

BIRDING THE IPSWICH RIVER WILDLIFE SANCTUARY

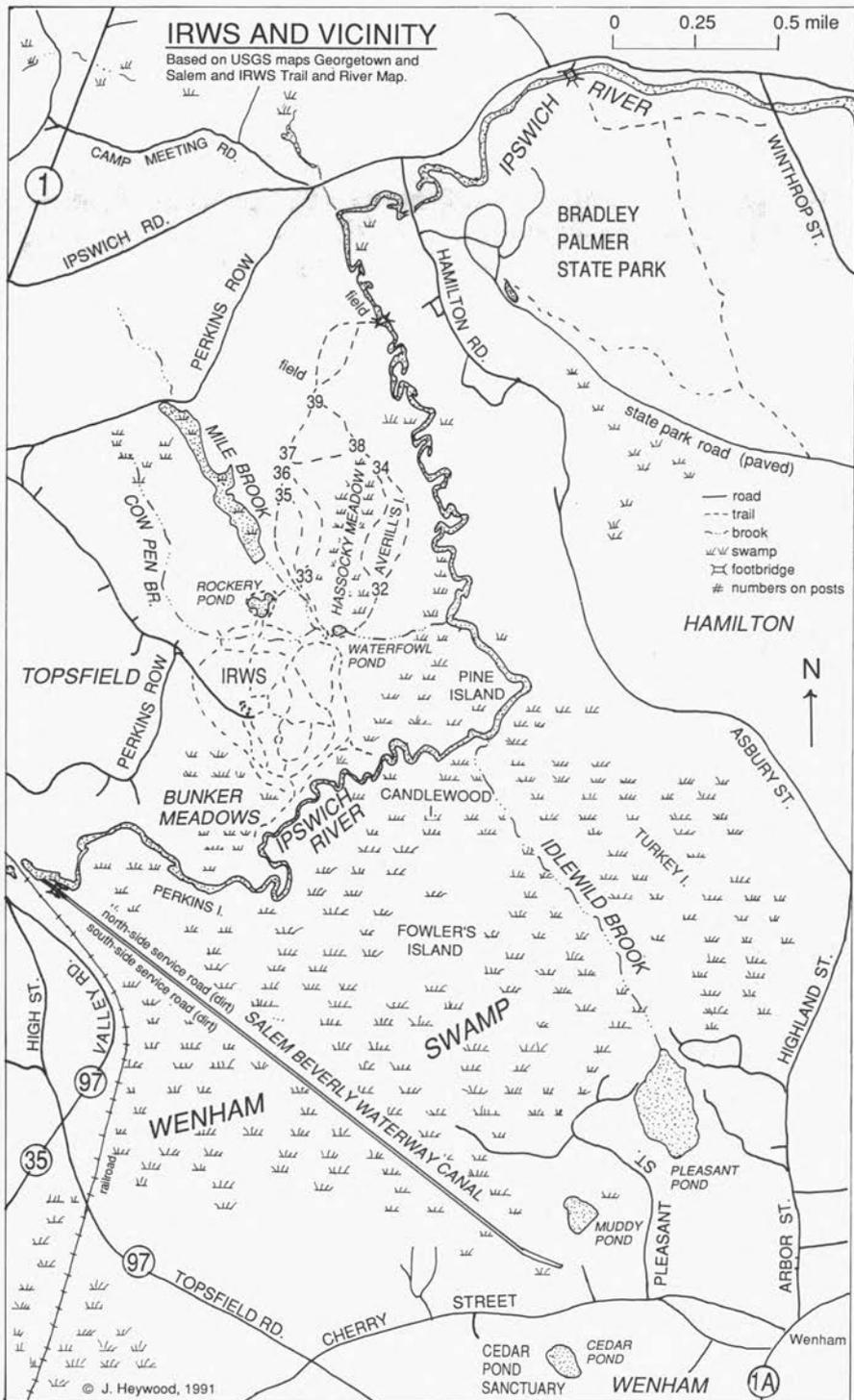
by Jim MacDougall

The Ipswich River Wildlife Sanctuary in Topsfield, Massachusetts, protects 2500 acres with a rich mosaic of habitats that in turn attract a wide array of birds. It is situated about halfway between Boston and Newburyport just off Route 1. The property is dominated by the Wenham Swamp, the largest floodplain wetland on the Ipswich River. The landscape is typical glacial topography with a drumlin, kames, and an esker. There are clear indications of areas of glacial ice contact such as the margin between Hassocky Meadow and Averill's Island.

