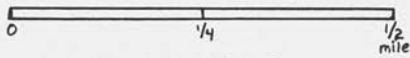


# BREAKHEART RESERVATION

SCALE:



Maps prepared by Julie Roberts

## BREAKHEART RESERVATION: A MAGICAL URBAN WILDERNESS

by Craig Jackson, Malden

Over the last several years I have become increasingly acquainted with Breakheart Reservation in Saugus, have come to know its patterns and its rhythms, and have explored many parts of it. For me it has become a place to renew my sense of natural order. Though one reason for coming to Breakheart is to look at birds, I don't expect rarities, nor are they likely to be present. But after all, the visit of a rare bird implies that to some degree the natural order has been disturbed and is thus, itself, a disturbing event. What are found here are the birds that should be here, along with some less common ones like Sora or Turkey Vulture, probably my two least expected sightings.

Geologically part of the Fells Upland, Breakheart Reservation consists almost entirely of hilly terrain with numerous granite outcrops on many of its hills. It also contains two relatively large ponds. Along its northern border, the Saugus River winds its way through level swampy areas and on the eastern side forms two freshwater marshes with its tributary, the Hawkes Brook, in the area known as Camp Nihan.

At one time the entire reservation was a Boy Scout camping area, but now only Camp Nihan, a Metropolitan District Commission youth camp, is still used for that purpose. As a result while Camp Nihan, to which access is restricted, is relatively pristine and litter-free, the rest of the reservation shows the scars of many suburban parks - trash, broken bottles, cans, graffiti on the rocks, etc. These "signs of civilization" are less disturbing if I try to view them as future artifacts. Archeologists of the twenty-second century will treasure them as highly as archeologists today value broken potsherds from American Indian ruins, which may themselves be the remains of "beer blasts" long ago.

Although small when compared to Middlesex Fells, or even Lynn Woods, Breakheart Reservation contains a great diversity of habitat. As there are three main entrances into Breakheart, it can be divided arbitrarily into three parts: Camp Nihan (not strictly within the reservation but regarded here as a part of it), the Lynn Fells section, and the Vocational School section. Although each section possesses a variety of habitats, Camp Nihan is mostly freshwater marshland, the Lynn Fells section is mostly upland oak forest, and the Vocational School section is mostly wooded lowlands. In addition, several of the larger hills and the larger ponds present special habitats. Thus, each part has its own characteristic plant and animal life.

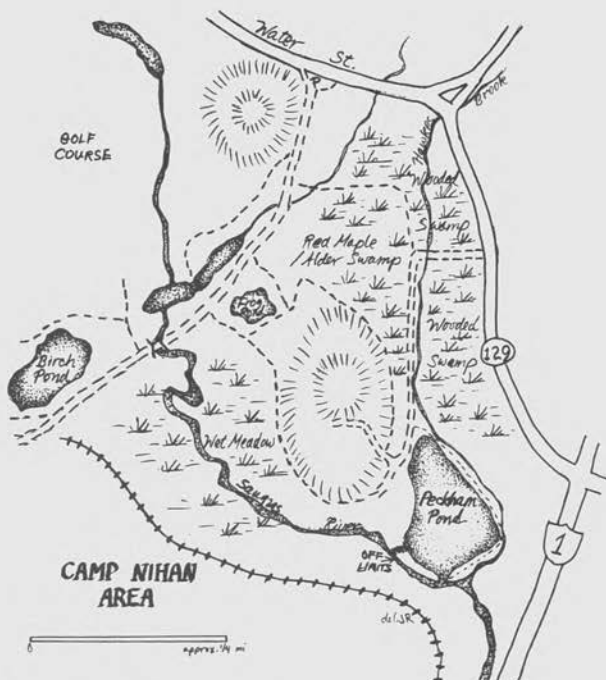
Before describing each of these areas more fully, I would like to offer some hints that may increase your enjoyment of the reservation. First, although the visitor may be tempted

