

FIELD NOTES

The Subjective Effect of a Desirable Visual Stimulus on Exhaustion: Sighting of a Harris's Sparrow (*Zonotrichia querula*) in Amherst, Massachusetts 5/14/2000

Mark Lynch

On Birdathon Saturday, May 13, Sheila Carroll and I returned from one *long* day of birding the Berkshires for the Broad Meadow Brook Sanctuary of the Massachusetts Audubon Society. We had been up since 4 a.m., and it was now 7 p.m. I also organize our sanctuary's Birdathon efforts, which is not unlike planning the D-Day assault. We phoned in our birds to Deb Carey, and I asked if anything unusual had been seen. Some good birds certainly had been tallied, but nothing too outre. Sheila and I then immediately hit the sack because I had to lead a class field trip the next day to south Quabbin that met at 7 a.m. This has become a tradition of sorts, as many of the people in the class also participate in Birdathon. We all show up tired and bleary-eyed to trade stories and look at migrants.

We had a great class trip on Sunday, getting good views of lots of birds, including a pair of Cerulean Warblers. By noon we had hit the wall, and headed back home totally exhausted. Dragging ourselves in the door, I noticed a folder in the slot. This was the Birdathon species list totals for our sanctuary as compiled by Deb. We had seen an impressive 227 species.* I glanced down the list to make sure no bizarre birds had been reported. At Broad Meadow Brook we are sticklers that even during Birdathon, a species reported has to be identified carefully and correctly or not reported at all. One species leapt off the page. The Wild Bird Crossing Team had reported seeing a Harris's Sparrow. My reaction was "What?!!!" with some deleted expletives thrown in. I immediately called Bill Cormier, head of the Wild Bird Crossing Team. He said that team member Bill Lafleche on a scouting mission had found the bird. They had faxed their team's species list into the sanctuary, and so the list had not been seen until after I went to bed. I quickly called Bill Lafleche, a good, careful birder who birds south Worcester County extensively. He was on his way to a wedding, but gave me a long list of details of his sighting.

On Saturday Bill had hiked into Lawrence Swamp in Amherst in the hopes of seeing some cuckoos. All he got for his efforts were several thousand black flies and mosquitoes. He returned to his car which was parked a little way down busy Station Road in a small dirt pulloff. He heard what he thought was a Rose-Breasted Grosbeak in a nearby bush. Checking it out, he spotted a strikingly plumaged bird that was unfamiliar to him. At first he thought it was an aberrant House Sparrow, but quickly realized it was an unusual sparrow. Fortunately, he had James D. Rising's guide, *The Sparrows of the United States and Canada*, and realized he was looking at an adult summer Harris's Sparrow, a species he had never seen before. He used his car phone to call other team members while he was watching the sparrow feed on the ground

right in front of his car. The details sounded convincing, but Bill had no previous experience with this species.

I was now faced with a tough decision. A bird of this rarity in the state needed confirmation and documentation. It was 2 p.m., and Sheila and I were exhausted from Birdathon and from leading a full morning trip. The idea of driving west yet again on Route 9, beyond where we had just met the class that morning was tough to contemplate. After some deliberation, Sheila grabbed her camera, I grabbed our binoculars, and we went for it.

It was a long drive out to Amherst, with two tired and cranky birders sitting in silence for most of the trip. Bill's directions were good, and we soon found the dirt pulloff on Station Road. This was along a small stream and across the street from a horse farm. The immediate area had lots of dense low shrubbery and willows with taller trees further back. Cars sped along the road, which had no other nearby pulloffs or sidewalks, making birding along the edge all but impossible. It was also hot, humid, and dense with biting flying insects. It is at times like this when you realize that there is a thin line between birding and standing on the side of the road looking like an idiot.

Sheila and I started to systematically check the area. After about half an hour of no results, we were standing in the small parking area feeling even more tired and cranky when Sheila loudly whispered to me, "It's right next to you!" Sure enough, an adult Harris's Sparrow was sitting quietly in a bush below eye-level not three feet from me. It then hopped down to the ground where it proceeded to feed quietly on dandelion seeds. I slowly backed off, and Sheila grabbed her camera and began shooting. Suddenly, I was no longer tired.


