

# New Hampshire

## BIRD RECORDS



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## NEW HAMPSHIRE BIRD RECORDS

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Steve Mirick  
photographed these two  
juvenile Black-backed  
Woodpeckers chasing  
each other at Pondicherry  
Wildlife Refuge on  
8-15-21.

## In This Issue

Harris's Sparrow in Greenland, NH; Black Tern at the Exeter WTP, NH .....	Inside Front Cover
From the Editor .....	2
How Many Birds in the Picture? .....	2
Fall Season: August 1 through November 30, 2021 <i>by Ben Griffith</i> .....	3
Regional Report, Fall 2021 – Sullivan County and Lake Sunapee <i>by Dylan Jackson</i> .....	9
A Hybrid Flycatcher in Dover <i>by Stephen Mirick</i> .....	9
A Lazuli Bunting on Star Island.... Again! <i>by Rebecca Suomala</i> .....	11
Field Notes, <i>Kathryn Frieden, Coordinator</i> .....	11
Northern Gannet Blown Off Course <i>by Kathryn Frieden</i> .....	11
Surprising Location for a Sanderling .....	12
Common Nighthawk on Star Island .....	12
Noisy Grackles <i>by Richard Bielawski</i> .....	12
Woodpecker Drinking from Hummingbird Feeder .....	12
Discovery of a Bank Swallow Colony .....	13
Black-crowned Night-Heron Bonanza! .....	13
Fall 2021 New Hampshire Raptor Migration Report <i>by Iain MacLeod</i> .....	14
Documenting Rarities in eBird <i>by Steve Mirick</i> .....	18
The Merlin App Sound ID <i>by Iain MacLeod</i> .....	20
Volunteers and Research—Black Tern with Color Bands <i>by Danielle Dauria</i> .....	21
Backyard Birder – Do Birds eat Small Mammals? <i>by Kathryn Frieden</i> .....	22
Chasing Rarities <i>by Jon Woolf</i> .....	23
Birding from Gorham to Errol, NH <i>by Robert A. Quinn</i> .....	25
Photo Gallery – Cattle Egrets Doing What They do Best! .....	28
Concord 2021 Nighthawk Migration <i>by Rebecca Suomala</i> .....	29
Corrections, Summer 2016 through Winter 2017-18 .....	30
What to Watch for in Fall .....	31
More Fall 2021 Rarities .....	Inside Back Cover

Cover Photos: A rare hybrid flycatcher believed to be a Couch's/Tropical Kingbird x Scissor-tailed Flycatcher, found in Dover, NH. Top photo by Ken Faucher, 11-14-21; bottom right by Steve Mirick, 11-15-21; bottom left by Paul Kursewicz, 11-14-21.

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# Documenting Rarities in eBird

by Steve Mirick

*If you currently use eBird or are considering using it in the future, please take the time to review the following article and its bullet statements.*

*— on behalf of the New Hampshire eBird Review Team*

## eBird Overview

Using eBird is a fun way to keep track of bird sightings and it's an incredible educational tool for people to learn more about the birds around them. It's been growing tremendously in popularity over the years and with the increase in data around the world, eBird has created some wonderful range maps and migration simulations that would not have been dreamed about 20 years ago. But with the value of adding more and more data, the difficulty in keeping up with quality control is extremely difficult. As more beginners are using the system, the likelihood of errors in data entry grows exponentially. eBird reviewers review the data in order to confirm it for the scientific database.

## New Hampshire Team

In New Hampshire, we have an eBird team of volunteers that review filters, hotspots, and all of the “flagged” data that is caught by data entry filters. This job is a very difficult job with few rewards. Reviewers currently on the team include Eric Masterson, Pam Hunt, Jim Sparrell, Katie Towler, Susan Wrisley, Greg Tillman, Ben Griffith, Steve Mirick, and Zeke Cornell with help from Kathryn Frieden, Unity Dienes, Kyle Wilmarth, and Dylan Jackson. All of these birders have many years of birding experience in New Hampshire and are doing their best to keep up with the data entered. We are also trying to bring other experienced members of the birding community in to assist with the data quality control efforts. Becky Suomala recruits and supports NH eBird volunteers, and coordinates the statewide coverage.

## Filters

Filters are data entry triggers that tell the user that a certain species they are entering is not expected in that area, or that the number of individuals they are reporting is higher than is expected. Filters are set by date and number for each species. Filters are currently one of the most important quality control systems in eBird, but they require a tremendous amount of effort to adjust and keep up to date. In addition, they **only work at a county level** so this can create major problems. For instance, a regularly encountered bird of coastal and offshore ocean waters such as a Razorbill

is not filtered in Rockingham County. This is fine if you are birding at the coast, but if you were birding anywhere away from the coast, a Razorbill would be an extremely rare find that would require detailed documentation. Certain species of waterfowl on the Connecticut River are rare elsewhere. Purple Martins are locally common at nesting colonies on the New Hampshire seacoast, but they are rare anywhere else in Rockingham County. A Red-bellied Woodpecker in southern Grafton County is not unusual, but it's still rare in northern Grafton County, etc.. Unfortunately, we can't adjust the filters with any more accuracy at this time, but we believe (hope) that the eBird team at Cornell is working on this significant problem. Bottom line – the filters are not perfect, but we are doing our best to work with them.

## Provide Detailed Documentation for Rare Birds

When eBird triggers a filter and tells you something is unusual, please **provide some words of description** for **any** noteworthy birds. A decent photo can be extremely valuable and, if it's singing, try to record it with your cell phone! Species Comments are essential for reviewers and are helpful even for other eBird users. Every flagged sighting should have at least something in the species comments field. It doesn't always have to be a lot, but even a small amount of detail may mean the reviewer doesn't need to ask you for more information or invalidate your sighting.