to drive into Breakheart when the gates are open, I strongly advise against it (even though the M.D.C. has made some recent improvements for parking). Once on the road, the driver may become caught in what often seems to be a race around the track with few places to pass or be passed. Thus it becomes impossible to drive leisurely around. Second, although Breakheart Reservation is small enough that it is possible to walk completely around it in one day, it is much better to explore only one part of it at a time. Your day's list may not be as large, but you will undoubtedly gain a much better grasp of the ecology of the area you visit as well as have a greater chance to observe the interactions of organisms that are present. Finally, and most importantly, Breakheart needs time to work its magic and entrance you. Give it the time it needs!

Although it is probably good to have a map along (the Boston North topographical one works well), it is not necessary and at times may even be an impediment. I often "forget" my map at home and, while wandering, may find that I'm "lost" (most trails are unmarked and may be easily missed) only to stumble upon a new and interesting area or come across an old one that I had forgotten existed or could no longer find.

Camp Nihan. The first time you visit Camp Nihan you should stop and introduce yourself to the ranger for trespassing in the area without permission is prohibited. The main entrance to the camp is off Water Street (Route 129) which goes west off Route 1 (see map). Since this is for persons using the camp, continue west and pull into a dirt parking area on the left just after the road turns - there is a traffic triangle here. A walk down the dirt road (emergency vehicles only) brings one to the edge of the Camp Nihan marshes. These marshes which comprise the largest part of the area are surprisingly varied. The first one on the left is surrounded by alders and Red Maples. There are also a good number of Red Maples in the marsh itself. It is generally quite wet but in many parts seems to be in the process of succession from a marsh to a shrub-tree swamp. There are two large stands of cat-tails within it as well. The Hawkes Brook flows slowly along its edge and in one section flows into it. You can walk completely around this marsh by going down the first path on the left, following it until it intersects the main road into Camp Nihan, then going right at the ranger station and following the path at the base of the hill that goes around the other side of this marsh. This path will take you back to the dirt road from which you entered.

Birds can be quite plentiful and varied in the Red Maple/alder swamp as the year progresses. In early spring, just after the Skunk Cabbage has unfurled, and while male Red-winged Blackbirds proclaim their territories, numbers of other blackbirds, including a fairly large number of Rusty Blackbirds, will be found roosting and feeding either in the marsh or on its edge. As spring advances, in early morning Swamp Sparrows will be heard (and occasionally seen) trilling from



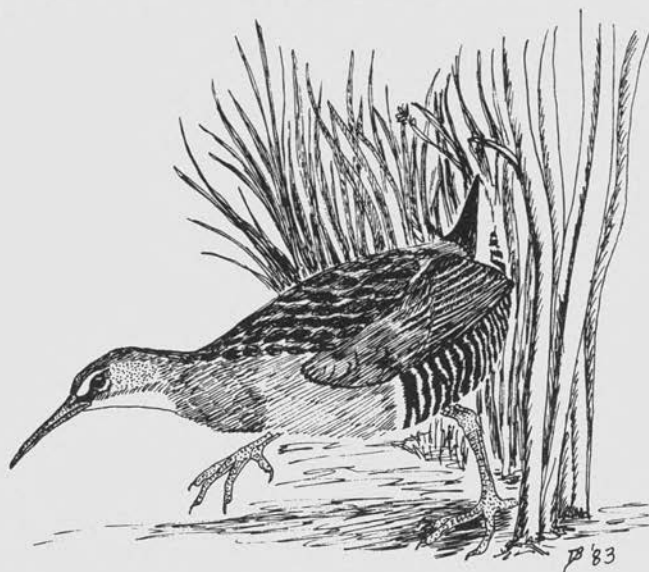
some of the Red Maples, alders, and cat-tails in the swamp; a pair of Green Herons may be flushed as you walk along; female Mallards will appear with their young in tow; and as the day gets warmer, Tree Swallows will swoop across the marsh, a pair of which will soon take up residence in a hollow stump near the ranger's station. If you are patient while playing a recording of rail calls near either stand of cat-tails, you will almost assuredly have Virginia Rails call back, come out and dash around looking for the intruder, then dart back into the marsh. One pair appears to be so well "trained" that they answer the tape as soon as the tape button is pushed and before any sound comes out! Within a week or two, Northern Orioles and Yellow Warblers will be singing from trees along the marsh, seeking mates and proclaiming territories, while Common Yellowthroats do the same from bushes along the edge of the marsh.

