



The Connecticut Warbler

The Journal of The Connecticut Ornithological Association



January 2024

Getting a handle on the ups and downs of our breeders.
The spring season produced a nice array of rarities.
Appreciating the look – and taste – of color.

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ON THE COVER

Yellow-billed Cuckoo

The often-elusive Yellow-billed Cuckoo proved especially so for participants in the Summer Bird Count, where it was found in lower than average numbers, but this beauty showed itself well for crack photographer and Connecticut Ornithological Association President Chris S. Wood.

The 2022 Summer Bird Count

By Patrick Comins and Tom Robben



Blue-gray Gnatcatchers are widespread but never numerous. According to Summer Bird Count results the numbers don't seem to be going up. This little sprite was recorded at a ten-year low. (Bruce Finnan)

Introduction

The Summer Bird Count (SBC) is our oldest and largest inventory of breeding birds in Connecticut. This effort is now in its 31st year and helps us to sample the changing status of breeding birds in the state and provide insight into the dynamic nature of the distribution and status of our breeding birds. Thank you for all of your efforts to track the breeding birds of Connecticut.

Results

This year 186 count-day species were recorded. This is just about average (101%) (Note: averages in this article refer to the average of the previous ten years' data, respectively) and seven more than the last year's count. You can find the 2022 data table showing all SBC species and numbers at the website of the COA Connecticut Ornithological Association: <https://www.ctbirding.org/birds-birding/ct-bird-count-data/> Go to that web page and click on the link called "2022 Summer Bird Count."



It comes as no surprise to anyone that the American Robin was the most numerous species logged by participants in the Summer Bird Count, just as it was the year before. (Bruce Finnan)

Litchfield Hills had the most species with 132 and Storrs the fewest with 109. There were 245 observers, in 125 parties. Volunteers tallied 1409.5 party hours, with 1372.7 being daylight hours and 36.75 night hours; about 105% of average for party hours and 95% of average for day party hours.

There were 100,030 individual birds recorded, which is 1,776 below last year's total and just about average (95%). The ten most abundant species were, in descending order: American Robin (1), European Starling (3), Red-winged Blackbird (4), Gray Catbird (2), Common Grackle (5), House Sparrow (6), Song Sparrow (9), Canada Goose (8), Red-eyed Vireo (7) and American Goldfinch (10)

Last year's ranking is given in parenthesis. These are the same species as last year in slightly different order.

Sixteen species were represented by a single individual: Sora, Black-bellied Plover, Red-breasted Merganser, Greater Yellowlegs, Golden-crowned Kinglet, Pied-billed Grebe (E), Blue-winged Teal, Greater Scaup, Bufflehead, Common Goldeneye, Mississippi Kite, Northern Harrier (E), King Rail (E), Western Sandpiper, Short-billed Dowitcher, and White-throated Sparrow.

Non-nesting Species

There were 24 species recorded on the count days that do not regularly breed in

Connecticut and can be considered either late migrants or non-nesting visitors. Underlined species could potentially nest in Connecticut, but are assumed to be non-breeders unless specific evidence of breeding was submitted: Brant, Greater Scaup, Common Eider, Bufflehead, Common Goldeneye, Red-breasted Merganser, Northern Harrier, Black-bellied Plover, Semipalmated Plover, Greater Yellowlegs, Sanderling, Semipalmated Sandpiper, Least Sandpiper, White-rumped Sandpiper (6), Western Sandpiper, Dunlin, Short-billed Dowitcher, Laughing Gull, Ring-billed Gull, Forster's Tern (4), Common Nighthawk, Blackpoll Warbler, White-throated Sparrow, and Evening Grosbeak.

Noteworthy among these: Greenwich/Stamford had a Greater Scaup and six Common Eiders, only the second record for this species on the count, with the other occurring in 2019 and the count's only Red-breasted Merganser. New Haven picked up Bufflehead and Common Goldeneye, the fifth and fourth records since 2012. New Haven also recorded six White-rumped Sandpipers, the fifth record since 2012 and a Western Sandpiper, the first since 2000. Their Short-billed Dowitcher was only the third since 2012. Greenwich/Stamford also found four Forster's Terns, the first since 2016, and a White-throated Sparrow. Storrs recorded two Evening Grosbeaks.

Notable Nesting Species

Litchfield Hills had a Blue-winged Teal. This is a species that only occasionally nests in Connecticut. They also picked up a Pied-billed Grebe (E) and two American Bitterns (E). Hartford had one and New Milford/Pawling had two Least Bitterns (T). Litchfield Hills had a Mississippi Kite, a species that has moved into our area as a nesting species, but for which this is the first SBC record. Greenwich/Stamford found a King Rail (E). This may represent a nesting attempt and was the first count record since 2017.

