

# FIELD NOTES FROM HERE AND THERE

## STARLINGS AND TENT CATERPILLARS

On June 6, 1997, I visited Cedar Swamp Pond, in Milford, Massachusetts, for a Saturday morning bird trip. When I first arrived and hiked across the dam, I noticed several larvae of the Eastern tent caterpillar, *Malacosma americanum*, crawling across the paved walkway. They were big sixth instar (final larval stage) caterpillars. At this time of year, when caterpillars reach maturity, they lose interest in eating and abandon their favorite food sources and their tents and wander off looking for sites to spin their white, silken cocoons. I made note of this on my daily field card and moved along.

Later in the morning, on the return journey, I passed by the same spot. I noticed two European Starlings (*Sturnus vulgaris*), busy on the ground. I stopped to see what they were up to and found that they were busy catching tent caterpillars. I watched the birds at work for about fifteen minutes. A starling would land on the ground near one of the caterpillars, seize it, and rub it vigorously on the pavement. The starling would drop the caterpillar and inspect it, then pick it up and rub it again on the pavement. The process would continue until all of the hairs were worn off of the caterpillar. This was a quick and efficient process. Once the caterpillar was "dehaired," it was either eaten immediately or carried off by the starling. Most were carried off (possibly to a nearby nest). The starling would quickly return and seize another caterpillar.

Unfortunately, I didn't have the presence of mind to count the exact number of caterpillars processed by the two starlings, or to carefully time the events. However, during the approximately fifteen-minute observation period, each of the starlings processed between five and ten caterpillars.

When tent caterpillars are very small, in their early instars, they are sometimes eaten by a variety of bird species. When the caterpillars get bigger, in the later instars, their extreme hairiness renders them safe from most avian predators. Only the cuckoos, which are especially adapted to eating hairy and spiny caterpillars, pose a serious threat. Some birds, such as orioles, do eat some large tent caterpillars, but in order to do so, they skin them, consuming only the inner part. The skinning process is slow and inefficient, probably resulting in few tent caterpillars being consumed.

The starlings seemed to have hit upon a process for dehairing the large caterpillars, which results in many caterpillars being consumed when they are abundant, conspicuous, and easy to catch — one more example of the remarkable ability of starlings to efficiently exploit just any abundant food source.

Two excellent, modern books on tent caterpillars are available. *The World of the Tent-Makers*, by Vincent G. Dethier (University of Massachusetts Press,

1980), follows the life cycle of Eastern tent caterpillars throughout the year. This book contains some fine natural history writing and has some wonderful drawings by Abigail Rorer.

Largely because tent caterpillars are serious forest pests, a very large body of literature has accumulated regarding them. *The Tent Caterpillars*, by Terrence D. Fitzgerald (Cornell University Press, 1995), reviews the vast literature regarding tent caterpillars. This book is a comprehensive reference covering most aspects of the biology, behavioral ecology, and economic significance of these caterpillars (everything you wanted to know, and more). In the chapter on predation, the literature regarding predation of these caterpillars by birds is thoroughly reviewed.

— *Richard W. Hildreth*

### ON THE FARM

One nice thing about working on a farm is that you experience wildlife daily over a long period of time, rather than just on weekends. At "the farm" (Waltham Fields Community Farm at the University of Massachusetts Extension in Waltham), it seemed during the summer of 1998 that Killdeer were sounding a little different from the way they usually do (they do trill from time to time); but I soon noticed that we had a pair of Spotted Sandpipers around. Occasionally, they would fly up into the air like larks and sing! Not too elaborate, but louder and more musical than the usual Spotted Sandpiper call notes. In late June, they began to grow more quiet, which made me wonder if they were nesting. On June 23, while picking peas, we came upon a nest with four eggs, off-white with olive splotchings, about an inch long. The nest was well hidden among the peas. I assumed from the size of the eggs that they were Killdeer eggs, but then we saw the Spotted Sandpiper fly quietly in and out! I hope that we didn't bother them too much; we tried to stay away as much as possible.