This area is rich in cultural history. It was a favorite campsite for the Agawam sept of the Algonquin tribe. North of the sanctuary by just a few feet are areas where Native American artifacts, from 2000 to 7000 years old, have been collected in amounts that would indicate an active and continuous site. In 1643 this land was given to Governor Bradstreet, who leased it for farming and the taking of waterfowl. One of the original houses on the property was built around 1650 by Simon Bradstreet, the governor's grandson, and was located on Bradstreet Lane, now a dirt road running east of the sanctuary headquarters. Only a cellar hole remains today.

The sanctuary headquarters is in a house built around 1763. Its large seven-flue central chimney identifies the architectural period and offers habitat for a large colony of Chimney Swifts. The Bradstreets owned the land until 1898, when it was purchased by Thomas Emerson Proctor. Proctor, with the help of staff at Boston's Arnold Arboretum and a Japanese landscape gardener, began to transform Bradstreet Hill and surrounding uplands into a formal landscape, highlighting many hardy trees and shrubs of the world that would grow here. Italian laborers constructed the Rockery, roads, bridges, and trails. Hundreds of plant species were introduced and placed in areas around the hill which would offer them the best growing conditions. Large rocks were imported from nearby Newbury and placed with the plantings to augment the visual impact. People came from miles around to walk and picnic at Mr. Proctor's invitation. He died in 1947, essentially penniless, and it was from his estate that the Massachusetts Audubon Society (MAS) purchased the bulk of the sanctuary.

Proctor's arboretum and the introduction of exotic plants are responsible for an important change in natural plant communities. Many of the habitats have been overtaken by aggressive exotic plant species. The impact on these communities' utility to native breeding, migrating, and wintering birds is difficult to assess. The upside of the problem is that the extensive thickets of crabapple, bittersweet, smooth buckthorn, and multiflora rose offer food items for some guilds of birds throughout the fall and winter. The downside may be



that other native birds cannot locate their preferred community composite for breeding and foraging. Perhaps breeding bird surveys of these exotic communities compared with communities of largely native species would give us the answer to another of man's influences on the production of native birds. It raises the question of the effectiveness of stewardship programs on conservation land. Is it enough to simply set land aside? The MAS has begun a program to identify the natural communities on the sanctuary and quantify the impact of some of the more aggressive nonnative plants. Purple loosestrife, Japanese corktree, smooth buckthorn, and multiflora rose have been studied without clear results. Certainly a great deal of work is required to assess this problem.

The sanctuary is a big place, and like every other birding area around here, the birds are seasonal. The birds that attract people to this property during different seasons are Pied-billed Grebe, American Bittern, waterfowl (most notably Wood Duck), rails, Great Horned Owl, Northern Saw-whet Owl, Pileated Woodpecker, Yellow-throated Vireo, migrating warblers, Orchard Oriole, and Fox Sparrow.

You can bird the sanctuary on foot or by canoe. Canoes can be rented by MAS members at the sanctuary. Most people walk the extensive trail system.

Bradstreet Hill

Bradstreet Hill, a drumlin, surrounds the sanctuary headquarters buildings and parking lot. Three fields, each with its own grasses and habitat, nearly encircle the hilltop. The north field is the place to find Bobolink in the summer. On an October evening, it is also the place to watch waterfowl fly by overhead and the Pileated stake out its winter bounds. It is the place to watch accipiters dart, and in the spring of 1979, it was the place to watch Great Gray Owls hunt for mice. There is big sky above the north field and a bench under a crabapple tree to accommodate the artful watcher. In spring you will find male woodcocks strutting their stuff at dusk.

The bird-feeding area, viewed from inside the sanctuary's nature center, is usually the first place to stop when the station is operating. Regular feeder birds are Downy Woodpecker, Black-capped Chickadee, Tufted Titmouse, Red-breasted and White-breasted nuthatches, European Starling, Northern Cardinal, Song Sparrow, Red-winged Blackbird, Common Grackle, American Goldfinch, House Finch, and House Sparrow. East of the buildings is a scrubby area that follows along Bradstreet Lane. This is a good place to see Pileated Woodpeckers in March, White-crowned Sparrows in May, and to call in Eastern Screech-Owls at night.

