

TASL News

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



SEEING

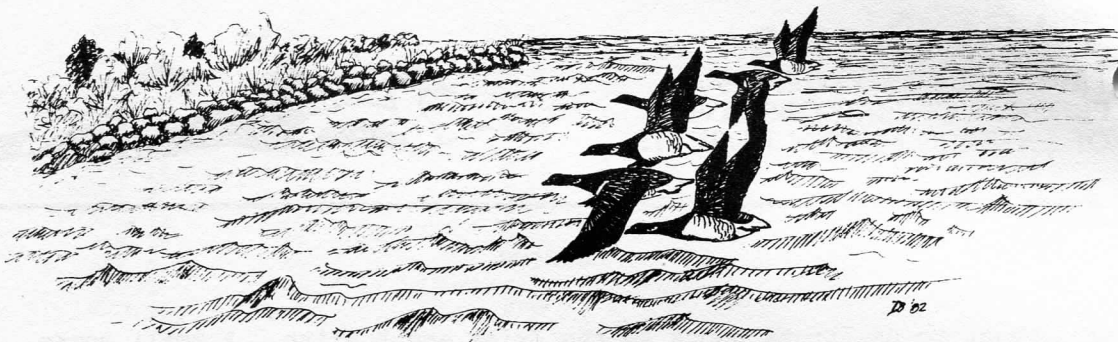
Brant to us, Brent goose to the Irish and English. A small goose feeding in flocks during winter, in shallow bays and along seacoasts. Its face a dull black; its neck also a dull black down to the water-line. Coloration as of charred wood. Its back dark brown. Color ochre heavily mixed with soot. Its common name, and genus name, Branta, derived from Anglo-Saxon brennan, to burn. A good name, a commonplace invoking the familiar; accurate.

Species name (Norwegian), bernicla, meaning "barnacle." (Choate, 1973) A product of vision rather than of sight; of the power of things unseen to affect what we see. Reminder that a fantasy to some is reason to others; that Chinese astronomers once could predict with mathematical precision when a dragon would consume the moon; that aborigines could find nothing to marvel at in a radio because the small men who sang from within it had entered it by magic.

A medieval author describes Ireland in 1187:

There are likewise here many birds called barnacles which nature produces in a wonderful manner, out of her ordinary course. They resemble the marsh-geese, but are smaller. Being at first gummy escrescences from pinebeams floating on the waters, and then enclosed in shells to secure their free growth, they hang by their beaks, like seaweeds attached to timber. Being in process of time well covered with feathers, they either fall into the water or take their flight in the free air, their nourishment and growth being supplied, while they are bred in this very unaccountable and curious manner, from the juices of the wood in the sea-water.

I have often seen with my own eyes more than a thousand minute embryos of birds of this species on the seashore, hanging from one piece of timber, covered with shells, and already formed.



No eggs are laid by these birds after copulation, as is the case with birds in general; the hen never sits on eggs in order to hatch them; in no corner of the world are they seen either to pair or build nests. (Giraldus Cambrensis, quoted in White, 1954)

The scholar says that he has the evidence of his eyes. Therefore he is no mere scribe, a copier of books, who only consults books. He has gone to look for himself.

His vocabulary of experience did not include knowledge of the migration of birds, nor of voyages to the lands where the Brant go.

Giraldus saw the Brant arrive. He had no words to account for their sudden appearance. He drew upon the vocabulary he had.

Perhaps we should not take amusement at him. Should we be surprised to find many among us who look only at maps of the lands where the Brant nest, and many who work there, who do not see the surface of the land and the creatures who live on it, but can only envision the oil and the minerals beneath?

J.H. Barton

Sources

Choate, Ernest A., The Dictionary of American Bird Names, Gambit, 1973.

White, T.H., The Bestiary, A Book of Beasts, Being a Translation from a Latin Bestiary of the Twelfth Century, G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1954. (White is better known as author of the Arthurian fantasy, The Once and Future King.)

BRANT POPULATION

The Brant is a small sea goose whose strategy for survival includes some interesting reproductive behavior and the utilization of some very specialized habitats. It breeds in the remote, high Arctic - farther north than any other species of waterfowl - but winters on bays and estuaries along some of the earth's most urbanized coasts.

