

Map by J. L. Heywood

BIRDING BY CANOE ON THE NEMASKET RIVER

by Kathleen S. Anderson, Middleborough

The winding, slow-moving rivers of eastern Massachusetts are seldom travelled by today's birders, yet they were major highways for the region's original Indian residents and were more often explored by earlier ornithologists when travel by road was slower and less comfortable. A canoe remains one of the best means of exploring natural areas that can be reached in no other way, and it continually surprises the paddler to find how wild and unsettled southeastern Massachusetts can seem as one glides silently between the wooded banks of a quiet stream.

For the novice at canoeing, a few words of advice may be in order. If you don't own a canoe, they may be borrowed or rented. Expert canoeing can be an art form; however, the neophyte can make satisfactory progress in slow waters at a first attempt. Aluminum canoes are far noisier than are fiberglass or canvas, but they can be used quietly if one is very careful not to hit the sides with the paddle. And silence is the key to seeing wildlife.

If your car does not have a roof rack, detachable racks (such as those that carry skis) are available. The easy method is to arrive at your river in a caravan of two cars, leaving one downstream where you plan to take-out, and the other at your put-in. Otherwise, remember that every mile of drifting leisurely downstream requires a harder paddle back to your car.

Always bring three paddles (we learned the hard way) and life preservers (a state law) - good insurance, even on a shallow, sluggish stream. My own list of equipment includes an extra sweater, notebook and pencil, field guides for plants and birds, a topo map (all best carried in a waterproof or plastic bag), and a lunch or snacks. Thirst and hunger can take your mind off the scenery and the birds, and it is unsafe, even though you may be desperate and some distance out on the river, to assuage that thirst by dipping up river water of uncertain quality.

Plymouth County's Nemasket River, which drains a large area of ponds and swamps in Middleborough, Lakeville, Rochester, and Freetown, is one of my favorites. It is only minutes from my home, it has a long history of human usage, and it provides good birding.

"Namasket" (present-day Middleborough) was Indian territory long after the coastal areas of Plymouth County had been settled. The Nemasket River was an important link in the system of waterways that connected Buzzards Bay (via the

Mattapoisett River rising in Great Quittacas Pond), Mount Hope Bay via the Taunton and Nemasket Rivers (originating in Assawompsett Pond) and Boston Harbor (via short portages between the headwaters of the Charles and tributaries of the Taunton River).

Human use of this region long predates the Algonquin Indians of the historic period. Excavations on the shores of Assawompsett Pond near the mouth of the Nemasket have unearthed an Indian village of the Archaic Period more than 4000 years old. A site along the Taunton River just below the Nemasket's mouth shows evidence of use some 20,000 years ago. Before that, the present Lakeville ponds were all part of one huge glacial lake, known to geologists as the Leverett Sea. Who knows what people hunted woolly mammoths by its shores?

From 1877 to 1897 a paddle-wheel steamboat ran up the Nemasket from the center of Middleborough to Assawompsett Pond, a favorite weekend excursion in a time when few people owned personal means of transportation. A few local old-timers still recall the excitement of taking the steamer (it cost 50¢) from Wareham Street in Middleborough up the river for four miles and thence around the largest natural pond in Massachusetts. Only Quabbin Reservoir is larger.

Although the days of dugout canoes and side-wheel steamers are long gone, in most places a strip of soggy floodplain protects the Nemasket from encroaching houses and one can paddle for a mile or more at a stretch with few signs of civilization, meeting only rarely another canoeist or fisherman. It is not difficult to imagine that ghosts from countless centuries paddle with us.

A straight line on a map between the Nemasket's origin at Assawompsett and its terminus at the Taunton River measures about five miles, but the twisting, meandering river channel provides about ten miles of paddling. There are only two dams and two stretches of rapids, all between Wareham Street and Oliver Mill Park on Route 44 in Middleborough. While it is possible to canoe the entire ten miles, portaging over Wareham Street and at Oliver Mill Park at the dams, we have found it easier to divide the river in half, sometimes choosing the upper four-mile stretch and sometimes the lower. Steady paddling can take one down either section in less than two hours, but that is not the way to enjoy this lovely river, nor the way to see the wildlife. Much better is to drift along, pausing here to watch a Red-tailed Hawk circling overhead, or there to listen to the pumping of an American Bittern, and occasionally pulling out to stretch the legs and explore a bit of the adjacent woodlands.

If you have two cars, the upper river can be reached by leaving one car at the dam on Wareham Street in Middleborough,



Tree Swallow

Illustration by William E. Davis

then putting the canoe in at Fall Brook on Wood Street or at Vaughan Street in Lakeville. There ~~is~~ a fish ladder at Wareham Street to aid the alewives over the dam, as there is at Oliver Mill Park.

For me, the lower river begins at historic Oliver Mill along Route 44, with take-outs at either Titicut Street or Summer Street bridges in Bridgewater, near the Massachusetts Correctional Institution. Local street maps (readily available) or topographic sheets (the Bridgewater and Assawompsett Pond quadrangles) are invaluable for finding one's way about country roads to canoe access points, and tracing one's progress on the river past various landmarks.

