May 1983

TASL News

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

THE SPRING MIGRATION CALENDAR

As any New Englander knows, the date doesn't tell you much about what the weather may bring here. A few balmy days in March usually set us up for a last sustained blast from winter, and spring's true advance is sometimes interrupted by a substantial snowfall in April or even, rarely, May. But nature does provide us a reasonably accurate measure of the advance of spring in the returnings of our migrant birds.

The true harbingers of spring are the blackbirds, particularly the Red-winged Blackbird, small flocks of which begin to arrive back in our area by early March. Large numbers of redwings winter in the southeastern United States, with significant numbers just to our south in the Middle Atlantic States. The males, with their showy epaulettes, get a jump on spring and begin setting up their territories in marshy areas in anticipation of the drab brown females, who may keep their suitors waiting until April for their return. Not far behind the male redwings are the Common Grackles, long-tailed blackbirds in which the sexes are similar.

By early April swallows may be seen flying about over open bodies of fresh water. These are the Tree Swallows, steely blue-green above and white below. This swallow winters along the Atlantic coast from North Carolina southward through Florida, the gulf coast, and Central America. In its relatively early return and relatively northern winter range, the Tree Swallow is notably hardier than our other common swallows. The Barn Swallow winters in South America and does not return to our area until late April. The less widespread Purple Martin winters in the Amazon Valley of Brazil. A few individuals of this large dark swallow species have returned by late April, but many are still arriving in May. An excellent place for observing swallows is Plum Island, where one can see Tree Swallows perching on fenceposts and nest boxes, Purple Martins looking out from the holes of their communal nest boxes, and any of the local swallow species migrating through the dunes.

From early April to early May, hawks may be seen migrating at Plum Island or other open coastal locations, particularly on fair days with brisk northwesterly winds, which tend to concentrate the hawks along our coasts. The commonest species is the American Kestrel, a beautifully colored small falcon. It winters mainly in the southeastern United States, and southward but sparingly also in Massachusetts. By April, they are seen much more frequently, usually perching on roadside wires and poles. Probably the next most common migrant hawk along the coast is the Sharp-shinned Hawk, which is slightly larger than a jay. Its winter distribution is very similar to the kestrel's. But while large numbers of kestrels may be seen migrating in early April, large numbers of Sharp-shinned Hawks are not usually seen until late April. And, unlike the kestrel, the Sharp-shinned Hawk is not likely to be seen other than in migration, since its preferred breeding

area is the northern forests, and since its secretive bird-hunting habits keep it within dense cover.

Of course, the traditional bird of spring is the familiar American Robin. In our area, most people who are watching for this bird's return to their lawns are rewarded by the first or second week of April. Actually, robins winter throughout most of the United States and even in our area. They withdraw to habitats with good winter berry crops, and the size of their winter population varies considerably from year to year. A Massachusetts birdwatcher usually has little difficulty finding his first robin in January.

A common suburban songbird by which one can more confidently know the state of spring's advance is the Northern Oriole (the "official" name for "Baltimore" Oriole), which normally winters from southern Mexico south. By the second week of May, the brilliant orange and black oriole males are announcing their return with piping notes from the treetops.

The ideal bird for timing the advance of spring in urban areas might be the Common Nighthawk. This relative of the Whip-poor-will winters in South America and nests on urban rooftops. A city-dweller who hears the nighthawk's repetitious nasal "peent" calls from above the rooftops around dusk can be reasonably sure that the third week of May has arrived and that spring in New England has fully unfolded.

