

## **NEW YORK STATE 400: MILESTONE OR MILES TRAVELLED?**

Sean Sime

I've always wondered what my 400<sup>th</sup> bird species in New York State would be. Thirty something years into this life of birding would imply it had to be something good. Unless of course, it's not. It could have been the dreaded clerical achievement, the by-product of the annual meeting of the American Ornithological Union deciding to raise a subspecies to full species status and wham, you wake up one morning with a new species on your list. No, the 400<sup>th</sup> needs to be something worthy. And you need to get out of bed for it.

Fast forward to May 24, 2015. One final check of reports on the spider web of online birding sites New Yorkers utilize before I hit the hay and there it was: a Franklin's Gull was photographed earlier in the day (at Plum Beach, Brooklyn no less). A breeder of the Upper Midwest and Canada, Franklin's Gulls migrate through Texas from their wintering grounds on the west coast of South America. They occasionally show up in western New York in fall, but to have a breeding plumage adult anywhere in New York in spring is a big deal. Not just a state bird for me, a coveted life bird as well, a worthy candidate. Similar in appearance to our most common summer gull, the Laughing Gull, this search was going to be the proverbial needle in the haystack.

Emails were sent. Calls were made. A plan was hatched. My friend Rob and I would search

alternate sites knowing a large group of birders would scour Plum. After coming up empty we eventually headed there ourselves deciding to start at the far western end. Seemingly out of the ether I watched the bird materialized a long way out in the channel to our southeast. To the delight of the twenty or so birders down the beach, we managed to communicate the location over the phone. Views were distant, but clearly identifiable before the bird departed unseen. Franklin's Gull was my 400<sup>th</sup> species in New York. I'm not sure what I expected to happen, an adrenaline rush, high fives, an end zone dance? I don't know, but nothing did. In fact, after congratulations from Rob I felt kind of empty. I chalked it up to being tired. I just couldn't reconcile the moment with the feeling. It got me thinking.

You see, as a new birder the flood of information can be intense. Eight hundred regularly occurring species in the US give or take a few. Then there's sexual dimorphism in the majority of those species (the males and females look different). If that wasn't enough many songbird species look completely different in spring and fall. Get the hint? There is a lot to figure out.

As I kid, I would thumb through my grandparents Peterson field guide. The possibilities were endless. Illustrations of bluebirds and curlews seemed almost mythical in

that moment. To this day I'm not sure if it was my desire to see them or the overwhelming feeling I never would that stirred something in me, but either way the effect was profound.

And then it began. When I was ten years old I was given my own field guide. Each species I saw would earn a check next to it's name in the index. Life birds! Early on it's magical. Ask any birder when they saw their first Scarlet Tanager and they could tell you. Even if like me, it was over thirty years ago (on a roadside trail off Oneida Drive in Silver Bay, NY if you're wondering). Moments seared in memory like stamps on a timecard.

I had been watching birds for years before I actually counted how many species I had seen. I vaguely remember being in my early 20's and realizing I had seen 175 species in New York, I

gave myself a mental pat on the back and thought

"Hmmm. Pretty cool." Ten years and a fair bit of effort later that number became 300.

And then something started to change. I became acutely aware of numbers. At that time the New York State list was roughly 430 species. After 300 species the majority of annually occurring breeders and migrants diminish rapidly. Basically, it becomes a tough road to see new birds.

My 300<sup>th</sup> species in New York was a Boreal Owl in December of 2004. My 350<sup>th</sup> was a Golden Eagle in November 2006. Fifty species in two years. My 375<sup>th</sup> was a Loggerhead Shrike in November 2010. Half the new species in double the time.



Birding with friends over the years we would say things like, “Wouldn’t it be awesome if a (insert most coveted bird here) flew over right now? Yeah, I need that for the state.”

That single word “need” represented a sea change for me. What used to be exploring the unknown and experiencing things for the sake of experience and understanding quietly morphed into filling in blanks. The joy of discovery reduced instead to relief if a target species was seen, disappointment if not.

