

LABRADOR CHICKADEE (*PENTHESTES HUDSONICUS*
NIGRICANS) IN BOSTON AND VICINITY IN
THE FALL OF 1916.

BY HORACE W. WRIGHT.

AGAIN after an interval of only three years another extensive southern migration of *Penthestes hudsonicus* into New England has occurred. The subspecific type of the birds of this incursion, Dr. Charles W. Townsend informs me he will discuss in a paper which he is preparing for 'The Auk.' Briefly it may be stated that he finds all the birds, which have been collected in this latest migration and have come under his examination, to be of the *nigricans*¹ type and not the *littoralis* type. My paper on the incursion of *hudsonicus* in 1913,² upon such testimony as is presented in the paper, assumed the type of that incursion to be *littoralis*. It is not the purpose of this brief article to assist in determining the subspecific type of the visitants in either migration, but to indicate by records obtained that the southward movement of *hudsonicus* has been general and as extensive, if not, indeed, more extensive than the migration of 1913. With the records which I have obtained I am enabled to unite those of a number of other observers, who have kindly coöperated to further the purpose in view.

My own records are: Mount Auburn Cemetery, Cambridge, October 29, one bird; Middlesex Fells, Melrose, November 7, two birds; 25, five birds; Belmont, November 9, nine birds; 20, eight birds; December 9, eight birds; January 1 and 3, 1917, three birds; Arnold Arboretum, Boston, November 16, three birds; December 5, twelve birds; January 8, two birds; Jamaica Plain, November 23, one bird.

Other observers' records are: Mr. William Brewster, Concord, October 7 and 12, one bird; 22, three birds; 23 and 31, one bird; November 3, one bird.

Dr. Charles W. Townsend, Ipswich, November 5, three birds;

¹ Auk, vol. XXXIII, Jan., 1916, p. 74.

² Auk, vol. XXXI, April, 1914, p. 236.

December 10, seven birds; 17 and January 1, two birds; Belmont, November 26, five birds.

Mr. James L. Peters, Harvard, November 8, one bird.

Miss Mabel P. Cook, Lexington, November 9, one bird.

Miss Annie W. Cobb, Arlington, November 11, two birds; Arnold Arboretum, Boston, December 1, twelve birds; Ipswich, December 2, ten birds.

Dr. Winsor M. Tyler and Dr. Walter Faxon, Belmont, November 15, twelve birds; 19, eight birds; 26, two birds; December 9, eight birds, 11, four birds; January 10, two birds; Dr. Tyler, Ipswich, December 31, one bird; Lexington, January 7, one bird.

Mr. C. J. Maynard, Waltham, November 18, five birds; 25, two birds.

Mrs. Edmund Bridge, Middlesex Fells, Melrose, November 19, nine birds; Arnold Arboretum, December 9, two birds; Walden, Concord, January 29, four birds.

Mr. Harold L. Barrett, Arnold Arboretum, November 19, 26, December 3 and 10, three to five birds; December 24, eleven birds; 31, seven birds; January 1, 1917, five birds; 7, four birds; 21, ten birds; 28, four birds.

Miss Viola E. Crittenden, Beverley Cove, Beverley, November 26, five birds; December 3 *et seq.* to January 7, two birds; 13, none.

Dr. John B. May, Cohasset, November 27 *et seq.* to January 5, four birds.

Dr. Walter Faxon, Granny Hill, Lexington, November 18, 22, 29, December 2 and 8, three birds; December 10 and January 7, one bird; Belmont, December 3, eight birds.

Mr. Campbell Bosson, Belmont, December 2, three birds.

Judge Charles F. Jenney, Westwood, January 6, 1917, two birds.

Miss Helen Granger, Chestnut Hill, Brookline, January 23, one bird.

The above enumeration indicates that twenty-eight birds have been noted by me in five different localities, while in 1913, twenty-five, and possibly thirty, individuals were recorded in twelve different localities, my outings extending over a wider range of country during the earlier incursion, which indicates that these Northern Chickadees have been in larger companies during the migration of 1916. Several of the records of other observers confirm this

view. The largest company observed in 1913 consisted of nine individuals on the Belmont lands. In this second incursion twelve birds have been reported in the Arnold Arboretum, twelve at Belmont, ten at Ipswich, and nine in the Middlesex Fells. In each instance these numbers were assembled essentially together, although on some occasions seen in scattered near groups.