Litchfield Hills came through with the count's only Golden-crowned Kinglet, a species that is both rare and difficult to detect in the nesting season. New Haven recorded two Seaside Sparrows (T) and five Saltmarsh Sparrows (SC). Barkhamstead had 10! Red Crossbills, a nomadic species that can breed almost anywhere at any time, but for which this is the first count record since 2010.

Ten-year High Counts

24 species recorded at least ten-year high counts. Of these, eight are considered rarities, had no previous report in the prior ten years or are non-nesting visitors (Common Eider, Mississippi Kite, Semipalmated Sandpiper, White-rumped Sandpiper, Western Sandpiper, Blackpoll Warbler, Red Crossbill and Evening Grosbeak) and were already discussed under notable species. (Numbers in parentheses are percent of the previous 10-year average.)

Hooded Mergansers (305%) had an all-time high count of 109, shattering the previous high of 56 in 2014. Numbers of this species fluctuate widely depending on



Connecticut's extensive forests and wooded swamps provide ideal habitat for the increasing Barred Owl, as Summer Bird Count's all-time high numbers confirm. (Bruce Finnan)

the number of young recorded, which can be a matter of timing of the count. Great Blue Herons (117%) continue to be recorded in good numbers, with an all-time high of 397. Yellow-crowned Night-Herons (500%) also had an all-time high of 25, eclipsing the previous high count of 21 in 2003. Black Vulture (173%) had an all-time high of 98, beating out the previous record of 84 in 2019. Osprey (163%) continue to have impressive counts with an all-time high of 291 as compared to the previous high of 229 in 2020. Bald Eagle (162%) recorded another all-time high of 83, beating the previous high of 76 in 2020. Red-shouldered Hawk (149%) had a new all-time high of 193, eclipsing the previous record of 177 in 2020.

Piping Plover (194%) had a ten-year high of 25, second only to the 34 recorded in 1992. Willet (157%) came in at an all-time high of 39, handily beating the previous



Connecticut's two big owls are headed in the opposite direction. As farmland disappears, Great Horned Owl numbers have slumped on the Summer Bird Count. (Frank Mantlik)

high of 29 in 2014. Herring Gull (142%) had a ten-year high of 825, though this is much lower than the all-time high of 1229 in 1996. Similarly for Great Black-backed Gull (177%) with 228 being a good showing compared to the previous ten counts, although there were 414 in 1999.

Yellow-billed Cuckoo (196%) had a new all-time high of 150, beating out the previous record of 144 in 2005. Barred Owl (136%) had an all-time high of 160, edging out the previous record of 152 in 2020. Peregrine Falcons (207%) were counted in all-time record numbers with 23, as compared to the previous high count of 17 in 2020. Common Ravens (152%) continue to make a good showing with a new all-time high of 231, beating the previous count of 204 in 2021. House Finch (138%) rounds out the list with a new ten-year high of 1473, although this total is much lower than the all-time high of 2510 in 1993.

Ten-year Low Counts

Many species turned in poor performances, with 35 species coming in at or below recent lows, some of which we haven't seen since the earliest statewide counts.

Two of these species do not nest in Connecticut, Laughing Gull and Ruddy Turnstone, the latter having been missed for the first time since 2006.

Ruffed Grouse (0%) was missed for the first time. For comparison the high count for them was 77 in 1995! Wild Turkey (80%) had a ten-year low with 356, the lowest since 1997 when there were 335. Only three Sharp-shinned Hawks (33%) were recorded. The previous lows were four in 2018 and 1992. Spotted Sandpiper (59%) had a ten-year low with 28, the lowest since 2004 when there were 24. Great Horned Owls (42%) had an all-time low of 11, beating the previous lows of 14 in 2014 and 2015. Eastern Whip-Poor-Will (0%) (SC) was missed for the 5th time since 2012.

The bulk of the low counts were forest passerines. If this trend continues it would be prudent to do further studies to see if it is an anomaly or a trend that is of concern. Least Flycatchers (68%) had a ten-year low of 95. The all-time low was in 2011 with 75. The 429 Great Crested Flycatchers (84%) also made for a ten-year minimum and the lowest count since 2006, when there were 389. Eastern Kingbird (81%) came in at an all-time low with 454, edging out the previous low of 456 in 2013. Warbling Vireo (83%) had a ten-year low of 893, the lowest since 2011's 772. There were 2771 Red-eyed Vireos (85%), a new ten-year low and the lowest since 2011 when there were 2718.

