

New Hampshire Bird Records





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IN MEMORY OF Dr. Bev Ridgely

This issue of *New Hampshire Bird Records* with its color cover is sponsored by NH Audubon and friends in memory of Bev Ridgely. Dr. Ridgely wrote the *Birds of the Squam Lakes Region* in 1973, which he revised and expanded in 1988. He received the Goodhue-Elkins Award in 2002 and we are pleased to honor him.

*Bev Ridgely doing something he
enjoyed immensely: bird watching.
Courtesy of the Ridgely family.*



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Cover Photo: David Lipsy captured the moment when the Great Gray Owl landed on the head of Marsha Richelli (who is coincidentally a NH Audubon volunteer), 3-11-17, Newport, NH. According to Marsha, she saw it coming and told herself not to move. "I felt safe, I had three layers on my head. I knew it landed but I didn't feel any pressure from the talons." She was hoping it wouldn't stay long, and it didn't, taking off across the field to a better perch.

New Hampshire Bird Records is published quarterly by New Hampshire 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. Records are selected for publication and not all species reported will appear in the issue. The published sightings typically represent the highlights of the season. All records are subject to review by the NH Rare Birds Committee and publication of reports here does not imply future acceptance by the Committee. Please contact the Managing Editor if you would like to report your sightings but are unable to use NH eBird.

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easy to apply, and are very effective at deterring birds. The American Bird Conservancy (ABC) has been leading the charge to raise awareness of the bird collisions issue, conducting research on the effectiveness of various products in deterring collisions, and producing a downloadable document on Bird-friendly Building Guidelines. More information can be found on their website (<http://collisions.abcbirds.org>).

NH Audubon's Bird-friendly Buildings Program began in 2011 when we joined a dozen other organizations nationwide to endorse the ABC's first edition of *Bird-friendly Buildings Guidelines*. Since then, we have collaborated with the ABC to promote their "Bird-Friendly Buildings" program to raise awareness of the devastating collisions problem and present effective solutions for buildings of all sizes. We have been treating the windows and doors at the McLane Center in Concord to make the building safe for birds. The variety of treatments, which includes films, tape, decals, and screens, will exhibit practical and effective solutions for homes, schools, and other buildings.

You can prevent bird collisions at home by covering your windows and other glass. A few products are now on display at the McLane Center as we work to make the building safe for birds. For more information, visit the ABC website noted above. The birds will thank you!

References

- Hager, et al. 2017. Continent-wide analysis of how urbanization affects bird-window collision mortality in North America. *Biological Conservation* 212:209-215. doi:10.1016/J.BIOCON.2017.06.014
- Loss, S. R., T. Will, S. S. Loss, and P. Marra. 2014. Bird-building collisions in the United States: Estimates of annual mortality and species vulnerability. *The Condor* 116(1): 8-23.



It takes a special place to produce a Little Egret for your yard list. Steve Mirick was lucky enough to see this individual from inside his porch on Great Bay in Newmarket. This Little Egret was present for just over two months in the summer of 1998 in the marsh at Lubberland Creek Preserve where Steve took this particular photo, not far from his yard.

Yard Listing: The Fascination, the Anecdotes, and, of course, the Numbers

by Phil Brown

The Many Virtues of Yard Listing

I'll admit it, I don't enjoy chasing birds. I'd prefer that they come to me. Maybe this is why I'm such a fan of yard listing. What can initially seem a matter of happenstance, whether or not a bird should stop by your little patch of yard, may, in fact, have some rhyme and reason. I've come to realize that accumulating a growing yard list is a factor of several aspects: location, longevity, awareness, strategy, and a whole lot of luck!

New birders will sometimes ask me my life list total and I typically answer the truth: "I have no idea, but I can tell you how many species I've seen in my yard!" This reply usually intrigues a new birder who has not yet heard of yard listing. It's a good conversation starter and yard listing is a useful strategy for beginning birders to begin accumulating knowledge of species identification, better understand migration timing, learn bird behavior, and learn about other occurrences in the avian world. Regardless of skill level, yard listing also keeps you in touch with common species even as birding can become focused on the unusual. Speaking of which, even rarities can be observed in your own backyard and perhaps with some regularity, if you know where and when to look. Unlike chasing rarities for your state list, however, yard listing requires no fossil fuel! You might even get some exercise if your yard is large. Lastly, it will connect you with your yard in new and exciting ways and you may just discover the wildness of the place you call home.

I interviewed many New Hampshire birders, particularly those involved with this publication, and came up with several suggestions and themes, some of which are detailed in the following sections.

What Defines a "Yard Bird?"

