

BOOK REVIEW: *Birds of Massachusetts*

by Frederick Purnell, Jr.

Birds of Massachusetts by Richard R. Veit and Wayne R. Petersen; illustrated by Barry W. Van Dusen. Lincoln, Massachusetts, Massachusetts Audubon Society, 1993, xvi + 514 pages; numerous black-and-white illustrations; range maps; \$39.95.

Massachusetts has been particularly blessed, it seems, as a seedbed of American ornithology. Since colonial times the state has produced a hardy strain of observers, researchers, writers, and artists who have devoted countless hours in the field and in museums to further the study of its native birds. The fruits of all this effort have been remarkable. No region in North America has had such extended and careful analysis of its avifauna as the Bay State. Perhaps Massachusetts inherited more of the spirit of the British countryside than other colonies. In any case, an attitude of respect for the study of the natural world has been developed and fostered in the state, and continues to the present day. The appearance of a new and comprehensive catalogue of the birds of Massachusetts is an event which should be viewed against the background of the ornithological heritage that preceded it.

When I first began to notice birds some forty years ago, it was due to my fourth-grade teacher, Miss Ida B. Talbot, overseer of the Audubon Junior Club of the Cornelius Callahan Elementary School in Norwood. Miss Talbot was a gifted teacher, one who introduced her classes to the world of birds as an integral part of our overall education. Working with my well-thumbed copy of Herbert B. Zim's Golden Nature Guide volume *Birds* and a cumbersome pair of binoculars from my father's army days (no center focus and never quite right on the alignment), I began to keep meticulous notes of my observations. Field trips to Moose Hill Sanctuary in Sharon, where I came to know the inspiring director, Albert Bussewitz, confirmed my passion. I soon graduated to my first Peterson field guide (second revised edition) and began to tackle the tough ones—shorebirds, immature gulls, and "confusing fall warblers." It was on a visit to a museum one day in the full flush of my enthusiasm that I happened upon a rather unprepossessing green volume entitled *The Birds of Massachusetts: An Annotated and Revised Check List* by Ludlow Griscom and Dorothy E. Snyder (1955). It was mine for \$4.95, a hefty sum, considering that it had no plates. Through it I entered another world.

Written with the austerity of a Greek grammar, Griscom and Snyder provided the bare bones of Massachusetts ornithology. The senior author was a legendary field man who had honed his skills in New York before coming to the Commonwealth. He moved the art of field identification to new levels and provided a major stimulus to Roger Peterson in the production of his first field

guide. Yet living in an era when professional ornithologists were extremely chary of sight reports unsubstantiated by a specimen and when the number of experienced and critical field observers was quite limited, Griscom and Snyder applied very strict standards in their consideration of records for inclusion in their catalogue of the state's avifauna. They were particularly intent on correcting what they took to be the insufficiently rigorous analysis of sight reports by their great predecessor, Edward Howe Forbush, in his *Birds of Massachusetts and Other New England States* (three volumes, 1925-1929). Intent on fostering bird protection, Forbush, in their view, had deemphasized the need for collecting as a means of substantiating a species' occurrence in the state. As a corrective, Griscom and Snyder thoroughly combed the ornithological literature and collections, deleting any record based on a specimen not personally examined by them or unsupported by an identifiable photograph. Sight records—even their own—were admitted only in the case of "easily identified species, supported by the multiple observations of competent observers and appropriate as to date and place." While this clearly led to the omission of valid records, they preferred to err on the side of conservatism, making Griscom and Snyder's work the bedrock on which later generations of ornithologists could confidently build.

The same year that Griscom and Snyder's *Birds of Massachusetts* appeared (1955) saw the publication of Wallace Bailey's *Birds In Massachusetts: When and Where to Find Them*, a work which also attempted to supplement Forbush's compilation, but which took a more open stance regarding the admissibility of sight records. Concentrating on reports submitted to the New England Museum of Natural History and the Massachusetts Audubon Society's *Records of New England Birds* during the period 1935-1954, Bailey sought to draw upon the increasing number of competent field observers active in the Bay State since Forbush's day. "Provided with high-powered binoculars, easy access to birding areas, and more field data than his predecessor could accumulate in a lifetime," he argued, "the competent observer is justified in believing that the records he gathers by means of them should be accepted." Bailey chose to sin on the side of inclusiveness: "Occasionally doubtful reports, clearly described as such, have been included to serve as a warning against too hasty judgment or to show that a discrepancy between reports and theory necessitates all the more careful study." Griscom and Snyder would not have concurred; they consigned to their Hypothetical List species whose presence could be supported only by sight records—even those they considered valid.

In the four decades that separate today's birders from the mid-1950s, the trends noted by Wallace Bailey have continued at an accelerating rate. The number of people active in the field has increased to a point the previous generation could not have anticipated, and even if the proportion of what Griscom would have termed "competent" observers may not have grown to the

same degree, the sheer numbers of enthusiastic avocational birders and photographers have made it difficult for an avian rarity to pass through Massachusetts unobserved and undocumented. A body of nearly forty years' worth of records, meticulously maintained by compilers such as Ruth P. Emery, the "Voice of Audubon," or published in journals such as *Audubon Field Notes*, *American Birds*, or *Bird Observer*, would have to be taken into account in order to bring the story up-to-date. In addition, continued refinement of identification skills and new information about patterns of vagrancy would necessitate looking anew at historical records called into question by Griscom and Snyder. It is this daunting project that Richard Veit and Wayne Petersen have undertaken.

