

HAIRY WOODPECKERS IN WESTON

Leif J. Robinson, Wellesley

The December, 1974, issue of American Birds contains the "Blue List" for 1975. This compilation calls attention to species "declining in numbers whether in restricted areas or throughout (ornithological North America). The Hairy Woodpecker was "Provisionally added to the list on the basis of opinions of three reporters in Florida and the Central Southern Region. No mention elsewhere. To be watched."

Since last April I have kept records of all birds seen during field trips throughout Weston, Massachusetts. These data can yield the number of woodpeckers encountered per hour, providing a basis for future comparison. During 28 trips from April 7, 1974, to February 16, 1975, a total of 9 Hairy Woodpeckers and 87 Downy Woodpeckers was recorded.

Since no Hairy Woodpeckers were found between June 22nd and September 18th, only autumn, winter and spring data were considered initially. On the average, 2.35 Downy Woodpeckers were sighted per hour and only 0.33 Hairy, a ratio of 7.1 to 1. Averaged throughout the year, Downy Woodpecker sightings remain virtually constant at 2.46 per hour, but the Hairy sightings fall to 0.14, a ratio of 17.6 to 1. Interestingly, though as many as 12 Downy Woodpeckers were recorded on a single trip, I never found more than 1 Hairy.

Therefore, my recent experience indicates that few, if any, Hairy Woodpeckers remain as breeding birds in Weston. This finding is at variance with Charlotte E. Smith's An Annotated List of the Birds of Weston, Massachusetts (1952), where the Hairy Woodpecker is described as a "Regular permanent resident." However, my result is consistent with the historical status of this species in eastern Massachusetts:

1895 H. D. Minot, The Land-Birds and Game-Birds of New England. "(Hairy Woodpeckers) rarely breed in eastern Massachusetts, and are not even common in winter. The constant decrease of woodland in this part of the State has caused them in a great measure to desert it."

1901 R. H. Howe and G. M. Allen, The Birds of Massachusetts. "Cambridge: Uncommon winter visitant." "Dedham: 'Rare.'" "Wellesley: 'A regular and usually scarce fall and winter visitant, rarely a summer resident.'"

1906 W. Brewster, The Birds of the Cambridge Region of Massachusetts. "The Hairy Woodpecker may be found in the Cambridge Region from October to April ... it is never really common." Brewster cites the nesting dates as April 22 to May 5.

1929 E. H. Forbush, Birds of Massachusetts and Other New England States. "As winter approaches many Hairy Woodpeckers leave their forested breeding grounds and appear in orchards and villages and in parts of southeastern Massachusetts where they are almost unknown in summer." Egg dates: April 22 to May 30.

1949 L. Griscom, The Birds of Concord. "Formerly a common resident, steadily declining with the wrecking of the woodlands. Now rare and local, unmated birds often seen wandering about in the breeding season."

1955 L. Griscom and D. E. Snyder, The Birds of Massachusetts. "Common resident in the richer and more extensive woods of the interior, rare to uncommon eastward ... sometimes found in towns and cities (has nested in Mt. Auburn Cemetery, Cambridge, for decades)."

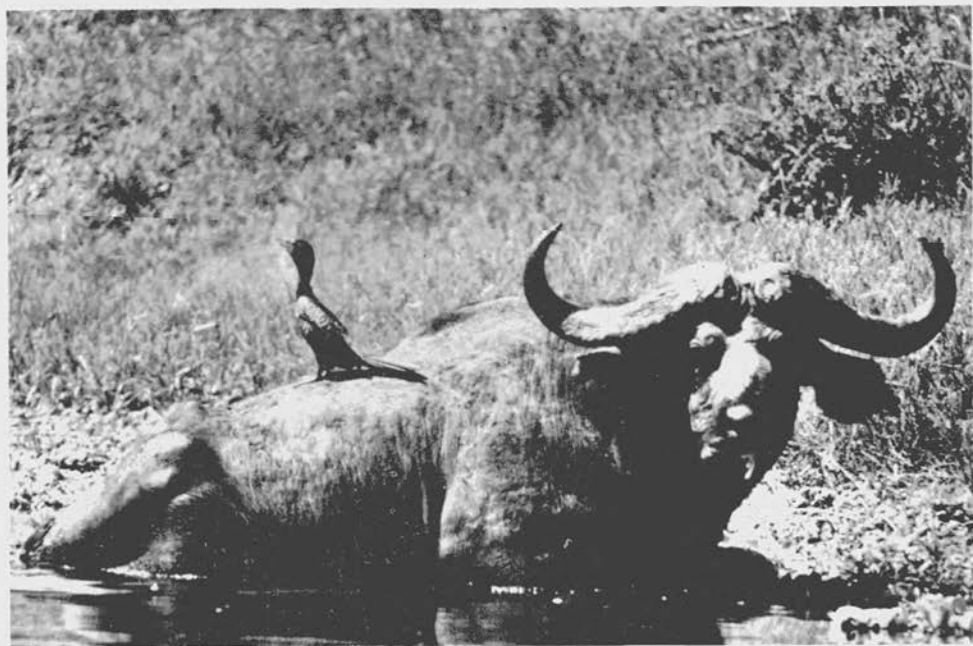
1955 W. Bailey, Birds in Massachusetts. "An uncommon permanent resident in most regions of the state. It is essentially a bird of the heavily wooded areas and is decidedly uncommon, often rare, along the coastal plain. During the coldest months it often moves nearer to suburban areas."

In conclusion, it appears that the status of the Hairy Woodpecker in Weston has not undergone any dramatic change during the past 80 years.

POSTSCRIPT: In preparing this article, I checked Bird Observer for records of Hairy and Downy Woodpeckers. There were none! To me this situation appears to reflect a general apathy among birders toward "common" species. One should not anticipate today which records will be of interest tomorrow.

L. J. R.

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