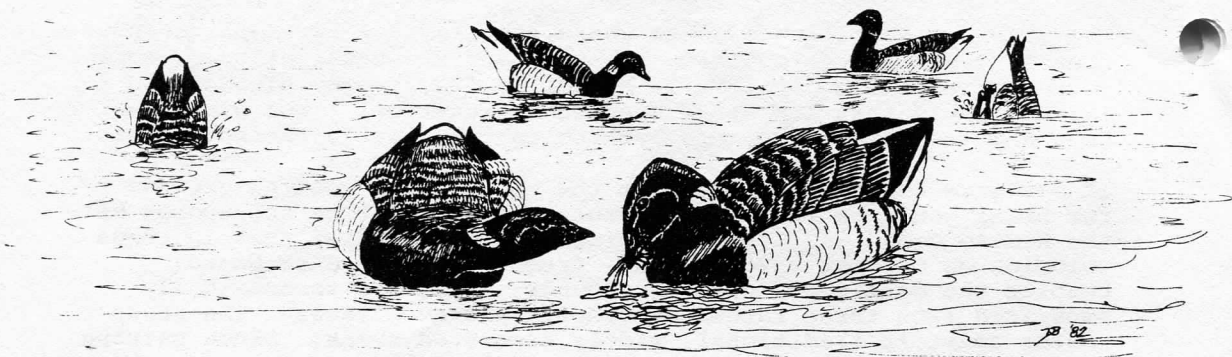
If one were to view a globe from the North Pole, nesting grounds for Brant would be found at suitable sites all along the shores of the Arctic Ocean and its connecting seas. Most Brant nest in loose colonies on or near river deltas, frequently with Snow Geese. Despite the contiguous nesting grounds, Brant are taxonomically separated into three rather distinctly plumaged races. The races winter apart in traditional, widely separated areas. Since pairing takes place on the wintering grounds, and families remain together for the first year, the races seldom interbreed.

This discussion is limited to that race that nests in the eastern Arctic, from Southampton Island and the Foxe Basin, at the north end of Hudson Bay, northward to the edge of land in the Elizabeth Islands, and winters along the mid-Atlantic coast of the U.S. About 50 to 80% of this population winter on the shallow bays of Southern New Jersey. Most of the rest go to similar areas along the south shore of Long Island or the Delmarva Peninsula. Several hundred to a few thousand may winter in Massachusetts or North Carolina.

Brant populations are subject to severe fluctuations, due mostly to the vagaries of climate in the high Arctic, but sometimes to adverse conditions on the wintering grounds. Since the mid-1950's when total population estimates were first kept, numbers have ranged from 42,000 to 266,000. The counts are made in January, and so reflect reproductive success of the previous summer.

In winter, Brant feed almost entirely on Eelgrass and certain marine algae. In the early 1930's, a disease wiped out the Eelgrass over much of its range along our Atlantic coast. The Brant population decreased alarmingly at the same time and in the winter of 1933-34 was estimated to be only 10% of that in 1930-31. The crash was generally attributed to starvation resulting from the Eelgrass die-off. Surely that was the cause of much stress and some mortality, but we now think that the relationship of the Brant decline to the Eelgrass die-off may have been more coincidence than cause and effect.

Despite the fluctuation in numbers, Brant are well adapted to cope with the uncertainties of the short Arctic summers. They are relatively long lived and don't nest until their second or even third year. The Arctic nesting areas are not free of ice and snow until early June (and some years not at all). Therefore, many



Brant don't leave the wintering areas until mid-May. They are paired before they reach the nesting grounds and egg-laying starts within a week. If weather is favorable, nesting success is high and the young grow rapidly in the endless daylight. They must, because summer is over by mid-August and the broods must move south to their staging area on James Bay. If snow and ice still cover the nesting areas in mid-June, the Brant do not attempt to nest. Egg yolks are absorbed within the body and the Brant conserve their energy (and themselves) for another year. Late nesting starts would be doomed to failure for both young and adults. As a result, Brant can withstand two or even three successive years of reproductive failure during which the population is greatly reduced, as apparently happened in the early 1930's. By that time all survivors are potential breeders and if conditions on the nesting grounds are ideal the population can double in a year.

