



NEWSLETTER

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FIRST BREEDING OF KILLDEER IN BERMUDA

by *Tim White*

Bermuda always hosts a few wintering and migrant Killdeer (*Charadrius vociferus*) but sightings are rare after April, when they have left the island to breed in Canada. This year was very different, with four pairs of Killdeer taking up residence at the new airport pond and successfully raising nine chicks between them - the first ever recorded breeding of Killdeer in Bermuda.

E-bird records show variation in the daily number of Killdeer seen at the airport pond this year, as birds moved between there, the overflow basin and other sites, but an interesting pattern emerges. The maximum number of individuals seen at the pond per day for each week of January was 8, 7, 9 and 4. In February, high counts were 8, 9, 9 and 7. In March, the numbers fell, with maximums of 2 birds seen throughout the month.



Above: Fig. 1. Adult Killdeer

Top: Fig 2. Killdeer chick, around day 3

All photographs © Tim White 2021

At the time this was unremarkable, it was assumed that birds were leaving the island and heading North. Hindsight tells us that this was when they were out of sight, laying and looking after eggs across the road in the overflow basin.

First evidence of Killdeer breeding came on 7 April, when two chicks, perhaps 5 -7 days old (with a single chest band and dark streak on flanks) were seen and photographed (Fig. 3), suggesting that eggs were laid very early in March. Questions were asked about whether they had bred here before, perhaps somewhere on the airport apron, but no chicks have been reported until now. It is possible that the new environment provided by the airport pond and overflow basin provided a habitat that triggered breeding, with plenty of food in the pond and a large open area of mulch around plants in the overflow landscaping across the access road in which to create their nest scrapes.



Fig.3 Chick from older brood

On 9 April a second brood of 3 very young birds (day 1 or 2) were seen crossing the road, ushered by parents. These would have come from eggs laid around 9-15 March. A single chick from a third breeding pair was seen at the northern end of the pond.

The original brood were moving over the entire southern end of the pond on the day of first observation. When the second brood arrived on the 10 April, there was a lot of argument between the two sets of parents over territory (Fig. 5), with the new parents attempting to claim the south west end, leaving the older brood on the south east corner. Our lockdown then meant no observations could be made for a while.



(www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Killdeer/maps-range)

Killdeer are resident or medium-distance migrant birds. Some northern birds spend the winter in Mexico. In the southern US and Pacific coast, Killdeer are year-round residents.

They lay eggs as early as March in the southern US (non-migrant birds), as late as June/July in Canada (migrant birds) and year-round in the Caribbean. When they breed, 4 - 6 eggs are laid that take 22-28 days to hatch, giving rise to precocial young (they can run as soon as their down is dry after hatching) and parents will lead them to where they can feed.



Fig.5 Parents squabble over pond territory



Fig.6 No black flank, 2 chest bands visible, day 27



Fig. 7 Chick perhaps day 32, tail feathers growing

Since lockdown ended, only the first two chicks were seen until 4 May. On day 21 they were observed flapping wings (no primaries yet) as they walked, (two chest bands visible and tail just starting to grow) and next photographed on day 27, 29 April (Fig. 6). Their run/flap abilities were stronger and they left the ground for a couple of wing beats as they ran.

Erich Hetzel reports that he saw a short (3m) “flight” on 1 May. The parents were highly protective. One parent would be seen at the side of the pond, the other watching from higher up the bank. They would chase away other birds such as Starling and Ruddy Turnstone that came too close, although the long staying American Pipits would stand up for themselves on occasion.

On 4 May a slow walk around both the pond and overflow basin revealed a pleasing sight. On the northern end of the overflow basin were three chicks, the younger brood that were first seen on 9 April. Their parents were displaying characteristic distraction behaviour to lead me away from them. On the southern end of the pond the two older chicks were still present along with their parents, tail feathers growing in nicely. (Fig. 7). On 7 May, the single chick was seen with its parents, calling and bathing in the pond. It had been heard but not seen until then.

On 13 May, I followed up on e-bird reports of “new” chicks on the pond. There were three chicks, perhaps 5 days old. This must be a 4th breeding pair that laid eggs a month later than the other three sets of parents.

Questions remain. Will these birds stay or leave once the young are fully fledged? If they stay, will they attempt a second brood? Will this group be the founders of a new Bermuda breeding population, or will this be just a pleasing one-off? Only time will tell...

BIRDERS, KNOW YOUR PLANTS!

by Lisa Greene

How often have you heard, when out birding with a group and surrounded by trees: ooh, warbler – where? – there - in the tree! Where? Where? Oh - it just flew off!