Chris Floyd

References

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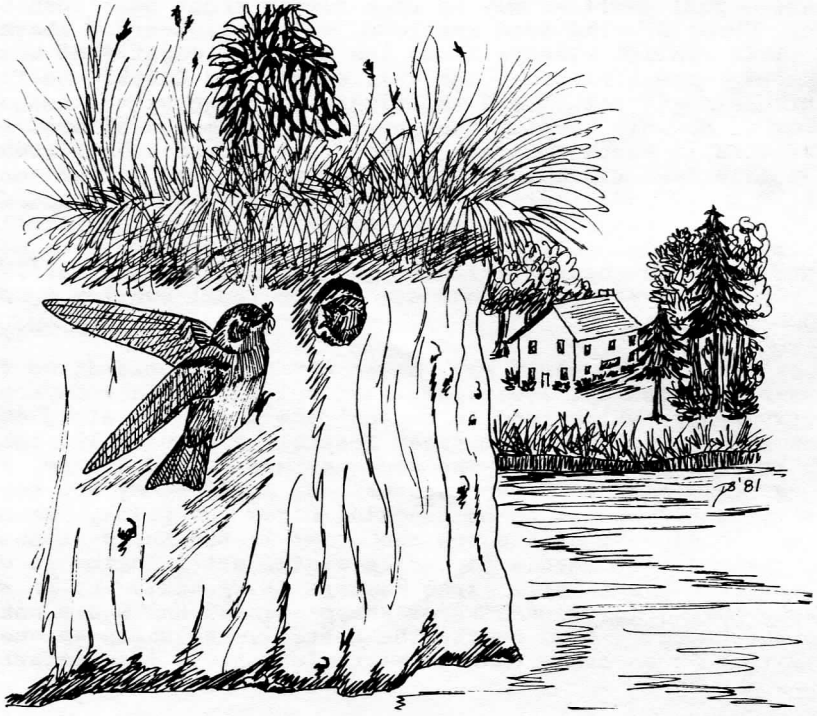
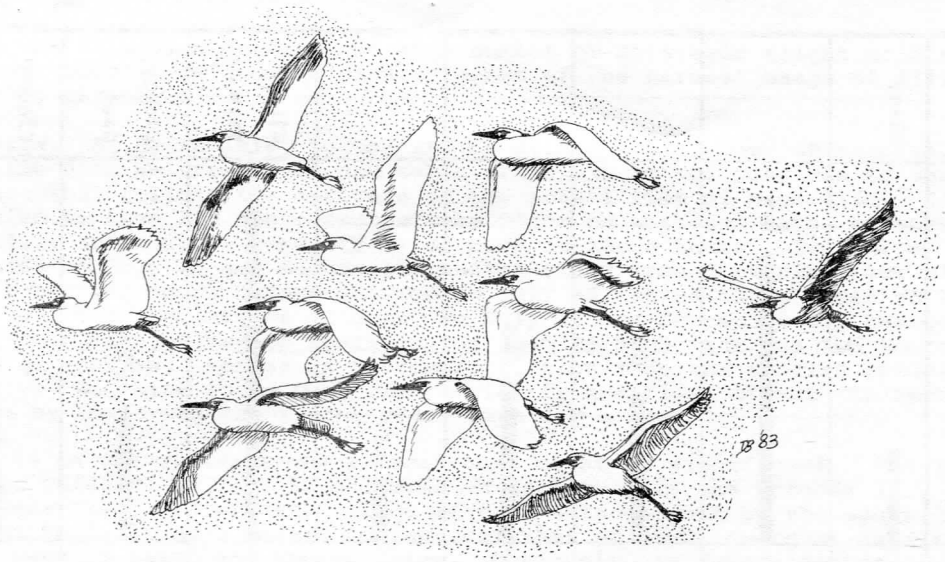
Pough, Richard H., Audubon Land Bird Guide, Doubleday, 1949.
Robbins, Chandler S.; Bertel Bruun; Herbert S. Zim, Birds of North America, Golden Press, 1966.





