

## FINDING BIRDS IN IPSWICH

by Jim Berry

Essex County, Massachusetts, is one of the best birding areas in the eastern United States, and Ipswich is one of the real highlights of the region. Ipswich has extensive salt marshes, a small amount of rocky shoreline, and just about every sort of upland habitat short of mountains: farms, orchards, duck ponds, a beautiful river, fresh marshes, wooded swamps, deciduous, coniferous, and mixed forests, and various fallow fields and meadows. Doubtless it is the variety of habitats, combined with the amount of coverage by birders venturing back and forth between Cape Ann and Plum Island, that makes Ipswich such a birding attraction.

No one article can cover all these habitats, especially since many desirable spots are on private property inaccessible to the public, but I will mention the more popular ones and lay out for the visiting birder an itinerary which can be covered in a day or less, depending on the season, weather, and time available.

**Crane Beach and Castle Hill.** I could not begin this account anywhere else. Ipswich Beach, renamed after the Crane plumbing magnate who acquired the land in 1910 and eventually donated it to The Trustees of Reservations for permanent protection, is, for the naturalist, the undisputed highlight of Ipswich. Crane Beach Reservation is not just a beach but includes the entire ecosystem of Castle Neck, which is some five miles long and over half a mile wide in some places. This biologically valuable peninsula lies between the mouths of the Ipswich River on the northwest and the Essex River on the southeast. It comprises the beach on the outside, the salt marsh and tidal flats of the Castle Neck River on the inside, and seemingly endless (but thickly vegetated) sand dunes in between.

To reach Crane Beach, take Argilla Road east from Route 133/1A at the South Green in Ipswich to the beach parking lot at the end of the road, a distance of 4.1 miles. From about Memorial Day to two weeks after Labor Day, be prepared to pay a stiff parking fee, especially on weekends, unless you come after 6 P.M.; the rest of the year the charge is less. For those who prefer to bird on foot rather than by car, the beach and the dunes can easily fill up a whole day and, if time permits, are worthwhile.

