

# Two Naturalists Buy a Swamp\*

\*with apologies to Edwin Way Teale

*David Larson and Susan Carlson*

On November 23, 2002, we moved to Bradford, Massachusetts (part of Haverhill). This move was quite a relocation after 16 years on the South Shore, but we knew we were in for something good as soon as we laid eyes on the spot. Our first official yard bird was a Belted Kingfisher, which flew chattering across the yard while we were moving in. Not a bad bird to be number one on anyone's yard list!

The house itself is modest but, as the man said, it has location, location, location. First of all, it is set on the side of a hill, looking northwest. The backyard is tiny, a strip of lawn between the house and a woodlot belonging to our neighbor. Our feeding station is up against the edge of the woods, in easy view of the back sunroom. The front yard is a different matter. Aside from too much lawn and a one-lane right-of-way, it consists of a weedy and brushy field, a creek, and two acres of red maple swamp (Fig. 1). The combination of the hill, the edges, the swamp, and the weedy field in the Merrimack River valley makes for very promising bird habitat!

After the first week, we had picked up many of the common winter resident birds, and a Winter Wren on November 30 was a nice treat. On December 8, a first-winter male Baltimore Oriole showed up at our feeder (Fig. 2) and stayed until early January. The winter months were slow for new birds though we kept a good watch: we participate in Project FeederWatch for the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology (see <http://birds.cornell.edu/pfw/>), and so our feeding station gets good coverage in the winter.



**Figure 1:** Aerial photograph of our yard, showing the house and the red maple swamp. Photograph by David Larson taken July 30, 2003.

New yard birds started flying in and over in earnest in March, with Common Grackles, Red-winged Blackbirds, Killdeer, Eastern Bluebirds, and Eastern Phoebes. American Woodcock displayed over the yard; we could hear five at once on March 21. Great Blue Herons and Green Herons flew into the swamp almost daily. On March 29, seven Wild Turkeys visited our backyard feeding station. On April 5 two of them fell asleep on the deck railing (Fig. 3), mesmerizing the cats and blowing us away. Our first Ruby-throated Hummingbird arrived on May 3 (on August 31, they brought their kid), and our first wood warbler (Black-and-White) arrived the next day.



**Figure 2:** First winter male Baltimore Oriole at our cracked sunflower feeder with an American Tree Sparrow. Photograph by David Larson taken December 8, 2002.

sudden, we had a goal. Could we find 100 species during our first year? After all, we had plenty of time left. The guessing game started. What would be the next species? A duck flying over? A fall sparrow?



**Figure 3:** Two Wild Turkeys on our deck railing, with a very frustrated indoor cat. Photograph by David Larson taken April 5, 2003.

Then the Fates intervened and gave us a really nice bird. A dilemma-type bird. We were checking the weedy field on November 1 when we saw a yellowish blur disappear into the brush. Was it the Common Yellowthroat, still hanging around? After an interminable wait, a first winter male MacGillivray's Warbler popped up. That bird skulked around for a few days but, because of the neighborhood (quiet

Rose-breasted Grosbeaks showed up on May 8 and produced two broods during the summer. Gray Catbirds and Yellow Warblers nested down by the creek. In July, August, and September, we heard Eastern Screech Owls whinnying, complementing the Great Horned Owls we had heard duetting in the winter. In July, Blue-winged Warblers fed their young in our yard, and young Warbling Vireos foraged in our trees.

On August 22, Susan watched a young Bald Eagle fly over the yard. Upon checking our list, we found that that bird was our 90<sup>th</sup> species! All of a

September brought, as highlights, a Canada Warbler, a Spotted Sandpiper, a Brown Thrasher, and a Philadelphia Vireo. October started slowly, but Rusty Blackbirds brought us to 98, and a Palm Warbler made 99. The guesses were flying faster than the birds. On October 14, with a month yet to go on our year, a Ruby-crowned Kinglet popped up as species number 100, followed about 10 seconds later by a Golden-crowned. Wilson's Snipe became species number 102 at the end of that month as two almost impaled Susan in the twilight.

neighbors on a one-lane private road with an abundance of three-year-olds), we decided that we could not publicize it.

