TASL News

Nov. 1981

TAKE A SECOND LOOK IS A PROJECT OF BIRD OBSERVER OF EASTERN MASSACHUSETTS

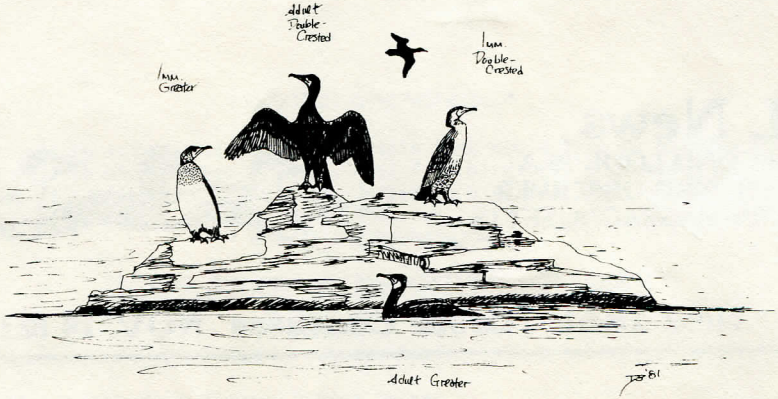
Next TASL Harbor Censuses NOV. 14 &15

CORMORANTS IN MASSACHUSETTS

There are few species of marine birds along the New England coast that are as common, easy to watch and as overlooked as the cormorants. The fate of being so commonplace as to be overlooked is truly unfortunate, because the two species of cormorants clearly demonstrate one way in which competition may be reduced or avoided - different temporal utilization of an area.

The Great Cormorant (Phalacrocorax carbo) breeds on isolated rock islands and jetties in the Canadian Maritimes, Newfoundland and in the Gulf of the St. Lawrence. While some individuals may winter in the breeding area, most individuals move south into the Gulf of Maine and along the North American coast to Long Island, with a few sightings as far south as Northern Florida. The nesting period for these birds is rather extended with different individuals laying eggs from mid to late April to early or mid July. In general, breeding adults are in the area of the colony by early April and the main period for fall migration is late September through October.

The Double-crested Cormorant (Phalacrocorax auritus)nests coastally in New England and into the Canadian Maritimes and down the St. Lawrence into the Great Lakes Region. Again, some individuals may winter in the breeding areas, but most move south to the Gulf of Mexico and throughout the Bahama Island chain and into Cuban waters. The nesting period is shorter for Phalacrocorax auritus, with egg dates being from mid May to mid July. The major movement south begins in early September, but stragglers can be found moving south in November. Spring migration begins in late March but the peak is in mid April with breeding individuals arriving in the area of the colonies in mid to late April and early May.



Data collected during the TASL surveys in 1980 and 1981 gives an excellent indication of spring movement for these two species and a fair representation of winter utilization of Boston Harbor by Great Cormorants. The accompanying chart shows the number of individuals seen by month with counts from both 1980 and 1981. The highest count of Great Cormorants is in March during the spring migration and almost all the individuals have left by mid April. The November data is probably a combination of late migrants and winter residents (winter residents are probably more accurately portrayed by February counts). Data for P. auritus shows that these individuals leave the TASL census area for the winter (November, February, March) and move into the TASL region in April during the spring migration. Of particular interest to me is habitat utilization and figure 1 shows that the cormorants, regardless of species, are not uniformly distributed in the region. Instead, the greatest concentration of them is in Area E, Hingham Bay. For individuals familiar with the Double-crested Cormorant breeding colony on Egg Rock near Nahant (north of Area A), there may be some surprise at the distribution of these birds. However, a review of cormorant feeding behavior solves the potential mystery.