The authors of *Birds of Massachusetts* bring a combination of qualities to the task at hand. Each is a trained biologist and skilled field observer with ample experience in Massachusetts. The project had its origin in Veit's master's thesis at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, but the final product is not only the result of a fruitful collaboration between the two authors, but draws upon the talents and effort of many others. An excellent regional survey of Massachusetts, edited by Simon Perkins, makes use of information supplied by birders familiar with their local areas. The handsome line drawings and halftone plates by Barry Van Dusen capture the feel of birds in their familiar surroundings. Anyone who loves birding in Massachusetts will recognize the care and sensitivity that went into their production. Roger Peterson's fine foreword underscores the role the Commonwealth has played in his own life's work and fittingly places this new contribution in its historical context.

Under the general heading "Aspects of Massachusetts Bird Life," Veit and Petersen devote separate essays to the status of pelagic birds and colonial waterbirds, recent changes in the population and distribution of Massachusetts birds, and patterns of migration and vagrancy. A brief chapter on "Sources of Data" surveys the literature consulted by the authors and discusses the method and criteria employed to assess sight records. Their overall approach to evaluating reports of unseasonal or extralimital birds reflects an awareness of the impossibility of applying a single uniform standard to all birds in all situations. Instead, they wisely opt for a more flexible approach, noting that reports of "highly distinctive birds . . . seen under good conditions by experienced observers of known competence" may be deemed sufficient, while notoriously difficult groups such as "skuas or *Calidris* sandpipers" will require more. They also admit that some cases will require specimen evidence for confirmation. A necessary consequence of the need for such flexibility is that the legitimacy of the decisions made will always be assessed in terms of the competence and credibility of the judges. This is as it should be.

The ultimate test of any state catalogue is, of course, the quality of its species accounts. Veit and Petersen accept 460 species as having occurred in Massachusetts through 1991. No accounts are given of known escapes, nor,

unfortunately, of extinct forms. Accounts of the historical status of Great Auk, Labrador Duck, Passenger Pigeon, and, especially, Heath Hen, would have been most welcome, particularly if they had been of the same high caliber as the account given of Eskimo Curlew, whose current status is tenuous at best. Interestingly, a full treatment of the status of European Goldfinch is provided, even though the introduced population was extirpated around 1900, and all reports since the early 1930s are deemed to have been of escapes. There is no hypothetical list.

For each species the authors provide detailed information on range, status, and occurrence within the state, with separate breeding and nonbreeding data presented for breeders. Maps based upon data generated by the Massachusetts Breeding Bird Atlas Project are included for those species whose breeding ranges are judged not to have changed appreciably since 1979. Veit and Petersen have gone to great care to standardize their use of terminology in discussing relative abundance and include specific data on seasonal maxima and extreme dates of occurrence.

The overall quality of the species accounts is extremely high. They range in length from brief paragraphs devoted to one-time stragglers to essays of several pages (e.g., on *Sterna* terns, jaegers, Black-backed Woodpecker). Collectively they present a comprehensive account of the current status of Massachusetts birdlife and the changes that have taken place over the last four decades. In the process they raise the standard of analysis to a new level, establishing a paradigm for all future works.

Documentation of the basis for each species' inclusion is clearly presented. In all but a few cases there is little to argue over. Some eyebrows will no doubt be raised over the decision to list such potential escapes as Greater Flamingo, Common Shelduck, Common Chaffinch, and Eurasian Siskin on the basis of the records cited. The shelduck is admitted on the basis of two records "perhaps not of wild birds" without further justification. (And surely there must have been many other reports of the species in the literature; why are these singled out?) The decision not to include a list of hypotheticals forces the issue on these cases, and a fuller discussion of the prospects of unaided vagrancy would be welcomed. Space limitations obviously preclude consideration of the details of particular records, so we are forced to look elsewhere to learn, for example, why some reports of Pacific Loon since 1960 have been "more convincing" than those of earlier sightings. The infamous "Cox's" Sandpiper receives full and judicious coverage, although the questions regarding its taxonomic status remain unresolved.

The lack of a hypothetical list raises another issue. A major contribution of a state catalogue can be to indicate which reports in the ornithological literature are deemed insufficiently documented or erroneous in those cases in which they would materially affect the overall picture if accepted. Old ghosts should be laid

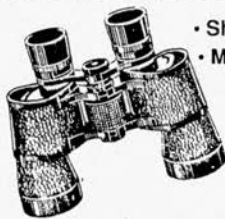
to rest. A list of hypothetical or unaccepted species provides an opportunity to clear the slate and indicate that the authors are aware of the reports but have not seen fit to accept them.

But these are minor points. They do not diminish the value of what Veit and Petersen have given us. They have restored Massachusetts to a position of eminence in the study and appreciation of its avifauna. Their work is a worthy addition to the distinguished tradition it continues. It will serve in its turn as an invitation to another generation to stare into the face of Zeus in an open field in Gill or stand shivering with anticipation on a cold March morning as the sun rises over Joppa Flats.

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