The Nesting of Several Canadian-Zone Species in Essex County in 2004, Including the First Nest Record of the Common Raven, *Corvus corax*

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The 2004 breeding season in Essex County, Massachusetts, was highlighted by the finding of nests of several Canadian-zone species that may have been regular breeding birds in earlier times, but were rare to absent nesters even half a century ago. The most significant was the first Common Raven nest in the county's history, at least in modern times. Several other northern species are featured, for which one to several nests have been found in the last few years.

The background for the return of these species to a county on the southern or eastern edge of their "normal" ranges begins with the clearing of much of southern New England for farming by the colonial settlers. Agriculture persisted, and by the mid-nineteenth century most of the forests had been cut, resulting in many of the woodland nesters retreating to more northern locations where farming had not taken such a dominant hold on the landscape. By the late 1800s farms began to fail as industrialization took over the New England economy and agriculture headed west.

Forests don't come back overnight, of course, and not all the abandoned farmland was reclaimed; much of it was developed. It took decades for reforestation to occur, and as late as the 1940s the species I cover in this article were still rare to absent nesters in Essex County. They have returned largely in the last fifty years, to the point where some of them have become fairly common breeding birds. The following accounts document some of the recent nesting events of five of these species.

Pileated Woodpecker, *Dryocopus pileatus*

"That the Pileated Woodpecker…was once a common inhabitant of all the primitive forests of this State [Massachusetts] seems to be unquestionable, though absolute proof of the fact may not be available" (Allen 1876). The prolific Joel Allen was talking about a prime example of a species that fell back before the colonial woodsman's axe and was reduced to "accidental visitor" status in Essex County by the early nineteenth century (Townsend 1905). Their recovery commenced with the gradual return of mature forests in the twentieth century (Forbush 1927). But it took awhile, especially in the eastern counties; the annual list of county sightings in the *Bulletin of the Essex County Ornithological Club* (*BECOC*) for 1931 cited a bird near Crooked Pond in Boxford as only the fifth county record and the first in thirty-five years. The 1934 *Bulletin* has a delightful account by one R. E. Wolfe of Boxford on his three-year quest, ultimately successful, to see one of these birds. From then on reports got more frequent, though they were still rare birds at mid-century.

The date of the first county nest in modern times is open to question. Griscom and Snyder (1955) mention birds "wandering east to Essex County where a pair has

bred in recent years," but do not say where or when. (An implied tie to a bird collected in Middleton in March 1937, traced back to the source [*BECOC* 1937, p. 75], does not bear out a nest record, though the birds were becoming regular in Boxford.) I found no confirmed county nestings in any of the published records covering the years 1919-68 (the ECOC *Bulletins*, the *Bulletin of New England Bird Life* [*BNEBL*], and *Records of New England Birds* [*RNEB*]), though several were confirmed in the 1950s and 1960s in Middlesex County. The first Essex County nest record I could find was at Crooked Pond in 1974, where a pair was observed at a nest throughout June (*Bird Observer*: Jerry Soucy et al.). This was during the Massachusetts Breeding Bird Atlas period (1974-79) and was one of three places in the county where nesting was confirmed in that six-year period (Petersen and Meservey 2003).

Male Pileated Woodpecker arriving at nest, South Hampton, MA, May 10, 2004. Photograph by Phil Brown.

In recent years nests have been found somewhat more frequently as the birds have solidified their hold on the county's larger forests (though not in large numbers) and more birders have started birding these places. I have seen two nests myself, and a third just over the county line in South Hampton, New Hampshire. A pair nested about thirty feet up in a pine snag near the home of Jim and Stina MacDougall in Topsfield in 1997; the nest was active well into June, but the results are unknown. Denise Peloquin has watched Pileateds in Magnolia for many years and believes they have nested almost annually in the grove of mature American beech trees behind her house. In 2001 I spent time observing a nest twenty-four feet up in one of these live beeches. On July 5 both adults fed a single large young that may have been the only one, since it was silent most of the time and did not seem to be in competition with any siblings. The only time it begged was as it was being fed; it remained silent even when a parent had landed outside the cavity and the young was clearly aware that it was about to be fed. My thought at the time was that it was the best-behaved young woodpecker I had ever seen. There was no activity at the nest when I returned on July 16, by which time the young one could have fledged.