The low Brant population of the mid-30's had recovered by the 40's. The 1950's were years of exceptionally favorable conditions for most birds in eastern Arctic Canada. Brant populations exceeded 200,000 by 1958 and reached an estimated high of 266,000 in 1961. Subsequently, years of poor to mediocre nesting resulted in lower, but still ample, populations. Then, successive years of reproductive failure in 1971 and 1972, coupled with an exceptionally high hunting kill in 1971, swiftly reduced the population to 42,000 in January, 1973. Fortunately, the population doubled in each of the next two years, but poor nesting conditions and severe winters in 1976 and 1977 again reduced the population to about 42,000 by January, 1978, and it remained low in 1979. It rebounded to about 68,000 in 1980 and 90,000 in 1981. The 1982 count is not complete at this time, but nesting conditions were favorable in 1981 and the population should be well over 100,000 again.

Ralph Andrews

FIELD STUDIES

Birding or bird watching is many things to many people. It's a challenge to find and identify rare birds and a competition to see how many species one can see in a day, a year, or in a lifetime; or in a particular locale, state, or country. It is also a simple way to appreciate the beauty of nature, to revel in its mysteries, and to establish a link between our hectic, disordered lives and the regular rhythms of seasonal change which nature follows. In these ways and others bird watching enhances our lives.

There is another side to bird watching, however. Through careful observation we can learn much about the world of birds. Behavioral patterns, types of food, size of territory, habitat needs can all be learned by just looking at birds. This information can add greatly to our enjoyment in bird watching, but much more importantly it can increase our ability to preserve the conditions which are necessary to ensure a species' survival.

Simple census projects such as Christmas Counts have for many years been used to ascertain the health of particular species and to determine their wintering locales. More detailed studies have tried to not only count particular species but also to map their locations. TASL's Boston Harbor censuses, now in their third year, are a good example of this type of project. Other projects, such as the detailed study of a Long-eared Owl roost that was done last winter may be only peripherally concerned with a population count but much more directed toward understanding other aspects of bird life.

Bird Observer of Eastern Massachusetts has set up a committee to coordinate these various bird watching projects. The Field Studies Committee (FSC) will advise and help those who want to design particular projects. Announcements and calls for participation as well as the raw data and preliminary conclusions from these projects will be published in TASL News, while more conclusive articles will appear in Bird Observer. Anyone who wants to propose a particular field project should contact the FSC Coordinator, John Andrews (862-6498).

We are pleased to announce three such projects elsewhere in this issue. These are the Screech Owl and the Boston Harbor heron surveys and the spring migration watch. We encourage all our readers to participate in one or more of these by contacting the project coordinators. We're sure that the experience will be a rewarding one.

SPRING MIGRATION WATCH

This project is an extension of the spring warbler study which was organized by John Andrews and Lee Taylor in 1980 and 1981. Participants will be asked to visit their selected spring birding sites about twice a week from mid-April to the end of May. The numbers of all migrants recorded on each visit will be recorded. The compilation will reveal how the observations at your favorite site compare with other sites in eastern Massachusetts. Persons who would like to participate in this project should contact the compiler before April 1:

Lee Taylor, 92 Brooks Avenue, Arlington 02174: 646-2529.

THE PREPOSTEROUS WOODCOCK

American Woodcock
(*Philohela minor*)



Those of us who make it our business to ferret out the secrets of our New England birds often take part in a Spring ritual known as the "woodcock walk". We meet in the twilight of an April evening at some carefully selected boggy meadow. When the last glow of the setting sun is fading in the west, an expectant silence settles over the scene. The show is about to begin. The woodcock are about to dance...

Why this unlikely fowl should so intrigue both birder and hunter is difficult for the uninitiated to understand. It is not an aspect of psychology suited for parlor explanations. Better to walk with me into these damp meadows on a night when Spring has newly taken hold, when the frogs are singing crazily of amphibious love, and the earthy smell of the fertile black muck is in the air. Spring may begin then to stir a little madness in you. Then you are ready to discover the charm of a most preposterous creature.

"this mysterious hermit of the alders, this recluse of the boggy thicket, this wood nymph of crepuscular habits . . ."

