



Hampshire Bird Club, Inc. Amherst, Massachusetts

www.hampshirebirdclub.org

Volume 23, No. 6

February, 2007

In this edition: programs for this month and the near future, field trip reports and February trips, the MONHEGAN ISLAND trip announcement, an offer from Bird Observer (Massachusetts's own birding magazine), programs coming up at other local organizations, a musing on Saw Whet Owls, and some dubious humor. I hope you find some of it useful!

PROGRAMS

Monday, February 12 at 7:30 PM

Elijah Goodwin delves into Song in Blackbirds: More Than Meets the Ear!

Immanuel Lutheran Church; 867 North Pleasant Street, Amherst.

Should bad weather force a cancellation, it will be announced on WHMP 1400 AM radio.

Elijah provides the following introduction to his program.

Are the songs of blackbirds beautiful? I think so, but I'll let you decide for yourself. In this presentation I'll make the argument that they are surprisingly complex and interesting. We will explore the song patterns seen in local wild blackbirds and their resident relatives from the south. I'll discuss what I've learned about blackbird song learning from aviary experiments and why these experiments might explain some of the patterns we see in the wild. The presentation will feature lots of songs and opportunities to judge with your own ear and eye. With the spring return of Red-winged Blackbirds and Common Grackles fast approaching, I hope this presentation will help you to listen to blackbirds this spring with a newly critical and open ear.



Elijah Goodwin is currently in his final year as a Ph.D. Candidate in the Organismic and Evolutionary Biology Program at UMass-Amherst. His dissertation explores the evolution and ecology of improvisation and invention as song learning strategies in birds, particularly in the blackbirds. He has researched song learning in Red-winged Blackbirds and grackles both in artificial aviary settings and at field locations in South Carolina, Florida, and western Massachusetts.

Elijah also has a M.Ed. in secondary science education from Boston College and a B.S. in wildlife biology from the University of Massachusetts. He has a wide variety of field experience including: radio tracking raptors out west, studying song and reproductive success in Chestnut-sided Warblers in the Berkshires, studying the song of Sedge Wrens and Sierra Madre Sparrows in the central volcanic highlands of Mexico, censusing breeding birds in beaver-impacted areas in the Adirondacks, and mist-netting migrants up in the tree canopy at Hampshire College.

Elijah also interned with the Cape May Raptor Banding Project in NJ, where he personally banded over a thousand hawks and owls during migration monitoring efforts. He currently lives in Greenfield, MA with his wife and 4 year old daughter (who already knows more bird songs than her mother).

Coming Programs

March 12, 2007.	Wayne Petersen.	<i>Massachusetts "Important Bird Areas" Program.</i>
April 9, 2007.	Sam Fried.	<i>Birding the Dempster Highway (North-West Territories).</i>
May 14, 2007.	Paul Sievert.	<i>The Short-tailed Albatross.</i>

FIELD TRIPS

Reports

Moran WMA, December 10, 2006

Mike Locher led Hampshire birders to **Moran Wildlife Management Area** in Windsor to look for winter specialties. The group had a good look at an adult **Northern Shrike**, and an immature Bald Eagle. The spruce groves supported numerous Golden-crowned Kinglets, Red-breasted Nuthatches, and Black-capped Chickadees. In the fields and transitional habitats there were scattered Cedar Waxwings and Dark-eyed Juncos. Winter finches were notable by their absence, as has been the case throughout this area this season.

Mike Locher



North Shore/Cape Anne. January 7, 2007

A hardy group of HBC members led by **Bob Bieda** donned long underwear and several more layers ... ooops, I guess I can't use my standard report form for the January trip to the **North Shore and Cape Anne** this year. Decked out in Hawaiian shirts, five of us spent the day in the warm sun looking at **King Eiders, Barrow's Goldeneyes, Iceland Gulls, Razorbills**, a **Dovekie** and many other beautiful but more typical winter species on Cape Anne. When is the last time you saw "Dovekie" and "warm sun" in the same sentence? We saw 59 species including all the winter specialties and never saw our breaths. Temperatures reached into the upper 60s as Harlequin Ducks and Gannets just beamed in the sunlight. Some other species of note: Red-necked Grebe, Eared Grebe (appears to be chained to the bottom at Niles Beach), Ring-necked Duck, Peregrine Falcon, Glaucous Gull, Nelson's Gull, Black-legged Kittiwake, Bonaparte's Gull. Enough of this gloating, next year it will be back to snow plows and bitter, biting wind.