Female Pileated Woodpecker looking out of nest hole, South Hampton, MA, May 10, 2004. Photograph by Phil Brown.

On May 10, 2004, Phil Brown informed me that Pileateds were nesting in

an easily visible cavity near the road that goes by a Great Blue Heron colony in a South Hampton beaver swamp with much standing timber. Local birders had been watching a baby Great Horned Owl in one of the heron nests, and Phil noticed the woodpecker nest after I had missed it. This nest was not in Essex County, but was only one mile over the state line and close enough for treatment in this article, especially in view of the odd outcome. Phil observed the male feed the sitting female that day in a cavity sixteen feet up in a deciduous snag in the beaver swamp. I saw the male on incubation duty the next day as he occasionally stuck his head out of the hole. On May 19 both birds flew to the nest tree at 10:20 a.m., the female entering the cavity. To my surprise, the male then started to enter himself. The female, perhaps deciding this wouldn't work, squeezed out under his body as he entered (!) and flew off, allowing him to resume incubation. I saw the male enter again May 29 and stay inside. Since incubation lasts about eighteen days (Baicich and Harrison 1997), and assuming the birds were incubating on May 10, there could have been small young in the nest by May 29.

I did not return until June 12, when I heard both adults near the nest but did not see them approach it in thirty minutes. My next visit was not until June 27. On this date there was no sign of the Pileateds, and to my surprise a female Northern Flicker (*Colaptes auratus*) looked out the Pileated nest hole! I had been monitoring a flicker nest very nearby in the same swamp and had already concluded that their nest had failed, and it seemed that they had now taken over the Pileated nest. But had the Pileateds fledged young, or had their nest failed? Both Baicich and Harrison (1997) and Ehrlich et al. (1988) give 26-28 days as the time from hatching to fledging. If the eggs hatched by May 29, the young could have fledged by June 27, but this is only speculation in the absence of more data. I also don't know when the flickers moved in. Thus, the outcome must remain unknown.

Two footnotes on Pileated Woodpecker nests. First, Sibley's first field guide (2000) is helpful in showing that the nest holes are round, rather than oval like the holes drilled for feeding. I have seen several other nest holes elsewhere in the U.S. in addition to those discussed here, and all of them have been round. Knowing this has enabled me not to waste any more time watching oblong holes for birds returning to feed young! Second, Harrison (1975) states that the nest holes typically face east or south. My sample is small, but of the four nests whose approximate orientation I can recall, two faced south, one east, and one west.

Common Raven, *Corvus corax*

I was in Mississippi when I got the call. Actually, it was an e-mail. Rick Heil sent me a message on April 27, 2004, saying he had discovered a nest of Common Ravens (*Corvus corax)* on a ledge of a small cliff in an old rock quarry in Manchester-by-the-Sea. He knew how much I wanted to document the nesting of this species in the county, and we both knew it was only a matter of time. He found it by following up his consistent sightings of ravens along that stretch of Route 128 on his commutes to and from work in Gloucester, as well as from a tip by Denise Peloquin, who works near the nest site and told him she suspected they were nesting in the neighborhood.

Common Raven nest with adult and chicks on (left) April 30, 2004, and (right) May 7, 2004. Photographs by Phil Brown.

His poking around paid off. Once he discovered the quarry, it was only a matter of seconds before the whitewash on the rocks below the large stick nest gave it away. The ledge, sheltered from above, was about thirty-five feet off the dry floor of the pit and perhaps fifteen feet down from the top of the cliff. The sitting adult was clearly visible on the nest.

