

BIRDING AT THE PRUDENTIAL CENTER

by Henry T. Wiggin, Brookline

If a birder were to bird only the Prudential Center, he might come to some weird conclusions. Based on his observations there, he would think

- 1) White-throated Sparrows are by far the most abundant species in this part of the state, in numbers equal to or exceeding all the other species combined.
- 2) The Sparrow-Finch family (Fringillids) far outnumbers all other families put together, by a factor of 7.
- 3) Alas, the poor Robin! It must have gone the way of the Labrador Duck!! Although thrushes are the third most prevalent family at the Pru (after Fringillids and Wood Warblers), there has NEVER been a Robin record from there.
- 4) The swallows too have vanished, like the Carolina Parakeet. There are no swallow records from the Pru.
- 5) The Short-billed Marsh Wren is a fairly regular migrant, with four positive identifications in the last years.
- 6) Lincoln's Sparrow is a regular, EASILY SEEN migrant in both spring and fall. A steady Pru observer should see at least three or four Lincoln's Sparrows annually, and he will have an excellent look at them. On May 4, 1968, 18 dead Lincoln's Sparrows were picked up at the Pru after a thick fog. I saw 5 on May 12, 1970. Most of them were exhausted---two in my hands at once and another only two feet away! On May 25, 1971, there were 6 live and 3 dead individuals of this species.
- 7) The Orange-crowned Warbler is a regular fall visitor (8 individuals in 7 autumns).
- 8) Migrating birds are relatively easy to pick up in one's hands, although the White-crowned Sparrow must be handled cautiously---it bites!
- 9) On migration, birds alight with complete disregard for normal habitat preferences, and not one in a hundred ever sings.

NUMBERS AT THE PRUDENTIAL CENTER: SEPTEMBER 1967--MAY 1974

Species: 67 species have been picked up dead, plus 2 additional subspecies.

91 species have been seen alive, plus 2 additional subspecies.

Individuals: (per cents within each category are rounded off, and values less than 0.5% are omitted)

Species or Family	Dead		Live	
	Number	% of Total	Number	% of Total
Black Duck			1	
Hawks			18	
American Woodcock	10		1	
Mourning Dove	1			
Goatsuckers/Swifts	3		7	
Ruby-throated Hummingbird	5		1	
Woodpeckers	3		2	
Flycatchers	1		4	
Jays/Crows/Titmice			9	
Nuthatches/Creepers	18	1	7	
Wrens	3		10	
Mimic Thrushes	20	1	41	1
Kinglets/Gnatcatchers	18	1	30	1
Pipits			3	
Thrushes	78	3	92	2
Starlings			2	
Vireos	3		4	
Wood Warblers	450	18	351	8
House Sparrows			10	
Blackbirds/Orioles	1		2	
Scarlet Tanager	1		3	
Sparrows/Finches	1898		4084	
Totals	2513	76 100	4682	87 100

MEMORABLE DAYS AT THE PRUDENTIAL CENTER:

