

What's Next After the Red-footed Falcon? Predictions of Future Vagrants in Massachusetts

Robert H. Stymeist and Jeremiah R. Trimble

1990 Predictions Revisited

It has been nearly fifteen years since Dick Forster and seven other well-known state birders tried to predict which would be the next ten new species of birds to appear in Massachusetts. In the June 1990 issue of *Bird Observer* [18 (3), pp.149-154] Forster published his results. Nearly forty species received at least one top-ten vote, and another fifteen received votes as "runners-up." Four of the species ranked at the top of that list have now been recorded in Massachusetts as follows:

Cave Swallow (#2): This species, which has become routine in the fall in New Jersey, was long expected in Massachusetts. Following reports of Cave Swallows in Connecticut and Rhode Island, it was finally added to the state list on November 14, 2003, when two individuals were seen in Orleans. Less than two weeks later on November 27 a single individual was seen in nearby Chatham.

Ross's Goose (#4): Population increases and range shift made it only a matter of time before this species landed in Massachusetts. Two birds were discovered in a flock of Snow Geese in Sunderland, May 25-26, 1997. Another individual was seen in Chilmark October 14-22, 2001, and a third report from Turners Falls October 21-25, 2004, is pending a decision from the Massachusetts Avian Records Committee (MARC).

Lazuli Bunting (#7): Although it often wanders east of its territory to the Midwestern states, Lazuli Bunting has only been recorded once or twice in the northeast. This individual was conclusively photographed on Nantucket, where it was seen from May 5-10, 2002.

Black-capped Petrel (#10): This species occurs regularly over deep water as far north as North Carolina, so it was a prime candidate for a storm-blown visit to Massachusetts waters. The first report was April 22, 1991, on Stellwagen Bank, followed by a second four months later on August 19, as one was described battling the winds of Hurricane Bob in Cape Cod Bay.

Additionally, twelve of the other species that were listed, but did not make the "top ten," have since appeared in Massachusetts. They are:

Northern Lapwing, December 26-30, 1996, Chilmark

Pacific Golden Plover, April 21-May 5, 2002, Plum Island

Snowy Plover, June 11, 1994, Chatham

Common Ringed Plover, September 5, 1990, North Monomoy Island, Chatham

Elegant Tern, August 4 and 15-28, 2002, South Beach, Chatham

Band-tailed Pigeon, May 29-June 4, 1995, Brookline

Calliope Hummingbird, November 1-December 19, 2002, Eastham
Vermilion Flycatcher, October 14-15, 1995, Plum Island
Tropical Kingbird, November 8-30, 2000, World's End in Hingham
Couch's Kingbird, September 9, 2001, Plum Island
Violet-green Swallow, May 12, 1997, Provincetown
Shiny Cowbird, October 14, 2002, Edgartown

Red-footed Falcon was not even on the radar for occurrence in Massachusetts (or North America!) in 1990. But what else did the panel of experts fail to predict? Remarkably, only two: **Ancient Murrelet** (November 29, 1992, Rockport) and **Broad-billed Sandpiper** (September 10, 2002, Plum Island).

An Update for 2004

So, what do we have to look forward to after the Red-footed Falcon? We gathered another panel of expert birders from Massachusetts to predict the next new birds for Massachusetts, just as Richard Forster and his panelists did fifteen years ago. They were asked to list the ten species most likely to be added to the Massachusetts State List and, as with the 1990 effort, they were also invited to include a list of runners-up (or long-shots). The votes were to be based upon the current accepted state list maintained by the MARC and could thus include species such as Black-tailed Gull and Trumpeter Swan, which have been reported but not yet accepted. The contributors for this effort included five players from the original group: Rick Heil, Blair Nikula, Wayne Petersen, Robert Stymeist, and Dick Veit. The team was rounded out by newcomers Vernon Laux, Peter Trimble, and Jeremiah Trimble.

Forty-three species received at least one top-ten vote by a member of the panel, and a number of others received honorable mention votes. Just as in the 1990 survey, there was an impressive diversity of opinion in what might be the next ten birds in Massachusetts. However, as you will see from the final tallies, there was some consensus on a number of species. For example, the top three received votes from six out of eight members of the panel; the top six received top-ten votes from at least five members. In 1990 Forster commented: "The final tally is skewed somewhat by Veit's selections, his rationale apparently being, if it can occur in California, it can occur in Massachusetts." While Veit has since moved from California to New York, his votes were again wildly different from the rest of the committee (only two of his ten choices were repeated by other panel members). Although Veit's selections may have skewed the results with his perhaps unconventional votes, his foresight may prove prophetic, since three of his 1990 top-ten have been accepted on the Massachusetts State List since then!

The ranking in the top-ten list is based on the number of top-ten votes received, with ties being broken first by how each species was ranked in the panelists' top-ten (for example, a number one vote and number four vote are better than two number six votes), and then by the number of runner-up votes received. The numerals in parentheses show number of top-ten votes, followed by number of runner-up votes.

