



Cape Cod Bird Club

VOLUME III

MARCH - APRIL 1992

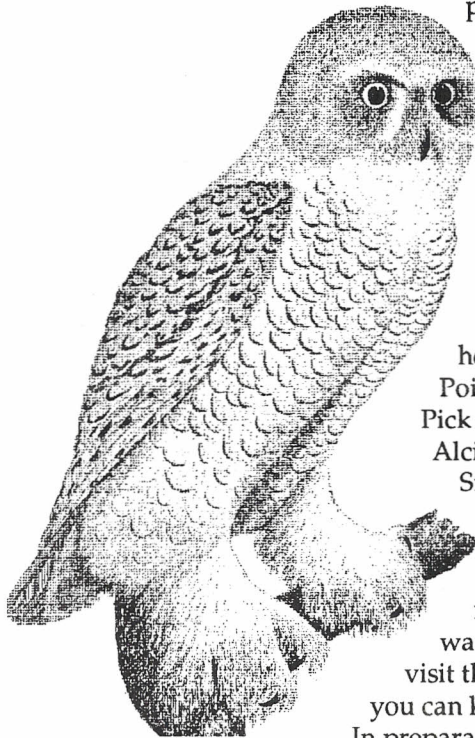
ISSUE 4

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Peter Trimble

March and April may not bring the majority of our colorful migrants, but there is some good birding potential this time of year that can be enhanced by following a few ideas.

Take a trip to an off-Cape location for a specialty or two. Scenic Quabbin Reservoir may have some Bald Eagles and winter finches to check out, as well as the



possibility of an interesting mammal like a coyote. Newburyport and Plum Island may have something different. Beside good looks at waterfowl and hawks, there may be an exciting gull in the harbor. Closer to home, a trip to Race Point may be worthwhile. Pick a nice day and look for Alcids, gulls, a shrike or Snowy Owl. The areas around some of the ponds in Falmouth often have early migrants and lingering waterfowl, so find time to visit this region and see what you can kick up.

In preparation for Spring migration, I have a few helpful hints and ideas to make the birding more fun, interesting and useful. First, pick a location that has sufficient habitat. This area might have a stream, a small pond, as well as woodlands. Next, if the area is large, select a tract that you would be able to cover in a reasonable period of time each morning or every few mornings throughout migration. Carefully, keep record of the weather conditions, times and dates, numbers and kind of birds you observe. For example, it will be fun and interesting to note early migrants vs. late migrants, or how long it "appears" that a migrant stays in the area. Then compare your findings with others on the Cape and Islands or in Massachusetts. Maybe we could set up a network of club members! The usefulness of this type of information will depend on how accurate and consistent you are. By covering the same area over a period of years, your effort could be beneficial.

Lake and Pond Waterfowl Survey

Blair Nikula

The Cape Cod Bird Club's 9th annual Land & Pond Waterfowl Survey was conducted on the weekend of December 7-8, with 38 observers censusing 317 ponds and recording 10,678 birds of 27 species. Like last year, the weather preceding the survey was exceptionally mild although a brief cold snap just before the census resulted in some icing on the smallest ponds at the beginning of the weekend. Total numbers were down for the second straight year and were the lowest since 1986, presumably because mainland ponds were still open, inducing many birds to linger to the north and west of Cape Cod. The total, however, was slightly above the previous average, though the number of birds per pond was the lowest ever.

Remarkably, despite the somewhat poor totals, eight species were found in record numbers: Common Loon, Horned Grebe, Mute Swan, Eurasian Wigeon, Common Goldeneye, Bufflehead, Common Merganser, Red-breasted Merganser. Additionally Ring-necked Duck and Hood Merganser were both well above average. On the down side, three species established record lows, Canada Goose, Green-winged Teal, and Canvasback. Also substantially down this year were two of our commonest species: Black Duck and scaup.

As usual, scaup (both species combined) were the most numerous birds, with 2271 individuals comprising 20% of the total. Very close behind was Bufflehead with 2173 (20%), Mallard with 1911 (15%), and Black Duck with 1047 (14%). These five species accounted for almost 70% of all the birds recorded. At the other end of the scale, rarities included our first ever Tufted Duck discovered by Dick Comeau and Seward Highley on Upper Mill Pond in Brewster. Scores of birders came from all over the state to see this bird in the following weeks. The total of five Eurasian Wigeon was exceptional and constitutes something of an invasion for this normally rare species.

