

RELICT OF DAYS PAST: WEST QUABBIN

by Peter H. Yaukey, Boulder, Colorado

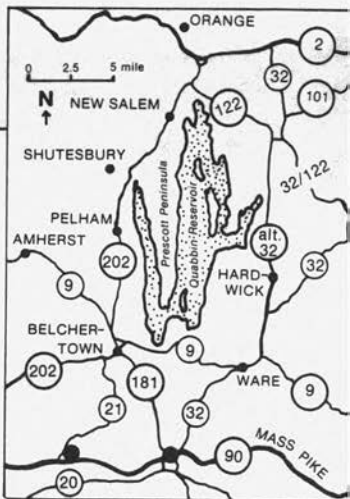
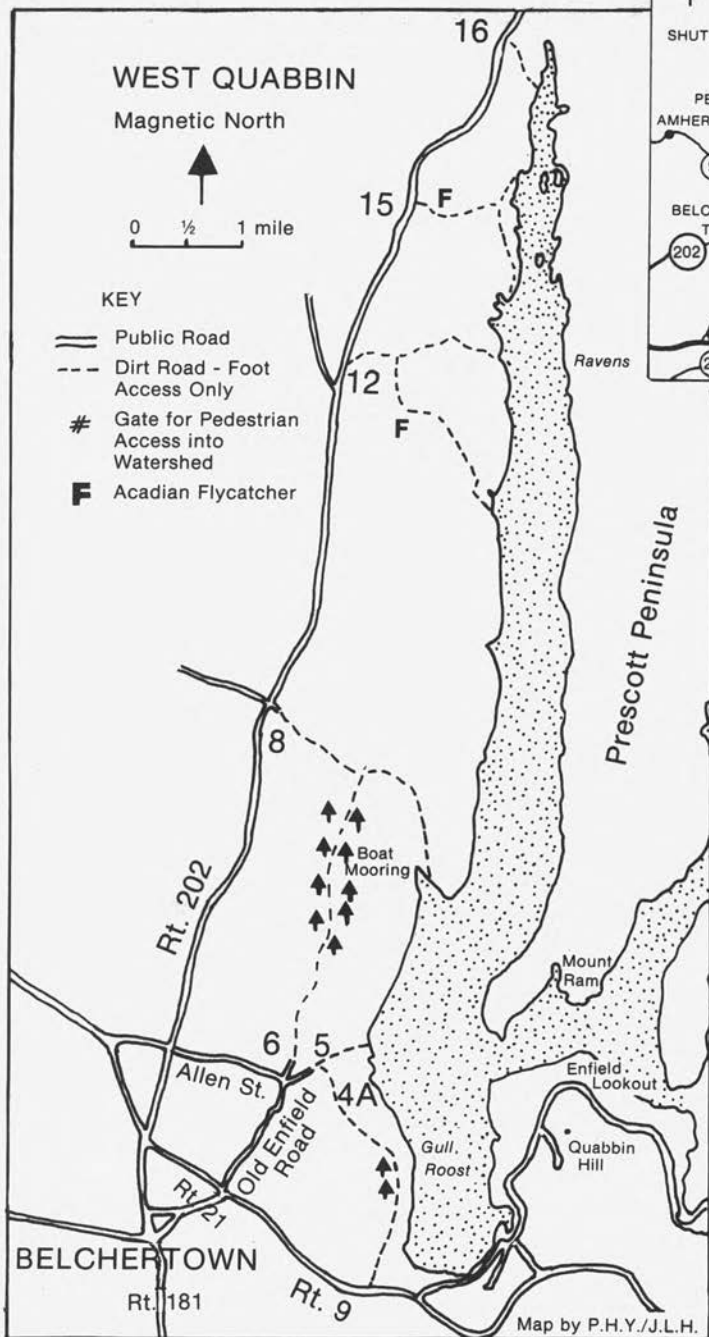
The Quabbin Reservoir in central Massachusetts is a pristine, eighteen-mile-long lake secluded within 55,000 acres of uninhabited woodland. Most of these forests are accessible only on foot along old roadbeds that are entered through fifty-five gates that border the watershed. This article focuses on the habitat and birdlife of the western side of Quabbin, a region that has received less attention from birdwatchers than the rest of the watershed.