Although there are some plants that everyone knows, such as the Bermuda cedar, casuarina and loquat, it always amazes me that many birders, who are so good at identifying birds, are generally pretty poor at identifying the plants that the birds are in. However, it is my experience that our local birders are willing to learn, so over the course of a few newsletters, I'll introduce some plants and their basic field identification.

Things to focus on:

Leaf shape and arrangement | Colour of leaf, fruit, bark | Form – tree, shrub, vine, ground cover

Let's compare two palms: the Bermuda palmetto and the Chinese fan palm. Both are single trunk palms with palmate leaves – ie. leaves that have veins radiating from one point (like the bones of your hand, as opposed to pinnate leaves that look like huge feathers, as on a coconut palm). To distinguish between these two palms look at these details, visible from a distance:



Bermuda palmetto, showing upright leaf endings

Bermuda palmetto:

Leaf ends tend to stand upright
Leaf colour - medium/deep green
Fruit - green to black, spherical
Narrow yellow "vee" in centre of leaf



Chinese fan palm, showing hanging leaf endings

Chinese fan palm:

Leaf ends hang down
Leaf colour - pale, washed out yellow-green
Fruit - blue-green, egg-shaped



Bermuda palmetto leaf showing yellow "vee" at the centre

As you travel Bermuda, you'll be able to quickly pick out Chinese fan palms and distinguish them from Bermuda Palmettos based on these field characteristics. You will probably be shocked to see how pervasive the invasive and undesirable Chinese fan palm is!

Better plant identification skills might lead not only to more rewarding experiences, with more shared bird sightings, but it could also add to what we know about bird species in Bermuda – for example that bird species X is often seen in plant species Y. As we continue our work to create a Bermuda that better supports our local and migratory bird populations, a more complete knowledge of which plants certain species or groups favour as a source of food could help us do a better job of supporting those species.

To inspire your learning and observations skills, David Wingate, who has been birding since the 1950s, has made the following observations of birds associated with these two palms: “The fruit of both palms are eaten by larger birds (kiskadees and crows), and cardinals eat the flesh of Bermuda palmetto fruit and perhaps also the flesh of the Chinese fan palm fruit. The palmetto, particularly, is attractive to insect-gleaning warblers such as the yellow-throated warbler and the black and white warbler – two species that are able to creep up and down the stem. Mourning doves are known to nest in Bermuda palmetto but it is not their favourite spot.”

Perhaps the reader can add to the observations above – now that you know how to identify these two palms.

THE BARN OWL - OUR UNSUNG HERO OF RAT CONTROL

by David Wingate

Our resident Barn Owls are barely known and even less appreciated by the general public because the service of rat control that they perform for us occurs unnoticed under cover of darkness. Considering that the black rat, *Rattus rattus*, its main prey, arrived on Bermuda with human settlement in the early 1600s, it is surprising that the first record of a Barn Owl presence on Bermuda was made by Dr. William Beebe during his tenancy for tropical marine research on Nonsuch Island in the summer of 1931. The same cliff hole in which he first found it was still being occupied for nesting during my own tenancy out there between 1962 and 2003.

As there is no official record of its deliberate introduction for rat control – not surprising because all avian predators were regarded as pests under the provisions of Bermuda's first Protection of Birds Act – we can only assume that it colonized naturally from North America. Proof that this was possible was finally obtained on 30 March 1983 when a banded Barn Owl was recovered dead on McGall's Hill, Smith's Parish. The bird had been banded as a nestling at White House, South Branch, Huntingdon County, New Jersey, U.S.A.



Barn Owl at Sears Cave - photo Alison Copeland

I first became aware of how important Barn Owls were as rat predators as a teenager. The Bronson Hartleys, who lived near Green Bay, Harrington Sound drew my attention to an active Barn Owl nest in Green Bay cave. Already a keen birdwatcher, I decided to do a series of night watches of the nest. There were at least four chicks in that brood and every half hour or less one of the adults would arrive with a freshly caught rat. Which brings me to the main point of this article.

The Barn Owl is in trouble in Bermuda, and the cause is the very thing that we and our pest control officers are using to control the rats that they eat.

