



Belle Isle News

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Number 55

Fall 1997

Friends of Belle Isle Marsh invite you to the Eleventh Annual

Arts in the Park

Sunday, September 14, 1 to 4 PM
raindate: Sunday, September 21

**Belle Isle Park entrance on
Bennington Street, East Boston
between Suffolk Downs & Beachmont Stations**



The Arts

Exhibits, paintings, sculpture



Children

*Hay rides, face painting
Caricature, drawing, arts & crafts*



Nature

*Hawkwatching, heron watching
Guided nature walk*



Music

*Aguilas del Norte
(Mariachi)*



Bring a picnic lunch
Bring a white T-shirt and have
a free Festival T-shirt
made for you

Co-sponsored by:
Metropolitan District Commission

Funding by:
MassPort, Art Councils
of Boston, Revere, Winthrop



MASSACHUSETTS CULTURAL COUNCIL
A state agency that links your community's local cultural council

This event is free and open to the public

for more information: (617)846-3294, (617)727-7250

Summer Birds

Belle Isle and the coast rekindled my interest in birding when I came to East Boston about eight years ago. I began birding at Penn State in the late Forties but never had much opportunity for studying shorebirds, so Belle Isle and the beaches presented enticing opportunities. Most of the time I had spent at Belle Isle was during the migration seasons. But this year, a pair of Baltimore Orioles and some flycatchers lured me to pay more attention to the late migrants and summer residents in this unique habitat.

Nighthawks and Other Transients

One species I've tracked at Belle Isle is the Common Nighthawk, which occurs in our region but is not really common. On May 30, 1992, while looking for Short-eared Owls after dark, I saw two nighthawks flying over the swamp. They did not reappear the following night. In following years, I observed nighthawks on either May 29 or 30 or both (whenever I looked), but never saw them any other days. This year I saw the nighthawks on May 29 from about 9 to 9:30 PM flying over the swamp and the grassy knoll and for the first time heard them sound off with their characteristic buzz. However, that evening I was accosted by a police car patrolling the park and informed that the park closed at dark. So I did not return on the 30th. I guess this will put an end to my annual (illegal) nocturnal meeting with these birds.

The most unusual sighting for me this year was a Gull-billed Tern on May 10. I believe this is the first sighting for this species at Belle Isle. MDC Ranger Geoff Wood was present at the time and confirmed the identification. The tern made several foraging circuits from the main flats to Rosie's Pond, picking up a morsel now and then. I had some close looks at it as it circled the pond and dipped in it.

I also sighted a Yellow-bellied Flycatcher on May 30 near the birches west of the parking lot and saw and

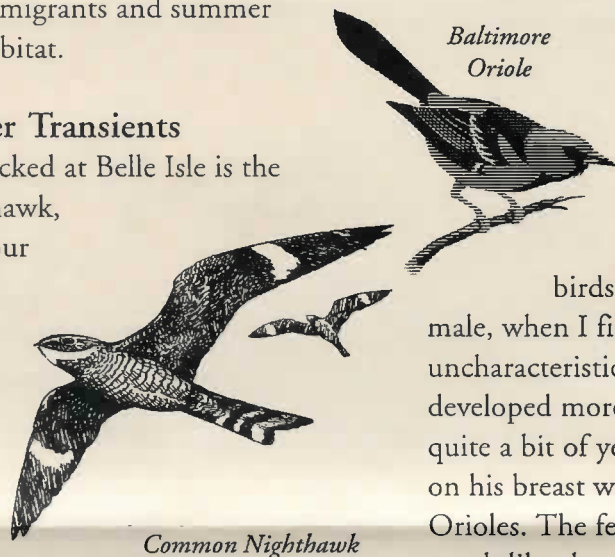
heard an Acadian Flycatcher in the same area on June 1. They apparently made a one-day stop-over and are rarities here though not in the northeast.

The Summer Residents

I have become intrigued with the Baltimore Orioles I saw building their nest this spring in the large willow in the corner of the grassy area. Actually, the female built the nest while the male spent most of his time hanging around preening himself. I guess he had it easy because there were no other male orioles around against whom to defend his territory. He worked harder later, in July, when I saw Daddy feeding a young one while Mama was nowhere to be seen. These birds were a somewhat odd couple. The male, when I first saw him on May 14, was an uncharacteristic lemon yellow. Later in the season he developed more of the characteristic orange although quite a bit of yellow was still evident. Only a spot high on his breast was the orange typical of most Baltimore Orioles. The female had more black around the head, much like the picture of the young in Peterson, which notes that the female can also have this coloring. Although Baltimore Orioles commonly pass through and nest throughout this region, I had never before seen them nest at Belle Isle.

