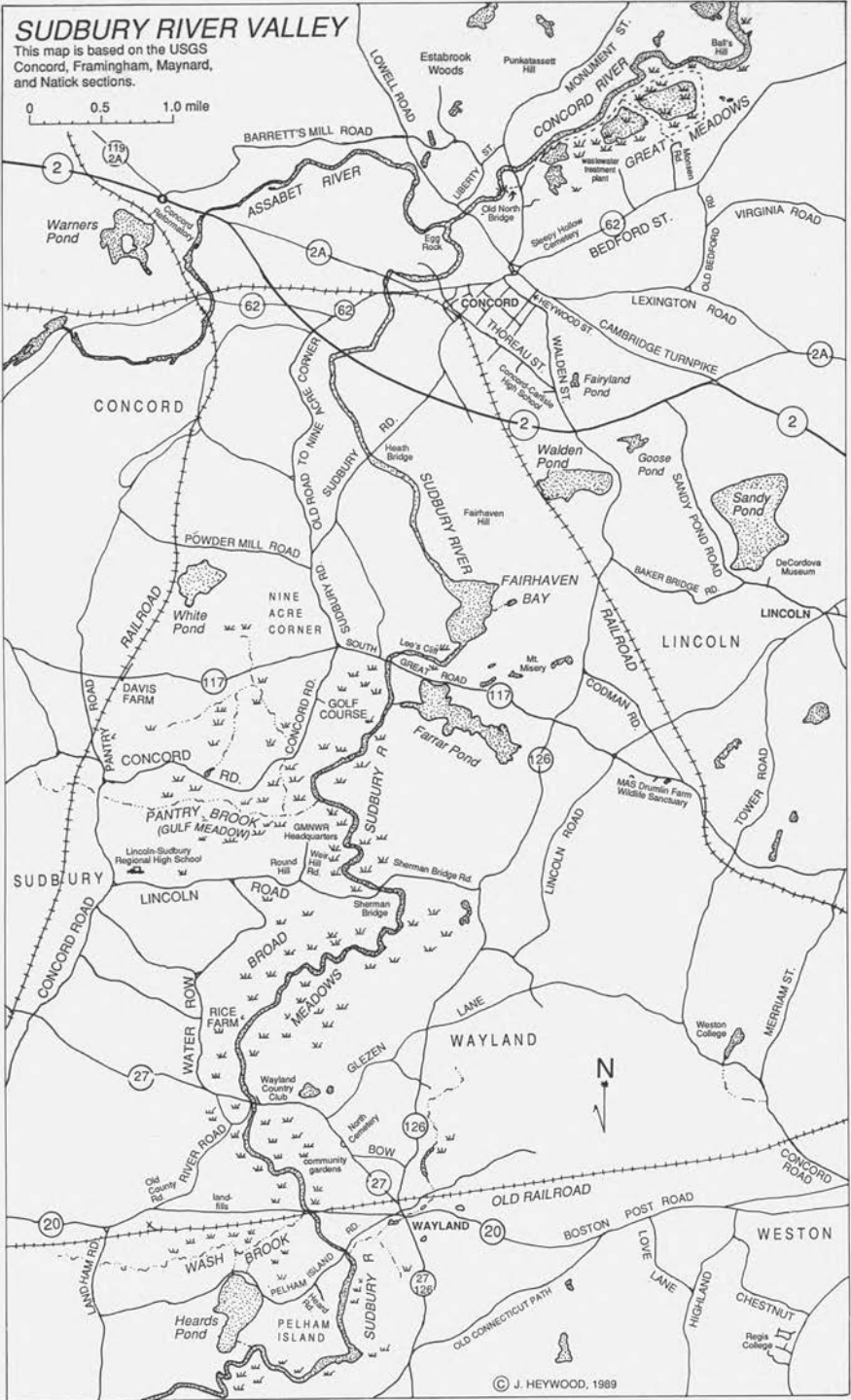


SUDBURY RIVER VALLEY

This map is based on the USGS Concord, Framingham, Maynard, and Natick sections.

