A COMPILATION OF ARTICLES WRITTEN BY

DAVE REID

FOR THE INDIAN PONDS ASSOCIATION

QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER

2007–2024

Edited by Emory D. Anderson

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TRIBUTE TO THE IPA BIRDMAN

Dave Reid, whose name long-time readers of this newsletter will recognize, passed away on May 2 at the age of 81 after a surprisingly short battle with cancer. He was the author of many articles about birds and birding on Cape Cod that were routinely included in issues of the IPA newsletter.

In 2007, my wife Geri, who was the editor of the newsletter at that time, asked Dave, whom we had known as a friend for many years and were aware of his great interest in birds, if he would be willing to write an article about birds for the newsletter. Dave kindly agreed, and his first article was published in the 2007 fall issue of the newsletter. Since reader feedback indicated great appreciation for that article, he agreed to continue writing articles, some of his own choosing and others based on requests. Over the next 18 years, Dave authored a total of 62 articles, all except three being about birds. The three exceptions were about chipmunks in the 2019 fall issue and about foxes vs. coyotes and squirrels in the 2023 summer and fall issues, respectively. He had agreed to write the non-bird articles because he had run out of bird topics. His very last article, again on birds (The robin in winter), was published in the 2024 winter issue just several months before his death.

At the IPA annual meeting held on July 28, 2019, I had the honor to present Dave with IPA's prestigious Order of the Turtle award in recognition of his then 13 years of service to the IPA via his very educational and entertaining bird articles. This was an award established in 2007 by the Board of Directors to honor individuals, mainly outside the IPA membership, who had made significant contributions to the mission of the IPA. Previous recipients of the award were John Klimm (2007), former Barnstable Town Manager, and Rob Gatewood (2007), former Director of the Town's Conservation Division; Ed Eichner (2008), water scientist formerly with the Cape Cod Commission's Water Resources Office; Tim Simmons (2009), former restoration ecologist with the Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife Natural Heritage & Endangered Species Program; Dr. Ken Wagner (2011), President of Water Resource Services; Evelyn Steele (2018), widow of John Steele, former director of the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, who provided valuable organizational advice when the IPA was updating itself as a non-profit, charitable organization; she and her late husband were also strong financial supporters of the IPA. Emory and Geri Anderson were jointly given the award in 2022.

Prior to his death, Dave lived in Centerville with his wife Claire. Geri and I became friends with them in the 1970s while we were all members of First Lutheran Church in West Barnstable where Dave, at different times, served as usher, communion assistant, treasurer, and web designer. Following service in the US Army during the Vietnam War, he received a college degree in accounting and subsequently worked in finances for various businesses and churches throughout the country. Dave was an avid birdwatcher, and he and Claire travelled all around the world to see different species of birds. He was also a faithful brother at Mariner's Lodge in Cotuit where he served as Master twice. Very proud of his Scottish ancestry, he learned to play the bagpipes as an adult and was a founding member of the Highland Light Scottish Pipe Band.

The IPA is fortunate to have benefited from Dave's avian experience and enthusiasm over the past 18 years. We convey our sincere condolences to his wife Claire and family.

Emory D. Anderson

EXOTIC VISITORS TO MILL POND

Sometime toward the end of September of last year, my wife called me to say that there were some strange ducks on Mill Pond. I, of course, having nothing better to do, grabbed my binoculars and one of our bird identification guide books and went off on a hunt. We are speaking of Mill Pond in Marstons Mills at the intersection of Routes 28 and 149.

Male American wigeon

When I got there, I immediately assumed that she was not speaking of the population of mallards, so I concentrated on the other big population of ducks on the pond. They were not really hard to identify since the males were present. They turned out to be **American wigeons**. Once known as baldpates, because of the male's white crown which resembles a bald man's head, these ducks have distinctive green ear patches extending back from their eyes and have a small, light blue bill. The females, naturally, are not so ornamental, and resemble mallard females. They have a light grey head and the same light blue bill as the male, with a dark eye patch.

We have not been birding long and have only accidently acquired a fairly good list, but we do like to see new species, so this was an interesting find for us. Now, these birds may have been coming to Mill Pond for years and we just hadn't noticed them before, so I was looking forward to their return this year. The American wigeon breeds, in the summer, in northern North America, Alaska, northern Manitoba, southern Quebec, the Dakotas, and the Great Lakes region and migrate to winter along the Pacific, Atlantic and Gulf coasts. About the end of September or the first of October, I noticed some female wigeons on the pond and learned another fact about them. The males and females don't seem to migrate together. The males showed up about two weeks later.

Someone else had noticed the arrival of the females too. The Cape Cod Bird Club has a list serve for people to note bird spottings. On that site, someone from Marstons Mills noted that among the arriving females was a single, much rarer, Eurasian wigeon. This, of course, set me off on another hunt. The **Eurasian wigeon** breeds in Iceland, the British Isles, Scandinavia, and northern Russia. It winters, more often, along the Pacific coast and only rarely along the Atlantic. The literature suggests that there may be only a hundred of these birds along our coast.

Male Eurasian wigeon

Sure enough, upon arrival at Mill Pond, we found the lone female, but also noted that the male American wigeons had arrived and among them was a male Eurasian. The Eurasian has a rufous-brown head with the same white to yellowish-white crown, but without the green eye patches of the American and the same short, light blue bill.

As of mid-October, they had all been there for about a week, and I saw them every day. Some stragglers could be found in the front cove to the right as you're standing at the viewing pullover, but most of them were out in the middle of the pond, so a pair of binoculars was needed to see them. The Americans spend the winter here, so I hope the Eurasians will be around that long too.

Dave Reid
Fall 2007

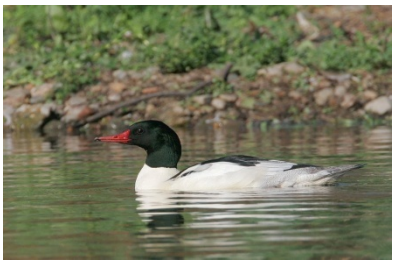
WINTER WATERFOWL ON THE INDIAN PONDS

I had a really good day last week. On my way to work that day, as I passed Mill Pond, I was treated to a flight of Canada geese coming in for a landing on the pond. For the most part, I share everyone else's opinion of Canada geese. I have to tell you that the group I saw that morning was spectacular. With their wings cupped to catch the air and provide braking for their descent, they looked like a flight of Klingon battle cruisers coming in for a landing. Just Google that term and you'll see what I mean.

Goldeneye

Later in the afternoon, I picked up Emory and Geri Anderson and we went on a tour of the Indian Ponds. At the first stop we made, at the south end of Mystic Pond, a neighbor reported seeing a **goldeneye**. At first, we saw a few hooded mergansers sailing along with their hoods raised. As we were searching the pond for other ducks, sure enough, the neighbor's goldeneye paddled right in front of us. It was a common, and the light was just right to get a really good look at his bright gold eye and the little white puff-ball on his cheek.

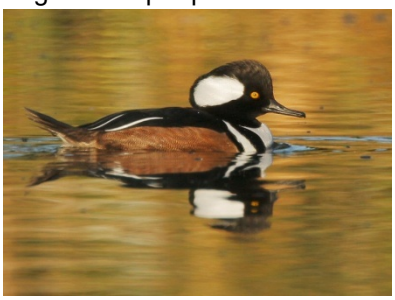
While we were enjoying this guy, Emory spotted a flight of birds landing out in the middle of the pond. When we got the scope on them, they turned out to be **common mergansers**, very distinctive with their shiny green heads and bright orange bills.



Common merganser

As we continued to travel around all three ponds, we saw so many **hooded mergansers** that we became blasé about them and if we saw a group of birds it became "Oh, just more mergansers".

Most of the early arrivals such as the wigeons on Mill Pond and the year-round residents, such as mallards, are dabbling ducks. They feed on grasses growing just under the surface by rotating the front of their body under the water and sticking their rump in the air. They rip up the grass with their beak which, if you look really closely, has a little point on the end called a nail. These ducks are found mainly on very shallow ponds or very close to the edge of deeper ponds.



Hooded merganser

The mergansers and the goldeneyes migrate down from Northern Canada, for the most part, and eat small fish and crustaceans. They catch their food by diving completely under the water and chasing their prey. Serrated rims around their beaks allow them to hold their food when they catch it.

The goldeneyes come from the farthest north and are the last birds to leave their home range. They migrate south, stop at the first open water they find, and then move further south only far enough to find open water. As a result, they usually don't get much further south than Cape Cod. There are two subspecies, the common and the Barrow's. The Barrow's is quite rare on the East Coast. They mostly breed from Alaska down through Oregon, but there is a small range in the far northeast of Nunavut in Canada. When they come to Cape Cod, they rarely get further south than Falmouth, but they are really worth seeing.

Dave Reid
Winter 2008

BIRDING NEWS

Well, it seems as though spring has sprung. All of our human snowbirds may not have arrived back from warmer climes yet, but the feathered snowbirds are here in force. I'm not especially excited by tiny little warblers and vireos that don't sit still long enough to be observed, but I do like to see some of the birds that come back to haunt our backyards in the spring and summer.


Eastern towhee

The first of the returnees that I spotted was the **eastern towhee**. The colorful male all dressed up in a little tuxedo with a rust waistcoat is always fun to see. He looks like a short, fat alderman out on his rounds around town. The towhee is one of the largest of the sparrow family. They spend the spring, summer, and early fall with us and breed and raise their broods in our area. When the weather starts to change in the fall, he beats feet south, wintering from Virginia to Florida.

Towhees establish nests on the ground at the base of upright vegetation, or in vine tangles, or under shrubs. They feed on seeds, fruit, spiders, insects, and other small invertebrates. In our yards, they can usually be seen under hanging feeders. They have a fairly unique method of scratching — a two-footed backward hop.


Gray catbird

The **gray catbirds** have returned in their usual great numbers and almost all of us have seen this jaunty little gray bird with the black cap. Although these birds are usually quite secretive across most of their range, on Cape Cod they are seen mixing it up with all the rest of our birds. When they are establishing or defending a territory, they use a loud raucous call, but when near their nest or their mate, they have a softer, more melodious call that is usually repeated back to them by their mate.

They are not necessarily monogamous. One catbird has been known to have two mates and nest in two territories separated by the territory of another catbird. He also defends both territories. They summer and breed from southern Canada south to Florida and winter along the east coast, south to Florida, the Caribbean, and Central America.


Baltimore oriole

One of my favorites is the **Baltimore oriole**. At the moment, we have five or six in our yard.

Like the American robin, the oriole is named after a similar-appearing Old World bird. It is not a member of the family Oriolidae, but is more closely related to blackbirds and meadowlarks. They summer and breed from southern Canada as far south as Texas, Louisiana, and Georgia, and winter in Florida, the Caribbean, Mexico, Central America, and northern South America. They are omnivorous birds, eating caterpillars and insects as well as fruits and nectars. I hang out a suet holder cage with orange halves in it and they love it. The flock we have goes through an orange a day and are not particular. They like the cheaper Florida oranges just as well as the more expensive navels!


Ruby-throated hummingbird

If you see a hummingbird on Cape Cod, you are looking at a **ruby-throated hummingbird**. It is the only hummingbird species in eastern North America. It summers from the Mississippi east and from southern Canada south to Florida and winters in Mexico and Central America south to Costa Rica. They always return to the same area around Mother's Day. Regardless what some experts say, they do not necessarily look for red feeders. They remember where their favorite feeder was last year and look for a feeder, regardless of color, there this year. They will accept some small movement, say from one side of the deck to another, but know their feeder and will defend it from all comers. They will come to hummingbird feeders, so putting one out is almost guaranteed to get you one of these little jewels.


Brown-headed cowbird

For me, the rarest bird of this spring has been the **brown-headed cowbird**. I'm sure they have been here every year, but in 35 years, I had never seen one on Cape Cod and had to go to Texas to see my first bird. That is really strange, too, because these birds try to lay their eggs in the nest of a gray catbird and trick the catbird into raising their babies; consequently, they are usually seen wherever catbirds are breeding. The brown-headed cowbird is the only brood parasite across the whole of North America. That is, the bird does not build a nest of its own. The female will lay eggs in nests other than those of the catbird, but an individual female will always lay her eggs in the nest of the same species. So far this year, we have had them on our deck twice, and I have also seen them on one other occasion. They winter in Baja and southern Mexico, and summer and breed all across North America and southern Canada.

Dave Reid
Spring 2008

RAPTORS ON CAPE COD

What a great time of year this is for birdwatchers! Almost all of the eggs have hatched, the babies have fledged, and, in most cases, the young have left the nest and are going about the business of learning to be like their parents.

The young of many species have grown to look so much like adults that it is hard to tell them apart. The babies are the ones fluttering their wings and making begging noises around the adults. The males are the ones who give in and feed them, and the mothers are the ones who generally ignore the pleading. I have even had a report of something I mentioned in my last article. Someone told me that they had, in their yard, a song sparrow raising a brown-headed cowbird chick.

Osprey

Bear in mind that almost all new hatchlings will be expected to migrate with their parents when they start to leave for warmer climes in several months. Now is the time to build stamina and endurance, learn how and where to find food, and learn how to avoid certain other species.

The **osprey** is the Cape's only eagle. Despite the fact that they are commonly referred to as "fish hawks", they are eagles and in the same family as bald eagles. Ospreys are migratory and will leave late in the fall, fly to South America for the winter, and be back on the Cape next April. They feed primarily on fresh-caught fish, and watching them fish is a lot of fun. They readily accept man-made structures on which to build their nests and will return to the same nest year after year. Ospreys generally lay one to three eggs over several days which hatch over a period of up to a week. In times of poor food, the older and stronger chick will keep his/her siblings from feeding, and they will starve. With good providers for parents, there is usually no aggressiveness, and all chicks that hatch will grow to maturity. Save the following URL, which shows a long-established nest where a pair of ospreys have two or three chicks every year, and next year you can watch the whole process from egg to flight.

Although someone told me the other day that they had seen a golden eagle in the Hyannis area, I would have to see and identify it to be convinced. In North America, they are most often found west of the Mississippi. The bald eagle, on the other hand, is definitely moving east. For years, there have been several pairs living and breeding on the Quabbin Reservoir in Belchertown. Several of them used to fly regularly to the Cape to feed, particularly at the Yarmouth dump until it was capped. They are still seen now and again in the area.

Red-tailed hawk

We have several medium-to-large hawks which are year-round residents of this area and are regularly misidentified. The **red-tailed hawk** can be seen circling in our skies along with the **turkey vulture**. The turkey vulture is the one with his wings in a slight V, while the hawk is the one whose wings are held in a straight line. The red-tail can also be seen sitting along the highway. He is looking for small rodents in the cleared areas adjacent to the highway, not necessarily for road-kill, although he will accept a fresh kill if provided for him. The call of the red-tail is used in movies to represent the call of any hawk or eagle anywhere in the world. They usually have a clutch of one to five eggs. They are found year-round in all parts of the United States.

Sharp-shinned hawk

When people see a hawk drop into a group of birds on their deck, they are almost certainly seeing a **sharp-shinned hawk**, which could be mistaken for a small red-tail. The sharp-shin has the same whitish coloring to its breast feathers, but a lot lighter brown to its back and wings, and it does not have the obvious red tail feathers. It does, however, have bright red eyes that are very apparent if you see one sitting in a bush near your deck.

The sharp-shin has almost entirely given up migrating in favor of a ready food source, birds around your feeder. The sharp-shin is an Accipiter type of hawk, which means that he has shorter wings and a longer tail that afford him more maneuverability in and among trees and bushes, which are his natural habitat. The red-tail is a Buteo type hawk with longer wings, which require more open space to get around and allow him to soar with the vultures. Both are year-round residents of the Cape who live and breed here.

Turkey vulture

And speaking of vultures. The other large raptor seen in this area is the turkey vulture. The turkey vulture is sometimes referred to as a buzzard. The name is interchangeable and is used to refer to the largest and most widespread member of the vulture family. The turkey vulture is a carrion eater. The part of his brain devoted to his olfactory system is larger than in any other bird. When you see him circling overhead or flying low across treetops, he is actually searching for the scent of decaying animal matter.

They do not use nests, but lay two eggs directly on the ground in crevices or caves and in hollow logs. The young are downy and helpless when hatched. They are widespread across all of North America unlike their cousins, the black vultures, which occur further south of New England.

Dave Reid
Summer 2008

HERONS ON CAPE COD

American wigeon (male front, female back)

I have been asked about the herons that you see on the Indian Ponds and all over the Cape, and I'll get to that in just a minute. First, I have to tell you that the **American wigeon** is back in force on Mill Pond, and the **Eurasian wigeon** is with them. Seeing a flock of American wigeon is rare enough in itself, but you'll be the envy of all your off-Cape birding friends if you tell them you can see a Eurasian wigeon any time you want, all winter long. You may even find yourself with winter guests instead of just summer. Now, back to the main story.

Eurasian wigeon

Great blue heron

On Cape Cod, we have a variety of herons and egrets, most of which you can see on all of the Indian Ponds. The most obvious is the **great blue heron**. The great blue is the largest and most widespread heron in North America and can be found year-round on Cape Cod and in most of the United States. It can be found along salt water shores as well as inland ponds. An all-white form, known as a great white heron, can be found exclusively in Florida.

Although its preferred diet is fish, it isn't a bit above taking an occasional frog, other amphibian, bird, or small mammal. They congregate around fish hatcheries and, if they find that you have a koi pond in your back yard, you'll have a friend for life.

As I said, they live and breed on Cape Cod, but since they need to be near open water to find food, you may not see too much of them around ponds that freeze over.

Less obvious and more secretive is the little **green heron**. The green heron sticks very close to the shore and wades out among the weeds and grasses. It can be very difficult to see because it tends to stand still and let small fish approach, rather than wading out after its food, as does the great blue. One of its distinguishing characteristics is its yellow legs.

Green heron

The green heron is one of the few tool-using birds. It will, regularly, drop bits of bread, feathers, insects, or earthworms on the top of the water and stand patiently waiting for some small fish to be attracted by its offering.

Black-crowned night heron

While the green heron can be found all over the eastern United States during the summer, it does migrate down to Mexico in the winter.

The third heron that you will sometimes see is the **black-crowned night heron**. You'll see this guy mostly in the evenings when he comes out to feed, generally standing still at the water's edge waiting to ambush small fish, crustaceans, frogs, aquatic insects, and small mammals. He can be found in the same areas that all the other herons frequent during the day.

The night heron is the most widespread heron in the world, being found on five continents including North and South America, Europe, Asia, and Africa. Other interesting facts about this bird are that it will nest in trees right beside other herons. It will also nest in groups in the same trees and apparently doesn't distinguish between its own hatchlings and those from other nests, and will brood chicks not its own.

Dave Reid
2008 Fall

WOODPECKERS ON CAPE COD

Do you wonder if a woodpecker ever gets a headache? Banging his head against a tree up to 12,000 times a day surely must be conducive to causing that kind of problem. Well, Ivan Schwab of the University of California, Davis wondered about that question and set out to research it. His research won him an “Ig Nobel Prize”, an alternative to the real Nobel Prize. It turns out that woodpeckers have a fluid surrounding their brains and other types of shock absorbers in both their skulls and their beaks.

Hairy woodpecker

Of the twenty-three species of woodpeckers in the United States, there are six whose range covers Cape Cod. Since at least four of them come readily to feeders, you have probably seen most that come here. The potential pool includes the **hairy**, **downy**, **northern flicker**, **red-bellied**, pileated woodpecker and the yellow-bellied sapsucker.

The hairy is the most widespread woodpecker in North America. There are seventeen recognized subspecies of this bird, so if you’re visiting in California or down south, you might get into an argument with your host about whether or not that is really a hairy.

Downy woodpecker

The downy, which looks like a miniature version of the hairy, is the smallest and most common American woodpecker. It is found from Alaska east to the Atlantic coast and south to Texas and Florida and varies in size from north to south, but is still recognizable in any location.

Red-bellied woodpecker

The hairy is distinguishable from the downy primarily by the size of its bill. The downy has a short, stubby little bill, while the hairy has a larger, more pointed bill. If you see one soon after the other, you will immediately recognize the difference. There are also some minor color differences, but size is the main indicator around here. The male of both species has a bright red spot on the back of his head.

