

New England

22 October–1 November 2019

Participants

David Hughes

Edward and Mandy Mayer

Catherine Reay and Andrew Smyth

John and Angela Watts



Leader James P. Smith

Pacific-slope Flycatcher

Day 1 Members of our party met in the arrivals hall at Boston-Logan International Airport. Edward and Mandy were already there, having flown in a few days early to explore the city. The remainder of the group reported a reasonable flight and even landed 25 minutes early! Outside the terminal, rain and drizzle prevailed and gave a taste of the mixed bag of weather to come – typical for New England in late autumn. We were on the road by 8pm and headed north through Boston toward New Hampshire in slow traffic. Fortunately, we still reached the Hampton Falls Inn by 9pm. With check-in already taken care of earlier that afternoon, we settled down for a good night's rest, eagerly anticipating our first full day in the field.

Day 2 After sampling the coffee, tea and pastries provided in the hotel lobby, we met at 7am and clambered into the vehicle in torrential rain – hardly an ideal start! Autumnal storms are very much part of New England's fall season, and with the winds in the eastern quarter we headed straight for the coast, optimistic that we'd find some sheltered spots and a few birds. Within ten minutes we were already driving north on New Hampshire's beautiful coastal drive overlooking the Atlantic Ocean. The squally showers and stormy seas were unrelenting but we soon found a noteworthy gull flock at Eel Pond in Rye with some 40 Bonaparte's Gulls resting, drinking and bathing among larger numbers of Great Black-backed and Herring Gulls. There was even a hybrid (sub-adult) of the two latter species that most likely originated from the nearby Isles of Shoals where both species breed alongside each other. A Laughing Gull passed through the flock and went by completely unnoticed only to show up retrospectively in a photo review after the tour had concluded! The rain continued to pour but we found shelter and birds at the tiny headland known locally as 'Ragged Neck', overlooking Rye Harbour. It was extreme high tide and Semipalmated and Black-bellied (Grey) Plovers ran about the parking lot as if it were a shingle beach. We remained under cover and over the next two hours amassed a nice species list including some quality sparrows, with 'Ipswich' Savannah, Song and White-crowned Sparrows all present on the headland and giving decent views. A fine drake Surf Scoter rested in the calmer waters of the harbour

with more scoters beyond the breakwater, and we had very good views of the Atlantic coastal form of Common Eider (*S.m. dresseri*), sometimes known as American Eider. Common Loons (Great Northern Divers) were also present in numbers, some close inside the harbour and some numbers migrating south offshore. Overhead, hundreds of Double-crested Cormorants in spectacular V-formations hugged the coastline heading south, and Northern Gannets were a constant just offshore. By 10am, the showers abated and the sun began to break through. Almost immediately raptors started to show, with stunning views of a monstrous Cooper's Hawk in the parking lot and an adult Bald Eagle over the salt marsh. Several House Finches and a Northern Mockingbird looked quite comical as they dried out in the brambles by the road. As the day warmed up we continued north along Route 1A, finding a sheltered nook at Odiorne Point salt pans. Remarkably, in just a matter of minutes, we found three quality sparrows close to the road, allowing for the excellent, close scope study of a traditionally tricky group. Saltmarsh, (Interior) Nelson's and (Atlantic Coastal) Nelson's Sparrows were all present together in one small, active flock. The birds remained faithful to the same small corner of salt marsh and gave an absolutely brilliant show, pretty much unprecedented within the first few hours of a tour. We didn't neglect the other species to be seen either and found Great Egrets, a Great Blue Heron, several American Black Ducks and an adult Bald Eagle. We combined a substantial brunch with an equally substantial supermarket 'pitstop' in Portsmouth and then headed south toward the hallowed birding grounds of Plum Island, crossing the state line into Massachusetts. Plum Island is a bleak, exposed barrier island with an extensive dune system, thickets, pines, saltwater and freshwater marshes, and has been widely regarded as a birding hotspot for years. Our first stop overlooked the ocean where, again, we found loons offshore including our first proper looks at Red-throated Loons. Travelling south along the peninsula we came across our first swan of the trip on the salt pans, an immature Mute Swan, along with close views of American Black Ducks, Black-bellied Plover and a juvenile Northern Harrier. Further south, the Bill Forward Pool got rather exciting when a local American birder casually mentioned an American Bittern hidden in the reeds under the very embankment on which we were standing! After a few heated minutes we found the cryptic beastie, brilliantly hidden amongst the phragmites only a few feet away. The raised berm also gave us extensive views over brackish and saltwater marshes where we found hundreds of American Black Ducks and Mallards with some Northern Pintails and Green-winged Teals in the mix. Northern Harrier sightings became a feature of the day; Great Egrets were plentiful in the salt marshes and Savannah Sparrows among the grasses along the embankments. From there we travelled south on dirt roads to Emerson Rocks, keeping an eye on the thorn scrub for a Northern Shrike reported the previous day. Emerson Rocks provided a pleasant overlook to the south-east with the headland of Cape Ann in view beyond Ipswich Bay and Plum Island Sound. The actual 'rocks' were just offshore and exposed at low tide, providing a resting place for Common Eiders, White-winged Scoters and good numbers of Sanderlings. Impressive numbers of Northern Gannets remained in view throughout. With a very busy first day drawing to a close we headed north, retracing our route along Plum Island, though interruptions came thick and fast: American Robins on the road, a Blue-headed Vireo in the plum trees by the road, and a real transformation at the salt pans which produced Greater Yellowlegs, Dunlin and Semipalmated and White-rumped Sandpipers, none of which were present on our first pass as we'd headed south – not too shabby! A fabulous day in the field had come to a thrilling end. We made it back to the hotel with plenty of time for a hot shower and dined at the Outback Steakhouse where we wrapped up the checklist after a brilliant first day.

