

# Some Thoughts About Strays, Exotics, and Other Rare Visitors

Howard B. Eskin

A vagrant, accidental or extralimital bird is one which occasionally shows up in our area but really belongs somewhere else. Somehow these visitors have strayed from their normal home grounds and/or migration routes and end up in Pennsylvania, New Jersey and/or Delaware. However, seldom seen resident birds or those that normally migrate through our area are really not vagrants. I have actually been able to photograph many of the extralimitals through the generosity of other birders or when the vagrant birds have been reported by their observers on internet Bird Lists.

First of all, no one can actually prove why birds stray. However, there are lots of theories and ideas as to why they do and the following list may help explain some of the causes and/or effects of vagrancy:

- It could be the result of climate change; El Niño; global thermal warming.
- An individual storm or bad weather or strong winds blew the bird our way, e.g., Northern Lapwings, Northern Wheatears.
- Illness or injury caused damage to the bird's navigation system(s).
- Illness or injury leaves an individual bird behind when its flock migrates and when it recovers, it doesn't know which way to go.
- The bird is a pioneer and looks to expand its range due to climate conditions, lack of food or overcrowding.
- A bird or birds may have hitched a ride on a boat coming from Europe, Asia, etc. e.g., Hooded Crows or a truck coming from our West Coast.



Northern Lapwing, New Egypt, NJ, 2013



Northern Wheatear, Fox Point State Park, Wilmington, DE, 2010



Hooded Crow, Long Beach Island, NJ, 2011

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- A bird may have been a pet and it was somehow released by its owner or collector, e.g., Common Chaffinches, Monk Parakeets, etc.

percentage of birds may be genetically wired to wander and thereby protect their species for perhaps one or more of these reasons. I certainly couldn't prove any of the theories one way or the other.

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Common Chaffinch, Hunterdon County, NJ, 2012



Australian Maned Duck, Peace Valley Park, Doylestown, PA, 2012

- If every flock of birds always went to the same place each year at the same time, eventually a natural or man-made disaster could wipe out an entire race or age group.
- There are lots of people running around today with much better optics and cell phones. Also, more people have access to the internet and are reporting vagrants.

I don't mean to imply that birds are capable of making a rational decision or a conscious choice because of any of the factors above. I do think, however, a certain



Allen's Hummingbird, Lititz, PA, 2011

Below: Anna's Hummingbird, Shartlesville, PA, 2011



Above:  
Ash-throated Flycatcher, Stockton, NJ 2010

Curlew Sandpiper, Heislerville, NJ 2008



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Gambel's White-crowned Sparrow, Peace Valley Park, Doylestown, PA, 2012



Green-tailed Towhee, Collingswood, NJ 2009

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Harris's Sparrow, Brandywine, DE, 2009



Above: Ivory Gull, Cape May, NJ 2009

Left: Bullock's Oriole, Barto, PA 2013



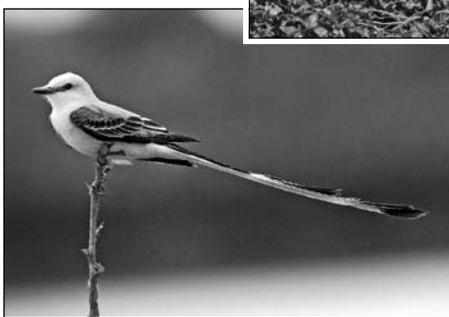
Lazuli Bunting,  
Red Hill, PA  
2007



Above, center; Roseate Spoonbill, E.B. Forsythe NWR, Absecon, NJ, 2009



Above, right: Henslow's Sparrow, Chester, PA, 2011



Scissor-tailed Flycatcher, E.B. Forsythe NWR, Absecon, NJ, 2012



Swallow-tailed Kite, Fort Washington, PA, 2011

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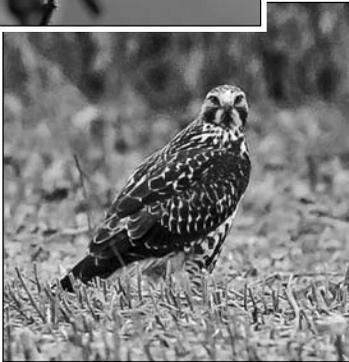
Varied Thrush, Allentown, PA, 2011

In any event, even if we don't know exactly why some of these birds that really belong elsewhere still manage to show up in our area, most of us are very, very grateful for the opportunity to get to see them.

Further, in addition to some of the rarer vagrants like the ones above, we also see birds in our area today, either breeding or on migration, that would have been considered extralimital fifty to sixty years ago. Some of these are Carolina Chickadee, Brown-headed Nuthatch, Black Vulture, Clay-colored Sparrow, Sandhill Crane and Blue Grosbeak. All six of these species have recently increased their range.



Above: Western Kingbird, Berks County, PA, 2011



Swainson's Hawk, Slaughter Beach, DE, 2012



Above: Carolina Chickadee, Peace Valley Park, Doylestown, PA, 2012



Left: Brown-headed Nuthatch, Cape Henlopen State Park, Lewes, DE, 2012



King Rail, E.B. Forsythe NWR, Absecon, NJ, 2012



Black Vulture, Harleysville, PA, 2013

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Above: Clay-colored Sparrow, Doylestown, PA, 2011



Blue Grosbeak, Bombay Hook NWR, 2013



Sandhill Crane, Middle Creek Wildlife Management Area, Kleinfeltersville, PA, 2012

Finally, some birds that are common in Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Delaware could actually become extralimitals when they show up in other parts of the country at the wrong time of year. I was in San Antonio, Texas in January, 2007 for a meet-

ing. I had one day off and, under duress, was forced to spend it at Mitchell Lake Audubon Center. While there, I saw and photographed an Eastern Kingbird (*Tyrannus tyrannus*).



Eastern Kingbird, Mitchell Lake Audubon Center, San Antonio, Texas, 2007

Being a picture taker (and not quite a birder) I really didn't think much about it as we see a lot of them in the tri-state area during the summer. But when the sighting was reported to the Nature Center, everything broke loose. Apparently, this was a first for Texas in January and only the third January sighting of the species in North America.

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**Howard B. Eskin**  
670 Whittaker Way  
Harleysville, PA 19438

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