

BIRD-FINDING IN SOUTHEASTERN MASSACHUSETTS -
BRIDGEWATER AND LAKEVILLE

by Wayne R. Petersen, Whitman

A look at the frontispiece map of Bird Observer shows that much of eastern Massachusetts is a region dominated by the seacoast - Essex County, the Boston Harbor basin, the South Shore, Cape Cod, the Buzzards Bay shore, and the islands of Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard, all providing prime habitat for birds of great diversity and often spectacular abundance. Yet, there are many square miles of landlocked countryside in eastern Massachusetts that can provide the student of birdlife with years of birding pleasure, at the same time offering interesting distributional anomalies worthy of investigation by the serious ornithologist.

Since moving to Plymouth County in 1970, the author has become increasingly intrigued by the many fine birding opportunities that inland southeastern Massachusetts has to offer. Unlike many of the more ornithologically rich coastal localities, in inland areas many bird species are actually more common than on the coastal plain, while other birds are rare or lacking. Although not at all surprising, these contrasts make bird-finding away from the coast both exciting and challenging. In addition, the pastoral setting of some of the finest areas is a pleasant change from the binocular-studded byways of Plum Island, West Newbury, and Mount Auburn Cemetery. There are a number of such rural areas in southeastern Massachusetts, but this description will focus only on a region defined by the U.S. Geological Survey topographic maps for Bridgewater, Taunton, and Assawompsett Pond. This fine map series is too often neglected by birders entering unfamiliar territory for the first time. Towns included in this discussion are Bridgewater, West Bridgewater, Halifax, Middleborough, and Lakeville.

Obviously, an article describing the birding potential of five towns, including Middleborough, the second largest town in the Commonwealth, can hardly be inclusive. Therefore, the article will discuss the region only in general terms and will selectively describe some of the dominant features and districts within the greater region. Most of the directions provided in this essay will use either Route 24 or Route 18 as major roads of access to the birding areas with most other major roads intersecting these at one point or another.

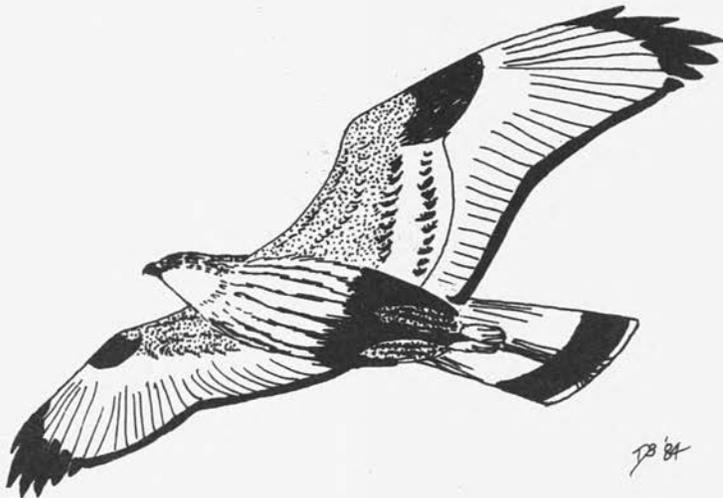
Winter is a particularly interesting season to make a first visit to the area. The rigors of winter impose a severe hardship on birds. Heavy snow covers weed seeds and stubble fields. Prolonged freezing temperatures lock up bodies of water and create extreme metabolic difficulties for those

species hardy enough to attempt wintering. While these conditions can exist near the seashore, they are greatly magnified as one moves inland; thus, the aggregate winter bird population in the interior generally tends to fall far below that of a coastal area. Raptors are among those birds best adapted to winter survival in an inland region. These large predators can generally eke out a living by preying upon field mice (*Microtus*), wood mice (*Peromyscus*), and on other small mammals or birds. With the leaves off the trees and hunger at the doorstep, they often become more conspicuous than at other seasons of the year. A leisurely and vigilant tour through open farmland and adjacent woodlots and wooded swamps often yields quite a tally of hawks in midwinter. If a special effort is made in a particular area, several species of owls may be found.

In addition to raptors, winter waterfowl provide a source of birding variety. If winter's grasp is not too severe, the larger ponds and rivers often sustain a surprising array of duck species. As these areas freeze over, the waterfowl are forced to move to either salt water or slightly more southerly localities. However, with the first thaws, leads in the ice are often found to contain the very species that only days or weeks before were frozen out. This opportunistic habitat usage by waterfowl is a phenomenon best appreciated in an inland region.