We ended up our first year of residence with a total of 106 species of birds, the last of which we tallied when two Pine Siskins showed up at our thistle feeder. While our second year will not produce 100 more bird species, we're sure we'll get some nice ones. Number 107 was a very obliging Common Redpoll; number 108, during the February 7 ice storm, was a Northern Shrike.

We had a wonderful year getting used to the area, a different constellation of birds, and lots of mammals, amphibians, and insects. And the swamp is changing. The beavers have been working, and most of the swamp is quite flooded now. We even moved our canoe down there so that we can indulge in a little floating natural history. Who knows, perhaps we'll have a Great Blue Heron rookery before long.

Some of the year one highlights included:

- watching a pair of Wood Ducks land in a tree in the swamp and later feed in the flooded forest with their young
- choruses of spring peepers, wood frogs, American toads, green frogs, bullfrogs, and gray tree frogs
- House Wrens double clutching in the backyard – that's a lot of wrens!
- watching the Northern Lights on October 30 from our backyard
- rivers of grackles, 100 birds wide and flowing from horizon to horizon, heading to or from the Methuen roost in the fall
- white-tailed deer, red fox, muskrat, beaver, eastern cottontail, raccoon, opossum, striped skunk, and various small rodents
- learning new plants and insects and spiders and things that go bump in the night.

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WHO'S STALKING WHOM? BY DAVID LARSON

# Birding in Massachusetts 123 Years Ago

*Robert H. Stymeist*

It's not hard to imagine: an instant mess age on your computer, a Gyr Falcon has been sighted in the Northampton Meadows. The reporter is on the scene with his latest toy, a notebook-sized computer, watching the Gyr devouring a Common Merganser just plucked from the Connecticut River. It's a big duck and it's going to be here awhile — come on down! It's almost nine o'clock, you're in the office in Boston, and all of a sudden you become sick, so sick you have to leave for home. In less than three hours you are there! The bird is still perched, a little less merganser, but you have added him to your life list. The next day you're back at work — just the twenty-four-hour flu, thank God, you tell your coworkers. Birding is easy these days!

In the following account from William Brewster's journal, Mr. Brewster learns of the arrival of Rough-legged Hawks in the Northampton area on March 13 by a letter. Planning to leave Boston is an ordeal; on the afternoon of March 16 Brewster boards a train for Springfield. He has to spend the night in Springfield before he can catch the next train to Northampton the following morning. A half a day to get to Northampton — you were there in less than three hours! It truly was an event to go birding over 100 years ago. The tripod has since replaced the rifle, and instead of specimens we can take photographs, even instant ones, back from a day of birding.

Most of what we know of North American birds is based on the careful work of ornithologists like William Brewster who, using the tools of their time, shot birds in order to collect and study them. He was tireless in his observations and had a distinct style of writing; reading his journal you can sense his enthusiasm and his desire to know more of the bird he is watching. I hope you will enjoy the following account.

## Gleanings from the Journal of William Brewster

March 17, 1881 Northampton, Massachusetts

At the invitation of Mr. E. O. Damon I made a second trip to Northampton to study the habits of the Rough-legs during this spring migration and to procure specimens. Leaving Boston on the afternoon of the 16<sup>th</sup> I spent the night at Springfield and taking the early morning train to Northampton met Mr. Damon at the depot. His report concerning the presence of the *Archibuteos* was very encouraging. For the first time in many years they did not winter in the valley although a single individual was being seen through January, February and early March. On March 13 however Mr. Damon saw several from his house and driving over a portion of the adjoining intervals during the afternoon of the same day he observed no less than twenty individuals. He thought they arrived that day on masse.

