

# Ninth Annual Report of the Massachusetts Avian Records Committee (MARC)

*Marjorie Rines, Secretary*

Since the last report of this committee, four additional species have been added to the MARC State List. The addition of Cackling Goose, Red-footed Falcon, Yellow-legged Gull, and Cave Swallow to the official state list brings the state total to 481 species. A copy of this list can be seen at <http://massbird.org/marc/MARCstalist.htm>.

In the past the MARC has occasionally considered reports for which the only documentation was photographs or digital images published on the Internet. The Secretary is pleased to note that for the second year in a row this trend has abated, and there seems to be an increase in the number of written reports being submitted to the committee. An extraordinary exception to this trend was the **Red-footed Falcon** (*Falco vespertinus*), a bird that was not only a first state record but also a first for the Americas. Perhaps its very fame accounted for this lapse, since hundreds of photographs of the bird were published on the Internet, and there was a tremendous amount of discussion about its identification on e-mail Listservs all across the country. In addition, the bird received heavy coverage in the national media, along with the bird's discoverer, Vern Laux, being named "Person of the Week" by ABC News. Despite all this publicity, no written record submission of this high-profile rarity was ever submitted to the MARC!

In the 45<sup>th</sup> Supplement to *The American Ornithologists' Union Check-list of North American Birds, Sixth Edition*, Canada Goose (*Branta canadensis*) was split into two species: Canada Goose (*B. canadensis*) and **Cackling Goose** (*B. hutchinsii*). In the MARC Eighth Annual Report the Committee accepted a report of a "Richardson's" Canada Goose, now more properly called a "Richardson's" Cackling Goose. As a consequence of this past action, Cackling Goose has now been added to the State List.

The by-laws of the MARC require that all reports must receive at least eight "Accept" votes out of nine members voting in order to be accepted. If any other majority of votes to "Accept" other than eight to one is received, the report is re-circulated among the members for up to three rounds before a final decision is made. Large gulls are often controversial, so it is not surprising that the 2002 sighting of a **Yellow-legged Gull** (*Larus cachinnans*) took three rounds of voting before reaching the eight minimum votes for acceptance.

For several years recently **Cave Swallows** (*Petrochelidon fulva*) have been recorded in Connecticut and Rhode Island, most reports coming in late fall. It seemed only a matter of time before a Cave Swallow was recorded in Massachusetts. This happened in 2003, with two independent reports at two different locations on two different dates.

## Reports Accepted

**Pacific Loon** (*Gavia pacifica*), #03-24, April 28, 2004, Provincetown (Barnstable), A. Strauss.\* This is a regular location and date for this now-annual-in-Massachusetts species. (First ballot)

**Yellow-nosed Albatross** (*Thalassarche chlororhynchos*), #03-05, June 2, 2003, Eastham (Barnstable), B. Nikula.\* During a heavy flight of Northern Gannets observed passing First Encounter Beach in Eastham in the aftermath of a strong low-pressure system that tracked south of Nantucket, two observers were able to study an albatross for several minutes before it disappeared, only to reappear half an hour later, when it was studied for another one or two minutes. Nikula was unable to discern bill color, but believed that it was not pale as in the Shy Albatross (*T. cauta*), the only other small albatross (i.e., mollymawk) species possessing a similar underwing pattern. After a lengthy discussion and evaluation of the description of the underwing pattern, the Committee agreed unanimously to accept the report as a Yellow-nosed Albatross. There are at least five previous occurrences of this south Atlantic mollymawk in Massachusetts waters. (Third ballot)

**Albatross species**, #03-06, August 29, 2003, Nahant Bay (Essex), L. Pivacek.\* An albatross noted without binoculars under good lighting conditions from a bluff exhibited a white body with dark mantle and upperwings, and a striking black-and-white underwing pattern. The observation was submitted to the Committee as a Yellow-nosed Albatross (*Thalassarche chlororhynchos*), and while the Committee accepted the observation as that of an albatross, the description of the bird lacked sufficient details to eliminate other albatross and mollymawk species. (Third ballot)

**Reddish Egret** (*Egretta rufescens*), #03-10, July 20, 2003, Westport (Bristol), D. Bowen.\*† Following a two-week stay in Rhode Island, this first-year bird was eventually seen and photographed just over the Massachusetts state line in Acoaxet. Reddish Egret breeds from Texas to Florida and has been documented in Massachusetts on just three previous occasions. (Third ballot)

