

SIGHTING OF AN ANHINGA (*Anhinga anhinga*) IN MASSACHUSETTS

by Richard A. Forster

Date. May 25, 1987 (ca. 12:20 P.M.)

Location. Nahant, Essex County, Massachusetts

Observers. Richard A. Forster, Carol E. Seeckts

Weather. Completely overcast but fairly bright, light sea breeze, temperature about 60 degrees F.

Optics. 10 x 40 Zeiss (RAF), 8 x 40 Leitz (CES)

When we arrived at Nahant about 11:00 A.M., it was obvious that a major landbird wave was in progress. We met Stella Garrett at Nahant Thicket, both parties having just arrived, and she said that she had just spent two hours watching warblers, including a Cerulean at Swallow Cove Road on the tip of the peninsula. We opted to go there with her before entering the thicket.

When we arrived, the trees were alive with birds -- warblers, thrushes, and flycatchers, but song was minimal due to the rather cool temperature. After Stella departed, we went to Nahant Thicket, a site that has proved to be an excellent landbird migration trap over the years.

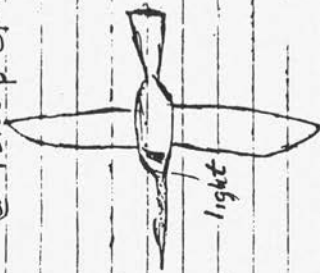
My usual approach to birding Nahant Thicket is to walk in the trail to an open area, then pish and look for birds as they approach from all directions. Quite a few birds approached, and many were in the treetops. While glancing around looking for something unusual, I noticed a large dark bird soaring overhead. I looked casually at the bird through my binoculars, and as it banked, I immediately became aware of the distinctive tail, shaped like an Anhinga's -- narrow at the base, gradually widening through its length, and fanned at the end. It appeared square or only slightly rounded at the tip.

The bird soared overhead in wide, lazy circles at a height of about five hundred feet and was under observation for about three minutes. During that time, it gained some height but was never at a great distance. As it soared and circled, the bird would occasionally flap its wings three or four times but never gave the impression that it had a purpose or was in a hurry to go somewhere. After watching it for several minutes, I ran to the car to get my telescope. During my brief absence, Seeckts told me that the bird had departed quickly in a northerly direction.

Due to the lighting conditions, the distance from the observers, and the fact that it was almost directly overhead, or nearly so, during the period of observation, relatively few field marks could be observed. The most obvious mark was the tail -- narrow at the base, long, and fanned at the end. The neck was long and thin. The body was not as heavy as a cormorant's. I looked for additional field marks. The only apparent one was that the body was dark with

Ninh Binh, Thailand

@ 12:20 p.m. 5/25/87



circling overhead continuously
for about 3 mins. - etc.
flapping several times but
continue soaring + circling
most noticeable mark was
tail thin at base, formed
at end-long - body not
so heavy as spine; neck
long and thin - bill not
heavy but could not see
length - body dark but
neck + upper breast lighter
tried for dorsal surface
when it banked but could

R. A. Forster's field notes

not see - light but had
1559, cloud cover but
fairly bright

tail looked \approx 5.6m long \Rightarrow
the neck

400-500' high

wings seemed long and
relatively narrow

did not have bulky head
neck and body typical of
Cormorant

the neck and upper breast lighter in coloration. The bill was not heavy, but a long, dagger-like aspect was not apparent. When the bird banked, which it did several times, I attempted to note field marks on the dorsal aspect, but due to the viewing angle and light conditions, nothing could be observed.

After the bird was lost from sight, we proceeded to the causeway that leads to Little Nahant to get another view of it but could not locate the bird again.

The identification rests mainly on the distinctive profile or silhouette in flight, the distinctive manner of flight, the long thin neck, and long fan-shaped tail. (Seeckts: "The tail looked as long as the neck.") A lighter coloration on the neck and upper breast was indicative of a female or more likely a subadult, nonbreeding bird. The soaring, circling flight is typical of Anhinga, but cormorants, mainly on migration, will also circle and soar. However, the wide, lazy circling seemed much different from that of cormorants, which seem to soar during migration in a compact circle much as Broad-winged Hawks do. The slender proportions were very unlike those of a cormorant, many of which were seen before and especially after the sighting when we were attempting to relocate the bird.

Along the East Coast, the Anhinga breeds as far north as North Carolina. Anhingas have been recorded well north of their breeding range in Michigan, Ohio, and southern Ontario. There have been several recent sightings in southern New Jersey and at least one sight record from Long Island, New York. Thus, an Anhinga in this state is not totally unexpected. This report represents the first documented sighting of the species in Massachusetts.

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