

COLORS OF FALL 2016

Outermost birding

Surveying fall's shorebird migrations, Beston-style

By **Don Wilding**

Banner Correspondent

As the days of autumn grow shorter across Cape Cod, many across the peninsula turn their eyes skyward for some of the best entertainment that the natural world can offer — “the great migrations,” as Henry Beston called it.

Bird-watching is big business in these parts, although it may have been Beston who popularized it after his Cape Cod nature classic, “The Outermost House,” was published in 1928. From his outpost cottage on the seaside dunes of Eastham, the self-proclaimed “writer-naturalist” had a view of bird life that few ever took before.

“How singular it is that so little has been written about the birds of Cape Cod!” Beston wrote in the first chapter of “The Outermost House.” “The peninsula, from an ornithologist’s point of view, is one of the most interesting in the world.

“The interest does not centre on the resident birds ... it lies in the fact that living here, one may see more kinds and varieties of birds than it would seem possible to discover in any one small region.”

Many shake their heads in admiration after reading Beston’s bird descriptions. One of them is Bob Prescott, the executive director at the Mass. Audubon Society’s Wellfleet Bay Wildlife Sanctuary. Every so often, Prescott presents a lecture program that he calls “Birding with Beston.”

“You’ve got to give Henry a lot of credit,” Prescott says. “He really was an excellent birder. He got sharp-tailed sparrow, and a lot of the birds offshore. He knew the difference between common murre and thick-billed murre.”

Beston and Prescott share a fondness for tree swallows, which swarm the dunes and coastal areas of the Cape in abundance during the late summer and early fall.

“They’re looking for bayberry, and they just descend on it,” Prescott says. “It looks like the shrubs are just alive with



The endangered red knot, currently the subject of a banding project, can be seen in the fall on the Cape's ocean shores. PHOTO COURTESY U.S. FISH & WILDLIFE SERVICE

swallows as they drop in and eat the berries off."

Beston often saw the swallows swarming around his cottage before the large mass of birds would head south down the coast toward Monomoy, where they'd congregate.

The dunes of Provincetown and North Truro are also popular spots.

"I saw them around the canal, and there had to be about 2,000 or

3,000 swallows in just an hour," Prescott recalls. "On any barrier beach, whether it's Crowe's Pasture in Dennis, or Nauset, or Skaket, or anywhere along the coast where there's bayberries, it's just really impressive."

Birds of prey are also passing through during September, particularly northern harriers and peregrine falcons, although the peregrines could be long gone by Columbus Day weekend. Other late-summer visitors, such as sanderlings and dunlin, also check out by October.

As the calendar advances into the tenth month, northeasters become more common. These gale-force storms often beach many birds who call the open

waters home, such as murres and dovekies.

"I remember seeing dovekies off of Coast Guard Beach during a northeaster in November," Prescott says. "We see them in Cape Cod Bay after Columbus Day, if we get a northeaster. That would be early on, at the beginning of their migration, when they're passing through."

Shorebird populations took a major hit in the late 19th century, as overhunting forced many birds to near extinction.

"Beston may have been the last one to write about the eskimo curlew and golden plover," Prescott says. "They would often

COLORS OF FALL 2016



Tree swallows swarm together in September and October, performing a spectacular synchronized sky ballet over the dunes in North Truro. BANNER
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BIRDING

From Page A18

get blown ashore during northeasters in the fall. Both species would migrate offshore, and leave from Canada, feed there, and then head to Venezuela. Those birds were well known to the hunters who would go out during these northeasters, and hunt them on Monomoy and in the marshes at Nauset."

The eskimo curlew may now be extinct, but other seabirds and ducks have managed to rebound somewhat in recent years.

"One hunter who lived in Brewster in 1850 counted over 25,000 red knots in a single season on Billingsgate Island," Prescott notes. "This fall, our count was 500 on Tern Island."

Hérons were also



From his outpost on the Eastham dunes, Henry Beston observed, and famously wrote about, the great autumn migrations of shorebirds. PHOTO
COURTESY HENRY BESTON SOCIETY

affected by the overhunting of a century ago.

"Beston doesn't mention great blue herons," Prescott says. "That's definitely a fall bird, and in Nauset Marsh, snowy egrets would leave by September. If Henry was on the beach today, he would see lots of different herons.

"Snowy egrets nest on Monomoy. They used to

be gone by Labor Day, but now they stay well into October."

Through October, "Beston observed the great multitudes of birds, fascinated by the mysterious force that seemed to be at work in their movements," writes Daniel G. Payne in his Henry Beston biography, "Orion on the Dunes." Payne added

COLORS OF FALL 2016



A great blue heron towers over more diminutive shore foragers on Race Point Beach.
BANNER FILE PHOTO/GUADAZNO



Late fall's gale-force storms often beach many birds who call the open waters home, such as dovekies. BANNER FILE PHOTO/LUM

that Beston's views of the autumnal migrations changed the way that he regarded wildlife.

"As I write I think of my

beloved birds of the great beach, and their beauty and their zest for living," Beston writes in the closing paragraphs of "The

Outermost House." "And if there are fears, know also that Nature has its unexpected and unappreciated mercies."