Both species of cormorants are diving birds which feed mainly on fish, although some crustaceans and amphipods are taken. Propulsion underwater is accomplished by use of the feet; the wings are used only in steering, not for drive. As a result, these birds can mane uver easily along one plane but are probably less agile when trying to quickly alter their vertical position. They therefore tend to feed in areas with basically uniform bottoms. Area E in the TASL count has the most uniform bottom conditions and should therefore be the best place for cormorants to hunt. Even during the breeding season, it is not uncommon for cormorants to go 5-10 miles from the colony to a feeding area. During the winter months, provided there are sufficient temporary roost sites, there is no reason for cormorants to leave a feeding area. Actual movement of populations of marine birds during the winter months is probably more related to available and accessible food reserves than to climate conditions.

In the TASL Area, both P. carbo and P. auritus have similar preferences for habitat but reduce competition by using the region at different times of the year.

Tim Rummage

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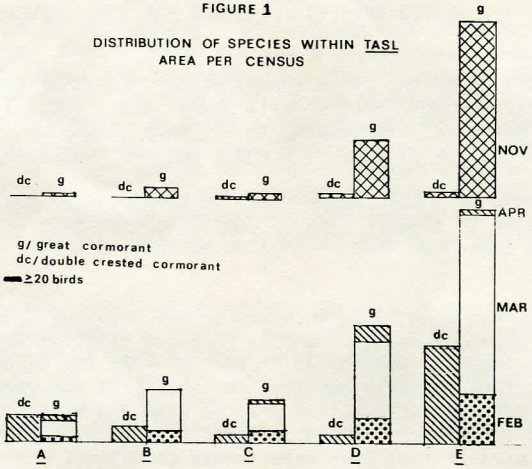
TASL and this newsletter are supported by contributions from participants and other interested persons, as well as by a grant from Bird Observer, Inc. Subscriptions to TASL News are nominally $2.00 per year. If you have not contributed already, please do so today. Make checks out to TASL and mail to: Bird Observer, Inc., 462 Trapelo Road, Belmont, MA 02178.

FIGURE 1

DISTRIBUTION OF SPECIES WITHIN TASL AREA PER CENSUS



CENSUS ZONES

CORMORANTS IN BOSTON HARBOR

Great and Double-crested Cormorant Data from TASL Winter Censuses of 1980 and 1981

Date	Area A		Area B		Area C		Area D		Area E		Totals	
	GC	DCC	GC	DCC	GC	DCC	GC	DCC	GC	DCC	GC	DCC
2/17/80	6		42		49		56		281		434	
3/16/80	18		41		65		219		266		609	
4/13/80		19		40		24	1	21	1	452	2	556
11/23/80	11	1	51		17	2	315	10	1018	10	1412	23
2/8/81	no data		17		12	1	81		no data		110	1
3/8/81	114		188	2	100		229		726		1357	2
4/5/81 *	15			27	9	18	84	29	13	87	121	161

* Hingham data (Area E) does not include 225 cormorants (species?) that were seen on Shag Rocks.

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Since 1973 BIRD OBSERVER, a bi-monthly magazine, has been publishing records of Eastern Massachusetts bird-sightings. Each issue features an article on where to find birds in this state (and elsewhere). The October 1981 issue features an article entitled "Sparrows and Weeds" and has as its "Where to Go" - "Premier Locations to Find Sparrows in Autumn." There is also an introduction to the study of bird behavior, which will become a regular feature in BIRD OBSERVER. These are just a few of the articles that you can look forward to if you subscribe.

Annual subscription to BIRD OBSERVER is $7.50. If you are interested in subscribing, please mail your check to: Bird Observer, Inc., 462 Trapelo Road, Belmont, MA 02178.

THE WINTER SURVEYS - LOOKING FOR SOME ANSWERS

On November 15 we will begin our third annual winter census of the birds of Boston Harbor. From November through March we will gather data that will gain meaning from the data we already have, and add meaning to it. Each census not only fills in new pieces of the puzzle but the picture as a whole becomes that much clearer.

In previous discussions of the harbor census, we have pointed out what we learned so far. Now we would like to discuss some of questions that have arisen concerning the harbor's bird life - questions that we hope to be able to answer through increased data accumulation.

