

Unusual Behavior of a Baird's Sandpiper

"Have you seen the Baird's Sandpiper?"

After the usual greetings and comments about the hawk flight, this was the first question directed to us upon our arrival on the hawk platform at Cape May Point.

"No, where is it?"

"On the beach, near the fort."

There it was. Right at the water line of the open beach where the surf rolls in from the Atlantic. It was pecking in the wet sand in the company of a Sanderling and a Laughing Gull. Next day, without the Sanderling or gull, it was in the exact same spot. For one full week (October 4-11, 1992) it remained in the same location, seemingly healthy and content, despite beach walkers, joggers, fishermen, even dogs, coming and going up and down the beach—to say nothing of migrating Merlins cruising overhead. As birders who look for it avidly each year well know, the Baird's is a rare autumn migrant along the Atlantic coast. For those individuals that do stop, Forbush poetically describes their haunts and habits.

On the south shore of Martha's Vineyard where in West Tisbury and Chilmark shallow pools are formed from the overflow of ponds and marshes just inside the beach ridge—there the Baird's Sandpiper loves to feed. In late August or early September when the grass has been cut, this bird comes in small parties of four to eight and hunts about the margins of partly dried out pools, threading its way among the stubble or poking about upon the bare mud . . . Occasionally it feeds on the beaches but seems rather to prefer inland ponds and even uplands (Forbush, E.H. 1927. *Birds of Massachusetts and Other New England States*, Norwood Press).

Granted that rare birds and rare behavior do sometimes coincide and that arctic-born juveniles of many species are known to be less people-shy than adults, the aplomb of this particular juvenile in its unusual situation was rather extraordinary.

It is interesting that a Baird's Sandpiper lingered in similar fashion in 1992 for two weeks (September 5-19) on a relatively small, shell-covered area of the upper beach at Lynn. One difference in the people-bird relationship at Lynn versus Cape May was that most viewers and photographers at Lynn were watching over a seawall, whereas the Cape May Baird's was often feeding, busily and unperturbedly, at a distance of no more than ten feet from a semi-circle of scopes, binoculars, and cameras intruding into its area of the beach.

Alden Clayton, Concord, Massachusetts

American Kestrel Caching Food

On May 1, 1992, I had joined David Ludlow at the Daniel Webster Wildlife Sanctuary (DWWS) in Marshfield at lunch to go over the hectic May and June schedules. While we were sitting in the parking lot, an American Kestrel male flew in and landed on a wire near a cherry tree in the yard of the work area. The kestrel was carrying a meadow vole. The bird hopped over to the cherry tree, clambered upward a few branches, and then flew off without the vole. We had expected the bird to pin the vole to the wire with its feet and proceed to eat from the head on down. We had seen that activity many times. Sometimes the only remnant was a rather neatly skinned pelt, and on other occasions, an apparently less hungry kestrel would leave entrails and body parts behind.

We examined the tree and found a mildly weathered and inactive nest of an American Robin near where the kestrel had been. Further examination showed that the vole had been left in the nest. At 3:00 P.M. the vole was still in the nest. No further observations were made that day. One week later, at 6:30 P.M., I was relating the story to Fran Garretson when the bird flew in again, deposited a vole in the nest, and departed. This visit, like the previous one, lasted about one minute, including the time spent on the wire, in the tree, and at the nest.

Until the past few years, the American Kestrel had used the DWWS as a nesting spot and migratory feeding area for many years. We have had as many as three nesting pairs, although one or two were more likely. In the fall kestrels or Northern Harriers occasionally appear for a day or two, using the sanctuary as a rest stop during migration. For example, one day we had seventeen harriers in about thirty minutes, just before dusk. On another late summer day there were more than sixty kestrels on the sanctuary in midafternoon.

When the kestrels that were caching the food did come in, they roosted in the hay sheds near the cherry tree and were regularly seen in the area of the tree and the barns. They did not exhibit any territorial behavior in the area. The cherry tree and the cache nest seemed to be unguarded and ignored. On the day after Fran Garretson and I saw a kestrel deposit a vole in the nest, Bev and Myron Litchfield noticed a kestrel in the same area and watched it eat a small mammal. They mentioned this to David Ludlow who looked into the nest and found that the bird had left substantial remains of its meal in the nest.

