

FIELD NOTES FROM HERE AND THERE _____

WILD BARNACLES IN QUIET OSTERVILLE

Birders were deprived of a life bird in December when a Barnacle Goose (*Branta leucopsis*) chose to graze on an off-limits commercial site in Lexington (see "Photo Feature" in this issue). This unfortunate happenstance was nicely compensated for when not just one but a group of six Barnacle Geese put down to feed on the morning of January 18, 1991, in Osterville's West Bay marsh.

The geese were first spotted about nine in the morning in a flock of Canadas and identified as Barnacles by Rebecca "Becky" Barber, who saw them from her windows overlooking West Bay. This I learned late Friday afternoon from a message she had left on my answering machine shortly after her discovery, a message ending with a mildly slanderous slur when she found that there was only magnetic tape to share her enthusiasm. On hearing how many Barnacle Geese Becky had seen, my first thought was that these must be wild birds, perhaps a family, and certainly a report worth putting on the Voice. Wayne Petersen concurred when I called Audubon to report. However, we also agreed to delay the taping until one of us could reach Becky to determine whether she thought her neighbors in quiet, residential Osterville would tolerate a weekend onslaught by troops of birders intent on securing a life bird.

The idea of two unreported sightings of potentially wild Barnacle Geese in successive months was unthinkable. There is little to equal the fury of birders thus frustrated when the news finally breaks, and they would never forgive the Voice of Audubon. Fortunately, Becky called just before five, assured us that her neighbors would understand, and the Barnacle Geese were reported on Friday's Voice, just in time to provide birders with a weekend chase. All went smoothly that first weekend, although one resident did inquire on Sunday, "Are we being invaded?" A number of birders saw the geese after a good deal of looping back and forth from West Bay to Cotuit, and one qualified observer, viewing the birds through a Kowa scope, noted that three of them were apparently immatures—so indeed, a family.

As usual on a Friday evening, the Voice was steadily busy. Bob Stymeist was unable to get through and only learned of the rare geese late Friday night when a Virginia birder called him. The Voice announcement had apparently been picked up by the national hotline. This caller also imparted the exciting intelligence that about a week earlier a family of six Barnacle Geese (two adults and four immatures) had disappeared from Cape Sable, Nova Scotia, very probably the same group that was now visiting Osterville!

The question always arises: Are these wild geese? Barnacle Geese breed in eastern Greenland, Spitzbergen (Norway), and on islands in the Barents Sea (Novaya Zemlya and Vaygach, U.S.S.R.). Although some consider the species

to be regularly vagrant here, the A.O.U. *Check-list* describes Barnacle Geese as "casual" to eastern North America south to North Carolina and inland. Sightings in Massachusetts are apt to be discounted as escaped birds; one sighted in Beverly in 1971 turned out to be the property of Stone Zoo. There is an old state record of a flock of three, one of which was shot, at North Eastham on November 1, 1885, and Brad Blodgett reported one at Wachusett Reservoir on November 4, 1979, a likely date for a wild vagrant.

A call to *American Birds* regional editor Ian McLaren in Nova Scotia provided more information about the six Cape Sable geese, which were first discovered by birders on the Christmas census although the birds had been around the area since mid-September 1990, feeding regularly with a flock of pinioned geese. The farmer whose land the Barnacle family frequented reported that the geese had been very wild and wary at first but over three months had learned to tolerate his comings and goings and accept his food. They also grazed or fed among the rocks along the shore, probably on eel grass, and roosted at night on an island offshore. On January 8, 1990, there was a very hard freeze, and this family of Barnacle Geese disappeared.

That the Osterville Barnacles are wild geese will be vehemently attested to by those birders who have traveled to Cape Cod repeatedly, scanning flocks of Canadas on meadows, marshes, and the Wianno golf course without catching a glimpse of the elusive Barnacles. Although irregularly seen, the geese were still around over a month later. Barnacle Geese are terrestrial grazing birds, roosting at night on land, sandbanks, or open water. My guess is that the feral and savvy Osterville Barnacles regularly retreat beyond the reach of birders to the gated, guarded, and untrespassable Oyster Harbors peninsula, where in winter there must be undisturbed grazing on the golf course and a quiet roost on the extensive grounds of exclusive estates. I just hope they are still wild.