Bank Swallow (80%) turned in a new all-time low of 133, with the previous record occurring in 2019 with 136. Cliff Swallow (57%) had a ten-year low with 139. The previous low was in 1992 with 59, but this was the second lowest count since statewide counts began. Black-capped Chickadee (81%) had a similar pattern with 1475, with a previous low of 1209 as far back as 1992. Blue-gray Gnatcatchers (48%), with 161 were also at a ten-year low, with the only lower counts occurring in the first two years of statewide counts, in 1992 (125) and 1993 (146). Only one Golden-crowned Kinglet (21%) was found, tying 2011 for the lowest count.

Veery (75%), with 1570 were at the lowest levels since 2004 when there were 1474. Wood Thrush (70%) had an all-time low with 750. The previous low was in 2018 with 885. Cedar Waxwing (80%) came in at a ten-year low with 2120, the lowest since 2010's count of 1876.

Ovenbirds (84%) had a ten-year low and with 1590 being the lowest count since 2008's count of 1398. Worm-eating Warbler (73%) with 84 had the lowest total since 2007 when there were 75. The 155 Blue-winged Warblers (54%) made for an all-time low, with the previous record low being 193 occurring in 2021. Black-&-White Warbler (72%) with 387 was also an all-time low, edging out 2020's count of 431. Common Yellowthroat (84%) was a ten-year low with 1494, the lowest since 1993's count of 1415. Chestnut-sided Warbler (78%) was also a ten-year low with 464, the lowest since the 375 in 1993. Black-throated Blue Warbler (60%) had a ten-year low of 123, the lowest since 1997 when there were 120. Black-throated Green Warbler (66%) had 169, the lowest total since 1993 when there were 103. Canada Warbler (41%) had an all-time low of 14, beating out the previous record of 21 in



Red-eyed Vireo was one of the 10 most numerous species on the 2022 Summer Bird Count, ranking No. 9 in a slide from seventh place the previous year. However, the 2771 recorded was a 10-year low and 85% of the 10-year average. (Frank Mantlik)

2003.

Savannah Sparrow (37%) with 29 were at the lowest level since 2003 when there were 21. Grasshopper Sparrow (0%) (E) was missed for only the second time since 2012. Scarlet Tanagers (78%) with 568 were at the lowest level since 1998 with 533. Bobolink (72%) had 331, the lowest since 1993's count of 257. Brown-headed Cowbird (79%) with 841 were at an all-time low, with the previous record being 847 in 2019. Baltimore Oriole (87%) with 914 was at the lowest level since 2002's count of 907. Purple Finch (65%) 69 was at the lowest since 1993 when there were 66.

Thank you

On behalf of the Connecticut Ornithological Association and the entire birding



Spotted Sandpipers need some elbow room to breed, so they're never found in large numbers on the Summer Bird Count. They hit a ten-year low with 28, the lowest since 2004 when there were 24. (Bruce Finnan)

community, we would like to thank all of the volunteer observers, captains and compilers for all of your hard work. The data that you provide is critical for understanding our summer bird abundance and distribution! A special thank you goes out to the late Joe Zeranski, the father of Connecticut's Summer Bird Count, for his leadership and all he has done over the years to coordinate, promote and report about the Count. This and future articles are dedicated to Joe's memory. Thank you for all you have done for the birds and birding in Connecticut!

Note: Any evidence of nesting by state-endangered (E), threatened (T) or special concern (SC) species should be reported to the COA Natural Diversity Database (NDDDB) Project. This will ensure that the best available information can be taken into account in land-use decisions. The taxonomic order will be updated next year, so it will be consistent with the latest AOS checklist.

You can find the 2022 data table showing all SBC species and numbers at the website of the COA:

<https://www.ctbirding.org/birds-birding/ct-bird-count-data/>



Connecticut Field Notes

By Greg Hanisek and Frank Mantlik



This Prothonotary Warbler, more often heard than seen, was photographed on May 5 at East Rock Park in New Haven. (Frank Mantlik)