DAWN HERON CENSUSES AT BELLE ISLE

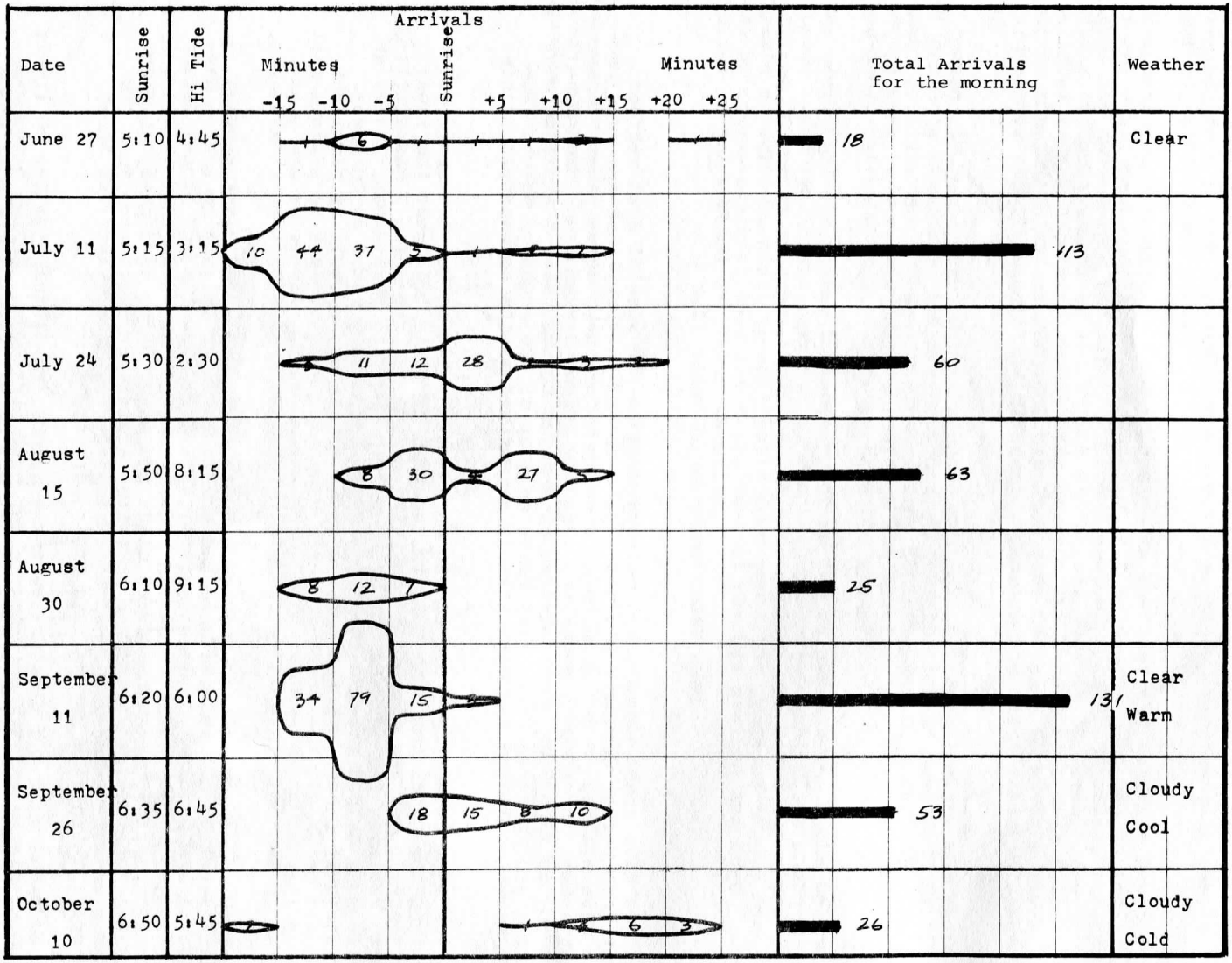
TASLers have spent three years getting used to the special foul weather that TASL Harbor Censuses produce. It's clear, however, that not many people were willing to get used to getting up before dawn every other Sunday last summer in order to participate in the Boston Harbor Dawn Heron Censuses (see TASL News, March 1982). I managed to volunteer a small core of people who censused Belle Isle Marsh on many of the required dates. Together we collected the data that is summarized in the accompanying tablegraph.

In any data gathering project, one must decide what format to use in collecting the data; how much data is usable once collected; what the final presentation of the data will look like. From the beginning I had difficulty deciding the answers to these questions. This preliminary census at Belle Isle helped provide the answers; it was a "dry run," so to speak. Predictably enough, it also provided new questions, as well as highlighting old ones. In the brief commentary below I will attempt to explain what we've learned about the methodology of this census, as well as the questions that appear answerable -- or perhaps even answered -- by this census.