I returned home on May 2, and Rick showed me the nest the next day. Three small young, blind and featherless, were plainly visible when they stretched up to beg. I made several more visits to the site over the next month, as did a few other local birders. (The nesting had been publicized but not the exact location, to minimize the number of visitors and, presumably, the amount of disruption to the nesting pair.) To my knowledge, all subsequent viewing was done at a considerable distance through telescopes. Consequently, we were often able to observe feedings, and it was instructive to observe the young even when the parents were away, which was most of the time. During these periods the young mostly slept, and one would often use an apparent ball of wool in one corner of the nest as a pillow. (Ravens typically line their nests with animal hair; Heinrich [1999] reported that of over fifty nests he had examined, presumably in northern New England, every one was lined with deer hair, sometimes in combination with fur from other mammals.)

When the young were in their first couple weeks of life and their eyes were still closed or only just open, they often stretched up and gave their loud, raspy begging calls for no apparent reason. On May 6 I watched the young do this seven times over a thirty-six minute period, after which an adult appeared, and they finally had a reason to beg. Each time one of the babies would respond to some stimulus, real or imagined, and set the other two to begging along with it. They did this far less frequently as they got older and could see what was going on around them.

Phil Brown, living nearby in Essex, visited the site every day during the nestling period and took many terrific digital photographs through his scope, some of which accompany this article. He provided valuable information on what the young were fed on May 23, when he saw the parents present them with a frog, a nestling bird, and birds' eggs that appeared to be those of an American Robin (*Turdus migratorius)*. That

Common Raven chicks on May 29, 2004. Photograph by Phil Brown.

premise was given credence by the screaming of a robin as the eggs were delivered. One of the feedings I observed, on May 6, appeared to consist of regurgitated food, which has often been observed (Forbush 1927; Foss 1994). At one point the parent put food in one mouth, then removed it and put it in another! After this feeding the adult ate a fecal sac; the excess was visible on the bird's bill. Heinrich (1999) described and even photographed this phenomenon.

The young gradually feathered out, and by the end of May were getting ready to fledge. Phil observed the oldest young on top of the cliff on June 6, the first fledging date. He saw the second off the nest on June 8. The youngest was in the nest the evening of June 10 and out of it the morning of June 11. So the fledging of these three ravens covered a five-day span. The staggered fledging demonstrates the staggered hatching, which results from incubation beginning before the clutch is complete (Baicich and Harrison 1997). Fledging takes thirty-eight to forty-four days after hatching (Ehrlich et al. 1988), or "at five to six weeks" (Baicich and Harrison 1997). This would put hatching about the last week of April, around the time the nest was discovered. Incubation takes eighteen to twenty-one days (Ehrlich et al. 1988), so the eggs would have been laid in early April. The nesting was successful, as Phil saw all three young with one of the adults near the nest on June 20.

The Common Raven is listed by Townsend (1920) as extirpated from Essex County, as it had been from southern New England generally. Forbush (1927) gives some of its history in Massachusetts and mentions the warfare waged against it by the colonial settlers, for reasons such as predation on newborn lambs and young chickens (which Forbush credited) and various superstitions about these intelligent birds. J. A. Allen (1876) had this to say about the subject: "In scores of the early enumerations of the birds of New England, and of the Atlantic States generally, the Raven, as well as the Crow, is mentioned. This seems to imply that the Raven, at the time of the first settlement of the country, was more or less common from Virginia to Maine, and that persecution, combined with its natural timidity, has caused its expulsion from the more thickly settled parts of the Eastern States."

Whether the birds formerly nested in southern New England is another question. Nesting is widely and reasonably assumed from the birds' commonality in former centuries, but despite much circumstantial evidence, Forbush's comment (1927) was that "we have no absolute proof that the species ever bred within the limits of Massachusetts." This uncertainty is due more to the lack of adequate historical records than anything else (Allen 1876). Whatever the case, ravens were seldom seen in the state through most of the twentieth century, with only a handful of Essex County sightings through the 1960s (Griscom and Snyder 1955; Veit and Petersen 1993). But with bird-protection measures in place, persecution largely over, forests growing back,

and the amount of available roadkill increasing with road-building and traffic, the birds started coming back on their own to western Massachusetts in the late 1970s (Quinlan 1978). In 1982 nesting was assumed from family groups in three locations from the Quabbin Reservoir west to Mount Greylock (Veit and Petersen 1993), and in 1983 a nest was found on Ragged Mountain in Adams, Berkshire County (Flanagan 1993). By 1992 at least sixteen active nest sites were known from Berkshire County alone (Flanagan 1993), with others being monitored in central Massachusetts.

