

## HISTORIANS OF ESSEX COUNTY AND THE ESSEX COUNTY ORNITHOLOGICAL CLUB OF MASSACHUSETTS

by Jim MacDougall

My first Essex County Ornithological Club of Massachusetts (ECOC) Ipswich River trip was in 1974, my introduction to serious birding. Some of the old-timers who were there could identify more by ear than I could by sight. Some, however, had lost their hearing and were so well along in years that they had to be transported overland from bridge to bridge in a big old Buick convertible and wait for those of us who were floating down the river in canoes. At each bridge we would compare notes. They were not so feeble as to show us a roosting nighthawk straddling a branch or the Prothonotary Warbler perched by the river. I had many firsts that day, but what impressed me the most were the evening festivities. After the buffet dinner all the participants pulled out their small bound notebooks, and the day's tally began. The reminiscing was more fun than the actual birding. There was intellectual sparring, a great deal of laughter, and a few omnisciently raised eyebrows at the announcement of single-observer rarities, the usual good-natured camaraderie one develops from shared experience. We recorded 132 species for that weekend, thanks to the efficient recording of Don Alexander, a member of ECOC since 1936. Some members of the day's group had been keeping track of the birds along the Ipswich River since 1906, when the first river trip was run. Ten years later, in 1916, the ECOC was founded, and our group included charter members.

Before the ECOC, the history of birds in Essex County and the men who kept records of their occurrences are best acquired from the writings of Dr. Charles W. Townsend, who in 1905 wrote *The Birds of Essex County, Massachusetts*, published by the Nuttall Ornithological Club. It is ostensibly from this work that we can look back over the previous three hundred years at the bird trends within this small area north of Boston.

### *The Birds of Essex County, Massachusetts*

*The Birds of Essex County, Massachusetts* contains an annotated list of the birds recorded from 1616 to 1904. It also contains descriptions of notable habitats along the coast, an ornithological history of Essex County, and records from local lighthouse keepers. Townsend compiles nearly all the writings dating back to 1616 of Essex County bird observations from William Brewster, John Josselyn, Thomas Nuttall, William Wood, Francis Higginson, and many others. These men, without knowing the impact of their diligence, created a body of knowledge that exclaims that we take notice of the trends of the past and demands the necessity of keeping records today. The picture of that three hundred-year period is a disappointing one, with only an occasional turnaround



*Logo of the Essex County Ornithological Club by Frank Benson  
Courtesy of the Peabody and Essex Museum*

that offers a glimmer of hope for conserving the diversity and abundance of birds that Essex County at one time hosted.

When one reads Townsend, it is difficult not to become saddened. To think that once upon a time, men, women, and children could simply look up at millions and millions of Passenger Pigeons, it is an outrage that none exist today. Imagine the sight of it: literally hours upon hours of a sky full of pigeons flying over during spring and fall migration. Townsend wrote:

The Passenger Pigeon, now rapidly becoming a bird of the past, was in former days very conspicuous from its vast numbers. Higginson writing in Salem, in about 1630, says: "Upon the eighth of March from after it was faire daylight until eight of the clock in the forenoon, there flew over all the towns in our plantacons soe many flocke of doues, each flock containyng many thousands, and soe many that they obscured the light that passeth credit, if but the truth should be written.

Wood, writing in 1634, says: "I have seen them fly as if the Aeyerie regiment had been pigeons; seeing neyther beginning nor ending, length, or breadth of these Millions of Millions . . . so they continued for foure or five

hours together." The last Passenger Pigeons seen in Essex County were a pair on August 17, 1904, at Kent's Island in Newbury. They were seen by Mr. John Sears, curator of Geology, Mineralogy, and Botany at the Peabody Museum of Salem (Massachusetts). The last one died in 1914 in Cincinnati.

Townsend wrote of another notable extinction. The Heath Hen, an eastern subspecies of the Greater Prairie Chicken, ". . . was formerly 'so common on the ancient bushy site of the city of Boston, that laboring people or servants stipulated with their employers not to have the Heath-Hen brought to table oftener than a few times in the week!'" The last one died on Martha's Vineyard in 1932.