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THE SUDBURY RIVER VALLEY

by Richard A. Forster

For over a century the Sudbury River Valley (frequently referred to as the Sudbury Valley) has been the object of intensive ornithological investigation. The bird notes liberally scattered through the writings of Thoreau are familiar to many. William Brewster, first president of the Massachusetts Audubon Society, began his visits to the area about 1870, and his explorations around the valley spanned nearly fifty years. His exhaustive journals provide a concise picture of the birdlife and its changes during his era. As the number of birdwatchers increased, the amount of available information swelled. The next luminary to appear on the scene was Ludlow Griscom, who began his visits about 1930. In 1949 Griscom compiled the wealth of information available and published *The Birds of Concord*. The book includes a systematic species list, but perhaps most interesting are the introductory chapters detailing the history of ornithology in the region and the advances and declines of the local avifauna. Published in 1984, Richard K. Walton's *Birds of the Sudbury River Valley - An Historical Perspective* updates the species accounts for the three and a half decades since *The Birds of Concord*. Species accounts aside, the introductory chapters detailing both the ornithological and cultural history of the area provide captivating reading and better understanding of the changes in birdlife brought on by years of progress and change.

The Sudbury Valley as defined here includes the towns of Wayland, Sudbury, Lincoln, and Concord along the Sudbury and Concord rivers. The area, once predominantly rural farmland, is dominated by the river meadows. Although like most areas within easy commuting distance of Boston it has suffered from expansion of an increasing population, the Sudbury Valley still retains much of its former attractiveness. Most of the river meadows and the area surrounding Hears Pond are now under the stewardship of the United States Fish and Wildlife Service and are administered by the Great Meadows National Wildlife Refuge, located at Weir Hill in Sudbury, thereby assuring that the area is preserved for future generations.

The most productive season for birding in the Sudbury Valley is early spring, from mid-March to the end of April. Although a visit in May can be rewarding for warblers and local residents, the number and variety of birds seen do not compare with coastal locations. The birds of prime interest in the valley are blackbirds, waterfowl, swallows, hawks, and marsh birds.

The following locations are laid out on a south to north route as a matter of convenience. These locations are time-tested and have for the most part withstood the pressures of development. While following this route, do not

hesitate to stop and explore any interesting areas you might happen upon. Although many of these roads are narrow and are regularly used, there are places to pull off that will accommodate a single car and sometimes two. However, this is not an area for large birding groups. Canoeists are sure to find a trip rewarding, particularly in summer when herons, shorebirds, and marsh birds can often be seen feeding on the muddy banks.

Hearde Pond, Wayland. From Wayland center, go west on Route 20, and then take the first left (about one hundred yards) onto Pelham Island Road. A brief stop in May along the beginning portion of this road will almost certainly yield Willow Flycatchers (beginning in the third week of May), Warbling Vireos, Yellow Warblers, and possibly an American Bittern or Virginia Rail. After crossing over the river, there is an adequate dirt pulloff on the right. A quick glance over the river from the bridge may reveal ducks, herons, or swallows. The first paved road on the left is Heard Road. (This is about 0.4 mile beyond the pulloff, and there is a sign.) It dead-ends at the parking lot for the eighty-five-acre Heard Farm Conservation Area. The conservation area is a diverse land of fields, orchards, and woods that is bordered on the south by the Sudbury River. Many of the common resident breeding species can be found here, and during the May migration there is a chance for migrant warblers or other uncommon visitors. Yellow-throated Vireos have been found almost annually both here and in the woods along the shore of Hearde Pond and have been proven to breed. The river may have various ducks and a Northern Shrike is often recorded in winter. Breeding Orchard Orioles are often present in the general vicinity between here and Hearde Pond, and the species has been recorded almost annually since 1887.