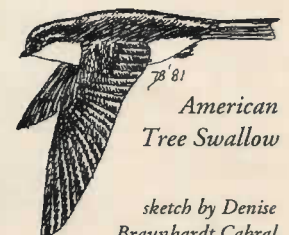
A less successful nesting was that of a Mourning Dove observed in late June sitting on a nest in the big willow behind the bulletin board. When I looked on July 1, the nest was gone. It was too high up for humans to be involved so I wonder what could have destroyed it. Starlings? Squirrels? Raccoons? An owl or hawk? There was a little debris on the ground and the dove was pecking around looking sort of disoriented and was not easily disturbed by the people passing nearby. In subsequent days, she began building a nest in one of the small pines in the grassy area, but never completed the nesting process. It seemed her heart was not in it.

In July, evidence of other nesting birds appeared. On July 5, there were many young



Baltimore Oriole

Common Nighthawk



American Tree Swallow

sketch by Denise Braunhardt Cabral

American Tree Swallows down by the Boardwalk being fed by their parents. I had seen only one nesting site in one of the boxes on the large flats to the west, so there must have been other natural nesting sites around. Earlier, young Barn Swallows were common over the flats, but I have no idea where they nested. *{They nest in the MBTA barn at Orient Heights Station.-ed}* On July 10, a pair of American Robins were feeding their young in a nest in the poplar behind the bulletin board. Robins have always been around, but apparently there has not been documentation of them actually nesting here. A male House Finch was also feeding a young one so the nest must have been nearby. Willow Flycatchers, which had first appeared in late May, appeared to be nesting among the sumacs in the corner of the brush by the picnic area. I did not see the nest or nestlings, but heard the peeps when the parents flew in to feed them.

I am told that they have nested here off and on, but this is the first time I have actually even seen the Willow Flycatcher here myself.

Nearby, Yellow Warblers appeared to have a nest as they seemed to be actively feeding their young. Yellow Warblers

and Common Yellowthroats have been known to nest here regularly. I have seen the yellowthroats, but never located their nest site or saw their young. Their territory seems to be by the birches. Saltmarsh Sharptailed Sparrows have long been known to breed here. They are not a very common bird, but can usually be found in the right habitat. Although these sparrows are usually rather secretive and hard to get a good look at, after the young come out they are more abundant and easier to see. I spotted some about July 19 in the flats west of the new Boardwalk.

Rails are also secretive and hard-to-see, but I am told they have been heard at Belle Isle in the past. This year, Geoff Wood had been hearing a Virginia Rail rather regularly and finally saw it near the Boardwalk on July 10. Unfortunately, I was never able to have it sound off for me. There is no evidence that it had a mate.

Around the same time, there were ten Glossy Ibis on

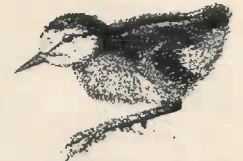
the flats. They were much less skittish than usual. They often feed in the Key, which is more protected. This could have been a new family group, but it is unlikely that they bred here. *[Ibis and herons nest on our offshore islands. -ed]*



Killdeer

Also at the Key were more than a dozen Killdeer. Killdeer are always summer residents but I had never seen this many at one time and place. Some had been around all summer, so I would assume this was the new crop and that they had nested in the Key.

Also suspected of nesting here are Spotted Sandpipers. I wasn't able to verify their nesting status this year, but in July 1994 I saw a spotty with a young chick in the flats southwest of the new Boardwalk. Barely out of the egg, the chick was rather comical, teetering like a seesaw as it stood there beside its mama. That area became extremely dry this year and the pond completely dried up, so nesting in the area may have declined.



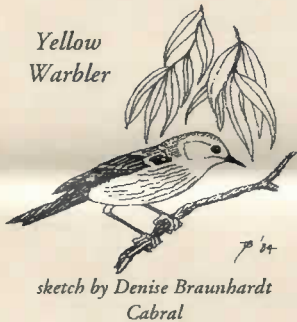
Spotted Sandpiper chick

General Comments

Ecologically, Belle Isle has great potential for harboring bird life, but limitations are imposed by its multiple use situation and its need to recover from the drive-in theater. The grassy knoll would be an excellent habitat for Eastern Meadowlarks, Bobolinks and Savannah Sparrows to nest in; they nest commonly in Eastern Massachusetts. But unfortunately, this is not possible with dogs frequently roaming through the area. Good bird sightings can often be made in the flats and the pond west of the Boardwalk. This area usually has little disturbance. The new Boardwalk gives an excellent view of this flat. Although the Key can still harbor some good species, it seems to me there are fewer birds there than there were several years ago. This might be due to a break in the levee which occurred during the big nor'easter a few years ago and allows the pond to drain more quickly and thoroughly.