One question that has not been fully answered by our previous censuses has been: how do our counts compare with those of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service? Government policy regarding waterfowl is determined in part by Fish and Wildlife's annual aerial census, which takes place in early January. In the first two years of the TASL survey, we made comparisons between our data and that of Fish and Wildlife; however, since our first count occurred in February, those comparisons have always been somewhat doubtful. This was especially evident last year when freeze conditions were present in the harbor.

This year, for the first time, TASL will conduct a census in early January. Thus, our data will be directly comparable with that of Fish and Wildlife and we can ascertain whether the assumptions we have made concerning their data are true. Specifically, are non-rafting ducks undercounted because of the difficulty in picking out isolated females from the air, while those that do raft tend to be counted more accurately?

We will also, for the first time this year, be extending our harbor survey to a new area, Newburyport Harbor. The results from this new survey will provide a means of comparing the two harbors, their productivity, the amount of disturbance and its effect on birds, etc. We will also begin the accumulation of much more precise information regarding the winter population of Newburyport Harbor. This information will prove to be valuable in assessing the effects of present or future development plans, e.g., the often-expressed proposal to build an oil refinery on the Merrimac River.

This coming winter we again will have the opportunity to further observe and record the winter population growth of a species, whose numbers have been increasing dramatically, the Great Cormorant. Christmas counts of Great Cormorant from Quincy have been the highest in the nation for a number of recent years, and data TASL has already accumulated indicate that the winter population in Boston Harbor may have doubled between 1979-80 and 1980-81. Extra-seasonal records are also becoming more common. Forbush states that Great Cormorant was once a much more common bird along our Northern coasts (A Natural History of American Birds, p. 22). We now may in fact be witnessing the beginning of the return of this species to its former winter numbers in our area. Only careful censusing during the winter will actually be able to show if this is true and TASL's data will therefore be of great interest.

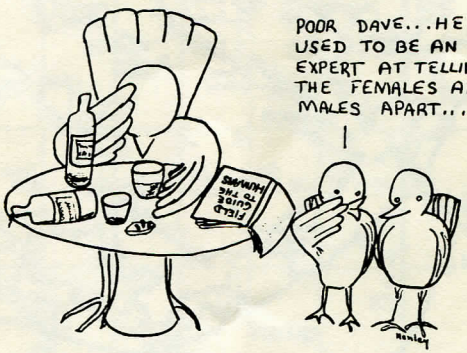
We will also be able to observe and study the population of Brant and to document its recovery from the crash it underwent in the 1930's when its principal food, eelgrass, was decimated by disease. By recording where Brant feed and how many of them feed there, we can determine what areas of the harbor may require protection from filling and pollution if Brant are to continue their recovery. One favorite feeding spot we are concerned about is the Fore River in Weymouth, which is also heavily traveled by oil tankers.

TASL data has been unique in another way. We have not only made accurate counts of different species but have also tried to sex the birds whenever possible. By doing so we can continue to increase our knowledge concerning bimodal movement, a subject that has not been well-studied. We know that in one month we'll see two males for each female, and in the next month we might see three females for every two males. What we need is more and better data, so that we can describe the movement with precision. Counting birds by sex and by location will enable us to evaluate the hypothesis that males and females not only move through our area at different times but also prefer to feed in different areas of the harbor. (The conclusiveness of this data is more tentative since the sexing of ducks at great distances can be both frustrating and difficult.)

We can begin to ask ourselves such questions now. We're not yet at the point where we can answer them: What represents a "normal" population for a given month under given conditions? What represents a fluctuation within a "normal" range? What is a "significant" increase or decrease? We are beginning to get enough data to develop hypotheses and then test them. That's the name of a game that is fascinating to us for its own sake, never mind the concrete benefits to the living creatures we observe and to those who observe them.

We invite you to join us or rejoin us for the census this year, to participate in a project that we believe is unique in breadth, depth, and continuity of systematic coverage. The better the job we do, and the higher the quality of our data, the better the model we may be able to provide for others who may want to undertake similar projects.

