

TASL News

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



OUR PRIVILEGE OF PLACE

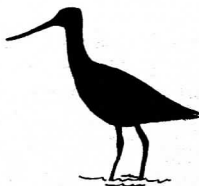
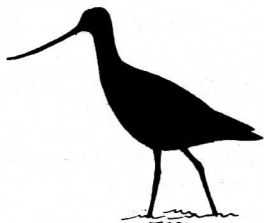
At Point of Pines in Revere. At Snake Island in Winthrop. In the marsh at Belle Isle in East Boston: against a background of blue subway trains; in front of a chain link fence; across the street from lawns of small homes - you can often find in summer and early autumn a group of Hudsonian Godwits - large and elegant wading birds that few people in our country can see so easily and that most never see unless they travel far. Later in the fall, and sometimes on into early December, you can also find the larger Marbled Godwit, so elegant of form, and also of color when in flight, that many in our city drive an hour to see at Newburyport or two hours to see on the island of Monomoy, which can only be reached at a cost of \$18 for a ferry ride.

Feeding.

At Point of Pines or at Snake Island, where shorebirds feed on a falling tide, look for dark birds at the water's edge who drive long bills down into the mud or sand with the steady, rocking motion of a walking beam. Look, too, at the birds that feed the farthest out into the water. On their longer legs, the godwits go deeper than the Greater Yellowlegs or the Willet.

Godwits often feed in one place for a time. They drive their upturned bills gracefully downwards into sand or mud as if their necks and heads and bills were the forearms, wrists and fingers of dancers trained in Thailand or Bali. They probe deeply beneath the surface of the water, immersing their bills and heads like those of giant hummingbirds. The godwits conduct a ritual, first at one station, then at another.

The yellowlegs chase small fish back and forth in shallow water; erratically, from place to place, like children released from stuffy classrooms to recess in a schoolyard; aggressively, like tennis players at a doubles match. Because they feed on fish, on snails and crabs, on insect larvae and aquatic insects, the yellowlegs don't probe. They strike and snatch like herons and egrets.



The Willets graze methodically. They snatch, but not frenetically; they probe, but not deeply. Often they proceed steadily forward, as if digging a trench or preparing a furrow, with their bills partly opened like a pair of tongs, and immersed to half their length in water, in mud or in soft sand.

Resting.

At high tide the godwits often rest at Belle Isle, standing close together in a roost with other long-legged shorebirds like the Greater Yellowlegs. To identify the godwits, begin by finding the largest waders in the group, then study their plumages, then study their bills. Rely on size and plumage to guide but not assure you (see text below). For confirmation, observe the length and color and contour of the bill (see box).

Wait, if need be. When resting, a godwit often conceals its long, distinctive bill among the feathers of its back.

Marbled Godwit. The largest shorebird in the group, if present; indeed, probably the largest shorebird you will see in Boston. Rich pinkish brown above, light brown below; and mottled - whence its common name.

Hudsonian Godwit. Usually the largest shorebird in the group for the Marbled Godwit is uncommon. In spring plumage, dark on the back above and russet on the breast below, where barred with black. In winter plumage, gray above and paler gray below; similar in tone and coloration to the large western race of the Willet. Like the Marbled Godwit, its legs are dark.

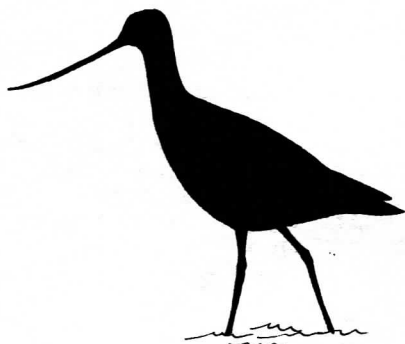
Willet (eastern race). Dull brown above and below; matte in finish. Far smaller than a Marbled Godwit. The common race of spring. Its legs are bluish gray.

Willet (western race). In size, may equal or surpass the Hudsonian Godwit. Gray upon its back, like in texture to polished marble; pearly gray upon its breast. The common race of fall. Its legs are bluish gray, like blueberries before they fully ripen.

