

BOOK REVIEW

Birds of the Sudbury River Valley - An Historical Perspective by Richard K. Walton. 1984. Massachusetts Audubon Society, 220 pages, \$10.

Increasingly, birders seem to be in pursuit of the exotic and the distant. Pick up any issue of Audubon or Birding magazine and peruse the advertisements for tours in quest of birds and wildlife nearly anywhere on earth - Attu and Gambell (Alaska), West China, the Philippines, the San Juan Seamont (off coastal California), Siberia, or Morocco, just to name a few. Bird listing and world touring have reached levels of sophistication heretofore unimaginable. But what has become of the old-fashioned and traditional natural historian, whose oyster is his own backyard and whose discoveries are daily made without spending hundreds or thousands of dollars to gratify his curiosity or to establish a line in the ornithological record book? Has the fine art of making systematic and careful observations of local fauna and flora fallen by the wayside? How many modern-day birders have the perseverance or desire to look back - to reflect - on what their predecessors have done? How has human history affected the natural phenomena that we observe today? Is the holistic approach to a study of local fauna being lost in this age of specialization on the one hand and superficiality on the other? I don't think so.

Richard Walton, in his book Birds of the Sudbury River Valley, modestly but assertively removes any doubts that the reader might have as to whether the traditional natural historian is a locally extirpated life form! Packed between the attractively illustrated covers of this well-produced volume is a meticulous and engaging account of a region that ". . . holds a unique place in ornithological history." It is a place where "for the past 150 years naturalists have been at work in the Valley recording facts about birdlife." Beginning with ten well-integrated chapters (Part I - The Land and the Naturalist), Walton traces the ecological changes and land use patterns in the Sudbury Valley from 1635-1800, providing interesting summaries about the contributions of the most important natural historians of the region, including Henry David Thoreau, William Brewster, Ludlow Griscom, and Allen Morgan. Carefully selected and often extensive quotations from a number of primary sources pertaining to the region lend flavor and color to the author's otherwise free-flowing style. These chapters include much human and natural history material not to be found under any other single cover.

Part II of the book relies largely on the journals of naturalists, past and present, to create a picture of seasonal birdlife in the Sudbury Valley. Always with a mind toward continuity and reflection, accounts and impressions of many observers are melded in a way that gives the reader an accurate picture of the birdlife, and its changes, in this region. Among these journal quotations are a number from the present-day birding fraternity that contribute particular enjoyment for readers from the Massachusetts area.

The final section of Birds of the Sudbury River Valley comprises an annotated checklist of the Sudbury Valley region, focusing on the period from 1949-1984, thus updating Ludlow Griscom's previous work The Birds of Concord (1949). After an introduction and rationale for the presentation of records, Walton proceeds to offer 304 carefully screened species accounts, some of which include valuable cross-referencing to primary literature sources. Each account includes a section headed "Remarks" where the author often demonstrates his own intimate understanding of the region's avifauna - an understanding that can have been derived only from years of careful and thoughtful observation and integration of information. Two closing appendices provide a review of Concord Christmas Count trends between 1960 and 1983, as well as a short section on seasonal avian highlights and where best to observe them in the Sudbury Valley.

In conclusion, after a careful and thoughtful reading of Richard Walton's book, the reader can lay to rest any of the concerns expressed in the opening lines of this review. The traditional natural historian is extant - he lives in the form of Richard Walton. This book belongs on the shelf of every serious student of New England ornithology.

I highly recommend it.

Wayne R. Petersen, Whitman

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