



**Bermuda Audubon Society**

**NEWSLETTER** Early Fall 2002

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## **A Message from the President**

**Jennifer Gray**

It seems most appropriate at this time to share my thoughts with those members who were not in attendance at the AGM. We were particularly honoured to have His Excellency the Governor and Lady Vereker as our special guests. Lady Vereker has kindly accepted the invitation to be the Society's patron. I would like to take this opportunity to thank Andrew Dobson for his incredible contribution to the Audubon Society over the years and for an extremely productive and successful two years as President. Andrew has done so much more than lead our meetings and guarantee a complete and effective programme of events. He is the pulse of the Society, keeping each and every one of us up to date and informed. If it's an opportunity to view an unusual bird he'll be on the phone or sending an email instantly with detailed accounts of where to go for the best view.

The Audubon Newsletter is Andrew's creation as is the informative and always current Audubon website. As if all this were not enough Andrew has organized a selection of

brilliant talks for us over the years, led numerous field trips and taught most of us a thing or two about birding in Bermuda. He maintains bird records for the island and is a supporter and advocate for Birdlife International and the global preservation of bird species. He has represented us well with the UK Overseas Territories Conservation Forum and with the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds. Andrew is also to be congratulated for his recent publication "A Birdwatching Guide to Bermuda".

Bermudians should appreciate the fact that Andrew is driven to lobby for conservation measures in Bermuda. Whilst always promoting the value of birds and protection of habitats. Andrew has been a key player in the Bermuda Biodiversity Project and its Strategy and Action Plan for Bermuda. He is not afraid to speak out and demand action toward a better Bermuda for us all. A wonderful father, family man and fulltime teacher too, he is truly a daunting act to follow as President and deserves our sincere thanks and appreciation.

A special thank you also goes to those stepping down from the committee. Ted Cassidy was presented with a stunning Roland Skinner framed Longtail photo for an incredible 33 years as Treasurer. Peter Holmes and Penny Hill received commemorative books for their 7 years of service to the executive committee. Welcome to the new committee and I look forward to an exciting year ahead. I would also like to thank all members of the Society for your continued support. Please try to join us for any of our events. If you have any concerns or suggestions, please don't hesitate to contact the Society.

## **Mississippi Kite – New Record for Bermuda**

**David B. Wingate**

In North America there are a number of highly migratory bird species with a propensity to turn up far beyond their normal range. As these are also the species which tend to occur most frequently as vagrants on Bermuda, I had predicted for a long time that the Mississippi Kite, as one of the most extreme of the wanderers, would sooner or later be recorded on Bermuda. It was especially satisfying therefore to be the first to sight one locally. It was seen in the early hours of 20 May 2002, on Nonsuch Island, as I was preparing to lead a tour. Unlike its close relative the Swallow-tailed Kite, which is also a frequent vagrant on Bermuda and which had already been seen by some earlier in the spring, the Mississippi Kite is nowhere near as spectacular or easy to identify. Indeed, at first glance I thought it was the Northern Harrier, which had over-wintered at the East End! Although the buoyant, low swooping flight had some resemblance, I quickly realized that this bird was smaller, lacked the harrier's diagnostic white rump, and glided with a flat, rather than dihedral wing profile. The long tail appeared uniformly dark brown above and was slightly notched when tightly folded. Unfortunately the dense, restored forest on Nonsuch prevented prolonged views as it swooped low over the canopy, and I failed to note two of the species most diagnostic fieldmarks - the short first primary and the barring on underside of the tail, because I couldn't remember what to look for specifically before I consulted the field guides and by that time the bird was

gone. Identification, therefore, was more by a process of elimination. Mississippi Kite in sub-adult plumage became the only possible option of all possible alternatives.

