

E. B. WHITE, FORBUSH, AND THE BIRDS OF MASSACHUSETTS

by Barbara Phillips and Dorothy Arvidson, Staff

Edward Howe Forbush's Birds of Massachusetts and Other New England States, a classic of ornithological literature, was the culmination of a career that began in early boyhood in the woods and fields of West Roxbury. E. H. Forbush gave up school at fifteen to devote himself to birds and one year later became Curator of Ornithology at the Worcester Natural History Society's museum. In the early years of his career, he studied birds chiefly by "collecting" and taxidermy as was the custom of the time but ultimately realized . . . "that an examination of the dead was merely a preliminary to a study of the living, and that it was more essential to preserve the living than the dead." During his middle years, he was in the forefront of the conservation movement, working in the Massachusetts Department of Agriculture and ultimately, as the state ornithologist. A prolific writer, he published a number of books that are now collector's items in the birding community. He died in 1929 leaving the third volume of his most famous work within a few pages of completion.

Volume I (1925) covers waterbirds, marsh birds, and shore birds; Volume II (1927), generally the most sought after volume, deals with land birds from bobwhites to grackles, and Volume III (1929) with land birds from sparrows to thrushes. Volumes I, II, and a small portion of III are beautifully illustrated with Louis Agassiz Fuertes' full color drawings, and at Fuertes' death, Allan Brooks very ably completed the illustrations for Volume III. The three volumes can often be picked up from dealers in old books or from estates for prices of one hundred to one hundred and fifty dollars per set or occasionally at library or flea market sales for as little as twenty-five cents per volume.

This three-volume work and its author are the subject of a long and appreciative essay by E. B. White ("Mr. Forbush's Friends") that appeared in the February 26, 1966 issue of the The New Yorker. E. B. White, well-known for his work as a staff member of that magazine and for his books for children (Stuart Little, Charlotte's Web), admits, "Although not a student of birds, I am thrown with them a good bit . . . [and] when I encounter a new face or renew my acquaintance with an old one, I turn to Forbush for help in comprehending what I have been looking at." And Forbush is more than equal to the task. In these volumes, every aspect of the bird is considered from its physical description to voice, breeding range, distribution in New England, and season in Massachusetts as well as its economic status and the species' "Haunts and Habits." In his discussions of the latter subject, Forbush drew freely on the communications he received from friends and acquaintances throughout the country, and it is this part of Forbush's writing, the reporting of unusual and

amusing encounters with birds, that particularly delighted E. B. White. Much of White's essay contains shortened versions of these encounters, translated into The New Yorker style made famous by him during the years he was in charge of "news-breaks" (fillers used to justify the columns). This creates a double delight for the reader - field notes from Forbush presented in the lighthearted fashion of one of modern literature's great stylists. The following selections are quoted from E. B. White's essay, "Mr. Forbush's Friends."

Dr. Joseph Grinnell. Passed night on island of St. Lazaria, Alaska. Found it impossible to keep campfire alight because Leach's petrels, who stay out all night, flew into fire in such numbers as to extinguish it. June, 1896.

Reverend J. H. Linsley. Opened the stomach of a gannet, found bird. Opened stomach of that bird, found another bird. Bird within bird within bird. No date.

Mr. Stanley C. Jewett. Asserts that wounded red-breasted merganser at Netarts Bay, Oregon, dived to submerged root in three feet of water and died while clinging there. Apparent suicide. May, 1915.

Mr. W. L. Bishop. Found ruffed grouse submerged in brook, except for head, to escape goshawk. No date.

Mr. Charles Hayward. Examined crop of a ruffed grouse. Found 140 apple buds, 134 pieces of laurel leaves, 28 wintergreen leaves, 69 birch buds, 205 blueberry buds, 201 cherry buds, and 109 blueberry stems. Splendid appetite. No date.

Mr. T. Gilbert Pearson. Lady of his acquaintance, while sitting alone in her room, was startled when beef bone fell out onto hearth. Went outside, discovered turkey buzzard peering down chimney. Carelessness on part of bird. No date.

Mr. William Brewster, of Concord. Was standing by corner of one of his barns. Phoebe pursued by sharp-shinned hawk used Brewster's body as shield in eluding hawk. No date.