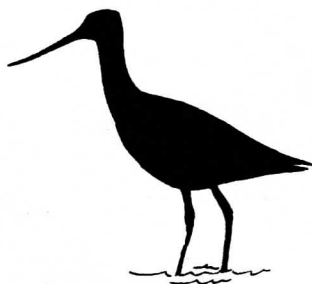
Greater Yellowlegs. In size, may equal a small Hudsonian Godwit or a Willet. Black above, speckled with white and gray; texture akin to granite. Pale below, breast often heavily streaked with black. Common in spring and in fall.

The bills of the godwits are striking: two-toned, pink at the base, darkening towards the tip, dusky at the tip. Long to very long; sometimes straight, often upturned; often markedly recurved in the Marbled Godwit.

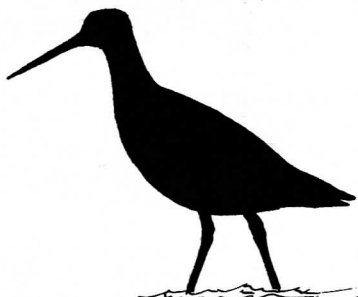
The Greater Yellowlegs will sometimes show you a slightly upturned bill, but never a two-toned bill, while Willets will have straight dark bills that are both shorter and thicker than godwits or yellowlegs.



Marbled Godwit

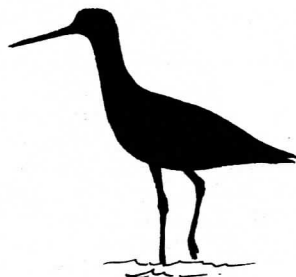


Hudsonian Godwit



Willet

P'83



Greater Yellowlegs

WADERS COMPARED

	<u>Length Overall</u>	<u>Length of Bill</u>	<u>Description of Bill</u>
Marbled Godwit	16 to 20"	3 to 5.5"	long to very long; straight or markedly upturned; two-toned
Hudsonian Godwit	14 to 17"	3"	long; straight or partly up-turned; two-toned
Willet	14 to 16"	2 to 2.75"	shorter; thicker and blunter; black or blue-black
Greater Yellowlegs	12.5 to 15"	2 to 2.3"	shorter; thinner; straight or slightly upturned; black

Source: Terres (1980)

Flying.

In flight, in winter plumage, three of the four species are studies in contrast between the black of wet shingle, the white of fresh snow, and the gray of cold clouds. The Greater Yellowlegs presents dark wings and a white rump. On the wings of the Willet, bands of black and white contrast sharply above and below; its back is grey. The Hudsonian Godwit presents a thin white strip on a dark wing, and a white tail ending in a broad black band; the underwing is strikingly black. On their bodies, all are as light as a pale overcast.

Above and below, on its wings and its body and its tail, the Marbled Godwit presents the brown colors of fallen oak and maple leaves - contrasting, on its raised wings, with linings of cinnamon or amber that gleam in strong sun like chestnut freshly opened or the fur of a seal. The Marbled is magic to see in flight. To see it so, at close range, in strong light, is to make with your eyes a work of art, perfect, in an instant.

Few Marbled Godwits visit our state - perhaps ten birds a year at most. For every Marbled Godwit we probably record a hundred Hudsonian Godwits. But both are a privilege to see.

At the end of summer, in northern Canada, Hudsonian Godwits gather in great numbers on the shore of James Bay and Hudson's Bay. In late August, 3000 to 4000 adults at a time may set out on migration in flocks of 70 to 350 birds. We usually see them here in far smaller groups of 10 or 20 or 50 birds. We rarely see more than 100 at a time. But at least we see them.

In most of the United States, the Hudsonian Godwit can be very hard to find; so hard, indeed, that several years ago a national organization of avid bird observers, all of whom had seen at least 500 of the 700 species seen in our country, listed the Hudsonian Godwit among the 10 species they most wanted to see. Apparently, nearly the entire population flies directly over the Atlantic and the Carribean from Canada to the eastern coast of South America. Only in Argentina and in Chile is the bird found in the great numbers that are seen departing from Canada.