**White Ibis** (*Eudocimus albus*), #04-13, May 29, 2004, Mashpee (Barnstable), M. Keleher\* et al. This adult White Ibis was spotted foraging among a small group of Snowy Egrets and was described unmistakably. Although the species' range in North America is limited to the southeast, White Ibis is prone to northward dispersal and has been reported previously at least twenty times in Massachusetts. (First ballot)

**Red-footed Falcon** (*Falco vespertinus*), #04-15, August 8-24, 2004, Katama, Martha's Vineyard (Dukes), V. Laux, J. Trimble† et al. A Eurasian breeder that winters in southern Africa, Red-footed Falcon had never been reported in the Americas prior to this report. The bird was initially identified as a Mississippi Kite but was quickly correctly identified from photographs, which precipitated an onslaught of birders to the Katama Air Park on Martha's Vineyard. For details about the two-week stay of this avian celebrity, see *Bird Observer*, Vol. 32, No. 6. Although captive origin of the bird was considered, it was ultimately dismissed as a factor since the insectivorous Red-footed Falcon is unsuitable for falconry and rarely kept in captivity. As noted

above, no formal details for this report were submitted; however, since it was one the most extensively photographed rarities to ever appear in Massachusetts, the decision of the Committee (most of whom had seen the bird) to accept the report was unanimous. (First ballot)

**Bar-tailed Godwit** (*Limosa lapponica*), #04-06 (*L. l. baueri*), May 9, 2004, North Monomoy, B. Nikula\*. #04-07, May 12, 2004, North Monomoy, B. Nikula\*†. #04-08, June 5, 2004, Chatham (South Beach), B. Nikula\*. There are approximately two dozen previous records of this species in Massachusetts, so the appearance of three different individuals in the same area within a month of each other is astonishing. Equally surprising was the fact that the first individual was of the subspecies *L.l. baueri*, which breeds in eastern Siberia and western Alaska, and for which there are only two previous records in the Commonwealth. The other two birds were of the nominate race (*L. lapponica*), the race that breeds in northern Europe. The May individual was in alternate plumage and the June bird was in basic plumage. Remarkably, the observer is responsible for no fewer than five previously accepted reports of this species in Massachusetts. (First ballot)

**Yellow-legged Gull** (*Larus cachinnans*), #02-45, October 6, 2002, Eastham (Barnstable), J. Trimble\*†, B. Nikula\*†, P. Flood. There is probably no group of birds that occasions greater discussion or controversy among birders and ornithologists than gulls in the genus *Larus*. The taxonomy of this group is often confusing, highlighted by significant geographical variation and regular hybridization among certain species. Yellow-legged Gull is considered conspecific with Herring Gull (*L. argentatus*) in some parts of the world, while in other regions it is considered a distinct species bearing a different Latin name (*L. michahellis*) (See *Gulls of North America, Europe, and Asia* by K.M. Olsen and H. Larsson, Princeton Univ. Press, 2003). Photographs of the Massachusetts individual were published online following the bird's discovery, allowing experts worldwide to comment on its identity. There was consensus that the bird was a Yellow-legged Gull, although there was some disagreement over whether it represented the subspecies *atlantis* or *michahellis*. When discovered the bird was described as slightly smaller and darker than nearby Herring Gulls, with a "blocky" head, thick orange bill with a blunt tip, and bright yellow legs. A hybrid Herring Gull x Lesser Black-backed Gull (*L. fuscus*) was also considered as an identification possibility but was eliminated for structural reasons. The only aspect of the bird's plumage which bothered some Committee members was the delayed state of molt of the primaries. However, aberrant molt is frequently a characteristic of many vagrant species. This represents a first state record for Massachusetts. (Third ballot)

**Sooty Tern** (*Sterna fuscata*), #03-28, August 8, 2003, Duxbury Beach (Plymouth), D. Clapp\* et al. A birding group watching a flock of terns and Laughing Gulls feeding off Duxbury Beach noted a large, dark tern among the flock. As the bird joined the other terns for about five minutes it afforded excellent looks, and the description by the observer clearly eliminated Bridled Tern (*S. anaethetus*), the most similar species. The appearance of Sooty Terns in Massachusetts is typically associated with severe

tropical storms and hurricanes. Since there was no tropical storm activity in the area, this occurrence was exceptional. (First ballot)