The problem is anti-coagulant poisons, which work by killing the rat slowly over multiple feedings, which causes internal bleeding and gradual weakening. Barn Owls are programmed to hear and follow the movements of a living rat. A dead rat, even if seen, is ignored, so they were spared being secondarily poisoned by the quick acting poisons. Even so it took the eating of several poisoned rats to kill an owl and they usually caught enough un-poisoned rats in between to recover. The problem is that, over time, the rat population has become more and more resistant to the anti-coagulants so that more recent versions of the poison can kill an owl after eating only one rat. We are now systematically killing off our very best ally in the rat control business!

Barn Owls are getting rare here, but they are not gone, as a recent record of a pair in Sears Cave confirms. One of their most ardent supporters is Bruce Lorhan, who has already initiated steps to meet with the head of the Government Vector Control Department to see if we can devise an integrated pest control program that can restore them to the role of an ally. There are lots of things we can do, including wider use of an ingenious trap developed in New Zealand which can kill multiple rats in succession, and the erection of Barn Owl nesting boxes. We have already given them full protection by an amendment to the Protection of Birds Act many years ago.

Report your Barn Owl sightings!

The Society plans to fund a detailed study of Bermuda's Barn Owl population in 2022. In preparation we want to record the location of Barn Owl sightings.

We are calling on all members and their friends and families to help as "citizen scientists" and report any Barn Owl that you see, with as much detail as possible about the location, time of day, behaviour of the owl etc. Please send your reports to info@audubon.bm, or message us on Facebook with the details. Photos would be an added bonus!

Thank you!

FINDING A RARITY IN BERMUDA

by Andrea Webb

It all began with a pandemic and a new-found interest in capturing pictures of birds that led to an amazing find on February 24th, 2021.

I developed an interest in birding and joined the Bermuda Audubon Society in late 2020. In January 2021 it was announced that there would be a February birding contest to try and encourage folks to get out and see what they could find in a usually dismal month. On 24 February 2021, I decided to take the afternoon off and travel west to find some birds. I felt there may be a Canadian Goose at Port Royal Golf Course and sure enough, it was there. While there, I took notice of other birds in the area, a Great Egret, some mallards, kiskadees, starlings, sparrows and this little bluebird that was flying around me. I quickly snapped a few pictures and continued westward.



Mountain Bluebird - Andrea Webb



Mountain Bluebird - Andrea Webb

Later that evening, as I was reviewing my pictures, I came across the bluebird... but something looked different. The colors were not quite right. In Bermuda, we have the Eastern Bluebird. It is mainly blue on the top with a reddish breast and white under the breast. I knew that female bluebirds and juveniles usually had more muted colors than the male, but that didn't seem to be it. The bird I had taken a picture of was more grayish, white and blue. I sent my pictures to seasoned birders for an opinion. They were not sure what the bird was and I was advised to share with a larger group. After some discussion it was determined that this bird may be a Mountain Bluebird, but Bermuda was clearly out of its range and there was no known record of one being seen here before. More pictures were needed and 2 days later someone else found it and got better pictures confirming the find!

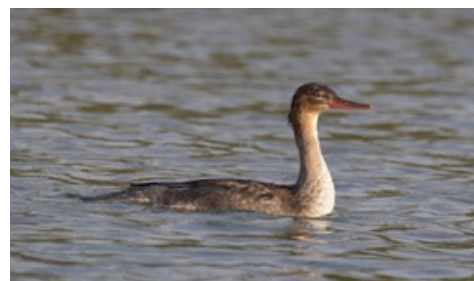
So, on February 24th, 2021 we had the first recorded sighting of a Mountain Bluebird in Bermuda. According to the West Indies & Bermuda: Winter 2020-2021 – American Birding Association Report, this was the first record for the West Indies and Bermuda region. Very exciting!

BIRD REPORT JANUARY - APRIL 2021

Joanne Smith

After a somewhat slow start, the year's sightings picked up thanks to our February Birding contest which kept local birders looking longer and harder than usual. Notable highlights of the four-month period include a Lapland Longspur, a Purple Finch, three American White Pelican our third Pacific Golden Plover ever and, of course, Bermuda's first Mountain Bluebird record.

A **Snow Goose** visited Bernard Park 05Jan (EH) where it remained for three weeks and an **American Black Duck** 02Jan (PW) paid a brief visit to the new Airport Pond. Most other waterfowl, like our wintering **Surf Scoter** at Spittal Pond, were continuing from 2020. A **Red-breasted Merganser** was first seen at Tobacco Bay 12Jan (PW) and remained until February. A **Purple Gallinule** was at Warwick Pond 13Feb (LS) and another, later, at Parsons Road Pond. A **Black-necked Stilt** appeared at Spittal Pond 03Apr (TW).