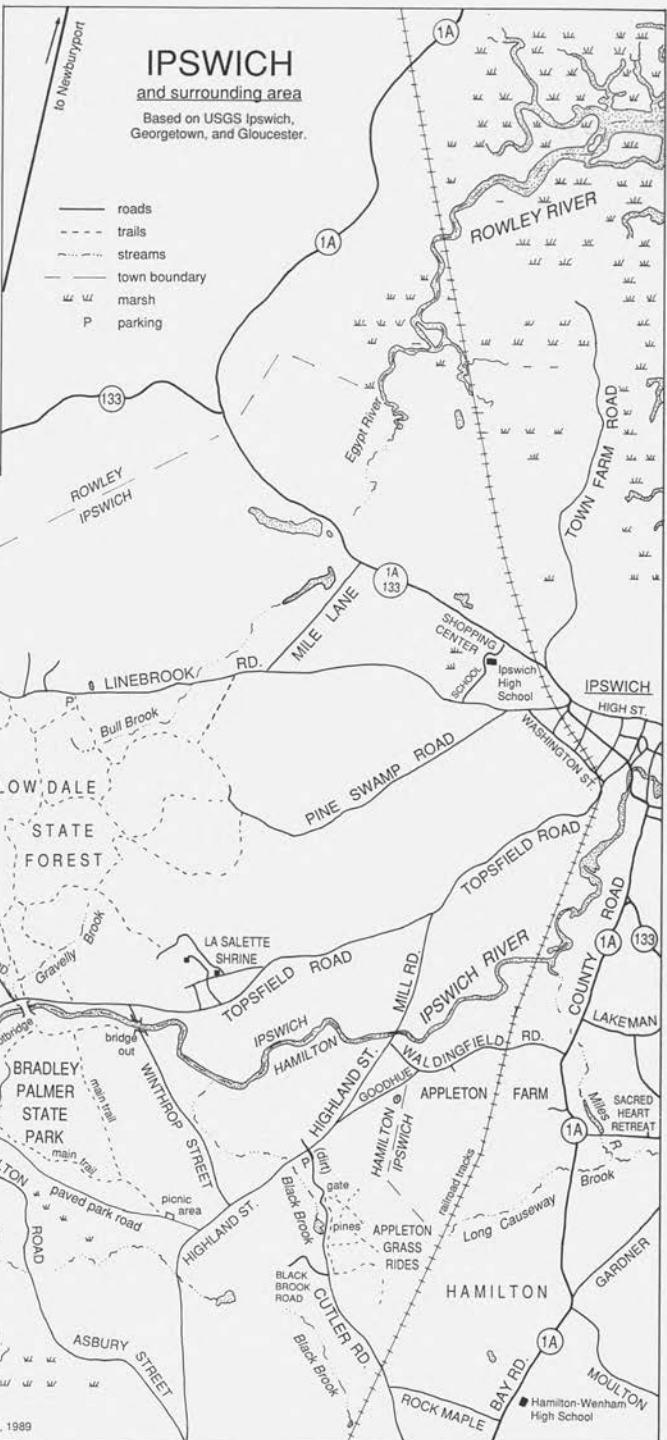
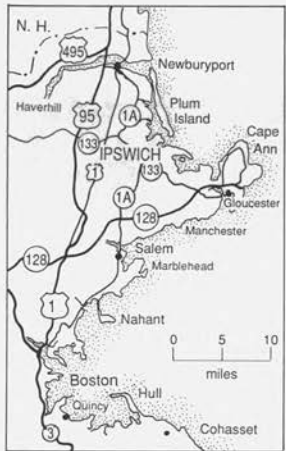
Be warned, however, that deer ticks are prevalent in this entire area. Many of these ticks carry Lyme disease, a serious problem in many areas of the United States. There is no chance of picking them up in unvegetated areas like the beach, but if you go into the dunes, be sure to check your clothing and exposed skin for these tiny ticks at the end of the day and remove them. The deer ticks are much smaller than the more familiar common dog ticks. However, they are