To reach the best raptor areas, drive south on Route 18 to Bridgewater Center, a small college town where several roads converge. Continue south on Routes 18 and 28 for approximately three miles to a large Massachusetts Correctional Institution sign on the left. Turn left at this sign. The road passes through a short stretch of low moist woods before coming to an extensive area of open fields. On the right the dreary gray walls and facilities of the prison will be seen. The State Farm fields are not off-limits to the discreet birder; however, the visitor may be questioned about his business in the area. Continuing straight ahead, the road leads past a small piggery on the right. From the road, the birder should look closely at the gulls on the barn roofs or at flocks resting in the nearby fields. Experience has shown that an occasional Iceland Gull can drop in, seemingly out of place from the more familiar rocky shores of Essex County.

After birding the piggery, take the dirt road on the left, a sharp curve into the fields. Working slowly along this road, observe closely the hay and corn fields on both sides, as well as the bordering trees and telephone poles. It is here that buteos, American Kestrels, and Northern Harriers can often be observed. Look for Rough-legged Hawks either soaring or perched on small bushes as they survey the area for periodically abundant field mice. Red-tailed Hawks and American Kestrels are most often sighted perched in adjacent trees or on the wires. Harriers cover a large area, but they regularly course the State Farm fields, especially late in



Rough-legged Hawk

Illustration by Denise Braunhardt

the day. Should the visitor arrive in the morning, spectacular concentrations of Common Crows can be found in the corn fields. When present in flocks of several hundred birds, these rowdy mobsters add a picturesque facet to a wintry landscape.

The evening is the hour of the owl. If time permits, a twilight visit will often be rewarded by the sight of one or more Short-eared Owls methodically hunting the grassy areas for mice. A loud squeaking on the hand from the open window of a parked car sometimes lures a hunting owl quite close. The Bridgewater State Farm is one of the few inland areas in Massachusetts where this species can be found with any regularity. After the sun has set, the resonant hooting of the Great Horned Owl is frequently heard from the adjacent pine woodlands. A careful and extensive search of neighboring pine and spruce groves by day occasionally turns up the communal winter roosts of the elusive Long-eared Owl. The gray, regurgitated pellets on the ground often indicate preferred roost trees. But remember, too much harassment may mean the abandonment of a roost!

During the warmer months, the Bridgewater State Farm holds substantial breeding populations of Bobolinks and Eastern Meadowlarks, while Savannah Sparrows sing their two-part buzzy songs from Timothy stalks in the hay fields. The lovely Upland Sandpiper is a regular migrant and occasional nesting bird in the lush farm meadows. The sandpipers are best observed in early August in fields where the hay has been freshly mowed.



Upland Sandpiper

Illustration by Denise Braunhardt

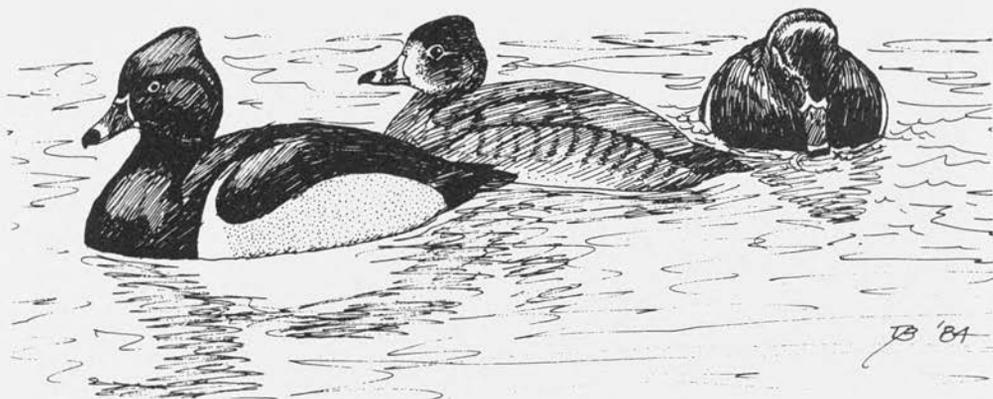
After thoroughly investigating the fields and nearby paved roads, continue a short distance beyond the farm buildings to Titicut Street. A left turn will bring one to Summer Street. A right on Summer Street will immediately lead to Woodward Bridge over the Taunton River. The wet woodlands along the river are fine habitat for the locally common Screech Owl, while many migrant songbirds routinely use the large riparian trees as a migration highway in spring. Just beyond the river crossing, turn left on River Street, and follow it for approximately two miles to Route 105 (Thompson Street) on the Halifax-Middleborough town line. River Street passes through a fine tract of woodland, some of which sadly is being logged but which still holds a pair or two of Barred Owls and where the Varying Hare's oversized tracks are easy to pick out on a winter snowshoe trek through the pine swamps.

