



**MARSHFIELD**

SCALE: 0 1000 2000 ft.

## MARSHFIELD: A BIRDER'S PERSPECTIVE

by Wayne R. Petersen, Whitman

The continuing encroachment of suburban sprawl throughout eastern Massachusetts places an increasing premium on prime local wildlife habitat. As woodlots are divided, as fields are built upon, as ponds are polluted, and as marshes are destroyed, the naturalist is forced either to be content with local habitats of secondary quality or to travel, often considerable distances, to more productive and unspoiled areas. Admittedly, describing a particular environment as being of "secondary quality" reflects a human perspective, since any number of organisms flourish abundantly in such environments. Nonetheless, who would not rather carry on field work in the most productive surroundings possible?

In spite of this steady decline of optimum habitats in many communities, there are always some areas in every town that, when properly examined, can yield no end of pleasure to the dedicated field ornithologist. There are several such areas in the coastal community of Marshfield on the Massachusetts south shore. Bounded on the north by the North River and the adjacent towns of Scituate and Norwell with Pembroke to the west and Duxbury on the south, Marshfield lies squarely on the coastal plain yet possesses something of an inland flavor in the northern and western parts of town. As its name would suggest, Marshfield has extensive wetland amounting to nearly 20% of its area. Much of this wetland is comprised of both tidal and brackish marshes bounding the North and South Rivers. There are also several ponds and old cranberry bog reservoirs that sustain modest but productive freshwater marshes. While many of the town's woodlands are a mixture of deciduous hardwoods, there are a few venerable stands of majestic White Pines and several patches of the typically coastal Pitch Pine. As one of the more progressive south shore communities from a conservation standpoint, Marshfield has over 1400 acres held as conservation land, many of which afford fine opportunities for the bird-finder. Perhaps the greatest natural treasure in the region is the 600-acre Dwyer Farm near the Green Harbor section of town. This magnificent property offers a fine array of productive habitat types in close proximity, thus making it ideal for a variety of wildlife species. Active efforts to preserve permanently the farmland and adjacent swampy woods and brushy meadows are being made by The Committee to Preserve Dwyer Farm. This group, representing a cross-section of the public sector, recognizes the value of maintaining working farmland within the community and is to be commended for its foresight as we see similar lands continually being turned over to industrial and residential development. The final major influence affecting Marshfield birdlife is the Atlantic Ocean which extends along the town's entire eastern boundary from the North River to Green Harbor. The mitigating effect of the sea is most obvious when one visits the coastal

thickets in the winter and regularly finds semi-hardy wintering birds that are uncommon or rare north of Boston.

With such a fine variety of habitats within a single town, the resident birder can easily find enough to look at throughout the year without ever leaving the community. Obviously, the resident birder will know many choice spots that are not readily covered by the occasional visitor. There are, however, a few exceptional areas that can profitably be checked by the transient observer.

The Ocean Beaches. Beginning with the ocean at Humarock and running southeastward, the Marshfield shore faces Cape Cod Bay. The upland is buffered by both rocky shingle and pure sand beaches, and the northernmost portion includes a steep scarp at Fourth Cliff which gradually flattens out to a low line of dunes in the Humarock section. Offshore lie a few glacial erratic rock piles, augmented by several artificial stone breakwaters off Brant Rock. In the winter these ocean waters harbor a variety of sea fowl including loons, grebes, Common Goldeneyes, Oldsquaws, Common Eiders, three species of scoters, and Red-breasted Mergansers. Purple Sandpipers are frequent feeders on the rocks along the beach at Brant Rock, while Red-necked Grebes are often numerous in late winter between Rexhame and Brant Rock. During the fall Gannets are a familiar sight offshore and, with migrating sea ducks, provide the sea-watcher with quite a spectacle from a vantage point on the headland at Fourth Cliff. The author has also seen pelagic species from these beaches including Manx Shearwater, Leach's Storm-Petrel, and even breaching Humpback Whales.

Unfortunately, the ocean beaches of Marshfield are eclipsed by the more favorable shorebird areas to the north at Scituate and to the south at Duxbury. There is, however, a splendid and flourishing Least Tern colony on the gravel beach behind Fourth Cliff at the mouth of the North River. The salt marshes in the vicinity of nearby Trouant Island abound with feeding herons and egrets in late summer. Unobtrusive, but equally regular, Whimbrels quietly feed in these same salt meadows.