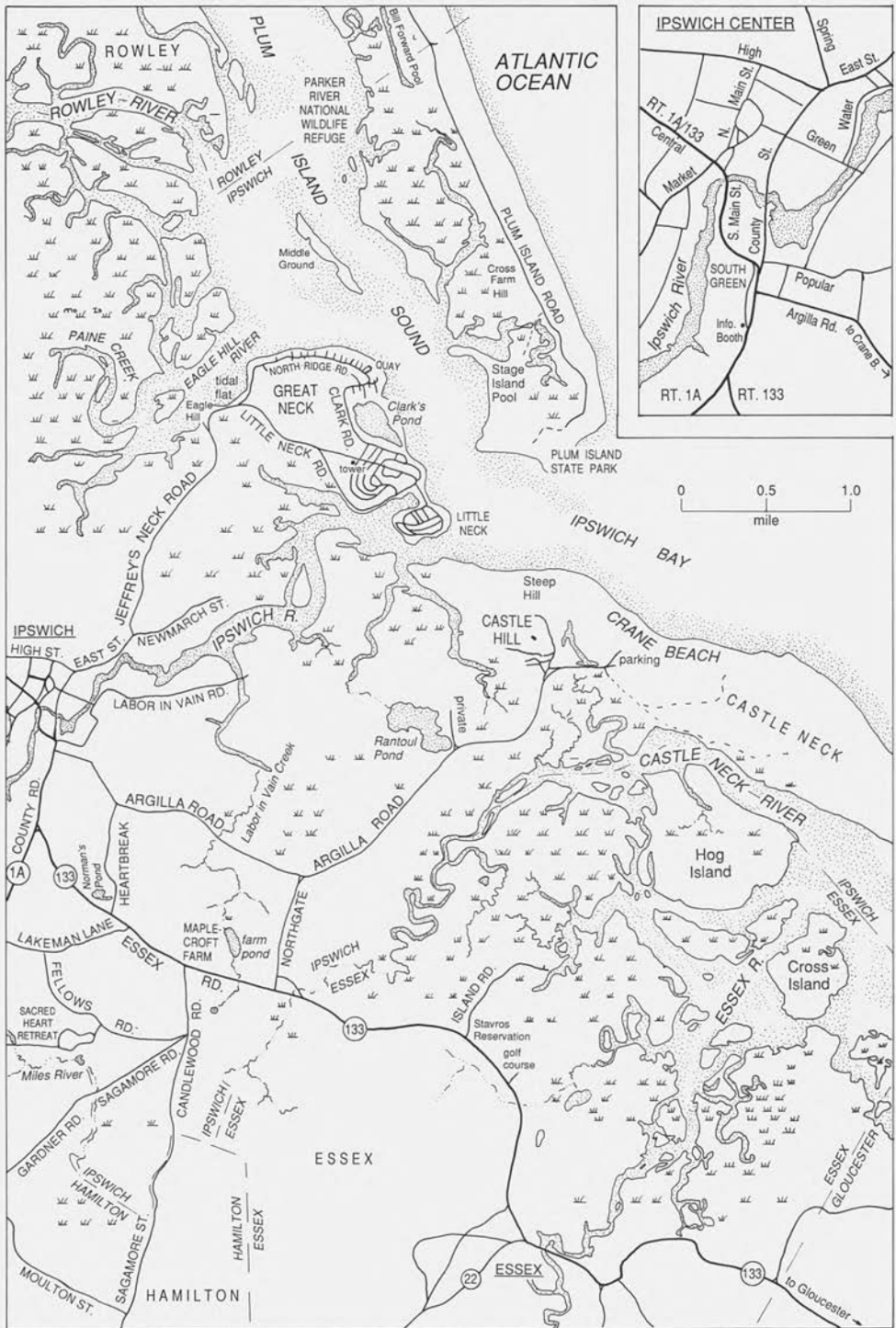
visible when engorged with blood. It takes twenty-four hours or so for the bacteria to enter the host's body after the tick attaches itself, so daily checks should be adequate. For more information, see "A Tick-list for Birders" in *Bird Observer* 17(2): 78-80, April 1989.

Notable breeding songbirds here are Bank Swallows, which nest in small colonies anywhere there is a vertical bank in the dunes, Gray Catbirds, Brown Thrashers, Yellow Warblers, and Rufous-sided Towhees. Less common are Pine Warblers, which occasionally nest in the extensive pitch pines not far to the southeast ("down" the beach) from the parking lot. There may also be a few pairs of White-eyed Vireos in the thick undergrowth behind the seaside dunes in either direction from the parking lot. Whip-poor-wills used to summer near the parking lot but have not been heard here since the 1970s.

Breeding waterbirds are Least Terns, which usually form several colonies at various spots behind the high-tide line, and Piping Plovers, which nest in small numbers either with the terns or at other beach locations where the large crowds of people offer the least interference. In recent years The Trustees of Reservations, a nonprofit land-preservation trust that owns the reservation, has employed a biologist, David Rimmer, who has taken commendable measures to protect these threatened species. Starting in 1987, David began "exclosing" the plover nests to keep predators like skunks and foxes from getting the eggs. Reproductive success mushroomed, and in 1988 fully nine pairs produced twenty young. In 1989, fourteen pairs fledged thirty-seven young! Green-backed Herons nest singly in a few of the thickets in the dunes; I have been lucky enough to find two of their nests so far.