At the junction of Route 105 and River Street, a huge corn field complex can be seen. A series of roads, including River Street, Wood Street, and Fuller Street, will take one around the perimeter of this extensive area. By regularly working these fields at all seasons, a number of remarkable sightings are possible. In the winter, the same diurnal raptors described for the Bridgewater State Farm are regular, and accipiters, especially goshawks, are by no means rare. In addition, Red-shouldered and Broad-winged hawks, and occasionally Saw-whet Owls, nest in nearby swampy woodlands.

Originally part of the Great Cedar Swamp, these corn fields were created by the Cumberland Farms food store chain as they cleared land for field corn to feed their dairy cattle

in Bridgewater. In doing so, they destroyed what was one of Massachusetts' finest Atlantic White Cedar (Chamaecyparis thyoides) swamps. A pitiful remnant of the original swamp is all that remains along the periphery of the fields and in some uncut acreage on the eastern side of the field complex. Despite this, pockets of the swamp still hold remnants of the original flora and small populations of the unique breeding bird fauna. The best of these pockets lies along Fuller and Cedar streets, where in spring it is still possible to record breeding Brown Creepers, Hermit Thrushes, Northern Waterthrushes, Canada Warblers, and rarely, White-throated Sparrows. The corn fields themselves are fine for waterfowl in early spring, large flocks of migrant Ring-billed Gulls in spring and fall, Horned Larks, Water Pipits, Lapland Longspurs, and Snow Buntings in fall and winter, and huge flocks of blackbirds in April and October. During their migration periods, shorebirds are particularly attracted to wet pools and to freshly spread manure, which is used as a fertilizer for the corn. Twenty-two species of shorebirds have been recorded by the author, but the most frequently occurring in numbers are Killdeer, Lesser Golden-Plover, Common Snipe, Solitary Sandpiper, both yellowlegs species, and Pectoral, Least, and Semipalmated sandpipers. In late summer and fall, tremendous swirling flocks of Tree and Barn Swallows feed over the corn fields, and later, Bobolinks, Indigo Buntings, and sparrows seek refuge in the corn and in the numerous weeds bordering the drainage ditches in the fields. To best appreciate the concentrations of birds in these fields, be prepared to do lots of walking at all seasons, taking precautions to wear appropriate rubber footwear during wet weather and in the early spring.

Return to Route 105 and drive south for about four miles to Route 44. A right turn will lead to the rotary where Routes 18, 28, 44, and 25 come together. Here a Howard Johnson's restaurant provides a pleasant break from winter cold or summer heat. From the rotary continue south on Route 18, which eventually joins Route 105 in Lakeville. After approximately 4.5 miles, Assawompsett Pond will be seen on the left. This large body of water is the biggest pond in Massachusetts after the Quabbin Reservoir. Once at the pond, park on the right across from the pumping station and walk out on the short stone dike. In the summer there is an active Osprey nest on a peninsula across the water from the pumping station - the only such active nest in inland Plymouth County at this time. The large cove to the left is apt to hold various species of diving ducks from October until freeze-up. Most common are Canvasback, both scaup species (be careful with identification), Bufflehead, and American Coot. Lesser numbers of Common Loon, Horned and Pied-billed grebes, both cormorant species (Great is rare), other diving ducks including scoters, Oldsquaws, and Common Mergansers are equally regular on Assawompsett Pond. In fact, over twenty species of waterfowl have been recorded on a single day - clearly an indication of the attraction of this area.