Ravens started showing up with regularity in Essex County in the mid-1990s (*Bird Observer* "Sightings" columns; pers. obs.). Sightings have been clustered near the large state forests—Harold Parker, Boxford, and Willowdale—and on Cape Ann. All these areas are, or contain, large unfragmented forests of from 2000 to 3500 acres. With sightings this regular, finding a nest was only a matter of time, and it finally came in 2004 as described. Not surprisingly, the first nest found was on a cliff ledge, which in many parts of the species' range is the typical nest site. Cape Ann, here broadly defined to include Essex and Manchester, has many granite ledges, quarries, and gravel pits, offering plenty of potential nesting habitat. But the birds will also nest in tall pines and other conifers, meaning that the county's state forests, which do not have much ledge, may still be chosen as nesting locations if they haven't been already.

A third category of raven nesting sites is human structures. These adaptable birds have used a wide variety of them all over the world. I have seen them in Alaska nesting at the top of a tall radio tower a hundred feet in the air and on one of the stanchions supporting the Alaska oil pipeline only ten feet off the ground. This remarkable variety of nest sites has also characterized the ravens that have colonized Massachusetts; Tom French has banded young in these nests for years and has a forthcoming article on the subject. Both the birds' adaptability in choosing nest sites and the consistency of sightings in certain Essex County locations give me hope that several pairs of ravens may already be nesting in the county.

Ironically, the nest site chosen, though typical for its cliff habitat, was not in the large adjacent Manchester-Essex Woods, but apart from it near a small industrial park. The nest itself was only about a hundred yards from the nearest business, an auto repair shop, though it was screened from the buildings by a line of trees growing in the abandoned dry quarry. The noise from the various businesses was rather constant during the weekdays, and close by could be heard the frequent bulldozing at the lower end of the quarry, where a nearby establishment was creating a new playing field. The ravens appeared not to care about these noises, because the people involved did not approach the nest site. A few did know about it, however, and the owners of one business were kind enough to allow a few birders to park in their limited space to view the birds. The son of the owner knew that ravens were around from their calls and responded to Rick's initial request to check the gravel pit with enthusiasm, saying he had enjoyed seeing and hearing them in the neighborhood. He was not sure whether they had been there in previous years, which I asked him about because ravens commonly reuse their nests for several years (Ehrlich et al. 1988; Flanagan

1993). If the old quarry remains undisturbed, he may continue to enjoy them over the next few nesting seasons.

Red-breasted Nuthatch, *Sitta canadensis*

An irruptive species that can range from abundant to absent in migration and winter, the Red-breasted Nuthatch was considered by Townsend (1905, 1920) to be a "rare summer resident" in Essex County. He knew of only a single nest, in Beverly in 1889, which held eggs on May 23. (Many nests were collected in those days.) Forbush (1929) also called this "dumpy" little bird a "rare summer resident" in the eastern counties. By mid-century, Griscom and Snyder (1955) were still calling the species "casual" as a nesting bird in the eastern part of the state. Then comes a curious sentence: "In Essex County, where there have been many decades of continuous observation, there are records for every day in the year." Despite all that observation, no county nests were reported in the published records from Townsend's time through the 1960s. The best county birders could do was to find family groups with fledged young in various towns five times between 1954 and 1968 (*RNEB*). Even in the Breeding Bird Atlas period in the 1970s, when scores of nestings were confirmed in the state including six in Essex County, few actual nests were found, and the published atlas (Petersen and Meservey 2003) does not say where they were.