Day 3 The day dawned cool and crisp with a slight frost, a complete contrast to the previous morning. Heading south from Hampton along Route 1 we came across a flock of six Wild Turkeys around some abandoned buildings right by the roadside. To the untrained eye these particular turkeys didn't look

especially 'wild' but it's actually quite normal to find turkeys in suburban situations in New England. Nonetheless, it was a fabulous start to the day and a nice precursor to the rest of the morning. We continued on toward the coast and Salisbury Beach, crossing the state line into Massachusetts on the north side of the Merrimac River. The sun was out but a cool, brisk north-westerly wind blasted unimpeded across the salt marsh, keeping temperatures from climbing. An Eastern Meadowlark and a surprising number of Northern Mockingbirds showed up along the driveway into the state park and our first stop was extremely productive as we took time to accommodate the group's diverse interests. In the sheltered warmth of the local Pitch Pines we found some fabulous birds: Yellow-rumped, Pine and Palm Warblers, House Finch, Northern Cardinal, Black-capped Chickadee, American Goldfinch, Golden-crowned Kinglet, Chipping Sparrows and several Dark-eyed Juncos. The small-bird activity also attracted some raptors, with Northern Harrier and Cooper's Hawks up close and a more distant Peregrine resting atop an Osprey platform. We had our first Brent Geese of the trip from here, with the same tidal channel hosting American Black Ducks, Common Eiders and a lot of Double-crested Cormorants. Harbour Seals could be seen resting and frolicking on the sand bars in the Merrimac Channel, where we had very close views of Common Loons. Northern Mockingbirds continued to feature throughout the morning, with at least a dozen or more around the park, surprising for a species that's not especially communal or migratory but giving us the distinct impression that at least some of those birds were migrants. Looking north from the Merrimac breakwater, the open ocean initially seemed pretty quiet but John skillfully spotted a Humpback Whale spout some distance offshore. Careful scanning of the inshore waters yielded some nice results including our first Red-necked and Horned Grebes, many Common Loons and all three expected scoters – White-winged, Surf and Black – the latter being the scarcest of the family along this particular stretch of coastline. 'Brunch' was calling after a fine morning in the field and at Marie's Restaurant we found everything on the menu, ranging from in-house oatmeal to the fully cooked "Hungry Man" breakfast plate, just the ticket for warming up and preparing for the next stage of the day. It felt somewhat counter-intuitive to be retracing our steps toward Boston-Logan Airport so early in the tour but the general mode had suddenly switched from 'bird finding' to 'bird chasing'! Not only is October a beautiful time of year to be in New England, but, much like October anywhere in the Northern Hemisphere, it just happens to be the most anticipated month of the year for rarities. While the focus of the tour is very much on the birds and wildlife of New England, a key component of autumn is the regular occurrence of rare and scarce birds along the Atlantic coast. Moreover, birding in a new location would almost certainly produce new birds for the trip so we had little to lose by doing a little chasing. We left the highway just before the drive became really urbanized and ended up in the rather pleasant surroundings of Rock Meadow Park and community gardens in suburban Belmont. Our main quarry was a Tropical Kingbird, a member of the 'tyrant' flycatcher family and, in terms of the state of Massachusetts, every bit as exotic as its name sounds. With only two previous state records, the bird we had come to see would be the third if accepted. From a Birdfinders perspective it would be a really neat addition to the tour list and a wonderful complement to the Grey and Western Kingbirds that we recorded in 2016. By the time we reached Rock Meadow the day had really warmed up and the kingbird was found almost straight away, thanks in part to the fixed gaze of three local American birders who were already present on site. The bird put on the most wonderful display before sallying out across a weed-choked meadow and wasn't seen again that afternoon. The rest of our walk around Rock Meadow was rather quiet, perhaps due to the warmth of the afternoon, although we did have nice views of Red-bellied and Downy Woodpeckers, Blue Jay and a super skulking Carolina Wren. Giddy with success, and rather keen to head back north and leave the suburbs behind, we thought it fun to try for a pair of previously reported Sandhill Cranes in southern New Hampshire, and especially since Sandhill Crane was a bird that Catherine had always wanted to see! The fear of hitting heavy afternoon traffic forced us to leave