TASL Staff



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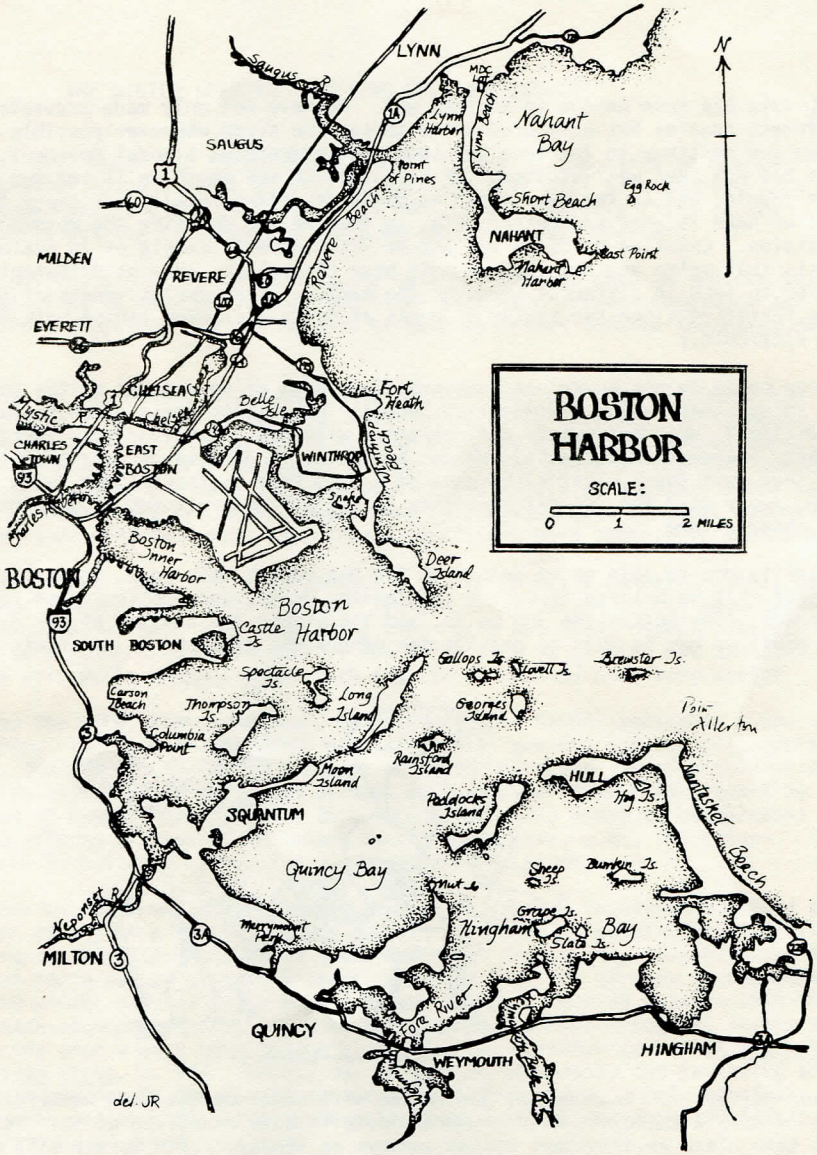
Harbor surveys for Newburyport and Boston will occur on the same weekends but on different days to enable those who wish to participate in both counts to do so. Newburyport surveys will take place on Saturday; Boston surveys on Sunday. Each survey will start at 8:30 a.m. and will last between three and five hours. A compilation will follow. If you wish to participate in either or would like additional information please contact one of the coordinators listed below.

Inquiries about the harbor censuses, as well as other TASL activities, should be addressed to TASL coordinators:

Craig Jackson, 22 Almont Street, Malden, MA 02148 - 321-4382.
Soheil Zendeh, 380 Broadway, Somerville, MA 02145 - 628-8990.