There is little doubt that this bird was using the nest as a storage site for its evening meal. The larder was filled during the day at varying times. A morning of successful feeding and hunting might provide the extra item earlier than a day in which hunting was difficult or slow. The meal was left in the nest to be removed and eaten prior to the kestrel's roosting.

David E. Clapp, Marshfield, Massachusetts

Never Bite a Pitohui, It's Poisonous

The genus *Pitohui* (the word even sounds like something you might say as you spit out something that tastes horrible) includes several poisonous species of birds endemic to the New Guinea area. The fact that three *Pitohui* species are poisonous is quite remarkable, because they are the first poisonous birds known to science, and more remarkably this was not discovered until June 1990. The setting for the discovery was a small tent camp about a mile from the nearest road in a mountain forest in Varirata National Park, only a few miles from Port Moresby, the capital of Papua New Guinea. Bruce Beehler of the Smithsonian Institution was conducting research on a variety of bird-related projects, with the aid of a number of graduate students (including John P. Dumbacher) and other helpers. I was at the camp for six weeks and arrived soon after the discovery of the poisonous nature of the Hooded Pitohui, the common representative of this genus at Varirata. These birds are common, noisy, conspicuous, and colorful (bright orange and black), and were often caught in mist nets for banding.

Several entries in my journal mention the discovery: "Occasionally a Hooded Pitohui will thrash around. These birds have poison in their feathers. Michael or Rodney [two natives working for Bruce Beehler] inadvertently put his hand to his mouth after handling one in the nets, and his tongue got numb. It



is well known to the natives that they are poisonous. Jack [Dumbacher] licked some pitohui feathers, and his mouth got numb. There were a lot of 'lick a pitohui' comments around camp. It's sort of a sign of manhood!"

"We photographed them [birds removed from mist nets] and released all but the pitohui, which will be sacrificed for the poison bird study (the meat and feathers are poisonous)."

The results of the analysis of the Varirata pitohuis, and those collected later elsewhere, appeared in the October 30, 1992, issue of *Science* (Dumbacher, Beehler, Spande, Garraffo, and Daly, *Science*, 258:799-801), published by the American Association for the Advancement of Science. The issue had two species of pitohuis on the cover and vaulted the poisonous birds into international prominence. The article tells the story of chemical analysis and informed speculation on the evolution and functions of the poison.

The poison is the steroidal alkaloid, homobatrachotoxin, found only in the three species of *Pitohui* and the poison-dart frogs (so named because their poison is used by South American natives for their blowgun darts) of the genus *Phyllobates*. The presence of the same poison in two different classes of animals, with very different evolutionary histories in different parts of the world, suggests that the poison was evolved independently (polyphyletic origin). Presumably, the poison evolved as a defense mechanism against predators, most likely raptors and snakes, which should be sensitive to it. The poison-dart frogs are brightly colored (some bright orange or yellow), and it is considered probable by biologists that the bright colors "advertise" their poisonous nature—a "bite me and die" statement. It is interesting that the Hooded Pitohui is also brightly colored (orange) and is conspicuous and noisy in an environment where most birds are cryptic and mostly silent. Maybe the pitohui is advertising as well. The Variable Pitohui is much less toxic than the Hooded Pitohui, but some races closely resemble the Hooded Pitohui, which the authors of the *Science* article suggest may indicate mimicry—not unlike the viceroy mimicry of the monarch butterfly.

The article in *Science* details the various analyses of toxicity, the high concentrations of the toxins in pitohui feathers and skin, arguments for the adaptive significance of the poison, and all in all makes for some fascinating reading. I highly recommend it to anyone who is interested in poisons, defense mechanisms, evolution, mimicry, or just plain birds.

William E. Davis, Jr., Foxboro, Massachusetts

Phalaropes, Phalaropes Everywhere

Far overshadowing all other events of the fall of 1992 was the coastal storm on December 11-13, which rivaled the "Halloween storm" of October 1991. Below is a chronology of the storm and selected sightings reported during the storm.

