

National Directory of Rare Bird Alerts

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Most members of the birding fraternity, zealous listers and eager novices alike, would agree with the proposition that the joy is in the telling as well as in the seeing. Birders secretive about their sightings are as common as fishermen mute about their catches. That being the nature of the game, organized communication of avian sightings has been an inexorable development. There is not yet a bird ticker tape but that's the general direction in which we are moving.

The current tendency to erect systems has affected even the birding world. For several decades various methods of disseminating the news of bird rarities have been employed. These information networks usually rest on a broad base of pyramiding telephone calls. Ideally, the symmetry of calls will not be broken, and every participating birder will be notified with dispatch. Smooth functioning is dependent on conscientious outlay of time. Over several years, repeated calling can become costly and the obvious possibility of inadvertent lapses in communication renders such a system less than perfect.

Another arrangement which several birding groups have adopted involves subscription to a commercial calling and answering telephone service. Sightings are directly reported to and screened by two or three designated local experts. Finds cleared by them are called into the answering service. It, in turn, relays the report to each of the subscribers along with directions to the site. The cost to each subscriber varies, of course, with the number of calls received. The spring and autumn charges tend to be the highest. Expenses to each member of a group of sixty, who have used this method satisfactorily for nearly two decades were recently estimated at \$1.50 once or twice a year plus \$.15 per call. Although this mode is more centralized and less personally demanding than the telephone chain, drawbacks entail missed calls, muddled messages taken by well-intentioned but wholly uninterested household members, calls coming at less than propitious times and the inherent limit of a single call about a single bird.

An efficacious alternative, already established in some areas, is the recorded rare bird alert (RBA). This is a "call us, we won't call you" system. The birder, curious about the latest hap-

penings on his avian scene, dials a number and hears a taped message listing current rare or unusual birds sighted, how many, and particularly how to get to the place where last reported. A thorough message will state the date and time of the taping, after identifying the alert and its sponsor. The most satisfying services include details and diagnostic features of birds highlighted on each tape, the best time of day to observe them, their status in the area and a note or two on their behavioral characteristics. A few services have expanded their coverage by including news of important conservation matters, upcoming legislation or public hearings of special concern to birders and notices of scheduled field trips or bird club meetings open to everyone. Finally, the message should include a telephone number where watchers can report their extraordinary observations for inclusion on the next tape. Fundamentally, so efficient a system could alert the active birder of sightings throughout his region in ample time to locate a high percentage of them. If you telephone an RBA long distance keep two suggestions in mind: (a) calls made between 11 p.m. and 8 a.m. and Direct Dialed (no operator assistance), will be governed by the lowest existing long distance telephone rates, (b) by simply recording the message repeated calling can be avoided.

The East and the West Coast are blessed with several twenty-four hour, no charge, taped rare bird alerts which provide rather impressive coverage of their self-assigned territories. As birding grows its enthusiasts bird increasingly far flung fields. For these peregrinating birders, the possible benefits of the alerts are legion. The editors of *American Birds* are preparing a national directory of bird hotlines and of persons who can be contacted for information on the rarities in their region. The directory will be kept current and the information will be available upon request. Readers are urged to cooperate in this preparation thereby making a fund of information available to fellow devotees.

Twenty years ago the Massachusetts Audubon Society instituted *The Voice of Audubon*. Today by dialing **617-259-8805**, one can listen to tantalizing details of the changing bird life in the eastern half of Massachusetts, Boston Harbor, Cape Cod

National Seashore and in the islands off the south shore: Martha's Vineyard, Nantucket and the sixteen Elizabeth Islands.