Spring Season, March 1 to May 31, 2023

First records of regularly occurring species included Blue-winged Teal – March 3 in Madison (JO); Eastern Whip-poor-will – April 14 in Old Lyme (SJ); Chimney Swift – April 16 in Ridgefield (AWe); Ruby-throated Hummingbird – April 13 in Simsbury (AWi) and Groton (EE); Sora – April 15 in Litchfield (DH); Piping Plover – March 5 in New London (ME); Least Sandpiper – April 7 in Madison (PDe); Pectoral Sandpiper – March 22 in Avon (PM, BM); Willet – April 9 in Westport (MRi); Spotted Sandpiper – April 5 in Monroe (EB, JHl); Green Heron – April 15 in Newtown (RN); Yellow-crowned Night-Heron – March 21 in Stratford (PDe, FM); Glossy Ibis – March 19 in Old Lyme (CLe); Broad-winged Hawk – April 20 in New Milford (ADi); Eastern Kingbird – April 26 in Greenwich (RM); Acadian Flycatcher – May 12 at multiple locations; Willow Flycatcher – May 7 in Madison (HB); Least Flycatcher – April 28 in Kent (GHa); Yellow-throated Vireo – April 25 in East Haddam (CGi); Blue-headed Vireo – April 11 in Canton (DB); Warbling Vireo – April 21 in Avon (MPe); Red-eyed Vireo – May 2 at multiple locations; Northern Rough-winged Swallow – March 22 in Southbury (RN); Purple Martin – April 1 in Old Saybrook (SK, WS); Barn Swallow – March 27 in Bethany (JO); Cliff Swallow – April 21 in Southbury (RN).



Shown here on May 27 in Barkhamsted, this crisp adult Black-legged Kittiwake was part of an unprecedented appearance of multiple birds in northern Litchfield County. (Jeffrey Kohan).

Blue-gray Gnatcatcher – April 2 in Madison (CLE) and East Hampton (RS); Veery – April 18 in Hebron (JFe); Wood Thrush – April 21 in Greenwich (RM); Grasshopper Sparrow – April 27 in Suffield (RS); Seaside Sparrow – April 11 in West Haven (JO, BR); Lincoln's Sparrow – May 5 in Easton (JN); Orchard Oriole – April 22 in Hamden (PG); Baltimore Oriole – April 11 in New Milford (ADi); Eastern Meadowlark – March 21 in Storrs (ADe); Louisiana Waterthrush – April 4 in Bolton (LK); Northern Waterthrush – April 14 in New Haven (NA); Black-and-white Warbler – April 15 in Branford (KS); Tennessee Warbler – May 7 in Woodbury (DS); Nashville Warbler – May 1 in Fairfield (AK); Mourning Warbler – May 12 in Westport (PL); Hooded Warbler – May 2 in New Haven (BR); American Redstart – April 22 in Litchfield (AWi&CW); Cape May Warbler – May 7 in Litchfield (MDo); Cerulean Warbler – April 30 in Kent (BM); Northern Parula – April 13 in Greenwich (PL); Bay-breasted Warbler – May 5 in New Canaan (FG); Yellow Warbler – April 14 in Bloomfield (DB); Blackpoll Warbler – May 5 in New Haven (JO); Prairie Warbler – April 24 in Southbury (VQ); Black-throated Green Warbler – April 20 in Norwalk (SMu); Scarlet Tanager – May 1 in Westport (TG); Indigo Bunting – April 18 in Madison (DMr).



This flock of Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks made a brief and startling appearance May 3 at Point Folly on Bantam Lake in Litchfield. (Bette Shaw)

Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks continue to amaze, with two groups totally 22 reported at Point Folly on Bantam Lake in Litchfield on May 3 (BS fide BD). A late Snow Goose was in Southbury on May 16 (FG). A flock of 410 Brant, known for late lingering on the coast, were moving north over Woodbury on May 18 (RN). A Trumpeter Swan, a second state record if accepted, was present April 11-13 at the Wyndham Land Trust's Aicher Preserve in Pomfret (AR et al.). Two Tundra Swans were at Sandy Point, West Haven on March 18 (MPa). An exceptional inland count of 16 Gadwall was at Highland Lake in Winsted on March 30 (DRs). An adult male Harlequin Duck was at Millstone Point in Waterford on April 14-16 (DP). A sea duck fallout April 17 dropped two Surf Scoters on both Shenipsit Lake in Tolland (DMA et al.) and Rainbow Reservoir in Windsor (WG et al.). The first flurry of Common Nighthawk reports on May 13 included nine in Stamford (BH) and eight at Aspetuck Reservoir in Easton (AK). A Chimney Swift roost in New Haven held 350 birds on May 1 (MA), and 600 were in that area May 11 (SU). On May 25 there were 330 at Stratford Great Meadows (FM). A Common Gallinule was in a Cornwall marsh May 23-30 (JCr et al). Away from known breeding areas, two Sandhill Cranes were at three different places: Bafflin Sanctuary in Pomfret on April 24 (JFe), on Paine Road in Windham on May 9 (JSy) and at Ekonk Hill in Sterling on May 20 (JPy).

