

# TASL News February 1995



Take a Second Look  
42 Baker Avenue  
Lexington, MA 02173

*Next TASL Harbor Census:*

**March 19**

*for more information, call (617) 863-2392 or (617) 268-7571*

## The Big Roost

Over the years we've all spent a lot of Sunday mornings looking at the waterfowl in Boston Harbor, counting the ducks at various locations as they go about their feeding, preening and other daily activities. But have you ever wondered where these same ducks spend the night? Well, I hadn't until I moved to a house near Dorchester Bay, along Carson Beach in South Boston.

Carson Beach is along Day Boulevard in South Boston (near the Bayside Expo Center). There are parking lots on either side of a very long brick building. From the lots, without leaving your car, you can observe waterfowl and gulls, with the occasional odd one: Black-headed, Iceland or Glaucous. And in autumn there are plenty of peeps, plovers and other shorebirds that sometimes frequent Columbia Park (across the street) during heavy rains and high tides.

Late one November afternoon several years ago I was walking along this beach and was surprised to see a raft of ducks that, at a glance, certainly appeared to number over one thousand. I had driven by here hundreds of times before and had usually seen a handful to, perhaps, as many as fifty ducks during the day—but nothing like this large tight group. I have since loosely monitored this occurrence for several winters. Although no firm conclusions can be



*Buffleheads (drawing by Scott Bickerton)*

drawn from this experience it is nonetheless interesting to observe.

From November until April, from about 3:30 to 4:30 in the afternoon, large numbers of three species, Common Goldeneye, Red-breasted Merganser and Bufflehead, fly in from around the harbor to roost. You can stand there on a

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## REMINISCING

### Sibley Higginbotham (1914-1994)

Those of us who are fortunate occasionally enjoy the privilege of knowing one of those rare individuals who somehow make the world a better place to live. I consider myself one of those so privileged, for I was able to call Sibley Higginbotham my friend.

Sib was one of the earliest regular participants in the now venerable TASL counts which to this day annually gather valuable long-term data on water bird numbers in Boston Harbor. On many a chilly Sunday, after lingering over at least two steaming cups of coffee, he and I would set forth to do our part in tallying cormorants, ducks and gulls in the Weymouth/Hingham sector of the Harbor. For many years we shared this tradition together, and for many years hence I will cherish those often frigid hours shared with Sib.

But it was not through TASL that I first knew Sibley; it was during the early 1960s when, as a high school lad, I first made the acquaintance of "the man with the curious name." Some years later, I began to regularly accompany him and others on "Big Days" and "Fall Roundups" with the South Shore Bird Club (which he cofounded in the 1940s). From these earliest associations, a friendship grew that will always remain among my most treasured experiences.

In addition to birding, Sib's many talents and interests included photography, music, and botany, as well as collecting Early American pressed glass, Canadian railroad stamps, and old natural history books. He was a consummate teacher, and several generations of South Shore birders owe their seminal interests and later expertise to his tutelage. His ability to view birds and plants in an ecological context, and to integrate these things in his teaching, his local field trips, and the various natural history excursions that he led throughout North

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## CORRESPONDENCE

Editor, *TASL News*:

J. Barton of Cambridge [in "Gone Gunning," *TASL News*, 11/94] indicated he would like to see for himself if Red-breasted Merganser would dive and hold onto vegetation to escape hunters. This is reported of other species as well. I had heard similar accounts related by hunters, usually second or third hand. I became convinced of the possibility, however, only by my own experience. I was banding Mallards at Norumbega Park in Newton in the early 1970s, capturing the birds in a 1"x2" welded wire bait trap. The trap was a large walk-in, and the birds would scatter and dive in their attempts to escape, although the water was only a few inches deep and Mallards are poor divers.

I grabbed at one bird that dived and remained under water with only its rear floating up and sticking out. When I attempted to lift the bird it appeared stuck. I thought it may have been trapped in the mesh of the wire, but when I felt down along the length of the bird, I discovered it had its bill firmly clamped onto a strand of the wire and was hanging on, apparently in an attempt to stay submerged. I was amazed that what I had previously considered just another old gunner's tale was probably based on actions similar to that of this bird.