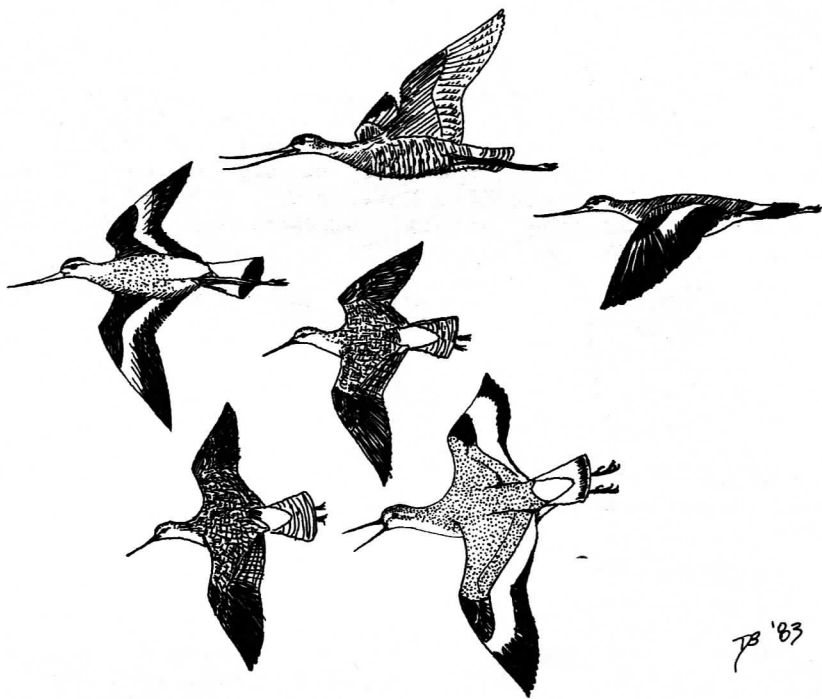
Our privilege is to see many of the few that choose to set down on land. You can exercise our privilege to see them by taking the subway, and by walking to a small, shallow pool at Belle Isle, called The Puddle. You can also drive to Winthrop or Revere. If you see them there, perhaps you will consider joining a campaign that I would like to start, to give official recognition to our privilege of place, by asking The Great and General Court to name the Hudsonian Godwit as the shorebird of our commonwealth.

J. H. Barton

Sources:

Peterson, R. T., A Field Guide to the Birds, Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston, 1980

Terres, J. K., The Audubon Society Encyclopaedia of North American Birds, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1980



As many of you are by now aware, we will cease publication of TASL News after our next issue. One aspect of birdwatching that we have attempted to encourage through the publication has been careful study of "local" areas that have not been greatly studied before. In this issue we have included articles that indicate some of the pleasures and significant results that may be obtained in this way. Katie Durham and Rhonda Rivers take us to an island "wilderness" twenty minutes offshore and Nicholas Komar compiles the results of a 10-day breeding survey from Newton. In a slightly different vein Jim Barton describes some of the shorebirds to be seen in the area and where to find them. We hope these articles will encourage others to delve into their own "backyards" next year.

Craig Jackson and Soheil Zende, Editors

A CENSUS OF SUMMER RESIDENT BIRDS
IN NEWTON, MASSACHUSETTS
June 19 - June 29, 1983

In attempting to census all the birds within the boundaries of Newton, we had two purposes. Primarily we documented the summer birdlife of Newton for posterity. Secondly, we wished to alert the community to the richness of birdlife in a suburban area. By publishing the account in TASL News, I hope to inspire amateur birders to take on similar projects or simply to get to know the birdlife around them, especially in urban or suburban areas. One urban area, Boston's Belle Isle Marsh, has benefited from this increased awareness in birders and other wildlife enthusiasts by receiving much needed support for its conservation.

One cannot go wrong with "local" birding. Aside from conservation issues, the result is great satisfaction.

