

SPRING MIGRATION ON SAVIN HILL

by Kenneth I. Winston, Boston

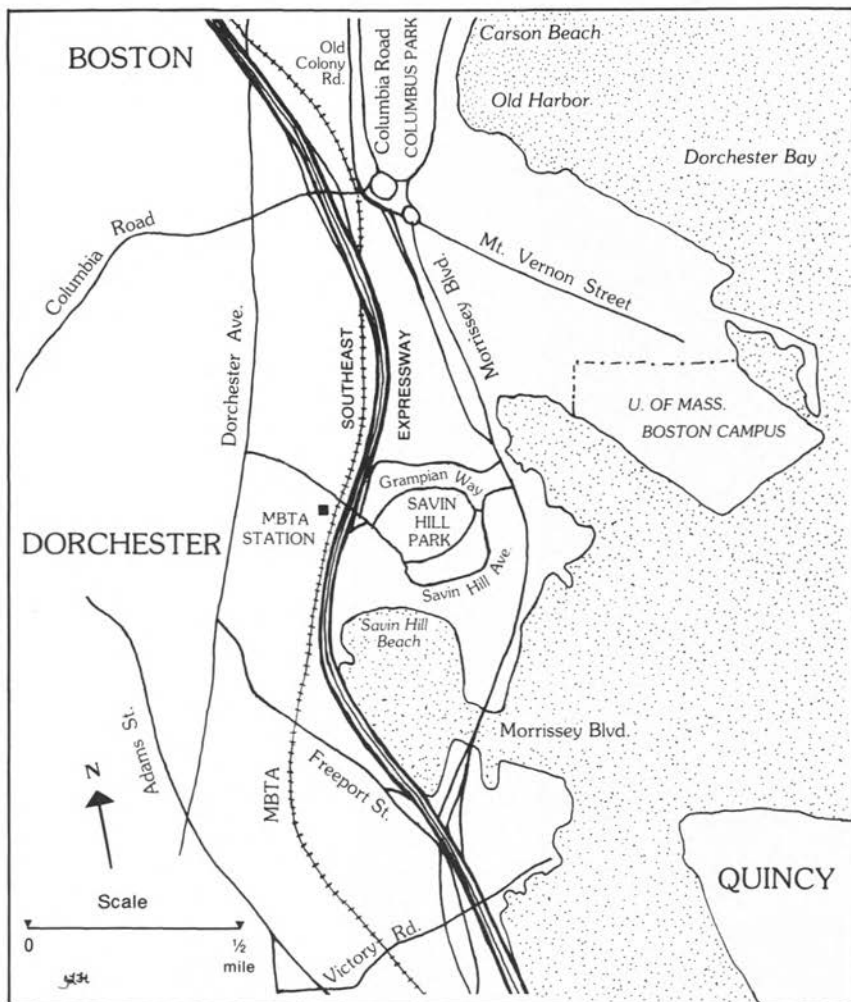
When the Puritans of the Massachusetts Bay Colony reached these shores in 1630, one group aboard the ship *Mary and John* decided to disembark at Savin Hill. The landing occurred in the middle of June, so they missed the spring migration by a few weeks. But as their plans were rather long-term, they stayed anyway and thus established the first settlement in Boston. The hill was favored apparently because its commanding view of the harbor made it an ideal place for defense. (The hill was fortified by the construction of a palisade in 1633 and again at the time of the American Revolution.) Also, the surrounding fields provided ample pasture for cows and were rich with native game, especially Wild Turkey. For this reason, I assume the Puritans took a lively interest in local bird life - even though handicapped by the nonexistence of Peterson's Field Guide to Eastern Birds - but I imagine them making a very sharp distinction between birding as a practical activity for obtaining food, which they would have approved, and birding as a leisure time activity, which they would perhaps have considered as frivolous as dancing - a worldly temptation that diverts people from the Lord's work.

All that remains today to remind the casual observer of these Puritan beginnings is a shabby commemorative plaque embedded in stone, placed at the eastern edge of Savin Hill in 1901, and a yearly reenactment of the landing at a nearby beach by local nostalgia buffs - in original costume. With the encroachment of modern urban civilization, the unencumbered part of the hill has diminished considerably, until it now consists of only a couple of acres of rocky outcropping with several dozen trees (mostly oak) on the slopes, surrounded by one-family houses and city-owned basketball and tennis courts on Grampian Way. The hill itself no longer serves any designated public function. It is too small and irregular to be a park, for example, though the view of the harbor still makes it a desirable (uncrowded) site for witnessing (at a distance) the occasional procession of Tall Ships. However, what is important now is that the hill is one of the few prominent oases of greenery in the contemporary city landscape and consequently has become a natural stopping place for land birds heading north in the spring. The avian invasion - in costumes much more colorful than those of the Puritans - has given Savin Hill a new significance.

I began birding the hill sporadically in the spring of 1980, shortly after moving to the area (known locally as St. William's parish). In 1981, I walked the hill for at least an hour or two, and sometimes more, each morning during the last two weeks of May. Then in 1982, and continuing through 1984,

I began my daily visits in the latter part of April, so they ranged over the better part of five or six weeks. (Occasionally I missed a day or two, I admit, when the weather was inclement or the demands of my job too pressing. Why must work get in the way of what's truly important!) The results of these forays were, to my mind, quite astonishing. I began to believe that almost any bird that ever migrated along the East Coast might be seen on the hill, if only one were sufficiently patient, listened carefully, and looked intently.