Unfortunately, there is a sad ending to the story. The farm manager wanted to plow the peas under after they had finished producing, so I persuaded him to wait for a while. But after about three weeks had passed, and no sandpipers were to be seen, the eggs were still there and were starting to smell. I gave up and gave the manager the go-ahead to finish his plowing.

— *Oakes Plimpton*

## **NUTTALL ORNITHOLOGICAL CLUB: 1999 Request for Proposals: Charles Blake Fund Grants**

The Nuttall Ornithological Club solicits proposals for bird-related projects to be conducted in 1999-2000 under the direction of organizations meeting certain qualifications (see below). Selected projects will be supported by grants from the Club's Charles Blake Fund.

Grants will support ornithological research, conservation, and education, with particular emphasis on the birds of New England and the Northeast. The Fund will support grants for research, publication, education, and other worthy ornithology-related efforts. The postmark-date deadline for applications is September 15, 1999. Awards will be announced by October 31, 1999. All funds will be distributed by November 30, 1999.

### **Application Guidelines:**

1.) Applying organizations must be tax-exempt under section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code and must not be private foundations under section 509(a). *In contrast with previous years, applications from individuals will not be considered.*

2.) Three typed copies of a brief proposal must be submitted in the following format:

- Title page: project title and brief abstract; name, address and phone number; proposed starting and completion dates; total amount requested from the Charles Blake Fund.
- Narrative of up to five pages including a) objectives, b) brief review of what is already known or has already been done, c) methods, d) value of the project to ornithology, e) project timetable, including a submission date for the final report, f) detailed budget, including funds applied for or expected from other sources.
- Brief statement of investigator qualifications and a resume.
- Documentary evidence of section 501(c)(3) tax-exempt status must be provided with each proposal.

3.) Grants will generally be awarded on an annual basis from total available funds of at least \$15,000 per year. Proposals may request up to that entire amount. Applications for projects expected to last more than one year will be considered, but no commitment beyond the funds available in the present year will be made.

4.) Proposals will be reviewed by the Blake Fund Committee and will be selected for awards based on the following merits:

- a) contribution to the goals of the Nuttall Ornithological Club
- b) conservation, management, or educational applications
- c) scientific merit
- d) feasibility
- e) qualifications of investigator(s)

5.) Over the first three years of awards from the Blake Fund, during which most grants were made to individuals (we are no longer able to grant to individuals), the mean grant size was \$3,400; and all winning proposals were pertinent to the birds of New England and the Northeast. In the fourth year there were two grants given to support work outside the New England area.

6.) Grant payments will be made directly to the winning applicant organizations, and the Nuttall Ornithological Club will retain no authority over use of paid grant funds. However, the Nuttall Ornithological Club requires that recipients prepare a report on their work and use of grant money within twelve months of receiving the grant.

Proposals should be addressed to:

David E. Clapp  
Nuttall Ornithological Club  
Chair, Blake Fund Committee  
2090 Main Street  
Marshfield, MA 02050  
southshore@massaudubon.org

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### **MASSBIRD.ORG: Massachusetts Birding On-Line**

In May 1999, *Bird Observer* announced the journal's sponsorship of a statewide birding web page, Massbird.Org (pronounced "Massbird Dot Org"). While the home page itself is primarily a series of links to existing web sites of interest to Massachusetts birders, *Bird Observer* has also made web space (and even web page design) available at no charge to all bird clubs in the state. Massbird.Org is also host to the Massachusetts Avian Records Committee home page. Please visit us at:

**<http://Massbird.Org/>**

If you represent a bird club that would like to create a web site at Massbird.Org, please e-mail us at [Webmaster@Massbird.Org](mailto:Webmaster@Massbird.Org)

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## EASTERN MASSACHUSETTS HAWK WATCH

### Annual Meeting September 10<sup>th</sup>

The Eastern Massachusetts Hawk Watch will hold its annual meeting on Friday, September 10, at Drumlin Farm in Lincoln at 7 p.m. (social hour starting at 6 p.m.). The meeting is free of charge and open to the public.