Several weeks ago, a friend of mine absolutely assured me that they have a red-headed woodpecker in their yard; no argument of mine could convince them otherwise. What theymost likely have is a red-bellied woodpecker. The red-headed woodpecker is a really nice little bird with a dark, red head whose range in the east cuts off like a knife edge along the New York/New England border. What we do have around here, in quantity this year, is the red-bellied woodpecker. The male has a bright red cap extending from his forehead back to the nape of his neck, while the female has red only on the nape. While all woodpeckers eat insects, fruit, and nuts, the red-bellied is not above an occasional lizard, small fish, or even a nestling or other small bird. It is called red-bellied because of the wash of red over the feathers on the abdomen.

Yellow-shafted Northern flicker

The other common woodpecker around here is the northern flicker. It is our only woodpecker that is migratory. On Cape Cod, we have the yellow-shafted variety, the male of which has a black mustache. When you get out west, you will find the red-shafted, the male of which has a red mustache. In spite of those differences, they are the same species and are called Northern flicker everywhere.

The last two, the yellow-bellied sapsucker and the pileated woodpecker, are rarely seen on Cape Cod, although their ranges do include the Cape. I have seen a pileated on our land in central Maine, but never on Cape Cod.

Dave Reid
Winter 2009

OWLS ON CAPE COD

Great horned owl

We just returned from a birding trip to Chincoteague Island in Virginia where we saw almost a hundred species and saw five new birds to add to our list. It was a good week. Upon my return, I found a request to write this article about owls on Cape Cod.

Long-eared owl

I have a confession to make. With the exception of the birds in various zoos, I have seen only one owl in the wild and that was a huge snowy owl which flew along beside us one night when we were returning to Runacraig after dinner in Stirling, Scotland. That having been said, I had to rely more heavily than usual on outside sources and books.

Cape Cod has only one owl that is here in quantity and all year round. That is the **great horned owl** and is the one we all hear at night around this part of the Cape. The common **barn owl** is occasionally seen during the fall, winter, and spring, but almost never in the summer. The **eastern screech owl** would be seen in mixed pine/oak woodlands, but is very local and not at all widespread on the Cape, although the numbers and sightings are increasing. My friend, the snowy owl, if seen at all, is very irregular and not seen every year. The **long-eared**, **short-eared**, and **northern saw-whet** are all seen regularly, but not in any numbers. The great horned owl, on the other hand, is common on the Cape, fairly easily found on an "owl prowl", is here all year round and breeds here.

Short-eared owl

Barn owl

The great horned is a brute. It is the only animal that will regularly kill and eat skunks. It is a major predator of other owls and, on Cape Cod, is a major predator of ospreys. All owls are carnivorous, picking mostly on small mammals and the occasional song bird, and most would not refuse a large insect.

With the exception of the short-eared, they all nest in trees, sometimes in cavities in trees, and almost always in nests but by other species of birds, probably ones they had for lunch. The short-eared nests on the ground, usually in grasslands or marshes, in nests that are just depressions in the ground lined with grass.

Northern saw-whet owl

Eastern screech owl

How to see these elusive animals? You have several choices and none of them is real great. If you hear one, you can get a really big flashlight and try to follow the sound. I have to warn you that owls' voices carry over great distances on a quiet evening, so he may sound like he's right next door when he's actually a mile away. Your second choice would be to find someone who knows where one lives and is willing to take you there. Your best chance is to watch the local newspapers and "what to do" inserts in the Sunday paper. The Cape Cod Bird Club and other organizations occasionally run "owl prowls", which are led by birders who know where owls live. The Wellfleet Audubon Center sometimes runs one. Join a group and trek out in search.

Good luck.

Dave Reid
Spring 2009

WHAT ABOUT BOBWHITE QUAIL?

A request for information about the **northern bobwhite quail** arrived this morning and it made me realize, once again, that the three coveys of quail that used to work their way through my backyard are a thing of the past.

There are six species of quail that inhabit some part of the United States, but only one of them lives east of the Mississippi River and only one of them is in decline. That one is, obviously, the northern bobwhite, which gets its name from its distinct, whistled "bobwhite" call. There are 22 subspecies of the northern bobwhite. The females show little difference among the subspecies, but the males can be dramatically different. Male bobwhites have a white throat and a white stripe extending from the bill over the eye to the base of the neck. The region below the eye stripe is colored black and expands under the throat to form a black collar. Females lack this black collar, and their throats and eye stripes are buff, rather than white. The subspecies occur as the distribution of the breed proceeds south. By the time you get down to northern Mexico, the males may not have any black and white banding at all.

Found from slightly west of the Mississippi to the Atlantic and from Massachusetts to Florida, Texas, and Northern Mexico, this little bird is the #1 bird in decline in the United States. Its numbers have decreased 82% in 40 years, from approximately 31 million to about 5.5 million.

As with most things, the reasons for its decline are varied, depending on location. They live, breed, and nest on the ground in open grasslands with sparse tree cover. The greatest reason for their decline is the increase in industrial farming in the area between the Appalachians and the Mississippi. In the East, the clearing of land for expanding housing has reduced their habitat. Here on Cape Cod, at least in my 25-year-old neighborhood, we had coyotes move in. We lost every cat in the neighborhood, all the squirrels, and, I'm afraid, all the quail. With no more food in the area, the coyotes have left, and all we've gotten back are the squirrels.

Female (left) and male (right) bobwhite quail

Another reason for its decline is that it is extensively hunted because, unfortunately, it is really nice tasting. Growing up in East Texas, we teenagers did a lot of quail hunting. Extensive pine forest farming and production may be the greatest threat to the life of the quail. Fire ants hurt them twofold: first, they pillage quail nests and secondly, when man finds the ants, he sprays them with chemicals.

Quail feed on fruits, leafy vegetation, and insects, with seeds making up the bulk of their diet during most of the year. Acorns are preferred over all other foods from fall through early spring. Food must be exposed on relatively bare soil and in open-structured vegetation. Quail scratch and forage poorly in extremely dense vegetation. Seeds buried beneath deep piles of leaf litter are basically unavailable to quail.

Where quail are absent or scarce, it is because either food or cover is inadequate. If protective cover is available, populations usually respond favorably to management practices that provide plenty of food in the fall and winter. If increases in food supply fail to improve quail numbers, landowners can manipulate the habitat.

Several habitat management methods are available to landowners interested in improving quail numbers on their land. These methods involve manipulating native vegetation and supplementing native food. **Controlled burning is often the most economical and effective method of creating and maintaining quail habitat** in old fields and woodlands. Regular fire use during late winter months increases the amount and availability of quail food. Annual burning stimulates coverage and seed production of most grasses and legumes. Lush, rapid-growing vegetation that follows such burning attracts and holds large numbers of insects, and discourages plant growth from becoming too dense. Quail find it easier to feed in burned areas, where food items are more abundant.

There are things we can do to preserve the birds that remain. We can support state and local initiatives that promote the purchase and protection of open land. We can advocate controlled burning of selected areas. We can support the federal farm bill which pays farmers to keep marginal farmlands out of production, thus providing millions of acres of perfect habitat. And, of course, we can always volunteer at conservation areas such as the Wellfleet Audubon Center.

Quail are prolific breeders, having up to three hatches a year with 10–12 eggs per clutch. Given a fighting chance, they may make a comeback.

Dave Reid
Summer 2009

Editor's note: Some of the above information was taken from http://www.rw.ttu.edu/sp_accounts/bobwhite/default.htm.

CANADA GEESE – A BIG PROBLEM

The current US population of Canada geese is estimated to be 3.5–5 million (http://www.geeseoff.com/). The website also reports that "the average Canada goose eats 3 lbs of grass each and every day damaging up to 5 sq. ft. of turf in the process" and that "each adult dumps 1½ lbs of effluent on your grass each and every day."

On dry land, and for most healthy people, goose feces can be harmful only if inhaled or eaten, but as with all things, the old and the young, and pregnant or breast-feeding women, are particularly susceptible to the parasites that inhabit Canada goose feces.

Canada geese on Mystic Lake. Photo by Betsey Godley

In ponds or lakes, Canada geese present another problem. They will eat their 3 lbs of water plants (just as easily as 3 lbs of grass from lawns, golf courses, and fields), and then deposit their feces directly into the water. As the season progresses and the water warms up, nutrients (phosphates) that have leached into the water column from the decaying feces can help cause an instantaneous algal bloom.

If used properly, these nutrients are really just fertilizer, but, when they are introduced into a body of water without restraint, they become a menace to all life in the pond.

Maintaining a beautiful, well manicured lawn can add to the problem by allowing fertilizer to leach into the pond. There are several things you can do to minimize your impact. Don't mow right down to the water's edge. Allow a buffer to grow. Plant fescues, not Kentucky bluegrass, which geese love. Plant aquatic plants at the pond shore. This acts as a physical barrier and provides a habitat for more desirable wading birds. Don't throw food into the water.

Remember, it is extremely difficult to control nature, and if you try to eliminate every goose from your property, you will end up extremely frustrated. Your goal should be to eliminate that which attracts them to you in the first place.

Dave Reid
Fall 2009

THERE'LL BE BLUEBIRDS OVER…

Tough-looking eastern bluebird

I'm sure, by now, we've all seen this guy. That is such a great photo.

I'll have to admit that, after living on Cape Cod for more than 35 years, I have seen only one bluebird in my yard. Also, having been to the White Cliffs of Dover at least four or five times, I don't recall seeing any there either. They are, however, around in large numbers.

Technically, what you are seeing around here is the **eastern bluebird**. There are also mountain bluebirds and western bluebirds which look quite different, but are just as pretty as our resident species. They are all small members of the thrush family, for what that's worth.

There is, of course, a reason why they are not hanging around my yard. They do not usually visit feeders nor do they hang around wooded areas. Eastern bluebirds live around open fields fringed with trees that provide suitable nesting holes. Meadows, fields, cranberry bogs, golf courses, and power line spaces are the best places to see them on Cape Cod.

They are year-round residents of the Cape and a good part of the eastern seaboard and the southern states. They are summer residents of the Midwestern states and are not found too much west of the Mississippi River.

Their major source of food is insects. They sit on fence posts or wires and watch for caterpillars, beetles, crickets, and spiders. At this time of year, they eat large amounts of fruit and berries. In this area, they find blueberry, cranberry, holly, bay, and juniper. In other areas, they also find huckleberry, dogwood, and currants. In other words, they will eat just about any fruit or berry that they can get into their beaks. They have also, rarely, been known to eat lizards and tree frogs.

The male participation in the family consists of hauling materials into a nesting cavity and then trying to attract a female to occupy it. The female builds the nest by weaving together the materials that the male provides, sometimes lining the nest with turkey feathers and other soft materials. She may build nests in several cavities or nesting boxes, but generally uses only one of the nests she builds. She will use the same nest for multiple broods since bluebirds are fully capable of more than one brood per season. The male graciously allows the female to do all the brooding and incubation of the eggs. The bonded pair may remain together over several seasons, although no exclusivity is to be inferred as the female can prove quite promiscuous.

Eastern bluebird in profile

As I have said, they prefer to nest in cavities in trees, but they will readily accept a man-made nesting box. You can see those all over most open areas on Cape Cod. If you happen to live near one of the suggested habitats, you could set out your own nesting box and maybe attract a family of bluebirds. If you are handy with wood-working tools, you could build your own from plans available on the internet. If not, Hyannis Country Garden or the Birdwatcher's General Store in Orleans will be happy to sell you one.

Happy birding!

Dave Reid
Winter 2010

TURKEY IN THE STRAW

Pine straw, that is, as on Cape Cod.

Wild turkeys are native to North America. There are five subspecies within the species. Here on Cape Cod and, in fact, in the whole eastern part of the United States, we see the Eastern subspecies. When you snowbirds go to Florida, you see the Osceola sub-species. For those of you fortunate enough to go out to Texas, you have the Rio Grande type. The Merriam's ranges along the Rocky Mountains, and for the luckiest of all, who go to southern New Mexico and Arizona, you have the Gould's. Can you guess my preference for a place to spend the winter? So far, I have seen the Eastern and the Rio Grande sub-species.

European explorers to Mexico took turkeys back with them when they returned to Spain and Portugal. They were so successfully domesticated in Europe that the English colonists brought them back to the New World when they came to settle here. The Gould's has a wide, white band on its tail feathers and because of this reintroduction, all of the other subspecies retain some trace of this white band, although their other colors vary significantly.

In the 1930s, turkeys had almost disappeared in the United States. Nowadays, with resettlement programs wildly successful, Alaska is the only state without wild turkeys. In the 1930s, there were only about 30,000, but now, there are around 7 million.

Turkeys are not what you would call the most spectacular parents. The male has nothing to do with the poults, and the female very little more. The newly hatched chicks must be ready to follow the mother within 12–24 hours of hatching. They tag along with her, and she feeds them for the first few days, but they soon learn to feed themselves, although they continue to follow her around through the first season. The mini-flock may join up with other mothers and their chicks and form large flocks for overwintering.

Wild turkeys require a habitat known as open woodland, that is, a hardwood forest with occasional openings. They use the open areas for feeding and mating, the fringe areas for nesting, the forest area to escape predators, and the limbs of trees in the forested areas as roosts for sleeping at night. The Cape, with its oak forests, provides the perfect habitat to sustain the wild turkey.

Mating usually occurs from February to April, while the birds are still flocked together for the winter. During the mating ritual, the male spreads his tail and lowers his wings so that the tips drag on the ground. He throws his head back, sticks his beak forward, and then proceeds to circle the female until she accepts his offer. The female lays 10–12 eggs over a 2-week period and then incubates them for about 28 days.

Dave Reid
Spring 2010

Editor's note: "Wild turkeys are mating on my chimney!" This was the comment by one of our IPA members that led to this article about the recent population explosion of wild turkeys on Cape Cod. In fact, it seems that everyone we talked to this spring has had their story to tell about the wild turkeys they have seen in their neighborhoods. Cape Cod natives have indicated that they either have never seen a wild turkey until this year or have never seen so many of them as they have this year. Reports have come in about scores of turkeys roosting at night in the pine trees on or near their property or about the turkeys' appetite for garden flowers. One lonely male turkey was observed courting his own reflection on the side of a metal truck. Yesterday, we were surprised to see a turkey at our front door when we returned home, but not as surprised as he was as he took off in a fast run to the neighbor's house. Wild turkeys are here to stay. So, our advice is to enjoy this new addition to our remarkably varied environment. Male wild turkey displaying ruffled tail feathers.

Male turkey investigating the porch at the home of John and Betsey Godley. Photo by Robert W. Kelley.

SOME TURKEY TRIVIA

The wild turkey was designated the Massachusetts State Game Bird in 1991. It was Benjamin Franklin's choice as the national bird. The sound of a turkey's gobble can be heard a mile away.

CAPE COD'S GULLS

In spite of my constant efforts to try to excite one or two of you enough to turn you into birders, I'm afraid I'm going to have to burst a bubble. They are not seagulls. They are not sea birds, they do not live on the sea or mate on the sea. In fact, they are not even found very far out to sea. As you sail out of Boston Harbor on your way to Bermuda, it is not very long before you don't see any more gulls. They are found farther inland than out to sea. They are a land bird with a preference for seafood, or anything they can dig out of the dump.

Herring gull

Because of its unique geographical position, Cape Cod, at one time or another, is home to at least half of the gull species that come into the United States. Some of them may be here in the winter, others in the summer, and some come here to mate whenever their mating season is, usually the spring.

Black-headed gull

We do have two species that are resident here year-round and those are the two we are most familiar with. The pretty, light-gray gull with the black tail feathers is the **herring gull**. Those really aren't his tail feathers, but rather the ends of his wings, called the primaries. If you look closely, you'll see that they have a little red spot on their bill. That spot is called a gonys and is present on a lot of birds, but is most noticeable on gulls.

The other species that we are graced with is the **greater black-backed gull**, which is the largest of the gull species. The fact that we have them here makes us the envy of birders everywhere away from the East coast. They can all talk about their own species of gulls, but when we casually mention that we have a gull with a 65-in wing span, they all go running for their books.

Greater black-backed gull

Bonaparte's gull

We have four species that show up here that are fairly easy to confuse when they are all in adult plumage. The little gull, laughing gull, Bonaparte's gull, and black-headed gull all have black heads and can be difficult to identify without study. This is especially true because all four of them could be here at the same time, which is late winter and early spring.

The **little gull** has a black hood, as opposed to a mask, a black bill, red legs, and is on-Cape primarily in the winter when he won't have the black hood, but a dusky cap with a black spot behind his eye. The **laughing gull** is on-Cape during his breeding season when he wears a black hood that barely comes down the back of his head. He has a red bill an black legs. The **Bonaparte's gull** is a winter visitor, so you may not see his black mask, but, if he is in breeding plumage, he can be identified by his black bill and red-orange legs. The **black-headed gull** is also here in the winter and can be distinguished from the Bonaparte's by his maroon-red bill and legs. In breeding plumage, he also wears a black mask.

Laughing gull

Little gull

The final gull that must be mentioned is the **ring-billed gull**, also a winter visitor. This gull looks remarkably like a herring gull except that when you study his beak, you will see that instead of a bright red spot, he has a black ring around the end of his beak.

Ring-billed gull

There you have a brief run-down on most of the gulls that you are likely to see around Cape Cod. You might see any of them on your ponds, particularly during winter. Before a storm, you can see great numbers of them in big parking lots such as at K-Mart. You will need your bird book and binoculars to properly identify them, but if it's spring and they are in full breeding plumage, they are probably either herring gulls or greater black-backs.

Dave Reid
Summer 2010

IF IT'S BLACK, IT MUST BE A CROW

The Cape, and our yards, is overrun with black birds, and they're not all crows. And not many of them are blackbirds.


European starling

The greater numbers of them are European starlings, which, as my wife says, look all grackley. The next most numerous are the common grackles, which are truly black and resemble crows.

The **European starling** is an introduced bird, as opposed to an endemic bird. It was first brought to the United States in 1890–1891 by a group of Shakespeare aficionados. A group of 100 were released in Central Park in New York City and all starlings in the US are descended from that group. It's bold, aggressive nature soon led to its spread throughout the continent. They are usually found in towns and villages and are not open-land birds. They fly in great mobs and can cover a lawn when they land to feed. They will eat almost anything, but prefer insects when they are available. They will also eat berries when available. They nest in cavities, which could be in trees, buildings, or light fixtures.


Common grackle

The next most numerous bird is the **common grackle**. There are two other types of grackles in the US, but they stay pretty much in the South. At first, the grackle appears to be solid black, but after you look at it for a while, you'll begin to notice a purplish sheen to it. Some grackles, especially in New England, may have a bronzed sheen about the head and back. Grackles are true blackbirds, but are taller and longer-tailed than typical blackbirds. Common grackles thrive around open land, but are also common in open woodlands. They also like lawns and feeders, where they tend to be the dominant bird (read bully). More often than not, if you have a flock of grackles at your feeder, you will find a **red-winged blackbird** flying with them. Grackles will literally eat anything, up to and including garbage. In the fields, they catch mice. They wade into the water to catch small fish. They are a huge menace to a corn field because first they eat the shoots, and if the corn grows, they eat the kernels.


Red-winged blackbird

The **red-winged blackbird** is one of the most abundant birds across the continent. Although they are not particularly migratory they are most often seen on the Cape after the spring thaw and after the ponds have become ice-free. They are most often noted hanging around the edges of ponds, on cattails around marshes, and sitting on telephone lines. Males are extremely territorial during breeding season and a single male may have numerous female mates nesting in his territory. They attack and try to chase off anything viewed as a rival or nest raider, up to and including people who stray too close to their nests. They are ground foragers and feed mainly on insects during summer and on seeds and grain during winter.


American crow


Fish crow

Next up the scale is the **American crow**, which is the largest type of crow in the US, although noticeably smaller than a raven. Crows are found everywhere. They are found in treetops and the center of town, from open woods to beaches. They feed on the ground and will eat almost anything: earthworms, insects, small animals, road kill, or seeds and fruits. They may travel in large groups or with only one or two companions, but they are rarely alone. They are big birds and are usually around 17 inches long. They are solid black. Even their legs and bills are black. They have short, rounded tails. Although it's really hard to tell apart, we also have the **fish crow** on Cape Cod, which has all of the same characteristics as the American crow.