Bob Bieda

Editors note: We have not had to wait for next year, as it turns out! dpj



Coastal Rhode Island. January 27, 2007

With Geoff LeBaron this year (in approximate order of height) were Betsy Higgins, Marcia Merithew, Shirley Hammerschmith, Dan Marchant, Dave Mako, Scott Sumner, Bob Bieda, David Peake-Jones, Chris Ellison and Dennis McKenna. The weather offered a brief reprieve from single digit temperatures (the thermometer soared to the high twenties), with almost no wind. The promise of snow showers and glowering skies were not enough to dampen our enthusiasm much. The focus of the day was to find as many as we could of the interesting assortment of rare geese being reported from both ends of the state.

We began at the Avondale Nature Preserve in Westerly. Despite the initial impression of birdlessness, the weedy fields eventually offered up a horde of American Tree Sparrows and Song Sparrows, interspersed with which were a Savannah Sparrow, two **Swamp Sparrows** and a **White-crowned Sparrow**. On our way to the first pit stop of the day, we peered over an overgrown stone wall at a mass of Canada Geese on a golf course, and found a **Greater White-fronted Goose** amongst them. These birds normally breed in Alaska and the far north and conduct their migratory lives far to our west. They have a rather homely look about them, being portly and very erect, for all the world like one of the domestic geese we so often dismiss with a flick of the binoculars. The bird we saw had a coral-pink bill with a striking white band around its base, a brownish front with black wheals across it (natural markings, not injuries) and bright orange legs.

Refreshed and (in some cases) lightened by our pit stop, we made our way across the Weekapaug breachway, where there were several Common Loons, Red-breasted Mergansers, and a peripatetic Belted Kingfisher. Along the recreational wastelands of the Misquamicut beach area we found Horned Larks bustling about on a grassy verge.

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Coastal Rhode Island. January 27, 2007. (continued)

Wandering through the overgrown thickets of Ninigret NWR, we found a beautiful group of Hooded Mergansers and Common Goldeneyes eking it out in the receding open water of the bay. Amongst them (taking a brief swim break from its customary rock) was the resident winter **Lesser Black-backed Gull** which, at close range, allowed us to see its characteristic long-winged appearance and doleful gray face. Staying behind to take photographs, Scott was able to add two Barrows Goldeneyes to the tally.

Moving on to the White Brook Fish Hatchery, we found a number of beautiful **Northern Pintail**, several **American Wigeon**, and a **Green-winged Teal** taking advantage of the fast-moving open water.

Beside a non-descript assortment of boats and lobster pots at the URI in Kingston, we found the **Clay-colored Sparrow** which had recently been reported at the location. It obliged us by feeding in the open long enough for me to convince myself that I would not have written it off as a Chipping Sparrow had I encountered it without warning. This certainty has already evaporated.

The remainder of our day was spent further to the east, searching for two Pink-footed Geese which have been reported in recent days from a relatively well-defined region, centered on the Hammersmith Farm just out of Newport. Despite the good odds and a lot of searching, these exciting birds eluded us, as did a Barnacle Goose and several Cackling Geese that have been in the region. We did, however, find a group of energetic Brant on a playing field in Fort Adams. Geoff noted that since the severe pollution-related declines of eelgrass beds in the northeast, he and others have made intriguing observations of Brant apparently diversifying into terrestrial feeding niches. Hope springs eternal. Snow Buntings along a nearby roadside were nice, but again, not to be confused with the rare geese we sought. Detouring briefly northward in search of these same geese, we found them once again NOT amongst the impressive aggregation of Canada Geese and Ruddy Ducks on Saint Mary's Reservoir in Portsmouth.