Observing such changes reminds us of the delicate balances at work keeping the marsh a safe habitat for birds and also for the rest of us.

Richard Cressman



Yellow Warbler

sketch by Denise Braunhardt Cabral

New Trails

In early July a new trail was cut through woodland off Palermo Street. The trail will allow access to an upland area previously isolated by impenetrable vegetation. The trail is suitable only for the quiet contemplation of nature. There are no sweeping vistas and in season the trail will probably remain the exclusive domain of biting insects. Soon after, the trail around Rosie's Pond was opened up for travel through to Belle Isle Inlet.

Clean-ups

In late July a large tide-dependent clean-up project was started on Winthrop Marsh (formerly the Zoppo property). Huge quantities of heavy-duty junk and wood were removed through the Bayou Street access. Boston Trial Court Community Service, Boston Natural Area Fund volunteers, Chelsea High Schoolers and many others assisted reservation staff in the removal of heavy materials from the marsh.

Tern Platform

Common Terns originally nested on the broken brick remains of a blocked sewage outlet in Rosie's Pond. The colony died out in the early 90's. In August the old tern platform was replaced and during this exercise Boston Natural Area Fund Project kids discovered just how deep, smelly and sticky real mud can be. It is hoped that terns will return to breed on the new platform in May 1998. Fake terns and cool white stones will be provided.

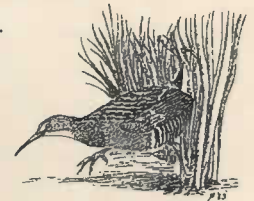
Local Ospreys

In 1994 an Osprey platform was constructed by Karl Pastore and others at Oak Island, Rumney Marsh. In 1996 the first pair of ospreys to breed reared three young to the flying stage. This year two young fledged.

Grandstand View

Great excitement followed the completion of the Boardwalk. Park visitors expressed astonishment and delight that such a structure should appear on the reservation. The new deck allows a unique viewpoint for marsh observation.

For instance, with the extra height many more salt pans and shorebird feeding flats become visible but also the secretive habits of Saltmarsh Sharp-tailed Sparrows become apparent. One breeding pair successfully raised four scolding juveniles within feet of the platform. I also obtained grandstand views of the foraging activities of Virginia Rails. I had not previously realized that these birds ever ventured into the saltmarsh.



Virginia Rail

Local starlings also enjoy the sweeping saltmarsh vista from the new boardwalk. They should be shooed off whenever possible.

Dry summer

During July, Greenhead Flies were present in large numbers yet mosquitoes were mercifully absent. The drought also dried out the grass meadow providing little food for the isolated vole population. By late July, trees began to shed their leaves or show muted fall colors; by early August, pine trees also showed clear signs of water shortage. The *Phragmites* swamp dried up completely, sending swamp denizens onto Bennington Street to meet their fate. In late July emaciated Muskrat carcasses began to appear around the reservation and several dead Painted Turtles were seen. Several school groups, however, had exciting excursions into the dried up swamp to explore animal trails and see Muskrat pools and lodges.



Common Tern feeding chick

Drying pools also provided attractive feeding opportunities for large number of shorebirds, egrets and ibis.

*Geoffrey Wood, Reservation Supervisor
sketches by Denise Braunhardt Cabral*

Saving Diversity

In his book, *The Diversity of Life*, Edward O. Wilson tells a poignant story. In May 1954, an avid birder named John Terborgh learned about a Bachmans Warbler on Polick Creek in Virginia.

Terborgh described his sighting this way:

"To my astonishment I walked up to the place . . . and heard it! I had no trouble seeing the bird. A full-plumaged male, it sat on an open branch about twenty feet up and gave me a perfect view while it sang. It hardly stopped singing during the two hours I spent there. Reluctantly, I

(Continued on next page)

Sireen Reinstein Memorial Boardwalk Trail Dedication

On Sunday, June 29th, clear skies, 90° temperatures, and a cooling east wind made it a picture-perfect day for the dedication of the Sireen Reinstein Boardwalk at Belle Isle Park.

Friends of Belle Isle Marsh President Jay O'Grady and MDC Reservations-North Supervisor Karl

Pastore welcomed over 75 guests to the brief ceremony. Harold Reinstein, Sireen's husband, and Leo Rabinovitz, her brother, thanked the assembled guests and donors and shared memories of the late FBIM Boardwalk Committee Chairperson Liz Regan highlighted the role played by the many project volunteers, in particular the assistance of long-time

FBIM members Phil Colarusso and Katie Durham, as well as the crucial and unfailing assistance of Representatives William Reinstein of Revere and Robert DeLeo of Winthrop, who sponsored the Fundraising Chairperson

Savings Bank, and Shirley Credit Union. Also on hand were Representatives William Reinstein of Revere and Robert DeLeo of Winthrop, who sponsored the legislation authorizing the MDC to name the boardwalk after Sireen Reinstein.