There are other interesting paths in the Camp Nihan section. On the right of the dirt road upon which you entered there is another trail which winds through briar thickets along the edge of a span of the Saugus River. It is a good place for catbirds, cardinals, Brown Thrashers, and other birds that like dense thickets. (I once flushed a Ruffed Grouse in here one winter.) The first person of the day to walk through this area may spot (or more likely, flush) a pair of Wood Ducks either here in the river or in a small marshy area on the other side of the path that leads to the golf course. They arrive early in spring and remain through most of May before they disappear. They may nest nearby for I once observed an aerial chase with one male pursuing four others.

When he finally drove them off, he joined a female swimming in the river. This was also the only time I ever saw a Wood Duck (a female) standing on a limb of a tree, certainly a peculiar sight.

Further on is a second marsh. The Saugus River flows through this marsh on its way to the ocean. It is really a wet meadow with Tussock Sedge being the dominant vegetation. There are also large numbers of bushes that border the river, particularly near the road. In the spring the river often overflows its banks leaving behind alluvial deposits that provide good soil for new growth. The road crosses the river over a narrow bridge from which one can watch the patterns of rushing water forming whirlpools and eddies as it courses by. Hatches of insects and schools of fish can be seen from this bridge, and it is a fine place from which to watch a sunrise. Although there are paths on both sides of this marsh, it is not possible to make a complete circuit unless you are prepared to get very wet.

This wet meadow seems to have a less varied bird population than the Red Maple/alder swamp, but there are other interesting creatures here. I once came across a Fishing Spider swimming along its edge, and huge fish, probably carp, can often be seen thrashing about. Red-winged Blackbirds and Song Sparrows (absent from the other marsh) nest in its sedges and bushes. Mallards can often be seen swimming in the river as well as a pair of Canada Geese that nest in the Camp Nihan pond. In the trees above the marsh there are often several Black-crowned Night-Herons roosting throughout the spring and summer.



Virginia Rail

Illustration by Denise Braunhardt

There are also two small ponds along the main dirt road which are surrounded by Grey Birches. These birch ponds, while they appear promising for migrants, never seem to deliver, but they are picturesque and can easily entice one away from searching for birds. Late one winter, in March, when little snow had fallen, "black ice" thickly covered the smaller one, and bubbles of air could be seen encapsulated within the ice, "stopped cold" as the water rapidly froze about them. Both ponds are shallow and may dry up considerably during summer droughts. Last summer the large birch pond was totally dry except for a small depression about eight feet in diameter, retaining the entire year's production of tadpoles for the pond. The former bottom of the pond was covered with small yellow flowers, springing up miraculously, their seeds having lain dormant there for several years.

There is a path that goes behind the larger pond on a hillside above it. The path starts from the edge of a pine grove that borders the golf course and goes through prime habitat for Rufous-sided Towhees and House Wrens as well as an area that Red Fox frequent and within which they may well den. Further along this path there is a pine grove where Pine Warblers can be heard singing.

Although the return of familiar birds in spring is exhilarating at Camp Nihan, my favorite time of year there is still the autumn, particularly one of our Indian Summer days near the end of October, despite the fact that there are, presumably, "no birds" around at that time of year. Indeed, it is probably at this very time that the bird life reaches its peak numbers for huge flocks of starlings can be seen wheeling and darting around the sky above the marsh. Watching these flights is for me one of the highlights of the birding year in Breakheart! However, it isn't really the birds but the vegetation that makes the fall season special. Red Maple leaves change to every hue of red and orange; fallen leaves speckle the placid river; and pine needles festoon every bush and tree upon which they fall. Goldenrod and Artemesia (Common Mugwort, its English name) grow thickly along the paths suffusing the air with powerful scents.