Fall and winter birds of the beach and dunes include Snow Buntings (especially in the parking lot in late fall), Lapland Longspurs, Horned Larks, "Ipswich" Sparrows, Yellow-rumped Warblers, and sometimes Snowy Owls, Short-eared Owls, Merlins, and Northern Harriers. Various loons, grebes, and ducks are commonly seen off the beach in winter except for those species associated with rocks, of which there are almost none along Crane Beach. The dunes catch their share of migrating landbirds in spring and fall, but the area is not sufficiently censused to determine how good a migrant trap Castle Neck is. White-tailed deer are plentiful (albeit tick-laden) all over the reservation, and the lone observer will once in a while be rewarded with a close encounter with a red fox. Castle Hill, a half-mile walk to the northwest of the parking lot, is good for many landbirds as well as for great views of the surrounding landscapes and seascapes. The pine stand on the west side of the hill is a reliable spot for Great Horned Owls. Twice I have seen Yellow-billed Cuckoos on Castle Hill in summer, and Black-billed Cuckoos have nested in the thickets in the sand dunes. The best birds I have recorded at Crane Beach are a Wilson's Plover (on Memorial Day 1974), a pair of Black Skimmers (July 1975), a Caspian Tern





(June 1984), and a Sandhill Crane in the marsh off the north end of the beach (September 1988). Occasionally Whimbrels and Roseate Terns can be seen on the beach, as can numerous other shorebirds at low tide.

**Rantoul Pond.** This large pond on privately owned land lies between Argilla Road and the marshes of the Ipswich River estuary and has no public access. It cannot be visited without permission of the property owners, though the front of it can be seen from the road. The pond is on the left as you approach Crane Beach, about half a mile before the parking lot. It was formed decades ago by damming a small creek and is frequented in migration by several species of diving and puddle ducks, especially American Wigeon, Ring-necked Duck, and Hooded Merganser in the fall. Mute Swans have nested here for years; Tundra Swans or a Eurasian Wigeon may drop in for a while in late fall. In early fall Black-crowned Night-Herons often roost here. This is the only place where I regularly see American Black Ducks diving for food.

**Maplecroft Farm area.** The quadrangle bounded by Argilla, Heartbreak, Essex (Route 133), and Northgate roads is primarily pasture land and is one of the best places in Ipswich for Turkey Vultures, Rough-legged Hawks, and Red-tailed Hawks, the former in summer, the second in winter, and the latter year-round. Canada Geese graze in the fields and are occasionally joined by a stray Snow Goose. The fields closest to Route 133 at Maplecroft Farm sometimes have Cattle Egrets in summer. Any of the pastures can contain, at appropriate times, Glossy Ibises, Black-bellied Plovers, Killdeers, Dunlins, Pectoral Sandpipers, and Horned Larks. A number of rarities have been found here, too: Gyrfalcon, White-faced Ibis, Buff-breasted and Curlew sandpipers, and Yellow-headed Blackbird. But the specialty of the house, in my opinion, is Lesser Golden-Plover. Every November, even into December, you can often find several immatures with the large flocks of immature Black-bellied Plovers by looking into the pastures from Essex Road. These flocks are regular and provide a superb opportunity for studying the respective field marks of these sibling species. Be sure to take a scope, however, for the birds are often well back from the road. There are places you can pull over on Essex, Northgate, and Argilla roads—the latter with difficulty. However, these pastures are private property and must be viewed from the road unless permission is obtained from the property owners. The one exception is a privately owned, cultivated field off Northgate Road—a small pulloff indicates its location—leading down to a shallow pond that was created in the early 1980s by damming a small stream. [At this writing, the owner does not mind birders walking this field to view the pond as long as no fences are crossed.] This is an excellent pond for puddle ducks. Its grassy edges attract a variety of shorebirds, including a famous Black-necked Stilt in May 1983. Great Egrets and Glossy Ibises are regular visitors. The field itself, after the fall harvest, can be a bonanza, especially when muddy.

Water Pipits often share it with Horned Larks, and Common Snipes love the place. One day in April 1987 I counted a minimum of one hundred and fifty snipes.

Just to the west of the Heartbreak/Essex Road intersection is Norman's Pond, a productive little duck pond during migration. Permission should be obtained from the owners of the Norman residence, a brown house on Essex Road fronted with evergreens, to view the pond from the driveway. Regular visitors are American Black Ducks, Mallards, American Wigeons, Northern Shovelers, Gadwalls, Wood Ducks, and Green-winged Teal; less frequently there are Hooded Mergansers, various other diving ducks, and once in while a Eurasian Wigeon. Rusty Blackbirds sometimes congregate in the trees here in autumn, and Willow Flycatchers breed here, as they do in many Ipswich wetlands.