Results and Comments

1. **Yellow-billed Loon** (*Gavia adamsii*): (6, 1). This, the largest species of loon, has a proven track record of vagrancy throughout the lower forty-eight states. Last winter, for example, up to three individuals were found in the southeast, one each in Georgia, Kentucky, and Tennessee. It has recently been recorded in interior New York, and there is a historical record from Long Island, New York, in 1930. The pattern of records suggests that it is most likely to occur in the winter or early spring on large inland bodies of water. Quabbin and Wachusett Reservoirs seem likely spots for this species to turn up. (#6 on the 1990 list)

2. **Slaty-backed Gull** (*Larus schistisagus*): (6, 1). This Asiatic gull is routinely encountered in Alaska and has recently been turning up throughout central and eastern North America, including Florida (two records), Michigan, New York (two records), Ontario (three records), and Nova Scotia. An individual reported in New Hampshire in December 2003 is pending NHRBC approval. Diligent searching among large flocks of wintering gulls in coastal Massachusetts may turn up this difficult-to-identify species. (Runner-up on 1990 list)

3. **Bell's Vireo** (*Vireo bellii*): (6, 1). Although its eastern populations have been declining, this species has been recorded at least twice in New Jersey and at least twice in New Hampshire! As one panel member put it, "Any bird that can occur twice in New Hampshire before being found in Massachusetts is bound to have been overlooked in the past and can be expected in the future!" (#8 on the 1990 list)

4. **Black-tailed Gull** (*Larus crassirostris*): (5, 0). This is another Asiatic gull that has shown a strong tendency to wander across North America. *Larus crassirostris* has occurred at many localities in eastern North America, including Virginia, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New York, Rhode Island, and Nova Scotia. Indeed, it may have already occurred in Massachusetts (Lynn Beach, June 2004 and Chatham, August 2004), though at the time this article was written, neither of these sightings had been accepted by the MARC. Panel members were asked to use the current official state list to base their lists on to avoid confusion. (Not mentioned on the 1990 list)

5. **Boat-tailed Grackle** (*Quiscalus major*): (5, 0). *Q. major* currently routinely breeds as close as southwestern Connecticut, has been observed in Rhode Island, and is thus a legitimate candidate for occurrence in Massachusetts. The difficulty with recording this species in Massachusetts is providing sufficient documentation to eliminate the very similar, though perhaps less likely, Great-tailed Grackle (*Q. mexicanus*). To date there are two records of a large grackle species in Massachusetts, neither of which provided enough evidence to prove without a doubt which species was involved. Interestingly, *Q. mexicanus* made it on to the top 10 in 1990, chosen for the fact that its range was expanding greatly in the west, and it was definitively recorded in Nova Scotia in 1983-1984. Most other records of this species pair in eastern and northeastern North America have gone unresolved. (Not mentioned on the 1990 list, but this may be because the panel at the time accepted a sight record in

1986 as valid, which was later accepted by the MARC as Boat-tailed/Great-tailed Grackle)

6. **Eurasian Collared-Dove** (*Streptopelia decaocto*): (5, 1). Originally introduced to the Bahama Islands in the 1970s, this species spread to Florida and has since been expanding its range westward to California and northward in the East, at least to Pennsylvania and Long Island, New York. This species is quite similar to the Ringed Turtle-Dove, which is frequently reported as an escapee in Massachusetts. Birders in Massachusetts should be aware of this similarity and be prepared to diligently record plumage on any bird suspected of being a Eurasian Collared-Dove. Along those same lines, don't dismiss any strange dove as an escaped Ringed Turtle-Dove; it could be a new state record! (Not mentioned on the 1990 list)

7. **European Golden-Plover** (*Pluvialis apricaria*): (4, 0). This species was regarded by some panelists as the most overdue species for Massachusetts. Although it has yet to be definitively recorded in the United States, there are a large number of records for eastern Canada, including over 350 seen in Newfoundland in the spring of 1988! It occurs regularly in southern Greenland and even breeds in eastern Greenland. It is most likely to turn up in the spring, during or following a strong northeasterly blow. (#1 on the 1990 list)

8. **Redwing** (*Turdus iliacus*): (2, 1). This Eurasian thrush breeds commonly from Iceland across Eurasia to central Siberia and winters south to the British Isles, casually wandering to Greenland. In North America it has been recorded in Newfoundland (at least five times), Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Quebec, and even New York. It has occurred at various seasons from late fall through spring, often associating with flocks of American Robins. (#3 on the 1990 list)

9. **European Storm-Petrel** (*Hydrobates pelagicus*): (2, 1). *H. pelagicus* breeds on islands in the northern and eastern Atlantic Ocean, as well as the western Mediterranean Sea. As many pelagic species do, it ranges widely when at sea, and can be seen throughout the eastern Atlantic. In the western Atlantic there is a record from Nova Scotia (in 1970) and a specimen at the Smithsonian labeled as being collected in "Bay of Fundy." In May 2003, a bird was inadvertently photographed off Hatteras, North Carolina, that showed many characteristics of *H. pelagicus*. This species closely resembles other species of dark, white-rumped, storm-petrels, especially Wilson's Storm-Petrel (*Oceanites oceanicus*), and it will take a diligent and alert documenter to get this species on our state list. (Not mentioned on the 1990 list)

