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Ralph W. Dexter

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Marine banding and nesting studies at Cape Ann, Massachusetts

Ralph W. Dexter

I. Introduction

Since 1933 I have studied marine life at Cape Ann, Massachusetts, including the marine birds. I began banding them in 1958, and have banded four species, mostly Herring Gull nestlings, on eight islands surrounding Cape Ann. In this article I shall trace historical records of nesting birds in the area with the addition of brief notes on my banding program. A complete report on recoveries of banded Herring Gulls will be given later.

II. Common Tern

S. Jillson of Lynn wrote to F.W. Putnam at the Essex Institute 1 December 1855, "I have been on all the rocks and islands between Lynn and Gloucester where the Terns were breeding, in short, pecks of them, but they were all the Common Tern." Townsend (1905) wrote, "The Common Tern once bred on all the rocky islands and back of all the sandy beaches on the Essex County Coast. — They formally bred on Great Egg Rock, off the Manchester shore. — On 19 July 1876, I found 800 or more Common, with perhaps some Arctic Terns breeding here. — Two years later, on again visiting the rock, only two or three pairs were found and they have since abandoned the place. — The Common Tern still breeds at Milk Island off the end of Cape Ann, to the number of about 50 pairs of late years." Later, Townsend (1920) found one nest on Milk Island 15 June 1919 — the only place known for nesting in Essex County.

Griscom and Snyder (1955) reported a record of John Kieran for approximately 200 pairs of Common Terns nesting on Thatcher's Island, off Rockport, in July of 1954. Apparently this species had returned to that island as a nesting bird. In 1956 the writer, with Dr. Kieran and his party, visited Thatcher's Island on 11 July, where we found a resident tern colony of about 3,000 birds. It was estimated that about 75% were Common Terns, 24% Roseate Terns, and 1% Arctic Terns. A

dead Common Tern was found bearing band number 48-317908 banded 20 June 1949 as an adult by the Austin Ornithological Research Station at Mattapoisett. This was recovered 65 miles north of the banding site, 7 years later.

Many active nests of terns were located. The following year the Kieran party estimated the total population had dropped to about 2,000 birds, and in 1958 Terns were completely replaced by nesting Herring Gulls. In 1961 they were joined by small numbers of nesting Great Black-backed Gulls and Cormorants.

III. Roseate Tern and Arctic Tern

Townsend (1920) wrote of the Roseate Tern, "Nested 50 years ago [1870] at Ipswich." Griscom and Snyder (1955) added, "In Essex County the Roseate Tern ceased to breed after 1870 and was not reported again until 1918." Townsend (Ibid.) by 1905 had not seen Roseate or Arctic Terns in Essex County. By 1920 he reported the Roseate Tern to be common during the latter part of the summer at Ipswich. Griscom (1938) stated that the "Roseate Tern now common on coast of Massachusetts: more Arctic Terns nesting with us each year." Kieran found 40 pairs of Roseate Terns and a few Arctic Terns on Thatcher's Island in July 1954, nesting along with the Common Terns (Griscom and Snyder, 1955). As mentioned earlier, all three species of terns nested on Thatcher's Island in 1956 and 1957, until replaced by Herring Gulls in 1958.

IV. Least Tern

Townsend (1905) pointed out, " — the Common, Arctic, and Least Terns found breeding among the dunes in the late 60's by Maynard have long since ceased to nest there. — As the bird does not now breed regularly north of Cape Cod, its occurrence on the Essex County coast must be purely accidental." Hagar (1937) wrote, "The small colony at

Ipswich mentioned by William Brewster is probably the extreme limit of the species on the Atlantic Coast. It was then wiped out north of Virginia by plume hunters. Townsend in 1920 wrote, "Least Terns have been seen in Essex County." Griscom (1938) added, "Least Terns now fairly common in Massachusetts," and Taber (1947) reported, "Least Tern breeding on Crane's Beach (Ipswich) in 1944."

In the spring of 1956 Elliott Rogers (personal communication) saw the Least Tern in Goose Cove on Cape Ann. That summer with the Kieran party, we found a nest of two eggs on Crane's Beach. Another nest was found there by Kieran the next year. In 1957 we found 10 pairs feeding nestlings on Plum Island. One nestling was captured, but unfortunately no bands were at hand. This species nested there since 1958 (Griscom and Snyder, 1955) and I banded the first one from Crane's Beach 14 August 1958.

In the fall of that year, sand dredged from Lobster Cove was dumped on a marsh that was behind Wingersheek Beach at the north extremity of the Annisquam River (Tidal Inlet). The following August I found 10 Least Terns circling the bare sediments on this marsh. One nestling was captured 27 August 1959, but was not banded. It was the first record of nesting by Least Terns along the Annisquam Waterway. In 1960 about 50 Least Terns were found over this artificial beach and two nests were located, but this species did not nest there in the following years. At first, disturbance proved to be too much and later the deposit became overgrown with vegetation.