To understand the trail system around Bradstreet Hill, envision the hill as the hub of a wheel. The outer rim of the wheel is the Drumlin Trail, while the spokes are trails and roads originating at the center (or top of the hill) and connecting to the rim. Beginning at the north and proceeding clockwise, the

spokes are the Rockery Trail, Innermost Trail, Bradstreet Lane, Ipswich River Trail, Bunker Meadows Trail, and the driveway. Mr. Proctor planted each area within the spokes with different tree and shrub families. Maples are in the southwestern quadrant; cherries, *Sorbus*, and magnolias in the southeast; oaks and beeches in the northeast; and rhododendrons and hemlocks in the north and northwest. Again, the impact of the plantings and their orientation to the elements may influence birds due to the habitat communities they create. Waves of spring warblers are most often seen on the south, east, and north sides of the hill, and the late-spring birder with limited time can make this circuit productive.

Bunker Meadows Trail

From the top of the hill, go to post number 6, and take the trail down to Bunker Meadows. This is a flooded shrub meadow constructed with federal funds in 1965. Prior to that time it was a seasonally flooded grass meadow along the Ipswich River. Possibly harvested for hay by colonial farmers, it had maintained a sedgy open structure until the impoundment was created. The purpose of creating the impoundment, according to the Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife, "was to maintain year-round water levels that would provide suitable waterfowl nesting habitat."

An early morning visit in the spring or fall to Bunker Meadows is fun and good birding. Head down to the observation tower, and approach it quietly. First see whether anything is perched on the tower. Then slowly make your way to the first landing. Check the meadow and buttonbush for birds and mammals. A quiet approach will allow birds to merely skulk away rather than wildly flushing, thereby stopping feeding and courtship activities. It will also allow you to locate many of the birds around the fifty-acre marsh by the time you reach the tower's top deck. A scope is helpful here, although the tower's shakiness tests your patience with keeping a steady view. From the tower you should see: in the spring, Pied-billed Grebe, American Bittern, Canada Goose, Wood Duck, teals, Mallard, Ring-necked Duck, Hooded Merganser, Osprey, Virginia Rail, American Coot, all of the swallows, Eastern Kingbird, Yellow Warbler, and Common Yellowthroat; in the autumn, Great Blue Heron, Great Egret, Wood Duck and other waterfowl, Sharp-shinned Hawk, swallows, and blackbirds and grackles.

From the tower walk east on the trail that follows the marsh edge to the canoe landing. This trail is one of the best for spring migrants. It gets early morning sun and is usually out of the cold northerly wind. Kinglets, Blue-gray Gnatcatchers, Warbling Vireos, warblers, and Swamp Sparrows can be very common in late April and May. The canoe landing gives you another perspective of Bunker Meadows and your first views of the Ipswich River. Walk out to the well-named Beech Island and the dead-end dike beyond. This area is

where I go first thing in the morning to catch Pied-billed Grebe, American Bittern, and Virginia Rail. The end of this dike (if you can get to it; water levels occasionally make it impassable) has consistently been visited by Common Snipe in April. All these upland areas adjacent to the Wenham Swamp are excellent for spring and fall warbler waves.

South Esker Trail

From post 10 at the canoe landing, you may walk northeasterly along the South Esker Trail, which skirts the southeastern and eastern edge of Bradstreet Hill where it abuts the Wenham Swamp. Bear right at the first fork by some hemlocks to stay on the South Esker Trail. This is an area known for Red-tailed Hawk, Sora, Eastern Phoebe, Marsh Wren, Yellow-throated Vireo, Warbling Vireo, Scarlet Tanager, Swamp Sparrow, and Orchard and Northern orioles. The scenery along this trail is among the best the property has to offer, with two places to sit and enjoy it. One is the gazebo, which you will have to share with the resident phoebes; the second is a bench perched atop the south esker with a view of the *Phalaris* floodplain marsh. At the toe of this esker, next to the marsh, are Soras, Marsh Wrens, and Swamp Sparrows. (The trail forks at the gazebo, but you can take either branch. The left fork is the main trail, while the right fork is just a short loop that takes you to the toe of the esker.)

Waterfowl Pond

From the north end of the South Esker Trail, it is but a short distance along Mile Brook Trail to Waterfowl Pond. You should be aware that lately, beavers have been damming Mile Brook in this area. Thus, the Waterfowl Pond and Rockery trails, which lie to the west, may be flooded. This itinerary, however, omits those trails.