Continuing west along Pelham Island Road will bring you to Hearde Pond. This is the best location for diving ducks in the valley, although their occurrence is spotty, usually during or after rain. Species that are likely are Common and Hooded mergansers, Common Goldeneyes, and Buffleheads. Species diversity is often better in October and November with loons, scoters, grebes, and cormorants as possibilities. There is usually a flock of gulls on the water, resting or bathing. Herring and Great Black-backed gulls predominate, but Ring-billed Gulls are regular, and Glaucous and Iceland gulls are occasionally found. Increasingly, late Ospreys are often found in November.

On cloudy or drizzly days in April and early May, swallows can often be seen in impressive numbers. All the usual swallows can be seen, and with careful search Cliff Swallows can be found. Even Purple Martins are present on occasion. Another specialty on rainy days in May is Black Terns, but their stay is usually brief. Common Terns and even Arctic Terns have also been seen at Hearde Pond.

About halfway along the shoreline (0.4 mile from Heard Road) is a small parking lot on the north (right) side of the road. A trail leads from the parking lot through the woods and eventually to Wash Brook Marsh. (A short distance along the trail, note the marker honoring Ludlow Griscom on the left.) Wash Brook Marsh is perhaps the best location in the state for marsh birds (best *heard* in the early morning). Soras, Virginia Rails, and Marsh Wrens are very vocal, whereas Common Moorhens, King Rails, and Least and American bitterns are often present but infrequently heard. Willow Flycatchers breed here, and Swamp Sparrows are common. During migration thrushes, flycatchers, and warblers are present both here and in the woods along the road. West along the road from the parking lot the woodland character changes from dry oak to wet red maple swamp. Rusty Blackbirds are often encountered here from mid-March to late April. Yellow-rumped and Palm warblers are common in late April, and an occasional Pine Warbler can be found. In recent years Yellow-throated Warblers, Cerulean Warblers (twice), and Prothonotary Warblers (twice) have been seen. Blue-gray Gnatcatchers have increased in recent years and now breed at least occasionally.

From Heards Pond continue on Pelham Island Road to its end, and turn right on Landham Road and then right again when you reach Route 20. After about half a mile, just beyond the Wayland/Sudbury line, Route 20 goes up a hill where there is a pulloff at the top on the right-hand (south) side. This location affords a fine view of Wash Brook Marsh. It is a good location for Wood Ducks, both species of teal, Northern Pintails, and possibly American Wigeons, Gadwalls, and Northern Shovelers. The marsh is best when flooded, and in dry springs viewing can be difficult. Since the marsh is a considerable distance from the lookout, a telescope is essential. This is also one of the more reliable spots for Rough-legged Hawk in winter, and a Red-tailed Hawk is almost a certainty. Across Route 20 from the pulloff are the Sudbury and Wayland sanitary landfills. Fish Crows are regular here from October to April. A Bank Swallow colony once existed here.

Continuing along Route 20 for another 0.6 mile, look for an obscure dirt pulloff shortly after you cross over the river and just before a commercial garden center. A walk back toward the marsh along the abandoned railroad bed will offer another opportunity to hear and possibly see marsh birds in May and June, again best in early morning. Traffic noise from Route 20 is an added inconvenience.

From here, return on Route 20 to Wayland center, completing a five mile circuit. As you approach the stoplight at the busy intersection of Routes 20 and 27, watch for and turn left at the convenient short cutoff just before the light. Or if you miss it, turn left onto Route 27 at the light.

Wayland Community Gardens. About 0.7 mile along Route 27 from the intersection is a somewhat hidden semicircular parking lot on the left for the town of Wayland Conservation Land. (This is opposite Wayland's North Cemetery.) Park here and walk back (south) a short distance to the Wayland Community Gardens. In the latter half of September and October, the gardens are often host to numerous sparrows. Most of the common species are present in reasonable numbers, and uncommon species such as White-crowned and Lincoln's sparrows are regularly seen. Both Dickcissels and Clay-colored Sparrows have been seen here.

