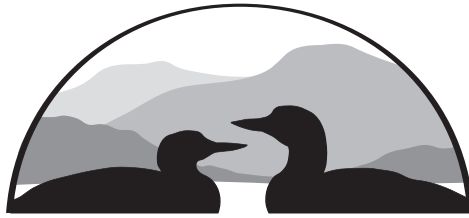


New Hampshire Bird Records



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Cover Photo: *Western Reef-Heron by Mandy Houston, 8/9/06, Rye Harbor, Rye, NH. For more on the Western Reef-Heron in New Hampshire see the article by Steve Mirick in this issue.*

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Western Reef-Heron in New Hampshire

by Stephen R. Mirick

At 8:04 AM on the morning of Wednesday, August 9, 2006, Mandy Houston was waiting to head off shore on the “Granite State,” a whalewatch boat out of Rye Harbor, New Hampshire, when a small dark gray heron flew across the harbor and over the boat. She pointed her camera at it and took a series of photos thinking it was a Great Blue Heron. She then put these excellent flight shots on her Web site (www.whalesightings.com) and there the story might have ended. Except.....

Nine days later, while driving home from Connecticut early in the morning on August 18, Lysle Brinker decided to do some birding on the southern Maine coastline and he stumbled upon an amazing sight. A small dark gray heron was roosting on a small island just off the public boat landing in Kittery Point, Maine. He soon realized that this was a Western Reef-Heron, an extremely rare bird from Africa and only the second record for the United States! Cell phones started ringing. Within an hour, other birders confirmed the identification, and within 24 hours, the word was out all across the country.

Fortunately for New Hampshire birders, the heron was found the following day in New Hampshire and during its 34-day stay along the Maine and New Hampshire coasts, it chose to spend most of its days feeding in and around the area of the inner Portsmouth Harbor area. It was often visible from the bridges and causeways leading onto the island of New Castle. Although the bird was not always reliable, most birders were able to get distant views as it fed on the tidal mud flats or roosted with Snowy Egrets in the surrounding rocks. On one occasion, it was seen from Odiorne Point in Rye as it flew offshore towards Duck Island with a small group of Snowy Egrets to spend the night out at the Isles of Shoals. The bird was last reported to the NH.Birds listserv on September 20, 2006.

During its stay, hundreds of visiting birders from all over the United States traveled to the Maine and New Hampshire seacoasts to see the bird. A voluntary survey of birders visiting the Maine area of Kittery Point recorded 53 responses from a total of 123 birders. According to the survey, visitors came from 11 states including birders from as far away as California and Alaska (Lovitch 2006)! I personally helped out a birder from Missouri who had flown east by herself just to see this bird for her life list!



Western Reef-Heron by Lillian Stokes.

The Western Reef-Heron is normally a coastal species of western and eastern Africa as well as the coastal areas of the Saudi Arabian peninsula, the Persian Gulf, and into the western coast of India. Although it is not normally a highly migratory bird, the Western Reef-Heron has strayed across the ocean on several occasions. The first record for the New World occurred from the Graeme Hall Swamp of Barbados in 1975. Since then, there have been at least 12 other sightings from Barbados and nearby in St. Lucia and Trinidad and Tobago (Mlodinow 2004).

This record from Maine and New Hampshire represents the fourth North American record and the second for the US. The first North American record came from Nantucket, Massachusetts. During the summer and fall of 1983, it was seen by hundreds of birders during its stay. The second record of Western Reef-Heron came from northern Newfoundland in Canada during the summer of 2005, and the third record came from Glace Bay in Nova Scotia from the summer of 2006. The 2005 and 2006 records likely all represent the same individual. The bird at Glace Bay, Nova Scotia, was last reported on August 2, 2006 (Maybank 2006), seven days before it was first seen in New Hampshire; details of plumage are similar to the New Hampshire bird.

The taxonomy of the Western Reef-Heron is complex and somewhat controversial. Different authorities have different opinions regarding the taxonomic relationship of the Western Reef-Heron with the closely related Little Egret. The bird that appeared in New Hampshire (and all other New World sightings) has been identified as the dark western subspecies, or race, of the Western Reef-Heron (*Egretta gularis gularis*). This race breeds in coastal regions of western Africa and is recognized as a subspecies of Western Reef-Heron, according to the American Ornithological Union (A.O.U.). Many leading taxonomists, however, believe that this subspecies may actually represent a dark morph race of the Little Egret (*Egretta garzetta*) and that the taxonomy should be changed to reflect this. This change may or may not be eventually accepted by the A.O.U., but for now at least, all the birders who saw the New Hampshire bird can “put it on their lists” and New Hampshire can include it as a new species for the state.

...And then the whole story became more complete (and even more interesting) when on September 17, 2006, I was traveling back from a whalewatch trip out of Rye Harbor, New Hampshire. The naturalist on the boat told me about a photographer named Mandy Houston who often comes on their whalewatches and maintains a Web site dedicated to whales. She said that this woman had photographed the reef-heron flying over Rye Harbor more than a week before its discovery in Maine! I told her that was very unlikely, but she told me about the Web site where there was a photo. And what a photo it was! You can see it on the front cover of this issue.

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