Dorothy R. Arvidson, Arlington

A FINCH OF ANOTHER COLOR

My backyard is loaded with many different types of feeders—ground feeders, suet, tube feeders, etc. My housekeeper and friend, Miss Bridie Rielly, has become very good at bird identification. Sometimes, when she cannot identify a bird at a feeder or is unsure, her cry rings out, "Mr. Wiggin. Strange bird!" And I will come running.

One day in early December, the call came. There were five House Finches on the tube feeder and a "mystery bird," Miss Rielly said. "It is with the House Finches, but it looks like a Purple Finch." I studied the bird in question for ten minutes in good light through nine-power binoculars, and the bird could not have been more than sixty feet from me, probably less—I am a miserable judge

of distances. The finch was an adult male. It unquestionably had the "crushed raspberry" color of the Purple Finch. Moreover, the color came much lower down on the breast than does the color of the House Finch. However, the bill was House Finch size, not the almost grotesquely large Purple Finch bill. The bird did not have the Purple's type of superciliary line, and it also had streaks on the side that House Finches have and Purples lack.

My conclusion was that this was either a House Finch-by-Purple Finch hybrid (Is that possible?—I just don't know) or else an ordinary House Finch that for some reason was very differently colored. Interestingly, the other House Finch males tolerated the odd-colored bird. Three birds were at the same feeder, one of them being the Purple Finch-colored bird.

I hope other birders will watch to see whether they can find similarly colored House Finches.

Henry T. Wiggin, Brookline

Editor's Note. Henry Wiggin sent this field note to me in December 1988. On January 2, 1991, I observed some House Finches that prompted me to reread Henry's letter. On that date a male House Finch similar to the bird Henry describes came to a feeder on Morris Island in Chatham. My eye was first drawn by its startling color, which extended in a ventral wash well down onto the bird's underparts. I thought it was a Purple Finch. But the bird had the same general configuration and jizz as the female House Finches with it. Shortly, more male finches flew in, all of them with the same bright plumage as the first. None showed the dingy red color I am accustomed to seeing in our New England House Finches. But the pattern was typical of House Finches, and there was a distinct solid patch of red on the forehead.

I think that a hybrid between the two finch species is not very likely. The mentor I consulted suggested that if one observes enough House Finches, great variation becomes apparent. His other thought, which also had occurred to me, was that the birds were newly molted. The plumage certainly had looked very bright and fresh.

Regional populations of House Finches in California exhibit marked color differences, which I have observed. Also the color of House Finches I have seen in Mexico, Arizona, and Colorado varies from state to state. Within a decade of its first introduction (1940) in the East, this species underwent a rapid evolution, becoming darker and dingier, also larger bodied and heavier billed, than its western counterpart. Hence, it is not unreasonable to expect color variations to show up in an ever-expanding population of finches.

What astonishes me, however, is that in over thirty years of watching New England House Finches at feeders, I have never before noted this markedly different coloration. Nor apparently has Henry Wiggin or Bridie Rielly!

Dorothy R. Arvidson

RED-TAILED HAWK IN HARVARD SQUARE

On January 4, 1991, during my lunch hour walk, I saw some crows flying noisily around in the Old Burying Ground on Massachusetts Avenue in the center of Harvard Square, Cambridge. Because the burial ground is surrounded by a fence and not open to the public, I could not get very close. I suspected that a raptor was causing the crow behavior, but at first I could not find anything. I noted that the raucous activity was attracting additional crows. Determined to locate the cause of the excitement, I walked to the Garden Street side of the area and looked again. There on the ground was an adult Red-tailed Hawk. Soon it flew to a large deciduous tree nearby and landed on a branch about twelve feet off the ground. Then I could see that it had something sizable and white in its talons but could not make out what it was. Luckily, a passerby who paused to see what I was looking at had better vision and was able to confirm that the prey item was a pigeon.

