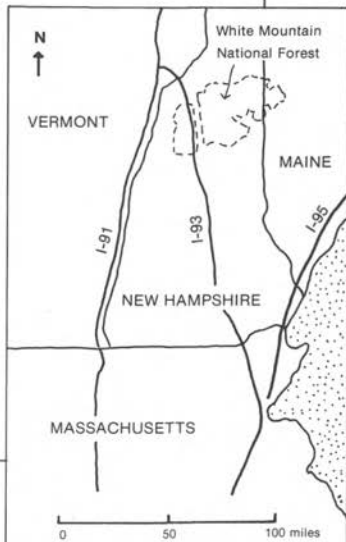
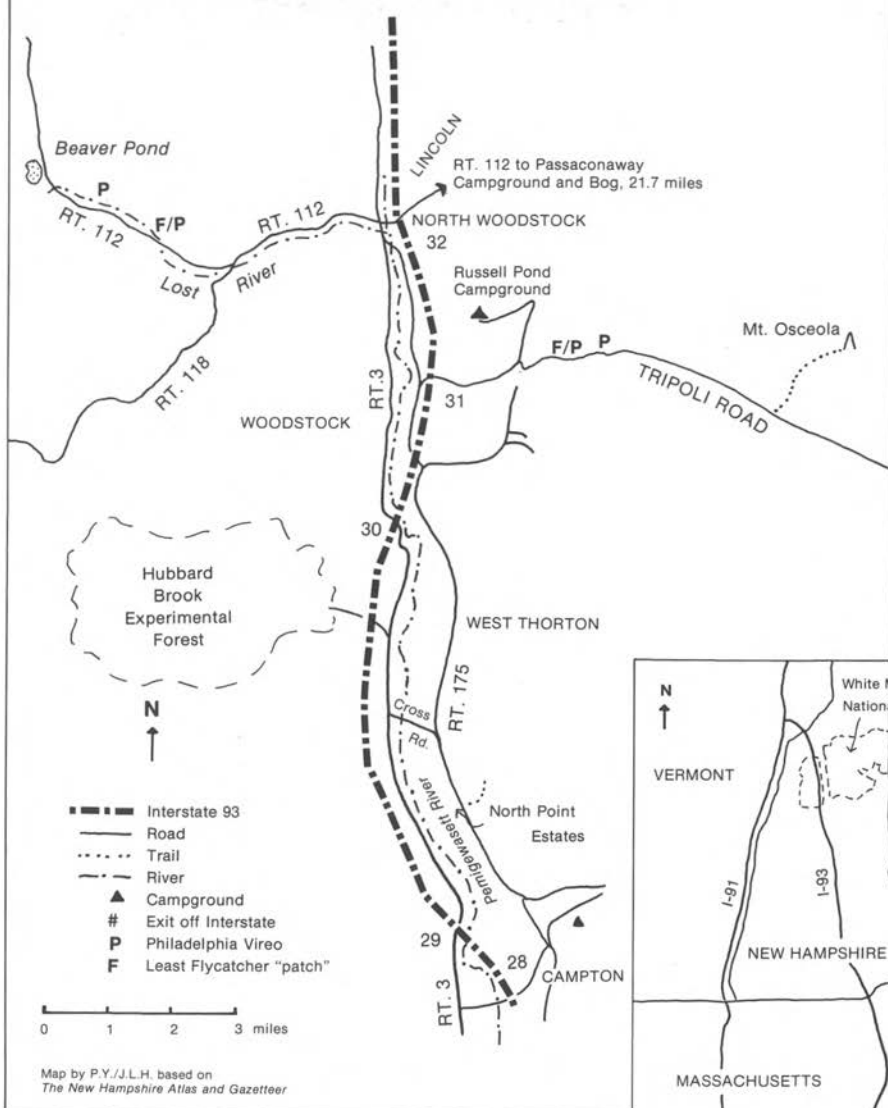


SOUTHERN WHITE MOUNTAINS



SUMMER BIRDING IN THE WHITE MOUNTAINS

by Peter H. Yaukey

The White Mountains of New Hampshire form the tallest mountain mass in New England. While their highest peaks reach above timberline, their upper slopes are covered by a dense forest of dwarf paper birch, spruce, and fir, and their lower slopes are cloaked in a northern hardwood forest of beech, yellow birch, and maple. These forest communities harbor a broad variety of bird species of interest to the Massachusetts birder.