Participants in the April 5, 1981, TASL Census:

NAHANT: George Gove, Bob Stymeist
WINTHROP: Jim Barton, Paul Bovitz, Craig Jackson, Tim Rummage
CENTRAL: Christine Newman, Dave Lange, Soheil Zendeh
QUINCY: Dave Brown, Glenn D'Entremont, Mike Sharpe, Lee Taylor
HINGHAM: Sib Higginbotham, Sharon and Neil Osborne, Wayne Petersen, Elfi Zdimal

WATER BIRDS IN BOSTON HARBOR

Winter of 1980-1981

Species	TASL 4/5/81						TASL 11/23/80	Incompl. TASL 2/8/81	TASL 3/8/81
	Area A	Area B	Area C	Area D	Area E	Total			
Common Loon							15		1
Red-throated Loon							7		
Red-necked Grebe	1			2		3	1		
Horned Grebe	17	17	5	15	24	81	342	1	87
Pied-billed Grebe				1		1			
Cormorant (sp.?)					225	225			
Great Cormorant	15		9	84	13	121	1412	430	1444
D.-c. Cormorant		27	18	29	87	161	23	1	2
Great Blue Heron		3		4		7	12		1
Little Blue Heron		1				1			
Snowy Egret	3	2		4	2	14			
B.-c. Night-heron		15				15	6		1
American Bittern							1		
Canada Goose	1			33		34	85		2
Brant	11	90		413	48	562	1237	490	2247
Snow Goose							2		
Mallard	6	12		22	2	42	71	1	64
Black Duck	1	37	9	283	32	362	1863	526	1028
Green-winged Teal		12		2		14			3
Canvasback									4
Greater Scaup		16	23	145	6	190	2454	6050	2663
Common Goldeneye	16	76		32	29	137	494	728	1547
Barrow's Goldeneye				2		2			3
Bufflehead	45	49	233	635	231	1193	1630	769	1215
Oldsquaw							59		8
Common Eider		490		3	4	497	9350	2600	10131
W.-w. Scoter		20		112	20	152	732		114
Surf Scoter							2		
Black Scoter							7		
Ruddy Duck							2		
Hooded Merganser				2		2	4		
Common Merganser									17
R.-b. Merganser	18	58	14	520	194	904	2596	833	1522
Bald Eagle				1		1			
American Coot							2		
Killdeer		2		7		9			
B.-b. Plover				1	1	2	48		
Sandpiper (sp.?)		88				88			
Ruddy Turnstone							6		
Willet							1		
Greater Yellowlegs		9		10	6	25	3		
Lesser Yellowlegs		4		4		8			
Common Snipe				6		6			
Red Knot							2		
Purple Sandpiper	190	275		12		477	508	75	310
Pectoral Sandpiper		6		30	10	46			
Dunlin	2			7		9	450		10
Sanderling							23		90
Ruff		1					1		
Glaucous Gull				1		1			2
Iceland Gull									3
Black-headed Gull							1		
Bonaparte's Gull				15		15	55		

SALT MARSH IMPRESSIONS

Tucked away in the midst of urban congestion and airport noise is the Belle Isle Salt Marsh, where I and seven companions spent a hot, sunny July morning on a TASL field trip. Salt marshes have intrigued me for several years. At first glance they often seem sleepy and quiescent, but a closer and longer look usually reveals much activity. And it's a productive place too - the popular paperback, Life & Death of the Salt Marsh, - states that the salt marsh yields more organic matter per acre than even the best wheat fields in the world. So there's a lot going on in the marsh, and recently I've begun to delve into its activities. The TASL trip was a marvelous beginning. Knowledgeable leaders and participants, including naturalist Wayne Petersen, added to the pleasure.

This was my kind of trip - not just a birding trip, but a nature trip. We were recognizing the environment we were in, in this case the marsh, as well as the plants and animals, rather than isolating one element, the birds. It may be heresy to say, but I feel that some birders are oblivious to their surroundings. Once they add a bird to their list, they immediately move on to another, incognizant of the bird's behavior or anything else in the area.