**Appleton Farm.** Appleton Farm, about two miles south of Ipswich center on Route 1A, is one of the scenic highlights of Ipswich, especially if one rides the commuter train. The tracks run right through the middle of the farm. Both Cattle Egrets and Glossy Ibises can sometimes be seen from the train, especially in summer. Fortunately, both species can also be seen from Route 1A, which is wide enough to permit easy pullover, or from Waldingfield Road on the north side of the farm, or from Mill Road (Highland) on the west side. This farm is probably the best place in either Ipswich or Essex to observe Cattle Egrets, which are at the northeast limit of their range here. My personal high count is sixty-one on August 28, 1983. This high number is explained partly by postbreeding wandering [see "The Ipswich Cattle Egrets" in *Bird Observer*, October 1985, 13(5): 258-59]. Do not attempt to drive through the farm as it is not open to the public.

**Appleton Farms Grass Rides.** Immediately to the south of the main farm, in the town of Hamilton, lies a 164-acre tract of mixed woodland known as the "Appleton Farms Grass Rides." This extensive forest, much of it swampy, is crisscrossed by wide trails. It was donated to The Trustees of Reservations by the Appleton family and is open to the public, though off-limits to off-road vehicles and horses. This is an excellent place for Ruffed Grouse, for they are regular here and are easily heard drumming in April and May. One morning in 1978 I recorded five grouse, including a close look at one in the act of drumming. Be sure to come at dawn for the best chance of seeing and hearing grouse. Pileated Woodpeckers also occur here, and I suspect Pine Siskins may breed some years.

The tract is accessible from the north end of Cutler Road, which goes southeast (left) from Mill Road about a half mile south of the intersection of Mill Road (which becomes Highland Street in Hamilton) and Waldingfield Road. There is a small parking lot at that intersection (i.e., Cutler Road and



Highland Street), but parking along this dirt road is very limited, and large groups are out of the question. There is a gate where you can enter the forest a few hundred yards down Cutler Road. From late May on, be prepared to do battle with some of the best trained mosquito armies to be found anywhere. The swamps that produce them, however, also entice a delightful array of migrating and breeding birds.

Another feature of the Grass Rides is its several stands of thick evergreens, which harbor not only grouse, but owls. In addition to the more common Eastern Screech-Owls and Great Horned Owls, which can be heard in the neighborhood, these groves often harbor one or a combination of Barred, Long-eared, and Northern Saw-whet owls. Barred Owls are the most regular, but singles of the other two species have been found several times [see "Finding Owls in the Grass Rides" in *Bird Observer*, October 1986, 14(5): 217-22]. Thus the Grass Rides is one of the best owl spots anywhere, especially in winter. Be advised, however, that if there is snow on the ground, there may be hordes of cross-country skiers using the reservation. Parking is at a premium, and the police will ticket cars parked along the dirt road. Use the aforementioned parking lot, and get there early.

**Jeffrey's Neck.** "The Neck" is thickly inhabited at its bulbous end, and this includes birds. Here you will find Ipswich's only rocky shoreline and some of the birds associated with that habitat, as well as extensive salt marshes, tidal flats, and the best duck pond this side of Plum Island. In fact, Clark's Pond is only a few hundred yards from Stage Island Pool at the south end of Plum Island—the observation tower there is easily visible from various parts of the Neck. It is not unusual for birds to wander back and forth between the two ponds, which is something to keep in mind when you are in Ipswich but do not have the time to drive the twelve-plus miles to Newburyport and another ten or so to get down to Stage Island Pool.