-A.C. Bent, Life Histories of North American Shorebirds

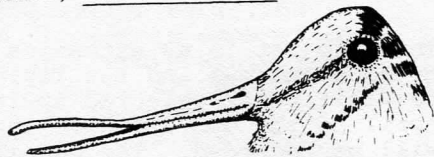
"The woodcock is a mottled brown, about the size of a man's fist, with a striped head the size of a golf ball; the shoebutton eyes are set high and far back on the head. Its most distinguishing feature is a bill two and a half inches long. It has short legs feathered to the heel. In its usual stance the head appears attached to the body with no neck. Closer examination of the color reveals a light cinnamon-colored breast and back and sides which appear to be washed with black and different shades of brown, reminding one of forest floor covered with dead leaves. Once seen, a woodcock is never forgotten."

-W.G. Sheldon, The Book of the American Woodcock

"The eyes of the woodcock crowd upward towards its crown and are set slightly to the rear, the better to detect foul play which might come at it from above and from behind; as a result, its cerebral axis is so far tipped back that its brain is almost upside down. That it actually sees better backward than forward may or may not account for the tendency in this peculiar bird to collide with tree limbs."

-Peter Matthiessen, The Wind Birds

The bill of the woodcock is hinged, allowing it to open and grasp earthworms even when it is probed deeply into the soil. The nostrils are located near the base to allow the bird to continue to breathe while probing.



"Unlike many birds which hold their beaks vertically when swallowing water, the woodcock appear...to suck water."

-W.G. Sheldon, The Book of the American Woodcock

"The woodcock thumps its damp haunts with its feet, to lure worms upward to their doom; why thumping should hold this fatal attraction for the earthworm is not clear, but one recalls that rain will draw worms upward, and doubtless an inspired woodcock can drum like a local thunderstorm. Once the worm is contacted, it is sucked up intact, like spaghetti, and in more epicurean times these wholesome worms from the woodcock's stomach were prized as a delicacy called trail."

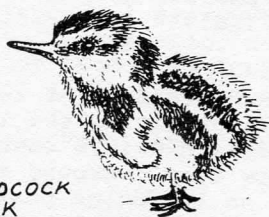
-Peter Matthiessen, The Wind Birds

"Though you roam the woods all your days, you never will see by chance what he sees who goes on purpose to see it. One gets his living by shooting the woodcock; most never see one in their lives."

-H.D. Thoreau, Journals, 1856

"The best time to listen for woodcock is on calm evenings when temperatures are above 40° F, although the birds will sing when it is colder. Singing starts at dusk, usually 15 to 45 minutes after sunset, depending upon cloud conditions, and continues for 30 to 40 minutes. Singing occurs again just before dawn. Listen for a short, rasping call, described in the literature as a "peent". Various workers have described it as a "breet", a roadrunner cartoon "beep" or a nighthawk-like rasp. Woodcock may "peent" for several minutes before flying. They take off with a twittering sound made by the air rushing through their primaries. The sound continues as they spiral upward 200 or more feet. At the top of their flight, they begin their song, a series of chirping notes. The vocal chirping and the twittering of the wings continues as the bird spirals back down, lands and then starts the process over. If you try carefully stalking the birds, moving up to the singing area only when the bird is in the air, you can frequently get within a few feet of the bird. Migrants also sing as they pass through our state and one singing ground may be used by several different birds as the season progresses. Generally, birds still singing after April 15 can be considered permanent residents. Birds will continue to sing until the first of June, although the peak of activity occurs in late April and early May."

-H.W. Heusmann, Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Game



WOODCOCK
CHICK

"A woodcock nest is very rudimentary compared to those of many other birds. The usual nest is a cuplike depression on the ground with a few twigs arranged around the rim. The hen makes no effort to conceal it; woodcock plumage is such effective camouflage that close inspection is required to recognize an unconcealed, incubating hen."

-W.G. Sheldon, The Book of the American Woodcock

"Woodcock hunting can become almost an addiction".

-W.G. Sheldon, The Book of the American Woodcock

Woodcock require rich moist soil with many earthworms. They also require adjacent (with in 300 yards) thick cover in which to hide during the day. In periods of drought when the soil becomes too hard for their probing bills and earthworms retreat downward, they soon begin to show signs of starvation. The best woodcock habitat occurs where trees (especially Alder) grow from 10 to 20 feet tall in damp soil with scattered open areas.