Waterfowl Pond is another nice place to sit and rest the soles. While sitting at the bridge, you may be introduced to the local tame chickadees. These poor birds are the product of good-hearted people who cannot resist intimate contact with wildlife. People flock to the sanctuary with their children clenching mitts full of millet and sunflower seeds to feed the birds for a so-called outdoor experience. As many as eighty percent of all winter visitors are there to feed these birds, which are the offspring of birds hand-tamed by one man who has been visiting the property nearly every weekend for the past twenty years.

Despite these distractions, spend some time around the pond. Walk the little trail (partially overgrown) around the back of the pond and the short segment of Averill's Island Trail back to the stone bridge. Springtime brings Hooded Merganser, Virginia Rail, American Woodcock, Marsh Wren, Magnolia and Wilson's warblers, Northern Waterthrush, Lincoln's Sparrow, and Orchard Oriole. It used to be the only place to see Least Bittern and Common Moorhen, neither of which has been reported in the past fifteen years. Later in the spring,

Willow Flycatchers call from the stubby maples in Hassocky Meadow. Waterfowl Pond is also the gateway to the hinterlands of the property: Averill's Island and the North Esker.

North Esker Trail and Averill's Island Trail

This is the place I like to bird and rest my soul. It is also the longest loop on the sanctuary. If your time is limited, either omit these trails, or take these and omit the others. The birds are relatively few and far between, but it is on this circuit that you will see or hear the Great Horned Owl, Northern Saw-whet Owl, Hairy Woodpecker, Pileated Woodpecker, Eastern Wood-Pewee, Great Crested Flycatcher, and Fox Sparrow. For the Christmas count we hit this area late in the day for Virginia Rail at the spillway from Hassocky Meadow. One year we also had Hermit Thrush. It is one of the few areas on the property where there is open water in the heart of winter; it is located between post 34 and 38 on the map.

From Waterfowl Pond, proceed north on the North Esker Trail where it begins at post 31. Take either branch at post 33 (the right one is lower and hugs the marsh), and rejoin the Mile Brook Trail at post 35 or 36, turning right in either case. A Great Horned Owl nest is located east of post 39. To see it, walk northwest, north, and northeasterly (take the left fork, then bear right twice) from this post along an unmarked trail for 200 yards looking to your right. You should see the bottom of a barrel placed in the fork of a tree as an artificial nest platform for Great Horned Owls. They have been using the structure for a few years now and should be a sure bet for years to come.

Retrace your steps to post 39, and now it is off to Averill's Island via the White Pine Trail between posts 39 and 38. At post 38, take the Averill's Island Trail toward the southeast. Take either branch where it splits at post 34; they rejoin and take you back to Waterfowl Pond. This is a good place for late-fall, winter, and early-spring birding. Pileated Woodpecker and Great Horned Owl are the staples. This is the only place from which I have seen Bald Eagle on the property. It is an old woodland on good soil, offering trees optimum growing conditions. Some of the trees are very impressive in size and are alone worth seeing. In fact, walking through this magnificent forest is probably the closest one can come to a return to the days before the European settlers arrived.

Other Areas Near the Sanctuary

The next three areas are not accessible from the parking area on Bradstreet Hill, but they are well worth birding.

Pleasant Pond and Idlewild Brook. The outlet of Pleasant Pond into Idlewild Brook, which flows into the Ipswich River in the southeast portion of the sanctuary, can be reached from Pleasant Street in Wenham. Pleasant Street is off Cherry Street, half a mile east of the entrance to Cedar Pond Sanctuary and

about the same distance west of Route 1A. Follow Pleasant Street to the end, which will be the parking area for the Wenham public swimming beach. Walk along the edge of the pond to the outlet and the beginning of a loose trail system. This is a good place to visit in the dead of winter. The brook usually remains open and will attract rails and Winter Wrens. There are no marked trails, but you can follow the skimobile tracks into the far reaches of the Wenham Swamp, tracking deer and fisher in the snow. If you get out as far as the *Phalaris* floodplain, look for shrikes. Great Horned and Barred owls are always a possibility in the winter. I do not, however, recommend venturing out into this area unless it is thoroughly frozen, you have a compass, and you are with a friend.