Cherry Hill. One of the finest conservation lands in Marshfield is the area known as Cherry Hill and Slaughter Island, easily reached from Webster Street which runs south off Rte. 139 from Marshfield Center. Travel about 1.5 miles south on Webster Street until a sign for the Recreation Center is seen on the left. Turn here and park in the parking area. At the parking lot the trail head to Cherry Hill and Slaughter Island is clearly marked. This trail, with its several alternate routes, leads the hiker through 1.25 miles of a mixture of low wet woods, brushy thickets, dense cedar groves, and past a fine freshwater cattail marsh. A great number of interesting migrant and resident birds are regular in this area, each with its own specific seasonality and

habitat choice. Of the breeding landbirds, the sharp-eared and observant visitor can hardly fail to find Great Crested Flycatcher, Veery, Cedar Waxwing, White-eyed Vireo (brushy thickets), Yellow Warbler, Chestnut-sided Warbler (locally uncommon), American Redstart, and occasionally Orchard Oriole (near the pond). American Woodcocks and Screech Owls are regular, but reclusive, residents. In the early spring Red-shouldered Hawks often hunt for Wood Frogs around the marsh edge, and by May, herons and marsh birds become a feature. In fact, this small marsh complex is probably one of the finest such habitats on the south shore. Nine to ten species of long-legged waders occur here annually, and the Least Bittern is a regular summer resident. Most frequent are Green and Little Blue herons, Great and Snowy egrets, Black-crowned Night Herons, and Glossy Ibis. King (irregular), Virginia, and Sora rails are to be expected, and occasionally the Common Gallinule is present. There is a substantial colony of Marsh Wrens in the cattail areas. Besides the regular marsh dwellers, migrants of a great variety frequent the bordering alder thickets and Red Maples. An early morning visit in May can easily provide several hours of excellent birding. Some of the best views of the marsh and neighboring thickets can be obtained from Cherry Hill, which happens to be the site of Daniel Webster's last speech. Be sure to notice the fine old Tulip Trees and Basswoods near this spot as these plantings seldom are seen reaching such proportions locally.

Dwyer Farm. Leaving the Cherry Hill area, one can easily return to Webster Street, drive several hundred feet north, and then turn right on Winslow Cemetery Road. Drive to the end and discreetly park in the small cemetery on the left. Walk to the end of the road where you will see Dwyer Farm. Visitors are welcome to go birding on the property as long as gates are carefully closed and the grazing Holstein cattle are not disturbed. Enter the fields beside the cow barn, but first check the manure heaps near the barn for Savannah and White-crowned sparrows during migration and the barn itself for nesting Barn and Cliff swallows. The rare Brewer's Blackbird has also been recorded in this farmyard in late fall.

As one proceeds down the cart path through the fields, the small wet depression on the right, as well as the edge of the pond beyond, should be watched closely in early spring for Common Snipe and Pectoral Sandpipers, both of which can be surprisingly numerous. In April, especially in years of good rainfall, other shorebirds are regular in this pool, particularly Solitary Sandpipers, both yellowlegs species, and Least Sandpipers. The pond often holds Canada Geese and Blue-winged Teal, and a remarkable assortment of other waterfowl has occurred here as well including the state's second Garganey record.

At the far end of the field, a small knoll provides the best

vantage point for viewing the back pastures. These pastures, actually a polder of reclaimed land made possible by the dike at Green Harbor, are at their best in late March and early April when, in wet years, large numbers of Mallards, Black Ducks, Pintails, teal, American Wigeon, and an occasional Gadwall and Northern Shoveler use the rain pools for courtship and foraging. From time to time during rainy weather in spring, great flocks of shorebirds briefly visit these same rain pools. Most common are the species mentioned above, and Whimbrels and Stilt Sandpipers have been seen here as well.

The first warm, southwest winds of April are apt to generate small flights of Sharp-shinned Hawks and American Kestrels over the farm. In fall and winter these raptors are often replaced by Rough-legged Hawks, Northern Harriers, Short-eared Owls, and periodically a Northern Shrike. Red-tailed Hawks, kestrels, and Great Horned Owls are all known to nest on or near the farm property. The same winds that bring the hawks in April usher in Cattle Egrets, Glossy Ibis, Upland Sandpipers (irregular breeders), and an abundance of Bobolinks by May. Late spring also gives the patient observer a chance to see or hear Fish Crows, Carolina Wrens, and White-eyed Vireos in the bordering woodlands. The viburnum thickets along the meandering Green Harbor River usually contain nesting Willow Flycatchers by June; however, the species is very inconspicuous. An early evening visit to Dwyer Farm in the first part of summer can produce a fine flight of herons headed south to the Clark's Island rookery in Plymouth as well as the auditory stimulation provided by the vespers of Eastern Meadowlarks and Whip-poor-wills.

The combination of wet woods, old pastures, and open hay fields makes this an area worthy of repeated scrutiny at all times of the year. The list of casual and vagrant species seen here gives testimony to its ornithological worth.