Falmouth, of course, far outdistanced all the other towns with 4199 birds or 39% of the total. As usual, scaup made up almost half of the Falmouth Birds. Greatest variety was found in Yarmouth where an impressive 21 species were found, followed by Falmouth with 19 species and Barnstable with 18 species. Follins Pond on the Yarmouth/Dennis line was tops with 715 birds, mostly Bufflehead. Top pond for variety was Mill Pond in Yarmouth with 14 (!) species.

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Big Cheeses & Great Horned Owls: Doing a Christmas Count

Fahy Bygate

PART ONE

The first time that someone asked me to take part in a Christmas Bird Count I couldn't believe it. I was flabbergasted. After all not only was my life list still in the double digit numbers, I wasn't even sure I knew what the Christmas Bird Count was. Well, of course, I knew that all of the Big Cheeses went out all day in terrible adverse weather and rounded up all of the birds and classified them in alphabetical order or something like that. Whatever it was that they did was very important and could only be entrusted to either a card-carrying Big Cheese Birder or to an incredibly serious student of ornithology. Then, I got the idea that I had, unconsciously I'll admit, exhibited some fantastic birding ability unknown to me that they were able to pick up on. So what could it be? Whatever it was, I decided to be very modest about it and to prepare myself well for this initiation rite. So I studied some sparrows for an hour or so and bought a nifty pink hat and glove set.

I spent the night before on the Cape so that I could be well rested for the big day, but since I barely slept all night for looking at the alarm clock terrified that I would over-sleep, I woke up feeling awful. I couldn't believe how dark it was. I couldn't believe how cold it was. I'd better dress warmly I told myself, so I put on a really heavy sweater under the coat that I had brought with me that looked best with a pink hat and gloves. When I stepped out of the door and the wind came around the corner of the cottage, I felt as if I was walking around with no clothes on. Great, not only will I make a total fool of myself on the birds, but I will have to drop out early, like fifteen minutes after we start judging from the way I was shaking as I started the car. I headed for the Harwich Conservation Area where we were all to meet, but halfway there I realized that I didn't know exactly how to get there. I had been there only once before and that was in broad daylight. Now not only was I shaking with cold, but my stomach was starting to jump around. Suppose I got lost and they all waited for me and I personally ruined the Bird Count for everyone? Little did I know then that no one ever waits for anyone on a Christmas Bird Count or any other bird count I've ever been on. By some great good fortune, I found Bell's Neck Road without mishap and drove half way down to where we were to meet.

It was pitch dark, and there was no one there. I checked my watch. I was about fifteen minutes early, but hadn't they said that they were usually early? Had I gotten the time wrong? Had I gotten the place wrong? Had I gotten the day wrong? It was now not quite so dark

and didn't seem as windy as when I had started so I stepped out of the car. There was a little place behind the tree line where the sky was gray instead of black, and I began to have a little hope that the entire day wouldn't be so dark and scary. And then I heard a funny sort of muffled cough from the woods across the pond. I grabbed the door handle. I heard it again. This time it sounded a bit more like a muffled "hummpf". Very deep. Very scary. "Hummpf, hummpf". A dog woofing? A very big dog woofing? No. But then I knew what it was although I had never heard it before. Great Horned Owl. I was listening to my very first Great Horned Owl calling. I wasn't in an empty place all alone. I was in a Great Horned Owl place with a Great Horned Owl. It was still cold, dark and lonely there but I wasn't scared any more and I was very sure that there wasn't any place I'd rather be at that moment.

When the "real birders" showed up, I found out the real reason that I was invited that day: they needed another pair of eyes for the basic business of a Christmas Bird Count: beating the bushes for robins and blue jays, cardinals, titmice and chickadees. The Big Cheeses were doing just fine counting all of the rarities by themselves. But I didn't really care. I was exhausted and cold by the end of the day, but hearing my first Great Horned Owl at dawn alone in the woods in the dead of winter made me feel a little bit like a Big Cheese.

