


**RUTLAND  
STATE  
PARK**

SCALE:  
  
 2000 FT.

Map by Julie S. Roberts

## BIRDING RUTLAND STATE PARK: A PRELIMINARY REPORT

by Mark C. Lynch, Worcester

There are many choice birding spots west of Route 128 that are not visited by many birders, except those local to that area. It seems that the further west one goes in the state, the larger the potential birding area becomes, while the population of birders decreases. The west of Route 128 birders are left with an enormous area to cover and too few people to cover every place thoroughly. Although most birders are familiar with such spots as Bolton Flats and Quabbin Reservoir, there are many secondary spots that deserve to be examined. Rutland State Park is just such a place.

Rutland State Park, a large plot of wooded land between Hubbardston and Barre (to the north and west) and Rutland (to the south and east), is owned by the Metropolitan District Commission (MDC) except for small tracts belonging to the U.S. Government. The park's 1400 acres are criss-crossed by numerous dirt roads of varying condition. The forest is mixed coniferous and deciduous with tracts of planted pines. There are several small ponds and streams near roads. It is the kind of deep, deserted wood, especially at night, in which one expects to see all manner of strange things and indeed there are several reports of UFO's from this area! It is a popular recreation area for fishing, hunting, snowmobiling and swimming but also offers definite surprises for the birder.

The best way to bird Rutland State Park is to drive down the dirt roads, stop where it looks good, and proceed a short way on foot. One of the popular routes to follow is the Prison Camp Road. Follow Route 122 west and take a right on 122A. Enter the park proper on your left about 1/4 mile up the road. Take your first right and drive beside Long Pond until the paved road ends at Whitehall Pond. These ponds promise much, but I have only found Canada Goose, Mallard, Black and Wood duck. Occasionally a Great Blue Heron drops into one of the smaller ponds in the interior. The road here curves around this pond that is frequented by picnickers and bathers in the summer, but you want to continue north on Prison Camp Road. This road essentially continues straight through the park until it intersects Route 62. Prison Camp Road changes its name to Elm Street at the junction with Prison Camp Fire Road (the ruins of the prison camp will be visible just past the junction, on the left). If you turn right at this junction you will very soon come to a small bridge crossing a stream: a good birding area when not populated by fishermen. Continuing north, Elm Street becomes Brigham Road at the Barre/Rutland line. When you finally reach the paved surface of Route 62, turn left and take your next left to reach the Barre Falls Flood Control Dam. There are cornfields to check for birds, especially raptors, on

your left; and the Barre Falls area has several trails that can produce rewarding birding. A large colony of Barn Swallows can be found under the bridge at the dam itself.

By all means explore the numerous other roads off the Prison Camp Road but be aware that none of the roads in the park is marked. It's a good idea to take along a compass so you don't go round in circles.

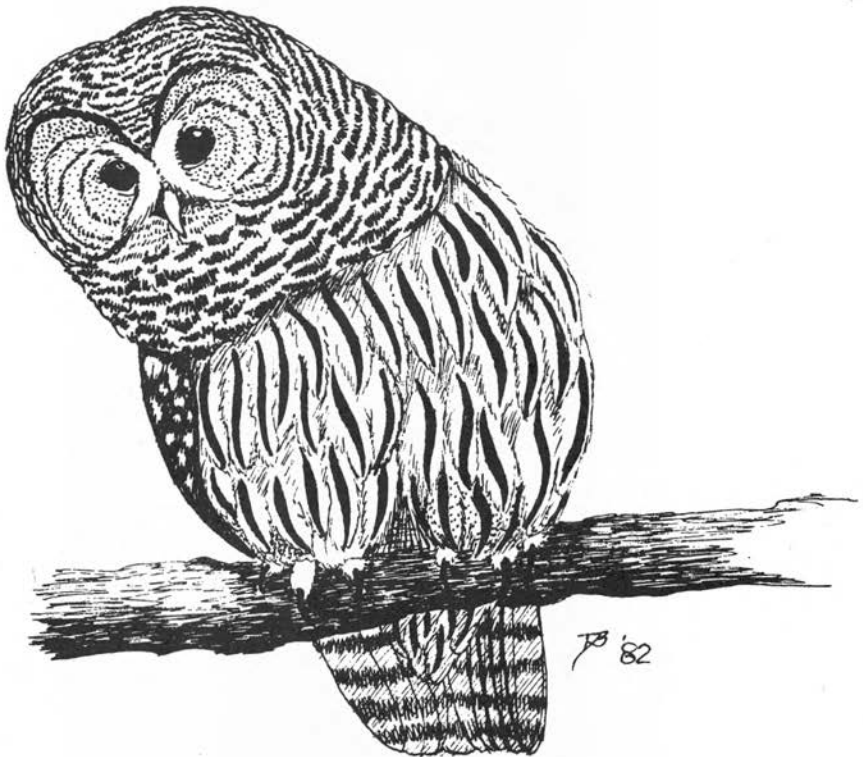
My primary interest in Rutland State Park is nocturnal birding, primarily for owls. Three species are well represented as breeders in the park: the Great Horned Owl (Bubo virginianus), Barred Owl (Strix varia) and Northern Saw-whet Owl (Aegolius acadicus).

