

Additional Significant Essex County Nest Records from 2001

Jim Berry

In two recent issues of *Bird Observer* (Berry 2000, 2001), I summarized recent nesting confirmations for fourteen species of birds for which nests in Essex County, Massachusetts, have seldom (if ever) been found. My field work in 2001, supplemented by that of several other observers, added to the list of significant recent nesting records for the county. What follows is a brief summary of those observations for eight species. Some of them pertain to the same species covered last year and some to additional species.

Pied-billed Grebe, *Podilymbus podiceps*. Pied-billed Grebes have nested in Essex County on occasion, but not consistently. Townsend (1905, 1920) knew of no county breeding records, and his research went well back into the nineteenth century or farther. Griscom and Snyder (1955), writing of the species statewide, had this to say: "An inexplicably local summer resident, not known to nest in the coastal plain or the outer islands, and said by Forbush (1912) to have decreased greatly as a summer resident since 1850." Root (1957-1958), however, mentioned several nesting locations in the Andover region, estimating two breeding pairs a year in that area in the 1950s. (The "Andover Region," as Root defined it, is the northwestern part of Essex County, but excluding most of Methuen and Haverhill north of the Merrimack River.) Veit and Petersen (1993) cite the Parker River National Wildlife Refuge as a



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breeding site in the latter half of the twentieth century, even as statewide breeding numbers were decreasing, with a maximum of four breeding pairs in 1973. This situation came about as a result of the creation of three freshwater impoundments on Plum Island in midcentury after the establishment of the new refuge in the 1940s.

In recent years, however, the quality of the freshwater marshes on the refuge has deteriorated, partly due to introduced plant species such as purple loosestrife and phragmites competing with the native cattails and apparently lessening the appeal of the marsh for many nesting birds. This has been a difficult problem to manage; in addition, water levels have been inconsistent, with fresh water being let out of the impoundments for various reasons at various times, and salt water introduced into the North Impoundment over the last few years. Whatever the causes, few of the marsh birds that used to nest in those impoundments are still breeding there. The last published record of nesting Pied-billed Grebes on Plum Island was in 1978, when a pair with six young was seen on August 19 (*Bird Observer*), although Rick Heil (pers. comm.) observed ten birds including several juveniles on 7/14/79. There have been

quite a few summer records of grebes on Plum Island in the intervening years; some of the *Bird Observer* reports have been of multiple birds, e.g., five on 7/10/81 and four on 7/12/82. The presence of this many adults was a good indication of nesting at least through that year, but after that summer, reports trickled off to one or two birds with no reports of juveniles, so it is unlikely that they have nested there in two decades.

One of the *Bird Observer* reports was of an immature bird in Salem on July 4, 1995. Ian Lynch (pers. comm.) described to me what was almost certainly a juvenile Pied-billed Grebe in a productive wetland known as Thompson's Meadow. However, he did not ever see or hear adult grebes in the marsh that year. Thus that nesting can only be assumed and should be regarded as probable rather than confirmed.

Given this background, it was nothing short of exhilarating in the spring of 2001 to hear a Pied-billed Grebe yodeling frequently in a relatively new (but large) beaver pond in Willowdale State Forest in Ipswich. The marsh, which is very close to Route 1, has been there all along, but in recent years has had its water level raised by beavers. This change has clearly made it suitable for grebes to move in; to my knowledge, nobody had ever found them there in the breeding season.

The proof of nesting came on June 9, when Susan Hedman, Geoff Wood, and I searched the marsh in Geoff's canoe. We found a suspicious mound of wet decaying vegetation, about a foot across, in open shallow water near some sparse shrubs. We inspected it and found six eggs under the top layer of vegetation, which I photographed. It is typical for grebes to cover the eggs when leaving the nest, so I knew we had it. The whitish eggs were beginning to be stained brown from the decaying vegetation, which is also typical for the species and for grebes in general (Baicich and Harrison 1997). Later that morning, Susan and Geoff, standing on land, saw an adult grebe slide off the nest.