The crest of the wave of the 1916 migration in this vicinity seems to have been between November 9 and December 10; earlier records are of one to three individuals only, while my later records fall to two or three individuals respectively in the first week of January, 1917, three birds on the Belmont lands and two birds in the Arboretum. Mr. Barrett, however, furnishes a record of ten birds seen in the Arboretum, January 21, after having obtained smaller records on previous dates, and on January 28 he found but four birds.

In general it may be said that these Hudsonians of the migration of 1916 have been much more shy than the birds of the 1913 migration. I have seen none at as near range as I viewed many in the former migration. Then they were accustomed to be feeding in the sunlight and frequently upon stalks of golden rod and aster, allowing very near approach and as full scanning as the observer desired to make. During this migration of 1916 the birds have been very elusive and kept themselves very largely in dense shade either in the cedars, hemlocks, or pines, as the growth might be, or upon the ground underneath from which all strong light was excluded. The birds have also been very restless and suspicious upon approach, leading the observer a considerable chase sometimes to follow them up. This has made difficult the determination of their particular coloration. So "a bird in the hand" rather than "in the bush" has been required for an examination adequate to determine the subspecific type. Happily, Dr. Townsend with the assistance of others is rendering this necessary service. The call-notes, however, are always *specific* and distinct from those of the Black-capped Chickadee. So an identification of the species is readily made.

A letter from Mr. George L. Kirk of Rutland, Vermont, to Dr. Townsend, which the latter has kindly placed in my hands with the privilege of quoting, is of so much interest as bearing on this 1916

migration that it is herewith presented almost in full with the author's permission. Mr. Kirk writes under date of January 12, 1917: "Your letter in reference to the Acadian Chickadee came to hand this morning. . . . Unfortunately I did not secure any, nor have I shot any of these Northern Chickadees during the two years I have been collecting bird skins. I very much regret that I cannot supply you with material for examination in preparation for your paper, especially in view of your statement that the birds which visited us in the fall of 1916 were probably the form *Penthestes hudsonicus nigricans*, but the best I can do is to give you some idea of their abundance last fall.

"For some reason the birds were abnormally shy at this time. Heretofore those I have seen were so tame that one could approach within five or six feet, if they happened to be feeding low, but this year they were constantly on the move and seemed to leave the vicinity every time they realized a hunter was near. . . .

"The Acadian Chickadee is said to be found rather regularly in northern Vermont, but eighteen years of careful observation have convinced me that it is rare in this part of the State, even in the winter season in the heavy spruce woods of our mountains. With the exception of that season, three or four years ago, when you had a visit from them in Massachusetts (I have not my notes at hand this minute to look up the date), I have seen only an occasional single bird until 1916, when they were much more abundant than during the flight previously referred to.

"During the week of October 22, 1916, I was in the mountain woods every day hunting partridges. The Acadian Chickadees were then confined almost entirely to spruce timber above 1800 feet altitude and were so abundant that their notes (so different from our Black-cap when the two are heard together) were heard everywhere. They kept to the thick evergreens so persistently that it would be difficult to estimate how many were seen or heard each day, but they were as abundant as any species of bird about at that time. The troops in which they travelled seemed to keep by themselves and not mingle to any extent with the native Chickadee. The following two weeks the birds were seen in the hardwoods of the lower country, and the writer and friends who are interested in birds saw and heard them a number of times. After

November 20, they apparently had passed south, for, although I have been in the woods for a considerable time once each week since that date, I have heard the notes of only two stragglers. . . .

"This has been the best season in many years here for winter birds. Redpolls, Snow Buntings, Pine and Evening Grosbeaks, and White-winged Crossbills came unusually early and are abundant."

Mr. Kirk in a subsequent letter states that he saw one of the Northern Chickadees on January 14 at Rutland.

Mr. Richard M. Marble of Woodstock also gives interesting Vermont testimony in a letter received from him, in which under date of January 14, 1917, he states, "An Acadian Chickadee has been a visitor to Mr. Fred Dana's feeding station since November, and possibly before," and he adds, "also a wintering White-throated Sparrow. Doesn't this locality seem a little far north for that bird to be wintering? Undoubtedly a home-made feeding station, which is always well supplied with food, has much to do with his stay. A Junco is almost always with him. We have all the winter visitants with us now and in fairly good numbers. I see almost every day in some large box elders on our lawn three Evening Grosbeaks. Pine Grosbeaks, of which there seem to be more adult males than usual, are quite common, as are both Crossbills and Redpolls."