the highway and we passed through many a classic New England scene with white timberboard houses neatly set against beautiful fall foliage with the maples, oaks and beech all turning colour and shedding leaves. It was also a productive drive for raptors, with plenty of soaring Turkey Vultures, Red-tailed Hawks, a Bald Eagle and our first Common Ravens before we stopped for coffee and restrooms at Candia in southern New Hampshire. Our destination was a mere 15 minutes away but little did we know that another major rarity lay between us and the site where the Sandhill Cranes had been seen. Driving east along Route 101 we could hardly believe our luck when a lone swan was spotted in a beaver swamp on the north side of the highway. A hectic scorch down to the next exit ensued, followed by an equally hectic scorch back along Route 101 westbound! We needn't have panicked; the swan hadn't moved and was the only water bird present in the entire swamp! This was no Mute Swan (well established as a feral breeder in New England) but actually a Trumpeter Swan of unknown origin with the potential of furnishing New Hampshire's first state record if accepted. This lonely bird had apparently lingered in the same area since the spring when it was first discovered and was no longer at the forefront of local birders' thoughts. Still, it was a major scoop for us and literally a 'tick n' run' situation as we could only watch it rather briefly from the side of the highway. Distractions behind us, we soon found ourselves in the tiny, quaint farming settlement of historic Nottingham and quickly found the favoured crane site, a recently harvested corn field. Having had so much success earlier in the afternoon it was a little deflating to find the cranes missing but Nottingham itself did look beautiful in the late afternoon sunlight. We tried hard for the Sandhill Cranes but it wasn't to be. On the other hand, the search for them did produce fantastic views of up to seven Killdeers on a freshly-watered manure pile and numerous Northern Cardinals, White-throated and Song Sparrows along the hedgerows. It had been another wonderful day in the field, and the weather had been kind and the rarities co-operative. We headed back to Hampton Falls and dined at the fabulous Outback Steakhouse once more.

Day 4 Somehow the three nights at the Hampton Falls Inn had already managed to pass and it was with a slight air of sadness that we found ourselves loading the vehicle at 7am for our first major travel day of the trip. On the plus side, the Connecticut River Valley was our final destination and only a three-hour drive to the west. But first we had another full morning to look forward to along the coast before heading inland. Seabrook Harbour in New Hampshire was our first call. The conditions looked flat and calm, and generally pretty good for views across the harbour. Scope views were had of Common Loons, Buffleheads, Red-breasted Mergansers, a Bonaparte's Gull and an impressive gathering of no less than 12 Great Blue Herons. Hampton State Beach was just a short drive across the channel, where the barren, tundra-like parking lot seemed to be a major draw for a lone American Golden Plover that circled over us multiple times and was even ticked as a 'heard-only' from the public restrooms! Semipalmated Plovers and Killdeers also flew over, while the protected dune system hosted two or three distinctive 'Ipswich' Savannah Sparrows, providing a nice contrast to the two rather more typical Savannah Sparrows also present. At sea we enjoyed close views of a male White-winged Scoter, Horned Grebe and yet another close Common Loon, with huge 'V' formations of Double-crested Cormorants migrating south along the coast. We headed north on Route 1A through beautifully scenic coastal New Hampshire, making a brief stop at the local pharmacy as one of our party had picked up a nasty cold overnight. The pharmacy just happened to be a good excuse for the rest of us to top up on fluids and snacks before we were back at the birding, viewing from Hampton Sea Wall over a pan-flat Atlantic Ocean. Conditions looked superb but try as we might it was actually pretty quiet, producing lots of Common Loons and Common Eiders but little else. We cruised north, hugging the coastline until we reached Odiorne Point State Park where we had nice views of Song and White-throated Sparrows, Yellow-rumped Warblers, American Goldfinches and a lovely party of Eastern Bluebirds. After a hearty brunch in Portsmouth we