Nicholas Komar

Great Blue Heron	1	Tree Swallow	12
Green-backed Heron	1	Northern Rough-winged Swallow	4
Black-crowned Night-Heron	11	Barn Swallow	15
Canada Goose	1	Blue Jay	70
Wood Duck	1 ad. + 9 yg.	American Crow	106
American Black Duck	3	Fish Crow	9
Mallard	179	Black-capped Chickadee	113
Broad-winged Hawk	1	Tufted Titmouse	48
Red-tailed Hawk	4 (+ nest ?)	White-breasted Nuthatch	25
American Kestrel	1	Brown Creeper	7
Ring-necked Pheasant	20	House Wren	11
Ruffed Grouse	7 yg.	Veery	2
Northern Bobwhite	1	Wood Thrush	19
Killdeer	1	American Robin	180
Herring Gull	34	Gray Catbird	146
Ring-billed Gull	34	Northern Mockingbird	34
Rock Dove	137	Brown Thrasher	5
Mourning Dove	47	Cedar Waxwing	51
Yellow-billed Cuckoo	5	European Starling	421
Screech Owl	6	Warbling Vireo	22
Chimney Swift	52	Red-eyed Vireo	26
Belted Kingfisher	1	Yellow Warbler	84
Downy Woodpecker	52	Ovenbird	4
Hairy Woodpecker	15	Common Yellowthroat	108
Northern Flicker	37	Scarlet Tanager	8
Eastern Wood Pewee	9	Northern Cardinal	48
Alder Flycatcher	3 singing	Rose-breasted Grosbeak	31
Willow Flycatcher	9	Indigo Bunting	18
Great Crested Flycatcher	12	Rufous-sided Towhee	8
Eastern Kingbird	24	Chipping Sparrow	33

Field Sparrow	1	Orchard Oriole	4
Song Sparrow	168	Northern Oriole	79
Swamp Sparrow	24	Purple Finch	3
Red-winged Blackbird	105	House Finch	73
Common Grackle	187	American Goldfinch	60
Brown-headed Cowbird	26	House Sparrow	109
		Total species:	72
		Total individuals	3,223

Six additional species are believed to nest in Newton:

Virginia Rail	Common Nighthawk
American Woodcock	Eastern Phoebe
Great Horned Owl	Marsh Wren

OBSERVERS: Mary Andersen, Marshall Cohen, Sherman Denison, Karen Komar, Nicholas Komar, Oliver Komar, Marilyn Murphy, Alfred Wilson

COMPILER: Nicholas Komar (332-5509), 61 Wade Street, Newton, MA 02161

The ten most common species are:

1. European Starling	421	6. Gray Catbird	146
2. Common Grackle	187	7. Rock Dove	137
3. American Robin	180	8. Black-capped Chickadee	113
4. Mallard	179	9. House Sparrow	109
5. Song Sparrow	168	10. Common Yellowthroat	108

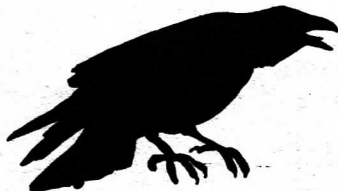
Twelve species account for over 60% of Newton's birds.

The ten species most unusual for this urban area are:

Wood Duck	Fish Crow
Ruffed Grouse	Brown Creeper
Northern Bobwhite	Veery
Alder Flycatcher	Ovenbird
Northern Rough-winged Swallow	Orchard Oriole

BIRD OBSERVER FIELD STUDIES COMMITTEE PROJECT

ROOSTING BEHAVIOR STUDY: January 7-22, 1984.
 This project will study the large communal roosts formed by the American Crow during the winter months. Participants will first work individually to map flight lines into crow roosts within the Route 495 perimeter. Then there will be at least one attempt to surround a major crow roost with observers and count all birds entering the roost at dusk. For instructions, contact John Andrews, 22 Kendall Road, Lexington, MA 02173.
 Telephone 862-6498.



BOSTON HARBOR ISLAND BREEDING BIRD SURVEY

How do seasoned TASLers while away the summer months after thawing out from Greater Boston Harbor winter waterfowl counts? By returning once again to the harbor, this time to explore the wilderness of the islands and to conduct a breeding bird survey.

The islands located within the confines of Greater Boston Harbor, approximately thirty, have been used extensively since colonial times for purposes such as military fortifications, correctional facilities, and farming. More recently, they have been the focus of recreational opportunities. In 1972, to counter a long history of abuse and lack of direction, the Department of Environmental Management produced a comprehensive management plan to develop the islands and to promote field studies and inventories. One of the resources provided by many of the islands is excellent habitat for breeding, resident, and migrant birds. TASL chose four islands - Grape, Bumpkin, Lovell's, and Peddock's - for a preliminary breeding bird survey the summer of 1983. (Because the ferry service is limited to the summer months, TASL is focusing its energies on breeding birds rather than a census of migrants.) The following is a recounting of our adventure on Grape Island over the hot and hazy weekend of July 9.