The Salem Beverly Waterway Canal. The Salem Beverly Waterway Canal (or Wenham Canal) is a sleeper for birdwatchers. The canal is a two-mile-long trench through the Wenham Swamp with a dirt service road on either side. It begins at the river near Route 97 and terminates at the pumping station in Wenham near the entrance to the Cedar Pond Sanctuary on Cherry Street. You can access the canal from Route 97 in Topsfield. From Route 1, drive south on Route 97 about a mile. Park at the railroad tracks crossing Route 97 near the Ipswich River. Walk southeast along the tracks, cross the river, pass three houses on your right, and turn left at the first trail in that direction. This will take you out to the canal where it diverges from the river. In spring and fall this is a good place for both Solitary and Spotted sandpipers, and the woodland between the railroad tracks and the canal is good for Eastern Screech-Owl. With such a big sky, one can expect just about anything to fly over. The winter can bring shrikes to perch on the scrub of the adjacent swamp, rails can be coaxed out of the marshes if there is open water, and Great Horned and Barred owls are generally accommodating. Spring brings waves of kinglets, warblers, and blackbirds as well as their migratory associates, Merlins, Sharpshins, and kestrels.

If you have time for a pleasant walk, you can follow the south-side service road for two miles to the Wenham end of the canal. Crossing behind the pumping station, you can then return on the north-side service road and cross over the canal at the little bridge to bring you back to where you started. Three dips in the north-side service road are often under water, so always start a hike along the canal on the south side.

Canoeing. Canoeing the Ipswich River for birds has been a traditional May outing for the Essex County Ornithological Club since 1906. The land that is now the sanctuary has long been recognized as one of the hot spots along the river. Mr. Proctor encouraged the club to visit his property and to camp on what is known as Perkins Island, near the south end of the sanctuary. The records for these outings show some interesting trends. Whip-poor-wills have disappeared, along with locally nesting Black-crowned Night Herons. On the other side of the

Trends in Bird Occurrences in Essex County: 1907-1989
Records from Essex County Ornithological Club
Mid-May Canoe Trips on the Ipswich River

Increasing

Pied-billed Grebe
Double-crested Cormorant
Snowy Egret
Little Blue Heron
Cattle Egret
Glossy Ibis
Mute Swan
Canada Goose
Mallard
Blue-winged Teal
Gadwall
Turkey Vulture
Ringed-neck Pheasant
Lesser Yellowlegs
Willet
Ring-billed Gull
Herring Gull
Great Black-backed Gull
Rock Dove
Pileated Woodpecker
Great Crested Flycatcher
Tufted Titmouse
Red-breasted Nuthatch
Brown Creeper
House Wren
Blue-gray Gnatcatcher
Northern Mockingbird
European Starling
Blue-winged Warbler
Northern Cardinal
House Finch
House Sparrow

Decreasing

American Bittern
Black-crowned Night Heron
Ruddy Duck
Bald Eagle
Northern Harrier
Sharp-shinned Hawk
Cooper's Hawk
Red-shouldered Hawk
American Kestrel
Peregrine Falcon
Common Snipe
Yellow-billed Cuckoo
Short-eared Owl
Whip-poor-will
Horned Lark
Eastern Bluebird
Yellow-throated Vireo
Golden-winged Warbler
Nashville Warbler
Vesper Sparrow

coin, Herring and Great Black-backed gulls, Tufted Titmouse, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Northern Mockingbird, and Northern Cardinal, once accidental, are now common. A full day's canoe ride can be started from Green Street in Danvers with a take-out at Asbury Street in Topsfield. To canoe only within sanctuary boundaries, put in at Route 97 in Topsfield. A canoe guide is available from the Ipswich River Watershed Association, which has its office at the sanctuary.

Birds commonly seen along the river within the sanctuary are Great Blue Heron, Black-crowned Night Heron (post-nesting), Canada Goose, Wood Duck, American Black Duck, Red-tailed Hawk, Spotted Sandpiper, Great Horned Owl, Pileated Woodpecker, Northern Rough-winged Swallow, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Yellow-throated Vireo, Warbling Vireo, Yellow Warbler, Common Yellowthroat, Red-winged Blackbird, and Common Grackle. During the third week in May and the third week in August, this river has major Common Nighthawk migrations. In some years the numbers can reach eighty to one hundred birds per flock. On the mornings of such flights, it is easier to locate resting nighthawks sitting parallel to the branches of trees overhanging the river.

It would be easier to list the birds you will not have the potential of seeing than those you will. Of the 400 or so birds that have been seen in the county (approximately ninety of which are accidental), 224 have been seen here. Thus, about two-thirds of the birds seen in eastern Massachusetts visit this property with annual regularity. Because the vegetation is thick, you should visit the sanctuary before May 15 for best viewing.

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