Since then I've done lots of Christmas Bird Counts. Some on the Cape and some on the South Shore nearer to where I live. I love it. I love the ritual. I love the fact that birders have been doing this since 1900 when some really smart person decided that counting birds was a big improvement over the hunting tradition of trying to see how many birds could be shot in one day. I love the way that every bird "counts" as well as "is counted". A flicker is "worth" just the same as a Bald Eagle. We will spend almost the same amount of time looking for the

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EDITORIAL

Jim Talin

Christmas Birding Rituals

The sun may be rising early, and it may almost be spring, but this newsletter is really the Bird Club's Christmas issue with its focus on early winter bird counts on Cape Cod. But don't worry. While you may be thinking of seeds, gardens and big days at Beech Forest, here on Cape Cod it will be almost spring until July. I grew up inland where spring takes root first before spreading to the shore, but spring is the inlander's reward for surviving endless, frigid winters. Hopefully the cold will be far enough behind us when you read these reports about birding's sort of Christmas ritual, our way to liven the darkest days of the year, as we rouse ourselves long before dawn, gulp some coffee, grab a scope, and see the bird life contained in a corner of Cape Cod on a day chosen and celebrated in time.



Cape Cod Bird Club Newsletter

The Cape Cod Museum Of Natural History
RR 1, Route 6A, Brewster, MA 02631

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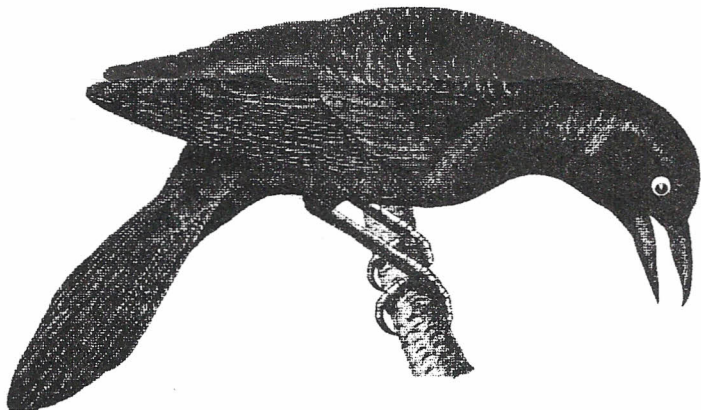
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PROGRAMS/ MEETINGS

Frank Caruso and Mark Tuttle

Monday evening **March 9** at 7:45 at the Cape Cod Museum of Natural History located on Route 6A in Brewster, *Michael Sylvia* will present a program, which will cover several miscellaneous items. He will talk about the loons which visit us in the winter and how to identify them (particularly the Pacific loon). Michael has also censused waterfowl during the past few winters in the South Shore area. He will speak about the reasons for doing such a study and the advantages and disadvantages. Time may permit some other things on his mind. Michael got his degree in Wildlife Studies at the University of Massachusetts and is currently involved in several endeavors.

Monday evening **April 13** at 7:45 at the Museum, Peter Trull will offer a program entitled "*The Spirit of Birdwatching, From Open Windows to Open Ocean*". Peter will dig deep, exploring the hobby/sport of birdwatching or "Birding". He will help us relax and gain self-confidence, while explaining the realities of what is supposed to be a "no pressure hobby", but isn't always. Whether you're a casual bird watcher or a hard-core birder, this program will help you put it all in perspective.



Mid-Cape Cod Christmas Bird Count

Peter Trimble

Our best ever Christmas Bird Count was conducted on Dec. 22, 1991. Observers found 117 species, which is seven more than the previous high. The coverage of the count area was probably better than usual, and most importantly the weather was very cooperative. Three new species were found. An adult Red-shouldered Hawk located by Ken Hamilton, and Eastern Phoebe discovered by the Don Dyer group in a cranberry/pond habitat in West Barnstable, and a Rose-breasted Grosbeak coming to Bob William's feeder.

Officially this was the 11th year of the Mid-Cape Christmas Bird Count. High totals for 22 species were recorded, and record highs were tied for 7 more. Some examples of these are 97 Gadwall, 223 Oldsquaw, 179 Razorbill, 18 E. Screech Owl, 87 Carolina Wren, 11 Winter Wren, 5 Pine Warbler, 27 Palm Warbler, and 42

FIELD TRIPS

Sally McNair

March

Wednesday **March 4th.** Falmouth, 9 am. Meet behind Town Hall, Falmouth Center. Mary Ropes. 548-6086.

