

YOUNG BIRDERS

Massachusetts Audubon Birdathon of 1999

Joseph Moffett

I have been interested in backyard birds and hiking since preschool, but in third grade I started to take birding seriously. It was at that time when I was first taken on a bird club walk. My mother and I went with the Brookline Bird Club to Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge — the many different species of warblers that we saw there hooked me. Birding has brought me to places I have never been before. Without birds and birding, I would not appreciate the world around me as much as I do. Birding allowed me to visit Florida this past November, where I was asked to be part of a youth team that participated in the Space Coast Flyway Festival Birdathon. We raised money for ABA educational programs. (*Editor's note: According to the January issue of Winging It, Joe's team came in a "very respectable fourth place" with 139 species.*)

For four years now, I have participated in the annual Massachusetts Audubon Birdathon. I love these events because they allow me to test my birding skills, and at the same time raise money for my local sanctuary, Stony Brook. This past year was by far our team's best (we were able to identify 120 bird species).

On May 14 our team began the 24-hour birdathon in Mendon, where we found grassland species such as Bobolink, Eastern Meadowlark, Savannah Sparrow, and American Woodcock. The area we birded, formerly a small airfield, offers a great habitat for all of these species. It is a Woodcock breeding ground, and the birds were displaying that evening. We then went to West Hill Dam in Uxbridge. This dam was built to prevent flooding in the Blackstone River area. The land surrounding the dam is a wildlife management area, and has a variety of habitats, including grassland, swamp, and deciduous and coniferous forests. We saw a Common Nighthawk, Northern Rough-winged Swallows, Greater Yellowlegs, and Turkey Vultures.

At 3:00 a.m. our team traveled north to check out Oak Hill Cemetery in Newbury, which had been filled with great passerine species the year before. Unfortunately, the area was not very active that morning, and we decided to move on to Turkey Hill Road in West Newbury. As we drove along this road, we were able to pick out and identify bird songs. Off this road is a dirt road (Pike's Bridge Road), and we birded its forest and swamp habitats. We saw or heard a Brown Thrasher, a Cape May Warbler, and a Black-billed Cuckoo. The cuckoo was particularly nice to find - after hearing its distinctively mellow *cu-cu-cu*, we followed the song to its source. The bird was out in the open, singing from the middle of a tree. Probably one of the more disappointing moments at Pike's Bridge Road was the realization that Blue-winged Warblers are capable of singing a Cerulean Warbler-like song. In the same area we have heard another variation of the *bee-buzz* song of the Blue-winged Warbler that sounds similar to the Golden-wing's song (*bee-buzz-buzz*).

After birding at Pike's Bridge Road, we traveled to Newburyport and stopped at the seawall. We soon found out that, unfortunately, we had missed the ideal tide; the stop was fruitless. We moved on to the Parker River NWR on Plum Island, the most productive birding spot of our route. In addition to spotting the usual shorebirds and waders, we came across a large pocket of warblers, including Chestnut-Sided, Magnolia, and a beautiful Wilson's. We also saw a Ruby-throated Hummingbird, a Wilson's Phalarope, and Piping Plovers at the refuge. The hummingbird, in an interesting spectacle, hovered around a red car for some time before flying off to a different area. At our next stop, Gloucester, we spotted a Pacific Loon at Bass Rocks. This was very exciting; we could tell that the bird was a Pacific Loon by the chinstrap visible in wintering adults and most juveniles. Pacific Loons appear casually on the east coast, making this a write-in for us. At Marblehead Neck Sanctuary (one of our last stops), we were able to check off a Blue-headed Vireo and a Yellow-crowned Night-Heron. The night-heron was especially pleasant to see; it was not far from us, standing on a rock with its wings outspread. It was the best look at a Yellow-crowned Night-Heron I had ever had (it was also calling, which made it even more interesting).

In all, it was a great day for us. As usual, we missed some of the birds we expected to get, including Ovenbird, which may have been there all along, but which sang only after the event was over (naturally)! Still, we were able to break our previous record for number of species identified, which made us very proud, and we hope to break this past year's record in the birdathon of 2000. 🐦

Joseph Moffett, 16, lives in Mendon, Massachusetts, and is a sophomore at Nipmuc Regional High School. He is involved in many school activities, including concert band, jazz band, National Honor Society, Peer Education, and Student Council. Last year, he instituted a Rainforest Club at school that has raised money to save rain forest acreage. Joseph is a member of the ABA and the Massachusetts Audubon Society. He is a volunteer naturalist and a councilor in training at the Stony Brook Wildlife Sanctuary in Norfolk and is a member of the Stony Brook, Brookline, and Forbush Bird Clubs.



Digital image by Dotty Moffett