V. Herring Gull

MacKay (1892) knew of only one record of the Herring Gull nesting in Massachusetts which was recorded in Buzzards Bay in 1888. Townsend (1905 and 1920) never knew Herring Gulls to nest on Cape Ann or in Essex County. Forbush (1925) reported Herring Gulls resumed nesting on the south shore of Massachusetts about 1919 or somewhat earlier. Eaton (1933) reported Herring Gulls nesting in Essex County from 1926 on, at Great Egg Rock in Manchester. In 1928 there were 20 nests there; in 1929 over 100 nests, and they were on neighboring islands as well. By 1938, Griscom declared this species was becoming a pest and breeding widely in Massachusetts. In recent years, Herring Gulls have nested on all eight islands at Cape Ann, although not successfully on Salt Island after 1961 because of the disturbance on

that island which is accessible by foot at spring low tide.

The following species have been found nesting with the Herring Gull on six of the islands as follows:

Great Egg Rock and Dry Salvages — Double-crested Cormorant

Straitsmouth Island — Great Black-backed Gull

Kettle Island — Great Black-backed Gull and Black-crowned Night Heron

Thatcher's Island — Great Black-backed Gull and Double-crested Cormorant

Milk Island — Great Black-backed Gull; Double-crested Cormorant; and Black-crowned Night Heron

In recent years, nesting of the Black-crowned Night Heron has declined on Kettle Island and Milk Island as the gulls broke down the sumac trees in which the herons nest.

A special report will be issued later on returns from banding Herring Gulls on these Islands at Cape Ann.

VI. Great Black-backed Gull

The first summering record in Essex County was reported by Townsend (1905) for Ipswich Beach in 1903. The first nesting record was reported by Eaton (1931) for Salem that year. This species was uncommon on Cape Ann between 1933-37 in the experience of the writer. In the later 1930's numbers increased, especially following 1947. In 1956 it was found nesting on Milk Island and since 1957, nested on Kettle Island, Thatcher's Island and Straitsmouth's Island. On these four islands, 36 were banded between 1960-64. One juvenile banded on Milk Island 22 July 1960 was recovered one year later at Saugus, Massachusetts, 23 miles southwestward. One adult banded there 23 July 1962 by the Massachusetts Audubon Society was found dead by the writer on Straitsmouth Island five years later.

VII. Ring-billed Gull

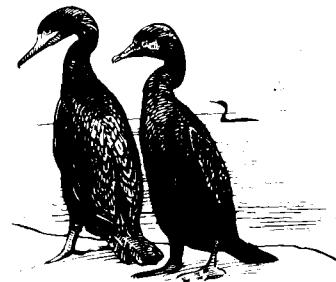
Concerning this species, Townsend (1905) quoted Outram Bangs that "Once in Gloucester Harbor I saw a lot of them." Fifty years later, Griscom and Snyder (1955) wrote "It summers at Newburyport Harbor; rarely elsewhere in Massachusetts." The only record made by the writer was a single adult found dead on Salt Island in the summer of 1961.

VIII. Laughing Gull

Townsend (1905) reported this species originally as a "rare transient visitor." Fifteen years later he wrote, "For the last six years I have seen one or more of this species at Ipswich nearly ever summer" (Townsend, 1920). Several were reported along the Annisquam River in the summer of 1937, but these were not seen by the writer. Griscom and Snyder (1955) described the Laughing Gull as "a common transient and non-breeding bird along the whole coast of Massachusetts." The only record for this writer was one adult seen in Sandy Bay at Rockport 30 July 1964. John Kieran saw one in Plum Island Sound adjacent to Cape Ann the same summer. Dorothy Snyder at the Peabody Museum of Salem stated that this species does not go north of Nahant as a common bird (personal communication).

IX. Double-crested Cormorant

Townsend (1905) regarded this species as a "common transient visitor." The writer first saw this species in Ipswich Bay in the summer of 1934. It has increased in abundance through the years. Burnett (1945) in her study of a nesting colony on Great Egg Rock found two nests in 1942 (the first record for Essex County) which increased to nine nests in 1945. Since 1956, the writer has found the Double-crested Cormorant nesting on Great Egg Rock, Milk Island, Thatcher's Island, and Dry Salvages with several dozen nests on each island. In spite of destruction in recent years by some fishermen, the colonies have continued to grow. On visits made by this writer only one nestling was of suitable size to be banded as on most occasions the eggs had not yet hatched.



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Department of Biological Sciences, Kent State University, Kent, Ohio

Book Review

Birds of Central Pennsylvania by Merrill Wood. State College Bird Club, Inc., 626 West Nittany Avenue, State College, PA 16801. 1976. Second Edition. Pp. 54. \$2.00 postpaid.

An updated compilation of bird records from the State College area of central Pennsylvania extending through a radius of 25 miles from Old Main. Some statistical annotation are provided for the less common species.

This is a useful record of the birdlife of the

geographic area covered, but it certainly is not an adequate account of the entire Central Pennsylvania region as the title suggests. Curiously, no literature whatever is cited in support of some of the records contained in this booklet. This is unfortunate because there are published bird-banding studies from the State College area and probably other ornithological data as well (e.g. Christmas Bird Counts, etc.).

Reviewed by Donald S. Heintzelman.