

# Report of a Rare Bird Chaser

By Julie Cramer-Le

I'm what's known in the birding world as a "chaser" -- someone who travels out of their home area following reports of rare or unusual birds. While I love the local usual suspects, meandering around just to see what I see in my favorite parks and preserves, there's something incredibly fun about making a big trip in search of something new. Some of my favorite chases have included driving up to the northern New York/New Jersey border to see a very lost teenage anhinga (usually seen in the US south), or down to Sea Girt, NJ, after an even more lost garganey (Europe). I get to see new places, meet other birders who are also on the hunt, and look for a bird that I would never get to see in my own backyard.

However, the thing about chases is that you also run the risk of not seeing the bird you've decided to run after! Recently, I've made three separate trips to different locations hoping to see a Eurasian wigeon. Our American wigeons are reddish birds with green heads and a white vertical stripe down the face. Their Eurasian cousin has a grey body with a red head. When they wind up in New Jersey, it's typically just one or two lost individuals, and they usually stand out on ponds or lakes covered with more typical local birds. I expected each of these trips would be pretty easy, but over and over again I've missed what I was looking for (in one case, the wigeon switched ponds on the day I arrived; in another, it was there one day and gone the next).

Because I was looking for a specific bird I believed to be present, I had an incentive to sit around and wait. I got out my scope and trained it on any suspicious bird-like blobs in the water. I scrutinized every American wigeon that sailed by. And the cool thing that happens when you do this is you pay a lot of attention to the birds that you aren't looking for.

As I checked out one duck-heavy zone I mentally checked off the birds I wasn't interested in -- green-winged teal, northern shovelers, gadwall, pintails. No wigeon! Then I started to hear a weird noise, like a whistle mixed with a coo. It was actually quite pretty. Was that the sound of a rare bird? I pulled out Merlin, a birdsong ID app.

The whistle-coo was coming from the pintails! Not what I was expecting at all. I had never heard them vocalize before and had no idea they could make such a soft, charming noise -- I had just assumed they would quack! I trained my scope on the pintails. The males are a beautiful sleek grey with a white throat and a chocolate head, and a long pointy black tail. One of the males on the edge of the pond was standing on one leg with its wing outstretched, preening by dabbling at its feathers with its bill.

I'm sure the first time I saw pintails I was struck by their looks, but by now I had seen so many that I'd become somewhat blasé. But as I watched these pintails, I started to appreciate them again. Like a Shamrock Shake at McDonalds, these birds are a seasonal flavor that you can't get all the time, and it's worth savoring them for the months of the year that they're around.

At the end of the day, I missed my wigeon again, but I drove home feeling content all the same.

Another recent failed chase was down to Manasquan Inlet, where in early January a flurry of dovekie had been passing close to land. Dovekie are tiny, round seabirds that rarely come close enough to the shore for viewing -- they're more often observed during sea trips. I was hoping the high numbers other birders were reporting would still be coming through and I'd get a chance to add one of these little alcids to my life list.

Alas, I stood on the end of the jetty with a crush of other birders for around three hours with no sign of the dovekie. With not much else to do, I started taking long looks at the birds that **were** around.

Manasquan is a great spot for common and red-throated loons in the winter. These birds, especially the red-throated loons, seemed fearless, completely unimpressed with the large numbers of humans peering through binoculars and scopes. They floated close to the jetty, close enough to snap pics with a cell

phone and see field marks with the naked eye, and then dove so smoothly it felt like a magic trick. They would surface again with Atlantic blue crabs in their bills.

Further out, long-tailed ducks dove in the surf. These sea ducks are true to their name -- males can have a tail up to 9.3 inches -- and their markings are striking. Like the loons, long-tailed ducks feed by diving below the surface of the water. They have been seen in flocks of 200 or more!

I was running out of time, so I wished everyone else luck and headed out. Ten minutes up the road, I saw a text flash onto my screen -- the dovekie had appeared! But I had somewhere to be and couldn't turn back.

It was all right. I was happy I had gotten out, happy to have had a reason to visit the inlet, which isn't close enough for me to go just any time. I was happy with the birds I did see. In a few months they will all have headed back north and these seasonal flavors will be off the menu until next winter.

Chasing doesn't always work out, but I've never regretted a chase. Even when you don't get the bird you went for, you get a chance to stand still and appreciate what you do see.

#### Photo credits

1. Dovekie. Susan Dixon/Audubon Photography Award 2021
2. Red-throated Loon. Kate Persons/Audubon Photography Award 2021
3. Northern Pintail Drake. Judi Dressler/Audubon Photography Award 2018
4. Raft of Long-Tailed Ducks. Joan Tisdale/Audubon Photography Award 2016