It is possible to leave a car, well-locked, at almost any bridge by putting it well off to the side of the road. At the Summer Street bridge it is possible to back a car down almost to the point of take-out. A small detail, but important to weary paddlers at day's end.

In very dry years the water can be too low for canoes in July and August, but in recent years we have made it in all months between March and November. April through early June are best for water conditions, with late May through the summer being best for birds.

There are no rest-room facilities en route, but there are lots of secluded woodlands. Because Assawompsett Pond is a public water supply, swimming is forbidden, but one can swim in the river wherever the water is sufficiently deep.

Putting in at Fall Brook on Wood Street, we follow a narrow creek wandering through a broad grassy marsh, especially good for Marsh Wrens. After some twisting about, Fall Brook enters the wider, deeper channel of the Nemasket where one can turn left and paddle up to Assawompsett Pond. If time is short, turn right and drift down to your car at Wareham Street. There is a pleasant picnicking spot where the river enters the lake, and the prevailing southwest breeze across more than a mile of water guarantees a cool respite on hot days.

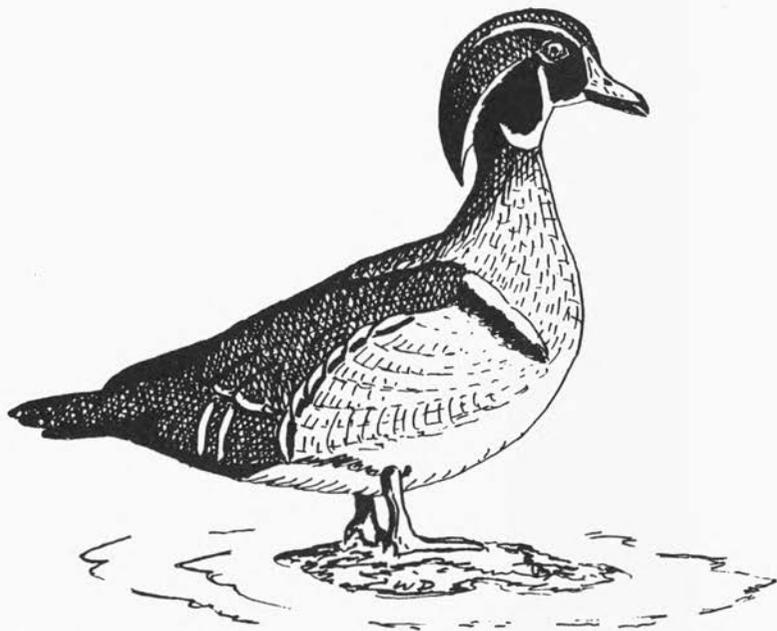
The birds to be seen will vary with the time of year. In April and early May, the herring are still running upsteam to lay their eggs on the sandy lake bottom, and the gulls that soar overhead are searching and scavenging for luckless fish or resting with full stomachs on rocks along the river. This upper reach of the Nemasket is the best area for American Bitterns (more often heard than seen) although we have flushed them downriver as well. Green-backed Herons are abundant, can appear anywhere, and I have recorded as many as twelve on a single trip. Great Egrets and Little Blue Herons have been seen and the Great Blue Heron, most often seen during migration, has also bred near Fall Brook. Black Ducks, Mallards and Wood Ducks are all common and, in May and early June, we often see females attracting attention with their flopping, broken-wing display ahead of the canoe while ducklings patter frantically across the water to disappear into brush or grasses. Blue-winged Teal are seen less often, but I suspect they also breed here; and this year, (1984) for the first time to my knowledge, Canada Geese are nesting along the river. On some trips, when there are many little flotillas of young or when flocks are gathering in early fall, I have recorded thirty to fifty ducks of several species.

Ospreys now breed on Assawompsett, and we regularly see them fishing in the lake. Like the bitterns, rails are more often heard than seen, but Virginia, Sora and King rails have all been recorded along the river. Purple Martins from a well-known colony on Cherry Street, established by the late Reginald Maxim, join Tree, Barn and the occasional Rough-winged Swallow over the upper Nemasket. Eastern Kingbird nests tend to be conspicuous, but the abundant Yellow Warblers, Common Yellowthroats, Song and Swamp sparrows do a better job of concealment. Red-winged Blackbirds are superabundant, and their nests are not hard to find in Buttonbush or Silky Dogwood along the channel's edge. An extensive patch of Wild Rice near Wareham Street draws hundreds (thousands?) of blackbirds, including Bobolinks, in late summer.

Easiest access to the lower Nemasket is at Oliver Mill Park along Route 44. This historic colonial industrial site has picnic tables, an easy put-in, and is a fine spot to see the alewives going up the fish ladder in early spring.

