

WHERE TO WATCH BIRDS IN FRAMINGHAM

by Richard A. Forster

One of the most rewarding aspects of birdwatching is monitoring birds on a local basis, be it a yard, a park, a town, or other similar land area. Although the expectations are not nearly as great as a trip to the coast or to a birding hot spot, the discovery of an unusual find is equally as rewarding if not more so. More importantly, the observer becomes well acquainted with the local avifauna and can better assess the reasons for increases or declines of local populations, a major concern for ornithologists and conservationists.

This article will not concentrate on all the birding possibilities in Framingham, Massachusetts. Rather, it will concentrate on a few localities and species of interest that may entice birders to visit the area. I will focus primarily on Callahan State Park (in the northwest portion of town) and the wintering ducks of the Sudbury River. Framingham also has the largest and most accessible crow roost in the state, and observers who have not witnessed this truly phenomenal event have a glaring void in their ornithological experience.

Crow Roost

The precise location of the crow roost has varied in the past decade but is generally in the vicinity of Natick Mall or Shopper's World, large shopping malls located on Route 9 in the Natick and Framingham area. The roost begins forming by mid-October to late October and begins breaking up by early March at the commencement of breeding season. The best time to view the roost is from December through February. The best place to watch the roost is the north side of the Bradlees parking lot adjacent to McDonald's on Route 30. This has been the preferred roosting area for the past few years. Even if the crows do not roost here, a quick glimpse over the vast parking expanses will enable you to locate crows, and you can adjust your location accordingly.

The crows should be on hand by about 3:30 P.M. They utilize a number of staging areas nearby, and there is much movement of flocks from area to area. They become quieter and more sedentary as darkness approaches. Interspersed among the familiar "caws" of American Crows is the distinctive nasal "ka" of Fish Crows. The actual numbers of birds and the species composition of the roost are conjectural, but reliable estimates begin at about 5000 birds with as many as twenty percent being Fish Crows.

For the adventurous a morning visit would provide a different perspective. Arrive by 6:15 A.M. The crows should depart soon thereafter. At this time the crows are extremely vocal, allowing the observer to single out individuals or small groups of Fish Crows. If you are a few minutes late, the crow roost will

seem to be a myth, with only the odd crow remaining to scrounge through the dumpsters.

Callahan State Park

The most consistent location for interesting birds is Callahan State Park, located on Millwood Street on the western side of town. The park can be reached by driving west on Route 9 from the Speen Street intersection in Natick to the Route 30 West exit (2.8 miles). At the end of the lengthy exit ramp, take a right at the stoplight on Edgell Road, and proceed one mile to Belknap Road. Turn left on Belknap Road for 1.1 miles, and take a right on Millwood Street. The parking lot is located 0.6 mile along the road on the left, and is open year-round from dawn to dusk. Alternatively, the park can be approached from Route 20 by going west from Wayland center for 3.5 miles and taking a left at Nobscot Road, a well-marked turn for Framingham. After 2.5 miles, turn right at the stoplight in Nobscot center on Edmands Road. Turn left after 0.5 mile on Winch Street, and proceed 1.4 miles (going diagonally across the stop sign at Grove Street) to the parking lot. The character of the park has been substantially altered since the mid-1980s by the construction of a large dike, but its integrity has been maintained.

Birding Callahan is most rewarding in the fall, but visits at other seasons are not without merit. The area consists of a well-wooded stream bisecting extensive fields bordering a mixed upland woodland. Spring migrants are not noteworthy, but coupled with as many as seventy-five breeding residents, a visit in this season can be fruitful. The most interesting species breeding in the fields are Savannah Sparrow, Eastern Meadowlark, and Bobolink, while Willow Flycatcher and Warbling Vireo can be found in the trees along the stream. The upper field may host Blue-winged and Chestnut-sided warblers, Brown Thrasher, Rufous-sided Towhee, and Field Sparrow. The uplands, with well-marked trails, have typical woodland breeding species including Black-and-white and Black-throated Green warblers, Ovenbird, Veery, and Wood Thrush. Both Northern Goshawk and Broad-winged Hawk have bred frequently in this area, while Turkey Vulture and Red-shouldered Hawk are not infrequent sights. This diversity, coupled with the occasional migrant (e.g., both Olive-sided Flycatcher and Mourning Warbler on the same day) illustrate the area's potential.