In winter, some species will linger in the Camp Nihan marshes and may well survive. On recent Christmas Counts, I have recorded Virginia Rail, Marsh Wren, Common Yellowthroat, and Swamp Sparrow in the Red Maple/alder swamp. If the winter is cold enough and the marshes frozen, one can traverse them entirely, examining at close hand the many different marsh plants as well as the nests that had been built that summer.

Vocational School Area. Although Camp Nihan is my favorite place in Breakheart, there are other areas which offer different experiences. The most interesting and productive of these is near the Vocational School entrance to Breakheart. This entrance is off Farm Street, which is the extension of Main Street, and it is about 0.5 mile south of the intersection of Farm Street and Water Street (Route 129). The area



### *Ruffed Grouse*

*Illustration by Denise Braunhardt*

has many different habitats but the dominant one is wooded lowlands. Enter through the gate and follow the road to your right. There will soon be a dirt path on the left which leads downward. A large pile of dirt is there to prevent vehicular traffic. Follow this path. In spring, the area you are now in is almost certain to have Ovenbirds calling. They are probable but unproven breeders here. Farther along there is a small path on the left that skirts a grove of pine trees with ferns covering the ground beneath them. A Veery might be calling here, and you may also hear and feel the ground vibrate as a Ruffed Grouse drums upon a log. This sound can also be heard near the school entrance, so it's hard to tell where the sound is coming from. Following this path takes you to a stream crossing. This seems to be the best spot to observe migrants in Breakheart. One day last spring I found twelve warbler species plus five other migrant species here. I have also seen nesting Broad-winged Hawks in this area.

Another habitat that can be explored from the Vocational School is the upland forest (young second growth, mostly birch and aspen) through which the power line path has been cut. Access is either by way of Fir Path (see map) or by hiking up the power line road. Rufous-sided Towhees are common here, Field Sparrows and Prairie Warblers can be heard singing throughout the area, and Indigo Buntings may call from the woodland edge. I have not often explored this area, so there may be other treasures as well.

The Saugus River winds through some very marshy areas near the Vocational School. One of these is a very large marsh just behind the school that has many "drowned" trees. As

with Camp Nihan, some species such as Swamp Sparrow may linger here through the winter. I have also been told that Eastern Bluebirds nested in a tree in this vicinity about ten years ago. The dense thickets that border the river near here seem to offer ideal winter habitat for Winter Wren as well. Unfortunately, I have never found any but I'm still looking.

Lower Pond (John A. W. Pierce Lake). This is a very picturesque lake which can be most easily reached from the Vocational School entrance. Along its edge many different species of plants can be found and Pepperbush, Witch Hazel, and Mountain Maples are some of the shrubs which often are very numerous. Hemlock and White Pine are the dominant trees along its shoreline, and there is a dense stand of American Beech in one section as well. However, my favorite trees that grow around this lake are the Yellow Birch. In one spot in particular one can clearly see the "big visible roots of Yellow Birch lay hold of [the] rocky hillside like monstrous claws" (R. Platt, A Pocket Guide to Trees, Pocket Books, New York, 1951, p. 55). This tree with its delicate, silver curls of bark reflects the sunlight and normally hints of frailty; but here it reigns, its grip secure, its bark as solid as its place along this shore. A walk around the lake's perimeter, though quite long, reveals the varied lake shore communities that are present and their representative bird life. Over the years, it has become clear that the same species are found in the same places year after year - Spotted Sandpipers along one shore, Eastern Kingbirds along another, and Scarlet Tanagers along a third.