Not surprisingly, in the thirty-two years I have lived in Ipswich I have seen few nests of this species. Until 2002 I had found only one, fifteen feet up in a hemlock snag next to the Ipswich River in Hamilton in 1983. An adult entered the cavity on June 5, apparently with food, and went back out; I did not visit the nest again. The experience taught me that Red-breasted Nuthatches do nest in the county, but I failed to follow up on it and spent little time in subsequent years looking for their nests. That changed for good in 2002, when on May 16 I found a pair — mostly the female — excavating a small hole near the top of a short, thick snag just below the beaver dam in Willowdale State Forest. (Most of the forest is in Ipswich, but this little wedge of it is in Topsfield.) Nests of Brown Creepers (see below) and Red-bellied Woodpeckers (*Melanerpes carolinus*) were nearby, and it was a pleasure to sit in one place in the shade and watch all three nests. The laying stage for the nuthatches seemed to occur in late May, possibly into early June. On June 20 both adults took food to the young (invisible inside) at irregular intervals and occasionally removed fecal sacs. In one thirty-minute period on June 30 they fed the young once every two minutes on average. By this time the young were coming to the opening and were near fledging. There was no activity on July 4, so fledging probably happened before that date.

Red-breasted Nuthatch nest hole. Photograph by Jim Berry.

Luck was with me again in 2003, this time elsewhere in Willowdale. Linda Cook told me of a pair excavating in mid-April about 28 feet up in a red pine

snag in the northern part of the forest off Linebrook Road in Ipswich. The habitat here was high and dry in a pure red pine grove (many of which were planted in the county by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1930s), and this pair was on an earlier schedule than the 2002 pair. I found the female tapping away inside the cavity on April 24; on May 15 the male fed the female at the entrance as she was probably incubating. These birds typically smear sap or pitch around the entrance to the nest hole to deter predators, and that was easily visible on this nest; one wonders how they remove it from their bills after spreading it. He was still feeding her on May 23, but by May 28 both adults were taking food to the young. I was unable to return until June 16, by which time there was no activity at the nest. The outcome was apparently happy, however, because on June 21 a family group of nuthatches was feeding in the same pine grove.

A nest in 2004 was less exciting. Jim MacDougall told me of one being excavated near Crooked Pond in Boxford on April 22. I heard nuthatches calling in the vicinity on May 6, but found no activity on four subsequent visits through June 11. Nor had the edges of the hole been smeared with pitch. It was evident that this nest had been abandoned early in the cycle, perhaps in favor of another nesting site. As it is, I have been privileged to see three nests in three years and hope this trend will continue.

Brown Creeper, *Certhia americana*

This was one of the first of the Canadian-zone species to return to eastern Massachusetts when the forests started coming back. Most likely this was because Brown Creepers typically nest behind the loose bark of dead trees. Such trees are more common in swamps, which presumably did not get logged as intensively as upland forests. In addition, many trees were killed in Massachusetts a century ago by outbreaks of gypsy and brown-tailed moths, giving dead-tree specialists plenty of potential nest sites (Tyler 1914). It may have been that a few creepers nested in eastern Massachusetts right through the nineteenth century, since pairs were found nesting "near Lynn," "in the neighborhood of Boston," and in Taunton in the 1870s (Kennard and McKechnie 1905). Then, around the turn of the century, nests were discovered in Andover in 1898 (Brewster 1906) and Hamilton in 1904 (Townsend 1905), as well as in three towns near Boston (Kennard and McKechnie 1905). Tyler (1914) studied nesting behavior at sites in Lexington and Concord, Middlesex County, in 1913, but still considered the birds "rare in eastern Massachusetts [where] they have been reported in summer not more than a dozen times in the last thirty-five years."

No details were published on the Lynn nest, but of the other two Essex County nests, the one in Andover was behind loose bark on a dead oak four feet above the ground and held six eggs on May 13, 1898. The Hamilton nest, similarly situated ten feet up in a leaning dead pitch pine, was under construction on May 11, 1904. After that, however, nest-finding in Essex County came to a halt. Townsend apparently never found another creeper nest (he died in 1934), and called the bird "very rare in summer" (Townsend 1905, 1920). The annual ECOC *Bulletins*, published from 1919

through 1938, only twice mentioned nesting birds, once in Hamilton in 1930 and "a pair with grown young a-wing" in Boxford in 1932. In several other years creepers were "probably nesting." And by this time the birds were apparently seen with some regularity in the breeding season; the county checklist published in the 1931 *Bulletin* called them "Resident; very rare but rather regular in summer" (Stubbs and Emilio 1931). This was consistent with Forbush (1929), who wrote that "only a few remain [after migration; the species does migrate to some extent] to breed in the cool swamps of eastern Massachusetts."