Premise. We know that a large number of Snowy Egrets and Black-crowned Night-Herons breed at Spectacle and Middle Brewster Islands in Boston Harbor. A small number of Great Egrets, Little Blue Herons and Glossy Ibises also nest there. Observations in prior years had shown us that the "day herons" roost at Spectacle every night and move out to feed every morning. Night-herons and ibises appear to follow a different pattern. Thus the "heron census" I envisaged had as its object of primary interest Snowy Egrets, Little Blue Herons, and Great Egrets.

On mornings when the tide is low these herons immediately scatter to likely feeding places and are not seen in any concentrations. On the other hand, when high tide and early morning coincide, we see large flights of birds fly in to several specific staging areas from which they continue on to feeding spots in the upper reaches of marshes. We decided that we should watch and count the incoming flights at dawn on high tide mornings. If we

DAWN HERON FLIGHTS AT BELLE ISLE MARSH SEASON OF 1982



Participants in Boston Harbor Heron Census: David Glod, George Gove, Craig Jackson, David Lange, David Leland, Christine Newman, Kermit Norris, Martha Reinstein, Soheil Zendeh.

could get this plan carried out at a number of strategic flight points or stopover places, we'd get a clearer sense of the herons' usage of different city marshes.

Arrivals. At Belle Isle, herons arrive within a half hour of sunrise. From the data we present in the table-graph, it is not possible to see a pattern that relates the arrivals to the actual time of high tide. Since we tried to have all the censuses take place on week-end days, on some days high tide and sunrise were off by as much as three hours. Two large flights, on July 24 and August 15, peaked right around sunrise, yet high tide was three hours before sunrise on July 24, three hours after on August 15. The two largest flights, on July 11 and September 11, peaked ten to fifteen minutes before sunrise. On July 11 high tide was two hours ahead of sunrise, whereas on September 11 high tide and sunrise coincided closely. We think it is possible to clarify how tides affect the heron flight by observing the flight every dawn for a week.

There is in the arrivals one pattern that might be significant. The latest flights relative to sunrise occurred on September 26 and October 10. Both days were heavily overcast. Since weather data on most of the other days was not kept, it must remain conjectural that on dark, overcast days the birds wake up later and arrive later. Obviously, in future censuses weather data should be kept scrupulously.

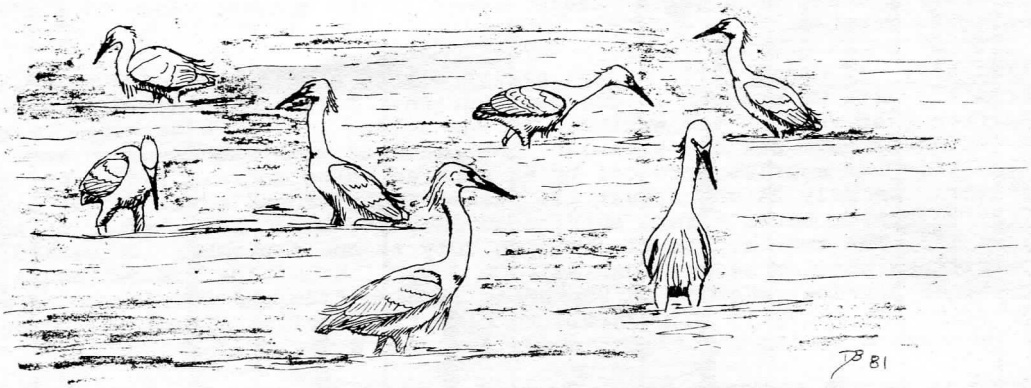
Totals. We had speculated that in the early part of the summer, when adults are incubating, only half the total number of herons at the colony would be out feeding at any one time. Later on, say around mid-June, when the young would all be hatched, both adults from each nest would go out to feed and bring back food for the young. Still later, entire family groups would fly to feeding spots together, swelling the observed numbers. As the summer progressed, we thought, "postbreeding dispersal" might scatter the birds to other roosts and feeding spots near and far. Finally, in very late summer we would see another peak as dispersed birds that had moved north began their southward migration and sought out preferred spots to concentrate.

Unfortunately we have no data from the early part of the season. But note the very large jump in numbers from June 27 to July 11. This is probably the observed effect of lots of immature egrets finally getting out to feeding spots with their parents. From late July to late August the numbers are middling, as predicted by the theory of dispersal. (The August 30 count was poorly timed, as high tide was more than three hours after sunrise.) Finally, the biggest count of the year came on September 11 when our hypothesis would predict the onset of southward migration.

