

Searching for Seabirds in All the Wrong Places: The Joy of Finding Pelagics Inland

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“How can the mountain finch know the wild swan’s aspiring?” (Zen phrase)

There is indeed something akin to imagining the sound of one hand clapping in looking well inland for birds normally associated with the high seas. It seems positively oxymoronic. But unlike the famous Zen koan, enlightenment is much easier to come by. My article will focus mostly on Worcester County and nearby areas because that is where I live and the area with which I am most familiar.

I admit to still getting a thrill from finding species like Oldsquaw and scoters on bodies of water like Lake Quaboag, and Wachusett and Quabbin Reservoirs. Despite the fact that these species are found yearly in interior lakes in the state (although uncommon at these locations), in Massachusetts we usually associate these ducks with the late fall and winter oceans. Consequently, finding one on a pond or lake well inland has a special kick to it. Traditionally coastal shorebirds like Red Knot or a godwit are extremely exciting finds from Worcester County west. Even better of course, is finding a truly oceanic species well inland.

Now, I have done my share of hurricane chasing on the coast. Sheila and I have driven through many a gale, through horizontal rain while dodging flying tree branches and swerving around downed power lines. Sometimes, when the path of the hurricane is right, it is quite a spectacle. But it is a long and very scary drive from here to Cape Cod. How much more satisfying and convenient then to find a pelagic in one’s own backyard.

Most pelagics in the county are seen after major weather events, usually strong hurricanes. For best results, the eye of the hurricane should pass well inland and over or even to the west of Worcester. My first successful inland pelagic hunt came on August 20, 1991, the day after Hurricane Bob. On the day of the hurricane itself, a rather large linden tree fell clear across our street and smack into our front door announcing that this hurricane was something special. When we opened our front door, we were “in” the tree among impenetrable branches, and I will never forget the smell of the wet foliage or the alarming number of yellow jackets. Amazingly, our driveway remained open, and in the middle of the storm we headed out to Wachusett Reservoir. The number of trees down across the roads made the trip difficult, and when we arrived at the Mile Hill Road overlook in Boylston, the winds were still blowing so hard as to make a scope useless. We could find no interesting birds to speak of in all the turmoil. We did, however, pick out Fran McMenemy across the water huddled behind a maintenance building.

The next morning, we were up at dawn and walking out on the Sterling Dike. Sheila spotted what she first thought was a nighthawk fluttering far out on the water. The only problem was this nighthawk kept landing on the water and taking off again. After we got a scope on the bird, it turned out to be a Leach’s Storm-Petrel. Granted,

we had seen plenty of Leach's during coastal storms and on pelagic trips, but there is something very special about finding one so far inland that made this my most satisfying sighting. Later that day, with Bob Bradbury, we spotted several Common Terns and even a Gull-billed Tern. Common Terns are much more regular, although still pretty uncommon, along the Connecticut River Valley than they are in Worcester County. The Gull-billed Tern was a county record, and I was hooked on inland pelagic birding.


Sometimes it can be something less than a hurricane that can bring coastal waifs well inland. Nor'easters, tropical storms, and sometimes just a good, strong wind from the right direction usually combined with rain can bring coastal birds to the county. On November 2, 1997, we found a Roseate Tern on Indian Lake in the city of Worcester. This was a day after just a decent rain and windstorm. Weeks later, on November 23 at the same spot, a second winter King Eider was found among a flock of Common Mergansers. Another nonhurricane pelagic was found on November 2, 1986, when Fran McMenemy and the Forbush Club had a Northern Gannet on Wachusett Reservoir.

Although it would seem that Quabbin Reservoir would make the best spot to head for when the weather conditions are right, this may not be the case. Though Quabbin is undoubtedly the largest body of water in the state, your access by car is limited to the Quabbin Park off Route 9. Even here at the southern terminus of the reservoir, in a hurricane the State Police and MDC could close the access roads beyond the Winsor Dam because of the possibility of tree damage. The advantage to Wachusett Reservoir is that it is surrounded by public roads which allow an almost complete check of the water without having to hike far at all. Indeed, over the last two decades, Wachusett Reservoir has hosted several Leach's, numbers of jaegers, and even a Northern Fulmar (September 27, 1985, seen by Fran McMenemy). Last year, after the passing of Hurricane Floyd on September 17, Sheila and I found a small flock of Common Terns, a Forster's Tern, and a first winter Laughing Gull.

Of course, any large body of water can host a storm-driven bird, as Indian Lake illustrates. On September 6, 1979, during Hurricane David, a jaeger species, likely a Pomarine was found pursuing a Sooty Tern at Lake Quaboag in Brookfield. Sometimes the birds do not even make it to any body of water at all. When Worcester County experienced the monumental hurricane-like blizzard on March 13, 1993, an exhausted Black Skimmer was found in a snowbank in Auburn. This bird, banded in 1989 in Maryland, later expired at the Tufts Wildlife Clinic. Sometimes coastal or pelagic birds appear inland for no apparent reason, like the Marbled Godwit at Quinapoxet Reservoir or the Arctic Tern that spent some time one summer along the Connecticut River.

One last tip. If the weather conditions are right and the hurricane has passed well inland, be sure to look at your chosen body of water throughout the next day. It often seems that interesting birds can drop in anytime during the day. This is especially true of terns. It seems as if the birds, initially blown well inland, are making their way back to the coast after the storm abates somewhat but may drop in on any large body of water en route to rest and feed. Watch especially any sandbars or jetties in large ponds and reservoirs which may appeal to exhausted birds.

Realistically, your chances of finding pelagics inland are slim, but that is what makes those sightings all the more memorable.

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Osprey Update:

MassWildlife's successful Osprey Recovery Project has been redirected in response to the tremendous comeback of the birds. When begun in 1981, only 41 pairs of ospreys were known to nest in Massachusetts, the majority of which were confined to the Westport River estuary under the watchful eye of Gil Fernandez of Dartmouth. By enlisting the support of ComElectric, Mass Electric, Eastern Utilities, environmental groups and the public, MassWildlife led a campaign to provide artificial nesting poles across southeastern Massachusetts for the fish-eating hawks. By 1990 the osprey population had soared to 200 nesting pairs and reached 300 pairs just a few years later. Range expansion occurred as well with ospreys establishing territories across Bristol, Plymouth, and Barnstable Counties, then jumping north to Essex County and inland to Worcester County. With the population secure, MassWildlife and the utility companies can no longer justify prospecting for new nest pole sites. Rather, biologists are providing the public with information and plans to enable them to erect nest poles themselves. This frees up limited state resources that are devoted to other, more urgent conservation needs. For their part, the utility companies are now graciously dealing with "nuisance" ospreys, as the opportunistic birds can easily build their huge stick nests on active transmission poles and towers. MassWildlife continues to provide technical assistance in dealing with these conflicts and also works with cooperators to monitor a sample of the nesting population to determine productivity.

Eagle Cam:

Two bald eagle chicks are growing rapidly in a wild nest located on an island in the Connecticut River in western Massachusetts. What makes this nest unique is the placement of a video camera above the nest which transmits images to a nearby mainland receiver. Residents in the immediate area have access to the video signal via their local cable TV network, while folks around the world have been checking the eagles' progress via the internet. Single video frames are captured by computer at the Silvio Conte National Wildlife Refuge office and transmitted to offices of Northeast Utilities where they are posted on the company's web page and refreshed every five minutes during daylight hours. The web site is now receiving thousands of visits per day. Check out this fascinating wildlife success story by logging on to www.MassWildlife.org and clicking on the "eagle cam 2000" box or go directly to www.nu.com and click on "Eagles Raising Two Chicks."

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