

New Hampshire Bird Records





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IN MEMORY OF

Chandler S. Robbins

The 2018 issues of *New Hampshire Bird Records* are sponsored by George C. Robbins in memory and honor of his father, Chan Robbins. Each issue has an article by George about his father, highlighting his father's phenomenal accomplishments in the field of ornithology and connections to New Hampshire.



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Cover Photos: Three first state records. Wood Stork by Debra Powers, 8-10-18, Pickering Ponds, Rochester, NH. South Polar Skua by Leo McKillop, 9-4-18, offshore waters, NH. Neotropic Cormorant by Jason Lambert, 8-9-18, Androscoggin River, Gorham, NH.

New Hampshire Bird Records is published quarterly by NH Audubon's Conservation Department. Thank you to the many observers who submit their sightings to NH eBird (www.ebird.org/nh), the source of data for this publication. The published sightings typically represent the highlights of the season. Not all species reported will appear in the issue. All records are subject to review by the NH Rare Birds Committee and publication here does not imply future acceptance by the RBC.

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We had a guided tour of the former weapons storage area and were able to walk into one of the bunkers that was used to house nuclear warheads. We were excited to see the unmistakable nests of Cliff Swallows up in the eaves above the doorway. A good repurposing of the bunker!

After the tour, we took a beautiful walk into the restricted access area of the refuge down Merrimac Drive to Woodman's Point. We had a close encounter with a juvenile Bald Eagle out at the Point, and Susan spotted a massive eagle's nest in a pine tree along the shore of the bay. Altogether, we saw seven Bald Eagles in the restricted area. But the real excitement came on our walk back through the field when we spotted an adult Red-headed Woodpecker flitting through the trees. Our second red head for the day! The woodpecker perched just off the trail, allowing for some great photographs, and hung around long enough for other birders to come see it. At one point as we watched the bird fly off, we heard what we believed was another Red-headed calling, suggesting that there might be a pair. Kyle Wilmarth was able to gain access to the area for the Christmas Bird Count and heard one Red-headed Woodpecker.



Red-headed Woodpecker by Jim Sparrell, 10-14-18, Great Bay NWR, Newington, NH.

In May of 2014, a Red-headed Woodpecker was seen along Bay Road on the western side of Great Bay. One was also seen periodically at Adam's Point from November of 2014 to February of 2015. Let's hope that Great Bay will host a nesting pair and birders will have more opportunities to search for them. This past year, GBNWR has held a series of events to allow the public to explore closed areas of the refuge. Staff told us they would hold more Weekend Walkabouts in the future. In the winter, they have been offering guided snowshoe tours in restricted areas and, once a month in warmer weather, they offer guided bicycle tours. Check the Facebook page of GBNWR for updates on events that allow expanded access to the refuge.

It's Squirrel-maggedon!

by Diana Stephens



Roger Frieden photographed this squirrel swimming across Pawtuckaway Lake in Nottingham, NH, 8-31-18.



A Bald Eagle catching a squirrel as it swam across Squam Lake, 10-5-18, by Iain MacLeod.

This past August and September, Gray Squirrels everywhere seemed to be behaving like lunatics in our backyards and were dying in vast numbers along the highways. The squirrel population had exploded and, sadly, they were running across highways to their deaths. Humans in cars were swerving to avoid the squirrels, sometimes successfully, but mostly not. Squirrels appeared as though they were high on psychedelic mushrooms, doing back flips and swimming across lakes and rivers. The squirrels looked like they were going "nuts." Some folks thought they were dying because of mosquito spraying along the highways among other theories that were floating around the internet. So, what was actually happening to these creatures?

Every other year, as an evolutionary strategy, oak, hickory and beech trees produce a surplus of acorns and nuts so they have a better chance at survival, and these are called mast years. Fall 2017 was an extraordinary mast year, which means that these trees produced an unusually large number

of acorns and nuts. This overabundance of acorns and nuts allowed the rodent population, including squirrels, to soar above their usual numbers. All the food they stored helped them survive the winter and have lots of young in the spring and summer. But, when the food supply dropped back down to lower than normal in the fall of 2018, there were many more squirrels and other rodents desperately searching for food and there was not enough to go around. (The fall of 2018 was actually a very poor mast year.) More squirrels meant more competition for the severely limited food, which in turn meant squirrels traveled a lot, crossing highways and rivers in search of food.