I immediately alerted the other birders, and those who could, spent the rest of the day on adjacent Cooper's Island watching for it. Only Eric Amos, who got there first from his art studio in St George's was lucky enough to encounter it as it swooped over Nonsuch before heading across to Cooper's Island. Eric also managed to get distant video footage, which constitutes the only tangible proof of the record, albeit marginal, for identification purposes. Like so many of our rarest vagrants this proved to be another "one day wonder". Steve Rodwell and Dave Wallace think they may have glimpsed it over the Hamilton Harbour islands later that day, but it was never seen again after the 20th.

## **A Birdwatching Guide to Bermuda**

by **Andrew Dobson**

**Published by Arlequin Press**

**176 pages including 32 colour photos**

**ISBN 1 900159 71 6**

**Now published - \$19.95 (through Bermuda Audubon Society)**

This guide has been written for both Bermuda residents and tourists. In his foreword, Dr. David Wingate says, "Andrew has also unveiled the extraordinary diversity of bird life and birding opportunity that awaits residents of Bermuda who have any inclination to become interested in natural history. I would venture to say that it is probably the most comprehensive guide to bird finding for any area outside Great Britain". The main section of the book describes birding localities found in each parish with accompanying maps. Birding is described through the seasons as well as by habitat. Detailed accounts and descriptions are provided for Bermuda's breeding birds. A conservation section focuses on ways in which we can all help the breeding success of longtails and bluebirds. For the visitor there is advice on travel and accommodation. A full annotated bird checklist is provided as well as information on other wildlife species. Superb colour photos compliment the text. The book forms part of a highly acclaimed series by Arlequin Press.

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## Bird Report Apr - June 2002

**Andrew Dobson**

A short period of time to report on since the last newsletter, but there have been some excellent bird records, including Bermuda's first Mississippi Kite and second Little Egret

### Grebes to Geese

**Pied-billed Grebes** bred at both Somerset Long Bay (two broods) and Pitman's Pond (at least one brood). The **Cahow** (Bermuda Petrel) produced a record 36 fledglings from 65 breeding pairs. **Cory's Shearwater** passage saw low numbers passing in May and early June. **Greater Shearwaters** were uncommon until late May with most birds being well off-shore. **Sooty Shearwaters** however were seen in good numbers in mid-May with nearly 50 per hour on 23<sup>rd</sup> May (SR). Manx Shearwaters are early spring migrants, so very few were seen after April. A **Little Egret** (WF, EA) was the second ever Bermuda record (first in 1985). A superb bird in breeding plumage was at Pitman's Pond from 24<sup>th</sup> April to 3<sup>rd</sup> May. A juvenile bird with an adult **Great Blue Heron** (PW) on Ferry Reach in June suggested that breeding may well have taken place. At least four **Green Herons** (WF) birds on 26<sup>th</sup> May and early June at Trott's Pond may well have been attempting to breed. A **Snow Goose** (RB) – a 'Blue Goose' at Port Royal golf course on 12<sup>th</sup> May was the first ever spring arrival of this form of snow goose.

## Birds of Prey to Terns

A **Mississippi Kite** (DBW) over Nonsuch Island 20<sup>th</sup> May was the first record for Bermuda. The **Red-tailed Hawk** (DW) was over Morgan's Point on 27<sup>th</sup> April (presumed to be the bird seen in December) and was seen again over Paget Island (PW) on 19<sup>th</sup> June. A **Black-necked Stilt** (AD) flew over Harrington Sound on 20<sup>th</sup> April then stayed at North Pond into May. A **Eurasian Whimbrel** (SR, DBW) at Darrell's Island on 10<sup>th</sup> June, the first for about 10 years. Several sightings of **Red Knot** were made this spring from 21<sup>st</sup> May into early June. A **Ruff** (WF, SR) was at North Pond 18<sup>th</sup> – 24<sup>th</sup> April. This has been a very good year for **Skua** sightings with four birds this spring (either **Great Skua** or **South Polar Skua**). Off-shore on May 5<sup>th</sup> (GL), over Nonsuch on 16<sup>th</sup> May (WF), Devonshire Bay on 18<sup>th</sup> May (SR) and Elbow Beach on 19<sup>th</sup> May (SR, AD). There was also a good passage of the three jaeger species – **Pomarine**, **Parasitic** and **Long-tailed Jaeger** (see article by Steve Rodwell). A second-summer **Laughing Gull** was seen throughout the period, while a **Royal Tern** (AD) flew past Grape Bay on 2<sup>nd</sup> June and was present all month. A **Roseate Tern** (EA) was reported from early June. A **Gull-billed Tern** (AD, EA) was in St. George's Harbour 16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> June, while a **Sandwich Tern** (PW) was at Cobbler's Island on 20<sup>th</sup> June.