Red-breasted Merganser - Neal Morris

New Shorebirds included a **Ruff** 21Jan (MM) first seen at Cooper's Island NR and a **Short-billed Dowitcher** 07Feb (TW) spotted amidst a flock of Black-bellied Plover. A golden plover seen in April was assumed to be one of the European Golden Plover from previous airport sightings but review of several photos confirmed it to be a **Pacific Golden Plover** 26Apr (NM), only our third record ever with the last sighting here in 2003. A **Red Phalarope** was photographed and reported by an Anonymous eBirder at Doe's Bay and a **Spotted Sandpiper** was seen at Lagoon Park 07Feb (LF).



Purple Gallinule - LeShun Smith



Black-necked Stilt - Tim White



Ruff - Tim White

A sea-scan near East End Dairy gave views of a **Black-legged Kittiwake** 21Jan (PW), a **Manx Shearwater** was seen offshore 11Feb (LF) and a productive Cooper's Point sea watch included **Parasitic Jaeger, Leach's Storm-Petrel, Bermuda Petrel, Cory's, Sooty and Manx Shearwaters** – with a count of nearly 180 Manx in 90 minutes 31Mar (PW). A **Forster's Tern** was at Dockyard 24Jan (LF) and the first **Common Tern** 12Mar (EH) and first **Roseate Tern** 21Apr (EH) were seen on Pearl Island. Bermuda's harbingers of Spring, the first **White-tailed Tropicbirds**, were seen off Church Bay 11Feb (LS), a **Northern Gannet** off Fort St. Catherine 21Jan (PW) and three **American White Pelican** reported over Abbott's Cliff and later seen at Pembroke Dump 20Jan (NM).

The first **American Bittern** this winter was at Parson's Rd pond 23Jan (LF) and a **Least Bittern** at Mid-Ocean 11Feb (MM). A **Northern Harrier** was seen at Tom Moore's 23Apr (MM), a **Barn Owl** at Stokes Point 02Jan (PW) and a **Short-eared Owl** at the Airport 17Feb (PA) which, by March, had a companion. An **American Kestrel** was seen in Southampton 11Jan (LS), the first since November.



Short-eared Owl - Richard Brewer



Black-whiskered Vireo - Tim White



Snow Bunting - LeShun Smith



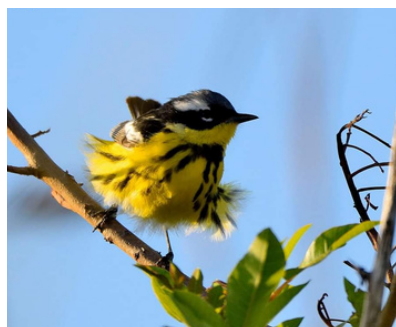
Red-winged Blackbird - Herb Marshall

A **Blue-headed Vireo** was seen at the Arboretum 06Feb (PA), **Yellow-throated Vireo** 09Apr (RB) were more abundant than usual in April and as many as three **Black-whiskered Vireo** 28Apr (MM) were on island simultaneously, both initial sightings at Ferry Point Park. A **Horned Lark** was at the Airport 23Jan (PW) and the first **Purple Martin** seen nearby at Kindley Field 27Feb (HM). **Cliff Swallow** 12Mar (MM) and **Tree Swallow** 19Apr (PW) were seen at St. George's GC and a **Northern Mockingbird** first near Clearwater 05Feb (MM)

Bermuda's first **Mountain Bluebird** was recorded at Port Royal GC 24Feb (AW). At Fort Victoria a **Gray-cheeked Thrush** 24Apr (PW) was seen briefly and a **Purple Finch** 28Apr (PW) was seen at Ferry Point Park. A **Lapland Longspur** (last eBird record in 2005) joined the Airport plover for a week 16Feb (PW), a lone **Snow Bunting** was seen near Fort St Catherine 15Jan (RB) and a **Dark-eyed Junco** was seen on St. George's GC 20Apr (MM). Two sparrow species were added for the winter - a **White-throated Sparrow** 13Mar (PW) at Ruth's Point and a **Swamp Sparrow** at Warwick Pond 11Jan (MM). We had a **Yellow-breasted Chat** at St. George's GC 28Jan (PW) and a **Red-winged Blackbird** at Parson's Road Pond 21Mar (LS) delighted birders and non-birders alike.