Proceed north on Route 27 for half a mile. Just beyond the entrance to the Wayland Country Club is a short spur road that bears off to the right and dead-ends at an old bridge over the river. Go in this spur road as far as a small parking area. The bridge just beyond is a good vantage point for ducks, occasional marsh birds, and wintering Red-tailed Hawks and a likely location for observing migrating raptors, especially Northern Harriers that course over the river meadows. There is a paved path into the marsh on the other side of the bridge.

Return to Route 27, and turn right. Just after crossing the Sudbury River, turn left onto River Road.

River Road, Wayland. A short distance down this road, which parallels the river, is a sharp right turn. Park here and scan the river and marshes for ducks and hawks in winter and spring. Often there are numerous crows perched in the trees along the road, and Fish Crows are regularly heard. From here you can turn around and return to Route 27, or you can continue on River Road and bear right at the fork about one hundred yards ahead. This brings you back to Route 27 opposite Water Row. The roadside shrubbery often has Fox Sparrows in the fall. At Water Row a sign announces that the Great Meadows National Wildlife Refuge is 2.5 miles away.

Water Row, Sudbury. Water Row parallels the Sudbury River meadows on the west. It is a narrow curving road that soon passes into the Great Meadows National Wildlife Refuge. The first vantage point is on the right, 0.3 mile along, at a dangerous curve. There is room to pull off, and since Water Row traffic flow is light, parking should not be a problem. Walk to the rocky ledge that affords an excellent vista of the meadows. This is an excellent spot for Ring-necked Ducks, Wood Ducks, Pied-billed Grebes, and possibly a Common Moorhen.

The next stop (0.3 mile farther along and also on the right) is the former Rice Farm, now the property of the United States Fish and Wildlife Service. The area is fenced off and marked closed, but permission can be obtained from refuge headquarters to walk across the field and scope the river meadows.

Bordering Water Row are fields with intermittent scrubby areas and woodland borders. Check these areas in late March or early April and again in early November for Fox Sparrows, which sometimes can be numerous.

Turn right at the end of Water Row. There is no sign, but this is Lincoln Road. Within a scant 0.2 mile there is a conservation land parking area on the left. When the cornfield across the road is flooded, ducks are often present, and Common Snipes can be numerous in early April. Look for Savannah Sparrows along the field edge, where an occasional Vesper Sparrow can be found.

Round Hill, Sudbury. Adjacent to the parking area is a dirt trail leading to the top of Round Hill. This is the best lookout in the region for observing migrating hawks. Sharp-shinned Hawks, Ospreys, American Kestrels, and Broad-winged Hawks can often be observed during the appropriate weather in both spring and fall, with a chance for something more unusual. The best days are warm days with southwest winds in midmonth to late April and cool days with northwest winds in September. Other birds to be seen flying over are swallows, gulls, flickers, Double-crested Cormorants, and with extraordinary luck, a flock of Snow Geese. The hill is sometimes alive with landbird migrants both spring and fall. In fall check the community gardens at the parking lot for sparrows and other migrants.

Just 0.2 mile beyond Round Hill, the road descends a hill. Turn left at the sign to visit the Weir Hill Center (Pantry Brook) of the Great Meadows National Wildlife Refuge. A variety of pamphlets are available here, including a bird checklist. A well-stocked feeding program attracts most of the normal winter fare.

Return to the road from the refuge headquarters, and turn left. Within 0.6 mile, you will reach the Sherman Bridge. There are small pulloffs at both ends of the bridge. This section may be unproductive, but a quick check of the river should be made. Pileated Woodpeckers are resident in the vicinity but are seldom seen.

This road continues beyond the bridge as Sherman Bridge Road and leads to Route 126. However, it is best to turn around at Sherman Bridge and travel back on this road past Round Hill and Water Row Road. After 1.8 miles, turn right at the intersection just past the Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School on the right, and travel another 0.7 mile. Bear right at the first fork onto Concord Road, which becomes Sudbury Road in Concord. Another 2.25 miles of travel will take you past the Nashawtuc Golf Course (discussed below) to traffic lights at the intersection of Concord Road and South Great Road (Route 117), where there is a restaurant, a clothing store, and a service station. This part of Concord is Nine Acre Corner.