Common raven

And finally, the **common raven**. Although Cape Cod is included in its range, it is on the very southern and eastern edge of it. In other words, it's probably not a raven you're seeing. They are large, massive birds with shaggy throat feathers and a huge beak. They are entirely black; legs, beak, and eyes. Ravens are not as social as crows and may be seen alone or in pairs. They build their nests, which can be 5 feet across, in trees and on cliffs or utility poles. Like the crows, they are completely omnivorous.

Dave Reid
Fall 2010

COLD BIRDS

Male cardinal

The subjects for these articles come from questions or inquiries from the readers. The other day I received a question that caused my brain to freeze solid**. How do birds stay warm in the winter when it is freezing cold?** That shut me right up and that's saying something. When I went to investigate the question and its answer, I had what has become known lately as a face–palm moment or a "well, duh" moment. Now it's your turn.

Hairy woodpecker

Downy woodpecker

First, birds, like us, are warm blooded and must maintain a body temperature within a certain range, usually around 100– 107°F. Some birds do this by leaving for the winter, going south to Florida, Texas, or Mexico, just like some of us.

Other birds used to migrate, but now, due to the large number of winter residents of the human variety who are willing to put out feed for them, no longer migrate at all. Among these are the **cardinal**, the **chickadee**, **titmouse**, and, surprisingly, the **robin**, although no one is truly certain if that chickadee or titmouse is "ours" or if "our" population has moved farther south and a population from Montreal has moved in. While you are putting out sunflower seeds for all of these, don't forget to put out a suet block for the four woodpeckers that no longer migrate, the **downy**, **hairy**, **red-bellied**, and **flicker**. It is important to fill feeders late in the afternoon so that the smaller birds may find enough to eat to burn (metabolize) during the night.

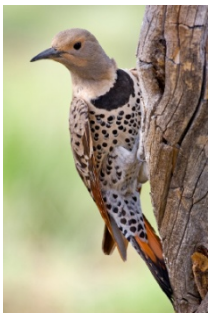
Chickadee

Red-bellied woodpecker

Bird metabolism is very high and they spend all day either eating or looking for food. Their metabolism becomes even higher in the winter when they are trying to keep warm. They also have a faster heart rate, higher blood pressure, and a faster respiratory system.

Titmouse

Some birds, like the chickadee, go into a state of hypothermia at night where their body just shuts down to save energy.



Flicker

But the single most important tool that birds have going for them is exactly the same thing that we do to keep warm in the winter. We put on a down coat before we go out. Birds live in a down coat and may put on 25–30% more feathers for the cold weather. There are tiny air spaces over and under the overlapping feathers. You may even see them fluff up their feathers to conserve heat within these air spaces. You may also see them standing first on one leg and then the other while they draw the opposite leg up to their chest, or tucking their bills under their wings while they nap.

Robin

Some birds huddle and cuddle together to keep warm. Others roost together in groups to share heat. You can get specifications off the internet to build roosting boxes for those species that prefer this method of spending the night. One such website is: http://yardener.com/YardenersPlantHelper/MakingForAHealthyYardEcoloy/AttractingBirdsToTheYard/HousingForSongbirds/DontForgetRoostingBoxes. There are also instructions on the internet for how to grow bird-friendly yards to help provide food for birds. This would include growing sunflowers and thistle and leaving the seeds for the birds.

Keep warm.

Dave Reid
Winter 2011

CREATE A BIRD-FRIENDLY YARD

With the understanding of a few basic rules, you, too, can create a bird-friendly yard. The best place to start bird watching is in your own backyard. Chances are, there will always be some birds present, but there is no reason to settle for the occasional robin that drops in.

Birds have four basic needs to survive, and by providing for those needs, you can attract birds to any yard. Those needs are even quite obvious. They need food, water, shelter, and a place to nest. On Cape Cod, all of these necessities are relatively easy to provide.

Food is the first need that will attract birds to your yard. Black oil sunflowers seeds are the most universally accepted feed, with thistle seed running a close second. The birds around here do not seem to appreciate the millet that is in so many commercial blends, so don't waste your time and money on them. Feeders vary, but regardless what they promise, no feeder is squirrel-proof. Some birds, like cardinals, are not perching birds and, therefore, cannot handle the little pegs that come out of the sides of tube feeders. To attract those types, you can set up a platform feeder that they can stand in, or sprinkle feed on the ground.

Water is an obvious need. Some people live on or near a pond and have a ready source of fresh water. If you want to put a bird bath in your yard, there are several things of which to be aware. The bowl should be relatively shallow or about 3 inches maximum depth to allow the birds to comfortably get right into it to bathe without feeling as though they are going to drown. The edges should be wide enough so that they can stand and drink without having to first dive in.

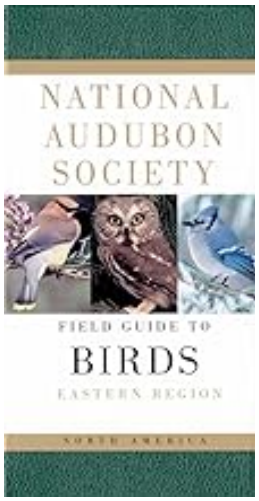
Shelter is relatively easy to provide. The next time you spruce up your yard, leave a brush pile in the area of your feeders. If all your chickadees and titmice are calmly feeding and the lookout lets out a screech that a hawk has come into the area, all the birds will disappear into your brush pile. Some birds, like the towhee, will search a brush pile for food and never come to your feeder. If they do not have ready shelter in your yard, they will not be frequent visitors. Don't trim your yards right down to the water's edge. You will be rewarded with waterfowl fishing, feeding, and hiding in the rushes and bushes that you leave.

Providing a place to nest, i.e. bird houses, can be fun, but on Cape Cod, there are enough woods around most yards that they can find their own preferred nesting sites without your having to do a whole lot.

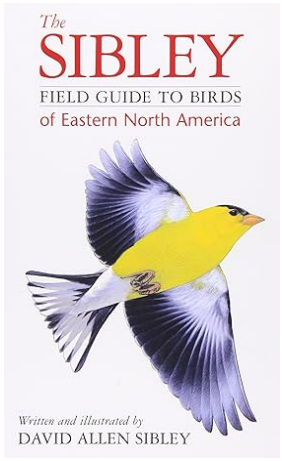
Dave Reid
Spring 2010

BECOMING A BIRDER

So, by this time, some of you may be wondering, “How do I become a birder?” Well, if you have read all of my articles in past newsletters, have gone out in your yard and neighborhood and looked for the birds I have talked about, and have gone down to Mill Pond to see the American and Eurasian widgeons return each September, then, as they say, “You is one.” The question is, “Where do I go from here?” That obviously depends on where you want to go and how fast you want to get there.



Probably, the minimum equipment you need is a good bird book and a fairly good pair of binoculars. There are a lot of really good books on the market and as you stay involved, you will undoubtedly acquire many of them. As a beginner, you might consider the National Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Birds: Eastern Edition. This book has outlines of the types of birds first, then all of the color plates, and finally all of the write-ups. This allows you to look up the basic shape of the bird and then look at the plates that cover that shape of bird. The Sibley Bird Guide is supposed to be the best book out there. I have a Kaufman that I am rather partial to, and any time I go to a new area, I buy a book of birds that I am likely to see in that area. Most of these books come in both Eastern and Western editions, so be careful. Get both, just in case.



Binoculars are a whole other story. These should be the best you can afford at the moment. They must be comfortable to hold up to your eyes for extended periods of time. They must gather enough light to let you see a bird at a hundred feet or more. Your best bet is to go to some retail outlet that can advise you. The Bird Watcher’s General Store in Orleans is one of the best around. You can also get a feel for binoculars by studying the reviews on the internet.

OK. You’ve got your books and binoculars; what next? I rarely go on any birding trips that are not guided by someone far more experienced than me. There are several very good sources for these trips. Wings Birding Tours Worldwide at http://wingsbirds.com/, Road Scholar at http://roadscholar.org/ or the Massachusetts Audubon Society at http://www.massaudubon.org/ are some of the better ones locally available. They provide knowledgeable experts who can identify any bird you see. They can also provide foreign birding trips. There are over 1800 species in Peru and over 2000 in Ecuador.

If you really get into this, sooner or later you’re going to want to keep a list of the birds you have seen. There is a lot of software for your computer out there to track your finds. You could just keep a hand-written journal. I use an Excel spreadsheet.

Dave Reid
Summer 2011

EAGLES ON CAPE COD

At about this time of year, there begins to be a number of sightings of **bald eagles** on Cape Cod. So far, there has been no evidence that they nest on the Cape, only that they are here on a regular basis.

When we say “nest”, we mean that area where they breed, incubate, and rear their young. For the most part, eagles breed out on the Quabbin Reservoir in the Belchertown, MA area. There also seems to be one pair breeding in the Lakeville area.

Historically, they have flown down to the Cape to feed at the landfills that each town provided, and you could always see them at the Yarmouth and Barnstable dumps. Although they are primarily fish-eaters, they will take advantage of carrion. They will also eat birds, reptiles, and amphibians and will take their food live or as carrion. Basically, they will eat anything that they can get their talons into.

Now that the land-fills have been capped, they can be seen cruising the shores around our ponds or perched in trees alongside the ponds watching for fish.

Both male and female eagles have the distinctive “bald” head, neck, and tail, and both have a dark brown back and breast. They have a wingspan between 72 and 90 inches. Juvenile eagles are a mixture of brown and white and reach maturity, with the white head and tail, in four to five years. The female is slightly larger of the two, and they do pair for life. They will take a new mate shortly after the death of their previous mate.

The eagle became our national symbol in 1782, but was not protected, and hunting reduced their numbers. By the time hunting of eagles and DDT were outlawed, their numbers had fallen to less than 500 pairs. Today, with conservation efforts, that number has risen above 9,800 pairs.

Eagles are strong flyers and can be seen soaring over Cape Cod, particularly at the annual Truro Hawk-Watch. They frequently harass other birds, such as ospreys, to steal their catches, sometimes grabbing a fish right out of the osprey’s talons. They are strong swimmers and are capable of floating and occasionally use their wings as paddles to move along where they cannot wade. They are often harassed themselves by other raptors and small birds such as crows, blackbirds, and flycatchers.

Dave Reid
Fall 2011

BALD EAGLE FACTS

- REMOVED FROM ENDANGERED SPECIES LIST IN 2007
- FLY TO AN ALTITUDE OF 10,000 FEET, AT SPEEDS OF 30–35 MPH
- WEIGH FROM 10–14 LB.
- MAY LIVE AS LONG AS 50 YEARS IN WILD
- ARE STRONG SWIMMERS, BUT MAY BECOME HYPOTHERMIC IN COLD WATER
- MATE FOR LIFE, OR UNTIL ONE DIES
- BUILD NESTS IN TALL TREES NEAR RIVERS OR COASTS
- NEED FROM 1,700 TO 10,000 ACRES TO HUNT IN
- WEIGH FROM 10–14 LB; WITH WINGSPAN OF 72–90 INCHES

BENEFICIAL BATS

OK. I know!! I know!!. Bats are not birds. In fact, they are one step closer to us humans than to birds. They are the only mammals in the world capable of "true and sustained" flight. With about 1,240 species of bats, they comprise approximately 25% of all living mammalian species.

Little brown bat

Although they are afraid of humans and view us as predators, all types of bats are extremely helpful to man. For example, a **little brown bat**, which inhabits our area, can eat up to 600 mosquitoes an hour, and that is great by me. The 20 million **free-tailed bats** that live in a particular cave in Texas consume 250 tons of insects in an evening. The more insects they eat, the less chemicals we need to employ to keep insects out of our crops. A colony of only 150 **big brown ba**ts can consume 18 million rootworms each summer. Other types of bats pollinate flowers and drop seeds that will grow into new trees and plants, thereby aiding the regrowth of cut forests. Even the scary sounding **vampire bat** contributes to our well-being. Their saliva is being studied in hope of discovering a new medicine for heart problems.

There are untold myths concerning bats. The greatest danger to bats is not knowing enough about them. For instance:

- "**Blind as a bat**…" Bats are not blind and can see very well. Most bats locate their food in the dark by sound or echolocation, but they are not blind.

- **Bats can get caught in your hair**. Bats are able to locate mosquitoes in mid-air and, therefore, are completely capable of avoiding something the size of your head.

- **Bats are dirty and have rabies**. Bats are actually very clean and groom themselves just like cats. They are mammals and, therefore, are susceptible to rabies just like any mammal, but they do not have rabies just because they are bats.

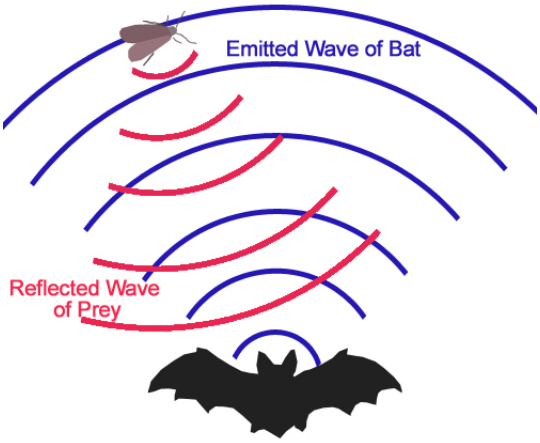


Diagram showing bat sending out high-pitch sound waves and the reflected waves returning from an insect, which allows the bat to visualize the location and size of the potential prey item.

Which brings us to the focus behind this article. Bats are wild animals and should never be handled without proper knowledge and procedures. As I said above, healthy bats will go out of their way to avoid contact with humans. It follows, therefore, that if you see one on the ground or on the floor of your house or garage, it is likely to be sick. Do not handle it. Call your town's animal control department and let them dispose of it.

Rabies in humans is very rare in the United States, but the most common source of rabies in humans is from bats. If you are bitten by a strange dog, cat, or a raccoon, you can usually go to the hospital or to your doctor where you can obtain a series of vaccinations that prevent the disease from harming you. The same procedures apply when you know that you have been bitten by a bat. A problem arises when you are not aware that you have been bitten by a bat.

Tens of thousands of people are bitten by rabid animals each year, but most are successfully treated by vaccination. Each year, there are only one or two cases of rabies that travel a full course. For instance, for the ten years from 1997 to 2006, there were only 19 cases. Rabies is a fatal disease, but even with the cases that go to full-blown rabies disease, medical procedures have improved to prevent fatality. At the end of last year, a case in Wisconsin was successfully treated using what is called the Milwaukee Protocol. However, using the same method, the most recent case on Cape Cod was unsuccessful.

The main lessons to be drawn from this article are that (i) bats are extremely useful to man, (ii) bats are wild animals and should never be handled, and (iii) we need to work for their protection and not attempt to destroy them as a species.

Dave Reid
Winter 2012

THE SWALLOWS HAVE COME BACK TO CAPE COD

There are at least five different kinds of swallows on Cape Cod. The one that we are most likely to see flying around our houses and power line spaces is the **barn swallow**. You may occasionally run into a bank swallow, but unless you go to a more wilderness area like the Wellfleet Audubon area, you probably will not run into the **violet-green**, **northern rough-winged**, or **tree swallow**.

Barn swallow

The barn swallow is the most widespread species of swallow in the world, being found all across northern Europe, North America, and Asia. It is highly migratory and flies as far south as Argentina, South Africa, and northern Australia. This swallow can be identified by its shiny cobalt back and tawny under parts. It has the most deeply forked tail of all the swallows.

Barn swallow nest

The barn swallow prefers open countryside to hunt, but they use man-made structures for nesting. You will find them under your decks, in the eaves for your porches, and, of course, in your barns. They have followed the expansion of mankind to all corners of the world, including Cape Cod.

Barn swallow

All swallows feed on flying insects and only rarely take insects off the ground. You will see them soaring gracefully over open fields or water in search of their prey. The barn swallow, being more acclimated to human presence, includes suburban parks and ball fields, beaches, lakes, and ponds in its territory.

Northern rough-winged swallow

Both male and female barn swallow participate in the hunt for a good nesting site, flying back and forth between two or more possible sites until they narrow their choice down to the best possible spot. You will see them hovering over the top of each potential site while they assess its potential. They may use nests from a previous year, but avoid those infested with mites or other parasites. The nests are constructed of mud pellets mixed with grass and lined first with grass and then with feathers. Nest-building barn swallows are not above stealing nesting materials from a nearby nest. If the nest is built against a wall or beam, it is formed into a half-cup shape; if built on top of a beam, it forms a complete cup or bowl. The clutch size can range between three and seven, and a pair may have two broods a year.

Violet-green swallow

Both parents participate in feeding the young. They may also get help from older siblings from previous clutches and from totally unrelated younger birds. An unmated barn swallow may kill the nestlings in an attempt to break up the parent couple in order to mate with the female.

Tree swallow

Barn swallows have been quick to adapt to humans and their structures. For the most part, people have encouraged them to nest nearby since they feed on insects that harm us or our gardens. They used to be hunted in large numbers to provide feathers for milady's hats, but, fortunately, that practice has been eliminated.

Dave Reid
Spring 2012

AN OSPREY, BY ANY OTHER NAME...

Well, here we are again. You should all know that I do not choose the topics I write about. They are chosen by you. If there is something you want to know about tell Holly and she will tell me. The list of suggestions she gave me to start the IPA's new year included the osprey and I jumped on it.

The osprey is a very unique animal. He has a whole family (Pandion) all to himself. In contrast, for instance, all of the many types of hawks are divided into two families, Accipiter and Buteo. There are four subspecies of osprey, but they are all osprey. No matter what they are called, anywhere in the world, they are osprey.

Ospreys exist on every continent except Antarctica. Their diet is primarily freshly caught fish so they live within flying distance of any body of water where they can catch fish. My neighbor has a small backyard fish pool that got cleaned out of a number of large goldfish by two ospreys that nest in the area.

Ospreys are brown above and white below. When viewed from below, the wings are predominantly white. The head is white and has a broad brown stripe through the eyes. Juveniles have white spots on their backs.

They live 15–20 years and may log up to 160,000 miles in migration during their lifetime. In general, the ospreys we see on Cape Cod migrate as far as South America during their annual migration. They breed on Cape Cod and in the winter fly south.

Ospreys possess a thumb of sorts. They have a reversible outer toe which allows them to grasp a slippery fish more readily. When flying with prey, they line the fish up head first for less wind resistance.

Ospreys mate for life. The female generally lays two or three eggs each season and both parents share in the duties of raising their chicks. The eggs are laid over several days and hatch more or less in the order laid. The older hatchlings dominate their younger siblings and hog all the food brought in by the parents. When fishing is good and there is plenty of food the hatchlings share meals with little problem, but with inexperienced parents or in times of poor fishing, the younger ones may starve to death.

Osprey readily adapt to man-made structures for their nesting sites. You can see osprey platforms constructed all over Cape Cod. Some of the structures have been used regularly and some have never been used. Some have had nests built on them that have been destroyed by high winds and storms. Some have been built by inexperienced couples and just have not stood up to the rigors of time.

There are any numbers of Osprey WebCams, both on the Cape and across the country. You can locate these WebCams by simply Googling "Osprey WebCams". Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution has a very good WebCam which looks directly down on a nest. This year however, the nest was not occupied so the camera is not turned on. This nest has been constantly occupied the last 20 years and has been a lot of fun to watch. The WebCam looks directly into the nest and meticulous records have been maintained showing the dates of arrival of the parents, the dates of the eggs being laid, the dates of the eggs hatching, the fledging of the young ospreys, and their departure on their migration.

All of the life stages of these animals are interesting and fun to watch. It is particularly interesting watching them fish. They usually have a success rate of about 25% but it can be as high as 70%. That is much better than most of us humans manage.

Dave Reid
Summer 2012

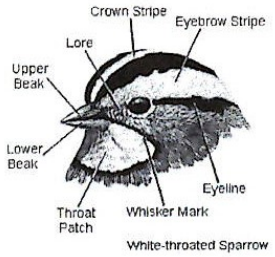
A LESSON WELL LEARNED

I learned a lesson recently and I thought it might be helpful to pass it on to you.

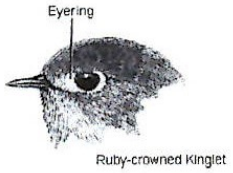
We have a very good friend from Michigan that we don't see often enough. She is a very competent birder and we love to go out with her whenever and wherever we can arrange it. About ten years ago, she visited us here on the Cape and while we were sitting at breakfast one morning, a male rose-breasted grosbeak suddenly appeared at one of our feeders. Now, mind you, that bird had never before visited us and, for that matter, has never been here since, even though the Cape is well within the area of his range. We like to remind Coleen that when she comes to visit us, strange birds show up, so she should come more often.