A Black-necked Stilt was a stellar find on May 13 at Plum Bank Marsh in Old Saybrook (NB). The same could be said for an American Avocet on April 18 at Milford Point (WB, KV et al.). An American Golden-Plover, uncommon in spring, was at Sandy Point in West Haven on April 7 (JSm), and from April 10 to May 21 up to two were at Milford Point (MJ et al.). Barely hanging on in the state, single Upland Sandpipers were in Coventry on May 3-4 (DMa et al.) and in South Windsor on May 4 (RS et al.). A Stilt Sandpiper was present on the record early date of March 5 at McKinney NWR in Stratford (FG, AK et al.). Exceptional high counts of Solitary Sandpipers were made at the Hockanum Linear Park in Vernon, with 33 on May 15 (JFe) and 19 still there on May 17 (DMa). A Red-necked Phalarope was a nice surprise on May 21 at Sandy Point (JO et al.).

Perhaps the most impressive event of the season was the unexpected inland appearance of up to eight Black-legged Kittiwakes on May 5-8 at Barkhamsted Reservoir, starting with discovery of four on the first day (DH et al.). The birds were seen in varying numbers over the four-day period, with eight seen by several observers on May 6 (PS et al.). This coincided with reports from Berkshire County, MA, and the Hudson River in Dutchess and Putnam counties in NY. A nice inland flock of 19 Bonaparte's Gulls was at Nepaug Reservoir in Canton on April 23 (DLa). A Common Gull (Kamchatka) present during winter in the Cove Island area of Stamford remained to March 6 (PDu et al.). In addition to a Common Gull (European) continuing from winter in Mansfield and North Windham, a second one was present in the same area March 19-21 (PR et al.), and another was at Long Beach in Stratford from March 6-11 (GHa, TMu et al.). A good count of the now-regular Lesser Black-backed Gull was four on April 1 at Seaside Park in Bridgeport (JN). The first of less than a dozen Caspian Tern sightings was on April 22 at Stratford Great Meadows (EB). Single Anhinga reports, possibly involving the same bird, came from East Haddam on April 26 (DRo) and Essex on May 8 (CGI).

A Snowy Egret was far inland on May 1 at Thompson Dam (CE). A Tricolored Heron was a good early find April 7 at Stratford Marina (DMc, KJ); up to two were at Hammonasset Beach State Park in Madison (hereafter HBSP) throughout May (CI, m.ob.); and one was at Beal Preserve in Stonington on May 20 (TMa). Always a nice find, a Western Cattle Egret (the new official name) was at Silver Sands State Park in Milford on May 1 (PF et al.); other singles were in Glastonbury May 5-7 (ADa et al.) and at Sherwood Island on May 7 (KB et al.). Three Glossy Ibis were a good inland find on May 13 at Nod Brook WMA in Avon (PC). An overshooting Swallow-tailed Kite was along I-91 in Enfield on May 4 (JC) and one was at East Rock Park in Hamden on May 13 (AB). The first Mississippi Kite was reported from Meriden on April 27 (MDi). There were reports of single birds from at least seven other locations, and a pair was seen mating in Lebanon on May 12 (LB), followed by numerous reports there through season's end. A flight of Broad-winged Hawks produced a count of 90 on April 24 at Johnnycake Mountain in Burlington (DC).



One of as many as three Common (European) Gulls for the season, this one was at Long Beach in Stratford on March 20. (Frank Mantlik)

Red-headed Woodpeckers were at Grace Salmon Memorial Park in Westport on March 25 (TG), at HBSP on May 15 (LW) and at Hartman Park in Lyme on May 21-23 (JSt et al.). The first of an excellent 20+ reports of Olive-sided Flycatcher was on May 8 at Lake Mohegan in Fairfield (JPu). The first of a typically sparse six reports of Yellow-bellied Flycatchers was in Newington on May 11 (PDe). Alder Flycatcher, the latest regularly returning breeding species, proved this status with a May 13 arrival in Easton (JN). A probable Bicknell's Thrush was audio-recorded in Greenwich May 19 (RC). In a non-flight year single Evening Grosbeaks were at feeders in Waterbury on May 13 (NC) and in Hamden on May 23 (DJ). The wintering Green-tailed Towhee in Fairfield was last reported April 19 (m.ob.). The state's fifth Western Meadowlark was at HBSP March 26-30 (RH, MRo, m.ob.). A female-type Rose-breasted Grosbeak was unexpected April 6 at a feeder in Wilton (AMr).