Nine Acre Corner, Concord. Except for Heards Pond, this is generally the most productive area for a variety of birds in the Sudbury Valley. Canada Geese

are a familiar sight in the fields from October to May. Beginning in early March the fields are teeming with blackbirds. Killdeers follow shortly and remain to breed.

The fields of Nine Acre Corner are low and lie adjacent to the Sudbury River. This is a good area for ducks in spring including both teals, Northern Pintails, American Wigeons, Gadwalls, and is excellent for Ring-necked Ducks. Rain in early April often grounds a flock of Snow Geese that may remain several days before moving. An indication of how exciting this area can be was the occurrence of a Sandhill Crane, a Lesser Black-backed Gull, two Caspian Terns, and a Laughing Gull during a brief two-week span in May 1987, not to mention the one-week stay of a Fieldfare in April 1986.

Aside from Great Meadows proper, this is the best location for shorebirds in the valley. Common Snipes can be numerous here after rains in April. Other shorebirds that may be found along the pool edges in April and May are Greater and Lesser yellowlegs, Spotted, Solitary, Least, and Pectoral sandpipers.

The cultivated fields northwest of the intersection are among the best locations in eastern Massachusetts for Water Pipits. Peak numbers occur in midmonth to late October and more than one hundred individuals are frequently encountered. Water Pipits are occasionally seen here in spring as well. Horned Larks are occasional in spring and fall, and Snow Buntings are possible in November and December.

Nashawtuc Golf Course. The entrance is located about 0.4 mile south of Nine Acre Corner. The long road to the clubhouse is lined with a variety of flowering crab apples that bear an abundance of fruit, which remains into winter. These trees are often host to American Robins, Cedar Waxwings, and Pine Grosbeaks (in flight years). In two of three recent winters Bohemian Waxwings have put in an appearance.

Davis Farm Conservation Area. At the intersection at Nine Acre Corner, go left (west) on Route 117. This conservation area is located on the left immediately before the railroad tracks, 1.5 miles from Nine Acre Corner. Prepare to turn left when you see the railroad crossing sign. The very shallow parking area is hidden by trees when you approach from this direction, but a road marked private way enters Route 117 on the right just across from the conservation land. The trees here are primarily second growth, and it is an attractive area for landbird migrants, particularly in the fall. There are several trails leading through the area.

Return to Nine Acre Corner and continue east on Route 117 to the stoplight at Route 126 (1.5 miles). Continuing on Route 117 another 0.7 mile will bring you to the entrance to the Massachusetts Audubon Society's Drumlin Farm Wildlife Sanctuary. A gift shop and bookstore, open weekends (closed Mondays), are located in the nature center there.

The Great Meadows, Concord. To reach Great Meadows National Wildlife Refuge from Drumlin Farm, return on Route 117 to the stoplight at the intersection with Route 126. Turn right (north) on Route 126, and travel 2.2 miles, passing Walden Pond, to the intersection with Route 2. Cross Route 2, and continue toward Concord center. One mile from Route 2, at the intersection with Heywood Street, turn right onto Heywood, and then after about five hundred feet, turn left and drive 0.2 mile to the common in Concord center. Turn right (east) on Route 62. Proceed for 1.4 miles to Monsen Road. The left-hand turn here is obscure, and the refuge sign (opposite Monsen Road) is inconspicuous. About 0.5 mile down Monsen Road, the dirt road to the refuge parking lot is well marked.

