

SOUTHERN BIRDS IN SOUTHERN BERKSHIRE COUNTY

By Don Reid

About five or six years ago, my friend and colleague Alva Sanborn and I were walking around Ledges Trail at The Trustees of Reservations Bartholomew's Cobble in Ashley Falls, Massachusetts. Alva (who winters in Florida) was spending a great deal of time looking at Turkey Vultures. Since the 1950s, Turkey Vultures in southern Berkshire County have become common summer residents and can often be seen by the hundreds. With several large roost sites on or near Bartholomew's Cobble, Turkey Vultures are certainly not difficult to observe here. In late summer and fall, when the more northern birds begin to migrate south, the numbers in southern Berkshire County can be quite amazing. I jokingly asked Alva if he was in search of a Black Vulture (quite common for him in Florida but extremely rare in our area). I believe there had been only one or two confirmed sightings in Berkshire County. We both laughed — and then, a minute later, saw a Black among the Turkey Vultures.

And so the story of the Black Vulture begins. Black Vultures are now increasing residents in southern Berkshire County. They are most often observed in late spring, summer, and fall, although I do have records of winter individuals. Black Vultures have increased in numbers significantly since 1993; as many as six individuals at one time were observed in the summer of 1999 at the Cobble. (I was personally disappointed to find Black Vultures referred to in a recent issue of *Field Notes*, now *North American Birds*, as "trash birds" in southern Berkshire County and northwestern Connecticut; I wonder how they're describing the increase in Bald Eagles in southern Berkshire?) Black Vultures can sometimes be found in small numbers roosting with Turkey Vultures, but more often they seem to prefer sites near them, not with them. Of course your best chance to see them is always when they are on the wing.

Why Black Vultures, and why now? These simple questions open some interesting avenues of thought about expanding bird populations in general. The Black Vulture is, I believe, an easy case to figure out. For years, field ornithologists have known about a unique relationship between Black Vultures and Turkey Vultures. I have had the good fortune to lead many birding trips across the country and have often witnessed first hand the Black Vulture's parasitic relationship with the Turkey Vulture. Turkey Vultures have sophisticated olfactory capabilities — that is, a terrific sense of smell — not often found in the avian world. These olfactory capabilities have long been known to be a benefit to the Black Vulture, which has no such luck. Black Vultures have taken advantage their relative's ability to find carrion for thousands of years. So why not follow them in their northward expansion? Since Turkey Vulture populations began to explode in southern Berkshire, and

Berkshire County in general, it was only a matter of time before the even hardier Black Vultures showed up.

Black Vultures, although smaller, appear to have more true hawk-like capabilities. They are overall much stronger fliers, with feet and mandibles apparently closer in strength to those of a small hawk. Body bulk is also substantially higher than that of the Turkey Vulture. It is not uncommon to see Black Vultures hunting and feeding on live prey (primarily small rodents) in the fields of the area, behavior rarely observed in Turkey Vultures.

At this time I think it likely that Black Vultures are a nesting species in at least southern Berkshire County, along with their cousins. Bartholomew's Cobble, and all of southern Berkshire County, are hot spots for both vulture species probably due to continuing active agriculture. Mowing and pasturing, for example, offer up a fair share of mushy chow. Also let us not forget we're in the middle of cow country here, and there never seems to be a shortage of calf birthing and all the delectables associated with that process.

Although I personally have the opportunity to see Black Vultures on a fairly regular basis because my office is located at Bartholomew's Cobble, it is still a bird you have to work for due to its intermittent appearances. Many birders are still seeking to pick up this elusive critter. On many occasions I have watched disappointed birders leave the area, only to have a couple of Black Vultures go right over the Bartholomew's Cobble parking lot five minutes after they have left. David St. James, a good friend and one of the best birders I know, is a fine example (or not so fine, depending on how you look at it). Dave has searched for this bird for at least a year with no luck yet. Such is the life of the birder!

The increase of another southern Berkshire specialty may be a bit more difficult to explain. It was just six years ago that Red-bellied Woodpeckers began to show up irregularly in southern Berkshire County. Four years ago the first nesting pair was confirmed in Sheffield, and now they are perhaps the most common woodpecker species observed in backyards in southern Berkshire.

Why a northward dispersal of Red-bellied and not Red-headed woodpeckers? Both are found geographically very close to us. There may be several reasons. In their respective ranges, which overlap extensively, the Red-bellied is a much more urban species. And the Red-headed prefers dense or only somewhat open forest. Southern Berkshire County is rapidly becoming more urban, as is the entire East Coast. Another consideration may be feeding habits. The Red-bellied will regularly come to backyard feeding stations, even feeding on the ground at these sites. The Red-headed is usually much too shy for this type behavior. Perhaps Red-bellied is another hardy species that has learned to take advantage of winter bird-feeding stations. I suspect if it weren't for feeding stations, Northern Cardinals would still be considered hot sightings, just as they were not all that many years ago. (*Editor's note: See, also, "Range Expansion of*

the Red-Bellied Woodpecker," by Jerome A. Jackson and William E. Davis, Jr., in the February 1998 issue of Bird Observer [26:4-12].)

There are several other old, tried-but-often-true explanations for the expansion of a species' range. Some birds are doing very well in their natural latitudes and are forced to expand as far north as reasonably possible due to nesting competition. Other species are doing poorly in their historical ranges, and are forced to look for suitable habitat farther north. Whatever the reason, our fine, feathered friends always seem to be on the move. As long as birds have wings and the wind at their back, you can never take anything for granted. When folks come in with reports of some of the wildest sightings, I always tell them just that.

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