Well, about two weeks ago, another stranger showed up. We didn't get a good look at it for the first week because every time it would notice us, it would disappear. It finally became accustomed to us standing by the slider so it stayed at the feeder long enough for us to get a good look. We pulled out every book in my library in an effort to identify it. I was pretty sure it was a female because it was predominantly brown, not at all fancy like a male would be.

I don't know if you have had the experience of trying to look through a book to find a specific bird, but to me, all the females look the same and, in a book, they all look the same size. Anyway, there are these things called "Field Marks" to which I have never paid much attention. Field marks include such things as shape of the beak, eye lines, eye rings, etc. There are four key areas to begin your study: **size & shape**, **color pattern**, **behavior** and **habitat** (where you see the bird). I have always left that sort of stuff to my guide, but now the more we tried, the more I wanted to know what this bird was.



White-throated Sparrow



Ruby-crowned Kinglet

So, let's see. It was far bigger than any sparrow or finch in the yard. It had a distinctive white eye line, a very streaked breast, heavy white wing bars, and a really big, thick bill, even thicker than the cardinals in the yard and definitely bigger than the sparrows. Using that information, I was able to zero in on the species and again we got a big surprise. Our strange visitor was a female rose-breasted grosbeak. The day that I identified her was the last time we saw her. It was time for her migration to begin. In the winter, they fly south to Central America and northern South America.

So, in summary, field marks can be very helpful in differentiating one bird from another when they all look the same or fairly close. The concept is worth a few minutes of study. Most good bird books have a section on field marks in the front.

Dave Reid
Fall 2012

COLOR ME SURPRISED

Have you noticed lately how brilliantly some of the birds are colored? The two male cardinals and even the females in our yard absolutely glow. The Carolina wrens with their buff chests seem to have an internal light. Even the chickadees seem to be starker white and black than just a few weeks ago.

Normally, most male birds change their plumage at mating time to attract a mate, but, it is still the middle of winter. It was 17° when I took the dog out for a walk this morning. So why are the birds changing so early? I speculate that the past few weeks of 50° temperatures have fooled the birds into thinking that spring is coming early. I hope they're correct.

But that brings up a whole other discussion, fortunately, because I was looking for something to write about this time. As you may have suspected, birds do see in color. Otherwise there would be no point in males changing plumage. In fact, they see more colors than humans as some can see into the ultra-violet ranges.

The colors in birds' feathers are formed either with pigment or by reflective light or, in some cases, by a combination of both. The greens shown by some parrots are the result of yellow pigments over-laying the blue reflective quality of the feather.

Pigmentation comes from melanins, carotenoids, and porphyrins. Melanins provide strength as well as colors to feathers. Those without any melanin are the weakest of all the feathers. Depending on concentration, melanins can produce colors ranging from black to pale yellows. Carotenoids come from plants and are acquired by eating the plant. They produce the red of the cardinal and the bright yellow of the goldfinch and yellow warbler. They can work with melanins to produce other colors such as the olive-green of the female scarlet tanager. Porphyrins are produced by modifying amino acids. Porphyrins produce colors like pinks, browns, reds and greens. They are found in some owls and pigeons. They also produce the brilliant reds and greens of some tropical birds.

The reflective quality that produces colors in some birds is a result of the structure of the feathers. The hummingbird is the best known example of this. Those of you who have hummingbird feeders may have noticed that, at some angles, the throat feathers appear black while, as the viewing angle changes, they take on a glowing, shimmering quality. This shimmering is the result of the reflection of light on the microscopic structure of the feather.

Not all structural colors are iridescent. Tiny air pockets within the feathers scatter incoming light producing color. Bluebirds and the various jays are examples of this. If you find a blue jay feather in your yard, shine a flashlight through it from behind and you will see that the feather turns brown because the light is not being reflected off the front of the feather.

Now you know more than you ever wanted to know about the colors you see in birds. The next time you are looking at a bird, you can try to figure out how its color is generated.

Dave Reid
Winter 2013

ROBIN, ROBIN

Not even three feet outside our front door, a mother robin has chosen to construct a nest and fill it with three little blue eggs. This got me to thinking.

I had always heard that the American robin was named that because it looked like the European robin and that, sometime around the year 1703, people began calling it a robin without any scientific reason for during so. Before last year I had never seen a European robin, so I didn't question the logic. Last year we spent a week in Sterling, Scotland with some old friends and while sitting in their conservatory, gazing out into their garden at the abundance of avian life, I inquired what a little grey bird was. I was promptly told that it was a robin. Surprise, surprise. There isn't really much of a resemblance.

The American robin (left) is between 9 and 11 inches long, while the European robin is 5 to 5.5 inches long. The American robin has a red breast, while the European could be said to be wearing a red bib. While the European is predominanantly a light grey, the American has a black head and dark gray to black back. I guess the resemblance was sufficient for the people in the 1700s. The American robin is a member of the thrush family (*Turdus migratorius*), while the European robin is a chat and a member of the flycatcher family (*Erithacus rubecula*).

The American robin is the second or third most abundant bird and is widely scattered across North America. It winters south of Canada, and no population residing south of Canada still migrates. On Cape Cod, you will notice that robins mob up during the winter and spread out during the spring. They are among the first birds to mate and produce offspring, and at this time of year, they can best be described as being kamikaze. The way they flash past the front of your car as you are driving makes it seem as though they have a death wish.

The European robin (right) is as widely scattered in Europe as our American robin is in North America. They occur from Great Britain south to Spain and the Azores and east to western Siberia. They are smart enough to get out of Siberia when the winter starts, migrating to western Europe.

Both species have similar diets. They are both omnivorous, eating earthworms, grubs, and grasshoppers as well as wild and cultivated fruits and berries. Both hunt visually and can be observed running and stopping. Presumably, the running simulates the sound of raindrops and causes those delectable worms to rise to the surface where they can be added to the menu. While the American hunts and feeds during the day, the European is diurnal and may be observed hunting by moonlight or artificial light.

Dave Reid
Spring 2013

STRANGE BIRDS

You are all very lucky, indeed, that I am here to write this article and not off in Socorro, New Mexico. There has never been a recorded sighting of a **rufous-necked wood rail** in the United States and even as I sit here trying to type, there is one running around at the Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Reserve in Socorro. Not only that, but what is normally a very secretive species of bird is out in the open being photographed and, in general, making a real spectacle of itself. This bird is a native of the coasts of Central and South America and is a very long way from home. It is causing a frenzy in the birding world with everyone flying to Albuquerque and driving down to Socorro to get a look at the visitor.

Lazuli bunting

The wood rail aside, Bosque del Apache Wildlife Reserve is a very good place to be in November if you happen to be in my favorite state in the U.S. In November they hold the Festival of the Cranes and you can see 100,000 **sandhill cranes** and almost as many snow geese flying out in the morning to feed and back in in the evening to roost. What a racket of wings, feathers, and honking.

Rufous-necked wood rail

Occasional interlopers of this sort are fairly common after large storms or high winds. You often find birds thousands of miles from their normal area of residence. You may remember, several years ago, a strange hawk flew into Martha's Vineyard or Nantucket and the birding world descended on Cape Cod. It happened again in February last year when a **lazuli bunting** showed up at the Wellfleet Wildlife Center. That one Claire and I did get to see, along with several hundred other people. That bird normally stays west of the Mississippi and winters along the West coast of Central America so it was a long, long way from its normal winter habitat.

Ruby-throated hummingbird

When these strangers arrive, they usually stay for a good part of the rest of the season, circulating around to good feeding spots. When it is time for them to migrate, they return to their usual winter haunts and the next time they return north they go to their normal home range.

That is not always the case, however. South Texas, like Cape Cod, used to have only the **ruby-throated hummingbird** in residence. Lately, two or three other species of hummingbirds have started moving in. First, bird-watchers saw one or two of some other species and then the next year there were more and so on. It appears that a part of the population of two or three species has decided to relocate their home range to South Texas. So there may be hope for us here with our lone type of hummer.

Sandhill cranes

Good birding.

Dave Reid
Summer 2013

OWL PROWL

There are nineteen species of owl in North America. They are divided into two families: Strigidae and Tylonidae. Our area, Cape Cod, is in the all-season area of six of them and in the winter range of two others. I can hear them calling from my deck, particularly in the spring. I have been on several organized owl prowls. In spite of all of the above, I have never seen an owl in this area or, for that matter, the United States. I had to go to Scotland to see a snowy owl, which is becoming quite common in Massachusetts, and go to Peru to see a burrowing owl, which is resident mostly west of the Mississippi and in parts of southern Florida. While there, we also saw the tawny-bellied screech owl, which is quite common in South American, but doesn't come to the US.

Great horned owl

Owls offer a wide variety of traits. Some are really big and some are really small. Some hunt by day, but most hunt at night. Some are intensely curious; others will totally ignore you if you happen to come upon them on an owl search. Not that they don't see you, you are just judged to be "not prey" and, therefore, not worthy of further notice. The **great horned owl**, which is probably the one I hear off my deck, is found everywhere in North America and parts of South America, but not in Central America, and is one of the largest owls. It is a powerful hunter and is quite willing to take game larger than itself such as rabbits and even skunks. It has also been seen to take very small critters like scorpions and frogs. It is the largest predator of the osprey on Cape Cod and also takes the occasional peregrine falcon and house cat. This is the owl of most of the storybooks.

Barn owl

Often confused with the great horned owl is the long-eared owl, since they both have the same long feather tufts on their head. The long-eared is much smaller and skinnier, but when it is alarmed, it may stretch itself up to a tall posture in an attempt to intimidate. The long-eared owl is very quiet and often overlooked. It is strictly nocturnal and may roost in groups. The **barn owl**, which is the member of the other family (Tytonidae) is easily recognizable by its flat, heart-shaped face disc. They are widespread in the world, but scarce over much of their range, which includes the Cape. They are nocturnal and spend the daylight hanging out in barns and old buildings, caves, and dense woods. One of the owls we do not usually see around here is the burrowing owl. This is one of the more curious species and is currently featured on a commercial on television hiding in the hollow of a tree. First, he drop down below the opening of the hollow and then, as if he can't stand the suspense, he pops back up to check what's going on with the camera.

Owls do exist on Cape Cod and I encourage you to get involved in an owl prowl when you can find them happening. They are occasionally run by Mass Audubon and are listed on their website at www.massaudubon.org.

Dave Reid
Fall 2013

A PARLIAMENT OF OWLS

Recently, Cape Cod has begun to have a mini-invasion of a very special species of owl. I know I just did an article on owls, but this one wasn't even on the radar at that time. I am, of course, referring to the **snowy owl**.

The snowy owl is the largest owl, by weight, in North America, but Claire and I had to go to Scotland to see our first one. They are one of the few owls that can get even non-birders out to see them, and I am sure, by now, that most of you have seen some of the ones we have this winter on Cape Cod.

In years when the lemmings are abundant inside the Arctic Circle, snowy owls can produce clutches that are two and three times the normal size, and ornithologists are speculating that this is what happened during the last breeding season. Fully grown adult and breeding birds remain in the Arctic year round, but the younglings have not learned to find food during the extreme winters up there, so they fly south to a place where they can find food. Of course, there are some adults in the mix that come south but, for the most part, it's the young owls that we see.

In any year, they can be found in Boston at Logan Airport, but this year, the invasion has been so large that wildlife people have been forced to trap them at Logan and relocate them for everyone's safety. The last number that I heard for birds relocated was 65. Some of those were brought to Cape Cod for our enjoyment.

I had the pleasure of going out to Sandy Neck with some people from Mass Audubon's Long Pasture Wildlife Sanctuary. When we finally reached the end of the beach and walked up a dune we were able to see four snowys. They had seen three here and three there before, but until that time they had not seen a group of four in one place. One of them flew in and landed while we were watching, and I want you to know that they are huge. I believe that a recent special on television said that they can have a wing-span of ten feet, but my reading for this article indicates that it really is more like five feet. In any case, I would have been ready to believe that the one we saw had a ten-foot span.

They do breed and fledge their chicks in the Arctic and are very good and attentive parents. The female does most of the coddling of the chicks while the male does most of the hunting for himself and the chicks. He switches off with the female on occasion so that she can go off and find food for herself. Once the chicks become more mobile, both male and female go off to find food for them. These owls are diurnal and hunt 24/7. They are territorial, returning to the same nesting area and, in some cases, even defending a hunting area. Drawings of snowy owls have been found in Neolithic cave paintings in Europe.

Dave Reid
Winter 2014

Editor's note: The owl photos accompanying this article, of young female snowy owls, were taken by IPA Director Betsey Godley at Sandy Neck.

LET'S GO ON VACATION

The idea of migration fascinates me. I don't mean migration like some of the snowbirds on Cape Cod pull, but the migrations accomplished by birds, the ones that create a whole new population of birds for me to look at starting in September and April.

When we set off on a round trip south of snow, we encumber ourselves with maps, tour guides, GPSs, and all other kinds of paraphernalia to help us get to where we are going. When birds, tiny in comparison and without steel armor, leave for the south, all they have is a brain smaller than a walnut. Yet, they manage to fly thousands of miles with unerring accuracy, wind up in the same location each year, and then turn around at some given signal and fly back those thousands of miles winding up in the same backyard that they left last fall. If I ever doubted that, the little female hummingbird that owns our deck is right there to say "Hey, remember me?" the first time we see each other.

I have also found that south is a relative term. The winter ducks that we see each year have, in fact, flown south. As cold as it sometimes gets on Cape Cod, our weather is far more hospitable than the weather on their home breeding grounds. The beautiful little common goldeneye and the more rare barrow's goldeneye are probably the best examples of this idea that the Cape is more hospitable than home. They are the absolute last to leave their breeding grounds in the Canadian Arctic, and they don't leave until there is no more open water. They then fly south, jumping from open water to open water, until they finally get within reach of the Cape and even then they don't come much further out than Falmouth.

Migratory flyways in the United States

Recently, science has advanced a new theory that the birds that we think of as non-migratory such as robins and chickadees do, in fact, migrate. They just don't go very far. According to them, the robins that we see in winter are not the ones that we see in spring and summer. Winter robins have flown south as little as several hundred miles and have been replaced by others from several hundred miles north.

The illustration on the left will look much better on the website than in the newsletter, but I think you will get the idea. There are a series of major highways that birds follow south and you will notice that Cape Cod is right on the Atlantic flyway.

I have never had the opportunity to get out to Kearney, Nebraska to see the sandhill cranes migrate through, but we have been to Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Preserve in Socorro, New Mexico to see them arrive at their wintering grounds. I would really recommend either trip as highly worthwhile. Thousands of cranes and snow geese flying out to feed and flying back in to roost is a really impressive sight. Noisy, too!!

Dave Reid
Spring 2014

BIRDING AT WASTEWATER TREATMENT SITES

So, here I sit, in a dilapidated motel in Lockhart, Texas waiting for the interment ceremony for a well-liked relative in-law. His ashes were returned to the town he was born and grew up in until he left for the Naval Academy.

\Now, as bad and boring as this all sounds, there is an absolute silver lining to this dark cloud. Lockhart is only about 30 miles from Austin, so it makes sense to fly into and out of that city. Outside of Austin, at the city's wastewater treatment plant is the Hornsby Bend Bird Observatory. Hornsby Bend is a world-class birding site, and we hope we are not too late in the season.

Shoveler duck

As long as we are on the topic of birding sites at wastewater treatment plants, there are such sites all over the United States. We have been to one in Henderson, Nevada where we got twenty birds for our list. The site is beautiful. All the paths around the settling ponds are tree-lined, wide, and well maintained. The trees surrounding the ponds provide food, roosting sites, and shelter.

The next one we went to was in Port Aransas, Texas. This wasn't built around settling ponds. it was a small inlet that backed up to the ponds and had a long pier running out into the inlet. It was surrounded by lots of trees which were full of warblers and sparrows. The inlet had several little islands which were crowded with blue- and green-winged teals, moorhens, coots, and shovelers.

Red-headed ducks

All in all, I think it is a very good practice for towns to build bird-attracting facilities around their wastewater sites. It will be guaranteed to attract birders who will travel great distances to add to their list. California leads the way in number of wastewater birding sites, but there are other places in most states across the continent. New York has several and even New Hampshire has a popular site. I don't think Massachusetts has any yet. That is mostly a function of us not having enough activists to get some established. They can also be good for the economy. The plant in Milwaukee dries their by-product and sells it as Milorganite. The one in Austin sells Dillo Dirt.

Scissor-tailed flycatcher in winter plumage

Well, we just came from Hornsby Bend and have checked into the hotel. Unfortunately, the birding was just about as bad as I suspected it might be. Most of the residents have gone south. We did see a small flock of northern shovelers and a few red-headed duck which were in transit. We also saw a fairly large grebe. The highlight of the trip was four scissor-tailed flycatchers. They were in winter plumage instead of their dress white, breeding plumage. Their whole under-carriage is bright orange, really spectacular.

By the way, I don't know if I have ever mentioned it in one of these articles, but whenever you see a flock of Canada geese, you should, if you have the time, study that flock for interlopers. Several other types of geese will flock with Canadas and you might get a good find. I was looking thru a flock of Canadas in the field in front of the Cape Cod Animal Hospital the other day and I found a greater white fronted goose of the Greenland subspecies. This was a new bird for me, which just goes to prove that you can find birds to add to your list without ever leaving the Cape.

Dave Reid
Fall 2014

BIRDS OF WINTER

This article would probably have been better back in November or December, but as late as two weeks ago, I was still getting questions. First, how do birds stay warm during the winter and second, what can we do to help them?

A brown thresher feeds on mealworms scattered on the snow

First, birds, like us, are warm-blooded and must maintain a body temperature within a certain range, usually around 100–107°F. Some birds do this by leaving for the winter; going south to Florida, Texas, or Mexico, just like some of us. Other birds used to migrate, but now, due to the large number of winter residents of the human variety who are willing to put out feed for them, no longer migrate at all. Among these are the cardinal, the chickadee, titmouse, and, surprisingly, the robin, although no one is truly certain if that chickadee or titmouse is “ours” or if “our” population has moved farther south and a population from Montreal has moved in. While you are putting out sunflower seeds for all of these, don’t forget to put out a suet block for the four woodpeckers that don’t migrate, the downy, hairy, red-bellied, and flicker. It is important to fill feeders late in the afternoon so that the smaller birds may find enough to eat and burn (metabolize) during the night.

In addition to food, birds also need shelter and water. Shelter, on Cape Cod, is not a particular problem. You can get specifications off the internet to build roosting boxes for those species that prefer this method of spending the night. There are also instructions on the internet for how to grow bird-friendly yards to help provide food for birds. This would include growing sunflowers and thistle and leaving the seeds for the birds. Water can be a problem. Birds are capable of turning snow into water, but that takes energy. On the other hand, if you put out water in the morning, it has turned to ice by noon unless you splurge and buy a heated bird bath.

In answer to the question of how birds stay warm during the winter, bird metabolism is very high, and they spend all da either eating or looking for food. Their metabolism becomes even higher in the winter when they are trying to keep warm. They also have a faster heart rate, higher blood pressure, and a faster respiratory system.

Some birds, like the chickadee, go into a state of hypothermia at night where their body just shuts down to save energy. But the single most important tool that birds have going for them is exactly the same thing that we do to keep warm in the winter. We put on a down coat before we go out. Birds live in a down coat and may put on 25–30% more feathers for the cold weather. There are tiny air spaces over and under the overlapping feathers. You may even see them fluff up their feathers to conserve heat within these air spaces. You may also see them standing first on one leg and then the other while they draw the opposite leg up to their chest, or tucking their bills under their wings while they nap. Some birds huddle and cuddle together to keep warm. Others roost together in groups to share heat.

Keep warm.

Dave Reid
Winter 2015

BLACK BIRDS AND BLACKBIRDS

Occasionally, I hear people referring to a group of black birds as blackbirds and I say to myself, “Those are black birds, but they are not blackbirds.” Pretty snooty of me, huh?

We do have a lot of black birds on Cape Cod right at the moment, but we may have only one blackbird. We have common ravens. We have two types of crows (the American crow and the fish crow), two types of grackles (the common grackle and the boat-tailed grackle). We have the brown-headed cowbird whose body is black, and the European starling who is not really black all over. All these and I haven’t even mentioned shore birds or water birds and ignored one you don’t always see like the black vulture.

