

THE HERONRIES OF BOSTON HARBOR

by Jeremy J. Hatch, Boston

The striking expansion of breeding waders along the Atlantic coast has extended in the last twenty years to at least fifteen sites in Massachusetts of which three are in Boston Harbor. In 1977 the coastal survey of waterbird colonies by the Fish and Wildlife Service (Erwin, 1979) reported more than 2500 pairs from a total of seven species: scattered records suggest that the totals have not changed greatly since then, although colonies have fluctuated. This represents a great change from the 1950s when the Black-crowned Night Heron was almost the only species to be found breeding here (Griscom and Snyder, 1955). The heronries in New England are, of course, much less diverse than those farther south and the most numerous species are always the Black-crowned Night Heron and Snowy Egret, with only a scattering of up to five other species. In contrast, the southern colonies tend to be a more uniform mix, and there may be thirteen species in a colony if one includes not only the herons, egrets and ibises but also the Double-crested Cormorant and Anhinga.

The purpose of this paper is to describe the three heronries in Boston Harbor. These are on the following islands: Spectacle (Dorchester Bay), Peddocks (southwest of Hull) and Middle Brewster (north of Boston Light). The first year for which I have definite records of these heronries is 1974, but they could easily have existed for some years before that although they were probably not present in 1961 when Bill Drury studied gulls in the Harbor.

On Middle Brewster the only nesting species has been the Black-crowned Night Heron which has nested in every year for which I have records (20 to 154 pairs). Most of the nests are on or near the ground amidst the extensive brambles.

On Peddocks the heronry was located from 1974 to 1978 in an area of dense shrubs and small trees, heavily overgrown with poison ivy, on West Head. Black-crowns, Snowy Egrets and occasionally a few Glossy Ibis nested there. Several informal reports suggest that Black-crowns, at least, nested there for some years before 1974 (perhaps from about 1970). The 1978 season was notably unsuccessful, and this was also the first year that I found signs of raccoons and perhaps other predators. As far as I can tell, the heronry has not been used since then except by a few roosting night-herons.

The Spectacle heronry is at the northern end of the island and the most frequent nest-sites are in rose, buckthorn and

cherry, with some nests in apple, aspen and even sumac. The branching pattern of the last plant species seems to be less suitable for nest construction than are the other trees. Black-crowns have been the most numerous species (30 to 300 pairs), with good numbers of Snowy Egrets (a maximum of 140 pairs in 1980) and a handful of Glossy Ibis. The first pair of Great Egrets was recorded nesting in 1980.

The numbers of nesting pairs at each heronry are combined in Table 1 to give annual totals for Boston Harbor. With only three regularly breeding species this group of heronries is less diverse than either Clark's Island with five species or House Island, off Manchester, where seven species nested in 1977.

Table 1. Pairs of Waders Nesting in Boston Harbor

	<u>1975</u>	<u>1976</u>	<u>1977</u>	<u>1978</u>	<u>1980</u>	<u>1981</u>
BNHE	253	211	193	82	324	380
SNEG	70	50	59	30	140	80
GREG	0	0	0	0	1	2
GLIB	5	4	?	5	12	10
Total	328	265	252	117	477	472

The Clark's Island colony in Duxbury Bay is described by Ted Davis and Kathy Parsons (1982) in another paper in this issue. Herons probably first nested there in the late 1960s and the colony has been studied each year from 1974



onwards. In the five years for which the complete counts are reported the total numbers have fluctuated between 463 and 561 pairs. For House Island, off Manchester, there is much less information available: from 1975 through 1977 the numbers fluctuated from 812, to 235, to 944 pairs. By 1980 the colony had crashed: that year there were no more than 50 pairs of Black Crowns, and this number fell to none nesting in 1981. The fate of the colony, except for the 3 to 5 pairs of Cattle Egrets and 24 pairs of Black Crowns found nesting on Eagle Island in 1981 was a mystery, until 1982 when herons were seen flying to Kettle Island, a few miles away.

When I started to write this paper, I expected to compare the numbers of herons nesting in Boston Harbor with those reported for Clark's Island and House Island. These three sets of numbers might together suggest whether changes were very local or of a more regional character. The abandonment of Peddocks and of House Island both seem to be local events; the former was probably caused by predators, but I know no cause for the latter. The imperfect data show no general pattern in the changes of numbers since 1974, but unfortunately the gaps in the records are too numerous for any detailed conclusions.

References

- Davis, W. E., and K. C. Parsons. 1982. The Clark's Island Heronry. Bird Observer of Eastern Massachusetts 10: 125.
- Erwin, R. M., and C. E. Korschgen. 1979. Coastal Waterbird Colonies: Maine to Virginia 1977. U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Biological Services Program, FWS/OBS-79/08.
- Griscom, L., and D. E. Snyder. 1955. The Birds of Massachusetts. Salem, Peabody Museum.

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BIRD SURVEY IN MINUTEMAN HISTORICAL PARK

The Minuteman National Historical Park contains a variety of wetlands, forests, orchards, and farm fields which stretch along Route 2A in Lexington, Lincoln, and Concord. It also includes the area around the Old North Bridge on the Concord River. As part of a general resource inventory the National Park Service is undertaking a breeding bird survey of Park properties. They have contacted Bird Observer to ask for assistance in this effort from local birders. Anyone who would be willing to visit one or more sections of the Park in order to conduct a survey is asked to contact Lee Taylor (646-2529) or John Andrews (862-6498).