

sports & outdoors

THE BELLOWING BULL OF THE MARSH

Just a few Sundays ago, 45 enthusiastic birders, including a dozen from Massachusetts Audubon in Ipswich, clustered along a fence rail on the Polpis Road at Folger's Marsh in the near freezing north-west wind hoping for a glimpse of a bird. Actually we were hoping for three different ones but any would be good.

We first played the call of the Virginia Rail, the bird in this column two weeks ago. After three tries, one sounded off about 30 feet from us with a fine series of grunts. But he chose to remain hidden. Then we tried the call of another rail, the Sora, but perhaps the chilly wind dampened its enthusiasm.

Finally we tried the call of this week's bird, the American Bittern. The player emitted a grotesque series of sounds like an old hand water pump would make. Again — nothing. But you don't know until you try. If we polled the group I'd bet 75 percent would say they'd never seen a bittern, but many more would say they have heard one.

"Bittern" is a strange word. It goes back to a Latin phrase referring to the bellowing of a bull. The scientific name, *Botaurus lentiginosus*, can be translated as a freckled creature that sounds like a bull. Based on this information you must have a mental image of this boisterous, feathered beast, stomping and snorting its way through the marsh. But, oh dear, wipe that image from your brain.

American Bitterns are among the most retiring of birds. To quote the early New England naturalist, Elliott Coues, "No doubt he enjoys life after his own fashion, but his notions of happiness are peculiar. He prefers solitude, and leads the eccentric life of a recluse, forgetting the world, and by the world forgot."

They are heron-like — not like a Great Blue though — more like a night-heron. Actually a young night-heron is the bird with which they'd most often be confused. So we have a mainly brown, streaked bird with a long yellowish bill. In flight the primary feathers in the outer wing are dark and contrast sharply with the brown elsewhere. And it is in flight that most bitterns are seen. It requires great luck to

BIRDS OF NANTUCKET

by Kenneth Turner Blackshaw



American Bittern

catch one in the open.

These birds are rare year-round here on Nantucket. They used to be encountered more frequently but an alien invader is displacing them. This is not another bird but an aggressive plant that is making our native cattail marshes rarer and rarer. I speak of the tall, brush-tipped reed known as *Phragmites*. Although there is a native *Phragmites*, the one causing so many problems is from Europe. Our poor American Bitterns are now considered 'endangered' in Massachusetts, not only because wetlands are being drained and filled, but also few of the remaining ones contain any cattails.

Like so many year-round birds, the winter population migrates in from Canada, replacing our summer

birds that head south. Strangely, this bird is not unusual on the island of Bermuda, over 600 miles from North American shores. It's a long flight out there, and in the late 1800s an 'officer' shot 13 in one season. I read several instances of this bird being a target. It's illegal now, and other than to prove shooting prowess, why would anyone do it? Their flesh is close to inedible.

So often the 'you are what you eat' phrase comes to mind and bitterns eat almost anything — a little vegetable matter — and any animal they can catch. A young bittern that was caught immediately spit up one garter snake about sixteen inches long, a meadow mouse and three crayfish, all partially digested. When you consider they are fed by regurgitation, you have to think about first swallowing the snake, bad enough, but then returning it? Dedicated parents are these.

Bitterns build a grass nest in the reeds quite early in the year. As incubation and chick raising occurs, the reeds grow up and form a canopy over the nest making it harder to locate. The birds develop runways they use to approach and leave the nest so that you never see them fly directly to or from it.

These birds have been confirmed to nest on Nantucket but not in recent years. Over the next weeks we'll be listening for the thunder-pumping sound of an American Bittern trying to attract a mate. Folger's Marsh and the marshes around Long Pond are good places to try. Their favorite time of day is the hour following sunset, so that can make for a great activity for a mild spring evening. Drop me a note if you are lucky enough to hear the bellowing bull of the marsh.

George C. West creates illustrations for these articles. If you enjoy 'social' birding, join the Nantucket Bird Club at 8 a.m. Sundays in front of Nantucket High School for a two to three hour birding trip. Call 228-1693 for more information. To hear about rare birds, or to leave a bird report call the Massachusetts Audubon hot line at 1-781-259-8805. Find more about Birding Nantucket on the web at <http://k-blackshaw.com/BN/BN.htm>. ■

Spring soccer starts season with banner weekend

For the third year in a row the Nantucket Student Soccer Association spring travel teams opened under rainy, raw and windy conditions. Seven of the nine teams, were in action, with all but one coming away successful. Down from 12 teams fielded last year, the NSSA has nine solid teams playing a competitive travel team schedule this year against teams as far away as Seekonk, with ages ranging from eight to 15.

On Saturday, two of the three girls' teams hosted Bourne at the Delta Fields. The U-9 girls' team is made up of girls facing competition for the first time, with some having played on the U-8 boys' teams last year. Evenly matched, the teams remained deadlocked at 0-0 until Nora Harrington managed to lift one over the head of the goalkeeper for the 1-0 win.

The U-11 girls team faced a competitive Bourne team that had been warming up by playing indoors. Nantucket's squad, undefeated for the past two years, had one week to practice outdoors. Giving new meaning to the phrase "see-saw action," Nantucket went up quickly, 2-0. Bourne tied it up. Nantucket went up, 3-2, Bourne knotted it again. Nantucket went up, 4-3. Bourne drew even again. Nantucket then put some distance between them by forging ahead, 6-4, only to have Bourne draw even

with only three minutes to go. Nantucket then inched into the lead off a series of passes that ended with Kate Daniels notching her first hat trick of the season. Led by the stellar play of Claire MacKay, Nantucket held Bourne in their end for the last thrilling few minutes to get the 7-6 nail-biter win. Scoring was also spread out among Nora MacLellan (2), Olivia Slade (1) and Kelli Molloy (1). Keeper Renee Perkins was outstanding in goal and tallied over 20 quality saves in net.

The U-13 boys opened at home against Dartmouth, a team that has given them trouble in the past. Nantucket took control early and peppered the hapless Dartmouth keepers, 11-1. Dartmouth had no answer for the Nantucket attacking game, as Nantucket moved the ball at will. Captain Conrad Troast and Caleb Gomes were impressive on both sides of the ball.

On Sunday, the U-15 boys team, which went 0-8 last year as a U-14 team, triumphed over Westport, 4-2. Scoring for Nantucket was Tony Espinoza, Henry Fee, Jose Ramirez and Luke Daniels. Coach Jorge Rojas was optimistic. "It was a great way to start the season."

The U-10 boys team traveled to Falmouth. Most of the boys, like the U-9, U-11 and U-13 teams, have been playing together in the gym for the past three

months, doing skills development. The U-10 team has the advantage of having the trainers from the indoor session as their coaches for the spring travel season. First time NSSA coaches Jessica Mulson and Claire Richardson are teachers in the school system. In front of a strong outing by Chris Tran in net, Ethan Wing scored two, and Raheem Spence and Timmy Earle one goal each, for a 4-3 victory. The defensive prowess of Dominic Costanzo, Jake Legge and Lewis Mundy-Shaw kept most of the action out of Nantucket's end.

For the first time in NSSA history, Nantucket is fielding two U-9 boys teams that opened their season on Sunday against each other before a cold but supportive home crowd. The two teams were evenly matched in general but one team had the benefit of a very strong defensive player in Quinn Towne, who proved impossible to get past to score, despite several quality runs from the forwards. He should be a formidable player when his team faces an off island team next weekend. Not only did the teams battle each other, they battled the stiff breeze which helped one team take advantage, with U-9-1 taking the win, 7-2. ■

— Linda Williams