Getting ready as quickly as possible we were soon driving across the broad intervals and to my great delight the Rough-legs proved to be still on the ground in considerable numbers. Upon approaching the first group of noble elms that grow to such great size on this rich bottom land we counted no less than five Hawks in sight

at once and during the forenoon at least twenty were seen. But ill luck awaited us. Damon killed the first bird he shot at, stalking it from behind a barn. But the second he missed and his horse which I was holding broke into a furious run and I had great difficulty in stopping him while the strain of pulling on the reins weakened my broken arm so seriously that I did not dare to run the risk of trying it again! Accordingly as our only resource (I being unable to jump from the wagon with the horse going at a fast trot, as Damon is in the habit of doing before firing) I was left concealed in a shed while he drove the birds about in hopes of getting them to alight on a tree that grew within long range of my ambush. Two birds were successfully driven near but I got neither although both went off very badly wounded. Finally we returned to dinner with only one bird.

In the afternoon I started out again with Mr. Maynard, a friend of Damon's. We took a stable horse, an excellent, steady beast well trained for the work in hand! Maynard's method is different from Damon's. He shoots from the buggy, placing one foot on the step and rising just before raising his gun. Had the Hawks been as numerous as in the forenoon we should have made a good bag, but they were scarce and very shy. However we succeeded in killing three, one of which I shot from a tall elm while Maynard cut down the other two from on wing, making superb shots each time with the horse going at a sharp trot! We went around the "Ox-bows" later in the afternoon, seeing no Hawks, but running across a flock of Black Ducks which Maynard stalked laboriously and from which he shot down one at very long range. It however got into some bushes and as we had no dog, escaped. The day was cloudy and chilly with a piercing north-east wind. The valley land was bare and brown but Mt. Holyoke and Mt. Tom were white with snow.

I passed the night under Damon's hospitable roof and on the morning on the next day (March 18) we again started, Mr. Maynard accompanying us. About two inches of snow had fallen in the night and it snowed fitfully through the forenoon. We drove about over the upper intervals, Damon, lying, hid in a barn and Maynard shooting while I managed the horse. There were about a dozen Rough-legs on the intervals but they were so restless and shy that we could do nothing with them and we did not get a bird though Maynard fired a number of impossibly long shots. During the experience of both days we did not see a single Red-tail or indeed any other Hawk except *Circus hudsonius* (Northern Harrier). I returned to Boston in the afternoon with five Rough-legs one of which was shot by Mr. Maynard before my arrival. One of my Hawks is being mounted for the Boston Society, the others are cataloged: MCZ 205319, 205320, 205321, and 205322.

Habits: The experience of these two days had largely added to my knowledge of the habits of this interesting hawk and in the following account I propose to formulate these observations. I have also added some facts, which I had from Mr. Damon as well as others obtained from Mr. Maynard.

The Rough-legged Hawks though still numerous in their season about Northampton do not now occur in nearly so great numbers as in former years. The old farmers tell of fifty being killed in a day in those times and they were then comparatively easy to approach. Some ten years ago, Messrs Maynard and Damon

began to shoot them with the rifle and in 1879, the latter first began to systematically hunt them with a shot gun and a horse. On Thanksgiving day of that year twenty-five were killed near the town by Mr. Damon and his friends. During the winter of 79-80 Mr. Damon alone killed over fifty.

During mild winters they remain on the intervals in considerable numbers. They regularly go to roost about dusk in a group of yellow pines (*P. rigida*) {Pitch Pine} on a hill to the west of the town. Mr. Damon used to lie in wait for them there and shoot them as they came in. They flew over the town singly and at a considerable height. In the morning they returned to the interval at about sunrise. This habit is also maintained at all seasons. I saw them yesterday flying overhead in twilight towards Mt. Tom.

So far as Damon has observed the Rough-legs feed entirely on mice. Their manner of hunting has been described in some notes made by me in former years so I will not repeat it here.