Mixed among the tales of extinction are records of birds that have been extirpated as breeding birds and migrants from the county and the state. Sandhill Crane was common during colonial times and thought to breed here. Tundra Swan and Eskimo and Long-billed curlews were also common migrants at the time of the establishment of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Upland Plover, Common Snipe, and Purple Martin were already on the wane in 1905, but a few decades earlier they were common breeders. Northern Harrier, Cooper's Hawk, Red-shouldered Hawk, White-eyed Vireo, Orchard Oriole, and Yellow-breasted Chat were common breeders in 1905.

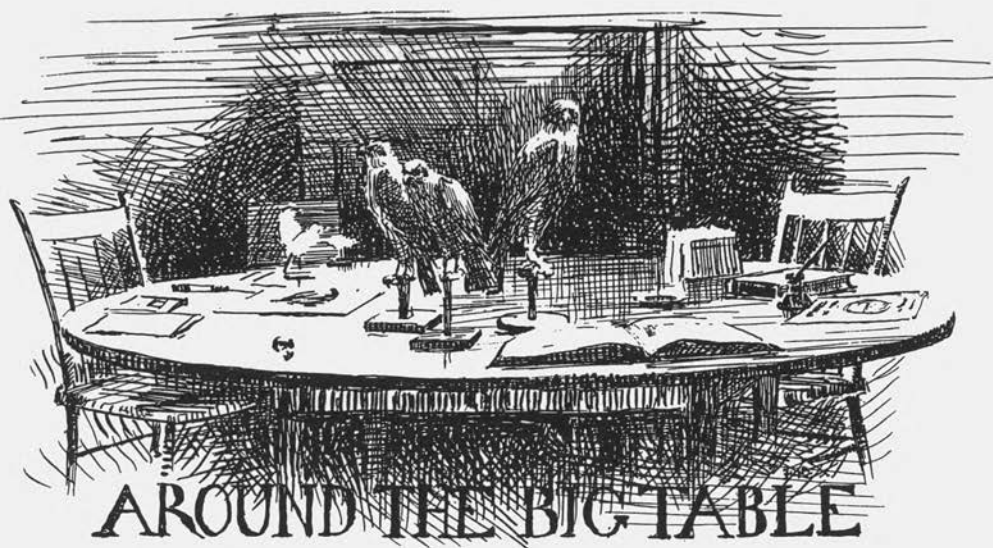
In Townsend's *Supplement to the Birds of Essex County, Massachusetts* (1920), he begins to paint a rosier picture for the existence of birds in the future. A number of laws had been enacted between the turn of the century and 1920 that substantially reduced the gunning seasons for shorebirds and waterfowl. Concurrently, the National Audubon Society's crusade to eliminate hunting of terns and egrets for the millinery industry had been successful.

Townsend's books can be found in many local libraries. I recommend that you take the time to look them up. Like Forbush, Brewster, and Bent, these are writings that every birder and local wildlife professional should read.

### **History of the Essex County Ornithological Club**

The ECOC, founded in 1916, actually got its start on the Ipswich River in the cane seats of a couple of canoes owned by Ralph Lawson and Gil Emilio of Salem ten years earlier. With trolleys, trains, and locally based liveries, it was convenient to catch a trolley from Salem out to Howe's Station in Middleton, pick up one's canoe "parked" at the waterhole below Spofford's Boathouse on the river, and canoe down to Ipswich center. Mr. Spofford would pick up the canoes and ferry them back up to Middleton. Lawson, Emilio, and company would board the Boston-bound train and depart for Salem. And so the tradition began and has continued to this day with the annual ECOC Ipswich River trip.

The club published an annual bulletin from 1919 to 1938. Contributors included Emilio, Lawson, Townsend, John Phillips, Norman Brown, and Ludlow Griscom. The artwork was supplied by their first president, Frank



*Illustration by Frank Benson*

*Courtesy of the Peabody and Essex Museum*

Benson, internationally acclaimed portrait and wildlife artist. Within the bulletin one can also read of accounts of a young R. T. Peterson tagging along with Griscom and Lawson. Membership averaged about sixty-five members, all men, until about 1975, when women were voted into membership.