H W Heusmann

*Waterfowl Biologist*

*Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife*

*Although we requested no response from him, J. Barton insisted on providing the following commentary:*

After reading H W Heusmann's letter, I started wondering how ducks think. So I invented...

### The Sitting Duck Game

*This is a multiple choice test. You pick all the right answers, you get to take another test.*

*Consider yourself a sitting duck, menaced on the water by (1) an alligator, (2) a Peregrine Falcon, (3) a saltwater crocodile, (4) a Snowy Owl, (5) two women in a boat with shotguns, (6) a Short-eared Owl, (7) an adult male waterfowl biologist intending the benefit of your species. Now, do you survive by (a), taking flight? (b), sitting tight? or (c), seeking refuge under water?*

Crocodylians can't fly and owls can't swim. That much is obvious. Owls do prey on waterfowl resting on the surface but aren't much good at hunting birds in the air. Peregrines do prey on roosting or feeding shorebirds but like to attack ducks in flight, first disabling the birds in the air so they can easily kill them on the ground. You know about such things, very likely.

Sitting tight on the surface of the water, you're safe from the women. But you don't know anything about the ethics of hunting, much less about the ethics of women, so sitting doesn't appeal. Meanwhile, you do know from experience that people with guns shoot at birds in flight, so flying doesn't appeal. Similarly, you don't have any way to know what the waterfowl biologist intends, much less any reason to trust his competence with live birds. But you do know he has lured you into a cage where he's grabbing for you on the surface.

Before reading Heusmann's letter, I would never have thought that waterfowl could reason so well, diving to escape danger and anchoring themselves beneath the surface when they know that flying is impossible or could mean death. But maybe I'm giving ducks too much credit. I mean, except for people voting in national elections, who else falls for decoys?

## NEWS & NOTES

### The State of the MWRA

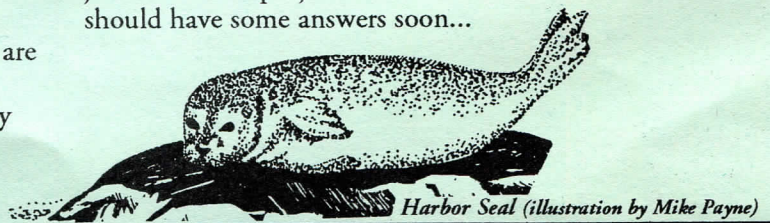
The Massachusetts Water Resources Authority (MWRA) is entering the sixth year of its giant sewer-rebuilding project. Its late-1993 interim report, titled *The State of Boston Harbor*, is "a window into the world of scientific studies of Boston Harbor and the larger coastal ecosystem of Massachusetts and Cape Cod Bays."

The report goes on to pull together various strands of information regarding this marine environment, and quotes the results of much current research. Among the many tables and charts presented is one titled "Boston Harbor is a Valuable Over-Wintering Site for Water Birds," where the results of 13 years of *TASL* censuses are summarized in graphic form. Ten major species are tabulated; the graph is based on data analysis by Maury Hall published in *TASL News* 1/93.

### To Grant or not to Grant...

We have been looking for a way to fund the "number crunching" aspect of our harbor research. In addition, we'd like to expand the reach of our publication. And finally, we would like to be able to give something back to the volunteers who have put in so many hours and years gathering this data, often in truly outrageous weather (e.g., Sunday, February 12; Craig Jackson, where were you?).

Recently, Maury and I have been working on a couple of different grant applications. Our initial impression of the funds we're applying for is that they are intended for just the sort of project we have all been involved with. We should have some answers soon...



Harbor Seal (illustration by Mike Payne)

*TASL (Take Second Look) is organized and staffed entirely by volunteers. TASL data is compiled by Maury Hall. This newsletter is produced by Soheil Zende, assisted by Maury Hall, Joan Labby and Christine Zende.*