On June 23 Geoff returned to the nest to find three exposed eggs, but no other evidence of the birds except for a grebe calling. On July 4 we checked it again and found two cold, exposed eggs, but no sign of any grebes. It was not until July 15 that we knew any of the eggs had hatched, when Jan Smith and Rick Heil (pers. comm.) observed an adult Pied-billed Grebe with two chicks. I went to a point overlooking the marsh the next day and spent an hour observing an adult grebe with three stripe-headed chicks, perhaps two-thirds grown in length and about half in bulk. Now all six eggs were accounted for, with three hatching and three failing to hatch.

The behavior of the birds was fascinating to watch. The chicks followed the adult around (but not always closely) as it foraged, sometimes picking things off the surface themselves and sometimes begging for food with plaintive peeping notes or, in one case, by pecking the parent on the neck. The adult was generous with the food it brought up from the bottom, usually offering it to the nearest chick. The food appeared to be plant matter, but I could not be sure; the species' diet is mainly animal food (Ehrlich et al. 1988). When the adult preened, the chicks preened, but when the adult dove, the chicks usually stayed on the surface. They dove occasionally, but only briefly, and were clearly just learning how to do it. There was some aggression among the young, indicating that a pecking order was probably being established. All this activity took place within about fifty yards of the nest. The last sighting I had of these

grebes was of one of the juveniles on August 15, now competently diving and feeding on its own.

Least Bittern, *Ixobrychus exilis*. Unlike the American Bittern, *Botaurus lentiginosus*, which was consistently called a "common summer resident" in marshy areas through the first half of the twentieth century (e.g., Townsend 1905, 1920; Forbush 1925; Griscom and Snyder 1955), declining only in recent decades as the pace of wetland destruction accelerated, the Least Bittern was labeled a "rare summer resident" by the same authors, although Griscom and Snyder suspected that it was "badly overlooked." Veit and Petersen (1993) also call it a "rare and local breeder" in Massachusetts. Nevertheless, there is no lack of nesting records in Essex County. J. A. Farley found a nest with eggs in Lynnfield in a year unspecified by Townsend (1920);



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Least Bittern, Cambourne Pond, Rockport, September 4, 2001

fledglings there on 7/15/87, but no young have been documented there in *Bird Observer* since.

Most of the cited authors say that Least Bitterns are restricted to extensive cattail marshes for nest-building, which makes the nests too inaccessible to be found very often. Even the fledged young are rarely seen, as the above review of the records shows. Thus evidence of breeding of this elusive species is always exciting news. The 2001 nesting season provided a bonanza for Essex County in that two nesting pairs were found, and although the nests were not discovered, young were fledged for certain in one case and very probably in the other case. Neither pair was on Plum Island.

The first pair to be found was in the previously mentioned beaver marsh in Willowdale State Forest in Ipswich, presumably the same birds that were there the two previous years, although no evidence of nesting was obtained then. I heard and/or saw Least Bitterns there on June 9, July 4, and August 15, 2001; they were seen as well by many other birders from May through that entire period. On July 4 Steve Leonard and I were in Geoff Wood's canoe and came very close to finding the nest. We had several looks at a male and a female both standing and flying, and at one point they converged on the same small area of thick cattails within minutes of each

Griscom and Snyder mentioned nesting locations in Ipswich and Wenham Swamp. Root (1957-1958) stated that a pair nested regularly at Chadwick Pond on the Haverhill-Boxford line. Rick Heil (pers. comm.) suspects they have also nested in Peabody and Rowley, and perhaps to this day in Lynnfield Marsh, although recent confirmations are lacking. The Plum Island impoundments have been at least occasional nesting locations, where adults are often seen but rarely with young. Heil observed a female with two

other. We could not get the canoe into that area (which was just as well), but I am reasonably certain that is where the nest was.

Additional evidence came on August 15, when from an overlook on the shore I observed two different Least Bitterns fishing at the edge of a cattail stand. Neither of these birds was the adult male, based on their pale plumage, quite unlike the striking contrast made by the male's black crown, back, and wings. This means, on the assumption there was only one breeding pair in the marsh, that I was seeing either the adult female and one fledgling, or two fledglings. I could not see white down on the head of either bird, but the likelihood that one or both were fledglings was very high.