Ferry Hill Thicket. Another of the Marshfield Conservation Commission properties is the area known as Ferry Hill Thicket. Only six acres in extent, this superb oasis can be an excellent spot to observe fall migrant warblers and sparrows. In addition to the regular appearance of certain of the more uncommon warblers, the Carolina Wren is an occasionally conspicuous permanent resident. To reach the thicket, turn left onto Summer Street off Rte. 3A, just south of the North River crossing. Summer Street divides two small ponds, both of which warrant examination for waders during the warmer months. A short side trip down Damons Point Road to the left will yield a good panorama of the North River and produces at low tide in proper season herons, egrets, feeding shorebirds, and gulls. Continuing along Summer Street will eventually bring one to Elm Street on the left. Follow Elm Street to a fork where Ferry Hill Street bears to the left. A few hundred feet on the right will be a sign marking Ferry Hill Thicket.

Go back to Rte. 3A, then down Spring Street, directly across from Summer Street, to an old fish hatchery within about 1.25 miles. In the winter, species such as Virginia Rail, Common Snipe, Winter Wren, and Swamp Sparrow are to be looked for around the open pools. During early spring the author has called both Barred and Saw-whet owls from the adjacent woodlands.

The North and South Rivers. The two major rivers in Marshfield, the North River and the South River, offer some of the most aesthetic birding opportunities available on the south shore. Each has its own merits and both are best explored by canoe. The North River can easily be entered by canoe off Cornhill Lane near the northern end of Union Street. Once on the river, be aware of the tide as the river is tidal all the way upstream to its headwaters in Hanover. There is about a two-hour tidal difference between the river mouth and the headwaters. Best canoeing from the Cornhill Lane area is upstream.

In a canoe one sees things otherwise impossible to notice from shore. From the gradual disappearance of saltwater mollusks to the subtle appearance of brackish and freshwater aquatic grasses, sedges, and pondweeds, the river displays a spectrum of change as one paddles upstream. Birds along the river include Green Herons, Black Ducks, Red-tailed Hawks, Spotted Sandpipers, Belted Kingfishers, swallows, Marsh Wrens (locally abundant), and Swamp Sparrows. Some grand old White Pines along this stretch of the North River have perhaps looked upon the days when ships were built along the river banks or when the meadows were mowed for salt hay. These same groves today provide habitat for breeding Pine Warblers and Scarlet Tanagers, and Plymouth County's first Goshawk nesting record was established in this area. It is with a just sense of local pride that the writer invites the visiting naturalist to explore one of the state's most beautiful and scenic rivers.

The South River, while perhaps not quite as spectacular as the larger North River, nonetheless provides some interesting birding. Either by using a canoe or by walking with rubber boots, fall birding on the South River marshes can afford a chance to see Marsh Wrens, Water Pipits, Sharp-tailed and Swamp sparrows, and occasional Lapland Longspurs, all from a somewhat different than usual perspective. Perhaps of still greater interest is the chance of flushing Virginia, Sora, and even Yellow rails in the short grass of the upper marsh during flood tides in September and October. The birds are elusive, but hard work with a dragged rope or a good bird dog can sometimes jump rails at close range from the grass bordering the mosquito ditches. This area historically saw the capture and collection of many Yellow Rails, and the species has been taken there within the decade. Sharing these same meadows are the more conspicuous Northern Harrier and Short-eared Owl. Botanically, the South River

marshes contain some lowly but interesting grass and sedge species, while the adjacent upland has a few stands of the rare Elliott's Goldenrod.

If this description of Marshfield seems cursory, the writer invites the curious naturalist to come to the area and discover for himself the details of the local ornithology, for a region so richly diversified in habitat must have many other birding secrets yet to be revealed. Whatever the season, the town of Marshfield is certain to produce some fine birding and natural history exploration.

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WAYNE R. PETERSEN, resident of Whitman, teaches life science at Hanover Junior High School. He is particularly interested in waterbirds, with special emphasis on shorebirds. In addition, he has taught courses in bird biology and identification, has lectured extensively, and has published a number of papers on various aspects of birdlife.

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#### SCREECH OWL SURVEY

The Screech Owl is a surprisingly common bird of prey in suburban and urban environments. Yet it is severely underrepresented on most bird censuses. This project will involve a roadside survey of Screech Owl populations conducted in pre-dawn hours in late March and early April. At periodic stops along a given route, tape recordings of Screech Owl vocalizations will be used to detect the presence of Screech Owls. The type of habitat at each stop will be recorded so that habitat analysis can be carried out during compilation. Persons who would like to join a survey party on one or more mornings should contact the compilers before March 17:

Nick and Ollie Komar  
61 Wade Street  
Newton Highlands, MA 02161  
Telephone: 332-5509



#### SPRING MIGRATION WATCH

This project is an extension of the spring warbler study which was organized by John Andrews and Lee Taylor in 1980 and 1981. Participants will be asked to visit their selected spring birding sites about twice a week from mid-April to the end of May. The numbers of all migrants recorded on each visit will be recorded. The compilation will reveal how the observations at your favorite site compare with other sites in eastern Massachusetts. Persons who would like to participate in this project should contact the compiler before April 1:

Lee Taylor  
92 Brooks Avenue  
Arlington, MA 02174  
Telephone: 646-2529

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