This lower section of the river has a somewhat different character but is just as interesting in its own way. The trees along the river are larger. There are more White Pines and Swamp White Oaks. We see more hawks - Red-tails, Red-shoulders and Broad-wings - and once, two young Great Horned Owls in a riverside pine in broad daylight. Bitterns and Green-backed Herons are seen less often, but broods of ducklings are common. Sand bars and muddy river banks are more frequent here, and they attract Spotted, Solitary and Least sandpipers as well as yellowlegs and Killdeer. Swallows and Redwings are fewer along this more wooded reach of the river. Of course, any species common to forested areas of southeastern Massachusetts can be looked for in the riverside trees as one drifts along, and I have regularly recorded woodpeckers, flycatchers, vireos, warblers and more, of many species.

I cannot think of the Nemasket without thinking of all the lovely flowers I have found along its banks. The large white Fragrant Water-lily and the smaller yellow Bullhead-lily are easily recognizable, and the Broad-leaved Arrowhead is widespread in wet places. But do you know the tiny white aquatic gentian known as Floating Heart? Or the small White



Wood Duck

Illustration by William E. Davis

Water-Buttercups? The minute yellow blossoms of the bladder-worts? And what of that rarer aquatic primrose, with its floating rosettes of thread-like leaves surmounted by a strange inflated flower stalk, the Featherfoil? All of these, and more, I first met while paddling on the Nemasket.

And then there are the shrubby plants that form thickets in shallow water - the lovely little Swamp Sweet Bells, the fragrant pink Swamp Rose, and the abundant Buttonbush which, when in bloom, can look as if it has been hung with small ping-pong balls. Leatherleaf, Sweetgale, and Silvery Dogwood are not so flashy but typically found in standing water.

Flowers of the water's edge seem to be more colorful and more robust than the "floaters," and their florets are often in spikes. Pickerelweed has blue spikes, Steeplebush, pink spikes, Turtlehead, a droopy white spike, and the Yellow Loosestrife has lovely, tall yellow spikes, aptly called "Swamp Candles." Showiest of all are the flaming scarlet spikes of the wetland lobelia, the Cardinal-flower. But not all are spikes. Water-parson (white), Joe-Pye weed (dusky pink), and New York Ironweed (lavender) all have flat-topped clusters of florets.

Some of the conspicuous blossoms are on flowering shrubs, rather than true flowers. The Swamp-honeysuckle (actually an azalea) which blooms in June and July, is followed later in July by Sweet Pepperbush, or Clethra, and both have white blossoms with almost overpoweringly sweet fragrances. Less common, but even more showy, is a northern hibiscus with large pink blossoms, known as Swamp Rose-mallow. Taking a flower guide when canoeing can add greatly to your appreciation of the natural beauty of a river trip.

Canoeing on the Nemasket, and on other rivers in southeastern Massachusetts, may not add many rare species to the annual list, but it does provide an entirely different experience in birdwatching. The sheer pleasure of drifting down a quiet stream, slipping up on a muskrat or a brood of ducklings, the sense of seeing this long-settled part of New England much as it was a century or more ago, and always the chance that around the next bend there will be a surprise, make canoeing my favorite way to explore the little known waterways of my part of the Commonwealth.

CANOE DEALERS

Listed below are canoe dealers, addresses, and telephone numbers. Four were contacted to obtain a representative sample of costs and services. Rental prices range from \$4 to \$5 per hour and \$15 to \$25 per day. Paddles and life jackets are included and roof racks for transportation where necessary.

AA Rental Center
1053 Belmont St., Watertown
(617) 484-1554

South Bridge Boat House
46 Main St., Concord
(617) 369-9438

Capeway Canoe Rental
1009 Washington St., Weymouth
(617) 331-5177

Treeline, Inc.
12 Central Square, Middleton
(617) 774-6536

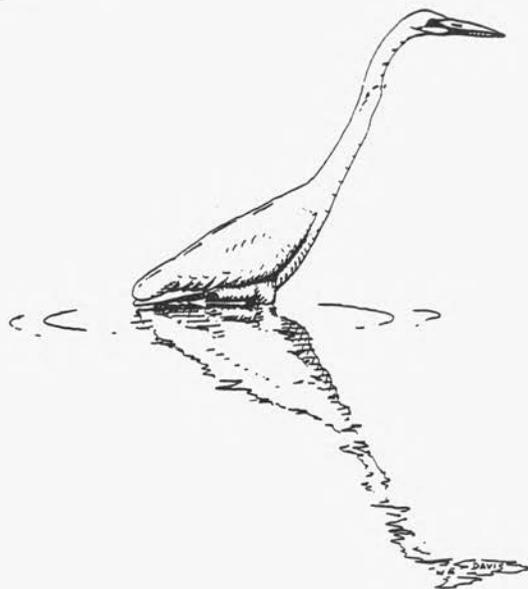
Carroll's Bait & Sporting Goods
Route 1A, Norfolk
(617) 384-8322

Tropicland Marine & Tackle
100 Bridge St., Dedham
(617) 329-3777

Charles River Canoe Service
2401 Commonwealth Ave., Newton
(617) 965-5110

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80 Lincoln Road, Sudbury
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Great Egret

Illustration by William E. Davis



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