Greater excitement came on August 5, when Rick Heil discovered a family of Least Bitterns in Cambourne Pond, opposite Pebbly Beach in Rockport, only yards from the Atlantic Ocean. For weeks afterward, the spectacle of the whole family fishing the pond was enjoyed by scores of birders, although fish were not their only source of food: on August 5 Rick had watched one of them snatching familiar bluet, *Enallagma civile*, damselflies from the air. Some of the birds remained on the pond until at least October 7, a late date (Jerry Soucy, *Massbird*). This was a remarkable nesting site in that the pond is disturbed and has no cattails, but is dominated by phragmites and purple loosestrife. The pond is also variably brackish, testing at four percent salinity on August 14 (Ted Tarr, pers. comm.). That a pair of Least Bitterns would nest in such seemingly unfavorable habitat is both astonishing and encouraging, since it is an indication that the bitterns might be starting to adapt to the exotic aquatic species that have taken over so much of their historical nesting habitat. (Note, however, that in coastal Mississippi, nesting Least Bitterns "seem to make little distinction between fresh, salt, and brackish environments;" Judy Toups, pers. comm.) It also means that the pond had an adequate food supply regardless of the introduced plants.



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Young Least Bittern at Cambourne Pond on August 13, 2001

My own enjoyment of these birds came on August 14, when I watched them for an hour or two with Karen Haley and Dave Bates. The birds we saw that morning were the adult female and three fledglings. They appeared at the edge of the reeds after a period of clucking from deep within the cover. The young ones had downy feathers sticking out of their heads, which made for fabulous photos on the internet (not mine). Two of the young stayed in the open virtually the entire time, where they were practicing their newly acquired fishing skills to very different degrees. One of them mainly sat still or climbed around, clucking occasionally (a guttural *uk uk uk*) to keep in contact with its parent(s). This bird made only one (successful) strike at a fish during the period we had it in view.

The other bird was an accomplished little predator. Within half an hour we saw it make eleven strikes and come up with a minnow on ten of them! What made it even more remarkable was that its perch was on a broken reed at least a foot and a half above the water. From this lofty position it would lean over until it spied a small fish. Then it would slowly stretch down as far as it could, revealing its incredibly long neck. The extension of the body was complete when it made the strike, after which, amazingly, it would spring right back up to its perching position. Most of the time. On several occasions it lost its balance when making the strike and dangled by its feet, eventually climbing back up to the perch – always with the fish firmly gripped in its bill! Never have I admired a baby bird like I did this one. It put to shame three fledgling Green Herons, *Butorides virescens*, that I watched in training in Ipswich on July 16, which were coming up with nothing but weeds and sticks!

This experience was one of the highlights of my birding year. Few things are so rewarding as watching young animals learn how to survive. This family of Least Bitterns, nesting as it did in unaccustomed habitat and raising young to be efficient hunters, gave me hope that the species is hanging on amid the plethora of human activities that collectively overwhelm so many habitats and creatures. The baby that caught so many fish and gave us so much pleasure gets my vote as Bird of the Year.

Common Eider, *Somateria mollissima*. Last year I reviewed the literature to the effect that Common Eiders have nested historically only from the midcoast of Maine north, with the recent exception of an introduced population in the Elizabeth Islands in Buzzards Bay and scattered nests in Boston Harbor. Nesting at the former location was initiated by the introduction of eider chicks to Penikese Island from 1973-1975. Those birds began nesting by 1976 – the first recorded nesting of the species in Massachusetts – and had grown to an estimated 200 nesting pairs on several islands in Buzzards Bay by 1988 (Stanton 1989). There was a report of a female eider with two downy young in outer Boston Harbor as early as 1982 (Jeremy Hatch, *Bird Observer* 10 (4): 194-95); after that nesting apparently increased, for in a 1994 MDFW coastal waterbird breeding survey, division biologists discovered thirteen eider nests on four harbor islands (Heusmann 1995).

I also mentioned frequent verbal reports of eider chicks from the islands off Rockport, including my own observation of three rather large ducklings with adult females off Straitsmouth Island in late July 2000. Such records provide excellent circumstantial evidence of nesting in Essex County, but given the ability of waterfowl to lead babies miles from the nest within days or weeks of hatching, absolute proof of nesting would require the finding of an actual nest or, at the least, the presence of tiny chicks obviously just hatched.