The species' status had apparently not changed by mid-century, when Griscom and Snyder (1955) called the bird an "exceedingly local and erratic summer resident, regular only in Berkshire County, sporadically east to the coast." Regular or sporadic, Brown Creepers did not reveal another county nesting record until three adults with three juveniles were observed in Gloucester in July 1958 (*RNEB*). By this time, however, it was probably a matter of the nests simply not being found, given numbers like twelve creepers reported from Boxford in late April 1960 and ten there in May 1965 (*RNEB*). Brown Creepers begin nest-building in April or early May, and singing birds in suitable habitat at that time are not likely to be migrants.

Brown Creepers were much more in evidence as breeders by the time of the Breeding Bird Atlas in the 1970s, with dozens of confirmations statewide, and at least five in Essex County (Petersen and Meservey 2003), though no actual nests are mentioned from the county. Brad Blodget, who wrote that species account, called the birds "locally common" in the northeastern part of the state in "mature, mixed, swampy forest," and attributed their increase to the return of the beaver and the birds' ability to exploit "the growing system of [b]eaver flowages and their attendant dead timber." This is a fair assessment of their status. But his statement that creeper nests "are almost invariably built 5 to15 feet above the ground" needs amendment, as the following paragraphs will demonstrate. That height range is given in other sources as well, but Hejl et al. (2002) cite nest heights from many parts of the continent ranging from two to seventy-four feet, though nests in western North America tend to be higher.

Brown Creeper nest site, 2002. Photograph by Jim Berry.

My own experience with creeper reproduction began with nests in the Bald Hill Reservation in Boxford in 1992 and 1995, and one in Willowdale State Forest in Ipswich in 1998, the latter under construction as early as April 12. All were behind loose bark on dead trees, at heights of thirteen, six and one-half, and fifteen feet. But I did not revisit those nests, and will devote the rest of this account to more methodical observations of single nests in 2002 and 2003 and four nests in 2004. Again, all nests were behind

loose bark on dead trees. I should add that the bark strips chosen by these birds to nest behind are generally attached at the top and flare out at the bottom. That is, the nests typically have a roof but no floor. The birds prefer this to having a floor but no protection from the rain, not to mention the better protection a roof provides from predatory eyes.

The 2002 nest was about twenty feet up in a large drowned white pine below the dam in the Willowdale State Forest beaver marsh in Topsfield. I discovered it on May 16 and watched the adults make frequent visits to the tree with nest material. (The female builds with help from the male; Baicich and Harrison 1997, Hejl et al. 2002.) The nest could be seen from the side where the end of it stuck out of the crevice; typically, many twigs and bark strips must be jammed into the available space to form a foundation that keeps the nest from falling out, and the birds are anything but tidy in their construction habits. But despite five more visits to the site, I did not see any further activity. For whatever reason, this nest was apparently abandoned.

The 2003 nest was at the edge of the same marsh, perhaps a couple hundred yards away, and conceivably built by the same pair of birds. It also was in a drowned white pine, about thirty-five feet up. The nest site was very well chosen, because the loose bark, though buckling, was firmly anchored both above and below the crevice, which meant that the nest couldn't fall. The entrance was above and to the side; the birds had to crawl through a narrow slit at the edge of the bark and descend to the nest. Both adults were building on April 23. I saw no activity on May 3, but on May 9 the male fed the sitting (or possibly brooding) female, who came to the opening to take the food. Both birds were foraging on May 15; then one returned to the nest and stayed there. I observed them both carrying food to the nest on May 23 and 31, clearly to feed young. Some of the food items appeared to be spiders.

Brown Creeper nest, 2003, with both adults. Photograph by Jim Berry.