This year's featured speaker is Laurie Goodrich of Hawk Mountain. She will give a presentation on "The Private Life of the Broad-winged Hawk." Ms. Goodrich, the author of the monograph on the Broad-winged Hawk in the acclaimed *Birds of North America* series, will be giving us the most up-to-date information on the breeding biology of these elusive birds. The mass migration of this elegant buteo is the highlight of the fall hawkwatch season, yet few of us know much about the lives of these birds on their home territory. So this presentation ought to be of interest to both hawkwatchers and general birders.

EMHW will also be offering a workshop, "Tips and Tricks for Beginning Hawkwatchers" on Monday, September 13, at the West Medford Congregational Church. This workshop will include a survey of the most frequently seen fall hawks, with special emphasis on how to avoid common mistakes in identification.

For directions and additional information on the annual meeting or the workshop, please e-mail hane@ziplink.net or call (781) 648-3794.

### Volunteer Hawkwatchers Sought

Eastern Massachusetts Hawk Watch seeks volunteers to hawkwatch this fall. You don't have to be an identification expert to participate; indeed, participating is a great way to develop your skills, because the best way to learn to identify hawks in flight is to look for them as often as possible during migration. We need volunteers to hawkwatch from well-known sites such as Mt. Watatic, Bolton Flats, and Wachusett Mountain, especially on weekdays, or from any location you would like to cover, including your own back yard. Reporting the volume of migrating hawks is more important than identifying them all by species.

For more information on participating in a hawkwatch or on submitting reports of what you see, contact Paul M. Roberts, 254 Arlington Street, Medford, MA 02155; telephone (781) 483-4263 after 7 p.m.

### EMHW Information Available

If you are not a member of the Eastern Massachusetts Hawk Watch and would like to receive a copy of the Fall 1998 EMHW Report, complete information on the fall hawkwatch season, fliers on "Where and When to Watch Hawks in Eastern Massachusetts," and a "Guide to Books on Hawks," please write EMHW membership secretary Joe Paluzzi at 362 Elliott Street, Beverly, MA 01915, and enclose a check for \$2 (made out to EMHW) to help defray costs. (You can also get information and join up at the Annual Meeting on September 10th.)

## **BIRD OBSERVER: On Becoming a Truly Statewide Journal**

At the inception of this journal in 1973, records published in *Bird Observer of Eastern Massachusetts* (as it was then called) included only those from east of Worcester County. More recently, the geographical scope of the magazine grew to include Worcester County. Beginning with this issue, *Bird Observer* will publish records from throughout Massachusetts, reflecting more fully the state's wealth of habitats and diversity of bird life, from the waters off Nantucket to the peaks of the Berkshires.

Massachusetts has the oldest and most complete written ornithological history of any region in North America. The written record began in the 1600s, spanned the years during which John James Audubon roamed the state in the 1800s, and continued through the first half of this century through the efforts of such luminaries as William Brewster, Edward Howe Forbush, Ludlow Griscom, and Samuel Elliot and Aaron Bagg.

The latter two, coauthors of *The Birds of the Connecticut River Valley*, were the undisputed authorities on the birds of Western Massachusetts. That mantle is now carried by Seth Kellogg, who, for the past twenty-one years, has maintained and published the records of the birds of Western Massachusetts in the quarterly publication, *Bird News of Western Massachusetts*. In so doing, Seth has kept the bird records from that region seamlessly intact and has provided an invaluable service to the state's birding community as a whole. Seth will continue to publish *Bird News of Western Massachusetts* as an annual report, and he will also edit western records for inclusion in *Bird Observer*.

Just prior to the creation of *Bird Observer of Eastern Massachusetts*, a regional summary of bird records appeared under one title, *Records of New England Birds*. With the addition of the western records, which we hope will represent a steadily growing portion of our "records" section, *Bird Observer* becomes the first journal to provide a statewide perspective on the birds of Massachusetts. This unified view of Massachusetts bird life will foster a better understanding of bird distribution and movements within the Commonwealth, and we hope that it will encourage our readers to explore areas of the state with which they are not yet familiar.

— The Editors