- September 11, 1967: My first day of birding there, my office having moved from downtown Boston to the Prudential's 45th floor the day before. On my lunch period, as I was walking to one of the stores, there at my feet, inside the glass, on the concrete, hopped a Long-billed Marsh Wren.
- October 2, 1967: 31 individuals of 11 species dead; 33 birds of 14 species live, including (Bicknell's) Gray-cheeked Thrush and a Black-headed Grosbeak. All birds were only a few feet away, which is the rule rather than the exception at the Prudential.
- October 5, 1967: Bennett Keenan saw a Cooper's Hawk chase a Rufous-sided Towhee. I missed that, but did see our first Short-billed Marsh Wren. Ben went to the Massachusetts Audubon's Boston office (they had one in those days) and brought Ruth Emery back. The power mowers were in operation by then, but the wren continued to hop around within three feet of all who were interested. The 17 species at the Pru that day also included a Yellow-throated Vireo, an Orange-crowned Warbler, and a Lincoln's Sparrow.
- October 13, 1967: Over 200 dead birds (70% White-throated Sparrows and 30% Dark-eyed Juncos), plus an Orange-crowned Warbler, exhausted but alive.
- December 4, 1967: A Peregrine Falcon zoomed past my 45th floor office. (Peregrines were also seen December 8, 1968, September 29, 1969, November 17, 1970, October 4, 1972, October 17, 1972 and April 13, 1973.)
- December 26, 1967: A Rough-legged Hawk circled around.
- May 4, 1968: Approximately 700 dead birds of 21 species, including 40 Swamp Sparrows, 18 Lincoln's Sparrows, 3 Whip-poor-wills and 1 Least Flycatcher (the only record for that species).
- May 10, 1968: A White-eyed Vireo was singly loudly in the flowering shrub in front of the office of Paine, Webber, Jackson and Curtis.
- October 17, 1968: Bennett Keenan, Herbert Pratt and I finally saw well a Seaside Sparrow after 30 minutes of chasing it. The bird would hide in the pachysandra, not fly until it was almost stepped on, then take off and fly 50 feet or so, dropping again, as if shot, into another pile of pachysandra.
- October 23, 1968: Another Short-billed Marsh Wren, so close that one's binoculars couldn't focus on it.
- April 29, 1969: A Merlin was trapped between the storefronts and the glass. It zoomed around madly, startling more than one early arriver at the Pru, before one of the maintenance men put thick gloves on and caught it. Another flung the door open, and the hawk was thrown out the door. He flew off to wild cheers by one and all.
- September 18, 1969: A Water Pipit flew overhead, calling.
- September 22, 1969: Keenan found 3 dead Ruby-throated Hummingbirds, that had flown into the glass---all within a foot of each other.
- September 29, 1969: Highlights included a Winter Wren, a Red Bat, and a Peregrine Falcon.
- October 8, 1969: Short-billed Marsh Wren number 3.
- October 22, 1969: 280 dead birds of 25 species, including a Woodcock, a Grasshopper Sparrow, 9 White-crowned Sparrows, 2 Lincoln's Sparrows, and 3 Yellow-breasted Chats. Around 300 birds of 11 species alive.
- November 14, 1969: 134 dead Fox Sparrows at the Pru, and 46 dead birds of other species, including 25 Tree Sparrows and 2 Woodcocks.

November 26, 1969: 7 Red Crossbills flew by the 49th floor dining room at the Merchants.

May 29, 1970: The only Common Crow ever seen at the Pru flew by.

September 15, 1970: 63 individuals dead of 14 species, including 17 Northern Waterthrushes and a Mourning Warbler. Alive were 42 individuals of 8 species, including 15 Northern Waterthrushes, 15 American Redstarts and a Winter Wren.

October 1, 1970: One of the maintenance men rescued a Common Nighthawk that was drowning in the moat. He didn't know what to do with the soggy goatsucker--Ah, that crazy little birdwatcher would know what to do with it. The trouble was that he thought that I was on the 43rd floor (I'm on the 45th). So up he came on the elevator with the reviving Nighthawk starting to flap its wings and spreading water in all directions. The maintenance man, who could speak maybe 15 words of English, strode steadily ahead, in through an office door, and proudly presented the bedraggled bird to the President of a multi-million dollar corporation. After five minutes of pandemonium, the maintenance man took back his unwanted gift, went back down the elevator, out the door, and let the bird fly off.

October 8, 1970: A Scarlet Tanager was drowning in the moat. Naturally, I waded in (only slightly over my knees) and rescued the bird. I took him home, fed him some of my dog's hamburger, and he flew off. I have also gone into the moat to rescue 2 Lincoln's Sparrows going down for the last time. Would I do it for a White-throat? I just don't know; I've never seen one caught in the moat.

November 12, 1970: Rescued a Yellow-breasted Chat that was banging continuously against the glass behind a bench.

January 25, 1971: A Black Duck spent a week in the moat, surviving on the cracked corn that I fed him daily.

May 3-13, 1971 (4 dates): 4 different Whip-poor-wills rescued from behind the benches and released outside.

May 6, 1971: A dead Louisiana Waterthrush, which was taken by Massachusetts Audubon.

May 25, 1971: The finest day ever at the Pru, and probably there will never be a finer. 17 individuals of 9 species dead, including an Orange-crowned Warbler and 3 Lincoln's Sparrows. Alive: 47 individuals of 19 species, including 1 Common Nighthawk, 1 Yellow-bellied Flycatcher (perched three feet from me on a railing), 1 Long-billed Marsh Wren, 1 Philadelphia Vireo, 1 Worm-eating Warbler, 1 Orange-crowned Warbler, 1 male Cerulean Warbler, 1 male Kentucky Warbler and 6 Lincoln's Sparrows.