Mr. H. H. Waterman, of Auburn, Maine. Saw Cooper's hawk plunge flicker in roadside ditch containing one foot of water, hold it under for three minutes. May 15, 1921.

Mr. William Brewster again. Saw sparrow hawk amusing himself at expense of two flickers. No malice involved. September 12, 1888.

Mr. Aretas A. Saunders. Heard sparrow hawk, while hovering, squeal like a mouse. Hawk possibly trying to entice mouse from concealment. No date.

Friend of Mr. Forbush's, no name. Bought farm in Touisset, found osprey's nest atop chimney. Ospreys in charge of premises. Owner removed nest. Birds immediately began rebuilding, using sticks, clods, and stones. Owner, now desperate, shot female. Male went off, returned a few hours later with another mate. Pair went on with rebuilding operations. Filled chimney from bottom to top with sticks, stones, and rubbish. Owner accepted challenge, shot both birds. Large section of chimney had to be removed on one side, for removal of material choking flue. Perseverance. No date.

- Mr. Joseph B. Underhill. Caught and confined male great horned owl. In return was struck and injured by female owl. Much blood spilled. 1885.
- Mr. F. H. Mosher ("a competent observer"). Watched yellow-billed cuckoo eat 41 gypsy caterpillars in fifteen minutes. Later saw another cuckoo eat 47 forest tent caterpillars in six minutes.
- Mr. J. L. Davison, of Lockport, New York. Found a black-billed cuckoo and a mourning dove sitting together in a robin's nest. Nest contained two eggs of cuckoo, two of dove, one of robin. Bad management. June 17, 1882.
- Mrs. Gene Stratton Porter. Examined food remains in nest of kingfisher, found one-tenth of them to be nearly equally divided between berry seeds and the hard parts of grasshoppers. Exacting work but easier than writing. No date.
- Mr. Harry E. Woods, of Huntington. Watched pair of yellow-bellied sapsuckers feeding their young on insects. Each insect was taken by the bird to a tree in which was a hole the size of a quarter; insect was soaked in sap, then fed to young. Principle of the cocktail-hour dip. No date.
- Mr. E. O. Grant again. Saw farmer near Patten, Maine, sitting on a snowdrift about fifteen feet high, surrounded by a hundred redpolls. Birds perched on farmer's head and shoulders. One sat on knee. Farmer told Grant he had enjoyed the previous half hour more than any other period in his life. March 23, 1926.
- Mr. H. C. Denslow. Timed the chirps of a Henslow's sparrow, which sings in its sleep. Found they came eight to the minute.
- Mrs. Chester Bancroft, of Tyngsborough. Reported to Thornton Burgess she saw large bullfrog with barn swallow in mouth. Mr. Burgess relayed information to Mr. Forbush. Summer of 1927.
- Miss Dorothy A. Baldwin, of Hardwick. Observed inconstancy in female tree swallow. Entertained young male when husband off somewhere. Happened again and again. One day, female left with interloper. Mate mourned for day, then disappeared, leaving eggs cold in deserted nest. Broken home. No date.
- Mr. John Willison. In woods behind Mayflower Inn, at Manomet Point, came upon gay crowd of cedar waxwings swigging ripe chokecherry juice. All birds had had one too many, were falling-down drunk. (Social drinking a common failing of waxwings.) No date.
- Mr. Neil F. Posson. Credits yellow warbler with 3,240 songs a day, or 22,680 a week. 1892.
- Owner of a bar in Fairhaven (no name given). Had pair of Carolina wrens build nest in basket containing sticks of dynamite. No untoward results. No date.
- Mrs. Daisy Dill Norton. Found female house wren nesting in bluebird nest box, with no mate. Little wren busy and happy with domestic chores, allowed no other bird near, male or female; whiled away time by laying eggs. Laid, it turned out later, twelve. No date.
- Mr. Fred G. Knaub, of New Haven. Male bluebird neglected own family in order to tend young house wrens in nest box nearby. Fought wren parents to a fare-thee-well. No date.