The ceremony ended with a moving prayer and blessing by Sireen's son, Rabbi Victor Reinstein, after which the guests adjourned for lemonade, watermelon, and a stroll on the beautiful new Sireen Reinstein Boardwalk.



Working on the Boardwalk



It is done!

Photos by Reinstein family members

Isabelle Guttell reported on the fundraising campaign and the major donations by Suffolk Downs Racetrack, Wal-Mart of Lynn, East Boston

Saving Diversity (continued from page 4)

pulled myself away, wondering whether this was an experience I would ever repeat."

It was not. As other birders were to testify, the male returned to the same spot the next two springs. No female ever joined him. The extraordinary exertions of the Bachmans male were a sign that he was in prime breeding condition, but he was destined to go undiscovered by any Bachmans female. It is likely that this scenario was duplicated as the tiny remnant of the Bachmans Warbler population fanned out into the huge area of the Southeast where distance and small numbers combined to prevent mating. Once this situation developed, there could have been no possible salvation for the species in the wild.

Dr. Wilson is regarded as the dean of biodiversity studies; The *Diversity of Life* tells the remarkable story of how the living world became diverse and how humans

are destroying the diversity. This book is a wealth of information and documentation. The story of the Bachmans Warbler is unfortunately not unique. Migratory birds as a whole are declining across the U.S. from the same environmental malady that afflicts the warblers. Winter habitats are being destroyed by the logging and burning of forests in Mexico, Central America, tropical Asia and the West Indies. Wilson's book warns of the dangers this industry poses to our lives on earth.

One of the many interesting species discussed by Wilson is the Rosy Periwinkle of Madagascar. Once obscure, this flower became valuable when it was discovered to produce substances that cure most victims of two of the deadliest forms of cancer, Hodgkins and a form of leukemia. Another example is the Neem Tree found in the rainforests of tropical Asia. This tree

(Continued on page 6)

Fall Programs

Arts-in-the-Park Festival: Sunday, September 14, 1-4 PM. See front page for details.



Canoe Snake Island: Sunday, August 31, 10 AM. Meet at Winthrop Public Landing on Shirley Street. (Alternate plan in case of high winds: canoe Belle Isle Inlet; meet at Belle Isle Park Observation Tower.)



Canoe Rumney Marsh at very high tide: Sunday, September 21, 2 PM. Meet at Route 107 and Pines River. Pre-registration is required for these canoe trips: Call (617) 727-5350. Sorry, no children under 12 on canoe trips.

Sunday morning rambles with Conal Foley: 10 AM (11 AM when Daylight Savings ends). Meet at main parking lot. Please call (617) 846-0786 if you're coming.



Hawkwatching: Saturday and Sunday mornings starting September 20. Call Soheil Zendehe at (617) 863-2392 for more information.

Saving Diversity (continued from page 5)

relieves so many different pains, fevers, infections, and other complaints that it has been called the "village pharmacy." Millions in India believe it has miraculous powers, and now scientists around the world are beginning to think they may be right. Wilson believes that a revolution in conservation thinking in the past twenty years has led to a new perception of the practical value of wild species. The destruction of the world's rainforests is a prominent example of resources lost before being fully understood. Products cannot be harvested from an extinct species. It is shortsighted to destroy a wildlands for the immediate gain of a few more acres or a few more feet of lumber. The economic yield of wildlands mined for genetic material over time will be far greater than the industrial benefits of clearcutting. Wildlands are like a magic well: the more that is drawn from them in knowledge and benefits, the more there will be to draw. The race is on to develop safer harvesting methods that draw income from wildlands without killing them, and so give to the "invisible hand" of free market economics a green thumb.

John Kilmartin

Friends of Belle Isle Marsh (FBIM) is a volunteer organization dedicated to the preservation of this marsh. We believe that protection ultimately depends on public awareness of the value and beauty of this natural resource. Our focus, therefore, is mainly educational.

To join: Send dues to our post office box: \$8 (Family), \$5 (Individual), and \$1 (Seniors/Under 16). FBIM is a registered non-profit corporation; contributions are tax-deductible. Thank you for your continued support.

For extra newsletters to share or leave on magazine tables at your hairdresser, lodge, or boat club, etc., please call (617) 846-3294.

Friends of Belle Isle Marsh
P. O. Box 575
East Boston, MA 02128

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We welcome our new Editor, Emily Hegarty, a Winthrop resident. This issue was produced by Emily Hegarty and Soheil Zendehe

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