**Rufous Hummingbird** (*Selasphorus rufus*), #03-38, November 1-3, 2003, East Sandwich (Barnstable), R. Ayotte†, C. Marantz\*. #03-43, November 1-31, 2003, Chicopee (Hampden), V. Glascz†, M. Lynch\*, C. Marantz\*. As described in the MARC Eighth Annual Report (*Bird Observer* 32 [2]), the fall of 2003 was exceptional for *Selasphorus* hummingbirds, with at least six individuals being reported. The East Sandwich bird was a first-year male, and careful review of high-quality video showed the outer rectrices to be too broad for Allen's (*S. sasin*). The Chicopee hummingbird was banded and determined to be a first-year female. (First ballot)

**Rufous/Allen's Hummingbird** (*Selasphorus rufus/sasin*), #03-26, September 10-20, 2003, West Falmouth (Barnstable), S. Fazzino\*†. This adult male *Selasphorus* was photographed and submitted as Rufous Hummingbird, but the photos did not reveal back color which would have differentiated it from Allen's, so the Committee accepted it as Rufous/Allen's. (Third ballot)

***Selasphorus* species**, #03-41, October 21-28, 2003, Amherst, P. Brown\*†. Excellent photos unambiguously showed a *Selasphorus* hummingbird. (First ballot)

**Least Flycatcher** (*Empidonax minimus*), #03-35, November 11-December 22, 2003, Marblehead (Essex), R. Heil\*. *Empidonax* flycatchers are typically gone from Massachusetts before October, and late sightings are as likely as not to be vagrants. However, an experienced observer was able to view this individual at very close range, and the description indicated that the bird was clearly *minimus*. This is the latest report of this species in Massachusetts. (First ballot)

**Ash-throated Flycatcher** (*Myiarchus cinerascens*), #03-29, November 7-16, 2003, Melrose, D. Jewell, M. Rines \*†. The description and photographs positively eliminated other *Myiarchus* flycatchers, including the very similar (but highly unlikely) Nutting's Flycatcher (*M. nuttingi*). (First ballot)

**Scissor-tailed Flycatcher** (*Tyrannus forficatus*), #03-39, October 13-14, 2003, Wellfleet (Barnstable) D. Manchester\*†. #03-40, Wellfleet (Barnstable), November 13-December 4, 2003, B. Elrick\*†. A juvenile Scissor-tailed Flycatcher was seen and photographed by a hawk watcher on Morris Island in Chatham, and although it was again found by a few people the following day it subsequently disappeared. A month later a juvenile was discovered fifteen miles away at Marconi Station in Wellfleet. While the Committee accepted these as two separate reports, it seems plausible to think that it may have been the same individual. (First ballot)

**Philadelphia Vireo** (*Vireo philadelphicus*), #03-37, December 23, 2003, Plymouth (Plymouth), W. Petersen\*. Although a regular fall migrant, Philadelphia Vireo has a fairly well-defined window of appearance in Massachusetts and is rarely seen after the first week in October. The previous late date for this species was November 5, 1979. (First ballot)

**Cave Swallow** (*Petrochelidon fulva*), #03-31, November 14, 2003, Orleans (Barnstable), J. Trimble\*†, B. Nikula\* et al. #03-30, November 27, 2003, Chatham (Barnstable), R. Merrill\*†. For several years prior to these observations there have been reports of Cave Swallow from elsewhere in southern New England, so a first state record for Massachusetts has been long anticipated. Although photographs were taken of the birds from both sightings, the quality was sufficiently poor to make it impossible to eliminate Cliff Swallow (*P. pyrrhonota*). The report of two birds in Orleans was accompanied by a field sketch and excellent reports by two experienced observers, and the Committee was unanimous in its acceptance of this report. Less than two weeks later a single bird was reported from Chatham, and although the details were sketchier (and might not otherwise have met the standard for a first state record), the report and accompanying photos and video were enough to convince the Committee of its veracity. (First ballot)

**Varied Thrush** (*Ixoreus naevius*), #04-02, January 30-February 3, 2004, Nantucket (Nantucket), E. Andrews\*, E. Ray†. #04-03, January 25-February 17, 2004, Belchertown (Hampshire), M. Lynch\* et al. Both of these western vagrants were well described and photographed. (First ballot)