Red-winged blackbird

These are all “black birds”, but none are blackbirds. There are really only two blackbirds that may be seen on Cape Cod: the red-winged blackbird and the rusty blackbird. I have seen several vagrant Brewer’s blackbirds, undoubtedly blown in on some storm, but basically we have the red-winged blackbird and the rusty blackbird, but at different times of the year.

Rusty blackbird

You can find red-winged blackbirds flying in groups of grackles unless you are near a marsh and then you will see lots of red-wings and virtually no grackles. They will nest and breed near any body of water, but occasionally make in open pastures. They raise two to three broods each season, building a new nest for each brood. After the breeding season, red-winged blackbirds gather in flocks, off Cape, sometimes numbering in the tens of thousands.

Brown-headed cowbird

The rusty blackbird is not quite as visible as the red-winged. During its breeding season, it is liable to be the only blackbird in its area. It is a winter resident on the Cape and is seen in other seasons only because it has strayed from its normal pathways or been blown off course by a storm or strong winds. At other times of the year, they fly north and live and breed in northern Canada and most of Alaska.

Brewer's blackbird

While in spring the male is black with a bluish iridescence, in the fall both sexes are much more a rusty brown. Both sexes have conspicuous yellow eyes.

The Brewer’s blackbird, which shows up here once in a while, is my favorite because it is so easy to identify. Picture, if you will, a jet black bird with a stark white eye. What could be simpler? Its normal range is west of the Mississippi, but I have seen one on the street I live on and several in Falmouth. It is named for a 19th century ornithologist, Thomas Brewer of Boston. The Brewer’s is still expanding its range and is moving east. It is a very social species and plays well with red-winged blackbirds and brown-headed cowbirds.

Dave Reid
Spring 2015

KINGFISHERS IN OUR LIVES

It is my understanding that there has been a kingfisher hanging around Middle Pond this summer, and I have been asked to write something about the bird. First, what you are seeing is the belted kingfisher. Since there are around 90 species of kingfishers in the world, we must be precise.

Belted kingfisher

There are actually three species that come into the United States. The belted, which you have seen, is found in almost every state and is the most common kingfisher in the United States. The other two are found in a very narrow band down in Texas along the Rio Grande. They are the green and the ringed kingfishers.

There are six species to be found in the Americas, both North and South, so that leaves about 85 distributed over the rest of the world. Some of those are not commonly known as kingfishers, but they are members of the clan. The Australian kookaburra is one of these.

Green kingfisher

Because we see the belted kingfisher perched along the shore of rivers and ponds and occasionally diving in to snag a minnow, we might be surprised to find that most kingfishers live away from water, some in the middle of forests, and eat invertebrates, mollusks, frogs, reptiles, small mammals, and even the nestlings of other species of birds. The method of feeding, however, is pretty much universal, that is, sitting on branches and swooping down on some passing prey.

Most kingfishers nest at the end of tunnels dug into the ground. The length of the tunnel depends on the softness of the ground. Some have been found to be 28 feet into the ground. Some nest by burrowing into large, abandoned termite nests.

Ringed kingfisher

Before I hang it up this time, there are a couple of other facts that I didn't know before this article.

Because of the arrangement of their eyes in their head, the kingfisher, like humans, has binocular vision, that is, they see with both eyes at the same time, whereas most birds see out of one eye at a time. They also have nictitating membranes in their eyes which slide into place when they dive into the water. These protect their eyes while allowing full vision.

This has been an interesting article to research. I learned a lot that I didn't know before starting it. The article was the result of a request from one of you. This is the way I would prefer to work. You suggest, I write and answer questions.

Dave Reid
Summer 2015

HUMMINGBIRDS THAT WE KNOW AND LOVE

I wrote an article on hummingbirds maybe five years ago, but do you think I could find it in my files? Obviously, NO!!!!!!!! So you get fresh copy, not re-hashed stale stuff. The facts remain the same, however. Except by accident of nature such as storms or high winds, we only have one species of hummingbird on this side of the Mississippi River. If you have seen a hummingbird, you have seen a ruby-throated hummingbird. West of the Mississippi, they have 17 varieties, and they can all be seen in one place like Green Valley in Arizona.

Ruby-throated hummingbird

I have now seen 17 species, but it took traveling to California, Texas, and Peru to get that many. Arizona is still on my bucket list. But then, they say, travel broadens one's perspective, so go ahead and plan some trips to find hummingbirds.

Hummingbirds are strictly New World birds. They are found from southern Alaska to southern South America. Each island in the Leeward and Windward chains has several breeds, and Central America and all the countries in South America have many different species. In total, there are about 350 different species, from the smallest bird in the world, the bee hummingbird that weighs less than a US penny, to the giant hummingbird in Peru, which is about the size of our northern cardinal and which my wife has seen, but I have not.

Bee hummingbird

Attracting and keeping hummingbirds in and around your yard is a matter of putting out a nectar feeder for them and stepping back five feet. The feeder will be noticed fairly quickly, and if there are only a few hummers around your yard, they will be at your feeder as long as you continue to fill it. They are absolutely fearless little birds and very territorial. We have a female who owns our deck and an interloper who also wants to feed there. If the interloper happens by, she will not even perch on one of the bars. She sips on the wing because as soon as the owner discovers her, she will attack.

I found that it did little good to put out two feeders because if they are within sight of each other, they both belong to the female who owns the deck. She is really quite cute; the first time she sees me in the spring when she returns from migration, she flies right up to my face and looks me in the eye. I don't know if she is saying, "I'm back, feed me," or "Hello". If we are sitting at the table, she will fly right up to check us out.

When there is a large number around, as at the camp we were staying in when we went to the Big Bend country in Texas, they are not quite so possessive, and you can see 15 or 20 around a feeder at any one time. I supposed that there must be safety in numbers, and they just can't decide who really owns the feeder.

So, what do you put in a feeder? The best nectar is created by bringing two cups of water and one-half cup sugar almost to a boil, stirring until the sugar disappears, and then letting it sit until the mixture cools. You should not add any coloring as that might be harmful, but most feeders have red plastic on them. Baltimore orioles will also appreciate your nectar, and you will find that you have attracted two kinds of birds for your efforts.

Good birding.

Dave Reid
Fall 2015

BIRDS OF WINTER

OK, the Super Bowl is history and we are due for another major snow storm, so it must be time to get my fancy iPad cranked up and discuss birds that over-winter on Cape Cod. I think that only one bird, that red-bellied woodpecker, has left my yard this year. I have several male and several female cardinals, lots of tufted titmice, lots of chickadees, several white-throated sparrows, a pair of flickers— just the normal run of backyard birds on Cape Cod.

White-breasted nuthatch

Now, before we get into a discussion of why birds stay or fly south for the winter, let me say that we have entered into an area of discussion with proponents on both sides. The question under discussion is whether or not these birds really do stay in your yard, or whether they perform mini-migrations, flying short distances of, say, two to three hundred miles rather than thousands of miles. In my opinion, some remain and some do mini-migrations. I think my cardinals are ones that were born and grew up in my backyard, but that the titmice have exchanged home ranges for the winter. I have no scientific proof of this, just my observations. The cardinals always seem to be here, while the titmice all disappeared for a while, and the white-breasted nuthatches seemed to appear all at once.

Tufted titmouse

So, why do some birds stay and others migrate, regardless of how far? The question has a one-word answer: FOOD. Migration takes a very heavy toll on birds, and if they can find sufficient food and shelter where they are, they have no good reason to leave. It is a matter of economics, really. Energy economics. It costs a bird a great deal of energy to fly south and unless they are reasonably certain of being able to restore that lost energy at the end of the migration, they will go no further than a reasonable assurance of being able to find food. On Cape Cod, this results in some birds not migrating at all because we are so generous with food to get them through the winter. I know that the first thing I do every morning is take the refilled feeders and suet feeders out for the day. This by itself has produced changes in birds in my yard. Under normal circumstances, you would not expect to see ground feeders like cardinals and sparrows using hanging feeders, but that is where the food is.

Red-bellied woodpecker

Another factor is water. I have a solid granite block that has been hollowed out to form a water bowl. At this time of year, any water put into the bowl freezes in very short order. Birds, of course, are fully capable of getting their water from snow, but really seem to appreciate the water between the time I put it out and the time it freezes. Once it does, it is just a place to sit and wait for their turn at the feeders.

So, what birds do you see in your yards? As I said, I have cardinals, flickers, white-throated sparrows, hairy and downy woodpeckers, tufted titmice, dark-eyed juncos when the snow gets here, Carolina wren, and house wrens. This morning, as I add pictures to this piece, I have seen both blue jays and red-bellied woodpeckers at my feeders.

There are winter backyard bird counts to join if you would like to help with demographic studies. I particularly like any sponsored by Cornell Lab of Ornithology, which you can find out about by Googling them. Oh well, I have pretty well exhausted this topic so I guess I'll hang it up. For now.

Keep on birding.

Dave Reid
Winter 2016

CHANGE OF SEASONS

Well. Spring has sprung, the grass is riz, etc, etc. So what has been going on with our birds?

The birds of winter have returned to their home range where they will breed, and our migrant birds have returned to the Cape for their breeding cycle. I have to admit, I prefer the birds of winter. The only duck we are left with is the mallard which doesn't excite me any way near as much as one or the other of the goldeneyes which visit us.

Eastern bluebird

We are very fortunate to live on Cape Cod because it sticks out into the middle of the Atlantic Flyway so that we host a lot of birds that don't use the flyway to go all the way to South America. The Audubon Society says about 500 species of birds use the Atlantic Flyway, but some species don't use it all the way to the end. Some species migrate only a few hundred miles, others just travel from the Boston area to the Cape. Birds who use the Atlantic Flyway to come home to the Cape include the American goldfinch, Baltimore oriole, blue jay, eastern bluebird, eastern towhee, house finch, red-winged blackbird, and the ruby-throated hummingbird, most of which are back now.

Some very rare species, the two types of goldeneyes, for instance, leave the area around Hudson Bay in Canada only when their home range there gets so cold that they cannot find open water. They fly as far south as they need to be assured that they won't get iced in. The Barrow's goldeneye doesn't come much further than North Falmouth, while the common goldeneye makes it as far as Shore Road in Falmouth. They all fly as far south as recollection tells them that they will be able to find sufficient food.

Barrow's goldeneye

In our own area, in the Mid-Cape, we have some interesting migrants. On the Indian Ponds, we get the American and Eurasian wigeons. Also, we get the dark-eyed junco and the greater and lesser scaup. In winter, the black-throated sparrow and when it leaves, it is replaced by the very similar house sparrow. These last two I had never really looked carefully at so didn't appreciate they were two species that swapped places each year. I got a rude awakening when I realized that the house sparrow that I was looking at didn't look quite right.

You can participate in hawk watches on the Outer Cape to see the migratory hawks and eagles flying over on the flyway. You just need to venture down to Truro when you see the watches advertised. You can also travel down to the bays around Chatham to see the long-tailed duck, which used to be called old squaw, when they arrive.

All in all, although I am not that enthusiastic about the birds of spring, there are really a great variety of birds that have moved back in the last month. They are mostly passerines which is why I tend to ignore them; they never sit still long enough for me to identify them.

Happy birding.

Dave Reid
Spring 2016

GOLDEN EAGLES

From even the quickest glance at a bird book that shows ranges, it will be obvious Cape Cod is on the easternmost edge of the golden eagle's winter range. I suppose that, for this purpose, November could be considered winter. On the other hand, this guy might be the forward scout for eagles to come. In any case, it seems as though we now have a golden eagle living at Fort Hill in Eastham. If he is just the lead scout and we can expect others, he seems to have found a good starting point. We regularly see bald eagles on the ponds, but I don't believe we are quite so used to seeing goldens. Off-hand, I can't think of an instance of seeing a golden on Cape Cod unless it was during a hawk watch down in Truro. The golden's main diet consists of small mammals, squirrels, rabbits, prairie dogs, etc. Since mammals tend not to eat those types of food that have been treated by chemical sprays and other types of fertilization, or metabolize those chemicals, the eagle eggs don't develop the thin, fragile shells of some other raptors and, therefore, are more successful parents.

The golden is the most common official national animal in the world and is the emblem of or on the flag of at least five countries. While traveling on the Isle of Bute on the west coast of Scotland, my wife, Claire, and I saw golden eagles frolicking in the air like seagulls off the Isle of Arran, Bute's neighbor to the west. They appeared huge even from a distance of two to three miles; the golden is one of the largest birds in North America, with wings broad and long.

Goldens favor partial to completely open territory, preferably around mountains, hills, and cliffs. Eastham's Fort Hill would suit them perfectly. They also prefer areas near streams and rivers. They are most common in the western part of the United States and are rare in the eastern half.

A few interesting facts about golden eagles: the rough-legged hawk, the ferruginous hawk, and the golden eagle are the only American raptors to have feathers all the way to their toes. The oldest recorded golden was at least 31 years, 8 months old when found in 2012. The golden is one of the largest, fastest, and nimblest raptors in North America.

They are much like goldeneyes in their migratory habits. They will stay as far north as possible until the first lasting snowfalls start and then move south until they are out of snow cover.

If you have the chance, it would be well worth the time to drive down to Fort Hill to see if you can catch a glimpse of the one that is there now. Since they most often travel in pairs, it is not unreasonable to suppose that there may be two of them soon.

Dave Reid
Fall 2016

BIRDS OF TRINIDAD

Hi there, I'm Baaaack!

Let me tell you about an adventure that Claire and I had during the February school vacation this year. We took a birding vacation to Trinidad and it was quite spectacular. I don't know how many of you maintain a life list of birds seen, but I got 50 new birds for my list in very pleasant surroundings. Caligo Ventures is the sole North American agent for the Asa Wright Nature Center in Trinidad, so your stay there must be coordinated through them.

Bearded bellbird

The Asa Wight Nature Center is located on 400 acres of an old coffee plantation at the top of a rather steep hill in Arima, about an hour's drive from the airport. When you come off the plane, you will see a man with a sign for the Nature Center waiting to pick you up for the drive up the hill. It is a rather winding road and, at spots, quite precipitous. I had a little bit of a problem up and down the hill with my dislike of heights. I made it by not looking out the windows. It was quite late when we got there and when we got to our room, we found a plate of sandwiches and a cooler of water on our nightstand.

Oilbird

We stayed right in the old plantation house for the coffee plantation. It had a veranda looking down the hill side and out into the valley below. At ground level, below the veranda, management had set up three or four feeding tables which they kept stocked with fresh fruit at all times and there were 10 to12 hummingbird feeders hanging from the roof all along the veranda. You could sit on the veranda, and between the feeding tables and hummingbird feeders, you could pick up 40 different species of birds. At night, the bats took over the hummingbird feeders, so it was fun to sit out on the veranda after dark and watch the bats feeding on the nectar for the hummingbirds. In all, there are about 140 species of birds that have been spotted in Trinidad. Over 100 have been seen on the Nature Center. I added 13 species of hummingbirds right from the veranda.

Scarlet ibis coming in to roost for the night

They also ran tours of the grounds conducted by members of the staff who are excellent at identifying the birds you are looking at. These tours were practically required because there were a number of birds that you would not see from the veranda. These included the bearded bellbird and the oilbird.

We also took a tour of the Caroni Swamp. In addition to seeing a tropical screech owl, a small boa constrictor, and a caiman, we were there to witness the amazing sight of thousands of scarlet ibis coming together to roost for the night on just one island! We can heartily recommend a week spent at the Asa Wright Nature Center. Flying Caribbean Air direct from New York is a good move. Due to bungling by United Air, we came home that way and found it much more pleasant than our trip to Trinidad.

Dave Reid
Spring 2017

GOLDFINCH: IN WINTER COLORS!

The other day, I saw a bird at one of my feeders that I could not identify. That, in itself, really surprised me because I thought I knew all of the birds that visit my deck. I searched through my Peterson's and finally found it. It turned out to not be a new bird, but a bird that should not be here in that configuration. It was a goldfinch in winter colors. Goldfinches should not have changed colors yet, as demonstrated by two or three that have visited my feeder since.

American goldfinch in winter colors

There are several types of birds that appear at our feeders on Cape Cod. We have those birds that fly in, grab a seed, and fly to some convenient location to brace the seed under one talon while they peck at it to crack the shell and get to the seed contained inside. These include the chickadees and titmouses.

Then we have the species that sits on our feeder, cracks the seed cover with their bill without having to peck at them, and, using their bill and tongue, consumes the seed right there and grabs another one. The finches all belong to this last group. You can identify this kind of bird by its conical shaped bill. Cardinals are also in this group, and they just fly in and park at my feeder.

Goldfinch is the state bird of Washington, New Jersey, and Iowa. They often flock with pine siskins, although I have not noticed that species on Cape Cod. Their preferred feeder food is black oiled sunflower seed, so since I don't use those in my feeder, I don't see them often. They do need water, so I more often see them at my water bowl.

The goldfinch's natural habitat is weedy fields and floodplains, where plants such as thistle and asters are common. They are also found in cultivated areas and orchards. American goldfinches can be found at feeders at any time of the year, but especially during winter. I have not found any reference to why the bird I saw was already in winter colors. They seem to be fairly late changers.

This was a good example of why you should look for more identifying attributes than just color. The bird I saw did have a wedge-shaped bill, several wing bars, and a notched tail.

To encourage goldfinches to visit your yard and feeders, you should plant native thistles, as well as native milkweed. The milkweed is also important for the monarch butterfly. I don't know if you can buy those at Country Gardens, but they are abundant on the power lines and easy to dig up and replant. For your feeders, they are most attracted to sunflower seeds and nyjer. They don't mind feeders that sway in the breeze and are just as comfortable feeding on the ground below feeders where other birds have spilled uneaten seeds. You should keep the ground below your feeders raked so that no ground feeders pick up any contagious diseases.

Happy birding.

Dave Reid
Summer 2017

CORMORANTS I HAVE KNOWN

Cormorants seem to be a sore subject on Cape Cod. Most of us know what they look like and have seen them any time we are near saltwater. If we have a boat in saltwater, we have probably found cormorants perching on it at one time or another, and we have had to clean up behind them from time to time. We have all seen them on the wires over that little pond at the end of the Mid-Cape highway just before you get to that rotary before you go into Eastham.

Double-crested cormorants

Cormorants are a much maligned species for the most part, but they are a huge family and worth the time it takes to become acquainted with. There are at least 40 species in the family, and they are found all over the world. The one we are most familiar with is the double-crested cormorant which is not especially attractive, but some in the family are quite brightly colored and nowhere near as drab. I will include pictures of some of the ones we have on our list as examples of this.

The family is made up of cormorants and shags. They are medium-to-large birds that run from less than one pound up to 10 or 11 pounds. They have wingspans between 18 and 48 inches. They are excellent divers and propel themselves underwater with both their feet and their wings. They are all fish eaters, although fish are not the only food in their diet. They will also dine on small eels and water snakes.

Cormorants nest around the shore. They are coastal rather than oceanic birds, and some have taken up nesting on inland waterways. As I said above, they are found all over the world. The exception to this is the central Pacific islands.

Red-legged cormorants

There is no consistent distinction between cormorants and shags, so dividing them into two separate families has not been successful. The same bird can be referred to as a cormorant in one place and as a shag in another. As an example of this, the great cormorant is called a black shag in New Zealand. In general, the name shag applies to those species that have a crest.

They may often be seen holding their wings out in the sun. This wing-drying action, which is seen even in the flightless species such as the Antarctic shag and the red-legged cormorant, is a way to dry the plumage since cormorant feathers are not waterproof. It has been suggested that it might also aid in temperature regulation and digestion. Our local favorite is the double-crested cormorant, which is considered a large bird. It has a body length between 28 and 35 inches and a wingspan between 45 and 48 inches. It takes its name from crests located just above the eyes, which are white, black, or a combination of the two. The adult, in breeding plumage, is black, while the juveniles are more dark gray or brown.

Happy birding.

Dave Reid
Fall 2017

TALKING TURKEY

When I was young, my father was in the Army. When I was 3 years old, he thought he had had enough and got out. We moved from San Antonio, Texas back to the family homestead in Saxonville, up near Boston. At that time, my grandmother was still living in the house, so we moved in with her. After a year or two of civilian life, he changed his mind, rejoined, and spent the next 25 years on active service.