It should be noted that some sightings may require more detailed documentation than others and a reviewer will take this into consideration when judging an eBird submission. Generally, the more rare the sighting, the more detailed the documentation required. If there are very few observers, then more detailed documentation is required. For instance, if you are recording the Purple Martins at their colony on Cross Beach Road in Seabrook (in May through July) you don't need to submit much documentation or, if you were one of the 100+ birders that saw the Northern Lapwing earlier this month, it wouldn't be necessary to provide “bullet-proof” detailed documentation since there were so many photographs submitted and so much corroboration on the identification. A few simple field marks that you noted would be sufficient. **But** if you are the only observer of a flagged bird species and if there are no photographs, it is up to you to submit **detailed** documentation.

**Detailed** documentation should include at a minimum:

- What field marks did you notice that differentiate it from more common species? (This is very important and could include size, shape, colors, etc.)
- If relevant, detailed discussion of call notes or song.
- What is your past experience with this and other similar species?



- How long did you watch it for and from what distance?
- What was the bird doing? (flying by overhead, perched in tree, swimming in water, etc.)
- What did you use for optics (eyes only, binoculars, spotting scope)?
- What was the visibility like (fog, clear, backlit, frontlit, dark out, etc.)?

Try to write notes right there in the field or when you get back to your car if possible. These are most valuable. Writing them when you get home after you've read through all of your field guides is not as useful.

Training yourself to patiently *observe* birds and notice details of their plumage is a valuable way to learn field identification. Read your field guides and understand the “field marks” of birds. One of the downfalls of eBird is the fact that it tends to encourage people to hastily chase birds and tick them off for their year/life lists. While this can be lots of fun (I do it too!), you don't learn as much and it doesn't make you a better birder.

## Provide a discussion on high counts

A high count trigger also needs to be explained in detail. Again, a photograph can help a lot but, if you don't have a photograph, indicate how you arrived at a number. Was the flock estimated or was it a count of each individual bird? If it was during migration, indicate that the birds were migrating. Include the flock size of each individual flock if multiple flocks are involved.

## Subspecies

Avoid selecting subspecies (or forms such as Downy Woodpecker (Eastern)) on the basis of expectation or because they are high on a list of suggestions. Some subspecies (or groups of ssp.) can be very difficult to differentiate in the field. Even professional ornithologists argue about what is a valid subspecies and what is not, and field guides are sometimes not useful (or are confusing) for field identification at this level. I (personally) avoid using all subspecies categories except for a couple of subspecies and then only enter them in certain circumstances. When in doubt, *don't use* the subspecies category. It most often isn't necessary and is not valuable. If you do use the subspecies category, then supply sufficient details so that other subspecies, even western subspecies, are excluded. Stating “expected subspecies” is not sufficient for documentation.

Red-tailed Hawks—At this time, New Hampshire reviewers are *requiring* photographs for all Red-tailed Hawks that are identified at a sub-species level due to the complexities and variations within Red-tailed Hawk populations. Please do not

## Key Points to Remember

1. eBird is a great free tool that is providing fantastic information to us all, but the quality of the information is directly related to the quality of the data.
2. Volunteer eBird reviewers with decades of experience birding in New Hampshire work to maintain the standards in the state.
3. Filters are manually set by reviewers based on expected species and numbers for location and time of year.
4. Filters can only be set to a county level at this time. If eBird prompts you for more information on a bird that is common in your area, please understand it might be because it is rare elsewhere in the county.
5. If you are a beginner and your submission trips a filter, that might be an indication that your identification is incorrect. Documentation is required, but check other species options first.
6. Good documentation includes good photographs or describes the salient field marks that you observe in the field. One of the most common errors is to describe where the bird was – instead, describe what it looked like.
7. Please don't enter subspecies level data except in cases where the subspecies is clearly field identifiable and where other subspecies have been eliminated.
8. Use care in selecting the location for your sightings. Try to use an existing “Hot Spot” where it makes sense.

submit Red-tailed Hawks to a subspecies level unless you submit it with a good photograph.

## Don't be Offended

Don't be offended if a reviewer asks you a question. Be proud that you may have found something unusual! Reviewers volunteer their time to maintain data quality for eBird sightings and are usually very knowledgeable about the birds in New Hampshire. You can learn a great deal from their questions! Be aware that all of your data may not be accepted. This is not to say that you were wrong about your identification, but it is just that the reviewer(s) could not be sure based on the documentation that you supplied. *Don't be offended if your sighting is invalidated.* It happens to us all! Really! Try to use it as a learning experience for providing better documentation in the future.

# New Hampshire Bird Records Endowment Fund

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## Abbreviations Used

AMC	Appalachian Mountain Club
BBC	Brookline Bird Club
BBS	Breeding Bird Survey
CA	Conservation Area
CC	Country Club
CFT	NH Audubon Chapter Field Trip
FT	Field Trip
IBA	Important Bird Area
L.	Lake
LPC	Loon Preservation Committee
NA	Natural Area
NHA	New Hampshire Audubon
NHBR	New Hampshire Bird Records
NHRBC	NH Rare Birds Committee
NWR	National Wildlife Refuge
PO	Post Office
R.	River
Rd.	Road
RO	Raptor Observatory
Rt.	Route
SF	State Forest
SP	State Park
SPNHF	Society for the Protection of NH Forests, Concord
T&M	Thompson & Meserves (Purchase)
TNC	The Nature Conservancy
WMA	Wildlife Management Area
WMNF	White Mountain National Forest
WS	NHA Wildlife Sanctuary
~	approximately
WTP	Wastewater Treatment Plant

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