The bird seemed oblivious to our presence. It would often disappear in the taller grass at the edge of the pulloff, but would soon wander out into



Photographs by Sheila Carroll

plain view. It hopped behind our car, feeding right next to it. Sheila slid into the passenger side and called Scott Sumner, asking him to alert Valley birders. Scott lives in Belchertown just minutes from where we were. Scott was mowing the lawn at the time, and I can only imagine his reaction to getting a phone call from two birders from Worcester reporting a Harris's Sparrow virtually in his backyard. Minutes later, a grass-covered Scott showed up with daughter Samantha. The sparrow was still there behind our car at the time, and Samantha started taking photographs of the bird while Scott watched it from inside his car. We all remained as quiet as possible. The bird was still there when we left to return home and notify other birders. Interestingly, the ride back was much more pleasant than the ride out.

Unfortunately, the sparrow was not seen after this, but that did not come as a surprise. The parking area could hold at the most four cars. As birders were notified of the sighting and piled into the area, there was literally nowhere for the bird to go. If the road had other pulloffs, or if birders could have watched from across the street, the bird might possibly have been seen later. This was an unusual case of a rarity showing up in a spot where you had to stand in the only place where the bird wanted to be.

An interesting coda to this report is that birders looking for the sparrow that night had a Sandhill Crane put down at the horse farm. Also, I heard a report that another birder had possibly seen the Harris's Sparrow on the Friday before it was officially found, but had dismissed it as an aberrant House Sparrow as they drove by the area. 

**Editor's note: Broad Meadow Brook Sanctuary placed first out of fourteen sanctuaries participating in Massachusetts Audubon's Birdathon 2000.*

A Tale of Urban Red-tails

Lorraine Kaplan

It is not unusual to see Red-tailed Hawks around Boston — a walk through Boston Common or the Fenway will almost always produce one. Similarly, at Boston University we typically would have an immature Red-tail spend the winter hunting around central campus.

About three years ago, however, I noticed that our wintering immature Red-tail had been displaced by an adult. This hawk was shortly joined by another and I could see them sitting together, sharing prey, and soaring together — often the male would fly above the female with his talons down. We had become host to a mated pair of hawks. I watched the birds repeatedly flying off to a particular area, and within a few weeks I located the nest in a woodlot on Amory Street close to Hall's Pond. The following year, the hawks nested in the same woodlot.

This year I again saw the birds together frequently (the male hunts on campus year-round) and witnessed a lot of courtship behavior, but there was a difference — the birds were clearly not in the Amory Street woodlot. I suspect that some major construction a block away may have scared the hawks from the site. So where was

this year's nest? I could not see the hawks flying off to any particular location, and I eventually became resigned to not knowing where to find the nest, assuming there was one.

On May 17, I was working late and at about 7:00 p.m. walked over to Burger King on Commonwealth Avenue, just outside of Kenmore Square, for a quick dinner. As I approached Burger King, movement caught my eye and I thought it was one of the adult hawks on one of BU's buildings. A closer look left me awestruck — I was looking at a baby hawk walking around on its nest — on a fire escape at the back of one of BU's four-story brownstone residences! Over the following days I was able to see that there were three young hawks in the nest. In the weeks since May 26, when I shot the accompanying photo, I have watched the birds, now fledglings, on nearby buildings and surrounding trees, learning to be hawks. But that is another story — I can't wait to see how it unfolds. 🦅



Photograph by the author

New Voice in Western Massachusetts . . .

Jan Ortiz has replaced Scott Sumner, the Voice of Audubon for Western Massachusetts for the past sixteen years. Jan is only the fourth Western Massachusetts Voice of Audubon in its history, following Scott, Helen Bates, and Seth Kellogg. Jan has an extensive knowledge of bird distribution throughout western Massachusetts as well as New England.

All Massachusetts Voice of Audubon recordings are now available by calling the toll-free number 1-888-224-6444.