This is where it gets interesting. The nestling period can range from thirteen to twenty days, which means the young would have fledged at the latest by June 9—earlier if the young hatched before May 23. Yet on June 15 I watched an adult enter the nest twice with apparent food items. Were the young still inside, or was the male feeding the female on a second clutch of eggs? (Baicich and Harrison [1997] say that Brown Creepers can be double-brooded, whereas Hejl et al. [2002], while citing frequent renesting attempts, found no confirmed cases of second broods.) One of the pair entered the nest on June 21 and stayed inside, indicating incubation. But I saw no activity on June 26 or on subsequent visits, and so do not know the outcome. It is possible that the pair was raising a second brood, or making a second attempt after the first failed.

The nesting season is the time of my most intensive field work, and 2004 was the Year of the Brown Creeper. My first success came on May 10, when I followed a lead from Jim MacDougall on a creeper nest he had seen beside Crooked Pond in Boxford. I never found that nest, but did find one being built farther down the trail at the back of the pond. This one was a nest-finder's dream: the birds were building behind loose bark on a small maple snag at the edge of the pond, only three and one-half feet above the water. Even better, they paid no attention to me while I watched them take twigs into the crevice. I looked forward to watching them raise a family, but it didn't happen. In four more visits I saw no activity at the nest. On the last visit, in July, long after the nest would have been empty, I waded out to discover what had happened. I looked behind the bark, but the nest was gone. The crevice had been wide from the start, as it flared out considerably at the bottom and there was no floor whatsoever. I knew then that the site had been poorly chosen and the nest had fallen into the water, though I could find no trace of it. I suspect it happened early on and the birds rebuilt, since I heard a male sing nearby on both May 21 and June 2.

A second nest was found five feet above the water in a red maple snag in a beaver swamp in Rowley by Linda Cook on June 6, when she observed both adults feeding young in a nest every couple of minutes. This indicated either large young or a lot of them, or both. That proved to be the case, for when she showed me the site on June 10, the young had fledged and the parents were feeding them out of the nest. We saw at least two of them, though there were probably more. One was following an adult around, while the other had landed in the root structure of a fallen tree and was staying put. Both methods worked, since each was being fed by a parent. "On leaving nest [the] young fly weakly but climb well" (Baicich and Harrison 1997), so it was no surprise that one of them had decided to stay put until it learned to fly better. Fledging had probably occurred that morning or the day before. Two food items we recognized were a large moth and a small spider.

The third and fourth nests were in adjacent drowned white pines and almost certainly belonged to the same pair of birds. The circumstances were so strange as to be astonishing. On May 11 I was sitting at an overlook on the east side of the Willowdale State Forest beaver marsh in Ipswich watching a Great Blue Heron nest and looking for grebes and bitterns. This was the site of the 2003 creeper nest, and eventually I noticed that that nest was being used again! I believe what I saw that day was the male feeding his mate on the nest, but I was not certain. On May 24 both adults were taking food to the nest and sometimes remaining inside, indicating small young. On May 30 the feeding visits were shorter, indicating larger young. My next visit was not until June 13, when there was no activity; with a nestling period of thirteen to twenty days, fledging would almost certainly have occurred by then if the nest had been successful.

At the same time, I noticed what looked like another creeper nest in the next tree, this one only ten feet off the water (the old one was thirty-five feet). I thought that odd, but since there was no activity there either, I left without knowing what was going on. I was not able to return until July 3, when I saw both adults feeding young

in the new nest! And since the lookout was on a hillside, the nest was at eye level. It was fascinating to watch how the adult(s) entered the nest: each time it (they) would creep in horizontally on the outer wall, turn left 270 degrees, and then, facing downward, deliver food to the nestlings. This pattern never varied over eight feedings in twenty-one minutes, or over a dozen feedings two days later. (Once again, many food items looked like spiders.) The young were not visible because of the typical hammock-like structure of the nest, but the adult's head could be seen when it brooded the young. When I returned again July 11, I saw no activity, so either the young had fledged or the nest had failed; I did not have enough data to know when they had hatched.