Is it something that you have seen, or do "heard" birds count? Does the bird have to be occurring in your actual yard instead of flying overhead or seen in a next-door-neighbor's tree? Or, even more of a stretch for some, could the species have been recorded, and not even detected in real-time, by either a trail camera or audio recording device? The latter has been deployed by my neighbor and *New Hampshire Bird Records* Spring Editor Eric Masterson over the past couple of years. This tactic has undoubtedly helped Eric stay ahead of my yard list as his recording equipment captures the call

notes of nocturnal migrants flying over his house as he sleeps soundly below!

In yard listing, you, not the American Birding Association (ABA), get to make the rules. My own current view for my yard list is that the species must be a fully countable (included on the official NH state bird list – so I can't count the Chukar) species for New Hampshire and either seen or heard by me, when I have feet on the ground somewhere on my property. My "yard" extends to 22-acres of woodlands and open areas around my house. Eric may claim that the playing field is already not level as his acreage is smaller, but he uses a more sophisticated way of detecting birds, so let's call it even.

Location, Location, Location!

Diversity is the spice of life in the world of building a big yard list. You generally won't find most species of seabirds away from the coast proper, nor will you find open-country birds in the middle of the woods. A little bit of habitat diversity will add a lot of bird diversity. Most of New Hampshire is forested and your house may be surrounded by trees, but don't ignore the beaver pond in the back woods. Check that unique feature more frequently, especially during migration, to add new yard birds. Not all woodlands are equal. Young forest or old field conditions are where you may find a whole suite of early successional forest birds such as Eastern Towhee, Brown Thrasher, and Mourning Warbler.

If you don't have high-quality habitats or features, you may decide to create them instead. The simplest first step is to add a food source. Sunflower seed is the classic choice for a wide variety of winter songbirds and migrants, but you might consider expanding your array of feeders to include other grains such as millet and cracked corn for sparrows, suet for woodpeckers, fruit for orioles, and nectar for hummingbirds.

Natural habitats and food sources, however, can be a superior strategy compared to bird feeders if implemented successfully. Keep in mind that food, water, and shelter are the essential ingredients in attracting birds to your yard. Wildlife plantings for birds, including crabapple, winterberry, mountain-ash, and apple trees, might just be enough to bring in your first yard Pine Grosbeak or Bohemian Waxwing. The same can be said for the attraction of a water feature such as a drip fountain, cascade, or small pond to many of the migratory warblers and other songbirds that would otherwise pass through undetected. Dan Hubbard stresses the importance of chemical-free habitat management and bird baths, a strategy that many interviewed also utilize. Paul Miliotis recommends working with nature through managing habitats to make a garden attractive to wildlife. George Gavutis manages 20 acres for wildlife that include fish ponds, restored wetlands with native shrubs, early successional

habitat, and actively mowed fields. Bob Crowley finds that planting flowering shrubs is key to finding yard birds.

A view of some sky is also an essential way to grow your list over 100 species. Migrating raptors, waterbirds, and other species might only be detectable when flying overhead during spring and fall. On a good raptor day at Pack Monadnock or Carter Hill, you might find me scoping the sky from my back lawn searching (in vain) for my first yard Peregrine Falcon. This tactic has paid off for finding the other falcons and a suite of other raptors and waterbirds which I would not have tallied otherwise.

Proximity and Vigilance – Take it from the Experts

So, the stage is set. Birds are almost always on the move and you might have the perfect yard setup, but will you be there to greet them? Many of us cannot keep daily vigil during the height of migration due to work or other circumstances, but there is much to be said for being ready for your next yard bird. Kathryn and Roger Frieden recommend sleeping with the window open and Hank Chary suggests going out at night to listen for birds. John Williams says to "keep your optics handy!" Chad Witko provides the tip of carefully checking mixed species flocks. Along those lines, Katie Towler and Jim Sparrell recently found a yard-first Dickcissel brought in by the House Sparrow flock, finally delivering something "good" to their yard. Adam Burnett says to be always vigilant (plus it helps having three birders living in the house).

How Many Yard Birds Can You Find?

Many of us who read *New Hampshire Bird Records* get excited about the number of species we can find in a given place, whether it be within the state, a particular county, or simply a favorite location or eBird hotspot. Just over 400 species of birds have now been recorded in New Hampshire, and it is possible to see over 200 species of birds at a handful of hotspots, such as Star Island, Odiorne Point State Park, and even the Exeter Wastewater Treatment Plant, according to eBird data.