Ending the day at twilight at Sachuest Point, we found beautiful Harlequin Ducks and a flock of mixed Scaup, all richly lit by the fading embers of the day. Two birders from Pennsylvania told us they had found the Barnacle Goose just across the river from one of our search locations in the late afternoon. In birding, as in life, you may not find what you seek, but you will always find good things along the way.

David Peake-Jones

Coming Trips

Please see also the (green) "Winter-Spring-Summer Field Trip Schedule, 2007," published previously, but note that, due to extensive changes, a revised version of schedule will be issued in March. February trips are as published.

Saturday, February 10. South Shore: Plymouth and Falmouth. All day. Al Richards heads to the coast south of Boston to find ducks, gulls, owls, and whatever happens to be around. Dress warmly. Call Al (413-665-2761) for meeting information. (E)

Wednesday, February 21. Midweek half day in the Connecticut River Valley. Morning. Harvey Allen (413-253-7963) scours the local area in search of birds, and shows off his favorite birding sites along the way. Meet at 8:00 a.m. across from Atkin's Farm (on the corner of Rt. 116 and Bay Road, Amherst). (E)

See also the next page for the announcement of the MONHEGAN ISLAND trip this year!!

MONHEGAN ISLAND: A Birding Pilgrimage Memorial Day Weekend (May 26-29), 2006

Ask any of the best birders in the northeast where to go for the ultimate spring birding experience, and most will mention one place: Monhegan Island. Ask most Hampshire Bird Club veterans to name the five most memorable moments in their times with the club, and most will mention the Monhegan Island trip. Here's why.

During the Spring, migrant songbirds moving northward up the Atlantic seaboard are sometimes pushed out over the ocean by storms, and have to fight their way back toward the safety of land. Monhegan Island lies about twelve miles off the coast of Maine and is often a haven for exhausted birds to recuperate before resuming the perilous journey northward. We will arrive on the island on the Friday of Memorial Day weekend, without vehicles, and immerse ourselves in the gentle rhythms of island life. We'll find migrant songbirds throughout the tiny village of Monhegan, sheltering in the numerous apple trees, sometimes picking through the sea-wrack on the town beach for sand-fleas, or even hiding in the lobster pots piled almost everywhere. Each day will bring fresh migrants to the island, and a storm could even produce one of the fallouts of birding legend. Rarities can and do crop up at any time. When the birding slows down, we can venture off on any of the island's numerous walking trails to Lobster Cove, the stupendous seaward cliffs, the Seal Rocks (aptly named), or the Enchanted Forest.

Most of us will leave the valley early on Friday, May 26, and arrive on the island late that afternoon. We will stay at the rustic Trailing Yew, which will lay on breakfast and dinner each day, including a local lobster dinner. This is the perfect opportunity to slow down, REALLY learn the birds, and remember what life *should* be about. We depart the island at mid-day on Memorial Day, and most will be home by early evening, traffic permitting. This trip is open only to members of the Hampshire Bird Club. Registration is by deposit.

For further details call Betsy Higgins (586 7585) or Andrew Magee (586 1509).

LIBRARY

HBC has a substantial library, located at the Hitchcock Center for the Environment in Amherst.

Hours are those of the Hitchcock Center:

9:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. from Tuesday through Friday, and

9:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. on Saturday.

The collection is catalogued on-line at www.hampshirebirdclub.org.

The library contains birding resources in various media, including field guides, bird-finding guides to almost every major birding destination in the U.S., and overseas, natural histories, periodicals and videos. Items can be signed out and borrowed for a period of up to one month, or longer by arrangement. Henry is happy to bring items to meetings, if you give him a few days in advance. You can reach him at **(413) 549 3722**.

CONSERVATION

*If you are interested in conservation of birds and birding habitat, you may like to share information and effort with others in the club. **Anne Lombard** and **Bob Zimmerman** make up our **Conservation Committee**. The club is looking for ideas on how we can contribute to habitat conservation in our area. Contact Anne at **(413) 586 7509**, or Bob at **(413) 585 0405**. The committee email is conservation@hampshirebirdclub.org.*

Some winning entries from the 2006 Washington Post neologism contest.

“*Coffee*” (n.): the person upon whom one coughs.

“*Flabbergasted*” (adj.): appalled over how much weight you have gained.