May 28, 1971: A stunned Mourning Warbler was picked up by Hollis Leverett and released.

September 27, 1972: The only Blue Jay ever seen at the Pru flew over.

September 10, 1973: An Osprey circled twice, then flew off. An Olive-sided Flycatcher was fluttering against the glass in front of the Merchants Bank. I caught him, took him outside, and let him loose.

May 16, 1974: A dead Red-breasted Nuthatch and a Yellow-throated Vireo.

May 23, 1974: Only two birds were at the Pru, one a Gray Catbird, the other a Short-billed Marsh Wren. Once again, the bird was at my feet so that all field marks could be picked out by the naked eye.

DISCUSSION:

Birding at the Prudential Center often runs to extremes. On certain days, the entire area is flooded with birds; on other days, it is nearly deserted. Bennett Keenan and I, who have studied the Prudential's birds more thoroughly than anyone else, have concluded that the best birding there results from a combination of several factors:

1) The weather should be favorable for migration at the point from which the birds take off. In the spring, this might mean clear weather in Philadelphia; in the fall, good weather in mid-Maine.

2) Winds should parallel the migration route in the spring, i.e., they should come from the south-west. In the fall north-west winds are best, since they tend to concentrate the birds along the Atlantic Coast.

3) The best birding results at the Pru if the above conditions are fulfilled and if fog or rain should happen to move in during the early morning hours, when the migrants are already over the Boston area. Apparently, the birds become dis-oriented, mill around, and are finally attracted by the light on top of the Prudential tower. As daylight comes, the birds are brought down by the many kinds of ground cover, shrubs and trees, on both the Huntington Avenue and the Boylston Street side of the Prudential complex.

Needless to say, our theory does not always work. Sometimes conditions occur which seem perfect for Pru birding--and there are no birds. Other times there is no rain or fog, yet the birds are there. As a general rule, however, Ben's and my theory succeeds more often than it fails.

Another point to remember about Prudential birding: generally, the birds act totally differently at the Pru than they do anywhere else that I have ever birded. Birds hop around at your feet. When a bird does fly, no matter what the species, it behaves like a Sharp-tailed or a Seaside Sparrow, flying just a short distance and then dropping vertically into a small clump of ground cover from which it is extremely difficult to flush. Many times I have seen birds go under such clumps no bigger than a pocket handkerchief---never to see them again.

I have wondered for years why the birds always favored the west side of the Prudential area. In my years there, I have seen hundreds of birds trapped between the storefronts and the glass, but always on the western side, and never a bird trapped on the eastern side. This spring Margaret Argue pointed out that the western side was the sunny side, and this could be an explanation. It would not explain why the birds are also on the west side on those days when it is foggy or rainy, but I do think Margaret's point is well-taken. Even outside the glass, the birds constantly favor the western side of the complex.

Many migrants glance off the glass windows, fall into the moat, and drown. It would cut down mortality if the moats could be drained from April 1 to May 30, and again from September 15 to November 15. The Prudential management did install four nets (position shown on the chart), and this has cut down on the deaths considerably ---a fine, public-spirited action.

A possible explanation for the failure of Robins or swallows to be recorded at the Pru is that they are diurnal migrants. They are not so apt to lose their bearings during the daylight hours and would not land at the Pru as the nocturnal migrants do. But why should White-throated Sparrows outnumber all the rest of the species put together? And why does the Sparrow-Finch family outnumber all other families by a 7 to 1 ratio? Why have there been so many Short-billed Marsh Wrens there? Is that species actually less rare than birders realize? The species is such a skulker that it may slip through this area unseen, except at the Pru where this is not possible. Why has the birding at the Pru been less productive in 1972-1974?

I would appreciate it if anyone with a possible answer for any of my questions would call me. I also hope to see more birders at the Prudential. How many Short-billed Marsh Wrens have you seen lately?

All Houghton Mifflin Co. books, including the Peterson Field Guide series and Lansdowne, Birds of Eastern Forest, are available at 20% off from

Herman D'Entremont
P. O. Box 507
Newton Center, Mass. 02159