

"HOW WE SAW THE BLACK-WINGED KITE" or What Channel 8 Did for Me"

by Ned Mueller, Wellesley

Saturday, September 12th, 1979: what a day! I even remember the weather. We'd had four days of Nor'easter, with Herman reporting lots of shearwaters at First Encounter Beach. Then the wind shifted to north-west and the sky was bright clear blue. We had to get Bob's kid to hockey and mine to soccer and swimming; so we didn't leave for Newburyport 'til about 10. But the trip up went quick enough, with I-95 finally finished. For years we'd had to weave back-and-forth between the old and new lanes, while Massachusetts politicians debated the merits of finishing the job. Politics here are one thing that never changes!

We weren't after any particular bird that day; we hadn't even bothered to call the Voice of Audubon. Besides, even with their new 7-line service, the line was still always busy. It being a weekend, there'd be a lot of birders ahead of us, and we'd soon know what was around. When I saw the Scotland Road exit, I got antsy to get the local information:

"Hey Bob. Let's swith on Channel 8. I think we're close enough."

"Sur-ah."

"(static noises) ... crackle, crackle ... so if anybody has a loaded camera, get yaselves here rightaway, and let's get some picture proof on this Black-winged Kite. (wind noises) ... now it's finished hunting over the dunes ... It's gonna land, it's landed at the same place. Oh, why did I forget my film! ... This is Willet 5, and I'll be wating for ya ... crackle ... (static noises)."

"Hey, is this guy for real? I'll try to get his 10-20, and you check the foreign field guides."

We soon knew that the Black-winged Kite was from Portugal, and that it had never been recorded in North America! Checking the ABA listing, we found that Willet 5 was none other than Joseph Sailor, the respected New York City birder with over 800 North American species! I could feel my excitement growing when Bob mentioned the size of Willet's list. This was no beginner yelling "fire." Before I had noticed, the speedometer had inched above the President's 40-mile-per-hour limit.

"Breaker 8 for that ol' Willet 5. You ... "

But I couldn't finish the message; the Tulsa Nature Club caravan was already on the channel:

" ... now on your left is the famous clam shack; Prudence and John saw Ross' Gull from right here back in '75; and to think they just were coming to Boston for the Elks convention! Praises be!

"The large bird in the meadow grass is an American Egret. Now I know that most of you learned it as the "Great" Egret; but the ornithologists' union has gone and changed the name again. Why folks, the funny thing is that they changed it back to the way I learned it, goin' on twenty-five years ago.

"Birders, remember that we'll turn left at the beach. Then watch for a church with a parking lot beside it. I'll bet you'll be ready for those coffee and doughnuts we've promised. This is Dickcissel 21. We're standing by and prayin' for pipits."

By this point we had reached the Newburyport exit. Tree Swallows were hunting across the broad grassy right-of-way. We knew we could still head up to Salisbury Beach, on back roads, if Willet 5 were there rather than on Plum Island. Bob had loaded high-speed color film into his Nikon, and was busy attaching it to his 10-60X zoom telescope.

"Here goes Bob," I began. "Breaker 8 for that ol' Willet 5. How about a come back to that ol' Skimmer number 1."

"Go ahead Skimmer 1."

"Surely do appreciate that comeback good buddy. We tuned in late on that ol' kite report. We can take pictures but we need your 10-20."

"Good to hear about that picture machine, Skimmer. We're at the state park headquarters building at the end of the island. You familiar with it?"

"That's a big 10-4 Willet, and we know your 10-20 well; we've got our pedal to the metal, and we're skimmin' to ya."

Well we almost broke our springs in the muddy ruts on the Plum Island Road. Why I even cleaned mud off the top of the car the next day. But we eventually reached the state park at the south end of Plum Island. The radio hummed the whole way as news of the sighting spread as far as the Rowley dump. Needless to say, the Tulsa Nature Club never got their coffee and doughnuts. Indeed considerable confusion resulted when half the caravan, hearing the report, turned right to get to the state park, while the other half proceeded faithfully to the church yard. We were able to redirect them as we came onto the island.

Besides half the Tulsa caravan, a lot of other birders had arrived at the state headquarters building ahead of us ... but none had a camera. The kite, a beautiful light gray with black wing shoulders, was sitting on the radio antenna tower right beside the headquarters building.

Bob was out of the car and clicking away with his camera before I could turn off the ignition and find my binoculars. The light was perfect and he took a whole role at every magnification, of the bird flying and sitting. The professionals wanted to see every one and chose a flying shot to publish (Auk, 712, (1980), page 1047). I always preferred the sitting shots myself, like the one the Bird Observer published in color.

At 3 o'clock about seventy-five birders were at the site. By this time, local CB birders, hearing the reports at home, had phoned in the info to the Voice, and a special alert was out. But it didn't do much good except for people close by. For at ten minutes past three, that beautiful little kestrel-sized hawk took out and started gainin' altitude. While hunting, it had always remained near the ground. Now it coasted south, out over the inlet; the last scopes lost it over Crane's Beach. It was never seen again.

by J. Robinson, Wellfleet

Since the birders coffee shop and supply house had opened in '77 it was a tradition to end North Shore birding days there, both the good and bad ones. It was a happy group of birders that assembled before the giant fireplace at the "Ross' Gull" that afternoon. Everybody seemed to have a different field guide picture of the kite; we looked at them and watched the Bonie flock still workin' the harbor. Bob couldn't relax though, until he knew his pictures were O.K. Everybody knew that our sighting wasn't worth much without them. So he got a healthy share of kidding:

"I didn't see a cap on that camera lens, did I?"

Well, it isn't every day that you're involved in a first North American sighting, and we all were pretty anxious to have it counted. And to think we had planned to spend the day off the island! Without the MBH (Mobile Birding Hotline), we might not have heard about it until it was too late.

That reminds me that Paula said that some of you new to birding might not even know about MBH yet, so I said I'd give a little history. Two birding clubs took credit for the idea, but I have my doubts about both claims. The name "hotline" was supposed to come from the DVOC telephone recording in Philadelphia. Travis Audubon in Austin used Channel 8 as early as anyone can remember. The "8" was supposed to look like a binocular head-on. This always seemed rather corny and we stuck to "5" for several years. But "8" was being used everywhere else, so Massachusetts finally switched, too.

Anyway, the active birders in both these clubs started using CB's during the winter of '76-'77 They were on sale that winter because dealers were unloading them before CB switched to 40 channels. At first it was all very hush-hush. Ordinary CB handles were used. But it grew very fast. Less avid birders got tired of "just missing" good birds for want of a CB radio.

The ABA directory to birder handles just came out last year. I don't like the number part of each handle. It seems too formal. But the directory is nice, particularly for identifying out-of-state birders in our area.

There were a lot of worries about the system when it started. Birders thought that regular CBers would show up in droves at sightings. But it hasn't happened. Nobody but other birders know what we mean by the "boat yard" or the "salt pans." Also most CBers are still hooked on Channel 19, listenening for smokie bear reports, particularly since the 40-mile-per-hour limit was imposed.

Well, that's about it, I guess. I'll sign off in my usual way: "You keep your ears on and your eyes open; I'll be standin' by and skimmin' for scarcities."

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