For approximately half an hour I watched feathers fly as the Redtail tore into the pigeon. The crow flock had by now greatly increased in number. Crows flew in and out of the tree until a maximum of thirty-five birds were perched in the upper branches, about twenty-five feet above the hawk, but at no point did the Redtail mantle its catch. Astonishingly, the crows no longer harassed the raptor but were fairly still. They remained sitting quietly in the tree for twenty minutes, then departed while the Redtail was still dining. I wanted to stay until the hawk finished eating, until it flew off, but the numbing cold in my feet changed my mind. I returned to the scene twenty minutes later, but the Redtail was gone. All that remained of the event were a drift of feathers over the ground and a few pigeon remnants on the branch. This was my first Red-tailed Hawk of 1991 and my first view, ever, of a Redtail consuming prey!

Harriet E. Hoffman, Arlington

Red-tailed Hawk
MIT Campus
Cambridge, MA
1987
Photo by
John Morawetz



THE TAME LONGSPUR

It was one of those warm, cloudless September days that leave birders unable to go home early. I had spent most of the day at the Parker River National Wildlife Refuge with the Brookline Bird Club. It had been a wonderful time. We had seen two Peregrine Falcons and watched one of them try several unsuccessful dives at the sandpipers in the Salt Pans. I thought as I left Newburyport in the late afternoon that I would try one pass through Great Meadows National Wildlife Refuge in Concord. I was very glad I did.

At the beginning of the main path into the refuge, a group of people were thumbing through their field guides and peering down at a small, brown finchlike bird. I joined the group and was amazed at how tame this bird seemed to be. I rarely have had a chance to observe an unfamiliar species at such close range, especially for an extended period of time. The bird stayed on the ground, moving no more than a foot or two from our feet, picking up seeds and small stems and sometimes crossing to the other side of the path. I had my camera with me and took some photos as I stood there. Then I sat down on the ground and took more than ten pictures face to face with the bird, which just stared at me or went about the business of scratching at the edge of the path for food.

This continued for an hour or longer. A few new people joined the group at intervals. We opened our field guides to the sparrow and finch pages. We noted



Lapland Longspur
Great Meadows, Concord, MA

Photo by Sandy B. Selesky

an ear patch and the buff, brown, and black patterns on the head and back and checked the beak for size and color. We followed the bird around to see what type of white outer tail markings it had, but we could not positively identify the bird as any of the sparrows or finches.

The Voice of Audubon reported the next day that a Lapland Longspur had been seen at Great Meadows. I looked the bird up in the field guide and sure enough, that was our bird—an immature or a female since it had no rusty collar. Somehow, we had overlooked the page of longspurs in Peterson. Judging from its tameness and total lack of fear, I would guess that the bird was an immature. It was like the young Snowy Owls near Newburyport. Never having seen people before, they are unafraid of humans.

At first, we thought the bird was perhaps sick or could not fly. However, when a large dog walked by with its owner, the longspur immediately flew off. It returned within three minutes and landed at the same spot by our feet. It flew off twice while I was there, both times when a dog was passing. It did not seem to fear people, just dogs, perhaps because of their similarity to Arctic foxes, a predator the longspur may have encountered in the Arctic.

Since that particular day at Great Meadows, I have seen fairly tame longspurs in groups of Horned Larks at Salisbury State Park and gotten very close to Snow Buntings on the main road of the refuge on Plum Island in late fall and winter. However, although these birds remained unafraid if I drove up very slowly and stayed inside my car while I took pictures from the window, once I was out of the car, they either flushed or kept their distance. They did not let me sit down next to them as the very obliging longspur in Concord had allowed me to do on that beautiful September afternoon.

Sandy B. Selesky, Westford

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