Many migrant northern breeding species can be seen in greater numbers in the White Mountains during the summer than during migration through the Bay State. Other species, such as the Spruce Grouse, do not occur in Massachusetts at all. Observing familiar migrant birds on their nesting territories can be novel, since they reserve certain behaviors and vocalizations for this time of year. Such opportunities for finding birds, combined with scenic mountain vistas make the White Mountains a worthy destination during the summer months.

Based on my observations in a large stand of maple, birch, and beech during the last three years, the most common birds in this habitat are the Red-eyed Vireo, American Redstart, Ovenbird, and Black-throated Blue and Black-throated Green warblers. Other species that can be expected in a morning's birding include Hermit, Swainson's, and Wood thrushes, Veery, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Scarlet Tanager, and Rose-breasted Grosbeak. Along streams where a few conifers occur, Blackburnian Warbler, Solitary Vireo, Winter Wren, and Brown Creeper are similarly common. Less common but nevertheless likely are Pileated Woodpecker, Yellow-rumped Warbler, Golden-crowned Kinglet, and Purple Finch. The raptor most often detected in the northern hardwoods is the Barred Owl, which is often vocal by day.

Two specialized habitats worth investigating -- clear-cuts and beaver ponds -- are found locally within the hardwoods. Clear-cuts harvested within the previous two or three years harbor breeding Mourning Warblers. One clear-cut of this age that I observed also had numerous Chestnut-sided Warblers and Ruby-throated Hummingbirds. These areas are especially worth investigating during July or August, when birds of the closed forest such as thrushes, grosbeaks, and redstarts move in. The beaver pond habitat is favored by Northern Waterthrushes and Olive-sided Flycatchers. Canada and Magnolia warblers often reside along the edges of these ponds.

Interesting for its perplexing patchy distribution within the hardwoods is the Least Flycatcher. Whereas this species is absent from many apparently suitable sites, groups of up to fifty pairs pack together in other areas with each pair occupying but a tiny territory. Vigorous fighting and chasing is common in

these patches, and the morning chorus at first light is a treat. Each male contributes a rapid string of loud "chebeks" continuously from its territory, and together they produce a cacophony.

Above the northern hardwood forest, spruce, fir, and paper birch increase in abundance as the trees become progressively more stunted. Scattered within these areas are dense stands of spruce and fir with an open mossy ground cover. These high-elevation forests are home to several long-distance migrants that breed here close to their southern limits. The Blackpoll Warbler, Yellow-bellied Flycatcher, and Gray-cheeked Thrush seem to be present on most peaks where there is sufficient coniferous habitat. Blackpoll Warblers and Yellow-bellied Flycatchers occur down to about an elevation of 3000 feet, whereas the Gray-cheeks are found slightly higher. All three of these species, but particularly the Gray-cheeked Thrush, can be difficult to spot even where they are numerous because the vegetation of this habitat is so dense. Magnolia and Yellow-rumped warblers occur at their highest densities here, and Dark-eyed Juncos and White-throated Sparrows can also be numerous.

One treat of the conifer-clad mountains is the Boreal Chickadee, which I have found on most of my hikes in recent years. The spruce-fir habitat is also exciting because of the possibility of encountering a Gray Jay, Black-backed Woodpecker, or Spruce Grouse; though less widespread than the chickadee, they are worth looking for.

The northern hardwood and spruce-fir forest communities occur throughout the White Mountains and are accessible to the public as part of the White Mountain National Forest. Although good birding can be found along many roads and trails, the following road guide should nevertheless be useful for those with time constraints. Included are several sites where the Philadelphia Vireo may be found as well as Passaconaway Bog, a sphagnous area with breeding boreal species, including Lincoln's Sparrow.

Interstate 93 provides a direct conduit between eastern Massachusetts and the southern White Mountains. Take Exit 28 off this freeway, and drive about one mile east to the first traffic light, beyond which is a sizable wetland. This area is worth checking both from the road and from the back of a public campground located about one mile farther up the road. Tree, Bank, Barn, Cliff, and Rough-winged swallows are seen here frequently, and Alder Flycatchers and Yellow Warblers often sing. Look for Killdeer, Spotted Sandpiper, and Belted Kingfisher here during the breeding season, when Great Blue Heron, American Black and Wood ducks also occur. During shorebird migration in May and July, appearances have been made by Solitary and Least sandpipers, Semipalmated Plover, and Greater Yellowlegs.