The table below shows the approximate number of pairs of herons breeding on Boston Harbor islands. This data was kindly provided by Professor Jeremy Hatch of the University of Massachusetts, Boston.

BREEDING HERONS OF BOSTON HARBOR ISLANDS

SPECIES	PAIRS	LOCATION
Great Egret	2	Spectacle Island
Snowy Egret	120	Spectacle Island
Green-backed Heron	1	Spectacle Island
Black-crowned Night-Heron	400-500	Middle Brewster Island (most)
Glossy Ibis	10	Spectacle Island



General remarks. Each flight had its particular characteristics. On June 27, George Gove and David Lange watched a total of 18 birds come in dribs and drabs that continued long after sunrise. Two weeks later a hundred birds were in by five minutes to sunrise. On September 11, we watched many birds come from the northeast and disappear into a totally obscured place in the marsh, behind the MBTA tracks. A bit later they all came up and over in a vast cloud. How many birds we miss because they go up Belle Isle Inlet is anyone's guess. Perhaps a better observation post at Belle Isle is required.

The problems and ambiguities at this one site will of course multiply as we expand the census to other marshes around the city. We do need, however, to get these other sites covered if we wish to confirm our conjectures. And I must emphasize, many of the statements about the pattern of arrivals, and the number of arrivals over the season, must be kept at the conjectural level until other evidence is in. For example, the September 11 count of 131 birds was the observed peak number at Belle Isle this year; we do not know if that was the peak date for Spectacle Island or the harbor in general. Such information can only be gathered by dozens of loyal TASLers forsaking sweet slumber on many summer Sundays in years to come, so that some day the full story of the herons of Boston Harbor can be known and told.

Soheil Zendeh

BELLE ISLE MARSH COMMUNITY CLEANUP

Friends of Belle Isle Marsh, in cooperation with the MDC, Representative Gus Serra's office, and the East Boston community, is organizing a clean-up of the marsh and surrounding areas, scheduled for Saturday, June 18 at 10 AM. Anyone interested in helping to clean up and celebrate one of the most unique and cherished natural resources in this community is invited to join us. Please call Rose Corrado at 567-5854 to find out how you can help.

A SPRING MIGRATION JOURNAL

Editor's Note:

In recent years Bird Observer of Eastern Massachusetts has organized a cooperative study of bird migration in eastern Massachusetts. The study required that a number of volunteers make regular visits to selected sites during the spring migration in order to census birds as they migrated through on their northward journey. John Andrews conducted such a census at the Whipple Hill conservation area in Lexington in 1980. The following notes are based upon a journal he kept during the census.

April 6. Today I made a preliminary visit to the site with Lee Taylor. We entered from Winchester Drive and climbed to the summit of Whipple Hill, the highest spot in Lexington (374 feet above sea level). From the summit we observed a northward bound Cooper's Hawk - the first I had ever seen in Lexington, although I regularly encountered his smaller cousin - the Sharp-shinned Hawk.

As we descended into the ravine, a large form with broad, blunt wings flushed from a pine tree. The agitated calls of the crows left no doubt that we had flushed one of their enemies from his roost. We followed the cries of the crows and managed to catch a glimpse of a Great Horned Owl as it slipped away over the ridge.

April 19. The spring migration has begun on a warm southerly wind. Eight Palm Warblers bobbed their tails among the fallen leaves. The song of Ruby-crowned Kinglets came from several directions and a Hermit Thrush moved through the underbrush. As I was returning from the census, I met a young lady carrying an impressive array of photographic equipment. I found she lives nearby and often visits Whipple Hill to photograph birds and wildflowers. She claimed to have photographed over 110 species of wildflowers at Whipple Hill. I was happy to show her the stump in which a Black-capped Chickadee was busy excavating a nest. With the help of a tripod-mounted telephoto lens, she soon captured his portrait as he emerged from the cavity with a beak full of wood chips.

