

RESISTING THE NORTH POLE'S PULL, or, YES, THERE IS (AVIAN) LIFE WEST OF WORCESTER!

By René Laubach

(Editor's note: we welcome René Laubach as guest editor of this special issue of Bird Observer, which is devoted to birds and birding in Berkshire County. Thanks to René and all the contributors to this issue for their hard work and their willingness to share what they know about birding the unusual habitats and enticing locations at the western end of Massachusetts.)

For many birders, and indeed for most citizens of this biotically varied Commonwealth, the Berkshires remain *terra incognita*: a vast, howling wilderness avoided by all but the most foolhardy. Certainly that was once the case for me. Back in 1983, I found myself working in South Dartmouth, Massachusetts, fresh from the prairie state of Iowa and ecstatic about the relocation of my wife, Christyna, and me to the East Coast. The lobster boats, the salt marshes, the stone walls — it was all so quintessentially *New England*. One day, however, while thumbing through a Massachusetts Audubon Society publication about the Massachusetts landscape, I chanced upon a 1904 black-and-white scenic photo. In the distance loomed Mount Greylock. Amazement! I had only vaguely imagined the fact, staring up at me from the page, that my new state wasn't flat. This chance encounter changed my outlook immediately and indelibly. Although I knew that today's landscape is almost unrecognizable from that of ninety-five years ago, the fact that my newly adopted little state possessed formidable uplands intrigued me greatly. Little did I know that less than two years hence (it's a long story), my wife and I would relocate to the Berkshire Hills.

As a nonnative New Englander, it has intrigued me that most residents of eastern Massachusetts are far more familiar with what lies to the north — New Hampshire and Maine — than they are with the western part of their own state. Whatever the sociological, economic, and historical reasons for this, it is real, the storied Tanglewood Music Festival notwithstanding. Although our state is a small one geographically, we in the Berkshires sometimes feel that we might as well be in Ohio. By now you might be getting the distinct impression that we Berkshirites (after fifteen years I almost feel like one) have an incurable inferiority complex. Perish the thought! (although it is probably true that we bird the coast far more often than eastern Massachusetts birders point their vehicles westward on the Massachusetts Turnpike or Route 2).

The Berkshires do have much to offer the birder and naturalist, or indeed anyone else, who lives in the more congested parts of our state: hundreds of thousands of acres of forested uplands, the state's highest peak at 3487 feet

(with almost 3000 feet of elevational relief), and limestone-lined valleys that harbor rare plants, to mention just some of the highlights. And better yet, many of the untrammled conservation lands are accessible to the public. Numerous Neotropical migrant birds, especially vireos, wood warblers, thrushes, and flycatchers — those tantalizing species that zip through eastern Massachusetts on their way northward — actually call the Berkshires home. They breed here. Perhaps that is the most compelling avian argument for birding the Berkshires. And in the process, the sheer scenic beauty, outdoor recreation possibilities, and yes, culture, make this little corner of New England a very special place.

The following articles by some of the area's most active field ornithologists offer a closer look at the status of birds that, while they nest in the Berkshires, are essentially absent from the rest of Massachusetts as breeders. Ron Roncatti relates his extensive experiences with higher-elevation (the average Berkshire elevation is 1500 feet above sea level) species in northern Berkshire County, while David St. James figuratively peers through the cattails at some elusive marsh dwellers. Ed Neumuth explores breeding winter finches in the vast (by Massachusetts standards) October Mountain State Forest, while Don Reid speculates on the dramatic invasion of the neotropical Black Vulture into South Berkshire.

From Black Vultures to Blackpolls, the Berkshires boast an intriguing avifauna. Sure, you can see migrant Swainson's Thrushes and Blackpoll Warblers at Mount Auburn Cemetery, but if you want to see these birds in their Massachusetts breeding habitats, you'll have to venture out our way. Birding the Berkshires may not produce as many ticks on your daily field card as would a visit to, say Plum Island in mid-May, but you'll have a wonderful time doing it. You might even end up agreeing that there is indeed avian life west of Worcester!

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Mt. Greylock, photograph by Susan Carlson