**MacGillivray's Warbler** (*Oporornis tolmiei*), #03-34, November 27, 2003, Westport (Bristol), E. Nielsen\*. Prior to 1997 there were only four records of this western vagrant in Massachusetts, but this represents the seventh report since then, all in the fall and all but one between October and December. The observer described hearing a call note similar to that of a Common Yellowthroat that he could not identify. After birding the area intensively for several minutes, an *Oporornis* warbler suddenly popped up only five feet away. Careful scrutiny revealed a complete gray hood, light gray throat, prominent eye-arcs, and short undertail coverts that, collectively, clinched the identification as *tolmiei*. (First ballot)

**Western Tanager** (*Piranga ludoviciana*), #04-04, January 13-25, 2004, Brewster (Barnstable), R. Everett, P. Brown†. Although no written details were submitted for this western stray, photographs taken showed that the bird was unambiguously a Western Tanager. (First ballot)

**Painted Bunting** (*Passerina ciris*), #03-36, December 12, 2003-January 24, 2004, Shrewsbury (Worcester), S. Lucier, M. Lynch\*, I. Lynch\*, J. Trimble†. An unmistakable male was described and photographed as it visited a feeder in Shrewsbury. Recent appearances of this handsome bird have increasingly been winter visitors at feeders. (First ballot)

**Hoary Redpoll** (*Carduelis hornemanni*), #03-32, December 27, 2003, Belchertown (Hampshire), G. LeBaron\*. #04-09, January 5, 2004, Worcester (Worcester), M. Lynch\*. #04-10, January 1-April 7, 2004, Pepperell (Middlesex), E. Stromsted\*, P. Terasii†. The winter of 2003-2004 witnessed a major redpoll irruption in the northeast, including Hoary Redpolls. Identification of Hoarys is notoriously difficult, not only because of plumage variations in both Common and Hoary redpolls, but also because there is some taxonomic question about the true status of the two species.

Despite these realities, these reports appeared to represent typical individuals and were consequently accepted by the Committee. (03-32: Second ballot; 04-09 and 04-10: First ballot)


### **Not Accepted**

**Trumpeter Swan** (*Cygnus buccinator*), #04-12, March 10-30, 2004, Northampton (Hampshire). This swan, whose initial identity was controversial, was seen and photographed by many, and although the Committee was convinced that it was a Trumpeter Swan, there were many questions raised about its origin. This species has long been extirpated from much of its original range, and there are currently a number of programs attempting to re-introduce the species in eastern North America. The Committee decided that it would be impossible to differentiate a swan from one of these introduced populations from a truly wild bird, so the report was not accepted for reasons of its unknown origin. (First ballot)

**Eskimo Curlew** (*Numenius borealis*), #00-29, August 19, 2000, Wellfleet (Barnstable). The observer described two curlews seen in flight. The Committee unanimously voted not to accept this report, agreeing that there would have to be an exceptional level of evidence to accept a species that is presumed by many to be extinct. (First ballot)

**Le Conte's Sparrow** (*Ammodramus leconteii*), #02-44, October 13, 2002, Marshfield (Plymouth). Although the description was suggestive of LeConte's Sparrow, the Committee felt it failed to eliminate other *Ammodramus* species. (Third ballot)

**Hoary Redpoll** (*Carduelis hornemanni*), #03-33, December 29, 2003, Nahant (Essex), #04-01, February 3, 2004, Deerfield (Franklin). As previously mentioned, the identification of Hoary Redpolls is often very critical, and while the Committee agreed these reports may have referred to Hoary Redpolls, the evidence presented was insufficient. (First ballot)

For more information about the MARC, or to see copies of previous MARC reports, see <<http://Massbird.org/MARC/>>. Current members of the MARC are Dennis Abbott, Jim Baird, Davis Finch, Rick Heil, Erik Nielsen, Blair Nikula, Wayne Petersen (Chair), Scott Sumner, and Jeremiah Trimble. Marjorie Rines is Secretary. 

*The author thanks Wayne Petersen for editorial assistance.*

\* Details submitted

† Photographs submitted, or obtained on the Internet.



TRUMPETER SWAN BY GEORGE C. WEST