embarked on the long journey west toward the Connecticut River Valley. The overcast sky stayed with us well inland but the fall foliage for which New England is justly renowned was radiant as we covered the 100 miles or so to the Hadley floodplain. News of a remarkably rare flycatcher had reached us and with only a slight deviation from the original route to Brattleboro, we'd reached the flycatcher site by 4pm. The bird in question was a Pacific-slope Flycatcher. Not only was it a first for Massachusetts but was also the first ever to be identified in New England. It was no surprise, therefore, to find the location inspiring a modest twitch of 15–20 hopeful birders, all of whom were friendly, cordial and quite fascinated by the idea that a group of Brits should happen to show up at one of their own twitching events! The dull, overcast day fizzled into a gloomy afternoon and so did the mood around seeing the flycatcher. Apparently, the bird had put in the briefest of appearances only minutes before we walked into the site but hadn't been seen since. On the other hand, that was only one species and our group found plenty of enjoyment in seeing an array of New World birds up close: Red-bellied, Downy and Hairy Woodpeckers, Northern Cardinal, Blue-headed Vireo, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Yellow-rumped Warbler and Red-winged Blackbird to mention a few. Reluctantly, we left Hadley just before dusk, arriving at our well-appointed hotel with plenty of time to settle in and shower. Dinner was taken at the local Ninety Nine pub where we pored over the checklist among the families of Brattleboro, Vermont enjoying a Friday evening out.

Day 5 The day dawned cool, damp and foggy after heavy overnight rain – a typical October morning full of atmosphere. We met at 7:15am with our party in good spirits having consumed a more than ample buffet breakfast in the hotel. The theme of the morning was raptors and the location in mind was Putney Mountain in Windham County, Vermont, one of several dedicated hawk-watching sites dotted around New England where volunteer counters put in sustained daily efforts from 1st September to 1st November. We drove the quiet scenic route to Putney Mountain and, since the fog was still swirling around, we were in no rush as most raptors need some sun and breeze for migration. A quick stop at the Putney General Store for consumables was both fun and welcoming, as Edward engaged the locals with questions about the “night crawlers” advertised on the store’s blackboard propped against the front porch. Being the season for Halloween, “night crawlers” might have insinuated something other than fishing bait but we were assured that’s all they were. The winding road up to Putney Mountain brought us above the remnant fog banks and into mature woodland where we embarked on a pleasant trail system to finally reach the clearing at the top of the mountain. The walk itself through hemlocks, white pine, birch, beech and oak had been productive for a number of woodland species: Hairy and Downy Woodpeckers, Brown Creeper and fabulous views of a couple of Red-breasted Nuthatches. We received a warm welcome at the hawk watch, with some familiar faces already in place and counting, namely John Anderson and JoAnne Russo. Little did we know as we settled in for a couple of hours that it just happened to be John Anderson’s birthday! Not only had his friends gathered around him but they had also produced the most wonderful locally made apple pie at the mountain top and, even better, we were all invited to share!! Life was good – a very friendly atmosphere, apple pie, a beautiful autumn day and migrant raptors passing the mountain in small numbers. We enjoyed good views of Sharp-shinned, Red-tailed and Red-shouldered Hawks, local Common Ravens and small flocks of passerines including 13 Eastern Bluebirds and six Pine Siskins. With lunchtime fast approaching, we retraced our steps along the wooded trails to the parking lot and descended to the Putney Diner for a quaint but filling lunch. The afternoon had really warmed up and the fact that the Hadley Pacific-slope Flycatcher had been seen again couldn't be ignored. We headed south for the remainder of the afternoon, hoping to catch a glimpse of the elusive little green-and-yellow beast that should have been fattening up somewhere on the California coast rather than in Hadley. The location was a familiar one but being a warm Saturday afternoon, the numbers of birders had swollen considerably since our visit the previous day. As we

chatted to them, it transpired that the flycatcher hadn't been seen for a couple of hours and with that we settled down to searching for (and finding) a number of new birds for the trip – Grey Catbird, Hermit Thrush and White-breasted Nuthatch – as well as having second and third helpings of species that we'd seen already, including lots of Ruby-crowned Kinglets. As dusk crept in, only three birders, excluding our group, remained. Most had thrown in the towel and we elected to do the same only to find out later that the three remaining birders saw the flycatcher just 15 minutes after we left and watched it go to roost! Twitching can be a perilous business at times but this one did feel particularly unjust, missing such a massive rarity by just quarter of an hour. In the meantime, our journey back towards the north was enlivened by two adult Bald Eagles right by the Connecticut River in Sunderland and a spot of owling in Satan's Kingdom (well, Halloween was beckoning after all!). The owling was difficult as it often is, but of the three spots we tried, we clearly heard a Northern Saw-whet Owl giving a drawn, wailing 'whine' call at one of them. Dinner and the checklist were taken back in Brattleboro at the now familiar Ninety Nine pub.

