



NEWTON CONSERVATORS

SUMMER ISSUE

NEWSLETTER

Newton's land trust working to preserve open space since 1961

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PHOTO: CATHI GILMORE

Wild Turkey Fanning



PHOTO: CATHI GILMORE

Mature Tom Intimidating First-year Tom in Presence of Bored Hen

A Few of Newton's Nesting Birds

By Pete Gilmore

This is the prime season for chick-rearing by the birds that nest in Newton.



PHOTO: GEORGE MCLEAN

Turkey Wattle

By the time that this summer issue is in your hands, many birds will be raising their second brood of this summer.

One large and unmistakable wanderer through our yards is the Wild Turkey. These birds were exterminated from Massachusetts as the land was cleared, and they were hunted. The last known native Wild Turkey was killed on Mount Tom in 1851.

MassWildlife tried to reintroduce them four times between 1914 and 1947, using birds from game farms, but each attempt failed. In 1972 MassWildlife got permission from New York State to live-trap some Wild Turkeys and release them in Massachusetts. This worked very well.

The estimated population is now over 15,000 birds in our state. A flock of about forty of these large birds was seen on Winslow Road in Waban late this spring. At dusk, they flew up into trees to roost for the night — it was quite a sight! People do not know what to make of something as large as a Wild Turkey up in a tree. They seem to be, like bumblebees, far too large and clumsy for their wings to get them aloft. Another engineering marvel by Mother Nature!

The young, called poults, start appearing in early June. Often an older, experienced hen will supervise the poults of several other hens; you can see several hens with their offspring, all together.

Hunting these birds is now legal in Massachusetts, with the spring season already over and the fall season coming up, from October 24 to November 5. Only one Wild Turkey can be taken each day, with a total allowable limit of two Wild Turkeys per year. There are strict regulations on the guns and archery that can be used in this hunting.

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Wild Turkeys spend the winter with us, finding food even when the ground is covered in snow. Life is not easy for them, then.



Belted Kingfisher

A much smaller but unique bird that nests along the Charles River is the Belted Kingfisher. They are pretty hefty birds, weighing about half a pound. These birds nest in tunnels in riverbanks, where they raise their

young. The tunnels slope upwards from their entrances in order to keep water from soaking the chicks.

Both parents cooperate in digging the tunnel, with the males doing more of the digging — this work usually takes them about one week. The resulting tunnel is about three to six feet long.

These birds are monogamous for the season but may pair up with new mates each year. The female Belted Kingfisher, pictured above, is more colorful than the male. She has a rusty tan band of color below the blue-gray band on her breast. The male has only the blue-gray band.

Belted Kingfishers eat aquatic prey, including fish and crawfish. The young have special acids in their stomachs to digest small fish bones and scales. When they are older, they cough up pellets, which can be found under Belted Kingfisher perching spots.

Kingfishers have a monotone, loud rattle as their call. They have a wacky appearance that seems a perfect match with their rattling call. They could have been used in Walt Disney's cartoons instead of Woody Woodpecker. (A visit to earlier times can be had by finding "Woody Woodpecker's call" on YouTube. Try to imagine what Mel Blanc would have done with the Kingfisher call.)

The adults find an exposed branch over water and perch there to watch for prey. When one spots an appropriate meal in the water, it dives in, plunging headfirst into the water and grabbing the prey in its beak. They can also be seen hovering above the water, looking for food. Because they nest in banks, look for them along the Charles River near places where there are somewhat high riverbanks.

As long as there is open water in the winter, you can find these birds. They are harder to find in the winter as some do migrate to safer, more southern waters.

A much smaller bird is the Brown Creeper, which nests under the bark of trees. In contrast to the two larger and noisier birds above, this common species is small and quiet and difficult to see. Its behavior is most like the more easily spotted White-breasted Nuthatches that visit our feeders during the winter. In my experience Brown Creepers are not usually seen at feeders. They are known to eat suet and seeds, however, so it is possible that they visit some feeders.



Brown Creeper

They crawl up the bark on the trunks of trees. They spiral around the tree, always going upwards, whereas nuthatches will crawl down as well as up. They find insects and insect eggs in the crevices in the bark. Their beak is small and curves downwards.

They sing a high-pitched warbling song up in the canopy of big trees in the spring. Their more usual call note is a thin, high note that is easier for young people to hear. The male and female Brown Creepers look alike.

In the picture you can see some of the white underparts on the bird. These are often hidden against the trunk of a tree and are not seen by the observer. You also see the incredible camouflage that their plumage provides when viewed against the bark. The stiff tail supports this little bird as it steadies itself on the bark. In this photo, a parent Brown Creeper is bringing a small moth to its nest site, behind the crevice in the bark where the bird is perched.

The female builds the nest behind a loose piece of bark on the trunk of a tree. Often a dead tree has an appropriate spot. The male helps by bringing dried grasses, twigs, spider web strands and insect cocoons that the female uses to bind the twigs and grasses together to glue the nest structure in place. Both parents bring insect food to their young.

It is a challenge to try to observe this common bird that slips past most of us. Look for them in Newton parks that have large, mature trees. They are permanent residents here, so one can see them at any time of year.



Male Rose-breasted Grosbeak

A final bird to look for during the summer is the Rose-breasted Grosbeak. In this species, the more usual color contrast between the males and females occurs. The male, pictured at left, has striking black and white plumage over most

of its body, with the beautiful rose-colored triangle on his breast. Both genders have the large, gross (large) beak.

The song of the male is described as “the song of an American Robin who has taken voice lessons;” it is lilting, very cheerful and sweet.



Female Rose-breasted Grosbeak

The female has a more subtle beauty with a very eye-catching white line, called a supercilium, over her eye. Her photograph appears at left.

There was a Rose-breasted Grosbeak nest in the upper gardens at Nahanton Park in Newton two years ago. It was in some shrubs, about eight feet from the ground, around the edge of the gardens. Perhaps this pair took advantage of the nearness of humans to deter predators.

Both birds inspect possible nest sites and share in the building of the nest. The result is a loose construction of twigs, grasses and plant stems and is lined with finer material of the same sort. Both birds incubate the eggs, with the female spending more time at this task. The female usually takes the entire night shift. When the birds exchange places on the nest, they sing quietly to each other. They share the feeding of the young birds and are mostly monogamous for the season.

Males will challenge other male Rose-breasted Grosbeaks if they sing, but will tolerate them if they do not. Females, on the other hand, will actively attack other females who get near their mates or nest. Our numerous Blue Jays and Common Grackles are serious egg and chick predators for Rose-breasted Grosbeaks. The parents will become very aggressive if either of these species approaches their nest.

In contrast to the other three birds described, Rose-Breasted Grosbeaks do not spend their winters with us. Even though their large beaks are good for cracking open seeds, they depart in the fall for Central America, the south of Mexico, and northwestern South America. Many of them fly over the whole Gulf of Mexico in a one-night flight. Others fly around the Gulf, through Mexico. They reappear in Cold Spring and Nahanton parks in Newton during early May each year.

These beautiful and interesting visitors to Newton’s open spaces are here now. Perhaps you know them already. In any case, it helps all of our souls to go into nature. We in the Newton Conservators urge you to take advantage of your own open spaces. Use them or lose them. ■

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