By dawn on Friday, December 11, the storm was full upon the coast. Sustained winds were due east in excess of thirty miles per hour, with gusts up to sixty miles per hour for most of the day. Viewing conditions were satisfactory until midafternoon. One intrepid observer maintained a constant vigil at Andrew's Point in Rockport for seven and one-half hours beginning at 7:30 A.M., with the following results: 115 Northern Fulmars (all light morph), 550 Northern Gannets, 1320 Black-legged Kittiwakes, and 1565 Razorbills. Other noteworthy sightings included Common and Thick-billed murre, Dovekies, a single Pomarine Jaeger, and several Red Phalaropes.

By the morning of December 12, heavy snow enveloped Boston and points to the north, while driving rain prevailed in the milder southeastern coastal region. Winds were fairly steady out of the northeast at about twenty-five to thirty miles per hour, with gusts over forty miles per hour. Viewing conditions were best on Cape Cod. Through midday, observations along the bay shore of Cape Cod were very unproductive. At Sandy Neck in Barnstable, observers saw an early morning flurry of jaegers. Gannets and kittiwakes were present but not in numbers even suggesting anything interesting was happening. A handful of Razorbills and a flock of about seventy Red Phalaropes were about the only observations that served to instill any hope of continued searching with any chance of reward.

By midday most of the shore vantages were closed to the public, and observers were ordered to evacuate in anticipation of storm-surge high tides. A few observers converged on First Encounter Beach in Eastham in early afternoon. Due to the protection afforded from the strong northeast winds, conditions were almost benign. Rain was light, and the ocean was calm. Only a scattering of kittiwakes and gannets was present. Given the lack of activity, some observers went to East Sandwich in midafternoon. Small groups of Red Phalaropes were passing by and as time progressed seemed to be increasing in numbers as the rain slackened. During about one hour of observation, 2100 Red Phalaropes, a Dovekie, and an Iceland Gull were noted before darkness brought an end to the day's observations.

Sunday morning saw the wind shift farther to the north-northeast. Sustained winds had diminished to about twenty miles per hour, with peak gusts to about thirty miles per hour. Light rain persisted until about 9:45 A.M. By 9:00 A.M. some observers had gathered at Sandy Neck and marveled at the spectacle. The dominant theme was Red Phalaropes everywhere. The shoreline resembled a veritable windrow of birds. Small groups would alight on and then take off from

the beach. Many of the birds that landed on the beach were near exhaustion. Extensive patches of what appeared to be foam resolved itself into flocks of phalaropes. Meanwhile a steady flow of phalaropes moved by just offshore. Singles and small groups of Razorbills passed by with an occasional Dovekie. Close observations of several white-winged gulls were made as they drifted over the dune ridge. Anything that appeared to be a duck or duck-like was casually dismissed as uninteresting. Several jaegers lumbered by including an adult dark morph Pomarine Jaeger. The climax was a massive, dark form moving resolutely up the beach toward the observers. Exhausted Red Phalaropes resting on the beach took panicked flight at its approach. The menacing form of a Great Skua passed close enough to see the glint in its eye and the symmetrical molt in its primary feathers. Not to be outdone by the spectacle that was unfolding, it performed a dramatic semiflip, as if waving to the appreciative observers. Soon after, the number of birds began diminishing appreciably.

While unproductive in the morning, First Encounter Beach in early and midafternoon proved highly productive. Northern Fulmars, some close enough to distinguish their diagnostic field marks, flew offshore. Flocks of alcids were almost constantly in sight, many appearing as featureless forms in the distance but a considerable number close enough that bulk and bill shape were clearly noted. A small group of three Atlantic Puffins passed by alone, while others took up consort with passing Razorbills, thus affording comparison of size and shape that are less apparent when viewed alone or at a substantial distance.

Jaegers and skuas were frequent enough to satisfy even the most callous observers. A couple of Dovekies landed on the water not far offshore affording excellent views of their curious neckless appearance. A steady stream of Red Phalaropes continued throughout the afternoon.

By 3:45 P.M., nary a binocular was raised at the passage of a form offshore. A satisfying quietude surrounded the remaining diehard observers. All knew that they had witnessed something special.

The sightings reported on pages 101 through 112 represent conservative estimates. It is likely that the majority, if not all, of the unidentified species were of the dominant species present during the storm. However, due to the presence of some individuals of similar appearance or species that require extremely careful study at close range, those birds were lumped in the sightings under the convenient category of "species unknown." This designation should not detract from the value of the documentation of this memorable storm.

Richard A. Forster, Wellesley, Massachusetts

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