In short, the numbers of dead squirrels and road kill along New Hampshire's highways were staggering. Below are the results of informal gray squirrel mortality surveys conducted by several individuals.

Rebecca Suomala 9/23/18

Counts were made of dead gray squirrel carcasses on five mile stretches of the highway:

Rt. 101 westbound, Mile 125-120, between Exeter and Brentwood = 165 dead.

Rte. 101 westbound to Rt. 93 on-ramp, Mile 105-100, Candia/Auburn/Manchester = 175 dead.

Rt. 93 northbound, Hooksett tollbooth to Rt. 89 on ramp, Mile 30-35, Hooksett - Bow = 159 dead.

Pam Hunt

Rt. 93 northbound from Rt. 89 to Exit 17, about 10 miles in the afternoon, 9/1/18 = 100 dead.

Same route the next morning (9/2/18) going southbound = 100 dead.

Count coming back from the Seacoast on Rt. 101 & Rt. 93 = 280 dead (fall, date unknown)

Jeff MacQueen 9/1/18 (from a post to NHBirds the same day)

Driving from Durham to Plymouth = 213 dead gray squirrels

130+ on Rt. 93 alone from Concord to Plymouth
Many red squirrels, but not counted

While this was an unusual occurrence, extraordinary mast years have happened occasionally throughout history. The Great Squirrel "Migration" of 1968 occurred in September of that year, when a report by Vagyn Flyger mentioned gray squirrels showing "unusual activity throughout portions of the eastern United States from Vermont to Georgia" (Flyger, 1969). This included large numbers of dead squirrels on the highways as well as accounts of mass migrations, mass starvation, and unusual activities such as swimming across lakes, damaging farmers' crops and entering areas where they had previously been absent. The activity in 1968 took place after an excellent mast year the year before, which was

followed, once again, by a very low mast year.

Some observers this year wondered if there was a squirrel migration or mass movement of some sort. In several different cases in the United States, observers have witnessed mass squirrel migrations or movements from one territory to another. According to an article written by Ernest Thompson Seton in the *Journal of Mammalogy* in 1920, the gray squirrel population in 1800 most likely numbered in the several billions across the United States. (Of course, back then, there were many more intact virgin forests and fewer human obstacles to their survival.) Seton also cites observations by Dr. P.R. Hoy of Racine, Wisconsin who witnessed a movement of a half billion squirrels during four weeks in the early autumn of 1842, and again in 1847, 1852 and 1857. So, that is one theory, one of a squirrel migration, but what we know for certain is that the overpopulation of squirrels this year combined with fewer acorns, nuts and seeds caused the squirrels to move in vast numbers in search of sufficient food and to behave in squirrelly ways in order to find it.



The "squirrel apocalypse" generated this costume idea at the Portsmouth Halloween parade. Photos by Jim Sparrell, 10-31-18.

What does all this have to do with birds? Squirrels prey on bird nests, especially songbirds with open cup nests, and can influence songbird populations. More squirrels mean some bird species will be less successful raising young. The high squirrel population in the spring and summer of 2018 may mean fewer young birds were raised and headed south in the

fall of 2018 and fewer returned to nest in 2019. The crash of the squirrel population that began with “squirrel-mageddon” in fall 2018, will mean fewer squirrels in 2019 and thus fewer predators of the songbirds that return to breed. Of course, it will also mean less prey for owls and hawks that eat small rodents! Nature is a complex web.

References

- Seton, E. 1920. *Journal of Mammalogy*, 1(2):53-56.
Flyger, V. 1969. University of Maryland, paper presented at Northeast Fish and Wildlife Conference, WV.

A Barnacle Goose Story

Duck, Duck, Goose!

by Jim Sparrell



Barnacle Goose by Jim Sparrell, 11-12-18, Odiorne Point SP, Rye, NH.