May 2. Today I was surprised to hear a Starling imitating the plaintive whistled call of the Eastern Wood Pewee. The Pewee is a common breeding bird at Whipple Hill, but at this date it has not yet returned from its wintering grounds. Hence, the Starling must have remembered the call from the previous summer. Its mimicry was quite convincing. I have noticed that the Starling mimics only local breeding species. This is generally true of Mockingbirds as well. The calls of migrants, no matter how striking, seem to be unworthy of the mimic's attention. Connections between mimicry and territoriality seem to be implied by this.

May 3. The first major movement of May occurred overnight. I found five species of warblers were foraging on the hillside. The most abundant species was Yellow-rumped Warbler (29 individuals counted).

May 4. Two Spotted Sandpipers sat close together on a piece of plywood floating in Locke Pond. They seemed to feel that their plywood board offered them more security than was available on the shore.

I heard the musical song of the Field Sparrow for the first time. They find the dry, thin soil and stunted blueberries of the summit much to their liking.

May 5. A ribbon of red sky hung on the eastern horizon long after sunrise. The full ringing call of the first Ovenbird came from the slope above the pond.

May 9. A major migratory movement. Six new species were counted. A late Yellow-bellied Sapsucker prospected in the ravine. Nine species of warblers foraged through the trees. The first Orioles arrived.

May 12. Three Prairie Warblers sang on the hillside. Will they stay to nest?

May 14. Another major movement occurred on southwest winds following the clearing weather. As I was admiring my first Black-billed Cuckoo, a second cuckoo flew up and perched beside the first. These sleek birds with their strange gutteral calls always capture my interest for as long as I can hold them in view - which usually is not too long, for they are somewhat secretive.

The first Blackburnian Warblers appeared - two males with bibs of dayglow orange - moving through the treetops.

May 15. A Solitary Sandpiper stepped daintily through the mud at the far side of Locke Pond. The first brilliant Scarlet Tanager sang hoarsely from one of the lone oaks on the east slope. The Common Flickers, which had been quite vocal earlier in the season, are suspiciously quiet now. No doubt the female is brooding a set of eggs.

May 17. Two Broadwinged Hawks sat about 200 yards apart in the tall oaks above the Pond. One screamed the high "tew" call and the other immediately answered. After a pause the call and answer were repeated. This continued for several minutes.

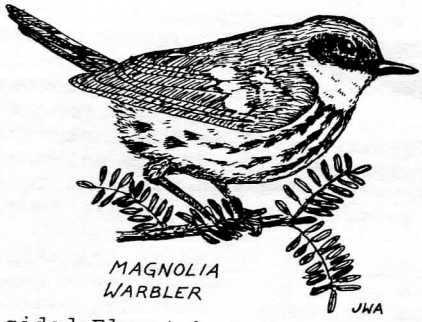
May 18. A big flycatcher sat on a bare branch. Periodically he would fly out into the air, snap up some passing insect, and return to his perch. I noted tufts of fluffy white feathers protruding from underneath his wings - as if he had dressed hurriedly and forgot to tuck his undershirt in. These untidy tufts are a field mark of the Olive-sided Flycatcher.

May 20. Visited Whipple Hill at 8:00 p.m. to see if there was any evidence in the sunset of the volcanic dust resulting from the eruption of Mt. St. Helen's in Washington. The sunset was beautiful, but not spectacular. Heard a nasal call from high overhead, and soon found the source - a Common Nighthawk passing in steady, northward flight. A few moments later a second Nighthawk passed silently. Then a third, calling.

May 21. Thick fog hung over the summit. On the bare twigs along the trail, spider webs glistened in profusion, suddenly made visible to my eye as they caught tiny beads of the fog. Upon looking closer I found that a tiny spider sat in each web. Undoubtedly I had passed the spiders unaware many times before. Now the fog revealed to me that this was <u>their</u> trail too.

May 26. Barn Swallows appeared, flying low over Locke Pond, feeding upon a recent hatch of tiny gnats that swarmed in erratic fashion over the surface. Suddenly one swallow plunged (accidentally, I assume) into the water. In a flash it arose and was on the wing again, leaving only ripples behind.

May 27. I almost stepped upon a Pale Corydalis in bloom. This wildflower was worth sitting down to contemplate. It grew in a depression in the rock where there scarcely seemed to be enough soil for any plant. Its unusual blossoms were washed with the most delicate pastels of yellow and pink. And the deeply cut, ornate leaves held my eyes for some moments.