The Great Meadows National Wildlife Refuge consists of two large water impoundments adjacent to the Concord River. Before you begin walking out the main dike, check the bulletin board for a detailed map and general information. The Great Meadows is a desirable location to observe marsh birds and waterfowl. In the spring the main dike is sometimes flooded so viewing from the tower at the parking lot is necessary. When the ice begins to break up in March, ducks soon appear. First to arrive are Common Goldeneyes, Buffleheads, Hooded and Common mergansers, and local Mallards and American Black Ducks. Soon to follow are both teals, Northern Pintails, Ring-necked Ducks, and a smattering of other less common species. By April, Tree Swallows have made an appearance, and in the ensuing months all the other swallow species are possibilities. In the latter part of April marsh birds appear. Soras, Virginia Rails, and Common Moorhens are the most common, and a King Rail, Least and American bitterns are possible. In the past all of these species have bred, but a decrease in cattail cover and the tremendous increase in the exotic water chestnut have lessened the available habitat for the secretive marsh species. Plans to eliminate the water chestnut and promote the growth of native plants were postponed in 1988 and are now scheduled for 1989. During May a few shorebirds put in brief appearances, chief among these being Least Sandpiper.

During May it is possible to observe both water birds and landbirds. Walk out the main dike and take a right at the end. The path skirts the north (lower-level) pool, and then returns to the main parking lot along the woodland edge. Typical resident woodland species are encountered, and migrant warblers can be seen, although the area is not known as a landbird location. Common breeding landbirds found along the Concord River include Willow Flycatchers, Marsh Wrens, Yellow Warblers, and Warbling Vireos.

Beginning in July the area takes on a different flavor. Broods of ducklings, especially Wood Ducks, are a familiar sight. Herons have begun postbreeding dispersal and are prevalent from now through September. Great Blue Herons, Black-crowned Night-Herons, and Green-backed Herons are most frequently

encountered, and both bitterns, Snowy Egrets, and possibly others can occur. Shorebirds may put down on the muddy edges on rafts of algae. Periodic drawdowns of the water level will increase the number and variety of species. During one such period in the mid-1970s, about thirty species of shorebirds were recorded here. Species most regularly observed are Killdeer, both yellowlegs, Common Snipe, and Least, Semipalmated, and Pectoral sandpipers. Species diversity is greatest from late August to mid-September.

In the middle of September, on sunny days with northwest winds, keep your eyes on the sky. Although not known as a hawkwatching location, the open vista can provide a goodly number of hawks if you hit it right. Species regularly seen are Broad-winged and Sharp-shinned hawks, Northern Harrier, American Kestrel, and Osprey. The latter may linger into November. A Merlin is sometimes encountered, and a Peregrine Falcon or either eagle species is a remote possibility. Each has been recorded on more than one occasion.

Also in September the dabbling ducks begin to build up. Species that occur in appreciable numbers are Wood Duck, American Black Duck, Mallard, Green-winged Teal, American Wigeon, and Blue-winged Teal (September). Others occurring regularly in lesser numbers are Northern Shoveler, Northern Pintail, and Gadwall. Be alert for Pied-billed Grebes, American Coots, or something more exotic among this assemblage. Ducks continue in decreasing numbers through November and into December depending on the availability of open water.

Common Nighthawks are sometimes plentiful, hawking over the marshes at dusk in late August and early September, at which time the marsh vegetation may host flocks of Bobolinks. Sparrows, particularly Savannah, can be found along the main dike, and Sharp-tailed Sparrows are amazingly regular in October, though hard to see. Blackbirds, predominantly Red-winged Blackbirds, are common in October, and small flocks of Rusty Blackbirds can be seen flying to roost in the fading light. A Snow Bunting is occasionally found along the main dike in November, but by then the season has pretty much wound down.

If you have time to spare after completing your birding sojourn in the valley, you might consider some sightseeing. The Concord area offers a wide variety of cultural and historical landmarks.

RICHARD A. FORSTER has birded the Sudbury River Valley for nearly thirty years. He is noted for his knowledge of the field records of New England birds to which he has contributed a number of important sightings. Dick has written numerous articles for *American Birds*, *Bird Observer*, and other journals and is co-author (with E. S. Gruson) of *The World's Birds*.

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