Additional circumstantial evidence was found in 2001 by Chris Leahy and Linda Pivacek (pers. comm.). Chris discovered a hen with three chicks “more or less newly hatched” off Niles Beach in East Gloucester on June 12, and figured that she might have nested on nearby Ten Pound Island in the harbor, which contains a summering eider flock each year. There is no reason to think this flock is all immature birds: adult males are in eclipse plumage in summer and adults could certainly constitute part of the flock. Linda observed a female Common Eider with three “quite small” ducklings July 7 off East Point in Nahant. The mother was trying to show the young how to feed

in the rockweed without getting swamped by the swells. Reports of babies this small make it more and more evident that the birds are nesting along the rocky coast of the county.

More direct evidence was obtained from Brad Blodget, the recently retired State Ornithologist. After my article was published, I learned of H.W.

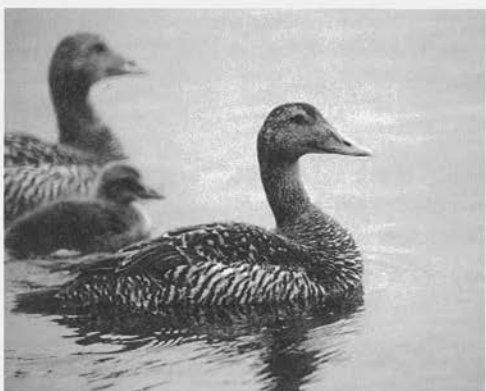
Heusmann's 1995 article in *Massachusetts Wildlife*; in it, he cited an eider nest Brad found "on an island off Cape Ann" in the 1994 coastal waterbird breeding survey. From Brad (pers. comm.) I learned that he visited

Norman's Woe, a large rock off Magnolia, on May 16, 1994. He and his crew were surveying for nesting Double-crested Cormorants, *Phalacrocorax auritus*, and large gulls. They incidentally discovered an apparent Common Eider nest lined with down and containing two eggs, although no duck was on it, and Brad suspected that the nest had been abandoned. The day was stormy and they did not linger, and no follow-up visit was made.

I hope to be able to explore some of the Cape Ann islands by boat in the coming years, which is what it will take to find occupied nests. Meanwhile, the circumstantial evidence for nesting in Essex County appears overwhelming, especially in view of the finding in June 2001 of no fewer than 214 (!) Common Eider ducklings in Boston Harbor (Petersen 2001). The question thus becomes whether the local nesting birds are expanding south from the historical Maine breeding population or north from the Boston Harbor population. A related question is whether the Boston population itself came from the introduced Buzzards Bay colony or represents a southward expansion of the long-established Maine population, wherein birds perhaps bypassed Essex County in view of the large number of gull colonies on the offshore islands. (Large gulls are very fond of eider ducklings; on the other hand, eiders contend with gulls almost anywhere they nest.)

Without an eider banding program the answers will remain elusive, but the apparent explosion of breeding eiders in Boston Harbor argues for that population as the source of what few birds might be nesting in Essex County. It will be interesting to see whether the eiders, under pressure of expansion, will be able to adjust to their larid predators and establish a viable breeding population on the North Shore. It may be that there are already many nesting attempts, and that the broods observed in 2001 were some of the very few that succeeded.

Northern Harrier, *Circus cyaneus*. Townsend (1905, 1920) described the "Marsh Hawk" as a "common summer resident, very rare in winter." Today it is almost the opposite. The Northern Harrier as a nesting bird in mainland Massachusetts is virtually a thing of the past. Even by the 1920s, Forbush (1927) had downgraded it to a "rather common migrant and summer resident in open lands...formerly much