Veteran's Day had the pleasant combination of being a school holiday and reasonably warm for November, with a high of 46° F and virtually no wind to keep the birds down. “Chat Cove” at Odiorne Point State Park in Rye had been host to an Ash-throated Flycatcher, Orange-crowned Warblers, an American Pipit, and a Yellow-breasted Chat, which made it an appealing destination with the afternoon sun still giving good light. On several occasions, there had been Ruby-crowned Kinglets scattered all along the beach. One of the frustrations and pleasures of taking pictures of birds is the hope that next time you can get a better shot. I had some pictures of the Orange-crowned Warblers, but headed to “Chat Cove” hoping to get a close shot of them feeding on the weedy seed heads in that soft, angled autumn light. I walked the Boy Scout Trail and up and down the beach a few times with no success in finding the warblers. I

followed a kinglet through the weeds a few times, but didn't get any good pictures. I stopped to talk with another birding friend who was also looking for the Orange-crowned, but neither of us had had much of interest despite it being a lovely day, and I decided to give up looking for the warblers.

As I walked away from the cove toward the more open water and the clear view of the Isles of Shoals, a small flock of Canada Geese took off from the water. There was something about how they flew, low over the blue water with Appledore Island in the background that invited me to swing up the camera and snap a couple of shots of the group. I often take too many pictures that I just go home and delete, so I remember thinking, “Stop taking pictures of Canada Geese – what on earth would you want those for?” Also, one of my faults as a birder is that I rarely exercise the patience to sort through familiar flocks of ducks, egrets, robins, geese, or gulls, looking for something different. I took a few more pictures of a Ruby-crowned Kinglet that was flirting with the camera on my way out, headed home, and didn't even download my pictures to look at them.

Just before I was headed for bed, since the next day was a “school day,” I decided to look at my pictures and remembered that the Canadas had looked lovely coming up off the water. As I scanned those pictures I had an “OMG” moment. One of those geese was much smaller and shaped differently. I was not certain of the identification so I emailed Steve Mirick, who I assume stays up at night waiting to help the rest of us with bird IDs, and in the morning woke up to find his confirmation that it was a Barnacle Goose. It didn't take long for the Fall eBird reviewer, Ben Griffith, to notice that Bob Quinn had had an interesting goose farther down the coast, shortly after this sighting. I photographed the Barnacle Goose at 2:07 pm and, some time after 2:10 pm at Eel Pond in Rye, Bob Quinn and a small group were scoping migrants from the seawall. He got a quick look at a different goose that he identified as a possible blue morph Snow Goose. The photos I had managed to snap a few minutes earlier farther north provided compelling evidence that his bird was almost certainly the Barnacle Goose continuing down the coast.

According to the American Birding Association (ABA) list of unusual birds for North America, the Barnacle Goose is a code 4 bird, meaning that it tends not to be recorded every year in the ABA area but, with multiple records over the years, does have a pattern of occurrence. The most recent reports for New Hampshire prior to this sighting include a bird in the Hinsdale Setbacks area in March of 2012 and another Barnacle Goose that was seen in the Dover-Somersworth-Rollinsford area during the winter of 2011-2012.

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Wilson's Snipe by Kyle Wilmarth, 10-24-18, Salem, NH.

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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Fall 2018 Highlights

Photo Quiz



Can You Identify This Bird?

We are once again able to offer a color Photo Quiz, thanks to George Robbins' sponsorship of all four 2018 issues. See inside for the answer. Photo by Stephen R. Mirick.



Hooded Warbler by Susan Wrisley, 11-4-18, Little River Saltmarsh, N. Hampton, NH.



Ash-throated Flycatcher by Jason Lambert, 11-4-18, Odiorne Point SP, Rye, NH.



Western Kingbird by Jason Lambert, 9-23-18, Goss Farm, Rye, NH.



Scissor-tailed Flycatcher by Zeke Cornell, 11-8-18, Hampton Beach SP, Hampton, NH.