Day 6 We met a little earlier than average in preparation for the long drive ahead. This was to be our big day 'up north' where we hoped to find some of the select species that can only be found in the boreal forest zone close to the Canadian border. We loaded up, optimistic that the weather forecast of 100% chance of rain would be incorrect, but it wasn't. As we headed north along Interstate 91, the weather worsened and it became clear that we were in for a very wet day. The rest of Vermont appeared to get the memo too because the roads were virtually empty. Our chosen site was Moose Bog at Wenlock Wildlife Management Area in Vermont's North-east Kingdom, arguably the best-known site in New England for four key bird species of the boreal woods: Spruce Grouse, Boreal Chickadee, Canada (Grey) Jay and Black-backed Woodpecker. As tempting as these species might have been, our motivation was clearly going to be tested as we geared up in ridiculously heavy rain, a real shame because Moose Bog is a beautiful spot composed of spruce-fir forest and mossy understorey and well worth an extended visit in more favourable weather. And so it began; we walked the narrow trails in single file, doing our best to hear and see any sound or movement in the forest. It was eerily quiet as cold, clammy rain penetrated even the finest wet gear. Then, suddenly and without warning, a Grey Jay flicked across the trail in front of us and only a few minutes later a Spruce Grouse did exactly the same, both birds disappearing into the forest never to be seen again. Somewhat optimistically we walked out onto the new boardwalk that led to a wetland across extensive beds of sphagnum moss. No birds were present on the pond itself but sharp-eyed Catherine spotted several Purple Pitcher plants, apparently New England's only carnivorous plant species. With no end to the deluge in sight, we returned to the trail system and set a course back to the vehicle. The walk was deathly quiet until we heard a small flock of Golden-crowned Kinglets, which, luckily, allowed for a close study just off the trail. As we walked away, it became clear that Edward had been watching a small passerine quite different to the surrounding Golden-crowned Kinglets and he gave a perfect verbal description of a Boreal Chickadee! Attempts to relocate the feeding flock and the chickadee proved fruitless and we headed back to the van feeling a little crestfallen but quietly content that at least a gallant effort had been made to see some boreal bird species in atrocious weather conditions. We headed back to the town of Island Pond for warm food and engaged in the first stage of the drying-out process. Lunch was fun with pizza and "grinders" freshly made on the spot and it was there that we made the snap decision to try something a little more ambitious than just driving home through the rain. By heading west, we'd be hitting the clearance of the weather system that had set in for the day further east. The route took us through rural Vermont via winding roads that we certainly wouldn't have seen had we spent the day in the rain at Moose Bog. It was simply beautiful as we traversed through the rolling countryside, passing from slightly denuded trees in the north to rather more colourful, foliated trees in the east. There was some pressure too, as the goal was to reach a key staging

area for Snow Geese before sundown. As we entered Addison County on the eastern shores of Lake Champlain, Northern Harriers could be seen quartering over rough pasture by the road and it wasn't long before we were gazing at a white mass in the fields below the village of Addison – Snow Geese, thousands of them! Luckily for us, many were right in front of the sheltered public viewing area at Dead Creek Wildlife Management Area. For an hour or more we watched mesmerized as the geese came and went in noisy gaggles only to be flushed *en masse* back to the viewing area where we'd set up. It was a fantastic experience and remarkable to us that we had the whole place to ourselves! The damp meadows were alive with waterbirds, not just Snow Geese: Mallards, American Black Ducks, Northern Pintails, Green-winged Teals, substantial numbers of Canada Geese and two Ross's Geese (adult and immature), the latter quite brilliantly scoped out by John. Feeling more than sated with such a magnificent haul, we began the long journey south back toward Brattleboro in darkness but still reached the hotel with enough time for supper at the now-established favourite – the Ninety Nine pub! The day's 400-mile loop had been unexpected but worth every mile in terms of the rewards.