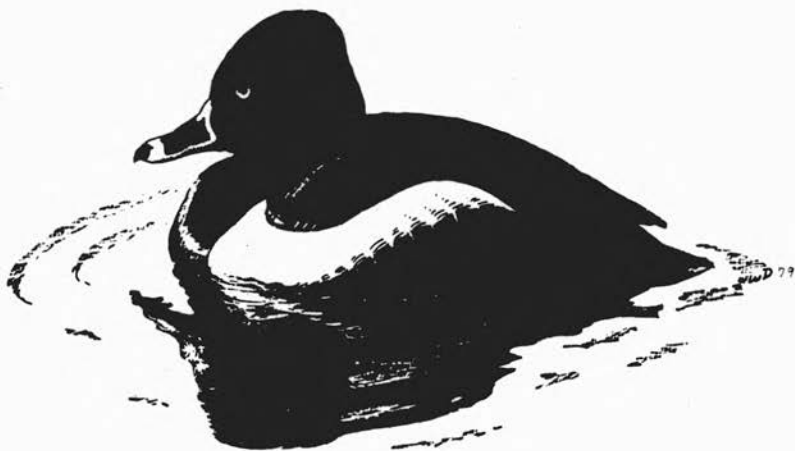
West Quabbin's forests are mostly deciduous with a significant scattering of conifer groves, chiefly red pine. Mysterious and intriguing against this backdrop are low, crumbling stone walls and defunct cellar holes, relicts of habitation fifty or more years in the past. Trees of great girth sometimes line the roadways; distinctly older than the trees behind them, they once stood alone in a field. Recent logging has thinned out the woods in some places, although nowhere by clear-cutting.

This scene hosts a rich avifauna, particularly during the breeding season when six flycatcher, five thrush, and eighteen warbler species nest here. When birdsong is at its peak in early June, large numbers of birds can be recorded: in one three-hour hike to the water and back on June 1, 1981, the rich tally included fourteen Veerys, twenty Red-eyed Vireos, twenty-three Black-and-white Warblers, twenty-seven Ovenbirds, and twenty American Redstarts. It is possible to find five or more of several warbler species in an outing: Blackburnian, Black-throated Green, Chestnut-sided warblers, and Louisiana Waterthrush, and similar numbers of Least Flycatcher, Eastern Wood-Pewee, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, and Scarlet Tanager.

Among the less common species at this season are birds with both northern and southern affinities. The Black-throated Blue, Yellow-rumped, Magnolia, and Canada warblers, Solitary Vireo, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, and Purple Finch are among the northerners. The southern contingent includes Pine Warbler, Yellow-throated Vireo, and a West Quabbin specialty, Acadian Flycatcher, which can be found at gates 12 and 15 as indicated on the map. Conveniently, the walk inside gate 12 passes an old beaver pond favored by sapsuckers and bluebirds, and the walk inside gate 15 provides the best spot from which to scan for ravens. Their nest cliff across the water on inaccessible Prescott Peninsula was once home to a Peregrine Falcon eyrie.

In wintertime, the predominantly deciduous forest becomes gray and barren, strikingly peaceful, silent but for the wind pushing through the trees and the crunch of snow underfoot. The few birds that remain from summer include chickadees, titmice, White-breasted Nuthatches, Brown Creepers, Downy and Hairy woodpeckers,





Ring-necked Duck

Illustration by William E. Davis, Jr.

and an occasional Pileated Woodpecker or Ruffed Grouse. Conifer groves, where Red-breasted Nuthatches reside the year round, now attract Golden-crowned Kinglets, and, sporadically, northern finches such as Pine Siskins, Purple Finches, Evening and Pine grosbeaks, or even Red or White-winged crossbills. A large spruce grove that narrowly lines about two miles of trail at gate 6 has held Red Crossbills, and may someday host Boreal Chickadees.

In early spring and again from late fall until freezeup, the waters of Quabbin attract the most birds; in summer, they are worth scanning for a Common Loon, found here at one of their southernmost breeding outposts. Gates 5 and 16 provide the easiest access to the waters of West Quabbin.

Walking to the water from gate 5 takes ten minutes, and on the way you are likely to encounter a Red-breasted Nuthatch or a Golden-crowned Kinglet; Red Crossbills and Common Redpolls have also been seen. One year between October and freezeup, Snow Buntings were found on the shoreline here, and Red-necked Grebes, Oldsquaw, American Coot, and Black Scoters were seen on the water. Peak counts of that period included twenty Horned Grebes, thirteen Ring-necked Ducks, twelve Buffleheads, thirty-three Common Mergansers, and three Bald Eagles: such good results this far inland beg for further coverage.

During the only two visits to gate 16 during waterfowl season that have been recorded, Common Loons and six duck species were found. Solitary and Spotted sandpipers have been found on the flats in August, and the ten-minute walk to the water has produced Red Crossbill in April.

Gulls often roost at the southwest corner of Quabbin on winter evenings with 2600 at one count. White-winged species have been found among the hundreds of milling Herring Gulls. The best opportunity for close views may be via the twenty-minute walk in from gate 4A, which passes through an attractive spruce grove.

Quabbin is a wilderness enclosed in an ever-encroaching world. Its expansive forests and varied birds seem a throwback to a peaceful time long departed.