*Great Skua by John Busby*



*Ovenbird by Andrew Dobson*

## Owls to Bobolink

The long-dead remains of a **Northern Saw-whet Owl** (JM) were found in Jenningsland on 24<sup>th</sup> April. A **Grey Kingbird** (WF, SR) was present at Tudor Farm from 11<sup>th</sup> – 13<sup>th</sup> May, while a **Red-eyed Vireo** (JM) was on Nonsuch Island 11<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> May. **Barn Swallows** arrived in small numbers during the period. There were a few records of **Bank Swallow** and **Cliff Swallow** from the East End of the island. A **Veery** (WF, SR) was a very good find at Ferry Point on 4<sup>th</sup> May (the latest ever spring record). Several **Magnolia Warblers** were seen in May, making it the most common spring warbler. A stunning male **Blackburnian Warbler** (WF) was seen at Gibb's Hill Lighthouse on 12<sup>th</sup> May, where it stayed for a few days – a very rare spring migrant. A singing **Prairie Warbler** (WF) was found at the same site from 12<sup>th</sup> – 23<sup>rd</sup> May. This species has never previously been recorded in May. Other May warbler sightings included **American Redstart**, **Ovenbird**, **Northern Waterthrush** and **Common Yellowthroat**. Several **Rose-breasted Grosbeaks** were noted in April and May, but one at Nonsuch Island on 10<sup>th</sup> June (JM., SR) was the first ever summer record. A **Blue Grosbeak** (WF, SR) was at Ferry Point on 4<sup>th</sup> May, while the only spring **Bobolink** (EA) was singing at Hog Bay Park on 6<sup>th</sup> May. Finally, on an exotic note – not only are the escaped flock of parrots (Blue-fronted Amazons) still being seen in the Southampton area, but a pair has raised two young in a cedar tree!

Observers: Eric Amos, Robert Blakesley, Andrew Dobson, Wendy Frith, Jeremy Madeiros, Steve Rodwell, Paul Watson, David Wallace (DW), David Wingate (DBW).

## Cahow Update 2002

Jeremy Madeiros

Since intensive management of the cahow began, its population has increased from 18 pairs producing 8 fledgling chicks in 1962, to 65 breeding pairs with a record number of 36 chicks in 2002. (The previous record was 32 in 2001). Despite the continuing increase in the cahow population, it remains critically endangered and still only nests on four tiny rocky islets totaling less than 2.0 acres (0.8 hectares) in area. Continuing threats include: coastal erosion by hurricanes; over-washing of the nesting islands; sea level rise; and the physical constraints of the present breeding areas. Since assuming my new post last year, I am attempting to fill in the gaps in understanding the biology of the cahow. There have been exciting new developments in the recovery program, including the following:

- **Weighing of birds.** Some 20 fledglings have been weighed regularly to determine growth rates. This has already shown that there is great variation in the rate at which individual cahow chicks develop. Fifty-two days after hatching, chicks range from 211 to 508 grams in weight. The preliminary data suggests that the chicks, after reaching their 'peak' weight, possibly undergo a 'slimming down' period before departure. Weighing is also beneficial in identifying malnourished or underweight fledglings that have been underfed or prematurely abandoned by adults. These fledglings can then be taken into care at BAMZ and fed to enable them to complete development.
- **Banding.** With help from Steve Rodwell and Alan Martin of Porzana Ltd. (U.K. Wetlands Trust affiliation), the proper leg band (or ring) size was determined and a special order of bands, unique to the cahow was delivered in time for this year's nesting season. Each band has a unique code which makes it possible to identify individual cahows for the first time. This year, 30 fledglings and 10 adults have been banded. This will help to confirm aspects of cahow breeding biology previously impossible to prove.
- **Scientific information** is now being gathered to attempt the establishment of a new cahow colony on Nonsuch Island. This will be accomplished by the translocation of nearly fledged chicks from existing nesting islets to a complex of new, artificial burrows on the larger island, where they will be safe from storm and hurricane flooding and have larger, more suitable nesting habitat in which to expand.

## Two major steps forward with the Nonsuch Living Museum Project

David B. Wingate

Members and friends who join the Society's annual tour of Nonsuch Island this July will see two major advances in the living museum project.

Firstly, thanks to Evan Morbey, who runs the Save Open Spaces (SOS) nursery, a major breakthrough was achieved in the propagation of Bermuda's rarest endemic and native

understorey plants in 2001. Most notable has been the propagation of the endemic Bermuda Sedge from seed. The sedge is the botanical equivalent of the Cahow in terms of rarity, and there are now about three times as many in the SOS nursery as survive in the wild! This windfall could hardly have been more timely, because the Nonsuch project is just at the stage where the restoration of the forest canopy is complete, but most of the associated understorey species are still missing. Evan was very anxious to see his nursery stocks planted out on various nature reserves, so in cooperation with the new conservation officer, Jeremy Madeiros and Sara Northcott of the Tulo Valley nursery, we shipped several hundred specimens of eight rare species to Nonsuch and planted them out in a series of volunteer planting sessions over the course of the winter between November and April. There is now more Bermuda Sedge growing on Nonsuch than in the rest of Bermuda, and in the absence of rats, which eat the seed and inhibit its survival on Bermuda's mainland, we believe we have restored it to its level of abundance on pre-colonial Bermuda. Other rare understorey species planted out were Turkey Berry, Bird Pepper, Bermuda Peperomia, Wood Grass, Rhacoma and Lamarck's Trema. Incidental to this work, we encountered and culled out something on the order of tens of thousands of non-native invasive species, notably Brazil pepper. Our special thanks to Evan, (who won a National Trust award for his efforts) and to Eugene Harvey and Saskia and Wendy Frith. Wendy, in particular, undertook to keep us all energized with gourmet meals cooked on the island!

Secondly, a major achievement on Nonsuch this year has been the installation of a toad barrier around the freshwater pond. The three-foot high smooth walled barrier is designed to prevent the introduced and invasive Cane Toad, *Bufo marinus*, from breeding in the pond so it can eventually be eliminated from the island. Toads were not a part of Bermuda's original native heritage and would pose a potential threat to the burrow nesting Cahows in the event that we are successful in attracting the latter back on to the "Living Museum". The threat lies in the fact that this species of toad has poison parotid glands and might encounter Cahows when taking refuge in their burrows to keep cool and moist during the daytime. Toads may also compete with and prey on the endemic skink, so their eradication from Nonsuch is doubly important. This project was made possible by a very generous donation from Roderick Ferguson, directed via the Bermuda Audubon Society. He was inspired to help after learning about the toad problem on a senior citizens' tour of Nonsuch in 2000. Research on the best design and material for the barrier was carried out in 1999-2000. The installation was completed in April 2002. We have already captured and removed more than 300 toads since the barrier was installed and notwithstanding an amusing cartoon by Peter Woolcocks, which was presented to me at my retirement it is working perfectly.