# November TASL Census Results 1991-94

Species	Nabant	Wintthrop	Boston	Squantum	Hough's Neck	Weymouth	Hull	Totals			
								11/20/94	11/14/93	11/22/92	11/24/91
RED-THROATED LOON	1	14		5		2	1	23	57	11	23
COMMON LOON	1	1	1	1				4	10	6	13
PIED-BILLED GREBE		1						1			
HORNED GREBE	8	93	15	61	3	3	12	195	349	243	169
RED-NECKED GREBE	1	4		1			5	11	14	28	5
NORTHERN GANNET											1
GREAT CORMORANT	11	8			6			25	15	36	71
DOUBLE-CRESTED CORMORANT	14	65	91	53	42	34	42	341	211	57	90
CORMORANT (sp)			9		50		135	194	83	9	22
GREAT BLUE HERON		2	12	4		1	4	23	30	28	31
BLACK-CROWNED NIGHT-HERON											1
MUTE SWAN						2		2	4	9	12
SNOW GOOSE		1						1			1
BRANT	250	150	258	51	668	45	32	1454	1476	1516	1959
CANADA GOOSE		216	68			32	16	332	44	141	67
GREEN-WINGED TEAL									3		
AMERICAN BLACK DUCK	48	110	224	432	59	155	117	1145	1397	1376	1282
MALLARD		88	20	5	2	25		140	102	155	117
NORTHERN PINTAIL											1
GREATER SCAUP	4	36	14	3		23	15	95	127	448	1059
COMMON EIDER	1187	2519	65	183	460	6	1488	5908	264	5438	9497
OLDSQUAW										36	23
BLACK SCOTER									2	3	14
SURF SCOTER				9	6		5	20	443	159	8
WHITE-WINGED SCOTER	121	203	2	46	5	40	243	660	392	440	421
SCOTER (sp)				109				109			1250
COMMON GOLDENEYE		8	62	118		101	36	325	478	998	618
BUFFLEHEAD	129	257	214	446	278	301	464	2089	2114	3164	1916
HOODED MERGANSER						16		16	7		15
COMMON MERGANSER							1	1			5
RED-BREASTED MERGANSER	166	202	134	1010	79	117	242	1950	2496	2981	1778
RUDDY DUCK						3		3			
NORTHERN HARRIER									1		
SHARP-SHINNED HAWK	1			2				3	1		
COOPER'S HAWK				1				1	1	2	
RED-TAILED HAWK			1				1	2	1	1	3
AMERICAN KESTREL			1					1	2		2
MERLIN									1		
PEREGRINE			1	1				2			
LARGE FALCON (sp)										1	
BLACK-BELLIED PLOVER				2				2	66	13	27
SEMIPALMATED PLOVER									1		
KILLDEER									1	1	
GREATER YELLOWLEGS						1	6	7	22	7	2
RUDDY TURNSTONE									9	1	13
SANDERLING	4							4	113	324	100
WHITE-RUMPED SANDPIPER											1
PURPLE SANDPIPER		4						4	301	13	25
DUNLIN					37			37	33	272	313
LAUGHING GULL	1	8			2			11	4		
LITTLE GULL											1
COMMON BLACK-HEADED GULL						1		1	3	4	4
BONAPARTE'S GULL	72	413	32	43	305	177	70	1112	394	863	1497
ICELAND GULL											1
THICK-BILLED MURRE				1				1			
GREAT HORNED OWL				1				1			
SNOWY OWL										5	3
BELTED KINGFISHER			1			1		2			
EASTERN PHOEBE									1		
HORNED LARK	1							1	218		
PALM WARBLER		1						1			
LAPLAND LONGSPUR								2			
SNOW BUNTING	4	10		3			3	20	102		
COMMON REDPOLL									3		
HARBOR SEAL	4	6	2	3				15	17	12	4
RED BAT									1		

**Participants in the November 1994 Census:**

**Nabant:** Marj Rines, Bob Stymeist

**Wintthrop:** Wayne Barron, Ed Sullivan, Peter & Fay Vale

**Boston:** Joan Campbell, Paula Chasan, Mike Fager, Kathy Foley, Joan Labby, Soheil Zende

**Squantum:** Ronnie Donovan

**Hough's Neck:** Jim Barton, Bob Bowker, Michelle Parham, Geoff Woodward

**Weymouth:** Maury Hall

**Hull:** Ted Mara, David & Dennis Oliver

WEATHER	Clear	Sun/ Cloudy	Cloudy Rain PM	Rain
WIND	NW20-25	SW10	SW5-10	E7-10
TEMP	40-50°F	70°F	55-60°F	65°F
HI TIDE	12:11PM	10:45AM	12:30PM	12:30PM