I was introduced to the owls of the park when, hearing a mobbing group of nuthatches and chickadees, I found a roosting Barred Owl. Since that time I've led several "Owl Prowls" for classes here, and the Barred Owl is most regular. At the right times of the year it is typical to get from two to four owls on one sweep through the park, and I have gotten as many as seven in one evening. Barred Owls are among the most vocal of owls, and one can easily hear their deep resonant tones by simply driving down the Prison Camp Road a bit, stopping the car, dousing the lights, and waiting outside the car for 10-15 minutes. It is imperative to keep still and very quiet. Barred Owls have a wide variety of hoots and calls, other than the well-known "who-cooks-for-you." There is nothing quite so chilling as to be alone on a dark moonless night on a deserted dirt road in the middle of Rutland State Park and, without warning, hear the piercing scream of the Barred Owl close-by. There are also fascinating "hooting duets" that occur, but because of the observational limitations of nocturnal birding, it is difficult to surmise exactly what is occurring. Sometimes a pair seems to be communicating, hooting in response to one another; and sometimes it seems that two owls are having a heated territorial dispute. An imitation of their call will bring them close at hand but never for very long. Although I have heard Barred Owls throughout the year, including one memorable New Year's Eve, I have had the most luck in mid-fall, though why this is I'm not sure. It seems there are more owls here in October and November than December and January. They may be just as vocal prior to the breeding period (mid-March through April), but unfavorable road conditions usually hamper birding at this time.

The relationship between the Barred Owl and Great Horned Owl is a subject about which more research needs to be done. The Great Horned, though present in the park, is by no means as common or vocally conspicuous as the Barred. I've had the most luck with Great Horned in the southern and eastern portions of the park, but the owls are usually not very close. This would seem to reinforce the belief that Barred Owls

inhabit the deeper, more secluded sections of the forest and the Great Horned, the periphery of the park. I have heard both Barred and Great Horned calling at the same time, in apparent territorial response to each other but this was a singular occurrence.

Most delightful was the discovery of a population of the tiny Northern Saw-whet Owl in the park. Indeed on one night in April, I heard and/or saw at least four individuals and I knew of another's presence in another part of the park. Whether all these birds remained to breed in the park has not been determined. The beginning of April seems to be the best time to hear and see these uncommon owls. I noticed them becoming vocal just after sunset so that I could actually see the birds fly against the still somewhat light sky. Saw-whets like coniferous areas with marshy areas nearby, and Rutland State Park has several choice examples of this habitat. This habitat is also the breeding area for the wood frog, whose "quacking" calls I have heard on the same spots I've looked for Saw-whets. The tooting call of the Saw-whet carries further than you would expect, and it is difficult to find the location of a calling bird. Patience and a



*Barred Owl*

*Illustration by Denise Braunhardt*

strong flashlight are needed. What a difference it is seeing a Saw-whet on its home turf, "active" and calling, from seeing the silent and still birds found in Plum Island's New Pines. The birds become less vocal as the year wears on. I have called a bird in by a voice imitation of its call in the fall but it did not vocally respond. Indeed the only way that I knew this tiny owl flew very close by was that I happened to catch glimpses of it against the night sky. Prison Camp Road through Brigham Road seems to be the most convenient route to follow in the hopes of seeing these owls. It should be noted that on one occasion an imitation of the call of a Saw-whet brought in a silent Barred Owl, probably looking for a meal.

Another nocturnal breeder in the park is the American Woodcock, whose fascinating aerial displays can be seen and heard at many of the scrubby fields throughout the park. I have had my best looks at woodcock on the ground and in the air in Rutland State Park. Other birds are present in the dark night woods, including the usual passerines that can be heard occasionally chirping and thrushes that are often seen on the road in the headlights' glare; and it is not unusual to startle a Ruffed Grouse. This species is present in good numbers in the park. I can recall one night I was almost frightened to death when, while quietly waiting for an owl to call, a Ruffed Grouse exploded through the brush and trees next to me.

Rutland also offers some interesting day birding. Hawks and vultures are well represented, with Red-tailed Hawk and Turkey Vulture (in season) being the most obvious raptors in the park. Broad-winged, Sharp-shinned and Red-shouldered hawks, American Kestrel, and Osprey have all been recorded. I personally have not recorded Northern Goshawk at this location, but have seen it in areas surrounding the park, so I'm sure persistence will reward me with a sighting.

