

### Third State Record of Mountain Bluebird in Massachusetts

On January 27, 1995, I was birding at Cape Cod National Seashore, South Wellfleet. At approximately 10:00 AM, I was driving past the parking lot of the headquarters building when I noticed a quick flash of blue from a bird that took flight from a tree in the middle of the headquarters lawn. At first glance, I thought the bird was an Eastern Bluebird. As the bird flew between trees, however, I could not distinguish any rusty coloring on its underside. As soon as I looked at the bird through binoculars, I realized that it was not an Eastern Bluebird but a Mountain Bluebird. There was no rusty coloring on the underside of the bird, but instead a blue-gray tinge to the upper breast and abdomen. There was also some black streaking at the ends of the primaries. I watched the bird fly between trees around the headquarters building for approximately twenty minutes. At one point, I thought there may have been two individuals, but I dismissed that idea; one Mountain Bluebird was hard to believe but two? I called representatives of the Massachusetts Audubon Society at Lincoln and at the Wellfleet Bay Wildlife Sanctuary (WBWS) hoping they might send someone to confirm the sighting. As people began arriving, observers from WBWS and I saw a group of three birds fly toward and land in a red cedar tree approximately twenty feet away. All three birds were Mountain Bluebirds, two males and one female.

These birds were occupying somewhat open grassland habitat interspersed with short pitch pine and eastern red cedar. In addition to grasses, predominant ground cover included bearberry, broom crowberry, and lichen.

Mountain Bluebirds are distributed throughout western North America. They breed from central Alaska and the Yukon Territory through the western provinces of Canada south through the western United States. Wintering birds occur from the extreme western United States south to northern Mexico and east to central and west Texas (National Geographic Society. 1983. *Field Guide to the Birds of North America*). Mountain Bluebirds are rarely observed east of the Mississippi River and are considered vagrants in Massachusetts (R. Veit and W. Petersen. 1993. *Birds of Massachusetts*). Two records for Massachusetts existed prior to this sighting. The first record was a male captured alive on a boat seventy miles south-southeast of Nantucket on April 28, 1980 (Veit and Petersen 1993). The second record occurred on May 29, 1994. An individual in Rutland had snapped a picture of a Mountain Bluebird in his backyard. He did not realize the importance of this sighting until friends later informed him of the significance (W. Petersen, personal communication). In the past several months, two Mountain Bluebirds were observed in Connecticut. Each sighting consisted

of individual birds. To my knowledge, the sighting reported here is the largest "concentration" of Mountain Bluebirds recorded in Massachusetts, New England, and perhaps east of the Mississippi River.

Edwin Hoopes, Yarmouthport, Massachusetts

### White-Winged Junco

On April 1, 1994, I received a phone call from Gwythian Evil of Marion, who asked whether I would like to take a look at a White-winged Junco. Being a bit skeptical, I drove to her house with only binoculars in hand. I did not realize when she called that this bird had been caught in a mist net and I would have a chance to see the bird in the hand. My initial reaction, when I saw the bird, was that it was a large blue-gray Dark-eyed Junco, with two very distinct bold white wing bars. I could not get over the distinct white bands; it was as if an artist had taken a brush and painted two white lines, one on the median wing coverts and the other on the greater wing coverts, against a slate-gray, almost blue-slate background. On closer examination of the coverts, each feather of the coverts was tipped with white for an estimated width of 1/8 of an inch.

The tail was striking in that the sixth and fifth rectrices were wholly white; the fourth rect was ninety to ninety-five percent white, with a narrow inside band that was dusky gray; and the third rect was white from the shaft outward, while the next one had some white, but was mostly a dusky slate-gray.

After looking at all the white on the tail and placing a phone call to Trevor Lloyd-Evans at Manomet Observatory, I decided to make a quick trip home to get my camera and photograph this unusual find. The possibility of collecting the bird was discussed, but the bander decided against it. Several photographs were taken, and the best were duplicated and sent to the Massachusetts Audubon Society and Manomet Observatory.

What was compelling in reading Alden Miller's book, *Speciation in the Avian Genus Junco*, was the close similarity this bird had with *aikeni*, the race called White-winged Junco, normally confined to the Black Hills in southwestern South Dakota. For example, Miller says that white on the third rectrix occurs in ninety-four percent of *aikeni* and only in two percent of *J. h. hyemalis*. Using the following criteria, wing length of 82 mm, two white wing bars (clear white tips on both greater and median coverts), tail (R5 and R6 all white, R4 seventy percent white, R3 forty-five percent white, and only R1 and R2 dark gray), blue-slate-gray tertials, and narrow paler edges on feathers around throat—along with what Alden Miller found in White-winged Juncos, then one can make an excellent case that this bird was indeed a White-winged Junco.

The contrast between the white in the tail and the white wing bars was apparent and easily observed when the bird was released, for it perched on a low

branch and preened allowing for good views with 10x40 binoculars. I noted a pinkish bill with a dark gray tip. The mantle was slate-gray, almost bluish slate-gray.

There are many examples of juncos having featherware that give the appearance of white wing bars, but, as far as I know, there are no juncos from the northeast that have such definite, distinct white bars as did this bird. This bird was apparently distinct from our eastern race.

Richard Harlow, Marion, Massachusetts

### **Murder on the High Seas**

Sunset was approaching on a late January day as Jim Berry and I arrived at Andrews Point in Rockport. We had been enjoying a productive day, so when we heard rumors of a Dovekie in the vicinity, we were eager for one more victory. Since the waters in the direction of Halibut Point proved to be virtually alcid-free save for one meager Razorbill, we tried looking in the other direction toward Cathedral Ledge. As we scanned the waves, I spotted what appeared to be a black and white fishing-line bobber. We looked more closely and saw that the bird was a Dovekie.

But our celebratory attitude was short-lived, for as we observed this bird at what was remarkably close range, a Great Black-backed Gull seemed to mistake it for a floating oreo cookie and swooped down upon it. The Dovekie avoided certain doom by executing a swift dive, leaving the gull apparently befuddled. Jim and I watched in horror as the Dovekie surfaced again and the gull, given a second chance at an afternoon snack, did its best impression of a cat and pounced. A painfully long struggle ensued as, for nearly a half-hour, the gull wrestled with the Dovekie, which thrashed helplessly, merely delaying the inevitable. Eventually the unfortunate Dovekie quietly expired. The final affront to both alcid and alcid-watchers was embodied in the gull's ridiculous efforts, which were pathetically unsuccessful, to consume its prey. Nor could this great behemoth of a larid even pick up the much smaller bird; frustrated, it conceded defeat and fled the scene in embarrassment. Another Great Black-backed Gull made a cursory attempt to pluck the Dovekie from the waves, failed, and departed. The distasteful spectacle was over, leaving a minuscule carcass floating forlornly off into the sunset.

Tom Young, Ipswich, Massachusetts