Day 7 After another well-received hotel breakfast, we packed and loaded the vehicle for the long journey south-east to Outer Cape Cod. A drive of over 200 miles lay ahead but, to be honest, having completed a 400-mile round trip the previous day the prospect of another long drive didn't seem too daunting. It was a cool, drizzly start and we planned to use as much of the morning as we could before starting the drive proper to the Outer Cape. Our first stop was the West River Trail at the Retreat Meadows in Brattleboro. We had a nice close study of two different forms of Canada Goose foraging in a recently harvested corn field: the white-breasted Atlantic form right alongside the smaller, darker-breasted form that breeds in the Hudson Bay area of Canada, sometimes known as 'Interior' Canada Goose. Between the geese we found Mallards, a Northern Pintail and even had a few Wood Ducks flying over. The morning was still young when news broke, once again, that the Pacific-slope Flycatcher was being seen at its favourite spot below the power lines in Hadley. This time, conveniently, Hadley was actually on our way south and, seeing as that spot by the Connecticut River had been one of the most bird-rich on the trip, there was nothing to lose by trying for the flycatcher one final, nail-biting time. In thirty minutes we were on site and being greeted by local birders who gave us the 'thumbs-up'. The sun had broken through and it wasn't long before we had some quality insectivores in view: Black-throated Green Warbler, Blue-headed Vireo, numbers of Ruby-crowned Kinglets and close-up views of a Winter Wren. The latter, a close relative of the European Wren, was actually a life bird for John, Angela and David, all seasoned ABA listers who've travelled extensively in North America. This had been our third visit to Hadley and each visit had produced new birds for the trip. The feisty flycatcher, meanwhile, was still giving us and everyone else on site the run around. And then, at around 10:30am, a few of our group chanced a sighting of the flycatcher high in the canopy. In an instant it was gone and all we could do was point out to the gathering birders where it had last been seen. An hour or so passed and the decision was made to head out and begin the long journey to Cape Cod. Only moments later, a local birder started frantically waving us over...he had the flycatcher, or rather he'd just seen the flycatcher, right alongside the track that we'd walked so often. We reached the spot only to find a handful of birders gazing hopefully into the weeds and scrub with no obvious sign of the bird itself. But the situation was good. We had a feeding flock in front of us with weeds and vegetation either side of a wide open track. Sooner or later, or so it seemed, the flycatcher would have to appear and start foraging. Suddenly, David's booming voice announced, "There it is," and indeed, there it was – a tiny green-and-yellow denizen of the Pacific rainforest there before us in Hadley of all places! The flycatcher, while tough to see at times actually put on a nice show for the 15–20 birders now gathered along the track. We drank it all in, chatted with the locals, enjoyed the high-fives and even managed to take a few pictures – a victory for

perseverance. While some might say that visiting a single site three times in one tour is a little excessive, each one of those visits produced new birds for the trip and life birds for everyone in the group (except the leader). Moreover, being there at the scene of a first state record was a moment in history. It's quite likely that an interior site like the one we visited in Hadley will never see a bird as rare as a Pacific-slope Flycatcher again. Indeed, it's the only species in the modern era to be added to the state list from a deeply interior location; all the rest have been close to or on the coast. The time had come to set sail for the next major stage of the tour, the long, hook-like peninsula that forms Cape Cod. The journey passed quickly as we picked up the fast roads, stopping only for lunch at a convenient travel plaza. Less than two hours later we reached Cape Cod Canal where a brief stop found Great Blue Herons, Double-crested Cormorants and Herring Gulls all foraging around the fast-flowing tidal water. We crossed the canal via the Sagamore Bridge and then simply headed east along Route 6, passing through ten of miles of Pitch Pine and oak scrub barrens before reaching the Outer Cape proper at Eastham. First Encounter Beach provided spectacular views across Cape Cod Bay. The tide was fully drawn out, exposing miles of open mudflats with plenty of birds to be scoped: Common Eiders, Great Black-backed Gulls, Dunlin, Sanderling, Black-bellied Plovers and a couple of Laughing Gulls spread across a wide canvas of mud and sand flats. Check-in at our beautifully appointed motel in North Truro was straightforward and we arrived in good time to get settled in, shower and head out to a local seafood restaurant in Provincetown. After supper and the checklist we shopped at the local supermarket for breakfast items for the next three mornings.