In September, 1964, Massachusetts Audubon Society put into operation another telephone alert service in Springfield, Massachusetts. This *Western Voice of Audubon*, **413-566-3590**, gives news of the variable bird scene in the western half of the state. Both of these Voices are boons for the birder. They report highlights without editorial elaboration. The message is usually brief, and the eastern alert tends to be delivered at a lively pace. Note taking while listening calls for nimble fingers. Neither recording mentions the date or time of taping, which is a shortcoming. Although both tapes indicate where birds have been seen and in what numbers, neither of them offers directions to the sites. Supplemental material (detailed maps, regional guides, etc.), will be needed by the newcomer or visitor to Massachusetts. The newer Voice tends to include local bird club and local Audubon Society field trips announcements, while the other does not. Neither voice informs the listener to whom he can report his observations, which stands as a considerable lack.

The popularity of these services has been established. In late 1973, a counting device was added to both systems. In the following eight months almost 33,000 calls were clocked. The peak month was April, 1974, with 6213 calls.

The Buffalo Museum of Science sponsored the pioneer taped bird alert in New York State. It began its *Dial-A-Bird* just over ten years ago and can be reached at **716-896-1271**. The messages are fairly concise but more often than not are crop full of avian gems. Sightings are reported from northwestern New York, the Niagara River, the eastern end of Lake Erie and the western end of Lake Ontario (both United States and Canadian sides). The date of the taping is always included. The delivery of the message is well paced. No local bird club announcements are made and no notice of field trips is given. General locations of birds seen, when and in what numbers — but, without directions to specific sites is the usual format. The summary is changed twice weekly, or more often as needed. There is no telephone number given for birders to report their observations.

The New York Rare Bird Alert is the veritable *creme de la creme* of RBAs. Each communique contains a little something for everyone. A new caller senses he is watching, from a box seat, the current ornithological pageant pass in review. In addition to precise dates and times of taping, the editor makes every effort to supply copious ac-

counts of the birds seen when and where (originally and subsequently). Plumages, color and other variable markings are noted. Down-to-the-fencepost site directions are provided. The NYRBA keeps callers abreast of upcoming field trips, environmental items of interest, various pending conservation legislation, and local meetings of interest to birders. Most of the recordings run nearly six minutes and are usually changed twice weekly. In the event of an urgent 'hot tip,' it is changed immediately. No tape is concluded before a series of names and telephone numbers of regional editors, who gather observers' data, is reviewed. Coverage includes New York City, Long Island, lower Connecticut, northern New Jersey, Westchester, Putnam and Rockland counties. Originally, in December, 1970, The Linnaean Society of New York sponsored and operated this advisory system but since October, 1972 the National Audubon Society has subsidized it. Although the answering apparatus does not register the number of calls taken by the NYRBA, a conservative estimate is an average of 400 per week. The peak months are September and May. The telephone number is: **212-832-6523**.

In February, 1975, another RBA in New York State was inaugurated. This Dial-A-Bird is sponsored by the Hudson-Mohawk Bird Club of the Capital District and is located in Albany, New York. Coverage includes the Capital district and the editor conscientiously culls the highlights from the current Boston, Buffalo and New York City RBAs and passes those along also. Field trips, films, local radio programs featuring bird topics and sightings, copious precise directions, specific field marks and references for further information are given. This is an excellent alert and can be reached at **518-377-9600**.

In December, 1974, the announcement of a new alert was received enthusiastically by birders in the greater Philadelphia area. The *Delaware Valley Birding Hotline* telephone number is: **215-236-2473**, (easily remembered as 236-BIRD). The Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia and the Delaware Valley Ornithological Club co-sponsor the hotline. The reporting area encompasses the southern two-thirds of New Jersey, including thorough coverage of Brigantine National Wildlife Refuge, eastern Pennsylvania and northern Delaware. The date of taping is always stated and complete information is reported on birds seen, with their numbers, locations and some identifying characteristics. Excellent directions to particular sites are presented. This service announces local and



Audubon meetings and field trips. A number where observations can be reported is given. This hotline has already secured a loyal following. Although it is often busy, persistence is well rewarded.