SCREECH OWL: Otus asio

The Screech Owl is a small "eared" nocturnal prowler, roosting in tree cavities during the day. Despite its quiet nature, many people associate this bird with evil superstitions and graveyard stories. Why? The Screech Owl actually does exhibit ghostlike qualities. For one thing, it flies noiselessly, due to the downy edges of its flight feathers. Another thing is its voice: usually one or two long, descending tremulous whistles or wails followed by an even-pitched trill. The screech for which the bird is named is so rarely given that most birders have never heard it: a truly blood-curdling shriek.

Description

The Screech Owl is the only small New England owl with eartufts. These tufts of feathers are not ears but are protective devices simulating splinters of wood when erect.

The Screech Owl is dichromatic, appearing in two color phases, grey and red, which have no connection to age, sex, or season. Individuals retain one or the other phase throughout their lifespan.

The Screech Owl measures eight to ten inches long with a wingspan of twenty-two inches. The wings are very wide and rounded, in flight giving the impression of a huge bat. In typical relaxed posture, the Screech Owl is short and plump. Its head is large and rounded with bright yellow eyes. Around each eye is a facial disc, either grey or rufous, depending on its color phase. The back of the head, back, wings, and tail are either rufous-brown or grey. Undersides are basically whitish with an intricate system of heavy black markings over very narrow horizontal barring, giving the bird a mottled appearance.

In New England, the Screech Owl can be confused with two other species: The Long-eared Owl and the Saw-whet Owl. The Long-eared, measuring 3 to 8 inches longer, is brown, with rufous facial discs; the Saw-whet is up to 3 inches shorter and lacks eartufts.

Distribution

The Screech Owl is found in all the lower 48 states, small sections of southern Canada, and south to central Mexico. In New England, it is common in Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, and in southern Vermont, New

Hampshire, and Maine. It is a year-round resident throughout its range, although there is some evidence of local migration from northern inhospitable regions in winter. This explains the noted increase of wintering Screech Owls in the Boston area.

Habits

Screech Owls will nest in any tree cavity, woodpecker hole, nest box, or other suitable crevice. Their nests are usually found in orchards or big trees, near fields and streams, and may even be in towns. They are aggressive in protecting their brood and have been known to knock the hats off of people who innocently walk underneath their nests at night.

In southern New England, the young hatch between April 7 and May 5, after an incubation period of 21 to 25 days.

One of the more interesting aspects of the Screech Owl is its diet. Pough (1949) says the Screech Owl "eats almost any animal food," whatever happens to be available. It will catch night-flying beetles, moths, birds, frogs, crayfish, snails, reptiles, fish, bats, other small mammals, and even earthworms. Since its preferred foods are large insects and rodents, both of which destroy crops, the Screech Owl is useful to mankind. (Forbush, 1927) In the absence of their preferred foods, however, Screech Owls will eat birds, including species their own size such as Blue Jays, Redwings, Mourning Doves, and occasionally small game birds.

Conclusion: a census

The Screech Owl is a common bird found almost anywhere, including cities and towns. The actual population is probably grossly underestimated on all general bird surveys such as the Christmas Bird Count. For this reason, a Screech Owl survey to collect data on general population, habitat preference, and territory size, a project of the Bird Observer Field Studies Committee, will be conducted during the nesting season in late March and early April. Anyone interested in participating in this survey should call the coordinators:

Nicholas and Oliver Komar: 332-5509

Nicholas Komar

Sources

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- Walker, Lewis Wayne, The Book of Owls, Alfred A. Knopf, 1974.

This issue of TASL News was produced by Soheil Zendehe with assistance from Barbara Gard, Craig Jackson, Christine Newman, and Polly Stevens. Artwork for this issue was contributed by John Andrews and Denise Braunhardt.



Friends of Belle Isle Marsh

Belle Isle is a unique and beautiful salt marsh situated in East Boston, Revere, and Winthrop. Over the last few years it has become the focus of a good deal of attention from persons interested in coastal bird life. TASL's heron and shorebird censuses in the summer of 1980 drew attention to the large number of birds such as Snowy Egret, Short-billed Dowitcher, and Hudsonian Godwit that use this marsh as a resting and feeding spot. (See TASL News, November 1980.)

In the past few months the staff of TASL has founded and promoted Friends of Belle Isle, an organization whose aims are:

1. To research and document the human and natural history of the marsh.
2. To educate community residents, through slide shows, lectures, and field trips, about the value and beauty of the marsh.
3. To inform public officials and conservation organizations of the wildlife habitats that exist in the marsh, and of the threats to them.