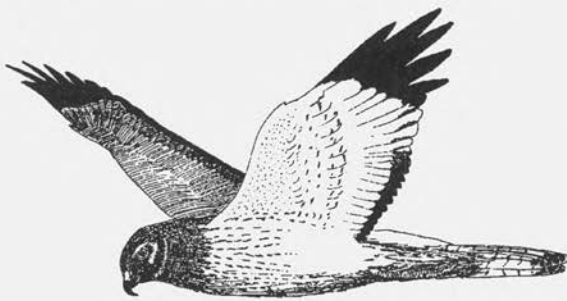


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Common Eiders in Iceland

more common....” By midcentury, Griscom and Snyder (1955) were calling it a “locally common summer resident throughout the state at lower altitudes....” Veit and Petersen (1993) state that “Northern Harriers have decreased considerably as breeders in Massachusetts since 1955. Their decline is probably due to habitat destruction and ecological succession in the open fields and pastures where they prefer to nest.” I would eliminate the “probably” from that sentence. Jim Brown (pers. comm.) grew up in a part of Danvers with fields and wet meadows where harriers nested regularly into the 1950s. He showed me photographs of eggs and young in a nest he monitored there in 1951 as a teenager. That area was filled, cleared, and developed, like so many other wildlife habitats across the state. End of harriers.

The last nest from Essex County cited in Veit and Petersen (1993) was one with five eggs found in Andover in May 1956 and credited to Oscar Root. That nest was



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reported in *Records of New England Birds* for May 1956 from North Andover and indeed credited to Root. However, Root (1957-1958) did not mention finding any nests himself; rather, he cited three nests found in the Andover region by Jack Holt in 1953, 1956, and 1958. Jack Holt (pers. comm.) remembers finding only one nest in that time period, in North Andover,

probably in 1956. When he checked his written records, he did not find that nest but did find that he had banded young in nests in Newbury in 1960 and in West Newbury in 1960, 1961, 1962, and 1963. The 1963 nest was therefore most likely the most recent Essex County breeding record. Whatever the case, by the mid-1960s the species had clearly disappeared as a breeder in the county, and on the mainland in general, remaining as a nesting species only on the islands off southeastern Massachusetts with the exception of a nest in Weymouth in 1986 and territorial pairs in four or five scattered locations since then (Tom French and Dan Furbish, pers. comm.). For this reason it is officially listed as a state-threatened species.

In 2001, Rick Heil confirmed probably the most significant Essex County nesting record of the year when he watched a pair of harriers feeding young in a dry portion of a cattail marsh in the North Impoundment on Plum Island. The breakthrough came in May when Paul Roberts alerted Steve Haydock of the Refuge staff to his observation of courtship behavior by a pair of harriers over the Hellcat marshes and fields. Steve Haydock (pers. comm.) saw both adults hunting the fields adjacent to the marsh in mid-June and alerted Rick Heil, who on June 21 witnessed a food exchange in which a male harrier passed a rodent to the female, who rose up from the marsh to accept it and dropped back into the cattails with it. This alone was virtual proof of nesting, but the show continued. On July 4 the female dropped into the nest site with more grasses, and on July 12 with a rodent. On August 8 the female was seen with a freshly plumaged juvenile near the nest site, the juvenile sometimes perching on the

dike while the female hunted. On August 11, 13, 14, and 15 the female was seen hunting the Hellcat marshes with 2-3 juveniles (Rick Heil, pers. comm.).

The irony of this unexpected and very welcome breeding episode is that it comes just as the Refuge management is about to give up on maintaining the North Impoundment (but not the other two impoundments) as a fresh marsh. For several years, salt water has been sporadically introduced into this pool in an attempt to begin returning it to its original, pre-Refuge salt-marsh condition. The stage is thus set for a very difficult management decision: should the marsh, infested with phragmites and purple loosestrife, and considered by the staff an inordinate consumer of time and resources to maintain, be returned to salt marsh, or should efforts to maintain the fresh marsh be renewed in view of a state-threatened species beginning to use it as a breeding site? The management issues are complex, and the Refuge staff has been open to input on the subject, but the future of this marsh, representing over 100 of about 265 acres of fresh marsh in the three impoundments, is in doubt.

In my own view, it is the fresh marsh that is the threatened habitat in the northeast, not the salt marsh, and management for state-listed fresh-marsh species should be adopted as a priority in Refuge planning. The salt marshes have their share of important species, such as the maritime sparrows that nest there and the dozens of species that use them in migration and winter, and management for these species is certainly important. But the cattail marshes attract many of the state-listed species in Massachusetts: grebes, bitterns, rails, moorhens, and harriers. All these species except the harriers adopted the Plum Island impoundments as breeding sites in the decades after they were created, although they were made specifically to encourage the nesting of Black Ducks, *Anas rubripes*. But the Black Ducks never nested there in significant numbers, and today the grebes, bitterns, moorhens, rails, and Ruddy Ducks, which were fairly regular nesters until the early to mid-1980s, are no longer breeding. Now we are in danger of losing the largest of the three impoundments, and this loss would be felt most keenly by several state-listed species that deserve protection and encouragement. These impoundments have been some of the most valuable nesting sites for these birds in the entire state, and perhaps could be again if management for this purpose became a Refuge priority.