Summer birding is as rewarding as in any area I have encountered in eastern Massachusetts. Most of the aforementioned species can be seen with appropriate effort. But it is the fall season that provides the best incentive to visit the park. Usually some of the fields are planted with crops. It is these areas with their accompanying weeds that are the focus of fall birding, with sparrows providing the major attraction. Lincoln's Sparrow is found from early September to mid-

October. As many as twenty-one individuals have been found in one day in early October. Also present in varying numbers are all the regularly occurring sparrows including Song and Savannah sparrows in profusion. White-crowned Sparrow is present in appropriate seasons, and Grasshopper Sparrow has been seen on several occasions.

Areas to check most intensely are the cultivated fields and the wooded stream. Warblers in surprising variety can be found with diligent searching. In a one-week period the park has produced Western Kingbird, Sedge Wren, Yellow-breasted Chat, and Connecticut Warbler. It is best to check these areas in early morning when the sun glistens on the eastward-facing slope. The fall is a good time to keep your eyes on the sky because the expansive vistas allow for good hawkwatching.

Winter provides little of interest. Canada Geese are found in numbers both in the fields and on the golf course across the street, and Snow and "Blue" Geese have been found. American Tree Sparrow is usually present in flocks, and other tardy sparrows are occasionally found. Northern Shrike is sometimes seen perched prominently in the treetops.

Sudbury River

The Sudbury River, which meanders through Framingham, can provide very interesting birding during the winter. Much of the river remains open even during periods of hard freeze, and a surprising variety of waterfowl can be found. A logical starting place to search for waterfowl is the Framingham/Wayland line at Potter Road in Framingham. To reach Potter Road, proceed west from Wayland center on Route 20 for 2.2 miles, and take a left on Landham Road. Travel down Landham Road (becomes Elm Street in Framingham) 1.6 miles to Potter Road, and take a left. The road crosses over the Sudbury River. Scan the river here for mergansers, Wood Duck, and other species that may accompany the ubiquitous Mallards.

Turn around and return to Elm Street, and take a left. After 0.3 mile, Little Farms Road is on your left. Proceed to the end, and scan the river here. Return to Elm Street, and take a left to Saxonville center (stoplight, 0.6 mile). Go straight, and take your second left on Mechanic Street, which brings you to Danforth Street that crosses over the river. Waterfowl can be found here, and the sloping riverbanks may host interesting landbirds. Turn around and retrace your route to Saxonville center via Mechanic Street avoiding the one-way block of Danforth Street, and go left at the stoplight on Central Street. Proceed straight through the second stoplight for one mile to Wickford Street on your right. Where the road passes over the river, stop and check the numerous ducks here. A local resident feeds the ducks, and virtually any freshwater duck can be found among the Mallards. This is also a good location to look for species such as

Pied-billed Grebe, Ring-necked Duck, mergansers, and others.

Turn around and return to Central Street. Turn right and go 0.3 mile to a small pumping station on your left and park here or on the adjacent Haynes Road. Cross the road and proceed onto the footbridge over the river. Looking to the left provides a good view of a section of the river that usually freezes only during the most severe weather. Hooded and Common mergansers and Ring-necked Duck are often recorded here. Continue on Central Street until it intersects with Edgell Road (one mile). Turn left and follow the signs to Route 9 west. Once on Route 9, go 0.8 mile to the stoplight at Temple Street, and turn left. Go to the end of Temple Street, and turn right on Salem End Road. After 0.1 mile, reservoirs will appear on both sides of the road. The right-hand section often attracts waterfowl, especially Bufflehead, Common Goldeneye, and Common Merganser. Be alert for other waterfowl species, Great Blue Heron, and Belted Kingfisher.

Just beyond the reservoir on the right is a pumping station with a spruce grove. This area has proved to be one of the most reliable locations in eastern Massachusetts in recent years for Boreal Chickadee as well as Red-breasted Nuthatch and Golden-crowned Kinglet. However, selective clearing and damage from Hurricane Bob in 1991 have significantly reduced the density of trees and present a stern test for future attractiveness for these species.

From here continue out Salem End Road, bearing right at two intersections (Parker Road and Gates Street), and follow the signs (poorly marked) back to Route 9. There is a large reservoir here on Route 9. The reservoir hosts good numbers of Ruddy Ducks in October and November and, after periods of rain, is worth checking for other species of diving ducks, Common Loon, and similar birds.

For the past twenty years local birders have conducted a half-day town count in January. The total number of species recorded for these years now exceeds 100, with a great majority of birds found in the areas mentioned in this article. Local birding is not without its own rewards, humble though they may be.

RICHARD A. FORSTER is a frequent contributor to *Bird Observer*. The focus of much of Dick's work has been the Sudbury River Valley and Essex County in Massachusetts.

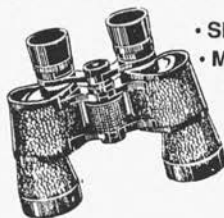
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