Day 8 The day dawned cool, grey and overcast with a moderately strong easterly wind. The Outer Cape offers multiple beaches for viewing and it's really a question of picking out the optimal beach relative to the wind direction. Luckily for us, the best beach under those conditions was Head of the Meadow Beach in North Truro, a mere five minutes from the motel. We arrived to find we had the entire beach to ourselves. After heeding the Great White Shark warnings, we strolled down to the sand and surf to get closer to the many birds passing over the inshore waters. It was magnificent. The surf was pounding and the sea simply 'boiling' with birds: Common Eiders, White-winged and Surf Scoters passed by or rested on the ocean in huge numbers; Black-legged Kittiwakes and Bonaparte's Gulls were streaming by in impressive numbers, and Red-throated and Common Loons appeared plentiful. Farther out, careful scope scanning produced some fantastic late-season pelagics, with Great, Cory's, Sooty and Manx Shearwaters, hundreds upon hundreds of Northern Gannets and a surprisingly strong showing of Arctic Jaegers. As if that wasn't enough, we were then treated to a fabulous study of small gulls and *Sterna* terns all clustered together as they rested in a tight flock on the beach: Bonaparte's, Ring-billed and Laughing Gulls, and Common and Forster's Terns all providing wonderful scope views. After an all-important stop for warm drinks and bathrooms, we headed over to Herring Cove Beach where Mandy was quick to spot the first swallows of the entire tour, Tree Swallows in fact, streaming over the dunes and buckthorn scrub in numbers. At sea, it was every bit as busy, with hundreds of late-season Common and Forster's Terns, White-winged Scoters, Northern Gannets and plenty of Common Loons. Closer to shore we enjoyed good views of Red-breasted Mergansers, Red-necked Grebes and marauding Arctic Jaegers that found easy pickings amidst the masses of terns. We also befriended one very chunky juvenile Great Black-backed Gull with a taste for Peanut Butter Cliff Bars! From there we crossed the beautiful fishing town of Provincetown and had a walk around Macmillan Wharf in the harbour. Hundreds of resting Double-crested Cormorants were lined up along the breakwater and careful scanning produced five Great Cormorants, something of a regional specialty and not easy to see anywhere in eastern North America being almost exclusively restricted to the north-east Atlantic coast. The breakwater also supported a few Sanderlings and our first proper Ruddy Turnstones of the tour. Close-range Common

Eiders were plentiful and provided a good opportunity to study the distinctive head and bill shape of the North American form, *S.m. dresseri*. By early afternoon the wind had dropped and the sun was out. The day had warmed up considerably and couldn't have been more contrasting to the morning; as the locals always like to say, "If you don't like the weather in New England, wait a minute." The calm conditions seemed conducive for observing passerines and we headed down to Fort Hill, a preserved area composed of historic farmsteads, grassland, coastal scrub, estuary and salt marsh. The hoped-for passerine activity didn't quite happen, at least in the scrub patches, though we did have good views of Carolina Wren, Tufted Titmouse, Black-capped Chickadee and a brief Grey Catbird. The salt marsh was more productive and being there at extreme high tide meant that any sparrows lurking in the saltings had to be pushed up into the higher vegetation. Fortunately, we were treated to super views of Saltmarsh and Nelson's Sparrows at point blank range. In addition, we had good views of several Eastern Meadowlarks before we left Fort Hill, a nice treat as they were the first that we'd seen since the single bird at Salisbury Beach on the second day of the tour. We finished off at the somewhat infamous Eastham Stump Dump, an interesting foray to say the least because it became clear early on in the visit that the local firing range wasn't too far away and that shots were being fired! We needn't have worried as it was all very civil and didn't interfere with us or our birding. And how birdy it was too – we found multiple Northern Flickers, Eastern Bluebirds, Song and White-throated Sparrows, Dark-eyed Juncos, American Robins, a Red-bellied Woodpecker and a fly-over Sharp-shinned Hawk. The banner bird for this visit, however, was the Field Sparrow, a member of the genus *Spizella*. Small, shy and furtive with a plain-faced expression and a bubblegum pink bill, it's a fairly distinctive species and, fortunately for us, we found plenty at the stump dump, perhaps seeing a dozen or more. What we didn't see, however, at least as a group, was another *Spizella* sparrow photographed by David who'd wandered off to find a few birds of his own. David, quite innocently, believed he was photographing a co-operative Field Sparrow right in front of him but his photos actually revealed a Clay-coloured Sparrow which didn't come to light until weeks after the tour had concluded! Clay-coloured Sparrow is a rare/scarcely migrant in New England and would certainly have generated some interest on the local hotline had we known about it in 'real time', but kudos to David for having the presence of mind to take the photographs in the first place. We wrapped up our day with a nice early finish and dinner at the local Italian restaurant, which went well for the most part but ended up with some of the most bizarre waiter behaviour that we'd seen anywhere on the trip. Needless to say, the Italian restaurant wouldn't be seeing our custom the following evening.