Lynn Fells Entrance. The third entrance to Breakheart Reservation is via Forest Street which comes off Lynn Fells Parkway a short distance west of Route 1. This area is predominantly upland. Oaks dominate most of the area with Scrub Oaks ruling the higher elevations and Red Oaks in the lower areas. Blueberry bushes cover the hillsides, and the area is subject to regular brush fires. The best way to observe this part is to walk left from the entrance and then take two more lefts. This will put you on Ash Path<sup>f</sup> (see map), a dirt road that goes up and down some of these hillsides. Prairie Warblers, Field Sparrows, Brown Thrashers, and Rufous-sided Towhees can all be heard singing, and House Wrens may also be present and singing as well. Broad-winged Hawks have nested along this path and have been seen here. (There is at least one pair and possibly two that regularly nest in Breakheart.) Along the bases of the hills throughout the area both cuckoos may be heard though rarely seen, Great Crested Flycatchers can be spotted calling from the tops of trees, and Black-and-white Warblers may also be singing.

Summer is the best time to visit here. Just bring a small bucket, plop yourself down among the blueberries, and while away the afternoon picking them as you listen to the ascending song of a Prairie Warbler or the rapid trill of a Field Sparrow. While taking a rest and lying on your back, you



may spot a soaring Broad-winged Hawk, and it's no trouble at all to call out a towhee.

Upper Pond (John Leo Silver Lake). Summer is also the best time to visit Upper Pond, best reached from the Forest Street entrance. The predominant vegetation includes Gray Birch, Pepperbush, Red Oak, and Sheep Laurel. The spectacle here is the swallows and swifts that whiz around over the pond hawking insects. Both Tree and Barn swallows will be found in good numbers, and other swallows may be seen as well. In the fall, Buffleheads will visit, returning again in the spring when courtship can often be observed here. This spring, three Common Mergansers were seen on the pond which also seems promising as a place for spring migrants, but so far I have not had any luck.

Castle Hill. One other spot in Breakheart that I should mention is Castle Hill, easily reached from Main Street or by following Fir or Spruce paths. It is the highest hill in Breakheart and between its two peaks commands good views in all directions: one peak has a better view northward, the other southward. Although I have hawk-watched from these peaks on occasion, it was not particularly fruitful. What is fascinating to watch from here, however, is the build-up of the Breakheart crow roost. In winter, starting around two or three P.M., American (Common) Crows can be seen flying toward this area. Much vocalization will be heard as the numbers build and move from one group of trees to another. Around four P.M., the crows start flying to the trees that are to the southwest of Castle Hill. Up to 2000 birds may be in these trees! After the sun sets, a large number of these head for Crystal Lake in Melrose, their nighttime roost. Whether all fly off to Crystal Lake, or how many do and how many stay behind or go elsewhere are all questions that remain to be answered. However, regardless of the answers, the sight and size of this roost is mind-boggling!

There are other creatures to be found in Breakheart. I have several times come upon Woodchucks in the Camp Nihan area. Once, one walked right under me as I quietly sat on a log across a path, watching chickadees building their nest! Both Woodchucks and Red Foxes appear to have their dens near here. Although I have seen foxes during the day, one is more likely to encounter them at night; in early spring they can sometimes be heard (and glimpsed) at night, yelping as they pursue their mates and dash in a frenzy across the golf course. Raccoons may be found sleeping in the tops of trees during the day, muskrats may be seen swimming in the marshes and ponds, and skunks may cross your path at night. Once, I even found a Spring Peeper sitting on a Jewelweed leaf. My most surprising encounter, however, was with a nasty Northern Water Snake, two and a half feet long, which refused to let me pass along the path but instead struck at me repeatedly. I kept looking to make certain there were no rattles on the tail! After a prolonged confrontation, I was finally able

to convince it with the help of two large sticks (one was not enough!) to retreat back into the water.