## **Nonsuch Island Natural History Camp**

**Lucy Hollis**

During the last week of June I took part in the Natural History camp on Nonsuch Island. When I signed up for it I was pretty sure I would find it interesting, but I didn't realise how much fun I would have as well and just how much I would learn. Before the camp I thought I knew a lot about Bermuda, but each day I learnt more and more about the island and realised there was so much more to know about our surroundings. Our days were filled with interesting field trips to amazing areas in and around Bermuda, some that I never even knew existed. Each evening we would be given lectures by experts who certainly 'knew their stuff'. The following day we went on field trips to see what we had just learnt in action, shown by guides who were equally knowledgeable. Parts of our evenings were occupied by lab work and quizzes which furthered our learning. One of the many highlights of the camp for me was our trip to North Rock. I had never had the opportunity to go there and I was fascinated by the variety of underwater life and how it all compared to other reef sites that we saw in different locations. Of course we were allowed plenty of free time to just relax and get to know the other participants, all of whom were really fun and motivated people who shared a common interest in our natural environment. I would recommend this camp to all 15-16 year olds who have any appreciation for their Bermudian surroundings. It was certainly an experience I will remember for the rest of my life.

The camp could not have happened without the help and generosity of many people. I would like to thank the Bermuda Audubon Society and the Bermuda Zoological Society for sponsoring the camp. I would also like to thank the organisers behind the scenes and our counsellors who ensured everything went smoothly, the lecturers and guides who helped us learn so much about our island. In particular, camp directors Joe Furbert and Fiona Doe and the Madeiros family who so kindly hosted us on Nonsuch and spent much of their time cooking delicious meals for us.

*(Lucy Hollis received the Mervyn White Memorial Shield for being the top student on the camp).*

## Sea-watching in Bermuda

Steve Rodwell

"I wonder what he's watching?" - "Could it be a boat?" - "Maybe birds?" - "Is he just watching the sea?" - "The heat's probably got to his head!" - "Perhaps he's staring at me?!" - "No darling, I'm sea-watching! You may be drop-dead gorgeous but give me a Great Shearwater any day!"

The above comments are typical of many you'll receive or overhear if you choose to sea-watch at Elbow Beach. Okay, it might seem strange to the ordinary punter, seeing a guy huddled over a telescope on a busy resort beach, but I can assure you its perfectly normal! After all, every birder on the island will be glued to their bins or scopes if there is a strong southeasterly wind in spring. I just chose to watch from Elbow Beach. Its fun, colourful,

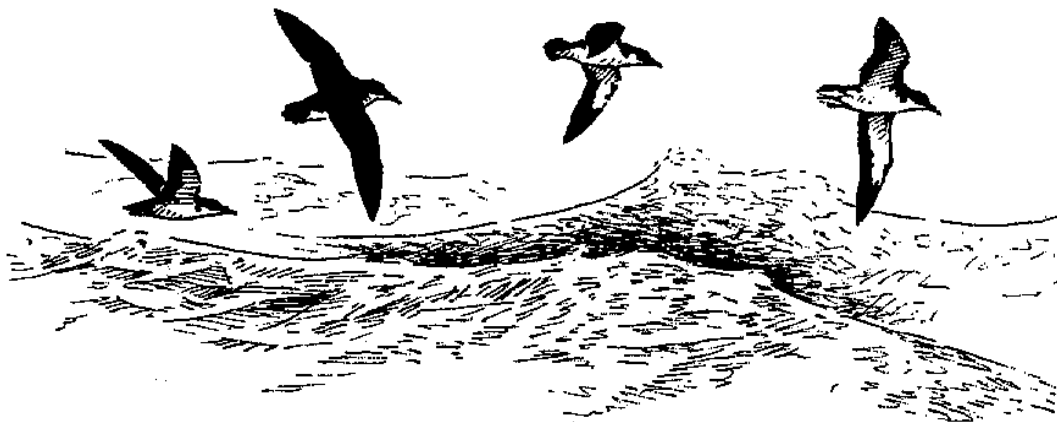




there's plenty of company, you can swim, and if the conditions are right, they'll be plenty of birds.