Several things were remarkable about these two nests. First was the reuse of the same nest from the previous year, presumably by the same pair of birds. Hejl et al. (2002) found no evidence of nest reuse by Brown Creepers, so this may be the first documentation of it. Second was the building and use of two nests in adjacent trees only twenty feet apart in the same season. Were they used by the same pair of birds in a double nesting? Surely the original pair would not tolerate a second pair building so close to them, and the species is one of low density. But the second nest was complete-looking on June 13, very shortly after the first brood would have fledged. Had they built this nest that quickly after the first brood left the nest, or had that nest somehow failed before fledging so that they began the second nest earlier? Or had the second nest been built even while the birds were raising the first brood? And if so, why would they build another nest when the first one had served them so well and did not appear damaged? Do creepers contemplating a second nesting typically build a second nest or use the first one again? For that matter, how often do they nest a second time if the young from the first nest fledge? (Hejl et al. [2002] say, "No confirmed cases of second broods.") Many questions arose in my mind that I hope to find answers to in the coming years. Whether I succeed or not, these birds are fascinating to watch at the nest, and friendly enough to allow cautious humans to observe them at will.

Winter Wren, *Troglodytes troglodytes*

This is a Canadian-zone species whose nest habits were virtually unknown a century ago. Another "very rare summer resident" (Townsend 1905, 1920; Forbush 1929), the species has only gradually come back with the forests, preferring streamside habitats. These authors knew of only one summer record from Essex County, a pair that probably nested "near Lynn" around 1882. Griscom and Snyder (1955) knew of no other county nesting, nor were there any in all the published records from Townsend's time through the 1960s (*BECOC*, *BNEBL*, *RNEB*). As with many other species, the atlas project provided the first comprehensive look at the birds' status statewide and the first three Essex County nesting confirmations of the century (Petersen and Meservey 2003). The atlas account does not say whether any actual nests were found in either the county or the state (implying that none were), but agrees with other sources in describing the favored sites as hollows in the upturned roots of fallen trees or "other nooks and crannies," and the nest as mossy with the entrance on the side.

Winter Wren nest site at Crooked Pond. Photograph by Jim Berry.

I have found two Winter Wren nests in the county, both in the same location: the outlet stream from Crooked Pond in Boxford. One was in upturned tree roots, the other in a nook that took the form of a tiny rotten stump. The stump nest was the first, in 1989, when I found a female wren carrying moss into a cavity in a hemlock stub only nine inches above the water on the bank of the stream. This was on April 22. I did not return until June 3, when the male wren was still singing but there was no activity at the nest. After a long wait I carefully felt inside the hole and discovered six rotten eggs; the nest had been deserted.

Jim MacDougall alerted me to the second nest when in late April 2004 he told me that a Winter Wren was repeatedly taking moss into a cavity in the upturned roots of a hemlock that had fallen into the stream. I spent a lot of time watching this site, and managed to see a presumed female wren enter a certain area of the root structure about a foot and a half above the water on May 6, 10, and 20, usually staying inside as if incubating eggs or brooding small young. On none of these occasions did I see the bird carrying food. A male wren was often singing nearby. On June 2, after a long vigil with no activity at the nest, I waded into the stream and felt carefully around the unseen hollow. My fingers found the soft nest, and it was empty. Either the young had fledged or the nest had somehow been raided; I simply did not have enough information to know. (The time between hatching and fledging is long for such a small bird, twenty-nine to thirty-seven days; Baicich and Harrison 1997.) It is also possible that this was a dummy nest, the construction of which is typical for wrens of many species. But the evidence of seeing a bird enter it on three different dates over two weeks, sometimes staying inside, leads me to believe that this nest was the active one.

Thus is the birder challenged to find nests of this enigmatic species. As Martha McClelland wrote in her species account in the *Breeding Bird Atlas*, "The Winter Wren is one of the least-known nesting birds in Massachusetts." I heartily agree.

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***Jim Berry**'s series of articles on significant nesting records in Essex County continues with this offering, in conjunction with the annotated checklist he is writing on all the birds of that area. Birders are encouraged to send Jim information on county nest records of the less common species, whether current or historical. Details of the nests he finds are submitted to the nest-record database at the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology, so that they are available to researchers and authors, such as the editors of the various state breeding bird atlases. Contact Jim (jimberry@nii.net) if you are interested in contributing to this valuable program.*

BROWN CREEPER BY GEORGE C. WEST