A three-dollar ferry ride to George's Island and a free water taxi from there provided convenient access to the outlying islands. A telephone call earlier in the season to the Boston Harbor Island State Park had reserved a camping site for us on Grape at no charge. One drawback to the primitive conditions on the islands is that fresh water must be lugged along with camping gear and food, and, of course, an equal weight in field guides. The more experienced island campers, as we learned, toted their supplies in laundry carts.

When we arrived Saturday afternoon, we were greeted by two very enthusiastic island managers, Don Swann and Melissa Burdett, and weekend volunteers from Friends of the Boston Harbor Islands who gave us a warm welcome and escorted us to our campsite. Don and Melissa are very competent botanists, but much less at ease at avian identification. Thus, they were delighted that two "real" birders had descended on the island for the weekend, and they eagerly awaited our discoveries.

After setting up our tent, we ventured out to familiarize ourselves with the island. Grape is a 50-acre drumlin rising about seventy feet over Hingham Bay. A walk along the pebbly beach at low tide revealed a multitude of Herring and Greater Black-backed gulls loafing on the mussel spits. The high tide line meets a very steep and densely vegetated bank, squelching any hope that there would be shorebird or gull nests along there.

For the remainder of the daylight we explored the trail system that loops through dense bayberry, blueberry, and staghorn sumac. At times it crosses through open fields and small birch-aspen stands. Many wildflowers were in bloom, including meadowsweet, spreading dogbane, multiflora rose, and steeplebush. Gray Catbirds, American Goldfinch, Song Sparrows, Yellow Warblers, and yellowthroats were in good supply. One adult male Yellow Warbler, much disturbed by our stroll through his domain, delighted us with a broken



wing display only a few feet away. Two American Woodcock bounded along the trail ahead of us at dusk. The rise along the northwest corner of the island afforded a panoramic view of the harbor and a spectacular sunset over downtown Boston.

Back at camp we stopped by Don and Melissa's hideaway to let them know our plans to census the island the following morning and to pick their brains about bird life on the island. We agreed to team up for the official walk Sunday morning. We would help them with bird identification, and they in turn would show us what they had learned about the many species of edible plants on the island. We turned in early (you have to bring your own night-life as well) after identifying what constellations we knew and admiring the Milky Way. No owls serenaded us that night; the new bushy growth did not provide proper breeding habitat.

We gathered by the docks at dawn Sunday morning. Our explorations the day before convinced us that bushwhacking for nests through the thick brush and poison ivy was unrealistic. Rather, we would stick to the trails and record on our map that came with the camping permit all birds seen and heard, noting behavioral displays that would help us distinguish breeding birds from nonbreeding residents. Along the way we feasted on raspberries, blackberries, and lemon grass.

Most of the birds we encountered that morning - cardinals, Rufous-sided Towhees, catbirds, warblers, and a Willow Flycatcher - were sticking to their territories. Goldfinch, however, were engaged in aerial mating displays, arcing over the brush and making it very difficult to arrive at an accurate count. Snowy Egrets and a Black-crowned Night-Heron flew by high overhead.

Three immature Northern Harriers quartered lazily across the island. There was no lack of food: voles were thick underfoot, and the remains of a Red-winged Blackbird and a catbird were strewn along the paths. Don showed us a wing he had found earlier in the season of a newly-fledged Ring-necked Pheasant.

The only nest we found belonged to a Green-backed Heron. A downy nestling clambered through the willow at our approach. We were periodically to see the parents heading back and forth between the harbor and the nest on feeding expeditions.

By midmorning we had completed the first census walk. The tally was disappointing considering what seemed like a relatively dense avian population. The route was quickly walked again to try to pick up on new territories, but the information remained basically the same.

By now it was quite hot, and we treated ourselves to lounging in the glens and checking out the action in the dock area. Grape is the closest island to Hingham. That Sunday was the busiest the island managers had seen thus far in the summer. Hoards of people came out in power boats to picnic, swim, and fish; however, they pretty much restricted their activities to the beach area. A last quick walk before the arrival of the midafternoon water taxi back to George's reconfirmed our impression from the day before that relatively few birds were visible that late in the day.

