



*This Gray Heron, originally found on September 5th, represents the first record for the lower 48 states of this palearctic species.*

## **Coastal Steward's Letter, September 2 - September 9, 2020.**

Nantucket County has had its fair share of rare wading birds. In 1983, a few careful eyes at the University of Massachusetts Field Station at Quaise Marsh detected an unusual heron - later identified as the first New World record of a unique African species, the **Western Reef-Heron**. Such a find prompted hundreds of birdwatchers and amateur ornithologists alike to descend on the tiny island, including big names like Roger Tory Peterson and Michael O'Brien. Over the course of the last two or three decades, the islands have also hosted a number of **Little Egret**, another mind-boggling vagrant from the Western Palearctic - most notably in 1994, 1998, and 2014.

Now, **Gray Heron** adds itself to the list, and it is quite the record indeed. Never before has an individual been documented in the lower 48 states, although scattered records exist in both Newfoundland and far western Alaska. It is quite possible too, however, that this European counterpart of our resident **Great Blue Heron** has appeared along the east coast several times in the past, but they were most certainly overlooked because of identification issues that surround being able to separate the two in the field. Some of the immediate qualifying features of a good Gray Heron candidate include: overall smaller size, shorter legs, shorter bill, more obviously white neck, thinner neck striping, and no rufous anywhere (especially in the thighs), all when compared to the overlooked king of the salt marsh, the Great Blue Heron.

I had first encountered this bird on the afternoon of Saturday, September 5, at the base of Whale Point. It immediately stuck out to me as being "different" from some of the field notes stated above, but the identification never really clicked until I was able to upload the photographs I had taken onto my computer. It became apparent then that my bird was a serious contender for Gray Heron, and so I forwarded the pictures to some of the local authorities, including our very own Dr. Richard Veit. With an overwhelming amount of positive feedback, I became confident enough in the identification to go out and try to refind the bird, but like too many good things, was gone before I had time to truly savor the brief, initial encounter.

With an immense amount of pressure to relocate the bird and gain better documentation photos, I spent most of my morning on Sunday out searching for it here on Tuckernuck, but to no avail. It was not until later that afternoon, at around 5:30pm, that Tucker Taylor, Michael Taylor, and myself were able to head out to Muskeget and take a look there. We were met with almost instant gratification. The bird was quite literally *the* first bird Tucker saw upon approaching the island, and upon disembarking, we were able to get many of the shots needed to get a streamline and fast-tracked acceptance by the Massachusetts Avian Records Committee.

Probably the most astounding aspect of this record is that we have a relatively good idea from which direction it came from. Thanks to a feather-by-feather analysis provided by Tom Johnson, we can almost safely say that this is the same bird that became a "provincial first" up in Nova Scotia this summer. From June 30 to August 22, this Gray Heron spent its time in a small park just outside Kentville, on the

north shore of that peninsula. That means the bird had just thirteen days to high-tale it down to Tuckernuck, some 400 miles southwest of Kentville. Incredible! Where it heads now is anyone's guess, although Martha's Vineyard or Chappaquiddick would make a natural next landfall if the bird continued to move West as it did.

Here is just one possible explanation for how this relatively short-distance migrant in the Old World wound up here on the East coast of the United States. As a juvenile, this bird embarked on its first journey South from breeding grounds in France, to the west coast of Africa. There are numerous records from the Azores (150-300 mostly juvenile birds/year), so perhaps the bird touched down there first. However, somewhere along the way, the bird took advantage of some of the prevailing easterly winds near the equator, and headed west towards the American tropics. This is evidenced by recovery of banded birds in Barbados that were originally captured in France. It may have spent as many as two years being sedentary on those islands, before wandering North to Nova Scotia this past spring. Now, it is on its way south again, and is catching up on some much needed island-hopping along the way.

Above all else, this record goes to show the extraordinary quality of habitat that the Tuckernuck Land Trust provides - a bountiful oasis in a dark and unforgiving sea for rare birds such as this.

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

Best,

*Skyler Kardell*

*"The grey herons in flight seem slow and awkward/ but as fisher birds with patience they have skill/ they wait for hours in slow shallow waters/ and they won't miss their opportunity to kill./ In moonlit stream at border of quiet meadow/ in shallows of pool partly shaded by trees/ the patient heron waits for his next victim/ with water lapping around his spindly knees." - Francis Duggan "The Grey Heron"*



*The image on the left, taken on Whale Point, provides the evidence necessary to confirm that this bird is the same individual that spent its summer in Nova Scotia.*



*Two Lark Sparrow were spotted this week along the airstrip, and a female Blue-winged Teal was just one of three found Monday on Muskeget.*



*A juvenile Baird's Sandpiper is a scarce migrant and a long-distance voyager, breeding in upper Nunavut. A juvenile Yellow-breasted Chat peeks out from the undergrowth.*



*A Least Flycatcher is an unassuming denizen of the low brush, and two Yellow-crowned Night-Heron fly off together at dusk near East Pond.*

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