



Bittern Chorus and the Bitter Cold

Spring temporarily presented as spring to us this week through a few wonderfully mild-blue days, puffy cumulus clouds, and gentle rainy evenings; that is until Saturday. Despite Saturday's sunny snow showers, migration forged ahead throughout the week, putting us just days from a full spring chorus. Over 15 species of warblers have been observed so far this spring, making the mornings fill the ears with wonderful pleasantries. The new melodies are motivations to rise with the sun each morning and absorb the beauty. Migration continues with each burst of southern wind and is a reminder of nature's beautiful strength. Chestnut-sided Warblers, belting-out their hurried song, not only mark the midpoint of warbler migration, but strike a chord in the heart. Birding is good for the body and soul, and as the lengthening days bring more sun, find time to listen to that poignant Chestnut-sided Warbler as it reminds you to be in the present and that the morning is pleased to meet you.

A Week in Birds



Virginia Rail: By Zach Adams

Warblers must be on everyone's mind at this point; judging a good day of birding by the number of warblers on the list. The early week, an extension of the warm weekend, brought sunny days with more and more migration each day. It began with the nice waves of Black-throated Green warblers, and Ovenbirds which exponentially increased in presence. Ovenbirds are a forethought to mid-summer with swishing leaves, humidity, and that unmistakable "teacher, teacher, teacher, teacher" echoing through each ridge and valley. Next came the Chestnut-sided warblers, just beginning to trickle into the Berkshires last weekend, they are now in full pomp and circumstance from each hedgerow or forest edge. Later, the flame-throated Blackburnian Warbler began its ascending notes into the stratosphere of pitch. Nashville, Tennessee, and Wilson's warbler all were sighted by Saturday, creating a very nice list of those tiny, colorful insectivores that have finally joined our forests.⁵

Not too distant of relatives from the warblers, a few other neo-tropical birds made quite sizeable appearances as well, including vireos, orioles, and Rose-breasted Grosbeaks. Early in the week both Orchard and Baltimore Oriole were seen in small numbers increasing to multiples and pairs by the weekend. Even in Saturday's numbing chill, they were out and about singing. Rose-breasted Grosbeaks started similarly slow but eventually took up their place in the chorus. Vireos, feeling very late, just finally arrived in complete diversity. Surprisingly, Blue-headed Vireos, our earliest vireo migrant, only just reached sizeable numbers and almost simultaneously with Yellow-throated Vireos.⁵ Both of these vireos have a similar, slow pace to their songs, but the Yellow-throated's raspy "three-eight" seems to amplify through

the new-found leaf cover. The insectivores were not the sole arrivals, marsh birds have awoken with their own unusual chorus of grunts, clicks, and gulps. Richmond Marsh has been the source of recent excitement with sightings of Pied-billed Grebes, Common Gallinule, Sora, Marsh Wrens, and even multiple Least Bitterns. The American Bittern was also spotted there and many other locations across the Berkshires in numbers as high as three. For a state-listed species, the American Bittern has been on quite a few lists, and seeing or hearing multiple is a testament to the endurance of migration and the strength of conservation. With their booming call, flared epilates, and cryptic plumage, the American Bittern as snuck into the reeds as this week's Bird of the Week!

Bird of the Week

American Bittern (*Botaurus lentiginosus*)

For most of the year, American Bittern is a difficult bird to find, announcing its presences only when flushed or a few gulps resounding from deep in a cattail patch. This very secretive marsh bird finds healthy numbers in the Berkshires and stands as a symbol for conservation and land protection. As they slip through the reeds, they often pause with their pointed beak towards the clouds allowing their striped neck to fool the onlooker as shades of the surrounding vegetation.²A member of the family Ardeidae, the American Bittern shares the long legs, neck, and bill with other bitterns, herons, and egrets.⁴The American Bittern stands out from the group with its incredibly cryptic patterns. Their multi-colored, mottled feathers are reminiscent of Ruffed Grouse or Great-horned Owls, creating an extremely complex pattern on the flanks and that notable reed pattern on the neck.³ Almost as cryptic, the American Bittern's "unk ah chunk" call begins with a few hunched gulps and both the call and the intro often sound just like water droplets making hearing this bird extremely difficult if there is a beaver dam nearby.



American Bittern: By Zach Adams

Searching for American Bitterns in the mysterious marshes of the North East is the fuel for almost every birder at some point. Whether you are a beginner or have birded for decades, you have likely spent time with ears peeled or scopes scanning the edge of marshes. If these birds are so hard to find for birders, it becomes even harder if you are a researcher attempting to capture the birds. One technique used to capture these birds is using a recording of the deep booming call and mirrors to attract the aggressive males who fly in to defend their territory.¹Life amongst the marshes might seem quiet in the heat of mid-summer, but this aggressive behavior stands as a record of how much is happening without much notice. Somewhere deep in the cattails, the bitterns are stalking their aquatic prey (fish and amphibians) moving with slow, marched footsteps.²Their success is enhanced by eyes that actually focus downwards - appearing crossed- allowing them greater focus on prey that lurk in the shade of the reeds.¹The reward of spotting an American Bittern is a deep breath and a broad smile and the motivation to keep looking for those other secretive marsh birds like the many rails. There is mystery whispering through the marshes that only a foggy morning or a still evening will reveal; find it.

Works Cited

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For questions, comments, or suggestions please email Zach Adams at Mass Audubon Berkshire Sanctuaries: zadams@massaudubon.org