



Ruth Grierson on Somes Sound, July 2011. *Photo by Steven Katona*

## Reflections of a Natural Historian

*Ruth Gortner Grierson*

After many years of summer camping on Mount Desert Island, particularly at the Seawall Campground at Acadia National Park, it came naturally for us in 1972 to think of the Island when the time came for my husband Stanley and me, our daughter Heather, and our son Scott to move. MDI had always been a wonderful vacation destination for us and we had enjoyed all the wildlife to be seen, even on our short visits. So we gave our twenty-acre wildlife sanctuary and home called "Tri-Loba Hill" in Westchester County, New York to The Nature Conservancy. It is now part of the Marion Yarrow Preserve on Todd Road, just on the edge of Katonah, and remains to this day a place where you can walk and enjoy the native wildlife not far from New York City.

Our search for a piece of land on MDI brought us to Bass Harbor, where we bought a number of acres near Ship Harbor, with Acadia National Park as our neighbor. These acres, too, are protected; they are under a conservation easement held by Maine Coast Heritage Trust so they will remain unspoiled. On our new land, we created a pond in a natural wet, springy area and it has made a popular habitat for birds, beavers, and all sorts of other wildlife.

What I've observed generally over these forty years is that the number of birds has greatly decreased, even though there are a few additional species now living here year round. A few new mammals have also arrived and now breed here, but not in great numbers. There are several reasons for these changes, of course—among them, many more people living here now, more homes and hotels constructed and open spaces destroyed, increased pollution with more cars and industry, the filling in of wet areas, more pets such as cats and dogs running loose, and the effects of climate change.

I remember well, when we became residents in 1972, the yearly gathering each August of hundreds of tree swallows lining up on the wires near the road at the Seawall causeway as they prepared to migrate. It was also there, in the wet marshy area across from the ocean, that we saw and heard earlier in the season red-winged blackbirds proclaiming their territories with lusty, melodious voices, the males displaying their red epaulettes. A favorite memory of those days is enjoying delicious Maine meals at Annabelle's Restaurant, a popular eating-place at the edge of the Park for many years, and watching the birds nearby.

As I write these words in 2012, the swallows are no longer to be seen—not a one—and in the marsh at Seawall, only one or two red-winged blackbirds continue to nest. The reasons for these changes have been investigated for several years. Studies conducted on MDI in 1997 and 1998 by Jerry Longcore, Reza Dinali, and Terry Haines and their Environmental, Monitoring and Assessment team from the University of Maine and Acadia National Park found that high levels of mercury were present in tree swallow eggs, their young, and their natural food. I don't know for certain if they have confirmed the answer but my personal thought is that the mercury is but one of many reasons for the birds' absence.

Back in 1972, if we wanted to observe a turkey vulture we would have to drive towards Bangor until we were almost at the Lucerne Inn before seeing one. There these large scavengers would be circling in their characteristic flight on their long, slightly up-turned wings over the hills and valleys. According to the local people then, there was a nearby pig farm that particularly attracted the vultures when the slaughtering took place for market. For some reason they did not frequent Ellsworth or Mount Desert Island. In recent years, however, turkey vultures have joined the great blue herons, bald eagles, and ospreys in the large bird group spotted regularly here during the warmer months. Bald eagles, of course, are here year-round. Once in awhile a black vulture may even appear, but it is not a regular summer bird. Seen up close in the sunshine, a turkey vulture shows very colorful iridescent feathers and could be described as beautiful. Vultures are part of a large group of scavengers that includes ravens and crows. All these birds make a very efficient clean up team in removing and eating road-kill from Island roads every morning. Local bird experts believe turkey vultures are nesting here on MDI, but at this writing their nesting site is not known. Fledgling vultures have been found in Brewer.

Another rarity when we arrived here forty years ago was the mockingbird, even in the summer. Back then, mockingbirds were considered strictly birds of the middle and southern Atlantic states. However, as the years went by individual birds remained later and longer until now mockingbirds are seen every month of the year on the Island. In 1990 I noted in the back of my copy of Bud Long's small booklet, *Native Birds of Mount Desert Island and Acadia National Park*, that "mockingbirds are now nesting here regularly." An especially nice sight in winter is a mockingbird in a snowy barberry bush voraciously eating the red berries. For years I wrote a nature column for the *Norwalk Hour* in Connecticut and, as I do here, received many notes and phone calls

about birds. One day a call came from a new resident in the area complaining about mockingbirds singing outside her window at night. She wanted to know how to stop them. I had some difficulty not telling her to move back to the city. Being serenaded to sleep by this feathered singer hardly seems undesirable. Mockingbirds, along with catbirds and thrashers, belong to the Mimidae group of birds that sing beautifully.