Directions for travel through West Quabbin.

Access to Quabbin is from Massachusetts Route 9 and U. S. Route 202. To reach their intersection at West Quabbin's southwest corner in Belchertown, take Route 202 south from Route 2, or Route 9 west from Worcester, or Massachusetts Route 181 north from exit 8 of the Massachusetts Turnpike.

Some gates are not labeled with their numbers, so follow directions carefully. From the intersection of Routes 9 and 202, proceed east on Route 9 to its intersection with state Route 21 on the right. On the left here is Old Enfield Road, at the end of which is gate 5. Gate 4A is located 0.1 mile down the dirt road to the right of gate 5.

Return to the intersection of 202 and 9 and proceed north on 202 for one mile. Turn right on Allen Street. Proceed 1.3 miles and turn left on Juckett Hill Road. A quarter mile along it is gate 6, one mile inside of which is found a spruce grove.

Eight miles farther north on 202 is a scenic overlook of West Quabbin. Gate 12 is on the south edge. A half mile inside the gate, take the first major right; 0.75 mile beyond, look for Acadian Flycatcher in the hemlock grove on the right.

On Route 202, 1.75 miles beyond the overlook, gate 15 is located down the embankment on the right shoulder, at the apex of a left-hand bend. Hemlock areas, beginning 0.25 mile in on the left, are Acadian Flycatcher habitat. About one mile in, turn right at the "T" and walk one mile to the water to scan the sky for ravens.

Four miles north of the overlook on Route 202, gate 16 is found on the right, next to a large parking area.

PETER YAUKEY has been birding since elementary school in Amherst, Massachusetts, where he grew up. He graduated from the University of Virginia with a B.A. degree in biology (1983) and is currently working on a master's degree in geography at the University of Colorado. Since 1979, when he was employed by Massachusetts Audubon to collect field data for the state Breeding Bird Atlas, Peter has spent every summer doing field research on birds, including work in northern Maine, New Hampshire, Virginia, and at Manomet Bird Observatory, where he was an intern.

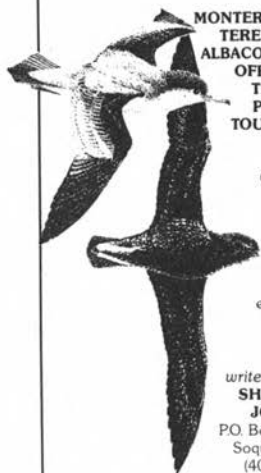
The author wishes to thank Keith Hadley and David Shankman for their helpful comments on an earlier draft.

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Eastern Massachusetts Hawk Watch

Hawks are migrating once again, giving birders in the state an excellent opportunity to see significant numbers of hawks in good variety. The Eastern Massachusetts Hawk Watch (EMHW), in its eleventh year, will attempt to monitor portions of this flight.

The EMHW will maintain a consecutive-day hawkwatch on the summit of Wachusett Mountain in Princeton from September 1 through October 13, and continuing on all weekends through November 23, if the number of volunteer observers permits. Help is especially critical for weekdays at Wachusett from September 22 through October 13, the period when accipiters and some of the larger buteos are best seen.

Participating in a coordinated hawkwatch throughout New England, the EMHW will also cover as many sites as there are volunteers available on four weekends — September 13-14, 20-21, 27-28, and November 1-2. Volunteers are needed to report the level of hawk migration activity from any site on any of the eight coordinated weekend dates. Select a site near your home or contact the EMHW coordinator for recommendations as to the best sites available for coverage.

You don't have to be a hawk identification expert to participate and report. Reporting the number of hawks seen - not identifying every one of them - is the critical requirement. If you would like to learn more about hawk migration and identification, the EMHW coordinator can team you with a more experienced hawkwatcher at any of a number of sites across the eastern half of the state, from the Cape to the Connecticut.

Volunteers are needed for all dates, especially for the four coordinated weekend-watches and for Wachusett on weekdays from September 22 to October 13.

If you would like to participate, please contact
PAUL M. ROBERTS, 254 Arlington Street, Medford, MA 02155.
Telephone: 617-483-4263 (after 8:00 P.M.)

If you would like more information on hawkwatching in eastern Massachusetts, including copies of the EMHW reports for the fall of 1985 and spring 1986 flights, please write Paul Roberts at the address above and include \$1.00 to help defray costs. The information packet includes two fliers: "Why People Watch Hawks" and "Where and When to Watch Hawks in Eastern Massachusetts."

Additionally, a six-page silhouette guide to hawks of the north-east is available for \$1.64 (including postage), and a sixteen-page *Beginner's Guide to Hawkwatching* is available for \$1.22 (including postage). Checks should be payable to Eastern Massachusetts Hawk Watch and mailed to the above address.