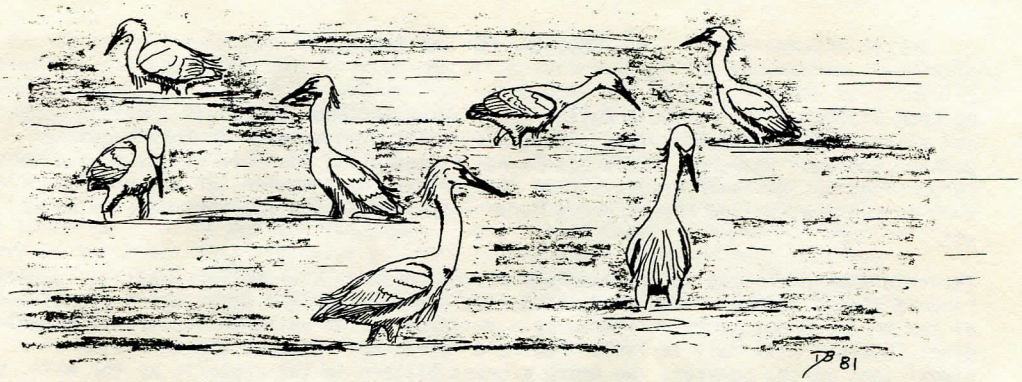
We noticed a lot. We looked at plants, butterflies, birds. Feeding on the mudflats were Lesser Yellowlegs, Short-billed Dowitchers, a Semipalmated Plover, and Least, Semipalmated, and Pectoral Sandpipers. A Great Blue Heron flew overhead. A number of Glossy Ibises were feeding nearby. Looking at them for the first time through a scope, I saw the chestnut-colored sheen that gives them the "glossy" part of their name.

As usual, I struggled to distinguish between species of shorebirds. Questions popped into my head. What kind of peep was wandering over there at the end of the mudflat? Was it a Semipalmated, which is supposedly gray and mousey-looking compared to the browner coloring of the Least Sandpiper? If I were alone, how would I know if I were seeing Lesser or Greater Yellowlegs? I tried to recall the article on shorebird feeding behavior in a recent TASL News, but all I could remember was that there were differences among the birds; I couldn't remember what they were.

At least shorebirds give you time to sit and observe them, unlike warblers, which seem to flit constantly from tree to tree. I have no patience with warblers; they frustrate me. I need time to ponder, to consult my well-marked copy of Birds of North America without the bird in question making a sudden exit. Shorebirds in general are much more cooperative with occasional birders like me. And being able to view them through a scope was a treat. I started feeling like maybe I would be able to identify a Short-billed Dowitcher the next time I saw one.

As we walked along we took note of the marsh grasses and plants - Spartina patens, Spartina alterniflora, Distichlis, Juncus, Phragmites - the latter being an indicator that all is not well with the marsh, for Phragmites, a reed, eventually takes over and edges out the other plants. We saw another sign of threat to the marsh - a huge pile of dirt probably being used as fill for part of the marsh which is going to become a park. Certainly there is a continuing need for urban open space, but I wonder why, in this case, the open space can't remain in the form of a salt marsh.

I marveled at the natural engineering wonder of the main marsh grasses, Spartina patens and Spartina alterniflora, which can tolerate so much salt. Words like osmosis and



salt concentrations came to mind. Who would recognize the uniqueness of these plants just by looking at them? They looked pretty ordinary to me the first time I saw them. I nibbled the salty, but tasty, Salicornia, commonly called glasswort. One variety turns red in the fall, giving the marsh an autumnal glow.

We moved on to another part of the marsh where there was a shallow wading pond. At first glance there wasn't much birdlife there - a few yellowlegs, dowitchers, Snowy Egrets, and a lone Least Tern. The trip was ending, but just as we reached our cars, a large flock few in to the exact spot we had just left. Back across the marsh we traipsed. A number of Red Knot, heading south, had stopped by. I had never seen knot and had a hard time distinguishing them from dowitchers, even through the scope. Notice the chunky body and orangey breast with white around it, I was told. I kept trying, but I think I'll have to see more knot before I'll be able to identify them. I was amazed to find out that these birds fly nonstop from here to their winter home in Latin America. Flight time: about 50 hours. That bit of information reminded me of how little I know about the behavior of different birds. I enjoyed hearing about and looking at their patterns and behavior on this trip. I guess I'm usually too busy trying to identify the bird; that often takes a lot of effort.

