

## Best Birds in Massachusetts: 1993-2002

Wayne R. Petersen

In the February 1993 issue of *Bird Observer*, an issue celebrating the twentieth anniversary of the journal, I wrote an article titled "Best Birds in Massachusetts: 1973-1992." Now, a decade later and concurrent with the thirtieth anniversary of *Bird Observer*, a number of new and astounding avian records have been established in Massachusetts. As was suggested in the seminal 1993 article, the definition of an "astounding avian record," or a "best bird" is, quite clearly, a matter of personal opinion. The concept is debatable, even among experienced observers, each of whom proffers legitimate reasons for claiming that one record is more outstanding than another. Perhaps more to the point is the fact that a less experienced birder might logically debate whether a Tropical Kingbird seen in Massachusetts is really any more exceptional than one's first killer look at a male Scarlet Tanager on a sunny May morning at Mount Auburn Cemetery. Recognizing the reality in these polarized points of view, it should be stated at the outset that what follows is the author's personal selection of "best birds" from the past decade. Other birders charged with a similar task might select quite a different assortment. One fact remains, however, and that is that Massachusetts birders are seemingly blessed with infinite possibilities when it comes to finding and identifying unusual birds in the Bay State.

Two milestones deserve recognition when considering the history of bird record-keeping in Massachusetts. The first is the Massachusetts Avian Records Committee (MARC), a group formed in 1989 and charged with providing judicial oversight in the matter of bird record-keeping in Massachusetts. The formation of the MARC has provided a greater degree of structure and rigor to the process of evaluating avian sight records than ever before. Consequently, it is now necessary to gain consensus over the veracity of unusual bird reports in Massachusetts before they are officially entered into the state's ornithological record. In some cases this process has facilitated making a selection of the "best birds" in that only records that have withstood the rigor of the MARC are officially accepted as bona fide occurrences in Massachusetts.

In addition to the establishment of the MARC, a second benchmark in Bay State bird record-keeping has been the establishment of a *Bird Observer* bird records database, a project and product of the indefatigable Marj Rines. Thanks to her diligence and interest in local bird records, birders now potentially have access to a searchable, computerized, bird records database that currently dates back to 1994. Using this database considerably streamlined the process of pulling together the list that follows.

Besides the "best bird" records teased out of the tapestry representing the complete record of bird reports over the past decade, there are several general observations that can be made about the records over the last ten years. First, and perhaps most notably, is the fact that approximately twenty hummingbirds of the

genus *Selasphorus* have been recorded in Massachusetts in the last decade. Several of these birds have been positively determined to be Rufous Hummingbirds, but quite a number of others were indeterminate due to problems with the field identification of female and immature individuals within this difficult genus. The undeniable fact remains, however, that something clearly seems to be going on with these birds, a reality supported by a similarly increasing number of reports from elsewhere in New England and throughout the Northeast. Hopefully, time and careful observation may eventually reveal the explanation for this apparent sudden increase in the number of reports within a group that first made an appearance in Massachusetts as recently as 1978. *Selasphorus* hummingbirds made the "best birds" list in 1993.

At least as remarkable as the pattern of increasing numbers of *Selasphorus* hummingbirds during the last ten years is the fact that no fewer than three Ancient Murrelets have been recorded in Massachusetts during that same period. Although there is more than a scattering of records for this handsome Pacific Coast alcid in interior North America, for Massachusetts to lay claim to three records in a single decade seems almost incredible. Somewhat less dramatic, and somewhat more expected, is the fact that within five years of each other Bay State birders twice recorded Ross's Geese for the first and second time in the recorded history of Massachusetts bird record-keeping. And finally, who could guess that within the last three years of the decade Tropical, Couch's, and Cassin's kingbirds would all sequentially appear in Massachusetts? This is the kind of stuff that makes birding such fun!

Two records worthy of special mention culled from the avian record of the past decade, but not included in the "best birds" list, pertain to species not accepted by the MARC, not because their identification was suspect, but rather because their provenance and local origin was unknown. The first of these problematic records was a European Tree Sparrow that appeared in Brighton in November 1995. This widespread Eurasian species was introduced in North America in the St. Louis, Missouri, area in the 1870s. From there the species spread into central Missouri and western Illinois, and stragglers have been reported in Manitoba, Ontario, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa, Indiana, and Kentucky (*The A.O.U. Check-List of North American Birds* 1998). That an individual of this species, a species which is not especially popular in the pet trade, should show up in eastern Massachusetts in late fall poses some interesting possibilities, despite the absence of a clear pattern of historical vagrancy for this species. One specific piece of evidence suggesting that this individual may have had a captive origin was that the upper mandible of its bill was strongly overgrown, giving it a shrike-like appearance. This condition frequently develops in cage birds that are unable to properly maintain their bills through normal use.

