

## FIELD NOTES FROM HERE AND THERE

Arctic Encounter at Plum Island. On December 11, 1983, I joined a group of birders at Parker River National Wildlife Refuge to observe the Gyrfalcon that had been seen there for over a week. On this day, the bird was observed north of Cross Farm Hill flying over the salt marsh or perched on one of the many staddles. A little after three in the afternoon the Gyrfalcon flew from its perch and headed south disappearing behind Cross Farm Hill. I drove south searching for it and then proceeded north, finally spotting the bird flying at the far (west) end of the hill where it landed and began feeding on something down in the grass. We watched it for several minutes noting that while it was feeding, it made frequent scans overhead. After one of these scans, the falcon took off and quickly rose to a height of about seventy feet when it made a harrassing pass at a large all-white bird that was flying steadily to the southeast. At first glance, I thought a white-winged gull but soon noted that it had the large head of an owl. The Snowy Owl continued on a level flight as the Gyrfalcon made four or five passes at it. Despite this harrassment, the owl barely altered its wingbeat. The two birds crossed the road and descended out of sight behind the dunes. I hastened to parking lot 6, hoping to get a better view of the falcon in the dunes. Some of us proceeded towards the beach stopping at intervals to check things out. Almost immediately I spotted a Snowy Owl perched atop the nearest dune, and my companions found another one perched on the other side of the boardwalk. By now our group had grown to six, and though we searched the dunes and beach, we could not find the Gyrfalcon. With lessening light and the arctic chill increasing on that cold, windy Sunday, I headed back to my warm car, greatly excited by this wonderful encounter with a Gyrfalcon, a life bird for me only the day before. Heading north in the twilight, I was rewarded with a Short-eared Owl coursing batlike along the edges of the salt pans.

David Lange, Arlington

High Arctic Spectacle. Late fall in Churchill belongs to the Polar Bear. Moving slowly in our tundra buggy for another glimpse of Ursus maritimus, we were instead treated to a spectacle of the high Arctic we shall never forget, a fascinating interplay of Arctic bird life. A white-phase Gyrfalcon appeared on a boulder ahead of us, then joined two gray-phase Gyrs and disappeared behind the icy tundra. Excited, we moved on following them when a snow-white Willow Ptarmigan was spotted flying toward us. Just behind, in hot pursuit, came one of the gray-phase falcons. Then, with a spectacular burst of speed, the magnificent white Gyr streaked past, hit the Ptarmigan in a shower of white feathers, and carried it off. Thrilled with our good fortune, we started back toward Churchill when an immature goshawk landed a short distance away clutching another freshly killed ptarmigan. As we watched



Young Snowy Owl with rat



Illustration by William E. Davis

intently in the diminishing light, a pair of Snowy Owls silently flapped past us. The larger owl spotted the young goshawk, flew down toward him with legs outstretched, snatched the ptarmigan from the Gos - another poof of feathers, and the young goshawk watched helplessly as the huge white owl flew off with its prey.

Dorothy S. Long, Wayland

Starling Fracas. On as many days as possible in the fall, I try to cover the community garden plots at Rock Meadow in Belmont at about a half hour after sunrise for the BOEM sparrow migration project. On 17 October 1983, as I was about midway completed coursing through the area, I saw the first real concentration of birds and heard an unusual soft, buzzy call among them. Species in the flock, which was comprised of about fifteen individuals, included a Field Sparrow, Savannah Sparrows, and some House Finches. My first thought was that I was hearing an unfamiliar feeding song from the latter. As I moved in on the source of the noise, the birds flushed in ones and twos, but the sound continued. Finally, when I was within a few feet of the site, no further birds flushed, and the noise stopped.

First I saw just a wing on the ground among weeds and right next to a small wire fence. Upon closer examination, I determined that the appendage belonged to a European Starling. The body was askew, and I thought that this might have been an unclean kill by the Merlin that I had observed terrorizing passerines in the area the day before. At this point I squatted down to further check out the situation and immediately noticed that something was hanging out of the bird's bill. A blink of its eye let me know that the creature was alive, though the lack of movement led me to believe not by much. Finally, I realized that what I was looking at was two starlings, locked in serious combat. The foot of one was apparently clutching the other's beak area, with one claw hooked just below the eyelid. The second bird had one of the other toes of the same foot clamped in its beak; this was what I had noticed initially.

The starlings seemed uninterested in doing anything, and I decided I might as well interfere a bit. The bill that I had first observed seemed like a good (though in retrospect, irreverent) handle. Picking up the whole vulgaris mass, which still showed no significant movement, gave me an opportunity to see how thoroughly the birds were intertwined. In addition to the first foot I had seen, a pair of feet, one from each individual, was locked together. The final foot of the two-bird complement of four was grasping body feathers in the opponent's breast area. Both individuals, for the record, were wearing the glossy adult plumage. Only after I set the clump back down did it finally break apart, revealing two apparently healthy birds that flew vigorously off, with a screech.

Lee E. Taylor, Arlington

Clever Jackdaw. While on Nantucket for this year's Christmas Bird Count, we found our old friend, the Jackdaw (Corvus monedula), in a group of American Crows on Low Beach. The bird had not been reported since the previous April. I was told that back then the Jackdaw was always seen near a small flock of crows, but when it approached too close, it was chased off and forced to remain on the outskirts of the flock. The bird's persistence in gaining acceptance by this group has obviously paid off. At Christmas, whether the group was feeding or flying about, the Jackdaw remained in the midst of these crows, staying close to one crow in particular. It probably roosted with the flock as well. The amazing corvid intellect and adaptability seem apparent in this situation. Here, a small cousin of the American Crow (thirteen inches compared to the crow's seventeen inches) had found a group of birds of its own family and, although initially treated with hostility, had worked its way into the group. It is possible that the habits and vocalizations of American Crows are enough like those of the Jackdaw for it to stand its ground and finally be allowed into the flock as a peer. Jackdaws range over most of Europe, northern Africa, and western Asia to Mongolia and the Himalayas, with a few reports coming from Iceland. Although a long way from home, the Nantucket bird has apparently earned acceptance and is now a regular member of the gang of crows residing on Low Beach.

Robert Abrams, Milton

Foolish Pelican. On December 9, a White Pelican plummeted into a Springfield, Massachusetts parking lot, apparently mistaking the reflecting pavement for a pond. The poor bird was taken to Laughing Brook Sanctuary where it was given a daily vitamin supplement and antibiotics to combat any infection resulting from the chest swelling and bruising as a consequence of the crash landing. After two weeks, the pelican was flown by Eastern Airlines to Florida to be released.

Robert H. Stymeist, Watertown