10. **Common Greenshank** (*Tringa nebularia*): (2, 2). This Eurasian wader is a fairly common species throughout Europe and Asia, breeding from Scotland east to Siberia. It undergoes a long-distance migration, wintering as far south as southern Africa, Australia, and New Zealand. In eastern North America it has been recorded in Quebec, Newfoundland, and Nova Scotia, with a sight report from New York. (Runner-up on 1990 list)

The following three species also received two top-ten votes but were ranked lower on the panelists' lists (runner-up votes in parentheses):

Cassin's Sparrow (*Aimophila cassinii*): (1). This southwestern sparrow has been recorded in the northeast on numerous occasions in Nova Scotia, Ontario, Maine, New York, and New Jersey. (#5 on the 1990 list)

Brown Shrike (*Lanius cristatus*): (0). This beautiful species of shrike has been observed on several occasions in Alaska and California. In eastern North America it has recently been sighted in Nova Scotia in November-December 1997.

White Wagtail (*Motacilla alba*): (0). In eastern North America two subspecies of White Wagtail have been documented. There are records of *Motacilla alba alba* (the European subspecies) from Quebec (May 2002) and Newfoundland (Sept. 1998), and recently in North Carolina (October 2002). The Siberian subspecies (*M. a. ocularis*) was recorded in South Carolina in April 1998.

The next listed species each received one top-ten vote (with the panelist and number of runner-up votes in parentheses):

Black-bellied Whistling-Duck (Petersen, 2)	Jack Snipe (Laux, 0)
Clark's Grebe (P. Trimble, 1)	Heermann's Gull (Laux, 1)
Shy Albatross (Veit, 0)	Common Wood Pigeon (Veit, 0)
Kermadec Petrel (Veit, 0)	Broad-tailed Hummingbird (Heil, 0)
Juan Fernandez Petrel (Veit, 0)	Green Violet-ear (Heil, 1)
Fea's Petrel (J. Trimble, 0)	Pacific-slope/Cordilleran Flycatcher (Petersen, 0)
Herald Petrel (Heil, 0)	Swainson's Flycatcher (Veit, 0)
European Shag (Veit, 0)	Plumbeous Vireo (Nikula, 0)
Gray Heron (J. Trimble, 3)	Rook (Veit, 0)
Eurasian Hobby (Laux, 0)	Red-throated Pipit (Laux, 0)
Eurasian Dotterel (Nikula, 0)	Stonechat (Laux, 0)
Common Redshank (Laux, 0)	Virginia's Warbler (Petersen, 2)
Lesser Sand Plover (J. Trimble, 0)	Slate-colored Fox Sparrow (Veit, 0)
Wood Sandpiper (P. Trimble, 2)	Lesser Goldfinch (Laux, 0)

Finally, the species below were mentioned as runners-up but received no top-ten votes:

Pink-footed Goose	Groove-billed Ani
Velvet Scoter	Pacific Swift
Little Shearwater	Broad-billed Hummingbird
Swinhoe's Petrel	Anna's Hummingbird
Masked Booby	Eurasian Wryneck
Corn Crane	Cassin's Vireo
Eurasian Oystercatcher	Common House-Martin
Common Sandpiper	Arctic Warbler
Great Knot	Rose-colored Starling
Long-toed Stint	Yellow Wagtail
Mediterranean Gull	Eurasian Redstart
Large-billed Tern	Lesser Whitethroat
Whiskered Tern	

Certain birds mentioned in these lists (namely Velvet Scoter and Slate-colored Fox Sparrow) are currently considered subspecies but are distinct enough to be recognizable in the field and are being considered for full species status by certain groups.

Herein, the challenge has been laid down. We hope that this list provides birders with a perspective into the future and excitement of Massachusetts birding. Although part of the challenge in finding vagrant birds such as these is to know what species are possible and what they look like, it is just as important to have a wide knowledge of our commonly-occurring avifauna so that we may recognize that one different species when it comes along. 🍷

Robert Stymeist and Jeremiah Trimble have been birding since childhood, write the bi-monthly commentaries on bird sightings for Bird Observer, and work in the Ornithology Department at the Harvard Museum of Comparative Zoology. They share a passion for birding, but while Stymeist is more likely to be searching for songbirds in a corner of Boston, Trimble is more often found on outer Cape Cod scanning for water birds. Stymeist is a former member of the Massachusetts Avian Records Committee. Trimble is a current member.



CELEBRATING THE RED-FOOTED FALCON ARE (LEFT TO RIGHT) PETER ALDEN, BOB STYMEIST, VERN LAUX, JEREMIAH TRIMBLE, AND PETER TRIMBLE. PHOTOGRAPH BY KRISTIN NUTTLE.