Finding 100 species of birds in your own yard (across most of our state's landscapes) is an easily attainable goal, given the right amount of dedication and time, honing of your skills, and strategy. In fairly typical landscapes, I have attained the century mark at five of the six yards where I have lived over 13 years total time in New Hampshire. In many locations, with a mix of habitats including open water, and excellent visibility for sky-watching, 100 species of birds or more are possible each year. How many species do you think can be found in your backyard?

The law of diminishing returns will ensure, after a few years living anywhere, that your yard list will begin to level off. I have come to accept that, short of creating another Powder Mill Pond in my backyard, my Hancock yard list will probably never reach 200 species like that of Don and Lillian Stokes. This is when it becomes fun and useful to maintain an annual or monthly (or even more frequent) species list for ease of comparing two or more years, seasons, and so on. As birders, we love to know the first arrival dates of spring birds such as Eastern Phoebes and Red-winged Blackbirds, the warblers, hummingbirds, and more. I begin watching my basswood tree around the end of March with anticipation that my first spring Yellow-bellied Sapsucker will appear there shortly at its numerous sap wells. Likewise, from several years of spring arrival data in my yard, I can pin down the Hermit Thrush's first visit to a window of three days in early April. Tallying monthly lists since the spring of 2012, I have casually tracked changes and similarities, basing my hypotheses on weather events, climate change, species range expansions, population declines, and other factors. Yard listing can turn any of us into citizen scientists, particularly when this venture is associated with a larger project such as NH Audubon's Backyard Winter Bird Survey, Project Feederwatch, or data entered into eBird. eBird is a great tool for yard listing, and there is even a "My Yard List" function which encourages friendly competition between individuals. Some incredibly diligent birders even enter daily backyard species lists! A link to eBird's Top 10 Yard Lists in New Hampshire is provided here: <http://ebird.org/ebird/nh/site/yard>.

There are other fun variations for maintaining yard lists, too, such as keeping a breeding bird list (species for which breeding evidence has been confirmed) or a list of species whose nests have been found. On one memorable day in June a couple of years ago, I found two active Ovenbird nests in the same walk, a double-first for my yard nest list!

A Yard List Partial Hall of Fame

I polled some of New Hampshire's top birders (current *New Hampshire Bird Records* Editorial Team, as well as a select group of others) in an effort to document the top Granite State yard lists. Some of their stories, species, and strategies may surprise you.

#1: Davis Finch – 218 species! Davis started his list in 1948 and his "yard" consists of 175 acres in East Kingston. His tips included "live many years" and "feed birds abundantly." His famous meat pile attracted species not normally expected such as Thayer's Gull (now a subspecies of Iceland Gull) and Black Vulture. Some of his yard species include birds more common in the early years such as Loggerhead Shrike and Sedge Wren. His yard is responsible for state records such as the recent Eurasian Collared-Dove. Only 100

species to go to tie the ABA area yard list record, set on the Texas coast!

Don and Lillian Stokes recently moved on from their "Bobolink Farm" backyard on Powder Mill Pond in Hancock. By the time they had left, their meticulously manicured-for-the-birds backyard (which includes exceptional views of the pond and the sky above a ridgeline) had given them records of **202 species** including several state rarities.

Dr. Robert Ridgely, of Sandwich, has also tallied a remarkable **200 species or so** from his yard abutting NH Audubon's Thompson Wildlife Sanctuary, a premier birding spot in the region.

Andrea Robbins in Pittsfield has tallied **198 species** and is ranked #55 in the country with this total on eBird at the time of this writing.

George Gavutis has found **187 species** in 44 years on his 20-acre property in Kensington, which is heavily managed for wildlife and includes fish ponds, restored wetlands with native shrubs, early successional habitats, and actively mowed fields. Almost half of this total species number have bred on the property or nearby. His rarest bird was Kentucky Warbler and, just as impressive, he has lured in many species of waterfowl including Northern Shoveler.

Steve Mirick tallied **177 species** from the 141-acre Dame Farm in Durham over 12 years. This includes the state's first accepted record of Worm-eating Warbler. Another former yard in Newmarket (where he lived for over six years) produced rarities such as Little Egret, Leach's Storm-Petrel, Franklin's Gull, and Tundra Swan, among 33 overall species of waterfowl!

Tony Vazzano has found **176 species** in 35 years in his Sandwich yard. This total includes heard Boreal(!) and Long-eared Owls, though both were not accepted by the NH Rare Birds Committee. He never could manage to see the next-door Snowy Owl from his yard, though.

Dan Hubbard has recorded **152 species** over 33 years in his ¼ acre suburban Rochester yard, including 27 species of warblers. He practices chemical-free habitat management and is a fan of bird baths. He suggests that "passive birding from the deck with a glass of wine" is a strategy for growing one's list!

Scott Young has recorded **152 species** from his yard in Strafford.