"Lawrence's" Warblers were at East Rock Park in New Haven on April 30 (CLi) and May 8 (AMa), and at Bauer Farm in Madison May 7 (CI). Single Prothonotary Warblers were at the state's most reliable spot, East Rock Park in New Haven, on May 5 (PG et al.) and at Valley Falls Park in Vernon on May 11 (DF). Single Kentucky Warblers, always eagerly sought, were at Trout Brook Valley on May 13 (LH), in Chaplin on May 16 (PR), at Birdcraft Sanctuary in Fairfield on May 17 (IR) and at East Rock Park on May 19 (m.ob.). A "Western" Palm Warbler, rare in spring, was at Trout Brook Valley in Easton on May 7 (JN); another was reported on the late date of May 13 at HBSP (PDe). Rare birds usually appear one at a time, so two Yellow-

throated Warblers on April 27 at Connecticut College in New London were a double treat (SK).

Summer Tanagers, now regular in spring, were at Trout Brook Valley on May 8 (JN); at East Rock Park on May 8 (AL, PS) and May 12-16 (JO et al.); on May 13 at Huntington SP in Redding (ASp); and on May 21 at Bates Wood Park in New London (JA). A Western Tanager was photographed at a Harwinton feeder on April 16 (DLp). Blue Grosbeaks, a species on the increase, were at Trout Brook Valley in Easton on May 1 (JN), at East Rock on May 16 (MZ) and in Suffield on May 31 (ASa et al.). There were four reports of Dickcissels ranging from April 2 to May 18 (PL et al.)

Observers:

Mark Aronson, Joe Attwater, Nicholas Aubin; Ed Bailey, William Batsford, Debbie Bishop, Nick Bonomo, Andrew Boone, Lindsey Bradley, Hannah Burgio, Kevin Burgio, Dana Campbell, Richard Chmielecki, Paul Cianfaglione, Jeremy Coleman (JCo), John Correia (JCr), Norman Crepon, Andrew Dasinger (ADa), Carl deBor, Alex Delehanty (ADe), Angela Dimmitt (ADi), Paul Desjardins (PDe); Buzz Devine, Mike DiGiorgio (MDi), Mike Doyle (MDo), Patrick Dugan (PDu); Evan Ehrlich, Chris Errington, Marie Everett, Adam Fasciolo, Jo Fasciolo (JFa); Jeff Fengler (JFe); Kevin Finnan, David Funke, Paul Fusco, Frank Gallo, William Generous, Chris Gill (CGi), Christie Gilloolie (CGI), Tina Green, Peter Grund, Greg Hanisek (GHa), Larry Havey, Regina Hausmann, Craig Heberton, Brian Hindman, Gary Hodge (GHo); Dorrie Holmes, Janet Holt (JHl); Julian Hough (JHo); Chuck Imbergamo, Suzanne Joffray, Matt Joyce, Deborah Johnson, Kim Jones, Skyler Kardell, Aidan Kiley, Mike Krampitz, Lori Kurlowitz, Denise LaPerriere (DLp), Dave Lawton (DLa), Corey Leamy (CLE), Cody Limber (CLi), Alex Lin-Moore, Preston Lust, Andrew MacDonald (AMa), Ryan MacLean, Paul Mahler, Frank Mantlik, Adam Markham (AMr), Barry Marsh, Terry Master (TMa), Dave Mathieu (DMA), Steve Mayo (SMA); Don McGregor (DMr); David McLain (DMc), Kristine Mika, Isaac Murson, Tom Murray (TMu), Sean Murtha (SMu), Jeremy Nance, Russ Naylor, John Oshlick, Jeffrey Payette (JPy), Matthew Papula (MPa), Maggie Peretto (MPe), Dave Provencher, James Purcell (JPu), Victor Quintanilla, Bill Rankin, Laurie Reynolds, Andy Rzeznikiewicz, Michael Richardson (MRi), Imani Rodriguez, Michael Rosano (MRo), Dave Rosgen (DRs), Dan Rottino (DRo), Phil Rusch, Alex Sauerbrunn (ASa), Will Schenck, Bette Shaw, Russ Smiley, Donna Rose Smith, Jeremiah Smith (JSm), Paul Smith, Joan Smyth (JSy), Alton Spenser (ASp), Jim Stanton (JSt), Katrina Stewart, Severin Uebbing, Kathy Van Der Aue, Lisa Wahle, Alan Welby (AWe), Alison Wilcox (AWi), Chris Wilcox, Glenn Williams, Sara Zagorski, Molly Zahn.

Blast From the Past: East Coast Ghost

By Julian Hough



The 1996 Boreal Owl at Hammonasset Beach State Park. (Bob MacDonnell)

Despite all the highlights in a birding year, it is the missed opportunities that often sting the most. We all know what it is like to be there a moment too late. Only when the next one appears are the spirits lifted enough to finally lay the ghost to rest. For me, it was one particular species that became an enduring spectre. To explain, it requires a trip into the dark past of British and US birding.