So what is sea-watching? Well' it's a form of birding - looking out to sea from the shoreline, watching migrant seabirds flying offshore. Here's a better example: one of the prime UK sea-watching sites is Portland Bill - a brute of a headland that juts out into the English Channel and a mega place to watch shearwaters, jaegers etc. I was the last of a hundred seawatchers huddled in the lee of the lighthouse. Muffled calls of 2 Poms (Pomarine Jaegers), 5 Kittiwakes, 2 Manxies (Manx Shearwaters) drifted across the ranks. Initially I saw very little but once I tuned in, birds streamed across my field of view. A family with a teenage daughter braved the elements. The girl's parents gave us a shifty look but the girl had more confidence. "What are you looking at?" "Seabirds" I replied. "Can I have a look?" "Sure" I answered. "All I can see is the sea!" She's right. Most of the time that's all you see. If you were to sit on any beach in Bermuda, you're more than likely to see absolutely nothing. There's no point sea-watching in Bermuda unless there is a moderate southeasterly wind and you position yourself on a vantage point along South Shore. You will get some great days but you also have to expect some pretty dull ones! After all, sea-watching is not an extreme sport! The only extreme thing is how long you can sit there without being fried or taking root!

I spent up to 8 hours at any one time sitting at Elbow Beach, Cooper's Point or Devonshire Bay, so the advice is bring something to sit on and wear a hat and sunscreen! Choose a vantage point about 4 or 5 metres above sea level, high enough to see the horizon but not too high that the birds don't break the skyline. I always use a telescope. It gives you a fighting chance of identifying a reasonable number of birds. Sand and salt spray take their toll on the lens, so don't forget a lens cleaner. Pan the horizon from left to right and you should pick up birds breaking the skyline.



*Manx Shearwaters by Mike Langman*

Sea-watching starts in earnest in February with a trickle of kittiwakes and manxies. March and April are the real manxie months but there are also a few Cory's Shearwaters and any of the three jaeger species may be seen. May is the best month as birds that have completed their breeding cycle in the South Atlantic catch up with birds that are returning to their North Atlantic breeding grounds. This May I saw hundreds of

Sooty and Great shearwaters, with a maximum of 47 per hour and 71 per hour respectively. Much larger numbers have been seen, but it is certainly enough to keep the interest of the observer firmly fixed on the sea. About 100 jaegers were seen of all 3 species including some very close views of Long-tailed and Pomarine Jaegers. Further out to sea you could see them harassing hapless Arctic Terns and Longtails. Scarcer species included 3 Skuas (Great or South Polar Skua) and Northern Gannet. Sea-watching is not for everyone but once you get into it you'll quickly get hooked. Try to go with an experienced birder as is much easier than trying to struggle identifying distant 'dots' on your own. Over time you will have some memorable sightings - lines of Great Shearwaters soaring dynamically, a jaeger chasing a frantic tern, the blow of a humpback whale or even the rising turret of a nuclear submarine - anything is possible!

**Future Events** - For information on any of the events: tel. 292-1920

- **Sunday 14 July**  
Field trip to Nonsuch Island. 1.00 pm to 5.00 pm  
Depart Tucker's Town Dock (park Mid-Ocean tennis courts)  
Bring your own lunch. , snorkel gear etc.  
**Please let me know if you can help with boat transport.**  
Email [info@audubon.bm](mailto:info@audubon.bm) or tel. 238-3239
- **Sunday 8 September**  
Field trip to Spittal Pond - Early Fall migration. Meet in car park at 7.30 am. Venue is subject to change if water level is high.  
Email [info@audubon.bm](mailto:info@audubon.bm) or tel. 238-3239
- **Friday 4 October to Sunday 6 October**  
Paget Island Bird Camp. Cost approx. \$40 per person.  
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## **Executive Committee 2002-2003**

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David O'Neill  
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Newsletter Andrew Dobson

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