A small part of the family land in Saxonville was rented out to a neighbor who constructed several turkey houses and raised domestic turkeys for sale. For a long while, I only knew two things about turkeys: (1) they smelled unbelievably bad and (2) they were white.

Wild turkey

The turkey is a native bird to North America. It is found in Europe only because some of the early visitors from both Spain and northern Europe took some back across when they returned. The result of this is that, in New England, we have the Rio Grande subspecies. Spanish explorers sent back the Rio Grande type of bird from Mexico that was eventually carried to New England.

The white or domesticated turkey is the same species as the wild turkey. There have been several domestication events in the turkey history. It was originally thought to have begun in central Mesoamerica at least 2,000 years ago. Recent research has shown a second domestication event between 200 BC and AD 500.

Domestic turkey

Domestic turkey is a popular form of poultry, and it is raised throughout temperate parts of the world. Industrialization has made it very cheap for the amount of meat that it produces. The majority of domestic turkeys are bred to have white feathers, because their pin feathers are less visible when the carcass is dressed. Brown and bronze varieties are also raised.

A wild turkey, in a sprint, can outrun a horse. They can fly distances of more than a mile at speeds of up to 55 miles per hour. The domestic turkey, on the other hand, has had all of that stuff bred out of it. It's heavy, broad breast means that it cannot, for the most part, fly at all. It also has shorter legs than a wild turkey which means it can't run as well.

By the 1930s, wild turkeys had almost disappeared in the United States. With resettlement programs that were wildly successful, Alaska is now the only state without wild turkeys. Wild turkeys require a habitat known as open woodland, that is, a hardwood forest with occasional openings. They use the open areas for feeding and mating, the fringe areas for nesting, and the forest areas as roosts for the night. The Cape, with its oak forests, provides the perfect habitat for the wild turkey. We used to eat regularly at Mayflower Place in Yarmouth and learned that the head chef there was among a group of people primarily responsible for bringing the wild turkey to Cape Cod.

There is a lot more that could be said about turkeys, but, in my estimation, the best that can be said by me about turkey is, "Yes, thank you. I'll have some."

Dave Reid
Winter 2017

BUNTING BY ANY OTHER NAME

As a fairly experienced birder, there is one thrill that has eluded me. I think it would be really neat to come across a bird that shouldn't be where I find it. This circumstance happened to a friend of mine recently when she walked out in her yard and found a **painted bunting**. It must have gotten blown into her yard on the winds of a recent storm, but it didn't get blown into my yard.

If you consult your bird book, you will find that painted buntings are native to a very small area covering the eastern two-thirds of Texas where I was born, graduated from high school, and started college. Its range also covers Louisiana, Arkansas, and most of Oklahoma, but not Cape Cod. They migrate through Mexico and down to Central America almost as far as South America. There is a second, smaller population along the Atlantic coast from North Carolina south to Florida. This population migrates through Florida down to Cuba and the Bahamas.

When Claire and I went back for my 50th high school reunion, we went out to Mineral Wells State Park to give her a break from some of the rednecks we would otherwise be hanging out with.

When we went into the park, we asked some of the rangers what, if any, birds they were seeing at the moment. They told us that they had just started seeing some painted buntings along the pathways of the park.

We parked the car and started walking into the park. Just a few steps into the park, we came to a dust wallow with a little bird thoroughly enjoying a dust bath. Rather than disturb him, we stood there and watched him enjoy his bath. When he was done, he hopped out and shook himself vigorously and flew off. Then we were able to see that it was a painted bunting.

You will notice that I kept referring to the bird as "he". That is because only the male is "painted". They are a vivid blue, green, red, and yellow that you won't be able to see in the printed version of this article. You'll have to look them up online or in a book. Better yet, visit the IPA website (http://www.indianponds.org/) to view this newsletter in color. Female and immature birds are bright green.

Once we saw him, we could have gotten back into the car and gone back to the motel, but that wouldn't have given Claire much of a break.

The western population of painted buntings begins its migration before molting, molts in stages as it progresses through northern Mexico, and then continues to migrate farther south. The eastern population molts on its breeding grounds before it migrates.

The French name of the painted bunting is nonpareil, meaning "without equal". The oldest wild painted bunting on record was 12 years old.

This bird's diet consists mainly of seeds, supplemented with high-protein insects. On the breeding grounds, he stakes out and defends territories up to several acres. The female builds a cup-shaped nest in a small bush or tree. She lays three or four eggs in each brood and may have up to three broods a year. Chicks are fed by the female and fledge after 12–14 days.

Other birds in the same family, Passerina, include the other four buntings, cardinals, and tanagers.

Dave Reid
Spring 2018

WAS THAT A CAT OR A BIRD?

The gray catbird can be found from the eastern seaboard to as far west as Idaho and as far south as Florida. Where it can find them, it prefers to live in wooded or thicket covered areas. To attract them to your yard, plant shrubs, hang suet or seed feeders, and you will soon attract a regular population of visiting catbirds. They even, occasionally, try to raid my hummingbird feeders, which are the only feeders I have out right now, at least until the chipmunks go into hibernation. They also like fruit so planting fruit-bearing trees and shrubs will help to attract them.

If you are trying to learn to recognize bird calls, the catbird would be one to start with. The catbird is a relative of the mockingbird and they share that bird's ability to copy the sounds of other birds and string them together to make their own song.

The gray catbird's song may last up to about ten minutes. He uses a loud song to mark his territory and a softer version of the song when he is on or near his nest. The female may also sing the softer song back to the male.

The oldest known gray catbird was at least 17 years, 11 months old when it was re-captured during a banding operation in New Jersey.

In summer, gray catbirds eat mainly ants, beetles and grasshoppers. When berries are available, they eat holly berries, cherries, and blackberries. They can be garden pests, eating raspberries, grapes, and strawberries.

Catbirds usually build nests at the center of dense shrubs or in vines. Nests may be within four feet of the ground or as high as 60 feet above the ground. The female builds the nest with males sometimes helping by supplying building materials. Nests take 5–6 days to build, and the final result is usually a bulky open cup made of twigs, straw, and sometimes pieces of trash. It has a softer, finely woven inner lining of grass, rootlets, and pine needles. When completed, the nests may be 5.5 inches across and 2 inches deep.

They may have 2–3 broods each season with 1–6 turquoise green eggs in each clutch. The normal incubation period is 12–15 days.

Catbirds sometimes destroy eggs and nestlings of several other woodland species including chipping sparrow and song sparrow.

Male catbirds are territorial during spring and summer. Males and females defend their own territories during winter when territoriality is uncommon in many species.

I always enjoy seeing the catbird when they come onto my deck even though they, like most species, are not above leaving little droppings just to remind me that they came to visit.

Dave Reid
Summer 2018

EAGLES ON THE PONDS

A request, finally. The hardest part of writing one of these epistles is thinking about the topic. It's much nicer when it comes as a request. I wrote about eagles back in 2011 so I'll try not to repeat too much.

The next hard part is trying to get started in an attention-grabbing way, but this time that was handled for me also. We lost one. Someone put out some rodenticide to get rid of his population of mice. A mouse consumed some of the poison and died. An eagle, doing his scavenging duty, ate the mouse carcass and got so sick that there was no saving him. He was either going to die horribly or be put down quickly and quietly. Fortunately, he had been taken to Cape Cod's wild animal care facility and was euthanized. I'm not sure how many eagles we started with locally. I think we started with two on Mystic Lake. Then I heard that there might be two others on Hamblin Pond, but they might have been the same pair. Anyway, we lost one.

The eagle is the largest raptor in North America. In North America, we have two types of eagles who are resident and two others who visit regularly. The **bald eagle** and the golden eagle are residents of the continent. Both share the same areas in the country. They are found in the north in the warmer seasons and in the southern states and Mexico in the colder months. Just like a lot of us. Two other types visit North America from Asia by coming over through the Aleutian Islands. They are the Stellar's sea eagle and the white-tailed eagle, also called the gray sea eagle. These two have been known to nest in Alaska.

The bald eagle dwarfs most other raptors. It has a heavy body, large head, broad, flat wings, and a long, hooked beak and is not really bald. It has white feathers on its head and tail, giving the appearance of being bald. Young birds attain adult plumage at about five years.

Bald eagles scavenge many meals by harassing other birds and stealing their catch or by eating carrion or garbage. They eat mainly fish, but also hunt small mammals, gulls, and waterfowl.

The eagle usually begins to breed at 4 or 5 years of age and may mate for life. Nest sites are usually in very tall trees, but can be on the ground in northern islands. Nests are built by both sexes and are usually a mound of sticks lined with finer materials. Nests may be reused and added to over the years and may become huge. The female may lay 1–3 eggs. Both parents participate in the incubation of the eggs. Incubation period is between 34 and 36 days. At least one parent remains with the chicks constantly for the first two weeks. Both parents catch and bring prey to the nest. Anything brought in will be ripped into small pieces and fed directly to the young. After 3–4 weeks, the young will begin pecking at food brought in and dropped in the nest. When prey is scarce, only the largest of the young may survive.

I'm beginning to sound like I'm lecturing instead of having a conversation, so I think it's time to quit. I hope I have given you a fair look at eagles.

Dave Reid
Fall 2018

A BUZZARD BY ANY OTHER NAME

I have been asked to regale you with a story about buzzards or vultures, since both names may be used interchangeably. I was going to title this “The American Vulture”, but in researching it, I discovered there are five different vultures in North and Central America. There are even two in North America. They are the turkey buzzard (or vulture) and the black vulture, also known as the American black vulture. The black vulture is only found in the Southwest, while the turkey vulture is found in some sections of every state in the Union.

Turkey vulture in flight

Turkey buzzards may be found as they cruise open areas such as farmland, forest, and rangeland. They are most likely to be seen along roadways and near landfills that have not been capped, like those on Cape Cod.

Their diet is carrion, which they locate using their excellent sense of smell. Their preferred diet is mammals, but they would not refuse reptiles, other birds, fish, or invertebrates. Their first choice is dead animals that have had time to soften up so that the buzzard can pierce the skin. They are also quite particular having been known to set aside and leave the scent glands from dead skunks. Buzzards, fortunately, have great immune systems that allow them to scavenge carcasses without contracting any of the diseases that their prey may have been carrying. Vultures almost never attack living animals.

Turkey vultures nest in crevasses in rocks, caves, thickets, burrows constructed by mammals, and abandoned nests of other birds. They prefer to nest far away from any civilization. They do not build full nests. If they cannot acquire a nest, courtesy of some other bird, they may scrape out a spot in the soil or the litter on the floor of the woods. Once they have constructed such a site, they may use it for many years.

They generally have one brood a year. This may consist of 1–3 eggs, for which there is an incubation period of 28–40 days.

They are able to soar at low altitudes, which helps them to locate carrion with their acute sense of smell. On the ground, they move around with ungainly hops. At carcasses, you may find many vultures assembled, but typically only one bird feeds at a time. The lucky one of the moment must enforce the one-at-a-time pecking order while also trying to maintain his position at the carcass.

Turkey vulture perched on a tree branch

These birds rate a 5 out of 20 as a Continental Concern Score, which shows where birds rate in concern for species survival. They are threatened by DDT and can be killed by poisons or lead in dead animals. Of main concern is lead shot left behind by hunters. The birds eat the shot along with the remains left behind and eventually suffer lead poisoning. Other concerns include trapping and shooting for the “fun of it”.

You may often find turkey vultures along the side of the highway, but you probably won’t find them in your backyard. The only thing of any interest to a buzzard in your yard might be the occasional bird that may die there. But, one day last fall, my wife and I saw five of them sunning themselves on the roof of a cottage on Church Street in West Barnstable.

Dave Reid
Winter 2019

WHEN IS A CROW A RAVEN?

Crows and ravens are very easy to tell apart when you know what to look for. On the other hand, if you haven't found out the simple things to look for, they are both just black birds. Notice that I did not say "big" black birds. The raven is twice the size of a crow, but unless they are sitting side by side, that's a hard comparison to make.

Both birds occur over most of the United States, including Cape Cod. So, yes, we have both species here and you are liable to see either at any given time.

Let's explore the differences and then you need to practice.

As I said before, the raven is twice the size of a crow. So, if you see a mixed batch, the larger ones might be ravens. The next thing to look for is their language. The crow has a very limited vocabulary and is likely to emit only a CAAing sound, which I'm sure you will all recognize. The raven has quite a large vocabulary starting with a CRONKing noise and progressing through several other squeaks and squeals.

Crow

In the pictures, notice that the crow's head slopes in a straight line from the top of the skull to the tip of the beak, whereas the raven has a forehead and does not slope in an unbroken line. The raven's beak may have a hook on the tip.

When the birds are flying, the crow's tail is squared off, while the raven has a pointed tail. This can be hard to distinguish when they are sitting on a fence, but the crow's tail will still be squared off, while the raven's tail will appear more rounded.

When they are flying, the crow must flap its wings constantly to keep from falling out of the air. The raven is capable of soaring like hawks or eagles.

Raven

Crows are very social and sometimes form flocks (sometimes called murders) in the thousands. They are inquisitive and mischievous. They are common birds of fields, open woodlands, and forests. They thrive around people and since they are good learners, they have learned that people are a good source of food.

The raven has coexisted with man for thousands of years. It is the most widely distributed of all corvids, a family of birds that includes crows, ravens, jays, magpies, and nutcrackers. Worldwide, there are at least 120 species of corvids. There are at least eight subspecies of the raven with very little difference in appearance.

Common ravens can live up to 21 years in the wild. Young birds may travel in a flock (sometimes called a congress), but eventually mate for life. Each mated pair selects and defends a territory.

Part of their success is due to their omnivorous diet. They are extremely versatile in finding food, feeding on carrion, insects, grains, berries, small animals, nesting birds, and food waste.

Over the centuries, the common raven has been the subject of mythology, folklore, art, and literature. The common raven has been revered as a spiritual or godlike creature in the cultures of Scandinavia, ancient Ireland and Wales, and also in Bhutan and Siberia.

When you see either of these two on the ground, the raven will immediately impress you by his size, even if there is no crow around. The crow is big, but is truly just another bird.

Dave Reid
Spring 2019

TUFTED TITMOUSE

Before I get into my chosen subject for the month, I would like to thank the members of the IPA board and the membership of the Indian Ponds Association for the Order of the Turtle award that I was presented at the recent annual meeting. It was a very thoughtful way to recognize my efforts through the years when I certainly did not expect any other recognition than the occasional comment that someone had enjoyed some of my articles. Also, to the gentleman with the picture of the hawk that I could not identify, I now believe that to have been a common black hawk. I could not see the beak or the tail, but, assuming the beak to have been hooked and yellow, and assuming the tail to have had a white band, it was probably the common black hawk. I looked it up as soon as I got home while the memory was still fresh.

Now, on to my subject of the month. Emory couldn't provide any suggestions from anyone as to a particular bird to write about, so I was pondering the subject while we were breakfasting out on the deck. Our feeders were inundated with titmice, and my wife suggested that since I had not discussed them previously, they might be interesting.

Tufted titmouse

The tufted titmouse is common in eastern deciduous forests and is a frequent visitor to backyard feeders. They are native to the whole eastern side of the United States, with a western boundary just west of the Mississippi River and a southern boundary at the Gulf of Mexico.

They are small gray birds with short, rounded bills whose food of choice is insects of various kinds, which make up about two-thirds of their diet, but they will definitely accept various kinds of seeds from feeders set up in their patrol area. They will usually grab a seed from your feeder and fly off to some perch to crack open the seed pod with their stout bills rather than sitting on the feeder to open the seed pod like a cardinal would do.

Tufted titmouse

Titmice build their nests in cavities, so one way to attract them to your yard is to put up nest boxes. They cannot dig their own holes in trees to provide nesting cavities, so they make use of natural holes and cavities left by woodpeckers. They line their nest with hair plucked from dead or even living animals such as raccoons, mice, woodchucks, squirrels, and rabbits. Once, a brave little gal tried to pull some fluff from our sleeping chow-chow.

Although you may see many tufted titmice around your feeder, they are not a flocking bird. Once they mate, they can be found in pairs, and although there may be several pairs around your feeder, they are all individuals or mated pairs. The female can lay 3–9 eggs in the nest. The eggs are white and finely dotted brown, reddish, or purple and are incubated by the female only for 12–14 days. After hatching, the female stays with the young while the male brings in food. After a while, the young are fed by both parents, sometimes with the aid of an additional helper, usually a member of a previous brood.

The tufted titmouse has several cousins which occur west of the Mississippi. They all appear very similar to the tufted, and you would see them and say, "What is wrong with that tufted". They are the black-crested titmouse, the oak titmouse, the juniper titmouse, and the bridled titmouse, the latter looking like a cross between a tufted and a chickadee. Their calls are all different, and you could easily identify which bird you were seeing by listening to their calls.

Dave Reid
Summer 2019

THE CHIP MONK AND THE FISH FRIAR

As a lead-in to my story, I thought the following joke would be fitting. *A monastery in the English countryside has fallen on hard times, and the monks decide to open a fish-and-chips restaurant. The establishment soon became very popular, attracting people from all over. One city fellow, thinking himself clever, asked one of the brothers standing nearby, "I suppose you're the fish friar"? "No", answered the brother, straight-faced. "I'm the chip monk*".

This month, my epistle is not going to be about birds, but one of my favorite backyard rodents, the chipmunk. The topic was suggested, so hopefully you will enjoy it.

I get a bit of amusement from watching the chipmunks try to monopolize my deck and bird feeders. Usually, one tries to be the "owner" and, therefore, must defend the area from any interloper looking for a free meal. This can result in a screaming match and, occasionally, some serious rough and tumble. Sometimes, the owner comes out on top and sometimes he is defeated. They are small enough so that when one of them raids my bird feeder, he is quite capable of getting himself entirely inside, much to the surprise of the next one that comes along.

Chipmunks are primarily found in North America, with the exception of the Siberian chipmunk, which is found in Asia. For those few who are unacquainted with the animal, chipmunks are small, brown, and white-striped rodents. They are all classified as members of a single genus (Tamias) or, just to be confusing, as members of one of three genera: Tamias - the eastern chipmunk, Eutamias - the Siberian, and Neotamias - the other 23, mostly western species.

Over the years, chipmunks have been referred to as chip squirrels, chipping squirrels, striped squirrels, timber tigers, minibears, and ground squirrels, although "ground squirrel" has been adopted to refer to other squirrels.

Chipmunks have an omnivorous diet, consisting of seeds, nuts, fruits, and buds. They commonly eat gra ass and many other forms of plant matter. They will sometimes eat insects, small frogs, worms, and bird eggs. Chipmunks mostly forage on the ground, but are perfectly capable of climbing trees to acquire preferred nuts or acorns. They cache their food in a larder in their burrows and remain in their nests until spring.

Eastern chipmunks mate in early spring and again in early summer, producing litters of four or five twice a year. Western chipmunks mate only once a year.

Chipmunks are prey for various predatory mammals and birds. They typically live about three years, but have lived as long as nine in captivity. In captivity, they have been observed to sleep about 15 hours per day.

I think by now that you know more about chipmunks than you really wanted to know, so I guess I'll quit for now.

Dave Reid
Fall 2019

PUFFINS OF THE WORLD

With the lack of any requests for a specific type of bird, I am left to telling you about birds that I have enjoyed seeing in my travels. Please remember that I am willing to research any species of birds that you would like. Just let Emory Anderson (emoryanderson@comcast.net) know what you would like to read about.

We have been fascinated by puffins in our travels around Great Britain, Iceland, Greenland, the Svalbard Islands, and, of course, Maine. There are three species of puffins. They are Alcids (which are a type of auk) and are all members of the genus *Fratercula*, which is Latin for little brother and is a reference to their black and white plumage, which resembles monastic robes.

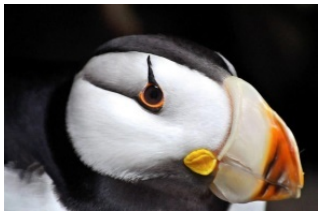
Tufted puffin

Atlantic puffin

Only one of the three species, the Atlantic puffin, is found in the Atlantic Ocean, while the other two, the horned puffin and the tufted puffin, are found in the North Pacific Ocean. All three species have mostly black and white plumage, a stocky build, and large beaks. There are several extinct species, Dow's puffin, that was found on the Channel Islands of California until the Late Pleistocene or Early Holocene and a type of tufted puffin found in North Carolina during the Miocene and Pliocene.

