

# FIELD NOTES FROM HERE AND THERE

## The Varied Thrush of Moonpenny Drive.

[In the winter of 1984-85, Bernard and Joan Wasserman of Boxford discovered on the eve of their departure for a midwinter holiday that they had a beautiful vagrant visiting the feeding area of their backyard. Considerately, they arranged for food to be put out during their absence and were jubilant upon their return to find the visiting thrush still there. Bird Observer asked them for a picture and for any notes on behavior that they might observe. The following notes were what we received.]

*Joan Wasserman:* Early in the first week of January 1985 a Varied Thrush came to the back of our house, to eat cracked corn on the ground where we feed birds and small animals. It took two days for us to identify this male bird. A small head view of him can be found on page 221 of the Roger Tory Peterson *Field Guide*, 1980 edition. This [identification] we further reinforced in John James Audubon's plates.

The Varied Thrush came to eat the corn at first daylight - often the first bird to arrive. I offered sunflower seed but he seemed to prefer the corn and ate on the fringes [of the feeding area]. I observed him eating snow off the tree branches, and he methodically cleaned his beak after this. He settled in a favorite roost - enclosed in the evergreen (hemlock) tree (above the bird feed) and sat still for hours, observing and resting. When the temperature was below 20° F., he fluffed his feathers and became quite round in appearance. As time passed and he remained in our yard, I noticed his pattern of sitting, looking, and then going to the ground for a brief eating period, repeating this sequence over and over. He seemed wary of the larger birds (crows, etc.). Also, he was completely alone. On windy days, he remained mostly on one branch with his feathers fluffed. He continued to eat on the fringes of the ground feeding area. He liked to sit in the sunlight where the snow had melted away but also spent time in his sheltered roost - near the food.

When all the snow melted, the Varied Thrush began to pick among the leaves, much like a robin, searching the ground and eating less cracked corn. A few days of warmth and no snow, he ate a fairly large amount of corn, and the next day he was gone (February 28, 1985).

*Bernard Wasserman:* You will notice [from the pictures], he is very fluffed up while perching off the ground but is more robin-like while feeding. It was bitterly cold that weekend. . . [and] the light was relatively poor so the lens was generally wide open with a shutter speed of 1/125 or 1/60 [film speed: 200 ASA]. Most shots were taken through the rear kitchen window, as it turned out - an ideal blind.

We became very attached to our unusual visitor. We looked for him when we first arose in the morning, and our day was made when



*Varied Thrush*  
Boxford, Massachusetts  
February 1985

Photo by Bernard Wasserman

he was observed. We feel we significantly contributed to his survival during the two months he was with us and wish him god-speed to whatever his destination after he left us. In retrospect, it appears to have been a good decision not to publicly announce his whereabouts - not so much for our privacy - but for his welfare.

Joan and Bernard Wasserman, Boxford

*Editor's Note:* Although nearly a hundred years elapsed between the first (Ipswich in December 1864) and the second (Rockport in November 1961) reports of Varied Thrush (*Ixoreus naevius*) in Massachusetts, this irregular vagrant who summers chiefly in the tall spruce forests of the Pacific Northwest and winters as far south as the lowlands of southern California, now appears at winter feeders in Massachusetts almost every year, sometime between the end of November and early April, with as many as eight birds reported in one season (March-April of 1978). What causes the appearance of this species in the east is uncertain, but heavy snows in the Rockies (certainly true in 1985-86) have been suggested (Keith, S. 1963. A Summary of the Extralimital Records of the Varied Thrush, 1848-1966. *Bird-Banding* 39: 245). There have been three reports so far this winter (1985-1986).

Unfortunately for Massachusetts birders (many of whom have never seen this lovely thrush), this elusive denizen of dense evergreen forests usually appears at feeders and, depending on the situation of the property, may not be accessible to viewing by large numbers of birders. Another interesting facet of this species is that the birds reported in Massachusetts, according to Richard Forster, ornithologist at Massachusetts Audubon Society, are usually adult males, and this provides an interesting puzzle, because such far-ranging strays from the west are usually immature birds and not adults - who presumably know their way around.

## Bewildered Sharpshin.

In December, while standing by my sliding glass doors observing the birds at my feeders, I noticed out of the corner of my eye a large fall of feathers floating to the ground. Grabbing my binoculars, I went outside, started toward the spot, and then noticed movement in a Red Maple tree about fifty feet away from me - an adult Sharp-shinned Hawk.

As I watched, she (by her size I judged it to be a female) looked carefully all around and even, to my astonishment, went down on the ground, hunting for the meal that she - and I, too - thought she had. After about ten minutes of searching, she gave up and finally soared away over my house.

I went over to the spot where the feathers came down and found five primary and secondary feathers and a lot of body down - but no bird. After looking over the area, I decided that the lucky bird had apparently made it to the safety of an arborvitae hedge about ten feet away. The dropped feathers were later identified by Richard Forster of Massachusetts Audubon Society as those of a Mourning Dove! I've had many raptors in my yard, and they never fail to get my blood going, this bird being no exception!

Kevin M. Ryan, North Easton

## A Singular Kettle.

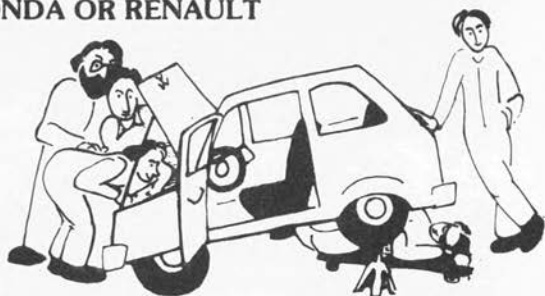
In early October I was sitting in my backyard in Dedham at lunch-time when I noticed a very large bird soaring in the distance. I picked up my binocs and made out a large heron soaring in tight circles. It continued soaring for another few moments, then headed south but now flapping its wings, losing some altitude. As it came closer, I could see that it was a Great Blue and watched it fly in a straight line until it suddenly went into a glide in another tight circle, having found another thermal. This time I was able to count the number of times it circled - six - until it peeled off the top heading south again. There were several Herring Gulls in weaker thermals nearby.

Ted Raymond, Dedham

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To learn more about the *Friends of Mount Auburn* and to get a list of the upcoming programs, contact Eden F. Sizemore, Program and Membership Director, Mount Auburn Cemetery, 580 Mount Auburn Street, Cambridge, MA 02138, 547-7105.

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