Sharp-shinned Hawk, *Accipiter striatus*. Last year I reported on a Sharp-shinned Hawk nest in a Norway Spruce grove on Choate Island in Essex Bay, the first Essex County nest of the species for which I have found evidence since 1896. Remarkably, another pair nested in Willowdale State Forest in Ipswich in 2001, making two county nests in two years. This nest was in a pine stand along the south edge of the marsh mentioned above. The nest tree was beside a trail that edges the marsh, and was in fact only yards from the open marsh, on the edge of the pine grove. Several other similar nests could be seen in adjacent pines, indicating possible nesting by sharpshins in prior years, although I am certain they did not nest there in 2000 because of the amount of time I spent in the same grove watching for Least Bitterns in the marsh without encountering any sharpshin activity.

I discovered the nest on June 9, the same day three of us found the Pied-billed Grebe nest out in the marsh. I was waiting for Geoff Wood and Susan Hedman to return to shore from their first canoe excursion to pick me up when I noticed an adult

sharpshin foraging and perching among the dead lower branches of the pines in the grove. Eventually I saw the bird on a nest 65-70 feet up in an Eastern white pine, although I could see no young. On June 30 I watched an adult break off a dead pine twig and carry it to the nest, where I still could not see any young. So far the bird(s) did not seem alarmed at my presence.

On July 8 things picked up. I could see one white downy young in the nest, and I also witnessed a food exchange from the male to the female, as Linda Cook and I had observed several times on Choate Island the year before. But unlike that pair, which had always tolerated our presence and freely fed the young in front of us, this pair was much more aggressive, especially the female. That day she made two stoops on me, coming within inches of my head. Both adults gave frequent alarm calls, so my visits to the site from then on were always very brief, usually not more than a few minutes, just long enough to put the scope on the nest and get out. I believe that the hatching of the young was the point at which the birds changed their behavior from tolerant to intolerant.

On July 16 I could see three young. By now they were mostly brown, and one had already branched out a few feet from the nest. This older nestling imitated its mother's alarm calls, only higher-pitched and not so loud. The mother stooped on me again, so I declared defeat and left. On July 20 I saw one young on a branch and none left in the nest; also another food exchange from the male to the female, who was clearly doing the feeding. On July 28, with Susan Hedman and Nick Nash, I saw both adults and two fledglings, who were giving frequent begging calls. At one point the young birds landed on the ground at the edge of the marsh and one of them bathed. With the young now flying, the parents tolerated our presence much better, did not stoop on us, and gave few alarm calls.

My experience over the last two nesting seasons has convinced me of the likelihood that Sharp-shinned Hawks have nested in the county more often than has been observed or documented. It is apparently a case of nests simply not being discovered. For example, Jim MacDougall (pers. comm.) observed a sharpshin carrying food on the Boxford-Georgetown line on June 22, 1998. This bird may have been nesting. There seems to be plenty of acceptable habitat, so it may be just a matter of time until more nests are found, although the species should still be considered rare in the breeding season.

Alder Flycatcher, *Empidonax alnorum*. The history of this species is more difficult than most to trace because the former Traill's Flycatcher, *Empidonax traillii*, was split in 1973 into two species, Alder Flycatcher, which became *Empidonax alnorum*, and Willow Flycatcher, which retained the old scientific name, *Empidonax traillii*. However, before the common name "Traill's" was adopted in 1957, the species was called Alder Flycatcher. That is what Townsend called it in his books of 1905 and 1920, with the subspecific name *alnorum* (*Empidonax traillii alnorum*). This implies that today's Alder Flycatcher is the form that was found in Essex County a century ago; Townsend gives no hint of two different populations with differing songs and call notes, despite the fact that the very existence of a subspecific name implies the existence of other subspecies. Nor does Forbush (1927) refer to other song types; he is consistent with Townsend in describing the songs of yesterday's Alder

Flycatcher as what we today refer to phonetically as *fee-BEE-o*, *vee-BEE-er*, or syllables to that effect.