Topics covered in the bulletin included birds sighted on each annual Ipswich River trip, compilations of the early Danvers Christmas counts, a five-year comparison of Christmas counts at Cape Ann and Cape Cod, reports of land acquired by the Federation of New England Bird Clubs, and the initiation of Big Days by Ludlow Griscom.

A feature in the bulletin was "Around the Big Table," which covered accounts of rarities and behavioral notes on birds. The feature was named for the round table that served as the club's meeting place in the Peabody Museum of Salem.

To give you a taste of their observations and the flavor of the times, I have included below some brief accounts verbatim from the ECOC Bulletin.

J. W. Goodridge (1920) "Bird Notes on Plum Island:" April 24th and 25th when ECOC visited my camp at the island we found five Piping Plover," and "While on a fishing trip, off to sea of Plum Island, May 28th, I saw my first Terns for 1920. There were both Wilson (Common) and Roseate and with them were Herring, Bonaparte and Laughing Gulls, all feeding upon the sand eels, driven to the surface by schools of pollack and codfish. The Terns were being pestered by their enemies, the

Jaegers.

Albert Morse, curator of Natural History at the Peabody Museum of Salem (1921): I wish to place on record a New England example of Franklin's Gull . . . in the Essex County collection of the PMS. It is labeled "o, Salem, Oct. 28, 1885, Geo. O. Welch."

A. P. Stubbs (1921): One of the most pleasant recollections of woodland life in my younger days is my acquaintance with the Yellow-breasted Chat, which during the years 1885-1895 was very plentiful in this part of the state. In one season I personally knew of as many as twelve pairs breeding in Lynn, Salem and Peabody. Nearly all the nests were in thick clumps of young barberry bushes.

A. B. Fowler (1922) "The Drumming of the Snipe:" It was just before dusk on April 25, 1922, when a party of Club members gathered about a clump of bushes on the edge of Nichol's Brook (Middleton). The object of the meeting was to listen to the drumming of the Snipe and, if possible, observe birds in this aerial performance. The men composed themselves, and there was as much silence as the different dispositions of the group would allow. There were never more than five men talking at once.

The sun had long since set and night was drawing its curtain across the afterglow and in the swamp the thrushes, song sparrows and other birds were singing to the passing day. Down the road a large dog pointed his nose to heaven and tried to break all long-distance records for uproarious vocalization. Different sounds, both tame and wild, were identified and commented upon, until there came a lull; even the talkative members of the club were silent, and then from above was heard a sound similar to that made by the air rushing through the wings of a domestic pigeon. The Snipe had arrived and everything else was forgotten. During the next half hour the air was filled with drumming of the Snipe and the conjectures of the party. The darkness made it impossible to catch but fleeting glimpses of the birds as they darted downward from the sky or fluttered to the ground. No one was able to see how the sound was made, but everyone heard it and caught an occasional quick view of the birds. Some saw one bird, others saw more, and one man went so far as to declare he saw five Snipe, thereby drawing on himself sundry observations more pointed than scientific.

Charles W. Townsend (1923) "Birds in Their Relation to Changes in Vegetation:" Juncos and White-throated Sparrows and probably Myrtle Warblers occasionally nest within its [Essex County] limits, and Red Crossbills, Canada Warblers, Winter Wrens, Brown Creepers, Red-breasted Nuthatches and Golden-crowned Kinglets have all been

recorded as breeding in the county. The less typically Canadian birds like Hairy Woodpeckers, Olive-sided Flycatchers, Solitary Vireos, Nashville and Blackburnian Warblers, and Hermit Thrushes also breed here.

In earlier days, before the forest was invaded by the white man and before the swamps were drained, the sun was unable to warm and dry much of the land which is now open to its rays. The coolness and dampness of the forest floor was favorable to the growth of Canadian plants, and these, instead of being few in numbers and limited in kind as today are the vestiges of a larger Canadian flora and are doomed to disappear if the land is all given over to pasture and to cultivated land and to the habitations of man.