A second enigmatic record was a Crested Caracara that spent several days in Middleborough in early January 1999. Traditionally thought to be a relatively sedentary species in Florida, Texas, and Arizona in North America, there are nonetheless reliable reports from locations as far away as Washington, Oregon, California, Wyoming, Ontario, Pennsylvania, New York, and New Jersey. While it is

certainly possible or highly likely that most or all of these distant records represent escaped captives, it is also possible that some are true vagrants. Although the origin of the Middleborough caracara was never established, it certainly has to stand as one of the more outstanding records of the decade.

In an effort to follow the format adopted in the 1993 "best birds" article, I have highlighted at least one especially notable record for each year of the past decade, and in most years more than one was chosen. Furthermore, with the exceptions noted above, the MARC has accepted all of the records included in the list that follows. For each record the location of the sighting is indicated in parentheses, and a brief notation is included to explain why the record was selected.

**1993 Black-tailed Godwit** (Monomoy National Wildlife Refuge): second state record and one of only three for Massachusetts.

**1994 Wood Stork** (Cotuit): first definitive record since 1955 and one of less than eight for Massachusetts.

**Snowy Plover** (Yarmouth): first and only state record and first north of the Carolinas.

**1995 Vermilion Flycatcher** (Parker River National Wildlife Refuge): first fully documented occurrence and only the second record for Massachusetts.

**1996 Northern Lapwing** (Chilmark, Martha's Vineyard): first and only state record.

**Swift sp.** (Cape Poge, Martha's Vineyard): undoubtedly one of the most interesting reports of the decade pertained to a large, dark swift that was well observed and photographed near the Cape Pogue lighthouse. Watched at leisure by several experienced and competent observers, descriptions and photographs were sufficiently ambiguous to cause the MARC to accept the sighting as simply that of a "large, fork-tailed swift," possibly of the genus *Apus* or *Cypseloides*.

**1997 Ross's Goose** (Sunderland): first state record.

**Violet-green Swallow** (Provincetown): first and only state record and only second for New England.

**Chaffinch** (Scituate): third record for the state; photographed in color.

**1998 Swainson's Hawk** (Provincetown): first summer record; present for weeks.

**Ancient Murrelet** (Provincetown): second state record and second for Atlantic Coast.

**1999 Ancient Murrelet** (Rockport): third state record and third for Atlantic Coast.

**Lark Bunting** (Weymouth): present for days and enjoyed by many.

**2000 Yellow-nosed Albatross** (Penikese Island in Buzzards Bay): only two or three previous records for Massachusetts.

**Tropical Kingbird** (Hingham): first state record and only the third in New England.

**Swainson's Warbler** (Naushon Island in Buzzards Bay): second state record; photographed and tape recorded.

**Brambling** (Montague): fourth state record.


**2001 Couch's Kingbird** (Parker River National Wildlife Refuge): first state record and first for New England.

**2002 Eurasian Kestrel** (Wellfleet and Chatham): second state record and second for New England.

**Pacific Golden-Plover** (Parker River National Wildlife Refuge): first state record and second for New England.

**Elegant Tern** (Chatham): first state record and first for New England.

**Lazuli Bunting** (Nantucket): first state record and second for New England.

There's the list. As suggested at the outset, even if it does not include the same species that others would have identified as their choice of "best birds," it certainly serves to remind readers why Massachusetts is such an exciting place to watch birds, regardless of the composition of the past decade's roster. With the additions from the decade just past, and considering the species currently under review by the MARC, the Massachusetts state list currently stands at approximately 475 species – a remarkable total indeed! What will be added in the next ten years? 

*Wayne Petersen, a Massachusetts native, is Field Ornithologist with the Massachusetts Audubon Society. Throughout his career, Wayne has led trips and tours, lectured, and conducted birding workshops across North America. His tour-leading experiences have taken him from arctic Canada to South America, Antarctica, Iceland, Africa, and Madagascar. Wayne is a past Vice President of the American Birding Association, past Chairman of the Massachusetts Avian Records Committee, and is a New England Regional Editor for North American Birds. His writing projects have included coauthoring Birds of Massachusetts (with Richard Veit), contributing to The Audubon Society Master Guide to Birding, and The Sibley Guide to Bird Life and Behavior, along with editing the Massachusetts Breeding Bird Atlas (in press), and writing the National Audubon Society's Pocket Guide to Songbirds and Familiar Backyard Birds (East). His top pick for "best bird" for the 1993-2002 period is a tie between Snowy Plover and Elegant Tern.*



ELEGANT TERN ON SOUTH BEACH, AUGUST 18, 2002, DAVID LARSON