In a later letter Mr. Marble writes: "If one is able to distinguish between the *nigricans* type, as described by Dr. Townsend, and the *littoralis* type by the brown on the sides, the Northern Chickadee which is wintering with us is unmistakably *littoralis*. The brown on its sides is very red and conspicuous. It also seems to me that the back shows quite a brownish tint." May not this Woodstock bird be a northern New England resident, and, therefore, as such definitely *littoralis*, attracted to the feeding station in its wanderings, and remaining a constant visitor because so well cared for?

As indicating the time of the southward movement reaching northern New England, it may be stated that before my departure from my summer home at Jefferson Highland, New Hampshire, October 11, I had seen several individuals in that locality. The records are one bird on the first day of the month, three on the fourth day, one on the fifth, and one on the tenth. These records

probably represent as many different birds on account of the various localities and separation of time in which they were seen. No *hudsonicus* had been noted earlier than October 1. Its appearance was upon the first morning of heavy frost, the mercury registering 30° with ice skimming the puddles in the road. A considerable migratory movement had occurred in the night, bringing White-crowned Sparrows and Ruby-crowned Kinglets with an increase of White-throated Sparrows, Juncos, Myrtle Warblers, and Olive-backed Thrushes. White-winged Crossbills and Pine Siskins had already been much in evidence about the Highland. My assistant, Mr. E. D. Parker, in a recent letter informs me that he heard and saw some of these Northern Chickadees about the cottages on the Highland at various times up to the middle of December.

During the week of October 22, Mr. Kirk states that while he was in the mountain woods, he found the species "so abundant that their notes were heard everywhere." The rapid progress of individuals southward is indicated by Mr. Brewster's records at Concord, Massachusetts, which range from October 7, when the first bird was noted, and October 12, when the second bird was noted, to the 22d day, when three birds were seen "pecking at gray birch seed-cones." And Dr. Tyler informs me that he recorded on October 29 and again on November 3 in his notes respectively for those days that he heard the calls of several Chickadees flying southward and for a moment alighting in a tall white pine tree, which he was almost certain were the notes of *hudsonicus*, identical to his ear with the minor notes of the Acadian, as heard on several occasions in the White Mountains and in 1913 when for a few weeks the species was common in the Boston region. By the middle of November, or thereabouts, the birds seem to have been most numerous in this vicinity and not to have diminished in number, perhaps, until about December 10, after which date fewer individuals were in evidence.

And as indicating the much farther southward movement of the migration of *hudsonicus*, Mr. H. H. Cleaves in a letter to Dr. Townsend states that he saw four individuals at Staten Island on December 5 and that these birds were first seen on December 2. Dr. Townsend has later received from the American Museum of Natural History a specimen taken at Staten Island on January

14, 1917, and one taken at Plainfield, New Jersey, on December 31, 1916. Other southern records in this 1916 migration, which have been already published,¹ are of one bird on November 6 at Rhinebeck, New York, and one on November 13 at Hewlett, Long Island.

Golden-crowned Kinglets have proved to be the closest companions of these Northern Chickadees on many occasions. Indeed, they seem to be their natural associates. Black-capped Chickadees are rather their incidental companions, with whom they occasionally come in touch, but do not habitually move. Casual associates on the cedar-grown pastures of Belmont Hill were a Palm Warbler on November 9 and December 9, a full-plumaged male Cape May Warbler and a Ruby-crowned Kinglet on November 20. The individuals which have come under my notice have usually been quite silent, giving their characteristic calls infrequently, and so revealing their presence but little. On this account it is quite probable that more individuals have been present on some occasions than have been enumerated and the numbers actually recorded fail to adequately express the size of the migration. They may be regarded, however, as serving to suggest its extent and for illustration.

¹ Auk, vol. XXXIV, Jan., 1917, p. 91.



Wright, Horace Winslow. 1917. "Labrador Chickadee (*Penthestes hudsonicus nigricans*) in Boston and Vicinity in the Fall of 1916." *The Auk* 34, 164–170.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/4072481>.

View This Item Online: <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/54047>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/4072481>

Permalink: <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/partpdf/86568>

Holding Institution

Smithsonian Libraries and Archives

Sponsored by

Smithsonian

Copyright & Reuse

Copyright Status: Public domain. The BHL considers that this work is no longer under copyright protection.

This document was created from content at the **Biodiversity Heritage Library**, the world's largest open access digital library for biodiversity literature and archives. Visit BHL at <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org>.