As for nesting, Townsend cites confirmed breeding locations for Alder Flycatchers in Lynnfield, Groveland, and Amesbury. Forbush has a map showing no fewer than five nesting locations in Essex County and three more in Middlesex and Norfolk Counties, although he described the bird as nesting more commonly in the western half of the state. Griscom and Snyder (1955) added West Newbury to the list of breeding sites, which is apparently one of the dots on Forbush's map. Interestingly, there is no mention of a second form (the future Willow Flycatcher) in this landmark work on Massachusetts birds, although Peterson (1947) had already called attention to the difference in song types in his popular field guide. Perhaps this form had not moved into Massachusetts by 1955.

In the 1960s things started to change, as the *fitz-bew* form of the species started moving into New England from the west and south. Since I have lived in Essex County (1972), the Willow Flycatcher has been the common nesting species. I encounter them routinely and have found several of their nests over the years, beginning with one in Ipswich on June 27, 1976. Alder Flycatchers, in contrast, remain hard to find in the county in summer. I am aware of only two or three locations where they may be regularly found in the nesting season, and these are mainly power lines with brushy wetlands. To my knowledge, no Alder nest has been found since the species was split in 1973, and perhaps not for many years before that.

I was therefore happy to find a small cluster of these birds along the power line in West Boxford a few years ago. Over the last several nesting seasons I have found singing and calling Alder Flycatchers in four different places along this power line, all within a two-mile stretch. More significantly, I observed an adult bird carrying food on July 8, 1999, and again on July 22, 2001. In neither of these instances were any Willow Flycatchers vocalizing in the area. On the latter date I made a careful search for the nest but did not find it. I returned in January 2002 and searched for the nest again in the leafless brush, still without success. This, combined with the rather late date, leads me to believe that the bird may have been feeding a fledgling rather than nestlings, although I have little doubt the nest was nearby. This one location has been the most consistent for the Alders, and both instances of food-carrying were in exactly the same place, near the edge of a beaver swamp. Food-carrying constitutes firm evidence of nesting for most songbirds including flycatchers, and establishes that the species is still breeding in the county.

As a footnote, this power line contains a major beaver swamp that harbors the only large Great Blue Heron nesting colony in Essex County that I am aware of; the colony itself straddles the North Andover town line. This is a rather recent colony, discovered in the 1990s, that rapidly doubled in size from about 43 to about 82 active nests between 1997 and 2001.

Blackburnian Warbler, *Dendroica fusca*. The nesting status of the Blackburnian Warbler in Essex County is a bit of an enigma. Last year I reported an instance of nest-building in Boxford in 1998, and summarized the available literature to the effect that the species is a rare breeder in the county and has been over the past century. I can now add significant additional information on this species.

Townsend (1905) summarized what was apparently the first confirmed county nest record as reported by his friend J. A. Farley in *The Auk* in 1901, a record I neglected to mention in my previous article. Farley found a nest in Lynnfield on June 21, 1901, where he thought the species was "a rare but regular breeder." The nest was thirty feet up in a hemlock, at the end of a long branch. Unfortunately, Townsend did not include anything in his summary on what the nest contained; only its construction.

Another major source of information in my research on the ornithological history of the county has been the series of annual *Bulletins* published by the Essex County Ornithological Club (ECOC) from 1919 through 1938. The *Bulletin* for 1924 contains a short piece by Rodman Nichols about his study of a Blackburnian Warbler family at his camp in Boxford in late June and July of that year. He describes hearing and seeing a male bird that carried food regularly to a suspected nest site high in a dense white pine. Later, he and his family observed both birds of the pair along with two fledglings, starting on July 10 and lasting until July 30. The nest could not be found, but the account firmly established a second county breeding record.