24 Warbler species were seen since January, including a **Blue-winged Warbler** 20Mar (LF) and a **Nashville Warbler** 25Feb (PW) at Port Royal GC, a **Kentucky Warbler** at Old Road in Hamilton Parish 19Apr (MM) and **Magnolia Warbler** at Hog Bay Park 15Feb (RB). A small influx of Grosbeak and warblers in April brought together a **Golden-winged Warbler** 20 Apr (TW), a **Blue-winged** and a **Lawrence's** hybrid to the area between Forts Victoria and Albert. A **Summer Tanager** visited the Tudor Hill area 16Jan (EH) and a **Scarlet Tanager** the St. George's GC 23Apr (LF).

Observers: Peter Adhemar, Richard Brewer, Luke Foster, Erich Hetzel, Herb Marshall, Miguel Mejias, Neal Morris, LeShun Smith, Paul Watson, Andrea Webb, Tim White



Magnolia warbler - Herb Marshall



Mountain Bluebird - Neal Morris



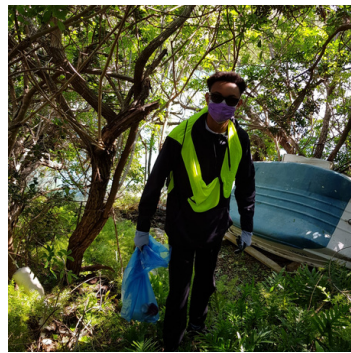
Summer Tanager - Richard Brewer

SOCIETY NEWS

Despite everything going on with Covid, it was still a fairly busy and productive start to 2021.

On January 28th we celebrated the 70th anniversary of the rediscovery of the Cahow. David Wingate, Jeremy Madeiros and Miguel Mejias joined together (virtually) for an informative presentation on the past, present and future of the Cahow Recovery Programme. Thank you to the Bermuda College, BEST and Glenn Fubler for making this happen at one of their Lunch and Learn events.

January also saw a great turn out for our volunteer work party at Stokes Point East.



Volunteers working at our Stokes Point East Reserve

In February some of our members, and a few visitors, joined us for a guided bird walk in the Arboretum. We also held an impromptu competition among our regular birders dubbed "The Great February Bermuda Birding Contest".



And the winner is ... Andrea Webb !!

Participants earned points for each day they entered an eBird list and for each species seen and, to keep things competitive, the more experienced birders were given a handicap. The friendly competition got participants out in rain and gale force winds looking for birds and, in the end a total of 110 species were seen in February – well up on the average 84. Andrea Webb took first prize and won the boardgame 'Wingspan'. Thank you to Erich Hetzel and Joanne Smith for organizing this great (dare we say annual..?) event.



Volunteers at Alfred Blackburn Smith Reserve in March

We kept busy in March with a bird photography walk at Cooper's Island Nature Reserve, led by Devika Mather and Paul Watson. The following day we had an excellent turnout for our annual volunteer day at the Alfred Blackburn Smith Nature Reserve. This event helps us to stay on top of the many invasive seedlings. Many thanks to all who joined in!

Also in March, our Whale Watching trip on *Endurance* finally went ahead, though with much reduced numbers due to Covid restrictions. The Humpback Whales put on quite a show for everyone on board, with several whales breaching together and some tail and fin slapping.



Breaching Humpbacks seen during our Whale Watching trip - Photos by Devika Mather

And at the end of the month, we provided two speakers for the BAMZ virtual lecture series: Janice Hetzel gave a talk on 'All Things Bluebird' and Andrea Webb spoke about 'The Silver Lining of Covid Restrictions'.

As expected, April was quiet as far as organized Society events, but May brought us the Global Big Day event for which our birding community spent all day trying to see and record as many species as possible, with some joining international teams to help raise funds for Caribbean bird conservation studies. And most recently, on 15th May member volunteers and friends gathered to complete the tree planting at our Somerset Long Bay West Reserve - another 22 trees were planted!



E. Michael Jones (left), Luke Foster, Morgan Beckles and Andrea Ottley were some of our hard-working Somerset Long Bay West tree planting volunteers

Unfortunately there was also sad news. In March we lost a long-time member, keen supporter and lover of Bluebirds, Keith Rossiter. Our community will not be the same without him and he will be greatly missed.

UPCOMING EVENTS

Annual General Meeting

Monday, 7 June 2021

5:30pm

ZOOM

President's report on the year's events
Treasurer's report and approval of financials
Election of Committee of Management

Enjoy a short video on Birds of the Year

Please email info@audubon.bm if you plan to attend. Zoom details will follow.

Paget Island Bird Camp

8-10 October 2021 - Mark Your Calendars!

Details to Follow