## Roost (continued from page 1)

good afternoon and watch the ducks fly in until it is dark. Indeed they are still flying in when you realize it is too dark to identify them; are those females goldeneyes or mergansers? Depending on wind and tides the birds will sometimes be far out (150 yards or more), sometimes much closer. Further out are also scoters (between 200 and 450 this year—unusually high) which are impossible to tell apart. It is extremely difficult at dusk to get an accurate count of the three main species (interspersed with 25 to 80 Horned Grebes) usually in a tight bunch swirling around each other.

As long as the bay remains unfrozen this is a nightly occurrence with six or seven hundred to about 3,000 birds. On several dates I have estimated numbers of 2,200, 2,500 and 3,000, although 1,200-1,800 is probably the norm. Except for the unusual presence of White-winged and some Surf Scoters the three main species make up at least 90% of the birds that roost here. Eider are almost never seen, though Brant (up to 280) fly over from Squantum, staying apart from the other birds. Large groups of scaup used to appear, but no longer. The only other winter water birds here are a few American Black Ducks, an occasional Red-throated Loon, and lots of gulls. This winter for the first time my brother Steven and I saw a Barrow's Goldeneye mixed in with the flock. I've since seen it on several occasions.

When you watch the goldeneyes fly in, often up to a thousand individuals, you would think that every goldeneye in Boston Harbor must spend the night here. In most years

you would say the same of the mergansers (frequently numbering between 1,000 and 1,500, though they are scarcer this year) and of Buffleheads. These numbers can fluctuate from month to month. Carson Beach is well protected from waves and strong winds. I guess this is why they seek the shelter of this bay. It raises a few questions: how do they get together everyday, every winter in this same place from all over the harbor? Is there some safety in numbers? Safety from what?

It would be interesting to take TASL and Boston Christmas Count totals of the three main species and see how they compare with the totals at Carson Beach. The conditions, however, make it hard to be accurate: The birds are very concentrated, swimming around, and the light gets poor rapidly. In any case, if anyone else knows of a similar roost anywhere around the harbor I would be very interested to hear of it, especially to see how these totals correspond to the TASL totals.

It is amazing to see more ducks in a five minute period than I see during several hours of TASLing. It is a strange experience to see this big concentration of ducks with the harbor and islands behind them, and behind me the silhouette of the city and the setting sun, sort of half urban, half wild.

*Ronnie Donovan*

*Ronnie has been a faithful TASLer since our early days. He is most often in charge of the Squantum route during our harbor censuses.*

*Sib in 1986, at his Harvard 50th Reunion. Sib was a charter member of TASL Harbor Censuses in 1980. Later, in the mid-eighties he responded to Prop 2½-mandated cutbacks in education and childcare by becoming very active on Beacon Hill, agitating for a more humane approach to social policy. (photo courtesy of Wayne Petersen)*



## Sibley Higginbotham (continued from page 1)

America, all made him very special to me and gave me a perspective I embrace to this day.

Having spent time with Sib from Texas to California and from Canada to Peru, I was able not only to glean from his wealth of knowledge, but also to appreciate his congenial, entertaining and compassionate personality. A Harvard University graduate, Sib enjoyed a long and fruitful career in child care administration and human services. His many colleagues and friends will certainly miss him. But none more than I.

Wherever you are, Sib, may you find rare orchids, listen to the songs of lots of new birds, and enjoy a robust drink of Scotch Whiskey as you retire with a good book.

*Wayne R. Petersen*  
*Field Ornithologist*

*Massachusetts Audubon Society*

## THEN & NOW

"The conservation movement is a breeding ground of Communists and other subversives. We intend to clean them out, even if it means rounding up every bird watcher in the country."

*John N. Mitchell, President Nixon's first Attorney General. Mitchell was convicted of perjury in the Watergate case and spent 30 months in jail.*

"I think this will give us a chance to firm up the Act so that it will do what we want it to do. We can decide what it is we want to save and save it. The little things—the birds and the bugs—might not get the same level of protection."

*Senator Phil Gramm (R, Texas) at a public hearing on the federal Endangered Species Act.*