One field ornithologist disagreed that the species was a rare nester in Essex County, and that was Oscar Root (1957-1958), who described the Blackburnian Warbler as an "uncommon summer resident" and cited four nesting locations in the Andover area, including the Boxford and Harold Parker State Forests. He did not give specifics of any confirmed nestings, but estimated 10-15 pairs annually, "mainly in white pines." Greater numbers of these birds in the western part of the county would make sense, but few birders report from the Andover region these days. Thus Harold Parker State Forest and other extensive woodlands in the northwestern part of the county are high on my list of locations to check in the coming years for breeding birds. We simply don't have a good handle on how many of these warblers nest in the county, due in part to the height of the nests, given by Baicich and Harrison (1997) as anywhere from 5 to 85 feet (but mainly on the high side), well concealed in conifer branches or *Usnea* lichen.

Be that as it may, on June 30, 2001, Karen Haley and I witnessed a female Blackburnian Warbler gathering nest material from an old nest along the north side of Crooked Pond in the Bald Hill Reservation in Boxford. The old nest was fairly low in a white pine right over the main trail, and appeared to be that of a Chipping Sparrow, *Spizella passerina*. The warbler pulled grass stems out of it and flew with them across the pond to another stand of hemlock and pine, where she was presumably building her own nest. We watched for a while but did not see any Blackburnians emerge from the canopy. However, this is the second time in four years that observers have seen nest-building by this species in a place where the birds have consistently been found in small numbers for many years. It is only a matter of time, I hope, until another nest is found. So far as I know, no actual nest has been discovered since Farley's in 1901.

Louisiana Waterthrush, *Seiurus motacilla*. A warbler of southern affinity, the Louisiana Waterthrush was unknown in Essex County until 1919, when one was identified in Marblehead in July, during the species' fall migration. Forbush (1929) described the bird as an "uncommon to rare summer resident in southern part [of New England], accidental elsewhere." He shows a map with the species' summer distribution, with dots frequent in the four western counties and sporadic in the

eastern counties. Only two south-coastal Essex County locations are given, Marblehead and Nahant, clearly reflecting sightings of migrants.

By midcentury, Griscom and Snyder (1955) could report that Louisiana Waterthrushes had been nesting near Crooked Pond in Boxford since 1948, with a maximum of three singing males and an estimate of a single breeding pair annually. Veit and Petersen (1993) report the same status for Essex County, with Boxford the only breeding location given, but estimate perhaps two or three breeding pairs, which I would concur with since I have heard the birds singing in several parts of that 1600-plus-acre forest. Confirming this tradition, Wayne Petersen found a nest with five young along the outlet stream from Crooked Pond on May 23, 1990 (*Bird Observer*). The young fledged around the end of May, as I recall, and I was able to find the empty nest on June 2. It was in a protected area at the base of a small hemlock, perhaps fifteen feet up the slope from the bank of the stream.



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I thought that this might have been the only nest ever found in the county, until I learned from Chris Leahy (pers. comm.) that he and Dorothy Snyder found a nest at Crooked Pond in the late 1950s; Chris estimated that it was in June 1957. They observed a Louisiana Waterthrush carrying food, and Dee Snyder remarked that a nest had not been found before in the county. Chris then waded into the swamp and found the nest with young in the roots of an overturned tree.

But with only a single historical nesting location for this species in the county, it was welcome news when Rick Heil (*Massbird*) found one or two adult Louisiana Waterthrushes feeding two or three fledglings at the edge of a Red Maple swamp in Manchester near the Hamilton line on June 24, 2001. This area is densely wooded and thinly populated (with humans), but has always been underbired. It is on the western side of the huge Manchester-Essex Wilderness Conservation Area, a forest-swamp complex I have only recently begun to learn and will be exploring more thoroughly this year. It is not surprising that Louisiana Waterthrushes would nest here, even though Essex County is on the north edge of their range, since the habitat is favorable. Sometimes the lack of nesting records reflects less the absence of breeding birds than the absence of birder effort.

That lack of effort, particularly in underexplored places, is something I and others will be trying to remedy in this and future nesting seasons. Some of the 2001 nests were complete surprises; who knows what gems will be uncovered this year. For me, establishing or reestablishing significant nesting records is by far the most exciting aspect of birding. I hope to exchange more of this kind of information with fellow birders in this and other New England counties on a continuing basis.

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