Day 9 We awoke to warm southerly winds, far from ideal for any beach on the Outer Cape. As we had yet to see Race Point Beach we headed there first and found it pleasantly devoid of beach-goers – we had the place to ourselves with miles of sandy beach in both directions and a magnificent dune system behind us. It was immediately obvious that fewer birds were on the move than the previous day but there were still impressive streams of Bonaparte's Gulls, some Black-legged Kittiwakes and Common and Forster's Terns all heading west. On the plus side, there was an impressive show of close Red-throated Loons and numbers of Black Scoters, a species that hadn't been particularly well seen on the tour thus far. The light was actually pretty good, enabling reasonable scope views of Great and Manx Shearwaters passing to the east in the distance. Busy flocks of Sanderlings worked the shore and a Baird's Sandpiper appeared all-too-briefly with one of the flocks. As we moved in for closer views, the Baird's rather annoyingly seemed to vaporize and wasn't seen again. Equally frustrating was a Snow Bunting that called as it flew down the beach but couldn't be seen. On the other hand, it was both sobering and interesting to see a Sharp-shinned Hawk winging it over the ocean, only just making landfall at Race Point Beach. A short coffee break in Provincetown produced a Turkey Vulture overhead before we headed south to Orleans for a fun visit to the Birdwatchers' General Store where we found all manner

of bird-related consumer goods. During lunch we couldn't help but notice that the weather was taking a turn for the worse, pretty much exactly as had been promised in the forecast. There had been much talk about Great White Sharks on the trip and since we were close to the beach that gets the most frequent sightings, we thought it would be at least worth a little effort to try and see a dorsal fin offshore! The sea at Nauset Beach was raging when we arrived, with strong onshore winds and a dark, brooding sky as the clouds of the approaching front were there for all to see. The inshore waters were full of Northern Gannets, Red-throated and Common Loons, gulls and terns but, sadly, no Great White Sharks. The parking lot did hold a few birds of interest including several Song Sparrows and a pair of co-operative Carolina Wrens. Then the rain started in earnest and, despite pushing on and trying new spots at Nauset Light and Marconi Beach, we failed to add any new birds for the trip but Catherine did point out some American Pokeweed before we decided to close our day in the field. Dinner was an absolute delight and, being the last evening of the tour, we treated ourselves to a little waterfront dining at a fabulous restaurant overlooking Provincetown Harbour.

Day 10 The morning began with that air of awkwardness that's often so evident on the last morning of a tour. However, with the hotel check-out at 11am, we had an entire morning at our disposal and decided to make the most of it by heading back to the Provincetown beaches. Unfortunately, the weather was unrelenting and hard, lashing rain continued throughout the morning. Herring Cove Beach was 'bubbling' with hundreds of gulls and terns just offshore, as well as Arctic Jaegers, White-winged Scoters, Red-necked Grebes, Red-breasted Mergansers and plenty of Common Loons. Edward thought he may have seen a Glaucous or Iceland Gull fly past but we couldn't locate it, at least among the gulls that were resting on the beach. A drive out to Race Point Beach through the dunes and Pitch Pines wasn't so productive for birds but was definitely enlivened by a close encounter with a beautiful Red Fox right by the road. We finished off at Beech Town Forest, a new location for us and very birdy indeed, with Black-capped Chickadee, Tufted Titmouse, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Blue-headed Vireo and some absurdly tame Wild Turkeys that clearly had no fear of being taken for the pot! Bird of the day, though, was spotted by David when he abruptly announced, "I've got a Red-eyed Vireo," delivered with such conviction that he had to be believed! Most Red-eyed Vireos had left New England a month or so earlier so to claim an exceptionally late bird would require verification. But sure enough, we were all treated to good views and even managed a few photos for the records. Finishing the tour with a rare passerine was a fitting end to our time in the field. A final hour in the rooms gave us the chance to shower and pack in comfort before the long journey home. Boston-Logan Airport beckoned but not before we made one last stop at another Ninety Nine pub for lunch. The rain never stopped all the way to the airport and we decided against any further birding in favour of staying dry and an early drop-off at departures.

It had been a wonderful trip full of great banter and brilliant sightings, all amidst the beauty of New England in the fall. Thanks very much to all for helping to make the trip so successful.

James P. Smith

Northfield, Massachusetts.

December 2019.