Dr. Mary F. Hobart, of Needham. Male bluebird became infatuated with caged canary. Began flirtation on May 16th, continued it while own mate was busy incubating eggs. Frequently alighted on canary's cage, offered worms, caterpillars. July 1st, saw error of ways or tired of color yellow, returned to mate, resumed parental duties. No date.

To the above, Mr. White then adds some "eccentric bird experiences" of his own:

Of all Mr. Forbush's tipsters, the only one I am jealous of is Fred G. Floyd, of Hingham. Mr. Floyd beat me to a very fine niche in "Birds of Massachusetts" - he beat me by some thirty years. There is just one record of a Harris's sparrow in "Birds," and Mr. Floyd, along with his wife, gets the credit for it. The bird was seen in Hingham in April, 1929, shortly after Mr. Forbush's death but still in time to get into the unfinished Volume III. Five or six years ago ... a Harris's sparrow ... showed up at my home in Maine and hung around the feeding station for three days - a beautifully turned-out bird, reddish-brown, with a black face and throat and a white waistcoat.... The bird is almost unknown in New England, and this one was at least a thousand miles from where he belonged. We had a gale not long before, and he must have ridden it all the way from Nebraska or Kansas.

I have never watched a merganser commit suicide, but once, in Florida, I saw two flickers dancing at one end of a tin rain gutter to music supplied by a red-bellied woodpecker, who was drumming on the gutter at the other end. Mr. Forbush came instantly to mind. I have never seen a bullfrog with a swallow in its mouth, but the first cast I ever made with a spinning reel (it was a practice shot on a lawn) was taken by a mockingbird, who swept down out of a bush and grabbed the bob.

For more in this vein, we suggest you read Mr. White's essay. Lest the reader might feel that Forbush unadulterated is less a pleasure to read, we offer some of our favorite selections from the original source.

Some catbirds may even attempt to imitate the screams of hawks. Miss J. Olivia Crowell tells me that she is not sure that they have a sense of humor, but that one which makes its home near her dwelling seemed to find amusement by flying from the roof of the shed to that of the barn and there indulging in a series of whistles or squawks, to the utter bewilderment of four hens and a rooster, which eyed that Cat-bird with manifest disapproval and alarm, and cackled and craned their necks until the disturber flew away and left them in peace. He has even been known to attempt an imitation of a hand organ, keeping the time correctly, but having less success with the tune. (III: 325)

Some House Wrens may mate for life, others certainly do not. Mr. S. Prentiss Baldwin . . . says that one male mated with a certain female and while she was sitting on her eggs he left her and mated with another female, joining her in nesting in another box. The first female hatched her brood, fed them for awhile, and then apparently became enamored of another male, brought the first male back to attend her brood, and went away with her new lover and started another family while her first mate fed and reared her first brood. Such actions would constitute a scandal in polite society. (III: 343)

I once saw a Chickadee attempting to hold a monster caterpillar, which proved too strong for it. The great worm writhed out of the confining grasp and fell to the ground, but the little bird followed, caught it, whipped it over a twig, and, swinging underneath, caught each end of the caterpillar with a foot, and so held it fast over the twig by superior weight, and proceeded, while hanging back downward, to dissect its prey. (III: 371)

Like E. B. White, we recommend highly your "reading around in the books . . . for refreshment and instruction."

BARBARA PHILLIPS works at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government. A former resident of Martha's Vineyard (her great-grandfather was a whaling captain there), Barbara spent some twenty years as the wife of a foreign service officer living in prime birding spots on six continents, only marginally aware that birds existed. A newspaper article on birding along the Massachusetts coast caught her attention several years ago, and she has pursued birds in a desultory fashion ever since.

DOROTHY ARVIDSON, editor of BOEM, wishes that she could have birded with E. H. Forbush and could write like E. B. White.

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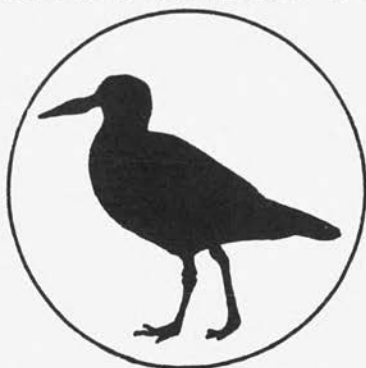
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