All in all, it was a good trip, and I hope TASL sponsors similar ones to other habitats. My final impression? Following the trip I had a refreshing swim at nearby Revere Beach.

Peggy Kapisovsky

Robbins, Chandler S., Bertel Bruun, and Herbert S. Zim. Birds of North America, New York, Golden Press, 1966.

Teal, John & Mildred, Life and Death of the Salt Marsh, New York, Ballantine Books, 1969.

This issue of TASL News was produced by Craig Jackson with assistance from Jim Barton, Barbara Gard, and Soheil Zendeh. Artwork for this issue was contributed by Denise Braunhardt and Nancy Henley. The map is by Julie Roberts.

CHECKING OUT THE CHARLES

On June 21, TASL visited MDC's Cutler Park, which includes about 250 acres of marsh and fields and the Charles River. The area is situated between Newton, Needham, Dedham, and West Roxbury. Two Great Egrets flying along the Charles River were most surprising; and Ruffed Grouse was also unexpected. Good numbers of breeding birds such as cuckoos, Willow Flycatchers, Marsh Wrens, and Swamp Sparrows were noted as well.

The trip then proceeded to Hammond Pond at the Chestnut Hill Mall in Newton. Hammond Pond is slowly becoming overrun by cattails, water lilies and other marsh plants because of sediment and nutrients delivered by a drainage system built to accompany the original Chestnut Hill Mall in 1949. Periodic "clean-ups" prevent the formation of a significant marsh, however. We heard a Least Bittern in the cattails by the mall, but that was an unusual occurence, among the more regularly found Red-winged Blackbirds, Tree Swallows, Wood Ducks, and Green Herons.

The trip ended up at Novitiate Park in Newton. It too is along the Charles River, adjacent to Cutler Park. Novitiate Park is an undeveloped tract that used to belong to the Xavarian Brothers' Working Boys Home. It was purchased by the city in 1979. It is predominantly comprised of oak woods but also contains within it a stand of aspen along the river, and an overgrown field where Woodcock perform their courtship dance. Here we found an immature male Orchard Oriole and several Warbling Vireos, as well as the more common Yellow Warblers and Brown Thrashers.

The Charles River is a home for many species of birds which are not easy to find in the Boston area. So next time you're looking for something unusual, why don't you take a tip from TASL and check out the Charles!

Nicholas and Oliver Komar

NOTES ON THE TASL NEPONSET RIVER SURVEY

We met at Moswetuset Hummock in Squantum at 6:00 a.m. on a murky Sunday in August, for the TASL tour of the Neponset River near its' terminus in the productive Dorchester Bay area. Although we had some prior knowledge of the river since it passes through our hometown of Norwood, we learned a surprising amount about the area's birding possibilities, its' natural habitats, a bit about man's influence, and even managed to add three new birds to our local list. The trip was led by Dave Brown, whose knowledge of the area is second to none. We were also fortunate to have Craig Jackson and Soheil Zendeh, TASL's "Board of Directors" join us.

Our first stop was the extensive salt marsh west of Squantum Street where we spent some time examining the plant communities in relation to tide levels. It is fascinating how the vegetation calibrates the penetration of the tides. Grasses are a case in point: Salt Grass, (Spartina alterniflora) favors the wettest area, spending about half of each tide with its' feet under water; Spike Grass (Distichlis) and Salt Hay Grass (Spartina patens) thrive in less wet locations, and Black Grass (Juncus) (actually a rush) grows where it will get its' feet wet only at high tide. One prominent shrub of the drier levels stumped all the experts. We later identified it as Marsh Elder or Highwater Shrub with the help of Larry Newcomb's ingenious keying system (Newcomb's Guide to the Wildflowers).