Because of the ferry schedule we had to stay overnight to have enough time to poke around the island and to do so early in the morning. Therefore, it took the commitment of most of a weekend, and we were unable to fit in a return trip later in the season. There were relatively few species on Grape that weekend, but the island was densely populated, and we were rewarded by many close looks. At least twenty-one species were considered to be using the island (Table 1). For those species hiding in the brush, the number may have been very much underestimated. The count probably reflected more closely the number of territories rather than the total of individuals, and those territories were generally restricted to ones bordering the paths.

Grape Island hosted primarily land birds, but the harbor islands are diverse; elsewhere there are tern colonies, heron rookeries, and shorebirds. Meaningful management of the islands' resources requires that inventories be conducted at regular intervals. One of the last major studies was sponsored by Earthwatch in 1978, so a TASL census at this point provides timely data for the continuing monitoring of the harbor. In addition to the bird life, the harbor islands offer a unique opportunity to study flora and other fauna in relatively small but varied habitats. We are looking forward to another pleasant excursion next summer to the urban wilds of the Boston Harbor Islands. May the green herons return there as well.

Katie Durham and Rhonda Rivers



Table 1. Results from breeding bird survey conducted July 9-10, 1983 on Grape Island.

<u>Species</u>	<u>Number of Individuals</u>	<u>Breeding Status* (Activities, conditions observed)</u>
Green-backed Heron	3	CO (nym on)
Mallard	9	
Northern Harrier	3	PR (fl)
Ring-necked Pheasant	1	CO (fl)
American Woodcock	2	PO
Mourning Dove	3	NB
Northern Flicker	2	PO
Willow Flycatcher	1	PR (s)
Barn Swallow	3	NB
American Crow	6	NB
American Robin	2	RO
Gray Catbird	33	CO (fy; d, t)
Yellow Warbler	15	CO (dd, fl; d, t)
Common Yellowthroat	11	PR (s, d, t)
Northern Cardinal	5	PR (s)
Rufous-sided Towhee	6	CO (fy; s, d, t)
Song Sparrow	22	CO (fy; s, d, t)
Red-winged Blackbird	2	CO (on; s, d, t)
Common Grackle	2	PO
American Goldfinch	38	PR (d, t)
House Finch	3	PO

*Categories based on Massachusetts Breeding Bird Atlas Project:

- CO - Confirmed (fl - recently fledged young; ny - nest with downy young; on - adults entering or leaving nest-site in circumstances indicating occupied nest; fy - adults with food for young; dd - distraction display or injury feigning)
- PR - Probably (s - singing male present on more than one date in the same place; d - courtship and display or agitated behavior or anxiety calls from adults; t - bird (or pairs) apparently holding territory)
- PO - Possible (bird recorded in the breeding season in possible nesting habitat but no other indication of breeding noted)
- NB - Nonbreeding (no suitable nesting habitat found; no indication of breeding noted)

DON'T MISS OUT!



Subscribe to BIRD OBSERVER OF EASTERN MASSACHUSETTS. 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). Other pieces on field problems, ornithological research, and bird behavior appear in the magazine.

Annual subscription to Bird Observer is \$8.50. If you are interested in subscribing, please mail your check to Bird Observer, Inc., 462 Trapelo Road, Belmont, MA 02178.

Bird Observer of Eastern Massachusetts is a non-profit tax-exempt organization.

TASL HARBOR CENSUSES: Jan. 7, Feb. 4, March 3, 1984

TASL is presently conducting the fifth and final year of its Boston Harbor Waterbird Census and Survey. The next census will take place on January 7, 1984 and will start at 8 A.M. The February count will be Saturday, February 4, 1984 and the final count will be held on Saturday, March 3, 1984. We invite you to join us and observe another of our bird watching "backyards," Boston Harbor. For further information and details, call either Soheil Zende (628-8990, 923-0941 - work) or Craig Jackson (321-4382).

BELLE ISLE MARSH FIELD TRIPS

All field trips start at 2 P.M., 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 waterproof boots: we will walk through parts of the marsh. Presently scheduled trips are:

Saturday, January 14

Sunday, February 26

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

TASL News



BIRD OBSERVER
462 Trapelo Road
Belmont, MA 02178

NONPROFIT ORG.
U. S. POSTAGE
PAID
BOSTON, MA
PERMIT #53133