



MONTEREY NEWS

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Redbellies

“Rare to very uncommon and local, but increasing, resident.”

Twenty-three years ago the Massachusetts Audubon Society published a book, *Birds of Massachusetts*, with dates and details on the occurrence of 460 species of birds in the state. If you think you might have seen an albatross off Cape Cod, for instance, you can look this up and find you are not alone in thinking this. By 1993 there had been three sightings of the black-browed albatross and two of the yellow-nosed albatross. I used the book recently to see if it were wildly possible that I'd seen a western tanager here. Turns out it was, it is, and this book says they are among the more “frequent vagrants” to Massachusetts from western North America.

We all have our usual suspects, birds we think of as “common pals.” I think of chickadees, blue jays, goldfinches, crows, and a host of others. I think of several kinds of woodpeckers: downy, hairy, pileated, and then the yellow-bellied sapsuckers and flickers. Call them what you like, to me they are family, or familiar.

Maybe you get frequent visitors, and then one day realize they feel like family. This experience must vary from place to place, within Monterey. To me, bears are rare visitors and moose have never even dropped by. To some of my neighbors, bears have become such regular characters that they feel like old news, maybe even family.

When this book of Massachusetts birds came out in 1993, the red-bellied woodpeckers were never seen by us in this part of Monterey. We did hear that folks down south in Sheffield were seeing them more and more. The book says that before 1955 the redbellies were considered “rare vagrants,” like the albatrosses. If a new edition of the book were to come out, I bet the redbellies would get a new descriptor, maybe even “familiar.”

This past month we stocked the feeder, hung the suet, and right away chickadees and titmice hit the café. There were downy and hairy woodpeckers, too, the trusty bird family right out the kitchen window. Every day more old pals showed up, and then one day, the glorious and rather new pal—a red-bellied woodpecker.

This was a female, with her grey under-plumage, black-and-white barred back and wings, and that scarlet nape or back of the neck. She came right to the feeder and picked up seeds in her big business-like bill. She flew off and then came back



to grab onto the tall post that holds our platform feeder. She climbed straight up under the center where there is a lag bolt holding the feeder to the pole. Our feeder has stood out there shaking in the wind and weather so long, with all those patrons landing and taking off, that the hole has gotten enlarged and some seeds trickle down through it beside the bolt. Woodpeckers are designed for vertical perching on tree trunks, so they get up under our feeder and take the seeds that trickle down the bolt-hole.

I was thrilled to see her, of course. It seems only yesterday that I was envying the Sheffield folks and only knew this bird myself from pictures in a book. Now that she comes here, I am excited when she first shows up, and look forward to seeing more of her.

The day after her arrival, I sat by the top of the garden and watched the sun come twinkling up. Four ravens flew croaking up the brook valley. Chickadees and titmice arrived in the apple tree near where I sat. They fluttered and foraged, talking to each other: dee-dee, dee-dee. I don't think they were talking to me, but maybe. I stood up and headed out past the compost bins for a walk.

There by one of the bins I saw a drift of feathers on the ground, a new one. These had not been there the day before, and there were several sorts of feathers, too many for this to be an accidental

loss or molt. There were fluffy grey ones, the kind that keep a bird warm, and long sturdy black and white ones, that keep a bird in the air. I knew it was a woodpecker by the look of these primaries and secondaries, the wing feathers. I thought maybe it could be a hairy woodpecker, by the size, but there was something broader, bolder, more contrasty about them. So I carefully folded a few into my little notebook and took them to the house, to the field guides.

After more than forty years of partnership with me, Joe has hit upon a sure gift every birthday and Christmas: yet another field guide. So I have the one to feathers. I also have guides to bark, skulls, caterpillars, and even one called *Field Guide*, a guide to fields, of course, which is handmade and the only copy in existence so far.

I looked at the pages of woodpecker feathers from several species, noticing the differences among many similar black-and-white wing feathers. As I sat at the kitchen table, with the usual suspects zooming in and out of the feeder right outside the window, I knew there was a good chance I would not see that lady redbelly again. I hoped I would, but it's been a week now. The feathers are a wonder. None of the other local woodpeckers have white tips on their wing feathers, and I still say there is something even clearer, something that feels more pure, about these from the redbelly than any I've picked up over the years from the hairies or downies.

So she died, my new familiar. We crossed paths, and then she crossed over, gone to feed a hawk, we think. I have a bright memory of her, a vision of those few seconds she was at our feeder. I have a few of her feathers, and my greater understanding now of one of the ways she was a redbelly and only a redbelly, a member of the species *Melanerpes carolinus*. She had a red belly, too, though most people never see this. It is a rosy patch right between the legs, and there are some good photos that show it. Mostly, though, these birds grab up tight against a vertical perch like a pole or tree trunk, hanging on with sharp claws and bracing with a strong stiff tail. That belly is flat against the trunk, impossible to see.

I miss that lady redbelly, in some detail. Thanks to this, I'll always have her. — Bonner McAllester