

Westford birdwatcher identifies 137 species

By GORDON B. SEAVEY

WESTFORD — With the spring migration of birds, common to this vicinity, reaching its peak within a few weeks, nature lovers will be scanning the roadsides and the tree-tops for a "lifer."

A lifer to a birdwatcher is not a person in jail for the rest of his natural life. Its meaning to them is the recognition for the first time of a different species of bird with full identification.

Although Westford's farming and forest acreage is being replanted with suburban homes at an accelerating rate, there are still many favorite spots where the birdwatcher may go, other than his own back yard: More and more people are taking up this healthful and inexpensive hobby.

One who has concentrated on bird sighting in Westford over the past 25 years is Richard S. Emmet, Jr., of 224 Concord Road. He has identified 137 species within a two-mile radius of his residence, the old Proctor homestead (circa 1730) on Route 225 in the Parkerville section of town.

Here, in general, in the watershed area of Nashoba Brook there are still fairly substantial tracts of woodland, fields and marshlands, with a sprinkling of open fields, all ideal for birding.

Nashoba Brook has its beginning near the Kimball Ice Cream farm on Route 110 and picks up three smaller streams, Vine, Nonset (or Nonesuch) and Butter, before entering the Assabet River at Concord Junction. The abandoned railroad "Red Line" passes through the territory.

BECAUSE of its sizable area, sparsely populated, this part of town was called Texas, or the Lost Nation, by the earliest settlers. Fifty years ago, George W. Goode, a local naturalist, wrote in detail of the birds and animals to be found here.

Although he admits that "Westford will never be a birdwatchers' mecca," Emmet listed 102 species in a single year, 1974. He had counted 24 by March 1; added nine more that month, added 16 in April and 42 in May. He recorded the remainder as follows: June, six; July, one; and the final four in September and early October.

On an "active" day in May, during the peak of the spring migration, he identified as many as 53 species. This is five times what the average person would recognize.

Emmet has grouped his findings by seasonal as well as habitat habits. He says that in his "area" much of the upland has an elevation of 200-300 feet and is wooded. Highest elevations are Nashoba Hill (426 feet) and Bear Hill, near the Carlisle line, 369 feet.

There are some pure stands of fine white pine, but much of the woodlands is mixed.

He says that many of his identifications are based on bird calls and songs, once the original sight identification has been made.

"I strongly recommend learning to identify

by sound, not only for its inherent pleasure but also because it should not be required of any person to pursue a northern waterthrush more than once through knee-deep water, alder thickets and clouds of mosquitoes," he advised.

WHILE HE HAS put together his quarter-century of birding in Westford for his own interest and pleasure, he said, "I have found birding to be a stimulus and a joy, adding an extra challenge and diversion to the many pleasures of being outdoors in all kinds of weather.

"Another purpose, however, is hopefully to increase the awareness and interest of other people in our local natural surroundings. It is not necessary to drive for two or three hours to enjoy the woods and streams, wildflowers and wildlife. The enjoyment and health that these can bring to people should be remembered as we consider the future development of our town," is his conclusion.

Asked what his favorite bird might be, he joined countless others when he named the bluebird. This lovely little songbird, the smallest thrush in this area, used to be abundant as a summer resident. Now there are only small pockets of them in scattered places.

The bluebird is vulnerable to severe weather and pestered by English sparrows. For protection against storms, nesting boxes, with entrances no larger than one and one-half inches, should be placed in semi-open places, away from buildings, about three to five feet off the ground. A favorite nesting place used to be a natural hole in an apple tree, but Westford has lost most of its orchards.

BLUEBIRDS BEGIN TO build nests in mid-April so the boxes, either commercial or homemade, should be erected at once.

Most folks are unfriendly toward blue jays because of their noise and greed. Emmet, however, feels differently. He says they add color and liveliness to the winter scene as well as to all other seasons. Their songs are extremely varied as are their calls.

He reports the mockingbird, cardinal and tufted titmouse are now permanent residents but herons and bitterns are rarely seen. A most striking change over the years, he notes, has been the replacement of the red-shouldered hawk as a summer resident by the broad-winged hawk.

The pheasant, since the Commonwealth has stopped stocking them, is disappearing gradually and the bob white's cheerful call has been missed the past eight years.

The director of studies at Buckingham Browne and Nichols School in Cambridge for the past 16 years, Emmet has made Westford the family home for the past 30 years. He adds to his bird list while lying in bed, sitting on the porch or working in the garden in addition to his field trips.

His wife, Alan, enjoys plants and wildflowers. Therefore, he says, "While she looks down, I look up!" By looking up, he probably has earned the title as the town's champion birder.



AMERICAN BITTERN
... guards nest