To reach the Neck from the south, follow County Street (not County Road) where it splits from Route 1A/133 at the South Green. (Consult the map, because street signs can be hard to find in Ipswich.) From the north, follow High Street, marked East Street where it joins County Street. The two streets merge and become Jeffrey's Neck Road, which brings you to Eagle Hill about halfway out on the Neck. On the left, just after the big curve at Eagle Hill, is a good tidal flat for shorebirds, especially at midtide. Diving ducks are common here at high tide. Stay on the main road, eschewing all forks to the left, until you come to the isthmus between Great Neck and Little Neck, where you can park and look out over the sound to the south end of Plum Island. From this point, the Ipswich River flows in from the right, behind Little Neck. This estuary is like a waterfowl crossroads and virtually any littoral species can be seen here. In addition, the pelagic Parasitic Jaeger sometimes comes here in late summer to

harass the terns. These jaegers can also be seen from the north end of Crane Beach and from the sound end of Plum Island. At low tide it is easy to walk out on the rocks at the base of Little Neck, where Ruddy Turnstones, Red Knots, Willets, and Laughing Gulls are all possible in late summer. In winter this same area has produced Brants, Common and Barrow's goldeneyes, large mixed flocks of scoters, Iceland Gulls, and occasionally a Snowy Owl. It is also an infallible hangout for Common Loons. Later, starting about the vernal equinox, a flock of Brants invariably arrives everyday at low tide to feed off the rocks at the left (northern) end of the isthmus. As is the case with the spring Brants in Newburyport Harbor, these Ipswich birds, which may be part of that larger aggregation, usually remain for a month or more before moving on to the tundra. Almost any sea duck can occur here, and views are always excellent because of the relative narrowness of Plum Island Sound. An added attraction in the winter is the regular presence of harbor seals on the rocks at the base of the red channel marker at low tide or on one of the several sandbars in the area.

**Clark's Pond.** From here follow the map to Clark's Pond, which is only about a half mile away. This man-made pond can be observed, though with some difficulty, from one or two places as one drives along Clark Road. Just be careful not to trespass on the developed lots. It may be better to observe from the road at the north end of the pond. Although it is bushy here, some viewing spots are available. In summer Mute Swans and Gadwalls nest here, and sometimes bitterns of either species, as well as Virginia Rails and Soras. Purple Martins and Cliff Swallows may nest on Great Neck and often feed over the pond. Later in summer hundreds or even thousands of swallows (mostly Tree and Bank) gather on the weeds, wires, and trees, as they do next door on Plum Island. If the summer is dry, the pond's shallow water can be filled with egrets and herons. Late-summer and fall bonanzas seen here in years past include Black-necked Stilt, American Avocet, Sandhill Crane, and a flamingo (1965) afflicted with a severe case of wanderlust. One of the more unusual phenomena I have witnessed here has happened on two different Labor Days: a large congregation of immature Purple Martins (as many as two hundred) positioned on the top of the nearby water tower, at a time when one expects this species to be long gone. In both instances the weather was unsettled. Until the pond freezes, it is a haven for Gadwalls, which often number over one hundred. Hooded Mergansers are also very regular in the fall, and up to thirty have been recorded. Any puddle duck is likely, and there is often a Pied-billed Grebe or two. When Bonaparte's Gulls are on the pond, look carefully for a Common Black-headed Gull or a Little Gull, as both have visited here from Plum Island.

To leave the Neck, continue around the north side on Colby Road, which quickly becomes North Ridge Road before it rejoins Jeffrey's Neck Road a mile to the west. On Quay Road, a short little dead end near the beginning of North



Ridge, there is a pier by the yacht club which offers a perfect spot from which to observe the waterfowl and shorebirds of Plum Island Sound. This is not a summer stop, but it is fine the rest of the year.

