

will perhaps see a bird that you have been looking for for a long time, simply because you heard it this time and knew where to look.

Winter is a good time to go to your local library or bookstore and see what they have in the way of birding books. Many birding travel books are arriving on the shelves — you can take yourself on a brand new adventure in a completely different birding area and maybe it will even be warm there.

Plant and seed catalogs make wonderful reading in the cold of winter. All those bright colors, the hint of what is to come, cheer one up immeasurably. It is a grand time to plan a native plant garden, a butterfly garden, or a garden that will attract birds with nectar, fruit, and seeds.

Winter is also a good time to read all those flyers and clippings you have amassed that speak of local environmental problems. When you have finished reading each one, send an e-mail, write a letter, make a phone call, and show that you really do care what is being done to our land and water. The birds will benefit from your caring response.

On particularly bad weather days, one's bird feeder provides for the birds' sustenance and for us it provides the birding that we crave. Some of the prettiest birds with some of the most interesting behaviors frequent backyard feeders.

And of course, there are those days when you absolutely must just get out there and see birds no matter how cold it may be, so I hope we see you on our winter Sunday bird walks. Check out the listing on the next page for the walks' locations, and enjoy some winter birds with us.

- Birdseed
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NATURE TALES FROM A WANDERER Surprise Bird – Thick-Billed Murre

Joe Grupp

There is an area at the south end of Hempstead Lake State Park, by a picnic area, that has a shallow pond that we usually call the swamp. It is surrounded and dissected by shrubby brush and trees, with open water at the south or outflow end that gives way to that same type of growth as you go north towards the inlet, where it becomes stream and wetland. On January 8, a group of us were surveying the area to record the species of birds we observed there and their numbers as part of the SSAS Research Committee's effort to build a database of the bird population using that area of the park. Our group consisted of SSAS members Mary Jane Russell, Jeannette Miller, Joe Landesberg, Rick Kopitsch, Steve Schellenger, and me, as well as a visitor from upstate, Norm Trigoboff.

The amount of water in the pond varies and over the years I have seen the area just about completely dry and also well-watered as it is now. Over the last few years, it has become a local hotspot during migration times. We were standing on the shore among some of the shrubs and trees where the water begins to open up, counting some ducks and geese, when a black and white, different-looking bird than what we might expect there swam out from among some cover not far from us. "What's that?" "Dovekie" (pictured). "No, too big!" Steve calls, "Murre!"



The bird swims out into open water, passing fairly close to us, moving toward the south end of the pond. Multitasking, we observe the bird, check the field guides to confirm field marks, and change our position to follow it as it swims along. Finally our bird is identified as a Thick-billed Murre. It is a pelagic bird, a bird of the northern ocean, one who even in the ocean is about at the southern limit of its winter range. Perhaps it was blown in by the rain and gusty wind of yesterday. Who really knows?

We moved with the bird to the south end of the pond as we observed. The bird's feet are set well back on the body, so far back that you could see the actions of the legs under the tail as it swam. It worked its way onto a log at the outlet end of the pond. It was awkward in doing so and even had to use its wings as a prop to achieve the upright position necessary for it to stand on the log. Being very close to us while it rested there, we were able to observe a fine dull-white line along the area where the upper and lower portions of the bill meet. That line is one of the field marks of a Thick-billed Murre.

Rick, using his cell phone, called an avid birder he birds with to report our find even before we were sure of the identification. While we were still actively observing the bird, cars bringing other birders began coming into the parking area. They joined us or independently observed. All were in agreement that it was a Thick-billed Murre. More birders came and then all of a sudden we were alone

again as the bird flew off and the other birders left, some hoping to find it on a nearby lake or pond.

A Thick-billed Murre has very stubby wings and has to beat them vigorously in order to fly. Those same wings, however, serve it well when it dives, allowing it to "fly" underwater. Its dives can take it to depths of 300 ft and even 600 ft under the surface of the ocean. It feeds on fish, crustaceans, squid, marine worms, and marine invertebrates collected while diving. Most of the area in the pond could probably be walked wearing fisherman's waders without getting wet. This shallow pond is a strange place to find this bird, even as I did see it dive twice while observing it. I couldn't help but wonder what it might find to feed on in this shallow pond.