May 29. Another Olive-sided Flycatcher - almost certainly not the same bird seen two weeks ago.

May 31. The migration is all but over. Among the warblers, only Nashville and Black-and-white can still be found. A male Wood Duck, resplendent in his breeding plumage, sat warily in the middle of Locke Pond.

June 1. As I walked along the fire road a Hairy Woodpecker suddenly materialized and followed me along, sounding loud "peek's" of alarm. It was not difficult to locate the reason for his behavior: a nest hole newly excavated in a tree overhanging the road. Later, observing the cavity from a distance, I was able to see the woodpecker looking out from inside.

One bullfrog at Locke Pond began to strum and his simple tune was soon taken up from all shores. This resonant chorus caused the very ground to hum. Then, in an instant, the singing ceased. What was accomplished thereby I cannot fathom, but I suspect that even frogs do not sing for naught.

June 7. The Hairy Woodpecker remained quite incensed whenever I trespassed in the vicinity of his nest. It was his own fault really, locating his cavity over the road. But he is not the only Lexington resident to complain of too much traffic in recent days.

June 14. Steve Brueger and I censused Whipple Hill as part of the Greater Boston Breeding Bird Census. Steve is an exchange student from Germany. He is thoroughly familiar with the birds of Europe, but here he marvels even at Blue Jays.

On the summit we made an unusual discovery: Two Nashville Warblers appeared, quite agitated at our presence. I had wondered at their regularity in late May, and now I know that they were not migrants, but breeders. Two Black-and-white Warblers were soon recorded and three Prairie Warblers were found singing on the slope overlooking the marsh. A Rough-winged Swallow mixed with the Barn Swallows skimming the pond, and a Broadwinged Hawk floated high in the sky. The Hairy Woodpecker was absent - no response came, even when we rapped upon the nest tree.

Epilogue

As I sat down to make a final compilation of my census data, I found myself somehow dissatisfied that the living birds I had seen during the spring were now reduced to little more than ciphers on my tally sheet. I realized that something more than the accumulation of data had motivated me to arise early on twenty mornings to complete the census.

It was my privilege at Whipple Hill to observe a sweeping drama - one that has been repeated ten thousand times since the glacier's last retreat. It is a drama of life and death in which the actors never grow stale. It be-

gins with a tiny jewel of a warbler departing a Venezuelan jungle in March on a hazardous journey toward a Canadian forest which he only dimly remembers. He travels by night to avoid his enemies and to take advantage of the stars for guidance. He comes to the black vastness of the Gulf of Mexico and launches himself toward the watery horizon with faith that before his wings fail him, he shall make landfall. Luck is with him, for the storm is still a day away, and dawn finds him within sight of the Texas coast. He continues northward. Through wind and rain, chill and fog, he makes sporadic northward progress.

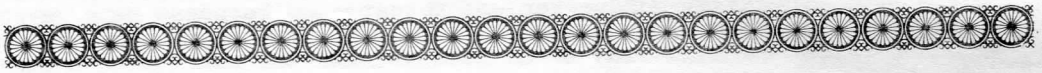
One misty dawn, after a long night flying in the chilly air of mid-May, he drops lower, looking for a place to rest and seek nourishment. A wooded ridge catches his eye, and he plunges into its inviting greenery. Soon he is joined by other birds, and they band together into a small foraging flock.

He does not know nor care that the Indians which his ancestors met upon this very hill have long ago retired from the scene. He is blissfully unaware of the deliberations of town meeting in which the preservation of this island of greenery was approved. Nor does he pay much attention to the binoculars which are now raised in his direction. His kind began their migrations long before there were town meetings or binoculars. With luck, they will still be migrating when newer creatures replace man.

With dusk, he launches himself into the starry sky and is off again on the final leg of his journey. The occasional lights of human habitation grow ever sparser, until the unbroken darkness of the boreal forest undulates from horizon to horizon. With the first soft shades of dawn in the east, he drops lower. The positions of stars satisfy him. The lacy foliage calls to him. His journey is over. As the first direct rays of the sun strike the treetop, they fall upon the breast of a tiny creature whose orange brilliance rivals the sun. The song of his race bursts from his throat, full of vigor and meaning. The ancient rites have begun.