The name "puffin" was applied in the mistaken idea that the birds were related to the Manx shearwater (*Puffinus puffinus*) which were formerly known as Mank's puffins. They are not related.

Puffins breed in colonies on coasts and islands. The male Atlantic puffin builds the nest, while both sexes of the horned puffin and the tufted puffin participate in the construction of the nest. Both the horned puffin and the tufted puffin of the West Coast nest in burrows. The burrow for the horned puffin is usually about 3 feet deep, while that of the tufted puffin can be up to 9 feet deep. The Atlantic and tufted puffin usually dig their burrows in soft soil, while the nesting sites of the horned puffin are rock crevices on cliffs. Where rabbits breed, sometimes Atlantic puffins use their deserted burrows as breeding sites.



Horned puffin

Puffins form long-term bonds. The female lays a single egg annually, and both parents incubate the egg and feed the chick (puffling). After fledging, the chicks spend the first few years of their lives at sea, returning to breed about five years later. After breeding, all three species winter at sea, usually far from coasts and often extending south of the breeding range.

Puffins eat both fish and zooplankton, but feed their chicks primarily small fish, either sandeels or sea herring.

Puffins are hunted for eggs, feathers, and meat. Their populations drastically declined during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They continue to be hunted in Iceland and the Faroe Islands. The Atlantic puffin forms part of the national diet in Iceland where the species does not have legal protection. Their meat is commonly featured on hotel menus.

Dave Reid
Winter 2020

IT MUST BE SPRING

It must be spring, the blue jays have returned. You can safely say that because you are living in the northeast corner of the United States. For the most part, blue jays are around all year long. And, although there is some slippage, blue jays are only found on this side of the Mississippi. On the other side, however, there are eight other types. I hope to acquaint you with all of the American jays and one from Peru.

Blue jay

Blue jays are large blue, white, and black songbirds, with a crest and a noisy call. They are known for their intelligence and tight family bonds. Their fondness for acorns is credited with helping spread oak trees all over the eastern United States.

Blue jays are most often detected by their noisy calls. Near shorelines, they migrate in loose flocks. You can recognize them by their steady flight, rounded wings, long tail, and white underside. While resident birds may associate in flocks, they usually fly across open areas one at a time, usually silently. If you have feeders out, you may find them at the feeders all day long.

Steller's jay

The Steller's jay might be confused for the blue jay at a quick glance. They are a large songbird with large heads, chunky bodies, rounded wings, and a long tail. They have a large triangular crest that often stands straight up from their head. At a distance, Steller's are very dark jays. They do not have the white underparts of most other species. The head is black, and the body is all blue. Like other jays, Steller's are inquisitive, intelligent, and noisy. They come down to the ground to investigate visitors and to look for food. If you throw food for them, they will stay with you until you no longer feed them.

Scientists have described 16 subspecies of the Steller's in North and Central America, showing varying combinations of black and blue on the crest, head, and body. The largest and darkest are found on the Queen Charlotte Islands off British Columbia.

Green jay

I think that the prettiest jay I have seen is the green jay. It is found primarily in Mexico, but comes across the border far enough to let us see it on the King Ranch is southern Texas. It is a gaudy tropical bird and is common in riverside woods, parks, and oak groves. It has a brilliant green upper body with bright yellow underparts. It has a purple and black head and bright yellow outer tail feathers. This bird travels in family flocks through brush lands and forests seeking insects, small vertebrates, and fruit to eat.

Green jays are among the few known North American birds to use tools. They are known to pick up sticks to pry up loose bark seeking insect prey.

Western scrub jay

Western scrub jays have long tails and small bills. Unlike Steller's and blue jays, they do not have a crest. They do not migrate and are found from Washington State south to Mexico and east to Texas. We found ours in the Rocky Mountains National Park in Colorado. The Pacific coastal group have the shorter bills for eating acorns, while interior scrub jays have longer bills to allow them to get at pine nuts from deep within pine cones. The Pacific group are loud and raucous, while those of the interior tend to be quieter and lower pitched.

Mexican jay

The Mexican jay is locally common in mountain canyons and oak woods near the Mexican border in Arizona and New Mexico, a very small area of west Texas, and a greater area in Mexico. It was formerly known as the grey breasted jay. It lives in social groups that may include multiple breeding pairs. Group members may feed young at multiple nests within the group territory. In winter, Mexican jays are often followed by northern flickers. The flickers pay attention to Mexican jay alarm calls and are protected by the vigilance of the jays.

Gray jays are the national bird of Canada. Gray jays are medium-sized birds with lighter bellies. They are stocky, fairly large songbirds with short, stout bills. They are dark gray above, light gray below, and have no crest. They have black on the back of the head like a partial hood. Gray jays are typically found in small groups. They stay with their mates as long as both birds are alive and rarely leave each other's sides. The pairs breed in frigid conditions during February and March.

Gray jays eat a variety of foods including berries, arthropods, carrion, nestling birds, and fungi. They will snap up flying insects, wade in shallow water to capture invertebrates and amphibians, kill small mammals, raid the nests of other birds, and sometime attack small birds such as chickadees and warblers

Gray jay

Violaceous jay

And finally, the violaceous jay. The violaceous is found in South America and found its way onto our list in Peru. This medium–large bird has violet-blue plumage and a black face and throat. The violaceous is omnivorous, mainly consuming fruits, insects, and bird and reptile eggs. Like other jays, flocks are often noisy, but also, like other jays, they can be quiet and inconspicuous at times. They have been known to mob potential predators.

In addition to the jays I have discussed, in the United States we also have the brown jay, the Florida scrub jay, the Island scrub jay and the pinyon jay. Unfortunately, I haven't seen any of those yet. Maybe we'll travel some more sooner or later.

Dave Reid
Spring 2020

BROWN-HEADED COWBIRDS

A few years ago, I was driving down to Hyannis and as I passed my neighbor's house, I saw a bird playing in the dirt in his front yard. It was a bird that I had never seen before so I thought I would try to remember to look it up when I got home. This was back in the day when my "rememberer" worked a little better than it does now, so I was able to look it up. It turned out to be a brown-headed cowbird and was a new bird for my list.

Male brown-headed cowbird

The brown-headed cowbird male is distinguished by its finch-like head and smaller size. The adult male is black in color, with a distinctive brown head. The female is slightly smaller and is dull gray. Their total length is about 6–8 inches. The wingspan is about 14 inches and its weight is 1–2 oz, with the females being the lighter of the two.

Female brown-headed cowbird

The brown-headed cowbird is a "brood parasitic icterid". In plain English, that means that the female lays her eggs in the nests of other birds and then abandons them to be raised by the owners of the other nests. Since she may lay up to 24 eggs, she must be busy finding other nests to lay them in. The interlopers usually are the first chicks to hatch and immediately begin to remove any other eggs in the nest, usually by working them up to fall over the edge to the ground. Brown-headed cowbird eggs are a mottled gray-green and are usually quite distinctive from other eggs in the nest, but very few host birds seem capable of telling that they have an interloper in with their own eggs.

Each cowbird is raised by foster parents, but instead of flocking with others of the species that raised them, the young cowbirds begin congregating with other cowbirds before their first winter. It seems, according to some behavioral scientists who study those things, that cowbirds learn to recognize each other through sight and sounds.

Some birds, such as the yellow warbler, have a specific call that seems to be well known by birds of other species. This call is distinct from its alarm call for predators, such as blue jays. This call warns that a brown-headed cowbird is in the neighborhood. When female birds hear this call, they immediately rush to cover their nests to prevent the cowbird from laying an egg. Cowbirds trick more than 200 bird species into raising their young.

Brown-headed cowbirds feed on the ground in mixed species groups of blackbirds and starlings. Males gather on lawns to strut and display for mates, while females prowl woodlands in search of nests. Cowbirds are noisy, making lots of clicks, whistles, and chattering calls. In addition, they also have a gurgling flowing song.

As I said, I first saw the cowbird several years ago, so you might ask what brought it to mind for this article. Over the past weekend, on our back deck where I have four feeders set up, I saw a little sparrow trying to feed a bird twice its size. When I looked up the bird being fed, I found it to be an immature brown-headed cowbird. They are definitely in our neighborhoods, so keep an eye out for strange birds.

Dave Reid
Summer 2020

A WORLD OF NUTHATCHES

Red-breasted nuthatch

There are about twenty-eight different nuthatches in the world. There are four different types here in the United States, but only two on Cape Cod. We have the red-breasted and white-breasted nuthatch. I have both at my feeders every day, and I am sure that those of you who have feeders out have them too. I also have one other on my life list, the pygmy that I got in Colorado when we were out there for Claire's work.

White-breasted nuthatch

The nuthatches belong to a genus of small passerine birds that are characterized by large heads, short tails, and powerful bills and feet. Their most endearing feature is the way they walk down tree trunks, head-first. Often they will be in the feeder "upside-down". Most of the species have grey or bluish upper parts, the tops of their heads, back and wings, and a black eye stripe. The sexes look similar, but may differ in the under part coloration. They vary in size from the giant nuthatch, at about 7.5 inches, to the small brown-headed nuthatch and the pygmy nuthatch, around 3.9 inches.

Most nuthatches breed in the temperate woodlands of the Northern Hemisphere, although two species have adapted to rocky habitats in the warmer regions of Eurasia. The greatest diversity is in southern Asia. All members of this family nest in holes or crevices. Most are non-migratory and live in their habitat year-round; however, the North American red-breasted nuthatch prefers warmer climes during the winter and shows up on the Cape usually in late September.

Nuthatches are omnivorous and eat mostly insects, nuts, and seeds. They are also frequent visitors to the suet I put out for the birds. They have been known to wedge large food items in a crevice and then work on the food until it is all devoured.

Nuthatches are very vocal, using an assortment of calls and whistles. Their breeding songs tend to be simple and often identical to their contact calls, but longer in duration. The red-breasted nuthatch, which coexists with the black-capped chickadee throughout much of its range, is able to understand the chickadee's calls. The chickadee has subtle call variations that communicate information about the size and risk of potential predators. Many birds recognize the simple alarm calls, but the red-breasted nuthatch is able to interpret the chickadee's detailed variations and respond appropriately.

All in all, the nuthatch is fun to watch as well as being relatively intelligent.

Dave Reid
Fall 2020

A WINTER BIRD

Most of the birds that come to my feeders are here year-round. I don't get many migrants and those few only hang around for a few days before moving along on their way to other pastures and other people's feeders. There is, however, the exception that proves the rule. When I see the slate-colored junco show up, I know that winter is truly on its way and that we can expect our first snow later that week. If my deck is not covered in snow very shortly, I don't see him again until it is, hence the nickname, "Snow Bird".

Slate-colored junco

The slate-colored junco is one member of a family of seven different Juncos, only six live and breed in the United States, while one, the cismontanus, breeds in the Yukon and British Columbia. Two of them, the slate-colored and the Oregon, have breeding areas that include parts of New England and Cape Cod. I have never, as far as I know, seen an Oregon, even though they are supposedly here. In addition, the cismontanus appears to be identical with the Oregon, as far as outward appearance is concerned.

There are also four other members of the family found in Mexico and Central America. These are the Guadalupe junco, the yellow-eyed junco which has four subspecies, Baird's junco, and the volcano junco. The four subspecies of the yellow-eyed junco are the Arizona yellow-eyed, the Mexican yellow-eyed, the Chiapas yellow-eyed, and the Guatemalan yellow-eyed. So, as you can see, it is quite an extensive family. If I have counted correctly, that makes around fifteen members.

The slate-colored is to be found all over the United States except the south of Florida, the southern tip of Texas, the far south of California, and the southwest tip of Arizona. The Oregon is found all over the United States except the deep South. The gray-headed is found primarily in the desert southwest from mid way through Oklahoma and west to include most of California and everywhere south. The pink-sided covers most of that same range, but extends its northern range up through the Dakotas and Montana into Canada. The last American junco, the white-winged, has a very small range from southern Oklahoma north to the Black Hills of South Dakota.

Juncos are a small North American bird in the New World sparrow family. Their name appears to have derived from the Spanish term for the plant genus *Juncus*, meaning rushes. Juncos are seldom found among rushes which grow in damp or wet soil. Juncos prefer dry soil. Go figure.

Juncos forage on the ground or on my deck because they know that chickadees are sloppy eaters and spill as much on the deck as they eat. They usually nest in well-hidden locations on the ground or low in a shrub. They eat mainly insects and seeds.

Their breeding habitat is coniferous or mixed forest areas throughout North American ranging from subarctic taiga to high mountain forests in Mexico and Central America south to Panama. Northern birds usually migrate farther south. Southern populations are permanent residents, moving only short distances to avoid severe winter weather in the mountains.

You might watch for juncos on your deck at this time of the year. Like most small birds, they are quick and flashy. You might look on the ground near your deck as they will eat any seed dropped by other species.

Dave Reid
Winter 2021

MY FRIEND FLICKER

Several months ago, my laptop died. We had to buy a new one, and the salesperson assured me that they would transfer all the data from the old hard drive to the new one. Yeah, right. They only transferred about six months of my previous IPA reports, so I have no idea whether I have previously written about flickers or not, so if any of this sounds familiar, I apologize.

The flicker we all know and love here on the Cape is technically the northern or common flicker. It is native to most of North America, parts of Central America, Cuba, and the Cayman Islands. It is one of the few species of woodpeckers that migrate. Ten subspecies of northern flicker are recognized, of which one is now extinct. The subspecies were, at one time, considered to be subspecies of two separate species, the yellow-shafted flicker and the red-shafted flicker. Since the two species commonly interbreed where their two ranges overlap, they are now considered to be one species.

The yellow-shafted flicker is found from Alaska, through most of Canada and the Northeastern United States, and is what we see here on Cape Cod.

Yellow-shafted flicker

Adults are brown with black bars on the wings and back. They measure 11 to 14 inches in length and 17 to 21 inches in wing span. They weigh between 3.0 and 5.9 ounces. A black patch occurs on the upper breast, while the lower breast and belly are beige with black spots. Males can be identified by the red or black moustache at the base of the beak. The tail is dark on top, transitioning back to their white rump which is very obvious when one is flying away from the observer.

According to the Audubon Field Guides, “Flickers are the only woodpeckers that frequently feed on the ground”. They probe with their beaks looking for insects. They may also catch insects in flight. While they eat fruits, berries, seeds, and nuts, their primary food is insects. Ants alone make up about 45% of their diet. Flickers often break into underground ant colonies to get at the larvae there. Their tongues can dart out 2 inches beyond the end of their bill to catch prey. Flickers, like some other birds, use the formic acid from ants to preen. It is useful in keeping them free of parasites.

In studies, the oldest flickers have been observed to have lived at least 7 years; however, the oldest observed yellow-shafted northern flicker lived to be at least 9 years and 2 months old, while the oldest known red-shafted northern flicker lived to be at least 8 years and 9 months old.

They are cavity nesters which usually nest in trees, but they will also use posts and even birdhouses are sometimes acceptable. They will repair or recondition abandoned nests. Their abandoned nests are used by other cavity nesters, and sometimes they are driven from their nesting site by another cavity nester, the European starling.

They hang around our yard and we always enjoy watching them. We particularly enjoy hearing them rapping on the metal downspouts and the chimney cover, usually around dawn, as a sign of territoriality.

Dave Reid
Spring 2021

BIRDS THAT LAY EGGS IN OTHER SPECIES NESTS

The other day, out on my deck railing, I saw a really small mother sparrow feeding a baby brown-headed cowbird that was about three times her size. Since I was looking for a good subject for this month's article, I thought brood parasitism might be of some interest.

Brood parasites are birds that lay their eggs in other birds' nests and rely on others to raise their young. Cowbirds and cuckoos, goldeneyes, and black-headed ducks are just some examples of this type of behavior in North America. Some ducks go even further than the black-headed duck by laying their eggs in the nest of other members of their own species.

Brown-headed cowbird

Many brood parasites are specialists that only lay their eggs in the nests of a single host species or closely related species, but most use a wide variety of hosts. The brown-headed cowbird, for instance, has 221 known hosts. In case you are wondering, I have brown-headed cowbirds in my yard, so I may use them for examples when I have the occasion.

Some of the birds that specialize in a particular host have developed egg coloration that mimics the eggs of their chosen host. Others imitate the size of the host eggs. In either case, they have developed characteristics that give their eggs the best chance of being accepted in the nest of their chosen host.

The intruder egg shells are often thicker than those of the host. In some instances, the host may be adroit enough to realize that an interloper has been placed into their nest and may try to remove or destroy the egg of the other species. This might be accomplished by pecking at the intruder shell until it is pierced or broken or physically removing the egg from the nest entirely by dropping it over the side. If the shell is thicker, it might be able to withstand these attacks. Some host species, when confronted with an intruder they can't remove, may abandon the nest entirely and start all over again at a new location. Other species, on recognizing that they have acquired a parasite, may build a mini prison around it and leave it to starve. Others build a whole new nest right on top of the parasitized one.

When the host species, for whatever reason, is unable to rid themselves of the intruder, they may find themselves ending up raising the offspring. This usually results when the intruder so closely mimics the host eggs that the host parents are unable to tell which belong to the intruders' and which are their own eggs.

Sometimes hosts are completely unaware that they have been parasitized. This most commonly happens when the host leaves the nest after laying one or two eggs of their own and an intruder comes along and lays several eggs among those of the host.

Brood parasitism is not limited to birds. It also occurs among fish, and insects. I had never heard of it before and have found it to be very interesting. Since we regularly have birds feeding their offspring on our deck, I'm going to have to pay more attention to the pairs to see if we have any other species raising parasite chicks.

Please let Emory know if there is any specific bird that you would like to see a future article written on. I welcome suggestions from you the readers.

Dave Reid
Summer 2021

A PLETHORA OF CHICKADEES

Black-capped chickadee

We, in the Northeast, are in the habit of simply saying “chickadees” when we are referring to this little black and white bird. That would not work so well in any other part of North America. There are seven species of chickadees from Alaska to Mexico. Some of their ranges overlap and others have their exclusive territories. Black-capped chickadees have the biggest range which includes all of the northern US, Alaska, and much of Canada. The boreal chickadee shares much of the Canadian region with the black-capped, but very little of the United States. The Carolina chickadee picks up where the black-capped stops in the southeast and continues down through all of Florida and west to most of Texas. My personal favorite, the mountain chickadee, drops down from northern British Columbia, south through the Rockies, Cascades, and Sierras to southern Arizona and southern New Mexico, going right through Albuquerque, where I used to live.

The chestnut-backed chickadee is found mostly along the central California coast from Marin County southward. This bird has a dark chestnut colored back and sides. The gray-headed chickadee is the rarest and most poorly known chickadee, living only in remote areas of northern Alaska and northwestern Canada. The Mexican chickadee is the southernmost of the chickadees and is found in mountain forests over much of Mexico.

Chickadees are also found in England and other countries in Europe. Over there, they may be found in colors other than black and white. For instance, I have on my bird list, the blue tit, which has a blue cap and a yellow under side, the coal tit which looks pretty much like a black-capped, the great tit, which, like the blue tit, has a blue cap and a yellow underbelly, and the willow tit, which, like the coal tit, looks pretty much like our black-capped chickadee, except for the differences in color. They also have some other species that we don’t have, for instance, the crested tit, the long tailed tit, and the bearded tit.

Chickadees are social birds that flock to feeders. They are also very polite birds that will wait at the side of a feeder until the one that is currently feeding is done and has left. They will usually just grab a seed and fly off to some favored perch to open the hull and consume the nut inside. They also consume small insects and can be observed flitting through treetops and pecking at tree bark in pursuit of insects and grubs.

They are curious and unafraid of humans and may be induced to feed from a hand. I have had them practically hit me in their rush when I’m putting out the feeders. Pairs remain together year-round. From fall through early spring, chickadees form roaming flocks with titmice, nuthatches, warblers, brown creepers, and kinglets and occasionally with small woodpeckers.

Most chickadees are talkative, with a whole repertoire of high notes in addition to the trademark call. A super high-pitched *seeeee* is a warning that there is a predator in the vicinity. Many other species of birds recognize the predator warning call of the chickadee.

Chickadees will eat sunflower seeds, but peanuts and chopped nuts are irresistible. High-fat suet and peanut butter are also popular. Grab and go is their usual style, but, especially if they have up to ten chicks in the nest, they will soon be back.