Iain MacLeod had found **151 species** in his former Deering yard (reportedly with a very strict definition of "yard") in 12 years including the **only** Chestnut-collared Longspur in New Hampshire's history!! Iain offered that habitat diversity and location are the keys to a big list.

Phil Brown has seen or heard **148 species** in five years in his 22-acre Hancock yard.

Paul Miliotis has tallied **140 species** in three years on a 19-acre farm with significant butterfly gardens. Working with nature to make his gardens attractive to wildlife has helped him locate 28 species of warblers there.

Ken Klapper has found **138 species** in three years in Sandwich. Proximity to Squam Lake may have helped him record a Red-necked Grebe as a flyover, as well as Cackling and Snow Goose records in the same day.

Adam Burnett has found **137 species** in eight years in his Westmoreland yard. The highlight was a Snowy Owl that stayed for over two months in 2009, and he has also recorded Black Vulture over a dozen times. In addition to habitat diversity, he advises staying vigilant for new arrivals.

John Williams has recorded **137 species** in 13 years in Rumney, where he manages 55 acres of varied habitats for wildlife.

Katherine Towler and Jim Sparrell have recorded **132 species** in 10 years of birding on South Mill Pond in Portsmouth (a great location for an urban yard!). Among the rarities have been Yellow-breasted Chat an amazing four times in fall and a Dickcissel. They suggest keeping an eye out the windows.



One of the Yellow-breasted Chats that appeared in Jim Sparrell and Katherine Towler's yard, photographed by Jim, 9-19-16.

Bob Quinn – undetermined number, but a remarkable total of 26 species of warblers in his “fairly average” Webster backyard, most eye-level or below and almost all recorded in fall, plus two Pileated Woodpeckers and four Ruffed Grouse in crabapple trees after a big fall snowstorm!

Eric Masterson – undetermined number over 16 years in Hancock; nocturnal flight calls (recorded) of Sora, Virginia Rail, Long-tailed Duck, and Brant, among many others.

Scott Heron – **108 species.**

Dave Govatski – **107 species** in 10 years; Eastern Whip-poor-will copulating **on** the deck!

Bob Crowley – **101 species** over 32 years in Chatham; the most out of place being a European Starling!

Hank Chary – **around 100 species** in Newmarket including Red-headed Woodpecker.

Lloyd Bunton – **100 or so species** in Canaan; Mourning Warbler while doing yard work.

Kathryn and Roger Frieden – **95 species** in 28 years in Manchester; Blue Grosbeak (which “followed them back from Big Bend” after a trip to Texas).

Chad Witko – **83 species** in two years in Wilton.

A Few Stories from My Yard

Some of my most memorable yard birds in New Hampshire have been warblers: the singing Cerulean as I stepped out of my front door one May morning in Lee; the skulky Connecticut I tracked down in the shrubbery in that same yard; and most recently, the adult male Brewster's (Blue-winged X Golden-winged hybrid – not its own species, but still a really rare and neat little bird that fed around my garden one May as I worked outside with my family). Lloyd Bunton shared a similar story about finding his yard Mourning Warbler through tending to the garden.

I'll always recall the first Common Raven and Pileated Woodpeckers that I saw over my Lee, NH yard (the first New Hampshire residence I had); two forest species which I would never have thought to find in my New York City childhood backyard. But perhaps my most memorable yard bird occurred in that childhood backyard – a Northern Flicker that appeared on a snag one April and stayed to nest. In the last summer of his life as he struggled with cancer, it provided my Grandfather and me with a unique bonding experience that only observing nature can bring.

A lot of the memories of yard birding are more than the birding itself and those memories better connect us with that special place we call home.

Phil Brown has been yard listing his sightings since he first noticed a Great Egret fly over his parents' backyard in Staten Island, NY, in 1986 at the age of six. Coincidentally, he recently added this species as a yard bird for the first time in New Hampshire, observed with his young kids after being woken up early one morning.

Phil would like to thank the New Hampshire Bird Records Editorial Team and many other birders for contributing their thoughts and tips to this article.

Colorful Birds of Spring 2017



Yellow-throated Warbler by Jason Lambert, 5-7-17, Hampton, NH.



Northern Parula by Scott Heron, 5-4-17, Kingston, NH.



Yellow-rumped Warbler by Leo McKillop, 5-4-17, Exeter WTP, NH.



Baltimore Oriole by Scott Heron, 5-4-17, Kingston, NH.



Blue-winged Teal by Leo McKillop, 4-12-17, Exeter WTP, NH.



Horned Grebe by Scott Heron, 4-9-17, Great Pond, Kingston, NH.