Their temperament varies considerably with the weather. On still days they are usually sluggish, hunting but little and remaining on their perches for hours at a time. During snow storms they are usually very inactive and easily approached but sometimes exactly the reverse as was the case this morning. On windy, blustery days they are invariably restless, shy and active darting about high in air and shifting from tree to tree at frequent intervals. They have their favorite perches to which they soon return after being driven away, a habit, which is often taken advantage of by the shooters. They frequently perch on the topmost slender sprigs of the tall elms where they swing in the wind with as much ease as a Robin or a Blackbird, but they are more apt to choose those horizontal limbs about two-thirds of the distance from the ground. They usually sit in a slovenly attitude with the body nearly erect and the feathers ruffled. But sometimes when suspicious of danger their plumage is closely drawn and the pose and outlines of the motionless bird is then superb. Their colors vary interminably; Damon has rarely seen two alike. The dark birds look much darker than they really are and many of them appear as black and shining as a Crow. They are peaceable and rather sociable in disposition, two and, sometimes three being seen on the same tree. On several occasions I saw one alight on the same branch where another sat in which case the first usually flew to the next tree with apparent good nature. They rarely if ever swoop on their prey from their perches, their hunting being thus carried on quite differently from that of other Buteos.

Their flight is easy and graceful, never hurried, rarely if ever swift, but perfectly well sustained. They sail in a straight line across the fields like Turkey Buzzards but rarely circle about as the Buteos do. When about to alight they sweep downward often nearly to the ground and rising on motionless pinions close their wings as they strike the branch. When the topmost twigs are chosen they usually stand for a moment with uplifted wings until they get their balance and sometimes flap once or twice in accomplishing this. When passing overhead from one place to another, as when going to roost, the wing beats are regular and unremitting and the flight resembles a Herring Gulls.

They were screaming incessantly this morning, the first time I ever heard these notes. These resemble the syllables – pee, pee, plee, pl-ee uttered in a shrill whistling



tone. The cry reminded me of the spring song of the Osprey but it was feebler and the notes were less continuous. Occasionally it resembled the long drawn whistle of the Black-breast Plover. Ordinarily *Archibuteo* is a very silent bird.

**From:** *Journal of William Brewster*, Volume 2 pages 196-198. Reprinted with permission from the Museum of Comparative Zoology, Harvard University.

**Addendum.** I was curious to find out the current status of Rough-legged Hawks in the Connecticut River Valley, especially the Northampton Meadows and how it relates with today's birders. Tom Gagnon, a long-time birder from Northampton with a particular fondness for raptors, wrote me: "Twenty to twenty-five years ago you could always plan on seeing a Rough-legged or two in the Meadows. The last fifteen years they have been quite unusual; it seems like I rarely ever see one anymore. The farming practices have changed, better methods of harvesting the corn with less being left there for the rodents to feed on and exploding their populations. There are very little grassy or weedy strips left anywhere. There used to be much asparagus grown here in the valley and that created a great winter habitat for many species and now we have very little grown here with zero in the East Meadows of Northampton. I consider it to be a RED LETTER DAY if I should see a Rough-legged Hawk in the meadows." 🌱

**Bob Stymeist** has been interested in birds since 1958. He started "brown bag" birding in 1961 with his first pair of binoculars and boarded the subway in Harvard Square to visit the Arnold Arboretum. His love of urban birding continues today and he keeps an annual list of birds found in the City of

Boston. His other favorite spot is Mount Auburn Cemetery, which he didn't find out about until 1963, even though it was only two miles from his home. He has recorded 213 species in the Cemetery. His current project (obsession) is trying to find a Carolina Wren in each of the 351 towns in Massachusetts; currently he has found them in 277! Bob was a founding member of Bird Observer and served as its President from 1978-1984. He has been Treasurer of the Nuttall Ornithological Club since 1981 and has been the Statistician for the Brookline Bird Club since 1987.



Local birders gathered in Mount Auburn Cemetery at the gravesite of William Brewster on July 5, 2001, to honor the 150th anniversary of his birth. Left to right: Carolyn Marsh, Janet Heywood, Bob Stymeist, Peter Vale, Marj Rines, Fay Vale, Judy Jackson, Larry O'Bryan, Linda Pivacek, Brooke Stevens, and Tom McCorkle. Photograph by John Marsh.



ROUGH-LEGGED HAWK BY ANON.



HUNTING ROUGH-LEGGED HAWK BY DAVID LARSON