Add to this the rise of competitive listing on the coat tails of the ever-popular Ebird database’s Top 100 list and it seemed a perfect storm was brewed. (Yes, I have had strangers walk up to me in Prospect Park and after introducing themselves announce they’re gunning for me! Nice to meet you too.) The cherished experience of discovery replaced by a numbers game measured in success and failure, in gamesmanship, but without joy. Four hundred should have felt special, but it didn’t.

Milestones can and should be evaluative moments in time. It’s human nature. Take stock. Adjust perspective. What I have come to understand as I crossed this particular threshold is that for me, 400 was less a milestone and more a nod to the miles travelled. It speaks to effort, but really says little of ability.

As I entered my checklist into Ebird, describing the field marks I was able to ascertain during my brief and distant sighting this notion was driven home. This just wasn’t me.

Days later I made it back to Plum with my friend Doug. To my relief the gull eventually appeared on the south flats. A slow approach was rewarded. For the better part of an hour the bird actively fed and defended whatever patch of sand it stood on. Without fanfare in the warming afternoon light the opportunity to study this incredible bird was afforded to a small group of us. It was amazing to see this species alongside Atlantic Brant, Laughing Gulls and Eastern Willets, birds it probably never encountered before. The gull may have been out of place, but in that moment I was right at home.

The best experiences in nature both answer and ask questions and this was no exception. My time with this bird left me with a greater understanding of the species yet wondering

about its journey here and how it was able to identify and adjust to a food source not native to it.

As the Franklin’s Gull screamed up the beach one last time it dawned on me. Although perhaps not at first, my 400<sup>th</sup> species had just showed me exactly what I needed, and it wasn’t another “tick.”

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### HELEN HAYS HONORED

On May 10 Society Fellow and past-president, Helen Hays was honored by the University of Connecticut with an Honorary Doctorate of Science and was the Commencement Speaker at the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, University of Connecticut, Storrs. Following is the text of the citation that accompanied the Doctorate Award.

“The mission of any College committed to the teaching of both the liberal arts and the sciences is to enable intellectual curiosity and success.

“With this mission in mind, we are especially privileged to honor today a woman who, over the past 30 years, has been a leading figure in bird conservation.

“Helen Hays, during your distinguished career as a researcher, you have demonstrated a true commitment to science, to the cause of conservation, and to training generation after generation of students.

“You received your Bachelor of Arts in Biology from Wellesley College. It was with graduate work at Cornell University that you began your exemplary career in ornithology.

“In 1964, you volunteered to go to Great Gull Island, formerly Fort Michie, to participate in the nascent attempt to convert the island to nesting habitat for terns that were disappearing from coastal areas.

“In 1969, you became the Chair of the Great Gull Island Committee, in the Department of Ornithology at the museum, a position that was, and remains, a gratis appointment. You list your 45 years of extraordinary scholarship and leadership of the Great Gull Island Project under

the heading “Volunteer” on your curriculum vitae. Under your leadership, Great Gull Island has become one of the largest colonies of terns in North America.

“You have recruited, trained, and managed hundreds of volunteers, many of whom return for years or decades. You have, through personal example and direct training, inspired and launched the careers of hundreds of students who have gone on to become biologists, natural history filmmakers, teachers, and physicians, and to work for universities, state, national, and international government agencies, and non-profits.

“Over your 45 years on Great Gull Island, you have amassed the largest continuous life history data set on any North American bird that will serve in the future for understanding the effect of climate change on Long Island Sound. You are an internationally recognized expert on the biology of terns, having published peer-reviewed papers in every major North American ornithology journal. You were among the first to discover the devastating effect of PCBs on wild

birds, work that contributed to the development of regulations protecting humans from this widespread pollutant.

“Throughout your eminent career, you have earned honors and awards from a diverse array of institutions.

“You have been recognized with Elective Membership and election as a Fellow of the American Ornithologists’ Union, by a President’s Volunteer Action Award from Ronald Reagan, a Conservation Service Award from the U.S. Department of the Interior, a lifetime Achievement Award from the New York Audubon, and an Alumni Achievement Award from Wellesley College.

“Helen Hays, for your continued commitment to environmental conservation and restoration, for your vast body of research that serves as a treasure for ecologists and ornithologists, and for your exemplary public service and scientific dedication, it is our honor to bestow upon you today, this 10th of May 2015, the degree of Doctor of Science, *honoris causa*.”