In Connecticut, USA, on 1 November 1996 I had been in the office barely an hour when the secretary announced, “There’s a Greg Hanisek on line 2.” I picked up the phone and listened in disbelief, “A WHAT! WHERE!?! You’re joking! Is it still there?”

I should have known by then when Greg calls me at work it is usually with news of something good. I was still half-asleep and the shock was equivalent to sticking a screwdriver in the wall socket. Surrounded by co-workers, I had to summon up all my energy to maintain my composure. Diligent local birders Jerry Connolly and Scott Henckel had unearthed a Boreal Owl - only the second Connecticut record - at Hammonasset Beach State Park in Madison. Why was I such a wreck? First, Boreal Owls or Tengmalm's, as they are known in Europe, are considered one of the rarest winter visitors from the north, rarely straying south of southern Canada. As a result of their entirely nocturnal and secretive habits, Boreal Owls are almost unheard of in southern New England. From a personal perspective, this biggie had more far reaching affects than being just a lifer. More importantly, it was a chance to finally exorcise a ghost that had haunted me for 14 years.

It was 9 am and I tried to reassure myself that the bird would stay for most of the day. There was no reason for it to go anywhere, but one thing I knew was that this bird was a prime candidate to be a "Friday-night flipper".... Saturday morning would be an empty pot. First problem first. How to escape from work when I've only just arrived. Straight into a performance worthy of an Oscar, I put on a glum face, gave my breakfast away due to loss of appetite and finally, on the boss's prompt of "Are you feeling OK?" I was gone!

I made Hammonasset in good time and thankfully, the rain had eased off as I neared the appointed site, a small group of cedars adjacent to the main roundabout. I found a suitable entry point and walked cautiously into the grove.

I peered slowly around the gloomy evergreen understory. Suddenly, there it was. I couldn't believe my eyes. I had half-expected butt-end views buried high up in a clump of branches and needles. But no, there it was, only 15 feet away. At last, Tengmalm's Owl -on-my-list! It sat snugly against a tree trunk, all its feathers puffed up to help insulate it from the cold. Binocular-filling views ensued and I devoured every morsel of feather and flesh: heavily spotted forehead, dark-bordered facial disks and pale greenish bill. Its still and unobtrusive form was occasionally brought to life when it revealed its staring yellow eyes.

It is at this point that I need to add some context and refer to one of the most controversial events in UK birding history - the suppression of the Spurn Tengmalm's Owl in March 1983. At that time, Spurn Point, Humberside was in a precarious position. February storms had pummeled the coast and the sea defenses were near breaching-point. Weather, interference with coast guard operations and large-scale construction led the Yorkshire Naturalists Trust to suppress news of the bird's presence.

When news of the Humberside bird finally broke, the birding world erupted in

panic - but the bird had gone and nothing could change that. In the heat of the moment, emotions had run high, criticism had been fired in machine-gun fashion, and disbelief and anger had reached boiling point. The Christians among the lions - the 'lucky' souls who had seen the 'Teng-mum's-the-word Owl' - were sworn to secrecy. The whole ugly scenario was previously described in the birding media as "the most distasteful event in twitching lore." This comment is somewhat unfair and should not be taken as a general view of the situation.

Looking at it from an egocentric standpoint, we had all been cheated out of a chance to see a very rare and hard to get-to-grips-with species. The period of ornithological unrest that existed at that time came about as a result of collective disappointment, frustration and anger among birders all over the country. "Surely something could have been arranged?" was the thought of many.

In hindsight many agree that the YNT was totally justified in its decision. Time has helped heal the pain for many birders but some may still bear a grudge. For example: the alleged story of two RSPB wardens visiting Spurn for a conference. At dusk, near the point, they briefly saw what they naturally assumed to be a native Little Owl. "A good bird for the point," they were told by the tight-lipped warden. Oops!

Why do such birds create so much commotion? The very nature of owls conveys mystery and arouses the curiosity. Secretive in nature, attractive in plumage and generally charismatic they have a lot to offer the birdwatcher. In Europe, Tengmalm's Owls breed from northern Scandinavia east to Siberia and western China and south to Belgium and Germany. Eurasian birds are relatively sedentary, but they are prone to occasional eruptions as is the Nearctic's population.

In North America, 1996 was showing signs of being an eruption year. In late November 1996, it was becoming evident that Boreal Owls were pushing south in unprecedented numbers. I had learned of three found in Massachusetts in the days preceding the Connecticut bird. One was discovered roosting in a schoolyard and was often surrounded by boisterous children. In Boston, one even took up residence in the city center. Roosting outside a block of flats on a busy street, it was admired by birders and the public alike and soon became a media-star. At the same time, a banding station on the Great Lakes had trapped and banded over 300! To where had all the other 296 disappeared?