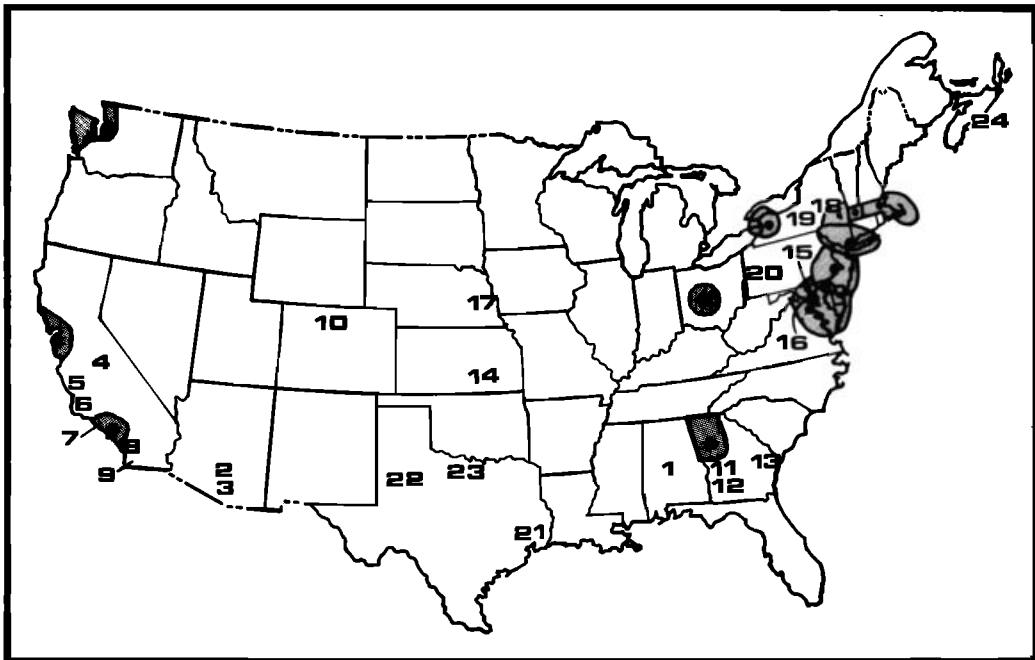
In the District of Columbia or Maryland, the *Voice of the Naturalist* answers either 301-652-3295 or 202-652-3295. The Audubon Naturalist's Society sponsors this well-organized advisory. Coverage extends to Maryland, southern Delaware and Virginia, which includes the bird-rich Chesapeake Bay. Date and time of taping are never omitted. The editor is masterful in presenting the maximum amount of information in the minimum time. Details concerning the birds highlighted, directions, local meetings, field trips and references for further details are briskly imparted. Nothing is missed. A makeshift shorthand will be helpful, if not necessary.

The most southern alert, east of the Mississippi, is located in Atlanta, Georgia. It was inaugurated January, 1975, and is confidently working toward perfection. The Atlanta Audubon Society, which sponsors 404-634-5497, conscientiously monitors rarities occurring in northwest Georgia. The alert serves also as a bulletin board for local bird club activities and Audubon Society meetings. Callers are urged to participate in field trips and to contribute observations to the alert. The date and time of taping are omitted and the listener sometimes finds himself wishing that the recording had included more details. The voice delivery is engaging and site directions are

meticulous. A unique and especially useful feature of this system is that the caller has the opportunity to report his own finds at the tape's conclusion.

Last year the Ohio Historical Society and the Columbus Audubon Society began a rare bird alert in Columbus, Ohio, called *Dial-A-Bird*. By telephoning 614-299-7833 one can listen to a brief general description of the birdlife within a 20-mile circle around Columbus. The date of the taping is never given, although it can usually be deduced. Coverage is not limited to rarities. Comments include numbers of birds seen, when and where. The references are doubtless familiar to the local birder but the visitor, with the aid of maps alone, would be unable to locate sites. Area bird club and Audubon Society activities are stressed. Outsiders desiring further assistance or directions should telephone Jean Stahl, 614-882-5084, or Ann Bingaman, 614-466-5963. A single, and rather minor defect persists on the recordings, which causes blurred or fuzzy voice reproduction. The caller must pay close attention.

