

YARD BIRDS

Editors' note: We encourage readers to continue sending their observations to brookestev@aol.com.

Are you sure you want to hear everyone's favorite backyard bird story? Well, you asked for it. Dave Cooper and I live on a busy street in Medford in a house on a corner, with neighboring houses close by and very little yard. The "habitat" consists of the shrubs next to the house. I don't keep a backyard list since we see just the usual suburban stuff. Even so, in the two or three years that we have been birding somewhat seriously, there have been a few highlights:

- * The pair of Red-tailed Hawks that sat side by side for a couple hours on Christmas morning in a tree we can see from the kitchen window
- * Four Fox Sparrows that showed up the day after the April Fool's Day snowstorm (2 feet of snow), and stayed for 4 days to scratch for seeds under the feeder
- * An immature Cooper's Hawk that landed beneath the feeder this winter
- * A Robin that we watched building a nest in a rhododendron bush just outside the window in a torrential rainstorm
- * A Ruby-crowned Kinglet that hung out for an afternoon in one of the front yard shrubs
- * A Red-breasted Nuthatch that appeared twice at our feeder just the past weekend
- * And finally my favorite story: One May morning in 1997, the first spring that we owned a good pair of binoculars and had just begun to look for warblers, Dave and I went for a walk at the Brooks Estate, about a mile from our house. While we walked, we heard a strange, new (to us) buzzy bird call and worked hard to follow the sound. Dave finally caught a brief glimpse of the bird, and we got out the field guide and guessed that it was a Blue-winged Warbler. That afternoon, back at home, I realized that I was hearing that same buzzy call in our back yard. Sure enough, it was another Blue-winged Warbler (or had he followed us home?), busily eating little green worms in our neglected pear tree. We got out the lawn chairs and our single pair of binoculars and enjoyed the luxury of watching and listening to this wonderful bird for a couple of hours. We've not seen another warbler (of any kind) in our yard.

Renee LaFontaine
Medford, MA 🐦


My yard is roughly two acres with a hedgerow of bittersweet, multiflora rose, and wild black cherry trees bordering two sides of the property, and a row of hemlock trees along the northern border. About an acre is left untouched and open with a few trees that were planted to attract birds. We also have a weedy field surrounding a 35' x 15' pond and have many bird feeders and different nest boxes. The area consists of agricultural

farmland and deciduous woodlands and is semirural. We are about two miles from Padanaram Harbor.

I started my yard list in 1986 and to date have 147 species. It is hard to list my top 10 birds since I have had some interesting sightings. My favorites would be: a pair of Northern Goshawks, Common Black-headed Gull, Caspian Tern, Snowy Owl, Yellow-throated and Philadelphia vireos, Mourning Warbler, Yellow-breasted Chat, Blue Grosbeak, and Dickcissel. My yard is also a magnet for sparrows, totaling fifteen species to date. These include Clay-colored, Vesper, Lark, Grasshopper, Fox, Lincoln's, and White-crowned.

My most unusual sighting would have to be a Common Black-headed Gull. November 14, 1995 was a drizzly and raw day and I had some stale bread to throw out for the birds. A flock of Ring-billed and Herring gulls came in not long after the bread was out. I watched from my den window (roughly fifteen feet away from the birds) when I noticed a gull with a red bill and legs. After studying the other field marks, it was obvious that it was a Common Black-headed Gull. Not a bad yard and feeder bird!

Micheal Boucher

North Dartmouth, MA 

My yard in Lincoln is a 2.3 acre corner lot on a hill with oak-lined roads on two sides, a conservation wetland with swamp maples at the bottom of the hill, and conservation land (mixed pine and oak woodland) a very short distance away in several directions. My actual back yard is mostly mowed grass, but across my street is an overgrown field with a few apple trees and some bramble patches, and a short distance away are farm fields and ponds. In a nutshell, anything could visit briefly or fly over.

I have lived here for 6 years now, after almost 25 years in a bleak condo in Brookline where I was starved for birds and greenery. The exquisite joy of finally having a yard to observe, and the fun of adding to my yard-bird list was one of my primary motivations for becoming a serious birder.

Very early on, I decided to keep my backyard mowed so I could raise bluebirds, and each year a pair has graced the property, raising up to three broods a season — some successful, some not. These hardy and gentle souls have provided me with hours of drama, sadness, and joy as I watch them guarding their boxes, incubating and feeding their chicks, helping their young fledge, and facing agonizing adversity like snowstorms in April, House Sparrows and House Wrens raiding their nests, and Crows trying to eat the new fledglings as they first try to fly. The Bluebirds never give up and are models of perseverance — keeping the petty problems of my own life in perspective.

Other birds visit as well, and I love to add to my yard list whenever possible. To give myself a fighting chance, given that my property is in no way ideal bird habitat and few birds actually nest here, my yard list rules allow me to count anything I can see or hear while standing within my property boundaries. To my own amazement, I now have seen or heard 104 birds (106, if only I could distinguish a Herring from a

Ring-billed Gull flying overhead at 500 feet). Included in this count are 18 species of warblers, 3 wrens, 5 different raptors, 6 sparrows, and 2 owls. Many other species have flown over or have spoken briefly but have remained unidentified, leaving me perpetually motivated to learn more.

