making vast shallow pools. As the tide retreats, White-faced Herons, Variable and South Island Oystercatchers and Ruddy Turnstones flock from their roosting places to feed on the newly exposed rock. Giant bands of kelp writhe in the seething waters at the edge of the tide, looking just like the seals that roll playfully in the waves.

Double-banded Plovers stake out feeding territories in the sandier areas, assaulting any other plover that gets too close. Pacific Reef Herons actively patrol the tidal pools, agilely clambering over seaweed covered rocks and sometimes shading the water at their feet with wings spread out like an umbrella. The wings block out the glare from the sun and afford a clear view into the shallows. Fish sometimes perceive this darkness as valuable cover in an open habitat. It is a very successful technique as the heron always comes away from a subsequent jab with a wriggling fish. Red-billed Gulls are everywhere, sometimes performing unearthly duets in the shallows and often trying in vain to avoid their insistently begging full-grown young. Offshore feeding flocks of the

gulls often form, clearly centered around large schools of fish. These attract White-fronted Terns and Hutton's Shearwaters, the shearwaters sometimes numbering in the thousands. In certain areas the fur seals will rest in such awkward places that they might as well be invisible. One such seal was at the edge of a parking lot nestled in the high tide line of seaweed and I didn't notice it until my foot was hovering above it about to step down to make my way to the water. This seal was small, probably a female, and barely opened her eyes enough to see that I was there before they were closed again. Needless to say I got some interesting pictures of her from above and left her in peace.

Variable Oystercatchers are the only polymorphic (more than one color morph) species of oystercatcher in the world and range from having all black plumage to having large amounts of white on their undersides. The species is a solid bird with a comparatively shorter bill than the South Island Oystercatcher which is pictured on the right. Both of the species are endemic to New Zealand and are incredibly common and almost always very trusting. The 'screams' of the oystercatchers can often be heard and quickly become a background noise. Kaikoura is famed for its seabirds, and with an underwater canyon very close to the shore, they are often easy to see. Taking a boat only a mile out can afford spectacular views of species such as Northern Giant-Petrels and Wandering Albatrosses among many other species of tubenose. Parasitic Jaegers can be seen flying very close to shore harrasing the gulls and terns. During certain feeding frenzies, the masses of Hutton's Shearwaters come so close to the beach next to the town that you could reach out and touch them if they did not fly farther out with your approach. Pied and Little Pied Cormorants dot the coastal rocks and the larger, the Pied, are often mistaken for penguins by the tourists with their white bellies and black backs. The upland areas of the peninsula are mostly open farmland and provide habitat for Masked Lapwings and many introduced species of songbird such as European Starlings, European Greenfinches, European Goldfinches, Common Chaffinches, Yellowhammer, Dunnock, Sky Larks, Eurasian Blackbirds, Song Thrushes, and House Sparrows. Native songbirds are scarce but include New Zealand Fantails, New Zealand Bellbirds, and Silver-eyes. I could have spent hours, even days, just sitting on top of the grass-covered cliffs overlooking the ocean. It is a place of amazing natural beauty. Even after be-



Top: A South Island Oystercatcher marches across seaweed-encased rocks. This species is slightly smaller and more delicate than the Variable Oystercatcher. Bottom left: A female New Zealand Fur Seal expresses her disapproval at a human (not me) who came far too close. Bottom right: A Red-billed Gull forages in a shallow tidal pool in the silvery morning light. These gulls breed in large numbers on the peninsula.

ing destroyed to an extent by humans it still felt like the coast was as it should be, even if there were no longer primeval forests reaching over and cascading down the tops of the cliffs. Kaikoura was one of the few places that felt right in some way to me. Feelings of destruction were ever-present while I was in New Zealand. So much of the country (both animals and habitat) has been destroyed over such a relatively short period of time that it seemed to leave a strange feeling in my gut. Many of New Zealand's endemic species are on the brink of extinction and it is only the amazing efforts of conservation in the country keeping them alive. New Zealand is practically unrivaled in the amount of introduced pests that abound, and it is only the people working to help the native wildlife there that can turn the tide for creatures such as the flightless and defenseless Kiwi and Kakapo. ♦

