

YOUNG BIRDERS

A Winter Outing

David Allen

On Sunday March 4, my friend, Ed Morrier, invited me to come birding with him. He planned to go to Winthrop, Nahant, Lynn, and Gloucester. In Winthrop we searched for Snowy Owls at Logan Airport with no luck. In Nahant we looked fruitlessly for another Snowy Owl that had been on buoys 15 and 11. In Lynn the funniest incident of the trip occurred. While driving calmly, Ed exclaimed excitedly, "Building 19!" and took a sharp right into a Building 19 parking lot. At this point, I was wondering how Ed's mental health was and why he wanted to go to Building 19 while birding. It turned out I had not been reading my MassBird carefully. Recently, Short Eared Owls had been seen there. After spending a long enough time behind Building 19 — three and a half minutes — we had not seen any owls so we headed for Flax Pond in Lynn. There were supposed to be good ducks at Flax Pond. The people who saw the birds reported them from a playground, so Ed and I found a playground on a map (the wrong playground we found out later) and went there. The problem was all we saw was ice. We thought the people seeing ducks here must have been crazy until we drove around to the other side of Flax Pond. There we found another playground (the right one) near open water. In the open water there were many ducks and gulls. The highlights were three American Coot, five Ruddy Ducks, and more than twenty Lesser Scaup. It was 2:30 p.m. by then so we hightailed it to Cape Ann.




Part of a page from David's notebook

When we reached Cape Ann, Ed and I headed straight for Atlantic Road, East Gloucester. Nothing was going to stop us from trying to see the Atlantic Puffin reported on MassBird the previous day, except that Ed desperately needed gas. After stopping for gas, we continued on to Atlantic Road looking for any alcids or birders. Nearing the end of Atlantic Road, we started to get worried because we weren't seeing any birders either with the puffin or without it. Ed and I decided to try Dog Bar Breakwater. As

he was pulling into Eastern point, I spotted a birder at Niles Beach taking out her scope. We turned around and went to see what she was seeing. She hadn't seen anything there, but she had had the puffin a few hours earlier at the breakwater. After thanking, her we traveled down to Dog Bar Breakwater as fast as the many speed bumps would let us. On the way we ran into two birders who had just been at the breakwater and hadn't seen the puffin. Not a good sign, I thought. When we got there, two people had the bird!

It was right there! I first saw the puffin through another birder's scope. It was so close, though, that a scope wasn't even necessary. With binos you could easily see its massive, comical, orange bill. The puffin was very cooperative. It was staying within fifty feet of the shore most of the time, and just hanging out on the surface for up to five minutes at a time. Although watching the puffin was most interesting when it was entirely above the water, observing it dive was also very interesting. First, the puffin would spread its wings. Then it would tip its head down like a dabbling duck and just slide its body into the water. And it happened so fast, if you blinked, you missed it. The fact that Atlantic Puffins are so rare also made everything about this one more exciting.

Near the breakwater there were many other birds. Three Black Guillemots in breeding plumage and a drake Barrow's Goldeneye were found with a raft of Common Goldeneyes. Most of the other common sea ducks were seen also. Any other day many people would have watched these birds, but today the guillemots were practically ignored, and the Barrow's Goldeneye was only watched for the few minutes when the puffin was underwater.

I had a really memorable day getting killer looks at a life bird rarely seen in Massachusetts, and it wasn't even in a roaring nor'easter. Although we didn't accomplish our goal for the trip, to find Red-throated Loon and Red-necked Grebe for Ed's year list, I think the puffin made up for that. 

David Allen, eleven, is a fifth grader at Wilson Middle School in Natick, Massachusetts. David has been birding since he was seven years old when his interest in hawks extended to birds of all kinds. He has been birding in Vermont, New Hampshire, Maine, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, New York, Florida, and the Bahamas. David also plays sweeper for his soccer team, the Natick Warriors. His other hobbies include painting and drawing (birds, what else?), reading, and skiing.