Charles J. Maynard (1926) "Ornithological Reminiscences of Ipswich Beach:" Another bird then common in the hills of Ipswich was the "Esquimaux" Curlew, once exceedingly abundant in the autumn, but even then in the days of which I am writing (cir. 1870), not very common, and now gone forever.

This brings to mind another extinct bird. About 1874 I was rowing across Plum Island sound one day to reach the mouth of the Ipswich River. The tide was running out with great force and I had to make considerable effort to hold my course in the whirling, rushing water. Suddenly a duck appeared very near the mouth of the Ipswich which I was confident was a Labrador. Although I had my gun with me, I knew if I attempted to take in my oars and pick it up, my boat would be whirled about so quickly that I could not shoot. The bird remained but a brief moment in sight then dived and I saw no more of it. . . . If this was a Labrador Duck it was one of the last of the species and very probably the last to ever come to Ipswich.

Ralph Lawson (1926) "Herring Gulls Nesting in Salem Bay:" The following letter received from Mr. Bernard B. Bancroft of Salem is most interesting: "One Sunday sometime around the first of July, a party of five, myself included, landed on North Gooseberry Island to eat lunch and found quite a lot of young Herring Gulls that were unable to fly. I could hardly credit it until I caught and examined a few of them and found that they were about four or five weeks old, so I made up my mind that they must have hatched there. I went looking about for nests and found at least twenty nests, . . ." Frank Benson Esq., of Salem, tells me that when he was a boy fifty years ago there were no gulls nesting in the bay, and he believed that at that time that these birds had not nested there for many years before owing to constant shooting and the collection of eggs. This may, therefore, be the first nesting there for



nearly a century.

Horace Green (1929) "Note on the Yellow Rail:" The Yellow Rail usually seems to be overlooked by the Club Members and is not included in the "Annotated Lists." I think this species is to be found regularly in the meadow near Lynnfield Centre. On September 28, 1929, I shot an adult in good plumage and on October 5th, I shot a male which I judge to be a young bird in his first plumage. I also shot an adult in the same meadow on October 3, 1924, and I have found it there on several other occasions and regard it as a regular visitor.

My usual experience with this bird has convinced me that their usual habitat is in the drier parts of the meadow where wild meadow grass grows thickly, and not often in the wet ground or among cattails, where snipe, Virginia Rails and Soras may be found. One must almost step on a Yellow Rail to make it fly, and then it will rise barely high enough to clear the vegetation, and after fluttering along a short distance, it will drop into the grass again.

Ralph Lawson (1930) "The Stoop of a Hawk:" I have been told recently of a most interesting observation made by a man well fitted and well placed to judge the speed of the stoop of a hawk, probably a Duck Hawk, the story coming from the observer himself. I know this man well and although his conclusion may seem very impossible, I am confident that it is very close to the actual truth. My friend was in Texas for some months completing his training as a pilot before he went overseas. He was flying a small pursuit plane, which had a normal speed of about 125 miles per hour and, while cruising about at a considerable altitude, he saw a bunch of ducks flying far below and ahead of him. Thinking to gain some experience in diving at a moving object, he turned the nose of his plane down and opened the throttle of his engine, thereby gaining speed rapidly. While he was still some distance from the ducks he glanced at a wing tip of his plane to see how much vibration his swoop was causing and as he did so, a hawk shot by him "as though the plane was standing still," and struck one of the ducks which fell towards the ground apparently lifeless. At the time the hawk passed the plane the latter was traveling at a speed of nearly 175 miles per hour and my friend thinks that the hawk was stooping two feet to his one but of course that is only an estimate as under the conditions no accurate computation was possible. We do know however that this particular hawk was moving at a rate of speed much greater than 175 miles per hour and perhaps not far from double that rate, as the observation was made by a man whose business it was to make fairly accurate observations while traveling through the air at high speed and who

came through much active service in France and England without any serious mishaps.