Most birds made my yard list in the first two years, and now I am lucky if I can add two or three in any given year. So, if I hear something new, all conversations stop, friends or relatives roll their eyes, and out I run to identify the latest visitor. I have been outside at 3 a.m. in my nightgown, finally to be blessed with a face to face encounter with "my" Great Horned Owl. I stand in my driveway at 20 minutes past sunset to get a glimpse of "my" migrating Woodcock. I stop commuter traffic at 5:30 a.m. as I crane my neck from the street to identify the call notes of the latest migrating warbler.

Each visitor is a joy and a blessing. Warbler migration (when, at last, that orange cheek of a Blackburnian Warbler peeks out from under a leaf in the canopy) and the unpredictable arrival of winter finches is always wonderful. The annual arrival, singing, and nesting of the neighborhood pair of Blue-winged Warblers in the scrubby field across the street is heartwarming. The occasional appearance by Pileated Woodpeckers, a Rusty Blackbird, a Fox Sparrow, or an Indigo Bunting can't help but be thrilling. Some visits are simply unforgettable — like Wood Ducks copulating on the branch of an oak tree within sight of my porch; being woken every morning one entire season by the song of a Wood Thrush under my window; the chimpanzee screeching of Barred Owls sorting out their territory; the death of a pigeon at the talons of a Sharpie; and thirteen turkeys admiring their reflections in my sliding glass door. Nonetheless, I love all my goldfinches which are there every day, even if they eat my spinach and beet greens. And, my all-time favorite will always be the first chickadee to find my brand new bird feeder after only two hours.

Nancy Soulette
Lincoln, MA 🐦

Your request for backyard bird information got me to review my lists and journal. I, too, am amazed at the diversity of visitors to my yard. Our feeders regularly support 14 species, with another 3 or 4 seasonal "regulars." Our total list is 45 species. This year's highlight has been a Red-bellied Woodpecker. I had not seen one in my yard in 7 years!

More important to me than numbers and rare birds is the daily rhythm and constancy that backyard birds provide. They have become part of my extended family. I eagerly await their children in spring and carefully fill their feeders throughout the winter. If a "regular" does not show up for several days, I begin to feel concerned and keep a watchful eye out for him or her. I love to go out on bird trips and see many different and beautiful birds, but I feel a real sense of relationship with my backyard family. It is something I value greatly!

Ann Gurka
Watertown, MA 🐦

My wife, Ellie, and I live on the Merrimack River in Salisbury, just down river from the two bridges that connect Amesbury with Newburyport via Deer Island. In fact, we live exactly opposite Eagle Island which is just down river from Deer Island. We live on 23 acres of mixed habitat that includes the river, saltmarsh, grasslands, mixed woodlands, and successional brushlands. We feed cracked corn to the ground feeding birds; black oil sunflower, safflower, and a woodpecker mix in tray and tube feeders; suet for the woodpeckers and nuthatches; and nectar for the hummingbirds in season. We feed all year since we like to see the birds all the time.

Additionally, we have 12 nest boxes that have drawn Eastern Bluebirds, Tree Swallows, Great Crested Flycatchers, House Wrens, and Black-capped Chickadees in the three years that we have been here. We also have a variety of nesting species on the property including Red-tailed Hawks, Mallards, Rose-breasted Grosbeaks, Northern Cardinals, Tufted Titmice, American Robins, Eastern Phoebes, Wood Thrushes, Gray Catbirds, Northern Mockingbirds, Brown Thrashers, Downy Woodpeckers, and Northern Flickers to name a few. We have not taken an inventory of all nesters.

My best sighting this year was in late February to early March when the ice was breaking up on the river. I had 7 Bald Eagles in sight at once with 5 in flight in one binocular field. This is the most I have seen at one time since living here. Usually 4-5 has been the maximum.

A couple of incidents also featured Bald Eagles. The first was last year when I went out in the early morning to tend the bird feeders. I noticed a group of birders on Eagle Island all looking in my direction with scopes and binoculars. I waved to them and then heard a sound above my head. An eagle was sitting on a tree branch about 20 feet above me. The second incident happened this year when I saw one immature eagle being chased by another. The first eagle had a hornpout that the second eagle wanted. The first eagle landed in a tree about 30 feet away from my deck and proceeded to eat the fish. The eagle stayed for approximately 30 minutes and leisurely consumed its meal.

Perhaps my favorite sighting was of a Mourning Warbler two years ago. It was a rainy morning in May and I was out in the yard observing migrating warblers. I wandered into an adjoining piece of property and took shelter under a cedar tree. After a few moments I noticed the Mourning Warbler in the brush about 30-40 feet away, so I stayed perfectly still to watch. Eventually he came my way and proceeded to forage within 6 inches of my feet, while I had the best look ever at this hard-to-observe species.

Randall L. Shore
Amesbury, MA 