Saturday **March 21st.** Harwich, 9 am. Meet at Saquatucket Harbor across from Thompson's Farm Market on Rt. 28. Bessie Tirrell. 432-9248.

Thursday **March 26th.** Orleans Hotspots, 9 am. Meet behind Bird Watcher's General Store on Rte 6A, Orleans. Mike O'Connor. 255-6974.

April

Wednesday **April 1st.** Falmouth, 8 am. Meet behind Town Hall, Falmouth Center. Mary Ropes. 548-6086.

Monday **April 6th.** Eastham, 8 am. Meet in the lower parking lot, Fort Hill. Art King. 255-8919.

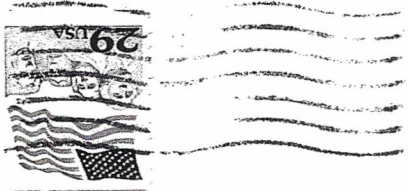
Saturday **April 18th.** Sandwich. 8 am. Meet at the Purity parking lot off Route 6A in Sandwich. Bessie Tirrell. 432-9248.

Saturday **April 25th.** Off Cape Trip to Plum Island. Meet in the Burger King parking lot at the intersection of Routes 6 and 132 at 6 am. Peter Trimble. 477-3847. Later in the morning you may want to attend the Parker River National Wildlife Refuge review of the permit process for visiting the Refuge.

E. Meadowlarks. A few other highlights included a drake Eurasian Wigeon in Centerville, 2 Redheads in Yarmouth, a drake Barrow's Goldeneye in the Bass River, a Peregrine Falcon in Barnstable, a Killdeer in Marstons Mills, an American Woodcock in W. Barnstable, a Snowy Owl on Sandy Neck, 4 Eastern Bluebirds in W. Barnstable, an American Pipet in Centerville, a Northern Shrike in W. Yarmouth, a Seaside Sparrow in Hyannisport, 4 Rusty Blackbirds and a Purple Finch in Centerville.

I would like to thank everyone who helped whether you birded or provided sustenance at the tally. Some of you are unaware that we have two regular birding participants who come from the Worcester area, Scott Ricker and Rodney Jenkins, who have helped Blair for a number of years by birding the Osterville, Marstons Mills and Centerville areas.

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Big Cheeses & Great Horned Owls: Doing a Christmas Count

Fahy Bygate

group of cardinals that spend each winter in a particular thicket as we will on that blasted rare bird in our area that we are expected to come up with. Now, I know enough to wear all of my heavy sweaters, and now none of my gloves ever seem to match anything, but my coat is the warmest one I could find. I don't worry so much, and I have lots more fun. I know that if I am doing the Cape Cod Count that we will all stop halfway through the morning and have a big, fat Melt-Away from Bonatt's Bakery in Harwich just to keep the body and soul together, and also because we always do it. I know all of the little nooks and crannies, ponds and thickets that we will patiently peer and "pish" into before the day is over. I have a pretty good idea of what we're looking for and what we are likely to find. Since I came late to this game, I don't remember the "old days" when the birds were so much more plentiful, so I am happy to find anything.

It is a long day. We climb in and out of the car uncountable times. The heavy clothes wear you out. Sometimes it rains, and everything is damp, and

all of your optics fog up. Sometimes it is so windy that all of the birds hunker down and refuse to be counted no matter how hard we "pish". Sometimes there are no birds. Well of course there are birds, but when it is nearly 4 o'clock and you are looking at a list of less than 40 birds, it's pretty discouraging. Lunchtime makes a nice break, and if you are really lucky some dear soul invites your team to stop at their house because they live right in the count area, and you are able to take off your coat and warm up a bit before venturing out again. And then there is the feeling that what you are doing is important. Not earth shaking but important to you if you are any kind of birder at all. These figures are nearly a hundred years old. They are an important record of what is happening to our world and the bird life in it. If any conclusions are to be made regarding the effects on our environment through these years, this census should contribute to those conclusions enormously. And then there is the Tally!

Part Two: The Tally in the next issue.