Cardinals, too, have become year-round birds, where formerly they were only rarely seen in the warmer months. Now they nest readily in Island yards and towns where houses are close together, and are seen throughout the winter months. I have frequently heard them in Bar Harbor. Cardinals seem to prefer living near people and all their activities. This handsome red bird's song is easy to recognize as it sounds like someone whistling for the family dog. A number of dogs have been fooled and gone trotting to their owners.

Pileated woodpeckers historically have been birds of the deep forest, keeping away from civilization. Now on MDI they are commonly seen tapping away with a noisy flourish on a dead tree in dooryards in and out of town and often right next to a busy road. They are living all over the Island. These large, handsome woodpeckers with the flaming red crest clearly have adapted to living near people and all their activities. Not all species will or are able to do this. Pileated woodpeckers are excellent tree surgeons, drilling into dead and unhealthy trees to remove the insects infesting them. They are not on an exploratory mission, for with their good hearing and sensitiveness they know something is to be found in whatever tree they attack. If a tree is basically healthy to begin with, the large rectangular holes made by this woodpecker will not hurt it. After the woodpecker is finished removing whatever insect life it has found, the tree will heal over. You can see many instances of this healing and of the large rectangular holes where they have drilled. They really make the chips fly!

In recent years, gannets have been seen more regularly off our shores in the winter. These magnificent sea birds dive from quite a height and plunge like arrows shot from the heavens into the water. It is an exciting sight; I never tire of watching them at Seawall right off from the causeway or in the waters between Cranberry Island and MDI. They hit the water and disappear after sending up quite a spray. When emerging again, one may have a fish in its bill. A large colony of these birds nests on Bonaventure Island off the Gaspé and roams into our area in the winter following schools of fish.

For centuries, peregrine falcons nested regularly on our cliffs here, but in the mid-1960s, scientists discovered that there were no more breeding pairs and that the species was endangered. Among the reasons for their disappearance were nest robbing by falconers, trapping, shooting, and the birds' ingesting of pesticide. These birds are high on the food chain so that any poisons taken into their body are accumulated, resulting in reproductive failure. In 1973 Congress passed the Endangered Species Act and steps were taken to reintroduce birds to Acadia National Park and other areas in the Northeast. The first birds were brought here and released in 1984. Bringing them back has been a long and involved process affected by many factors, including weather.

Since the re-introduction program was launched, scientists and interested residents have watched and waited. Now, in 2012, we have peregrine falcons regularly nesting on both sides of the Island—off the Park Loop Road at the Precipice and on Beech Mountain near Southwest Harbor. Seeing peregrines hunting all over the island is now quite common. One peregrine in Southwest Harbor discovered the plump pigeons and doves at a local dock area. There happened to be a bakery nearby, where the birds fed on scraps. The peregrines found the spot and dined on the fat birds as needed. Nearby workers found it great entertainment to watch one pick off a pigeon and then fly to the top of a pole to eat, holding its prey down with its talons and tearing it apart.

We heard the first coyotes on our property in 1986, and since then their voices have increasingly been heard in my woods. I love hearing them call, for they actually do seem to be howling in great joy. I have watched captive coyotes tip their heads back and sing to the heavens with operatic voices from the depths of their bodies; it even looks joyous. My big old Irish setter used to sing with them every time their howling began in the woods near our house. He couldn't resist joining this great primordial chorus from the middle of the living room rug. There are no large predators on MDI, and the coyote has filled a niche. Since no hunting is allowed on the Island, the coyotes' presence can help alleviate the problem of too many deer, especially in the winter when food is scarce. Deer carrion is their favorite food, and of course they do take a few fawns, which helps to control the deer population. Coyotes also eat snowshoe hares and other small mammals as well as berries, fish, insects, frogs, and other small creatures. They are a useful part of the Island wildlife and will help keep it healthy.