Return to the traffic light and proceed north on State Highway 175. Along this road, Bobolinks can be found in the uncut fields, and bluebirds are a

possibility in open areas. Pine Warblers are scattered in the stands of white pine. After 2.7 miles, stop at North Point Estates. On the right here a dirt track about a half-mile long traverses an area of tall conifers mixed with young deciduous growth, home to Nashville and Magnolia warblers in surprisingly high density. Large numbers of White-throated Sparrows are present, with smaller numbers of Black-and-white, Yellow-rumped, and Canada warblers, Red-breasted Nuthatches, Scarlet Tanagers, and Rufous-sided Towhees. The start of this dirt road has proven a good site to find Whip-poor-wills at night, although they were sporadic here in 1986.

Returning to State Highway 175, drive north 1.4 miles to Cross Road. Proceed west 0.7 miles on this road, crossing the Pemigewasset River. Turn north onto State Highway 3. After 1.1 miles, Fuller's Market marks the start of Mirror Lake Road on the left. Along the first mile of this road, listen for summer resident Yellow-throated Vireos. Then bear left onto Hubbard Brook Road, which winds 5.8 miles through the uninhabited northern hardwoods of Hubbard Brook Experimental Forest. A wide variety of breeding birds can be found in this area, which is the site of long-term research in avian ecology.

After returning to Fuller's Market, head north 0.3 miles on State Highway 3 to a picnic area on the right shoulder. Louisiana Waterthrushes inhabit the wet areas on both sides of the road here, and a Yellow-throated Vireo may be singing. Proceed north 1.4 miles farther to I-93, and take it north to Exit 31, Tripoli Road. Turning right off the exit ramp heads you east on this road, locally pronounced "triple-I."

Its entire ten-mile length traverses good northern hardwoods habitat. A turnoff to Russell Pond Campground will be passed at 1.9 miles. Beginning exactly one mile beyond that and extending another four hundred yards down the road is a Least Flycatcher patch that held thirty-seven pairs in 1985. Two or more pairs of Philadelphia Vireos were also here that year, and others were found 0.8 miles farther east on Tripoli Road, two hundred yards up a dirt road that heads north.

The song of this species is very similar to that of the Red-eyed Vireo but comprises a smaller repertoire of phrases, frequently just two or three different types. Cues such as high pitch, slow speed, and "cheapness" (sounding as if produced by a poor quality tape player) are also helpful, but less dependable.

Four miles farther down Tripoli Road, the trail to Mount Osceola (elevation 4326 feet) starts on the left. This hike is very gentle, very birdy, and can be completed in a morning. Blackpoll Warblers, Yellow-bellied Flycatchers, and Gray-cheeked Thrushes are numerous, and Spruce Grouse have been seen on the higher slopes more than once. The summit, though below tree line, has a beautiful view and a cliff face off which echo the songs of high-elevation birds.

Returning on the Tripoli Road to I-93, head north to Exit 32 and take 112 west. You will quickly cross State Highway 3 in the community of North Woodstock and 2.6 miles after that pass a junction with State Highway 118. Proceed 1.3 miles farther to where the Lost River crosses under 112. Extending from this bridge five hundred yards farther up the road is another Least Flycatcher patch. Thirty-five pairs used this site in 1985, when it also held two or more summering pairs of Philadelphia Vireos. It is best to come here in the early morning, when traffic is light. Other Philadelphia Vireos have been found along the next two miles of 112. A particularly good site is across from two semicircular pullover areas above the National Forest wayside area.

Farther up 112, 2.2 miles above the Lost River bridge, the Appalachian Trail crosses the road. Park along the shoulder, follow the trail in to the left, and after fifty yards, turn right onto the unmarked footpath. This leads immediately to Beaver Lake, a tea-colored pond lined by small dense conifers and flanked by steep mountain slopes. Proceed left along the driftwood-strewn shoreline to look for Rusty Blackbirds. In 1984, I saw a pair feeding fledglings here.

Return and head back east on State Highway 112 to Passaconaway Campground, 21.7 miles past I-93. Bearing left inside the entrance, head to the back of the campground to the Church Pond Loop trail. After fording a stream and traversing some woods, the trail loops through Passaconaway Bog, a sphagnum area in which a variety of northern birds breed. On a visit here in 1984, I found Lincoln's Sparrows (in short coniferous growth surrounded by sphagnum), a singing White-winged Crossbill, and two moose.

One final word on timing your visit to the White Mountains. If you are intolerant of biting insects, you should visit after June 25. Black flies are most abundant May 25-June 15, when they can test even the most patient soul. Buy the strongest insect repellent available. After mid-June you will miss the peak period of bird song, but you can still find a great many birds through mid-July. Some species, such as Evening Grosbeak and Pine Siskin, may even become more apparent as the summer wears on.

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