AUTUMN BIRDING AT GREAT MEADOWS

Peter Alden, Cambridge

As the swamp maples start turning red and the water level subsides, Great Meadows plays host to an increasing variety of fall migrant birds.

Conditions have changed there often in recent years and shall continue to change in the future. In the late fifties and early sixties, the area was certainly one of the top freshwater marshes in the state, both in the quality of habitat and in the numbers of birds. In those years, it was an expanse of tall cattails, broken here and there by small patches of water, with some exposed mud flats in the autumn.

An unusual winter in the late sixties greatly changed the character of the meadows. Today the cattails have been reduced to a fifth of their former number, and even these are off in corners accessible only to muskrats. The dikes which allowed one to penetrate into the heart of the marshes are now flanked mainly by vast amounts of open water, most of which is too deep to be used by wading birds. In the shallower areas, the American Lotus has formed masses, and on open areas the beautiful weed known as Purple Loosestrife now predominates. In some years, when the water level is quite low due to lack of rain or the refuge personnel's efforts, a superb shorebird habitat is formed.

The first birds to indicate the beginning of the fall migration are the red-wings, which begin to flock during the summer. By August, a number of Least and Semipalmated Sandpapers scamper on the mud and even on the buildup of duckweed, algae, and scum next to the main dike. Here these birds are surprisingly tame, providing one of your best chances to photograph "peep." Also in August, many swallows start coming to roost at selected areas of cattails. They sleep on stems and branches over the water, giving them an out in case of nocturnal visits by flightless predators. In the evening at this time of year, you may also hear the delicate "pink" note of Bobolinks as they join the redwing flights. Don't expect to see any spring-plumaged males, however, since these birds have usually moulted before leaving the fields for the marshes.

The shorebirds are certainly of much interest to the lister, though the casual birder dreads the thought that there is more than one kind of sandpiper and shudders to think that some day he will have to identify them. Great Meadows is one of the most reliable spots in the state for Pectoral Sandpiper, which is found with the smaller peeps on the mud. The other specialty is Stilt Sandpiper, which in several past autumns has been present during September in numbers up to a dozen. Dunlin are sometimes common in late September and early October, occurring along with occasional White-rumped Sandpipers. Other shorebirds that are usually present include: Semipalmated Plover (a few), Killdeer (often common), Snipe, Spotted and Solitary Sandpipers, and both Yellowlegs.

In the good shorebird years, particularly in early September if broad expanses of mud are available, you could be rewarded with such unusual inland sights as flocks of Golden Plover (up to 75!), odd Black-bellied Plovers, a few Western Sandpipers and very rarely a Baird's, occasional Dowitchers, and a fair chance for either Wilson's or Northern Phalarope.

Ducks are restricted pretty much to dabblers, since the water is too shallow for most divers. Yet Pied-billed Grebe, Ruddy Duck, and Hooded Merganser do occur fairly regularly. The nesting pairs and young of the Black, Mallard, and Wood Duck families are augmented by other birds from elsewhere, the collection building up into the hundreds. The chief feature of autumn is the state's largest inland concentration of American Wigeon, numbering over a thousand at times. These are joined by several pairs of Gadwall, as well as occasional strays.

Great Meadows is no Mt. Tom for hawks, but many species can be seen by birders who visit repeatedly. Back in the good old days when the marsh was truly extensive, Marsh Hawks were common and conspicuous, but today only an occasional migrant comes by and then doesn't stay long. Broad-winged and Red-tailed Hawks sometimes nest in the vicinity and can be seen much more often than the Red-shouldered, whose fortunes have nosedived in the Sudbury Valley. Ospreys continue to be regular migrants and often stay around the refuge, providing a good show. Bald Eagles are noted perhaps once a year, but they pass by and don't linger. Merlins (formerly called Pigeon Hawks) are noted occasionally in the fall, while American Kestrels (Sparrow Hawks) are somewhat more common. Since the Merlin follows the migration of shorebirds, a year with many Dunlin, for instance, should also be a good year for this hawk.

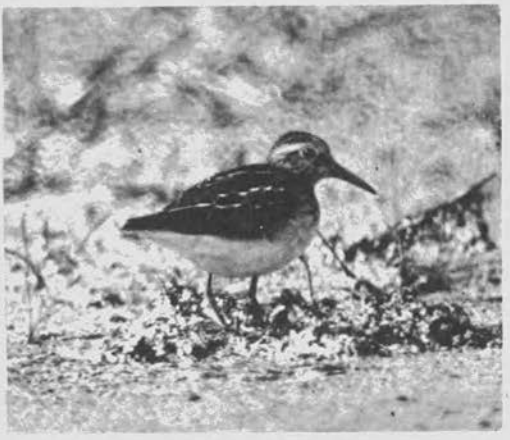
Herons continue to use the meadows during migration, despite the catastrophic decline in the habitat. Fifteen years ago, summer days could be counted on to produce a number of pairs of both American and Least Bittern. But today the Least is absent and the American rarer than before. Black-crowned Night Herons, Great Blues, Greens, and an occasional egret stop by in the fall. The Great Blues sometimes number around a dozen, which is impressive.

Rails have long been of interest, and again we find that breeding Soras and Virginias have dropped considerably, though there may be an increase in Common Gallinules. But the King Rail, which apparently bred regularly in the fifties, is no longer to be seen. Yet, in August and September, a good migration of Soras and Virginias still takes place, and Great Meadows is the easiest place in the state to see these birds. Often, they walk right out of the reeds onto the mud flats -- but never too far. This action is readily seen just before dusk, when half a dozen rails may be watched on the left side of the dike about a hundred yards from the parking lot. I receive many reports of Yellow Rails in the autumn, but it seems strange that there could be so many aberrant Yellow Rails lacking the white wing patches! The Common Gallinules are difficult to miss in the fall, and again Great Meadows rates as one of the easiest places to see them.

There are several passerines of note that may be found at the meadows. Long-billed Marsh-Wrens still breed, though in smaller numbers than before. At this time of year they can be induced into view among patches of cattails beside the dikes, particularly if you are alone. Short-billed Marsh-Wrens are now extremely rare. Swamp Sparrows, which are permanent residents, are noted all fall, along with the ubiquitous Song Sparrow in many habitats. Savannah Sparrows can be seen on the main dike about half way out, and Sharp-tailed Sparrows are found occasionally in migration. Be careful not to call an immature Swamp a Lincoln's, or an emigrant Sharp-tailed a LeConte's!

The above remarks apply to the original section of the refuge in Concord, between the Old North Bridge and the Bedford line, which is reached off Monson Road. The newer additions to the refuge are not so productive nor accessible. Perhaps if dikes, impoundments, and the like are funded for places like the Sudbury meadows, they too will be worth many visits. One way to see these other sections is to rent a canoe from the South Bridge Boathouse in Concord, on Main Street at the Sudbury River Bridge.

Any significant sightings should be reported in writing with pertinent details to: Refuge Manager, GMNWR, 191 Sudbury Road, Concord, Massachusetts 01742 and the Massachusetts Audubon Society, Lincoln, Massachusetts 01773 (marked to the attention of Ruth Emery, James Baird, or Peter Alden). Outstanding rarities that might require verification should be telephoned to MAS at 259-9500 (ask for Mr. Baird or Mr. Alden). A checklist for Great Meadows (including 209 species seen since 1944) is available at the refuge parking lot or from the manager.



An abundant fall migrant is the Semipalmated Sandpiper. This photograph was taken at Great Meadows by L. J. Robinson with a 2,000-mm. lens.