Dave Reid
Fall 2021

THE WREN FROM CAROLINA

As I believe I have mentioned before, some months ago my computer died and I lost all of the bird articles that I had written. Emory kindly sent me a list of all the birds that I have written about in the last few years. After checking that list, I found that I had never written about the Carolina wren, which is a regular visitor on my deck. I have a pair of them that come by every day when they are on the Cape. I began researching what information I could find, and one of the first things I discovered was that, while they will readily come to a suet feeder, they will not bother with bird-seed feeders. I thought that was rather strange since I was watching them alternate between my suet feeder and my seed feeder. I put safflower seeds in the seed feeder, since squirrels will not eat those, so there is your first tip for the day.

Carolina wrens are found along the Atlantic coast from Maine to Florida and as far west as all of Texas north to the Great Lakes and slightly into southern Canada. Being good tourists, some of them visit the Yucatan Peninsula in Central America. They are rather small birds and unless they are looked at closely, will be lumped together with other wrens, sparrows, or other small birds.

Carolina wrens are small, round reddish brown birds that have a long, narrow, pointy curved beak and a fairly long, narrow tail which, when they are sitting on a deck railing, they usually hold upright. Both sexes have a white eyebrow which runs from the end of its beak to its shoulder. Unless you are an ornithological expert, which I am decidedly not, you probably cannot tell which is the boy and which is the girl.

The Carolina wren is a rather shy bird and, under most circumstances, is hard to see. It is not, however, hard to hear. Its voice delivers an amazing number of decibels for its size. While it visits my deck, its winter home is probably out in the brush behind my house. They gravitate toward overgrown swamps, wooded lots, and brushy suburban yards. They usually prefer to nest in open cavities up to six feet above the ground. Near houses, they are more versatile. They may make use of discarded flower pots, mailboxes, and a variety of other items. Males often build multiple nests before a pair decides on a final choice.

Insects and spiders make up most of the diet of the Carolina wren. This would include caterpillars, beetles, grasshoppers, and crickets. They will occasionally eat small lizards, frogs, or snakes. They also consume some plant matter such as seeds from bayberry or poison ivy.

Carolina wrens are common across their range, and their numbers are increasing. Their global breeding population is estimated to be in the vicinity of 14 million.

Keeping a brush pile in your backyard is a good way to encourage wrens to take up residence. They are on the Cape and are available for your enjoyment, so you might try to find some way to attract them to your yard.

Dave Reid
Winter 2022

RED HEADS AND RED BELLIES

People on Cape Cod occasionally tell me that they have seen a red-headed woodpecker. It is always possible that they have, in fact, seen one on the Cape, knowing that the winds blow birds here and there all the time, but it is more likely that they have seen a male red-bellied woodpecker.

I have seen a red-headed woodpecker, and they are quite spectacular. Claire and I saw our red-headed at a roadside stop on the Gettysburg battlefield in Pennsylvania. We both just stood there and watched it search for grubs or whatever on a tree, and it is really quite unmistakable. Its range runs from a line drawn south from the middle of Montana down through Texas and east to a line drawn through the far eastern part of New York straight south to Florida. It comes into New England only as a vagrant. The red-bellied woodpecker covers almost the same territory, but includes all of New England including Cape Cod.

Red-bellied (left) and red-headed (right) woodpeckers

The red-bellied woodpecker is a colorful species recognizable to the most casual birder. Its preferred habitat is open groves with abundant snags for nesting and roosting. This choice puts it into direct conflict with cavity-nesting birds like European starlings. The main reason for the decline in numbers of red heads is habitat loss caused by development of forest lands.

The red head is a nomadic species with periodic movements based on the yearly abundance of nuts, a favored winter food. The red head is one of four species that commonly store or stash food in caches for later consumption. They can be observed stuffing nuts or other edibles in crevices, tree cavities, or under bark.

Red-headed woodpeckers are more omnivorous than many other species of woodpeckers. They feed on a variety of insects, nuts, fruits, berries, and seeds. Pairs may remain together for several years and may often use the same nest cavity as well. In the southern part of their range, red heads may even raise two broods a year. Male and female red heads look alike. Juveniles, however, have a grayish-brown head which gradually becomes the bright red of the adult bird in their second year.

The red-bellied woodpecker is a relatively large bird about the same size as the hairy woodpecker common on the Cape, which is the larger version of the downy. These birds are common in eastern woodlands and forests from old stands of oak and hickory to young hardwoods and pines. They are a common sight at backyard feeders. I see them most often at my suet feeder. Despite the name, the red on their belly is often not readily visible, but can only be seen when they are in the right position; however, they do have a vibrant red head.

Unlike the red head, male and female are readily distinguishable. The male has a full red crown from the back of his neck by his shoulders right around the top of his head down to his beak. The female has a red area running from her shoulders only up to the back of the crown of her head.

Red-bellied woodpeckers sometimes wedge into bark crevices and then break them into more manageable pieces using their beaks. They also use cracks in trees and fence posts to store their food for use later in the year. They have been known to take over the nests of other birds. On the other hand, they are most often the victims of the larger, more aggressive European starlings. In some areas, more than half of the nests of the red-bellied are invaded by starlings.

The red-bellied are omnivorous. Their diet may be more than 50% plant material. They feed by searching for insects on the trunks and major limbs of trees in their home area. They climb and perch among branches to pick berries and nuts and sometimes catch insects flying by their perch. Occasional items in their diet may include tree frogs, eggs of small birds, and even small fish.

These have been some comparisons between the red-headed and the red-bellied woodpeckers. The better way is for you to look for them at your feeders or at rest areas along the roadway. You may have to travel out to western New York or down to Pennsylvania to see the red-headed, but if you happen to be in that area anyway, be sure to watch for them. The red-bellied you can probably coax to a suet feeder right here on Cape Cod.

Dave Reid
Spring 2022

AVIAN ANOMALIES

When I sit down for a meal at our dining room table, I look out on our deck with two seed feeders, a suet feeder and a hummingbird feeder. This collection is usually surrounded by numerous birds all trying to acquire a free and easy meal. Since there are so many birds around, I get to see various anomalies in the birds that come to visit.

Bald cardinal

The first of these that I noticed was a pair of cardinals. They were both bald. Since I had never seen this before, it kicked me in the eyes and I began to look for one or both of them to show up every day. Sure enough, they both showed up regularly. The male showed up first in early summer and was around for about a month before the female joined him.

I noticed the male almost immediately. The contrast between the red body and the black head was most striking. Eventually, I noticed a female too. The contrast between her coloring and her head was not as glaring as the male's, but was definitely there. The female also had two small, red feathers sticking straight up out of her black head.

At that point, I began to research the condition. I found that the cause was really evident, if one took the time to think it through. In the summer, after the nesting season, most birds molt. During the molting process, they shed their feathers and grow new ones. Occasionally, a bird loses all of the feathers on its head at the same time. This produces a "bald" bird until the head feathers regrow. The process of regrowth seems to take longer than the growth of feathers on the rest of the body. The result of this time difference is that you see a bald-headed adult bird for considerably longer. The missing feathers do eventually grow in and suddenly you cannot see a "bald" bird any longer. Until the correct color head feathers regrow, you have one very strange looking bird.

Bald blue jay

While researching this anomaly, I found that the same condition can affect blue jays. I have a number of blue jays that frequent my feeders, but I had never noticed the condition until recently. Let me tell you, these are some strange looking birds. Of course, they have a much larger body than the cardinal and a much longer neck. When the blue jay fails to grow head feathers, it also fails to grow neck feathers. You can imagine a full grown, adult blue jay with this long, bald neck in your feeders. He is truly comical. Kind of like a circus clown.

This condition can happen later in blue jays than in cardinals. I noticed my first bald blue jay yesterday, in the middle of August. I suppose that the growth rate for cardinals and blue jays may differ, but even the internet has a quote that says "If the blue jays are bald, it must be August."

Dave Reid
Summer 2022

Anyway, anomalies are fun.

THE OLD COOT

Although I don't hear the term "old coot" being used in a derogatory manner as much anymore as it used to, I still hear it once in a while. Nowadays, I wonder if the people I used to hear it from ever realized they were maligning one of the most wide-spread birds in the world. There are at least twenty sub-species of the coot, and they are located throughout North America (US, Canada, and Mexico), and in Eurasia, from the west coast of Spain, France, and Great Britain to the east coast of Asia and into Australia. My wife, Claire, and I have seen them in the canals of Florida near Miami, in Paracas in Peru, and in Copenhagen on a pond near the statue of "The Little Mermaid". Recently, I saw a flock of them on the Mill Pond in Marstons Mills.

They are quite recognizable. They are a plump water bird with a white bill and a white plate on their forehead leading down to their bill, which is tipped with a ring of black. They have bright red eyes and a spot of red at the top of the white plate. They are not primarily divers and usually feed from the surface, but will occasionally dive. They are predominately a black or dark brown bird and may appear chicken-like when they are out of the water and walking around on land. Youngsters are pale grayish and have a pale bill. Right after hatching, chicks have bare red spots on their heads and a red bill.

Coots are most often found in ponds, marshes, along lake edges, and in roadside ditches. They can most often be confused with gallinules and swamphens. They are awkward fliers and require long running takeoffs to get airborne. They often mix with ducks, but they are closer relatives of sandhill cranes and rails than of mallards or teals. In the winter, they can be found in large rafts of mixed waterfowl numbering up to several thousand individuals.

Although it swims like a duck, the coot does not have webbed feet like a duck. Each one of the coot's toes has broad lobes of skin that help it kick through the water. This lobe of skin folds back every time the coot lifts its foot so that it doesn't hinder walking on dry land, though it helps to support the bird's weight on wet or muddy ground.

The ecological impact of this bird can be impressive. One study from Virginia estimated that the local coot population consumed 216 tons of vegetation per winter.

Dave Reid
Winter 2023

BIRD HUNTING ON CAPE COD

Regardless what some of us may think about the subject, the fact remains that there is a large population of hunters on Cape Cod and at least seven species of birds to be hunted. The most common of these are the pheasant, quail, woodcock, coot and several waterfowl species including Canada goose, merganser and northern pintail. There are also those of us to whom the term “hunting” means looking to observe the various species.

There is a long list of rules and regulations that must be complied with in order for the hunt to be legal. All of Cape Cod is included in the waterfowl zone. All migratory game bird hunters must register with the Harvest Information Program each calendar year and must complete an HIP survey on line with the State or anywhere hunting licenses are sold. These include online at a MassFishHunt license agent or MassWildlife office. A 2023 hunting license for a resident, which includes two deer tags and is valid statewide will cost you $29.50. A resident minor license is $6.50, and a senior license is $14.75. A non-resident over 15 must pay $101.50.

Hunting in the Upper Cape may be accomplished in several areas. The Francis A. Crane Wildlife Management Area in Falmouth along Route 151 is stocked with pheasant in the northern section and bobwhite quail in the southern section. American woodcock and ruffed grouse are also present. The woodlands and grasslands shelter the eastern whip-poor-wills, grasshopper sparrows, eastern meadowlarks, upland sandpipers, northern harriers, short-eared owls, American kestrels, eastern bluebirds, and blue grosbeaks. While these are not all birds that hunters would be interested in shooting, they are some of the many birds available for birders to observe.

The airfield in Marstons Mills is also a good place to observe bird life. The taxiways set off large areas of grassland which all seem to have some bird life present. Many of the species previously listed can be found with patient observation and caution for approaching and departing airplanes.

If you are inclined to stray a little further afield, the Mass Audubon Wellfleet Bay Wildlife Sanctuary in South Wellfleet is a super place to wander the pathways and observe many different species going about their daily chores. Make sure to go all the way in to get the best viewing.

Closer to home and a spot that we will be going today is the Long Pasture Sanctuary off Route 6A in Barnstable. It is a good place to get a view of that most elusive bird: the woodcock.

Dave Reid
Spring 2023

FOXES VS. COYOTES

I was asked to do a report comparing foxes and coyotes. I have to admit that my first thought was: one is red and the other is gray. I quickly became disabused of this simplistic view after discovering that there actually are gray foxes, and Cape Cod is within their range. Suddenly, my job became a lot more interesting, so I created this chart that I hope you will find interesting.

	Red fox	Gray fox	Coyote
Order	Carnivora	Carnivora	Carnivora
Family	Canidae	Canidae	Canidae
Genus	*Vulpes*	*Urocyon*	*Canis*

All three of the animals have identical order and family, but differ as far as genus. So much for the science; now we can start to look at the various animals.

Gray fox

To me, the **gray fox** is the most interesting. It is an omnivorous animal widespread throughout North and Central America. It was once the most common fox in the eastern United States, but has been edged out by the red fox as human advancement and deforestation made the area more suitable for the red fox and less suitable for the gray. It has a black stripe ending in a **black-tipped tail**, has white on its ears, throat, belly, and hind legs, and weighs 8–15 lb, although occasionally as much as 20 lb. They also have black around their eyes and on their lips and noses. While they are similar in size to the red fox, they appear smaller because of their short, stubby legs. The gray fox is specifically adapted to climbing trees and is capable of climbing 50 feet up and jumping from branch to branch. Its hooked claws allow it to scurry up trees to reach food sources or to escape predators. It may walk down trees by jumping branch to branch or by descending backwards slowly like a cat.

Red fox

The other night, around 10:30, we were driving home from the Cape Playhouse in Dennis when a young **red fox** ran across the road in front of us. I say it was young because it was small, very skinny, and very curious; it stopped and stared at us until we were almost on top of it. The red fox is the largest true fox and one of the most widely distributed, being found across most of North America, Europe, Asia, and parts of North Africa. It has also been introduced to Australia. Red foxes are usually found in pairs or small groups consisting of families, such as a mated pair and their young. The young of the mated pair usually remain with the parents to assist in caring for new kits. Red foxes primarily feed on small rodents, rabbits, squirrels, game birds, and invertebrates. Fruit and vegetables may also be eaten on occasion. They tend to kill smaller predators, but are vulnerable to attacks from larger predators such as wolves, coyotes, and birds such as the golden or bald eagle. Red foxes are the largest species of the genus *Volpes.* However, they are much lighter than similar sized dogs. Their limb bones may weigh 30% less than those of a dog of similar size. On average, adults measure 14–20 inches high at the shoulder and 18–35 inches in body length, with tails measuring 12–22 inches (**with white tip**) which may hang to the ground when they are standing. They trot at a speed of 4–8 mph and can reach a maximum of 30 mph. Their color may vary from red to silver, platinum, and amber.

Coyote

The **coyote** is a species of canine native to North America. It is smaller than its relative the wolf and has occasionally been re-ferred to as the American jackal, prairie wolf, and brush wolf, although it is neither a jackal nor a wolf. It is listed as *least concern* by the International Union for Conservation of Nature due to its wide distribution and abundance throughout North America. The species is versatile and able to adapt and expand into environments modified by humans. Urban coyotes are common in many cities. There are 19 recognized subspecies of coyote. The average male weighs 20–40 lb and the average female 15–40 lb. Their fur color is predominantly light gray and red mixed with black and white. Their tail is bushy with **a black tip.** They live in a family unit or in loosely knit packs of unrelated individuals. Coyotes sometimes mate with gray, eastern, or red wolves producing a hybrid known as a “coywolf”. Genetic studies show that most North American wolves contain some level of coyote DNA. At the time of the colonization of the Americas, coyotes were largely confined to the open plains of the western half of the continent. Reading early descriptions of new animals seen for the first time, it is often difficult to determine whether the writer is referring to a wolf or coyote. This is especially true since the coyote was unfamiliar to Europeans since it was native to North America. Even at the time of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, though it was already well known to European traders, it was described in reports of the Expedition as “the small wolf or burrowing dog of the prairie”. The coyote’s diet consists mainly of rabbits, rodents, birds, reptiles, fish, and invertebrates. Just as its cousins described above, it may occasionally consume fruits and vegetables and like them, it may form groups to bring down larger game such as deer.

As I said at the start, this project became very interesting because it concerned animals that I found very interesting and introduced me to an animal, the gray fox, that I didn’t know existed.

Dave Reid
Summer 2023

SQUIRRELS ON MY DECK

As occasionally happens, I have procrastinated until the last minute. Fortunately, a subject has been suggested and it is one that I think I'll enjoy writing about. I enjoy sitting and watching the squirrels playing on my deck. I realize that they are more concerned with searching for food than with entertaining me, but the result is the same. There are three who usually spend time with me, and I have come to recognize them from their actions more than from their appearance. For instance, there is one who feeds from the drain holes on the bottom of the feeder rather than from the feeder openings on the top of the container, one who crouches inside the ring on the top of the feeder and hangs over the side to get his seeds, and one who has a large white spot on his side from some injury sometime in the past. One of them is a large female and the other two are males.

Squirrels are rodents and are members of a family that includes both small and medium-sized members. The family includes tree squirrels, ground squirrels, and flying squirrels, as well as chipmunks, groundhogs, marmots, and prairie dogs. Squirrels are indigenous to the Americas, Eurasia, and Africa. They were introduced by humans to Australia. They can be found in various colors: grey, red, black, and white, to name a few. There is a really beautiful solid black one in the woods when you first come onto the road where we live who has been there for the last 6 months or so.

Eastern gray squirrel

Here on the Cape, there are two main squirrel species: the eastern gray squirrel and the American red squirrel. The gray squirrel is most commonly seen, whereas the much smaller red squirrel is more feisty, aggressive, and noisy. A third, less common species is the flying squirrel which is small, nocturnal, lives at the tops of trees, and is rarely seen. There are actually two species: the northern flying squirrel, which prefers coniferous forests, and the southern flying squirrel, which prefers deciduous forest.

In the wild, squirrels enjoy a lifespan anywhere from 5 to 10 years, chipmunks from 6 to 10 years, and marmots from 15 to 18 years.

American red squirrel

Squirrel predators include coyotes, hawks, bobcats, black bears, owls, snakes, foxes, and man. They are quite good to eat. When I lived in Florida and Texas, my father and I used to go squirrel hunting. As you can imagine, you'd need to bag quite a few for a decent meal.

Squirrels inhabit both hardwood and coniferous woodlands. Hardwood and mixed hardwood and pine forests offer ideal habitats. Squirrels build nests, called dreys, from leaves and twigs and moss about 25 feet from the ground. They also burrow into hollow trees and tree cavities. They will also willingly accept a bird's nest that they find abandoned. They communicate with other squirrels both vocally and by signaling with their tails. Tail whipping is usually used as a sign that predators have been spotted nearby. They also scent mark to mark their territory and to find mates. They are friendly to humans and can be coaxed into accepting food from your hand.

Dave Reid
Fall 2023

THE ROBIN IN WINTER

The robin in winter tends to congregate in nomadic flocks, called waves, which consist of anywhere from three to thousands depending where in the country they are. The farther south they are located, the larger the wave is liable to be. Waves on Cape Cod tend to contain between three and twenty, while in Florida, they may be in the thousands.

Usually, these flocks appear where there are plentiful fruits on trees and shrubs. Robins are always here in the winter, just not in as great numbers as in other times of the year.

Researchers don't fully understand why some robins migrate while others do not. Females are more likely to migrate than males, so it may be that males stay to give themselves an advantage in establishing a breeding ground in the spring. Even in freezing weather, robins can stay warm enough to make staying through the winter worthwhile. Those that remain near their mating grounds will get first choice of the best nesting grounds when spring arrives.

When robins migrate, it is access to food that causes the move, not temperature. They can withstand cold temperatures, but in winter, they need more food, so they tend to congregate where a constant supply of food is available. Many robins, especially those in the northern states and southern Canada, change their diets in winter. Since worms and insects are not usually available, they look for trees and bushes that still have fruit such as crabapple, holly, and juniper. I have several large holly bushes in my yard that are usually heavily laden with berries until the onset of winter. When all of the berries disappear, I know that I have been visited by the robins of winter.

A robin's internal temperature is 104°F, and yet they can be perfectly functional in areas below freezing just by fluffing up their feathers and getting really big. They can survive by eating snow, but really appreciate a watering dish for drinking and bathing. I have seen a couple of robins almost empty my water dish just by seeming to be playing in the water.

As temperatures warm in the spring, the bulk of the robin population follows a reliable northward migration pattern. The ground thaws and that is when earthworms and some insect larvae are available. That is when you see big movements in the robin population. That is when you first begin to see signs of robins switching from winter behavior to courtship and nesting behavior, and becoming territorial instead of being neighborly with the wave.

Dave Reid
Winter 2024