Liam Waters

I’ve always thought about doing a big year. First it was “the year I get my license I’ll do a state big year!” Then it was “well, maybe I’ll do a Norfolk County big year next year - it will be less driving time.” Needless to say I never did any of those, the closest I came was trying to hit 300 species in MA last year once I was at 294 at the end of November. It would’ve been a heck of a lot easier had I decided to do that in the spring, when I decided not to chase a few rare, but hard-to-get-to birds. Anyway, I did end up making it to 301 with the Tufted Duck in Falmouth my 300th. So, around the first of the year, I did my periodical check of the eBird homepage to see whether anything interesting was happening that I didn’t know about, and came across their suggested “New Years resolutions” pitch to get people to eBird more. They again stressed the importance of eBirding under eBirded areas and trying to make it fun and whatever else it said - I don’t really remember. I thought about it and decided that the closest under eBirded county was Bristol County, which wasn’t so bad as I have started commuting down to Fall River twice a week to attend classes. My mind was made up that this was the year -- I was going to do a big year! Now, keep in mind that I really don’t know my way around the county that well, and haven’t birded there all that much. My next step was to figure out what my goal should be for species. I kind of guessed that it would be somewhere in the mid 200’s, but I went onto eBird and looked up the species totals one person has had in a year. It ranged from 170 to 230, so I decided that I would aim for 240 species. With a little help and a lot of luck I might be able to hit 250+ but we will see. Realistically, I’ll be happy if I get 220.

Andrew Barndt

I did about no birding until May, and yet I have a stack of highlights from this past year. 15 species of warblers at Plum Island on May 12, including finding a reported Northern Waterthrush (a lifer at the time) on a second pass through the area it was seen in after missing it my first time through, and a Chestnut-sided Warbler about 8 ft. over the boardwalk in front of me. Observing tiny puffballs known as Piping Plover chicks at Plum Island in June, something that had eluded my mother for so long. Seeing no less than 5 breeding-plumaged Black Guillemots on one cliff ledge on an island off of Maine in August. Finally ending my lifelong drought of gannets and sapsuckers at Plum Island in September and during the MYBC trip in October, respectively. ♦

EIGHT MASSACHUSETTS BIRDS TO SEE IN 2015

By Davey Walters

Everyone has bird lists: life lists, year lists, month lists, day lists, ABA region lists, country lists, state lists, county lists, town lists, neighborhood lists, yard lists, and more. Many birders will create any new list they can imagine just to check off another few species. I will be the first to admit this. To tell the truth, I love it when my life list gets all torn up. It’s just an excuse to print out a new one and go check all the species off again. That may seem ridiculous, but there is a real satisfaction that we gain from marking a job as done. Seeing a new bird is just another job accomplished. But how satisfying would checking off a bird be if you had planned to see it? I’m going to give you a list of 8 Massachusetts birds that you should target in the year 2015: two species for each season.

WINTER

SNOW BUNTING -

A specialty from the north, these fast, aerial birds are a real treat to watch. They zip around in tight flocks, swerving and then suddenly alighting, sometimes one hundred of them in a single tree!



SNOWY OWL -

Famed for their ghostly appearance and calm beauty, these owls have been noted of late to be hunting seabirds to supplement their regular diet of rodents. They are a must for any birder who can get to the coast.



SPRING

WINTER WREN -

These spritely wrens can be seen on their early spring migration north, often bursting out in short phrases of song. They are very interesting to watch as they flit in and out of dense cover, giving trace views of their ornate plumage.



SCARLET TANAGER -

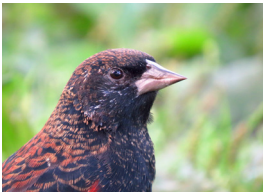
These gorgeous birds are often seen on migration, and sometimes even breed here. The males are a stunning crimson with jet black wings, and very celebrated. The females are often forgotten about, though they are also a special bird, their leaf-green bodies setting off their pitch-colored wings.



SUMMER

RED-WINGED BLACKBIRD -

Flashy black with red epaulets in summer, male Red-wingeds will perch atop an open branch or cattail until they fall off with exhaustion. Their song is a short ‘Conk-a-ree’. The female is striped brown, and builds her nest in dense reeds.



PIPING PLOVER -

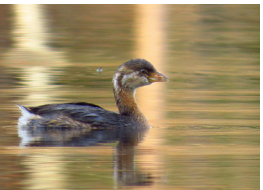
Though very small and fast, these plovers are very entertaining. They can be found on the enclosed breeding grounds, roped off to the public because these birds are endangered. They zip back and forth, chasing innumerable small invertebrates across the sand.



FALL

PIED-BILLED GREBE -

Small and rather cautious, these grebes are not uncommon on their southbound migration. They reside in small lakes and ponds and marshland along the coast. They don’t stay long above the surface when they’re fishing, so you may have just a few seconds to glimpse them before they dive.



AMERICAN WOODCOCK -

Stillier than statue, these mid-sized sandpipers are nearly never found near sand. Birds of the woodland and small field, the male’s nasal “peent” calls often pierce through the early fall night. They are stocky and somewhat awkward, with bills the length of their body. A bird of funny proportions, their large eyes give them a surprised appearance.



That is my list. Perhaps you will see some of them, perhaps all. But whatever the outcome, hopefully there will be some satisfaction in checking these birds off your list. ♦