Back at Hammonasset, I reveled in the experience. Birders came and went. I was soon left alone with the bird. As darkness fell, the bird became more alert. When it was almost too dark to see, it shuffled out of the roost, and with a flick of its wings it was gone. It was never seen again. I was suddenly cold. I realized I had been standing there for three hours, but it had been worth it. I had felt haunted by this species for 14 years, but at last the Spurn "curse" of the Tengmalm's Owl had been lifted.

Photo Challenge

By Mark Szantyr



As a young birder, I was rarity-crazy. I was more than driven to find the different bird in the bunch. This excitable boy was led on by working at a banding station at the Flanders Nature Center in Woodbury, Litchfield County, with a very excitable man, the late, great Michael Harwood. We passed the time between net checks by watching the migration unfold each morning. We had noted a major movement of Northern “Yellow-shafted” Flickers, *Colaptes auratus*, on this one particular morning. Early in the day, we both noted an oddball in the bunch. Rather than the expected yellow wing linings, one of these birds appeared to have red in place of the yellow. We both bellowed, Mike more vehemently than I as was his way, “Red-shafted Flicker!” And this is where the story begins.

Without benefit of today’s internet, research was only possible by reviewing all the literature about this rarity. Flickers are common over the whole country. Red-shafted Northern Flickers are the western counterpart to the Yellow-shafted birds we have in the East. There is a large contact zone between the two color forms and, as they are

closely related, quite a large zone where hybrids between the two forms are found. This is not an uncommon occurrence. So, yellow equals eastern and red equals western and “orange”, a mixture of red and yellow, means hybrid. Straightforward and easy. Hey, we identify fall warblers!

So this is where it gets more interesting. The characteristics that make a Yellow-shafted Flicker yellow-shafted are: Yellow feather shafts and linings to the flight feathers (wings and tail), a gray crown, a tan face, a red crescent on the back of the head, and on males, a black teardrop shaped mark on the cheeks. These birds also have an overall yellow appearance behind their patterning of brown and black. The characters of the Red-shafted form are similar. Red where the yellow-shafted has yellow on the linings and shafts of the wings and tail, a tan crown, and a grayish face. Both sexes lack a red crescent on the nape and the males have a red teardrop shape on the cheeks. The red wing and tail linings are not quite as pervasive as the yellow. I often find that red-shafted birds appear overall whiter in the field.

Here comes the fun. Hybrids can show any, all or some of these characters. To identify a hybrid is much more difficult than looking for intermediate wing-lining colors. All of the suite of five characters for each color form must support your identification as red-shafted or yellow-shafted or a hybrid.

We have all done more difficult things. Perhaps the most difficult part of this is seeing a flicker well enough as it is eating ants of your lawn to evaluate these marks.

But wait, there is more,

I got a phone call from Tom Sayers a few years back telling me of a possible, Red-shafted Flicker, coming to a suet feeder in Tolland County. I immediately hopped in the car (older but still driven to see a rarity) and met Tom at the home. There were two flickers coming in to the suet feeder, a typical Yellow-shafted male, and a female that showed obvious but sort of diluted red linings to the wings and tail. Hybrid! Well hold your horses buckaroo. I obtained good photos of the bird in question (the Challenge photos). All the other characters were fine for a female “yellow-shafted” bird. A closer look at the wings and tail showed a mix of red and yellow shafts. So, a hybrid!

Well, research is a wicked mistress. Ornithologists have noted that, especially with the recent influx of ornamental plantings, birds that tend to eat the colorful fruit, usually red, can accumulate an over abundance of carotenoids in their system (like when your little brother looked orange after eating all his carrots) and the yellow feathering, yellow being influenced by the carotenoids, can turn bright orange and sometimes even reddish. Carotenoids are also present in some invertebrate food sources like ants and shrimp (Pink Flamingo anyone?).

Northern Flickers eat an abundance of ants, and they also eat the fruit of many ornamental trees and shrubs like Japanese Bittersweet. You may have noticed a few Cedar Waxwings, *Bombycilla cedrorum*, sporting orange and not the expected yellow terminal tailbands. Same situation.

So back to the photo quiz. Lacking any other indicators of a hybrid origin, I think that diet is the likely culprit in this red feathering. Disappointing? No! How can learning something ever be disappointing!

For more information on *C. auratus* and all its color forms, check out Bird of Nebraska Online, <http://birds.outdoornebraska.gov/northern-flicker/>

For more info on dietary color influence in birds, www.bobvila.com “6 Birds That Get Their Coloring From The Food They Eat and What to Feed Them.”



Next Challenge Photo

THE CONNECTICUT WARBLER

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