The day before I wrote this article, I polled the SSAS members I was with the day of the observation, asking them to, in a very few words, tell me what impressed them that day. Steve: "The position of the legs and feet so far back on the bird." Mary Jane: "The number of cars with birders in them that descended on us so quickly." Rick: "The sharp contrast of the upper deep black portion of the bird to the very white underparts as it swam." Jeannette: "Why was it there?" Joe: "With its rear-positioned feet propelling it, it looked like a toy powerboat as it swam quietly along." Me: "Only by chance and chance alone was our group and the bird at the same place at the same time." I'm sure all our thoughts are more extensive than those few words allow and the day will live in our memory for a long time. It was quite a day!

BACKYARD SURVEY DATA NEEDED!

Joe Grupp

We greatly appreciate input from anyone that feeds and/or observes birds in their yard or neighborhood. Please do not hesitate to submit your observations, even if you make only very few. Simply record the date, time, and the number or approximate number of each species. Survey sheets are available at SSAS events and at ssaudubon.org or you can create your own.

Please mail your data to Mr. J. Grupp, Research Chairperson, 660 Edgemere Ave., Uniondale, NY 11553, hand it to me at our monthly meeting, or e-mail Birdstudyjoeg02@aol.com.

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BIRD WALKS

All walks start at 9:30 A.M.; no walk if it rains or snows or temperature is below 25°F. Any questions? Call Steve Schellenger at 987-8103. Directions and summaries may be found at ssaudubon.org.

- Feb. 22 Point Lookout Town Park, S.E. corner
(and Lido Preserve afterwards)
- Mar. 1 Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge
- Mar. 8 Hempstead Lake State Park (Southern
State Parkway Exit 18 south, Field #3)
- Mar. 15 Jones Beach West End #2, N.E. corner
- Mar. 22 Mill Pond Park (Wantagh/Bellmore, north
side of Merrick Rd.)
- Mar. 29 Point Lookout Town Park, S.E. corner
(Lido Preserve too)

 RARE BIRD ALERT (212) 979-3070

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EARLY SPRING MIGRANTS (Sat., March 28, 10 A.M. to 1 P.M.). Visit Jamaica Bay Refuge to look for phoebes, osprey, oystercatchers, other early migrants. Learn about the history & ecology of this 9,000 acre preserve. Easy hiking around the ponds & gardens. Free. Contact Don to reserve.

SPRING MIGRATION AT JAMAICA BAY (Sat., April 25, 10 A.M. to 1 P.M.). Meet at visitor center for easy hike around ponds & gardens. See warblers, tanagers, egrets, herons, other beautiful migrants. Limit 25. Contact Don to reserve.

JAMAICA BAY SUNSET CRUISE (Sat., May 30, 5-8 P.M.). Enjoy a 3-hour cruise aboard 100' boat "Golden Sunshine" from Sheepshead Bay, Brooklyn. Visit backwater marshes & JFK Airport. Learn about history, ecology, and wildlife of the bay. See nesting peregrine falcon, osprey, egrets, shorebirds, and waterfowl. Cost: \$45 includes narrated tour plus wine & cheese, fruit, drink, snacks. Leaders: Mickey Cohen, Don Riepe.

MONTAUK SPRING WEEKEND (June 5-7). Easy hikes along bluffs, "Walking Dunes," woods, and beaches during peak orchid and heather bloom. Activities include birding, seining, tidepooling, botanizing. Cost: \$345 incl. 2 nights at luxurious Manor House, 5 meals, 5 hikes, 2 evening programs, star watch, free LIRR pickup. Leaders: Mickey & Don. Limit 60.

For information and free field trip brochure,
 call/write Don Riepe, (718) 318-9344, driepe@nyc.rr.com,
 28 West 9th Road, Broad Channel, NY 11693; www.alsnyc.org.

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Option 1. You can join SSAS for a year by sending \$15 payable to **South Shore Audubon Society** using the form below. Our address is P.O. Box 31, Freeport, NY 11520-0031.

Option 2. To join NAS and your all-volunteer local chapter, you can help SSAS survive NAS's major dues-share cutbacks by joining Audubon through us for the same price that it costs if you join through NAS (we get \$0 unless you join through us). Mail the form below and your check payable to **National Audubon Society** to SSAS at the address above. The special rate for the first year is \$20 per household; \$15 for students and seniors.

➔ **Renewing?** Please send NAS renewals directly to NAS (we now get \$0 for all NAS renewals).

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