“*Abdicate*” (v.): give up all hope of ever having a flat stomach.

Bird Observer: Focus on Western Mass

The upcoming February issue of *Bird Observer* magazine will be devoted to birding in western Massachusetts. The issue will include the following articles:

- Western MA Rarities by Seth Kellogg and Jim Smith
- South Hadley White-tailed Hawk by Scott Surner
- Where-to-Go feature on the Sod Farm in Northfield by Mark Taylor and Hector Galbraith
- Important Bird Area (IBA) series installment on the Berkshires by Brooke Stevens and Wayne Peterson
- Review by Mark Lynch of Berkshires author Andrew Blechman's new book "Pigeons: The Fascinating Saga of the World's most Revered and Reviled Bird".

In conjunction with this issue, *Bird Observer* is offering all residents of western Massachusetts (Berkshire, Franklin, Hampden and Hampshire counties) the February magazine as a free bonus issue when they take out a new subscription. More information about this journal, including a subscription form, can be found on the journal's web site, <http://www.massbird.org/birdobserver>.

HITCHCOCK PROGRAMS

TRACKING OTTER AND MINK

Alan Amond, Little Cree Spy Excursions
Saturday, February 10, 10 a.m. - 3 p.m.

LIVING WITH WILDLIFE: BEAVER SOLUTIONS

Mike Callahan, Beaver Solutions
Tuesday, February 13, 7 p.m.

WINTER TREE & SHRUB ID

Brayton Wilson, UMass Professor Emeritus
Saturdays, February 17 & 24, 9 a.m. – noon

NATURAL HISTORY OF TEA

Bob Heiss, Author and Co-Owner of Cooks Shop Here
Tuesday, February 20, 7 p.m.

SPRING BIRDING COURSE

Scott Surner, Instructor
Evening Classes: February 28, March 21, 28, April 11, 25, May 2, 9, 16, 6:30 - 8:30 p.m.
Field Trips: March 3 (5 a.m.), March 24 (5 a.m.), April 7, 14, 21, 28, May 5, 12, 19 (5 a.m.), June 2 (5:30 a.m.), generally 7 a.m. – noon

QUABBIN EXPLORATION

Ted Watt, Hitchcock Center Naturalist
Saturday, March 3, 9:30 a.m. - 2 p.m.

For details and registration for all Hitchcock programs, please contact the Hitchcock Center for the Environment, 525 South Pleasant St., Amherst MA 01002. Telephone (413) 256 6006, or on the web at www.hitchcockcenter.org.

Another Reason for the Christmas Count

Our Encounter with A Saw Whet Owl

“It’s the Christmas Count. We should look!”

There are many ways to conduct the Christmas Count. Most of us cast a cursory glance at the empty parts of our areas, and concentrate on the bird-rich habitats close to roads, thus reducing the wear and tear on our all-too-well-worn bodies and spirits. However there are some of us for whom no vacant thicket can go unpished, no tiny copse unsearched, and no empty field untrodden.

It was with this hopelessly inefficient strategy in mind that we found ourselves slogging across a waterlogged brushy field in the shadow of Mt Warner in Hadley, Massachusetts on December 17, adding scattered Chickadees, Dark-eyed Juncos and Tufted Titmice to the time-honored database of the Northampton Christmas Count. These records, of course, gave us twinges of virtuousness, but our secret hopes were fast being dimmed by our waterlogged feet and aching backs.

Toward the edge of the field, we came to an area of young white birch and aspen with scattered white pines.

“It’s the Christmas count. We should look!” we thought.

So we did, fighting our way through heavy undergrowth to peer hopefully into each white pine. It was, so far as the first fourteen trees were concerned, a fruitless exercise. After examining hundreds of promising evergreens in my time as a birder, I had yet to find an owl in any of them, and I had concluded that, so far as we mortals are concerned, there would never be one. It was with this gloomy reflection already reinforced in my mind that we blundered through the brambles surrounding tree number fifteen. Unthinkably, we almost walked into the most perfect Saw Whet Owl you can imagine. Suddenly, the brambles, the Christmas Count, and all other trappings of the real world were forgotten. The world contracted to a tiny bower framed with green needles. We were three souls, held in a web of wonder and, presumably, fear.