Charles W. Townsend (1931) "The Desertion of the Heronries in the Ipswich Dunes:" In May and June, 1931, I found that the populous heronries in the two large pitch pine groves of the Ipswich Dunes were devoid of breeding Black-crowned Night Herons. No cloud of herons arose over the trees at my approach. No deafening cries of young and old were to be heard. The ground, bushes and trees, which in former years had been white with droppings, and where the odor had been overpowering, were now clean, and fragrant only of the pines. The unusual silence there, except for the cheerful songs of Maryland Yellow-throats, Redstarts and other birds, was most surprising. The sand and the mud flats of the neighboring creeks and estuaries, formerly abounding in Night Herons even in the daytime, all intent on procuring fish for their young, were noticeably deserted of these birds. Comparatively few were to be seen.

The southerly pine grove where the original heronry was established had diminished in popularity for the herons since 1926 when raccoons first appeared there, or rather their tracks, for the animal itself, largely nocturnal in habits, has almost never been seen in the dunes . . .

This spring and summer of 1931 I have often seen Night Herons flying north towards Plum Island and I believe our birds have taken up residence there, for the heronry on this island has more than doubled in size. The distance from the Ipswich heronries is about four miles.

Although Night Herons had previously roosted in the southerly grove of the pines in the Ipswich dunes, it was not until 1916 that I found their nests there, some 25 in all. These increased in numbers yearly, and, in 1918, a census taken in December of the nests showed the numbers to be at least 761. The heronry in the northerly grove a few hundred yards from the southerly grove was begun in 1923.

The same issue of 1931 contains an early history of the acquisitions on Plum Island by the Federation of New England Bird Clubs to establish a wildlife reservation. Edward Howe Forbush, first president of the Federation, urged that Plum Island become a bird sanctuary because he thought it was the most important region on the Massachusetts coast. In 1929 Miss Annie H. Brown of Stoneham, a lover of birds, died leaving \$15,000 for the purchase of a wildlife sanctuary to bear her name. The money was used to purchase 300 acres on Plum Island for a sanctuary. The Federation of New England Bird Clubs then purchased an additional 600 acres. In 1931 the Massachusetts Audubon Society (MAS) purchased seventy-five more acres adjoining the Annie H. Brown Refuge. In 1947 the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service purchased the land that is now the Parker River Wildlife Refuge. The MAS used the money toward the



purchase of the Ipswich River Wildlife Sanctuary in 1951.

The ECOC Bulletin also contained bird lists from each of the annual Ipswich River canoe trips, run on the weekend closest to May 15. It was a two-day trip with an overnight at the club's camp (behind Masconomet High School, Boxford) or at the Pines, now Perkins Island within the Ipswich River Wildlife Sanctuary. These lists have been carried forward to the present largely by Alexander. There is a hiatus in this record keeping from 1951 to 1962. Some highlights (first year seen) from eighty-five years of the river trip are as follows: Least Tern (1965), Cattle Egret (1971), Snowy Egret (1968), Glossy Ibis (1971), Gadwall (1970), Canada Goose (1931), Mallard (1932), Red-tailed Hawk (1961), Turkey Vulture (1979), Willet (1983), Ring-billed Gull (1963), Rock Dove (1935), Pileated Woodpecker (1964), Great-crested Flycatcher (1918), Tufted Titmouse (1970), House Wren (1924), Blue-gray Gnatcatcher (1963), European Starling (1919), Blue-winged Warbler (1963), House Sparrow (1919), Northern Cardinal (1969), and Northern Mockingbird (1963).

Also of interest are the years that some birds were last seen: American Bittern (1987), Northern Bobwhite (1927), Cooper's Hawk (1970), Common Snipe (1971), Whip-poor-will (1977), Short-billed Marsh Wren (1946), Eastern Bluebird (1975), Golden-winged Warbler (1981), Vesper Sparrow (1968), and Eastern Meadowlark (1986).

This is but a brief review of the history of the record-keepers of birds of Essex County. Because of Townsend, Brewster, Higginson, and Alexander, we have history. There are many lessons within this history. Is it enough to simply notice? How can we offset future population declines? Locally we are losing marsh birds, the Whip-poor-will, bluebirds, Purple Martins, Bank and Cliff swallows, Golden-winged Warblers, and Red-shouldered Hawks. The overall populations of waterfowl, shorebirds, and wood warblers are on the wane. We must accurately determine by how much the populations are declining and help to identify possible causes. Do we want to be the record-keepers of the last Golden-winged Warbler?

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