Ring-necked Ducks

Illustration by Denise Braunhardt

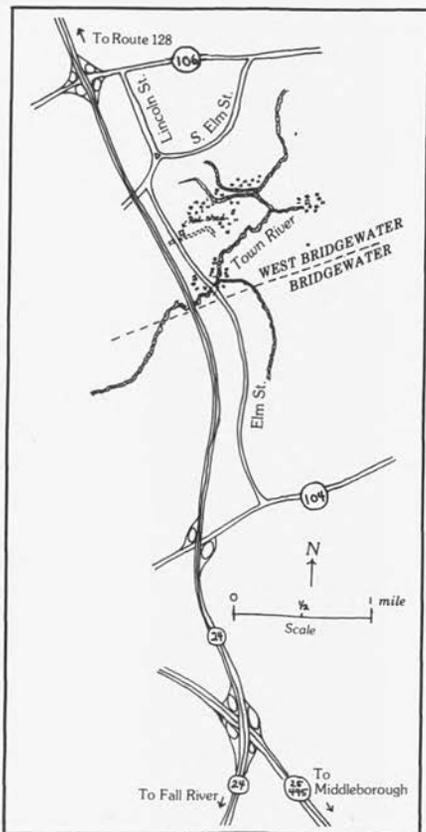
Continue south along the shore of the pond to the Tamarack Restaurant on the right. Check the dead trees at the north end of Long Pond, visible from the parking lot behind the restaurant. In recent winters these trees have been perches for Bald Eagles. Rarely, a Golden Eagle has visited the area. While eagles range over all of the Lakeville ponds, the area near the restaurant seems to be particularly attractive, since the open water often holds Mallards and coot that the eagles actively pursue when everything else is frozen. Keep an ear open in mild weather for the ringing song of the Carolina Wren, a regular inhabitant of the nearby Bittersweet tangles.

Leave the Tamarack Restaurant and continue south on Bedford Street along the pond shore, checking all suitable vantage points, since water birds can appear anywhere on the pond. Especially in late summer, scan far out over the middle of the pond for gulls and terns; Laughing Gulls, which are rare inland, and both Common and Forster's terns have been seen at that season. After traveling about 2.5 miles, look for a large spruce plantation on the left. Originally planted by the New Bedford Waterworks, this plantation has provided a nesting station for Red-breasted Nuthatches and Golden-crowned Kinglets for several years, and Yellow-rumped Warblers are suspected of breeding in the White Pines across the road where the more common Pine Warbler also nests. Boreal Chickadees have been noted in the spruces following years of fall invasions.

Shortly beyond the spruce grove, the road follows a dividing dike between Great Quittacas Pond on the left and Little Quittacas on the right. With Assawompsett Pond, these ponds are among the finest diving duck ponds on the Massachusetts mainland. They deserve careful attention at all seasons,

but especially from September through November. The Ring-necked Duck occurs here in greater numbers than anywhere in the state, and flocks in early November frequently reach one thousand birds. In some seasons, Ruddy Duck flocks numbering in the hundreds join the Ring-necks, usually in Little Quittacas; however, any species of pond duck is apt to appear in the Lakeville ponds in the autumn. Even such improbables as the Tufted Duck and the Marbled Murrelet (!) have been recorded in the area.

The coniferous woodlands around the Quittacas ponds are off-limits to pedestrians; however, all the roadways are open and provide good chances to observe the waterfowl and occasionally eagles and other raptors. A particularly good observation point is reached by returning north from the Quittacas ponds and turning right on Long Point Road, which runs along the north end of Great Quittacas Pond across a dike that divides Great Quittacas and Pocksha Pond. On clear, windy days, this can be an attractive location, reminding one of areas at the much larger Quabbin Reservoir and can also afford good looks at soaring birds of prey or goshawks as they sneak from one side of the wooded lake shore to the other.



In April or September, a profitable stop can be made when leaving the Bridgewater-Lakeville region by departing on Route 24. From the previously mentioned rotary where the Howard Johnson's Restaurant is, travel five miles northwest on Route 25 (U.S. 495 North) to the junction with Route 24. Go north on Route 24 and exit east on Route 104. Turn on to the first street on the left, Elm Street. This passes through a series of blueberry and turf farms, paralleling Route 24. A little less than one half mile after the road crosses the Town River into West Bridgewater, there is a red shed on the right overlooking the fields. A cart road leading into the fields in front of the house affords fine views of the meadows, inundated each spring by the Town River. These flooded meadows attract large numbers of waterfowl, Common Snipe, yellowlegs, and Pectoral Sandpipers. Ruffs have appeared almost annually for the past several years, sometimes

lingering for days at a time so that many visitors have been able to enjoy their striking plumages and occasional displays. The turf farms are best in September when concentrations of Killdeer and Lesser Golden-Plover may cover the grassy flats in search of earthworms. Periods following gloomy wet weather produce the best birding in both of these habitats. To depart the area, continue north to Lincoln Street, which runs into Route 106 adjacent to Route 24.

Through the description above - just a sampling of the possibilities - the author hopes that he has whetted the reader's appetite for the pleasures of birding an inland region in southeastern Massachusetts. Although the daily list may not match that of a coastal outing, the quality of the birding experience does. This experience is enhanced by the opportunity to explore a region less frequented by birders, where the visitor can make his own birding discoveries. The area awaits, like a sleeping giant, only to be awakened!

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