Anyone interested in the activities of the Friends, or any organization wishing to see our slide presentation on Belle Isle, should contact:

Soheil Zendehe, 380 Broadway, Somerville 02145: 628-8990.



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.

Since 1973 BIRD OBSERVER, a bimonthly 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 February 1982 issue has a major article by John Andrews on last winter's roost of Long-eared Owls at Lexington. Other pieces on field problems, ornithological research, and bird behavior also appear in the magazine.

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.

BOSTON HARBOR HERON CENSUS

When 240 Snowy Egrets and 4 Great Egrets flew into Belle Isle Marsh, East Boston, at 6 AM on August 28, 1981, my first reaction was to gape in disbelief. Being a good TASLER, my second reaction was to scheme up a heron census.

Here are some of the questions that occurred to me as I witnessed this flight, and others of like magnitude, in following days.

1. Where are they coming from? Where are they headed?
2. If by night they roost on Spectacle Island, which we suspect, do they spread to other areas around the city -- say westward and southward -- as well as north to Belle Isle and beyond?
3. What fraction of the total numbers of Snowy Egrets in Boston Harbor come thru to Belle Isle at that season? At other seasons? Do their preferred paths and feeding spots change daily? monthly? seasonally? Depending on the tide cycle?
4. How many pairs breed at Spectacle Island? How many young do they raise? Do the large numbers we see in late summer represent adult and young birds of the Boston Harbor colony, or are they all mixed with birds from other places?

To answer these and other questions, I've designed the following censusing scheme.

1. The primary census work will be carried out by observers situated at four sites: Belle Isle Marsh, Long Island, Squaw Rock and Nut Island. Each party will position itself at the observation spot 45 minutes before sunrise on the days listed below, and will record the number of arriving herons at two minute intervals. Observation can cease about an hour after sunrise.
2. At least one observer is interested in evening flight observations from Belle Isle Marsh. The numbers recorded on the evening flights should compare in interesting ways with the corresponding morning flights.
3. Throughout the season data will be collected about nesting numbers and success of the colony at Spectacle Island by Professor Jeremy Hatch.
4. At some point in the summer, probably in September, the dawn flight monitored every day to determine the effect of changing tide on the p... arrival of birds.

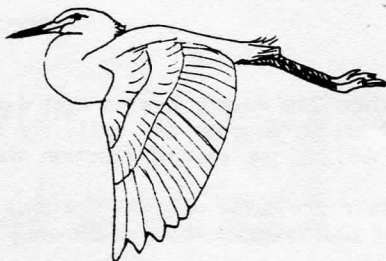
Raw data from the censuses will most likely be published in this publication, although the final results of the census work and any analysis or conclusions to be drawn will be more appropriately summarized in BIRD OBSERVER.

See the following page for the dates and times of the Boston Harbor Heron Census.

To participate in this project please contact the coordinator: Mr. Soheil Zende, 380 Broadway, Somerville, MA 02145: 628-8990.

Dates for the Boston Harbor Heron Census:

DATE	HIGH TIDE	SUNRISE
APR 18	6:30	5:00
MAY 2	7:30	5:40
MAY 16	6:00	5:20
MAY 30	6:00	5:10
JUN 13	4:30	5:10
JUN 27	4:45	5:10
JUL 11	3:15	5:15
JUL 25	3:15	5:30
AUG 15	8:15	5:50
AUG 29	8:15	6:05
SEP 12	7:00	6:20
SEP 26	6:45	6:35
OCT 10	5:45	6:50



WINTER WATER BIRD SURVEYS

The third season of TASL harbor censuses began on November 29, 1981, and will end with the March 7, 1982, census. This season TASL censusing parties covered Newburyport Harbor and the Merrimack River, as well as Boston Harbor. Also, we added a January census date so we could compare our data directly with U. S. Fish and Wildlife's winter waterfowl censuses, also conducted in January.

As there is one more census left to go, we have decided to save all the data from this season's censuses and present it in the next issue of TASL News.

We urge anyone who wishes to observe the spectacle of spring waterfowl migration to join us on our final census of the season. For information on meeting times and places, please call one of the TASL Coordinators:

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

Next TASL Harbor Censuses MAR. 6 & 7

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