It suddenly became desperately important that the bird not fly. The image of this tiny creature blundering through the alien brightness of day to escape our intrusion kept us both frozen to the spot. Fortunately, the owl sat entirely motionless as we retreated to a more respectful distance, and nervously took several pictures. Only its wide eyes and breathing betrayed what it might be feeling. We spoke softly to it, as a gesture of reassurance. This was both an obviously pointless and absolutely unavoidable reaction to how we felt about being in its world. After a few minutes, it began being distracted by nearby chickadees, and we were delighted to see its eyes narrowing, almost as if it were contemplating going back to sleep. With a gentle goodbye, we carefully replaced the foliage and departed through the brambles to resume our count.

Our owl is a thing of hope. Hope brought us to it through the fields on a December morning. Hope has us at the shore in the desolation of January. Hope makes our hearts leap with the first flush of gold in the April woods. Hope slows our steps through the singing woods of June, and hope brings us to the mountain-tops in September. Hope is what birding really is.

We began our search of the pines with a simple thought:

“It’s the Christmas Count. We should look!”

It turns out we were only half way to the truth.

It’s winter. It’s a pine tree. You should always look!

David Peake-Jones and Betsy Higgins

Northampton Christmas Count

December 17, 2006

More winners from the *Washington Post* contest

“**Negligent**” (adj.): describes a condition in which you absentmindedly answer the door in your nightgown.

“**Lymph**” (v.): to walk with a lisp.

“**Gargoyle**” (n.): olive-flavored mouthwash.

ARCADIA PROGRAMS

Eagles at Quabbin: *Patti Steinman, DCR Staff, Saturday, Feb. 3, 10:00 am-2:00 p.m.*

Natural Wild and Scenic Connecticut River: *Carrie Banks, Feb. 7, 7-9 pm*

Tracking large Mammals: *David McLain, Feb. 10, 9:00 am-noon*

For more details of these and other programs go to www.massaudubon.org (select "Sanctuaries", then "Choose a Sanctuary: Arcadia") or call the sanctuary at the number below. To register for programs contact **Arcadia Wildlife Sanctuary**, 127 Combs Rd., Easthampton MA 01027. Telephone **(413) 584-3009**.

GREAT FALLS DISCOVERY CENTER PROGRAMS (abridged)

Hidden Landscape: A Film Preview Event.

Thursday, Feb. 1 from 7:00 pm - 9:00 pm:

Opening for Stephen Gingold's Nature Photography.

Saturday, Feb. 3 from 2 pm - 4 pm

"Special Places in the Valley" Series: National and Scenic Westfield River: *Carrie Banks.*

Wednesday, Feb. 7 at 7:00 pm. Held at Arcadia Wildlife Sanctuary, Easthampton.

Tracking the Wily Coyote & other Canids: *David Brown*

Thursday, February 8 from 7:00 – 8:30 PM

Tracking Wild Canids: *David Brown*

Saturday, Feb. 10 from 9:00 AM to 12:00 NOON. Pre-registration required. Fees.

Accessible Birding: *Co-hosted by Hampshire Bird Club.*

Saturday, Feb. 10 10am – Noon

Sense of Wonder (A one-woman play on the life and work of Rachel Carson): *Kaiulani Lee.*

Thursday, Feb 22 from 7pm – 9pm at Mount Holyoke College, Blanchard Campus Center.

Massachusetts Turtle Symposium: *Various presenters including Tom Tynning*

Friday and Saturday, February 23-24, 2007.

*Great Falls Discovery Center is located at 2 Avenue A, Turners Falls, MA
Open Fridays and Saturdays from 10 AM to 4 PM Phone (413) 683 3221*

Welcome New Members!

Deborah Levy: Northampton

Barbara Snook: Westhampton

New members joining the club between January 1 2007 and September 1, 2007 will not need to renew until September, 2008. This means up to seven months of free membership! What better reason do you need to join now?

That's it for this time.

Until next month, talk softly and carry a big scope!

David Peake-Jones, Editor

(413) 529 9541

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