My habit is to approach the hill from the grassy skirt at the eastern end, which is the only extensive part where houses do not line the fringes. Behind the basketball court, a broken set of stairs carved out of the rock leads to a ledge along one side of the hill. This path is one of the most advantageous places for spotting warblers, since it



brings the observer almost level with the tops of a row of trees on the southern slope. This year (1984), for example, it yielded Blue-winged and Prairie warblers, among others. It's also the place, however, where one is first likely to encounter some of the hazards of birding the hill. For the path is strewn with broken beer bottles and cans and other litter left behind by teenagers from the neighborhood who use the hill (especially in warm weather) as a refuge from their families. Fortunately most of this activity occurs at night; in the morning one encounters, at worst, only its aftereffects - although one time I startled a young couple hidden among the rocks who had spent the night in a sleeping-bag. With the enactment of the bottle bill by the Massachusetts legislature a few years ago, I had hoped the situation on the hill would improve, but it seems that the tradition of littering is too deeply entrenched. (In the neighborhood, on the other hand, an annual clean-up campaign now enjoys wide support.) Beer drinking of course leads to urinating, at least among males, but I'm happy to report that no foul odors linger on the hill - unlike, for example, the Savin Hill subway station, which lacks natural drainage.

The path dips slightly as one walks west and leads to an area of shrubs and tall grasses, as well as a few trees. (To the right, the rock face is at its steepest and so has provided the most tempting place for graffiti. The observer needn't look too long in that direction.) This is a good spot for the mimics, thrushes, flycatchers, and sparrow. For example, Great Crested Flycatchers put in an annual appearance, and I've had visits from Yellow-bellied and Least flycatchers. Hermit and Swainson's thrushes show up in significant numbers, as well as Veery (two years), Wood Thrush (the following two years), and Gray-cheeked Thrush (in 1982). This is also one of two places where I came upon a Worm-eating Warbler. From here the path again rises as it curves around, and another set of steps leads to the northern edge of the hill. A row of trees and a considerable amount of underbrush make this one of the most productive areas. It's here, for example, that I saw a first-year male Cerulean Warbler (in 1982), a Yellow-breasted Chat (in 1984), and a couple of Indigo Buntings. This is also the best place for the kinglets, both Ruby-crowned and Golden-crowned, and for the two raptors I have spotted occasionally: American Kestrel and Sharp-shinned Hawk.

If one turns right, it's only a few dozen steps to the top of the hill, and though one is not likely to add anything to one's list, the view is always refreshing. Actually at lowtide the extensive mudflats in Dorchester Bay are in plain sight, and with a good telescope one might be able to pick out a number of shorebirds. However, since my aim has been to focus on what may legitimately be called the birds of Savin Hill, I have refrained from adding to my list in that way. I have made it a rule to count only birds that land on the hill or that fly directly overhead. Neverthe-

less, the proximity to the shore has had its advantages, for overhead flights have included Great Blue Heron, Green-backed Heron, Snowy Egret, Double-crested Cormorant, Greater Yellowlegs, and Short-billed Dowitcher (which, fortunately, was calling as it passed). In addition, a couple of Black-crowned Night-Herons have spent time sitting in the trees.

Returning to the northern edge, I usually continue walking east to the point where the path slopes back down to the grassy skirt. But instead of following it I clamber up a small outcropping to the right which puts one level again with a stand of trees. This area has also been good for warblers, as well as Rose-breasted Grosbeaks, Bobolinks, Cedar Waxwings, and a Warbling Vireo. In 1981 I disturbed the morning nap of a Common Nighthawk in this area. The next year I spotted a waterthrush in the same location, but unfortunately I could not further specify it, because it stayed for only a few seconds. It was also near here that I discovered a Black-billed Cuckoo and both White-breasted and Red-breasted nuthatches. As if this wasn't excitement enough, I spent considerable time one afternoon of an early June day trying to locate the source of a strange, plaintive cry high in the thick foliage of an oak tree, only to discover that one of my neighbors was missing a pet Cockatiel.

The only bird that I can say with confidence breeds successfully on the hill is the European Starling, though others seem to nest in the surrounding area, including Northern Cardinal, Northern Flicker, American Goldfinch, and Downy Woodpecker. There is probably too much human and animal disturbance for all but the most impervious of avian creatures. Even humans of a certain sensibility might find the hill hard to cope with after the ravages of summertime activity. But during the migration, when the blush of spring is still upon it, Savin Hill is a worthy place to train one's binoculars. Of course, it doesn't have the beauty of Mt. Auburn Cemetery, but then it doesn't have the crowds of people either. In the five years that I've been tracking the spring migration, I've seen another birder only once. In the same period of time, I've seen a total of ninety-seven species, including twenty-five species of warbler. The Puritans may not have approved, but as I see it, I'm only standing witness to one of the few glories of nature observable in the city on a hill.

KENNETH I. WINSTON writes that he "was born and raised in Boston and feels a special affinity with the Puritan spirit that lingers desultorily in the city." Dr. Winston is a professor of philosophy at Wheaton, educated at Harvard (A.B.) and Columbia (Ph.D.), whose research interests are in ethics and philosophy of law. Kenneth further states, "I became a serious birder in 1976 under the tutelage of my colleague at Wheaton, John Kricher. However, he should not be blamed for my literary proclivities."