Common summer residents in the park include both cuckoos, Eastern Wood-Pewee, Eastern Phoebe, Wood Thrush, Hermit Thrush, Veery, Cedar Waxwing, Red-eyed Vireo, Ovenbird, Chestnut-sided Warbler, Common Yellowthroat, American Redstart, Northern Oriole, Indigo Bunting, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Scarlet Tanager, American Goldfinch, Rufous-sided Towhee, and Swamp Sparrow, among others. I have recorded Pileated Woodpecker from the park, but it is a very uncommon and secretive resident. Early mornings or evenings after five p.m. seem the best times to bird the park in the summer, as the trail bikes are fewest at these times.

I have birded Rutland State Park a comparatively few times for spring and fall migrations, but the results are tempting. I have recorded Willow and Yellow-bellied flycatchers, Solitary Vireo, many warblers including Black-and-white, Parula, Blackburnian, Pine and Yellow-rumped, and White-crowned Sparrow. Once while looking for newts on a cloudy spring day, I was treated to the spectacle of over 100 Yellow-rumped War-

blers materializing about the small swamp I was in, seemingly from nowhere, flitting about a while before moving on.

Winter day birding can be bleak and sparse. Red-tailed Hawks, Black-capped Chickadees, Brown Creepers, Golden-crowned Kinglets and both nuthatches prevail. At least a few Red-breasted Nuthatches can be found throughout the year here (sometimes in impressive numbers in the fall) even when they are scarce in the eastern part of the state. I have not been in the park enough in winter to report definitely on winter finches; the few times I have tried, I have been unsuccessful in finding any. Snowmobiles flock in great numbers up and down the roads during winter, and their constant drone may explain why birds seem scarce.

Birding Rutland State Park is still in its infancy; more hours in the field and hopefully more birders will help to complete the birding picture.

**NOTE:** The condition of the dirt roads can be a problem and should not be attempted by anyone with a low-riding car. Spring mud and winter snow and ice sometimes make the roads hazardous to all but four-wheel drive vehicles.

---

MARK LYNCH teaches a two-semester course, An Introduction to Birding, in Worcester Adult Education and is also a teacher in the children's program of the Worcester Art Museum, rock director for radio station WICN and a parapsychical investigator. Mark's major interest in birds is the management of critically endangered species.

## Join the Flock!

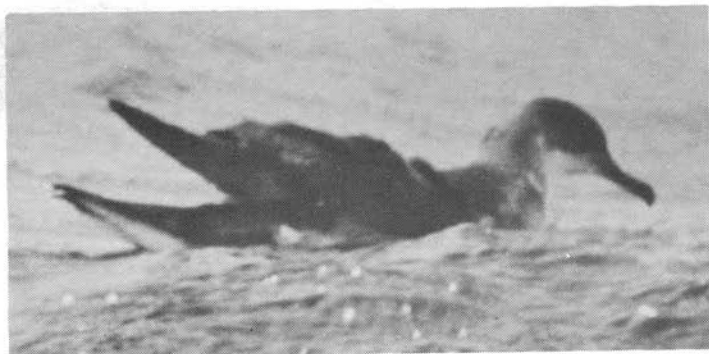
**GET YOUR RABBIT, DASHER, VOLVO,  
DATSUN, TOYOTA, HONDA OR RENAULT  
REPAIRED AT:**

### **CO-OP GARAGE**

106 Pleasant Street  
Watertown  
923-0941

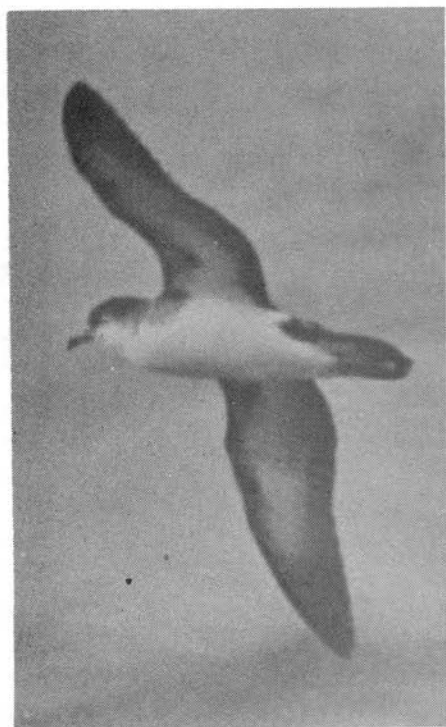
(Convenient to MBTA)





*Shearwater  
August 1982 pelagic trip*

*Photo by Alan Brady*



*Audubon's Shearwater  
off Virginia coast, 1979  
Photo by Alan Brady*



*Shearwater  
August 28, 1982  
pelagic trip*

*Photo by  
Alan Brady*