The *Los Angeles Audubon Society Weekly Report of Rare Bird Sightings* was begun in late 1973. It is never disappointing. Each new tape is distinguished by an articulate account of the sightings along the southern coast of California, centered around Los Angeles. Precise details and directions, the best possible times of day to locate various birds and fine coverage of field marks are specialties of this alert. There is absolutely noth-



ing vague or obscure in these presentations. The number of this service is: **213-874-1318**. It also publicizes field trips and programs of the Los Angeles Audubon Society. The lucid dispatches of this alert should arouse the latent lister in every birder.

The telephone number of the *Northern California Rare Bird Alert* is: **415-843-2211**. Sponsored by the Golden Gate Audubon Society, it was begun in the spring of 1974. The alert is located in Berkeley and coverage includes the entire San Francisco area, north to Red Bluff and south to Monterey. The bulletins are concise, accurate and provide abundant tips for even the most active birders. The details provided by the alert are practical and should be valuable. This service restricts its news to the bird sightings in the area. Northern California is fortunate to have

such a first-rate source.

Without pomp or embellishment, the voice on the recordings sponsored by the Seattle Audubon Society delivers a summary of rare bird sightings in the northwest corner of the United States. The alert was started on November 26, 1974, and messages are compact but adequate. The unadorned delivery concentrates on current significant sightings in the Seattle, Washington vicinity north to the Canadian border and south to Longview. The sightings in and around Puget Sound are emphasized. Rare birds in threatened wilderness or semi-wilderness areas have highest priority. With this lean and hungry format, a listener might wish for a little fat, by way of dates, numbers, directions and local birders to call for additional information. The telephone number of the Seattle alert is: **206-455-9722**.

Sources of Local Rare Bird Information

<i>No. on Map</i>	<i>Source</i>	<i>Telephone</i>	<i>Area</i>
U.S.A.			
ALABAMA			
1	James Peavy	205-592-9988	Birmingham
ARIZONA			
2	Mrs. Murray Hansen	602-296-8288	Tucson
3	Gale Monson	602-297-5529	Tucson
CALIFORNIA			
4	Irene Heath	805-871-2642	Bakersfield
5	Nora Strong	805-528-0327	Morro Bay
6	Margaret Bender	805-528-0883	Morro Bay
7	Jewell Krieger	805-969-4192	Santa Barbara—RBA of Santa Barbara Audubon Society
8	Helen Morris	714-583-4218	San Diego
9	Harlow Hyde	714-264-4816	San Diego
COLORADO			
10	Narca DeWoskin	303-447-2614	Boulder
GEORGIA			
11	L.A. Wells	404-323-5551	Columbus
12	Sam Pate	404-327-2574	Columbus
13	Jack W. Ganann	912-236-5771	Savannah
KANSAS			
14	Sue Jehle	316-522-5755	Wichita
MARYLAND			
15	Mrs. Walter Bohanan	301-752-3520	Baltimore—RBA of the Maryland Ornithological Soc.
16	Mrs. Harold Archer	301-435-9067	
NEBRASKA			
17	Miriam H. Kain	402-292-1653	Omaha
NEW YORK			
18	Mrs. Stanley Schultz	315-363-0670	Oneida
19	Mrs. Betty Strath	607-594-3302	Schuyler County
PENNSYLVANIA			
20	David B. Freeland	412-795-3157	Pittsburgh
TEXAS			
21	Mrs. L.W. Anderson	713-668-6405	Houston
22	Sharon Menaul	806-795-8903	Lubbock
23	Kathleen S. Zin	817-767-5568	Wichita Falls
CANADA			
NOVA SCOTIA			
24	Shirley Cohrs	902-477-6036	Halifax