Black bears were talked about when we first moved to the Island and a few seen here and there occasionally. In recent years, however, especially in 2010

and 2011, they have frequently been spotted visiting feeders, pulling them down, and climbing in apple trees, sometimes near a village. Black bears are not particularly aggressive, but they should be treated with caution and never encouraged. Before hibernation, feeders should be taken in and no food put out that might tempt them at a time when they are fattening up for their winter's sleep.

In earlier days moose were here in numbers, but they were all killed off and until 1987 had not been seen on MDI. Since that year, they have increased in numbers. Cow moose with calves are now reported annually and there is no doubt that they are breeding and living on Mount Desert Island. Reports of them come from both sides of the Island. On New Year's Day in 2012 a young bull moose was seen outside a home on Mill Road in Bar Harbor, chewing on some small branches. Dale Rex Coman, a well-known naturalist who lived in Bar Harbor for many years, wrote in his 1972 booklet on our native mammals, "It is unfortunate that the Moose cannot once again roam the island. One hopes that it will be encouraged to do so." I wish I could tell him that they do now roam freely over Mount Desert.

As of 2011, Canada geese were known to be nesting on the Island; a pair with young was recorded nesting near the Maine Coast Heritage Trust headquarters in Somesville. One always used to see them only when they migrated north and south and stopped on their way to feed at the Trenton Bridge area and a few other locations, but a few pairs are now calling MDI home.

Wild turkeys, too, have become a familiar sight all over the Island since the Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife first started their re-introduction program in 1942. After several failed attempts, the birds began to flourish in the late 1980s and today they are doing sufficiently well that there is now a hunting season for them. I have had to stop the car numerous times while driving around the Island as a flock of these interesting birds wandered across the road on its way to somewhere.

The use of DDT in the decades after World War II and the aerial spraying of other chemical poisons to control gypsy moths were devastating to many species; several suffered and in some places were annihilated. After we moved to MDI, we continued to learn of the long-term damage to the landscape and particularly to eagles, large moths, butterflies, and songbirds. There has been progress, but long-term pollution in whatever form, be it poisonous chemicals sprayed directly on the earth, acid rain falling on the Island, or industrial pol-

lution floating from long distances away on the air stream, adversely affect us here. Fortunately, constant vigilance and testing of the air quality is being carried on by Acadia National Park and other organizations.

With respect to climate change, I have certainly observed general warming since 1972. Winters here at first were very severe, with deep snows and very low temperatures. Ralph Stanley, our well-known Island historian, has told me of going out to the Cranberry Islands by horse and sleigh on the ice, so winters must have been much colder to freeze the salt water for all that distance. In recent years, though, ice fishermen have had increasingly fewer days in which to venture out on lakes and ponds to pursue their favorite sport. Years ago, I remember long-time residents complaining about the eighty-degree summer days. In recent summers, however, we have several times experienced days registering one hundred degrees and more. Humidity was almost unknown on this Island; now it is frequently experienced and only escaped by going to a favorite spot along the shore. Future projections by experts say that we could become as warm here as it is in Atlantic City, New Jersey, and that seas could rise two and three-tenths feet. Rising seas would affect life all along the shore in countless ways. With climate change, the door is opened for major insect outbreaks and the consequent destruction of native plants and the introduction of invasive plants such as kudzu. All of these events would drive some species to extinction.

With so many things affecting us and all the living plants and creatures, it is difficult in the midst of change to know exactly what causes a species to disappear or to become more populous, to flourish, or to die. Scientists are of course looking for the answers and hopefully will discover ways to arrest or reverse some of the changes. I know that in my eighty-four years I have observed countless changes and the one most disturbing to me, since I am both a musician and a bird enthusiast, is the absence of early morning bird song. It used to be a magnificent chorus with many enthusiastic participants; now it is but a small choir greeting the daylight.

Changes in our lives and the world around us are inevitable. Some are good; some are hard to live with; and some are disastrous to humans and wildlife. My thought on life on this planet is that what happens to us is not as important as how we react to what happens. Wildlife is dependent on how wise and caring we humans are as stewards of the world we live in. We have in the past and still now are making unwise decisions regarding our land and wildlife. Nevertheless, I retain the hope that perhaps one day, twenty or so years from

now, one of my grandsons will write an article on Island life and it will tell of positive changes and a healthy wildlife community in this lovely place.



Young bull moose in Bar Harbor. *Photo by Judy Dyer*