**Ipswich Shopping Center.** This ornithologically famous shopping center is located 0.6 mile from the intersection of 133/1A and Linebrook Road, just past the high school. It was built right over a freshwater marsh in true "developer" style but ironically provides birdwatchers one of the best places in the state to study the behavior of Virginia Rails and Soras. The parking lot gives easy access to the marsh. The reason for the presence of the rails is that no matter how cold it gets, the water running through this marsh from under the shopping center never completely freezes, thus attracting a few rails to spend the entire winter. When there is considerable open water, they can be impossible to find, but if one comes during a prolonged cold spell or after a heavy snowfall, and there is only a narrow stream of open water, you are almost guaranteed seeing Virginia Rails. One January day a few years ago I had six of them along with two Soras. Snipes and Swamp Sparrows also winter here, and every bird in the neighborhood comes here for water; so, needless to say, it is a popular place on the Christmas Bird Count. Both rail species probably nest here—both were present in spring 1988—and Willow Flycatchers definitely do. The trees between the shopping center and the adjacent high school usually have Warbling Vireos, another common nesting bird in many parts of Ipswich. Once or twice Cliff Swallows have nested in the rafters of the canopy over the shopping center sidewalk, in full view of the shoppers below.

**Willowdale State Forest.** This extensive mixed forest, which with its white pine and variety of hardwoods is typical of the forests of Essex County, has a distinctly more northern flavor than the rest of Ipswich. It does not have the eastern hemlock habitat of Boxford State Forest, but it is riddled with swampland and is also regularly logged, which gives it an exciting variety of both habitats and breeding species. If you like censusing summer populations and do not mind socializing with mosquitoes, this is the place for you.

Many Canadian-zone birds are regular here. Ovenbirds are the most common warblers, followed by Black-throated Green Warblers and Common Yellowthroats; the latter are common even in deep woods because of the swamps. Other nesting birds are Ruffed Grouse, Great Crested Flycatchers, Red-breasted Nuthatches, Veerys, Hermit Thrushes, Pine, Black-and-White, Canada, Nashville, and Blackburnian warblers (the latter two rarely), Scarlet Tanagers, Rose-breasted Grosbeaks, and Purple Finches. Some possible breeders are Broad-winged Hawks, Winter Wrens, Northern Waterthrushes, and White-throated Sparrows. Nearby La Salette Shrine has cutover fields in which I have found nests of American Woodcocks and both Blue-winged and Golden-winged warblers. It also has a small stand of Norway spruce, in one of which I found the

nest of a pair of Golden-crowned Kinglets in June 1987 and again in 1989. Over the years I have come to bird this forest more than any other part of Ipswich. And just across Topsfield Road is the equally extensive Bradley Palmer State Park with a habitat similar to Willowdale's.

To enter Willowdale State Forest, take either Linebrook Road or Topsfield Road, both of which connect with Route 1. The forest headquarters are in a small unmarked building on Linebrook Road, 1.1 miles west of the intersection with Mile Lane and the same distance east of Route 1. Several trails, all wide enough for state vehicles to drive on, penetrate the forest from this vicinity; parking is no problem, although there are no parking lots as such. Access from Topsfield Road is best at the Ipswich-Topsfield town line, 1.1 miles west of the La Salette Shrine and 1.9 miles east of Route 1. This pulloff next to the Ipswich River is one place along Topsfield Road where canoeists park. A brook flows into the river from the north here. To the left (west) of the brook is an old dirt road one can use to drive into the forest. To the right (east) of the brook is a trail (bridle path) that quickly brings you within hearing range of most of the species mentioned above. At this spot there is also a footbridge over the Ipswich River, providing an entry point into the northern trails of Bradley Palmer State Park.

**JIM BERRY** expanded his original piece on Ipswich, which appeared in *Bird Observer* in December 1979, to provide the updated article printed here. A recognized authority on the breeding birds of Ipswich, Jim worked on the first North American breeding-bird atlas project in Montgomery County, Maryland, in 1971-72 and has since contributed to the atlas projects in Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Maine, Vermont, Ohio, and Wyoming. In addition to this work on breeding bird censuses, Jim's favorite birding activities are compiling the Newburyport Christmas Bird Count and contributing nesting records to Cornell's Laboratory of Ornithology. At other times, he does personnel work in the Federal Aviation Administration and serves on the Ipswich Conservation Commission.

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