



A Lapland Longspur is an elusive visitor from the high north: it exists in both North America and Europe.

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Once every blue moon, there comes a day that really just kicks the senses into overdrive. The dedicated observer must utilize every ounce of his ability, in a desperate attempt to identify as many birds as possible. This day happened to be Thursday, when an incredible morning flight took place at North Head, in which almost sixty **Red-breasted Nuthatch**, several dozen finches, multiple vireos, and upwards of one hundred wood-warblers undertook a mass exodus from Tuckernuck, departing northwest towards Muskeget.

This is somewhat of a mystical phenomenon in the bird world, this certain type of morning flight, and much of it has to do with being in the right place at the right time. Sure, careful calculations and study of weather can sometimes be helpful in determining *when* a flight like this might occur, but *where* you are makes all the difference. It can be the difference a handful of orioles, or fivefold that amount. In this case, the vantage point that North Head provides turned out to be the perfect place to witness such an event.

So what is a morning flight? Morning flights usually accompany favorable winds, or nights of heavy migration among songbirds. Modern technology like NEXRAD radar and Birdcast can help forecast how many birds are flying overhead on a given night, and in what direction they are heading. Once first light comes around, any birds that are still airborne will attempt to reorient themselves toward the direction of certainty. In the case of these islands just southeast of Cape Cod, that direction is usually West or Northwest. The result is something spectacular.

When I arrived at North Head, maybe a few minutes before civil dawn, I could already tell that there was a lot of activity. Besides there being a few sparrows calling in the low bush, several unidentifiable warbler chip notes were heard overhead. In those wee morning hours, when it is hard to discern beak from tail, the best one can do really is just listen. Over the course of the next two hours however, I would record no less than seventy species from my tiny radius of observation.

Some of the high counts from that day include six **Nashville Warbler**, twenty-four **Northern Parula**, three **Blackburnian Warbler**, and thirty-seven **Blackpoll Warbler**. Almost all of these birds were hatch-year or in non-breeding plumage, however, which means that they were nowhere nearly as spiffy-looking as when they pass through in spring. Indeed, there is something quite infamous about these "confusing fall warblers", as Peterson made them out to be, although warbler identification is actually relatively easy compared to other groups of birds - and certainly nothing to be intimidated by!

The day before the madness on Tuckernuck, a **Gray-cheeked Thrush** scuttled by below the undergrowth on the path that goes behind the field station. These are a tricky species to find on the Cape and islands, and patience and temperament can play a big role in both finding and identifying this tiny thrush of the boreal forest. This is one of only a handful of North American songbirds that actually has a range that bleeds into Russia - and the population in Kamchatka is apparently increasing. **Bicknell's Thrush** is extremely similar to Gray-cheeked Thrush, but the former generally tends to have warmer

rufous undertones. Still, the majority of birds are best left unidentified without hearing vocalizations, or having specific measurements of the bird in-hand.

That same day, yet another male **Hooded Warbler** appeared in a wet spot on-island. This marks the third individual here this fall, and is apparently a trend not replicated on the nearby Cape, with there being no fall records of this species there so far this year. Hooded Warbler breeds northward to Rhode Island, but has not made the leap into Massachusetts yet as a breeding species. One wonders when they might start colonizing the coast of Bristol County, which would be a likely next stronghold.

In other non-avian news, the passing through of **Monarch** butterflies is now fully underway, and I've even seen several individuals making the crossing both between Esther's Island and Tuckernuck, but also between Tuckernuck and Muskeget. A good flight of **Mourning Cloak** continues this week, and several species of sulphur, although best left unidentified, have also taken flight. The blooming goldenrod continues to be a great host plant for several of these species of butterfly.

That's all for now. This has been another fantastic week on Tuckernuck!

Best,

Skyler Kardell

"Bird identification in the real world is far more than just matching a picture to a bird. The fact that the living bird is a shy and wary creature, with no particular interest in being seen, means that the challenge of matching the details of the bird's appearance to a picture is compounded by the challenge of seeing and interpreting the details in the first place." - David Sibley



A female Chestnut-sided Warbler gleans insects by the Triangle Pines. A Canada Warbler was a late surprise on Thursday.



A Gray-cheeked Thrush is a rare passage migrant, and is difficult to distinguish from the nearly identical Bicknell's Thrush. Another Hooded Warbler marks the third one this season.



A Green Heron is a secretive and unassuming denizen of the stillwater marsh. A Semipalmated Sandpiper roosts on the beach with a flock of Semipalmated Plover.



Two Mute Swan make the crossing over Whale Point. An American Kestrel feeds on a recently caught Meadow Vole.

Tuckernuck Island is private property, accessed only by explicit permission by landowner(s).