

300 SPECIES IN MASSACHUSETTS IN ONE YEAR: MARCH AND APRIL

by Herman D'Entremont and Dorothy R. Arvidson

Red-winged Blackbirds arrive early in March, sometimes before the ice has left the marshes, the first birds to proclaim that spring is coming. They will be abundant in any marshy area such as the Sudbury River Valley and Great Meadows and will be joined before the month is over by Brown-headed Cowbirds, Common Grackles, and Rusty Blackbirds. Learn to identify the high-pitched squeaks that pass for song in the blackbird group so that you can pick out Rusty Blackbirds, the migrant that you might miss, unless you learn its song.

Before the month of March is gone, you should see Tree Swallow, Eastern Phoebe, Water Pipit, and Fox Sparrows. Of these, pipits and Fox Sparrows are the birds to focus on for your list. Water Pipits can be found in numbers wherever there is a newly plowed field. Nine-Acre Corner in Concord is a likely spot for pipits. Learn to recognize the sweet, rising song of the Fox Sparrow, and you will easily find this migrant, hopping and scratching away with both feet at once under scrub bushes and tangles, along with White-throated Sparrows, who produce one of the most beautiful songs of our New England spring.

March will also witness the arrival of Pied-billed Grebes, Great Blue Herons, Black-crowned Night-Herons, American Coots, the first Turkey Vultures, and migrating Ring-billed Gulls. These birds are all easily found and will be around for several months, if not throughout the year. Waterfowl returning in March include migrating Wood Ducks, Green-winged and Blue-winged teal, Northern Pintails, Gadwalls, American Wigeons, Hooded Mergansers, Ruddy Ducks, and Snow Geese. Every spring a flock of Snow Geese spends one or two weeks in the Plum Island area, so here's another chance to check this species on your list.

If you missed seeing Purple Sandpipers at Rockport (*Bird Observer*, February 1983, II: 5) during the winter, look for them at Nahant, Lynn, or Scituate, or take a trip to the Dartmouth and Westport area (April 1976, 4: 36). The beach south of Richmond's Pond is also a good place for Sanderling, Dunlin, and Piping Plover. Keeping your distance so as not to disturb this diminishing species, you can watch for Piping Plovers along the beaches of Cape Cod (April 1978, 6: 40), Plymouth Beach (April 1985, 13: 61), the beach at the state reservation on the southern tip of Plum Island (June 1985, 13: 116), and on the beaches of Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard. Other shorebirds to be watched for in March are Killdeer, Greater Yellowlegs, Common Snipe, and American Woodcock. Woodcock can be found in wet woodlands in April and will continue their mating maneuvers into June. The best spots around Boston to

witness this are the Belmont incinerator on Concord Avenue, Rock Meadow in Belmont, Fowl Meadow in Milton, Ipswich River Wildlife Sanctuary in Topsfield, and a number of marshy meadows throughout the Sudbury River Valley. To hear and see them displaying, you must arrive at one of these locations just before dusk.

April is the month when most of the raptors return. The better hawk spots are Mount Tom in Northampton, Wachusett Mountain in Princeton, the Blue Hills of Milton, Plum Island's dunes, and the Pilgrim Heights area of outer Cape Cod. Northern Harriers, Turkey Vultures, Osprey, and Broadwings appear first, followed shortly by Sharp-shinned and Cooper's hawks, Merlins, and migrating Peregrines and kestrels. The west border of the Westport River has the highest number of Osprey nests in the state, and the birds are back in late March. In April, Red-shouldered Hawks can be found in the Lakeville/Bridgewater area and at Crooked Pond in Boxford, a spot where the Northern Goshawk is often seen.

Before April is over, you may have seen Chimney Swifts, Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers, several flycatchers - Least, Great Crested, and Eastern Kingbird, and most of the swallows. The Tree Swallow appears in March, Barn Swallows and Purple Martins (check the houses on every visit to Plum Island) arriving next, followed closely by the other three species - Northern Rough-winged, Bank, and Cliff. Great Meadows and Plum Island are the best places for swallows. Tree, Northern Rough-winged, Bank, and Barn swallows can be seen in both places, but Purple Martins are found only on Plum Island and a few places near the coast where houses are provided for them. Cliff Swallows have traditionally nested on buildings at various spots in Essex County, including the warden's building on Plum Island.

April brings to Massachusetts three wren species -- House, Winter, and Marsh. Wrens are best located by listening for their songs. The House Wren has a lively, noisy song emerging from woodpiles around houses. In marshes with tall reeds the Marsh Wren's song rattles like a toy sewing machine. Great Meadows is a good spot for this bird. The prolonged and gentle warble of the Winter Wren is best listened for at traditional sites such as Crooked Pond. This area, a good place to visit in late April, may add several species to your list: Winter Wren, Hermit Thrush, Black-throated Green Warbler, Louisiana and Northern waterthrushes, as well as Barred Owl and Eastern Phoebe. (If you miss seeing the Winter Wren now, you can find it at a nesting area later on in June, e.g., Mount Greylock.) There is no problem seeing most of the landbirds that appear in early April -- Ruby-crowned Kinglets, Hermit and Wood thrushes, Gray Catbirds, and Brown Thrashers, but some like Blue-gray Gnatcatchers must be specially sought in wet woodlands such as Heards Pond in Wayland, Pikes Bridge Road in West Newbury, and Oxbow National Wildlife Refuge.

A number of sparrows may be added to your "300" list in April. These are Blue Grosbeak, Rufous-sided Towhee, Chipping, Field, Vesper, Savannah, and Swamp. These are generally distributed and, except for the Blue Grosbeak and Vesper Sparrow, easily found in appropriate habitat. Blue Grosbeak usually makes a yearly appearance at Mt. Auburn Cemetery in the spring, but you may have to wait until the fall migration to find this species (on Nantucket or in Truro on Cape Cod), and Vesper Sparrows may also be easier to find in the fall.

The earnest novice will do well to bird often and early during March and April when the pace is leisurely, and there is more time to learn. It is easier to hear and remember the calls and songs when there are fewer bird sounds, and it is much less difficult to see the birds before the trees leaf out. When May arrives with the flocks of migrating warblers and the swarms of flocking birdwatchers, the new birder will find that the year's list grows rapidly. In May listing is easier than learning.



Eastern Massachusetts Hawk Watch

SPRING 1988 EASTERN MASSACHUSETTS HAWK WATCH (EMHW)

The Eastern Massachusetts Hawk Watch (EMHW) needs volunteer observers for coordinated hawkwatching on the **weekends** of April 23-24, April 30-May 1, and May 7-8 (coastal sites only this weekend) and on **weekdays** during the peak migration period from April 15-May 10 at points near Newburyport, on the Outer Cape, or on Wachusett Mountain. Last year, EMHW recorded the best spring flight ever documented for eastern Massachusetts, with the majority of the birds seen in May. For more information, write Paul M. Roberts, EMHW, 254 Arlington Street, Medford, MA 02155, or call 617-483-4263 after 8:00 P.M.

KESTREL NESTING BOXES OFFERED BY BROOKLINE BIRD CLUB (BBC). Want to put up a kestrel nesting box in March? The BBC will supply the boxes or building plans and reimbursement for the cost of materials if you build one. Write Paul M. Roberts, 254 Arlington Street, Medford, MA 02155, or call 617-483-4623 after 8:00 P.M.



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