On my data form the warbler has left but a single stark tally mark to satisfy the data-hungry computer. There is more to say, but would the computer care? After all, computers have never migrated, nor felt the urgencies of spring. Yes, we must have science to free us from superstition. I am a scientist by training and a rationalist by practice. The net with which I fish is strong, but somehow I glimpse golden fins slipping through into the depths while I pull forth my dogfish. Aldo Leopold once wryly commented that education is the process of trading insight for things of lesser value. Perhaps something more must carry us on to the final meaning. Perhaps, the final truth about migration exists only in a song, flung with abandon from the breast of a Blackburnian Warbler on the topmost hemlock bough.

John Andrews



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 April 1983 issue contains an article by Craig Jackson on birding Breakheart Reservation in Saugus. 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.

HARBOR ISLANDS BREEDING SURVEY

TASL is hoping to begin a new project this summer. We will be initiating an on-going breeding survey of several of the Boston Harbor Islands. Participants will camp overnight and conduct surveys and may also be asked to help lead nature walks on the islands. If you are interested in participating in this project, please contact Craig Jackson, 321-4382, or write to him at 22 Almont Street, Malden MA 02148.

Dear TASL News Readers:

As we enter our fourth year of publication, we would like to ask for your help in redefining our goals. Among other things the cost of producing and mailing this publication has increased to the point where we need to cut back our mailing list to those who subscribe.

Therefore, if you wish to keep receiving this newsletter, please send $2.50 to: Bird Observer, 462 Trapelo Road, Belmont, MA 02178. If you see a red dot on your mailing label, you have already subscribed for 1983, and we thank you.

Please answer these questions, then cut out and mail this section of the page to us:

---------- Cut Here ----------

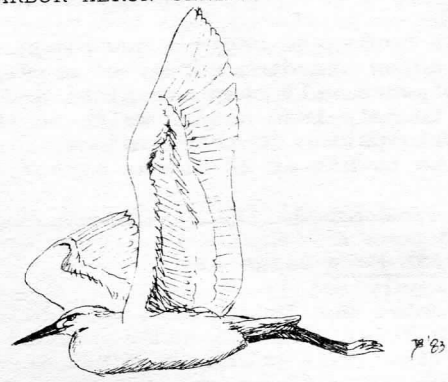
1. Do you read TASL News? Which features of the publication do you particularly like? Dislike?

2. Does the data and information that appears in TASL News help you in your field study? In your involvement with birds?

3. Would you like to see TASL News change or include material other than you have been reading here? Would you care to provide material that you think appropriate for this publication? Would you help with the production of TASL News?

DATES FOR THE 1983 BOSTON HARBOR HERON CENSUS

Date	High Tide	Sunrise
MAY 8	8:45	5:30
MAY 22	8:30	5:15
JUNE 5	7:00	5:10
JUNE 19	7:00	5:10
JUL 3	5:30	5:15
JUL 17	5:45	5:20
JUL 31	4:15	5:35
AUG 14	4:15	5:50
AUG 28	3:00	6:05
SEP 4	9:15	6:15
SEP 18	9:30	6:30
OCT 2	8:00	6:40
OCT 16	8:00	7:00



Observers are needed on these days about one half hour before sunrise at four locations: Weir River, Weymouth; Long Island, Boston; Squantum Marsh, Quincy; and Belle Isle Marsh, East Boston. We urge you to participate in these censuses. Please contact the Heron Census Coordinator: Soheil Zendeh, 380 Broadway, Somerville, MA 02145 (628-8990).

BELLE ISLE MARSH FIELD TRIPS

All field trips start at 2 PM, and are free and open to the public. Please meet at the entrance to MDC's Belle Isle Park on Bennington Street, East Boston. We suggest very warm clothes and water-proof boots: we will walk through parts of the marsh.

Saturday, April 30
Sunday, May 8
Saturday, May 14
Sunday, May 22
Saturday, May 28
Sunday, June 5

For further information please call any of the leaders: Craig Jackson, 321-4382; Kermit Norris, 567-2339; Soheil Zendeh, 628-8990.

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