From the salt marsh we proceeded to the old air station site. Little remains of the barracks but the skeletons; the runways are disappearing under the encroaching vegetation; the ammunition bays - massive mausoleum-like structures are intact, and may well survive to be our contribution to the archeology of the year 10,000. The air station is still in the early states of plant succession, largely populated by the resourceful and aggressive weed species. It is favored by a variety of birds - in late summer the migrating shorebirds use the puddles that collect on the runways as resting areas during high tide. One group we checked out produced two species new to us in the area - the Stilt Sandpiper and the Western Sandpiper. Long-legged waders are another prominent feature of the bird life, including a Black-crowned Night Heron rookery approaching 100 birds. Our trip was too early for the passerine waves that touch down on their way south in early Autumn, and the raptors, a winter attraction, were represented only by a resident pair of kestrels.

John and Ann Carey

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The above accounts were written by participants of last summer's TASL trips. These trips were designed to give participants a better understanding of the habitats in which birds are found and to increase awareness of the diversity and large numbers of birds that can be found in our own "backyards." Since these areas are so close to urban environments, they are very vulnerable to development, increased pollution and dumping, and to other forms of misuse. They are valuable, in and of themselves, but if they are to survive, we must act to protect them.

Two of the areas we explored, Belle Isle Marsh and Squantum Marsh are the two most important salt marshes in the Metropolitan Region. Both are at least partially vulnerable to development and a proposal has already been put forward for part of the Squantum Marsh peninsula. Although this proposal does not call for building on the marsh itself, there is no way to tell what the long-term effects of the development on the marsh might be. Similarly, Belle Isle Marsh's future is by no means entirely secure. Illegal dumping and filling continues to go on and only part of the marsh is officially protected.

As an additional project next year, TASL intends to conduct bi-weekly surveys of these marshes, recording the birds, especially the herons, that are present. We will use the data from these surveys to show the importance of these natural areas in our efforts to protect them. These surveys will also provide baseline information so that the effects of development (if it occurs) can be documented. If you would like to help in this project and at the same time enjoy the beauty of these urban marshes, or would like further information concerning these proposed surveys, please call either: Craig Jackson (Home: 321-4382) or Soheil Zendeh (Home: 628-8990; Work: 923-0941) or write to: Craig Jackson, TASL, 22 Almont Street, Malden, MA 02148.

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Where to Find Birds in Eastern Massachusetts, a publication of Bird Observer, Inc. is a 160 page soft-cover book that contains 34 articles on the best birding spots in eastern Massachusetts. It makes an excellent gift for the holidays. Each copy is $5.00 post paid and copies may be directly obtained from Bird Observer, Inc. Mail your check to: Bird Observer, Inc., 462 Trapelo Road, Belmont, MA 02178.

The poets of spring and the merchants who quote them would have us believe that we should only rejoice when winter is over. But from birding I've learned that winter is not death; it's life, continued life, in rich and varied form.

J. Barton

CALENDAR FOR 1981-82 TASL WINTER HARBOR SURVEYS

November 14; 15: Newburyport Harbor survey; Boston Harbor survey.

January 9; 10: Newburyport Harbor; Boston Harbor.

February 6; 7: Newburyport Harbor; Boston Harbor.

March 6; 7: Newburyport Harbor; Boston Harbor

MEETING LOCATIONS AND LEADERS FOR BOSTON HARBOR SURVEYS

Nahant: Meet at MDC parking lot at the north end of Nahant Causeway. Robert Stymeist (734-1289).

Winthrop: Meet at Orient Heights MBTA Station, East Boston. Craig Jackson (321-4382).

Central Harbor: Meet at Orient Heights MBTA Station, East Boston. Soheil Zendeh (628-8990).

Quincy: Meet at Moswetuset Hummock, Squantum. David Brown (328-3533); Lee Taylor (646-2529).

Hingham: Call leaders for meeting place. Sibley Higginbotham (472-8578); Wayne Petersen (447-0332).

TASL News

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