My favorite times to be in Breakheart are either after sunset or before dawn. During these nighttime rambles, I often call out Screech Owls with a tape recorder. They can be heard in all three main areas. At other times, I just walk in and listen, being as unobtrusive as possible. It is at these times that the din of Spring Peepers, the trilling of American Toads, the "quacking" of Wood Frogs, and the yelping of Red Foxes may best be heard. Walking down a path, I may be as startled as the skunk I have just surprised, or upon hearing a rustle in the bushes and standing very still, I may observe a shadowy raccoon saunter across my path. At such times, or when just hearing the rustling of leaves and the gurgle of streams, I feel a sense of serenity and oneness with the natural world about me.

I invite you to share Breakheart's magic! I have not described all the paths and wonders there, for you will discover them on your own when you come. I hope I have persuaded you to look for them. Further, in writing about this place, I hope to encourage the reader to do something else: to find your own Breakheart in whatever part of the state you live - a place where you can retreat and renew your spirit.

One last word. If, in exploring Breakheart Reservation, you do come across a rarity, please break the news to me gently.

CRAIG JACKSON, an avid birder since 1975 when he went up to Newburyport to look at "that dumpy little gull," is a founder of Take a Second Look (TASL), an organization that encourages the careful study of common birds. He has been instrumental in forming the Friends of Belle Isle Marsh which seeks to preserve that marsh through public education. Massachusetts Audubon Society presented Craig and Sôheil Zendehe the Audubon "A" award for this conservation effort. In his spare time, Craig works in a factory where he is chief steward of his union.

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## Shorebirds: a workshop and observer training program

Part I. In a unique joint venture, Manomet Bird Observatory joins Bird Observer to offer a three-part shorebird workshop led by Wayne R. Petersen. Two seminars, highlighted by slides, study skins, and discussion, will cover shorebird distribution and ecology, feeding and migration strategies, and an overview of modern research techniques. Special emphasis will be given the problems of identifying and aging local species. The culmination of the seminars will be a field trip to prime shorebird habitat in the Newburyport/Plum Island area.

Part II. Under the auspices of Manomet Bird Observatory and the International Shorebird Survey Project, Wayne R. Petersen will offer a series of three training sessions at major shorebird concentration areas for serious students interested in contributing to ongoing research. This field work will emphasize techniques of estimating flock size, aging and identifying shorebirds, and assessing habitat and usage areas. Participants in this program will then be encouraged to take part in MBO research programs that require the assistance of trained observers, an unusual opportunity for amateurs to get involved in research. Only persons who have enrolled in Part I (or observers with extensive shorebird experience) are eligible for Part II.

### Dates, Hours, and Places.

Part I. The seminars will meet 7:30 - 9:00 P.M. at the First Church in Belmont, Unitarian Universalist, 404 Concord Avenue, on Tuesday and Thursday, June 21 and 23, OR on Monday and Wednesday, June 27 and 29. The field trips to Newburyport/Plum Island will be on Saturday, July 16, for the Tuesday/Thursday group and on Sunday, July 17, for the Monday/Wednesday group. Participants should register for one sequence or the other. Each sequence is limited to 20 persons.

Part II. The first field trip meets at Manomet Bird Observatory, off Point Road, Manomet, at 1:00 P.M. on Saturday, July 30, OR Sunday, July 31. The second trip will be to Newburyport/Plum Island on August 6 and 7, and the Monomoy trips (ferry charge = \$12) will be on August 27 and 28. Participants should register for either the Saturday or the Sunday sequence. Each sequence is limited to 20 persons.

### Schedule for Registration:

Part I:	June 21, June 23, July 16	(Tues./Thurs./Sat. sequence)
	June 27, June 29, July 17	(Mon./Wed./Sun. sequence)
Part II:	July 30, August 6, August 27	(Saturday sequence)
	July 31, August 7, August 28	(Sunday sequence)

To register for Part I alone or for Parts I and II, send a check for \$35 (Part I only) or \$65 (Parts I and II) made out to Manomet Bird Observatory, to Box 936, Manomet, MA 02345. Please include your name, address, day and evening telephone numbers and indicate whether you have a sequence preference. Call MBO, 224-6521 for further information.